



THE LOVE 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

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The Fastest Way to Fall

The Love Connection

The Love Connection

Denise Williams

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For Jay, who is the best risk-taker I know (and also a pretty phenomenal brother)

Chapter One

Ollie

“Flight 682, direct service from Orlando, has arrived at Gate C7.”

I normally tuned out the constant stream of announcements from the disembodied voices over the PA system—flights arriving, flights delayed, gates changed, personal items left at security, but this announcement caught my attention. Pre-Flight Paws was right across from Gate C7. If the airport was a small town, which it often felt like, that gate was our neighbor.

Jess walked from the back, calling over her shoulder, “Pepper is an escape artist—be careful when washing him!” After two years of continued popularity and an incredible response from travelers to the idea of having their animals groomed during layovers, we had a staff. Jess let the door swing closed behind her and joined me behind the counter. “You’re staring again.” My best friend and business partner’s voice interrupted me from what wasn’t staring but simply observing the passenger exiting the jet bridge.

The tall, broad-shouldered, sharp-jawed mystery passenger.

“I am not staring.”

“You didn’t even look away when you answered me.” She bumped her hip with mine, nudging me toward the counter.

I didn’t know his real name, but around 11:15 a.m. every Tuesday, I watched an Adonis in a dark tailored suit leave the jet bridge, check his phone, look around, and then walk out of my neighborhood to some unknown

destination. The only thing that could have possibly made him sexier was if he was holding a book. I was always a sucker for a fellow reader.

Jess tsk-tsk-tsked and nudged me out of the way to access the computer. “It’s sad, really.”

Mr. Tuesday looked serious all the time, and today a crease formed between his brows as he paused, leaning against a wall, and stared at his phone. “What’s sad?”

Her fingers clicked across the keyboard. “That your Diet Coke break is going to be the highlight of your day.”

I sipped my straw, keeping an eye on him. “It’s iced coffee.”

“You remember that commercial from the nineties where the women ogled the shirtless construction worker drinking a Diet Coke at the same time every day?”

I finally dragged my gaze from Mr. Tuesday. “That sounds . . . problematic. What are you talking about?”

Jess rolled her eyes. “So young.” She pulled her phone from her back pocket and searched YouTube. She was only ten years older than me, but apparently that meant I’d missed an entire world of advertising-related pop-culture references. “Hold on.”

“Speaking of Diet Coke, how did Pepper end up covered in it and in need of a bath?” I’d returned from the restroom to find his owner, breathless and handing over her little terrier, wet and unhappy, though calorie-free.

Jessica held up her phone to me proudly, showing a video of a shirtless man in a hard hat being ogled by women with big hair and bigger glasses. “Apparently, he wriggled away from her and had a run-in with an open bottle someone was drinking. Pepper. Not this actor. I don’t know about his wriggling habits.”

I glanced back at C7, unwilling to miss more of my Mr. Tuesday moments, even for a Pepper story. “This is not a Diet Coke break,” I said, acknowledging in my own head that it was; I just had smaller hair than those women. “It’s . . . curiosity.”

Jess laughed, the lively sound filling the small check-in area. When some policy changes made it possible to move our mobile grooming business into

the terminal, we'd sunk all our savings, all our connections, all our favors, and all our time into getting it off the ground. Time I had, the rest of it was short, but I loved this space, especially with my best friend's voice bouncing off the walls. "Curiosity about what he looks like without the suit on?"

I grinned and watched Tuesday stash his phone, look around, and then head toward the other end of the terminal. "No, just . . . who he is. Where he's going."

Jess walked toward the back with a knowing smirk. "Diet Coke break," she called over her shoulder, letting the door swing behind her.

With Mr. Tuesday off to his flight, I returned to the computer, where I'd been reviewing our finances. Jessica was the groomer. I was the adorer of pets, and while I could help with the basics, the business side of things was my contribution. After a moment of looking at the screen and skimming through the numbers one more time, I glanced back up at the spot on the wall where Mr. Tuesday had been leaning. Him suitless would probably not be so bad. A suitless guy in an airport was fun. A suitless guy in an airport didn't date you for three years, convince you a long-distance relationship was better than you moving to DC for your dream job, and then lead a double life for a year.

I shook off the memory because that betrayal had changed me into someone who was scared to get into anything romantic—but also into the river-rafting, skydiving, business-starting, fearless woman I was. Some risks were worth it to prove to myself I wasn't a timid person anymore. People risks . . . well, I had book boyfriends for that. I glanced at the novel tucked into my purse under the counter, eager to get back to it later.

Back to the hustle. I scrolled through the accounting software, double-checking my work, the proposal to expand in another window.

The muted sound of Pepper's sharp, high-pitched bark came through the usually effective soundproofing door. "Hey, Ollie, Jess is in the middle of it with that chihuahua. Can you help me with—" Jeremiah pushed through the swinging door, his hands covered in suds.

It never occurred to me that we'd have so many regular customers in an airport, and I turned immediately, knowing how squirrely Pepper could be

when motivated. “Sure, just close the—”

A young couple holding an animal carrier walked into the shop, but before they could say anything, Pepper, covered in soapy water, made a run for it, leaving a trail of suds across our floor and out into the terminal, trailing his lead behind him like a snake.

Damn it! “I’ll get him.” I pushed from behind the counter, giving our new clients the best possible impression, and sprinted after Pepper. “Jeremiah, please help them!” I cursed the devious little animal I used to find adorable and ran after him through the crowded walkway, calling after him. “Pepper!” I dodged a family staring blankly at the arrivals and departures board, ignoring my instinct to help them. “Pepper! Come!”

Ahead of me, the dog bobbed and weaved and I swear the little jerk slowed down until I got close, probably laughing manically in his head. I’d planned to land in DC as a power player in a corner office for high-level campaigns. As I slid on one of Pepper’s wet paw prints and hurtled to the ground, banging my forearms on the tile, I questioned the life choices that had brought me to this point.

Scrambling to my feet, I searched the area and followed his wet trail. “Pepper!”

The crowd had thickened, but I heard a deep voice say, “Gotcha,” and I breathed a sigh of relief, hoping the voice didn’t belong to one of my fellow business owners who were lobbying to get us kicked out. *Please don’t let him stop by Julianna’s Candy Shoppe. She already hates us.* I wasn’t sure whether she didn’t like animals, didn’t like us because we took over her friend’s storefront when that shop went out of business, or didn’t like us because she didn’t like anyone. Regardless, I did my best to avoid her cutting glares.

I walked through the crowd, searching for Pepper and following the trail of soap along the tile to trace his whereabouts. The one time Pepper was quiet was, of course, when I needed to find him in a crowd.

We are banning Pepper.

“This is yours, I presume?”

I narrowly avoided a collision with a family running for a flight when I snapped my gaze up to find a bedraggled and gleeful Pepper wiggling in the arms of my Diet Coke break.

Chapter Two

Bennett

I despise airports.

“Hold on,” I said, looking around the gate area for an open outlet. My phone hadn’t charged the night before and now my battery rested at eleven percent. When it dipped below thirty, my anxiety started to roil, much like when the fuel gauge reached twenty-five percent. I never saw any point in taking chances.

“Where are you?” My best friend shouldn’t have had to ask, because my job always left me in the same place, and I grumbled my response, going in search of an available spot to charge my phone.

“Where else?” I attempted to navigate around the group ahead of me who had decided four people at a leisurely stroll was the ideal spread and speed for the middle of the crowded walkway. I didn’t have somewhere I had to be, not for another hour and thirty-three minutes, but that didn’t lessen the rising frustration at having to slow my pace.

“Why haven’t you quit that job yet?” I heard conversation and birds chirping in the background and assumed Gia was walking outside on the college campus where she taught chemistry.

“For starters, I quite enjoy the paycheck.” I finally eased past the left-most person, earning a cutting glance as if I’d used my roller bag as a battering ram. “Things like that tend to come in handy for food and shelter.” Ahead, a

kid stood and reached for the cord attached to his device, and I quickened my pace.

“Sure, but you have another source of income.”

My best friend hadn’t been shocked when I told her I wrote a romance novel, much like she hadn’t been shocked when I told her I’d gotten a job in risk assessment. She’d simply demanded I send her the draft, and five published novels later, she was still the first person to read my work, only I hadn’t sent her anything in a while because I hadn’t written anything in a while, not since turning in my last manuscript. It was as if all my creativity was in a piece of lost luggage with my next deadline looming ever closer.

“Attention in the terminal: If you lost your phone, wallet, and cigarettes, please return to the security checkpoint.”

That person is having a bad day. I stepped around two young people cuddled together on the floor, basking in the warm light of an iPhone. Immediately past them was an elderly couple, both in wheelchairs being pushed by two young men. Young love. Old love. Love was all around me, and even though it was my job—my second job—to write love stories, I had no new ideas. The well was dry.

Gia pulled my attention back. “You still with me?”

“Sorry. And I can’t quit my job, but I especially can’t quit my job if I can’t finish this manuscript.”

“Maybe you’d be able to finish if you took time off to let your creativity replenish. Or if you went on a few dates to get *inspired*.”

“It’s not like inspiration is going to jump out at me just when I need it.”

“It might,” she said. “You might meet the girl of your dreams in line to buy a cinnamon roll if you put down the carrot sticks and let yourself enjoy something.”

I remembered the first time I’d flown, when my parents brought me to the States. The smell of cinnamon when we passed a Cinnabon smelled like opportunities. I glanced at the storefront to my left. Now I barely registered the scent. I spotted someone else eyeing the kid’s outlet and ticked up my speed. “Why did you call? Other than to question all my decisions?”

“That was the main purpose.” She laughed into the phone and I felt the pang in my chest of missing her. My best friend since my first day at uni—or *at college*, as she would challenge me—Gia and I lived half a country apart and I’d never found anyone else I could connect to like that. I missed her laugh. The colleagues I spent all my time with chuckled, but I hadn’t been around real laughter in a long time.

“All right, then. Good to chat,” I said, already reaching into my messenger bag for the charger.

“Wait, wait, wait,” she said. “You’re not bailing on me for the week at the beach, right?”

Stuck behind another glacially moving group of people, I reluctantly slowed, looking for a way through the crowd, until I felt a tap on my shoulder. A woman who looked to be roughly two hundred years old stood next to me, her slight frame coming to my shoulder. “Excuse me. Can you point me to baggage claim?”

No one could stop me from getting to that outlet and the power of a charged phone except this woman. “Hold on, Gi,” I said into the phone and came to a stop to help the woman find the right direction, asking her, against my better judgment, if she needed any assistance. She reminded me of my gran, who wasn’t really my grandmother, but our neighbor. She’d been the closest I had to a reliable adult growing up.

Gia waited until she heard me say goodbye and then asked, “Were you saving old ladies again?”

“I was assisting someone elderly. Why do you say it with such derision?”

“It’s not derision. You just can never not help someone. It’s cute.”

“Well, as you know, cute is what I’m going for.” My competitor for the outlet beat me to it and I began my search again. “And yes. Next month will be great.”

“A week at the beach. I can’t wait to get sun, surf, and a hot beach hookup.”

“You plan to limit yourself to just one?” She’d strong-armed me into taking a vacation and we’d rented a house on Tybee Island in Georgia. I fully

expected her to find a long line of adoring fans while we were there, but she ignored my question.

“You could make your own hookup plans,” she chided. “It’s been a while. Maybe a little no-strings fun would clear your writer’s block.”

I rolled my eyes. This conversation was also not new, and I had just as much interest in it as in the one regarding quitting my job. Unfortunately, being unable to write was the number one reason I couldn’t quit—sometimes the stories didn’t come. My mind wasn’t always reliable when it came to getting my words on paper. She was right and I had been blocked, but a no-strings thing wasn’t the answer. I liked strings. I liked tethers to something and someone.

Gia laughed again. “Are you ignoring me?”

“I am.” I shoved my charger back into the bag and looked longingly at the outlet that I had failed to snag. “I would settle for a hookup with an available outlet right now, though.”

“Kinky.”

“I’m hanging up on you.”

I smiled to myself at her laugh as I ended the call. I was looking forward to the vacation and seeing Gia, and hoping the change of setting had the desired effect on my writer’s block.

“Pepper!” a voice in the crowd called out, and I glanced around in time to spot what looked like an oversized wet rat with perked ears darting at full speed through the crowd.

I could have ignored it. I should have ignored it, but damn it all if Gia wasn’t right about my need to help people when I could. I bent and snatched the creature from the floor, holding the squirming, slippery rodent-looking animal with both hands. On closer inspection, I saw the rat was actually a dog. “Gotcha.”

I couldn’t see the person looking for it, but I heard their voice again. “Pepper!” I scratched the dog behind the ears and it stopped squirming, and then I heard, “I could have been in a corner office.” A moment later, a woman squeezed between two travelers, head down. She wore a lime green T-shirt that read PRE-FLIGHT PAWS, and I recognized the name from the little

shop near the gate I flew into often. I hadn't noticed her before, but her curly hair was pulled back from her pretty face and jeans hugged her hips.

It took me a moment to find my voice. "This is yours, I presume?"

At my words, she looked up and almost ran face-first into a man and child dashing by.

When they passed, I saw her whole face—a complexion like warm amber, clear skin, and full lips. Her brown eyes were wide and landed on me, quickly skating to Pepper.

"Yes. I'm so sorry." She held out her arms to take the dog, who had made a little home in the crook of my arm. "He's an escape artist."

"I hear Houdini started out in airports," I said, giving him to her, my hands momentarily brushing the smooth skin on her forearms.

She smiled at my joke, a slow grin as she held Pepper to her chest, her fingers scratching behind his ears as mine had. "Impressive, since there weren't many airports to speak of in the 1920s."

"Well," I said, stealing a glance at the logo on her shirt as she readjusted Pepper. "That's a trailblazer for you."

I wanted to know her name. It was a bizarre thought needling into my brain. I hadn't needed to know the elderly woman's name or the name of the person who'd glared at me for passing. Hell, I didn't know the names of most of my neighbors, but I wanted to know hers. Her gaze fell to my chest and I felt myself flexing. *Maybe Gia was onto something.*

"Your suit," she said with a grimace. "I'm so sorry. Can we pay for your dry cleaning?"

The suit. I laughed at my instinct to flirt with the strange woman. "No," I said, waving her off and removing the wet jacket. "It's fine."

She examined me again as I lifted my bag onto my shoulder. "Are you sure?" She held the slippery dog firmly in her arms while he tried to lick her and possibly find a way to escape again.

Logically, I knew she was studying my wet jacket, the smears of suds slowly soaking into the fabric, but I had the strangest sensation that she might have been checking me out. I rather liked it. "I'm sure. No bother."

"Sorry again, and thanks. I won't keep you."

“You’re welcome,” I said, not quite ready to look away from her. A woman hadn’t captured my attention like this in a long time. “I’m Bennett,” I said, holding out my hand. “In case that one tries another escape, you can shout for me.”

She grinned and I wanted to make her smile again. “Ollie,” she said, trying to hold out a hand but pulling it back when Pepper shifted, ready to jump. “Olivia. I run the grooming shop back there,” she nodded over her shoulder. “Thank you, Bennett, for saving me a much longer run through the airport.”

I gave a little wave when she took a step back. “My pleasure.”

“If you’re ever here and in need of pet grooming, stop by.” She nodded toward the aisle again. “I promise Pepper is the only animal who has ever escaped.” The dog wriggled in her arms, whining. “But good to know I can shout for help.”

I nodded, taking one last glance at the splash of freckles I’d noticed across her cheeks. “I don’t have any pets, but if I happen upon one, I definitely will.”

Then, for the first time in my life, I considered adopting a puppy.

Chapter Three

Ollie

I merged onto the interstate and waited for the call to connect. The sun hung low in the sky, the summer day sinking into a warm night. I left my window down to breathe in fresh air and listen to sounds other than the soundtrack of the airport. I held my palm out the window to make waves like I had as a kid.

“Shouldn’t you be out on a date or something?” Harriet was my mom’s aunt, and when I was five, she said if she could call me Ollie, I could call her Harry. It stuck.

I slowed behind a sea of undulating brake lights. “Shouldn’t you?”

“Getting ready for one right now.” She would have sounded impatient to anyone else, but I knew better. “And before you ask, it’s probably just a one-night thing. He’s very cute but I don’t know if we have much in common.”

My sixty-eight-year-old aunt was well entrenched in hookup culture, and I had to applaud her. She looked great, but she exuded this bad-bitch energy I had a hard time picturing anyone ignoring. It didn’t seem like many men did.

“Another twenty-five-year-old?”

“There’s no need for hyperbole. He was twenty-nine. Almost thirty, and that was one time.” I could hear the eye roll in her voice. “Anyway, he was lousy in bed. Nice to look at. Stamina for days, but no technique. No finesse. Is that what you have to put up with from men your age?”

I laughed, enjoying the breeze, but before I could answer, she added, “Look who I’m asking. If he ain’t in a book, you don’t want him.”

“I mean . . . I’m okay with men in movies, too, but yes . . . sometimes there’s a dearth of finesse.”

“Damn shame. This one is fifty-four. I’m holding out hope.” Her tone softened. “Now, why did you call?”

I debated putting the car in park—this congestion stretched as far as I could see. “Just checking in.”

“How’s the shop?”

She knew well enough as our first investor, but she always asked like that, voice gruff and like she didn’t really care, when I knew she did. She’d been the one to give me the money to start the business, the money she’d set aside to help pay for my wedding. “It’s good. Pepper escaped today. I had to chase him through the terminal.”

“That dog is a menace.”

“He’s free-spirited, for sure.”

“Free-spirited my ass; that dog is a troublemaker. No shame in calling someone what they are, especially when what they are is a dog.”

My face flushed and I knew she was referring to my ex. “A helpful stranger snagged him and saved me from a much longer run.” Mr. Tuesday. Bennett. His British accent was unexpected but fit him so well. Sitting in my car, I remembered how I felt his voice in my spine when he spoke—my spine and other places.

“I guess there are some helpful people out there.” Harry’s voice grew faint, and I imagined she had walked into her closet, leaving her phone set down on some surface as she thumbed through her jeans and skirts. If my butt looked as good as hers at that age, I would count my lucky stars. “Something else on your mind?”

“I’m curious if you think I should start dating again.”

Harry was quiet for a few seconds, and I heard the rustling of fabric. “Well, how would I know? Do you want to date again?”

“No,” I said automatically. That wasn’t fully true. I liked dating. I enjoyed flirting and having someone to share jokes with, to have meals with. I didn’t miss the being-tied-down part, the being-tethered part. I sure as hell didn’t

miss the careful part where I shaped myself to fit someone else's life and came to expect disappointment in return. "I mean, not really."

"It's okay to be skittish. A little fear is probably normal after the way that lying sack of refuse treated you."

Harry had said much worse and much more colorful things about my ex-fiancé, not that she was wrong.

"I'm not scared," I said, tasting the lie. Scared wasn't part of my new brand, the new me. When Harry had handed me a check, the money she was going to give me to spend on my wedding, she'd clutched my hands and told me I didn't have to fear life, that I could take it in both hands. I did. So I wasn't scared of something as basic as dating. *Right?*

Harry laughed. "Keep telling yourself that. I know you dive off cliffs and take chances left and right. You're not scared of dying, but you might be a little scared of meeting a nice man and living a little."

"I'm not," I said again. Nice men were in short supply anyway. I went to work and I went home. Unless I wanted to start something up with Martin, the custodian at the airport whom I adored and who was a widower with seventeen grandchildren, I was fresh out of luck. But I thought about Bennett. "I mean, I don't think I am. I don't want to be."

"It's not rocket science, girl. Go on a date and see if you enjoy it. Otherwise, enjoy those men in your books."

My phone pinged with an incoming message.

"Just sent you a photo. How does this look?"

Harry had slid into a form-hugging red dress that popped in every possible way.

"How do you always look this stunning?"

"Good genes, good luck, and good use of my alimony." Harry laughed and I assured her the outfit was perfect. She air-kissed the phone before we hung up, and I stared ahead at the traffic. Her comments about me being afraid of living a little rankled me, and I didn't like the idea that he whose name shall not be uttered was still influencing my life. I wished there was a way to get all the good things out of dating without the risks. I'd fiddled with

the apps but hadn't committed. The entire vetting process seemed like so much work.

My mind drifted to Bennett again and his deep voice and big hands. In an ideal world, I could date someone like him—handsome, funny, and only in my life for increments of thirty minutes to two hours.

Traffic finally started to inch forward, and I looked ahead to see movement.

If only.

Chapter Four

Bennett

“Ben, we’re going to need you in LA week after next,” my boss said without preamble, his voice loud through the phone. He looked like how I imagined Humpty Dumpty might in real life, only with a mild addiction to orange Tic Tacs and hemorrhoids he was inclined to mention in conversation.

“I’m out the week after next,” I said, standing in the aisle of the plane, waiting for the doors to open. “Can Carter do it?”

“Oh, that’s right, the book thing,” he said. “Sure. Sure. I’d rather have you, but Carter can handle it. Are you ever gonna give me a sneak peek of the next book? I didn’t expect the cliffhanger with the viscount in that last one.”

The decision to leave the job might have been easier with a boss who was a tosser or judgmental, but as it was, he was always interested in my writing and supportive of my side hustle. He preordered my books and read them with his wife—it was nice. He was nice, and even though I didn’t have time, I added, “I can work with Carter ahead of time to help him prep if you want, and I’ll make sure you get an early copy.”

“That’d be great. Thanks, Ben.”

The doors opened and I pressed forward with the rest of the travelers, the routine so ingrained, I could do it in my sleep, but this time when I stepped out of the Jetway doors, I ignored my waiting emails. I threaded between a family of four making plans for their layover and spotted the storefront across the hall. Pre-Flight Paws was brightly painted, with a small lobby area, where

the woman I'd met the week before stood, helping a customer. She was in the same lime green shirt and smiling at someone while stroking a dog's head. It didn't look like the same dog as last time. This one was dry, for starters, and not trying out to be an Olympic sprinter.

The customer and the dog pushed out of the glass door and I had a full view of her face. Olivia. Ollie. She was focused on her computer, and I cut my glance away when a short, elderly man shoulder checked me as he passed. I'd become one of those people I hated, blocking the flow of traffic.

"Apologies," I said. My words were met with a grunt from the man, but when I glanced back up, Ollie was looking at me, smiling. I'd hoped to see her—the shop was right next to my gate, after all—but I hadn't planned on talking to her. I waved, which felt like the dumbest thing to do, but she waved back. Then we stood there, both our hands raised like someone had hit pause, but she looked away first, saying something over her shoulder.

Before I got knocked over by another senior citizen, I stepped aside and opened my emails, my mood instantly sinking. There were seven urgent messages from my boss, none of which he'd mentioned when we were on the phone. Risk assessment had seemed like a job I'd enjoy—it wasn't sexy or glamorous, but it fit me. I grew up in a house where betting it all on the next big thing was a love language. Risk was all around, and as an adult, I enjoyed identifying and hopefully minimizing risks with my clients that I never could with my family. The emails sat on my phone like talismans of doom. I was drafting a quick reply to the first one, which wasn't as urgent as my boss had made it seem with the subject line. I had fantasies of deleting the mail app I used for work, hitting uninstall, and watching the messages disappear in a flash.

"Are you on the lookout for wet dogs?"

I shot my head up in surprise, dropping my phone and two file folders I'd pulled from my messenger bag to get my boss the information he needed, at the sound of her voice and the sight of her approaching. "Should I be?"

"Pepper just left, so you're relieved of duty," she said, bending with me to pick up the papers, our knees bumping for a split second. I couldn't remember ever touching knees with someone in a memorable way before,

and I made a note to include it in a book, as there was something exciting about that brief contact.

“Shame—I liked the little guy.” I shoved the folders in my bag and we both stood in the mostly empty gate. That flight always cleared fast.

“Maybe we should hire you.” Her gaze cut to my tie and swept over my suit. “Not sure we could afford it, though.”

I hoisted my bag on my shoulder. “As luck would have it, dog catching is a hobby. I’d prefer to maintain my amateur status.”

Ollie crossed her arms over her chest and tilted her head. “Sounds nefarious. Are you a bad guy?”

“I don’t think so . . . I always give the dogs back. I’m not Cruella de Vil or anything.”

Her laugh filled the gate area, and I wanted to make her laugh again. She grinned before speaking, continuing the joke. “You sure? You didn’t just leave your dalmatian coat in an overhead bin?” She tipped her head back in a way I wanted to video so I could write it accurately later, the lines around her smile and the arc of her neck. I had an overwhelming urge to drop everything and write down the description that came to mind, but now she was looking at me, aware I had been turning her into my main character.

“Best to check the coat. It’s insured, after all.”

“Prudent.” She leaned against the column, her crossed arms still folded under the swells of her breasts.

My phone buzzed in my hand and my boss’s face flashed on the screen.

“Go ahead. Thanks for checking to see if we needed any animals corralled.” She took a step back, still facing me. “And thanks for not kidnapping any baby animals in the middle of the concourse. I consider it a personal favor.”

“Who knows what I would have gotten up to if you hadn’t arrived.”

She smiled again, and, God, she had a great smile. I felt something shift in me, a rock rolling out of the way. “Good luck with the coat.” She waved again and turned to walk back toward her shop.

I took a moment to appreciate the way she moved and the curves of her body as she walked away. It was like I could feel her smile in the bounce of

her step. I turned back to the urgent messages and rolled my eyes at my cheesy internal monologue but still made note of the line in an email I sent to myself. Ideas suddenly started flowing, but a text notification from Carter flashed over my screen as two more urgent emails arrived. I gave Ollie's retreating form one more glance, amazed at how that short exchange with her had lit a fire under my creativity.

Chapter Five

Ollie

Jess adjusted the camera for Harry to see us both.

“So, what did you decide?” Aunt Harry asked. She never spent much time on small talk, and I always liked that about our relationship. We video chatted with her every couple of weeks to talk about the store.

Jess and I exchanged a look. “We want to do it,” I said in a confident tone. The opportunity to expand, to join with a parent company to get Pre-Flight Paws locations all around the country, was a huge risk. It would mean changing the way we functioned as a company, it would mean travel to new locations, and it would mean facing the unknown.

“Hot damn!” Harry’s smile was wide and she clapped her hands together. “That’s my girls! Taking chances and taking names!”

“It’s a big risk,” Jess hedged.

“Big risk. Big reward. To that end, I have some news for you girls. I’m getting hitched again.”

Jess and I exchanged shared jaw drops.

“Oh, don’t be so surprised. I’m old and impetuous.”

Jess shot me a did-you-know look. “Who is he?”

“Well, remember that date last month? The red dress? Well . . . I like him. He likes me. We’re gonna try marriage on for size.”

“What if it doesn’t work out? You haven’t known each other long,” I said, worry taking hold at the base of my spine.

“Then we’ll get divorced. It’s fast, but we’re old and he makes me happy. Don’t make other plans for August ninth,” she said. “Gives you plenty of time to find a date if you decide you want one, Ollie.”

“Wow,” Jess said. We exchanged another look and said “Congratulations” at the same time.

“Go big or go home,” Harry said, her face lit up. “Right, girls?”

I glanced over the top of the laptop. We’d closed the shop before jumping on the call, and the area outside was mostly free of passengers. The airport was always brightly lit, but the giant windows from Gate C7 showed an inky sky and it made me miss looking up at the stars. I loved so much about Atlanta, but the city lights made it hard to stare up at the stars.

“Right,” I said. In addition to the lights of the flight line and the inky night, I saw someone familiar walking down the concourse. “Go big or go home,” I said, half listening to the two of them talk and watching Bennett. I usually only saw him on Tuesdays, always at the same gate and in a suit. Tonight, he’d lost the jacket and his sleeves were rolled up to showcase forearms that made me want to run my fingers over them. He paused as he neared the store, seeing the closed doors and the dimmed front lights, but he approached and smiled when he spotted us inside.

“Ollie, are we boring you?” Harry’s tone drew me back to the screen. “I’m over here making dirty jokes about going big and I don’t think you heard a one of them.”

“Sorry,” I said, shooting a quick glance over the screen again, hoping she wouldn’t repeat the dirty jokes. Bennett was crossing the shiny tiled walkway with a wave.

“The cute guy she’s been stalking just walked by,” Jess added. “Well, I guess it’s not stalking anymore. Maybe it’s just flirting now.”

“I’m not stalking him or flirting,” I said, returning his wave with a quick one of my own and earning a smile. I held up a finger off screen and he shrugged, waving a hand. The international talking-through-a-door sign for “take your time.” *Is it common body language or did I just understand him?*

Either way, he settled in the mostly empty area around Gate C7 and pulled out a laptop.

“Cute, huh? How old is he?”

I laughed along with Jess. “Didn’t you just tell us you’re engaged? You already have a younger man at your beck and call.”

Harry waved a hand in front of the camera. “I grew up in a time where you had to pretend your hoo-haw didn’t have needs and that men were always right. There will never be enough young, attractive men at my beck and call for me to not appreciate a nice, firm butt.”

Jess and I both laughed again, and I peeked at Bennett working across the hall, a crease between his eyebrows and his mouth in a firm line. “He’s just a nice guy who I met in the airport,” I said.

Harry kept going. “But does he have a nice butt?”

I was about to cut the conversation when Jess jumped in. “I don’t know, but he is handsome and seems to like our Ollie.”

“I’m going to stop talking to you two. What does it matter if he’s cute? I only ever see him when he has a layover.”

“Are you trying to marry him? I know you think you get enough romance from books, but there are a few things books can’t do I wager that man could.”

“No. Too complicated.” Dating meant being boxed in by someone else’s needs and wants, someone whose plans might not always be in my best interest, and I wasn’t interested in a hookup.

“Is he still out there?”

Jess nudged me. “Yep. Go talk to him.” She looked back at the screen. “We’ve got things to catch up on anyway, and we’ll make sure he doesn’t snatch you up and drag you off somewhere.”

“Unless you snatch him up and find a nearby Ramada,” Harry added.

“I’m done with both of you,” I said, sliding off my stool and walking toward the door. “I’ll be right back.”

The music was playing through the overhead speakers. It was usually too loud to hear anything, but the area was mostly still with just the normal background noises and announcements piping through the space. I stepped into the hall and walked toward Bennett, aware I was wearing the same thing I’d been wearing the first two times we’d met. We didn’t always wear the

shirts, but it was familiar, easy, I had a ton of them, and I never cared if they got animal hair all over them. Still, I wished I looked a little more impressive.

“I think you might have a while to wait for this flight,” I said, pointing to the blank screen.

Bennett’s head tipped up in surprise and he smiled. He smiled like I was wearing something impressive. “Hey.” He tucked his laptop away and stood. “I wasn’t certain you would be open this late.”

“We’re not,” I said, pointing over my shoulder at the obviously closed shop. “Just working late.”

“I know it’s strange, but I was out in Anaheim on business and I saw this,” he said, pulling a Cruella de Vil figurine from his bag, a small plastic toy with moving arms and legs. “I couldn’t really explain to my colleague why I laughed when I saw it or why I bought it, but I thought it was . . .” He handed it to me, our fingers brushing.

“Hilarious,” I finished, studying the small toy, my belly fluttering in a way I had not given it permission to do. “So perfect. Now when you’re not around, I’ll still have a reminder to protect the puppies from would-be villains.”

A splash of pink covered his cheeks and I had a sudden, impulsive urge to kiss him. I took risks and did impetuous things a lot—well, a lot more than I used to—but not the kind that involved kissing a stranger at work. Still, I grinned.

“Reminders are important. I’m glad you like it and don’t think it’s too silly.”

I turned the toy in my hand and imagined him purchasing it. “I’m a fan of silly.” I wanted to ask him why he was flying at a different day and time than usual, but even in my head that sounded less silly and more like the stalking Jess had accused me of. Though, if I thought about it, we weren’t normally in the salon that late—we’d only stayed to discuss the expansion and to call Harry. Maybe Bennett had been in my airport, waiting to be adorable on Friday nights, this whole time.

He glanced down at his hands. “I don’t want to keep you; I just wanted to give that to you. Looks like you’re busy.”

I nodded and glanced over my shoulder, where my friend was staring at us and had turned the laptop for Harry to see. *How embarrassing.* “Thank you,” I said. “I am. We’re having a meeting with my aunt—well, an investor; she’s both, so I guess I should get back in. Clearly, they’re just watching us.”

“Good to have people looking out for you.” He gave a little wave to our audience.

“I guess so.” I held out my hand, which seemed odd and too professional, but also, I was kind of giddy to touch him again, because the first time the sparks had been like a shot of adrenaline. “It was nice to see you again.”

My hand was small in his, and he shook it slowly, giving me time to soak up the sparks. “You, too.”

“Maybe next time you come through,” I said, not pulling back my hand. *When you come through next Tuesday at 11:15 a.m.* “Maybe we could get coffee or something.”

He hadn’t let go of my hand, either. “I’d enjoy that. Maybe tea instead of coffee for me. I’ll be through again in a couple of weeks.”

“I guess I’ll see you then.” This was good! This was human interaction with a man and I wasn’t scared. My ex’s cheating, lying butt hadn’t held me back.

The speakers came to life. “Flight 7816 to Miami is now boarding at Gate C24.”

“Oh, that’s me,” Bennett said, glancing down the hall. It was a bit of a walk to get to C24, with a myriad of shops and busy intersections along the way. “I guess I should get going.”

I finally pulled my hand back from his, knowing Jess and Harry were going to give me a world of shit about this. “Yes, sorry! Don’t miss your flight on my account.”

I think he realized how long our hands had been clasped, too, and shoved his hand in his pocket. “I guess not, though talking to you is more fun than the work I’ll do on the plane.”

“I won’t tell you not to work, but I hope you get a break soon.”

He hoisted his bag to his shoulder from its place on the seat behind him. “Soon. Taking a little vacation to the beach next week.”

“You’ll have to tell me about it when we have that drink.”

He grinned again, a dimple popping on his cheek. “Definitely.” He paused, his eyes on my face, and I used my hand to do the shooing motion.

“I’ll see you in a few weeks.”

“Count on it,” he said, before beginning a jog toward his gate.

Chapter Six

Bennett

“Bennett!”

I heard Gia, but it was the kind of passive hearing I could do when in the zone, and I waved at her without looking away from my screen. Something had pushed the boulder that had been blocking my creativity out of the way, and I’d flown through the first half of my draft in the last two weeks.

“Ben?” Gia was standing behind me now.

“In a minute,” I said, raising my hand. “I’m almost done with this.”

I furiously tapped out the end of the chapter. I glanced over the words on the screen. *Not bad*, I thought to myself.

“Ooh! Spicy,” Gia said from over my shoulder, and I hit save and closed the laptop.

“I did not grant you permission to read that yet.”

She sank into the deck chair across from me. “Well, I have excellent eyesight and I haven’t met any sexy strangers on this trip, so your drafted sex scenes are all I have to hang on to.”

I made a hushing noise, nodding to the trio of older women walking nearby.

I was used to Gia’s eye rolls, but when the women looked over and she waved and called out to them, I wanted to roll up in a ball and strike out toward the ocean.

“My best friend writes the best romance novels, and the love scenes are perfect!”

I wasn't embarrassed that I wrote romance novels, but the combination of Gia loudly extolling the virtues of my more explicit writing skills along with promoting me by literally yelling at people on the beach was more than I felt like experiencing.

“Oh, what's your name? Iris loves a good steamy read,” one of them said, giggling and pointing to her friend as they walked over to us. I normally enjoyed meeting fans, and after the moment of surprise when they learned that D.A. Bennett wasn't a woman, they usually seemed to enjoy meeting me, too. But normally, I wasn't half-dressed, unshowered, and coming off an almost nonstop writing binge.

Gia handled the conversation for me when I didn't chime in. “D.A. Bennett, and he wrote *The Duchess Affair*, *To Loathe an Earl*, and *The Scoundrels of Maleficent Falls* series.” Gia popped up. “I can grab a piece of paper to write them down if you want.”

Two of the women had pulled out their phones. “No need. I'll buy it right now. You should hire her to do all your marketing,” the woman in front directed at me, taking in my hobo-like appearance.

“You know, I should.”

“So, I've always wondered,” her friend said. “I always assume romance writers have these epic, sweeping love stories in their own lives. Is that you two?”

Gia laughed. The laugh was so sudden, so loud, and so uproarious, I should have been offended. “No, absolutely not,” she said while gulping in breaths.

“We're friends,” I interjected, cutting my eyes away from my friend, who now had tears streaming down her face, “despite how hilarious the idea of dating me is to her. I am single.”

The woman patted my hand. “I bet your love story is out there waiting for you.” She waved her phone at me. “And thanks for the recommendations,” she said to Gia. “A good hot scene is all I need to turn me on to an author!” The women waved and continued up the beach as Gia's giggles subsided.

“Was it really that funny?”

“It was,” she said, pushing a wayward curl behind her ear. “Not only us together, but your expression.”

“I didn’t have an expression.”

“You did. With your hair all messed up and your writing-zone face, it was a cross between horror and confusion, like you’d forgotten I was a woman, that you are attracted to women, and that love stories exist in the real world.” Gia settled back in the chair, bringing her glass of iced tea to her lips once she’d finished mocking me.

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about. How could you get all that from a split-second expression?”

“I know you. Tell me I’m wrong.” She didn’t wait for me to tell her she was wrong and pointed at the laptop. “Is the beach helping? You’ve barely looked up from your computer since we got here. Writer’s block defeated?”

“I think so.” I reached for my own coffee and found three different mugs and an abandoned sandwich. Blessedly, my friend didn’t say a word, though she gave me an arched I-told-you-so eyebrow raise. “Ideas just started flowing during my last couple work trips.”

“Did you meet a sexy fellow risk assessor who turned your mind to thoughts of love and steamy carriage activities?”

“Definitely not. Fred in California just doesn’t do it for me. Plus, his motion sickness would make carriage activities decidedly less fun.” I’d been struck with a flood of ideas after running into that cute dog groomer in the airport again, and she’d been on my mind the entire time I was in California. Ollie. Our brief exchange along with the smell of the dog’s soap on my jacket had been stuck in my brain, and the block had begun to crumble. By the time I gave her that silly toy, the wall was a memory. She was pretty, the kind of pretty I wrote into my characters, with wide, expressive eyes and full lips, and she was funny. *Have I ever babbled on like this in my own head?* “The only thing of note was catching a runaway dog and meeting the owner of a grooming salon in the airport.”

“You caught a runaway dog and met a pet groomer inside the airport?”

“I know.” I chuckled. “Cute dog.”

“Cute groomer, too?”

Stunning groomer. I set my tea aside—it was cold and I didn’t remember the last time I’d gotten up from my computer to refill it. “Her name is Olivia.”

“So, you met the sexy groomer. Are you going to call her?”

“I didn’t say sexy.”

“It was implied from your dopey expression.”

I waved her off and laughed. “And of course I’m not going to call her. We live in different states and we met three times for like five minutes.”

“Three times? Long enough to get you writing again.”

If I was honest, and I didn’t plan to be, I’d thought about her more than once. The way her lips tipped up in a smile was so memorable. Instead of admitting that, I stood. “You’re too much of a romantic.”

Gia laughed again and motioned to herself. “I am not the romantic in this friendship. I’m the flirt.”

“Fair. Are you planning to bring some strapping man or devilish woman back to our place tonight? Will I need earplugs?”

Gia held up crossed fingers. “I hope noise-canceling headphones. I bet—” She stopped mid-sentence when a kitten stepped onto the deck, a little gray, dirty, mewling kitten. It wasn’t tentative but walked toward Gia’s leg like it owned the house. “Hello,” she purred, lowering her hand for the animal to smell. “Are you lost?”

The animal didn’t look like it lived with people, or people who took care of it. It was thin, even for a cat, and with something black and sticky streaked along its back. “Looks like a stray,” I said.

Gia was checking for a collar, and I had a feeling that cat had found its owner. Gia said she wasn’t romantic, but she loved easily. I was envious. She was a sucker for taking in stray animals and stray people. It was how we’d ended up friends—she a popular, bubbly student, and I the quiet, reserved kid in the corner unsure how to make friends.

“You can’t adopt any more pets,” I commented. She had two cats and a turtle at home, plus her elderly dog, who for the last five years had looked

like he had only ten minutes left. “You’re going to get kicked out of your apartment.”

She waved me off. “My landlord loves me. Can you find her something to eat?”

I hustled into the house, wondering why so many pets were coming into my life lately and what she would name this one. With the appearance of the cat, Gia had forgotten about goading me, but I still thought about Olivia. I couldn’t just use her as a muse. That would make me kind of a dick. Still, I couldn’t shake the fact that her smile and meeting her were the catalysts to words actually flowing again. Maybe if I was up front with her, she wouldn’t think it was weird. I rolled the potential request around in my head. *Hello, would you like to spend time with me so I can continue to write romance novels? I promise it won’t be weird.* I rolled my eyes as I rooted around the kitchen. I’d never be able to ask that. The idea of a muse wasn’t real, but even just thinking about the conversation with her made my fingers itch to write.

When I emerged from the kitchen with some water and sliced lunch meat, Gia and the cat seemed to be already fast friends, the furball tentative but winding in and out of Gia’s legs. “You’ve picked out a name already?”

“I’ll try to find its owner.”

I nodded, knowing she would and that the cat would still be getting on a plane with us. I examined the black substance stuck to its fur. “Should get that looked at.”

Chapter Seven

Ollie

“Oh, my sweet baby,” the woman said, holding out her arms for Pepper. “Was he just a perfect little guest today?”

In the back, Jess snorted. I accepted the woman’s credit card. “Just like always.”

The woman cooed over Pepper. We saw him without fail, every two weeks, and I kept meaning to ask her where she traveled every two weeks that required that her dog be bathed. I had an idea it was some kind of love affair and was curious about the person who would want Pepper around on a date. I leaned an elbow on the counter, enjoying the slow moment. Gate C7 was still, with nothing posted about upcoming arrivals or departures.

“You’re staring at that gate like it’s Tuesday,” Jess commented, wiping her hands down the front of her smock.

I was hoping Bennett would show up. Bennett, who pulled some knight-in-shining-armor stuff, interrupting Pepper’s unplanned marathon through the C terminal and then bringing me a gift. “I am not,” I said, shooting a quick glance at the groups of people walking by in hopes of spotting him. I hadn’t at all thought back on our loose plan to have coffee. “Even if I was, he’s just nice to look at.”

“And has a great voice,” she said, parroting my words back.

“And a nice suit,” I said with a sigh. “He might not come back through.” It was on brand to meet a cute, funny guy while he was on his way to

somewhere else.

“Shame,” she said. “Too bad you can’t find a guy like that to take to Harry’s wedding. Show that jackass ex what he missed.”

Harry and my ex’s grandma were close friends. We’d practically grown up together. The likelihood that he’d be there with his grandma was high, even though Harry would grumble. The idea of showing up alone made my stomach churn, but that might have just been the idea of seeing him.

The door chimed as a woman walked in, mid-conversation with the person behind her. She was tall and curvy and carrying a cat case. “The love of my life,” she said with a smile over her shoulder.

I smiled at her open expression, the affection clear on her face for whoever she was speaking to behind her. I didn’t want that but I kind of wanted it. *I really do need to try dating again.*

“Welcome to Pre-Flight Paws,” Jess said with a smile, but it took me a minute to catch up because Bennett, Mr. Tuesday with the ruined suit and the quick hands, walked in behind her, returning her adoring smile.

He was dressed casually this time, in jeans and a long-sleeve T-shirt, the sleeves rolled over those very impressive forearms. “Hello again,” he said, meeting my eyes.

“We found this little guy at the beach and couldn’t find an owner. The vet said he’s healthy, but there’s something stuck to his fur. Would you be able to give him a wash or maybe cut it out? We have a long layover and Bennett said he knew this place.” She motioned over her shoulder at Bennett. Tall, handsome, funny Bennett, who had openly flirted with me yet was apparently the love of this woman’s life.

Jess reached for the cat carrier. “Oll, can you get them checked in and I’ll take a quick look?”

I snapped my attention back to the woman and her cat and away from her presumed boyfriend or husband, whom I’d agreed to have coffee with. That, right there, was the prime reason to stick with my books. “Of course.” I handed her a tablet to fill out the needed information.

“I’m sure this cat will not give you the same chase as Pepper,” he said from over her shoulder. “He’s not near as clever.”

I nodded with a tight smile. He hadn't propositioned me or anything, but his tone still felt too familiar, especially with this woman standing right here. "That is helpful information."

He glanced around before landing back on me with a boyish smile that just felt slimy now. "It's nice to see you again."

"It is." I accepted the tablet back from the woman, my face heating with guilt. "Thank you. I'll check with Jess, but I think probably forty minutes. Will that work?" I was trying my best to be professional, but disappointment clawed at me. *He has a girlfriend.*

The woman nodded. "Perfect. I can pick up some chocolates from that shop I love. Ben, can you wait here for the cat?" She gave him a side hug once he nodded, and dashed out the door.

"She loves that chocolate shop. I get truffles for her sometimes."

He was sweet. He bought chocolates to take home for her. The sweetness made my teeth hurt because I realized with striking clarity that either he was a cheater or he hadn't been flirting with me at all; he'd just been nice and my radar was off. I would reinstall the apps later. Normal no-strings dating was the best way to avoid this faulty-radar thing happening again.

"You can have a seat if you'd like," I said, motioning to the small waiting area. "Or we can text you when the cat is done."

He looked around, taking in the place. "I was, uh, glad to see you again. While Gia's at the shop, I was wondering . . ." He adjusted his glasses, ears tinted pink like he was nervous. "Would you maybe want to get that drink with me? I know you're probably busy, but I was hoping we could like we talked about . . ."

Nope. Nope. Nope. I held up my iced cold brew, as evidence for why I wouldn't get coffee while his girlfriend was off buying chocolate truffles for them to take home. "I'm all set."

"Oh. I apologize." He didn't even look ashamed that I refused to be part of his cheating ways.

Internally, I pumped my fist, but I was also sad for the gorgeous woman who'd made the mistake of loving a cheater. He didn't say anything else and

walked toward the seating area, leaving us five feet apart and not speaking until Jess pushed out from the back, thankfully breaking the tension.

“Hi there,” she said, approaching him, the scent of the pet shampoo surrounding her, which was comforting since it blocked out the whiff I’d gotten of his aftershave or deodorant or whatever made him smell as good as he looked. “I don’t know what’s on the cat, but I don’t think it’s going to wash off. Is it okay to trim the fur?”

He glanced at his hands. “Oh, let me ask my—”

The woman in question pushed through the door, holding a paper sack from Julianna’s Candy Shoppe, spelled with two *p*’s. The woman was from Missouri, where I was pretty sure only one *p* was the conventional spelling. I chided myself. I didn’t really know her well enough to say that, but it irked me that she disliked Jess and me so much.

Jess repeated the question as Bennett rose to stand next to his girlfriend. I expected him to touch the small of her back, but he just stood by. I still couldn’t believe my crush, the guy I’d been admiring for so long, was the kind of guy who would ask me out while traveling with his partner. I lifted the coffee to my lips when his arm brushed the counter.

Jess confirmed with the woman. “You and your boyfriend can wait here or we’ll text.”

The woman chuckled. “Oh, I am a single pet parent. He’s not my boyfriend.”

“My mistake. I really shouldn’t assume,” Jess said cheerily, disappearing into the back.

The woman by Bennett turned to me with a smile. “You must be the woman he ran into with the wet dog, though.”

“Gi, drop it,” he said flatly. “She’s busy.”

“I will, but we’re not together. I promise,” she said, meeting my eyes. “Oh no! Did you think he was some kind of a jerk? I would, too!” I was initially skeptical, but she talked like we’d been friends for years and had this energy that made me wish we had. “He’s a great guy, just not my type.”

My eyes flicked to his face, where his mouth was set in a line, face a little pinker than the last time. “Good to know he’s not asking me out while dating

someone.”

Gia swung around to look at Bennett. “You actually asked her out?” As she moved, she knocked over a cup of pens, and when he and I reached to catch it, my iced coffee went tumbling, the lid popping off and cold brew flowing everywhere . . . including onto his white shirt.

I slapped my hand over my mouth and he jumped when the cold liquid hit him. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” I searched for paper towels behind the desk.

“It’s okay,” he said, holding out the fabric from his body.

“The benefit of being a traveler is having spare clothes.” His friend smiled and wordlessly reached into one of their bags, pulling out a T-shirt and handing it to him. “Did he ask you to go have a hot beverage? That’s his go-to first-date move.”

I nodded, glancing between them but stopping on him as he pulled his wet shirt over his head and pulled the clean T-shirt on. I hadn’t known how much muscle was under those suits, and a smattering of hair covered his chest. I shouldn’t have been looking, but I certainly wasn’t looking away.

“I do not have go-to moves,” he said to his friend. “And she already has coffee so it doesn’t matter, anyway.”

“Looks like you don’t have coffee anymore, though,” she said, motioning to the now empty cup next to the spilled drink I was sopping up.

“I suppose I don’t.”

A drink with a good-looking guy was still a date, and I could start my practice without the task of getting back on the apps. The idea of showing up to Harry’s wedding alone and running into my ex without being able to show him how well I’d moved on clawed at me. “Can I buy you a hot beverage as an apology?”

Chapter Eight

Bennett

We settled at a café table near a coffee kiosk, snagging a spot as two people left. “About what happened in the shop.” I needed to make sure she believed that Gia and I were just friends.

“Sorry, again,” she said, brushing condensation off her cup. “I assumed you two were together.” She held another iced coffee in her hands, black with one sugar. “And then I accused you of being a cheater . . . and then dumped coffee on you.”

“You’re going to be a hard person to forget,” I joked, using a napkin to clear a few crumbs off the table. I racked my brain, trying to remember the last time I’d gone on a date with a woman. It had been when I first started writing the last book, and there hadn’t been a second date. Now I wished I was in something nicer than the T-shirt Gia had bought for me that read *SASSY AND SALTY AT TYBEE ISLAND*. I’d told her I had no intention of wearing it, so the irony was not lost on me that I was now wearing it on a date with a woman I kept wanting to describe as “enchanting.” “I’m not sure my wardrobe will survive many more encounters with you.”

“I’ll make sure to have a Pre-Flight Paws T-shirt ready for you next time your friend drags you in,” she said with a smile.

When Gia decided to adopt that cat, I’d thought of Ollie immediately. “She didn’t pressure me,” I said, staring into my cup of tea. *Get it together, man.* “I was interested to hear more airport trivia.”

She looked confused for a moment.

“From the first time we met?”

She laughed, the sound filling the little bubble we were in. “That was a solid throwback. You’re kind of smooth, huh?”

“I am unequivocally not smooth.”

She sipped her coffee. “How long have you lived in Florida?”

“How did you know I live in Florida?”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, I’ve . . . Shit,” she said with an embarrassed laugh. “I’ve noticed you getting off the flight from Miami a few times.”

Ollie was adorable when she was embarrassed, and I sipped from my cup to temper the smile. “I fly from there every couple of weeks for work lately. You really noticed me?”

“I thought dumping coffee on you while accusing you of being a cheater was going to be the embarrassing low point of my day.”

“A man can always hope to be someone’s low point.”

She tapped her cup to mine. “I don’t usually say the right thing. I haven’t had coffee or anything else with someone new in a long time.”

“Same for me. I guess we can practice with each other, huh?”

She looked interested, her eyes flicking up. “Practice is good.”

“If I’m honest, I’ve had writer’s block for a while, and I guess talking to you helped.”

She tilted her head in the way people do when they hear something unexpected. “What do you write?”

“Romance novels,” I said, glancing down at my cup. “Not that I think this is a romance between us,” I clarified. “I mean, not that it’s not, just that it’s —”

Her wide smile made me pause in my rambling.

“When you get nervous, you keep talking, huh?”

“Don’t tell anyone. It’s not very dignified.”

She laughed again and ran a finger over her lips. “It’s our secret, but somewhere in there you told me you write romance novels? I love romance novels. I read two or three a week.”

“That’s amazing.” My face heated. “I’ve been getting stuck lately. That’s why I wanted to see you. I’ve been writing again since I ran into you.”

“I think you technically ran into Pepper. Maybe he’s your muse,” she said. “What are your books about?”

“They’ve all been historical. The next one is due soon.” I didn’t often talk about my writing away from writing-centered spaces, and I wondered what she might say, if she’d ask why or ask about sex scenes. That was usually what people asked.

“What made you want to write love stories?”

I’d been asked that a lot, especially as a man writing stories featuring men and women. I had my canned answer. *There’s so much going on in the world that I wanted to write happily-ever-afters for those who have found love or those who hope to.* I didn’t want to tell her that, though. “Honestly, I started reading romance to figure out how to do it.”

“To do . . . it?”

“To do romance . . . not ‘it’; I mean, I figured that out mostly on my own; I mean . . . not just on my own, well, kind of on my own, but . . .” I sucked in a breath. “I’m doing the rambling thing again, aren’t I?”

She held her delicate index finger and thumb together. “Little bit.”

“I wanted to learn how to have a great love story in my own life. I didn’t grow up with that in the traditional sense and I thought maybe I could pick it up in books. It didn’t work, so I thought maybe if I started writing them . . .”

Ollie smiled and rested her chin in her hand. “And it worked?”

“Well, no.” I gave a nervous laugh. “Turns out reading and writing about chemistry doesn’t make you any better at actually sustaining it.”

“Chemistry is hard to get right,” she said, sipping coffee through her straw. “Sometimes you think you have it, and then . . .” She made an explosion motion with her hand. “So, that’s why you wanted to see me?”

I didn’t have a good answer other than I couldn’t stop thinking about her, but that would sound weird after we’d just met. “I thought maybe if we spent some time together, I could keep writing and we could both . . . practice, like you said. I’ve never been this blocked or been around someone who so . . . well, inspired me, I guess.”

“Oh. Wow.” I couldn’t read her expression, but she shifted to a tentative smile.

“It sounds a little strange when I say it out loud, I guess.” In my head a giant neon sign was flashing BACK UP! and ABORT! “You’re not . . . I mean, I’m not writing about you, if you’re worried about that, but being around you, well, I couldn’t not ask.”

She glanced at her watch. “So, you want to hang out with me to finish your book?”

“Yes. I mean, I like you, too, of course.” I glanced at my own watch. I didn’t have much more time and I didn’t get the sense this was going well. “I have to catch my flight soon. Maybe we could meet again?”

She looked uncertain, so I rushed to add more. “I mean, maybe we could talk next time I fly through. Obviously, we would stay in. In the airport, that is . . .” I would never recount this conversation to Gia after this woman flatly refused me.

“Can I think about it? I like you—you’re kind of funny and strange—but I’ve never been someone’s muse before.”

Bollocks. That backfired.

She stood. “I should get going. Sorry again about the coffee.”

“Sure,” I said, half standing and bumping the table. “I mean, no problem.”

She walked backward, literally backing away from me, but paused. “What name do you write under?”

“D.A. Bennett,” I said, handing her a card from my wallet. “All the information is on my website. Of course, you probably want to make sure I am who I say I am.”

She took the card and tucked it in her pocket. “I’ll think about it.” She started back toward the grooming salon, and I watched her walk away, worried my writing mojo was taking the same path.

I buried my head in my hands and then felt my phone buzz.

Gia: I have the cat. How’s the date?

Bennett: Over.

Gia: Thumbs up or thumbs down?

Bennett: 🤖

Gia: Did you make it weird?

Bennett: On a scale of normal to 100? 98.

Gia didn't immediately respond, which meant she was effectively flirting with someone she met while walking to our gate or slamming her head against a wall at my ineptitude.

Gia: They're about to board—how about we debrief on the plane.

Chapter Nine

Ollie

The next Tuesday, I volunteered to do inventory, making sure I was buried in the back at the time Bennett's flight normally landed. Jeremiah eyed me curiously when I sent him out to the front and got to work unloading boxes and making sure everything was stocked. There weren't any animals in back, and the cozy space was kind of comforting. I'd told Jess about the disastrous date, or maybe it wasn't even a date. Bennett had been so cute and I'd been intrigued when he told me he wrote romance novels. Even though he'd left things between us in a weird place, I'd wandered down to the bookstore on a break, but the romance section was crowded with shoppers and I couldn't get close enough to spot his books.

"Are you having fun hiding?" Jess strolled in holding an iced coffee.

I added another bottle of the special shampoo we used to the shelf and wiped my brow. "I'm not hiding."

"I think Mr. Diet Coke Break got to you," she said, leaning against the doorframe.

"He said I inspired him."

"That sounds like fun. Who better to inspire a romance novel? You read them all the time."

"Sure," I said, hoisting two more big bottles onto the shelf. "I mean, that would be cool." Also, I'd wanted him to be a little interested in seeing me because he liked me. It had seemed like he did, with his nervous rambling.

My phone buzzed and Jess handed it to me from the place I'd set it on the counter. "Oll, you have like ten messages on this dating app."

I rolled my eyes. "They're mostly dick pics," I said, dismissing the notifications. "It's exhausting."

"I don't believe they're all dick pics," she said, grabbing for my phone. "Surely—" She stopped mid-sentence as she entered my passcode and scrolled. "Wow. Those are several poorly photographed penises. Do they have no sense of lighting or good angles?" She studied the photos with an incredulous smile. "There are a few normal messages, though." She handed back my phone.

"I know," I grumbled. The normal messages were tempting to respond to, but every time I opened them, I fast-forwarded to getting hurt, to feeling betrayed, and I froze. Then another poorly lit phallus would land in my inbox.

"Are you sure the awkward frequent flier isn't a better option?"

I tucked my phone into my pocket, ignoring her probably good advice. "He wasn't interested in *me*, anyway; he just needed my presence to help him write. So . . . what's the point?"

"Are his books any good?"

Even though I hadn't been able to get to them in person, I'd checked out his website and reviews of his books, and people seemed to like his writing. "I was too scared to read them. What if they're all really good and this one he's writing because of me bombs? That's a lot of pressure."

"I . . . guess? It's not like you have to *write* the book." Jess handed me the coffee and a slip of paper. "Here."

"You got this for me?"

"Nope," she said with a smug grin and walked out. "But maybe you could think about this whole muse thing."

I took a sip from the coffee, bitter with just a touch of sweet, how I liked it. I flipped over the note.

Olivia,

I wanted to apologize for last time and if I made you feel uncomfortable. I don't know if you'd want to talk to me again, or spend time with me, but I wanted to reiterate that there is no pressure to go along with my request, even if we spend time together.

Bennett

He'd left his phone number, and I read and reread the note.

It would have been nuts to contact him. For starters, even for a friend, he'd be in the airport for an hour or two tops.

"Gonna text him?"

I jumped at Jess's words. She stood in the doorway holding Pepper with a vise grip on his harness. "You scared me! Also, why are you accepting beverages for me from strange men?"

Jess laughed and fastened Pepper in to be washed, tossing a treat on the surface in front of him to keep him occupied. "He dropped it off while running for a flight, and I made him pour a little into a cup and taste it himself."

"You did?"

"No," she said, turning on the water and holding Pepper steady. "But that would have been kind of badass, huh?"

I eyed it and brought it to my lips. "Would it be weird to accept his offer to hang out? I kind of love being the idea behind a novel getting written, but . . . it's weird, right?"

Jess shrugged. "Weird because you've been eye-banging him for a couple months from afar? Yes, that will be weird, but otherwise . . . I don't know. It's kind of low stakes getting to know someone in an airport. You could ease back into socializing with real people who aren't me. You said you needed practice, and none of those dick pics were very inspiring as a reason to get out there."

She turned and focused on Pepper, and I bit the corner of my lip and pulled my phone from my pocket.

Ollie: Thank you for the coffee.

Ollie: I'm in. I couldn't forgive myself if a romance novel didn't get written because I refused to help.

Bennett: I promise it won't be weird, Olivia.

Ollie: My friends call me Ollie.

Bennett: My friends, unfortunately, call me Bennett.

Ollie: Maybe I'll call you Benny. What do you think?

Bennett: I think our arrangement was short-lived.

Ollie: Well, nice knowing you, Benny.

Bennett: It's been real, Olivia. 😊

Bennett: But maybe we can have lunch next time I fly through? Probably next week.

Ollie: Sure. Maybe another hot beverage.

Bennett: I'll bring a change of clothes.

Bennett: In case of spills or a wet dog.

Bennett: Not because I think I'd have to take off clothes.

Ollie: Benny.

Bennett: Rambling again. Got it. I have to go into airplane mode but I'll talk to you soon.

I tucked my phone in my pocket with a grin. He oscillated so quickly between charming and awkward. It was all adorable and maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

Jess washed Pepper, the hose in one hand and the extra-tight grip on the harness attached to him in the other. "So, you're going to be friends with him?"

“You read the note?”

She spoke over her shoulder through the noise of the sprayer. “Of course I read the note. You think I was going to just deliver something to my best friend without checking first?”

I chuckled before I slipped out front. “We’re going to be friends.”

“Friends who fool around in hidden airport corners?”

“Friends who don’t end up on a TSA watch list,” I corrected at the same time I imagined kissing Bennett and how his strong arms might come around me, how his lips might feel against my neck.

As the door swung shut, she said in her I’m-talking-to-an-animal voice, “Who wants those kinds of friends?”

Chapter Ten

Bennett

Ollie'd texted when I was still in the air.

Ollie: Lunch still work?

I'd never been more eager in my life to get off a plane, so of course there was an issue with the sky bridge, and the man sitting in front of me apparently thought he had left suitcases in every single overhead bin, judging by the number of times he stopped, set down his things, checked, and picked them back up. I smoothed a hand down the front of my shirt and glanced at her text again. My departure had been delayed because of mechanical issues, and the man with a million suitcases or just a bad memory was moving like molasses.

Bennett: Flight delay + slow fellow passenger. Can I still see you?

The crowd finally started to move forward again, and luckily the bag man found all his belongings and stopped searching. I'd been antsy all day, waking two hours ahead of my alarm because I was paranoid about missing a flight. I hated being late. Even though my tardiness wasn't my fault, it reminded me of my parents and the constant uncertainty about whether they'd show up or not. I didn't want Ollie to question whether I'd show up, even if we'd established this was just a mutually beneficial friendship.

Ollie: Sure. I'll be the woman behind the counter at Pre-Flight Paws.

Bennett: Or the woman chasing a wet dog.

Ollie: It's always a possibility.

Bennett: Even better. It's really Pepper I hoped to see.

Ollie: See you soon.

My chuckle earned a kind glance from the flight attendant, and I thanked her, navigating around bag man and smoothly circumventing a chatty young couple ambling up the jet bridge. The airport was one of the few places where you could walk fast around people and no one minded. They'd assume I had to catch a flight and not the attention of a beautiful woman who'd agreed to practice dating for some reason.

Emerging from the jet bridge into the terminal was like walking out into sunshine, even though the lights were fluorescent. For a moment, there was so much space, I felt like I could spin. I never spun, of course, because that would get me followed and taken in by security. Sometimes I wanted to, though. I'd stepped off a plane three years earlier to find out that my first book had sold to a publisher. This time Ollie was waiting and leaning against a column at the edge of the seating area. She wasn't wearing the same T-shirt I'd seen her in before; instead a blue cotton dress with a belt at her waist that showed her curves.

"I figured I'd meet you," she said, standing straighter. "Not sure how this whole muse thing works."

"I . . . Well, I don't know, either, but I'm glad you're here," I said, returning her wave and rushing across the open area. I wanted to hug her, but we hadn't set any boundaries yet and I was dragging my roller bag behind me. "I'm sorry I'm late."

She waved a hand. "That's okay. How long do you have?"

I didn't need to look because I'd done the math in the sky bridge, eager to maximize my time with her, but I glanced at my watch anyway. "An hour and seven minutes."

She giggled. God, she had a great laugh. “That’s very specific. Are you a specific kind of man, Bennett?”

“Well, I work with risk assessment for an insurance company, so I’d say so.”

She nodded toward the terminal and I followed her, standing close to hear her and to be a little nearer. “Insurance and romance novels. That’s quite a combination.”

“I’m afraid those are the two most interesting things about me,” I confessed as we neared an open area filled with different food options. “I want to hear about you, though. How you decided on pet grooming in an airport.”

She laughed again and paused, glancing around. “I can share that, but first . . . which culinary delight tickles your fancy? I’m flexible.”

I looked for the shortest line. It was hard to hear her in this crowded space, and leaning into her would mean I’d be inhaling the delicious scent of her, which would probably cross a line for friends. “Do you like pretzels?”

“Why? Did you sneak some off the plane?” We walked toward the soft-pretzel vendor and stood behind three other people.

“I always choose the cookies, even first thing in the morning.” I had a small addiction, but they were excellent cookies. “My friend Gia found them for me in a store once, but they just taste better on the plane.”

“Sweet tooth, huh?” The customer in front of us stepped back unexpectedly and bumped Ollie with his backpack. She braced herself against my arm, and her palm stretched across my biceps.

My face heated for no reason. Liking sweet things wasn’t even embarrassing, but her touch sent a warm flush through my body. I’d felt the same thing after I gave her the Cruella de Vil toy and we’d shaken hands. “They’re excellent cookies. I, uh, have a stash.”

She moved her hand away and I missed the feel but pulled my messenger bag toward her and opened the front compartment, where I had ten or fifteen little packets of Biscoff biscuits. “You have a problem,” she said, peering into the bag and then meeting my eyes. “But the bigger question is: Do you share your cookies?”

“Only with my friends.”

She grinned. “Good thing we’re friends.”

* * *

By the time we got our pretzels, we had only forty minutes, which was how we found ourselves on the moving walkway, standing off to the right together, eating our pretzels and watching the concourse move slowly by us. “So, tell me about work. That’s what people talk about on dates, right? How did you decide to do this?”

She finished chewing and leaned back against the moving rubber hand belt. “My best friend, Jess, has wanted to open her own grooming place for years, but it’s expensive.”

I nodded, remembering the woman in the shop who had trimmed Duke the cat—Gia had named him the Duke of Maleficent Falls, from my third book.

“I went to school for management and political science,” she added, looking out over the flight line as we passed a series of floor-to-ceiling windows. “I was going to move to DC and maybe try to change the world.”

“So, you’ve never been a corporate drone like me. Perhaps a high-powered lobbyist?”

She smiled without her teeth and shook her head. “No.”

“What happened?”

She swung her gaze to mine and fixed a smile on her face. “That’s a story for another pretzel. I didn’t end up going but came into some money later. Yada yada yada, we did our research and decided the trend of pets flying wasn’t going anywhere, and with some policy changes, we were able to give it a try. I’d been trying to take more risks, and . . . well, this was a big one.”

“I have limited knowledge of pet grooming,” I said. That was a bit of a lie—I’d looked up everything I could find on the business after meeting her the first time. If I’d put that much research into my new book, the writing might go faster. “Seems like the risk paid off.”

“It did. We might be expanding into some other airports. It will mean a ton of travel, but that’s kind of exciting,” she said as we stepped off the end of the walkway and strode toward the next one. I saw my gate in the distance and contemplated missing my flight so I could talk to her longer.

“That’s fantastic. Congratulations.” I crumpled the wrapper from my pretzel to do something with my hands. “From one frequent flier to a soon-to-be one, it can be hard to keep up with people. In my experience, all relationships start to feel like long-distance relationships if you’re gone a lot.”

She shook her head. “I believe it. I will never have another long-distance relationship.”

My heart sank. This was just pretzels on the people mover, and this was just friendship and book inspiration. “Sounds like that’s a story for another pretzel, too?”

“Definitely,” she said, crumpling her own wrapper. “Is this helping? For the book, I mean?”

I’d forgotten about it, lost in talking to her. “Yeah, I think it is. In the book, the character is heartbroken; not that you’re heartbroken, of course. But it’s about long-distance relationships and how he might be lonely. How that might shape his actions.” I’d pulled that out of the air, but it was a perfect angle for the part I was writing. I glanced away and then back to Ollie, tracing the constellation of her freckles.

“Lonely is definitely a thing,” she said, her own gaze wandering. “That’s why I love books. Should I read your books? I don’t know if that’s allowed.”

We stepped off the moving walkway again and stood near a wall across from my gate, both regaining our equilibrium. “You don’t have to.”

She shrugged. “It would be nice to see what this might lead to.”

The gate agent’s voice startled us. “We will begin preboarding for Flight 2225, service to Chicago, shortly.”

“I guess we’re about out of time,” she said, with maybe a hint of disappointment at the corners of her lips.

“Here,” I said, reaching into my bag and pulling out a few packages. “For dessert.”

“Three? Wow, what did I do to earn this much of your stash?” Our fingers brushed when she took the cookies from my hand. That same electricity sparked over my skin.

“Just to ensure I get to hear those other pretzel stories.”

She ran a hand over her stomach. “Heavy trade-off, but I guess that’s fair. I can enjoy the cookies when I start reading your book.”

I liked the idea of her holding my words in her hands. “I like to read with something sweet, too.”

She pressed her lips together and shifted her gaze, and I wondered if what I’d said sounded as flirtatious to her as it did in my head. She met my eyes again, though. “I’m sure it will only sweeten the reading experience. I’ll make sure to leave good reviews.”

“Only if you enjoy them,” I said automatically, trying to tamp down the smile.

“Oh, of course. If I don’t, I’ll eviscerate you on every platform I can access.”

My laugh came out bigger than I’d intended. “That’s all I ask.”

“Now, this isn’t *101 Dalmatians* fan fic, is it? If so, I just need to mentally prepare.”

I laughed again, noticing the looks from a few nearby passengers waiting for our flight. “Just love stories; no puppies were harmed.”

She wiped her brow in mock relief. “Whew!” Ollie glanced over my shoulder at my gate. “I think you probably have to go.”

“I suppose you’re right.” There was a crumb under her lip I noticed just then and I had a fleeting fantasy of kissing her there, taking care of the crumb and then backing her against a wall. “You have a little something here,” I said, motioning to my own mouth.

She brushed it away immediately. “How long have you let me talk to you with food on my face, Benny?”

“Not long, and I didn’t want to interrupt your story.” I didn’t mention that I’d been so focused on her, I hadn’t noticed the fleck of bread.

“Well, I guess that’s polite,” she said, walking with me closer to the boarding area, where they’d begun boarding the main cabin.

“And I didn’t want to brush something from your face without your permission.”

She grinned. “It’s a good thing we weren’t eating chicken wings,” she said, brushing her own lips, seeming to check again.

“You’re perfect,” I said without thinking. “I mean, you got it. The crumb. Not that your face is perfect. I mean, it’s a lovely face, a beautiful face, a perfect face, really, but I meant—”

“Bennett?”

I pressed my lips together.

And she laughed again. “You can brush away crumbs or chicken bones, or any other food that might end up there. It’s something I’d ask of any of my friends.”

I had the urge to practice the motion, but the gate agent indicated the doors would close soon. “I will. Thanks for having a pretzel with me,” I said, taking a step toward the gate.

“See you soon,” she said, waving me toward my flight.

“Definitely.”

Chapter Eleven

Ollie

Our business saw mostly dogs, with a few cats in the mix, but every now and then, a customer would throw us a curveball. I accepted the animal carrier from the gentleman across the desk once he was finished talking sweetly to and then kissing on the mouth a sable-colored ferret. I wanted gold stars for maintaining a straight expression. After checking him in, I walked the case to the back for Jess, who was showing Jeremiah a few tricks of the trade.

“Miss Cornelia is here,” I said handing over the case. “How do you bathe a ferret, anyway?”

“Carefully,” Jess joked. “I read up on it since I knew she was coming in. You want to stay and watch?”

“No, thanks.” I liked dogs, but Jess was the animal lover between the two of us. Also, I was stuck on the image of the owner’s mouth on the animal’s mouth and I was feeling a need to wash my hands. Instead, I pulled my phone from my pocket.

Ollie: I just watched a man kiss a ferret.

Bennett: Have you no shame? Some moments between a man and his ferret are private.

Bennett: Tongue wasn’t involved, was it?

I clapped my hand over my mouth to stifle giggles, though the lobby was empty.

Ollie: Do you really want to know?

Bennett: On second thought, I don't. Do you have anything unrelated to ferrets to discuss?

Ollie: Do you have a minute for a question?

Bennett: Sorry, all my minutes are reserved for answers. You can try again later.

Bennett: Shoot.

I checked the lobby again and took a selfie with the five books I'd brought from home.

Ollie: Which one of your novels should I start with?

I waited for a reply and glanced over the book covers, the first two with sweeping covers featuring two people in an embrace, the man's hands always venturing slightly toward indecent and the woman's expression looking perfectly wanting. I wondered how much influence Bennett had in picking the models; maybe that was the type of woman he was interested in. The three in the series were a mix of illustrated background and half photo and half sketched images, the effect feeling like the artist had been caught mid-render.

Ollie: Did I lose you?

Bennett: Sorry, no. I just didn't expect you to buy them all.

Ollie: I'd already bought your first and then the bookstore in the terminal had them in stock. The owner loves you, by the way. She talked my ear off and two other customers joined in.

Ollie: You're a little famous, Benny.

Bennett: I am not famous.

Bennett: I'd start with *The Duchess Affair* or *To Loathe an Earl*. They're stand-alone books, so if you don't want to keep reading, you're not left with a cliffhanger.

Ollie: I'm not worried about not liking them. 😊

Bennett: FYI. They all contain love scenes. They're rather graphic.

I glanced at the books I'd stashed back under the counter. The bookstore owner did tell me the books were “very steamy” and the two customers who joined the conversation said to “have extra batteries on hand while reading.” My face warmed. Other parts of my body warmed at the idea of Bennett, my new *friend*, writing sex scenes that were so hot they elicited warnings from well-meaning strangers to make sure my vibrator was charged. I thought about the feel of his hand against mine when we shook hands, the way his grip had been firm but gentle. I wondered how much of his writing translated to real life.

Ollie: Dedicated romance reader, remember? Looking forward to those! 🍆🍑🏆

I sent another text with just a smiley face to balance out the sexting emojis and watched the dots blink back and forth until a customer entered and I set aside my phone. Ten minutes later, once I had them checked in, I looked back at the thread, where I found a GIF of a ferret sticking out its tongue.

* * *

Late the next night, I set the book aside and let out a deep breath. I wasn't sure what I was expecting, but the novel had ticked every box. The characters were interesting and well-rounded, the story kept me turning pages, the romance felt both normal and grand, and, as promised by the women in the bookstore, the sex scenes made me blush. I had a fleeting curiosity about whether his rambling carried over into the bedroom. *Does Bennett just keep going?*

Ollie: I finished your book.

Bennett: I'll await your eviscerating review.

I glanced at the clock. I hadn't realized it was so late, after 1 a.m. my time. I did the math for California, where he was working that week, and I wondered if he was in bed, too.

Ollie: I loved it. I loved every second of it. How are you this good? Is it too weird that I'm texting you from my bed at 1am?

Bennett: It's three hours less weird in California, if that makes you feel better. I'm happy you liked it.

I picked up the book again and ran a finger over the raised font of his name. I'd heard his voice in the words and touches of the humor I was getting to know, and a few moments that made me gasp.

Ollie: You didn't tell me there was a runaway dog.

Bennett: That was a bit of a coincidence.

Bennett: Not that it's the same. No nudity for you, and Pepper isn't a pug.

Bennett: I mean you weren't naked when chasing the dog. Not that you're not naked now.

Bennett: Not that you are naked or not that you'd tell me if you were. Of course, I wouldn't ask you what you were wearing. It's none of my business.

Ollie: Benny, you're rambling. Is it rambling if it's in a text message?

Bennett: Yes. It is my natural state. Apologies.

I grinned and imagined his expression when he realized he'd been going on and on about me being naked, the words falling out of him like they had nowhere else to go. He'd look a little flustered and a little embarrassed and then he'd flash this smile that was a little bit kissable.

Ollie: For the record, I am not naked. I have paired an ages-old T-shirt with my rattiest sweatpants for this conversation. Does that inspire anything for you?

His end of the conversation was still for a few minutes.

Bennett: Definitely. Well, now that you've told me what you're wearing, will you tell me something else?

Ollie: Granny panties.

Bennett: I just choked on my tea. I wasn't going to ask that. I was only joking about the what-are-you-wearing thing. I know that would be completely inappropriate.

Ollie: I know. I just wanted to see you ramble.

Bennett: Mission accomplished. What I really wanted to ask was if you'd share one of the 🍷 stories? Why didn't you move to Washington DC?

I swallowed and set the book down, glancing out the open window with the city lights twinkling. I didn't want to type it all out and see the words in front of me, so I hit the call button.

"Hello." His voice was low and soothing, and I liked the unexpected rush I got from the familiar way he answered.

"It's an easier story to say than to type," I jumped in.

"The best pretzel stories are." I heard rustling in the background and wondered again if he was lying in bed like me, a few thousand miles away.

"It's not that great a story. I mean, you wouldn't put it in a book, but maybe it will help."

Bennett spoke a little slower and a little lower. I didn't know if that was because of the late hour or if it showed he was relaxed, but I liked it. "I wouldn't put it in. It doesn't always have to be about the book; we could just talk like friends."

I rolled the term around in my head. Friends. "I had a job offer to work with a campaign strategist in DC. She was supporting a candidate I really believed in who had some sweeping ideas. It was everything I'd worked for, what every internship and late-night study session had led to." I glanced at

the space across the room where I had a framed photo of me in DC in college, standing in front of the Capitol Building with friends during a trip.

“That sounds like an amazing opportunity.” He had this way of responding without a question or without prompting me to continue that made me want to tell him everything.

“It was.” I settled against my pillows. “My boyfriend at the time had a good job here and asked me to marry him, said he would miss me too much, that he wanted us to have the best chance to make it.” I looked at my bare ring finger. “I loved him and I agreed to put off the job and to look for something local.”

Bennett didn’t say anything, so I kept talking.

“I found a few things here and there with some local politicians, but nothing on the level of the DC job, and then he got a new job in New York.”

“And you moved with him?”

“I was going to go. I had to wrap up a campaign here, so he went on without me for the first six months. We planned to get married and live there. Well, turns out he chose New York for more than the job. His girlfriend was there. When I found out, he tried to convince me it was my fault, that if I were with him and not working so much, it wouldn’t happen. That it was just the distance.”

“I’m sorry he was such an ass, Olivia. You broke up with him?”

Aunt Harry had advised me to blow up his life and go full scorched earth, but she didn’t mean it. That would hurt his grandma, one of her best friends. Jess still offered to bring the matches, though. “I returned his ring to his sweet grandmother—it had been hers—and began to figure out what to do with my life.”

“You’re much kinder than I would have been. Did you at least tell granny that her grandson was a cheating asshole?”

I smiled. “I should have. I was so angry and sad, I didn’t know where to direct it all, but then I channeled it into other things and eventually the business with Jess. Anyway, that is my pretzel-for-another-time story.”

“And that’s why no long-distance relationships?”

“Yes.” I checked out the clock; it was after two in the morning now. “I should get some sleep, though. If I stay up any later rereading passages from your book, I’ll be dead at work tomorrow.”

“You’re right. It’s getting late.” There was a hedge in his voice, like there was something more he wanted to say but decided against it. “Thank you for telling me your pretzel story, Ollie.”

“Thank you for listening to it.” Now we were both just breathing into the phone, soft puffs of breath the only sounds between us, and neither of us seemed to be making a move to hang up. I liked the sound of his breaths. I liked the way it was comfortable. And I didn’t like how much I wanted to stay on the phone with him. “I’ll see you soon?”

“Absolutely. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Good night, Benny.”

“Good night, beautiful Olivia.”

Chapter Twelve

Bennett

Aside from a text here or there, I hadn't really spoken with Ollie since our late-night phone call, which started out with me imagining her naked in bed and ended with me imagining her in her tattered sweatpants reading my book next to me. The second image had been harder to shake away.

As the plane taxied and I powered my phone on, I drummed my fingers on the seat, eager to see her. She'd texted that morning asking if my flight was on time and if I was allergic to anything, leaving me curious.

Bennett: Just landed.

Ollie: Hungry?

Bennett: Famished.

The stars had aligned for this flight—we'd arrived early, I was near the front with efficient travelers ahead of me, and I'd spent the first leg of my trip working on my book, the one scene I couldn't get out of my head since meeting Ollie. The hero and heroine shared their first kiss, a moment of passion alone in a rose garden. The entire time I was writing it, I was imagining Ollie at Gate C7 and the rows of chairs instead of a maze of rosebushes. The fantasy left me eager for a kiss that wouldn't happen, but

when I stepped off the plane, Ollie smiled at me like she'd been eager to see me, too.

"What's all this?" I motioned to the two brown paper bags she carried.

"I didn't want to chance long lines, so I picked up lunch for us." She held up the bags and nodded to the other end of the concourse. "There's a gate at the end of the concourse that's usually not busy this time of day."

"You made us a picnic lunch?"

She looked up at me through thick lashes with a sheepish grin. "I bought us a picnic lunch in the food court."

"Still counts." When I reached for one of the bags, our fingers grazed. I still wasn't used to the feeling that shot through me at her proximity. "I have a long layover this time."

"Good, because I acquired a lot of food and have help covering the front of the salon for a while."

I liked that she wanted to spend more time with me. I'd asked my assistant to make sure I had a longer layover in the airport when traveling to or from LA. She'd given me a curious expression—my requests in the past had always been to spend as little time traveling as possible, as I preferred to spend the time doing the work. Despite this job, I didn't actually like travel all that much. Except for Ollie. She made it worth it.

She pulled a blanket from one bag and spread it on the carpet near some empty seats and the airport's floor-to-ceiling windows. "Is sitting on the floor okay?" She looked at my suit skeptically.

I set my bags near the seats and laughed, in awe of this whole setup. "I just can't believe you set up a picnic lunch. I'm so impressed."

She shrugged and joined me on the blanket, her legs tucked to one side. "It's no big deal. I figured sitting down was better than the moving walkway and it would be quieter here."

I accepted the bottle of water she handed me as she begun unpacking things from the bag. I admired the slope of her shoulder—she wore a tank top today, her soft brown skin a contrast to the bright white of the shirt. I wondered if she'd chosen it thinking of me in the same way I'd studied my shirts wondering which might look nicest when I saw her. She smiled when

she handed me a wrapped sandwich and placed a container of chips and guacamole between us. “Did I do something special to deserve this level of care?”

“I finished all your books,” she said, digging a container filled with chopped vegetables from the bag. Impressively, the broccoli and carrots looked fresh and crisp and not sad and deflated as could be the case with prepackaged, to-go vegetables.

“All of them? It’s only been a few days.” I imagined her reading some of the scenes in my second book—the ones Gia said were the hottest thing I’d ever written—and my neck heated.

“You’re a really good writer,” she said with a wink. *This woman is going to kill me.* “Dig in,” she said, motioning to the food. “I have dessert, too.”

As soon as I’d seen her, I’d forgotten I was starving, but the sandwich was thick sliced turkey on soft bread, and one bite was all it took to remind my brain that my body needed sustenance. “This is really lovely. You’re an excellent picnic curator,” I commented.

“I order takeout with the best of them.”

“It’s an important life skill,” I said, reaching for a baby carrot.

We chewed together in companionable silence, enjoying the food. It was so strange that these silences never felt awkward. Other than with Gia, silences often felt so stressful, so anxiety producing, like I needed to come up with the next thing to say. Ollie just made me feel like I could relax, and the conversation would reinstate itself at some point.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“You don’t actually have to ask permission before asking.” I shifted so I could lean against the seats behind us as I finished the sandwich I’d mostly inhaled. “What would you like to know, beautiful Olivia?”

“No one calls me Olivia. I’m not really used to it, I guess. But no one calls me beautiful, either. Why do you do that?”

“That was your question?” I stalled because I hadn’t meant to call her that—her given name or adding on to it. It’s how I thought of her in my head, and I knew it was completely wrong to say to someone who’d said they

wanted to be friends, and she was doing me this favor. “I apologize. I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable.”

“I don’t . . . mind; it’s just so . . . I don’t know.”

“I’ll stop. I do think you’re beautiful—stunning, really.” I snapped my gaze up to her eyes from her lips, where it had naturally fallen. “But I know it’s odd to say that, to make you believe I only appreciate how you look. And that couldn’t be further from the truth, though, of course, how you look is . . . well, you’re beautiful, and . . . I’m rambling again.”

She glanced down at her hands, as if she were hiding the smile on her lips. “The rambling is kind of adorable,” she said quietly before taking a gulp from her water bottle.

We fell into one of our silences again, this one filled with my awkward admission that I thought she was the most beautiful woman I’d ever met and I couldn’t get her out of my mind. Maybe I didn’t say that out loud, but it felt like I’d told her everything. “So, what was your actual question?”

“In the book, the characters’ parents were gamblers. You wrote that in such a . . . I don’t know, moving way. Was that from personal experience?”

I’d answered the question before. That wasn’t fully true—I’d been asked the question before and provided a response, but not the real answer. I nodded. “Yes. Mum and Dad met at a card game. They always joked they bet it all on love.”

“That’s sweet,” she said, studying me.

“It was, I suppose. It is. They’re still betting it all on each other, but also on everything else, too.”

“And on you?”

“Not so much.” I gave her what I was sure was a wry grin. “They’re not bad people. They love me; they just love the next big thing a little more, or so it’s always seemed.”

She chewed her thumbnail, considering my words. “So, you built a career assessing risk.”

“Doesn’t take a psychiatrist to figure out that one, huh?”

She smiled, one of her familiar soft smiles, and we both watched a small family walk by, one father holding a little boy’s hand and talking to him in

that way parents always seemed to talk to kids in airports—one part keeping them close, one part teaching them how to behave in the space, and one part awed at the child having this little adventure. The other father pushed a stroller and spoke to the baby inside, making exaggerated funny faces.

“You like it, though? The work?”

I returned my attention to her. “I enjoy it. I’d rather be writing, but the day job is more stable.”

“Have you ever thought about writing full-time?” She began to clean up the empty containers and I helped, passing wrappers and lids across the blanket. “Or is that too big a risk financially?”

Gia asked me that all the time; so did my literary agent. I’d never given either of them the real reason I was hesitant to do it. “It’s a financial risk, but it’s not really that.”

She narrowed her eyes and handed me a single serving of cheesecake from inside her brown paper bag. “It’s hard to take a chance on ourselves.”

I nodded. “If everything goes tits up, it’s on me, and in publishing, nothing is guaranteed. You must know that feeling, owning your own business and all. I just don’t know if I’m cut out for that.”

“You’ve been able to keep writing, though? No more writer’s block?”

“Not since I met you.”

She handed me a fork and rested her hand on mine. It was the first time we’d touched in any sustained way since that handshake, and the risk I wanted to take was to link my fingers with hers, or to tip her chin up so our lips could meet. That’s what I wrote into my books. It was what my characters would do, but my characters were braver than me.

Her eyes met mine, her cool hand still over mine. “For what it’s worth, I couldn’t put your books down. It felt like you were next to me when I was reading.” She leaned forward and my hands finally took over where my brain had stilled.

I lifted my hand and brushed the pad of my thumb over her cheek, gently, barely touching her, but her eyes fell closed.

“Did I have a crumb?”

My voice sounded foreign to me, rough. “It was a chicken wing, actually.”

She chuckled but didn’t move her hand. She didn’t pull back, and I needed to kiss this woman more than I needed to breathe, but the sound of wheels clattering on the tile broke our connection, as two men chatting animatedly about baseball rounded the corner and sat nearby.

Ollie pulled back and smoothed out her tank top, though it wasn’t unsettled. She nodded toward the cheesecake in my hand. “It’s not as good as the cookies, but eat up.”

I had a sinking feeling the opportunity was gone and I cursed my parents in that moment for raising me to not take chances. I knew they didn’t always come around again, that sometimes being careful meant missing out.

I couldn’t believe we’d been talking so long, and when I checked my watch, I knew I’d have to head to my gate soon. As we finished cleaning up and threw away our trash, I didn’t want to leave her. “Thank you for the picnic. This was the best layover I’ve ever had.”

She did a deep bow, her tank top dipping low in the front, and *No, I will not ogle her breasts even though they look perfect*. “It was fun. Maybe you can add a picnic to the book.” She smoothed a palm down the front of her shirt. “And, for what it’s worth, I hope you decide to take the chance if it will make you happy.” She ran her palm down my forearm and goose bumps covered my arm at her touch. “It’s important to be happy.”

The guys behind us were still talking about baseball, loudly and without mind to our conversation, so Olivia had leaned close when she spoke, her hand still on my arm. The flurry of sensation from her touch was the only way to justify what came out of my mouth. “May I hug you?”

“Hug me?”

“I mean, to say goodbye. Well, not goodbye. I’ll be back, but goodbye for now. Goodbye until next time. I don’t know why I tell you all these things, but I seem to be able to talk to you, and I just thought, maybe we were good enough friends to hug, if you want to, but of course if you don’t—”

She cut me off, wrapping her arms around my neck. She smelled like cinnamon and flowers, and the two scents should not have gone together so

well, but they did. “Thank you for telling me your pretzel story, Benny,” she said, as I wrapped my arms around her back. “And for showing up again without your fur coat. Too bad my aunt Harry isn’t getting married in the airport. You’d be a really fun date.”

“Would she consider changing the venue?” I laughed from my belly and used the joke to pull us closer, all the while thinking about risks and her enticing cinnamon scent and how much I didn’t want to get on that plane.

Chapter Thirteen

Ollie

“No picnic lunch today?” Jess bumped me with her hip at the front desk, practically in sync with yelps from Pepper and his fellow guest waiting to be picked up alongside him in the back.

“I regret telling you about that.”

“Why?”

“Because you keep making the whole thing into something more than it is.” In truth, she wasn’t, because I was making it bigger than it was. When he’d asked to hug me, when he’d pulled me to him and our bodies were close, I’d wanted more, and not just more physically, which . . . Well, of course I wanted more physically, but I wanted more time spent getting to know him. And in the back of my mind, I knew this was for his book, that for whatever reason, I inspired him. But the book would be done at some point.

Jess raised an eyebrow and sipped on the straw of her massive water bottle. Her hydration intake was truly impressive.

“I mean, we’re just friends. I barely know him.” Except that I felt like I did know him on some level. I’d told him about my ex and he’d shared about his parents; not a lot, but it felt like more than what you’d tell a stranger. “And he lives somewhere else.”

“True,” she said, skimming through the paperwork on the desk. “Is that the only thing holding you back?”

“Holding me back from what?”

“From going on a real date or at least admitting you want to.”

I didn't respond, filing away the stack of invoices I'd just paid. I'd thought he was going to kiss me during that picnic. I'd leaned in and he'd touched my face, and even though we were in the middle of the airport with the PA system and all the background noise and the fluorescent lighting, I thought he would kiss me and I'd wanted him to.

“You know, you're my best friend. You're my business partner, but I don't get you sometimes. After that jackass cheated on you, you've been all about taking chances, taking risks, and never playing it safe just to play it safe. I love that about you. But you meet a guy who is the exact opposite of a safe choice, and suddenly you don't even consider risking it?” Jess nudged me again and I met her stare.

Her words reminded me of Bennett talking about striking out on his own, on taking a chance on himself. Jess was right; Bennett was not a safe choice—he lived somewhere else and we'd spent a grand total of maybe five hours in each other's company. I'd liked him immediately, though, and nothing about that initial attraction had dampened. He was a risk, a big one, but it wasn't financial or professional. “I like him a lot, Jess,” I said quietly. “I think if I opened the door, I'd fall through, and I'm a little skittish about doors at this point.”

She wrapped an arm around my shoulders and tipped her head to mine, bumping it in time to another explosion of conversation between Pepper and the poor shih tzu who was his unwilling bunkmate. “I know.”

The barking intensified and we saw Pepper's owner approaching the doors. Jess slid away and walked into the back room. “I'm not letting you off the hook about this yet,” she called over her shoulder.

My phone buzzed by the computer.

Bennett: Are you free tomorrow evening? I'm flying through around seven.

Bennett: And hello 😊

I made small talk with Pepper's owner, who was, in fact, not visiting a love interest, but staying with her grandson every couple of weeks. It made

me look at Pepper a little more kindly, knowing she wanted him dapper and clean before he interacted with a toddler with whom he was “a peach.” After they left, three more customers arrived and I didn’t get a break to respond to Bennett until almost an hour later, when Jeremiah and Jess had the animals in the back and in the throes of pampering.

Ollie: I can be here at seven.

Ollie: Also, can you recommend some more books since I ran through all yours?

Bennett: Of course! What do you like to read? More historical? Lower heat?

Ollie: I’m feeling historical right now.

I drummed my fingers against the counter.

Ollie: High heat.

I bit my lower lip, waiting for his response, not because I was basically telling him I liked reading about sex but because he knew I liked reading the sex he wrote. The sex he wrote so well that it transported me into this feeling like I was completely in the moment and experiencing every detail. Bennett was very good at details.

Bennett: I enjoy those, too.

I expected him to add a qualifier, to ramble in that way I was kind of coming to love, but he didn’t.

Ollie: Then send those recommendations that will require me to buy a fan, Cruella!

Bennett: Here are some of my favorites.

He sent three texts in a row filled with book recommendations, and I imagined him typing furiously before having to stow his phone for a flight. The last message contained a gif of a half-naked man sitting in front of a fan,

and I covered my grin. I didn't need to—Jess was in the back—but if I covered it, I could convince myself the guy didn't delight me so much.

Ollie: Thanks. I'll let you know how it goes.

Ollie: I mean, how the reading goes, not how the fanning goes.

Ollie: Not that I'll actually be using a fan.

Ollie: That would be dangerous and cold, which, I'm not into that . . .

Bennett: I think you picked up my rambling habit.

Ollie: It's contagious, isn't it?

Bennett: I should have given you a warning, but it's cute when you do it.

I'm in trouble. I wasn't sure what to reply. I could have told him I felt the same, but our conversations were getting flirtier and flirtier and I didn't want to lead him on. I didn't want to lead myself on, because Jess was getting to me, and the reasons I couldn't admit this crush out loud kept seeming more and more insignificant.

His next message was a photo from the window of the plane—the sun had cast the tops of the clouds in swaths of orange and lavender like they were a giant blanket.

Ollie: Wow, that's gorgeous.

Bennett: I'd never paid much attention to the color of the clouds, but it made me think of you for some reason. Couldn't stop looking out my window during my flight.

Deep trouble.

Ollie: You should put that in a book. The line about the sky making you think of someone, not the air travel.

The door chimed and a customer clutching a pug to her rushed in needing quick service before a flight. We were slammed for the next two hours solid, customers in and out constantly. When I picked up my phone after things finally slowed down, I had a message waiting from Bennett.

Bennett: Good idea. It's probably something you wouldn't say to another person in real life, anyway, huh? Too sappy?

Ollie: Maybe just the right amount of sappy.

Chapter Fourteen

Bennett

I lucked out and ended up needing to spend a few days in Chicago for work, so I was able to visit Gia. When I arrived at her office to pick her up, a student in a Thurmond University sweatshirt, the hood pulled over his hair, was talking to her. Gia wore jeans and a sweater, and I felt out of place in my suit.

“Thanks, Dr. B,” the student said, backing out of her office. He gave me a nod as he moved past me, pushing sunglasses down from his forehead.

“No problem, Quinn.” She gave a wave to the student and then turned to me. “Hey,” Gia said with a smile.

“Look at you, shaping young minds,” I said while taking in her space, every surface crowded with books and papers. She wrapped her arms around my neck.

“Today, I’m just giving young minds another chance to pass chemistry.” She motioned to the chair across from her. “I just have to finish up a few things and then we can go.”

“No problem, Professor. I’ll sit here quietly.”

She rolled her eyes and spoke while closing things out on her computer. “So, I finished reading the new book.”

I always sent Gia my stuff before anyone else read it. I’d been feverishly writing it, the book I was inspired to work on every time I talked to Ollie.

“What came over you with this one?”

“What do you mean?”

Gia studied my face, her eyes narrowed.

“Does that mean you didn’t like it?”

She shook her head. “I loved it. It’s romantic and moving. The hot scenes were, well . . . damn, Ben. I always love your work, but this one hit different. What changed when you wrote this one?”

I shrugged. “Nothing.” That was a lie. I normally plotted my books before writing. I knew each beat of the story, each step of a character’s arc. There was no risk in writing it because I knew what would happen when I started typing. After getting so stuck, I’d ditched my plotting for this book—I’d been surprised at my own twists and turns, and it needed editing, but I’d been inspired, I supposed. I’d had Ollie in my head.

“How’re things going with the airport woman?”

I pulled my phone from my pocket to have something to do with my hands. “Fine. Why do you ask?”

She arched a brow. I’d told her about my screw-up and our decision to be friends. She’d eventually pried out of me how we texted and that we’d gone on dates in the airport. “Just curious when you’re going to tell me you’re completely falling for her, which is why this book feels different. Like, now? Or will I have to wait until we get our entrées?”

I didn’t respond to the text waiting from Ollie. It was a picture of her holding one of the books I recommended and a series of emojis. Her smile was wide and I saw her bedroom in the background, the space I imagined her texting me from late at night. I flicked my eyes up to meet my friend’s. “I might need my dinner in front of me first.”

* * *

Seeing Gia was good for my soul. We laughed and caught up and she told me I needed to get my head out of my ass about quitting and about Olivia in the way only my best friend could. When my flight to Atlanta landed, I’d gone back to sketching the future. I had a plan.

When I powered my phone on, I had a voice mail from Ollie. “Hey, when you get here, follow the signs to walk toward Terminal B.”

I rushed toward the underground walkway between terminals and spotted Ollie standing near the escalator in jeans and a loose-fitting shirt that somehow still hugged the swell of her breasts. I walked down the escalator, sliding around people who were more patient to get to the bottom.

“Welcome back,” she said when I neared the bottom and stepped from the metal steps onto the tiles. She paused for a second and then pulled me into a hug. She was soft, her body pliant against mine, and even the feel of her back under my palm was inviting. We talked most days now, so even though I hadn’t been near her in a few weeks, seeing her again felt like coming back to someplace familiar.

“It’s good to be back,” I murmured near her ear, holding her a few beats longer than was probably normal for that section of the airport. I grudgingly let her go, holding on to her sweet scent. The shuttle groaned to a halt and a hundred feet shuffled on or off, eager to get to baggage claim or their connecting flight. The automated voice announced, “Attention, passengers, the train doors are closing.”

“I wanted to show you something,” she said, nodding to the left.

“Lead the way.” I placed my hand at the small of her back and wished I hadn’t, because I didn’t want to pull it away. “How did the meeting go?”

She’d told me she and her partner had a meeting with the company that wanted to work with them to expand the business. She took risks the way I admired, after researching and strategizing, but there was still a lot up in the air.

“I can’t believe there are going to be Pre-Flight Paws locations in other places.”

We navigated around the crowds waiting for the train and into the long tunnel connecting gates for those who wanted to walk, and the entire time I longed to touch her lower back again. “Do you ever miss politics? The kind of work you thought you’d do?”

She shrugged. “I do, but running the business has been more fulfilling than I thought it would be. The new challenge is exciting.” She motioned

around as we stepped into the tunnel and began walking next to the moving walkway. There was a display that stretched the length of the long hall with depictions of historical figures and people through time connected to social movements. It felt like walking through a museum. Ollie bumped my shoulder with hers. “Kind of a hidden gem, huh? Well, as hidden as a gem can be in an airport that sees tens of thousands of people a day.”

“Perfect airport date location,” I said, looking around, catching my words after they left my lips.

I risked a glance to catch her reaction, but it didn’t seem she’d made anything of my comment. “Are you ever going to tell me what this book is about? Every time we hang out, I’m dying of curiosity about what I say that shapes the book.”

I should have told her it was done, but I didn’t want this arrangement to end. “No book today,” I said, searching the display without really looking. “I just wanted to see you.”

“Pressure is off, then, I guess. I’ve never been this creative with dates before,” she said, pausing to read a display about a prominent Black transgender woman who’d pushed for changes in the 1990s. The crowds had thinned, most people taking the moving walkway or the train to their next destination. “I never actually enjoyed dating.”

“Me, either. Always felt like a job interview, and when it worked out, it felt like being at a job I didn’t deeply care about.”

“So, you quit?” She was still reading the sign and not looking at me, which made it easier to answer.

“I was usually fired before I could quit.” I chuckled.

She gave a wistful smile and I wanted to kick myself. “Not that that’s what happened with you. I know being engaged is a whole other thing.”

“No, it’s pretty much what happened to me.” She turned to face me, but she didn’t look sad. She smiled. “That’s okay, though. There were better dates ahead.” The back of her hand brushed mine and that now familiar sweep of sensation rushed through me.

“With friends?” I shifted my fingers so they touched hers lightly, feeling like I was holding a breath, waiting for this to go wrong.

She held my gaze, though, and linked her finger with mine, her middle finger sliding against mine before I curled my fingers to bring them together.

We stood together for only a few moments, but it felt like longer. “Could I take you on a real date?”

“Are you saying the Cinnabon outside the men’s room I have planned after this isn’t a real date?”

Her wry grin made me laugh and the tension was gone. We were just two people holding hands and learning about the history of the city, not that I was paying attention to the display now that we’d made this jump to something new. “I love Cinnabon.”

“I knew you weren’t a total cartoon villain,” she said as we walked. “Sure, you make questionable fashion choices and might be on PETA’s most-wanted list, but you can’t be all that bad if you love gooey, giant cinnamon rolls.”

“Not ‘all that bad’ is what I was going for.” We reached the end of the display and passed the next stop for the train into a smaller hallway with large prints of wild animals adorning the walls. There were even fewer people here, and I considered walking Ollie back toward the wall and pressing against her between the macaw and manatee photos where we’d paused. She hadn’t answered my question, though.

“What do you think, beautiful Olivia?”

She faced me. She was thinking, her brow furrowed, and I bit my tongue to stop myself from rambling, attempting to play it cool for once in my life. “It’s probably good for your writing, right? What would we do on a real date?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. I hadn’t thought about my writing until she brought it up, and I remembered this was an arrangement. Just because my heart felt like it was beating out of my chest didn’t mean she’d changed what she needed. “I’d just like to spend time with you knowing you don’t have to be at work and I don’t have to catch a flight.”

“I could smell like something other than wet dog,” she mused.

“It’s a good scent on you.”

“You and your fetish.” She leaned against the wall, pulling me closer.

“It’s a fetish now?” I’d stepped nearer to her, inhaling her scent, which was definitely not wet dog.

She raised her eyebrows and grinned when I stepped closer, sliding the pad of my thumb over her soft cheek. Her grin fell and her eyelids were hooded. “Chicken wing?”

“Mutton chop,” I said sweeping my touch over her satin skin, feeling a little reckless. “If we went on a real date, I might want to kiss you at the end.”

“Ahem.” A phlegmy voice behind us coughed and I stepped back, dropping my hand. “I’d like to see the artwork.” A man I would describe as crotchety in one of my books stood with arms crossed behind us.

“Sorry,” Ollie said, taking me by the hand and leading me toward the escalator. “Do you think there will be grumpy old men on our real date?” She took the step ahead of me on the escalator and I was happy with my decision to check my carry-on.

“Do you want there to be?”

“I’m not sure. On the one hand, could ruin the mood.” She dragged her palm down my biceps. “But on the other hand, it would be familiar.”

“So, is that a yes?” I linked our fingers again.

“To the date or the kissing or the old men?” We neared the top of the steep escalator. “Would kissing me inspire your writing?”

I briefly considered telling her the truth, that the book was finished, and that I wasn’t looking for inspiration, and I was only looking for her, but I didn’t want to risk this thing we had, not yet. “Kissing you would inspire me in a lot of ways.”

“Then . . . maybe don’t wait until the end of the date.”

I was too lost in looking at her and almost tripped when the escalator ended. I stumbled into her and she laughed. “Or I’ll just kiss you first. Think about it,” she said, leading us toward Cinnabon.

Chapter Fifteen

Ollie

I smoothed a hand down my dress and examined myself in the mirror from different angles. I'd taken a page from Harry's dating handbook and wore a white dress that fit snugly over my curves and dipped low in the front. I'd paused when I pulled the dress from my closet because I'd bought it for the engagement party we never ended up having and the tags were still on, but I pushed my hesitation aside. I looked good in this dress. I checked my phone for the fortieth time.

Ollie: I can meet you there.

Bennett: I could pick you up.

The annoying butterflies in my stomach fluttered. I was beginning to fall for him, to crave time with him, and that was scary as hell because it wasn't the plan. It was actually the thing I'd been set on avoiding. Me admitting how I felt would just make it awkward between us. I took a slow breath and held my hand to my stomach, calming myself. I checked myself out in the mirror again as I stepped into my heels. The dress was a good choice. It reminded me to stick to the plan, to have fun, and not to fall for Bennett, not because I was afraid of heartbreak, but because I was smart about it.

My phone buzzed and I prepared myself to be careful.

Bennett: Unless you live in the parking lot of this Zaxby's, I think I am lost.

* * *

I got him turned around in the right direction and peeked out the front curtains, looking for his rental car to pull into the driveway, eager to see him again. The red sedan pulled in and I watched him check his hair in the mirror. I'd always seen him put together—he usually traveled in suits or business casual—but when he stepped out, he looked . . . good. Different. The gray suit fit him well and the shirt was unbuttoned at the top. I snatched my purse and stepped out my front door before he made his way closer, taking another slow breath to remind myself this was for fun and not for keeps.

“The Zaxby's is my winter home. I summer here,” I said, pulling the door closed behind me. I thought he would laugh, but he stilled. “Is something wrong?” I looked down, searching for a stain on my dress. “Did I spill something?”

“No. Sorry.” He shook his head and smiled. “You just . . . you look wonderful. I mean, you always look wonderful. This dress, though, it's something else. I mean, it's not the dress, it's you, of course, and—”

I pressed my finger to his lips, which I meant to be funny but which felt incredibly intimate, especially when his hand fell to my waist. “You're rambling,” I murmured.

He said, “Sorry,” but my finger against his lips muffled the sound and we both laughed. It was nice laughing with Bennett, his hand on my waist, my hand falling over his shoulder and down his arm.

His hand flexed and his mouth drew closer to my lips. I thought he might kiss me there in my driveway. I wanted him to, but at the last moment, he pulled away and opened the car door for me.

He'd picked a nice restaurant on the BeltLine and conversation was easy, comfortable, and just missing the announcements about keeping luggage with you at all times and lost car keys. After our meal, we decided to walk for a

while, taking in the families and couples walking the trail and enjoying the night. Bennett's hand found mine and a slight breeze blew around us. "Is this okay, walking in your heels?"

"I was planning to hop on your back for a piggyback ride in the next few minutes."

He nudged my shoulder with his. "Well, that's awkward because I was planning to ask you for a piggyback ride."

"A real one, or is that creative romance-writer slang for you prefer to take me from behind?"

Bennett's head shot up, eyes wide and expression horror-struck. "No, I meant a real piggyback ride. I didn't mean to imply . . . people actually say that?"

"I'm kidding, Benny," I said, putting my hand on his back, feeling the muscles under his shirt. "Breathe." I wasn't exactly kidding. I'd wanted Bennett in my bed for a long time, since before I even knew his name, but we had an arrangement to stick to and I wasn't sure I could sleep with him and pretend it was all casual.

We kept walking and after a couple of minutes he slipped his hand around mine again.

"How is the book?" He hadn't ever told me much about it, and I got the sense he wanted to keep his work to himself until it was perfect, but I was dying to know.

"It's . . . well, it's done."

"Oh." I dragged my gaze forward to the trail. "That's great," I said, making sure my voice was bright. "Are you happy with it?"

"I think so. I sent it to my editor a few days ago."

"That's great. Congratulations." I nodded, an emotion I didn't expect clawing at my throat. "I guess you won't need me anymore, huh?" I nudged his shoulder with mine to temper how sad my voice sounded.

"What?"

"If your book is done, you won't need me to keep your writer's block at bay, right?" I squeezed his hand. "And I got practice, so this is a nice way to

finish our arrangement, right? And for what it's worth, I'm really proud to have helped to bring another of your books to the world."

He stopped abruptly in the middle of the path. "You . . . want to be finished?"

"I mean . . . I don't want to be. Just if it's run its course, I don't want you to feel like you have to keep doing this for my benefit." I tugged his hand, nodding toward the path. "C'mon. We can still have a fun last hurrah."

He didn't step forward with me, and I looked over my shoulder and then down at our hands, our fingers still linked. "So, that's what you want?" Bennett gently pulled me back to him, our linked hands against his chest. "Because I don't want that." His free thumb ghosted across my cheek.

"You don't need me anymore," I insisted, not daring to move and risk losing the featherlight touches against my cheek.

"I think I do need you." His thumb grazed my skin again. "Or at the very least, I want you in my life. It feels . . ."

"Too fast," I added.

He nodded, searching my face. "Far too fast."

"Too much." My voice was breathy, odd because I was positive I'd been holding my breath.

"Probably too much."

"You wanted to kiss me tonight."

"I wanted you to know the book was done first, that I was here just for you. That kissing you wasn't some literary exercise."

"And you still want to kiss me?"

"Yes." He brushed my jawline before sliding a finger down my neck, his thumb grazing my throat.

"Mutton chop?" My voice was breathier than I wanted.

"Would you believe it? An entire chicken potpie," he murmured, his gaze on my lips, his body close and his grip firm and possessive. The evening crowds moved around us, unaware of the seismic shift happening to our quid pro quo.

Inside my head my swallow was audible like in a cartoon. "Do you want to go back to your hotel?"

He dipped his face to my shoulder and laughed against my skin. “How fast can we get to the car?”

Chapter Sixteen

Bennett

The hotel room was cool, a sharp contrast to the warm weather outside and the overhanging humidity. I looked around the spartan room, aware of her near me, of the pace of her breathing and her scent and how much I wanted to touch her, but I kept my hands at my sides, determined not to mess this up. “Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

She smiled, her fingers continuing the path up my neck and to the back of my head. “In a way.”

“Is ‘thirsty’ some slang I don’t know?” I finally snapped into action, fitting my hand to her waist and guiding her to me. Her body fit against mine just like I’d imagined.

Her lips parted, her tongue wetting her lower lip, and I tipped my chin closer.

“What does it mean?” I spoke into her ear, my lips grazing over the shell, the tip of my nose stroking against her skin in a slow path toward her mouth. It was hard to reconcile the feel of her skin with the knowledge that I was able to touch her.

Ollie tilted her head to the side. “It means I want you.” Her voice was breathy, open, and inviting, like I might refuse her. “So, if you want me, too . . .”

Our mouths were close, almost touching. I stroked a finger across her collarbone and kissed her there, inhaling her. “That’s not a question, Olivia.”

I tipped up her chin and took a moment to admire the way she slid her tongue along her lower lip, and then her lips were on mine, eager, opening to me as our tongues danced. “I wanted to do this on the moving walkway and the escalator.” I kissed her again, my hand sliding up her spine until I could hold the back of her neck, and then back down the glorious expanse of her body.

“That would have been dangerous,” she said on a groan as I moved to kiss her neck, to find the hollow of her throat. I trailed lower and kissed her collarbone, a place I’d never been excited to touch on another woman. “We would have tripped when the walkway ended.”

Ollie’s nails dragging down my back spurred me forward, and I walked her backward toward the bed in the middle of the room as my own hands roamed lower, palming the swell of her backside, where the dress clung to her perfect curves. “Probably.”

“We might have fallen,” she said, before she pulled my lips to hers again, her mouth against mine, tongue moving over my lower lip and her body in my arms, her softness against my hard length.

“I guess it’s good we’re not in the airport, then.” I found the zipper of her dress and toyed with it. “Can I unzip your dress?”

She nodded and moved her hands to mine, but I nudged them away.

“Let me,” I whispered, guiding her to turn toward the bed. “Let me look at you.” I pulled the zipper down with as much restraint as I could, watching the white fabric open and gape, revealing her bare skin, a shock of black-and-white-spotted bra strap across her back. “Your bra . . .”

Her back moved in time with her laughter.

Ollie glanced over her shoulder, so I could appreciate the smile on her lips. “I wanted to remind you of our joke.”

“I remember everything we’ve joked about.” I slid the dress off her shoulders, tugging it down and enjoying how my palms grazed her hips as I slid it over them. I trailed a finger down her spine, feeling her body react to my touch. “You’ve been in my head since the day I met you.” I kissed her shoulder, sliding her bra strap out of the way.

“Before we met, I used to watch you when you’d get off the plane.” She spoke as I continued a trail of kisses across her shoulder and the back of her

neck, my finger sliding up and down her spine.

“What did you think about?”

“This.” She rolled her body and I let out a low groan. “What this would be like.”

I unhooked her bra slowly, letting the garment fall to the floor and sliding my palms up her ribs. “Do you want me to touch you?”

She slid her hands over mine and placed them over her breasts, showing me how to touch her, guiding my fingers.

I knew she trusted me to have listened, to have paid attention to what made her feel good, and her hands fell away. “You’re beautiful,” I said into her ear, enjoying the way she groaned and moved under my touch. “I am desperate to taste you.” I slid my hand down her stomach to the lacy edge of her underwear. “Can I touch you here? Can I spread your thighs and learn how my tongue can make you come apart?”

She was quiet for a moment, and I paused.

“That’s a line from your book.” She turned in my arms, her fingers working the buttons of my shirt. “That’s cheating.”

“I still wrote it.” I watched her make quick work of my shirt, pushing it off my shoulders. “And how do you remember that line?”

Ollie flashed a devilish grin and pushed her panties down before sitting on the bed and beckoning me forward to the space between her spread legs. “I reread that scene a lot of times.”

I kissed my way up from her knee. “If you don’t let me do or say things from my books,” I said between kisses, nudging her knees farther apart. “There’s a lot of things I won’t be able to do.”

Her nails grazed my scalp. “Like that thing from the carriage?”

I nuzzled her with my nose, letting out a shaky breath at the feel of her hot, wet flesh. “Definitely the thing from the carriage.” I wasn’t a stranger to sex, more of an infrequent out-of-town guest, and the nerves that usually plagued me were quiet. “Which would be a shame because I rather like the thing from the carriage.”

When I ghosted a finger up the crease of her thigh, across her mound, and then down the other crease, she groaned and arched her back. “Maybe a few

things from the books is good.”

Ollie was just as responsive and vocal and I’d fantasized she would be, sinking her fingers through my hair when I hit the right rhythm and squirming under me when she was close, her breath stuttering. Feeling the rush and pulse of Ollie as she came undone under my tongue was addictive—I wanted to feel and taste it over and over again.

“The carriage,” she panted, falling back onto the bed, her hand resting over her heart. “The damn carriage.”

I kissed the side of her knee, watching her body buzz. “Do you need a drink of water before I do that again?”

“You’re going to do it again?” She smiled as she raised onto her elbows.

“If you’d like me to.”

She hadn’t stopped smiling, and her eyes fell down my chest, leaving a trail of heat. “I’d like you to take off your pants.”

I hurried out of my trousers, conscious of her gaze on the unmistakable erection in my boxer briefs. I liked her looking at me, examining me.

She reached for my hand and tugged me to the bed with her. “Where did I find you?”

I slid my palm over her belly. “Technically, Pepper found me.”

“You’re saying I have Pepper to thank for that?”

“Well.” I slid my hand lower and guided her thigh to my hip. “I had a little something to do with it.”

“Sixty–forty.” Ollie giggled, a light, airy sound that delighted me.

“Fair, I suppose.” I followed the line of her thigh, inching higher, holding myself back as I took in her face. “I meant what I said. I want you in my life. Not for my book and not just in my bed.”

Her own hands were tracing my biceps, delicate fingertips playing over the muscles. “We might break each other’s hearts.”

“We might.” I pulled her closer, feeling her heat against me, the swell of her backside under my hands. “You’re worth the risk, though.”

“Yeah?” She slid her fingers up my neck, and I had to close my eyes at the wave of sensation. When she stroked them through the hair at my nape, I took in her expression, her parted full lips. “You are, too.”

I grinned; I couldn't help it, so taken in by her words.

"Now, can you do the *other* carriage thing?"

I rolled her to her back, lowering my lips to her throat. "I thought I might do the first one again and then work my way through the series."

She let out a whimper as my fingers skirted lower, brushing between her slick folds, and my cock jumped at the sound of her voice, the sounds of her reacting to me. "I really like how you think."

* * *

I buried my face in the crook of her neck. "Please stay tonight," I panted.

"Well," she returned, her own chest heaving. "You're still inside me, so I'm not going anywhere right now."

I kissed her, already addicted to kissing her, addicted to the way her tongue swept over mine. "Maybe I was a little overeager." I slowly pulled from her, both of us reacting to the loss of contact. "Stay, though? We get so little time together, and I know we haven't talked through how this will work, and of course there is a lot to talk through, but mostly I just don't want to let you go and I'd—"

Ollie pressed her finger gently to my lips. "I'll stay," she said, looking up at me with a dreamy expression that made me want to rally and go again. She brushed a finger along my hairline. "I'll stay, Benny. I'm not going anywhere."

I grinned, kissing the tip of her finger, loving the sound of those words, the definitive Olivia-shaped tether to the ground they felt like.

Chapter Seventeen

Ollie

I walked through the security checkpoint the next Monday humming “Feeling Good” by Nina Simone, waving to Martin on my way into the shop and suppressing the grin I felt in my whole body. My body was sore in the most delicious way, and the sense of having landed somewhere, of establishing something new with Bennett, was disorienting.

Bennett: I hope I didn’t keep you up too late last night.

Ollie: You were the one who had to leave for the airport at 4am.

Bennett: You’re right—you should be apologizing that I was half asleep on the plane imagining being back in bed with you.

Ollie: Isn’t it too early in the relationship to say sappy things like that?

Bennett: I’ll rephrase to be less sappy. I couldn’t lower the seatback tray because thinking about being back in bed with you had **that** kind of effect on me. 😏

Ollie: Definitely less sappy. More awkward for your seatmate, too.

Sex with Bennett had not been what I expected. I’d fantasized plenty, first when he was the guy I watched from afar, then after I got to know him as the rambling, adorable nerd, and especially after reading his writing, but he was somehow all those three fantasies and more. He was creative and methodical

but playful, even sometimes a little dominant. I sighed as I unlocked the grate for the shop, remembering how he looked after the first time, breathless, with a wide grin, like we'd just been on the best roller coaster.

Bennett: Heading into a meeting and then a call with my agent. Talk to you later, Beautiful?

Ollie: 😊 Definitely.

I sang to myself inside the empty shop, powering on the computer. I'd wanted to add something else. Not "I love you." It was way too soon for that. Even with my ex, I hadn't been someone who texted throughout the day. We said what we needed to say and then didn't talk until we saw each other. I'd liked it. Texting with Bennett made me want to cuddle up on the bed with my phone like a preteen, though.

Ollie: Please tell your agent I'd like more carriage scenes if possible.

Bennett: You've inspired a few, but please leave that for later so I'm not turned on when my boss walks into my office in a few minutes.

Ollie: I promise.

"Hey," Jess said when she walked in a few minutes later. This was a busy time in the airport but we didn't usually see a rush of clients until a little later in the morning. She sidled next to me, glancing over my shoulder at the schedule for the day. "How was the date?"

"Did you have to practice that casual tone?"

She laughed, her smile cracked wide. "I totally did on the way in. Tell me everything."

I glanced around, making sure no one was coming in, and shared about dinner and the conversation on the BeltLine. "We spent the rest of the weekend together," I said, pressing my lips together.

"And it was good?"

I nodded. "We're together now, I guess. It sounds weird to call him my boyfriend."

“I bet.” Jess took a swig from her massive coffee cup. “Does it feel different than with your jackass ex?”

“You know, it’s hard to remember the beginning, but something I thought about when I was driving in this morning was that I was never sure I could rely on him. Even before everything that happened, I’d need to remind him about things, have a backup plan in case he didn’t show, and he never called me back. It’s such a small thing, but Bennett calls back; he shows up. He’s conscientious.”

“That’s sexy,” Jess said. “Competence porn, for real. My ex-husband was never sexier than when he remembered to do shit and didn’t leave me hanging.”

“Right?” We exchanged a look and both laughed. I clicked through our emails and the scheduling software, confirming a few appointments. “I don’t know. I didn’t realize that was such a big deal until I had it. Until I had someone I knew would be there.”

Jess gave me a side hug, squeezing me to her. “I’m proud of you. So proud that I will not ask for more details about the sex until later.”

“That’s very selfless.”

“Not really . . . I’m expecting a lot of details and we have two dogs coming in fifteen minutes.” She hugged me again and walked into the back room to prepare the bathing and grooming stations, leaving me alone to grin to myself and smile at my text messages.

Chapter Eighteen

Bennett

I scrubbed my palms down my face, the stubble on my cheeks longer than normal since I hadn't taken time to shave early that morning, preferring the extra moments with Olivia in my arms. That bed seemed years away now.

I flipped my phone over, the screen black. I hadn't touched it in hours, since the meeting with my boss where he'd dropped a huge project in my lap in addition to offering a promotion. That was before I learned the book I'd turned in months earlier needed major revisions fast if I had any hope of salvaging it. The phone buzzed in my hand and it was only a lack of sleep and muscle memory that made my thumb swipe up to answer the call from Gia.

She launched into conversation without preamble—she always did, which was a blessing when I was short on time. “I met someone.”

My stomach growled and I looked around my office as if a taco truck might be hiding between the bookcases. “It's not another cat, is it?”

“It's a human woman, thank you. My new next-door neighbor, Elena. We're going out for drinks tonight.”

I didn't get too excited about new love interests of my best friend—she was someone who flirted easily, fell hard, and fell out of love even faster. “What happened to Dustin, the yoga instructor?” I asked, opening the DoorDash site in my browser. I wasn't leaving the office anytime soon, and it was after eight.

“Dustin is a great guy. We’re going to just be friends.”

I clicked through and gave up, hungry but not sure for what. I could always pick something fast—it was my superpower. Even if I didn’t crave it, I’d pick the first thing that looked decent and call it good. “Careful, you said that about me back in the day, too.”

“I was right. We are great friends. We would have been a disaster couple. You’re too nice for me.” The phone rustled and then I heard the unmistakable mewling and chirping of her menagerie. “Speaking of couples, how did your weekend with the indelible Olivia go?”

I’d let my gaze drift back to the Corterian Incorporated file on my desk—a huge project that would mean more travel, a staff, and the promotion. It was more money, which would mean more financial security. I wasn’t sure I could turn it down. It would mean less time for writing and anything else, though.

“She’s fantastic,” I said, knowing I wasn’t fully answering her question. Holy hell was she beyond fantastic. Olivia made me feel like I’d hit the jackpot, and for the first time in my life, I understood my parents a little, the high of winning they seemed to be chasing their whole lives and their laser focus on only each other. Olivia made me want to block out everything else. That was why I hadn’t called her after I spoke with my agent or my boss. I never let myself get swept up—that was something other people did, and I had to wrap my head around all this before I could share it.

“Yes, you’ve mentioned she’s fantastic, once or a thousand times. Did you tell her how you feel? Did you tell her you’re planning to quit the job now that you’ve finished the new book?”

“Turns out, the new book might not matter.”

“What do you mean?”

My agent never minced words with me, which was why I liked working with her. My editor didn’t like the book I’d turned in before I began the book I’d written with Ollie in mind. I’d need to make major revisions and make them fast before turning it in again. Those kinds of revisions would take all my time and still might not be enough. “I have a lot of work to do on this last manuscript before they’ll accept it.”

“Maybe it’s a good time to quit the day job, so you can take the time you need.”

It was the worst time to quit my job. When I was with Olivia, I’d thought about it more. She inspired me, the way she bet on herself, and it felt like the right time. But getting the news the book didn’t measure up put in sharp perspective what it meant to take a risk on myself, that it could all crash down with one book.

“You’re in your head,” Gia said. “A stumble is not a fall.”

“A stumble is also not proof you should be a professional sprinter.” I stared at the extensive notes from my editor outlining the issues. They made sense, and I wasn’t sure why I hadn’t seen them myself. “I don’t think it’s the time to put all my eggs in one basket.”

Gia was quiet for a minute. “Maybe you should talk to your new girlfriend about this. See what she thinks?”

An email came in from my boss marked urgent and I was skimming it as I responded. “I don’t want to bother her with it.”

“You’re bothering me with it,” she said, and I heard the raised eyebrow in her voice.

“I think that’s the other way around,” I muttered, knowing she would read my tone for what it was—frustration with myself. “I need to go, Gi. There’s no way I’m getting out of here for another few hours, and then I need to start on these revisions.”

She promised to bother me again later, and when we hung up I let out a slow breath. I wanted to read through the revisions and figure out a plan for attacking them, but the voice in my head—the voice of caution and intentionality and not taking chances—yelled to focus on the safer bet, so I started working, leaving my phone on the other side of the desk.

* * *

The next morning, I woke groggy and stiff at the desk in my apartment. The sky outside was gray, rain falling in sheets, and the clock read quarter after

five. A clap of thunder shook my fourth-floor apartment and I stretched, blinking away the bleariness and waking up my sleeping computer. The manuscript came to life, red and marked with my tracked changes. The screen looked like it had gotten as much sleep as I had, and I shuffled into the kitchen for tea. It was Tuesday and normally I got to see Ollie on Tuesdays when I flew to LA, but I'd canceled the trip, needing to attend meetings in town for the new client.

As the kettle heated, I searched my desk for my phone, finding it hidden under a stack of binders filled with reference materials and research from previous books. I had four texts and a missed call from Ollie.

Ollie: How did it go with your agent? More carriage scenes coming soon?

Ollie: Guessing it's a busy day—text me tonight to let me know if you'll have time to do lunch tomorrow when you fly through. Is it sappy to say I'm looking forward to kissing you?

Ollie: In an uncharacteristic moment, I'm fine with sappy. I really can't wait to kiss you.

The last was timestamped around eleven. I vaguely remembered hearing my phone buzz, but I'd been trying to untangle a mess I'd made in a subplot and ignored it, assuming it was Gia. I hadn't considered it might be this incredible woman who'd just agreed to be part of my life.

Ollie: I'm getting a little worried. Are you okay?

Bennett: I'm okay. Sorry I didn't respond.

I thought about telling her the whole story, but the idea of admitting I'd messed up so badly made me want to shrink into the wall. I didn't want her to believe I wasn't someone who had it together. Someone she could count on.

Bennett: Something came up, so I won't be flying through this week.

I didn't expect a response—it was still early in the morning and I was sure she was asleep, but I still stared at the message for a few moments, listening to the rain against the glass and the last drops of coffee falling into the mug.

Bennett: I'm sorry. We'll talk soon!

I set the phone on the counter and grabbed the mug—I could work for a little bit before I showered and headed into the office. I wanted to feel better about my plan before I told her what was going on.

Chapter Nineteen

Ollie

Bennett: I'm sorry. We'll talk soon!

I hadn't heard from Bennett since early the morning before when I'd woken up to two texts and no real explanation. My brain immediately flashed back to the months before I found out what my ex was up to, and the years before that when I'd receive texts and no real explanations.

An explosion of barks erupted from the back, where Jess and Jeremiah were washing and clipping two shih tzus and Pepper. "You need my help?" I called through the door versus opening it, not wanting a repeat of Pepper's last adventure. My stomach sank. Bennett wasn't going to be there to snag him for me.

"We're good," Jess called through the closed door. "They're just making friends." A series of yelps erupted, along with a bark so deep I had a hard time imagining any of those little dogs making it.

I returned to the desk and glanced at my phone again, angry with myself for checking. On the one hand, I understood being busy and knew that Bennett was not the type to do what my ex had done. On the other hand, we'd slept together and then I barely heard from him, and it was hard to know for sure he wasn't like my ex. I was in the middle of weighing this out when the chime sounded as a customer walked in the door.

No. Not a customer. He was tall and toned, a swimmer's build and an easy, too-wide smile, as if he knew he'd popped into my head and then taken shape.

"Well, look at you," he said, walking toward me. "I couldn't fly through and not come see you. My grandma said you'd opened a little store. This place looks great," my ex said, looking around.

I hadn't seen him in a couple of years and was too surprised to respond.

"You look great. How are you? If I'm honest, I always saw you doing something like this versus working in Washington." He said it like he still knew me, and my blood pulsed in my ears. "Washington was too serious for you. Too demanding."

"How is . . . what was her name? Amy?" I knew her name and I'd long moved past the idea that she was to blame, but her name still felt like acid in my mouth.

He laughed, but kind of a humorless bark. "Oh man. I haven't thought about her in ages. That didn't last long."

I wanted to say a lot of things. Among them, that she lasted long enough for us to end our engagement, but that seemed somehow unfair to her, this woman I didn't know, whom he'd probably ignored or cheated on like he had me.

Before I could say any of that, he glanced at his watch. "Gotta catch my flight, but I had to pop in. I'll see you at the wedding—I'm my grandma's date." He raised his palm and I think he was planning for me to give him a high five, but when I didn't, he just waved and walked out.

"Was that . . ." Jess stepped out from the back.

"Yep."

"And you let him walk out with his legs and other extremities still intact?"

I nodded. "I barely said anything. How weird to see him."

"Are you okay?"

I'd thought about what I'd do if I ran into him again, wondered if I'd cry or yell, if I'd feel sad or angry, but I didn't feel much of anything. I did glance down at my phone to see no new messages, which somehow felt

worse than running into my cheating ex. “Better off without him,” I said with a shrug.

“Exactly.” She pushed back into the mayhem of Pepper and the Pips, calling over her shoulder. “You’ve got hot Bennett now!” I looked at the spot where my ex had stood, and a chill gripped me. I didn’t miss him, but I remembered how it felt when he’d go quiet on me, not responding. It felt like he was gaslighting me, and in the end, he was. I’d tie myself into knots worrying he was no longer interested in me or that he was with someone else and then tighten the knots when I convinced myself that those thoughts were silly.

Bennett canceling his trip and not responding to me wasn’t the same.

I could have sworn the disembodied voice of the announcer was calling me out. *Attention, passengers in the terminal. Olivia Wright, please report to a security checkpoint. You seem to have lost your mind.*

I started sorting through invoices and receipts, double-checking our books. *It feels the same, but it’s not the same.* I drummed my fingernails on the countertop. *Sure, he slept with me and then kind of ghosted me, but there has to be an explanation.*

I heard the disembodied voice in my head: *Attention in the terminal. Keep telling yourself that.* I didn’t like how familiar this feeling was, and I reminded myself that I didn’t have to feel this way, that I could cut ties and move on. In this instance, I could play it safe. I thought about Harry’s wedding—the only thing worse than being there alone and near my ex would be getting stood up at the last minute and still having to walk in alone.

Ollie: Not sure what’s going on, but I think we should maybe cool it. Long distance might not have been a good idea.

I expected a quick response, maybe for him to explain or reassure me that I was overreacting. I looked at the screen, but my only response was another round of somewhat soulful barks from Pepper’s backup vocalists. After a couple of minutes, I set my phone aside and got to work.

Four hours later, I looked again, taking a deep breath to prepare for what the response might be. I straightened my back in preparation to defend my decision, the decision that had started to feel less correct.

Nothing.

The same when I left the airport.

By the time I checked before going to bed, I wasn't sad or even mad. Well, I was a little mad. I was mad at myself, mostly, because I knew better than to trust someone again. I'd wanted practice and I got it and I didn't need to stick around again to see if it got better.

Chapter Twenty

Bennett

I rolled my shoulders and stretched my neck from side to side, allowing the words in front of me to go blurry. It was after two in the morning and I'd been up since five again, writing before work, working through lunch, and then diving into writing as soon as I arrived home. My eyes felt dry, my five-o'clock shadow something closer to a seven forty-five, and I wasn't sure I'd eaten anything besides popcorn since lunch, but I was finally moving the book into what my editor wanted it to be. When I stood, my body protested the move from the seated hunch I'd adopted over the previous days, but after hitting save three times and backing the book up to the cloud, I walked away from the desk.

Gia kept texting me about taking care of myself and trusting myself, and I finally muted my phone because every time she brought it up, I started spiraling. *Keep the job, quit the job, trust yourself, you're fixing a big mistake—don't put your trust in you.* I was glad I hadn't told Ollie about everything. I didn't care that Gia saw me out of sorts and uncertain, but I didn't want to be that guy with Ollie.

I fell onto my bed and unmuted my phone, seeing a missed text from Ollie from around lunchtime. I grinned and settled against the pillows. She'd be asleep but I couldn't wait to talk to her. The last thing I'd told her was we'd talk soon, and a few days had gone by where I hadn't let my focus leave the book and the job. Of course my mind had wandered, wandered to how her

lips felt when she kissed me first thing in the morning, sleepy and relaxed. It wandered to the feel of her under my tongue and how she shivered when I kissed her neck. To the way she sounded when she laughed.

Ollie: Not sure what's going on, but I think we should maybe cool it. Long distance might not have been a good idea.

I reread “cool it,” my own body going cold and my exhaustion temporarily shocked out of me.

Bennett: Cool it? What does that mean?

Bennett: I'm sorry I went quiet. Please don't be angry.

The dots bounced next to her name.

Ollie: I'm not mad, but I don't think this will work. It was a mistake to make it more than it was.

Bennett: Olivia, I know it's late, but can we talk? Please?

Ollie: No. I don't think so.

The chill I'd felt at her words was replaced by heat over the back of my neck. I didn't want to tell her a lie, but coming clean meant showing her all my messy, disorganized cards.

Bennett: I've been working a lot, writing and day job.

Ollie: Ok.

I took a chance and hit the call icon next to her photo, one I'd snapped while we ate Cinnabon huddled close together outside my gate. She was laughing after telling me I had icing on my cheek, and I wanted nothing more than to hear her laughter.

When she picked up, the silence crackled through the phone.

“I'm sorry,” I repeated. “Please don't give up on me.”

“I’m not giving up on you,” she said. She sounded tired, her voice resigned. “But I spent years with someone who disappeared with no explanation. I won’t do that again, and I know a few days doesn’t matter, but I’m not willing to risk a few days turning into weeks and months. I’m just not. I don’t like the way it makes me feel.”

“It will never happen again. I can manage my time better.” I looked through my bedroom door to my desk across the apartment. The screen had gone dark and shadows played on the small succulent Gia had bought me because she said my apartment was depressing. “I . . .”

“What?”

“They sent back the last book I turned in. I have to make major changes to it.”

Her voice softened immediately. “I’m so sorry, Bennett.”

“I can do it; it’s just a lot of time, and then work is piling on . . .” I scrubbed my face again. “That’s not an excuse, but that’s what I was doing.”

“You’re busy.”

“I didn’t want you to know I’d failed with the book.”

“I don’t care about the book. I mean, I care that you care about it, but I wish you’d told me.”

“I also wasn’t sure how to tell you I was offered a promotion at work and assigned a big local client. I wouldn’t be flying near as much, and usually flying through another hub when I had to.” I wasn’t sure about the response I was expecting, but stone silence wasn’t it.

After a few more beats of silence, she finally spoke. “Congratulations on the promotion. I thought you wanted to leave the job, though.”

“Publishing is so tenuous . . . I thought this book was perfect when I turned it in, a homerun ready to be broadcast, and I was wrong. I don’t think I can risk quitting my job yet.”

“Well,” she said, her voice quieter than I’d ever heard. “Then I think I was right the first time. We should cool it. You have to pursue your dream and you have to keep your job.”

I wanted to tell her she was my dream, but it was too soon; that sentence was too big a declaration. “I can—”

“Bennett,” she interrupted. “Let’s not do this. It could have been good at another time, but you’re there and I’m here. I won’t settle for a distracted partner and you can’t risk taking anything off your plate.”

“I can . . .” I didn’t know how to complete the sentence.

“It’s late,” she said, and I floundered for something, anything, to stop her, but I didn’t have a good response. “Good night, Bennett.”

I looked around my dim bedroom with blank white walls as if it might have answers, but nothing stared back at me except open, empty space. “Good night, Olivia.”

Chapter Twenty-one

Ollie

“Might as well close up shop,” Jess said. The terminal was packed with travelers, the thunderstorms outside leaving all flights temporarily grounded. “I think I’d like to get home before it gets even worse.”

I nodded from my perch behind the counter, glancing through the crowds to the darkened sky beyond the glass, where rain belted the tarmac and high winds whipped around the building. I’d stared at Gate C7 so often, I could sketch it in detail from memory, but I kept looking for Bennett. It had been two weeks since we’d spoken, two weeks since we’d ended whatever had just begun, and two weeks since I’d felt like myself. “Yeah,” I said. “Let’s go.”

Jess and I closed the shop, locked the grate, and made our way to the exit. “You okay to drive in this?”

I nodded, reaching for my keys as if that were proof. “I’ll take it slow.” We usually liked to walk the length of the space between terminals, but both of us stood in front of the closed doors, waiting for the train to transport us. “I’m proud of you, you know.” Jess nudged my elbow once the train pulled away, heading toward the exit.

“For what? I grew up driving in weather like this.”

“Not that.” We jostled as the train sped toward the end of the line. “For everything with your Diet Coke Break.”

I laughed. Well, I didn’t laugh, but I let out a puff of breath that some might have considered a laugh. “I don’t think that was anything to be proud

of. It lasted like three days.”

We flowed with the crowd exiting and stepped onto the escalator. “Well, three days or not, I know you opened up your heart a little, just enough to start again. For that I’m proud.”

“That’s me . . . opening up my heart to be reminded why it was closed off in the first place.”

“I don’t buy this little I-don’t-care routine, you know that, right?”

I tipped my head to her shoulder and she rubbed my arm. “I know.”

When the escalator reached the main level, we were greeted by the squeals of a young woman running toward a young man dragging a suitcase. In seconds, she was in his arms, her long legs wrapped around him, and her hair flew in all directions.

“I’d like to be greeted like that,” she commented.

“That wasn’t how you and Jack reconnected when you got home every night?”

“No time,” she said with a wink. “It was straight to bed. Who had time for big gestures when *big* gestures were on the table?” She held her palms apart and wiggled her eyebrows. She and Jack split up when he wanted kids and she didn’t, but they were the poster couple for mature and friendly marriage dissolution.

I laughed, giving the reunited couple one last glance. They were standing now on either side of the stanchion separating the guests from the passengers, staring into each other’s eyes. I’d always kind of loved those grand gestures, the public display of affection, and my heart ached for what wasn’t. If Bennett were next to me, he would have said something grumpy like how they were blocking traffic. I imagined his fingers twining with mine, and my heart hurt anew.

When I was alone in the car, I stashed my phone in my bag and prepared for the long drive home in a thunderstorm. Since traffic was slow, the rain was kind of calming in tandem with the sea of brake lights. Jess was right on some level. I was proud of myself for taking a risk, even though it didn’t work out. I was proud that I gave Bennett and me a chance, that I was open to it, but I was also proud that I stood up for what I wanted. I knew he was

scared to quit his job, and for good reason, and I knew he loved writing. His face lit up when he talked about his books, and his characters seemed like real people when he talked about them. Maybe the practice had been enough to kick me into gear. I debated the different dating apps as I drove slowly toward home.

As I pulled into my neighborhood, my shoulders ached from sitting tensely behind the wheel and I stretched my neck. A hot bath and a good book, one of the ones Bennett had recommended, waited for me at home, and I was ready, but when I pulled into my driveway, I hit the brakes on instinct.

Bennett sat on my porch, his back against my front door, knees pulled to his chest. He gave a small wave when he saw me, and it wasn't until then that I noticed the rental car parked on the street.

"What are you doing here?" I called through the rain, holding my jacket over my head as I made a run for my porch.

"I wanted to tell you something in person." He had to yell over the whipping wind and sheets of rain.

"What?" I was yelling, too, after ducking under the cover of the porch. It was a little quieter in that bubble, and I already didn't like being near him and not touching him. "It's a severe thunderstorm. Why are you here?"

He scratched the back of his neck. "I should have checked the weather, but I just booked a ticket. When I decided I wanted to see you, I didn't want to wait any longer. I hoped you'd be home at the normal time, and then with the weather it slowed everything down, and then I worried you were out with someone new, and—"

"Bennett . . ."

"I ramble when I'm nervous." His clothes weren't dotted with raindrops, and I wondered how long he'd been on my porch. He glanced down and then back up at me. "And I'm nervous."

A clap of thunder shook the ground and I jumped, inching closer to the front door and to him. "Why are you nervous?"

"Because you might say no."

I searched his face, where dark circles shadowed his eyes; he looked exhausted. "Say no to what?"

Bennett's hands stretched toward mine, glancing at me for approval before linking our fingers, sending that familiar sensation over my skin. "To taking a risk with me."

"Bennett . . ."

"I quit my job. I put in my notice."

My jaw fell open, but he kept talking before I could figure out what to say.

"And the book still needs a lot of work, but I can't wait for you to read it." His smile was earnest and I gave a small one back. "I added a dog."

That made me smile more genuinely. "You added Pepper to your book?"

He nodded. "In case you said no. I wanted a reminder of you, of us, in print, even if it didn't last."

"But in case I said no to what?"

He sucked in a deep breath. "I want to move here—well, not here," he said motioning to the house. "I don't mean I plan to move into your guest room, but to the city or nearby. I could get an apartment or rent a small house and we could try again."

I stared at him.

"I know that sounds absurd," he added.

"Yes, it does." I unlinked our fingers, stepping back. "That's too much pressure. You can't uproot your life for me."

"That's the thing . . . I'm not uprooting my life and it's not just for you. I always wanted to be tethered to something, grounded, but I'm alone in a city I'm ambivalent about and doing a job I don't enjoy, looking forward to landing in this airport because that means I get to see you." He slid the pad of his thumb over my cheek. "I want to uproot that life. I want to replant somewhere else. To belabor the metaphor, you make me feel like I'm blooming, and . . . I want to establish my own roots in soil near you."

"Are you done making plant references?"

"That depends . . . What do you think?"

I tugged on my cardigan. "It's a lot to consider. It's a big risk."

"I know." He linked his fingers with mine again. "And you should probably tell me to get in the car and drive away. You should probably tell

me I blew my chance with the most amazing woman in the world because I couldn't get over my own pride and baggage." Lightning cracked in the distance, giving the sky a disco-ball effect for a moment. "But I'm striking out, whether it's here or somewhere else—but I'd really like it to be here because you're here and I'd like to take you to that wedding and then on picnics with or without grumpy old men. I'm flexible on that point."

His hands were big around mine, the way our fingers linked already familiar. "You don't take big risks. What changed?"

"I found something worth taking a chance on."

"Me?"

He shook his head. "Not just you. Us. Me, too, I guess. That probably doesn't make sense, but if you'll give me more time, I'll explain it."

I chewed on the corner of my lip. "You don't have to leave yet."

"Was that a plant joke?"

I stepped forward into the comfort of his arms, breathing in the now familiar scent of him. "It was."

"So that means . . . yes?"

"It means I'll hear more of what you're planning." I slid my palm up his chest, coming to rest over his heart. "And that you should kiss me now."

He grinned before lowering his lips to mine, his kisses soft and slow, until a clap of thunder made us both jump. "Maybe we could take this inside?"

I dug for my keys. "Maybe a good idea."

His body was warm behind me as I unlocked the door, his hand resting on my hip and anticipation coiling in me. "You know, I thought about meeting you at the airport with a big sign that read, 'I'm sorry.' "

I stepped inside, toeing off my wet shoes after Bennett shuffled in behind me. "Why didn't you?"

He backed me against my door slowly, his hands moving down my shoulders, then my ribs, at a glacial pace. "If it went badly, I figured it would be less embarrassing without an audience." His fingers inched under my shirt, stroking my belly and sides.

"And if it went well?"

“I prefer this kind of thing in private.” His lips met mine again as his palms grazed over my skin. “And I want our story to exist beyond the airport.”

I kissed him back and ducked under his arm, tugging him toward my bedroom. “I like the idea of that.”

Epilogue

Bennett

Bennett: How many truffles would you like me to pick you up from the candy shop?

Gia: A lot. I'm still nursing a broken heart.

I walked toward Julianna's Candy Shoppe near Pre-Flight Paws ahead of boarding my flight to Chicago. I'd made this trek a hundred times in suits. Doing it in jeans and a T-shirt was better. I'd owed Gia a visit for a long time, and after the book I'd spent so many sleepless weeks ripping apart and reconstructing hit the bestseller list, it felt like things had been nonstop. Aside from a stop at two favorite Chicago bookstores—one specializing in romance novels, where I planned to spend an exorbitant amount of money on books—this trip was pure vacation.

Gia: Can you bring me someone hot from the plane, too?

Bennett: I believe that would be kidnapping at worst and solicitation at best?

Gia had surprised me. She and her neighbor had dated for almost two years, and Elena had become part of our circle, a part I assumed would be permanent, but they broke up when Elena got a job that would take her to Tokyo for the foreseeable future. It had been a few months, and I was mostly certain Gia was playing up the raw pain of her heartbreak to get me to bring

her more chocolate, but I'd bring it anyway because she'd found someone to love and then lost her.

Gia: And Ollie isn't coming with you?

I'd missed her call when I was going through security, and the voice-mail notification popped up as I was replying to Gia and making my way through the terminal. I'd planned to listen to it once I got to my gate, but why wait? I wanted to hear her voice.

"Hey. Just calling to say have a good flight and I hope you can make some headway on that steamy scene you've been working on. I'm in meetings all day, but let's talk tonight. I didn't want it to pop up on your screen, so I emailed it, but I just sent you a photo to help get you in the mood for writing carriage scenes. Love you, Benny!"

I grinned to myself, thumb hovering over my email icon, but Gia's last message waited for me.

Bennett: My lady love is traveling for work this week. The new salons in LaGuardia and Sea-Tac open next month.

She loved the traveling and I joked I'd need to get a part-time job at Pre-Flight Paws or the candy shop so I could watch her cutting through the airport like she used to watch me. She lovingly told me I wasn't qualified to deal with Pepper and she wouldn't tolerate me being friends with Julianna. We were making it work.

Bennett: You'll have to wait until the wedding to see her.

Gia: I can't believe you're getting married in the middle of winter. How am I supposed to attract someone new in my banging Best Woman ensemble if I have to cover it with a coat.

Bennett: I'm sure you'll have no trouble attracting someone.

Gia: You're right. 😊

I ducked into the candy shop, greeting the clerk and determining whether I would need an additional carry-on bag for all Gia's heartbreak chocolate. The woman behind the counter was helping a customer and said she'd be with me shortly, so I took a free moment to open my email, shielding the screen.

The subject line read, *Who Knows You, Baby?* I clicked on the attached image, my mind swirling with the idea of her sending me a provocative photo. What she actually sent was even better. She was holding two tiny packages, the Biscoff label visible over her fingers, and in the background was a dalmatian puppy on a leash. I chuckled to myself and replied, *I don't know if I'm impressed that you know me so well or terrified that you know me so well. I love you, Beautiful Olivia.* I tucked my phone in my pocket and stepped up to the counter.

"Hi. Welcome to Julianna's Candy Shoppe. Is this your first time here?" She straightened her pink apron when I walked to the counter; her gold name tag read *TEAGAN*.

"No," I said, eyeing the display. "I've spent a lot of time in this airport. I know exactly what I want."

Keep reading to meet Gia and Felix, coming soon in Denise
Williams's

THE MISSED CONNECTION

Gia

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

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

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

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

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

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

So much for a new friend.

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

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

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

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

Unfortunately, someone else had the same idea, and a middle-aged woman and I arrived at the seat at the same time. I had to act fast. "Do you mind? I'd really like to sit next to my husband." I motioned to the man in the seat next to the vacant one, who looked up at me in confusion from behind glasses, his amber-hazel eyes narrowed slightly. His low fade and edges still

fresh from a barber made him look polished, and the wide shoulders hinted at an athletic build. I widened my eyes in a “play along” gesture.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He still eyed me like I had two heads.

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

“I suppose you’re right.”

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

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

He looked up with a small grin when I laughed. The bartender set down my drink and another beer for my husband, telling us the nachos would be out soon. “I’m Gia,” I said, holding out my hand. “Desperate to board a flight to get me back to Chicago.”

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

“Home?”

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

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

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

Attention in the faculty meeting, Gia stopped listening to this conversation ten minutes ago.

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

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

“In the last three hours?”

I giggled, loading a chip with as much topping as I could. “Sure.”

“Fourteen.”

“You counted?”

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

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

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

“Too bad. My assessment stands.”

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

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

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

“Just a friendship?”

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

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

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

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

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



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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.

CONNECT ONLINE

DeniseWilliamsWrites.com

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