

THE Sweetest CONNECTION



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

How to Fail at Flirting

The Fastest Way to Fall

The Love Connection

The Missed Connection

The Sweetest Connection

The Sweetest Connection

Denise Williams

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For Brian and Matt. Every person should have phenomenally kind, supportive, and funny friends who can also rock a sweater-vest or no-veto you into a nine-hour bus tour of Manhattan.

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 close 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 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 harrumph. 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, but 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 one 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 more than 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 been taking only 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 manage to leave 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. My coworker had 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 mid-fifties, with a smoker’s voice and 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; I didn't need to seek them out when neither woman was around.

Chapter Three

Teagan

I smoothed down the front of the god-awful pink apron and checked my watch. The amount of time until the end of my shift hadn't really changed from when I'd looked thirty seconds earlier. I'd never imagined a pink apron when I used to think about being in my mid-twenties, but I was finally getting my life back on the track I'd planned on. I was back in school, about to take the trip of my dreams, and hoping to ditch the apron permanently very soon.

"Don't let Julianna catch you checking your watch like that." Martin leaned on the handle of the push broom he was carrying, smiling like he was preparing to tell me a joke. I loved Martin, one of the members of the custodial staff. He'd been in the airport even longer than Julianna and was like a fixture. He had great stories about all the unbelievable things he'd seen over the years.

"Hey." I glanced around and then handed him one of his favorite dark chocolate truffles coated in coconut. He was the only person I gave freebies to besides Silas, but I'd learned his favorite from Julianna, who, despite being a demon with a sweet tooth, couldn't resist Martin's charms any more than anyone else. "When are you going to let me write a story about you?"

He laughed, nodding in thanks for the candy. "So much to write. How'd a budding author like you end up working here?"

I shrugged. "I needed a job and Julianna was hiring." I'd been lucky to find a job at all—it had been a tough time to search, and I'd loved the idea of being so close to international travel, even if it was just watching other people take off. The job got a hundred times better two years later when Silas

took the customer service job with the airline. Getting to know people like Martin made the gig a little sweeter, though.

He adjusted his belt. “Aren’t you flying off to France to write stories? Why would you need mine?”

I cocked my head to the side and leaned toward him. “Don’t act like you haven’t gotten up to some stuff in this airport.”

His big, booming laugh made me instinctively try to catch Silas’s eye. He said he always knew where Martin was because of that laugh, but a crowd of people swarmed his and James’s counter. “You know I have, but you’re too young to hear any of those stories. Julie would have my behind if I corrupted her young employees.” He motioned toward the gates near us, where people were dancing. “You see the hullabaloo down there? Looks like they’re having a dance party or something.” He glanced toward the gates. “I’m gonna go check it out. You want me to toss that?” He motioned to the other side of the shop where a slip of paper was on the floor.

“Nah. I’ll get it. We were rearranging some things, might have fallen out of a box.”

“I’ll report back if the hullabaloo is anything interesting.” He shook his hips as he walked out and called over his shoulder. “Just might cut a rug myself.”

I waved and wiped my hands again before walking to pick up the paper. I was hungry for something exciting, anything to break up the monotony of my days. I wasn’t in any classes until my trip, so I went to work and sold candy, which wasn’t a bad job, but I was so tired of standing still. The thing about working in an airport was you were constantly seeing new people, but it still often felt like seeing the same people day in and day out. People who were going somewhere else and seeing somewhere new. I couldn’t wait to be one of them. When we weren’t too busy, I loved to learn where people were going and imagine going there, too.

I had a to-do list a mile long to get ready for my trip, including cleaning out the fridge and scrubbing the bathroom of my apartment, and I ticked off the items in my head as I picked up the sheet of paper. It was a printout from

an email, though the address wasn't visible, and I gave it a quick glance, ready to throw it in the trash and check my watch again.

Before I tossed it, the headers caught my eye. "Pros." Then "Cons."

PROS

She's my best friend.

Seeing her is the best thing about working here.

I could listen to her stories for hours.

I'm in love with her. I think I always have been.

CONS

If I lost her, I don't know what I'd do.

I'd have to see her in the terminal all the time if it didn't work out.

She doesn't know I'm in love with her and it might be too late to tell her.

Silas was leaning against the counter when I looked up, the light catching the metal on his name tag, and the dark blue of the lanyard around his neck stood out against his shirt. "You're not studying your itinerary again, are you? I know you have it memorized." He made fun of me for being so excited about my trip, but there was never real bite in it. He knew how much I wanted to travel, and now that I had a second chance, I was obsessed with being prepared to make the most of it. He was always reticent to tell me about his own travels, worried I'd be jealous he was able to go and I wasn't. "Or have you moved on to sketching out the next three trips?"

"Very funny," I said, setting the list on the counter. "What are you doing here?"

"Shift is over. Want to get dinner?" He scratched the side of his neck the way he did when he wanted something to do with his hands. Silas had nice hands, with neat nails and long tapered fingers.

"Won't Erin mind? We've had dinner together a few times this week already and her birthday is soon, right?" I liked Erin; I just didn't think she

was particularly interesting enough for Silas. But I couldn't say that to him.

"It's today." He shrugged one well-developed shoulder and skirted my question. "But she's out of town and you're leaving in a week. Pizza? What's that?" He pointed to the list on the counter and I had a moment of panic wondering if I should hide it or play it off. Another wild hare tickled the back of my consciousness. *What if Silas wrote this?*

"I found it on the floor," I said, holding it away from him. "It's a pros and cons list."

"For what?" He made a grab for it anyway, his fingers sweeping it from my grip. *Damn him and his big hands.* "Hm," he said, reading through it as I searched his face for some flash of recognition even though I knew not to expect one. "I wonder what the person was deciding to do."

"Kind of sounds like telling someone how they feel or maybe starting a relationship?" I took the paper back, drawn in by the words. "I don't know. You think it's someone who works here?"

He shrugged again. "Dunno. Pizza tonight?"

"Si, why aren't you interested in this?" I swatted at his arm. "It's a mystery."

"It's . . . trash."

I rolled my eyes, smiling at a couple lingering near the entrance who then decided to walk on. "I blame Erin if you are this unmoved by a potential love story." My brain was waving hands wildly at my mouth, the universal sign to indicate "Stop talking. What is wrong with you?" I rarely listened to my brain in those moments.

"It's not a love story; it's someone's discarded decision-making tool." Silas swatted at my arm as I had his and tried to grab the paper out of my hands, but I snapped it back.

"It's the *possibility* of a love story. What if someone dropped this and they have to make this decision soon? What if their happily ever after is hanging in the balance?"

His brown eyes narrowed, those brows that had no business looking as manicured as they did furrowed. "The list isn't that long. I'd hope they could re-create it or work from memory."

“You’re missing the point,” I said, tucking the paper into my apron.

“The point being you’re nosy and bored?”

I leaned on the counter, catching the clock out of the corner of my eye. My shift was almost over. “What if you had to make some critical decision about the woman you loved and you were talking yourself into the right decision, then lost this?”

“That doesn’t sound like me.” He handed me a stick of gum from his pocket. Julianna didn’t let us chew it in the shop and I always craved something minty at the end of my shift.

“Humor me. Maybe this person is taking losing this list as a sign from the universe they shouldn’t act on their feelings.”

“Teag, I really think you’re reading too much into this.”

I met his stare head-on, lifting one of my much less impressive eyebrows. “I’m invoking the no-veto rule.”

Silas stilled, his lips parting. Damn those full lips. “The no-veto rule . . . for this?”

The summer after sophomore year, we’d gone on a road trip through the Midwest. At the time, it felt like a grand adventure, but mostly it was cheap motels and an inordinate amount of gas station snacks as we took in the world’s largest, oldest, best, et cetera. It was the best and worst days of our friendship, and we’d created the no-veto rule. Each of us got to choose one thing we both had to do, and the other couldn’t say no. We kept it going, each year the clock resetting and each of us getting one new no-veto card to play. Over the years, he’d made me do *Star Wars* cosplay, eat octopus, and spend Thanksgiving with him and Erin. I’d made him take a nine-hour bus tour of Manhattan, watch the entirety of *Gossip Girl*, and go skinny-dipping. I’d been grossed out by the octopus and he’d considered never talking to me again when we almost got caught skinny-dipping, but we always had fun whatever we were doing together.

Silas sighed and held out his hand. “Okay. This is low stakes for no-veto, but let me see it again.”

“And pizza sounds great,” I said, beaming and tapping his nose with my fingertip. “Extra pepperoni.”

“Like you had to specify.”

Chapter Four

Video Call

Six Years Ago
A Saturday

Teagan: So, what happened?

Teagan: A shrug doesn't tell me anything.

Silas: She dumped me. She wasn't happy and "kissing me had become like kissing her brother."

Teagan: Ouch. I know you really liked her. Want me to drive out there and egg her car?

Silas: I don't think the petty vandalism is worth the three-hour drive.

Teagan: Says you. I love petty vandalism. And breaking my friend's heart is not a petty offense.

Silas: Save the eggs for an omelet.

Teagan: I never learned how to make one. So, how are you doing?

Silas: We were good friends since high school. We never should have dated in the first place.

Teagan: Are you sure you don't want me to pick up some eggs?

Silas: *(Laughing)* I'm sure. I don't get the sense we'll be talking anymore. Just remind me to never date a friend again, okay?

Teagan: Okay. I mean, there will be a point when you find me irresistible, but I'll remind you.

Silas: The first night we met in person, I held your hair while you threw up cheap beer and whipped cream. I think we're safe.

Teagan: That was a fun party.

Silas: If by fun you mean loud and out of control.

Teagan: I did mean that when I said fun. So, I was thinking . . .

Silas: Uh-oh

Teagan: It's not a bad thing.

Silas: What is it?

Teagan: There's this study abroad program that has connections with both our campuses. Do you want to go to France with me next spring?

Silas: I don't speak French.

Teagan: I remember, but the program instruction is all in English and we'd have almost a year to learn some French.

Silas: I don't know . . .

Teagan: Think about it—we'd get to spend four months together and we've lived three hours apart since becoming best friends.

Silas: Since you decreed we were best friends.

Teagan: And I was right about that, so I'm probably right about France.

Teagan: Just think about it!

Chapter Five

Silas

Present Day

Sunday

I opened my eyes slowly, my face warmed by the sunlight from the open window. I had an alarm set, but I usually woke ahead of it, like my body knew the sun was up and it was time to go. I still braced for the loud chirping of Erin's alarm, which she'd snooze and then silence again seven minutes later. This time it was only the heavy breathing of my best friend asleep on the other side of my bed. I'd told her once she snored and she'd insisted it was just normal breathing. Teagan's normal breathing shook the walls, and it was one of my favorite sounds.

I rolled to find her sprawled over my comforter, her worn T-shirt riding up to reveal a sliver of her lower back. As soon as I realized I was thinking about how warm and soft her tanned skin would feel beneath my fingers, I climbed out of bed to walk away. I didn't need to be thinking about the skin on Teag's back and I scrubbed my palms down my face as I walked to the bathroom. We'd both passed out on the most uncomfortable couch on the planet the night before watching a movie and I'd told her to crash with me on the bed instead of driving home at three in the morning or waking up to a sore back. We'd started watching a movie after pizza and both fallen asleep after dissecting the pros and cons list she was so interested in. I still didn't understand, especially not making it a no-veto pick. She was leaving the country, leaving me for months, and I figured there'd be something bigger, more significant for her to use the rule on.

When I returned from the bathroom, she was stirring, sliding back and forth on the pillow the way she did when she didn't want to wake up.

"C'mon, sleeping beauty," I said, swatting at her calf peeking out from under the blanket. "Rise and shine."

"Sorry," she said, rubbing her eyes and pushing her hair off her face. "I didn't mean to fall asleep. Why didn't you boot me out?"

I pulled boxers and a T-shirt from my dresser, my uniform already pressed and hanging in my closet. "Because it is physically impossible to wake you up. I tried once and you kicked me in the groin. You sleep like an ogre."

Teagan grinned, knowing it was true. "Still, you could have rolled me onto the floor. Your girlfriend will not appreciate me sleeping over."

I glanced back into the drawer, pretending to search for socks. "It's not a big deal." I didn't want to talk about Erin, not with Teagan, and not really at all. "What time do you have to be in today?"

She rolled off my bed and walked toward the bathroom door. "Not until this afternoon. I want to take another stab at that last French language lesson. I can't believe I remember so little from college." She pulled her phone from her pocket and tapped away. "And . . . *et nous avons un mystère à résoudre!*"

"I never spoke French very well, Teag." I shut the drawer, casting a glance at the list I'd pulled from her sleeping fingers and set on the nightstand.

She called over her shoulder before closing the door. "We have a mystery to solve!"

I rolled my eyes and set my things on the dresser, wandering over to the list and the handwritten notes she'd scribbled the night before of potential list writers, staff who might have been near the candy shop, and a game plan for figuring it out. She was going to talk to Julianna first, which I would have paid money to see. I didn't know the shop's owner well, but if anyone could be described as severe, it was her. She was like a cross between the personality of Ursula the Sea Witch and the face of Mary Berry from *The Great British Bake Off*, and I couldn't think of anyone less likely to inspire the kind of romantic angst reflected in that list. I reread the second-to-last item. *She doesn't know I'm in love with her.*

Behind the closed door, Teagan was singing a Beyoncé song while washing her hands, her off-key voice coming through the closed door, and my chest tightened. She wasn't meant for me. I'd decided that a long time ago, and she was leaving the country so she didn't need to know what I had been thinking about. "My neighbors are going to complain about the noise," I said instead when she came out.

"Your neighbors love me." She pulled one of my hoodies from the closet and tossed it on the bed. "Well, maybe not love me. But the one really likes me."

Erin had introduced them at a party we threw the year before, saying she thought they'd be cute together despite my protestations. I'd finally agreed, swallowing the bile in my throat when they left the party together. "That one moved. The new neighbors are an older couple, so you'll have new people to charm."

She raised her eyes and laughed before pulling the shirt over her head, planning to wear it home without asking, the way only she would. "What if the letter is Julianna's? Can you imagine being in love with her?" She pushed the cuffs of the sleeves up.

"I can't, but I guess there's a lid for every pot."

She searched the floor for her shoes, which I'd set neatly next to her bag. "I used to tell you that and you didn't believe me. Julianna would need one hell of a lid." She spotted the shoes and fell onto the floor to tie them. "Anyway, it's too bad Erin had to be out of town for her birthday. Are you going to celebrate when she gets back?"

I gathered the stack of clothes, looking away. "Maybe." My chest tightened again, this time at the lie. Erin was out of town, but I only knew that because she'd told me it would be another few days before she could pick up the box of her things I'd found at my place. "I don't know. It's just a birthday. It doesn't really matter."

"Si, you need to be a better boyfriend. Maybe it matters to her."

I swallowed. It had mattered, and if we hadn't broken up a couple of months earlier, I would have paid attention to the day, gotten my girlfriend of several years flowers and presents. I would have thought about buying a ring

and probably put it off again. Instead, we'd ended it, and she told me she didn't want to keep competing for my affections, knowing she'd never be the woman I loved more than Teagan.

"I brought this for Erin," she said, pulling a candy-shop box from her bag. "For her birthday. It's some of her favorites."

I opened it on instinct and it was full of white chocolate options plus peanut brittle and gummy bears. "Ouch!" I pulled my hand back when she smacked it.

"Not for you," Teagan said. "Don't eat your girlfriend's birthday present, you sugar fiend." She stood from her cross-legged pose and tossed her bag over one shoulder. "I'll get out of here so you can get ready." She swiped the list off the nightstand. "And I'll let you know what Julianna says."

"Au revoir," I said with a wave.

"Hey, that's my line!" She blew a kiss and trounced out of the room, probably en route to my kitchen to make coffee before leaving, but I felt her absence immediately. It was a relief. Since Erin had left, I'd been worried I'd let too many things spill. It was right to break up. She wasn't the one I was in love with. Trouble was, the woman I was in love with was in my kitchen making coffee and a mess, and there was nothing I could do about my feelings because that ship had sailed the day I reaffirmed having my best friend was more important than entertaining a what-if. Thinking about more than friendship wasn't an option. No mystery there.

Chapter Six

Teagan

Julianna looked up from the paperwork in front of her when I walked into the shop. Her silver-streaked hair was short and pushed off her face with a soft headband. The combination of soft pinks and purples in her outfit might have made her look grandmotherly, but it was a ruse. “You’re early. That’s a first.”

I nodded. “Well, I’m here.” I straightened the boxes of chocolates on a shelf nearby and strode behind the counter, plucking the pink apron from the hook inside the back room. “I wanted to ask you something, if you have a few minutes.”

“You can’t take any time off. I know you’re leaving in a few days, but I can’t just be giving people time off to prepare to gallivant around the world as a creative writer. You’re already leaving me in the lurch.” She hadn’t looked back up at me yet somehow communicated complete disdain through her posture. I’d told her about the trip months earlier, as soon as I found out I could go, but I ignored her tone.

“I’ll work all my shifts.” I settled next to her behind the counter. I’d actually picked up more shifts this week to make a little more money for the trip. Working every day was a lot, but it was worth it to squeeze in a little more money. “Could I ask you a personal question, though?”

Julianna signed something with a flourish and then stacked the papers. “I can’t guess why you’d want to, but fine.”

I tried to imagine someone besotted with the woman in front of me, toiling over a pros and cons list about wooing her, and I came up empty. “Are you dating someone?”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, not in her normal derision but like she was trying to tease out my hidden meaning, before she laughed, a genuine belly laugh. “Why on earth would you ask that?”

I hadn’t expected the humor, the delight in me asking that question. I could have pulled the list from my bag, but I paused. If I showed it to her, she’d tell me it was trash like Silas had. It was trash, but I didn’t want to let it go. I was saved from having to answer when a customer entered and I helped them decide between three kinds of truffles. My answer was always to just get all three and try a few more because who didn’t need more chocolate, but apparently others had more restraint than me. Candy was the one thing Silas had no restraint around. He never bought it himself, but when I’d bring some over to his place or with us to a movie, he was a man on a mission to eat it. When I first told him I’d gotten the job here, after I had to leave school, his eyes lit up like a kid’s on Christmas morning. Total sweet tooth.

By the time I’d finished with the customers, who finally decided on one white chocolate cookie butter truffle and one dark chocolate espresso one for their flight, Julianna was gathering her things to leave. “So, not seeing anyone, then?” I asked, peeking my head into the office.

“Girl, why are you asking? Is this for one of your stories or something?”

I bit my lower lip. “No, just heard about a budding relationship between staff in the terminal. I thought maybe it might be your love story.”

She hoisted the world’s largest purse onto her shoulder and grazed a hand over the desk. “Gossip. It’s probably one of those annoying pet-grooming women, who treat this place like their personal dating show.” She checked her watch. “Ask Martin. He always knows all the rumors. Gossips like an old hen, too. If there’s something going on, he’d know.”

“Okay, thanks.” I smoothed down the apron and clocked in for my shift on the computer, entering my employee code. “I’ll ask him.” I glanced at the customer service counter across the way. Silas wasn’t there but James was, and he caught my eye and waved. James was cute and a nice guy, but it was always hard to pay attention to him when Silas was nearby.

Alone in the shop once Julianna left, I texted an update.

Teagan: Not Julianna.

Silas: Not surprised.

Teagan: She said to talk to Martin.

Teagan: Where are you? I can only see James.

Silas: Stalker much?

He walked into the shop, all long legs and easy strides, pushing his copper-colored hair back off his forehead. “I was on my break.” He set a notebook down on the counter between us. “I started this.” Since I had met Silas over a video call, I’d been surprised months later when we met in person and I saw his full height. I’d seen his photos on social media, but I still wasn’t prepared for the size of him.

I took the notebook, reading through the list of people quickly. “You made a list of suspects?”

Silas scratched the back of his neck and shrugged. “You seem to care about figuring this out and we only have a few days.” It was the thing he did when he wanted to play something off like it wasn’t a big deal. He’d always done it, like when he’d told off a drunk guy who wouldn’t leave me alone at a bar, changed my tire when I went to visit him for a weekend in college, or after that night we’d never seemed to fully get past. “There aren’t that many people, but maybe it’s a start,” he added, motioning to the list and then picking up a toothpick from our free sample tray.

“They’re chocolate-and-caramel-dipped crispy rice treats,” I said as he examined it. “They might be good for your difficult customers in the future.”

Silas didn’t respond as he chewed the sample, and I laughed at his yummy noises, pushing forward with the task at hand. “Jess at the pet-grooming place,” I said, reading the first name. “I love her. She’s divorced, so maybe this is a second chance! Ooh, I want this to be her epic love story.”

Silas chuckled. “You would.”

“Why is everyone so cynical? I asked Julianna if she was seeing someone and she reacted like I’d been practicing a stand-up set.”

“I think it’s just that you believe in love stories more than most people.” He took back the notebook, turning it on the counter and reading his own notes. “That’s not a bad thing. It’s why you’re such a good writer. You look for stories.”

I toyed with the corner of the page, our fingers brushing briefly, the spark I’d felt longer than I could remember when we touched lingering under my skin as it always did. “I know life isn’t a fairy tale or a rom-com, but imagine there being one person you’re meant to be with no matter the obstacles, no matter the cons on the list. It would be nice to live in that world.”

He didn’t look up. “Sometimes the cons on the list are what we should pay attention to.”

“Yeah,” I said, pushing thoughts of him and Erin from my head. “Anyway, Jess is a start. Who is Ada?”

“Works with operations. She takes a walk through here every day and has talked about her walking buddy. I don’t know his name, but he’s in security and she seems kind of into him. She said he comes in here sometimes.”

I nodded, scanning his list. “This is great, Si.”

He shrugged again. “Well, if we’re going to make sure love wins out, we have to get going.” He nodded toward James. “I gotta get back.”

I was excited about my trip, more excited than I’d been in years, but he kept reminding me I was leaving, and the distance it would put between us made me a little sad. I had a fantasy that he went with me. The first time around, we’d always planned to do it together.

Chapter Seven

Phone Call

Five Years Ago
A Sunday

(Buzzing)

Teagan: You're the only twenty-year-old who still calls anyone.

Silas: I'm sure I'm not the only one.

Teagan: Even my grandma texts me at this point.

Silas: Well, I'm driving. Leave me alone. What are you doing?

Teagan: Packing. I can't get this damn suitcase to close!

Silas: Packing for what?

Teagan: Um, our study abroad trip to France. You know, the semester-long excursion we've been planning for months?

Silas: The excursion that we leave for in over a month?

Teagan: I needed a practice run to see if it will all fit.

Silas: Of course. Packing usually requires rehearsal. I'm guessing it doesn't all fit?

Teagan: I'm going to hang up on you.

Silas: No, you won't. What did you overpack? Notebooks? You don't need that many. They sell paper over there.

Teagan: What if I'm walking down the boulevard de la Croix-Rousse and I'm struck with inspiration but I don't have my favorite notebook with me because I had to make room for underwear?

Silas: So, does that mean you're currently deciding between packing notebooks and going commando across Europe?

Teagan: You're funny, Si. Do I ever tell you that?

Silas: Not enough. I'll make you a deal. You can pack a few notebooks in my suitcase if you promise to take underwear with you.

Teagan: This is why you're single. *C'mon, you stupid thing. Zip!*

Teagan: Don't laugh at me.

Silas: I can't help it.

Silas: And I'm single because I spend all my time wrangling my best friend to make sure she's not going to flash her creative writing professor.

Teagan: I would totally flash my creative writing professor. He's hot! And your standards are too high.

Teagan: *Yes! Got it! It zipped!*

(The sound of a car blinker in the background)

Silas: Having standards isn't the same as them being too high.

Teagan: I'm just saying, maybe you should worry about some other woman's underwear. Or what's inside them. You might meet the girl of your dreams and then you could call her on the phone like an old man instead of calling me.

Silas: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Teagan: *Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.* What kind of a friend am I if I don't do my best to get you laid and find you love?

Silas: I'm not interested in finding love.

Teagan: Ah, but you are interested in getting laid. See, Si, this is why you have me around. There's a lid for every pot, but I'll shift my focus from you falling in love to you falling into bed.

Silas: Great, does that mean you're changing your no-veto so we don't have to go look at the Pont des Arts in Paris and can instead go to a club?

Teagan: Never! Literal tons of padlocks affixed to the bridge by couples in love? I would never miss that.

Silas: You're not going to find some French dude to fall in love with just so you can add a padlock, are you?

Teagan: Here's hoping. I think I could be pretty good at falling in love in French. *L'amour. C'est grand.*

Chapter Eight

Silas

Present Day

Monday

James held up a hand, indicating he was taking his break, and I nodded, moving my hips along with the hold music while I waited for the agent to get back to me. The song wasn't exactly a bop, but the longer you listened to it, the easier it was to imagine it wouldn't be bad with a better bass line. Teagan made fun of my dancing, especially when I started trying the dance trends on TikTok. She still joined me sometimes, usually both of us laughing too hard to finish the video. I saved them all, though, and would rewatch sometimes when I couldn't fall asleep.

Martin approached, sweeping the area on the other side of the counter.

"Morning," I said, holding the phone with my shoulder.

"And a beautiful one at that," Martin said, leaning on his broom. "It's kind of quiet today." He glanced around the mostly empty terminal, the relative quiet promising an onslaught of people at any moment.

I looked across the hall at the candy shop. I couldn't see Teagan, but I glanced back to Martin. "I have a weird question for you, if you have a minute."

"Always have a minute for a weird question." He leaned an elbow on the counter and he smiled under his bushy mustache. "Hit me, but I bet I might know what's coming and my answer will be yes."

I cocked my head to the side, curious, but asked anyway. "Do you know of any budding relationships between staff? Probably someone who would be

around this part of the terminal?”

He straightened. “Well,” he said with a laugh. “That was not the question I was expectin’ you to ask.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s for Teagan, really.” I motioned across the hall.

“Oh, well . . . that maybe makes more sense.” He held his chin in his hands and stroked the short beard. “Why does she want to know about couples?”

“It’s a long story. She roped me into it. I just figured if anyone would know, you would.” I’d never been particularly self-conscious, but I felt like a preteen, standing next to Martin asking what felt like a very dumb question.

“Let me think . . . there’s two kids who work in the coffee place who I’ve seen making eyes at each other, and between you, me, and the counter, I think Jess at the dog groomers might be interested in that owner of that new luggage store on the D concourse, or he might be interested in her. I’ve seen them together, but I don’t know for sure.”

I jotted down the notes next to the short list I’d already made for Teagan, circling Jess’s name. “Thanks, Martin.”

“I mean, then there’s the other obvious one.”

“Obvious one?” The hold music still played in my ear.

Martin grinned like he had some good information. “I’d say pretty obvious.”

“Want to share?”

“Boy, anyone with two eyes and a few minutes of spare time could see you’re in love with our sweet Miss Teagan over there.” He nodded toward the shop without looking and I checked over his shoulder on instinct, making sure she didn’t see us.

“We’re just friends.”

“Yeah,” he said, laughing and pushing the broom again. “I have friends, and I ain’t never looked at them like you look at her.” He tipped his head. “Well maybe a few of them, but only because I’d hoped we might be more than friends. I figured you were going to ask me if I thought you should make a move.”

The hold music suddenly stopped, half a second before the anticipated beat drop, and I was left with a dead line. “Damn it,” I muttered, setting the handset back in the cradle.

“For the record, I would have said yes, ’cause she looks to be in love with you, too.” He shrugged. “Just one old man’s opinion, of course.”

“We’re just friends,” I repeated, glancing over his shoulder again and wondering what he saw on my face when I looked at Teagan and if she saw it, too. “Wouldn’t risk a great friendship for a chance at something more.”

“Why the hell not?” Martin held up a hand. “I know times are different, but where’s your courage, man? I’ve loved three people. One I married, one turned me down, and I hope one will eventually cave to my charms.” He rapped his knuckles on the counter twice. “The good stuff comes with risk.”

Teagan reappeared from the back office in the candy store and flashed me a smile from behind the counter.

“Ah, see?” Martin raised his eyebrows. “Your whole face just lit up. I bet you caught a glimpse of her.” He laughed to himself and began sweeping past me toward the next area. “Act like I can’t tell what’s plain on your face, c’mon, now.” He waved as he left, chuckling to himself.

I scratched the back of my neck and scanned the monitor screen, my face feeling roughly two hundred degrees, and I was glad James had stepped away. Unbidden, the memory of Teagan’s lips on mine slammed into me. I let myself look up and take in her expression as she helped a customer. If I was honest, the memory didn’t slam into me so much as remind me it was there like it did all the time. We’d gotten through the fallout of that kiss, but it almost destroyed our relationship. How I felt about her now was just something I had to ignore or get over because I would never risk that again.

“Hey, I’m back!” James stepped behind the counter next to me, interrupting the memory.

“Hey. Didn’t miss much.” I glanced down the hall after Martin. I had the notes in front of me and knew Teagan would be excited for me to share what I’d learned. I pushed the memory of the kiss out of my head and intentionally did not look into the candy store as I got back to work. If Martin knew, then she might suspect, too. It was why I hadn’t told her I’d ended things with

Erin. She was really the only person I spent time with, and if I really lost her, I'd be lost.

Jess and the baristas at the coffee shop. Maybe that's where we'd start. I tapped at my keyboard and attempted my call again. If solving the mystery made her happy and distracted me, maybe that was the best possible outcome I could hope for.

Chapter Nine

Teagan

I walked through the parking lot, going through checklists in my head. It was hard to believe my trip was coming up so soon. I'd been up since seven that morning, running errands and generally freaking out. I didn't remember feeling this frantic about leaving the last time, but I'd been younger and life had been a little easier. I stepped to the left to give a wide pickup truck the berth to pull around and tripped on a bit of uneven pavement. The truck near me caught my fall and as I twirled to get my hand off it, lest I set off a car alarm, I spotted Jess from the grooming place walking ahead of me.

For some reason, Julianna didn't get along with Jess or her business partner, but I thought both women were kind of sweet. I guessed Jess was in her late thirties or early forties and she reminded me a little of my mom when I was a kid—all soft curves and long legs. I hoped the letter was about her.

I started walking again, staying back because even if I didn't have sunglasses and a trench coat, if I was going to lean into solving a mystery, I was going to lean all the way in. I hadn't gotten to talk to Silas for long the day before. He'd left in a hurry when his shift was over, but he'd texted me what Martin said and it felt serendipitous to follow Jess in from the parking lot, though I wasn't sure what I expected. I pulled out my phone.

Teagan: Are you on your break? Jess is walking in front of me.

Silas: Wasn't there any other hobby you could pick up this week besides sleuthing? I don't know if I like this side of you.

Teagan: Yes, you do.

Silas: Well, did you ask her if the note is about her?

Teagan: I can't do that! If it's her, maybe she doesn't know.

I rolled my eyes instead of including the emoji. Silas thought this whole thing was silly, but he'd play along. He'd help because I asked him to, even though I hadn't explained all the reasons I wanted to figure this out before I left.

Watching Jess walk ahead, though, made me think about my mom, and about my parents. They'd weathered hard financial times when I was in college and after I dropped out, but they'd made it through. I loved my parents, but my mom had told me about the plans she had when she was young, how she'd take the world by storm, but then life happened, and she never saw her quiet home life as much of a storm. I promised myself I'd never set my dreams and plans aside for any man. And I hadn't. Unfortunately, so far, that meant I hadn't gotten a love story, either.

I stepped out of the way again, letting two cars get through before I kept going, being more careful of the uneven concrete this time, part of that old conversation playing in my head.

Ahead of me, a lanky man stepped out of a car and called to Jess, and when she whipped around a smile all but exploded on her face.

Jackpot.

They chatted as he walked toward her. They didn't kiss or embrace, but he approached her eagerly, angling his body in a way that looked like he wanted to kiss her cheek or wrap an arm around her.

Teagan: They're so cute together.

Silas: Doesn't your shift start in ten minutes?

I glanced at my watch. *Damn it!* I sped up and ended up at the elevator with Jess as the man slipped into the stairwell.

"Good morning," I said. The doors slid open just as I arrived and I took it as a good sign from the universe.

"Morning," she said, hitting the button for us.

This is where my lack of planning bit me in the butt, because I was always friendly with Jess but we'd never had any substantial conversations that would let me casually, in the length of an elevator ride, find out if the man from the parking garage was secretly in love with her.

I said the first thing that came to my mind, and it wasn't my best work. "That guy you were talking to looks so familiar. Is he an actor or something? I swear I've seen him on TV."

Silas would have hung his head and laughed at my bald-faced, poorly acted lie, but I was fairly certain Jess didn't know me well enough to think I was being anything other than strange.

She gave me a curious expression and let out a small laugh. "I don't think he's ever acted. He just opened a luggage store on the D concourse."

"Must just be one of those faces," I said, racking my brain. I'd hoped for a little more information, like he just opened a luggage shop *and we kiss on the weekends*, but she hadn't tacked anything on. "That's cool, though. You two are friends?"

The doors opened with a *whoosh* and her phone rang as we stepped off. She glanced at the screen with a grimace. "I need to take this, but yeah, we go way back." She stepped away and I waved, hurrying toward the shop and determined to fill in Silas as soon as I got the chance.

In the years since I'd started working in the airport, I'd had a few fantasies. One was the superhot TSA agent giving me a very thorough pat down and the other was a faster way to get through security to get to work. As I took notice of said hot TSA agent two lanes over, I realized the odds of either happening were about the same. I tapped my foot and waited in the line for staff. I'd really wasted time trailing Jess, but death, taxes, and the TSA were on no one else's timeline, so I followed the young woman in front of me with the bouncing ponytail and her friend who had dark hair. They looked familiar and I listened to their easy banter about work. It sounded like they worked at one of the coffee kiosks.

I was in my head because now I immediately jumped to whether they were a couple and if one of them might be considering confessing their romantic feelings. Maybe Silas was right. I did look for love stories.

“Late for work?” Martin called out when he saw me power walking to the candy shop. “Julie’s not going to be too happy about that.”

“You’re the only one who calls her that.”

Martin shrugged. “Call it a perk of age.”

“Perk of beauty,” I said with a wink, hurrying by.

“You know, you’re right,” he said. “Tell her not to be too hard on ya.”

“Would that work?” I called over my shoulder.

Martin laughed. “Nah. Can’t imagine it would.”

Chapter Ten

Teagan's Dorm Room

Five Years Ago
A Monday

(Phone buzzes)

Teagan: Shh! Will you turn that down? It's my mom.

(Phone buzzes)

Teagan: Hey, Mom. What's up? You're on speaker.

Mom: Hi, honey. Just checking in. Are you leaving for home soon?

Teagan: Yeah. Silas is here and he's going to give me a ride on his way to his parents' place. We'll leave in a couple hours.

Mom: Hi, Silas!

Teagan: You're on speaker, Mom. You don't have to yell.

Silas: Hi, Mrs. Jones.

Mom: Don't underestimate me, young lady. Just because you're going to be traveling the world doesn't mean you know more than me.

Mom: Oh, hold on. Your dad just walked in.

Teagan: My mother just put me on hold.

Teagan: Why are you watching plane crash videos?

Silas: There's so many of them.

Teagan: You're afraid to fly. Stop it.

Silas: I'm not afraid.

Silas: Stop looking at me like that. I'm not *unduly* afraid. Look at this!
There are legitimate reasons to be hesitant about flying.

Teagan: Do you want me to hold your hand during takeoff and landing?

Silas: You wouldn't hold my hand.

Teagan: Sure I would.

Silas: Hey, I was watching that.

Teagan: You're done watching it. What if my mom comes back on the line and just hears the audio of chaos and destruction? She'd be in her car and halfway here before you clicked the next "World's Most Dangerous Airport" videos.

Silas: What are you doing?

Teagan: I'm holding your hand. Here, close your eyes and imagine you're in a plane and you're freaking out.

Silas: I'm not going to be freaking out.

Teagan: But you can squeeze my hand like this if you do.

Silas: This is ridiculous.

Teagan: Squeeze, man!

Silas: Your hand is too small. I would crush it if I actually squeezed.

Teagan: I think you're giving yourself a little too much credit, but fine.
This way with our fingers linked. You can still squeeze and you won't
crush my hand with your Hulk Smash grip.

Silas: Hm.

Teagan: What?

Silas: It's . . . nice.

Teagan: Yeah? You feel less anxious?

Silas: I didn't feel—

Silas: Yeah, I do. Is that some kind of trick? Moving your thumb over
mine like that?

Teagan: Oh, I, uh, didn't realize I was doing that. Sorry.

Silas: Don't be. It was . . . nice.

Teagan: I told you I'd take care of you. You should trust me.

Silas: . . . I do, Teag. I always have.

Teagan: Yeah?

Silas: Yeah.

Teagan: You have soft hands. Why are your hands so soft?

Silas: I . . . have no idea. Why are your hands soft?

Teagan: I moisturize on the off chance I have to walk a friend through a simulation of air travel.

Silas: What if . . .

Teagan: What?

Silas: Never mind. It doesn't matter. Did your mom forget about you?

Teagan: She'll be back eventually. What were you going to say?

Silas: Just . . .

Teagan: You just tightened your fingers around mine. Is it the flying? It's really going to be okay. I'll be with you the whole time.

Silas: No . . .

Silas: Teagan, what if—

(Click)

Mom: Teag? You there?

Teagan: Sorry, yeah, Mom. I'm here. Was just talking to Silas. Are you okay? You sound upset.

Teagan: No. You're not on speaker anymore.

Teagan: Oh my God!

Teagan: I'll be home tonight and we can talk, okay? I love you.

Teagan: Bye.

Silas: Are you okay?

Teagan: It's bad, I think.

Teagan: You don't need to keep holding my hand.

Silas: I know, but you can squeeze my fingers if you want to.

Chapter Eleven

Silas

Present Day

Tuesday

“Do you miss the sweater-vest when you finish a shift?” Teagan ran a finger over my shoulder, which was covered in the synthetic fibers, and I ignored the flare of sensation that simple touch left on my skin when her hand trailed down my arm. We were walking toward the food court because I insisted she have Americanized Chinese food before leaving the country and she would never turn down the offer when I was treating.

“I look good in the vest,” I said, gently swatting at her hand and then adjusting my tie.

“I will admit, there aren’t a lot of people that can really pull off this look, but I think you’re one of them. Nerd chic suits you well.”

I shot her a look. “When you hang with a former communications major and current deeply uncool adult, this is the best you get, my friend.” The airport was buzzing but we’d caught the food court at a decent time and the lines weren’t atrocious. I nodded toward the place we were going to grab food. “Aren’t you going to miss this?” I said, motioning to the window.

“Overpriced, inauthentic Chinese food? I’m guessing I’ll be able to find that in Europe, but otherwise, no, I don’t think I’ll miss it.” She gave a little smile and I noticed the three freckles like a constellation across the bridge of her nose.

“Even the egg rolls?”

“Okay. Yeah.” She nudged my shoulder with hers. “I’ll miss those.”

I didn't expect the lump to form in my throat at her words. I swallowed thickly but I heard a familiar voice behind me and turned. Ada chatted amiably with her walking buddy behind us, a few inches closer to him than I thought I might walk with just a friend.

"Well, hello there!" Ada's warm voice was chipper. "Looks like we weren't the only ones craving fried food for lunch," she said to her buddy. I looked him up and down, a guy a little shorter than me with gray hair at his temples. He wore the security uniform and Ada grinned at him like he'd invented the fried food she was craving.

"Hey," I said. "Teagan, do you know Ada?"

Teagan held out her hand. "Nice to meet you." She pivoted to the man. "I know this guy, though!" They did a multistep handshake and the man's face cracked into a smile.

"Where's the pink apron?" His voice was deep like James Earl Jones's and I weirdly felt like we were in some kind of competition for the affections of my friend.

Teagan cringed. "Don't remind me. Four more days and I am apron-free."

Ada glanced between them. "How do you two know each other?"

"She works in Julianna's shop," he said. "I can't resist those peanut butter cups."

"He's one of my best customers," Teagan added, turning to Ada. "I'll make sure he buys you some next time."

I watched Ada's smile turn girlish, her cheeks pink, and even though Teagan was the one who was supposed to notice these kinds of things, I saw the crush on her face, the clear adoration.

"I'll try to lock it in up here," he said, smiling down at Ada and tapping his temple. They held eye contact for a few moments and then he glanced at his watch. "I don't think I'll have time for egg rolls. Later this week, Ad? I gotta get back to my shift."

"Oh!" She looked at her own watch. "I didn't realize we'd been walking for so long. You're right." She stepped back along with the man, whose name I still hadn't caught. "Nice to see you kids."

I watched them walk away until Teagan tugged on my arm. “Oh my God, what if it’s them!” She leaned in close and hissed, her eyes sparkling. “That would be so cute!”

“Why cute? They’re like fifty.”

She punched my arm and we stepped forward to order. “Don’t be a jerk. Couples of all ages are cute!”

“I don’t think they’re a couple,” I said, though I remembered the look on Ada’s face.

“Not yet,” Teagan said, and the lump in my throat returned as she ordered her favorite. She glanced over her shoulder at me. “I hope he buys her something sweet she loves. I would totally do that for a boyfriend.”

I was about to remind her she did it for me all the time, but I closed my mouth and let her keep talking as we waited for our food.

“I feel like you can tell a lot about a person by their favorite candy. About how they are in a relationship.”

I laughed. “Because you’re such an expert?”

She elbowed me in the side. “More than you. Think about it. I know if someone picks a fun flavor combination, like whiskey chocolate or bacon and potato chip, they’re probably a little adventurous.” She ticked off her fingers. “And if they pick safe choices like solid milk chocolate or white chocolate truffles, they’re super reliable and steady. Like Erin,” she added, and I bit my tongue again at the mention of my ex. “Olivia, the dog groomer. Do you know her husband always picks up his best friend’s favorite chocolates for her whenever he flies to Chicago? How sweet is that? He’s one of the reliables, too.”

She talked faster when she got excited about a new idea. “Then there’s the I-like-everything people. They’re the ones who will rock your world or break your heart. Maybe both. They’re the ones who want it all.”

The kid at the counter handed us our food and we walked the short distance to the seating area. “But I like everything. You make me sound kind of reckless.”

Teagan mulled over that and bit the corner of her lip in the way that always made me want to watch her mouth. “You like *almost* everything.”

“Well, only a sociopath would want black licorice.” I set our tray down on a table, using a napkin to brush crumbs away. “What kind of person am I in a relationship if I like everything except black licorice?”

“I’ll have to think about that. At the very least, not a sociopath. That’s something. I’m sure that’s at least part of why Erin loves you.”

I skirted the comment and tossed away the napkin I’d used to clean the table. When I returned, Teagan was digging into her meal. “So,” I said, as I joined her at the small table. “How are you feeling about leaving? Are you ready?”

Across from me, she unceremoniously shoved an egg roll in her mouth, deep-fried flakes falling across her pink uniform and taking up residence over her breasts.

I glanced down at my own bowl, trying to ignore how I’d taken in the shape of her out of habit, examined how the flakes dotted her chest.

“I’m not,” she said with her mouth full. “But let’s talk about the list.”

I raised an eyebrow before I knew I was doing it. “Is this whole thing a distraction so you don’t have to think about actually leaving?”

She broke her chopsticks apart. “Of course it is. Thinking about someone’s love story is way better than thinking about whether or not I canceled my cable and what is worth packing.”

“Are you packing underwear?” I jumped back when her soy sauce packet squirted, and I narrowly missed getting hit. By the time I looked back to Teagan, her eyes were wide.

“Um, yes, I’m bringing underwear. Why would you ask that?” She lowered her voice. “What do you think I plan to get up to in France?”

I laughed, the memories from years ago coming back effortlessly. “Back in college, you told me you were going to give up packing underwear so you could fit in more notebooks.”

Teagan snort-laughed and her hand flew to cover her mouth, almost knocking over her soda in the process. “I’d forgotten about that. How do you remember that stuff?”

My face warmed. It felt like I remembered everything when it came to her, and I always had. The fantasy of my best friend leaving her underwear at

home had plagued my thoughts more than I wanted it to those months I was in France. “It was memorable.”

“Well, lucky for you I have succumbed to the electronic age and one notebook will suffice.” She eyed me thoughtfully. “Well, it won’t make a difference for you, but lucky for the French citizens who will be saved a view of my butt.”

“Attention in the boarding area. Flight 344 with service to Detroit is now boarding.”

“I’m sure some French citizen will probably still get to see it.” I froze the fork halfway to my mouth before shoving the rice in. I wasn’t sure why I said it, and even though Teagan laughed, my stomach clenched at the thought of her finding someone while over there.

She shrugged. “I mean, you met Erin when you went, so maybe luck will be on my side.”

“Anyway,” I said, moving the conversation along after swallowing too much food at once. “We’ve got Ada and . . . what’s his name?”

“Sam,” she said. “He comes in all the time, so he could have dropped it.”

“So, Ada and Sam, and then Jess and the luggage guy.”

“And the two baristas—I can’t shake the feeling they’re pining for each other, like how they look at each other. It’s so telling.”

“Do you know them?”

“I’m just guessing after seeing them a few times. It’s so obvious.”

I glanced down at my food on instinct. *Do I look at her a certain way?* “Okay. Where do we start first?”

She bit her lower lip and looked around. “I get off at four. Want to get some coffee?”

“And spy on baristas?”

She placed two palms on the table and I noticed the dark purple nail polish, which was new since the last time I noticed her hands. “That’s my love language, Si.”

I laughed and handed her a few napkins from the stack I’d grabbed, knowing she was moments away from popping up to find some. “Being nosy is your love language?”

“Duh.” She picked up a second egg roll and grinned. “Part of me doesn’t want it to be any of them so we can keep looking for the owner. This is kind of fun.”

“Except you’re leaving in a few days.”

She shot me a look over her bowl. “Buzzkill.”

“That’s *my* love language.”

“Maybe you do secretly like black licorice.”

Chapter Twelve

Teagan

Silas leaned over the café table, lowering his voice. “This is creepy.”

I sipped my mocha and glanced over his shoulder. “It’s only a little creepy.”

“We’re pretending to drink coffee to spy on two twenty-year-old baristas. I think that fits the bill for creepy.” Silas’s eyes darted around as if everyone knew what we were up to or would care.

“For the record, I’m actually drinking mine.” I took another sip, enjoying his twitchy discomfort with more glee than I would ever admit. “And look on the bright side: If it’s these two, then we’ll return the note and you don’t have to play my game anymore.”

He grumbled something unintelligible and sat back in his chair.

Mara, the barista with swept-back brown hair, stepped up to the counter and set down two disposable cups. “Half-caff Americano and a caramel latte with oat milk!” Our view of the counter was momentarily obscured by the suited duo who approached to grab their drinks.

“Have either of them been in the shop?” He looked over my shoulder again, and as much as he grumbled, I was pretty sure Silas was excited about solving the mystery.

“Not that I remember, but there’s lots of times I’m not there.” I followed his gaze to where Mara was laughing with the other barista, whose name tag we couldn’t see when we ordered. “Look at them. Ah! Silas, what if we found the owner of the list? There is some serious pining happening between those two.”

He looked back at me skeptically. “How can you tell?”

“The way they’re leaning in toward each other, how the one on the left is pushing their hair behind their ear. I think this is it.”

“I kind of think you’re seeing what you want to see. That’s how James and I look when we work together.”

Her eyes met mine and she blinked slowly, lowering her long lashes. “First, I see you guys all the time and you don’t look like that. Second, are you pining for James? Because if so, I have questions. Namely, does your girlfriend know and would you like me to turn James down the next time he asks me out?”

He leaned forward again and I had to clutch my cup to stop it from toppling at his sudden movement. This was the second time in one day that I was in danger of losing my beverage because of Silas.

“James asked you out?”

“That’s what you took from that?”

He picked at his thumbnail and I absently let my gaze wander the even trim of his short beard. “But he asked you out?”

James was sweet and kind of cute, but I’d turned him down since I was going to be leaving soon. “Last week, but I asked for a rain check until I’m back in the country.”

Silas’s jaw worked and he bounced his clenched hand on the table.

“He was polite. It’s not like he catcalled me in a stairwell. Why do you look so ragey?”

“I’m not ragey,” he said, unclenching his fists, his long fingers awkwardly stretching on the table between us. “I just didn’t know he asked you out is all.”

“Well, at the time, I didn’t know you were pining for him, but I’ll proceed accordingly.”

“If I was pining for James, you’d be the first to know.” He took the first drink of his black coffee and winced. “Cold,” he muttered.

We’d been sitting there for fifteen minutes and he hadn’t touched it, so I wasn’t shocked it wasn’t piping hot anymore, but in that moment, the last customer in line moved aside and the line was blessedly empty. “We’re

coming back to the James thing,” I said, finishing my drink and standing. “C’mon.”

“C’mon, what?”

“Let’s go ask them!”

He shook his head, his vehement disagreement with my plan written on his face. “No way. What are we going to say? ‘We’ve been watching how you flirt. Is one of you in love with the other?’ ”

“I’ll be smoother than that,” I said, tipping my head to the counter. “No veto, remember?”

He grumbled but stood. After all the years I’d known him, I still wasn’t used to Silas’s height or the way his long limbs unfurled like a giant’s when he stood. I wasn’t short, but he had a good eight inches on me and I loved the rare occasions when I had reason to get a hug from him and his long body wrapped around me. I always wanted it to last longer.

The first time I connected the dots of wanting more of his hugs to wanting more of him, period, we’d been on a video chat. I’d been upset about some guy who’d ghosted me and he said he was sorry he couldn’t give me a hug. I remembered thinking how much I wanted one from him and knowing he really would hug me if he wasn’t several hours away. It was such a small moment in the course of our friendship, but that’s when that first spark of attraction started. I’d been with other guys, some seriously, and he’d been with Erin forever, so I’d learned to ignore it, but it was always there, that feeling that Silas’s arms around me would always make things better. His solid body near me always had.

Now he was in a grumpy mood since I made him spy with me. So I got a stiff, awkward Silas next to me as we approached the counter.

“How can I help you?” Mara greeted us. The gold name tag said SHE/HER under her name. “Refill?”

“No,” I said, glancing over my shoulder. Silas wasn’t going to help me at all and I guessed I deserved that. “This will sound odd, but I’m just wondering if either of you lost a note in the candy shop down the hall.”

Mara looked confused and shook her head. “Katie, did you lose a note in the candy shop?”

Katie approached the counter, and I didn't care what Silas said—there were vibes between these two. “Nope. Never been in there. What kind of note?”

I was a little relieved the note wasn't theirs, only because it meant we got to keep trying to figure it out and it distracted me from the realization that I was going to be leaving Silas for five months. “Dang,” I said, looking at Silas for a moment before turning back to them. “We found a pros and cons list. Looks like someone was deciding to tell someone else how they felt who also works in the airport, and we wondered if it might be you two.”

Mara glanced over her shoulder at Katie and then back to us. “Uh, nope. Sorry. Why did you think it was us?”

Silas poked me out of view of the baristas, since he'd already made fun of me for not having a great answer other than creeping on them.

“We're just asking everyone at this point,” I lied.

Mara glanced at her friend and then back to us with a shrug. “I hope you find the owner. It's really hard when you can't tell someone how you feel about them.”

“You're right,” I said, avoiding a glance at Silas. “Thanks, anyway!”

I reluctantly turned on my heel, tugging on Silas's arm.

His voice was pitched low so they couldn't hear us. “Sorry it's another strike.”

“Me, too. I—” I stopped and slowed my pace, listening in on the two baristas behind us.

I was pretty sure it was Mara who spoke first. “That was kind of weird.”

“Yeah.” Katie's voice was a little higher. “But, um, funny thing is . . .”

I was moving at a glacial pace now, waiting for Mara's response. “Really?”

The disembodied voice reminding people to keep an eye on their luggage and sounds of coffee brewing in the background were the soundtrack to the baristas' heart-to-heart, and I reached behind me to swat Silas's poking finger away as he tried to prod me forward, our fingertips brushing.

“We're such good friends, so I wasn't sure, but, yeah . . . I've been into you for a long time.”

I swallowed my “aw,” pressed my fingers over my smile, and poked Silas back, subtly motioning to the counter.

“I’ve . . . been into you, too.” The two grinned at each other and their fingers almost touched. “I never knew how to say it.”

Silas cleared his throat and I could have killed him for ruining the moment, not that either of them seemed to hear us. Really, he was just ruining my ability to spy on the private moment. “We should probably leave them to it, Teag.”

We walked away toward his counter and the shop, Silas still holding his cold coffee. “Well,” I said. “I think an ‘I told you so’ is in order.”

“You could not have predicted that would happen. You got lucky. That could have been super awkward.”

I brushed off his comment, though he was right. “Young love, though! And just blurting it out like that? Admitting it? I’m impressed. I’ve never been that brave.”

I bit the inside of my cheek because I’d maybe said too much. There’d been a time—there’d been lots of times—when I thought about telling Silas I wanted more than friendship, but then he was attached or I was attached and it wasn’t worth the risk. Out timing was always off.

In my periphery, Silas straightened his tie, his hand moving down toward his taught stomach. He’d gotten into working out during the pandemic. Before then, I’d always liked that he was a little soft in the middle, but from the few times I’d seen him without a shirt on or when he’d posted on social media, I knew Silas was now kind of ripped. I averted my thirsty gaze and looked back at his face. “Anyway, you know I avoid awkward through sheer force of will.”

He looked at me, eyes soft but assessing. “Yeah,” he said, looking ahead again. “I know.”

Chapter Thirteen

Phone Call

Five Years Ago
A Tuesday

Teagan: You could have texted.

(Sound of windshield wipers swishing)

Silas: I'm driving. How is it going?

Teagan: *(Sighs)*

Silas: Bad?

Teagan: Really bad. My dad got laid off and he'd made some big investments that went south. He didn't tell my mom about any of it. They're so mad at each other. They're not talking.

Silas: How are you?

Teagan: I'm okay.

Silas: How are you really?

Teagan: I don't think I can go on the trip. I don't think I can even stay in school.

Silas: Oh no. Is there any way with financial aid?

Silas: Don't cry, Teag.

Teagan: I'm not crying.

Silas: I can hear you crying. Your snot noises are ricocheting off the inside of my car.

Teagan: *(Laughing through her tears)*

Teagan: I was being quiet. It's weird you know me this well.

Silas: Not that quiet. And who else could know you like I do?

Teagan: No one.

Silas: Well, if you're not going to France, I'm not going, either. I'm sure I can cancel.

Teagan: No!

Silas: I don't want to go without you. I wouldn't know anyone else on the trip, anyway.

Teagan: You're going.

Silas: The whole thing was your idea. I'm staying.

Teagan: Don't make me fight you. I won't play fair and I'll win.

Silas: What will you do if you're not in school?

Teagan: Get a job, I guess. I think it's going to be all hands on deck for a while. I have no idea what you do with half an English degree.

Teagan: It's . . . people go through a lot worse. Not getting to go to Europe isn't exactly the end of the world. I know that.

Silas: It's okay if it feels like it is, though.

Teagan: They're not sure we'll be able to keep the house. It's like everything is disappearing.

Silas: You still have me. Even if I'm thousands of miles away.

Teagan: I know. Besties for life.

Silas: No veto.

Teagan: Where are you driving, anyway? It sounds like it's really coming down out there. I didn't realize this storm spread so far across the state.

Silas: It didn't. I'm here.

Teagan: Where?

Silas: Your driveway. Come let me in.

Silas: I thought you could maybe use a hug or a hand to hold or we can go egg your dad's car if you want.

Silas: Well, I told you not to cry.

Teagan: It's just that you know I love petty vandalism. I'll be out in a second.

Chapter Fourteen

Silas

Present Day
Wednesday

My shift was ending in a few minutes and James had arrived early to relieve me. “Hey, man,” he said, logging in to the system.

Despite Teagan’s insistence that it was not a big deal, her revelation the day before had stuck with me. “Hey,” I said, finishing what I’d been working on. My tie felt too tight and I wanted to hit the gym when I left, needing to burn off some energy. I briefed him on the few issues he might end up dealing with during his shift and caught his gaze wandering across the hall, where Teagan was getting ready to close the shop. “Uh, hey. So, you asked Teagan out?”

James didn’t look up from the computer. “Yeah. Why?” He froze. “Oh shit. That’s okay, isn’t it? I know you two are . . .”

“We’re not together or anything. Just didn’t know you’d asked her out.”

James shrugged. “She shot me down, if that makes you feel better.” His gaze still lingered on where she had bent over near the counter, and I clenched my fist to stop from smacking his arm. “What’s up with you two, anyway? I know you’re with Erin. You’ve never . . .”

“Just friends.” I made sure my phone, wallet, and keys were in my pockets. “She’s leaving the country in a few days.”

James didn’t respond, and when I looked up, his face held a bit of amusement. “You sure you’re just friends?”

“Yes,” I said, wondering what had changed that everyone was doubting this all of a sudden. Well, rightfully doubting it, but still.

Before she had to drop out of school to help her family, Teagan had visited me one weekend during our sophomore year. I was freshly dumped by my first girlfriend, who had been my best friend through high school, and I was basically a storm cloud in a hoodie. In retrospect, that relationship was doomed to fail—we were young and inexperienced—but we weren’t friends after the breakup, which was the hardest thing to deal with. When Teagan arrived, she took one look at me and made me change out of the hoodie, shower, and go to a party. It was my campus and not hers, so I didn’t know how she even found the party, but hours later we were a little drunk on the porch of some random house. “Here’s the thing,” she said, all of a sudden, breaking the combination of the silence of the evening and the party behind us. “You’re going to find someone new because you’re amazing.” She slurred her words a little and I studied her face. I’d always known Teagan was pretty, but I’d never thought about it much since I had a girlfriend. She was actually beautiful.

“I might not find someone new,” I said, my own words slurring as I leaned against the nearby wall. “What if that was my one chance at love and it’s over?”

She leaned against me, so I felt the sharp angle of her elbow until she shifted and fit with me like a puzzle piece. “You’re nineteen. Highly unlikely.” Teagan smelled like oranges and beer and my arm fell around her. “But if it’s true, then sadly you’ll be alone forever,” she said sweetly. It took a second for me to register her playful tone. “Which is a shame because I think you would have liked sex.”

“You’re mean.” Her sarcasm was really the furthest thing from my mind. I was nineteen and her saying the word “sex” coupled with her snuggled against me was all it took to send my mind down a dangerous path. Her hand rested on my stomach and her head was against my shoulder and I couldn’t remember what my ex felt like against me in that moment. It was all Teagan. That random house party, her hair tickling my chin, was when I first knew I

wanted Teagan and that I'd never have her. We'd fallen back into drunken silence until she spoke again.

"But now you have me, so you might be a virgin forever, but at least you'll never lose your best friend again."

I pushed the memory out of my mind and answered James. "Yeah. Just friends. Since college, so it's kind of like you asking out my sister."

James's smirk fell. "I got it, man. Like I said, she turned me down, so, no harm, no foul."

"You ready?" Teagan strode toward the counter with a smile as he finished. "Hey, James."

"Hey," he said without looking up, and I caught Teagan's confused expression, shrugging. She'd murder me twice if she knew I was going all alpha male on someone interested in her.

"See ya, James," I said with a wave, and we headed toward the exit. I was giving her a ride home since she'd lent her mom her car to use while she was in France, and she let me guide her away from the counter without saying anything else to James.

"Is he mad I turned him down?" She sounded concerned, and my guilt returned.

"I don't think so. Just had an angry customer," I lied, hoping she hadn't been watching the counter too closely.

"Oh, because—" She paused and stopped abruptly. Her voice was a hiss and she nudged me against the nearby wall. "Look!"

I followed the direction of her nod and saw Jess from the dog-grooming place glance left and right and then step into the luggage store at the other end of the concourse. "Teag . . ." When I looked back, I could see on her face that she was already plotting. "No."

"Yes," she said. "We'll just walk by and maybe . . . pop in. I'm about to be traveling, after all," she said.

"Yes, every college student is bargain hunting in a high-end airport luggage shop."

"They don't know I don't have any money." She took my hand; her soft palm fit perfectly against mine, and she linked our fingers. It was so she

could drag me toward the shop, but I got lost in the feel of her hand on mine for a moment. “C’mon!”

I eventually slowed my pace and pulled her back. “It will take us a few minutes to even get down there, and she might not even be there anymore.”

“Then we should get moving.”

I leveled her with a stare. “Why does it matter?”

“You didn’t see them together. There was chemistry! Don’t you want to know?”

I cocked one eyebrow and resisted the urge to go with her when she tugged on my hand again, our fingers still linked.

“I’ll buy dinner if you do this with me,” she said, tugging my hand one more time. “And I’ll let you pick the place.”

“I’ll pick sushi.”

She made a face but nodded and tugged on my hand again, her grip stronger than I expected, and I reluctantly followed her.

“Will you pick up the pace?” she said over her shoulder.

“I agreed to help you spy. I did not promise to be excited about it.”

The interior of the store smelled like leather, and one of the clerks was near the front helping someone decide between two bags.

“Where did she go?” Teagan leaned into me as we neared the back of the store, pausing to look at a rack of luggage tags. Like all shops in the airport, the place wasn’t big, and we slowly made our way along the wall of luggage options, looking around like Jess might appear while the clerk was mercifully busy with someone who looked like they might buy something.

“Are you sure she came in here?” I asked.

“I didn’t see her leave.”

“Maybe she slipped out while you were agreeing to eat sushi with me,” I said with a laugh.

Teagan didn’t have time to answer because we both heard the muffled groan from the other side of the closed door to what must have been a back office or storage space. Our eyes met, hers wide with recognition, as mine must have been.

“Was that . . .” We both heard the sound again, followed by a soft moan, and I tugged on her hand to pull her toward the exit.

“That was definitely . . .” We’d gotten almost all the way out of the store, but the person deciding between bags was blocking the path; then we heard the door open behind us. I wanted to crawl into one of the suitcases.

“Hi, folks. Can we help you?” The man approaching us smiled and adjusted his tie, though he didn’t reach out to shake our hands. *Noted.* Behind him, Jess from the pet-grooming place emerged, running a hand down the front of her shirt, her cheeks a little pink.

“Oh, hi, Teagan,” Jess said. I thought she sounded a little breathless, but I might have imagined it. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh,” Teagan said, fixing her face. I knew she wanted to be squee’ing and it was all I’d hear in the car on the way back to her place. “You know, I’m taking a trip soon and wanted to check out what was in here.” The lie rolled off her tongue so easily, I was jealous . . . and a little frightened, but then I remembered the lie I’d been telling her for months.

“Did you know my ex-husband ran this shop? Jack, Teagan works at that candy place that’s so good, a few gates from us.”

Ex-husband. Teagan’s lip twitched at the realization, but she smiled and greeted the man.

“Will you excuse me? I need to get back to the salon.” She kissed Jack’s cheek and they shared what looked like a pretty heated gaze. “If I don’t see you, have a good trip, Teagan!”

We walked out, too, Teagan saying she’d think about the bags we’d supposedly looked at. She practically vibrated next to me as we walked out. When we were almost to my car, she turned. “Are we not going to talk about what they were doing behind that door?”

My body had reacted to it the same as I imagined hers did . . . or fantasized hers did. “Do we really need to debrief it?”

“Um . . . people were having sex five feet from us. Yes, we need to debrief. How often does that happen?”

I shrugged and hit the button to unlock my car. “Admittedly, not since I had a roommate in college who didn’t respect boundaries.”

“How is Caleb, anyway?”

“I have no idea, but I overheard enough of his partners to be pretty confident he’s making someone somewhere very happy.”

“I really should have gotten to know him better,” she mused. She said it to get a rise out of me, but it still worked.

“I’m sure it would have changed the course of your life,” I said dryly. “The best and loudest three minutes you’d ever had.”

“Just because you weren’t hooking up in college doesn’t mean you have to sound so snarky about people who were.”

“What makes you think I wasn’t hooking up in college?”

“Because you weren’t. You would have told me. What girl were you spending time with besides me?”

“I didn’t tell you everything,” I said quietly. I hadn’t told her when I lost my virginity or the few times I’d had sex after because it wasn’t good, and if I was honest with myself, I’d been thinking of her the entire time.

“Silas, I am shocked. How did I not know?” She met my gaze over the top of my car before climbing in. “I told you about all my hookups.”

I cracked the knuckles on my left hand as I climbed into the driver’s side. I hadn’t exactly minded when she told me, but I never liked it. I’d chalked that up to us being so close and me feeling protective, but after a while, it was jealousy. It was the same feeling I had when I learned James had asked her out. “It’s not a big deal.” I shrugged and started toward the exit.

“Anyway, what do you think they were doing?” She drummed her fingers on the cup holder. “They weren’t in there long enough to do much, were they?”

“I have no idea, Teag.” Also, I didn’t like how my body reacted in pretty obvious ways to her talking about sex.

“Maybe just fingering or something . . . She definitely looked like she was flushed.” Teagan gripped the handle when I swerved at her words, then played it off like I thought a car was backing out. “I can get off pretty fast from fingering if it’s done right,” she mused, looking out the window, and I hoped she wasn’t looking down, because I was now cruising through a

parking garage with an erection thinking about how fast I could get my best friend in the world to an orgasm with my fingers.

Chapter Fifteen

Teagan

I pushed open the door of my apartment and shivered, searching for the sweatshirt I'd stolen from Silas that I kept near the door.

"It's freezing in here," he said, walking in behind me and rubbing his arms. "What's up with your heat?"

"I'm trying to save as much on utilities as I can before I leave," I said, pulling on the sweatshirt, the familiar weight and softness surrounding me. "And it's not usually this cold." I glanced around my one-bedroom apartment. The benefit of living near campus was that it wasn't hard to find someone to sublease it while I was abroad. A math major who would be returning from her own study abroad trip needed something furnished for the remainder of the year. I loved that cramped little home, though—it had been my first place all on my own—no roommates, no parents, just Silas visiting and the occasional Tinder date coming home with me.

"You know, I might want that back someday." Silas plopped down on my love seat and motioned to the sweatshirt.

"I think the statute of limitations has passed." I tossed him a fleece blanket from the arm of the couch. "It wouldn't fit you anymore, anyway." I hadn't planned to let my gaze drop from his face to his now well-developed chest and arms. It wasn't usually what I was attracted to, but on Silas it worked, not that I hadn't liked how he looked before.

"I'm taking something of yours, then." He looked around and I grinned at his assessment. "This blanket," he finally said. "It's mine now until you return the sweatshirt."

“Okay,” I said, taking the short walk to the kitchen and pulling two beers from the fridge. Silas, despite all his laid-back qualities, was a beer snob, and I had a couple of bottles of his favorite microbrew still in my fridge.

“Why did you give in to that so quickly?” He had the blanket over him. It really was cold in the apartment.

“I stole that from you, too.” I settled on the arm of the love seat, taking a drink after I handed him his beer. “You let me use it during a camping trip and it ended up going home with me.” I’d kind of forgotten about that until he mentioned it.

“Teag . . . I’m concerned you’re in this friendship solely to steal from me.” His neck stretched when he took a drink from his own bottle, and I watched his throat work like a creeper. He had a nice throat.

“Oh, I am. No doubt.” I set my bottle aside on the end table and rubbed my upper arms to generate heat. “That and to get help with solving mysteries. Was that not clear before?”

“I feel so used.” He eyed my movements and then lifted the fleece fabric. “C’mon, get under the blanket with me. You’re shivering. Can I Venmo you some money so you will turn your actual heat on?”

I slid down the arm of the couch and under the blanket with him, the heat from his body already warming the space under the thick fabric where our bodies were pressed together. That had happened thousands of times in our friendship and it shouldn’t have meant anything, but I had an inkling of a feeling and I pushed it back. “Nah, no need for Venmo. I’ll just take it from your wallet.” I nudged my shoulder against his and his arm fell around me, again, like it had a hundred times before.

“So,” he said, pulling his phone from under the blanket. He thumbed to a photo of the list we’d made. “Looks like our leads are coming up as dead ends.” I leaned against his arm and looked at the list. Silas’s biceps were solid against my cheek.

“Well, not total dead ends. Julianna laughed at me, but the baristas seem happy together, and Jess seemed. . . . really happy.” My face heated thinking about our conversation in the car about Jess and her ex-husband. We talked

about everything, but I'd tried to back off on sexy things since he got serious with Erin.

"True," he said, zooming in on the list, "but no closer to finding the owner of this."

"Maybe—" I paused when a notification flashed over the screen and we both stared at it.

Erin: Thanks! I'll be by later tonight.

He dismissed it quickly, but I pulled out from under his arm, suddenly aware this was too close, no matter how familiar it felt.

"Do you want something to eat?" I walked back into the kitchen, eager for some excuse to step away from my very attached friend.

"No, thanks." He was still looking at his phone. "Maybe Ada and Sam? You said he comes into the shop sometimes, right?"

I opened the fridge—there wasn't much in it besides eggs, whipped cream, cheese, some questionable cold cuts, and beer. "Yeah, we could look into that. Will you go on another fact-finding mission with me?"

He looked up, pinning me with his brown eyes and raised eyebrow. "Do I have a choice?"

"No." I settled back on the arm of the couch and Silas eyed me curiously.

"Do you want back under here?"

"Nah. That's okay." I stuffed my hands into the hoodie's front pocket. "When is Erin coming over? Do you need to get out of here?"

He glanced back at his phone. "Uh, I have a little time."

I nodded and reached for my beer. "So, she's back in town? I bet it will be nice to see her again!" I was going for positive, but I'd veered a little far into maniacally peppy.

He nodded and glanced down at his phone. "Yeah, I guess so." He wasn't a guy who spent a lot of time staring at his phone, but he spoke again without looking up. "Couldn't we avoid spying on people and just ask Ada or Sam directly?"

I ignored his question because he was giving off a weird vibe. "Why are you being weird?"

“Says the woman who refuses to turn on her heat.” He held up the blanket for me again. “Will you get under here? You’re clearly cold.”

“I don’t think we should snuggle on the couch. Your girlfriend would hate it, even though nothing is happening.”

He looked away again. “She won’t care.”

“She hates me. She would definitely care.”

“She doesn’t hate you. And it doesn’t matter if she does. You’re my friend.” He reached for my ankle, tugging my leg toward him and under the blanket.

The space under it was warm through my socks and I let him pull my other foot under the blanket, resting his palms over my toes while I kept my perch on the arm. “It matters because you love her and I’m your friend, because I respect boundaries, a few of them, anyway.”

Silas was looking down at where my feet had disappeared under the blanket, and I appreciated not seeing his reaction. He always looked so conflicted when it came to me and Erin, and I worried I hadn’t made enough effort to get along with his girlfriend.

“Anyway,” I said, wiggling my toes under the blanket. “I’m glad you have her.”

“Teag,” he said, looking up, his brown eyes flashing.

“I know. I know. Just let me say this, okay? No veto.”

“You already played your no-veto card for the year.”

“Yeah,” I said, rubbing my arms through the sweatshirt material. “But don’t you think I should get two?”

He rolled his eyes but held his arm out in the “carry on” motion. “Why are you glad I have her?”

“She makes you happy and I like you to be happy. It’s good you have someone besides me.” I pushed my hands between my thighs to warm them and I wondered if it might be time to cave on my cost-saving measure of keeping the heat off. “And you being with her made it impossible to ever . . . slip up, like we did before you left all those years ago.”

He gave me a very Silas look, so I knew he had something to say but also wasn’t going to say it out loud.

“Which is a good thing,” I reassured him. “When it was bad between us, and then awkward . . . that was hell. I don’t ever want that to happen again.”

He finally spoke, holding up the blanket and tugging on my leg. “Will you get under this damn thing? You’re freezing. Stop being so stubborn.”

Silas was warm and the blanket was warm and even though on a few levels, I knew I shouldn’t, I slid under the fabric and his arm fell back around my shoulders.

“Happy now?” I asked, ignoring the warm sensation moving through my body that had nothing to do with the blanket.

He didn’t answer immediately, but his arm over my shoulder tensed. “For the record, that would never happen again, us being awkward and weird together. Even if we were both single.”

“But it could. What if you got drunk enough to think I was attractive or you wore those suspenders I think are so weirdly sexy?”

“They were my grandfather’s and I only put them on as a joke.” His body jostled with his low chuckle and I smiled. “And I wouldn’t have to be drunk to know you’re beautiful.”

I ignored his words and the flutter I felt in my chest at hearing them. “But since you have Erin, it doesn’t matter. We won’t slip up and ruin everything.”

When I glanced over, he was staring at a spot on the blanket, jaw set.

I nudged his side with my elbow. “You should probably get going. I’m sure you want to shower before she gets to your place, and I want this blanket all to myself. I’ve decided I’m not giving that back either.”

I thought he’d laugh, but he gave me another Silas look before finally nodding.

Chapter Sixteen

Phone Call

Five Years Ago
A Wednesday

Silas: Hey, it's Silas. Leave a message.

Teagan: Hey, stranger. Remember me?

Automated response: If you would like to keep your message, hang up.
If you would like to delete and rerecord, press 1.

(Beep)

Automated response: Rerecord your message.

Teagan: Hey, it's me. I can't believe it's been two months already. I want to hear everything, and can we forget about the whole me making out with you at the airport thing?

Automated response: If you would like to keep your message, hang up.
If you would like to delete and rerecord, press 1.

(Beep)

Automated response: Rerecord your message.

Teagan: It's Teagan. Are you even checking this voice mail? I hope so. I miss you. I really miss you. I'm sorry I kissed you. It was a huge mistake. I was just swept up in the moment but it was so wrong.

Automated response: If you would like to keep your message, hang up. If you would like to delete and rerecord, press 1.

(Beep)

Automated response: Rerecord your message.

Teagan: It's me and I miss your face. I'm sorry for what I did. I kissed you and you kissed me back and I think we both just got swept up, but then I ran away without saying anything. I tripped and fell down the stairs in front of a hundred strangers while running, if that makes you feel better. It probably doesn't because you're usually a better person than that, but on the off chance it helps, my butt was bruised for a week and the contents of my purse flew everywhere, so I had to retrieve tampons from where they landed in front of a bunch of hot military guys. And I know you called me a bunch of times and I didn't call back. I'm the worst kind of friend. I don't have an excuse, but I promised you'd never lose me as your best friend and you haven't. If you still want me. I hope you do because, as previously stated, I miss your face. And I know you're not living in your hoodie because I stole it from you, but I hope me being a jerk didn't ruin your trip. Call me back so I can grovel properly?

* * *

(Phone buzzing)

Teagan: Hi!

Silas: Hey.

Teagan: You got my voice mail, then.

Silas: Yeah.

Teagan: How is France? Is it amazing?

Silas: It's good.

Teagan: . . .

Silas: What?

Teagan: This is so awkward—and I hate it.

Silas: I hate it, too.

Teagan: The military guys were really cute and one of them had to tell me someone's discarded gum was stuck to my shirt from my fall.

Silas: *(Laughs)*

Teagan: So, that has to make up for me being a jerk a little, right?

Silas: You kissed me, like really kissed me, Teag. And then took off, like . . . what happened?

Teagan: You were leaving and I realized how much I'd miss you and I was so sad I couldn't go. And it's not like I hadn't thought about it before.

Silas: You'd thought about kissing me?

Teagan: I mean . . . it doesn't mean anything, it's just . . . thoughts. It doesn't have to mean anything.

Silas: It sucked, Teag. You ghosted me and it was like getting dumped by my ex all over again.

Teagan: I know. I freaked out.

Teagan: Some of the gum got in my hair, too.

Silas: That helps.

Teagan: Are things going to be awkward until we're eighty now?

Silas: With as fast as you drive, there's no way you're making it to eighty.

Teagan: With as slow as you drive, you'd think you were already eighty.

Silas: (*Chuckles*) Okay. I was being awkward.

Teagan: I deserve it. But I promise I'll never let anything get in the way of us being friends again. I'll never let it happen. Are you okay, though? Is someone there to make you get drunk and forget about girls who mess with your head and kiss you sloppily when they're sad?

Silas: It hasn't been great, but it's getting better.

Silas: And it wasn't a sloppy kiss. For the record.

Teagan: It wasn't. It was actually a—

Woman's voice: Silas, *êtes-vous prêt à partir?*

Teagan: Are you ready to go where? Who is that?

Silas: Yeah. Give me a minute.

Woman's voice: *En français!*

Silas: That's Erin—she's the other communications student here with the group. We're going out to dinner.

Teagan: *Très bien.*

Silas: *(Chuckles)* Can we talk this weekend?

Teagan: *Oui.*

Silas: I miss you.

Teagan: *En français!*

Silas: *Tu me manques, mon amie.*

Chapter Seventeen

Silas

Present Day

Thursday

The conversation from the night before was still on my mind as I brushed my teeth. I'd left Teagan's place so close to telling her how I really felt and in dire need of my car's seat warmer. Her apartment really was freezing. I thought about inviting her to stay at my place until she left, but since I was leaving her to meet with my ex-girlfriend, that felt like a bad idea, too. As I went through my morning ministrations, I replayed the rest of the evening.

As much as we could be, Erin and I were still friendly. After dating for six years, many of those including the foregone conclusion that we'd be together forever, it was hard to not be friends, and we'd shared a long hug when she stopped by. Hugging Erin was different from hugging Teagan, and that I'd always made that comparison on some level was a reminder that I should have ended things with her sooner.

"Hey," I said when we pulled apart. She didn't look anything like Teagan, which was what had first drawn me to her when we met on our study abroad trip. Erin had dark blond hair, was on the short side with a beautifully round body. She had a great laugh and I'd loved her on some level. On that study abroad trip, she'd been a friend and then more when I didn't have anyone, and then I realized I liked being with her because it was safe. I wasn't ever risking anything. Now we stood a few feet apart but I didn't long to be closer. "I packed up the things of yours I found," I said finally, nodding toward the kitchen, where a box of her stuff was organized.

“Thanks,” she said. “I appreciate you keeping it all together.” She looked around the apartment. We’d never moved in together, but she’d practically lived here and I at her place. The untangling part had been harder than I imagined, especially because the person I’d normally confide in didn’t know I’d ended the relationship with Erin.

“You want something to drink?” I invited her into the small living room. The box of chocolates Teagan had left for Erin’s birthday sat on my table.

“Sure. Beer if you have it.” Erin settled on the far end of the couch, which had been her spot, and traced a finger over the box.

The bottle was cold in my hand when I handed it over, and it made me think of Teagan’s cold apartment. “Help yourself.” I probably should have told her the box was hers, but I realized with a cold clarity that Teagan got her something and I didn’t, and the words lodged in my throat. I’d make sure she took them with her.

“You and your candy,” she said, accepting the bottle. “How is Teagan?”

I knew I wouldn’t hear bitterness or vindictiveness in her voice, even though they’d never gotten along. She knew how important Teag was to me, but that didn’t stop the guilt from gnawing at me.

“She’s good. She’s taking that study abroad trip finally. She leaves in a few days.”

“Ah, *c’est bon pour elle*,” she said before sipping from her bottle. I did the quick translation in my head. “Good for her” could have sounded sarcastic from someone else, but I knew Erin meant it. She slid into French sometimes—it had always made me smile.

Unlike me, Erin had really wanted to be in Lyon, kept up with her French, and did a lot of business internationally. Once things were kind of resolved with Teagan, I’d had some fun, but Erin and Teagan looked at travel like the ultimate experience. For me, those five months were a trip I took once. Neither woman ever understood my ambivalence.

Erin set her beer on the table. “You’re sad she’s leaving?”

The question was so direct, I took a sip from my beer instead of answering. “I’m glad she’s finally getting to go.”

“You didn’t answer my question, but that’s okay.” She gave me a small smile and looked at her lap. “So, I wanted to tell you I started seeing someone.”

“That’s great,” I said unconvincingly. “Who?”

“We work together. You don’t know him. It’s nice to be in something new. It’s different.” She leaned forward on her knees again, tracing the writing on the top of the box. “Did you tell her yet?”

I shook my head and she nodded like she knew that answer was coming. “I don’t think I’m going to.”

“Silas. I say this with love,” she said. “Because I think part of me will always love you, but you’re being a dumbass.”

“Don’t sugarcoat anything.”

“I won’t,” she said with a cheeky grin. “You said too much of your heart was with her, that that’s why you couldn’t stay in a relationship with me. That hurt, but you were right. I deserve to be with someone who can give me their whole heart.”

“You do. I’m sorry, Er—”

She held up a hand. “I’m okay, and we did that part already. What I’m saying is, why are you denying yourself the chance to be happy?”

“That’s not what I’m doing.”

She eyed the candy box and her smile saddened. “Do you realize our entire relationship, anytime I brought you candy, you only let yourself have a little at a time? I thought at first you were just being healthy or not having too much sugar at once, but it wasn’t that. You never want too much of a good thing at once.”

I didn’t have an answer, so I glanced at the box, too. “I like to savor it. Make it last.”

“You know people don’t work like that, though, right? You love her. Holding that in doesn’t make anything better.”

“It’s more complicated than that.”

She arched a brow and took a last swig of her beer, setting the bottle on a coaster. “Is it?” She let the silence of her question mark hang in the air before rising to her feet.

I'd never told Erin everything that had happened and how gutted I'd been for most of the time in France after things with Teagan got so weird. When we started dating, I could mostly ignore that gutted feeling, and by then, Teag and I were getting back to okay.

"Fine, fine," Erin said, standing. "Don't answer, but I know I'm right. I should get going, but I hope you tell her. For what it's worth, I think she probably feels the same way, but you guys are closer than any two people I know. Even if she doesn't feel the same, you'll figure it out."

I handed her the box of the things I'd found. A hairbrush, a half-empty bottle of her expensive conditioner, a few books, and knickknacks. It wasn't heavy. I held out the box of chocolates to her. "These are actually for you."

"Thanks, but you keep them," she said, balancing the box of her things on her hip. "Eat some candy, Silas. There's no prizes for leaving it in the box."

I sat on my couch in the quiet of my apartment for a while after she left, mulling over what she said and not coming to any conclusion, but I ate a few of the truffles from the box on the table. She was right—I'd been only letting myself have a little at a time. Unable to resist, I let my mind wander to what it would be like to have more of my best friend all at once.

Chapter Eighteen

Teagan

“Hi, James,” I said, sidling up to the customer service counter after my last shift at the shop.

James startled and glanced away with a mumbled hello. *What is up with him?* He’d been flirting with me for months and was a friendly guy, and now it was like I’d tripped him in the parking lot or something. “Silas,” he called over his shoulder to my friend, who had his back to the counter working on something. We’d been busy all day and hadn’t had a chance to really see each other, but he looked tired up close, with faint dark circles under his eyes.

“Hey,” he said, tapping at something on the keyboard. “You’re a free woman. Ready to go?”

I nodded, still eyeing the heaviness in his eyes. “You don’t have to help me pack. You look like you need some rest.”

He waved me off and snatched his messenger bag from the counter before saying goodbye to James and the petite woman with a high ponytail who’d shown up to replace him. “I’m okay. Who else is going to force you to finish packing?”

We weaved through the crowds toward the exit. Ahead of us, two people held hands, their twin tan complexions and floral shirts giving the impression that they were coming home from vacation together, and I shoved my hand in my pocket because I wanted to be holding someone’s hand, and that someone was Silas, whose hand was spoken for.

Silas must have seen my examination and lowered his voice. “We’re not following random travelers to see if they lost a love letter.”

I laughed. "Even I'm not that much of a romantic."

"I wouldn't put it past you," he said, his elbow nudging my arm as we moved through the crowds until we could veer toward employee parking.

* * *

It wasn't as cold when we walked into my apartment, but the relative warmth was balanced by the visible chaos of my life turned upside down. "Teag," Silas said, dragging out my name. "What the hell?"

I took in the mess. "Well, I was packing for the trip and then deciding what I needed to box up and take to my mom's before the subletter arrived, then I decided to organize some things, and, well . . ." I motioned around.

Silas dropped his bag next to the door and pushed up his sleeves on his forearms, revealing the fine auburn hairs on his arms. "Where do we start?"

"With wine," I said. "I need to finish a bottle before I go."

"I mean . . . I won't fight you. Is there food to go with the wine?" Silas walked into my kitchen and opened the fridge. I admired how his back muscles looked under his shirt after he'd peeled away the sweater-vest. "You have . . . eggs, cold cuts, sliced cheese, and whipped cream."

"Omelet sundaes?" we said at the same time, and I laughed, looking for my corkscrew. "I love us," I added.

He pulled the egg carton and the cheese from my fridge but left the whipped cream to me.

I watched him work and poured glasses for us. "Who is going to cook for me in France?"

He snort-laughed. "No one. You're going to have to fend for yourself. I'd pay to see it."

I grabbed the whipped cream can and hopped onto the counter to the left of the stove, watching him work. "Want to be impetuous and chuck it all to come with me?"

"So I can make you eggs and Kraft Singles in a new time zone? I'm good." He whisked the eggs with a fork, searching my counter for seasoning,

and I handed him the salt and pepper shakers. “I wasn’t in love with France the first time.”

“I’ll never understand that.” I admired the soft red stubble covering his familiar jaw and how his movements were so quick and precise in my kitchen.

“By the way, I ran into Ada today.”

I gulped. “I ran into Sam.”

“Kismet,” Silas said with a smile. “Ada said they weren’t together but she was hopeful. She’s been single since she and her husband divorced. I know I got on you about saying people were cute, but she was really . . . I don’t know. Sweet about it.”

I opened the Kraft Singles for him, peeling back the plastic and spraying a little whipped cream on my finger before licking it off. “Ugh.”

Silas’s eyes dropped to my lips for a split second. He usually teased me for eating whipped cream from the can, but he didn’t comment. “Ugh? I thought you’d be thrilled. You love this stuff.”

“I do,” I said, licking another fingerful. “But I talked to Sam, too.”

“What did he say?”

“Well, I showed him the list and he immediately started naming people he thought it could be. Why do the middle-aged and older men in this place know everyone’s business, anyway?”

Silas shrugged one broad shoulder, pouring the eggs into the heated pan. “Airport illuminati?”

“Maybe so.” I tapped my fingertips on the surface of the laminate counter before filling my finger again. “But Sam didn’t write it.” I held my finger out to offer Silas some of the cream—he always declined, but his gaze fell to my finger like he was considering it before turning back to the pan.

“No . . . no, thanks.” He flipped the omelet, adding the cheese as best he could with what I gave him to work with. “So, I guess we’re out of leads.”

When I finished sucking the sweet cream off my finger, he was looking at me again. “What? Is there some on my face?”

Silas shook his head and returned to the eggs. “Sorry we didn’t solve the mystery. I know you wanted to before you left.” He slid the food onto a plate

but didn't make a move to get forks. Instead, he watched me spray more whipped cream. "It was fun to investigate with you, though."

"We always have fun." My stomach did a weird flip-flop at the way he looked at me. I'd wanted someone's love story to work out, for the letter to mean something, but now time was up and maybe I'd been putting too much symbolism into all of it. I held out my finger again, waiting for his rebuff, but just before I pulled my hand back, Silas turned off the burner and his fingers wound softly around my wrist.

"Yeah, I'll try some."

"You will?"

His lips wrapped around my index finger, his tongue sliding along the pad of my finger and sending chills through me. More than the feel of his mouth, the intimacy of the gesture, his eyes were on mine the entire time, and my body warmed. "It's good," he murmured, his fingers still holding my wrist, the hold loose but unmoving.

My brain was rearranging itself, sitting there in the tiny half-packed kitchen with the ghost of Silas's mouth on my finger. Maybe he was calling my bluff or he just wanted some whipped cream, but it felt like more. My voice was small when I spoke. "Did you know when I first found the list, I wondered if you wrote it?"

"You did?"

I nodded. "Isn't that horrible?"

"No." He didn't elaborate.

"You've been dating Erin for years," I said, pulling back my hand, my senses coming back to me as I realized how wrong it was to feel the things I was feeling. "How could I hope for even a moment you'd be thinking those things about me?"

His brows pinched together and his hands stilled.

I lifted the whipped cream can. "I know. I'm a bad person. You are lucky I'll be in a different time zone for the next several months." I didn't want to put a wet blanket on what little time we had left, so I sprayed the whipped cream directly into my mouth, alleviating me from having to say anything or acknowledge how long I'd wanted Silas to touch me like that.

Silas's lips tipped in a grin once my mouth was full. "I broke up with Erin."

I stared, incredulous. "Last night? What?" The words came out as a garble because my mouth was still full.

"A few months ago," he said, interpreting my nonsense, his voice still low. He wanted to look away, I knew he did, because he always did when I was angry, but he kept his eyes trained on mine. "I didn't tell you because . . ."

I swallowed the rest of the whipped cream. "What happened?"

Silas sucked in a deep breath but didn't answer my question. "You have some here." He swept his thumb under my lips, his gaze following the movement. "I ended it."

"But why?"

Silas stepped closer and I placed my palm on his chest, feeling his heartbeat. "Because I didn't write that list . . ." His thumb still ghosted near my lip, sweeping back and forth in a slow arc. "But it wasn't fair to her that I *could* have written that list."

"What are you saying?"

He shook his head slightly. "I don't know." Silas cupped my jaw, one soft palm against my face, warm and solid. Our mouths were so close together, foreheads almost touching. "I don't know what I'm saying because you're my best friend but I want to kiss you."

"My mouth is going to taste like whipped cream."

His chuckle was low and his chest vibrated under my hand. "That's better than tasting like the cheese."

"Can you imagine an American cheese kiss?" My voice was a whisper, but now we were both laughing, pressed together in my cramped kitchen.

"A French-cheese kiss." Silas's finger stroked the shell of my ear.

I shivered at his touch. "A camembert smooch."

His finger trailed slowly, achingly slowly, down the side of my neck.

"I've never talked about cheese this much when someone was about to kiss me." Our lips were close and our breaths mingled, our noses almost touching. "That might have ruined the moment."

“No.” His lips brushed the corner of my lip. “It didn’t.” The teasing sweep was maddening, and I tipped his head, seeking his lips fully against mine. “I’ve wanted this since the first time.” He dipped his head and teased his lips over my jawline. “I never stopped thinking about it.”

“Silas,” I murmured.

“You’re my best friend,” he said, holding my face so our eyes met while he repeated my words from all those years ago—but I’d meant them then to stop us. Now they felt like a lit match near kindling, and his lips lowered to mine.

Chapter Nineteen

Silas

As many times as I'd fantasized about kissing Teagan again, I thought I would have been prepared for the feel of her lips and tongue, for the way she sucked in a breath when I settled my hand at her back and pulled her against me. I wasn't prepared for any of it and my head was clear of any thought except to keep touching her. It felt like we kissed for hours, me standing in her kitchen and her on the counter, the food, wine, and packing and all the reasons we shouldn't be kissing forgotten.

Her skin was smooth under the hem of her T-shirt, and when I lowered my kisses to her neck, she dragged her fingertips across the back of my neck, her short nails barely grazing the skin. I could have moved into the crook of her shoulder because of how intoxicating it was to kiss her neck and find the secret places that elicited an intimate groan. "Si," she groaned, tipping back her head when I found one.

I kissed her there again, hunched over to get the best angle. It wasn't exactly comfortable, but I couldn't have cared less. Her legs were spread wide at my hips and she ground against me, stretching her neck the other way.

The sound of a bang startled me.

"Shit! Ouch!"

I snapped back to see her rubbing the side of her head. "What's wrong?" I slid fingers gingerly over her hair.

"I smacked my head into the cupboard," she said, her fingers under mine as I stroked where she'd hit. "You never told me you were so good at this."

I linked our fingers and slid her hand to behind my neck. “You never asked.”

“I wondered,” she said, tracing a fingertip up my neck. “What else are you good at?”

Throughout the course of our friendship, Teagan had touched me thousands of times, but the gentle brush of her fingertips on my neck made my mind spin, and I crashed my lips to hers again, pressing between her thighs, my hand on the back of her head to keep her from banging it into the cupboard again “Is your curiosity satisfied?”

She grinned and pulled my lips to hers again. “Not even close. What else?”

“I’ve been told I’m good at . . .” I stroked the back of her thigh, pulling her leg up my hip. “Packing.”

“Don’t even joke.” Teagan wrapped her other leg around me. “Bedroom.”

My cock jumped at her word and I pulled her to me. “That’s bossy.”

She bit her lower lip. “I actually like it if you’re a little bossy. Do you like that?”

I lifted her, settling my hands under her thighs and her ass as she clung to me. “Yeah, I think I do.” It’s hard carrying someone down a hall when that hall is filled with boxes, and I tripped twice, Teagan clinging to me harder and both of us laughing as I made my way to the bedroom, thankfully without dropping her. “Your apartment is dangerous,” I huffed, lowering her to the floor.

“We made it,” she said, pulling her T-shirt over her head, revealing a yellow lacy bra over the breasts I’d dreamed of for years. “You’re staring.”

“I . . .” I slid my hands up her ribs, stopping just before my thumbs stroked the underside of the bra. “Yeah. I am.”

She tucked a finger under my chin and lifted my gaze until our eyes met. She unhooked her bra and tossed it aside before sliding her hands back to my chest. “Show me what else you’re good at, Silas.”

My world could have ended in that moment. If lightning had struck her unpacked bedroom, I’d have died at my happiest with Teagan’s bare chest against me, her plump lips slightly parted. I kissed her again, savoring the

feel of her lower lip before spinning her around so her back was to me. Her short gasp at the spin and at my breath on her bare shoulder was a shot of adrenaline. She said she liked me in charge—that was new for me.

“I know everything about you,” I said against her neck as my splayed palms slid over her stomach and up her ribs. “But I don’t know how you like to be touched.” Her breasts were heavy in my palms as I cupped them, letting a thumb play over her nipples. It was sheer luck that I hadn’t come in my pants at the feel of her body. It felt like the culmination of half a decade of foreplay, and she wiggled against me as if issuing a challenge.

“Like that, but harder. I can’t see you.”

“I know. You can feel me, though. Close your eyes.” I rolled her nipple between my finger and thumb, adding more pressure with each twist, seeing what she reacted to. “I’m here.”

“You’re always here,” she murmured sliding one of my palms over her heart.

My own heart was unexpectedly full at the realization that the same was true for me, and I tried to think of the best way to say it, except my brain was otherwise engaged with the feel of Teagan’s body. She saved me the emotional moment when she pushed my hand lower. “But maybe tonight you can be here, too.”

I laughed against her shoulder and let her guide my palm down her body, over her stomach, and under her sweatpants. “I thought you wanted me to be the bossy one.”

She shrugged. “I’m unpredictable.”

“I know,” I said against her neck. “I like that about you.” I slid my hand lower and hers fell away. The heat at the apex of Teagan’s thighs was what I’d dreamed of, and I slid past the waistband of her underwear, inching closer. I dragged my fingertip over her mound, only brushing over the side of her already swollen clit and then up the other side, my finger sliding along her wet folds easily. “Teag,” I groaned against her neck. “I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

“I’ve wanted it for so long.” She looked over her shoulder, and I caught her lips as I continued to explore her with my finger while still cupping her

breast.

“Hold still,” I said into her ear, and I moved in front of her, kissing her again because I needed to kiss her. I felt like I’d always need it. I fell to my knees in front of her and tugged down her pants, looking up to catch her dreamy expression. “These are in the way,” I said, enjoying her hand on my shoulder as she stepped out of them. “On the bed, baby.”

She climbed onto the bed after pushing a packed suitcase to the side. She stretched out in front of me but scrunched her nose. “Baby?”

I settled between her legs, my shoulders nudging her thighs apart. “I was trying it out.”

“Silas?”

I traced kisses down from her belly button before lifting my head and meeting her hooded gaze. “Yeah?”

“You’re my best friend.”

I nipped at her thigh, then kissed the spot. “But you don’t like ‘baby’?”

She laughed, a perfect throaty laugh that shook her body under me, and her fingers traced through my hair. “I really don’t.”

Her laugh was still in my ears when I dragged my tongue along her folds, holding her hips in place. Teagan was sweet on my tongue, her body wrapped around mine as I explored her with my lips and tongue and fingers, giving her everything I had and not able to make her wait. She reacted to every touch, every lick and kiss, guiding me with her fingers and her body. I would have stayed there forever and drowned between her legs.

She climaxed hard and fast, thighs pressing against me as the ripples of her core squeezed the finger I’d slipped into her eager body. I wanted to do it again, but she’d gone limp, her expression dreamy as she looked at the ceiling, and I kissed up her body, pulling her into a kiss.

“Si,” she groaned, clutching me, her hands sliding over my back. “Why are you still dressed?”

“I didn’t know how far you wanted to go, and I was too busy to get undressed.”

Her fingers were already working at the buttons on my shirt, her leg on my hip. “You taste like me,” she said, pushing the sleeves off my shoulders.

“Better than whipped cream,” I said and she laughed, her cheeks tinting pink.

Teagan’s hands moved over my chest, tracing the line of hair down my stomach to my belt.

“We don’t have to,” I said, resting my hand over hers. “This is a lot. A good lot, but we can just . . .” I searched my brain for a way to say “stick with oral” that sounded nicer.

“Do you not want to?” Neither of us was particularly new to sex, but I felt like I was, a little, with Teagan, like with us it was all a little new. I couldn’t explain why that made me smile.

I arched against her hand, the contact forcing me to close my eyes against the desire to explode. “No, I want to.” I didn’t move away from her touch but dipped my head to meet her eyes. “Just to be clear, I want more than this, though.”

“I don’t know if we have time for anal,” she teased. “I still have to pack.”

I kissed her smile, inhaled her laugh. “Unzip my pants, smart-ass,” I said, rolling to my back. As I moved, something shiny caught my eye, a padlock tossed on the top of her half-packed suitcase.

I reached for it. “You kept this?”

Teagan was working my pants and boxers down my thighs, and my straining cock glistened at the tip. “Of course,” she said, stroking me, her warm, sure hand moving over my sensitive skin.

She moved up my body, dropping kisses over my stomach and up my chest, and I set the familiar lock back down, stroking the back of her neck as she met my lips, her thighs against mine. “It reminds me of you.”

“There’s no bridge to hang it on now,” I said, reaching into her bedside drawer and praying to God she hadn’t packed there yet. *Success!* I pulled a condom from the drawer and began sliding it down my length. “Ride me, Teag.” I guided her thigh over mine.

She grinned and I had a good idea she liked being on top. “I don’t need a bridge to hang it on.” She hovered over me before sliding down.

“My God.” I saw stars, actual stars in my vision, as she lowered herself onto me and her heat surrounded me.

“I know,” she said, beginning to rock, her hands on my chest.

I let her lead, despite every fiber of my muscles wanting to pump up into her, and my palm settled at her hip as I worked my thumb against her, willing her to break again before I did. I wanted to say something sweet and romantic and confess my love in three languages, but all I could do was hold on to her gaze as our breaths quickened and we both fell over the edge one after the other.

Teagan fell onto my chest, her fingers linked with mine over my heart, and I pulled her to my side, reaching for the padlock behind her.

“It might be a little early to incorporate locks into the bedroom,” she teased, touching her fingers to the lock and studying it with me. “It always reminded me of you and that once you thought of me in a place so filled with love stories,” she said softly.

“I love you,” I said, matching her tone, but the words felt like they exploded from me, like they couldn’t be held in. “I always have.”

“I love you, too,” she said, sliding her fingertips against mine.

“We still have to pack your apartment, huh?” I hugged her to my side.

“Oh yeah,” she said. “This was totally a bribe to stay and help with Bubble Wrap.”

I squeezed her against me and kissed the top of her head. “It was a good bribe. I’m not going anywhere.”

Chapter Twenty

Video Chat

Five Years Ago
A Thursday

Teagan: You're online!

Silas: Sorry I haven't been on much.

Teagan: That's okay. How's it been?

Silas: Okay.

Silas: Took this photo for you.

Teagan: The Pont des Arts! OMG! You went!

Silas: I got Erin to go with me.

Teagan: Ooh. You two have spent a lot of time together.

Silas: Uh, yeah. Sad news about the bridge, though—they're shutting it down.

Teagan: No! Why?

Silas: The weight of the locks is messing with the structural integrity of the bridge or something. They're going to cut them down and replace the rails with glass.

Teagan: I can't believe I'll never get to see it. Do you have more pictures?

Silas: I knew you'd ask. Here are three more photos.

[photo]

[photo]

[photo]

Teagan: Aww. You even took a selfie. You hate selfies.

Silas: I thought you'd want one.

Teagan: Did you take one with Erin?

Silas: No.

Teagan: Why not?

Silas: I don't know. It was your thing and it felt too weird.

Silas: I'm sorry you don't get to see the real thing.

Teagan: All those love stories.

Silas: All those padlocks.

Silas: People still have all their love stories.

Teagan: It's symbolic.

Silas: Sometimes a symbol is just a symbol.

Teagan: You're the most unromantic person I've ever met. Tell Erin she should be looking for some swoony Frenchman and leave you behind.

Teagan: Where did you go? I was just teasing you.

Silas: We are kind of seeing each other a little.

Teagan: Oh wow. I was just kidding but that's great.

Teagan: I told you you'd find someone in in France. My mission is complete.

Silas: I don't think you can take credit.

Teagan: Sure I can. You needed me to make it so awkward that you had to find someone else to spend time with.

Teagan: Did I make it weird? I made it weird, huh?

Silas: Yes.

Silas: Anyway, I picked something up for you.

[photo]

Teagan: You got me a padlock?

Silas: There was a vendor there selling them. I figured even though the locks would be gone when you went back, you can still symbolically toss the key into the Seine.

Teagan: I take it back. You have your moments, even if you don't believe in symbols.

Chapter Twenty-one

Teagan

Present Day

Friday

When the alarm buzzed, I flailed my arm to silence my phone, but I didn't find it on the nightstand and I forced my eyes open. "Where is my phone?" I tried to push the haze of sleep from my brain and looked around the floor.

"You can't snooze this morning," Silas said from the other side of the bed, holding up my phone and then sliding his thumb across the screen to silence the alarm.

He rolled to his side, an elbow tucked under his cheek, and grinned at me. His gaze unabashedly swept over my body, pausing on the bare skin of my shoulders and legs. "Good morning."

I lay back down and pulled the covers around us, scooting closer to him. "Why can't I snooze?"

Silas stroked his finger down my arm, making the tiny hairs stand up, until he pulled me closer. He shifted, tucking me against his chest, his fingertips still sliding over my back and down my neck. "Because you have a lot to do today and you leave the country in ten hours."

"I stayed up late," I whined, enjoying the feel of his chest and stomach under the blankets in our cocoon.

"We could have gone to sleep earlier," he said, lips grazing my forehead.

We'd managed to pull ourselves from bed, shower, make more eggs, and pack most of my things. By the time we finished, it was past midnight and we'd fallen into my bed again. "I didn't want to," I said, crossing my

forearms over his chest and remembering his murmured voice, telling me about the view of Mont Fourvière from Footbridge St. Georges and how he'd go there and think of me. Then he'd kissed me and we'd been up even later.

Silas gave a little laugh and I rested my head on his chest again, listening to the steady *thrum-thrum* of his heartbeat until he spoke. "Ten hours isn't a lot of time." He drew circles on my shoulder blades.

"No," I said, tracing my own circles on his chest. "I was thinking about it and maybe I can cut back some of the things I planned on the trip so there's more time for us to . . ." I chewed on the words. "To be together even while we're apart. And I was planning to take some side trips that would extend my trip but I could cut back on those. Nothing is set. I don't want to be with you and not make time for you."

"You've been waiting for this for so long." Silas was quiet, only the way his breathing changed giving away that something was wrong. "I don't want you to do that. I don't want you to change your plans for me."

"You're my plans," I said, enjoying the warmth of him against me and snuggling closer.

He didn't reply, and when I finally looked up, he had a wry smile on his lips. "That's a good line."

"Thanks. I wrote it myself." I rested my chin on my forearm again so I could meet his gaze.

His expression turned serious. "I'm not your plan, though. And you weren't mine. I swore I'd never let another friendship be ruined by dating, and when we kissed in college and then I left . . ."

I stretched my arm so I could trace the line of the hair along his jaw with my fingertips.

"The way you took off and then wouldn't respond. Then when we reconnected, I didn't think it meant anything to you. It seemed like you just lost your head and kissed me because you were sad. It drove me nuts. I couldn't focus. My head was all over the place because I kissed you back because I *wanted* to. It made me feel . . . used or like a prop. I know you didn't ever mean to make me feel that way, but I did. I really thought it didn't mean anything to you."

“It meant something to me,” I said, remembering how at home I’d felt in his arms, how seen and cherished I felt when his lips were against mine. “But I knew you were so broken when your ex broke up with you and you lost your friend.”

“I was.”

“So I ran because I was scared and I didn’t know what I was feeling. When we reconnected, I never wanted you to worry you’d lose me as a friend. Plus then you had Erin, and I dropped it.” I scooted higher on the bed so we were face-to-face and I could cup his jaw. “Are you worried about that now? Losing me?”

“No.” His hand fell to my waist and I thought about how much I loved learning this new side of him, the side that needed to touch and be touched. “I meant what I said last night. I love you. I mean, that’s scary to admit, but it’s nice, too. It’s honest. I think loving you is the one thing I’ve been certain about for a long time, and not telling you just to keep things the same just isn’t sustainable. I love you, Teag.”

“I love you, too. But you want to leave this until I get back?” The warm cocoon we’d formed began to feel a little cooler, and I didn’t understand what he was getting at. Hitting the brakes felt wrong down to my toes.

“I mean . . .” Silas shifted his big body until I rolled to my back, my flimsy tank top riding up, and he propped himself on his elbow. “We waited this long.” He traced a line down my sternum to my belly button, and I tensed as his fingers brushed the waistband of my sleep shorts, but he brushed his fingers back up my bare stomach, making goose bumps rise on my skin.

“What would waiting even look like? What would we wait for?” I lay still, feeling the rumpled sheet below me and Silas’s fingertip moving achingly slowly up and down, teasing at my waistband each time. “Because we already *didn’t* wait a few times.”

His voice was low and throaty and full of Silas humor. “I remember.”

I rested my palm over his, stilling it low on my belly, and met his gaze. “Tell me what you’re thinking. I know you’ve been thinking about this. I can tell from the crease between your eyebrows.”

“It’s like . . . you found that pros and cons list and you worried the person who lost it would take it as a sign, right?”

“Sure.”

“Well, back then, last time . . . I felt like that. Like, we were so far apart, it was a sign that the kiss was a mistake we couldn’t come back from.” The warmth from his palm radiated through my body. “And I thought I’d lost you.”

My breath hitched when his palm edged lower. “Okay. And now?”

“Now we’re talking about it.” When he dropped his other hand from under his head to stroke my hairline, the combination of touches put me on edge in the most delicious way. His fingertips slid under the waistband of my shorts and I went limp with anticipation, imagining where his touch would land next. “I want to do this right, though. Are we setting ourselves up for failure starting a relationship the day you leave the country?”

“It’s hard to think when you’re doing that,” I said, wiggling under his hand, attempting to nudge him further.

“Sorry,” he said, grinning and stilling his hand. “I think we should talk; it’s just hard to stop touching you.”

I studied his expression, his cheeks a little pink, eyes that were hooded focusing on my face. “We’ll talk and then touch,” I said, soaking in the warmth of his hand.

“Go to France and do all the things you planned on doing and I’ll be here when you get back. I’m not running and neither are you.”

“You don’t want to talk while I’m there? It’s going to be months.”

“Maybe we could talk once a week or something. I don’t want to be the reason you don’t take time to do everything you want to do while you’re in France and during all your side trips. You’ve waited so long for this and I don’t want to be a distraction that keeps you from soaking it all in.” He dropped a kiss to my shoulder and I smiled that his decision for us not to touch was abandoned so quickly.

“Si . . .” I knew he was right. There was so much I wanted to do, and I’d want to tell him about what I’d seen virtually all the time. “What if we hate only talking once a week?”

He kissed my shoulder again, brushing the skin. “I was lying awake last night and listening to your snoring shake the walls.”

I poked him in the side where I knew he was ticklish, earning a laugh.

“And I thought about how we’ve been inseparable since we met. You’ve been a constant in my life since I was eighteen and I in yours. If we hate it, then we’ll make a new plan, but maybe being apart before we’re together wouldn’t be a bad thing.”

“You want to date other people?”

His eyes widened in surprise. “No! I mean, do you?”

“No . . . unless he’s hot and rich and French.”

“Obviously. Same.” Silas smiled and I felt his palm slide incrementally lower. “But we could talk once a week and you can do all your adventures and I’ll do my thing here and, save the emergence of a hot, rich, French man in either of our lives . . .” His hand dipped lower, fingers grazing my needy places.

“You’re touching me again.”

“I know.” He slid his fingertip in slow circles that made me groan, and then he spoke close to my ear, the feel of his breath like more fingers on me. “When you get back, we can figure out what happens next. I know you’ll want to keep traveling when you finish school, and who knows what happens if I move up with the airline. Maybe this will be good preparation.”

“Okay,” I said, letting my legs fall apart, writhing already under his teasing touches.

“Okay?” His eyes met mine as his fingers worked me into a frenzy.

“Yes, but please, just—”

Silas grinned and slid under the blankets in a flash, wriggling like an oversized garter snake and making me laugh as his mouth found me under the blankets.

“That.” I stared at the familiar ceiling as pleasure rolled through my body, and I tried to imagine what it would be like to only talk to my best friend once a week.

Chapter Twenty-two

Silas

“Flight 93 with service to La Guardia at Gate D12 is now boarding all passengers, all rows.”

“Guess it’s time to go.” I handed Teagan her bag from the floor. Her eyes were wet and I wrapped my arms around her again. “Are you crying because you’ll miss me or because you’ll miss Julianna?”

Teagan laughed against my chest and I held her tighter, blinking back my own emotion. “You’re a better kisser, I imagine,” she said, pulling back so our eyes could meet.

“God, I both hope so and hope I never have to compete with her for your affections.” I brushed her cheek with my thumb, wiping a tear from her skin. “I love you. I just wanted to say it again.” I cupped the back of her neck and lowered my lips to hers.

When we pulled apart, she hugged me again. “She’s just a little better than you, but she’s had more experience.”

I laughed and dropped another kiss on her lips. “Let me know when you get there?”

She nodded and pulled her phone from her pocket, the mobile boarding pass visible on the screen. “Here we go,” she said with an exhale and a longing look toward the boarding door.

“You got this,” I said, dropping one more kiss on her lips.

“You, too,” she said before stepping back from me, ready to board. “I love you, Si.”

“I love you, Teag.”

* * *

“Hang in there, man.” James patted me on the back before leaving our customer service desk. He’d covered for me so I could see Teagan off for her flight. When she’d shown up to the airport in my old hoodie, I’d wanted to laugh and tear up and pull her into a hug, and I’d done all three. I’d questioned my plan all day, still unsure if suggesting we step back from each other was the right thing. That morning in bed with her body in my arms, it felt like a smart decision, but now with her plane on the way to France, all I could wrap my head around were worries that things might fall apart.

“So, how goes the investigation?” Martin walked toward me. “Uncovered all the hidden dalliances going on around here?”

“You know, I don’t think we scratched the surface.” I leaned forward on the counter, catching some of the early morning sunlight that flooded the gate area nearby this time of morning. “You gave good tips, though. The baristas sure looked like they were on their way to dating when we walked away, and it turns out the luggage guy is Jess’s ex-husband.”

“Well, hey. Look at that. You two were playing Cupid!” Martin smacked the surface of the counter with a good-natured *thwack*. “Who’d the letter belong to?”

I shrugged. “We never found out.”

“You’re giving up?”

I glanced across the hall at the stranger standing there in a pink apron. “Teagan’s flight left about an hour ago.”

“Ah,” Martin said. “And she took the fun of this with her on the plane, along with your heart?” Before I could respond, Martin laughed. “I told you, boy, it’s as clear as day.” He held up a palm. “And I know you said you’re just friends, but I’m just telling you I think you’re lying.”

“She did take my heart, but I think she’ll bring it back.”

Martin slapped his thigh. “I knew it! Told Julie the other day and now she owes me five bucks.”

I tried to imagine how the unlikely friendship between Martin and Julianna looked and I couldn’t make the pieces fit together, but it didn’t

matter. “We were all out of ideas about who it could belong to, anyway.”

“Hm . . . maybe I can help. Can I see this letter? You have it? You didn’t actually tell me much about it the first time.”

I pulled my phone from my pocket and scrolled through to a photo of the list. It had been printed from someone’s email recently, but the original information about the date and who sent it was missing. “It’s really not a love letter, more of a pros and cons list.”

I handed it over to Martin, who zoomed in and dragged his finger along the screen while he read. I glanced around the space again. I thought about the love stories we’d seen play out since beginning the investigation—young love, old love, unrequited love. Teagan teased me all the time about how little credence I gave symbols and metaphors. It wasn’t that I didn’t understand them. I just didn’t think they were signs from the universe, but when she told me there was a job open at the airport that I’d be great at, she’d tried to sell me on the beauty of so many stories coalescing in one place. At the time I’d been more interested in the health insurance, but now I saw it.

Across the hall, the stranger in the pink apron prepared to close the shop, checking things behind the lowered gate. It would take time to get used to Teagan not being there, not being within arm’s reach all the time. She’d always been there. Even when I was in France, she was still always there, on my mind and on the other end of a call.

Martin was still reading, scrolling up and then back down, a faint smile on his face. “Well,” he said finally, setting my phone down. “You should have showed me this in the first place.”

“Yeah?” I slipped my phone back in my pocket. “You saw some clues?”

“Better than that,” he said with a grin. “I know who wrote it.”

Chapter Twenty-three

Video Chat

After One Week in France
A Saturday

Teagan: I have a thousand things to tell you. A week is an eternity.

Silas: I know. Do you feel French yet?

Teagan: I missed you. Are you sure about this distance and space thing?

Silas: No, but I still think it's a good idea.

Teagan: I guess you're right.

Teagan: So, these weekly chats . . . they can involve sexy times?

Silas: I could be interested in that.

Teagan: And let's discuss this. When did you get good at sex?

Silas: I've always been good at sex.

Teagan: Lies. I taught you about the g-spot and clitoris junior year.

Silas: With a grapefruit. How could I forget.

Silas: Visiting you was always so memorable.

Teagan: Your future girlfriends all thanked me.

Silas: I think my next girlfriend appreciates you.

Teagan: Thanks, self. You're a VIP.

Silas: By the way, I dropped everything from your apartment at your mom's place.

Teagan: You repacked it, didn't you?

Silas: I don't know if you throwing everything in garbage bags because we spent too long in bed counts as packing in the first place.

Teagan: It wasn't just that we spent so much time in bed. We were in the shower, too.

Silas: What am I going to do with you?

Teagan: Why are you laughing at me? It's true!

Silas: Yes, I repacked all your stuff. And cleaned the shower, so everything is ready for your subletter.

Teagan: You're really great.

Silas: I know.

Silas: Great at sex, as you said.

Teagan: I said good.

Silas: I'll buy some grapefruits to practice while you're gone.

Silas: Speaking of you being gone . . . you ready for the first day of class?

Teagan: No! I'm nervous. Can I just spew my anxiety at you?

Silas: Of course.

Teagan: Okay, so . . .

Chapter Twenty-four

Video Chat

After Four Weeks in France
A Saturday

Silas: Hey, you.

Silas: You're muted, sweet cheeks.

Teagan: Ugh, why do I always do that? Also, sweet cheeks?

Silas: I'm trying to find the right pet name for you.

Teagan: Well . . . keep trying. Sweet cheeks ain't it.

Silas: Noted. You look exhausted. Everything okay?

Teagan: I truly love that you went from "sweet cheeks" to "you look like crap."
(*Laughing*)

Silas: You look gorgeous and sexy and only a little rough. Late night?

Teagan: Yeah. We decided at the last minute to take a train to Paris and partied and explored all weekend, so I was up late last night finishing a paper I put off.

Silas: Isn't Paris like five hours from Lyon?

Teagan: Only two on the train, so I could have worked on the paper then but . . .

Silas: You made friends with strangers instead?

Teagan: Not strangers, just friends I hadn't met yet.

Silas: You didn't meet that rich, sexy Frenchman, did you?

Teagan: A couple of them, but they don't eat grapefruit, so you're safe.

Silas: Whew! I was worried. Glad you're meeting new people and doing all the things you want to, though.

Teagan: You, sugar butt, don't look exhausted at all. You're glowing, if I'm honest.

Silas: Sugar butt? Is that payback for sweet cheeks?

Teagan: Sucrose glutes?

Silas: Much better! As for the glowing, you might make fun of me.

Silas: I went to a day spa with Ada. We got facials.

Teagan: Like . . . Ada from the airport?

Silas: Her sister backed out at the last minute and she was teasing me about being lonely with you gone and I ended up agreeing to go with her. It was kind of fun. Did you know Ada was in the navy and is a drummer in a band? James and I went to see her perform and she's good.

Teagan: I still can't believe we didn't find out who wrote the list. I was sure we'd figure it out. For a minute, it felt like it was mirroring our story and I wanted a happy ending.

Silas: I'm, um, still working on it.

Teagan: Give me updates!

Silas: I'll tell you when I get something good. I promise. It's not Ada or Sam, though. She's way too good for him, and if I was into women twice my age and didn't have you . . .

Teagan: She's cooler than me and I'm in France. Shoot your shot.

Silas: I only have eyes for you.

Silas: And even exhausted you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

Teagan: You're going to make me cry. And I love that you're getting out and doing things. I was worried you'd stay home without me there to drag you out.

Silas: I did, for a while, but yeah. This has been good.

Teagan: James isn't mad you stole me after he asked me out?

Silas: Yeah, James . . . has way more game than I ever knew. Going out with the guy is like being at a casting call for a modeling agency. I can safely say he's moved on from you.

Teagan: I so want to see you in a club playing wingman!

Silas: I'll take some video next time. We've been hanging out a lot.

Teagan: Silas! You made friends!

Silas: Shut up . . . I'm not a total hermit.

Teagan: You are, but in a good way. Like a sexy hermit.

Silas: It's amazing you mock me like this and I still want to kiss you.

Teagan: Yeah?

Silas: Yeah. Tell me more about Paris.

Chapter Twenty-five

Video Chat

After Three Months in France
A Saturday

Teagan: Hi!

Silas: Hey, honeybun.

Teagan: Keep googling nicknames, syrup rump.

Silas: I like syrup ru—

Teagan: Silas? I think you're frozen. Can you hear me?

Teagan: You still there?

Silas: Teag, sorry. I don't know what happened but everything froze and then I couldn't get back on. I got your voice mail, so you're probably in bed now. I'm so bummed to have missed you tonight. Can we talk tomorrow instead? I love you. Sleep well.

A Monday

Teagan: Hey, it's me. I was hoping I could catch you before you went to work. Things are nuts here, but it's so amazing. I wish you were here and I could show you everything. I took a day trip to Vienna and I felt

so inspired. I just couldn't get the words down fast enough. It's like when I was in Barcelona last month. I just felt inspired. I'll tell you about it soon. I hope we can catch each other. I love you.

A Tuesday

Silas: I went to Vienna when I was there. Do you remember me telling you about it? I can't wait to read all this writing. I had to work a double shift so I'm sorry I missed you again.

A Wednesday

Teagan: This is hard. I guess we'll just connect next week at our normal call time. I got an A on that last paper. My professor talked to me about graduate school. He thinks I'd have a shot at a good MFA program in creative writing. Can you believe it?

Silas: I'm so proud of you. I can believe it. And yeah, it's harder than I thought. I didn't realize how much time we spent together until you were gone. I think I count on you to make me . . . interesting, and I've had to figure that out with people on my own. I don't know. Anyway, I love you. I know you're in class now, so . . . we'll talk soon.

A Thursday

Teagan: You were always interesting. Hey, I took this picture for you the last time we took the train into Paris. After I snapped the selfie with it next to my face, three people reminded me I couldn't attach the padlock to the bridge. I told them I didn't need to. I'll talk to you tomorrow at our normal time.

Silas: This is the cheesiest message I've ever left, but you aren't the only one with a padlock and I know you'll appreciate that after taking this selfie with it over my heart, I accidentally hit myself in the nose with it. Have a good night.

Chapter Twenty-six

After Five Months in France A Saturday

Teagan: Where's your video? I can only hear you.

Silas: Just a bad connection. What's wrong?

Teagan: How do you know something is wrong?

Silas: I hear it in your voice.

Teagan: I loved this trip but I want to be back near you. I'm tired of waiting and growing and becoming our own people. We did that, but now I want to be *with* my person.

Silas: I know. Me, too. Soon, though. Only another month.

Teagan: I wore out my vibrator. I didn't budget for replacing it.

Silas: Do you need to buy some grapefruits so you can reacquaint yourself with driving a manual transmission?

Teagan: (*Laughing*) No, I bought a new one. I'll just go without food for a couple weeks. Priorities.

Silas: Your vibrator costs what you'd theoretically spend on food for a few weeks?

Teagan: Clearly, you're not spending enough time searching for high-end toys.

Silas: I guess not. You are still actually eating food, right?

Teagan: Of course. I'm waiting for dinner to get delivered. Hey, you want to know something weird?

Silas: Of course. Is it related to high-end toys?

Teagan: No. I actually miss Julianna's chocolates. Can you believe it?

Silas: They're good! Should I send you some?

Teagan: Yes! A whole box of my favorites, please.

Silas: I'll get on that. Um, do you want to know what I found out about the list?

Teagan: Yes! You found a new clue?

Silas: Okay, so . . . don't be mad at me.

Teagan: That makes me assume I'm going to be furious.

Silas: I've known who wrote the list for a while.

Teagan: How long is a while?

Silas: . . .

Teagan: You're very lucky there's an ocean between us. How long?

Silas: Um . . . I found out the night you left.

Teagan: You've known for five months!?

Silas: I swear I had a reason for not telling you.

Teagan: Spill it. You're on probation.

Silas: Well, Martin wrote it.

Teagan: Martin? No way! About who?

Silas: It was like two years ago and he wrote it about . . .

Teagan: Say it already!

Silas: Julianna.

Teagan: No way. Not possible!

Silas: He said they were getting close and he wrote the pros and cons list and he sent it to her, like via email.

Teagan: You're messing with me. Not possible.

Silas: That's what he said! She must have printed it and, I don't know, it ended up behind a box or fell or something, but I guess that's how you found it.

Teagan: She said she wasn't seeing anyone.

Silas: Well, that's why I didn't tell you. He was into her and made the list, but they tried for a month or so and it fizzled. Didn't work out.

Teagan: Oh.

Silas: And you were so convinced the list was a sign of it being like us. I didn't want you to take it as a bad sign.

Teagan: Martin and . . . Julianna? Wow.

Silas: That's what he said. They decided they were better as friends and that's how it is now.

Silas: You still there?

Teagan: Yeah, sorry. I think my food delivery just showed up.

Silas: No problem. So, what do you think about the end to the mystery? Kind of a letdown?

Teagan: Just a little, but I guess it's okay. I like the idea of the list being a symbol for us, but I don't think it is. I mean, that's why we waited, right? To take some time apart to make sure being together is what we want and, I do want that. Hey. Hold on, my food is here.

(Door opens)

Teagan: *Bonsoir. Merc—*

Silas: Did you know my employee discount can be used for international flights?

Teagan: I can't believe you're here!

Silas: I made a pros and cons list about coming.

Teagan: This is unreal. You're on my doorstep. Come in!

Silas: Do you want to hear the list?

Teagan: No, I want to kiss you!

Silas: I want that, too, but can I read it to you first?

Teagan: Can you read it fast? Because what I want is to tackle you to the ground.

Silas: Con: you'll probably steal all my stuff. Pro: I won't have to worry about checked luggage

Silas: Con: I'll owe James big for covering my shifts at the last minute.
Pro: I can brush up on my French.

Silas: Pros: I want to kiss you awake in the morning and make you omelets and I want to call you the woman who is the most important person in my life instead of just thinking it. I want us and I don't want to wait anymore.

Teagan: You didn't say the last con.

Silas: There isn't one. I—

(Knock on the door)

Teagan: Oh, that's my food. Uh, hold on.

Teagan: *Merci.*

Teagan: Sorry, that kind of spoiled the moment. Our timing is always bad, isn't it?

Silas: Nah. I think we've always been right where we needed each other at the right times.

Teagan: Can I tackle you to the ground now?

Silas: Definitely. Oh, and I brought you these.

Teagan: Julianna's chocolates.

Silas: Who knows you, sugar?

Teagan: I'm going to kiss you now in hopes you eventually come up with a better nickname.

Silas: Might take a lot of kissing.

Teagan: Might take a lifetime of it.

Silas: No veto.

Epilogue

Martin

“Attention in the boarding area. Flight 706 with service to Phoenix is now boarding.”

I settled against the counter and accepted the second truffle Julianna handed me. “Thank you.” I eyed the new flavor. “What is it?”

“Just try it.” She was annoyed when I asked before taking a bite, like she always was. Probably the reason I always asked. “It’s not like I’m gonna hand you something you don’t eat or try to poison you.”

“True,” I said with a chuckle. “You’d’ve poisoned me a long time ago if you were planning to.” I bit into the milk chocolate, the shell cracking and a combination of strawberries and peanut butter filling my mouth. “Mm. Julie, this is good.”

She brushed her hands down her apron. “Of course it is.” I saw the grin at the corner of her lips, that secret smile she tried to hide when I loved one of her new creations. “It’s one of the ideas Teagan tried to sell me on before she abandoned us to travel the world.”

I glanced out the front of the store, giving a wave to the two girls from the coffee kiosk walking by hand in hand. I didn’t know them well, but young love always showed up on my radar. “You ever wonder why there’s so much love in this airport?”

Julianna rolled her eyes at my observation and began cleaning the counter. “Because a lot of people are horny toads?”

I touched my fingers to the back of her hand to still her scrubbing of an already spotless counter. A few days earlier I’d chatted with Silas on his way

to catch his flight and finally go get his girl. I never understood why they put off being together while she was away, but I was happy they'd gotten over the 'finding themselves' thing. "Jess from the grooming place and her husband are back together, and remember how her business partner met her husband right here near the C gates?"

"Oh, don't mention the dog women to me." She brushed off my hand and kept cleaning, holding on to her old grudge against the women who'd moved into the storefront her old friend had occupied for years. I was pretty sure the grudge didn't have teeth anymore. Julie just liked to look tough and unyielding.

"Then that couple got engaged at the gate with that crazy dance party? Love is all around us." I gazed down the hall before looking back to her and accepting one more of the peanut butter and jelly chocolates.

"Are you drunk?"

I winked. "Not yet. You wanna grab a drink on the way home?"

Julianna met my gaze with an annoyed look that cracked quickly, and I earned another of her small smiles and a shrug. "Sure. I could use a glass of wine."

I helped her lock things up and we walked toward the parking lot, the route toward the exit as familiar to me as the back of my own hand.

When we reached the exit, the summer air swirled around us, blowing one lock of gray-and-black hair around Julie's face. I always liked watching her hands when she brushed her hair off her face. She had a soft side; it just only came through in those kinds of moments. "I've been meaning to ask you something, old man."

I nodded. "As a gentleman, I won't remind you that we're the same age."

"Why did you tell those kids it didn't work out between us?" She reached into her pocket and fiddled with her key fob when we neared the lot.

I'd told her all about the conversation I'd had with Silas when he finally showed me that list. I hadn't thought about it in more than a year and it was wild to see my words on the page. I shrugged. "A little white lie. I knew it wasn't gonna change how over the moon he was for that girl. I was right, by the way. He ran off to France to see her, and I'm calling it now—they're

engaged by next year. And anyway, you told me you'd skin my hide if any gossip about you and me ever started."

"I guess I did." She looked around and then stepped close to me, touching my cheek with her delicate fingers. "I can't believe you were able to keep your mouth shut this long."

I pulled her to me next to her car. "A man does a lot of things for the woman he loves that he won't do for anyone else."

"Holding in juicy gossip is a feat for you." She gave me a quick kiss before we climbed into her car.

"It is. You know I'm a born storyteller." I fastened my seat belt and inhaled the scent of her car, which was always a little floral mixed with the aroma of chocolate. "You gonna let me make an honest woman out of you one of these days?"

She signaled as we worked our way out of the lot. "You got a ring in your pocket or something?"

I laughed. "No, ma'am. You also said you'd skin my hide if I ever proposed inside the airport."

"Yep. This," she said motioning toward the terminal, "is not my idea of a romantic place."

I followed her gaze and then linked my fingers with hers, pulling them to my lips. "On that we disagree, beautiful. On that we disagree."

Keep reading for a special preview of
DO YOU TAKE THIS MAN
by Denise Williams

Chapter One

RJ

I didn't blame Maddie Anderson for scowling at her soon-to-be ex-husband.

He appeared calm and collected in a somber Italian suit, remaining quiet and deferent and seeming reasonable. He almost looked bored by the proceedings and the minutiae of his marriage ending. I made note of the gray at his temples and supposed it was easy to look dignified as a fifty-seven-year-old sitting next to one's twenty-three-year-old wife, and probably easy to look bored when you'd done this a time or two before.

Behind the makeup, Maddie's eyes were puffy, and the cuticle on her thumb looked shredded, like she'd been nervously scratching it. Since walking in on her husband with not one but two women during their son's first birthday party, she'd been through a lot. The hurt and embarrassment were clear in the woman's mannerisms, but Mr. Anderson didn't seem to care.

I'd never been in Ms. Anderson's shoes—today, a pair of crystal-encrusted pink stilettos. I'd learned young that people were rarely worth trusting, and baring your teeth was easier than baring your soul only to be shown you weren't worth someone's time. It didn't make me bitter, but it made me careful. It also made me enjoy these little moments when I could help someone else bare their teeth.

Granted, my client huffed anytime opposing counsel spoke. I glanced at the clock on the far side of the wall and estimated how long this would take. Despite the eye rolling, gum popping, and faint smell of a perfume probably

marketed to teenagers, Maddie Anderson was going to leave this office a very rich woman.

Twenty-five minutes later and before rushing back to my desk, I smiled at Maddie, whose philandering ex-husband was not as covert in his affairs as he'd hoped, and who'd chosen the wrong woman to underestimate.

"Everything should be finalized by the end of the month." I shook Maddie's hand to interrupt the hug coming my way and shared her smile. One point for the wronged woman and one more win for me. I rushed down the hall, trying not to look like I was in a hurry even though it was five fifteen and there was no way I was going to be on time.

"RJ." The smoky voice of one of the senior partners left me cursing in my head as I turned to greet her. Gretchen Vanderkin-Shaw would have scared the crap out of me if I didn't admire her so much. Really, she still scared the crap out of me, but as a named partner before forty with a success rate through the roof, she was a force to be reckoned with, and she liked me. Gretchen was the lawyer I wanted to be, and I was gathering my courage to ask her to be my mentor.

She nodded toward the conference room. "The Anderson case?"

"We were able to come to a resolution that worked in our favor." That was code for crushing them like tiny little bugs and then doing a victory dance that might involve some light professional twerking.

She nodded, a faint smile on her lips because I'd learned the victory dance from her. "Excellent. Eric mentioned you wanting to talk to me. I have a free hour now."

I stole a quick glance at my watch, because nine times out of ten, if Gretchen asked to meet, we did. Hell, if she asked me to hop, I'd have gone full Cha-Cha Slide.

"Do you have somewhere to be?"

I could have lied and said a conference call or a client meeting, but what was the point? Everything I was doing was happening because the firm wanted to keep a client happy. Well, mostly. "I have to be downtown at six."

Her mouth formed into a thin line, and I knew she'd decoded my reason for needing to be downtown. She nodded. "Well, you'd better go. You know

how I feel about this, though, RJ. You're better than some publicity stunt."

I fumbled with a response, biting my lower lip. That wasn't characteristic of me—I held my shoulders back and chin up on the regular, and I never backed down from anything. I made powerful people want to cower, and I was good at it. She was right, and I was better than a publicity stunt, but I had to admit, I enjoyed this particular stunt. "Thank you for checking in. I'll talk to your assistant and make an appointment."

I hurried into the back of a waiting Uber, with plans to change clothes modestly in the back seat. Was I telling myself I would be modest, knowing that I was about to give anyone looking a bit of a show? Absolutely.

Penny: Where are you?

RJ: On my way. There's traffic.

Penny: You're killing me.

I sent her the knife emoji. *Top of my class in law school and this is my life now. Event planners harassing me as I strip down in the back of an Uber.* My phone buzzed again from the seat as I brushed powder onto my cheeks and checked my edges in a compact.

Penny: But I love you.

RJ: I know.

RJ: You have the mic set up how I like?

Penny: Yes, but if you're late, you're getting a handheld with a tangled cord.

I pulled out the binder where I kept my prepared script. All the pages were in plastic covers with labeled tabs just in case, a copy of all pertinent information in the back folder and a Post-it Note reminding me of everyone's names and pronouns tucked in the front. I climbed from the car and repeated the opening phrase to myself as I hurried toward the stairs of the venue. I spoke part of the line to myself. "... the promise of hope between two people who love each other sincerely, who—"

Suddenly, I was hurtling toward the sidewalk, not sure whether I should try to save myself, my bag, or the notes. I clutched the binder to my chest as I hit the concrete, scraping my leg, my palm stinging with the impact. The clothes I'd hurriedly shoved in my bag after changing fluttered around me, and I took in the large form who'd been blocking the sidewalk.

In a movie, this would be the start of a how-we-met story. The tall guy, his features obscured by the sun at his back, would lean down and help me up. Our eyes would meet. He'd apologize, I'd note something like the depth of his voice or the tickle of the hair on his forearms, and we'd be off. That might have happened for other people, but though our eyes met, I was not in the market for cute, and now I was about to arrive late and bruised to perform this couple's wedding rehearsal.

Chapter Two

Lear

I stepped out of my car and stood looking up at the wedding venue as if I was standing on some great precipice. My phone buzzed again, and against my better judgment, I looked at the screen.

Sarah: I just need to know you're okay.

She hadn't texted for a while. Someone must have told her I'd gone home. I'd never planned to return to Asheville, North Carolina, and yet there I was, living in my cousin's basement after doing my best impression of someone trying to self-destruct for the better part of a year.

I tapped the delete icon with more force than it needed. I imagined the sympathetic face she'd probably made while typing out the text, with her lower lip out, eyes soft. When I didn't respond, she'd sigh in exasperation. She told me once that nothing drove her crazier than when someone didn't respond to texts, and I made it a point from then on to never leave her hanging. One of the many things I did to make sure I was everything she wanted, something I'd done with everyone since I was a teenager.

Done with her sympathy. Done with her. Done with being a nice guy. My phone buzzed again, but this time it was my cousin.

Penny: Did you go back to LA or something? Can you still cover this?

Lear: Got held up. There in a sec.

Penny: You're killing me.

I shoved my phone into my pocket, clearing my head so I could take on my first task as Penny's assistant wedding planner. The title required a second deep breath, because my old job, planning events for a professional football team—my dream job—was across the country, and it wasn't mine anymore. With Sarah's text fresh on my mind as a reminder that falling in love was the first step off a cliff, I headed into my first day as a wedding professional. I'd helped my cousin with setup earlier in the day, but now my only task was to woo a prospective client and her mother. I sucked in a breath. *Here goes my new life.*

A fast-moving body stopped my progress when it rammed into me, the voice of its owner high-pitched as they cried "Motherf—" but hit the ground before completing the expletive.

The woman was sprawled on the pavement, the contents of what looked to be her entire life strewn around her. Her shocked expression quickly shifted, lips pursed and brow furrowed.

"Dammit," I muttered.

She was dressed professionally, but the grass near her thigh was littered with a few tampons, a balled-up shirt, a stick of deodorant, a small bottle of maple syrup, and nine rolls of butter rum Life Savers. I lost focus on her haughty expression and tried to figure out why a person would have these things just with her. If she wasn't still muttering curse words under her breath, I would have really taken a moment to appreciate the randomness of the maple syrup and the audacity of that many Life Savers.

She looked up at me like I owed her something, eyes narrowed and expression incredulous, and I lost interest in the contents of her bag. I didn't have time for this, but I tried to sand the edge from my voice. "You should watch where you're going," I said in what I hoped was a playful tone, holding out a hand only to be met with a deeper scowl.

"Speak for yourself," she said in a huff, pushing away my hand and scrambling for balance. Her face was pinched, annoyed, and she turned in a flash to collect her things. "And manners. Have you heard of them?"

"You ran into me."

"Because you were standing in the middle of the sidewalk, not moving."

I still held out my hand to help her. Ten years in LA hadn't completely robbed me of my Southern home training, but this random angry little woman was pissing me off. I reminded myself that I left the nice-guy thing back in California, along with everything else. I shook my outstretched hand at her, letting any veil of politeness slip. "Will you take my damn hand so we can both get going?"

She scowled again, and the entitlement running off her petite frame in this brief exchange hit me in waves, even from a few feet away. "This is not what I needed today." As she pushed herself to her feet, she ignored my outstretched hand, and I stepped back.

Her hands flew frantically over her clothes and swiped at her hip. She muttered to herself as she tried to pick everything up, swatting my hand away when I tried to help. "Assholes just standing in the middle of the sidewalk," she muttered to herself. "The last damn thing I needed today . . ."

I'd never heard that combination of whisper-quiet cursing. My instinct was to offer help again, to apologize again, and to smile until she walked away, but if the last several months had taught me anything, it was that my instincts weren't all that great.

"Good luck with that." Without another word, I turned to walk away, but not before deciding I could truly go against everything my gut told me to do, to hammer that last nail in the coffin of the old me. I called over my shoulder, "You know, you should smile more."

I regretted it immediately. My sister would have my ass on a plate if she knew I'd uttered those words. I thought briefly about turning back to apologize, but I was already pressing my luck after getting lost. My phone buzzed in my pocket again, no doubt my cousin.

I pushed the woman from the sidewalk out of my mind and reminded myself that being a nice guy was not on my priority list anymore. I'd probably never see her again anyway.

* * *

The venue had been a bank once upon a time, and the old architecture framed the entryway. Following a complete renovation years ago, it was an event space now, and today would host a wedding rehearsal. I wondered if the vault was still in place and if anyone held parties there.

Lear: I'm here and waiting for them. Fear not.

Penny: You're my favorite cousin, but if you fuck this up, I'll end you.

Lear: Noted. Love you, too.

The door opened, letting in a swath of sunlight. A pang of anxiety hit me that it might be the woman from outside, and I ducked my head, intent on examining the pattern on the marble floor. Instead of the angry growl someone had briefly introduced me to outside, a voice that sounded more like chirping filled the space.

A stylish younger woman chatted with an older woman, both adjusting their blond hair. Catching my eye, the younger woman beamed. "Are you Penny's cousin? She said you'd be tall and well dressed and, oh my, you are. How lovely. She didn't say you'd be so good-looking, but of course you are." She talked without pause, her words flowing from her nervous laughter. I flashed an easy smile at Melinda and Victoria Matthews, daughter and wife of Richard Matthews. The family apparently owned one-third of North Carolina.

"Nice to meet you," I said smoothly, taking the younger woman's hand. "Lear Campbell." I wanted to make a good first impression, but I also wanted her to stop rambling. From what Penny said, the bride wanted to copy and paste the next day's wedding, but we wanted her to feel like she was just getting inspiration. Her wedding was over a year away and it seemed silly to be concerned with how the rehearsal venue's lobby and gardens might work, but Penny's words played in my head. *Make them feel special. Don't disparage any idea they love, no matter how bad the idea is. Make it seem like you can move mountains.* She'd also added, *Don't make that face*, but I was fairly certain that was her being my older cousin and not my boss.

“This is so beautiful!” Melinda twirled around in a circle, looking at the space. She also seemed to end every sentence with an exclamation point, her voice high and excited. She reminded me of a teenager or a terrier.

“It’s a beautiful venue. You chose well.” My compliment on her excellent taste was met with a beaming smile from both mother and daughter. Penny didn’t give me quite enough credit. It wasn’t like I didn’t have to schmooze and make people feel important working in professional sports. “We can visit the gardens. That space isn’t in use now.”

“We are just so excited. I can’t believe—” Her voice halted and her eyes grew wide.

Over my shoulder, I saw the woman from the sidewalk hurry out of the restroom across the vestibule. I snapped my head down before she caught my face. She’d put herself back together, clothes straightened and her hair, which had come loose when she fell, pulled back into a bun that showed off her neck. She had a nice neck. She was short but in sky-high heels and a black dress that subtly highlighted her rounded curves. She looked better when she wasn’t scowling at me from the ground. It was a wonder I hadn’t seen any of that outside. *Well, maybe not a wonder. She was pretty adamantly insisting I was an asshole at the time.*

“Mom,” the girl hissed. “That’s her! The woman who performed Alejandro’s wedding! I love her.” Mrs. Matthews followed her daughter’s gaze.

“Who is Alejandro?” Her voice was sweet and slow. Her accent reminded me of my aunt, and I smiled, also interested to learn why the bride knew who the woman from outside was.

“Alejandro Calderón proposed to George O’Toole in the park and it was totes cute, just, like, all the feels. Their families were there, and he said all these nice things. Mom, I was seriously bawling.” The woman bounced on her heels, her energy like a gale-force wind.

“Melly, you know I don’t know who those people are,” her mother interjected.

I’d been in a hole for almost a year and even I knew who they were. The two men had played opposite each other in a superhero epic a couple of years

earlier, and when the country's new favorite hero and most reviled fictional villain started dating, it was big news.

Melinda fiddled with her phone and held it out to her mom. "You remember. They were in the Interstellar Man movies. I had the biggest crush on Alejandro when I was a kid and had all these posters." She took a breath, and I slid into the conversation, because this was taking us way off course.

"Weren't those movies great?" I asked smoothly, sidestepping Melinda's trip down Middle School Crush Lane. "So, they got married?"

"Anyway, this woman was in the park where it happened and could perform weddings, so they did it that day. She was amazing, like, such a beautiful ceremony that she wrote on the fly. Absolutely everyone has seen the video. Mom, we have to get her. Can you imagine if the same woman who married the coolest couple in Hollywood married me and Sam?"

I peeked over my shoulder again as the woman strode toward where the wedding would be held, hands smoothing down the front of her outfit.

"Well, you know your father and I would prefer you use our pastor, but it's your day, and if you want this woman, it's fine with us." She turned to me. "Can you check on that?" I did not know the answer to her question and would rather have talked up an anti-deodorant activist with a new multilevel marketing obsession than show my face to that woman, but Penny had told me to make them think we could move mountains, so I nodded.

"She's completely popular, but everyone on the wedding websites says she doesn't take new clients. How cool is it that she's attending this wedding?" the younger woman exclaimed, her smile spreading. "If you could get her, I would be the happiest bride in all North Carolina."

As the woman I'd left scowling on the sidewalk reached the door, a slip of paper fell out of her binder, and I jogged over to her. *Turn on the charm. Apologize. Move mountains.*

"Excuse me?" I bent to pick up the yellow Post-it Note from the ground. "You dropped this."

At my voice, she turned, her smile genuine. "Oh, thank—" She stopped when she saw my face, her soft eyes snapping into cold daggers and her smile turning into a tight line of full, pressed lips.

I held out the note and smiled anyway.

“Thank you,” she said coolly, taking the slip of paper but being careful not to touch my hand, as if I’d peed on it or something.

“Listen, I’m sorry about what I said outside. I was way out of line and—”

She interrupted me with practiced skill. “Can I help you with something? I’m in a hurry.”

“Yes, I just wanted to apologize. I’m Lear Campbell,” I said, holding out my hand.

She looked at it like I’d just offered her an old gym sock. “Lear? Like King Lear?”

“It’s a nickname,” I said, pulling my hand back for a moment. “My client over there is interested in working with you on a wedding.” I motioned to the embodiment of fangirling, her blond ponytail bobbing while she bounced on her heels. “Do you have a card, or can I call you about your availability?”

“Did you hear me say I’m in a hurry?”

“Sure—”

She interrupted me again. “Are you familiar with the phrase?” She arched one eyebrow in a way that made me feel two inches tall despite having a good eight on her.

This might be the least pleasant person I’ve ever met, beautiful body and stunning smile be damned. “I am,” I gritted out. “If I could just get your card.”

The door to the anteroom pushed open, and Penny slipped out. “RJ. Thank God. I was about to send out a search party. You’re never actually late.” She glanced between us. “And you met Lear,” she said to her with a sideways glance at me. “He’s just starting out with me. Lear, RJ Brooks is the officiant.”

Oh shit.

I noted the binder RJ held, the one she’d clutched to her chest outside. The officiant for this wedding. That made sense and was so much worse for me. “It’s nice to formally meet you,” I said, holding out a hand again.

She raised that eyebrow again and then turned away from me, a fast-moving polar vortex taking over the space where she’d stood. “I ran into

something unpleasant on the way in. Sorry. I'm ready." She flashed a smile to my cousin and didn't give me a second glance.

Penny flicked her eyes to me in a way I knew meant *What the hell did you do?*

My first day was off to a great start.



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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