



CLAIRE KINGSLEY

FALLING

for
My Enemy

A

HOT

Romantic

COMEDY



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CLAIRE KINGSLEY

Always Have LLC

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*To nerdy girls and geeky boys. Love what you love, and love it hard,
especially if it sets your soul on fire.*

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

What happens when frenemies take the experiment out of the lab and into the bedroom?

Corban Nash is a self-proclaimed data nerd with a sexy half smile and a set of abs that leave girls drooling. He developed a theory he claims will make two people fall in love. And after numerous tests on friends and family, it's been successful for everyone who's tried it.

The problem is, it's never worked on him. And he doesn't know why.

Still, he's determined to prove his theory. The only thing standing in his way? His nemesis, Hazel Kiegen.

Hazel refuses to be distracted by Corban's adorable awkwardness or his temptingly muscular body. He claims to have cracked the code to falling in love, and she's going to prove him wrong.

From the moment these two rivals meet, their chemistry is irresistible. And what's wrong with a little sex between enemies? But when they put Corban's theory to the test for themselves, the results are deliciously unexpected.

Author's note: Stand-alone romcom featuring a sexy nerd with a great big... heart. Tons of tension and witty banter. Super hot frenemies with benefits. Badass lady friendships with a widening circle of trust. And a romantic HEA that will leave you swooning.

Falling for My Enemy was formerly titled Love According to Science.

HAZEL

“The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances. If there is any reaction, both are transformed.” ~ C.G. Jung

There were three things I knew with absolute certainty: The scientific method was humanity’s greatest invention, a vodka martini was best served dirty, and Corban Nash was an impostor posing as a scientist.

Which was why, at the end of my second week at my new job at Woodward College, I was staring at the bulletin board outside my office in the psychology building. The notice pinned there had to be a mistake. There was no other logical explanation.

I put my hands on my hips, tilted my head, and narrowed my eyes, as if squinting would somehow change the announcement’s content. The hallway behind me bustled with activity, mostly graduate students and lab assistants making their way to their classrooms, offices, or the interview rooms in the lab. And there I stood in a crisp white blouse and herringbone skirt, tapping the toe of my practical black pump, like an irritated librarian on the verge of hushing a noisy study group.

But a librarian I was not, and this wasn’t a library. And no amount of hushing would change what it said.

“Good morning.”

I startled, blinking at the interruption to my thoughts. Dr. Sheffield, head of psychology research here at Woodward—and my new boss—stood next to me with an *it’s in the syllabus* coffee mug in his hand and the hint of a smile

crinkling the lines around his eyes.

“Good morning, Dr. Sheffield.”

“Please, Hazel, call me Elliott. Being on a first-name basis with my staff creates a friendlier environment.”

A respected researcher in the field of social psychology, Dr. Elliott Sheffield looked every bit the academic. He wore a gray sweater vest over his button-down shirt, a pair of slacks, and brown shoes that didn’t match the rest of his attire. Wire-rimmed glasses and a sprinkling of silver in his brown hair and beard gave him a scholarly, distinguished air. The dullness of his gold wedding band suggested he’d worn it for many years.

He’d recently recruited me away from my former position at the University of Washington. Leaving the large university hadn’t been in my long-term life plan. But Woodward College had a strong psychology research program with a focus on my areas of interest—nonverbal communication and human relationships.

It suited me so far. Or it *had* suited me. Looking at the notice on the bulletin board made me wonder if I’d made a grave error in judgment.

Corban Nash was giving a talk—here, at *my* college—today. It was absurd. Unconscionable, even. I couldn’t fathom why an institution such as this, with a stellar reputation to uphold, would let that man on campus, let alone provide him with a forum to promote his unsubstantiated and outlandish claims.

Elliott took a sip of his coffee, then nodded toward the bulletin board. “Are you familiar with Corban Nash’s work?”

My eyes flicked to the notice. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“Not a fan?”

I tapped a finger against my skirt. Not only was I not a fan, I’d been embroiled in an online debate with the charlatan for months. I didn’t doubt his intelligence. He’d invented the algorithm that powered the world’s most popular dating application. But he had no business calling himself a scientist.

“His background is unorthodox, but primarily I question the accuracy of his work.”

“Do you? Why?”

Where did I begin? “He claims to have cracked the code to falling in love. But he has yet to provide any real, scientific evidence that his questionnaire works.”

“You’re right; his research is anecdotal at this point. But I find his data

fascinating. And he approaches the subject of intimacy formation from a fresh angle.”

My cheeks warmed as a surge of irritation rushed through me. Corban Nash’s research wasn’t *fascinating*. It was unsubstantiated pop science. He had the audacity to claim that two people who answered his questionnaire together would inevitably fall in love. It was unscientific, not to mention ridiculous.

But getting into a debate with my still-new boss at nine o’clock in the morning over a guest speaker was probably ill-advised. I schooled my expression to stillness and let my hands drop to my sides so I no longer appeared confrontational.

“I suppose one of the hallmarks of any free society is the open exchange of ideas.”

“Exactly,” Elliott said, gesturing toward me with his half-full coffee mug. “Have you ever heard him speak?”

“No.” I’d read every single one of his articles, despite their tendency to increase my stress level. And he and I had engaged in some rather rigorous back-and-forth debates online. But I’d never seen him in person.

“You should come. He has a unique way of captivating an audience.”

I had to admit, I was tempted. But I didn’t want to legitimize his talk by attending.

Plus, Corban Nash made me irrationally angry. Under normal circumstances, I was a calm and reasonable person. But he made my blood run hot, even when our only connection was via the internet. What would I do if I was in the same room with him?

It was probably best if I didn’t find out.

“I’m afraid I’m quite busy. Still settling in.”

He nodded. “Of course. I should let you get to it.”

I glanced around, realizing the hallway had emptied. “Yes, well, have a nice day.”

“You too,” he said with a smile.

I gave the bulletin board one last scathing look before going into my office. The space they’d given me was small, but more than adequate. I had a wall of shelves for my extensive selection of books, a tidy desk, and a window that overlooked a pleasant courtyard.

Things were good here at Woodward College. I had a great deal of autonomy, access to resources, and opportunities to research topics and

questions that interested me. Professionally, my life had never been better.

Personally? I lived alone with my cat, Erwin. I wasn't close to my parents, but I had a tight-knit group of girlfriends who were like family. I was focused on my career and had determined that engaging in romantic relationships with men was an unnecessary distraction.

I'd also apparently lost my ability to orgasm, but that was neither here nor there.

It did, however, make things uncomfortable when my body decided to remind me of the rising level of unrelieved tension building in my lady parts. Which it did just as I took my seat at my desk.

I crossed my legs, attempting to ignore the sensation of pressure. There was nothing I could do about it. I'd tried almost everything—except for a few rather extreme techniques I'd read about online. Or having actual sex with a human. But considering I lacked anyone to have sex with, and I was interested in neither anonymous sex with a stranger nor dating, my options were limited.

And the disappearance of my orgasms had nothing to do with my job, or with Corban Nash. So I firmly put it out of my mind.

Attend his talk? I couldn't imagine a good reason to do so. I didn't want to lend credence to his position in the scientific community. My absence would be my silent protest.



THE FULLNESS of the auditorium grated on my nerves. Most of the seats were taken. Morbid curiosity had won out over my resolve to stay away. I slipped in with just moments before Corban's talk was set to commence and took an open seat in the back.

I adjusted my glasses, then crossed my arms as I scanned the front of the room. A grad student and someone from campus IT tested the projector, and Elliott stood to the side speaking with another professor. But no sign of my nemesis.

The fact that I was internally referring to him as *my nemesis* was probably not a good sign. The logical part of my brain knew this.

But I'd never been very good at applying my hard-earned cache of knowledge and logic to my own circumstances.

So I remained in my seat, arms and legs crossed. The very picture of defensiveness. I'd listen to what he had to say in order to better frame a rebuttal.

Elliott stepped up to the microphone and a hush settled over the room.

"Thank you for joining us today. It's my pleasure to introduce Corban Nash, here to discuss his popular accelerated intimacy theory. Please join me in giving him a warm welcome."

I was mentally framing the opening paragraph of my counterargument when a man in the front row stood and replaced Elliott behind the microphone.

He had careless brown hair that stuck out at odd angles and wore black Converse with his slacks. His short-sleeved button-down shirt was partially untucked, as if he'd gotten partway through dressing himself and forgotten what he was doing.

He cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses. "Good afternoon."

I stared at him, pressing my lips together, willing myself to ignore the wide set of his shoulders. His trim waist. The way the muscles in his arms filled out his shirtsleeves. Were those veins in his forearms? He wasn't bulky, but he was certainly toned and fit. Not exactly typical for someone with a background in data analytics and social psychology.

Crossing my arms tighter over my chest, I mentally reprimanded myself for noticing his physical qualities. And pointedly ignored the way my traitorous lady parts reacted to them.

Elliott had said he had a unique way of captivating an audience, and as Corban began speaking, I could see what he'd meant. Although he occasionally stumbled over his words, there was a sense of excitement in his deep voice that seemed to resonate with the crowd. He clicked through slides and I noticed many people—women in particular—leaning forward in their seats. He held their attention, their body language suggesting rapt interest.

I couldn't help but wonder if they were interested in his talk, or in him.

Re-crossing my legs, I huffed out a breath. Yes, he had a certain charisma, and his passion for his work was clear. But that didn't change the fact that his so-called theory was poorly researched at best, dangerous at worst.

Although my friends had mentioned, on more than one occasion, that I seemed preoccupied with Corban Nash—truthfully, they'd called me *obsessed*—it wasn't due to a personal vendetta. I'd seen this sort of thing

before. Someone in another field would burst onto the scene with an easy-to-digest and compelling theory, claiming their data had led them to a groundbreaking new insight. Their articles and videos would go viral, spreading unproven information as if it were scientific fact.

Corban's theory of accelerated intimacy was not scientific fact. He hadn't cracked the code to falling in love, and it was reckless of him to spread his ideas before they'd been properly tested.

I glowered at the screen as he continued his presentation, shifting from the data behind his theory to his supposed evidence. He clicked through slides of happy couples, mostly wedding photos, naming the people pictured. Relatives. Friends. Colleagues. Corban had tested his questionnaire on people he knew. No control groups. No means of controlling for variables.

The fact that he admitted his theory required more data didn't make up for his lack of respect for the scientific method, as far as I was concerned.

The crowd oohed and ahed at the romantic photos. Corban stuffed his free hand in his pocket, clicking the remote with the other, looking a little sheepish at the enthusiastic reaction of his audience.

And there was nothing at all endearing about his half-smile or the way he shrugged his shoulders. Not a thing.

He concluded with statements about how more research was needed but he was excited for the potential applications. I rolled my eyes again.

"Does anyone have any questions?" he asked into the mic.

Hands shot into the air, mine included.

Corban called on a few people near the front and answered their—easy, in my opinion; was no one going to challenge him?—questions. Then he got to a young woman in the middle of the room.

"Are you single?" she asked, eliciting a murmur of half-suppressed giggles.

He ran his fingers through his hair and gave her a crooked smile. "Well, I..."

"I mean I'm wondering if you've used your questionnaire with anyone," she said. "Of course, if you haven't, and you aren't in a relationship, that would also be interesting to know."

I wished I had another set of eyes so I could roll them all simultaneously.

"Um, no," Corban said. "I'm not currently in a relationship."

"Well, if you need a test subject, I can give you my number," she said. "For science."

More giggles rippled through the audience.

I cleared my throat. Loudly.

“Yes,” he said, his eyes finding me. His expression indicated relief as he pointed. “There in the back.”

“Mr. Nash, how can you claim to have developed a theory when none of your research could possibly withstand any outside scientific scrutiny?”

The relief in his expression melted away and our eyes locked. Did he know who I was? There was recognition in his face. He only knew me by my internet handle—Kiegen314—but he was quite familiar with my criticisms.

“I’m well aware that my data has limits.”

“But still you speak and write as if your claims are already substantiated. You’ve even given your theory a name. This lends undue authority to your assertions, framing them as scientifically valid when they are, in fact, not.”

The murmur that went through the crowd this time was no longer of the giggly variety. I ignored the rest of the audience, my gaze locked on Corban.

His eyes narrowed. “My results are so conclusive, I’m confident in what the data is telling me.”

“But what about the biases inherent in the way you’ve collected—”

“I’m afraid we’re out of time,” Elliott said into the mic. He’d appeared out of nowhere. “Professor Cole’s class is beginning soon, so we need to clear the room. But thank you all for coming, and thank you, Corban, for your informative presentation.”

The audience clapped, some with a great deal of enthusiasm. Not me. I sat on the edge of my seat—when had I scooted forward like that?—my eyes locked on the man at the front of the room. He stared right back, apparently oblivious to the praise from the crowd.

A renewed rush of heat burst through me, warming me from the inside. Corban Nash was indeed my nemesis. The way he fixed me in a hard glare, I could tell the feeling was mutual.

I wasn’t afraid of a rivalry. It was time someone challenged his supposed theory.

Bring it on, Corban. Bring it on.

CORBAN

“Science is like a love affair with nature; an elusive, tantalizing mistress. It has all the turbulence, twists and turns of romantic love, but that’s part of the game.” ~ Vilayanur S. Ramachandran

The woman in the back of the auditorium had fired me up, and I couldn’t let it go. It had been *her*. Kiegen314.

I sat in a coffee shop across the street from campus, stewing. The rest of my talk had been great. Even the young woman who’d offered me her number hadn’t fazed me—not too much, at least. Overall, the reaction from the audience had been exactly what I’d hoped for.

Until her.

I knew exactly who she was. The one who’d been coming after me online. She popped up everywhere with her long-winded attacks on my work. And now she was here?

I was aware of the limits of my research. I never claimed anything that wasn’t true when it came to my data. Those disclaimers were in every article I wrote and every talk I gave, especially when I was addressing academics. I was already an outsider—a data guy intruding on the soft science of psychology. I was careful to speak their language and not make any claims I couldn’t back up.

But my results were real, and they were too conclusive to ignore. The data didn’t lie. Every couple who’d used my questionnaire had fallen in love.

Except me. But I didn’t like to talk about that.

The solution to that problem was simple anyway: Leave myself out of the data. The fact that I was the one aberrant data point didn't matter because my personal results were too biased to include in my findings. If the academics of the world wanted to find fault now, they'd really pick me apart if they thought I'd been experimenting on myself.

But my romantic failures weren't what was bothering me today.

There was nothing wrong with a good debate, and I was used to fielding questions. But Angry Hot Librarian in the back had come after me like she had a bone to pick.

The fact that she was hot had nothing to do with anything. But I was a guy; of course I'd noticed. There was something about that ponytail and glasses. The blouse with the top button open.

Of course it would be the hot girl who hated me.

It also bothered me that Elliott had stepped in and cut us off. It wasn't public knowledge yet, but my talk today had been the culmination of the interview process. Elliott was considering me for a position in his department, and I really wanted this job. It was a great opportunity to gain access to the resources I needed to continue my research.

Research that would legitimize my theory in the scientific community in a way even Angry Hot Librarian couldn't refute.

A muffled beep, followed by a second soon after, made me glance around. Was that a timer behind the counter? I heard it again. Then another one. That was weird, it sounded like it was coming from—

My pocket.

Right, my phone.

I pulled it out to check my messages. It was my twin sister.

Molly: *How did it go today?*

Molly: *Why haven't you texted me yet?*

Molly: *You know I can't handle the suspense.*

Molly: *Did you get the job????*

Me: *Not yet. I'm still here.*

Molly: *But you gave your lecture? How was that?*

Me: *Fine, except for Angry Hot Librarian in the back row.*

Molly: *Who?*

Me: *Never mind. It went well. I'm meeting Dr. Sheffield for coffee in a few.*

Molly: *And he's going to offer you the job?*

My sister was a little excitable, especially since she'd gotten pregnant. I wasn't sure how Martin, my brother-in-law, was handling it. She was driving me crazy and I didn't even live with her.

Me: *I don't know yet. I think so.*

Molly: *What do you think your chances are? Percentage wise.*

Me: *Seriously?*

Molly: *Since when do you not have a calculation for something?*

She had a point. I did a quick estimate in my head. Prior to the question-and-answer session at the end of my talk, I would have put my chances of a job offer at ninety-eight point four. But now?

Me: *Fine. 92.6%. Approximately.*

Molly: *Why do you say approximately when you added the point six? That's a very specific number.*

Molly: *Never mind. Just get the job.*

Me: *Why are you freaking out?*

Molly: *I'm not freaking out. I just don't want you to move to freaking New Jersey.*

So that was where this was coming from. I'd made the mistake of telling her I had an opportunity at a private research facility in New Jersey. I wanted this job a lot more, but there was no guarantee Dr. Sheffield was going to hire me. Moving was a possibility.

Me: *I know. Stop worrying.*

Molly: *Have you met me?*

Molly: *Don't answer that, it wasn't a real question.*

I backspaced my reply about how of course I'd met her; we were twins so we'd essentially met in utero.

Me: *It's going to be fine, Moll. And I'll text you as soon as I know.*

Molly: *Okay. Good luck!*

Me: *Thanks.*

I re-pocketed my phone and a clunking sound jarred my attention back to my surroundings. A woman had set—or rather, dropped—her purse on the table next to me.

It was her.

At least four trains of thought took off in my brain, chugging locomotives heading in different directions, each laying their own track as they went. It made it hard for my mouth to keep up.

“Oh great, it's Angry Hot Librarian,” I muttered, realizing a beat too late

that I'd said it out loud. But once those trains got going, it was hard to get them to stop. "You remind me of a swan."

Her brow furrowed. "What?"

"A swan. People consider them beautiful and assume their outward appearance means they're friendly. But if you approach a swan, especially during nesting season, it can become aggressive if it thinks it needs to defend its territory."

"I don't think I need to defend my territory. And I'm hardly aggressive."

"Your feathers are ruffled."

She crossed her arms. "I don't have feathers, and if I did, they wouldn't be ruffled."

"It's a figure of speech. It means—"

"I know what it means."

"I just mean people probably think you're harmless." I adjusted my glasses and took a bite of the pastry I'd forgotten I'd ordered.

She was even prettier up close. Usually I found myself analyzing a woman's facial symmetry and thinking about objective versus subjective measures of attractiveness. But not with her. She was simply beautiful without any distracting qualifiers. Big blue eyes behind her glasses. Cute upturned nose. She pursed her lips and the first thing that came to mind was how kissable they looked.

My eyes rested on her mouth and I pictured sucking on that plump lower lip.

"Be that as it may," she said, jarring my attention again, and I tore my eyes away from her mouth. "I'm concerned about the message you're sending with your poorly researched theory."

"Why?"

She opened her mouth, paused, then closed it, her arms still folded over her chest. It made one side of her shirt collar fall open, exposing half an inch of additional skin. Which shouldn't have been enough to matter, but somehow it did. One little peek of neck and collarbone and I almost needed to adjust my pants. This was getting uncomfortable.

Also irritating. Why was my dick rebelling against my brain?

Stand down, big guy. We don't like her.

"What kind of question is that?" she asked.

"A valid and straightforward one," I said around another bite of pastry.

"I just assumed you'd say something else."

“Like what?”

She uncrossed her arms and placed her hands on her hips. That position annoyingly emphasized her curves. How could one woman be so simultaneously irritating and attractive? My brain and my dick were sending two completely different messages and it was messing with my head.

“I thought you’d offer a defense of your methodology or an explanation of your reasoning. But instead you’re asking me why I’m concerned about it?”

“Yeah.”

“Because your conclusions are unsubstantiated at best, wrong at worst. There’s no formula that will make people fall in love.”

“Yes, there is.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because I’ve seen it happen, over and over. It works.”

“It works on an extremely biased, non-representative sample, consisting primarily of your family and friends.”

I took a drink of my ice water and wiped my hands on my napkin. “That’s correct.”

“But that’s... you can’t...”

Now her cheeks were flushing. This was bad. She was absolutely adorable with pink cheeks. Not only was her attractiveness skyrocketing to dangerously high levels, flushed cheeks were a sign of sexual arousal. In her case that’s not what the pinkness meant—obviously—but the association was too primal to ignore. This woman was hitting pleasure buttons in my brain like an overzealous kid playing his last quarter on the final boss of an arcade game.

I cleared my throat, but she started talking again.

“Admitting the inherent problems in your research won’t make them disappear. It makes you reckless for overlooking them and charging forward with claims you can’t substantiate. People forget or ignore disclaimers. They hear and remember your primary message, especially one as provocative as *I’ve cracked the code to falling in love*.”

“But I have cracked the code to falling in love.”

“That’s my point,” she said, gesturing with her hands. “You haven’t cracked anything.”

She put her hands back on her hips and did that thing with her lips—pursing them in a way that made me think about kissing her. Except the brain

signals were starting to win out over the dick signals. Physical beauty aside, she was pissing me off.

“Yes I have, and I *will* prove it,” I said, pointing at her with my pastry. “In the meantime, I’m sure you have better things to do than tell me what I already know. I know my theory needs further research. That’s why I’m here.”

Her eyes widened and her entire body stiffened. “What do you mean, that’s why you’re here?”

“Hazel.” Dr. Elliott Sheffield stood on the other side of my table. I hadn’t noticed him come in. “I see you and Corban have officially met.”

Angry Hot Librarian—who was apparently named Hazel and it was weird how much it suited her—clicked her mouth closed.

“Not exactly,” I answered for her. I dropped what was left of my pastry on a napkin and wiped my hands on my pants, then held out my hand. “Corban Nash.”

Eying my hand like it might bite her, she slowly slipped hers into mine. Her skin was soft, her handshake firm. Also, sticky.

No, that was my hand. Damn it.

“Hazel Kiegen.”

Our eyes locked and I held her hand a few seconds too long. A smoldering mix of attraction and annoyance flared hot in my chest.

I didn’t like her.

But part of me wanted her.

It was fucking confusing, but for the moment, my brain and dick were in sync. Flushed cheeks? Good. Fiery gaze? Good. Touching? Very good.

The need to adjust my pants was nearing critical mass.

Elliott unknowingly spared me the awkwardness of figuring out how to stand up without anyone—especially Hazel—noticing my growing hard-on. He set his coffee down and took the seat across from me.

I dropped Hazel’s hand.

Hazel stared at me.

Elliott looked amused.

I adjusted my glasses and noted the coffee sitting in front of me. I’d ordered that, hadn’t I? Now it gave me something to do that wasn’t staring at Hazel, internally wrestling with the potent and mildly intoxicating fusion of temptation and agitation. I shifted in my seat, picking up my coffee to take a sip.

“Dr. Sheff—I mean, Elliott,” Hazel said, smoothing her skirt. “I apologize if I’m interrupting.”

“Not at all,” Elliott said. “This is just a formality. I already have approval from the hiring committee.”

“Hiring committee?” she asked.

He smiled. “I’m hoping Corban will join our team.”

The look of shock that stole over Hazel’s features was surprisingly satisfying. *Take that, Angry Hot Librarian.*

Her eyes shifted between me and Elliott a few times, her lips working like she was trying to speak. I raised an eyebrow and took a sip of my coffee.

Was the half-grin I gave her a little smug? Yeah, it was. But who could blame me? She was the one who’d come in here and picked an argument.

“Wait, did you say you want to hire me?” I sat up in my chair, Elliott’s words finally sinking in.

He grinned. “Absolutely. We need someone with your expertise, not to mention the fresh outlook you’ll bring to our team. I want that big brain of yours working for me.”

Hell. Yes.

“That’s great.” I tried to reach across to shake his hand but knocked my napkin and the last bite of my pastry onto the floor. “Sorry, that’s just good news. I’m definitely interested. I mean, I accept. Yes.”

Hazel slowly crouched and picked up the pastry and napkin. I couldn’t tell what she was thinking—probably nothing good—but I didn’t care. Angry Hot Librarian wasn’t going to ruin my moment.

“Excellent,” Elliott said. “If it works with your schedule, you can start Monday.”

“Yeah, that works.”

“Great.” He beamed, his smile wide, his eyes moving between me and Hazel. “I think you two are going to love working together.”

I grinned at Hazel. We were not going to love working together, I could already tell. But conducting my research right under her nose? This was perfect. I was going to scientifically prove my theory, and I was going to do it right in front of Hazel Kiegen’s pretty face.

CORBAN

“Let the beauty of what you love be what you do.” ~ Rumi

The toe of my shoe hit something solid and I stopped. Damn it, I’d almost walked into a wall. I lowered the comic book I’d been reading. A classic issue of *The Uncanny X-Men* that I’d probably read a hundred times, but the storyline never got old. Luckily, I hadn’t dropped the stack of mail tucked beneath my other arm.

I probably needed to stop reading while I was walking, even if it was just from the mailbox back to my apartment.

My phone rang, the sound muffled by my back pocket. At least I knew it was my phone this time. I moved the comic book to my other hand while also trying to open my apartment door and retrieve my phone. Somehow I got the door open and pulled out my phone without dropping my comic. But the mail I’d been carrying slipped out from under my arm and scattered around my feet.

Oh well.

“Hey Molly,” I answered.

“Did you forget something?”

I crouched down to pick up the mail. “I don’t think so. Why?”

“You were supposed to text me when you found out about the job. What happened? Did you get it?”

“I texted you. Didn’t I?” I set the mail on the kitchen table and put the comic book down next to it, then looked at my phone and navigated to my

text messages. I had one all typed up, but apparently I hadn't hit send. "Oh shit, sorry. I didn't send it."

"So?"

"I got the job."

"Hell yes, twinkie. I'm so happy for you."

I had no idea why she insisted on calling me twinkie. She had since we were kids. It was kind of embarrassing. "Thanks. I start Monday."

"This is so awesome. Martin wants to know if this means you're going to move again."

I glanced around at the boxes I still hadn't unpacked. I'd moved back to Seattle from San Jose recently after deciding to pursue research psychology full time. It had been a gamble, and I'd known I might not be able to stay. It depended on where I landed job wise. But it looked like I'd be unpacking the rest of my stuff and settling in.

"I guess at some point, but this apartment isn't bad. Tell him he doesn't have to worry. You guys have enough going on with the baby coming."

"I know, life is crazy, right? I still can't quite believe I'm making an entirely new human."

"Yep. You literally have a person inside you."

"I'm not going to lie, it's kind of creepy. But I already love this little intruder, even though he or she likes to kick me from the inside."

I pulled out a chair and sat at the kitchen table. "I'm so glad I'm a guy."

She laughed. "Anyway, I know you just moved, but maybe you should consider getting a bigger place. Something a little more permanent?"

"Yeah, I'll think about it."

It was pretty cool how much my sister wanted me to stay in the area. We'd always been close, but it had been a long time since we'd lived near each other. After college, I'd moved a couple of times for work—once to Massachusetts, and then to northern California. With her expecting her first baby, I'd decided I wanted to be around for that, if I could make it happen. Be the cool uncle? Sounded great to me.

Not that I was *cool*, strictly speaking. I was a data geek who wore glasses and loved comic books, and who tended to be socially awkward more often than not. But at thirty-three, I wasn't shy or self-conscious about my nerdiness anymore. I was good with who I was. And hell, even a nerd could be a cool uncle.

But this apartment was fine for now. I didn't need more than the one

bedroom. And I didn't want to admit it to my sister, but if I had more space, it would just be a constant reminder that I didn't have anyone to share it with.

"So tell me about your job," Molly said.

"I'm going to be the lead data analyst for the psychology research department at Woodward College."

"Also known as resident math genius."

I laughed a little. "Something like that. They do a lot of cool stuff there. I haven't seen it yet, but their motion capture lab is state of the art. And I'll have the opportunity to do some of my own research."

"That's so exciting. Watch out, if you start giving your questionnaire to scores of research subjects, you're going to wind up a groomsman in a lot more weddings."

I'd already been in at least a dozen weddings—couples who'd used my questionnaire and gone on to get married. "Professional hazard, I guess."

"At least weddings have cake."

"Usually. Although the last one I went to didn't. Can you believe it? They were both eating low carb or something, so they had a cheese and fruit platter instead of cake."

"Oh my god. That's a travesty. I hope you started a food fight."

"I should have."

She laughed. "I probably would have cried. But I'm also very pregnant and possibly a little bit irrational when it comes to food."

I heard Martin's voice in the background. "Very irrational."

"You're the one who knocked me up. You get to live with the consequences. Sorry, Corban, my husband likes to play with fire. Anyway, have you called Mom and Dad yet?"

My smile fell. "No, not yet."

"Well, don't forget. They're going to be so excited for you."

Were they, though? My parents hadn't approved of my choice to leave my last job, especially without having a new one lined up. I hadn't told them that I had plenty of money. It wasn't any of their business, and it wouldn't have changed their opinion anyway. They didn't exactly approve of most things I did, so it was easier to just let them think what they wanted.

"Yeah, I'll call them."

"Are you nervous?"

"Not really. I'm pretty sure I don't have to worry about being shunned in the cafeteria at lunch."

She laughed again. “They better not shun you or I’ll come down there and... well, I’m too pregnant to do much more than yell at people, but I could use lots of obscenities.”

“Thanks, weirdo.”

“You got it, twinkie. Text me on Monday and tell me how it goes. And don’t forget to hit send.”

“I won’t.”

We finished our goodbyes and I set down my phone. I went to the fridge to grab a beer and took it to the couch.

I’d told Molly the truth—I wasn’t nervous about starting my new job on Monday. But what I hadn’t mentioned was the potentially hostile situation I was walking into.

Hazel Kiegen. Ms. Angry Hot Librarian.

She didn’t like me, and the feeling was mutual. I wasn’t sure how this was going to work, but a little rivalry didn’t scare me. Besides, once I had the funding to conduct a full-fledged study of my theory and questionnaire, I’d show her I *had* cracked the code to falling in love.

For most people, at least.

And hopefully by Monday, my brain signals and dick signals wouldn’t be so mixed. I’d never felt something so intense for a woman before. How could I hate her and still be so attracted to her? It didn’t make any sense.

Maybe my brain was confusing hate for lust.

There was research to support that. Studies on elite athletes showed they typically framed their physical symptoms before a high-pressure athletic event—elevated heart rate, so-called butterflies in the stomach, and so forth—as excitement. Other people framed the same sensations as anxiety or nervousness. The difference wasn’t in the symptoms, it was in the way their brains interpreted the data their body sent.

My brain was obviously misinterpreting the data. I wasn’t attracted to Hazel Kiegen. I disliked her. It was the intensity of that feeling that had caused the confusion.

I was sure my dick would get the message the next time I saw her, and stay out of it.

Hopefully.

I finished my beer and ate some leftovers for dinner. I went to toss the to-go box in the trash, but it was already full.

That was the thing about living alone. There wasn’t anyone else around to

make a mess, but there wasn't anyone else to help clean up either.

I grabbed the trash bag, made sure I had my keys in my pocket—I'd locked myself out a couple of times already and didn't want to do it again—and took it out into the hall.

"Hey, Corban."

I shut my door and glanced at my neighbor. Paisley Hayes stood in front of her door, holding her keys, a smile on her face. Her thick blond hair was wavy around her shoulders and her pink lipstick stood out against her skin.

"Hi, Paisley."

"Taking out the garbage?"

I glanced down at the trash bag, wondering why she was asking such an obvious question. "Yeah."

"Cool." Her keys dangled from her hand, but she wasn't making any attempt to unlock her door. "Do you have any plans for later?"

"Not really. I might go to the gym and shoot some hoops."

"Oh yeah? I don't have plans either."

Wasn't it a Friday? It seemed like she usually went out on Fridays. I glanced around the hallway as if there'd be a calendar somewhere. "Isn't it Friday?"

"It better be, because I am *not* going in to work tomorrow."

"Yeah, it would suck to make that mistake and get fired."

Her smile faded a little. "Yeah."

"Well, have a good night."

"I was hoping to do something with Molly tonight, but she said she's too tired," she said quickly. "I guess pregnancy would be tiring. So, no plans."

Paisley had been my sister's best friend since high school. But we'd existed on rungs of the social ladder that were so far apart, they might as well have been different worlds. I'd been nothing but her best friend's nerdy twin brother. Totally beneath her notice.

That hadn't stopped me from having the world's biggest crush on Paisley Hayes. At seventeen, I'd been a lovesick puppy, a total idiot who'd given over self-control to the whims of teenage hormones.

Now, though? I wondered what I'd ever seen in her. She was pretty—almost any guy would think so—and she knew how to maximize her physical advantages to attract members of the opposite sex.

But she and I had almost nothing in common. And I knew from Molly that over the years, she'd dated a string of guys, all variations on the same

theme—good-looking assholes. I wasn't her type, and one thing I'd learned working for social media and dating app developers was that most people had a type and stuck to it.

She wasn't my type either. She was just my sister's friend, and she was fine as a neighbor. She'd even given me the lead on this apartment when I'd been looking for a place to live.

"Okay, well, I'm going to take this out." I held up the trash bag. "See you."

"Oh, okay. Yeah, you don't want to stand there holding the garbage. I guess I'll just go inside and figure out what to do with my free evening." She gestured to her still-locked door.

"Yep. Night, Paisley."

"Bye."

I patted my pocket again—really wanted to make sure I hadn't locked myself out—and took the garbage downstairs. Molly's mention of wedding cake made me wish I'd stopped by the bakery down the street and picked up something. They had salted caramel cupcakes that were amazeballs.

And why not? I'd just gotten a new job that meant I could stay in Seattle. I'd taken a risk in moving up here and it had paid off. That called for a celebration for one.

HAZEL

*“All you need is love. But a little chocolate now and then doesn’t hurt.” ~
Charles M. Schulz*

Erwin blinked at me, his green eyes bright in his flat-nosed face. His long gray fur was so thick, it was prone to matting, and it was time we took a trip to the groomer. Although my cat was typically even-tempered—he didn’t do much other than sleep—he was incredibly defiant when it came to one particular activity. Getting in his pet carrier.

I was lying on the floor next to the open pet carrier, sticky with sweat after chasing him around my apartment. None of my usual tricks had worked, and he’d escaped from every trap I’d attempted.

“Come on, Erwin. I put six salmon-flavored cat treats in there. Surely it’s worth getting in for six whole cat treats.”

He blinked again.

“You’re being far too dramatic about this. Get in the carrier, already.”

I sighed and sat up, crossing my legs. Erwin didn’t move.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t raise my voice. It’s just that I’m already stressed about work, and I’d very much like to get this over with. I’m meeting the girls for a run and drinks later, and I don’t want to be late.”

Erwin ignored me.

There had been a time when my sweet gray cat was trusting enough to follow a trail of cat treats right into his pet carrier. But the Erwin of today had seen things. Moving car things. Veterinarian’s office and rectal thermometer

things. Coaxing him into his carrier—I didn't like to think of it as forcing—had become a two-person job.

“We aren't going to the vet today. The groomer is like the spa. They'll make your fur nice and soft and keep it from getting matted. We are both well aware of the ramifications of matted fur, particularly in your anal region.”

I needed help, but even though my friend Nora lived just two floors down, I couldn't call her. Not after last time. My other friend Everly would have been willing to help, but she was busy with preparations for her upcoming wedding.

Other than my girlfriends, I didn't have many options. My only close family were my parents, and they lived several hours away—and weren't the sort of people a girl could call with no notice to help get her pet to the groomer. And although I had numerous coworkers with whom I enjoyed amiable relationships, I wasn't close enough to any of them to ask for this sort of favor, especially on a weekend.

My circle was small, but I refused to describe myself as lonely. However, in moments like this, I did wonder if my self-imposed singlehood had more drawbacks than I wanted to admit.

There was one other person I hadn't yet considered: Sophie Abbott. She was Everly's replacement at her old job, and Everly had started inviting her to come running—and out for drinks—with us. Nora, Everly, and I had been friends since high school, but Sophie fit in quite naturally. Perhaps she and I had built up enough of a rapport that I could call on her for help with a minor cat crisis.

I texted Sophie, explaining the situation as briefly as I could. A few minutes later, she replied that she'd be right over. I breathed out a sigh of relief.

It was good to have friends.

“Don't look so smug, Erwin. Sophie is on her way.”

My cat didn't seem to think the latest addition to our so-called running club would make a difference. I hoped he was wrong.

It didn't take long for Sophie to arrive. Her mass of dark blond curls was partially contained in a bun, and she was dressed in a black t-shirt and jeans.

“Hey.” She smiled and set her purse on the table by the door, knocking over my mail basket in the process. “Oh no, I'm sorry. Here, let me get that.”

“That's not necessary.” I crouched down to pick up the spilled envelopes.

Sophie was prone to clumsiness and this wasn't the first time she'd bumped that table upon entering my apartment. "Thank you for coming."

"Of course. What's wrong with your cat?"

"He's fine, other than high-maintenance fur and a stubborn disposition. I can't get him into his pet carrier and I need to take him to the groomer."

Sophie put her hands on her hips and eyed Erwin. "He must be faster than he looks if you haven't been able to catch him."

"If you're implying he's fat, he isn't. He's just fluffy."

She raised her eyebrows. "Okay. Well, what's the plan?"

"I'll catch him with a towel, then you help me get him in the carrier and close the door before he can escape."

"Got it."

Sophie picked up the carrier and I armed myself with a thick towel.

Erwin eyed me with suspicion as I took careful steps toward him.

"Don't pay any attention to what I'm doing, Erwin. I'm not going to scoop you up in this towel. I'm just walking toward you. There's no reason to run—"

He darted into the kitchen.

"Really?"

I followed him with Sophie tiptoeing behind me. She had the carrier ready. For an animal who could barely jump onto the couch—he waited for me to pick him up and set him on the cushion these days—he could be surprisingly agile when evading capture.

Erwin sat next to his food dish, watching me with bright green eyes.

"Ready?" I whispered to Sophie.

"Ready."

I bounded forward, but Erwin shot past me and ran between Sophie's legs. She yelped and spun. I tried to chase after my ridiculous cat, but Sophie's feet got tangled together and she stumbled in front of me. It was all I could do not to crash into her.

"Oops." She steadied herself against the doorway. "Where did he go?"

"There." I pointed to the dining table where he was attempting to use the chair legs for cover. "I'll flush him out. Be ready."

"Got it."

I crept toward Erwin, murmuring soft reassurances and promises of cat treats. His flat-nosed face seemed impassive and for a second, I thought he might let me scoop him up in the towel this time.

I was wrong.

He dropped and turned onto his back, ready to defend himself with his claws. I lunged toward him, towel in both hands, but he rolled over and darted between the table legs. Sophie pulled out a chair, trying to make room to catch him, but she yanked too hard and it crashed to the floor. Right in front of me.

I leapt over the obstacle and grabbed for Erwin. He was just out of reach. My glasses slipped down my nose, but I kept up the chase, running after him. He scurried past the couch and I followed with Sophie right behind me.

“Erwin, stop!”

Naturally, he did no such thing. He darted around the perimeter of the room, effectively making a U-turn.

“Take this.” Sophie snatched the towel from my hands and shoved the carrier at me.

She changed directions, ready to cut Erwin off before he could run past. I bobbled the carrier, almost dropping it.

Sophie dove at Erwin, landing flat on her stomach, the towel outstretched. In the blink of an eye, she scooped the towel toward her and curled up around it.

“Carrier!”

I quickly crouched down, holding the carrier door open. She took the bundle of cat and towel and gently shoved Erwin inside. I shut the wire door with a click.

She rolled onto her back and let out a breath. “Phew.”

“Are you injured?”

“No, I’m fine.” She sat up and tilted her head to look at Erwin. “You weren’t kidding about him being stubborn.”

I fixed my glasses, then shook my head at my headstrong cat. He peered at me through the wire door. “Oh, Erwin.”

My eyes met Sophie’s and we both burst out laughing.

“Well, that was an adventure,” she said.

I stood and helped her to her feet. “That was an impressive catch. Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Oh yeah, I’m fine. Do you want me to come with you to the groomer?” She smoothed down her shirt, then lifted the carrier. “Wow, he’s heavy.”

“He’s of average size and weight.”

“Well, it’s not his fur that weighs so much,” she said under her breath.

“Fluffy,” I said decisively. “But thank you again for your help. I’ve been trying to get him to cooperate all morning.”

She smiled. “Anytime.”

“And I appreciate the offer to join us, but he’s learned that getting back in the carrier means going home. I don’t expect I’ll have any trouble.”

“Little stinker.” She handed the carrier to me. “Be a good boy, Erwin.”

“Will I see you for our run later?”

“I’ll be there.”

We said our goodbyes and Sophie left, thankfully without knocking the mail basket onto the floor again. After righting the furniture, I took Erwin to the groomer. True to my prediction, he got back in his carrier willingly once they’d finished.

When we got back to my apartment, I let him out. He immediately went to the kitchen and waited for me to give him more cat treats. I indulged him with another small handful.

“Was that really so bad?”

He ignored me in favor of wandering over to his cat bed and curling up in a fluffy ball.

“Well, of course you’re tired, you naughty thing.” I bent over and ran my hand over his soft fur a few times. “I’m meeting the girls for a run. I’ll be home later.”

He seemed too worn out from his unusually eventful morning to care.



“HAZEL, WAIT UP.”

Slowing my stride, I cast a glance over my shoulder at my friends. Why were they lagging so far behind? I stopped and pressed my finger to my neck, checking my pulse. It was higher than usual. I must have inadvertently increased my pace.

I waited with my hands on my hips, taking deep breaths.

“You didn’t say we were sprinting today.” Everly’s voice was slightly breathless. She was dressed in a yellow tank top and gray leggings, her blond hair in a bouncy ponytail.

“We’re not sprinting.”

Nora’s eyebrows lifted. Her dark brown hair was in a thick braid and she

wore a pink tank top and black shorts that showed off her long legs. Nora always wore the sort of clothes I knew I never could. “Then what was that about? We’re not being chased.”

“You’re fast when you want to be,” Sophie said. She’d traded her t-shirt and jeans for a tank top that said *I run for wine* and a pair of black capris.

“I haven’t run that fast since that time in high school when Toby McDaniel’s mom caught us making out in their hot tub,” Nora said.

Everly winced. “Wasn’t Mrs. McDaniel the scary substitute teacher?”

Nora pulled her phone out of her sports bra and swiped the screen. “The very same. She was terrifying.”

“Did you get away?” Sophie asked.

“Of course I did. Mrs. McDaniel was scary, but she wasn’t fast.”

“Apologies for getting ahead,” I said. “I had a burst of energy and took advantage.”

That wasn’t entirely true. I’d spent most of our three-point-five-mile run unreasonably preoccupied. Despite the trouble he’d given me this morning, my mind wasn’t on my stubborn cat. It was on another stubborn male.

Corban Nash.

On his smug smile.

His surprisingly wide shoulders.

His deep brown eyes.

The jolt of electricity I’d felt when he’d shaken my hand.

The way he—

No. I needed to stop any line of thinking that involved reaching the conclusion that Corban Nash was attractive.

He was. But that was beside the point.

The man was my nemesis.

“Hazel?”

I startled, blinking as I pushed my glasses back up my nose. “What?”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Sophie asked.

Her eyebrows were drawn together. As were Everly’s. And Nora’s. All three women eyed me with the same look of concern.

I could hardly blame them. I wasn’t acting like myself. I hadn’t been since I’d seen that notice on the bulletin board at work yesterday.

“Yes, I’m fine,” I said, straightening my shoulders. “Let’s go get a drink.”

We walked the rest of the way back to the parking lot where we usually started our runs. I checked my stats on my Fitbit, and we all took a few

minutes to stretch.

“Uh-oh, ladies,” Nora said. “Incoming.”

Looking up, I paused my analysis of my recent running performance. Four women in matching pink tank tops and pink and gray camo leggings jogged into the parking lot. Their tops read *Bedazzled Bitches*, the letters outlined in sparkling gemstones.

“Just ignore them,” Everly said quietly.

That was easier said than done. The *Bedazzled Bitches* consisted of two women Nora, Everly, and I had known in high school—and would have preferred to never see again—and two new friends they’d made somewhere in the last dozen or so years since. Bella Ferndale and Drew Browning had done their best to make my life miserable during our teen years, and the two additions to their clique appeared to be cut from the same cloth.

When we’d first seen them running our route, my curiosity had taken precedence over any hurt feelings from the past. After all, we were adults now. Any so-called mean girl tactics, I thought, had to have been left firmly in the past.

I’d been wrong. When I’d attempted to ask them a few questions—I was particularly interested in their personality types and the social structure of their group—Bella had called me a freak. Everly and Sophie had been forced to hold Nora back to keep her from engaging in a physical confrontation.

“Why do they always have to glare at us like that?” Sophie waved her hand in front of her face, as if to ward away a bad smell. “So much negative energy.”

They were indeed eyeing us with expressions of undisguised scorn.

“They lack self-confidence, so they lash out at other women in an attempt to feel better about themselves,” Nora said.

“That’s very insightful, Nora,” I said.

She smiled. “Thank you.”

“It’s so unnecessary,” Everly said.

“I agree,” Nora said. “I’m normally not in favor of female rivalries. Women have enough to deal with without being shitty to each other. But those four are the exception.”

I adjusted my glasses. “Just don’t make eye contact.”

“Too late,” Sophie said. “I’m sorry—when you said that, I looked. I didn’t mean to.”

The *Bedazzled Bitches*, led by Bella, walked toward us with exaggerated

hip sways. They stopped in front of us, all striking the same hands-on-hips pose.

“Have a good run, ladies?” Bella’s eyes flicked to Sophie. “That’s a cute shirt. I didn’t know they made it in plus size.”

My eyes narrowed at the attempted insult to Sophie’s body type. She was curvier than me, but perfectly healthy, not to mention beautiful. I opened my mouth to reply, but Sophie beat me to it.

“Thanks, I love this shirt. It’s so hard to find things that fit my chest. But I guess you’d need to have boobs to understand that problem.”

Bella huffed. It took Drew and their other two minions a second before realization settled in.

“It’s not her fault her boobs are small,” Drew said. “It’s all the antibiotics or hormones or something. You know, in our food. And she’s getting them fixed soon.”

“Drew, shut up,” Bella hissed.

“The presence of antibiotics in animal products is highly unlikely to have any impact on breast size,” I said. “Although there is a case to be made for chemicals in the food supply impacting other aspects of human physical development.”

Bella rolled her eyes. “Oh my god, is she talking again? Blah blah, science. Whatever.”

“Hazel, is there any correlation between breast size and brain size?” Nora asked.

“Not that I’m aware of.”

She clicked her tongue. “That’s too bad. Then the boob job won’t make you smarter. Well, as lovely as this little chat has been, I’m sure you need to go. Looks like it’s time for a new set of Lee Press-On Nails.”

All four women looked at their fingernails. Nora gave me a little smile and gestured for us to make our exit.

I put the Bedazzled Bitches out of my mind as we walked across the street to Brody’s Brewhouse. Unfortunately, Corban Nash immediately took their place at the front of my consciousness. Why was I unable to go more than five minutes without him invading my head space?

Brody’s was a restaurant and bar not far from the apartment building where Nora and I lived—as had Everly, until she’d moved in with her fiancé, Shepherd Calloway. We were frequent patrons because it was casual enough that we could come in immediately after our runs, but still nice enough to

have good food. And good martinis.

Some of the best in Seattle, in fact.

We chose a table and took our seats.

“Well, if it isn’t the Dirty Martini Running Club.” Jake, our favorite bartender, came to our table. He’d given us the name, a commentary on what might be perceived as an inconsistency—women who went running only to consume alcoholic beverages immediately after.

He probably had a point.

But our routine also made our running sessions much more fun than if we’d only been focused on fitness. Yes, the fitness aspect was important. We’d all discovered that life after thirty meant making certain adjustments. But none of us particularly wanted one of those adjustments to be fewer martinis. I’d suggested we take up running.

It was a brilliant plan, as far as I was concerned, and the results were conclusive. We’d all maintained a reasonable level of health and fitness without sacrificing the pleasures of girl talk over an enjoyable cocktail.

My genius IQ came in handy for practical purposes from time to time.

“Looks like you had a good run,” Jake said with a smile. “Nora’s actually sweating.”

“I don’t sweat, I glisten.” Nora’s full lips turned up in a smile. “Although I don’t mind getting a little sweaty in the right situation.”

Jake just shook his head and took our orders. Nora’s thinly veiled innuendoes never seemed to faze him. And we all knew she wasn’t serious. Although Jake was what most women—including Nora—would consider attractive, he was married, and that was a line none of us would cross.

Not intentionally, at least. But that was another story.

Jake took our orders—dirty martinis for each of us, plus our usual salads with grilled chicken. He came back with our drinks a few minutes later.

“How are the wedding plans coming?” Nora asked.

Everly’s blue eyes sparkled. It was wonderful to see my friend so happy. “Right on schedule. It’s hard to believe it’s almost here.”

“It’s going to be amazing,” Nora said. “I’m so excited.”

“Nora, your prediction that Everly would force us to wear ugly dresses didn’t come true,” I said. “Our bridesmaid attire is very flattering.”

“That’s because she let me pick the dresses,” Nora said.

I shrugged. “Still.”

“We won’t come close to outshining Everly, but we are going to look

fabulous,” Nora said. “What about my request that there be hot single men at the wedding?”

“There should be a few, I guess. But it’s not like I’m going to invite strangers to my wedding just so you might get a date.”

Nora rolled her eyes. “I thought we were friends.”

Everly laughed. “Fine, I’ll see what I can do. Sophie, are you bringing a date to the wedding?”

Sophie was busy trying to tame her unruly locks, smoothing them into a new bun. “No. It would be nice to go with a date, but that would require having a date. That came out weird, but you know what I mean.”

“I’m attending solo as well,” I said.

“You’re still on your no-dating kick?” Nora asked. “I have to be honest, I’m surprised you’ve held out this long.”

“Holding out implies I’m acting against my true desires. I’m not interested in dating, so it’s not a matter of willpower. I’m simply being true to myself.”

“Good for you,” Everly said.

“As long as you’re happy, you know I’m happy for you,” Nora said.

But I had a feeling that Nora didn’t believe I was happy.

As if I needed a reminder of my singleness—and lack of sexual activity—I felt a little twinge in my lady parts. There was no reason for me to experience even a hint of arousal, but apparently I’d reached a point where my body didn’t require outside stimulation.

I thought about mentioning it. My friends would no doubt provide a variety of potential solutions. But then Everly asked a question that sent all thoughts of my missing orgasm fleeing from my mind.

“Hazel, how’s work?”

My back stiffened. “My workplace is about to be invaded by the enemy.”

“The enemy?” Nora stirred her martini with the skewer of olives. “That’s... dramatic.”

“I’m not being dramatic. This is a real problem. My boss hired Corban Nash.”

“Who’s that?” Sophie asked. “Is he an ex-boyfriend? That would be awful.”

“No, he’s *not* an ex-boyfriend,” I said, pulling a face.

Everly put a hand over her mouth—was she hiding a laugh?—and Nora grinned at me.

I turned to Sophie before either of them could say anything. “Corban Nash is a charlatan posing as a scientist. And he’s apparently managed to hoodwink my boss, a man I’d previously deemed to be perfectly respectable. Now I don’t know what to think.”

“Your boss hired Corban Nash?” Nora asked, her lips still curling in a knowing smile. “The guy you’ve been obsessed with forever?”

“I’m not obsessed with him, and forever is far too long a time period to be relevant. In fact, one could argue that our minds aren’t capable of understanding the concept.”

“Don’t try to change the subject,” Nora said. “The man you’ve hated from afar will now be working with you?”

I took a sip of my martini, as if I needed the alcohol as fortification. “Yes.”

Nora leaned closer. “Is he hot?”

I pressed my lips together to stop myself from saying yes. “What he looks like is of no consequence.”

“He’s hot,” Nora said.

“No, he isn’t.” *Liar.*

Wait, why was I lying to my friends?

I wasn’t lying. I didn’t think he was hot. Maybe some women would find him attractive. Women who liked his brand of rumpled carelessness coupled with a strong, muscular body. Brown eyes and a dreamy smile.

Dreamy smile? Who was I?

“Will it really be that bad?” Everly asked.

“Yes. The man is single-minded and stubborn.”

“That doesn’t sound at all like someone else we know.” Nora sipped her martini.

“I’m not single-minded and stubborn.”

“Yes, you are.” Nora set her glass down.

She might have had a small point. “Be that as it may, I suppose the best course of action is to avoid him. That, or make it my professional mission to destroy his research.”

“Just don’t do anything crazy,” Everly said. “You don’t want to put your job at risk.”

“I wouldn’t do anything of the sort.”

Nora and Everly shared a look. I pretended I didn’t catch the meaning behind their glance, but I did. They didn’t believe me.

I took another drink of my martini. They had no reason for concern. I'd be a consummate professional.

But if I had the chance to poke holes in Corban Nash's supposed theory, I was going to take it.

CORBAN

“Sometimes the heart sees what is invisible to the eye.” ~ H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

I pulled the last of the books I’d brought out of the box and set them on a shelf. A new office. A fresh start. This was good.

Elliott had come by first thing this morning to make sure I was getting settled. He’d given me a quick tour of the building and said a student aide would show me around campus later today. I liked him. I could tell he understood me. A lot of people didn’t, so finding a boss who didn’t change the subject as soon as I started geeking out over statistics was a good sign.

He’d left me with paperwork for HR and a stack of folders detailing a few of Woodward’s currently-open research studies. I took my seat and thumbed through them. Interesting stuff. A big part of my job was going to be analyzing data from the studies run by Elliott and the other research professors here. I loved numbers, so it was right up my alley.

But I was also itching to get my own research going.

I had tons of data to work with already, but as Hazel had unhelpfully pointed out, it was anecdotal. That didn’t make me any less convinced of its validity. The next step in gaining widespread acceptance of my theory was to put it to the test in a controlled setting.

To make that happen, I needed access to resources, and this job was the beginning. I also needed grant money, and Elliott had already given me the go-ahead to work on grant applications. Unlike Ms. Angry Hot Librarian,

Elliott believed in my work.

I sat at my desk and ran a hand through my hair. I didn't want to think about Hazel, but since Friday, she'd been a constant distraction, tickling the edge of my consciousness. Now that I was here, it was hard to think about anything else.

Her office was next door, but I hadn't seen her yet. Maybe that was the problem. I was subconsciously anticipating a confrontation. She didn't want me here; fine. But Elliott did, and he was the boss. We'd learn to live with each other eventually.

Maybe.

Had she stayed home today to avoid me? Was she in Elliott's office right now making a case for getting rid of me? I heard footsteps in the hallway outside my office and looked up, expecting to see her. Did she always dress like a hot librarian?

Why did I keep thinking of her as hot?

A pair of students with backpacks slung over their shoulders walked by. Not Hazel.

Good.

Was it good?

I moved the now-empty box off my desk. Maybe I needed to get our first official meeting as co-workers over with. She could purse those lips and glare at me. Put her hands on her hips.

Those hips.

Sexy hips.

Again with the wandering mind. Sexy? No. Not Hazel Kiegen.

Then she did walk by.

Her stride slowed just enough for her to cast me a quick glance. Our eyes met. Hers narrowed and the flickering coal in my gut flared hot. And then she was gone, out of my line of sight.

Sexy? Yeah, she was. Damn it.

But sexy or not, Hazel and I weren't going to get along. She didn't like me, and the feeling was mutual. I'd just have to keep my distance. Ignore the fact that she was on the other side of the wall.

I grabbed my lunch and took it down the hall to the staff lounge so I could store it in the fridge until later. There were several cafeterias and restaurants on and around campus, but I hadn't been sure what to expect on my first day, so I'd brought a sandwich.

A professor I hadn't met yet sat at one of the round tables with a cup of coffee and an open book in front of her. She glanced up and gave me a friendly nod when I came in. The rest of the tables were empty, as were the cluster of armchairs near one of the windows. There was a half-full coffee pot on the counter and a few mugs sitting in a dish drainer by the sink.

I went to the fridge and found a spot for my brown lunch bag. Another, similar brown bag caught my eye. It was on the top shelf next to a large bottle of coffee creamer. But it wasn't the fact that someone else had brown-bagged it today that made me pause with the refrigerator door hanging open. It was the name on the bag.

Hazel.

There was that flare again, a spark that made my blood run hot in my veins. Narrowing my eyes, I stared at the lunch bag, as if it were the source of my frustration.

I was struck by the way she'd written her name. If I'd taken the time to think about what sort of handwriting Hazel would have, I'd have assumed neat and tidy. Writing that was as precise and careful as her appearance. But these letters looked hastily scrawled, like she'd whipped her pen across the crinkling brown paper in a rush.

Why was I analyzing the handwriting on her lunch bag?

I was just about to close the refrigerator door when an impulse took hold. I grabbed Hazel's lunch, took it out of the fridge, and deposited it in the freezer.

Without looking at the professor with her coffee, I stuffed my hands in my pockets and wandered back to my office. Nothing to see here. I hadn't done anything. Nope, nothing at all.

I hesitated for a moment outside my door. Hers was mostly closed, a gap of six or seven inches between the door and the frame. A nameplate on the wall next to the door read *Dr. Hazel Kiegen*.

Was putting her lunch in the freezer childish and petty? Yeah. It really was. There was a logical guy somewhere inside of me who knew I was being dumb. Who tried to tell me I should really go back and take it out.

Did I listen to that guy? No. No, I did not.

Instead, my lips turned up in a subtle grin and I felt a spring in my step as I walked into my office.

It was time to get to work.



I ALMOST FORGOT about Hazel while I dove into the department's current data analytics system. My mind buzzed with ideas. There were so many ways to make this process more efficient. Shortcuts and algorithms that would streamline data analysis across studies. Ways to manipulate and display their raw numbers that would make it easier to tease out the meaning behind the data.

My stomach brought my attention back to my physical reality. There weren't many things that could get me to stop once I got excited about a project, but hunger was one of them.

Hazel wasn't in her office when I left to go to the staff lounge. Not that I looked very hard. But her door was open more than the crack it had been earlier, and I didn't see her at her desk.

I wandered back to the lounge, a few comic books tucked under my arm, and felt a twinge of anxiety. Nothing like I would have as a kid. Back then, eating lunch in the crowded, noisy cafeteria had been the worst part of my day. Mostly because I usually sat alone, and being the kid who sits alone in the cafeteria sucks balls.

Sometimes Molly had taken pity on her nerdy brother and sat with me. But she'd been a popular social butterfly. I'd known I couldn't count on her to rescue me from my social isolation. So most days I'd eaten alone, or with a handful of other awkward kids, generally doing my best to disappear. Wishing that eating while doing extra credit math assignments had been as cool as it was fun.

But I wasn't an awkward kid anymore. I was geeky as hell, and I knew it, but I'd learned to embrace who I was. Discovering I could work out and look physically powerful had helped. By the time I was a senior in high school, I hadn't exactly been homecoming king—that had been Molly's boyfriend, and of course she'd been queen—but no one had messed with me either. Bullies were usually cowards who preyed on the weak. Big biceps made it clear I wasn't weak, even if I'd spent my lunch hours studying advanced calculus.

However, there was still that nerdy kid inside me who got nervous in new situations.

The staff lounge was only about half-full, and much quieter than a school cafeteria. A few of the tables were occupied, as were most of the armchairs. I grabbed my lunch out of the fridge, took a seat at a table, and flipped through

my comic while I ate.

My skin prickled and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. Lifting my eyes, I wondered why the air suddenly felt like it was full of static electricity.

Hazel. Of course it was Hazel.

My eye twitched and I felt my heart thump. She was dressed in a cardigan over her blouse and a pair of slacks instead of a skirt today. Still very much the hot librarian, especially with her dark-rimmed glasses.

Oh shit. I'd put her lunch in the freezer this morning, hadn't I?

For a second, I regretted it. The logical guy in my head got loud, reminding me that being dickish wasn't going to help.

Then our eyes met. Hers narrowed with a look of challenge and the coal in my gut flared hot. It chased logic back into the recesses of my brain, replacing it with childish glee.

I tore my eyes away and pretended she didn't exist. Or tried to. Every one of my senses reached for her, seeking feedback. I could practically feel her displacing the molecules in the air as she walked to the fridge.

She stood just inside my peripheral vision. I forced myself not to turn and look while she opened the refrigerator door. Swallowed a chuckle as she leaned down and moved things around, looking for her lunch. She straightened, glanced around the room, and resumed her search.

Her hands went to her hips and she tilted her head, still standing in front of the open refrigerator. After another few seconds, she opened the freezer.

She made a little noise in her throat and reached in to draw out her bag. I coughed, trying to suppress the chuckle attempting to work its way up from my chest.

Hazel spun around, clutching the frosty bag in a tight fist. I could feel her eyes on me. Feel her staring me down, daring me to look at her. To meet her eyes and betray my guilt.

The sense of smug amusement that stole through me was very un-Corban-like. But damn it if riling up Hazel Kiegen wasn't satisfying as hell.

Slowly, I lifted my gaze. She was rooted in place, staring me down like a wild animal ready to charge.

One corner of my mouth hooked upward. Her eyes widened. I went back to my lunch.

I didn't look up again as she huffed and marched out of the staff lounge. Shots fired.

HAZEL

“Everyone has their weak spot. The one thing that, despite their best efforts, will always bring you to your knees, regardless of how strong you are otherwise. For some people, it’s love. Others, money or alcohol. Mine was worse: calculus.” ~ Sarah Dessen

The spring air was pleasantly warm, the sun shining behind me. Students milled around the courtyard, backpacks and bags in tow. Some wandered by, headed to classes or to get lunch or coffee. Others clustered in small groups, finding spots at tables or spreading out on the grassy areas.

I sat on a bench with my legs crossed at the ankles, the remains of my lunch—not frozen, today, thank you very much—in a bag next to me, and watched.

A guy in a t-shirt smiled at the girl next to him and angled his body to lean closer. The confident set of his shoulders and suggestive grin indicated flirtatious intentions. Her body language sent clear signals of acceptance. She tilted her head and fingered a lock of her hair. Smiled up at him. Shifted her feet in a subtle movement to square her body with his.

Moving my attention to a small group on the grass, I watched them talk. Animated hand gestures and serious expressions suggested a weighty topic. Perhaps even a debate.

I loved it when the sun came out. Students and staff seemed to come out of the woodwork to soak up the sunlight. Seattle came by its reputation for

clouds and rain honestly, so when the weather dried up, it was as if everyone came outside to replenish their stores of vitamin D. Which made for excellent people-watching.

People fascinated me. They always had. As a child, I'd been considered quiet, but it hadn't been shyness that had kept me on the outskirts of the social goings-on around me. I'd simply been watching. I liked to see how people interacted. Puzzle out their nonverbal cues and make guesses as to their personality traits based on what I observed.

The world was my laboratory and people were my subjects.

But even people-watching on a sunny afternoon wasn't enough to keep my mind from wandering to Corban Nash. I knew he'd put my lunch in the freezer yesterday. He hadn't fessed up, but I'd seen it in his eyes. In that smirk he'd given me.

The man was infuriating.

What I needed was a way to get back at him. I'd see his childish prank and raise him one of my own.

I was peripherally aware that contemplating revenge was very unlike me. But Corban made me irrational.

My phone buzzed with a text, so I picked it up to check.

Nora: *I've been thinking about your problem, Hazel. If you really want to get under his skin, go for his weakness.*

Me: *I don't know what his weakness is.*

Nora: *He's a man. They all have the same weakness.*

Sophie: *Ooh she's right.*

Everly: *I have to agree.*

Me: *What weakness?*

Nora: *YOU are his weakness, my sexy little minx.*

Me: *I'm not following.*

Nora: *For a genius, you're adorably clueless. I honestly love that about you.*

Sophie: *She means you can distract him by being sexy.*

Everly: *I feel a little bad for liking this plan. But he did freeze your lunch.*

Me: *Corban doesn't think I'm sexy.*

Nora: *He does. Trust me. And if he doesn't realize it yet, you're going to show him.*

Me: *How? I don't like him. I don't think I can flirt with him.*

Nora: *You don't have to flirt. Just find ways to emphasize your hotness*

when he's watching.

Sophie: *Wear skirts as much as possible.*

Everly: *You do have gorgeous legs.*

Nora: *Use your natural gifts. You have a banging body underneath all those cardigans.*

Me: *What's wrong with my cardigans?*

Nora: *Nothing, love. Your style is beautifully you. My point is, use your assets to drive him crazy.*

Everly: *Is it bad that I'm giggling?*

Nora: *Remember the trifecta of man distractions: Mouth. Boobs. Butt. Starting with your mouth. Touch it. Lick your lips. Bite something, but not your nails.*

Me: *I don't bite my nails.*

Nora: *Good.*

Everly: *Nibble on your lower lip.*

Sophie: *Lick food off your fingers.*

Nora: *Boobs: Leave the top of your blouse unbuttoned. Let your bra show.*

Sophie: *Pretend you got something on your shirt and brush it off.*

Everly: *Wear a necklace and play with it so it draws attention to your neck and chest.*

Nora: *Butt: Touch your hips. Carry a pen and drop it so you have to bend over to pick it up.*

Sophie: *Ask him if you got something on your pants.*

Everly: *Wear that polka dot skirt you always say isn't work-appropriate. It makes your butt look amazing.*

Nora: *For maximum impact, try combinations. Lean over a desk or table and tap a pen against your lips.*

Sophie: *Take a bite of something, lick your lips in slow motion, then suck on your fingertips.*

Nora: *Good one, Soph.*

Sophie: *Thanks!*

Everly: *Don't forget to look at his lips while he's talking to you.*

Nora: *Absolutely. Stare at his package too.*

Me: *I'm not going to stare at his genital region.*

Nora: *I didn't say genital region, I said package. And why not? Is his package not worth staring at?*

Me: *I don't know.*

Nora: *Yes you do, you just don't want to admit it.*

Me: *I can't stare at his penis.*

Nora: *I'm all for using valid names for things, but penis is one of the world's unsexiest words.*

Me: *Calling it "package" is better?*

Nora: *Clearly better. Also cock, manhood, bulge, etc. But we're getting off track. Trust me on this, Hazel. There won't be any better revenge than making him want you.*

Everly: *Good luck, sweetie!*

Sophie: *You've got this!*

I let out a breath, still looking at my phone. I knew Nora could easily pull off the type of behavior she was suggesting. She was not only gorgeous, but enviably comfortable with her sexuality. Everly as well. They possessed a natural aptitude for this sort of flirtatious—or faux-flirtatious, as it were—behavior.

I'd never been good at this. I often felt stiff and awkward around men. Especially men I found attractive.

Not that I found Corban attractive.

I put my phone in my purse and went back to people-watching. Observing was easier.

Picking at the remains of my lunch, I watched Ivy Cole, a literature professor I'd met on my first day, greet a man with a kiss. Her husband, presumably. He had a large white dog on a leash and a little girl in his arms. Ivy hugged the child, then crouched down to pet the dog. They were a lovely family, but what captured my attention was the way Ivy's husband gazed at her. The look of adoration on his face made my chest ache.

What would it be like to have someone look at me that way?

The back of my neck tingled, the prickly sensation pulling my attention away from little family across the courtyard. Blinking, I glanced around.

Corban.

He stood a few feet away, one leg in front of the other, as if he'd stopped walking mid-stride to look at me. His plaid shirt was partially untucked—could the man not dress himself properly?—and the way his hair stuck up in front made it look like he'd been raking his fingers through it.

For the briefest moment, I wondered what his hair would feel like if I raked *my* fingers through it.

I sucked in a quick breath. That sly jerk. Did he have a Nora giving him advice as to how to get under my skin? Was he trying to use his effortless sexiness to disarm me?

That was not going to happen.

“I know it was you,” I said, straightening my spine.

His eyes widened and for a split second, he looked like a little kid who’d been caught stealing a cookie. “What was me?”

“You put my lunch in the freezer.”

He rubbed the back of his neck and let out a quick laugh. “That’s crazy. Why would I freeze your lunch?”

“Fine. Don’t fess up. But I know you did it.”

“What was in your lunch?”

“Nothing that was ruined by your attempted prank.”

“Then I guess there was no harm done.”

“Indeed there wasn’t.”

He hesitated for a beat. “I should probably be afraid to leave my lunch in the staff lounge, shouldn’t I?”

“Perhaps.” I lifted the corner of my mouth in a subtle smile, which reminded me of what Nora had said.

Mouth. Touch it. Lick your lips. Bite something.

My tongue darted out across my lips. Wait, Sophie had said to do it slowly. Had Nora meant slowly? I pulled my tongue back in. That had been fast. Maybe I needed to try again. I poked the tip of my tongue out of the corner of my mouth and slid it between my lips.

This didn’t feel particularly sexy. My upper lip rolled inward along the surface of my tongue, so I pushed my tongue out farther to compensate. Now I was basically sticking my tongue out at him. Maybe curling it would help. All that did was leave a trail of saliva on my lip.

But now I was committed. My tongue completed its slow sweep from one corner of my lips to the other. All while Corban stared at me.

At least he was looking at my mouth?

Feeling awkward and suddenly nervous, I clasped my hands in my lap and avoided Corban’s eyes.

“Female bats give birth hanging upside down and catch their babies with their wings before they fall,” he said out of the blue.

“Excuse me?”

He cleared his throat. “It’s just an interesting thing I read and thought of

just now.”

Maybe my attempt at seductive lip-licking hadn't been as terrible as I'd thought. Had I flustered him?

“Are bats your favorite animal?” I asked.

“No, penguins,” he said, then cleared his throat again. “Or wait, no. Something big and fierce. Grizzly bears? Lions? What's yours?”

I shrugged. “I don't really have one.”

“Why not?”

There was no reason for his question to irritate me. I'd broached the subject of favorite animals. But it did. My tongue felt too thick, my brain racing with too many thoughts to straighten them out before I spoke, and the net effect was a rush of potent irritation.

“I don't know why not. Does everyone have to choose a favorite animal? How would one even come up with the proper criteria for an objective choice? There are a variety of attributes an animal might possess that could make it a favorite.”

“That's true. It would probably be better to divide the concept of favorite into categories. Maybe by class or major ecosystem.”

“Ecosystem presents all sorts of problems, unless you want to get specific by species. Some animal varieties inhabit multiple ecosystems. Besides, that misses the entire point of discussing favorite animals in the first place.”

“What point is that?”

“To learn something about the other person. What does their favorite animal say about their personality? You said penguin, so presumably I can discover something about you by the fact that you like penguins so much.”

“I didn't say penguin.”

“Yes, you did.”

“I didn't mean penguin.”

“Well, you said it.”

“I took it back.”

I breathed out an exasperated sigh. “Fine, grizzly bear or lion, then. The point is, when a person asks for your favorite animal, they're using that information to make inferences about your personality.”

“So what does it say about you that you don't have a favorite?”

“We're not talking about me.”

“Why not?”

“Because we're talking about you. And penguins.”

“Not penguins.” He held up a finger. “And I know exactly what it says about you that you don’t have a favorite.”

I crossed my arms and he paused for a beat, his mouth still open.

Wait, did he just look at my boobs?

Keeping my arms crossed, I lifted them slightly so they pushed my breasts up.

“What does it say?” I asked.

“What does what say?”

Oh my god, was it working? Was he distracted by my boobs? Maybe he was thinking about the way they’d feel in his hand, my nipples hardening at his touch.

My cheeks flushed with warmth and a rush of arousal hit me between the legs. No, this was all wrong. I was distracting *myself*. That wasn’t how this was supposed to work.

His tongue slid out along his lower lip and for a second, all I could think about was what it would feel like to have his tongue on me, gently lapping my sensitive nipples.

Oh no, he was doing it again.

Distracted by Corban sex fantasies? What was I thinking? I didn’t even like him.

I needed to get my mind back on track. “What does my lack of a favorite animal say about my personality?”

“That you don’t like being labeled.”

I pressed my lips together. That was an insightful answer. But I didn’t like the idea that I’d given something away. Not to him.

“Well, I know what it means that you said penguin, then quickly changed your mind. You’re concerned about how others perceive you and are afraid of appearing weak.”

He crossed his arms. “That’s fascinating, but wrong. I’m not weak, so I’m not afraid of people thinking I am.”

It was true, he didn’t appear weak in the slightest. Certainly not physically. His wide shoulders, broad chest, and muscular arms indicated strength. And I had to admit, he’d displayed strength of character as well. He’d risked—and received—criticism for his research, yet stuck to his principles.

I didn’t want to be impressed with him, so I decided that meant he was just stubborn.

It was possible I was still being irrational. But I wasn't in the mood to admit it.

"I have to go." I started gathering my things.

"So do I."

"Good."

He hesitated for a second. "Good."

Keeping my lips pressed firmly together, I watched him turn and walk away. He was so aggravating. How was I supposed to work like this?

For a second, I thought about complaining to Elliott. But I was rational enough to realize that would not only make things worse, but risk my own reputation in the department. Tell Elliott what? He already knew how I felt about Corban's theory. Harping on that topic would be petty. And what else could I say? That Corban annoyed me? That I hated the way his unkempt shirt and careless hair were so frustratingly cute?

No. I had to be the bigger person. Yes, he'd put my lunch in the freezer as some sort of childish revenge prank. And yes, I'd succumbed to the temptation to retaliate using my friends' provocative suggestions. But one of us had to deescalate the situation, otherwise this was going to become a hostile working environment for both of us.

I'd simply have to ignore him. That was the only logical solution. I'd be polite when necessary, but otherwise, I wouldn't engage. He would do his work, and I would do mine. Separately. It was the only way.

HAZEL

“Occam’s Razor is the scientific principle that, all things being equal, the simplest explanation is always the dog ate my homework.” ~ Greg Tamblyn

“Excuse me?” I asked, tilting my head to one side.

“I need you and Corban to work together,” Elliott said.

The three of us sat at a small table in a corner of Elliott’s office. His desk was strewn with files and books, and a slideshow of his wife and three kids faded in and out on his computer screen. The table was bare except for a short stack of blue folders and my crisp white notepad and pen. Which I probably should have been using to take notes, but my boss had just rendered me unable to move. Or speak a coherent sentence.

His words took their time crawling through my brain, like a line of garden snails climbing up the side of a wall, leaving a trail of slime in their wake. Had he just said *work together*? Together with Corban?

Oh no. This would not do.

“Is that a problem?” Elliott asked, his dark brow furrowing deeply.

“No,” Corban said.

A flash of irritation roused me from my stupor. I didn’t need him to answer for me. “Not a problem at all. I just wanted to be certain I’d heard you correctly.” I stuck a finger in my ear and wiggled it. “I’ve been experiencing a bit of fuzziness in this ear. If it persists, I’ll be sure to check with my physician.”

“It could be allergies,” Corban said. “Do you have any pets at home? Oh

wait, never mind, you already said you're not a fan of animals."

"I said no such thing. And yes, I do. I have a cat."

"Maybe you're allergic."

"I'm not allergic to my cat."

Elliott pushed a folder toward each of us. "Copies of the study abstract, introduction, and proposed methodology. There's also a reference list of other labs doing motion capture studies."

The motion capture lab. My breath caught in my throat as I flipped through the brief. One of the reasons I'd taken this job was the potential for doing motion capture research. The technology had gone far beyond creating special effects in movies. Psychology labs were using it in studies that involved motion and use of space. Elliott's proposed study would explore nonverbal behaviors such as mirroring and synchronizing and the effect on both communication patterns and perception.

It was fascinating.

I wanted to work on this study. But with Corban?

"Are you sure we're the best people to work on this?" Corban asked.

My spine went stiff and I whipped my head toward him. "Why wouldn't we be the best people to work on this?"

"Of course you are," Elliott said. "I know you're both new to our department, but this will give you a chance to dive in headfirst. And as much as I'd love to devote more time to it, I have too many other things on my plate. My wife will kill me if I start working twelve-hour days again."

I felt a tingle of relief, realizing Elliott thought our trepidation was due to the fact that we were both new here. It was a logical reason, and I was happy to let Elliott keep thinking it. The rational grown-up inside me didn't want to have to explain to my boss that the thought of working closely with Corban made me feel like the blood in my veins had been replaced with lava.

Corban raked his fingers through his hair. "Okay."

Did he have to act so miserable about it? Was working with me the worst thing that had ever happened to him? Of course, I wasn't showing any enthusiasm either.

Still, it stung, even though I knew very well that it shouldn't.

"All right," I said. "When do we get started?"

"Immediately," Elliott said with a satisfied smile and opened his folder. "Let's go over the details."



MY ARM ACHED from creaming butter and sugar. I had a stand mixer, but I'd opted for some old-fashioned elbow grease. I made a mental note to research the etymology of the expression *elbow grease*. It was an odd turn of phrase when I thought about it, one I surmised had its origins in agriculture or perhaps the Industrial Revolution.

With my large glass mixing bowl braced in the crook of my right arm, I stirred furiously with my left, whipping the soft butter and sugar into a smooth mixture.

The oven beeped, letting me know it had finished preheating. Erwin twitched his ears at the noise, lifting his face and blinking his green eyes at me.

"It's just the oven," I said, still stirring.

Erwin lifted a single gray paw and licked between his claws a few times. He sat on the floor just outside the entrance to the kitchen, where carpet met linoleum. He only came into the kitchen to eat—or to escape capture—seeming to prefer the softness of the rug. His long gray fur spread out around him, making him appear larger than he was.

Glancing into the bowl, I studied the texture of the butter and sugar mixture. Deeming it smooth enough, I set the bowl on the counter and shook out my tired hand.

"Erwin, what am I going to do?" I started measuring dry ingredients and carefully pouring them into a second bowl. "I have to work with him. How can I work with that man? He's... well, he's... I mean, really, he's so..."

I didn't know what to say. Not that Erwin understood. Nor did he reply. He didn't, as a general rule, which was only to be expected considering his feline nature. Despite the illogic of holding one-sided conversations with a cat, I did so regularly. I told myself it was fine because I was fully aware of what I was doing. Talking to an animal as if it were a person wasn't crazy if you didn't expect them to answer.

Truthfully, I found it comforting.

"He's a pain in my ass," I said, finally. I picked up my martini and took a sip.

Usually baking relaxed me. I liked the precision of it. Proper baking required exact measurements to produce the right chemical reactions during the heating process. And the products of my labor had their own, delicious

appeal.

But whipping up a batch of my signature chocolate chip cookies wasn't making me feel better.

My persistent sexual frustration wasn't helping my mood. I cast an irritated glance at my bedroom, just down the short hallway. The most recent accessory I'd tried had been as useless as the rest of my growing collection of self-pleasuring technology.

I picked up the bowl of butter and sugar and stirred it more, just for good measure.

"Obviously I'm excited at the prospect of working in the motion capture lab. And surely this experience will strengthen my grant application. We both know how important that is."

I was excited to work on Elliott's study. But my professional goals included doing my own research. That was another reason I'd taken the job at Woodward College. Elliott was highly supportive of his staff pursuing their research interests. To that end, I was working on a grant application. It was quite competitive, but I was confident I had a solid chance at securing the funding. And I certainly wasn't going to let Corban Nash get in the way of that.

"What do you think, Erwin? Am I being too hard on him?" I put down the bowl and cracked an egg into the sugar-butter mixture. "There's just something about him. It's like he knows exactly how to get under my skin and drive me crazy. How does he do it? We haven't even known each other very long. Not in person, at least."

I added another egg, plus a teaspoon of vanilla, and started mixing again.

"I have to figure out how to make this work. What choice do I have?"

Erwin's ears twitched, his eyes drifting closed.

"Yes, obviously resignation is one option, but that's a bit drastic, don't you think? I haven't even been there a month. And so far, Corban is the only real problem with my job. The positives outweigh the negatives."

I combined the wet and dry ingredients and gently folded the thickening cookie dough so I didn't get flour everywhere. After mixing in chocolate chips, I plopped dollops of dough onto a baking sheet and slid them into the oven.

"There. Finished." I brushed my hands together, adjusted my glasses, and drained the last of my martini.

While I waited for the cookies to bake, I checked my phone for messages.

Sophie: *I have an idea and don't say no until you think about it. What if we train for a half-marathon?*

Everly: *Um...*

Nora: *Sophie, are you joking?*

Sophie: *I'm serious. The Soggy Seattle Half-Marathon is coming up. I know Everly's wedding is soon, but we'd still have time to get ready. And it's not competitive. We'd only be doing it to finish.*

Everly: *I don't know. What do you think, Hazel?*

I sat back and stared at Sophie's message. A half-marathon? That was both an interesting and intimidating prospect. We'd started running to keep ourselves healthy, and admittedly to offset our indulgences. And I'd enjoyed researching training regimens to improve our fitness. But a half-marathon? That was thirteen-point-one miles. We'd never completed a run longer than four.

Generally speaking, I wasn't afraid of a challenge. But this poked at one of my deep-seated insecurities. Growing up, athletics had been the bane of my existence. I'd been physically awkward, and my high IQ hadn't translated into any sort of body coordination. The only threat to my perfect GPA had been the dreaded physical education requirements.

Years of yoga had improved my brain-body connection, so I no longer felt like an awkward bundle of limbs. But the mention of training for an athletic event made me nervous in a way I hadn't felt in a long time.

Essentially, I had two options. Let an old fear influence my decision or face that fear head-on.

Me: *I think it's an excellent idea. New challenges are stimulating for both the body and the mind.*

Nora: *I'd rather be stimulated in other ways, thank you very much.*

Everly: *Okay, I'm in.*

Sophie: *I'm so excited! This is something I've wanted to do for a long time, just to prove that I can.*

Everly: *That's so awesome, Sophie. We'll be right there with you.*

Sophie: *Is it weird to say I love you guys? Because I love you guys.*

Everly: *We love you too.*

Nora: *Fine, I'll do it. But I hate you all.*

Everly: *No you don't.*

Nora. *You're right, I don't. Still, this calls for retail therapy. Should we get matching shirts like the Bitches?*

Everly: *Oh my god, no bedazzling.*

Nora: *I'm insulted you'd think I'd even consider it.*

Sophie: *Matching shirts would be adorable.*

Me: *I can work on creating an appropriate training program if you'd like.*

Sophie: *That would be great. Thanks, Hazel. By the way, how are things with your nemesis?*

Me: *I'd resolved to avoid him but my boss assigned us to the same research study.*

Everly: *Uh oh. So that means working together.*

Me: *Closely together.*

Sophie: *Any more lunch shenanigans?*

Me: *No. But he did send me a very irritating and unnecessary memo.*

Nora: *This is perfect!*

Me: *Did your phone autocorrect to an antonym? I'm sure you mean this is terrible, or this is a disaster.*

Nora: *No, I mean this is perfect.*

Me: *You're not making sense.*

Sophie: *I'm with Hazel on this. Why is this perfect?*

Nora: *Because now you'll have even more opportunities to drive him crazy.*

Everly: *She's not wrong.*

Me: *Why are sexually suggestive antics the only solution?*

Nora: *They're not, but they're effective. I know you're already attacking the problem with your big brain. I'm just trying to get your hot body involved.*

Me: *I tried some of your suggestions, but I'm not very adept at this sort of thing.*

Nora: *You don't give yourself enough credit. I bet he's at home fantasizing about you right now.*

Everly: *I agree with Nora.*

Me: *I highly doubt it. But I'll keep you posted.*

I put my phone down. I was going to enjoy creating a training program to get us ready for the half-marathon. My mind was already swirling with possibilities. First, I'd dig into existing research. There were numerous options already in existence. I'd take our current level of fitness into account and proceed from there. And I didn't want to neglect the mental side of training for a distance event. That could be just as important as training runs.

As for Corban, I'd trust my friends' advice. Nora knew what she was talking about, and not just because she had an aptitude for interacting with men. Her online column, *Living Your Best Life* , was very popular, and covered topics such as dating, attraction, and sex. This was what she did for a living. I wasn't particularly talented at flirtatious behaviors, but if I kept it simple, perhaps I wouldn't make a complete fool of myself.

But I still couldn't let his lunch-freezing antics go unanswered. And I knew just the thing to counter it.

CORBAN

“Gravitation is not responsible for people falling in love.” ~ Albert Einstein

The data from Elliott’s preliminary work in the motion capture lab was fascinating. I was used to codifying subjective information. I’d started my career doing data analytics for a large social media platform and later I’d worked for the company that had invented the most popular dating app in existence. Truthfully, I’d invented it—or the algorithms that made it work, at least. But in both positions, I’d gained experience in taking subjective information and finding the patterns behind it.

The motion capture data was totally different, and it made my brain light up like a Christmas tree. I clicked through the interface, familiarizing myself with how it worked. I already had so many ideas. Ways we could codify and display the information. Things we could do that no one else in the field was doing yet.

It was exciting.

Almost exciting enough that I could forget I had to work with Hazel.

I hadn’t seen that coming. Maybe I should have, but Elliott putting us together on the same study had surprised me. Hadn’t he noticed that Hazel and I didn’t exactly get along? It was obvious she didn’t like me. Anyone could see it on her face. The woman hated my guts. How were we supposed to work together?

I’d have to figure it out. What could I say? Sorry Elliott, but can you assign me to work on something else? Every time I’m in the same room with

Hazel, I can't decide if I want to pick a fight with her or push her up against a wall and kiss the fuck out of her.

Nope. I couldn't say that to my boss. I didn't always know the right thing to say—and I screwed up when it came to verbal communication pretty often—but I knew this one. I couldn't tell Elliott I was in hate-lust with my coworker and would prefer to avoid her at all costs.

I sat back in my chair, letting out a long breath. Sometimes I wondered if I'd done the right thing in pursuing psychology. I'd always been a math guy. Numbers were my thing. But working on that dating app had sparked a fascination—an obsession, really—with the reasons behind the numbers. Why did people do the things they did?

What made a person reject a potential match? What made them accept? And ultimately, what made a couple go from a tentative connection to a committed couple?

What made people fall in love?

I'd started finding patterns in the data, and it had only increased my curiosity. So I'd started taking psychology classes online. A few years later, I'd earned a second master's degree.

My sister said I was over the top. Who accidentally earned a second master's degree in their spare time?

Me. I did stuff like that. And it didn't seem weird to me. Which was probably part of my problem.

If I hadn't jumped down the social psychology rabbit hole, I'd have still been tucked safely away in an office where no one bothered me, running advanced algorithms and churning out an endless stream of charts and graphs. Not starting a new job at a college where I had to work closely with other people—which wasn't exactly my best skill.

But then I thought about Molly and her husband. They'd fallen in love because of my questionnaire—because of the research I'd done—and now they were happily married and having a baby soon. When I thought about it like that, it was hard to have any regrets. Even if sometimes I looked around and wondered how I'd gotten here.

Something buzzed against the desk. Right, my phone. That was weird, I had a ton of new messages, but none of them were from numbers I recognized.

Scanning through the dozen or so texts, I furrowed my brow, thoroughly confused. The messages were all similar, asking about my schedule or when I

had an available time slot. Time for what? Who were these people?

They had to be wrong numbers, but why were there so many? Another one came in while I was scanning through the others, so I replied, asking who it was. A few seconds later, I got a reply, saying his name was Aaron. That wasn't exactly helpful information—I didn't know an Aaron—but maybe I could get to the bottom of this.

Me: *Sorry, not sure what this is about.*

Aaron: *Is this Corban Nash?*

Me: *Yes. Where'd you get my number?*

Aaron: *Your flier.*

Me: *What flier?*

Aaron: *The one posted outside the English department. Don't you offer free tutoring?*

My brow furrowed as I stared down at my phone. A flier? Free tutoring? What was he talking about?

Oh my god. Hazel. This was retaliation for putting her lunch in the freezer. I was sure of it.

I tossed my phone on my desk and went out to find the English department. It was across the courtyard from the psych building and sure enough, tacked up among the other notices fluttering in the breeze was a flier that read, *Free tutoring, math, science, literature, foreign languages, contact Corban Nash*. Most of the little tabs with my phone number had been ripped off already.

Grinding my teeth together, I ripped down the flier, crumpled it into a tight ball, and tossed it in a nearby trashcan.

Judging by the number of texts I'd already gotten, there had to be more of these around campus. I found another one outside the math department, and two more just inside the main campus cafeteria. I checked outside every building, speed walking past students and staff, my head down, my fists clenched.

After taking down what I hoped were the rest of the fake fliers, I went back to the psych building. Furious. Fuming. Grinding my teeth and ready to snap like a dry twig.

I stopped in the doorway of Hazel's office and held up one of the fliers. "What is this?"

She calmly looked up from her laptop and blinked once, her eyes bright behind her dark-rimmed glasses. "I don't know. I can't read it from here."

“I know you did this.” I shook the flier, making the paper crinkle. “My phone’s blowing up with texts.”

Her lip twitched like she was trying not to smile. “I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Growling with frustration, I crumpled the paper. “I’ve been all over campus tearing them down. This was really unnecessary.”

She turned her attention back to her laptop, her fingers clicking on the keys as she spoke. Her voice was infuriatingly monotone. “So was freezing my lunch.”

“It couldn’t have been in there long enough to actually freeze.”

Her eyes snapped back to me. “So you did do it.”

Damn it.

“You know what? You’re not a swan. You’re a crow.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Why is that?”

“Crows have been shown to hold grudges and to exhibit retaliatory behavior. They also remember human faces, but that’s beside the point because you’re a human and we all know humans can remember faces.”

“Unless a subject has prosopagnosia. Then they can’t recognize faces.”

I rolled my eyes. “Obviously in cases of prosopagnosia the subject is essentially face-blind. But I don’t know if that has any impact on revenge-seeking behavior.”

“That’s an interesting question.” She leaned back a little and tapped her lips with her finger. “My understanding of the disorder is that other brain functions remain intact. So it stands to reason that if a prosopagnosiac felt the need to exact revenge, their inability to recognize the face of their target wouldn’t negate the revenge-seeking impulse.”

“But that assumes their face-blindness doesn’t impact their perceived needs. A person with a brain disorder that inhibits their ability to recognize facial features is likely to be focused on other things.”

“Such as learning alternative cues for recognition and coping with the social impact of their condition.”

“Which could push their desire for revenge out of their needs hierarchy, rendering it unimportant to them.”

Wait, were we agreeing on something? We stared at each other for a few seconds. I couldn’t read her expression, but the way she pursed her lips drew my attention to her mouth. Which made me think about kissing her.

Which made me wonder if she’d ever thought about kissing me.

Which reminded me that she hated me.

And had posted fliers with my phone number all over campus.

And I was mad.

I held up the piece of paper. “I’m going to tell them all it was a wrong number and they should text you.”

“That won’t work. Your name is on the flier, too. Unless you’d like me to pretend to be you in my interactions with them?”

I growled again. “Never mind. But remember, you started this.”

“I most certainly did not,” she said, sounding offended. “You started it by freezing my lunch.”

“This started well before I made your sandwich a little frosty.”

“It was yogurt.”

“Are you serious? Damn it, frozen yogurt is delicious.”

Her lips twitched again. “Indeed.”

“But you started it, Hazel. You came after me online before I ever set foot on this campus.”

“Someone had to raise the important questions.”

“You said if you could rate the quality of my research, you’d give it negative ten stars and that I needed to stop spreading nonsensical fantasies wrapped in the guise of science.”

Her eyes flicked back and forth a few times. “I don’t seem to recall that particular comment.”

“Well, you said it. Or typed it. You know what I mean.”

She pursed her lips again. It was probably the single most aggravating thing she did. Worse than her online comments, or scathing looks, or the flier. Those things were irritating, but that was all. There was no confusion as to how I felt about them.

But when she looked at me like that, her eyebrows drawn together like she was trying to solve a puzzle, her lips puckering slightly, I felt a thousand things at once. And the strongest two—anger and attraction—shouldn’t have been able to exist simultaneously.

I wanted to hate her, not feel like I’d do just about anything to get my hands on her.

“Stop doing that,” I snapped.

“Doing what?”

Closing my eyes, I let out an agitated breath. “Never mind. Don’t put up any more fliers.”

“Fine.”

“Good.”

I turned to go, but she spoke up again before I'd taken a step toward my office.

“Did you find the one by the restrooms on the first floor?”

I groaned. “No.”

She stood. “I have to go down there anyway.”

I stepped aside as she swept past me and headed for the stairs, her heels clicking on the floor in the empty hallway. She was wearing a polka dot skirt that showed off the curve of her ass. God, what an ass. Her hips swayed as she walked, a sultry back and forth motion that was at odds with the straightness of her spine and the typical stiffness of her posture.

Why did she have to be so fucking sexy?

At least she isn't married or dating someone else.

Scowling, I tightened my fist around the crumpled flier. Why had I thought that? It probably would have been better if she was married, or at least dating someone. Maybe then my brain would quit being stupid, thinking about her ass. And kissing her. And... other things.

I glanced down at the bulge in my pants. *No. No kissing. No sexy ass. We don't like her.*

Unsurprisingly, my dick didn't listen.

And I didn't actually know if she was dating anyone. Was she?

Damn it. I didn't care.

With another roll of my eyes and a low groan in my throat, I adjusted my pants. I was just about to stalk into my office when the nameplate on the wall caught my attention. The one with Hazel's name on it.

I glanced around to make sure no one was watching, then slid the nameplate out of its holder. Turned it backwards, so the blank side faced out, and replaced it.

Petty? Yep. But the urge to annoy her was an impulse I couldn't control.

Because if I didn't indulge *that* impulse, it would be a lot harder to keep from giving in to the other impulses I was having.

And that absolutely could not happen.

CORBAN

“I think lovemaking is a lost art.” ~Pedram Shojai

Hazel’s presence behind me made it hard to concentrate. Her pen scratched against her notepad while I recalibrated the motion capture equipment. We were running preliminary tests today, using grad students as our subjects. The data wouldn’t be included in the official study, but we’d agreed it would be beneficial to gain some experience with the equipment.

At least we’d agreed on something.

She was dressed in her typical button-up blouse—pale blue today—with a matching blue cardigan and dark gray skirt. Her hair was down, loose around her shoulders. Every bit the hot librarian.

The texts from her stupid flier had died down. Hazel had come back to my office that afternoon and offered to reply to each, explaining that the fliers had been falsified. I’d told her it wasn’t necessary.

Truthfully, I’d snapped at her, saying I’d deal with it myself.

I wasn’t exactly proud of that. But the woman made me crazy. I considered myself a reasonable guy, but every time I was near her, reasonableness went right out the window, replaced by that potent mix of hate-lust I couldn’t seem to shake.

Case in point, I couldn’t stop thinking about how good she smelled, even though the sound of her writing notes was driving me nuts. She smelled like vanilla frosting and it was stupidly delicious.

“What are you doing over there? Writing another dissertation?”

“No. I’m working on an initial draft of the pre-study questionnaire. We’ll need to collect a variety of information on the test subjects.”

I grumbled something incoherent. She was right, we did need to do that, and it was good she was being proactive about getting it ready.

She was quiet for a long moment. Not even her pen made a sound. “Would you like to see what I have so far?”

I turned my chair around. “Sure.”

She ripped off a piece of paper and handed it to me. I recognized the same messy handwriting I’d seen on her lunch bag. I could read it, but only just. It was a little bit gratifying to know she wasn’t perfect.

I scanned down her list of questions. She’d covered just about everything. “This is good. Did you add anything in here about their relationship status? That might be something we’ll need to know.”

She wrote on a fresh sheet of paper. “Of course. What’s yours?”

“My what?”

Her voice was matter of fact. “Relationship status.”

“Why?”

She looked up, blinking as if something had surprised her. “I don’t know.”

Was she really asking me if I was dating someone? That was weird. But there wasn’t any harm answering. “It’s fine, it’s not like I keep it a secret. I just don’t know why you asked.”

“No reason,” she said quickly. “I was just writing down the words *relationship status* and it occurred to me that I don’t know very much about you on a personal level, including whether or not you’re in a relationship. So, I asked.”

“I’m single.”

“Oh.” She gave a little nod and wrote something else on her notepad. “So am I.”

I chewed the inside of my lip and shifted uncomfortably in my chair. The impulse to analyze every detail of what she’d just said—from her body language to her tone of voice—sent my brain running in multiple directions. Was she making idle conversation? Was she trying to get information out of me? Had she offered the fact that she was single as a signal?

I hated it when I did this. It reminded me of the insecure shy kid I’d been in high school and how much time I’d spent over-analyzing my interactions

with girls—especially Paisley Hayes. Whenever she'd been at our house to hang out with Molly, I'd looked for hidden meaning in every word she said to me. Not that she spoke to me very much. But that hadn't stopped me from wondering if I could find a hint that she liked me.

She hadn't liked me. She'd mostly ignored me, or rolled her eyes at me. And all these years later, I still felt like an idiot for how much time I'd spent looking for clues that she had a secret crush on her best friend's brother. They hadn't been there. It had all been wishful thinking.

What was I wishing for with Hazel, anyway? That this attraction that made no sense wasn't one-sided? Regardless of the way I reacted to her physically, we didn't like each other. Pondering what her comments meant was a waste of energy.

“Corban?”

I startled, my attention coming back to reality. Damn, I hadn't been listening. What had she just said? “Sorry, what?”

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, fine I was just thinking about...” I paused, searching for a believable topic. “Data collection techniques.”

She eyed me for a second, her pen hovering above her notepad. “Okay.”

As we got deeper into the logistics of running the next phase of the study, my brain stopped circling around Hazel and focused. We didn't argue over any of the details. Just got to work, both of us bringing our experience and expertise to the table. We divided up areas of responsibility, at least enough to get us started, and set preliminary goals and deadlines.

I tried not to dwell on it, but I didn't hate working with Hazel. She was organized, intelligent, and passionate about her work. So passionate, it made me wonder what else she had going on in her life.

She tapped her pen against her notepad. “This looks good. I think Elliott will be pleased.”

She was right, we'd gotten a lot done. “Yeah.”

Our eyes met and suddenly I wasn't thinking about work anymore. My brain darted back to her eyes and how they lit up when she was excited about something. Her lips and the way they puckered when she was annoyed with me. I wondered what those lips tasted like.

She glanced at the pen in her hand, as if remembering it was there, then touched the tip to the side of her neck. Moving her hand slowly, she absently traced it down her skin, toward the open collar of her shirt.

My eyes followed, drawn toward the swell of her breasts behind that tantalizingly proper blouse.

Then I noticed she'd drawn a blue line down her skin.

I cleared my throat, hoping she couldn't tell how turned on I was. Why did she have such an effect on me? "You got some ink on your... right, um, there."

"Oh god." She looked at the pen and abruptly opened her fingers like she'd been burned. The pen bounced off her lap, landing on the floor. She touched her neck, muttering to herself.

I was still too distracted by her chest to think clearly. Because noticing how good her boobs looked in that shirt made me think about ripping it off, sending her buttons flying in all directions. Burying my face in her tits. Licking the hard peaks of her nipples and—

"Did you know a male pufferfish can spend days creating patterns in the sand on the ocean floor to attract a mate?" I blurted out, talking fast.

She'd grabbed a tissue from somewhere—her purse, maybe; I wasn't sure what had just happened—and her hand froze in the act of trying to rub the ink off her neck. "Really?"

"Yeah. If a female likes his work, she'll lay her eggs in the middle so he can fertilize them."

Her eyes darted from side to side. "I didn't know that. I'm afraid my knowledge of pufferfish mating habits is limited."

I had no idea why I was suddenly talking about pufferfish. I tended to blurt out random facts when I got nervous or wanted to change the subject. And that brief but powerful fantasy of ripping Hazel's shirt off had left me feeling flustered as fuck. So naturally, I kept babbling.

"The patterns he creates in the sand are symmetrical, which makes you wonder what that tells the female about his suitability as a mate. What does the ability to rub against the sand and leave symmetrical tracks have to do with health or virility? Fish don't care for their offspring, so her instincts wouldn't drive her to seek a mate who can shelter or protect their babies. All she needs are sperm to fertilize her eggs."

"Perhaps that's the answer. The patterns the male creates are a targeting system, designed to show the female a location for depositing eggs that is most likely to lead to fertilization."

"Good point. That's a solid possibility. But I kind of feel bad for them. All that work and all the male gets is a pile of eggs."

“But said pile of eggs satisfies his instinct to mate and he’s able to pass on his genetic material.”

“I know, but he just releases his sperm and that’s it,” I said. “He doesn’t get to actually mate with the female.”

“You’re saying you feel pity for pufferfish because the male’s efforts to attract a mate don’t culminate in sexual activity in the manner of humans or other mammals?”

“Yes, exactly. The poor fish doesn’t even get to have sex.”

“Is it because you think a male should be sexually rewarded by the female for the work he puts forth in the process of attraction?”

The corner of my mouth lifted. She was baiting me into saying I thought a girl should put out. I could feel it. “Not at all. I just think fish who don’t get to physically mate got the short end of the evolutionary stick.”

“Do you enjoy sex that much?”

“Absolutely. I love sex.”

I wasn’t sure if I was more surprised by her question or the fact that I’d answered with so much enthusiasm.

We blinked at each other.

Great, I’d made it awkward.

Or had she made it awkward?

A few more seconds ticked by. It didn’t matter. At this point, we were swimming in awkward.

And then I made it worse.

“Don’t you?”

Her posture stiffened. “Don’t I what?”

“Enjoy sex.”

She tucked her hair behind her ear—a nervous gesture I’d never seen from her before. “Doesn’t everybody?”

“I don’t know. It probably depends on who they’re having sex with.”

“Maybe.”

Had Hazel ever been with someone she’d enjoyed? Maybe she didn’t have a lot of sexual experience.

This wasn’t a conversation we should be having. Especially since only moments ago, I’d been fantasizing about licking her tits. But I’d never been good at saying the right thing.

“I guess if you haven’t had many good sexual experiences, you don’t know what you’re missing.”

“Are we talking about me, or pufferfish?”

“You. Or the fish. I don’t—”

“I’m not lacking in good sexual experiences,” she said, cutting me off. “I haven’t had an excessive number of partners, but I’m no naïve virgin either.”

“That’s not what I—”

“Why do so many people assume I’m inexperienced? The same thing happens when I say my favorite drink is a vodka martini, dirty, with three olives. Is it so shocking that I enjoy a nice cocktail or two? Can’t a woman who is academically inclined also indulge in alcohol and be adventurous sexually? Those things should not be mutually exclusive.”

Almost involuntarily, I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “No, they shouldn’t.”

“I once had very spontaneous sex in the ladies’ room of a restaurant. The guy turned out to be a jerk, but that particular experience was satisfying for both of us.”

Oh god. She really needed to stop. Hearing her talk about sex with another guy—especially one who might have hurt her—riled up my protective instincts. The drive for vengeance stoked the fire of my hate-lust, making it flare hot in my chest.

I wanted to show her just how fucking good spontaneous sex could be. Erase the memory of that other man from her mind forever, replacing it with me. When I was done with her, she’d pity those pufferfish too.

We were back to staring at each other. Her mouth opened slightly, her bottom lip glistening with a bit of moisture from her tongue. Her glasses had slipped a few centimeters down her nose, but she didn’t move to adjust them. Mine also felt askew, but I was trapped in her gaze. Paralyzed except for my pounding heart and my lungs dragging in ragged breaths of air.

“I should go see if I can get this ink off.” She quickly stood and gathered her things, muttering something about a wedding and a bridesmaid dress. “Thank you for a productive meeting.”

Her voice and sudden departure from the room broke my paralysis. But I didn’t get up. I stared at the empty space where she’d been sitting, wondering what the hell had just happened. And how I was going to wipe all the very dirty thoughts I’d just had about Hazel Kiegen from my mind.

Because if I didn’t, I was going to get myself into a shit ton of trouble.

HAZEL

“A friend is someone who knows all about you and still loves you.” ~ Elbert Hubbard

To the surprise of no one who knew her, my friend Everly’s wedding was perfect.

For the venue, she’d chosen a winery nestled in the Cascade mountains—Salishan Cellars—and everything from the setting to the flowers to the food had been lovely.

They’d said their vows outside, in a beautiful garden surrounded by vineyards and mountain peaks in the distance. The sun was pleasantly warm, but not too hot, the air fresh and pure. It had been pouring rain yesterday, but the sun had come out for Everly.

She was nothing short of stunning, her blond hair swept up, a sheer veil cascading down her back. Her strapless white gown was fitted, flaring gently at the bottom. A slit up one thigh added a touch of fun and sexiness to the elegant dress. It was all so very Everly.

Her new husband, Shepherd Calloway, wore a perfectly tailored tux, his dark hair and stubble trimmed neatly. But it wasn’t his appearance that caught people’s attention—although he was an objectively attractive man. It was the way he looked at Everly. Like she was the source of all goodness in his world and he’d never been happier than he was today.

Which was saying a lot for Shepherd, because he wasn’t one to be overly expressive with his emotions. Everly used to call him her robot-boss due to

his typically emotionless exterior.

But the way he looked at her now as he guided her around the dance floor wasn't the least bit robotic. And it made my heart ache.

Not because I wasn't happy. I was absolutely thrilled for my best friend. She'd always believed in love, even when reality had seemed to be trying to tell her it didn't exist. She'd held to her wish of finding her Prince Charming, and she'd found him. So perhaps a good portion of the ache in my chest was the satisfaction of watching one of my best friends in the entire world share her wedding dance with the man of her dreams.

"Here." Nora handed me a glass of white wine, then lowered herself into the chair next to me.

I took a sip—the wine was light and refreshing—and set my glass on the table. "Thanks."

Nora tilted her head, watching the newlyweds. "They're disgusting, aren't they?"

"Truly awful."

"It's our fault, you know. We're the ones who made sure Shepherd got his head out of his ass."

"Indeed."

Nora and I raised our glasses to clink them together and shared a smile.

After taking a sip, Nora set down her glass. "Well, if I have to wear a bridesmaid dress, there's no one I'd rather wear it for. Except you. Although I take it you're still stubbornly determined to stay single."

"Stubbornness is not the driving influence in my decision. And what's wrong with the bridesmaid dresses?"

We were dressed in similar, but not identical, pale yellow dresses. Nora had helped Everly choose a flattering style for each of her bridesmaids, and the designer had coordinated them by fabric and color, rather than stuffing us all into matching gowns. Mine was long and form-fitting with thin straps and a sweetheart neckline. Elegant and still comfortable.

Nora was impossibly sexy in her long strapless dress, her curves tastefully highlighted. As usual, her hair, makeup, and attire were all perfect for the occasion.

She glanced down at herself. "Oh, there's nothing wrong with the dresses. They're lovely and my boobs look great. I'm just referring to the stereotype of the ugly bridesmaid dress. I'd happily wear an ugly dress for either of you. I'd wear one for Sophie, too. Although when she gets married, we're not

even going to pretend she's allowed to pick any of the clothing."

Sophie chose that moment to join us, a glass of wine in her hand. But judging by her amused laugh as she sat, she wasn't offended. "I'm glad you said that, because I was going to beg you to come dress shopping with me. Not that I'm getting married anytime soon. You kind of need a groom for that and the only man I see on a regular basis signs my paychecks and is hopelessly in love with one of my best friends."

"You need to start putting yourself out there," Nora said. "You're not going to meet anyone if the only time you leave the house is to go to work or go running with us."

Sophie sighed. "I know. I'm just very talented at screwing up when I try."

At least she hadn't drawn on herself with a pen in an ill-fated attempt to distract her nemesis by pulling his attention to her boobs. Luckily, the ink had washed off. I supposed the good news was that I hadn't stuck the pen in my mouth, which had been my first idea. Nora had said to draw attention to my mouth by biting things—but not my fingernails—so I'd considered putting the tip of the pen against my lips or between my teeth.

Although now that I thought about it, I wasn't sure what would have been worse, drawing a line down my neck or getting ink in my mouth. Upon further reflection, I decided their mortification factor was roughly equal.

I took another—bigger—sip of wine. My attempts at acting sexy in front of Corban had been bungling at best, humiliating at worst. There was my awkward attempt at lip-licking, which I was convinced had made me look deranged. The neck-drawing debacle. A few days ago, I'd dropped a book in the hallway outside his office and slowly bent down to pick it up. When I was doubled over, I'd tried to check to see if he was watching, lost my balance, and toppled right into Pete the janitor.

The only good thing about that situation was the fact that Corban hadn't been in his office to see it.

I'd already decided not to dwell on the part where I hadn't looked to see if Corban was actually present to witness my little display before going to the trouble of bending over in the first place.

And also resolved that the next time I was bent double in heels, I needed to be careful not to move my head too quickly.

Nora clutched her wine glass and scanned the room. "Now that our bridesmaid duties are fulfilled, let's see if we can make the rest of our evening more fun, shall we?"

“No,” I said quickly. “I’m not interested in hooking up with one of Everly’s wedding guests.”

“Why not? None of us brought dates and I spy with my little eye some serious man candy.” Nora pointed to three men in suits talking to each other near the bar. “I’m pretty sure that one is Everly’s bridesmaid gift to me.”

“Which one?” Sophie asked.

Nora tilted her head as if considering. “Any of them.”

The men looked in our direction. One of them met my eyes and his lips turned up in a smile. He lifted his wine glass and nodded.

“Oh damn,” Nora said. “He’s totally into you. Go talk to him.”

“What? No.”

“Why not?”

Why not, indeed? He was an attractive man. Nicely dressed. But the thought of striking up a conversation with him unsettled my stomach.

“Men like him aren’t interested in women like me.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Nora sounded genuinely offended. “What, women who are brilliant, sophisticated, and sexy? You must be right, I can’t imagine why he’d be interested in a woman like that.”

I picked up my wine glass, mostly for something to do with my nervous hands. “I’ll take brilliant because my intelligence is objectively documented, but you’re the sophisticated and sexy one. Not me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“We both know I’m right. Look at you. You have excellent fashion sense and confidence in your appearance. You know how to do all the right things to make men notice you.”

“Maybe some of the time—” She paused when I raised my eyebrows. “Okay, most of the time. What can I say, I like the game and I’m good at playing it. But that doesn’t mean you’re not sexy. I know we’re different, but there’s more than one way to be sexy.”

“She’s completely right,” Sophie said.

“I bet you’ve never drawn a line down your neck with a pen in a humiliating attempt to seductively distract a coworker.”

Sophie winced.

Nora’s eyes flicked to my neck. “You did that, didn’t you?”

I straightened my spine. “Yes. I didn’t realize the cap was off.”

She reached over and squeezed my hand. “Hazel, I adore you. I hope someday you’ll see what I see—a beautiful, smart, funny, and sexy as hell

woman. And I can tell you one thing for sure, the man who's worthy of you will see it all."

My eyes misted with tears. "I hope the mascara you used on me is waterproof."

"Of course it is. Now go talk to that hottie over there."

I looked at him again, flurries of indecision keeping me rooted to my chair. Was the fear of rejection making me hesitate? Logically, I knew I ought to be able to put that aside. Nora was right, he'd given adequate signals that he was interested in me.

"Come on, Hazel." Nora nudged my elbow.

"Do you want another glass of wine first?" Sophie asked.

I still didn't move.

"Oh, I see what's happening," Nora said.

"You do?"

She nodded. "You're saving yourself for Corban. I can respect that."

"What? No, I'm not. I don't like Corban. This has nothing to do with him."

Nora's raised eyebrow spoke volumes. She didn't believe me.

I didn't believe me.

Which was completely illogical. Corban and I were only coworkers. Two people who barely tolerated each other. We weren't even friends. So I had absolutely no reason to feel strange or guilty at the thought of engaging in the preliminary stages of potential relationship formation with another man.

"I've told you numerous times, I'm not dating anymore."

"Mm hmm."

"That's the only reason."

"Yes, you've mentioned that."

I put my wine down. "Nora, I'm serious."

"I'm sure you're very serious."

"This isn't about Corban."

"Of course not. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to push your buttons."

"Corban is not a button."

She brushed a tendril of hair over my shoulder. "Hazel, my love, I think it would do you some good if you admit you want Corban to push your buttons. And by push your buttons, I mean destroy your clit with his tongue. Or his dick."

Sophie laughed softly.

The mention of Corban's dick and tongue in such close verbal proximity with the words *your clit* sent a rush of heat to my chronically unsatisfied lady parts. I had to resist the urge to clench my thighs.

"I can assure you I don't want any such thing."

I didn't.

I couldn't.

Corban and I were enemies. Any attraction I felt toward him was simply a byproduct of the intensity of my dislike combined with my ongoing sexual frustration. My body was trying to convince me that not only did I need a partner to achieve climax—specifically a human rather than anything that was battery-operated—but that it needed to be one *specific* human male.

My body was wrong.

Nora was wrong.

"I stand corrected." I got up from my chair and squared my shoulders. "I believe he was expressing interest and if he asks me for my number, I'm resolved to give it to him."

Five minutes later, I was reciting my phone number while a charming man named Antonio typed it into his phone. The unease in my stomach hadn't abated, but I firmly told myself there was no reason for it. I was doing absolutely nothing wrong in sharing my number with him. It wasn't necessarily going to lead to anything.

Even if it did, I was a single woman. Corban would have no right to be upset.

And of course, he wouldn't be. Why would a man be upset that the woman he didn't like but was forced to work with had given out her number?

I didn't have feelings for Corban Nash. Not the romantic sort, at least. And this proved it.

CORBAN

“Lots of people want to ride with you in the limo, but what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down.” ~ Oprah Winfrey

A bead of sweat dripped down my spine as my muscles strained. I kept my grip tight on the hand-holds and pushed with my legs to move higher up the rock wall.

It felt good to be off the ground, plastered against a near-vertical surface, my skill and strength the only thing between me and falling. There weren't a lot of activities that were intense enough to quiet my brain, but rock climbing was one of them. I couldn't think about work, or numbers, or my research, or the annoyingly hot psychologist I had to work with five days a week.

Climbing required focus. Just the placement of my hands and feet. Shifting my body weight for balance. I was bouldering today—free-climbing without a harness or ropes—so every position was important.

But even though I was traversing across a challenging section of wall, making my body burn with effort, my head wasn't nearly as clear as I wanted it to be.

Damn it, Hazel, why are you ruining my Saturday?

I couldn't stop replaying the moment she'd said *be adventurous sexually*. Those words coming out of her pretty mouth had set off a cascade of thoughts and fantasies.

How adventurous was she? Were there things she dreamed of doing, but

hadn't? Things she liked that I could do better than her previous partners?

Frustrated at the sudden intrusion into my calm, I maneuvered sideways to put myself in a better position. My fingers gripped the hand-holds, and I kept my body pressed against the artificial wall. I glanced down, noting the location of the ground. It was all too easy to lose track of where you were. That tended to be how accidents happened.

I'd tried rock climbing in college and discovered I really liked the sport. For a kid who'd grown up believing he was hopelessly un-athletic, finding something I was good at physically had been a big win.

What climbing did for my body didn't hurt either. I'd put on quite a bit of muscle, even more than when I'd started working out in high school. And as it turned out, muscles made a nerdy guy a hell of a lot more attractive to members of the opposite sex.

Even if I'd hated it, I probably would have kept climbing just for that reason.

I got to the end of the course and made my way back down. When I was close to the bottom, I pushed off and let go, landing on my feet on the mat below.

Even though I'd already worked up a sweat, I decided not to go home. I wanted to beat myself up a little more. Maybe that would finally get Hazel out of my head.

I walked down the street to my gym and joined some guys in a game of basketball. That was another sport I'd gotten good at. Or good enough, at least. I could sink three-pointers like a boss.

After two games, I headed home, exhausted, sweaty, and starving.

And discovered I had an almost-empty refrigerator.

With a groan, I grabbed my wallet and left before I could collapse onto the couch and decide I could make do with a slice of cheese and some stale chips, which were the most substantial things I had left in my kitchen.

The corner store a block away had a nice deli with good hot meal options. I grabbed a container of meatballs and a couple of bags of groceries so I wouldn't be scrounging for something to eat tomorrow.

I carried the bags to my building, the scent of the meatballs making my mouth water. My stomach gnawed at me. By the time I got to my door, I was well past hungry and deep in hangry territory, as my sister would say.

I set the bags on the ground and reached into my pocket for my keys.

Oh shit.

My keys weren't there.

With a growing sense of alarm, I stuffed my hand into my other pocket. No keys there, either. I had my wallet and my phone, but I'd walked out the door without my keys.

Hoping against hope, I tried the doorknob.

Locked.

Damn it, why did these stupid apartments have doorknobs that were so fucking easy to lock without meaning to?

I barely resisted the urge to kick the door. Instead, I called Molly.

"Hey twinkie, what's up?" she asked.

"Can you do me a favor that's not a big deal? And by not a big deal, I mean it's probably really inconvenient for you."

"That's quite the set-up. What do you need?"

"My spare key."

She groaned. "Did you lock yourself out of your apartment again?"

"Maybe?"

"Corban, what is wrong with you?"

"Can you lecture me when you get here? Preferably after I'm in my kitchen eating the meatballs I just picked up."

"Oh my god, are they the ones from that store by your building?"

"Yeah."

"I'll be there soon."

"Molly, you're not getting my meatballs. I'm—"

She hung up.

I thought about kicking the door again.

My stomach growled, protesting the proximity of my dinner and the fact that it was still in the bag instead of my mouth. Maybe I'd just sit here and eat with my hands.

A glance toward Paisley's apartment gave me another idea. She'd have forks.

Hoping she was home, I picked up the bags and knocked on her door.

She answered dressed in a cropped shirt and yoga pants, her hair in a ponytail. "Hi there."

"Hi, Paisley."

Her eyes flicked to the grocery bags. "What's all this? Are you coming over to cook me dinner?"

My brow furrowed. "No. I locked myself out of my apartment. Molly's

on her way with a key. Can I wait inside?”

“Yeah, sure.” She stepped aside so I could come in.

I went straight for her kitchen—her apartment was a mirror of mine—and set my bags on the counter. “Do you mind if I eat my dinner? I’m starving and if I don’t eat it, Molly will steal it when she gets here.”

“No, please do. Make yourself at home.”

“Thanks. Where do you keep your forks?”

She leaned her hip against the counter and pointed to a drawer. “In there. I was just kidding about you making me dinner, by the way.”

I grabbed a fork and glanced at her. “Yeah, I know.”

“Obviously you wouldn’t just show up and cook for me.”

“Right, I don’t know why I’d do that.” I fished my to-go container of meatballs out of the bag, my salivary glands doing double duty.

“Yeah, so... Can I get you something to drink? A beer or glass of wine?”

“I’m good. I’ll get some water when I get home.”

“Well, that’s silly. I can get you a glass of water.”

I took a seat at the small kitchen table and dug into my food. Oh my god, it was good. I liked their meatballs anyway, but as hungry as I was, this was like the best meal I’d ever eaten. Paisley put a glass of water in front of me, then sat in the chair on the other side of the table.

“Thanks,” I said around a mouthful of food.

“Sure. Why are you all sweaty?”

“I went rock climbing. And then played basketball.”

“Really? I didn’t know you were into rock climbing.”

“Yep.”

“Wow.” She reached across the table and squeezed my bicep. “That must be why you have these.”

My brow furrowed again, and I glanced at her hand. “Yeah.”

She smiled and pulled her hand away. “So, Molly said you got a new job. How’s that going?”

“Mostly great.” I took another bite of meatball. “I’m working on some stuff with motion capture technology that’s really exciting. Plus I’m introducing my boss to data analysis techniques that better codify subjective answers to survey questions.”

“Oh.”

“Even my boss was surprised at some of the results. It’s not that what I do changes the data, but when you can look at it in new ways, sometimes it tells

you things you would have missed otherwise.”

I stopped talking because the glazed-over look in Paisley’s eyes cut through my usual obliviousness. I knew that look. It either meant she didn’t understand what I was talking about, or she didn’t care.

I got that look a lot, and I’d learned to shut up when I noticed it.

“Hmm,” she said when I didn’t continue. “You said *mostly great* . Why not all great?”

Shrugging, I took another bite. I didn’t know why, but I didn’t want to talk to her about Hazel. I could have. Who didn’t have a frustrating coworker? Paisley would probably commiserate with me. But I had the weirdest feeling that if Paisley said anything bad about Hazel, I’d get mad. Just the thought of it made my back clench and my shoulders tighten.

“It’s just work,” I said finally. “You know.”

“Do I ever. I don’t know why I ever thought working for lawyers would be a good idea. I know I’m just the receptionist, but I work hard and deserve respect like anyone else.”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“I’m pretty sure the wife of one of the partners is trying to get me fired.”

“That sucks. Why would she do that?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, she just hates me. So do the other women in my office.”

“You don’t get along with any of the women in your office?”

“Not really. But I’m used to it. I’ve never had a lot of girlfriends. Except for Molly. I don’t mean to sound conceited, but women are usually jealous of me.”

She did sound conceited, but I decided to keep my mouth shut about it.

“That’s too bad.”

My fork hit the bottom of the cardboard container. I’d inhaled the entire heaping portion of meatballs. Oops. I’d meant to leave one or two for my sister. I’d have to make it up to her later.

“Yeah, but it’s okay.” Paisley curled the end of her ponytail around her finger. “They’re just gossipy bitches anyway.”

I tapped my foot beneath the table. Where was Molly? How long was I going to have to stay here? Now that I was no longer in danger of immediate starvation, I didn’t particularly want to be in Paisley’s apartment.

What was Hazel doing this weekend? I’d overheard her say something about a wedding. Had she brought a date?

God, why was I thinking about her all of a sudden?

But really, what was she doing? Probably having adventurous sex with someone.

“Are you okay?”

I startled, looking up at Paisley. “Yeah. Why?”

“You just looked like maybe you were upset about something for a second.”

“No, I’m good.” I grabbed the remnants of my meal and held up the fork. “Do you want me to wash this?”

“That’s okay, just put it in the sink.” She paused, still twirling her ponytail. “So Corban, do you want to—”

Whatever Paisley was about to say got cut off by a knock at the door.

“Good, that’s probably Molly.” I tossed my to-go container in the garbage and answered the door.

Molly looked like a less nerdy, female version of me. Same dark hair, although hers was cut in a chin-length bob that she kept tucked behind her ears. Same brown eyes, but no glasses. Same nose, similar mouth. No one ever doubted we were related.

“You didn’t save me any meatballs, did you?” Her white t-shirt said *baby bump* in swirly black letters, and she rested her hands on her belly. She’d gotten bigger since the last time I’d seen her. Or rather, the baby had, stretching her body with it.

I winced. “I was hungry.”

She rolled her eyes and pushed past me. “Hey, Paisley.”

“Hi, Moll. Oh my god, look at you.” She got up and hugged my sister.

Molly’s husband, Martin Tan, strode in behind her with his hands in the pockets of his slacks. He’d been born in Singapore, but his family had moved to the States when he was a baby. We’d gone to college together, which was how he’d met Molly. He was a data nerd like me, only infinitely cooler—good-looking, well-dressed, and funny. More like Molly.

“Hey, man,” he said with a nod when he walked in.

“You can just let me into my place.” I couldn’t explain it, but I had a rapidly growing urge to get out of Paisley’s apartment. I went into the kitchen and grabbed my groceries. “I have cold stuff I need to put away, so...”

“Okay, okay,” Molly said. “Maybe I’d be moving a little faster if you’d saved me some meatballs, but whatever.”

“Do you need me to run down there and get you meatballs, baby?” Martin

asked.

Molly scrunched her nose. “Would you mind? It sounds so good.”

He smiled. Placing his hand on her belly, he leaned down and kissed her forehead. “What my baby wants, my baby gets. I’ll be right back.”

“Why don’t you guys just hang out here?” Paisley asked. “Martin can grab dinner for everyone, and I’ll open a bottle of wine.”

Molly glanced at her husband. “That sounds good to me if you don’t mind. And since I can’t drink the wine, would you pick me up something yummy and pregnancy-friendly?”

“Sure.”

I really needed to find a way to nope out of this. I’d been around people all day. I might have overcome the worst of my shyness, but I was still an introvert. I needed downtime.

“You guys go ahead, but I’m going to head home. I have some work stuff I need to do.”

“On a Saturday night?” Molly asked. “Come on, Corban.”

“Maybe another time.” I kept inching for the door.

Molly gave an exaggerated sigh. She reached into her pocket and pulled out my spare key. “Fine. Here’s your key, you big loner.”

I shifted my groceries so I could take the key.

“Oh, you know what you should do?” Molly asked, moving the key just out of my reach. “Get a copy of your key for Paisley. Then next time you lock yourself out, you won’t have to call me to get back in.”

“I’ll get a copy made while I’m out.” Martin took the key from his wife. “Let’s go. I’ll let you in your place on my way out.”

“That’s a great idea,” Paisley said. “I’ll give you a copy of mine, too. It seems silly that we haven’t done that already.”

“Okay, sure.”

I said goodbye to my sister and followed Martin out the door. He let me into my apartment and sure enough, my keys were right there on the table. I rolled my eyes. Figured. I didn’t know why I did things like that. But it was nice of my sister to bail me out—again. I just felt like a dork for still needing it. You’d think I’d have gotten the hang of this adulting thing by now.

I could analyze complex data sets or write a sophisticated algorithm that accounted for hundreds of different variables to match potential romantic partners, but I couldn’t remember my keys.

I was kind of hopeless.

CORBAN

*“The demand to be loved is the greatest of all arrogant presumptions.” ~
Friedrich Nietzsche*

I didn't see the tiny intruder on my desk at first. My mind was occupied with too many other things to notice much about my surroundings. Data mapping, response rates, complex algorithmic calculations. Not to mention my grant proposal.

Hazel was in there too, but I was trying to pretend she wasn't.

I'd already been at work for a few hours when I finally saw the penguin figurine sitting on my desk. How had I not noticed it until now?

Shaking my head, I picked up the little penguin. Nice one, Hazel.

I ran my thumb over the smooth ceramic surface. It was only a few inches tall, painted shiny black and white. She'd obviously put it there to poke at me over the favorite animal conversation. I still felt like a dork for backtracking when I'd said penguins. Lion or grizzly? Really, Corban? I didn't know why I'd done that. It wasn't like I was trying to impress her. Why did I care if she knew I liked penguins?

I set it down off to the side behind a stack of books. Next to the other little penguin I already had.

They kind of matched.

Suddenly, my mind lit up with another way to mess with her. She wanted to tease me about my favorite animal? She didn't have a favorite, so I'd start putting a different animal on her desk every day. I did a quick search on

Amazon and found several sets of small plastic animals. Zoo animals, safari animals, marine creatures, household pets. I even found a package of dinosaurs.

Hazel was going to get a menagerie.

The scent of cinnamon and freshly baked bread wafted into my office, pulling my attention from my prank planning. What was that? Where was it coming from?

Like a cartoon character following a tantalizing scent he can't resist, I practically floated into the hallway. I paused in the doorway of Hazel's empty office. It smelled good in there, but that wasn't the source. I kept searching, sniffing the air. My mouth watered and my stomach growled. I hadn't even been hungry a minute ago, but whatever I was smelling had triggered a chain reaction of responses in my brain and body.

My nose led me to the staff lounge where a knot of people had gathered around one of the tables. They were chewing, licking their fingers, and emitting a chorus of satisfied murmurs.

"Hazel, these are the best cinnamon rolls I've ever eaten."

Hazel? Oh, boy.

The little crowd parted, revealing a triumphant Hazel standing in front of two trays of fresh cinnamon rolls. Her blouse was beige today, paired with a black skirt, and it was weird that I noticed what she was wearing given the other sensory stimuli demanding my attention—namely, the smell of those cinnamon rolls. But I did notice. Her hair was pulled back in a bun, her dark-rimmed glasses perched on her nose, and her nails were painted soft pink. I'd never noticed her with painted nails before.

"Corban, you have to try one of these," Elliott said. He popped a bite in his mouth and closed his eyes. "These aren't on my diet, Hazel. I should be mad at you, but they're too good."

"I'm glad you like them."

A few of the other staff members thanked Hazel and wandered off, still pulling apart sticky bites of cinnamon roll. My eyes flicked between Hazel and the trays, my stomach shouting at me to get one and shove it in my face immediately.

For half a second, I wondered if she'd let me have one.

With precise movements, she cut a thick cinnamon roll, the top bathed in white sugary frosting, and set it on a napkin. Meeting my eyes, she lifted it and held it out.

I took it and oh my god, it was still warm. “Thanks.”

Biting my lower lip, my mouth watering at the delicious aroma of fresh bread and cinnamon, I pinched a soft bite between my thumb and forefinger. Hazel watched me with eagerness in her eyes, like she couldn’t wait to see me taste it.

Hold on.

I hesitated, the sticky chunk of sweet and cinnamon heaven just inches from my mouth.

Had she done something to my piece?

Everyone else, including our boss, was happily eating. They were moaning, licking fingers, and showering her with compliments. Their cinnamon rolls were obviously fine. More than fine, they were clearly extraordinary.

But could she have saved the tainted one for me? Was that why she was personally handing them out? She had to be sure the one filled with... what could she have filled it with? Pepper in the cinnamon? No, this smelled fantastic. Had she put something gross in the frosting? It didn’t look any different from the rest.

It was official. I’d gone crazy. I was actually wondering whether my coworker had baked a huge batch of cinnamon rolls and ruined one of them just so she could get back at me.

I was undoubtedly making it weird by standing here with a chunk of cinnamon roll halfway to my open mouth. So I took the bite.

The soft doughy roll melted in my mouth, giving me an immediate rush of euphoria-inducing neurotransmitters. She hadn’t ruined it with unappetizing ingredients. It tasted perfect. Fluffy and sticky. Sweet with a savory kick from the cinnamon. If she’d poisoned it with something I couldn’t taste, I decided it was worth it. This wouldn’t be a bad way to go.

“Oh my god,” I groaned around the bite.

Hazel pursed her lips, the corners hooking in a little smile.

“I’m glad you’re both here.” Elliott wiped his fingers on a napkin. “I know this is last minute, but the Personality and Social Psychology Conference is coming up soon. Would either of you be interested in attending?”

“Yes.”

“Absolutely.”

We answered at the same time and our gazes darted to each other’s. Her

eyes narrowed. I slowly chewed another bite of cinnamon roll.

The Personality and Social Psychology Conference was a big deal. Not only was it a chance to network with other professionals in our field, the sessions covered a wide range of topics—including research grants and funding.

I wanted that spot.

“Both of you,” Elliott said, tossing his napkin in the trash. “Great. I know the conference organizers, so I’m sure we can make that happen. Since it’s so soon, get with Maggie this afternoon to make arrangements.”

He was sending us both? So it wouldn’t be a gladiatorial match to death to compete for the conference ticket. That was probably best. And I probably needed to take a break from comic books.

But an out-of-town trip with Hazel? Our eyes met again, and I wondered if she was dreading it. Or regretting that she’d spoken up. Did the thought of spending a few days at a conference with me make her sick? I couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

I wasn’t sure how I felt about it, either.

“Thank you,” Hazel said. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“It’s a very well-run conference,” Elliott said. “You’ll get a lot out of it. Since you’re both going, coordinate with each other so you hit different sessions. Then you can share notes, cover more topics that way.”

“Sure, we can do that.” I nodded and shoved the last bite of cinnamon roll in my mouth.

Of course we could. We were both adults. Professionals. Elliott didn’t know he kept shoving the two of us together against our will.

Although this cinnamon roll was so good, it was making me question everything. How could a woman who was so evil produce such heavenly food?

We thanked Elliott again and he went back to his office to email us more details.

Hazel transferred the remaining cinnamon rolls into one of the trays and covered it with foil. “I suppose we ought to take a few minutes to review the conference sessions and divide them up.”

“Now?”

“My schedule is packed for the rest of the week. I’d prefer to deal with this now, rather than letting it linger on my to-do list.”

“But we haven’t even looked at the sessions yet, and I have a lot to do

this afternoon.”

“We can look at them now.”

The competing urges to be near her and to fight with her warred inside me.

Just agree and get this done.

No, you can't give in.

She gave you a cinnamon roll.

Insist on meeting with her tomorrow so she doesn't get her way.

Her boobs look fantastic in that shirt.

Wait, where had that last one come from? It was true—one of the buttons looked like it might come undone and the thought of it popping open was so arousing I got a little dizzy—but her boobs were beside the point.

She drew the foil back, revealing her tantalizing desserts. “Would you like another one?”

Temptress.

But yeah, I really did.

“Sure, thanks.”

She cut another cinnamon roll, put it on a napkin, and handed it to me. After replacing the foil on the tray and tucking it neatly beneath the lip, she moved to the empty table near the window and sat.

I brought my cinnamon roll and took the seat across from her.

“The conference sessions should all be listed on their website.” She tapped her phone screen. “Yes, here they are.”

I had to lick the gooey frosting off my fingers before I could get my phone out of my pocket. Hazel scrolled, her eyes darting back and forth while she read the descriptions. I brought up the conference website and started reading through the options, absently picking at the cinnamon roll with my other hand.

Her phone dinged and she muttered, “I’m working, Nora, I’ll answer you later,” under her breath.

We sat in silence for a few minutes. My eyes were on my phone, but I wasn’t really seeing the session descriptions. My brain kept circling around the fact that I had to go to this conference with her. Why did it seem like the universe was conspiring to throw us together? I couldn’t avoid her. Certainly not at work. And even in my off hours, I found myself thinking about her.

This was some nerd-level obsessiveness, and I needed to make it stop.

Her phone dinged again. But this time her eyes widened, and she fumbled

her phone, almost dropping it.

“Is everything okay?”

“Um...” She swiped the screen, her brow furrowing. “Yes. It’s nothing. I mean, it’s a text, but it’s not important.”

I shrugged and pinched off another bite, hoping it looked like I didn’t care. Because I didn’t. I wasn’t the least bit curious about what kind of text she’d just gotten that had her so flustered.

Not curious at all.

Okay, a little bit curious.

Why were her cheeks turning pink?

“Did your new boyfriend text you a dick pic?” I tried to inject humor into my voice, like my suggestion had to be a joke because obviously it couldn’t be true. But as soon as the words left my mouth, it felt like I’d just blurted out the worst-case scenario.

Her lips parted and her eyes didn’t leave the screen.

Wait, did she have a new boyfriend? Had he sent her a dick pic? A dick pic she’d asked for? God, that was even worse. At least if it was an unsolicited dick pic, I could call him out for being douchey and it wouldn’t seem strange. But if she’d wanted the dick pic...

“What did you say?” She finally looked up at me.

I turned my attention back to my phone, mumbling a reply. “I was just joking. Your boyfriend. Dick pics. I don’t know.”

“Oh. No, he’s not my boyfriend.”

I looked up in alarm. “He’s not your boyfriend but he sent you dick pics?”

“What? No. No pictures of any kind, and certainly nothing showcasing his genitalia.”

“Oh. That’s good. Then why did the text freak you out?”

Her eyebrows drew in and she adjusted her glasses. “Why would you assume the text freaked me out?”

“Because it obviously did. You seemed surprised and then you started blushing.” Tendrils of heat snaked their way through my chest while I spoke. Who the fuck had made Hazel blush?

She touched her cheek. “I’m not blushing.”

“Your face is red.”

“If my face is red, it’s because it’s warm in here, not because of the contents of this text. It’s nothing. Just a man I met last weekend. I didn’t

expect him to actually text, so the fact that he did surprised me.”

Grinding my teeth together, I kept my gaze lowered. If she looked into my eyes right now, I didn’t know what she’d see, but I knew I didn’t want to have to explain it. How could I, when I didn’t understand it myself?

A man she’d met this weekend was texting her. Why did that make me so fucking angry? I wanted to reach through her phone, grab this asshole by the throat, and tell him to stay the fuck away from her. He wasn’t getting her or her cinnamon rolls.

What I needed to do was keep my mouth shut. Let this stupid rush of insane emotions pass.

Did I do the right thing and stay quiet? Of course not.

“Did he ask you out?”

She chewed her bottom lip for a second before answering. “Yes. He invited me to meet him for coffee.”

“Are you going to say yes?” *Shut up, Corban.*

“I…” Abruptly, she set her phone down. “I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“I was just wondering. You’re the one getting all flustered over some guy texting you at work.”

“I’m hardly flustered.”

I shrugged again, a bad attempt at appearing nonchalant. “Sure, but he made you blush.”

“I’m not blushing because of him.”

“Okay.” I held my hands up in a gesture of surrender. “You’re not blushing because of him.”

“It’s none of your concern who makes me blush, or who texts me, or who asks me out, or whether or not I say yes. If I want to go out with him, I will, and it doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

She was right, obviously, but my sense of rationality liked to go missing when it came to Hazel. “Yeah, I know. If you want to go out with some random guy, who am I to stop you? Just don’t call me from the bathroom when it turns out he’s a psycho and you’re worried he slipped something in your drink.”

“That scenario is highly unlikely. He’s not that sort of man.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I know.”

I raised my eyebrows at her. “No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do. I have better judgment than to give my number to a psychotic person.”

“Yeah, well, good luck with that.”

“Why are you being such a jerk?”

That was an excellent question. Why was I being such a jerk?

Because Hazel made me crazy. It wasn't a good excuse. But it was true.

Jealousy ran hot through my veins, stoking my temper. My brain searched for a justification, a reason she made me so mad. But I didn't come up with anything coherent. She just did.

I needed to get out of here.

“I'll look at these and email you.”

She watched me as I stood so fast, my chair almost tipped over behind me. I left the remnants of the cinnamon roll on the table and walked out without another word.

HAZEL

“Physics is like sex: sure, it may give some practical results, but that’s not why we do it.” ~ Richard P. Feynman

I had three perfectly logical reasons for working late on a Friday night. One, attending the upcoming conference was an unexpected schedule change and it would benefit me to get ahead on my work before spending several days out of the office.

Two, tonight’s evening run with my girlfriends had been canceled. Everly was of course on her honeymoon, Sophie was dealing with a family issue, and Nora was attending a work event.

And three, the thought of spending an evening at home with only Erwin, Netflix, and my useless vibrators for company held no appeal.

The absence of my girlfriends was particularly disappointing. Not that I held it against any of them. We all had our own lives and they often took precedence over our plans. But I wanted some advice regarding the frustrating departure of my orgasms. I should have brought it up months ago—no doubt Nora would have a list of solutions—but I’d hoped things would return to normal on their own.

They had not. And I was afraid to admit that something about me was clearly broken.

Work, however, was not sexually arousing, and would therefore not contribute to my growing discomfort and frustration. So, working late it was.

I looked at the check marks on my list with satisfaction. I’d been very

productive since my coworkers had left for the weekend, the quiet of the empty building doing wonders for my ability to focus. Corban still hadn't sent me his choices for the conference sessions, so I'd have to transfer that item to Monday's list. But otherwise, I'd accomplished almost everything I'd tasked myself with completing tonight.

"Corban," I muttered to myself, tapping my pen against the desk.

I shouldn't have given him a second cinnamon roll. Who did he think he was, commenting on my potential date? It wasn't any of his business if I went out with Antonio for coffee.

Although I'd turned him down.

After Corban had rudely stormed out of the staff lounge, I'd typed a furious acceptance and almost hit send. But something had stopped me.

I'd taken some deep breaths and analyzed my feelings. The truth was simple: I didn't want to go on a coffee date with Antonio. And I didn't want to rope myself into a date just to spite Corban.

So I hadn't accepted.

I adjusted my glasses and put down my almost-completed list. Dwelling on my irritating coworker wasn't helping my mood. I'd simply have to force him out of my mind, finish a few more things, and go home to feed Erwin.

I needed to make some copies, so I grabbed the necessary stack of folders and got up from my desk.

The nameplate outside my office was turned around, the blank side facing out. Again. With an irritated growl, I slid it from the holder and turned it so my name was once again visible.

Corban didn't have a name plate yet, but when he did, I was going to do him one better. Instead of turning his around, like he kept doing to mine, I was going to have another one made. I was still mulling over ideas for what to have printed on it. *Asshole* would probably get me in trouble. Perhaps his name spelled wrong. How long would it take before he noticed it said *Norban Cash* outside his office?

I walked by his closed door, toward the copy room at the end of the hall. My heels clicked against the floor, their echo making the building sound eerily hollow. The unusual silence made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. It was so rarely this quiet. Even Pete the janitor had gone home for the night.

The copy room was a small space, with the requisite copy machine, a worktable, and shelves full of office supplies. I flipped the light on and got to

work.

The copier light flashed and the machine whirred, spitting out several warm copies onto the side paper tray. Holding my stack of folders with one arm, I lifted the lid and pulled off the original.

A loud bump behind me made my heart leap into my throat and I gasped, dropping the folders. Papers fluttered down. I whipped around, sucking in another breath, and braced myself to face an attacker.

It wasn't an attacker. Corban stood in the doorway staring at me with his mouth open.

"What's wrong with you?" I snapped. "You can't go sneaking around the building at night."

"I wasn't sneaking." His button-down shirt was actually tucked in, but he was still wearing Converse with his work clothes. He raked a hand through his thick hair. "I didn't know anyone was here."

"I've been in my office. You didn't see me?"

"I was in the lab. I didn't notice everyone else left."

I let out a breath and crouched down to pick up the papers strewn around my feet. Corban helped me scoop them up and I stood, tapping them into a neat pile as best I could. I'd have to reorganize everything at my desk.

"Um, Hazel?"

"Yes?"

He cleared his throat.

I took my copies off the paper tray and tucked them into a folder. "What?"

"Your, um... buttons."

I looked at him first, before his words registered. His eyes flicked down to my chest and suddenly everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. His tongue did a tantalizing dance across his lower lip, drawing it into his mouth. Then he caught it with his teeth in a bite that sent a very unexpected rush of heat straight between my legs.

Suppressing a gasp, I clenched my thighs. And then I realized what he'd just said. My buttons.

I glanced down and sure enough, not just one, but two of my shirt buttons had popped open while I'd been gathering my papers off the floor.

I'd already worn my shirt with the top button undone—perfectly work-appropriate—but with the loss of two more, my chest was on full display. With all the sexually frustrated baking I'd been doing lately, I'd put on a few

pounds, and most of it had gone to my boobs. If a girl had to gain a little weight, that wasn't a bad place for it. But it also meant my clothes didn't fit quite as well in the chest.

And right now, my boobs were not only spilling out of my open shirt, they seemed to be trying their hardest to pop right out of my bra cups.

I stood frozen. Transfixed by the predatory gleam in Corban's eyes. By the conflict I could see raging through him. I could feel the effort it took for him to tear his gaze away and a part of me, way in the back of my brain, recognized that for the gentlemanly action that it was.

Then he made eye contact.

A potent mix of intense desire and irritation poured through me. How dare he sneak up on me and make me drop my things so I had to bend over and make the buttons on my shirt pop open so he got a good look at my boobs!

"Why are you even here?" I snapped.

"I was working."

"You shouldn't have scared me."

He took a step closer. "It was an accident."

The pressure between my legs grew, his proximity in the small space making my entire body tingle. Almost involuntarily, my eyes darted to his groin. The tenting in his slacks was unmistakable.

And impressive.

He inched toward me, adjusting his glasses. The whirlpool sensation in my belly left me feeling light-headed and tingly. I was well aware that my shirt was still open and I wasn't making any attempt to fix it. But the closer he got, the harder my heart beat, and the more the pressure between my legs begged me to do something about it.

Something crazy.

Something reckless.

Something so ill-advised I was angry at myself for even thinking it.

Angry at him for making me think it.

I had to break the spell, so I reached for that anger, grabbing it and holding it tight. "Your research is bad, and you have no business being here."

But the words I threw at him did not have their desired effect. He didn't back away. He didn't even stop. He took another step closer, his eyes locked with mine, his jaw set.

"You're too close-minded and can't admit when you're wrong."

“You think you can distract me with your... gifts.” I glanced at the bulge in his pants again. “But it won’t work.”

“You’re the one trying to distract me with... all this.” His eyes flicked down. “It’s very unfair.”

He moved closer, so close we were almost touching, and my body tensed with anticipation.

“I don’t like you,” I whispered.

“Good. I don’t like you either.”

His mouth crashed into mine, his lips firm. I grabbed his shirt and yanked him against me, meeting his angry kiss with my own. He wrapped his hand around the back of my neck, holding me in place, and invaded my mouth with his tongue. The wet, velvety softness slid against mine.

God, he knew how to kiss. Damn him.

He shoved his thigh between my legs, forcing them apart. My skirt rode up and I moaned into his mouth at the sudden pressure against my clit.

Do not dry hump his leg, Hazel. Do not.

Obviously I did.

With a fleeting thought that I’d forgive myself for this later because I was that desperate for an orgasm, I tilted my hips and ground myself against his thigh.

Oh dear god yes. The friction and pressure were just what I needed.

He growled into my mouth, still kissing me, and grabbed my backside. With his fingers digging into my ass cheek, he pressed me against his thigh, encouraging my movement.

The throbbing pressure between my legs was blindingly intense. Holding me tight, he rubbed me against his leg in a steady rhythm, helping me chase the orgasm that was already tantalizingly close.

Wait, helping me?

He wanted me to come. He wanted to give me an orgasm, right here. Fully clothed. Using his leg.

Oh no. I was not going to be a good, cooperative girl. Not for Corban Nash.

I sank my teeth into his lower lip and he grunted, pulling me tighter against him. The hard thickness of his arousal dug into my belly, an invitation too tempting to resist. I slid my palm down his body and wrapped my hand around his cock through his pants.

He grunted again, the noise rumbling in his throat, and squeezed my ass

cheek harder.

“I still don’t like you,” I said, my voice breathy.

“Me neither,” he growled. Fisting his hand in the back of my hair, he tilted my head to the side. Scraped his teeth down my neck. “But I’m going to make you come anyway.”

“No you’re not.” *Yes, please make me come, Corban. Please.*

He kept nibbling and licking my skin, his thigh still firmly planted between my legs. His other hand slid to my breast and he rubbed my hard nipple through the thin fabric of my bra. It was stupidly unfair how good he was at this.

“Yes, I am. Tell me you want it, Hazel.”

Shuddering, I moaned.

We couldn’t. We were at work.

And I couldn’t give in. Not to him.

But it was late. We were alone.

And this felt so good.

“Say it.” His fist tightened in my hair and he sucked on my neck. “I have to hear you say yes.”

I did want it. I wanted it more than I wanted to be right. More than I wanted to win.

“Yes.”

He pulled away and angled me toward the empty worktable. Planted his palm against my back and bent me over. With rough hands, he shoved my skirt up to my waist.

“This doesn’t mean anything,” I said over my shoulder.

“It doesn’t for me either.” He unfastened his pants and pulled his boxers down, revealing his hard length.

I hated how the sight of his cock made my knees nearly buckle. But it was perfect. Long, thick, and solid. Flushed to the color of wine. Biting his lower lip again, he gave it a few quick tugs with his fist and a tremor ran down the length of my spine.

Give it to me, Corban. Now.

With his thick erection in one hand, he shoved my panties aside and slid his fingers along my opening, dipping them inside. “Fuck, you’re wet.”

I arched my back harder, desperate and wanting. He aligned himself with my entrance, grabbed my hips, and thrust himself inside.

An explosion of pleasure burst through my entire body. He stretched me

open, his thickness filling me. My eyes rolled back, and I didn't bother stifling the moan that left my lips.

"One time, Hazel," he growled, driving deep. "You get my cock once."

"I won't want it again." That was a lie, and I knew it already. But there was no way I was admitting it.

He didn't answer. Just grunted as he buried his cock into my wetness.

I braced myself on the flat surface of the table while Corban held my hips and fucked me from behind. Every thrust was like magic, giving me both pressure and friction where I needed it most. I closed my eyes, focusing on the way his cock felt, dragging in and out. The tension building in my core.

If he didn't make me come, I was going to kill him.

"You better warn me before you finish."

He thrust harder. "You're coming first."

The impulse to argue with him was as strong as it was ridiculous. Why would I argue with that? My brain was too tangled up to reply coherently, so I just moaned again.

Bracing himself with one arm, he leaned over me, his breath hot on my neck. His low growls reverberated through me, making my nerve endings fire.

I wished we were naked. I bet his skin felt good.

But that wasn't what this was. It wasn't the time for the softness of skin against skin. For tender caresses and passionate kisses.

This was hard and furious. His cock driving deep. My boobs smashed against the table, the edge digging into my hip bones. It was my skirt hiked up, my panties pulled to the side, his pants zipper scratching me with every thrust.

It was rough and raw and uncomfortable. And I needed it like I needed air.

"Is that the best you can do?" I asked, goading him on purpose. Lashing out because he felt so good it made me irrationally mad.

His angry growl was primal and untamed. He clamped his teeth at the base of my neck, biting hard enough to make me gasp. I felt pinned down. Restrained by this unexpected animal of a man.

I had no idea I'd love that so much. But oh my god, I did.

"If it's not good enough, I can stop," he said in my ear.

"You wouldn't dare."

"I'll pull my cock out of you right now." Thrust. "A few jerks of my hand

and I'll come anyway." Harder thrust. "So if you don't need it, I'll just..."

He pulled out and paused with just the tip inside.

I whipped my head around to look at him over my shoulder. He was still braced over me, his face close. "Don't you fucking dare."

His body shuddered. "Oh my god, did you just say fucking?"

I arched my back, desperate for more. "So?"

"So? God, I hate how hot you are." He thrust back in.

"I hate that your cock feels good."

"I hate that you make me hard every time I fucking see you."

He drove with his hips, sinking his cock in deep. Fire ran through my veins, every thrust igniting a new spark. My walls tightened around his length, my core pulsing with tension.

His hand slid down around the top of my thigh, his fingers finding my clit, and I almost died.

I could no longer separate anything I was feeling. Lust. Anger. Desire. The hot swirl of pressure built as his fingers rubbed tight circles over my clit. It was perfect.

How did he know?

No, really. How did he *know* ?

The rhythm of his cock sliding in and out of my wetness matched the quick brushes of his fingers against my desperately sensitive clit. Rational thought fled. I closed my eyes, holding the table for dear life. Feeling nothing but his thickness. His body slamming into mine. His fingers dancing across my tender bundle of nerves. Heat and tension rising. So fast. So hard. So good.

I threw my head back as my entire body convulsed with the breathtaking power of my orgasm. My pussy clenched around his cock, squeezing hard, pulsing with the waves of climax.

Finally. Oh thank god, *finally* .

"Fuck, fuck, oh fuck," he growled and his cock throbbed inside me.

The table slammed into the wall, the legs scraping against the floor. Corban groaned into my ear, his muscles flexing, and drove his hips harder. The sound of his voice, so low and raw, and the feel of his cock as he burst inside me sent a renewed rush of pleasure pulsing through my body. It rocked me to my core. He drew out my orgasm, one rolling into another, until I was nothing but a mess of quaking limbs sprawled out on the table.

He paused, breathing hard, his cock still buried inside me. I could hardly

open my eyes. My body trembled with the relief of finally finding release.

Without a word, he stood, his cock slipping out. I pushed against the table to stand, hoping my legs would take my weight. They shook, but held, saving me the humiliation of crumpling to the floor.

Although part of me wanted to, just to see if Corban would put his arms around me to help me stand.

I closed my eyes again, letting out a breath, and pushed my skirt down. Behind me, I heard a zipper. A few muttered words I couldn't make out.

And when I turned to look over my shoulder, Corban was gone.

CORBAN

“Mathematics may not teach us how to add love or how to minus hate. But it gives every reason to hope that every problem has a solution.” ~ Anonymous

The basketball hit the floor, the sound echoing in the gym. I dribbled a few more times, then took a shot. Swish. Nothing but net.

I’d gone to the climbing gym earlier, hoping to get my head on straight. It hadn’t helped much. Of course, it didn’t matter how high I climbed or how many baskets I shot. I’d still fucked Hazel over a table in the copy room at work last night.

A woman I didn’t like.

A woman who drove me crazy.

A woman I’d been attracted to since the first time we’d met.

What had come over me? I hadn’t even needed to go to the copy room. But I’d swear it until the day I died, she’d been releasing a massive quantity of intoxicating pheromones. I’d been as helpless as a worker bee, obeying the commands of his queen.

Until I’d taken charge.

I’d never done anything like that before. I’d *taken* her. It had been pure raw instinct and unbridled lust. We’d been at work, in a copy room, with the door open right behind us. I was pretty sure the building had been empty, but *still* .

And I’d been achingly aware of every detail. The way she felt, her wet pussy surrounding me. Her scent and the heat of her body. The open door

behind us and how I was going to hide her if someone approached. I'd been in charge, in command of the whole situation. And I'd fucked her like an animal.

I didn't want to think about how much I'd liked it.

No—loved it.

It had been fucking amazing, there was no other way to describe it. Like a beast had always lived inside me, and I'd finally let him out. She had drawn him out.

The fact that we hadn't used protection, however, reminded me how reckless that had been.

Fuck.

“Sup, glasses,” a voice said behind me.

I grabbed the ball and tucked it under my arm. “Hey, man. How's it going?”

Alex unzipped his hoodie. He was tall—about my height—with dark hair and a beard. “Can't complain. You?”

I shrugged. *Totally fucked in the head.* “Not bad.”

His brother Caleb was right behind him. He looked a lot like Alex. Same dark hair, square jaw. Good looking guys. They came in here to shoot hoops a few times a week with their brother-in-law, Weston. I'd joined their games enough that we'd exchanged names, although they mostly called me *glasses*. I referred to them as *the dads*, since all three were married with kids.

Caleb said hi and peeled off his sweatshirt. I passed the ball to Alex and the three of us started shooting around.

Weston strolled in a few minutes later, hands in his pockets, still wearing his sunglasses. He didn't say anything, just put his keys, phone, and sunglasses in a pile next to the wall before coming out onto the court.

I shot around with them while they chatted with each other. Sometimes they talked about work, but more often it was family stuff. Progress on backyard swing sets, piano recitals, baby-proofing challenges, and funny things their wives had said.

Most of the time it was cool to be around them. These guys were happily married and raising families. They didn't bitch about their wives or complain about the responsibilities of having kids. They clearly loved their families—loved being husbands and fathers. It gave me hope that this was possible. Maybe even for a guy like me.

But today, hearing Caleb laugh about a late night trip to the store to get

his pregnant wife grapefruit because it was her current craving, and Weston idly mention that his daughter had painted his toenails and no, he would not take his shoes off so everyone could see... it just reminded me that I was the guy going home to an empty apartment after this.

“Someone get this guy a beer,” Caleb said, passing the ball to me. “What’s going on, glasses? You okay?”

“He does look like shit,” Weston said.

I scowled at him and turned back to Caleb. “I don’t know. I’ve got some weird stuff going on with a coworker.”

“Who is she?” Alex asked.

“What makes you think it’s a she?” I took a shot and missed.

He jogged over to grab the ball and passed it to Weston. “Just a guess. It is, though, right?”

“Yeah, it’s a she.”

“So what’s the deal?” Alex asked. “You have a crush on her, but she has a boyfriend?”

“No.”

“Worse than that? She’s not your boss’s daughter, is she? Or maybe she is your boss?”

Caleb rolled his eyes. “Why do you assume his life is basically the plot of a novel?”

Alex just shrugged.

“I don’t have a crush on her. I don’t even like her. She drives me crazy.”

“That sucks,” Caleb said.

“She’s a total pain in my ass. Constantly questioning the things I do. And she keeps fucking with me. Like we had this conversation about favorite animals, and I said I liked penguins, then backtracked and said something else. But she wouldn’t let it go, like she had to shove it down my throat that I’d said I liked penguins. So later what do I find on my desk? A fucking penguin.”

Alex and Caleb stared at me, but now that I was talking, I couldn’t seem to stop. Weston just kept shooting hoops.

“She says I started it when I put her lunch in the freezer, but that wasn’t even a big deal; she had yogurt in her lunch. Who cares if it’s frozen, right? Besides, *she* started it by following me around the fucking internet just to make sure I knew she disagreed with me.”

The ball bounced past, but I ignored it.

“Now I have to work with her every day and no matter what I do, I can’t stay away from her. Last night she told me that my research is shit and I have no business being in her department.”

Caleb winced. “Ouch. That’s harsh.”

Without warning, Weston passed me the ball—hard. I caught it with a grunt.

“How long have you been fucking her?” he asked, his tone nonchalant.

“Dude,” Alex said.

Weston raised his eyebrows, but otherwise his expression didn’t change. “What?”

“Why do you assume he’s sleeping with her?” Caleb asked. “He said they don’t get along.”

“Doesn’t mean they’re not fucking,” Weston said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world, and we were idiots for not realizing it.

All eyes swung to me.

“Just the one time. Last night.”

Weston gestured toward me. “See?”

“I don’t know what happened. She bent over to pick up some papers and her shirt popped open and the next thing I knew...” I trailed off, shrugging. They got the idea. I wasn’t about to describe it in detail. Seemed like a crappy thing to do to Hazel.

“And now you want to fuck her again, but you also basically hate her,” Weston said.

I rubbed the back of my neck. “No, not... sort of? I don’t know.”

“Just fuck her again,” Weston said and held out his hands, ready for a pass. “Are we playing, or not?”

I passed him the ball.

“Don’t listen to that asshole,” Caleb said. “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. My sister’s the only reason he’s not alone and miserable.”

Weston took a shot and it swished through the net. “He’s not wrong.”

“Sorry, you guys,” I said. “I just made a huge mistake last night and I don’t know what the hell I’m going to do about it. Let’s just play.”

“You sure?” Alex asked.

“Yeah, I think I just need to get my mind off her for a while.”

Not that a game of basketball would work. Nothing had. I could still feel her. Smell her. Taste her lips.

Alex and Caleb shared another look, but they let me drop the subject.

Weston passed me the ball, effectively dividing us into teams—me and Weston versus Alex and Caleb. We played a tough game of two-on-two. By the time we finished—Weston and I won by three—I was exhausted and drenched with sweat.

Good. Maybe I'd sleep better tonight.

After our game, we all wandered to the side of the court to hydrate and grab our things. Alex and Caleb chatted while they put on their sweatshirts. I took a long drink from my water bottle and wiped my forehead on the back of my arm.

“You don't hate her,” a low voice said next to me.

I glanced over at Weston. “What?”

“You don't hate her, or you wouldn't give a shit about any of this.”

As much as I wanted to say I hated Hazel, he was right. I didn't. I didn't know what I felt for her. But it wasn't hatred. It was a lot more complicated than that. “Yeah, maybe.”

He eyed me for a second, like he wasn't sure if he was going to bother continuing the conversation. “If it had been some other woman's shirt popping open, would you have fucked her?”

“No,” I said with a lot more vehemence than I expected.

“Didn't think so. That's your problem.”

“What?”

“You care. Sex isn't meaningless if you care. So that means it wasn't.”

“Wasn't meaningless?”

“Nope. She's under your skin. Maybe she does drive you crazy, but that's because you care about her, and you care what she thinks of you.”

This was the most Weston had ever spoken to me. And he was hitting too close to the truth for comfort.

“So what am I supposed to do?”

“Fuck if I know.” He took a long drink from his water bottle. “Caleb's right, no one should listen to me for relationship advice.”

I rolled my eyes. So he was just bullshitting me. “Great, thanks.”

“There is one thing I do know.”

“What's that?”

“If she has the power to fuck up your insides this much, you only have two choices.”

“Yeah?”

“Get as far away from her as you can so you never have to see her again.”

My gut churned at the thought. “Or?”

“Marry her.”

Without another word, Weston slipped on his sunglasses and walked out.

I didn’t know why, but I had a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach that he was right.

HAZEL

“Relationships are the most transformational space, whether it’s with your children, your parents, or your loved ones, because you can’t control the other person.” ~ Neil Strauss

The lemon meringue pie had baked approximately four minutes longer than necessary, browning the edges too much. I glared at it, as if it had over-baked itself on purpose, and shoved it down the counter. It joined a pile of sugar cookies, two dozen chocolate cupcakes decorated with multicolored sprinkles, and a plate of apple turnovers.

It was early afternoon, but my legs and back ached with fatigue. I’d started my day with a run—solo, this time, but if I was going to be ready for a half-marathon, I needed to stick to my training regimen.

I’d spent the rest of my day baking. I needed something—anything—to take my mind off last night.

Off Corban and his superhuman ability to drag an orgasm out of my previously stubborn body.

I felt both infinitely better and so much worse. When I’d slid on my panties after my shower this morning, my clit hadn’t momentarily buzzed at the brush of contact from the fabric. That had been a pleasant change.

But the memory of him inside me—the blissful pressure of his thickness—made me ache.

I’d told him I wouldn’t want him again, and I’d known it was a lie when I’d said it. I did want him again. Or rather, my traitorous body did. My brain

understood the reality of our situation. My body did not.

How had I let this happen? Was an orgasm—a glorious, mind-blowing orgasm—worth it? I had to work with him on Monday. Look him in the eyes and speak to him.

I hauled a fresh bag of flour out of the cupboard and set it on the counter with a thump. Puffs of white billowed in the air and I waved my hand, coughing. There was already flour everywhere from my marathon baking session.

“Don’t be so judgmental,” I said to Erwin.

He cracked an eye open and one ear twitched.

“I know what you’re thinking. You said yes, Hazel. You told him you wanted it. And now you have to live with the consequences.” I grabbed a dirty mixing bowl out of the sink—I’d used every one I owned at least once today—and started cleaning it out. “And you’re right. I did. But rubbing my face in it isn’t helping.”

I dried the bowl with a towel and set it next to the flour just as the oven timer dinged. I’d whipped up a batch of shortbread cookies while the lemon meringue pie baked and tossed them in the already-hot oven after it had come out.

“Erwin, where did I put my oven mitts?”

My cat offered no suggestions, so I poked around the mess of mixing bowls, utensils, measuring cups, and ingredients I hadn’t put away. Finally, I found them beneath a torn sheet of parchment paper and pulled the shortbread cookies out of the oven. They’d spread more than they should.

Another fail.

Frustrated, I set the baking sheet down so the shortbread could cool. This was so unlike me. I was usually an excellent baker.

Perhaps my subconscious was acting out. My baking mistakes were an outward sign of my inner turmoil. A rather Freudian notion, but it probably had some merit.

With my hands on my hips, I contemplated the new bag of flour. What to make next? I could make muffins, although muffin batter required a fair bit of finesse. Over-mixing was a danger, and I doubted my ability to be gentle at this point. I needed something forgiving—something I couldn’t ruin.

“Hazel?” Nora’s voice came from the front of my apartment.

I’d texted her earlier to let her know I was baking and she should come over to take some of it off my hands. If I was left alone with all this, I’d be

gaining a lot more than a bra size.

“In the kitchen.”

“God, why is it so hot in here? And why does it smell like—” She stopped, both speaking and walking, when she rounded the corner to my kitchen. “What happened?”

I groaned. “Well, the cupcakes are a bit dry and I think the frosting is too thick. The sugar cookies are uneven, and the turnovers are too chewy. The meringue got too brown, and—”

“Hazel,” she said, cutting me off. “What happened to *you*?”

“Nothing.” My voice was oddly high-pitched. “Nothing at all. I just can’t seem to get these recipes right.”

Nora’s eyes swept over the disaster that was my kitchen. I blinked in surprise, as if seeing it for the first time. The sink piled with dishes. The growing mound of imperfect baked goods. Smears of butter and shortening, a sugar spill on the floor, and a light coating of flour dust on just about everything.

“Why didn’t you tell me something was wrong?” Nora stepped over Erwin and took my hands, leading me out to my couch. “I would have come over sooner.”

“I sent you a text.”

“You said I should stop by because you made cookies. You didn’t say you were therapy-baking, nor that you’d gone through twenty pounds of flour in half a day.”

“I have more flour.” I gestured toward the kitchen as she nudged me onto the couch and sat beside me.

“That’s not my point, and you know it. Now tell me what’s going on.”

I adjusted my glasses and blurted it out. “I had sex with Corban last night.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You had sex with the man you’ve been complaining about?”

“Yes.”

“The one you call your nemesis?”

“Yes.”

“Why were you two even here? Or was it at his place?”

“Neither. It was at work. In the copy room.”

Nora blinked at me. “I’m sorry, honey, what did you just say?”

“I had sex with Corban Nash in the copy room at work,” I said miserably,

my shoulders slumping.

Without a word, she got up and disappeared into the kitchen. I heard cupboards opening and the clink of glass. Erwin got up from his spot on the floor and moved a few feet over to his kitty bed.

She came back loaded down with a bottle of gin, tonic, a lime, a knife and cutting board, and two glasses filled with ice.

“I’m going to be honest,” she said as she started prepping drinks on the coffee table. “I don’t know if I’m equipped to handle this alone. Did you have to get yourself into this mess while Everly’s on her honeymoon?”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“I know you didn’t, sweetie. I just don’t know if I should be the one to walk you through this. My first instinct is to ask about his dick size and how many orgasms you had, and I have a feeling that isn’t what you need right now. Everly would know how to begin. I’m better as backup. Or styling, but there’s nothing I can do with that.” She gestured to me.

“Hey.”

“You’re covered in flour. So, how big was his dick and how many orgasms did you have?”

I raised my eyebrows at her.

“See? We need Everly.” She handed me a gin and tonic. “Drink that, and no more baking.”

I sipped my drink while Nora got up and fished her phone out of her purse. She tapped her foot while she sent a text, then waited, her eyes on the screen.

Her ringer chimed and she quickly swiped to answer. “Everly, you are the best, most beautiful friend in the entire world. I’m so sorry to bug you, but Hazel had sex with her nemesis.”

She wandered into my kitchen and lowered her voice, although I could still hear her.

“Yes, she had sex with that Corban guy. *At work*. I just got here, and she’s already made enough desserts to open a bakery. I got her out of the kitchen and mixed her a drink.”

Nora paused, but I couldn’t hear what Everly was saying.

“Good idea, I will. At this point, I think I’ll just cancel my plans for tonight and we’ll stay in and get tipsy.”

Another pause.

“You’re a goddess. I love you. Go fuck that hot husband of yours on the

beach and pretend I didn't interrupt."

I took another sip of my drink while Nora came back and sat down next to me.

"This isn't that big of a crisis," I said. "You didn't need to call Everly."

"The pile of baked goods on your counter says otherwise." She finished another text and set her phone down. "Besides, you know I count on Everly to balance out my advice when it comes to men. She suggested I call in Sophie as backup."

Erwin waddled over and sat at my feet, looking up at me with sleepy green eyes. I scooped him up and set him on the couch next to me.

"What have you been feeding him?" Nora eyed my cat.

"That's an odd question. Cat food. What else would I feed him?"

"Are you sure he's not gorging on cookies?"

I ran a hand down Erwin's back. "Cats don't generally eat that sort of thing. In fact, they don't have the taste receptors for sweet flavors."

"You know I'm not pro-dieting as a general rule, but I think he needs to go on a diet."

"No he doesn't." I kept petting him. "He's just fluffy."

Nora raised her eyebrow. "Okay."

"He's not fat," I argued.

"Hazel, he can't even jump up on the couch."

My brow furrowed. "He's getting older. And he's not fat. He's fluffy."

She just patted my leg and took a sip of her drink.

Sophie didn't live far away, so Nora and I had only finished half our drinks by the time she arrived. She came in wearing a pink shirt and distressed jeans, her curly hair down around her shoulders.

"I got here as fast as I could. What's the emergency?"

Nora started making another gin and tonic. "Have a seat, Soph. I know Everly isn't here, but I have her blessing. I think it's time we extend the circle of trust."

Sophie slowly lowered herself into the armchair next to the couch. "Circle of trust?"

I knew, without reservation, that Nora was right. Everly, Nora, and I had been a tight-knit group for years, and the circle of trust was the cornerstone of our friendship. Sophie fit in with us like a puzzle piece we hadn't realized was missing.

"I agree." I put my drink down and extended my arms to clasp each of

their hands, forming a circle.

“The circle of trust is sacred,” Nora said. “What we share in the circle stays in the circle.”

“And it’s a no judgment space,” I added.

“Mostly,” Nora said. “If one of us is being an idiot, I’m going to be honest about it. And I expect you all to do the same for me.”

“Fair point.”

Sophie held our hands and nibbled on her bottom lip. “I don’t know what to say. This feels like such an important moment.”

“It is.” Nora squeezed, then let go. She dropped a slice of lime into Sophie’s drink and handed it to her. “Okay, Hazel. Circle of trust. Tell us everything.”

I recounted the events of the previous evening. How I’d stayed late. How Corban had surprised me in the copy room. My shirt buttons and his subsequent reaction. And my ill-advised acceptance—no, encouragement—of his advances.

“Oh my god.” Nora fanned herself. “He just bent you over the table and took you. That’s so hot.”

Sophie grabbed the front of her shirt and pulled on it as if trying to create a breeze. “Ten out of ten, Corban. But I thought you didn’t like him.”

“I don’t,” I said quickly.

“But you were all in when he started kissing you,” Sophie said.

Nora gestured with her drink. “To be fair, you don’t have to like someone to have brutally hot sex.”

“I shouldn’t have done it.” I sank back into the couch. “But I hadn’t had an orgasm in months. Nothing has worked and there he was with his thigh between my legs and he’s an excellent kisser, which is so unfair. I threw common sense out the window. This is so unlike me.”

“It really is, but sweetie, is that such a bad thing?” Nora asked. “See, this is why we needed another opinion, because I don’t look at this situation and see a disaster. Especially if your orgasms had gone missing, which is news to me, by the way. You could have told me.”

“I know, but I assumed you’d prescribe sex—with a man, not with anything that requires batteries—and I’d already resolved that I wasn’t dating or having sexual relationships with men.”

“I probably would have,” Nora said. “And clearly, I’d have been right.”

I scowled at her.

“Okay, let’s look at this logically,” Sophie said. “The sex was consensual, so that’s not the problem.”

“Correct.”

“The problem is that you don’t like Corban.”

“He’s my nemesis.”

Sophie nodded. “And now that you’ve slept together, things are going to be awkward at work.”

I took a deep breath. “We didn’t just sleep together. We gave in to our most primal urges in a completely inappropriate time and place.”

Nora lifted her drink. “Hell yes, girl.”

“What if someone had walked by?” I asked, ignoring Nora’s enthusiasm. “What if we’d been caught? We could have both lost our jobs.”

“At least he didn’t bend you over the copy machine and you accidentally hit start and it made a hundred copies of your boobs,” Sophie said.

Nora and I looked at her.

“Not that something like that has ever happened to me,” she said quickly. “Not exactly, at least.”

“I still don’t think this is a bake-enough-carbs-to-feed-an-army crisis,” Nora said. “Yes, you gave in to your lust-filled urges, and yes, it was at work. I know that sort of semi-dangerous sexual adventure isn’t typical for you. But maybe that’s exactly what you needed. How was the orgasm?”

My shoulders slumped with a heavy sigh I couldn’t contain. “Unbelievable.”

Nora took my now-empty glass and stood. “See? You had sex. You both enjoyed it. It doesn’t have to be a big deal.”

“And you didn’t get caught,” Sophie added. “Worrying about what could have happened isn’t helping.”

“This is exactly why we needed you,” Nora said. “Thank you, Soph.”

She smiled. “My pleasure.”

“We didn’t use protection.”

Nora paused, her mouth slightly open. “Well, that’s not ideal, is it?”

“Are you on anything?” Sophie asked.

I nodded. “I stay on the pill to keep me regular. But this is what I’m talking about. It’s not just two people who had sex and it’s nothing. My behavior was reckless. A few months of sexual frustration is no excuse for throwing good judgment out the window.”

Nora went into the kitchen and came back with fresh ice in my glass. She

sat back down on the couch and mixed me another drink. “Here’s what you’re going to do. Own it. Don’t walk by his office and look away, hoping you don’t make eye contact.”

“Are you sure? Because that’s what I’d like to do.”

“Nope. Own your sexuality. You did something you wanted to do, you enjoyed it while it lasted, and there’s absolutely no shame in that.”

“I agree,” Sophie said. “If you pretend it didn’t happen, it’ll only make things worse.”

Nora handed me the glass and I took a deep breath. “So you’re saying I didn’t make a terrible mistake by having sex in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong man.”

“I don’t know if he was really the wrong man,” Nora said.

“He’s my nemesis.”

“You’ve mentioned that,” she said with a smile. “But your body doesn’t think so.”

Which brought me back to the core of my dilemma. On a deep, physical level—in the depths of my primal brain where logic had no influence—I was attracted to Corban. Intensely attracted to him. More than I’d ever been attracted to any man in my life.

But we didn’t get along. He was irritating and frustrating and so adorable when he raked his hand through his hair and—

“I don’t think I’ve ever been so confused.”

Nora grabbed my hand and squeezed. “You have a brilliant mind, Hazel, and it’s not often that it lets you down. But sometimes your head gets in your way.”

“Own it?” I asked, wondering if I had it in me to do what she was suggesting.

“Absolutely. Just fucking own it. Acknowledge it, and move on.” She grinned at me. “Or make plans to meet somewhere more private and see what happens.”

“No.” I held up a hand. “It’s not happening again.”

Nora and Sophie shared a look, like they didn’t believe me.

But maybe they were right. I needed to own it. March into Corban’s office on Monday, look him in the eyes, and tell him in no uncertain terms that what had happened last night was never, ever happening again.

CORBAN

*“When you are courting a nice girl, an hour seems like a second. When you sit on a red-hot cinder, a second seems like an hour. That’s relativity.” ~
Albert Einstein*

I expected things would be tense on Monday. What I didn’t expect was Hazel marching into my office first thing in the morning and closing the door behind her. I’d only just put down my keys.

For the first time since we’d met, she was dressed in a shirt without buttons. That was obviously not a coincidence. Her hair was up, showing off the soft skin of her neck. Now that I knew what that skin tasted like, seeing the curve where her neck met her shoulder took on a whole new meaning.

I wanted to bite her right there. Pin her down and slam my cock into her while my teeth left red marks on that silky-smooth skin.

Had I really just had that thought? Who the hell was I?

She lowered herself into a chair, crossed her legs, and folded her hands in her lap. “We need to talk.”

“Yeah.” I adjusted my glasses and shifted in my seat. “Right. So...”

“I’m on birth control, so you don’t need to be concerned about a surprise pregnancy.”

My eyes widened at her bluntness, but my shoulders relaxed. I hadn’t let myself think about that side of things too much, but now that I knew it wasn’t an issue, I was relieved. “That’s good.”

“It was still an irresponsible choice on both our parts.”

Should I tell her I now had a stash of condoms in my wallet? No, because we weren't doing it again. I hadn't bought the condoms for her, anyway. Friday night had just made me realize it was better to be prepared.

"Yeah, I know."

"Good." Her voice was clipped. "As far as the events that transpired between us, I think it's best we keep that information to ourselves."

What was that supposed to mean? "What do you think I'm going to do? Put up notices on all the bulletin boards around campus? Bring it up in our next meeting with Elliott?"

"I should hope not."

I furrowed my brow. "Do you really think I'd do something like that?"

"Many men are prone to boasting about their sexual conquests."

"I'm not *many men*."

Her expression softened, but only slightly. "That's good to know. Then I also think it's important to clarify that it won't be occurring again."

The familiar Hazel-induced fire ran through my veins. "I know. *I* already made that clear, remember?"

"I recall you saying something of that nature, yes."

"Then don't pretend like you're the one who decided it was a one-time thing."

She crossed her arms. Buttons or no buttons, her tits looked great. And I'd barely gotten my hands on them.

Stop, Corban. Don't be hypnotized by her boobs. Again.

"I did decide it was a one-time thing," she said.

God, she was so stubborn. "Maybe it won't be."

"That's why I came to clarify. Because it's not happening again."

I crossed my arms, too. She wanted to argue? Fine. I didn't care that I'd said she only got my cock once. Now I just wanted to fight with her, even if it meant fighting over doing it again.

Plus, fuck it. I really, really wanted to do it again.

"Well, then I'd like to clarify that what I said was in the heat of the moment and I didn't mean it literally."

Her mouth popped open. "Were you trying to create scarcity to increase my desire?"

"Maybe. Did it work?"

"No."

The corner of my lips hooked in a grin. "Are you sure?"

“Yes, I’m absolutely sure.”

The flush in her cheeks and the slight breathiness in her voice made me wonder if we were thinking the same thing. That there was plenty of room on this desk for us to—

“I see what you’re doing,” she said, interrupting my thoughts.

“You do?”

“Yes. You’re trying to use sex to manipulate me into... something. It won’t work.”

“What do you think I’m trying to manipulate you into doing? Having sex again? Liking me?”

“Probably both.”

“Would either of those things be so terrible?”

She pursed her lips for a second. She was so sexy when she did that. “Yes. They would be so terrible. I think.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” She let out a frustrated breath. “Friday night was a mistake. We have to work together, and meeting in the copy room for clandestine encounters is not conducive to a good working relationship.”

I stared at her and my jaw hitched. A mistake. I’d had the exact same thought, but hearing her say it out loud—throwing it in my face like that—hurt. A lot more than it should.

What had Weston said about her having the power to fuck me up inside?

She did. She really did. I was twisted up in a knot so tight there was no way to untangle it.

“You’re right. It was a mistake. At least we can agree on something.”

She flinched. Not much and if I hadn’t been staring her down, I would have missed it. That tiny flicker of pain in her expression twisted the knot in my gut even harder.

“Good,” she said, her tone all business. “Then we’re agreed.”

“No more sex.”

“Right.”

“From now on, we’re strictly professional.”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Fine.”

Her tongue swept across her lips and my dick—which apparently had no connection to my frontal lobe and was incapable of logic—reacted. The anger running through my veins felt a hell of a lot like something else. Like lust.

Like I wanted to rip that buttonless shirt over her head, bury my face in her tits, and stroke her clit until she begged me to fuck her again.

After hesitating long enough for me to fully form that tempting fantasy, she rose from her seat. "I'm glad we understand each other."

"Oh, we do."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm agreeing with you."

She put her hands on her hips. "Were you? Because your tone of voice implied sarcasm."

"What do you want from me, Hazel? You're right, it was a mistake. We shouldn't have done it."

"And it won't happen again."

I shrugged. "Not unless you want it to."

"I won't."

"Okay, then there's no problem."

She pushed her glasses up her nose. "Indeed there isn't. I still need your conference session choices, so please email me at your earliest convenience."

Her abrupt change of subject felt like a punch to the gut, and instantly deflated my growing erection. I turned toward my computer screen. "Sure. I'll do that now."

"Thank you."

I didn't say anything else. Just waited for her to leave. She hesitated for a beat and I wondered if she was going to say more. I hoped not. Every word out of her mouth seemed to make things worse.

Finally, she opened the door and left.

Slumping in my chair, I let out a breath. Why did I feel so shitty?

It wasn't because I wanted to fuck Hazel again. I did. I couldn't deny it. I'd wanted her from the first time we'd met, and having her once hadn't been enough.

But that wasn't the problem.

The problem was, she was right to reject me. And it fucking hurt to face that.

There was a reason I was still single. A reason my own theory had never worked on me. I'd tried. I'd been through the whole questionnaire with women. Twice, about a year apart. Both times thinking we already had a spark of something at the start, and if my theory was correct, we'd fall in love.

They were both married now. But obviously not to me.

Maybe I shouldn't have spent so much time trying to crack the code to falling in love. Maybe I should have focused on why no one could fall in love with *me*. I'd always been the aberrant data point. The one who didn't fit.

Of course, that was the story of my life. I'd always been the guy who didn't fit in.

I wasn't going to fit with Hazel, either. It didn't matter how she'd reacted to me physically. She didn't want me. Didn't like me.

I didn't like her either.

She was stubborn. Maddening. Frustrating.

Smart. Intriguing. Sexy.

She did have the power to fuck me up on the inside and I once again wondered if Weston was right. Maybe I needed to stay away from her. Get a new job. Maybe take the one in New Jersey. I could call and tell them I'd changed my mind. Move across the country and never see Hazel again.

My phone dinged with a text from Molly. My twin. My best friend. Soon to be a mom to my first niece or nephew.

I really wanted to be around for that.

Was it a message from the universe? Great, because my life wasn't confusing enough.

Molly: *Do you want to see the creepiest thing ever?*

Me: *Obviously yes.*

She sent a picture that, at first glance, looked like a strange dark blob. Tilting my phone a little, I realized it was an ultrasound photo.

Me: *Holy shit, Moll! Is that the baby?*

Molly: *YES! FEAST YOUR EYES ON MY OFFSPRING!*

Me: *You're right, this is creepy. Are you sure it's normal?*

Molly: *Ass. Yes, all normal.*

Me: *Is that a second nose?*

Molly: *No. Only one nose. Ten fingers. Ten toes. And a vagina.*

Me: *Wait, what? You're having a girl?*

Molly: *Yep, baby girl in there. We didn't find out with our first ultrasound because we were going to wait. But we cracked once we were in there this time.*

Me: *That's awesome, sis. Excited for you.*

Molly: *Thanks! How's the job?*

Me: *Good.*

Molly: *That's it? Good?*

No, that wasn't it. Things were complicated and confusing. But I really didn't want to talk to my sister about Hazel. She didn't want to hear about who I had sex with, anyway.

Me: *Yes, good. I like my job. They're sending me to a conference.*

Molly: *Awesome!*

Me: *Congrats on the baby girl. Can't wait to meet her. And tell Martin I said hi.*

Molly: *I will. Love you, twinkie.*

Me: *Love you too, weirdo.*



LUNCHTIME CAME AND WENT. I looked at the clock mid-afternoon and realized I'd forgotten to eat. No wonder my stomach was growling at me.

I went down to the staff lounge and stopped in the doorway. Hazel was the lone occupant, her lunch spread out in front of her. She had a steaming mug of tea and an open book.

"Did you forget to eat, too?" I asked.

"Not exactly. I got busy in the lab."

I stood there awkwardly for a second. Rubbed the back of my neck. I wanted to keep talking to her, but I wasn't sure what to say.

Miraculously, I didn't start spewing out weird animal facts. That realization got my feet moving again. I grabbed my lunch from the fridge, ready to bolt out of there before I inevitably made things weird.

But we really needed to be able to work together. We couldn't avoid each other. Maybe it would be better for both of us if I tried to make peace.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I marched over to her table and sat down. "Do you like babies?"

Her eyes widened behind her glasses and her eyebrows winged up her forehead. "Excuse me?"

"I don't want to assume that because you're a woman you must like babies. Some women don't. I think it says something about the success of our species that the urge to procreate is no longer universal. Anyway, do you?"

"Why do you need to know if I like babies?" She leaned closer and lowered her voice. "I already told you that's not a concern."

I blinked. What was she talking— “Oh, no. That’s not what I meant. My sister’s having a baby and she texted me an ultrasound picture and I wasn’t sure if you’d find that interesting, so I was asking first.”

“I didn’t know you had a sister.”

“Yeah, Molly. We’re twins.”

“Oh. Yes, I like babies.”

I pulled out my phone and opened the ultrasound photo. “That weird looking blob is my niece.”

Hazel’s eyes softened and the corners of her mouth turned up slightly. She took the phone from my hand and brought it closer. “You can see her cheeks.”

“Pretty cool, huh.”

She gazed at the picture for a long moment, as if lost in thought, her expression wistful. Then she seemed to come back to herself and handed me the phone. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks. Molly’s doing all the work. I just get to be the cool uncle.”

I looked at my lunch bag, wondering if I should cut my losses before Hazel and I found something to argue about. She didn’t say anything else. Maybe she just wanted me to go.

“Do you like having a twin sister?” she asked, breaking the growing silence.

“Yeah. We used to fight when we were kids, but we get along great now.”

She dipped her spoon into her yogurt. “I don’t have any siblings. But I have best friends who are like sisters.”

Were we actually talking? This was new.

It was nice.

“That’s cool about your friends. Do they live around here?”

She nodded. “They do. What about your sister?”

“Yeah, she and her husband live about ten minutes from me.”

“So you’ll get to see the baby a lot.”

“I hope so. I don’t really know anything about babies, but I’m excited for Molly. She and her husband really wanted kids.”

“How long have they been married?”

“Five years. They were one of the first couples to use my questionnaire when I was developing my theory.” I cut myself off. Damn it, I shouldn’t have brought that up. We’d actually talked for more than a sentence without fighting, but my research was the war zone between us. This was dangerous

territory.

Hazel adjusted her glasses. “Were they dating prior to that?”

Her non-combative question caught me off guard. “No. They knew each other, but not well.”

“And your questionnaire made them fall in love?”

“It’s more complicated than that. The process of answering the questions together develops a level of intimacy that usually takes months or years. Going through the questionnaire accelerates it. In Molly and Martin’s case, they started dating immediately and got engaged a few months later.”

“Sounds like it worked well for them.”

“Yeah, it did. They’re great together.”

She wrapped her hands around her mug. “Thank you for sharing the picture of your unborn niece.”

I put my phone back in my pocket. “Sure. I’m just glad we’re humans and not long-tailed skinks.”

One side of her lip twitched in an almost-smile. “Why?”

“Unlike many lizard species, long-tailed skinks raise their offspring. But if a mother skink feels too threatened, she’ll eat her babies.”

“Then I’m also glad you don’t have to be concerned that your sister will consume her offspring. The animal kingdom can be a brutal place.”

“Yeah, it really can.” I decided now was the time to cut my losses. We’d had a nice conversation. And if there was anything I knew about myself, I was good at screwing up normal human interactions. I didn’t know where that skink comment had come from. Definitely time to go. “I have more data to analyze, so I better get back. I’ll just eat at my desk.”

Meeting my gaze, Hazel smiled. Her lips curved and her eyes brightened. It was the first time she’d ever really, truly smiled at me, and it hit me like a blow to the chest.

I was so fucked.

HAZEL

“Science is not only a disciple of reason but, also, one of romance and passion.” ~ Stephen Hawking

The lobby of the research lab was packed with volunteer subjects. Someone had brought in plastic chairs to handle the overflow, and there were still students standing along the walls and in small groups. I couldn't be sure, but I liked to think the cookies I'd brought in had helped with the turnout. One particularly enthusiastic male subject had come through the door sniffing and decided to sign up for the study.

Unfortunately, my sugary temptation had worked a little too well. We wanted the numbers—more data was a good thing—but I hadn't planned to process this many study applicants at once.

I passed out more application and disclosure forms, still warm from the copy machine, and tried not to let my mind stray to Friday night's encounter in the copy room. But the faint scent of paper and ink and the quickly dissipating warmth of the crisp paper sent a pleasant—and unwanted—tingling through my body.

Really, Hazel? Copy paper does it for you now?

“Hey.”

I turned at Corban's voice behind me, suppressing a gasp at the fluttery feeling in my stomach. “Hello.”

He wore a navy sweater vest and the front of his button-down shirt hung out over his slacks on one side. His hands were stuffed in his pockets. “It's

busy in here.”

The first response that came to mind was a sarcastic, *oh, I hadn't noticed, thank you for pointing out the obvious*. But I stopped myself from saying it. Corban and I had been getting along. We seemed to have reached an unofficial truce, and I didn't want to be the one to break it.

“Yes, very busy. I should have brought in more grad students to assist, but the turnout is unexpected.”

He sniffed the air and cracked a small grin. “I bet it's the cookies. You can smell them all the way down the hall. Did you make them?”

“I did. I thought it would be a good way to keep people occupied while they wait.”

“Good thinking. They smell amazing.”

I didn't want to preen at his comment, but it filled me with warmth. I adjusted my glasses, trying not to smile too much. “Thank you.”

He glanced around the waiting area. “Can I help with anything?”

“Yes, actually. We need to make sure everyone has their forms filled out properly with the necessary signatures. Then they need to be taken into room A in groups of three or four to fill out the initial questionnaire.”

“Got it.” He grinned again. “When we finish, do I get a cookie?”

“Yes, if—” I stopped because the look in his eyes made me wonder if he meant one of the chocolate chip cookies I'd baked, or something else entirely. Was *cookie* a euphemism? Was he thinking about sex?

I was thinking about sex.

Sex with him.

Flustered, I shoved the stack of paperwork at his chest. “Cookie. Yes. If there are any left.”

He pulled his hands from his pockets and took the forms. “Okay. I'll get started.”

“Thank you.”

Why was my heart beating so fast? And were my cheeks red? I sincerely hoped not, but I felt the telltale flush of blood into my facial capillaries.

I always felt a high level of emotion when I was with Corban. Which was perplexing. I'd never been an overly emotional person. But he brought out something in me, as if everything was heightened. At first, it had been almost entirely feelings of antagonism. Then attraction. Lust, if I was being truthful; attraction was too mild of a word for the scorching fire he produced in me.

Now I wasn't sure what I was feeling. It was similarly hot—hence the

flushing of my cheeks—but no longer fueled by anger or irritation. At least, not entirely. I still felt a streak of argumentativeness. But there was something else.

Did I actually like Corban Nash? The man I'd deemed my nemesis?

I glanced across the waiting area where he'd gone to begin checking application forms. He didn't have to be here. He certainly had plenty of his own work to do, and processing study applicants wasn't one of his responsibilities. Was the scent of chocolate chip cookies enough to lure him from his spreadsheets, tables, and databases?

Maybe I'd been the tiniest bit wrong about him. He clearly had a number of redeeming qualities. When we weren't picking at each other, he was interesting and funny. Passionate about his work.

Yes, I decided I did like Corban.

I liked what he had in his pants, too.

Blowing out a breath, I adjusted my glasses. This was neither the time nor the place to be thinking about that.

I took a group of subjects into room A and passed out the questionnaire. It wasn't long, and with Corban making sure the incoming participants were properly registered and documented, the process would go faster.

The subjects finished and I collected their forms, then handed them off to one of the research coordinators. I went back to the waiting area to collect a new group.

I found Corban surrounded by a small knot of students. Female students. His hands were back in his pockets and he had a smile on his face.

A surge of anger burst through me. I'd studied human behavior extensively, particularly as it related to coupling rituals. Every one of the girls standing around him exhibited telltale signs of flirtation. From their posture to their facial expressions, I could read them like words on a page. No, like a giant billboard with flashing lights.

I had an overpowering—and very strange—urge to march over there and attach myself to him like a koala. Tuck myself beneath his arm and kiss his neck. Show them they were wasting their time with their coy smiles and suggestive body language.

He was mine.

Except he wasn't. We'd surrendered to our primal urges once, and regardless of how good it had been—good was hardly the word, but I didn't want to dwell on that—we both knew it hadn't meant anything. We'd

explicitly *said* it hadn't meant anything.

So why did seeing him surrounded by those girls make me both enraged and slightly sick to my stomach?

I did march up to him, but refrained from physical contact. "If their paperwork is in order, I can take them back."

"Um, yeah." He took a small step backward, his hands still in his pockets. "I think they're all set. I'll just see who else needs to be checked in."

"Will you be out here when we're done?" one of the girls asked.

He shrugged. "If Hazel still needs me."

His comment did wonders to soothe my heightened emotions. I met his eyes and smiled. "Thank you again."

"I just hope we don't run out of cookies."

"I can always make more."

We looked at each other for a long moment. Blinking, I realized I was standing in the middle of the waiting area, staring at Corban.

My cheeks warmed again, and I tore my gaze away. "This way."

The girls followed me into room A, chatting to each other. They lowered their voices, but I could still hear their comments clearly.

"How cute was he?"

"I know, right? I'm a sucker for a hot nerd."

"Is he a professor? Because if he is, I'm signing up for all his classes."

The hot spike of jealousy made my spine straighten, but I didn't comment. Corban hadn't bent any of them over the worktable in the copy room, now had he? And it was my cookies he was craving.

I passed out their questionnaires, desperately trying to suppress the confusing swirl of emotions that ate at me. I'd experienced more individual feelings in the last ten minutes than I usually did in a week. This rush of jealousy was so unlike me.

I managed to gather up my emotions into a tight ball and focus. Corban helped me move through the rest of the waiting applicants. Each time I went back to the lobby for a new group of students, a bit of that emotional ball broke apart, scattering feelings like a sprinkling of glitter. And each time, I scooped it all up again, taking deep breaths to maintain control over myself.

Finally, the waiting room was clear. Corban sat on one of the couches, typing something on his phone while I dismissed the last group of students, letting them know we'd be in touch for follow up questions.

The cookie plate was empty, and I found myself wondering why he'd

stayed.

He stood and put his phone in his pocket. “Finished?”

“Yes. Thank you again for your help.”

“Sure.”

I glanced at the scattering of crumbs on the cookie plate. “I suppose I owe you a cookie.”

“You absolutely owe me a cookie. Maybe even more than one. To make up for the fact that you ran out.”

“Do I? It’s not my fault college students have an insatiable cookie appetite. I thought I’d be bringing leftovers home.”

“You should have known better. And those kids have nothing on my appetite.”

His appetite for what? Were we still talking about cookies?

I couldn’t ignore the growing pressure between my legs, and he had that predatory gleam in his eyes again. The one I’d seen in the copy room. Like he was about to toss me over his shoulder like a caveman and haul me into one of the interview rooms to—

“How did everything go in here today?”

Someone was speaking to me. Oh god, it was Elliott. My boss. I jumped back from Corban like we’d been caught making out, although we hadn’t even been touching.

“Fine.” I smoothed down my hair and adjusted my glasses. “The turnout was higher than we expected.”

“Excellent. I’ll be here for phase two to oversee the work in the lab.”

“Right. Good. Of course.” I sounded so flustered. I needed to pull myself together.

“Corban, if you have some time in the morning, I’d like to meet to go over your grant proposal.”

“Great, yeah. Morning is fine.”

Grant proposal? Why was Corban writing a grant proposal?

Elliott’s eyes flicked between the two of us. “Okay. Well, I have a class, so I’ll chat with you both later.”

Corban said goodbye and I mumbled something similar. But my eyes were on Corban, a dose of suspicion suddenly added to my emotional cocktail.

“You’re working on a grant proposal?”

He pushed his glasses up his nose. “Yeah. Elliott’s working with me on

getting funding for my research.”

That made sense. As I’d pointed out—on numerous occasions—Corban’s so-called theory hadn’t been properly tested. The fact that he was seeking funding shouldn’t have been surprising.

But a spark flared in my belly. I was in the process of securing funding as well. “Which grant are you applying for?”

“The Glasner Foundation Grant.”

I clenched my teeth, my body going stiff, and before I could give any thought to how I should respond, I was already speaking. “You can’t apply for that grant.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m applying for it.”

His eyes narrowed. “Why does that mean I can’t apply?”

Logically, I knew it meant no such thing. There was nothing wrong with two people from the same institution submitting proposals. It happened all the time.

But that ball of emotion I was holding so tightly exploded, and logic didn’t stand a chance.

“Because we can’t compete for grant money.” And then I said one of the most childish things I’d ever uttered. “And I started my application first.”

“You started yours first so I can’t submit mine?” He crossed his arms. “I don’t think so.”

I knew I was being irrational. I knew it and I couldn’t stop. He made me absolutely crazy. I mimicked his posture, crossing my arms. “Then prepare for defeat, because I’m getting that grant.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

“My proposal is going to kick your proposal’s ass.”

“I beg to differ.”

I wanted to keep going. Tell him his so-called theory was baseless and he’d never get funding for it. But even though I was irrationally lashing out at him, I couldn’t bring myself to lie. Despite my criticisms of his work, I was intrigued by what he’d done. Interested to see if his theory would hold up under proper testing conditions.

But I wasn’t about to admit that to him. Not now.

“You know what? I don’t need your approval.” The heat in his eyes was no longer lustful, and I was hit with an unexpected surge of disappointment.

“I don’t care what you think about my theory or my research or how I got my data. I know that I’m onto something. And I’m going to get this grant.”

Pride—stupid, stupid pride—had hold of me and I was too flustered to step away from it and deescalate this rapidly deteriorating conversation. “You’re right, you don’t need my approval. I’ll be sure to make you a batch of cookies to ease the sting of loss when I get the grant and you don’t.”

He let out a frustrated growl. “I have to go. I have work to do.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

His eyes swept over me, his brow furrowing. Then he turned and stormed off.

CORBAN

“We all have relationship issues that we’re going to need to work on. All of us. It’s just part of human nature. The only question is going to be with whom.” ~ Esther Perel

So much for our truce.

Hazel and I were right back where we’d started. Rivals. Enemies. She’d only spoken to me in short sentences. No more smiles. No more soft eyes behind her glasses. She was stick straight and all business.

Basically out to destroy me.

And now I was on an airplane to Florida, staring at the back of her head.

At least we weren’t seated next to each other. It was bad enough we were the only two people from our department going to this conference. If she’d have been stuffed into the seat beside me, I probably would have gone crazy.

Truthfully, I was responsible for a solid fifty percent of the tension between us. Maybe sixty. I’d purposefully egged her on. Turned the nameplate outside her office backward every time I walked by. Hid her lunch in the back of the fridge. Sent her terse memos. Threw the memos she sent me in the garbage without replying, crumbling them up while she watched.

But the worst thing I’d done—the thing that had her glaring daggers at me in the airport this morning while we’d been waiting for our flight—was to ignore the batch of brownies she’d brought into work yesterday.

She’d been in the staff lounge, cutting thick pieces of gooey brownie and handing them out on small napkins. They’d smelled like chocolate heaven.

I'd stopped in the doorway. Our eyes had met, hers narrowing, like she was daring me to resist her brownies. My urge to lash out at her had been so strong, I'd turned around and walked right out.

Nope, I wasn't eating any of Hazel Kiegen's brownies.

I still kind of regretted it—they'd smelled so good—but I was sticking with it. Or I was just a stubborn dumbass.

Probably the latter.

But now I was committed. And the fact that we were going to a conference together didn't change anything.

I spent the flight working on my grant proposal—suck it, Hazel—and reading for a while when I needed a break.

And told myself, over and over, that I was going to stay away from her.

That lasted until we got off the plane.

She walked ahead of me, pulling her rolling suitcase, her smooth ponytail swinging with each step. My eyes drifted to her ass. I was mesmerized by the way her hips swayed. She moved fast, but I kept pace. I could have slowed down. Stopped for a snack before heading to the hotel. Let her get ahead of me so I wasn't trailing behind her, thinking dirty thoughts about what I could do to her.

About the fact that we were alone, in a city where no one knew us.

Where getting caught wouldn't matter.

She stopped just in front of the exit to the passenger pick-up area and whipped around. "We should share an Uber."

Her tone wasn't friendly, but it wasn't antagonistic either. I stared at her mouth for half a second, a wild urge to grab her and kiss her almost overtaking me.

Don't do it, Corban. Make an excuse. Keep your distance.

"Yeah, we can split it."

She gave a short nod and pulled out her phone.

Powerless. I was powerless against this woman.

The wait for our ride wasn't long. The driver helped us load our bags and we both slipped into the back seat. The car was small—because of course it was—putting only inches of space between me and Hazel. Between my hand and the tempting skin of her thigh. She'd worn a skirt to fuck with me, I was sure of it. Who wore a skirt like that on a plane?

She crossed her legs and the skirt slid higher up her thigh. Yep. She'd done it to torture me.

It was working.

The confined space of the car heightened my awareness of her. She smelled faintly of vanilla frosting again. It made me want to lick her all over.

Why was everything I felt around her so strong? She didn't just make me mad, she made me furious. I wasn't just attracted to her, I was obsessed with her. There was no in-between. Either she was smiling at me and I wanted to kiss her, or she was glaring at me and I wanted to bury her.

Or fuck the fight out of her.

That last one especially.

None of it made sense. I was the guy who'd forget to tuck in half his shirt in the morning and miss lunch because I wasn't paying attention to the time. But I could recall in perfect detail what Hazel had worn every day in the last week. How she'd done her hair. As we drove down the road to our hotel, I was keenly aware of how many times the driver's eyes landed on her in the rear-view mirror. The way she fidgeted with her hands in her lap and kept her face angled toward the window.

I was unnaturally attuned to her and it was driving me fucking crazy.

After a short, but silent, ride to the hotel, we got out and retrieved our bags from the back. The air outside was warm and thick with humidity. The resort was right on the beach—a great location for a conference. I tried to focus on that while we went inside. Not on Hazel and her intoxicating scent.

We walked side-by-side to the check-in desk. There wasn't a line, so we went to the first open attendant. She was dressed in a turquoise top with a pin shaped like a sea turtle.

“Can I get your name, please?” she asked.

“Corban Nash and Hazel Kiegen,” I said.

Her fingers clicked across her keyboard and her brow furrowed. “I'm sorry, we seem to have you in separate rooms.”

Hazel and I looked at each other in alarm.

“No, we're not—”

“We aren't together.”

“Separate is correct.”

“We were just on the same flight.”

“We work together.”

“Here for the conference.”

I stopped talking and rubbed the back of my neck.

The attendant's eyes flicked between us, but she just smiled. “No

problem.”

Hazel fidgeted beside me while the attendant took our credit cards and IDs. I hoped our rooms weren't next to each other. I didn't think I'd be able to sleep if there was nothing but a wall separating us.

She handed our IDs and credit cards back to us. “We do have you in adjoining rooms, but the door between them can remain locked.”

Figured.

“Here's your room key, Mr. Nash.” She slid a key-card across the counter. “Room five sixteen. The elevators are just down that hallway. Fifth floor, then take a left.”

I shifted awkwardly, wondering if I should wait and walk up to the room with Hazel, or go now since I had my key and I was checked in. My arm accidentally brushed hers and the unexpected contact was like a lightning strike.

“Otters hold hands when they sleep,” I blurted out. “And sometimes they form otter rafts of up to a hundred individuals. Sleeping in the water provides protection from predators, but they hold onto each other so they don't drift apart.”

The attendant blinked at me, her brow furrowed with confusion.

“I wonder how they learned to do that,” Hazel said. “At what point did an otter reach out to clasp a neighboring otter's appendage and hold on? And how many instances of napping that way did it take before it began to spread through the larger otter population?”

“And how much of it is instinct versus learned behavior?”

Hazel tapped her lips. “Good question.”

“You're all set.” The attendant pushed another room key across the counter, still eyeing me like I was odd. “Room five eighteen. Enjoy your stay.”

“Thank you.” Hazel readjusted her luggage handle and glanced at me. “Shall we?”

“Sure.”

We walked to the elevators and rode in silence to the fifth floor. My heart thumped hard in my chest. Hazel smelled so good, I found myself shifting toward her. Breathing in deeply. I was practically sniffing her hair.

She didn't seem to notice, or if she did, she didn't react. Her body was tense, her posture rigid. I darted a quick glance at her before the elevator doors opened. I could almost see the fluttering of her pulse in her neck—a subtle shiver of her delicate skin.

Still no talking while we walked down the open-air hallway to our rooms. Adjoining rooms. Shared-wall rooms. We moved to our respective doors, lifting our key-cards to the locks, like we were in sync. The doors clicked and lights turned green.

I turned the handle and pushed, opening the door an inch. Glanced at Hazel. She met my eyes but quickly looked away. Without a word she went into her room, letting the door fall closed behind her. So I went into mine.

The room was standard for a hotel. Air conditioned, which was good because it was hot outside. Small bathroom. Thick curtains drawn closed, blocking out most of the light. There was a table with two chairs, a TV mounted on the wall, and two queen beds with crisp white linens flanked by tables with lamps.

I glanced at the interior door that led to Hazel's room. Hers was probably a mirror image of mine. Which meant she had two queen beds on the other side of that wall. I wasn't sure how thick a hotel wall was, but not thick enough. She'd be sleeping right on the other side of that one.

At least we were in separate rooms.

I wheeled my suitcase next to the closet, took off my shoes, and flopped down on one of the beds. There wasn't anything conference related until the keynote address tonight. That meant I had several hours to kill. I'd brought work, and things to read. There was a TV. I had my laptop and wifi. The internet was an ocean of potential distractions. Or I could go out and explore. Wander along the beach and clear my head.

Fifteen minutes later, I was still lying on the bed, vaguely daydreaming about Hazel. Every little noise sucked at my attention, making me wonder what she was doing over there. She was probably the kind of person who unpacked. I could imagine her carefully hanging all those cardigans and button-up blouses she wore. Smoothing the fabric of her pencil skirts so they didn't wrinkle.

Was she bored? Reading a book? I didn't hear a TV, but she might have had it on with the volume low. Would she take a shower before the keynote tonight? I'd probably hear the sound of the water running if she did.

Oh god, Hazel in the shower.

I'd been inside her, but hadn't seen her naked. Except for her ass. And that peek of her pussy when I'd pushed her panties to the side.

Grabbing a pillow, I smashed it against my face and groaned. Why was this so hard?

Why was I so hard?

I was lying here, torturing myself by thinking about her. Imagining her naked body in the shower. Or lying on the bed just on the other side of the wall. I didn't know why she'd be naked on the bed, but in my mind she was.

Was she thinking about me, too?

Probably not. She'd seemed tense today, but that didn't mean she was ready to smother herself with a pillow to end the agony.

That was just me.

Maybe I just needed to take care of this hard-on myself. Jerking off wasn't going to keep me from reacting like an animal during mating season as soon as I saw her again. But it might help me calm the hell down so I could relax. I was tired—probably from getting up early to catch our flight. Maybe if I emptied the tanks, I'd be able to take a nap before dinner.

The sad thing—or maybe the good thing, I wasn't sure how to frame it—was that I wasn't going to need any help. No porn necessary. I'd been getting off to nothing but fantasies of Hazel since I'd fucked her in the copy room. The entire incident was imprinted in my memory. I could bring it up like a movie, letting the whole thing play in my mind.

The scientist in me wondered if I was making things worse for myself by continuing to fantasize about her.

My dick, however, ached with unrelieved pressure. And that sensation was a lot louder than any logic my brain might try to throw at me.

The only thought getting through to the front of my mind was worse.

She's right next door.

But really, what was the worst thing that could happen if I went over there? She'd answer her door and tell me to leave? We'd get in an argument about something? Hell, we'd argued the whole time we'd been fucking in the copy room. That hadn't seemed to matter.

Fuck it.

I got up, left my room, and went straight to hers. Lifted my hand to knock.

The door opened before my fist could connect.

Hazel held the door, her eyes widening. My first thought was to wonder where she was going.

Until I saw her buttons.

Those fucking buttons.

Her shirt was partially open, the tops of her tits and part of a nude lace bra

showing.

My mouth turned up in a predatory grin. Fuck. Yes.
She grabbed my shirt and hauled me inside.

CORBAN

“Books are finite, sexual encounters are finite, but the desire to read and to fuck is infinite.” ~ Roberto Bolaño

I didn't wait for the door to shut behind me before grabbing Hazel's shirt and ripping it the rest of the way open. Buttons flew in all directions, but I couldn't have cared less. I had one objective. Getting this woman naked.

Now.

Without a word, I yanked the shirt down her shoulders, and she let it fall to the floor. I spun her around and hooked my finger beneath her bra, tugging on it to draw her closer to me. She gasped, backing up a step. I leaned down and kissed her bare shoulder, then let my teeth scrape along her skin until I reached her bra strap.

“Corban.”

I pushed her bra straps over the curves of her shoulders. “Yeah?”

“This isn't...”

Reaching around, I slipped my hands into the now-loose fabric of her bra and cupped her tits. Her nipples were hard against my palms.

“This isn't what?”

“Happening again. Not after this.”

I squeezed her tits and she arched her back. “Just this once.”

She nodded. “It's only because—”

“We're out of town,” I finished for her between planting wet kisses along

her neck. I let go and unclasped her bra. “That’s fine. Just take your fucking panties off.”

She finished undressing and set her glasses on the nightstand. I wasted no time tearing my clothes off and tossing them to the floor. Barely taking the time to appreciate her—she was a goddamn goddess—I shoved her onto the bed. For half a second, I thought about spreading her legs and climbing on top of her.

But that would put us face to face. I didn’t know if I could handle that. It was too close. Too intimate.

This wasn’t bending her over a table, but I hadn’t come over here to make love to her. And that wasn’t what she’d been about to come to my room for either.

I got on the bed and flipped her over. With her chest still on the bed, I lifted her hips so her ass was in the air.

This ass. It was perfect. Grabbing it with both hands I traced my thumbs up and down her slit. She was already glistening wet. Swollen and pink. She moaned into the sheets, arching her back harder.

With my hands still cupping her ass cheeks, I pressed my hard length against her. Rubbed up and down a few times. She was slick and warm, her skin silky smooth.

“Corban.”

I slid my cock against her. “What do you need?”

Her body shuddered. “I need you inside me.”

Grabbing the shaft, I rubbed her slit with the tip. “You need this?”

“Yes.” Her voice was a whimper.

“I know, sweetheart. I need it too.”

I thrust inside and groaned, my eyes rolling back. She surrounded me, pressing at me from all sides—hot and wet and everything a pussy should be.

Only more.

Being inside her didn’t just feel good. It was a fucking relief.

I held her hips and drove in and out, my muscles flexing. Hard edges against her soft curves. Every thrust eased the ache that had been plaguing me since I’d had her the first time. I needed this. Needed it more than was good for me. But right now, I didn’t care.

Pumping my hips hard, I drove deep. She gasped and moaned, clutching the sheets, her eyes closed.

All that warm skin beckoned to me. I pulled out and yanked her legs

straight, pushing her ass down onto the bed so she was flat on her stomach. Climbing on top of her, I slid my cock back inside, my hips against her ass. My body draped over hers, the contact electrifying.

She propped herself up on her forearms and arched her back. The beast inside me roared to life. Growling into her ear, I slid my hand to her throat. She was pinned beneath me, totally in my control. I kissed and licked down her neck, still driving into her wetness, then bit her shoulder. Her whimper made my blood boil.

I didn't know who the hell I was. Not Corban Nash, awkward data genius. I was an animal. Operating on pure instinct. No distractions. No trains of thought headed in opposite directions. Just my cock in her exquisitely tight pussy. Her skin against mine, her scent everywhere. My hand on her throat and her body pinned beneath me. Her uninhibited moans of pleasure mixing with my rough grunts.

We didn't talk this time. Didn't argue. I couldn't have if I'd wanted to. She was too overwhelming. I rode the edge of climax, not ready for this to end, holding back just enough so I could keep fucking her.

Plus, she was coming first.

Making Hazel come the first time had felt like the ultimate win. No matter what we argued about or how often we picked at each other, I'd made her come apart. That had been me. I'd sent those pulsing tremors through her, brought her to the height of pleasure and felt her explode.

And I was going to do it again.

My awareness shifted slightly, away from the intense pressure in my groin and the superb feel of her slick walls hugging my cock. I felt the pulse in her throat beating against my hand. Her ass pressing into my hips as she arched her back. Her soft, needy whimpers filled my ears.

Don't worry, Hazel. I'll give you what you need.

I pulled out again and flipped her onto her back. Fucking her like this meant facing each other, but I let my instincts have their way. I got on my knees, and with my hands on the backs of her thighs, I pushed her legs open toward her shoulders.

Her eyes rolled back when I thrust my cock inside. Leaning down, I put her legs over my shoulders and braced myself on top of her. Thrust again, harder.

"Yes," she whimpered.

I drove my cock in and out, sinking deep inside, grunting like the beast

only Hazel could turn me into. Her cries were louder, uninhibited. I pushed her legs higher, practically bending her in half, her knees at her shoulders. Her tits brushed my chest and oh fuck I was deep. So far inside her I was bottoming out, filling every bit of her.

Our mouths collided in a furious kiss. Tongues tangling, teeth biting lips. I fucked her harder. Faster. Driving her up the bed.

“Don’t stop.” Her tongue slid across mine and she nipped at my lip. “Don’t fucking stop.”

A curse word coming out of Hazel’s mouth was the hottest thing I’d ever heard. This wasn’t the straight-spined, buttoned-up scientist I sparred with at work. This woman was a sex goddess.

“You want me to fuck you all day, sweetheart, I’ll fuck you all day.”

“I hate that you’re so good at this.”

But her eyes closed and her lips curled in a smile.

I made her smile.

My cock was making her smile.

God, I loved that.

I gave her what she wanted—what she needed—pumping my hard length into her. Thrusting as deep as I could go, grinding against her clit.

Faster.

Harder.

Her pussy was hot, clenching around me. She was close. I could feel her climbing to the brink, ready to explode. I was right there with her, teetering on the edge, my balls drawing up tight. The pressure so intense it filled my entire body.

Our gazes met. Her eyes were glassy and unfocused, her cheeks flushed. Her lips parted, her eyelashes fluttered, and she moaned, the sound reverberating through my chest.

“That’s it.” Thrust. “Come for me.” Thrust. “Fucking come for me.”

Another deep drive of my cock and her pussy spasmed, squeezing tight. I was so deep, I felt every inch of her inner muscles clenching around me.

It made me lose my damn mind.

My muscles tightened, my back stiffened, and I went off like a bomb. My cock throbbed as I spilled hot bursts of come inside her. I thrust hard, still sinking deep, over and over. Groaning and growling, I bit her again, then sucked on her neck while I came.

I was unrestrained and untamed. Taking what I wanted. Indulging my

primal instinct to claim her. Mark her. It was sweet relief and pulsing agony all at once.

Reality rushed back, like air filling the space in a vacuum. I had Hazel bent in half on the bed, her feet over my shoulders. My breathing was ragged, a sheen of sweat on my forehead and chest. Her eyes were half-open, her hair a tangled mess, and she was breathing as hard as I was.

Holy shit. What had just happened?

I untangled myself from her, a fleeting thought about her impressive flexibility darting through my mind. But the sudden loss of contact made me feel empty, a jarring contrast after coming so hard.

My vision swam and I realized I wasn't wearing my glasses. I located them on the floor—no clue how they'd gotten there—and got off the bed to retrieve them.

By the time I turned back to Hazel, she'd put her glasses back on. She was still naked on the bed, her hair a mess, her eyes darting around like she wasn't sure what to do next.

I wasn't sure what to do next either.

Part of me wanted to get in bed with her, wrap her in my arms, and fall asleep holding her against me.

But I knew she didn't want that.

She didn't want *me*. Not really. This primal attraction was purely physical. We'd tried to get along and it hadn't worked. Our hormones and brain chemicals simply hadn't caught up yet.

I picked up my clothes and quickly hauled my boxers and pants on. Her warm body in that bed called to me, tugging at something in my chest. I cast a quick glance at her, out of the corner of my eye. She sat on the edge of the bed, holding the sheet up over her chest.

"I'll see you at the keynote?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'll be there."

I fastened my pants, wondering if I should ask her to have dinner. We both needed to eat. Neither of us knew anyone else here. It made sense to have dinner together.

Except, she'd just said she'd see me at the keynote. That was *after* dinner.

It was just sex. She didn't want anything else from me.

Of course she didn't. She didn't even like me.

I pulled on my shirt. She was still on the edge of the bed, the sheet clutched in her fist, like she was waiting for me to leave so she could get up

and put her clothes back on.

“Corban—”

“I know.” I cut her off, not wanting to hear what I knew she was going to say. “It won’t happen again.”

She flinched and I didn’t understand the flash of pain in her eyes. She’d already said it wasn’t happening again. I was only agreeing with her.

My legs felt oddly heavy. I just wanted to lie down. Maybe I should have said something else, but I didn’t know what to say. If I tried, chances were I’d make things worse, not better. Or a random fact about animal behavior would pop into my head—my brain served those up at the worst times—and I’d blurt it out.

I was so fucking awkward.

Raking my hand through my hair, I turned to go. “See you later.”

She didn’t answer.

So I didn’t stay.

HAZEL

“Math is like love—a simple idea, but it can get complicated.” ~ Anonymous

Corban was avoiding me.

No, it was more definitive than that. Avoidance could have involved a lack of eye contact or a reluctance to engage in conversation. It could have meant sitting on the other side of the room at the keynote address last night. Perhaps slipping out before circumstance had an opportunity to push us together.

He wasn't avoiding me. He simply wasn't here.

I hadn't seen him at the keynote. Nor among the attendees mingling and drinking cocktails afterward. I hadn't seen him in the lobby this morning, nor had I caught sight of him heading to the first conference session.

The conference was large, but not so populous that he could have gone completely unnoticed. Not with how intently I'd been looking for him.

Only out of professional concern, of course. Naturally I'd wonder where my colleague was.

It had nothing to do with what we'd done yesterday afternoon. That had been a mere opportunistic sexual encounter. Two people who'd already determined their physical compatibility, engaging in a mutually pleasing act. That was all.

Which meant it shouldn't have stung so much when he'd abruptly left my room. But it had.

He'd hesitated, half-dressed, and for a moment, I'd wondered if he would

ask to stay. Or suggest we have dinner together. And in that moment, I'd stupidly let myself yearn for it. My illogical heart had swelled with hope.

But he hadn't. He'd left.

And that was precisely why I was so anxious to see him again. I needed to show my silly heart that it didn't need to be involved where Corban Nash was concerned. There wasn't anything between us. No reason for my heart to be hurting today.

I slipped out of the first session approximately one minute early. Adjusting my glasses, I scanned the lobby outside the conference rooms. There were a handful of people—attendees with name badges around their necks—but no Corban. I checked my phone, but he hadn't replied to my texts.

Of course, he was probably in the neighboring conference room, listening to a different session. Perhaps he'd arrived a few minutes late, when I'd already taken my seat in the first room, and I'd missed him.

Or maybe he'd decided to skip the morning session in favor of a walk on the beach. That was possible. It didn't seem like him, but the weather was beautiful.

The sessions ended and all four conference room doors opened. Attendees filed out and the hum of noise in the lobby grew. Some headed for the growing line at the coffee bar. Others checked their schedules or their phones. Small knots of people formed, introductions were made, conversations began or continued.

Still no Corban.

Where was he?

My phone hadn't vibrated with a notification, but I checked it again anyway. Nothing. Feeling agitated and jittery, yet still assuring myself this was only professional concern, I peeked into each of the conference rooms. Maybe he was talking to someone. One of the presenters, perhaps.

He wasn't there, either.

A sick feeling grew in the pit of my stomach. Had he left? We weren't supposed to go home until this weekend, but he could have called the airline and changed his flight.

Had he gone home because of me?

I debated what to do. Press on with the conference and assume there was a logical explanation for his absence? Ask the front desk if he'd checked out? Call Elliott to see if he'd heard from Corban?

There were fifteen-minute breaks between sessions. Plenty of time to go upstairs and knock on his door. I'd simply go up there and find out for myself what was going on.

Because he had to be there. He couldn't have left.

The elevator seemed to move in slow motion, rising from floor to floor as if it had no reason at all to hurry. I tapped my foot and tugged on my name badge, growing increasingly impatient.

And increasingly angry.

Corban had given me one of the most intense orgasms of my entire life—vying for the title with the copy room orgasm, also courtesy of Corban—and then disappeared. If he'd decided to blow off the conference, the least he could have done is text me to let me know. He had to realize I'd expect to see him, if not last night, then certainly this morning.

The elevator doors opened on our floor. I barely noticed the humidity of the outside corridor. I was too busy fuming at Corban. My heels clicked on the ground, my gait going from a walk to a determined march. I wasn't hurt that he'd abandoned me. I was angry at his rudeness.

That's what I told myself, at least.

I stopped in front of his door, my spine straight, and knocked. Hard.

Nothing.

I knocked again. Waited. Still nothing.

A lump rose in my throat. Leaning closer to the door, I strained to listen for signs of life inside. For any sound that would tell me he was still here.

Silence.

Anger flashed through me again and I felt the frustrating burn of tears. Damn him. He had no right to leave without telling me. The next time I saw him, I was going to—

The door opened.

The first thing I noticed was Corban's lack of glasses. His hair was a mess—even more than usual—and his t-shirt and sweats were rumpled, like he'd just gotten out of bed. But it was his face that made my breath catch. His eyes were heavy, ringed by dark circles, and his skin was deathly pale.

“Oh my god, what happened to you?”

“Stop.” He lifted a hand, palm facing out, and his voice was rough. “Don't come closer.”

“Why?”

“I don't want to get you sick.”

He looked unsteady on his feet, like he was about to fall over.

“You need to get back in bed.”

Ignoring his weak protests, I stepped into his room and put my arm around him. He shuffled toward the closest bed, his feet barely leaving the floor. His skin was hot—I could feel the feverish heat coming off him.

“When did this happen? You seemed fine yesterday.”

He collapsed onto the bed and closed his eyes. “Last night. I felt a little off after... you know. Fell asleep in my room. Woke up a few hours later feeling like I got hit by a bus.”

I put my things down, then touched his forehead and face with the back of my hand. “Fever. What are your other symptoms?”

“Everything hurts and I want to die.”

“Any vomiting?”

“No.”

“Diarrhea?”

He cracked an eye open. “God, Hazel. Really?”

“I need to know if you’re in danger of dehydration.”

“No. You shouldn’t be in here. Whatever this is, you don’t want it. Trust me.”

“Corban, we exchanged copious amounts of bodily fluids less than twenty-four hours ago. If this is a viral infection, I’ve already been exposed.”

He just groaned and closed his eyes.

I looked at him for a moment, lying on his side, his legs bent. His face was flushed with fever, his skin sallow. He was disheveled and miserable.

And utterly adorable.

I ran my fingers through his hair, a gesture that was overly familiar, considering we were barely even friends. But we’d also slept together twice, so I decided my urge to physically comfort him wasn’t out of place.

“Have you had any water?”

He didn’t open his eyes. “Some.”

“What about food?”

“No.”

“Do you want anything?”

“Death. Sleep. I don’t know.”

“Okay,” I murmured, smoothing his hair one last time. “I’ll be right back.”

I found his room key sitting on the bedside table, so I tucked it in my

pocket, grabbed my purse, and went downstairs to the shop in the lobby for supplies. There I found bottled water, microwavable soups, and ibuprofen to bring down his fever. I brought everything back to his room and roused him enough to sip some water.

He was still hot and clammy, so I soaked a washcloth in cool water. At first, I stood by the bed, holding it to his forehead. But I had to lean over at an odd angle, so finally I got on the bed with him.

“You should go back to the conference,” he muttered.

“Don’t worry about me. I will.”

I pressed the washcloth to his neck and gently stroked his back. It seemed to help him relax. The tension in his forehead eased and his breathing slowed. Even after the washcloth had warmed from his body heat, I stayed next to him, touching him softly. Rubbing slow circles across his back and idly threading my fingers through his hair.

After a while, he seemed to have fallen asleep. I glanced at the clock next to the bed. I’d missed the second session, but if I left now, I could listen to the lunch lecture.

But Corban might be hungry when he woke up. If he wanted some of the soup I’d bought, it would be easier for him if I was here to heat it up.

It wouldn’t hurt if I stayed. There was an extra pillow right here. This way I’d be close if Corban got worse.

I glanced at the door, wondering what I was doing. This didn’t make sense, and I knew it. Why would I stay? It wasn’t strictly necessary, and given the nature of our relationship, it was probably out of place. But even though I couldn’t explain why, I didn’t want him to be alone. I felt compelled to stay.

Leaving my glasses on the bedside table, I settled in next to him. After a moment, I glanced around the room—not that anyone was around to see—and scooted closer.

Closer.

A little bit closer.

Until I was right up against his back and could feel him breathing.

Just a precaution in case his condition turned significantly worse, of course. Not because my body craved closeness with his.

He was still feverish but sleeping peacefully. I’d just stay for a little while. With my body tucked against him, I relaxed and waited while Corban slept.

CORBAN

“Mathematics is not about numbers, equations, computations, or algorithms: it is about understanding.” ~ William Paul Thurston

The first time I woke up, Hazel was there. I didn't know what time it was, but daylight peeked through a small gap in the curtains. She was curled up next to me, her hands tucked beneath the pillow, her eyes closed. My head was too fuzzy and my body hurt too much to contemplate what it meant. All I knew was that I was glad she was here.

I relaxed and went back to sleep.

The second time I woke up, she was sitting in bed next to me, reading by the light of a lamp. I was dimly aware of her touching my face and smoothing back my hair. She gave me a few sips of water and offered me soup. But I wasn't ready for food.

But unlike the previous night, when whatever shitty virus I'd caught had kept me up, tossing and turning, my body was calm. Relaxed. I drank some more water and went back to sleep.

It helped knowing she was there.

The third time my eyes opened, I could tell my fever had broken. I didn't feel good, exactly, but the haze in my brain had lifted and I was no longer hot and clammy. Light once again peeked through a crack in the curtains. It was probably morning.

I sat up and swung my legs over the edge of the bed, then rubbed my hands up and down my face. I was weak and sore, but it seemed like the

worst was over. What a crappy time to get sick. Not that there was ever a good time, but alone in a hotel thousands of miles from home was particularly bad.

Except, I hadn't been alone. Hazel must have been here all day yesterday. She'd missed the first day of the conference to take care of me.

That realization made my chest feel tight. Not only had she come looking for me, she'd stayed.

I put on my glasses and checked my phone. I had a text from her, asking me to let her know when I woke up. I replied that I was up and feeling better. Less than a minute later, there was a knock at my door.

"Morning," I said when I opened the door.

Hazel's short-sleeved shirt was white with dark blue dots and pearly white buttons. My mouth twitched in a hint of a smile, thinking about the buttons flying off her shirt the other day. I'd probably ruined that one, but I had no regrets.

"You seem to be recovering quickly." She stepped in and put the back of her hand to my forehead, then touched my neck. "Body temperature appears to be normal. How are you feeling?"

"Better." I let the door shut and she followed me inside. "Still kind of run down, but I also haven't eaten since the flight."

"Would you like me to heat up some soup?"

"You don't have to do that. You'll miss more of the conference."

She raised her eyebrows. I knew that look. Determination, or maybe stubbornness. But it meant she wasn't going to back down.

"It's fine. I can stay."

I lowered myself onto the edge of one of the beds. "I don't have the energy to argue with you. But I need more than soup. How about we get room service?"

"Are you sure your digestive system is ready for something substantial?"

"Yes. My digestive system needs waffles."

That made her smile. "Very well. Waffles it is."

I called room service and ordered eggs and waffles, plus coffee for me and tea for Hazel. While we waited for breakfast, I decided to shower. I hadn't since I'd been here, and I felt gross from the fever. By the time I came out, dressed in a clean t-shirt and pair of sweats, I felt mostly human again.

Our food arrived and we took the tray to one of the beds. I wasted no time scarfing down everything on my plate. Hazel looked amused, but I didn't

care. I was starving.

“Feel better?” She took a sip of her tea.

“Much.”

“Good.”

She was probably going to go once she finished her tea. Which kind of sucked. I didn't want her to leave, but it didn't make sense to ask her to stay.

A train of thought took off, the idea racing through my brain.

A dangerous idea.

A terrible idea.

An irresistible idea.

Once the thought hit my frontal lobe, I couldn't get it out. So I just said it.

“Do you want to do my questionnaire together?”

Her mouth parted and she blinked a few times behind her glasses. “You want me to do your questionnaire with you?”

“Yes.”

“The one you claim makes people fall in love with each other?”

I decided not to counter with, *it does make people fall in love with each other*, but to consider it a win that she hadn't thrown something at me for suggesting it.

“It's actually more complex than that. The questionnaire is designed to develop intimacy, which is a necessary condition for falling in love.”

“So you're saying you want to develop intimacy with me?”

The thought train was still racing through my head and I was along for the ride. I didn't particularly want to contemplate why I'd suggested we do my questionnaire. There were reasons—I could sense them pushing at the edges of my consciousness. But I was vaguely aware that if I thought too hard about those reasons, I'd balk.

I adjusted my glasses. “I just figured it might be interesting. And you don't have to worry; it won't make you fall in love with me against your will.”

Her back straightened. “I'm sure it won't.”

Of course it won't. It doesn't work on me. “Will you do it?”

She pursed her lips but still didn't answer.

One corner of my mouth turned up in a grin. “What if I dare you?”

“Are we children on a playground? You're going to issue a dare?”

The spark in her eyes contrasted with her words. I was getting to her.

“Yeah, I am. Hazel, I dare you to go through my questionnaire with me.

Right now.”

Her eyes narrowed and a flush of pink hit her cheeks. It was such a turn on when she looked at me like that. Even better when it wasn't because we were arguing.

“This isn't a controlled environment. It won't have any scientific merit.”

“I know. It's not an experiment. Just two people in a hotel room asking each other questions.”

“Fine.” She pushed her glasses up her nose. “I'll do it. But only out of professional curiosity.”

We cleared the remnants of breakfast and I got out my laptop. There was a small table with two chairs, but she sat cross-legged on the bed, so I joined her. I liked that she'd chosen to sit here. It felt more personal.

Plus, I liked her on my bed. Even if we were dressed and I wasn't bending her in half.

“How are we going to do this?” she asked.

I clicked to open the document. “It's pretty simple. There are thirty questions, and they—”

“Get increasingly deep and complex. I know, I've read your articles.”

I lifted my eyes to meet hers. “And argued with every one.”

“Valid criticisms.”

“If you say so. You've read my articles, but I don't publish my questionnaire publicly yet, so you haven't seen that. Thirty questions designed to make each partner increasingly open and vulnerable.”

She shifted, like she was trying to get comfortable. “All right. Are there any specific parameters that need to be followed?”

“That's a good question. I haven't determined how variables like encouraging or discouraging back and forth conversation or imposing a time limit change the results. Obviously, I need a lot more data. But since we're just doing this out of—what did you say, professional curiosity?”

She nodded.

“Then we can just see how it goes.”

“Fair enough.”

I turned my laptop so we could both see it. “It seems to work best if we take turns asking the questions. But we both need to answer each one. Do you want to start?”

She nodded took a deep breath. “First question. What is your favorite holiday, and why?”

“Christmas, because I like getting presents. I like giving them, too.”

“Very deep, Corban. I feel like I know so much about you now,” she deadpanned.

“Just answer the question.”

Her mouth twitched with the hint of a smile. “Halloween, because ever since high school, my friend Nora has picked matching costumes for us. She dresses me up and I get to pretend to be someone, or something, else.”

“Why do you want to be someone else?”

She glanced at the screen. “That’s not the next question.”

“I know. I’m just asking because I’m curious.”

It took her a moment to answer. “I suppose because it’s fun to pretend. I’m different from my friends, but when we’re all dressed like cats, or witches, or zombie prom queens, I feel very included. Which, when I think about it, is an odd sentiment, because they never make me feel excluded.”

“Zombie prom queens?”

“Nora does an excellent job with her costuming.”

God, she was so cute. “Okay, next question. What career aspirations did you have when you were a child?”

“My mother was a school librarian, so for a long time, I thought I’d do that.”

Hot librarian indeed. Even hotter when she wasn’t angry. Although she was hot when she was angry, too.

I looked at the screen so I’d focus on the question, instead of how good her boobs had looked with her shirt partially open. “When I was five or six, I wanted to be a race car driver or a firefighter. But when I got a little older, I wanted to be an astronomer.”

“And now you’re a data analyst and psych researcher.”

“Yeah. I’m not sure when it happened, but at some point I stopped looking at the sky and started looking at the people around me.”

“People are so fascinating.” She leaned forward and her voice was passionate. “So perplexing, and yet so many human behaviors follow discernible patterns.”

“Exactly. You can even see it in the data. You’d think distilling human behavior into numbers would take the humanity out of it, but it’s the opposite. When you realize there are things you can predict if you understand the patterns, everything gets more interesting.”

“Yes, I know. When I was an undergrad, I came across a meta-analysis

on the psychology of friendship formation and I couldn't believe how much the data supported my own casual observations and experiences."

We blinked at each other, the air still buzzing with our shared excitement. Almost simultaneously, we both adjusted our glasses—again—and looked away.

I suddenly wondered if this was the worst idea I'd ever had. Even worse than fucking Hazel in the copy room at work. Although, to be fair, that hadn't been an idea as much as following a primal instinct and letting my inner sex beast take over. But we were only on question two, and this was already getting a little intense.

I'd done this before. I knew these questions inside and out. But answering them, especially the early ones, had never felt like this. It was like walking into a maze I'd thought I'd solved—the route to the exit memorized—and realizing all the walls had moved.

But it was too late to go back now. Wherever this led, I was committed.

HAZEL

“Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.” Marie Curie

This wasn't going to work.

I'd already decided before even catching a glimpse of Corban's questionnaire. Oh, I was answering his questions. I was even being honest. But it wasn't going to create, or accelerate, intimacy between us. And it certainly wasn't going to make me fall in love with him.

Fifteen questions in—halfway through—and I was holding strong.

Mostly.

The initial questions had led us to discuss things like our most prized possession, our fears, or lack thereof, when it came to public speaking, and whether or not we liked spoilers when we watched movies or TV shows. Incidentally, we agreed that the thrill of discovery was worth the anxiety of not knowing the ending, even when the storyline was dramatic or tense.

I could sense the methodology behind the questionnaire. Some were easy to answer: *What do you find relaxing?* I'd answered baking; he said rock climbing. Seemingly innocuous tidbits of information to share with another person. But every question we answered sparked a mini-conversation. What was it about baking that I found aided in stress relief? Why did rock climbing, which was an intense physical activity, provide an experience that was relaxing? And why had neither of us said something more passive, like reading or getting a massage?

And every time we moved on, it was easier to answer the next question. If we'd started with *If you could plan your own funeral, what would it include?*, I doubt either of us would have been able to answer honestly. But by the time we got to that question—number eleven—it was like we'd been primed to answer. Our conversation flowed so easily, I found myself sharing things I wouldn't have under different circumstances.

With the way Corban blinked in surprise at some of the things he said, I wondered if he felt the same way.

However, learning things—even interesting things—about him wasn't going to change my mind. About anything.

"If you were suddenly independently wealthy, what would you change about your life?" he asked, reading from his laptop screen.

"I'd move. My apartment is adequate, but I'd enjoy having more space. And no one living above or below me."

"Is that all?"

"I suppose there would be changes to my professional life, but I'd still do research. What about you?"

He paused and nodded silently, like he was working through his thoughts before speaking. "Money means security. It means being in control of your own destiny. I'd move, too—not because I can't afford to now and more money would make it possible, but because I'd know that I can stay where I am for as long as I want."

"Have you moved a lot?"

"We moved around a few times when I was a kid. Not enough that it was excessive, but enough that I didn't have a childhood home. As an adult, I've always followed my career, moving when I got a new job."

"And that's not what you want."

"No, it's not. Now that I'm back in Seattle, I'd like the security of knowing I can stay. Especially since Molly's having a baby."

I tried to covertly chew on the inside of my lip so he wouldn't see me react. That statement had absolutely not hit me right in the ovaries.

That was a lie. It really had.

It was my turn to read the next question, so I used it to steer the subject away from babies—and the way it made me feel a little melty when Corban talked about his niece.

"What's the best advice you've ever been given?"

"In high school, a teacher said there are few things as exhausting and

ultimately useless as changing who you are to get people to like you. At the time, I had a crush on my sister's best friend, Paisley Hayes. She was pretty and popular, and the only reason she knew I existed was because of my sister. She dated jocks and cool guys, not math nerds. My teacher wasn't necessarily talking about girls, but I thought about what he'd said and realized it was kind of dumb for me to keep crushing on a girl who'd never notice me."

"I know what that feels like. The part about having a crush on someone who doesn't notice you. In high school I liked a boy on the baseball team. But he liked my friend, Nora. Of course, all the boys liked Nora."

"Was she dating him?"

I shook my head. "No. She knew I liked him, so she tried to redirect his attention to me. Naturally that didn't work, but as seventeen-year-old girls, we weren't yet experienced enough to realize it wouldn't. When he didn't ask me out, we decided we hated him and burned a picture of him in the fireplace at my friend Everly's house."

Corban chuckled. "I'm pretty sure Molly burned a guy's picture—or his stuff—more than once."

"It was very therapeutic."

"What about you? Best advice you've ever been given."

I had to consider that for a moment. "You know, I've been given numerous tidbits of wisdom from professors and colleagues over the years. But I think the best advice I've ever been given was from Nora. She told me to own it."

"Own what?"

Having sex with you in the copy room. "She was referring to a specific incident, but really, she meant own everything. My choices. Myself. Who I am."

He grinned. "That is good advice."

We paused to get a snack. Corban was like a bottomless pit after not eating for a day. Then we settled back onto the bed to continue.

The next several questions were thought-provoking without being uncomfortable. We talked about recurring dreams and discovered we both tended to dream about missing a college final exam when we were stressed. We'd also both read much of the relevant literature on such dreams.

Finding our way back to the questionnaire after the dream discussion, we answered several more. Then we came to question twenty-two.

"Tell your partner about a mistake you made that you'll never make

again,” Corban read.

“Marrying the wrong man,” I said without thinking.

My mouth snapped shut. Oh no. I shouldn’t have said that. This wasn’t a topic I enjoyed discussing.

“You were married?”

I took a deep breath. “Yes. We got married when we were still in grad school. It didn’t last very long.”

“What happened?”

“We both applied for a job in London. It was a long shot, but an exciting opportunity. He got the job, and I didn’t. We decided there were too many benefits to his career for him to turn it down, and we could make a long-distance relationship work. After all, we were both so busy, we hardly saw each other. It wouldn’t be terribly different from how we were already living. So he went.”

“And long-distance didn’t work.”

“No. Actually, I thought it *was* working at first. I’d been right, it wasn’t so different from when we’d been living under the same roof. Which probably tells you everything you need to know about our brief marriage.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

I shook my head. “I thought it was because we were so similar. Neither of us was overly emotional or sentimental. Both very independent and focused on our careers. It turns out that what I’d perceived as a lack of sentimentality was actually a lack of him being in love with me.”

Corban’s hand twitched, like he was going to reach out and touch mine. But he didn’t.

“He’d been gone three months when he called to say he wanted a divorce. He said he’d never really been in love with me and he knew that now because he’d met someone else. His feelings for her were so strong, he was having a hard time refraining from committing adultery. I hadn’t realized the man was capable of strong feelings of any kind, romantic or otherwise. We never even fought.”

“Really? Never?”

“Not once, and we were married for a year before he moved to London.” I looked down at my hands in my lap. “It was for the best. He’d been gone three months and I hardly missed him. So we quietly divorced.”

“That must have been hard.”

“It was, and it wasn’t. It was just some paperwork. We didn’t have any

children or shared assets. But..." I paused. This part was harder to share. But somehow I felt safe enough with Corban to share it. "The hard part was that divorce felt like such a failure. I'd been so wrong about him. I should have known better."

I hated admitting that. Hated having been so wrong.

He shrugged. "Sometimes you can't see things for what they are until you get on the other side of them."

I nodded. "And I suppose I wasn't in love with him either. I was sad when things ended, but it didn't take me very long to move on. I've had other break-ups that were worse than the end of my marriage."

He raised his eyebrows, like he wanted to ask about them.

"Don't ask. Your turn. What's a mistake you've made that you'll never make again?"

He hesitated, once again wearing his thinking face. I hoped he wasn't going to say having sex with his coworker in the copy room.

"My mistake is one I don't want to make again, but sometimes that's easier said than done."

I bit my lower lip, waiting for him to continue.

"I was working on the algorithm for the dating app and everything was coming together. We'd started market testing it on a small scale and it worked better than my team and I had expected. I'd been developing the questionnaire at the same time, plus taking psychology classes and diving into all the research I could find on attraction and relationship development. I liked the data stuff, but it wasn't what I wanted to do. I wasn't excited about finding ways to match people using a phone app, even if it was more accurate than anything else out there. I wanted to dig deeper. Focus on the humanity behind the data."

"But you didn't?"

"No, and that was my mistake. I had a conversation with my parents about it and I let them sway me into staying at my job. I didn't trust my instincts. Ultimately, it worked out fine. I did leave my job, obviously. I'm here now. But at the time, it was kind of a blow to my confidence."

"I'm glad you did eventually trust your instincts."

He met my eyes. "Me too."

Feeling uncomfortably vulnerable, I shifted the laptop to read the next question.

They didn't get easier.

Before beginning, I'd understood the logic of the questionnaire in an academic sense. But I hadn't realized how it would feel to experience it. Especially how it would feel to experience it with Corban.

The thought-provoking questions drew out answers from deep inside. His responses fed my openness, as if my subconscious sensed his vulnerability and sought to match it. It was like spinning down a whirlpool. The more questions we answered, the more we shared. The more we shared, the deeper our responses became. The deeper our responses became, the easier it was to continue, and the more I felt something very unexpected.

Connection.

Understanding.

Familiarity.

I couldn't fight the strange desire to continue. And as we answered the last few questions, I realized there was something to this. Something brilliant and deep and real.

But his questionnaire was not going to make me fall in love.

HAZEL

“The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge.” ~ Bertrand Russell

The Seattle air felt cool after nearly a week in Florida. Not that I'd gotten out much. Other than a couple of early morning runs on the beach, I'd mostly been in the hotel.

With Corban. But I didn't want to think about that right now.

The parking lot across from Brody's Brewhouse was nearly full, and I'd already seen several people out for a walk or jog, taking advantage of the clear day. Standing next to my car, I stretched my quadriceps while I waited for Nora and Sophie to arrive. Everly hadn't yet returned from her honeymoon, but the rest of us were sticking to our half-marathon training schedule. We'd increased our mileage and all of us, even Nora, had been getting in solo runs during the week.

Although I was still a bit jet-lagged from my trip, I was glad to be meeting my friends for a run today. Seeing them would provide the bit of normalcy I needed after the conference.

Specifically, after all the mind-blowing hotel sex I'd had with Corban.

That first night at the conference, we'd both said it wouldn't happen again. But we'd continued to succumb to the temptation of each other, over and over. On the one hand, it had been enjoyable and satisfying. Incredibly satisfying. Intensely satisfying, unlike anything I'd ever experienced before.

But on the other hand, I wasn't sure what it all meant. Or whether it

would continue. Or how I'd feel about it if it did continue... or if it didn't.

It was a lot of information to process. An afternoon spent with my friends, focused on running, was just what I needed.

That, and a very strong martini afterward.

Nora pulled up in her red convertible Jeep with Sophie in the passenger's seat. They both got out, and Nora adjusted the straps of her sports bra. Her dark hair was in a ponytail today, and she wore a fitted tank top and black shorts that showed off her legs. I'd always admired the confidence she had in her body.

"How was Florida?" she asked. "And why aren't you tan?"

"The conference was... very informative. And I was mostly indoors."

"That's better for your skin, anyway. You look great. Very satisfied."

I looked away and lifted my other leg to stretch it. "It was time well spent, but I'm glad to be home."

"Time well spent? Oh, Hazel."

"What?"

Nora smiled at me. "Nothing."

"You do look great," Sophie said. Her curly hair was unusually tame, most of the strands contained in a thick bun. She wore a purple tank top, black capris, and what looked like a new pair of running shoes.

"Thank you. Are the shoes new?"

"They are." She stuck out one foot, pointing her toe. "Thanks for noticing. I went to a fancy running-shoe store last weekend. The sales guy who helped me was so cute."

"Did you get his number?" Nora asked.

"No. I kind of knocked over one of the big shoe displays. After that, I just wanted to get out of there. But that's okay, because I got these and they're the most comfortable shoes I've ever had. I ran seven whole miles the other day and my feet felt great. Plus, I didn't trip once."

"That's a very impressive mileage gain," I said.

"Thanks," Sophie said brightly. "I'm not very fast yet, but I'm really starting to think I'll be able to finish this race."

"Of course you will," Nora said. "Hazel came up with the training schedule, and she's brilliant, so we know it'll work."

"It will definitely work. The research says—"

"Stop," Nora said, and I closed my mouth. "You know I love you, but you already told us all about the research."

“You’re right, I did. Perhaps we should just get started.”

Nora nodded once. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Uh-oh.” Sophie gestured toward the parking lot entrance. “It’s them again.”

A white SUV pulled into a spot a few cars down, and the Bedazzled Bitches poured out. They were wearing their gem-encrusted tank tops and had added matching hats to their attire—decorated with more bedazzling.

“Could they be any trashier?” Nora crossed her arms.

“Oh look, aren’t you three cute?” Bella and her minions stopped in front of us. “But it looks like you’re missing someone. What happened to the ditzy blonde?”

“Oh no she didn’t,” Sophie mumbled.

I put a hand on her arm.

“If she doesn’t come back, you’ll have to get someone to take her place. Otherwise who’s going to be the dumb one? You already have the curvy one”—Bella made air quotes when she said *curvy* —“the nerdy one, and the slutty one.”

“Was that supposed to be an insult?” Nora asked.

Drew spoke up. “Obviously.”

“I’m just wondering if that’s the best she can do. Sophie *is* curvy. Women would pay good money for boobs and hips like that. Calling Hazel nerdy? Really? Every woman who wears glasses just collectively rolled their eyes at you. And I assume I’m the slutty one?”

“If the shoe fits,” Bella said.

“Boring and unoriginal. And not very insulting. Better luck next time, sweetie. Maybe stick to jogging and dressing like truck-stop strippers.”

Bella put her hands on her hips. “Drew and I were only dancing to pay for school, and it wasn’t at a truck stop.”

“I don’t think that was intended to insult your choice of employment,” I said. “But rather your taste in fashion, or lack thereof.”

“Whatever.”

“This is a total waste of time,” Nora said.

“Indeed.” I checked my watch. “We have a half-marathon to train for.”

Bella burst out laughing. Drew and their two minions followed suit, although I doubted they understood the cause of Bella’s amusement.

“You’re training for a half-marathon?” Bella asked, swiping a tear from the corner of her eye. “The Soggy Seattle Half?”

I glanced at my friends in confusion. “Yes. And I fail to see why that’s funny.”

“We do that race every year,” Bella said. “It’s a little out of your league. None of you are serious runners.”

My gaze swept over the *Bedazzled Bitches* and their gaudy attire. “And you are?”

“Dead serious.” Bella held out her wrist, showcasing a Garmin running watch. The other three did the same. Naturally, they all matched.

“Running is basically our life,” Drew said and the other three nodded, their expressions serious. “I even subscribe to *Runner’s World* magazine.”

“How nice for you,” Nora said.

“No offense, but...” Bella made a dramatic show of looking us up and down. “None of you are really made for this. A half-marathon isn’t a little jog around the block.”

“We’re aware of the distance and training required,” I said.

“Oh my god, every time you talk I get cramps.” Bella turned her scathing glare on me. “Can you just not with the whole I’m-so-smart monotone thing? It was weird in high school and it’s still weird now.”

“You know what?” Sophie stepped forward. “I’m done with this. I don’t care if you have low self-esteem or if you’re just crappy human beings, you have no right to be mean to my friends. And yes, we are going to run the Soggy Seattle Half, and you know what else? We’re going to kick all four of your asses doing it.”

Bella’s face twisted in a scowl and she crossed her arms. “You think you can beat us?”

“I know we can.” Sophie moved closer. “We’re going to finish before any of you and we’ll be at the finish line when you cross, with signs that say *suck it, Bedazzled Bitches*. With glitter.”

Bella pointed at Sophie, sweeping her finger up and down. “You must be joking if you think all that is going to finish with a better time than me.”

“It’s not a joke.” Sophie’s hands clenched into fists. “I’ll bet money on it.”

“Whoa, Sophie.” Nora tried to grab Sophie’s arm, but she shrugged her off.

“I’m serious. I’ll bet you five hundred dollars that we finish before any of you.”

“I’ll take that bet,” Bella said.

Drew leaned closer to her and whispered. “Are you sure? That’s a lot of money.”

“Shut up, Drew.” Bella held her hand out to Sophie. “You’re on.”

Sophie took her hand and shook. “Prepare to lose.”

I met Nora’s eyes and we nodded to each other. We needed to get Sophie out of here.

“Well, that escalated quickly.” Nora hooked her arm through one of Sophie’s and I did the same on the other side. “Come on, Soph. Let’s go.”

Sophie craned her neck to shout at the Bedazzled Bitches as we led her away. “You guys better save all that bitchy energy and quit flinging it at us, because you’re going to need it.”

Nora and I led her across the street, straight to Brody’s.

“Wait, we have to run first,” Sophie said.

I opened the door and Nora hauled her inside. “We’ll make up for it later.”

We found a table, deposited Sophie into a chair, and sat down on either side of her.

She blinked, glancing around like she wasn’t sure where she was. “Oh my god, what did I do?”

“I should probably be mad at you for that, but I’m too busy basking in your badassery,” Nora said. “Betting money was a bad idea, but damn, Soph. I didn’t know you had that in you.”

“They just made me so mad. I don’t care if they make fun of me. I’m never going to be a size two and I’m fine with that. But they called Everly dumb, and you slutty, and the way they talk to Hazel makes me want to punch them in their stupid faces.”

I smiled at her. “Oddly, that’s a very nice thing for you to say.”

“All four of those shabby bitches could use a punch to the face,” Nora said. “But now what are we going to do?”

“There’s only one thing we can do,” I said.

“What?”

I adjusted my glasses. “Win.”

CORBAN

“Scientists are the peeping toms at the keyhole of eternity.” ~ Arthur Koestler

The alarm went off, and I sprang out of bed. I had a lot to do today, including a meeting with Elliott to go over my grant proposal. That was why I hurried through my morning routine to get into work. It had nothing to do with a certain prickly coworker in the office next door. I’d been gone most of last week, and although the conference had been great, I had a lot of catching up to do.

Whatever virus had hit me had run its course in about a day. By the second morning, I’d been more or less back to normal—well enough to finish out the conference with Hazel. We’d hung out between sessions and eaten our meals together. Nothing that could be considered a date, but I’d liked spending time with her.

Getting naked with her a few more times, however, had been the best part.

That hadn’t been planned, but we’d clearly been on the same sexual wavelength. And it had been fucking fantastic.

Now that we were home, I needed to get my head back in the game. No more hot hotel sex. Hazel and I had both insisted—more than once—that we were only sleeping together because we were away.

Was that true? I really didn’t know. Given the opportunity, I knew damn well I’d sleep with her again. Whether I’d get that opportunity remained to be

seen.

I showered, dressed, and grabbed a quick breakfast before heading into work. Hazel was in her office cradling a mug of tea in her hands when I walked by. I paused, and my first instinct was to walk in there and kiss her. But I pushed the urge aside. Regardless of how insanely hot the sex had been, we weren't together. Before last week, we'd barely even liked each other. So the little smile she gave me felt like a win. I'd take it.

Doing my questionnaire with her had been another big win. I believed in what I'd created—believed in the data behind it. I'd put countless hours into analyzing the information that had led to those questions. I was proud of it and I'd liked sharing it with her.

Not that it had made us fall in love. But I hadn't expected that. I already knew it didn't work on me. And I wasn't going to let the discontent humming in the back of my brain ruin the fact that we were getting along now. That had to count for something.

I just hoped I wouldn't say something stupid to screw it up.

The morning got busy. Hazel disappeared—probably to the lab. I lost track of time again, but I didn't work through lunch. Not quite. Around one I grabbed a comic book I'd brought to read while I ate and headed for the staff lounge.

Flipping through the pages and whistling softly, I read while I walked down the mostly empty hallway. My toe hit something solid and I looked up just before walking into a door frame.

That would have sucked.

For half a second, I was disoriented. Where was I? This wasn't the staff lounge.

I'd walked straight to the copy room.

What was it with this place? This was the second time I'd wandered over here without meaning to.

And once again, Hazel stood in front of the copy machine.

Pheromones, man. Motherfucking pheromones.

My mouth curled in a grin. She was wearing a dress today. Dark blue with tiny white polka dots, belted at the waist, with a pair of coffee brown heels.

It was impossible not to imagine stepping up behind her and grabbing her hips. Pressing myself against her while I kissed her neck. Hiking that dress up around her waist.

She glanced over her shoulder and her eyes flicked up and down, taking me in. Was she remembering that night too? Thinking about what it had felt like when I'd taken her right on that table?

I took a step closer. "We really need to stop meeting here like this."

"We aren't *meeting* here. I'm making copies."

"Is that what they're calling it now?"

With a roll of her eyes, she turned back to the copy machine.

I kept grinning. She was so cute when she was annoyed with me. I lowered my voice. "What was that? We should both work late and accidentally run into each other here? Hazel, I'm shocked. That doesn't sound like it would be an accident."

"Will you be quiet? Someone might hear you."

"I'm just trying to keep things professional."

She glared at me over her shoulder.

I put a hand up in a gesture of surrender. "I am. You're the one in here looking cute by the copy machine. What am I supposed to do with that?"

"Do with what?"

"With you."

She whipped around and lowered her voice to a whisper. "Nothing. Not here."

I made a show of looking around. "You don't have to whisper. We're alone."

"Corban."

"Okay, not here. But there's a closet down the hall. Or one of the interview rooms?"

She huffed out a breath and took her copies off the machine. But I'd seen the little smile she was trying to hide.

I chuckled again. "Okay, you're right. We're at work."

"Thank you." She tapped her copies into a neat pile. "Speaking of, I need to get back to my office."

She moved to step around me. Without really thinking about it, I shifted so she couldn't get past. She pursed her lips and tried to get by. I moved in the same direction that she did, then we both shifted to the other side.

"Corban."

"What?"

"You're in my way."

We both side-stepped the same direction again.

“I’m trying to let you by.”

She rolled her eyes again, but the corners of her mouth turned up. “No, you’re not.”

“Did you know pigeons can do math?” I didn’t know where that had come from, but it got her to stop moving.

“Math? I think you’re making that one up.”

I took a small step closer. “Nope. It’s true. One study found that pigeons can rank images in order of how many objects were pictured. They can basically count.”

“One study?” she asked. “Without additional data to confirm the findings, I remain skeptical about the math skills of urban scavenger birds.”

“It doesn’t mean those initial results aren’t valid.”

She tilted her head and raised her eyebrows. “It means for *those* birds it was valid. But did they have a representative sample? Or did the researcher study his or her own birds and deem that adequate to draw conclusions?”

I knew she was trying to poke at me about my research, but I didn’t care. I was slowly inching closer to her. Pretty soon I’d be close enough to—

“Hazel,” Elliott said behind me.

She stiffened, clutching her stack of papers to her chest.

“Hi, Corban,” he said, standing in the doorway. “Good to have you both back. How was the conference?”

Hazel’s eyes widened. “It was just a typical conference. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

He looked mildly confused and swung his gaze to me.

“Unfortunately I was a little under the weather and missed the first day.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“But Hazel was nice enough to check in on me and make sure I was okay.”

“Um, yes, I did do that.”

“Once I was feeling better, the rest of the week was good. I learned a lot. The sessions were great, although I think my best experiences were in the off hours.” My eyes flicked back to Hazel.

Her eyes narrowed and she gave a tiny shake of her head.

“Good,” Elliott said. “Networking opportunities are always valuable.”

“Definitely. And Hazel and I did a *lot* of networking.”

Hazel made a noise in her throat.

Elliott didn’t seem to notice. “Did any of the sessions stand out?”

“Um, well...” Hazel stammered a little and trailed off. She was so adorable when she was flustered.

“Advances and applications of exploratory graph analysis was the standout session for me,” I said. “The technique is fascinating, especially when it comes to assessing the number of latent variables in multivariate data.”

“Excellent.”

Hazel was glaring at me again and it was hard to keep a straight face. She adjusted her stack of papers. “I attended a symposium on social signaling as a framework for understanding human nonverbal communication. They’re doing interesting work with functional near-infrared spectroscopy to study social signaling in a lab setting.”

“Sounds like you both got a lot out of it,” he said. “Glad to hear it.”

“I really did. And Hazel and I were able to spend a lot of time together privately...” I paused on purpose to see her squirm. “Comparing notes and going over what we’d learned.”

“Yes, that’s how we spent our time,” she said quickly. “Comparing what we learned.”

“That’s perfect. I was hoping you’d have the chance to share with each other.”

I nodded. “We shared a lot. We were very productive.”

She widened her eyes at me again as if to say *shut up right now*. I just grinned at her.

“Great. Hazel, I’ll need you in my three o’clock class today.”

“Of course. That’s not a problem. I’ll be there.”

He smiled. “Thanks. I have office hours soon, but I’ll chat with you both later.”

Hazel and I said goodbye to Elliott.

When he was gone, she poked my arm. “You need to stop.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“We compared notes and did a lot of networking? We did neither of those things in appreciable quantities.”

I gave her a wide smile. “I know.”

“You’re impossible.”

“And you’re cute when you’re annoyed with me.”

The temptation to kiss her was too much to resist. I craved her like a drug, and she was right here, only inches away. Stepping closer, I put my arms

around her and hauled her against me. Pressed my lips to hers and teased my tongue into her mouth.

She was stiff at first, drawing in a quick breath, her spine straight. But a second later her body softened. Her lips parted and her tongue met mine, sending a jolt of fire through my veins.

I loved making her relent like this. Melting her hot librarian exterior.

As much as I would have loved to continue—and rip her clothes off—I wasn't that crazy. It was the middle of the day. I stepped back and dropped my hands, letting her go.

Her eyes fluttered and she licked her lips. I did the same, enjoying her lingering taste.

Just as quickly, she straightened again and adjusted her glasses.

I grinned at her. "You should really get back to work. I'm sure you have a lot to catch up on, and you need to assist in Elliott's three o'clock."

With a quick—and rather adorable—roll of her eyes, she brushed past me. This time, I let her by.

She stopped just outside the door and turned around, still clutching her papers against her chest. "I no longer view our competing grant applications as a negative. I probably shouldn't have in the first place, and I'm sorry for what I said. In any case, should you need advice or suggestions on making yours as strong as possible, I'd be happy to assist."

An unexpected warm feeling filled my chest. That was another win. A big one. "Thanks, Hazel. I really appreciate that."

"You're welcome." She smiled, then turned around and walked away, leaving me with an unavoidable realization.

I liked Hazel. A lot.

This wasn't hate-lust anymore. I didn't hate her at all. Teasing her hadn't been the same as arguing. I wasn't fuming at her, and yet I could have easily bent her over that table again.

I still wanted her. And it had nothing to do with being enemies.

I didn't know what I was going to do with that.

HAZEL

“Half of wisdom is learning what to unlearn.” ~Larry Niven

Hesitating outside Corban’s office, I mentally cataloged a list of valid reasons to go in. All work-related. None of them having anything to do with the fact that he felt like a magnet, constantly pulling at me. We’d be bringing test subjects into the motion capture lab soon, which gave us plenty to discuss. That was the only reason I needed to see him.

“Hey.” His face lit up with a smile when he saw me, and he pushed his keyboard away.

That smile. It made my insides feel all squishy. And I was not usually the sort of girl to get squishy insides.

“Hi. Do you have a few minutes? I thought we could review the study protocols.”

“Sure. Have a seat.”

I winced as I lowered myself into the chair. Our training runs were getting longer, leaving me with an excess build-up of lactic acid in my leg muscles.

“Are you okay?”

I smoothed my skirt over my legs. “Yes, fine. Just a bit sore.”

“From what?”

“Running. My girlfriends and I decided to train for the Soggy Seattle Half-Marathon.”

“Yeah? Have you done one before?”

I shook my head. “No. We’ve been running together for quite some time, but this is a new challenge. And my friend Sophie made things more competitive when she bet another group of runners that we’d finish before them.”

“Why did she do that?”

“They engage in typical mean-girl social behaviors.”

His expression grew serious. “They’re mean to you?”

I shrugged. “They try to be, but they no longer have the power to hurt my feelings.”

“Still, that’s not okay.”

“Apparently Sophie agrees with you. Their meanness was the catalyst for her challenge. She bet them five hundred dollars that our finish times would beat theirs.”

“Wow. Well, if you ever need a running buddy, I could go with you.”

The corner of my mouth twitched in a smile and my heart did the strangest little flutter. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

Something on his desk caught my attention. Off to the side, almost hidden, was the penguin figurine I’d left to tease him. It sat next to another one of similar size.

“I knew you liked penguins.” I pointed to the pair.

His sheepish grin and little shrug sent a pleasant tingling through my stomach. “Busted. They are my favorite animal.”

“Why?”

He picked up the two penguins. “They mate for life. Some species do, at least. They pick a partner and stick with them, year after year.”

Why did he have to be so adorable? He was making it very hard not to climb over the top of his desk and launch myself at him.

“Their ability to find their mate in a sea of other penguins is rather heartwarming,” I said. “As is their dedication to protecting their egg together.”

“Yeah, exactly. It sounds cheesy, but I’ve always wanted to find my penguin.”

My heart fluttered and if I’d have been standing my knees would have gone weak. Which was so strange. Thankfully, he continued, preventing me from saying something ridiculous like *I’ll be your penguin, Corban*.

“The problem is, I’m not a penguin.”

“Of course not. You’re a human.”

He grinned again. “No, I mean my animal equivalent. I’m more like a duckbill platypus.”

“Why a duckbill platypus?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? They’re the most socially awkward animal on the planet.”

I was about to say that I didn’t think he was socially awkward at all—and if he was, maybe I was too—when something behind me caught his attention.

He stood, his face lighting up with a big smile. “Hey, Molly.”

Both my heart and my stomach continued their reactions, only they shifted from flutters and tingly butterflies to a startling—and very unexpected—rush of panic.

Corban’s sister.

His twin sister. A family member he was close to and, for reasons I couldn’t fathom without further analysis, a woman I very much wanted to like me.

Wiping my suddenly sweaty palms on my skirt, I stood. Corban was already hugging her in the doorway. He stepped back, revealing a pregnant woman who looked like a female version of him. Her brown hair was cut in a cute bob and they had a similar nose and mouth. Her features were more feminine, but the resemblance was impossible to miss.

Her eyes landed on me. “Oh, hi. I’m Molly, Corban’s sister.”

“Sorry,” Corban said. “This is Hazel. She’s, um... we work together.”

I firmly ignored the way his introduction—we’d done a lot more than work together—made my heart sink a little. How else would he introduce me? This was fine.

Molly kept one hand resting on her very pregnant belly and reached out to me with the other. We shook, which gave me the second I needed to find my voice.

I had no idea why I was so nervous.

“Nice to meet you, Molly. Congratulations.”

“Thank you.” She smiled brightly and rubbed her belly, then stepped aside, gesturing over her shoulder. “This is my friend Paisley.”

My smile faded as a jaw-droppingly beautiful woman stepped up beside Molly. Her blond hair hung around her shoulders in the sort of flawless waves that looked effortless, but I happened to know took a great deal of expertise to get right. She wore a stylish white shirt with high-waisted slacks

and her makeup highlighted her best features—which, to be honest, were all of them.

This was Paisley Hayes? His sister's best friend? The girl he'd had a crush on back in high school?

"Hey, Paisley," Corban said.

His voice was nonchalant, like he'd expected to see her. Which made me wonder why. I hadn't realized he still saw his former crush on a regular basis, but her presence here with Molly and his unfazed reaction seemed to indicate that he did.

I quickly told myself this was fine. Again.

Until Paisley's attention turned to Corban.

It felt like watching a scene unfold in slow motion. She angled her body so she was aligned with him—classic physical mirroring. Her lips parted in an open-mouthed smile and even from a few feet away, I could see her pupils dilate. Her gaze swept up and down and her tongue wet her lips.

"Hi, Corban." Her tone was just seductive enough to indicate interest, but not so flirtatious as to be obvious to the casual observer.

But casual observer I was not, and I could see her intentions as plain as day.

She wanted him.

I hated her.

The heady rush of jealousy was so fast and so unexpected it practically stole the breath from my lungs. I watched with horror as Paisley approached Corban, threw her arms around his shoulders, and hugged him. He hugged her in return, giving her an awkward pat on the back while I dug my fingernails into my palms.

She dropped her arms but didn't move more than a few inches away. "I hope you don't mind me tagging along for lunch."

"No, I don't mind."

My eyes darted to Molly. Was she supportive of this? Had Paisley asked her to set her up with Corban? Was Molly playing matchmaker with dreams of her brother marrying her best friend?

It was hard to say. Molly had her phone out and appeared to be texting someone rather than watching Paisley unabashedly throw herself at Corban.

Maybe *unabashedly throw herself* was a little dramatic—after all, she'd only hugged him—but the haze of jealousy was fierce. I didn't want her anywhere near him, let alone touching him.

She ran her hands down the front of his shirt, as if to smooth it, and I bit the inside of my lip.

Molly tucked her phone in her purse. “Sorry, Martin freaks out if I don’t text him back within thirty seconds lately. Are you guys ready?”

Corban put his hands in his pockets. “Sure.”

“Uh-oh.” Paisley tilted her head as if to inspect him. “Your shirt is untucked right here.”

She reached out, like she was going to grab his shirt and tuck it in for him.

In his pants.

With her hands.

Her hands in his pants.

I was livid.

Corban stuffed his shirt into the waistband of his pants before she could. “I got it.”

“God, Paisley, leave him alone,” Molly said with a laugh. “Let’s go, I’m starving.”

Paisley pinched his shirt between her thumbs and forefingers, right at the waist, and tugged a little. Then she smoothed the front down, skimming her hands over his torso. “There. Much better. Where should we go for lunch?”

I barely heard the rest of their short conversation. I was too busy trying not to glare at Paisley—and sorting through the very confusing barrage of feelings I was experiencing—to focus on what they were saying.

A moment later, they appeared to have decided on a lunch location. Molly had already stepped out into the hallway with Paisley just behind her.

Paisley turned and her eyes landed on me, as if just realizing I was here. I saw her gaze dart from me, to Corban, back to me again. The flash of smugness in her expression was so brief, I almost missed it. But I’d studied micro-expressions quite extensively and there was no mistaking her disdain. Her look said, *you’re no threat to me*.

And of course, I wasn’t. Because I wasn’t Corban’s girlfriend. Yes, we’d slept together, but we’d both insisted it was only an out-of-town indulgence. He was free to do what he wanted. This sudden experience of intense jealousy was as silly as it was irrational.

Besides, I never got jealous. I wasn’t that sort of woman.

Was I?

“It was nice to meet you, Hazel,” Molly said with a little wave.

“You, too.” Good; my voice sounded completely normal.

Corban paused in the doorway. “Are you hungry? You can come with us if you want.”

I didn’t miss the flash of anger that crossed Paisley’s face. A part of me—the part where jealousy burned hottest—wanted to go so I could wedge myself between Corban and Paisley. So I could ruin whatever plans she had of trying to get close to him.

But I had work to do. I didn’t have time for those kinds of games. Corban was a grown man. He could do what he wanted.

“Thank you, but they’re expecting me in the lab soon.”

“Maybe another time,” Molly said.

I squared my shoulders and adjusted my glasses. “I’d like that.”

Corban met my eyes with a crooked smile.

That look sent a buzzing warmth through my veins, and that very odd and so-unlike-me flare of jealousy was back.

“Corban, before you go, I meant to ask if you’d like to have dinner. With me. At my place. I’ll cook.”

His eyebrows lifted. My offer surprised him.

It surprised me too. What was I doing?

“We still have a lot of work to do on the motion capture study,” I added quickly.

“Sure, yeah. That sounds good.” Meeting my eyes again, he shoved his hands in his pockets. “We have a lot of data to cover.”

There was something so disarmingly sexy about the way he could be both assertive and almost shy. The heat in his gaze was unmistakable, but the way he put his hands in his pockets was adorably sheepish. The combination made me want to kiss him, right here.

But I couldn’t do that.

“Great. We can finalize details later. Your sister’s hungry, so you should probably go.”

“Right.” He looked back and forth between me and Molly, as if he’d forgotten what was going on around him. “Yeah, lunch. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay.”

My gaze flicked to Paisley. The smugness in her face was gone, replaced by irritation.

Not a threat? We’d see.

They left and I let out a long breath. What had I done? Inviting Corban

over for dinner was a lot like a date.

Did I want it to be a date?

I didn't know anymore.

He'd started as my nemesis. And in a moment of weakness—a hot, lust-filled moment of weakness—I'd slept with him. A man I hadn't even liked. Now? Things had changed between us. I had to acknowledge that. We weren't enemies anymore.

We'd become friends in addition to being coworkers. And coworkers who were also friends could certainly have dinner together, particularly if it gave them a chance to analyze important study data.

There was nothing more to it than that. I knew what I needed in my life, and it wasn't dating. I'd already made that decision.

I firmly pushed my feelings aside and went upstairs to the lab, focusing instead on a dinner menu.

CORBAN

“Sex is always about emotions. Good sex is about free emotions; bad sex is about blocked emotions.” Deepak Chopra

Hazel answered her door wearing an apron with little cookies on it. Her hair was up, and she had a spot of flour on her nose.

She couldn't have been any cuter.

“Hello.” She adjusted her glasses. “I'm running a little behind.”

“That's okay.”

Stepping back, she pushed the door open wider. “Come in.”

“Thanks.”

I stuffed my hands in my pockets to keep myself from grabbing her and kissing the fuck out of her. I wasn't quite sure if that was why she'd invited me over. Obviously, I hoped so. But she might have actually meant it when she said she wanted to work on the motion capture study.

Plus, if she was cooking—and something in her kitchen smelled amazing—I knew it would upset her if she burned it. Even if it was because I'd ripped her clothes off and buried my face between her legs.

So I held back—squashing the urge to pull her against me and taste those sweet lips—and followed her inside.

Her apartment was exactly like I'd pictured. She had a couch and an armchair with a blanket draped over it. A round table with four chairs next to the kitchen. Two bookshelves, and I could decipher her organization system at a glance. Her books were neatly sorted by category, then alphabetically by

author. A short hallway had three doors—bedroom, bathroom, and maybe a closet.

The colors—mostly earth tones—all matched, and every inch looked tidy. Not just clean, but precise, like she'd put everything exactly where she wanted it.

All so very Hazel.

"You can have a seat." She gestured to the couch. "I just need to finish in here."

"Need any help?"

"Thank you, but no."

She went into the kitchen and I glanced around again. There was a pair of running shoes by the door and several books about marathon training on her coffee table. I wasn't usually so aware of my surroundings, but this felt like getting a glimpse of a superhero's secret lair. This was her home. Where she took off her shoes—and her clothes, but I was trying not to get into that—and put her feet up. Where she ate and slept and relaxed and *lived*.

Did it always smell so good? It wasn't just the food she had cooking, although that was making my stomach growl and my mouth water. Beneath that, it smelled like her, and it was oddly relaxing.

I took a seat on the couch, once again admiring her precision. My mouth turned up in a grin and I scooted the table lamp an inch to the side, just to see if she'd notice. I couldn't resist.

The fattest cat I'd ever seen ambled down the hall. He stopped to stretch, arching his back. Or at least, he was probably arching his back. Cats usually did, but it was hard to tell what this one was doing beneath the enormous amount of gray fur.

The cat's head swiveled toward me. He had long whiskers and a flat face. He yawned, then seemed to decide he needed to come inspect his owner's guest. Between his long fur and considerable girth, I could barely see his legs. He was like a big, poofy ball of gray, shuffling across the room toward me. He plopped down next to my foot and sniffed my pants.

"Hi, kitty." I reached down and scratched his head.

"That's Erwin," Hazel said from the kitchen entrance.

I chuckled. "Erwin. I get it. Erwin Schrodinger. Schrodinger's cat. That's funny."

"It is funny. But no one ever gets the joke."

"Really?" I kept petting him. He allowed it. His soft fur was perfectly

groomed—not a single mat. Impressive, considering the thickness of his coat.

“You’re the first person to both understand and find amusement in the reference.” She tilted her head, a little smile crossing her lips. “He likes you. He’s waiting for you to pick him up and put him on the couch.”

“He won’t jump up?”

“No, he can’t make it anymore.”

I chuckled again. “Erwin, I know your mommy’s a good cook, but if you can’t jump up onto the couch, you’re probably eating too many cookies while she’s at work.”

“It’s not his size that prevents him from jumping onto the couch. He’s just getting older.”

“Are you sure? Because he’s huge.”

She crossed her arms. “He’s just fluffy.”

Raising my eyebrows, I put my hands around his middle and lifted him onto the couch next to me. He was very fluffy, she was right about that, but he had to weigh twenty pounds. “Holy crap, Hazel, he’s heavy.”

“He’s not that heavy. And he’s perfectly healthy.”

I smoothed down his fur as he settled onto the cushion, looking like a gray blob of fur with ears and a flat face. “He’s definitely a happy cat.”

“Precisely,” she said, her tone decisive, and went back into the kitchen.

“What do you think, Erwin?” I lowered my voice and kept petting him. “Did your mommy really invite me over to discuss study data?”

Erwin closed his eyes.

“I didn’t think so.”

Hazel came back out, pulling her apron over her head. “Dinner’s ready.”

“It smells amazing.” I stood, but glanced at Erwin, still on the couch. “Can he get down by himself?”

“Oh, yes, he’s fine.”

The table was already set for two and I helped Hazel bring dinner from the kitchen. She’d made chicken in a lemon cream sauce with pasta. I couldn’t wait to dig in.

We sat down and dished up. The food was delicious. I didn’t get home-cooked meals like this very often and I devoured two helpings in the time it took Hazel to eat one.

We mostly talked about work, and Hazel brought up the motion capture study. In the back of my mind I once again wondered if that was really the reason she’d invited me over. Maybe it was. Maybe whatever crazy sexual

connection we'd had was over.

But it wasn't over for me. The longer I spent here, surrounded by all things Hazel, the more I thought about taking her clothes off.

"I made dessert," she said after we'd both finished.

She rose and gathered our plates and silverware. The clipped way she spoke and her stiff posture reminded me of the day we'd flown to the conference in Florida. I'd assumed the way she'd acted had been because she was mad at me.

But I knew her better now. That *strictly business* act was a façade hiding the sex kitten she was on the inside.

I grabbed the serving dishes and followed her into the kitchen. She set the plates in the sink and pulled the foil off a square pan.

Brownies. She'd made brownies.

I'd refused to eat her brownies that day at work. And she'd made them for me again.

I didn't know why that hit me in the chest the way that it did, but I set the dishes on the counter, grabbed her by the waist and spun her around.

She met my kiss without hesitation, and the second our lips touched, fire raced through my veins. I was aching to touch her. Taste her. Feel her body against mine.

I wanted her a hell of a lot more than I wanted brownies. And that was saying something.

Her arms flew around my neck and she pressed herself against me. My hands fumbled with her clothes and I backed her out of the kitchen, heading for the couch, the bed, I didn't care. All I knew was that I needed her. Now.

We stopped near the couch and our mouths parted so we could pull shirts over our heads. I let mine drop and grabbed her, hauling her against me to kiss her again. The beast inside me roared to life. I was going to do a hundred dirty things to her. Fuck her senseless all over this apartment.

My eyes flicked open for a second and I caught sight of Erwin, still sitting on the couch, staring at us.

I froze with my hands tangled in her hair. The cat's green-eyed gaze was unblinking.

This wasn't going to work.

Hazel's hand slid down and she grabbed my cock through my pants. I groaned. Fuck that cat. I picked her up, tossed her over my shoulder, and carried her to her bedroom.

I kicked the door shut behind us and flipped her onto the bed. She bounced on the mattress and let out a little squeak. I quickly shucked my pants. Licking my lips in anticipation, I tore the rest of her clothes off, knelt next to the bed, and pushed her legs open.

Groaning, I slid my tongue along her slit. There were no words for how good she tasted—better than any dessert she could ever bake. I teased her, dipping my tongue inside and dragging it out. Brushing her clit with quick strokes.

She writhed against the sheets and ran her fingers through my hair. I found a rhythm she liked and followed her lead, flicking her clit with my tongue.

Sliding two fingers inside her, I groaned again. She was hot and wet, her walls trembling with tension. I kept flicking her clit and pumped my fingers, curling them gently. She moaned louder, moving her hips.

I loved doing this to her. Making her feel so good she shed her inhibitions and gave in. Moaned and bucked her hips and grabbed my hair.

My dick was achingly hard, but I didn't want to stop until she came. I paused just long enough to slide my fingers out and wipe her wetness on my cock.

"I want to watch," she said.

I raised my eyebrows.

Biting her bottom lip, she nodded.

She scooted up the bed and I climbed on, kneeling in front of her. I grabbed the shaft and slid my hand up and down my hard length.

Tentatively, Hazel's fingers crept across her hip and over the crease of her thigh.

"Fuck yes," I said, my eyes locking on those tantalizing fingers. "Do it. Touch yourself."

I tugged on my cock while she dipped two fingers inside. Her legs fell open and she worked her fingers, rubbing her clit with the pad of her hand.

Matching her rhythm, I stroked my hard length, her slippery wetness all over me. Up and down the shaft. I squeezed, feeling the tension intensify.

Hazel was mesmerizing. Her cheeks flushed and her eyelashes fluttered. She fingered herself harder. Faster. Her eyes never leaving my cock.

I could have easily kept going. Stroked it out to come all over her. But I needed more. I needed to fuck her.

"Give me that pussy," I growled.

She stopped, grabbing onto me as I climbed on top of her and thrust myself inside.

My eyes rolled back as my cock sank into her. Sweet fucking relief.

Burying my face in her neck, I drove into her, my hips pumping. I wanted to devour her. Lick every inch of her skin.

I fucked her hard, until the bed knocked against the wall and she dug her nails into my back. Still harder. She pulled her knees up to take me deeper, a demanding refrain of *yeses* breathed in my ear. I growled with every thrust, letting instinct and lust take over.

By the time she started to come, we'd somehow turned sideways and her head was falling off the bed. Neither of us cared. I grabbed her hips, pulled her back, and thrust into her while her pussy spasmed around me.

Still holding her hips, I pumped faster. My muscles tensed and all at once, the pressure broke. I exploded inside her, my cock throbbing. I groaned with relief, thrusting with every pulse, coating her slick walls.

Claiming her.

Owning her.

She was fucking *mine* .

Breathing hard, I stopped. Opened my eyes. Hazel brushed her hair back from her face and let out a contented sigh.

“That was better than dessert,” she said, her voice uncharacteristically dreamy.

I climbed off her, shaken by that moment of primal possessiveness. Where had that come from? “Definitely better than dessert.”

She propped her head in her hand. “But do you still want some?”

“Dessert?”

“Yes. I made brownies.”

I cracked a grin. “I saw that.”

She smiled and got up to retrieve her clothes. “They should still be warm.”

I got off the bed and grabbed my pants. There was a tiny hum of discontent in the back of my brain, but I pushed it aside. Delicious dinner, amazing sex, and now brownies? Couldn't ask for much more than that.

HAZEL

“Ultimately the bond of all companionship, whether in marriage or in friendship, is conversation.” ~ Oscar Wilde

The couple at the table across from me were on a first date—possibly second, but I was willing to bet first. There was a telltale hesitance about the way they looked at each other, experimenting with eye contact. His posture was relaxed and confident, but clearly interested. She’d become increasingly open in the few minutes I’d been watching. Now she was leaning closer, touching her hair, and smiling.

It was so interesting to watch the tentative connection between them begin to strengthen. I wondered what would happen if they spent their date doing Corban’s questionnaire. Would they fall in love?

“Oh my god, I thought I was late, but maybe I’m early,” Sophie said. She seemed to have appeared out of nowhere.

I blinked, tearing my attention away from the couple. “I believe you’re right on time, actually.”

It was Saturday night and I was happily meeting my friends for drinks. Everly had just returned from her honeymoon and I was anxious to see her.

“Wow. Go me.” She tried to hang her purse on the back of the chair, but the strap tangled around her wrist and she almost pulled the chair over backwards. “Oops. What were you looking at?”

I helped her right the chair before it crashed to the floor. “Just observing the couple over there. They’re exhibiting nonverbal communication that

indicates the potential for deepening intimacy.”

“Aw, that’s cute.” She managed to get her purse situated and sat. Her green dress buttoned up the front and suited her frame nicely.

Everly arrived next, wearing a yellow and white dress, turquoise heels, and a sunny smile. “Hi, ladies.”

I stood and hugged her, as did Sophie. Everly caught Sophie’s chair when it almost toppled over. Again.

“Sorry,” Sophie said. “I swear, I use up all my coordination at work and by the time I leave, I’m a mess.”

“No harm done,” Everly said and took her seat. “It’s so good to see you two. I missed you so much. No Nora yet?”

“Not yet. And we missed you as well. How was your honeymoon?”

“Amazing.” She smiled and her voice had a wistful quality. “I kind of wished we could stay forever, but it’s also nice to be back. Although I’m confused about this half-marathon thing. Sophie, did you really make a bet with Bella Ferndale?”

“I did, and we’re going to crush them.”

Everly raised her eyebrows. “Wow. I guess it’s a good thing I went running while we were gone. But I still have some catching up to do.”

Nora rushed in, darting to our table. She cast a quick glance over her shoulder, then slid into a seat and leaned in. “He’s right behind me, but I wanted to warn you first. My brother’s in town.”

“Uh-oh.” Everly met my eyes and we both looked at Sophie.

“What?” Sophie asked. “Is there something wrong with your brother?”

“Half-brother, and yes,” Nora said. “So many things.”

“Don’t look him directly in the eyes,” Everly warned.

I nodded. “And don’t believe a word he says.”

“What?” Sophie asked.

“I’m so sorry to spring this on you,” Nora said. “I had no idea he was in town until he showed up at my office. The good news is, I think he convinced my boss to give me a raise. The bad news is, he’s coming. I made him park my car, but he’ll be here any second.”

“I’m so confused,” Sophie said.

Nora glanced back again. “Jensen Lakes is the most charming, charismatic demon you’ll ever meet. Keep your wits about you, or he’ll have your panties in his pocket and you’ll be thanking him for the pleasure of being a one-night stand he’s already forgotten before you’ve gathered up

your clothes and limped out of his room.”

That was fairly accurate. The first time I’d met Jensen, years ago, I’d been halfway to his car before Nora had grabbed me and dragged me out of his grasp. It was like I’d been spellbound, willing to do anything he said.

Without looking toward the front of the restaurant, I knew when he’d entered. You could feel it. A hush settled over the establishment, his presence making everyone—women and men—stop mid-conversation or mid-bite, and stare.

It was remarkable. Had I not witnessed it myself on numerous occasions, I wouldn’t have believed one man could have such a widespread effect on everyone in his path.

He was dressed in a slate gray suit—no tie—and wore it so well, it made you wonder if the concept of a man’s suit had been invented just for him. He had thick, dark hair, dark eyebrows, and dark brown eyes. So dark, you could imagine yourself falling into them. Sinking into oblivion while he—

“Ladies,” Jensen said, a seductive grin stealing over his unfairly gorgeous features.

Good god, his accent. He’d grown up in London and that accent of his was a deadly weapon. I wondered how he managed to get it through customs.

Sweet-talked the customs agents, probably.

I nudged Sophie with my elbow. She was practically drooling.

“You remember Everly and Hazel,” Nora said, gesturing to the two of us. “And this is our friend Sophie.”

He took Everly’s hand and lifted it to his lips, kissing the backs of her fingers. “Everly, darling, the ring on your finger both wounds and delights me. Congratulations to the man who gets the pleasure of you for the rest of his life.”

There had been a time when that dramatic, yet admittedly swoony, speech and kiss would have left Everly blushing and fumbling for words. But perhaps marriage—or maybe simply Shepherd—had rendered her immune to Jensen’s considerable charm. She smiled, as if he was a normal person, not a walking sex god dripping pheromones. “Thank you, Jensen. It’s nice to see you again.”

Jensen blinked at her, like he was surprised by her response, or lack thereof. But he quickly recovered, turning his attention to me. “Hazel, you look ravishing as always. What I wouldn’t give to be the man who gets to rip that proper blouse right off you.”

Nora groaned.

His gaze warmed me from the inside, but I was pleased to realize he wasn't reducing me to a senseless mute. I held out my hand with a smile and even when he brought it to his lips, I didn't feel as if I were melting into a puddle beneath the table.

"Hello, Jensen. What brings you to Seattle?"

He hesitated for a second, my hand still perched in his, his smile faltering. "Business, naturally. And the chance to see my wonderful sister and her friends, of course."

Nora sighed.

Sophie squeaked when he turned to her.

"Be strong," I whispered. "You can do it."

"Well, hello," Jensen said, a predator sizing up potential new prey. "Aren't you delicious. Sophie, is it?"

She nodded, her eyes wide.

"Lovely to meet you." He took her hand and kissed the backs of her fingers. "How would you like to come with me and—"

"No." Nora smacked his shoulder. "You are not taking her anywhere."

He rolled his eyes and smoothly slipped into a chair between Nora and Sophie. "I was merely going to suggest we go to the bar and ask for drink menus."

"No you weren't."

He grinned again. "Maybe not."

"Behave yourself."

"Well, that's bloody boring."

The server came and took our orders—martinis for the girls and a scotch on the rocks for Jensen. Everly told us a bit about her honeymoon. Sophie chatted about work, in between giggling glances at Jensen. Nora was working on a new series about high-end spa treatments for her column. Jensen said he was in town for business but didn't elaborate. He seemed to mostly enjoy irritating his sister by trying to flirt with Sophie.

"Can we discuss the important issue, here?" Everly asked, looking at me. "What's happening with Corban?"

"Very good question." Nora raised her eyebrows and folded her hands.

"This sounds juicy." Jensen rested his arm on the table and leaned forward. "Who's Corban?"

"The guy she's been hate-fucking," Nora said.

His mouth hooked in a grin. “I’m proud of you, darling. I love a good hate-fuck.”

I pushed my glasses up my nose. “I don’t think that’s accurate anymore, nor can I continue calling him my nemesis.”

“Is his dick game that good?” Nora asked.

Yes, yes, *a thousand times* yes. “It’s not just that, although our physical encounters have been...”

“Satisfying?” Sophie offered.

“Exciting?” Every asked.

“Mind-numbingly hot?” Nora said.

“Yes, all three.”

Nora’s lips curled in a smile. “Good for you, sweetie.”

“But you don’t hate him anymore?” Sophie asked.

I sighed. “No. Not at all.”

Nora clicked her tongue and shook her head. “There goes another one.”

“I haven’t gone anywhere, and certainly not the way of dating, engagement, and marriage, as your tone suggests. We’re no longer enemies—in fact, we work quite well as a team—and yes, we’ve slept together. Several times. But that’s all.”

“So no more hate-fucking,” Nora said. “Now you’re friends with benefits?”

I thought about that for a second. Was that an accurate descriptor of our current relationship? “Yes. I think so. Maybe.”

“It should be quite easy to tell,” Jensen said. “Are you friends?”

“Yes, I’d say we are now.”

“And you’re having sex?”

I nodded.

“But you’re not dating,” he said.

“We did have dinner together the other night. But it wasn’t a date.” I paused again, my mixed feelings—and confusion—over Corban swirling to the surface. “Actually, it might have been a date. I’m not entirely sure. These things are so much easier to determine when you’re observing the behavior of others instead of experiencing them yourself.”

“Well, tell us about dinner,” Everly said. “Did you just happen to eat together because it was convenient and then it started to feel like a date? Or did he ask you to dinner but you’re still not sure if he meant it as a date?”

“Neither. I invited him to my apartment and cooked him dinner.”

“Sounds pretty date-like,” Sophie said.

Jensen lifted a shoulder. “Maybe. Or it was a booty call with the added bonus of a meal. After all, he didn’t ask you out, but the other way around.”

Nora rolled her eyes again. “Since when does the man have to be the one to ask for it to count as a date?”

“He doesn’t.” He took a sip of his drink and I nudged Sophie under the table. She was staring at him again. “But if he’d asked her to dinner, it would undoubtedly have been a date. A man looking for no-strings sex isn’t going to feed her first. And if she’d asked him out, but they’d gone to a restaurant, that’s also clearly a date.”

“But since she invited him over to her place, dinner could have been her excuse to get him there for sex,” Nora said. “I hate to admit it, but you have a point.”

“Really?” Everly asked. “A booty-call dinner?”

“Certainly.” Jensen raised his glass. “And cheers, darling—if you’re feeding him and fucking him without commitment, he’s earned my envy.”

“Did he think it was a date?” Sophie asked.

“I’m not entirely clear on that, but I don’t think so.”

“And he’s never asked you out, has he?” Everly asked. “So you don’t have reason to believe he wants to get serious?”

I thought about his invitation to lunch with his sister and Paisley. That wouldn’t have been a date by anyone’s definition. He’d only asked me to join them because I happened to be in his office at the time.

“No, he hasn’t given me any indication that he would like to date me.”

“I think the real question is, what do you want?” Everly asked. “Did you want it to be a date?”

I took a drink of my martini, giving myself a second to consider her question. “I think that’s the source of my confusion. I’m firmly committed to remaining single. I’ve tried relationships and they’ve never worked for me. I even got married once and we all know how that turned out.”

Everly and Nora glanced at each other, nodding.

“I don’t know this story, but I have a feeling I shouldn’t ask,” Sophie said.

“There’s not much to tell. We got married mostly out of convenience. It seemed logical at the time, but it didn’t work.”

“He was such a stick-in-the-mud, even your divorce was boring,” Nora said.

“Not that we wished a painful breakup on you,” Everly said. “Although we’ve all had those. Even you.”

I nodded. “I have. I’ve already experienced a range of relationship variations. Casual dating. A long-term relationship. A difficult breakup. A failed marriage. Even a fling once that lasted all of a weekend.”

“I remember him,” Everly said. “Oh my god, we were so young then.”

“Indeed, we were. So, you can see that I’ve amassed enough first-hand knowledge of how relationships work in my life to determine that I don’t need to try another one.”

“Yeah, but you can change your mind,” Sophie said. “Especially for the right guy.”

“She certainly can,” Jensen said, smiling seductively at Sophie. “For the right man. Or perhaps the man who’s right for now. Could you use a *right now man* in your life, darling?”

Nora smacked his shoulder again.

“This is so different from anything I’ve experienced before,” I said. “I’ve always followed a more traditional relationship progression. The customary coffee date, followed by outings of increasing duration that would allow us both to assess whether we’re compatible. And if the relationship developed from there, it would naturally become physical.”

“That’s the most boring description of dating I’ve ever heard,” Jensen said. “No wonder you decided to stay single.”

I ignored him. “But everything with Corban has been backwards.”

“Maybe that’s what you need right now,” Nora said. “There’s nothing wrong with some no-strings sex if you’re both enjoying yourselves. There’s no rule that says you have to saddle yourselves with labels and commitment.”

“That’s true.”

“I like to see you letting loose a little,” Nora said with a smile. “It’s good for you. And I think his cock is good for you, too. I was starting to feel the tension of all that repressed sexual energy.”

“Nora,” Everly said. “Do you have to say that so loud?”

“What, repressed sexual energy?” Nora asked.

“No, the other thing.”

“Cock? What’s wrong with cock? We’re all adults here.”

“I know, but...” Everly’s cheeks were pink and her eyes darted around. She’d always been easily embarrassed.

“At least she didn’t call it a *penis*,” Jensen said, enunciating the word.

Nora grimaced. “That sounds terrible when you say it.”

“Isn’t it odd how the proper terms for body parts are so unsexy?” Sophie asked. “Until a second ago, I thought you could say anything and make it sound hot.”

“Don’t encourage him,” Nora said.

Jensen angled himself toward Sophie. “I take it you prefer the term cock. How about I use it in a sentence? I’ll thrust my hard cock—”

“Really?” Nora asked, interrupting him.

“Back to Hazel,” Everly said quickly. “If you’re happy with things the way they are, maybe Nora’s right.”

“Of course I’m right. Let’s be honest, you need some good orgasms in your life right now. And if it makes for a more pleasant working environment, even better. It’ll run its course and you can go back to not-dating.”

I nodded slowly.

“Or, you know, you’ll fall for him.”

“No. I’m not falling for Corban.”

Nora held my eyes for a long moment, like she was scrutinizing me. If I hadn’t known it was demonstrably impossible, I would have wondered if she was reading my thoughts.

Jensen raised his glass again. “My lovelies, I propose a toast. To friendship with benefits, and the cocks who are worthy of it.”

Nora lifted her glass but cast him a sidelong glance. “I suppose you think yours is worthy.”

“Oh, I’m an excellent friend.”

She groaned again, and we all clinked glasses.

Friends with benefits. That was a positive change, and seemed fitting. The lack of hostility in our relationship hadn’t diminished our physical attraction, nor had returning to our normal environment. In other words, it hadn’t been our rivalry, nor had it been the hotel room.

Maybe Nora was right. Maybe this was what I needed in my life right now.

CORBAN

“In everyone’s life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit.” ~Albert Schweitzer

I got home from work and put my keys down. It had been a good day, even for a Monday. Hazel and I had spent most of the afternoon going over my grant proposal together. I’d also cornered her in the lab when no one else was around and kissed her. It was too bad I couldn’t get away with that more often. Those lips of hers were so kissable.

My phone rang, the noise startling me. It was Hazel.

“Hey, you.”

“Corban, I apologize for bothering you, but I need help and I didn’t know who else to call.”

My back straightened and I grabbed my keys, ready to run out the door. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Erwin. He hasn’t been eating well. And he isn’t acting like himself. I think something might be wrong and I need to take him to the vet.”

“I’ll be right over. But why do you need help taking Erwin to the vet?”

“He has a remarkably sharp memory for a feline. He’s opposed to being put in his pet carrier. I can’t get him in.”

There was a note of worry in her voice. That wasn’t like Hazel. “I’m on my way.”

I drove to her place and parked on the street outside her building, then

went up to her apartment. She answered the door still dressed in the same blouse and slacks she'd been wearing at work, although her shirt was no longer tucked in and she had several bandages on her arms.

"Thank you for coming." She quickly shut the door behind me.

"Oh my god, what happened in here?"

Her apartment was in total disarray. The lamp was tipped on its side, books were scattered across the floor, and there seemed to be throw pillows everywhere except on the couch and chair where they belonged.

"He's a very mellow cat until it's time to go to the vet. Getting him into his carrier is a challenge."

"A challenge? That seems like an understatement. It looks like you've been trying to catch a raccoon in here, not a cat who's too fat to jump on the couch."

She put her hands on her hips. "He's not fat. He's fluffy. And also very stubborn."

I decided not to argue about Erwin's weight, even though he was legitimately the fattest cat I'd ever seen. "Where is he?"

"Hiding under the bed. And thank you again for coming. This is really a two-person job. I couldn't get in touch with Everly or Sophie and I don't want to ask Nora again."

The way she looked at me, almost pleading, made me want to scoop her into my arms. "I'm glad you called me. We'll get him in there."

She led me into her bedroom, and I got down on my hands and knees to peer under the bed. A pair of glowing green eyes shone back at me. "Erwin. Kitty, kitty. Come out, kitty."

He just blinked.

"Come on, kitty. I know you don't like the vet. Who does? But your mommy's worried about you. Let's just get this over with, okay?"

I rubbed my hand back and forth across the carpet, but that didn't seem to interest him. I couldn't fit under the bed and he was too far back for me to reach without moving furniture. He didn't look like he'd budge willingly, but he was also too fat to jump up onto a couch. How hard could this be?

"Get a towel or blanket." I got up and straightened my shirt. "I'll move the bed and you can toss it over him."

"He'll run."

"How fast can he really move?"

"He's surprisingly agile when he wants to be." She got a towel out of a

closet just outside her bedroom. "I'll stand between the bed and the door."

I got on the other side of the bed and placed my hands on the frame. "Ready?"

She nodded, holding the towel out with both hands.

"Okay, Erwin. We're just trying to help. Don't be scared." I pushed the bed, sliding it across the carpet.

Erwin dashed past us both, a streak of gray fur tearing out of the bedroom. Hazel tried to wrap him up in the towel, but missed.

"How did he do that?" I grabbed the towel from Hazel and rushed out to the other room. Erwin was trying to hide beneath the coffee table.

"Kitty, kitty." I crept toward the cat. His big green eyes were locked on me. I stopped next to the table and slowly crouched. Erwin didn't move. "Don't be scared, Erwin. I'm not going to hurt you."

With the towel stretched out in my hands, I carefully reached for the cat.

Just before I could get the towel around him, he bolted again. He scrambled all the way up to the back of the couch, ran across to the other side, and jumped onto a bookshelf.

"Since when can he jump onto furniture?"

"It must be the adrenaline," Hazel said.

She had another towel, so I nodded for her to get on the other side of the bookcase. Moving in sync, we flanked the cat. His eyes darted back and forth between us. There was barely room for his round body on the shelf but somehow he padded across the length of it and stopped, as if plotting his next move.

"Erwin, you're being ridiculous," Hazel said.

I took a step closer, but he leapt from the shelf. While he was still in midair, I tossed the towel, draping it over him. He landed, and both Hazel and I dove to the floor to grab him before he could get away.

My hands caught nothing but towel and the streak of gray fur disappeared into the kitchen.

"You have got to be kidding me."

I got up and helped Hazel to her feet. She adjusted her glasses and gave me a determined nod.

With towels once again in hand, we moved slowly, side by side, toward the kitchen. Erwin sat on the counter, watching us, his squished-nose face expressionless. He was a demon cloaked in a mass of soft gray fur, his green eyes mocking our failure.

“Erwin, how did you get up there?” Hazel asked.

“He’s been fucking with you.”

“What?”

“Look at him. He can get on the furniture anytime he wants. He tricked you into believing he can’t jump.”

Hazel gasped. “Naughty kitty.”

Erwin just blinked.

“Why don’t you get closer,” I said, lowering my voice. Which was a weird thing to do, considering Erwin was a cat and couldn’t understand me. “Try to grab him. He’ll jump down from the counter and I’ll catch him before he can get out of the kitchen.”

“Good plan.”

She took slow steps forward, murmuring soft reassurances to her evil cat. I backed up, ready to pounce as soon as he tried to make a run for it.

He dashed across the counter, sending a metal measuring cup clattering to the floor. Hazel’s towel just missed. Then I watched the impossible. Erwin, the cat shaped like a football with legs and a head, leaped onto the top of the refrigerator.

The joke was on him. Now he had nowhere to go.

He darted back and forth across the top of the fridge, but I reached up and scooped him into the towel.

“Don’t let go,” Hazel said and ran back to the bedroom.

I expected Erwin to try to wriggle free, but he went still when I cradled him against my chest. He poked his flat-nosed face out of the towel and his whiskers twitched.

She brought out the pet carrier. I deposited Erwin inside, and she quickly shut the door so he wouldn’t escape. He didn’t meow or claw at the latch. Just settled down on the blanket, staring us down with his bright green eyes.

“Thank you.” Hazel brushed her hair back from her face and adjusted her glasses. “I can take it from here.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I know.” I tucked her hair behind her ear. “But you might need help getting him back in. I’ll just be there as backup.”



FOR A CAT who'd been so difficult to get into a pet carrier, Erwin was remarkably well behaved once we left Hazel's apartment. He sat quietly on the short drive to the vet's office. Hazel handed him to me while she checked in at the front desk. I set him down and reached my fingers through the wire door to pet the top of his head.

The wait wasn't long. A vet assistant brought us back to an exam room. There, we had the opposite problem. Erwin didn't want to come out of the carrier. After a few tries, Hazel managed to coax him out and set him on the table.

He hissed at the vet assistant. Then hissed at the vet when she came in to examine him.

"I see the problem," the vet said. "He has an abscessed tooth. That's why he's not eating. He needs a round of antibiotics and then we'll remove the tooth. But after that, he should be fine."

Hazel's shoulders relaxed. "Good. I was so worried it was something worse."

The vet left again and Hazel scooped Erwin up in a blanket. He buried himself in it, like he was trying to hide. Poor kitty.

The vet assistant came back and went over the instructions for administering Erwin's antibiotic. Hazel listened carefully, all while cradling her blanket-wrapped cat in her arms.

"Thanks for your help," Hazel said when she'd finished.

"Just make sure he finishes the prescription," the vet assistant said. "And get him in here for regular check-ups."

"I bring him in once a year."

"Really?"

Hazel's back straightened. "I'm sure my records show that I do."

The vet assistant waved a hand, as if dismissing Hazel's comment. "Considering how much weight you let him gain, I figured you didn't bother with preventative pet care."

I winced, waiting for Hazel to fire back that Erwin wasn't fat, he was fluffy. I grabbed the pet carrier so we could get out of here.

"I don't overfeed him," she said.

"Yeah, clearly."

"I don't. I take good care of him."

The vet assistant sighed. "Don't beat yourself up. Most cat owners are hands-off; it's why they have cats. But you can't ignore his needs and expect

him to stay healthy.”

I stared at the vet assistant. Had she really just said that? I opened the pet carrier door. I needed to get us out of here before Hazel got going on what I was sure would be a well-researched defense of her cat’s size.

But she didn’t.

I glanced at her and couldn’t quite believe what I was seeing. She chewed her bottom lip and her eyes were red-rimmed, shining with tears.

I’d never seen Hazel look like that before. She was always so confident, like she knew how smart she was. It was one of the things I liked about her.

But this woman had hurt her feelings, and it made me furious.

“Hazel doesn’t ignore his needs. She’s an amazing cat mom. She probably has his entire medical history memorized. She takes good care of him and the fact that he’s fluffy doesn’t give you the right to make her feel bad about his size.”

The vet assistant’s eyes widened, like she was shocked she’d been called out for being a dick. “Sorry.”

“You should be sorry. Now get out so we can get Erwin home. You’re making him worse.”

She glared at me, but I didn’t give a shit. Ignoring her as she left the room, I reached out to scratch around Erwin’s ears.

“Thank you,” Hazel said, her voice soft.

I met her eyes. They still shone with unshed tears, but she smiled.

God, I loved that smile. It was going to be the death of me.

HAZEL

“Let us always meet each other with a smile, for the smile is the beginning of love.” ~ Mother Teresa

One of the tricks to gathering useful data in the motion capture lab was allowing the subjects enough time to gain comfort with the equipment.

That was an interesting phenomenon in and of itself. Much like people being filmed for a reality TV show gradually forgetting about the presence of the cameras, subjects in our lab gradually forgot they were wearing motion capture sensors and began to act naturally.

I could see it happening now as I observed through the one-way glass. The male and female subjects—both undergrads—had been given a list of questions to spark conversation. They were small-talk in nature, things that were easy for most people to answer. We weren’t as interested in their responses to these questions as we were in watching for the signs that they’d crossed into what Elliott referred to as the comfort zone, when we could begin gathering data for our true purpose.

Elliott stood with his arms crossed, his attention on the view through the one-way glass. Corban sat at a desk off to the side, rapidly clicking through different screens on the array of monitors in front of him. I could almost see his brain working, analyzing the preliminary readings coming through the motion capture equipment, devising different ways of manipulating the wealth of data.

Seeing him made me crack a little smile. I still felt the warm glow of

gratitude for the way he'd helped me with Erwin. I'd brought him blueberry muffins this morning as a thank-you. Two empty muffin cups sat next to his keyboard. It would appear he'd enjoyed them.

"What do you think?" Elliott asked, angling his face toward me.

I checked my watch. "It's been just over four minutes."

"But what do you think? What are your instincts telling you?"

I observed the pair again. Their posture had softened. They were maintaining natural eye contact and their conversation was continuing without significant pauses.

"They appear to have adjusted sufficiently. But I would still suggest waiting the full five minutes we've allotted before the next phase. That way we're not inadvertently introducing a new variable."

"That's a valid point," Elliott said. "But don't forget that sometimes your instincts as a researcher matter as much as the data."

That was hard to believe. "Not to be unnecessarily argumentative, but instincts are fallible. Data is... data. Numbers don't lie as long as they're interpreted correctly."

"In a lab, maybe. But the world isn't as controlled as a laboratory." Before I could ask what he meant, he turned for the door. "I'll send the lab assistant in. This is our last pair for the day, so if you could get everything reset for tomorrow when they're done, that would be great."

I adjusted my glasses. "Of course."

Once the lab assistant went in, there wasn't much for me to do except observe. She entered and informed the subjects that we needed to calibrate the motion capture system by having them walk in a circle around the room.

In reality, we were already capturing data. The purpose was to discover how long it would take for their movements to synchronize, if they would at all.

I watched, fascinated, as the two subjects circled at a self-selected pace. It didn't take long before the length of their steps, the angle of their bodies, and even their posture began to match. They were syncing. Mirroring each other.

The lab assistant then asked them to perform a series of tasks and mirroring games while we observed, and the motion capture system collected data. When they finished, and they'd removed their equipment, I joined them to administer a questionnaire. It contained a variety of questions, but we were particularly interested in their self-reported feelings and their reactions to their study partner. Did the syncing behaviors—conscious and unconscious

mimicking of each other's movements—influence how they felt about the other person?

The data would tell us for sure.

After the subjects left, I went back into the observation room with Corban and checked my phone. I was meeting Sophie for lunch today, but she'd texted to say that something had come up at work and she couldn't get away. I texted back to let her know I'd see her later in the week for our run.

"Everything okay?" Corban asked.

He stood from his spot at the desk, not bothering to smooth down his shirt. It was partially un-tucked in the back today, like he'd gotten partway through dressing and forgotten what he was doing. I had a feeling that's exactly what had happened.

Absently, I brushed a few muffin crumbs off his shirt. "Yes, fine. I was going to have lunch with Sophie, but she had to cancel."

"Do you want to go grab something? I didn't bring lunch, so I need to go out anyway."

I smiled. "Sure."

Although there were places to eat on campus, we decided on a Thai restaurant a short drive from the college. I followed him to his car—a late model crossover SUV. He had a sticker on the back window that read *I do my own stunts*, next to a figure hanging from a rock wall.

His brow furrowed as he patted his coat pockets, presumably looking for his keys.

"They're in your pants pocket," I said. I'd seen him slip them into that pocket before we left his office.

He located them and gave me a sheepish grin. "Thanks. I lose my keys a lot."

Why was he so cute?

I didn't understand why his absent-mindedness was so appealing. The men I'd dated in the past, including my ex-husband, had generally been organized and meticulous. No un-tucked shirts, missed buttons, or disheveled hair. I couldn't remember any of them losing something as important as their car keys. Before meeting Corban, I wouldn't have thought a tendency toward distraction could be an attractive trait.

But in Corban, it wasn't just attractive. It was almost irresistible.

We got in his car and I placed my hands in my lap, trying not to fidget. But his car smelled like him, and the little smile he cast my direction made

my core tingle. I crossed my legs, trying to ignore the sudden warmth. It was like my lady parts had been classically conditioned to expect an orgasm if Corban and I were alone.

I had a sudden urge to suggest we skip lunch and go to his place—or mine—instead.

“Corban, would you like to—”

His phone rang and I stopped short.

“Sorry, it’s my brother-in-law. I should take this.”

“Of course.”

He swiped to answer and put the phone to his ear. “Hey, man. What’s up?”

I couldn’t make out what his brother-in-law was saying, but judging by the way Corban’s eyes widened, it was important or surprising.

“Oh my god. Now? I’m on my way.” He put his phone down—I couldn’t tell if he’d even disconnected the call—and started the car. “My sister’s having her baby. Like, right now.”

I wasn’t sure if I was unconsciously mirroring his excitement or if it was simply the news of an impending birth, but my heart rate increased considerably. “Is she?”

“Yeah, they’re already at the hospital. They’ve been there since the middle of the night and he was supposed to text me, but he forgot.”

He backed out of the parking spot and I had the fleeting thought that it was inexplicably sexy the way he put his arm over the back of my seat and looked behind us as he drove in reverse.

Before I could process the fact that we were headed toward the hospital instead of lunch, and I was still in his car, we were speeding down the road. I didn’t mind missing the meal, but I wondered if he was truly aware that I was with him. That he was bringing me to the hospital to see his sister and her brand-new baby.

What did one do in a situation like this? Although I studied human interactions and behavior for a living, my professional experience so rarely seemed to be of any use when I found myself in unexpected situations. Was there data that pointed to the proper response to joining a friend—whom you’d slept with, which was another complicating variable—during what was more appropriately an intimate family moment?

Not that I was aware of.

Corban was focused on the road, so I pulled my phone out of my purse

and group texted my friends.

Me: *I have a dilemma. Advice needed ASAP.*

Everly: *Are you okay?*

Nora: *What's up, sweetie?*

Sophie: *Working, but I'll help if I can.*

Me: *Relevant details. Corban's sister is in labor. I was in his car when he got the call. We're now heading to the hospital.*

Everly: *Aw! I'm so happy for his sister!*

Sophie: *I love babies!*

Nora: *Uh oh.*

Everly: *What's wrong?*

Nora: *Friends with bennies don't do family shit.*

Sophie: *But it's a new baby.*

Everly: *Can't she just go see the baby?*

Nora: *This is asking for trouble.*

Sophie: *But we need baby pictures.*

Nora: *Why am I the only one of us with any sense?*

Me: *She's right, this is an important event and should be reserved for close family members.*

Nora: *See? Hazel agrees with me, so you know I'm right.*

Everly: *They're friends now. This isn't that weird.*

Sophie: *Have you met his sister?*

Me: *Briefly.*

Sophie: *You can always just keep him company in the waiting room.*

Everly: *That's a good point. And obviously he knows you're with him. If he didn't want you to come, he would have taken you back to work, right?*

Me: *Possibly. Although his distraction level is high.*

Nora: *This is a bad idea. She's setting herself up to get hurt.*

Everly: *It's fine. Friends can hang out at the hospital for something like this. There's no rule against it.*

Sophie: *Plus, baby!*

Everly: *I know! I can't wait to see pictures!*

Nora: *Why are you so excited to see pictures? We don't even know Corban's sister.*

Everly: *So? Babies are cute.*

Me: *I don't expect to go farther than the waiting room so pictures are unlikely.*

Sophie: *That's no fun.*

Everly: *Maybe just one picture?*

Nora: *You're all hopeless.*

Everly: *Why so negative? Don't we like Corban?*

Nora: *I'm sure Corban is great. Maybe he's even amazing. His dick makes Hazel happy, so that makes me happy. But this is a girlfriend thing. And if you're not a girlfriend, doing girlfriend things is dangerous. I'm just looking out for her.*

Me: *I know you are. It's appreciated.*

I tucked my phone back in my purse. Maybe Nora was right. Maybe I should go back to work.

But I didn't want to. I wanted to stay with him.

Why? Maybe it was the tension in his grip on the steering wheel. The way his forearms flexed. The set of his jaw. He was nervous or concerned—either one a completely understandable reaction to the news that his sister was in labor. But there was something deeper than his posture or body language. Something that made the thought of leaving him in the hospital parking lot inexplicably unbearable.

I felt like he might need me, even if it was just to keep him company while he waited. He'd been there for me when I needed him. Why shouldn't I do the same?

He was silent during the rest of the drive, his eyes on the road. Every minute or so he checked his phone, as if expecting a call or text with more news. I wanted to touch him, soothe his agitation. But it was as if he'd forgotten I was here.

We pulled into a spot in the hospital parking lot and got out of the car.

He reached out and grabbed my hand as I fell in step beside him. "I think he said they're on the fourth floor."

I slipped my hand into his and our fingers twined together. "We can ask at the front desk if it's not clear."

"Yeah. Sorry, I'm just kind of freaked out right now. My sister's having a baby." His voice was slightly breathless with awe and his concern was palpable.

I squeezed his hand. "She'll be fine."

He squeezed back. "Thanks."

We went in through the large automatic doors at the front entrance and signs pointed the way. When we got to the maternity waiting room, he asked

someone at the desk about his sister. She gently told him we could wait here, and Molly's husband or a nurse would let us know as soon as there were any updates.

The waiting room was outfitted with couches and upholstered chairs. TVs were mounted high on the wall and stacks of magazines littered the side tables. A small group of people sat together in one corner, most of them looking at their phones. They didn't appear to recognize Corban, so I assumed they were waiting for someone else.

I took a seat, but Corban couldn't seem to stay still. He hesitated in front of the chair next to me, then stuffed his hands in his pockets and wandered around the room.

After a while, he stopped and glanced at me. "Oh, shit. Hazel, I'm sorry. We didn't get lunch."

"It's okay. I don't mind."

"Are you sure? There's probably a cafeteria. I could go with you, or..." He trailed off, looking toward the entrance to the maternity ward.

"No, you should stay here. I can wait."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "Thanks."

"I'm sure your sister is fine." I bit my lip before continuing. My mind fed me information I'd cataloged on the impact of modern medicine on the safety of childbirth. But I had a feeling even Corban didn't want data right now. "Although it's understandable that you're worried about her."

"I know she's probably fine, and she has Martin and nurses and a doctor. But she's my sister." He shrugged. "I worry about her."

He resumed his pacing and I flipped through a magazine. An excited father came out to share his news with the other group in the waiting room. I texted Elliott to let him know where we were. Fortunately, we didn't have more subjects coming into the lab until tomorrow morning. He replied, asking me to congratulate Corban and his family.

We'd been waiting for just over an hour—sixty-three minutes since arriving, to be exact—when the door opened again.

A tall man with black hair, dark eyes, and a wide smile came out. I could tell immediately by Corban's reaction that this was Martin.

"How is she?" Corban asked.

"They're both great. Molly was amazing."

Corban raked his hands through his hair again. "Oh thank God. Can we see them?"

We? Did he mean we, as in also me?

Uh-oh.

Martin looked past Corban at me.

“It’s okay, I can wait here. I don’t want to intrude.”

“Oh, right.” Corban gestured toward me. “Sorry, I always forget introductions. This is Hazel. Hazel, my brother-in-law, Martin.”

Martin smiled and his happiness was contagious. “Come on back. It’s just us right now.”

I stood from my chair, slipping a magazine back on the table. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’ll ask Molly before you go in, but I don’t think she’ll mind.” Martin smiled again and clapped Corban on the back. “Come meet your niece.”

Corban reached out and grabbed my hand again. The warmth of his skin and the way his fingers twined with mine proved to be irresistible. We followed Martin through the interior door and down a hallway.

I’d never been in the childbirth wing of a hospital before. I wasn’t sure what I’d expected. More noise, perhaps? Babies crying? Women screaming in pain? There was nothing like that here. Just soft lighting and a hushed ambiance that reminded me of a library.

Martin stopped in front of a partially open door, the interior screened by a thick curtain. He went inside and came back a moment later. “Come on in.”

Corban pulled me through, past the curtain, into a dimly lit room. More thick curtains blocked the light from a window and a door led to a bathroom. Molly sat up in bed, cradling a tiny bundle in her arms.

“Hey, weirdo.” Corban let go of my hand and took a few steps closer.

She smiled at him. Her face was makeup-free, her hair tucked behind her ears. There was tiredness in her eyes, but like her husband, her joy was infectious. Quite frankly, she looked beautiful.

“Hey, twinkie,” she said. “Do you want to hold her?”

Corban froze next to the bed, his eyes wide. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure.” She lifted the bundle and set her gently in Corban’s arms. “Say hi to Uncle Corban.”

“Oh my god,” he whispered, his gaze fixed on the tiny baby in his arms. “I love her so much.”

Molly laughed softly, her eyes shining with tears. “I know. Me too.”

“Hi, sweet girl,” he cooed at the baby. He shifted his weight from one

foot to the other in a subtle rocking motion.

The fact that I remained standing and didn't melt into a puddle on the floor was a miracle rivaled only by the miracle of new life sleeping in Corban's arms. My knees were in danger of buckling and my heart felt as if it would burst right out of my chest. A breathtaking surge of emotion consumed me from within. Awe, happiness, and gratitude that I was here to witness this moment, mixed with a dose of lust so potent my cheeks flushed hot.

I had never been more attracted to Corban Nash than I was seeing him gently cradling his newborn niece.

"What's her name?" Corban asked.

"Kaitlyn, but we'll call her Kate."

"It's perfect." He turned to me. "Do you want to hold her?"

My breath caught in my throat, my eyes darting between Corban and Molly. I was completely out of my depth, invading a family moment so beautiful and personal it made my eyes sting with the threat of tears. "I apologize for intruding. Corban and I were going to lunch when your husband called and then I stayed to keep him company in the waiting room. I realize you don't know me well and this is all very private and I won't stay long because I'm sure you're quite tired. But I would very much like to hold your baby."

I stopped, surprised at the torrent of words that had poured from my mouth. Especially the last part. But it was true. I did want to hold her.

"You're fine," Molly said with a smile. "I don't mind that you're here with Corban."

"I should wash my hands. I wouldn't want to be responsible for introducing any harmful microorganisms to her developing immune system."

Molly and Martin shared a look—a subtle communication passing between them that I didn't understand. I set my purse down and washed my hands thoroughly, then approached Corban with hesitant steps.

He carefully passed the sleeping baby to me. She weighed almost nothing, just a tiny body wrapped tightly in a blanket, a pink knit hat on her head.

Her eyes were closed, and a bit of dark hair peeked out from beneath the hat. She had round cheeks and a little bow of a mouth.

"She's perfect," I breathed.

Corban rubbed my back while I stared down at the baby, unable to look away. I'd always wondered if I lacked the natural biological instinct to

procreate, since I'd never been one to gush over babies. But holding Kate in my arms ignited a tiny spark inside me. A little flare of desire I'd never felt before.

It was all quite overwhelming. After a moment, I carefully passed her back to Corban.

Watching him hold her, gently swaying from side to side, only made the feeling stronger.

I made an excuse to leave as soon as I could, congratulating Molly again and telling Corban to take his time. The cafeteria was downstairs, and I ordered us both lunch. I knew Corban would be hungry. He was always hungry.

The warm squishy feeling persisted while I waited for Corban. I'd experienced something profound today. Was it just holding a tiny human who was so new to the world? I'd never held a newborn before. And it stood to reason that watching Corban hold baby Kate would produce certain feelings. It was normal for a woman to react positively to seeing an attractive man with a baby.

It was just typical human biology.

Wasn't it?

CORBAN

“Three, if you are lucky enough to find love, remember it is there and don’t throw it away.” ~ Stephen Hawking

Patting my pants pockets—although I’d already checked there—I looked around my office for my keys. I couldn’t find them anywhere. They weren’t sitting out. I’d looked in all the drawers. Lifted the small stacks of paperwork, files, and folders off my desk. Checked underneath my keyboard and behind my monitor.

It was the end of the day, and I’d offered to bring dinner to Molly and Martin. They’d brought Kate home from the hospital yesterday, so I figured they’d appreciate a meal they didn’t have to cook themselves.

I groaned in frustration and got down on the floor, moved my chair aside, and felt with my hand. They had to be around here somewhere.

From this vantage point, I saw a pair of black men’s shoes and slacks appear in my doorway.

“Hang on.” I grabbed the edge of my desk to hoist myself up, and stood.

A man in a suit jacket, no tie, came in and shut the door. Tall and imposing with dark hair and a strong jaw, he was the type of man who took up space in a room. Before I could ask who he was or what he was doing here, he’d taken a seat on the other side of my desk.

“Can I help you?” I moved my chair back in place and sat down. I had no idea who this guy was, but he looked pissed.

“Are you Corban Nash?” His voice was cold, almost monotone.

“Yeah.”

“The Corban Nash who’s sleeping with Hazel Kiegen?”

I raised my eyebrows. What the hell was going on? “Who are you?”

“I asked you a question.”

“And I answered with a question, but I’ll elaborate. Who are you that you think Hazel’s personal life is any of your business?”

His eyes narrowed slightly. I could tell he was trying to intimidate me, so I stood my ground and held his gaze.

“Shepherd Calloway.”

Why did that name sound familiar? “How do you know Hazel?”

“None of your goddamn business.” He didn’t make any aggressive moves—he barely moved at all—but the menace in his tone was unmistakable.

“Then why are you here?”

“Because you and I need to have a little chat.”

“About?”

“I won’t tolerate anyone fucking with Hazel.”

No, really, who *was* this guy? She didn’t have any brothers. It couldn’t be her ex-husband, unless that situation was a hell of a lot more complicated than I’d realized.

“I’m not fucking with her.”

His expression didn’t change. “That remains to be seen. But you need to know that if you hurt her, I will come after you.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“It’s not a threat. It’s a promise. If you hurt Hazel, I’ll destroy your life. Believe me, I have the necessary resources.”

Somehow, I did believe him. But his threat didn’t scare me, it pissed me off. “I don’t know who the fuck you think you are, but Hazel is a grown woman—a brilliant woman—and she’s perfectly capable of making her own decisions.”

“Indeed. If she wants some kind of friends-with-benefits arrangement with you, that’s her prerogative. But I won’t tolerate you taking advantage of that. If she gets hurt, I’m blaming you. And I’ll make you pay for it.”

Friends with benefits? Had she said that? “Seriously, who the fuck are you? Does she know you’re here?”

His eye twitched almost imperceptibly.

I rolled my eyes. This asshole needed to take his low-key bravado and go back to his corner office or whatever chamber of hell he’d broken out of.

“Look man, I don’t know what this is about or why you think Hazel needs someone to play scary dad on her behalf. Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m not going to hurt her.”

I’m the one in danger of getting hurt.

Shit, where had that thought come from?

“You’re right. You’re not.” He stood and adjusted the cuffs of his sleeves. “I’m glad we understand each other.”

Without another word, he walked out.

I watched him leave with a mix of bewilderment and irritation. Had that just happened? Had some guy in a suit just come into my office to threaten me if I hurt Hazel? I didn’t know who he was or how he knew her—or how he knew about us.

And friends with benefits?

That made sense, so I didn’t know why it was bothering me that he’d said that. We were friends. There were certainly benefits—benefits I enjoyed very much.

My phone buzzed with a text from Molly, pulling my attention back to reality. I needed to pick up dinner.

Before I could do that, I had to find my damn keys.

Maybe I’d left them in the lab. Although I didn’t know why I would have had them there in the first place. Still, I’d checked my office and the staff lounge. I’d even checked the refrigerator. You wouldn’t think finding your keys in the fridge would be a possibility, but once I’d put my phone in the freezer, so you never knew with me.

I checked the floor again, just to be sure—no luck—then went to the lab. Hazel was in one of the interview rooms chatting with a grad student. I waited in the doorway until he left.

“Hi.” She adjusted her glasses. “I thought you would have gone home by now.”

“I’m trying to, but I can’t find my keys.”

“How are Molly and baby Kate?”

“They’re fine. Settling in at home. I’m bringing them dinner.” I almost asked Hazel if she wanted to come, but something stopped me. “By the way, who’s Shepherd Calloway?”

Her eyebrows drew together in surprise. “Shepherd? He’s my friend Everly’s husband. Why?”

That was interesting. At least he wasn’t her ex. “He was just here.”

“Was he? That’s odd, I don’t have plans with Everly.”

“No, he was alone. At least, I didn’t see him with anyone. And he didn’t say he was looking for you.”

“Then why was he here?”

“To threaten me, apparently.”

“Are you sure it was him? That doesn’t sound like Shepherd.”

I leaned against the door frame. “Tall guy. Dark hair. Suit. Could probably watch a movie where the dog dies and his expression wouldn’t change.”

“Oh, yes, that’s Shepherd. But he threatened you?”

“Yep. Said if I hurt you, he’d destroy my life.”

Hazel’s lips parted, but she didn’t seem to know what to say.

“It’s not a big deal. If he’s your friend’s husband, I guess it makes sense in a weird way. I know you’re really close to your friends, so maybe they’re just looking out for you.”

“I’m honestly not sure how to feel about this. It’s very surprising behavior from him. I need to speak to Everly.” She looked past me, like she was momentarily lost in thought, before coming back to herself. “And your keys are on the counter in the motion capture lab. You set them down when you came in after lunch.”

How did she remember that? “Thanks.”

“Of course.”

Her eyes lingered on mine, but suddenly all I could hear was Shepherd Calloway saying we had a *friends-with-benefits arrangement*. That must have been what she’d told her friends. Which meant that was how she saw us.

I still didn’t know why that was bothering me so much. It was true.

“I should get going.”

“Okay. Tell Molly I said hello and I hope she’s adjusting well to motherhood.”

“I will.”

I left her standing there and went to the motion capture lab down the hall. She’d been right, my keys were on the counter. She really had remembered. Of course, noticing where someone set their keys was probably normal. I was the weird one who could easily memorize complex data sets, or the storyline of every comic book series I’d ever read, but couldn’t remember where I’d set something as important as my wallet or car keys.

She wasn’t in the interview room when I came out. I didn’t know where

she'd gone. Which was fine; I didn't have time to talk to her anyway.

And what did I want to say? I wasn't mad that her friend's husband had threatened me. It actually made me feel good to know she had people in her life who cared about her that much.

Regardless, I needed to pick up dinner. I left campus and stopped for takeout at a Mexican restaurant I knew Molly liked.

When I got to her house, Martin answered the door. He had dark circles beneath his eyes, but he smiled. "Hey. Thanks for bringing dinner."

"No problem." I walked in and he shut the door behind me.

"Fair warning. Your parents are here."

I stopped. How had I not noticed their car? This felt like walking into a final exam I hadn't studied for. "Oh, okay. Have they eaten? Because I don't think I brought enough food."

"I don't know. They just kind of showed up. You know, grandparents. They're excited."

I didn't miss the hint of tension in Martin's voice. He seemed to get along fine with my parents—and they certainly loved him—but he was probably exhausted.

"Don't worry about it. I'll run out and get more if I need to. Go sit down. You look tired."

He ran a hand over his face. "Yeah. I haven't slept much since she was born."

I took the food into the kitchen and spread out the to-go containers on the counter. My mom's voice carried from the other room. I hadn't seen my parents in a while. Not since just after I'd moved back to Seattle. I didn't avoid them, exactly, but it was easier if I didn't see them too often.

Steeling myself for whatever was about to happen—it was hard to know with them—I went into the living room.

Molly was in a recliner with a blanket spread out over her lap. Like her husband, she looked happy but tired. Martin sat in a chair beside her. The coffee table was littered with baby stuff. Tiny diapers, a container of wipes, little cloths, and a pile of what looked like wadded up baby clothes.

My parents sat next to each other on the couch, baby Kate cradled in my mom's arms. They were both babbling at the baby, and didn't look up at me.

"Hey twinkie," Molly said with a smile.

"How are you feeling?"

She shrugged. "Tired, sore, and like my guts have all been rearranged."

“Gross.”

“Giving birth is disgusting. But worth it.”

I glanced at my parents, but they still hadn't looked up. “So I brought takeout from that Mexican place you like, but maybe not enough for everyone. Do you need me to go back out?”

“Thank you so much. Mom, have you guys eaten yet?”

“You are the most perfect baby in the world, aren't you?” Mom said. “What's that?”

“Hey Mom,” I said. “Have you had dinner?”

Her eyes flicked to me for a second, then she turned back to the baby. “Of course we have. We wouldn't come over here expecting your mommy to feed us, now would we?”

“I didn't mean it like that. I was just wondering if we needed more food.”

“We already ate,” Dad said.

Molly met my eyes and shrugged again.

Jerking my thumb over my shoulder, I gestured to the kitchen. “I'll go fix you a plate.”

“Thanks.”

I dished up two plates—one for Molly and one for Martin. I'd eat later. For some reason I'd lost my appetite. I brought their dinner, then stood off to the side, feeling awkward. I wasn't sure what I should do now. I wanted to hold my niece, but my mom didn't show any signs of putting her down. And they were taking up most of the space on the couch, leaving no other places to sit.

“All right, Grandma, my turn,” my dad said. He slipped his hands around Kate before my mom could reply. “There's my little girl.”

Mom pressed a palm to her chest. “Oh Molly, I'm just so happy. I wasn't sure if we'd ever be grandparents.”

“Why not?” Molly asked around a bite of her enchilada. “Of course you were.”

“Well, you're not exactly getting younger. And I gave up on your brother a long time ago.”

I didn't react to her comment, even though I hated it when she talked about me like I wasn't here. It wasn't the first time she'd said that.

“Jeez, Mom. We're thirty-three, not fifty.”

“You can't have babies forever, you know. So I certainly hope you don't wait too long before having another one.”

“I literally just gave birth and you’re already pressuring me to have more kids?”

Mom lifted her hands. “No pressure. I’d just love to have more than one grandbaby, that’s all.”

“And look at that, you have two kids to fulfill your grandparent dreams.” Molly gestured toward me.

Dad glanced up, his expression doubtful, and Mom clicked her tongue. “I think we can all stop pretending that Corban will have a family. Some people just aren’t made for it.”

“Mom, come on,” Molly said.

“Corban’s special. We all know that.” She looked at me with a sympathetic smile, although she kept talking like I wasn’t here. “He’s very smart, but there isn’t room in that brain of his for everything else. We tried to balance him out, but he is who he is.”

Molly started to say something, but Kate squirmed in my dad’s arms and let out a squeak.

“She probably needs to be changed. Or fed. Or both.” Molly held out her arms. “Pass her back to me. I’ll finish my dinner later.”

Dad stood and put Kate in Molly’s arms. Martin got up and took their dinner plates to the kitchen.

“We should get going,” Dad said. “Come on, Kathy, the new parents need their rest.”

Mom sighed, but stood. “I know, I know.”

I waited, still standing off to the side, while my parents gushed over an increasingly agitated baby Kate, saying their goodbyes. They said goodbye to me too, and my mom gave me a quick hug before trying to circle back to the baby. Finally, Martin gently but firmly led them to the front door.

“Do you want me to go too?” I asked.

“No, don’t go. You just got here.” Molly rocked Kate, offering her a pacifier. “I know, little one. Daddy will change your diaper and then we can feed you.”

Martin came back and took Kate. She looked so small in his hands. He lifted her to kiss her forehead and murmured that he’d bring her back to mommy in a minute.

I took a seat on the couch and crossed one leg over my knee. “He’s an awesome dad already, isn’t he?”

Molly smiled. “So awesome. He’s the best. And hey, you shouldn’t let

them get to you. Mom and Dad, I mean.”

“It’s fine.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Is it, though? What she said isn’t true.”

“Which part?”

“That you’re not made to have a family. That was a crappy thing to say. Although I’m not going to lie, I have no idea how you’re still single.”

I leaned back against the couch cushions. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“No. It’s not obvious at all. You’re genius-level smart. Good-looking. You probably have abs under that shirt.”

I absently touched my stomach. “So?”

“Do you not understand the power of abs?”

“I don’t know. I guess.”

“Are you just being modest, or do you not realize how awesome you are?”

“Shut your face.”

“You shut your face.” She paused and tilted her head, still scrutinizing me. “Do you have commitment issues?”

I groaned. “Really?”

“I’m just trying to figure out how it’s possible that you’re still single. Commitment issues would explain it.”

“I don’t have commitment issues.”

“Are you sure?”

I looked around for something to throw at her. Something soft, obviously—she’d just had a baby. I wasn’t a total animal. But there wasn’t anything within reach.

“I’m not single because I can’t commit.”

“Then why?”

Adjusting my glasses, I raised my eyebrows at her. “Have you met me? I’m weird.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Thanks for not arguing with me,” I said wryly.

“You are weird. But that’s not a bad thing.”

“Have you ever found yourself describing the mating behavior of ring-tailed lemurs to someone you’re interested in?”

“No.”

“Then don’t tell me being weird isn’t a bad thing.”

She sighed. “Okay, so you can be a little awkward sometimes. But you’re

not the shy kid who never spoke up in class anymore. You've given lectures to hundreds of people. You put yourself out there. That's brave."

How could I explain to her that public speaking wasn't intimidating because it wasn't close? It wasn't intimate. I believed in my work, so it was easy for me to talk about it, even in front of a crowd. It was the one-on-one conversations that went sideways and left me feeling like an idiot.

Although I didn't feel that way around Hazel, did I?

"The fact that I can give a lecture has nothing to do with me being single. And stop worrying about it. I'm fine."

"You're just such a great guy. I want you to be happy."

"Motherhood is making you weird."

She extended her leg, trying to kick me, but I was too far away. "It is not. You're my twinkie. I wanted you to be happy even before I had a baby."

"God, Moll, you need to stop calling me twinkie. Where did you come up with that, anyway?"

"Because we're twins. Twinkie has the word *twin* right in it."

"You've been calling me twinkie our whole life because it has the word twin in it?"

She laughed. "Yes. You didn't know that? I thought it was obvious."

"Not obvious, weirdo. Can't you come up with something better?"

"Nope. It's too late. You'll always be my twinkie."

I rolled my eyes. "Just promise me you won't teach Kate to say it."

"Fine," she said. "So how's Hazel? I thought you might bring her with you."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because there's obviously something going on between you two."

"We're just friends."

Martin brought Kate back to Molly. She was free of her swaddling blanket, dressed in a white onesie, her tiny limbs wriggling.

Molly put a curved pillow in her lap and Martin handed Kate to her. "That's bullshit, and I need to feed her."

"Should I go?"

"No, it's just breastfeeding. If you're afraid of catching a glimpse of my boobs, don't look."

I waited while Martin helped her get the baby situated. I didn't want to catch a glimpse of my sister's boobs, but it was easy enough to look away. And hopefully we could talk about something else.

“As I was saying,” Molly said, finally, “I know you’re not just friends with her.”

I groaned. “Do we have to talk about this?”

“Yes, we do.”

Martin sat on the couch next to me and gave me a sympathetic glance, as if to say, *good luck getting her to drop it*.

“Fine, we’re sort of more than friends. I think. I don’t know, it’s complicated.”

“What does that mean?”

I wished I knew. “I guess we’re friends with benefits.”

Molly rolled her eyes. “See? I told you. Commitment issues.”

I spread my hands wide. “Why do you assume that means I have commitment issues?”

“Friends with benefits?”

“She said it, not me.”

“She told you that? She said she doesn’t want to date you?”

“No, but that’s what she told her friends.”

“How do you know?”

I didn’t need to get into that. “Long story.”

Narrowing her eyes, she pressed her lips together, studying me for a long moment. “Is that okay with you?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. We basically hated each other at first, so friends is good. And the benefits are really good.”

She kept scrutinizing me. “I don’t know how I feel about this.”

Neither do I. “I told you, it’s fine. It’s not like she’s forcing me to do anything.”

“She better not.”

“Trust me. That’s not an issue.”

“Okay, good. Like I said, I just want you to be happy. And I don’t understand how a girl could be with you and not want to keep you forever.”

I tried not to flinch, but damn, that stung. Because that was the thing, wasn’t it? No one had ever felt that strongly about me.

And the truth was, no one was ever going to, whether I wanted it or not.

CORBAN

“We need love. We need loving relationships. It doesn’t have to be marriage. But sex is the most healing thing you can do to your body.” ~ John Gray

After leaving Molly’s, I went home, feeling kind of shitty and restless. I thought about going climbing, or maybe to the gym to see if the dads were playing basketball. Neither of those sounded all that great. They weren’t what I really wanted to do tonight.

There was only one thing—one person—I really wanted.

“Fuck it,” I muttered to myself and texted Hazel. If we were friends with benefits, there was nothing wrong with texting her for a booty call.

Me: *Hey. Busy tonight?*

Hazel: *No, why do you ask?*

Me: *Do you want to come over?*

Hazel: *I just took a batch of sugar cookies out of the oven. Would you like me to bring them?*

Me: *Are you kidding? Obviously yes.*

Hazel: *Send me your address and I’ll be there shortly.*

I texted her my address and tossed my phone on the counter. Her cookies were great, but that wasn’t why I wanted her to come over. Of course, I wasn’t going to turn them down either.

She arrived about fifteen minutes later. I didn’t even pretend I had another reason for inviting her. As soon as she came inside, I took the container of cookies out of her hand, set them on the table, and kissed her.

Kissed her hard and deep so she knew how much I wanted her.

How much I needed her.

The way she tore my shirt off made it easy to pretend she needed me too.

We stumbled into the bedroom and made short work of ripping off our clothes. Fell onto the bed. She was soft and delicious, and it felt so fucking good to be inside her again.

It was stupid how much I needed this. How badly I craved her. But tonight, I didn't care.

Afterward, we lay together beneath the sheet. She rested her head against my shoulder while I absently played with her hair. My room was in total disarray. We'd knocked over the lamp, the comforter was on the floor, and our clothes were everywhere. I couldn't seem to contain the beast when I was with her.

"How's the training for your half-marathon coming?" I asked. "The race is soon, isn't it?"

"It is. We've been progressively adding mileage." Her voice sounded relaxed and sleepy.

"Do you feel ready?"

She hesitated before answering. "To be completely honest, I'm not sure. This particular training program doesn't include completing the full distance prior to the race. When I read the research behind it, the training program seemed quite sound."

"But?"

"But now I'm worried about my ability to finish."

I tightened my arm around her. "I'm sure you have nothing to worry about. You're going to do great. Just imagine how amazing you'll feel when you cross that finish line and see everybody cheering for you."

She laughed softly. "The finish line will be crowded with strangers, but I suppose you're right. That will be an exciting moment."

"You don't think you'll have anyone cheering for you at the finish?"

"No. My girlfriends will be running. And I don't know who else would come."

"What about your parents?"

"I'm sure they'll be happy to hear about it the next time we talk. But they wouldn't come all the way here for something like this. Plus, they're not comfortable in crowds."

It made me kind of sad to think about Hazel crossing the finish line with

no one to cheer for her. Maybe I'd have to fix that.

"Speaking of families, how's your sister?" she asked.

"Tired, but they're all doing really well."

"That's good to hear. I imagine the transition into motherhood would be challenging."

"Yeah, although Molly's the type of person who's good at everything she does. She already looked like an expert mom."

"Sounds a bit like you."

I glanced at her. "No, I'm pretty much the opposite of my sister."

"But you're very competent at a number of things."

"Mostly just math."

She shifted, the bare skin of her leg sliding against mine. "You're skilled at more than just math."

That made me crack a smile. "Okay, I'm good at sex too."

"That's an understatement. You're exceptionally talented."

"You're right, I'm amazing." I squeezed her and she laughed softly. "But that's not exactly the sort of thing that makes your parents proud."

"I suppose not, but you have no shortage of qualities to elicit parental approval."

"My parents are hard to impress."

"How so?"

I paused for a long moment, still sliding my fingers through her hair. "To them, being good at one thing never made up for all the other stuff I was bad at. They wanted us to be well-rounded, so they pushed me to do things to balance me out. Like even though I was bony and awkward, they still signed me up for soccer and Little League. And in high school, they made me go to all the pep rallies and school dances, insisting that I needed those experiences. I'd have been happier to stay home reading comics, doing extra math assignments, and watching nature documentaries. But they didn't want their son to be weird."

"They think you're weird?"

"I am weird."

"I disagree."

"Well, they wanted me to be more like Molly."

"It sounds as if they unfairly compared you to your sister."

"They probably did, but I get where they were coming from. Research from longitudinal happiness studies supports it."

She lifted her head. “What research?”

“Happiness studies show that across cultures and socioeconomic groups, the one thing that defines people’s lifetime happiness is the quality of their relationships. Not wealth, education, career, or social status. Nothing predicts happiness as conclusively as close, meaningful relationships.”

“But you have meaningful relationships. You’re very close to your sister.”

“I know. But I think my parents see success as having it all. A good career, a house with a white picket fence, a couple of kids. That was what they both wanted out of life, so they want the same thing for us.”

“I appreciate their desire to see their children lead happy, productive lives...” She trailed off, sounding uncertain.

“It’s simple. I got good grades, but Molly got good grades *and* had a million friends. I have multiple college degrees, but she has a degree *and* she’s married and starting a family. Being good at math doesn’t cut it. They don’t understand why I can’t be smart *and* fit in.”

“Fitting in is overrated.”

“Yeah, true. It took me a long time to accept that being a data nerd is just who I am. But humans are social animals, so ultimately being a math genius isn’t what’s going to make me happy. My parents can see that, and they don’t think things will ever change for me. My mom gave up on that a long time ago.”

And that was why my parents’ lack of approval stung so much. They were right. I wasn’t happy. Not really.

“Gave up? Gave up on what? On you leading a happy and fulfilling life?”

“I guess. But it’s fine. I have a good life even if they don’t think so.”

This conversation had bypassed deep and gone straight to uncomfortable. I didn’t want to talk about this anymore.

Before Hazel could say anything else, I unwound myself from her. “I just remembered you brought cookies.”

She hesitated and I could practically feel her thinking. The wheels turning in that big brain of hers. I probably shouldn’t have told her all that. Especially the part about my mom giving up on me. It sucked to say it out loud and it was worse saying it to her.

Thankfully, she let it drop. “I did bring cookies, although I doubt they’re still warm.”

She sat up and started feeling around for her glasses. I put mine on and

found hers on the nightstand. We got dressed, and for the first time, we kept hanging out after having sex. Usually, once we got up, that was it. One of us left.

Tonight, we settled on the couch with her container of cookies. They were crisp on the outside with soft, chewy middles and a sprinkling of sugar crystals decorating the tops. Delicious. I clicked through Netflix while we ate, and she pointed out a documentary about penguins. I'd seen it before but turned it on again anyway.

She went home after it was over, leaving me with the rest of the cookies. It was late, but I wasn't tired. Not tired enough to sleep, at least. I took a cookie to my desk.

A stack of unopened mail was in my way, so I scooted it to the side. Sticking out of the middle was a thick envelope. I pulled it out of the pile. My name and address were handwritten in fancy script. I had a feeling I knew what this was.

I popped the flap open. Inside, I found a gold embossed wedding invitation with an RSVP card and a self-addressed stamped envelope. It was for Julia Rubin and Easton Donnolly, a couple who had used my questionnaire about six months ago.

There was a note among the formal wedding stationary.

CORBAN,

We wouldn't be together if it weren't for you. You're a genius. Thank you for everything.

Love,

Easton and Julia

THE NOTE SLIPPED from my fingers and I let it fall to my desk. I picked up the RSVP card. They'd written my name on the line and beneath it was a little box next to the words *plus one*.

The box was empty.

Of course it was. I never had a plus one.

Although—the wedding was two months away. Could I ask Hazel to go with me?

But why? You didn't go to a wedding with your fuck buddy. Granted, you probably didn't go to the hospital to visit your fuck buddy's newborn

niece either, but that had been an accident. It didn't mean we were together.

It didn't mean my questionnaire had worked on us.

I glanced at my still-closed laptop, knowing the truth, even though I didn't want to admit it. I'd gotten my hopes up. I knew better, but deep down, I'd wondered if maybe this time things would be different. Maybe this time, my questionnaire would work on me.

It hadn't.

And I knew it was stupid to get bent out of shape about it. Something about me was broken and science hadn't helped. The data hadn't told me what was wrong with me. My parents hadn't been able to fix it. Me and my genius IQ hadn't been able to either.

Except, in a way, my questionnaire *had* worked. That was the real truth I'd been avoiding. The realization sat deep in the pit of my stomach and tried to work its way to the surface every time I saw her.

I was falling in love with Hazel.

The problem was, she wasn't falling in love with me. She liked me. She liked sleeping with me. But that wasn't the same, and at the end of the day, it wasn't what I wanted.

And it really fucking sucked.

HAZEL

“For small creatures such as we the vastness is bearable only through love.”
~ Carl Sagan

Erwin sat next to my feet, looking up at me expectantly. I glanced at his dish, wondering why he wasn't eating his breakfast, but it was empty. I had to leave for work soon and I'd forgotten to feed him.

“No wonder you're looking at me like I betrayed you.” I filled his dish with wet food, and he plopped down in front of it. Now that his infected tooth was fixed, he was eating normally again. It was such a relief. I was familiar with the various potential diagnoses for a cat who refuses food, and most of them were not something a pet owner wants to hear.

“I know what you're thinking. I shouldn't have stayed up so late.”

Erwin glanced up at me, then turned his attention back to his dish.

“Stop judging me.”

I'd been up half the night researching. What Corban had said about his parents baffled me. They weren't impressed with his accomplishments? How could they view him as inferior to his sister just because he was single?

He had multiple degrees in two different fields. He'd invented the algorithm that drove the most widely-used dating application in the world. And regardless of my early criticisms of his accelerated intimacy theory, he'd done excellent work. He'd come at the question of how to create emotional intimacy from an interesting angle.

He wasn't just impressive. He was remarkable.

I was the first to admit I didn't have a close relationship with my own parents. But that wasn't the result of a painful childhood or the pressure of unreasonable expectations. My parents were quiet, private people, much like me. They lived several hours away, and we saw each other a few times a year. I didn't need more from them. But I also knew they viewed me, and my life, favorably. They were proud.

Corban didn't believe his parents were proud of him.

I'd picked up on the pain in his voice when he'd said his mom had given up on him. It had stirred something inside me. My inner scientist wanted answers. Did the fact that Corban and Molly were twins influence their parents' comparisons of their children? How had that shaped Corban's self-perception, and what did it mean for his ability to form relationships as an adult?

There was something else driving my curiosity. Something I didn't quite understand. It was a feeling, an emotional response to the hurt I'd felt when he'd talked about his parents. There was a familiarity to it, and yet I couldn't seem to untangle its meaning. All I knew was that I felt something—something big and deep.

I'd shied away from it last night, and I pushed it aside now. This wasn't about me. It was about Corban.

The desire to better understand him had kept me up until my eyes had gone dry and the words on the screen blurred. I knew one night spent poring over research studies wasn't enough to reach solid conclusions. But it had left me with a few potential insights, as well as numerous questions.

I'd printed out a stack of information—excerpts, overviews, graphs and charts. Data. Good, solid, reliable data on everything from attachment theory in adults to twin studies to psychological models of parent-child relationships. I gathered everything up, tucked it into a folder, and headed to work.

Corban wasn't in his office when I arrived. I caught a few glimpses of him during the first few hours of the workday, but we were both busy.

Despite my other responsibilities, he was never far from my mind. I cast furtive glances at the folder sitting on the corner of my desk. The information buzzed in the back of my brain—data, theories, and unanswered questions.

Questions were the lifeblood of a scientist's work. Words like *what if* and *why* were mainstays in our vocabularies. Even if our theories and experiments didn't produce conclusive results—even when the questions

were too big to be answered easily—they drove us to keep deepening our understanding of the world.

I wanted to know why. Why was Corban hurting?

By mid-afternoon, I still hadn't found a moment alone with him. Perhaps I'd invite him to dinner again. I gathered up a few things and headed down the hallway, smiling at the thought. Dinner with Corban would be nice. He so enthusiastically enjoyed my cooking.

And we both enthusiastically enjoyed other things together.

I stopped in the copy room to make a few copies. The machine whirred, spitting out warm sheets of paper onto the side tray. I picked them up and took my original.

Corban came in and paused just inside the doorway. Warmth hit my cheeks and my stomach tingled with a rush of excitement. Memories of our first encounter in this room flitted through my mind, making my heart beat faster.

The urge to resist him—to treat him as my nemesis—had faded. Although I had no intention of repeating our first sexual encounter in this precise location, his workplace flirtations had become enjoyable and welcome. I smiled, ready for him to make a suggestive comment.

Or maybe even kiss me.

I hoped he'd kiss me. We could get away with it. No one else was around.

But his eyes didn't shine with playfulness and no hint of a smile tugged at his lips.

"Are you finished?" he asked. "I can come back."

I hugged the papers to my chest. "I'm finished."

He didn't say anything else. Just brushed past me to stand in front of the copy machine. Perhaps he was tired. I'd left his apartment late, and maybe, like me, he'd been up for several more hours.

It was tempting to launch into an explanation of the research I'd done. But I was hoping for a chance to ask questions. Standing in the copy room wasn't particularly conducive to an in-depth discussion.

And his body language was sending me confusing messages. His shoulders were bunched, and he hadn't made eye contact. I hesitated for a moment, but he didn't say anything. No remarks about meeting here again or teasing comments about the buttons on my shirt.

Something was wrong.

My brow furrowed as I studied him from behind. I opened my mouth to

ask if he was feeling well, but he picked up his copies and moved past me with barely a nod in my direction.

“Corban.”

He didn’t stop, so I hurried to catch up with him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just have a lot to do.”

I kept walking next to him. “I’m sure you do, but I can’t help but think something is bothering you.”

He stopped outside his office and our eyes met. He held my gaze for a few seconds, then looked away. “I’m okay. Just distracted, I guess.”

“Have you had lunch?”

His eyebrows drew together. “I don’t think so. What time is it?”

“After three.”

“No wonder I’m so hungry.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “You should eat. Did you bring lunch? I’ll come sit with you.”

“I’m not really in the mood for—” He stopped abruptly, meeting my eyes again, and seemed to change his mind. “Yeah, sure.”

I ducked into my office to retrieve my folder of research, then walked with him to the staff lounge. It was empty. He got his lunch out of the fridge and I poured myself hot water to make tea.

Dunking my tea bag, I joined him at a table. Small talk wasn’t my best skill, so I decided to get straight to the point. “I did some research last night.”

“About what?” he asked around a bite of his sandwich.

I opened the folder and thumbed through the information I’d printed. “A variety of things. Parent-child dynamics in adulthood. Attachment theory. Twin studies, especially as they relate to fraternal twins raised in the same household.”

His brow furrowed. “Why?”

“I have questions. You said your parents don’t view you as successful despite your numerous accomplishments, and that they compare you unfavorably to your sister.”

“So you printed out a bunch of studies?”

“This is just a preliminary look at the relevant literature. I’m sure there are angles I haven’t considered.”

He took another bite of his sandwich and chewed slowly.

“The relational dynamics within a nuclear family can heavily influence

everything from personality development to self-perception to adult decision-making. It seems to me that your parents relate to you and your sister in sharply differing ways. Which led me to wonder what sort of effect that would have on your ability to form emotional attachments.”

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “It did?”

“Yes.” I pulled out a sheet of paper. “And the fact that you’re a twin is another important variable. Attempts at self-differentiation are most commonly seen in identical twins raised together, but a similar phenomenon can be observed in fraternal twins, even of different genders.”

“Meaning what? You think I’ve never gotten married or started a family like my sister because I’m trying to differentiate myself from her?”

I adjusted my glasses. “Perhaps, although I suspect it’s deeper than that. The emphasis your parents seem to place on certain outcomes is also a factor. Do you feel compelled to live up to their expectations? Or is it more natural for you to follow your own path, regardless of parental pressures?”

“Are those your questions or did they come from some study?”

I thumbed through the papers again. “Both. There’s a study on—”

“What are you doing?” he asked, cutting me off.

“Discussing what I found in a preliminary search through the relevant literature.”

“What do you think you’re going to find in there?” He gestured to my folder. “The answer to what’s wrong with me? It’s not there. Trust me, I’ve looked.”

“I didn’t mean to imply there’s something wrong with you.”

Pressing his lips together, he looked away. “Look, my parents are fine. They don’t really understand me, but I’m used to it. It’s not a big deal.”

It seemed like a big deal to me. The pain in his eyes was unmistakable. It made me hurt for him. With him. Which was an odd sensation I couldn’t recall experiencing before—not with this degree of intensity. But this wasn’t about me.

“I disagree. And research suggests—”

“Research?” He cut me off again. “Do you think I haven’t read this stuff before? I know you’re the expert and I’m just the data guy, but give me some credit.”

“That isn’t what I meant. I just thought this might help. Knowledge leads to understanding which leads to solutions.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t try to fix me.”

“You’re misunderstanding my intention. I don’t think you need fixing.”

He pointed to my stack of papers. “Then what’s that?”

“It’s data. And maybe I spent my time looking in the wrong places. That’s why I wanted to talk to you. I’m trying to understand.”

“I’m not a fucking a lab experiment, Hazel.” He gathered up his lunch and stood. “I have a lot to do. I should get back to my office.”

The crisp sheet of paper slipped from my fingers as I watched him go.

He was angry.

Why was he angry?

Couldn’t he see that I wanted to help? He understood data better than anyone else I knew. I’d thought for sure he’d be as interested as I was in what the research had to say.

This was science. Science had the answers.

But maybe they weren’t the answers he wanted. Or perhaps he just didn’t want to hear them from me.

HAZEL

“You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him discover it in himself.” ~Galileo

The row of macarons I piped were perfect—shiny, round, and even. Pausing with the pastry bag held to the side, I smiled in satisfaction. These would not only be delicious, but pretty to look at. Exactly what I was aiming for.

I’d started my Saturday with an early morning run. We didn’t have long before the Soggy Seattle Half, and the training plan I’d devised called for decreasing mileage leading up to race day. We wanted to be fresh and energized on the day of the race, not sore and tired. This morning’s shorter run had left me feeling good.

For the most part, at least. An undercurrent of worry poked at me as I piped another row of macarons. Could I really do this? Could I run over thirteen miles?

Even without Sophie’s bet with Bella Ferndale, that prospect would have been daunting. Logically, I knew the progressive nature of the training program, and my adherence to it, would enable me to finish. But the increased competitiveness stirred my self-doubt. I could explain to my friends everything they’d ever wanted to know—and then some—about race training. And had. But could I successfully apply it?

This was pushing me outside my comfort zone in ways I hadn’t anticipated.

I finished another row of macarons. Erwin stretched out near the entrance to the kitchen, a fluffy pile of gray fur on the carpet.

“What do you think, Erwin? Will I be able to finish the race?”

He twitched an ear.

“Well, yes, objectively speaking, I shouldn’t be concerned about finishing. Even if I wasn’t adequately prepared and had to walk much of the distance, I could finish. But crossing the finish line isn’t enough.”

I spooned more batter into the pastry bag.

“Look at me, Erwin. I’m a scientist, not an athlete. The Bedazzled Bitches might have terrible taste in fashion, but they’re good runners. They’re experienced. Who knows, maybe there’s something to all those gemstones they use on their shirts.”

Erwin licked a paw and ran it over his flat nose.

“I know, that’s silly. There’s no objective reason their bedazzling would make them faster. Although maybe there’s something to their matching attire. It undoubtedly creates a sense of connectedness between them.”

I finished piping the macarons while Erwin groomed himself, and put them in the preheated oven. There was more batter, so I prepped a second baking sheet.

Before I got started on the next batch, I checked my phone. No new messages. My stomach sank with a renewed sense of disappointment. Corban and I hadn’t spoken since yesterday. I kept hoping he’d reach out and want to talk. But he hadn’t. And maybe he wasn’t going to.

“I feel bad for upsetting Corban. But I’m not sure what to do to make things better.”

As usual, Erwin didn’t answer. But as I went back to the kitchen, I kept talking. Maybe it would help me make sense of my tangled thoughts.

“I didn’t intend to treat him like a lab experiment. I simply had questions. And what do we do when we have questions? That’s right, first we look at the literature to see what’s already been discovered and explained.”

That was true, when the questions were scientific in nature. Questions about human behavior and related outcomes lent themselves well to structured research. We gathered data and drew conclusions based on our findings.

But Corban wasn’t a subsection of the population. He wasn’t a dot on a graph or a percentage. He was a man.

“Oh, Erwin. No wonder he was upset. He was right, I *was* treating him

like a lab experiment. And he isn't. He's a unique human being. He's a man with his own history, personality, and talents. A person can't be distilled into a data set. Especially not a person like him."

I started piping a new row of macarons onto the baking sheet.

"He's intelligent and insightful. Somehow he manages to be handsome in a strong, masculine way, and also charming and adorable. He's funny and talented, and he knows so many interesting things. I could talk to him for hours. You know what he's like, Erwin; you've met him. He's..."

I slowly lowered the pastry bag, my latest row of macarons only half-finished. But I was experiencing a feeling.

A big feeling.

An intense surge of emotion flooded through me. It wasn't new. I'd felt it before, but until this moment, I hadn't let myself truly feel it in all its fullness.

I'd felt it as I ran my fingers through Corban's hair when he'd been sick.

When he'd stood up for me at the vet.

Each time he'd stolen a kiss at work or grinned at me like we shared a secret.

It had been there, trying to nudge its way to the front of my brain, every time I'd lain in bed with him, my body warm and satisfied. That had been more than the release of oxytocin and the flood of dopamine. More than just physical gratification.

And now, with a pastry bag dangling from my limp fingers, I felt the full force of the truth.

I was falling in love with Corban Nash.

Scientific curiosity wasn't driving my desire to understand him. I cared about him. Deeply. I didn't want to examine him under a microscope. I wanted to feel him laid bare, physically and emotionally, and I wanted to be right there with him, open and vulnerable.

I wanted intimacy with him. Real intimacy.

The oven beeped and I almost dropped the pastry bag.

"Oh my god, Erwin. Do I love him?"

My cat didn't seem nearly as unhinged by this realization as I was. But I'd never felt this intensely about someone before. I'd dated and even gotten married—although that had proved to be an ill-advised decision—but I'd never felt this way about any of them.

I'd never been in love.

Erwin let his chin settle on his front paws and closed his eyes.

I pulled the baking sheet out of the oven and set it on a cooling rack, my hands trembling. Instead of finishing the cookies, I turned the oven off.

How had I not realized it? I was a smart woman. I understood the science of human attraction. But I'd been walking around, living my life, working with him, *sleeping with him*, and I hadn't put the pieces together?

Or maybe I hadn't wanted to put the pieces together. After all, I'd said I wasn't interested in dating again, and declared his questionnaire wouldn't work.

I'd been so determined to be right—or perhaps determined to avoid being wrong—that I'd pushed my feelings aside. Avoided them. Denied them.

What else had I missed?

“This raises an important follow-up question. If I'm falling in love with him, does he feel the same about me?”

Erwin looked up this time, lifting his head and opening his eyes. He meowed, a distinct feline verbalization.

Had my cat just answered me?

I stared at him, open-mouthed. Maybe my habit of talking to Erwin had caused a mental break with reality. Or perhaps this was simply my brain assigning meaning to a coincidence.

Either way, I needed to know. Because I had a feeling the answer to my question was yes. Corban was falling in love with me just as surely as I was falling in love with him.

At least, it was possible. It had to be.

My usual response to a burning question or personal revelation was to do what I did best. Research. But this time, instead of sitting down at my laptop and searching for everything I could find on feelings of romantic love—how did one know?—I did something very un-Hazel-like.

I trusted my instincts.

This couldn't wait. I didn't need data or research to confirm what I felt—what I'd been stubbornly refusing to see. And my instincts were telling me, loud and clear, that what I needed to do now was tell him.

The prospect was scary and exhilarating—what if I was wrong and he didn't feel the same?—and I almost talked myself out of it twice before I put on my shoes to leave. But what good would it do to wait? The last time I'd seen him, I'd made a mistake, and he'd walked away hurt. I didn't want to let that linger any longer than necessary.

Energized by the combination of emotion and resolve, I gathered my things and drove straight to Corban's apartment.

He lived in a large brick building about ten minutes from me. I went inside and took the stairs up to his floor.

My heart raced and my mouth felt dry. I didn't know if I was excited, scared, or perhaps a combination of both. What was I going to say? What was *he* going to say once I'd said it? None of the speeches I'd attempted to rehearse on the drive over had felt right. Maybe I didn't need to say anything other than the important parts. Just, *Corban I'm here to tell you that I'm sorry for treating you like a lab rat and by the way, I think I'm falling in love with you* .

That wouldn't be so hard. Would it?

Feeling jittery and unable to stop smiling, I approached his door. I bit my bottom lip and knocked.

The door opened and a blond woman wearing nothing but a plaid button-down shirt—Corban's shirt—and underwear answered.

My excited smile melted. It was Paisley Hayes.

His sister's best friend and his high school crush. Answering his door. In nothing but his shirt and her underwear.

The pit of my stomach felt like it had dropped through the floor. I checked the apartment number. Had I gotten the wrong one?

"Can I help you?" Paisley asked.

"Sorry, I must have the wrong apartment."

"Are you looking for Corban?"

"Yes."

"You're in the right place, but..." She paused and glanced over her shoulder. "He's in the shower."

The faint sound of running water carried through the apartment.

Why was Paisley in his apartment while he was showering? Given the way she was dressed, I had a good idea. But he couldn't have. He wouldn't.

Would he?

"Do you want me to let him know you stopped by?"

I didn't miss the false sweetness in her voice, nor the way she eyed me like she'd just scored a victory.

"Sure."

Paisley smiled. "Hailey, right? I'll tell him."

"No, it's Hazel."

But she'd already shut the door in my face.

I backed away, so stunned I could barely think. Had Corban slept with her? Had he been sleeping with her this whole time?

And did I have any right to be mad if he had been?

I felt like I might cry, or possibly vomit. My hands shook and I found myself on the ground floor, walking outside with no idea how I'd gotten there. All I could see was Paisley standing in his doorway, dressed in his shirt, her legs bare.

If this had happened to one of my friends, I knew my mind would have been able to walk through the evidence in a calm and logical manner. I'd have come up with a number of alternative explanations and encouraged her to reserve judgment until she was sure of the truth.

But the sharp sting of betrayal overrode my ability to think logically. All I knew was that I'd been wrong about him. I'd been wrong to think he might have shared my feelings.

Maybe he liked me as a friend. And he certainly seemed to have enjoyed sleeping with me. But we'd never gone beyond that. Never talked about the possibility of exploring what we had together. We weren't dating. We weren't exclusive.

So maybe Paisley Hayes answering the door in her underwear had just saved me from making a terrible mistake. He'd never have to know I had entertained the notion that I was in love with him, or that he might be in love with me.

I went home and did the only thing I could. I group texted my friends. I knew they'd be here for me. They always were.

But half an hour later, as we sat on my floor with martinis in hand, I didn't cry. I didn't let the tight ball of emotions loose. I couldn't.

I couldn't even find it in me to feel vindicated. This proved that Corban's theory had a flaw. We'd done his questionnaire together, and although it had sparked a change in our relationship, it hadn't made us fall in love.

Or at least, it hadn't made him fall in love with me.

And for the first time since that afternoon when we'd gone through his questionnaire, I allowed myself to admit another truth. For perhaps the first time in my life, I'd wanted to be wrong. I'd wanted his accelerated intimacy theory to be right.

CORBAN

“Just remember you will find that one special love that you know is right but for some reason just doesn’t last.” ~ Marie Curie

Steam clouded the bathroom mirror. I raked the towel back and forth over my wet hair a few times, then wrapped it around my waist. My jaw was rough with stubble, thicker than I usually kept it, but I decided to leave it. I didn’t care if I looked scruffy.

I’d spent the morning at the climbing gym, trying to distract myself from Hazel. Again. Apparently that was just my life now. I spent a lot of time up on that wall trying to keep her out of my head.

It never worked very well.

Maybe I shouldn’t have snapped at her yesterday when she’d hit me with all that research. But what did she think, that I didn’t know something was wrong with me? That she could compile a meta-analysis and the answers would be somewhere in all the data?

The answers weren’t there. I’d already looked.

My childhood memories were filled with my parents’ attempts to fix me. To ensure I grew up normal, not the weird guy who memorized random facts and did math for fun. But I *was* the weird guy who memorized random facts and did math for fun. And even though I didn’t understand what part of that equation was broken, something was. My parents hadn’t been able to fix it. I hadn’t been able to fix it. And now Hazel wanted to try?

I didn’t need her to make me her latest research study.

The air outside the bathroom was colder, making my skin prickle when I opened the door. I'd soaked in the hot shower for quite a while, so I probably needed some water.

Clutching the towel in one hand, I walked out to the kitchen.

"Hey there."

I whipped around at the voice, almost dropping the towel. Paisley sat on my couch, her legs crossed at the knees. Why wasn't she wearing pants? And was that my shirt?

"What are you doing here?" I hiked up the towel, fumbling so I wouldn't drop it.

She licked her lips. "Waiting for you."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to see you."

"How did you get in?"

"I have your key, silly. You gave it to me."

My key? "That was in case I locked myself out."

Her lower lip protruded in a pout. "I didn't think you'd mind if I surprised you. I thought it would be fun."

"But why are you wearing my shirt? And where are your pants?"

She stood and walked closer. "You weren't picking up on my hints, so I decided it was time to take bolder action."

"What hints?"

She stopped in front of me and draped her arms around my shoulders. What the fuck was happening right now?

"See? You're so clueless."

Without letting go of my towel, I grabbed one of her hands and took it off my shoulder, then moved the other one. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I know. That's why I'm here. I've been trying to let you figure it out, but I'm tired of waiting."

"For what?"

"For you."

My brow furrowed. "What?"

She laughed softly. "I like you, Corban."

I stared at her, dumbfounded. "No you don't."

Her smile faltered. "Yes, I do. That's why I'm here. I kept hoping you'd get the hint and ask me out, but you're obviously not going to. So I'm taking

matters into my own hands.”

I took a step backward. Paisley Hayes had been waiting for me to ask her out? I was so confused. “This is very... weird and unexpected.”

She tilted her head, her full lips curling upward at the corners. “Why weird? I thought maybe you liked me, too.”

“I did.”

“Good.” She moved closer and reached for my bare chest. “Let’s explore that feeling.”

“No, I mean past tense.” I stepped back so she couldn’t touch me. “I liked you in high school.”

“You did? Oh my god, Corban, that’s so cute. You really liked me?”

“Yeah, but that was a long time ago.”

She reached for me again. “It was, wasn’t it? Now we’re both grown up. We know how to do things right.”

I sidestepped to avoid backing into a wall. “This is... Paisley... I don’t...”

She kept after me, matching me step for step. It seemed like her hands were coming at me from every direction. “You don’t what?”

“I don’t like you like that.”

Eyebrows lifting, she stopped in her tracks. “Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression somehow, but I’m not interested.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying right now.”

“Really? You’ve never had a guy tell you he’s not into you?”

“No.” She crossed her arms. “Corban, I’m basically throwing myself at you. Do you know how many guys would kill for this chance? In case I’m not being completely clear, we can have sex. Right now. You just said you liked me in high school. Let’s make that teenage fantasy come true.”

Paisley Hayes was standing in my apartment in her underwear, telling me she wanted to have sex. Seventeen-year-old me would have died if he knew what I was about to say.

“No.”

Her mouth dropped open. “No?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Are you kidding?”

“I’m not kidding. It’s cool that you’ve been friends with my sister for so long and it’s been nice to be friendly with you, but I’m not interested.”

“Why?”

“Really?” I adjusted the towel again. “Should we get dressed first or...”

She put her hands on her hips. “No, I want you to tell me right now. Why aren’t you interested in me?”

“We don’t have anything in common.”

“Of course we do.”

“Like what?”

It took her a few seconds to answer. “I’m sure there are plenty of things. We just need to get to know each other better.”

“Do you like comic books? Or rock climbing? What about penguins?”

Her forehead creased. “What do penguins have to do with anything?”

“How do you feel about them?”

“I have no idea. Corban, I’m your sister’s best friend and we’ve known each other since high school. That’s like fate or something, don’t you think?”

“No. And you were kind of shitty to me back in high school.”

“How was I shitty to you in high school?” She crossed her arms again.

“It doesn’t matter now. The bottom line is, I’m not into this.” I pointed back and forth between the two of us. “I’m sorry you thought something was going to happen, but it’s not. I’m already...” I trailed off before I could say *I’m already in love with someone else*.

“You’re already with someone?”

“Not exactly, but that doesn’t matter either. Even if I was totally single, my answer would be the same.”

Her eyes narrowed, flicking up and down, and her jaw tightened. “Fine. I gave you a chance with me and you won’t get another one. I hope you don’t regret it.”

Not even for a second, Paisley. Not for one second.

She tossed her hair over her shoulder and swept out.

“You’re still wearing my—”

The door slammed behind her.

“—shirt.”

I didn’t really want it back anyway.

“That had to be one of the top five weirdest experiences of my life.” I didn’t know who I was talking to. I half expected to look down and see Erwin blinking at me.

I went into the bedroom and put on a t-shirt and pair of sweats. Had that just happened? Had Paisley Hayes just told me she liked me and wanted to

sleep with me?

There was a time when that would have seemed like all my dreams coming true. But seventeen-year-old boys weren't exactly the smartest creatures, even ones who were otherwise geniuses.

I didn't want Paisley Hayes. We weren't right for each other, and I'd known that for years.

But it figured. I'd liked Paisley in high school, and she hadn't liked me. Now Paisley wanted me, but I wanted Hazel.

And Hazel? To her, I was just a warm body and a science experiment.

CORBAN

“In the arithmetic of love, one plus one equals everything, and two minus one equals nothing.” ~ Mignon McLaughlin

Hazel had avoided me all day. And I didn't want to be grumpy about it, but I was.

We hadn't talked once over the weekend, and now that we were back at work, it felt like we were enemies all over again.

Not that we were picking at each other. I hadn't turned her nameplate around, and she hadn't left any memos on my desk. Truthfully, that would have been preferable to the awkward silence hanging between us. To the way she avoided my eyes and walked by my office quickly, like she didn't want to see me. The way she'd abruptly left the lab without a word when I'd come in this morning.

I wasn't the one who'd come up with a stack of research articles after she'd shared something personal. When I'd found out she'd been married before, had I immediately gone home and looked up everything I could find on getting over a divorce? Had I tried to science my way into her head so I could fix her? No.

So if me being mad about that put a wedge between us, fine.

I hunkered down in my chair and turned my attention back to my grant application. I had feedback from Elliott, showing me exactly how much work I needed to do to make it stronger. It was a lot, but this was why I was here.

My phone dinged and for a split second, I hoped it was Hazel. Maybe she

wanted to talk so she could apologize. Or maybe she wanted to pick a fight with me. I wasn't even sure if I cared which one it was.

But it wasn't Hazel. It was someone who'd found one of her fake fliers with my number on it—were there actually more of those out there?—asking about my free tutoring services.

Awesome. Maybe I'd put up fliers around campus advertising Hazel's services. *Do you have unresolved issues from your past? Have you ever wanted someone to poke at your insecurities like you're a lab rat? Call Hazel Kiegen.*

Looking at my phone, however, reminded me of the time. I was due in the lab in a few minutes.

With Hazel.

Great.

I got up and my stomach growled. Loudly. I'd forgotten my lunch at home today. Because of fucking course I had. I'd obviously needed something else to put me in a shitty mood and my subconscious had obliged. I didn't have time to run out and get something. I'd just have to suck it up and eat later.

Hazel was already in the observation room when I got there. Naturally. She was nothing if not punctual and organized. Traits I admired, but I didn't want to think about all the things I liked about her. Not now.

The fact that she didn't bother looking up at me when I came in sent another spike of irritation running through me. I decided to ignore her right back and got to work calibrating the motion capture equipment.

Two hours later, we were finished running tests, still hadn't spoken to each other outside of what was necessary to oversee the study, and I was hungry enough to eat that weird meatless thing my sister had tried to make when she'd been going through her vegetarian phase.

Hazel stood and tapped her papers into a neat stack. She opened her mouth and started to say something—it might have been *I think we should talk*—but in that moment, reasonable Corban Nash left the building.

I basically snapped.

“Do any more interesting research lately?”

She clutched her stack of papers to her chest. “Not really. Why?”

“Are you sure? I figured you must have studied up on conflict avoidance. Maybe passive aggression. Giving friends the silent treatment.”

“I'm not giving you the silent treatment.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“I’m talking to you right now.”

“Only because you have to.”

“On the contrary, I think we both have things that need to be said.”

“Okay, good.” I crossed my arms, waiting for her to apologize for trying to make me her latest study subject. And then, yeah, I probably needed to apologize for walking out the way I had. But she could go first.

She adjusted her glasses. It was odd that she wasn’t looking me in the eye. She didn’t usually shy away from eye contact. It was also odd that I knew that about her. But I tended to notice things about Hazel that I didn’t notice in anyone else.

“Our relationship, such as it is, hasn’t followed what would be considered a typical progression. Therefore, it would be unfair of me to place unreasonable expectations on said relationship. Such as it is.”

“Okay...” I had no idea where she was going with this.

“But I have also come to realize that my expectations were different than yours. And also different from what I may have communicated to you, in both verbal and nonverbal ways.”

“Expectations?”

“Yes. The first time our relationship progressed into the physical, we agreed it had been a mistake. It’s become clear to me that we were right, and it should have remained what it was. A single encounter that shouldn’t have been repeated.”

I stared at her. What was she talking about? “You’re saying we shouldn’t have slept together again?”

“Yes.”

My heart was beating too fast and my chest felt heavy. She regretted it. That was what she was telling me. She regretted sleeping with me. Whatever it was we’d had together, she didn’t want to fix it. She wished it hadn’t happened. We were a mistake.

That tiny spark of hope I’d stupidly been nursing—maybe she really had been trying to help with all that research stuff... maybe it meant she cared—snuffed out in an instant. It left me feeling empty, a different kind of hunger clawing at my hollow insides.

I was alone. I was always going to be alone. And I hated it.

My teeth clenched and I reached for the only thing I could find to get me through this moment. Anger.

Stepping back into my role as Hazel's rival was like wrapping myself in an old sweater. Sure, it was ugly and it didn't fit me very well anymore. But it was familiar and easy to wear.

I knew how to navigate a world where we were enemies.

"You know what, you're right. It was a mistake. It was a mistake the first time, and every time after that. And it was a mistake for me to trust you with anything personal. I should have known you'd turn it into a reason for extracurricular scientific analysis."

Her eyebrows drew together. "I was only trying to help."

"I don't need your help. And I don't need you to be my fuck buddy."

"I should say you don't."

"Friends with benefits is bullshit anyway," I muttered.

She sucked in a breath and her eyes glistened with... were those tears? Why did she look like she was about to cry?

"That's precisely the conclusion I've come to." She tightened her arms around her stack of papers and her spine straightened. "Friends with benefits isn't a viable option. And right now I'm questioning whether we can be friends at all."

Her words pierced through me, sharp and painful. She didn't want to be friends. She didn't want me in her life. For a second, the hurt cut through my anger. "What? Why?"

"Because I can't do that to myself, Corban. Being friends means staying on the periphery and putting myself in the position of having to watch you be happy with someone else. Even if that isn't now, it'll happen someday."

Someone else? What was she talking about?

"And I just can't," she continued. "I'm sorry, Corban, but I can't do this."

She walked out, leaving me standing in the observation room. The sudden silence was somehow deafening. It felt like the ground would open up and swallow me whole.

I kind of wished it would.



MOLLY ANSWERED HER DOOR, holding a sleeping Kate in her arms. "Hey."

"Hey. I know you have a newborn and the last thing you need is your idiot brother coming over, and I probably should have called first, but can I

come in anyway?”

“Of course you can.”

“Mom and Dad aren’t here, are they?” I glanced over my shoulder, wondering if I’d missed their car again.

“No. Mom was here earlier, but she went home a while ago.”

I shuffled inside and went straight for her couch. “Where’s Martin?”

“He got called into work. Some kind of emergency.”

“Are you okay? Do you need anything?”

She gently lowered Kate into a bassinet next to her chair, then sat down. “We’re fine. He’ll only be gone a couple of hours. And I feel pretty good. He took her for a walk earlier so I could take a nap. But what’s wrong with you? You look awful.”

I didn’t even argue with her, just ran my fingers through my hair. She was probably right.

“The last few days have sucked balls.” I wasn’t sure if I was ready to talk about Hazel. What could I say? That the girl I hadn’t really been dating had basically broken up with me? Or had I broken up with her? Was this really a break-up? My thoughts were too scattered. “Paisley kind of tried to get me to sleep with her on Saturday.”

“She did what?”

“I got out of the shower and she was on my couch. In nothing but one of my shirts and her underwear.”

Molly’s mouth hung open and her eyes widened.

“That’s basically the face I made.” I gestured toward her. “She told me she’d been trying to drop hints so I’d ask her out, but I hadn’t picked up on it. And that she wanted me, and we should... you know. God, in high school I would have sold a kidney to hear her say that.”

“Oh my god. Please tell me you turned her down.”

“Why? I mean, yeah, I did. But she’s your best friend.”

“I know. And I love her because I’ve known her forever, but she’s a mess when it comes to men. She picks the worst guys and then can’t figure out why it never works.”

“The worst guys? Thanks.”

She laughed. “I don’t mean you. Oh my god, this makes so much sense. Not long after you moved in next to her, she started talking about how she needed to stop dating all these assholes just because they’re hot and drive nice cars. Then she said she’d met this guy and he was so different and

maybe she should give him a chance even though he wasn't her type. I was totally encouraging her and I had no idea she was talking about you."

"Why wouldn't she tell you it was me?"

"I don't know. Maybe she thought she'd surprise me or something. You really told her no?"

"Yeah. I got over my crush on her a long time ago. I know she's your friend, but I don't know what I ever saw in her."

"This is going to sound awful, but I wouldn't wish her on you. I love her dearly—kind of like a sister you have to love even with all their faults—but she'd be terrible for you."

"Yeah. I know."

Molly tucked her legs beneath her. "So it must have pissed her off when you said no. I don't think she's used to being turned down."

I winced. "She wasn't happy. I guess I'll just add her to the list of women who hate me."

"Who else hates you?"

"Hazel."

As soon as I said her name, I regretted it. The Paisley thing had been awkward, but it was Hazel who had my insides twisted into a knot.

"Since when does she hate you? You guys were so cute together."

"We were?"

"Yeah. I know you said you weren't dating, but when she was with you at the hospital it really seemed like there was something there. Maybe you should have done your questionnaire together."

"We did."

She raised her eyebrows. "Then how could she possibly hate you?"

I ran my fingers through my hair again. "I guess she doesn't really hate me, although I think this is worse."

"What's worse than that?"

"She doesn't want to be friends anymore."

Molly looked incensed. "Why not?"

I blew out a breath, then explained what had happened last week. How I'd talked to her about our parents and she'd come back with a stack of research studies. How I'd told her I didn't want to be her latest experiment. And that she'd told me today it had been a mistake to keep sleeping with me, and she couldn't be friends anymore either.

"I know I shouldn't have snapped at her. She was just trying to help. But

now it's like she doesn't even want to see me."

"That does seem really harsh. And I'm so surprised. You guys really went through your questionnaire?"

"Yeah."

"The whole thing?"

"From start to finish."

Her eyebrows drew in and she hesitated for a long moment. "But how is that possible? Your questionnaire brings people together. It really does create intimacy. It works."

"Not on me."

"What do you mean?"

I shrugged. "I'm the exception. It doesn't work on me. That questionnaire is responsible for dozens of people falling in love, but for some reason, I've never been one of them."

"Maybe you just haven't done it with the right person."

"I don't think that's the problem. I'm the problem."

"How could you possibly be the problem?"

"Do you want something to eat?" I stood up. "I could go get takeout."

She pointed at the couch. "Don't even think about it. Why do you think you're the problem?"

I sat down again. "I don't know. Maybe all the numbers and calculations and stupid animal facts take up too much space in my brain. There isn't room left for other skills."

"That's ridiculous. There's room left to love someone."

"Look, I don't understand it either. I'm just not built for it, I guess."

She tilted her head, her expression full of sympathy. "Corban, everyone is built to be loved."

"Yeah, well..." I trailed off, glancing away.

"Why did you create that questionnaire?"

I was surprised by her question, but I answered anyway. "When we were testing the algorithms for the dating app, I saw people making snap decisions about potential matches. Passing on someone in an instant with almost no information about them. I wanted to see if there was a better way to bring people together."

"Yeah, I know this story. You did that thing you do where you learn everything there is to know about something. You did a bunch of research and gathered data. You tested it and refined it and along the way, you became

a cute little scientific matchmaker. I know all that. I'm one of your success stories. But that's not what I'm asking. Why did this fascinate you so much that you poured everything you have into it?"

I stood up again and started pacing around the room, suddenly too restless to sit still. "Did you know that I went out with Bethany Sanderson in high school?"

"No, when did you go out with Bethany? And what does she have to do with it?"

"Just stay with me. It was senior year. I took her out on one date and when I dropped her off at home, she told me she just wanted to be friends and made me promise I wouldn't tell anyone we'd gone out."

"Oh my god."

"Do you know how many girls I've dated who've basically done the same thing? Maybe not the part about keeping it a secret, that was particularly shitty. But that date with Bethany Sanderson is the story of my life. I meet someone and maybe we like each other enough to date for a while, but eventually it always comes back to that. We should just be friends."

"Oh, twinkie."

I kept wandering around the room as I talked. "I've never even had a huge breakup. Which is a weird thing to be disappointed about, I know. But no one's ever felt strongly enough about me for it to end badly. Or to show up at my door asking for another chance. Or run into me a year later and say maybe we made a mistake. No one has ever wanted me enough. And do you want to know the worst part?"

Her eyes were full of sympathy. "What?"

"I've never felt that strongly about anyone either. I've shrugged off the end of every relationship I've ever had because I knew none of them were in love with me. And I wasn't in love with them. But I've never been the kind of guy who wanted to date a ton of different women and never commit. I'm not wired that way."

"You're wired to find your person."

I stopped. "I'm wired to find my goddamn penguin."

"What?"

"Never mind. The point is, I wanted hope. I spent all that time and energy learning, researching, working with the data, creating the questionnaire, and even changing careers, because every time I had an insight, it gave me hope. Every couple who used my questionnaire and fell in love, every wedding I

ever went to—hell, even you and Martin—all of it made me feel like it was possible. If I could crack the code to falling in love and make it work for dozens, even hundreds of other people, maybe someday it would work for me.”

“And it will.”

I sank back onto the couch. “No, it won’t. That’s the thing, Molly. It won’t work for me.”

“How can you believe that?”

“When all the evidence is pointing to one conclusion, at some point you have to quit trying to prove it wrong.”

She got up and moved to the couch beside me. “Corban, there’s nothing wrong with you. You don’t have some inner flaw that makes you fundamentally unlovable. You’re brilliant and funny and kind and really freaking awesome. Any woman who can’t see that doesn’t deserve you.”

I shrugged. “Thanks.”

“But do you think it’s possible that you’re getting in your own way?”

“What do you mean?”

“If you really believe something about yourself, you’re going to act as if it’s true. If you don’t think you can fall in love, or you don’t think anyone can fall in love with you, that’s going to influence how you relate to people.”

I wrinkled my nose at her. She was making sense in a way that was rather uncomfortable.

“Think about it. You grew up assuming everyone was going to think you were weird. Whether or not it was true, you acted like it was. You were shy and quiet. And maybe you missed out on chances for people to get to know the real you because you were too worried about being different.”

“So you’re saying it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

“I’m saying that maybe assuming no one will fall in love with you means you aren’t open to it. You miss the signs that it’s happening because you’ve already decided it won’t.”

I pushed my glasses back up my nose. Was she right? Had something been happening between me and Hazel and I’d missed it because I assumed it never would?

She patted my leg. “I’m sorry things are tough right now. You know what might help?”

“What?”

“Baby snuggles.”

She got up and brought a still-sleeping Kate to me. Gently laid her in my arms. And she was right, it did help. A little bit, anyway.

I held my niece while she slept. And even though I still felt shitty about Hazel, at least my weird brain had done something right. I'd helped Molly and Martin get together, and now they had Kate. The tiny human in my arms reminded me that even if the rest of my life never got better, at least I'd always have that.

HAZEL

*“A real friend is one who walks in when the rest of the world walks out.” ~
Walter Winchell*

Friday morning, I sat in a coffee shop a few blocks from my apartment building, nursing a mug of black tea. The atmosphere was cozy, with soft armchairs and tables by the front window. It smelled like fresh coffee with a hint of sweetness from their selection of pastries.

I blew on my tea while I waited for my friends to arrive. The Soggy Seattle Half-Marathon was tomorrow, and we’d all taken the day off. The plan was to rest, hydrate, and eat well so we’d be fully energized and ready to run in the morning.

Specifically, ready to kick the Bedazzled Bitches’ asses in the morning.

I was glad for the reprieve from work, and not just because of the potential benefits to my race day performance. The last several days had been a struggle. I couldn’t avoid Corban. We had to work together too often.

Being near him hurt. A lot.

So I’d put up a wall between us. It was the only thing I could do to protect my heart. I hadn’t been cold or dismissive. I didn’t want to hurt him. But I’d kept things businesslike and avoided being around him unless I had no choice.

Everly and Sophie came into the coffee shop together. Everly’s hair was down and she wore a pretty yellow shirt with jeans and wedge-heeled sandals. Sophie’s floral shirt nipped at her waist and her cropped jeans and

sandals showed off bright pink toenails.

We exchanged hugs, as girlfriends were inclined to do, and a few minutes later, Nora arrived. She wore her hair down and was dressed in head-to-toe black. She whipped off her sunglasses and set a shopping bag on my table with a bright smile.

“Are you ladies ready for this?” she asked. “Because I don’t know if you’re ready for this.”

Sophie wiggled her hips and started singing the line to a song about being *ready for this jelly*—until she bumped her backside into a chair and almost knocked it over.

“Sorry,” she said, scooting the chair back into place. “What are we not ready for?”

Reaching into the bag, Nora pulled out a white tank top and held it up to her chest. “What do you think?”

Everly drew in a quick breath and Sophie squeaked. I pushed my glasses up my nose.

The shirt had a line drawing of a martini glass with the words *Dirty Martini Running Club* surrounding it in a circle.

“It’s so cute,” Everly said. “I love the pink and blue.”

“Adorable,” Sophie said.

Nora took three more shirts out of the bag and passed one to each of us. “I figured we should look like the sassy badasses we are.”

I held mine up. “I love it.”

“I’m so glad you like them,” Nora said. “I knew you would, they’re darling. But I’m glad anyway. No matter what happens tomorrow, we’ll look fabulous.”

“Hell yes, we will,” Sophie said. “So what do you think, ladies? Are we ready?”

“As ready as we’ll ever be,” Everly said. “How are you holding up, Hazel? Did your week get any better?”

My shoulders slumped. “Not particularly.”

Nora dropped her shirt back in the bag. “I’m sorry, sweetie.”

“This is proving to be exceptionally difficult to navigate. I don’t even feel like baking.”

Everly wrapped an arm around my shoulders and squeezed. “Aw, Hazel.”

“I know what you need,” Nora said. “Yoga.”

“Yoga?” Everly asked. “Since when do you take yoga?”

“I take yoga,” Nora said. “Well, only because my boss had me doing a series on alternative yoga studios in Seattle. But trust me, this isn’t ordinary yoga. It’s exactly what she needs right now.”

“Are you sure?” Sophie asked. “We’re supposed to be resting before tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry, it’s not strenuous. More for relaxation and release.”

“That sounds good,” Everly said. “What do you think, Hazel?”

“A restorative activity is probably a good idea.”

Nora got out her phone. “I’m texting you guys the address. We can all go home to change and meet for their ten-thirty class.”

“What do you mean by alternative yoga?” Everly asked.

Nora smiled. “You’ll see.”



THE FOUR OF US stood on the sidewalk outside Rebel Spirit Yoga Studio, clad in ponytails and yoga attire. I tilted my head and read the sign in the window again.

“Rage yoga? Is that a misprint? Rage yoga sounds like an oxymoron.”

Nora slipped her arm through mine and led me inside. “It’s yoga for the rest of us. There’s deep breathing and stretching and all that stuff. But you’re also encouraged to explore your emotional range through things like yelling curse words and punching pillows. Also, there’s alcohol, so it’s obviously the best yoga studio ever.”

I remained skeptical while we signed in at the front desk. It didn’t look like any yoga studio I’d ever been to. Instead of dreamy instrumental music, wispy curtains, and flowing tapestries, rock music played in the background and the space was decorated with wood paneling, industrial metal accents, and wine barrels.

We removed our shoes and Nora showed us where to find yoga mats. Those were typical, as was the smooth wood floor. There were also thick wool blankets stacked on a shelf and various foam blocks for modifications.

And a bar with a selection of alcoholic beverages.

We found a spot in the center of the room and spread out our mats. Three men and six other women filled out the class. Some stood, waiting for the instructor. One of the men and two of the women sat cross-legged on their

mats with their eyes closed.

A petite redhead in a black tank top and capris walked out onto the floor. She had a full sleeve of tattoos on one arm and several more decorating other parts of her body. “Welcome, badassess. I’m glad you’re all here today. Do we have any newcomers to class?”

Everly, Sophie, and I raised our hands, as did two other attendees.

“Great, welcome. I’m Kennedy and I’ll be guiding you through your practice today. I’m sure you’ve already guessed this isn’t traditional yoga. Just follow along and only do what you’re comfortable with. But I definitely encourage everyone to stretch themselves, not just physically, but emotionally as well. If you have something to let out, this is a safe place to do it.”

Nora glanced at me and winked.

Kennedy turned up the rock music and led us through a warm-up that included deep breathing and basic yoga poses. Other than the music—which, I had to admit, gave the room a great deal of energy—it wasn’t much different from a typical yoga class.

Until it was.

We got into warrior pose, with our front legs bent and back legs straight, arms held out.

“Now it’s time to find the badass energy inside you,” Kennedy said. “Take a deep breath, filling your lungs, and when you let it out, I want you to yell. Here we go. Deep breath in...”

I glanced around, feeling tentative. We were all going to yell? I took a deep breath and the room erupted with noise. Nora and Sophie shouted beside me. A man in back roared, his voice deep. Everly caught my eye, looking as hesitant as I felt. She shrugged, opened her mouth, and yelled.

So I yelled, too.

“Yes, amazing,” Kennedy said. “Let’s step out of warrior and reach our hands up. Good. Now let’s find warrior on the other side.”

We all moved as instructed.

“Again, deep breath, and then let loose. Take any pent-up anger or negativity and let it out with your voice.”

This time, I didn’t hesitate. I took a deep breath, and shouted.

I felt it low in my abdomen, as if the sound originated there. It traveled through my chest, taking some of the pain I’d been carrying all week with it.

The longer we continued, the easier it became to fully participate. We sat

cross-legged on the floor, put our hands on our stomachs, and shouted our obscenities of choice. Held plank pose, adding a loud *fuck you* at the end. The heavy metal music drove the mood of the class and Kennedy encouraged yelling, fist-pumping, and head-banging.

We took a short break for water—and cocktails, wine, or beer. Nora, Sophie, Everly, and I went back to our mats sipping mimosas. After all, it was still morning.

With our drinks set off to the side, Kennedy led us through more poses. Some were challenging, causing my muscles to clench and burn as I struggled to hold them. She followed those with poses designed to let go of the tension, adding what she called war cries to enhance the release.

“Now, I want you to think about something that’s really been bothering you,” Kennedy said, walking between the mats. “That one thing that’s been sitting deep in the pit of your stomach. I don’t care if it’s as simple as a broken fingernail, or as serious as a toxic person in your life. I want you to take that thing and visualize it for a moment. Then I want you to flip it some double fist unicorns, like this.” She raised her middle fingers. “And tell it to fuck off. Are we ready? Let’s do this. First, find your breath and visualize.”

With my bare feet planted shoulder width apart, I closed my eyes and brought to mind the one thing that was eating me alive.

It wasn’t Corban. I didn’t want to flip him double fist unicorns or tell him to fuck off. I didn’t even conjure an image of Paisley Hayes wearing nothing but Corban’s shirt and her underwear—although for a second, I was tempted.

And some of the obscenities I’d already yelled had been directed at her.

What I called to mind was my own stubbornness. My insistence on proving Corban wrong—and my fear of being wrong—had blinded me. It had kept me from experiencing the truth of my developing feelings for him. And now I was paying the price.

The irony was, my behavior had been completely contrary to the scientific method. I’d gone into our relationship thinking I already had the answers, and I’d ignored any evidence that challenged my beliefs. I’d decided ahead of time what the outcome would be. I wouldn’t fall in love with him. And I’d stubbornly held to that, until it was too late.

“All right, badasses,” Kennedy said. The music got louder, the heavy guitar riffs and pounding drums filling me with powerful energy. “Let’s get this shit out. Fill your lungs, breathing from your abdomen, and let those fucks fly.”

I pulled in a lungful of air, opened my eyes, and shouted as loud as I could. “Fuck off!”

My heart pounded hard in my chest and I realized I was digging my fingernails into my palms. I stared at the floor for a long moment and unclenched my fists.

“That was amazing.” Kennedy still slowly walked through the mats. “Does anyone have something they’d like to share? No pressure. But if you want to, feel free to let it out.”

I looked up as if coming out of a trance. “I think I fell in love for the first time. But I messed up, and he messed up. And now it’s just... a mess.”

Kennedy nodded. “That happens to so many of us. And it’s brutal. How do you feel about it, right now? What’s in here?” She placed her hands over her stomach.

“I’m angry. I’m angry at myself and I’m angry at him. I’m angry that this isn’t easier. That I didn’t tell him how I felt. That my education and professional experience not only proved to be no help whatsoever, they were probably a hindrance. And I’m pissed off that he might want to be with someone else more than he wants to be with me. Because I’m good for him. I understand him and he understands me and there are so few people who do. For both of us. I’m angry because I should be his penguin.”

I stopped, shocked at my outburst.

“Hell yes, you should be his penguin,” someone said behind me.

“Badass.”

“That was fierce as fuck, girlfriend.”

“Let it out, sister.”

Buoyed by the support of my classmates, I nodded. And I felt... better. Like I’d cleaned out some of the negative energy that had been weighing me down.

“So fucking awesome,” Kennedy said. “It sucks that you’re going through that, but girl, you are fierce as fuck. And I know you’re going to come out on the other side a stronger woman.”

A set of arms wrapped around me. Then another. And another. Everly, Sophie, and Nora all hugged me tight. In that moment, they gave me exactly what I needed. I was loved, accepted, and supported. And although neither that, nor yelling *fuck* in a yoga class, were going to mend my broken heart, they made the hurt a little more bearable. And that was priceless.

CORBAN

“The derivative for my love for you is 0, because my love for you is constant.” ~ Anonymous

I was up early for a Saturday. It obviously had nothing to do with the fact that Hazel and her friends were running their half-marathon today and it was about to start. I wasn't fidgeting at my desk, wondering how she was doing.

That was a lie. That was exactly what I was doing.

Was she nervous? Properly hydrated? I'd looked up pictures from previous races and knew there were hydration stops all along the route. But had she eaten this morning? Was she replenishing her electrolytes?

And would there be anyone to cheer for her at the finish line?

I knew her circle was small. I also knew that was just how she operated. She wasn't the type of person who needed a huge group of people around her to be happy. She had several close relationships that she valued deeply, and that was enough for her.

But I couldn't stop thinking about how she was going to feel at the end of the race. I'd planned to be there. I was even going to make a sign.

Didn't seem to be much point in doing that now.

She'd avoided me for the rest of the week, crushing any hope I'd had that she was just upset and would get over it. That we could go back to hanging out, poking at each other, and discussing all the random topics that seemed to come up when we were together.

I didn't miss her for the sex. No, that wasn't true, I did. Desperately. I craved her body like a junkie. But I missed all of her. I missed being around her. The way she pursed her lips when she was thinking or annoyed with me. The way she pushed her glasses up her nose and the way she got excited about the same things I did.

A sharp knock on my door roused me from my thoughts. I narrowed my eyes in suspicion. Paisley hadn't been back since last weekend when she'd pranced around here in her underwear. She was obviously avoiding me too, but since I wanted to avoid her, that worked out in my favor. Was she back? Had she decided to try again, or was she coming over to tell me I was an idiot for turning her down?

Or maybe it wasn't her at all. It was hard to believe she cared enough about me to put in more effort than she already had. I was convinced it wasn't me she'd been after, just the allure of a guy who was different. She'd been burned enough times that suddenly her best friend's dorky brother didn't seem like such a bad alternative.

No thanks. I didn't want to be alone for the rest of my life, but I didn't want to be someone's second choice either.

Whoever it was knocked on the door again, hard. They really beat on it, like they were determined to get an answer.

"Yeah, hang on."

I got up and thankfully remembered to look down to make sure I was wearing pants before answering the door. I was.

There was another knock right as I grabbed the doorknob. Seriously, who was pounding on my door on a Saturday morning and being such a dick about it? I opened the door and groaned.

It was *him* again.

This time he wasn't dressed in a suit, but he still wore a button-down shirt and slacks. He had the sleeves cuffed, and his forearms flexed as he clenched his fists.

I raised an eyebrow. "Hello, Satan."

Shepherd Calloway's cold blue eyes narrowed. "Nash."

"Might as well come in." I held my arm out and stepped aside.

Without another word, he walked into my apartment. I shut the door behind him.

His gaze swept over the room, lingering on the comic books littering my coffee table. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking. His face was hard

and expressionless.

Silence stretched out between us. I was pretty sure he was waiting for me to break it. So I didn't. Just stood my ground, crossed my arms, and waited for him to tell me what the fuck he was doing here.

Finally he spoke. "I thought we had an understanding."

"Are you here to insist I make an honest woman out of her? Because I'll let you in on a little secret. Hazel's the one who's going to protest that, not me."

Oh god, I'd just said out loud that I'd marry her. Kind of.

But it was also kind of true.

Fuck.

"I'm here because I made it very clear how I felt about someone hurting her."

"Yeah, you did. And I didn't hurt her. Besides, why do you care?"

"Hazel is my wife's best friend." His low voice was almost monotone, yet dripping with threat. "She's important to Everly, therefore she's important to me. And you did hurt her."

"What? I got annoyed with her, but all I did is walk away. I don't think that's bad enough to warrant you giving me the scary dad speech again."

"I'm not talking about you being *annoyed* with her." He emphasized the word. "I'm talking about you sleeping with another woman."

"What?"

He didn't reply. Just raised his eyebrows.

I had no idea what he was talking about. "I'm not sleeping with anyone. I was sleeping with Hazel, we both know that, but obviously that's never happening again. And you know, maybe that's better for me anyway. I'm probably just torturing myself. But have you ever been with a woman who feels so perfect you wonder if anything in the world will ever feel good again if you're not with her?"

His brow furrowed. "Yes, actually."

"See? That's the problem. She's fucking amazing and this whole thing sucks."

"If she's so goddamn amazing, why are you fucking your neighbor on the side?"

"What neighbor? I'm not sleeping with—" I stopped and stared at him for a second. "Wait, are you talking about Paisley?"

"That sounds right."

I cast a quick glance at the wall my apartment shared with hers. “You think I’m sleeping with Paisley?”

His jaw hitched and he raised his eyebrows again. This guy had a stare that could freeze your balls off. It was pretty impressive.

“Who told you I was sleeping with her?”

“My wife. She spent last Saturday evening consoling Hazel after she came here. Your neighbor answered the door in her underwear.”

“What the fuck?” I blurted out. “I didn’t know Hazel came over.”

“So now I have no choice but to—”

“No, what the fuck? I wasn’t sleeping with Paisley. I’ve never slept with Paisley. I probably would have in high school, but what seventeen-year-old kid knows what he’s doing when it comes to girls?”

Shepherd looked confused.

“But now? No fucking way. Paisley was here, but I turned her down. And you’re telling me Hazel came over?”

“You were apparently in the shower.”

“Oh god. What did Paisley say to her?”

“I’d assume she didn’t need to say much of anything, considering she was in your apartment half-naked.”

“Holy shit.” I raked my hands through my hair. “That’s why Hazel was so mad. That’s why she looked like she was going to cry, and why she said she can’t be my friend. She thinks I’m banging some other girl.”

“Indeed.”

“Oh my god, Shepherd, I’m fucked. This is a disaster. She’s wrong. This whole thing is a huge misunderstanding. And now... where is she? She’s running. She’s with your wife. Can you call Everly? No, that won’t work. They’ve been training their asses off for this, I can’t interrupt. What am I going to do?”

Shepherd watched me with that confused brow furrow. “I have no idea.”

“Come on, we’re smart guys, we can figure this out.”

“We?”

I stared past him, the trains of thought in my brain running full speed ahead. For once, they weren’t traveling in different directions. They were all in sync, and in an instant, everything was clear.

“I love her,” I said aloud, but I wasn’t really talking to Shepherd. It was more like talking to Erwin. I didn’t need, or expect, a reply. “I don’t know if she loves me, but I think she might, and I was too much of an idiot to see it.

Molly was right, I've been getting in my own way. I have to tell her. That's all there is to it. I have to take the risk and put my heart on the chopping block, even if that means she might obliterate it. But that would be better than losing her forever because we're both too fucking stubborn and stuck in our own heads to say it."

Shepherd slipped his hands in his pockets and his expression softened. Not by much. But maybe there actually was a human in there.

"I have to go." I patted my thighs, looking for my keys, but I was wearing pajama pants with no pockets. And my keys were on the counter. "What am I forgetting?"

"Clothes?"

"Right. See, I knew you could help."

I left him standing there and went into my bedroom. Threw on some clothes. I came out trying to tuck in my shirt, thinking about where I was going to find everything I needed, and whether I had enough time to pull this off.

"Ready?"

"Ready for what?" he asked.

"What time do you think they'll be done?" I shoved my feet into my black Converse. "That's okay, I can make some estimates on the way. Let's go."

He raised his eyebrows, his expression going from mildly confused to completely baffled. "Go where?"

"Come on, man, I don't have time to explain."

I swiped my keys off the counter, slid my phone in my back pocket, grabbed my wallet, and headed out the door.

HAZEL

“The best way to be appreciative for your life is to live it; don’t die for any other reason but love. Dreams are what guide us, art is what defines us, math is what makes it all possible, and love is what lights our way.” ~ Mike Norton

*M*y stomach churned with such a surprising amount of nervousness, I couldn’t stand still. Whether it was my own anxiety about the race, or the energy of the huge crowd, I didn’t know. Perhaps some of both. But the net result was a very unsettled stomach and a jittery sensation I couldn’t contain.

Thousands of people had turned out for the Soggy Seattle Half-Marathon. Despite its name, and Seattle’s reputation for rain, the sky was clear—not a cloud in sight. The temperature had dropped enough overnight that the early morning air was chilly and people blew into their hands, rubbed their arms, or jogged in place to warm up.

Members of the crowd ranged from serious runners in technical gear and specialty shoes, stretching their legs with focused expressions, to people in costume, each one more elaborate than the last. On the walk to the starting area, we’d passed women in frilly tutus, a bunch of frat boys with neckties around their foreheads, and people in solid-color bodysuits that covered them from head to toe. We saw runners with funny hats and glasses, wigs or multicolored hair, a huge man in a bigfoot costume, and a group of at least twenty men and women with matching t-shirts that read *Sloth Running Club... We May Be Slow But We’re Adorable* .

My friends and I were decked out in the Dirty Martini Running Club tank tops Nora had made, our race numbers pinned to our shirts. Although we hadn't planned to match the rest of our attire, we all had our hair in ponytails and had paired our tank tops with either blue or pink shorts. Blue for me and Sophie, pink for Everly and Nora.

As predicted, we looked fabulous.

But the most fabulous runner award had to be the peacock man. He was tall with a spiked purple and teal mohawk that matched his bright teal bodysuit. A fan of enormous peacock feathers was attached to the back of his costume and it rustled in the breeze as he strutted around the starting area. I didn't know how he was going to manage to run the entire distance in such an elaborate costume, but it did look impressive.

The cold air made goosebumps rise on my bare arms, but I'd warm up once we started running. I shifted from side to side, my entire body tingling with nervous energy.

I knew I was prepared. I'd followed the training program religiously. When I'd completed the final long run before the race, I'd felt good, considering I had just run ten miles. Logically, I had every reason to believe I would not only complete this race, but finish with a time I could be proud of.

And yet doubt lingered in my mind. The girl who would have done just about anything to skip gym class in favor of sitting on the sidelines with a book was still inside me. Could I actually do this? Could I run an entire half-marathon?

"Where's Mr. Calloway? I mean, Shepherd," Sophie asked Everly. "Is he coming down to watch? Or is there a view of the route from your condo?"

"He'll be here," Everly said. "He said he'd see me at the finish line. And I think my sister and her wife are coming, and so are Richard and Dahlia."

"Are Ethan and Grant running today?" Sophie asked.

Ethan and Grant were Everly's brother-in-law and his partner. "They are, but they're so fast, they're probably starting way up front. Ethan texted me early this morning to wish us all good luck."

"You're going to have an entire cheering section," Nora said with a smile.

"It's so nice. I love them so much," Everly said. "Is Jensen still in town?"

Nora dramatically rolled her eyes. "Yes. I made the mistake of telling him about today and he said he'd come watch me finish."

"That's sweet of him."

"I suppose, although he probably has an ulterior motive," Nora said with

a shrug. “But that’s okay, I’ll make him buy us all breakfast after the race.”

“My dad wanted to come but I told him to stay home and just watch the livestream online,” Sophie said. “He doesn’t get around very well these days and he’d probably just yell curse words like a drunken pirate.”

Nora laughed. “Oh my god, your dad is my favorite.”

My friends didn’t ask me if anyone would be waiting for me at the finish line. We all knew there wouldn’t be, so I was glad they didn’t bring it up.

“Well, look at this, they actually showed.” Bella Fernadale’s sneering voice made my back tighten.

The Bedazzled Bitches had never looked so... bedazzled. They wore black baseball caps with gold gems lining the edges and the word *Bitches* spelled out in pink rhinestones. Gold, silver, and pink gems filled the lettering on their tight tank tops. One of the girls turned to the side and I saw that they even had *Bitches* bedazzled in sparkly pink and gold across their backsides.

“Nice outfits,” Nora said, her voice laced with sarcasm. “It’s a good thing all those gems are cheap plastic, otherwise the weight of them might interfere with your time.”

“These weren’t cheap,” Drew said, pointing at herself with both hands. “We ordered the rhinestones from a specialty manufacturer.”

“That’s weird, they look exactly like the ones I saw at the Dollar Store the other day,” Sophie said.

“Shut it, Miss Piggy,” Bella said.

Nora lunged for her but Everly and I caught her by the arms. “I swear to god, I will claw out your eyeballs and replace them with those trashy gemstones.”

“It’s okay, Nora, they can’t hurt my feelings,” Sophie said.

I kept my grip on Nora in case she tried to pounce again. Although part of me wanted to let her.

Bella shifted her weight onto one leg and put her hands on her hips. “Whatever. I have to give it to you four, you have balls. What do you think, girls? Can a ditz, a slut, a fatty, and a freak beat us?”

Drew threw her head back with a fake laugh and nudged the other two when they didn’t laugh quickly enough.

Bella laughed, too, dabbing the corners of her eyes. “Oh my god, I’m hilarious.”

I glared at them. “It doesn’t matter who finishes first today. Even if you win, you’ll still be no better than a swarm of mosquitoes. Vicious and small

with tiny brains, and at the end of the day, just a passing nuisance.”

She huffed. “You’re so weird. We’ll see you at the finish line. I hope you brought cash.”

They turned with clichéd flips of their hair and sauntered away.

A new sensation spread through me, overtaking my nerves. Resolve. I was going to beat those awful women, even if it killed me.

“I think I need to go back to rage yoga,” Nora said, straightening. Everly and I let go of her and she raised both middle fingers at their backs.

“Nice double fist unicorns,” Sophie said. “They’re the worst.”

“This might not provide much consolation, but their unnecessarily antagonistic behavior indicates a deep dissatisfaction with their own lives.” I crossed my arms. “But I still say we bury them.”

“Oh, we’re going to.” Sophie tightened her ponytail. “I might not be able to walk for a week after this, but I’m winning.”

“It’s a worthy sacrifice,” Everly said. “I’m all in.”

Nora narrowed her eyes and smiled. “Let’s show those bitches what we’re made of.”



THE NOISE and energy intensified as the last minute before the start ticked down. A huge banner with the Soggy Seattle Half-Marathon logo and the word *Start* in block letters spanned the street in front of us, and an enormous digital timer awaited the signal. We wore bands on our ankles that would begin recording our time when we ran over mats at the starting line, and they’d stop when we crossed the finish.

The bet would be won or lost by our individual times. We’d set a goal of averaging ten-minute miles. It wasn’t terribly fast, but maintaining that pace over the full thirteen point one miles would be a challenge. I just hoped it would be enough to beat the Bedazzled Bitches.

With ten seconds to start, the crowd started counting down, the loud chant growing. My heart beat rapidly and a renewed rush of nerves made my stomach jumpy. My friends stood on either side of me, leaning forward, wearing matching expressions of fierce determination.

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

A sharp bang filled the air and a cheer rose up from the crowd. The competitive runners in front were off, and the rest of us began moving toward the start.

It took a full minute before our section made it to the start banner. We clasped hands as we approached the start line. Our feet hit rubber, our ankle bands activated, and we were off.

As soon as we reached the pavement on the other side of the starting line, my anxiety disappeared. I still felt the buzz of adrenaline flooding my system, but running gave me something to do with all that energy.

The crowd was thick, so we dodged around knots of people, looking for more open space so we could set our pace. I kept an eye on my Fitbit, making sure we didn't start off too fast. I'd read that one of the common mistakes first-time distance runners made was to push their pace too hard in the beginning. The increased adrenaline and excitement of the race could make you feel unnaturally confident and energetic. But you risked burning out before the end. We were running faster than planned, but we could ease up once we found a more comfortable space among the crowd.

Peacock Man was ahead of us, his fan of feathers bouncing with his stride. It was oddly hypnotic. An elderly man with wispy white hair ran by. The back of his shirt said *I'm 85 and I just passed you* .

That made me smile.

By the time we reached the first mile marker, the crowd had spread out. The four of us were able to run two by two, me and Nora in front, Everly and Sophie behind us. We'd finished the first mile in under nine minutes. Tempting as it was to push hard now, we still had a long way to go, so I intentionally slowed.

"Now we just do that twelve more times and we're done," Nora said. I couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic or not.

"We've totally got this," Everly said. "That first mile felt great. I think that's a good sign."

"I feel like I could go faster," Sophie said.

I glanced at my Fitbit. "My calculations require sticking to this pace for the next two miles. Then a slower mile. Then three more fast."

"Are you sure?" Sophie asked.

“It’s still early. We should stick with the plan.”

“Okay, okay,” Sophie said. “We’ll stick with the plan.”

The next two miles seemed to take no time at all. It hadn’t been that long ago that a three-mile run had been a challenge. And here we were, breezing through the route, still feeling like we’d barely begun.

Peacock Man maintained his pace a short distance in front of us. His tail feathers were like a bright teal and purple beacon leading us forward. We didn’t see the Bedazzled Bitches. They’d started ahead of us in a different section of runners. Even if our times were faster, it was unlikely we’d see them before the end.

As planned, we slowed after mile three, then picked up again at mile four. By mile five, Everly and Nora both said they felt good enough to run faster. Again, I insisted we stick with the plan. We needed to maintain enough stamina to finish.

We slowed through a water station and volunteers handed us cups as we jogged by. The water felt good, cool and refreshing. My body was warm and loose. Tired but not yet hitting the point of exhaustion.

And then we came to our first big hill.

We’d known the course wouldn’t be flat. Seattle was full of hills, so we’d trained accordingly. In my last long run, the hill I’d climbed had felt like the side of a mountain. I’d had to walk for several minutes after reaching the top to recover enough to continue running.

But today it was like our shoes were outfitted with the wings of the Greek god Hermes. All four of us bounded up the hill, pushing ourselves hard. Sweat dripped down my back and my leg muscles burned. But I felt powerful and strong.

When we got to the top, I glanced down to check my Fitbit again so we could adjust our pace. We needed recovery time so we could make it through the next section of the race.

“We made that hill our bitch,” Sophie exclaimed.

“Hell yes we did,” Everly said.

“Sophie, you’re right.” I looked up, ignoring the data offered by my watch. “We did make that hill our bitch.”

Nora raised her fist into the air and whooped.

Trust your instincts.

“Forget the plan,” I said. “Are we all feeling good?”

A chorus of yeses rose up around me. Not just from my friends, but from

runners nearby.

“Then let’s make this race our bitch.”

I stopped checking my Fitbit and let my body set the pace. We pushed hard for the next mile, energized by our triumph on the hill. Then there was another hill to climb and we naturally slowed. We jogged through a water station, high-fived a group of spectators cheering us on, and picked up the pace again when we saw the sign for mile nine.

The next mile was harder. Peacock Man fell behind us for the first time, and a few of the Sloth Running Club runners passed us. My legs were getting heavy, and as we approached mile ten, the nervous churning in my stomach returned.

Ten miles was the longest I’d ever run. And from here, we still had another three point one to go.

I glanced at my friends. Sophie’s expression was grim but determined. Everly’s cheeks were flushed pink and her skin glistened. Nora’s jaw was set, and she looked straight ahead, as if focused on keeping her feet moving one in front of the other.

“Don’t forget why we’re doing this,” I said in between breaths. “What are we running for?”

Everly smiled. “For the sense of accomplishment.”

“To feel like a badass,” Nora said. “And to kick those bitches’ asses.”

“What are we running for?” I asked again, louder this time.

“To show myself I can,” someone said.

“To finish something big.”

“Because I want to be healthier.”

“So I can drink lots of wine.”

Everyone around us laughed.

“I run because I can,” Sophie said. “My dad can barely walk, but my legs work perfectly. And damn it, I’m going to use them.”

A chorus of cheers rose up.

“What about you, Hazel?” Nora asked, her voice breathy.

“I’m running for all the nerdy girls like me.” I reached up to quickly adjust my glasses. “Because we can be fierce too.”

There were more cheers and high fives. Peacock Man caught up with us and gave me a wink. My legs still felt like my shoes had somehow gotten heavier, and I had to focus on my breathing. But the energy of my friends and the runners surrounding us lifted my spirit. I could do this.

Next thing I knew, we'd passed mile eleven. I'd stopped watching our pace, so I hoped we were still on track.

"A half-marathon is fucking long," Nora said.

"Keep going," Everly said. "We've got this."

Mile twelve and my thighs were starting to chafe. My feet felt like lead, my mouth was dry, and it was all I could do to keep moving forward.

We'd been following Peacock Man for the last mile. He veered to the side, and through the sudden gap in the crowd, something shiny caught my eye.

Up ahead, at the crest of a small hill, were the Bedazzled Bitches.

"Look." I pointed. "We almost caught up with them."

"Oh my god."

"Holy shit."

"Hell. Fucking. Yes."

We all exchanged glances. Shared a brief nod. And ran like we were being chased by zombie clowns.

It was the most terrifying thing I could think of.

My chest heaved, my lungs burning. Sweat dripped from my temples and I vaguely wondered how much I was going to regret this tomorrow and how long it would take before I could walk again. But I ignored the ache in my legs and the sting of chafed skin, and ran as hard as I could.

We crested the hill, closing in on the nightmares in cheap plastic gemstones. A dull roar filled the air and the spectators cheering from the sidelines thickened. The finish line was up ahead, the huge white banner with red letters stretching across the road.

It didn't matter if we crossed the finish before them. They'd started the race ahead of us, and we'd almost caught up. Our times would be better than theirs. We'd already won.

But we didn't just want to win. We wanted to crush them.

The road flattened. Pumping our arms, we ran faster. My shoes struck the pavement, every stride sending a jolt through my body.

Faster.

The Bitches were just ahead of us now. The onlooking crowd shouted encouragement as runners dug deep into their last stores of energy to finish strong.

We broke off into twos, parting around the four Bedazzled Bitches. Sophie and Everly passed on their left, Nora and I on their right. And as if

we'd planned the perfect choreography for our moment of triumph, we came together in front of them, looked over our shoulders, and waved.

Turning toward the finish, we clasped hands. Without slowing our pace, we sprinted across the finish line.

Volunteers were there to herd us to the side, making room for the runners behind us. We slowed to a walk, but it felt like everything was chaos around us. Someone put a medal around my neck. Everly collapsed into her husband's arms, surrounded by her family. Sophie hugged me, then squealed when she saw several of her friends from work holding a *Go Sophie* sign. Peacock Man walked by, flashing me a thumbs up and a big smile. Jensen had indeed come to greet Nora. He had a water bottle in one hand, a silver flask in the other. She happily took both.

My vision blurred. I took off my glasses and lifted my shirt to wipe the sweat out of my eyes. My heart still beat fast and my legs were beginning to feel wobbly.

But I'd done it. I'd finished. And in this moment, I wasn't Hazel Kiegen, psychology researcher and girl with a genius IQ. I was Hazel Kiegen, half-marathon runner.

I wasn't even too terribly sad that I was standing at the finish line alone. My sense of accomplishment was enough.

Mostly.

Even if it wasn't, I didn't want to ruin the moment.

"Hazel."

The voice calling my name didn't make sense. Before I replaced my glasses, I told myself my blood sugar must be low, and I was probably dehydrated. Because there was no way it was him. He couldn't be here.

Despite all logic, my foolish heart swelled with hope, and I slid my glasses on.

It was him.

Corban stood, surrounded by exhausted runners celebrating with friends and family, holding a sign. His hair was adorably unkempt and one corner of his mouth lifted in a crooked smile.

The hope in that foolish, stubborn heart of mine exploded like fireworks.

He closed the distance between us, which was good because I wasn't sure if I could take another step without collapsing. The hard sprint to the finish and the shock of seeing him here had rendered my legs almost useless.

"You did it," he said. "I knew you would."

“You’re here.”

He nodded. “Yeah. Do you like the sign I made?”

“Oh.” I adjusted my glasses. I was so surprised to see him, I hadn’t even read it.

I blinked and narrowed my eyes.

Adjusted my glasses again.

Blinked a few more times because the words on the sign brought a rush of tears to my eyes.

The poster board in his hands read *I love you, Hazel* , in large handwritten letters. In the corner, he’d drawn two penguins facing each other, their heads bowed, beaks touching, the shape of their bodies forming a heart.

And one of the penguins wore a race number, just like me.

CORBAN

“Love is the most powerful form of energy, but science cannot decipher its elements. Yet the best cure for a sick soul is love, but even the most advanced physician cannot prescribe it as medicine.” ~ Suzy Kassem

For a second, it felt like my heart stopped.

I held the sign, watching Hazel’s eyes flit back and forth, as if she were reading it repeatedly. She caught her lower lip between her teeth and the dread of potential rejection nearly took the air out of my lungs.

But I loved her enough to risk it.

“Hazel, I was never with Paisley. I didn’t know she was in my apartment that day, and she didn’t tell me you came over. I’m so sorry you had to see that, and that you thought I’d been with her. But mostly I’m sorry I was such a dick to you. You weren’t a mistake. *We* weren’t a mistake. Not to me.”

“I wanted to be wrong,” she blurted out, finally meeting my eyes. “It took me too long to admit it, even to myself, but I did. I’d decided your questionnaire wouldn’t work, and I was too stubborn to see beyond that. But you were right, Corban. You were right the whole time. Your questionnaire works. It made me fall in love with you. Although...”

“Although what?”

“It wasn’t just the questionnaire that made me fall in love. It was you.”

I tossed the sign to the ground and scooped her into my arms. Held her tight while she wound her arms around my neck. Her clothes were damp, and her ponytail was falling out, but I didn’t care. I pressed her body against me.

The hole in my chest I'd lived with for so long had suddenly been filled.

This meant I wasn't broken.

"Did you really just say you're in love with me?" I whispered close to her ear.

"Yes."

"I love you, too. So much."

"Yes, I know, it's what your sign says."

I laughed and loosened my grip so I could look her in the eyes. Brushed a sweaty tendril of hair off her face. Her cheeks were pink, and her mouth turned up in a smile.

I loved making her smile.

Leaning in, I captured those sweet lips with mine, and kissed her. She tasted salty, and her body was warm in my arms. Her mouth was soft, and when the tip of her tongue brushed mine, I surged in. Kissed her deeply. Because I loved her and she loved me, and no matter what happened, I was never letting her go.

"I'm sorry I told you it was a mistake," she said. "I don't regret anything we did."

"Me neither. I didn't even mean it when I said it."

"And I know you're not a test subject. I didn't mean to treat you that way. You're not broken. I don't see anything that needs fixing. I love you the way you are."

"Even though I'm weird?"

She smiled again. "You keep saying that but I don't think you're the least bit weird."

I touched my forehead to hers. "Maybe because we both are."

"That's a fair point."

"That reminds me, I brought you something." I reached into my pocket and drew out a smooth, round stone. "Here."

She held out her hand and I placed the rock in her palm. "Oh, Corban."

"Male penguins collect stones to present to the female they want to mate with."

"And if the female accepts, she uses the stones to build her nest."

I cupped her cheek. "Hazel, I'm glad we became friends, and I think we can both agree the other stuff was great. But I need you to know something. I don't want to just date you. You're brilliant and beautiful and yeah, sometimes you drive me crazy. But you challenge me. You love asking

questions and picking things apart as much as I do, and I think we're perfect for each other. I want you to be my penguin."

Her hand closed around the rock and she put her arms around my neck. "I am your penguin."

I kissed her again, feeling like I could fly. The fact that penguins were flightless birds ran through my head, but I pushed that train of thought aside. Someone nearby whistled at us, but I ignored them too, because love was awesome and for the first time in my life, I didn't care if I made things awkward.

She pulled away but her legs buckled. I grabbed her again to keep her upright.

"Are you okay?"

She clutched my arms. "My legs don't seem to want to work properly."

"You must be exhausted. Hang on, I brought you something else."

I made sure she was steady before letting go, then retrieved the bag I'd left sitting on the ground. I pulled out a banana and opened one of the bottles of Gatorade I'd picked up at the store.

"Thank you." She took the bottle and drank deeply.

"We bought enough for everyone."

"We?"

"Yeah, me and Shepherd."

She took another drink. "Why were you with Shepherd?"

I shrugged. "He came over to ruin my life, but he actually helped me figure things out."

"Ruin your life?"

"Never mind."

A woman with curly blond hair, much of it wet and matted against her head, came up behind Hazel and wrapped her in a hug. She was followed by Shepherd, holding hands with a blond woman who was obviously Everly, and another pair, both with dark hair, who appeared to share the same genetic material. Probably siblings. The women all wore matching shirts and finisher's medals around their necks.

"So this is him?" The dark-haired woman crossed her arms and looked me up and down, but she had the hint of a smile on her face.

Hazel slipped her hand in mine. "Everybody, this is Corban. If it's not already clear, the events of last weekend were a misunderstanding. And I'm his penguin."

“I don’t know what that means, but it’s so nice to meet you,” the curly-haired woman said. “I’m Sophie.”

I held out my hand, but Sophie came in for a hug—faster than I was expecting—and I practically punched her in the stomach.

“Oof.” She grabbed her middle.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry.”

“Nope.” She held up a hand and took a deep breath. “Totally my fault. Let’s try that again.”

This time, I went in carefully, keeping my arms to the sides. She gave me a quick hug and I patted her on the back.

Everly gave me a bright smile and we executed a hug without any inadvertent punching. “I can’t believe we haven’t met you yet. I’m Everly. This is my husband, Shepherd.”

I nodded to Shepherd. “Yeah, we’ve met.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Everly winced. “Sorry about that.”

Shepherd was still eying me like he hadn’t made up his mind about me. He didn’t look sorry at all.

“I’m Nora,” the dark-haired woman said. She gestured over her shoulder. “That’s my brother, Jensen.”

Jensen raised a silver flask with a smile. “Cheers, mate.”

Nora stepped close, putting her arms around me, and spoke quietly in my ear. “Good job, big guy. I’m glad Shepherd didn’t have to burn down your life.”

“Um, me too?”

She patted my arm and winked. “Don’t fuck it up.”

“Not a chance.”

I passed out bananas and bottles of Gatorade to Hazel’s friends. More finishers came in from the course, dozens of tired and triumphant faces passing by. A man with a purple and teal mohawk and wearing a peacock costume—complete with a huge fan of feathers—approached.

“Nice finish, ladies,” he said.

All four of them answered with a chorus of thank-yous.

“I love your costume,” Everly said.

Nora nodded. “It’s fierce.”

“Thank you.” He puffed out his chest, then turned to Hazel. “I just had to tell you, I really wanted to quit around mile ten. But I heard you asking everyone what they’re running for, and I remembered why I decided to do

this. It gave me what I needed to finish.”

Hazel smiled. “I’m glad my spontaneous words of encouragement were helpful.”

He grinned at her. “More than you know. I also wanted to tell you I overheard that fake-ass group of mean girls giving you crap before the race. Don’t let those bitches dim your shine.”

“It’s too bad they punked out on us,” Sophie said. “Bella owes me five hundred dollars.”

Peacock Man raised his eyebrows. “She what?”

“Bella’s their ringleader,” Nora explained. “Sophie bet her five hundred dollars that our times would be faster than theirs.”

“And you won?”

“We crushed them,” Sophie said.

“Oh, hell no. Don’t go anywhere, I’ll be right back.” Peacock Man turned and strutted into the crowd.

“Do you think he’s really going after them?” Everly asked.

Nora laughed. “I think he is.”

“You won the bet?” I asked Hazel.

“We didn’t just win.” She pushed her glasses up her nose. “We owned them.”

God, she was adorable. I grabbed her and kissed her forehead. I loved her so damn much.

A few minutes later, Peacock Man’s tail feathers appeared in the crowd. He approached with a smug look of triumph on his face. With a flourish, he stepped aside and sure enough, he’d brought a group of four women wearing the gaudiest outfits I’d ever seen. Bedazzled Bitches? Who in their right mind had thought that was a good idea?

They looked miserable. One of them scowled at Peacock Man. He shook his head as if to say, *don’t even think about leaving* .

Nora, Everly, Sophie, and Hazel all crossed their arms and narrowed their eyes. Shepherd and I shared an alarmed glance, and I wondered if he was thinking the same thing I was thinking. I wouldn’t want to face the collective wrath of the Dirty Martini Running Club.

“Trying to leave before you pay up?” Nora asked. “Classy, Bella.”

One of the women in the middle huffed and rolled her eyes. I guessed she was Bella.

“It’s not fair,” the woman next to her said. “She shouldn’t have to pay. I

think it was our shoes. We must not have broken them in properly.”

“Shut up, Drew,” Bella said. “It wasn’t your shoes. You just failed.”

“Me?” Drew asked. “We all ran today, Bella.”

“If you three hadn’t been weighing me down, I would have won.”

“Pay her, mosquitoes,” Hazel said. “Then go annoy someone else.”

I lowered my voice. “Mosquitoes? That’s a good one.”

She smiled at me. “Thank you.”

“I didn’t bring any cash,” Bella said.

“That’s okay,” Sophie said. “I’ll take PayPal, Venmo, whatever.”

Bella’s nostrils flared. She pulled her phone out of a pocket on her leggings, her narrowed eyes locked on Sophie. “Fine.”

Sophie cheerfully took Bella’s payment.

“You guys are like lions and hyenas,” I said.

Hazel looked up at me. “How so?”

“Female hyenas are vicious to each other. There’s usually a dominant female who controls all the reproductive opportunities, and the subordinate females attend to her like servants. Female lions are one of the few social predators who are completely cooperative. The lionesses in a pride all have equal access to mating opportunities and they almost never fight or attack each other. Plus they hunt together, share their kills, and help each other raise their cubs.”

Bella stared at me like I’d just sprouted another head. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“The fact that we’re badass lionesses and you’re mangy hyenas,” Hazel said.

“You know, it doesn’t cost anything to be a decent person,” Nora said. “You should consider it, especially since you’re a little short on money now.”

She rolled her eyes again. I got the feeling she did that a lot. “Whatever. Let’s go, ladies.”

Drew shot Bella’s back a glare, but followed. The other two copied Bella, rolling their eyes and flouncing away.

Nora smacked her brother’s arm. “Don’t check them out while they walk away. Gross.”

He scowled at her. “Good god, I wasn’t.”

“You’re telling me you wouldn’t hit that?”

“Just because I love women doesn’t mean I don’t have standards. Those four are a hard pass.”

Nora laughed, then turned to Peacock Man. “Thank you again, majestic one.”

“My pleasure. I love seeing some good karma in action.” He patted the tips of his hair. “My mohawk is starting to sag. I’m going to go put my feet up and eat a mountain of pasta. Have a good one, ladies.”

Everyone waved their goodbyes and Peacock Man left.

Nora put her arm around Sophie’s shoulders and squeezed. “How did that feel?”

“Amazing. Brunch is totally on me. And did you guys notice? I didn’t trip once. This has been the best day.”

“You were fantastic,” Everly said.

“It has been a remarkable day,” Hazel said, meeting my eyes again.

I put a knuckle under her chin and tipped her face up to meet my kiss. “Are you ready to go?”

Her shoulders slumped. “Yes. My ability to remain standing is rapidly deteriorating.”

“Let’s get you off your feet.”

Hazel and her friends all agreed to plan a celebratory brunch after they’d recovered. After several more rounds of hugs, they said goodbye. I grabbed the sign and the last of the Gatorade and took Hazel home.

Erwin greeted us from his cat bed with a slow blink and a few ear twitches. Hazel decided she needed a shower, so I joined her. Mostly so I could help her wash her hair and be sure she didn’t collapse. She leaned on me, resting her head against my chest while the hot water cascaded over us, and I couldn’t remember ever being happier.

I helped her dry off and got her into bed so I could massage her legs and feet. She looked content and sleepy. When I finished, I climbed into bed with her. She tucked her body against me and murmured a thank you. I slipped my hand around her and took a deep breath, smelling her damp hair.

“I love you, Hazel.”

Her voice was soft. “I love you, too.”

And just like that, my life was complete.

HAZEL

“May you live as long as you wish and love as long as you live.” ~ Robert A. Heinlein

The bar bustled with activity, the air filled with the clink of glasses and hum of conversation. The walls were adorned with glass shelves and prints of vintage cocktails, and the dark wood and dim lighting gave the establishment an elegant feel.

I stood with an excellent dirty martini in my hand, wearing a hot pink dress Nora had chosen for me. Corban met my eyes from across the room. Dressed in a suit and tie, he was both devastatingly handsome and charmingly adorable. The half-smile he gave me sent a pleasant tingling down my spine.

Love was truly a remarkable phenomenon.

We were surrounded by family, friends, and colleagues. Elliott and his wife stood chatting with Corban and several other members of our department. Molly and Martin had left Kate with her grandparents and were enjoying an evening among adults.

My girlfriends were all here. Sophie was beautiful in a short black dress that flared from her waist, her curly hair down. Nora had helped her find a pair of heels with a strap across the ankle to make walking easier. Everly looked amazing in a champagne cocktail dress. Shepherd stood next to her, dressed in a suit and tie. He rubbed slow circles across her back while she talked with Nora and Sophie. I hadn't missed the fact that Everly had been

sipping water, not a martini, all night, and I wondered if it meant she'd soon have news to share.

Nora was characteristically stunning in a bold red dress with red lips to match. She'd arrived with Jensen and complained that he'd invited himself. I didn't mind. He wandered among our other guests, entrancing them in conversation.

We'd gathered tonight to celebrate the successful acquisition of our grant funding. Instead of applying for separate—and competing—grants, Corban and I had combined our efforts. The resulting proposal had been stronger than anything either of us could have completed on our own. We'd been awarded enough to fund a five-year study. The accelerated intimacy theory would soon be put to the test—a variable-controlled, unbiased, statistically-relevant test.

I had no doubt the results would be fascinating.

Although throwing a party, particularly one that included dresses, heels, and suits, wasn't typical protocol for receiving a research grant, Corban had insisted. And I was glad he had. It was important to take time to celebrate an accomplishment. And any excuse to see Corban in a suit was worthwhile.

I wandered over to my friends. Nora held up her drink and I clinked my glass against hers.

"Cheers, darling," Nora said. "That color is so fabulous on you, I can barely stand it. You know, this would even look cute if you put a cardigan over it."

"I'm glad I took your recommendation even though I initially balked at the bright color."

"Own it," she said with a smile.

Corban came up beside me and slipped an arm around my waist. Shepherd met his gaze and gave him a subtle nod. I wasn't sure if I'd call them friends, exactly, but Shepherd had stopped eying Corban with undisguised suspicion. And Corban only greeted him as *Satan* about half the time now.

I glanced up at Corban and his smile gave me tingly feelings all over again.

"You two are so disgustingly cute." Nora shook her head, then nudged Sophie. "It's just you and me, now."

Sophie sighed. "Yeah."

"Don't give up, Sophie," Everly said. "Your Prince Charming is out

there.”

She shrugged. “Maybe. Although knowing me, I’ll accidentally give him a black eye or something.”

“Don’t be silly,” Nora said. “You’re going to trip and fall right into his arms. And you’ll know he’s the one because he’ll catch you without injuring himself.”

“He sounds perfect for me,” Sophie said. “And I’m sure your prince is out there too.”

Nora sipped her drink. “Princes need not apply. I like my life the way it is.”

“Are you sure?” Everly asked. “You’ve been going to rage yoga a lot lately. Maybe you have more pent-up frustrations than you admit.”

“Oh, I admit it,” Nora said. “I could definitely use a good fuck. What does that have to do with finding a Prince Charming?”

“Someday, Nora,” Everly said. “You’re going to meet the man who changes your mind and it’s going to be amazing.”

Nora laughed. “I doubt that, but I will always love your sunny optimism.”

Standing here with my friends, I couldn’t help but smile. They were my family, and I loved them so much.

I held up my drink. “I’d like to propose a toast.”

My friends all raised their glasses.

“To love. Whether between friends, or lovers, or both, may we all experience it in abundance.”

We clinked glasses with a chorus of *cheers*, and drank.

Corban squeezed me against him and kissed my head. “I’ll be right back.”

I chatted with my friends for a little while, finishing my drink and enjoying their company. I’d already made the rounds, talking with Elliott and his wife, as well as our other colleagues. And I’d had a very pleasant chat with Molly and Martin when they’d first arrived. In the months since Corban and I had officially started dating, I’d spent a lot of time with his sister and her family. Molly was excellent company, and I held a great deal of affection for her daughter.

But as much as I’d enjoyed our celebration tonight, it was getting late, and I could feel my social battery running low. I glanced around, wondering where Corban had gone.

Besides, Erwin would be hungry soon. And we had a busy weekend of unpacking ahead of us. Corban and I had just moved into a house together—a

charming three-bedroom in a quiet neighborhood near Woodward College.

As if in answer to my silent question, Corban appeared at the bar. He raised his hands and spoke over the din of the small crowd. “Excuse me, everyone. Can I have your attention?”

Our little group quieted, everyone turning to face Corban.

“Thanks. I just want to thank you all for being here tonight. As you know, Hazel and I got some good news at work recently. It’s really exciting, and I have to say, I couldn’t have done it without her.”

He held out his hand, beckoning for me to join him. Our friends and family clapped as I walked to the bar and clasped his hand.

“I also have a confession,” he continued. “Tonight isn’t really about the grant. It was just a good excuse to invite you all here.”

A hush settled over the room, as if everyone, even the bar’s other patrons, listened intently. My heart felt like it skipped a beat and my breath caught.

Corban pushed his glasses up his nose, then reached into his suit jacket. Someone gasped. Maybe it was me. He drew a small box out of his inside pocket.

Oh my god. This was happening.

“Hazel, I spent my whole life walking around with a hole in here.” He tapped his chest. “Until I met you, I didn’t think there was anything that would fill it. I know we had a bit of a rocky start, but I wouldn’t change a thing. I love you. I love your curiosity about the world and your brilliant mind. I love your big heart and your loyalty to everyone you care about. I also love your cookies and your cinnamon rolls. And of course your brownies.”

Everyone laughed and he grinned at me. Tears began to fill my eyes.

“I already talked to Erwin and he gave us his blessing.” He lowered down onto one knee and opened the box, revealing an engagement ring. “Hazel Kiegen, I want to love you forever. Will you marry me?”

“Yes.” I nodded enthusiastically, not sure if I was laughing or crying. Perhaps both. I kept saying it, too overcome with emotion to stop. “Yes, yes, yes.”

Cheering and applause erupted around us as he stood. I threw myself into his arms and melted into his strong embrace.

“I love you,” he whispered into my ear.

My voice was shaky with happiness and excitement. “I love you, too.”

He let go and I held up my hand so he could place the ring on my finger.

Through tears of joy, surrounded by the cheers and applause of our family and friends, I smiled at him.

I'd dedicated my career to studying human relationships. But not even science could have prepared me for the magnitude of this moment. For the depth and power of experiencing true love.

Corban cupped my face and kissed me. Then there were toasts, and hugs and congratulations from our family and friends. Elliott gave me a fatherly embrace and shook Corban's hand. Molly exclaimed that she couldn't wait to have me as a sister and made me cry all over again. My girlfriends hugged me tight and admired my ring. Everly couldn't seem to stop crying until Shepherd gently ushered her away.

When the excitement died down, Corban brushed a strand of hair over my shoulder. "Ready to call it a night?"

"Yes."

"Me too. Plus we need to feed Erwin."

"I wouldn't worry about him," Nora said. "He can afford to miss a meal."

Corban raised an eyebrow. "Erwin isn't fat, Nora. He's just very fluffy."

She laughed. "Whatever you say."

I slipped my hand in his and gazed up at him. I couldn't imagine loving him any more.

We said our goodbyes and headed home. I held out my hand, admiring my ring, unable to stop staring. Wearing his ring wasn't just the logical next step in our relationship. It was, of course. But it was much more than that.

It was trust and commitment. A sign of loyalty and love.

It was perfect.

There were three things I knew with absolute certainty. The scientific method was still humanity's greatest invention, vodka martinis were best served dirty, and Corban Nash was a remarkable scientist, the most amazing man I'd ever known, and the one true love of my life.

EPILOGUE

CORBAN

“Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage.” ~ Lao Tzu

Three years later.

“*U*ncle Co-ban, Auntie Hazel, can we go now?” Kate jumped up and down in the entryway as soon as we walked in the door.

“Hey, squirt.” I ruffled her hair. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

She stopped jumping and looked up at me. “What?”

“Your costume.”

Putting her hands on her stomach, she looked down at herself. Her stick-straight hair was black like her dad’s, and she wore it in two pigtails. She was dressed in nothing but a white tank top and bright pink underwear.

She giggled and smiled at me. Her hair and dark eyes looked like Martin, but that smile was all Molly. “I fo-got to get dressed.”

Hazel laughed, and I put an arm around her. “Yeah, I do that too sometimes.”

“You also forgot to eat your dinner, little miss.” Molly waddled out from the kitchen, hugely pregnant with their second baby. “No trick-or-treating until you get some food in your belly.”

“Okay, Mommy.” She ran for the kitchen, her bare feet padding against the floor.

“I swear, she’s your kid, not mine,” Molly said. “Three and a half years old, and she already gets so absorbed in what she’s doing, she forgets everything else.”

“Is she forgetting to eat in favor of doing math problems?” Hazel asked.

“You know what’s weird?” Molly asked. “Kind of. Remember that toy abacus you bought her? Lately she spends hours playing store with her stuffed animals, and I think her favorite part is figuring out how much their pretend purchases cost. She moves the little beads across the line, and I swear to god, she already understands addition and subtraction. She’s *three* .”

I grinned. I loved that little peanut. “It’s because she’s awesome.”

Molly smiled. “Yeah, she is. Come on in, she obviously needs to eat. Then we’ll get her dressed and you can take her around the neighborhood.”

With Molly so close to her due date, Hazel and I had offered to take Kate trick-or-treating for Halloween this year. We followed Molly inside, past little shoes and rainboots, drawings in crayon pinned to a bulletin board, and toys scattered around the floor.

“Sorry about the mess,” she said. “Martin’s been working late so he can take leave when this baby finally decides to grace us with his presence. I’m not even trying to keep up anymore.”

“You know we’re not judgmental about the state of your house,” Hazel said.

“Thank goodness for that.”

Molly led us to the dining table, and we all took a seat. Kate spooned a bite of macaroni and cheese into her mouth.

“How are you feeling?” Hazel asked, pushing her glasses up her nose. “Any signs of impending labor?”

“Not yet.” She rubbed the swell of her belly. “I saw my midwife this morning and apparently he’s very comfortable in here.”

“I’m sure it will be soon. And you have the added advantage of having experienced childbirth once before. Your body knows what to do.”

Molly smiled. “Yeah, I hope so. Thanks.”

“Uncle Co-ban, are you hungry?” Kate asked.

I eyed her macaroni and cheese. “Yeah, but you eat that. Auntie Hazel and I will have dinner later.”

She grinned and shoved another spoonful in her mouth, leaving a smear of cheese on her chin.

“Hey, Kate,” I said. “If your teddy bear buys two candy bars and they

each cost a dollar, how much money does he need?"

She held up two fingers, her mouth too full of macaroni to answer.

"Yep, two dollars. Nice."

"Kate, if your teddy bear goes to the store with eleven dollars, and purchases items costing one dollar, three dollars, and two dollars respectively, how much money will he have left?" Hazel asked.

I glanced at her and lowered my voice. "Geez, Hazel, she's three."

"Five," Kate answered through a mouthful of food.

Raising my eyebrows, I looked at Kate, then Molly.

My sister shrugged her shoulders. "See?"

Hazel smiled knowingly at me.

My niece the math genius. Coolest thing ever.

"Okay, Katie-bear, finish up, then go put on your costume," Molly said.

Kate shoveled one last heaping spoon of dinner into her mouth, then jumped down from the table and ran to her room.

A few minutes later, she came out wearing a bright yellow jumpsuit with a black stripe down each side. She struck a karate pose. "Hi-yah!"

"Is she Bruce Lee?" I asked. "Molly, you're dressing your half-Asian kid as Bruce Lee for Halloween?"

Molly laughed. "Oh my god, I know. It's ridiculous, isn't it? In my defense, it was Martin's idea. They love watching those old Bruce Lee movies together."

Kate squinted, still looking like she was ready to karate-chop someone.

"She's the cutest Bruce Lee I've ever seen," Hazel said.

"Okay, squirt." I stood and Hazel followed. "Let's go get some candy. But no karate-chopping anyone."

"It's kung-fu, Uncle Co-ban."

I put my hands up. "My bad. You ready? Go get your bucket."

She ran back to her room.

"Thanks again, you guys," Molly said. "You don't have to keep her out long. She doesn't need a lot of candy anyway."

"No problem. It'll be fun."

"We've been looking forward to it," Hazel said.

Molly grinned. "And who knows, maybe someday you'll be taking your own tiny person out to knock on strangers' doors for candy."

I adjusted my glasses, then stuffed my hands in my pockets. "Yeah. Maybe."

Hazel and I had been trying to have a baby for over a year, but so far, we hadn't had any luck. She'd been feeling discouraged, especially since Molly was pregnant again and we couldn't seem to make it happen. It wasn't for lack of trying, that was for sure.

We'd been to a specialist for tests, but they hadn't found anything wrong with either of us. No solid explanation for our trouble conceiving. I wasn't sure what bothered Hazel more—the waiting, or the lack of answers.

We took a very excited Kate, armed with an orange pumpkin bucket, up and down their street, knocking on neighbor's doors. Everyone loved her costume and she happily struck her best Bruce Lee pose every time. She also remembered to say thank you when the neighbors dropped candy into her bucket.

Molly and Martin were awesome parents.

We probably went to more houses than Molly would have liked. But Hazel and I were having as much fun as she was. Watching her dash up to each door, her pigtails bouncing, and say *trick or treat* in her cute little voice was adorable, every single time.

Finally, we brought her home. Martin was back from work, so he took over kid duty, tossing her over his shoulder and carrying her upstairs for a bath. We said goodnight to Molly and went home.

"That was one of the most enjoyable Halloweens I've ever had," Hazel said as we walked up to our front door. It was decorated with pumpkins, but we'd left the lights off since we wouldn't be home.

"Better than when Nora dressed you up as zombie prom queens?"

"Zombie prom queens was a close second, but yes."

We went inside and turned the porch light on in case there were any kids still out trick-or-treating. A bowl of candy sat ready on a table near the door. Erwin looked up at us from his cat bed next to the couch, then went back to his nap.

"Are you sure you don't mind that we didn't dress up and go out this year?" I hung up my coat and put hers away for her. "I know Halloween is your favorite."

She backed up a few steps into the living room. She adjusted her glasses and there was something in her smile. It made me suddenly nervous, but I had no idea why.

"I don't mind at all. Things change."

"Yeah."

She held my gaze with that mysterious smile on her lips. But she didn't say anything.

“What?”

Her eyes flicked to the side.

I looked. She'd decorated for Halloween a few weeks ago. A string of orange and purple lights draped across the fireplace and she'd put pumpkin shaped candles and a little black cat on the mantle.

But below that, on the hearth, was something covered by a black cloth. Had that been there before? How had I not noticed it?

“What's that?”

“Go look.”

Erwin opened one eye when I walked by. I crouched down and lifted the cloth.

It was a pile of smooth rocks, arranged in a tidy circle. Most were no bigger than the palm of my hand, and she'd placed them so the largest were on the bottom, leading to the smallest on top.

“What's this?”

“Those are the rocks you gave me.”

“Really? You kept them?”

Ever since the day of the Soggy Seattle Half-Marathon, when I'd handed her a rock to tell her I loved her, I'd made a habit of giving her rocks. Sometimes they were random. I'd see a rock on campus or in our yard and present it to her to make her smile. Other times they were from special places we'd been, like the rock I'd found on our honeymoon, or the one from when we'd presented our research together at the last Personality and Social Psychology Conference.

“Of course I kept them. Every single one. Even after mate selection, male penguins present their mates with rocks.”

My eyes widened and I slowly stood. “The female uses them to build a nest.”

Her bottom lip caught between her teeth and she smiled, nodding.

“Oh my god, Hazel, are you saying—?”

She nodded again, more vigorously this time.

“Are we going to have a baby?”

“Yes.”

I ran the few steps to her and scooped her into my arms. We didn't say anything for a long moment. Just held each other.

“You’re pregnant?”

She nodded. “I confirmed it with the doctor this morning. I’m definitely pregnant.”

My throat felt a little thick and emotion swelled in my chest. “Holy shit, Hazel. This is amazing. But when did you make the rock nest?”

“Earlier today. I wondered if you’d notice it before we left.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t.”

She smiled. “I can.”

I grabbed her again, picking her up off her feet. She wound her arms around my neck. I was overwhelmed, so happy I hardly knew what to do with myself.

Realizing what I’d just done, I put her down.

“Sorry, I should be more careful with you.”

She rested a hand on her stomach. “That’s okay. The baby is well protected by my uterus.”

I placed my hand on top of hers, my heart so full I wondered if it would burst. Leaning down, I touched my forehead to hers. “I love you so much. I’m so happy we’re having a baby.”

“Me too. I think our combined genetics is going to produce a remarkable child.”

Wrapping my arms around her again, I held her tight. She rested her head against my chest, and I took a deep breath, inhaling a lungful of her.

It was hard to believe there had ever been a time when I hadn’t had Hazel in my life. Those memories seemed like a bad dream. She was my world. She had my respect, my love, my heart... everything. And now a baby?

I didn’t know what I’d done to get so lucky.

We were perfect together. Perfect in our quirks and our weirdness. In our ability to challenge each other, and to understand each other the way no one else did. And now we were giving each other something we both desperately wanted. We were building a family.

Love really was awesome, and I didn’t even need science to tell me that.



WANT MORE of these two nerdy lovebirds? How about a peek into their happily ever after?

[TAP HERE FOR A BONUS SCENE!](#)

HAVE you read about Shepherd and Everly in Faking Ms. Right? [Read their hot fake relationship romcom here](#) .

IN THE MOOD for more steamy romcom goodness? Check out **[Book Boyfriend](#)** ! Turn the page for a preview...

BOOK BOYFRIEND: CHAPTER 1

ALEX

Sometimes in life we all have moments when we realize we screwed up so badly, there's no way out.

I'm having one of those moments.

Mia is staring at me, wide-eyed, like I just told her I murdered her mother. I didn't, for the record. But the book she's holding falls from her limp hand, and her mouth moves like she's trying to find something to say. The depth of the trouble I'm in is starting to hit me.

This is going to be bad.

"Are you serious?" she asks. "You aren't serious. How? No. You can't be."

"I am." Damn it, this is not how I wanted to tell her. "I'm so sorry. I've been planning on telling you. I wanted to tell you. It just never seemed like the right time, and when it did seem right, things kept happening."

She looks at the floor, her head slowly shaking from side to side. I'm panicking, trying to come up with the right thing to say. Is there a right thing to say when you've been lying to the woman you're in love with? If there is, I don't know what it is.

"Oh my god," she says, stepping away from me. "*Oh my god* . I've been... and you were... this whole time... and it was... Lexi was you?"

"Yes, Lexi was me."

"Holy shit." She puts her hand on her stomach, like she might vomit. "I've been telling you things—things about you. And you've been using that, haven't you? You've been manipulating me this whole time."

"No," I say, putting up a hand. "No, Mia, I swear it wasn't like that."

“How can you say that?” she asks. “Oh god, it started in the bookstore. *Can I buy you books*? I told Lexi I wished a guy would do that, and you used it on me. You picked me up with my own line.”

“No. God, Mia, I didn’t know who you were then. I just thought you were cute and it seemed like a good idea.”

“When did you know?” she asks, finally looking me in the eyes.

I stare at her, suddenly unable to speak. All my logic, all the decisions that seemed perfectly reasonable up until this moment come crashing down around me. The proverbial house of cards.

I really fucked this up.

“Alex, when did you find out who I was?”

“After we had dinner at Lift,” I say, reluctantly. “You messaged Lexi and talked about your date. I knew it had to be me.”

She gapes at me, her mouth dropping open, her eyes widening.

Yep. I’m screwed.

“How could you keep this from me?”

“The only person who knows is my sister,” I say. “I kept it a secret from everybody else.”

“Yeah? Well, you aren’t sleeping with everybody else,” she says.

I wince. “Mia, please. I didn’t mean to lie to you.”

“Of course you meant to,” she says. “Lying doesn’t happen by accident.”

“No, but I wanted to tell you,” I say. “I swear, I was going to.”

She meets my eyes and crosses her arms. “But you didn’t. Why?”

OKAY, maybe I should back up and explain why I’m standing in front of the love of my life, trying to make her understand how I’m also a woman named Lexi Logan.

Confused?

Yeah, me too.

It all started a little over a year ago. I know, that’s a big jump, and you want to get to the good stuff. The *boy meets girl, they fall in love, have hot monkey sex, are pulled apart by conflict, and come back together for a brilliant happily-ever-after* stuff. Believe me, I’m all too familiar with that story.

In fact, I write them for a living.

A year ago, that wasn’t me. Five days a week, I was schlepping off to my job, sitting in a dull gray cubicle, staring at a screen, writing computer code. I

had a shitty uncomfortable chair, a boss who needed a throat punch, and a bunch of coworkers who were stuck in just as deep a rut as I was.

But in my spare time, I was writing a science fiction novel. I spent hours doing research, taking notes, drawing sketches. I would work late into the night, plodding away, word after word. The book kept getting longer, but I figured I would deal with that when I started revisions. Or maybe make it a trilogy. I certainly had enough material. More often than not, the sun would be staining the sky with color, and my eyes dry and gritty, before I'd finally fall into bed for a couple hours.

Only to get up and go to my shitty job.

To be fair, the sleep deprivation was probably not helping my attitude toward work.

I'd wanted to be a novelist ever since I was a kid. I almost majored in English, but my dad, ever a practical man, talked me into getting a computer science degree in case the writing thing didn't work out. The problem is, that *practical* degree led to a *practical* career, which led to the soul-sucking existence I was wallowing in.

I didn't see a way out. My job sucked. I was divorced, after a very brief and tumultuous marriage. My relationship status was basically *I love women but I'm not interested in commitment*. All I had was my writing.

But as much as I enjoyed the process, I knew deep down that it was more of a hobby than a career, at least the way I was doing it. Even if the finished product—if I ever finished it—turned out to be the best sci-fi epic ever written, it would take a stroke of luck to get it published and make enough money to quit my job. And considering I'd been working on it for years already, with no end in sight, it didn't seem like I was going to write my way to a better life.

Until my sister, Kendra, said something that altered the course of my life forever.

[KEEP READING Book Boyfriend](#)

AFTERWORD

Dear reader,

Can I just tell you what a pleasure this book was to write?

It pushes so many buttons for me (yes, Nora, I know you also made a button reference). Weird, quirky, and/or nerdy characters are my FAVE. And two of them together? It wasn't even my birthday!

Witty banter? Yes, please! These two have some of my favorite dialogue I've ever written. They're both so quirky and smart and totally speak the same language. I loved writing it.

I will confess, I was nervous you wouldn't hang in there with Hazel. If you found her a little bit hard to understand in the beginning, you're not alone. My beta readers all had a moment of, "Um... okay, but where is this going, because I trust you, but what is her deal right now?"

That's a tough place to be as a writer. There's a line between making a character or plot point intriguing, so that the reader asks why but keeps turning the page to find out, and making the reader ask why in such a way that they drop their Kindle and abandon the book. I definitely don't want to be guilty of the latter!

But honestly, Hazel made sense to me. And maybe that's because I could see where she was going. She grows so much, especially in the second half of the book. And I absolutely love writing a strong character arc.

And can we talk about Corban for a second? Sweet, nerdy, clueless Corban. He was a very different hero for me. I had to find ways to balance his nerdiness with sex appeal, and his insecurities with strength. In the end, he spoke to me so clearly. He knew he was a little different, and he was okay

with that. He just wanted to love someone, and be loved in return.

Don't we all, buddy.

The enemies to lovers dynamic was also a TON of fun to play with in this book. That copy room scene? GAH. I'm not going to lie, I'm particularly proud of that one.

I hope you enjoyed Hazel and Corban! If you did, it would be awesomesauce if you'd love a review on Amazon, Goodreads, and/or Bookbub.

Stay tuned because there will absolutely be more hot romcoms featuring the Dirty Martini Running Club.

Thanks for reading!

xoxo,

CK

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And to all my readers for your love and support. Thank you! You're my favorite!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claire Kingsley is a Top 5 Amazon bestselling author of sexy, heartfelt contemporary romance and romantic comedies. She writes sassy, quirky heroines, swoony heroes who love their women hard, panty-melting sexytimes, romantic happily ever afters, and all the big feels.

She can't imagine life without coffee, her Kindle, and the sexy heroes who inhabit her imagination. She's living out her own happily ever after in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and three kids.

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