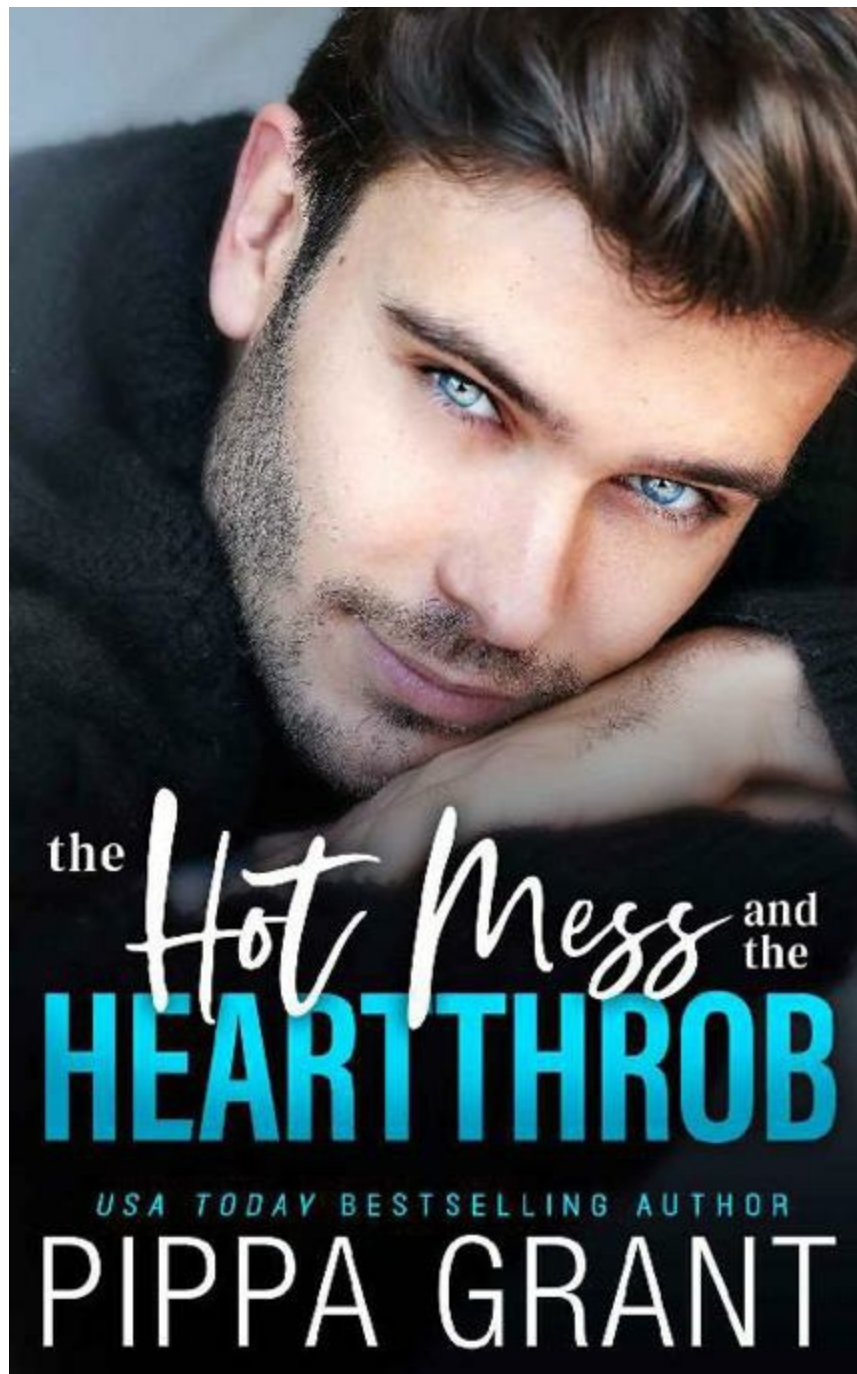


the *Hot Mess* and the  
**HEARTTHROB**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PIPPA GRANT



THE HOT MESS AND THE HEARTTHROB

PIPPA GRANT

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## INTRODUCTION

### **The Hot Mess and the Heartthrob**

*A Rock Star/Single Mom/Fairy Tale*

*Romantic Comedy*

You don't know me, but you *do* know me. I'm your neighborhood hot mess single mom, doing my best

to keep my head above water while running my little slice of heaven and keeping my youngest from

shoving marbles up his nose, which is exactly what he's doing the first time Levi Wilson, pop star

god, world's sexiest man, and my all-time number one celebrity obsession, walks into my bookstore.

Related: I'm writing this from beyond the grave, because I've died of mortification and am now

residing in an alternate universe.

I have to be.

Because Levi Wilson *came back*.

And we had a moment.

Like, a *moment* moment. The kind that makes me remember that adult pleasure isn't all about hoping

the lock holds in the bathroom so your kids don't interrupt on the rare occasion you feel like taking an

extra-long mommy-time shower.

So when he proposes a no-strings fling?

Count. Me. In.

Thrill of a lifetime, right?

Surely, nothing will go wrong...

The Hot Mess and the Heartthrob *is a rockin' fun, sexy romantic comedy featuring a celebrity*

*panty-melter who doesn't know what he's been missing, a sassy single mom hanging on by a string,*

*three adorable children who would never burst in on a woman when she's on a toilet (ha!), and*

*shameless ovary-busting moments between a guy who never thought he'd be a dad and a family*

*who thought they got along just fine without him. It stands alone and comes complete with a*

*happily-ever-after (though you'd never go wrong to read the other Bro Code series books first).*

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[The Hot Mess and the Heartthrob](#)

[Master Baker](#) (*Bro Code Spin-Off*)

[Jock Blocked](#) (*Bro Code Spin-Off, Fireballs #1*)

[Real Fake Love](#) (*Bro Code Spin-Off, Fireballs #2*)

ONE

*Levi Wilson, aka an international pop sensation who thinks a steak lunch is about to be the best*

*part of his day*

FOR MY THIRTEENTH BIRTHDAY, I talked my big brother into helping me sneak out of the house

to take the bus downtown so we could see Seven Knobs perform. They were a local indie rock group

with a wicked sound, and for that summer, they were my heroes.

Not that I had high standards for heroes. If a band had a good sound and I could see them locally,

they qualified.

I had many, many heroes.

Tripp and I both knew I'd go with or without him there to watch over me, which is the only reason

he agreed.

Older brothers.

They're the pains in the ass you love to love.

After the show, we got turned around outside the arena on our way back to the bus stop and ended

up with a police escort home at two in the morning, where our mother, who was raising us solo, had

called every other mom in the neighborhood and was about to send out a search party.

Mom's no dummy. She'd known where we were going. She knew when we



were supposed to be

home. And she knew something had happened.

I took ten years off her life that night.

That's the last time I ever got lost sneaking around in downtown Copper Valley.

Until today.

At least this time, I'm lost in broad daylight where the worst thing that could go wrong is missing

lunch.

Okay, second-worst thing.

It's highly unlikely I'd have a repeat of that incident in San Francisco when I was taking the scenic

route to a late breakfast and got spotted by a field trip from an all-girls' school who got so excited

that my security detail shoved me out of sight and into the nearest open door, which led directly into a

full mani-pedi spa.

Let's just say you shouldn't startle people having their toes painted by other people holding full

bottles of nail polish.

Especially not on a week when you're on the cover of both *People* and *Entertainment Weekly*,

which is basically when you're most recognizable as a celebrity.

Related: Nail polish is weirdly difficult to get out of your eyebrows.

But I'm sure that won't happen today. Especially since I'm only a pop-out picture on the cover of

*The National Enquirer*.

Apparently I have six toes and one writes all my songs for me.

It's a good sign the world's forgotten me this week, so I can go anywhere without being

recognized.

Or maybe not.

But optimism is important, right?

"This corner, G. This is the one," I tell my lead protection agent as we hustle down the street,

buffeted by the fall wind howling through the corridor between the fifteen- and twenty-story buildings

on the outskirts of Copper Valley's warehouse district. Rain's on the agenda for today, and Mother

Nature isn't playing. She's as serious as Giselle, who stays straight-faced, eyes perpetually scanning

the random people passing us by who haven't noticed me.

Ball cap, sunglasses, and someone else's old letterman jacket for the win.

For the moment.

"You're not issuing orders about parking garages next time," Giselle informs me.

“I like that parking garage. Good memories.”

“You’re thinking of the garage on Seventeenth and Sunshine. And no one has good memories of

that garage except you.”

Ah, hell.

She’s right.

No wonder she argued when I told her to park two blocks back and that we’d walk the rest of the

way. I don’t know where I thought we were, but it’s not where we are. “Just because you didn’t want

to wear a parking cone as a hat and be in my video—”

“*Giselle, don’t let me shoot a video riding a contact high ever again,*” she replies, completely

falsetto and sounding nothing like me, even though I do vaguely recall saying something like that the

day *after* the parking lot shoot.

“Still a fan-favorite collaboration.”

“And you still don’t know your parking lots here anymore.”

My stomach growls, and I swear she hears it. She’s five-six, dark-haired, about a decade older

than me, which you wouldn’t know since age is terrified to touch her face. She’s built like a badass

and has the skills of a ninja, thanks to being head cheerleader in high school and spending decades

honing her skills ever since. At least, that's her story.

"Let me know when you want me to steer you in the right direction."

"I think I can find my favorite steak restaurant in my own hometown."

"Clearly."

"Just testing you to make sure *you* know where we're going. And working up an appetite."

"Mm-hm."

Yeah.

I'm a little lost.

Must be what happens when you've lived away as long as you lived at home.

When did I get *this* old? I'm not old. Tripp's old, but I'm not old.

I freeze. Am I?

I thought Tripp was old two years ago, and now I'm the same age he was then.

Realization smacks me with a one-two punch to the gut and the heart, and I stop in the middle of

the sidewalk. "Shit. I'm old."

"Dammit, Wilson," Giselle mutters, and suddenly I'm being shoved into a shop. "You know the

rules. Don't stop."

Rule number one: Don't stop.

Rule number two: Don't argue with your protection agent.

“I’m in disguise,” I mutter back.

Clearly, I’m a rule-follower.

Her flat expression doesn’t change. “You *walk* like you. First row of books. Squat. Now.”

The bells have barely finished jingling over the red wooden door, reminding me of dashing into

the record store close to home every allowance day when I was growing up, before Giselle has me

tucked out of sight. She still has her sunglasses on and could be looking at the endcap, but I know

she’s studying the street outside the store window while I’m left staring at a row of books about

pregnancy and raising tantrum-free toddlers.

The scents of paper and ink tickle my nose, stirring other memories of mandatory library time in

the summers before we were old enough to be left on our own.

Yeah, I’m lost. But I don’t regret it. Not when ten seconds in this place has me on a trip down

memory lane and *not* thinking about how many years ago that was.

Sometimes getting lost is the best thing a guy can do.

For the first time in weeks, I inhale deeply and let my senses take over, cataloguing everything

about the feeling. The cozy temperature inside the building. The soft light, bright enough to illuminate

the bookshelves, not so bright that I have to squint. The exposed bricks between the shelves on the

side wall, and the low beam ceiling that reminds me we're near the warehouse district. A mix of

incense or a candle mingles with the library smell, along with something else.

Coffee? Or is it tea?

I rub my thumb over the rough light wood of the nearest shelf. There are voices drifting

somewhere else in the store, but no one's come to greet us.

Perfect.

I settle on the floor, head bent, knees up, close my eyes, and listen.

There's a song in here.

I can feel it.

This isn't *lost*. This is what I didn't know I was looking for.

Inspiration.

"Only you could find a song in a bookstore," Giselle murmurs.

"Told you I knew where I was going."

"I'm calling for the car."

"Shh. Five minutes."

She grunts. "Do. Not. Move. Especially if you hear the door open. Afternoon bachelorette party,

by the looks of it. Don't you dare so much as hum out loud either. The

vultures can hear you six blocks

away when you do that. I'm checking out the storytime crowd. I'll be back in twenty seconds."

*Storytime.* Good song title. I like it.

Not sure it's on brand for a pop god known for dance tunes and love ballads, but I can work with

this.

Even if it's not on brand for me, it'll be on brand for someone. A written song is never wasted,

even if it never goes anywhere beyond scribbled on a piece of paper.

I pull out my phone and open my notes app. I should find the bathroom. It's probably a single-

seater, which means I can lock myself in and hum all I want without making a scene.

Instead, I'm typing out notes about the sound in my head.

Not ideal, but I've worked with worse.

My thumbs are flying, my head nodding to the beat bouncing between my ears, when my entire

body is jarred sideways.

My phone flies out of my hand.

A voice shrieks.

Something heavy thumps to the wide-plank pine floor. Several somethings.

I'm shoved to my side, and something heavy and human-ish lands sprawled

across me from hip to  
shoulder.

“*Oh my god,*” a woman gasps.

She twists, flailing like a fish out of water.

I take an elbow to the chin and grunt again.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry,” she stutters.

I’m trying to crawl out from under her. She’s trying to squirm off me.

My ass connects with something hard, and three books topple over onto us.

“Ow!”

“Sorry,” I gasp.

“No, no, my bad.” She twists again, then *eeep* s.

I know that *eeep*.

Explains why I’m now sprawled on the ground by myself with a bunch of  
books scattered around

me, the person previously lying on top of me gone.

My bodyguard has arrived.

“Apologies, ma’am.” Giselle sets the woman on her feet, grabs me by the  
arm and hauls me up

too, then pushes me back to a squat. “He’s a danger to society. You okay?”

“Yes! Yes. Sorry. Didn’t realize anyone had come in. Good audiobook. I—  
oh, crap. My earbud.”



She spins, and when she turns back around, smiles, and squats to grab her missing wireless

earbud, my heart screeches to a halt.

My mouth goes dry.

My knees wobble.

She has thick, shoulder-length, honey-brown hair with a widow's peak over a round face, cheeks

like a cherub, lips a soft spring rose, and golden-brown eyes that flicker with shades of green. Her

dark gray T-shirt clings to full breasts with a design that my brain is too jumbled to read, and when

her gaze connects with mine, there's a current in the air that makes me lose my balance and drop back

against the shelf, sending two more books tumbling to the ground.

It's *her*.

Her eyes widen and her lips pucker in a perfect o. She lifts her hands and starts to make some

kind of motion, then clasps her fingers together instead.

Giselle's saying something. Probably apologizing for me again as more books topple off the shelf,

or telling me we need to go, as I process exactly how irrational I'm being.

There are seven and a half billion people on this earth.

There's no way this woman is *her*.

I'm a dreamer. A songwriter. A performer. A lover.

I'm not logic. I'm not math. I'm not statistics.

But even I know the odds are basically zero that this woman is the woman  
my entire being wants

to believe she is.

Which doesn't change my conviction that it's her.

Dreamer, right?

"I need a present," I blurt.

I can't tear my eyes away from the woman squatting opposite me, and I can't  
decide if they're

playing tricks on me or not.

They have to be playing tricks on me.

Doesn't matter how many times I play that night over in my head, logically, I  
know time and

experience have altered my memory. It's been so long, I can't even remember  
the last time I

consciously thought about it.

How long *has* it been? Six years? Eight?

I don't know, but it's *her*.

I feel it in my bones.

This is the woman I haven't been able to forget.

She licks her lips, and blood surges somewhere it shouldn't. Not while I'm in

public.

“Okay. What kind of present?”

The kind money can’t buy, and I think I just found it. I look around wildly, trying to find an excuse

to stay here.

I need answers to a million questions swirling in my head.

“Yodeling pickle.” Words are half my life, and a display of *yodeling pickles* on the checkout

counter is the first thing I see that I can identify with words.

The woman winces and once again stops herself as her hands start to move.

Giselle clears her throat. “Lunch...”

Lunch. Right. I’m supposed to be meeting my buddy Beck for a steak lunch. If anyone could eat

their way through a kitchen, it’s him. If we don’t leave soon, I won’t get lunch.

Not at my favorite steak place.

But I don’t actually care.

I stick my hand out. “Hi. I’m Levi.”

“Oh my god, you are,” the woman whispers.

“I need a yodeling pickle.” *Jesus*. What the fuck is wrong with me?

“Do you have a website?” Giselle asks.

I shoot her a look. *Do I have a website?* Did *she* hit her head?

“Yes,” the woman says. “Yes. Website. We ship anywhere.”

I’m still sitting here with my hand out like a dumbass, thinking Giselle is talking about *my* website

when she’s trying to help me get out of here but still support a small local bookstore.

“I can get you a card,” the woman adds. “Just...hold tight.”

She bolts to her feet, and yeah, I watch her hips swing in her jeans as she goes. She has a streak of

dirt across one round cheek, and there’s something blue on the back of her thigh.

“Levi. We need to go,” Giselle says quietly. “What’s going on?”

I rise, getting a little head rush from all the squatting, but I’m still watching the bookstore lady.

“Inspiration.”

“So make an after-hours appointment to come back. Storytime’s breaking up. We need to *go*.”

I peer around the shop. The shelves are a few inches shorter than me, so I can see they go another

four rows deep. Wooden signs hang from the ceiling, all of them hand-written and decorated with

charming little accents, identifying an *Escapism Fiction* section, an *Oh, the Places You Should Go*

section, a *For the Adorable Anklebiters* section, a *Cozy Reading Accessories* section, and a *Honey,*

*These Ladies Have Been There Too* section.

There's also an *Elixir of Life* section, but the arrow pointing up on the back wall suggests it's

upstairs.

The coffee. There's coffee.

This isn't just a bookstore. It's *more*.

No wonder it's inspiring.

Funny thing about inspiration—it used to be with me all the time. But the more I travel, the more I

explore, the more people I meet and stories I hear, the more everything looks the same.

Nothing's *new* anymore. I've seen the world. Met all the people. Written all the songs.

So this place? This *woman*?

I'm supposed to be here. There's something waiting for me here. It's *new*.

It's what I've been looking for.

"Hi." A small boy—I'd guess roughly my nephew's age—grins at me from around the edge of the

bookshelf. His light hair is buzzed so tight I can see a birthmark shaped like a pear near his crown,

his eyes are bright hazel, and his smile is full of a familiar mischief that matches his *That's Trouble*

*with a Capital T* sweatshirt. "Can I help you?"

"Levi." Giselle's voice has a familiar edge that says if I wanted to get lost and dawdle, I

should've brought a three-person-deep security crew with me. "It's *time to go*."

Sounds like elephants are tromping down the stairs, and the distant voices in the shop are getting closer.

Storytime was upstairs.

The woman getting a card is bent behind the checkout counter, and I can't see her. It's like she was

a ghost, and when she stands up, she won't be who I think she is.

"My nose glows in the dark." The little boy lifts his face and points at his nose, and—

"Oh, shi—shoot, little dude. Where's your mom?" I drop to a knee. Been here before. At least, on

the periphery. "Can you blow out your nose?"

He blows a big gust of Goldfish breath out his mouth.

Probably because his nostrils are each sporting marbles that indeed are the milky white-green

color of *glow in the dark*, and he can't blow out his nose.

"Turn around and face the far wall," Giselle orders. "Chuck's on the way."

I'm gonna owe her a massive gift card to her favorite vegan restaurant in SoHo for this.

And even though I have to quit shooting looks at the woman behind the counter, still rooting

around for a card, I obey orders, shifting the little boy as I go. "Try again,

kiddo. Blow out your nose.

Like this.”

I wrinkle my nose and blow.

He blows through his mouth again.

*“Hudson Andrew Scott!”*

He shoots a guilty look up at the woman, and yeah, I’m turning around to look too.

The bookshop lady’s lips are twisted, her cheeks going pink, and her eyes—soft brown and wide

a minute ago—are now defeated and tired as she twists around the display table and navigates

through a small stream of women pushing strollers in the main aisle to head our way.

I don’t know if she’s the same woman who changed my life eight years ago, but I believe in

nothing if not paying it back, forward, and sideways.

Whoever she is, she’s not in this alone today.

Also, I’m not leaving here until I know her name.

TWO

*Ingrid Scott, aka a single mom whose tombstone will one day read “She would’ve had her life*

*together if she’d had just one more day. No, really. Okay, probably not. But her intentions were*

*good and she only wanted to stab people occasionally, mostly because she was too tired to want to*

*stab them all the time.”*

ONE DAY. I would like to go *one single day* without someone in my orbit making a poor life

decision.

“Stop squirming,” I order my four-year-old son, who should be at preschool, but who’s been

banished for the week because of lice.

Yep.

Lice.

Heaven forbid we have one issue at a time.

Adding to my list of issues? Being *that mom* who can’t get her shit together while *Levi Flipping*

*Wilson* is watching. And not only watching, but actively engaging in trying to help. “Hey, bud, I bet I

can hold still longer than you can. Wanna see?”

I know my agenda on any given day will include *interruption for something my children do that*

*I never would’ve expected in a million years*, but that’s a lot easier to deal with when I don’t have an

audience.

Especially an audience made up of one famous man whose songs get me through the day—and



night—when I don't have enough free focus to read or listen to an audiobook, and who keeps stealing

glances at me like he's trying to figure out what kind of rabid creature I am. Normally, customers

aren't allowed back in the stockroom with me, which is where I dragged Hudson when I realized

what he'd done to his nose, but leaving Levi out there with the customers who'd figured out who he

was seemed like a bad idea.

Especially when his date skewered me with a look that clearly said *get him out of here or I'll*

*burn this place down.*

It's a bookstore.

Highly flammable.

Not taking chances.

Especially if there was a reason they were looking at maternity and early childhood development

books. His date doesn't look pregnant, but god knows that's when pregnancy is hardest.

Hudson finally stills, and I manage to smear a little more Vaseline gently around his nostril. "How

did you get a *marble* in your nose?"

"I pushed hard." He beams. "I gots stars in there too."

I squeeze my eyes shut and count to two, because I know if I get as high as

three, he'll find a way

to suck the marbles deeper into his sinus cavities, and *I don't know* how a doctor will get that out

without having to cut his nose open, and *oh my god*, he's four and he's about to be disfigured for life

because I thought he'd actually sit still and listen to Yasmin reading books for neighborhood storytime

while I re-stocked a few shelves.

"How many stars?" I inquire through clenched teeth.

"Four. Or maybe seven. Or maybe one. I forgets."

"You are so lucky you're cute."

"Do you have a vacuum?" Levi asks.

I twist my head to gape at him.

He shoots a *help?* look at his date, then shrugs at me. "If he won't blow it out, maybe you can suck

it out. Like with one of those sucky tools the dentist uses."

"That's...possibly not a terrible idea."

"Happens on occasion." He grins, which makes my heart basically stop because he's stupidly

gorgeous.

I could stare at him all day, but I have a preschooler with marbles up his nose to attend to.

"Mama," Hudson says, "look."

He scrunches his nose, which makes his nostrils swell, closes his mouth, and blows, and one

shoots out and lands on Levi's shoe.

My son has just snotted my favorite musician's Italian leather loafers.

"I win! I holded still!" He breaks into his preschool dance routine, but the poor kid got his moves

from me, which means to a casual observer, he probably looks like he's having a seizure while

choking on a piece of gum and tripping over barbed wire.

Levi Wilson, however, is not fazed. He squats down to Hudson's level. "Rematch."

And my four-year-old son meets his gaze head-on. "Let's put some money on it."

Next mental note: Find out what his older sisters have been watching on their tablets, and then

drink lots and lots and lots of wine. I grip his shoulder. "Little boys who shove marbles up their noses

don't get to put money on anything. Hold still and look up, please."

"There's no marble nose fairy?" Levi asks.

"Are you playing the hold-still game or not?"

"Go!"

Both of them freeze. Levi's girlfriend sighs. She's between the back door and a stack of book

boxes that I need to go through today, watching us like she's ready to leap in

and explain to all of us

how everything's about to go down.

Apparently she's not a fan of dating a man-child.

I, however, would date the hell out of said man-child.

No, that's not right.

I'd fling with him. In my fantasies, that is. In reality, there's no way a hot rich pop star walks into

my bookstore and asks to take me out to the mountains for a weekend of nakey-nakey grown-up time.

Why not, you ask?

*Not* because he was looking at how-to-have-a-baby books with his girlfriend, but because I'm

currently getting Vaseline fingerprints all over the flashlight I'm shining up my kid's nose to figure out

how many glow-in-the-dark stars he shoved up there. Sexy, I am not.

Not like his girlfriend, who still has perky boobs, bagless eyes, a ponytail that looks styled rather

than hastily pulled back, and who completes the total badass look with tight jeans, work boots, and a

leather jacket.

There's a reasonable possibility my jeans have a hole in the crotch, and I wish I'd remembered

that when I got dressed in the dark seven hours ago.

I peer up Hudson's nose and make another mental note, this one to remove the glow-in-the-dark

star kits from the store's inventory.

They're a little dated and don't sell well anyway.

"Congratulations, Hudson. You've just earned yourself an all-expenses paid trip to the emergency

room. Let's see if we can get that other marble out first though."

"When my niece shoves stuff up her nose, my brother makes her do this sinus rinse thing to get it

out. I saw mashed potatoes come out once."

I shift a glance at Levi, who's squinting at me in a way that makes my entire body flush. "You are

really bad at the staying still game, aren't you?"

"That'll be ten thousand quid," Hudson says in his best British accent.

*"Hudson."*

My kid grins.

And Levi Wilson laughs, which makes goosebumps race across every inch of my flesh. Add in

another side-glance from him, and I'm having a full-on sensory overload experience that comes

complete with hallucinations.

I swear it's like he's trying to figure me out, which makes zero sense.

All you really need to know is that I'm doing the best I can, but most days,

I'm a disaster whose

only solace is that my kids know I love them. I only qualify as a hot mess in the sense that I'm closer

to perimenopause and the hot flashes that'll come with it than I am to my tight black dress, makeup,

and nightclub days.

Plus, he's *Levi Flipping Wilson*.

He might've grown up a normal kid in Copper Valley, just like I did, but since he and his friends

left to tour the world first as the boy band Bro Code, and now him solo on his own career for so long

that I can't remember a time in my life when I didn't know his name, he's dated actresses, models,

athletes, and fellow musicians.

A divorcee with a mom bod and the chaos that comes with three kids under ten is the last thing

he'd be into.

And again—he was *looking at pregnancy books*.

“I'm sorry, I forgot to ask if you were looking for something specific. We're usually much more

helpful. Our maternity and baby section has the best books, and we're very discreet, so—”

His girlfriend launches into a coughing fit.

“What? No, I—” He cuts himself off as his brilliant blue eyes connect with

mine, and I'm

suddenly holding my breath.

Levi Wilson is holding me captive with a silent question that I don't understand.

But I want to.

I want to know what he wants from me. I want to know why he's here. I want to ask him for an

autograph and not sound like a total goober, or tell him—

"I was hiding," he stammers. "Not—I didn't—we don't—Giselle's my—"

"He wanted a yodeling pickle," Giselle interrupts.

There's a joke going on here, and I'm totally missing it, but Levi blinks again, his lips spread into

a grin, and pure mischief dances in his eyes. "Yes. Definitely three or four yodeling pickles."

"For the record," Giselle says, "I'm opposed to the pickle. I know what you're planning to do

with it."

Levi winks at me. "That's why she's my favorite bodyguard."

*Bodyguard.* Not his girlfriend.

And I'm the dummy who couldn't figure that out.

Awesome.

He probably thinks I'm an idiot.

Like it matters. I have to take my kid to the emergency room, and I'll be one more crazy fan he's

interacted with in his life.

Not someone he'll think about long after he gets his yodeling pickles. "I'll let Yasmin know you'd

like a few pickles. It was—it was really great to meet you."

"We haven't actually met."

"Right. You weren't here. Got it."

"No—I mean, I don't know your name." He holds out his hand. "Let's try this again. Hi. I'm

Levi."

This is the stuff of fantasies. Too good to be true. On some level, I know he's just a guy. But I've

listened to his music for *years*. It's been my companion through good times and dark times and every

time in between. He's not just a *guy*.

He's a guy who makes my world brighter without even knowing who I am.

My entire body is buzzing with suppressed energy as I make myself take his hand as non-dorkily

as I possibly can.

Our palms connect, and heat courses up my arms. His grip is firm, his fingers curling around my

hand, and I feel like a starry-eyed teenager meeting my idol.



For this feeling alone, I will probably quietly love this man until the day I die.

In the midst of chaos, it's the simple kindnesses that make all the difference.

And I can honestly say I'd feel the same if he were a random accountant or teacher or fast-food

worker.

I untie my tongue and force it to work like I'm a rational adult. "Ingrid. Hi. It really is great to

meet you. Your music—"

"Mommy, I hafta go take a dump."

And that's my life.

THREE

*Levi*

INGRID. Her name is Ingrid.

She has a kid. Probably a husband. Definitely a life.

I should be happy for her, be grateful for the perspective she brought me at a time when my focus

could've gone in a far worse direction, and move on with my own life.

Instead, I'm phoning in a glad-to-be-here performance over poker in Beck's penthouse living

room, chasing a melancholy melody with fragmented lyrics about the one who got away while my

lifelong buddies talk weddings and babies.

Melodramatic? Probably.

Do I care?

Nope.

“Frosted Tips. You in?”

Caught.

Beck, Tripp, and Wyatt are watching me, all three of them with cigars chomped between their

teeth that they won’t light, waiting for me to make a call so we can play this hand, using my old

nickname from the years when I made poor hair choices.

Also, huh. Ingrid starts with *in*.

Is this a sign on how I should bet tonight?

I do believe it is.

My pile of chips goes into the center of the table. “I’m in.”

“You gonna look at your cards first?” Ever the older brother, Tripp’s second guessing me again.

Ever the younger brother, I smirk at him. “Don’t need to. I always win. Luck favors the young.”

Wyatt, a military guy with a buzz cut longer than Ingrid’s kid, shoves his own set of chips into the

center and trades his cigar for his whiskey. “Luck rarely favors the stupid.”

“Hey, hey, he’s not *stupid*.” Beck tips his chair back and grins the grin that earned him an

underwear endorsement deal after our boy band days. Of the five of us, he most defined *tall, dark,*

*and handsome*—or so all the magazines have said for years. “Malnourished, probably. He missed

lunch. Also a sign luck’s not with you today.”

I found Ingrid today. Luck is definitely with me.

If we ignore the part where I’m fantasizing about her like she’s a woman I’d like to have dinner

with instead of as a random person in Copper Valley who recognized me and reminded me of a single

moment in my life that changed me for the better.

This isn’t usually a problem. As a general rule, I don’t daydream about fans. Experience has

taught me it doesn’t end well. But she—or someone who reminds me a hell of a lot of her—lodged

herself in my head with that sign eight years ago, and I can’t shake her.

“I’ve got all the luck, suckers.” I peek at my cards and flinch.

Wyatt, who’s the most straight-laced of all of us who grew up together in our old neighborhood,

watches me and cracks up. “Keep telling yourself that.”

Beck nods. “It’s okay to not get lucky every now and again.”

“When *is* the last time you got lucky, little bro?”

Since Tripp fell head over heels in love with the woman who almost stole his dream of owning

Copper Valley's baseball team from him, he's been insufferable. I give him a pass most days,

considering how he lost his first wife and considering that no one deserves another shot at happiness

as much as he does, but I'm not in the mood tonight.

I grab my own whiskey. "Some of us keep it to ourselves when we rent out the Eiffel Tower to

give a woman the night of her dreams."

"You did that again? I thought you already tried that move a year ago."

"Lot more than a year ago," Wyatt says. "It was before Ellie and I got together."

"No way. I thought it was the summer I was wooing Sarah."

"*Wooing?*"

Beck grins. "Hell, yeah. *Wooing*. I still woo the shit out of her every day. Gentlemen, I have found

my purpose."

I cut a glance around at my buddies again, and that feeling that I can't deny any longer surges in

my chest.

Beck accidentally stumbled into the love of his life two and a half years ago with a mis-tweet that

changed his entire world, and he and Sarah eloped this past summer.

Tripp was a widower trying to find his own purpose beyond being a dad to two little kids a year

ago when fate brought Lila and the Fireballs baseball team into his life, and now they're planning a

small wedding at Thanksgiving.

Wyatt married Beck's sister, Ellie, who'd hated him most of their lives until a car accident

brought them together, and now, she's six months pregnant with their baby and being an equal partner

in raising his older son.

Half of my best friends—my brothers from childhood—have settled down.

I'm thirty-six.

I've been touring as a musician since I was eighteen. I have more money than God, or at least

more than I'd need in a hundred lifetimes. I've seen the world twice over. I've acted some. I quietly

co-own an organic farm-to-table pizza chain that's growing across the nation. I have my charities,

causes, accolades, and awards.

I've also never wanted to get married. I wasn't even in high school yet when I told my mom I was

going to be a single-forever rock star who ate steak and French fries every night for dinner, and that

I'd only have a girlfriend when I felt like it, which would probably be never.

And for most of my life, I haven't wavered, unless you count giving up on French fries being the

greatest food on earth and liking girls more once I discovered the fun of sex.

But *only* when it doesn't get in the way of my goals.

But lately, I feel like I'm missing something.

Walking into that bookstore today, seeing *Ingrid*—it was like the world opened up and said, *Here*

*you go. This is what you've been looking for.*

Except nothing is ever that easy.

I toss back the rest of the whiskey in front of me and slam the glass on the table. "Who's up?

Ryder. You stalling?"

Beck grins. "I should take Sarah to the Eiffel Tower."

"You haven't yet?" Wyatt asks.

"You haven't taken Ellie either."

"She's not interested. I took her to Venice instead."

"I was thinking Lila and the kids and I should head somewhere in the Caribbean before the season

starts," Tripp says.

Beck shakes his head. "Leave the kids here. You two go have grown-up time."

"With you?"

"And Sarah. She loves your kids. And my mom'll help. So will yours. And your manny."

The three of them grin.

Yeah, yeah. They're all happily in love with lives beyond their jobs.

And I'm the single guy who can't stop picturing Ingrid's pretty face and her curvy ass and the way

she took charge when her kid shoved those marbles up his nose, never once losing her cool, handling

everything with the kind of efficiency that shouldn't be sexy when you're talking about nostrils but

nevertheless has me wanting to know more about her.

When she's probably happily married, because she should be.

Even if she's *not* the woman from my concert, she seemed like a good person, and good people

deserve to be happy.

"Poker, dumbasses." I wave my cards.

"Okay, okay, we'll take your money." Tripp grins at me, then downs a shot like he's *not* my

responsible big brother.

It's been years since he's been this happy.

I shouldn't be an asshole about it.

Three hands later, I'm holding my own with my head almost fully in the game. Tripp's playing too

safe despite that shot to loosen him up, and he's in the hole. Wyatt, who pretends he doesn't know we

lie to him about the buy-in at every game, is kicking all our asses, whereas Beck's losing his.

Probably on purpose for Wyatt's benefit, since Ellie won't let Beck buy them a new house for

when the baby comes. *You getting rich and famous for showing your underwear doesn't mean the*

*rest of us have to live better than we grew up. We grew up fine, and my kids will grow up normal*

*and fine too. By normal people standards, Wyatt and I are more than comfortable. Donate your*

*money somewhere it'll make a real difference.*

I like Ellie.

She used to try to keep up with all of us, though the girls were heavily outnumbered in our

neighborhood. Now, she helps keep us all grounded in remembering where we came from.

And I like that Wyatt still shows up for poker night with his fifty bucks despite knowing that the

rest of us inflate the value of each chip by a grand.

Wyatt will count his share of the winnings in the morning and send us all a picture of his middle

finger when it's more than he knows should've been in the pot.

The rest of us will pool what was leftover of our own buy-in and a charity somewhere in Copper

Valley will get a boost before the weekend's over.



Beck rises and scratches his stomach. “You guys hungry? Sarah made a cheese ball.”

Dude can pack it away. He’s legendary.

“You can’t make your own cheeseball?” I ask.

“It’s the relationship rule. She makes my cheeseballs, and I thank her in ways that would probably

make her dad kick my ass if he knew. Plus, I made the cookies that the ladies are enjoying at their

girls’ night tonight.”

“And how many did you eat while you were baking?” Tripp asks.

“Only like eight. Or eighteen. It was a big batch. Lots of small cookies.”

“You give Sarah small cookies?” I smirk. “Dude. Ladies like *big* cookies, if you know what I

mean. Just because you’re married now doesn’t mean you can slack off.”

“Says Mr. Hasn’t Had A Date In Months. How many cookies have *you* been baking?”

“I just told you I had a date at the Eiffel Tower.”

“If it wasn’t in *People*, it didn’t happen.”

“*People* doesn’t know everything.”

“Nah, but we do.” Wyatt’s had enough whiskey that he’s loosening up and starting to grin. “If you

had someone worth us knowing about, we’d know it. And we know you’re in a dry spell.”

“You’re getting old,” Tripp says. “Priorities change. Performance can suffer. It happens. But

we’re here for you if you need us.”

“Here for you for sure, man.” Beck returns to the table with the mother of all cheeseballs on a

platter that could hold a Thanksgiving turkey, with six boxes of assorted crackers tucked under his

arm.

He’s long and lanky and built to carry inhuman amounts of food in creative ways.

“You want a matchmaking service?” he asks. “We’ll get you hooked up. Hollywood type?

International? Girl next door? Someone into the freaky stuff? You name it, we’ll find you exactly what

you’re looking for.”

Wyatt frowns at him. “You still have contacts for all that?”

“Nah, man. I’m calling Cash to get the hook-up. He’s playboying it up for us boring old married

folk.”

“Dude. What am I?” I demand.

“A boring workaholic,” Tripp answers, and he and Wyatt dissolve into giggles again.

Beck lifts his phone, and the screen flickers to life with the fourth of our five-man band from back

in the day. When we decided to end Bro Code, Beck turned to modeling underwear and then

accidentally became a fashion mogul for people who like comfortable clothes. Tripp retired from it

all to get married, have kids, finish the finance degree he started while we were touring, and get into

business. Cash Rivers went to Hollywood and is killing it as an actor. Davis Remington, the youngest

of all of us, went to college for dual degrees in nuclear engineering and computer science, and now

works an hour or so south of Copper Valley. None of us are certain what he does, or if he actually

works for the reactor down there like he says he does, but given *why* we called it quits with Bro

Code, odds are good he couldn't tell us even if we asked.

Or maybe wouldn't.

I think he likes us thinking he has secrets.

Cash wrinkles his trademark nose at us. He's either on a movie set or he's living on painkillers,

because his nose is the only thing about him that looks normal. His eye's bruised, there's blood

dripping off his cheek, and his lip is split. "What the hell? You having a bachelor party without me?"

"Not yet," Tripp says. "We'll call you when you're not invited to that too."

Cash flips us all off.

Tripp and Wyatt crack up.

Lightweights. They wouldn't be laughing if they weren't tipsy.

"What happened to your face?" I ask.

"Marco the makeup man. Want me to book him for Tripp's wedding? You should see this guy's

zombie work."

Mr. Serious Older Brother hasn't had enough booze to let that go. He starts wagging a finger. "I'm

not having a zombie wedding."

"Could he give the whole wedding party dragon horns?" I ask.

Beck pumps a fist. "Oh, hell, yeah. Tripp, dude, you have to wear dragon horns to your wedding.

Bring in the baseball mascots too."

My brother gives us all the *shut up* eye. "Not why we called you," he says to Cash.

"Right," Beck says around a mouthful of cheeseball. "Levi needs a girl. We need you to find the

matchmaker."

I roll my eyes. "I don't need a girl."

"Like a reputation-enhancing girl, or a short-term fun girl, or are you looking to join the ball-and-

chain club?" Cash asks.

"I don't—"

Beck slings an arm around me. “Even his mom’s getting some. Poor guy.”

“*What?*”

Tripp falls out of his chair and echoes my question from the floor.

“Shut up, Ryder.” Wyatt throws a cracker at him.

“No, keep talking,” Cash says. “Ms. Wilson’s getting her freak on!”

“My mother is *not* getting her freak on.”

Beck shoots a guilty look at Wyatt. “Was that a secret?”

“Yes, you bonehead.”

Now he’s looking between me and Tripp, who’s pulling himself off the floor and looking very,

very sober. “Whoops.”

“Who is he?” Tripp demands.

My fists are clenched. “Have either of our people vetted him?”

“Lighten up.” Wyatt tips his chair back and grins at both of us. “Your mom has good taste.”

“And my mom likes him,” Beck says. “So does Sarah, and you know she’s suspicious of

strangers.”

“Who. Is. He?” Tripp repeats.

Beck takes another bite of cheeseball. “He’s *not* the answer to the question of who Levi needs to

get laid with.”

Wyatt snorts.

I shove him, and his chair tips over backward.

Tripp's on his feet, dialing his phone.

Beck dives for him. "You can't call your mom during poker night. It's a rule."

"I'm calling Lila, asshole. Her Uncle Guido owes me a few favors."

"Man, this sucks," Cash says from somewhere to my left. "You guys are having fun, and all I can

see is the carpet. Hello? Hell- ooo? Anyone there? Don't leave me in the dark. I'm dying. I'm *dyyyyyy-*

*innnnng.*"

I snatch the phone. "Quit being a melodramatic dickwad."

"Levi! You need a date. Tell me what you want. Short? Curvy? Natural hair or dyed?

Conversationalist or not?"

"I don't need a fucking dating service." Maybe I *do* need a dating service.

"Turn the phone. I can't see Beck and Tripp wrestling. Man, they haven't done this since— *ouch*."

Whoa. Wyatt's been pumping iron."

Wyatt's between them, with Tripp's phone tucked into his pocket and Lila's voice ringing through

so it sounds like Wyatt's dick is talking like a woman. "Tripp? What's up? Everything okay?"

“My mother’s dating!” Tripp hollers.

“Oh, honey...this isn’t the end of the world,” Wyatt’s dick says.

Fine, it’s Lila. Wyatt’s dick can’t talk, and I wouldn’t want to talk to it if it could.

I’m amusing myself, okay? It’s how I handle denial. And I’m deep in denial over *so very much*

today.

“No women during poker night.” Beck dives for Wyatt’s crotch.

And Wyatt might have muscles, but Beck has freaky-long arms, and—

“Whoa. Didn’t need to see *that*,” Cash says. “Anybody getting this on video?”

Tripp’s phone goes flying.

He and Beck and Wyatt are all wrestling on the ground and don’t notice when I grab it.

“Lila, sorry, no girls at poker night. I’m hanging up.”

“Is Tripp okay?”

I tilt my head and watch the grunting match on the floor. “Yep.”

“If he comes home bruised, I’m sending Uncle Guido after all of you.”

“If you know who my mother’s dating and haven’t said a word, I’m hiring a hacker and

announcing the Fireballs are doing away with their new mascot.”

She gasps.

Tripp rolls out of the wrestling match on the floor and lunges for me. “The *fuck* you will. She got

*death threats* over the mascot competition, and now all those people see she knew what she was

doing all along, and we gave them a winning fucking team for the first time in *decades*, and do you

think a single one of them apologized and took back the threats? No. Jesus. You’re acting just like you

did when you dated Violet.”

I go stone-cold still.

Beck and Wyatt freeze.

Cash sucks in an audible breath, and Lila whispers a soft, “*Whoa.*”

I glare at Tripp.

He glares right back.

“Oh, shit, dude.” Beck climbs to his feet. “Are you secretly dating Violet again?”

Jesus. Do a reputation favor for a woman who gets caught “cheating” on you when you’re feeling

like shit for having a temporary career crisis, and no one can ever let it go.

Mostly because they had no idea it was all just for show.

That was the deal.

“Fuck you all. I’m out.”

I know. I know.



Don't turn your back on your best friends when you're down.

But you know what sucks?

Being confused and wanting something I've never wanted for the first time in my life, and

knowing I can't have it.

Not the way I want it today.

I don't want to go to Tripp's wedding solo. I don't want to wake up alone at the holidays. I'd like

to get back to my place in New York and open the door knowing there's someone waiting who missed

me while I was gone. I want to know I can pick up the phone no matter where I am in the world and

call someone who'd answer at all hours of the day or night and listen to me talk about stupid shit like

my mic malfunctioning mid-song during a concert.

Is it wrong to want to be first to someone?

Tripp's in love.

Beck's in love.

Wyatt's in love.

Fuck.

Even my mother's apparently in love.

Maybe I should get a dog.

## FOUR

*From Levi Wilson's fan mail...*

Hi Levi,

I feel like a total dork writing this to you today, because I haven't written a letter to a celebrity in

over twenty years—so, you know, when I was a toddler, because there's no way I was a teenager

writing fan letters twenty years ago—but I needed to say thank you for... well, for a lot of things.

I'll leave it at *thank you* for being so patient and kind with my son and me at Penny for Your

Thoughts this afternoon, and to apologize for not helping you with the yodeling pickle you came in to

get.

Okay, actually, as a single mom of three, I can't leave it at *thank you*.

I really hope the yodeling pickles were for your crew and not your family. Not that I stalk your

family, but it's virtually impossible to live in Copper Valley and NOT know about your family,

especially with your brother getting involved with the Fireballs this year, and his family being all

over the news recently with the team finally having a great season and all the drama over the new

mascot and everything. They're adorable.

Your family, I mean. Not the Fireballs. Though I guess some of them are adorable too, which I can

say since I haven't been a teenager for a number of years, as we've already discussed, and so many of

the players are barely past their teen years, which makes them look like adorable little babies to me.

GAH.

And now you know why I don't write letters to celebrities. I'm rambling.

This definitely needs to be edited before I send it.

If I send it.

So. Back to the yodeling pickle and your family.

If your brother's kids are anything like normal kids, and by that I mean like my kids, then they

probably also love making as much noise as humanly possible all hours of the day, but especially in

those few moments when a parent really needs a few minutes of quiet to collect themselves after

managing everything from making sure everyone's hands are washed to checking their noses for errant

popcorn kernels to monitoring them when they get really quiet, which is when they're most likely

eating so many raisins from the cabinet that going out in public before those raisins finish doing what

two cups of raisins will do to a forty-pound body is a very bad idea.

That's all a very long-winded (long-typed?) way of saying that I really, really, really to infinity

hope your plans with the yodeling pickles were pure.

Not that you need a lecture from me.

I apparently can't help myself lately.

And now, because this is basically the worst letter I've ever written, I'm going to delete it and

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htsj.....

FIVE

*Ingrid*

IT'S BEEN a week since the Levi Wilson Marble Debacle, which I need to rename since every time I

think that phrase, I imagine Levi's, *ahem*, marbles, which does me absolutely no good. I've almost re-

trained my heart to not leap in anticipation every time the bell rings over the door at the bookstore.

He's not coming back.

Duh.

One-time thing. That's all. He found somewhere else for all his yodeling pickle needs.

Actually, I should be judging him for not wanting a book while he was in here, even if I

misunderstood what type of book he might be interested in. We have *lovely* books. Funny books and

smart books and thoughtful books. Thrillers and romances and mysteries. Kids books and popular

adult fiction. *All* the books. And candles and blankets and T-shirts too.

*Plus* I've worked super hard to renovate the loft upstairs to make it comfortable for people to

come in and relax and hide from the world and read a book, and if anyone needs a cozy escape from

the world with complimentary cookies from the bakery down the street to go with their tea or coffee

or flavored water, I imagine it's a pop star.

The fact that he came into a neighborhood bookstore called Penny for Your Thoughts looking for a

yodeling pickle should tell me exactly the kind of person he is.

But when the bells jingle late Thursday while I'm straightening the kids' book display table right

before closing time, I once again crane my neck to see if it's him.

It's not. Naturally.

"Are you for real with that face?" Portia Rodgers, my best friend in the entire universe, is hustling

my girls into the store along with her two boys. We grew up together, then I left to join the Army since

college wasn't an option—at least, not without significant loans—and we reconnected back here in

Copper Valley not long after Zoe was born, when I got out of the military since Daniel and I couldn't

both have jobs that required travel all the time and still be decent parents. She's officially helped

raise my kids more than my ex did. "If you don't quit mooning over Mr. Pickle, I'm gonna have to do

something drastic like sign you up for one of those special grown-up apps."

"We know about the bumglies app, Aunt Portia. You don't have to say it in code."

I make a strangled noise while Portia turns a dark stare onto my oldest. "Is that right, Zoe

Emerson Scott? And where are you hearing about apps you have no business hearing about?"

She points to Eric, Portia's eldest.

Eric, a thirteen-year-old equally obsessed with basketball and geeky board games, spins halfway

to the gaming section. "It wasn't me!"

"Was too," Shawn, who's fifteen months younger than his brother, offers.

Never one to be left out, Piper, my middle kid, nods too. "He did. He said it's what adults use

when they want to bumble around."

“Even though that’s not a word,” Zoe mutters. She might be nine, but she’s lived above a

bookstore for most of the years she’s been able to read. She knows *all* the words.

“What, exactly, is *bumgling*?” Portia asks all the kids as the bells jingle on the door again.

“It’s when you shake your bum for candy!” Hudson yells from the back.

And now I need to apologize to yet another customer for the things my children say in my

bookstore.

But when I turn as I’m making my *be quiet, all of you* hiss, instead, I choke on my tongue.

“Bumgling is *not* shaking your bum for candy,” Zoe yells back at her brother.

“It’s when grown-

ups screw around drinking wine and being bums!”

I need to stop this, but my new customer is making my brain malfunction.

While my children yell about a hook-up app with a name that’s short for *bumping uglies*, my

tongue is twisted sideways and my eyes are bugging out of my head.

Levi Wilson is standing there in jeans, loafers, and a black T-shirt advertising a local pet shelter

with his trucker jacket hanging open. His eyes are hidden by amber sunglasses, his brown hair is

windswept but still pop star quality, and his smile is growing amidst the dark scruff that’s too long to

be scruff but too short to be a full beard.

“All y’all got it wrong,” Eric says with a smirk that I don’t have to see to know it’s there. I can

hear it. “It’s when grown-ups hook up to do grown-up— *aaaaaahh!*  
*Mooooooooom!*”

“Customer!” I shriek.

Telepathy wasn’t working to shut them up.

Probably because my brain wasn’t working to transport the telepathic messages. Not that it works

in normal times, but it especially doesn’t work when Levi Wilson is smiling at me.

“If they’re your customer, they know what we’re like,” Zoe huffs.

Piper squeaks.

So does Portia.

Levi tucks his hands in his pockets. “Ah, bad time?”

“No! No. Come in. We were about to close, but—oh. Right. You probably like shopping better at

closing time, don’t you? Fewer crowds. Right. Pickles? Are you—are you alone, or—”

“Jeez, Aunt Ingrid, what’s wrong with you?” Shawn asks.

He’s eleven going on seventeen.

“Upstairs!” Portia shrieks. “All of you. Upstairs. Homework. Dinner. Let your mom finish her



workday.”

She gives me the eyeball of *I’ll be spying on you* as she effectively rounds up all five kids and

hustles them past the Penny for Your Thoughts merchandise toward the stock room, which is my secret

entrance to the staircase to my apartment over the store.

If she could reach the store’s loft from my apartment, I think she would, but I refused to add a door

there during renovations so customers wouldn’t accidentally wander into my home when one of my

kids messed with the lock.

Trust me.

It would’ve happened.

But right now, I have to get my heart rate under control.

“Starting over.” I suck in a deep breath like I’m a grown adult who won’t go all starry-eyed over

the pop god who just walked into my bookstore for the second time this month. Thank *god* I didn’t

send that email I started last week. I could never look him in the eye if I had. “Welcome back to Penny

for Your Thoughts. How can I help you?”

He chuckles, and the noise makes my spine tingle from my tailbone up and over my skull. “I was

hoping you could point me in a direction for *nice* gifts for my niece and

nephew.”

My ears go hot as lava and I’m pretty sure my cheeks are creating their own glow. “A n-nice

gift?”

“No pickles. I’m a changed man.”

I didn’t send that email.

Did I?

I was in the middle of writing it when Zoe and Piper started fighting over who got to shower first,

and I deleted it.

Or did I just mean to delete it?

And if I just *meant* to delete it and didn’t actually succeed, what happened to that note?

I must look like a deranged animal unsure what to do about the ice cream truck barreling toward

me—you know, panicked over *nothing* since ice cream trucks move at the speed of glaciers—

because his grin widens, but somehow becomes kinder at the same time.

Not like he’s amused that I’m a disaster.

But like he’s seen it enough that he knows how to handle me.

“I got your email,” he says. “My team didn’t pass it on to me until today, or I would’ve been back

sooner.”

“I didn’t send you an email.” Oh, shit. I wouldn’t have drunk-emailed it, because Hudson has

taught me that the minute I have a glass of wine, he’ll stick something up his nose or trip on something

and crack his jaw and I’ll need to be able to drive to the hospital. And I’ve never sleep-walked, so

odds of me sleep-emailing are slim.

But he’s approaching me and pulling a piece of paper from an inner pocket in his jacket, and *oh*

*my god.*

“This wasn’t you?”

I scan it, wondering if it’s possible for my face to melt off and take the rest of me with it. I’d much

rather be a melted pile of goo formerly known as Ingrid than tell my favorite singer on the entire

planet that I did, in fact, chew him out over email for his horrible taste in gifts.

And then I get to the end of the printed message, where there’s straight-up gibberish, and I realize

what happened.

Hudson.

Hudson happened.

“Yes. Yes, that was me, but I didn’t mean to send it, because you don’t really need a lecture about

what you can and can't get people as gifts. It's none of my business. I was just...in a mood."

"You have your hands full." He tilts his head toward the back of the store where my family has

disappeared, and where they're probably each trying to sneak back down the stairs one by one to

listen in.

At least Portia and Zoe, anyway. And probably Hudson if he sees anyone else having fun without

him.

"I do, but I don't. I mean, this is my life. I manage it as well as I can. It's what you do, you know?"

People probably think you have your hands full too. I can't imagine how busy it must be to be, well,

you." And now I'm rambling. And pretending I have half a clue about how amazing and busy his life

is. Great.

"So, what do you recommend?"

"For managing a life?"

"For gifts for a five-year-old boy and a three-year-old girl who are both spoiled absolutely rotten,

because I take my uncle duties very seriously."

"A trash bag?"

His face contorts, and I clap my hand over my mouth.

“For...?” he prompts.

“The donation pile,” I mutter between my fingers.

He *did* ask.

My kids have too many toys and I’m constantly sneaking some away to put in the donation pile to

try to manage both the chaos and their sense of entitlement.

But I don’t think that’s the kind of idea he was looking for.

Still, he tips his head back and laughs. “Tripp would like you. I thought you meant for them to use

their imagination.”

“Then I’d recommend a *paper* bag. Not a plastic trash bag. Kids should definitely not play with

plastic trash bags. And a coupon for your time so that you get the joy of seeing how many different

things they can turn a paper bag into.”

I tuck my hair behind my ear and unexpectedly find something dry and chunky tangled in it.

Levi Wilson is waving around his star factor, and I’m wearing Goldfish in my hair.

“If you’d rather traditional toys, I have a small section back here. Books are better though, but I’d

guess they already have a ton?”

“What’s your favorite?”

*“The Paperbag Princess.”*

“I’m sensing a theme.”

“Have you read it?”

He shakes his head, which doesn’t surprise me. I don’t know if he’s actually looking for gifts for

his niece and nephew, or if he’s trying to support a local business, or if he’s checking out the store for

some other reason, but my gut tells me he’s not actually here to shop like a regular person would

shop.

And he’s not alone. His bodyguard is leaning against the window outside the shop. What was her

name?

Giselle.

Right.

Even his bodyguard has an awesome sexy name, whereas I have a name that means my mother

was drugged up when my father insisted I could be the next Ingrid Bergman.

Nothing like never, ever living up to your namesake.

“Here.” I turn into an aisle of children’s books and quickly locate a copy.

“You should read it. It

might inspire a song.” I wink.

Oh my god.

I just told Levi Wilson to write a song about a badass princess who can take care of herself, and

then I *winked*.

His fingers brush mine as he takes the book from me. “That’s great. I love inspiration.”

He’s looking at me again.

It’s the same look as last week, in the storage room, and I don’t know what it means, but he is

definitely *not* here to shop for his family.

My brain offers up a sly *maybe he’s here for you*, which is ridiculous enough that I almost snort

out loud. I cover it by turning back to the rows of books and pretend I’m cough-sneezing, which is

even worse.

Now he probably thinks I have germs.

“If you like that one, you’ll have to try the Phoebe Moon books too. They’re a little old for your

niece and nephew, but definitely worth growing into.”

“Are you kidding? I love Phoebe Moon.”

I jerk my head back up. “You do?”

His eyes are dancing.

*Dancing*. It’s like I just offered him a plate of all of his favorite desserts at once, then told him

they were magic, and it's utterly adorable. "I'm playing Zack Diggory in the next movie."

"No."

He nods. "Voicing him, that is. Apparently I can't pass for sixteen anymore. Time's rude, isn't it?"

I rambled about being a teenager. Oh god. Oh god oh god oh god. "At least it hasn't taken your voice."

He grins again like that's not also the dorkiest thing I've ever said. "Yet."

What am I doing with my hands, and why can't I seem to hold them still? Am I signing *I love you*?

No. No, I'm good. "We are *definitely* seeing that one in the theater. Oh my gosh. Did you meet the author?"

"Ah, I see who the real superstars are around here." He laughs again, and warmth spreads through my chest.

How long has it been since I've enjoyed a man's laugh? I love listening to Griff, Portia's husband,

laugh, but it's not the same as this tingly glow lighting me up from the inside.

But that could also be the Levi Wilson effect.

"I do crush on a lot of authors," I confirm. "Hazard of the job. We have them in as often as

possible, and I go star-struck every time."



“You own this place?”

“It was my Grandma Penny’s.”

“Ah, Penny for Your Thoughts. I get it.”

It would be impossible to not smile at the memory of my grandma. When my parents split when I

was seven, Mom stayed here in Copper Valley so Grandma and Grandpa could help watch me, and

Dad took off for—you know what? I don’t even know where. But Mom wasn’t around long either.

After a year or two, she decided she needed to go back to college, in residence, in California.

I miss my grandparents. “She used to bake oatmeal raisin cookies for the kids who came in every

afternoon after school.”

“Poser cookies.” He shudders, and now I’m laughing.

“Oatmeal raisin cookies are *delicious*.”

“When you’re not expecting chocolate chip cookies.”

“I have her recipe, but not quite the time. Plus, the health department is pickier these days, and

more kids are in after-school programs. I compromise and get cookies from my favorite bakery

instead.”

“You’ve always worked here?”

“Off and on.” I pluck another book off the shelf. “How about the *Llama Llama* books? Hudson

still adores these.”

“I know that one,” he confirms. “Pretty sure the dog ate their last copy.”

“That sounds familiar.”

“You have a dog?”

“Not right now.” I point to the ceiling. “It’s hard enough keeping my kids contained in our

apartment.”

He glances up, then sets his gaze back on me, and there’s that sensation again.

The *he’s into me* sensation.

I know it’s the mystical, magical effect of being close enough to feel the outer edges of his space

bubble. I felt the same thing when I was at one of his concerts years ago and I swore we locked eyes.

But for two seconds, I let myself indulge in the fantasy that a man with his life together could be

interested in a busy, sometimes frazzled, always wishing for a glass of wine, woman like me.

“You?” I ask.

He blinks. “Me?”

“Do you have a dog? Or any pets?”

“No, but I do have the spare mascot costumes for the Fireballs at my place.  
Rumor has it someone

might try to steal them again before next season. Shh. Top secret.” And now  
he’s winking at me.

Levi Wilson.

Winking. At me.

I pretend to zip my lips and throw away the key while wondering when I last  
shaved my bikini

line. “Your secret is safe with me.”

He smiles again.

I smile and hope I don’t have lunch stuck in my teeth. What was today’s  
lunch? I can’t remember.

He steps closer, and I smell fresh cotton and spicy cologne and whatever  
unrealistic dreams must

smell like. “Can I ask you a crazy question?”

I nod. If I do much more, he might move away, and it’s warm and exciting  
and happy in his

bubble, like he’s sunshine itself inside an amusement park of only happy,  
non-scary rides that

everyone from babies to great-grandparents can ride, and where too much  
cotton candy doesn’t make

your stomach hurt and where funnel cake has zero calories.

His gaze drops and he rubs the back of his neck, then grins at me sheepishly.  
And just when I think

he's going to ask something groundbreaking, he says, "Do you ever rent out space in the off-hours?"

I don't know Levi Wilson personally. I've seen him in concert a couple times, and I've spoken to

him as a customer—or whatever this is—for exactly six minutes of my life.

But I know to the pit of my very soul that *do you rent out space in the off-hours* isn't the question

he wants to ask. "I—well, that would depend on what you'd need it for. Fire code is a thing, and the

neighbors get prickly about noise after eight."

His smile changes, and this one's flat-out adorable on a man who's usually sex on a stick. "No,

not to make noise. And I meant privately."

My brows shoot up and my face gets that hot tingle that means I'm blushing.

He's looking up toward the loft that hangs over two-thirds of the store, running the entire length

from the windows to the storeroom wall in back. "I like the vibe. Good for writing."

"You write books?"

*Gah*, that flip in my belly when his bedroom eyes land on me...

"Songs." He's amused. I swear his personal bubble is getting warmer and friendlier, which is

ridiculous since I'm not a *bubble* person.

"Oh! Right. Of course." I wave a flustered hand at the shelves around us.

“Clearly, my mind—”

“Mom! *Mom!* Skippy is sick!”

My left eye twitches as I look around Levi, breaking out of that warm glow he was pulling me

into, to see Zoe charging up the store’s central aisle with a Nike shoebox in hand. “What?”

“*Skippy!*” She flings the lid open, and there, nestled amongst sticks and leaves, is a furry little

rodent with glassy black eyes, its chest heaving.

I slam the box closed. “Zoe. Oh my god, *what is that?* Go. Back upstairs. Now. I’ll deal with you

and— *Skippy*—in a minute.” I glance at Levi. “This isn’t normal. I mean, it is, but not usually with...”

I flap my hand at the box.

“But he fell! And he wouldn’t get up. And he looks like Hudson did that time he had strep throat

and threw up all of his tomato soup.”

One...two...three... “Zoe. Go have Aunt Portia call Uncle Griff.”

“Uncle Griff’s a firefighter, not a squirrel doctor,” my daughter sobs.

The bells jingle over the door, and I call out a short, “We’re closed.”

“I heard screaming,” Giselle replies.

“Wasn’t me.” Levi’s right at my back, close enough that I can feel that warm bubble of light he

lives in, but in an *I know it's there* way, not in an *I've been let inside again* way. "Is that a

chipmunk?"

"It's a red squirrel, and *he's dying*." Zoe finishes her sob with a hiccup.

*Why does my child have a dying red squirrel in a shoebox?*

Also, why is that not the weirdest question I've ever asked myself? I curl my fingers into my

palms, then release them before I say something I'll regret. "Zoe, we can take this upstairs, and—"

Levi steps around me and tilts the lid to peer inside. "I know a great vet. Lives in my brother's

neighborhood, which is awesome, since my nephew's always finding frogs and gophers."

I try to push the lid closed again. "We can't—"

"When he says she's *the best*," his bodyguard interrupts, "he means that in all possible ways."

Fantastic.

So Levi's slept with her.

He stiffens next to me too. "Giselle, you might want to re-word that before Dr. Murphy's husband

gets the wrong idea."

His bodyguard cracks a grin. "Did that come out wrong?"

He ignores her and peeks inside the box again. "You know what he smells like? He smells like

this time Tripp and Cash got drunk on apple wine when we were— *Aaaah!*”

There’s a flash of fur, and he flings himself backwards with a furry creature hanging onto his face.

“*Drunk squirrel!*”

Giselle lunges for him.

Zoe lunges for the squirrel. “*Skippy!*”

I lunge for all of them. At once.

Levi twists and spins while the squirrel climbs his perfectly-mussed hair, then goes down his

back and into his jacket. His face contorts, and he makes a strangled noise, and *oh my god*.

Ohmygod ohmygod ohmygod.

*Please* tell me my kid’s rescue squirrel didn’t just go down Levi Wilson’s pants.

Ohmygod ohmygod ohmygod.

He rips his jacket off and flings it onto the floor, and *oh thank god*, there’s the squirrel, racing to

the top of the bookshelves.

“I got it,” Giselle announces.

Zoe’s crying. “But he was sick.”

“He’s *not sick!* He’s *loose in the store!*”

“Drunk,” Levi says, wiping his face. “That squirrel is definitely drunk.”

“He lost his balance!” Zoe shrieks as I try to hug her and calm her down. “He could’ve died! I

love him and he doesn’t know how to be a wild squirrel anymore.”

Levi’s eyeballing me, and I don’t know if it’s reverence or repulsion. “You have a pet squirrel?”

“I have chaos and a guilt complex and I didn’t know we have a squirrel!” But apparently we do

have a squirrel. Zoe *named* it. “How did I not know we have a squirrel? We can’t have a squirrel! Do

squirrels carry rabies? Zoe. How long have you had a squirrel?”

“He’s been living in my backpack for a month,” she sobs.

“A *month*?”

“He was so little and he fell on our fire escape and I feed him all the fruit cups the cafeteria

throws away!”

My eyeball is twitching and there’s a squirrel racing around my store and Levi’s bodyguard has

this look in her eye like she’s about to go *Matrix* or *Avengers* on his furry little ass.

“You got a bucket?” Giselle calls. “Also, lock the door.”

“I have canvas bags,” I call back. “Zoe. Please. It’ll be okay. Also, *thrown away fruit cups aren’t*

*good for anyone.*”

Fermented.



Fermented fruit cups.

The squirrel's liver is toast.

"I got the door," Levi says.

He turns as I head for the checkout counter.

Skippy appears, flying from shelf-top to shelf-top.

Zoe leaps for him.

Levi does too. He lunges left.

She lunges right.

The two of them collide with a crunch as Giselle spins around the corner just in time to see my

nine-year-old daughter taking down her client with her thick skull.

Pretty sure this is the last time Levi Wilson walks into my bookstore.

SIX

*Levi*

THE BEST THING about a concussion is that—

No, actually, there is no *best thing* about a concussion.

My head hurts. Not only won't Giselle let me leave my condo, but the rest of my security team is

backing her completely. Tripp won't bring his kids to see me because they're too rambunctious. I'm

still not talking to Beck and Wyatt because they didn't tell me Mom was dating someone.

I know, I know. Punch them and move on. It's the guy way.

Fuck that.

Melodramatic is more my style, and if I get another concussion, my mother will never move out.

Yeah. Move out. She moved into my guest room last night when I got home from urgent care and

refuses to talk to me about this rumor that she's dating someone.

And I'm bored as fuck.

There's no Animal Crossing on my phone.

Actually, there's no phone, period. TV either.

It's just me and my talking smart speaker in a dim room while Mom brings me ice packs if I so

much as wince, with the occasional visit from someone on my payroll like security or an assistant.

You'd think I nearly severed my head off for all the fuss they're making, when I have the mildest

concussion you can have and still call it a concussion. But since I'm supposed to fly to New York for

studio time on Tuesday, and then to Miami to perform at an awards show on Wednesday, it's full-

scale, hard-ass rules for recovery.

Giselle tells me Ingrid's daughter checked out fine, and Tripp tells me his neighbor, the Thrusters

hockey team's official vet, who's basically seen it all, said the squirrel was

indeed drunk, but

otherwise looked fine, and she offered to help find it a home at a sanctuary.

That's the good news.

The bad news is that I'm sulking, I've lost my inspiration, I'm still mad at my friends for being in

happily committed relationships while thinking I'd go back to dating *Violet*, who's not as bad as they

all think she is, and I don't see myself snapping out of it anytime soon.

And my master plan to pay Ingrid to let me hang out at her bookstore after hours—preferably with

her tinkering around while I soaked up the vibes and worked on songs—is dead.

You can't come back from being taken out by an elementary-school girl and a drunk squirrel in

front of a woman.

You just can't.

But I still want—

I want the impossible.

To spend time with Ingrid. Show her the old concert video my assistant delivered at my

insistence, which features video too shadowy for me to conclusively tell if the woman holding the

sign was Ingrid.

I'm not impartial. I'm seeing what I want to see, and I know it.

But I also know there are about a dozen massive barriers to me heading back to her bookstore,

starting with *I'll look like a stalker* and ending with *dating a not-famous person is hard enough, but*

*dating a not-famous single mother whose family deserves privacy can only end in disaster.*

Every time I'm near her, I get this warm glow in my chest. When she smiles, I want to write a

song about paradise. Her laughter is an introduction to a universe that I can only see distantly, on the

horizon, but that I want to live in.

And I can't.

She has a life. A job. Kids. Friends. Responsibilities.

Kids.

I said that part, didn't I?

It's the big one.

Besides, she still looks at me like I'm that guy on the stage.

Not like I'm a guy whose mom is baking me stuffed squash for dinner because *it's good for you,*

*Levi. You need your vegetables to recover.*

I'm idly picking at my guitar strings in my living room, where Mom has graciously allowed me to

keep my curtains open for the view of the city and the Blue Ridge Mountains  
beyond, when Giselle's

voice comes over my smart speaker.

"Visitor, Mr. Wilson."

I don't bother asking which one of my friends is dropping by. If it's Beck or  
Wyatt, they can deal

with my cranky ass. "Can you let him keep his phone so he can find new  
jokes to entertain me?"

"No."

"Then tell him to go away."

"Yes, your baby majesty."

About a year into touring as Bro Code, we played an arena somewhere—I  
don't even remember

where now, though I'm certain Cash would—and at the meet-and-greet with  
the fans beforehand, this

dude walked up to us, informed us he was only there to tell us we sucked, and  
that we should all do

the world a favor and sever the cords on our harnesses during the number  
when we all five flew over

the crowd thirty feet up.

First, security called off the flying that night.

But next, I wrote a special song for us. We called it "The *Fuck You* Song,"  
and we'd sing it on the

bus anytime one of us stumbled across a bad review or a critical piece

deriding us for being

overhyped or not doing more public charity work or accusing us of lying about where we came from

to make an extra buck.

You can't tell those people to fuck off in public—everyone's entitled to their opinion—but even

now, plucking out the first few chords of that song makes me feel better when someone's a dick.

“Very funny, Mr. Wilson,” Giselle's voice says over the smart speaker. “And you're welcome.”

Huh.

Guess she knows the song.

Apparently Mom does too, because she pops her head in the doorway from the kitchen. “Don't

use that language with your staff. It's disrespectful.”

“I played a song. Not even a song. It was—”

“Do you remember your thirtieth birthday party?” She's wearing the eye twinkle. That's not a

good sign.

“Every minute,” I lie.

What? Birthdays that end in zero are hard. Of course I got shit-faced.

“You couldn't stop giggling while you confessed all about the *fuck you* song.”

“You can’t trust the giggling ramblings of a drunk man.”

“Even Wyatt knew the song.”

“We wrote it for him. *And* for dickheads who try to take advantage of our single mothers.” Wyatt

grew up with a single mother too, though his is no longer with us.

She laughs. “Nice try. Here. Fresh ice pack. I’ll get the door.”

I grumble, but I take it.

I’ve got a shiner the size of the moon on my temple. It’s not pretty, and it’ll probably still be

hanging around for the awards show on Wednesday. I’ll tell a few jokes about it, everyone will laugh,

I’ll nail my performance, and that’ll be that.

I hear Mom open the door, and I scowl. “I said no visitors.”

“Watch your mouth, young man, or you’ll never get visitors again.”

She sounds cranky.

Maybe Davis drove up for a visit. Haven’t seen him in months. But considering he has ways of

finding out things—or just *knowing* things—that the rest of us are slow to pick up on, maybe he knows

something about Mom’s new boyfriend, and she knows it.

But that’s not his voice drifting in from the foyer.

Not unless he’s been doing enough voice training to accurately pull off sounding like a woman.

And given that he supposedly works at a nuclear reactor, and he's definitely completely out of the

public spotlight, I sincerely doubt he's been having voice lessons.

I glance toward the doorway as Mom steps through, giving me a look I haven't seen since—

Actually, I'm gonna stop myself right there, because if I even *think* that name, Mom'll smack me

upside the head.

Let's just say if Tripp and Beck and Wyatt and Cash were horrified at the idea that I'd hooked

back up with Violet, Mom would be first in line seasoning my date's coffee with laxatives.

But that's not an ex-girlfriend trailing behind her with pink cheeks and wide-eyed wariness, a

foil-wrapped plate in her hand.

It's Ingrid.

This is unexpected, except it shouldn't be.

Both of my primary protection agents and my personal assistant know I'm obsessed with this

woman and would take any excuse to see her again, and I asked Giselle this morning to make sure she

wasn't feeling bad about the squirrel thing.

"Oh. Hey." I move my guitar aside, belatedly remember to check and make sure I'm wearing pants



—I am, gray sweatpants, thank you—and am about to rise when my mom makes one of those mother

noises that means *if you move, I'll make sure you regret it for the rest of your life*.

She's taking this *get over this concussion* thing seriously.

Probably because she was planning a trip into the mountains for a girls' spa retreat with the other

moms from the old neighborhood this weekend—or so she said—and now she's stuck here

babysitting me instead.

At least I know she's not out on any dates if she's here with me.

“Don't get up,” Ingrid says, like being a mom means that she, too, knows when a guy's about to

cause trouble.

Fuck.

Now I'm realizing I want to get to know a single mother while getting pissed that my own single

mother has found someone whose company she enjoys.

It's different. I'm harmless, and I don't know if the same can be said about Mom's mystery guy.

“I needed to stretch anyway,” I tell Ingrid.

She shakes her head. “No, really. I won't stay long. I didn't mean to intrude. I just wanted to

apologize for Zoe and the squirrel, and Giselle told me I could stop by to

check on you. We baked

cookies. I don't know if you eat cookies, but they're chocolate chip since I got the impression you

don't like oatmeal raisin, and—"

"Do me a favor and get as far from my mom as possible before she steals them and doesn't let me

eat any."

Mom rolls her eyes. "I'm extremely disappointed they're *not* oatmeal raisin."

"I'm getting *you* a squirrel for Christmas."

"Excellent. I'll feed it all your cookies." She turns to Ingrid. "Speaking of, I can put those cookies

in the kitchen."

"Don't do it." I'm tossing aside my guitar once again.

Mom points the *sit still* point at me while still smiling her *I don't trust you* smile at Ingrid, which

is probably fair after all of the *how do I know I can trust this guy?* questions I've lobbed at her about

her own secret boyfriend since she arrived yesterday to babysit me. "I'll let him have one after he

eats all of his dinner."

"Extra peas and carrots?" Ingrid's eyes sparkle.

"I'm sneaking liver into his stuffed squash too."

I'm beginning to suspect Mom's enjoying this even more than she'd be

enjoying her spa retreat in

the mountains, but not as much as she'd enjoy me and Tripp not knowing she's seeing someone.

I rise, which makes both women order me to sit back down.

"I have a headache, not a broken spine," I grumble.

Ingrid winces, and I immediately feel bad. "Which wasn't your fault, or your daughter's," I add

quickly. "How is she?"

"Completely fine. Doing back handsprings, the last I saw."

"And the squirrel?"

She winces again. "Unfortunately quite at home in my apartment since I have a hard time telling

my children *no* when they put their hearts into something."

Mom clucks her tongue in sympathy. "Been there. Levi kept a pet porcupine for a few years."

"It was a pinecone that I *called* a porcupine." That didn't sound any better out loud than Mom's

betrayal.

But Ingrid smiles. "That would definitely be preferable. Instead, I'm considering putting a

warning sign on the shop door."

"Books, games, and unexpected entertainment?"

"I was thinking more like, 'You should probably order online and we'll meet

you at the door.’ We

call the store’s book club the *Hot Mess Book Club*, and we sell these *Hot Mess Mom* T-shirts, but I

think we’re past hot mess and into utter disaster territory.”

“You sound like my kind of people. Not that I wouldn’t trust my son to have good judgment with

people.” Mom succeeds in not only delivering the subtle dig that I should trust *her* judgment while

reminding me that she doesn’t, in fact, trust my judgment, but also in stealing the plate of cookies.

The little boy inside me dies a bit at knowing I won’t be able to stuff my face with six of them like

the grown man I am would if no one was watching.

My pants would be tight tomorrow, but it’d be worth it.

I slide my mom a *please leave* look.

She smiles like she’s just getting warmed up.

Shit.

“Ingrid you said?” Mom says. “Lovely name. You run a book store?”

“It was my grandmother’s. We’ve remodeled it and started new programs to be a community

gathering place for frazzled modern women, mostly because that seemed the smartest way to not lose

customers who’ll see me in my natural habitat, but yes, our primary focus is books.”

“And you have a daughter?”

“Two daughters and a son.”

“How old?”

“Nine, seven, and four.”

“Married?”

“Divorced. My ex was— *is* a photojournalist. Traveled too much. Not the family type. Which

you’d think I would’ve learned after the *first* kid, or possibly after the second, especially since he

was gone even more after Piper and her—and I really didn’t need to go there, did I?”

“Oh, honey.” Mom squeezes Ingrid’s arm. “You are *far* from the only woman that’s ever happened

to. And if we’d all stopped after the first kid when we were married to worthless shithheads, Levi

wouldn’t be here either.”

They both look at me, Mom smug in a *gotcha* and *you’re welcome* kind of way, Ingrid mildly

perplexed.

I shift uncomfortably. “Why are you both looking at me like Mom should’ve stopped after Tripp?”

Ingrid shakes her head as she lifts her hands, then twists her fingers together again. “No! No, it’s

not that. I’m trying to picture Hudson eventually being an actual grown-up,

and it's not working."

Mom laughs. "Oh, I had my doubts with this one too."

"Did he shove marbles up his nose when he was four?"

"No, but he did try to play his penis like a guitar every night at bath time."

For fuck's sake, *she did not*. "*Mother*."

Her eyes twinkle.

Ingrid's gone pink in the cheeks, but she slides Mom a look. "Do they grow out of that?" she

whispers. "After two girls, my boy has been...enlightening."

"They reach an age where you voluntarily quit wondering about the answer to that question. But

you should know I've moved into his guest room to take care of him. So maybe it *is* hopeless that they

ever reach full maturity."

Jesus. She didn't just go for the jugular, she used a rusty hacksaw on it. "I don't need a full-time

babysitter. I'm *fine*. And I want a cookie."

"Apologies that you have to see him like this," Mom tells Ingrid. "I raised him better." She peels

the foil back and hands my guest one of her own cookies. "Sit. Make yourself comfortable. Do you

like coffee?"

"I—yes."

“If you’re anything like I was when my boys were seven and nine, I’d bet you live off the stuff.

Levi, sweetheart, go brew a pot.”

I gape at her.

But Mom hasn’t been a mother for almost forty years without *still* being three steps ahead.

“You’ve been insisting you’re not helpless. I’m sure you can push a button in the kitchen.”

Ingrid glances at me and smiles with those gorgeous curvy lips and kind hazel eyes, and my breath

evaporates out of my lungs.

Poof.

Just gone.

And then she tucks her hair behind her ear, and I remember a Goldfish falling out of it the other

day, and I couldn’t resist smiling back at her if the fate of the world depended on it.

Do I want to get seriously involved with a woman with three kids?

Not really.

But do I want to see Ingrid smile again?

Damn right I do.

There has to be middle ground here. Hell, over half my relationships the last ten years have been

fake for one reason or another. Surely, I can find a way to take a lady out to dinner with no strings.

“Where are your kids now?” Mom asks her.

“Birthday party, gymnastics class, and with a friend hiking outside the city for the afternoon.”

“So you have thirteen minutes?”

Ingrid laughs again. I get a cramp in my gut realizing that *take a lady out for a simple dinner*

probably won't be nearly as simple as my brain is trying to convince me it will be. Her schedule is

probably tighter than mine, and mine's busy enough that I sometimes wake up in Japan in the summer

and still think I'm celebrating Mardi Gras in New Orleans two years ago.

Mom makes the *go on, go make us coffee, the lady doesn't have all day* gesture to me.

Considering it's the first thing she's let me lift a finger for in the last two days, I silently obey. I try

to steal a cookie on the way and get my hand slapped, which makes Ingrid snort with laughter.

“Don't grow up to be like her,” I tell Ingrid with a chin jut at my mother.

“He's only saying that because I can hear him and he's upset that he can't have a cookie,” Mom

confides to her. “He actually thinks I'm the best person on the entire planet.”

“Not every day,” I mutter as I pass into my kitchen.



“I understand you talked Levi out of buying yodeling pickles for my grandchildren.”

Oh, good. Mom’s been talking to Giselle too.

I’m totally screwed here. No way around it.

I hit the button to start the coffee maker, realize I forgot to put a mug under the spigot, and miss

hearing whatever Ingrid replies with as I fling open my cabinet and grab the first mug I can find.

It’s not until the coffee’s dripping into it that I realize I grabbed a mug that has two cartoon boobs

on it and the phrase *have you squished me today?*

Where the hell did that come from?

I dig deeper into my cabinet and realize all of my mugs are either mugs about me, or mugs that my

buddies must’ve dropped off as jokes. I’m waffling between a mug that just has my name on it, rather

than a mug with my face on it, and a mug announcing that I don’t spew profanities, I enunciate them

like a fucking lady, when I realize the original mug is overflowing.

“Fuck!” I yank the first mug out of the way, slosh hot coffee all over my hand, and toss it toward

the sink while I shove the fucking lady mug under the stream.

“Levi?” Mom calls.

“Yes, you can eat more of my cookies,” I reply. I thrust my hand under cold

running water and try

to reach for the towel hanging off my oven handle to mop up the coffee,  
which is now dripping off the

counter and onto my bamboo floor, but I can't reach because my arms are  
four inches too short.

I need Beck-length arms.

"Oh, honey," Mom sighs behind me.

"This is how I always make coffee."

"Maybe you should cancel your plans on Tuesday."

"I'm not canceling Tuesday." It's not just me in the studio. I'm doing a  
collaboration with Waverly

Sweet, who's basically the only pop sensation in the world bigger than I am,  
and her schedule is

possibly worse than mine and Ingrid's combined. "If this doesn't happen  
Tuesday, it'll be March

before we can coordinate again."

"Always so busy." She tosses me the towel on the oven handle, then pulls a  
fresh towel out of a

drawer and gets to work sopping up the coffee that my soaked towel can't  
get. "Go on. Go sit and talk

to your friend. I'll finish up."

"I can make a cup of coffee."

"Maybe in a few days. I'll go with you on Tuesday."

“Mom—”

“It’s nice to have my baby be the one who needs me again for once.” She hip-checks me. “Go on.

Don’t leave poor Ingrid alone. Do you know how starved single mothers get for adult company?”

I don’t, honestly, but the guilt trip is working, both about what Mom’s life must’ve been like thirty

years ago when she was in Ingrid’s shoes, and what it must be like today. I thought she was always

chatting with the other moms in the neighborhood when she wasn’t working or running Tripp and me

to our various activities, but I was also a self-centered brat who wouldn’t have taken the time to pay

attention to what she was actually doing.

My objections to her dating now have nothing to do with me being a self-centered brat, though,

and everything to do with the unscrupulous assholes who might take advantage of a lonely,

inexperienced woman with two very rich sons.

I shut off the water, wipe my hand, which isn’t going to melt off, and Mom hands me the mug that’s

only three-quarters full. “Try not to trip.”

No use scowling at her.

Not when she’s actually letting me talk to Ingrid for half a minute alone. Hopefully.

When I get back to the living room, my guest is standing at the wall of windows beyond the blue-

and-gray sitting area that suddenly feels pretentious and not as warm and welcoming as I've always

thought it was.

I have throw pillows and blankets and pictures of my family in here, but I also know my rug alone

probably costs more than what her bookstore brings in during an entire month, and don't ask about the

artsy-fartsy chandelier that I like to stare at when I get stuck writing a song.

Ingrid's not looking at my décor though. She's peering out at the city and the soft mountains

beyond, which are wearing a darker fog as the late afternoon sun dips low in the sky.

"Coffee?" Shit. I forgot to ask if she wanted anything in it.

She jerks her head like she's been caught eating more cookies, then smiles softly at me. "Thank

you."

"I can get cream or milk or sugar—"

"Black is fine." Her gaze flits over my face, and she grimaces again. "I can't believe Zoe's head

hit you that hard. She doesn't have a mark on her."

"It's makeup. Photo shoot later where my PR people are gonna tell it like I was the one who

climbed the shelves to capture a squirrel in distress.”

“You’re a terrible liar.”

I grin. “I’m better when I want to be.”

“Again with the *terrible liar*.”

She’s wearing her own makeup today, along with ankle boots, tight jeans, a thick, dark gray cable-

knit sweater that might or might not be masking ketchup and spilled milk, but the earrings, necklace,

and subtle scent of something sweet but not overpowering suggests she would’ve changed if that were

the case.

“I’m glad you stopped by.”

Her cheeks go pink. “I got Giselle’s number the other day so I could check on you, and she said

you could use some cheering up and that I should come over. I feel awful—”

“When I was thirteen, I dared Beck to get on a trampoline with me to see if we could time it right

so that we could both jump high enough to reach this tree branch in his backyard. Both our moms had

to take us to the emergency room. I broke my collarbone. He sprained his ankle. Believe me, I’ve

done a lot worse to myself.”

She chuckles. “Oh, I believe it. But I still feel—”

“A fan at a concert threw a box of Milk Duds at the stage, and I ducked because I thought it was a

bat—don’t ask—and as I was standing up, I ran into my bassist and the two of us tripped over my feet

and I sliced myself open on the rough edge of a snap inside my jacket.”

“Don’t forget the part where you just tried to maim yourself with the coffee maker,” Mom calls.

Of course she does.

Ingrid smiles over her mug, which she’s gripping with both hands, like she’s afraid of what she’ll

do with them if she doesn’t. “Okay. Message received. I’ll stop feeling bad. But now I want you to

know I’m refraining from asking why you wear a jacket on stage when you have to be sweating up a

storm with as active as you are up there.”

“Thank you. Your tact is appreciated. *If* you said something about the dumbness of wearing heavy

clothing on a stage that’s four hundred degrees, I’d have to tell you that fashion is important. And

you’d probably tell me I could get up on stage just like this, and I’d have to be modest and argue that

sweatpants and a tight T-shirt don’t do me any favors, despite the number of times gossip rags post

pictures of me like this and sell out every time.”

She laughs. “Yes, I can see where you’re all kinds of modest.”

“Talent. It’s all talent.”

“Stories.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“The magazines selling out? Yes. But the part where you cut yourself on the rough side of a snap?

I *know* you can do better than that.”

I lift my shirt and point to the scar under my ribs, and her eyes go wide, then dark.

*Good* dark.

I’m not the let-it-all-hang-out underwear model Beck is, showing off nearly everything on

billboards around the world and causing car crashes on a daily basis, but I’m not a buttoned-up

Hallmark Channel hero either.

Having a woman staring at my body isn’t new.

Feeling like she’s touching me everywhere her eyes rake over is, though.

*Single mother*, I remind myself. *Complications*.

“What about that one?” She doesn’t touch my skin, but her fingers hover just over my hip.

“Are you asking as the mother of a kid who’s gonna make the same mistakes I did, or as a woman

who likes what you see?”

Her eyes lift to mine, and for the first time since she spotted me in her

bookstore last week, I feel

like we're on even footing. She's not flustered. Not in a star-struck way at the moment, anyway.

Turned on?

I hope that's what I'm seeing in the way she's biting her lip while her darkening eyes drift down

to my torso again, then back up to my eyes. "What did you really stop by to ask me the other night?

You could've had someone on your team call if you wanted to rent space to write songs. But you

didn't. Why?"

Correction.

She definitely has the advantage.

I drop my shirt to cover my stomach again, but I don't step back. She's one-handing her coffee

while she studies me.

Her eyes are like a treasure chest. Gold wrapped in brown. And they're asking a question I don't

have to answer.

I want to.

But I don't know her well enough, and I've been in the limelight long enough to know that once I

put it out there, I can't take it back.



Telling someone she was my inspiration for changing my entire life?

I can't do it. "I thought you'd say no."

A pink stain comes over her cheeks again, matching the heat I feel rising around my ears. "To

what?" she asks softly.

"Dinner."

I swear she knows I'm not telling her everything. It's in the subtle twitch of her eyes and the

tightening of her lips.

Or maybe she doesn't believe I'm serious.

She *did* just call me out on two very believable fibs.

"Let me take you to dinner." Yeah. I'm doing this. "Whenever it works for you."

"Why?"

"Because it's what you do to clear the air after you bond over a drunk accidental pet squirrel."

Her eyes narrow. "So dinner wasn't what you were going to ask about *before* the squirrel

interrupted us."

Hello, hole. Let me dig you a little deeper. "When's the last time you had a quiet dinner out, just

you and one other adult?"

"Do *you* ever have quiet dinners out?"

“*Out* is a relative term. I can promise quiet.”

“So you’re asking me to dinner, just the two of us, at a secluded place where no one could see us,

hear us, or possibly find us?”

My mother snorts softly in the kitchen and almost makes me wish I didn’t have top-notch hearing

protection on stage so that I couldn’t hear her and didn’t know she was listening in.

“I’m a sucker for a woman who won’t pull punches when I’m being an idiot.” I roll my neck and

jerk my head toward the kitchen. “Clearly.”

Ingrid’s entire cherub face lights up in a smile so big her eyes crinkle. “Now you’re cheating.

How’s a hot mess mom supposed to resist an invitation from a guy who loves his own mother so

much?”

“A lesser man would be very embarrassed right now.”

She laughs.

It’s music. Fucking gorgeous music.

“On my honor as my mother’s favorite son, I’ll take you to dinner somewhere *safe*, keep my hands

to myself, be a pleasant conversationalist, not judge you if you fall asleep halfway through dessert,

and get you back home at a decent hour so that you’re not paying for a night

out for the next three

days.”

The offer hangs in the air between us like the blue mist that hangs over my favorite mountains, and

I know my mother can hear every word, and I don’t care.

I want to take this woman out to dinner.

But she’s watching me like she’s waiting for me to add a punchline. “One, have you been spying

on me? That’s an oddly specific version of a grown-up dinner out that might match exactly what I was

telling my best friend I need. And two, why me?”

“One, raised by a single mother and watched my brother be a single dad for a couple years, and I

*do* occasionally have observant moments. And two, I could use a few more friends to keep me

grounded. Not often anyone tells me when I’m making bad decisions anymore. At least, not friends

who aren’t keeping secrets from me about what my mother’s been up to. And I might need advice on

dealing with that too.” I nudge her arm with mine, and a crackle of energy passes between us.

I pretend I don’t feel it.

Her lips part and she straightens, but she also looks away. When her phone rings out a shrill alarm

bell, she seems relieved for the distraction as she balances her coffee with digging her phone out.

“Time to get the first kid. Thank you for the coffee.”

“And dinner?”

“You’re very persistent.”

“It’s a youngest child thing.”

That finally earns me another smile. “I’ll think about it.”

“Good. When you’re ready, text me.” I slip her phone out of her hand and program my number in

while she watches me with surprised eyes. I shoot myself a message so I remember not to block her

number, then hand it back to her. “Stop by anytime.”

“Bring your kids next time.” Mom steps into the doorway, making no secret of just how closely

she’s been listening, which isn’t a surprise to me, and I expect Ingrid’s been aware of her too. “It’ll

serve him right to have them wreaking havoc on his furniture instead of him wreaking havoc in your

store.”

Ingrid turns a wry smile to her. “I’m pretty sure my kids would’ve caused the same problems

without him there.”

“Then do it for me and all the times he disastrophied my house.”

She laughs, and when I show her out the door so she can start her run to pick up her kids, I still

don't know if I should expect a houseful next time she stops by.

Probably not.

If I want to see her again, I get the feeling it'll still be on me.

And I'm okay with that.

Especially since I still want to hang out in her loft and write songs.

There's *always* one more way to get what I want.

And what I want is more Ingrid in my life. However I can get it.

SEVEN

*Ingrid*

I'M PUTTING Hudson to bed for the third time when I hear the girls thundering through the living

room. "I want my own Skippy," Hudson says.

I kiss him on the forehead and tighten his Thomas the Tank Engine comforter around him. "When

you grow up, you can go live in the woods and have all the Skippys you want. But right now, you have

to go to sleep."

Sleep.

I want to crawl into bed, finish the audiobook I started this week, and go to sleep.

But for the first time in weeks—months, maybe?—I want something else more.

“Mama? Can I have a drink?”

“You already had a drink.”

“I want a banana.”

“You already brushed your teeth.”

“Story?”

“I told you *five* stories. It’s bedtime.”

“Can I be a firetruck?”

“You can be anything you want to be.”

“Can I have a drink?”

“Hudson. I’m walking out this door, and you’re going to close your eyes and go to sleep, or else

you’ll have to eat liver and onions for breakfast.”

He giggles.

Something crashes in the living room, and I hear the girls whisper to each other in the panicked

tones that suggest I should’ve taken the vet up on her offer to find Skippy a new home.

Especially after she told me a story about another client who tried to keep a pet squirrel and

ended up having to explain to the chief of police how one of his officers’ badges ended up in her

house.

I kiss Hudson one last time and head out of his tiny room, knowing full well we'll repeat this

routine two more times before I get to sit down with my phone and do something braver than I've

done in years.

"Zoe. Piper. *What are you doing?*"

Our living room is basically the size of Levi Wilson's foyer. When Grandma and Grandpa lived

here, they kept a small loveseat and a single La-Z-Boy recliner in the room, along with a TV stand for

their 32-inch television, which was the only thing they splurged on in their entire lives that wasn't

books or bakery treats, but Grandma liked seeing Alex Trebek in 32-inch glory every night on

*Jeopardy!* and Grandpa liked Grandma to be happy.

Also, they both liked one-upping each other in seeing who would've gotten a higher score.

Grandpa passed away when Zoe was a baby, the result of all those years of indulging in his

favorite bakery treats.

When I moved the kids here to live with Grandma after Daniel left, we thought it would be a

short-term solution. But I got invested in the bookstore again when I didn't have my hands full with

the kids, and about the time I felt like I had my footing under me, Grandma's stroke took her from us

too.

Rather than moving the kids when Zoe and Piper were both happy at school, I redecorated a little

by bringing our old sectional sofa out of storage. Portia, Griff, and I nearly couldn't get it up the

stairs. The only reason it fits is that our television hangs on the wall instead of needing a stand. And

the girls are currently racing across the cushions, chasing Skippy, who's leaping from the curtain rods

to the very skinny top of the television to the bookshelves to the couch, and looping back again.

"Skippy doesn't want to go in his cage, Mom," Zoe says.

Yes, his cage.

The vet said since he'd been inside already, he'd need special assistance adjusting to the wild,

and if we wanted to nurse him until he's old enough, we'd need to cage him when we weren't home.

I'm pretty sure the squirrel has brain damage, no matter what the vet said. But I swear he's also

learning the phrases *peanut butter* and *bird seed* and *don't make me call animal control, you mangy*

*little thief.*

Which I only say when my kids aren't around. Promise.



And only when I find Grandma's jewelry in his cage.

Piper ducks under her sister's arm, narrowly missing getting clotheslined.

"He likes the

bookshelf."

"He's going to pee on the books on the bookshelf."

Both of my daughters spin and gape at me. They couldn't be more different  
—Zoe has Daniel's

dark brown eyes and dark-colored hair, but my hairline and round face,  
where Piper got my lighter,

wavy locks and lighter eyes, and Dan's button nose and stubborn chin.  
They're in matching

nightgowns from last Christmas that they're both growing out of, and when  
they're gaping at me,

horrified, there's no denying they're sisters.

I make the sign for *it's bedtime, knock it off*—it's practically habit—then  
hand them each a

butterfly net. "Catch the squirrel and put him in his cage, or he's going to the  
animal sanctuary *right*

*now.*"

"You can't take him to the sanctuary if you can't catch him," Piper points  
out.

I give her a mom look, and they both leap into action. I grab my own net and  
join them, and ten

minutes later, Hudson's sitting on the floor in the hallway in his own  
nightgown, watching as Skippy

gets tired of the game and darts into the cage on his own.

I should've let Dr. Murphy find him a new home, but the look in Zoe's eyes—there are some

battles I can fight, and some I can't. Or possibly won't. Maybe both.

My kids are strong. They survived their father leaving. They survived moving from the suburbs to

Grandma Penny's apartment, and they survived losing her. I don't like disappointing them, but I can't

protect them from everything, so instead, I try to teach them to cope and heal.

Zoe would've survived if I'd let Skippy go.

But I couldn't do it.

So, yes, it's all mom guilt at what they're missing that's led me to allow them to continue letting a

squirrel live in the house.

"Mom, Hudson got out of bed."

"Piper, is he actively hurting you by sitting there?"

"He's breaking the rules."

Here we go. "All three of you. Bed. Now."

Forty-five minutes later, there's relative peace in my house, and I let my shoulders relax for the

first time since chatting with Levi's mom.

Levi Wilson's mother.

I hung out with Levi Wilson *and his mother*.

There's nothing like chatting with a guy's mother to make him seem less like a pop god and more

like a regular man.

Who wants to take me out to dinner.

That's *insane*.

Usually, once my kids are in bed, I head straight into a book—there are so many good options—

but tonight, I need something else.

I grab my phone and dial Portia before I can stop myself. “Help,” I say when she answers. “I need

courage.”

“Honey-boo, you survived Hudson being three. You're gonna survive him being four.”

“Levi Wilson invited me to dinner after he showed me his abs.”

“Hold on.” Her voice goes distant. “Griff, you got the boys. Ingrid needs me to talk her into taking

a booty call.”

“It's not a booty call! He said he needs more friends to keep him humble.”

She cackles. “He showed you his abs. He wants a booty call.”

“He was technically showing me a scar.”

“The man doesn't have a scar on his arm or his face? He had to show you the scar *on his abs*?”

Booty. Call.”

“He said the friend word.”

“Are you fighting talking to the man because he’s famous, because you’re afraid your kids will

scare him away, or because you’re not ready to get back into the world of dating?”

“Yes?”

“One, tell him nothing in public because your kids’ privacy is paramount. Two, he’s met your

children already, so it’s not like he doesn’t know you’re a package deal. Three, if he doesn’t want the

package deal, fling it up, because you’re a grown-ass woman who deserves to be treated like one,

and four, talk to me. What’s wrong with dating? *I don’t know how* is not a valid excuse, because there

is no *how*. We’re all special and we all do it our own way. *I don’t know if I want the complication of*

*a man in my life* is baloney. If you’re not interested in him, say you’re not interested in him. Decide

what you want or don’t want, then own it. You read a lot. I know you have words. Use them. Other

objections? Which ones did I miss?”

“You only had two.”

“I had at least a dozen, and they’re the most common, and don’t start with the *what do I tell my*

*children* stuff. Mommies are allowed friends, even booty call friends, and they won't break when you

quit seeing him. You're not introducing them to a new potential daddy every night of the week, and

you deserve to have a life beyond your family and your job. Your kids deserve to see that example

too."

I flop back on the couch and stare up at the cracked popcorn ceiling. "Do you remember when I

went to his concert? The one here in Copper Valley?"

"Do I remember you and Daniel fighting because he was terrified of putting his own child to bed

by himself? That might ring a bell."

I smile, but it's a sad smile. "Is it weird that I regret for him that he wasn't home more?"

"Don't regret it for him, boo. And don't feel like you have to be two parents at once. You want to

go to another concert, we've got you covered. You want to go out to dinner by yourself, we've got you

for that too."

"You do so much already—"

"You're in my village, Ingrid Penelope Scott."

"You *are* my village."

"And as much as I'd love to keep you to myself, you have a hot pop star who

wants to join yours.”

“His security guards slipped me a backstage pass at that concert,” I whisper.  
“I swear to god,

while he was singing ‘Baby Me,’ we locked eyes, a few songs later, this massive bouncer tapped me

on the shoulder, got right down in my ear, and said I was randomly selected for the post-show meet-

and-greet.”

Portia goes silent.

I know exactly how it sounds. *Naïve bookstore owner thinks she had a moment with a pop star*

*on stage and that he remembers her and wants to seduce her now.*

Except he’s come to my store *twice*, and when I texted Giselle to ask how he was doing, since the

gossip sites seem to have totally missed that he got injured, she said he’d appreciate it if I stopped by

and checked on him in person.

Famous people don’t do that.

I swear they don’t.

And then he asked me to dinner. Persistently. Not like he was doing it just to be polite.

Levi Wilson has *everything*. Not just money and fame, but also solid friends and family.

He doesn’t need me. Especially not with the chaos that my life comes with.

His condo wasn't

sparse and minimalist or anything, but it *was* stupidly neat, with the two exceptions being his guitar

tossed on his couch and the water bottle that his mom put on his end table without a coaster beneath it.

What could I possibly have that someone like Levi would want?

"The man's crew slipped you backstage passes and I'm just now hearing about this?" Portia asks

slowly.

I sit on my hands, because if I don't, I'll start talking with them too. "I was *married*."

"*Backstage passes* aren't an invitation to a booty call."

"But if it had been, I would've stripped out of my nursing bra and humped him on the concrete

floor, and I knew it. So I didn't go. And you're forgetting the part where we locked eyes over the

song."

"*Ingrid*."

"You weren't there. I'm not crazy. It happened. I had this sign—and two weeks later, it hit the

news that he was playing a pro bono USO tour—and how do they really pick random people to get

backstage passes?"

"I don't know, but it sounds like you could ask the man yourself, now,

doesn't it? What did your

sign say? *Levi Wilson, Booty Call Me?* ”

“Of course not.”

“Forget the concert, Ing. Concentrate on the fact that a guy who can afford to buy you a freaking

steak wants to do just that, and go have a night of fun. You name the night. We've got you covered.”

“Look, it's one thing to be a stranger in a crowd and think you have a moment with a star, because

that's what they're paid to do, right? They're paid to make you feel something with their music. And I

do. It works. Logical me recognizes this. Say we *did* have a moment. Say it wasn't in my head. He

didn't know if I was single or married. Kids or not. Straight or gay. So all he probably wanted was to

make a fan's night. But today? Asking me to dinner? Portia, *he knows* I'm a hot mess single mom, and

he still asked. *Why?* I wouldn't take me out. Why would one of the most successful superstars on the

entire planet want to take me out?”

“Tell me you don't think this is a publicity stunt. You know if that's all this is, I'll kick his ass to

kingdom come.”

“What else does he stand to gain by having dinner with *me*?”



“Dating you.”

Sparkling grape juice fizzes in my veins at the idea that Levi *wants* me. “If being seen in public

with a non-famous, everyday woman was the goal, he has local friends with normal friends who

could set him up. He could find a matchmaker for the stars. He could walk into any café in the city

and hit on a barista. But he not only asked me to dinner, he basically promised we’d be completely

alone.”

“Like in the serial killer kind of way?”

“Yes.”

“Which means he’s into you.”

Is he? It’s the question I keep asking myself. When I went to see him, he was funny and charming

and attentive and just a bit of a hot mess himself. Plus, she’s right. He showed me his abs when he

probably has scars elsewhere. “I keep asking myself if I’d say yes if he was just a customer who

came into the shop instead of a hot superstar, and I don’t know, because I can’t picture him as anything

*other* than Levi Wilson. You know?” Except seeing him with his mom—I think I can.

“You turned down three customers last year.”

“One was barely out of high school, the second was the first’s great-grandfather, and the third

asked Yasmin and three other customers out before he left the shop.” All of whom were happily

married and had been for years.

“*And* you politely rejected our server at Easter brunch.”

“He kept grimacing every time Hudson missed his mouth and dropped food on the floor and only

asked me out after I tipped him well.”

“*And* that single dad at Zoe’s school.”

“No spark.”

“So there’s a spark with our dear Mr. Wilson.”

“How can there not be?”

“Eh. He’s too skinny for me.”

I laugh, but she’s nailed my issue.

Self-esteem and confidence. I am *not* skinny. I’m on my feet all day at work, and I do the

occasional yoga or high intensity workout with YouTube videos, but I’ve also had three kids and I eat

their leftovers for my own lunches and dinners between dashing them around to their extra-curricular

activities. I haven’t shaved my legs in months, and my eyes have permanent bags.

“Don’t start that,” Portia says softly.

“You know what I miss from my Army days?”

“The chow hall?”

I laugh. “My arms. I had the *best* arms.”

“You still do, boo. And if Levi Wilson sees it, then you need to let that man take you to dinner.

Provided I get to track your phone’s location and you text me every fifteen to thirty minutes so that we

can make sure this isn’t an elaborate scheme to kidnap single mothers for government experiments to

turn you into a superhero.”

“*What?*”

“One day, they’re finally gonna clue in to the fact that we women would make the better

superheroes, and then we’ll be in serious trouble. Think about it. Who else can get the laundry done in

the morning, work a ten-hour shift, get dinner on the table, and then swing from the rooftops for the

next couple hours fighting secret alien invasions better?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, boo. Now go take a leap.”

EIGHT

*From the text messages of Levi Wilson and Ingrid Scott*

*Ingrid:* I discussed your offer with my best friend in the entire universe, and since you've promised

you're not going to murder me and bury me somewhere that no one can find me, she wants to know if

you're instead planning to kidnap me so that the government can do experiments on me and turn me

into a superhero.

*Levi:* Ah, she's mistaking me for Davis. Common misunderstanding, since he hasn't been seen

since our Bro Code days.

*Ingrid:* Rumor in my part of town is that he got a new job. \*gif of Bigfoot\*

*Levi:* And there goes my drink out my nose...

*Ingrid:* Picture or it didn't happen.

*Levi:* \*picture of himself raising an eyebrow on the bruised side of his face while lounging on a

couch with a big wet spot on his white T-shirt\* Happy now?

*Ingrid:* \*laughing emoji\* I'm saving this to prove to my kids that I really am funny sometimes.

*Levi:* Take the win where you can get it. Happy to be of service. So. Dinner.

*Ingrid:* It's a good meal. One of my three favorites.

*Levi:* Ah, you're a normal human.

*Ingrid:* Or a big dork.

*Levi:* No, I mean, not like my buddy Beck. He eats seven or eight meals a

day.

*Ingrid:* Like a hobbit?

*Levi:* Exactly. His wife started naming them.

*Ingrid:* She named his hobbits?

*Levi:* Haha. No. She named his meals.

*Ingrid:* Just checking. You're recovering fine then? Back on screen time, I see.

*Levi:* My mother's sleeping. Don't tell her.

*Ingrid:* You sound like a teenager.

*Levi:* I know. \*eye roll emoji\* \*shh emoji\* \*bandaged head emoji\* \*rock star emoji\*

*Ingrid:* Your emoji game is a little weak. Portia's pre-teen could kick your ass in emoji speak.

*Levi:* I'll concede to the pre-teen emoji master if you'll tell me what you want to eat when I take

you to dinner.

*Ingrid:* Anything hot that's supposed to be hot and cold that's supposed to be cold?

*Levi:* Very picky of you.

*Ingrid:* I know. The squirrel is chastising me right now for dreaming too big.

*Levi:* Ignore the squirrel. Have you ever had Italian gelato?

*Ingrid:* I have three pounds on my hips made exclusively of Italian gelato.

*Levi:* The real stuff? From Italy?

*Ingrid:* I was in the Army for about eight years. My first duty station was in Germany. I used to

spend half my leave and every four-day weekend touring Europe. I'd come home on holidays with my

suitcases stuffed full of treats.

*Levi:* Favorite country?

*Ingrid:* Ah, I see you're starting with the easy questions. \*laughing emoji\* You first.

*Levi:* Definite toss-up between Portugal, Austria, and Iceland. Possibly Italy. Or Norway.

Assuming you're asking favorite European country, as opposed to favorite country on the planet.

*Ingrid:* An easy decision then.

*Levi:* Ah, I forgot Romania. Add it to the list of favorites...

*Ingrid:* I'd find a friend and we'd hop a quick flight to wherever just to dip our toes in the

Mediterranean, or to wander around Paris and eat croissants, or to stuff ourselves full of gelato for

every meal for two days. And now I miss Europe.

*Levi:* It's still there.

*Ingrid:* Maybe after Hudson survives childhood...

*Levi:* I give him an eighty-nine percent chance.

*Ingrid:* That's highly optimistic of you. \*smiley face emoji\*

*Levi:* And once again, you've managed to not tell me what you like to eat.

*Ingrid:* Sleep.

*Levi:* You like to eat sleep?

*Ingrid:* STEAK. OMG. My fingers malfunctioned.

*Levi:* Are you blushing right now?

*Ingrid:* Possibly.

*Levi:* Pic or it didn't happen.

*Ingrid:* You want a picture of me.

*Levi:* I can either ask or hit Google.

*Ingrid:* You wouldn't seriously Google me.

*Levi:* \*winking emoji\*

*Ingrid:* Stop, or you're going to get a picture of a beet with eyes.

*Levi:* \*selfie filter that makes his face shaped like a triangle with the pointy end on top\*

*Ingrid:* OMG, I just snorted so loud I think I woke one of my kids.

*Levi:* Your turn.

*Ingrid:* \*selfie filter that makes her look like a big-eyed bunny rabbit\*

*Levi:* \*selfie filter that squishes his face and makes it wide and flat\*

*Ingrid:* \*selfie filter that makes her look old and wrinkled with big glasses and a pile of white

curly hair\*

*Levi:* \*selfie filter that rearranges his features and makes his nose look like a penis coming out of

his mouth\*

*Levi:* Oh, shit. Delete that. I didn't look at it. That's my nose. I swear to god, that's my nose.

*Ingrid:* I AM CRYING. \*laughing emoji\*

*Levi:* Shit. Don't cry. It's my nose.

*Ingrid:* \*gif of a woman laughing so hard she slides off her chair\*

*Levi:* I'm giving this app one star.

*Ingrid:* No! Give it five. I'm laughing so hard I got the hiccups.

*Levi:* Do I need to worry your friend will track me down and threaten me for sending you

unsolicited dick pics?

*Ingrid:* No, she'd leave that to her husband. He's Mr. May in the Copper Valley Firefighter

calendar.

*Levi:* I am officially out-classed.



*Ingrid:* I'm wearing ketchup and just noticed a sticky hand about to fall off my ceiling right over

my head. You are NOT out-classed.

*Levi:* The last time I watched Tripp's kids, I left with a yogurt-covered raisin in my ear, a new

hairdo courtesy of Emma and mayonnaise, and apple juice spilled all over the front of my white

jeans.

*Ingrid:* 1. Never fall asleep while watching children, and 2. The white jeans needed to go. They

did you a favor.

*Levi:* WHAT? I love my white jeans.

*Ingrid:* You do you, boo.

*Levi:* What's wrong with my white jeans?

*Ingrid:* You have many, many other people in your life who could tell you what's wrong with

white jeans. If they choose not to, then clearly, you're starting a fashion trend, and I need to stay out of

it.

*Levi:* C'mon, Ingrid. You can't tell me why I'm wrong with yodeling pickles and then not tell me

why I'm wrong with white jeans.

*Ingrid:* \*picture of Skippy the Squirrel with a filter that dresses him like Jack

Sparrow\*

*Levi:* Adorable. And you're changing the subject.

*Ingrid:* White jeans are pretentious. They say "Look at me, I can wear white and sit on a park

bench in a field of fresh-mowed grass and not get dirt on my ass or stains on my cuffs," and then

basically every woman who's ever tried to wear white anything to anywhere other than her wedding

or from her bedroom to her kitchen sort of hates you for being able to pull it off.

*Levi:* Huh. I thought you were going to say they made me look like I was trying too hard to be

European.

*Ingrid:* I can't even buy white underwear. It somehow gets stained with mud and blue Gatorade

too.

*Levi:* This is where you'll notice I'm not asking what color your underwear is. That's third-text-

date material.

*Ingrid:* Text-date?

*Levi:* Text-date. It's where we flirt over text before I take you out for a steak dinner.

*Ingrid:* Are we flirting?

*Levi:* You sent me a picture of your pirate squirrel. We are definitely flirting.

*Ingrid:* This is where I'm not freaking out over realizing just how innuendo-filled the words

"pirate squirrel" are, or the images they're causing my brain to conjure.

*Levi:* Ah, does your... squirrel... frequently need an eye patch or a peg leg?

*Ingrid:* I'm gonna let you answer that one about the peg leg for yourself.

*Levi:* \*gif of a pirate with a peg leg\*

*Ingrid:* That's not the kind of "peg leg" that my brain conjured.

*Levi:* Oh. OH.

*Ingrid:* Excuse me for a second. I need to ask Portia to raise my kids since I'm about to go die

from embarrassment over this conversation.

*Levi:* Don't be embarrassed. It's really not fair that women need peg legs when all guys need is

their hand.

*Ingrid:* Maybe you can talk to the people in power about that.

*Levi:* For you? Absolutely. So, dinner tomorrow night?

*Ingrid:* Piper has therapy until five, then Zoe has gymnastics until seven, and Hudson doesn't have

anything, but he gets cranky on Mondays since waiting at gymnastics isn't his favorite thing, which

means dinner and bed will be a chore that I wouldn't hand off to my worst enemy.

*Levi:* Thursday?

*Ingrid:* Penny for Your Thoughts hosts Hot Mess Book Club Thursday nights. Last week was self-

help book club. This week's the romance book club. We're discussing Nora Dawn's *How To Train*

*Your Vampire*. If you crash it, I truly will die, and not in the good way that I die with my peg leg,

because there will definitely be at least thirty minutes dedicated to discussing the awkward sex scene,

and I don't talk about awkward sex scenes until the second text-date.

*Levi:* A challenge. I like it.

*Ingrid:* Do NOT make me call Giselle. I'll ask her to temporarily maim you, and I honestly think

she'd do it for me.

*Levi:* She definitely would. But I mean coordinating calendars is a challenge. Not the challenge to

not crash your book club. Which I won't do.

*Ingrid:* Oh my god, you're going to crash it, aren't you?

*Levi:* No.

*Ingrid:* I'm texting Giselle and asking for your mom's phone number too.

*Levi:* You don't trust me?

*Ingrid:* I'm still figuring you out.

*Levi:* I'm simple. Write music, play instruments, eat good food that I sometimes cook myself,

shake my booty, shoot hoops, hire spies to find out everything there is to know about my mother's

secret boyfriend, and play poker with my lifelong friends every chance I get.

*Ingrid:* Nothing's that simple.

*Levi:* Right. I forgot – I buy terrible presents for my family too.

*Ingrid:* Did you do something horrible and need to improve your reputation, but the tabloids

haven't figured it out yet?

*Levi:* I walked into a bookstore while I was lost in my own hometown and ran into a woman who

intrigues me on many, many levels.

*Ingrid:* Oh.

*Levi:* Also, I was completely serious about wanting to hang out in your shop for a bit. I like the

vibe. It's inspirational.

*Ingrid:* You know you don't have to buy me dinner to hang out in my shop.

*Levi:* Would you please just say the phrases "Your welcome anytime, Levi," and "Yes, I want to

have dinner with you?"

*Ingrid:* \*You're

*Levi:* \*gif of himself sliding off a couch on stage, clearly embarrassed\*

*Ingrid:* \*gif of Levi grinding on stage shirtless\*

*Ingrid:* OH MY GOD, THAT IS NOT THE GIF I CLICKED ON!!

*Ingrid:* I don't keep a collection of shirtless gifs of you. My gif search and my finger

malfunctioned.

*Levi:* If you wanted me to, I could send you a few no one else has seen. Also, does that gif make

my white pants look extra tight and clean?

*Ingrid:* LOL Believe it or not, I didn't notice the color of your pants.

*Levi:* You were looking for my scar. Admit it.

*Ingrid:* I was looking for THIS one: \*gif of Levi high-fiving a Muppet on Sesame Street\*

*Levi:* That scored me so many points with Tripp's kids.

*Ingrid:* Confession – it might've scored you points with me too.

*Levi:* Excellent. So I'll consider that an open invitation to your bookstore, and I'll have my

assistant send you my calendar so you can let me know which morning, noon, or night I should make a

point to be here to take you to dinner.

*Ingrid:* Your theory sounds so simple, yet the execution...

*Levi:* Ah, crap. Mom was in the shower. NOT sleeping. I'm gonna lose my phone.

*Ingrid:* Of everything you've texted me tonight, you should definitely be most embarrassed by that

one. Also, you're adorable, and I'm looking forward to dinner whenever it happens to work out.

Thank you.

*Levi:* \*pic of his mom frowning at him with a filter that makes her look like SpongeBob

SquarePants\*

*Levi:* p.s. Don't show her that picture either or I might get grounded.

NINE

*Levi*

FOR THE THIRD time in two weeks, Giselle and I are marching down the street toward Penny for

Your Thoughts, though this is only the second time I've known I was going there on purpose.

Giselle is scowling. "You know you shouldn't lie to women you want to date?"

"I want to *flirt* with her and treat her to dinner. Also, I didn't lie. I'm not *crashing* her book club.

I read the book, and I'm here to participate."

"She'll want to kill you."

"That's why I put on the fake mustache and bushy eyebrows. No one will recognize me."

"It might be worth never working in personal security again to let her maim you."

Since I left Copper Valley for my dash to New York and then Miami, the

temperature's dropped

thirty degrees and all the leaves have departed the city. My hands are tucked in my coat pockets, with

the book under my elbow, and I keep my head down against the wind. But when we walk into Penny

for Your Thoughts, warmth seeps from my nose through my chest.

There's a lively discussion already going on upstairs in the loft.

"Book club only tonight," Ingrid's assistant, Yasmin, tells me from behind the cash register. She's

a few years older than I am—maybe more—and she squints her brown eyes at me like she knows

what I'm up to.

I wave my copy of Nora Dawn's *How To Train Your Vampire* at her, then nod and head toward the

curved staircase at the back of the room.

"I don't like this," Giselle murmurs as we climb to the top.

"I'm in disguise," I mutter back. "It's fine."

The loft comes into view.

Mostly.

I can't see it all through the mass of people. "Holy shit."

"Like I said. Don't like this. Stay close to the stairs."

There must be fifty women here. Probably more. Folding chairs are lined in rows, couches and



easy chairs shoved between short, overflowing, multi-colored bookshelves and end tables along the

wall, all the perfect height for holding a plate of cookies and a cup of coffee. The coffee counter is

built into the wall to my right, staffed tonight by two women, one with short green hair and the other

nodding her head in time with music I can barely hear flowing over the sound of voices. Plates of

cookies are at the ready, and several of the women are sipping out of sparkly gold coffee tumblers.

I think I'm actually in love with Ingrid's bookstore. This place is brimming with potential.

Not for the store—the store itself is perfect exactly the way it is.

But for *me*.

For me to disappear into my head and let the atmosphere pull a few songs out.

"Close to the stairs," Giselle repeats as I step toward the crowd.

"Grabbing a seat," I tell her. "Less conspicuous."

"You're one of four men here. You're conspicuous."

I don't see Ingrid, but I do spot the author. I recognize her from her website—smiling, curly-

haired, talking with her hands while she chats with a small group of women up front, but not the same

way Ingrid does.

Ingrid's hand gestures are more precise, almost as if she's learned to be intentional with her

subconscious movements, or like she's had experience with sign language.

"Dude. What the fuck are you dressed in?" Luca Rossi, center fielder for the Fireballs, squints at

me from his perch against the exposed brick wall. Next to him is Brooks Elliott, third baseman for

Tripp and Lila's team.

Unlike Rossi and his apparent horror at my presence, Elliott's smirking. He nods to me. "I don't

know what you're up to, but I got your back."

Rossi's horror turns to a scowl as he narrows his eyes at his teammate. "Pick him over me, and

we'll see what happens to you tomorrow when we're batting off the rooftops."

That would be weird if Tripp hadn't told me they were spending the week all over the city and the

mountains, shooting promo videos for next season.

Elliott's still unfazed. "Here for book club?"

A familiar laugh reaches my ears.

Mackenzie. His Fireballs-obsessed, baseball-loving wife.

Huh. Didn't know she liked book clubs, but there she is, with Beck's wife, Sarah, beside her.

Those two are inseparable, and I'm busted if she spots me.

I hitch my shoulders higher, hoping my collar covers more of my face, and scan the loft again. Still

no Ingrid. I would've thought she'd be with the author. "Yeah," I say absently. "Can you pretend you

don't know me? I'm incognito."

"*Why* are you here?" Rossi is seriously glowering now.

Oh, shit.

Is he dating Ingrid?

She would've told me if she was dating someone. Wouldn't she?

I lift my book. "Just wanted to participate."

"If you interrupt Henri's big night, I will squish you like a bug. You don't need the attention,

asshole."

Giselle's lips twitch.

"Who's Henry?" I whisper.

Elliott chokes on his own spit.

"Levi Wilson, *what are you doing here?*" Mackenzie demands beside me.

Dammit.

"I'm Barry," I blurt in a deep voice. "People make that mistake all the time."

Sarah chokes on a laugh behind the blond spitfire who spent this past baseball season giving my

brother more indigestion than she'll ever know.

“Barry Staniglow,” I add as a few other women shoot curious looks my way.  
“I work in

insurance. Like paranormal romances. Good books.”

“What kind of insurance?” Sarah asks.

“Don’t even think of hitting on Henri,” Rossi growls. “She’s taken, asswipe.”

“Oh my god, you have a crush on Nora Dawn?” Mackenzie whispers.

“What? No! I—”

“*What are you doing here?*”

“Busted,” Giselle murmurs.

And there she is.

Ingrid’s at the top of the stairs, gaping at me. She has her hands full, one  
balancing a massive tray

of cookies that are tottering dangerously, the other gripping a large carafe  
that’s making the scent of

coffee waft through the air. Her eyes are as wide as the moon, and about as  
shocked as I would be if

this *How to Train Your Vampire* book’s main character turned out to have a  
secret twin.

I wink at her. “Barry Staniglow. I like romances,” I repeat as I steady her  
cookie tray.

She squeezes her eyes shut, but there’s definitely a smile twitching on her  
lips.

“I don’t think he’s into your girlfriend,” Elliott stage-whispers to Rossi. “You  
won’t have to

defend her honor tonight by beating up a pop star half your size.”

“Three-quarters,” I mutter to him, which makes Ingrid’s face contort a little more, mostly in

amusement. Or so I tell myself.

“Two-thirds at best, and that’s only after you make a pig of yourself at Thanksgiving dinner.” He

leans forward and nods to the brunette at the front of the room. “Henri, with an *i*, short for Henrietta,

also known as Nora Dawn, is Rossi’s girlfriend.”

“Dude. I didn’t know you were dating someone.” I hold up a fist.

He glowers.

Elliott snickers. “He redefines overprotective, which is reasonably understandable once you get

to know Henri. He thought you were here to woo *her*.”

“Why?” Giselle mutters. “Why is it always *woo*? You know you all sound like you’re from

another planet when you say *woo*?”

“That’s the irony,” Elliott replies.

“I’m more worried he’s gonna cause a scene.” Rossi’s got a glower that won’t quit.

“No one’s causing a scene,” Ingrid says quickly. “Promise. I might look harmless, but I’m former

military. I still have a few tricks to bring a man to his knees. Plus, I know his mother.”

Hell.

Now I'm picturing myself on my knees in front of a very naked Ingrid, and my brain is short-

circuiting.

I would very much like her to bring me to my knees.

"Here, Barry." Sarah grabs me by the shoulders and points me to the back row. "You can sit by me."

Ingrid's eye twitches, and that thing in my head that sometimes helps me be smart re-engages.

I point to Sarah. "Best friend's wife," I whisper. "I didn't know she was coming."

Makes sense, though, if Nora Dawn's dating a Fireball. Copper Valley royalty all intermingle. If

you know one of us who used to be in Bro Code, it's two degrees of separation at most to any

professional sports player, newscaster, politician, heiress, or restaurant owner here.

Beck really likes food.

I think he knows them all.

"You promised," Ingrid says softly to me, but her eyes are twinkling like she might actually be

glad to see me.

"I said I wouldn't *crash*. I didn't say I wouldn't *participate*."

“You still only get a cookie if there are any leftover after everyone else gets theirs.”

I give her my best *youngest child that no one can ever say no to* smile.

“I’ve already said no to that exact look sixty-four times today. You get your cookies last.” She’s

still smiling though, and as she turns to Sarah to offer her a cookie, she adds, “Don’t even think of

taking one for him.”

“Oh, I won’t,” Sarah promises. “He’ll behave next to me. My parents got him a movie gig, and I

can ask them to take it away.”

That’s the other reason Sarah’s dangerous. She grew up as the only child of Hollywood’s biggest

power couple. She knows things, even if she hates the limelight herself and moved here from

California to hide from it.

“I’m here *to participate*.” I lift my book. “And get this signed.”

“Last,” Rossi growls. “You’ll wait in the fucking bathroom if I tell you to.”

“Ignore him.” Elliott grins at Ingrid. “Last time he took Henri— *Nora* out in public, he

accidentally almost burned her eyebrows off with dessert.”

“And don’t let anyone near her with wine,” Rossi adds. “No flame. No wine. No alcohol, period.

Good job on the high railings though.”

“I have children. I’ve got this.” Ingrid offers him a cookie, keeping the tray out of my reach, then

smiles at me one more time. “Your left eyebrow is falling off.”

While I fiddle with the fake bushy eyebrows that apparently aren’t working as a disguise, she

slips away with the cookies.

“I like her,” Giselle says.

“Does Barry like her too?” Sarah asks.

“I like books,” I insist. “Where are we sitting?”

Sarah points, and I add a limp as I follow her directions to a seat.

“So somebody has a crush on a bookstore owner,” Sarah murmurs as I sit next to her. She has dark

hair, bright brown eyes, and is always half-smiling like she has a secret. Given that she’s married to

Beck, it’s more likely she always has something to smile about.

He makes the rest of us look bad with all the romantic gestures he’s capable of before he even

wakes up in the morning.

“I’m trying out new hobbies.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“If you’d had kids when Beck mis-tweeted you, would you have helped him get his reputation

back the same way you did?”



“So your reputation’s in danger?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” Mackenzie plops down on my other side. “What did you do?”

“I burned the new Fireballs mascot.”

She sucks in a breath and her face drains of all color, and the next thing I know, I’m bent double in

my seat with a searing pain in my ear. “That is *not funny*. Take it back. Take it back *right now*.”

Okay, yeah, that’s too far. “I take it back. I take it back.”

“Now say the Fireballs are the best baseball team ever.”

“The Fireballs are the best baseball team ever.”

“Agree to do a free concert opening night.”

“I have to check my— ow! Okay. Calendar cleared. I’ll do it.”

“Show up at my sister-in-law’s apartment in New York on Christmas Eve dressed as Santa and

give her a signed copy of every one of your albums, Bro Code years included.”

“Giselle? A little help here?”

“Promise, *Barry*,” Mackenzie hisses.

“My mom will miss me.”

“Your mom would be horrified by the filth spewing out of your mouth.”

“Let him go, hot stuff.” Elliott’s whispering behind us. “We’ll take him

behind the bookstore and

make him pay for whatever he said to you later. Don't let him ruin Henri's night. Luca says this is her

biggest event to date."

Mackenzie lets go of my ear.

Sarah's lips are pinched together, her shoulders shaking like she's suppressing laughter.

And we're getting weird looks from the women in the row in front of us.

"Everything okay?"

*Shit.* That's Ingrid's friend. Portia. The one who helps with her kids.

"Brothers." Mackenzie rolls her eyes. "They are *such* a pain in the ass. Always tagging along for

free cookies."

I grunt an agreement.

Portia's eyes narrow, and I can't decide if the look she's aiming at me means *hurt my friend and*

*I'll kill you, or you better do something nice for her, because she deserves it.*

If it were me in her shoes, I'd be thinking both.

I sink deeper in my seat.

Ingrid claps her hands at the front of the room, then signals something with her hands, and most

everyone's attention turns to her and Nora Dawn.

“I didn’t know it would be this big,” I whisper to Sarah.

“I didn’t either,” she whispers back. “Mackenzie asked me to come in case no one else showed up

for Henri. We’re guessing it’s a combination of the bookstore’s customers and Henri’s fan base.

Either way, it’s pretty awesome.”

So is watching Ingrid in her natural habitat.

She has a sixth sense for knowing when to pass the cookie plate around again, when to steer the

conversation back on track, when to offer someone a coffee refill, and when to rescue the author when

someone says something awkward and makes Rossi twitch like he’ll take out anyone who implies an

insult to his girlfriend. She sweeps up messes before anyone else notices them and walks that line

between being the quiet background support and the leader of the group when questions stall.

She’s clearly read the book and loved it, but everyone else talks about it and asks the author

questions while she nods along, not offering opinions.

I wonder if that’s the bookstore owner in her letting readers have a safe space, or if it’s the mom

in her automatically taking the backseat to let someone else shine.

There are plenty of people who work for me who do the same, and I’m suddenly wondering if I

tell them often enough that they're appreciated.

Have I been taking them for granted?

When the discussion is over and people start rising, Giselle slips into the seat Sarah vacates, then

orders me down the row, away from the stairs, head down. I fiddle with my phone. She acts like the

irritated girlfriend, tapping her foot.

We've done this before.

Works nearly every time, and tonight, thank god, it's working again. I can hear women asking for

selfies and pictures, and a quick glance sideways verifies that the baseball players have been

recognized, but I'm mostly flying under the radar.

Mostly.

Someone takes the empty seat in front of me.

"Is he always a handful?" Ingrid's friend Portia asks Giselle.

"I've never met someone like him who wasn't. It's a prerequisite." Giselle's bantering, but I

know she's also swiveling her head and watching everyone around us, one hand on her phone to text

for backup if I do something stupid.

Like being here in the first place when there are way more than fifty people up here.

“Can you cover your ears a minute so you don’t have to drag me out of here?” Portia says.

“I’m more worried about the group of women by the author who might possibly identify Barry

Staniglow’s real name if they happen to look this way than I am about anything a friend of the owner

might say to my client. I don’t hear a thing.”

She’s listening.

We both know it.

I lift my gaze to Portia.

She smiles, but it’s not the kind of smile you wear before you ask a celebrity for a selfie.

It’s the kind of smile you wear when you don’t trust the guy sniffing around your best friend. “I

hope you’re not making Ingrid any promises you can’t keep. She *and* her kids have had enough of that

for one lifetime.”

I don’t remember my own father. Tripp doesn’t either. We both knew Mom made sacrifices for us,

but I’m realizing more every day how big those sacrifices were.

The thought of me being the person who disappoints Ingrid the same way my father disappointed

my mother makes my gut tighten and sour. “I *was* one of those kids once.”

No free passes from Portia though. Her eyes narrow. “You *were*. And now

you get everything your

little heart desires, don't you? Some people forget where they came from. I don't care what your

reputation says about you, if you're playing some kind of sick game with Ingrid, I'll make sure this

entire town knows."

"No games. I won't hurt her."

I've been threatened with having my nuts removed, with having naked pictures of me posted

online, with having my food poisoned, and with eternal damnation, but the idea of losing my

reputation in my hometown is one of the few threats that makes me uncomfortable.

Home *is* who I am. This place made me. It keeps me rooted.

Doesn't it?

Or am I one more idiot who doesn't realize how much he's changed?

Ingrid's helping an elderly lady in pink polyester pants and a Hot Mess Book Club sweatshirt to

the stairs, both of them smiling while the customer chatters about picturing Cash Rivers as the lead

vampire if they ever make the book into a movie.

They pass a small group of women, and every one of them interrupts to thank Ingrid for a great

night out.

*I needed this.*

*I'm so glad we can bring our own wine.*

*My husband has texted me six times to ask what to do since our son won't stay in bed, and I'm*

*like, welcome to my world, buddy.*

*Can you send out that work excuse note for staying up all night reading to the newsletter list*

*again? My kid got on my computer and now I can't find the folder where I stored the last one.*

Portia's still watching me, and it's dawning on me that I haven't changed.

I'm still the same idiot who has no idea how much my mom—and all the neighborhood parents—

did for me while I was growing up.

How much she probably needed a break.

How hard it must've been when Bro Code went viral on YouTube and all five of us left the

neighborhood to see the world.

I make sure she's taken care of now, but it's never a sacrifice. I can afford to pamper her. Spa

days. Vacations. The latest phones every year.

But I'm still not around often. I call her at weird times.

And I take for granted that she's cool with that, because she's my mom.

Yeah.

I'm an idiot.

In so many ways.

TEN

*Ingrid*

LEVI'S STILL HERE.

Everyone else has departed the store, including Portia, who gave me a quick hug and whispered a

*girl, be careful, he looks deadly for the heart* before taking off. Giselle is making a show of checking

that the front door's locked, and I'm sinking into one of the easy chairs at the coffee bar.

Levi hands me the last cookie off the tray. "This one has your name all over it."

I should head up and relieve my babysitter, but there's a hot guy who looks like he'd be willing to

rub my feet if I play my cards right, and I technically told the sitter I wouldn't be back until ten.

"Thank you. I'm always super hyped up but extra tired after book club night."

He grins as he takes the seat next to me, his leg barely an inch from mine. "I know that feeling

well."

"Did you know your friends would be here tonight?"

"Nah. Sarah's basically family, but we don't compare schedules. She comes



with Mackenzie, who

married Brooks Elliott a few weeks ago, but I didn't know all the connections through the baseball

team to Nora Dawn."

"I adore Nora." I stifle a yawn. "She came in here over the summer, not long after she moved to

the city, looking for other books a few times before I realized who she was. I'm glad she has good

friends too."

And I don't think he's here to talk about Nora Dawn's friends.

I bite into the cookie, and half of it crumbles and falls to the floor, but not before bouncing off my

chest and dropping crumbs into my bra under my shirt. "I meant to do that," I say around a mouthful of

cookie.

"Three second rule." He snags it and pops it in his mouth before I can warn him of some of the

things Hudson's done on that rug.

"Oh my god, don't eat that. Not off the floor!" I do clean it regularly, but it's not like I can have it

shampooed daily.

"The thing about being eighteen when you leave home to tour the world is that you eat and drink a

bunch of really stupid things," he says, also around a mouthful of cookie,

which makes me feel

infinitely better about my own lack of manners. He pats his abs. “Stomach of a goat now.”

He’s so flipping adorable, comfortable as if he’s just as at home in my grandparents’ renovated

bookstore as he would’ve been in his condo here or his penthouse in New York, and he’s *here*, and he

wouldn’t be here if he wasn’t into me, and I haven’t done something frivolous and just for me in so

long that I suddenly can’t fight the overwhelming urge that comes over me to kiss him.

So I don’t.

My instincts lead the way, with me following them to grab him by the shirt, press my lips to his,

and close my eyes.

I haven’t kissed a man in at least three years. I haven’t kissed a man I wasn’t married to in over a

decade. Kissing Levi is unfamiliar and awkward, but only for the briefest moment before his fingers

thread into my hair and he meets me all the way.

This is the chocolate chip cookie, rainbow at sunset, convertible parked on the beach, kiss of all

kisses.

Or maybe I’m that starved for adult male companionship.

Whatever it is, when he tilts his mouth against mine and sucks on my lower lip, every cell in

every dormant part of my womanhood wakes up at once. My nipples tighten. My skin flushes. My

vajayjay pulses.

My kids could walk in.

A customer we didn't realize was still here could burst out of the bathroom.

Giselle's probably taking pictures.

And *oh my god*, what am I doing?

I break away, flustered and hot for so many reasons. "Sorry. I—you—I—no. You know what? I'm

*not* sorry. I'm a grown-ass woman, and I wanted to kiss you, and I want to do it again, but I really

can't offer you anything in the way of a serious relationship, because hashtag kids, and oh my god, I

just said *hashtag* in conversation, but the point is, I—"

Levi silences me with another kiss, and I surrender.

I want to kiss him.

I want to do *so much more* than kiss him. I don't know when—he already told me over text that he

has to be in LA for a massive list of events starting Sunday and then off somewhere else to shoot a

video—but maybe that's good?

He eases out of the kiss but tilts his forehead against mine. "I like you."

"That's very brave of you."

His chuckle lights up my entire soul. It has to be the star factor. I know better than to actually fall

for *any* man, much less one whose calendar is even more hectic than my family's.

"I'm completely serious." I squeeze my eyes shut, because I'm so close that his eyes are mushing

together and it'll make me giggle if I look at him cross-eyed much longer. "I really don't have a lot of

energy left for anything resembling a relationship."

His hand settles on my thigh, and my entire body asks if we can send the kids to boarding school

and run away to Tahiti with this man.

He opens his mouth, but before he can say a word, a giant glob of brown something falls between

us and splatters on my skirt.

I stare at the dark wet stain soaking into the crinkled cotton, refusing to look up.

If I look up, I'll confirm for myself that either my store is booby-trapped, or I have a plumbing

problem.

What's above us? I make a mental inventory of the apartment's layout while another thick drop of

brown water joins the first on my skirt.

“Uh-oh,” Levi says.

“The bathroom,” I gasp.

I leap up and dash down the stairs, into the back room, and up the other stairs to our third-story

apartment. Mrs. Schneider bolts straight upright on the couch as I barrel inside. “Chicken nuggets!

You scared the crap out of me!”

“Bathroom.”

“Oh, honey, don’t wait that long. If you gotta go, you gotta— *whoa*. Anyone ever told you that you

look like Levi Wilson?”

“Stand down, ma’am,” Giselle says. “Plumbing emergency.”

I don’t know how she knows where the bathroom is, but she beats me to it, and she’s squatting in

the gunk of an overflowing toilet, twisting the input valve to shut off the flow before I can blink.

Then she grabs my plunger, flips it upside down, and fishes out a white nursing bra that I may or

may not still wear, which she flings into the tub, followed by two pairs of my granny panties, and

finally, a black lace negligee that I haven’t seen in years and worn in longer.

Maybe no one else can tell what they are. There’s too much fabric or they’re too wet and stained

or—or maybe I’m delusional, and this is how it all ends.

With me dying of mortification so that my children have to be raised around people who say

*things like it was for the best. God knows what more she would’ve subjected her kids to if she’d*

*lived. At least Hudson was too young to understand it was his fault she was so embarrassed that*

*she had a full-on humiliation implosion.*

Giselle’s still fishing in my overflowing toilet.

And there’s one more nursing bra coming out, along with a towel with—

Oh god.

I didn’t know I still had that.

Levi’s right behind me with a front-row seat to my delicates drawer and the prank towel that my

ex had printed with his face for my birthday the last year we were together, when he said he was

getting me the one thing I wouldn’t already buy for myself.

Skippy’s watching the whole thing from his perch on the shower curtain rod, nibbling on

something that looks like my grandmother’s favorite ruby necklace.

I squeak, and that’s all anyone says for a very long time.

Or possibly ten seconds, but it feels like an entire lifetime.

“James, my nephew, got mad at Tripp and tried to flush his phone down the

toilet once,” Levi

finally offers in the relative silence.

I say *relative*, because Giselle’s actually plunging the toilet now, making those wet sucking

noises, and *oh my god*, tell me that’s not my vibrator.

*Tell me that’s not my vibrator.*

“I can get that,” I tell her. “You don’t have to—”

She turns kind brown eyes to me. I refuse to think it’s pity, but only because I need to hold on to a

shred of pride. I *used* to have my life together.

I swear I did.

“Don’t worry about it.” She pumps the plunger once more. “I’ve done much, much worse for

flyboy over there.”

“Unfortunately true,” Levi agrees. “Got any old towels?”

The rest of the item clogging the toilet comes into view, and *oh thank god*.

*Not* my vibrator.

It’s a spare old flip phone that used to be my grandmother’s.

Is it bad that I’m just as relieved that I don’t have to hit the internet to order a new toy for myself?

I squeeze my eyes shut briefly before turning to Levi. “So like I was saying, my free time is *very*

limited.”

*Squick squick FLUSH!*

He grins. “But you’re a hell of a lot of fun.”

“I don’t know that I’d call this *fun*.”

An hour later, my bathroom is spotless, the towels are in the wash—except the one with Daniel’s

face, which is in the trash—and someone did all of my dishes, folded all of my kids’ laundry, and got

the squirrel back in his cage.

That *someone* was Levi.

Had to be, because I paid Mrs. Schneider for watching the kids and sent her home before

everything else was done, and Giselle was helping me in the bathroom the whole time. We emerge

smelling like we’ve been toilet wrestling just as someone knocks on the door.

“Hey, G, you got that?” Levi says from the couch.

She doesn’t bat a lash, just goes to the door at the other end of the living room, rather than the

door I use through the dining room that connects to the store.

We’re not alone in the building—it’s twelve stories high, with sixteen other occupied apartments

accessible from the same entrance as my living room—but visitors this time of night are rare.



“Do you make her do everything for you?” I whisper.

Wait.

I’m whispering.

I’m whispering because I don’t know who’s at the door, and I don’t want them to know Levi’s

here.

But how does he know who’s at the door?

I glance at Giselle. She’s taking two white bakery bags.

Levi pats the couch next to him.

I sniff my armpit.

Yeah. I just sniffed my own armpit in front of him. “Ten minutes?”

“He’s a night owl. Take your time,” Giselle answers for him. “Kick him out anytime.”

Is it weird that his bodyguard is helping him flirt with me? Or am I overtired and that’s not what’s

actually happening? “What’s in the bags?”

He grins. “Turtle cheesecake from Angelica’s.”

My taste buds shriek in excitement, and my jeans groan.

Seriously.

I can hear them all the way from my closet.

“Seven minutes,” I amend.

Should I put on makeup and real clothes after a quick shower? Yes.

Will I? No.

I'm not auditioning for the role of arm candy.

But the minute I strip naked in my tiny bathroom, I realize I'm naked with a man in my place for

the first time in years, and it's entirely possible he's actually contemplating the same thing.

Would he think about me naked?

The thought is so unusual, I jerk wrong in the shower and knock my shampoo bottle to the floor.

We managed to clean up quietly to not wake the kids, but Hudson's unpredictable, so I should *not* be

making noise in here.

I squat to retrieve the shampoo and my ass hits the conditioner wrong and knocks it to the floor

too.

Grandma Penny was short. She liked her low shelves, and Grandpa liked Grandma happy, so he

lived with them. I hate them for practicality but love them for the memories.

Also, replacing the single-stall shower in here is so low on my priority list that I'll probably die

before I so much as mention to a friend that I need to get it done.

Three dropped bottles and one mishap with being unable to get my arm through my pajama sleeve

correctly later, I'm ready for what feels like the weirdest date of my life.

What I'm not ready for?

The sight awaiting me on my couch.

ELEVEN

*Levi*

INGRID'S SON smells like Cheerios and mischief.

I like him. He's my type of people.

"Skippy gots to eat nuts," he's telling me as he snuggles in next to me, holding the squirrel tight

enough that the animal's eyes are bugging out. "If he eats fruit, he gets the drunks."

"Softer here, bud." I help him loosen his grip, still a little weirded out by the fact that the squirrel

jumped right in his lap and seemed to want to snuggle. I swear the little devil knows what's going on.

"Does he like peanuts or walnuts or acorns?"

Big hazel eyes study me like it's the deepest philosophical question ever posed. "My mommy and

sisters gots ga-vinas, but I gots a peanut."

"Sounds about right. Do you have an elbow?"

He lifts his arm and shows me his elbow. "I gots Thomas on my panties."

"How old are you?" I know he's four, but he doesn't know I know he's four, and if there's one

thing I've learned from Tripp's kids, it's how to deflect the body part questions.

"I'm eighty," he says solemnly.

For the record, I manage to not crack up. "Eighty, huh?"

"Sometimes I'm free." He holds up three fingers. "Sometimes I'm Iron Man."

"I like Iron Man. He has a big heart."

"I got a big peanut." He digs into his pajama pants.

"Whoa, hey, did you hear that? I think Skippy asked to go to bed."

I leap up. The squirrel dashes for the curtain rod. And Hudson pulls an orange circus peanut out of

his pajama pants. "I got a big peanut for Skippy."

*"Hudson."*

We both look to the hallway, probably equally guiltily, at Ingrid's voice. I can't tell if she's

panicked at finding her son offering to show me his peanut, or frustrated that he's out of bed, or just

exhausted.

I should let her get to sleep, except she's utterly fucking adorable, and I don't want to leave.

I want to help her get un-exhausted. I want to give her a little slice of joy to end the night.

Her hair's damp and hanging loosely in waves that look towel-dried and finger-combed. No

makeup. Pink cheeks like she scrubbed them hard.

She's in a baggy gray T-shirt that has HOT MESS MOMS CLUB: COFFEE  
CHAPTER

PRESIDENT written in huge letters, and pink pajama pants with little reading  
mice all over them. No

bra, which is making my cock twitch.

No socks either.

Also making my cock twitch.

Not saying I have a foot fetish, but I'm not saying I don't, either.

"Skippy needs a friend," Hudson says. He doesn't make his *R* s and *L* s sound  
like *W* s the way

James did forever, and Emma still does. If he wasn't small with a short  
attention span and a penchant

for ditching bed for fun, I'd believe that he was eighty.

Sometimes.

"Skippy needs to go to bed, and so do you."

"We're busted, pal," I tell him. "How about you go to bed, and in the  
morning, this magic thing

will happen where you'll wake up with lots of energy and you get to have  
fun?"

Ah, the suspicious eyeball. Always my favorite. "I wants fun now."

"Sleeping's fun."

More suspicious eyeball.

Ingrid sucks her lips into her mouth like she's trying to not laugh at my failing attempt to get my

couch buddy to go to sleep.

"You ever have temper tantrums?" I ask him.

He freezes.

I nod. "Me too. Always when I don't have enough sleep. And then my mom puts me in time-out,

and I don't get dessert *or* to see my friends. That's why I *always* go to bed at my bedtime."

"You're not in bed now."

"I have a grown-up bedtime."

He looks at Ingrid, who's approaching in full-on mom mode, then back to me. "That sucks."

"*Hudson.*"

I grin at him as the squirrel leaps on my shoulder and inspects my hair.

"You're busted, little

dude."

"I got him."

We all look at Giselle, who sneaks in the door and nods to me in answer to a question I posed five

minutes ago, before she left the apartment.

"The squirrel or the potty-mouth?" Ingrid asks her.

Giselle smiles.

“That means the boy,” I translate. “She doesn’t do squirrels.”

“Here. I’ll get Skippy. He—” Ingrid reaches for the animal, and our fingers collide as I reach for

him too, and there it is again.

That same jolt I felt when she kissed me. “Cage?”

She tucks her hands behind her back like she’s embarrassed. “You’re very observant.”

“Sometimes.”

She gives the squirrel a look, and he leaps off me and heads for the bookshelf.

“No, Skippy!” Hudson tries to follow, but Ingrid gets a grip on his shoulder and bends down and

says something quietly in his ear.

Giselle squats in front of both of them. “Hey, little person. You’re going to bed, and I’m going to

tell you a story, and then you’re going to stay there. Okay?”

He wrinkles his nose. “You smell like poop.”

“Did you throw your mommy’s things in the toilet?”

His eyes go wide, and he darts a look at Ingrid, then back to Giselle.

Giselle winks. “I won’t tell her, but only if you get your tush up and go to bed *right now this very*

*instant.*”

Hudson darts for the hallway.

Ingrid lifts a brow at Giselle. “How...?”

“I can smell fear, and I know how to use it against them.” Giselle looks down the hallway. “Do

you want me to make sure he goes to sleep, or do you want me to drag the other troublemaker out of

here?”

I’m clearly the other troublemaker, so I snag the bakery bag and lift it up with puppy dog eyes.

And five minutes later, Ingrid and I are alone on the roof while Giselle plays babysitter.

I’m gonna owe her big for this. Kids aren’t her thing.

Pretty sure squirrels aren’t either, but Ingrid tossed a handful of peanuts into the cage and told

Giselle to just shut the door if he climbed in, and otherwise not to worry about the loose rodent.

“She’ll let us know if they get up, right?” Ingrid asks.

I like her rooftop. It has a garden in it, and there are three picnic tables scattered about too, with

fairly lights turned on to make it all glow. I touch her lower back and guide her to the nearest seat.

“Yep.”

“You really are the world’s worst liar.”

“They won’t get up. Giselle has presence. It scares kids into staying in bed while also reassuring



them that they're safe."

"That—huh. I actually believe that." She stifles a yawn and leans back against the table. We're

facing north. Pretty sure we could see Reynolds Park in downtown, or maybe even Duggan Field from

here during the day. Probably at night too, if the Fireballs were playing a home game and the stadium

lights were on.

I pull the first carton out of my bakery bag and hand it to her. "You know you could tell me to get

lost and I'd leave you the cheesecake?"

"Thank you for staying and helping out. You didn't have to."

"I have ulterior motives."

"You want fashion advice, hm?" She wiggles her feet, now clad in slippers that look like

hippopotamuses. She's also bundled in a sweater so I can't see her breasts jiggle as clearly.

"I want a few more minutes of feeling like a normal person."

She laughs. "This is *normal*?"

I hand her a spoon and take the second cheesecake out of the bag. "This is *awesome*."

"You're serious."

"Keep a secret?"

“My brain is so full, I’ll forget I have it.”

I lift a pinky.

She laughs again.

“C’mon, Ingrid. Pinky promise me you’ll keep a secret. I haven’t even told my family this one.”

“Then why would you tell me?”

“I don’t really want to make out with my brother or my mother.”

“It’s a making-out secret?”

“It is.”

Her amusement fades. “In case the leak in my bookstore ceiling didn’t reinforce what I said... I

really don’t have a lot of time—”

“I’m a terrible boyfriend, but I’m a damn good friend. And I’d love to walk the line and be the

kind of friend who makes out with you.”

She studies me briefly before turning her attention to the cheesecake, leaving my pinky hanging.

My heart spins and teeters. I’ve had my ego bruised. I’ve had my heart broken. I’ve been on top of

the world, and I’ve felt my foundation rattle when my head got too big and I lost sight of what was

important.

I’m asking her for a quiet, convenient fling. Not a commitment.

But I'm feeling weirdly exposed here as I watch her slide a bite of cheesecake between her lips

and contemplate my offer.

Her eyes slide shut, she lifts her chin, and she sinks back, leaning into me. "Oh my god, that's

good," she breathes. "Is this a bribe? Like a fling bribe? Is that a thing? I haven't dated in...actually,

you don't need to know how long. Are you sure this is Angelica's cheesecake? I've had her

cheesecake before, and this is better."

"It's the company."

She laughs. "You'd be intolerable if you weren't funny."

"There's a very small list of people in the world who'd be that honest with me."

"You never get hate mail or bad reviews?"

"Not what I meant."

"This is really good cheesecake. Here. Try this." She turns and holds her spoon out to me. I hold

her gaze as I take it in my mouth, and her eyes go three shades darker.

She kissed me. She's leaning into me.

This isn't one-sided.

And it's not that I'm nearly positive she was the soldier with the sign at my show eight years ago

that helped me get my head back on straight, or that she was the woman in my fan mail correcting me

for wanting to get my niece and nephew yodeling pickles.

It's that every extra minute I'm with her, or texting with her, or talking to her, I feel *home*.

"Good?" she whispers.

I can't taste it. I'm too full of watching her watch me. "Delicious."

"Better than normal?"

"Definitely."

She smiles that *shame on you* smile that's getting addictive. "You've never had Angelica's

cheesecake, have you?"

"First one that came up on my app."

"Are you really from Copper Valley?"

"Apparently there are parts I've missed."

Her eyes widen, and she leans in like she's completely unaware that she's doing it. "When you

look at me like that, I don't think you're talking about my neighborhood or the cheesecake."

"You're very perceptive." I brush a crumb off her plump bottom lip. She smells like baby

shampoo and caramel and a woman who needs to be kissed.

"How often do you get bored?" she whispers.

The question surprises me. Does she think I'd ghost her after a single date?  
"Not very."

"Do you have other friends you make out with?"

"You'd be the first. And only."

"Why are you a terrible boyfriend?"

"I'm a total diva."

"You did my dishes and let my son slime you with his sucking thumb, and yes, I noticed that. A

diva wouldn't tolerate four-year-olds and squirrels."

"I like to be the center of the universe. And I have *very* exacting standards."

"So you wouldn't take me out in public if I had gum stuck to my pants?"

"Depends on what color gum. And flavor, if we're being honest."

She laughs again. "I don't believe that for a second."

"You don't get the truth until you pinky promise to keep my secrets."

I *should* be asking her to sign a non-disclosure agreement. That's how my usual relationships

start.

This is different.

I'm intrigued. I'm captivated. For the first time in ages, there's a connection that isn't forced,

something that feels *real* instead of *the next step your career needs, Levi*.

This isn't about doing the right person a favor just in case we need to call it in

later. Upping my

visibility before an album drops. Paying back an IOU from earlier in my career. Distracting people

from dumb shit that's nothing, but never comes off as nothing when the tabloids catch you after one too

many drinks in a club or get the right angle on a photo to make it look like you're feeling up a woman

who was twelve feet away when the picture was taken.

When you're known around the globe, you know you're making certain sacrifices.

For me, it's sacrificing trust.

Sacrificing *normal*.

Always looking for the angle.

I'm pretty sure the only angle Ingrid's looking for is whichever one gets her to bed faster, and I

don't mean with me.

Which means I need to be on top of my game to make it worthwhile for her.

She needs to know how little in my life feels real sometimes, and how much I value it when I find

it.

I wiggle my pinky between us. We're so close, she has to look down, and when she does, she

smiles, almost shyly. "I haven't done this in decades."

Her pinky hooks around mine, and I want to hold it there all night.

Instead, I lean in for another kiss.

She responds slowly at first, but then she melts into me, and the cold disappears, the night

disappears, and the world itself disappears.

It's just her and me floating among the stars in a *nice to meet you* kiss that's rapidly becoming an *I*

*want to tear your clothes off* kiss.

She's had me transfixed from the moment I laid eyes on her, and this kiss?

Tonight?

It's the first of many.

It has to be, because I don't want to let go.

I'll have to eventually. I can't have a friends-with-benefits fling with a single mom forever. I'm

always gone. Her kids are settled here, and so's she.

But I can't resist her, and I don't want to.

Her fingers brush my cheek and drift down my neck. Heat rockets through my body, the electric

current between us pulsing so hard, the shock that comes when we part will be unbearable. The rock

star in my pants is ready for a show.

I need to go slow. Don't scare her. Don't push her too far.

But she's kissing me back like she's been underwater too long and I'm her first gasp of oxygen,

one hand tightening around my shirt to hold me here, lips parted, tongue exploring, delicate, desperate

noises coming from her throat.

Don't ask how we end up on top of the picnic table, her on her back, legs wrapped around my

hips, her fingers clutching my hair while I slide my hand under her shirt, taking in the soft skin leading

to those gorgeous full breasts.

Pretty sure we just floated here.

All I know is, I feel more alive here, with Ingrid, than I've felt doing anything in a long time.

"I told you kids to *knock it off*," a voice snarls, and a cold stream of water slaps me in the ear.

Ingrid gasps, then sputters, and *fuck*.

She's taking it all right in the face.

I leap off the table and jump in front of the water. "*Stop.*"

"This ain't for hanky-panky!" The man behind the hose keeps spraying me while Ingrid coughs

and chokes.

I grab the hose and wrench it away from him. I can't see him—I have water in my eyes—but I can

see enough to know he's shrinking back. "Do you own this building?"



“This rooftop is for *pretty* things and *family* things and—”

“Do. You. Own. This. Building?”

The hose is pointed at him now, but I’ve got it kinked so it doesn’t spray.

“It’s okay,” Ingrid says between coughs. “Mr. Bouchard, he’s with me.”

“*Mrs. Scott?*”

My shoulders twitch.

Ingrid wrenches out another cough. “We were having cheesecake.”

The older man looks at me.

I glare at him. “And we’re all going to forget this happened.” Not what I *want* to do—I *want* to

turn the hose on him and see how he likes it—but it’s what I need to do.

Rumors went around five or six years ago that I was dating Cash’s sister, and there were

paparazzi lining her neighborhood, stalking her, for weeks. Even with sitting on the fringes of public

life for over a decade at that point, she got frazzled.

This thing with Ingrid?

It’s top secret.

I shouldn’t even be looking at this guy.

“I don’t know who the hell you think you are, but you keep your hands to yourself around our Mrs.

Scott, do you hear me?” he growls.

She puts a hand on my chest and steps in front of me. “Mr. Bouchard, I’ve got this. Army training,

remember? I know twenty-two ways to kill a man.”

“Hmph.” He scowls at me one more time. “You need help burying his body, you know where I’m

at. And I’m sorry about getting you wet, ma’am. I thought you were a teenager.”

She follows him to the door to the stairwell, bends, and then twists something squeaky.

When the hose lightens in my hand, I aim it at a flower pot and release the last of the pressure.

“Sorry,” she mutters.

She’s shivering. I’d wrap her in a hug for body heat, except I’m soaked to the bone. “Not your

fault. You okay?”

“Yeah.”

Dammit.

That’s not the *yeah* of a woman happy at the end of a date. “Twenty-two ways to kill a man?”

“I actually only know one, and it’s to sing to him until his ears bleed. You’re soaked. We should

—”

“Definitely do this again sometime,” I finish for her.

One brow quirks up, and then she’s laughing. “You’re insane.”

“Yeah, but only in the best ways.”

She goes up on her tiptoes and presses her warm lips to my cheek. “Thank you for the

cheesecake.”

“Anytime.” Preferably soon.

TWELVE

*Ingrid*

I’M at Piper’s hockey practice Saturday morning, still reliving making out with Levi in my head while

I try to entertain Hudson with Matchbox cars.

He has a habit of trying to get out on the ice with the other kids.

Zoe has her nose stuck in a book and earbuds in her ears, listening to music on my old phone. The

other parents are gathered in their normal groups. It’s not that we’re outsiders—it’s more that after

our first practice where Hudson sneezed red slime that he’d stuck up his nose all over the coach’s

wife, who was very kind and understanding about the whole thing, we tend to rotate to wherever he’s

happiest and wherever he can’t find more things to stick up his nose.

Like other kids’ popcorn crumbs.

His doctor tells me this will pass, but I sometimes wonder if he’ll be the life of the frat party with

all the magic tricks he'll be able to do with his nose by then.

And then I wonder if Levi would still want to make out with me if he knew how many things I pull

out of Hudson's nose every week.

Probably.

My kids don't seem to faze him. But then, it's not like he's auditioning for the role of their

stepdad. We're having a thing where I get to pretend to be a normal adult, and he gets—

You know, I'm still not entirely sure what he gets.

A chance to blow off steam without the world watching? The novelty of dating someone different?

No, not *dating*.

*Flinging*.

We're flinging.

We actually worked out terms over text early this morning before my kids were out of bed, with

both of us agreeing that all of our dates— *dates!!* —should be kept on the down-low. He can't

guarantee I won't get spotted by the paparazzi, but he did promise they'll leave my kids alone.

I promised I wouldn't tell a soul about our arrangement and added that no one would believe me

even if I did.

Sad, but true, and he didn't argue the point. And then Piper crawled into my bed, and she can

read, so I put my phone away.

If I'm lucky, I'll have another few texts from him the next time I get a chance to check.

I don't realize how far I've retreated into my own head when Brittany Danvers plops down next

to me.

In nine years of parenting, I've learned that we moms fall into basically three types.

There's the organized PTO mom who can talk anyone into anything and generally sends her kids to

school on national holidays with hand-stuffed baggies for their classmates, full of raisin boxes,

Snickers bars, glow sticks, those little stamps that kids use to stamp the hell out of their walls when

their mothers aren't looking, and toothbrushes.

Then there's the working mom who donates more money than necessary to every fundraiser to

alleviate guilt.

And finally, we have the hot mess mom whose socks rarely match and who sometimes forgets to

comb her hair and check to make sure her sweatshirt isn't on backwards before she leaves the house.

I'm somewhere between the latter two, and a quick glance down confirms

that while I'm wearing

pants, and my blouse buttons up the front and even *correctly* today, my shoes are two different colors.

And I'm wearing sneakers. They're actually two different *styles*.

Crap.

The thing about all of us, though, is that we all feel like we're on the cusp of losing it, whether we

look like it or not.

Brittany told me over drinks that we all wished were spiked at last year's end-of-the-hockey-

season party that she hasn't slept in eleven years and that the sand she got up her vagina at their family

Christmas trip to an all-inclusive in Mexico was the most action she'd had in months.

So while it would be easy to hate her for making the rest of us look bad, I realize it's her way of

handling the stress and expectations of modern motherhood.

Also, when Hudson sneezed his red slime, Brittany was the one who whipped out baby wipes and

mopped the coach's wife up before half the other parents noticed what had happened.

Brittany's youngest is Piper's age. They're seven. Rapidly approaching eight.

And she still carries baby wipes to save the rest of us.

"I heard Levi Wilson came to your store the other day," she whispers.

My heart pitter-patters, swells to exploding, and then sinks to my toes as a million scenarios play

out in my head, the first being that I'm suddenly uber-popular for nothing more than proximity to one

of Copper Valley's favorite sons, the last being that my kids never get a moment of peace again.

But it's not like that. Levi's spotted in stores all over Copper Valley. Brittany's not asking if we're

dating. She's asking if my store was blessed by the pop god.

"Oh my god, he *did*." Brittany's whisper is the kind of shriek that shrieks *I have gossip*, and every

mom in the stands knows it.

Zoe looks at me.

I silently telegraph to her to keep her mouth shut, since Hudson wouldn't stop talking about *the*

*magic babysitter and her friend who was a boy*, which Zoe has deduced to mean that I had a man-

visitor.

She seems on the fence about believing if it was a late-night plumber.

"I shouldn't talk about my customers," I say to Brittany.

"He's a regular?"

"No, he—"

"Are we talking about Levi Wilson at Ingrid's store?" Akiko Takahashi drags her five-year-old

son down the steps to sit on Hudson's other side.

"Local celebrities come in from time to time." I shrug, but my face is getting hot, and I don't know

if they'll buy it with me brushing this off like it's nothing. "We had a few Fireballs players at the book

club meeting the other night too."

"When Levi was there?" Alyssa Perlman joins us too. She's firmly in the middle camp of moms—

middle management at one of the many environmental engineering firms in town, planned to stop at

one kid, and instead got twins who like completely opposite things.

And clearly, she has the gossip. "Where did you hear that?" I ask.

She pulls out her phone and swipes over it, then holds it out, screen first, showing a social media

post with Levi right there in his goofball big eyebrows and extra-thick graying beard that he pulled off

once all the other customers had left. "My friend said he was there *in disguise*."

I'm blanking.

I'm completely blanking.

"Oh my god, Ingrid, is he going to use your store for a video or something?"

"Tell me he secretly loves to read. What book were you talking about?"

"He probably lost a bet. I heard he and Cash Rivers make crazy bets all the time."



My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out and glance at it. “Sorry, guys, it’s the store. Hold on.”

*Thank god.*

I swipe to answer, and when I put the phone to my ear, all I can hear is the swell of voices.

“Yasmin?”

“Don’t freak.”

That’s not reassuring. “About what?”

“The cash registers just went down.”

“What do you mean, *down*?”

Yasmin has been with Penny for Your Thoughts since it was my grandparents’ store. I used to

babysit her kids. She’s seen a lot. She can fix a lot.

Calling me on my day off is not a good sign.

“I think the wifi is going wonky,” she says, “and I can’t log onto the iPad for backup either, so

we’re having to do hand receipts, and we’re a little busier than normal since all those gossip pages

are covering the Fireballs players being here the other night...”

I look up at the ice, at Piper skating around a line of orange cones with the puck firmly in her

control, then at the crowd of moms gathered around me, watching my every

move.

My gaze lands on Brittany. “Can I ask a favor?”

She beams. “Anything at all.”

Crap. She probably thinks this means I’ll give her all the gossip. “Can you bring Piper home?”

There’s a problem at the store.”

“Of *course*.”

Twenty minutes later, I’m walking into the back door at Penny for Your Thoughts. I hand Hudson

an iPad in the stockroom and tell Zoe to sit on him if he tries to get away or shove anything into his

nose or ears or let the squirrel in, then push through the more-crowded-than-average aisles to get to

the register.

Yasmin’s smiling like a champ, but I recognize the tightness in it, and the worry lines around her

eyes.

“Still nothing?” I ask as I point to the computer.

She shakes her head. “Still nothing.”

I’m already dialing our web support, ignoring the pinging in my own heart and the little voices

demanding to know why a single day can’t just go *right*. The store does pretty well, but a Saturday

with a lot of customers when we can't take credit cards?

This isn't good.

"We should get a sign on the door until we can get this fixed. Cash only today."

"I'm on it." Her eyes flicker down. "And I'm sorry I called you on your day off."

"Don't apologize. Things happen. It's not your fault."

It's rarely *anyone's* fault. But things do happen.

They happen *all the time*.

"Are you up for hand-calculating discounts? I feel like today's a hot mess day. Twenty percent off

all hot mess merchandise paid for in cash."

"Appropriate." Yasmin smiles at me, but it's a stressed smile.

Sort of like my budget might be this week if we can't take credit cards all weekend.

Brittany drops Piper off while I'm trying to restart our internet connection, and I manage to get

Mrs. Schneider to watch the kids the rest of the day. Zoe misses gymnastics. Hudson misses his little

ninjas class, and also Zoe's gymnastics, where her instructors let him play to his heart's content on a

spare mat to get his energy out.

I'm on the phone for five hours, mostly on hold, with the companies who should be able to help us

get back up and running.

And I swear the shop's busier for a Saturday than it usually is.

We close an hour early when it becomes clear we're dealing with more frustrated customers than

customers that we're making happy, and that the issue won't be fixed today. I get my kids takeout from

a greasy spoon down the street, and we walk a couple blocks to a park so Hudson can run until it gets

dark, which will unfortunately be too soon.

And all the while, as I'm huddling on a park bench in the chilly November weather, I'm

wondering little questions.

*Were* we busier than normal today, or was that in my head? And if we were, was it because Nora

Dawn's been talking us up in her reader group, because the Fireballs players came by for book club,

because holiday shopping season is creeping up soon, or because rumors are going around that Levi's

been at the store too?

The moms at hockey practice knew it, and it's not like my store is the thing *any* of them randomly

think about during the week. They have their own lives that are just as hectic as mine.

And speaking of Levi—he texts me as we're walking home from the park.

*Someone just handed me an oatmeal raisin cookie. Made me think of you.*

I'm both smiling and wrestling with myself at the same time.

Do I call him and ask if he's telling people to go to my store?

Or is that super presumptuous of me?

Screw it.

I'm calling.

That's why I have his number, right?

As soon as I get the kids inside, I tell the girls to get Hudson in the bath, then duck into my

bedroom and dial Levi. I don't expect him to answer—if someone's offering him cookies, he's not

alone—but his voice tickles my ear almost immediately. "Hey. This is a nice surprise."

"I had a shitty day and needed a friendly voice."

Huh. Not sure where that came from, but it's true.

"Glad to be of service. Tell me nobody broke any bones." I can practically hear him smiling. Is

that weird? That's definitely weird. I don't know him *that* well yet.

Do I?

"No, but the day's not over. Just... our software went on the fritz at the store so it was...

interesting to say the least, and I swear there were twice as many people as there would be on a

normal Saturday...”

He clears his throat.

And yeah, it’s the *awkward* throat-clear. Not the *I have something in there* clear, but the *I don’t*

*know what to say so I’ll make an awkward noise* clear.

“*Levi*. Please tell me you’re not sending people here. I appreciate the gesture, but I don’t have the

staff for a bigger crowd on a regular basis, and I don’t want to hire someone if interest is going to

peter out, plus, people will start putting two and two together. All the moms at hockey this morning

saw a picture of you at book club the other night, and now they’re asking tons of questions, and I don’t

want this to sound super rude, but I thought we agreed we’d be a secret. My kids—”

“Ingrid. I didn’t tell a soul.”

“You...oh. Sorry. I—”

“But I was dumb to show up the other night. You’re right. That wasn’t my brightest idea.”

I sink onto my bed. The kids are arguing, which means none of them are bleeding or drowning, so

I let myself have another minute. “I *did* like seeing you.”

“I’m very much looking forward to seeing you again.”

I smile so big my cheeks almost crack.

“A secret, huh?” he adds.

My face has been replaced with the sun and is now going to melt from the inside out. “That...

wasn’t the exact word either of us used earlier, was it?”

“No, but I like being a secret. You don’t get many when you live in the public eye. And I don’t

want *you* having to deal with the crap that comes from your every move being scrutinized. Or with

staffing and inventory issues.”

“I’m wearing mismatched sneakers.”

His laughter is silk and chocolate. “Pictures or it didn’t happen.”

A noise that sounds like children chasing a baby squirrel echoes through the hallway, and I stifle a

groan. “I need to go. Kids. Squirrel. Bath time. Sorry I freaked on you.”

“Don’t be sorry. My life’s weird sometimes. But for the record—was one day of a busy store a

bad thing?”

“It was since we couldn’t take credit cards all day.”

“Ouch.”

“Yep.”

“Internet problems?”

“Software or server problems.”

“I know a guy if you need help.”

I laugh. “I suspect you know *all* the guys.”

“All the women too.”

“We should be fixed by morning, but I’ll keep you in mind if I need more help.”

Piper shrieks, and Zoe yells, “Put the squirrel down!”, and Hudson moos like a cow, and I cringe.

I *think* the insulation is good in the ceiling, but some days I wonder if I need to send the upstairs

neighbor a fruit basket.

“Was that your kids?” Levi asks.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Skipppy troubles?”

“I’m about to open the door and start yelling, and I don’t want you to hear that, so I’m hanging up

now.”

“Text me later.”

He doesn’t ask if he can do anything to help, but the minute I open my door, he drops off my list of

top ten things I’m thinking about.

But only because I suddenly have a dozen domestic issues to sort out immediately, starting with a

squirrel who wants to take a bath with my mooing son.



That's just how it goes.

## THIRTEEN

*From the texts of Levi and Ingrid*

*Levi:* Are you up?

*Ingrid:* Unfortunately. Piper talks in her sleep and Zoe answers. I'm lying in bed at 4 AM

listening to a one-sided debate over whether hockey pucks or eyeglasses will be a better tool to feed

the conquistadors.

*Levi:* Is that how you wake up every morning?

*Ingrid:* No. Sometimes I wake up to wet willies and sometimes I wake up to Hudson just standing

next to my bed staring at me like he's a zombie. And \*very occasionally\* I wake up naturally when

my body has had enough rest and it's time to get going for the day.

*Levi:* How often does that happen?

*Ingrid:* I can't remember, but I'll let you know if it happens again. What time is it where you are?

*Levi:* Trouble time.

*Ingrid:* As in you're causing trouble, or you're avoiding trouble?

*Levi:* I need someone with good taste to stop me from doing something my brother would regret.

\*selfie of himself holding a two-foot-tall squeaking rubber chicken\*

*Ingrid:* What IS that?

*Levi:* My nephew's Christmas present. If you squeeze it hard enough, it'll squawk for almost a full minute.

*Ingrid:* Put. Down. The. Rubber. Chicken.

*Levi:* Full disclosure. I already bought it.

*Ingrid:* I'm breathing deeply through my nose and assuming you bought it so no one else could buy

it to gift it to anyone else's kids, and that you're going to use it yourself in YouTube videos where you

and the chicken have a sing-off and then set it on fire as a warning to all other rubber chickens who

would dare squawk for a full minute. And yes, that does mean I'm ignoring that little note you sent

above about getting it for your nephew. I'm creating my own reality here where I can still talk to you.

*Levi:* That's a really good idea about the YouTube videos. A little off-brand on the setting it on

fire part though.

*Ingrid:* And it's at 4 AM, before coffee. Imagine what I could come up with if you had the full

power of mom-brain working for you.

*Levi:* I don't think I've ever fully appreciated the power of mom-brain.

*Ingrid:* It often disguises itself behind crazy hair, wild looks in our eyes, and

both hands full of

caffeine at any given hour of the day.

*Levi:* You're in camouflage. \*mind blown emoji\*

*Ingrid:* I've been in real camouflage before. This doesn't feel quite the same.  
This is less warrior

and more total mess. Army Years Ingrid is horrified at Mom Years Ingrid.

*Levi:* I think you look hot in that mess.

*Ingrid:* \*laughing emoji\*

*Levi:* Totally serious. Competence is sexy.

*Ingrid:* Are you still holding a large rubber squeaky chicken?

*Levi:* Yep.

*Ingrid:* Huh. For once, I have absolute confidence that I truly am the more  
attractive of the two of

us at this moment.

*Levi:* So I should keep holding the chicken?

*Ingrid:* Only until it makes me throw up in my mouth. Then you've gone so  
anti-attractive that I

won't want to keep talking to you.

*Levi:* What if I pick up a screaming goat then? Goats are cuter than chickens.

*Ingrid:* I love the screaming goat! We did a reading marathon with book club  
last month, and

everyone who read their twenty-six-point-two minutes a day won a medal,

and everyone who told me

their kids interrupted them every single farking time they tried to read or listen to an audiobook won a

screaming goat. GREAT for stress relief.

*Levi:* I did not see that coming. \*gif of himself with his jaw dropping and the words PLOT

TWIST flashing at the bottom\*

*Ingrid:* I keep one hidden in a drawer behind the register and pull it out and let my goat scream

for me when I'm having a super rough day.

*Levi:* \*gif of Waverly Sweet doing a mic drop\*

*Ingrid:* Are you always this giffy, or are you loopy because your body doesn't know what time it

is?

*Levi:* Yes to both. I don't know how long I've been in Melbourne, but I know I have no idea if it's

close to lunchtime or bedtime. Am I keeping you up when you could've gone back to sleep?

*Ingrid:* Nope. Brain had already engaged. I forgot to call the insurance company with a question

about open enrollment yesterday, and then I realized it's time to sign Zoe and Hudson up for soccer in

the spring, but I didn't write it on my calendar to do it because Piper got a bloody nose as I was

checking email. Sort of like I meant to delete that email with all the gibberish at the bottom that I

accidentally sent to you when I chewed you out about the yodeling pickle, but the girls were arguing

over something while I was writing it, then Hudson snuck into my bedroom and played on my

keyboard while I was keeping his sisters from throwing food at each other.

*Levi:* After meeting Skippy for the first time, I actually assumed he was the one who sent the

email.

*Ingrid:* \*bulging eyes emoji\* That...hadn't actually occurred to me until just now.

*Levi:* My nephew got hold of Tripp's phone a while back and he and his pet frog texted me a

series of links to a few adult sites. You'd think touring the world would be where you'd see it all, but

nope. Sometimes it really is right at home.

*Ingrid:* I can't decide if Hudson and your nephew would be BFFs or if they should never meet.

*Levi:* Probably both.

*Ingrid:* Was the pet frog a pet for long after that? I already know it was the frog's fault. \*eye roll

emoji\*

*Levi:* Grandma to the rescue on that one. I called her to save them both. Tripp rolls with a lot

more than I would've given him credit for when we were younger, but a five-year-old on adult sites

would put his blood pressure through the roof. Last I heard, the frog was on an extended field trip

with froggy daycare, courtesy of Grandma, and Tripp changes the passcode on his phone daily.

*Ingrid:* I'd lock myself out of my own phone on day three if I changed the passcode that often.

*Levi:* You have parents around to help with your kids?

*Ingrid:* Nope. My mom got me in the divorce, but once puberty hit, we were at each other's

throats daily, so she let my grandparents raise me. I was already at their place most days after school

until bedtime anyway.

*Levi:* I'm having a hard time picturing you at anyone's throat.

*Ingrid:* It's a very good thing that who we are at eleven or twelve doesn't define us for the rest of

our lives. And my Army years were good for me too. Also, I have a feeling I'll pay mightily for my

own pre-teen years when Zoe and Piper hit theirs.

*Levi:* Nah. You'll do great.

*Ingrid:* Spoken like a true optimist who's never spent weeks on end with pre-teen girls and their

mothers...

*Levi:* At least therapy's more socially acceptable now.

*Ingrid:* \*laughing emoji\* So true. What about you? Did you get to hang out with your grandparents

when you were growing up?

*Levi:* I don't remember a lot about my grandparents. Mostly that my grandpa smelled like cigars

and my grandma always stole knick-knacks every time she'd come visit. Found out later that Mom

used to visit garage sales to stock up on knick-knacks for Grandma to steal, once she figured out what

was going on.

*Ingrid:* I have a customer who sneaks stir sticks from the coffee bar into her purse when her

daughter's not looking. Sugar packets too some days. Holly, my barista, helps distract her.

*Levi:* The daughter or the mom?

*Ingrid:* The daughter. Holly's wife's dad was just put in a home for patients with early onset

Alzheimer's, and I think helping an old lady commit petty larceny is her way of dealing.

*Levi:* Ah, that sucks.

*Ingrid:* That's life.

*Levi:* Do you think a giant rubber chicken would make any of them feel better?

*Ingrid:* \*laughing emoji\* Maybe? There has to be *someone* in the world who'd enjoy a terrifying

bird that squawks for a minute.

*Levi:* It only squawks that long if you're strong enough to squeeze it all the way.

*Ingrid:* I don't want to know how many times you've displayed your strength today, do I?

*Levi:* Not nearly as many times as I've wanted to. I'm actually hiding in a bathroom because I got

spotted when I squawked it the second time. My security team put me in time-out. I think I'm due back

on set in an hour? Seriously losing track.

*Ingrid:* Is that hard? Being recognized everywhere you go?

*Levi:* It's the trade-off. I know how to get off-grid when I need to.

*Ingrid:* But what if you're in the middle of a tour and you can't?

*Levi:* \*video of himself squeezing a giant rubber chicken and then letting it squawk for a minute\*

*Ingrid:* OMG. \*crying laughing emoji\*

*Levi:* Stress relief. Full confession: I love squawking rubber chickens. Apparently this is my

screaming goat.

*Ingrid:* That should be super annoying but I can't stop laughing. I'm going to wake my kids up.

*Levi:* Feel free to add that video to your screaming goat arsenal.



*Ingrid:* Now I'm picturing an army of tiny screaming goats led by you and a giant rubber chicken,

and I can no longer stay in bed laughing this hard, because if I do, I'm going to wet myself.

#thankschildbirth

*Ingrid:* Also, please delete that last message and pretend you never saw it.

*Ingrid:* For real. I didn't say that.

*Ingrid:* Okay, it's been ten minutes and you didn't reply, so I'm going to assume that my goat army

and I are on our own. Excuse me while I go die of mortification. Enjoy playing with your rubber

chicken.

*Levi, three hours later:* Oh, shit. Sorry, Ingrid. My chicken and I got busted by Giselle and then

my manager called and I had to get back to the set for some night shooting. Just saw these. Feel free to

picture me playing with my rubber chicken anytime if it makes you feel better. Gotta dash again. Talk

to you soon. \*gif of himself blowing a kiss\*

FOURTEEN

*Levi*

AFTER AN ETERNITY away and a very long plane ride home, my body refuses to acknowledge

that this hour of the day should be for sleeping.

And I refuse to acknowledge that I was supposed to stay in LA to hang out with Cash for a few

days on my way back from Australia instead of sitting in the small recording studio in my condo,

fiddling with some lyrics and waiting for the clock to tick over to a reasonable hour to text a lady and

ask if I can take her to breakfast.

There's no reasonable explanation for how obsessed I am with Ingrid, but then, logic and I don't

really go together.

It's not in my nature.

I'm playing back a song I've been working on when my phone buzzes with an incoming message.

And when I see who's texting, my entire body lights up with a smile.

INGRID: I have no idea what your body clock is like right now, but mine's on "how the hell did a

squirrel get into my pillowcase?" time. \*morning selfie with a baby squirrel\*

LEVI: Aww, he got so big.

INGRID: Fess up. You've practiced that line, haven't you?

LEVI: Ha! A time or two, yeah. Especially after my new friend the rubber chicken joined my posse.

But he does look bigger. What's the average size of an adult squirrel? Hold old is he? Too many big

peanuts?

INGRID: Are you seriously up already? Or is this your normal away message auto-reply sequence?

LEVI: Night owl + time zone changes = me at your service to deliver breakfast.

INGRID: I have exactly twenty-six minutes free and alone starting at 8:32 this morning.

LEVI: I should still be awake then.

INGRID: I'd very much like to tell you I'll be wearing something sexy, but odds are strong I'll have

peanut butter smeared in my armpit.

LEVI: That could be sexy.

INGRID: Do you have fetishes, or has it honestly been this long since you had female attention?

LEVI: I can't answer that in writing.

SHE STOPS TYPING, and my phone rings.

My body jolts in anticipation of hearing her voice. Brain? Fully engaged.  
Legs? Tense and ready

to leap to get to her place. Fingers? Twitching at the thought of touching her.  
Chest? Taking a mad

beating from my blood-pumper.

I mis-swipe the first time and have to try again to answer. "Hey, Superwoman."

Her laugh is soft and tinged with early morning. "Hey, peanut-butter-fetish-on-a-rubber-chicken

man.”

She could’ve called me *music man*, or *pop god*—that’s what most women I’ve known would’ve

gone for.

But not Ingrid.

I seriously like this woman. “You really are always up this early, aren’t you?”

“I’d like to say no, that it’s just when woodland creatures sneak into my bedroom, but if it wasn’t

Skippy, it would’ve been Hudson with a potty emergency or Piper with a nightmare or Zoe freaking

because she realized she got a problem wrong on her math test or the alarms on the bookstore going

off because the garbage truck’s lights looked at it wrong.”

And there it is again. The reminder that she has a big, full, busy life with her family and her

business as her top priority.

This is a *good* thing.

It means we can be casual. Not deep.

She doesn’t have time to get deep with me.

“So this week’s completely different from last week.”

She laughs quietly, throaty with sleep. “Life is *never* boring here. Also, if you squawk your rubber

chicken, I *will* hang up on you.”

“He stayed in Melbourne. A guy on the crew for the shoot had an English Mastiff that decided Mr.

Chicky was his new best friend, so I let him keep it.”

“That was kind of you.”

“Self-preservation, really. Tripp would’ve kicked me out of the family if I’d given it to either of

his kids. Or to Lila, come to think of it. I think she’d use it as an alarm clock to get everyone out of

bed in the morning just for fun.”

“I’m picturing her at Duggan Field squeezing a rubber chicken instead of blowing a whistle and

making the mascots all drop and give her twenty.”

I laugh. “You *have* been following the Fireballs.”

“Piper loves the Thrusters. *Love*-loves the Thrusters. But she got bored when there weren’t

hockey games to follow over the summer, so she adopted the Fireballs as her second favorite team.

And the mascot contest was fun for all of us. That was so smart.”

“I will *not* be telling my future sister-in-law that you said that. She doesn’t gloat, but she has a

killer *told you so* look. She’s been wearing it since the final mascot reveal.”

“With good reason. Did she know the whole time?”

“Probably.” I stretch back and close my eyes, simply enjoying the sound of Ingrid’s voice. I’ve

never wanted to get serious with a woman. Never—not even as a kid—  
wanted to think about getting

married. But I could go for a cup of coffee or tea and an early morning chat  
like this more often.

“What’s your favorite breakfast?”

“Anything I don’t have to cook or wear.”

“Allergies?”

“No, but—never mind.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“C’mon, Ingrid. But what?”

“Beggars can’t be choosers.”

“You’re not begging. What’s *but*?”

“I don’t like runny eggs and I think bacon’s burnt three shades of brown  
before anyone else does,

but I don’t like it chewy either, so basically, I only ever make myself bacon  
because every other

bacon disappoints me. So I guess my favorite breakfast is oatmeal?”

I try—and fail—to stifle a laugh.

“Don’t start. Oatmeal’s a good, solid breakfast. Protein *and* fiber. You can’t  
get that from a

pancake or a waffle, and if I start my day with syrup, I’m falling asleep by  
ten. I miss when my body

was in its twenties.”

Now I’m smiling so hard my cheeks hurt. “How old—”

“Don’t finish that question.”

“—is the rest of you?”

“Dammit, I told you not to finish that question.”

“Are you an old soul?”

“No. I’m actually a very *young* soul, but life is working very hard to beat it out of me.” She sighs.

“And apparently I’m feeling dramatic this— ow! Bad Skippy.”

“Did he bite you?”

“No. Just a scratch. Like I said. Feeling dramatic. Might do some *King Lear* on the storytime rug

later.”

“Or maybe you need someone to take some stress off you.”

“Sometimes I think letting someone else help run my life would be more stressful. It’s easier to go

grab Hudson’s Mr. Axolotl when you know the four places he’s most likely to have tossed it aside

than it is to walk someone through *which* corner in the living room or *which* cabinet in the kitchen

he’s likely to have tossed his favorite stuffy. Assuming he hasn’t flushed it down the toilet, since his

preschool teacher told him axolotls are amphibians.”

“Ingrid?”

“Yes?”

“I wasn’t talking about someone managing your kids or your life. I was talking about private grown-up time.”

“I— *oh*.”

There’s a wispy, yearning quality to that *oh*, and where my cock was semi-hard before, he’s

surging to full attention now.

“My kids are going to wake up any minute,” she whispers.

“It’s barely five AM. How early do they usually get up?”

“Six-thirty, but *they’ll know*.”

“What will they know?”

“If we start having phone sex.”

Yep. Raging hard-on. “That’s an excellent idea.”

“For you,” she grumbles.

“I do the talking. You do the touching.”

“Wait—what?”

“What do you sleep in, Ingrid?”

“I—a T-shirt.”

“What color?”



“It used to be light blue, before The Great School Spirit T-shirt debacle in the wash. Now it’s a

dirty gray. Lesson for the ages—never trust black T-shirts that come home from school.”

I love that she has a story for everything. “What does it say?”

“Fuck off, I’m sleeping.”

My dick is raging and trapped in denim because I’m the dumbass who hasn’t changed into my

sweats yet—don’t ask—and I’m still smiling like the happiest dude on the planet. “What does it

really say?”

She sighs. “It says *Mommy Loves You*. Zoe’s school did this thing where the kids could go into a

bazaar with ten dollars before the holidays her kindergarten year, and she came home with this shirt

big enough to fit a grizzly bear, and it’s getting threadbare but it’s legit the softest shirt I’ve ever

owned, and—and this is why I never have sex, isn’t it?”

“Don’t worry. Dr. Levi’s here to address all your sexual needs.”

There’s a muffled noise, and yeah, I know she’s laughing, and no, I don’t care.

Make a woman come, she’ll remember your name.

Make a woman laugh *and* come, and you’ve set the standard by which she’ll judge every other

man.

I'm not just here for the pussy.

I'm here for the whole package.

There's a different muffled noise, and it strikes me that she quite possibly has a squirrel watching

her as I try to talk my way into phone sex.

Not the weirdest thing I've ever seen. Got lost in Georgia once and saw a raccoon pulling a dildo

down the road.

"Sorry," Ingrid whispers, though she doesn't sound sorry in the least. "You caught me off guard.

I'm not exactly in practice."

"I love practice."

"Maybe you can talk to Piper. She wants to be the next Ares Berger without putting in the—sorry.

Not sexy to talk about my kids, is it?"

"They're your world. But right now, *you* need to be your world."

"I don't know if that's possible."

"Want help?"

"I'm completely serious. They could walk in any time."

"If you want to tell me no, tell me no. I promise, I won't push you. But if you're using them as an

excuse because you're afraid of wanting something for you..."

I wish I could see her. I want to see her eyes. Her lips. Her body language. Is she quiet because I

hit a nerve?

Her breath comes softly over the phone. "That's a remarkably deeper sentiment than I expected at

five in the morning."

She doesn't add *from you*, but I assume it's there.

Much as she's willing to talk to me like I'm just a regular guy, there's no hiding the whole

traveled-the-world, got-rich, dated-superstars, lives-large thing.

"My mom still breaks up with guys if she doesn't think they're good enough for Tripp and me," I

say.

It's not hard to picture Ingrid's golden eyes studying me now, trying to decide if I'm serious or

not.

I'm not.

Except I'm starting to wonder if it's possible.

I settle deeper into my couch and kick my feet up on the armrest. "You're calling me a liar again,

aren't you?"

"Am I right?"

“Yep.”

She laughs softly. “Let me guess: she doesn’t date at all, and if she does, she doesn’t tell you

about it?”

“Nailed it.”

“Do you ever have your people spy on her?”

“No, but lately...” I shake my head. “We’re talking about *you*. Not my mother.”

“And I very much want to know how you treat your mother when you’re not being a brat about her

giving up her own time to take care of you when you get a concussion.”

“Hey!”

More laughter.

Does she know it’s better than any song I’ve ever written?

Probably not. “Everyone from my old neighborhood—we’re still tight. And in a lot of ways, it’s

like we never grew up. Mrs. Ryder chewed me out last Christmas for not encouraging her to get out

and live more. I blew her off, because I thought if Mom wanted to date someone, if she found

someone worthy, she’d date someone. But I didn’t expect her to do it and keep it a secret.”

“You still think she has a secret boyfriend?”

“Know she does. Gossip train still works. Pretty sure Beck’s getting coal for Christmas this year,

since he’s the one who let it slip. Guy can’t keep a secret for anything.”

“I’m sure coal in the ol’ stocking will be horrible for a happily married billionaire.”

“He’ll get excited about snowman eyes and disappear to his place in the mountains for a week.”

“While you’ll be grilling your mother on her secret boyfriend over a turkey dinner?”

“I get the feeling you’re on her side here.”

“Team Mom, all the way.”

I’d smile at her teasing tone, except I’m starting to wonder if I haven’t been as good to my mom as

I should’ve all these years. “I used to think she didn’t want another guy in her business after raising

two boys, but now I wonder if she’s been afraid all this time. You think your mom’s not afraid of

anything.”

“Motherhood is basically constant fear about something.”

“Don’t live in the fear, Ingrid. You’re smart. You’re capable. Your kids know you love them.

When shit happens, you handle it. When shit’s not happening—that’s *you* time. Don’t let the fear own

it.”

She's quiet again.

Heat creeps around my ears.

The last thing she needs is me lecturing her about how to live her life.

"What are *you* afraid of?" she asks softly.

And now it's not just my ears.

It's been a long time since someone who didn't know me well asked that question. And even the

people who know me well didn't get a straight answer.

"You sound like you know fear pretty well," she adds.

No judgment.

Commiseration, if anything.

I close my eyes. There's no shame in what I'm afraid of. But it's still hard to say it out loud. "I'm

afraid of losing what's important."

"Your family?"

"No. *Me*. I'm afraid of losing *me*." It sounds like a selfish asshole thing to say out loud when I'm

surrounded by people who worry more about their kids and partners, but it's true. "A few years after I

went solo, I was on the road three hundred days a year. I worked. I wrote songs. I recorded them on

my bus because I didn't have time to take off the road and get into the studio. I played bigger and

bigger venues. I wanted to make enough money to take care of my mom, to have a cushion if

everything fell apart tomorrow and I had to start from scratch, and it became... It was like an

addiction. I was addicted to success, but more success wasn't bringing more joy. It was just bringing

more and more pressure, until one night, I stepped out on a stage, not knowing why I was doing it

when I didn't need the paycheck, when I was missing my family even though Mom was literally six

miles away that night, when my brother was settling down in love, when my friends were in all

corners of the world and I almost never saw them together, and I didn't want to be there, because I

was an imposter. Just a kid from a middle-class neighborhood who got lucky a few times, and who

was getting spoiled by the world for being born with a gift for music that I didn't ask for and didn't

earn. And that night, I looked out at all those people, and I saw a woman in the third row holding a

sign that *my song* was what had gotten her through three tours in a combat zone."

She sucks in a breath, and I know.

*I know.*

It was her. She was the woman in the crowd.

And so I keep talking, because I've had this bottled up inside me for years,  
and if I don't get it out

now, I won't ever tell her.

I want her to know.

"I lost *me*. I lost my *why*. I forgot that for every dollar that went in my bank  
account, there was

someone out there who found happiness in my music. So I changed my  
attitude, I went back to who I

was before Bro Code, I figured out what mattered most and where I wanted  
to change the world, and

that's what I've been doing ever since. Fewer big shows, but more time with  
fans. More visits to

hospitals and nursing homes and schools. Charity work. Not in public, where  
everyone can see, but

where *I* know it counts. Life without a purpose, without a meaningful goal—  
that's not for me. So

that's what I'm afraid of. I'm afraid of losing me again."

"That's...wow."

"You didn't show for the meet-and-greet." My heart is pounding. My  
tongue's dry, and my voice is

raspy.

If I'm wrong—

"You saw me. I didn't make it up."

"I saw you."



“The bouncer—with the backstage pass—”

“I told him to give it to you between sets. But you didn’t show. You disappeared.”

“I was married, Levi.”

“I wasn’t—I wouldn’t have—Jesus, Ingrid, I—”

“I know. *I know*. I do. It wasn’t you. It was me. Daniel—my ex—he was already pissed that I was

taking the sign. He said it was like I was cheating on him. And he was upset about watching Zoe when

he rarely handled bedtime, and he kept texting that he was having trouble, and if I’d been out later

than I said, he would’ve—that would’ve been the end. I *knew* that would’ve been the end. And it

probably should’ve been, but I wouldn’t have Piper *or* Hudson if I’d used that pass, and they’re all a

handful, but they’re *my* handful, and—I can’t believe you saw me. I can’t believe you *remember* me.”

I’m itchy in my own skin, like I’m naked on stage at Madison Square Garden. I’ve never told

anyone all of that together. Not Tripp. Not Beck or Cash, who would get it. Not my mom either.

But Ingrid gets it.

She *felt* it.

And I hate her ex. I hate the sacrifices she has to make. Most of all, I hate that she feels guilty

about anything. “One person can change the world, Ingrid. One person can change *one person’s*

world. But you can’t do it if you’re afraid.”

“I—wow. This is blowing my mind a little. I...I changed your life?”

“It’s not why I keep coming back.” My tongue needs to consult my brain before I keep talking, but,

as usual, it doesn’t. “It could’ve been anyone holding that sign. But I keep coming back because I’m

glad it was you.”

“This might be better than phone sex.”

I smile. Leave it to Ingrid to break the weird tension, even if her voice is shaky. “Clearly, you’ve

never had good phone sex.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever—Ah, Hudson. Good morning.”

“Mama snug-snug?” a sleepy, tiny voice says distantly over the phone.

My heart tugs with a memory of the first time I held my nephew. I’m a workaholic and I know it.

Kids? Even less in the plan than marriage. I wouldn’t make a good dad. James and Emma are the

closest I’ll get, so I drop by, read them books, chase them in the yard, help build play forts all over

Tripp’s living room, and snuggle them at naptime, which they’re both about to outgrow. I’m the fun

uncle that they can trust with anything, and I like it that way.

*I miss the way they smelled when they were babies*, my big brother told me a few weeks ago.

Hard agree.

I wonder if Ingrid misses it too.

The rustling noises on the other end of the phone have died away, replaced with the soft, non-stop

chatter of a fully-activated four-year-old.

“Breakfast,” I say to Ingrid.

“Twenty-six minutes,” she repeats. “Eight thirty-two. Don’t be late.”

FIFTEEN

*Ingrid*

I DON’T KNOW if Levi is the punctual type, but I’m clearly not, which means I’m two minutes late

to meeting him at the back door of the store to let him in for our breakfast date.

Despite being up first, Hudson was last to be ready for the day.

It’s basically a rule. If any of my kids are up early, they’re impossible to get ready on time. It’s

like they think beating their alarm clocks by thirty minutes means they get three extra hours of

playtime.

“You time, Ingrid,” I mutter to myself as I hustle down the alley after walking Hudson to

preschool. I was trying to listen to an audiobook, which is my normal routine, but I couldn't silence

all the thoughts swirling in my head today. "Think about something other than your kids. Be a dazzling,

interesting conversationalist. Be a grown-up without any responsibilities. Remember to smile. Show

a little cleavage. Go for it if he offers to strip and take you on the table."

The desert formally known as my vagina roars to life at that suggestion, and heat pools in my

breasts.

Having a partner for sex is a novelty, and obviously, one my body's on board for.

Having a partner who confessed this morning that he saw me, remembered me, and used my sign

as inspiration to give his life meaning?

This should be overwhelming and terrifying, but instead, I'm feeling powerful.

Sexy.

Attractive.

Desirable.

Like Levi's confession put us on a completely level playing field.

He's not coming back because he's into booty calls with frazzled moms.

He's coming back because he sees me as something more. And maybe I should see me as

something more too.

I spot a late-model Buick parked near the back door, and I blow out a relieved breath. Definitely

not Levi. I have a minute to get myself together.

Is this a booty call?

Or is he just bringing breakfast?

I hope it's cheesecake. *And* a booty call.

I'm six steps from my back door when my phone rings at the same time the back door of the Buick

swings open.

The girls' school.

*Crap.*

For a split second, I consider letting it go to voicemail.

But if they need something— "Hello?"

"Hi, Mrs. Scott. It's Rebecca."

No *It's Rebecca St. John, receptionist from your girls' school.*

Not for me.

We talk at least twice a week, and not because I'm a model PTO parent. "Hi, Rebecca," I say as I

take in the scene unfolding before me in the alley.

Holy shit.

Levi was in the Buick. He's stepping out of the back of the car and smiling at me with a warmth

that completely takes my breath away.

*Hi. I missed you. Are you real? How fast can you strip? I can't wait to touch you. But it's okay*

*if we just talk and eat too. I like hanging out with you. You get me.*

I swear it's not one-sided, and I swear it's not my imagination.

He wants to take my clothes off. And he'd do it right here in the alley and take me against the

wall.

A brute of a dude with a shaved head who looks like he could hold his own with Piper's favorite

hockey player steps between us, cutting off my view of Levi's dark, inviting eyes.

Bodyguard. Right. I don't know this one. Giselle must have the day off?

"—could bring that in for her?"

I shake my head. I'm *on the phone* with my daughter's school, and I'm standing here mentally

getting myself laid in the alley. "I'm sorry, Rebecca, my connection cut out. What was that?" I fell

under the spell of looking at Levi, and I missed what the school secretary said.

But I don't miss it a second time.

"Piper forgot her hearing aid."

No.

*Nooooooooo.*

Is she serious?

My entire body sags in defeat, and I shift my gaze to the crumbling asphalt on the ground beside

the building's dumpster. "Does she know where she put it?"

"She says right where she's supposed to before bed."

"Okay. Okay, I'll find it and bring it ASAP. Thank you. Tell her to hang in there."

Levi lifts a brow as I hang up.

His security dude is looking pointedly between me and the door.

Right.

Because *come to the back so no one sees you* only works if we go inside.

And if we don't bang each other's brains out here for the office occupants in the building behind

us lucky enough to have an alley view.

*We were going to bang, my neglected vagina wails. C'mon, Ingrid. Four minutes in the back of*

*the Buick. Piper can wait.*

I shake my head again. "Sorry. School. Piper forgot her hearing aid, so I—"

"Hearing aid?" Levi frowns as he steps next to me, hands in his pockets, close enough that I can

feel that warm bubble of light he carries with him, but not close enough to touch.

“Yes, she—why did you think we all talked with our hands all the time?”

“Because he’s not very observant,” the bodyguard mutters.

He takes my keys from me, miraculously finds the first one on the first try—maybe he learned that

in bodyguard training?—and briskly shoves both of us into the stockroom.

“Tripp was teaching James sign language when he was little.” Levi shrugs as his bodyguard

closes us in the small room. “Please and thank you and more and a bunch of others. I guess I

thought...”

“Not very observant,” his security guy repeats.

I hold out a hand to him while I fight the urge to throw myself at Levi the same way I’d been

afraid I would’ve if I’d taken his backstage pass all those years ago. “Hi. I’m Ingrid. I’m a disaster.”

“Chuck. I’m not here.”

“Does Levi hire you himself, or does he have an excellent human resources manager who likes to

surround him with people who’ll keep him humble?”

I get a grin, but no answer. Warm hands settle on my shoulders, talented thumbs dig into the

perpetual tension knots at the base of my neck, and I suddenly agree.



Chuck's not there.

It's just me and Levi and his magic hands. "Oh my god, that feels good."

"I know." He kisses the back of my head, pulling me deeper into his cocoon of happiness and

safety, smelling different today. Like spiced cider and the first frost of the year. "You need help?"

*Tease*, my vagina grumbles.

It's right.

No nooky until Piper's hearing aid is found. I know she's freaking out in the school office. She

*hates* not hearing.

I don't blame her. The number of nights I've lain in bed wondering how I'd cope if I couldn't hear

the bells jingle on the door, or hear a truck coming down the street, or if I just couldn't hear music.

I reluctantly pull away from Levi, but I snag his hand and tug, and he follows me to the staircase.

"It's usually the first thing she grabs in the morning once she's gotten out of her sleep funk—that child

does *not* wake up well—but Hudson went flying into her room and woke her up with Skippy, and Zoe

spilled her orange juice, and things were a little more—you don't want to hear about that. Sorry."

"Why does she need a hearing aid?"

I like that he asks. So often, people dance around it like we don't want to talk about her disability.

"Ear infections. So many ear infections. They eventually caused permanent damage. She was three

when she got her first hearing aids. We don't need the sign language, but we've all been learning

anyway for cases like today—when her ears are lost."

We push into the apartment, and I head straight to the girls' room.

No hearing aids in the Thrusters coffee mug she keeps on her nightstand next to the bunk beds.

Which basically means they could be anywhere. "*Dammit.*"

I turn. Levi's leaning in the doorway, warm blue eyes settling on mine, looking both completely

out of place and completely at ease at the same time. He's in jeans again—black today—and a loose

Henley under that same trucker jacket, his five o'clock shadow thick, his hair freshly trimmed.

I wonder how often he has to fit in places where he doesn't belong, or if he's just gotten used to

making himself belong everywhere.

Or possibly that's a *me* problem—faking fitting in—and I'm projecting.

Either way, this wasn't what I had planned for this morning.

Especially after everything he told me on the phone this morning.

The warmth in his eyes is melting into flat-out heat as his gaze drifts down

my body. Hiding under

a long skirt, a camisole, and a lightweight fall cardigan, I'm in my best bra and a pair of red cotton

panties, which were the sexiest I could find buried in the back of my underwear drawer. A side trip to

the lingerie store down the way was on my agenda for this afternoon.

I haven't done anything special with my hair, which I used to keep cut within military regs since

it's easy to manage that way, but the past year or so, I've let it grow out, and now I basically wear it

in a ponytail half the time.

Today it's down.

My makeup is minimal—I didn't have time to do much more. I look like a mom and a bookworm.

But he's looking at me like I'm a sexy, desirable woman. One without stretch marks and boobs

that laugh at the idea of ever being perky again. A woman who doesn't come with a package that

includes three kids with their own challenges and a bookstore that does a little better every single

week, but still keeps me up at night for the same reason he mentioned early this morning—I don't

know when everything we're doing here will quit working, and when I might have to start over from

scratch.

He could have the world.

Yet he's gazing at me like in this moment, I *am* his world.

I know this is temporary. I know it's a short-term fling until one of us gets tired of the hassle, or

until one of us finds someone better, but *god*, it's so damn intoxicating and exhilarating to be *wanted*.

To be desired.

To be looked at like I'm something more than a frazzled mom.

"What am I looking for, and where do you want me to start?" he asks.

There's no impatience. No *let's do this so we can bang* in the timbre of his voice. It's all *how can*

*I take care of you? What do you need? How do I fix this?*

My ex would've been growling in frustration and yelling at me for this being *my* fault somehow.

Not Levi.

He doesn't owe me anything. He doesn't owe my kids anything.

But he's *here*. Taking time out of his busy schedule.

Offering whatever I need.

My tongue doesn't want to work. But my legs are fine, and they swiftly carry me the five steps it

takes to reach him, to throw my arms around him, and to press my mouth to his.

I don't know if I'm saying *thank you* or if I'm saying *save me*, but I know

when his arms wrap

around me and his lips part and his tongue touches mine, I'm not anyone's  
mom anymore, and I'm not

frumpy, and I'm not barely holding on to everything I have to manage.

I'm simply a woman.

Kissing a man.

My hands exploring the contours where his neck meets his shoulders, down  
his hard pecs, around

his slender waist beneath his jacket.

Inhaling the spicy sweet scent of his soap that makes me think of Italy in the  
spring and feel young

and carefree again.

Feeling the hard bulge growing against my belly.

I turn this man on.

He's devouring my mouth like I'm his favorite dessert, his hands sliding to  
squeeze my ass,

turning me against the wall in the hallway, his knee pressing between mine.

I want him naked.

I want him naked, in my bed, touching every inch of me while I lick every  
inch of him. I want to

be wild and irresponsible and reckless. I want—

I just *want*.

“God, you feel good,” he gasps against my lips.

I’m riding his hard thigh while he grips my skirt and pulls it up, rubbing my clit against him,

getting wetter than I’ve been in years, waking nerve endings that I thought had died, or at least could

only get excited by something powered by batteries, and it’s perfect and not enough and everything

and a fairy tale all at the same time. “I don’t—usually— *oh, god*, do that again.”

The man has found my nipples.

He kisses me again, wet and hot, deep, while he thumbs my nipples through two layers of fabric

and I ride his leg, heat coiling fast and hard in my core, everything building, sensations rocketing

across my skin, making goosebumps erupt over every inch of my flesh, my nipples tightening, my

breasts swelling while I grip Levi’s shirt and hit that peak moment when everything shatters inside

me.

I gasp as the first wave hits, hard and thorough, my toes curling, my thighs squeezing to hold on to

this exquisite, heavenly, thorough, bone-melting pleasure.

“Oh, please don’t stop.” I don’t recognize my own voice, and his is both foreign and familiar.

“So fucking gorgeous, Ingrid. I want to taste you.”

I picture his head buried between my thighs, and my body spasms harder.  
“*Levi.*”

He dips his head to my neck and nips at my straining tendons, and rational thought abandons me.

It’s all feeling, instinct, desperation to hold on to this moment, because god knows every moment

of pleasure is so very, very fleeting.

My orgasm is already fading, my body slumping, my head falling back against the wall and

knocking into a family photo.

He brushes a kiss to my neck, and a fluttery aftershock leaves my clit smiling.

Technically impossible, but I swear she’s purring.

“Oh my god,” I pant.

“You’re a fucking goddess.” He kisses my earlobe, and there’s another pleased flutter down

below.

His hard-on is still persistently making its presence known at my hip.

I need to do something about that.

As soon as my eyes uncross.

“You—”

My phone buzzes, and I groan.

He chuckles, his stubble brushing my cheek. “You’re a very popular

woman.”

“It can wait.” I trail my fingers down his back. “You—”

The damn phone double-buzzes.

Levi reaches into my skirt pocket and pulls it out. “Preschool?”

I let loose with a string of curse words I learned in the Army, and then the guilt settles in.

My daughter *can’t hear*, my son is probably missing something as well, and I’m standing in the

hallway trying to get laid.

Levi drops a kiss to my nose. “I’ll get Chuck. More hands. We’ll find it.”

I drop my head to the wall again, this time completely dislodging the photo from the wall. I catch

it with my back.

He grins, reaches behind me, and rescues my family photo that fell off the wall. “Never dull, is

it?”

“I’m missing my afterglow,” I mutter as I swipe my phone.

I shouldn’t complain.

He doesn’t have an afterglow at all.

But he’s not leaving.

“Mrs. Scott? This is Adelaide. Hudson brought a squirrel to school this morning...”



Yep.

This is my life.

SIXTEEN

*Levi*

I HANG around at Ingrid's place while she heads to the preschool to pick up Skippy, then to the

grade school to deliver Piper's hearing aid, which Chuck found in a nest in the squirrel's cage. My

security agent heads downstairs to wait for the repair crew coming to give Ingrid a quote on fixing the

water damage to the bookstore ceiling and to her bathroom floor, in case they arrive before she's

back, while I'm allowed to do exactly nothing where I might be seen.

Ingrid's family deserves privacy. Therefore, I can't be associated with her.

End of story.

But I snoop in her kitchen while she's gone.

Fantasize about the things I'd like to do with the canned whipped cream in her fridge, and wonder

if it's hidden in back because she sometimes takes a hit straight off it when her kids aren't looking.

Resist the urge to jack off in her bathroom to relieve the pressure. Whip up a few peanut butter and

jelly sandwiches and wrap them in baggies, since all signs point to her kids being lunch-takers, and

the peanut butter and jelly were both still on the counter in her small kitchen,  
along with half a loaf of

wheat bread.

Sing to myself. To my phone, really—never know when something good will  
pop out of my mouth,

so anytime I'm singing nonsense, I record it.

Fold the blankets strewn across her couch.

Debate how weird it would be to sniff her sheets and decide that's exactly  
when she'd walk back

in the door.

Fix Skippy a fresh bowl of water.

Check out the escape window and rickety fire escape balcony before I  
remember I shouldn't be

near windows.

All seems calm outside, though, and Ingrid's building backs up to another  
building without many

windows on this side. At least, not in the first three floors. The next several  
floors are clearly

apartments too.

She rushes back inside as I'm in the middle of serenading a scraggly  
houseplant. And yeah, I spin

like I'm caught.

Her eyes are wide like she's frazzled, but her lips part, and then tip up in a  
smile. "Were you—"

“Shh. Wynona’s sleeping.” I pet the plant.

“Wynona?”

“All plants need names.”

Her lips purse, and her eyes dance. “How many plants do you have?”

“Three. Elvis, Mr. Freckles, and Shithead, but I call him Poopsie when my niece and nephew

ask.”

“Shithead?”

“He’s in the corner of my room. Scared the hell out of me the first morning I woke up and forgot it

was there.”

“Who takes care of them when you’re gone?”

My ears get hot. “Housekeeper. You could say I’m more of a plant guardian than a plant daddy.”

“You know I’m calling you *Plant Daddy* for the rest of my life now, right?”

It’s impossible to not smile back when her amusement is lighting the whole building. “I can live

with that. How’s Skippy?”

“Grounded.”

She lifts a small cat carrier. The squirrel is gripping the bars like he knows he’s in prison.

“He seems like a good squirrel. You should consider a work release program.”

Her laughter eases something deep inside me that I didn't know needed easing. My shoulders

relax and relief loosens my neck too.

And when she sets the carrier on the kitchen nook table and opens the door, letting Skippy climb

up her arm to sit on her shoulder and nibble at her hair, eyeing the squirrel like he's been adopted into

the fold and he's not just an obligation she's taken on to make her kids happy, my heart swells with

warmth and I subconsciously close the distance between us.

There's something about seeing someone smile at another person—or animal, or plant, or rock, or

whatever—and knowing that they want the best for them. That she's spreading goodness outward

instead of trying to keep it all inside for herself, even when she's already given so much.

She deserves a break.

She won't ask for it. Which means it's up to me to make it happen.

I reach for her hip, ignoring the glare from the squirrel. "When—" I start, but Chuck sticks his

head in the door.

"You back? Handyman just got here."

She straightens and smooths her skirt. Skippy leaps for the table and uses the coffee pot as a

springboard to get on top of the cabinet.

“Yes. Thank you. I’ll be right down.” Her gaze collides with mine, and I get a subtle scent of

turned-on woman.

So much better than cheesecake.

“Thank you—” she starts the same time I say, “I’ll text about—”

We both stop.

Grin.

And meet in the middle for a kiss.

My bodyguard is watching, so it’s short. I’d consider firing him, except security is an unfortunate

necessity. Last time I tried to grab a burger at home by myself...let’s just say it was the last time local

law enforcement was willing to do me a favor.

“Later,” she whispers.

“Count on it.”

Chuck offers to chase the squirrel into his cage before my brain can recover from kissing Ingrid to

do the same.

I would’ve.

I swear.

Just not while short-circuiting on everything about this woman.

I'm free until six—private concert tonight for one of my favorite charities—so I head the few

blocks to Fireballs headquarters to bug Tripp at work.

It's unusual to catch him alone in his office, but I manage it. "Not making out with your wife-to-

be?"

"She's handling construction issues at the field." His goofy grin—very uncharacteristic of my

overly-serious big brother—makes me both happy for him and jealous that he's managed to find

another woman in his life that he loves as much as he loved his first wife.

Hell, as much as we all loved her. Hurt worse than anything I've ever lived through when she

died.

The jealousy isn't explainable, nor is it familiar.

And it's not something I have any intention of thinking about right now.

I kick back on the orange couch in his office, which he refuses to let anyone replace. Even after

being completely and thoroughly sanitized by a forensic clean-up crew, it's disgusting, inherited from

the previous owner, who was a horny old guy with questionable taste in friends and companions and a

terrible work ethic when it came to overseeing the ball team.

Considering my brother's war with hypochondria, I know the couch isn't

here because he likes it,

but rather because it's his constant reminder of how bad the Fireballs were, and how much work they

still have to do to keep the faith of the fans in Copper Valley again.

One successful season of not being the worst team in baseball doesn't make a trend.

"You hiding from being told you picked the wrong layout for the seating chart?" I ask.

"Nope. Tied up with scouting reports."

"Is that a subtle hint for me to leave?"

"Of course not. I want to know all about the woman who dropped by your place after she gave

you a concussion, and you've been ignoring my texts."

I grab a baseball and flip it in the air a few times. "Playboy bunny. I'm bringing her to

Thanksgiving. With her pole."

"You're taking a poll? About what?" Beck sticks his head in the door too, followed by Cash

Rivers.

"Dude!" I stand and give him a man-hug. "Welcome home."

He thumps me on the back. "Had to come here since *someone* stood me up *twice* in a week."

Beck's grinning. "Are we taking a poll on how serious Levi is about this chick if he's skipping

bro time for her?”

“We’re taking a poll about how we’re going to torture you to get Mom’s boyfriend’s name.”

“Won’t work. My lips are sealed.”

I eyeball Cash.

He grins and shakes his head, making his shaggy light brown hair shake with it. “I know nothing.

But I wouldn’t mind knowing more about this chick who has you running home with your balls tucked

between your legs.”

As if I’m saying a word about Ingrid to any of these guys. Cash isn’t into settling down either, but

that doesn’t mean he won’t rib me as hard as Tripp and Beck will. “Not a chick. A *chicken*. I heard

there’s a specialty store nearby with two-foot chickens that squeak *extra* long.”

Tripp flips his pen onto his desk and gives me the exact death look I’d expect, especially after

getting Ingrid’s opinion on the squeaky chicken. “Why are you all here? Because not a single one of

you have said anything worthwhile yet.”

“Got bored,” I say.

“Expecting a hero’s welcome,” Cash replies.

Beck spreads his arms. “I just missed you and wanted to see your face.”



“I have to get through scouting reports if the Fireballs have any chance at staying good.” Tripp

points to the door. “Out.”

“But you need lunch too,” I tell him.

“It’s ten-thirty, and the *only* reason I want to see *any* of you is if you have information to share

about my mother’s new boyfriend.”

He glares at Beck, who looks at his watch. “Ten-thirty. You’re right. It’s first lunch time. Don’t

you want to know about Levi’s lady love?”

Tripp’s eye starts twitching. “Do any of you work?”

The rest of us trade glances. “No,” we reply in unison.

“I do want to know about Levi’s lady love though,” Cash says.

The fucker.

I roll my eyes. “I don’t have a new lady love.”

Wow. Those words tasted way more sour than they should’ve.

“So you really were at that bookstore across the park because you’re reading vampire novels?”

Cash nudges Beck. “You see the pictures of the owner? She’s hot.”

Forget the floor is lava. My lungs are filling with lava and I’m about to spew it in his direction.

*Think about your blue balls, Levi. Think about your blue balls.*

I squeeze my hand into a fist. “I didn’t know you knew what bookstores were.”

Cash laughs. “Weak sauce.”

“I like books with pictures,” Beck says. “Do you think she has any of those?”

“One day,” a female voice says from out in the hall. Every one of us brightens as Sarah sticks her

head in the doorway too. “One day, I ask for two hours to get some work done, and you disappear to

disrupt everyone else to keep them from working.”

Beck grins at her. “I just got here.”

“After stopping at six other offices on the lower floors. I’ve been getting text messages since

nine.”

“Had to say hello to my friends.”

“So invite them over for arcade night. Cash. Levi. Time to go.”

“How long have you been in the building?” Tripp asks Beck.

He and Cash share a look. “Five, six hours?”

“It’s *ten-thirty*.”

“How are you not all over social media right now?” I ask Cash.

“Bribery.”

“Who the hell are you bribing at five o’clock in the morning?” Tripp’s making the same face he

makes when someone asks how long James has had a pet gopher hiding in his room.

“Night cleaning crew, and only to not tell people I was here.” Cash crosses his heart with a finger.

“Swear on my sister’s favorite baby doll.”

“Whatever you did, *please* undo it before I either have to explain it to Lila or the cops, whichever

shows up first.”

“Tripp. Dude.” Beck shakes his head. “Don’t you know by now that no publicity is bad

publicity?”

I flip one of the couch cushions up and use it like it’s my Captain America shield. “Take cover,

Sarah,” I whisper. “Tripp’s about to blow.”

“I am *not* about to blow, but I don’t have time for making sure none of the mascot costumes are

missing, that everyone in marketing won’t be sitting on whoopie cushions all day, or for looking into

all of your social media accounts to make sure you didn’t record yourselves using foul language while

touring the building wearing the Ash costume.”

Cash grins. “Tripp. How long have you known us? Would we show up in your office and let you

know we were here if we were just here to cause trouble?”

“Yes.”

Beck nods. “We really would.”

Sarah’s stifling a smile. “There’s a new Thai restaurant two blocks over. They open for lunch at ten-thirty.”

“You’re a genius,” I tell her.

“I’m starting to get hungry every time Beck does too. This is totally self-serving.”

“Speaking of self-serving, what do you know about my mom’s boyfriend?”

She ruffles my hair. “Nice try. Ask her yourself.”

“I have season tickets behind home plate open,” Tripp says. “They’re yours and Mackenzie’s if

you spill the beans. I won’t even ask you to find out what these two yahoos have been doing in my

offices all morning.”

“And this is why Mackenzie knows nothing about your mother’s boyfriend either. I even blocked

Beck’s number on her phone so he can’t accidentally spill the beans.” She slips one hand into Beck’s,

then grabs Cash by the collar with the other. “Levi. C’mon. You too. Leave the man alone.”

Tripp spins back to his computer. “He doesn’t need lunch. He needs sleep.”

“I—”

“Haven’t slept since you left Australia,” Mr. Know-It-All interrupts.

I flip him off behind the couch cushion I’m still using as a shield.

He smirks. “I’m telling Mom.”

“I don’t think either one of us are at the top of Mom’s list right now. But if you want to be the one

tattling and making me look better, be my guest.”

“Leave your mother alone unless you want to just go have lunch or dinner with her or take her out

for mother-son pedicures,” Sarah says. “She raised you. She let you both go off and tour the world.

She’s earned some of her own happiness *without judgment* from either of you.”

And this is why I like Ingrid so much.

She tells me the same thing, but nicer.

“Dibs on the pedicure,” I tell Tripp.

“C’mon, Levi. *Out.*”

I look at my big brother one last time, and I know Sarah hit a nerve.

Mom would tell us about her boyfriend if she didn’t think we’d be assholes about it.

Tripp knows it too.

“Text me which nights you can get away for dinner, and I’ll coordinate with Mom,” I tell him as I

head to the door.

His brows go up, and so does my guilt factor. He's usually the one asking me for my schedule

when Mom needs something or when I've been gone too long.

Time to quit taking them both for granted.

SEVENTEEN

*Ingrid*

I'M asleep by the time Levi texts that he's done with his charity event, and when he doesn't respond to

my text in the morning, I assume he's sleeping now. Night owl, plus jet lag on top of it. I get it.

I'm still disappointed, but I also have a bookstore to run and kids to wrangle.

When he texts back and we try to coordinate schedules to fit something in, it turns out he has a

family dinner, then a bachelor party, then business meetings in New York and a commercial to shoot

in Germany early next week—and yes, I’m incredibly jealous that he gets to visit Germany, even

though he insists his sightseeing time is limited.

But it’s a good reminder to concentrate on the *friend* part of our arrangement.

My ex traveled all the time too.

So much so that when he left, he barely knew his kids. When he was home, he wanted me to keep

them quiet so he could recover from the stress of being gone.

*Girl, what are you doing?* Portia asked me when I told her I was pregnant with Hudson.

Guilt and shame had washed over me.

I wasn’t taking care of my marriage. I was barely hanging on to taking care of the two kids I

already had, and now we had a third on the way.

Daniel was in Ukraine on assignment, and I hadn’t told him yet.

I didn’t *want* him to know.

I wanted *this* baby to only know people who loved him and were there for him.

Portia talked me out of the guilt and shame— *don’t you ever apologize for loving other people,*

*but you need to start taking care of you too,* she’d said.

So when she shows up at Piper’s hockey practice Saturday morning with that no-nonsense, *we’re*

*having a talk* look, I know what I'm in for.

"Zoe, watch Hudson." I slip her my phone. "Text Aunt Portia if you need me."

She takes the phone without looking up from her book.

I just got her started on the *Aru Shah* series, which means I also look to another mom, who nods

and smiles to me.

Universal symbol for *if your kid gets distracted from drawing scribble squirrels and his sister*

*doesn't notice because her head's buried in a book, I'll let you know.*

"Everything okay?" I ask Portia as I join her in the hallway outside the practice rink.

"Shawn had a birthday party at that game place down the way, and I haven't seen you much this

week." She pulls a mini-Heath bar from her purse. "Figured I'd bribe you to find out what's going

on."

"Zoe told Eric I've had company?"

"That she did."

"It's casual. No strings. I don't have it in me to take on strings."

"Plus, he's Le—"

"*Shh.*"

"Oh, Ingrid." Portia clucks her tongue, points me to a small, round café table



with blue plastic

chairs outside the concession stand, and dumps half a bag of baby Heath bars on the Formica. “Spill.”

I give her the shorthand version of the phone flirting and making out on the roof and in my hallway

while we both dive into the candy pile, plus the *top secret* part. I know Portia gets it—she doesn’t

have the years of military operational security training that I did, but she has a cousin who went viral

on Facebook for trying to make a homemade angel food cake while slightly inebriated and couldn’t go

a single day for weeks without strangers asking about her *floof cake* and if her boyfriend liked the

way she whipped him good too—don’t ask, you really don’t want to know—but I still emphasize the

secret part multiple times.

When I’m done whispering, my friend nods. “One, good for you. Two, are you out of your mind?”

This is why I love Portia. She doesn’t pull punches, and she sees all the sides. “It’s just a little

fling.”

“Did you set an end date?”

“No, but come on. He’ll find someone young and smart and worldly who can stay up past eight-

thirty at night, and he’ll gradually quit trying to make out with me, and then

he'll gradually quit

calling, and that'll be that."

"I will have absolutely zero respect for the man if he does that to you."

"Or maybe I'll go get the girls from school and run into a new single dad of *one kid* who's

attractive and attentive and whose kid needs siblings and we'll hit it off and *I'll* be the one gradually

letting go of my fling."

The seven wrappers now in front of me suggest I'm dealing with my delusions by eating them.

I lean in closer and drop my voice even more. "You know that thing where nothing goes as

planned when you have three kids and a job?"

She squeezes her eyes shut. "I'm terrified of where this is going, Ing."

"Every time he's been around in a disaster, he's helped out."

"You need to drop this man before you get attached."

I probably do. "I've *never* had a partner. I don't *need* a partner. But having a friend who

sometimes washes my dishes and happens to be really good at making me remember I'm also a

woman with needs is making me feel...alive isn't the right word, but..."

"More?" she asks softly.

"Yes! *More*. Like I'm re-discovering a part of myself. And I'm never alone—

ever—but I feel less

lonely now.”

She tilts her chin down.

“Ah-ah, don’t take offense. You know I love you. You know I’d jump in front of a train for you.

But your boys keep you as busy as my life keeps me, and there are certain things you *cannot* do for

me.”

Her lips twitch in amusement. “If he hurts you—”

“Portia, it’s inevitable. And I’m okay with that. We’re all works in progress, and I can either hide

and never hurt, or I can experience life, hurt sometimes, grow, and move on.”

“You’ve been going through your self-help shelves, haven’t you?”

“There are *so many good books* right now. I was just listening to this new one I heard about in my

small bookstore owners group on social media.”

“Hey, Ingrid?” Brittany calls from the doorway. “Hudson has a crayon in his ear. I don’t think it’s

hurting anything, but you should probably come look just in case you need to tell a doctor about it

later.”

I sigh.

Portia shakes her head, but she’s smiling. “He’ll grow out of it.”

“I know. It’s all a phase.”

We spend the rest of the day running errands and hitting the local rec center for Zoe’s gymnastics

class and Hudson’s little ninjas class, which seems like a terrible idea for an already rambunctious

little boy, but it gets his energy out.

Some.

All three kids need new shoes, and Piper needs bigger skates, and Hudson needs a new lunch box

since he taught Skippy that his always has peanut butter smears in it.

Let’s just say I declared the lunchbox a federal disaster zone.

When we get home, we go in through the bookstore. My feet are tired, my ears are worn out, and

I’m dragging six bags from our shopping trip.

I spot Holly grabbing a box of mugs in back, which means the coffee bar must’ve been popular

today. Foot traffic’s up, and I’m glad we have extra holiday help starting Monday. And Yasmin seems

flustered by the customer at the register.

“Go see if there are any new books you want to put on your wish lists,” I tell Zoe and Piper when

Yasmin waves me over.

I keep a tight grip on Hudson’s hand through one of my bags and paste a smile on my face.

The customer is tall and lanky with a thick brown beard and a manbun, and I can't tell if he's

closer to twenty-five or forty-five, though the lack of gray suggests he's closer to twenty-five. Or

possibly in the middle.

Yasmin's shifting from foot to foot. "Ingrid, do we have any books on wave mechanics?"

"The surfing kind, or the science kind?"

"Both," the customer answers.

There's something unnerving about his brown eyes. They're both kind and probing at the same

time, which is a special skill to have in a gaze, and I find myself tightening my grip on Hudson's hand.

"Unfortunately, no, but we can special order anything." I step behind the counter, drop my bags,

grab my emergency tablet for when I need Hudson occupied, and point my son to a small bean bag

chair I keep back here for him.

"Thank you," Yasmin whispers.

She's blushing.

I glance between her and the customer. He keeps a straight face, but I see Yasmin fanning herself

as she ducks toward the hot mess merchandise section.

We don't get a lot of male customers as a general rule. We carry a little bit of

everything, but sell

more mysteries, women's fiction, kids' books, and popular self-help than anything else—all books

bought more by women than men. We don't stock games and puzzles and toys because we're trying to

compensate for low book sales. We keep them because women make impulse purchases for their

families. And the coffee shop in the reading loft, the weekly book club, the twice-weekly storytime

for the little kids, the Hot Mess Moms Club shirts, mugs, and bags, and even the way we identify the

different sections of the store—that's all about *girl, I have been there, and I will take care of you*

*when you need a break.*

It's worked well. So well, in fact, that we're picking up more male clients who want to escape the

same way the neighborhood moms do, though this one today is unique.

"Were you flirting with my sales associate?" I ask him.

"Only if *do you know calculus* is a pick-up line." He leans his elbows on the counter, the sleeves

of his dark denim jacket hitching up just enough for the ink on his wrists to peek out. "Do *you* know

calculus?"

He has presence, I'll give him that. "Are you a student?"

“No.” He grins—not a full grin, mind you, but just enough to let you know he’s amused—and he

suddenly looks weirdly familiar, though I can’t place him.

“Professor?” I probe.

“Professional geek.”

“Have you been in here before?”

“Nope.”

“Then welcome to Penny for Your Thoughts. Is there a particular book on wave mechanics you’re

looking for?”

“One I haven’t read yet.” He accompanies his answer with a sly smirk.

No wonder Yasmin was flustered. “Do you have a list of books you *have* read?”

“No.”

“Great. If we’re special-ordering, which we’ll have to, that opens the doors to a lot more books.

Let’s see what we can do. I’m Ingrid. And you are...?”

“That’s classified.”

“A handful, then. Got it.”

I pull up my supplier’s database and settle in for the challenge, peeking at Hudson and listening

for the girls. We’re fourteen books deep before I find one that Mr. Mystery hasn’t read, but he takes

one look at the author, snorts in derision, and suggests I go back to looking again.

Four more books that he's already read later, my children make their presence known. "Mom!

Piper ripped a book!"

"I did not! It was already ripped!"

"Bookstore voices, girls," I call back. "You know what to do with damaged books."

"She pushed me!"

"She won't let me through!"

"She's trying to hide the book she broke!"

"Mama, I'm being the good one," Hudson says from the floor.

My customer's lips twitch with his almost-grin again. "Do you have the new *Dog Man* book?"

"Most likely."

"I'll just take that, please."

Is he serious?

I try to hide my reaction, but his lips twitch once more as he rocks back on his heels. "Quality

literature."

"The kid section is behind you. Can't miss it. Look for the massive yellow duck and the *For The*

*Adorable Anklebiters* sign. Excuse me. I need to go break up a fight."



By the time I'm finished sending the girls upstairs, Yasmin's helped Mr. Mystery find his *Dog*

*Man* book and sent him on his way. She flits back to the stockroom, where I'm inspecting the torn

book, with her hand over her heart. "*Ingrid. Do you know who that was?*"

"He wouldn't tell me his name." I suddenly realize Hudson's still alone behind the cash register

with an iPad in hand. Knowing Hudson, he's probably found either porn or a political talking head

show.

I set the book down and set a path for my youngest.

Yasmin follows. "That was *Davis Remington*."

I'm focused enough on getting to Hudson that it takes me the full length of the store for the name to

penetrate.

Davis Remington.

The one member of Bro Code who basically disappeared after the band split.

One of Levi's neighborhood friends. I know they stay in contact, because he's mentioned him a

time or two.

I have my phone pulled out, ready to text Levi to ask if he's been talking to his family and friends

about me, when I spot Hudson standing on the checkout counter, reaching for —actually, what *is* he

reaching for?

*“Hudson.”*

“It Charlotte, Mama.”

A spider.

He’s reaching for a spider dangling off its thread, hanging in the middle of my grandmother’s

bookstore.

I shudder.

Holly, who’s coming down the stairs, shrieks.

Hudson goes up on his tiptoes, and there’s no question in my mind what’s about to happen.

It’ll involve him losing his balance, toppling off the counter, landing on his head, and needing

stitches.

I dive for him.

Yasmin dives for the spider.

Holly shrieks again, comes running, and dives for Hudson and me.

And the four of us end up rolling on the floor together as the bells jingle merrily over the door,

opening for a woman with twins in a double stroller.

She stares at all of us, stuck with her stroller wheel caught so she can’t get fully in, and I manage

to get out, “Hi, welcome to Penny for Your Thoughts. We’ll be right with you.”

Her bottom lip trembles as she studies the four of us tangled on the rug, and then she bursts into

tears. “Oh my god, this really is where I belong!”

Yasmin and I share a look. “Self-help,” I say.

“Board books,” she says.

“Coffee, tea, or hot chocolate?” Holly asks.

The woman sobs harder. “Sorry. I don’t normally—it’s the hormones—I haven’t left my house in

six days—self-help sounds great.”

“Mama, what’s hornymoans?” Hudson asks.

“They’re what get us into trouble in the first place, baby.”

“Whoops,” Yasmin says. “Lost Charlotte.”

Hudson bursts into tears too.

And even though this is exactly why my bookstore is as successful as it is—we are so relatable

here—I say a silent thanks to the universe that Levi’s friend wasn’t around to witness *this*.

EIGHTEEN

*Levi*

IT’S mid-afternoon Sunday when I roll out of bed. I’m in New York, in my penthouse in Tribeca, and I

would've been up a few hours ago if I'd gone to sleep before eight this morning.

Early morning was my only chance of catching Ingrid awake and free to chat, and since I was up

until four working on a new song after flying in after Tripp's bachelor party last night, it made sense

to stay up a few more hours rather than miss her entirely today.

And now she's running her kids between play dates and birthday parties.

I snap a picture of my view of the Manhattan skyline and text it to her.

No answer, so I hop in the shower.

She'd like my shower. It's state-of-the-art, with wall nozzles and a rain shower head. Heated

towel rack within easy reach. Heated floors too.

It's been three days since I've seen her, and I've rubbed more than one out to fantasies of her wet

and naked in the shower with me. Here. Copper Valley. My place in L.A. Any shower will do. That

look on her face when she came in her hallway—and how easy it was to get her there—I want more.

I want *all* of her.

And I currently hate my calendar for keeping me out of Copper Valley for the next eight days.

I have a dinner meeting with the president of my record label at eight, two days of meetings about

my next album, and then my plane leaves for Germany Tuesday night. On any other trip overseas, I

might call up an old friend from the area for a good time in my three spare hours. This time, I haven't

even left yet, and I want to be back home.

I'm getting attached. This isn't normal.

But it's not as unwelcome as it should be for a guy who's known since birth that he wasn't ever

planning to settle down with a woman.

I picture sweeping her away for a weekend at a mountain cabin, snow falling outside, fire roaring

in the hearth, me strumming my guitar while she reads a book, sometimes sharing her favorite

passages with me, sometimes laughing softly to herself until I can't resist being so close without

touching her.

Stripping her.

Caressing her.

Tasting her.

Her hands exploring my skin.

Her eyes dark and needy.

Her lips parted, her tongue darting out, hungry and eager while she devours me with her eyes, so

turned on that she's subconsciously rubbing her own breasts.

I jerk my aching cock while the hot water pounds down on me.

Eight. Fucking. Days.

I don't want to wait eight more days. I want to see her *now*.

And it's not because I didn't get off in her hallway. It's not because things have to be *even*.

It's because she's hot. She's smart. That mouth—whether she's gasping my name or kissing me or

sassing me over whatever, I want more of it. *All* of it.

I have an obsession, and her name is Ingrid Scott.

Even her name makes my nuts tighten and my cock strain, and I'm blowing my load in my hand

before I've completely mentally stripped her.

One hundred percent official.

I have a problem.

She's not my first no-strings relationship.

But she's the first I can't stop thinking about.

And no amount of showering until the water runs cold can wash her away, put her back in the *for*

*when I have a free minute* box, or convince me that I have any right to ask to date her for real.

I'm out of town for the next eight days, home for two, out to...hell, I don't even remember where I

have to go, but I know I'm booked until Thanksgiving.

Tripp's wedding weekend.

And then I'm not *off-off* the rest of the year, but I'm slowing down.

Just until January, when I take off the same way Ingrid's ex apparently used to as well.

I'm in a foul mood when I walk out of my bathroom, rubbing my hair dry.

Almost miss the smell of coffee.

Did I set the timer?

Or— "*Jesus Christ*, asshole. Who let you in?"

Davis is stretched out on my couch, reading a book with a cartoon dog cop on the cover. He's in

cargo pants, a Nine Inch Nails concert T-shirt, and Chucks, which he has propped on my armrest.

"The door. You wanna know what I know, or not?"

I glance down—not naked. I'm in a towel.

Lucky Davis. And now that my heart's settling back in my throat, yeah, I'll admit I'm glad to see

the fucker. "I saw you last night at home and you couldn't have made the offer then?"

"Nope."

"What's it gonna cost me?"

"If anyone asks, I wasn't here."

“That’s it?”

“Yep.”

“So you don’t want anyone to know you’re in New York. And you could’ve avoided anyone

knowing you’re in New York by not breaking into my place.”

He smirks.

“Hairy asshole,” I mutter. “You want them all to know you were here.”

“New York, yes. I promised someone authentic black and white cookies. At your place? No.

They’ll know I spilled the beans on your mom’s boyfriend. Hence why I couldn’t say anything last

night. Too many witnesses.”

If he didn’t have my full attention before, he has it now. “What’s this gonna cost me?”

“Two meet and greet tickets to your holiday special in Chicago.”

“For who?”

“Not part of the deal.”

Of course it’s not. That’s how he rolls. Could be planning to give them to anyone from two mega-

fans that he overheard talking at a coffee shop to a couple pets from a shelter. Or he could be planning

on using the actual physical tickets as a prank against someone who wouldn’t be caught dead listening



to my music.

Never know.

“Done,” I tell him.

“I could go for homemade cinnamon rolls too.”

Now he’s just pushing my buttons. “So call your sister. Hers are better.”

“She doesn’t do the orange marmalade ones.”

“You hate those.”

He doesn’t crack a smile, but he doesn’t have to. Of the five of us who left home to tour the world

as Bro Code, Davis was always the most dangerous when it came to pranks.

Mostly because he looks so serious and above it all.

I scrub a hand over my face.

Yep. Totally caving to his demands, even suspecting he’ll be using them for evil. “Do you need

them today?”

“By Christmas is fine.”

“Anything else?”

“Don’t flash me when you sit down.”

I tighten the tuck on my towel and roll my eyes. “Who’s she dating?”

“Stan Sheldon.”

It takes me a full second before I figure out why I know that name. “*The car*

*guy?* ”

“That face is exactly why she didn’t tell you.”

“My mother’s dating a used car salesman.”

“She’s dating a tycoon.”

Fine. Yes. She’s dating the guy who owns basically the entire Copper Valley new car sales

industry. If there’s a car brand to be sold, he owns a dealership that sells it. It’s not the same as the

used car market. And I shouldn’t judge used car salespeople. Just because the guy who sold me *my*

first car sold me a lemon and knew it doesn’t mean they’re all corrupt assholes.

“The look on your face right now is why she hasn’t told you.”

I consider flashing him, even though he’s right. “So when *is* she going to tell us?”

“My sources say when she decides if it’s serious or not. He’s not the first guy she’s dated.”

“Good for her.” The words practically choke me. My mother’s been dating. And I didn’t know it.

“Does Tripp know?”

“I’m a good friend, not a masochist. Telling Mr. Overprotective is a job for little brother.”

Or not.

Davis pulls himself off the couch. “Besides, you can hardly blow your temper

on your mom for

dating when you're hooking up with a single mother yourself."

"What the fuck?"

"You went to a book club. The store's owner is the only person working there who's both single

and into men."

"Maybe I was doing research."

He smirks. "And that's why you let her come to your place with cookies after her daughter gave

you a concussion."

"You have your own mother. Quit kissing up to mine for information."

"Filling in for you, bro. Your mom misses you."

And there goes the guilt again. "We took her out to dinner last week, and I'm taking time off for

the holidays."

He snags his book, then grabs a jacket off my chair. "Yeah. Noticed, with that holiday mini-tour

you're doing through half of December."

"It's five shows." And I'm doing two charity concerts, and a couple virtual fan meet-and-greets

for super active members of my fan club, now that I'm thinking about it.

And then there's the shoot for the—huh.

Also, *dammit*.

I'm not taking time off.

I won't see Mom. I won't see Tripp and Lila and the kids, or anyone else from the neighborhood.

I won't have time to see Ingrid.

Davis shoves his inked arms into his army green jacket. "Is it serious?"

"Is what serious?"

"You and Ingrid. I like her. She has spunk."

"You—tell me you didn't pull the mysterious overbearing stranger routine."

He grins and snags his book.

*His book.* Did he get that book at Ingrid's place?

Where's my phone?

Bedroom. I texted Ingrid a picture. It's in my bedroom.

"Me and Ingrid aren't a *thing*." The words choke me.

Davis knows it too. He's giving me the all-knowing man-bun eyeball of *liar*.

"Fake, secret, or

blackmail?"

"Always one of those three, isn't it?"

"You picked the life, dude."

I did, and this is exactly why I haven't gotten serious with anyone.

Infatuated? Yeah. Hard-core infatuated? A time or two. There's a reason my

mother hates Violet,

my most notorious ex, the way she does. But every reason Ingrid gave me for not wanting to date me

is exactly the reason I've never been willing to settle down myself.

I grew up without a dad. I won't do that to a kid. Or to a partner.

Slowing down? Yeah, I could see myself doing that.

Giving up on touring all together?

No way.

They can pry that microphone out of my cold, dead hands when I'm ninety-seven.

"Secret," I tell Davis. "She has three kids she doesn't want appearing in the tabloids. Not a lot of

spare time. Plus, her ex traveled too much. It's just—just a thing."

Davis can be a sneaky bastard, and he can be annoying, but he understands shit the rest of us miss

all the time. Which means the sympathetic, *dude, you're fucked* look coming from him makes my gut

tighten. "Good luck with that."

"I can handle a fling with an attractive woman who needs to blow off steam, and we'll both be

just fine."

In coming up on twenty years on the road, I've eaten some questionable foods, put my body

through jet lag more times than I can count, drunk a lot of stuff I shouldn't, and my stomach has

suffered the consequences.

Right now, it's suffering about the same fate as the night I should've skipped the oysters and

tequila at that dive bar in—hell, I don't remember where I was.

Most of the next week was a blur of digestive disorders.

Davis is giving me another one of those sage man-bun looks. "Do what makes you happy, man.

The rest is in the noise. Tickets. Cinnamon rolls. And tell your mother you're happy she found

someone who treats her well."

I need to be home more.

No, that's not right.

I *want* to be home more.

See my family more. Sneak into open mic night at a bar in the warehouse district. Have a talk with

fucking *Stan Sheldon* about how to treat my mother.

Date Ingrid.

I want to date Ingrid.

Not temporarily. Not be friends with benefits. Not in secret.

Smart and low-key to keep her out of the tabloids, yes. But a secret from my family and friends?

No.

Except I can't be there for her the way a guy who wants to date her should. I can't get to know her

kids without being the guy who also doesn't make it to hockey games and gymnastics meets and

preschool Christmas programs.

I want to date her, but I can't be what she needs.

This is officially a fucking disaster without a solution beyond *keep calling this a secret fling for*

*as long as you can so you can keep her forever.*

Except there's one other solution.

And that's that I let her go.

NINETEEN

*Levi*

FORGET LEAVING HER ALONE.

I've been in Germany for less than twenty-four hours. I can't sleep. The director on this car

commercial is a grade-A dick, and as someone who can be a perfectionist when it comes to stage

performances—trust me, I really can—I have the absolute authority and experience to recognize *dick*

over *fussy artist*.

One uses his manners and shows appreciation. The other is just a dick.

My favorite restaurant here in Nuremberg doesn't open for another two hours. I don't want to go

out. I don't want to stay in the hotel.

I want to be home.

Maybe I *have* been traveling too much.

Except *home* is New York these days, and I'm not thinking of New York.

I'm thinking of Copper Valley. The city skyline. The ballpark. The Blue Ridge Mountains hugging

us.

Ingrid's bookstore.

Ingrid. Naked. Laughing. Smearing cheesecake all over my chest.

Licking it off.

I'm hitting her number before I give myself time to process what I'm doing. She picks up on the

fourth ring. "Hey?"

She's out of breath, and it's a question.

*What are you wearing* is probably not what I should lead with here. "Hey. You busy?"

"No, I— *Zoe Elizabeth, put your brother down*—I'm good. Breathing through my nose. Not

planning to sell my children to a wolf pack. Doing just— *Piper. We do not pull our pants down and*

*moon our family at the breakfast table.*" She snorts like an angry rhinoceros



to punctuate her

statement.

Even though I'm an ocean away, I back up from the window in my hotel room to get out of the

blast zone.

No phone sex.

Right.

Dammit. "I can call back later. Or you can call me. Whenever. Anytime."

"So help me, if you hang up this phone, I might not have three children when you get back to the

States." She blows out a loud breath. "And I don't actually mean that, but—  
*Hudson Andrew Scott,*

*DO NOT TOUCH YOUR SISTER'S HEARING AID.* Jeremiah was a bullfrog,  
*I cannot* with all of you

this morning. *Oh my god*, why is the squirrel in the refrigerator?"

There's a mass of voices and shrieks on the other end of the phone.

A door slams, and all goes quiet.

"Sorry," Ingrid mutters. "You didn't need to hear that."

"I called Tripp once when James was giving Emma a bath in the toilet."

"Oh my god."

"Not the best discovery for a guy dealing with hypochondria..."

"I just want to pull my hair out. We do this *every morning*. Seven days a

week. We *always* have

somewhere to be, but can they just eat breakfast and brush their teeth and get dressed and get out the

door without fighting or breaking something or telling me they forgot they have a science project due

tomorrow and we were supposed to be growing mold for the last two weeks? No. No, they cannot.

And *there was a squirrel in my refrigerator*. Do you know what that means? That means if I hadn't

opened the fridge door before we left, I'd come home to half the things in my fridge eaten by the dead

squirrel laying in the middle of it. *How is this my life?* How? Do you know when I was in the Army, I

once broke up with a roommate because she left cups on the coffee table without using coasters? And

now I'm happy if all the laundry in my bedroom is shoved in a *small* pile in my corner because it

means the kids have just picked stuff out of it all week so there's less to fold when I finally get around

to it."

"Spa day."

"*When the fuck am I supposed to do that, Levi? When? WHEN?*"

She blows another breath over the phone line as I trip over my own two feet retreating from my

tactical error.

Single mom. No family. Friends just as busy as she is.

Right.

“Sorry,” she says. Swear I can hear her wincing. “Sorry. Not your fault. I shouldn’t yell. Sorry.

Seriously. Bad time.”

“Hey, let it out. Can’t keep it bottled up all the time.”

“Are you serious?”

“Back in our Bro Code days, Davis used to get amped up when the local reporters would ask

what his mom thought of all of his tattoos, or if it was true he was dating an actress as old as his

parents. We had scream time on the bus to help him cope. All five of us. We’d yell like banshees, call

each other names, fight about who used whose toothbrush and who kept putting dirty socks in whose

bunk. Yell away. Thick skin. I can take it.”

“You have lived the weirdest life.”

I reach across the bed and grab my laptop. “If you ever need a babysitter, let me know. Tripp has

one or two he trusts, which means they’re basically qualified to take care of royalty.”

“Thank you, but it’s not necessary. I’ve got this. I do. I have babysitters. I have friends. I just—

some mornings I need to blow off steam. Zoe’s almost ten. *Ten*. I don’t have

*any* idea how I'm old

enough to have a child with a double-digit age, especially when she was born yesterday—and I don't

mean that in a *she's stupid* way—but the next thing I know, even Hudson will be leaving the nest, and

as much as they drive me crazy some days, I don't *ever* want them looking back and saying I wasn't

there and that I didn't do everything I could to help them find their way in the world."

I pause in the middle of starting an email to my brother to ask for his favorite babysitters' names.

"Ingrid. You're like supermom. They'll know."

"But will they?"

"Maybe by the time they're forty."

She laughs, but it doesn't sound like she's amused. "If I'm lucky."

I wonder how many of these days my mom had when I was growing up.

Probably more than I want to know.

"You know what might help?"

"Traveling to a dimension where time moves in a way that I can have a full spa day in the three

minutes before I need to go back out and face the monsters of my loins?"

"Phone sex has to be a close second, right?"

"*Moouooooom! Hudson showed me his penis!*"

Ingrid sighs the kind of heavy sigh that settles on me like a blanket made of iron.

A guy who's gone all the time, adding more things to her to-do list, demanding more of her time

when she already has so little of it to herself, is *not* what she needs.

Or maybe I can be exactly what she needs for a little bit. "Next week. You pick the day and time.

I'll find you a babysitter, and then I'll fix you dinner. My place. Stay as late as you want. Or leave as

early as you want. Just—let me give you a night off. Or an afternoon off. Or —"

"WHAAAAA! ZOE HIT ME! "

I squeeze my eyes shut.

She needs someone who can *be there*. "Right. You need to go. I'll text you later. No rush in

replying. Sorry. Forgot it was breakfast time there." Because I'm a self-centered asshole who wanted

to distract myself from boredom with phone sex with my not-girlfriend.

"Did you just offer to find a babysitter for me?" she asks quietly while her kids keep yelling in the

background.

There's a landmine hidden in her voice. "I didn't mean you're not capable," I sputter. "I just

meant—"

“That you’d take it off my plate.” She’s getting quieter and quieter.

“Am I in trouble?”

“No. *No*. That’s— *thank you*. That’s incredibly thoughtful.”

“I don’t want to be a complication.”

A soft laugh carries over the miles, and she says something I miss over the sound of her kids all

calling her.

I don’t know how she does it.

Some days I can barely handle myself, but she’s there running her life *and* three others’ like a

boss.

“Text me later,” I say. “Whenever. You’ve got your hands full.”

“Thank you.” She says a quick goodbye, and then she’s gone.

It’s fine. She needed to go. Her kids are her life. I’m a side distraction.

So why do I want to be there to offer to walk Hudson to preschool and help put together a science

experiment on non-existent mold?

I decide it’s because I’m a nice guy.

Ego? I can live with that.

Having my world turned upside down by a woman who’s filling in cracks that I didn’t even know

I had?

When I'm everything she *doesn't* need?

Not ready to face that yet.

So I tell myself I'm being melodramatic and go in search of a pretzel instead.

TWENTY

*Ingrid*

PENNY for Your Thoughts is decorated for Christmas. The shelves are stocked, staff schedules are

set, babysitters are booked, and we are officially ready for the kick-off to the holiday season in four

days.

My kids are nearly ready for bed.

And I am more than ready for one Mr. Levi Wilson to be back in Copper Valley.

He's not due back from Germany until tomorrow sometime, but since he called late last week,

we've been texting like crazy, and we have a date.

*A date.*

I mean, a *fling* kind of date, but still. Portia's taking all three kids for a sleepover Wednesday

night. I went shopping for lingerie. And Levi's cooking.

For me.

At his place.

Where there are no children, no squirrels, and no interruptions.

But I have to get through tonight first, then tomorrow, and *then* all day Wednesday. And I can't

quite stay busy enough to distract myself from thinking about him.

And a night of grown-ups being grown-ups.

Talking without interruption. Eating hot food while it's hot and cold food while it's cold.

Sex.

We are so having sex.

"Mom! Hudson licked my arm!"

"Zoe said Mr. Axolotl is a fibbamibbian!"

"He *is* an amphibian! Ow! *Piper*! What are you doing?"

I love my children. I do. And I want them to remember childhood with fond memories of doing the

things they loved and knowing that I love them.

But I am so ready for Wednesday night. Forty-eight hours.

Forty-eight hours until I get my first real night off in—actually, I'm not going to finish that

sentence.

It's for the best.

I finish folding the last of the laundry and head out of my room with the kids' stuff in a basket.



“Zoe. Shower. Hudson. Back to your room. Piper, put your— *Piper*.” I nudge her with my foot, since

she’s laying in the middle of the hallway, poring over the same *Sports Illustrated* issue she’s read

three times a day since it arrived over the summer, ignoring me, which means she took her hearing

aids out so she didn’t have to listen to her brother and sister argue.

She looks up at me.

My hands are full—no signing *get your tush to your room and get ready for bed*, so I settle for

giving her a mom look.

She rolls her eyes.

Rolls. Her. Eyes.

She’s *seven*.

And she’s flipping back to *Sports Illustrated* like it’s more important than the mom look. Even the

squirrel on her shoulder is ignoring me. “Ares is in this issue.”

I nudge her again, which earns me a dirty look from Skippy. I’m *very* aware of which issue she’s

reading, because it’s the only issue she ever reads. “Bed,” I say, very distinctly, when she scowls up

at me. “Skippy too.”

“Ares’s mom didn’t make *him* go to bed.”

“Yes, she did. He probably talks in that article about how important sleep is, which you can finish

reading *tomorrow*.” It’s pointless to argue. She’s not looking at me, and even if she was, her lip-

reading skills only get us so far.

But she climbs off the floor, tucks the magazine under her arm, cradles the squirrel, and heads to

her bedroom.

I nudge her again, prop the laundry basket on one hip, and point to my ear.

“They were being annoying,” she grumbles.

I’m suddenly jolted sideways, and I twist in time to grab Hudson by the arm while Piper shrieks

and Skippy uses all of our heads as springboards to get back to the living room. “No running in the

hallway.”

“Super Axolotl to the rescue!” he crows. “’Scuse me, ma’am, let me put out that fire!”

He points his buggy-eyed amphibian toy at me, hisses like he’s spraying water, and grins.

Zoe stomps out of her room too. “Quit spraying Mom, Hudson. That’s rude.”

“You’re rude!”

“No, *I’m* helpful. *You’re* a baby.”

I growl.

Both of my children slide glares at each other, but they also go their separate ways.

An hour later, I collapse on the couch, everyone tucked in, the squirrel in his cage, and I'm staring

at the TV, which is muted on a nature channel. I want to read a book or listen to an audiobook, but my

nervous energy kicks up and sends me right back up to my feet.

When is Levi getting back?

Will it be first thing in the morning or in the afternoon? Or late tomorrow night?

*I don't know.*

And does it matter?

Not really. I have a full day at the shop tomorrow, plus the girls are off, and Hudson only has half

a day, and then there's the preschool Thanksgiving program tomorrow night.

Huh.

I haven't scrubbed the stovetop in a while. Probably time.

Maybe I'll tackle the fridge while I'm at it. We have Thanksgiving dinner at Portia's every year,

so it's not like I'd be cleaning something to make a massive mess again in a few days.

Not that my kids will let anything stay clean more than thirty minutes, but still.

It's a grown-up thing to do, and one that usually gets neglected.

I cue up my audiobook app and try to concentrate on the mystery I've been listening to while I

clean, but I'm honestly stealing more and more glances at my text messages.

Do I text Levi?

Do I leave him alone?

I sent the last message in our text string, so technically, it's his turn. I don't know his exact

schedule, but I know it's the middle of the night in Germany.

And I know I'm missing an entire chapter in this book.

But my stovetop is gleaming.

I've just emptied my fruit and veggie drawers from my fridge to scrub the hell out of them—you

don't want to know what I found in the bottom of the veggie drawer, and I probably couldn't even tell

you what it originally was if you asked—when my phone rings.

*Yes!*

Levi's *calling*.

It takes me four swipes to answer because my hands are a disaster, and I might be too. "Hey,

you!"

Do I sound like a dork?

I think I sound like a desperate, breathless dork.

“Hey. Your kids asleep?”

Yes! Finally. Phone sex. I am so *in*. “In theory. They’re not volunteering to help me scrub the

fridge, at any rate. Why aren’t you asleep?”

“It’s not usually a good idea to sleep in alleys. Tried it once. Didn’t like it.”

“Why are you in an alley?”

“Because I don’t have a key or the code to your security system, and unlike some people I used to

be in a band with, I don’t randomly break into my friends’ places.”

I drop the vegetable drawer. “*Shit!*” I hiss as the noise echoes through the apartment.

“Ingrid?”

“You’re *here*?” Shit shit shit. Did I wake my kids? Tell me I didn’t wake my kids.

“Yeah, and I gave my security detail the night off, because I was supposed to stay home. If you

want me to leave—”

“No! No. Stay. I’ll be right— *erp*—down.”

That *erp*?

That’s me sliding on a wet spot on my kitchen linoleum in my rush to get to the door.

*Don’t slip and die, Ingrid. Don’t slip and die.*

We could be heading to *serious* booty call time.

I'm halfway down the stairs before I remember I'm in leggings with a rip in the thigh and one of

my hot mess mom T-shirts.

I don't even want to think about the underwear underneath. Of which there are only panties,

because I released the krakens an hour ago.

So. The plan.

Let him in. Go change. Hope the kids stay in bed.

I should've done better sleep training. Nightly meditation or something. Noise machines that

induce deeper sleep.

Plus fashion training for me, if only to give myself a subconscious boost.

Right now, I'm not certain he won't take one look at me, remember what he's actually getting out

of this deal, and decide to head home.

I kill the alarm system and unlock the back door, and he slips out of a black Audi and into the dim

stockroom.

Where I'm in a ratty outfit that even I wouldn't wear to get drive-thru Starbucks, smelling like

bleach and oven cleaner, he's in cargo pants, a button-down shirt, and a leather jacket, and he smells

like fresh bread and a chai latte. His hair's perfect—mine's falling out of a makeshift bun—and

despite subtle bluish bags beneath his eyes suggesting he needs three solid days of sleep, everything

else about his scruffy face says *I could make you scream my name in four-point-three seconds.*

“You’re home early,” I blurt. My hands are raw and smelly, but I couldn’t keep them to myself if I

tried. They have to touch him. To prove he’s not a hallucination—not the man, and not the smile

teasing his full lips, and not the way his eyes are devouring me. “And you came here?”

“Had to. The pretzels aren’t as good the next day.”

I’m stroking his chest as he slips one arm around my waist and reaches into his jacket to pull out a

white bakery bag that instantly makes my mouth water.

I swallow and stare at him. “No. Way.”

Pretzels, a man who smells like a corner tea shop, and that smile he aims at me—this is normal

for a fling, right?

I’m soaking up extra happiness because it’s been so long since I’ve been spoiled by a man.

It’s not that I’m falling hard for someone who would be around even less than Daniel was.

I don’t have a love-at-first-attention problem. Really.

“It’s not gelato,” he says.

“Bread is *always* the answer.” I glance at the stairs, then back at the pretzel bag.

Would I be a horrible person if I scarfed it down right here, in the midst of boxes and books in my

stockroom, rather than risk the smell of the pretzel waking my kids?

Also, would it totally turn Levi off if I did?

He chuckles like he knows what’s actually turning me on at the moment, and my face warms. “I’m

glad to see you too,” I tell him. “It’s not just about the pretzel. I ran down here to let you in *before* you

mentioned pretzels. Real pretzels? *German* pretzels? Oh my god. I did *not* see this coming.”

“You don’t want to share.”

*Gah*, that smile.

And he hasn’t stopped smiling at me since I shut the door. It’s like he thinks my pretzel-deprived-

when-I-didn’t-even-know-I-wanted-one, questionably-fashioned, makeup-free, smelling-like-cleaner

self is adorable or something.

“The vegetables! Crap. I think I left my fridge open.”

“Do you still have a pet squirrel?”

“Yes. Caged. I don’t think he can pick the lock yet, but clearly...I need to go shut my fridge.” I

stick my nose in the bakery bag and inhale, almost have a nosegasm on the



spot, and then promise the

pretzel I'll be back ASAP. "Five minutes," I tell Levi. "Head up to the loft. I'll meet you there."

"Is Hudson comatose?"

I snort with laughter, but it could easily be a sob. Legit question. "I have a baby monitor, and once

I set the alarm again, if he tries to sneak out, we'll know it. Go on. Shoo. To the loft, I mean. Don't

leave. If I'm hallucinating you, I will be *very* pissed off."

He presses a kiss to my forehead, and even though it's a simple, friendly gesture, I feel it in my

clit. "Don't change."

"My personality, or my clothes?"

"Yes."

Hello, warm tinglies in my chest. "Are you this nice to everyone?"

"Kind-nice? Yes. Pretzel-nice? No. That's only for my favorite people."

"Did you stop and give your mom one first?"

His eyes widen, and the tips of his ears go pink. "I—yeah."

"You *did*."

"Just making sure she remembers who *her* favorite is."

I grab him by the cheeks and press a kiss to those perfect lips. "That is the sweetest thing *ever*."

“I missed your lips.”

He’s staring at them like they’re the best erotic art he’s ever seen. Like he’s not at all turned off by

the way my hands smell like cleaners, or the way my hair’s in knots, or even the way my boobs are

sagging under my T-shirt.

That surge, that connection, the spark—it wasn’t in my imagination while he was gone.

He thinks I’m attractive.

No.

He thinks I’m *sexy*.

Have I shown him that I think he’s sexy too?

Not because he’s *Levi Wilson*, pop god. Not because he brings me pretzels. Not because he’s

always in well-tailored clothes with perfect haircuts.

But because he smiles at me in a way that makes me feel like I’m everything that’s missing in his

life. Because he asks how my kids are doing and doesn’t seem to mind when they act like themselves.

Because he offers to find me a babysitter on top of offering to cook me dinner, like he gets that dinner

is never just *dinner*.

Because he does crazy things like flies home early and comes here, to see *me*, after stopping in to

see his mom.

He's such a great guy.

"I have a confession," I whisper.

His eyes are sapphire at midnight as they lift back to meet mine, his hand sliding down my ass.

"Has someone been a bad girl?"

"I can't stop fantasizing about taking your clothes off."

"And where do these fantasies happen?"

"Everywhere."

Oh, god, his smile. His hands. His *I want to spread you out on the kitchen table and eat you*

bedroom eyes. My panties are officially soaked.

He's pulling me tighter to him, and that bulge against my belly is making me even wetter. "So I

know I understand you right...are you fantasizing everywhere about me, or are you fantasizing that I'm

making you come everywhere?"

"Yes," I whisper.

His hard length twitches against me.

I arch into him. "But I want to make you come too."

"Fuck, Ingrid."

"Yes. You definitely need to *fuck Ingrid*. But first..." I flick open the top

button on his silky  
smooth shirt. “You.”

His chest rises unsteadily as I free the next button. “Is this my reward for pretzels?”

“You don’t have to bring me presents for me to want to strip you. You *are* the present.”

I press a kiss to his chest, the dark hair tickling my face, the hard muscle beneath warm against my

lips, his breath making his sternum rise up to meet my mouth, and I work my way down.

I haven’t done *this* in ages either.

It’s possible I don’t remember how.

But he flew home early to see me. He’s kept me entertained with text messages for the past week.

He made me see stars in my hallway, then didn’t ask for anything in return when I was having another

family crisis.

The man deserves a reward.

His fingers curl into my disaster of a ponytail as I press a kiss to his belly button and reach for the

snap on his jeans. “Ingrid—you don’t have to—”

“Shush and let a woman see if she still remembers how.”

“You—”

I drop to my knees and cut him a look. “Levi Wilson, I *will* use the mom voice. So unless you’re

telling me *no-no*, and not just being a gentleman...”

“No more gentleman. Cross my— *fuck*, that feels good.” His head drops back as my knuckles

graze him through his boxers while I pull down his zipper.

He’s in emoji boxers. Oh my god.

He’s perfect. Silly and serious and sexy and *everything*.

I rub his hard-on through the cotton. “I like the way you say *fuck*.”

“I like the way you do everything.”

Just a few little words, and he makes me feel *more*.

And does he get this hard for every woman he passes on the street?

Somehow, I don’t think so. If he did, he wouldn’t keep coming back.

*You are out of your ever-loving mind*, a level-headed, logical, Portia-like voice whispers in my

ear.

It’s not wrong.

But peeling Levi’s cargo pants down his hips, taking his boxers with them, and seeing his proud

cock spring free?

That’s not wrong either.

He’s *lovely*.

Thick and long without being terrifying, his head bulging, and a prominent vein running jaggedly

from root to tip. I stroke him once, and he hisses out a slow breath. “Jesus, Ingrid...”

“You don’t touch yourself?”

“I can’t *stop* touching myself when I think about you, but you touching me—this is—”

I lick his tip, tasting his salty pre-cum, and he cuts himself off with a guttural moan as his fingers

tighten in my hair.

I’m driving Levi wild.

*Me.*

He could’ve gone anywhere tonight. Seen anyone. And he wanted to bring *me* a pretzel.

I cup his balls, swirl my tongue around his head, his raspy *oh, god, yes* all the encouragement I

need to suck him into my mouth, my breasts tingling and my clit pulsing.

How did I forget how much of a turn-on it is to make a man lose his mind?

It takes me a minute to find a rhythm, squeezing him at his base while I take him deeper and

deeper, rubbing the flat of my tongue against his smooth, silky underside, one hand moving to brace on

his tense thigh for balance, because *yeah*.

Not enough core work lately.

Too much ice cream.

But he's gasping my name like I'm the sexiest, smartest, most talented woman on the planet.

Are guys picky about blow jobs?

I honestly don't know.

But I want to touch myself. I'm aching so hard between my thighs right now.  
The things I want to

do to this man.

The things I want this man to do to me.

He hits the back of my throat, his thigh trembling under my fingers. "Fuck, Ingrid, I'm gonna

come."

*Good.*

That's the whole point.

I squeeze his thigh, rub my thumb along it, and suck him deeper, lifting my eyes to watch as he

throws his head back and groans, spilling himself down my throat, my name on his lips like a song,

like a prayer, like poetry.

It's the first time in my life that I've *liked* my name.

His body sags against the shelves as I pull off his still semi-hard cock.

"Jesus, Ingrid. That was—" He cuts himself off with a surprised grunt as I'm pulling his boxers

back up, and then something thumps and falls on my head.

I shriek and tumble back in time to see a second box teetering on the top shelf, while yodels

explode behind me.

*Yodels?*

“Box!” I point, smacking Levi in the arm as he reaches for me, a throbbing pain taking up

residence on top of my head.

He’s still hanging out of his pants, open over his thighs, and when he turns, he trips and goes head-

first toward another box.

I shriek again as he catches himself, but the motion sends the second box toppling.

More yodels behind me.

Levi and I both dive out of the way of the second box, which lands with a thud, followed by a

bunch of chicken screams.

*Yo-da-lay-dee-hoo!*

*BAGOCK!*

*Yodalay yodalay yodalay!*

*BOCKADOODLEDOO!*

“Oh my god, the chickles! The pickens! The *yodeling pickles* and the *screaming chickens!*”



Levi snorts with laughter while I lunge for the two boxes.

And suddenly I'm snickering too.

"Are you okay?" I manage to ask between gasps of laughter.

He sinks to the floor next to me, pants back on, bent double while the boxes continue to squawk

and yodel. "What—the hell—do you—sell?"

He's clearly trying to stop laughing but can't.

"Oh my god, my kids. Tell me my kids can't hear this."

"How's your head?"

"Been through worse."

The box of yodeling pickles goes quiet, then yodels once more.

Levi and I lock eyes, and I swear we're both thinking it.

*That's not how a blow job usually ends.*

We both double over again.

Until I realize what I've done. "*My fridge!*"

He wipes his eyes, his smile so bright, I almost don't care if the milk is all spoiled, except for the

part where I'll have to run to the drugstore to get more because Hudson will have a total shit fit if he

can't have milk on his Cheerios in the morning.

"C'mon, Superwoman." Levi offers me a hand. "Let's go fix your fridge."

We pull each other up, and I almost get lost in those happy blue eyes again, but I force myself up

the stairs, knowing he's right behind me—oh my god, and with *pretzels*.

I almost forgot about the pretzels.

And I have *every* intention of asking him to help me work out this lingering arousal.

That hand he has on the small of my back?

It's also turning me on.

Get in. Fix the fridge. Take the pretzels to bed.

That's the plan.

Except my doorknob is locked.

"Oh, fuck," I whisper.

I yank it again.

Twist harder.

And then I drop my head to the thick wood.

For the record, this wood isn't *nearly* as nice as the wood I had in my mouth five minutes ago.

"Spare key?" Levi asks.

"Cash register. Except I'm pretty sure I used it last week and forgot to put it back."

I'm locked out of my apartment, where my four-year-old could get up at any minute and crawl out

the balcony window if he decides it's time to set the squirrel free, with my fridge hanging wide open,

and *oh my god*, what if he decides to play hide and seek in the fridge like Skippy did last week?

Deep breaths.

*Deep breaths.*

"I don't suppose you know how to pick a lock?" I ask Levi.

His gaze meets mine, and there's something in his that I can't interpret.

It's not a *no*.

But it's not a *yes*, either.

It's more of a wince.

He pulls his phone out of his jacket pocket. "I might know someone."

"It's okay. I can call Griff. Portia's husband. Firefighter. They'll knock the door down for me.

They know Hudson. I mean if I can't get a locksmith." I'm not getting laid tonight. "You don't have to

wait. If you don't want—"

"Ingrid." He squeezes my forearm, which is one of those gestures I had no idea I was missing.

Everything in my arm warms, and then it spreads to my chest, and it's suddenly easier to breathe. "My

way's more fun. Possibly more dangerous, but definitely more fun."

"More dangerous than boxes of yodeling chickens?"

“Only for me.”

He looks up from his phone, winks, then hands me the pretzel bag. “Sit. Dig in. Help’s on the way.”

TWENTY-ONE

*Levi*

IT’S NOT unusual for me to wake up and not know where I am, but it *is* unusual to wake up, not

know where I am, have a crick in my neck, and still be utterly and completely relaxed and happy.

Must’ve been the dream.

I let myself smile, because I can still hear it. It sounds like Ingrid. “Levi. Hey, sexy pants. Sun’s

coming up. Gotta move.”

Wait.

That’s not a dream.

*Dammit.*

I pry one eyelid open and decide I’m good with this not being a dream.

Ingrid’s bending over me. Her hair’s down and damp, leaving wet marks where it falls on her

shoulders. Her lips are full and rosy, her eyes dark, her cheeks smooth where my fingers drift to touch

them.

“Morning.”

Her eyes crinkle when she smiles. “Good morning, sleepyhead. My kids are awake and both of

my girls know exactly who you are, so if you don’t want them telling their friends that I know you and

that you crashed overnight in the bookstore’s loft, you need to hurry.”

“I like your loft. It has music.”

“There isn’t a single minute of the day when you’re not attractive, is there?”

“Nope.” I snag her at the waist and pull her to the couch with me. I don’t remember falling asleep

last night. I remember Davis coming over and working his magic. Ingrid asking him if he finally found

a new book on wave theory, or if *Dog Man* really is more his speed. Davis smirking at me, then

texting that I owe him a cover story for next Tuesday night in payment. I’d be mad, except I like the

game, and he knows it. He asks me for favors from time to time too.

I remember Ingrid sitting with me on the couch, with four different house keys and her baby

monitor in hand, moaning over the pretzel.

Laughing over stupid shit we both did in our younger years.

Every time I thought I’d one-upped her, she came back with a story of her own from her time in

the Army, or before, with her grandmother.

She really did see the world before she settled here to raise her kids.

And the number of things she does and sees with them on any given day is amazing too.

I curl a lock of her damp hair around my finger. “What are you doing Friday night?”

“Soaking my feet and using the back stretcher thingie that Piper got for me at last year’s holiday

fair at school. Assuming I manage to get upstairs before midnight, that is. And I don’t actually know if

it’s a back stretcher or if it’s a missing part of a cat-sized hamster wheel or something, I just know it

feels really good to stretch when I remember and have the energy to use it.”

Oh. Right.

Dammit.

Holiday shopping season. Retail store.

She’s probably even less available than I am for the next month.

Should be comforting, but that gut-level disappointment tells me this isn’t the casual fling it’s

supposed to be.

Neither was flying home early because I missed her.

I have it *bad*. “Tell me more about this back stretcher thing.”

She kisses my cheek, and my morning wood tries to sprout an extra branch. “Later. C’mon, you

big sack of potatoes. Don't make me nag you like I nag my kids to get moving in the morning."

"Can I come back tonight?"

A thousand thoughts flit over her face, and I swear I can read at least four or five of them. She's

probably thinking about which kid has which activity tonight, when she can get out to have a few more

spare keys made, if I want to just hang out in her loft and write songs after the store's closed, or if I

want to help her tuck the kids into bed.

I like her kids.

They're funny. At least, they seem funny, based on all the stories she's told me. Zoe's apparently

wicked smart, which is no surprise for an oldest kid. Piper sounds unstoppable on ice skates. And I'm

pretty sure Hudson and I could be life-long friends.

He's definitely the type to dare someone to lick a metal lamppost on a snowy day. And also the

kind to probably take the dare.

Thirty years ago, he would've fit right in back in my neighborhood.

Which I won't be telling Ingrid.

"After the store closes," I say to her perplexed expression. "I'll bring Giselle. She'll make sure I

stay up here and out of trouble. And if you get a free minute, maybe I can

find more cheesecake.”

“You are seriously cutting into my reading time.” She smiles like she doesn’t mind, though. “Text

me later. We’ve been picking up traffic, and restocking is taking longer than it usually does, plus

Hudson’s class is doing a Thanksgiving pageant and I’m worried he’s going to try to take Skippy to

play the part of the turkey.”

Like I said, Hudson and I could be total bro-mates.

She pokes me in the ribs, and I twitch and squirm. “Tickle spot!”

“Up and out, or I’ll *really* make you regret dilly-dallying.”

I shift to bring my face to hers, and I brush a kiss to her lips. “I like you, Ingrid Scott.”

Her blush is immediate. “I like you too, Levi Wilson. Now scoot. I also have to find a last-minute

babysitter.”

My ears perk up. “For today?”

“The girls are off school, Hudson only has half a day, and my usual sitter has the flu.” She pulls

back, wagging her tickle finger at me. “No distractions this morning. No time.”

“I can do it.”

“Distract me?”



“Watch your kids.”

Her face screws up so hard in comic disbelief that her eyes actually cross.

It’s fucking adorable.

“I watch Tripp’s kids all the time. They’re just people with less life experience.”

*“Just people with less life experience* tells me you have no idea what you’d be getting into.”

I grin. “I know. That’s the best part.”

“Absolutely not.”

“On my honor as a grown-up whose lead protection agent will be there to supervise, I will not

wreck your children or your home.”

Yes, I do know *exactly* how not normal that sounds to Ingrid. The security part, I mean. Not the

*wreck your home or your children* part. I know her well enough to know that’s probably a standard

question she asks babysitters.

I add my most irresistible smile.

She squeezes her eyes shut. “*Why?*”

“Why won’t I wreck your house?”

She’s good. That’s the exact same look my mother has given me time and time again for thirty-odd

years. “*Why* would you want to watch all three of my children all day today,

from basically now until

probably six tonight, cooped up in an apartment because there's no way you're taking any of them out

in public, and—”

“How does Hudson get to preschool?”

“I walk him. It's twenty minutes. Yasmin can handle the store and Holly's good back-up. And how

is it that you have nothing else on your calendar today?”

“I'm on vacation.” And I'm supposed to be helping Tripp with anything he needs before the

wedding on Friday.

Considering he doesn't need to be talked off a ledge, he's had the rings for months, Lila's

terrifyingly organized, and they're doing a small family thing at a reception hall that caters to Copper

Valley's more prominent citizens, I doubt he needs me for much.

Typical older brother.

Making me useless.

Ingrid's still squinting at me like she doesn't believe me. “Do you actually take real vacations?”

Legit question. I lift a pinky.

She smiles like I'm a total goofball. “I don't think you actually told me your secret the last time

you offered me a pinky.”

“There’s no one to hose us down this time.”

She laughs and hooks her pinky in mine.

Total excuse to touch her. Won’t apologize. I like touching her. “I have a secret phone that only

Mom, Tripp, and my assistant know the number to. When I’m on vacation, the regular phone gets

locked up, and I’m truly only reachable in an emergency.”

“So you’re not actually on vacation right now.”

“I’m one-hundred percent on Thanksgiving-family wedding vacation. And I’m one-hundred

percent ignoring about sixty-eight messages from other wedding guests.”

“Mom?” a voice calls from below.

Ingrid’s eye twitches. “Coming, Zoe.”

“Hudson put a Pop-Tart in the microwave and it exploded.”

Her shoulders sag. “Okay. Be right there.”

“You have Pop-Tarts?” I whisper.

“Apparently not anymore.”

“Hey. Totally serious. I don’t have plans. If you need help, I’m here. And I can have Giselle pick

up more Pop-Tarts on the way over.”

She studies me like she knows this isn’t normal behavior.

It's not.

I've never offered to watch a girlfriend's kids. Hell, I've never offered to find my girlfriend a

babysitter for her kids either.

And Ingrid wouldn't call herself my girlfriend.

I probably shouldn't call her my girlfriend. I probably shouldn't hang out with her kids. If they're

going to have someone in their lives, they deserve someone who can *be in their lives*.

Someone who can go to their Thanksgiving pageants and hockey games and gymnastics events,

either because he's actually in town, or because him showing up won't be such a distraction that no

one pays attention to the kids.

She shakes her head, then rises and uses our linked pinkies to tug me to my feet. "Go home, Levi.

Enjoy your day off. I'll text you later. Promise."

"Offer stands if you can't find a sitter."

"You are a fascinating puzzle."

And I'm officially being banished.

It's disappointing.

After Ingrid disappears back to her apartment with Zoe, and I sneak out the back door, my car is

gone, exactly as it should be.

My security detail is a well-oiled machine. Giselle is waiting in a Honda Pilot with tinted back

windows.

I've been sneaking around Copper Valley in cars that blend in for *years*.

And I'm getting tired of it. Tired of the constant security. Tired of having other people handle

some of my most basic needs, like shopping for groceries and setting up a cleaning service.

Tired of being interested in a woman— *seriously* interested in a woman—for the first time in my

life, and that very same life being an impediment to getting to know *all* of her better.

Giselle eyes me in the rearview mirror. "Rough night?"

I shake my head.

It was an excellent night.

The rough part was that it had to end.

TWENTY-TWO

*Ingrid*

DID you know that the three days before Thanksgiving are the third-hardest days of the year to find a

babysitter?

If they're not, it's close, beat only by Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve, or

possibly the

holidays themselves. Or maybe the problem is that there's an early flu making the rounds, and most of

my circle is full of working moms or volunteering moms.

And that's the short reason explaining how my girls end up gaping at me as I formally introduce

them to Levi and his friend, Giselle, who will be watching them while I'm working today.

Hudson too, after preschool this morning.

"Are you the real Levi Wilson?" Zoe wants to know.

"That's his name." Piper rolls her eyes. "Duh."

"I mean the *famous* Levi Wilson. The one who sings 'Got That Back.'"

"I don't like that song. I can't understand the words."

Giselle smirks.

I mean, as much as Giselle ever smirks. But I swear her eyes crinkled a little like she's amused.

And I think Levi sees it too, based on the subtle *shut up* look he slides her way.

"You sure you're still up for this?" I ask him.

He smiles the self-assured smile of a man who's never babysat grade school girls. "Can't get

better if you don't know what you're doing wrong."

Zoe's still squinting at him. "You shouldn't wear white pants. They'll pick up

dirt and you'll

never be able to get them clean."

Now that look he aimed at Giselle lands squarely on me, and I swallow a smile.

*I* didn't say a word about his clothing choices when he got back. For the record.

Beggars and choosers and all that. I'm a little desperate for help.

Plus, I like how he looks in his tight white pants, even if I also get jealous that he can pull it off

and I can't.

"I'd leave now if I were you," Giselle says to me. "Before he changes his mind."

"And you're just here to call 9-1-1 if something catches fire or a bone gets broken?"

"He's the only person I babysit, but I'm morally bound to alert authorities and medical personnel

for anyone else in my vicinity who might be in trouble. Your children are safe."

"How's your squirrel today?" Levi asks Zoe.

She points to the fridge. Skippy's sitting on top of it, chewing on a magnet.

"Darwinism," I mutter.

My daughters *both* roll their eyes, and now Levi's smothering a grin.

"Do you know how to bake pie?" Piper asks him.

“Nope.”

“We should YouTube it and learn.”

“Awesome.” He pulls his phone out of his pocket. “Go on, Ingrid. We’ve got this.”

I don’t know that he does, but I’m also not in a position to be picky. Portia’s taking the kids

tomorrow night and neither she nor Griff can get off work today. Nor would I ask them to.

They do so much for me already.

Zoe and Piper could technically hang out with me in the store all morning, but Hudson’s spent too

much time cooped up there already this fall, so the afternoon would be an issue. Plus, they’d all three

be bored.

And as soon as I’m back downstairs, it’s clear that I couldn’t even keep half an eye on them

anyway.

We’re way too busy.

“Hey, Ingrid?” Yasmin says as we work the register side-by-side.

“Yeah?”

“Remember three years ago you were freaking out about how much the renovations cost when you

weren’t sure this would work?”



“Yes.”

She grins. “It worked. Good job, boss.”

I blush.

I think she’s right. This isn’t just a holiday shopping crowd. It’s regulars.  
Regulars bringing in

friends. People who tell us they heard about us from coworkers.

The loft is so busy that Holly calls her wife in as backup for the coffee bar,  
which usually only

happens the three days before Christmas.

I still find time to text Levi once or twice an hour.

And when I bring Hudson home after his morning preschool, I find my entire  
kitchen coated in

squirrel-footprinted flour, two made-with-love-but-not-talent pies cooling on  
the oven, tampons

scattered about the living room, Zoe wailing along to one of her new favorite  
songs, using a pretend

microphone as she shows off her best Waverly Sweet impersonation, and  
Levi sitting on a white sheet

in the middle of it, sporting fairy wings, while Piper paints his fingernails  
purple.

I can’t decide if I’m horrified or absolutely, completely, positively in love.

Confession: Part of me asked him to come back so my girls could one day tell  
people about the

time Levi Wilson, international pop god, babysat them.

Other confession: I think this is both the stuff of nightmares and better than my wildest dreams.

*Why are my tampons all over the living room?*

“*Skippy!*” Hudson yells.

He bolts for the squirrel, who’s sitting on top of the bookshelf, chewing on a tampon that’s still in

its wrapper, and starts to climb the shelves like a monkey.

“Don’t move!” Piper shrieks at Levi.

Zoe stomps a foot. “*Ugh*. Now I have to start my song *over*.”

“Hey, Ingrid,” Levi calls. “I can’t move. The couch is lava and my force fields to cool it aren’t

dry yet. Smart move bolting those bookshelves to the wall.”

Giselle’s sitting at the dining room table. “I told him not to leave the pies on the counter with the

squirrel loose, but he doesn’t pay me for my wisdom.”

“Mom, did you know Levi knows *Waverly Sweet*?” Zoe bounces on her toes. “And if you say yes,

he’ll text her a video of me doing her song. Say yes, Mom. *Say yes*.”

“Your cuticles are really bad,” Piper tells him. “But not as bad as Mom’s when she had toe

fungus.”

I follow Hudson and grab him before he can climb the shelves. “Thank you, Piper. We don’t talk

about toe fungus with strangers.”

“Levi’s not a stranger, Mom. He’s Captain Lava-Man, and he knows how to sign all the bad

words in the dictionary.”

His eyes go wide, and he twists to look at me. “She asked if I knew them. I didn’t demonstrate.

Cross my heart.”

I sign *learn better signs* before traipsing around the living room, shoving tampons into my

pockets, trying to figure out how to say both *thank you* and *so I’m officially mortified out of my mind*

*and understand if you want to bail on me forever* without my kids catching on to the warring

emotions battling in my head and my chest.

“He also knows how to sign *please pass the mashed potatoes* and *who let the dogs out?*” Piper

beams at him.

“I got bored on the plane,” he reports.

“*Please pass the mashed potatoes?*” I repeat.

“And hungry.”

I start to laugh, but—Oh my god.

Piper’s using *my wedding dress* as the towel covering the floor to keep nail polish off the carpet.

I stifle a whimper.

Does Levi know he's sitting on my wedding dress?

It's white, but it wasn't traditional. Linen instead of satin and lace. Curve-hugging, because my

shape was cute, curvy, and perky back then, as opposed to droopy, saggy, and one-too-many-pints-of-

Ben & Jerry's now. I should've gotten rid of it when Daniel left, but I probably thought I already had.

Hudson was only a few months old. Zoe had just started kindergarten, and Piper was still

adjusting to her hearing loss, as was I. *Thinking* was less at the top of my mind than *surviving*.

Leave it to my girls to find it and slice it up for a tarp.

And sliced it is—the jagged edges are fraying, which suggests this wasn't something they did

today.

The streaks of various colors of nail polish across it indicate they've had it a while.

Both my girls go suspiciously quiet, then each point at the other. "Piper found it!"

"Zoe cut it!"

"You never wear it!"

"We needed a cape!"

Once again, I'm squeezing my eyes shut.

One... Two... Three... I didn't have a positive emotional attachment to the dress, but it's still my dress.

Four... Five... Six... "It's fine. It's fine. But *don't cut things up that you find in my closet.*"

"It wasn't in your closet. It was in Zoe's baby blanket tub."

"I told Piper we still needed to ask you first, but she already cut it with your nose hair trimmers."

Seven... Eight... Nine... Ten.

Not quite enough, but it'll have to do. "Have you had lunch?"

"Levi made us eat *carrots.*"

"Excellent. I have to get back to work, and I'm going to pretend I haven't seen a thing up here, and

*ask next time. Also, do not let the squirrel in my bedroom.*"

"But he was freaking out about the closed door, Mom. He has anxiety."

"He's *a squirrel.*" I snatch one more tampon out of the straggly sweet potato vine that Piper had to

grow for school and that I forget to water all the time. "And he's getting into *things he should not get*

*into while we have guests.*"

I need to count to ten again.

"Did you eat?" Levi asks me.

Awesome. Now I'm the harping hangry hot mess. "Yasmin's grabbing us

both something down the  
street.”

“Something good?”

“Something fast and easy. We’re busy.”

He frowns.

I pretend not to notice, even though my heart flutters and soothes everything  
that counting to ten

didn’t.

A month ago, it never, *ever* would’ve crossed my mind that Levi Wilson  
would be the kind of guy

to care that someone else enjoys what they have for lunch. He has people to  
worry about that for him,

right?

Except that’s not him.

And I’m slowly realizing that his inherent kindness and goodness and  
compassion are probably

exactly what make him so good on a stage. He doesn’t just *pretend* to see  
people. It’s not something

he was taught.

It’s who he is.

And *who he is* keeps coming back for who I am. Despite the utter insanity in  
my house.

Or maybe *because* of the utter insanity in my house?

I duck my head to press a kiss to Hudson's hair. "Be. Good."

"Mama, I'm *always* good."

I cringe and silently apologize to Levi. "That means you need to lock all the doors and windows

and put mattresses over the bookshelves so he doesn't climb them again. They're bolted, and I don't

want to know why you had to figure that out, but it's still a far fall from the top."

"We've got this, Mom," Zoe says with a sigh well beyond her years. "Go sell some books so you

can afford to keep us fed."

"The bookstore does *fine*," I stutter. "We can afford food. And clothing. And everything you

need."

"Blah blah," Piper mutters. She grabs Levi by the foot. "Take your socks off. We have to do toes

unless you can walk on your hands to battle the lava couch, and you're good at a lot of things, but I

doubt you're good at hand-walking."

"Shows what you know," Levi fires back.

Zoe tackles me with a hug. "Mom? Can Levi send Waverly Sweet a video of me?"

"Yes. Fine. But not for putting on the internet. The internet is—"

"Full of pedophiles and people with seaweed fetishes. We know, Mom." She

kisses my boob,

because it's at face height and *of course she does*, then prances back to her makeshift stage that I

probably shouldn't look too closely at, lest I discover it's my new lingerie.

"I'll be back at five. And *thank you*. And I'm sorry."

I turn to leave, and Giselle holds out a hand. "I won't help him babysit, but I'll put your tampons

away for you. Girls gotta stick together."

"I think I love you."

I get a full smile at that. "Good. Because I don't put tampons away for just anyone."

Downstairs, I pause in the stockroom and call Portia.

She picks up on the third ring. "Oh, honey, don't tell me he canceled."

"Worse. Or better. I don't know. My sitter canceled today, and he volunteered to cover, and he's

upstairs fitting into my chaos like—hold on. He just texted me."

I put her on speaker and flip over to my text messages.

*When I was eleven, I wrote an original song for the school talent show about living out of a*

*van down by the river with my best friends, Raccoon and Otter, while my mom 'worked for a*

*living,' and the school called my mom to talk about public assistance programs that the state*



*offers. Your kids are awesome. And totally normal where I come from. Enjoy work.*

“Portia,” I whisper.

“Oh, Ing, don’t do it. He’d be home even less than Daniel was.”

“I know.” God, I know. I know from my roots, where I found three more errant gray hairs this

morning, to the tips of my toenails, which do *not* have fungus anymore, thank you very much. My

throat gets thick and my eyes burn. “*I know*. And this is just—it’s just a fling, you know? But he’s

upstairs having a pie-making, bad karaoke-singing, squirrel-throwing-tampons-all-over-the-living-

room party with my kids.”

“He’s trying to make a good impression on you. You put out yet?”

I take her off speaker in case Yasmin or Holly or a random customer who thinks this is a bathroom

wander in. “He brought me a pretzel from Germany. What was I supposed to do?”

Thank god she laughs at that. “I’d go down on Griff every night for a week if he brought me home

real German pretzels.”

“Right? And it’s not like we’re gonna sit on his couch and watch old episodes of *I Love Lucy* and

just talk all night tomorrow.” The two dinged-up boxes of squawking chickens and yodeling pickles

sitting more securely on the shelf beside me remind me exactly how much fun we're likely to have,

completely naked, and hopefully multiple times over.

Am I horny because I've been denying myself so long, or am I horny because Levi's that sexy?

Both, I decide. Definitely both.

"Are you falling for *him*, or are you falling for having your needs met for the first time in years?"

my best friend asks.

We share a wavelength. I swear we do. "I don't know."

"Would you give him a kidney?"

"Yes. I mean, if the doctors told me I wouldn't ever have to give my kids one. Actually, I'd have

them tested to see if we'd be a match first, because if we wouldn't—"

"Let's just call that a yes then."

"I'd donate a kidney to *anyone* who needed it. Probably. Maybe."

Holly pokes her head into the stockroom. Based on the way she's scrunching her face at me, she

clearly overheard that. "We're low on *Hot Mess Moms Club* mugs at the coffee bar."

"Gotta go, Portia. Text me and save me from myself, okay?"

"I'm not one to waste my breath."

"*Please.*"

“I could tell you I can’t take the kids tomorrow night.”

I whimper. “Maybe save me next week?”

“I’ll add it to my calendar.”

“Thank you.”

“That’s what friends are for.”

Holly looks me up and down as I hang up the phone. “You’re thinking about keeping the squirrel,

aren’t you?”

I almost blurt a fast *no*, then realize a *yes* gets me out of questions about what else I might be

losing my mind over. Instead, I offer a weak smile. “I need to learn to say no.”

“Don’t we all.”

TWENTY-THREE

*Levi*

LIFE LESSON NUMBER six hundred thirty-four: Do *not* let young girls talk you into art projects

with glitter.

Especially when their four-year-old brother is nearby.

“C’mon, Hudson. Don’t swallow the water. Just put it in your mouth and shake your cheeks, then

spit it out.”

His impish grin in the mirror as he leans over the sink to suck water from the faucet tugs at

something deep inside me.

This kid.

He's a handful. Creative as hell. Fearless. Determined. Boundaries will *not* keep Hudson Scott

from much.

And I get the impression his sisters have the same spark. They channel it differently, but it's there.

Plus, I haven't yet seen Piper on skates.

I tap his shoulder. "Rinse. Or your mom won't let us play anymore."

I have so much pink sparkle glitter in my hair that I'll probably die looking like a Vegas show

gone wrong. I'll probably sneeze it out of my sinuses for weeks. And there will be *so many questions*

at Tripp's house for Thanksgiving dinner on Thursday.

On the bright side, Zoe and Piper have quit freaking out about Ingrid losing her shit when she sees

the glitter carpet. It took me calling my own mom and asking her to please share a story about a time I

did something dumb and she wanted to kill me, but she didn't, because she's my mom and she loves

me, and then assuring the girls that their mom will forgive them too.

Yep.

There'll be questions at Thanksgiving dinner.

It's leverage, I swear. I'll tell if she will. She's completely clammed up about her boyfriend, and

even my normal spies won't give me anything.

Also, I'm not convinced Ingrid won't be the one to kill me. And I have a feeling that offering to

replace the carpet in her apartment isn't something she'd appreciate.

Money *cannot* buy everything. Nor should it.

"One more time, Hudson. Can't have a glitter tongue for your Thanksgiving pageant."

It *would* be cool, and memorable, but Ingrid doesn't need the stress, so rinse him out we will. He

thought pooping glitter would be the best way to spend the holiday week, and he knew swallowing it

was the only way to make it happen.

For the record, I did *not* suggest an alternative method to sparkly poop.

"My teeth have the power!" he crows.

The squirrel slips and slides along the tub, chasing a tube of lip gloss that he can't get his little

paws around.

Zoe pops her head in and studies us with her dark eyes. She has flour smudged across her pink

Waverly Sweet T-shirt and glitter stuck to her black leggings, and she's holding a bottle of glue. "We

can't find the cap."

"Skippy stole it," Piper reports behind her. It's like looking at a mini-Ingrid when she makes her

*the damn squirrel causes all the problems* face, except she has a dusting of glitter freckles and I've

never seen Ingrid wear a Thrusters shirt with Thrusters leggings and a Thrusters gaiter used as a

headband. "We should throw it away and then tell Mom we used it all making her Christmas presents

so she can't be mad."

"Mom doesn't get mad when we use all the glue, dummy. She gets mad when we use it all and

don't tell her and then you or Hudson need it last-minute before your science project is due."

"We don't have science projects, *dummy*."

"Did you know Ares Berger's wife has dummies?" I ask. The hockey star and his ventriloquist

wife are the first thing that pops into my head, and I figure it'll diffuse the situation.

I'm right. Piper and Zoe stop fighting.

And I'm wrong. Because Piper is shapeshifting before my eyes from a normal seven-year-old girl

and into a monster.

"*OH MY GOD, DO YOU KNOW ARES BERGER?*"

Piper shoves Zoe out of the way and crowds me up against the sink, a mini rabid fan-girl attack

unfolding in ways that I didn't see coming, but I probably should've, considering her outfit, plus the

Thrusters posters all over her half of her bedroom walls and the way she talked about *which*

Thrusters shirt she was planning to wear to Thanksgiving, and which pair of Thrusters pajamas she

was taking to stay over at Aunt Portia's house tomorrow night.

"I want his autograph for Christmas. And I heard he sings. Have you ever sang with him? I'll bet

he sings like an angel. Did you know he had a hearing problem when he was little? And that's why he

doesn't talk a lot? We are *so much alike*. He's my favorite. And his baby is *sooooo* cute. One day,

they walked past the store, but they didn't come in, and when Mom told me, I cried, because if he'd

come in, she could've asked him to sign my skates, but he didn't, and he'll probably never come back,

and he should come back, because he could be my dad. I mean my pretend dad. Not a real dad. His

wife's okay, but she's no Ares, you know?"

I ease Hudson to the ground and steer him around his sister to safety. "There can really only be

one Ares."

“Do you know him? Like *know* him know him?”

I’ve met him a few times, which I will *not* be confessing to Piper. Especially since *no* isn’t a lie.

I’m not sure many people know the *real* Ares Berger. “I don’t, but—”

“*How can you not know him?* Jesus. What good is it to be famous if *you don’t know Ares*

*Berger?* ”

Zoe rolls her eyes. “Do I need to go get your bodyguard?” she asks me.

“Very funny.” I try one of the *shape up* looks my mom used to use on me, and it fails completely.

“Piper. No more talk about hockey until the dishes are put away.”

“The dishes *are* put away.”

“Did you two finish vacuuming the living room?”

“Zoe won’t let me plug it in.”

Zoe huffs. “She always plugs it in backwards.”

“Do not! You do!”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Piper. You’re only *seven*.”

“They’re always like this,” Hudson announces.

Seriously. Fucking. Amazing.

Also, my mom’s getting a new car or—fuck.

*Not* a new car. Her *boyfriend* could give her that.



Maybe I can buy her a gazebo with a fully-stocked bar and a heater for use in winter. Like a she-

shed, but fancier. Seems like something a single mother would appreciate. Twenty or thirty years late,

but it's the thought that counts, right? Making up for past wrongs in not doing it sooner?

"I plugged the vacuum in," Giselle announces, "and anyone who doesn't get their rump into the

living room to take thirty-second turns pushing it while the other one moves furniture will have to

drop and give me twenty."

All three kids look at each other, shrink a little from Giselle, and then dart for the living room.

"I vacuum first!" Zoe yells.

"No, *I* do!"

"Me me me! What does *twenty* mean? Do we have to give her our allowance?"

"It means push-ups, idiot."

I eyeball my bodyguard. "I thought you didn't babysit."

"You were clearly being assaulted by a seven-year-old. I did what I had to do. You can send my

Christmas bonus to a women's shelter. And increase it by fifty percent."

"Doubled, and done, and you'll still get your normal Christmas bonus."

"Had enough?"

I shouldn't smile. I'm exhausted. I don't know how Ingrid does this day in and day out. But I can

also see how it's worth it.

She's raising three funny, smart sparks of light who'll take the planet by storm one day.

It's like an entire world right here in one small space.

Giselle folds her arms. "You're in over your head."

"Yep."

She starts to open her mouth again, then shakes her head, gives the squirrel a look that makes him

freeze, then rocket out of the tub and down the hall before she follows the animal.

She doesn't have to say what she's thinking.

None of them do—not my employees, my friends, or my family.

Ingrid doesn't need one more complication. If I'm in, I'm *in*. No playing. No dabbling. No *when*

*it's convenient for me.*

If I'm getting involved in her kids' lives, if I want to be more than a one-time babysitter, then my

entire life has to change.

Everything I've ever thought I wanted has to change.

Since the minute my piano lessons clicked, I've never wanted anything beyond being a musician.

I'd still play ball with my buddies in our parents' driveways. I'd jump in both feet first whenever

someone recommended fun. In high school, I took girls to homecoming and prom, because that's what

my buddies did, but I always knew none of them were my future.

Subconsciously, I caught on to how much Mom did for Tripp and me. And I caught on to the fact

that she worked a desk job to support us instead of following her own dreams.

Mom can sing.

Mom can sing *circles* around me.

My first year solo, I brought her out with me for part of the tour. Had her sing on stage with me a

few times. And I know— *I know*—that she would've loved this life for herself, but that she would've

given it up in a heartbeat for Tripp and me.

Hell, she *did*.

So there's never been a question in my mind.

I can be Levi Wilson, single pop star, or I can be Levi Wilson, the guy who walked away from it

all for a woman.

I'm not *unhappy* being by myself. I've never felt like anything's missing from my life. But I also

light up from the inside out when Ingrid pushes through the door thirty

seconds after we get the

vacuum put away.

She freezes.

Glances at the dining room, set for dinner.

Then into the living room, still sparkling in spots on the rug, with the squirrel sitting in the

windowsill, nibbling on the corner of a picture frame.

Over at her kids, who share a guilty glance and then huddle together.

And finally at me, a single wrinkle between her brows, silently asking what in the world we did

this afternoon. “I covered the pie after Skippy tried to eat it,” I blurt into the silence.

And then the kids unload.

“Zoe spilled glitter!”

“Only because Hudson bumped my arm!”

“Piper called me poop face!”

“Home sweet home,” Ingrid murmurs softly with a slight smile touching her lips.

I want to kiss her. I want to sweep her off her feet, fetch her a glass of wine, pour her a bath, and

wash her hair for her.

In my entire life, I’ve never once wanted to wash a woman’s hair.

But I want to wash Ingrid's.

I can't do any of that while her kids are watching, so I shove my hands in my pockets and pretend

I'm not watching for any sign that she wants to throw herself at me and kiss me the way I'd very much

like to kiss her right now. "I tried to teach them some Von Trapp family songs, but they thought I was

asking them to sing about alfredo sauce."

She glances down at my crotch, and yeah, Mr. Superstar in my pants knows it, and he decides it's

time to show off, which is *also* not good when her kids are watching. *Down, boy. Down. Think about*

*your mom having sex with a used car dealer. Think about your mother having sex.*

Okay.

I'm gonna make it.

And throw up in my mouth a little, but at least I won't be having a birds-and-bees-and-boners

discussion with Ingrid's kids.

And after the tampon fiasco this morning, I'm convinced there would be questions. And *Skippy's*

*setting the base for an invisible force shield* probably wouldn't work the same this time.

Her gaze lifts back to my eyes. "How is it that your hair makes you look like a vampire in the

sunlight, but your *freaking white jeans* don't have a speck of craft herpes on them?"

I almost choke at *craft herpes*, but manage to keep an almost straight face to reply. "Magic."

Also, making eye contact with her is re-invigorating the boner situation.

*Mom having sex. Mom having sex.*

Nope. Not cutting it.

*Beck having sex. Beck having sex.*

Okay. Got it. I'm under control. You wouldn't think that'd do it, but Beck insisted on practicing

his O-face on us while we were trapped together on a tour bus in Montana not long after we started

Bro Code, and I've never been more turned off.

Ingrid's kids are still tattling on each other. But she's smiling at me like I'm getting laid tonight.

For the record, what I'm about to tell her *isn't* just so I could get laid. "There's spaghetti sauce in

your slow cooker and a pot of water ready to boil on the stove, plus garlic bread ready to go in the

oven. And we tried to make cookie pie for dessert, and the squirrel did *not* get into the one we put in

the fridge."

Her eyes go shiny, and she blinks quickly. "Thank you."

"I can't guarantee there's not glitter in the sauce. We had...an incident."

“If you only had one, you had a good day.”

“I couldn’t find any wine.”

“Every time I drink by myself, Hudson needs the emergency room.”

“Right. Forgot. You’ve mentioned that.”

She’s smiling at me like I can do no wrong. “But thank you for the thought.”  
She claps her hands.

“Zoe. Piper. Hudson. Tell Mr. Levi thank you for hanging out with you today.”

All three instantly morph from an arguing horde to a swarming mass of hugs wrapped around me

and out-shouting each other with *thank you s* and *Text my mom if Waverly replies* and *If you ever*

*meet Ares Berger, tell him I’m JUST LIKE HIM, and My boogers have glitter.*

I ruffle everyone’s hair. “Be good for your mom, and sing good tonight, Hudson.”

“Thank you so much again,” Ingrid whispers after she’s disentangled me from her kids and shoved

me out the door.

I get it. Tight timeline. “Sure. Anytime.”

Even Giselle can’t stay quiet at that one. She snorts to herself while Ingrid laughs. “If you say so.

Also, if you have a secret magic trick to getting glitter out of your hair, I want to know what it is. And

Hudson got a glitter booger on your white pants. You have no idea how much joy it gives me to know

they don't have actual magic and that you're subject to normal human issues."

"My pants *definitely* have magic," I murmur.

Her eyes widen, then go dark, and she shoots a look three steps down at Giselle before turning her

attention back to me. "That was *not* what I meant."

I grin.

Her cheeks go pink. "And not what I should think about all through my preschooler's

Thanksgiving pageant..."

"Call me later."

Her smile promises she will.

And that warm knot in my chest promises I'll enjoy it more than I should.

TWENTY-FOUR

*Ingrid*

I SHOULD NOT BE HERE.

It's Wednesday night. I was late getting out of the store. Late getting my kids to Portia's. Stuck in

traffic on my way downtown. And now I'm punching the button to Levi's floor in an elevator that only

goes to the top six floors, because those are the floors reserved for Copper



Valley residents who can  
afford the most privacy.

But I shouldn't be here.

This Levi?

He's not the Levi on stage that I was obsessed with seeing in concert every  
chance I got.

He's the Levi who keeps coming back despite physical danger, weird pets,  
and the utter chaos that

goes with my life.

He *babysat my kids*.

And left me with a clean apartment—the girls insisted he did most of the  
cooking and wiping and

scrubbing himself between playing games and beauty parlor and arts and  
crafts with them.

And now I have a sleepover. At his place. Where I'm very, very likely to fall  
completely, madly,

helplessly in love with him, which is the *last* thing my family needs.

*No, Zoe, Levi can't be at your gymnastics meet because he's in Arizona for a  
concert. No,*

*Piper, Levi's shooting a commercial in Austria. He can't be at your game.  
No, Hudson, Levi's in*

*New York, at very important meetings, and he can't take you to little ninjas  
tonight.*

And who's to say he'd even want that?

Which is exactly why I shouldn't be here.

I'm falling head-over-heels for a man who offered me a friends-with-benefits secret fling, and

then did me a favor that I never should've let him do.

Tonight won't make that better.

But I'm helpless to resist the idea of a full night of grown-up time with the man who makes me

feel like more than a frazzled mom and busy shop owner.

The elevator dings on Levi's floor, and the doors slide open.

It's not too late.

I could hop back in, text him that I don't feel good, and go home for a night of ice cream and

vodka and leftover cookie pie, all by myself.

Read books.

Go to bed early.

Toss and turn because it's so weird that my apartment is empty.

Watch grown-up TV.

Oops. I'm leaving the elevator and knocking on the door to my left.

Too late to back out now.

And when Levi opens the door and smiles at me, scruffy-faced and crinkly-eyed, I forget every

reason I have for not wanting to be here.

No, that's not right.

I forget every reason I shouldn't want to be here as badly as I absolutely, unquestioningly,

desperately desire to the pit of my soul to be here.

"Hi," I breathe as I step into his foyer. "Oh my god, your glitter hair."

He closes the door, his smile growing three sizes. He's in cargo pants and a black T-shirt, with

nails that are short and cleaned of all polish now, and when he leans in to kiss my cheek, I smell

cinnamon and yeasty bread again.

"Hi," he whispers.

That's it.

One tiny syllable. Barely a syllable, even.

I drop my bag, throw my arms around him, and suddenly we're making out like teenagers who

only have fifteen minutes before Mom gets back from the grocery store.

My hands go everywhere, from the sandpaper of his cheeks to the strained cords in his neck to the

soft silkiness of his shirt to the hot sinew of his arms. I slide my fingers under the hem of his shirt and

up his taut abs and broad pecs, then around to scrape my nails down his back until I'm grabbing his

ass.

He's devouring my mouth, walking me back against the wall. Something  
thunks to the ground

beside me, and I almost pull out of the kiss, but Levi growls, "Leave it,"  
against my lips, and then he's

pushing my own loose blouse up and over my head while I tackle the button  
on his pants.

My shirt gets caught on my ponytail, but I bat his hands away. "Leave it," I  
repeat back to him

while I dive into kissing him again.

His stubble is rough against my lips, stirring long-neglected nerve endings  
back to life with the

delicious sting.

He pinches my nipples through my new lace bra, and I hook one leg around  
his hips and try to

grind my clit against his leg.

"Naked," he gasps.

"Now," I agree.

His shirt goes flying while I rip open his zipper and yank his pants down,  
revealing that glorious

hard-on again.

It still amazes me that *I* do this to him, and I smile as I wrap a fist around him  
and stroke.

"No, ma'am." He grabs me by the wrist, then snags my other hand too, when  
I try to reach for him

again, and holds both arms over my head, pinned to the wall, while he works my pants one-handed. “I

want inside you this time.”

“I just want *you*.”

He lifts his dark, hooded gaze to mine, dips his hand into my silk panties, and strokes my seam,

thumb to my clit while he slips a finger inside me. “Like this?”

“*More.*”

Two fingers. My hips jerk against him, and he circles my clit with his thumb while he fucks me

with his fingers. “Christ, Ingrid, I love your pussy.”

“She’s pretty— *oh god, just like that*—enamored— *Oooh, yes, more*—with you— *Levi, oh my god*

*oh my god oh my god, I’m coming.*”

I am.

He’s jerking his fingers inside me while he nips at my breasts through the lace and does that magic

with his thumb, and I’m coming like I have a hair-trigger release.

My entire body is unraveling under his touch. My shirt’s still hanging off my ponytail, my hands

are pinned to the wall over my head, his hard cock is bobbing against my leg, and I’m clenching so

hard against his fingers that I’m suddenly worried he’ll never be able to strum a guitar again.

The crashing wave of my orgasm mutes the thought, and I throw my head back, press my pelvis

into his hand, and ride the euphoria through spasm after spasm of pleasure that's so much better than

anything my locked drawer at my bedside can do for me.

"So fucking gorgeous." He rubs his scruffy cheek against my neck and sears a kiss beneath my ear,

and my walls clench around him again with one last resounding aftershock.

My chest is heaving as I attempt to catch my breath. Clearly, more exercise needs to be in my

future.

Also?

I need to get this man off.

Right now.

Preferably with him buried balls-deep inside me.

"Levi?" I pant.

Seriously. Not kidding about the exercise.

He presses hot, wet kisses along my jaw. "Mm?"

"Take my pants off and fuck me, please."

His head jerks up. "That...wasn't good?"

"That was transcendent." He's still holding my wrists, so I arch my hips and belly to rub his hard

length. “And now I want more.”

His momentary panic disappears behind a cocky smile. “I’ve awakened a beast.”

“Mama’s horny and there are still cobwebs that need clearing down there.”

He buries his face in the crook of my neck and makes a noise.

“Laugh now, but you are in for the night of your life. If I can stay awake past eight.”

“I fucking adore you.” He slides his hand under my waistband and squeezes my ass, inching my

pants down.

“Thank god, because I am *not* for everyone.” I can’t arch back into his touch and still rub my

stomach against his hard-on, because I’m a woman in my mid-thirties who’s had three kids, not a

gymnast.

Note to self: Become a gymnast.

Other note to self: Did he slip some kind of hormone or pheromone up my vajayjay, because I

really am desperate for more, and that was already one hell of an orgasm.

“I’m letting your hands go, but if you stroke me again, I’m gonna come on the spot, so don’t ruin

this for both of us, okay?”

“Tell me you’re not a one-thrust wonder, because I’ve been looking forward to this for *days*.”

“Only days?”

“It took me a while to catch on that you actually wanted me, and I don’t like to waste my fantasy

time on things I can’t have.”

He’s inching my pants down now, and I suck in a breath and wonder if the light will highlight my

faded stretch marks.

I hope not.

But then, I did just tell him I have cobwebs in my vagina.

“Are you telling me you touched yourself and thought about other men after we met?”

I can’t look away, and I can’t help touching him. His cheeks. His hair. The curve of his ears. “No.

I touched myself and thought about a hamburger that someone else cooked for me or cheesecake. I can

*totally* get off on cheesecake.”

Gah, that smile. It’s infused with angel juice or something. So potent it should be illegal. “So if I

have cheesecake for dessert, and some happens to get smeared all over both of us...”

My eyes cross as blood surges to my clit and makes me feel achy and empty and desperate. “Can

you hurry up with my pants? Or let me help?”

“Is it me you want, or am I just a convenient conduit to cheesecake?”



I break his rule and double-fist his cock. “These cause babies. If I’m willing to risk that, you can

trust it’s you I want.”

Poor guy’s face takes a minute to settle down. “So double condoms.”

“Wasn’t kidding. And I’m on birth control. Now take my pants off and do me against the wall,

please.”

He squats and yanks my pants off, leaving his own on the floor when he rises, pressing kisses

from my thighs, up my belly, to between my breasts on his way up. My breath catches when he

unhooks my bra, letting my breasts sag in all their post-maternity glory, but he smothers them with

kisses, murmurs, “So gorgeous,” and then he’s scooping me into his arms like I weigh no more than a

rag doll, devouring my mouth again as he carries me into his living room.

It’s not until he sets me on the couch and reaches into a bowl on the end table that I realize the

entire room is lit with candles.

There’s a table for two set in front of the windows overlooking the city lights, right where he had

a couch the last time I was here, with roses in a vase, a bottle in an ice bucket, and two wine glasses

at the ready.

And my breath leaves me.

It's so thoughtful.

And I don't question who set it up.

He did.

He did this *for me*.

"Hungry?" he asks as he settles next to me on the wide couch, his thick length pressing into my

belly.

"Only for you."

I wrap my arms around him again, kiss him hard and deep, and then the two of us are fumbling

with the condoms he grabbed, my hands shaking a little, his clumsy as well. "Naked Ingrid makes my

brain short-circuit," he says as our fingers collide.

"I do not."

"You do."

"Are you sure it's the real me and not your fantasy me?"

"You—"

He cuts himself off and attacks me with a kiss, takes a condom and drops the rest on the floor, and

makes quick work of satisfying my sperm phobia without my interference. I fling a leg around his

hips, feel the slide of his hard length against me, forget where I am, and roll us both off the couch.

“Aaaah!”

“Oof.”

“Ohmygod, I’m so sorry. Are you—”

“Still horny as hell? Yes.” He snags me by the waist, takes control of the rolling-onto-each-other

game, and suddenly I’m beneath him, his tip probing my opening while he hovers on his elbow. “Are

*you* okay?”

I arch my hips and feel him dip inside me, and everything swims into focus.

Levi.

Me.

The thick, soft rug under my back.

His head breaching my entrance.

Cinnamon and sweat and *man* teasing my nose.

The cool air and his gaze lingering on my chest making my nipples tighten in that delicious way

that I can feel all the way down between my legs.

“Never better,” I whisper.

He holds my gaze while he pushes into me, every inch utter heaven, my clit pulsing and my breasts

aching, my already swollen, satisfied vajayjay rejoicing at more attention.

“Fucking exquisite,” he breathes.

I tilt my hips and take him deeper while my fingers skim his cheeks and down his neck. I want

more. *All. Everything.* “Kiss me.”

He groans as my hands go lower, my thumbs brushing his nipples, and then he’s kissing me, his

tongue clashing with mine while he pulls almost all the way out and thrusts back into me again.

There’s no time to worry about remembering what to do.

My body knows.

He’s brand new and exciting, but familiar and *right*. And he’s making me remember what it feels

like to be alive.

Not just in my satisfied-but-still-desperate nerve endings, but in the part of me that used to take a

train to Paris, or hop a flight for a long weekend of hiking in Iceland, or drive six hours for a

clandestine getaway with a guy for no reason other than that I wanted to.

“God, Ingrid, you’re so tight.” His voice is strained, sexy, desperate.

“I want to feel every bit of you.”

I want him.

I want him so much that even being this close to him, having him rocking

inside me, kissing me,

whispering that I'm beautiful, that I turn him on—it's not enough.

I want him *more*.

Deeper.

Harder.

*Forever.*

I gasp as the word sneaks into my conscious thoughts at the same moment that he hits a magic spot

deep inside me and sends my body coiling tight, pleasure building on exquisite pleasure, anticipation

and glory and champagne fizzles, skin on skin, our eyes locked, his dark and hot and heavy-lidded,

mine suddenly feeling unexpectedly wet even as everything inside me is spiraling fast and furious

toward taking flight to the stars again.

*"Levi."*

"You drive me fucking wild, Ingrid." He's slamming into me, every thrust magic, making me see

glitter and confetti and sequins in the candlelight.

"Oh god, *oh god*, right there, I'm— *right there, Levi.*"

He pumps his hips to mine once more, and my body shatters into a billion sparkly iridescent

snowflakes, the spasms in my core squeezing him tight while he groans and

drops his head to my

shoulder, his cock pulsing in time with my orgasm.

His skin is slick with sweat, his breath ragged, my name whispered reverently on his lips, and in

this moment, I'm a fucking goddess.

Floating in the heavens, all billion bits of me, centered around a core of sheer, blissful, luxurious,

pulsating ecstasy.

I'm one with the world, and my world is Levi, and nothing else exists or matters.

He kisses my forehead, then the tear that slipped down my face and into my ear. "Ingrid?"

"That was—wow." I wipe it away, blink my eyes open, and dig deep to not let the hotness build

more behind my eyeballs as he strokes my cheek and gazes at me like he felt it too.

Like in this moment, I'm *his* world.

His touch—his kindness—his voice—I could love this man.

I could so easily love this man.

But that's the whole problem, isn't it?

I could so easily love *any* man. And I have. I've loved *any* man, which is why I don't let myself

get close, or go on dates, or fall in love.

I can't afford to lose one again.

I'd survive. But I wouldn't *want* to.

Levi drops his face until our noses are touching. "I want to kiss you more," he whispers.

"You're in luck, because I'm here all night."

When he smiles at me, I feel that same overwhelming brightness flood my chest that I felt the

moment I held Zoe for the first time. *Hello, my love. We're going to have a beautiful life together.*

It's like I'm seeing a smile for the first time.

Hearing waves rolling on the beach and smelling the ocean air after a decade in the desert.

Tasting cheesecake after nothing but rice cakes for weeks.

Knowing every hoodie I'll ever toss on again will be dewy-soft felt on the inside and never get

pilly or hard or snag on my rough elbow skin.

"Penny for your thoughts," he murmurs into my hair. He's still trailing his free hand over my arm,

down my hip, and back again, like he, too, is afraid if we stop touching, all of this will disappear.

I get it. I can't stop touching him either. "What about my bookstore?"

"I like it. It's nice. What are you thinking about?"

*You.*

My fingers connect with the raised edge of his button scar, and I smile. “I’m still wearing socks.

And they might not match.”

He blinks at me, and suddenly, we’re both cracking up.

*This.*

This is what I want.

I can’t have it—not long term. My kids deserve someone who’d be around more than he’s gone,

and honestly, I do too.

But tonight?

Tonight, I’m going to make the most of every single minute.

TWENTY-FIVE

*Levi*

*SHE’S everything I didn’t know I was missing.*

The thought won’t stop bouncing through my head as I sit with Ingrid at the small table I set up in

front of the windows overlooking downtown. She’s wrapped in my favorite bathrobe, moaning over

bacon-wrapped scallops that I pan-fried myself while she slipped into the bathroom to freshen up.

She gestures to her mostly-empty plate. “Seriously, when did you learn to cook like this?”

“I went through a Cooking Channel phase during my *Chase the Beat* tour.”



“When was that? Two years ago?”

“Five.”

“*Five?*”

“I was on the floor talking about the stage set-up with my tour manager when Tripp called to tell

me James was born. He’s five, so...”

She leans back and sips her wine, the robe gaping open enough to tease me with what I know is

hiding underneath. “I like that you remember things based on family events.”

“What else would I track it on?”

“Seriously? *That was the year I took home three Grammys*, maybe?”

I shake my head. “Nah. That’s all frosting. And I like the cake better.”

She purses her lips, and my cock leaps again. I want her hands on me again. I want her mouth. I

want her legs wrapped around my hips.

Now.

For dessert.

After dessert.

Before bed.

In the shower.

Against the glass windows.

In the morning.

The next day.

The day after.

“So if you like the cake better than the frosting, what’s your stance on chocolate chip cookies

versus gelato?” she asks.

I reach across the table and slip my hand into her, rubbing her soft skin.

“Gelato sandwich with

chocolate chip cookie bread.”

“Ooh, you’re cheating.”

“Nope. *Dreaming.*”

“Well, if we’re dreaming, I want a birthday cake with cheesecake on the bottom—graham cracker

crust, please, but a thick one, because I want to taste it—and a layer of salted caramel gelato on top of

that, then a massive layer of brownies, which you’d have to pre-bake and smush on to get it right, so

I’m probably doing this out of order, but I really want that graham cracker crust too, and then a huge

swirl of homemade whipped cream, sprinkled with peanut butter cups and topped with a cherry,

served by a shirtless man with glitter in his hair.”

“When’s your birthday?”

She laughs and squeezes my hand. “Nope. Not telling. You’d probably do it, and then I’d eat it all

and die of a sugar coma.”

“I could get you a small one.”

“And then I’d let my kids eat it all.”

“Now you’re being difficult on purpose.”

Her eyes go distant, but she’s smiling. “Can you imagine Hudson on that much sugar?”

“You’d have to put a tracking device on him then turn him loose in Reynolds Park to run it off.”

“The poor squirrels.”

“And geese.”

“And the fountain.”

“And the rage yoga people.”

“*Rage yoga*? That’s a thing?”

Her eyes go comically wide, and I can’t decide if she wants to join the class, or if she’s mad at

me because she thinks I made it up.

I lift my other hand. “Swear to god. It’s a thing. They almost took Beck out a couple years back

when he pissed off the entire female population of the world.”

She laughs. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Ask Sarah sometime. She tells it best. Or Ellie. She saved him.”

The candles are getting low, and she’s not picking at what’s left on her plate anymore. And now

she’s biting her lower lip.

I don’t know if it’s the suggestion that she hang out with people in my circle, or if it’s that she’s

full, or if half a glass of wine will put her to sleep, but something has definitely shifted.

“Dishes,” she says suddenly. “You did all of my dishes. And made dinner. I should—”

“Leave them. No kids. No squirrels. I’ll get them tomorrow. I have a few more days before I have

to hit the road again. Plenty of time to clean a few dishes.”

Her eyes flicker. “Lots of travel next month?”

“Few shows. Couple other things. But it’s light compared to normal. And once I’m home, I have a

couple weeks actually off before it starts up again in January.”

Seventeen days, to be exact. And oh, the things I could do with Ingrid in my time off if I can

convince her to trust my resources for finding babysitters.

“Hmm.” She frowns, but then her gaze drops to my chest, and she bites her lower lip.

Don’t tell my mother, but I’m eating dinner without a shirt on.

And having Ingrid’s eyes on me is making me tent my sweatpants.

“Do you have any idea how much I appreciate not having to worry about the little things for a

night?” she asks quietly.

I pull her hand to my lips. “I can try to imagine, but honestly, probably not.”

“It’s incredibly special. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I stroke my free hand down her arm and watch goosebumps race across her

skin. “And I might have ulterior motives.”

“Mr. Wilson, are you saying you’re taking good care of me so I’ll let you have your way with me

in the bedroom?”

“I was thinking against those windows right there.”

Her golden eyes go black as night and her chest rises quickly. “I’m about to ask a stupid

question,” she whispers.

“Reflective glass,” I whisper back.

She leans into the table, closer to me, giving me an excellent view down the gap in her robe. “I

was going to ask if it’s cold.”

My hard-on is working on setting a world record, and I have to swallow hard before I can talk.

“You’d be okay if someone watched us?”

“Oh my god, no.” Her words are in direct contrast with the ever-darkening of

her lovely eyes and

her quickening breath. “My kids—I did research once. On glass. And apartments in cities. And—

wait. Are *you* turned on at the idea of someone watching us?”

“Ingrid?”

“Yes?”

“I’m turned on by *you*.”

“I’ve started to pick up on that.”

Her plump lips are a breath from mine, and I can’t resist kissing her for another second.

I’ve dated women who would’ve been upset that I didn’t order in gelato from Italy for dessert, or

that I didn’t take the hint to fly them across the country to eat at their favorite restaurant. I’ve dated

women who would’ve spent the meal intentionally tugging that robe open to tease me. I’ve dated

women who needed the compliments piled on thick and heavy.

But it’s been a long time since I’ve dated someone who feels as real and honest and comfortable-

in-her-own-skin as Ingrid.

Who’s so grateful for the smallest kindnesses.

Who’s so easy to please.

Who can talk about her kids being total goofballs in one breath and then say

something that makes

me want to push that robe off her shoulders the next.

I know she'd be the first to say she's a disaster.

And I know she's wrong.

She's not a disaster. She's not a mess. She's a woman who has too much asked of her every day,

with too little help, which is exactly why something as simple as a homemade meal without having to

do the dishes is the easy part.

But I don't want it to be *easy*.

I want to be worth the woman who does so much for everyone else.

"Best date ever," she sighs against my lips.

I rise and tug her out of her seat too. "Just getting started."

"I hope you realize you've already set the bar pretty high." She threads her fingers through my

hair, goes up on tiptoe, and rubs her soft belly against my hard-on, the robe falling open but still

hiding the rosy tips of her nipples from me.

"I love a good challenge."

"You do seem up for it."

That twinkle in her eyes. That seductive smile. That spark that seems to glow from inside her.

She's so fucking intoxicating.

I reach into the pocket of her robe and pull out protection, then shuck my pants and walk her back

until she's against the window. "Do you like the cold?"

"Yes," she whispers.

"Then let's lose this."

She doesn't object when I push the robe off her shoulders, leaving her completely naked in the

soft light. All curves and softness, with silvery marks on her lower belly that I assume are left over

from pregnancy.

I trace one, and she holds her breath.

"Does it hurt?"

She shakes her head. "Nothing but my memory of my pre-baby body."

"Your body has done amazing things. It tells your story. And that's beautiful."

"Levi?"

"Hm?"

"I'd like your body to do amazing things to my body now, please."

She kisses me again, and nothing else in the world matters.

Not yesterday. Not tomorrow.

Only making love with Ingrid. Her legs wrapping around mine while I hold



her against the cool

window. Sliding inside her. Losing my mind at the feel of her tight pussy wrapped around my aching

hard-on. Holding her gaze while I take my time stroking in and out, watching every nuance of her

expression when I'm buried deep inside her, her parted lips and tilted head telling me when I've

found the right rhythm, the right angle to make her pant harder and grip my shoulders tighter, chanting

my name faster and faster until she's coming all over my cock again, squeezing me so tight and

spasming so hard around me that I couldn't hold back from joining her in falling over the edge if the

world depended on it.

I don't want to let her go.

I want to hold her. Kiss her. Whisper total and utter nonsense with her. Right here. All night long.

It's her.

I've found her.

Not a short-term fling. Not just a friend-with-benefits.

*Her.*

My Ingrid.

And I never, *ever* want to let her go.

I don't know how we'll make this work, but we will.

*We will.*

She's everything I didn't know I needed in my life.

Now I need to be everything she didn't know *she* needed.

No matter what it takes.

TWENTY-SIX

*Ingrid*

GUILT WAKES me later than I thought it would. The sun is peeking through the gauzy curtains in

Levi's bedroom, and the contemporary analog clock hanging on the wall over his stately chest of

drawers tells me it's almost eight.

I haven't slept until eight in *years*.

But I haven't been up having sex with a real-life rock star until three in the morning in...ever...

either.

Levi's passed out cold on his stomach next to me, his lashes brushing his cheek, full lips parted,

his hair a messy pile of amazing, a light gray sheet that matches the deep gray walls barely covering

the top of his ass.

It's not sleeping in that has me feeling guilty.

It's Levi.

He has to be the kindest, sexiest, most patient, gorgeous, understanding man I've ever met.

But the thing is—he isn't meant to be *mine*.

He's bigger than that.

In here, I can convince myself that he doesn't have a higher purpose. A bigger calling. That this

room, this apartment, condo, whatever you want to call it, doesn't sit empty most of the year while

he's out making millions of dreams come true.

He made my dreams come true eight years ago.

Mine, and thousands of other people who showed up for his concert at Mink Arena, just like the

hundreds of thousands of other people he'd performed for before us.

If he'd never walked into my store a few weeks ago, I'd still always hold that memory as one of

the best of my life. I used to tell people I splurged on tickets in the pit. That I waved a sign and that

*Levi Wilson looked at me.* That we had a moment.

No one believed me then, but *I* believed me.

He gave me the thrill of my life. Who am I to ask him to stop what he's doing because I'm falling

head over heels in love with him but want more for my kids than what their father was willing to give

them?

I'm a hot mess—emphasis more on the *mess* part—nine days of the week. But I'm still ten times

the mother I was when I was angry all the time for all the myriad ways Daniel let our family down.

Which is why I have to end this.

Now.

I don't know how much Levi throws himself into his relationships. If this is normal for him. But I

can't afford to delude myself into thinking we have the future I'm starting to imagine when it'll not

only hurt me, but it'll hurt my kids too.

Let them get attached to people who will float in and out of their lives?

Yes. It's inevitable. Teachers change. Classmates come and go. Neighbors move.

Let them get attached to someone as if he could be a father figure when I know he can't? Let

*myself* get attached like that?

No.

And that's where the guilt comes in.

I shouldn't have come last night, and I knew it.

Because if Levi's feeling even a fraction of what I am—if this is *real*—then I'm going to hurt him.

And *god*, he's the last person on earth who deserves any kind of pain.

I almost sneak out.

My clothes are still in the foyer, and I have to cross the entire condo to get to them, but I won't

take the coward's way out and not say goodbye.

Especially when it's *goodbye*-goodbye.

I can't find my socks, which is fine. I'll slip my flats on when I get back to the foyer to leave. In

the meantime, I tiptoe back through the living room, past the table that we *did* clear off, past the

candles burnt down to their candlesticks, past the entrance to the kitchen where we had some fun with

cheesecake, and into his bedroom, where he's still sleeping so soundly, I once again wonder if I

should leave a note and go.

I'm *not* avoiding the discussion. I *will* be honest with him, in person. Soon. *Very* soon.

But I value sleep myself too much to wake him if I don't have to.

My stomach cramps and heat floods my eyes.

*Do the right thing, Ingrid.*

Paper.

I need a piece of paper.

I don't know if the notebook I keep in my purse still has that last sheet in it or not. Hudson likes to

sneak it out and draw on it while we're at Piper's hockey practice or Zoe's gymnastics class.

"Ingrid?" Levi's pushing himself up to sitting, his eyes adorably sleepy, his body lithe and long,

his stubble thicker.

I gulp hard. "Hey. I need to take off. The kids—Portia—slept too late—"

He shoots a look at the clock on the wall, then those bright blue eyes land on me again, a sheepish

apology sneaking into his expression and making him look ten years younger, and *oh god, I love him.*

"Breakfast next time." He starts to move.

I hold a hand out. "Don't get up. You don't need to get up. It's okay. I know where the door is."

He frowns.

I'm being a rambling idiot. "Thank you. This was—this was easily one of the best nights of my

life.”

My voice cracks.

I can’t help it.

And he’s on his feet, instantly, crossing the room completely naked to get to me where I’m

hovering in the doorway. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing! Nothing.”

He reaches for me, and I shrink back.

I don’t want to.

I don’t.

I want to melt into his arms and have him tell me he’ll cancel every show next year and move into

my dinky little apartment over the bookstore and play with my kids every day, and *that isn’t reality*.

My eyes squeeze shut on their own. It’s instinct to get away from the searing hurt crossing his

face. “I’m sorry,” I whisper. “It’s not you. It’s me. It’s *all* me.”

“You’re breaking up with me.”

*Breaking up. Not ending this. Breaking up.* Like we’re a real couple. Like *he* thinks we’re a real

couple, instead of two strangers who bumped into each other randomly and agreed to have a secret

fling to burn off some steam.

“It’s *not you*.” I force myself to open my eyes and look at him. “You’re utterly perfect. You let my

daughters paint your fingernails and you do dishes and you text me the funniest gifs ever, and that’s

basically my definition of the perfect man.”

“But?” The hurt the man can pack into that one syllable almost breaks me.

No, not *almost*.

All the way. I can’t blink the tears back in, and my nose is starting to run too, and that most likely

means it’s turning the color of a maraschino cherry. “But I’m falling in love with you, and we don’t

have a future, and so I need to go. *Now*. My kids need me as together as I ever am. *I need me as*

together as I ever am. I can’t go back to being the woman I was when I was with Daniel. *I can’t*. So I

have to go. Thank you. For *everything*. These past few weeks have meant more to me than you’ll ever

know, and not because you’re some fancy famous trophy, but because you’re so very *real*, and kind,

and because you made me feel things I never thought I’d be able to feel again. You’re a good man,

Levi Wilson. The very best. And I have to go.”

I’m sobbing so hard I can barely understand myself as I duck away from his intense, tight-jawed

gaze and dart through the living room to the foyer.



Out in the hall, I realize I have to wait for the elevator. And even a fancy, semi-private elevator

that only goes to the top four floors of the building at a quick pace takes time.

But the door to Levi's apartment doesn't open behind me.

When I step off the elevator in the parking garage, his security guy doesn't blink at me in my

snotty-faced, teary-eyed, rat-nest hair glory.

And when I pull my phone out of my purse to make sure I didn't miss any calls from Portia, there

aren't any messages from Levi either.

Of course there aren't.

I'm the basket case who just broke up with him because I love him.

Who'd message that?

I drive home, shower quickly, and take time to put on makeup, staring myself in the eye and

ordering myself to keep it together until I'm no longer afraid of having a meltdown in front of my kids.

And then I head out to Portia's house.

I miss my babies.

I need my best friend.

And today, I'm going to be thankful. For *everything*.

Except the one message that dings through just as I'm pulling up to their cozy brick house.

*Can we still be friends?*

I breathe through the pain, and three minutes later, Portia's shoving me into her bedroom and

locking the door. "Oh, honey, you have it *bad*. Here. Have a biscuit. It'll settle your belly."

"Do you have anything to settle my heart?"

She wraps her arms around me and hugs me tight. "Tell me I don't have to kick his ass."

"I broke up with him."

"Oh, honey."

"He travels—"

"I know. Shh. I know."

"Was I wrong?"

I hold my breath, because if Portia sees a way that I was wrong, I'll go crawling back on my

knees and beg him to forgive me.

But she's shaking her head. "He was the right guy at the wrong time. You don't need another

Daniel. Your babies don't need another Daniel. You need—no, you *deserve* a man who'll be there. A

partner. Not one more person's schedule to work around. You overbook yourself enough as it is."

"He *did my dishes*."

“A man’ll do anything a few times. Doesn’t mean he’ll still do them two years from now.”

“Griff does.”

“Griff knows which side his bread’s buttered on.”

I laugh for the first time all morning, and my abs protest.

Portia pulls back and gives me a look. “Was it worth it?”

“It *does* hurt a little to walk,” I whisper.

She shakes her head. “At least you’ll have *that* memory.”

“I don’t think I’m ever having sex again.”

“Then tell him you can be friends, and set a date to seduce him again in another ten years when

Zoe’s out of the house and Hudson needs you to have a sugar daddy for bail money.”

I gasp and feel my eyeballs nearly drop out of my head. “*Oh my god*, are you serious?”

Portia grins. “Maybe ten percent? That boy makes mine look like angels.”

My kids. My friends. And my bookstore.

That’s what I need to be grateful for today.

And the few weeks this year that Levi Wilson played the part of my boyfriend.

I’ll always have the memory, right? “Do you think he’ll be okay?”

“Ingrid, honey, even if I knew the man at all, there’s literally no good answer for that.”

She's not wrong.

But if life's taught me anything, it's that time heals.

So I ignore his text.

It's the kindest thing I can think to do for him.

No matter how much it bruises my soul, and no matter how badly it hurts  
behind the smiles I fake

for my kids and friends all day long.

Levi and I don't have a future, which is exactly what I want from him, so I  
need to let him go.

TWENTY-SEVEN

*Levi*

I'M A SHELLSHOCKED MESS, but Thursday, I manage to go through  
most of the motions of

pretending it's an awesome Thanksgiving Day with my family despite the  
fact that Ingrid hasn't texted

me back. In the end, I cut the day short and plead a sinus headache brought  
on by the cold front

moving through.

Yeah.

*I plead a headache.*

I can't get Ingrid's face out of my brain.

The pain. The tears. The crack in her voice.

I hurt her.

I hurt her, and I don't know how to fix it, and while I should be playing poker with Mom and

Tripp and Lila, instead, I'm lying in my bed, staring at the ceiling, except for the times when I roll

over and sniff my sheets and wonder how long Ingrid's scent will linger with me before I breathe it

all gone.

Then it's somehow Friday.

Tripp's wedding day.

I smile broadly through the ceremony, which is the biggest small wedding ceremony I've ever

been to. Our immediate family, our extended family made up of my entire circle of close lifelong

friends, the family they've brought into the mix with marriage and babies, most everyone who works

for the Fireballs, from players who could make it to the office staff and all of their families, and a few

of Lila's closest friends from her time in New York—they're all here.

And they're all going about life as if nothing's broken.

Like it's sunshine and rainbows on a tropical beach, instead of cold and desolate and gray.

*I'm falling in love with you.*

When the *fuck* does love make you leave?

When all the formalities are done, and my smiling brother and his beaming bride take to the dance

floor in the reception hall of Heartwood Manor, a renovated mansion from the early nineteen

hundreds that sits on a couple thousand sprawling acres atop the highest hill in Copper Valley, I take

to the bar and a quiet corner of the room, my back to the wall, sitting in an extra seat, floor-to-ceiling

windows overlooking kids playing on the brown grass outside to my right, a dance floor getting more

crowded by the minute to my right, and tables of scattered people enjoying the end of dinner in front

of me.

Doesn't take long for Mom to find me. "Lovely day to be a grumpypants."

"I'm not *grumpy*. I'm *introspective* and recovering from a sinus headache."

"Grumpy," Wyatt echoes.

The two of them sit, uninvited, on either side of me, while Davis lurks by himself at a nearby

table too.

"Violet couldn't make it?" Mom asks cheerfully.

I slide her a *don't start* look. "Stan couldn't make it either?"

Her lips twitch, and I realize I know that twitch.

It's the twitch of *gotcha*.

*Fuck.*

I glare at Davis, who's not watching, but his beard moves like he knows it and he, too, is having

an attack of the lip twitch.

"You're not dating Stan Sheldon," I say to Mom.

"And you never dated Violet. Not for real, anyway."

Fuck. I signed a non-disclosure agreement on that one. It was a good career move for both of us at

the time—Violet needed someone to help with her image, and I was getting ready to go on my first

stadium tour and needed the extra press. My family isn't supposed to know.

It all feels as dumb and stupid now as being sentimental still about a toy from childhood.

I can't think of anything good to say, so I settle for glaring at my mother a little more.

She laughs. "What? I had to make sure your brother heard *something*. And *I've been enjoying*

*dinner with your team's manager* isn't so bad comparatively now, is it?"

My gaze whips around the room until I locate Jimmy Santiago, who's not actually easy to find

since I tend to listen to more Fireballs games on the radio than I watch.

But when I do find him, I wonder why I didn't see it sooner, because he keeps shooting covert

looks at my mother from his perch across the room.

And he's the only one.

"Tripp's gonna kill you," I mutter.

"No, he's not. We're both grown-ups, and it *certainly* didn't impact Jimmy's performance in the

play-offs, now did it?" She pats my knee. "*Your* performance, however..."

"I'm *fine*." I'm not fine at all.

"You had a fight with Ingrid?"

"Said I'm fine."

"Levi. You're not fine. And on top of not being fine, you still have glitter in your hair, and you still

won't tell us why."

"He might not want to talk about it, Ms. Wilson," Wyatt says.

"I have about forty-eight hours before he leaves town again, and I'm not interested in spending

most of it babysitting him to make sure he's *not* going to do something like taking a fake girlfriend

again when it might ruin his chances with a woman I actually like. So, he'll talk about it whether he

wants to or not."

She's threatening torture, and if she's confessing to dating Tripp's team manager, I doubt there's

any amount of blackmail I could use to get her to stop.

Which means the easiest course of action is to give in and tell her so I can get



back to dealing

with this on my own. “Ingrid dumped me. Happy now?”

“Of course not. What did you do?”

“What did *I* do?” I throw my hands up. “Do you think if I knew what I did, I’d maybe be working

on *un* doing it right now instead of sitting here with no fucking—sorry, *freaking* clue where it all went

wrong?”

Mom’s studying me, and I know that look.

It’s the *you know what you did wrong, Levi, but I’ll let you pretend you don’t*.

I take a swig of beer.

That doesn’t help.

So I try it again.

Nope. Still not helping.

“Her ex was always gone,” I say to the floor. “So I’m out of the running. Because I’m always gone

too.”

“Oh, sweetheart...”

“I called my assistant and told her to cancel everything she could for next year. I can’t cancel my

tour. I mean, I could. *I could*. But I couldn’t live with myself.” The economic impact of a canceled

tour is massive, and I don't mean to me. I mean to all the people who work on a tour. The support

staff. The crew. The band. The people who work the stadiums for shows.

I'd still have millions in the bank if I paid to cancel a tour. But those people count on their

paychecks. I can't let them down, and I know Ingrid would be extremely disappointed in me if I did.

And then there would be thousands upon thousands of disappointed fans.

The weight of making the world happy has never felt so heavy.

"Does she ask you to do that?" Mom asks.

I shake my head. "It'd be easier if she had. Instead, it's like...it's like she sees me for exactly who

I am and what I do, and she respects me the same way *you* do for it, not like I'm some kind of a god,

but like I'm a guy who does good things in the world because I have an obligation to use the gifts I've

been given. But *who I am* is also the exact barrier. And you know what's dumb? *She told me that.*

She told me, time and again, that she put her kids first, and she didn't have it in her to commit to

anything else on that level."

Mom sighs and leans closer to me, bumping my shoulder with hers. "Honey, being a single mom is

hard enough. Bringing another man into it who'll have different ideas of what's okay for the kids to

get away with and what's not, and trusting he'll be as consistent with rules and boundaries as you are,

before you even consider when he's there and when he's not...that's a *huge* burden. I didn't date

when you were younger because it wasn't worth the emotional toll of balancing a man with what was

best for you. There was literally no energy left to even begin to consider one more person to care for,

and unfortunately, when I was younger, I tended to go for the men who needed care as much as you

did."

My fist tightens around the wet beer bottle. "Why did you give *us* so much? You deserve time for

*you* too. You can't *just* be a mom. You get to be *you*."

"Ah, sweetheart...if only it were that easy."

Is this anger irrational, or is it justified? I don't know. I just know I'm seeing red. "And you had

Beck's family. And Mr. and Mrs. Rivers. Davis's family. Wyatt's family. They watched us all the

time. You could've had the help. Ingrid doesn't have that. Her parents dumped her on her

grandparents when she was her girls' age. Her ex is nowhere to be found. Her best friend lives out in

the suburbs. Her kids—they're awesome, but there's three of them, and Hudson—he's like Beck and

Davis and me all rolled into one.”

“The good parts?”

“The fun parts.”

Mom grimaces.

“Exactly.” I sigh. “She won’t ask for help because...”

I trail off.

She probably does ask for help, but knowing Ingrid, not until she absolutely can’t avoid it.

Just not from me, with the one exception of watching her kids earlier this week.

When she couldn’t avoid it.

And I get it.

I’m not dependable. I travel all the time. I can’t be the father *any* kid deserves.

Not the kind of father I’d expect myself to be after watching the examples of all of my friends’

fathers, and the years I’d look around on my birthday, or holidays, or during talent shows at school,

and realize somewhere out there was a guy who cared enough to knock my mom up, but not enough to

stay, and knowing that I’d *never* be that kind of person.

Fuck. Just *fuck*.

“You want my advice?” Wyatt asks.

Dude was so quiet, I forgot he was sitting on my other side.

But of everyone here, he's the only one who'd understand. He got married years ago to the wrong

woman because she was pregnant, then had a rough divorce later that cut him out of his own kid's life

nine months out of the year for several years. Then when he and Ellie hooked up, they had to make

long distance work until he managed to network his way into an assignment at the local base north of

the city.

He would've gotten out of the military if they'd sent him anywhere else, and even as close to

retirement as he is now, if he got orders somewhere outside Copper Valley, I know he'd bolt for his

family.

And he knows tons of fellow service members who have to deploy for months on end, but still

make it work with their families.

He's probably the *only* person here who has a clue. Beck more or less left the fashion industry to

settle back home and be with Sarah. Tripp and Lila work together day in and day out. Cash and Davis

are still single. The Fireballs players—I don't know any of them dating a single mom, and the ones

who *do* have kids take their families on the road with them as often as they

can.

Wyatt's the only person with perspective.

I nod, still staring at the floor.

"It's not about how much you're gone," he says. "It's about what you do when you're gone, and

what you do when you're home. You call. You email. You video chat. You don't walk in the door after

a week away, say you're tired, and go straight to lock yourself in the bedroom instead of taking all the

hugs and listening to all the stories about what happened when you were gone. She's tired too, man.

And I don't care what you were doing while you were gone, I guarantee she's more fucking tired than

you. And I guarantee you she wouldn't be divorced with an absent ex if he hadn't been the kind of

asshole who expected her to wait on him hand and foot too the minute he walked in the door."

I swallow hard.

I hear him.

I do.

Hell, I got it enough that I offered to be the one to find a babysitter so we could have dinner.

"How do I prove I've got what it takes when there's not a snowball's chance in hell that she'll let

me?”

Neither of them answer me.

So I sit there, staring at the floor, knowing I don't get another chance to hang out with Ingrid's kids

during the day.

I almost regret taking the nail polish off and washing as much of the glitter as I could out of my

hair.

Mom's right. I'm leaving in two days, again. I'm out half of December. I can get studio time in

Copper Valley and move recording here from New York in January, and I can find a local place to

host rehearsals for the tour next year, but I still have travel on the books for at least a week or two a

month until the tour kicks off in April.

“You know that's what you've got us for, right?” Davis says from the other table.

I lift my eyes to look at him. He tips his head toward Mom. “Every kid needs a grandma.” Then

toward the dance floor, where Tripp and Lila are dancing with James and Emma. “And aunts and

uncles and cousins.”

That's fucking presumptuous.

I like it.

But I don't know if Ingrid will.

"The family you make always starts with friends," Mom says crisply. "I might like this one better

than I liked your last girlfriends, but that doesn't mean I'm ready to trust Mr. Never Getting Married

to know what you're doing yet."

"Says Ms. Won't Tell Her Oldest She's Dating His Team Manager."

"Of the two of us, I believe you have a bigger hill to climb."

She's right.

I do.

And the next step is figuring out exactly how I can prove to Ingrid that I can be there for her and

her kids even when I'm not *here*.

I eyeball my beer bottle.

Drinking is not the answer.

But it's more of an answer than I can see myself finding anytime soon.

I can't let my family date her for me. That's ridiculous.

"I should let her go," I mutter.

"Do you love her?" Mom asks.

Fuck. I've loved her from the minute I saw her holding that sign eight years ago. Then, it was a

love for a stranger, an affection for what she did for my life without her even



knowing it.

Now, it's for knowing *her*.

Mom rubs my knee again. "Whatever you decide is right, I'll support you. Davis is right, you

know. When a woman gets involved with *one* of you, she gets *all* of us."

My eyes drift to Sarah, who's now twirling with Emma while Cash pretends Emma's feet are

going to knock him over every time they spin. And then there's Lila, who's surrounded by the rest of

the mom squad, who are clearly plotting something.

Ellie was always part of the crew, but instead of sitting with Beck or with the Rivers clan, she's

rubbing her belly and chatting animatedly with a group of Lila's friends from New York.

Pulling the outsiders in.

It's what we do.

Jimmy Santiago is looking at Mom again. I lean back and nudge her elbow. "Go dance. Have fun.

Thank you for being awesome."

"I'm writing that one in my journal tonight. *Today, my youngest acknowledged that I'm*

*awesome.*"

"I don't tell you that enough."

She smiles as she rises. “You do, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do it more.”

I don’t. I never have.

And if I hadn’t met Ingrid, I probably never would’ve realized it.

Wyatt claps me on the shoulder. “You need anything, let me know. I’m gonna go grab a dance with

my wife.”

I want to dance with Ingrid.

I want to dance with her. Chase Hudson out of the dinner mints so he can’t shove them up his nose.

Convince the deejay to let Zoe borrow the mic to karaoke to her favorite song. Tell Piper that Tripp

needs advice on how to make his baseball players more like hockey players and watch her trap my

brother against the wall.

I want to *be here*.

Just need to figure out *how*.

TWENTY-EIGHT

*Ingrid*

WE’RE LATE to Piper’s hockey practice Saturday. I’m cranky that she has practice at all,

considering half the kids are out of town since it’s Thanksgiving weekend, and the kids who *are* in

town aren't the kids whose parents I know well enough to beg for a ride for her, and my babysitter

isn't one that I trust to drive my kids in holiday shopping weekend traffic.

The good news is that it's just Piper and me, since I have a babysitter.

The bad news is that she hates being late for hockey.

The worse news is that I'm a complete and total bear, and I'm trying *very* hard to not take it out on

my kids, but I'm tired.

I'm so tired. The store. Their activities. The squirrel. Just everyday *life*—today, it's too much,

and I don't think I can solve it by declaring today to be *watch TV and order in pizza* day.

Nor would I want to. Staying busy is good, right?

"It's okay, Piper. No one's upset that you're late," I tell her as I help her shove her skate on. She's

all padded up and ready, bouncing on the bench while five or six other kids skate out on the ice with

the coach. "Most of the team isn't even here. Any minutes you get are bonus minutes."

"But I want to be out there *now*."

I finally get her skates tightened, and she takes off so fast I nearly lose a finger.

That child was *born* to live on the ice. I'm a little terrified of what'll happen the first time a coach

tells her she can't play with the boys, or the first time I tell her she can't move up in the league

because Mama's terrified she'll take a punch to the ear.

I'm shaking my head as I rise off the players' bench, but instead of seeing the other parents when I

turn to head up into the stands, I come face-to-chest with a mountain in a Thrusters jersey.

I stumble back against the half-wall, crane my neck up, and find myself staring into the face of

Piper's idol.

There are exactly three things I remember about Ares Berger.

One, he's the largest man in pro hockey, nicknamed *The Force*, which I'm quickly realizing is

probably an understatement.

Two, he told *Sports Illustrated* in an interview early this summer that he had hearing problems as

a kid that went undiagnosed until grade school since his twin brother did all his talking for him when

they were little.

And three, Levi knows him.

Ares doesn't smile—not exactly—but his lips lift in one corner, and I get the feeling that's as

close as I'll get to any hint that I need to get out of his way, and also that he's amused at the idea of

puny little me blocking him.

“Quit scaring the civilians, Berger,” another male voice says behind him.

I slide aside, pretty sure I’ll never blink again.

Ares unlocks the half-door that Piper just flew through, and six Thrusters in uniform follow him

out onto the ice as every one of the dinky little players, including my fearless little girl, turn and gawk

at them.

Parents behind me are murmuring and whispering.

The coach smiles broadly and takes a fist bump from one of the players.

I don’t know which players are which or who plays what position. Names flash on their backs,

some familiar, some not. *Berger. Frey. Lavoie. Murphy. Applebottom. Jaeger. Klein.*

My brain doesn’t have space to keep up with all of the names of the pro hockey players, but the

heavier pads on two of them tell me the team sent two goaltenders.

I almost giggle at the idea that a professional hockey team would need *two* goaltenders to stop

Piper and her crew from scoring.

“Are you Ingrid?”

I glance to my left, where a pretty redheaded woman in an official Thrusters polo is smiling at me,

baby on her hip, then belatedly remember to nod.

She steps next to me and tilts her head to the ice. The players are all bending or squatting to say hi

to the kids. “Which one’s Piper?”

“Number twenty-two.”

She lifts a hand and flashes two fingers twice, earning an actual full grin from Ares, who instantly

turns and zeroes in on Piper like he knows exactly who she is despite none of the kids’ numbers being

visible.

Then she turns back to me. “Hi. I’m Felicity. The Thrusters’ front office got a call from a

concerned citizen who was worried we weren’t doing enough to support said concerned citizen’s

favorite youth hockey team.”

My eyes get hot.

This is *not* fair. “He shouldn’t have—”

“Rule number one of knowing *concerned citizens*—they do what they want.”

I suck in a wavering breath. “He still shouldn’t have.”

“Shouldn’t he?” She nods out to the ice, where Ares has taken a knee to get closer to talk to Piper,

and in return, Piper’s taken a knee too, to do what her idol does despite it meaning that Ares has to

lean down even farther to talk to her, and my eyes go hot all over again as I pull out my phone and

start snapping pictures.

She's so small next to him. I want to call for her to stand up, but I stifle myself. Ares is smiling at

her like he's amused and I don't want to interrupt the moment. I can't hear what he's saying, but

Piper's nodding, and then her jaw starts moving.

"I don't think he's going to get another word in," I whisper.

"Trust me, he's *quite* content with not being the one doing the talking."

"This is making her entire life."

"*That's* why they do it. My dad played pro hockey. My brother plays pro hockey. My husband

plays pro hockey." She slides me a sly grin. "He's the one talking to your daughter."

If there's anything that I've learned since Levi Wilson walked into my life, it's that no matter how

wide my eyes go, they still won't fall out of my head. "Oh."

"I also work in the Thrusters front office. I know all of these guys. It's not in the exact same

ballpark as touring the world and playing sold-out stadiums, but I've seen fame all my life. Famous

people can do the normal things for friends and family, and they do. But they're always driven to

*more*. It's in their DNA. And they don't do what you think are the *big* things to show off or to impress

you. At least, I don't think *this* particular concerned citizen did. It's more that when you have the

means to make people's dreams come true, there's a responsibility to do it when you can. To share

their privileges. Honestly, we feel bad this was the only weekend in the rest of your season when we

could make it happen, because we know there are a lot of kids missing today. But trust me—Ares

would *not* have said yes in any other set of circumstances, and if he hadn't said yes, none of the rest

of the guys would be here right now either.”

I don't ask what circumstances. I can guess what Levi said.

“Can you tell Ares thank you for talking about his hearing when he was little? She reads that

interview he did in *Sports Illustrated* every single day.”

Felicity smiles, *huge* smiles, and I realize I missed how pretty she is. Her baby gurgles and

smiles back at her and reaches for her hair. “I don't like to use *I told you so* often—with Ares, I

mean, because he usually doesn't need it—but I'll make sure he hears that his brilliant wife was right

that his story would help other kids who've been there.”

I swear he cuts his eyes to us at that exact moment like he did, indeed, hear



what she said.

Felicity grins.

He shakes his head and goes back to listening to Piper.

Our coach skates over next to us and reaches out a hand to Felicity. “Sorry for thinking you were

prank calling. I didn’t even tell the parents you were coming because I didn’t want their kids

disappointed if—anyway. Thank you. This is awesome. Even if I’ve done a little cursing at Murphy

this year.”

She laughs.

Cackles, really. “He’s getting old. Good thing we have Klein.”

And now our coach goes pink. “You’re—you’re Murphy’s sister, aren’t you?”

“Don’t worry. I tell him every day that I heard someone say the same. He won’t know it was you.”

“Can I get your autograph? My wife didn’t watch hockey until you joined the announcer booth.

She’s a huge fan.”

I have no idea what’s going on, but clearly, Felicity is a bigger deal than she’s making herself out

to be, and she doesn’t stop with signing an autograph for the coach.

She also slides him a massive manila envelope and says the magic words. “Tickets for all of you.

For a few games, actually. Give me a call and let me know which one you'd like to do the Little

Skaters game between periods."

My brain mentally goes to *one more thing to add to the calendar*, and shame washes through me.

Piper's going to get to skate on the ice at Mink Arena where her idols play.

I hope she someday appreciates just how monumental this is.

In the meantime, I have something in my eye again.

"Mom! Mom! Come take video!" Piper races to the boards. "Ares is going to show me how to do

a killer wrist shot!"

All of us parents venture out onto the ice to get close-ups of the hockey guys with our kids.

Practice runs long, but not by much, and before the players leave, they pose for group pictures with

our scrappy little team. As the rest of the guys start heading off the ice, Ares bumps helmets with

Piper. "Play good."

"I'm gonna kick butt!"

He rises, covers her helmet with his massive gloved hand like he's ruffling her hair, then nods to

me.

I nod back. "Thank you."

“Boy Band Levi likes you.” He smirks, and then he’s gone, bringing up the rear as the Thrusters

file off the ice.

“Mom. *Mom*. Oh my gosh, Mom. Mom. Mom, that was *Ares Berger*.”

“I touched Tyler Jaeger,” another mom next to me whispers.

“I got a picture with Duncan Lavoie.”

“I can’t believe they knew about our team.”

“Nick Murphy signed my purse. It was all I had that I could think to ask him for.”

“Okay, I wasn’t paying attention to Applebottom since they traded for him—because really, how

do you replace Zeus?—but did you see how *gorgeous* he is up close?”

The tears catch me off-guard. Again.

I know where they’re coming from.

*Gratitude.*

Levi did this. He arranged for the practice of these kids’ lives and gave all their parents a thrill

too.

He won’t take credit for it.

I don’t even know if he wants *me* to know he did it.

But I know.

And so after Piper and I climb back into the car, I pause before starting it, and

I pull up my text  
messages.

*Can we still be friends?*

I haven't replied to his last text message.

Yet.

But I grab my favorite two pictures of Piper with Ares Berger, add a *Thank you*, and send it to

Levi.

I don't expect him to answer. Gossip's slow in Copper Valley, so the radio was talking about how

he's off to start his small Christmas album tour soon.

But before I buckle my seatbelt and start the car, my phone dings.

*Anytime.*

"Mom? Why do grown-ups cry when good things happen?" Piper asks.

I swipe my cheeks. "Because we're weird."

*Anytime.*

I might not have known Levi long, but I can see his smile. I can feel the warmth in his blue eyes. I

can feel his arms wrapped around me in a hug. And I can hear his voice.

*Anytime.*

If only.

TWENTY-NINE

*Ingrid*

THE BEST THING about the holiday season is that the store is busy, so I have less time to think

about the fact that Levi's still texting me.

Not a lot.

Maybe every other day, and always with something like *Saw your store mentioned in this article*

*and wanted to make sure you knew, or Waverly Sweet is doing a Christmas special that starts*

*streaming Friday night, if Zoe hasn't already told you, but what she doesn't know is that there's a*

*new song dropping during the show. You didn't hear it from me, or No kidding, just met a guy who*

*keeps squirrels as pets, and I cannot unsee the pictures of his pet squirrels in pajamas, and I can't*

*decide if I'm charmed or horrified. Have your kids put Skippy in pajamas yet?*

Stuff you'd send to a friend.

Things that say *I'm still thinking about you.*

I call Portia on my lunch break after that last text. It's Friday, a week after Thanksgiving, and even

the thick stream of customers coming for both books and to kick their feet up for a few minutes over

coffee in the loft upstairs hasn't distracted me from the squirrel message that was waiting for me

when I woke up.

"What does it mean?" I ask my best friend.

"It means you have a stalker."

I almost choke on my chicken salad sandwich. "He is *not* stalking me," I say through a mouthful of

food.

"He's not leaving you alone either."

"It's all so... *normal*. Like he's part of my life, and like he's thinking about my kids too, except

he's not."

"Is he sending you nudes?"

"No."

"Sexts?"

"No."

"None?" She doesn't sound convinced.

"I guess the squirrel in pajamas could be an innuendo?"

"That text was the least innuendo-filled message I've *ever* seen with the words *squirrel* and

*pajamas* in it."

"I'm suddenly really glad you don't share Griff's texts with me." I shove the

last bite of my

chicken salad in my mouth, wipe my hands on a dirty paper towel already sitting on my table, briefly

contemplate how far I've fallen since my military days when the mere presence of the dirty paper

towel would've sent me into a cataclysmic fit, and fall right back to thinking about Levi doing the

dishes the last time he was here.

"Is it normal for guys to be friends with their exes? And am I an ex, or am I really just a friend

who had some benefits, and now I'm being completely friend-zoned because I never left, and he's

being kind in not mentioning my little meltdown when I told him I was falling for him?"

"One, don't call it a meltdown. It's *emotions*, and they're normal, and healthy, and you're entitled

to feelings, especially feelings for sexy men who take care of you in ways you haven't been taken care

of in years. And two, Ingrid, the man's playing a game. You need to ask him what he wants or tell him

to go away. I don't care if he's the king of the whole damn world. You broke up with him. If he still

wants to be in your life, he owes you that answer."

I don't demand an answer from Levi.

In fact, I reply two days later by sending him an article *I* stumbled over about

his concert Saturday

night in Chicago, and a young fan who got to live out a dream of dancing on stage with him after

getting surprise backstage passes in the mail.

*Nice job, superstar*, I text.

He replies back with a gif of himself blushing during an interview.

I'm in this weird space where he's gone, and I miss him, and I know I need to let go, but I don't

want to.

And when I go to bed at night, I toss and turn and flop around and wonder if he's alone, or if he's

out with friends, or if he's flirting with someone new, or sleeping with someone.

He's not mine.

I let him go.

And I wasn't wrong to.

What he did in Chicago?

That wasn't just a random fan he pulled up on stage with him. He gave a kid with terminal cancer

the thrill of his life.

No one else could've done that.

Okay, a very, *very* small handful of other people in the world could've done it. But that doesn't



mean many of them would've.

Levi's out in the world doing what he needs to do, sprinkling happiness and magic and hope and

dreams everywhere. He does *not* need to be here with me and my kids. Who are we to keep all of that

for ourselves?

Mind made up.

I need to tell him to quit texting me.

And I will.

Soon.

Which is exactly what I'm actively avoiding thinking about when I yank my kids up the bookstore

stairs to the loft with me late Wednesday evening.

We're running holiday hours, so the store's open until eight, which isn't fair to Zoe at all.

Her birthday always gets the shaft because of holiday hours.

"Saturday," I'm repeating to her for the eleventy-billionth time in her life, and feeling like a

complete asshole since she used to get a real birthday, back before Grandma died and I took over the

bookstore. "I promise, you'll get a real birthday Saturday, but for tonight, Holly's making you a

special hot chocolate, and I have a stack of new books *just* for you, and you don't even have to keep

an eye on Hudson or Piper for me while I close up. Promise.”

Gymnastics is over for the year. Little ninjas is on hiatus until January. Even Piper’s speech

therapy appointments are done until next year, though she still has hockey practice and we have tickets

to a game Sunday night.

The store is the *only* big thing on my plate in the evenings right now, but it’s busier than ever.

Case in point?

It’s half an hour before we close, and three of the couches are full of women who are apparently

having a baby shower up here.

“Ingrid! Oh my goodness, are these your babies?”

I freeze halfway to turning to Holly at the bar and look back at the women lounging on the

mismatched couches in the middle of the loft.

Oh, god.

Levi’s mom is here, and she’s beaming at me.

I lift a hand and give a small finger wave. “Hi, Ms. Wilson. Welcome to Penny for Your

Thoughts.”

She makes a face. “Call me Donna. Please. *Ms. Wilson* sounds too much like my daughter-in-law,

and while I adore her, there's no way I could keep up with her." She rises and beckons us over. "Is

that Hudson? Oof. I see what Levi meant."

I look down and catch my son shoving a handful of marshmallows from the hot chocolate bar into

the back of his pants. "*Hudson*."

The other women with Ms. Wil—with *Donna* are all smiling. "I definitely see Beck," one says.

"You have no idea how much Davis is sitting in that smile," another replies.

"Thank god my boys were angels and I have *no* idea what you're talking about," the third says.

And the fourth, who's closer to my age than the matrons all comparing my son to the Bro Code

guys, cracks up as she rubs her very pregnant belly. "Your boys were the worst, Mrs. Rivers. Next to

Wyatt, I mean. Thank god for girls."

"I'm a handful," Piper tells her.

"She really is," Zoe agrees.

"Piper," Donna says. "How's hockey?"

My middle child beams at her. "Ares Berger thinks I'm awesome."

"So I heard. Zoe, how's your birthday been?"

While Zoe lights up and tells the story—again—about how one of the boys in her class

accidentally dropped one of her birthday cupcakes on the floor and how the teacher didn't see it and

almost wiped out, my eyes get hot and wet.

Levi's been talking about us. Not just me, but *us*. And all four of us are drifting closer to the group

of smiling, happy ladies like they have some kind of magic magnetic pull.

"Where are my manners?" Donna shakes her head. "Ingrid, do you know Michelle Ryder? And

this is her daughter, Ellie, and our partners in crime, Carol Rivers and Alice Remington."

"I'm not a partner in crime," Ellie says. "I'm not old enough for the cool club yet."

"If you need to get back to work, we can sit with the kids," Donna says. "We *all* remember the

working years."

The other moms give emphatic nods.

I sniffle, because my nose is hot and wet too. "I—you don't have to—"

"How many times did I catch Beck in my cookie jar when the boys were growing up?" Carol asks

Michelle.

"At least three times," Alice answers.

"A day," Ellie adds, and all of the mothers crack up. She grins at me. "They *all* raised us.

Together. It's what they do. They can handle anything, and they can't sneak

out of the store and leave

you with wild unsupervised children up here. Promise. Although I *can't* promise they won't spoil

your kids silly. Not a single kid left under thirty for any of them, and they only have three and a half

grandkids among all of them. They're all twitchy to spread more spoiling."

I shake my head. "This is—"

"A birthday gift for Zoe," Donna interrupts, her eyes glinting exactly like Levi's do.

It's an ambush.

Except it feels like a warm hug instead of something I need to put on armor to get through. "Not

exactly fair," I finish quietly.

Donna smiles again, and for a minute, I see my grandma not long after I moved in with her.

Compassionate. Full of love. And completely understanding.

"None of us like to see our babies hurting," she replies.

Yep.

Gonna cry.

I wave a hand at the stairs. "Thank you. I need to—"

"Say thank you," Holly whispers next to me. She raises her voice. "Help me with a mug

problem."

“Thank you,” I stutter.

Holly grips my arm and turns me to the stairs. “Gonna cry?” she asks halfway down.

“Yes.”

“That’s hardcore, sending his mom *and* her friends to take a little stress off your plate.”

“It’s half an hour on Zoe’s birthday.”

She snorts, but she’s grinning. “You’re out of your league, Ingrid.”

She might be right.

I help Yasmin check out our last few customers, then we lock the door. My kids are all laughing

upstairs, and I can hear all of the ladies talking too. Shortly after I’ve told Yasmin and Holly to go

home for the night, my phone dings.

It’s Levi, texting me.

*You’re going to get a FaceTime request from a weird number in about five minutes. Take it.*

I text him back. *You sent YOUR MOTHER? Why did you send your mother?*

He doesn’t reply.

And five minutes later, like clockwork, my phone rings with a FaceTime request from an email

address made up of random letters and numbers.

I swipe to answer, and immediately wish I was sitting down.

“Hi!” the bubbly blonde with glitter eye shadow on the other end says. “I’m Waverly. I’m looking

for Zoe? I heard it’s her birthday.”

So, basically, my daughter’s entire life is made.

Again.

And I definitely need to sit down.

And breathe.

And probably stick my head between my knees so I don’t hyperventilate, which seems like a silly

reaction to a couple small kindnesses, but it’s where I’m at.

I head up the stairs, stammering to the pop star calling on my phone, then holler for Zoe like an

idiot, because *I’m yelling in front of her favorite singer*, and that’s not a good look for anyone,

except when I hand her my phone, she screams even louder than I yelled for her.

“Zoe,” I whisper. “Quieter.”

“It’s okay, Ingrid,” Waverly says cheerfully. “That’s how I felt when I met Taylor Swift too.”

“Oh my god, I love you!” Zoe squeals.

“What? No way! I love your hair. Is that pink glitter?”

“My mom let me have a glitter streak since I’m the birthday girl!” Zoe turns her head and shakes

the camera, and I almost apologize, except I know what Levi would do.

He'd sit there and talk to a fan and get motion sick without complaint.

While Zoe chats with Waverly Sweet, I drop into a chair at the edge of the loft, close enough to

listen in, far enough away to not ruin this little thrill for my baby girl, and I drop my head between my

knees, and I breathe.

Most guys would send flowers or chocolates.

Levi sent family.

He sent friends.

He sent a message.

It's not *I can afford nannies and private planes to make this easier.*

It's *I can give you what's important. I can pay attention. I can make your dreams come true.*

Or did he put all of this in motion before I broke up with him, and he's doing this for my kids, and

not for me at all?

But if he did, why would his mom be here?

Does this mean he was falling for me too? That he's not ready to let me go?

Or is he a master of making me regret what I did?

"Overwhelming, isn't it?" Donna says quietly beside me.

I nod. I can't yet look up, because if I do, I might cry.



“If you want us to go, we will. You’ve done an amazing job with your babies, Ingrid. We know

you don’t need us. And Hudson’s going to be just fine. Take it from *several* of us who’ve been there.

But if you *want* us—all of us—I think you know how to get our numbers.”

I swipe my eyes with the balls of my hands and look up at her. “I think you did a pretty amazing

job with this mom thing yourself.”

“Honest truth? My boys shock me more every day, still. The one thing Levi’s never wavered on

since he was nine years old, wailing into a toilet paper tube microphone in the bathroom while he

was buck naked, was that he was never getting married or having kids. Watching him fall for you and

your family has been like watching his final puzzle piece fall into place.”

My heart hiccups.

It’s easier to think this was all pre-arranged kindness than to know that I need to decide if I want

to take a chance on what we had being real.

If it’s real, I have to bend.

I have to meet him halfway.

And after doing my life *my* way for so long, I don’t know if I know how.

“I broke up with him.” The words taste like rotten sawdust on my tongue. This woman should hate

me. I rejected her son.

Instead, not only is she still here, she's reaching for my hand and gripping it tight. "Apparently not

very well if he still thinks there's a chance he can win you over."

Something swells so big in my chest that I almost can't breathe.

I could give her all the arguments I gave him—that my family and I need someone who's *here*,

someone who won't miss birthdays, who won't be performing in Times Square at midnight on New

Year's instead of hanging out in the loft for our annual celebration of New Year's in England so that

we can go to bed at a decent hour. Someone who can take a day off to get a sick kid to the doctor for a

strep test, or who can do split ops with me so that Zoe can level up in gymnastics, since that class is

offered at the exact same time as Piper's hockey practice and I can't bring myself to ask someone to

take Piper to hockey every week when I don't know when I could pay them back the favor, and I don't

want to miss all of her hockey practices either. Someone who'll respect the rules and boundaries I've

already set for the kids without question and fit into our lives smoothly, instead of us having to bend

to fit around his life.

But I can't make myself say any of that to his mom.

Instead, I look her straight in the eye and ask her the same question I've wondered time and again.

"But why *me*? Why *us*?"

"Does *why* matter?"

"Mom! Mom, oh my gosh, Mom, *Waverly Sweet knows it's my birthday!*"  
Zoe throws herself into

my lap and hugs me tight. "Thank you thank you thank you. This is the best birthday *ever*."

And there goes that hot ocean behind my eyeballs again. But I look at Donna Wilson while I hug

my baby girl close, even though she doesn't fit nearly as well in my lap now as she used to. "He's

cheating," I whisper.

She smiles, and I see *his* smile, and my heart somehow manages to swell with warmth and break

down in sobs at the same time. "He second-guessed himself, if it helps. But what you'd be

comfortable with got overruled by what would make someone else happy."

And that's both better and worse.

Because he's not just thinking about *me*.

He's thinking about all of us.

"Do I need to worry about surprises for Hudson?"

Donna laughs. "Absolutely not. He likes you too much for *that*."

“Mom! Hudson’s trying to eat the mistletoe!”

Three of the mom squad leap to their feet and dive for Hudson, who is, indeed, chewing on the

plastic ivy wrapped around the balcony railing.

“Do you think Waverly’s going to call other people and wish them happy birthday?” Zoe asks. “I

hope so. That would be so nice of her to call everyone on their tenth birthday.”

I squeeze her tighter. “I hope so too. Who’s ready for cake? We apparently need to give your

brother something edible to chew on.”

Levi’s mom and her friends don’t stick around, but they do all tell me to call them if I ever need a

helping hand.

And Ellie hugs me before she leaves too. “I *adore* your store. When the little one gets here, we’re

coming for storytime on Saturday mornings.”

It takes three centuries to get my kids and the squirrel to bed after birthday cake and presents, but

once they’re all settled, I close my bedroom door, take a deep breath, and hit Levi’s number.

It goes straight to voicemail.

Right.

Because he has a concert tonight.

I don't leave a message.

I don't know what to say.

*Thank you* seems insignificant.

And my gut-level *he can't take your phone call because he's too busy for you*  
reaction isn't

something he deserves.

He's trying.

Question is, can I find a way to meet him halfway?

THIRTY

*Levi*

SOME DAYS I hate my job.

Today's one of them.

I'm supposed to be on a bus halfway between Denver and Seattle right now,  
headed to my last

show of my Christmas album mini-tour, but instead, I'm in Copper Valley.

Why?

Because I want to see Ingrid.

I don't *want* to be performing in Seattle tomorrow night.

I want to be *here*.

Unfortunately, though, it's Friday. She's working hella awful hours at her  
store, and I can't walk

into a crowded shop to ask the owner to be my girlfriend without causing a massive scene.

If there's one thing she'll *never* be, it's a publicity stunt.

Talking to her in private is the only option.

She's texted me more since Mom and her friends stopped by the store to visit, but it's not the same

as it was before yet.

While the clock ticks down to closing time, I head over to Tripp's place. He and Lila and the kids

are back from their honeymoon, and they've been working half-days so they can spend more time

together after the craziness of the baseball season.

"You saved a squirrel," Tripp repeats to me. We're hanging out on his back deck as James and

Emma run around the yard throwing leaves at each other in the waning afternoon light.

I've been filling them in on my adventures with Ingrid, since I haven't yet. Feels good to talk

about her. "It wasn't my squirrel."

"That's worse. And after all of James's frogs and chipmunks..."

Lila pats his hand. "Think of all he's learned from them."

"James or Levi?"

"Both."

“Nice throw, Emma,” I call down to the three-year-old, who’s sporting yellow and red leaves in

her blond curls. “You need me to come talk to that leaf about flying farther next time?”

“I do it myself, Unka Wevi,” she yells back. And then she picks up a stick half her size and flings

it at James.

“Atta girl,” Lila whispers.

Tripp sighs. “Emma, don’t throw sticks.”

“It frowed on its own.”

God, I love three-year-olds. “How’d you know Lila could handle your kids?” I ask Tripp.

Not even gonna beat around the bush about it. If I’m heading to Ingrid’s place to ask to be part of

her life, part of her family’s life, then I’m going in armed with knowledge and an answer to every

objection she might give me.

“Sitting right here,” my sister-in-law says with a smile.

“You strike me as the type who’d rather have people talk about you behind your back while you

can listen in.”

“She could handle me,” Tripp says around his wife. “At my worst, I mean. My kids are easier.”

Lila nods thoughtfully. “I can’t actually argue with that.”

“The kids will get there one day, but she’ll love them too much by then.”

“Possibly more than him,” Lila agrees, flicking a thumb toward my brother.

They share a secret smile, and *fuck*.

I miss Ingrid.

She’s only a few miles away, but it feels so damn far. “How’d you know you were ready to be a

stepmother?” I ask Lila.

She doesn’t blink. “Are you saying you only save squirrels for women you’d like to have a future

with?”

“Pretty much.”

Tripp eyes me. Then Lila, who eyes him back before turning to me again.

Both of them take a hit off their beers like there’s not enough alcohol in the world for this

conversation.

“Very funny.” I eyeball my niece out in the yard and wonder if I could convince her to fling a stick

at my brother without getting her in trouble.

Huh.

Maybe that’s why Tripp’s not answering.

“Seriously, how do you do it? Especially when things are busy?”

“Clear boundaries,” Lila says, the same time Tripp answers, “With a lot of



communication.”

“And the nanny,” they add together.

I don’t know if Ingrid would want a nanny, male or female. She’s always done everything herself,

but is it because she needs to, or because she wants to?

Doesn’t matter.

She’s hopefully already figured out that I come with a posse of grandmas.

“Being a stepmom is a little terrifying,” Lila says. “I’d never been around small people before

that meeting with the commissioner that Tripp brought James and Emma to last year.”

Tripp grimaces. “And the baby chipmunks...”

His bride throws her head back and laughs, which is pretty fucking remarkable.

I was at that meeting too.

Ugly, ugly mess.

But it turned out okay.

Better than okay, actually.

Knowing what Tripp and Lila went through to get to today, happy, together, and a family, makes

me feel like a lucky bastard for only having to rearrange my schedule, re-evaluate my life plans, and

learn to be a father-figure and not just an uncle-figure to be the man Ingrid

needs me to be.

Hopefully.

Also, yeah, I know that's a hell of a list of things to tackle.

Good thing I don't like to half-ass anything.

Lila's still chuckling as she tips her bottle toward me. "I learned a lot by watching you, you

know."

"It's easy when you know you can leave anytime."

"James built a snowman in the drivers' seat of your Porsche. And *it melted*. And had a mud heart

inside. You can leave, but you can't forget something like that."

"It had a *what?*" Tripp whips his head between Lila and me, then squeezes his eyes shut. "I didn't

hear *that* part of the story."

"And James is still alive," I point out. "It's just a seat. I got a new one. And I don't even drive that

car that much." I frown, realizing how *I don't drive my Porsche often* would sound to the woman I'd

like to be my girlfriend. "If I talk Ingrid into coming to the party next week, can we maybe *not* start

with that story?"

"Have no fear. There's not a single person in your circle who'd start with that one. That one

makes you sound like a saint. Sort of like going with the whole glitter-in-your-hair-on-tour thing

makes you look like you're an angel, which is probably the last time I'll ever put the words *you* and

*angel* together in the same sentence."

"My hairdresser couldn't get it out after an incident with Ingrid's kids, so we decided that

sparkling me up like a Christmas tree was better, so it at least looks like it's on purpose." We get a lot

out every night, but I'll be digging glitter out of my scalp for the next ten years.

No question.

Shaving my head probably wouldn't even get rid of all of it.

Tripp kicks his feet up on the deck railing, which is the height of my brother at his most relaxed,

and pretty impressive considering he just found out what his oldest did to my car. Probably shouldn't

mention the time Emma took her own diaper off and redecorated my walls while she was going

through her prunes phase.

"Heard you've been asking Beck how he dialed back so fast after he met Sarah," he says.

"Yep."

"You're cutting back?"

“Yep.”

“For her?”

Tricky question. “She’s why, but the more my calendar opens up...I feel lighter than I have in

years. I think I needed this for me too.”

It’s not a lie. I miss my family. I don’t remember what a real hobby is, and my golf game has gone

to shit. I don’t like getting lost in the city I grew up in, even if this time, it turned out pretty fucking

good.

Hopefully, anyway.

“Is her four-year-old as much of a handful as Mom says he is?”

“Probably more.”

“You gonna ask her to move to New York?”

“What the *fuck*? Why would I do that? Her store’s here. Her kids’ schools are here. Their

activities are here. Her friends are here. Are you insane? Would you do that to your kids?”

He pretends to wipe a tear from his eye. “Aw, hell. It’s true. My baby brother’s growing up.”

“He means you’ve got this,” Lila says.

“If she’ll take him back. Look at him. Doesn’t know how to use a razor, wears pants so tight he

has to sleep in them since he can't get them off. And Cash is still single. Everyone knows he was the

hot one in Bro Code."

"Look at you, trying to be the funny one." I tip my beer back too. Three more hours until the shop

closes. *Dammit*. That's forever. "Also, if she had her pick of the five of us, she'd take Davis. Her

cash registers would never go down and her kids would never be able to lock her out of her

apartment."

"Speaking of..." Tripp eyes me.

I eye him right back.

And we have a silent stand-off over the last thing Tripp's aware of Davis finding out in that

sneaky way he has of finding out things.

In addition to being a melodramatic ass for missing Ingrid the past few weeks, I've changed the

subject every time Tripp's brought up Mom dating the car guy.

Not my news to share.

Especially if he was dumb enough to not see what was in front of his own eyes at the wedding.

Guess it's true.

He only has eyes for Lila.

Tripp cracks first. “Stan Sheldon and I had a nice long chat yesterday.”

And I choke on my beer.

Lila stifles a whimper. Pretty sure she’s trying not to laugh.

“I was going to wait Mom out. Let her have her fun. Decide if he was worth introducing to us. But

the guy had the nerve to call and ask about sponsoring a car giveaway if any of our players hit a

billboard he’s proposing in center field,” Tripp continues.

I wipe my mouth on my sleeve. “What...how did that go?”

“We’re putting a massive ad for his car empire up in center field. Raffling off another car next

season with all proceeds going to a children’s hospital. Getting use of a car for the mascots to ride

around in for between-inning shenanigans. And he swears the one and only time he met our mother, he

personally showed her around three car lots and gave her the same deal he would’ve given to either

of us, which would’ve been basically the best deal he gives to his own kids, but he’s not dating her,

he would never date her without asking our permission first, and swore up and down that he knew she

was out of his league.”

To be a fly on the wall in that conversation... “So you went easy on him?”

“Who the fuck is she dating?”

“Daddy? Did you say the fuck word?” James calls.

“No, James, I said I need Uncle Levi to get me a fork.”

“Fork fark ferk!” Emma chants.

Tripp sighs.

Lila squeezes her lips tighter together, but her green eyes are dancing and her shoulders are

shaking like she’s barely holding her laughter in.

“You know you’re gonna have to apologize to Stan,” I tell Tripp. “And probably make Mom and

Davis apologize too. And then apologize to your team manager. If you were more approachable, he

wouldn’t be sneaking around with Mom the way he is.”

He’s muttering to himself, eyes squeezed closed again, and even Lila’s not laughing anymore.

“You wouldn’t have hired him if he wasn’t a decent guy, right?” I offer.

“And here I thought I had at least twenty years before worrying about someone on the team dating

one of my family members. My head coach *and my mother*? Jesus.”

I glance out at the yard again, where James and Emma are both chasing the dog with arms full of

leaves now. “Gives you perspective on how they feel, doesn’t it?” I say with a nod to the kids.

I wonder how Ingrid’s girls would feel about their mom dating.

And it's not the first time it's crossed my mind.

Hudson's closer to James and Emma's ages. He'd notice I'm there, but I don't think he'd read a

lot into it. I'd be one more person to play with.

Zoe, though?

She's smart.

And Piper? She wears her heart on her sleeve over her hockey pads. It took approximately three

seconds to figure that out the day I watched them all.

"No." Tripp shakes his head, glaring at me. "This is *nothing* like what preschoolers go through

when their parent starts dating. Because *I know what he's doing to my mother.*"

Lila rubs his back. "We're going to have to pretend we don't."

"They're definitely not doing anything to each other," I agree. "Dinner. That's it. Hands to

themselves."

"He's fired," Tripp announces.

Lila stifles another smile. "No, he's not."

"He is in my mind until I get a grip on this." He tilts his head toward me. "What are you grinning

about? You have no idea if the woman *you're* in love with will take you back."



He's not wrong.

I can do all the right things, and it still might not be enough.

And I wouldn't blame Ingrid one bit.

Sending my mom and calling in favors aren't the same as someone who's there day in and day out,

doing the hard work right alongside her.

Her life is busy. It's full.

And I might not add enough to it to be worthwhile.

"I'm irresistible," I tell my brother. "Of course she'll take me back."

He hears the doubt in my voice. I know he does.

So it's no surprise when he shakes his head, takes another hit off his bottle, then clinks it to mine.

"Damn right. She'd be lucky to have you."

That's what a good big brother says when he has to.

Even if he doesn't believe it.

I sigh and sink lower in my chair. "Here's hoping she agrees."

That knot in my stomach?

It's not so sure.

Not at all.

THIRTY-ONE

*Ingrid*

ZOE'S SINGING at the top of her lungs as she combs her wet hair, and  
Piper's shrieking over

Skippy joining her in the shower, and Hudson's running around in his briefs  
and a cape, making Mr.

Axolotl fly and *pew pew* at the glitter still on the wall from the day Levi  
babysat the kids.

How is it possible to miss someone so much you can't breathe one moment,  
and then glow so hard

you can't breathe for sheer appreciation of a simple bakery bag delivered to  
your doorstep the next,

and still be standing here capable of barking orders at your children despite  
not being able to breathe

so much lately?

Add in that I haven't had more than six texts from him since his mom and her  
friends stopped by

the other night, and I'm questioning everything I know and feel.

But only for a moment, again, because Hudson just ran straight into my  
stomach. "*Oof*. Hudson.

*Stop.*"

Apartment living is going to kill us.

This boy needs space to run. I've known it for a while, but living above the  
store, three blocks

from school, no more than a five-minute drive, even in traffic, to any of the  
kids' activities and

doctors, makes my life work the way it needs to.

I spend zero time commuting so that I can fit more into every day.

And maybe I fit more into every day so that I don't have the time to stop and think about if I'm

doing the right things for my kids, and if they'll one day appreciate living in an apartment instead of a

house with a yard, and getting to do all of their activities so they can have well-rounded lives with

hobbies when they're my age instead of packing in everything they need to pack in for everyone else.

How is it that Levi never once complained about how difficult *my* schedule was to work with too,

yet all I can think about since his mom left the other night is all the ways I haven't been setting a good

example for my kids, and all the ways I could be more flexible if I got just a little more sleep and had

a little less to do every day?

And then all the ways that I feel lonely.

And a little hollow.

And how it's my own fault because I'm the grown-up here, and how can I put all the blame on

Levi for not being here when I keep myself so busy that I didn't even realize Zoe had adopted a baby

squirrel for *an entire month*?

My son eyeballs me like I'm an alien, and I wonder if I muttered any of that out loud in the last

two seconds.

But then he lifts his stuffy. “Mr. Axolotl *told* you to move.”

“Don’t do drugs, Mom,” Zoe said.

*“I am not doing drugs.”*

“We talked about drugs today at school and you look like people who are on drugs, all spacey and

running into people.”

One...two...three...

My phone rings, and I fish it out of my pocket so fast that I drop it on the floor before I answer,

and when I flip it over—

*“Dammit.”* The fudging screen is cracked.

And it’s not Levi calling.

It’s Yasmin.

*Shit shit shit.*

Four... five... six...

I swipe and answer, because let’s be real.

The only reason my screen wasn’t cracked before is that I upgraded from my last cracked-screen

version six months ago, and I’d somehow managed to *not* find the right angle to crack this one when I

dropped it.

Until now.

“Ingrid? I’m so sorry to bother you, but there’s a customer in the loft who won’t leave.”

Seven... eight... nine... “Me or the police?”

“You. I’m not worried, I just...well, I need to lock up and go.”

“Can you watch my kids for five?”

“Yep. I’m in the stairwell.”

I hang up, open my door, and there’s Yasmin. “Sorry,” she whispers.

I shake my head. “It’s okay.” We get this from time to time. Usually a woman who needs to cry it

out a little more before heading back to her family.

Possibly I’m that woman tonight, and our late customer will be talking me off a ledge.

Because when Levi gets home from his tour on Sunday, I’m texting him and asking if I can take

him out for dinner.

“I locked the front door so no one else can come in,” Yasmin says.

“You’re the best. Sorry about Hudson. And the squirrel.” I also need to let the squirrel go.

But it’s right before Christmas.

The kids are home most of the day with a very tolerant—for now—babysitter.

I tuck my phone into my front pocket, realize I’m wearing a slice of

pepperoni on my left boob,

and belatedly wonder if I have any pizza sauce smeared on my face.

Whatever.

Not like a fellow mom who needs a safe place for a few more minutes won't get it.

I wonder if it's Brittany. I legit keep thinking she's going to crack any day now.

Or possibly I'm projecting.

But when I climb the stairs to the loft in the dim light that happens when the downstairs lights are

off and just a single lamp up here is left on, it's suddenly very, very clear that the customer isn't

Brittany.

The customer isn't a customer at all.

I grip the handrail tighter as Levi turns his head and looks at me.

He's on the nearest couch, my favorite couch—purple velvet with exactly the right spring in the

cushion—with his elbows resting on his knees, in dark jeans, a plaid button-down, cheeks three days

past needing a trim, his hair still a little sparkly, and those beautiful blue eyes resting over dark

smudges that haven't shown in any of the photos I've seen of him in concert, and yes, I've been

stalking social media and the entertainment gossip sites for all the photos I

can find, and yes, I am

utterly in love with the fact that he's wearing glitter in his hair *on purpose* during his holiday

concerts.

My heart leaps into my throat at the same time words tumble out all wrong. "What are you doing

here?" I know he has a show in Seattle tomorrow night after performing in Denver last night. Southern

Virginia is the wrong direction.

"I want to date you."

I suck in a breath that sits in my lungs like electrified butterflies. My knees wobble and order me

to sit. I don't *want* to sit. I want to throw myself at him, tell him I'll sell the store and ask if we can

just travel the world with him for the next forever, wherever he goes, even though I know my kids

wouldn't be happy without their friends and I don't know how I could throw away the little

community we've built here, which is exactly why my knees are issuing orders.

They know I can't just do whatever I want when it would hurt other people.

But I don't see hurt when I look at Levi.

I see hope. And determination. And worry.

"Ingrid?" His eyes rake over me like he's a drowning man and I'm his life

raft.

*Me*. He could want anyone else, but he's back for *me*. "You're *here*."

"Is that good or bad?"

Fuck my knees. They're wrong. And I don't need them.

Okay, I *do*, and thank god they're not holding it against me that I just said to fuck them, because

they're carrying me the last few steps to get to him as he stands, and then I'm throwing my arms

around him and hugging him with all my might.

I couldn't hug him if he were a mirage.

"You're here," I repeat.

He wraps his arms around me and holds me tight. "Only for a couple hours, but I'll be back

Sunday. I had to see you."

I bury my nose in his shirt and suck in the scent of pine and cinnamon and *Levi*. I don't know how

he manages to smell different every time, but still the same, but he does, and I want to sniff him every

day. "You're here."

I can't stop saying it. I'm a broken record.

He grips me tighter and strokes my back. "I missed you."

"But *why*?"



It's a legitimate question. I'm a serious work in progress. I made him jump through hoops just to

*fling* with me.

"You made me happy. And isn't that what life is all about?"

Forget the floor is lava. My knees are white toast soaked in milk, which is exactly what Hudson

tried to eat for breakfast this morning. "I'm an utter disaster, Levi."

"From where I stand, you're a successful businesswoman with three kids who know you love

them more than anything and who know they can do anything too."

His shirt is so soft, the chest beneath it so solid and dependable, with his heart racing in my ear,

and I can't stop rubbing my cheek on him. "You, of all people, should know looks aren't everything."

"I'm not *looking*. I'm *feeling*. You are. You're fucking amazing. I've met thousands of people.

Tens of thousands. You're the one who sticks, Ingrid. Every time. You make me happy. You change my

life. You put your heart into everything you do, put everyone else first, you own who you are, and you

deserve whatever it takes to make you happy too. I want to know if I can be what makes you happy."

I've been practicing how I want to ask him to dinner for a week, and I can't touch that. "Do I make

you happy?"

We're swaying. The only music is the sound of his voice, and we're dancing to it. "So much,

Ingrid. So much."

"What if it's all a honeymoon phase?"

"We'll go slow. You tell me the rules. I still have a lot of travel next year, but when I'm here, I'll

*be here*. I like you. I like your kids. I *miss* you. I want to call you and text you and make you dinner

and be here for birthdays instead of feeling guilty for calling in favors that aren't the same and then

pretending that Thanksmasbirthaversaries for all of the days I missed are enough."

I could dance with him like this forever. "We're a lot of work."

"I know. And you're worth it."

"Are we?"

"*Ingrid*."

I smile into his shirt. Dating a guy who's gone a lot is still terrifying.

But it's Levi.

He's grounded. He's smart. He knows me. He knows my kids. He knows what he's getting into.

And he's a leap worth taking. "I'm sorry I pushed you away."

"Don't be. You had good reasons." He presses a kiss to my hair. "Come to my family's New

Year's party with me. Bring the kids."

"You're in New York on New Year's." The ads to watch his New Year's Eve show have been all

over lately. You could say the universe has been taunting me.

"That's why we do it three days before Christmas. It's when we can all get together."

It's so absurd, but also so understandable, that a surprised laugh bubbles out of my chest. "On one

condition."

"Anything."

"You let me— *Yasmin*."

"I let you Yasmin?"

"She's with my kids. She needs to go home. I need—"

"Help?"

I look up at those kind blue eyes, his brow quirked like he's well aware of how much help I need,

but he likes me anyway, and I sigh.

It's a mostly happy sigh. "If the kids see you, they'll get wound up, and then —"

"And tomorrow's Saturday, and they'll sleep in."

"No, they'll be up early. It's the universal law of children. Let them stay up late, they get up early.

Something about their sleep rhythms being off." I suck in a deep breath. Time

to prove I can do this.

“But it’s okay. It’s almost Christmas break, and they *will* catch up some. If the squirrel behaves.”

The smile spreading across his face lights me up from the inside brighter than anything since

watching Piper’s face when she had her hearing aids put in.

“You are everything I never knew I was missing,” he whispers, and then he’s kissing me with his

perfect lips, his fingers tangling in my hair, his body pressed to mine, and I know what we’re about to

attempt to do won’t be easy, and I know I’ll have my moments of doubt, but I know one other thing

that’s more important than any of my fears and worries and objections.

I know I’m *home*.

THIRTY-TWO

*Levi*

IT’S three days before Christmas, and Ingrid and her kids are with me in the elevator on the way to

Beck’s penthouse.

Zoe’s bouncing on her toes. “Are you *sure* Waverly won’t be here?”

“Positive, glitter-bug. She’s not family.”

Piper’s giving me dirty looks because I already answered the same about Ares Berger.

Only Hudson is currently happy with me, mostly because I slipped him a fidget device at my

mom's recommendation, and he's trying to figure out how many different buttons and knobs he can

push on the heavy dice-like object. His tongue's sticking out of the corner of his mouth, and he's

concentrating so hard I wonder if I might've broken him.

The squirrel is back at Ingrid's place. All the bedroom doors are shut and the window is open, but

I swear Skippy gave me the *Are you nuts? Pun intended. I know where my dinner comes from* look

when I whispered to him that he should run off and be free.

And Ingrid is playing with her fingers beside me. "Are there name tags? I feel like there should be

name tags. And will it *really* just be your closest friends and family, or does your closest friends and

family include like, the mayor and a bunch of important business people and half the Fireballs?"

"If anyone's rude about you not knowing their name, remember what they look like and I'll take

care of it later. Besides, you already know Davis and the mom squad, you met Wyatt when Ellie

brought him into the store yesterday, and that pretty much just leaves Cash's siblings and the dads for

you to figure out." I pause as the elevator doors ding open. "And possibly a handful of baseball

players. Sarah probably invited Mackenzie, and she'll come with Brooks, so..."

"Brooks Elliott?" Piper asks. "I don't like the way he wore his underwear outside his uniform for

warm-ups, but I guess his cape is okay."

I squeeze Ingrid's hand while she reaches for Hudson and the five of us step out of the elevator.

"I'm on root beer all night, there are almost a dozen other parents here, and you met Beck and Cash's

security teams downstairs too. The elevator's direct to where they're hanging out with Giselle and

Chuck. No one's escaping. Have all the fun you want. You're covered."

"Do I look like I need a drink that badly?"

"You look gorgeous."

Stressed but gorgeous. Her shop is still open for a couple more hours, with Yasmin in charge and

two extra last-minute holiday helpers on hand. Piper apparently sometimes slips her hearing aids out

when things get too noisy, and Hudson's always a wild card.

I get it. New situations like this with lots of people she doesn't know and who her kids can

disappear behind aren't easy.

And since we've been on the phone every free minute we've had while I was finishing up my

travel schedule, and then I've been at her place more or less every evening since, I've seen how much

she does firsthand.

She presses a kiss to my cheek. "Thank you."

"Frosted Tips! Or should I say Glitter Tips? You made it!" Beck leans into the foyer from his

kitchen, plate in hand. "Whoa, little people. Awesome. You guys like pool? Ping pong? Frogger? Pac-

Man? Donkey Kong? Poker?"

Zoe crowds closer to Ingrid, but Piper squints at Beck. "I've seen you in your underwear."

Beck nods. "The whole world has. Sorry. It's how I afford all the good games. Wait. I know.

Foosball. Soccer, right?"

*"Hockey."*

He groans melodramatically. "Dang it, I always get those confused. You guys hungry?"

"Hey, Ingrid." Sarah gently pushes Beck out of the way and leans in to hug my girlfriend.

Yeah.

*Girlfriend.*

I like that.

"Don't mind Beck. He's basically a puppy dog in man form. Completely harmless. Also, we set

the alarm on the patio doors *and* locked the bedroom. Everything's safe here."

Ingrid goes white.

"Sarah has beehives on the patio," I murmur to her. "She doesn't think Hudson would jump. Trust

me. James and Emma have been here enough that it's completely Hudson-proof."

"I might definitely need something strong if you keep tempting fate by saying things like that out

loud," she murmurs back. "Should I apologize in advance for anything they break or ruin by spilling

food all over?"

"The first time I met Emma, Beck shoved her at me and she exploded out of her diaper all over

the entire kitchen," Sarah tells Ingrid. "He deserves anything he gets."

"It's true," Beck agrees around a mouthful of food. "You guys allergic to anything?"

Ingrid shakes her head.

Beck squats to Hudson's level. "Bet I can eat four chicken wings before you can."

"Is he eating more than normal?" I ask Sarah as Beck and Hudson race for the food.

She goes beet red and stammers out a short *no*.

"Holy shit," I whisper.



“Shove it, Wilson. My parents are here, and I *will* tank your movie premiere if you start spreading rumors.”

I pretend to zip my lips and throw away the key.

Ingrid stares at me like I’ve turned into an alien.

And I can’t stop grinning.

Beck Ryder is the only person I know who’d find out his wife was pregnant and then have to eat

more himself. And Sarah’s murderous glare suggests tonight isn’t the night we’re speculating about

that.

“Am I missing an inside joke?” Ingrid asks me quietly.

“You’re gonna miss about a thousand tonight, but I’ll fill you in as much as I can. This one has to

wait until tomorrow though, or I might not live through the night.”

“Unka Wevi!” A blond-curved demon child streaks through the kitchen, and I catch her and toss her

in the air, which is harder than it used to be. She’s getting big.

“Hey, Emma-banana.”

She squeals, my back reminds me she’s not two and I’m not in my twenties anymore, and I settle

her on my hip. “You want to make a new friend?”

She sticks her finger up her nose. “No.”

Ingrid snorts with laughter and looks down, pretending she's not laughing as Tripp joins us.

"Emma. Be nice."

She scowls at him.

His eyeballs both twitch.

Ingrid claps both hands over her mouth. "Sorry," she says to my brother through her hands. "Just

glad it's not mine for the moment."

"I hear it'll be your turn soon enough."

"It will." She's smiling as she holds out a hand. "Hi. I'm Ingrid. And I'm only pretending I'm not

freaking out a little on the inside."

Tripp smiles back as he shakes her hand. "Don't freak out. We're all more nervous to meet you

than you are to meet us. Best behavior is hard, and Levi's unbearable when he's sad that we've

chased another one away."

"*Hey*. Standing right here."

My backstabbing brother grins at me. "That sounds like something my wife said to you not all that

long ago..."

And yeah, I grin right back.

I love being home.

We finally make it past the kitchen. Wyatt's oldest is just a little older than Zoe, and he talks her

into playing ping-pong in Beck's game room. Piper follows and settles in at the pinball machine. My

mom and Beck's mom insist on playing *ten million questions for Hudson* in the living room, where

there are a thousand and one Matchbox cars already scattered around, which leaves Ingrid standing

next to me looking slightly lost.

But only momentarily until Ellie, Sarah, Mackenzie, and Lila pounce.

And by *pounce*, I mean shove a glittery wine tumbler into her hand, ask where she gets the hot

chocolate mix for the coffee bar at Penny for Your Thoughts, and close ranks around her, leaving me

out of the circle.

"You're welcome," Davis says next to me.

We clink bottles—mine root beer, as promised, his something stronger. "Thank you."

"Still owe me a pan of orange marmalade rolls."

"I'll text you when they're done."

The women all suddenly burst into laughter.

All except Ingrid, who's still talking, her eyes bright, her smile wide, occasionally signing

something with her free hand.

I lean back against the wall and just watch the magic happen.

“She has no idea what she’s getting into, does she?” Davis says.

“She knows.”

“You sure?”

“I believe her exact words were, *you cheated, Levi Wilson. You offered me an entire family to take care of mine.*”

He smiles.

I lift my phone and get it on camera. “It’s like spotting Bigfoot. Hold on. I’m texting this to your mom.”

He pulls a kung fu move out of nowhere, and then my phone’s gone, my arm’s cramping, and Beck

and Tripp are both somewhere nearby, laughing their asses off.

“Let him go, or I’ll tell your whole family you’ve moved on from *Dog Man* to *Captain*

*Underpants*,” Ingrid calls.

“I got this,” I call back to her. “Don’t anger the man-bun. He has tricks up his sleeves.”

Davis suddenly jerks away, twisting and flailing, and then a squirrel shoots out the bottom of his shirt.

I look at the squirrel, then lock eyes with Ingrid, whose mouth is as round as

her eyes are.

“*Oh my god, who let in a squirrel?*” someone shrieks.

“*Tripp!*” my mom yells.

“Bowl,” my brother barks.

Beck’s already headed to the cabinets.

Ingrid’s going bright red, and I’m reasonably certain she’s about to cry. I shake my arm out, forget

my phone, and head to her side. “Ask Piper for help,” I call to Tripp.

“Is she the scary one or the one reading a book in the corner?”

“The scary one.”

“Got it.”

“James brought a raccoon once,” Sarah’s saying as I break the barrier to get back into the girl

circle.

“He did *what?*” Lila sputters.

“Oh my gosh, like all five of them didn’t have weird pets while they were touring together. Don’t

freak over James and a raccoon.” Ellie rolls her eyes. “This one time, Beck came home with a ferret,

but he told Mom it was a special kind of de-smelled skunk from Europe. And I know Levi kept a

possum on the bus once.”

“All rumor,” I interject.

“Point is, we have a cage,” Sarah tells Ingrid.

“And a friend who’s a vet,” Mackenzie adds.

“And this isn’t anywhere *near* like the time Cash brought a tiger to a cookout.”

Ingrid looks at Ellie, then back to me, and then she takes a long swig of her drink. She points to

the words *crazy pants* on the side of the tumbler. “I’m keeping this. It speaks to my soul. Also, I might

need a second margarita.”

I crack up. “All yours, Superwoman.”

She goes up on tiptoe and kisses me, tasting sweet and salty, and I wonder what the odds are that I

could sneak us to Beck’s offices on the next floor and get a little more kissing time.

Or naked time.

Or both.

“This is me not freaking out over my kids causing a scene,” she whispers.

“Is it killing you?”

“Pretty much.”

“Tripp’s gonna give you shit about this for the next forever, but you’re officially his favorite

person in the world right now. And all of our parents have dealt with worse

than a domesticated

squirrel. Plus, I'm hoping someone got a shot of Davis dancing with a squirrel in his shirt. He never

loses his shit over anything. He'll probably hack your computer and make it unusable for five minutes

while a chicken dances to some awful earworm all over your screen, but then he'll call it even and

he'll have your back for whatever happens next."

Her eyes go shiny, and she blinks fast. "Are you honestly offering us a family who can actually

handle us?"

"Yep."

"You really do play dirty."

"Is that a bad thing?"

She's smiling as she shakes her head, and then she kisses me again.

And my heart is full. Whole. Ready.

Squirrels?

That's the easy part.

Proving to Ingrid time and again that she can count on not just me, but on my entire family when

I'm not here?

I thought that would be the hard part, but I'm starting to think I was wrong.

And I'm totally okay with that being the easy part too.

THIRTY-THREE

*Ingrid*

THE WORLD IS SPINNING off its axis.

It's hurtling through space, completely off course, bouncing off other planets like they're playing

bumper cars and making my head twist all topsy-turvy and my stomach roil and my room twirl all

around me.

Not that I can see my room.

My eyes won't open.

They're concreted shut.

Yep.

Concreted.

My mouth is stuffed full of squirrel fur, and something sweet is tickling my nose and making me

want to throw up.

What the hell was in those margaritas last night?

I swear I only had three.

Which is like seventeen times more alcohol than I've had combined in the last five years.

Even the wine Levi had at his place the night I stayed over was low-alcohol



wine.

He's so thoughtful.

And he probably thinks I'm an utter disaster.

*And oh my god, where are my kids?*

That thought, more than anything, has me bolting from the bed and out of my room, ignoring the

nausea and the need to throw up, channeling my inner soldier to get through this, because I have to.

I'm a mom.

It's what I do.

"Whoa, hey, slow down." Warm hands grip my arms, and I force my eyes to focus on my favorite

pair of blue eyes in the entire universe.

"Kids," I croak.

"Fed, dressed, and at the park a couple blocks away with my mom and Giselle." Levi guides me

to a dining room chair and squats as he helps me sit, then presses a warm cup of coffee into my hands.

"You okay?"

Am I okay? "What time is it?"

"Nine-thirty."

"Oh my god."

“Yasmin and Holly have everything under control downstairs, and after you arm-wrestled Davis

last night, he agreed to be on standby if things get out of control.”

“Oh my god again.” I wince. Then take a big gulp of the coffee, which is sweeter than I usually

take mine, and definitely has some cream in it, and it might not actually be coffee, but it’s warm.

Like my memories of last night.

They’re warm. I think I remember the arm-wrestling. It happened sometime after the squirrel thing

and before— *oh god*. “Did I really walk in on Cash Rivers completely naked in the bathroom last

night, or was that a very, very bad dream?”

“He’s sending apology cheesecake later. And basically every day for the next year. He strips and

showers when he’s drunk. But honestly, I haven’t seen him that drunk in *years*.”

“Oh my god.” I take another gulp of the warm magic liquid.

Levi chuckles. “If you want, I can strip so you can think of me naked instead.”

“Yes, please. Also, I might need a bucket.”

“Not what a guy wants to hear when he offers to strip for his girlfriend.”

“Oh my god.”

“Kidding, Ingrid. Kidding.”

“How much did I have to drink?”

“Ah, Superwoman, I don’t think this is a hangover.”

*“I’m pregnant?”*

He wraps his arms around me. “No. I mean, I’m not telling you that. Are you telling me that?”

“No!” Am I freaking out? Am I sitting down? Am I breathing? “I need more life juice. Why do I

feel like I was hit by a truck?”

“Ingrid.” He kisses my temple and strokes my back, and the nausea starts to fade. “Hudson spilled

your second margarita and you didn’t finish the replacement. You’re not drunk or hungover. I think

*this* is called a burnout crash.”

“Or the flu?”

“You *are* hot, but you’re not feverish.”

“Did you stay all night?”

“Yep.”

“Did the kids freak this morning?”

“Nope.”

“Did you freak?”

“Nope.”

“Is the squirrel back?”

“He’s staring at the open window and laughing like a cartoon villain.”

“Is he really our squirrel?”

“Tripp looked him over good last night and said that their family squirrel has one more stripe on

its tail, so yes, that’s really our squirrel.”

His shoulder is so comfortable. And his hands are so warm. And— “What’s that smell?”

“Cinnamon rolls.”

“We didn’t have any cans.”

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear you say you eat canned cinnamon rolls when my homemade

cinnamon rolls are basically the next best thing to orgasms or listening to me sing on stage.”

I laugh, because I can’t help it. “Oh my god, I love you.”

And then nothing’s funny.

I just said that.

Out loud.

To a man I dumped a month ago because he’s never around, except he *is* around, even when he’s

not.

He calls.

He texts.

He sees all the little things that need to be done that make *so much* of a difference. He doesn't say

my kids are too loud, or complain when one of them interrupts us when we're having grown-up time

on the couch after they're supposed to be in bed.

And right now, he's sucking in a surprised breath and gripping me tighter and pressing a kiss to

my forehead, and then my cheeks, and then to my morning breath, and there's a solid possibility I'm

spilling this coffee or tea or whatever it is all over both of us, because my leg is suddenly wet and

warm, and I'm ninety-eight percent certain I didn't just wet myself.

Which is a lot easier to think about than what I just said.

Except I mean it.

"I love you," I say again against his lips. "I keep trying not to, but I do. I love you. You're so damn

easy to love, and I'm so hard and—"

"God, Ingrid, I love you too. I do. So much. You're not hard. You're cotton candy under all those

layers of responsibility. You're heart. You're compassion. You're joy. You're everything I didn't

know I needed, and I miss you like crazy when I'm not here."

"You keep saying that. And I keep trying to believe it. And there's so much to work out. You can't

move in here with us. We don't have room. But I'm so scared of leaving, and \_\_\_"

"And we don't have to change anything today." He pulls me tight again, kissing my temple and

then my hair. "We're okay. Right here. Just like this."

"Oh my god, I'm not wearing pants."

He coughs.

Then he chuckles.

And then he's on his feet, taking away the warm mug, tugging me up too, wrapping his arms

around me again, kissing me, walking me backward, back down the hall and into my bedroom.

"You like me not in pants?" I whisper when the backs of my knees collide with my bed.

"I like you every way." His hands slide under the hem of my T-shirt, and then it's flying across the

room while his knuckles graze my nipples and he kisses me again.

Every nerve ending in my body flares to life, and my cranky stomach settles into a low grumble

that might be nothing more than hunger now.

"Why are you so good at kissing?"

"Why are *you* so good at kissing?" he counters.

"It's not practice."

“Then it must be that we’re supposed to be kissing.” He presses his lips to my jaw. “And look at

this. More Ingrid skin to kiss.”

“Levi?”

“Hm?”

“Will you strip for me?”

He guides me back onto the bed. “Only if you touch yourself while I do.”

“Like this?” I lift my breast and circle my nipple.

“Any way that makes you feel good.” He straightens and pulls off his simple black T-shirt, and the

sight of his bare chest gives me a surge of longing between my legs.

We made love one night in the loft.

Another on my couch, hidden under a blanket, mostly dressed, and very, very quietly with one eye

on the hallway the whole time in case any of the kids woke up.

Both well past my bedtime and after hours and hours of talking.

But we haven’t been *alone*.

Not like this.

My fingers drift between my thighs and I rub the cotton of my panties over my aching clit.

His fingers freeze on his pants button, and his dark eyes land on mine. “Fuck, Ingrid.”

“I want to be loud.”

His tight jeans hit the floor, and he stumbles kicking them the rest of the way off, and then he’s

crawling onto the bed, hovering over me, kissing me between my breasts, dipping down my belly,

swirling his tongue around my belly button, and then lower, to the waist of my panties. “You smell

delicious.”

“You must seriously like disasters.”

“I love you.”

He peels my panties down, spreads my thighs, and buries his face in my pussy, his tongue magic

as he starts slow and easy, licking my seam, then sucking my clit into his mouth.

“Oh my god,” I gasp.

“I missed this pussy.” He strokes a hand over my inner thigh, spreading my legs wider, licking me

faster while my hips buck into his mouth.

“*Levi.*”

“That’s right, Superwoman. Scream my name.”

I do.

Oh my god, I do.

While he licks and sucks and teases, bringing me right to the edge, my body



completely under his

spell, I gasp his name, gripping his hair, my hips out of control and operating on pure instinct.

*Oh my god*, his tongue.

And his lips.

And then he slides two fingers inside me, then three, while he sucks hard on my swollen clit, and

everything inside me comes completely undone.

I come so hard I see the other side of the universe. "*Levi*. Oh my god, *yes*, *Levi*, *I love you*. I love

you. I love you."

He crooks his fingers inside me, and everything goes blinding white.

I'm dancing naked in heaven, my body singing the *Hallelujah* chorus, my brain already plotting

how to make Levi feel as transcendently euphoric as I do right now.

He's seen me at my worst. At my lowest. At my most hectic.

And he's still here.

Worshipping my imperfect, life-worn body as though I'm the most beautiful creature he's ever

seen.

"I love you." I'm still chanting it as the last of the spasms leave me boneless.

"Ah, Ingrid." He presses a kiss to my belly. "I love you too. Every inch of you."

I don't know where I find the strength, but I roll him onto his back, then shimmy down his body.

His legs are hanging off the bottom of my bed, which is so close to my dresser that he'll probably

kick it and knock an entire pile of pictures and art projects that my kids have given me onto the floor

if he moves wrong.

I want my kids to make him art projects too.

I want him to know the joy of a pile of pictures made with love.

I should make him an art project of my own.

"Why are you so perfect?" I ask him as I straddle him.

He brushes his thumb over my cheek. "I'm so far from perfect, Ingrid. Especially next to you."

"Are we both delusional?"

He smiles that gorgeous, confident, *I've got this* smile. "No. I think it means we fit."

I rub myself over his thick hard-on. "Can we fit a little more?"

"Yes, please."

We knock everything off my dresser trying to locate a condom. And then we lay in bed and make

love slowly, laughing, talking, touching.

I introduce him to my horrible shower.

We fall out of it trying to have sex in there too.

And when his mom brings the kids home, we're cuddling under a blanket,  
watching Christmas

movies and eating the most delicious cinnamon rolls I've ever tasted in my  
life.

Pretty sure if Levi wasn't a pop star, he'd be giving Cinnabon a run for their  
money.

But he *is* a pop star.

He's my pop star.

And he doesn't bat an eye when my babies demand to crawl up under the  
blanket with us, and then

order us to turn on *The Grinch*.

I catch Donna's eye as she's trying to quietly sneak out.

*Thank you*, I mouth.

Her eyes go a little shiny, but she blinks quickly, and smiles right back at me.  
*No, thank you.*

I think this is what love is *supposed* to be.

When we all feel like we're getting the best part of the bargain.

I know Levi will have to go away sometimes.

But I also know he'll always come back home.

## EPILOGUE

*Levi*

ONE YEAR after I got lost in Copper Valley but found my way to Ingrid,  
I'm in my second-favorite

spot in the entire city, content in knowing that I can come visit here any evening I want for as far out

as my calendar goes.

Probably any day, at this point too.

Ingrid's customers have gotten used to me popping through the store, which is happening more

often now that the tour is over. I'm even getting to know a few of the regulars, and Giselle's even

more popular than I am around here.

But tonight, Piper's in my lap, working on getting her finger positioning right for a C major chord

on my guitar. My laptop's closed on the end table next to us, because songwriting can wait. Below us,

the store is closed for the evening, with the only light coming from a single lamp lit near the stairs.

Ingrid has three more staff starting tomorrow, since the store has continued growing by leaps and

bounds this past year. She says it's because of the Levi factor.

I remind her that I can get them in the door, but she and her staff are why customers come back.

And it's true.

This is the best little bookstore in all of Copper Valley.

And the owner is buying herself some extra time off to be with her family. She started this

summer, when she and the kids took a few trips to be with me when I was in the busier parts of the

tour, and now, we're making it more official.

Ingrid is officially a forty-hour-a-week employee at her own shop who has help getting the kids to

all of their activities, instead of a workaholic running everything.

There's a house down the street from Tripp that I bought a couple months back when it came on

the market, ready for us to move into whenever we're ready to move into it. I have a ring back in the

condo I'm rarely at, waiting for our first date anniversary in a couple weeks.

And my love is upstairs in the apartment that's too small for five of us, but still home because it's

where the people I love most are, helping Zoe with homework while Hudson takes a shower on his

own.

Ah, correction.

Hudson *was* taking a shower on his own.

Now, he's sneaking up the stairs into the loft with us, his hair dripping down on his axolotl

pajamas.

It's grown out since last year's second round of lice went through his preschool. And since Mrs.

Ryder mentioned some special oils she used to put in Ellie's shampoo to

deter the lice, we've gotten  
through the fall unscathed.

With Hudson, anyway.

Piper's caught a few colds that have had Ingrid worried about her ears, but so far, she's come

through each of them without issue. And I survived the panic at being in Canada during the worst of it.

That. Fucking. Sucked.

It's so damn good to be home. I'm looking forward to a year or two off.

And then?

We'll figure it out when we need to.

"When I grow up, I'm gonna play the harpsichord and dance a booty dance for all the ladies,"

Hudson informs us.

Oh, yeah.

He's been spending a lot of time with my Bro Code buddies too.

And picking up all the good things that make Ingrid cringe when he says them.

She laughs herself silly over all of it once he's tucked in bed for the night though.

And there's no music better than Ingrid laughing.

Except maybe Ingrid coming.

“Are you hiding from bedtime again?” I ask Hudson.

He climbs onto my lap too, knocking Piper off-balance, who glares at him.

“Go away, Hudson.”

“I want a story.”

“You have to be *in bed* for a bedtime story.”

“I don’t want a bedtime story. I want a regular story.”

“Okay, enough, both of you.” I sound just like my mother, and I’m okay with that. “Hudson,

Piper’s practicing. Gotta wait your turn, bud. And your turn’s tomorrow.”

“I got a stick.” He reaches into his pajama bottoms, and sure enough, there’s a stick.

“Hudson Andrew Scott, *I told you to stay in the apartment.*”

“Busted,” I whisper to him as Ingrid comes into view on the stairwell too.

She’s exasperated, but she’s nowhere near the level of wound tight she was a year ago. You can

see it in the way there’s always a smile teasing the corner of her lips, and the way her shoulders

aren’t bunched so tight, and the way she’s not constantly checking her phone anymore when Mom

takes the kids for a night.

Considering how much publicity she’s had to adjust to, along with constant security, and

explaining at the beginning of every new activity to the other parents that yes, I’m *that* Levi Wilson,

but please just treat me like any other parent, it's a testament to something that she's not completely

flipping her lid every day.

I like to think I'm a good enough boyfriend to make up for all the hassle, but I know it's probably

also the number of adopted grandmas who call and check her schedule every week and demand to

know which one of the kids they can take to which activity.

Plus, I got pretty good at phone sex this year.

That definitely didn't hurt.

She meets my eyes and gives me the *I know what you're thinking about and you have to wait*

*until the kids are in bed* smile, followed by the *and they're never going to bed tonight* grimace.

Ah.

Zoe's right behind her.

Makes sense now.

Once all three kids get out of the apartment at bedtime, it's basically game over for the night.

And I mean for the two of us.

Not them.

Three on two.

The kids win.



Every time.

“And Piper, I’m sorry, but it’s shower time. You can practice more in the morning if you’re up

early enough.”

Piper sets the guitar aside, but she doesn’t move to get off my lap.

Neither does Hudson.

Ingrid makes the *you are all two seconds from seeing my head spin* face at all three of us.

I pat Piper’s knee. “C’mon. Your mom’s right. Time to shower.”

She ignores me and signs something to Ingrid. I miss whatever it is, because I’m whispering to

Hudson that he’s going to get both of us in trouble if he doesn’t scoot toward bed too.

But I look up when Ingrid sucks in a surprised breath.

She signs back, *that’s up to him*—I know that one pretty well—and then she blinks fast and wipes

her eyes.

Zoe leans into Ingrid.

“I got a rock too.” Hudson reaches into his pants.

Piper huffs and climbs off my lap, then turns and faces me.

She doesn’t speak, but instead uses her hands.

And she asks me a question that makes my lungs malfunction and my eyes get hot too.

I look at Ingrid, verifying I understood what Piper just asked.

Then back to Piper.

I don't know the signs for *I'd be honored*.

But I know nothing in the world has ever felt quite as amazing as being asked if she can call me

*dad*.

I blink hard a couple times, and I nod. "Yes. If that's what you want. *Yes*."

She smiles, makes jazz hands, and then launches herself at me for a hug. "I love you, Dad."

"Love you too, Piper."

"Are you my dad now?" Hudson asks.

Fuck. Talking is hard. "If you want me to be."

He frowns. "Can I have Beck instead?"

"Shut up, Hudson." Zoe crawls onto the couch next to him and leans in for a hug too. She's almost

as tall as Ingrid, and she can reach all the way around me. "It was my idea."

"You three are the best."

"I remember my last dad." Zoe snuggled closer. "You're better."

Fuck.

These kids.

"I'm the best!" Hudson crows.

“We *all* are, Hudson. Not just you.”

“No, Hudson’s second-best.”

Ingrid curls up on my other side and buries her face in my arm.

I kiss her head, because it’s all I can reach.

Biggest argument we’ve had this past year?

Which one of us is getting more out of our relationship. She thinks it’s her.

But she’s wrong.

She just got me.

I got all four of them.

She always counters with *I got your whole family*, but we don’t get them twenty-four hours a day.

Not the way I get her and her kids.

“Does this mean you all approve of me marrying your mom?” I ask the kids when I can talk again.

“Can I be a bridesmaid?”

“Can I be a flower girl?”

“Can I eat cake?”

Ingrid smiles at me, and once again, I lose my breath.

She’s my everything. She and her kids.

*Our* kids.

And I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life making sure they know it.

*Hey, awesome reader! Ingrid here to say thank you for reading my and Levi's story! We hope you*

*loved it. Also, I wanted to let you know that Ares Berger, Piper's most favorite hockey player in the*

*ENTIRE UNIVERSE, has his own story in the Copper Valley Thrusters series! But to really fully*

*appreciate him, start with his twin brother Zeus's story, [The Pilot and the Puck-Up](#). Trust me. It's the best way to enjoy Ares. Get [The Pilot and the Puck-Up](#) on Amazon [HERE!](#)*

*[P.S. If you'd like to see the epic prank I helped pull on Levi during our wedding reception, CLICK](#)*

*[HERE to grab a bonus epilogue! You'll also get the opportunity to sign up for the Pipster Report, a](#)*

*weekly newsletter about all things in the Pippaverse that makes me snort out loud with laughter*

*every time it lands in my inbox.*

*P.P.S. If you're the awesome type of person who likes to leave reviews, here's a quick link for you to*

*[Goodreads](#). I'll update with Amazon and BookBub if I ever get five minutes to myself!*

*P.P.P.S. Team Pippa left a spelling error in this book on purpose, as a fun little game, after Pippa's*

*readers noticed she'd made a public-public error in [Real Fake Love](#). If you spotted the spelling error, send us an email at [youfoundit@pippagrants.com](mailto:youfoundit@pippagrants.com) for a special reward!*

**SNEAK PEEK AT THE PILOT AND THE PUCK-UP**

*If you love big, bad, spider-fearing hockey heroes, tough-as-nails heroines  
hiding her soft side,*

*and one night stands gone sideways, read on for an excerpt of [The Pilot and  
the Puck-Up...](#)*

## **Chapter One**

*Zeus Berger (aka the biggest, baddest, most spider-fearing mother pucker in  
the NHL, except for*

*maybe his twin brother)*

Coconuts are itchy. I should've gone for the watermelons.

But it was a bitch and a half getting that last-minute private fitting at Madame  
Cosette's anyway,

and the woman probably would've had to stitch three bras together and then  
nailed the damn

contraption to my shoulders to get it to hold without losing a melon, so  
coconuts it is.

Besides, it's the heels that are gonna be the bigger problem. Damn good thing  
I have ankles of

fucking steel.

And my minidress is stretched to max capacity over the coconuts anyway.  
It's also in danger of

showing my other coconuts, if you catch my drift. And there's definitely a  
drift—or is that a draft?—

on my other coconuts.

A wolf whistle echoes through the swanky private clubhouse where I'm  
strolling in with my twin

brother on one side and my brother from another mother on the other. A passing server drops a tray of

champagne. Conversation stops. And a bunch of stuffy golf pricks gape at us like we're a mutant alien

circus freak show crashing their million-dollar wedding reception.

We're three dudes with more money than God, more muscles than all the Kardashians' bodyguards

combined, and more fun than cotton candy and roller coasters.

And this is no wedding reception. It's a chance for pretentious rich asses to brag to each other

about who gave more money to whatever foundation is sponsoring this Pro-Am golf tournament for

charity.

Ares is scowling, squinting around the room like he's looking for the dumbass prince who was

stupid enough to bet me ten grand I wouldn't show up tonight dressed like a chick. Chase is on his

phone, snickering like he's not half a foot shorter and a hundred pounds lighter than me and Ares are.

I swipe his phone from him and shove it between my coconuts. "Quit sexting my sister in public."

"I was posting that picture of you getting dressed to Facebook," he replies. "Ares, fetch the

phone."

Ares grunts. "Shut your face," he tells Chase.

I slap my brother on the shoulder. “Lighten up, bro. I make this shit look good.”

“Hate to break it to you,” Chase says, “but your sister actually makes a better woman.”

“You saying you wouldn’t tap this?”

“Saying she gives a better blow job.”

He easily ducks my fist, because the fucker’s known me too long. Plus, my heart isn’t in taking

him out. Chase is good for my sister, and he’s a damn good friend to boot. Not that I’ll ever tell him

that to his face. Again.

Ares quits scowling enough to snicker too. “Girls don’t hit,” he tells me.

“You gonna let him talk about Ambrosia like that?”

“I know where he sleeps.”

People think Ares is dumb because he doesn’t talk in big words. But he’s one of the smartest

fuckers I know, in his own way.

Only dude in the world as big as me too, but in these heels—special ordered Mablanoks

something or others—I’ve got him by four inches.

“Gentlemen.” A half-british, half-ice king voice intrudes on our private party before we reach the

food table. Never met the dude in person before—all our shit-talking happened over the phone—but

I've seen his picture and I know his stepsister. "And... I'm sorry, madam, it seems I've missed your

name."

Like Chase, he's tall and beefy enough for a regular dude—comes from some friggin' cold

northern Atlantic nation with enough sheep for his own harem—but Ares and I are towering over him

too.

"This is Ambrosia," Chase offers. "I have terrible taste in women."

"Lick my tits," I say to Chase before I grab the fucker and rub his face between my coconuts.

Ares grins.

Chase pinches my ass and I let him go. Two more servers do an about-face and scurry away with

their trays of little vegetable appetizers that apparently pass as *food* at these things.

"You can call me The Goddess," I tell the prince.

Manning Frey's royal features split into a grin as he rocks back on his heels. Where I'm in a

girdle, size 18 fuck-me pumps, and coconuts, he's in some tan suit and white shirt getup that was

probably picked for him by some royal ninny. "Overselling ourselves, are we?"

I like the fucker already. Not because he owes me ten grand, but because I've got a feeling he'd be



a good companion in his own coconut bra and minidress if we wanted to crash another snooty

function tonight. “Not if a pansy-ass like you passes as a prince. I’m still taking home the hottest girl

here tonight.”

He juts his chin up, grin going wider. “You’re going to get a woman. While you’re dressed like

that.”

Yeah, I know what it looks like. Me and Ares, we’re the biggest mother puckers to ever strap on

skates and wield sticks in the NHL. I’m sprouting a five o’clock shadow before I’m done shaving

every morning. Each one of my thighs is the size of one of those European sissy cars. Solid muscle

too. My ma calls us big-boned. My sister calls us overgrown apes. I make one ugly-ass woman.

“Damn fucking right,” I tell Prince Manning anyway. Because you don’t get to be the biggest,

hairiest, most feared badass on the ice by owning up to your shortcomings. No, I bear my teeth at

those fuckers and take them *down*. If you ain’t got your balls, you ain’t got anything. “I’m gonna make

her switch sides, then when we get back to my hotel room, I’m gonna make her switch back, and I’m

gonna rock her fucking world.”

“As completely wrong as that sounds, I’ve seen him do it before,” Chase says.

Ares grunts an agreement, even though both of them know I’m full of shit and I know they’re each

looking forward to watching me fail. I share a look with my twin.

*You’re such a fucking dumbass*, his says, because he knows it’s biologically impossible for any

woman in this stuffy, exclusive clubhouse to seriously be attracted to me like this. I flunked biology,

and I still know it too.

*Two words*, my look replies. *Endorsement. Dollars.*

I don’t give two shits if I score a chick tonight. I score plenty, on and off the ice, and everyone

knows it.

The other thing everyone knows?

Zeus Berger doesn’t back down from a challenge. And I smell a challenge coming on.

“Care to put some money on that?” Manning says, right on time.

“Double or nothing,” I reply. Win or lose, no man will *ever* say I didn’t put my heart in it. And

I’ve got my winning personality on my side. I might be ugly, but I’m not out.

Ares snickers again.

“Go on and pick the girl,” I tell Manning. “Wouldn’t want you to think I planned this.”

He rubs a hand over his dark blond beard while he scans the room. “I’m beginning to see why

Willow speaks so ambiguously of you.”

“That means she only half-likes us,” I translate for Ares. “Probably intimidated by our

awesomeness.”

“Or the fact that you threatened her fiancé with a ten-pound wheel of moldy cheddar,” Chase

muses.

“Fucker needs to put his foot down with his mother.”

“On that, we’re in complete agreement,” Manning says crisply. He stops and nods toward the wall

of windows overlooking the golf course with the Blue Ridge Mountains to the west. “Her.”

I squint, because that half of the room is backlit by the light glaring in. “The chick who just shoved

her finger into Levi Wilson’s beer bottle?”

Ares perks up. “Boy band Levi?”

“Aw, shit, Bro’s gonna be pissed she missed this,” Chase mutters.

That’s right—my sister is a boy band ho. Got a thing for Levi’s old band, Bro Code—which she

swears is a total coincidence, considering Chase has called *her* Bro since we were kids, a nickname

she claimed to hate until she realized how much she liked Chase.

“Not the beer bottle-finger,” Manning says. “The woman with her.”

I shift my attention from the woman trying to shake a beer bottle off her finger while obviously

stuttering apologies to the world’s reigning pop rock god, and a familiar beat takes up residence in my

pulse.

Long, dark hair. Tall. She’s built—not heavy, but not turn-sideways-and-she’d-disappear slender

either. She’s in pants that accentuate her curves and a no-nonsense blouse that can’t hide her rack.

Even in the backlight, there’s a feline grace to her movements as she efficiently grabs her

companion’s arm, neatly twists the stuck bottle off her friend’s finger, and hands it back to Levi

Wilson.

I do love me some feline grace.

And even though she has the bearing of a woman much smarter than my usual type, there’s some

stirring over my southern coconuts that suggests I might be about to start a bigger scene.

These rich mofos would shit a brick if I popped a boner in this dress.

Heh.

But while I’m damn proud of my Neanderthal heritage—gets me a big paycheck on the ice every

year, and sponsorships for everything from deodorant to car jacks off the ice—even I know the

quickest way into a lady's pants isn't always showing her the goods. So I tell Jupiter to cool it down

there—what? You're damn right both me *and* my junk are named after kings of the gods—and nod to

Manning. "You're on."

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Pippa Grant is a USA Today Bestselling author who writes romantic comedies that will make tears run down your leg. When she's not

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