



THE NEW GUY

USA TODAY AND WSJ BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SARINA BOWEN





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Author's Note:

If you watch a hockey game, you'll see the athletic trainer standing behind the bench. He (or she) is the one who runs out onto the ice if a player gets hurt.

Before writing this book, I didn't have a terrific grasp of what athletic trainers really do. They're not strength and conditioning coaches. They're certified healthcare professionals.

I owe a special shout out to reader and athletic trainer Corie H., who steered me toward appropriate resources and who assisted with Hudson's injury. Thank you! All mistakes are my own!

Cheers from New England,

—Sarina B.

ONE

Go Have Fun

FEBRUARY

“GO OUT,” my sister says. “Have fun.” She literally pushes me toward the door to our new apartment. “What’s the point of free babysitting if you don’t take advantage?”

“Can I at least put on my coat first?”

“I suppose.” She grabs it out of the narrow coat closet and thrusts it at me with one tattooed arm. “There. Now go. See a movie. Or find a bar. Meet a guy. Have some adult fun, before you forget how.”

An argument forms on the tip of my tongue, but then my seven-year-old daughter, Jordyn, pipes up from the sofa. “Ooh! Aunt Reggie! ‘Love is an Open Door!’”

“Awesome!” my sister agrees. “Let’s hit it!”

The two of them are in the midst of a *Frozen* sing-along. I enjoy a good Disney movie as much as the next guy. But *Frozen* has been on heavy rotation in my home for a few years now. Adult fun is a barely recognizable concept at this point.

And half the reason I moved Jordyn to Brooklyn was so she could have more of a relationship with my punk rock sister.

So I do it. I put on my coat, give them a wave, and leave.

Outside, it’s a crisp, February night, although Brooklyn is nowhere near as cold as New Hampshire, where Jordyn and I lived until a few days ago. Another perk of Brooklyn: I don’t need a car here. My new neighborhood is within easy walking distance to everything we need.

At least that’s what the real estate broker promised when she showed me the rental last month. I made the decision to move here in a single day, after accepting a new job working for the Brooklyn Bruisers hockey team.

In the past, I'd done many impulsive things. I used to be a fun, easy-going guy who lived for excitement. But that was the younger me. I used to have a lot less to lose, and fewer people depending on me.

Now, as I walk past the historic brownstones, I'm a little terrified at what I've done. New job. New neighborhood. New school for Jordyn.

It's a lot. And I think I'm already lost. Literally.

I don't want to look like a tourist, though, so I don't pull out my phone and check the map. I just keep going, turning corners and walking down every interesting block I encounter.

After a while, the quirky residential buildings give way to shops. I could do some grocery shopping, even though that isn't what Reggie meant by "adult fun."

When I turn onto Atlantic, the street becomes more lively. There are people out and about. It's 8:30 on a Tuesday night, and the restaurants are doing good business. Even if I've forgotten how to party, the rest of the people in my new neighborhood haven't.

Reggie says I'm the oldest twenty-five-year-old she knows. And maybe she's right. When my phone vibrates a moment later, I pull it out immediately, just in case my sister has an emergency at home.

Stop looking at your phone, Reggie has texted . ***Go out and have at least half as much fun as we are right now*** . There's a photo of her dressed up as Elsa, with my daughter Jordyn as Kristoff, because she is seven years old and determined not to do a single thing the same way that other seven-year-old girls do.

It's adorable. And the sight of Reggie and Jordyn together makes my heart happy.

We're going to be fine. Moving here wasn't a huge mistake, and we're going to love New York. I take another deep breath and then respond to the text. ***Cute. But why are you texting me if you don't want me to look at my phone?***

I was just testing you , she says. ***Now go find a hunky guy and don't come home until the wee hours of the morning*** .

Right. Like that's going to happen. I shove the phone in my pocket and continue on my way.

There was a time in my life when I was exactly the kind of guy who looked at a night out as an adventure. But now I'm the kind of guy who is thrilled to simply wander alone for an hour while my sister babysits.

Atlantic Avenue has a bunch of restaurants, but I can't seem to make myself go in and ask for a table for one. I wander a little further and end up on Hicks, which is a quieter street. I stop in front of a sports bar that's not too busy. I could sit at the bar and order some wings.

As I open the door, I notice there's a hockey game playing on a TV over the bar. And it feels like a sign. In two days, I'm starting my new job with the Brooklyn NHL franchise. I've never worked with hockey players before, and I'm kind of nervous about it.

I'll take all the positive signs I can get.

There are plenty of empty seats at the bar, probably because it's only Tuesday. So I sit down and order a beer from a kind-looking older gentleman. "Should be a good game tonight," he says. "We're favored to beat Boston."

"Awesome," I say, as I wait for my beer.

I'm not a Brooklyn fan yet, though. I haven't started the job. Also, it feels disloyal to Eddie. My husband—he died two years ago—was a Boston fan. Big time.

Growing up, I watched a lot of sports, but hockey wasn't really on my radar. Then I met Eddie, and watching hockey together was part of our courting ritual. We had three great years together, and then he died in an accident at the age of thirty-two.

People always tell me, "You don't look old enough to have a seven-year-old daughter." And they're mostly right. Eddie was nine years older

than I was, and he was already a dad when I met him. I never imagined dating a single father of a toddler. It wasn't on my bucket list.

But Eddie was special, and I fell hard. We watched a lot of TV together at home, because he had a kid to raise.

And then *we* had a kid to raise.

And now *I* have a kid to raise.

I miss him so much. It's one reason why I applied for a job with the hockey team. *Eddie would get a kick out of this*, I remember thinking. It was really just a whim.

When they offered me the job, I was floored. Now here I am, on a barstool, hoping I made the right call.

Meanwhile, my beer lands in front of me in a frosty pint glass, and I take a grateful sip. When I glance around the bar, I notice a *lot* of hockey paraphernalia. There's a signed Brooklyn Bruisers jersey framed at one end of the bar, and a signed Brooklyn Bombshells jersey at the other.

Eddie would get a kick out of that, too. But he'd still root for Boston.

On the screen, Brooklyn has the puck. But not a lot is happening. Nothing good, anyway. Boston is all over them. This is an away game, and the Boston fans are loud.

Not to contradict the bartender, but I'm not sure Brooklyn feels like winning tonight. I guess time will tell.

Just as I'm having this thought, a guy sits down on the stool beside me. Like, *right* beside me, even though there's a whole row of stools available.

It's been a million years since I was a single guy sitting alone in a bar. But somehow the old reflexes kick in, and I turn my head to check him out. And *hello*. He is a fine specimen. Broad shoulders. Sandy brown hair and deep brown eyes. And a handsome face with the kind of strong, scruffy jaw that might leave beard burns on my thighs.

Whoa. That fantasy escalated quickly. That's what happens when your dry spell is two years long.

Just as I remember to keep my tongue in my mouth, the hunk slowly cruises me, too. My pulse quickens, and our gazes lock.

“Hi,” I say, because I’m brilliant like that.

He blinks. I swear his eyes dilate, too.

But that’s when the bartender arrives in front of us, and the guy shuts it down so fast that I might already have whiplash.

“Hey, Pete,” he says, his attention fully on the bartender.

“Evening,” Pete returns with a chuckle. “Here to watch the game?”

“Of course. Can I have a lager and my usual?”

“Any time, kid.” Then he turns to me. “Any interest in a menu?”

“Heck yes,” I say. “Let’s have it.”

The older man slides it onto the bar, and I skim the offerings.

My new friend stays quiet until the bartender moves away. “Sorry to crowd you, but you have one of the best seats in the room.”

I almost make a joke about how nice my *seat* is. Almost. But I rein it in. “You’re not crowding me,” I say instead, my voice carefully neutral. “Any advice on this menu? Looks pretty standard.”

“Sorry, no.” That perfect, scruffy face says. “I always order the same thing. But the guys tell me the burger and the nachos are about as adventurous as you’re supposed to get.”

“Good tip.” I flag down the bartender again, and order the nachos.

Living large tonight. Chips for dinner!

It’s a start.

I Made that Awkward

OKAY, yup. I probably made that awkward. A really cute guy checked me out, and I panicked.

Guys don't usually hit on me. Especially not in *this* bar. His smile, though? Caught me totally off guard. Made me forget for a minute all the reasons why I'm supposed to concentrate on hockey.

Only hockey.

Still, I sneak another look in his direction to try to figure out why he's so distracting. Dark blond hair. Tight T-shirt reading Hank's Gym, and muscular arms that have probably spent some serious hours in Hank's Gym, wherever that is. He's not bulky, though. Lean muscle, nicely defined chest. Blond hairs down his forearms.

He laughs suddenly, and I feel it in my groin. "Did you see that? Oof. So embarrassing."

My eyes flick back up to the TV in time for the replay. And, yeah, things are not going well. Castro got stripped of the puck by a Boston D-man, and Silas had to dive for the save.

It's chaos up there, but my eyes still turn back to their new favorite place. The world is full of attractive, toned men, and I usually don't bother staring at them. My neighbor is a total hottie, though. And just for a moment, I allow myself to imagine how it might play out: I buy him a

drink. We watch the game. And then I invite him over for a little Tuesday night stress relief.

That's just a fantasy, though. I'm humoring myself, because it's been a bad day. Honestly, a bad year. And it's barely February.

The only reason I'm sitting here at all is because the Bruisers left me behind to go play Boston. The medical staff sent me to a specialist today to try to diagnose the pain and swelling I've had in my hip.

Luckily, the doctor said it's just bursitis. But it's sidelined me at an awkward time. Four weeks ago I was minding my own business in the weight room in Chicago. I'd had a recent string of bad games, and I'd been trying to stay positive and work hard.

But then? In my sweaty T-shirt, I'd been summoned to the GM's office. And I'd known exactly what was happening. *Here we go again*, I'd thought as the big boss quickly thanked me for my service and sent me off to pack for a flight to New York that very evening.

I'd been traded. For a third string goalie and a first round draft pick.

Trades happen. You're not supposed to take it personally. But I do. This was my fourth trade in five years. That's a very high number.

Getting traded is very disorienting, and super stressful. So it's no big surprise that I've been struggling on the ice in Brooklyn, too. I'm just not used to my teammates yet.

Tweaking my hip was just the latest indignity. So here I sit, watching my own damn team on TV, playing without me. So humiliating. And I can't even watch this at home, because someone is watching *Frozen* on the other side of my wall, and singing along at the top of their lungs. I couldn't even hear the damn game.

"Maybe this is the wrong bar to say so," says the hot guy beside me. "But Brooklyn looks a little shaky tonight."

My loyalty is a reflex. "Not *that* shaky." Except they do look skittish. "My name's Hudson, by the way," I add for no good reason.

“I’m Gavin,” he says, offering his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

And, shit. There’s that smile again. Hot like a summer’s day. His eyes are gray, and they crinkle in the corners when he smiles. His handshake is pleasantly firm.

Something crackles between us again. When he holds my gaze a little too long, I can’t seem to make myself look away.

But then he lets go, just as Pete approaches with two plates. “Food, boys.” He slides them onto the bar at the same time, as if we’re dining together.

And I guess we are. After the game, though, I’ll get out of here. I’ll go straight home and watch some video for our upcoming game against Minnesota.

Eyes on the prize, Newgate. I remind myself. Stay the course .

I pick up my fork and cut into my burger patty, which is resting on a bed of salad greens. If my new friend Gavin thinks my no-carb dinner is weird, he doesn’t say so. He just crunches into a cheesy chip with a sigh of happiness.

It’s a nice sound, too. And my rebellious mind wonders what other sounds I could get him to make.

Yeah, like that’s ever going to happen.

I tuck into my food, and the game picks up speed. Castro has possession of the puck, and my guys try to make some magic.

But the offense falls apart again a few minutes later, and I watch the puck get carried into our defensive zone.

My guys are struggling tonight. The schedule has been brutal. And I’m not there to help.

Then, just as the scoreless first period is winding down, a Boston player trips Castro, who goes down while trying to catch a pass. The puck goes right into the waiting stick of a competitor.

Even worse—the ref doesn’t call the foul.

“Fuck that!” I shout. “Come on, Crikey. Time for payback. Can’t let them get away with it.”

Sure enough, the younger of our two enforcers looks for the first opportunity to pick a fight. The gloves are off before you can say *let’s do this*.

The bar is quiet tonight. But every pair of eyes turns toward the TV screen.

Gavin shakes his head, though. “I just don’t get the fighting.”

“Yeah? It’s an honor code thing,” I explain. Although I realize this hottie has no idea who I am. “Not a fan of violence?”

“Well, no. But it’s more than that. Here you’ve got twenty-three pampered thoroughbreds. They’ve got the best training money can buy, right?” He’s gesturing at the TV screen, and his big eyes light up as he talks. “They get optimized fitness training. And specialists for every boo-boo. But then it’s like, *go ahead and beat the crap out of each other. We’ll just get out the gold-plated bandages and stitch you back together again*.”

I laugh so hard that I almost choke on my salad. He just called me a *pampered thoroughbred*, and he looked good doing it.

But I can’t let him get away with it. “You think football is any better?”

“Hell no,” he scoffs. “Football should be illegal. They’re all going to have brain damage at fifty.”

I give up watching the screen and just stare at him instead. “All right. So what sport makes more sense to you?”

“Oh, lots of them. I watch a lot of soccer—their fitness is amazing. Tennis is another favorite. I like endurance sports, too. And ski racing is fun to follow. I’m just a big fan of athletic bodies in motion.” His eyes dip like he’s a little unsure of himself all of a sudden. “Aren’t you?”

“Definitely a fan of that,” I agree. Holy crap, I’m flirting with him. I need to stop, but I don’t really want to.

I glance up at the screen instead. And, fuck, I look right in time to see my guys fail to connect a pass. And then it just gets worse as I finish my dinner. We're down by two at the end of the second period.

Pete comes by to clear away my plate. "Are we having more than one beer tonight?"

"Absolutely," I surprise myself by saying. "Just a light beer, though. And one of whatever he's drinking." I gesture to my neighbor, who's polishing off his nachos.

"That's very kind," Gavin says in a low voice after Pete moves away.

"You've had to put up with my cursing. We're down two goals already."

"The way I see it, we're up by two goals."

I turn on my stool. "A Boston fan? Really? You know you're in Brooklyn, right?"

The guy shrugs his shoulders. "I'm from New England. And Boston is the better team this year. It's just the truth."

Lord . I bite back a laugh. I should probably let him know that he's spouting hockey wisdom to a professional hockey player. But I think I won't. It's more fun this way. And I'm not really in the mood to talk about myself.

Fuck it. Tonight I'm just a frustrated hockey fan. I really need Brooklyn to make it to the playoffs. I just need it a little more desperately than everyone else in this bar.

My guys make a beautiful attempt on goal, thwarted only by excellent goalkeeping from Boston. "Come on guys, let's do it again."

"They look tired," he says.

"They had back-to-back games earlier this week. No wonder they look tired."

I should be there with them, not sitting here like a loser.

"You know what?" Gavin says out of the blue. "I read that Castro used to play left wing."

“Yeah?” I say noncommittally. It’s true, although I wasn’t on the team then.

“They should switch him back,” my new friend says decisively. “Or else make Drake play center. The first two lines are so lopsided.”

“I like it,” Pete says, passing by with clean glassware. “Good idea.”

I let out a snort. “Maybe you should swing by and give your thoughts to management. The headquarters is right in the neighborhood.”

Instead of getting offended, Gavin gives me a big, open smile that makes me feel like a jerk for taking a bitter tone with him. And he’s so attractive that I feel that smile in my pampered groin.

“How do you feel about the defensive pairings?” I ask, because I can’t help myself.

“I’m underwhelmed,” he says, and I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. So I take a gulp of beer instead.

Five minutes later, Boston commits another egregious foul, this time against Tank, my fellow defenseman. “Goddamn that cross-check!” I shout at the TV. “Ref! You’re blind!”

And then it gets worse when those fuckers score on us thirty seconds later. Now it’s three to zero. I groan.

“Ouch,” Gavin says, draining his beer.

I set my beer down on the bar, half full. Watching my team lose is honestly excruciating, knowing I’m not there to help.

“Hey—feel like a game of pool?” Gavin asks suddenly. “I think I saw a table in that back room. And this game? It’s all over but the crying.”

“It isn’t,” I argue as a reflex. Because of *course* I’m going to watch the game all the way to the end. This is literally my job.

But then Boston scores again. And I’m in hell. It hurts to watch, and Coach Worthington is just going to make me watch it again during tomorrow’s video session. “Is that pool game still on offer?” I hear myself ask. “Or even better—ping-pong?”

His gray eyes widen, and he pulls out some cash to settle his check. “I love ping-pong. Lead the way.”

Confession: I am a stud at ping-pong. Most hockey players love it, and most teams have a table somewhere in the practice facility.

Except it turns out that Gavin is good too, so I don’t have to take it too easy on him. He holds his gorgeous body in a loose, wide-legged stance. And he seems to find the ball no matter where I put it.

Watching him parry the ball back to me does nothing to dampen the attraction I feel for him, either. I’d like to take that shapely jaw in hand, testing its lines against my fingertips. And I’d like to run my hands through his wavy blond hair.

The game is fun. Really fun. I win the first game, but just barely.

“You’re pretty good,” he says. And there’s that flirty smile again.

“I’m all right. My backhand is a little awkward tonight.”

“No it isn’t,” he argues. “Your backhand is fine, but the way you unwind it slows you down.”

I bark out a laugh. “Wait, really? What are you, a ping-pong guru?”

He shrugs. “I’ve taught tennis lessons. It’s kind of the same principle. Watch.”

Setting his paddle down, he moves around the table until he’s standing behind me. Then he reaches around my body to grasp my wrist—the one that’s holding the paddle. “So, the way you move your paddle is efficient.” He guides my arm to move into the backhand position.

His grip on my wrist is firm. He doesn’t do anything cheesy—like gratuitously stroking a thumb over my skin. But it doesn’t matter. I *like* that firm grip. I want more of it on my body.

And suddenly I can picture it way too clearly. Those strong hands pulling my T-shirt over my head. And me, kissing that crooked smile off his face.

“...But you turn your body too much at the same time,” he says, briefly tapping one finger against my back. “Square your body to the table the whole time, so that when you leave the backhand position, the angle is still good.”

“Okay,” I say uselessly as he moves my arm again. But I’ve lost my train of thought completely.

“See what I mean?” Gavin asks.

Instead of answering, I turn my head to look over my shoulder at him. His face is just inches away, and his eyes widen slightly. Like he can’t believe I went there.

“You got any other tricks you want to show me?” I ask quietly.

The next few seconds seem to last forever. In the first place, I can’t believe I’m doing this. And Gavin is a little off-kilter, too. He’s clearly interested. But still, he hesitates.

I’m holding my breath now, afraid that he’ll turn me down. And also afraid that he won’t.

Slowly, he licks his lips, and drops my wrist. But he doesn’t step back. If anything, he leans a fractional degree closer. “Yeah,” he says under his breath. “I think I do.”

Well *that* got heated fast. Go me.

And I don’t *ever* do this. I must have lost my mind, picking up a guy in a bar where my team hangs out on the regular. So I need to downshift. “Let’s finish the game,” I whisper. “Want to put five bucks on it?”

“Sure,” he says with a slow smile. “Only five?”

“Well, I’ve been holding back a little.”

He laughs, and the sound of it is bright with promise. “Really? Why?” The question comes out sounding flirty. “Trying to flatter me?”

I shrug, suddenly embarrassed. But that's exactly what I've done. I'm in the mood to live a little. And by live a little, I mean take this guy home and strip his clothes off. It's been a long time since I had such a reckless urge.

It's been *years* .

But I'm pretty sure he wants me just as much as I want him. We're gazing at each other in a way that dudes in a bar just don't usually do.

Not *this* bar anyway.

Fuck . This is a bad idea. I drop my gaze, even though I don't want to.

Gavin moves back to his end of the table so we can finish the game. He taps his paddle on the table to let me know he's ready. "Bring it, man. Do your worst."

"All right. You asked for it." I take a breath that's meant to cool me down. And then I serve up a blazing fast ball, diagonally across the table.

Gavin returns it with a stroke so fast that it's almost invisible to the human eye.

I'd laugh, except I'm too busy yanking my paddle toward the ball. I get my shot off, but just barely. And he returns it again like gunfire.

"Jesus," I gasp as I dive for it. But this time he smokes me and takes the point.

I'm thinking I might be out five dollars. He hustled me. But I'm going to go down fighting.

THREE

A Playful Opponent

I HAVEN'T HAD this much fun in a *long* time. Hudson is a playful opponent with quick reflexes and a knowing smile which he deploys after every point.

Even though I'm winning. In fact, the match is evolving into a blowout. But something tells me this guy doesn't want me to take it easy on him.

Still, that doesn't mean it has to end too quickly. So I draw each volley out, testing his reflexes, upping the ante until we're both laughing and a little breathless. He ekes a point or two, but usually I ace him before he can find a way to get past me.

When I win the game, he laughs. "Holy shit. Didn't take you too long to finish me off."

I shrug, like it's no big thing. But my heart is thumping and my face is flushed. And I realize that I want this—I'd like to *finish him off* in a few other choice ways. It's the first time I've had that urge in a long time. A *really* long time.

I used to be fun, damn it. A party animal. But grief can change a guy. Tonight, though, I feel the old me bubbling to the surface. The handsome stranger at the other end of the table has helped me find him again.

"You're a shark. I owe you five bucks." He reaches for his wallet.

I hold up a hand. “Sorry, I don’t take cash. You’ll have to work it off in trade.” Yup, that ridiculous line just came out of my mouth. And I don’t regret it.

His hand stills on his back pocket. Then he braces his hands on the table and studies me. “Yeah?”

“Oh yeah.” My words are full of bravado. But this is a big moment for me. I haven’t been with a guy since Eddie died.

Across the table, Hudson might be having his own internal battles. His handsome face is thoughtful. Maybe even troubled. He sets down his paddle and actually glances over his shoulder to make sure there’s nobody nearby. There isn’t, though. We’re the only ones in the ping-pong room. His gaze snaps back to mine. “I don’t do this.”

“Oh.” That could mean so many things. “You mean pickups? Or guys?”

“Well, both.”

Shit . “You’re not married,” I whisper. “Right?”

He actually laughs. “Nope. No way.” He turns his chin toward the front of the bar, and I am suddenly worried that I’ve killed the mood. But instead of begging off, he says, “My place is only a couple blocks from here. But I have to settle up with Pete. You want to meet me outside?”

Ah. Now I get it. He doesn’t want us to walk out together, and he doesn’t know how to say so.

“Sure,” I say with forced casualness. “I’ll be outside. Don’t take too long.” I grab my jacket off the hook on the wall and stride past him, through the bar and out the door.

I don’t glance at the bartender. They obviously know each other, and I am not going to think too hard about why Hudson doesn’t want to be seen with a guy.

It’s fine , I remind myself. Maybe he’s experimenting. And we’re not dating. This is just sex.

I feel a tremor in my chest, though. *Just sex* . Am I really going home with a stranger? After all this time?

The February air is bracing. I walk a few paces down the sidewalk, so that I'm not visible from the bar's front windows. And I hope Hudson doesn't spend too much time saying good night to the bartender. I might start thinking of all the reasons this is a dumb idea.

But I want this. I need to break the seal, even if it makes me feel a little trashy.

This is what moving on looks like, right?

Luckily, Hudson doesn't leave me alone too long with my thoughts. He emerges a minute later, his footsteps quick, a look of determination on his face. I love his sexy scowl—like he just can't wait to get at me.

The feeling is mutual, buddy .

"C'mon," he practically growls, and we walk side by side for a few paces. But as soon as we turn the corner, Hudson stops. He pushes me up against the side of the brick building. And then he kisses me hotly.

For a second, I'm too surprised to react. But his mouth is both firm and welcoming, and his hands grip my shoulders with a determination that totally works for me.

"Mmm," I say against his lips.

"Tell me about it," he murmurs. "Been wanting to do that all night."

Gripping his jacket, I dive in for another hot kiss. Our chests bump, and his tongue catches mine. He tastes of beer and hunger. Then he takes a half step closer and our hips meet. The hard column behind the fly of his jeans is unmistakable, and a zing of desire shoots like fire through my veins.

"Whoa," I say against his mouth. "Hi there."

His chest shakes with a chuckle as he pins me even more firmly to the wall with his cock.

He kisses me again, and it's a little desperate. He's physically aggressive in a way that's fun, not creepy.

But there's also something a little vulnerable about him that's hard to pin down. Like his aggression may be disguising a case of nerves. Maybe we're both a little outside our respective comfort zones.

And what's more fun than that?

"Goddamn," he pants, breaking our kiss. "You are just what I didn't know I needed."

This lights me up. Specifically my dick, which is fighting to get out of my boxers and into his. "I bet you say that to all the guys," I whisper. And then I nudge my hips against his.

He makes a sound that's half moan, half laugh. "It's been a long time for me. Now I'd better take you home and suck you off before I forget how that works."

Omifuckinggod . "Yes please."

He tugs me off the wall and steers me down a side street. It's not the same route I took to get here, but at least he's heading in roughly the same direction as my own Brooklyn street.

At least I think so. Hope I can find my way home after this little adventure is over.

Although it's hard to worry too much when there's a hot, horny man marching me down the sidewalk. When we reach the corner, the crosswalk light turns red, I almost let out an unmanly whimper of disappointment as the traffic begins flooding past us. I console myself, though, by placing a hand on Hudson's very firm ass.

And, wow, it's like a boulder. "You must spend a lot of time doing squats."

He whirls around, laughing. It transforms his face, honestly. He looks five years younger when he laughs. "Oh you have no idea." He looks over his shoulder again, and for a second I think he's checking for onlookers.

But nope. He was just searching out another surface against which to press my willing body. His firm hands land on my chest, and my ass lands

against a sign kiosk. Then his tongue invades my mouth a second later.

Desire swamps me again. I fumble a hand between us and shamelessly cup his fly.

“Fuck yes,” he grunts into my mouth. “Can’t wait to get these clothes off you.”

It’s not Shakespeare, but it works on me nonetheless. I nip his lip and then use both hands to lift his jaw so I can lick a stripe up his neck. His stubble scrapes my tongue as he growls happily. The vibration goes straight to my balls.

And I realize with a start that I’d forgotten how this feels. Not just the promise of sex, but of adventure. My inner wild man is waking up after a *long* slumber. And he is ready to party.

“Let’s go,” he whispers hoarsely, probably because the light just turned green.

But then, changing his mind, he cups my face in one hand and gives me a steamy kiss. Our gazes lock, and I see my own joy reflected back at me in his brown eyes.

Tonight is turning into a fantastic, unexpected gift. And I don’t intend to squander it. I push off the kiosk and grip his elbow. “We can make it,” I insist, even as the walk sign is counting down its last few seconds.

Chuckling, he hurries across the street with me. “This way.” We speed walk past some low slung buildings.

They’re familiar, actually. I’ve been on this block before. “What street do you live on?” I ask.

“Henry,” he says.

“So do I.”

He glances toward me. “Really? What address?”

“Forty-one.” I point up the block. I recognize the deli on the corner we’re approaching, too. We’re close.

He comes to a sudden stop. “You’re shitting me.”

Uh-oh . “No, I’m not. Just moved in yesterday. Three bedroom apartment. Second floor.”

His mouth hinges open in an expression of pure horror. “Fuck no. There’s a little kid next door. And a woman. I saw her. Lotsa tattoos. Are you *married?* ”

“No!” I yelp. “That’s my *sister* .”

He closes his eyes and then shakes his head. Like he hopes I’m not there when he opens them again.

I am, though. I’m just staring up at this attractive man and watching my night go up in flames. “So we’re neighbors?”

“Across the hall,” he barks. “Fuck.”

“Is that so bad?” I have to ask. I’m still clinging to the possibility that my new neighbor doesn’t care that much about our unlucky proximity. “I mean, think of the commute.”

But it’s no good. I can tell by the way his shoulders tense up. And by the way he looks up at the sky and yells “*FUCK* ,” and not in a fun way.

“No need to get ragey,” I mumble. “I guess I’ll just be going.”

He lets out a sigh that carries the weight of total disappointment. I guess I should be flattered. “Look, I’m sorry. But I don’t do pickups. Ever. For so many reasons. But we’re gonna have to forget this happened.”

“Yeah, I picked up on that,” I grumble.

“Okay. Sorry.” He grimaces and looks away. “Fuck,” he says one more time.

And then he abruptly walks off, heading back the way we came. Away from his own home, and away from me.

Stunned at the turn of events, all I can do is watch his muscular ass power walk away from me, up the sidewalk.

“Okay,” Reggie whispers. “Why do you look so flustered?”

We’re seated side by side on my sofa, and Jordyn is finally in bed. She was almost too hyper to sleep. I guess moving to a new city can do that to a girl.

“Well...” I glance at her bedroom door. It’s closed. “I almost did it. I met a guy in a bar. A *great* guy. And I was three quarters of the way to a hookup.”

Her eyes light up. “Omigod, really? What do you mean almost?”

“He bailed,” I whisper. “It turns out that he lives in this building. On this *floor* .”

My sister’s mouth flops open so far that I can see her tongue piercing. “Get out of here. Really? There’s only one other apartment on this floor.”

I nod violently. “When we both realized it, he freaked. I mean—hooking up with your neighbor is not super cool, right? Because you have to see each other every time you take out the recycling.” I scrub my hands through my hair. “But his reaction was a little oversized.”

“Oh shit,” she whispers.

“Yeah,” I breathe. “Maybe he’s involved with someone. I really doubt it though. He must be, like, super deep in the closet?”

Reggie shakes her head. “I have another theory. That broker you rented from? She wrote something in her note with the keys. Hang on...” My sister pops off the couch and crosses to our messy dining table. We’re at that ugly stage of unpacking where everything is chaos. “Oh, here.” She plucks a sheet of paper out of the mess and returns it to me.

Gavin, welcome to the neighborhood . The Henry Street building houses several Brooklyn Hockey associates already. I’m sure you’ll get a warm welcome!

“Oh yeah.” When I’d been scouting apartments, the broker had told me that the power couple who owns the hockey teams also owns several neighborhood buildings. They only rent them out to people who work for

one of their organizations. If you're on a budget, they're the best deal in town.

Since I'm most certainly on a budget, I'd asked to see anything in those buildings first. That's how we ended up here, in a three bedroom apartment that was priced the same as two bedrooms elsewhere.

"I guess it wasn't as warm a welcome as you'd been hoping for," Reggie says. And then she snort-laughes.

"Yeah, yeah. This could be bad." Really bad. I have a prickly feeling at the back of my neck. Are Hudson and I going to work together? Is that the reason he was so horrified to learn that we're neighbors?

Honestly, it would make me feel better. Hooking up with coworkers is a terrible idea. Maybe he'd figured this out before I did.

It's better than my other theories—that he's a cheater. Or that he's ashamed of his attraction to men.

But now I have to know. I get up and grab my laptop off my bed. Back on the sofa, I open a Google window and search "Hudson Brooklyn Hockey," since he never told me his last name.

The news article comes up immediately on a sports website, complete with a photo of the guy I was making out with an hour ago. *Chicago trades defenseman Hudson Newgate to Brooklyn* .

I make a strangled noise, and Reggie grabs the computer out of my hands. "Holy hell. *That* guy? That hottie right there?"

"Omigod," I whimper. "He's a *player* . That makes no sense. Why was he in the bar when his team was on the road?"

Unless...

I grab my computer back and google: "Hudson Newgate injury." Yup. Another news item pops up, from an injury roundup a few days ago. *Hudson Newgate out for three games for a lower body injury* .

"Oh shit. Oh shit oh shit oh shit..."

"Breathe," my sister says.

“Nooooooo,” I wail. “Not only do we work together, but I’ll probably be massaging his *lower body* injury in thirty-six hours.”

She cackles. “Perks of the job. And, wow little brother. I always knew you were cute, but look who can pull a professional athlete in a bar! Go Gavin!”

“Shhh.” I snap the laptop shut, as if that could undo the damage. “You don’t understand. I didn’t know who he was, so I ran my mouth off about the team!”

“You did?” She’s grinning ear to ear, like this is the most charming story she’s ever heard.

“Stop smiling! He asked me what I thought of the defensive pairings. And I said...” I want to die now. “I said I was *underwhelmed* .”

She giggles.

I hate my sister.

“Oh Gavin! It must not have been that bad, if he still wanted to...” She drops her voice. “...Polish your piston.”

My head drops into my hands, and I let out another moan. “Maybe he was just really horny.”

“Who knew Brooklyn had a queer player? This is fascinating.”

My stomach fizzes with anxiety. “Reggie? You can’t mention this to anyone. He obviously isn’t out.”

“I am a vault,” she says. “But maybe it’s not a big deal. Maybe he’s out to his teammates.”

I shake my head. “I doubt it. When I had my interview, I made a point to tell the head trainer that I’m an out gay man. And then he made a point to tell me the team would never discriminate.” I’d really liked Henry, and—up until a few minutes ago—I’d been excited to start this job.

“That’s good, right?”

“Right. But then he said—‘we have out players within the organization.’ And I asked if any of them were men. Because hockey isn’t historically

welcoming to queer men. And he said ‘So far the only out athletes are on the women’s team.’”

“Ah.” She bites her lip. “So your new friend has a secret.”

“Sure sounds that way.”

“Well, shit,” she says. “He’s not going to be very happy to see you again, is he?”

“Probably not.”

She gives me a sad look. “I’m sorry, Gav. I hope that doesn’t ruin your enthusiasm for meeting hot guys in bars. Eddie wouldn’t want you to be lonely for the rest of your life, you know.”

I know she’s right. But that doesn’t make this any less awkward.

Reggie retreats to her tiny bedroom after that.

My sister is living rent free with us for six months, until she goes off on tour as the bass player in a punk band. In exchange, she is going to pick Jordyn up from school most days and hang out with her until I get home.

It’s a nice arrangement, even if the place will be a little crowded.

Alone with my thoughts, I lock the front door and tuck myself into bed. I stare at my unfamiliar ceiling and listen to the sounds of New York City beyond these walls.

It occurs to me, as I grow drowsy, that my bedroom shares a wall with Hudson Newgate’s apartment.

I don’t know the layout of his place, but it’s conceivable that we are lying only a few feet away from each other right now.

Just not in the way I’d imagined.

Under my Thumb

AS I WIPE down the weight bench for my teammate, my phone starts singing “Under My Thumb.”

Shit.

“Whose ringtone is that?” Drake asks with a snicker. “Your dad’s?”

“Good guess. I’d better get it.” My dad is also my agent. And he doesn’t like to be ignored.

“Go ahead,” says Drake. “You aren’t supposed to spot me anyway.”

This is also true, if overly cautious. Nobody wants my hip inflamed before I can skate again. As my phone continues to play The Rolling Stones, I walk into the corridor for a little privacy. “Hey, Dad,” I say, answering when I’m out of earshot.

“Hudson, hey!” His voice is full of jocular enthusiasm that his other clients seem to love. Today, it just makes me tired. “How’s the hip?”

“Better,” I tell him. As if any other answer would be acceptable.

“You taking good care of yourself? Physical therapy? Good nutrition?”

“Yessir.”

“Getting lots of sleep?”

“Yes,” I lie. But it’s not for lack of trying. I’ve spent the last two nights staring at the ceiling, wishing I could sleep on my side. And, fine, thinking

about my neighbor. Wondering who he is, and what he thinks of me and my freak-out the other night.

I haven't run into him, though. Not on the sidewalk, or in the stairwell. And not here in the team headquarters.

But that's my fear. Our apartments are the only two on our floor. And billionaire couple Nate and Rebecca Kattenberger own the building—as well as the hockey team. So either Gavin or his sister must be a new hire.

Although the job could be anywhere in the Kattenberger empire. They own several companies as well as two hockey teams.

If there's a God in heaven, I'll never see him at work.

"You feel ready for tonight's game?" my father asks.

Here we go . "I'm not playing tonight, Dad."

"What? Why?" he barks. "They shouldn't overlook you like this! I'm going to put in a call to Karl..."

"Dad, *don't* . I mean—you don't have to." I close my eyes and regroup. It's rare for me to push back against the steamroller of Derek Newgate, and it has to be done delicately. "Coach spoke to both the specialist and the athletic trainer this morning. You don't need to worry. He's on top of this."

"Hmm." He mulls this over.

And I wait, like a good son.

My father is a two-time Stanley Cup winning veteran of hockey. And now a very in-demand agent. If he ranked the value of his clientele, I might not even make the top twenty. He knows everyone in hockey, including my coach. They were teammates at some point. He's well liked, and Coach would probably laugh off his invasive phone call.

But still. *Give it a rest, Dad* .

"All right. One more game," he says, as if it were up to him. "You're taking anti-inflammatories, and icing it?"

"Textbook, I promise. I practically live in that damn ice bath."

He chuckles. "All right. I know you're doing the work."

All I do is work.

“—It's just that four weeks in on a new team is a crappy time to be injured. They need to see you as their new powerhouse on the blue line.”

I lean my head against the wall and let him talk. As if I don't have all these same thoughts every day.

Even before breakfast.

“—While you're waiting, don't slack off. Lots of upper body work. Get yourself to every video meeting.”

Yeah, that's every day of my life.

“You're going to heal up and settle in. Pretty soon Brooklyn won't be able to remember how they lived without you.”

“You know it,” I say, because that's my line in this drama. Plus, I want to believe it.

“Chin up, Hudson. You can overcome this.”

“Thanks, Dad.” He's overbearing as fuck, but we both want the same things. And to his credit, he never expresses what we're both thinking—that five years bouncing around on different teams is not a good look.

I'm like the dog who's still looking for a forever home—but people keep returning him to the shelter after a few months. *He's great. Lots of enthusiasm, never pees on the rug, but he doesn't fit our family.*

My father and I sign off, and I wander back into the weight room. Someone else has taken my turn on the bench, and my hip has gotten stiff from standing still for ten minutes, so I head for the mats and stretch.

“Hey, New Guy?” Castro calls. “You got your phone on you? We need some tunes. Something retro? Maybe Santana.”

“Sure,” I say, reaching for my phone. A couple of taps later, and Santana is wailing away on his guitar.

“Thanks, New Guy.”

I give him a friendly salute. But the truth is that I hate that nickname with the fire of a thousand suns. Not that Castro means anything by it—

with a name like Newgate, “New Guy” is just low-hanging fruit.

But after four trades in five years, I’m damn sick of being the new guy—and trying to prove myself day in and day out for a new set of faces. It’s exhausting as well as inconvenient. I’ve learned not to sign a long-term lease. I don’t buy a lot of furniture, and I can never own a pet.

Those are just minor inconveniences, though. The grueling part is constantly adapting your style of play to fit in with the new team’s needs. You have to be a sponge—learning your teammates names, nicknames and quirks. Listening to the coach like your job depends on absorbing every word.

Because it does.

I roll back and tuck one knee into my chest, and then massage the opposite hip. The athletic trainers usually help with this, but I haven’t seen one today.

Just as that thought forms in my mind, I hear Henry’s voice out in the corridor. “The men’s weight room is usually about half capacity after morning skate. Some guys want to get in a quick workout, some go right home and take a pregame nap.”

Henry’s giving someone a tour of the facility. And suddenly I’m on high alert, like there’s a noticeable change in the air pressure.

Two men walk through the door, and my heart practically explodes.

Oh no. Oh *shit* . It’s *him* . Gavin from the bar. Gavin with the clear gray eyes, and the quick smile. In a Brooklyn polo, with an employee ID clipped to his khakis. That’s the uniform for athletic trainers.

Holy hell. There’s a clipboard hugged under one muscled arm, and I can see my own name on it. Fuck me. This is bad. He’s going to work with the team?

It takes me about zero-point-five seconds to picture him kneeling down on this very mat and lifting my leg in his hands to pin it back against my

chest, while I gaze up at his dark blond hair, and that rippling chest that I still want to explore with my tongue.

“Fellas, listen up!” Henry says, clapping his hands together. “I’d like to introduce you to Gavin Gillis. He joins the training staff today as my right-hand man.”

The players all turn to listen, and O’Doul leans down and turns the Bluetooth speaker off.

The sudden silence is deep.

“Thanks, guys,” Henry says. “Gavin joins us as senior training staff. He’s never worked in hockey before, but that doesn’t matter. His last full-time position was at the University of New Hampshire, where he worked with their D1 men’s soccer team, as well as with the women’s tennis team...”

I lose the thread of what Henry is saying, because I’m still staring at Gavin. He stands tall at Henry’s side. He’s wearing the half-smile of someone who’s being forced to hear praise about himself and doesn’t quite know what to do with it. As I watch, he makes eye contact with each player in the room, one at a time.

He gets to me last, though, because I’m on the floor, in the corner. When his eyes find me, he does a quick double take. His surprise is muted, though. On his second pass, he looks directly at me and does the world’s quickest nod.

I forget to breathe, and my vision tunnels.

This can’t be happening. He’s a *trainer* ? He’ll be here every damn day. He knows things about me that nobody else knows.

And if he really wants to be a dick about it, my privacy could be shattered before the puck drops tonight.

Even if he’s not a dick, it’s still going to be awkward.

So fucking awkward.

I force some air into my lungs and try to stem my panic.

But this is bad.

So, so bad.

The Moment I've Been Dreading

THIS IS the moment I've been dreading.

Sure enough, Hudson Newgate is scowling at me from the corner, as if I've done something wrong by showing up here.

Sorry, pal. It's not my fault .

Let the record show that he sat down beside me on that barstool.

Henry drones on, and I try to keep my cool. First days are always awkward. In this job you have to meet new faces all the time, though. You have to gain people's trust so they'll tell you their troubles, and also relax when you put your hands on their bodies.

I'm good at my job, damn it. I have every right to be here. Once I settle in, he'll get used to the idea.

When Henry is finished introducing me, we leave the weight room and settle into the training room. It's a big operation, and there's a lot to learn. Athletes wander in and out, and I watch Henry work on knees and ankles. I pull files for each athlete, and make notes, and make conversation.

My head is spinning, but that's just first day stuff.

Hudson Newgate does not turn up, though. And a trainer on the first day does not have a discreet way to pull an athlete aside for a private conversation. The main training room is a busy place, with multiple

conversations in progress at any given moment, and athletes lurking nearby, waiting their turn.

Heck—that first day I can barely navigate the labyrinth of Brooklyn’s deluxe practice facility. It’s actually two facilities—the male and female athletes have separate floors of the building.

And I spend a solid hour signing personnel forms, and getting my new K-Tech phone. “Everyone who works for the organization has one,” says Heidi Jo, the GM’s assistant. “And there’s an app for the medical system that Henry uses to track player injuries.”

“Cool. Thanks.”

It’s a lot to learn. And when I get back down to the training room, I start skimming through case files, and memorizing every player’s name.

As for Hudson Newgate, the files say that he’s supposed to be seeing the training staff today for ongoing treatment of bursitis. But he’s a no-show. A ghost.

The panic I saw on his face earlier was not my imagination. We need to talk. And soon.

When I arrive home that evening, laden with groceries, I eye his apartment door. I just stand there for a second, keys jingling in my hand, trying to talk myself into knocking. He’s probably at the stadium, though. It wouldn’t even work.

That’s when my daughter throws open our apartment door. “Daddy! I thought you were never coming home.”

I wince, even though she didn’t mean it literally. Because that is something that already happened once in my daughter’s life.

One day Eddie left for work and never came home.

“How’s school?” I juggle one grocery bag so I can hug her.

“It stinks.” She throws her arms around my waist. “I hate being the new girl. But guess what? There’s a Scholastic Book Fair tomorrow. I need money.”

“What else is new?” I tease, giving her ponytail a tug with my only free finger.

But she takes the question literally. “Well, did you know we live *right next door* to a hockey player?” She looks up at me, eyes like saucers. “I saw him! His jacket says NEWGATE on the back! Reggie and I googled him!”

Oh boy . I nudge Jordyn into the apartment, just in case he’s home and listening.

“—He’s a defenseman! Did you meet him? And the rest of the players yet?”

“Some of them,” I say weakly. “I didn’t memorize all their names yet.”

Reggie smirks at me as I deposit the grocery bags on our kitchen table.

“We’re going to watch the game on TV,” Jordyn announces. “It starts at seven.”

“Yeah, okay,” is my automatic response, because that sounds like a good time. But then I remember it’s a school night, and I’m supposed to be a responsible parent. “You can watch until your bedtime.”

She wrinkles up her cute little nose. “Can we go to a game in the stadium? Do you get free tickets?”

“I’m not sure how that’s going to work.” Technically I could watch any game from the press box. But I don’t think they allow children. “After I settle in, I’ll ask around.”

“Hockey players are cool,” she says gleefully. “Do you think Hudson Newgate will give me his autograph?”

“Uh...” I honestly don’t know how to get her off the topic of Hudson Newgate. It’s bad enough that he’s living rent free in my own head.

“Let your dad get to know the people first,” Reggie says. “Before he starts asking for favors.”

“Okay,” she says. “Maybe he’ll teach me how to play hockey! And Daddy can invite him over for dinner.”

Reggie laughs. “Wouldn’t that be fun?”

I hold back a groan and start unloading the groceries. This kitchen is decent for a New York apartment, but I’m not used to it yet. My mind is chaos, and so are my cabinets.

Uprooting your life is hard.

As if I weren’t busy enough, my phone begins to trill from my pocket. “That must be Grandma,” Jordyn says. “Everyone else texts.”

Reggie and I laugh because it’s true. And when I check my phone, I see that my daughter is right. So now I have a moral quandary. On the one hand, it’s not good parenting if Jordyn sees me blowing off Eddie’s mother.

But, Lord, I do not want to talk to that woman after a long day. She’s never liked anything about me. Not my job, which she saw as inferior to her son’s. Not my attitude, which she finds frivolous. She always saw me as Eddie’s boy toy, and when he asked me to marry him, she was legit shocked.

The phone stops ringing, giving me an out. “I’ll call her back after I get dinner going.”

“Put me to work,” Reggie says. “I’ll help.”

It’s a nice offer, except that Reggie is useless in the kitchen. “Do you know how to prep potatoes for baking?”

She shakes her head. “Don’t judge me. I can learn.”

“Okay, start by running cold water over them and scrubbing them with the potato brush.”

“The what?”

I love my sister, but how does she get through the day? When I travel for work—my contract specifies three road trips with the team, to give Henry a break—she and Jordyn are going to have to eat take-out food for lunch and dinner. Cold cereal is about as fancy as Reggie’s cooking gets.

As I instruct her on the finer points of washing and scoring potatoes with a fork, my phone trills again, though.

“Might as well just deal with her,” Reggie whispers. “She’ll probably keep calling.”

She’s right, so I swipe to answer. “Hello Eustace. How are you this fine evening?” This is part of my strategy for dealing with her—always be pleasant, but then stick to my guns. In other words—smile while putting my foot down.

“I’m great! And how is the *best* little girl in the world?” Eddie’s mother gushes.

I’m great too, thanks for asking . “Jordyn is doing well. Her bedroom is shaping up. Would you like to speak to her?”

“In a moment. First, I wanted to tell you something wonderful.”

I brace myself, because Eustace has used this strategy against me before—she claims to have good news even as she arm-twists me into doing her bidding. “We’re coming to New York for a visit at the end of the month!”

Already? I’d hoped for more of a reprieve. “That’s lovely. I’m sure Jordyn will be excited to see you.”

“Of course she will. And the best part is that we’ll be apartment hunting in Manhattan.”

My stomach drops suddenly, as if I’m on a roller coaster entering a sudden dive. “Is that so?” I manage to ask. But I really just want to throw my phone at the wall.

“We’re looking at two-bedroom condos in new buildings. Jordyn can have her own room, for when she visits with us!”

I take a deep, calming breath. “That sounds like a very big expense for the occasional weekend visit,” I say carefully.

“Well, you know Chad can work anywhere,” she says. Her husband is the CEO of a medical equipment company. And a multimillionaire. “Our plan would be to spend most of our weekends in the city with Jordyn.”

Another deep breath. “I’m sure Jordyn would enjoy spending time with you in Manhattan. But it can’t possibly be every weekend. She’ll have her own friends and activities in Brooklyn.” *And me!* I want to scream. *She’ll have me .*

But that’s not the way to win an argument with Eustace. There has never been a day when she accepted me as Jordyn’s father. To her, it’s just a legal accident that I became Jordyn’s custodial parent after Eddie’s death.

In fact, she didn’t even wait for the funeral flowers to wilt before she asked me to relinquish custody. “Jordyn needs a stable home with two parents who love her. Chad and I are her best chance.”

At that moment, standing in the kitchen of my dead husband’s home, making a peanut butter sandwich for a five-year-old who’d spent the last seventy-two hours crying, I didn’t even yell. I was too shell-shocked to yell. I just said “She’s my child. End of story.”

But Eustace is savvy. She never outright asked again about custody. Still, I know she thinks I’m not Jordyn’s real dad, and everything she does feels like territorial warfare.

That first year after Eddie’s death, I was in shock, and needed her help just to get through the day with a grieving kindergartner. After a few months, though, I pulled myself together and stopped leaning on her. I got grief therapy for both Jordyn and myself. I planned outings, even if I wasn’t in the mood. I took pictures. I celebrated holidays with my child, like a normal person.

Since Jordyn is now in school for thirty-five hours a week, I realized I needed to get back into the workforce. I took on some private clients. But I didn’t have the bandwidth to run my own business, so I started looking around for jobs.

That’s when I saw the posting for the Brooklyn Bruisers. And when I showed it to my sister, she said: “Come to Brooklyn. Start a new chapter. I’ll help.”

On a whim, I applied to exactly one job, and landed it.

And then Eustace *freaked* . It's the only time I've ever seen her get red with anger. "Jordyn is my only link to Eddie! You can't tear her away from my bosom."

She actually used those words. I still cringe when I remember it.

But I'd rehearsed this. I calmly explained that Jordyn had an aunt who also loved her. And that I'd gotten a very good job with excellent health benefits and a retirement plan. I even said I couldn't "live off Eddie forever," which was exactly a thing she'd accused me of doing when Eddie was still alive.

So here we are, two hundred miles out of her clutches. And she wants to buy a condo across the river and put her nose in at every opportunity?

"We'll just see how the house hunting goes," she says calmly. "Jordyn loves her grandparents."

"Of course she does," I say without gritting my teeth. "And when you plan your visit, please email me the details so I can make sure she's free."

"Already have!" she says cheerily. "It's in your inbox. Now let me speak to that sweet girl."

Beaten, I carry the phone over to my child, who takes it eagerly.

And I resume making dinner.

The next few days are busy. I begin working full time with the players. I memorize injury reports. I sit down with Neil Drake to discuss his diabetes protocols, so I'll know how to intervene in a crisis.

I work with Ivo Halla on his ankle stiffness, and with Patrick O'Doul on his creaky shoulder. I do soft tissue work on everyone's aches and pains.

Except for Hudson Newgate's. He's still avoiding me.

The other guys are friendly and welcoming. That goes a long way toward easing my new-guy stress. But not Newgate. With a recent injury, he's near the top of the list of players with pressing physical issues. A close look at his chart reveals that he was sidelined from four games by a bursitis flare-up in his hip.

During which time I met him in a bar.

But can I find him to discuss the injury? Nope. Whenever I offer my services in the weight room, he's just leaving. When I walk into the players' lounge, he walks out.

It's nerve-wracking. He obviously doesn't want to talk to me. At all. And the longer it goes on, the more awkward it gets.

One morning I arrive just as the team is finishing a yoga session, and Newgate is there. From this distance, his hip movement looks smooth. So that's good news for him.

What's equally smooth, though, is the way he avoids me after the class. He strikes up a conversation with the team captain, which I am loathe to interrupt.

And then another player—Jason Castro—asks me if I have a minute. “My mid-back is cranky.” He reaches awkwardly over his shoulder and frowns. “Like a rib is out of line.”

“Can you feel it on a deep inhale?” I ask.

“Yup.”

“Let's take a look.” I point toward the treatment rooms, and we head in that direction.

“Hey baby,” he says to a petite blonde woman in the corridor. “You look hot in that dress.” Then he makes a *meow* sound. She rolls her eyes.

Well, okay, that's a little aggressive.

He follows me into the empty treatment room. “That's my wife, by the way. I'm not sexually harassing the staff.”

“*Oh* .” I let out an awkward laugh. “I *did* wonder.”

Castro cracks a smile. “This is a very incestuous workplace. O’Doul is married to the yoga instructor. Trevi is married to the publicist.”

“Ah. Which one?” I ask, quickly rubbing down the table with an antiseptic wipe. This place is *stocked* . I’ve never worked anywhere so clean and accommodating.

“Georgia. The, uh, female one.” He sits down on the table.

“I was pretty sure that’s who you meant. Just teasing, really.”

“You married?” he asks.

“Actually, widowed.” As I say it, I’m thinking *here we go* . It’s important to me that I don’t hide my sexuality. But I’m pretty sure I’m the only gay man on the staff, and you never know how that will be received. “My husband died two years ago in a car accident.”

Castro’s eyes widen sharply, and I brace myself for an awkward conversation. Or worse—maybe he won’t want me to work on his cranky back.

“No shit?” he asks. But then he suddenly clasps my shoulder. “Man, I am really sorry to hear that.”

I feel myself relax. “Thank you. Lie on your stomach?” He rolls, and I begin by placing my hands on his shoulders.

“You know,” he says, his voice slightly muffled. “There’s rules for when someone shares that, right? You’re not supposed to say—oh, the same thing happened to me. Because they usually follow that shit up with—*my cat died last month* .”

I let out a bark of surprised laughter. Because that *is* a thing people do. “Yeah, grief comparisons can be weird.” And this conversation did not go in the direction I was expecting.

“Truth. But—just saying?” He raises himself on an elbow and looks over his shoulder at me. “When I was still in high school, my girlfriend died in a car crash. I know it’s not the same thing, but it messed me up real good for a few years.”

“Wow, I bet it did.” I give him a nudge and he reclines again.

I work carefully on the muscles of his upper and mid-back, until I find a concentration of tightness. “This is the spot, right?”

“You know it.” He’s quiet a moment as I coax those muscles to loosen up. Then he sighs. “Humans aren’t wired to look at their comfortable lives and understand that it can all be snatched away at a moment’s notice. And when it happens, we can’t even process it.”

“The back pain is that bad?”

He snorts. “No, but your jokes are.”

“Ooh, burn.”

He shakes his head. “I used to do that, too. Always making a joke to get through it. Two years isn’t very long, is it?”

“Nope,” I admit. “Once a week I think of something and I’m like—oh, I should tell Eddie.”

He nods. He gets it. Our club has a small membership, but we recognize our members.

“Welcome to Brooklyn,” he says. “May your luck turn around. Mine did.”

“Hey, you never know. I’ve always been an optimist.”

But some days are easier than others.

“Hey, I’m heading over to set up at the stadium in a bit,” Henry says on Monday. “But could you grab Newgate? He hasn’t come into the training room.”

Yikes . “I’m happy to try. He’s been, uh, hard to track down.” I’m about ready to put his picture on a WANTED sign in the weight room. If you see this man, report him to the training office. May be armed and dangerous with a bad attitude ...

“Make sure you grab him before all the players head home to rest.”

“Will do!” I say with more charm than actual confidence.

But, honestly, this avoidance has gone on long enough. I’m not about to let this arrogant man make me look bad to my new boss.

The minute Henry leaves, I march out of my treatment room and go looking for Newgate. I find him in the locker room, chest deep in the ice bath, a grimace on his face. *Finally* . A captive audience.

Also—why do irritating people have to be so hot? His chest is a work of art, even with goose bumps all over it.

“Excuse me, Mr. Newgate?” I ask politely, in a tone that suggests we have never had our tongues in each other’s mouths. “I should see you before you go. Let’s follow up on that hip.”

He looks up at me like he’s tasted something sour. “Sorry, can’t. After this I’ve got a video session.”

“Right.” It comes out sounding bitter. “Another time then.”

I want to scream into the void. But I leave the room instead.

SIX



I'm Not Wearing Pants

Charli

IT'S a beeping alarm that pierces through my hangover to wake me up.

At first, I fight it. I'm lying on my back in a plush bed that's way too comfortable to be my own. This isn't necessarily a problem. I'm a professional hockey player, and we spend a lot of nights in hotels.

Not *nice* hotels, though. It's the silky, high-thread-count sheets that provide the first clue that something is very wrong.

Also, I'm topless. And I have a hangover headache. But those two things happen occasionally, and neither one is too worrisome.

The alarm, though. It isn't mine, and it isn't my road-trip roommate Samantha's. Whose room is this?

I'd open my eyes to check, but it's awfully bright, and I'm so sleepy. I drift off for another moment.

Eventually, though, another mechanical beep pulls me back to the surface. This noise is familiar. It's the sound that Neil—Cornelius Harmon Drake III—makes when he's testing his blood sugar.

Wait. I'm in a bed with *Neil Drake* ?

And I'm topless, too?

Shit .

My eyes spring open. The first thing I see is... the ceiling. It's really far away and very decorative. There's a line of goddamn gold leaf running around the border of the room. It's further confirmation that Drake is in this bed with me. He's the richest person I'll ever meet.

My head throbs in protest, and my mouth is dry. Hello, hangover.

"What the fuck happened here last night?" Drake mumbles from a few feet away. "Why am I not wearing my pants?"

"I am!" This comes out all raspy, as if I smoked a pack of cigarettes. I'm not a smoker, though. Then again, all bets are off this morning.

“You’re wearing my pants?” Drake asks.

“No,” I clarify, relieved to discover that my bottom half isn’t as naked as the top half. “If we’re taking inventory, I’d like to report that I’m wearing underwear and pantyhose. And also...” What is that thing near my foot? With my toe, I drag it upward until I can reach it. I pull one high-heeled shoe out from under the bedclothes.

We both snort at the same time. Apparently, I got in bed wearing my hose and at least one shoe. No shirt, though, which is going to be awkward in a moment when I get up.

Still, it’s a relief. We got wasted in Vegas, but at least we didn’t get wasted and screw each other. So whatever damage control we’re doing right now, it can’t be *that* bad.

I finally get up the courage to look over at Neil Drake, just about the same time he gets the courage to look at me. His hazel eyes widen. Mine do too.

He looks like he’s been to *war* . He’s still wearing his bowtie, but the tuxedo shirt underneath is open and missing half its buttons. His thick hair is all askew, like sex hair, even though I’ve established that no sex happened.

Well, no banging happened. But those missing buttons are ringing some bells with me. I think maybe I—

“*Oh shit* ,” I whisper. I’m pretty sure I ripped those buttons off myself. Although I hadn’t been able to get that bowtie off him.

“What the hell happened here last night?” he asks in a harsh whisper. His expression is so confused.

“Um...” *Think, Charli* . “We did some drinking after the awards ceremony. And after your fight with Iris.”

“My fight with Iris,” he echoes. His eyes squeeze closed with remorse.

The fight had been pretty ugly. Lots of shouting. I’d been eavesdropping from the living room, silently cheering Neil on whenever he landed a verbal

blow.

Not that it's any of my business, but I can't stand his on-again-off-again girlfriend. They've been *off* for a while, but I think she came to Vegas to try to change that.

It hadn't worked. When she'd finally screeched her goodbyes and had stormed out of this hotel suite, I'd smiled at the sight of her skinny ass as it departed.

"You got pretty drunk after that," I say to my tousle-haired companion. "Is your, um, blood sugar okay?"

Neil is diabetic. Before him, I'd never met anyone who has to monitor his own body chemistry to remain alive.

It almost makes him seem less like a carefree rich dude and more like a real person.

Almost. But not quite.

"I need to eat," he says. "Although we're supposed to be downstairs in, like, seventeen minutes."

"Seventeen?" I screech.

"Yeah, I like to sleep as late as I can."

Ugh. I sit up so fast that I feel nauseated.

Also, I'm still topless. Neil is now staring at my breasts.

"Oops." I grab them in two hands.

"Wow," he says, his eyes glazing over lustfully.

"Come on, now. You've seen tits before." I can play this off as a joke, right? We'll be laughing about this in a week. *Remember that time you flashed me your tits before we almost missed the team jet?*

But it's too soon.

"Charli," he croaks, his eyes still glued to my hands cupping my breasts.

"What?"

"I've seen *those* tits before. They look super familiar. Because we fooled around last night." He scrubs a hand over his face, somehow without

breaking the stare-off he's having with my tits. "Hot damn."

"Whoa *whoa whoa* . First of all, tits are tits." This is a lie. As someone who's also fond of tits, I'm oversimplifying things. But now is not the moment for brutal honesty. "Besides, I don't remember it like that," I say carefully. "Maybe your memory could also fuck off right about now."

"That might be tricky. It might be hard to forget playing with those. They're pretty spectacular."

I grab the sheet and yank it up to cover me. "Hey! Is mind bleach a thing? Because I think you need some."

He grins suddenly. "My head is killing me right now. Like someone put an ax through it. But this is going to be so funny later, isn't it? I think I drooled all over your chest last night like a Saint Bernard."

"Stop! This isn't funny! What about Iris?" Honestly, Iris can die slowly in a pit of Las Vegas quicksand. (Is that a thing? It should be.) But if Neil feels guilty, then maybe he'll put our drunken encounter out of his stupidly handsome head.

Instead, he shrugs. "I told her we're never getting back together, right? That's why you and I got drunk. *God* , never sleep in a bowtie, though." He reaches up and unclips it.

I blink. "You wear a *clip-on* tie? You? With your Tom Ford tux?"

"The tux is Armani." He drops the tie onto the crisp white comforter. "The clip-on is something I bought just to irritate my uncle. But it's awfully handy. Saves time."

I just stare at the thing for a moment, because I'm having a bit of a flashback to last night. I'd been tugging on that bowtie to try to get it off him. Then I'd gotten frustrated and yanked the two halves of his shirt apart.

Then? I'd leaned down and licked his sixpack...

Holy, *holy* crap. I licked Neil Drake. And I liked it.

"You look like you just saw the devil." He snickers. "We were obviously in a weird, self-destructive mood. I never get drunk. And you

never—” He stops talking suddenly. His mouth falls open in shock.

“I never what?” There’s a lot of ways that sentence could end, and none of them are good. I’ve always been careful to *never* let on that Neil is the most attractive man I’ve ever met. I’ve never torn his shirt off, either. Or shown him my breasts.

His face is seriously confused. “Charli... you told me before that you don’t fool around with *men* .”

Oh . That’s mostly true, especially lately. But really? That’s what he finds so shocking here?

“But last night you... and I...” He swallows hard. “We were going to...” Then he lifts up the covers and looks down at his body.

His naked body. I can’t see it right this second, but I saw it last night.

“I’m not wearing pants,” he says again. “We were going to—” He’s like a stuck record now.

“Okay, look.” I clap my hands. “Time is wasting. Can we just get out of here, and worry about this later? Can I have the shower?”

“S-sure,” he stammers. He’s still looking at his dick, as if checking to see if it’s still there.

“Close your eyes, please,” I say primly.

Shockingly, he obeys me. He flops back onto the pillow and squeezes his eyes shut.

I dart out of bed and make a run for the bathroom.

SEVEN



Playing the Rich Asshole

Neil

I'M GOING to die of embarrassment. Or die of this headache.

Or both at the same time.

It's not the nakedness or the drunkenness that's killing me. I look good naked, and I rarely get drunk, because it makes my diabetes harder to manage.

And it's not the clip-on tie. I wear what I want. Fuck the haters.

But the details from last night are starting to cut through the fog in my brain. Charli's breasts woke me up for good. Those *spectacular* breasts that I've spent the last year and a half trying not to ogle.

Last night she let me, though. No, she actually *encouraged* me by whipping off her dress.

And I'd pounced. I'd been sloppy drunk for the first time in years. After we'd rolled around a little, I took off my pants while she tried to remove my tie and my shirt.

She'd been only partially successful. But eventually she gave up and kissed her way down my body.

I'd been in *heaven*, having guiltily jacked off to this very fantasy quite a few times. Then she'd—and I swear this actually happened, it wasn't a fever dream—put her mouth on me. Everything had been pure bliss.

But I'm a greedy bastard. I'd wanted more. So I'd grabbed a condom off the bedside table and tried to put it on, but...

I let out a loud groan of despair. Because unless I'm remembering a nightmare, I'd suddenly been afflicted with whiskey dick at just the wrong moment.

God, how embarrassing. I will never live this down.

Or maybe I will. Charli asked me to forget that it ever happened. And suddenly I'm on board with this plan.

Nothing happened. Not one thing. Not the whiskey dick or the blowjob. Okay, it's going to hurt me to give up the memory of my hand threaded through Charli's red hair as she—

Whew . My cock stirs at the mental image.

But no. I can't keep that in the spank bank if I don't want to remember what happened afterwards. So I have to delete the whole mental file, no? The breasts and the stumbling into the elevator. We'd been laughing like nutters. I'm pretty sure an elderly couple had exited the elevator early just to escape our howls.

"We gotta celebrate," Charli had said. And I'd agreed. We'd been celebrating our...

Whoa.

Hold up. That memory can't be right. Can it?

I leap out of the bed and cross the room, looking for evidence. Not that it's difficult to find. My belongings have been tossed helter-skelter on the desk in the way of a hotel drunk. And right there, beside the key card for this suite, is a certificate with a decorative gold border looping around the edges of the page.

A marriage certificate. With my name on it. And Charli's.

Holy fuck.

"Holy fuck," Charli calls from the bathroom. "What is this thing in my hair?"

I can't answer her, because I've lost all capacity for speech. Is there any chance this certificate is fake? Who'd marry a drunk person to another drunk person?

There's a crumpled receipt on the desk that answers the question pretty handily. It's from the TruLove Vegas Wedding Chapel, and the charge is for over twelve thousand dollars. It's itemized, because—as I learned in childhood—when you fuck up your life, there's usually somebody there to make sure you know the details of your self-destruction.

Wedding music: \$57.50

Ceremony: \$250

Flowers: \$75

I glance around the room and find a bouquet of white roses on the floor near the bedroom door. So that charge tracks.

Deluxe Multi-stone Engagement Ring: \$11,000

“Seriously,” she calls. “What is this thing? Neil? It’s heavy. Like jewelry. Help!”

At the sound of Charli’s distress, I snap out of my stupor and cross to the master bathroom. When I open the door, I find that she’s wrapped her body in a towel before summoning me. But I can still see cleavage.

I yank my eyes upward. “What’s the matter?” My voice is outwardly calm, but inwardly I’m wondering if I can take care of this little marriage thing before Charli finds out. Or I investigate it, at least. So I know for sure if we’re really—

Yeah, I can’t even think it. Too crazy.

I concentrate on the problem at hand. Charli clutches a section of her hair, where there’s an object imbedded in her red waves. It’s in an awkward spot at the back of her head. No wonder she can’t untangle it herself.

I reach up with shaking fingers and clear the loosest strands away from what turns out to be an eleven-thousand-dollar, multi-stone engagement ring. And by “multi-stone” they meant multiple *different* stones. It’s like a rainbow parade in jewelry form.

“Holy fuck,” I whisper. Somehow this makes it real in a way that words on a receipt don’t seem to capture.

“What?” she snaps. “Did you just realize you’re naked from the waist down?”

“That is the least of our problems,” I mutter. “Just don’t look at my dongle.”

“Oh, sure. The same way you didn’t just stare at my breasts? Fine. Is it out yet? OUCH!”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to pull so hard. But the last bit of hair was stuck between two stones.”

“Two stones? Of what?”

“Nothing.” I palm the ring, still in full-on panic mode.

“Neil, show me what was stuck in my hair.”

“No.” I put my hand behind my back with all the finesse of a kindergartener who’s stolen a cookie.

“Cornelius!” The pitch of her voice is high and scared. “Show me. Because it felt like a...” She swallows hard.

“A what?”

“A ring. A damn ring. And I don’t wear rings. Except I think maybe...” She takes a deep breath. “What did we *do*?”

I pull my hand out and slowly open it. We both look down, and then we both take identical sharp breaths.

“Wow,” she says.

“I know,” I grunt.

“That’s *hideous* .”

“I guess you get what you pay for. It was only eleven large.”

“Eleven...dollars?” she asks, her voice climbing in pitch. “Please say that’s what you meant.”

“Nah. Eleven thousand. We’re in the tackiest city ever built.”

“Oh my *God* ,” Charli gasps. “What a waste of—” The sentence ends abruptly. “Shit. The ring isn’t the real problem, is it?”

“No,” I say quietly.

“Did we really...?” She looks up at me in horror.

“Yeah.”

“Oh my God.”

“Yeah.”

“OH MY GOD.” Her face flushes red, and her mouth flops open. “What have we *done*? ”

Now I’m feeling the same panic that she is. I can’t believe I got drunk and got... Urgh. Even *thinking* the “m” word makes me feel a little queasy. Charli clearly agrees. She’s clutching the wall with one hand and her chest in the other. It’s actually possible that the toughest girl I have ever met is about to fall into a dead faint. I brace myself to catch her.

Then, from the other room, my blood-sugar monitoring app starts pinging away to remind me to eat. The shrill sound seems to snap Charli out of her stupor. “Drake, order some room service before you crash.”

“I’ll eat granola bars. We’ve got to get out of here. Take your shower. I’m fine.” I grab her by the shoulders and ease her toward the giant walk-in shower. “Go on.”

She turns to give me one more dazed look before I head out of the bathroom. “You *do* know you’re naked, right?”

“I’m aware. Just enjoy the view. You saw it last night already.”

The door closes behind me.

“And we are legally *married* for fuck’s sake!” I call out. There—I said it. Like ripping off a Band-Aid. I’ll have to say it again to my lawyer on the way home to New York. Might as well practice.

I cross to my bag and pull out a granola bar and a bottle of fruit juice that will lift my blood sugar until I can have regular food. My system is probably haywire from the alcohol. Because I’m not usually a drinker, I don’t have the tolerance for alcohol that other people have. If I had to guess, four or five drinks was all it took to accidentally get married.

A few gulps later, I’ve downed the juice. I’m just ripping the wrapper off the granola bar when my phone rings. I edge closer to it, wondering what else could go wrong.

Had anyone witnessed last night’s fiasco? And if so, why didn’t any of those assholes stop us? Maybe the whole team is laughing at me right now.

God, are there photos?

But the caller is only Doc Herberts. I pick up the phone. “I’m fine! I’m eating. Are my numbers really that ugly?”

“Well, I’ve seen worse. But a couple of the guys said you’d been drinking. And then you missed the jet.”

“I... what? We’re meeting in the lobby at eight! It’s a quarter to, at least.”

He chuckles uncomfortably. “You’re an hour off, Neil. The meet-up was at seven. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I missed the jet?” I whisper.

“Seems so, son. Better stop teasing Anton about that time *he* missed the jet.”

Anton . Oh, shit. “I’ll never live this down. I’ll never live *any* of this down.”

I’d fucked up my personal life. But I’d screwed myself with the team, too?

“Take a breath. I’ll let Hugh know that you’re on your way back to New York as fast as possible. Call the travel office. They’ll find you a flight.”

“Right,” I whisper. “Thanks for calling to check up on me.”

“My pleasure,” he says. “You always take good care of yourself and your diabetes. It’s admirable.”

That isn’t really the word I’d use to describe myself right now, but I thank him again and hang up the phone.

Now I’ve got another problem to solve. Luckily, this one is easy. It’s time for some Drake-family-style damage control. I hit another button on my phone and order up a private jet. Vegas is one of our larger markets. “I need it fueled up and ready to go in an hour,” I tell the customer service agent. “No excuses.”

Man, I am really embodying the role of Rich Asshole right now. That’s something I try never to do.

But hockey is my whole life. I can't screw up the one thing that goes well for me. Even if I have to act like a rich prick, I'll do it in order to make it to practice this afternoon.

"Yessir, Mr. Drake. Whatever you need."

"Thank you." I hang up.

This is a terrible day already, and it isn't even eight o'clock.

EIGHT



Waffles on the Private Jet

Neil

AN HOUR later we cross the tarmac to board a Drake jet. I motion for Charli to climb the airstairs ahead of me and then scoop her suitcase out of her hand as she passes me.

I get a frown for my trouble. Charli frowns a lot, actually. I've noticed she isn't comfortable getting help from anyone.

But carrying a woman's luggage is just the way I was raised. My father didn't spend a lot of time with me, but his lessons stuck, and that man believed in chivalry. So I am going to carry a lady's bag up a set of stairs if I can.

At the doorway to the jet, I'm met by an air hostess. "Welcome aboard, Mr. Drake. I'm Marsha. The pilot has informed me that we'll be cleared to push back momentarily. May I take your bags?"

"I'll stash them, Marsha." I open the baggage closet and do the deed, while Charli stands beside me wringing her hands.

"Is this a plane? Or a suite at the Ritz?"

I glance around the jet's interior. It's been a year or so since I've boarded one of our aircraft. Private jets are bad for the environment. And yet that's how my family makes their billions. "I think we call this design the *Plaza*."

She snorts. "So I was close?"

"Yep." There's a lot of cognac-colored leather and dark wood paneling. This is a small plane, so there are two studded leather seats, each one twice the width of a normal airplane seat. They face a marble-topped table. Everything is bolted to the floor, including the plush Persian-style rug underfoot. Because Safety First.

After takeoff, the table will be set with crystal and china. "The design is a little much, right? But at least it's going to get me back to New York in

time for practice.”

Charli looks unconvinced. “Are you sure leaving Vegas was the right decision?” she asks. “Shouldn’t we have tried to straighten this out at the county clerk’s office?”

“In a perfect world, yes. But if I miss practice, I’ll be fined.”

“Do you even hear yourself?” she demands. “The fine probably costs less than this flight.”

Charli is a smart girl, and unfortunately, she’s right. “But it’s the principle of the thing. Do you want to be late to practice?”

Slowly, she shakes her head.

“I didn’t think so.”

“I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

Marsha is watching this little drama play out, of course, so I have to be discreet. “I have a plan.”

“That’s such a relief,” Charli says with a disbelieving eyeroll.

Honestly, it’s hard to blame her. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing, and she can probably sense my ineptitude, which is leaking from my pores along with stale whiskey.

“Once we reach cruising altitude, I’ll be serving brunch,” Marsha says, ignoring the tension in the room. “You can peruse the menu while we taxi.”

“She needs us to take our seats.” I nudge Charli toward the table. “Do you want to ride forwards or backwards?”

“Which one is safer?” she asks before plunking down in the nearest chair.

“Are you a nervous flier? There’s nothing dangerous about this.” I sit down opposite her.

“Oh my God. Are you trying to jinx us?” She leans over and knocks on the wooden wall panel.

“Easy now. I was just thinking that after all that’s gone wrong today, it’s time we catch a break.”

“Okay, stop it.” She knocks on the wall again. “Maybe that’s how luck works in the Drake family empire. You have a little snafu, and then the world rights itself.”

Marsha makes a strange choking sound which I assume is her trying not to laugh.

“But it doesn’t work that way in the real world.”

I roll my eyes. “Fine, but just so you know, I say this from a place of knowledge. Our safety record is unmatched, and in the event of an emergency, I could actually fly the plane myself.”

Her eyes bug out. “Really?”

“Sure. You can’t grow up in the Drake family empire and not know how to fly a plane. I was a qualified pilot at seventeen.”

“You are such a freak.”

I laugh for the first time all morning.

Charli is not like any of my other friends. My whole life, women have been trying to get closer to me. They want a trip on the jet. They want to join the Mile High Club. They think it’s sexy. And if the planes don’t appeal to them, the money does.

But not Charli. She looks vaguely revolted by this whole experience. She hasn’t touched the menu that Marsha set down in front of us. She only grips the cool edge of the marble table as the plane begins to move, taxiing on the tarmac and then, after a few moments’ delay, accelerating for takeoff.

“Breathe, doll. Everything is going well at the moment.”

“Neil!” she snaps, and I chuckle.

The silly nickname was an intentional ploy to distract her. I’ve been ordered to *never* call her “doll.” That’s how we met, actually. I mistook her for a member of the training staff, and casually called her doll, which is admittedly a patronizing name.

And she ripped me a new one.

Fun times.

“Now.” I push the menu across to her side of the table. “Let’s eat. I’m going to need a good meal to get us through this mess we made.”

She sighs deeply, then picks up the menu.

Thirty minutes later I’m hoovering down a huge plate of eggs and bacon, while a waffle waits its turn on a fluted china plate.

“You’re not eating,” I say to Charli between bites. “How can you cure a hangover if you don’t eat?”

She’s seated across from me, a wedge of barely touched quiche in front of her. “Neil, there are two kinds of people in the world—the kind who eat their feelings, and the kind whose feelings eat them. I think I’m the latter.”

My fork pauses on the way to my mouth, and I make a sad puppy-dog face, the kind that usually gets me out of trouble with women. “Hey, I’m so sorry.”

“You said that already,” she growls.

I have it so bad for Charli that her attitude only makes her more attractive to me. Even her growl is sexy. “I’m going to fix it. I promise. This is all my fault.”

“It’s not *just* your fault.” She puts her head in her hands and takes a deep breath. “This is my fault, too. Last night I had a *lot* to celebrate. And things got out of hand.”

She isn’t wrong. Before we’d started drinking ourselves silly, it *had* been a fortuitous night. She’d just won a medal at the women’s All-Star exhibition—a silver in the fastest skating competition. And my All-Star team had taken home a trophy. I’d stood on that podium thinking I knew a thing or two about how to live my life.

Things began to deteriorate pretty quickly after that. First, I'd fought with my ex-girlfriend. I'd told her we were done for good. It had been inevitable, and I'd do it again, but it had left me feeling guilty.

And when my sister—Iris's bestie—had started in with her angry texts a half hour later, I'd just felt rage.

It's my damn life, right? I can date who I want.

That had been the battle cry that had led me to drink more than one pour—my usual amount. After that first whiskey, I'd just kept on going.

I really don't see why Charli is blaming herself. "Did you pour the whiskey down my throat?"

"No." She snorts. "But I probably egged you on. You were in a 'fuck Iris' mood. And I'm always in a 'fuck Iris' mood. So I didn't step in and tell you to slow down."

"Not your job," I grumble. "I'm pretty tired of people telling me how to live my life. And when you say you were in a 'fuck Iris' mood—" I use air quotes. "—Did you mean, like, literally? Or figuratively?"

I give her a cheesy grin, but the truth is I'm damn curious about what happened last night. Things are still not adding up for me—and not just the parts that I can't remember. Because I *distinctly* remember Charli's mouth on my dick.

But I spent the last year and a half thinking she wasn't into men. At all.

"Not literally," she clarifies. "I have never wanted to fuck Iris. She's too prim. I'll bet even her sex face is prim. Am I right?"

I shove another strip of bacon into my mouth so that I don't have to answer. Iris's sex face is definitely prim. She leaves her pearls on and only likes missionary. There's no way I'm telling Charli that, though. I'm a gentleman.

A confused one.

"Help me out, here," I try. "Didn't you tell me last year that you didn't do guys?"

“Well...” She looks guilty. “Those weren’t precisely my words. I didn’t say that I don’t *like* dicks. I simply said that I would never ride a hockey player’s dick. Do you hear the difference?”

“I guess I do. But—”

“You just *assumed* I meant all men. But I was just laying down some rules so that nobody would hit on me.”

“But then you changed your mind,” I point out. Last night I *know* she was about to saddle up and tango on my mango.

“Not necessarily.” She gives her red hair a careless toss, but I can see the heat climbing up her neck. It’s Charli’s one tell. She blushes easily.

“Oh, so I just *imagined* the part where you tore some of my clothes off? And I’m being literal here. My tux shirt is history.” And don’t get me started on the dick-sucking. The sight of her lips wet against my—

Suddenly my underwear is too tight. I need to think about something else right now. Like the sight of my uncle’s face when he hears that I accidentally got married.

Instant boner killer. He’s going to scalp me.

“I was under the influence,” Charli says with a scowl.

Even her scowl is pretty. I’ve been attracted to her ever since that first day when she yelled at me. And last night was a game-changer. I can’t unsee that. I can’t unwant it, either. I might have *gotten* it, too, except that my dick went to sleep before the grand finale.

I have so many regrets. I can’t believe I blew my shot before I could, um, blow my shot. We’re definitely going to revisit this question at a later date.

First I have a marriage to dissolve. And Charli still hasn’t eaten her breakfast. “Is there something wrong with that quiche? If there is, I want management to know.”

She gives me a withering look and lets out a sigh. “It’s fine. The peas are a strange choice, though.” She reaches over and steals a strawberry off

my waffle.

With my own fork, I grab a bite of her quiche. And, yup, the peas really are a strange choice. “Marsha?” I call out, and the flight attendant comes running. “Could you bring Charli a bowl of strawberries and a waffle?”

“Of course!” She picks up Charli’s plate.

“Also? Could you send a memo to the chef that peas don’t belong in a quiche? Like, ever?”

“Yessir. Right away, sir.”

“*Neil!* ” Charli yelps. “You can’t do that. The man could get *fired* if some message comes down saying the heir to the Drake family throne doesn’t like his cooking. *Jesus* . It’s only a few peas.”

“He won’t get fired. Marsha!”

Her head pops out of the galley again. “Yes, Mr. Drake?”

“Never mind about the peas. I don’t want to get anyone in trouble.”

“Yessir. The waffle will be two minutes, sir.”

“Thank you.”

Marsha’s subservient demeanor just makes Charli scowl harder. “How do they make waffles on a jet, anyway?”

“There’s a waffle iron affixed to the wall right above the toaster oven. The batter is premixed in disposable cups.”

She shakes her head like this is the dumbest thing she’s ever heard. And maybe it is. We’ve always catered to the one percent of the one percent. My grandfather started Drake Enterprises in 1966, after retiring from a long and distinguished Air Force career. My father and uncle ran it after his death.

Four years ago, my father died at the age of eighty-one. Now my uncle runs the company, with the help of *his* son, who’s almost twice my age. My mother, my sister, and I control some stock, two seats on the board, and half the family’s charitable foundation.

That’s how I happen to know how the waffles are made. And that’s why the flight attendant looks as though she’d offer up a limb if I asked her to

spare one.

Honestly, being the heir to Drake Enterprises is mostly a pain in the ass. Every time I try to make a difference at the company, I get shot down. My board seat is only useful to me once or twice a year.

Today just happens to be one of those days.

When Charli's waffle shows up, she finds her appetite and gobbles it down. She doesn't even grimace when I prick my finger at the table to test my blood sugar, probably because she's seen me do it a dozen times before.

This month I'm calibrating a new insulin pump as part of a research project. It's finicky and time consuming. But I don't complain, because nobody wants to hear a rich guy gripe.

Charli isn't a complainer, either. That's part of why I like her so much. She knows the world is cracked and bitching about it is just a waste of breath.

Mostly. Occasionally she needs a good scream into the void. And then she's back to her default setting of *suck it up, buttercup* .

Although today we have a problem that neither of us can ignore. Charli is sneaking glances at me while mowing down that bowl of strawberries.

"What?" I finally ask her. It's my secret, fervent hope that she's sitting over there picturing me naked.

"What are we going to do?" she asks. "I still think we should have gone back to that county clerk and asked about an annulment. That's what they do on TV."

I wince. "Do you really want to go AWOL from practice?"

"Of course not," she grumbles. "But I don't want to be married to you, either."

"You're hard on a guy's ego, Charli."

She grins. "I've been told that before."

"I'll bet. Let's call my lawyer right now. He'll sort this out."

"That sounds expensive." She bites on her lip, and I'd like to bite it too.

“Listen.” I lean forward on the table and nail her with a stare, which is, to my grave disappointment, the only thing I’ve managed to nail her with. “I know you roll your eyes when I throw money at problems. But there’s no way around it, okay? I’m going to throw *all* the money at this problem and make it go away. And you’re going to just nod and smile.”

She scowls. “I hate it when you go all alpha rich guy.”

“Even when it’s going to make your life easier?” There’s no way she can pay a lawyer. She can barely make the rent.

We both know she’s going to have to eat her pride this time.

“I’ll nod, but I won’t smile,” she finally agrees.

“Fine.” I pull out my phone, place it on the surface of the table, and call Cassius Witherspoon, our family lawyer.

He answers on the second ring, because old money talks. My family has been his client since *his* grandfather ran the firm. “Neil,” he says in his gruff voice. “What can I do for you?”

“I got a little problem,” I tell him. “Something I need you to make go away.”

“Who is it?” he asks. “A woman? Is this a paternity situation?”

Across the table from me, Charli rolls her eyes so hard that it might cause permanent damage. Then she collapses back against the leather upholstery, as if the first four seconds of this call has already killed her.

“Cassius, it’s nothing like that. My friend and I pulled a dumb stunt last night in Las Vegas, and we need you to dissolve our...” I swallow hard. “Hasty drunken marriage.”

There’s a beat of silence on the other end of the line. “A Vegas wedding? How did that happen? Did you go to the clerk’s office? If you didn’t get a license, the wedding isn’t legal.”

“We, uh, went to the clerk’s office.” Now I feel like a seven-year-old kid who’s been called to the principal’s office. Only dumber. “Our friends

were going to the clerk's office, so we went with them. And we bought a license as a joke."

"As a joke," he repeats slowly. "Did your friends get married, too?"

"No." I sigh. "They're getting married *next* time we're in Vegas. The license is good for a year."

My teammate Bryce Campeau and Petra, his sweetheart, have decided to have a small Vegas wedding when we play there in March. Last night they'd been preparing for it. Like normal, responsible adults.

Charli and I had been their loud, drunk friends who'd commented on everything and everyone in the room. We'd gotten a marriage license as a funny kind of Vegas souvenir.

But then I'd had another two glasses of whiskey. And woke up with a wife.

"You're *sure* you went through with it?" My lawyer sounds skeptical.

"Uh, yup. Got the witnessed certificate and the bill."

He sighs. "Okay, I have a couple of preliminary questions. Please tell me the name of your bride."

"Charli Higgins."

Another pause. "You married a man?"

Charli snorts. "Charlotte Fern Higgins."

"Aw!" I break into a smile. "You were named after two characters in *Charlotte's Web* !"

She gives me a death glare.

"Where are the two of you right now?" Witherspoon asks.

I look out the window. "Somewhere over the great plains, I think."

"Wait, you're not in Vegas anymore?"

"No way. I have practice this afternoon. I had to get back."

My lawyer groans audibly. "That was a mistake. If you'd gone right back to the clerk's office, you might have talked your way into a quick annulment."

Charli pales right before my eyes. “Oh my God. I knew it.”

Shit .

“Well, we’re on the jet,” I say levelly. “We’ll have to fix this another way. That’s why we pay you the big bucks.”

“One last question,” the lawyer prompts. “Did you sign a prenuptial agreement?”

Charli and I let out twin snorts of laughter. “No,” I say. “Have you *met* whiskey?”

“I had to ask.” I hear the sounds of rapid typing in the background. “And the date of your wedding was...”

“Yesterday.” I say.

“No, today,” Charli corrects. “It was past midnight.”

“We can still fix this, right?” I press. “Even though I’m not in Vegas? Should I call a divorce attorney? People who don’t want to be married don’t have to stay that way. It’s a rule. Ask my father’s first wife.”

“Calm down,” my asshole lawyer says. “Location matters in a courtroom. But let me do some digging and see what I can learn. By any chance could you get back to Vegas sometime in the next seventy-two hours?”

Charli buries her face in her hands, because she already knows the answer.

“I have three games this week, none of them on the West Coast.”

“And you can’t skip just one? This seems important.”

“There is *no way* I can skip one. It’s not high school! And Charli has four practices and two games this week, too.”

“Fine. Let’s talk about annulments versus divorces, anyway. Technically, you need grounds for an annulment but not for a divorce. I think your grounds for an annulment would be—”

“Inebriation,” Charli offers.

“Yeah,” the lawyer agrees. “And we’d throw in Neil’s disability.”

“Hey!” I argue. “It’s not disabled. Usually it works.”

“He means your *diabetes*,” Charli corrects. “Not your penis.”

“But we can also use the penis,” the lawyer says. “I’m writing that down.”

“*Do not write that down*,” I roar. “Please just find out if we can get an annulment in New York.”

“Right. I’ll call you in a couple of hours,” he says. Then he hangs up.

When I look at Charli, she’s laughing for the first time all day.

“What?” I bark.

“Nothing,” she says. Then she giggles.

“I knew he meant diabetes,” I lie.

She braces her head in her hands and laughs until her shoulders shake.

NINE



If a Unicorn Sneezed

Charli

CORNELIUS HARMON DRAKE III feels guilty. I can tell because he insists on dropping me off at my apartment even though it's in a far-flung corner of Brooklyn he's never seen before.

This is not okay with me.

"It's way out of your way. You might be late for practice," I argue. I really don't want him to visit my apartment. There's a reason that none of my friends have ever seen it.

My objections are shouted down, though, so I let him put my hockey bag into the trunk of a gleaming sedan. And when the female chauffeur opens the back door, I climb in and sink into the buttery leather seat.

"Liz, we're making a stop before I head to the rink. Charli, can you tell Liz your address?"

Oh boy. This isn't just a car service. It's Neil's *driver*. I tell her my address.

"What are the cross streets?" she asks.

Even when I provide the answer, she types it into the GPS. She's probably never seen that corner of Brooklyn.

I don't blame her.

"Okay, let's figure out our game plan," Neil says as the car heads east. "We'll need to talk to the lawyer again tonight. Or tomorrow. I could come into the diner after practice."

"It's hard to carry on a private conversation at the diner," I point out. I'm a waitress at the Orion in the DUMBO neighborhood of Brooklyn, which is a pretty good gig. The hours are early, and everything there costs a fortune. Neil and his teammates often come in for breakfast or lunch and leave me fat tips. "Although maybe you could use a plate of fried oysters. Just saying."

It takes a beat before he realizes I've made a dig at him. Oysters are supposed to make men virile. "*Charli!* "

"I'm sorry. But come on, you walked right into that one."

He scrubs a hand over his face as silence falls over the backseat. "This is a crazy thing to say, but I'm glad it was you."

I run that sentence backwards and forwards a few times before deciding that I have no idea what he's talking about. "You're glad *what* was me? The whiskey dick? The legal trouble?"

"The whole mess," he says. "If I'm going to make an ass out of myself, I'd just as soon do it in front of you."

"Why? Because I'm so easy to impress?"

"No, dummy. Because I trust you."

Oh . That shuts me up for a second. I honestly have no idea what to say. Neil and I haven't known each other that long. The first time we met, he offended me, and I let him know it. Since then, he's been much more courteous. Friendly, even.

But I still don't know what to make of Neil Drake III. He grew up with more privilege than most people dream of. He's exactly the kind of person who made my teenage years hell at the fusty private school I attended on scholarship.

Neil and I are acquainted because our circle of friends overlaps. But I trust about three people in the whole world. On a good day. My heart is like a skittish kitten. It runs away at the first sight of danger.

Still, it could always be worse. "You're right, Drake. If I must be needlessly shackled to a man or ask him to remove the ugliest ring ever made from my hair, it might as well be you."

He gives me a sweet smile. Like I've just paid him the *best* compliment. And my inner kitten crawls a little farther under the sofa. Now is not the time to think sentimental thoughts about Neil Drake. I've got enough problems, and that was *before* I accidentally got hitched.

After a long ride, we eventually pull up in front of my dumpy apartment building. There's a check-cashing place on the ground floor. "Thanks for the ride," I say, my hand on the door before the limo even comes to a complete stop.

"Let me walk you up," he says, opening the other door.

"Not necessary." I hurry out, hoping he'll stay put.

No luck.

"But we've got to strategize." He's already lifting my hockey bag out of the trunk before I can get to it.

This is really not the time for chivalry, but I clamp my jaw shut as he follows me to the grimy door. I unlock it and start up the stairs. "What did you mean, strategize?"

"Well..." He steps over a dead bug on the stairway. This place smells of old kitchen grease, with top notes of urine. Neil is almost certainly disgusted. But his blue-blooded manners make him too polite to say so. "Are we going to tell management about this?" he asks. "They hate PR surprises."

"No way," I say quickly. "When I do stupid things, I like to keep it to myself. This is bad enough without telling Bess and Rebecca about it."

"It's not like I *want* to tell them," he argues. "And forget management. My teammates would never let me forget this."

I smile a little wickedly. "Is it terrible that I'm really curious which pranks they'd pull first?" I unlock my door, wondering if I can avoid letting Neil see the inside of my apartment.

Apparently not. He pushes open the door and then carries my hockey bag right into the cramped little space known as my living room.

And just when I thought this day couldn't get any worse, it does. My mother's cousin's creepy son is sitting on my sofa in his underwear,

smoking a bowl. He's also pointing a remote control at a TV.

Except I don't own a TV.

"Robert? What are you *doing* in my apartment?" I bark. "DENNIS!" I yell. Robert and my useless brother often lurk around together.

"Hello to you, too. I'm watching wrestling. Your brother found a poker game."

My stomach drops for a whole bunch of reasons. "In Philly?"

"No. In the neighborhood somewhere. I don't fucking know where."

Oh no.

Oh, *hell* no.

Until this moment, I've held it together. But the minute Neil leaves, I'm going to lose my shit. I can already feel the scream building like a hurricane inside me.

Robert, that idiot, has no idea, either. He takes another puff and then passes his beady eyes over my breasts. "Have a seat, Charli." He pats the couch cushion beside him.

My couch cushion.

I feel like grabbing that TV—and the cardboard box it came out of—and hurling them both out the window and onto the avenue below.

But I don't do it. Not yet. Instead, I turn to Neil and thank him for bringing me home.

He shifts his weight, eyeing Robert. But he doesn't set down my hockey bag. Neil, being ten times smarter than Robert, can probably sense the fury radiating off me. Lord knows he's seen it before, occasionally directed at him.

"You know..." he says. "What if you got your stuff together and came home with me so we could do that thing?"

"What thing?" I'm not in the mood to play games.

"That thing we have to work on?" He gives a faint eye-roll at my refusal to get with the program. "We could have dinner together tonight, right? To

discuss our project?”

He has a point. Why wait to discuss our problem? It’s not like I want to stay here alone with Robert, and Neil is giving me a reason to leave. I make it a point to stay as far away from Robert’s branch of the family as possible.

But this is *my* place, damn it. Am I really going to let him chase me out of it?

On the sofa, Robert lets out a tremendous belch.

Yup. I am. “All right,” I say through clenched teeth. “Let me grab a few things.”

I roll my suitcase into my bedroom where I realize the bed is unmade. It wasn’t me who left it like that. Either my brother or Robert has been sleeping in my *bed*?

Someone is going to die. I just haven’t decided who.

Hastily, I swap the dirty clothes in my bag for clean ones. I make sure I have everything I need for practice tonight. And I turn around and march right out of there again. Neil opens the door for me, and I leave without a backward glance.

Downstairs, Neil’s driver is so well trained that she doesn’t even blink when we return with the same number of passengers and the same amount of luggage as we left with a few minutes ago.

“Where to, sir?” she asks Neil.

“The practice rink, please. And then please drop Charli and all our luggage at my apartment building? Thank you.”

We get back into the car. I’m grinding my teeth as the worst streets in Brooklyn begin to slide past the window.

“All right—who’s that guy?” Neil asks.

I actually have to take a breath before answering, because nothing triggers me quite like Robert—or his evil father. “He’s my second cousin. He’s tight with my brother.”

“Looks like he made himself pretty comfortable in your apartment.”

“Yeah, I noticed that. We’re gonna have a talk later.”

Neil grins. “Can I watch?”

“No, you can’t. I don’t want any witnesses.”

He snickers. “How come I’ve never met your brother?”

“Because he lives in Philadelphia? Or he’s supposed to.”

Last year, during my first season, my brother said he wanted to come into town and watch me play.

I’m not stupid. I knew he’d have some ulterior motive. But I’m not like the other girls on my team. I don’t have a fan base of family members who use my comp seats every week to cheer me on. I spent my childhood getting passed around to various family members. Everybody’s burden, nobody’s joy.

I play hockey for myself. Just for myself. And it’s usually enough, but I’d said yes to my brother. He’d shown up alone that time, thank God. I’d spent money I didn’t have taking him out for Brooklyn pizza and beer.

That weekend, he’d made a copy of my key. “For emergencies,” he’d said.

Pretty shortly after that, he began using his key whenever I was at an away game. It happens all the time now. I stopped telling him my schedule, but apparently, he can Google as well as anyone.

And I guess Robert joined him this time. Maybe other times, too. The thought of him in my place makes me want to howl. My apartment is supposed to be a sanctuary, but now it’s a flophouse.

I’m so mad I could burn the place down.

But then I’d be in jail. And there’s no hockey in jail.

My family is the worst, and getting out of Philly was my life’s goal. But now Philly comes to me all the damn time, and I don’t know how to scrape them off.

“Look, I know you don’t like to accept help,” Neil says quietly. “But I could help you get him out of there if you need me to. Right now, if you

want. Then we could change the locks.”

“I’ll change the locks later this week,” I say, because I don’t want Neil worrying about it. But a decent deadbolt on that door will cost me over two hundred dollars including the labor. I don’t have that kind of cash.

“Or—here’s a suggestion. You could find a different apartment.”

“You know, I wondered how long it would take for the rich boy to throw shade on my place.” I fake a glance at my watch. “Ten minutes. Not bad.”

“But there have to be better options. Most of your teammates live closer to the practice facility.”

“It’s not that simple, Neil. Most landlords want three months upfront. The security deposit, first month’s, and last month’s rent. And when I arrived in New York, I had zilch.”

Less than zilch, actually. I’m still in debt, thanks to my idiot brother.

Neil nods as if he understands. But a billionaire really can’t. “If things are better now, maybe you should try again? Maybe Bess will get you another modeling job.”

“God, I hope so.” I once made some quick cash modeling clothes for a sportswear company. But that was last year, and lately I’m always broke. Everyone thinks that professional athletes are well paid.

That’s really only true if you’re a man.

So my first weeks in New York were hard. Not only did I take the first apartment I could afford, I took the job with the quickest access to cash. For those first couple months, I tended bar at a strip club.

Yup, strip clubs are open at lunchtime. And when you’re topless while making drinks, the men tip pretty well. It paid the bills until I could afford to get the kind of job where you can keep your clothes on.

It had been a stupid risk, and I shouldn’t have done it. I hope nobody finds out. Not even Neil.

Especially Neil.

“Maybe you can find a landlord who likes really ugly engagement rings,” Neil suggests, a smirk in his voice.

“Not likely.” I pull the ring out of my handbag and hold it up to the light. We both stare at it for a long time.

“It’s kind of mind blowing,” he says. “Someone’s *job* was to design that.”

“Right? One day the designer woke up and asked himself—what would it look like if a unicorn sneezed? And this was the answer.”

Neil lets out a belly laugh, and I join in.

What a pity drunk me didn’t have more sense. Eleven *thousand* dollars. That’s just disgusting. Maybe I can get them to take it back.

Neil’s poor credit card. Ouch. “Here.” I offer him the ring. “You should obviously keep this, for whatever that’s worth.”

“No way.” He pushes my hand gently away. “That’s your party favor. Obviously, you picked it out.”

“I did not,” I argue vehemently. “There’s no chance.”

“Well, I sure as hell didn’t.” He laughs. “That thing is so tacky.”

“Hold on,” I bellow. “Did you just call me tacky?”

“No,” he backtracks. “It’s just... I don’t have opinions about jewelry. So I wouldn’t have made the choice.”

I snort. “Here’s a plan—how about we just assume the salesperson suggested it? Because I don’t *think* you meant to imply that this gaudy disaster reflects a personal lack of taste on my part.”

He gives me an amused smile. “Sure, wifey. Let’s go with that.”

“Thank you,” I grumble.

“Was that our first marital fight?” he asks.

“Nope. Our first fight was when I said we needed to fix this in Vegas, and you said *don’t be silly*. Then, if you recall, the lawyer agreed with me thirty seconds into that call.”

“Okay, yup.” Neil winces. “That’s on me. But I’m not taking the fall for this ugly ring. Sell it. Or keep it as a reminder of why drinking is a bad idea. Whatever floats your boat.”

I tuck the ring away and sigh. It should make a fine reminder. This is what happens when I let my hair down—bad, bad things.

Neil checks the time. “I can still make it this session. I’ll give you my keys. You can take a nap before your practice.”

“Thanks,” I whisper. “Hey, look—let’s not tell management yet? We can wait until the lawyer gets back to you, right? Just give us one day before we reveal ourselves to be idiots?”

“Fine.” He tucks an arm around me, which shouldn’t be a comfort but somehow is. “Maybe nobody will have to know that we fell out of the stupid tree and hit every branch on the way down.”

“Every. Last. One,” I agree.

TEN



Posh Industrial

Charli

THE LIMO PULLS UP at the practice facility at one minute past four. Neil is *almost* on time.

“Here’s my key card,” he says, one foot out of the car already. “I just texted Miguel, so he’ll let you go up. I’m apartment 613. Leave the card with him when you leave for practice, okay? Gotta bolt.”

He tosses the card, and I catch it. Then the door closes after him with a well-engineered click.

I lean back against the leather and let out a long breath. The car slides onward toward his apartment building, which is only two blocks away on Water Street.

When we stop again, I hop out of the car before the driver can open the door for me. “I’ll get the bags,” I offer.

“I’ll help,” she says easily. “There’s a lot.”

She isn’t wrong. I grab my own, and she takes Neil’s. Miguel, the concierge of the Million Dollar Dorm—as we refer to the luxury renovated condo building where many of the Bruisers live—emerges to stack all the luggage on a trolley.

“Thank you,” I say uselessly. The people who live in this building are used to this level of service. They hand out fat tips at Christmastime.

Across the street there’s a line of smaller, walk-up buildings where some of my teammates rent apartments. There aren’t any doormen across the street, but the Bombshells are still grateful for the two-block walk to work and the below-market rent that the team owner charges.

I wish I’d taken one of those places. I’d tried to save money, and now I live in a dump, and I can’t evict my brother’s creepy pal.

Fun times.

“Raphael will help get these upstairs,” Miguel says as I follow him into the glamorous lobby and across the marble floors to the elevator. “He’ll be down in a moment.”

“No, I can do it,” I insist. “Can I just leave the trolley outside of Neil’s door?”

“Sure,” he says. “Have a nice afternoon, Charli.”

Wow. He even remembers my name. “Thank you, Miguel.”

It occurs to me that he probably makes more money than I do. My salary on the hockey team is about twelve thousand per year, and my waitress job pays about sixteen dollars an hour after tips.

I should ask if they have any openings here in this building. I’d look fine in a navy jacket with gold buttons. And I already know the names of everyone who lives here.

The elevator arrives, so I file that idea away for later.

On the sixth floor, I carefully steer the luggage cart out of the elevator, so as not to ding up the walls, which are papered in a paisley pattern.

I’ve visited this building before. My teammate Sylvie’s boyfriend Anton has a loft apartment a couple floors below this one. So after I unlock Neil’s door and enter the apartment, I’m expecting more or less the same space as Anton’s.

But that is not what I find.

I roll the trolley through a generous foyer, and into a vast living space with impressionist paintings on the walls.

Yikes. I hope I can spend a couple hours here without breaking anything.

I carefully unload the luggage into the foyer, and then steer the trolley back into the hallway.

And then I go back into Neil’s apartment and sit politely in a chair for two hours.

No, that's a lie. Who could resist snooping around a billionaire's bachelor pad? Taking my time, I walk slowly around Neil's luxury apartment. I'm not going to open any drawers, or anything. But I pace every inch of the shiny wood floors.

First, I tour the living room, which is the size of a soccer field. It's a corner unit, so the windows provide views from two directions—the cutest streets in Brooklyn with the Manhattan Bridge looming in the distance.

New York is prettier from up here. When you're down at street level, hurrying to work, things look a lot less romantic.

The apartment's interior is just as impressive as the view. Everything looks like it belonged to a Roosevelt or a Carnegie. It's beautiful, but not comfortable.

The super-formal-looking living room furniture consists of a big leather sofa with buttons all over it and a couple of stiff-looking armchairs. There's a bronze sculpture of a horse on the coffee table.

I didn't know Neil was interested in horses. Or maybe he isn't, but this is just something rich guys have.

Like I'd know the difference.

The room is so big that I don't notice the grand piano in the corner until after I make a complete circuit. There's also a formal dining table and six chairs.

Does Neil throw dinner parties? I can't quite picture it.

Things get a little homier in the enormous kitchen. It's fancy, but more inviting, with a table for three by the window, and a couple of nice stools at the counter. There's a gleaming metal coffee machine and a six-burner stove in stainless steel. The backsplash is laid with shiny mosaic tiles, and the countertops are concrete.

The style is what I'd call "posh industrial." I dig it. There's even a metal circular staircase in the corner that leads upward. Toward the roof, I suppose?

I don't climb up there to snoop, because getting trapped on the roof of a strange building is the only way this day could get worse.

I wander the rest of the apartment, passing an elegant half bathroom, where a rolled-up fluffy towel waits on the marble counter. I open a door, expecting a bedroom, but find a giant walk-in closet.

True fact? Neil's closet is nearly as large as the bedroom in my shithole apartment.

After exiting the closet, there's only one doorway left, so I head through it. And wow. Neil's bedroom is the nicest room of all. It's enormous, for starters, with a bed the size of a city block. The pretty views of Brooklyn are back, and on the wall opposite the bed hangs a nice but not outrageously large television.

This is also the only room in the place with hints of life. There's a *Men's Health* magazine on the bedside table. I can picture Neil reclining against the padded headboard, thumbing through that magazine, comparing the fitness gurus' sixpacks with his own perfectly sculpted, lickable—

Okay, nope. I am not picturing Neil Drake naked. That is a bad idea. I'm ashamed to say that even before last night, I'd often wondered what Neil Drake looked like naked.

And now that I know, I wish I didn't. Because he was a truly breathtaking sight.

With a shuddery breath, I poke my head into the en suite bathroom. It's ludicrously large, with a fancy walk-in shower and a deep, triangular tub—the kind you see in movies about billionaires.

So the bathtub is on-brand.

Although I suppose Neil could live in a three-bedroom apartment with a home gym and—heck—something bonkers like a bowling alley or a movie theater.

But nope. He lives in the nicest one-bedroom apartment I've ever seen.

On my way out of the bedroom suite, I take one more glance at the bed. The sheets look crisp and smooth. And as I pass by, it occurs to me that—at least for the next couple of hours—I’m actually Neil’s legally wedded wi—

Nope. I can’t even think that word, let alone say it.

I hurry back into the silent living room. I’m supposed to be napping. It’s a great idea, because I need rest for practice later, and I need to shut off the worry loop in my brain.

I slip off my shoes and take a seat on Neil’s weird sofa. I scoot back, leaning against the buttoned leather and it’s... awful. Somehow, I’m reclining on the least comfortable piece of furniture I’ve ever encountered.

Who had decided that putting so many buttons under your ass would be a good idea? The buttons dimple the leather upholstery into a surprisingly firm, pot-holed surface. Not only is it too hard, but it’s also bumpy.

I kick off my shoes and lie down on it anyway. A button digs into my cheek.

I close my eyes, but it’s hard to sleep. The couch is partly to blame, but blurry memories keep teasing my consciousness. Even though last night I’d been very, very drunk, when I close my eyes, it comes back to me in little flashes.

A glimpse of Neil laughing at the county clerk’s office.

The wedding chapel with its fake roses on every surface.

I’m pretty sure the wedding had been Neil’s idea. It was supposed to have been a game. My drunk self had known this. But I hadn’t spoken up, even when we’d been standing in front of the Rent-A-Reverend dressed like Elvis.

It’s painful to think about why.

But the truth is, I’d done it because he’d chosen *me*. Drunk off his ass, of course, but it still mattered that he’d looked at me and had said *she’s the one*. I hadn’t been able to resist a starring role in his drunken caper.

I don't remember all the specifics, and Neil, with his unlucky metabolism, probably remembers even less. But I do remember how it had felt to be picked by the fancy guy all the women wanted. The sleek athlete who grew up in Westchester and Switzerland and Whistler and on Martha's Vineyard. A guy who knew what kind of wine pairs well with fish.

He'd smiled at me. Sloppily, sure. But at *me* . Not Iris. Not anyone else. Just me—the rough kid nobody had ever wanted. So I'd helped him make a huge mistake that would complicate our lives, just because I hadn't been able to turn down the compliment.

Nice one, Higgins. Way to go .

One of the sofa's buttons is poking my jaw. When I roll over, they poke my ass. I dig my bulky phone out of my back pocket. The top-of-the-line Katt phone all the Bruisers and Bombshells carry is as big as a slice of bread.

Since I can't sleep, I shoot off a text to my brother. ***DENNIS! I don't ever want to come home again and find Robert. Take him and that TV and clear out of there by tomorrow morning .***

God, he'd better do it, too. Then I'll have a big decision to make. Do I change the locks and force a confrontation with the only family member I have who bothers with me?

I really don't know.

My Katt Phone beeps, but it's not my brother. The tone is the special sound reserved for management. My stomach rolls with dread, and I check the screen with great reluctance.

My fear grows when I see that the text is from Georgia, the publicist. *Holy crap!* What does she know? I tap the message with a shaking finger.

Hey Charli—can you bring your All Stars medal to practice today or tomorrow? And if you could be a few minutes early, I'd love to get some photos .

Oh. Phew. ***Sure. No problem*** , I reply.

I get up and tiptoe into Neil's bedroom with the goal of stealing a pillow, but the giant king-sized bed beckons. I climb onto it, resting my head on a luxury goose-down pillow covered in a crisp linen case.

It's much more comfortable here. Maybe I'll be able to sleep. But my stupid brain pokes me with the terrifying truth: I'm *married* to the man who owns this bed.

I'm his *wi* —

Nope. Still can't do it.

ELEVEN



Eggplant Jokes

Neil

IT WOULD USUALLY EMBARRASS me to be even two minutes late for a video meeting. But today my timing was perfect. I'd slipped into the back of the tape room just as the session was starting, leaving my friends no chance to razz me for missing the jet.

And no chance to ask awkward questions about last night.

Sure, several heads turned to give me the once-over. My friend Anton's gaze had lingered the longest. *You okay?* he'd mouthed.

I'd nodded quickly. *Nothing to see here* .

Then the session had begun, with me sitting up straight in my chair and paying close attention. I'm the kind of guy who always shows up on time and does what's expected of him. Last night was an anomaly, and I need management to know that.

Let the healing begin.

The meeting is pretty dull, though, and after a while, I take a surreptitious glance at my phone. This must be how criminals feel after the heist has been accomplished—uneasy, like they're waiting for cops to show up.

Anyone could have seen us in that wedding chapel. Las Vegas was crawling with hockey journalists for the All-Star events. That's why I'm nervous. Anton used to frequently find himself on the gossip rags. I'd like to avoid the same fate, thank you.

Luckily, none of my new messages are from the publicity department. There are dozens of texts from my teammates, though, and these are almost as scary. If I was drunk enough to get married last night, who knows what else I did or said?

One mortification at a time, please.

I skim through a series of emails where my teammates razz me over missing the jet. ***Dude, what happened?*** Anton says. ***I thought you were joking when we argued about the flight time .***

Well, that's embarrassing. But it's only Anton. He's done worse. For example, the captain tells every rookie that he has to get a Brooklyn Bridge tattoo on his ass to prove his loyalty.

Anton is the only one who fell for it. He wears that sucker proudly now.

But I guess I can't feel too smug about it anymore. I'm the only one in this room who accidentally tied the knot in Vegas.

Not that I'll tell anyone. I don't want to look like a dumbass.

And Charli would kill me.

When the video session ends, most of us head to the weight room. After a day spent in planes and cars, we need to move around.

So the room is crowded. I stretch, check my blood sugar and wait my turn on the bench press.

Castro refills his water bottle beside me. "Where did you go last night? I lost track of you after the clerk's office."

"Oh, here and there," I mumble. I unwrap a granola bar and shove half of it into my mouth. "You?"

"We played some blackjack. It was awesome. Beacon won a grand. And Heidi Jo won three grand."

"Of course she did." Castro's wife is a total shark.

"How's the hangover?" Castro chuckles. "Musta been brutal if you missed the jet."

"Yeah, brutal."

"Who were you drinking with?" Castro glugs his water and waits for an answer. Why won't he just let it go?

“Charli mostly,” I say with a shrug.

His eyes widen. “Oh yeah, I remember you guys drinking whiskey at dinner. You and Charli. She missed the plane too, right? Did you guys...?” He wiggles his eyebrows.

“No way. No,” I say awkwardly. “It’s not like that with us.” He doesn’t have to know how close we came. Charli would *hate* to hear people gossiping about her, almost as much as she hated waking up next to me this morning.

Although, I didn’t hate that part at all. I don’t need the whiskey to want her, either. I’d do her drunk or sober, any time of day. I’ve always had the hots for Charli.

I thought there was no conceivable way she’d be attracted to me, though, so of course I never said anything. And now I have sketchy memories of tumbling into bed with her. Making out. Unzipping her dress...

“You okay, Drake?” Castro asks, poking me. “You seem a little dazed.”

“I’m fine,” I say quickly. “Long day, right?”

“Yeah,” he says, giving me a sideways glance. “I love Vegas, though. Totally worth it. Did you hit the casino at all?”

“Uh, nope.” I shake my head. “Not a fan of gambling.”

“You’re up, Castro!” the new guy calls, saving me from this conversation. The big defenseman—a recent trade from Chicago—trades places with Castro. “How’d you get home, Drake?” he asks, squeezing my shoulder. “Thought you’d miss the video session at least. Felt like a dick when I realized you weren’t on the plane.”

“No worries, Newguy,” I say quickly. His real name is Newgate. But of course, we don’t call him that. Not with the perfect nickname just dangling there in front of us. “It was easy enough for me to get a flight.”

“He’s not kidding,” chirps Silas from the leg press. “Drake basically owns a whole fleet of aircraft.”

A few guys chuckle, and I clench my jaw. Like I said—calling on Daddy’s private jets is not a good look on me.

But it’s my turn on the bench, so I shake it off.

The workout is just what I needed. An hour later, I’m sweating out last night’s bad decisions on the treadmill after a quick upper body workout. I’m feeling much better about my life and ordering groceries via voice commands on my phone.

But then Georgia appears in my peripheral vision, and the team publicist is wearing a cautious frown.

Uh-oh.

I remove my ear buds without breaking my stride. “Hey, Georgia. What’s up?”

“Do you have a minute?”

“For you? Sure.”

She hits the STOP button on the machine, and my stomach sinks further. “Step into my office, please. We have a situation.” Then she leaves the cardio room.

Oh shit. This is bad.

Two minutes later I enter Georgia’s office to find Charli standing there, arms crossed, her green eyes full of hot fury.

“I’ll get right to the point,” Georgia says from her desk chair. “A journalist saw you two go into a wedding chapel last night. He left me a message asking if there was any exciting news in the organization.”

“Well...” I chuckle nervously. “Do you see anyone excited here?”

“I’m sure not,” Charli growls. “I already told her the truth, Neil. This is bad.”

“Okay,” I say, even though nothing is okay. “The two of us are speaking with a lawyer tonight. We’re hoping to resolve this quickly.”

“Right,” Georgia says, fighting a smile. “Still, we have to decide our plan of attack. What am I telling this reporter?”

“Nothing,” Charli spits. “It’s none of his damn business.”

“Saying nothing never works,” I point out. “If it’s a gossip site, they’ll publish whatever they want. What if our statement just said—*Charli and Neil Drake are not a couple* .”

Charli’s eyes cut to mine. For a split second, hers look guilty. But they quickly return to angry.

“Guys, I’m not sure you’ll be able to contain this story,” Georgia says. “Marriages are public information. I don’t know how many days it takes the Clark County clerk’s office to post them on their website, but sooner or later the marriage will be searchable.”

“Oh, *no* ,” Charli gasps.

“Oh, yes,” Georgia says. “I just checked, and it’s not up there yet. But unless you guys failed to make it legal somehow, it will be.”

Charli groans. “Can we just, like, give it a day? We really don’t know what this lawyer is going to tell us.”

“Sure,” Georgia says soothingly. “Call me tomorrow morning. Can I ask if your teammates know?”

“No,” Charli says immediately. “And we plan to keep it that way.”

Our publicist sighs. “Fine. Steal all my fun. What good is the best gossip in the world if you can’t share it?”

“Georgia,” I warn.

“Okay, okay,” she says with a smile. “I’m a vault when I need to be. Call me tomorrow when you sort this all out. I can’t keep the journalist off our heels forever.”

“I’m late for practice,” Charli says. She looks panicked.

“Go,” Georgia and I say at the same time.

“It will be fine,” I add. “We’ll keep this quiet.”
I hope we actually can.

At home, I cook a really nice meal to soften Charli up. By the time she arrives at my apartment after practice, I’ve got marinated eggplant *and* a cauliflower gratin in the oven. I’ve got steaks ready to grill, and one piece of cheesecake chilling in the fridge.

“You didn’t have to cook,” Charli says, even as she eyes the vegetables through the oven’s glass door. “We could have just gotten takeout.”

“I was in the mood for a steak,” I explain. “And it’s just no good as takeout food.”

“Why not?” She pulls out a barstool and sinks down onto it.

When I glance over at her, I lose my train of thought for a second. Because she’s so fucking pretty. Even in an enemy T-shirt—the Flyers? *Please* . Even with her hair still damp from the shower. She’s got luminous skin, a spray of freckles across her nose, and giant blue-green eyes.

I *kissed* her last night. I only remember the night in blurry snippets, but I’ll never forget that I’d had my hands on her smooth skin. On her body.

I’d liked it. A lot.

She’s blinking up at me, waiting for an answer, and it takes me another beat to dredge our conversation from the murky depths of my lust. “A steak has to be eaten right off the heat, or it loses its crust.” I open the first package of meat and put the steak onto a plate. Then I grab my salt grinder and go to town. I do the same with the pepper grinder.

“If you say so,” she says. “That looks like a lot of pepper.”

“Shut up. I know what I’m doing.”

She gives me a tiny smile. “I had no idea you could cook. If I had limitless resources, I’m not sure if I’d bother.”

“I like it,” I insist. Although, I have a lot of guilt over my *limitless resources*, as she calls them. I learned to cook because nobody else in my family ever did. “And nutrition is a big deal for me.” Diabetes means watching what I eat. “It’s easier to know what’s in your food if you make it yourself.”

“True. But where are you going to cook that?”

“On the grill, of course. Like real men do.”

Charli snorts. “Where’s the grill? On your super fancy oven?”

“No—on the roof. I have a Weber up there.” I point at the spiral staircase in the corner.

“Get out of town!” she squeaks. “You’re like a suburban dad.”

“I know.” I shrug. “It suits me.”

“What else is on the roof?” she asks.

“Nothing. I didn’t bother with furniture. Wasn’t sure if I’d get to stay in Brooklyn, you know?” Not every rookie makes it. “Besides, the grill is actually against the building’s policy. Don’t turn me in.”

“Me?” Her smile is amused. “Are you kidding? You’re the rule-follower in this marriage.”

I bark out a laugh. She’s right. I *am* a rule-follower. But, man, the word *marriage* sounds so wrong. All day I’ve been having these moments of cognitive dissonance.

It’s freaky to hear her say it out loud.

Charli must think so, too, because she changes the subject. “So how do you decide what kind of steak to make?”

“Well, I got you a filet mignon.” I nudge the second package toward her. “And me a sirloin.”

She glances at the label. “Thank you for buying me a steak I can’t pronounce.”

“Really? You can’t say *filet*?” I say lightly. “Something wrong with your tongue?”

Our eyes meet for a split second right after I say the word *tongue* . And then we both look away. I open the package and toss the filet on the plate for the salt and pepper treatment.

I need to stop picturing Charli naked.

I need to feed her dinner.

And I need to figure out how to unwind the mess we're in.

In that order.

A half an hour later, I've got Charli moaning. "Oh God, oh God." She lets out a dreamy sigh. "I didn't know it could be this good."

If only she'd take her clothes off and say that again.

For the moment, we're sitting at the table, enjoying a nice steak.

"It's like *butter* ," she says, wiping her mouth. "This is the best thing I've ever eaten."

"That's what all the girls say when they taste my meat."

She reaches around the table and slaps my arm. "Don't ruin this sensuous experience for me."

"Have some more of the cauliflower," I offer, scooting the dish towards her. I'd heard some moaning over that, too. "You know you want to."

"I have to slow down," she says, plopping another scoop of it onto her plate anyway.

"You really don't. Go hard, baby. Go all night long." She kicks me under the table, and I chuckle as I cut another bite of my own steak.

"Linen napkins, though? You complain about your rep as the fancy guy on the team, but you don't fight the cliché very hard."

"Cloth napkins aren't fancy. They're better for the environment." I lift the wine bottle and top up her glass. I can't enjoy a good steak without a

nice, full-bodied red. “Do me a favor, though, and don’t mention the truffle butter at the rink.”

“Deal,” she says, sipping her wine. “I mean—I wouldn’t want to piss off my truffle-butter dealer.” She takes another bite.

It’s very gratifying to cook for Charli. She looks super happy right now.

“It still blows my mind a little,” she says. “Cornelius Drake III can cook. You even made *eggplant* taste good.”

I put down my fork. “Charli, if you want me to stop making dirty jokes, you have to stop serving them up to me like that.”

She laughs and covers her mouth. “Ten bucks says you bought the eggplant just to make that joke.”

“No, ma’am. Eggplant is super healthy. You should have more of it in your diet.” I give her a sleazy wink.

She rolls her eyes and goes back to her meal. “So, what’s our plan? Is the lawyer calling at a set time?”

“He’s sending over some papers, and we’re supposed to call him after we receive them.”

“Even if business hours are over? It’s eight o’clock.”

“Yeah. I guess his clients get into trouble at all hours of the day. He’s used to it.”

“And I’ll bet he charges accordingly.”

I smile at her over my dinner plate. “Trust me, he does. But don’t worry about that, Charli. You promised you’d let me handle this.”

“Because I have no choice.” She takes a tiny bite of steak, like maybe she’s trying to make it last longer. “But my experience with men who say, ‘Trust me, Charli,’ has not been great.”

“I’m here to break your streak,” I insist. “I’m going to make this right.”

“Okay,” she says warily.

It’s time to bring out the big guns. “There’s chocolate cheesecake for dessert.”

She puts her chin in her hand and lifts those green eyes to mine. “Thank you for dinner, Neil.”

“You’re welcome, doll.” I give her a wink.

“Still can’t call me that,” she grumbles.

“Not even while we’re married?”

She scrapes the last of the cheesy cauliflower off her plate and eats it.

“Not even then.”

But she’s smiling when she says it.

TWELVE



Skittish Kitten

Charli

AFTER DINNER, I insist on tidying up Neil's kitchen.

I cannot believe he cooked that lovely meal for me. Of all the bonkers things that have gone down in the last twenty-four hours, a steak dinner shouldn't shock me the most. And yet it does.

When his white casserole dish is clean again, I dry it with a crisp dish towel and put it away in a pristine cabinet. The tiles glisten under warm lighting, and Neil has some music playing on an invisible stereo system.

This place is like a foreign country, where every drawer is tidy and even the bottle of dish soap is pretty. My belly is full of exquisite food, and I feel... almost optimistic.

Which is just crazy. Today was a disaster by any measure. Maybe I'm not as sharp as I thought, though, because a nice meal, a glass of wine, and a pretty kitchen have smoothed all my rough edges.

Apparently, my inner skittish kitten is easily bought off with treats.

Just as I'm closing the dishwasher door, a phone affixed to the wall chimes. Neil answers it, and the concierge tells him that the lawyer's documents are on the way upstairs.

"Thank you," he says as I streak past him to reach the foyer. I open the door for a sweaty messenger in a bicycle helmet who's trotting down the hallway.

He passes me his phone and asks me to sign. I scribble my initials and greedily accept the envelope he's brought us.

"Hey, I'll take that," Neil says from right behind me.

"Why? Are you going to mansplain the documents to me?"

"No, but—" He tries to take the envelope from me, but I duck under his arm and edge away.

That puts Neil in a pickle. The messenger is gazing hopefully at him. Neil lets me go and reaches for his wallet to tip the guy.

I'm not afraid to play dirty, so I slip farther way, heading into Neil's generous living room.

"Hand it over," he says, joining me a moment later. "I'd like to read it first. My name is on the envelope, isn't it?"

"So? This mess belongs to both of us equally." I'm eager for a solution, so I rip open the envelope and skim the cover letter. *Dear Cornelius, enclosed please find a summary of divorce procedure, and...* "Whoa!" I cry. "Your family wants us to sign a post-nuptial agreement? Is that like a prenup for people who were too stupid to sign it before they got hitched?"

"Basically," he says with a sigh. "Charli, let me read it first."

"Hell, no," I say. "We'll read together. The first page is an introduction to New York divorce law..." I skim the letter. *There are several paths to divorce in New York, including a no-fault option. Depending on the path, a divorce could be accomplished in as few as twelve weeks, or it could take nine months. After you agree to the post-nuptial agreement, we will discuss your options ...*

"Twelve weeks," I breathe. "Ouch."

"That's not *that* long," Neil says from over my shoulder.

I'm still skimming. "It also says that the divorce will be on the public record."

"So will the marriage," Neil points out. "We know this already."

This is upsetting, though, and I feel the urge to remind him again that we should have stayed in Vegas to try for an annulment. We might have been able to take care of this faster and more privately.

On the other hand, this whole mess would have been avoided if I weren't a weak and stupid person. So I keep my silence and turn the page, where it says POST-NUPTIAL AGREEMENT in big letters.

That's when Neil makes a sneak attack, reaching for the papers. I handily leap aside, just out of his reach. "If you want to take something from a professional athlete, you got to try a little harder than that."

"Charli," he says cautiously. "The appearance of that post-nup means my uncle is involved now. He probably put some ridiculous shit in there. I'd like to read it first."

"Neil, I said I'd let you handle the divorce, but I didn't say you could keep me out of the loop."

He sighs.

"Besides, I already know what it's going to say. When I divorce you, I don't get a penny. That's exactly as it should be." I skim the first page, but the text is dense, and there's a lot of legalese. I navigate over to the world's least comfortable sofa and sit down to read.

WHEREAS Cornelius Harmon Drake III is legally wedded to Charlotte Fern Higgins. This document sets forth the terms of their divorce. Upon divorce, the settlement of their affairs will proceed as follows. Charlotte Fern Higgins will receive a cash payment of \$250,000...

I let out a choked-off shriek. "What the actual fuck! You never told me your family was *stupid*. Don't they know I'm divorcing your ass for *free*?"

"Charli, they *don't* know that. I'm warning you that document is going to be a tough read. And whatever they're offering you—it won't be worth it."

I stare at that number for a long beat. All those zeroes. I'd never take that money from Neil. How would I even look him in the eye afterward? But now that number is sitting here on the sofa between us, like a hand grenade.

God. I feel a flare of anger at Neil, even though I know this wasn't his idea. He's still reading, easing the sheaf of papers out of my hands and flipping to the next page.

He makes a noise of pure disgust and folds the pages in half, like he's shielding us both from what's written there.

"Hey! I was reading that."

Ignoring me, he makes a move to get up. I sense the window of opportunity closing, so I dive for the pages with the same one hundred percent commitment that I bring to each lunge for the puck.

And guess who's the number-two scorer on her team? It was Neil's mistake to try to be casual about his exit. Because I get my hands on those papers and clamp down with a vise-like grip. Then, with a forceful jerk, they're mine.

"Charli," he cautions, the tone of his voice uncharacteristically beaten.

"What?" I turn my body slightly away from him to protect my prize. He too is a professional athlete with top-notch reflexes.

He tries a different tactic. "Just don't read that."

"Why?"

"You're not signing it."

"Well, the financial part is garbage. But can't we just cross out that number? We can write in ten dollars as a joke. I'll let your family buy me a premium beer."

"Just don't," he whispers.

I glance at him over my shoulder, and he honestly looks distraught. A nicer girl would hand back the documents. But I'm not that girl. I'm the desperately curious one with poor impulse control. I flip open to a random page.

Furthermore, Charlotte Fern Higgins will not reside within three miles of Cornelius Harmon Drake III. She will not approach him nearer than 200 yards. She will not call, text, email or otherwise contact him in any method either extant or invented in the future .

"Holy. Crap." I read that paragraph three more times just to make sure I'm not dreaming. But it's right there in black and white. The Drakes want

me so far away from their precious son that I'm not allowed to contact him at all. "*Invented in the future*?" I sputter as my famous temper ignites. "Who *knows* what future ways there might be for me to get at your fortune! Robots? Attack drones?"

"Charli, don't *read* it," he begs.

But now I have to. I skim the whole damn thing, and it's horrifying. "There's a paragraph whereby I agree never to give a quote to a journalist about *any* member of the Drake family, living or dead. There's one where I agree never to supply my likeness to any news organization for any purpose. So I guess if I win MVP this year, we can't take a *photo*?"

Wow. That's just *mean*.

On one level, I know this isn't really about me. But it's still cruel. These people want to write a fat check and then erase me from their son's orbit. "This doesn't even make sense. I could never comply with—" I wave the papers around. "—this atrocity. Do they even care that we work in the same building?"

"They don't," he says in a low voice. He parks his ass on the sofa, then plants his elbows on his knees and buries his forehead in his palms. "You know this isn't personal, right?"

I make an angry noise. I do know what he's saying, but this isn't my first brush with crazy rich people. "They're *terrified* of me," I say, as the realization dawns.

I'm not sure how I feel about that. I spent my teenage years trying to become so fearsome that I could incinerate everyone who'd bullied me with a single glance. I learned how to fight. I learned how to support myself, even in some pretty grim ways.

I learned how never to take any bullshit from anyone. And *definitely* never to cry. I thought by now I knew a lot about how the world worked, and maybe I do.

But I've always been an outcast. The kid from the wrong side of the tracks who won a sports scholarship to the same prep school Neil's sister and ex-girlfriend attended. The girl nobody ever brought home to meet the parents. I'd been cast in that role since I was fifteen, and after a while, it wears on a person.

"This is not about you," Neil says quietly. "It's actually about my mother."

"Wait, what?" I'm totally lost. "Your mother?"

"Yup. It's an old family rift. Uncle Harmon always thought my mother was a gold digger, and my father was an idiot for marrying her."

I try to make sense of that. "Because she wasn't rich, too?"

"Possibly. She was also twenty-five years younger than my father, and his second wife. My uncle doesn't need reasons to dislike people, though. He doesn't trust anyone. He never liked my mom, and ever since my father died, it's worse." He rubs his handsome chin. "He controls my mother's inheritance. Hers and Paisley's."

"Wait—but not yours?"

Neil's smile is thin. "The estate was set up in a complicated way. I got control of my share when I turned twenty-five. Paisley will, too. But my mother's money is under Harmon's control for life. He gives her an allowance, and she has to petition him for any unusual expenditures. She wants to sell her apartment and buy another one, and he's making her write a proposal. It's humiliating."

"Yikes." On one hand, I'm starting to get the picture—Neil's family is all twisted up about money, and it doesn't have a thing to do with me.

On the other hand... don't these people know they don't have any *real* problems? Jesus.

"I'm sorry you are tangled up in it, too," Neil says quietly. "You can't sign this document. I can find another attorney to handle this." He flings the pages at the coffee table, where they land at the feet of the bronze horse.

One page goes skimming off the table, and I lean over to pluck it off the floor. I hadn't noticed this page before. It's separate from the post-nup. "Hey, what's this?" The letterhead is different, too. *The Drake Family Foundation* .

Neil takes the page from my hand and reads it, a deep furrow forming in his forehead. "Huh. I'd forgotten about this provision."

"What?" I let out a huge yawn. This has been the longest day. Literally, since I woke up in another time zone.

"When a Drake gets married, his spouse automatically claims a seat on the board—not of the company itself, but of the family foundation..." Neil trails off, but he's still staring at the page. "So they're asking you to give up your seat voluntarily."

"I don't need any new hobbies, so that's an easy decision." I reach up and pat his cheek. The stubble scratches my palm in a satisfying way.

Okay, stop touching Neil . Bad things happen when you touch Neil.

He hasn't noticed. He's still staring at the paper. "You'd change the vote," he says slowly. "We'd control the foundation."

"So what?" I lean back, trying to get more comfortable on this awful sofa. My limbs are weary. I need this to be over, so I can go home to bed.

Then I remember Robert might be there.

Shit .

"The family foundation is partly a charity and partly a political vessel. My uncle supports certain causes to get the breaks he needs on Capitol Hill."

I yawn again so widely that my jaw cracks. That's how intrigued I am by Drake family politics.

Neil picks up the post-nup and tears it in half, loudly. Then he produces his phone and hits a button. I hear a dial tone.

"Evening, Neil," the lawyer's voice says through the speaker a moment later.

“Witherspoon,” Neil barks. “We read this document. And I honestly can’t understand why you bothered. Is this some kind of sick opening gambit?”

“No,” he grunts. “This was your uncle’s language. He’s very adamant about most of these clauses.”

Neil stares at the phone as if he could incinerate it with his eyes. “We’re not signing.”

“Think carefully before you make that call. Your uncle will use this against you.”

Neil’s head jerks back, like he’s been slapped. “Really? You’re his heavy, now? Did I piss off the Godfather? Am I going to wake up with a bloody horse’s head in my bed?”

“Don’t be dramatic,” the lawyer rumbles. “I’m just reminding you that he’d do anything for his company. And your marriage threatens the family’s hold on voting rights. So you can expect that he’ll take action to protect his shares and his interests in the foundation.”

“What kind of action?” I whisper. Because that sounds bad.

“He’ll go after Neil’s board seat,” the lawyer says. “I’m just stating facts.”

“Here’s a fact,” Neil spits. “You’re fired.”

The lawyer sighs. “You can’t actually fire me. You know that, right?”

“I do know that,” Neil clips. “But if you were my personal attorney, you’d be fired for insulting Charli like this.”

“We offered her a quarter million dollars!” the lawyer booms.

“An insult that comes with two-hundred-fifty large is still an insult. Now go bill my uncle for your time and tell him to get fucked.” Neil taps the screen, and the call is disconnected.

I let out a long breath. “Okay. Wow. You just fired the guy who was going to fix this!” My voice gets a little high and crazy. “We’re still married, Neil! Maybe I should have just signed.”

“No!” he thunders, rising to his feet. He steps around the coffee table and begins to pace the vast expanse of his living room. “No way. We’re not signing that thing. I wouldn’t lower myself to that.”

“But what’s the alternative?” I squeak. “You can’t lose your father’s company over this. It’s not worth it.”

“Isn’t it? My uncle is a bully. He’s been controlling my mother and sister for years.”

“But how does this end?” I fret. “The lawyer made it sound like you could lose everything just because we got drunk in Vegas.”

He stops pacing and turns to me. “No way, Charli. Even if I lose my seat on the board, I’ll still keep most of my shares.”

“Oh.” I know nothing about Neil’s strange life. “But that’s still bad, right?”

He shrugs. “It depends on your point of view. My uncle hates me, and the feeling is mutual. I’ve been trying to get him to step down as my mother’s trustee. I’ve been trying to make his company more ecologically responsible. I’ve gotten nowhere. But now that could change.”

“Because of *me* ? Not likely.”

He stops pacing. He glances out the window, toward the Manhattan Bridge in the distance. His handsome face says he’s thinking. Hard.

I find myself holding my breath, and I’m not even sure why.

“I have a plan,” he says quietly. He turns around and pins me with his hazel-eyed stare. “I know how to win. I’ll beat him at his own game.”

“How? Lay it on me.”

“We have to stay married.”

THIRTEEN

Yes, He Definitely Got My Drunk Text

Mark

THE FIRST TIME I met Asher St. James, he was twenty-seven minutes late. The second time, he spilled his drink on me. I'd like to think the third time will be a charm, but I highly doubt it.

Only this time, it'll be all my fault.

I've behaved badly. And now I must pay the price.

Asher isn't even my biggest problem. As I make my way up Lexington Avenue on a warm May evening, I prepare to give my mea culpa. The one I have to deliver any second now to, count 'em, three people.

My baby sister, her groom, and his *superhot wingman* .

Groan.

Did I actually call Asher *that* ?

Maybe it was just a bad dream.

Grabbing my phone from my back pocket, I click on the group text once more, wishing for the five hundred and seventy-ninth time that last night's string of single-malt-fueled messages would go the way of a fax machine and just disappear.

But they're all still here. For digital posterity.

As I cross Fifty-Seventh Street, I pass a garbage can and seriously consider chucking my phone in it. Too bad throwing away the instrument of my own mortification won't do the trick. Nothing except a time machine will erase the drunk texts I fired off last night somewhere between midnight and regret o'clock.

Also known as the hour the scotch took over all my decision-making.

Thanks a fucking lot, liquor. You're a pal .

Have I mentioned I'm still hungover? I have the remnants of last night's Very Bad Decisions and a dull headache that aspirin won't cure.

I deserve it.

My head pounds, but the clock is ticking on my sister's engagement dinner so I keep trudging uptown. Three more blocks till I have to eat crow.

The crosswalk sign on Fifty-Ninth Street tells me not to go.

No shit, sign .

Stopping at the curb, I picture the three of them waiting for me at the nearby sushi joint. And I rehearse my apologies, one at a time.

First, Hannah. All big blue eyes, freckled nose, and small but growing belly bump.

Hey, my second-favorite person in the world. I wish I could say someone hacked my phone last night, but that was me with the all caps text: 'I SWEAR YOUR HASTY MARRIAGE WILL TOP A BUZZFEED LIST OF BAD IDEAS THAT ALSO INCLUDES CRYSTAL PEPSI AND MULLET. AND I SHOULD KNOW. I'VE TRIED ALL THREE. '

I'm so sorry. Your nuptials are nothing like mine, or that bad haircut I had in high school, and getting married to Flip is a great idea .

At least, I hope it is.

It damn well better be.

As for the guy my little sis is marrying, I'll have to apologize to him next. They're madly in love. And even though I'm still privately horrified that he got her pregnant three months after they met, I'll man up and apologize.

Hey, Flip, I deeply regret saying that your marriage will fail harder than Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers. And also for saying that grown men don't call themselves "Flip."

My analogy game was on point last night, scotch be damned. But my behavior wasn't.

Which means I'll inevitably turn to Asher, the groom's best bud, the guy who was twenty-seven minutes late the first time I met him. He'd delayed the start of game night six months ago—the one my sister had arranged so we could all meet, back when she and Flip had just become an item.

Then Asher had sauntered in. Yes, he *saunters*, with his too-toned-to-be-real frame, and too-floppy-to-be-anything-but-a-shampoo-model hair, with his *so sorry I was late, but I found a puppy shivering outside the building so I had to take him to the local rescue* apology.

Of fucking course.

He couldn't be that good-looking and just be late. He had to be late with style *and* substance.

The second time our paths crossed, they literally crossed. He lifted his glass of champagne right when I entered the dining room for my sister's dinner party, and my chest ran into his arm, dousing me in bubbly.

With a lopsided grin, and the kind of cocky confidence that only a former pro athlete can pull off, he proceeded to unbutton his shirt, take it off, and offer it to me in front of everyone.

I declined, while trying not to stare at his eight-pack. Obviously, I wore my champagne-soaked button-down all through dinner.

I'm not taking another man's shirt.

And, so, Asher, I didn't mean it when I called you Flip's superhot wingman, or referred to your body as annoyingly perfect .

His abs are truly perfect. Nothing annoying whatsoever about that washboard.

But still, as I reach the door of the restaurant, I remind myself to apologize thoroughly and sincerely. To proceed like I didn't mean all the things the liquor unleashed from my thumbs last night.

Like I'm not completely panicking over my little sister's sudden engagement. And her just-announced pregnancy to the guy she started dating in December.

Like I'm not at all terrified her shotgun marriage will go belly up, beached-whale style, just like mine did.

And like I'm not attracted to the wingman who irritates the hell out of me, the guy I also maybe, kinda, sorta would like to see naked.

Nope.

That shit will stay locked up tight. Where it belongs.

I straighten up, open the door, and walk inside.

“May I help you?” the hostess asks with a gracious smile.

It’s tempting to ask her to put me out of my misery. But I give Flip’s name instead. Well, his real name.

“I’m here for the Phillipe Dubois party,” I say.

“Fantastic. They just arrived,” she says. “You’re all so punctual.”

Great. I’m always on the dot, and this time they beat me to it by showing up earlier. Could this night suck more?

I follow her to the back of the restaurant where the superhot wingman is hosting a small but chic engagement dinner. He’ll have invited all their old prep school friends, with their boat shoes and suntans, and names like Carlisle Bancroft.

And, yup, the first guy I spot inside the room has whales on his tie. Called it.

The second guy is Flip. The welcoming smile slides right off his face when he sees me. My gaze swings from him to Hannah, who’s standing arm in arm with her groom-to-be. My sister’s expression doesn’t chill, though. If anything, she’s eyeing me with concern.

And then there’s Asher St. James. He’s leaning casually against a chair, his hair flopping theatrically across his forehead, a cocktail glass in his hand.

For a quick second, I wonder if it’s possible that he didn’t even see the texts. The thread was full of engagement party planning stuff. He’s probably too busy chatting up famous athletes and models to bother with my drunken rants.

A man can hope.

But the exact moment he registers my arrival, that hope dies. Asher doesn’t frown at me, though. It’s worse than that. So much worse.

A corner of his handsome mouth tilts up. And he smirks.

That's when a chill enters my body. Because it's go-time. No more rehearsals, just three awkward apologies.

Slowly, I cross the room toward Hannah, Flip, and Asher. One of them is frowning. One looks worried. One looks smug.

The answer is, yes, this night can suck more.

FOURTEEN

The Sliding Scale of Hotness

Asher

AND HERE I thought engagement parties were dull.

This one might have been, in spite of the fact that I'm throwing it. My opinion of marriage rituals is ambivalent at best. But here comes the bride's brother slinking through the door, looking like a kid who's just been caught putting a snake in the teacher's desk. A venomous one.

So this party just got a whole lot more interesting.

Ever since meeting Mark several months ago, I haven't known what to think about the buttoned-up banker with the midnight blue eyes. He's always struck me as mild-mannered and carefully inoffensive. Like a striped tie, or a white dress shirt. I'm sure he owns both. In multiples. If he has a car, I bet it's silver.

He works at a Wall Street bank, for fuck's sake, doing something with math or spreadsheets. "He's in derivatives," Flip once said, and I'd shuddered because the word made me think of failing out of calculus class in college.

Sometimes, though, if you get a few drinks in a guy, the truth comes out. That's what happened last night, I suspect. A little after midnight, when Flip and I were out on the balcony of his apartment, smoking a couple of Cubans I scored off a client, both our phones started pinging with drunk texts from the mild-mannered banker.

I should probably feel guilty for reading them. It was immediately obvious to both of us that Mark had only meant to text his sister. The four-way group text had begun only yesterday, as a quick way for me to plan this spontaneous engagement party, and Hannah was the last one to weigh in with an exclamation-laden (*I can't wait for the party!!!*) reply.

But did Flip and I stop reading? Not on your life. That text thread was a box of delights.

In the first place, I was fascinated to learn that Mark opposes his sister's wedding. Most men would be over the moon to welcome Phillippe "Flip" Dubois III to the family. My friend is both loaded and head-over-heels for Hannah. He's a good man, and she'll never want for anything.

He owns a full-floor condo on Park Avenue, a Mercedes E-Class, and has a membership at Maidstone. Material wealth aside, I'm here to tell anyone who asks that he cried actual tears of joy when she told him she was pregnant.

But all that's not good enough for our boy Mark, I guess. He wrote—in shouty caps, no less—that the marriage was **DOOMED LIKE THE TITANIC. I'M AFRAID FOR YOU ON THAT FLOATING DOOR .**

Now that's just dark. Besides, it's not even a good metaphor. Everyone knows there was plenty of room for Leo on that thing. The MythBusters even proved it.

The whole ugly blowup was, however, entertaining. The next five minutes will not disappoint, either, since our buttoned-up Wall Streeter now wears the abashed look of a man who's about to do the right thing and apologize to his sister and her fiancé.

I should probably walk away and give them some privacy. But I think I won't.

"Hannah Banana," Mark says in a rough voice as he approaches. "God, I'm sorry. I didn't mean any of it."

His sister grabs him into a hug. "Yes, you did, Marky Mark. You meant every last excruciating thing, including the mullet comparison. And I forgive you anyway."

"Thank you." He groans, sounding relieved. "I just don't handle change all that well."

"Gosh, you think?" she asks. "I know we just sprung this on you. The baby. The wedding."

He grunts in acknowledgment as he hugs his sister. “How can I ever make it up to you?”

She pulls out of that tight hug and looks up at her brother. “Hold that thought. Because I do have a favor to ask a little later.”

“Anything. Whatever you need. But I do need to apologize to your fiancé,” he says.

“Good. I’d appreciate that,” she says, patting his arm.

Mark obviously left the rep ties at home tonight in favor of a dress shirt in a deep blue color that makes his eyes pop. I’m such a sucker for eyes. And he’s wearing a very sharp pair of glasses that accentuate instead of hide them. His glossy dark hair is cut in an attractive style that works with the whole boss man look he’s got going on.

Fine. If I’m being objective, he looks good tonight. Hot, even. I’ve always thought so.

But he’s still a stuck-up banker who doesn’t like my BFF. And now he’s got to grovel for Flip anyway.

This should be fun.

Slowly, Mark turns toward my friend, his expression chastened. “Flip, man, I’m sorry. There was no excuse for the lack of faith I showed last night.”

“Damn right,” Flip says, posting an arm around Hannah and lifting his strong, waspy chin in defiance. “I’ve never given you a *single* reason to doubt my good intentions toward your sister.”

God, where is the popcorn when you need it? Mark’s jaw is flexing. I can practically hear the arguments forming in his brain—most of which center around my friend’s inability to use a condom correctly.

Flip and Hannah didn’t mean to get pregnant three months after they met. It’s all good, though, because by the time that plus sign showed up on the pregnancy test several weeks ago, they were already planning a future together.

“I’m sorry,” Mark says again, even if his teeth are practically clenched. “It’s just been sudden. I worry.”

Flip rubs Hannah’s shoulder. “I know it seems fast, but we’re very happy. And we chose that wedding date next month partly for your sake.”

Apparently Mark’s high-pressure job makes it hard for him to get away, but he’s free for the second half of June. “Thank you,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’ll be honored to attend.”

His sister grins. “Go get a beer, Mark. Just stay away from the whiskey.”

“Good idea,” he says. “Thank you.”

Mark turns and reverses course toward the bar in the corner. I’m about to follow him when the waitstaff begins carrying in an array of sushi rolls arranged on wooden boats, and also thinly sliced bites of ahi and hamachi served on elegant little dishes.

As a party planner, I’ve outdone myself.

“Mister St. James?” the manager says, touching my elbow. “Please let me know if you need anything at all.”

I survey the generous spread of food and my stomach rumbles. “This looks terrific. I really appreciate the way you arranged this so quickly for me.” Everything came together in a flurry, Hannah announced her pregnancy a few weeks ago, and last weekend, Flip proposed. Now, here we are.

“My pleasure, sir.” The man gives a slight bow, and I return it, as I learned to do on an extended trip to Japan a few years ago. “If you need anything more, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Pleased with both him and myself, I turn back to the party and take a plate off the top of the stack. Then I hand it to Hannah. “The bride-to-be should start, right? If that’s not a tradition, it should be. Step right up, Hannah. All this sushi isn’t going to eat itself.”

Then I move out of the way so that my guests can have first dibs on the spread. My drink is empty, though, so I head for the bar and another Asahi Super Dry.

That's where I find Mark, elbow on the bar, drinking . . . "Is that orange juice, Banks? How's your hangover?"

"I'll live," he says. "But I suspect drinking tonight is probably not in my best interests."

"I have to agree with you there," I say with a chuckle. "Unless you really enjoy apologizing. I know I enjoyed *watching* you apologize."

He gives me a dark look, but doesn't bother to respond. Understandable. That comment was more for my amusement. Which, let's be honest, a lot of things I do are.

But there was one *I'm so sorry* I definitely wanted a front seat to. I clear my throat. "I noticed I didn't get one."

"An apology?" Mark snorts, furrowing his brow. "Unless *you're* going to the chapel after knocking up my sister, I don't think I insulted you."

A laugh bursts from my chest. "Something no one will accuse me of. Ever."

"Then we're all good," he says.

I give an easy shrug. "Sure, sure. I guess I don't require one. After all, you did say I was hot. Nothing to be sorry for there. You're absolutely right." Then I flash him a grin. A damn good one, and I know how to give them. Though, as a rule, I don't flirt with straight men. Waste of time, right? But why did Mark say I was hot? Where did that come from?

But the loose-lipped texter is hard to read. He's shooting me an *I-can't-be-bothered* look. Damn. Mark Banks must kill it at poker. He has some impressive bluffing skills. "That was *just* the whiskey talking," he says evenly.

I scoff-laugh. "Right. Of course. Whiskey often goes on and on about levels of hotness."

“Like I said, you can’t trust the words of a single-malt scotch,” he says.
Hmm.

So that’s how he’s spinning this. Well, two can play that game. “You may be right. It is hard to trust the liquor, so I better refresh my memory to make sure I got it all correct.” I stop, grab my phone from my pocket, and whip it out, sliding a thumb across the screen.

Mark cuts in quickly. “There’s no need for that.”

Ha. Now I’ve rattled him. I clear my throat, and read aloud my new favorite text message ever. “*Also, what is the deal with your friend with the hair ?*”

I glance up from the phone, tilt my head. “You noticed my hair. So sweet,” I say, giving a shake of the locks.

“It’s impossible not to. It enters the room before you do.”

“Allow me to continue. *Why is it so floopy . . . wait . . . floppy . . . nope . . . it’s floofy. His hair is floofy.*” I look up. “Is floofy even a word?”

He answers my question head-on. “Yes. It’s a combo of poofy and fluffy.”

Well, he’s a worthier adversary than I expected. All the more reason to keep going. “My hair is not poofy, Banks. It’s shaggy. But we’re not even at the best part of your epic rant.” I inhale deeply, savoring what’s to come. The piece de resistance.

He knocks back his orange juice, and kudos to the man. He’s taking the text message reenactment like, well, like a champ.

I brandish my phone, savoring every single second. “*Anyway, whose hair looks like a shampoo commercial? Who takes off his shirt at a dinner party? Who has a body that annoyingly perfect? He’s not even real. He’s like a fucking comic book hero in those graphic novels I used to read. Here he comes . . . FLIP’S SUPERHOT . . . WINGMAN! Asher, with his stupid hair and stupid lips and ridiculous body. Who even looks that good in real life, Hannah? No one. Just no one .*”

There's more, but really, I need to bask a little longer in the glow of compliments. I tap my lip. "You're right, Banks. I do not at all require an apology for this ode to me. In fact, I ought to give you a thanks," I say, bringing a hand to my heart. "This made my week."

"You're welcome," he snarls.

I should let him off the hook now, and circulate a bit here at the party.

Yet I can't just drop it. Everything I thought I knew about Mark Banks is suddenly in question. Is he the fun-phobic banker I thought I knew? Who is this guy who invents words to describe my hair, and has deep thoughts about my abs?

I'm pretty sure straight guys don't refer to other dudes as superhot.

Which makes me wonder if he's not as straight as I thought.

Maybe I can get him to clarify. I tap my phone one more time. "I do have one last question about this description—*superhot wingman*. That must mean there are levels of hotness. So, Banks. Tell me. Where does the scale start?"

This is when he'll back down. Talk in circles. Run away. I'd be willing to bet my sexy new Nikon on it.

Mark takes a breath, meets my gaze head-on. "Yeah, St. James. There are definitely hotness scales for, well, lots of things. Starts at basic hot. And, to be honest, *lots of things* are basic hot. Like, for instance, when someone can do square roots in his or her head, that's *basic hot*."

I blink. What the hell? He's talking math now?

Mark continues, counting off on his fingers. "Superhot comes next. That's, like, knowing all the openings in chess, and their variations." He lets out a low hum that kind of rumbles past his lips, like he thinks that's the height of seduction.

I scratch my jaw, trying to figure out where he's going with this.

"Then you have extra hot," he continues, all smooth talker like he's the slick trader in a movie featuring a bunch of sharks on Wall Street. Or wait,

is it wolves? “And that’s understanding probabilities. Example—in any group of twenty-three people, there’s a fifty percent chance that two of them have the same birthday.” He taps his temple.

My brow knits. I part my lips, but words are hard to find. Because I think he just danced a whole math-word circle around me. I tap my chest. “Did you just compare me to a mathematician?”

He pushes his glasses higher up on his nose. “Stay with me, St. James. I said *superhot* was the person who could play chess. *Extra hot* is higher math. That’s the highest level of hotness.”

“I’m not even at the top of your hot scale?”

“It’s a sliding scale,” he says, lifting his juice and finishing it. “Anyway, like I said, lots of things are hot. A double play to get out of a bases-loaded jam, buying Apple stock in 1991, a chocolate molten lava cake with vanilla ice cream. Doing math for fun. I could go on. My remarks mean nothing, because many, many things are hot, and you just shouldn’t trust whiskey.”

Holy fuck.

Mark Banks, mild-mannered banker, just twisted my tongue with his hotness sliding scale of mental math. Even if he backpedaled his way out of that jam. Even if he did it with a whole lot of smoke and mirrors.

He did it.

And that’s just *hot, hot, hot* .

The highest level on the Asher St. James scale.

But he’s still the guy who doesn’t like my bud.

And he still dresses like my dad.

So I’m not about to bend, even if he won’t admit he wants to run his fingers through my so-not-floofy hair.

At least, I thought he did.

But now, I’m not so positive after all.

Dammit.

So that fishing expedition gave me nothing.

And yet, I toss out the bait one more time, swiping up on the thread. “But there is one thing that I keep tripping on.” I clear my throat, adopt his sexy, rumble voice. *“Asher, with his stupid hair and stupid lips and ridiculous body. Who even looks that good in real life, Hannah? No one. Just no one .”*

I lift my gaze from the screen. Mark simply stares at me with those dark blue inscrutable eyes. “Yes, Asher?”

If there’s something wrong with my mouth—and no one has ever complained about it before—I have to know. “How are my lips stupid?”

FIFTEEN

Double Screwed

Mark

BECAUSE THEY MAKE *me think about things I don't have room for in my life*. Like this inconvenient attraction to my sister's fiancé's best friend, who relishes goading me.

But I can goad back. I didn't get my promotion to VP by having zero game.

I know how to negotiate, and I've got a plan to shut this conversation down once and for all, then stuff this lust in a suitcase and tuck it away in an attic.

And never unzip it again.

"Let's make a deal, St. James," I offer.

"Okay," he says, tentatively.

"How about we forget I ever said that, and in exchange, I'll help you make sure you didn't ruin Hannah's night?"

He jerks his gaze away from me, gesturing to the guests milling about behind us. "I'm celebrating their engagement with a great party. On twenty-four hours' notice, no less. How would I have ruined her night? She loves sushi. Also, I might add, when I learned she was pregnant, I threw a party. You threw a fit."

Time to put him in his place *and* help Hannah.

I cast my gaze toward the server passing by, carrying a tray full of yellowtail rolls on the gleaming silver plate. "But sushi," I whisper. "Especially species of fish high in mercury . . . is on the verboten list for pregnant women."

"Wait." Asher's jaw comes unhinged, and for the first time ever, the cocky cavalier playboy is off his game. "Did I . . . really just throw an engagement party where the bride can't eat any of the food?"

“Seems you did,” I say. “And I figured you knew and would have ordered some cooked fish or edamame. Or I would have said something sooner.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Asher says, then jumps off the stool, waves over the manager, and quickly gives a request. “Big favor, Hiroki, but we’ve got to pivot and serve something cooked right away. Some of my guests are staying away from raw fish.”

“Of course. We’ll get some avocado rolls, shrimp tempura, and edamame out right away,” the man replies, then heads off to the kitchen, and just like that, Asher St. James saves the day.

No wonder he irritates me.

Too smooth.

Too handsome.

Too . . . just everything.

“How did you know that?” he asks when he returns, sounding begrudgingly impressed. “Do you moonlight as a midwife?”

I laugh, in spite of myself. “No. I have a kid, as you may recall. We discussed her at game night, when I said she prefers Chutes and Ladders to Scrabble. And I made sure her mom didn’t eat raw fish or drink too much coffee when she was pregnant.”

“How is Rosie? She was a total delight the time I met her with Hannah at the coffee shop,” he says, remembering her name as easily as he remembered the manager’s.

“Hi Marky Mark!”

I turn to find a college friend of Hannah’s sidling up to me. “Hey Yasmin!” Finally, someone I actually know at this party. I’ve never been so happy to see anyone in my life. Now we can stop talking about Asher’s mouth, for fuck’s sake. “How’s the art market?”

“Bangin.’ I’d ask you about your job, but I wouldn’t understand the answer. So, tell me about your daughter instead. How’s your little cutie-pie?

What's she up to?"

My chest squeezes with happiness, as it usually does when I talk about my favorite person in the universe. "Learning to read, doing both karate and T-ball. Her other skills include keeping me on my toes, and trying to wiggle out of brushing her teeth. She's just finishing kindergarten."

"T-Ball! That is totally adorable," Yasmin says in her cheery voice. "And how's Bridget? I haven't seen her in ages."

My shoulders tense. This is the seriously un-fun part. When I tell people I'm not with Rosie's mom anymore. "We're recently divorced," I say plainly, keeping emotion out of my voice.

Which is somewhat easy to do. I'm not heartbroken about my split. For many reasons.

What I am is bitter. But nobody wants to hear that from a twenty-seven-year-old divorced man.

A hand flies to Yasmin's mouth. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

"It's fine," I insist. "Don't worry about it." I give her a huge smile to show I don't care at all. And I won't. Eventually. That's what people tell me, anyway.

Even if signing my divorce papers made me feel like a giant fucking failure.

And even if my baby girl cried like she'd never stop the first night my ex stayed at her new man's apartment.

"Now your daughter is getting a cousin!" Yasmin gushes, shifting gears maybe for both our sakes'. "That is so exciting."

"Totally exciting," I repeat, and I can practically feel Asher's smirk even though I'm not looking at him.

"Well," Yasmin says brightly, "I think I'll go and congratulate her again." She gives me a peck on the cheek and then beelines for Hannah.

I look into my empty juice glass and wish scotch were in there.

“Here,” Asher says, thrusting a bottle of beer in my direction. “I’m sensing you need this.”

“So I can entertain you some more?”

“No,” he says quietly. “Dude, I had no idea your divorce was official. How long ago did that happen?”

“Last month,” I mutter. “Although we’ve been separated for a year.”

He frowns. “So . . . you got divorced the same month that Hannah announced her pregnancy and right before she got engaged?”

“Yup.”

He toys with the label on his beer. “You know, your freak-out is starting to make a little more sense to me. No wonder you let whiskey drive the bus last night.”

I bark out a laugh without meaning to. He’s right, though. My sister is having a shotgun wedding, just like I did six and a half years ago after getting my college girlfriend pregnant. And look how that turned out.

Asher St. James isn’t getting that story, though. No thanks. Or any stories. Earlier, I could hear him fishing for clues about my sexuality. I’m bisexual. I’m not conflicted about it. My family knows.

But my drunken text rant was over-the-top embarrassing. There’s no way I want Asher to think that I was hitting on him. Like his ego needs any more stroking.

More guests come through the door, and he hurries off to greet them. I watch him go. Well, fine, I admire his ass in those trendy, close-fitting pants. Still, Asher is everything I’m not. He’s the life of the party. He was a professional soccer player; now he’s a top photographer of athletes and models. He’s sporty and artsy and smooth.

So damn smooth. Like his clean-shaven face that I bet would feel so good . . .

“Mark!”

I drag my eyes off Asher's hiney and find my sister and Flip marching toward me. "Yes, Hannah. How's your party? I heard they're bringing out some vegetarian rolls, by the way." I give her a wink.

"That's amazing. Who could eat, though? I'm just so excited to see everyone!" She's beaming and fanning her face with excitement. That giant rock on her finger hardly looks real. She sent me about fifty pictures of it yesterday, and I assumed the camera angle was exaggerating things.

But, nope. Rosie's marbles are smaller than that thing.

She puts her hands on my chest, and the sparkle almost blinds me. "Mark, one of the reasons I was so happy for Asher to plan this party tonight is . . . " She stops, her smile growing bigger, like it's about to unleash a secret she's been holding in all evening. "Ever since we were kids, I always knew I would want to do *this* ."

Ah, I sense a moment coming.

Hannah isn't dramatic, per se. But she does like to do things up. Why go hiking when you can go bungee jumping? Why go to a wine tasting when you can do mustard canning? Proof of her get-out-and-go-for-it approach is that she met Flip at a candle-making class in Brooklyn that she signed up for at the last minute, and that's why *you just need to try new things, since life is full of moments, and you need to be ready to receive them* . Her words.

I'm not a moments guy. But I love my sister, and I owe her, so I go along with it. "And what is *this* exactly, Hannah Banana?"

Her eyes twinkle brighter than her diamond. "I've always imagined when I got married . . . that you'd be my best man." She practically squeals the request.

And whoa.

That's definitely a moment.

I didn't think I'd be part of her wedding party, being a guy and all. I figured Yasmin would be her maid of honor. Bet she is, and I'll be standing

with Hannah's college bestie.

"How many attendants are you having, exactly?"

"Just you."

That's all she says. But the way she says *just you* conveys the meaning. This matters to my sister. We're twelve months apart in age. We're good friends and always have been. We rely on each other.

I clear my throat, square my shoulders, and treat the request with the gravitas it deserves. "Yes, of course. I'd be honored."

I pull her in for a hug, trying to wrap my head around how I went from the worst brother to the best man in twenty-four hours, but hey, *it's one of life's moments*. As she squeezes me, Asher sails behind her, moving next to Flip. My skin prickles. He's everywhere, and I can't get away from him.

When Hannah and I break the embrace, she locks eyes with Flip, then gives the quickest of nods. Like she's giving him permission.

They've definitely got something planned.

Flip pivots, claps a hand on his wingman's shoulder. "Asher, we've been best buds since our first year at Lyceum du Lucerne when we had the brilliant idea to try out for the ski team and I broke my leg instead of making the cut. But you carried my tray in the caf for eight weeks. You're my guy. You've been there for me through everything. It'd be an honor if you'd be *my* best man."

I groan inside. No fucking way.

I bet it's not easy to surprise Asher St. James, but judging from the size of his hazel eyes—wide AF—Flip just did it.

And for the first time all night, I've got a sinking sense that Asher and I are feeling the same damn thing.

I don't want to be "the best men" with that guy.

But it'll be fine. It'll all be fine. What's the big deal anyway? Asher was always going to be at the wedding. Who cares that we're the best men? It's not like we have to pick balloons and boutonnieres together.

Probably all we'll have to do is stand opposite each other at the wedding. And right now, since Yasmin waves a hand high above her head. "This calls for a pic!"

She ushers the four of us together, and thank fuck she has the good sense to put the bride and groom in the center as she snaps a few shots of the wedding party.

When Yasmin lowers her phone, Hannah grabs my arm, and thrusts me next to Asher.

"Let's get a pic of the best men, too," my sister says.

Where is an escape hatch when you need one?

The answer is—nowhere close enough, especially since Asher throws an arm around my shoulders, and that is not fair.

Arms on shoulders are not supposed to send my mind spinning with thoughts.

My jaw clenches.

"Say cheese, Mark. You're not getting a root canal. You're going to a wedding," Yasmin instructs.

"And I promise I don't bite," Asher says, in a volume just for me.

Biting.

That's not helping.

I manage a sliver of a smile.

I probably look like I'm posing for my office headshot. Sidenote: I hate my office headshot. I also hate the existence of office headshots.

Ten endless seconds later, Yasmin is done. "I'll send them to you, Hannah, and you can send them to the guys."

There's no need for that, but I keep my mouth shut on that front. Asher lets go, then says, "It wasn't too painful," then he heads off, probably to charm more guests.

And I suppose it wasn't that bad.

And being the best men together won't be either.

How long does wedding stuff take? Two days? Then I'll be free of the object of all this weird, misplaced lust.

I move away from the center of the party, when Hannah grabs my arm, Flip beside her. "Just one more thing," she says.

I turn around. "Sure."

"The wedding is going to be a small one, and I'm already asking our friends to drop everything to come to it next month. So . . . remember that favor I said I needed?" she asks, rocking back on her heels.

Flip puts a protective hand on her waist. And I try not to hold it against him.

"Of course, Hannah," I say. "What can I do for you?"

"It's about the wedding. We're going to be pulling this off at warp speed, right in the middle of your MTA next month."

"Right, I do appreciate that." MTA, or *mandatory time away*, is a requirement for all securities traders who run more than a billion dollars of risk for the bank. For two weeks, you're not allowed to step foot in the building, so your books can be marked to market by someone else.

It's meant to root out fraud. But it's really just the best scam ever. Two weeks of paid freedom. If I ever meet the genius who devised MTA, I'm probably going to kiss him, because MTA is extra hot.

"We're going to do a glam little destination wedding in Miami," she says. "It was Asher's idea, actually."

Of course it was his idea.

"But some of us don't have Wall Street jobs with MTA." She rolls her eyes playfully. "And I want to use my vacation days for my honeymoon. So I was hoping you would fly down there a few days early and check out all our vendors. The caterer, the DJ. That kind of thing."

"Sure?" I rub the back of my neck, trying to picture how this would all work, since I'm not, well, a wedding planner. "I'm not that familiar with Miami, though."

“You won’t have to be,” Flip says. “Asher will be there to help you.”

Wait . Did he just say what I think he said? “Asher and me?” I choke out, hoping I got it wrong.

But Flip nods. “Yup.”

“*Just* Asher and me?” I ask, in case Flip arranged for a wedding planner to join us in Florida. Preferably a little old lady who carries a small white dog everywhere she goes—they’d be the perfect cock-blocking pair.

“Asher doesn’t have a shoot that week, so it’s no problem for him to fly down and help out,” Flip continues. “He’s the one who found us this sweet venue. A client of his owns a mansion on the beach. You two can be around to tell the equipment rental people where to set up. The tent. Chairs. Stuff like that.”

“O-kay,” I say slowly. My mind whirls while I try to think of a good reason I can’t do this, because I can’t be alone with a guy I’m stupidly attracted to. “If I don’t have Rosie that week. Let me do some checking.”

Hannah holds up her phone. “I already texted Bridget to invite her to the wedding. Maybe she’ll bring Rosie down with her, so you can go early and help me.”

“Who knows if Bridget is free, though? I bet she’s busy. Probably has a wine show.”

God, I hope she has a wine show. A wine anything.

But who am I kidding? My ex loves Hannah. She loves Florida, and used to complain in the early days when we couldn’t afford vacations.

She’ll take to this trip like a calico to catnip. I’m so screwed.

When I open the door to my apartment on West Sixteenth Street, my phone pings. I click on the notification.

It’s the dreaded group chat.

And Hannah has dropped in pics.

Nope. I'm not going to look.

I stick to that mantra the whole time I get ready for bed. I don't so much as glance at those photos as I give Blackbeard a couple scratches on the chin, or while my one-eyed rescue cat watches me brush my teeth from his favorite staring spot on the bathroom counter. *Weirdo* .

I let the tap run lightly for a few seconds so the orange beast can drink straight from it, then I turn it off. And I still don't look.

My willpower holds out until I flop onto my mattress, just before I take off my glasses. I leave them on, though, for one moment too long.

That's all it takes to peek at the last photo.

And, damn. That easy smile. That casual pose. That fucking arm around me.

Yup. He's annoyingly perfect, and I'm double screwed.

SIXTEEN

The Da Vinci of Underwear

MONDAY, A MONTH LATER

Asher

I GAZE at my forty-two-inch monitor, putting the finishing touches on a photo campaign I shot for UnderKlad.

Translation: I'm staring at photos I've taken of the ripped bodies of professional athletes who model underwear on the side.

I love my job. So much.

"Hey Lucy," I call. "Did we hear anything from FLI today?"

"Negative," she yells back from her desk across the studio.

Okay. That's a setback. I'd really been hoping to land a sweet gig with the most influential sports organization in the whole entire world. They told me I'd hear back from them ten days ago.

For the first few days, I'd thought maybe the contract got lost in the mail. Now I think they gave it to someone else.

I'll be pissed off if they did. The whole campaign was my idea.

But I'm not going to let it kill my vibe today. Whistling along with the Citizen Cope track playing on my speakers, I adjust the color balance of the final shot. Then I deepen the shadows, so that the hockey player's eight-pack comes into sharper focus. And, wow, it's perfect now. You can almost taste the tiny beads of sweat on his torso.

Yummy.

"I will be known as the fucking Da Vinci of underwear," I say to myself as I tap save on the project file.

"You are already," my assistant says from her desk at the other end of my studio space. "But if you don't leave now, you will also be known as the Da Vinci of showing up late. *Again*."

I whirl around in my chair. "Late? For what?"

Lucy blinks at me from behind her round glasses. "Don't tell me you've forgotten to check the schedule again."

“But I thought I was free today before I take off tomorrow for the wedding,” I whine. “I swear the calendar said so.”

She winces. “Check again.”

“Lucy! What did you do?” She probably snuck something onto my calendar. *Hell* . All I want to do is finish these edits, wipe my own drool off the monitor, and then reward myself with a long lunch of mussels and frites. “Just tell me—what am I almost late for?”

“Your fitting at Angel Sanjay.”

Shit . I open up my calendar and there it is—an appointment at the designer’s showroom, beginning in forty minutes. “This fitting—it’s for the wedding, right?”

“Of course,” she says. “You asked me to book you and a Mark Banks in for, quote, Miami-style beachy wedding attire.”

“Sure, sure,” I babble. The best men need to match their suits. And if I’d let Hannah’s brother pick the clothes, we’d probably end up in some 1955 seersucker disaster.

So this appointment was my idea. But I know it wasn’t on my calendar three hours ago.

Oh, boy. Lucy and I are quite a pair. I’m told that I function as about three quarters of a real adult. Lucy also seems to operate at seventy-five percent. But between us, we’re good for a person and a half. So I figure I’m still ahead.

Plus, even though she dresses head to toe in navy blue Talbots, and her aura doesn’t exactly scream fashionable photographer’s assistant, real talent, though, is telling it like it is to her boss and I need that.

My business has taken off these last couple of years, and before I hired Lucy, I struggled to keep my own calendar.

That led to some regrettable screwups. Just ask my ex-boyfriend. Garrett hated the way I was often late for our dates and all the times I was double-booked, or jet-lagged. It had been a huge transition from the life of a

professional athlete in Europe to running my own small business here in New York.

But I wanted Garrett to be happy with me. In a great leap of faith, I'd decided to ask him to move in with me.

I made reservations at the Kimoto rooftop lounge in Brooklyn, left early. But then a truck jackknifed on the Williamsburg Bridge, leaving me stranded for forty-five minutes in an Uber.

When I finally arrived, Garrett was waiting at the corner table in front of the sweeping city views, a designer cocktail in hand. I gave him a big, hopeful smile, fingering the copied key to my apartment that I had for him in my pocket.

But the moment he spotted me, his expression shuttered. The moment I sat down, he said, "Asher, I can't do this anymore."

"There was this truck! It will probably be on the news tonight. Seriously —"

He'd shaken his head. "It's not about tonight. I met someone else."

That was not what I'd expected. "What? Who?"

When I'd pressed him for details, the breakup turned even worse. He'd met a lawyer, who worked as in-house counsel, and took every weekend off in East Hampton.

"That's what you want? A lawyer?"

"What I want is someone who's not a hot mess," he'd said bitterly.

That was the low point. Even though I knew he was gone for good, I needed a change. So, the very next week I hired Lucy. I couldn't afford to be known as a hot mess. It had already ruined my chances with Garrett. I wouldn't let it ruin my business.

Since then, my bookings are up. Screwups are down. But I'm still lonely. Garrett's Instagram is full of pics of him paddle boarding in the Hamptons with his lawyer.

I know I shouldn't look. That's just dumb.

“Asher!”

My head snaps up, and Lucy is standing next to me. “Google says it’s a forty-three-minute trip via the F-train. Or forty-eight minutes if you take the ferry. I suppose you could chance it in a cab.”

“No cabs,” I bark. “Why am I always running late? Wait. Don’t answer that!”

I shove my keys and my wallet into my pockets. But where is my phone? “When will I see you? We still have to go over the Commando upload. That’s happening next week.”

“Go already.” She gestures toward the door. “Call me from Miami. I’ll upload the Commandos while we’re on the line together. Until then, go get sunburned and enjoy the wedding. Take some Instagram photos. Find a pool boy to hook up with.”

“While that sounds fun, this isn’t really a vacation.”

“You’ll find a way to make it fun,” she insists. “Oh! And don’t forget that *An Arranged Marriage* premieres on Webflix tomorrow night. It’s on the calendar that you never check. So don’t come crying to me if you forget to tune in.”

“There’s got to be a TV in that mansion that can stream from my laptop,” I say, ransacking my desk for my phone.

“Asher, your phone is in your shirt pocket,” Lucy says. “I can see it from here.”

“Oh, fuck. Thank you. Bye!” I give her a wave as I trot past her desk.

“Call me about the Commandos!” is the last thing she says before I run to the stairwell. Even if the trains are on time, it’ll take at least fifty minutes to make it to Manhattan and to the designer’s showroom on West Thirteenth.

I’ve got forty.

Shit.

SEVENTEEN

Captain Filthy Mind

Mark

SOME PARENTS ARE chill when their kids play sports. I am not one of those people. Especially when my little cupcake hits a double in T-ball.

“Go! Go! Go!” I shout as Rosie runs her butt off to second, while pigtailed Alba rounds third base, determination on her little face as she races home. When she reaches it, my daughter’s best friend jumps up on the rubber and her teammates join her, shouting with glee. Rosie cheers from second base, a bundle of energy.

“Yes! Go Firecrackers!” I thrust both arms in the air, shouting the loudest.

“A little excited, Mark?” The question comes from Alba’s mom, Valencia, standing next to me at the edge of the field in Chelsea Park.

“I can’t ever sit during softball games,” I say.

Her long, brown hair swishes against her olive skin. Valencia pats my arm affectionately. “And I love that about you. Though, you were just a touch louder last week when Rosie hit a homer.”

She has me there. I shrug sheepishly. “What can I say? I’ve got a fanboy in me and I’m not afraid to show it. I’m going to let you in on a little secret, V,” I tell her. “I had zero game as a kid. Team sports were not my friend.”

Valencia feigns shock, her big brown eyes going wide. “You? Nooo. You don’t say.”

“Is it that obvious?” I ask the woman who’s become a good friend over the last few years. She and her wife live in our building over on Sixteenth Street, and since our kids are friends, we became buds. A few months ago, we signed the girls up for the Firecrackers together.

“Yes, Mark. I can still recall your shudder when I suggested you join our co-ed frisbee league.”

I shudder involuntarily. Again.

She laughs. She often does at my expense, which is fine by me. I kinda feel like I can relax with her and her wife—they know how shitty the last year has been for me, and it's nice to let down my guard a little with someone. All day at work, I have to keep my game face on. I don't bring my personal life into the office—not at the water cooler of Wall Street.

“Fine, fine. I'm man enough to admit I'm a better spectator than participant.” I raise a finger in my own defense. “But I'm excellent at the treadmill, the StairMaster, and running solo in the park.”

“And I'm woman enough to know I will never invite you onto my frisbee team, since I want to win,” Valencia says.

A few minutes later, the game ends on a Firecrackers win, and Rosie runs over to me, a tiny brunette ball of energy. She lands in front of me, dirt kicking up as her pink cleats hit the edge of the softball field. “Did you see my double, Daddy?”

“Did you hear my shout, Rosie?”

With a serious stare, she says, “Everyone heard it, but I like to make sure.”

“That's my girl. Checking and double checking. Yes I saw it, and all I have to say is watch out, New York Comets. You're going to be the new slugger for the city's best Major League Baseball team,” I say.

She high fives me. “Yes! But I'd actually rather play on a girls' team than a boys' baseball team,” she says, matter-of-factly. “Or maybe I'll play hockey someday too. We're going to see the Bombshells next fall. Mommy is taking me.”

“Ooh, I love them,” Valencia chimes in.

“You and your wife have a crush on the goalie,” I say to her as the kiddos return to the field to pick up their bats and gloves.

“We have good taste in our crushes.” Valencia gathers her purse as I snag Rosie's backpack from the bleachers behind me. “Gimme. I'll take that for you.”

“You don’t have to do that. I can bring it along with me.”

She shakes her head, emphatic as she grabs Rosie’s bag. “You’re not taking a *Peppa Pig* backpack into Angel Sanjay’s showroom. I will not allow it.”

I let her have it. “Thanks again for taking Rosie to dinner with you so I can go to a . . . *best man fitting*,” I say, my tone a little heavy.

“On a scale of one to tax audit, that sounds like you’re looking forward to it?” Valencia asks with the lift of a well-groomed eyebrow.

“If you think trying on clothes is fun,” I say, groaning in over-the-top misery. “I don’t. Especially because . . .”

Because of Asher St. James. It’s impossible to explain in a rational way how difficult it is for me to keep my cool around him.

Tomorrow begins five days with him, including the travel day. The dread is strong in me now.

She shoots me a concerned look. “Are you okay, Mark? You look like you swallowed a grapefruit. Do you hate trying on clothes that much?”

The tension in my chest cranks tighter. “The other best man and I are polar opposites. But even that’s generous. It’s more like we’re poles of poles of polar opposites. I’m not sure how I’m going to survive the next week.”

Or the pent-up lust that rears its head when I’m around the former soccer star. But I keep that tidbit all to myself.

She hums, like she’s deep in thought. “Is he hot?”

“Yes,” I answer immediately. “But also smug.”

She laughs. “Then when you return from Miami, maybe you’ll need to do something fun. A little self-care in the form of dating again. You should finally let me set you up with my friend Gwen from my Zumba class. And if you’re not into her, then the creative director at my agency is smoking hot, too. Josh has got the whole cute nerd vibe working,” she says, waving a

hand in front of my face, gesturing to my glasses. “It’s a smorgasbord out there for you, Mark.”

“Possibly,” I mutter. “I’ll let you know when I’m ready.”

But will I ever be? This past year, I’ve been concentrating on Rosie. She took the divorce hard. I’ve just wanted to be there for her, not running around dating strangers. I don’t have the time. Bridget and I had agreed to parent fifty-fifty. But she has a job with her new wine merchant beau that requires travel.

So guess who does at least two thirds of the parenting? This guy.

That makes dating tough. But even if it didn’t, the prospect of dinner and drinks with someone new sounds equal parts exciting and horrifying. The last time I dated, I lived in a dorm.

Although I’m definitely eager to get back in the sex saddle.

It’s been a while.

A long, long while of just me and my hand.

If dirty thoughts were an origin story for a superhero, I’d be Captain Filthy Mind. But there’s a big difference between entertaining my long list of sex wishes alone at night and going out and getting them.

What would Asher do if he knew I had a spreadsheet buried on my laptop, with nearly a hundred lines dedicated to various fantasies?

He’d laugh his ass off, that’s what.

Good thing that sucker is password protected.

“When you’re ready, I’ll be your matchmaker,” Valencia says as Rosie rushes over, Alba by her side, the bats, balls and gloves all neatly sorted.

“We cleaned up, and now I’m ready for a burrito with my bestie,” Rosie announces.

“And fro-yo. Can we go to that new shop?” Alba asks.

“Yes! We have to try the pineapple-mango-coconut cake flavor.”

“With Gummi Bears and Sno-Caps on top,” Alba adds, intensely serious, and I have a feeling they’ve been planning their dessert all day.

Goals.

Then, before I can remind her, Rosie remembers her manners and turns to Alba's mom. "Thank you for taking me with you to dinner."

"And thank you for taking care of Blackbeard while I'm gone, too," I tell Valencia.

Rosie lifts a finger, all six-year-old bossy, as she sometimes is. "He gets two-thirds of a cup of cat food a day. That's sixty-six percent of a cup. Well, almost sixty-seven."

With an eyebrow arch, Valencia stares daggers at me. "This is your fault, Mark. All this mathing."

I hold up my hands in surrender. "I happily take the blame."

I say goodbye to my friend, then my kid and hers, and hoof it several blocks south to the designer's showroom.

Fashion is not my thing. Shopping for my own suits is a bit like changing cat litter. A necessary chore.

Just like this outing with Asher.

That's what this outing is—just another task. This mental trick works just fine until I reach Thirteenth Street, where my gaze lands on a tall, toned, ridiculously good-looking guy jogging down the block.

Effortlessly.

Looking really fucking good, and yeah, it's a good thing Rosie isn't here since I'm thinking about item 2B on my spreadsheet.

Focus, Mark .

Asher stops in front of me, looks at his wrist. "Damn, I impress myself. Forty minutes. Made it exactly on time," he says, sounding insanely pleased.

I lift a brow. "You're congratulating yourself for making it on time? Do you pat yourself on the back when you remember to brush your teeth, too?"

He shoots me a mega-watt smile, all gleaming teeth, and perfect lips. "Maybe I do, Banks. Maybe I do."

“To each his own,” I say, as Asher eyes me up and down.

“I had no idea you owned anything other than your Wall Street uniforms,” he remarks, his gaze traveling over my navy-blue polo shirt and jeans.

“Well, it’s laundry day. Dieter, my valet, is brushing and steaming my wardrobe this afternoon. Straightening the pinstripes. You know.”

A wrinkle appears in the center of Asher’s forehead. “You’re kidding, right? Nobody is really named Dieter.”

“The second you think that, you run into someone named Dieter.” I take a beat. “That’s a mathematical probability.”

Asher looks doubtful. “Sounds more like coincidence. Admit it. They’re one and the same,” he says, dragging a hand through his hair. I try not to follow the path of his fingers, but dammit, my gaze strays for a fraction of a second.

Probability of me making it through the next hour without thinking about 2C on my fantasy spreadsheet? Captain Filthy Mind says five percent.

So I return to his first question, answering it finally. “And yes, I own seven polos, five T-shirts, and three pairs of jeans. I don’t wear suits to my daughter’s softball games.”

That brings a smile back to his face. “I didn’t know your kid liked sports.”

“Of course you didn’t. You don’t know me.” And that came out snappish.

Asher rolls his eyes, like *can you believe this guy*. “I’m well aware of that.”

Why am I such a dick around him? Just because I can’t handle this inconvenient attraction? *Man up, Banks.*

I redirect my attitude. “Rosie loves softball. And she wants to try hockey too,” I say, aiming to inject more goodwill in my tone, and also to

talk about anything besides clothes, so I don't mention how good he looks in that tight not-a-T-shirt, not-a-polo, I-have-no-idea-what-it's-called, but it's short sleeve and just the right amount of snug to show off his pecs, and his biceps . . .

And that's not helping.

We head inside, and I hope this fitting ends mercifully fast.

EIGHTEEN

Stick With The Usual Favorites

Abbi

THURSDAY NIGHTS ARE ALWAYS busy at Moo U's favorite bar and grill. By nine o'clock, I've been hustling burgers and wings for eight hours. But my apron pocket is full of tip money, so I can't really complain.

I have one party that just sat down, though—three women about my age wearing matching hockey jackets. "Welcome to The Biscuit in the Basket." I pull out my order pad. "The special salad tonight has spinach greens, apple slices, and a warm bacon vinaigrette. The special wings are Cranberry Almond."

"Did you say Cranberry Almond?" one of the girls asks, lifting one eyebrow as if she doesn't believe me.

"You heard correctly." I lean a little closer and whisper. "Nobody likes them. Stick with the usual favorites."

"Got it," she says with a smile. "I'd like a half dozen of the Honey Garlic wings, in a basket with fries."

"Wait—what are the flavors again?" one girl asks.

I could rattle them off in my sleep. "We've got Honey Mustard, Honey Garlic, Tikka, Thai spiced, General Tso's, Chili Bacon, Chicken Parm, and—of course—Buffalo style in mild, hot, or wild."

And that's just the regular menu. The chef does a special flavor every week. Whiskey Maple is always a winner. Teriyaki is pretty good. But this week's special has been a disaster. Making a Thanksgiving-themed recipe was a nice idea, but I can't give away the Cranberry Almond wings. Not for love or money.

The other two girls make their choices, and I rush the order to the kitchen before it closes. Then I take up a position leaning against the nearly empty bar with my friend Carly, who's also on shift. She worked the bar tonight, while my section was in the dining room.

“We survived another one,” she says, passing me one of the mints she keeps in her pocket. “What was your best tip of the night?”

“Depends how you look at it,” I tell her. “A six-top tipped me fifty bucks. But my history professor tipped me fifteen bucks, and warned me to look over the Articles of Confederation before tomorrow’s quiz.”

“He gave you a *clue*?” Carly looks scandalized. “And a fat tip? I think he wants your body.”

“Think again.” I give her a smile. “He was here with his husband and their baby. I think he just felt bad that I was serving his dinner while the rest of my classmates are studying at the library.”

And the man has a point. I work a lot of hours, and I go to school full time. There’s no time for anything else. But that’s just the way it is.

“Fine, fine. So he’s not going to be your new boyfriend.” Carly drops her voice. “Besides, I know you only have eyes for that crew over there.”

My glance jumps involuntarily to table number seventeen. She’s not wrong. Who wouldn’t be interested in an entire table full of sizzling-hot hockey players? “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Uh-huh,” Carly says, eyeing them. Then she lets out a little sigh of yearning. “More for me then.”

“You wish,” I tease.

“You bet I do, Stoddard. Let’s face it, table seventeen is the best thing about working here.”

Once again, Carly is right. Neither of us can quit until springtime anyway. The owner pays a \$1500 bonus to wait staff who work for him for an entire year. I need that money. So I’m going to smell faintly of chicken wings for the next several months, no matter what.

At least I can ogle the hockey players. Table seventeen is a long, high table surrounded by a dozen bar stools. And it’s usually open by the time they wander in at eight o’clock, after practice. They’re always starving for wings and fries.

For Carly and me, it's like a delicious buffet. The hockey team has as many flavors of hotness as The Biscuit in the Basket has flavors of wings. First you've got Tate Adler, who's six feet tall, at least. His flavor is what we'd call Brown-Haired Defenseman Hot. Next to him sits Lex, who's Pretty Boy Freshman Hot. And then Jonah—the Grumpy Hot Giant.

And we can't forget the Twins of Hotness—Paxton and Patrick Graham. I can't actually tell them apart unless I take their order. Paxton likes the Chicken Parm wings, while his brother goes for Buffalo style with extra blue cheese.

My favorite player of all, though, is Weston Griggs. He's a defenseman, sporting thick brown hair in a tidy cut. He has a winning smile and inquisitive blue eyes. But he's also got tattoos that poke out from the sleeves of his T-shirts.

I've had a thing for him ever since he scored Moo U's first goal at the start of last season. And then my thing became a full-blown crush when he came into The Biscuit in the Basket that night and flashed me a huge smile, called me by name—or at least the name that's printed on my nametag—and then ordered a dozen wings and a side of coleslaw.

If I were a braver girl, I would have jotted my number onto his bill. But that's not how I roll. I'm the kind of girl who says nothing but then thinks about him all the time instead.

Weston often shows up in my daydreams. *Hey girl, I can't help noticing how sexy you look tonight. I have a weakness for women wearing T-shirts with hockey-playing chickens on them, shooting a Southern-style biscuit into a net. And even though I can have my pick of the campus women, I like mine wearing a polyester apron just like yours .*

I might as well fantasize, right? It's not like I have a real social life. I spend all my free time here.

Table seventeen has a big game tomorrow. So it's a little quiet over there. They're much rowdier on actual game nights. After a win, they drink

beer by the pitcher. And after a loss, they also order shots.

But there are more wins than losses. Moo U is a hockey school, and our guys have brought home more league pennants than any other team in the Hockey East conference. And this year could be big. The team looks great. They could go all the way to the Frozen Four.

They're decent tippers, too. Especially for college boys.

"Tell you what," Carly says. "All my other tables are gone. And since you can't stop watching the hockey players, how about you tip me forty bucks and you can close 'em out in my place? You know you want to."

"Forty bucks?" I yelp. "They're not drinking tonight. I'll be lucky to break even on that deal."

"But I'm giving you my eye candy! Duh. And besides—they just ordered two pitchers of beer. It's someone's birthday." Carly chirps. "Weston's I think."

"Weston's birthday," I say stupidly.

"Yup!" She holds out her hand. "Now pass me forty bucks, and bring the tattooed hottie his birthday beer. You know you want to," she repeats.

My glance travels, unbidden, to the strapping defenseman at the head of the table. The one whose smile makes my heart go pitter-patter. And now I know when his birthday falls. That will come in handy when we're married.

"Earth to Abbi! Are you going to let me go off shift, or what?"

"Fine," I say, digging two twenties out of my apron and passing them to her. "Go already."

"Give Weston my love," she says with a smirk. "Along with the big moony eyes you always give him."

"I don't give anyone moony eyes."

"Just keep telling yourself that." She winks, tosses her ponytail, and leaves for the night.

Weston must be turning twenty-one, or maybe twenty-two, if he played junior hockey before college. I'm surprised he's celebrating his birthday so

quietly with his teammates. It's not unusual for Weston to show up here with a girl on his arm. Or on his knee. Or anywhere on his person, really.

It's a different girl every time. He's a player in every sense of the word. The women always seem happy to be his girl of the hour, though. There's always a lot of giggling at table seventeen when Weston has female company.

He likes them giggly. That's his type, I guess.

I really have no chance at all.

The bartender wakes me from this daydream by setting two pitchers on the bar, then knocking his knuckles against the wood. Twice. "Carly around?" he calls to me.

"I've got it," I say, darting over to load the beer onto a tray. I carry the pitchers and a stack of glasses to table seventeen.

There are two freshmen at the table who probably aren't twenty-one yet. But Kippy, the lazy manager, left a half hour ago, and these guys all walk home. I'm not in the mood to play cop, so everyone gets a glass.

"Evening boys," I say, setting the pitchers down in front of Weston one at a time. "This one is the IPA, and this one is the IPL. Enjoy. Does anyone need anything else?"

"Yeah we do!" one of the freshmen shouts. "You know it's Weston's birthday? Maybe you should do a striptease for us."

Oh lovely . I don't know this jerk's name, but I make a mental note to remember his face, so I can stay well clear of his hands. There's enough trouble in my life already.

"*Rookie!* " Weston barks. "Our server doesn't need a side of sexual harassment with her job description tonight. Don't be that kind of asshole. And only an idiot would be rude to the woman who serves your food at least three nights a week."

I let out a startled laugh, and fall a little more deeply in love with Weston. "What an *excellent* point."

But he isn't done. "Now put ten bucks in the kitty." He pats the table and waits.

The freshman blinks. But then he reaches for his wallet. The team kitty is a stash of money that builds all season long. The captain and assistant captains are in charge of deciding which infractions require a contribution. And in the spring—after the last game is played—they choose a charity and make a gift.

Weston puts the younger man's ten into an envelope in his backpack. "Now apologize to Gail," he demands. "Or I'm not pouring you one of my birthday beers."

The younger guy scowls. "Sorry, Gail," he says gruffly. "My bad."

Weston turns his handsome face toward mine and meets my gaze. His is warm and cautiously amused. "How would you grade that apology?"

"Um...?" I've gotten a little lost in his blue eyes. "Sorry?"

"I think the kid deserves no better than a B-. But I'll leave it up to you. Should we let him pass?"

"Sure," I say, not wanting to make a fuss. "I've heard far worse, to be honest." And I wish I could say it was rare.

"That is unfortunate," he says softly. "But not tonight, okay? It's my job to train up the rookies—for the good of Moo U, and for the good of hockey. It's my sacred, noble mission."

"Sure it is." His buddy Tate elbows him. "Last night you said that convincing me to order the Thai wings was your sacred, noble mission."

Weston shrugs. "A guy can have two sacred, noble missions."

"Especially on his birthday," I add. "Cheers, boys. Drink up, because it's last call." We close at ten on weeknights.

Then I leave them to it. I need to do some side work so I can leave as soon as they're through.

By the time I deliver the sorority girls' food, the candles on the tables are burning low in their votive cups. This is my favorite time of night at

The Biscuit in the Basket. It's peaceful, as the murmur of quiet conversation replaces the dull roar we hear throughout the dinner rush.

The Biscuit has a cozy, old-time feel, like it's been here forever. The walls are paneled in dark brown wood, but most of the space has been given over to group photos of Moo U sports teams from every consecutive year since the turn of the last century.

I love to stop for a glance at the oldest photos, with the baseball players in their baggy, pinstriped knickers. And the hockey players with their 1960s haircuts. The women's team photos start up a bit later, in the eighties. There's basketball and cross country too.

One thing you won't find on these walls, though, is a photo of a football team. Moo U doesn't have one. We're a D1 hockey school, and we do well in lacrosse and baseball, as well as winter sports like skiing and ski jumping. But football just isn't very Vermonty. So we don't bother.

To finish up the night's work, I take a seat at an empty table and roll silverware for tomorrow's shift. And I just happen to pick a table that's within earshot of table seventeen. Eavesdropping is good service, right? I'm easy to find if they need anything.

Plus, it's entertaining. The hockey players are making celebratory toasts. "To winning the league this year!" one of the twins says.

"The *league*?" Weston yelps. "Why not the national championship? Aim high, Patrick."

"To Professor Reynolds for postponing the Rocks for Jocks test!"

"Wait, really? It was postponed?"

"To cold beer and warm women!"

That was the obnoxious freshman again. Weston ignores him this time.

"To Weston!" Tate cheers. "Another trip around the sun!"

"Aw, shucks, guys. You're all buying me dinner, right?" He sets down his beer. "Speaking of dinner, I almost forgot about my flyers." He pulls his

backpack off the floor and unzips it. He pulls out a folder from the copy shop and flips it open. "It's time to hang up my sign."

Tate looks over his shoulder and laughs. "No way . You're doing that again? Why?"

"Because I love Thanksgiving. It's my favorite holiday."

"You could come out to our farm, you know," Tate argues. "You have a standing invitation."

"That is a tempting offer, especially because your grandma makes that apple pecan tart with the crinkly edges." Weston makes a motion with his fingers, as if crinkling imaginary dough. "And the crumble topping is spectacular."

It's so cute I find myself smiling into the silverware bin.

"So what's the problem, then?" Tate demands. "And if you pick on my grandma's cooking, I will hurt you."

"Your grandmother's cooking is awesome. My problem is with your father's football picks. I can't root for the Patriots, man. Besides, this way I'm providing a public service."

"What service?" Someone snatches a flyer out of the folder and reads it aloud. *"Rent a boyfriend for the holiday. For \$25, I will be your Thanksgiving date. I will talk hockey with your dad. I will bring your mother flowers. I will be polite, and wear a nicely ironed shirt. Note: I don't cook, so I am not able to bring a dish. I'm from out of town, and have no plans for the holiday. But I love Thanksgiving, and would be happy to celebrate with you. Especially if your mother is a good cook. Or your father. I'm not sexist ."*

There's a smattering of laughter and sarcastic applause.

"You're charging money?" one of the freshmen squeaks.

"It's a nominal fee," Weston says with a shrug.

"But it makes you sound desperate," the youngster says.

“Nah, it makes me sound like I value my own time and company. And I always get multiple offers. The fee keeps the nutters away. Only women who really need my help will apply.”

Someone asks: “What if it’s a dude who calls?” And the whole table snickers.

I’m surprised when Weston just shrugs. “That would be fine I guess. Fake love is fake love.”

Twelve hockey players howl with laughter.

And I am captivated. There’s nothing on Netflix that’s half as interesting as Weston Griggs hiring himself out on Thanksgiving. *Boyfriend for Rent* .

I wonder if there’s a rent-to-own option?

“Weston, is this even legal?” one of the twins asks. “Coach will be pretty pissed if you’re busted for solicitation.”

“Does the team have a bail fund?” his brother asks. And then they high-five each other.

“Don’t twist my good deed into something tawdry.” Weston lifts his perfect, masculine jaw and gives the twins a glare. “My intentions are pure. Last Thanksgiving I had a lovely meal with a sophomore nursing student in Winooski. She’d recently broken up with her high school boyfriend, and her parents were upset about the breakup. God knows why. So I went along and they didn’t mention him once the whole day.”

“Huh,” Tate says. “So I guess she got her twenty-five bucks’ worth in peace of mind.”

“Exactly. And I enjoyed a lovely turkey—cooked sous vide style, so it was extra moist and juicy. Then her mother rubbed the skin with butter and crisped it up under the broiler. And there was a sausage stuffing with water chestnuts so good I almost cried.”

“Water chestnuts?” Tate shudders. “That’s just wrong.”

“No, it’s glorious.” Weston puts down his beer glass. “And now I’m hungry again. We’ve got to stop talking about Thanksgiving. It’s a whole week away.”

“You started it,” Tate says with a chuckle. “And the Pats are totally going to win this year.”

“Bullshit,” Weston mutters. “Maybe I should come over just so I can watch your dad cry.”

“Bet you a four-pack of Goldenpour they win,” Tate challenges.

“Deal. We’ll settle up after the holiday.”

Then Weston gets up and hangs his flyer on the bulletin board right by the door.

They depart forty minutes later, leaving behind a tip of fifty-five bucks. Totally worth it! I yawn my way through the rest of my side work until it’s time to race home to burn the midnight oil for my test.

But before I leave the Biscuit for the night, I stop in front of the bulletin board. If I hadn’t overheard that conversation tonight, I wouldn’t have looked twice at this sign. Weston didn’t put his name on it. There’s nothing there to advertise the fact that whoever hires Weston on Thanksgiving is getting a date with the hunkiest man on the hockey team.

I reach out and tear one of the phone numbers off the bottom corner. And then I tuck it into my pocket on my way out the door.

NINETEEN

People Get Restless

Weston

MY PHONE RINGS when I'm on the way into my econ class. This class bores me, so I stop outside the lecture hall and answer my brother's call. "What's shakin', Stevie?"

"You're coming home for Thanksgiving, right?"

Uh-oh . Cue the awkward silence. "Nah, I'm sorry. My practice schedule is awfully tight."

"Bullshit!" he says immediately. "You're a lying liar who lies!"

"Aw, come on now. It doesn't make sense for me to rent a car and drive across the state for a meal, Stevie. I'm a busy guy, and it will be a—"

"Shit show," he grumbles. "That's why you should feel obligated to come home and suffer with me. It's not like we live in Texas, asshole. Get a Zipcar. Drive a hundred miles. A hockey game is longer than your drive home."

"I can't, man. I have a date." This is strictly true, seeing as I have at least three offers already this morning.

"A date," he says, his voice betraying flat disbelief. "On Thanksgiving."

"Yup."

"That's what you said last year, too."

"It was true last year as well." He doesn't need to know that I've hired myself out. In truth, I feel bad that Stevie has to suffer through Thanksgiving at one of our parents' homes. He's a year behind me at Dartmouth, which is just a few miles away from our mom's house in Norwich and a few more miles from our dad's place in Fairlee. He can't blame the hockey schedule, either, because he hasn't played since high school.

He's trapped. But that is not my fault. "You'll have Lauren's company though, right?" Our sister lives in town with her fiancé.

Stevie makes a disgusted sound. “You know what she’s like right now. All she can talk about is the wedding. Flowers and colors and the rest of that bullshit.”

We both shudder. As the owner of a dick, weddings were never interesting to me. But since our parents’ spectacular divorce a couple of years ago, just the *idea* of marriage makes me feel a little squicky.

At some point in the near future, I’m going to have to put on a tux and watch my sister marry her boyfriend of three years. I’m going to have to clap and smile and try not to suffocate in my bow tie, while I watch my sister make the biggest mistake of her life.

Nothing against her guy, either. He seems nice enough for now. That’s the problem, though. Once the glow wears off, people get restless. And then they do stupid, crazy things to each other. And they make their kids watch.

Fun times.

“Look.” I level with my brother. “I’m not coming home for Thanksgiving. You don’t have to either, you know. You don’t owe it to them.”

“Dad, though. He’ll be all alone.”

“That’s true,” I murmur. And I feel for the guy. “But our father is an adult, you know? The destruction of his marriage is about to celebrate its third anniversary. He can either stew about it, or he can find a way to move on.”

“Good luck telling him that.”

“Oh I’ve tried.” I was gentle, of course. I’m not a monster. The problem is that my father prefers rage to action. He’ll spend the whole holiday muttering about “that bitch,” which is how he refers to our mother.

Or, if Stevie went to Mom’s house instead, Dad would be mad at him for days. You really can’t win with him anymore.

He doesn’t see how much this upsets us either. Sure, we were all pretty astonished when Mom left Dad. It was brutal. But she’s still our Mom, and

she still loves us. Three years later, and our father still expects us to take sides. It's fucking exhausting.

I shove a hand into my pocket and absently rub the smooth piece of obsidian stone that's resting there. Our assistant coach is really into crystals. He said obsidian would help me get rid of "emotional blockage" and give me strength, clarity, and compassion.

But what if I'm not the one who needs it? How much obsidian can I sneak into my father's house without him noticing?

My parents' divorce is why I no longer go home for Thanksgiving. And also why I will never *ever* fall in love. It turns you into a bitter freak when it ends.

"Dude, you *have* to come home for Christmas," my brother says. "If you tell me you have a date, I'm going to drive up there and haul you back here myself."

"Yeah, okay." There's no way I can pretend to be busy on Christmas Day. "I'll come home. We'll stay with Dad, yeah?"

"Yeah. And bring some nice clothes."

"Why?" I demand. "For church?" My parents still insist on attending the same church. Neither one of them is willing to be the one who leaves. As far as I can tell, they sit on opposite sides of the room shooting daggers at each other while the priest stands up front preaching about love and forgiveness.

"Worse," Stevie grumbles. "Mom is throwing an engagement party for Lauren on the day before Christmas Eve."

"Oh shit," I whisper. Then I let out a groan.

"Yeah." My brother sighs. We both know what that means—Mom and Dad at the same party for the first time in three years. With alcohol, too. It could be bad bad *bad*. "You'll be there, right? If you try to blow this off, I'll tell Dad it was you who scratched his Mercedes by having sex up against it."

“*Rude*,” I grunt. “You know that was a freak accident.” I’d set my date up on the hood and we’d had a fine time. Who could have guessed that her short little skirt had metal grommets on the back? What kind of fashion designer thought that was a good idea?

“Still your fault, though.” He snickers. “Don’t make me do it. If I have to go to this thing, then so do you.”

“Yeah, okay,” I grumble. It’s not my sister’s fault that our family has become just like a daytime TV show. If she’s crazy enough to get engaged, I’ll make sure there’s someone at her party who isn’t going to make a scene.

Even if it hurts me. And I expect it to hurt plenty.

“Who’s this date with, anyway?” my brother asks.

“Hmm?”

“Your date. On Thanksgiving.”

“Oh, uh, a new girl.” I haven’t chosen one yet, of course.

“They’re all new girls with you.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

He snorts. “Yeah. But we’re not all hockey stars. The talent pool works harder for you than it does for us mere mortals, bro.”

“It’s good work if you can get it.” Just because I’m never marrying a woman doesn’t mean that I don’t enjoy them.

“Later, Weston.”

“Later, punk.”

I slip into the back of the lecture hall and nab an empty seat. I’m just settling in to the lecture when my phone buzzes with a text. I don’t look right away, because I assume it’s Stevie busting on me again. He probably thinks he can guilt me into coming home for Thanksgiving.

But as the professor drones on about monetary policy, I decide to check. I don’t want to be a dick, but it’s a big lecture hall and I’ve perfected the art of texting while pretending to pay attention.

The number is unfamiliar. It must be another inquiry for Thanksgiving. I've gotten three already this morning.

Hi there , the new one begins. My name is Abbi. I saw your sign at the Biscuit, and I wonder if I could take you up on your Boyfriend Rental offer. I'm a junior here at Moo U, and my family's place is just fifteen miles away in Shelburne.

Hmm. Two of the other inquiries are from girls who live further afield. So I already like Abbi. I'm just about to respond when an additional message appears.

She adds: You should also know that my step-stepmother is the sort of cook who goes to a lot of trouble. There will be a dozen homemade dishes on the table. Like butternut squash soup with shredded bacon and croutons on top. Roasted turkey, of course. But also steamed Chinese dumplings filled with turkey and scallions. Plus an army of side dishes, and three kinds of pie. She's a superstar cook.

Well, damn. My mouth is watering already. And before I think better of it, I ask a follow-up question. ***Is there a dipping sauce with the dumplings? Wait, was that a rude opener? Let me try again. Hi Abbi! I'm Weston. I really like Thanksgiving, and your dumplings intrigue me .***

Abbi: Your curiosity is justified. You can't go home with just anyone for Thanksgiving, right? What if the mashed potatoes were out of a box?

Weston: Bite your tongue! Only a monster would make boxed mashed on Thanksgiving.

Abbi: I'm just pointing out that you have to be careful going home with strangers. And, for the record, last year there were two different dipping sauces for the dumplings. There was soy ginger and also cranberry .

That does sound promising. I think Abbi's Thanksgiving spread sounds like a winner. I decide to just accept it on the spot, and let the other women down gently.

Weston: *Okay Abbi, you're on. Please text the details when you're ready. I'm happy to meet you anywhere on campus. I don't have a car though .*

Abbi: *I can drive . And I really appreciate this. Holidays can be tense .*

Weston: *True Story . Send me the deets and I'll see you on Thursday .*

When Thanksgiving Day arrives, I am careful to arrive—showered and shaven—at Abbi's front door right on time. I might even be a minute or two early. I'm wearing a crisp Dad-pleasing shirt and my best Mom-pleasing tie, because I make it a point to always know my audience.

I get teased for it, too. The guys at the hockey house call me Mr. Smooth.

"You're referring to my skating, right?" I'd said the first time I heard it.

"Nah, man. Everything about you is smooth. The hair. The whole polite-guy thing. The ladies really go for it. I bet even your ass is smooth, but I don't need any proof, thanks." That had gotten a lot of laughs.

So sue me. Life is easier when you take control of every situation. If my skills with hair products and parents earn me the occasional ribbing, I'm perfectly okay with that.

Abbi's address turns out to be an old Victorian mansion that's been chopped up into smaller apartments. In the wallpapered vestibule, I push the buzzer for apartment 2, and a female voice calls, "Just a second!" on the other side of the door.

I wonder what Abbi is like. It doesn't matter very much, of course. I haven't agreed to marry her. It's just one day of my life. And people fascinate me, so even if Abbi's family is irritating as fuck, I probably won't take it personally.

But I have a good feeling about Abbi herself. She's local, which is interesting. Vermonters are pretty cool. They have a rugged mentality, and they rarely complain. And they're usually hockey fans. What's not to like about that?

The door opens, and I immediately lose my train of thought. I'm blinking at a pretty blond woman with shoulder-length hair. My first reaction is all *hell yes and thank you, Jesus* .

Then I realize this is not just any woman. It's the hot waitress from The Biscuit in the Basket. The one who remembers every order without writing it down. The one who always seems to know when we need something more, or when it's time to drop the check.

The one with the kissable ivory neck and gray eyes that always make me a little stupid. I've never asked her out, because it's rude to hit on a girl who's just trying to get through her shift at work. But man, I'd like to.

"Hi," she says, frowning at me. "Wow. You're wearing a tie."

"Too much?" I ask, my hand flying to the knot of silk at my throat. "I could lose the tie." And, heck, why stop there? If she asked me to lose my trousers, I'd do it. *Anything for you, honey* .

"No, you look very respectful. Thank you for doing this."

I blink slowly. I can't believe my luck. She's my date? "You work at The Biscuit in the Basket," I say stupidly. "But your name tag says *Gail* ."

She smiles. "That's right. The lazy manager put the wrong name on it, and then wouldn't redo it for me. But I'm glad you can recognize me without the uniform."

"Well, sure. You look nice. Your hair is different. Fluffier. Wait. Is fluffy a good thing?" I babble.

She laughs suddenly. "Fluffy is fine. At work they make us wear those visor caps. Like we're all golf caddies."

I smile back at her and get a little lost for another moment. And her laugh is terrific. A little husky. I dig it.

“So, uh, are you ready to go?”

That’s when I realize I’m blocking her way out of her own door. “Yup, sorry,” I stammer, leaping to the side like a frisky goat.

Oh, man. Nobody would call me Mr. Smooth right now, that’s for damn sure. I’m glad my teammates aren’t here to witness this. I’d never live it down.

Abbi locks her door. “Where are you from, Weston? Is it too far to go home for Thanksgiving?”

“I’m from the eastern edge of Vermont. But I don’t have a car, and we have practice tomorrow anyway. Hey—does your family drink? I brought a bottle of wine.” I hold it up, along with a bouquet of flowers, too.

“That’s lovely of you,” she says. “I have a bottle in my car too. I find that where alcohol and my so-called family are concerned, more is more. Although I’m driving tonight, so I can’t drink.”

“Your so-called family?”

“Well, it’s complicated without being terribly interesting. But we’re going to my stepfather’s house. I mean, he used to be my stepfather and now he’s married to someone else.”

“Your step-stepmother,” I say, recalling her text message.

“Right.” She leads me off the porch and down the walkway. “My car is just around the back. It won’t take us long to get there. You’ll be eating turkey dumplings in no time.”

“Sounds good. My body is, like, fifty percent wings and fries at this point. I’m sure you know that. I’m at your restaurant all the time.”

“Table number seventeen,” she says cheerfully. “The hockey table. Do you know that we prep a different portion of wings depending on whether you guys win or lose?”

“No, really? Why?”

“Because you eat more and get drunker on the nights you lose than on the nights you win.”

“Huh. That’s very scientific of you.”

She unlocks an elderly Honda Civic and opens the driver’s side door.
“Last chance to back out.”

I wouldn’t dream of it. I have to remember how to be Mr. Smooth, though, and flirt properly with Abbi. Who knows? After a great meal, we could make this a night to remember. “I’m at your *service*,” I say, hoping it sounds a little sexy and not creepy. “Let’s get our turkey on.”

Huh. Mr. Smooth seems to be on vacation today.

I give myself a fifty-fifty shot at success. But I’ve faced worse odds.
Game on.

TWENTY

Are We Really Doing This?

Abbi

"SO, SET THE SCENE FOR ME," Weston says as I drive toward Shelburne. "How much of an acting job do you need? I can be the new love of your life. Or I could be just one in a string of casual boyfriends. Or even just a friend from far away that you brought home to dinner out of pity. However you want to play this is fine with me. I just need to know ahead of time."

"Right, okay." I have to think fast, because I hadn't actually planned this through. I honestly assumed he wouldn't show up. "Nobody keeps very good tabs on me," I say slowly. "So if I say that we've been dating about a month, it wouldn't raise any eyebrows. And that seems plausible without being a big deal, either."

"A month it is!" he says easily.

This isn't nearly as awkward as it could be, thanks to Weston. He's good company, which I already know since I've listened to a thousand hours of hockey smack talk. He has a fun outlook on life.

"Names, please," he demands. "Who am I meeting?"

"Dr. Dalton Ritter is my stepfather. You can call him Dalton. The new Mrs. Ritter is Lila."

"Lila and Dalton Ritter, MD," he repeats. "I'm premed, so he and I could have plenty to talk about. One more question—can I ask why you felt the need for a date tonight? And are there any topics I'm supposed to avoid? Any conversations I'm supposed to interrupt?"

"Well..." I do have my reasons. But Weston doesn't really need to know what they are. "We should avoid the obvious tricky subjects—like politics. But there's no specific issue between Dalton and me."

"Gotcha," he says. "So I'm just here as a buffer? Is it a big gathering?"

"Nope, which is why I need a buffer. It will just be them and her son."

“Your step-stepbrother?” Weston guesses.

“Yeah, and he’s a tool. You’ll see.”

“No problemo,” he says easily. “So you might as well tell me about you too.”

“Me? I’m just a student like you. I grew up here in Vermont. And I’m trying to finish my degree in three years plus the summer terms I’ve done.”

“Whoa! Major?” he asks.

“Business, with concentrations in finance and marketing.”

“Ooh, finance? That sounds hard. I’m currently suffering through Modern Global Markets.”

“Huh, I loved that class,” I admit. “Plus, the business degree is practical. I’ll be on my own after graduation. That’s why I accelerated my degree. But it’s been so stressful. And all my extra time is spent delivering wings to drunk hockey players, so there isn’t much else to tell about me.”

“Oh, sure there is,” he says. “If we’re dating, I would know more about you than the basic facts. What’s your favorite song? What’s your favorite food? What’s your favorite color? Give me something to work with.”

“Let’s see.” I chuckle. “Food? Lately just anything that didn’t come out of the fryer at The Biscuit in the Basket. My favorite color is orange. My current favorite song is “Ain’t No Man” by the Avett Brothers.”

“Ooh, good one!” Weston says. “Put it on. Do you want to take the chorus or the verses?”

“Uh, what?” I reach for my phone and unlock it. Then I hand it to him, because Vermont has a law against holding a device while driving. “Go ahead and play it.”

“Okay, but you’re singing with me. We’ll do the chorus together.”

A few seconds later the guitar intro starts up. Weston starts clapping his hands with the syncopated beat. “Ready?” he says. And then he launches in.

And it’s rude not to join him, right? So I sing along. And we sing *loud*, the same way I would if I were alone.

Weston doesn't embarrass easily, I guess. He sings every word of every verse, and I belt it out too. Three minutes later we've done the whole thing.

"Whew!" he says, leaning back against the headrest. "That was fun. I always sing loudly before tests too."

"Is today stressful for you?" I ask. "This *was* your idea."

He laughs. "Not at all. I'm fine, but you look ready to barf."

Huh. He's probably right. A trip to Dalton's always stresses me out. Although the words *you look ready to barf* were not part of my fantasy date with Weston.

"Don't worry," I tell him. "I won't barf. They're not really worth it. I just have to show my face on the holiday, make nice, eat some gourmet turkey and then it's over until Christmas."

"Fair enough. Where's the rest of your family? Out of state?"

"Well..." Oh man. I was hoping he wouldn't ask. I swallow carefully before speaking my truth. "This is actually all my family."

"Oh," he says quietly. "I'm sorry. What a stupid question. Way to put my foot in it."

"No, it's okay. I never met my dad. And my mother passed away three years ago." I can say it smoothly now. For a while there I couldn't really talk about losing my mom. I don't remember the last part of my senior year in high school. I spent it curled into a ball, in shock that my mother had taken my dog to the vet one morning, and then died in a car crash an hour later.

It's not supposed to happen to a forty-year-old woman. But it did.

I clear my throat. "So tell me about you. I bet you come from a huge family."

"Uh..." He chuckles nervously. "It's kind of true. I have a million cousins. And an older sister and a younger brother. Thanksgiving can get rowdy."

“That must be fun. No wonder you like the holiday—it must be a huge party. How big is your table?”

“Big,” he says. “And my Aunt Mercedes practically has to drive an eighteen-wheeler to shop for Thanksgiving.”

“I can’t even picture it,” I say. Although I’ve always wanted to be part of a big family. My mom didn’t marry Dalton until I was twelve. So for years it was just the two of us, living in various run-down apartments around the greater Burlington area.

My mother had been Dalton’s receptionist. He married her about eighteen months after his first wife left him. They were married for six years. So now he’s on wife number three.

I moved out about ten minutes after his recent wedding.

Dalton isn’t a monster. But I am not his child, and neither of us ever did a good job of pretending differently. He owed me literally nothing after my mother died. She had no assets to speak of. She cut back her working hours after she married him, because he wanted her to have time to take care of his home, and to cook and to entertain.

My mother *loved* this arrangement. She learned to play tennis. She went out to lunch with friends.

What she didn’t do was buy a life insurance policy. Or put any savings in my name. And since my mother entered her marriage with no assets, save for a beat-up car and a nice collection of 90s music on CD, there was nothing for me to inherit.

I get a lot of financial aid from the university because my mother passed away. But Dalton pays a few thousand dollars every year toward my books and fees. He didn’t want to pay for me to rent an apartment, though. “Seems silly when you could live in your old room,” he’d said.

That was a generous offer, but it didn’t feel like a real option for me. So I work a lot of hours at the Biscuit, and I’m going to graduate a year early.

“What was Thanksgiving like?” Weston asks me. “Before? With your mom?”

“Oh!” I say stupidly. But it’s been so long since I thought about this. “When I was a little girl, it was just the two of us. We’d get up and watch the Macy’s parade from start to finish. And then mom got KFC chicken, mashed potatoes, and corn. She made the pumpkin pie, though. From scratch. My mother was an impractical person. Back then, she didn’t cook all that often, but she would bake the most exquisite things. I didn’t mind. And I really loved the ritual of Thanksgiving.”

“I bet,” he says. “The ritual is half the fun. Maybe more than half.”

We both go quiet for a few minutes after that. I’m picturing one of our small apartments, with its ugly green carpet and the sagging sofa. The truth is that I would give anything to go back there one more time. My whole childhood, I never had any cause to doubt my mother’s love. Even when she married Dalton, I still knew I was her number one.

“Sorry,” Weston says quietly. “Didn’t mean to bring you down. Do we need another song?”

“Too late!” I pull into Dalton’s grand driveway. “We’re here already.” I park behind Lila’s shiny BMW and put the car in park.

“Hey.” Weston turns to me in his seat, and makes no move to get out. “It’s never too late for a song. I sing loudly and badly whenever the mood strikes.”

Wow , is my only lucid thought. Those blue eyes are quite debilitating at close range. Weston Griggs is in my car. For the next couple of hours, he’s my Thanksgiving date.

“Once more for luck,” he says, hitting the play button again. The Avett Brothers launch into the intro again.

“Are we really doing this?” I laugh.

“We really are.”

Then we both open our mouths and launch into the song. This time I'm not driving, so we can watch each other. I'm sure I'd feel self-conscious if Weston weren't hamming it up like a drunk karaoke singer.

He's even dancing a little in his seat. It's so ridiculously cute that I can't help but giggle my way through the song.

Oh God, I'm *giggling* . Just like the girls who are always perched on his knee after hockey games. I get it now. Giggling makes more sense when Weston Griggs is smiling at you.

We're both red faced and laughing as the song ends. Reluctantly, I climb out of my car. Weston grabs the flowers and the wine, and then wraps an arm around my shoulders as we approach the house.

It feels—wow —really nice. He's naturally talented when it comes to this fake boyfriend thing. He even gives my shoulder a little squeeze just before the front door opens onto my step-stepmother.

"Abbi! Happy Thanksgiving!" she gushes. "And you must be Abbi's young man. I've heard so much about you."

"Really?" he asks with a chuckle. "What did she say?"

Oh no! When I'd called Lila to tell her I was bringing someone, she'd asked polite questions about my "new man." And since I already admired Weston, it was easy enough to provide some details. *Terrific at hockey. Fun person. Lovely manners* .

Praising him came easily to me. But if she repeats any of it, I'm going to sound like a creepy stalker.

But I'm in luck. She gives him a generic smile instead, probably because she wasn't listening to me anyway. "It's good to meet you. Come right in."

"These are for you," Weston says, offering the flowers. "And I brought a bottle of sauvignon blanc."

"How lovely," she says. "Hang up your coats, and meet me in the kitchen. I'll pour you a drink." She leaves us alone in the entry hall of this

house, which I've always thought of as Dalton's. Never mine. Not even when I lived here.

"Oh jeez," I say under my breath, realizing I've left something in the car.

"Problem?"

"The wine I brought is still outside."

Weston glances toward the door. "If you want, I'll step outside right now and grab it for you. But I have a better idea. You could think it over."

"What's that?"

"Leave it out there for now. And you and I can drink it *later*," he says, his voice richening to a suggestive pitch. "If you're into that."

Wait. Now hold on a second. Did Weston just proposition me? For *real*? I might do a happy dance right here on Lila's fussy new rug.

"Hello, sir," Weston says in the next breath. "You must be Dr. Ritter."

And sure enough, my stepfather is right here with us, reaching out a hand to shake Weston's. "Call me Dalton," he says.

They introduce themselves to each other while I stand here feeling befuddled. A second ago—when Weston suggested we save the wine for later—it felt so *real*. My mind offered up a few naughty ideas on command.

But now I realize that Weston probably saw Dalton approaching and whispered to me because it made us look like a convincing couple. Just a hot hockey player having a private moment with his girlfriend, right?

That has to be it. Weston is just doing his best to nail this acting job.

And it's too damn bad. Because white wine and a hookup with Weston Griggs would be the most fun I've had since...ever.

"Abbi?" Dalton's voice breaks through my reverie. "Are you coming?"

"Yes," I say quickly.

Weston takes my hand in his and gives it a friendly squeeze. And that feels nice, too.

It's all pretend, Abbi , I coach myself. Don't you forget it .

TWENTY-ONE

Anyone Get it on Video?

September

ANTON

It's a Wednesday afternoon during the preseason, and I should really be in the locker room. But I'm standing in an office in the Bruisers' headquarters, waiting to find out if I still have a NHL career.

Practice starts in thirty minutes. If they wanted me down there, I'd already know, wouldn't I?

My hands are clammy and my heart rate is erratic. So this is what it feels like when fate brings the hammer down. If only I could go back in time and make better choices. I wouldn't be standing here sweating.

Couldn't they just fire me already? I'm dying here.

Prayer probably won't work, even if this is one of those moments when I'm tempted to bargain with God. What would I even say?

Dear Lord—I'm sorry for all the cockiness I displayed last year. You know my stats were great during my rookie season. But then I kinda self-destructed.

I'm sorry I didn't leave the bar earlier all those times when I should have. I'm sorry about missing the team jet that time in Arizona when I had no business being so hungover in the middle of a road trip.

On the matter of a certain compromising photo, I think we can both agree that the incident with those women was not really my fault. But I do

apologize for putting myself in that situation and allowing for that tacky result.

But I am most sorry for the worst sin of all—squandering all those opportunities. You gave me a shot at greatness. But I started my second season on the struggle bus. And after that disastrous game against Chicago, you (in your infinite wisdom) sent me down to purgatory—aka the minor league team in Hartford. I had to watch on TV while the Bruisers went to the playoffs.

This summer I repented. I ran seven miles every day, even on the ones when New York City was as humid and gross as a used practice jersey.

I didn't skip a workout in the gym, either. In the evenings, I've drunk only a single light beer. Did you ever hear the joke about how light beer is just like sex in the bottom of a canoe? Because it's fucking close to water.

Oh hell! I can't even pray like a grownup. I just told a dirty joke to God.

Just then, the door swings open, and my heart plummets as Hugh Major walks into the small room, chest out. He's followed by Eric, my father's cousin, who is also my agent.

And Eric looks *grim* .

Oh shit. This is really happening.

Up until this very moment—when I saw that look on Eric's face—I still held out some hope that, after my strong showing at training camp, they'd give me one more chance.

Fuck my life. I deserve this. But it's still going to bite the big one.

"Well, son," Hugh says as Eric shuts the door. "You sure had some trouble last season."

"I know, sir," I say evenly, because a man doesn't cower from his fate. "My production was not up to my own standards."

"Nor mine," he agrees, even as a cold drop of sweat makes its way down my back. "You're capable of so much more."

"And I'm going to prove it, even if I have to do that in Hartford."

“Huh.” He frowns at me. “How about you do it downstairs on the practice rink instead? We’re going to roster you. But you’d better give us something to show for it.”

“*Yessir*,” I say, my ears ringing with confusion. Did I just hear that right? I’m *staying*?

I glance at Eric’s stern glower for clarification. Why does he look so dark when...

His lip twitches. Then it twitches again.

That Bastard! He knew how this was going to go. He was just fucking with me.

“Keep your head down, kid. You know you’ve got to,” says Hugh.

“I can,” I insist, dragging my gaze back to his. “I got this.”

“Then get down there and show us all.” He gives me a nod and—done with me now—lets himself out of the room to deal with someone else’s drama.

I don’t breathe until he’s gone. I’m drenched in cold sweat. And Eric, that fucker, is chuckling silently. “You jackass!” I hiss. “I about sharted myself just from the look on your ugly face when you walked in here.”

“I *know*,” he says with a snort. “It was priceless. And no less than you deserve. Honestly, Hugh should have yelled a little more and thrown some furniture around. Maybe that would put you into the headspace you need this season.”

“But I *am* in the right headspace,” I insist. “I’ve been there since I got sent down to Hartford in March. Now I’m fitter than I’ve ever been. Even since high school, when I was in lust with a distance runner.”

Eric shakes his head as he opens the door to shoo me into the hallway. “Let me guess—you ran half-marathons every day just to get into her spandex?”

“Yes.”

“Did it work?” he asks as we head for the stairs leading down to the historic lobby of the renovated warehouse where the Brooklyn Bruisers make their home.

“Oh, sure,” I recall. “Totally worth it. She was skinny, but man did she have stamina.” But I’m getting off topic. “This time I ran for *me*, though. Nobody will be able to outskate me. I’m fit and ready. They won’t be sorry they took this chance.”

Eric stops in the middle of the grand lobby, beneath the video screen showing highlights from last season. “That’s the problem. It’s your third season. They shouldn’t have to feel like they’re taking a chance. You’re not a rookie anymore.”

Well, ouch. “Yeah, no kidding. But things are already different.” I swipe open the door that leads to the practice facility.

“Tell me how,” he says as we enter the tunnel.

“I already told you my new rules.”

“Say it again,” he says. “Loudly. So the gods of hockey can hear you.”

Man, I love Eric, but I hate being treated like a kid brother. There’s no getting around it, though. He was this team’s first Bayer. It’s not his fault that he had to retire at the top of his game, after too many knee surgeries.

They picked me up that same season, so my nickname became *Baby Bayer*, and I can’t seem to shake it. I don’t enjoy the constant reminder that I was the second-choice Bayer.

Then again, my behavior last season helped the name stick.

This year will be different, though, because of these rules I made for myself. “No boozing,” I grumble. “No whoring.” Eric smirks. “And no scandals.”

“Good,” he says. “It’s a start. Although rules are what you make of them. And none of those three things is the real problem. It’s *focus*, Anton. And we both know it.”

“Yeah.” He’s right. But so am I, because the rules are meant to give some structure to my life. They’ll make me into a different man. A *better* man.

A man who can focus.

At the bottom of the tunnel, I swipe myself into the last secure door at the edge of the training complex. “I gotta suit up now.”

“Good thing,” he says cheerfully. “Have a great practice.”

“I will.” Seriously. I’ll never take this for granted again. Every time my ID card lets me through this door, I’ll say another hallelujah. “You’re still a shit cousin for making me sweat it, by the way.”

“Maybe.” He walks away laughing.

In the dressing room, I head for my locker. It’s right where it used to be, between Drake and Campeau. I’m so ready to buckle down and skate. And I won’t stop until we win the cup in June.

“You’re late, Baby Bayer!” O’Doul calls. “Change, already.”

“Sorry,” I say, preferring not to explain where I’ve been. “Let’s do this, boys!” I slap Drake on the back. “Who’s ready to skate until we puke?”

“You talk a good game,” my friend replies, pulling up his socks. “But I bet you’re really just planning the first big prank of the season.”

“Nah,” I say, tossing my T-shirt into my gym bag. “I’ve retired the whoopie cushion and the rubber chicken.” This will be the year that the hockey blogs know me for my stats, not my reputation as a party boy.

It’s time to settle down. Hell—it’s past time. “Where’s my jersey?” I ask, glancing around the room. It’s not at my station. And I feel an honest-to-God shiver, like the hockey gods are reminding me one more time that nobody owes me a seat in this room.

“Oh, uh,” Drake says, frowning. “Jimbo only made it half way around before something came up.” He points at a rolling laundry cart in the center of the room. “I found mine in there.”

“Thanks, dude.” I slap my upper body pads on and then cross to the cart. Sure enough, there’s my practice jersey right on top. *BAYER* it reads, number 70 . “One better than 69,” I used to tell the ladies in the bars after games.

I reach for the jersey. But just as my fingers close around the fabric, a hand comes shooting up from beneath the other laundry in the cart and *grabs me by the wrist* .

I shriek like a teenage girl at a Taylor Swift concert.

The room erupts with howls of laughter.

“MOTHERFUCKER!” I yell as Castro stands up in the cart, shedding a pile of jerseys. Then I clutch my chest, where my heart is beating wildly. “You will PAY, asshole!”

He doubles over laughing. “Anyone get it on video?”

“Oh ya,” says the rookie Wilson in his big Wisconsin accent. He’s clutching his phone and laughing. “That’ll be a classic. You jumped a *yard*, Baby Bayer. Shoulda gone out for basketball.”

“Assholes,” I grumble, lifting the damn jersey over my head. “You all think you’re so funny.” The whole room is still laughing, even Ivo, the Finnish kid who barely understands anything we say.

I stomp back to my gear and put on my hockey shorts.

“Oh, man,” Drake says, wiping his eyes. “What a way to start the season. How you gonna pay Castro back?”

As soon as I hear the question, my subconscious is making plans. I could steal that lucky peanut-butter sandwich he eats before every game. He might open it up and find a damp sponge in there instead. Or—since we live in the same building and share a laundry room—I could put a new purple T-shirt in his whites laundry and turn all his underwear lavender.

But wait. No.

Slowly I turn to Drake. “I’m not.”

“What?”

“I’m not going to get him back. I’m done with jokes and pranks,” I tell him. Even if revenge does sound nice, because my heart rate is still elevated from Castro’s jump scare, my focus needs to be elsewhere.

“*Sure* you’re done.” Drake rolls his eyes. “You can tell me all about it tonight when we go out.”

“Where?”

“Some warehouse party in Long Island City. Doors open at midnight but the real fun doesn’t start until one, prollly.”

But I’m here to skate. I didn’t bust my ass all summer to get drunk at a warehouse party. “Maybe next time,” I tell Drake. And then I pat him on the shoulder and grab my skates.

The first thing I see when I walk out to the main practice rink is a whole lot of journalists and photographers. They’re here to preview the new team roster and check out the new, expanded practice facility.

“Bayer! Over here!” a photographer calls. I give him a wave and a smile. I’m so juiced for the new season and a new chance to prove myself. The circus-like atmosphere only feeds me.

The second thing I see is our head coach.

“Anton!” Coach Worthington lands his piercing gaze on me. “Good showing yesterday at the track. I had no idea you could sprint like that.”

My chest practically expands from this compliment. “Thank you, sir. I worked hard this summer.”

“It shows. I was impressed. This is the year you settle down and put up the stats you’re capable of.”

“Yes, sir. That’s going to happen.”

“I have some ideas.” There’s a glint in the older man’s eyes. “We’re going to practice a couple different defensive pairings this year. You’ll skate with O’Doul in some preseason games and Tankiewicz in others. Gotta keep ’em guessing. We have so much strength on the blue line. Let’s make it all count.”

“Yes, Coach. I can’t wait.” His optimism is contagious. Everyone is buzzing about how this will be a big season for us. It was only a few years ago when the Bruisers were moved to the city and rebranded as a Brooklyn team. The GM got fired, and then the coach, too.

Everybody said Nate Kattenberger was a fool, that an internet billionaire couldn’t make a world-class hockey team out of his pricey investment.

They were wrong.

Nate is only part of our story now. Now there’s Rebecca Rowley Kattenberger—his wife—who owns the team. We’ve got a terrific GM, a great staff, and twenty-three players who are determined to get back to the finals this season.

Thank you, Jesus, for making me one of them. And I’m sorry about that dirty joke earlier .

I know I’m lucky to be standing here in this state-of-the-art practice rink in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. It’s a bit of a zoo today because the team is holding an open practice. There are little kids in the stands wearing purple Bruisers jerseys. And photographers angling their giant cameras toward the ice.

Practice hasn’t started, and most of the guys aren’t out here yet. But out of the corner of my eye, I see an unfamiliar skater in full goalie padding. My attention is snagged by the fluid, strong strides of his skating. Goalies have to be phenomenal skaters, but there’s something really stylish about

this one. I wonder who he is. Some college kid getting a tryout? A draft pick I haven't seen before?

"We're going to run a lot of back-checking drills," Coach says. "Our whole season could hinge on how many fractional seconds it takes us to recover a lost puck."

"That makes a lot of sense," I agree.

The goalie has reached my end of the rink now, where there is a little girl smiling and waving at him. He comes to a fluid stop in front of the plexi. He scoops a puck up off the ice and then shows it to the little girl, sending her into paroxysms of joy. He tosses it over, and the little girl lets out a whoop and leaps for it.

I smile as a reflex, because I was once that kid, desperate for a moment's contact with one of my idols at the rink.

But then? The goalie unclips his helmet and hauls it over his head, revealing a head of long, thick hair. Hold the phone—this goalie is a *girl*. No—a woman. With rich brown hair and lush olive skin. She shakes out her hair, which seems to be in the process of escaping whatever braid or ponytail that had confined it. Then she smiles, giving the little girl a wave.

And I can't fucking breathe. Her smile lights up her eyes, which are a warm brown. She is like the living, breathing picture of female perfection.

In a goalie's pads. Fuck me.

"*Anton Bayer*," Coach snaps. "We were having a conversation. And now you're staring at a girl."

Dazed, I look back in his direction. "Sorry, sir. I just didn't realize..." The sentence has no rational conclusion. I just didn't realize that a ten-second look at a woman from ten yards away was enough to make me feel so much. Curiosity. Intrigue. Hunger, even. Who knew I had a thing for goalies?

"Yeah, the Bombshells' season is starting up at the same time as yours," Coach says. "It's going to be an adjustment sharing this facility."

“Exactly,” I agree, as if I’d been thinking the same thing. And in truth, I had forgotten all about Rebecca’s investment in women’s hockey. “The, uh, new renovation looks great, though.”

Coach grunts his agreement. Over the summer, they’d done a lot of work on the practice facility. The full-sized practice rink—where I’m currently making an ass of myself in front of Coach—got five hundred additional seats and a new, high-tech roof. There’s a new stadium-worthy scoreboard hanging from the ceiling.

And—this is the wildest thing—an entire new story was constructed on top of our state-of-the-art locker room facility. So our dressing rooms are still there, but there’s a new suite for the women’s team above us.

I’d known all that. It’s just that it hadn’t really sunk in that there’d be actual women here in the building with us. And I really hadn’t anticipated that my brain could be stolen by the goalie on day one.

Lordy, I’m going to have to watch myself. Coach was absolutely right when he said this is my year to settle down and contribute. It isn’t just my sprints that I’ve been training. It’s my mind. I need to be tougher than I’ve been.

Focus, man. Come on .

Coach checks his expensive watch. “Let’s do this, Bayer. We’re starting. Get out there.”

I vault over the wall to get in a couple of warmup laps as my teammates troop down the chute to join me. I lean into my glide, lengthening my stride and stretching my legs. But as I round the ice, something silver glints at me from the surface. I stop, lean down, and remove my glove to pluck some kind of hairpin off the ice. It must have escaped when the world’s most sensuous goalie shook out her hair.

So much for avoiding her. I straighten up and skate hastily toward the end of the rink where I’d seen her disappear. And there she is, helmet under her arm, watching my teammates warm up. She’s wearing a frown now,

which puts a crease in her forehead. I have the urge to smooth it out with my fingers.

But that would be creepy and weird, so I speak to her instead. “Excuse me, miss? I think you might have dropped this when you were giving that little girl the puck. Nice move, by the way. You made her whole year.”

The beauty turns, and her eyes widen slightly. “Sorry. Are you speaking to me?”

“Yeah. I don’t know your name. But I found this on the ice.” I hold it out, and her eyes widen again.

“O-oh,” she stammers. “I didn’t...” She catches herself. “Never mind. thank you. I hope you didn’t trip on it.”

“Nah. No worries.”

She reaches out and takes the pin from me, brushing my palm with her fingertips. And just that small contact ripples through me like an electrical current. “Welcome to Brooklyn,” I hear myself say in a husky voice. “Was today your first practice?” That would explain the number of journalists.

“Yes,” she says with a quick smile that I feel right in the center of my chest. “Was it that obvious?”

“What? No.” I laugh. “I didn’t see any of it.”

Behind me, an assistant coach blows the whistle, calling for the first drills.

“But I’m about to have my own practice now,” I add.

“Well, good luck to you, then. I hope it goes better than mine.”

“Thank you.” Still, I linger a moment longer, staring into those soft brown eyes. “You have a nice day,” I say stupidly. Then I force myself to turn and skate away.

I didn’t even get her name.

TWENTY-TWO

Like the Caribbean Sea

SYLVIE

IT ISN'T until he skates away that I remember to breathe. Everything about my encounter with the big, blond hockey player was strange.

In the first place, I didn't know a man's eyes could be that brilliant shade of turquoise-blue. I missed the first thing he said to me, because I was wondering how that color was possible.

And then there's the hairpin. I don't wear them, but my mother did. We had the same thick hair, which she wore in pretty up-dos, while I'm more of a ponytail girl.

My mother died a year ago, but since then, I've been finding hairpins everywhere. She leaves them for me to discover.

Yes, that sounds crazy, but that doesn't mean it isn't true. Reality worked a little differently for my mother than it does for other people. She was a deeply spiritual, mystical person. She was dedicated to prayer, joy, and inner knowledge. And her intuition went well past the normal range and right into, well, *freaky* .

I'm convinced that her spirit was just stronger than everyone else's. She was a cosmic force. And even though she's left this earth, she's still sending me frequent signs. Like a silver hairpin on the bathroom sink at home, where nobody has been but me. And a copper one in the pocket of the dress I wore to her funeral. There was even a hairpin with a tiny jewel on it that appeared on the windowsill one night when I was washing the dishes. I set down the sponge, and it was just *there* .

So the appearance of a hairpin just now at this rink, where I never expected to be, is just more proof of her divine powers. And her nosiness, too. Maman is trying to tell me that she's still beside me, even though I've suddenly relocated five hundred miles from our home in Ontario.

Brooklyn was never part of my travel plans. Fifteen months ago I graduated from college. I had hoped to make the Canadian women's team, but they already had a full bench of excellent goalies, and none of the women's pro teams had knocked on my door.

There were only five teams in the league—that made for ten professional women goalies on a continent of millions.

Then, three months after graduation, my mother died, and I stopped thinking about hockey. Or anything, really. Mourning will do that to a girl.

So I was floored earlier this month when the phone had rung and someone had said, “Hi, Sylvie Hansen? This is Bess Beringer. I’m a sports agent, but I’m also in charge of recruitment for the Brooklyn Bombshells. I know this is last minute. But how do you feel about guarding the net for Brooklyn?”

For a moment, I’d honestly thought I was being pranked.

But Bess had been dead serious. “The season begins in ten days. I realize you probably weren’t planning to change your life today. But if it’s possible, we’d love to have you.”

“Would I be trying out?” I’d asked, still a little unsure that the conversation was real.

“I have tape from your final playoff game. And I just got off the phone with Sasha Marshall. We hired her, too. And she wants you in front of the net.”

“Sasha Marshall,” I’d whispered. Hearing my college coach’s name had made it real.

“That’s right,” Bess had said. “At the last minute we lost a goalie who decided to play in Sweden. And Sasha thought of you. Can I have her call you?”

And that had been that. Seven days later, I’d been on a plane to New York. I’d barely had time to pack and tell my closest friends that I was leaving Ontario.

There's one person in particular that I did not tell. Bryce Campeau, a center for the Brooklyn Bruisers, and the man I once believed I would marry.

He's going to be astonished to see me standing here. If he ever looks up.

The Bruisers are clustered around their coach, listening intently. People expect big things from the Bruisers this year. It's too early to talk of the championship, but they are well-positioned for the season. Which means I basically have a front-row seat to watch Bryce fulfill his dreams.

He stands stock still in his skates, his whole being focused on his coach's words. Bryce is the most serious man I've ever met. And when he finds out I've suddenly appeared in Brooklyn, he'll—

Okay, the truth is that I'm not exactly sure what he'll do. He and I have lots of history, but not the romantic kind. He'd lived in our family's house throughout my teen years, billeted as a junior hockey player on one of my father's teams.

We'd often had players living with us. They had been brash, silly boys, and I hadn't paid them much attention. But Bryce had been different from the start. At seventeen, he'd been a man already, with a serious expression and moody, dark blue eyes. Like me, he'd had a French-speaking mother. And like my mother, he was a devout Catholic.

But Bryce was alone in the world. He never met his father. His mother tried her best to give him a good life, he'd said, but by the time he came to live with us, she had died of complications from liver disease.

"She drank. A lot," he'd told us frankly. "She quit many times, but it got her in the end."

So there'd been this kid, only seventeen years old when he'd arrived, and motherless. He'd been playing for an Ontario team and could barely understand his coach, or my father, who ran the program.

My mother had taken one look at his solemn face and the gold crucifix around his neck and saw a kindred spirit. She'd basically adopted him on

sight. She could tell he needed someone to fuss over him—someone to make foods that he liked and organize his life and sit beside him at Mass on Sunday.

And I'd loved him from the first moment I watched his broody gaze scan my home, taking in my mother's collection of prayer candles and the carefully set table. He'd walked over to the mantel, noticing that one of Maman's statuettes had tipped to the side. And he carefully righted it. "Thank you for to bring me here in your home," he'd said in very halting English.

I'd liked the soft, measured tone of his voice. And I'd really liked that he needed my help with the language. As a French speaker myself, I would often come to his rescue, translating whenever he required it.

My father had required him to speak English at the dinner table. He'd known that Bryce needed to learn. But Maman and I had been his port in the storm. We spoke French when my father was out of the house, and we helped him adjust to life in a new city.

I'd hid my crush on him as best I could. And he and my mother were *thick as thieves*, as we say in English.

Bryce had lived with us for four years. And when, at age twenty, he'd left to play for Montreal, we'd all been so incredibly proud of him.

I'd missed him terribly, but I'd been self-aware enough to know that he viewed me like a little sister. Besides—I was headed off to college at the University of Michigan.

And there had been holidays and summers to look forward to. We had become Bryce's family, so he spent his free time with us. I'd lived for those moments when he'd watch movies with me in the den, and my mother would spoil him rotten.

Then—a couple years later—my mother died very suddenly. One day she was home with my dad and baking cookies. And the next day she was

just gone. She had a brain aneurysm and drove her car into a ditch, dying behind the wheel of her car before the police even arrived.

We'd been devastated. Bryce—recently traded to the Bruisers—was the first person I'd called after my father broke the news. "Sit down, I need to tell you something. Maman is gone."

The next few days had been a blur. Bryce told Coach Worthington that the mother of his heart had suddenly died, and Coach took the extraordinary step of sending him home to us for a week. He'd missed three games to come to Ontario and hold my hand at her funeral.

My father was beside himself. He'd loved her desperately. "My beautiful rose," he'd sobbed at the kitchen table the night after the funeral. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do without her."

Bryce had finally teared up, too. It had broken me to see them so sad, so I'd gone to bed, tucking myself in and wishing I could wake up and have my old life back—the one where my mother hummed to herself in the kitchen while she made tea.

Later, Bryce had come into my darkened room, climbed into bed with me, and held me in his arms. That had never happened before.

"Sylvie," he'd said quietly. "I want to love like that, Sylvie. The way your father and your mother were to one another. That could be us. Some day we will be together for real."

"*Oui* ?" I'd asked, stunned. "*Vraiment* ?"

"*Vraiment* ," he'd repeated. "She wanted me to take care of you."

"She did?"

"*Oui* . And I promised her I would. You are so special to me. You are everything. Fate sent you to me. I know it." He'd said a lot of things that night that I'd never expected him to say.

Then he'd kissed me. I'd already been on emotional overload, but Bryce's kisses had been the only thing that made me feel better about the terrible, gut-wrenching loss I'd just suffered.

My achy heart had held Bryce's promises tightly. Thoughts of our future together had sustained me for weeks after he left.

I should have known, though. Words spoken in the dark after you bury someone you love are not weighed and measured like other words.

Our friendship returned to its usual ways: texts from the team jet and the occasional phone call where he would speak to my father and then to me.

I'd thought about him every day, though. Bryce's whispered word in the dark—*someday*—got me through a lot of difficult hours.

But he hadn't brought up our future again, and eventually I'd grown impatient. This spring—six months after my mother's death—I asked Bryce when we could be together for real. "I would come to Brooklyn," I'd offered. "To be with you."

It had not gone over well. His stammering reply was not at all what I'd hoped for. My heart sank as he'd uttered phrases like "too soon," "incredibly busy," and "focused on my game."

"When, then?" I'd asked, trying to hold my heart together.

"Sylvie, I don't know. If you come here just for me, you are all alone much of the time. That is not right. The time is not right."

Alors . I had fallen for Bryce when I'd been a naïve girl of fifteen. But now, at twenty-two, I am a much wiser woman. I know what words of true love sound like, and they don't sound like that.

After that dreadful conversation, I wised up. I made myself stop dreaming of a future with Bryce. I went to work in the front office of my father's hockey organization. I even looked around for nice men to date, trying to get my mind off of *him* .

I didn't find any, though. It was a lonely, quiet time in the house with my father, both of us straining to hear the echo of my mother's voice.

Things began to feel easier for me this summer. Less sadness. More ordinary joy. And just when I'd stopped pining all the time, the phone rang, summoning me to Brooklyn.

So here I stand, twenty yards from Bryce in this beautiful rink, wearing a Bombshells practice jersey. My maman would say that fate brought me to his doorstep once again.

She did, in fact, predict this.

If that sounds crazy, it's because you never met Maman. She believed in fate. So does Bryce, by the way. He is forever seeing signs in ordinary things. So I wonder how he'll feel when he sees me.

As for me, I really don't know what to think. Part of me is full of skin-tingling wonder that I've been sent by fate or God or luck to be with Bryce again. Maybe he'll look over at me and understand that our paths are meant to join forever.

The other part of me knows that it's a long shot. I want to be loved *desperately*. I want to be cherished. I want a man who needs me in his life even when it's inconvenient.

Bryce has already failed this test once. But since I'm here, I think I'll school him on a few things. I'll show him that I'm strong, and that I am full of life and ready to be loved, even if not by him. I could even have some fun with this. I will show him what he's missing. He won't know what's hit him.

If he ever turns his freaking head and looks in my direction.

Someone else turns, though. It's that other man—the one with the eyes like the Caribbean Sea. He glances at me and then gives me a quick smile.

And it's *quite* a smile. My heart might be broken, but my eyes are not. His eyes linger on me for a long beat, and then he slowly turns his face back toward the coach.

But I still feel his attention directed this way. I don't know why, but I sense his interest.

The back of his practice jersey says BAYER. I've heard that name before. He's a defenseman, and one of Bryce Campeau's friends.

No one else glances this way, though, and I've been waiting here a long time.

So I turn and leave for the brand-new women's locker room.

TWENTY-THREE

Big No No

ANTON

“MAN, I NEED CALORIES,” I bellow in the locker room after practice.
“Pizza at Grimaldi’s? Who’s with me?”

Bryce Campeau raises a hand and gives me a serious nod.

“Excellent. Leave in ten?” I twist my head around, looking for my buddy, Drake. “Anyone seen the Drakerator? Why did he leave the ice early?”

“Blood-sugar crash,” O’Doul mutters.

“Oh, shit,” I say. Drake is a type 1 diabetic. Managing his condition during peak athletic performance is tricky. Sometimes he gets things a little wrong and starts to crash. And it’s often worse at the start of the season, when his metabolism has to readjust to the daily strain of professional sports.

Hoping to check on him, I head for the treatment rooms. But Drake comes skidding into the dressing room, his face red, looking harried.

“You okay, man?”

“No,” he says shortly. “I just fucked up big time.”

“Damn. You want me to find Doc Herberts?”

“Not necessary. And not what I meant. My blood sugar was a little wonky, so I headed off to find the juice and the test kits I keep in Doc’s office, right?”

“Sure.”

“Well, they moved it.”

“The juice?”

“The whole office!” He throws his arms wide. “It’s upstairs now, on the new floor. So I’m, like, dizzy as I climb those new stairs, and I’m in this hallway I’ve never seen before. I don’t know which office is which, so I start poking my head into all of them.”

“Whoa. Did you find it?”

He winces. “Eventually. But first I found this super-pretty girl in a treatment room, grabbing some tape. So I say, ‘Hey doll, could you help me find Herberts’s office?’” He scrubs a hand through his hair.

“Wait, you called a stranger *doll*?”

“I *know* , okay? But I was using one-syllable words for a reason. Everything started looking yellow around the edges, and I thought I might pass out.” He heaves a sigh. “I didn’t.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“Sorta. Turns out that girl is a *player*. I think she said defense. There was yelling. I didn’t get all the details.”

“Question.” Jimbo, our equipment guy, raises his hand, like a boy in school. “Do they still call her a defenseman even if she’s a *defensewoman*?”

“They could say D-man,” someone suggests. “Oh, wait...”

“Does this story have a punchline?” I ask. A guy could go all day without finishing a thought in this room.

“She ripped me a new one,” Drake grumbles. “She went *off* . And it didn’t help my case that in the middle of her telling me what a turd I am for treating her like a waitress or a puck bunny—her words—I basically staggered away from her, found Doc’s office, and grabbed my juice and chugged it.”

“Oh, man.” I just shake my head.

“So she thought I was an asshole twice—”

“Which you were,” Castro points out. “Even if you were not totally in control of your faculties.”

“Right. And I just kept on being an asshole, trying to stay conscious while she delivered a long lecture about making assumptions.”

“Assumptions you made,” Castro points out again. “And by the way, the women’s team officially starts today.”

“Wow, thank you for that timely information,” Drake grumbles. “The girl was *pissed* . Now I gotta watch my back every time I walk into this place.”

“Come to lunch with Campeau and me,” I say. “Sounds like you could use the calories. And we’ll guard your six.”

“Thanks, man.” Drake pushes himself off the doorframe. He still looks a little off. I’m thinking we’ll need to take a taxi over to our favorite pizza place.

The three of us leave the dressing room and troop down the hallway together. It still has that new-paint smell from all the work they’re hurrying to finish. We exit via a set of secure doors into a hallway that widens toward a glass brick tunnel. From there, the floor slopes upward from our practice facility to the Bruisers’ corporate offices.

Drake stiffens as we reach the tunnel. “Uh-oh.”

Glancing up, I see three women ahead of us. They’re stopped, as if waiting for someone else to join them. And, whoa, it’s like the Charlie’s Angels of hockey—a blond, a redhead, and the brunette beauty I can’t stop thinking about.

Her face lights up when she sees us, too. I’m just about to call out a happy greeting when my teammate Campeau says, in a shocked voice, “*Sylvie!* What are you *doing* here?”

This is a development I wasn’t expecting.

And if I’m not mistaken, her beautiful smile grows a little uncertain. “Um, *surprise !*” she says as we approach. “A week ago Bess Beringer called me and asked me to be the second goalie for the Bombshells.”

“You—” Campeau swallows. He looks stunned, and maybe a little pale. “Here?”

“Here,” she says firmly. “In Brooklyn.”

“In Brooklyn,” he echoes like a dummy. He takes a long beat to digest this news. “Where are you staying?”

She puts a hand on her hip. “With you, of course. You have a double bed, right?”

Campeau blanches.

She laughs. “Oh, *monsieur crédule* ! I’m just teasing you. This is my roommate, Fiona. We have an apartment together.” She indicates the blonde.

Bryce finally breathes. “An apartment? Where? Is it safe? There are some places in Brooklyn where you do not want to live.”

“Let me just stop you right there,” the redhead says with fire in her eyes. And when she speaks up, I swear Drake ducks behind me, using me as his human shield. “Isn’t Sylvie a grownup who can decide on her own where to live?”

“But—”

“Do you ask your male friends if their apartments are safe?” she presses.

Sylvie laughs. “Charli, stand down. Bryce met me when I was a silly, impulsive teen. He probably can’t help asking these questions.”

The redhead crosses her arms. “Fine, but on day one I’ve already witnessed two of these guys saying ridiculous things to grown women. And the day isn’t even half over.”

“Hey, Bryce,” I say, squeezing my teammate’s elbow. “Aren’t you going to introduce us to your friend? We’re sharing a workspace, right?”

He gives a stiff nod. “Sylvie, meet Anton Bayer, a defenseman, and Cornelius Drake, winger.”

“Cornelius?” the blond woman asks, incredulous.

“Neil,” he corrects.

“Ah.” She smiles, and her eyes dance with humor. “I’m Fiona, also a forward, and the captain of the Bombshells. This is Charli, who plays defense.”

“And Sylvie is the goalie,” I say, because I can’t help myself. And I can’t stop looking at her. Even in her street clothes, with her hair smoothed after a shower, her cheeks bear the high color of an athlete after practice. She has wide-set brown eyes and the cheekbones of a Swedish supermodel.

But there are lots of pretty women in the world. I couldn’t even tell you why this one makes me feel wild and loose inside. Like I’ve just had three drinks and gotten on a roller coaster.

“Yes,” Fiona says, putting a hand on Sylvie’s shoulder. “We have two incredible goalies. It’s going to be a great season, boys. I hope your stats can keep pace with ours.”

“Oh, bring it on.” I laugh. “How does five bucks a goal sound? You versus me.”

“But we only have twenty games,” says Charli, the woman who Drake is afraid of. “That’s not a fair bet.”

“I’m a D-man, though,” I point out. My job isn’t running up the score.

“How many goals did you have last season?” Fiona asks.

“Five.”

“So you like losing money?” she asks, and the women laugh, which puts the sparkle back into Sylvie’s eyes.

“New year, new opportunities,” I say lightly. “Do we have a bet?”

“Ten bucks a goal. Might as well keep it interesting.” Fiona shrugs.

“Done,” I say, knowing full well that I’ll most likely be paying Fiona some cash every week. If they picked her for captain, she should easily average a goal a game.

But that’s okay with me. I’ll just have to make frequent visits to their new apartment—wherever it is—and pay up.

Forty minutes later we're sitting in Grimaldi's putting away the pizza at a rapid pace. Except for Campeau, who looks shellshocked.

"What's your deal with, uh, the new girl?" I ask as casually as I can. Campeau isn't the kind of guy who gives you a whole lot of info about his past. I've spent a lot of time with the guy, and I barely know a thing about him. And not because I didn't ask.

"Sylvie," he says quietly, like it's difficult to say her name. "I really fuck things up with her."

My blood stops circulating. I barely met the girl, but I don't want to hear that they were lovers. I don't know what's wrong with me. "She's your ex?"

"No." He shakes his head. "Remember when I miss some games last fall to go to Ontario?"

"Yeah, when your mom died?" Drake asks.

"Not my real mom, but the mother of my heart. I billeted in their home as a junior player after my own mother died. And Marie was wonderful. I was very close with the family. Sylvie is Marie's daughter."

"Ah. But something happened between you two?" I press.

"No, and yes. After the funeral we were both very sad. I said some big things to Sylvie, about what the future might hold. I love Sylvie. I would do anything for her."

Brooklyn's best pizza turns dry in my mouth.

"But I should not have said anything. I should not have made any promises. And I should not have kissed her."

The image of Sylvie lifting her head for a kiss wrecks my brain. But after I take a drink of water and get a goddamn grip, I realize that nothing Campeau just said makes any sense at all. "Wait. Why not? If you love someone, why not say so and then kiss the girl senseless?"

He puts his head in his hands. "I was not ready. You already know how hard it is. We have to focus on the game."

“For that girl I would multitask,” Drake says, speaking my own thoughts aloud.

“This season will be everything,” Campeau says. “This one is for all the...” He frowns, searching for a word.

“Marbles?” I guess.

“Yes. I cannot afford to fuck up. I literally cannot afford it. The team offers last month to renegotiate, but I turn it down.”

My water glass stops halfway to my mouth. “Wait. They offered to extend you early?” If the team wants you badly enough, they’ll remake your contract way before the June cutoff.

Campeau nods curtly. “Yes, for a three-year deal. But the number was not very generous. We said no.”

Something goes wrong in my gut. Campeau was Mr. Serious last year, when I was busy fucking around. He got the job done, and the team offered to extend him for three—really four—more years.

And he said *no*? Because of a couple million dollars? “Nate and Hugh are very savvy,” I say slowly. “Of course they’d lowball you a little bit. But you would have all that added security against an injury, or even a bad season.” Even if my cousin wasn’t an agent, I’d still understand this on a gut level. The team offered him a *career*.

Campeau shrugs. “I do not plan to have a bad season. But I also do not plan to propose marriage before it is finished. I need the wins, the cup, the contract, and the girl. In this order.”

Drake and I exchange a brief glance that’s full of *what the fuck?*

“You understand,” Campeau continues. “I need the stats. If I am to give Sylvie a good life, I need a big, multiyear contract. I need to reach the next level.”

That is a story I know all too well. We all need the stats. We all crave the next level. Maybe I’m just a punter, and Campeau is the real deal. But

what if the “next level” is an illusion? What if every single day of my career will feel just as perilous as the last?

“Sylvie wanted me to invite her here. She wanted to come to Brooklyn. And I did not offer.” The Canadian sighs. “She stopped talking to me. She makes new friends. She even posted a picture on Instagram with a guy on a date.”

“Cold, man,” Drake says, reaching for another slice.

“No, it isn’t,” Campeau defends her. “We were never a couple. She wanted it. I always knew that. But I was living in her parents’ *home* . A man does not go there.”

“True,” Drake says. “No sticking it to the coach’s daughter. Big no-no.”

“Big no-no,” Campeau repeats. “She was just a teenager when we met, too. I love her. But...” He heaves a sigh. “The time was not right. The time still is not right.”

“But here she is in Brooklyn,” I say, twisting the knife a little. Because I’m still stuck on the whole *I love her but I should never admit it* thing. “What are you going to do now?”

“I have no idea,” he says. “First, I will make sure this place where she lives is safe. If it is not, she can come and stay with me. I have a pull-out sofa.”

“Women love that.” I chuckle. “When they’re in love with you, and you offer them the pull-out sofa.”

Drake snorts out a laugh.

“I am so fucked,” Campeau says.

“Yup! Entirely fucked.” I take another slice of pizza and eat it with gusto.

TWENTY-FOUR

An Ocean of Mercy

SYLVIE

I STRIKE A MATCH, and the flame leaps forth with a familiar hiss. I tip the glass candle holder and carefully light the wick. Then I shake out the match and lay it on a saucer, since I'm not keen to set my new apartment on fire.

Apart from the unfamiliar location, this ritual is as familiar to me as breathing. It's three o'clock, the magic hour. My mother always lit candles in the afternoon. Tradition holds that Christ died at this hour.

"Google says that three o'clock in Jerusalem is really eight in the morning here," I'd once pointed out during my contrary teen years.

"That is not the point, Sylvie," she'd replied. "A ritual is for remembrance. The meaning is here," she'd said, tapping her chest.

I watch the candle flicker in its cup, and now I understand. These days, I light a three o'clock candle whenever I'm able, and nothing could be a more potent reminder of Maman.

I kneel for her in front of the candle and close my eyes. I say the prayer in French, as she taught me. "*Vous avez expiré, Jésus, mais...*"

It's a comforting prayer. Who wouldn't want an afternoon reminder of an ocean of mercy? I'm basically a lapsed Catholic like my father. And I only say the prayer once instead of the three times the ritual calls for.

But then I address her. "*Maman*, please be careful about hairpins on the ice. Someone could trip." In the silence of my new apartment, I feel more self-conscious than usual, even though I know Fiona is out shopping for throw pillows. "Okay, a hairpin probably won't kill anyone, but it's not a good look. I'm sure you were just reminding me to be patient. Especially with Bryce. The look on his face, though..."

I fall silent, remembering his expression. It wasn't joyous. First, I saw shock, followed swiftly by confusion. And then discomfort, especially

when I made that joke about sleeping in his bed. I swear all the color drained from his face.

“It wasn’t the reunion I’d hoped for,” I tell my mother. “I thought he’d laugh and maybe pick me up and twirl me around. But he just looked like I’d run him over with the Zamboni.”

Sure, I’d expected some surprise. But a small part of me thought he might see it as a sign.

But, nope. He was definitely stuck on the shock phase.

“I could be patient,” I whisper. “If I thought that patience was the issue. And we already knew he doesn’t like surprises.” He’d had too many of those in his life already, many of them bad. Bryce likes order and planning and preparation.

But I’d sprung myself on him, because I wanted a big romantic reunion. Laughter, followed by the kind of kiss that sailors gave their women after returning from war.

I didn’t get it. And after that awkward greeting in the hallway with my teammates, I’d hurried away to regroup.

The candle flickers gently. It’s not a sign. My mother only communicates in lost hairpins and memories. “You did tell me to be patient,” I whisper. “A year ought to be enough, though. He doesn’t love me, Maman. It wasn’t real. I wish you were here. I wish you could tell me what to do.”

My voice cracks a little bit. I miss my mother so much that it aches. She and I were nothing alike, just as Bryce and I are nothing alike. But that doesn’t mean we didn’t get along. She was so strong and beautiful, and I thought she’d be with me forever. Instead, she was cut down on a sunny autumn day.

Nobody plans to die young. Nobody except my mother, that is. She’d had a will, which I guess is something responsible people do. But she’d also left me a letter.

It began: *Dear Sylvie, if you are reading this, then I have left this Earth. But I will never leave you, my baby girl .*

Maybe I should have waited to read it, because that first line cut me in half. The tears in my eyes made it hard to keep reading. She said so many loving things. And she reminded me to work on my patience.

But she followed that by telling me that I will be loved deeply and completely. And that Bryce was my soulmate.

The letter is tucked away in a shoebox now. It hurts too much to read it. And it won't do me any good to read it again, anyway. Maman was amazing, and many of her words will doubtless prove true.

But as I sit here staring into the candle's flame, I can't help thinking that she got a few things wrong.

It hurts, too.

TWENTY-FIVE

The Right Kind of Screw

SYLVIE

"YOU HAVE TO ADMIT," Charli says from a corner of our sofa. "*Bombshells* is a terrible name for a team. What were they even thinking?"

"It's not terrible at all," Fiona argues from the other end. "I love it. A bombshell is a sudden revelation. An overwhelming surprise. That's what we're supposed to be, in this scenario—the thing that makes New York realize that women's hockey is great. Plus, you get the alliteration with Brooklyn."

"But it *also* means sexpot," Charli sputters. "It's evil marketing. They think they can only sell tickets by sexing us up. If they print posters with a naked woman riding on a missile, I will quit on the spot."

"Hey," I argue from the floor, where I'm stretching my quads on the new rug I bought yesterday. "The logo is a cartoon bomb. No boobs in sight. But if it meant we could be paid more, and that a women's team could be profitable, I'd almost be willing to play topless."

I'm joking, of course, for two reasons.

First, I don't need the money because my bookkeeping job followed me to Brooklyn. "You can work remotely," my dad had said. "And I'll cover your apartment," he'd added during the frenzied twenty-four hour period where I had to decide if I was going to change my whole life and move to Brooklyn. "Just go and give this thing a whirl. Don't worry about money."

And the second reason I'm joking about flashing my tatas for ticket sales is that I'm hoping to get a rise out of Bryce, who's in my bedroom right now. That's right, in my *bedroom*, where I always hoped he'd end up.

Be careful what you wish for, though. A couple hours ago he texted me, asking if he could come over. So I washed my hair and put on makeup, as well as a low-cut sleeveless top.

In my defense, it's a warm September afternoon.

But when he came through the door, Bryce didn't even give my outfit a glance. He was carrying a small toolbox and a brand new deadbolt lock, the kind you can install above the perfectly functional locks already in place on our door.

He'd given me a perfunctory kiss on each cheek and got straight to work installing the extra lock, while my teammates looked on in amusement.

To be fair, Bryce's helpfulness is one of the things I've always loved about him. All the players who ever lived with us did chores. "This *eez* not a hotel," my mother would say, pinning a schedule to the refrigerator. Everyone in our home was responsible for taking out the trash or washing dishes or vacuuming the floors, at least when they weren't on a tour bus in the hinterlands of Canada.

Bryce's contribution was on another level, though, right from the start. He'd call on his way home from the rink to ask if my mother or I needed anything from the store. He fixed doorknobs that had stopped turning, he hung shelves, and changed the oil in my mother's car.

"So resourceful," my mother used to say. "The finest young man I've ever met."

Forty minutes ago, when Bryce had installed the lock on our front door to his satisfaction, I'd brought him a soda and led him into my room for a moment away from the prying eyes of Fiona and Charli.

"Listen, I appreciate your concern," I'd said. "But I feel very safe here." I'd sat down on the bed and patted the spot next to me. "I'm only two blocks from the rink. It's a nice neighborhood."

He'd sat down, too, but at a respectful distance, his serious blue eyes nowhere near my cleavage. "Your father thought it would be a good idea."

"Hmm?" I'd asked, distracted by my own agenda. *Kiss me you fool . Why won't you just lay me out on this bed and make love to me? Finally?*

“The lock,” he’d said, giving me a frown and putting the soda on the bedside table. “Your father worries about you, too. You know...” He’d turned and climbed onto the bed on his hands and knees, making my heart leap. But it turned out he’d only been looking out the window. “*Merde* . You are only on the third floor. And these burglar bars are loose. Someone might climb the fire escape. I will tighten them.”

That had been forty minutes ago. He’s already made a trip to the hardware store for just the right kind of screw.

Although the *right kind of screw* , in my opinion, is not something you can get at the hardware store.

It’s no use, anyway. We have a big team meeting in a half hour—the Bruisers and the Bombshells together. So if I’m going to convince Bryce to ravish me, it’s going to have to be another day.

Having given up, I left him to his screwdrivers and came out here to stretch my sore muscles on the rug and listen to my teammates’ chatter. We’ve known each other for four days, but they’ve been intense ones. I’ve moved to a new city, and I’ve had my first two grueling practices with my new team.

I’m tired, but happy. Playing hockey as a professional? There is no better job in the world. And I like these women. Fiona is just as bubbly and confident as a team captain should be.

And Charli is... not. She’s angry, although she hasn’t told us why. But she’s also smart, with a biting wit that frequently makes me cackle.

The buzzer rings on the wall, and I startle because I’m not used to the sound of it yet.

Fiona pops off the couch. “I’ll get it!” She spends a moment on the handset and then presses the button to admit someone.

“Who is it?” Charli demands.

“A couple of Bryce’s friends,” she says. “He asked them to stop by before we all go to the meeting.”

“It better not be that one who called me a *doll* .” Charli tosses her red hair. “I still can’t believe that. Two hours—that’s how long we’d been in the building before one of the self-important millionaires revealed his sexist attitude.”

“They’ll adjust,” Fiona says with a shrug.

“Will they?” Charli points a finger toward my bedroom, where Bryce is still performing his unsolicited home repair.

There’s a knock on our door, and this time I get up to answer it. The first thing I see when I open the door is a pair of bright, turquoise eyes. They’re smiling at me.

And then they take a slow trip down to my cleavage, before rising back upward.

My cheeks flush, even though I wore this top for that exact reason. “Hello there,” I say, just as I notice the object in his hands. It’s a toilet seat. “Gosh, is that for me?”

“It is, and aren’t you lucky?” I’d forgotten that his voice has a slightly husky texture. I feel it right in the center of my chest. “Some men bring flowers, but I brought a new seat for the throne.”

“Why?” Charli demands from somewhere behind me.

“Well—” Anton clears his throat. “Mind if I come in?”

I realize that I’m blocking the door while I stare at his pretty eyes. “Of course!” I leap out of the way.

“Campeau asked us to pick up a few things that he thought you needed.”

“A toilet seat?” Fiona asks, skeptical.

“Replacement!” Bryce yells from the bedroom. “You do not know who lived here before.”

“Actually, we do,” Drake says, entering the apartment behind Anton. Charli growls.

Drake moves to stand in the corner, in a pose that positions his hands in front of his testicles. “This is the apartment where Becca and Georgia lived until Georgia moved out to live with Leo, and Becca moved in with Nate. After that, Becca’s sister lived here.”

Bryce emerges from my bedroom. “Thank you for stopping at the store.”

“My pleasure.” Anton tosses the toilet seat—frisbee style—toward Bryce, who catches it. Then he hands me a small bag that contains four nine-volt batteries. “For your smoke detectors,” he says. “Safety first.” He gives me a wink that manages to mock Bryce and look sexy at the same time.

“Thank you,” I say. “You didn’t have to come all the way over. I could have gotten the batteries.”

“We live across the street in 220.” Anton lifts his chin toward the windows, where a luxury condo building is always in view. “Are we going to this meeting, or what?”

“Absolutely.” Fiona claps her hands like the team captain that she is. “We’ll leave in five minutes.” She gets up to gather her practice gear, since the Bombshells have practice after the meeting.

In the silence that follows, Charli and Drake eye each other warily. Anton ignores them both, taking a slow tour around our new living room, stopping in front of the prayer candles I’ve placed on the mantel. “Does this fireplace work?” he asks. “It’s pretty.”

“I doubt it,” I say.

He touches one finger to the blue glass candle holder and then turns around to look at me with those beautiful eyes. “How are you liking Brooklyn so far?”

“It’s gorgeous,” I say a little stupidly. My goodness, he must get a lot of attention from women.

“You’re from Toronto, right?”

“Montreal and then the Toronto suburbs. We left Quebec when I was a little girl. When my father retired. And you?”

“Pennsylvania. But then Colorado, where I played on a minor league team.”

“You ski?” I ask him. Colorado skiing is pretty great.

“Of course!” His eyes dance. “You too? Mont Tremblant? Did I just butcher that pronunciation?”

“Yes.” I try not to laugh.

“Tell me how to say it right.”

“Mont Tremblant. Use your nose.”

He braces his feet on the rug, spreads his arms, and tries again. “MONT... TREMBLANT.”

It’s better this time, but exaggerated, and I hear myself giggle. “We’ll work on it.”

“Awesome.”

At the meeting, I sit down between Fiona and Bryce. When our coach calls Fiona to the front of the room, Anton Bayer slides into her empty seat. I turn my chin to give him a polite smile of acknowledgement.

He gives me a smile so hot that I feel a little flushed as I return my attention to the meeting. Some men just radiate sex appeal, don’t they? I can’t even say why. Something about him just runs hotter than other men.

“Good afternoon!” Rebecca says from the front of the room. “This will be an unusual gathering. I’m well aware how busy you all are. The season will soon be in full swing, and you’ll be off on busses and planes having the season of a lifetime.”

“We all know who’s getting the bus,” Charli whispers from behind me. “And who’s on the jet.”

“So,” Rebecca says, “I wanted to have the rare opportunity to gather here just one time, as two teams with a common goal—to move Brooklyn hockey forward into a new era.”

We all clap. Even Charli, I think.

“Everyone here could be part of a history-making moment in sports. I mean that. I feel it, too.” Rebecca puts a hand to her heart, and every player in the room is completely quiet. She’s short, with a curvy build. She’s one of those tiny dynamo types. My mother would have said, *she has unique energy*. And everyone present has given her their complete attention.

I’m told that Rebecca used to be the GM’s assistant, before she was ever the girlfriend and then wife of the owner. And well before she owned the team herself. She used to pick up coffee and dry-cleaning for the men who ran this place.

“When I was a little girl,” she says, “I learned that girls take dancing or art classes. I didn’t have any friends who ran track or played hockey. Not one. And I need you all to hear that messaging matters. Everyone in this room heard a different message. Someone gave you the idea that you could be an athlete—maybe your parents or your siblings or a teacher. Even if you had this fire burning inside you from an early age, somewhere, some person showed you what was possible.”

I feel a little teary all of a sudden, thinking of my dad tying my first pair of skates onto my three-year-old feet.

“Everyone in this room has risen to the top of his and her field. That is commendable. But I want to take a moment to illustrate that it means a different thing to be a Bruiser than to be a Bombshell. The salary cap this year for a men’s team is fifty-two million dollars. The salary cap in the women’s league is two hundred and seventy thousand.”

Someone whistles under his breath. And I see Anton wake up his phone beside me. He opens the calculator app and divides two hundred seventy thousand by twenty-three.

I already know the answer, because I worked this equation myself. It's \$11,739. That's the average salary on my team. It works out to a few hundred dollars a week for the duration of the season.

"Jesus Christ," he whispers under his breath.

"Now, gentlemen. I will never tell you that you don't deserve your fame and glory. You sweat for every new rung of this crazy ladder that you've climbed. Your achievement is not arbitrary. The *reward*, however, is. Some people in this room make six or seven million dollars a year. And some of them make eleven grand. Because that is how the screwy world we live in values your contributions."

Rebecca pulls no punches. The room is so silent that I can hear my own heartbeat.

"Who gets to decide, though?" she asks. "It's so arbitrary. Football, basketball, baseball, and hockey all do well on TV. Soccer is not a money sport in this country, but it is in most other parts of the world. I'm sure my husband could draw us up a multivariable equation that explains where the money comes from, and where it goes."

I think I just fell a little in love with Rebecca Rowley Kattenberger.

"As much as I'd like to change the bare facts of the pay equality in hockey, I can't. Not this year, anyway. But that doesn't mean I can't make a few changes and contributions."

She paces at the front. "I'm not allowed to pay my female players amounts exceeding the salary cap. But there are a few benefits we've granted to all employees of Brooklyn Hockey LLC. And these benefits accrue to everyone who works here, because that means that it's not a special stipend for the women. Number one: more amenities in the locker rooms. And healthy smoothies are now always available in the players' lounge."

Everyone cheers.

Huh . I guess millionaires like a free smoothie as much as the rest of us normal people.

“Number two: all employees will carry a Kattenberger 5000 phone, provided by our organization.”

Now the women hoot, because we’ve heard about the Katt phone, and we want one.

“And this is my favorite new benefit—every hour you spend on charity work for the Brooklyn Sports Foundation will be compensated at twenty-five dollars per hour. And we’re going to do some great things this year. Georgia and I have some big ideas, and we’re going to share them with you.”

The blond publicist stands up. “That’s right, guys! We’ve done a lot for Brooklyn charities over the past few years. This year we’ve got a new one. Hang on. Let me just...” She points a clicker at the projector, but nothing happens.

“Let’s guess what it is!” one of the men calls. “Save the whales!”

“Can we sponsor a dog rescue?” Anton calls out. “I love puppies.”

“That’s because you are one,” Rebecca says, and his teammates hoot and laugh.

The screen finally lights up. It reads: *Hockey is for Everyone* . “Each year we participate in this promotion,” Georgia says. “But now we’re going to take it further.” She clicks the remote, and the words fade out and back in again, until it reads: *Sports are for Everyone. Bring it, Brooklyn!*

“When we say ‘Hockey is for everyone,’ it’s wishful thinking,” Georgia continues. “Of course, we welcome all kinds of fans. That will never change. But think of all the boys and girls in Brooklyn who will never get a chance to skate. There are very few skating rinks in New York City. And we can’t give up enough of our ice time to make a real dent. But there are more than fifteen swimming pools in Brooklyn, and yet most of New York’s

children never get swimming lessons. There are unused basketball courts and soccer fields, too.”

Rebecca chimes in. “‘Sports are for everyone’ probably seems obvious to all the fitness freaks here today. Which is basically everyone but me.”

“We love you anyway!” someone calls out.

“Oh, I know you do!” she says with a smile. “But seriously—the kids of New York don’t have enough opportunities to move their bodies. And guess what? Their health will suffer as a result.

“The men and women of Brooklyn hockey have a special power as role models. You can show boys and girls in your community another way to be in the world. How it feels to be part of a team. How your body feels different after a hard practice. How your muscles learn to do things that seemed impossible just a few weeks before.”

She clicks the presentation forward. “This year, I want everyone in this room to think of himself or herself as an ambassador for sport. Georgia and I have created several new programs to help us accomplish this goal. And I think every one of you can make a unique contribution. There are signup sheets on the wall.”

At the side of the room, Georgia reveals a whiteboard with several categories on it. *Skating lessons, swim lessons, soccer clinics*, etcetera.

“Look, guys. I know that time constraints are real. You have a big job to do here in this building, and you’re all dedicated to your own success. That’s what I love about you. So the scheduling is going to be tricky. That’s why I’m also hiring a dozen coaches to run these programs for us, so that you’ll only have to drop in when you’re in town...”

A hand shoots up. It’s one of the Bruisers. “Are we really going to teach these kids to play soccer? What if we don’t know the rules?”

“The YMCA coaches will help you out. And if you really can’t mingle with kids, you can stick to the black-tie fundraisers. Your famous faces always bring in the cash.”

“Even Baby Bayer’s face?” some heckler teases.

“Oh, especially his,” someone else chirps.

I just bet it does.

“Our first ticketed fundraiser is coming up in November. But our fitness classes for teens begin in two weeks.”

Charli’s hand waves in the air. “Will the time commitment be significant? Most of us work other jobs just so we can afford to be professional hockey players.”

“It’s only as significant as you make it,” Georgia says. “The Bombshells’ practice schedule is in the evenings, to match with the game schedule. We wanted you to have big blocks of time in the early part of the day for other commitments.”

“And they wanted all that ice time for the men,” Charli says under her breath.

“But no pressure. And if you do participate, you’ll earn twenty-five dollars an hour.”

There are a few more questions and comments, and then the meeting is dismissed. “Bombshells, come and get your welcome packets,” Georgia says. “And don’t forget to look at the signup sheets. You don’t have to commit right this second, though. I’ll move the sheets online after today.”

I head right over to the signup sheets, so that I will have first pick. There are teen swimming instructor and lifesaving coach slots in the middle of the day. I’m a great swimmer, and that sounds like fun. So I write my name down immediately.

At twenty-five American dollars an hour, this is perfect for me. I can earn some extra cash and play with kids. What’s not to like?

“Swimming coach,” Bryce says from right behind me. “Do you know where the pools are located?”

I turn around and offer him the pen. “I’ll find the place okay. Are you going to join me?” If he’s *that* worried about my welfare, maybe he will.

“No.” He shakes his head. “I do not speak enough English to teach people to swim. What if someone struggles, and I forget the word for...” He makes a frantic motion with his hands.

“Kick?” I try.

“*Oui* .” He puts the pen back on the ledge where it belongs.

Okay. Fine. There goes my opportunity to parade around in my bathing suit in front of him.

His loss, right? I leave him and head over to the table where Rebecca is handing out welcome packets to the Bombshells. The gym bag with our team logo on it—a cartoon bomb with the wick sizzling and ready to blow—is delightful.

Inside, I find a Bombshells T-shirt. On the back it reads: *Underestimate us. That will be fun* . There’s also a brand-new Katt phone with a sleek yellow case, which I know I’m going to be playing with all evening.

Beneath that, I find an invitation on thick, creamy paper for a black-tie benefit dinner to be held in November.

And, finally, a VIP card for the Colorbox Nail Salon, entitling the bearer to a free mani-pedi every week through April.

“Oh, sure,” Charli grumbles. “The little ladies need pretty fingers and toes to play hockey.”

“That’s not it at all,” Rebecca says from right behind her.

Charli, at least, has the good sense to flinch.

“I own that salon,” Rebecca says. “And I always tell people that I think better with my feet in a tub of warm water. So I just thought some of you might enjoy the same.”

“Thank you,” I say quickly. “The perks are really fun. I can tell you’re thinking hard about making this job sustainable.”

“We’re trying,” Rebecca says. “Brooklyn is an expensive place to live. And we’re not allowed to factor that into our salaries. So we’ve made sure

that players have access to housing that's close by. And some meals on the road. We'll do what we can."

"Thank you," Charli says, her chin down, her expression chagrined. "I do appreciate it."

She is saved from further explanation by a whistle from Fiona at the front of the room. "Practice starts in twenty minutes, girls. Let's suit up."

On my way out the door, I glance once more at the signup sheets. Bryce put his name down for soccer coaching, so we definitely won't be working together. But right under my name on the swimming sheet, the name *Anton Bayer* has been freshly scrawled.

He seems like a fun guy. The kids will enjoy his company.

That's got to be why I feel a strange little prickle of anticipation, right? It's because of his attitude. And not because I'm suddenly picturing him shirtless.

Nope. It's not because of that. Not at all.

TWENTY-SIX

Polish and Brighten

ANTON

I AM the last man on Earth who should coach swimming lessons. I don't really like the water. But teenagers should know how to swim, so they'll like it better than I do.

This is a selfless act on my part. That's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

"Are we going to lift?" Drake asks me on our way out of the meeting. "It's chest day."

"Of course we're going to lift." This is the season where I will take nothing for granted. "Let's go."

The weight room is a little crowded today, because everybody has the same idea. But that's okay. Drake and I make good use of the bench, and I like the camaraderie of the weight room during the season.

Plus, there's gossip. Castro's wife wants to redecorate their apartment. O'Doul picked a date for his wedding. And Beacon got a dog.

"I got a teenager and a toddler," he jokes. "It's chaos already. Why not add a dog?"

"Bring on the chaos!" somebody else yells.

"I don't know," Drake says, adding a plate for my last set. "It's going to be different around here. With the women and all. Now *that's* chaos."

"How do you figure?" I ask. "They have their own weight room. Their own locker room suite, too. They won't be in your way." I take a breath and then lift the bar overhead, grunting like a beast.

"But they're still here in the building," he points out. "We might have to change our behavior. Clean it up a little."

"Do you mean, like, fart less often?" someone asks.

"Exactly," he says gravely.

"Dude, what?" Castro yelps. "Nobody can just *decide* to fart less often. Your ass might explode."

“But you could do it quietly,” Drake says, and he’s completely serious. If I weren’t pressing nearly three hundred pounds of iron over my body, I might laugh.

“Look,” Trevi says. “You’re overreacting. There have always been women in the building. My wife, for starters.” She’s Georgia, the co-head of publicity. “There’s a female trainer, a female massage therapist. There are women in the front office, the travel department, the GM’s office. A woman owns the whole damn team!”

“But that’s not what he means,” Jason Castro says as he wipes down the leg press. “He means there are women in the building doing his same *job*. They’re not support staff. They’re also the stars of the show. His fragile male ego has taken a hit.”

“It has *not*,” Drake argues. “You’re putting words in my mouth. I simply meant that the tone around here is going to change some. I didn’t say it was a bad thing.”

“You’re *afraid* of the Bombshells,” someone teases.

“Yeah, especially that angry redhead.”

“I’m not *afraid* of her,” he grumbles. “Just, uh, a little wary.”

“Huh. You do look a little pale, my friend,” Leo says. “Have you tested your blood sugar lately?”

Drake gives him the finger and marches out of the room.

I’ve finished my last set when Drake comes tearing back into the room. “Guys! You’re not going to believe this, but the locker room is different.”

“Since yesterday?” I ask, skeptical.

“Yeah, there’s some strange thing in the toilet stall. A device.”

“A strange device,” Trevi muses. “Like, a bidet? They were doing some renovations.”

“No, it’s not a bidet. Look.”

A few of the players follow Drake into the locker room, including me. But I was headed there anyway. Soon, we’re crowded in front of a toilet

stall. “Look,” Drake says, eyeing the metal unit on the wall. “What’s that?”

Castro is the first to laugh. And then so do I. “It’s...”

“Just...” Tankiewicz howls.

“Maxi...pads...” I can’t breathe. “And tampons!”

“Don’t you have a sister?” Castro snorts.

“But what’s it doing in our locker room?” Drake demands. “Are we being evicted?”

“No, fool,” Castro says. “Maybe they hung it in here by mistake. Calm down, man. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Drake crosses his arms, still looking unsettled. “But there are other changes, too. There are cotton balls and Q-tips by the sinks.”

“Huh.” I strip off my sweaty practice shirt and toss it into a laundry hamper. “That’s good. We need clean ears so we can hear Coach yelling at us.” I strip off the rest of my clothes and grab a shower stall. The water is the perfect temperature, proving that everything that really matters is still the same.

There’s a new shampoo dispenser in here, though, so Drake will probably make a big deal out of that, too. Before, there was just one product in here—a three-in-one soap that was supposed to clean every single part of my tired body. And that was fine.

Now there are choices. The first dispenser contains a lemon-verbena body wash. The second is a shampoo for dry hair—with avocados and coconut. There’s also one for volume, with bamboo extract.

I like both avocados and coconut, so I push the button for that one. Easy choice. My shower takes three minutes, because I’m quick like that.

When I step out to grab a towel, Drake is stepping out of the stall next to mine. “Holy hell. Will I smell like a woman now?”

“Nah,” I say. “There’s nothing feminine about coconuts. Big, hairy nuts? Come on, man.” I grab a towel and toss him one.

“Where will it end, though?” He shakes like a wet dog. “Look, there are new products on the sinks. What is *that*?”

I walk over and pick up one of the bottles. “This one says *Daily Perfecting Cream*. It claims to polish and brighten.”

“You could stand to be brighter,” Leo cracks. “Try that one.”

I give him the finger.

“Careful!” Drake barks. “We can’t just spread any random thing on our bodies.”

“Then why do you pick up jersey-chasers in bars?” Castro cracks from inside a shower stall.

“I’m serious. You don’t know what’s in here.” He picks up the bottle and squirts a glossy white blob onto his palm. Then he lifts it cautiously to his nose, like it might be radioactive. “Whoa. What is that? Here—smell this.”

Trevi emerges from the shower stall. “I have a great nose. I bet I can guess it in two sniffs.”

“Wait.” Castro steps out, too. “I’m married to a girl who loves her products. I can guess it in one sniff.”

“Can not,” I argue. That’s why I love these guys. We can turn *anything* into a competition.

We all crowd around Drake, leaning in to get the first sniff.

“I’m getting...berries,” Castro whispers.

“And flowers,” Trevi says. “Gardenia?”

“Oh God. Flowers? It’s worse than I thought,” Drake complains. “Who’s *doing* this to us?”

“Not gardenia,” I argue, taking a deep sniff. “Lilac?”

“Nah.” Trevi smells it again.

That’s when O’Doul walks into the locker room, catching three bare-assed men, nose to nose, sniffing a gooey liquid out of Drake’s palm. “What the fuck, boys? What is that?”

We all straighten up quickly, as if caught with something far more scandalous than bath products.

“Never mind. I don’t even want to know.” He gives us a grumpy look. “Video meeting in ten minutes.”

“But what’s with all the new stuff in the locker room?” Drake presses. He’s like a dog with a bone. “We don’t get it.”

“Hey, just ignore that stuff. Rebecca wants to provide perks for her female players—like shakes and stuff. But the salary cap rules say that she can’t give them anything unless it’s for everyone who works here.”

“Ah,” Castro says. “That makes sense. Although maxi pads in our shitter is a bridge too far.”

O’Doul shrugs. “Not my circus, not my monkeys. But you guys *are* my monkeys. And we need to keep our eyes on the prize, guys. There’s a video meeting for all monkeys in ten minutes.”

“Roger.” I head for the dressing room and my clothes.

Bryce Campeau is sitting on the bench poking at his phone. “Hey, thank you.”

“For what?” My mind is still on maxi pads and gardenias.

“For earlier. Going to the store for Sylvie’s things.”

“Oh. No big deal. How’s that going, anyway?” I pull on my briefs.

“The smoke detectors work, but I do not love the burglar bars.”

“No, man.” I jump into my jeans. “I mean—how is it going with *her* . And you.” I eye my friend, the broody Canadian. He looks uncomfortable.

“She is annoyed with me. But I can’t change the circumstances. I can’t make my life less hectic. It’s not a good time to change our relationship. I can’t give her the attention she deserves right now.”

“So you’re just going to make her wait for it?” That’s cold.

“I only want the best for her. Right now, I can’t be my best.”

“You’ll help keep her safe, but you won’t sweep her off her feet.”

“Yes.”

And I've got nothing.

"Will you keep an eye on her?"

"What kind of eye?" I ask, grumpy now. Keeping my eyes on her is all too easy.

"She is very sheltered. New York will be a lot for her."

"Didn't she play for the University of Michigan? That's a huge school."

"I still worry. Just watch out for her. As a favor to me."

"Sure, man. Sure."

I'm a good teammate, and a good friend, even when I think my friends are crazy.

Besides—I plan to be around the neighborhood a lot this season. No more clubbing. No more late nights, and no more scandals. This will be the year when I make everything happen.

I guess it's just as well that the only woman I've been interested in since last spring is basically off limits.

Three rules , I remind myself. *Let's not break 'em* .

TWENTY-SEVEN

Sniper Speed

SYLVIE

IT'S MY FIFTH PRACTICE, and our preseason is flying by at top speed.

And so is the puck, unfortunately.

The Bruisers' goalie coach snaps a puck toward me. I'm forced into the butterfly position, protecting the five-hole. We've been practicing for forty-five minutes, and I'm dripping with sweat, my muscles shaking.

So I'm slow to recover in time for his next shot. I lunge to the left, deflecting sloppily with my stick. The puck drops to the ice. It's not a goal, but it creates a rebound opportunity that would cost me in a real game.

The coach blows a whistle. "Reset!"

I basically stagger out of the crease to help the other goalies gather up all our pucks.

This practice session is a huge opportunity for me. The Bombshells don't have their own goalie coach, but the Bruisers' guy invited us to work out with his netminders today.

That means I'm practicing alongside veteran star Mike Beacon and up-and-comer Silas Kelly, as well as the other Bombshells goalie, Scarlet McCaulley. She's twenty-five and an alternate for Team USA.

She's also kicking my ass. Our season opener is ten days away, and it's painfully obvious that I'm not ready yet. Scarlet has spent the last forty-five minutes stopping everything that moves. And the men are also crushing it.

I started out strong, but the pace of this session has been brutal. My instincts are still sharp. I stopped a lot of pucks that the coach slapped my way. But then I got tired awfully fast, and now half the time my body can't close the deal.

It's humiliating. At least Scarlet looks good. The goalie coach won't necessarily go back to his pals and say, *Tommy Hansen's kid is going to sink the new women's team before they even get started*.

“We’ve got ten minutes left. Let’s do some harder shots,” Coach says, skating backward. “I always get help for these, because...” He crosses his left hand to his right shoulder. “Already had one surgery to repair the repetitive-stress injury I gave myself shooting on goalies. Don’t need to go under the knife again.”

That’s when two players skate onto the ice from the bench. The first one is Leo Trevi. But when I glance over to see who the other player is, I find myself looking into the sturdy gaze of Bryce Campeau.

It just figures, since Bryce is the other super-frustrating thing about my stint so far in Brooklyn. He’s not avoiding me, exactly. We’ve had lunch together twice. And when I left a message for my father the other day, asking a simple question about the WiFi hookup in our apartment, it was Bryce who rang the doorbell two hours later to fix it for me.

That’s exactly the type of attention I’m getting from Bryce. The polite, obligatory kind, followed by two cheek kisses and the occasional text to ask me how I’m doing.

So I’m frustrated—with Bryce, with my performance, and with so many other things. I’ve only been here for ten days, but so far Brooklyn is a tough nut to crack.

Leo and Bryce line up a series of pucks on the ice. They’ll skate past the four goalies, firing on us each in turn. Longer shots provide more reaction time, but greater force and speed.

Then the drill begins. The coach and his assistant skate through the foreground, obscuring our clear view of the shooters and their setups, while the two players fire at us.

Leo shoots the first puck on Silas, who handily stops it. Then Bryce gets a missile off on Scarlet, who just barely swats it away with the tip of her glove.

Suddenly there’s a puck hurtling toward me at high speed. I dive, but miss it as it whistles past my ear and into the net’s upper corner.

Damn it . I pick my exhausted self up just in time to misjudge a shot from Bryce, sending that one through the five-hole.

Focus, Hansen , I coach myself. I know I can do this.

It works, too. I get the next one from Leo. No problem. And then I stop three more from Bryce. But as I'm batting away the third one, I realize that the speed of that puck wasn't much to deal with.

And neither is the next one. I watch as he fires a shot on Silas, and then on Beacon, both of them at jet speed.

I have to look away to dive for a shot from Leo. But then Bryce comes back to me and sends me a puck at the speed of a grandmother riding on a donkey.

He's *soft-balling* me, I realize. Bryce can see that I'm struggling, so he's throwing me a series of easy shots. He's *coddling* me.

And I am livid.

It's funny what anger will do to a girl's game. I am ferocious as I stop the next two shots from Leo. And when Bryce sends me another yawner, I slap it back to him so hard and so accurately that he has to dodge out of the way to avoid taking a shot to the nuts, because he's not wearing any pads.

"*Merde* ," he curses softly.

"Whoops," I say through gritted teeth. And I give him a look so bitter that his eyes widen in alarm.

But the boy does not learn his lesson. For the remaining few minutes of the exercise, he takes it easy on me. After ripping meteors at every other goalie, he sends me pucks that would embarrass a high school center.

I am incensed. I don't need Bryce to humiliate me like this, when I'd been doing a fine job of it without his help.

When the coach finally blows the whistle, calling our session to a close, I gather up the pucks with everyone else.

"Whoa, that was intense," Scarlet says, still breathing hard. "Great session, huh?"

“Yup. Great,” I manage. At this rate, I’ll spend the season sitting in the corner of the bench opening and closing the door for other players on shift changes, while Scarlet plays every last game.

I wait until the coaches depart. And then I skate up to Bryce, who’s moving one of the extra nets out of the way. “What the *hell* was that?” I hiss. “Why would you treat me like a child, instead of an athlete?”

Bryce jerks his head back in shock. “I did not treat you like a child.”

“You absolutely did! Don’t try to make my life easier, Bryce. That is not why I came to Brooklyn. And that is not what you’re supposed to be to me—my protector. You’re supposed to—” I bite off the rest of the sentence. *Kiss me. Love me. Want me .*

I don’t say these things out loud. I shouldn’t have to. And furthermore, we’re not alone. When I glance over my shoulder, I spy Anton Bayer crossing through the vestibule, in earshot of everything I’m saying. And his eyes look worried.

Luckily, I don’t have to stop yelling at Bryce. I can just switch to French, and insist that he *doesn’t ever* take it easy on me in practice again. On penalty of death. Or at least a good maiming.

“Je suis désolé, Sylvie. Je ne veux pas .”

He’s trying to appease me. But I’m still so angry I could burst.

So I turn on my skates and walk away without another word.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Such a Grind

ANTON

OH MAN. The moment Sylvie busts me for eavesdropping on her argument with Campeau, I high-tail it out of the rink.

Not that anyone asked me, but she was absolutely justified in her anger. Anyone could see that he wasn't shooting at her the same way he did for everyone else. That's not what the coach asked of him, either. A player can't grow without practicing at the highest level.

Yet any fool could also see that he'd done it out of love. There's no way he intended to humiliate her. That's just not the kind of guy he is.

I'm still thinking about them when I slip into the back of the video room, where the defensive coordinator is showing us tape in preparation for our first preseason games.

"This rookie sniper was named the MVP of the Junior World Championships in 2018..." Coach drones.

Campeau's thing with Sylvie is none of my business. And signing up to teach swimming lessons with her was probably a stupid move.

My little crush is only going to get worse.

The coach drones on about New Jersey's scoring style, and I try to pay attention.

When Coach is done, I somehow manage to enter the lobby from the video room at the same moment that Sylvie bounds out of the tunnel, heading for the door.

"Hey," I say, startled by the reappearance of the girl I can't stop thinking about. Her cheeks are flushed. Stealing glances at her for a week has taught

me that she always has high color in her cheeks, as if she burns a little brighter than other women.

“Hi,” she says, slowing her pace as she approaches. “You’re not waiting for Campeau, are you?” The name sounds extra French when she says it.

And maybe I’m a jackass for thinking this, but I’d really like to hear her mutter French into my ear in bed. “Uh, no. No. Don’t know where he is.”

“*Good* .”

She sounds so fierce, I have to laugh. “Walk out with me,” I say with more nonchalance than I feel.

“Are you going to give me a lecture about patience, or gratitude?”

“Fuck no, I don’t give lectures. I’m usually on the receiving end of those.”

Her face breaks into a startled smile, and she follows me out onto the sidewalk. “Well, I probably deserve one. But I’m not in a forgiving mood yet.”

“Are you in the mood for tequila, though? That’s what I offer my friends after a shitty day.” It’s true, too. I’m not one to dole out advice. Who wants to turn into his father?

“I’m not much of a drinker,” Sylvie says, tossing her lush hair over her shoulder. “But I could use some food.”

“How do you feel about spicy Szechuan?”

“I feel *great* about it. You don’t have to cheer me up, though. If you have things to do.”

“Woman, it’s chow time. And you’re saving me from masturb dating.”

“Um, what?” she says, giving me a startled look.

“That’s a Frankenword for taking yourself out to dinner alone. Masturb dating.”

“A Frankenword?” She gives a shout of laughter and claps a hand over her mouth. “You are ridiculous.”

“True facts. Now follow me, newbie. It’s time for your introduction to the best cheap Chinese food in Brooklyn.”

She hitches her gym bag up on her shoulder and follows me down the street.

Soon we’re ensconced at China Garden and splitting a first course of green dumplings in tangy plum sauce.

“These are *magnifique*,” Sylvie gushes, plucking up another dumpling with her chopsticks. “How did you find this place?”

“Georgia Trevi. She has a thing for dumplings.”

“Bless her. And thanks for bringing me here. I was clearly in need of an intervention.”

“Hey, no problem.” I sound casual enough. But that’s not how I really feel. Sylvie has hovered at the edge of my consciousness these past ten days. Every time both teams are in the practice facility, I somehow manage to hear her laugh, or spot her down the corridor.

And now I have her alone. It’s no crime to buy a girl some spicy noodles and chicken after a bad day, but I feel a little guilty nonetheless. And it occurs to me now that Bryce Campeau hates this restaurant and never comes here.

Thanks, subconscious . Good work .

“You know,” I tell her. “You’re not the only one who’s struggling to prove herself.”

Sylvie glances up at me. “No? You too?”

“I didn’t have a great season last year. And now it’s all riding on this one.”

She sets down her chopsticks and puts her chin in her hand. “Do you believe in fate?”

“Um...?” Do I? “Not really.” Although every time Sylvie smiles, I’m not sure of anything anymore.

“My mother did. She raised me in a very spiritual household. And now that she’s gone, I think about it all the time. So when I got the call to come to Brooklyn, I thought it meant something big, you know? That my life was on a path to move forward.” She makes an exasperated face. “Ten days in, and I’m not sure anymore.”

“Ten days, huh?” I nudge her shoe under the table. “Well, I guess you gave it a thorough try.”

She smiles at me suddenly, and I feel it warming me like a heat lamp. “No lectures from you.”

“That’s not a lecture. That’s sarcasm.”

She beams. “Fine. So I shouldn’t throw in the towel yet. What is your story? What happened last year?”

I’m not looking forward to telling a pretty girl how I fucked up. But I suppose it’s only fair. “This will be my third season in Brooklyn. My rookie year I worked hard, and I had some early luck, I guess. But then I let myself slide. I took the summer off. And when I came back in the fall, I partied too hard.”

“Oh boy.” She points at the last dumpling. “This one is yours.”

I push the platter toward her instead. I would feed this girl a mountain of dumplings if she’ll just smile at me again.

She nabs it, and—*bam*—big smile. I almost forget what I was talking about.

Oh right. Failure. “It didn’t go well for me last season. My stats sucked, and we were all adjusting to Tank’s style of play.” Tankiewicz is a veteran defenseman we got in a trade a year ago. “He’s a great player, but it caused some adjustment on the ice.”

It was the kind of wrinkle that teams experience all the time. But I’d already been off my game. “I didn’t catch on fast enough. None of my

tricks were working. And at the end of January, Coach shipped my ass down to the minor-league team in Hartford.”

Sylvie flinches, even though she’s known hockey all her life, and has probably heard tales of woe like mine before. “You’re back now, though.”

“Yeah, Coach told me if I worked my ass off all summer, I might make it back.”

“And that’s what you did?”

“You bet. I found a trainer here in Brooklyn and basically lived at the damn gym. It was such a grind. But every morning I asked myself whether I wanted a real career, or whether I wanted to be one of those guys who has to frame his jersey and hang it on the wall, because everybody already forgot his name.”

“And here you are,” she says.

“For now,” I add, because I’ve learned not to take a thing for granted.

“My fitness is a problem, too,” she says, pouring more tea out of the pot for both of us. “It turns out that a year of mourning wasn’t very good for my game.”

“Your mother died,” I say quietly. “Campeau told us about that.”

“She did,” Sylvie says, folding her hands. “She and Bryce were very close. It really upset him when she died. And things got kind of weird after that...” She shakes her head and doesn’t say more.

But I’m curious, and kind of a bastard, so I have to ask, “What’s the deal with you guys, anyway?”

She looks out the window, where there’s steady foot traffic past the restaurant. “We’ve always been good friends. And for a while there I thought we’d be more. But I was wrong.”

My stomach clenches for her. Is Campeau really that stupid? This woman loves him, and he’s unmoved by that?

“Can I ask you a question?” She turns to me with those giant brown eyes. “You don’t have to answer if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“Anything.”

“Does Bryce have a girlfriend? He should just tell me that. But...” She gulps. “It would help me understand.”

“No ,” I say softly. “I really don’t think so. I’ve never heard him talk about anyone special.”

“Including me, I suppose.” Her smile is wry.

“Well...” I have to tread carefully here. But, nope, he never talks about her. “He always said how close he is to your family. I know you all mean a lot to him. But he is also the most buttoned-up guy I’ve ever met. I mean—I’m an open book. An over-sharer. But Bryce doesn’t talk about his feelings.”

She fiddles with the chopsticks’ wrapper. “It’s true. You’re right. He’s a man of deeds more than words.”

“Exactly,” I say quickly.

“His deeds could use some work, though,” she grumbles.

Our waitress appears, placing a heaping plate of spicy Szechuan chicken down on our table, along with a molded bowl of white rice.

“Yessss ,” Sylvie says with the gusto of a lover in the throes of passion. “Come to *mama* .”

We dig in, and I have the dual pleasures of spicy chicken and watching Sylvie enjoy the food. We also ordered a noodle dish. And that food doesn’t stand a chance. We both pile food onto our plates with enthusiasm.

“So we’re going to teach some kids to swim next week?”

“That’s the idea.” Sylvie heaps some noodles beside her chicken. “Did you read the handbook? Some of these kids don’t even own bathing suits. So we’re bringing bathing suits with us. And it’s not just a course on swimming. It’s a lifesaving course. They can apply for lifeguard jobs if they pass.”

Wait, what? “They never get in the water, and we’re supposed to teach them to be lifeguards? Does that sound plausible?”

“If they’re strong enough, a little fearless, and willing to listen, anything is possible.” She dives in with her chopsticks.

“Are you, uh, a decent swimmer?” I ask. “I took a lot of swimming lessons as a kid.” I leave out the fact that I hated every one of them. “But I’ve never been responsible for a bunch of wet teenagers who can’t swim.”

“I went to swimming camp every summer as a kid. I used to race. And I had my lifesaving certificate.”

Seems like I should have seen that coming. “Guess I’ll be following your lead, then. I’ll admit I’m a little worried about teaching non-swimmers to save lives. Won’t they be a little freaked out in the water already?”

“That’s the point, though.” Her forehead furrows in an adorable frown. “The message isn’t that you’re good enough to swim like kids from the suburbs. It’s that you’re good enough to save someone’s life. It’s empowering to be told you can do something that’s as difficult as it is important.”

“Wow, okay. We’d better do a good job, then.” Although Sylvie’s competence will go a long way. “I’ll do what I can, okay? My schedule is crazy, and I’m not the kind of guy you want in charge of a project like this. But when I’m there, I’ll give a hundred and fifty percent.”

She studies me with serious brown eyes for a moment. “I get that. And thank you.”

“No problem.”

“I just have one more question. Are you going to eat the rest of that chicken?”

As I pass her the platter, I think I fall a little deeper in lust.

TWENTY-NINE

The Tavern on Hicks

SYLVIE

ANTON GRABS the check the moment it hits the table.

My competitive streak is triggered by this show of macho behavior. “Hey! No fair. I don’t need you to buy dinner.”

“Didn’t say you did,” he says, slipping a credit card into the folder. “I’m not trying to baby you. I noticed that you hate that.”

My smile is embarrassed, because he witnessed my meltdown earlier.

“But I also happened to notice that we don’t earn the same salary.”

“That’s true,” I admit. “And a problem for women’s sports. But I’m not hurting like some of the girls. I’m the bookkeeper for my dad’s hockey organization, so I brought my job to Brooklyn with me.”

“Still,” he says, giving me a confident smile. “This is my treat. You can buy next time.”

Next time . I think Anton Bayer and I are becoming friends. “Well, thank you. I really appreciate it. And thank you for talking me off the ledge earlier.”

“I’ve been out on that same ledge.” He shrugs.

My new phone starts chiming with texts, and it’s awfully loud. “Sorry.” I pull out the phone. “I’m still getting used to this thing. All the features...”

The texts are from Fiona. Some of my teammates are gathering in a Brooklyn bar. ***It’s on Hicks Street! Are you in?***

“Wait until you win your first game,” he says. “There’s a gold star that appears on the screen.”

“I’ve heard about that. It sounds a little silly.”

“Doesn’t it?” He chuckles. “But, man, the Kattenbergers are onto something. After a couple of losses, you’ll be missing that damn thing. I’d do just about anything for the star.”

He signs the check while I read my texts. “Do you know where there’s a tavern on Hicks Street?” I ask. “Is that nearby?”

“Oh, sure. I’ll walk you over there.” He gets up. “That’s the name of the place—Tavern on Hicks. It’s the Bruisers’ second home, on account of being located between the arena and the practice facility. We usually walk there after home games.”

He holds the door open for me, like a gentleman. And we set off down the street together. He’s so ruggedly handsome that a few women on the sidewalk turn and stare.

I’m not immune to it either. It’s not just his face. There’s something so sexual about him, that I feel overly aware of my own body when I’m near him. I keep noticing tiny details about him, and each one is more fascinating than the last. He has golden hair on his strong forearms. And his long-legged gait is almost a swagger.

“You don’t have to walk me there,” I blurt out eventually. “I mean, you probably have other things to do on a Saturday night.”

“Not really. Ten bucks says my friends will be there, too. And there’s practically a print of my ass on one of the barstools.”

“Charming,” I say, trying to play it cool.

“Not that you asked, but this part of Brooklyn is safe enough. Although Bryce would probably suggest taking a taxi home if you leave the bar after ten, and especially if you’re alone.”

I snort, and it isn’t very ladylike. “Bryce would probably like me to take a taxi all the way to JFK and fly home to Toronto.”

“That isn’t true.”

“No?” I’m not so sure.

“No.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because Bryce isn’t insane. And only a crazy man would wish you were farther away.”

My cheeks begin to burn, because I don't know how to take a compliment from a hot guy.

I'm saved from trying to think of a suitable response by the appearance of the Tavern. "This is the place?"

"Oh yeah. In all its beer-scented glory. On a weekend, both bartenders are working. Pete looks crusty, but he's actually a cinnamon roll." Anton stops to open the door for me again.

I step inside and spot the gray-haired bartender immediately. The place is more than half full, and the man looks busy.

"And then there's Petra." He nods toward a young, blond woman pouring a pitcher of beer at the end of the bar. He drops his voice even though she's pretty far away, and there's a hum of bar noise in the room. "She looks sweet, but she's made of steel. She keeps us in line."

Petra looks up, as if she's overheard. "Hey, Anton!" she calls. "Who's this? She's too pretty for you."

He puts a warm hand on my shoulder. "Just a friend who puts up with me once in a while. This is Sylvie. She's new in town, and one of the Bombshells' goalies."

Petra glances at me. And I swear her eyes narrow a little bit. "Welcome," she says stiffly. Then she carries that pitcher off without another word.

"See?" he says with a chuckle. "If you need a favor, ask Pete."

"Got it."

"If you don't see your friends yet, there's a few other things you should know about the Tavern." He gives me a serious face.

"Yeah? Like what." Anton is such a hoot.

"Hockey players carve their names into the paneling on the wall outside the men's room. You all might need to start your own spot outside the ladies'." He strokes his chin thoughtfully. "Never order the turkey burger. The fries are great, though. And the nachos are so bad that they're actually

good. With that fake cheese that seems to soak up alcohol at three in the morning.”

“Ah. Never knew that stuff had magical properties.”

“Stick with me. I know things.” He squeezes my shoulder. “You see your friends anywhere?” He glances around, and the heat of his big hand disappears from my shoulder.

I miss it. We *are* becoming friends. He said so himself. I’m grateful. It was not an easy day.

Suddenly I see a hand waving at me from a back corner of the bar. “There they are. At that funny round table.” It’s a C-shaped booth, just the right size for five or six women who need to gossip about their first ten days as Bombshells.

“Bummer. That’s the worst table in the bar.”

“Why? It’s cozy. Nobody can come and bother you there.”

Anton laughs. “That’s it exactly. You’re all stuck with each other.”

“We could make room for you,” I offer.

He shakes his head. “I’m going to go sit with Drake.” He points at a barstool in front of a TV showing a baseball game. “You kids have fun.” He gives my shoulder another quick squeeze. “Thanks for coming out to dinner with me.”

“Oh, please. We both know who got the better end of that bargain.” I give him a grateful smile, and those turquoise eyes smile back at me.

The effect is pretty dazzling. So I give him an awkward wave and turn away, heading for my girls.

They all shift slightly around the circle to make a space for me. “Sylvie! Sit!” Fiona waves me in. Then she leans forward and drops her voice. “Did you just waltz in here with Anton Bayer? What’s up with that? Did I miss something?”

“What? No .” As if. “He watched me lose my mind at Bryce a couple hours ago. And then he invited me out as a kind of intervention. He

probably assumed it was that, or I was going to hurt some unsuspecting Brooklyn native.”

“What did Bryce *do* ?” Fiona asks, her eyes wide. “Did you guys have the big conversation?”

I shake my head. “No, it’s worse.”

“Yeah, that was some serious bullshit,” Scarlet says, swigging her beer. “That man was disrespectful, and whatever you said to him afterwards, he had coming.”

“It was the goalie practice,” I clarify. “He was there to shoot on us. And I was struggling, so he kept sending me easy shots.” When I say these words out loud, they sound stupid and whiny.

But the other women all gasp. “Oh no, he didn’t,” Fiona breathes.

“That *total* dick,” Charli growls.

“It really was that bad,” Scarlet says with a shrug. “If Bridger did that to me, I’d lose my mind.”

“Wait,” I stop her. “Is your husband a hockey player?”

“He was.” She smiles. “He was a *terrific* college player. And we all have shitty days in front of the net, Sylvie.”

I know she’s just trying to be nice, but my struggles are larger than one bad practice session.

Luckily, my dreary thoughts are interrupted by a pitcher landing on the table. “Evening, ladies,” says bartender Pete. “This pitcher of margaritas is a gift of those hooligans at the bar. Welcome to the Tavern, and welcome to Brooklyn.”

“Thank you, Pete,” I say as he sets down several glasses, too. “We sure do appreciate it. Will you tell those hooligans I said so?”

“Absolutely.”

Fiona lifts herself up a few inches so that she can wave a thank you to the men at the bar. “It was your new friend, Anton, and that Drake guy. And Jason Castro.”

Charli growls. “They’d better not be expecting sexual favors.”

“No way,” I say, flipping over a glass and pouring it for her. “Drink this and be grateful. Not everything a man does is a ploy.”

“It’s more like seventy percent,” Scarlet says with a giggle. “But I don’t mind, because my guy is the best there is.”

I pour a glass for Scarlet and pass it over, wondering what it would feel like to be in her shoes—to be unafraid to say “my guy” and know that he loved you and wasn’t afraid to say so.

“It was nice of Anton to send us drinks,” Fiona says. “Does he have a thing for you?”

“Nah.” I pass another glass across the table and then pour my own.

“He’s got a reputation,” Fiona whispers. “For being excellent in bed.”

“Figures,” I say. “His whole sex-on-a-stick thing is a little much.”

“What do you mean?” Charli asks.

“Well, lots of guys are attractive. But he’s just so...extra. Like, I don’t know where to put my eyes, you know? Everything about him is super sexual. And super hot.”

Charli shrugs. “If you say so.”

“All hockey players are hot,” Scarlet says.

“Sister—” Fiona puts her hand on top of mine. “—what if it’s not just him? To me, that sounds like *chemistry*. Between both of you. Do you find yourself suddenly wondering what he looks like naked?”

“What? No.” My face burns, though. Because during dinner I had wondered that about five different times. But it’s only because he’s not my usual type. He’s rougher around the edges than Bryce. He wears his attractiveness differently.

But I’ll *never* admit my petty fascination with Anton Bayer’s incredible body. It’s confusing to me. It must just be hormones or something.

“Be careful with that one,” Charli says. “He’s a total man-whore. Last year it became a problem—he ended up in the blogs for a hotel foursome he

had on a road trip.”

“A...*foursome*? That sounds complicated.” Does she mean sex between four people at the *same time* ? Does that math even work?

I sip my drink and try not to call any more attention to my inexperience. Not that it’s anyone’s business.

Charli rubs her hands together, because even she isn’t immune to a juicy piece of gossip. “The trouble was that one of the women took a selfie while Anton was passed out in the hotel bed with three women around him. This woman sent it to some friends as a trophy, and it ended up on the internet. The publicity department was not pleased.”

Three women in a bed with Anton. I turn my head and glance quickly in his direction. He’s holding a glass of beer in one strong hand, laughing at something Drake is saying, and I feel several different emotions at once.

There’s such *joy* in him, for starters. It’s been a while since I laughed as easily as he does. But he reminds me that it’s possible.

He intimidates me, though. Somehow I can picture each muscular arm around a different woman at the same time. I’m not sure where woman number three would be in that scenario. But still—confidence practically seeps through his pores.

I can’t imagine what it would feel like to be on the other end of that dazzling smile when there were no clothes on that body. A girl could burn right up. Nothing but a little puff of smoke and a wisp of ash left to show for her.

He is really out of my league. And I really must stop staring.

I turn back to my friends and take in their happy faces. My drink is tasty, I’m full of good food, and my teammates are amusing. Life could really be worse.

And I’m enjoying this opportunity to spend time with Scarlet. In many ways, we’re competitors. If she ends up starting every Bombshells game,

I'll be sad. But she's smart and funny and living the life I hope to lead in a few years.

"We're in Manhattan, on the Upper East Side," she's saying. "I take a ferry across the river for practice. It's not such a terrible commute. And Lucy doesn't need us to walk her home from school anymore, because she's in ninth grade, and wouldn't be caught dead with us, anyway."

"Lucy is your...stepdaughter?" Charli guesses. Scarlet is only twenty-five, and too young to have a daughter in high school.

"Sister-in-law," she says with a smile. "Bridger is raising his little sister, and has been since she was eight. Their parents have passed."

"Awww," Fiona says, and I swear there are hearts in her eyes. "What a guy."

"Lucy is the reason that he had to quit hockey," Scarlet tells us. "He loves that I'm still playing. I run the youth hockey program at Chelsea Piers as my day job. And when Bess called about the Bombshells, Bridger brought home a bottle of champagne and told me to go for it."

There's a moment of silence at our table as we all contemplate the perfection of Scarlet's marriage. Even Charli has a soft expression on her face that I rarely see there.

And then a low voice breaks the silence.

"Sylvie."

I freeze at the sound of Bryce's voice. But I do not turn around. I'm still angry.

A warm hand lands on my shoulder. "Please. I need to apologize."

The fight seeps out of me. I don't want to make *another* scene. So I slide out of the booth and turn around to face him.

A very familiar set of dark blue eyes greets me. And they look worried. "*Désolé* , Sylvie. I am very sorry for not sending you the same shots that I sent the others. I did not mean to disrespect you."

“Thank you,” I say stiffly. The hurt is still there, though. I keep attracting the wrong kind of attention from this man, and I don’t know how to break the cycle.

But maybe Bryce does. He takes both my hands in his, and gazes lovingly at me. “I never want to hurt you. I love you. I’m sorry.” Then, just as my heart begins melting into a puddle, he pulls me into a hug. I’m snuggled against his warm chest, and my nose lands at the collar of his shirt, where I get a whiff of the aftershave that he’s always worn.

A soft kiss lands at my temple. “*Désolé,*” he says one more time.

As apologies go, it’s top notch. And so is this hug. *This* is the kind man I’ve pined for since I was a girl. Even though it was never mutual.

When his arms relax, I step back. “Did you eat dinner?” he asks. “I was about to order a burger from the bar. I could make it two.”

“I ate,” I admit. “But thank you.”

He flashes me a rare smile. “Then enjoy your evening, *mademoiselle*.”

“*Merci*.” I sit back down then, to the questioning eyes of my teammates.

“Okay, that was nice,” Fiona says. “But that boy confuses me.”

“Sing it, sister.” Confusing should be his new middle name.

“Although I might know a way you could unconfuse him.”

“Really? How?” I ask a little too quickly. It’s so obvious that I’ve spent too much time wondering how to do that.

“The black-tie dinner and dance that’s coming up—let’s find you a sexy dress, some killer heels, and smoky eyes.”

I blink. “That’s it? That’s your idea?”

“Never underestimate the power of showing yourself in a new light. Men can be simple, visual creatures. You’d be activating the *other* definition of bombshell, you know?”

Charli makes a face, like she hates this plan. “Why do we have to put ourselves on display to raise money for charity?”

“You don’t,” I point out. “It’s optional. Although the men have to put on a tux several times a year for these things. Donors plunk down a thousand dollars a head to meet the players and shake their hands.”

“It’s basically prostitution,” Charli complains.

“It’s for an excellent cause,” Scarlet says. “With free food and music. Bridger and I are looking forward to it.”

“Fine, but I won’t be showing any skin,” Charli grumbles. “I’m in it for the open bar.”

“I’m in it for the new dress,” Fiona chirps. “I can hear Bloomingdale’s calling my name. Are you with me, Sylvie?”

“I’m in,” I decide. It’s been a long time since I got dressed up for an occasion. And maybe Fiona has a point. “You can help me find the dress. Bryce isn’t going to know what hit him.”

“That’s my girl,” she says, refilling my glass.

I swivel around in my seat and glance toward Bryce. He’s leaning on the bar, deep in conversation with Petra the bartender. He doesn’t notice that I’m studying him and trying to predict his reaction when I arrive at the party in a low-cut dress I picked out just for him.

It occurs to me that Bryce isn’t very interested in dancing. But I’ll convince him.

Another man catches me gazing in that direction, though. It’s Anton, of course, who doesn’t miss a chance to notice every silly thing that happens to me.

He gives me a friendly wink and turns back to his boys.

I pick up my margarita and raise my glass. “To teaching the men of Brooklyn a few new tricks.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Charli raises her glass.

“Cheers!” Fiona yells as our glasses clink together. “Bottoms up, girls. I’ll buy the next round.”

A couple hours later we put Scarlet in a taxi, and we walk Charli to the subway. “Where are you living, anyway?” Fiona asks her.

“I found a place. It’s a few stops away.” She waves off the question. “See you at practice.”

Fiona and I walk home together. The cool air sobers me up.

Or so I thought. When I’m safely in my bed, I have unusual dreams. They’re very sexual. A pair of hands unzips my dress. Bryce says “*Désolé*,” in my ear. *Sorry*. But an apology isn’t what I want, so I say, “Keep going.”

He doesn’t, and I wake up, frustrated.

Thanks, tequila.

When I roll over onto my back, the dream continues. There’s kissing. And strong hands remove my underwear, sliding it down my body in a sensuous pass of silk on bare skin.

Those hands pass over my breasts. And then he kisses his way down my body, thrilling me. My legs are parted, and a hot, eager mouth lands exactly where I want it.

I arch my back and moan. *Yes. Finally. More*. And then I look down to watch this wonderfulness in action.

He lifts his head to give me a smoldering glance. But it’s not Bryce who’s pleasuring me. It’s Anton, with his wicked smile, and those brilliant, heavy-lidded eyes.

I wake up with a start, sweating and turned on. I let out a quiet groan of frustration and notice that dawn has already arrived to leak pale light into my bedroom.

I sit up, grab the glass of water beside my bed, and take a gulp. My body is deeply confused. In the first place, it forgot how to lunge for pucks. But I’m working on it.

It also craves sex. I blame Bryce and his ridiculous hesitation to take the next step with me.

And Anton Bayer's appearance in my dreams? That's on me. All the man did was buy me some Chinese food and talk me out of my snit. He didn't hit on me. And he sure as hell didn't...

The image that assaults me is so vivid that I clench my thighs together, as if that would soothe the ache I'm feeling.

I drain the rest of the water. When I turn to put the empty glass back down on the table, I notice a hair pin on the wooden surface, glinting in the early morning light.

"Really, Maman?" I whisper. "What on Earth are you trying to suggest? Should I be encouraged? Patient?"

As usual, she doesn't say.

Part Mermaid

SOMETIMES ADULTING JUST SUCKS.

These are my thoughts as I drive my rickety Volkswagen Bug up my parents' gravel driveway. I haven't been here for most of a decade, and I'm bracing myself in every possible way. Anything could have happened during the intervening years. They could have moved away. (Although that's unlikely.) They could have gotten divorced. (Also hard to picture.)

Conceivably, one or both could be dead.

I don't even know how I'll feel if that last thing has happened. My parents and I didn't part on good terms, to put it lightly. But people can change their ways.

Not all of them do, though.

At first glance, my parents' property looks exactly the same. The little one-story house is still clad in cheap vinyl siding, and its shade of ochre-yellow is just how I remember it.

The tall pines have been carefully pruned of their dead lower branches, which argues for the continued existence of my father, who always enjoyed firing up his chainsaw to tidy things up. Also, Dad's old ride-on mower is visible inside the garage.

He's still around, then. I feel a little hit of relief, which makes no sense. The man will probably shut the door in my face when he sees who's come

to visit. This is going to end badly. I'm already ninety-nine percent sure.

Still, I need to ask for their help. After paying for the gas to drive up from Nashville, I have less than four hundred dollars to my name. And no job. If they turn me away, I'm sleeping in my car again tonight.

It won't kill me, but it's not ideal.

Parking in front of the garage, I get out and almost bleep the locks. I'm so used to parking in Nashville. I haven't lived under these tall pines for eight years.

Back then, I couldn't wait to leave this place. I had my reasons, and some of them were solid. And I used to hate the trees and the winding country roads as much as I hated my parents' attitude.

I still hate the things my parents said to my teenage self. But Vermont looks better to me than it ever did before. I'm ready to live somewhere without smog and traffic. I miss the smell of woodsmoke in the nighttime air, and the sight of the sun setting over the Green Mountains.

Maybe it's weird to feel nostalgia for a place that wasn't good to me. But I'm in the mood to give Vermont a second chance. I'm hoping it gives me a second chance, too. And I'm about to find out if driving eleven hundred miles was a good idea or just plain stupid.

As I approach the house, the front door is already opening. My dad stands on the other side of the screen door, TV remote in his hand, staring at me like he's seen a ghost.

"Hi," I say carefully.

"Roddy," he whispers. He makes no move to open the screen door, but then, neither do I. Maybe we both need a minute to get over our mutual shock.

He looks older. It startles me to catalog all the gray in his hair and the new wrinkles around his eyes.

I'm pretty sure that I don't look like the skinny eighteen-year-old I used to be, either. So he's staring back at me trying to get over that, too.

“You’re back?” he asks, still befuddled.

“Well...” I let out a nervous chuckle. “I’ve been living in Nashville. And yesterday I just got in my car and drove up here without a plan. It took me two days.”

I won’t tell him why I left Nashville. He won’t want to hear about the awful way my relationship ended. Hell, he won’t want to hear about my relationship at all.

“So,” I continue. “I’m happy to be back in Vermont. But I’m kind of starting over. And I was wondering if...”

“Ralph?” my mother’s voice calls from deeper inside the small house.

I have very little time to prepare before she appears behind him. She’s drying her hands on a dish towel, her hair in a messy bun.

My heart gives a little squeeze of familiarity before I can steel myself.

“Roderick,” she whispers, her eyes popping wide. “Oh, honey. What’s happened?”

“Well, not much,” I stammer. “I just needed to get out of Nashville and start over. So I was thinking of doing that here.”

“Here?” She squeezes the dish towel, her eyes alight.

“Perhaps,” I say, trying to sound like it isn’t my only option in the whole world. But if I step over the threshold and stay with them, it has to be because I’m invited. I won’t live with their disdain. Sleeping in the car would be better.

“You want to stay here,” my father clarifies. He’s still holding that TV remote. And he still hasn’t opened the screen door.

It’s not a good sign.

“Just for a little while,” I say. “Until I find a job and a place of my own. I’m a baker.”

“You...what?” my mother asks. “Like, cakes?”

“Bread, mostly. I went to culinary school. I specialize in bread-baking.”

My father squints at me, and that's another clue this isn't going to work. "Culinary school," he echoes. There's dismissal in his voice. *Baking is not a real man's job* . I might as well have said that I'm a ballet dancer, or that I star in a drag show. My father's ideas of what a man should do with his life are straight out of the fifties.

"No more guitar?" my mother asks. She's hoping I've grown out of being the queer little music nerd my father couldn't tolerate. She's trying to sway him.

"No guitar," I agree, although it kills me a little to imply that I somehow got with Dad's program and outgrew music. The truth is that I accidentally left my guitar behind in Nashville.

I did outgrow musicians, though. But that's another long story.

"If you stay..." My father purses his lips. "It's our house, our rules."

I swallow hard. "I'm a great house guest. I even cook. And clean up."

My mother makes a happy sound and reaches for the latch on the screen door. She even elbows my father a little to shift him out of the way.

He doesn't move, though. He's still staring at me like I'm a puzzle he's trying to figure out. "But you're not... You won't..." He falters.

"I won't what?" I ask, already knowing where this is going.

Dad can't even spit out the loathsome words. "You have a girlfriend?" he asks.

Coward . I shake my head. "I don't have anybody. That's why I'm standing on your front steps. I had to leave a bad relationship with nothing but my clothes and a box of books. But I still date men, if that's what you're asking. I'm still gay."

My mother lets out a sound of dismay. And the way my father's face shutters, I know I came here for nothing.

"You haven't been to church," my father says, as if that isn't a non-sequitur. But to him I suppose it isn't.

“Not lately,” I admit. “My life blew up, Dad. I have nowhere to go. I’m asking to stay in my old room for a couple of weeks until I can regroup. And I’d help out around here, of course.”

There is a terrible silence while we stare at each other. And then he slowly shakes his head. “Not until you ask God’s forgiveness.”

It’s really astonishing that you can storm out of a house at eighteen in the middle of a shouting match, and then pick right up again in the same place eight years later. We’re still trapped in the same dialogue we’d had my entire last year of high school.

“I am humble before the Lord,” I say quietly. “But I will not apologize to Him for who I love, or who I am.”

My father gives me a disgusted look, as if I just announced my committed worship of Satan. He folds his arms across his chest. The posture is clear. *Go away. You are no longer my son .*

Message received . I feel a flash of the old hurt, but it’s followed swiftly by exhaustion. My anger is muted by two days behind the wheel of my car and by already having years of living with his rejection.

Still, I look him right in the eye. *You arrogant fuck. Who says you can judge me?*

My mother sniffs, and I know she’s crying. Mom wants me to come inside. But she doesn’t want it enough to stand up to him.

That’s when I finally realize I’m done here. Probably forever. There is nothing left to do but turn around and leave.

I take one last look at him. But there is no softness there. No affection for the kid he used to love, although I’ve always been me. I’m the same boy who caught all those baseballs with him in the various yards around the country where we lived when he was in the Air Force. I’m the same son who mowed the lawn and got up early to go fishing, because I craved his attention.

He doesn’t even blink. His rejection is unmoving.

So I turn around and make myself walk away.

The sound of the heavy wood door shutting behind me comes even more suddenly than I expect it to. And I have the sudden, terrible urge to spin around and hurl myself at that fucking door. *Open up, you cowardly fuck!* I might scream. Part of me wants to make a big scene, the way I used to when he lectured me during my senior year of high school.

But the other half of me is already numb. I drove all the way to Vermont thinking I might have a chance. *When God closes a door, he opens a window*. It's the worst kind of cliché, but I wanted it to be true. All the way here I wondered if my breakup was some kind of sign that I was meant to live my life elsewhere. I thought maybe I was sent home again for a reason.

Apparently not, though. This week, when God closes a door, he also engages the deadbolt.

I go back to my car and start the engine again. Might as well have left her running. I do a three-point turn without looking at the house, yellowed pine needles crackling under my tires. It's time to form a Plan B. So I point my car toward the center of Colebury.

I'll bet my father is already watching the playoff game again. Maybe he's treated himself to a second beer, just to wash away the disturbing intrusion of his queer son during the fifth inning.

And my mother is crying into a hand towel in the bathroom. Quietly. So she doesn't make a fuss.

I can't think about them right now. I have more practical problems—like how to get a job immediately. And where to sleep tonight. Best-case scenario—there is magically a job opening at the King Arthur Flour Bakery, where I began my career. But even if they hire me tomorrow, it will be at least two weeks until I could expect to be paid.

I have to figure out how to stay alive for several weeks on a few hundred dollars.

As I drive into town, I notice that my gas tank is almost empty. There goes twenty-five bucks. I drive slowly anyway, taking in the sights, wondering what's changed. Just before the turn into Colebury, I spot a couple of new businesses. There's a bar called the Gin Mill with lots of cars in the parking lot. That place looks like a good time, but I don't have money to spend, not even on a single beer.

In the same lot, though, there's another business that's even more interesting to me. The Busy Bean. A coffee shop. It's closed now, but I make a note to pay it a visit soon. If it's a big coffee shop, they might be able to use a baker, one who doesn't mind pouring coffee, too.

Beggars can't be choosers. And since I'm *this* close to becoming an actual beggar, I have to keep my options open.

I gun the engine, climbing the hill toward the town square. The houses look a little better maintained than the last time I was here. It's a warm autumn night, and there are people standing outside the old diner, chatting. That place has shined itself up, too. When did Colebury get cute? I'm stunned at how cheerful it looks, with window boxes on the store fronts and every street lamp lit.

My nostalgia bubbles up inside me again like yeast. This is my hometown, even if I never felt welcome here before. I was born here. And even if I spent most of my first eighteen years living on various military bases around the world, I finished high school here, too.

And I like the look of the place, damn it. I feel the pull.

Wouldn't it be funny if I settled down in Colebury right under the noses of my parents? I want to see the look on my father's face when I walk into the diner holding hands with my future boyfriend.

Now there's a happy thought I'll need to revisit when I'm trying to fall asleep in the passenger seat later.

Behind the old diner, I see something that's actually useful to me. A gym. TRY A WEEK ON US, reads a sign in the window.

It's the first lucky break of the day. Or maybe the month, if I'm honest. If the gym has even a half-decent locker room, I can shower there every night. I'll need to look professional while I'm job hunting.

I park my car and get out. *Come on, Colebury. Don't let me down .*

Never forget a woman

I'M LEANING against my car in the parking lot at the gym. I'm aware that just standing around outside the gym defeats the whole purpose of being here, but I'm on the phone, listening to my older brother plead with me to do his chores at home.

"Come on, this is my opportunity to make an extra hundred bucks. You can come into the Gin Mill and I'll buy you a beer."

"How can I come in and drink beer if I'm moving the cows for you?" I ask. People always tell me that I have a grumpy voice. But lately it's extra grumpy when I talk to Kyle.

"Come later," he says. "After chores."

Only Kyle would pretend that's a workable plan. He expects me to abandon my workout, drive forty minutes home, move the cows' grazing fence before it gets dark, and then finish the other farm chores.

Then drive forty minutes back for a free beer? Ridiculous.

And here's the shitty thing—Kyle gets *paid* by our dad for farming. But I don't. "You have two jobs, and Kyle does most of the ranch work," he'd said last year when he'd finally added Kyle to the payroll.

That would make sense if only it were true. But Dad's back problems started getting worse right after that, so I've been pitching in three nights a

week. “Let me get this straight. I’m doing your chores for free so that you can earn money elsewhere?”

“Please?” he begs. “What if I paid you twenty bucks? It’s only a two-hour gig, but Alec says the beer-industry people are big tippers.”

I look forlornly toward the gym. If I’d gotten here ten minutes earlier I would have been inside already, unreachable. I do everything that’s asked of me. *Everything* . And nobody really appreciates it.

“Tell me this—what are your plans for the rest of the week?” I demand. He’s terrible at planning. And I need him to use his head for once, before I lose mine.

“Well, tomorrow I promised Dad I’d take him to the newest *Robot Wars* movie in Montpelier...”

While he talks, my attention is snagged by a man who’s just climbed out of a bright blue Volkswagen Bug. He’s reading the sign on the door of the gym. I can’t see his face, because he’s turned to the side. But I get a good look at his muscular shoulders, which are straining his black T-shirt. And his forearms have terrific muscle definition...

“Kieran?” my brother prompts. “Did you get that?”

No, I was just admiring a dude . I close my eyes and try to forget the hot guy across the parking lot. This is the extent of my sex life—admiring men, and then feeling confused about it. I spent the first twenty years of my life thinking that attractive men were interesting to me only because I admired them as people and wanted to be like them.

But that was only half right. Lately it’s gotten harder to ignore the fact that I also want to be *under* them. Or over them. Or even side by side.

Just as I’m having this bold thought, the guy reaches for the door to the gym. And he turns his body in a way that lets me see his face...

That’s when everything goes a little haywire. Because I recognize that face. It’s been years since I’ve seen it, though. And I’d bet every dollar in my wallet that he doesn’t even know my name.

Thank God.

My face flushes hot and my body runs cold. It doesn't matter that he didn't look my way before disappearing into the gym, or that there would be no way that he would remember me the way I remember him. I still feel a flash of utter shame.

"...so that's why I'll need your help the next few nights," my brother is saying.

"The next few nights," I echo stupidly.

"Look, I know it's a lot. But this thing with Dad's back is a bummer, and there's really no way we can get through the next month without a lot of extra hassle."

I must still be experiencing an adrenaline rush, because I suddenly snap. "Hassle for *who* ? You want to pull a shift at the bar, where you can earn extra money and hit on women. And tomorrow you want to go to the movies, but it's with Dad so you think that excuses your lack of planning. And I zoned out for that last thing you said, but I'm sure it doesn't matter. Because unless you said you're going to save babies from a burning building, I can't understand why you think it's okay to bail on me three or four nights in a row."

There is a deep, stunned silence after I deliver this tirade. I never go off on Kyle, although maybe it's time I did. My life is ridiculous. I work like a dog, and I never complain. I never do a thing for myself, and all I wanted tonight was a goddamn workout.

"Well," he says a moment later. Then he clears his throat. "Tell me how you really feel."

I feel like a dick, that's how I feel. A wave of cold remorse washes over me.

"I won't take the bartending shift," Kyle says. Then he hangs up on me for the first time in his life.

Standing here in the gym parking lot, I'm breathing a little too fast and my heart is hammering. I can't believe I snapped like that. Yes, it's time to stop doing everything my family expects. Standing up for myself is a fine idea. But I didn't have to be a dick about it.

And Roderick Waites is back in town.

My gaze travels back to the gym door. He's still in there. Which means that I just blew up at my brother for nothing, because I'm not going into that gym.

My thumbs are tapping out a text to Kyle before I can even think twice about it. ***Take that bartending shift , I say. It's fine. I'm on my way home to move the cows .***

By the time I get into my truck and start the engine, he's already replied. ***Dude. Are you sure? You just lost your shit at me .***

I'm sure. But tonight when you get home we have to make a plan for the rest of the week. Because I'm not doing all your chores again tomorrow just so you can go to the movies .

Fine , he replies. Thanks. Later!

I back out of the parking spot and turn the truck toward home. I suppose I could take my dad to the movies tomorrow. But Dad wouldn't want my company, he wants Kyle's. The privilege of being Dad's favorite is lost on my goof of a brother. Kyle is incapable of imagining that life doesn't fart rainbows on everyone the way it does on him.

Something's got to give , I tell myself as I put some miles between Colebury and home. This isn't the first time I've wanted to break out of my rut. I'm twenty-five years old and still live at home. My family is a minefield, yet they depend on me for farm labor.

And—worst of all—I still care too much about what other people think. Case in point: I just ran away from the gym, because of a guy who won't even remember me. That's ridiculous.

But at least I realize that. It's a start.

Back at home, I do all the chores and then some.

First I put the cows in the north pasture. Moving cows is easy enough in good weather. It only requires me to move the portable fence and wave them through the opening. “Go on, enjoy,” I say as they file past me eagerly. Our herd is grass fed, and they don’t need to be asked twice. The long, seedy grass and corn stalks I’m offering are like a recently freshened, all-you-can-eat buffet.

Let’s face it—the cows are easier to handle than any of my family members. They go where they’re needed, no questions asked. But my dog—Rexie—gives the cows a nice loud *woof* just to pretend he’s working hard.

Rexie and Kyle have a lot in common, honestly. They’re both a little ridiculous. They both have an inflated sense of their own usefulness. And I love them both in spite of it.

After the cow parade, I close up the fence and turn the electricity on. Since it’s October, darkness is falling fast. In another couple of weeks we’ll have to set our clocks back, and then it will be pitch dark before five. I’m already squinting as I check the hens’ nesting boxes for eggs, and topping up their water, and I have to turn on my head lamp to connect up their electric fence.

Most of our farming income is made on grass-fed beef. We also grow some corn and organic oats as feed crops. By this time of year, all the crop work should already be done, but Kyle and I still have to bale the oat straw. It would have been done weeks ago, if it weren’t for my dad’s back pain getting worse.

I make a mental note to remind my brother to make the baling a priority. Again. After that, I spend forty-five minutes raking cow shit out of the lower farmyard in the dark.

It's boring drudge work, and my mind starts to wander. And, fuck, it wanders right to Roderick Waites—the guy who climbed out of a blue Volkswagen and right back into my brain.

I wish I could say I haven't thought about him since high school, but that would be a lie. And if I were a more spiritual person, I'd probably interpret Roderick's reappearance in town as a sign. A wakeup call.

Nobody knows all the tangled things in my brain, but for a split second when I was a teenager, Roderick came close to learning one of my biggest secrets.

The first time I saw him on his knees in front of another guy, it was an accident.

It was autumn then, too. I'd been at a high school football game. It was chilly that night and, last second before leaving for the game, I'd grabbed my dad's jacket from the hook by the door. After shoving my hands into the pockets while standing on the windy sidelines, I'd found a flask of whiskey. My father must have last worn the jacket when he was sitting out in the deer blind with his pals. *Bonus* .

But, of course, I'd had to sneak around to find a place to take a taste.

Leaving the crowd and the game, I ducked inside the door to the school's gym. Under the cover of the bleachers, I drew out my dad's flask, and unscrewed the top. Just as I raised it to my lips, I froze at the sound of whispered voices. Whoever was speaking had entered the gym at the other end of the bleachers.

Their shadowy figures weren't easily visible. But I guessed it was a couple looking for a little privacy for a make-out session. And since a couple sneaking off together wasn't a threat to me, I stood my ground.

I took a swallow of my father's hooch. My first sip wasn't life-changing—it burned going down and made my eyes water—it's what happened next that changed everything.

After screwing the lid on the flask and pocketing it, I ducked out of the gym and into the hallway. Feeling nosy, I walked toward the gym's other entrance, noiseless in my Nikes. When I reached the door, I eased into a position that allowed me to spy on the couple I'd heard whispering to each other. They were silent now, and I wanted to know why.

When I saw who it was, I swear my heart almost stopped. A varsity soccer player—Jared Harvey—stood beneath the bleachers, bracing his hands on a tread overhead. Roderick Waites knelt in front of him, unzipping Jared's jeans.

You can bet I didn't even blink for the next five minutes. I was riveted by the tension in Jared's body. The muscles in his arms bulged as he held on to the tread, his chest rapidly rising and falling as he watched Roderick tug down his underwear and free his cock.

"Suck it, man," Jared bit out.

Roderick didn't hesitate. He grabbed the base of Jared's dick in one hand and eagerly took the tip into his mouth. Jared made a strangled sound and tipped his head back in pleasure.

I could barely breathe as Roderick hollowed out his cheeks and sucked. And I became lightheaded when he began to bob up and down.

"*Ungh !*" Jared grunted. "Goddamn. Faster."

Instead, Roderick slowed his pace, looking up at Jared with luminous eyes. And, damn, the sounds he made—the smack and slurp made my teenage brain melt.

Jared's hold on the tread got shaky and, at last, Roderick picked up the pace. Jared gasped, one of his big hands falling to land in Roderick's hair. Roderick glanced up at him again, and the eye contact seemed to burn Jared. He yanked his hand back and looked away.

I saw Roderick reach up and tug Jared's balls with his free hand. No, I *felt* it. I was suddenly, painfully aware of my own arousal, of being so hard that my jeans were uncomfortable.

Jared cursed and shuddered, every muscle locking. His face slackened with release, and Roderick's throat worked as he swallowed. It was the most erotic thing I'd ever seen in my seventeen years. My heart was thumping and blood pounded in my ears.

And other places.

Self-preservation finally kicking in, I backed away from the doorway and ducked into the men's room across the hall.

In the mirror, my face had been flushed, my eyes hooded and dark. I'd looked like a man who'd seen his dirtiest fantasies brought to life. Because I had.

For days afterward I don't think I had a single rational thought. Both Roderick and Jared were seniors—a grade above me—and it was a good thing we didn't share any classes. I probably would have burst into flames, if I had to speak to either of them. I spent a lot of time thinking about what I saw, and wondering if they were gay.

The weird thing was that I had all those thoughts about them without considering why I was so obsessed. That would take a few more years.

But the story doesn't end there. Two weeks later there was another home football game. As I sat in the bleachers with my brother and our friends, I saw Jared get up and head toward the school. Roderick's dark head passed by the side of the bleachers a minute later.

I'm sure you know what I did next.

"Taking a leak. Back in a few," I muttered to my friends. Then I snuck into the school building and tiptoed down the dark hallway again. I have never felt so much shame as I crept toward the gym. What the hell did it mean that I wanted to watch this?

But curiosity was burning me up inside. Would it be Jared on his knees this time? Or would they do something totally different?

I'm sure I shivered with anticipation as I slowly peered around the gym's door. The picture was the same. Roderick sucking off Jared. Jared

gasping and writhing and desperate. I watched every second that I dared.

And that wasn't the last time either. It took a couple more secret trips to the gym before I learned my lesson. I'd known I needed to stop watching, but I just couldn't stay away. Also, it was the final home game of the season, and what was one more sin among so many?

That last time was different. From his usual spot on the floor, Roderick used one of his hands to unzip his own fly, and he stroked himself while he sucked off his friend. I was dying slowly in my hideout, my eyes glued to his hand on his cock. Jared was almost ready to blow, and so was I—hands free.

But that didn't happen. Because Roderick's gaze shifted in the dark.

He lifted those blue eyes and looked right at me. And his expression told me that he'd known I was there. He'd known it all along.

You would've thought I'd turn around to run, but I froze, my shame complete. And then? He stared at me while he came all over his hand.

God . Even now—years later—the memory gets me hard. The sheer nerve of those boys getting off on school property. They were living, and I was watching.

But *man* did I like watching.

A sharp whistle from the farmhouse breaks my reverie. It's my mother calling me in to dinner. I hang up the rake on the side of the barn, adjust my jeans, and head toward the house.

Eight years later I'm still thinking about Roderick Waites. And I'm still keeping secrets, still doing exactly what everyone expects of me.

Nothing has changed, really. Nothing at all.

I just jinxed us

AS I KICK off my boots in the mudroom, I take a deep breath and try to rearrange my thoughts. I've lived here my whole life, but lately the place really brings me down. "Hey, Ma," I say, after entering the kitchen. "How are you doing?"

"Okay," she says from the stove. Then she drops her voice. "But your father is a bear today. And there's something we need to talk about at dinner."

"Okay. Sure," I agree. Although my father is a bear almost all the time, and we both know it. "Are we making some sandwiches?"

"No, I cooked!" she says. "Chicken casserole."

"Great," I say, mostly meaning it.

My mom's cooking is bland, and that dish is particularly tasteless. She'd never been a great cook, but when her doctor suggested she cut down on the sodium, the menu took a turn for the worse. Chicken casserole with no salt? Trust me, you don't want any. Even Rexie prefers his kibble to mom's casserole.

I'll eat it anyway, though, because I'm hungry, and it's free. For a few years now, I've been saving up to rent a place of my own. My dream is to live in town.

My pile of cash is pretty tall at this point, so when Dad is back to work again, I can start looking for something cheap. There's even a chance that I'll rent a house in Colebury from Zara, my boss at the coffee shop. She's probably losing her next-door tenant next month. "He was offered a job in another state," she'd said. "If they leave, I'll rent the house to you on the cheap, if you can help me with the yard work and the snow removal this winter." And then she'd named a price that fit my budget, especially if I got a roommate.

Man, I would shovel *acres* of snow to have a place of my own.

Meanwhile, I set the same kitchen table I've set my whole life. It's square, with a joint right down the center. My mother and I always sit on one side, and my father and Kyle sit on the other. It's a damn metaphor if I ever saw one.

"How was the desk job today?" my father asks as he shuffles into the room and pulls out the chair on his side. He says *desk job* the way some people say *acupuncture*. Like only a crazy person would get a job at an office.

"Fine. Busy." I stick to one word answers with him. We have so little in common and don't see eye to eye on anything.

"If they're so busy, why don't they take you full time?" Dad sits down gingerly, accepting a plate from my mother, looking down at the beige blob of food on it with a grimace.

Please don't critique the food, I privately beg him. I can tolerate my dad's ire toward me, but when he picks on my mother, I tend to lose my cool.

"I mean, how can you learn the ad business if you're only there four afternoons a week?" he asks, picking up his fork with a wary glance at his dinner.

"I learn plenty," I say mildly. The truth is that I haven't said much about my job in Burlington. Nor have I said a word about the college course I'm

hoping to take this spring. He won't approve. And there's no law that says I have to explain myself to him.

I'm just going to do my own thing and give the bare minimum amount of information to anyone who asks. That's how you keep the peace in this house.

"You didn't go to the gym?" my mother asks, just to keep the conversation flowing.

A wave of discomfort rolls through me, because the question makes me think of Roderick. Again. I wonder if I'll ever be able to think of that guy and not feel embarrassed. "I almost made it to the gym. But Kyle called me and sent me home to do his chores instead."

"It is his night, isn't it?" my mother asks. "Where is that boy?"

"Tending bar for a couple hours, for extra cash." I shovel in some more of my mother's casserole and chew so I won't say what I'm thinking.

"It's good to earn extra cash," my father says, excusing Kyle. "We're going to have a tough season around here."

"Why?" I set down my fork. "Did we lose an animal?"

"No." He shakes his head.

That's when the kitchen door opens and Kyle steps through, grinning. "Am I just in time for dinner?"

"Yes you are!" my father says, smiling for the first time, because his eldest—his boy—is home.

"It's my super power." Kyle hangs his coat on a hook.

"Sally, get him a plate," my dad says.

My mom gets up and makes Kyle a plate, while my brother slides into his chair. He plops twenty bucks on the table in front of me. "Thanks for your help."

"Sure," I grunt, wishing I'd never made a big deal about it in the first place. I tuck the bill into my pocket anyway. My rent fund can use it.

Mom sets a plate in front of my brother, and then takes her seat again. “Since Kyle’s home, we might as well talk about this winter.” My father’s scowl tells me I won’t like whatever she’s about to say. “Your father is having back surgery. Soon. He’s going to be out of commission for months.”

“Weeks,” my father corrects gruffly.

She rolls her eyes. “It’s a spinal fusion. Major surgery, with a long recovery time.”

Spinal fusion . Yeesh. I’ll be googling that later, but it already sounds dreadful. I feel a rare pang of sympathy for Dad. But when I look up at him, the steely look in his eyes asks for no pity.

“Okay,” I say, draining my glass. “You know Kyle and I will pitch in.” I give my brother a sideways glance.

“Yeah, we’ve got this,” he says. “It’s good that you’re doing this before calving and planting.”

“That’s the idea,” my mother says. “It’s going to be a rough time for a little while. But I knew you’d both pitch in. It’s the Shipley way.”

“Right,” I say, trying to keep the bitterness out of my voice. “I can give you weekend afternoons and Mondays. I don’t go to the office on Mondays.”

“What if you found a job closer to home instead?” my father asks.

Wait, what? “You think that’s so easy to do?”

“It has to be easier than driving clear across Vermont to work that desk job. And you’re pouring coffee in the mornings. Seems like you could save yourself a lot of trouble and take a job at the hardware store in town.”

“So you’d have me quit the Busy Bean and bail on Audrey and Zara? Is that the Shipley way?” The Bean is owned by Audrey Shipley, my cousin’s wife. If my mom was gonna pull the family card, it seemed worth mentioning.

My father shrugs, as if I'm being ridiculous. "Audrey can find someone else to sell muffins, no?"

"How about you let *me* figure out the best way to get paid?" I ask, and each word is a little chip of ice. The undertone is perfectly clear, too—if *he's* not paying me, then he can shut the hell up. "I just offered you every spare hour of my week. Is that not good enough?"

"It's great," Kyle says quickly. "We'll figure this thing out, right?"

"Right. But you'll have to be thoughtful about your schedule. Baling those oats is a two-man job, so you're going to have to make yourself available when I'm off work."

"No problem," he says.

"That means baling and handling the fences even when there's football on TV."

"I know. *Jesus* ." Kyle gives me a grumpy look, too.

But I already know how this is going to play out—a long, cold season doing farm work after putting in a full day at my other two jobs.

"If we all pull together, it will be okay," my mother says.

"That's right," Kyle echoes. "And cold drinks when the work is done. That's the Shipley way."

He makes it sound so simple. Meanwhile, I'm sitting across the table, trying not to scream.

In this house, *that's* the Shipley way.

Some saves are guesswork

I PASS a difficult night in the passenger seat of my car.

In the first place, it's harder to find a safe place to park than you'd think. Being invisible isn't easy. I'm afraid to lurk where the cops might notice me. I suppose I could google *homeless shelters in Vermont* and find one.

But I don't want to. When I was eighteen, I spent some time in homeless shelters. I'd rather not repeat that experience. I am never going to be that terrified teenager again. I don't want to go back to that defeated mental state. I don't want to even say the word *homeless*. I'm just between houses at present. At least this time I have a car. I'm locked in and safe.

That's what I'm trying to tell myself, anyway. But sleep is fitful. Every little sound wakes me up. I'm parked behind a dumpster in back of a karate dojo. I keep expecting to see a police cruiser pull up with its lights flashing.

Also, my legs are numb, and whenever I try to roll over, I smack my knee against the door.

I doze fitfully. At some point during the darkest part of the night, my thoughts turn to my ex, Brian. He's asleep in our bed right now, sprawled out and comfortable. *His* bed. It was never really ours. I spent three years loving him on his terms. Hiding our relationship in public. Feeding on the scraps of attention he was willing to give.

On some level I always knew he wasn't capable of loving me back, even though he would sometimes tell me he did. But just as often he'd push me away. He'd "forget" about our plans, or change his mind at the last minute. He did these things just to keep me on edge—to prove that I wasn't really necessary in his life.

Eventually I got clingy and threw down an ultimatum, which he pretended to consider. But then? He cheated just to make sure I knew he was in charge.

That's the Cliffs Notes. And now I'm sleeping in my car, because he froze me out of our bank account the minute I left town. At a gas station in Massachusetts I realized he'd canceled my credit cards, too.

Forget my numb ass—it's hard to sleep when you're questioning all your life choices.

Dawn comes eventually. I blink my bleary eyes and make a plan. First I'll hit the Colebury Diner for a cheap plate of eggs. Then I'll brush my teeth and wash my face in the men's room.

It's a thirty minute drive to Norwich, where I did a one-month internship at King Arthur Flour after culinary school. I'll get there by eight a.m., when they take their first break. My old boss is still listed on the website. I'll dazzle him with my recent experience, and he'll offer me a job on the spot.

And if that doesn't work, I'll cruise by every bakery in Vermont. Something will work.

Two hours later, I leave the fancy new King Arthur facility feeling discouraged. Gone is the cozy, undersized kitchen where I learned to bake sourdough. The new gleaming commercial space was as unfamiliar as the

faces in it. My former boss has moved into management and works in a different building now.

“I’ll give you a great recommendation, Rod,” he’d said when I called the number they’d given me at the new bake shop. “Go ahead and fill out an application. But I know the baker gets several applications each week.”

“Great, I’ll do that,” I’d said, my heart sinking.

“Come back next month if you’re still looking. They always need seasonal help in the retail store.”

“Will do. Thanks.” I’d filled that application out, which took five minutes.

But now I climb back into my car again and crank the engine. I have never felt so untethered from the world as I do right now. I have no address. No job. And no real friends, either, because they’re all coworkers at the job I left behind in Tennessee, or—worse—pals of Brian’s.

The scary truth is that if I disappeared from this earth today, nobody would notice, or come looking for me.

Also, I need coffee. Nobody should be expected to solve his not-quite-midlife crisis while under-caffeinated, right?

So I point my car back toward Colebury. *Chin up*, I coach myself. I can’t expect my problems to be solved within the first hour of job hunting. I’m the kind of guy who always has to hustle for everything he gets. King Arthur is the biggest bakery in the area, but it’s not the only one that could hire me.

I hope.

It’s still midmorning when I reach the Busy Bean. When I step out of my car, I smell good coffee brewing. The scent of a strong brew on the piney Vermont air is like a siren’s song to me. I approach the door, already filling up with hope. *Come on, Vermont. Give me something to believe in*.

The first thing I notice is the acoustic guitar music humming off the wide-plank floorboards. The scent of coffee is stronger, too. And the place

is *adorable* . It's full of mismatched furniture upholstered in dark colors and animal prints. There are snarky sayings chalked onto the ceiling's wide support beams. One verse in particular catches my eye:

Roses are red

Violets are blue

I love my coffee

And if you talk to me before I drink it I will cut you

I let out a happy snort. Is it possible that I've found my people?

Cautiously, I approach the bakery case. I hope it's not full of underbaked institutional cookies and rubbery bagels.

But, nope! It's full of homemade pastries. They're simple—mostly muffins and scones—but they look too good to have been dropped off by a food distributor's truck. My stomach rumbles as I take in the offerings.

"Can I help you?" This question comes from a tall woman with dark, wavy hair. "I recommend the lemon muffins, because my partner just made them, and if you don't have a couple, I'm probably going eat some more of them."

"I would love a couple of muffins," I say. Not only am I legitimately starving, but it makes opening up the conversation that much easier. "And a small coffee, black." I pull out my wallet. Just because I'm broke doesn't mean I can survive this day without more caffeine.

"Dark roast or breakfast blend?"

"Dark roast. Breakfast blend is for sissies."

The dark-haired beauty laughs. "That will be four fifty."

That's pretty cheap, honestly. I push a five-dollar bill toward her. After she makes my change, I drop the bomb. "Listen, if there's any chance you are hiring, can I leave my name? I'm a baker by training. But I make a mean espresso, too."

The woman's hands freeze on the cash drawer. "You're a *baker* ," she says slowly. "Are you looking for part time or full time?"

“Well, full time. But right this second I’m not picky. If I don’t find what I’m looking for, I’ll have to piece together a couple of jobs.”

“Did he say full time?” asks another voice. A sunny-haired woman appears suddenly in the doorway behind the counter.

“He did.”

The blonde emerges from the kitchen, dusting flour off her hands. “So I guess we’re talking about this now?” She steps out where I can see her. She’s a little thing and appears to be pregnant.

“So...” I’m not even sure what to say. “You might be looking to hire some help?”

“We really need to,” the dark-haired one says. “But we’ve been putting it off. I’m Zara Rossi by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Zara. I’m Roderick.”

“And I’m Audrey Shipley,” says the cute blonde.

“Oh, the Shipleys.” That familiar name perks me up. “I remember your family. They were always winning awards at school and running things at church.” Everybody loved the Shipleys. And there were a lot of them.

“Well, I wasn’t enough of an overachiever to be born a Shipley,” Audrey says. “I had to marry one.”

“Whatever works,” I say, and she laughs.

“Do you both run this place?” I ask, trying to get a feel for whom to impress.

“Yep!” Audrey says, buzzing around behind the counter, straightening the empty cups. She reminds me of a jolly bumble bee. “We’re partners.”

“Oh,” I say slowly, not quite sure what she means by that.

Zara laughs, and it’s a rich, full sound. “Not *life* partners. We just own the business together.”

“Okay.” I let out a nervous chuckle. “Sorry for jumping to conclusions. Tell me what you are looking for.”

“We need somebody full time. Somebody reliable, with good references,” Zara says immediately.

“I can be all of those things,” I promise. “I once did a summer internship with the guys down at King Arthur Flour. That was a few years ago, but they’ll still vouch for me. Lately, I’ve been working in a big Nashville bakery. I have references there, too.”

Zara nods. “So you’re from Vermont originally?”

“Sort of? I was an Air Force brat. I was born here, but then we moved away. We came back my last two years of high school.”

“You went to high school in Colebury, right?” Zara asks. “I thought you looked a little familiar.”

“And you just moved back home?” Audrey adds.

“Yeah,” I say, trying not to look uncertain. “I want to stay in Vermont, but only if I find a job.” The truth is I don’t know how much time I can give myself to look for work. The safest thing would be to get right back in the car and try to get my old job back in Nashville.

“Why did you leave Tennessee?” Zara asks.

Tell the truth, or lie? It’s not an easy decision. “I got out of a bad relationship. Seemed like driving out of state was the only way to fix it.” That’s understating things somewhat, but they don’t need all the gory details.

“Don’t *grill* him,” Audrey yelps.

Zara laughs. “I managed a bar for five years. Grilling people is how you weed out all the nutters.” She gives me a sheepish smile. “Sorry. But it is.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” I say, hoping to sound agreeable.

“Well, fine,” Audrey says. “Zara is the businessperson. She keeps me from fucking up.”

I bark out a laugh because it seems wrong to see such a sweet-looking human dropping f-bombs.

“But let me tell you a little more about the Busy Bean. We’ve been open for about a year. It’s just been Zara and me and a part-time employee. But he can’t give us any more hours, and we need someone full time. I’m having a baby this winter.” She pats her belly. “And Zara has a lot going on in her life, too. We need full-time help, but we’ve been putting it off because we’re cheap.”

“You do your own baking, right?” I tear apart one of the muffins Zara served me and toss a bite into my mouth. “Wow. Good lemon flavor.”

“Thanks!” Audrey beams. “We do all our own pastries. But we buy our bagels.”

“I can make your bagels,” I say, putting another bite of muffin into my mouth. “Easy peasy.”

“But would you have to start at four in the morning?” Audrey asks. “That’s why we don’t make bread.”

“Nah. Now, baguettes need a four a.m. start time. But bagels and pretzels don’t need that kind of double rise. I’d use a sourdough starter for flavor, but the rise would come from instant yeast. One rise time. Boil ’em up and bake for twenty minutes.”

“Pretzels?” Audrey asks with a dreamy sigh. “That sounds amazing.”

“You could try me out for a probationary couple of days, and I’ll show you,” I promise. “How’s your oven?”

“It’s all right,” Audrey says. “Nothing fancy like they have at King Arthur.”

“You don’t need a fancy oven to make small breads and rolls,” I say quickly. “The giant oven is necessary for crusty boules and baguettes. In a smaller oven you can bake rolls, bagels, freeform pizza, pretzels, popovers...”

“Pizza!” Audrey yelps. “Now I want pizza.”

“You were just telling me that you had to watch the carbs,” Zara says. “That’s why we agreed to have chicken salad salad for lunch.”

“Plus it’s fun to say chicken salad salad,” Audrey points out.

“So that’s chicken salad—”

“On salad!” both women say at once.

I have a feeling this would be a fun workplace. Besides, if the Shipleys run it, the place is bound to do well.

“Can I have those references?” Zara asks. “I’ll call them today, and then if you were serious about working a couple of days as a trial, I think we should do that.”

“Sure! Let me grab my résumé out of my car,” I say. “One sec.”

I run outside, where I grab a folder. By the time I get back inside, Zara and Audrey are having an intense, whispered discussion. “Hours, pay, benefits,” Zara is saying. “We don’t have any of that stuff nailed down.”

“We can do some research,” Audrey says. “It’s time, right? I’ll ask May about the legal stuff.”

“Okay, sure.” Zara turns to give me a smile. “I thought we’d procrastinate a little longer, but then you walked in. Maybe it was meant to be.”

I hope she’s right. Because if there’s someplace in this world that I’m meant to be, I haven’t found it yet.

THIRTY-FOUR

You could do this professionally

Tuxbury Vermont

“GRIFFIN?”

My mother sat down across from me at the big farmhouse table as I chewed the last bite of her home-smoked applewood bacon. My farmhand and I had already finished Vermont-cheddar omelets and homemade bread with butter from our own cows.

Breakfast had been great, but what Mom said next was even better. “I found you some more seasonal help.”

My coffee mug paused on its way to my mouth. “Seriously?”

“I did. And he starts today.”

“You’d better not be teasing.” We were always short-staffed at this time of year, when the grass grew so fast you could practically watch it lengthen, and the bugs waged a full-scale war against my apple trees.

It wasn’t even nine o’clock in the morning, and my farmhand and I had already worked for hours. At dawn we’d milked several dozen cows in two different barns. We always came in for a nice breakfast after the milking, but then it was back to work. For the next eight hours we’d tackle a to-do list of projects and repairs as long as a country mile.

Mom’s promise of a new employee was music to my ears. I lowered the mug to our dining table and met her gaze. But when I spotted her uncharacteristically tentative expression, I felt the first prickle of worry. Maybe I wasn’t going to like the sound of her new hire.

“Angelo called last night,” she said.

Oh, hell . Now I knew where this was going. Angelo was a lovely man who attended our Catholic church a couple towns away in Colebury. He was also a parole officer.

“He’s dropping off a young man today. Just released. He spent three years in jail for manslaughter. It was a car accident, Griff. He crashed his

car into a tree.”

The familiar flash of stress that came from running a struggling business bolted through my chest. That second cup of coffee might have been a mistake. “Crashing into a tree isn’t illegal, Ma. There must be more to it.”

“Well.” Her face went soft. “He killed the sheriff’s son, who was a passenger in his car. And he was high on opiates at the time.”

“Ah.” The truth comes out. “So you hired a drug addict?”

She frowned at me. “A *recovering* addict. He got out of jail a month ago, and he’s been in rehab since then. Angelo said this kid can make it, but he just really needs a job. He’ll stay in the bunkhouse. Unless there’s something you’re not telling me, our property is a drug-free zone.”

Zachariah, our farmhand, gave a snort of laughter. “Coffee is our drug, Mrs. Shipley. But we’re in pretty deep.”

She reached over and gave Zach’s wrist an affectionate squeeze. My mother was good at taking in strays, and Zachariah was her most successful acquisition. But they couldn’t all be Zachariahs. I felt my blood pressure notch higher at the idea of adding a drug addiction to our long list of difficulties. Like I needed one more complication.

Since my father passed away three years ago, my mother and I ran the farm together. I made all the farming decisions—what to produce and where to sell it. But make no mistake—Mom kept the place running. She did the books. She fed me and our farmhand Zach, my three younger siblings, my grandfather and whichever seasonal employees were around. And when apple-picking season began five weeks from now, she’d run our busy pick-your-own business while somehow feeding an army as our workforce quadrupled.

So my very capable mother had every right to make a quick hiring decision, and we both knew it. Still, her choice of hires made me nervous.

“He’s twenty-two, Griff.” She crossed her arms, waiting me out. “The young man is clean, as they say. He’s off drugs. But nobody else is going to

take a chance on him. And we'd only take him on for the growing season and through the harvest. Sixteen weeks, tops."

Right. *The sixteen most crucial weeks of my year* .

A smart man knows when to back down to his mother. She'd obviously made up her mind already, and the day was getting on. "Okay," I capitulated. "We'll set him up in the bunkhouse when he shows up. Call me and I'll give him a tour. Let's go, Zach." I stood, grabbing my baseball cap, and Zach did the same.

Carrying our dirty plates, we exited through the kitchen where my sister May was tidying up. She was on summer break from law school. "Did the twins move the chickens?" I asked by way of a greeting.

"Yes, captain," my sister snarked. "They're outside already."

"Thanks." I gave her elbow a squeeze as I passed by to make up for my lack of manners. At times I could be an overbearing grouch, especially during the growing season. And my sisters were quick to call me on it.

"Hey, Griff?" May called after me as I opened the door. "Do you still plan to send Tauntaun off to freezer camp today? I'll need a heads up."

I paused in the doorway. "Good question." Butchering the pig would be a lot of work, and I didn't really have the time. Then again, next week would be the same story, if not worse. "Yeah. We should get it done, unless the day gets crazy. I'll give you some warning, so you can heat the water." May gave me a salute, and Zach and I went outside.

Scanning the property, I spotted the twins in the back meadow, beyond the bunkhouse. They were moving the portable electric fence we used to keep our chickens safe from predators, and probably squabbling over something. At seventeen, they were a decade younger than I was.

A year from now I'd be paying both their college tuitions, and not a day went by when I didn't worry about it. I gave my property the usual critical glance. The big, aging farmhouse where I'd grown up was in good shape for now. We'd redone the roof and the paint last year. But on a farm, there

was always something going awry. If there wasn't a problem with the farmhouse, it would be the stone bunkhouse or one of the dairy barns. Or the cider house or the tractor.

And even if nothing broke down today, there were business decisions in my near future. I needed to reinvest in the farm, yet we also needed cash. Somehow I needed to guide the farm toward greater profitability without borrowing a pile of money.

If only I knew how to do that.

With a sigh, I turned to Zach. "You want the fences or the mowing?" I asked him. There was plenty of work for both of us, so I was happy to let him choose.

"You pick," he said immediately. Zach was a dream employee. He worked like an ox from sunup until supper, and he never complained—I didn't know if he even knew how.

"I'll mow," I said. "But maybe we'll swap after lunch. The new guy'll be here..." *Shit*. "Walk with me a minute?"

"Sure."

I headed across the circular meadow toward the tractor shed.

"We're going to have to keep an eye on this kid. I never asked you to spy on anyone before. But this is a little weird."

He grinned. "It is...colorful. But Angelo's no fool."

This was true. "Now, is there anything I need to know about the Kubota?" Not only was Zach a model employee, he was a skilled mechanic.

"She's running fine. I'm more worried about the milking rig in the big barn."

I swore under my breath. Most of our dairy cattle lived across the street on a neighbor's property. The bulk of our milk went to an ordinary dairy. On our own property, we raised a dozen organic cows, and that milk was sold to friends down the street who made fancy cheese from it.

“Did the pump give you trouble again?” Every farm had aging equipment, because no farmer could afford to upgrade his tools like the rest of the world upgraded their cell phones every year. I was a chemist by training, not a mechanic. So Zachariah was the one who coaxed all our most difficult equipment into performing. And the milking rig was about the most important machine on the whole property.

“It’s not going to last much longer. Some of the gears are stripped, and I can’t find those parts anymore. Odds are we’ll have to taker ’er out back and shoot ’er before New Years.”

I groaned. “Never tell me the odds.”

“Right, Han.”

“Thank you, Chewie.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Chuckling, I walked off through the July morning toward the tractor barn, my head full of worry. I tried to imagine walking a hundred cows across the road to be milked in the smaller of the two dairy barns twice a day. Investing in new equipment on land I didn’t own sounded like a bad idea.

I’d figure it out somehow. I’d have to.

THIRTY-FIVE

The Twist

Boston, Massachusetts

I WORE a halter top to be fired.

Since the bigwigs at Boston Premier Group had asked me to appear at corporate headquarters at nine, I assumed I'd be pounding the pavement for a new job by nine-thirty.

I was a trained chef, and a damn good one. But my cleavage would be more interesting than my knife skills to most of the restaurateurs of Boston. I'd already learned this the hard way.

These were my thoughts as I rode the elevator up to my doom.

Getting fired was nothing new for me. I'd been kicked out of two colleges before I turned twenty. Disgusted by my lack of academic achievement, my mother fired me next. She took away my car and withdrew all financial support.

Things seemed to turn around after that. I put myself through culinary school, which I really enjoyed. But now my first job had proven to be a disaster.

As the doors parted on the fifteenth floor, I checked my watch. At least I was one minute early. My mother, wherever she was, would be thrilled that I was prompt to face the firing squad.

Go me!

"Mr. Burton will be right with you," the receptionist said from behind a beautiful desk outside several C-suite offices.

"Thank you." Nervous, I slipped into one of the deep leather chairs in the waiting area. I picked up a copy of *Boston Magazine* from the selection of periodicals on the table and hid behind it.

By now, the details of my latest failure would have made it into every manager's office. Not only had I ruined a night's worth of business at their

top-rated restaurant, my fuck-up had made the gossip pages of the newspaper.

My hands began to sweat on the magazine.

The problem wasn't my cooking, of course. I was a good chef. A *natural*, as one of my teachers had said. At twenty-two years old I'd finally found something I was good at. And I'd needed this job on my résumé, damn it.

"Audrey!" a voice barked.

Startled, I dropped the magazine and scrambled to stand. "G-g-good morning," I stammered, shaking the hand that Bill Burton offered me.

"Come with me," he said, leading the way into his plush office.

My mouth dry, I followed him. He waited for me to sit down in the chair facing his big desk, and then he shut the door with an ominous click.

Shit!

I sat up straight in my chair. I was going to go down fighting.

He sat in his chair and measured me with his eyes. There was a deep silence before he finally said, "Why don't you tell me what happened?"

Right. Okay. That was a better opener than "*Get the fuck out of our office building* ." But where to start? "Well, sir..." I hesitated, hating the tentative sound of my voice. *C'mon, Audrey! This is for all the marbles* . "I'm an excellent chef, sir. Top of my class. But BPG keeps giving me assignments outside the kitchen."

He raised an eyebrow. "Your job title is intern, sweetie. Nobody becomes a great chef without learning the business."

Sweetie? I had to bite down on my tongue to keep myself from screaming. But now was not the time for a rant. *Deep breaths, Audrey* . "I do want to learn the business," I said carefully. "But when you toss an intern into a job unprepared, you shouldn't be astonished when things go badly."

Flipping open a folder on his desk, he frowned down at its contents. “Six weeks ago your first assignment was tracking seafood deliveries at the fish market. You lasted one day.”

“True.” I’d reported for work at four-thirty in the morning, where a computer system I’d never seen before had greeted me.

“You were supposed to order two hundred lobsters for our flagship seafood restaurant. But you ordered two hundred *gross*. That’s more than twenty-eight thousand lobsters.”

I kept the cringe off my face, but just barely. “Nobody taught me the software,” I insisted.

Bill Burton sighed. “Fine, but software wasn’t the problem last night, was it?”

“Yes it *was*,” I insisted again. “Indirectly.”

He sat back in his chair. “Explain.”

“My latest position has been at l’Etre Suprême.” It was Boston’s only Michelin-starred restaurant, and I’d felt lucky just walking in there every night. Chef Jacques was one of my culinary heroes.

But they hadn’t put me in the kitchen where I could be useful. Or course not. They had me up front, working on the restaurant’s reservations.

I cleared my throat. “The other night, the software over-booked a reservation for thirty CFOs, and I didn’t catch it. There was no place to put them.” When the suits realized we weren’t prepared to seat them in our private alcove, they began abusing the staff and they never really stopped. “And while I scrambled to solve the problem, the rest of the seating and dining schedule went haywire. Orders were lost and meals were delivered out of synch...”

I started sweating just remembering this disaster. Chef Jacques had nearly had a coronary. His screaming could be heard all the way out to the beaten copper bar, where bartenders in elegant vests had poured free drinks to soothe irritated customers.

Jacques did not know my name and was therefore unable to scream it. But that was no blessing, since it takes longer to screech: “Zee fucking wench who makes zee reservations.”

That would be me.

“Go on,” Burton prompted.

“I was mortified that I’d caused trouble in the kitchen.” I folded my damp hands in my lap and looked him in the eye. “My roommate is a pastry chef.” A slovenly one, I could add. I rented a room in his apartment because it was all I could afford. “I wanted to make amends, so I took a big pan of brownies he’d baked, and I brought them to work with me last night. It was a peace offering.” I’d deposited my chocolaty gift in the middle of the kitchen. The staff fell on them like seagulls. “Then I’d gone out to the front of the house to spend the evening working on reservations.”

That wasn’t exactly true, but Burton didn’t need to know that. In between tasks I always headed back to the kitchen. Some women might have trouble staying away from designer shoes or hot actors. My weakness was a star chef in action. I’d rather watch Jacques whisk a balsamic reduction than watch Channing Tatum strip for the camera. So I had a front row seat on the evening’s unfolding disasters. When I’d snuck back to watch, I’d found Chef screaming at the grill cook.

“Zat is not how we treat zeh fish!” he had yelled at Enrique. “You must respect zeh filet!”

I’d cringed as Chef Jacques smacked Enrique on the back of the head. Jacques was an asshole on his best day, but last night he seemed to be wound even tighter than usual.

On the other hand, Enrique *had* been acting awfully sluggish. Normally a hard worker, last night he’d seemed off his game. If Enrique didn’t treat the fish like the governor of Massachusetts, I’d known it wouldn’t bode well for him.

Now, if there were any justice in the world, *I* would've been the one wielding the fish spatula. I would have respected the *hell* out of that filet, if they'd only given me a chance. I knew I could cook circles around many of the people in that kitchen.

But no. It had been back to the reservations system for me.

The next I'd seen Jacques he was chewing his salad boy a new one. "Leaves should make pretty *hill*," he'd said, holding a plate in the air for the entire kitchen's inspection. "Zhis is alps after earthquake. Feex it!" He'd tossed the plate onto the steel work table, where it broke in two.

Haute cuisine may be the only industry where the boss is encouraged to behave like a cranky toddler. They pay extra for that, especially if you're a man and from France.

Strangely, the salad guy hadn't looked as put out by his ass-ripping as I'd expected. Instead of leaping to clean up the mess, he pinched a salad leaf off the pile and shoved it in his mouth. Then he did it a second time.

I'd thought it was weird. But I still hadn't guessed why.

"It was a busy night," I told Burton now.

But when I'd stopped by the kitchen again, I could hardly believe my eyes. The salad boy had been slumped over his station, which was freaky enough. But Jacques hadn't even noticed. He'd been busy screaming at the fish cook again, while the mega-horsepower exhaust system tried in vain to remove fish-scented smoke from the kitchen.

Jacques's rant had been unintelligible. When he got angry, his accent thickened. I couldn't make out a word of it.

I'd stood there with my mouth hanging open when the dishwasher stopped beside me, laying a hand on my shoulder. "Awesome revenge, Audrey. Seriously. You're my fucking hero."

Um, what? I'd almost missed what he was saying. As I'd watched, another line cook shoved hand-cut polenta medallions into his mouth. It was as if the whole kitchen lost fifty IQ points and then got the munchies.

“Doesn’t affect me, because I’ve built up a real tolerance. Looks like the salad boy can’t handle his weed, though. You should get out now, girl,” the dishwasher was saying. “Any second now Jacques is going to figure out who brought in the spiked brownies.”

“The spiked—” I’d bitten off the sentence as horror crept up my spine. “Oh my God.”

“I’m *definitely* inviting you to my next party. Those were killer.” Chuckling, the dishwasher had wandered off to have a cigarette.

And to think that I hadn’t even needed a lighter to burn my own career to the ground.

“So...” Burton sighed. “You’re saying you didn’t know the brownies were spiked?”

“I had *no idea*,” I whispered. “There are always baked goods in my apartment. I don’t, uh, usually steal them. And I really wish I hadn’t this time.”

He pushed the file folder away from him on the desk. “I could fire you for this.”

“I know that, sir,” I said quickly. “But I know I can do better if you give me a second chance.” *Or a fifth chance* .

He folded his hands onto the desk blotter and seemed to think it over.

I held my breath. Bill tapped his fingers on the expensive-looking leather blotter and sighed once again. “All right, Audrey. You’re heading to Vermont.”

“I’m...really? Did you say Vermont?” Did that mean I wasn’t fired? Did BPG own a restaurant in Vermont? I didn’t think so.

“We can’t put you in another front-of-house job. And we can’t send you back to the fish market.”

“I understand, sir,” I said in my most humble voice.

“But we’re going to give you one more chance, as a favor to your mother.”

“My...*what?*” My mother and I hadn’t spoken in over two years, since she cut me off financially. I’d put myself through culinary school, renting rooms in dives all over Boston. “What does *she* have to do with it?”

“She owns fifteen percent of the *company*,” Burton said in a voice that made sure I knew how stupid I was. “We can still fire you next week. But we’ll give you one more chance at bat as a courtesy to her.”

I didn’t even hear that last bit, because I was still stuck on the bomb he’d just dropped. *My mother owned a stake in BPG?* I’d had no idea. I guess it shouldn’t be a complete surprise. My mother had her hands in moneymaking ventures all over Boston. And since she dined out with business associates four or five nights a week, she knew her restaurants. In fact, when I’d worked the reservation system at l’Etre, I’d wondered if she’d come in for dinner some night.

But an owner? Ugh. I could see how she and the company were a good fit. BPG was ruthless, and so was she.

“Audrey?” Burton prompted.

“Look,” I said, hating the desperate sound in my voice. “I need this job. But keep me because I’m a good chef. Not because my mother has deep pockets. She doesn’t even know I work here.” We weren’t on speaking terms at the moment.

He shrugged, as if it made no difference. “Are you going to go to Vermont for a few days or not?”

“I’ll go,” I said quickly, “as long as you don’t throw out my application for the Green Light Project.” I was in no position to make demands. But if he wasn’t going to let me compete for my own kitchen, I might as well cut my losses and find another job.

Burton startled me by laughing. He actually *laughed* at my dream. “Audrey, it takes a hell of a lot of savvy to win the Green Light. There are guys who have been trying for *years*.”

I knew that. But I didn't have years. I needed to win BPG's annual new restaurant competition on the first try. "I know it's hard to win." It had to be. A company like BPG didn't just fund every idea that walked through their door. But I was going to bring them a great idea, and I was going to take top honors. "But promise me you'll let me try."

"Go ahead and give it a shot." He spread his hands magnanimously. He was humoring me, I was sure of it. "You never know. Now, let's talk about this assignment in Vermont." He picked up another file folder and opened it. "I'm sending you to talk to some farmers for me. I want you to help our supplier fill some late-summer, farm-to-table acquisitions. You'll be negotiating prices on two dozen agricultural goods."

Oh, brother . Here we go again . I was a trained chef. A good one. And yet BPG kept giving me tasks that weren't aligned with my skills, and then yelling at me when I failed.

"Sir, I don't know anything about negotiating." He could have sent my mom, though. The woman could make a deal with a field mouse and come out ahead.

"Doesn't matter." Burton grabbed a printout from the folder and tucked it into a BPG envelope. Then he handed it to me. "The goods and the prices are listed right on these pages. All you have to do is stop by each farm and offer to purchase the items on the list. Just fill out the sheet with who's supplying what. These guys will be eager to sell their organic produce to upscale Boston restaurants. It's good exposure for them. Here."

I took the sheet of paper from him and scanned it. It was a list of farms and addresses. They all had cute, scenic names. Muscle In Arm Farm. Misty Hollow. The Lazy Turkey Farm.

The task sounded easy enough. But I'd worked here long enough to be suspicious. Nothing was ever simple when it came to BPG. "Why aren't we doing this over the phone?" I asked. It had to be cheaper than sending me

off to Vermont in a rental car to go door to door. And a hotel, too? BPG hated spending money. Something about this whole idea was just weird.

“Farmers don’t answer their phones,” Burton said. “They’re too busy growing things. So off you go. Pack a bag and get on the road already. It’s a two-hour drive.”

I stood up, clutching the envelope, hoping for the best.

“Do a good job, Audrey,” he said as I turned toward the door. “If this doesn’t work out, I don’t know if we can give you another chance.”

“I will, sir.”

Two and a half hours was a long time to ponder one’s failings, even if the scenery was beautiful. I wound the rental car higher and higher along a country road on a pretty Vermont hillside. Out the driver’s side window I caught glimpses of the Green Mountains in the distance.

I was still a bit stunned that Bill Burton hadn’t fired me. But the more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that my mother’s stake in the company wasn’t the reason. Premier Group was famous for chewing up and spitting out culinary grads. Having their corporate name on your resume was like a badge of honor. It was the Purple Heart of the foodie world. There was even a Facebook group called *I Survived BPG* .

Their business model seemed to *depend* on slaves like me. As an intern, I was expected to work seventy hours a week for very low pay. They called the paycheck a “stipend” only because it sounded better than “slave wages.” If they fired one of us every time something went wrong, there would be nobody left to do the shitty jobs and fetch the coffee.

That’s what I was going to keep telling myself, anyway. Because I was sick of letting my mother influence my life. I’d thought that moving away

from Beacon Hill would be enough to shake her off. Turns out I should have left the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Maybe Vermont was far enough to avoid Mom's bad juju. I hoped so, anyway. Outside my car windows, everything was green. Meadows lined the hillside, and the tree branches that framed the country road created a leafy tunnel. I didn't have the first clue where in the hell I was. But it was very beautiful.

Thank God for GPS, because navigation wasn't my strong suit. Again—put me in the kitchen with a knife and I'm a happy girl. But if you want me to run your business or negotiate your multi-farmer purchase agreement in the wilds of Vermont in a rental car? *Dicey, people*.

According to the dashboard indicator, I was just a half mile from the first grower on my list—the Shipley Farm. I'd known a Griffin Shipley during my first unsuccessful year of college. He was a football stud and party boy, and we'd hooked up a couple of times. I remembered those nights with perfect clarity. Every thrilling moment.

But I hadn't known Griff very well, except in the biblical sense. And I couldn't remember whether he was from Vermont or not. Maybe Shipley was a common name. The man I'd been sent to find today was someone else, anyway. My instruction sheet listed *August Shipley: Apples and Artisanal Ciders*.

I'd picked the Shipley Farm as my starting place not because of the name, but because of the artisanal ciders. Perhaps Mr. August Shipley would let me taste them. If you were drinking for business purposes, it didn't matter that it wasn't quite noon yet, right?

The ciders were the most interesting product on my shopping list, with a few gourmet cheese products tying for second place. Before driving out of Boston, I'd put in a call to Bill Burton's son, Bob. He was the buyer who'd made up the list. "We're a bulk buyer, so we need the bulk price," Bob had

said. “The rates on this list ought to do the trick. Call me if you need to wiggle some numbers around, but we can’t negotiate much.”

That was no surprise. I was already familiar with BPG’s take-no-prisoners approach. But I was determined to make the whole thing work. I needed this job. My arrogant mother had made sure of it when she took away my car and my tuition money. Yet she still emailed me all the time and demanded updates on my progress at adulting. She left voicemail messages, too.

I responded only occasionally—just frequently enough to let her know I was still alive. But I thought about her more than I liked to admit. I often fantasized about the day a restaurant critic would give me a favorable review in the *Globe*. I wanted her to read it. Though I’d probably blacklist her on my reservations list, just because I could.

The dashboard GPS spoke up. “In two hundred yards, the destination is on your right.” I sped up. It had been a long two-and-a-half hours in the car.

A moment later, the road turned suddenly from pavement to dirt, taking me by surprise. The little rental car bounced on the rough surface, and I felt a sudden loss of traction. So I slammed on the brakes.

Big mistake.

I skidded, the back of the car swinging its ass over to the right. I experienced a moment of terror as the earth shifted in an unpredictable way. Two seconds later, the car came to a dramatic stop. My teeth knocked together and my seatbelt bit into my shoulder. But I was still clutching the wheel, still vertical. Mostly. The passenger side had dipped into a gully at the side of the road.

Okay . I’m still on one piece. Thank you, baby Jesus .

With shaky hands, I unlatched my seatbelt, opened the door and struggled to climb out of the tilting car. My heart was whirring like a KitchenAid mixer on the highest setting. I had a rush of adrenaline from the loss of control. “Shit!” I swore, standing on wobbly knees on the dirt road.

Trying to get my breathing under control, I eyed the Prius. It wasn't at *that* weird of an angle. Maybe I could just drive it out of the ditch.

But when I circled the rear bumper, my heart sank. The back tire was as flat as a fallen soufflé.

Damn it!

And now where was my phone? I opened the car door again to look for my purse. But naturally everything had shifted toward the passenger side and then slid onto the floor. The angle was a bear, so I resorted to lying on the driver's seat and sort of diving for my bag on the passenger-side floor. I got my hands on it, but of course the bag had been open. So I spent the next couple of minutes grabbing stuff and shoving it back in the bag. Lipsticks. House keys. My phone.

Only when I thought I had everything did I finally heave myself up and out of the car again, ass first. When I spun around, my heart nearly failed. A giant, bearded man was standing in the road behind me, muscular arms crossed over his chest, frowning. "Audrey Kidder?" he growled.

The growly monster knew my name. Wait. I *knew* that growly monster. "Griffin?" I squeaked. He looked so different. Five years had elapsed since my freshman year at BU, so it hadn't been *that* long. He'd been an upperclassman and a football star. I was used to seeing him clean-shaven in football pads or holding a red cup at a frat party.

The man standing in front of me was still just as tall and muscular as the football player I'd once known (biblically). But there the resemblance stopped. *This* Griff Shipley was tanned and ripped in a different way. He wore a tight T-shirt reading FARM-WAY and a baseball cap with a tractor on it. His work pants were paint-spattered and worn in a way that did not resemble the faux-aging of an Abercrombie pair, but rather seemed weathered from actual work.

And my God did he fill them out beautifully.

I had a flicker of a memory of the last time I'd seen Griff Shipley. We were in his room at the frat house, and he had me up against his bedroom door. My legs were wrapped around his waist while he fu—

“What are you doing on my farm?” he demanded. “Aside from driving into my ditch.”

“Your...farm?” I squeaked, feeling hot all over. “I’m, uh, here to see your father. I work for Boston Premier Group. They want to talk about buying produce. And cider. The yummy alcoholic kind.” I was babbling now.

He lifted his chin thoughtfully. “Do they now?”

Get it together, Kidder. I stood up straighter. “I’m the representative. Is your father home?”

Griff lifted an eyebrow. “You’re too late.”

“Really? I can come back tomorrow.” That was a great idea, actually. I needed to compose myself.

“You’re too late, because my father passed away a couple years ago.”

“He...” Griff’s words finally sunk into my addled brain. “Jesus, I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” He waited, staring me down.

“So...” I dug into my purse for the list of farmers. “BPG gave me his name. August Shipley. I’m sorry they got it wrong. Are, uh, you the one I should speak to?”

He grinned, and I saw just a flash of the old Griff. “That piece of paper is right. My full name is August Griffin Shipley the third. And yeah—I’m the farmer and the cidermaker.”

My brain struggled to wrap itself around this idea. Football jock Griff Shipley in charge of a business? I hoped his family had other means of income. Griff Shipley in charge of a tailgate party—maybe I could see that. But a farm and beverage operation?

Nope. Not possible.

“Okay,” I said slowly. “Can we talk? Do you have some time?”

Griff lifted his big, bearded chin toward the sky and sighed, as if I had just asked for the moon. Then he pinned me with a big, ornery stare. “Time is pretty scarce, seeing as I gotta pull your car out of that ditch, too. And your tire is probably toast. I have to mow, inspect the fences, milk the cows and slaughter a pig. I have to interview a drug addict and check my apples. But then, maybe. After that.”

“All right...” I shifted my weight, noticing that my cute little strappy sandals had allowed little bits of the gravel road to sneak under my feet. “My thing might only take a few minutes, though. It’s a couple of lines on a page.”

He lifted one giant hand to stroke his beard. “You might have called first. Did you think of that?”

“Good point,” I said gamely. “The BPG buyer told me that it was better to just drive up. He said farmers don’t answer their phones.”

Griff tipped his scruffy face toward the sky and made an unexpected sound which I eventually identified as laughter.

“What’s so funny?”

He crossed his bulky, lickable arms. “Look,” he said. “I have a feeling I know why your man at BPG doesn’t have *his* calls answered too often. His prices are probably bullshit, right? So his new plan is to send a hot sorority girl in a halter top and short skirt to dazzle the poor hicks who grow his food. Your guy thinks I’m a big enough idiot that a nice rack and a bright smile will blind me for long enough to agree to sell apples for a buck a pound.”

Later I would remember this moment as important. Standing there on Griff’s road, I’d gleaned the first prickle of understanding that a flat tire was just the *start* of my buzz kill. A brand new sinking feeling kicked in, because I had a hunch that Griff Shipley knew what he was talking about

for once. I opened the price list in my hand to see that the first item on the list was, indeed, *Apples: \$0.99 / lb.*

Fuck . “So you’re saying that a dollar a pound is not the market rate for wholesale apples?” I said it as sweetly as possible, but Griff’s face began to darken like a stormy sky.

“Listen, princess,” he growled. “You can buy shitty, mealy apples for that price from a giant orchard out west or from a farmer that got swindled into growing only Red Delicious during the eighties and can’t afford to re-graft his trees. But your guy wants organic apples, probably heirloom varieties. He wants bragging rights on the menu—apples grown locally in New England with no pesticides and blessed by virgins in the moonlight. That’s what he wants hand-lettered on the menu, right?”

“Right,” I agreed reluctantly. That was exactly how it worked.

“That does *not* come at a buck a pound. Not from me and not from any of my neighbors.”

Uh-oh. My heart sank a little further into the dirt, just like my rental car.

I wasn’t a stupid girl. Maybe business wasn’t exactly my forte, but I’d always been a good listener. And after listening to Griff rant for a minute, I already knew that when I visited the other farms in this county, every price on my page would be too low by half. And yet my job depended on sealing these deals.

I was so screwed.

“Now let’s get your shiny new car out of the ditch, shall we?” Griff was glowering at me. For real. Before today I’d never seen anyone actually glower. It was an expression found only in books, and on Griff Shipley’s ridiculously handsome yet grumpy face.

“It’s a rental,” I said in my own defense. “I can call for roadside service.”

Glowing Griff gave a weary sigh. “I’ll be rid of you sooner if I do it myself.” He raised two fingers to his mouth and blew an ear-piercing

whistle. Then he waited while I tried not to think of those fingers and the things they'd once done to me...

"Got a problem, Han?" a voice called from the meadow beyond the trees lining the road. A few seconds later an attractive blond dude slipped between the trees to join us. He was big, too. But where Griff was dark, this man was fair with pretty blue eyes.

Apparently all the people who grew pristine organic food were beautiful themselves.

"Yeah, we do have a problem," Griff told him. "We have to pull the princess here out of the ditch and change her tire. Then warp speed her ass back to the Death Star so she can report that the rebels are mutinying."

"Jesus, I'd forgotten about your *Star Wars* obsession." That just slipped out of my mouth. But as soon as I said it, the other guy's eyes opened wide, and the look on Griff's face made it clear that any further references to our tiny sliver of a past together weren't going to be tolerated.

Though *tiny sliver* wasn't good terminology for the boinking we'd done, because nothing on that man's body was tiny.

Moving on.

"How can I help?" I asked. "I'm happy to get going just as soon as I'm able. After we have a brief discussion about cider and apples."

"A brief discussion." He stared me down.

"Yes. You repeat things very well. Good job." I crossed my arms to match his posture. Maybe I'd been sent to Vermont on a fool's errand, but I wasn't going to cash in my chips just yet. If this errand could be saved, I'd save it. My future at BPG was at stake, and one grumpy farmer wasn't going to have the last word.

"Follow me," he grunted before turning and marching away.

"Yes sir." I saluted the back of his head.

The blond kid chuckled to himself and went to look at the deflated wheel of my rental car.

A little safety pin

I'M A NICE GUY. Swear to God. But today it was pretty hard to tell.

Blame it on the stress of running a farm, or the shock of seeing Audrey Kidder there on our road, her legs longer than the drive to town, her fiery eyes staring up at me. Blame it on a sudden spike in the summer day's temperature.

Whatever the cause, I started acting like an asshole at the moment I discovered Audrey's perfect ass sticking out of that car on my dirt road.

Trying to clear my head, I walked her up our half-mile gravel driveway at a death-march pace. But she had on those little strappy shoes, damn it. So I slowed my pace and tried to find my manners. "How've you been for five years?" I barked.

Maybe I hadn't quite remembered how to be civilized yet, though, because she looked shocked by the question. "Um, fine, thank you. I, uh, flunked out of BU. Then my mother sent me to Mount Holyoke where I repeated the performance."

I shouldn't have asked, I guess, because her story made me ragey. I'd busted my ass for four years to keep a football scholarship at BU because I knew it would leave more money in the college fund for my three younger siblings.

But Audrey had been a party girl. Always with her sorority sisters. Always looking for a drunken good time. Good-time party guy was the part I'd *tried* to play in college, but, meanwhile, I'd slept an average of five hours a night for four years so I could get everything done. Just like I did now.

“—so after I proved to everyone that a college degree was not for me, I went to cooking school where I graduated as the valedictorian. Go figure.”

“Nice,” I said. But Audrey Kidder in a kitchen? That was something I had a real hard time visualizing. She might chip a nail.

“I took the job at Boston Premier Group because I want to start my own restaurant. That's really hard to do—you need backers. If I kiss the ring for a while, they can help me get started.”

Interesting. But now she was just buttering me up in order to get what she needed from me. She worked for a bunch of corporate slimeballs who took advantage of everyone they could. And she wanted my approval? Not happening.

“Why don't you ask your parents for the startup money?” I asked. Audrey was a rich girl. That's why the sorority types had liked her so much. “Can't they help?”

“No, Griff.” Her voice dipped. “As a matter of fact they can't.” And a flash of something dark crossed her face.

Whoops. I'd stuck my foot in my mouth again. “Well,” I grunted. “Let's talk about my ciders while Zach fixes your car.”

“Cool! Can I see where you make them?” Her face lit up like a kid's on Christmas, and I felt a twinge of unfamiliar kinship in my chest. Cider was my passion, and whenever anyone expressed interest, it made me happy.

Then again, the girl really had enjoyed getting drunk back in the day.

“Yeah. Of course. This way.” We passed the farmhouse on our right, then I steered Audrey between the bunkhouse and the dairy barn toward my

pride and joy—the cider house. My father had always made artisanal cider, but he made it for himself. Every year he'd sold a few gallons just for fun.

But I'd grown Dad's tiny operation into something much bigger. Pushing open the door to the barn-like building, I flipped on the old soda lamps overhead.

"Whoa," Audrey said, her voice hushed. "Those tanks are serious."

"They are," I agreed, fighting off the rush of pleasure I felt whenever someone admired my babies. "My cider wins awards." Okay, *one* award. But I was just getting started. "Any yokel can brew a decent beer in his garage, but it's difficult to create a cider with any complexity. And there's a lot that can go wrong, chemically speaking."

"Uh-huh," Audrey said, wandering over to my bottling machine and picking up an empty bottle. "Nice label."

The label was the least interesting thing in the room. "Thanks," I said tightly. "My brother designed it."

She looked up quickly, a grin on her face. "I know you don't give a fuck about the label, Grouchy Griff," she said, putting it down again. "But marketing matters to buyers. People need to feel good about plunking down a lot of cash for premium goods. They want a *story*, because the story lasts longer than it takes to swallow something."

"Uh-huh." This was the kind of mumbo jumbo that made me crazy, because people should be willing to pay for organic quality simply because *it's the right thing to do*. "So you're saying the pretty picture means more to your customers than the fact that my orchard isn't poisoning Vermont's groundwater with chemicals and petroleum-based fertilizers? And that I pay my employees a living wage?"

She tossed her hair. "Does it matter how I respond? I wouldn't want to interrupt your sermon." She came closer, her big blue eyes looking up at me, a challenge gleaming in them. "And don't tell me you've never tried to

gussy up your cider house to appeal to the masses. If you don't believe in marketing, what's that?"

She pointed at a framed photograph on the wall. It was the first part of an informative display explaining how cider was made. We held tastings here during our busy apple-picking season. "My sister took that last fall. That's our fruit in the wheelbarrow. So what?"

Audrey grinned like she'd caught me with my hand in the cash drawer. "The apples in that picture did *not* go into your big, manly cider tanks. These—" She jabbed one pink fingernail at the photo. "—are fancy grade, flawless fruit. You sold those apples to tourists. And in there"—she pointed at my tanks, and raised her voice—"you put apples that look like they got their asses kicked in an alleyway! So don't even *try* to pretend you have no fucks to give when it comes to marketing!"

Christ on a cracker. The way her shapely mouth looked when she said *fuck* was ridiculously distracting. And I'd just been schooled by a girl who must have paid attention at least once in a while in culinary school.

Weirdly, I didn't care that much. I just wanted her to say *fuck* again, preferably while riding my dick in the hayloft.

"What?" she snapped. "You're staring at me."

"Did you call me Grouchy Griff a minute ago?"

She rolled her eyes. "Maybe. Does it make you want to sell me cider at a competitive price?"

The truth was that I wanted very much to sell cider to the Big Corporate Assholes Group of where-the-fuck-ever. Unlike my fruit, the cider could become a brand name, and it needed to find its special market. If fancy restaurants carried my cider, I'd have an easier time convincing Boston wine shops to stock it.

Taking a small loss on the cider was probably a good business decision. If I could stomach it. "Dare I ask?" I walked closer to Audrey where she

stood by the bottler. “What price does your employer expect to pay for a bottle of Vermont’s finest hard cider?”

For a moment she blinked up at me, then licked her lips.

Do not look at her lips. Do not think about them. Do not remember what she once did with ... Fuck.

“My pricing sheet says three dollars for a seven-hundred-fifty-milliliter bottle.”

Well, that was a libido killer. “*Three bucks?* So they can mark it up to twenty? You’re shitting me. The bottle and the cork alone cost a buck fifty.”

Her shoulders sagged, and when she spoke again, it was in a soft voice. “I will tell my boss he’s insane, okay? But if you want me to change his mind, you need to give me something to go on. I need information, not another rant.”

Hell, the girl had a point. “All right. First, let’s taste.”

Audrey clasped her hands together. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Right.

I fetched a bottle from the cooler, untwisted its wire clasp and then slowly removed the cork. To preserve the natural effervescence of my product, I used a champagne cork in every bottle. It cost more than a twist-off top, but the product had a better shelf life.

I grabbed a couple of glasses from the tasting counter and poured us each a half portion. Audrey took hers and smiled at me. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” I grunted. It was hard to remember the last time I had a drink with an attractive female. A couple months ago I’d broken things off with my fuck buddy, and since then I’d been living like a monk. Tasting cider before lunch in the hopes of making a sale wasn’t exactly a social occasion. But it was as close as I’d come in a while.

Pathetic much?

Audrey held her glass up to the dusty beam of light filtering down through the skylight. “A nice amber color.” She swirled the class under her

nose like a pro. “Pleasant, musky odor. More tannic than fruity.” She sipped, her gaze drifting off to the side as she concentrated on the tart, complicated flavors of my product. I saw her delicate throat pulse as she swallowed. “Wow. That’s some fine apple juice you’ve got there, Griff.”

“What?” I yelped. “Apple j—”

She grinned. “*Joking!* It’s magnificent. I get notes of oak and apricot. Nice finish. I can see why you’re proud of it.”

For a second, my chest swelled from the praise. But then I remembered she was trying to buy the stuff for peanuts. Obviously, she was just buttering me up. “It tastes like eight dollars a bottle at wholesale, fifteen at retail.”

Audrey took another dainty sip while I tried not to find her ridiculously attractive. “I think it’s delicious, and I’d pay your price any day. But the guys I work for are going to fire me if I come back with a number that’s more than double theirs.”

The truth was that I could do a little better than eight bucks. I just wasn’t ready to admit it. “BPG will do really well with this bottle. It’s still cheaper than ninety percent of the wines on their list. And we’re not exactly in Napa Valley. If they want to impress the Beacon Hill set, this is the way to go. The Massachusetts Bay colonists had too little grain to make the beer they’d drunk in England, so they made hard cider instead. This right here is our history.” I held up the bottle.

She took it out of my hand and put it back on the counter. “I may have flunked out of BU, but I did finish the fifth grade, where they taught us that John Adams drank hard cider with breakfast. I get it, okay? You’ve got the perfect regional beverage for my corporate overlords. I shall report back to the Death Star, where Darth Vader will express his disappointment and then strangle me for quoting eight bucks a bottle.”

Damn this girl. Not only did she know her stuff, she was smiling at me now over the rim of her glass. The other two times we’d been this close

together, our clothes had come off in a big fucking hurry.

Focus, Griffin .

“I could show you seven dollars. Why don’t you just see what their limit really is?”

“Well...”

Behind me, the door opened suddenly. “Griff?” my sister called. “Angelo just drove up with the new guy.”

“Be right there,” I said, taking a step back from Audrey. I felt oddly guilty, as if my sister had caught us doing something more furtive than discussing the price of cider.

You wish .

“Hi!” May said, catching a glimpse of Audrey. “Are you going to introduce me to your friend?” My sister’s voice was oddly bright. It was her snooping voice. I’d been hearing it her whole life.

“I thought we had a drug addict to meet,” I grumbled, setting down my glass and heading for the door. Nudging May and her big mouth out of the way, I watched the back door of Angelo’s old sedan open. “Excuse me a minute, Audrey.”

“Audrey?” My sister’s curiosity was in full swing. “I’m May, Griffin’s sister...”

I had no choice but to leave the two of them to chat. I hoped Audrey wouldn’t divulge our former entanglement, because everyone on the farm would be talking about it by dinnertime, even the dairy cattle. But in the grand scheme of things I had bigger problems.

One of them was climbing out of Angelo’s car.

What does an addict look like, anyway? To me he looked like any kid in his twenties. He had a serious face and a lot of tattoos, but so did half the men in Vermont. He was a little thin for farm work. But that was really the worst I could say about my first impression. He pulled a small duffel bag out of the trunk, then lifted his chin to look around.

“Hi,” I said, greeting our friend Angelo. Now here was a guy with a tough job. The next time I found myself grumbling about an invasion of apple maggot fly, I would try to remember that I could be hunting down ex-cons instead.

His dark skin crinkled at the corners of his eyes when he smiled at me. “Haven’t seen you at church lately,” he said, shaking my hand.

“What, now you’re moonlighting as Father Pat’s truant officer?”

He laughed. “Sorry. Occupational hazard.”

“I’ll bet.” I turned my attention to the newcomer, offering my hand. “I’m Griffin Shipley.”

“Jude Nickel.” He had a surprisingly firm handshake. “Thank you for giving me a try. I need the job.”

“You’re welcome,” I said. *Translation: we’re desperate* . “If you don’t mind the outdoors, it’s not bad work.”

“Just spent three years in jail and rehab. I could use a little outdoors.”

His candor took me by surprise. “Well okay then. We pay twelve bucks an hour if you’re living on site, or fourteen if you’re a day worker. Lunch is free for everyone, but those who live with us get docked ten bucks a day total for breakfast and supper. The food is great, though, and we provide a lot of it. Like Guinness World Record quantities.”

“Damn,” said a chirpy voice behind me. “Got any more openings? You pay better than my corporate overlords.”

Audrey was listening in on my little HR speech, and I didn’t know quite how to feel about that. I paid my employees as well as I possibly could, though nobody was getting rich working here. Least of all me.

“That’s fine. All of it,” my newest employee said. He looked older than his twenty-two years. He had tired eyes. “Where should I put this?” He patted his gym bag.

“That’s all you’ve got with you?” I asked, eyeing it.

“That’s all I’ve got, period.” He lifted his chin, challenging me to say anything else on the matter.

“No problem. Let me show you the bunkhouse.”

But first my mother wanted a word. I saw her come out of the back door, her apron on, crossing the yard purposefully to where we all stood around Angelo’s car. I waited while she fussed over Angelo and greeted Jude. “Honey,” she said to this ex-con whom she’d never met before, “I checked every corner of our house and didn’t find any medication stronger than aspirin. Angelo asked me to do that for you. He said it was easier if you didn’t have to wonder.”

“Uh, thanks,” he said, studying at his shoes. “Appreciate it.”

I glanced toward the bunkhouse. God only knew what somebody might have left in that bathroom. “I should check the...”

“Already did it,” my mother said quickly. “You might want to *clean* that shower more often. There are scarier things than narcotics in there.”

Audrey giggled while I cringed.

“I’m Ruth Shipley,” my mother said to our uninvited corporate raider. “And you’re...”

“Audrey Kidder. I swung by to ask Griff about buying apples and cider for a group of restaurants in Boston.”

“Oh!” Mom clasped her hands as if the queen herself had just dropped by. “Will you stay for lunch?” She ignored the look of menace that I aimed in her direction.

“I would love to!” Audrey enthused. “Especially since my car is in a ditch at the bottom of your road.”

“Not true,” I said quickly. Even as we spoke, I could see the Prius turning slowly up the drive. Zach had already swapped out the tire—although it was likely the spare was a donut, so Princess Perky’s troubles weren’t exactly solved.

“Wow,” she said, her voice awed. “He’s a miracle worker.”

“He is,” I admitted, even if it was just a tire change. “Shoulda been working miracles on my fence instead of your car, though.”

“August Griffin Shipley,” my mother demanded. “Where are your manners? Since when do you not go to the aid of a stranger?”

I would have preferred that Audrey *was* a stranger. Not that I’d say so out loud.

May socked me in the shoulder. “Grumpy much? Take Jude to the bunkhouse already, because lunch will be ready soon. Brisket sandwiches and potato salad. Come with us, Audrey,” my sister the traitor said. “We’ll pour you some iced tea.”

After saying goodbye to Angelo, who couldn’t stay for lunch, the women went inside, leaving Jude and I alone. I headed toward the outbuilding where we needed to stash his things, and he followed me. “The bunkhouse is pretty comfortable for what it is,” I said. “It’s been here a hundred years. My great-grandfather built it with the rocks he cleared from the meadow.”

Jude studied the stone building as we approached. “Pretty cool,” he said. “You must not use it in the winter. Too expensive to heat.”

“Not true. It has a hundred-year-old masonry heater. Every two days we build a fire in there, then seal that sucker up. It heats the place into the low sixties even on a sub-zero day. There’s electric baseboard heat to fill in around the edges. We make all our own electricity, too.”

Sustainable architecture was one of my numerous causes. I wanted this farm to be around for a long time. The solar panels had cost a lot, though. I invested right after dad died, before I realized how tight cash really was. Then I invested in my first round of cider equipment, and now I was out on a proverbial limb all the time. One lost harvest and we’d be looking at bankruptcy.

Holding open the front door, I let Jude enter first. “That room on the right is mine. Bathroom’s on the left.” I kicked off my boots and pointedly

set them on the rubber shoe mat by the door. “After you’ve been working in the dairy barn, you’ll want to leave your shoes at the door.”

“Makes sense,” Jude said, toeing out of his Chuck T’s. I was happy to see him following instructions. That boded well for both of us. “You sleep out here in the bunkhouse all the time?” he asked. “To keep an eye on the help, I guess.”

“No.” Studying this very jaded young man, I shook my head. “That’s not why. I gave up my bedroom in the farmhouse because Mom is trying to convince my grandpa to move in. He’s about a half mile down the road, all alone since my grandmother died. Every day she asks him if he’ll move today, and each time he says, ‘Not today!’”

Jude laughed, and it made him look five years younger.

“Anyway, I moved out here a couple months ago, because we thought maybe it would motivate him to give in. But no luck. And anyway—I don’t mind it out here with Zach. He’s easy company. You’ll see. Head straight back. End of the hall.”

I followed Jude into the wide bunkroom with high, beamed ceilings. I watched him take in the two sets of bunk beds—one on each side—and a single bed under the back windows. “That’s Zachariah’s,” I said, pointing at the center bed with the *Star Wars* pillowcase—a gag gift from me. “He gets the best spot, because he lives in here year round. During the harvest my cousins will sleep in here, too.”

I went over to our one big closet and pulled open the double louvered doors. “Storage space is our biggest hurdle out here. You can have a couple feet of this hanging bar if you need it, and you get one big drawer.” I pointed at the built-ins at either end of Zach’s bed.

“One drawer is plenty for me,” he pointed out as I poked around in the closet for a set of sheets and a blanket.

“True.” The guy would need more clothes if he was going to do farm work, though. We got plenty dirty. “Here.” I offered him the bedding I’d

found. Then I sat down on Zach's bed. "Now tell me what else I need to know about working with you. Is there anything special you need? Any work that you can't do?" I'd never known anyone who was trying to get off drugs, so I couldn't guess his limitations.

Jude turned his back to me and shook out a sheet before answering. But when he spoke, he eyed me over his shoulder. "Angelo brought me here because I'm trying not to move back to Colebury until I have a few more months where I'm clean. Eventually I'll have to go home, but I need to rack up some more time off the junk. He said your place would be like a halfway house, because I'd be stranded out here. So I'd rather not be sent into Colebury on errands, if you don't mind. There's drugs everywhere, and I just don't want to think about it. Don't want to run into any of my so-called friends."

Yikes . "Okay. Sure. What else?"

"I'm a decent mechanic. Started working in a body shop when I was fourteen. If you need any maintenance work on your vehicles, just ask."

"Thanks. Zach is an engine whiz, too. He's saved me a mint already."

"Well, that's lucky," Jude said. But I swear he looked a little deflated at this news.

"What else?"

He tucked the corners of the sheet over the mattress. "I don't sleep too well. Drugs really fuck up your REM cycles."

"So if I hear you walking around at night, I shouldn't call the police?" I meant this as a joke, but when the words came out of my mouth, I realized they were a poor choice for talking to someone who'd been arrested at least once.

He sighed. "You might find me sitting outside on the porch at two in the morning. I'll try to be quiet."

"No big." I cleared my throat. "Now, don't take this the wrong way, but I say this to every man who ever stays here."

He looked up at me, amusement in his eyes. “Yeah? Hit me.”

“My little sister is off limits. I have to say it. She’s seventeen going on thirty.”

“Aw, man. Don’t feel you have to say another word. I get it.” He chuckled. “Hey kids, stay the hell away from the junkie in bunk number three.”

I was relieved that he didn’t get pissed off by my little speech. I gave it to everyone. And this guy had that dark-eyed, brooding look working. Plenty of girls had probably flung themselves at him back in the day.

Hopefully my little sister wouldn’t cast aside her adoration for Zach and shift it to Jude. Zach I trusted. This guy I’d just met. “You know, I used to include both of my sisters in this little warning, but May got wind of it. She hates it when I treat her like a kid. And she has a good right hook, which she’s not afraid to use on me.”

“Good to know. But hitting on your sisters is not my style. Maybe you wouldn’t believe it from a guy who just got out of jail, but I’m a hard worker. Toward the end there I was mostly working hard to feed my habit. But I know how to put in a long day.”

“Good. We start at six and end at five, but we take two hours off during the day for meals and breaks.”

His nod was stoic. “Got it. Maybe I’ll sleep better after a long day, anyway.”

“You’d almost have to.” I stood up. “I’m heading in for lunch. It won’t start for another fifteen minutes, but be on time, okay? Lunch is at one o’clock every day and mom busts her ass to get it onto the table like clockwork, so she wants you to show up on time.”

“Yessir.”

I paused on my way out of the room. “And don’t call me sir. My siblings do it sometimes, but they’re just fucking with me.”

Jude laughed as I left the bunkhouse.

Nowhere to hide

MAYBE GRIFF SHIPLEY was a grumpy asshole. But his family was *lovely*. Their bustling kitchen was controlled chaos of the very best kind. Griff's mom was busy slicing up a slab of braised brisket large enough to feed several developing nations, while everyone else pitched in to get food on the table.

Or didn't, in the case of Griff's younger brother, Dylan. Best as I could tell, he was minding a big sterilizer full of jam jars on the stove. He had the tongs in one hand, but mostly he busied himself singing Technotronic's "Pump Up the Jam," and dancing around.

"You are killing me with that song," his twin sister Daphne complained. The two of them looked to be high school aged.

"This is what I sing when we make jam."

She rolled her eyes, her arms braced around a tall stack of plates. She nudged her brother and indicated an open drawer full of linen napkins. "Can you put those on top here?"

He reached into the drawer and piled a handful of napkins on top of the plates.

"We're ten people today," she said. "Put some more on."

"Stop calling me a moron."

She groaned all the way out of the kitchen, and Dylan went back to singing “Pump Up the Jam,” changing the line about “booty” to “fruity.” And all the while his mother and sisters moved like ninjas around one another.

The lunchtime bustle in the Shipley family kitchen rivaled a busy night on the cook line at l'Etire Suprême, but it was a hell of a lot cheerier.

The kitchen in the house where I'd grown up could not have been more different—it had been like a large, sparkling tomb. I'd never been allowed to cook anything in it, or disrupt its perfect order. Since my mother had been busy climbing the corporate ladder, she'd played host to guests all the time. But she didn't cook. We'd had a full-time personal chef who made me feel like an intruder if I wandered in there looking for a snack.

I hadn't started cooking until college, when I finally got free of that stifling place. My freshman year I had a rented house with a couple of girls I knew from high school. One of them was a great cook already, and I learned a lot at her elbow. In fact, I'd liked everything about that first year at BU except for the schoolwork. I'd liked our house, my friends, the sorority I rushed, and partying. If I'd spent fewer hours learning to make dumplings from scratch and more hours doing homework, I might have gotten B's instead of D's.

But I hadn't.

Water under the bridge.

Drifting into the dining room, I watched Daphne speed-set the table for ten people. “During picking season we hold lunch outdoors, because we're twenty people then,” she told me.

May Shipley rushed by with a tray of coffee cups and a water carafe.

“How can I help?” I asked her for the third time, following her back into the kitchen. “There must be something.”

“You are so sweet, but we've got this down to a science. We serve a whole lot of food in this kitchen.”

“I can see that.” It seemed categorically impossible that there wasn’t something I could do to help, but if she didn’t want to assign me a task, that left me free to admire the farmhouse kitchen. The house had to be over a hundred years old, but it had been lovingly handled. The giant butcher’s block table in the center of the kitchen looked as if it had been there since the dawn of time—there were scars and scratches in its oiled surface. But that only made it more beautiful to me.

What I’d wished for as a child was exactly this—a storybook family on a farm somewhere, crammed around the table, a rope swing on an old tree, lacy curtains blowing in the breeze...

Someone had abandoned a small bowl of cherries in the center of the table, half of them pitted. They gleamed like perfect red jewels. “Hey—these are gorgeous. Are they sour cherries?” I lifted the bowl up to my nose for a sniff—occupational hazard of being a chef. Wow . Nothing else had the same rich scent as a cherry.

“Yes they are, and they’re terrific in pies,” Mrs. Shipley said, lifting slice after slice of brisket onto a platter. “But we won’t get enough for a pie until next week. I never know what to do with the first few—it’s not enough to make anything. I tossed them into a batch of strawberry jam last year.”

“Can I eat one?” I laughed. “Is that rude? You can never find sour cherries at the store.”

“Go ahead, honey,” Ruth Shipley said.

I popped one in my mouth, and it burst forth with a wonderful sour fruitiness. “Fantastic.” The flavor filled me with ideas. I wanted to make chutney from these cherries. Or a gin cocktail. Or a tart. “Damn. I always wanted to live somewhere where there were fruit trees.”

May Shipley laughed. “All we’ve got are fruit trees. Twenty thousand of them.”

“Twenty...thousand?”

“That’s right. And that’s not counting Griff’s experimental crops.”

It was hard to even form a mental picture of twenty-thousand trees. Humming to myself, I picked up the paring knife and began to pit the rest of the cherries in the bowl. Knife work was soothing to me. Some people knitted. Some did yoga. I liked to cut things.

A few minutes later I had a tidy pile of pitted fruit. “I suppose you have a compost can for the pits and stems?”

Ruth Shipley looked up from her own work. “That didn’t take you but a minute.”

“Cooking is the only thing I’m good at.”

“I’m sure that’s not true. The compost can is there beside the coffee maker.”

I dumped the pits and then washed my blood-red fingers.

“May!” Ruth called to her older daughter. “Can you find the barbecue sauce in the refrigerator? We need to heat it up. Then we can eat.”

“Sure!”

“Um...” Dylan mumbled in that sullen teenage way. “Didn’t know you still needed that.”

“Dylan Gerard Shipley! Did you finish my sauce and not tell me? Now lunch is going to be late! I can’t serve brisket without barbecue sauce!”

Aw . The younger Shipley brother hung his head. He was a thinner, gawkier Griffin.

I felt bad that he’d been shamed in front of strangers. “I’ll whip up another batch if you need it,” I offered.

Ruth was still staring at her son with a laser gaze, and I was pretty sure the teenager would have been incinerated if looks could kill. “Thank you, honey,” she said to me. “I’d love that. There’s an onion there”—she indicated a bowl on the prep table—“and you can use the same cutting board.”

Yay, a task! When you’ve been told all your life that you’re quite useless, whipping up a little barbecue sauce is a good time. I grabbed the

onion and went to town. “Ooh, garlic scapes,” I said, reaching for the green shoots. “I never find these, either.” A quick mince had them falling into tiny discs on the cutting board.

“Yikes,” Daphne gasped, watching my knife move so fast it blurred. “How are you not missing a finger?”

“Still have all ten, and none have had to be surgically reattached. But the day ain’t over yet.”

As she giggled, the kitchen door opened and Griff Shipley filled the opening with his NFL-sized body. I’m ashamed to say that the rhythm of my knife faltered for just a moment. That chest beneath that tight T-shirt just did things to me.

My traitorous brain was saved from further embarrassment by the look on his face when he spotted me. First a bushy eyebrow quirked, as if he couldn’t believe I was still here. And then he gave me his now-familiar frown.

Ah, well. All that hotness wasted on a grouch.

I dragged my attention off Griff as Ruth Shipley scraped my minced aromatics into a saucepan. “Let’s see,” she said. “A little ketchup, because we’re in a hurry. Some vinegar...”

“You know what would be great in here?” I couldn’t stop myself from suggesting. “Those.” I pointed at the cherries.

“Interesting pick, miss.” She handed me the pan. “Go for it. I need to run upstairs for a minute.”

“Go on. I’ve got this.” I shooed her away and she smiled. At least one of the Shipleys liked me.

Turning my back on Griff, I put the pan on the stove on a low temperature. Then, still feeling his eyes on me, I went to his giant family refrigerator and opened the door. The ketchup was in a huge bottle. It would have to be if they served ten or twelve people for lunch every day. Before

adding some to the onions, garlic and butter already in the pan, I sautéed the veggies for a minute to bring out the onions' natural sweetness.

"What are you doing?" Griff said suddenly from *right* behind me.

"Barbecue sauce. You're familiar with it, right?" The heat of his body was somehow hotter than the Wolf stove in front of me. I tried to elbow him out of the way, but that was like trying to nudge a Humvee. So I went the long way around two-hundred-odd pounds of muscle to collect the cherries.

"Strange combo," he muttered.

"You don't have to eat it," I returned. There was a nice sizzle happening in my saucepan now and I grabbed a wooden spoon to stir everything together. "Be a dear and find me some brown sugar, would you?" I asked. "And some vinegar."

Across the room, his sister May laughed. "He'd need a map and a compass. I'll grab them. White wine vinegar? Or balsamic."

"Balsamic, I think."

The kitchen door opened slowly, and Griff's newest employee eased tentatively into the room. "That smells really good," he said softly.

"Thank you!" I chirped, giving Griff a pointed look.

Griff ignored me. He escorted his new employee in the direction of the pantry. "Having the sink over here keeps us out of the way," he said. "And keeps the cooks from getting cranky."

"What keeps *you* from getting cranky?" I called after him. "Whatever it is, have some of it."

All the Shipleys laughed except for Griff.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Ice Ice Baby

Chastity

“PLEASE BE CAREFUL, Chastity. Don’t drink anything that doesn’t come from a sealed bottle—unless Dylan is the one who pours it for you.”

“I’ll be careful, Leah,” I reply. But at the same time I roll my eyes in the mirror where I’m giving myself a last-minute once-over before I leave for my first college party.

The dormitory phone has a long curly cord that stretches *just* far enough into the bathroom. So I can listen to all Leah’s worries and check my look at the same time.

Squinting at my reflection, I button the second button on my blouse. But then I unbutton it again. I want to look attractive, but I don’t need my top to shout: HERE ARE MY BOOBS FOR YOUR PERUSAL.

It’s a fine line.

“Don’t go into the basement,” Leah says. “That’s where all the bad ideas happen.”

“What kind of bad ideas?” I ask, perking up. I don’t remember Dylan’s house on Spruce Street even having a finished basement. But if it did, I’d probably go into it, in spite of Leah’s warning. I’m more interested in bad ideas than anyone seems to understand. And I always have been. It’s just that my life hasn’t afforded much opportunity to try them out.

“Just be careful. Trust your gut. There are men who would get you drunk or high just to take advantage of you.”

“I’ll be very careful,” I promise, just because it’s the fastest way to end this conversation.

Leah means well. She’s only nine years older than I am, but she considers herself my guardian. Two years ago—when I was nineteen—I ran away from the cult where we both grew up.

I owe her a lot. She took me in, no questions asked, even though we're only distant cousins. Leah cares about me and my future, which is a lot more than I can say about my actual parents. If I'd stayed on the Paradise Ranch I'd be married by now to a fifty-year-old man with four other wives.

Sometimes when people hear this story they say we have a "colorful history." But it's just the opposite. It wasn't colorful at all; it was really drab. And that's why I'm standing here in a burgundy silk blouse I bought secondhand and a pair of tight jeans that would have earned me a beating at the compound.

Leah bought me my first pair of jeans two years ago. I'd put them on immediately, feeling very defiant. Then I'd looked in the mirror and thought: *whore*. Because that's what they used to call me.

I still hear their voices in my head sometimes. I was a whore to them. And all because I kissed a boy.

"Are you coming home this weekend?" Leah asks. By *home* she means her farm in Tuxbury, which is about an hour's drive from the university in Burlington.

"I think so?" I uncap my only tube of tinted lip gloss and touch up my lips in the mirror.

"Did you tell Dylan your idea?"

"Not yet." And that's one of the reasons I'm going to this party at his house.

It's Wednesday, when we have a standing tutoring date. But today he didn't show. I don't have a cell phone, which is probably why I didn't hear from him. He must have called the land line while I was out.

Dylan is a little flighty, but he's a good friend. He hasn't missed a Wednesday yet. That hour of the week is a double-edged sword for me. I love spending time with Dylan. But algebra. *Oof*. It's not my forte. I spend the whole time trying not to look either stupid or heartsick, with varying degrees of success.

I'm probably failing at the first thing, but Dylan has no idea how I feel about him, and I plan to keep it that way.

"I hope Dylan likes your idea," Leah says. "It's got a lot of potential. And the kitchen is wide open on Friday and Saturday nights. Nobody ever wants to claim those hours." Leah makes fancy cheeses, but it's a seasonal business. So she rents out the commercial kitchen in her creamery to other businesses during the winter months.

"If Dylan wants in, he'll pick Saturday," I tell her. "Fridays are reserved for his awful girlfriend."

"Shhh!" Leah hisses. "Won't she hear you?"

"No. She's not here." The biggest mistake of my college career—all four weeks of it—was asking Dylan to help me carry my things into the dormitory on move-in day.

I hadn't even asked, come to think of it. He'd volunteered. He'd driven me to school in his old truck and brought me to the housing office to pick up my keys.

And I'd been so, so grateful. Right up until Dylan carried my one box into the dormitory. I'd been so nervous I'd felt like throwing up, but Dylan had whistled a happy tune as he led me down the hallway to suite 302.

"Open 'er up," he'd said kindly. "Let's see if the housing gods were kind."

They weren't. I mean—the suite is fine. My twin bed is in a separate room from Kaitlyn's twin bed. We share a bathroom that's just ours. I have a desk and a dresser and a window. I can't complain.

I'd been hoping to be paired with a roommate who would also be a friend, but Kaitlyn had been instantly chilly to me. She'd barely glanced in my direction.

She had not, however, dismissed Dylan. You know that expression—"her eyes lit up"? Well, I've never seen anyone so obviously and instantly in lust. She was like a cartoon character with hearts in her eyes.

“Is this your brother?” she’d asked.

“Just about,” Dylan had said with a chuckle. “We live on neighboring farms.”

“That’s so sweet,” she’d gushed.

And then, as I’d put my meager possessions away, she’d chatted him up. I learned all about her life in Manhattan and her troubles at Barnard College, wherever that is. “There was a dalliance with a professor,” she’d said with a sigh. “It didn’t end well. My family is horrified.” She’d given him a sexy grin. “So here I am, banished to the hinterlands to finish school.”

“Welcome to Moo U,” Dylan had said with a slow smile. “It’s not New York City, but we have other kinds of fun.”

The very next day she’d asked me for his phone number. “I had a question about which dry cleaner to use. He said to ask him anything.”

“I’d be stunned if Dylan ever had anything dry cleaned,” I’d said. But I gave her the number, anyway.

Big mistake.

The following week she didn’t come home at all on two different nights. At first I thought this was a terrific development. I loved having our suite to myself. But then, just as I was crossing the center of campus and congratulating myself on figuring out a shortcut to the math department, I’d seen them. Kaitlyn had been standing under a tree with Dylan. And then he’d leaned in and kissed her.

No—that isn’t even an accurate description. He practically *devoured* her right there between classes in broad daylight. I’ve never walked away from anything faster in my life.

Three weeks later, and I’m still not over it. I already knew Dylan had a lot of sex. His twin sister refers to him as “the family slut.” There are always girls from his high school class hanging around the Shipley farm, riding shotgun in his truck. I’m always jealous of those girls.

But Kaitlyn? Just the idea of her with Dylan makes me insane. It doesn't matter if I express that aloud, either. Kaitlyn is almost certainly at Dylan's house right now. If it turns out that he spent our tutoring hours with her instead of me, that will sting.

But Dylan will make it up to me. He really is a good friend.

"Let me know how it goes," Leah says. "I'd better go and put Maeve to bed. I can hear her begging Isaac for another story."

"Kiss her goodnight for me," I say. "I'll call you about the weekend. I'll let you know if we need to use the kitchen Saturday night."

"Have fun tonight, Chass. Just be—"

"—careful. I know, Leah. I will."

We hang up. I give myself one more glance in the mirror, then I grab my backpack and leave the little suite behind.

I hurry down two flights of stairs, heading for the dormitory exit. It's already dark outside, and I can see my reflection in the glass door. My backpack strap has tugged the silk blouse aside, revealing a tiny glimpse of my bra.

I stop suddenly to fix it, and that's when somebody plows into my back.

We let out twin shrieks.

"Sorry!" I yelp, turning around.

"No, that was totally my fault," the other girl babbles. Her name is Ellie, I think. We're in the same English class. She holds the door open for me. "Your outfit looks fine, by the way. Stop fussing with that collar."

"Uh, thanks."

"Going on a date? Kinda fancy for a Wednesday night." We're heading in the same direction down the sidewalk. "I'm going to the library, because I'm fun like that."

"Oh, I already spent four hours there," I assure her. I don't tell her that I spent all that time waiting for Dylan Shipley to show up for tutoring. "I'm going to a party off campus."

“Really,” Ellie says, grinning. She has a mouth full of braces. Aren’t those just for kids? It’s been two years since I left the cult where I grew up, but there are still a lot of things that baffle me. Twenty-four months isn’t a long time to learn how the entire world works. “You have fun. I’ll be trying to understand Aristotle.”

“Cool.” I don’t know what Aristotle is, either.

She reaches for my hand and tugs it away from the second button of my blouse, which I’m fingering. “Don’t fidget. That’s how buttons come off.”

“Right. But—” I hesitate. “Is this too much?” I wave a hand in front of my chest.

“Too much what? Too much hotness? No. If I had boobs, I’d wear them proudly. Whoever it is you’re trying to impress is going to love it.” She gives me a wave and trots away toward the library. “Have fun!” she calls over her shoulder.

I keep walking, still feeling uncertain. Going to Dylan’s house right now is probably a mistake. I don’t know why he blew off our tutoring session today. It isn’t like him. On the other hand, he has a lot on his plate. And I’m the one who doesn’t have a cell phone.

It’s not Dylan’s fault that I sat there in the library from four until seven thirty, missing dinner like a dummy. But I’ve always been a little dumb when it comes to Dylan.

My stomach had been rumbling by the time I’d given up on him. On my way home, I’d paused outside the convenience store, wondering what a girl could buy for two dollars. Only candy, really. I hadn’t bought anything, but I had bumped into Dylan’s roommate, a character named Rickie.

“Chastity!” he’d exclaimed, coming out of the store with a bag full of various kinds of chips in one hand and a bag of ice in the other. “What’s up, lady? You coming over later?”

“For...?” I’d only been to their house once before. It’s out of the way, which is why Dylan always meets me on campus.

“The party! Didn’t Dylan tell you?”

He did not. But I hadn’t let it show on my face. “I didn’t catch Dylan today,” I’d told him. “Do you happen to know where he went?”

“Home to Tuxbury,” Rickie had said. “Shit, Chastity. He said he was going to call you. The goats got loose and ate something they weren’t supposed to.”

“Oh no!”

“Yeah. He got a call and there was yelling, and then Dylan got in the truck and went home. But he’s back at nine for the party. Come over. I’m making mulled cider and guacamole.”

My stomach had gurgled, and the decision had seemed easy.

But now, as I trudge uphill toward the old Victorian house where Dylan lives with Rickie and another guy named Keith, I’m questioning all my life choices. I’ll probably have to make conversation with strangers, which isn’t my strong suit.

Or they’ll just ignore me, which also sounds bleak.

And then there’s my algebra homework which is in my backpack still incomplete. If I turn up now, Dylan is only going to feel guilty for missing our session.

There are two things powering me uphill, though. The first is guacamole. I’d never seen an avocado until I became a nineteen-year-old runaway to Vermont, and I’d been seriously missing out. The second thing is morbid curiosity. In the four weeks since I came to Burlington U, I’ve had only glimpses of College Dylan. And I want to know more.

The Dylan I know from Tuxbury is Family Dylan. He milks goats and cows. He whistles in the orchard while picking apples. He takes off his shirt to stack hay. He eats third helpings at the dinner table. He spars with his siblings and takes his mother to church.

And? He’s a good friend to me.

College Dylan is different, though. And—fine—even more intoxicating. College Dylan drinks and smokes pot and has (from what I can guess) a lot of sex. Some of it with my evil roommate.

None of it with me.

THIRTY-NINE

The Whole Catholic Thing

Chastity

THE TEMPERATURE HAS PLUNGED since nightfall, so by the time I reach the house, I'm shivering.

Still, I stand on the front walk for a minute or two, acclimating. It's a beautiful house on a treelined street. There are three floors and several roofline peaks. Dylan says he's lucky to live here. Rickie doesn't charge much rent. Tonight the house is lit up like a Halloween pumpkin, with yellow light glowing from every window.

The windows are closed, but the sound of voices—lots of them—reaches me on the sidewalk. And some music. The sounds of people enjoying themselves. The longer I stand here, the harder it gets to imagine myself walking in there. I won't know anybody besides Rickie and Dylan. And Kaitlyn, who won't talk to me anyway.

I spot Dylan in the bay window. It's not hard. I'm tuned in to the Dylan Shipley channel, and have been since the day I met him two years ago. I'd know his big frame anywhere, and his familiar head of thick, wavy hair. All the Shipleys have brown hair, but Dylan's is kissed with lighter highlights. As if the sun loves him just a little bit more than it loves everyone else.

His back is to me, so I can't see his laughing eyes. But he's gesturing as he speaks, a beer bottle waving wildly between two fingers, half forgotten. All you have to do is glance at him, and you know he's a fun person.

Fun, and also *nice*. And warm. And hilarious.

Okay. I can do this.

I march up the porch steps and open the big oak door, where I'm greeted by shiny old wooden floors and an arched doorway leading to the living room. Dylan still stands in front of the window wearing his signature outfit—worn jeans and a tight T-shirt. And since it's October, he's pulled a flannel shirt on over it, the cuffs rolled up over his muscular forearms.

“...these goats are little fucking Houdinis. Griff calls me once a day at least to complain. But today they ate all my mom’s spinach and kale, so he was shouting at me when I picked up the phone.” Dylan takes a sip from the beer in his hand, shaking his head. “I drove home to calm him down. As if that would even work. And when I get there he wants me to raise the height of the fence, right? So I take a look around...”

I’ve met the two dairy goats in question. They’re wily little animals and cute as heck. Dylan loves them a lot. Maybe even more than he loves his cows.

“...and the fence is *fine* . So I asked Mr. Grumpy if by chance he brought a feed bucket into the goat enclosure earlier? And he’s like—‘So what if I did?’ And then I ask if it had the cover on it. And he said—‘How did you know?’” Dylan shakes his head, as if he can’t believe the stupidity. “Well, because you’re ripping me a new one even though you’re the idiot who gave those little fuckers a bucket to climb up onto and *launch themselves over the fence* .”

Everybody laughs a little drunkenly. There are maybe a dozen people in the living room. There’s a group on the floor passing around a small pumpkin. Someone has outfitted it with two pipes that stick out of either side. It’s a pumpkin *bong* .

You’re supposed to take a puff and pass it on. I never have, though. Up until last month, I’d only seen weed in movies. I’d smelled it in Dylan’s truck, without knowing what it was.

College is very educational.

My gaze snags on the couch, which is also occupied. The people seated on it aren’t listening to Dylan’s story, though, because they’re too busy making out. This wouldn’t be all that interesting except there are *three* of them. Two girls and a guy. It hadn’t occurred to me before that three people could kiss at the same time, but they seem to be managing just fine.

I can't tear my eyes away. The view is both beautiful and complicated. The boy's eyes are closed. I briefly spot his tongue as their lips reconfigure. His hand is up one of the girl's shirts. And that girl has her hand on the *other* girl's breast. As I watch, she passes her thumb over the nipple slowly. It's a hard peak through the T-shirt covering it.

Okay, wow. I wouldn't have thought that would turn me on, but there you go. The truth is that a lot of things turn me on. And they always have. Ever since I turned thirteen, there's been a raging battle between what I'm supposed to be thinking about and what I actually think about.

I really hope nobody can read minds.

Music throbs in the background while Dylan finishes his story about the goats. His mother is mad because they ate her garden greens. "And you practically can't call yourself a Vermont farmer without a nice patch of kale. What will the neighbors say?"

Everyone laughs. My eyes come to rest on Kaitlyn as she passes the bong after her puff. My evil roommate is looking up at Dylan with stars in her eyes.

It's hard to blame her for that, because I probably look at him the same way. It's literally the only thing we have in common.

Kaitlyn gets to her feet as he wraps up his story. She takes the beer out of his hand and takes a swig. It's a way of claiming him, I guess. It makes me want to smack her. "Come on, Dyl," she says the moment he stops talking. "You said you'd let me play something for you."

"Yeah, okay. Cool." They both take a step in my direction. That's when Dylan lifts his chin and spots me. "Chastity! Hey!" He pulls me in for a Shipley-style, full-body hug—the kind I'm never quite ready for. "God, I'm sorry about this afternoon. Rickie said you waited."

Ouch . I wish Rickie hadn't mentioned that.

"It was f-fine," I stammer as his arms encircle me. There's a quick press of his hard chest against my body. The flannel shirt he's wearing doesn't

disguise the muscle underneath.

His hugs always fluster me. I count to three and then step back, so I don't find myself awkwardly patting his back for too long. That happens sometimes.

It's been two years since I came to Vermont, and while I've figured out a lot of things—like Netflix and nail polish—these little interactions still tie me in knots. On the compound, no man *ever* hugged a girl who wasn't his wife. We didn't even shake hands.

These days I'm a decent hand-shaker and there are several people I can hug without difficulty. But Dylan isn't one of them. I'm so attracted to him that each hug makes me flush like a nervous loser.

"I called," he says.

"W-what?"

"I called the land line in your suite. Kaitlyn said she'd leave you a note."

"And I left it," Kaitlyn snaps. "On the desk. Weren't we going upstairs?" She gives Dylan a little tug.

"Hang on." Dylan untangles himself from her and puts a big hand on my shoulder. "Come into the kitchen a minute. Did you eat? Mom sent me home with lentil soup."

My stomach growls, but the party is too loud for anyone to hear, thank God. With Dylan, I turn toward the kitchen. I can almost *feel* Kaitlyn's anger radiating toward me.

It's weird, but I feel no guilt. Guilt and I are usually very close friends. But when it comes to Kaitlyn, I live for these little moments of irritating her. Probably because I know they don't matter. She has what I want, and there's a zero percent chance that I'll ever get it.

"Look who's here!" Rickie says from the stove where he's stirring a pot of steaming liquid. It smells like heaven. "The cider is ready, guys. Who's in?"

“I’d love some,” I say. That’s the scent of Vermont—apples and cinnamon. And weed, I guess.

“Kaitlyn?” he prompts.

“Why not?” She sniffs. “I have to, right? So long as I’m at Moo U, I guess I’ll drink the cider and wear a beanie and always use the pronoun of your choice.”

“You should be so lucky,” Rickie says cheerfully. “Just don’t burn your tongue. You’re probably gonna need that later.” He ladles cider into a row of mugs on the counter. “Here, Chastity. Hey—nice top. Vavoom! Love the fall-themed cleavage.”

My face heats instantly. I take a big sniff of the cider to cover my embarrassment. “Smells great, thanks.”

Dylan is already microwaving the soup and grabbing bowls from the cupboard. “Soup? Rickie? Kait?”

“Too carby,” Kaitlyn says.

“Cider is carby,” Dylan points out.

“But I can pour rum into it,” she says, taking a mug.

“More for me.” Dylan shrugs. “Have a seat, Chastity. Ooh, guacamole.” He grabs the serving bowl and plops it onto the table with a bag of chips.

Dylan and I take opposite seats at the table. Rickie parks his hip against the kitchen counter and sips his cider, while Kaitlyn circles, visibly humming with impatience that Dylan seems not to notice.

I will never get over the two of them as a couple. Never. According to his friends and gossipy family members (never underestimate Grandpa Shipley’s powers of observation), Dylan has always been a ride-or-die single guy. Until Kaitlyn ensnared him, that is.

Dylan is the kind of guy who sees the best in people. So while it’s obvious to me that she’s a shrew, he only sees her shiny hair. And her shiny lip gloss. And her skinny little body clad in expensive clothes.

That's the best explanation I can come up with. Not for lack of trying. And I'm not supposed to care.

Whoops.

"Chass, can we maybe do algebra at breakfast tomorrow?" he asks me now. "I don't have class until ten."

"Sure. Okay. At the dining hall?" Kaitlyn never goes to breakfast, so I won't have to deal with her. It's hard enough looking stupid in front of Dylan. I don't need her scowl, too.

"Yeah, that works." He picks up his soup bowl and drains the last bit.

"Come. On," Kaitlyn urges. "I'm waiting."

I look away, because I know what's going to happen next.

"Coming," Dylan says cheerfully. He pushes back his chair and carries his soup bowl over to the sink, where he rinses it carefully before tucking it into the dishwasher. "Back in a bit," he says to me on his way out of the room.

I dip my spoon in the soup and take another bite. It was nice of Dylan to feed me. He's a good friend. And it's hardly his fault that I want things I can't have.

A moment later, two mugs land on the table in front of me, and then Rickie takes Dylan's seat. "Those two are hard to watch, right?"

Ouch . Either I'm a terrible actress, or Rickie shares my opinion that they're an awful couple.

"She won't last," he says. "I'm sure the sex is great, but he gets easily bored."

"So I've noticed," I mumble before shoving a chip in my mouth.

Rickie flashes me a smile. I like Dylan's roommate, but he's a little intimidating. He speaks German and French, and he has an earring. His clothes aren't anything like Dylan's. Tonight he's wearing ripped jeans with black leather boots that would never stand up to farm work. His vintage

dress shirt is unbuttoned practically to the navel, exposing some elaborate tattoos.

Some people make my naiveté stand out. Rickie is one of those people.

He pushes a mug of cider toward me. “So what’s your story?”

“What do you mean? I’m just here for the algebra.”

“Uh-huh.” He uncaps a bottle of rum and pours generous dollops into both our mugs. “I mean your real story. Tell me how you got here to Moo U.”

“Don’t you know that part?” I just assumed that Dylan had mentioned my strange story. *Don’t mind my dorky friend. She grew up in a cult and can’t help it.*

“I want to hear it from you,” he says.

“Well it’s *your* Wednesday night. I guess you can spend it on my bullshit if you want to.”

He laughs suddenly, and he looks about five years younger. “I fucking love other people’s bullshit, Chastity. Lay it on me.”

I pull the mug of cider closer to me, considering what I might say. “When I was nineteen, I ran away from the religious compound where I grew up out West. I could only afford a bus ticket to the New York border. And then I walked and hiked the rest.” Thank God it had been summertime, or I would have frozen to death.

“What was that place like? The compound.”

“Um...” What to say? I don’t talk about it that much, because it’s weird and embarrassing. “Let’s see. The only clothing I’d owned before I left was something called the Paradise dress. Picture Laura Ingalls in pastel polyester. Long sleeves, long skirt. With a high collar.” I put my hand up to my throat. “You couldn’t show any skin, because that was sinful. We wore the dresses with hiking boots from Payless.”

“Oh fuck,” he says, blowing on the surface of the cider in his mug. “So the place was a fashion disaster. But what was it *like*? What did you do all

day?”

“I worked at home. Cooking, cleaning, and sewing. I didn’t go to a real school after third grade. Nobody wanted us to be smart, anyway. They only cared about obedience. They didn’t want us out in the sinners’ world, wondering why we couldn’t have all the things that other kids had. Too many big ideas. When I was seven, I asked for a pair of new shoes, like another girl at school had. I got a slap on the face, instead.”

“Wow.” Rickie watches me with obvious fascination. He has hypnotic eyes. They’re gray, with a darker circle around each iris. “So they thought you might figure out that polygamy is illegal?”

“Maybe,” I hedge. “But it wouldn’t matter all that much if we’d known. That’s what brainwashing is for. We sat in church for six hours on Sunday. The preacher spent a lot of time telling us how *special* we were.” I roll my eyes, although my nonchalance is forced. Two years isn’t all that long, and part of me still believes some of the things I was taught.

That’s the part I can’t explain to outsiders. Everything our Divine Pastor ever said was a big load of bullshit. But some of it was really appealing bullshit. I’ll never go back, and I don’t miss the place at all. But I *liked* hearing that I was part of a special mission from God, with a unique purpose in the world.

Say what you will, but it was easier living in a world where I knew the rules. Even if I didn’t always follow them.

“How did you eventually decide to run away from this special, special place?” Rickie measures me with his serious eyes.

“Now there’s a story.” I let out an uncomfortable laugh. “When I was sixteen, I got in some trouble. I got into the back of a car with a boy.”

“You hussy!” Rickie snorts. He’s kidding, but I get tense anyway. Because the boy and I got caught, and the things they called me afterward were so much worse.

“He got thrown out,” I say.

“Out of the car?” Rickie sips his cider.

“No—out of the compound.”

Rickie stares. “Forever?”

“Of course. The sons can’t ever be alone with the daughters. It’s forbidden. But I, um, wanted to know what all the fuss was about. When they preach at you every Sunday about sin...”

I don’t think I can finish the sentence. My face heats just from the memory of sitting in that garage, kissing Zachariah. His hand had been on my bare thigh. I’d *really* wanted him to take it further. And then? Disaster.

“Sin has always yelled my name, too,” Rickie says with a smile. “Every stupid thing. I did it.”

I can’t help but smile back at him. I take a big gulp of the steaming cider. The rum gives it a sharpness I’m not used to, but I kind of like it.

“So what happened to you? After you kissed the boy?”

“Oh.” I set the mug down.

This part of the story isn’t much fun. After several blissful minutes, we’d been discovered by the worst possible person—my vindictive uncle Jephtha. There had been no chance of him brushing it under the rug. He’d summoned the elders...

“We were punished,” I say, and it comes out as a squeak.

“Shit, Chastity,” says Rickie. “I’m sorry to bring up something painful.”

“Oh, it’s fine,” I say, but my ragged voice makes me a liar. I take a gulp of my cider. “I didn’t see Zach again for three years. The worst part was wondering if he was still alive.” Every night I’d lay in bed trying to imagine what a homeless Zach would do. “I knew nothing of the outside world, so I pictured things I knew from the bible—beggars at the side of the road trying to fill their bellies.”

Rickie’s eyes are round. “What did he do?”

“Oh—he hitchhiked to Vermont. You know the Shipley’s neighbors, Leah and Isaac? He knew where they’d run away together, and it wasn’t too

hard for him to find them.” But at the time I hadn’t known this—I’d thought he was dead. “Zach says getting kicked out was the best thing that ever happened to him. And now he’s one of the happiest people I know.”

“Uh-huh. But what about *you* ,” Rickie asks. “They didn’t throw you out?”

I give my head a slow shake. “I got a beating. They had to make an example out of me. If you get into the back of a car with a boy, you’ll be beaten until you bleed. There were at least ten men taking turns with the strap. I didn’t sit down for a week, my ass was so sore.”

Rickie’s eyes bulge. “*Jesus Christ .*”

But I can’t bear to tell Rickie the worst part—that I’d been naked for the beating. That was the real punishment, I think. The toxic cocktail of pain and total humiliation. I don’t mind telling Rickie how badly they hurt my skin, but I can’t talk about the sound of their laughter. *Slattern* , they’d called me. *Harlot . Whore .* I will never stop hearing those voices.

“I still have the scars,” I say with forced cheer.

“And so you ran away after that?”

“Nope. I hadn’t figured out that I could. But when I turned seventeen, nobody wanted me for a wife, because I was compromised.”

Rickie makes a noise of disgust.

“It wasn’t, uh, true. But that didn’t matter. And here’s where it gets interesting—I realized I was going to be a leper, basically. So I asked my stepfather for a job, and he set me up with a really unusual thing—a job off the compound. I became a cashier at Walgreens.”

“Now that’s living.” Rickie grins.

“No—it was! I got to leave every day and spy on the rest of the world. You have no idea how much fun I had selling candy and aspirin. And magazines—I read *Seventeen* and *Allure* behind the counter. I didn’t get to keep the money, though. My father deposited my checks into his account. I never saw any money until I finally learned how to steal some.”

“You are a *fascinating* girl, Chastity.”

“Oh, please.”

“I mean it.” He reaches for my empty mug. I don’t even remember drinking all that cider. It was gone so fast. “What would your life have been like if none of that happened?”

“They would’ve married me off to an old man on my seventeenth birthday. I’d get a five-minute wedding during Sunday services. And then I’d leave my parents’ home to live with whomever the elders chose for me.”

“And then the wedding night.” He watches me over the rim of his mug. “I’m guessing birth control was not an option, either.”

I shake my head. “I’d never even heard of birth control until I started reading packages at the Walgreens where I worked. Bearing children was our number-one job. They told me that every Sunday.”

What I don’t add is that I’d been looking forward to it. I used to sit up straighter on the bench when our Divine Pastor spoke about wifely duties. *Lie beneath your husband and give your body to God. Accept his love. Accept his seed. Bring forth a new generation to worship at our tabernacle .*

I couldn’t wait to lie beneath my husband and accept his seed. When I was six, I asked another little boy to practice with me. He tattled, and we both got spankings. That little boy got tossed out of the compound when we were fifteen. (Not because of me, thank goodness.)

But I still remember his smile. His name was Jacob, and he had clear blue eyes. I always liked the boys too much. Eventually I learned to conceal it, but that was my secret shame. My cross to bear.

It’s still true, too. Since those kisses with Zachariah in the back of a car, no other man has touched me. But I wish one would.

Dylan, specifically.

But now I’m very tired of my own bullshit. “It’s your turn, Rickie. What’s your story?”

He pushes my refilled cider mug toward me with a teasing smile. “I grew up an army brat. Lived in ten places by the time I turned eighteen.”

“Is that why you speak German?”

“*Das ist richtig* . And here’s the part you won’t even believe—I won a spot at the U.S. Military Academy. I did my first year of college there. With the buzz cut and the uniform.”

“And *saluting*? ” I can’t picture Rickie as a soldier. I just can’t.

“The whole thing.” He chuckles wickedly.

“Why’d you leave?”

“I don’t talk about that part.”

“*Hey!* ” I argue. “I told you my story.”

“Did you really?” His intelligent eyes hold mine. “Or did you leave out all the shame?”

Well, heck. I guess I did. We consider each other across the small table. Then he smiles, and it’s very kind. As if we understand each other. “A professor basically said the same thing to me this week. Did you take freshman composition?”

Rickie shakes his head. “Is that the one where you have to write a different essay on the same theme every week?”

“Right. The semester’s theme is food. So I wrote something about the unseen miracle of microorganisms making milk into cheese. The professor hated it. He said there wasn’t enough of me in there.”

“I guess you’re supposed to bleed for him onto the page.” Rickie snorts. “Have some more rum.” He holds up the bottle. And I push my mug a little closer for him.

FORTY

Zambonis

Dylan

IN MY BEDROOM, I pour myself a drop of scotch and listen while Kaitlyn plays a new composition on her acoustic guitar. I swear she played the same thing for me last weekend, but I won't want to be a dick and point that out.

Besides—it's entirely possible that the music is just a ruse to get me alone. Kaitlyn is a crafty one.

"You sound great," I say when she finally sets down her guitar. And it's true. Classical guitar isn't something I understand very well, but she's obviously talented.

"Thank you, farm boy."

That's her little nickname for me. Since it's a reference to the greatest movie of all time—*The Princess Bride*—I should take it as a compliment. But all of Kaitlyn's compliments have a dark side. In this case, it bugs the shit out of her that I really am a farm boy. It's harvest season, and I have to go home every Saturday morning at the butt crack of dawn to help my family for the weekend.

Until this year, I was a part-time student, driving to Burlington for classes. But that had kind of sucked, so when Rickie offered me a room in his house for practically nothing, I grabbed at the chance to be a full-time student. I get better financial aid this way, so I'm saving money over the long term.

My brother hates this arrangement, though, because he's shorthanded on the farm.

"Play a duet with me?" Kaitlyn asks.

"Nah," I say, because I feel too lazy to get out my fiddle and tune it up.

"Your loss." She climbs into my lap and kisses me. "I missed you earlier. We were supposed to get dinner."

“Trust me,” I say, running a hand down her ribcage. She’s wearing a velvet top that begs to be touched. “I would rather get dinner with you than go home to be yelled at.” I push her hair off her slender neck and kiss the spot under her chin.

She shivers. Kaitlyn is always horny, just like I am. That’s why I broke my No Dating rule to be with her. The sex is fantastic.

Also, she’d insisted. *We’re exclusive, or we don’t fuck*, she’d said the first time I got her naked. Then? She’d swallowed my entire cock to the back of her throat and sucked me dry.

And that’s how I ended up half of a couple. It’s not the most romantic story. It’s no *Princess Bride*. But it works for us, I guess.

I take her mouth in a real kiss. This is what she’s been waiting for, anyway. Forget dinner. Kaitlyn tugs my shirt out of my pants and runs her hands up my chest as I give her my tongue. She straddles me, hooking her ankles behind my body, nestling the heat of her core against my thickening cock.

It’s pretty great until my friend Keith calls up the stairs. “Dylan! Come and do a shot with me!”

“Ignore him,” Kaitlyn whispers between kisses.

For a moment I try. But it’s only ten o’clock, and the house is full of friends that I won’t get to see this weekend when I’m home selling apples.

“There’s Jagermeister!” Keith tries, and I laugh as I break off from kissing Kaitlyn.

She makes a noise of irritation. “Really? You’re choosing Jagermeister over me? Gross.”

“It’s not over you,” I say mildly. “It’s *before* you.”

“Two words: whiskey dick.”

“Oh, please.” I lift her off my lap and set her onto the bed. “It was *one* time.” Rickie got me wasted on absinthe one night last week, and I passed out before I could fuck her. But Kaitlyn won’t go unsatisfied tonight.

She knows it, too. She's just impatient.

I get up, adjusting my jeans to conceal my semi. "Come on. Bring your guitar if you want." Kaitlyn likes an audience almost as much as she enjoys being fucked.

We go downstairs together. Keith stops me in the foyer, pressing two shot glasses into my hand. I down the first one, then offer the second to Kaitlyn, who wrinkles up her nose.

"There's probably wine in the fridge," I point out.

Without a word, she disappears to go look for it.

Keith trades me the shot glasses for the bong, and I take a deep, slow puff. *Ahh*. That's when my shoulders begin to unknit. Finally.

Most people love October. This weekend the country roads will be jammed full of tourists who drive up here just to revel in October's colorful wonders.

But I hate it. The days are short, the nights are dark, and my family's business runs at one hundred and fifty percent capacity. And I can't win with anybody. My brother is pissed off at me for living in Burlington. My girlfriend is pissed off at me for running home to Tuxbury each weekend.

"Fucking October," I say as Keith hands me another shot.

"Yeah. Fucking midterms," he agrees.

It's more than that, though. October is the month my father died. It's been six years, but every October I feel raw. Like I'm bleeding out of every pore. I have a few remedies at my disposal to dull the ache: booze, home-grown pot, and sex. They're not perfect, but they're the best that I've got.

"So when are you gonna bring home some new cider?" Keith asks. "I love that stuff."

Someone cranks up the Green Day just then, so I have to shout my answer. "Don't know, man. Jagermeister is cheaper." I don't need my brother bitching at me for walking off with some of the fancy hard cider he

makes. “There’s the bonfire in two weeks, though. Griffin always pours a lot of cider that night. You’re coming, right?”

“YEAH!” Keith shouts back at me.

Christ, it’s loud. I hope they don’t blow out Rickie’s speakers. “Where’s our fearless leader?”

Keith shrugs. He leans into the living room to look around. “Rickie’s right there!” he shouts, pointing. “On the beanbag with your friend from home!”

Uh-oh . Rickie better be taking good care of Chastity. Maybe I shouldn’t have left her in the kitchen. And—I can’t believe this happened—it sounds like she waited around in the library for me today when I was halfway across Vermont.

I am such a dick.

Stepping into the living room, I survey the wreckage. The party has deteriorated severely in the last forty minutes. Or improved, depending on your viewpoint. The lights are low and the music is loud and everyone looks half in the bag.

Even Chastity, I realize with a start. *Hell* . She never drinks. I hustle over there and look down at where she and my roommate are sprawled out on the giant beanbag chair. “Chastity!” I shout. “Are you okay?”

She lifts her head a little unsteadily. “I’m FIIIIINE,” she yells. “Did you know there’s people having sex on your couch?”

Rickie giggles. “They are, aren’t they? Better be using condoms!” He shouts. “No messes!”

I’m afraid to look, but I do anyway. And, yup. Rickie’s friend Igor is thrusting lazily into our friend Gretchen, who’s making out with a woman I haven’t met. Although now I’ve seen her bare tits, because she’s caressing them as they kiss.

Right. “Time to go home, Chass,” I say, offering a hand to my friend.

“Why?” she whines. “It’s really comfortable here. Although I kind of have to pee.” She burps.

“Up you go.” I lean down even farther and take her hand. “Hit the bathroom and find your backpack. I’m walking you home.”

“My backpack?” she slurs. “That does sound familiar.” She sways a little as she turns her head to look around.

Uh-oh . I don’t know if she’s ever had anything stronger than the wine we drink at Thursday Dinner, the rotating party my family and hers share. “Bathroom is that way,” I say, pointing toward the kitchen.

“Right.” She toddles off.

I haul Rickie to his feet next. “What were you thinking?” I yell over Green Day’s heavy drum beat.

“I can’t hear you!”

Ugh . I tow Rickie toward the kitchen. “You can’t give Chastity rum! She doesn’t drink at all.”

“Everybody starts somewhere,” he says with a shrug.

“Not Chastity,” I insist. To say that she grew up sheltered is like saying that Mussolini was a little pushy. Chastity didn’t cut her hair until she was nineteen. Before then, she never even wore jeans or swore or used makeup.

“She’s fine, Dyl,” Rickie insists. “I would never hurt your friend. She had, like, three drinks.”

“What’s the problem?” Kaitlyn demands, a glass of wine in one hand and a corn chip in the other.

“Chastity got a little tipsy, and Dylan wants to call the paramedics.” Rickie rolls his eyes and leaves the kitchen.

“I didn’t say we needed the paramedics,” I grunt. “But I have to make sure she gets home safe.” I pat my pocket, finding my keys there. “Let me grab a jacket.”

“Wait, why?” Kaitlyn whines. “She’s a drunk college student. This town is full of them. She’ll either find her way home, or she’ll wake up on

someone else's floor. Just like anyone else."

"She's *not* just like anyone else," I point out. "I mean, every freshman gets drunk. But they go home to a roommate who makes sure they don't die. And that's you, right?"

Kaitlyn makes a face. "My drunk freshman days are long past."

Right. That's why it's going to be me.

I go to the back hall and grab my jean jacket. Kaitlyn sips her wine and watches me. She's already a junior. Her family shipped her to Moo U after some kind of scandal in New York City. That's how she ended up in the dorms with Chastity.

I'm the same age as Kaitlyn but still officially a sophomore, since I started part time.

Chastity is actually the oldest of us all. At twenty-one, she's a year older than I am. But running away from a cult steals your teen years.

"You're making too big a deal of this," Kaitlyn says, pointing toward the living room. "Look, she's fine."

I walk to where I can see through the doorway. And there's Chastity, back from the bathroom already and dancing in a loose, crazy freeform way beside Rickie. Every third or fourth beat they bump hips and then laugh.

And now I'm smiling, because that is incredibly cute. Chastity isn't one to let go very often. She'll probably have a terrible hangover tomorrow. But right now she's having fun.

The song ends, and she and Rickie stand there breathing hard. "How do you feel about pot?" Rickie asks, his hands on his hips.

"Never tried it!" Chastity replies.

And that's my cue. "Another time," I say hastily. "Did you find your backpack?"

"Yup!" she says.

"Jacket?" I prompt.

She shakes her head in an exaggerated way. "Didn't wear one."

“Can’t we take your truck?” Kaitlyn appears behind me. She’s wearing her jacket, so I guess she’s coming with us.

“No, I can’t drive. Too much booze and pot.” I’m barely tipsy, but I won’t risk it. I’m a fun guy, not a stupid one. “It’s a ten-minute walk at the max.” I put a hand on Chastity’s shoulder and guide her toward the door.

“They’re *still* having sex,” she breathes. “Does it usually last that long?”

Kaitlyn snorts, and Rickie chuckles. “Depends who you ask.”

There’s a reason that I’ve never invited Chastity to one of Rickie’s parties. You never know what you’re going to see. I open the front door and remind Chastity to watch the steps. “They’re steep.”

“I can handle a couple of stairs, Dyl,” she says with a sigh.

“It’s cold,” Kaitlyn complains.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” I point out. “The wind off the lake makes Burlington one of the coldest places in Vermont.” I remove my jacket and lift Chastity’s backpack off her shoulder. “Trade you.”

“Why?” she asks as I set the jacket onto her shoulders. “You don’t have to.”

“I’ve got a flannel shirt on. And I run hot. All you’ve got is...” I gesture toward her pretty silk shirt. And I kick myself a little for noticing how good she looks tonight. It’s not the first time I’ve snagged my eyeballs on Chastity’s cleavage. You’d have to be blind not to see how pretty Chastity is, or how stacked.

But it’s bad form to ogle your drunk friend. Luckily, Chastity accepts my jacket and buttons it, shielding that delicious cleavage from view.

We head down the street. It’s a crisp, fall night. The lamps inside all the antique homes give the rooms a yellow hue. The air smells like falling leaves and wood smoke, and I associate that smell with sadness.

Because I hate October.

Chastity stumbles on a sidewalk crack, and my hand shoots out to catch her. But she doesn’t actually go down, and she quickly shakes off my hand.

Beside me, Kaitlyn is silent and probably fuming. Good thing I know just how to cheer her up. You have to play to your own strengths.

I'm not the most reliable guy. But I am a good time. Sometimes it's enough.



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