



Real

**FAKE
LOVE**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PIPPA GRANT

REAL FAKE LOVE

COPPER VALLEY FIREBALLS #2

PIPPA GRANT

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INTRODUCTION

REAL FAKE LOVE

A Fake Relationship/Grumpy Hero/Jilted Bride Romantic Comedy

If people have polar opposites, Luca Rossi is mine.

His butt is in the baseball hall of fame. Mine's comfortably seated in the hall of lame.

When he's not snagging fly balls out in center field, he's modeling in shampoo commercials. I once jammed my own finger while stirring cookie dough, and sometimes I forget shampoo is a thing.

He's a total cynic when it comes to love.

I make a living writing love stories.

But after my latest broken engagement (no, I don't want to talk about how many times that's happened), it's clear he's exactly the man I need.

If anyone can teach me to be the opposite of me, it's him. The first thing I want him to teach me?

How to *not* fall in love.

And as luck would have it, he's in desperate need of a fake girlfriend to get a meddling grandmother off his back.

We couldn't be more perfect together, because the last thing Luca Rossi will ever be is the next man to leave me at the altar.

Or will he?

Real Fake Love is a line drive straight to the heart featuring a grumpy athlete, a jilted bride, a fake relationship, and the world's laziest cat. It stands alone and comes complete with sibling rivalry, the world's most awkward shower scene, and a sweetly satisfying happily ever after.

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Luca Rossi, aka a man who has no idea how many problems he's about to have

THERE'S a massive wedding cake glaring at me.

And by *massive*, I mean you can see it for miles around, because it's not actually a cake.

It's a monument.

A wedding cake *monument*. It's taller than all of the buildings in this dinky farm town—okay, *wedding town*, but it *should* be a farm town—and it's glaring at me.

“Stop looking at the eyeballs,” my mother mutters next to me.

“You first.”

She shudders. “I can't.”

“Exactly.”

If this were a normal monument that someone had defaced with giant googly eyes, I could look away. Hell, I might've even been the guy to participate in giving a monument googly eyes, and I'd probably be amused as hell.

But wedding cakes give me the hives. Check that. *Weddings* give me the hives. And here we are.

At a wedding in a weird little town so obsessed with weddings that they have a wedding cake monument with googly eyes that won't stop glaring at us. Behind us is a country club and a lake—*Harmony Lake*, naturally—and on the other side of the cake is a street lined with wedding shops, and inside each of those shops are people who believe weddings are the greatest thing on earth.

“Why are we here?” I ask Mom.

“Guilt, Luca. We're here because of guilt.”

“Ah. Right.”

“Be glad Jerry insisted on a Monday wedding during your all-star break so you could make it, or I would’ve had to be here alone in the middle of their festival.”

Now we’re shuddering in unison.

I hate weddings. *Hate* them. Thousands of dollars down the drain for two people to be all dopey-faced and *in loooooove* while wearing ridiculous get-ups that they’ll never pull out of their closets again, with hundreds of people that they’ll feel obligated to send holiday cards to for the rest of their lives merely because Timmy brought a toaster and Rosalee donated to their honeymoon fund.

A horny uncle will grope the bride’s butt while they’re dancing and everyone will pretend he didn’t. A drunk relative will spill all the beans about some sordid story from the groom’s past. And for the next two to twenty years, depending on how long they make it, the families will look at the photos and pretend that those wide-eyed, terrified, exhausted expressions the bride and groom are wearing in all the pictures is joy and happiness instead of stark raving madness.

Nope.

I’m not jaded about weddings and marriage and love *at all*.

Yet for some reason, I keep getting invited to the damn things.

Today, for instance, I’m here because Jerry Butts, who was the scrawny rich kid on the playground who stopped his high-class friends from making up stories about me to get me in trouble while I was the poor little scrapper keeping the bullies from breaking his glasses, calls me three times a year to talk about how we used to be such best friends, but he never sees me, even at the holidays, and can we play a round of golf sometime?

And also because he specifically told me he and his bride picked a day during baseball season when they knew I’d have the best chance of being free on the off-chance that I didn’t make the all-star game and that I’d want to come.

You can’t not come when someone plans their entire wedding so that you *can* be there, and somehow manages to make it *not* insulting when they suggest you’re not good enough to play in the all-star game at the same time.

Or when your agent hears you got invited to a wedding and he’s working on sealing a deal for a formal wear endorsement, and could I *please* go and dress up nice somewhere?

You know what would be nice?

It would be nice if I could stick to playing baseball and avoid all this other bullshit.

“Luca? Hey! Luca, you made it.”

My shoulders briefly bunch at the sound of Jerry’s voice, then Mom and I

both turn. He's in a gray tux with his hair slicked back to reveal his thinning hairline, and he doesn't look like a man ready to take a leap of faith into the blissful pool of matrimony as he rounds the corner of the country club with a photographer on his heels.

He looks like he ate a can of beans three years past their expiration date and his body can't decide the best way to take care of the problem.

And I'm not saying that because I hate weddings.

I hold out a hand. "Hey, man. Good to see you. Congratulations."

He grips me by my fingers and squeezes like he's drowning and can't quite get a grip on the whole life raft. "Thanks. Thanks. Good to see you. Glad you could make it." With his free hand, he tugs at his collar. "Warm one today, isn't it? But Henri's always dreamed of an outdoor wedding, and July won't stop us from making a bride happy, will it?"

"You poor dear, look at you sweating." Mom whips a pack of tissues out of her small clutch and dabs his face the same way she used to when we were kids in the Chicago suburbs.

Much like when we were kids, he blinks at her like she's the brightest star in the heavens.

His own mother never gave him popsicles.

Mine always did.

"Won't they let you sit inside in the air conditioning until it's time to walk down the aisle?" she asks.

He stares for a beat longer, jaw slightly unhinged like a bug headed straight to a zapper, before he blinks quickly and blushes.

Blushes?

No. Surely he's not blushing. Weather's hot, that's all.

"Pictures," he stammers. "None with the bride before the wedding, but me before the wedding. Wow. That cake has eyes. That cake didn't have eyes last night, but it has eyes today."

He slides a look at me.

I lift my hands in innocence.

He laughs awkwardly and steals a look at Mom again.

Is it weird here, or is it the wedding cake?

Mom seems to be wondering the same thing. She gently clears her throat and slides her sunglasses down from the top of her head to cover her eyes. "It'll make for memorable pictures."

"Memorable. Yeah. Did you see my parents? They're down at the lake. Fretting. Everyone frets. Did you know everyone frets? But it's a wedding. Of course they do." His laughter comes out high-pitched and panicked, and I'm glad

I'm already wearing sunglasses. "Luca. How about them Fireballs? Good season for a team that almost got sent back to the minors last year. Guess that's you playing for them, huh?"

"It's all of us. You doing okay, Jerry? Need a drink or something?"

"Is it too early for a Long Island?" He snort-laughes, tugs his collar, and gazes at Mom once more.

She gingerly tucks the sweaty tissue back into her clutch and takes a half-step back. "We should go find our seats and stop distracting you from your groomsly duties."

"No, you're not—wait." He looks between us, his pupils dilating more, his chest practically convulsing because he's breathing so fast. "Can we talk for a minute? Privately?"

Dread slogs through my veins.

Mom and I share a look, and even with both of us in sunglasses, I know she's thinking the same thing I am.

We should run.

Fake coming down with temporary insanity, go jump in that lake behind the country club, streak through the small crowds of guests gathered as everyone waits for the ushers—something, anything other than going somewhere to talk to Jerry privately.

Mom smiles brightly at him. "We can talk after the wedding, sweetheart."

I swear he turns purple. "No, really—now."

"Well, of course, anything for the groom."

I glare at my mother as my stomach rolls over. She glares back, like she's saying, *you're the one who insisted he was your best friend for all those years*. And yeah, you can feel the glare through the dark lenses, because it's that kind of glare.

"This way." He tugs on my arm, and Mom and I hustle after him as he leads us around the corner of the country club, inside the chilly entrance, and then shoves us into the coat closet.

Mom lifts her glasses. "Well, this is lovely."

Since it's the peak of summer and there aren't any coats hanging in here, save for a lone fur number that's dangling like it's about to fall off the hanger, there's almost enough room for all three of us.

But there's not enough room for the body odor. Especially as Jerry leans closer. "Remember when you left Emily?"

My stomach bottoms out and my skin breaks out in goosebumps while a surge of heat floods my veins and makes my face go hotter than the sun. Voices from somewhere outside the closet drift in, and I wish I was with that group,

whoever they are, instead of in here.

Mom shoves me out of the way. “Jerry, sweetheart, that’s not what you want to think about on your wedding day.”

He peers around her, and is he—is he *sniffing* my mother? “But it made me think—you remember that Thanksgiving after, when we hit the course for eighteen, and you said—you said love is something people say they’re in so they can manipulate each other.”

Mom turns raised brows on me, and my toes start to go numb as the voices get louder. Is that door made of paper?

“Jerry. Shh. I was talking about—” *About people richer, more famous, and in better shape than you.*

Hell.

I can’t say that to a guy on his wedding day, no matter how much I hate these damn rituals.

Not that it matters what I say. He’s rambling, and getting louder, and he’s raking his hands through his hair and making it stand on end, and why didn’t his photographer tell him he still has a piece of toilet paper stuck to his chin where he clearly nicked himself while shaving?

“It’s like, every time my mother says she loves me, I know. I just *know* she’s only saying it because she has to. And then I think about Henri, and her cat, and the way she loves *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* even though it’s like, *old*, and her weird glittery tea mugs, and about how some days she forgets to shower, and—”

“C’mon, man, you know you wouldn’t be here if you didn’t have real love with her.”

“Do I? I don’t know if I love her that way. But you’d know, wouldn’t you? How do you know?”

Christ on a manicotti, he’s going to make me spew lies.

I hate lies.

I hate lies almost as much as I hate weddings, but I stay neutral. I don’t encourage *or* discourage people from getting married.

Bad press if you do, plus, who the hell am I to punch a hole in someone’s fairy tale? Live and let live. I speak quietly, in the hopes that he’ll follow my lead. “You just...know.”

Even my mother winces.

He shakes his head. “I don’t know, though. I don’t. Love’s this...this *thing* that people want to have so badly that they lie to themselves and say they’re in it when what they really want is to know there’s someone who has to have sex with them every day for the rest of their lives, or someone who’ll make sure the bills get paid, or someone to harp on because they want to be in control. Love’s

not *real*.”

“This is cold feet, man.”

“I can’t marry Henri,” he shrieks. “I can’t do it. She’ll drive me fucking insane within six months. I thought I loved her because she’s like this siren who preaches that love’s so real and it’s awesome and I do like having sex regularly, and I thought I felt it, but it was all what I wanted to feel, and not what I feel at all.”

“Jerry. Shh. Quiet, man, they can—”

“Do you regret it? That’s what I need to know. If you had to do it over again, would you have gone through with the wedding?”

I squeeze my eyes shut.

This is not the time and place to answer that question.

“That’s what I thought. Ever since I put a ring on it, I’ve been wearing a noose too. And not a noose around my neck. It’s like a noose around my balls. *It doesn’t feel good*. I realized I can’t marry Henri, and for the first time in weeks, I can breathe without my nuts choking.”

There’s a gasp outside the door, and Jerry goes as white as the damn monument outside.

Minus the black googly eyes, of course.

“That’s her,” he whispers. “Oh, god, that’s her. Hide me. Save me. Protect me.”

The door wrenches open, and gaping at us in the doorway is a fresh-faced woman wearing a button-down flannel shirt that would make her look like she’s planning to go cut down a few trees if it weren’t for the hoop skirt covered by a plastic trash bag hanging off her hips and the rollers standing tall in her brown hair.

Jerry tries to hide behind me, which doesn’t work. I’m not a wall, and there’s not enough space in here.

“Jerry?” The bride’s eyebrows crease. “This isn’t...you’re not...oh, god. You are. I heard you and I thought you were talking in metaphors about seeing your cousins, but you were talking about...leaving me.”

“I’m sorry, Henri.” His voice is muffled. “It’s not you. It’s me. I—I—I have a crush on Luca’s mom!”

“*What?*” Yeah, that was me and Mom, together.

“It’s true,” he says. “I’ve had a crush on Morgan for years. I’m sorry, Luca, but I don’t call you because I like you. I call you because I like your mom. I just—she’s so out of my league—and so much older—but *god*, I love older women. They’re so experienced. And they don’t have hang-ups about their bodies because once they hit forty, they don’t give a damn and that’s so effing sexy.”

I'm gaping.

Mom's gaping.

The bride's stuttering.

Pretty sure we're not all just shocked he used the word *effing* in a sentence, either.

Jerry shoves me at the bride, then thrusts his fingers into my mom's short hair, goes up on his tiptoes since she has him by two inches even without the heels, and slams his mouth against hers.

I choke.

The bride—Henri—gasps.

Mom goes completely rigid, but only for a second before her hands drift to his waist, and—

And I cannot watch this.

I turn, and the bride and I accidentally lock eyes.

Her cheek is twitching like she's trying to hold in the tears, and there's a broken desolation haunting every speck of her face. Her chest heaves, and dammit.

If people want to be idiots and buy into all of this love crap, that's their problem.

But this scene?

It's all too familiar.

And I still have regrets about the day I was in Jerry's shoes.

I sincerely doubt any part of his story is identical to mine, but the end result is the same.

"He's not going to marry me," she whispers.

"Fuck him." Fuck him?

Probably *fuck me*.

Because while I did a lot wrong on the day that I was in Jerry's shoes, it's taught me one thing.

And that's how to temporarily do something right. "C'mon. Let's go get you drunk."

Henrietta Leonora Bacon, aka a jilted bride finally facing that she has an unfortunate addiction to love

OF ALL THE injustices in the world, being allergic to alcohol has to be the biggest.

Hey, Henri, you've just been left at the altar again! What are you going to do to drown your misery at knowing you're not the marrying kind?

Well, Bob, maybe I'll do three shots of vodka and end it all right here!

Except I can't.

My cat needs me. My readers need me, or so I like to think. And possibly I need me, but since I can't get drunk, I don't know if I'd reach a point of enlightenment where I'd begin to understand why I continually do this to myself.

I shove another handful of my wedding cake into my mouth on the bank of Harmony Lake behind the country club where I was supposed to be dancing at my reception right now.

"Got any weed?" I ask Luca Rossi, who's appointed himself my broken heart guard.

It's like a bodyguard, except he's protecting me from seeing people like my parents—*Oh, Henrietta, AGAIN?*—and my bridesmaids—*she should've seen this coming. We TOLD her to get dresses that we could wear to the club this time, but did she listen? No. She's bought FORTY BRIDESMAID DRESSES, and for what?*—and also random people who keep asking him about how often he's at weddings that don't happen, which makes him scowl in a way that sends them running away.

He's also protecting me from my perfect sister with her perfect husband and

her perfect four children—that’s the three she’s given birth to, and the two she’s currently incubating, who each count as a half until they’re born and they become a family of nine, since they have the perfect dog and the perfect cat as well.

Wait. Ten.

I forgot about the bird.

Luca’s peering at me with *she’s gone mad* written in his green eyes. “She sounds annoying.”

I shove another handful of cake into my mouth as I realize I was muttering all of that out loud.

Hazard of the job.

Oh. My. God.

How am I going to do my job now?

“She even got the better name. *Elsa*. She’s freaking *Elsa*. How is that fair?”

“You didn’t have to date a guy named Jerry Butts if you wanted a good name.”

“I was going to hyphenate.”

He glances at me.

Back at the marquee my mom rented, still sitting on the patio, then reaches for a handful of wedding cake himself. “Mmph.”

I drop my head to my knees, twist a curler wrong, reach up to pull the damn thing out, and get cake in my hair. “Fine. Go on. Say it. *Henri Bacon-Butts would’ve been a terrible name*. But you know what? I have another name. And I like my other name *just fine*. Which means it doesn’t matter what my real name is.”

I pause.

Try to look at up at my frosted hair, get that weird pain in my eyeball that tells me my sister might not have been wrong all those years that she told me I’d get them stuck like that if I didn’t quit crossing them, and blink hard to get them unstuck. “Do you think frosting can dye hair?”

He doesn’t answer.

He’s something of a prick, which I know from listening to Jerry talk about him for the last thirteen months since we met. *Yeah, I grew up with Luca Rossi. That baseball player on the billboards for Kangapoo Shampoo? We were best friends. He doesn’t have much time for me anymore, but man, I still remember the good old days...*

I study his hair.

It is nice. Thick. Long, without being *long*. No fly-aways. A lovely chestnut brown.

Whereas I probably look better with the frosting in my hair.

“Why are you sitting here with me?”

“Because I didn’t know you were allergic to alcohol when I offered to take you to get drunk, and it would be awkward for me to leave now.”

“I don’t need a babysitter. It’s not like I haven’t done this before.”

He winces, then his eyes go flat again. “Been a hot mess in a trash bag and curlers?”

I’m a nice person. Yes, I torture a character or three over the course of a month when I’m writing, but in real life, *I’m a nice person*.

But it’s pure instinct to grab another handful of wedding cake, with its bright purple frosting, and smear it all over that perfect coil of his.

He jerks away. “What the hell?”

I don’t know.

I don’t know *what the hell*. Elsa and I never wrestled growing up, because she’s freaking perfect *Elsa*. And I’ve never wrestled with a boyfriend or fiancé, and it would be weird to wrestle with my girlfriends, because we don’t have that kind of relationship, and also, nearly all of them are virtual friends from my online writer circles since most of my other girlfriends are either cousins who have to be nice to me or my former fiancés’ friends, but dammit, *I want to take him down*.

And so as he jerks away, I double down, grabbing more cake and lunging. I get him in a headlock and smear that cake all over his shiny, perfect, thick mane of hair.

I swear I wouldn’t have done it if he hadn’t called me a hot mess in a trash bag and curlers, because he’s not wrong, except he looks so freaking *perfect* sitting there next to me, and *I can’t take perfect today*.

Not when I’m anything but.

He scrambles to his feet.

I wrap my legs around his waist and hang on, rubbing that frosting in so deep that he’s gonna have sugar roots for *days* after this.

Also, good *god*, the man is *large*.

“What are you *doing*?” he hollers.

“*I’m caking you!*” I shriek back.

“That’s not a thing!”

“I make things up for a living, so if I say it’s a thing, *it’s a thing!*”

He’s twisting, but I’m a damn spider monkey, and I’m not letting go until his entire face is coated in cake, because *I hurt*.

I hurt, dammit.

Jerry didn’t want me badly enough that he decided *today* was the day to

grow a pair and go after *Luca's mom*, which is probably the true reason Luca's sitting here with me—we've both been deceived, and it hurts.

Winston Randolph dumped me four days before our wedding to run away and become a Buddhist monk. We bonded over spiritual enlightenment, and even though we were only together four months, I thought we had the one true path.

Six months before that, Lyle gave me the heave-ho in the middle of the ceremony because he couldn't get through his vows without puking.

And I could go on.

Love is my superpower.

It's my blessing and my curse.

Because every time I fall in love, I'm not good enough.

I'm *never* good enough.

And it freaking hurts.

"Jesus. Not the tears. *Please* not the tears. I know I deserve them, but fuck, I hate the tears. I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry I called you a hot mess in a trash bag."

"I loved him. And he left me."

Luca plops to the ground, twists, and suddenly I'm pinned beneath him. "You are not going to cry over a loser like Jerry, do you hear me? Love's a sham, and I don't know you, lady, but I know any woman with the courage to attack me with cake isn't the kind of woman to let something as dumb and useless as love, especially for the wrong man, ruin her life. So buck up. Get over yourself. And fuck love, okay? *Fuck love.*"

I gasp. Is he serious?

He can't possibly be serious.

"Love might hurt sometimes, but that doesn't mean it's wrong."

"Doesn't it? What has love ever done *good* for you?"

He shoves up off the ground, leaving me cold and exposed and rocked to my core, because *oh my god*.

He's right.

Love isn't the answer. Love has *never* been the answer.

In my books, maybe.

But in real life?

Maybe I need to give it up.

For good.

Luca

IT'S a rough up-and-down month after the all-star break, especially with ten straight away games in three different cities in the last week and a half, but now, the team's finally back home.

I love home. Not that *home* is my house.

Home is my team. My home stadium. No matter which team I'm playing for.

This year, though—my first year in Copper Valley, the booming metropolis outside the Blue Ridge mountains in southern Virginia—home feels homier.

Copper Valley's Fireballs have been the worst team in baseball for years, but now, under new management, the fans are coming back, and we're within sight of the play-offs.

We're history in the making.

Today, I'm camped out in the worn-down lounge at the ballpark with a handful of my teammates hours before we're due here for normal pre-game stuff. While parts of Duggan Field got upgrades over the winter, the players' clubhouse hasn't been touched yet. The dingy carpet, the chairs and couches that should've been retired ten years ago, the funky smell of years of loss—it's all evidence of this team's history.

We're putting a new layer on it this year, and there's not a single guy here whining that we should've had an upgrade first.

We're *earning* a nicer lounge.

In the meantime, we're flinging plush duck and echidna mascots at each other with thong slingshots—don't ask—and plotting how to win the whole damn season.

The de-cursing we did in spring training was merely the start. None of us believe a few rituals suggested by someone's great-aunt to lift a decades-long hex alone will be all it takes. We have to do the heavy lifting too.

Some of us—like me—think the heavy lifting is the more important part, but we also can't deny the power of the other guys' superstitions, so we'll do whatever it takes for *all* of us.

“Chicken feet.” Brooks Elliott is also a veteran player who's new to the team this year. He wasn't initially happy to be playing for the world's worst team, but he's come around. Helps that he's now engaged to the Fireballs' most dedicated fan and is a sappy pile of mush most days, and no, I'm not going to make any comments about the fact that he's signing himself up for marriage.

I'll even go to his wedding and not bitch about it.

We've played together before—I spent my rookie year in New York with him—and I like having him in our corner. Usually.

Not now, though, as he's nodding very seriously and talking nonsense. “We need to all wear chicken feet.”

Francisco Lopez rolls his eyes. “Did your fiancée make you say that?”

Brooks grins.

I shove his face away while I lean closer into the huddle. “Dinosaur costumes.”

“Oooooohh.”

Yeah. That's right, baby. I impressed my teammates.

Cooper Rock flings a stuffed echidna at Lopez as he grins bigger. “The T-Rex kind, or the kind that makes you look like you're riding them?”

“Riding. Definitely riding.” Darren Greene's face is lit up like a kid running the bases on a pro baseball diamond for the first time. “Can't show your face if you're hiding inside a T-Rex. And we need Boston to know we're coming. Dibs on the cow. I always wanted to ride a cow.”

“Alright. Luca, you're on point.” Cooper hands me the *In-Charge* hat, which is unfortunately inspired by the second-worst contender in the *Pick A New Mascot* voting that management started to get fans re-engaged with the Fireballs this year.

When you've consistently set records as the worst team in baseball—before I was here, naturally—you go to great lengths to get your fan base back.

In the Fireballs' case, the new owner retired Fiery the Dragon and has fans voting on a freaky-looking firefly, a duck—don't ask—an echidna—more don't ask—and a flaming meatball.

My hat?

It features *two* plush flaming meatballs swinging a curved bat, and it looks...

Well, it looks like injured male genitalia in need of jock itch spray. And possibly antibiotics.

I proudly plop it on my head, whip out my phone, bend over, and attack Elliott in the arm with the plush bent bat glued to my hat while snapping selfies for the unofficial team yearbook that Emilio Torres is putting together.

“That’s right, baby, rub it all over me,” Brooks crows. “Cooper. Get a shot for Mackenzie. With Francisco using the Fiery thong on the meatball in the background. She’ll be so turned on.”

“And this is the players’ lounge, which I thought would be empty this time of day,” a feminine voice says behind me.

We all leap to attention, because while we know we’re in no danger of being fired by Lila Valentine, team co-owner and the woman responsible for the Fireballs still existing, we also don’t need her to know about the dick-ball hat.

She’d probably decide to mass-produce and sell them, which would make the flaming meatball option even more popular, and we’d be stuck with the damn thing forever.

Elliott’s fiancée is right.

They need to bring back Fiery the Dragon.

I whip off the dick-ball hat and hide it behind my back.

Too late, it seems, because the seven women with her are all gaping at me.

Including—*oh, fuck me.*

Including trouble.

Trouble with a capital *Henri*.

It’s not that I’ve spared many thoughts or have any feelings about the woman jilted a month ago by my mother’s possible new secret boyfriend.

It’s more that the very sight of her makes me see that giant cake monument with the googly eyes, and remember Jerry asking all those questions about my own wedding disaster, and then remember Jerry kissing my mother, who’s gone radio silent since we both vowed to never discuss anything that happened in that weird little town that I had no idea existed an hour from where I grew up, and that I now can’t un-know.

“Oh, shit, dude, the romance novelists are here,” Francisco hisses to my left.

“The what?” I hiss back, and it’s not because I don’t understand his accent. It’s that I don’t want to hear.

“Romance novelists.” Brooks is also sizing up the seven women ranging in age from twenties to seventies, hair from platinum to purple, skin of all shades, and clothing from yoga pants to pantsuits. “Lila used to run a publishing company. She heard a few writers needed to do research about baseball for books, and...”

He shrugs.

Doesn't need to finish that sentence.

The thing about the Fireballs being total losers for so long is that their fans abandoned them.

Brooks's fiancée excluded, of course. He's shacking up with the most dedicated Fireballs fan ever put on this earth—including Cooper Rock, who grew up in the Blue Ridge Mountains an hour outside of the city and has never wanted to play for another team.

But Cooper gets paid to be a Fireball, whereas Mackenzie is doing everything for free.

Right down to stealing the damn meatball costume to screw with the voting on the new mascot contenders.

Things are working well, and management's still pulling out all the stops to get as much positive press on the team as they can, and it seems giving behind-the-scenes tours to romance novelists is the next ploy.

"Which one's Cooper Rock?" the oldest of the writers asks, peering around the dusty old common room. Granny Romance is a black lady, about four feet tall with chicken legs sticking out from under her jean skirt, mismatched socks with her white sneakers, and a Fireballs visor on her white hair. "I need a selfie with Cooper Rock so my daughter-in-law will believe we got the full tour."

Cooper lights up. "You want one with my shirt on, or my shirt off?"

"Oooh, honey, both."

"You get him, you want me too." Francisco whips off his practice jersey and flexes. "I have bigger muscles."

The tallest of the novelists fans herself.

The white lady in the Fireballs jersey is furiously scribbling in a notebook.

Granny Romance leaps at us while Brooks pulls his shirt off and flexes too.

And Henri Bacon is pretending she's using her phone as a voice recorder, but she's staring straight at me.

There's no way this is a coincidence.

I fold my arms and watch her, remember I'm holding the dick-ball hat, and scramble to hide it behind my back again.

She gives me a finger wave. "Hi, Luca."

"You know a romance novelist?" Darren asks.

"Not really."

"She knows you."

"We were in the same place once."

"Dude, I'd wave back. If you don't, she might write you into a book and make you the bad guy or kill you or give you fleas in your pubes or something,"

Francisco hisses.

Then he flexes for the selfies.

“Fleas in pubes! Brilliant!” The one taking notes is also walking blindly, and she trips over a chair.

Henri dives and catches her. “Whoopsie-daisy!”

“Now, which one of you ladies wants to write a story about a studly baseball player who hasn’t found *the one* yet?” Rock asks.

“I’ll be your one, Cooper.” Granny Romance strokes his biceps.

“But how’s that fair to the rest of the ladies?”

“I’ve got experience, sonny. The rest of these chickadees can’t say that.”

My sanctuary has been invaded by people obsessed with love.

And Lila’s frowning at me. “Luca? You have something in your eye?”

Yes.

It’s called *everything in my line of vision*.

“No.”

“It’s twitching.”

“I slept wrong.”

“Were you up late doing renovations again?”

“Ooooh, a baseball player who renovates things?” Notepad zeroes in on me. “Are you renovating a house? *Oh my god*. Plot bunny. A washed-up baseball star inherits an inn on an island in Florida—”

“Or Maine,” Henri supplies.

“Maine! A washed-up baseball star inherits an inn on an island in *Maine*, and he has to get help from...”

“I’m not washed-up,” I tell Lila.

“You can still be inspiration.”

Henri beams at me. “Definitely inspiration.”

I don’t beam back at her.

“Did you eat something wrong for breakfast?” Lila’s frowning now. “You’re very...growly today.”

“AC went out.”

“Again?” Cooper shoots me a look. “Dude. You know I’ve got a spare bedroom.”

Confession: I don’t have an AC unit in my house.

I like it that way.

At least, that’s my excuse for why I haven’t replaced it yet.

The truth might be a little deeper.

Also, Cooper is the last person I’d turn to for a spare bedroom. I don’t want to hear whatever goes on at his place.

Brooks snickers. “Luca never fixed it the first time. Being around women makes him nervous, and he knows no one’s shacking up with him if he doesn’t have basic life necessities.”

Fucker’s gonna die. I don’t care if he’s like a brother to me, he’s gonna die. “Okay, Mr. Oldest Virgin in Baseball.”

All seven romance novelists suck in a breath as one. “A virgin baseball player!”

It’s in stereo.

It’s actually in stereo.

And Brooks puffs his chest out. “One woman. For me. For life.”

“Oh my god, swoon.” The one who’s been quietly downing something in a big Starbucks mug in the corner turns doe-eyes on Brooks.

“A *ghost!*” Notepad exclaims. “The washed-up virgin baseball player who inherits a broken-down inn in Maine is getting help from a *ghost!*”

“What if he thinks it’s a ghost, and it’s really his long-lost love?” Starbucks says.

“*Who jilted him at the altar!*” Henri shrieks.

Silence falls over the group.

But only the group of romance novelists.

Francisco is shaking his head. “But why would she do that to him? And what’s in it for him if he takes her back? Once a failed relationship, always a failed relationship. Move on. People don’t change.”

“What if she had his secret baby?” Brooks offers.

My phone rings—thank fuck—and even though it’s my agent calling, and he’s been irritating the hell out of me since a small-time gossip rag printed a picture of me at Jerry’s not-wedding last month along with a suggestion that I have a curse, I pretend like I need to take the call, and I wave it at them, then slip out of the room.

“Hey, Luca?” Henri calls.

“Glad you’re feeling better,” I call back.

And I take the pussy way out, and I disappear.

Henri

It's possible I have a problem.

But it's not like I don't *know* Luca Rossi. If he was invited to my wedding, I technically know him, right?

And we *did* share those few moments that day my wedding didn't happen. You know. When I caked him.

Before I knew the full story of *why* Jerry called everything off.

Also, I'm not sitting on the step of what I assume is Luca's house because he's a baseball player. Or because he's famous.

That actually makes this more uncomfortable, when what I want is to ask him for a small favor. It's a tiny thing that I wouldn't hesitate to ask any other man. Or woman, for that matter.

Itsy bitsy on the grand scale of things.

Really, really small.

Sort of like his house.

It's a two-story house, but it's narrow, and on a small patch of land, super close to the other houses on the block. The houses are all small, but the yards are mostly well-kept. All of the streetlamps are lit, and a couple walking their dog waved at me a bit ago before continuing on their way.

I don't feel unsafe—especially with Dogzilla, my guard cat, in my lap, even if she's more terrifying because she's so lazy I sometimes worry she's dead—but I also know it's not normal for someone to just sit on another person's doorstep well past dark, and this isn't the house you'd expect a guy to live in when he makes millions playing baseball, then tops it with millions more in haircare

product endorsements, which makes me worry I'm in the wrong place.

None of my research on Luca said anything about where he lives. This was the address where we sent his wedding invitation, therefore, it was natural to assume he lives here.

Also, if it's weird that I did research on Luca, I don't want to hear it. It's professional research because he has an interesting personality.

Mostly.

Kind of.

Alright, *fine*.

It *could* be professional research, but it wasn't. And I *could* be living in my mother's pool house back in the Chicago 'burbs where I grew up, like I did for a few months after my last weddings that didn't happen, but this time, I'm standing on my own two feet, and I'm actively doing something to get over myself.

Even if it's probably weird to be sitting on the doorstep of the man I cyberstalked after his whole *love sucks* speech. Which I won't apologize for, by the way, because you don't get what you need in life if you don't go for it.

But maybe Dogzilla and I should be waiting in my car instead? At least that way, I could turn on the radio while we wait. And the air conditioning.

I'm about to move to the car when a clunker chugs around the corner, one headlight out, and turns into the driveway.

This is definitely the wrong house.

I'm sitting on the porch of a stranger's house, hoping that's a woman driving, because if it's a woman, at least I know I won't be in danger.

Of falling in love with her at first sight, I mean.

The engine shuts off, and while I don't often trespass at midnight, I have this feeling that jumping up with Dogzilla and making a run for it right now is exactly the wrong move. A well-timed, "Oh, sorry, I thought you were someone else," will give us all a laugh, I'll take my cat and leave, and then two complete strangers will have a weird story to tell their friends over margaritas—or an iced tea, in my case—and huh.

This would make an excellent meet-cute for my friend Dorothea's next steamy romance novel. I'll have to drop her a note too.

The occupant of the car is still sitting in it, and the figure illuminated by the street light looks too big to be a woman.

Dang it.

He also seems to be—

Is he hitting his head against the steering wheel?

Uh-oh.

If I picked the house of a nutjob, all bets are off.

“Be ready to run, Dogzilla,” I whisper.

My lazy cat doesn’t move, and instead snores in my lap.

Easier this way anyway, since it’s not like I can count on her to follow alone when I take off running at full-steam.

Which doesn’t happen all that often, if we’re being honest here. I’m a writer, not a runner.

But—wait.

The way his hair is moving—

That *is* Luca Rossi.

I rise, cradling Dogzilla, and when Luca looks my way, I give him a finger wave and a smile.

The light isn’t bright enough for me to see what he’s saying, but his lips are definitely moving, and if I’m not mistaken, he’s wearing the same long-suffering expression my father usually has when I tell him I’m engaged.

Again.

It might also be remarkably similar to the expression Luca was wearing when he recognized me at Duggan Field earlier today too.

Not my intention to ambush him at work, I swear. I was curious about the ballpark—I’m curious about a lot of things—so when I caught wind on social media of a writer organization that was touring the park, it was easy enough to get here in time today to join the group.

And it was fascinating to see where the players work out, to smell the chairs the announcers sit in, what it feels like to stand in the dugout, and hear how many light bulbs have to be replaced every day.

There’s a pop and a creak as the car door swings open, and I suddenly desperately need to know why Luca Rossi, millionaire sports star, lives on a grocery store clerk’s salary.

For research.

I swear.

I like to do research.

It’s one of the things my ex-fiancé Kyle liked about me.

“Henri,” Luca says.

My brain hears *what the hell are you doing here, and why are you between me and my bed, and I’m not asking out loud because I don’t honestly want to know.*

I either have a lot of experience understanding people because I write good characters, or I have a lot of experience with frustrating men after five failed engagements.

Plus my lifelong relationship with my father.

“Hi, Luca! Great game tonight. That catch you made in center field was like ___”

“The one where I didn’t move, the one where I stepped three feet to my left, or the one where I had to take two steps back?”

Okay, yeah, he had an easy game. “How did you know where the ball was going to be? That’s like—it’s like you’re psychic.”

“It’s called being a professional.” He squeezes his eyes shut briefly, opens them, eyeballs Dogzilla in my arms, and then sighs again. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company tonight?”

Wow. He’s cranky.

Not gonna lie.

I know it’s probably me.

But that’s no excuse for not forging ahead. I didn’t come all this way to chicken out. “You remember the last time we saw each other?”

“This afternoon in the clubhouse?”

“I liked your hat, but I meant the time...before that.”

He closes the distance between us with three casual steps. “Nope.”

And I go momentarily speechless as a waft of something delicious teases my nose.

But only momentarily. A quick recovery is a gift. Or possibly a defense mechanism. “The time we were together...in that town...with that big monument...and the event thing...”

No answer.

“The event thing that didn’t—”

“I’m trying to block it from my memory.”

“Oh. Oh! Thank you. That’s very kind of you. Sorry. I didn’t realize—”

“That I wouldn’t want to remember your ruined wedding, that you like to redecorate people with dessert, and that your ex-fiancé is the first man that my mother’s dated in three years and I might have to start calling him *Stepdad*?”

I wince.

My heart also weeps because yeah, still not over seeing Jerry lock lips with a woman who could’ve been my mother, and hearing that it might actually be going somewhere is salt in the wound.

“So, no, Henri, I don’t remember the last time we were together. At least, I won’t, once I get inside and pour myself a large enough vodka tonic. Care for one?”

Once again, I’m momentarily speechless. “Um, I’m kinda allergic—”

I cut myself off when one of his brows rises infinitesimally, and then I gasp.

Of course he knows I'm allergic. We had an entire conversation about it. "Are you *trying* to send me to the hospital?"

"No, but I *am* trying to get into my house. Alone. Preferably without the sad panda thoughts I'd finally managed to shake before you showed up today."

"Oh. That was a hint."

"It was."

"I'm bad with the subtle."

He swipes a hand over his mouth and looks up at the sky, and I'm certain he's not stifling a smile.

Probably the exact opposite.

Time to forge ahead. "I'm here because I need your help."

"And now I pay the price for my sins," he mutters.

I'd ask what his sins are, but my google searches were *very* thorough.

Normally, he really would be the last person on earth I'd turn to for help.

"I don't want money or anything like that. And I'd rather no one know I'm here, so I'm not after your fame either, though I wouldn't mind some tips on how to get my hair as good as yours always is. I've tried Kangapoo before, and—wait. Sorry. Off-topic. I need you to teach me how to not fall in love."

His entire body goes still, except for his eyes, which slowly settle on me in the dark.

And *oh no*.

It's the tingle.

It's the tingle over my skin that precedes the quiver in my breasts that sends a jolt of sensation rocketing to my lady bits, which will inevitably short-circuit my brain and make me think I'm falling in love with Luca Rossi.

I. Will. Not. Fall. In. Love. With. Luca. Rossi.

The eye contact is a lie. It's not love. And Luca Rossi doesn't do love.

I know, because he told me, and then I did my research and confirmed that he's *exactly* the man for the job.

"You want me to what?" His words are slow and deliberate, like he's grounding himself back in reality after taking a trip on the crazy train.

I might've heard that tone a time or two before.

But I forge ahead, because I don't have a back-up plan. "You don't believe in love."

Again, no answer.

I'm going to have to do this the hard way. "After the last time we saw—erm, *didn't* see each other, I went on my honey—post-traumatic event trip solo, and while I was there in the Canadian Rockies, I met this guy, and I felt this—this *instant* connection to him. He was a lumberjack type, super funny, super smart,

super handsome, super into me, and I realized *I was falling for him*. When I knew nothing about him other than that he looked great in plaid and he knew how to trim his beard and he could tell a thousand different jokes about pickles, and then I was like, *Henrietta Bacon, you know better. You. Know. Better*. And I realized I need help. I need to stop falling in love, because if I hadn't hopped the first flight out of Canada after that and forced myself into isolation for a week or two, I'd probably be planning wedding number six right now, and *that's insane*. So I asked myself, who do I know who can help me not fall in love?"

"Maybe a therapist?"

"No good. Third fiancé. I can't go back to therapy."

"Christ on a meatball..."

"Which means... It's you. You won't fall in love with me. You don't even believe in love. You've said so yourself. I read about your wedding—well, I mean about your *not*-wedding. And also some of those articles you were quoted in a few years ago. And even though there aren't any more recent articles, I'm guessing it's less because you changed your mind and more because someone told you to shut up if you want to keep getting paid to do shampoo commercials. So I want you to teach me how to not fall in love with anyone else too."

Wow.

It's been a few years since someone has stood there staring at me with their jaw hanging open.

Not that I can blame him. I *did* lay it all out there, and it's probably not every day someone's willing to do that.

Or maybe it is. I don't know what people say to famous athletes.

He shakes his head like he's trying to wake up from a bad dream. "Where are your writer friends?"

"They were all from a group in South Carolina, so they're on their way home." I have other writer friends, but they're all over the world and unable to drop everything at a moment's notice to stop me from doing something stupid.

"Your hotel?"

"I didn't know which one to pick, and I forgot to ask for a recommendation before I left the ballpark. Do you have one you like?"

"Your parents?"

"Mom's glad I'm not crying in her pool house anymore, and Dad's probably re-allocating funds in case I decide to throw another pre-wedding. It's what he's started calling the expense of my weddings, since they never happen even though I start planning them immediately after the proposal, though in my defense, at least two were called off before we got into five-figure spending."

He mutters something else that I don't understand, which is probably best for

my questionable ego, and then looks down at Dogzilla again. “What *is* that?”

“She’s my cat.”

“I can see that, but what’s she wearing?”

“She felt like a unicorn today.”

More mutters.

He thrusts his hands through his hair, then points at the door. “Get inside.”

Yes! “You’ll help me?”

“Yes. I’ll help you not get murdered by wandering lost in the city after midnight, looking for a hotel where you won’t propose to the clerk on sight, and tomorrow, I’ll help you by getting you on your way back to your mother’s pool house, and then I’m going to help myself by getting very, very drunk and forgetting any of this happened.”

I beam at him.

Because while this is currently a *no* for everything I’m asking, he’s not kicking me out yet.

I still have a chance. I also make some mean breakfast waffles, which may be exactly the reason two of my proposals happened.

Not that I’m looking for a proposal.

The exact opposite, actually. And I’m willing to be ruthless in making him waffles to get what I need to have a happy rest of my life, if need be.

I’m also not falling madly in love with him, despite what those initial tingles made me fear, so maybe I need to soak up some of these grumpy vibes, and then everything will be absolutely perfect.

All I need is an excuse to stay a smidge longer.

And probably to figure out what I can do to pay him back for the favor.

Watch out, world. Henri Bacon has a plan.

Luca

THE NEXT MORNING, I swim into consciousness to the smell of tomatoes, oregano, sausage, cheese, and doom.

It takes me a few minutes of staring up at my wobbly ceiling fan and listening to the birds outside my open window before full understanding of the *doom* part registers, and when it hits, it hits hard.

I leap up, dance into my boxer briefs, and fly out of the room after opening my door.

Why is my door closed?

Better question—how long has *doom* been here cooking if the smell has invaded my room despite the lack of airflow?

I thunder down the stairs, leaping past the bottom step by instinct after living in this house long enough to have tripped on the sag in it six times already, spin, and dart through the torn-apart living room and into the shithole known as the kitchen.

And *fuuuuuuuuuck*.

It's true.

She's here.

“Don't think words like that around me, young man.” Nonna shakes a tomato sauce-covered spoon at me. “And what in the *hell* is wrong with this stove? I had to use a damn match to get the burner to light, and that oven's so small it won't fit a potato, let alone a casserole dish. But at least you put clothes on. Minimal as they may be. Thank you.”

I stand there, staring dumbly at my grandmother at the stovetop, trying to not

think more curse words.

Even the ones she taught me.

My Nonna isn't tall, but what she lacks in stature, she makes up in being an Italian grandmother.

And on any day when she's not *baking ziti for breakfast in my kitchen*, she's the coolest grandmother on the planet.

But that casserole dish—and yes, I mean *her* casserole dish, the *special casserole dish*, the one that's been in the family for generations, and will be passed on to whoever can master the eye as effectively as my grandmother, and her grandmother before her, and her grandmother before her—that casserole dish says that she's about to bury me in a Nonna mess unlike any I've ever seen.

I am so fucked.

She gives me the eye again. I mean, not *The Eye*, but the *I heard that fuck in your head, young man* eye. “You didn't take my calls.”

“I was working.”

“You play for a living.”

“I get paid. It's work.”

“You don't play twenty-four hours a day. If I didn't have the television set with that sports package, I'd think you were dead. What kind of grandmother has to wait for a baseball game to start to make sure her grandson isn't dead? What if you didn't play that day? Then how would I know if you were dead?”

“I'm sure someone would think to call you eventually.” I fold my arms like my heart isn't racing and I'm not sweating buckets, and no, that's not the lack of air conditioning in mid-August talking. I *never* sweat like this in my own house.

Her blue eyes twinkle. “There's no room for sass here this morning, Luca Antonio Rossi. You know why I'm here.”

No.

Nope.

Not falling for this.

Or possibly I'm in denial, because I don't have time to get Eyed. “Because you promised your TikTok followers we'd do the Gel?” Yeah, I'm reaching. I'm reaching for anything I can to delay getting *Eyed*.

“Please. Like you can Gel like me.” She slides around the table crammed into the awkward space, busting a move and threading her fingers through her rainbow unicorn hair in the dance craze she started online last month.

My grandmother has taken on a new hobby, and she's now TikTok Nonna.

And it turns out, raising four kids and having nine grandkids and all that practice being a badass as an airline pilot and traveling all over the world for thirty years at a time when women pilots were rare makes her the next best thing

to Betty White as far as the next generation of social media video platform users go. All the kids who used to get on the video screen at ballparks across the nation to do the Dab or the Floss or the Hype are now doing my Nonna's Gel.

She swings her hips while she slides around the table, thrusting her fingers through her hair like she's putting in hair gel with every step, and stops when she's next to me. "Plus, I'm a bigger TikTok star than you are."

That's true enough, especially since my social media presence is minimal and run by someone at my agent's office. I lift a hand for a high-five, hoping we can Gel our way out of what she's cooking.

"I don't high-five grandsons who send my calls to voicemail." She flicks a green-tipped fingernail to the sink. "Dishes won't do themselves."

Is this *my* house? Yes.

Am I going to argue with my grandmother when she's here to put The fucking *Eye* on me? No.

She glides back to her casserole dish. "I can hear you thinking, and your language is atrocious today."

I flip on the faucet and remind myself that if I grind my teeth all the way to their roots, I'll end up saddled with the kind of woman who's into that sort of thing. "I'm sorry I worried you," I grunt to Nonna.

"You should be. You can't get over what's bothering you if you don't talk to anyone about it."

"Nothing's bothering me."

"Then why aren't you returning my phone calls?"

I test the water, then nudge the tap to the left to get the hot water flowing. Scalding myself is preferable to listening to the lecture I've earned. "I'm not ignoring your phone calls."

"You're not returning them either."

"We were traveling. It was loud."

"For a month."

"I'm playing for a team that didn't understand they were supposed to hit the baseballs when they were up to bat a year ago, and now we're in a position to make the playoffs. There's extra commitment involved in something this historic."

"And this has nothing whatsoever to do with all the sports channels talking about that interview you did after your wedding all over again?"

My shoulders bunch.

"Your agent must love that," she says to the ziti, but we both know she knows I can hear her.

"What are you talking about?"

“The *getting to know the new Fireballs* series on that sports channel. What’s it called?”

She taps her foot while she thinks.

I’m so fucked.

It’s not even *The Eye*.

It’s my career. My dream.

This team?

The last thing I expected when I moved here in January was that I’d want to stay so bad, no matter what happens at the end of the season.

These guys? They’re my brothers in a way no other team has been. The fans? Jesus. You know what it’s like to start a season being told your home stadium will be lucky to be half-full at any given game, only to be halfway through August with sold-out crowds every day?

I even love the damn mascots, though that firefly contender is weird as hell. Something about him bothers me. Maybe it’s the extra arms. Or the wings.

But most likely, it’s that big-ass bubble growing out of its butt.

And Nonna’s telling me I’m about to be a PR disaster for them.

While she gives me *The Eye*.

“Tea and baseball pants!” She thrusts her spoon in the air, sending a saucy chunk of pasta sailing across the room. “That’s the sports channel.”

“A *gossip site*?”

“It’s on the YouTubes.”

Jesus. I thought she was talking about ESPN. I said some bad shit after I broke it off with Emily, and while my agent can sweep old crap under the rug, it’s not what any of us need to worry about right now.

Also, I know damn well she knows it’s not *the YouTubes*.

She’s here to mess with me.

“We have six weeks to go until the end of the season. We’re on the cusp of making the playoffs. Don’t do this, Nonna. Don’t do this now.”

“It’s time, Luca Antonio. The stars told me so, and the stars are never wrong.”

“We’re *this close*.”

“And you need to give up all of your preconceived notions of love and accept that the universe needs you to find *the one*.”

“If she’s *the one*, she’ll have to understand the sacrifices involved.”

“That’s nonsense. You’re a grown man. It’s time you act like one.”

“Says the woman with the unicorn hair. *Ah!*”

Something hot, sticky, and gooey *lands in my ear*.

Something like a damn clump of ziti fixings.

There's too much of it to stay in my ear, so now it's dribbling down my bare shoulder and chest and onto the floor, which I can't mop too much because the linoleum is cracked, and I'll damage the subfloor and have to replace that too.

I'm usually further into renovation projects at this point in the season, but I'm not usually enjoying being part of a team as much as I'm enjoying being a Fireball this year.

Dammit, I hope they don't trade me.

But with my track record—it's only a matter of time.

You could say commitment and I don't go together *anywhere*.

I bend over the sink, glaring at my grandmother while I rinse out the cursed food.

She lifts a brow. "I could've set your hair on fire."

"Not if you want a good Christmas present," I grumble.

"Luca, how many women have you dated?"

I straighten, turn off the water, and grab a towel to dry my ear and face. "Don't you have to bake the ziti before we get started with you shriveling my nuts?"

Shut up, Rossi. SHUT. UP.

"Your oven isn't heating fast enough." She thumps the wall oven, which *looks* like a double-oven, but is actually the world's smallest oven with the world's largest broiler.

"It's an antique," I hear myself say. "Works better if you light a wood fire in the broiler."

She frowns at the oven.

Frowns bigger at me.

Her eyes start to narrow, and I am not ready for this.

My cousin Louie got the Eye put on him, and he was married to Isabella within two months. My cousin Joe? Seven months to a pregnant bride. Alonzo? He told Nonna to go to hell, and three days later, he was in a full body cast in the hospital.

Alonzo's an accountant. He drives a Volvo with a crucifix hanging from the rearview mirror, takes Fiber One every morning at breakfast, collects stamps, and has a YouTube channel where he discusses the ins and outs of button manufacturing.

For fun.

The *only* brave thing he's ever done in his entire life is to tell Nonna to go to hell when she put the Eye on him.

He slipped in his tub and broke every bone in his body while replacing his shower curtain hooks three days later.

I went to his wedding to one of his nurses the next Christmas. Under protest, for the record, but I went like I've gone to every one of my cousins' weddings.

Don't tell me The Eye isn't powerful.

And I play baseball for a living. Do you know how many opportunities there are for broken bones, torn groins, and balls to the head—not to mention freak bat accidents—every single day?

I shower naked with twenty other men on a regular basis.

I am not getting The Eye.

"Nonna, this isn't necessary."

"Oh, I think it is."

"It—*Jesus*."

I leap, because something furry brushes my leg, and I don't own furry.

Except—fuck on a fuck sandwich.

I have a houseguest.

I have a female houseguest. Who needs to leave. Now. Without Nonna seeing her.

"Luca Antonio," Nonna growls, and I don't know if it's for the *Jesus* out loud or the *fucks* in my head.

But I'll keep both of them, thank you very much.

Henri's cat—dressed in a bunny outfit—has plopped her ass down beside my foot and is lying on her side while she licks at the bits of ziti that fell off my ear.

And I'm getting an awful idea.

An awful, terrible, horrible, I'll-probably-get-a-concussion-and-end-my-baseball-career-for-this idea. In fact, it's such an awful idea, I give myself idea whiplash.

"Can you give me a few months before we do The Eye?" I hiss. "I don't want to freak out Henri."

I am going to hell.

In my own house.

Probably within the next five minutes.

Nonna folds her arms. "If you think claiming to be gay is going to stop me, look what happened to your cousin Tony when I put the Eye on him."

Right. Happily married to Tom, his former neighbor-enemy, and adopting twin girls that were left between their apartment doors approximately six hours after The Eye happened.

"*Henrietta*," I correct.

I can do this. I can tell Nonna that I'm dating Henri, and then she heard about The Eye, freaked, and ran away.

And then I can kick Henri out.

It's brilliant.

Or possibly desperate.

"Yes, love?" Like a demon summoned from the Underworld, the woman herself pops into the kitchen.

She's in a pink tank top without a bra—*fuuuuuck me*—and short shorts decorated with pandas above her skinny legs. Her hair's a mess of short brown curls sticking up at all angles under a backwards baseball cap, her cheeks are rosy, and her breasts jiggle while she bounce-steps the seven paces into the kitchen to join me at the sink, where she wraps her arms around my waist while she goes up on tiptoe to lick the ziti off my shoulder. "Mm, breakfast."

I almost recoil at the unexpected touch, except I can't, because Nonna needs to believe this.

Also, I need to put some clothes on.

Henri needs to put some clothes on.

I need to catch up real quick on why *Henri's* hugging me, but first, I need to be grateful.

Except Nonna is not impressed.

"Luca, are you going to introduce me to your guest?"

Gone is TikTok Nonna with a sparkle in her eye and a groove in her step, and in her place is the formidable head of an Italian crime organization.

Not that we're into crime in our family. It's more that she can channel it.

"Henri, this is Nonna. My grandmother. Nonna, this is Henri."

Henri claps her hands. "Oh my gosh! This is the best. Hi, Nonna. I *love* your hair."

Crime Boss Nonna doesn't take the bait. "What are your intentions toward my grandson?"

"She's—" I start, but Henri suddenly squeals.

"I know you! You're TikTok Nonna! *Luca*. You didn't tell me you were related to TikTok Nonna!" She swats playfully at my arm. "And I even wore my TikTok Nonna shirt yesterday, and you didn't say a word."

"Considering how much you haven't enjoyed meeting the rest of my family..."

"She's met your parents?" Nonna's bright eyes dart to mine. Then back to Henri, whose smile has faltered, but who's now gazing at me with the same calculated look Nonna was wearing a minute ago.

Babe Ruth on a bundt cake, does every woman secretly aspire to be a mob boss?

"Just his mom," Henri answers smoothly.

I swallow hard. My life is about to spiral out of control. "Mom was...an

unexpected participant in breaking up Henri's wedding earlier this summer."

Henri digs a nail into my hip while her grip around my waist tightens. "Luca and I bonded over the wedding cake while he comforted me afterwards. He was such a gentleman about the whole thing, so I came out here to thank him once I'd collected myself, and one thing led to another, and now..."

She shrugs.

"Like I said," I tell Nonna, unsure if I'm supposed to be grateful or terrified that Henri's riding out this lie with me. "It's awkward."

Henri tilts her head against my chest. She smells like imitation coconut and sweat, and it's warm enough in the kitchen that her cheek is now stuck to my bare skin, and that's gonna make a noise when we separate.

"Hm." Nonna's gaze flits between us while she picks up the family heirloom casserole dish and carries it to my oven. "Good thing you have a guest room then."

My blood runs cold. "For...?"

"For me to move into. Henri, dear, you're going to need all the help you can get with this one. He's stubborn as a mule."

"Nonna—"

"Oh my gosh, that's so sweet of you!" Henri peels herself off me—and yeah, there's some stretching skin, because I don't have a working air conditioner, and the oven's heating up now, which means we'll all be roasted like a chicken dinner within about ten minutes—and she launches herself at Nonna. "I'll have to clear my things out. Luca's been so kind, letting me use his guest bedroom as my office. I mean, I guess I can work in the living room...?"

Holy.

Fucking.

Shit.

She's in love with me.

She thinks this is real.

Is she the kind of woman who'll buy her own wedding ring and plan the whole wedding and then expect me to show up?

Better question—will it cost me my endorsement deals when the world buys into the crazy and believes that I'm the sixth guy who's jilted her?

Is this gonna cost me an endorsement deal?

I need to call my agent.

And maybe my lawyer.

And probably the cops.

Or maybe a few teammates. Maybe she can fall in love with Robinson instead. Maybe it's not too late.

“Luca? Honey, do you need to sit down?”

I grab a glass, turn to the sink, wrench on the faucet, and a stream of water explodes out of the handle, spraying all of us.

Including the ziti.

And now I’m wondering if it’s my grandmother or the ziti that gives The Eye, but I don’t have to wonder for long.

Because no matter what, I’m fucked.

Henri

IT'S a good thing I'm off love, because water all over Luca Rossi's tight muscles and golden skin, with him in nothing but black boxer-briefs first thing in the morning is enough to give a girl some ideas.

Lust.

I can totally be in lust.

Who wouldn't be in lust with that backside?

He's bent over under the sink to turn off the water, which feels dang good soaking my clothes and face and hair—and yes, my cat totally agrees. She's lying on the floor, on her back, letting the water rain all over her while I try to angle in to ask Luca if I can help.

With anything.

Not only is his sink exploding, but either the air conditioner is broken, or Luca's the devil and likes it really, really hot.

Lust is making me forgive a lot right now. Not that I have any right to be the forgiver—I *did* invade his home—but this morning, it appears I might have something he needs too.

“You work from home?” his nonna asks me.

I start to nod, but Luca leaps up from beneath the sink like he has the lightning-fast reflexes of a vampire, grabs me by the elbow, and drags me out of the room. “We'll get your room ready, Nonna,” he calls. “Can't wait for that ziti.”

“Good job turning off the water, honey!” I say loudly, then add in a whisper, “Is ziti for breakfast normal?”

“Stop talking. For thirty seconds, please stop talking.”

He marches me up the stairs and into the guest bedroom, where he rears back as soon as he enters. “Christ on a meatball.”

I peer around, but other than a few clothes on the bed and Dogzilla’s raccoon costume that I’m airing out after it got too close to a shampoo bottle that leaked in my luggage, I don’t see anything—oh.

Wait.

Right.

My hero from my most popular series is taped to the window.

I forget other people think it’s unusual that I had an eighteen-inch cardboard cutout made of him. I call him my muse, and he goes everywhere with me.

“Oh. Er...sorry about Confucius.”

Luca shuts the door—very gently, for the record, though I suppose you could call it *very controlled*—and pinches his lips together while he stares at the ceiling like he’s looking for divine intervention.

“The fangs are because he’s a vampire, but his sworn enemy cursed him, so instead of being able to shift into a bat, he turns into a turtlecorn. He’s hoping I’ll get back to work on his series soon so that he can get uncursed.”

More heavy breathing.

Is he meditating?

He might be meditating.

“So, your grandma’s putting The Eye on you if you don’t get a girlfriend?”

I’ve been writing romance novels since third grade, when I wrote my first book about a panda who fell in love with an eagle after my parents got divorced. I know a grandma who wants her grandson to settle down and get married when I see one, and TikTok Nonna definitely wants Luca settled.

He’s still counting the spiderwebs on the ceiling. With his eyes closed. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re terrifying?”

“That was why my first fiancé left me.”

“I’m not going to marry you, so if you’re thinking about falling in love with me, you can leave.”

“Um, yeah, *duh*. I’m going to pretend to be your girlfriend to get your grandmother off your back, apparently until the end of the season since I heard enough to know that it’s what you’re most worried about, and you’re going to teach me how to *not* fall in love. Preferably with your clothes on, because you’re hot, and not because your air conditioner doesn’t work. Also, I’m off sex. It complicates the love thing.”

His eyes drift open as he lowers his head to look at me, but his eyes aren’t drifting all the way open, which is a problem, because when his lids are at half-

mast like that, it gives me ideas about him having ideas, and *we are not doing that*.

“Are you never going to have sex again?”

Gah, the sex voice. *He’s using a sex voice.*

I blow out a short breath and shake out my hands. I can do this. It’s like he’s already giving me my first lesson. “I didn’t say that.”

“So you want me to teach you how to not fall in love—which I can’t do, by the way, but I can tell you a few reasons love sucks—but you think you—you—can train yourself on how to not fall in love *without* learning how to have casual sex.”

“Y-yes.”

“Have you *ever* had casual sex?”

I need to not answer that, because while my official record of being jilted stands at five, my college boyfriend—the one I lost my virginity to—technically counts as the prequel, since I started planning my wedding to him basically the minute he fell asleep after we did the deed the first time.

Luca’s lips curve into a grin.

It’s a wicked, wicked grin.

He leans back against the wall, which makes his wet golden muscles stand out starkly in all their solid glory, like they’re yelling *adore me! I’m beautiful! You want to touch me!*

“You haven’t,” he says.

“One problem at a time, and the first problem is that your grandmother’s sneaking up the stairs to listen in on us.” She’s not, so far as I can tell, but I need to get control of this conversation before I lose my brain and ask Luca to marry me. “Also, is this a one-bathroom house? *Why do you live in a one-bathroom house?* And is she going to stay here? Or is she only threatening to so she can make sure that we’re dating?”

He leaps to work, throwing all of my clothes into my suitcase, and when he touches my panties, the pair I’m wearing gets wet.

And now all of me is officially soaked.

I breathe through it, because this is okay.

He’s right.

I should learn how to have casual sex.

Maybe that can be a lesson for *after* I break up with him. That’s how it has to go to satisfy his grandmother, right?

This can’t be his fault.

It can’t be even remotely close to his fault, which means not only do I have to break up with him, I have to have the reason above all reasons to break up

with him.

I'm going to have to tell TikTok Nonna that I've discovered I'm supposed to become a nun.

I can't use the *kidnapped by a rockstar* trope, or the *found out I'm expecting another man's baby* trope, because in both cases, Luca, as my doting boyfriend, would come to my rescue and take my surprise baby as his own, except, *surprise!*, there wouldn't actually be a baby. If we do the failed friends-to-lovers thing, he gets in trouble for not trying harder. Neither of us can develop amnesia, because if it's him, his nonna won't believe it, and if it's me, The Eye would dictate that Luca nurse me through it.

The *only* way Luca gets forgiveness from his grandmother and a delay of The Eye is if I discover I'm supposed to be a nun.

Also? That's so cool that he has a grandmother who gives *The Eye*.

"Are you going to help me?" he hisses.

Oh, crap. He caught me ogling his ass again. "I'll get Confucius."

"No."

"But he's my muse."

"He's not going in my bedroom."

We lock eyes as I process exactly what he said.

I'm moving into Luca Rossi's bedroom.

I'm moving into Luca Rossi's bedroom.

Possibly I hadn't thought this *all* the way through.

Possibly he hadn't either.

"Do you have two beds?"

"What is this? A fifties sitcom? No, I don't have two beds."

"So we'll take turns sleeping on the floor?"

"Don't be a ninny, Henri."

"Did you just call me a *ninny*?"

"You're the one who wants two beds."

Uh-oh.

Have I misjudged this? Was he *glad* I didn't marry Jerry? Did he stay with me all grumpy-pants at the lake after my not-wedding because *he likes me*?

Does he *not* hate love?

Impossible. I'm good at reading between the lines, and my research confirmed he is *so not* the commitment type.

I read an interview he gave one time talking about how much it shaped him when his parents got divorced.

Weird how his parents' divorce led to him never wanting love, while my parents' divorce basically drove me to being a romance novelist and getting

addicted to it.

I shove my laptop into its case and lower my voice to a whisper. “You don’t want to have sex with me, and I’m not falling for any implications that you do, because I know you’re doing it to scare me off.”

“Don’t I? Do you just lay there? Do you have a third nipple that’s super distracting? A birthmark in the shape of a pooemoji? Would you call me another guy’s name when you come?”

“No. I mean, that’s for me to know and you to not find out.”

“Nonna expects to hear us having sex, probably often, from now until the end of the season. And she’s going to expect us to shower together. And she’s going to expect to walk into the kitchen and interrupt you giving me a blow job.”

“*Oh my god. You—you’re—you’re trying to get free sex out of me.*”

He yanks my suitcase off the bed, straightens, and glares at me.

I risk a glance down south, and what does it say about me that I’m disappointed at the lack of Mr. Woody?

Actually, what does it say about him that he can talk about sex with me without getting even the teensiest bit of a rise going?

Does he have some kind of erectile dysfunction?

Is he tiny?

Or is he honestly not at all attracted to me?

Yeah. I know.

He’s not at all attracted to me.

Which should be a good thing.

Right?

Because the point is to *not* fall in love.

I square my shoulders and nod to him. “I agree to your terms. We’ll fake this relationship until your season is over. We’ll sleep in the same bed. Make noises like we’re having sex. We can shower together, because we’re adults, and it’s not like we’ve never seen naked bodies of the opposite sex before. But I’ll have to draw the line at the blow job.”

His cheek twitches. “Great.”

“Great.”

We stare at each other.

We’d probably stare longer, except at that exact moment, the smoke alarms go off.

Luca

AS IF IT'S not bad enough that I'm not scaring Henri away by making her think I want to have sex with her, now my house is burning down.

I race downstairs to find Nonna fanning the open oven with a hot pad while flames shoot out of the ziti.

"Your oven is possessed, Luca Antonio! I told you this house was a bad idea."

I dive for the sink again, trip over Henri's cat, which is playing the role of a soaked floormat—and I'll wonder later at the weirdness that's a cat that seems to *enjoy* being wet—and I catch myself on the counter before I end up having to explain to the coaching staff that I can't play today because I gave myself a concussion while trying to leap over a bunny-cat to put out a fire.

Henri and I are having a talk *immediately* after this about where her cat is allowed to go in this house.

No, we're having a talk *immediately* about her and her cat *leaving* as soon as Nonna does.

I fling open the cabinet under the sink, grab the fire extinguisher, jump back up, shove Nonna out of the way, and I commit the biggest sin of my life.

I destroy the fuck out of her flaming ziti.

Undercooked ziti?

We eat it.

Burnt ziti?

We eat it.

Ziti accidentally made with salsa instead of marinara because Nonna refuses

to acknowledge that she grabbed an old pair of reading glasses that aren't strong enough anymore?

We eat it—and then we throw away the reading glasses when she's not looking and blame it on my cousin Angie's dog.

Ziti covered in whatever this chemical shit is that comes out of a fire extinguisher?

No way.

Not even for the sake of The Eye.

Heat courses down the back of my neck, and it has nothing to do with the fire I extinguished, and nothing to do with living in a house lacking air conditioning in August, and nothing to do with anything other than the *oooooh*, *fuuuuuuck* on the tip of my tongue.

I ruined Nonna's Eye ziti.

I can't look at her. If I look at her and she's gone full-mob-boss Nonna, I will be incinerated on the spot. Or, more likely, run over by a firefly mascot in an out-of-control clown car while warming up between innings in center field, because *that* would be appropriate karma for ruining Nonna's Eye ziti.

Dead by the only thing I dislike in my happy place.

No, that would be too good for me. Glow the Firefly in the runaway clown car wouldn't kill me. He'd probably break all my bones—like what happened to Alonzo—and then no team will want me, and where will I find my happy place then?

But worse—

If I look at Nonna and she's crying over her flaming ziti, I will have confirmed for myself that I am the worst grandson in the history of grandsons, and there are a fuck-ton of bad grandsons out there, and while I've never wanted to be number one, I don't want to be number four billion either.

Is my junk shrinking?

Is she The Eye-ing my junk and shrinking it *right now*?

“Oh my god, that was *beautiful*! I got it all on video, Nonna. You want me to text it to you so you can fix it up for TikTok?”

I briefly close my eyes, imagine myself turning and extinguishing Henri too, decide that would probably get me put in jail, which might be a safer place than here in this kitchen, and instead give the now-smoking ziti one last spray, because damn if that shit didn't flame up again.

I risk a glance at Nonna.

If her hair is rainbow unicorn sparkles, her face is confused llama with a side of twitching cheek and convulsing lips. “You destroyed my ziti.”

“Technically, my oven did.”

“You have a possessed house that aided and abetted the crimes you wanted to commit in your mind.”

This is bad.

I’ve pissed off Nonna before. There was the incident with her rhododendrons when I was eight. The replica statue of Michelangelo’s David that I ran over when I was learning to drive. The time I mistook her priest for a new boyfriend and pissed on the side of his car.

I’ve never felt this level of *you fucked up good now, idiot*.

Henri leaps between us. “I know a guy who can help with an exorcism. I met him while I was doing research. And I downloaded a grocery app for Crunchy—the organic grocery store?—and I was about to order some yogurt and bananas and tea anyway, so if you let me know what you need, I can add it quick. Easy-peasy!”

Nonna peers around my new fake girlfriend, but I leap away before The Eye can land on me.

It doesn’t count if I don’t look at her and *accept* The Eye, does it? “Team meeting. Emergency. Mascot problem. I’ve gotta get to the park.”

Yes.

Yes, I’m running away. I’m being a total and complete chickenshit.

Ask me to save a dog from a burning building, I’m in. Ask me to read *Everybody Poops* to a hundred first-graders, and I’m there. Ask me to stand naked in a shower and get recorded rubbing shampoo in my hair, and—

Okay, not a fair comparison, since I get paid to do those commercials.

But still.

I’m not a chickenshit.

Until it comes to my grandmother.

In fact, right now, I’m snagging my keys and dashing straight to Fluffy Maple.

That’s my car. I named her my internet stripper name. First pet, first street.

Which isn’t important, because The Eye can probably outrun Fluffy Maple. Especially since my wheels top out at about sixty-seven, and the maximum speed limit between here and Duggan Field is forty-five, and that’s only on the one stretch of College Boulevard for about a mile.

“Luca?” Henri calls.

Dammit.

I forgot to kiss my fake girlfriend.

I pivot, dash the seven steps from my driveway to my front door, dip her back in one of those kisses you see in the movies, except she’s off-balance, and something wrenches in my back—nothing the physical therapist at the park can’t

handle—and her lips smush against my nostrils while I suck on her chin.

I spin her back up, refuse to look her in the eye, yell, “Can’t wait to have wild monkey sex with you tonight,” and dash back to my car, hoping the threat of wild monkey sex is enough to convince her to leave.

I would dive into Fluffy Maple through her window if I had to, because I can sense Nonna coming.

My grandmother’s coming like tornado storm clouds. You think it’s on the horizon, until *bam!*

There she is.

My pulse is racing. My mouth is dry. Henri’s chin tasted like some weird kind of lotion, and now I have a dry tongue that tastes like dead-flower-flavored Vaseline.

My hands shake while I shove the keys into the ignition, and *I’m losing precious seconds.*

Finally—*finally*—I get the key inserted and crank it.

Nothing happens.

I press the brake and crank it again.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Fuuuuuuuck.

I crank the wheel, because sometimes it’ll lock up in the wrong position and keep me from starting the car, but it goes smoothly this way and that, and I still can’t start my car.

Henri leans in the window. “Luca?”

“I’ll get fined if I’m late.” Technically true. Except today, *late* would be like, three in the afternoon, and it’s currently ten AM. “Stand back. Gotta go.”

“Do you want to, erm, put on clothes first?”

I look down at my bare legs and my boxer briefs, then squint harder at my junk.

It’s shrinking, isn’t it?

Nonna Eyed me. She didn’t even wait for the ziti to get done.

A cold flush makes goosebumps break out all over my chest.

Henri leans in closer, her crazy-ass curly hair getting all up in my face as she peers at the steering wheel. “And your car won’t start?”

I could lie. Say it does this all the time. That I have to talk sweetly to her, except I don’t sweet-talk my car. That’s ridiculous.

I could also pull up an app on my phone and have a ride here in five minutes.

Henri pulls back, pats my hand on the steering wheel, and smiles brightly at me. “I’ll go get you some clothes, and then I can give you a lift to the park. You

could try an app-ride thing, but I think they have rules against nudity. Or that might depend on your driver. Back in a sec, and if you get your car running before then, no harm, no foul.”

She turns and jogs back to the house, calls something to Nonna, and I sit there and stare at the windows of my personal sanctuary.

I have officially lost all control of my life.

Henri

LUCA DOESN'T SAY much while I run him to Duggan Field—technically, he drives, because he says he knows the way—and I don't press him to communicate, because look at us not talking!

This is great.

It's like another example of all the reasons relationships aren't something I need in my life. They're awkward, where you think you know what the other person is thinking—usually, that they're madly in love with me as much as I'm madly in love with them—but you really don't.

Because surely Luca isn't thinking I'm a pain in the ass, even though I probably would be if I were him, even though I feel like that's what he's thinking.

And if he is, he's wrong.

I'm going to be the best fake girlfriend *ever*.

Good thing I have so much experience being a real girlfriend.

He pulls up to the special *authorized personnel only* entrance at the ballpark, and he shoots me a look for the first time in the twenty or so minutes since we left his house. "What are you doing today?"

"Writing." At least, that's what I hope I'm doing. It's been difficult to get in the mood the last month.

His green eyes scan me, landing on my hair, which I probably should've covered with a hat or a bandana, but then, he tried to drive here naked, so he can't talk.

"Where?" he asks.

“At your house.”

Wow. His entire body just twitched.

I rub my hands down my thighs, because I can't sit still. “Or at a coffee shop. Because it has running water. Do you have a good local coffee shop? I like to support local places. Not that chain places aren't local—local people work there, right? But there's something magical about finding a local coffee shop where there's an awesome staff that knows your name and they have air conditioning and they'll play seventies disco music because they know your vampire family loves it.”

He squeezes his eyes shut and does the kind of deep breathing that my grandma tried to teach me after my third failed wedding.

I should probably shut up, but I can't. It's a thing. “Is this me, or is this because of your nonna?”

“Yes.”

“Can you explain the significance of the ziti to me?”

“No.”

“I can run to the store for the ingredients for—”

“No. And can you skip the part where you go back to my house before you find a coffee shop?”

“My computer's at your house. But don't worry. Grandparents love me. So do parents. I'm like, the parent whisperer. I still talk to all of my exes' parents. And grandparents. And sometimes their cousins or aunts too. We trade Christmas cards. My second ex's sister even asked me to be godmother to her baby. It was their sixth baby, and they were running out of options, but still. They asked, and I accepted. Want to see pictures?”

“No.”

“Right. You have a fake emergency meeting to get to. But you should look at the pictures anyway, because little details like this are what will make our fake relationship convincing. And by the way, I'm only okay with lying about that because I think it's overbearing and underhanded of grandparents to use curses and threats of dying or disinheritance to make you marry someone you don't love. I do believe in love. I just need to learn how to not fall in it.”

“You're not staying at my house more than another day. As soon as Nonna's gone, you're gone too.”

I sigh. “Luca. Listen. I don't want to be a burden, but I think you need me. Your Nonna looks intense, and if I leave, she'll probably bring in a string of other women for you to date, and you don't need that kind of distraction from your job. Not when you're this close to the playoffs with a team that almost got disbanded last year. If you want me to go, I will, but...give me a chance, okay? I

can be the buffer you need so you can concentrate on your game. You won't even have to tell the lies. I'll take care of it, and then I'll pay the price of The Eye."

He doesn't answer, and instead, after a few seconds of staring at me, climbs out of my SUV, leaving me waving after him. "Bye, honey! Hit the ball good today!"

He shuts the door, takes three steps, stops, and turns and walks back to the car as I'm unbuckling to climb into the driver's seat. I glance behind me, thinking he must've forgotten something, but instead, he taps on the window.

I hit the button to roll it down. "What's up?"

"Thank you," he says gruffly.

My heart melts in direct proportion to the soft smile I feel coming over my face.

He sighs once more, I remember The Plan, and I imagine a bucket of ice in my chest re-solidifying everything in there that needs to stay ice cold. I make myself take on a growly-bear frown too. "We all have to make sacrifices," I say in as gravelly a voice as I can manage.

"Don't talk to Nonna. She's not a normal grandmother. This TikTok Nonna thing? It's a trick. She'll eat you alive."

This time when he turns back around, he doesn't stop until he's inside the ballpark, and I can't see through the door, so I don't know if he stops then either.

But I know one thing.

I was definitely imagining him smiling at my stoicism.

I crank up my *Trolls Soundtrack* playlist, get back to his house with a bright smile, walk in the door, remember that I forgot to ask him if I can turn on his air conditioner or if he has a preferred plumber to call about fixing the faucet in the kitchen, and come face-to-face with his nonna right in the middle of the construction zone that is the living room, which smells like flaming cheese and sausage.

She has her legs spread wide in her rainbow leggings and her arms crossed over her honestly pretty fabulous rack. All she needs is a toolbelt, and she could be *Builder Nonna*.

Especially with the pile of carpet in the corner and the boards leaning against the wall. There's not even furniture in here.

"How much is my grandson paying you to pretend to be his girlfriend?"

My eyebrows shoot up to the second floor and my hand flutters to my heart without conscious thought.

So this is the Nonna he warned me about. "He's been breaking your heart for years, hasn't he?"

She arches her own brow. “How long have you been dating?”

“Not long. I *did* just get out of a relationship.”

“Why are you here?”

“He was comforting me after that last relationship ended, and it stuck with me, so I came to thank him for his kindness. I would’ve been here sooner, but I didn’t want to trust that instant connection that happened after my—well, after my wedding didn’t happen, because I couldn’t trust myself. But I can’t stop thinking about him, and it turns out, I’ve been on his mind too.”

“Have you slept together?”

“There’s no right answer to that question, considering you’re his grandmother. Can I ask how you get your hair done? I’d love to do the unicorn rainbow thing, but with this mess...” I rattle my curls and smile harmlessly.

She doesn’t smile back. “Are you certain you’re in a relationship with my grandson?”

“Unless all those things he said last night were a lie...” Wow. I am *earning* this today. Dogzilla pokes a lazy head in from the kitchen, and I squat down and click my tongue at her. “Here, kitty kitty.”

She flops to her back and peers at me upside down. It’s Dogzilla-speak for *if you want me, human, you can come to me, because I’m a lazy ass.*

Possibly also for *the demon can sense that you’re stalling.*

Not that Luca’s Nonna is a demon.

But she’s also not as approachable in private as you’d think she’d be after watching her TikTok feed. Where’s the woman who used the green screen to make it look like she was bronco-riding a rhinoceros to that new rap song? And who read *Goodnight Moon* to a roomful of dressed-up mushrooms and substituted rhyming words for every item we say goodnight to?

I have a friend who lives for her weekly videos of setting the Sunday afternoon dinner table while lip-syncing death metal.

“Do you really give good Eye?” I ask Nonna.

She replies by glaring at me.

“Okay. So, that’s a yes.” I climb back to my feet. “Can I be super nosy and ask if you give The Eye because you want control, or if you give The Eye because you want your grandson to be happy?”

“If you’re in this for Luca’s money, you’re out of luck, sweetheart.”

Seriously not anything like her TikTok persona. Wow. Just wow. “Please. I don’t need his money. I make my own.”

“Twenty million in a year?”

“Anything over a million in a year is overkill for the average person. Besides, I get so much more than money out of my job. I get personal

satisfaction, and that's priceless."

"Are you a phone sex operator?"

"No, I write paranormal romance novels."

Her frown is getting frownier, but the frown isn't making her face any wrinklier. She must have some kick-ass face cream. I'll have to ask her about it once she's convinced I'm harmless.

She taps her fingers on her biceps. "So you come from money and get to pretend your hobby is a job."

Good gravy. She sounds like my father. *If you can't have a real job, you should get a husband like your sister and make something of your life. Oh, right...we've tried that, haven't we?* "I haven't taken money from my family since my third book took off. I make my own way."

She squints at me.

I smile brightly and pretend we're not talking about how many weddings my father has paid for, though for the record, I'm on a payment plan to pay him back. "Do you have baby pictures of Luca? I love baby pictures."

Her squint goes harder.

I'd match her intensity, except if I smile any harder through this, my cheeks will fall off and then I'll not only be Henri of the Five Failed Engagements, I'll be Henri Who Shows Her Gums All The Time. That won't go so well for the next time I do a live video for my fan group. "Anyway, I need to get to work, because these books won't write themselves! And I have readers waiting for the next installment of Confucius's book. I'll go get him and my laptop and get out of your hair for a few hours. And I do love your hair. It's the *best*."

I hold my smile until I get to the top of the stairs, and then it all blows out on a huge breath.

TikTok Nonna is a tough cookie.

And I don't think she likes me.

That can't be good. It's also as unusual as vampires being real, because parents always adore me.

She'll come around. She probably needs some space to recover from her ziti going up in smoke, though I *swear* I heard her cackling when I came back inside to get Luca's clothes and my keys before I took him to the park.

Maybe later I'll ask him for some tricks to get into her good graces, since he basically needs me to become his grandmother's favorite person.

But right now, I need to escape. And so that's exactly what I do.

For a while, anyway.

Luca

I CAN'T STOP CHECKING my junk.

Hell, I can't even get off this couch in the lounge. I didn't tell Nonna to go to hell like Alonzo did, but I don't know that disrupting her Eye ceremony and lying to her about having a girlfriend is better.

If anything, it's worse.

Which means I'm probably in danger of getting hit by a runaway floor waxer or buried under an avalanche of balls if I leave this spot.

"Are you sure he hasn't moved *at all*?" a familiar voice whispers in the doorway.

I open my eyes and pull my hand out of my shorts and glance at the small crowd watching me.

There's Cooper. Francisco. Brooks. Max Cole.

And Mackenzie.

Brooks's fiancée.

"Mackenzie! I need you." I bolt off the couch and hold out my hand.

Brooks leaps between us. "Don't touch my fiancée with your junk-hand."

"It's shrinking. My grandma put The Eye on me, and it's shrinking."

"Your hand?"

"My junk!"

All of my teammates—and Mackenzie, who's a pretty blonde with a superstition problem—look at my crotch.

Brooks looks back at my face first. "You can get your own girlfriend to help with that."

“I did!”

“You got a girlfriend?” Francisco’s raised brows say what everyone else is thinking.

Luca Rossi doesn’t date.

And not the same way that Cooper Rock *doesn’t date*. Cooper dates. Cooper dates all the time.

We don’t call it dating, because dating implies some level of intent to see the same girl again.

I shake my head. “My girlfriend isn’t superstitious, so she can’t help with this. Mackenzie. What do I do to get The Eye off me?”

Max plops down in the broken recliner across the threadbare carpet. It doesn’t collapse under him, so he leans back and adds a tally mark on the wall.

Yeah. How many times we can flop in that thing before it breaks is a game too.

“We need to talk about you having a girlfriend,” Max says.

“What are we, old grannies? We need to talk about breaking curses.”

“Man, all our curse-breaking energy is going on the field.” Cooper starts to sit on the couch relatively close to me, eyes my hand, then my junk, and sits at the far end instead. “We don’t have any curse-breaking left for your junk.”

“We still have the dildo cover,” Francisco says.

All of us except Mackenzie make *shut up* noises at him, because we don’t talk about what we all did together during spring training to start the curse-breaking for the team.

“Dil—” she starts, but Brooks covers her mouth.

“Shh, baby. Shh. You didn’t hear a thing.”

I drop my head in my hands and fall back into my seat. “I can’t leave this room until I know I’m not going to get Alonzo-ed.”

“Alonzo-ed?”

“What happened to my cousin Alonzo when he told Nonna off when she put The Eye on him. It—it was bad. Like, career-ending bad.”

“Is he a race car driver?” Cooper asks.

“Accountant.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. She ended his *accounting* career. And then *he still got married*. So I’m sitting here, *where it’s safe*, until I’m de-cursed.”

“You know Lila fell through the ceiling here in the clubhouse and almost squashed Tripp last fall, right?” Mackenzie offers.

I stare at her, because no, I didn’t know the Fireballs’ new owner *fell through the ceiling* last fall and almost killed her co-owner.

Brooks snort-laugh. “Aw, man, I forgot about that.”

But I’m going lightheaded. “Something could crash through the ceiling here?”

“No.” Mackenzie’s eyes go wide, and she shakes her head with enough force to rattle her brain out of her ears. “That’s already been done. Definitely not.”

“I’m not safe.”

Max found a baseball, and he’s tossing it in the air. “Back up. Back up. Why did your Nonna put The Eye on you? Is this so you get yourself a woman and settle down? Because you told us you have a girlfriend, so...I’m missing the problem.”

“Having a girlfriend and getting married are two *very* different things. I don’t want to marry my girlfriend.”

“So why are you dating her?”

“For the sex.” Jesus. Jesus on a tiramisu. I need to shut the fuck up. “And I can’t have sex if Nonna shrunk my junk because she doesn’t like my girlfriend.”

Yeah. That wasn’t shutting up.

“Wait, your nonna? TikTok Nonna?” Cooper bolts straight. “We gotta tell Lila and Tripp to do a grandparent week, where—”

I lunge for him and rub my junk-hand all over his face until I get his mouth covered. “*Don’t ever say that again.*”

“Junk-hand! *Junk-hand!*” Cooper leaps up and dashes for the sink, spitting as he goes.

Francisco’s snickering. “What’s wrong with your nonna? I thought you loved your nonna?”

“Not when she’s putting The fucking Eye on me!”

Mackenzie sighs. She marches to the sink at the small galley kitchen, shoves Cooper out of the way, squats, and pulls an industrial-sized bottle of hand sanitizer out from under it.

Then she strides across the room and points the industrial-size pump at me. “Bathe,” she orders.

I dutifully take six industrial-size squirts and rub the sanitizer all over my hands, up my arms, and over my exposed legs. I still have enough left to take to my junk, which I won’t do. First of all, it would sting. Second, my junk is already in enough danger. And third, if I put my hand down my pants again, Mackenzie will leave, and I don’t know anyone else superstitious enough to help me plot out how to counter Nonna’s Eye.

She pats her cheeks. “Face too. I saw you touch your face.”

I obey, because I know she wants us to win even more badly than we want to win, because that’s Mackenzie.

When I'm properly rubbed down in sanitizer, she bends over, grabs me by the cheeks, and stares straight into my eyes. "Why did your Nonna Eye you?"

"She wants me to get married and have babies."

"Dude." Cooper bolts closer to the door while Max and Francisco crack up. "That's not funny. Warn a guy before he gets that close to that kind of curse."

"Cooper, shut up," Mackenzie says. "Luca. You have a girlfriend?"

I swallow.

She frowns.

"It's complicated," I grumble.

"You're an idiot."

"That too."

"Get up, Rossi. You have work to do. The *only* way you have *any* chance of countering this is by doing as many good deeds as you can think of. Help old ladies cross the street. Pick up your own smelly jockstrap. Sign all the baseballs for all the kids. Donate lunch to the cleaning staff at the park. You get me?"

I nod.

She's probably screwing with me, but I'll try anything.

"Also, we're going to need to meet your girlfriend, because if you took a fake girlfriend to try to counteract The Eye, you're basically a dead man, and I will be so pissed at you forever, because the Fireballs are going to *win* this year, and you're currently helping us get there, but if you screw it up, I'll have my dads put another Eye on you and they *really* know how to shrink junk."

I open my mouth.

Close it again.

And I realize I need to talk to Henri, because I can blurt out *she can't come, she's writing*, but I don't know the first thing about her writing.

Except that she has a vampire-turtle shifter named Confucius in her books.

"Go easy on him, Kenz." Brooks pulls her back. "He's gonna need a few days here. Not every day a guy gets saddled with a girlfriend *and* The Eye at the same time."

"If he makes us lose—"

"I know. I know. I'll put corn flakes in his cup and prank call his room next road trip."

"Corn flakes?"

"Those fuckers itch for days."

Mackenzie gives me the *I'll be watching you* sign. "Good deeds. We meet your girlfriend. The universe is watching."

The universe isn't all that's watching, and Nonna's more terrifying than all of the universe.

And possibly Mackenzie's making this all up.

But good deeds can't hurt, can they?

"Where's Jarvis?" I ask.

I get five matching pairs of *where do you think?* eyeballs.

Naturally.

Because if Jarvis isn't at the ball field, he's boinking his girlfriend or walking his dog.

"Do you think he'd care if I borrowed his gear?"

He's our catcher.

Has the most protective gear of all of us.

"Not with junk-hand," Cooper says.

"I sanitized."

Mackenzie clucks her tongue at me.

And I sigh. "Fine. I'll go talk to the coaches." They have spare catcher gear somewhere.

It probably smells worse than junk-hand, and undoubtedly has more germs, but if I'm going to be walking old ladies across the street, then I'm wearing as much protective gear as I can find.

Cooper frowns. "You know, the Thrusters' goaltender lives here year-round. I could see if he has some pads you could borrow too."

"I love you, man."

"I'll love you too, so long as you don't screw up the best season we've had in my entire lifetime. Or touch me again with junk-hand." He echoes Mackenzie's *I'm watching you* gesture. "Go on. Get to work. Can't afford to be a man down. You get me?"

I get him.

I get him more than I've ever gotten anything in my life.

Question is, will this be enough?

Considering the Henri variable, I'm guessing not.

Not by a long shot.

Henri

I'M LETTING the fan I picked up at the store air out my armpits while I sit on the floor of Luca's seven-hundred-degree bedroom, hiding from his Nonna after listening to the ball game, when he texts to ask if I'll please pick him up.

With manners like that, how could I refuse?

So Dogzilla and I hop in my CR-V and head down to the ballpark in the darkness that's more lit than you'd expect, but then, the city and surrounding metro area *is* home to something like a million people.

This is like a normal relationship, except for the part where I know that Luca Rossi and I are not soulmates and he doesn't want me to stay.

But he *did* text me for a ride, so that's a good sign that he might not kick me out.

If I can soak up even some of his *love sucks* vibe, that would help.

I beam at him when he swings open the door and attempts to climb into my SUV. "Hey, slugger. Thanks for sending your plumber today to fix the kitchen faucet. Also, nice game."

"There's a cat in my seat. And—*aah!*" He leaps back as he catches sight of me.

Dogzilla rolls her eyes as Luca stares at me in horror, his lip curled and one eyebrow raised while the other slants down so severely it could discipline an entire high school even through a double-thick cinderblock wall.

I give him a *sorry* shrug and ignore the horror-stare. "You two can negotiate for the front."

"What are you wearing?"

I glance down at my tank and pajama shorts. The shorts have screaming angry vampire unicorns all over them, and the tank features a picture of Confucius with his trademark saying, *Confucius says vampires make the best lovers*.

I know. Not all that catchy. Not like that Confucius saying about the turnstile and Bangkok. But my readers love him, so that's what counts.

Also, the air conditioning in my car works, which means I'm nipping out.

Luca points to his hair, which is thick and perfect and how much styling product does he keep in his locker? Because *damn*.

That's some good hair.

Coupled with the polo, the jeans, and the swagger, this man *has it*.

Bet if he flexed one of those baseball forearms, women would walk into streetlamp poles, men would drop their beers in jealousy, and even some birds would gawk and fly into the building across the street.

"Oh!" My hand flies to the towel on my head as it finally clicks why he's horrified, and I smile bigger at him. "You and your hair inspired me. I'm doing an argan oil treatment to see if I can get the frizz under control. We'll find out in the morning."

He opens his mouth.

Closes it.

Does the same with his fists, which he then sticks in his mouth and bites.

Jeez. Is the guy allergic to bad hair on other people? How about some credit for self-improvement? "I'm sorry. I didn't know you had particular standards for your free chauffeuring."

"We're going to a party."

I look down at myself again.

Touch the towel on my head.

Eyeball my cat, who's also wearing a tank top celebrating Confucius and a shower cap, since a towel wouldn't fit right and while she's very tolerant, I felt like a monster trying to cover up her ears in the name of matching pajama night.

"Your text didn't say that," I tell Luca.

He pinches his nose, takes a deep breath, and then gingerly lifts Dogzilla so he can take the front seat.

She hangs limply in his hand, then settles like a pile of goo in his lap after he pulls the door shut. "Mackenzie needs to meet you."

"Is that a guy's last name, or is this a woman? I don't remember a Mackenzie playing on your team."

"She's Elliott's fiancée."

"Who's Elliott?"

“Henri, I’m about to be a dick, and I’ve been working very hard all day to *not* be a dick, but I need you to sit there and listen and *not be you* for the next two hours, okay?”

“Is this a lesson in not falling in love?”

“Sure. Let’s go with that. Drive. Left at the end of the road, then a quick right at the first stoplight. Do you have other clothes in here?”

“Nope. I emptied them all into your closet. I told your nonna that our relationship is relatively new, though I was vague enough that we have wiggle room in our story, and that I finally went through my first batch of clothes so I had to bring in my second. She probably thinks I’m homeless, which I guess I technically am, but not because I couldn’t afford a house. And oh my gosh, I was listening to the game while I was working on teasers for *How To Train Your Vampire* tonight—it’s my new book coming out in a few weeks—and *you leapt into the stands to help an old lady up the stairs*. That was so adorable. If I’d been not afraid of your nonna, I totally would’ve gone and shown her and been all, *that’s my boyfriend.*”

I follow his directions as I talk, heading to the end of the road and turning left.

“Left!” he yells. “*Your other left!*”

“I’m a writer, not a truck driver!” I yell back as I wrench the wheel the other way, cut off a bus, and floor the gas pedal so that we survive.

My heart’s in my throat. My thighs are buzzing like they’re made of bees. The bus is bearing down on us with its headlights lit up like they’re made of demon energy.

“Right!” Luca yells.

“Which one’s right?” I holler back.

“Toward me! *Turn toward me!*”

I almost take out a street sign as I jump the curb at seventy-million miles an hour, but I make that *right* turn, dammit, and I get the bus off our back, and I don’t even wet myself.

But I do pull into a driveway with my brakes screeching.

“*Jesus, Henri, don’t stop here!*”

A car honks, followed by another, and *dammit*, this isn’t a driveway.

It’s a freaking parking garage exit.

And I don’t care. I slam my car in park and fling open the door. “*If you don’t like how I’m driving, then you can fucking drive yourself.*”

Oof.

Whoa.

I just said *fuck*.

It's not that I'm opposed to the word. It's more that I try to use it sparingly, and I very much doubt Luca has any appreciation for the fact that I f-bombed him.

The cars keep honking.

Luca keeps sitting there, holding Dogzilla, who hasn't so much as meowed through this whole ordeal, because she's the easiest-going cat on the entire planet.

Except in very rare instances where she has to *not* be.

Cars and trucks are spewing the car-version of profanities at me as I march around the SUV to my passenger seat. I smile and wave at the first people in the line, mouth *sorry*, even though I feel like collapsing in a vat of non-alcoholic margaritas instead, and wrench open the passenger door.

Luca's face is twitching again as he deposits Dogzilla in my arms, makes a more gallant and handsome *I'm sorry* gesture to the cars, which makes the honking stop, and then jogs around to climb into the driver's seat, where he grunts and grimaces when his knees get stuck against the wheel.

"There's a button—"

"I know there's a fucking button."

"Yes, but do you know *exactly* where it is, or do you need me to point it out?"

"I need you to stop talking."

"We've been awake and in the same airspace for all of forty-five minutes today and you've said that to me *seven times*."

"*You fucking talk a lot*."

He locates the power seat button, and the gears whine as they slowly start to move his seat backward.

Mold grows faster than his seat is moving.

Dogzilla peers a chill eye up at me. "*Mee...*"

She doesn't finish the *ow*. Let's be real here. The fact that she even started to meow is sign enough. "Don't say *fuck*. It stresses my cat."

"How did you get yourself engaged *five times*? Are you always like this?"

I glare at him, because of course I'm not always *like this*. "You apparently bring out the worst in me."

"Great. Then there's lesson number one in not falling in love. Date people who bring out the worst in you, and they'll never ask you to marry them." He grabs the wheel with one hand, the gear shift with the other, and we roll out of the way of the garage traffic and into the street again.

Dogzilla lets out a sigh and melts deeper into my lap.

Poor thing's going to need extra kitty treats to recover from this.

Luca's breathing through his nose, and he looks every bit the angry, anti-love asshole he was after my wedding when he pinned me to the ground and told me that love sucks.

This is *exactly* what I want from him. Solid proof that love is the most awful thing in the world and I don't need it. Real, constant exposure to someone that I could *never* love and who will *never* ask me to marry him.

It feels like donkey poop.

Dogzilla sighs in my lap, uses one little paw to lazily knead my thigh twice before giving it up to play the role of a blanket again, and I wish she was a shape-shifter so she could change into a human and be my sister.

"Was Nonna mean to you?" Luca asks gruffly.

"She doesn't believe I'm dating you for anything other than your money, but it's okay. I know you're indebted to loan sharks or something, or possibly that you snort it all up your nose, so you don't have to worry about me looking for what's not there."

"What?"

"That's why you live in that house and drive that car, right? Because you don't have any money? What other explanation is there?"

More nose-breathing.

Loud nose-breathing.

And no, I don't believe he's on drugs. First of all, he's wound way too tight, and second of all, there's testing in professional sports. If he was snorting away all his cash, he would've been kicked out long before now.

But you know what?

I *like* aggravating him.

Your other left, Henri. You're an idiot.

Yeah.

I'm absolutely going to torture him.

That'll probably sell this fake relationship thing better to his nonna anyway. What's she going to believe more, that he tolerates me because we're in a real relationship where we snip at each other, or Luca, who *clearly* doesn't believe in love, suddenly turning into a sap who calls me honeypie?

Also, the writer in me is desperately curious to know the story of why a guy who's raking in twenty million a year between his various revenue streams is living in a two-bedroom, one-bathroom house with a possessed oven, bad plumbing, and a non-existent air conditioner.

Seriously.

The house *doesn't have one*.

It did at one point, because there's connections on the outside for that box

thingie part of the air conditioning unit that goes outside, with the fan?

That thing.

There are definitely connections for it. But no unit. Which means I couldn't even call a repair person, because there's nothing to repair.

I'd wonder if he was the type of guy who likes to do renovations, but with his kind of cash, surely he could afford to buy a nicer fixer-upper.

Like one that already had air conditioning and didn't need that plumber who stopped by as I was researching plumbers this morning to fix the broken kitchen faucet.

For the record, I'm not complaining about having a roof over my head. But I am saying that if I were the one paying rent—which I can afford, once I decide if I want to go back to the Chicago area or pick some random place I've never lived—I'd pick a place with AC.

"You're going to meet a few of my teammates," he says like I didn't just ask him if he does drugs. "Cooper Rock will hit on you. Don't flirt back. And *do not fall in love with him*. He would absolutely leave you at the aisle."

"Altar."

"Have you ever made it to the altar?"

And now my face is twitching. "Once. Fine. I cede your point. Though, at least twice, we didn't even get to the aisle, and I'm going to pretend I didn't say that, because it also doesn't disprove your point."

"Max Cole pitched tonight. He'll probably hit on you too, since we won. And also because he can be a dick and will think it's funny. Francisco Lopez *would* marry you for that cat, so you're not allowed to talk to him. But the person you need to worry about is Mackenzie Montana. She's Brooks Elliott's fiancée, and she's more superstitious than every baseball player in the world combined. She knows about Nonna's Eye, and she's going to help me combat it, but only if she's convinced I'm not going to be a dick to you."

"Charm Mackenzie. Got it."

He eyeballs me.

Grimaces again. "Can you at least take the towel off?"

"Yes, but if you thought my hair was crazy before..."

And now he's muttering.

"So I can bring Dogzilla in? She loves a good party."

We turn into a parking garage—the usual way this time—and Luca pulls my SUV into a parking spot, then turns to me. "We've been dating for one week."

"One week." I nod emphatically. It's good to have our stories straight.

"My Nonna put The Eye on me."

"Yes, I was there."

“This is what I’m telling people. Be quiet and listen.”

I zip my lips and throw away the key.

Wow. I have never seen a guy whose *entire face* can twitch like that. An eyelid, yes. A tick in a jaw? Yep. Even a tick in a nostril or two. But never the entire face like that.

He starts talking again, which is impressive, because he looks like maybe he’s come down with a sudden case of lockjaw. “We’re dating unexpectedly because I’m weirdly attracted to you and you need someone to watch over you, and I’m nervous that I’m your rebound guy, but you’re too sweet and funny to resist, so even though I know I’m probably going to get my heart broken, I’m fully committed to this.”

“Oh my gosh, Luca, really?”

“No, Henrietta, *that’s the story I told my teammates*. Jesus. Fuck on a lasagna. This is never going to work. Not for tonight, and not until the end of the season.”

I pat his arm. “Oh, Luca. Honey. I’ve been training for this my entire career. We’ll pull it off so well no one will know what hit them. And bonus? I’m already feeling like relationships are awful. You’re a peach.” I lean over, peck his cheek, ignore the tingle in my lips and the way my nose practically orgasms at the scent of his aftershave or shampoo or whatever that is, and reach for the door handle. “So. Where’s the party? I’m gonna charm the pants off all your friends, and when we’re done with them, they’ll be asking you for relationship advice.”

He doesn’t look convinced, but he climbs out of the car too.

Still muttering.

All the way to the elevator.

“Smile, honey,” I murmur. “The cameras are watching.”

He smiles.

Like, *actually smiles*.

Be still my panties. I think I’m in trouble.

No.

Not trouble.

What if he’s right? What if in order to figure out how to not fall in love, I *do* need to sleep with someone I don’t plan on living with forever?

And what if he can give me a real, honest-to-god orgasm in the process?

Huh.

In that case...party on, panties.

Party on.

Luca

THIS IS A DISASTER. We're not even to Elliott's apartment, and already, this is a disaster.

Henri keeps shooting looks at my crotch.

So does her cat.

They look like escaped clown prison convicts. Between the bright pink and green striped beach towel piled four feet high on her head, the black shorts with vicious pink vampire unicorns, and the fact that she's wearing another man on her shirt, *without a bra*, and dear god, the slippers.

She's wearing fluffy panda slippers.

This is the worst idea in the history of ideas. I should've taken all the hints and drove us straight back to my place, skipped this meeting-the-team thing, and then called one of her family members. She's a danger to herself, and I'm quickly making her my problem.

I'm becoming a problem myself.

I should've thought to ask if she wanted to go back and change, but when she didn't suggest it herself, and she took off not knowing her left from her right, what she was wearing became the last thing on my mind.

What does it say about us that I already believe she'd actually dress like this to go to a party?

"How the hell do you drive in those things?"

She jerks her attention away from my crotch and looks down at her feet, lifting her toes, which makes the panda heads on top of her feet dance. "Practice. Pooks and Elbow go everywhere with me."

“You...named your slippers.”

“In my third book, before I started writing Confucius books, my heroine slips through a time portal into another dimension when she puts these slippers on. When she lands on the other side, it’s full of were-pandas, and Pooks and Elbow are the first two she meets.”

No words.

None. They went poof.

“Since it’s an alternate dimension, the pandas don’t shift into humans when they’re not in were-panda form. They shift into sentient sticks of butter. But she doesn’t fall in love with a stick of butter. She falls in love with a centaur who was accidentally summoned to the alternate universe by the head were-panda during a ritual gone wrong. It sounds weird, but it works in the book. Trust me.”

“Can you pretend you’re mute for the next hour?”

She laughs, and fuck me, she’s a snorter.

She snorts when she laughs.

And it’s too late to bail on this entire thing, take my chances with having an anvil drop on my head next time I’m walking around downtown thanks to The Eye, and kick Nonna out of my house, because the elevator doors are opening, and Francisco and Max are standing in the hallway in the middle of a heated discussion that stops the minute they lay eyes on Henri.

For once, I don’t know the first question either will ask. I told them Henri’s name earlier, mentioned that I played it low-key like I didn’t know her when she came through on the tour with the romance novelists yesterday because we weren’t ready to talk about our relationship yet, and that I wasn’t sure how much she liked crowds.

It was almost the truth.

But the way Max is gaping at Henri suggests he’s starting to suspect my entire story is a load of bullshit. “What the—”

Lopez silences the pitcher with a shot to the arm and recovers first. He, too, has a terrifying grandmother, which probably explains the bright smile and the way he reaches for her hand, pauses, and then strokes the cat right over its vampire pajamas.

You can practically hear him thinking *thank god my abuela has never met this woman and cursed me with her, though her cat is adorable*. “Honor to meet you, Henri. Luca talks of nothing but your beauty.”

While Henri preens, Max shoves him out of the way. “Quit stealing Rossi’s girlfriend. We need him to live through the playoffs.”

“We need to *make* the playoffs.”

“You say potato, I say Lamborghini. Hi. I’m Max. You need a room so you

two can do the nasty? I'll kick Elliott and his lady out. Or I'll borrow another apartment for you."

I grab Henri's free hand and growl at the pitcher.

"Meatballs or echidnas?" Francisco asks.

Henri's brown eyebrows furrow. "For eating?"

All three of us stare dumbly at her, and she cracks up. "Wow, the looks on your faces. Guys. I know about the mascot contest. And I—"

Brooks's door swings open, and Mackenzie pokes her head out. She's holding Coco Puff, their rapidly-growing cavapoo puppy that Brooks got during spring training, and while Coco Puff barks and his collar shouts out an enthusiastic *You're a winner to me!*, Brooks's blonde fiancée eyeballs the hot mess that's pretending to be my girlfriend.

And her cat.

She squints.

Henri beams. "Hi! You must be Mackenzie. Can I have a Fiery Forever button? The echidna looks super cool, and I can't stop laughing at Glow's campaign around his big fire butt, but let's be real here. A team like the Fireballs deserves a dragon mascot."

"I hate that firefly's ass," I mutter, but no one pays attention to me, because Henri is clearly the center of attention.

And for good reason.

Who the hell can smile that bright like she's not wearing weird pajamas while meeting her fake boyfriend's real friends for the first time?

I think my nuts are sweating.

This isn't good. This isn't good at all.

Mackenzie stays poker-faced, which is impressive. This *is* the same woman who'd go catatonic in the presence of Fireballs players six months ago, and look at her now, playing the tough chick with my fake girlfriend. "Are you kissing up to me?"

"I could if you want me to, but really, I do like the dragon best." She shifts her cat and lowers her voice. "Even though I saw Luca's poster of the duck in his closet. We're a house divided."

Mackenzie rounds on me with a gasp, and Henri giggles, which is better than the snorting.

"She's lying," I say quickly.

"Teasing," Henri corrects. "Sweetie, we need to work on your trust issues, but that's okay. We'll get there."

And now I look like I'm completely and totally whipped by a psycho wearing a sexy male vampire on her pajamas.

Maybe this is karma for trying to dodge The Eye.

“Is that Confucius?” Mackenzie nods to Henri’s shirt.

My fake girlfriend gets so excited her towel starts to tilt. “Yes! Ohmygosh, you know Confucius?”

Brooks sticks his head out of the apartment too, followed closely by Cooper, whose grin is half *you want to sleep with me* until he gets a load of the leaning tower of towel. “Man who go through turnstile... Whoa.” He shakes his head. “Rossi, dude, you’ve gotta get your girlfriend the official pajamas.”

“No, no.” Mackenzie beckons us into the apartment. “She can wear Confucius anytime. He’s *hot*.”

Henri blushes while we all troop inside. “I can’t believe you know Confucius!”

“He’s okay for a vampire,” Brooks grumbles.

“Ohmygosh, *you’ve* read *Bite of the Wild*?”

“Brooks’s brother-in-law runs this romance book club in New York. We join in on video chat whenever we can. Do you think there’ll be a book five? I can’t believe that cliffhanger in book four, but it’s been almost two years, and—”

Henri grimaces. “Yeah. That was after Kyle. He took a while to recover from, but I think I’m about ready to tackle *For Whom the Vamp Bites*.”

“No, no, it’s not out yet. Knox heard Nora Dawn was having some personal issues, but she’s putting out *How to Train Your Vampire* soon, which is good, because it’s been a while since she had a new book, even if it is a new series. And...who’s Kyle? I don’t remember a Kyle.”

Henri elbows me, and I realize I’m supposed to say something.

Like I’m supposed to know anything about her vampire novels.

Shit.

I’m going to have to read them.

Dammit.

She elbows me again, and my brain cells finally click together. “Henri’s Nora Dawn,” I announce.

She beams, which means I got it right.

Thank fuck.

But then she elbows me a third time.

Shit. *Dammit*. I have to do something boyfriend-ish.

Right.

Sell it. If I can’t sell it to these bozos, how am I going to sell it to Nonna?

I wrap an arm around her, and in the process I accidentally tip the towel tower.

It tilts to the right.

Her head goes with it.

I try to grab it and accidentally punch it instead, which makes her jerk sideways into Mackenzie's wall of bobbleheads.

They all start clacking together—the ones not squished by the towel—and it startles her practically-dead cat, which yowls and leaps.

Right into Francisco's jewels.

Mackenzie's gasping. Like, she gasps, then we move, and she gasps again as we assault more of her bobbleheads.

Dogzilla the cat has suddenly realized *it's in clothing*, and it doesn't like it, and it's chasing its tail while Coco Puff barks and tries to escape Mackenzie's arms.

Every time Coco Puff barks, his collar yells.

I love you!

You're the best!

Believe it and you can achieve it!

"Make it stop!" Mackenzie shrieks while Coco Puff leaps out of her arms, onto the couch, and then to the ground, where he starts chasing the cat.

I'm trying to pull Henri off the bobbleheads, but every time I try, the pink-and-green striped beach towel grows arms and bats at me.

Swear it does, because *why else can't I get a grip on the damn towel?*

"I got it!" Henri yells while she swats my hands away.

"Demon cat!" Lopez yells back.

"Turn more to your right!" Cooper orders. "I need your face on this video!"

Brooks dives for the animals. Dogzilla dodges him and dives under the couch. Coco Puff tries to follow, but he's big enough that he can't reach, and he has this weird jaw issue that makes his tongue hang out, so he's like a deranged happy dog that would probably make a good partner to the demon cat.

I try one more time to grab the towel, and I end up poking Henri in the eye instead.

"Ow!"

"Whoa."

"Shit!"

"Demon cat!"

Francisco has a point. The cat's banging the underside of the couch and it sounds like there's an unholy orgy going on down there.

I grab Henri's face and tilt it up so I can look at her eye. "Are you okay?"

"I think so." She's blinking funny and the eyeball I poked is red and watery, but it's not bleeding, and she can open her eyelid all the way, so I didn't do any irreparable damage.

I hope.

At least, not to her eyeball.

Brooks's apartment may be another story.

The towel finally slides off, and all her short, curly hair springs to its natural form, though greasier than you'd expect, except—

“Demon girlfriend!”

Fuck me.

She has horns.

I rear back.

“Holy shit,” Cooper whispers as he drops his phone.

Francisco makes the sign of the cross.

Coco Puff yelps and runs for the bedroom.

And Henri sighs. *“I told you the towel was a better look.”*

She leans over, grabs it, and in three seconds, she's whipped it back around her crazy curls, which aren't real demon horns, but rather a haircut gone wrong. Then she carefully balances as she lowers herself to the ground, makes that clicking noise with her tongue, and coaxes Dogzilla the demon cat out from beneath the couch.

My teammates and Mackenzie are all gaping at her, which turns to them staring at me in disbelief.

Like there's something wrong with both of us, and like Henri will drag me down to the pits of hell with her.

And that pisses me off.

So she's having a bad night. I made her come to a party, *in her pajamas and a beach towel*, and she didn't argue.

She simply went with it, diving right in to meeting a group of people who were going to naturally be suspicious of her, and she didn't blink.

Hell, she charged in here with more enthusiasm than the damn puppy.

“You all got a problem with my girlfriend?” I growl.

My “girlfriend,” who's currently having to pull her cat out from under the couch, because the demon has left its body and returned it to a lump of rags, though a lump of rags now missing its shower cap and with its pajama shirt shredded like it's going to a metal rock concert next.

Max goes stone-faced silent. Francisco is still wide-eyed, but he shakes his head. Cooper's eyes dart between me and Henri's ass, which is enough to make me want to take a swing at him, but I still want to make the playoffs, and the fucker's a damn good second baseman, so for tonight, I'll let him live.

Brooks is sucking his lips in like this is funny, and Mackenzie's gnawing on her own knuckle as she stares at the floor. Her chest keeps spasming like she's

trying not to laugh.

“Good kitty,” Henri croons.

She must do yoga or something, because she rises elegantly with the limp, lazy cat back in her arms, towel perfectly balanced on her head.

She looks around the room, and then her brown eyes settle on me. “You okay?”

Is she serious?

She’s standing there with a red eye, her cat traumatized, one of her slippers torn, with everyone knowing about her demon hair under that towel, and she’s asking if *I’m* okay.

She’s either a martyr of the highest degree, or she’s a psycho.

Or possibly she’s the best kind of human, the ones who’ll do anything for their friends, and are as likely to yell an enthusiastic *yes!* to a Saturday afternoon playing Scrabble as she would be to leap into action if someone suggested sky diving.

Mental note: Do *not* suggest sky diving to Henrietta Bacon.

“We’re going home,” I tell her.

“But I was just getting to like your friends!”

“Dogzilla needs to rest.”

Mackenzie leaps forward and hugs her. “Good to meet you, Henri. Have Luca give you my number. We’ll do lunch. The Lady Fireballs need *all* the help, and I need to know when we’re getting more Confucius.”

She turns and hugs me too, but instead of gushing, she whispers softly, “You’re in so much trouble, dude. This is gonna be fun.”

Know what that means?

That means I’m fucked.

Henri

IT'S A DARK, quiet ride back to Luca's house. I want to say something like *that went well*, except it didn't, and I probably need to send Mackenzie a fruit basket and her dog a biscuit basket.

I let Luca drive, since he seems to like to be in charge and also, I don't want to wait the seventeen minutes it would take to move the driver's seat back into the short person position.

Plus, I can't drive with Dogzilla in my lap.

Not when there's someone else in the car who would judge me for it.

So instead, I sit in the passenger seat, petting my cat and letting her soft purrs take me to my happy place.

Or as close as I can get to my happy place when I've had the most disastrous introduction to anyone's friends ever, and I met Winston Randolph's friends when I had a horrible, uneven sunburn and a pulled neck muscle and looked like a humpback with a skin condition, so I think I know disastrous introductions.

Plus, that was the night I figured out I'm allergic to alcohol.

Luca would probably think it was a funny story if he were someone else, but he's not, so I sigh, keep it to myself, and then brighten as I realize it doesn't matter what Luca thinks.

He's my *anti*-boyfriend.

So this is going well.

Even if it feels like donkey poop.

There's a lone light on in a single window on the first floor when he pulls into the driveway behind his car, which hopefully means Nonna is sleeping, but

probably means she's pretending to sleep so she can spy on us to make sure we're doing this dating thing right.

My eyes land on Luca's car again, lit by the streetlamp on the corner, and I spin toward him so fast that Dogzilla half-meows. "Oh! I completely forgot to tell you. I looked under your hood, and someone had disconnected your distributor cap. I put it back together, but I didn't know where you kept your keys, and I didn't figure it would look good if I hot-wired your car, so you'll want to test it again in the morning."

He slowly swivels his head to stare at me.

Lucky for him, I'm used to that look, and it's easy to smile at him and offer an explanation of how I know so much about cars. "I do a lot of reading. And research. One time, when I was writing—"

"Thank you."

My eyebrows shoot so high they take flight off my forehead and soar to the moon.

I *am* aware that he's using the element of surprise to make me stop talking, but I didn't expect him to do it with manners. Also, this probably isn't the right time to tell him I suspect his car trouble was his Nonna's doing.

But it makes sense—of course she'd want to keep him from running away from The Eye.

He thrusts his hands through that thick mane of hair that belongs on the cover of a romance novel, and a sigh leaks out of him like he's letting go of all the demons and ghosts that have been haunting his family for more generations than he can count.

I feel like this moment calls for silence, even though now it's past the *don't talk to him because he's grumpy about the cat and the towel and the dog thing in front of his friends* stage and into what would normally be my *I must talk to cover the awkwardness* stage.

After fourteen seconds that last fourteen decades, his lips part, and after another three years, words come out. "I don't want to be one of those assholes who forgets where he came from."

It takes me a minute to catch up to where he's staring, and then, despite everything Jerry ever said about how Luca was too good for his old friends, it all clicks into place. "You didn't have air conditioning growing up?"

A muscle in his jaw ticks, which is better than his entire face ticking. I must be growing on him.

Hopefully that won't make his lessons in how to not fall in love harder.

Or if they do get harder, at least I'll learn something, and I'll be even stronger the next time I meet a new guy.

“I didn’t have much of anything growing up.”

“But didn’t your dad—”

His gaze sharpens and threatens to gut me from my nose to my hooah if I finish that sentence about his dad also playing pro sports, so I pinch my lips together.

“It’s not the house that makes the man. It’s the man that makes the man.”

Well.

That’s telling.

And not at all what I’d expect of him after everything Jerry always said. *We have to invite Luca Rossi, because my mom would kill me if I didn’t, but that dude...he’s not the same guy I grew up with. Doesn’t have time for losers like me.*

I’d assured Jerry that he wasn’t a loser.

Of course, all my writer friends online have been telling me for weeks now that any guy who’ll kiss his former best friend’s mother to get out of marrying me is a loser. And I’m also beginning to suspect that Jerry might not have been the most reliable narrator when it comes to matters of Luca Rossi, especially if the rumors Elsa keeps relaying from our mother that Jerry’s *dating Morgan Rossi* are true.

“It’s something you should know if Nonna asks,” Luca adds.

I realize he’s still talking about living in this house to stay humble, but before I can open my mouth to reply, or to ask questions, because I have lots of them now, he’s climbing out of the car and heading for the door.

I hustle out to follow him, almost knocking myself out as my towel gets caught wrong against the ceiling of my SUV, but I right myself without dropping the cat and catch up to him as he’s sliding his key into the lock.

Nonna’s nowhere in sight when we step inside.

There’s still a hint of smoke from the ziti fire hanging around us. The air feels like warm bathwater trying to tiptoe into my lungs, and the eerie shadow cast by the ladder against the side living room wall is making me think about haunted houses.

Specifically, of sneaking through haunted houses, waiting for the scary zombies and the dude with the chainsaw to jump out, and do you know what?

Luca’s house would make *the best* haunted house.

Which might not be the best thing to be thinking right now.

He takes the stairs directly in front of us two at a time, but my legs are short, so I go one at a time, which would be fine if the first stair didn’t give an ominous creak and bend beneath my foot as soon as I put all my weight on it.

Naturally, I freeze, because while I like writing about scary things, my scary

things are usually funny—I mean, I write about sentient sticks of butter, and who can take that seriously?—and I don't want to know what might be hiding under this stairwell if I fall through it.

Or what will happen to my slippers.

Pooks is already looking worse for wear after being impaled by the tail of the bobblehead dragon at Mackenzie's apartment, which is probably Brooks's apartment, but it felt like it had a woman's touch, so I'm gonna call it Mackenzie's place.

Plus, my feet are sweating with how warm it is in here, and that's probably not good for my slippers either.

"Are you seriously standing there thinking *that hard* about how to walk up the stairs?" Luca whispers.

I jerk my head up to him, and the movement makes the stair beneath me give an even more ominous creak.

"Skip that step," he hisses.

"My legs are short," I hiss back.

"Do you want to live, or do you want the stairs to eat you?"

I blink at him, because did he invade my mind and beat me to a joke that I'd totally make if I weren't the one in danger of being swallowed by the ancient, possessed staircase?

His entire face twitches again.

I leap to the next step, grateful to land on a more solid surface, and make a mental note to learn how to navigate this house without dying. It goes right after the mental note about writing down every single quirk of the house, because this house *has* to go in a book.

Probably one about a vampire lord who's been thrown out from his kingdom after succumbing to a sleeping spell cast by a troublesome fairy who ends up being the love of his life.

I seriously love love.

"You know you're terrifying when you smile like that?" Luca breathes in my ear as I join him at the top step.

"Do your teammates know you're terrified of anything happy?"

"I'm not terrified of happiness. I'm terrified of you. And no, they don't know that, and they won't, or else I'll propose to you. Got it?"

I suck in a breath at his threat and follow him to peek into the guest room.

Nonna's snoring.

Dammit.

So much for that lingering hope that she would've left so I wouldn't have to share a bedroom with Luca.

His sigh suggests he's feeling the same.

We creep down the short hallway past the lone bathroom in the house—seriously, it doesn't even have a powder room on the first floor, and I'd honestly like to know how you're supposed to have friends over when there's not a spare toilet, except not having guests is probably exactly his plan—and before I know it, Luca's shutting the door to his bedroom.

With just him and me inside.

In the total darkness.

He hits the light switch, and a woman sits up in bed and screams.

I'm not one to hear a random unexpected scream and not join in, so I scream too.

Dogzilla leaps out of my arms with a yowl and lands in the middle of Luca's back, where she digs in with her claws, and now he's screaming too.

"Get it off!"

"Intruder!" I shriek.

"Pastrami on rye!" the intruder yells.

"*Mother?*"

I stop screaming.

Dogzilla gives up the fight and falls off Luca's back.

And his mother pulls the threadbare sheet up to cover—*gah*.

Look away, Henri.

Look.

Away.

The door flies open, smacking me in the shoulder and sending me tumbling into Luca, who smells like a fresh spring rain shower in paradise.

The man can't smell like a simple spring rain shower. That would be too easy.

Nonna charges in, rainbow hair flowing behind her and leaving no doubt where Luca got his hair genes, her arm raised and ready to throw the rusty tea kettle she's armed with. "Who? What? When? Why? How? Where?"

I can agree with some of those questions, because *was she sleeping with a rusty tea kettle?*

It's a good thing Luca's teaching me how to not fall in love, because his family is adorable.

Mostly.

When they're not dating my ex or being terrifying with their Eye.

So maybe *adorable* isn't the right word here.

"Put the damn kettle down, Irene," Luca's mom snaps.

I glance at her, see the outline of her nipples behind the sheet again, and

whip my head back up to the ceiling.

There's only so much a woman can take, and seeing the breasts that I now know Jerry fantasizes about, *sleeping in my fake boyfriend's bed where I was supposed to sleep*, is one of those things that makes me wish I could drink.

It's not that I dislike her.

It's that the sight of her makes me sad, because if I wasn't what Jerry wanted, why didn't he go for what he wanted in the first place instead of spending so many months building me up as being the one person who would finally make his life complete?

I know.

I know.

It's me.

You don't get left by five fiancés without figuring out *it's me*.

"I told you to leave," Nonna growls.

"And I told you I was staying *right here* until I got to talk to my son," Luca's mom snaps back.

I can't stop picturing Jerry kissing her in that coat closet, and it's making me sad.

So sad.

I hate being sad.

"What are you doing here?" Luca asks his mother.

Dogzilla echoes the question with a lazy half-meow from where she's settled almost under the ancient dresser in the corner.

"You weren't answering my calls."

"He probably didn't want to talk to you. Completely understandable." Nonna's still waving the tea kettle, and I get the impression she's only holding back on throwing it because she doesn't want to see Luca's mom naked either.

"Oh, and he wants to talk to you? You're probably threatening to put The Eye on him so he'll do something stupid like—"

She looks at me and freezes, and I fill in the blanks.

He'll do something stupid like start dating Henri Bacon, the loser who's addicted to love but can't actually find it.

I don't wait for her to regroup her thoughts and stammer something else, because while I like to think I'm a happy, positive, always-see-the-bright-side person, I'm not an idiot, and I have my limits.

And right now, my limits are ordering me to grab my cat, which I do, and march out of this house and go find a hotel, because I'm the freaky weirdo in panda slippers and mismatched pajamas and a bath towel wrapped around my crazy hair that I chopped off when my fifth fiancé left me before we got to the

aisle, and *of course* Luca's mother doesn't want him to do something like date a woman like me.

Let's be honest.

His grandmother doesn't either.

When she *Eyed* him, she was thinking he'd get involved with someone cute and perky and put together.

She probably even had a candidate ready to roll in right behind her.

Not with someone like me.

What am I even doing here?

Do I really think Luca can teach me to not fall in love?

He's as messed up as I am, in his own way.

I hit the bottom step, which groans and sags beneath my angry weight, and I lose my balance and go flying.

Poor Dogzilla goes flying too.

Again.

The top of my towel hits the wall and slides off my hair, and a large philodendron that was *not* there this morning catches my fall.

I end up with a mouthful of leaves that I'm spitting out as someone thunders down the stairs behind me. "Christ on a parmesan sandwich," Luca mutters as he lifts me out of the plant, fully dislodging the rest of the towel from my head. "Are you okay?"

I pick a few more leaves off my chin and hold one up. "I probably wouldn't serve it on a salad, especially since they're poisonous, but I've eaten worse."

He gapes at me while I look around, verify that Dogzilla is fine—which she is, since she's sitting in the middle of the floor licking her butt, which probably means she's irritated with me, but at least she's not hurt—and then I remember I'm mad, and I switch my almost-smile to a scowl. "I'm fine. Thank you very much for removing me from the woman-eating plant. I don't think this house is big enough for all the baggage, let alone the four different sides heading straight into war, so I'm going to go get a hotel room, and maybe you can call me after your away games this week."

"I'm kicking them out. You can stay."

"I'm not sleeping on sheets that have been against your mother's naked body."

He shudders. "*I'm* not sleeping on sheets that have been against my mother's naked body either."

Wait.

Did he say he's kicking *them* out?

I drop my voice and go up on tiptoe to get closer to his ear, which makes me

inhale that sweet spring scent all over again. He could be a flower. The masculine kind of flower that you wouldn't mind having naked in your bed. "You can't kick your grandmother out. What will her Eye do to you then?"

"Her Eye can get over it."

Huh. I can *feel* his face twitching when I'm this close to him, even if trying to look at it makes me go cross-eyed.

Also, there's this hint of fear in his voice that suggests he doesn't believe himself.

I sigh.

This is the problem I've had with every other man I've ever been engaged to. They legit always make me solve all of their problems, and I never even realize it until we're done. "Do you have a tent?"

He pulls back and looks down at his jeans-covered crotch, and I swear he mutters *I wish*, which doesn't make any sense, because Luca Rossi isn't the least bit attracted to me, nor should he be if our mutual goals are going to work.

"A *camping* tent," I hiss.

That gets his attention. "A camping tent? No, I don't have a camping tent. Why would I have a camping tent?"

"No matter. Grab some blankets. We'll sleep under the stars in the back yard."

He stares at me.

"Unless you have a tree house? Ohmygosh, tell me you have a tree house."

More staring.

If I didn't know better, I'd think my nose hairs had grown and shape-shifted into dancing mushrooms and were making a wavy mustache for me right now.

"Do you have a better idea?" I whisper. "Also, your mother and your grandmother are watching us at the top of the stairs."

Without warning, he dips his head and presses his mouth to mine.

But it's not like the awkward kiss this morning when I was practically licking *his* nose hairs.

This is a real kiss.

The kind with hot, wet lips and eager tongue and fingers thrust through my short hair and his body pressed against mine.

It's the kind of kiss I like to write about.

The only thing missing is a solid rod poking me in the belly that would suggest he's having an undeniable hormonal reaction to my feminine allures.

"You know she recently got left at the altar for the fifth time," Luca's mom says. "Your evil plans won't work."

"The Eye always works," his grandmother replies.

His shoulders hitch.

My shoulders hitch.

We break apart, but he wraps his arm around me and turns us both to face his family. “You’re both leaving first thing in the morning. We’re going to sleep under the stars, and I’ll change my fucking phone number and move if either of you say one more bad thing about Henri or only take sides to piss each other off. I’m done with both of you being assholes to each other over shit that went down twenty years ago. Understood?”

I elbow him. “Don’t say *fuck* to your mom and grandmother.”

“They *fucking* earned it.”

Nonna lifts a brow. “You have balls, Luca Antonio. I’ll give you that. But if you think you can escape what’s best for you, think again.”

Are goosebumps contagious?

Not asking for a friend.

Because as soon as Luca’s skin pebbles beside mine, the hairs on my arms stand straight up too.

“Let’s go to bed, Henri,” he says in a deadly calm voice.

And honestly?

That’s more of a turn-on than having a boner pressed into my belly would’ve been.

I smile and finger-wave at the matriarchs, and then I follow him out to the back yard.

Luca

I'M BEGINNING to understand why Henri's been engaged five times.

When the woman makes up her mind about something, it gets done.

Tracking me down? Check.

Making my Nonna materialize out of thin air so she has an excuse to play my fake girlfriend and stay with me to execute this plan of hers where I teach her how to not fall in love? Check.

Convincing me to sleep on the grass with god only knows what kind of city creatures lurking, with too much ambient light to see the stars, and most likely a few rocks under my back?

Yep, she did that too.

It almost begs the question how she hasn't succeeded in getting married five times, except the explanation is right there in her drive.

Takes one hell of a man to be able to commit to forever with that.

I couldn't even commit to forever with someone with half that much drive, though drive wasn't the problem. Not in the same way, anyway.

Truth? I *like* drive.

Didn't exactly make it to the big leagues myself by half-assing it.

But I'm not letting it drive me into forever with a woman either.

I step outside with an old blanket that I keep in the basement for wrapping stuff when I move—which is approximately every two years or so since I entered the minors—and come to a halt, because Henri's talking to someone in the darkness, and she doesn't sound right.

“Oh, yes, Copper Valley is *beautiful*. I toured the Copperstone Building

today—it's the tallest building here—and I got to go all the way to the top and stare and stare at the scenery. This city is so *pretty*. With parks and trees and lovely buildings, and oh, gosh, the Blue Ridge Mountains! You can see the Blue Ridge Mountains from the top of—oh, okay. Mm-hmm.”

She sighs heavily, and her phone screen lights up as she pulls it away from her ear to squint at it, which also lights up her face. She looks like she's telling ghost stories over a campfire, except it's a ghost story that's giving her constipation.

She didn't even look like she was constipated after Jerry left her on her wedding day.

Maybe it's a trick of the light. Or her hair, which is now covered with a bandana.

Except she's also closing her eyes, leaning back against the old oak tree, and rubbing her temple.

It's weird.

She looks defeated.

A tinny voice comes through the phone, and she leaps and puts it back to her ear. “Oh, good for Titus! Tell him Aunt Henri's giving him a high five for using the potty like a big boy. Yes, naturally, *after* he washes his hands. Wouldn't want to encourage bad hygiene! Oh, is that Tatiana cheering him on too? What a good sis—yes. Sure. Of course. I—Hi, Oliver.”

She pulls the phone away from her ear again, lighting up her wincing face, as a loud squawking comes through.

“Nice to hear your voice too, Oliver,” she calls to the phone.

It squawks again, then clearly says the entire alphabet, and finishes with an impersonation of Elvis, saying “*Thank you. Thank you very much.*”

“Wow, Oliver, that's so great!” Henri cheers.

Is she cheering on an actual bird, or does she know someone who pretends to be a bird?

The fact that I honestly don't know the answer to that question, and can't even make an educated guess, says a lot about how much my life has changed in the last twenty-four hours.

“Oliver, can you put Elsa back—”

There's another squawk, and then the bird-person starts singing *that song*.

The *earworm* song.

The one made famous by a certain ride at a certain amusement park, and fuck me with uncooked spaghetti, that's gonna be stuck in my head *all night long*.

“Oh my gosh, Oliver, I'm so sorry, my phone battery is dying. I don't know

if—”

She cuts herself off, pulls the phone away, and hangs it up.

Then she sits there, thumbing over the screen.

“You’re not texting whoever that was to tell them your battery died, are you?”

She shrieks and drops her phone. “Luca! You scared me to death!”

“What the hell were you talking to?”

“My sister and her family.” Pause. “And their bird.”

I cross the small lawn and start shaking out the blanket. It smells like mothballs and musty basement, but we’re sleeping on ground that’s more dirt than grass, so does it matter? “Your sister makes you talk *to her bird?*”

“The first time Oliver learned to say a word, I asked if I could hear it, and now she makes sure I hear everything. My nephew learned to poop in the potty today too. Isn’t that awesome?”

Huh.

Henri knows sarcasm.

Didn’t see that coming.

“You and your sister don’t get along?” I guess.

“Oh, no! We get along *great!* We’re like two peas in a pod. She’s the perfect one with three kids and two more on the way and a handsome husband who gives her four-point-nine orgasms a week, a membership at the best gym in LA, the world’s most perfect name, a *Better Homes and Gardens* house, her own popular YouTube channel where she teaches yoga, and the ability to bend time so she can also be involved with the PTA where her oldest will start school year after next, and she also makes three hundred meals a week for the homeless.”

“That...makes you two peas in a pod?”

“Yes, Luca, because I’m the one without a home and children, with five failed engagements, the laziest cat in the universe, and a job that no one in my family considers a real job because I write about vampires that aren’t even very good vampires. I provide the balance by being the loser in the pea pod ecosystem.”

What the hell’s a guy supposed to say to *that?* “Mm. Pillows?”

“I *had* a house,” she grumbles. “Barry got it in our split.”

“Barry?”

“Number four.”

“You were engaged to a Barry before you were engaged to a Jerry?”

“Yes, and I was engaged to both a Kyle and a Lyle too, and if you think you have some new jokes to make about that, please consider that Elsa’s husband Roberto has already made seventy-five percent of all jokes that can possibly be

made about them, mm-kay?”

“How did Barry get your house if you didn’t get married?”

She heaves an exasperated sigh and shoves a pillow at me. “It’s complicated, okay?”

“Did you co-sign on a house with your fourth fiancé and no marriage certificate?”

“No. I’m not *that* stupid.”

I wisely don’t point out that she was stupid enough to not keep her house, but she still skewers me with laser eyeballs in the darkness.

She also huffs. Loudly. And then keeps talking. “He moved in while we were engaged, and he brought his dog with bowel control issues, and also his ferret, and his beef jerky collection—”

“*Beef jerky collection?*”

“It wasn’t *actually* a collection. It was more like...he had an obsession. He ate it all, and then he’d go get more, and I thought it was cute that he was addicted so I called it his collection, because my house started to smell like he was made of beef jerky, and I didn’t want it anymore after we split up, so I let him have it.”

“You could’ve sold it.”

“Not without putting more than it was worth into getting the beef jerky dog poop smell out of the walls. And believe me, I learned my lesson. No more dating men who smell questionable or sleep with raw garlic under their pillows.”

Pillows.

Yep. I need to put that pillow to use before she starts talking about the rest of her exes.

“Some people just need someone to love them,” she says quietly. “I’m good at loving people. Why is that wrong?”

This Henri?

She’s more than I bargained for last night.

And this morning.

And at Brooks and Mackenzie’s place.

She’s not simply a hot mess.

She’s hurting because her drive has been taking her on all the wrong trips.

And that’s why I hate love. It’s this idealized fantasy of perfection that makes people fuck up more than they get right.

“Love itself isn’t wrong.” I tuck my hands under my head and stare up at the soft darkness. “But you need to quit loving people who don’t love you back.”

“What if no one ever loves me back?” she whispers.

My heart twists. Distant memories from childhood that I never wanted to see

again poke their heads out of the dirt, and I have to swallow down the unexpected grit clogging my throat to do the one thing she's asked in return for playing my girlfriend.

She wants my help in learning how to *not* fall in love.

And it suddenly feels so wrong.

She's clearly more cut out for optimism than anyone I've ever been related to. Teaching her how to not fall in love feels like teaching a rainbow how to not sparkle.

An unpredictable, chaotic, klutzy rainbow, but still a rainbow.

Watching her head straight into meeting my teammates in her pajamas shook something unfamiliar loose inside of me, and it has me off-kilter and thinking weird thoughts.

I roll onto my side to face her. "Fuck 'em. Love yourself, and forget anyone who doesn't want to recognize and cherish what makes you special."

Christ on parmesan. This conversation needs to end.

Her family are a bunch of dicks. Her exes are a bunch of dicks. And her self-esteem is a dick too if it's telling her that she's not lovable.

Of course she's lovable. Probably to a normal person with healthy attitudes about love and commitment. One who likes all the optimism that she spews and who can handle her energy levels and who doesn't think it's odd that she dresses her cat in costumes.

One who'll hear her confessing all this stuff and kiss her to shut her up, because a woman feeling down deserves to be kissed.

Needs to be kissed.

To be reassured that she doesn't have to compete to impress a bunch of dicks, because she's perfect the way she is, and whoever kisses her will appreciate her soft lips and her hot mouth and the enthusiasm that she'd put into kissing the fuck out of them back, and *why the hell am I thinking about kissing Henri?*

Holy shit.

I am.

I'm thinking about kissing Henri.

Is she a witch?

Or is it that she's blindsided me with this unapologetic drive to get what she wants, when what she wants is a little crazy-pants?

"Mackenzie's read your books," I blurt.

She seems completely oblivious to my internal freaking out, though, as she mutters, "Wild, huh?"

Breathe, Rossi. Breathe. Think about ice cream. And deep-sea fishing. And

hitting a home run. And petting dogs at the shelter.

Yeah. That's helping with the freaking out.

I'm not in danger of popping a boner, because Nonna broke my junk, so I'm also not bothering with the whole *picture your mother naked* thing.

Or possibly knowing that my mother's sleeping naked in my room right now has already done everything my dick needs it to do.

It's not that I don't like my mother. It's more that I don't want to think of any of my relatives naked.

Ever.

I blow out another slow breath and sneak a fast glance at Henri again. "You make a living off your books?"

There's a beat of silence before she answers, and I get the feeling I'm on the receiving end of the look I used to give people when they'd ask if you could make a living playing baseball.

You have to be the best of the best, but I knew I would be the very best of the best.

I'm not—see also, *I've been traded by half the teams in the league*, or so it feels, and I've never once made it to the all-star game—but I'm still damn good if I'm playing in the pros.

"I do fine, yes," she finally says.

"My cousin Alonzo tried self-publishing while he was recovering from being Eyed. Ended up needing therapy and blood pressure medication. Said it's not as easy as it looks."

"Recovering from being Eyed?"

"No, writing and publishing."

"Yes, I got that part. Live it, thanks. I know it's not as easy as it looks. What I'm curious about is, what kind of recovery did he need after being Eyed?"

Hell. If I explain this to her, it'll probably end up in a book. Either that, or she'll double-down on efforts to convince Nonna we're real, and we'll probably end up engaged.

"Look at that. Eleven-thirty. Lights out time."

"Fine. Don't tell me. I'll make up my own version, and it'll probably be better anyway."

She stretches out next to me, and I study the outline of her profile. She's on her back with her face tilted to the sky, where there's not a star in sight because of all the ambient light from the city. It's a big blanket of dark gray.

Feels wrong to go to sleep with Henri cranky.

"Probably would," I agree softly. "Would yours involve a flaming asteroid made of toilets?"

She sniffs. "Amateur."

Would you look at that?

I'm actually cracking up.

And not thinking about kissing her.

We're two adults in a crappy situation making the most of it.

"I'll get my mother a hotel room and change the locks on the house tomorrow," I tell her.

"I can get a hotel room."

"Not if you're going to pretend to be my girlfriend for the rest of the season. Plus, we leave for an away series after the game tomorrow. My house will be empty."

"Except for your Nonna."

"I'll take her with me."

Fuckity fuckstrings. Where the hell did that come from?

Henri rolls to face me again. "She'll want to watch us sext."

"You'd rather she do that from here?"

"My entire career has prepared me for excellent sexting. But you...I know someone who can write you a sexting script, but you can't use a script if your Nonna's looking over your shoulder."

"I can sext absolutely fine on my own."

"Yeah, but it'll be weird if I know it's your own words."

"It'll be *better* if you know it's my words, because then you have to learn to resist them. You don't get to cheat, Henri. You can't learn to not fall in love if you don't believe it's genuine."

Yep.

I'm a masochistic idiot.

I'm *asking* Henri to sext with me.

It's The Eye.

It's Nonna's Eye.

There's no other explanation for wanting to kiss Henri and wanting to sext her, except possibly to convince myself that she's what's broken with my twig and berries today.

"Jerry was right. You can be a real dick."

Hell. She probably knows what I was thinking, and she's right. That was a dick thing to think. "Jerry's a social-climbing tool who only wanted to be friends with me in grade school because I was the only one of the other outcasts too big for the bullies to pick on."

She goes still.

Good.

Because I don't talk about grade school, even if I don't want to forget where I came from.

It's complicated.

"How were *you* an outcast?" she asks softly.

I flip over to my other side, which gives me the perfect view of my shithole of a house.

"Because you were poor?" she persists, and I swear the other question is dangling there in her head. I can feel it. *And how was Giovanni Rossi's son poor? He played professional hockey. You couldn't have been poor. Or picked on. Your dad was a star!*

It's what they all say if they get close enough.

And they all have no clue.

"Go to sleep, Henri. The world's problems will still be there for you to solve in the morning."

"I should know these things about you, Luca. If your grandmother can actually put The Eye on you, then this has to be as real as possible, because you can't hide from curses."

My pulse is suddenly soaring like a home run ball, except without the thrill that goes with knocking one out of the park.

"Yeah," I finally say. "Because I was poor. My sperm donor shit away all of the cash he made before I was born. Everyone thinks you spend a year playing pro, you're set for life, but you're not. He wasn't. And *that's* what everyone I grew up with knew."

She goes silent.

It's worse than her talking, because silent means pity.

I don't want pity.

I want to live my own life, on my terms, without making the same mistakes my parents made and without people who claim they *only want what's best* pushing me into relationships that won't work out.

And then I remember who I'm talking to. "Don't," I say shortly.

"I'm not feeling sorry for you. I'm admiring how much you've done and how you live your life."

"Don't go digging into my life. I'm not a research project and I'm not inspiration for one of your books."

She makes a muffled squeak, and her cat replies with a half-meow from the kitchen window.

The blanket rustles as she twists on it. "Do you know what?"

"Probably not."

"Mind-reading is a good talent to have when you're pretending to be

someone's boyfriend. Good job, Luca. We're going to pull this off. High five."

I twist to look at her.

She smiles brightly in the darkness, and fuck me if her enthusiasm isn't a shade of adorable.

"Go to sleep, Henri."

She settles back down, but I swear I can still hear her thinking.

And I also swear it's about me.

Henri

I SLEEP like a hunted animal in the jungle. A *wounded* hunted animal who knows that the next few minutes might be her last.

Or possibly I'm being melodramatic, but that's what happens when I don't sleep well and I'm hot and I can't stop obsessing over Luca being poor as a kid and how it probably ties into him living in a run-down house to save money so he doesn't end up like his dad, and thinking about his dad makes me think about both his parents, and then his mom with my ex-fiancé, and then Luca's ex-fiancée, and I want to know why he left her.

I can't help myself. Diving into characters is what I do for my job, and now I have a new puzzle.

Namely, Luca Rossi.

Baseball player. Dick. Bearing wounds from childhood that he refuses to talk to me about and a secret past with a woman that he pretends doesn't exist.

Or at least doesn't think about enough for her to have come up in our conversations.

Spending time with someone like Luca should be helping me want to give love the middle finger, but it's not.

Not yet.

I'm too intrigued by the puzzle of all the things I don't know about him yet, which will undoubtedly be my downfall.

I sneak into the house before dawn to use the bathroom.

I'm tiptoeing, and I even remember to skip the saggy step. The last thing I want is to encounter either his mom or his nonna. My plan is to do my business

and sneak out to a coffee shop for a morning of trying to write—*trying* being the operative word, since I haven't been in the mood since Jerry happened.

But trying to write is better than staying here and pretending life is great when his mom is dating my ex-fiancé and his grandmother will probably put The Eye on me too if she finds out I'm only playing the role of Luca's girlfriend.

When I dance into the bathroom upstairs, yank my pants down, and sit, I fall butt-first into cold toilet water.

"Aaaaah!"

I almost clamp my hands over my mouth, remember I'm touching the edges of a toilet seat that's probably gross, and instead squeeze my lips together and pray no one heard me.

"Hello?" Nonna yells.

"Who's there?" Luca's mother shrieks.

"Luca? Is that you?"

"Of course it's not Luca! He doesn't scream like a girl!"

"Oh. Then it's his floozy, isn't it?"

Oh god.

Oh god oh god oh god.

I didn't lock the bathroom door, which means one of them is going to find me in here sitting in toilet water with my hooha hanging out, and Luca's mom is probably naked too, and this is not how I want to start my day.

"Don't come in!" I screech. "*And why didn't you teach Luca to put the damn seat down?*"

"That's his father's fault!" his mother yells back.

Nonna snorts loudly enough to scare Dogzilla, who bolts into the bathroom after pushing the door open with her nose.

"Bullshit," Nonna hollers. "It's those last two assholes you tried to make Luca's stepfather!"

"That was *seventeen years ago*, you witch!"

"Would you two wait until after coffee to start this?" The bathroom door swings open again, and there's Luca, with his hair perfect and his pecs solid and his arms the very definition of arm porn, not to mention the black athletic shorts slung low on his hips and showing off his happy trail, striding into the bathroom built for one and taking up all the breathing room while I sit in toilet water soup with my arms crossed to block his view of my beaver and my shorts hanging around my ankles.

"I love them both, and I can't stand them together," he mutters.

"Get out," I hiss.

"Are you okay?"

Happy Henri who's had a solid week of good writing days, lots of sleep, and a chance to binge watch the first season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* recently would smile brightly and assure him I'm fine and that I meant to do this in the name of research so he'd leave.

I am *not* Happy Henri this morning, nor have I had enough sleep, enough writing time, or enough *Buffy* time. But I fake it anyway, because that's what I do. "Yes! I'm great! Fully awake now and ready to start the day! So refreshed! Especially on my bottom!"

His lips twitch.

His lips twitch.

The *nerve*.

"Who starts their day at this hour?" his mother calls.

I glare at him, since his mother can't see that.

He swipes a hand over his mouth. "Two seconds. I'll get you clean clothes."

Oh, he thinks it's going to be that easy, does he? "Pick out an outfit for Dogzilla while you're at it. She and I are going to a cat-fé so I can get some work done."

If he doesn't know what a cat-fé is—you know, a café where cats are welcome—he doesn't show it.

He merely turns and leaves the bathroom so I can hustle my flat butt out of the toilet water, shake my shorts off, and dive over my cat to hide in the tub before he returns.

I pull my shirt off and toss it over the boring blue shower curtain—which goes remarkably well with all the seventies-yellow tile in here—and crank the water, then scream again as the ice-cold flow surges out the showerhead in needlepoint spikes instead of the bathtub faucet.

Dogzilla hops her lazy butt up onto the tub shelf and peers at me. She loves showers, but she, too, has her limits.

And yes, my cat loves showers.

And I love her for loving showers, because it makes her unique.

The door opens. "You being attacked by the shower demons?" Luca asks.

"You may leave your sacrifice on the sink and see yourself out."

"But, honey, I need to shower too."

I freeze.

He did not.

He. Did. Not.

I peek out the back of the shower curtain, exposing nothing more than my eyeballs and nose.

Luca's peeling his shorts off.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

“Selling it,” he whispers back.

“You can just—just—” Oh, god, his butt.

No, that’s not a *butt*.

That’s an *ass*.

Muscle. And curves. And dimples. And muscle. And the backs of his thighs.

And—

I wrench my gaze to the window above the toilet. “You can stand there and make noises like you’re in here.”

“But then I won’t come out wet.”

And now *I’m* wet, and not because of the shower. Thanks, Luca. “It’s six million degrees in here. We’re all already wet.”

“I can’t still smell like sweat and dead leaves and ant guts when I leave this bathroom, Henri.”

“Then we’ll both take fast showers and fake that we’re in here together.”

“You told me yesterday that you’ve seen naked men before and that we had to do this.”

“Yes, but you’ve never seen *me* naked before, and I’m having a very bad day, and maybe I don’t want to do this right now.”

“Do you have four belly buttons and an eyeball in the middle of your breast?”

“What? *No*. Of course not.”

“Seen one, you’ve seen them all. And I’ve seen more than one, so trust me, it’s just a body.”

I glare at him, which is a mistake, because glaring at him means looking at him, and he’s standing there stark naked.

With everything hanging out.

Hoo boy.

Naked Luca.

He’s right, of course. He’s not the first naked man I’ve seen.

But he is the first naked man I’ve seen with muscles like that, and a scruffy jawline like that, and eyes like that, and basically, it’s like being in a room with one of the heroes from my books come to life and sculpted before me, and right now, I like my heroes way more than I like any man I’ve ever been naked with, which is confusing all the neurons firing in my brain and overwhelming my hormonal systems.

Which is to say, I’m so freaking relieved that I’m not a guy, or I’d be popping a visible boner.

Whereas he’s totally unaffected in the would-be-boner area.

Duh. Of course he's unaffected. He can only see my eyes, my nose, my forehead—where that massive vein I got from my dad is undoubtedly throbbing—and my hair.

My crazy, curly hair with the double misplaced cowlicks that make it look like I'm related to Lucifer when I get stupid and cut it this short.

When I was little, my eyebrows used to point wrong too.

It's entirely possible I've had so many failed weddings because my parents and sister always put *that* picture in the rehearsal dinner slide show.

The one of me in a red dress from when I was six and fisting a fork with the tines up and the flash hit my eyes wrong and made me look like I had the fires of hell burning inside to go with the weird horn curls and the tilted-up devil brows.

Luca's face twitches, but he's grinning through it. "Your brain is a terrifying place, isn't it?"

"Only one way to tell."

"I'm not going to ask you what you're thinking."

"I meant you could read my books, Mr. Know It All."

Someone knocks at the bathroom door. Dogzilla whines. That's a bad sign.

"Luca?" his mother calls. "I'm coming in."

My eyes try to pop out of my head. My heart tries to gather all my other internal organs and assure them this is going to be okay, but we all know it's lying.

And Luca?

Luca dives into the shower.

With me.

"No, Mother, you're not," he yells back.

"I have to pee!"

"Hold it!"

"I can't hold it! I gave birth to *you*. Do you know what that does to a woman's bladder?"

"Should've been doing your Kegels," Nonna calls.

Luca drops his head to the shower wall. His golden skin is speckled with water droplets that are getting thick enough to slide down all the curves of his various muscles that I usually know the names for, but my brain has short-circuited.

He doesn't smell like ant guts.

He smells like *delicious*. Like whatever the male version of brunch is. Not because he smells like food, but because he smells better than anything I've ever smelled, and brunch is the best-smelling meal of them all.

I blow out a breath, turn my back so he can't see my private bits, and stick

my head under the hard needle-prick pounding of the water.

Yet, I can still hear it when the racehorse known as Luca's mother starts doing her business.

Holy—just *wow*.

That's some seriously loud peeing.

I glance back at Luca.

His green eyes meet mine.

His mother keeps on keeping on with her toilet business.

And then she farts.

My eyeballs are once again in danger of popping right out of their sockets. Luca's face is contorting thirty-two ways to Sunday, but this time, he's not annoyed.

Oh, no.

He's trying not to laugh.

His mother farts again, the sound echoing first in the toilet bowl and then around the small bathroom, and he sticks a knuckle in his mouth as he wrenches his gaze away from me, but it's too late.

I saw it.

I saw Luca Rossi's full smile, all that mirth dancing in his eyes, his cheeks dimpling up behind that layer of dark scruff, and I want to lick it.

I want to lick his smile and claim it as my own and live in the glow of it for the next seventy years.

Oh, hell...I'm doing it again.

I'm falling for a guy because he smiled.

I poke him in the ribs, then immediately wish I hadn't touched him, because *gah*, his skin is smooth and hot and wet, and now I want to lick that too.

The peeing stops, and his mother gives one of those relieved sighs as he shoots me a raised-eyebrow, silent *what?*

I mouth *quit being attractive* to him, but his brows and cheeks do that *I can't understand you* twitch.

His gaze dips.

And the man's not looking at my shoulder.

I squeak and turn my back on him, but I can *feel* him looking at me. At my neck. My backbone. My hips. My lackluster butt. My skinny legs.

Oh, crap. Have I shaved recently? And *why didn't I think about that last night before I put my shorts on?*

Oh my god.

Oh my god, I met all of his baseball friends and Mackenzie with hairy bigfoot legs *on top of everything else*.

“God, is there anything better than a good piss first thing in the morning?” his mom asks.

“Showering with my girlfriend without having to listen to my mother take a piss two feet away comes to mind.”

“Then you should’ve bought a house with more than one toilet.”

“You could’ve peed in the yard. I have a shovel out there behind the tree too.”

“I agree with your mother, Luca Antonio, and you know I hate to do that,” Nonna yells. “There’s buying a fixer-upper, and then there’s being an idiot. You’re being an idiot. Henrietta, you have your work cut out for you with this one. If you’re woman enough to follow through with the job.”

“Quit baiting my girlfriend, Nonna,” Luca hollers back.

Dogzilla adds half a meow and gingerly steps down into the tub.

The sink turns on, and I make a mental note to not shake hands with his mother because she does *not* wash for twenty seconds. A moment later, the door closes.

I suck in a deep breath, grateful that the water’s finally hot in here. “May I please have the shampoo?” I whisper.

It appears over my left shoulder.

And it’s Kangapoo.

Of course.

I’m going to smell like Luca Rossi for the rest of the day.

“Need help?” he murmurs entirely too close to my ear.

“No! I need you to back up,” I whisper back.

“We have to make sex noises.”

“We—*what?*”

“They think we’re in here trying to have a good time. We need to sound like it.”

“Are you trying to make me uncomfortable?”

“No, that’s merely a bonus side effect.” He raises his voice. “Here, babe. Get my back?”

“Only if you get my front,” I reply.

My back is still to him, which means I’m going to have to rinse this shampoo out face-first, and talking about washing him is making my entire body flush.

“Oh, god, yeah, that’s good,” he says.

I look back.

He’s staring up at the ceiling.

And there’s absolutely *no* movement below his waist.

Am I *that* unattractive that I don’t even get a quarter of a woody? Not that

we're having sex.

We are so not having sex.

But I'm standing here with every cell in my body getting turned on by his earthy male scent and the hard planes of his body and that damn smile, whereas he can't even fake a teeny tiny bit of attraction in his primitive parts.

Life sucks sometimes.

Especially when this is pain I need to endure to grow and learn and not repeat all of my past errors.

"Oh, god, Luca, you know I love it when you do that," I say in a breathy voice loud enough to carry over the water.

He makes a choking noise.

"Get a room," Nonna yells.

"Quieter," I hiss loudly to Luca, still in my sex kitten voice, which might be having an effect on his penis?

Maybe?

He growls and turns away so I can't see. "I can't be quieter, Henrietta," he replies, equally loudly-but-pretending-to-be-trying-to-be-quiet. "You know what your body does to me."

"Good lord, he wasn't this enthusiastic over the supermodel he took to Evan's wedding last year," his mother says.

"No meat, no good lovin'," Nonna yells back. "Not that she has the right kind of meat either..."

I suck in a breath, because I'm not entirely certain exactly what they're saying, but I get the gist of it.

I'm not Luca's type.

Also, when I suck in that breath, I get a nose full of water since I jerk my head up at the same time. As I'm coughing it out, Dogzilla lets out a panicked *meow!*, a cold draft makes the shower curtain waft toward me, and I realize Luca's gone.

There's frantic whispering outside the bathroom. I stick my head under the hard spray so I don't have to hear it.

I know I'm not all that pretty. I know I have a weird personality.

You can't have five failed engagements and *not* have something wrong with you. You can't.

But I don't need Luca's family rubbing it in my face.

Coming here was a bad idea.

He's right. I should've tried therapy again.

Maybe with a female therapist this time.

Or virtually, with the voice distorted to intentionally sound like a robot.

The bathroom door slams shut, and the shower curtain wrenches open at the back of the tub. “They’re leaving,” Luca tells me.

“That’s not necessary. I know I’m not a supermodel, or even attractively curvy, and—”

“Quit making excuses for people who are total dicks to you.”

I blink at him.

Dogzilla, who’s been sitting at the edge of the tub, cautiously climbs down into the shower to rub my legs while the needle water pelts her.

And Luca keeps scowling, which is unfortunately as hot as him smiling, and my backstabbing body is not immune.

Not in the least.

He needs to leave before he starts to smell me.

His green eyes are going dark. “As long as you’re living under this roof, you’re going to talk back to dicks and you’re going to have a spine. Understood?”

I nod once.

His cheek twitches. He glances down at my body once more, and then he yanks the shower curtain closed.

The door clicks a moment later.

And I don’t know what happened, but I do know one thing.

I’m in a mood to write something hot and sexy for the first time in ages.

Luca

I'M HUSTLING my mother out the door when she pauses to give me a hug and follows it with one of those mom looks. "I'm not trying to be an asshole to Henri. I *do* know how it feels to be let down by a man, and I *am* taking that into serious consideration with my own next steps, but if Henri is honestly going to be a part of your life, then she needs to know what she's up against stepping foot into this family. Especially with your grandmother being who she is. And if she's something you're doing to get your grandmother off your back, she deserves better. I'd rather scare her off thinking I'm the ass than have her leave with the wrong impression of the man I know you can be."

"You can do that without being a dick." She can, can't she?

Hell, I don't know.

Can I be involved with Henri in any capacity without being a dick? Probably not, because she definitely shouldn't get close.

I shake my head. Problems for another day. "Also, maybe try being the bigger person the next time Nonna baits you."

That earns me an eye roll. "I will when she does." Her brows furrow, and she opens her mouth like she's going to say something else, then sighs, kisses my cheek, and walks away, leaving me realizing I don't actually know what else she wanted in her trip out here beyond the same as Nonna—making sure I'm alive since I've been avoiding everyone's phone calls.

Unease settles into my bones as she pulls away from the curb in her rental car.

Probably partly because there's clearly something on her mind that she

didn't want to talk about, and I'm guessing it's Jerry.

Partly because showering with Henri was weirdly fun, even if it was embarrassing as hell that Mr. Winky was playing Mr. Dinky.

Partly also because Henri's undoubtedly going to either dig into her research about me, or want to talk about my father and why I drive Fluffy Maple and live in run-down houses and what went wrong with my own wedding, and I don't want to talk about any of that.

I want to play baseball. Be in my happy place.

I don't have crises of *who am I?* when I'm on the field. I have the sun, the crack of the bat, tossing a ball with kids in the stands between innings, and goofing off with my teammates.

Nonna clomps down the stairs with her luggage, taking a video of herself that'll undoubtedly be up on TikTok with funky captions on it within an hour, because she's making faces and lip-syncing something at her screen.

I grab her bag and help her over the bad step.

She pockets her phone and pops out her earbuds, shaking out her long unicorn hair. "I don't know what your mother told you about Henri, but she's wrong."

Now it's my turn to give a look. "Oh, you like Henri now?"

"Of course I like Henri. She's off her rocker, but that's what makes life fun. You need fun. Also, don't tell her I said that. A woman has to keep up appearances while she's making sure her gut feeling is right. I'll be back early next week to check on her progress with you. Don't do anything stupid. Remember Alonzo."

"We're this close to making the playoffs. Can I please get through this season first?"

"Fate waits for no games." She pats my cheek. "Gotta dash. Pierre-Luc is waiting for me up in DC. We're gonna TikTok everyone's socks off for a long weekend."

"Have fun." I wait until she's unlocking her car to add in a mutter, "Maybe you should stay longer and help him with his love life instead."

"I heard that, Luca Antonio."

I'm still in a bath towel, and the neighbor across the street is standing in her front window with a phone, which means she'll probably be trying to sell a half-naked photo of me to a gossip rag soon, so I step back inside and let myself sag against the wall for a minute.

Time to go see Henri.

This whole fake relationship thing has been a shitshow. She couldn't have known what she was volunteering for yesterday morning, and being this close to

what almost feels like a relationship is making me break out in metaphorical hives.

They're worse than real hives, because they itch in places I can't scratch.

I woke up this morning knowing one thing for absolute certain—I don't want to help Henri learn how to not fall in love.

The world doesn't need more of us all fucked up on that front.

But I don't want her falling in love with the next random dick she meets either, which puts me in a conundrum.

I can tell her the secret to not falling in love is to learn to be a dick, or I can get over myself, do something good for another human being outside of a baseball team, and take a chance at making everything worse when I'm trying to be that bigger person I'd like my mother to be.

Best I can tell, even if she is crazy, Henri's not a bad person.

She has awful taste in men and a hair trigger when it comes to getting engaged.

I can convince her marriage isn't all it's cracked up to be without breaking her spirit.

Can't I?

She's not bailing on her end of our bargain, crazy as it might be. So I can find a way to live with my part.

Her cat is lying at the top of the stairwell, flopped half on its side, half on its back, with its paws crossed demurely and one eye lazily tracking my movement. It's the laziest, most chill cat I've ever met. Even its coloring is chill—mostly a soft white, with light gray on its face and tail, like the gray couldn't be bothered to get any darker or spread any more over the cat's body. Henri's dressed the animal in the dinosaur costume I grabbed, and I pause to snap a picture of it with its scales sticking up on the back, because it could fit with all the costumes I'm in charge of finding before we leave Duggan Field for our away trip to Boston.

We have a different away series starting tomorrow in Florida, but we'll be heading to the airport for that trip immediately after the game tonight, so we're not wasting costume time when there won't be anyone watching.

Plus, tonight's for wearing our Fireballs pajamas.

Don't mock it. It's a thing, and we've swept the last two away series that we've worn our pajamas for.

And yes, they're footy pajamas.

They rock.

I should ask Henri to come with us. It's not unusual for family to travel with the team. I'll have my own room, and the hotels always have air conditioning.

Plus, it's better for appearances, right?

She's out of the bathroom, so I head to the bedroom.

Not there.

Not in the guest room either.

"Henri?"

A muffled and irritated, "*What?*" answers me from somewhere back near my bedroom, so I head that way again, rubbing a hand over my face.

"I'm sorry on behalf of my mother and my grandmother. They can be—"

"*Shh!*"

What the hell?

Is this the same woman who even talked in her sleep last night?

And where is she?

I bend and peer under my bed, because I wouldn't put it past her to be there, but all I see are dust bunnies gathering on the wood floor.

But from this angle, I hear a weird clicking.

I follow the sound straight to my closet.

Henri's camped out with her back to the rear wall, sitting on the floor under my clothes in the smallest walk-in closet known to man, typing so fast on a laptop that I should see smoke. Her hair's dripping on a gray T-shirt that's inside out and backwards—you can tell by the tag flapping in front—and I don't want to know what she is or isn't wearing under that towel around her waist.

"What are you—"

"I'm *writing*, Luca. It's *my job*, and I haven't been able to do it for *weeks*, so *shh!* Go away."

Her lips keep moving after sound stops coming out, and her fingers fly. The words *Confucius*, *stud*, *amnesia*, *craft herpes*, and *boinky boinky* all slip out of her mouth in the fifteen seconds I stand there watching her.

She's a woman on a mission.

It's weirdly fascinating.

Also, seeing her in her natural habitat is making the image of her wet and soapy in the shower invade my brain, and was that a surge of blood heading to my limp dick?

No.

It was an itch.

Or was it?

I could grab myself and test it, but if I grab myself, she'll look up at me at that exact minute and think I'm making a crude gesture.

Jesus.

I'm a *baseball player*.

Grabbing ourselves is what we do.

Screw it.

I'm gonna—

“Don't you have somewhere to be?” Henri snaps.

Right.

I'm gonna go grab myself in the shower.

“What are you smiling at?” she snarls.

Look at that. I *am* smiling. “Glad to know I'm not the only one pissed this morning.”

“Confucius is having an argument with a daisy tree, if you must know, and when my characters are agitated, *I* get agitated, but I can't get *unagitated* until this daisy tree shifts into a fairy that he can bang, and then I'm going to get horny, so you might want to take your little tush on out to the ballpark before that happens.”

Holy. Fuck.

That's real, legitimate blood flow to my dick. I almost have half a woody.

Henri blinks angrily at me, a very clear *go the hell away* blink, and since I need to see if my boner's as big today as it would've been three days ago, I hightail it to the bathroom.

And that's when I realize I'm getting a woody over Henri, and I freeze.

The Eye is working.

The Eye is working.

Shit.

I picture my mother naked in my shower, and my nuts shrink back into my body and my dick asks if it can go with them.

Not much to do after that except shower fast and lie again about needing to get to the ballpark. I should offer Henri tickets to the game, but she's preoccupied, and I don't want to know what kind of damage she might inflict if I interrupt her writing again.

Nor do I want to stick around for when she gets horny.

Though, the thought does prompt more of that intrigued movement in my crotch.

I'm broken. There's something wrong with me.

And when I'm broken, there's only one thing to do.

Re-center myself.

With baseball.

Henri

“THANK you so much for calling me,” I say for the seventeenth time to Mackenzie as she points me to a seat a few rows back from the baseball field. “And I’m sorry about the whole *You’re not a vampire, you’re a witch* thing when I picked up. I was so deep in writing, I forgot where I was for a minute.”

“Honestly, I’m surprised no one’s said that to me sooner in my life.” She smiles, and I swear she could be a fairy princess. A baseball fairy princess.

Her blond hair is tied back in a ponytail under her Fireballs baseball cap, her lipstick is an adorable pink, her Fireballs jersey fits her like it was custom made for her—which it might’ve been, between her dating one of the players and her dads being drag queens—and she’s totally pulling off the denim skirt over her Fireballs Chucks.

I point to the shoes. “Those are amazing.”

“My underwear matches. Also, I have a few rules about watching baseball with me. They’re little bitty superstitions, but if we don’t follow them, and the team loses, we basically can’t be friends.”

I start to laugh, realize she’s serious, and quickly school my features in the gravest solemnity. “Will I have to quack like a duck?”

“No! No duck. We’re voting *against* the duck. But you might have to go to the bathroom every time Cooper steps up to bat, and we need to get you your own Fireballs hat. Also, we might start the wave. Can you believe the wave has died out at ballparks? Now that they have bigger video screens, group waves are out, and self-expression is in, but is it self-expression if all anyone ever does is whatever dance is trending on social media?”

“Aw, you miss the wave, don’t you?”

“*So badly.*” She suddenly sits straighter in her seat and lifts a hand, wiggling her fingers. Out on the field, one of the ballplayers waves back. I squint, looking for Luca, and I can’t find him.

Uh-oh.

Did something bad happen? Was it because of The Eye? Did he trip over something? Or get hit wrong with a ball during batting practice?

Mackenzie nudges me. “Luca’s waving at us.”

I squint harder. “That’s not Brooks?”

She gives me a funny look. “If it was Brooks, I’d be blowing kisses. Eight, to be exact, because that’s his number.”

“Ohmygosh, that’s adorable!” I fake a bright smile and wave in the direction she’s pointing.

She reaches behind me and moves my hand so that I’m waving to the outfield.

Probably I need to see an eye doctor. Or maybe I need to not spend nine straight hours on the computer.

But even though I couldn’t immediately pick Luca out under his ball cap and in his uniform pants—let’s be real, *all* baseball players look awesome in those uniform pants—I can clearly see the man out there swiping a hand over his mouth like he’s trying to hide a smile.

Or a grimace.

It could be either, especially after our short text exchange when I told him Mackenzie had invited me to the game.

Great. Have fun. Whatever she tells you, do NOT bring live goldfish into the stadium. Also, DO run to the bathroom, do the Hokey Pokey, or eat whatever she tells you is good luck once you’re in your seats.

I texted him that I loved him, that he was my pumpkin pie, and that I couldn’t wait for him to get home tonight, and he replied with a reminder that the team is leaving for Florida as soon as the game’s over, but he’d text me from the road.

“Are you traveling with the team?” I ask Mackenzie. Also, what number is Luca? I’m his girlfriend. I should know this. Isn’t there a program somewhere?

“Nope. Day job. Not enough vacation time. Plus, I haven’t yet, and they’re playing *really* well, and I don’t want to mess with their streak by changing whatever it is they’re doing. The Lady Fireballs have made a pact—no changing any routines. If any of us wives, girlfriends, and fiancées started the season by traveling with the team, they keep traveling. If they didn’t, they don’t. Consistency is *very* important. With an exception for Tanesha, since she and

Darren just had a baby, which changed their routine by default.”

“How did you meet Brooks?”

“I stole the meatball mascot costume and cock-blocked him a bunch of times during spring training.”

“You stole the—wait. *That* meatball costume?” I point to the field—close to us, right on the third base line—where a giant flaming meatball is having a pool noodle sword fight with a firefly with the largest ball of ass I’ve ever seen.

“This whole mascot contest that the new owners are running is *so dumb*. Can you see the other two over there? The duck and the echidna?”

I squint at the opposite baseline and nod. They’re blurry, but I can see them. Who knew writing that many words would short-circuit my eyeballs today? “Why an echidna? I didn’t know what an echidna was until I stumbled over it while researching different cool animals for shifter ideas. Are the new owners Australian?”

“No, they’re evil.” She sighs. “And friends of mine, so I shouldn’t call them evil, but on this, they’re definitely *so wrong*. I’m almost positive they picked the echidna because people wouldn’t know what it was, and then they’d spend more time thinking about the Fireballs and their new mascot options while they researched why there are such odd choices, which is unfortunately brilliant and also working, even if I will die a little inside if they don’t bring back Fiery the Dragon. And speaking of, here. I brought you a *Fiery Forever* button.”

A large, muscled man in the row behind us sticks his head between us. “Got any spares, Mackenzie?”

“Of course, I—*oh!* Hey, Tyler. And Duncan! And—wow. *All* of you.”

I look back, and an entire row of large muscled men are beaming at my blond companion.

“Training camp starts tomorrow,” one tells her. “Gotta support our weenie counterparts before we head off to be men.”

She rolls her eyes, but she’s laughing as she passes an entire bag of *Fiery Forever* buttons up to them. “Gentlemen, meet Henri Bacon. Henri, meet the Copper Valley Thrusters hockey team.”

Wow. Wow. This is like a research dream come true. Not that I put hockey players in my paranormal romances, but I could.

Couldn’t I? “Ohmygosh, what if they had fangs that got knocked out by pucks?” I whisper to myself.

Mackenzie shoves a button at me. “No. Nuh-uh. You want to put a sports team in a book, you’re writing a baseball book first. Luca would never forgive you if you didn’t.”

“Dude, Luca has a sister?” one of the hockey players says. “He didn’t tell me

that.”

“Henri’s *dating* Luca, goofball. And you’re married.”

“Not to my sister. I didn’t know Luca was into kinky stuff like kissing his cousins and sisters.”

They’re all grinning like they know they’re being funny, but Mackenzie squints her eyeballs at them and points at them individually. “Do *not* get on my bad side unless you want your team to make the most epic fall from grace ever seen in professional sports.”

Wow again.

She made an entire row of hockey players squirm.

And the ones that weren’t initially squirming start when she adds, “Also, I know how to get in touch with all of your wives and girlfriends. Don’t tempt me.”

I beam at her. “I think you’re my new hero.”

“Aww, that’s sweet. Here. Your button is crooked. Also, get out your phone so you can vote for a mascot. We’re all voting for Meaty, because I have video of him defacing public property and doing something unspeakable to the Thrusters’ mascot statue outside Mink Arena, and also of him being led away from my dad’s lounge in handcuffs, plus his mugshot, and so we need Meaty to win so that I can drop that bomb two days later and *make* the owners bring Fiery back.”

“Your brain is amazing.”

She blushes. “I probably need therapy.”

“You have a cause. That’s so admirable.”

“Enough about me. What are you getting out of fake-dating Luca?”

I choke on air and my eyes fly out to the grassy outfield, where there are now two men with their backs to us, and they’re both number eight.

No, wait. One’s eight. One’s three.

“He’s not going to answer for you,” Mackenzie tells me.

“It’s not fake.”

“You write romance novels and just had a bad break-up. His Nonna put The Eye on him and he’s a self-professed love-hater. I can put the bacon and the Nutella together here.”

“*Shh.*”

“Don’t worry, I’m all for this plan,” she whispers. “No good comes of people being forced to hook up. It’s a recipe for disaster. Especially when his grandmother is screwing with the best season the Fireballs have had in decades.”

I blink at her. “So...you’re not going to say I’m not his type? Or...not good enough for him? I mean, *if* we were faking this. Which we’re not. We might’ve

considered starting this as a fake thing to get his nonna off his back, but we have these feelings for each other, and—”

And I need to shut up.

Because rambling never leads to following the script. *Never*. I’ve written enough books to know that by now.

But Mackenzie brushes it all away. “I couldn’t even *talk* to baseball players this time last year. I hummed the national anthem in a closet to keep Brooks from scoring with a woman in spring training, and I’ve dedicated my entire life to being an obsessed baseball fan. I am *not* one to judge who is and isn’t the right type or *good enough*. Plus, you’re *Nora freaking Dawn*. Luca’s lucky you came along when you did, or god only knows what his nonna would’ve driven him to.”

I sit there blinking at her for a minute, because my eyes are suddenly wet and my throat is hot and I’m getting a tingle in my heart, right in that spot that lights up when I meet someone who *gets* it.

Not that I’m Nora Dawn, but that it’s okay for me to be weird by normal standards.

I spontaneously lunge for Mackenzie and squeeze her in a hug. “Thank you for being so accepting. Even though this is real. For real. Honestly.”

Good gravy, I am *not* a good liar.

“Chick sandwich. Awesome,” one of the hockey players says.

Mackenzie pulls back and laughs. “Don’t take them seriously. They’re completely harmless and awesome off the ice, but they like to pretend they’re not.”

“*Duck!*” one of them yells as a weird shadow dances over us.

“*Bird!*” another calls over a squawk.

“*That’s not a bird, it’s an ostrich!*”

“*Ostriches don’t fly!*”

I look up at the circling shadows, realize they’re inches from my head, and I duck.

Mackenzie screams.

Feathers explode around us, and something heavy beats at the side of my head.

I shriek.

Someone’s yelling.

I can’t get under the seat. *I can’t get under the seat.*

And suddenly I’m being squished by hundreds of pounds of something solid and sweaty that’s hollering, “*Back, devil, you can’t have them!*”

Someone grunts.

I think it's me.

I'm grunting with my lungs folded in half while feathers tickle my face and fly up my nose and land on my tongue.

There's more shouting, and then a familiar voice. "Get off my fiancée, you idiot."

"You weren't here to protect her," one of the hockey guys says.

"I can protect myself," Mackenzie snaps.

Yep.

Brooks has come to rescue Mackenzie.

And where's Luca?

I'm about to think he's *not playing his part* when the weight is lifted off me and there he is, dropping into a squat on the stairs beside my seat, reaching for me while Brooks trips over both of us to try to get to Mackenzie.

Luca's green eyes are pinched, his lips are having some kind of a spasm, and his hat is knocked crooked. People all around us are taking pictures. More people are running from the field, some official-looking, and fans are congregating closer to the two ballplayers in the stands while others start whispering about the hockey players.

He doesn't say a word, and while at first I thought he was annoyed, it's rapidly dawning on me that he's not annoyed.

He's trying desperately not to laugh.

"What just happened?" I ask him.

He still doesn't speak, but instead, gestures to his hat.

"The birds like your sequins," Brooks supplies as he inspects Mackenzie from head to toe while she beams at him, brushes feathers off her jersey, and insists she's fine and wasn't the intended target.

Luca chokes as I reach for my hat, which I'm wearing not because it makes me cute and fashionable like Mackenzie's does for her, but because my hair isn't fit to be seen in public.

"Brooks! Brooks, can you sign my ball?" a falsetto male voice says.

"Ohmygod, it's Luca Rossi! Will you sign my left butt cheek?" another chimes in.

"Where's Cooper Rock? Why doesn't Cooper ever come save the ladies?"

We all turn to stare at the hockey players.

They point at each other, none of them accepting responsibility for their requests. Also, half of them are going back to eating hot dogs or Cracker Jacks, which means they're gesturing at each other while also dribbling food all over amidst the bird feathers, which probably won't help with the long-term management of not getting attacked by flying beasts again.

Luca's lips are having another seizure. He squeezes my arm, glances at my head, and in a move so fast I'm not sure how he did it, he swaps our hats.

His, naturally, smells like delicious male shampoo and that smooth scent of new clothing, and not sweat.

Also, my ovaries are now exploding over the man who's pecking my cheek and heading back to the ball field, his cleats clicking on the concrete stairs as he dashes past adoring fans while wearing a sequined hat on his head.

It's not a far leap from wearing sequined hats on the ball field to wearing tutus to tea parties with little girls.

And there's nothing more dangerous to that over-eager puppy of love beating in my heart than the idea of a man playing dress-up and sipping pretend tea with his toddlers.

I'd ask if his Nonna cursed me too, but the sad truth is, she didn't have to for this to work.

Be strong, Henri. Be. Strong.

I chant it all through the game, while watching Luca make diving catches and hit doubles and steal bases and slide onto home plate to score the winning run.

I can do this.

I can be strong.

Wanna know why?

Because in *this* case, I know for a fact that Luca could never love me, and even if he said he did, I *know* I can't trust him.

I just wish that knowledge didn't suddenly sting.

Luca

WHEN WE WALK OUT of Duggan Field to board the bus that'll take us to the airport for our away series in Florida, there aren't any sports photographers with their cameras flashing.

But we're still swaggering, every last one of us in matching footy pajamas decorated with the official Fireballs mascot contender print.

I have Glow the Firefly on both my ass and my left breast pocket. Yes, it weirds me out. But fuck if I won't own the hell out of these puppies anyway.

They're our good luck charm, and we all look like goofballs together.

"Dude, I want bling," Francisco mutters to me as we file toward the bus.

"Get your own girlfriend who likes to wear bird bait."

Yeah.

I'm wearing Henri's sequin hat.

I traded it to the equipment manager for an official Fireballs hat before the game, but I have it back now, and I'm wearing it out to the bus.

Even without people watching.

The sentiment that I'm publicly claiming Henri through her hat should be enough to make me grimace, but the hat—

Damn thing's making me smile.

I don't know why, but it is.

For a woman who was on my last nerve two nights ago, Henri's amusing the shit out of me today.

Up on the bus, Brooks drops into the seat next to me. "Ready to kick some Florida ass?"

“Damn right.”

“Gonna sleep with that hat too?”

“You want one so bad, ask your fiancée to get you your own.”

He glances around and lowers his voice. “Is she one of your Nonna’s tricks?”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence in my ability to be a good person. Appreciate it.”

“Emily?” he mutters.

“Shut the hell up.”

“Not trying to be a dick, but you being a dick won’t help our game either, and I’d rather be the dick who calls your bullshit now than the idiot who didn’t stop a train wreck when all I had to do was ask a simple question.”

I played my rookie year with Brooks in New York. I met Emily in New York. I got engaged in New York.

And I called it off last-minute in New York.

Not many people cared about a post-season wedding disaster for a rookie who wasn’t yet shilling shampoo and hadn’t set any records, but a few of my teammates were there.

And this one remembers.

I scowl at him. “I learned my lesson.”

“Lesson wasn’t supposed to be *love sucks*.”

“Did I try to stop *you* from getting engaged?”

“No, because you’re usually one of the good guys. Fun on the field. Good teammate off the field. Pretend to be happy for us even when you think we’re making mistakes, because you know better than to be *that guy*. But if you and your grandmother are manipulating a woman who’s an utter disaster—”

I don’t lunge for his throat, but I’m close. “Do. Not. Call. Her. That.”

“Rossi. You’ve met my sister.” He lifts his hands like *peace*. “*Utter disaster*’s a compliment where I come from. Also means I’m not gonna sit back and watch you take advantage of someone who reminds me of her.”

“I’m not taking advantage of anyone.”

He squints at me like he’s gauging how honest I’m being, then slowly nods. “Good.”

“Hey, lovebirds, you made ESPN.” Cooper’s the last to board, and he drops into the last open seat across the aisle as the bus pulls into motion. He flips his phone toward us, and there’s video of Brooks and me leaping into the stands before the game while ushers and security race after us.

God, Henri’s face.

One minute, she’s buried under a pile of hockey players and bird feathers, and the next she’s emerging wide-eyed and gapping at me like she doesn’t even

know what planet she's on.

I swear, her eyes say she's talking as fast in her brain as she talks when she's awake as I try to explain to her that the vultures were attracted to the reflection of her sequins.

And that look that's shifted on her face as I turn away—*fuck*.

This entire situation is a bad idea. Brooks is right.

But who else is going to protect her from herself?

I might've screwed up royally when it came to Emily—though she messed up plenty on her own too—but I'm older, wiser, and better equipped to do the right thing by a woman.

With Henri, the right thing is making sure she doesn't hurt herself.

Physically or emotionally.

I can do that without getting involved, and the fact that she came to me with her eyes wide open, *asking* me to help her, is a good sign we're on the same page.

I'm about to grab my phone and text her to make sure she got home okay when it buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out, scan a few lines, and *holy shit*.

Whoa.

Just *whoa*.

HENRI: Do you know what I want to do to you? I want to swipe my hungry tongue all over your hot skin from your mouth to your dick, and then I want to lick your cock until it's weeping for me, and then I want to take your hard steel rod into my mouth, all the way to the back of my throat and suck you until you can't speak, can't breathe, can't do anything but feel the pleasure of my hot, wet, silky magic on your glorious cock, and until you know no other woman's name but mine.

MY DICK TWITCHES. My mouth goes dry. I angle in my seat so my teammates can't read this, and I'm gaping at the screen, my brain short-circuiting as I try to come up with a coherent response, when another text arrives.

HENRI: OH MY GOSH OH MY GOSH WRONG SCREEN. That wasn't for you. Erase that. Ignore that. OMG. OMG. OMG, I am so embarrassed.

LUCA: Wait. WHAT? Who the FUCK are you sexting with? Jesus. HOW MANY MEN ARE TEACHING YOU TO NOT FALL IN LOVE?

HENRI: I'm not sexting! THAT WAS FOR A BOOK!

HENRI: And it's not published yet.

HENRI: And it's not mine, so please, PLEASE don't share that. With anyone. My friend Dorothea had all these dangling modifiers and misplaced commas so I was helping her smooth out her sentence and I copy-pasted it to the wrong person on my contact list. OMG. I'm going to die. I'm going to die of embarrassment and then Dogzilla will have no one to change her costumes.

LUCA: That was from a book?

HENRI: YES. My friend Dorothea. She writes as Satin Knight. You met her the other day. She asked Cooper to take his shirt off.

LUCA: GRANNY ROMANCE? GRANNY ROMANCE WROTE THAT?

HENRI: She's seventy, not dead, Luca. Don't judge a woman on her wrinkles. It's not very nice.

LUCA: I'm not judging. I'm surprised. YOU SENT ME A BLOW JOB. Of fucking course I'm surprised.

HENRI: Clearly, it's a good thing your Nonna's not looking over your shoulder.

LUCA: *gif of a sexy older woman*

HENRI: Oh my gosh, tell me that's not what you see when you think of your Nonna.

LUCA: I was making a joke about older women being sexy.

HENRI: *gif of a hot actor from a space cowboy TV show trying to say something to stop someone from being an idiot*

LUCA: ?

HENRI: My last fiancé left me for an older woman. You know, your mother? That wasn't a very good joke.

HENRI: Probably you should stick to playing baseball. Good game, by the way. And thank you for the hat. It was nice to not have to worry about birds attacking me all through the game. But you can have it back. I don't want the team to be short a hat. I can buy one at the store like a normal fan.

LUCA: The team has plenty of hats.

HENRI: And bats? And cats? And mats? And pats?

HENRI: Sorry. Ignore me. I'm a dork.

LUCA: You're not a dork.

HENRI: I am, and I accept that about myself. But thank you for being kind enough to suggest I'm not if "dork" is an insult where you come from. *smiley emoji*

LUCA: You enjoyed the game?

HENRI: Yes! So much. And I got a jersey and ate too much popcorn and had the best time ever with Mackenzie. She's so funny. Did you know she and Brooks are getting married at Duggan Field? That's so sweet that she's such a big fan and she's getting to have her wedding at the ballpark. And so great that she's not letting any superstitions stop her from her dream either. She and Brooks are so adorable.

LUCA: Not as adorable as me and Brooks. *selfie picture with Brooks*

HENRI: Oh my gosh! Your pajamas! Dogzilla needs a pair. Dogzilla definitely needs a pair.

LUCA: Who named your cat?

HENRI: Confucius.

LUCA: Your...made-up character?

HENRI: He's very real in my head. And no, I don't need to see a therapist. This is normal for writers.

HENRI: But. For real, how Dogzilla got her name... One day, I was driving along and I saw this dead cat in the middle of the road, so I stopped, because it deserved to have a proper burial, except it wasn't dead. It was Dogzilla, and she was sleeping in the middle of the road. I took her to the vet, and it turned out she was microchipped, but her last owner died, and nobody knew it until Dogzilla and the vet and I tried to track her down.

LUCA: Jesus on mozzarella.

*HENRI: Okay, that was all a story. *giggling emoji* Sorry. I actually got her at a shelter after my third wedding didn't happen. I went in for a dog and came out with Dogzilla because we made eye contact and I knew it was right. And Confucius did name her. He was all up in my head like, *This cat is so lazy, it would be ironically beautiful to name her Dogzilla.* And so I did.*

LUCA: You are a very unique woman.

HENRI: I know. It takes one of a kind to get dumped by this many fiancés.

LUCA: Why do you keep trying?

HENRI: I'm not. Remember?

LUCA: But you did. For five times.

HENRI: Well...if a person can't believe in the simple purity of love, what *can* they believe in? Don't get me wrong—I still don't want to get engaged again, or plan a wedding again, and I know I need to learn the difference between “I love you as a person” and “I love you enough to want to spend the rest of my life with you,” but don't we all want someone to love us?

LUCA: Baseball loves me.

HENRI: For today. What happens in ten years?

LUCA: I was making a joke.

HENRI: I think you're hiding because it's easier to protect yourself than to risk being hurt again. And you have a great career and great teammates and a great life already, so it's easier to enjoy that than to wonder if things could be even better, or to think about what life will be like when you're too old to play anymore.

HENRI: Sorry. Ignore that too. Love sucks. People only want to hurt each other. I mistakenly think it's great because I'm a love-aholic, but really, I'm probably using my own weddings to compensate for feeling like I should've done something to help my parents stay together when I was a kid. I know I'm wrong. I'm working on it. And thank you for your help. I don't know who else in my

life I could turn to for this.

LUCA: Maybe your sister's bird?

HENRI: *laughing emoji*

THE BUS PULLS TO A STOP, and I blink at being pulled back to reality, realizing I'm smiling.

Brooks lifts a brow, then shakes his head.

I ignore him.

One, because he was his own brand of screwed up a few months ago.

And two, because oddly enough, I have a better puzzle to work on.

And that's the mystery of the many facets of Henri Bacon.

Because I'm going to help her.

Maybe not the way she wants, exactly, but I'll still help her the only way a guy like me can.

Luca

FOUR DAYS LATER, I get home late Sunday night to a house that smells like pine and something I can't identify until I walk into the kitchen.

Also apparently known as *the library*.

There are books everywhere.

On the table. On the floor. On the chairs. On the counters. Inside open cabinets.

Seriously. There are books stacked where my pots and pans and Tupperware would go if I owned more pots and pans and Tupperware.

That smell I'm smelling?

It's books.

"Wha...?"

Henri pops up from behind a stack. Her hair's tucked under a Fireballs bandana, her eyes are wide, her cheeks are flushed, and—is that my Boring Distillery T-shirt she's wearing?

Without a bra again?

"Hi, Luca! Welcome home! Sorry about the books. I have a launch next week and I was taking signed pre-orders off my website and it kinda got out of hand while I wasn't looking. My readers are very enthusiastic, and after I posted in my fan group that I was struggling to get excited about the book coming out after my wedding got called off, they sort of went crazy promoting the book for me. It's weird, because it's not like this is the first time they've seen me dumped on my wedding day, but my readership's grown some, and do you know that romance readers are the most amazing people in the entire world? They're

making teasers and sharing all over social media and I thought nobody would get excited anyway because everyone wants the next Confucius book, but I got this hair to write *How to Train Your Vampire*, which is a total standalone not in the Confucius world, when I was with Jerry after he accidentally gave himself a concussion with an open cabinet door, and I guess people are into hot mess heroines and hot amnesiac vampires. Who knew?”

Stacks.

And stacks.

And stacks of books.

I wave a finger around the room, and she blushes and does this weird thing with her eyebrows that makes it look like two stylish caterpillars are playing charades to answer my unasked question. “Usually it’s around two hundred, but this time, there are five hundred? And I have four questionnaires I still need to answer for bloggers, and two virtual video chat interviews to prep for...so I’m sorry if I miss one or two of your games this coming week. Also, *great job!* You hit a home run today! I got so excited I accidentally signed a book that was supposed to go to Lisa as *To Luca.*”

I don’t know anything about the book business, but I know that on season ticket holder appreciation days, or during team conventions when we all sign autographs for fans for hours, it always feels like I’m signing ten thousand balls and jerseys when I know management won’t let us sign more than a few hundred because they don’t want carpal tunnel derailing performance on the field.

Also, how the hell is she getting this many books to the post office?

“Am I annoying you already? I’m annoying you already, aren’t I?”

I shake my head. We texted while I was on the road, and I’ve learned a few weird things about her that could potentially be annoying, but are strangely intriguing, and what’s more, she’s been funnier and more relatable by the day.

I kept telling my teammates I was looking forward to getting home to her, and the weirdest part is...I think it was true.

I wave at the books again. “Is this normal?”

“Signing books?”

“For all authors to do this at home. Doesn’t your publisher have a place you could go?”

“I *am* my publisher.”

I glance at the books again.

The cover features a broody, dark-haired guy with a hairless chest and a six-pack baring his fangs at the world as he wraps his arm around a slender dark-haired woman in an apron splattered with what I sincerely hope is cake batter.

Is that what she finds attractive in a man? Fangs and scowls and leather

pants?

Leather pants aren't comfortable.

"Oh! Oh my gosh, silly me. Are you hungry? I made some peach ginger barbecue chicken earlier, and the coleslaw is my grandma's secret recipe—but don't worry, it won't make you fall in love with me—that's her strawberry cobbler, which I use responsibly since it's what my mom used to make my dad fall in love with her, and look how that turned out—and I also picked up some sweet corn from the farmers market downtown. It would only take a few minutes to get that boiled if you want some. Or I can stop talking if you need to go to sleep. What time's your game tomorrow?"

"Fresh sweet corn?"

She beams at me like I'm a toddler with a speech delay who finally said the word *mama*. "Yes! Let me put some water on to boil. Oh, also, I replaced your shower head with one that doesn't try to poke holes in my skin, but I left the old one under the sink so you can switch it out if you prefer it. Also, I called an oven repair guy while you were gone, and he came and took one look at your kitchen and started laughing, which was quite rude, and then he asked if your landlord was a total *rhymes with grassmole* for not updating this kitchen seventeen years ago, which was even ruder, so I'm writing him into my next Confucius book as a half-zombie who knows he's being taken over by the zombie bite and is helpless to stop it and is now reflecting on all the bad decisions he made in his life that caused his wife and child and parakeet to leave him, but I'll probably edit it all out before I publish the book, because that's too dark for a Nora Dawn book."

Is she breathing while she talks, does she secretly have gills? "Do I make you nervous?"

She pauses for an infinitesimal second, her brows furrowing again. "Is that a movie quote? Am I supposed to guess what it came from?"

"You talk a lot. I want to know if it's because I make you nervous."

"For real, Luca, I don't know what movie that's from. I don't watch that many movies. I read a lot of books—or listen. Ohmygosh, did I tell you I got Jason Clarke to narrate *How to Train Your Vampire*? His voice. It's like... shew." She fans herself. "It just does it for me. That's why the book isn't out yet—I wanted the audiobook to release at the same time. But it does mean I should get back to work. Oh! But your corn. First, I'll get your corn."

"I can make corn."

"But do you know the trick? I learned it from a cooking show. Most people way overcook boiled corn. You should only boil it for maybe three minutes for maximum flavor and crispness."

"Do you also use magic truffle salt and water made with the tears of

unicorns?”

“Aww, you’re cranky! It’s me, isn’t it? I’m sorry. I’ll shut up.”

“It’s not you. It’s me. I’m a grassmole.”

“*Luca*. You sent lunch to all those teachers in Florida who were going back to school this week, and you signed autographs and played ball with those kids in the bleachers in the outfield, and you asked people to donate to that family that lost their home in that fire on social media, and—”

“It’s my job.”

She rolls her eyes so hard, the dude on her cover winces like his eyeballs hurt in sympathy. “And you’re trying to counteract *The Eye*. I know. But it still matters that you do good things for other people, no matter *why*. It ripples. Like, one of those teachers probably had more patience with a kid who needed it that day because of you, or one of those kids you played ball with probably went home feeling like it was okay if he was dyslexic because he was still worthy of playing catch with one of his heroes, and that family—”

“Henri?”

“I know,” she sighs. “Stop talking.”

I wince. She does talk a lot, but after getting a few walls of texts from her in the past few days, I’ve realized she genuinely has a lot to say, and she probably hears *stop talking* more than she deserves.

Plus, has she been alone the last three days while I’ve been traveling? That can’t be healthy for a person with as much to say as Henri has. “Do you need help with your books?”

Her eyes flare wide. “Ohmygosh, is your Nonna on her way?”

“No, she’s—”

Too late.

Henri’s turned into Henri-on-a-mission, which means she’s flying around a stack of books, but missing and knocking into the stack of books, which sends all of the tomes toppling off the table and onto Dogzilla, who rowls and shoots between my legs, which is pretty fucking impressive considering I would’ve expected the cat to just lay there with a pile of books on her and give Henri a pathetic *please get these off me so I don’t have to move* look.

Huh.

Those walls of text now have me imagining Dogzilla’s internal monologues. Also—“Is your cat in a *cat* costume?”

She flips on the water to fill a pot. “She insisted. I offered the frog costume, the Marilyn Monroe costume, and the vampire costume, but she wouldn’t get off the cat costume. That one cracks me up. What cat wants to dress up like a cat? But I guess she was feeling like being an orange tabby today.”

“Is that a new faucet?”

She freezes. “Oh. Yeah, I installed that yesterday after I did some research on what causes faucet leaks. Your old one probably would’ve been fine with the temporary fix your plumber did, but this was better. If you don’t like the design —”

Jesus.

She’s going to make me do it.

She’s going to make me kiss her to shut her up.

I don’t know why it feels necessary when thirty seconds ago her blabbering was simply cute and endearing and not at all sexy, but I’m suddenly striding across the kitchen, cupping her cheeks, and devouring her lips like I’m a possessed Cupid trying to kiss the words out of her mouth and the problems out of the world.

Oh, god.

It’s The Eye.

I’m kissing Henri because I’m possessed by The Eye.

And I don’t care.

I’m the bug. I’m the bug drawn to the bug zapper light, and *I don’t care*. Because her lips taste like honey and they’re pillowy soft and pliable beneath mine, and I will *never* get enough of the sound of a woman’s sigh as she gives in to kissing me back, and until this exact moment, I didn’t realize how much I’ve been missing a woman’s touch.

Especially since this one comes with actual, honest to god blood flow to my dick.

Did I say *blood flow*?

I meant the dam burst and I’m harder than a baseball bat for the first time in what feels like seven long losing seasons.

She pushes up on her toes and wraps her arms around my neck. I reach behind her and shut the water off, turn us, and trip over another pile of books.

“Don’t stop,” she gasps when I break the kiss, and the next thing I know, we’re all over each other.

Is there anything hotter than being wanted by a woman?

I don’t think so.

She’s pressing her belly into Mr. Woody. I’m thrusting my tongue down her throat. She scrapes her fingernails down my back, but I’m wearing a shirt, which seems stupid when there’s a woman wanting to leave marks, so I pull back long enough to rip the damn thing over my head, shove three more piles of books off the countertop, and hoist her up there before diving back into ravaging her mouth.

I'm possessed.

Either that, or Henri's secretly made of some kind of potent aphrodisiac. She's a genetic experiment in walking temptation.

That's the only rational explanation for this desperate need to know how her hair feels between my fingers and why my palms itch to cradle her breasts and how if I don't bury my cock inside her in the next five minutes, all of my internal organs will implode, sucking me inside myself until I'm the black hole formerly known as Luca Rossi.

Jesus on a breadstick, *what is she doing to me?*

And why don't I care?

"Is this—how—you teach?" she gasps between kisses.

"Yes," I grunt back. I don't have a clue what she's talking about, but I'll tell her anything she wants to hear so long as she keeps her legs wrapped around my waist.

Her fingers trail down my bare chest, and she moans into my mouth.

She moans harder when I fumble my hands under her shirt, and when I find those two glorious mounds tipped with pebbled nipples, she pumps her hips harder against mine.

God bless the woman for not wearing a bra.

"*More, Luca.*"

"Fuck, you're sexy."

Is there anything wrong with coming home to a woman who'll hump me on the kitchen counter?

No.

No, there's not.

This time, she's the one who pulls away to tear her own shirt off, and *hello*, beautiful Henri breasts.

I'm drooling.

I'm drooling over the sight of her rosy nipples and the round plumpness of her flesh, and I'm silently naming the left one *Henri* and the right one *Etta*, and I definitely need to make sure both of these ladies feel equally loved.

I hit a home run this afternoon.

I deserve to score when I walk back into my castle.

My run-down castle with the queen who shines so bright that she makes it feel like Buckingham fucking Palace.

Fuckingham Palace.

Yeah. That's what I'm renaming my home.

Also, I have never tasted better breasts in my life.

It's like she rubbed them with bacon grease, except better, and also not

greasy.

Maybe this is why her last name is Bacon.

Jesus. Thinking about bacon grease shouldn't be a turn-on, but with every lick of her nipples, I'm getting harder and harder, and I don't know that my dick's going to survive me giving Etta the same level of attention that Henri's currently getting.

And I mean Henri the boob, not Henri the woman.

I switch to Etta before I come in my pants and blow the damn things right off my legs.

Henri the woman has my hair fisted in her hands and she's chanting *yes, oh god, more, Luca, yes yes YES* and her legs are rubbing my sides because apparently I'm damn good at sucking on breasts and I'm driving her wild, and swear to sweet holy fuck, this is better than bringing an entire stadium to their feet.

Because an entire stadium doesn't smell the way Henri's pussy smells.

"I'm going to eat you," I order her.

Yeah. *Order*. I'm ordering her to let me eat her like I'm a caveman, and I'd take it back, except she's suddenly twisting on the counter and pushing her killer vampire unicorn pajama shorts down, one hip at a time, until she's spreading her legs and pushing me down between them.

And there's Henri's sweet honeypot, and it is *all mine*.

I'll probably need the best therapist in the world to explain this all to me and help me work through it tomorrow, but right now, all I care about is licking her clean and exploring that sweet little nub with my tongue and teeth and making her moan.

She was going to feed me corn.

Corn.

Not today, Henri. Not when I can snack on your pussy instead.

I'm going in for the big finish—her hips are thrusting against my mouth and her pants and moans are getting higher pitched, and I know she's close.

Hell, *I'm* close.

I thought snacking on her breasts would do it for me?

"Luca, I'm—*Nonna!*"

Oh, no, she's not, because I'd never—

She swats my head, squeaks, and then says it again, this time in a hiss. "*Nonna.*"

"I don't care," I tell her pussy.

"Is that so, Luca Antonio?" my grandmother answers.

I jerk my head up.

Henri dives off the counter, lands on a book, which slips out from under her, and she goes flying, legs spread, beaver exposed while my grandmother stands in the doorway surveying her handiwork.

“What are you doing?” I explode while I throw a dish towel, and then a book, and then finally Henri’s shirt at the woman crawling on the floor to try to hide behind a table leg.

Nonna looks at me.

Then at Henri.

Then back to me.

She smiles. “Preening. I’ll be in the guest room. And I’ll wear earplugs.”

Nonna Gels her way out of the kitchen doorway, because that’s Nonna.

Henri peeks up at me. She’s crouched over like she’s playing the part of a turtle in a grade school play, but even the sight of her naked sides and legs is making my dick strain harder.

“So that was my next lesson?” she whispers. “It was very nice. Thank you.”

Very nice.

Thank you.

Only Henri.

“You’re welcome,” I mutter. Because what else is a guy supposed to say to that?

Henri

I, Henrietta Leonora Bacon, am not falling in love with Luca Rossi.

I'm not entirely certain what exactly just happened, but I know that if I don't acknowledge it, then it's not happening. Even if he's not the jerk that Jerry made him out to be, that doesn't mean I'm falling in love.

It means I'm learning to appreciate a man without feeling the need to get engaged to him.

Yep. That's it.

And the fact that my feelings toward the man who's re-stacking my books while I pull my clothes back on have warmed after getting to know him better, coupled with him saving me from the hockey players who were saving me from the bird that wanted my hat right before he left, added on to our funny text exchanges while he was gone, and I might still have the hat he gave me tucked in my luggage so I can sniff it occasionally—those are all merely signs that we're friends.

Not in love.

I'm not having visions of white and I'm not hearing wedding bells.

Does *anyone* hear wedding bells anymore? I've been to dozens of weddings—most of them for research, though I don't crash, I ask in advance and pay for my own meals—and I've only heard wedding bells at two of them.

Which isn't the point.

The point is, I had a sexual encounter with a man whose bed I'm going to sleep in tonight, with him, most likely naked because his house is a million degrees, and I am not falling in love with him.

“Can I—” he starts after he’s stacked the books, and I cut him off with my brightest smile.

“Nope, that’s great. Thank you! I couldn’t have stacked the books so fast without you! You should go get your rest. Big game tomorrow. It’s all over the news that you might make the playoffs for the first time in so long that the people here forgot the playoffs exist. Or would’ve, if Copper Valley didn’t have such an awesome hockey team. But that’s not important. What’s important is that you take care of you so you can be the best center fielder the Fireballs have ever had.”

He stares at me like my top half has turned into a shark or something. “My Nonna would’ve been a better center fielder than most of what the Fireballs have had the last thirty years.”

“Well, yeah. Your Nonna’s a boss. Have you seen the definition in her arms? She’s a role model for adults everywhere. And did you see the series she did on TikTok yesterday? Where she was Super Nonna flying to the rescue? I cracked up so hard when she rescued that thought bubble and raced it back to that baby. Oh! And when she went side-by-side to make fun of your last shampoo commercial—that was so Nonna. Like, I could see where you get your good looks from.”

“She can’t hear you.”

“I prefer to not take my chances.”

I don’t mention that five minutes ago, she walked in on her grandson with his head between my legs.

Luca doesn’t either. He immediately gets super interested in the pile of books on the counter next to him, and he flips open the cover, tilts his head, and frowns. “You know this Ramona person?”

“The Ramona with the dog, or the Ramona with the broken leg?”

Again, I’m a shark-head.

“Ramona with the dog is in my reader group,” I explain. “Ramona with the broken leg emailed me a few years ago about how she’d binged all my books while she was recovering, and things like that stick with you, you know?”

He takes the next book down on the stack and flips it open too. “Marquita?”

“Messaged me on Instagram after she had a miscarriage when she was reading to escape. We chat a few times a year.”

“Do you know *all* of these people you’re sending books to?”

“No, but ohmygosh, wouldn’t that be amazing? Readers are the best people.”

I’m waving my crazy. I can see it in his eyes.

I start to explain more, but he gently sets the books back down and murmurs, “Yeah, I’m gonna call it a night if there’s nothing else you need. Thanks for the

new faucet.”

He grabs an apple and heads upstairs, and I remind myself again that this is exactly what I need him to do.

Tempt me, and then remind me that love isn't the answer.

I'm sighing while signing another book a few minutes later when I realize I'm not alone anymore, and it's not Dogzilla coming back to check on me.

It's Nonna.

Nonna, with her very firm arms and rainbow hair and seriously amazing bra, because it has to be amazing to make her boobs look that good under her tank top. “You're not in bed.”

My whole face gets hotter than a pan of flaming ziti, and we've all had recent experience with that. While I like to embrace that whole *if you've seen one body naked, you've seen them all* concept, I can't quite get there when it comes to remembering the way her hair stood up on end in a rainbow of horror when she froze in the doorway as Luca was going down on me.

It was like, *when I gave my grandson The Eye, I didn't mean for him to get involved with the most insane woman to cross his path in the last twenty years. Oh my god. Their kids will probably also have devil-horn hair and fake jobs and they'll get a shed down by the river to hide all their special rocks that they use to pretend to summon vampires, and we are never comparing spas for waxing.*

Or something like that.

Still, I smile brightly, because I'll smile if it kills me. “I have a bunch of work to catch up on.”

“Psh. Your release date isn't for another week. You can work tomorrow while Luca's at the ball field.”

My shoulders tense, because those are my writing hours, not my signing hours, and if I ignore the hours that my muse is willing to sit on my shoulder and help me, I won't get any words done. Plus, I'm already behind on my deadline, since I spent a month not working on this book. But I smile brighter, because that's what I do when I want people to like me. “That's a great idea. Thanks. But I still want to finish these last few before I forget what I wanted to say to the readers.”

“Luca hit a home run today.”

“I know! Wasn't it amazing? Dogzilla and I were listening on the radio and we were cheering so loudly. Dogzilla even made a *whole* meow in celebration. That's super impressive for the laziest cat in the universe. Clearly, she adores him.”

“Why have you been engaged five times?”

“Because my three other boyfriends ran away before I could convince them

to put a ring on it.”

She lifts a brow that clearly says *I'm not laughing because I know you're telling the truth, and also, you shouldn't call those second two your boyfriends since you only got their names at that bar and dreamed about them being your boyfriends when you were taking a break from dating between failed weddings three and four.*

And I'm out. I leap to my feet. “Oh, gosh, look at the time. You're right. I should get to bed. Especially since it's been a few days since Luca and I saw each other. Work can always wait for the people you love. So glad you're back, Nonna. We missed you. Hope you had a great trip.”

Yep.

I'm a total chicken and completely intimidated by Nonna Rossi.

Also, I'm so distracted by my nerves that I forget to skip that bottom step and it creaks in the worst kind of ominous way, and I'm positive I barely make it to the next step in time.

“Watch out for that cranky step,” I stage-whisper to Nonna before turning and tripping over Dogzilla, who's sprawled on the next step in the darkness.

“Henri?” The bathroom door opens, illuminating the stairwell, and Luca leans over to peer at me.

“Just petting the stairs!” I stroke the wood and pretend this is normal. “They were feeling neglected. Be up in a minute.”

His face twitches again.

“You got yourself a keeper, Luca Antonio,” Nonna calls. “Life won't be boring with this one around.”

Is she mocking me?

I think she's mocking me.

Not the first time. Won't be the last. It's her problem, not mine.

I give the stair one final pat, hoist Dogzilla into my arms, and march the rest of the way up to Luca's bedroom, pausing in the bathroom to pointedly put the toilet seat down.

That's not a lesson I'm planning on forgetting anytime soon.

Also, Nonna's welcome for that too.

In the bedroom, Luca's already stretched out on the queen-size—yes, *queen size* bed. He's easily taking up three-quarters of it, and he's in nothing but black boxer-briefs that are definitely, *ahem*, fuller than I've seen them before.

I snap my eyes up to the squeaking ceiling fan currently running so fast that if it fell apart, one of the blades would probably fly through fifteen feet of reinforced concrete thanks to its velocity. Despite the bucket of cold water that Nonna effectively threw all over my clit fifteen minutes ago, she's back and in

the game.

My clit, I mean.

Not Nonna.

Wow. I'm even awkward in my head tonight. This isn't a good sign.

"So you know, I sleep almost naked too," I whisper.

Luca doesn't open his eyes. "We're both grown-ups."

Well.

That's that, then.

I strip except for my granny panties and the sleeping bra that I special ordered after our night under the stars, and I gingerly climb onto the bed.

The springs squeak, and I suddenly feel about twelve years old again, at my first sleepaway camp where my campmates and I slept in cabins with the windows open for a breeze, on beds that were rescued from college dorms when they'd finally gotten too much use from the co-eds and were only good for charity cases. My skin tingles like it has the same sunburns again from playing in the lake for hours, and my fingers itch to play with clay in the art hut where I spent as much time as possible the entire week.

I sculpted art that looked like giant turds, and my mom displayed my collection proudly next to Elsa's exquisite charcoal drawings of everyone in our family, right down to the squirrels that she named and knew on sight by personality and fur patterns. My dad claimed he took the sculptures I gave him to his office, though I never saw them displayed, and really, who can blame him?

I sigh and roll onto my side so I'm taking less room, but now I'm facing Luca, and I can clearly make out his profile in the moonlight streaming in from the open window. "Thank you for the lesson tonight," I whisper, because what else am I supposed to call it?

He flops around on the bed until he's facing me. "It wasn't a lesson."

Well.

What's a girl supposed to say to *that*?

"Look, Henri, I don't know how to teach you to not fall in love. All I know is how to compartmentalize my feelings so *I* don't fall in love. I shouldn't have done what I did. And you probably shouldn't be here. I can deal with my Nonna and The Eye. But I'm not going to marry you, or propose, or even be a very good fake boyfriend, so I can't see what you're getting out of any of this, and I won't blame you if you're gone in the morning."

Part of my heart lights itself on fire, and the rest watches while little minions from my soul come and beat the ashes with sledgehammers at the idea that I'd leave him in the middle of the night to run home to my mom's pool house yet

again while I search for one more new apartment in the same Chicago suburbs I've always circulated in, where I'll meet one more average guy that I convince myself is my one true love because I'm more obsessed with the idea of happily ever after than I am with looking at the reality of how good—or bad—of a life partner either of us can be to each other. “That’s exactly what I’m getting out of this. The opportunity to *not* fall in love. To prove it can be done.”

He squeezes his eyes shut, and I want to run my fingers through his thick hair again, but I know better.

Also— “But if you want me to leave, I can go. I’m not without means to take care of myself, and I don’t need to be a burden.”

I don’t add that I don’t want to stand in the way of him finding his true love, or that if he wants to un-Eye himself with some secret formula he knows, I won’t stop him.

Both options seem valid for him.

“You’re not a burden, Henri.”

“You don’t have to say that to be nice. I’m not blind, and I’m not sheltered.”

“I’m not—” He cuts himself off with a frustrated noise and drops his voice again. “You’ve been fun in a lot of ways, but I’m not cut out for this relationship shit, and I’m also not cut out to be an asshole who hurts people for the joy of it, and that’s where this is going.”

“I’m not falling in love with you if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“You texted me that you fell in love with a cartoon character.”

“Metaphor.”

Another grunt.

“I asked for this, Luca Rossi. So if you want me to leave because you don’t want me here anymore, say so. Otherwise, I’m going to stay, fulfill my end of the bargain through the end of your season, and be a grown-ass woman who can handle a little bit of pain in the name of growth. Okay?”

His eyes squint open, and he studies me in the semi-darkness for long enough that I should be squirming, but sheer willpower has me simply flexing my toes instead of giving in to the urge to let my whole body slink away.

“Okay,” he finally says.

And then he rolls over to face the window, and I roll over to face the wall, and that’s that.

We’ll continue acting like we’re dating and falling in love to appease his grandmother until I pretend-break Luca’s heart, and most likely, mine will get hurt in the meantime.

But we’re still not getting engaged.

Or married.

Nor will we fall in love for real.
Definitely won't fall in love for real.
Everything is working exactly the way it's supposed to.

Luca

IT'S BEEN five days since that thing that I'm trying not to think about that happened in my kitchen. It's a damn good thing I'm a professional, or I'd be dropping balls left and right in center field and watching easy fastballs go right by me at the plate. Santiago, who's our head coach, the manager, the skipper, whatever you want to call him, has me sitting out about every fourth game while he tries different line-ups, which means I'm watching tonight's game from the dugout, waiting to be tapped later as a pinch hitter, or possibly to not go in at all.

Also, thinking of line-ups and pinch-hitting has me thinking of all the different ways I could spread Henri out on my bed, and no, I don't entirely know why those phrases prompted images of naked Henri.

Fuck on a noodle, I need that trip to Boston to get here four days ago.

And that's before I contemplate how Henri's been bending over backwards, smiling cheerfully at Nonna anytime they cross paths, and generally being the bigger person.

How does she do that without falling apart?

I'd be planting cockroaches in Nonna's bed by now if I were Henri.

Is she actually that bright-side-of-life in her thinking? Or is she insane? Or is she repressed, and I'd find out if I got her naked again that she's crazy pants waiting to be unleashed?

I would not mind crazy pants waiting to be unleashed in the bedroom.

Also, she's nearly naked with me every night as it is, except for the bra and granny panties, which I swear she's wearing to be an intentional turn-off, but *it's not working*.

“Rossi.”

Guilt at the reminder that Henri wants me to teach her to not fall in love, rather than to fantasize about her all day, has me jerking a glance over at Cooper like I’ve been caught choking the chicken in a public movie theater.

If he notices my reaction, he ignores it as he skips down the steps into the dugout mid-third inning. He’s grinning at me as he hooks a thumb toward the video screen over center field. “Thought you said your girlfriend wasn’t coming tonight.”

I almost grimace, because despite my teenage fantasies, and despite her making those erotic noises and squeaking my bedsprings like we’re having monkey sex *twice* now, I have not been involved in Henri *coming* again.

I have a problem.

I have a serious problem.

And that’s before I let myself look in the direction Cooper’s pointing to see video of my fake girlfriend lined up with Brooks Elliott’s fiancée, Emilio Torres’s girlfriend, and Darren Greene’s wife—complete with their new baby in a sling—at a table with giant cream pies in front of them and with a mascot contender behind each of them.

“What...?”

“The Lady Fireballs are standing in for the mascots in a pie-eating contest. Whichever one wins gets an extra five hundred points for their mascot.”

Mackenzie’s been paired with Spike the Echidna. Tanesha Greene has Meaty the Meatball. Emilio’s girlfriend, Marisol, is teamed up with Firequacker the Duck.

Which leaves Henri with Glow the Firefly.

Glow freaks me out. It’s the butt. His public campaign slogans might be all around voting for Glow because of “baseball butt,” but I’ve never known a baseball player who looks like his asshole decided to fart out the world’s largest bubble, and not a regular fart, but an infected fart on fire.

Seriously, his butt has this massive ball stuck to it, and it’s not right. Mackenzie might take exception to the meatball, but Glow is enemy number one in the Rossi household.

And my fake girlfriend is supposed to help him win five hundred bonus votes?

“This mascot contest needs to end.”

Brooks jogs down the stairs and slaps me on the ass with his glove. “Fiery forever. Welcome to the right side.”

I tilt my head as I study the video screen.

Something’s different about Henri.

It's not the clothes. She's worn a Fireballs T-shirt a few times, though the fact that it's not on backwards is noteworthy.

Is it her make-up?

Have I seen her in make-up?

"I hope you're not scowling at your girlfriend while the cameras watch us," Darren mutters as he leans against the railing with me.

"I hate Glow."

"My wife and baby are on Team Meatball, and I have to live with that. Get over it, man."

"Who let Marisol close to that duck?" Emilio asks. "You know what that thing's willy looks like?"

We all shudder as Grover Flanagan, the Fireballs' Chief Entertainment Announcer, yells over the intercom for the women to *Go!*

But none of them bend over and dig into the pie.

I suck in a breath, because while I don't know what's different about Henri, I know that look in her eye.

It's the same look she had yesterday morning at breakfast when she charged into the kitchen in a bathrobe with her hair dripping wet, dropped into a seat at the table, took a hit of cold tea out of her glittery "Addicted to Love Stories" coffee tumbler that she'd left out overnight, and flung open her laptop, where she proceeded to type maniacally and cackle even worse for the next fifteen minutes.

I should've left, but I was honestly fascinated.

Especially since she was muttering the whole time.

Apparently she had Confucius accidentally stumble into a day spa that he thought was a den of were-beavers who were gnawing vampire-killing stakes at the behest of the Lord of the Killer Hornets, aka the mob boss of Henri's world, but it was actually a human day spa, and his super-vampire powers got incapacitated by the lavender clay mask.

I followed more than I want to admit, because admitting it means admitting that when I tell the guys I'm playing Frogger on my phone while we hang out before games, I've been bingeing Henri's Confucius books.

They're fun and unexpected.

And also wordy, but it's Henri, so of course they are.

And my point is, I know that look, so I'm already grinning as, instead of leaning over to eat the pies the fastest, the ladies turn together and fling their pies at the mascots.

Meaty takes it right in the face, because he's basically one big face, plus, Tanesha is a boss when it comes to throwing, which I can say for a fact since

she's been out here a few times tossing the ball with Darren. Firequacker's pie gets stuck on his beak no matter what Marisol tries. Spike's pie goes into the spiny needles coming out of his head, because whoever's inside Spike is smart enough to duck, probably because he got paired with Mackenzie.

And then there's Glow.

As Henri pulls her pie back in a wind-up, Glow swings his big bubble-fart-butt around, clearly planning on running away, but my girl's quick.

She ducks his wing, then slides under the table to avoid the butt, crawls out from the other side, leaps onto the table, and yells, "Hey, Fire-butt! Eat this!"

He looks over his shoulder as much as a massive mascot without a real neck can and knocks his butt into Spike, who clearly can't see, but goes down into Meaty, who falls on Tanesha, which makes Darren jump like he's going to climb over the dugout and charge the screen in the outfield.

Mackenzie lunges for Tanesha.

Marisol takes advantage of the distraction to grab the can of Reddi-wip and spray it in Firequacker's face.

And Henri makes a *Braveheart* cry as she leaps onto Glow's back, reaches around him with her pie, and rubs it into his bug eyes.

Every last fan at Duggan Field—even the fans who came to cheer on San Francisco, the visiting team—are on their feet whooping and hollering louder than I've ever heard.

We're a week away from September, which is crunch time, with the Fireballs four games from securing at least a wild card spot in the playoffs.

These fans have had a *lot* to cheer for this year, so saying they're louder than I've ever heard means something.

"Oh, boy. Oh, boy." Grover, the announcer, is wiping his face with a Fireballs handkerchief. He looks into the camera like he's trying to play that he has everything under control, but there's no mistaking his horror. "That was... unexpected. We'll be back at the top of the inning with the winner!"

Henri pumps a fist, and that's when I realize what's different.

"She did her hair."

The six men closest to me all give me *dude, you are so fucked* looks, but Brooks cracks almost immediately, ducking his head and snorting with laughter.

"Word to the wise, bro. *Always* look to the hair first." Darren claps me on the shoulder and heads to the nearest coach, undoubtedly demanding that they make a call up to the press room to verify Tanesha and the baby are okay. If Lopez gets a hit, Darren will be up to bat this inning, so we need him in smacking-the-shit-out-of-the-ball shape.

Not worried-about-his-wife-and-baby shape.

“You know they planned that,” Brooks murmurs to me. “Mackenzie told me Tanesha would be wearing a baby doll. Someone else is holding the real baby.”

“Are you shitting me?” Darren barks behind us on the phone. “Warn a guy. Damn.”

Brooks grins. “Yeah. Told you. Also, my soon-to-be fathers-in-law heard about Henri’s hair. They ambushed her lunch with Mackenzie today and took her to their favorite salon.”

“Looks good.”

“You expected anything less from Mackenzie’s dads?”

Of course not. But I can’t say a thing without leading myself down a path where Brooks gives me increasingly more shit, so I change the subject. “I should see if she wants to come to Boston.”

Dammit. Where did that come from?

But no worries—Brooks is giving me the *don’t be a psychopathic idiot* glare. “You know the rules. If they started traveling with us, they stay traveling with us. If they didn’t, *we don’t fucking mess with what’s working.*”

“I thought you gave up all your superstitions.”

He punches me in the arm and stalks off as Cooper doubles over laughing. “His face—your face—you two are like bromance goals.”

“Plus, you don’t want your dad and your girlfriend sharing your hotel room,” Emilio points out.

I freeze. “What are you talking about?”

“Papa trip. You miss the news?” Francisco takes his batting helmet from the bat girl in the dugout today, flips it twice, and grins at me. “Ah, you were thinking of Henri naked when you were supposed to be paying attention during the team meeting.”

Guilty. “Our dads...are invited...on the road trip to Boston?”

“Yeah. Newest promo push from management.”

Dammit.

Dammit.

Maybe he won’t come. Maybe they couldn’t find him.

And maybe if stars were wishes that can come true, they’re still so far out of reach it’s not even worth wishing. “Why are we messing with who travels with us? We’re on fire. Why are we risking this?”

“Because your fathers are your second biggest fans behind your mothers, who are invited for the last away series of the season.” Santiago’s clearly not having the excuses, which is surprising since he keeps the same package of beef jerky in his office that he had in his locker the day he started his own twenty-seven game hitting streak back in the day. Don’t tell me he doesn’t believe in

superstitions. “Also, because management said so.”

“Dude. You eat bad sushi or something?” Cooper tilts his head at me. “Or is this about the thing where we don’t talk about who your dad is?”

Brooks shoves between us. “Your dad coming, Coop? Rather have your Pop and his parrot. That’d make for some good sound bites. We could mic him up during the game.”

Cooper peers around him at me. “Can’t be winners if you don’t face your demons. Makes for a better life too.”

“You got demons?” He grew up an hour outside the city, so we see all of his family regularly. Usually they come bearing food. Except his grandfather, who thinks he’s a pirate and comes with a cursing parrot. And if Cooper Rock has demons, I’ll eat my left cleat.

He nods seriously. “Can’t grow up a die-hard Fireballs fan without picking up a few demons. Plus, I saw my sister naked once.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Darren mutters as he strolls past us, pulling on his batting gloves.

Cooper beams. “Thanks, man. Good to know my hard work’s appreciated. What about you, Elliott? Your old man coming?”

Brooks nods. “Ma’s making him hit the Boston shops for baby stuff.”

We’d give him shit about the possibility of Mackenzie being pregnant, except we’ve also all seen the pictures of his two new baby nieces, and in my opinion, it’s completely unfair that Henri’s hair bends weird to make her look like she has devil horns, when Brooks’s younger niece, the one born to his former-SEAL brother and hyperactive, innuendo-spewing hacker sister-in-law, looks like an absolute angel in all the pictures I’ve seen.

If you’d met his sister-in-law, you’d expect demon-spawn too.

Mackenzie says the baby’s inhuman adorableness is balance in the universe. Brooks says everything will change when the kid learns to talk.

“My dad wants a Duck Tour,” Robinson announces.

Cooper nods. “Mine’s gonna mark another ballpark off his list. He hasn’t been there yet.”

“We don’t actually have to share rooms with our dads, do we?” Emilio asks.

“You do, Mr. Gonna-Get-Carpal-Tunnel-From-Whacking-Off-Too-Much-On-Road-Trips.”

Even I find a laugh before Lopez smacks the shit out of a line drive up the middle, and that’s all it takes for the focus to go back to the game.

That is, after all, why we’re here.

To play the hell out of baseball.

The rest of it doesn’t matter.

Not yet, anyway.

Henri

AS I FOLLOW my new Lady Fireballs friends into Chester Green's Sports Bar after the nail-biter game that we barely won, thanks to Cooper's two-run home run in the eighth inning, I realize I have a girlfriend problem.

Aside from my long-distance writer friends, I've had very few girlfriends in my life that I didn't meet through a fiancé. Which means I don't have many girlfriends that I've kept past my failed weddings.

Okay, I have zero.

I have zero in-person girlfriends that I've kept after my failed weddings. I have Elsa, and I have a few cousins, and then I have a long list of girlfriends that I don't see anymore because my exes always got them in the split. And here I am, with an all-new set of in-person girlfriends...courtesy of Luca.

Tillie Jean Rock, who's not dating anyone on the team, but who lives close enough to the city that she joined the Lady Fireballs to annoy her brother, nudges me as we take our seats at a long table. "What's with the frowny face?"

Well, Tillie Jean, since you asked, I've realized I probably won't know you long. I shake my head. "I went to la-la-land. Thinking about a story problem."

"Ooh, with Confucius?" Mackenzie asks.

"Yes."

All four of my new friends stare at me expectantly. To the best of my knowledge, Marisol, Tanesha, and Tillie Jean haven't read my books, but Mackenzie kept talking about Confucius, and also some of the early reviews on *How to Train Your Vampire*, while we were cleaning up after the whipped cream mascot fight, so I think they've basically picked up on the fact that I write

slapstick humor in a paranormal package, and I'm not entirely right in the head, but that I've accepted myself for who I am.

"That's all I can say." I shrug, because it's a writer's first line of defense. "Anything else might be a spoiler. Or, I might totally change the storyline, and then you'd be expecting one thing and get another."

We pause to order drinks, and when all of my friends order for their significant others—or, in Tillie Jean's case, her brother—I realize I need to order something for Luca.

"Can I get a Shirley Temple and a tomato juice?" I ask the server.

Again, my new friends give me a weird look.

"Not mixed together," I add quickly. "I want the Shirley Temple in one glass, and the tomato juice in another. It's for my boyfriend."

Tanesha's baby makes a horrified sound, so she pulls him out of his sling and shoves a boob in his mouth while I get another round of weird looks.

"I'm allergic to alcohol," I blurt.

"Oh, honey." Tanesha's brown eyes go soft and sympathetic. "Have you ever had a Riley Anna?"

"A *what*?" Mackenzie sputters.

"I know you're not suggesting we eat child actresses," Marisol adds, which isn't far off from what I'm thinking, because I've secretly watched Riley Anna's *Stacey & Lacey: Twins on a Mission* kids' show more times than I can count. She's this kid generation's *Hannah Montana*.

Tanesha rolls her eyes. "Y'all need to get with the times on non-alcoholic drinks. Spend nine months not able to have so much as a glass of wine, and you'll know about piña mama-ladas and Mamaritas too."

"Piña mama-llamas?" Tillie Jean asks. "That sounds like something my brother would serve with his donuts."

"Cooper makes donuts?" I ask.

"No, our *other* brother, Grady. He has a bakery back home. If Cooper made donuts, we'd all die from being forced to eat his crimes against sugar. But Grady would offer his goat as a date for someone with—you know what? Never mind. I'm gonna shut up."

"Grady is adorable," Marisol says with a dreamy sigh. "And you know what else he did? He put a ring on it. That's a real man."

"It took him over ten years to do it."

"Never mind. Grady's not a real man either if it took him that long." Marisol glances at me. "Can you write me a happy ending, Henri?"

"Emilio adores, you, Marisol," Mackenzie interjects. "I'm not saying he shouldn't have popped the question already, but you're absolutely number one to

him. Brooks says you're all he talks about in the locker room."

"Being his lucky charm isn't the same thing as being the woman he's planning to marry."

"I'd offer to talk to him, but I don't exactly have a good track record with seeing men all the way down the aisle," I say.

Crap.

Crap.

Now they're giving me the matching looks of *you poor thing, and we know how Luca feels about love, so he won't be the one either.*

Except for Mackenzie, who's already guessed my secret, even if I keep expanding on the story about how much deeper in love we fall every time we're together, and then away, and then together to keep up appearances.

"That's why Luca and I are so great together!" I blurt. "Because this is for fun. I love it. Honestly. He lives such an interesting life, and I think I'm a good influence on him too. No matter what happens. We could be together forever as long as he *doesn't* pop the question. Isn't that what's important?"

Tillie Jean nods solemnly. "That's such a great attitude. It's sort of the same reason I flirt with Max Cole all the time. Except not. Because I flirt with Max basically to piss off Cooper, who thinks he can tell me who I can and can't date. But there's no doubt I'm a good influence on Max. You can tell by the way his eye twitches when I make duck lips at him."

Mackenzie leans over the empty chair between them—reserved for one of the guys whenever they get here—and hugs her. "I'm so glad you're an honorary Fireball."

"I'm so glad you all don't care that I'm only here to annoy my brother."

I don't believe her for a second, because there are easier ways to annoy a sibling than driving an hour plus in heavy traffic to show support for his dreams and his job.

But I also know superstitions take many forms, and I'd bet Tillie Jean's is that if she says out loud that she's cheering for the Fireballs to support Cooper, they'll start to lose.

A familiar face on one of the TVs in the corner catches my eye, and I smile at the familiar sight of Luca in the shower, holding out a bottle of Kangapoo.

Is it hot in here?

Or is that just me and my overactive ovaries?

"There's my favorite lady," a voice says nearby, and I jerk my head away from Luca's commercial to see Brooks making his way toward us, beaming at Mackenzie.

He's followed by Cooper, Emilio, Darren, Max, Francisco, Robinson, a

player I don't recognize but whom I think is a pitcher, and finally, Luca himself, fully dressed and dry, unlike his persona on the TV a moment ago.

Pretty sure he didn't just catch me drooling.

Probably.

Darren fusses over Tanesha and sits, clearly eager to take over holding the baby whenever he's done eating. Brooks kisses Mackenzie. Emilio kisses Marisol. Cooper pretends he's going to kiss Tillie Jean, who shoves him away and waves flirty fingers at Max, who grimaces and takes a seat as far as he can get from her.

"I know he's secretly in love with me," she stage-whispers loudly enough for all of us to hear.

"Quit embarrassing yourself, TJ," Cooper mutters.

"You know he'd be all over me if you hadn't threatened to turn ants loose in his hotel room," she fires back.

I can't decide if she's yanking Cooper's chain, or Max's, or if she does secretly have a crush on Max, but it suddenly doesn't matter, because a hand settles on my shoulder, and then there's a face in my face, and Luca's kissing me so soundly the rest of the sports bar disappears.

There are no other people.

No food. No Shirley Temples or Riley Annas.

There's simply this man who tastes like mint and whose jaw is rough and scratchy, but whose hair is thick and luscious, and whose tongue is teasing mine like we've done way more than lay facing opposite walls and jumping apart every time any parts of our bodies accidentally touch in the middle of the night for the last forever.

Because that's exactly how long it feels like I've been living in Luca's room.
Forever.

Without *any* of this.

I know it's for show. His Nonna is in town for a few more days at least, and it's not outside the realm of possibility that she'd show up here too. Plus, I overheard her on the phone working on a plan to do some TikTok videos with the Fireballs, so Luca's teammates need to think this is real.

And hoo boy, does this feel real.

This feels more real than being jilted five times.

And is that my clit demanding attention, or do I have a sudden growth in my vaginal region that I should have examined?

Probably my clit.

Luca gives good tongue.

And my clit knows it.

Is it wrong to wish this was something I need to see a gynecologist for? Because that could be cured with antibiotics, whereas whatever *this* is will definitely have much longer repercussions.

Luca Rossi is supposed to teach me how to *not* fall in love.

Not be so unexpectedly irresistible that I break every promise I've made to myself since my last—and final—attempted wedding.

“Get a room, Rossi,” someone shouts entirely too closely, and Luca stills, then slowly pulls out of the kiss.

“Hi,” he says, and *poof*.

There I go.

It's one step, right over the cliffs of love, and I take it, and now I'm tumbling headfirst into smoky green eyes and a dimpled smile that says *sorry, I had to do that because people were watching, but it wasn't exactly a hardship, was it?* and he has no idea how attractive it is for him be all grumpy about The Eye in private, yet also so attentive to the little things like making sure there's an air conditioning unit installed in the guest room for Nonna, and ordering special soy milk for me in his normal grocery delivery when he notices I like the taste of it better in my tea, and putting the toilet seat down now.

He even bought an electric tea kettle to replace the rusty kettle that sits on the stove, even though I have yet to see him drink tea *or* coffee at home.

“Do you have any idea how sexy you looked leaping onto Glow like that?” he murmurs. “I fucking hate that firefly.”

I know he wouldn't say the same in private, but I still can't help hoping he would. “Fiery forever.”

He glances down, touches the *Fiery Forever* button proudly displayed on my left breast, and I should probably make an appointment with a doctor anyway, because a man looking at my boobs shouldn't cause a mini-orgasm, should it?

Also, it *is* hot in here.

I know hot after living in his house for a couple weeks, and this place shouldn't be hot, but I'm burning up from my toes to my nose.

“I ordered you a tomato juice,” I blurt.

Oh, god, the grin.

He's giving me the grin.

“I'd be disappointed if you'd been less unpredictable.”

“If you want my Shirley Temple instead, I'll drink the tomato juice. It's like living in Confucius's body, since Burrito always gets his blood and his tomato juice mixed up.”

“Burrito is an awful bartender.”

“Right?”

“The Bat Cave should fire him.”

“I know, but it wouldn’t be a Nora Dawn book if a bartender was good at his—wait. *You’ve read my books?*”

Now he’s blushing.

Luca Rossi blushing is not the parachute that I need for this long fall I’m on. I need something more than a parachute, because this cliff face that I’m next to is so rocky, I should be wrapped up with mattresses or bubble wrap or something.

“He won’t quit,” Cooper says. “I had to pry his phone out of his hands so he wouldn’t miss batting practice yesterday.”

“You did not.”

“Okay, I didn’t, but I did sit behind you and mouth all the words to Lopez and Stafford while you were reading that brown-chicken-chocolate-cow part.”

Francisco nods and wiggles his eyebrows.

The last man—Stafford, I gather—pulls a face. “I was with him until he started pantomiming what was going on, using the special magic meatball hat. After that—let’s just say I’d rather have a nightmare than watch Cooper demonstrate what happens in dirty books.”

“You were mocking my books?” I frown at Cooper. “I know what that means. It means you’re bummed Tillie Jean doesn’t write romance novels, because we all know you’d want to read them and get turned on by your sister.”

“Oh, snap,” Brooks says. “Rock, you got owned by Rossi’s girlfriend.”

Tillie Jean’s bent double and nearly falling out of her seat. Mackenzie’s laughing so hard every other breath comes out as a snort. Tanesha’s baby gives another horrified cry as he accidentally unlatches, but she gets him hooked back up and happy.

The entire table is rolling, and yeah, it feels good.

Except for the part where I was a total asshole to Cooper.

But he grins at me and holds out a fist. “Nice one, Ms. Dawn. I bow to the master.”

I bump. “Thank you.”

“Oh, no. Thank you. As Mackenzie’s reminded me numerous times, I’m basically a god. So it’s good to have someone who can balance my ego.”

Our drinks arrive. We order food, and then spend the next two hours joking and laughing, all while Luca keeps one arm wrapped around the back of my chair, and I tell myself that it’s for show, but my heart can’t help believing what it wants to believe.

That I’m growing on him.

That he likes me.

That maybe our fake love story could be real.

To the best of my knowledge, none of the men I've been engaged to have ever read one of my books.

But Luca has.

Learning how to not fall in love wasn't supposed to hurt.

Which means one of two things. Either this isn't working.

Or it's working entirely too well.

I'm drifting deeper into my thoughts when Tanesha says something about indoctrinating grandpa the right way with the baby by sharing a hotel room with him for the players' father's trip, and my gaze instantly snaps to Luca.

He's poker-faced, except for a tiny tick in his jaw.

"Is—" I start.

"No."

I squint at him. I've been writing hard again, and yeah, I do need to get to an eye doctor, but maybe next month.

He lifts a brow, then follows it by lifting a corner of his lips, and *gah*.

I'm rapidly becoming fluent in Luca Rossi, and that corner lift tells me two things:

One, his father is *not* going on the dad's trip with the Fireballs, and two, if I don't drop it, he'll kiss me again.

I should drop it.

I should definitely drop it.

But if I drop it, I'll never get the right moment to ask again. If life isn't about seizing moments, what *is* it about?

My hand drifts to his thigh as I lean into him and lower my voice like I'm talking dirty to him. We *do* have appearances to keep up. "Is that because he's not invited, or because you told him not to come?"

"Henrietta..."

"A woman always wants to help her boyfriend deal with issues that cause him pain. I can't fix your problems for you—that's not the healthy route to lasting relationships, it turns out—but I can hold your hand if you want to work through them."

I slide my fingers higher on the thick muscle in his leg, and he shoots to his feet so abruptly that the chair topples over backward and clatters to the ground. "Gotta call it a night. Young love."

He wrenches me to my feet and nods at Max. "Remember LA?"

The pitcher gives him a knowing grin. "Calling in those drinks I owe you? Dunno, Rossi, that Shirley Temple might break me."

Luca waves bye with his middle finger and pulls me out of the bar. We make

it four steps past the door when he turns on me, loosely trapping me against the brick building. “You want to play games, Henrietta?”

“You’re helping me with my baggage. I should help you with yours.”

His hand trails down my hip and he leans closer. A passer-by would think we were planning on getting busy right here against the building.

And I wouldn’t object to that, because I know what he can do with his tongue. He smells like nighttime at the ballpark with a hint of danger added to the mix. And he’s watching me with lowered lids over darkened eyes like he, too, could easily forget where we are because I’m his favorite aphrodisiac.

Hello, party in my panties.

He nips my ear. “I don’t have baggage.”

“If that were true—” I cut myself off with a gasp of pleasure as he licks my neck beneath my earlobe.

Must. Resist.

I grit my teeth. “If that were true, you’d talk about your issues with your father and about why your mom and Nonna hate each other, and Nonna wouldn’t have—*mmph!*”

Okay, yes.

I talked until he had to kiss me to shut me up, and I’d do it again.

Because Luca Rossi is kissing me.

He’s kissing me when his teammates aren’t watching, when his Nonna isn’t here either, and when he’s digging his fingers into my hips and holding me tight against his body, which is *fully* on board with the *let’s go find a dark corner and do this the right way* plan if that hard ridge poking my belly is any indication.

It’s not forever, Henrietta, I remind myself.

As if I’m going to listen to that kind of negativity when my entire body is in absolute bliss.

A camera flashes, and Luca pulls back abruptly.

“Hey! Hey, it’s Luca Rossi!”

He blinks three times, like he’s re-centering himself and not entirely certain what happened, then the camera flashes again.

“Gossips,” he mutters. “C’mon. Let’s go.”

Oh, god. He knew.

He knew they were there.

He’s not attracted to me. He’s still playing the part.

And I still haven’t learned.

Which means I probably never will.

Luca

TWO DAYS LATER, right at seven in the evening, mere hours after getting one game closer to the playoffs, the team strolls out of Duggan Field to board the bus that'll take us to the airport for our flight to Boston, riding blow-up animals like the biggest, baddest cowboy team to ever exist.

Francisco's on a triceratops. Robinson's riding an alligator. Cooper's on a giraffe with a neck that doesn't fit into the bus's doorway. Brooks is shouting *giddyup!* to a blow-up bulldog with a mailman biting its ass.

I'm on a rooster, because Henri bet me I wouldn't.

She loses, so now she has to name a vampire after me.

We're both pretending Chester Green's didn't happen. That she doesn't know everyone else's dads are along for this trip, or that thinking about my father bothers me.

We've also gone back to pretending we don't kiss.

Best that way, since I'm supposed to protect her, not be the next guy to break her heart, no matter what she thinks she wants from me.

Part of me wishes she was coming with us, because it would be fun to watch her freak out on her book launch day in two days, but the other part of me is glad she's staying home.

It's easier to not get attached if she's not here.

That's the deal. She pretends to be my girlfriend through the end of the season, and I become a guy she doesn't fall in love with.

Realizing all the little, unexpected ways she's attractive wasn't supposed to be part of the package. And I have bigger things I need to worry about.

Namely, my job.

If we can sweep Boston, and if Toronto gets shut out in Seattle, we'll be within one spot of securing ourselves a trip to the playoffs.

Not bad for a team that set a record for the worst losing streak ever in baseball last year.

And with so many of the guys' dads along for the trip, we're all in good moods, ready to take on the world.

Until we hit the hotel in Boston.

Everything's normal at first—road manager handing out hotel keys so we can head in through the back entrance and straight upstairs, all of us grabbing our bags, giving each other shit, texting or calling home if we need to for the "I'm here" check-in—but then I walk through the door.

And come face-to-face with Nonna.

"What—"

"I'm your dad," she announces.

Jesus on fettuccine.

This time last year, her announcement would've been met with utter joy and relief.

This year? With her putting The Eye on me?

I'm in for three straight days of Nonna badgering me about when I'm gonna put a ring on it, without Henri as a buffer, and yes, Henri's a damn good buffer.

I fold my arms. "We're not talking about my love life. We're pretending this is my first trip to the Little League World Series."

Her grin grows. "Of course."

"Henri got left at the altar two months ago. No rushing it."

"Luca Antonio Rossi, it's like you don't know me at all. And by the way, there was a mix-up with my hotel room. I'm gonna need to stay in yours."

"TikTok Nonna's in the house!" Cooper descends on us, bends to hug my grandmother, and lifts her in a spin-hug that has her rainbow hair flying behind her. "You gonna make us famous, Nonna?"

He winks at me while he puts her down.

Code for *I'll distract her, you play ball*.

I love that guy. Sometimes I wonder, but not today.

He can't distract her while we're sleeping, though, and I wake up nearly positive she's shrunk my junk again. I briefly consider texting Henri a dick pic to ask if she can confirm that, except *we haven't had sex*.

But the good news is, thinking of having sex with Henri gives me the hard-on to end all hard-ons, so maybe she didn't shrink my junk after all.

Wait.

Fuck.

None of this is good.

Neither is calling to check in on Henri, because she sounds distressed.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I can’t find my lucky Confucius shirt. I always wear it on release days, even when it’s not a release day for a Confucius book, and I can’t find it. It’s not in the laundry. It’s not in my luggage. It’s not under a bed, or in a cabinet, or mixed up with Dogzilla’s costumes. Except it probably is, and I’m overlooking it because I’m being a dodo and not looking clearly. And it’s just a shirt. It’s not like shirts have magic powers that can influence whether a completely different thing will go over well with my fan base.”

She blows out a few breaths that make me think of those medical TV dramas that occasionally feature pregnant women, and then Nonna walks out of the bathroom.

Wearing Henri’s Confucius shirt.

“*Nonna.*”

“She’s not here,” Henri says.

“I know. She’s here. I found your shirt.”

I glare at my grandmother.

She smiles back.

And Henri goes temporarily quiet before pulling a Henri and talking her way into this being okay.

“Oh. *Oh.* Wow. That’s—um, I mean, I’m so glad Nonna’s a fan. I’m sure Confucius will be with me in spirit. Do you think she’d do one of her TikTok videos while she’s wearing the shirt? Wait. That’s too much to ask. If she’s read my books and likes them, I’m honored, but I would never ask someone to endorse Confucius like that. I don’t use people.”

“Henri.”

“Right. Talking too much.”

“I’ll overnight the shirt back to you.”

“No! No. Really. That’s not necessary. You go play baseball, and worry about the playoffs. I can make new traditions on release day. And Dogzilla still has her mouse costume, and I should get a new shirt made with the cover model for *How to Train Your Vampire* instead. That would be so much more fitting. And I think there’s a local T-shirt shop not far from here.”

I can’t decide if I adore the way she’s bending and flexing to make new plans, or irritated that she’s not irritated that my grandmother blatantly stole her shirt.

Both.

I'm definitely both.

And it's not better later that afternoon as we're hanging out in the visitors' lounge at the park. Some of the dads have gone sight-seeing or in search of all the lobster they can eat, but some are hanging with us.

No one's asking Max where his dad is, because we all know his story, and no one's asking me why my Nonna's here instead. It's not exactly an elephant in the room.

More like Glow the Firefly's butt. We all know there's something wrong, but no one's going to talk about it.

And why would we, when Nonna's in the house?

She's prancing through the lounge, being TikTok Nonna, the Blow-Up Dinosaur Slayer.

Seriously.

She takes out Cooper, who's riding Francisco's blow-up triceratops, by lassoing the dinosaur with a rope made of twenty years' worth of strung together pantyhose.

I don't want to know what else she has in her luggage, and for once, I wish the mascots were with us, because Nonna taking out Glow?

I'd sign up for that.

Brooks drops into the seat next to me in the kitchenette, where we have a good view of Nonna doing a second take with Cooper and Darren helping her. And yes, she's wearing Confucius. I refused to let her take him off. "Your nonna needs to meet my brother-in-law's nana next time we're in New York. They'd need bail money."

"So that's how I can get rid of her?"

He shoots me a look. "Hasn't uncursed your junk yet, huh?"

"My junk's fine." Getting frustrated, but fine.

"Don't sound fine." Francisco claims the seat on my other side and leans in. "Your old lady holding out?"

"No."

"Ah, man, she *is*." He cracks up.

"You won't be laughing when your abuela puts The Eye on you," I mutter.

He thumps himself in the chest. "Gotta think forward. Like me. My abuela? She thinks I'm engaged."

Brooks grins. "Ah, you're both screwed."

"Dude. *Dating Henri*. I'm fine."

"And you're in over your head. How long's she gonna stay with you if you can't give her what she wants?"

"Says the guy who didn't even know *how* to give it to a woman until...when

was that? Yesterday?”

“Don’t be ragging on the newly former virgin. His fiancée’s good luck.” Francisco shoves me. “You got your own problems. Don’t make them for the rest of us.”

Brooks tips his chair back. “Luca, if you’re not happy with a woman, forget the curse and get out.”

“It’s not Henri. It’s...” I jerk my head toward Nonna.

“No way, man.” Francisco gives me the *don’t do it* look. “Your grandmama only wants you to be happy. Don’t ever think she doesn’t.” He lowers his voice. “That makes the curse worse.”

The door opens, and Francisco’s right.

I should not tempt the fates.

Because I thought bad thoughts about Nonna, and now my father’s strolling into the room.

Brooks thumps his chair legs down and shoots me a look.

My failed wedding wasn’t the only thing he witnessed during that year I spent in New York.

Let’s just say he knows my relationship with the old man is rocky at best.

My sperm donor’s bloodshot green eyes settle on me. Lost weight since the last time he came around asking for money. And his gait isn’t entirely steady either.

Fuck.

How the hell did he get in here?

Oh, right.

Because he’s *Giovanni Rossi*. Still has the name, even if he doesn’t have anything else.

Brooks starts to rise. He glances at Francisco. “Get Santiago.”

I rise too. “No need. I got this.”

“And we’ve got you, okay? Don’t be a dick about having a team.”

I cross the carpet straight-faced like my heart isn’t thumping and my fingers aren’t tingling like they want to go numb. I stare down fastballs coming at me at a hundred miles an hour every single day. I’ve moved six times in my professional career, started from the ground up making new friends and learning to fit into the new flow of a new team *six times*. Been within spitting distance of tornadoes, hurricanes, and got snowed in once without power.

But facing my father always gets to me like nothing else.

I open my mouth as I stop next to him, and before I can get a syllable out, Nonna’s hip-checking me out of the way. “Gio! There you are. Come give your mama all the hugs.”

He winces, but she growls, and Mob Boss Nonna is once again in the house.

She shoots me another look as she grabs him and tugs—yes, still in her blow-up dinosaur costume—and drags him back out the door.

I should follow, but I don't *want* to see him.

I want—

Dammit.

I want sunshine.

I turn, and everyone pretends they weren't staring. So I lift my cell phone, which isn't ringing, and mutter, "Gotta take this."

And then, like a chickenshit, I dash into the nearest closet.

Fuck on a breadstick. I'm dialing Henri.

"Luca! Hey. I was thinking about—"

"My father showed up."

"Oh." It's a quiet *oh* that makes me think she probably did the research I told her not to do, and if I've learned anything at all about Henri in the last few weeks, it's that she can find things no other mortal being on earth can find when she sets out on a research mission.

"He played pro hockey for two years. That's where he met my mom. But his contract didn't get renewed, and then I was born, and then he left us both for my kindergarten teacher a few years later. My mom revenge-dated one of my classmates' dads for two years, I got attached, they broke up, and love sucks, and I have a shithole of a house because I buy and renovate shitholes everywhere I go, then I rent them out when I'm traded so that if my career ends tomorrow, I still have cash flow, and I still have money in the bank, and I haven't gotten used to a Lamborghini lifestyle on a ramen noodle budget. I'm not going to be him. *I am not going to be him.*"

Jesus on manicotti, I'm sweating.

I'm sweating like I ran a marathon in the Sahara, and I don't sweat. Not like this.

I live without central air when I'm home. My body's conditioned for heat.

"Luca—"

"I've never had a team sign me for longer than a year at a time. I could lose this. *All* of this. Any minute. It could go *poof*. And it's not the money, Henri. It's not the endorsements. It's the guys. The team. They're family. They're *family*."

"And that's why you'll never be him."

I blow out a slow breath and drop my head to a shelf lined with Gatorades. "But I still let his actions guide mine."

My heart's twisted in a knot and my gut doesn't feel all that great either. Since I left home and landed at my first minor league ballpark, I've watched my

teammates around me fall in love. Some get married. Some break up. Some get divorced. Some have kids.

I'm not *built* for that.

That part of me is broken. It has been since I was six years old.

"Do you want to get married?"

I rear back and stare at the phone, but the bone-deep horror isn't there like it should be.

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, not to me!" Henri calls. "Don't hang up! I wasn't proposing! It was a metaphorical question! I meant would you want to marry *someone* someday if your parents hadn't screwed up love for you!"

"Jesus on a meatball."

"Luca, there's nothing wrong with you. Your toes are shaped kinda weird, and you make those loud noises when you drink, but only sometimes, and you know you're good-looking, which is never a good thing, but other than that, you're a normal, everyday guy with the same hopes and dreams and fears as anyone else. They're custom-tailored hopes and dreams and fears. That's what makes all of us special. You can find love. You just—*gah*. Sorry. Sorry. I know. Not part of the deal."

"Henri?"

"Yes?"

She's cringing. I can hear her cringing. And I hate that. Is she cringing because I've been a dick, or is she cringing because everyone's always been a dick?

Dammit. I need to stop being a dick to her.

I do.

"Thank you for listening."

There's another one of those beats of silence where I don't know if she's marveling over the fact that I used my manners, or wondering if I'm silently adding "and please stop talking."

Again.

Probably both.

"I know I'm a disaster with my own love life, and it's not like I have a degree in psychology or anything that cool, but I do know a little bit about people. It's hard not to after reading so many books and writing vampires for this many years. Not that vampires are real. But they're based on people. And people usually simply want to be loved, but have a few hang-ups because you can't live a life and not get a hang-up or two. Don't give up if you want it, Luca. But you don't have to want it. Some people don't."

Thirty seconds, and she has me re-evaluating half the things I've believed

almost my entire life.

“Oh, wow, I’m talking too much again.” She forces a laugh. “You have a ball game to get ready for. Do I need to call Nonna and make sure she takes care of things?”

“No. She’s got it. *I* could handle it. But she’s got it.”

“Good, because I don’t know that I have any talents that could terrify a person the way your nonna’s Eye can. Also, every time you’re up to bat today, you should picture the ball as Glow’s butt.”

I rub my chest, right where there’s some weird swelling going on that my coaches would probably want to know about if it were caused by anything that might interfere with my game.

But this isn’t a physical problem.

It’s an emotional problem.

And the weirdest part is, it doesn’t feel like it’s a problem. “You’re a good friend, Henri.”

“I know.”

A surprised laugh wells out of my chest.

“Go on. Go win a few ballgames, okay? Everything else can wait. And I need to call my sister back—”

“Ugh.”

She laughs. “That’s no way to win a ball game.”

“I was talking about your sister.”

“I know. I’m pretending you weren’t. Call me back if you need anything.”

I hate her sister, and I don’t even know her sister. All I know is that every time she talks to her sister, she gets off the phone looking like a lost puppy dog who was abandoned by some railroad tracks and had to make friends with the grass fairies who always talked crap about the puppy dog behind its back.

She hangs up, and the closet door wrenches open. “You jacking off in here?” Nonna asks.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Good. Get out here. You’re up. Torres! Get the pink unicorn! My grandson and I are going to Gel together while in matching costumes!” She looks me up and down. “I took care of the problem. I’d apologize for it being a problem in the first place, except then I wouldn’t have you, and I will never apologize for you. At least, not when you’re doing what I tell you to.” She winks. “When’re you shooting your next shampoo commercial?”

“November.”

“Good. You have time. Torres! Nix that! Grab the hair dye instead. We got some work to do.”

Henri

BY THE TIME I'm off the phone with Elsa, who wanted to tell me about her latest cravings and the state of her cervix at this point in her pregnancy and Titus's new words and about their new rescue dog and about a fundraiser she's organizing for a women's shelter between batches of homemade bread that she's donating to a bake sale supporting a save-the-turtles initiative, I'm exhausted on her behalf.

How does one person do that many things?

But I'm not too exhausted to worry about Luca.

He called me.

He called me because he needed a friend, when he could've picked any one of his teammates.

I want to call him back and check on him, but I know—I know—he doesn't want me to. We've had our moment, and that's it, and now he wants me to leave him alone.

Or possibly my newfound *don't fall in love* radar says that I need space.

Space?

No. Forget space.

I need *brownies*.

But the oven is still broken—I'm pretty sure he doesn't want to see my six different proposed plans for in here, especially with what he said about getting traded so often, because who wants to design a dream kitchen only to spend the next however many weeks and months waiting for word that it's time to give it all up?

Gah.

And I thought losing my house to Barry was bad. At least I knew it was a starter house. My second starter house—don't ask about what happened with Winston Randolph, please—but still a starter house.

I give up on trying to get any more work done, and I text Marisol.

Two hours later, we're camped out in her adorable kitchen while brownies bake, her drinking a gin and tonic, me drinking Dr Pepper out of matching mugs that declare us both to be crazy pants, talking about our favorite episodes of both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Stacey & Lacey: Twins on a Mission*.

She and Emilio live in a cozy four-bedroom house in a middle-class section of Copper Valley. They, too, could live somewhere more upscale, but Marisol tells me she put her foot down when Emilio suggested they look somewhere more expensive. "I told him I was here for the man, not the money, but...four years later, here we are, and he still hasn't proposed, and I don't know what else to do to convince the man that I need a ring. I mean, not a *ring*-ring, but a formal commitment."

"Maybe you should propose to him?"

"And maybe I'm meant to live in sin and be excommunicated from my family until my parents forgive me in the name of seeing their illegitimate grandchildren."

"There's goodness in being the one who screws up. It means the bar's lower for what counts as right." I clap a hand over my mouth and eyeball the Dr Pepper that I drink when I want alcohol. "Sorry. I don't mean you're a screw-up."

She laughs. "We're all screwed up in our own ways. And you're not wrong."

Mackenzie strolls in through the back door right after the brownies come out of the oven.

Actually, *strolls* isn't right.

More like *hefts*.

She's grunting and sweating and pulling three massive trash bags behind her.

Marisol leaps to help her. "Oooh, is this *Meaty, Phase Seven?*"

"I have no idea what you're—*oof*—talking about." Mackenzie pauses and pants against the countertop. "Also, can we maybe toss these in your basement for, I don't know, twenty years or so? Don't look inside. Then you're not a hair tie."

"A hair tie?" I'm so confused.

Marisol snorts in utter glee. "She means an accessory. But if she calls it a hair tie, we don't know we're helping her commit crimes against the mascots. *Ohmygod*. Mackenzie! You *didn't*."

Mackenzie shoos her away from peeking inside the bags. “*Don’t look!*”

“Honey, I’ll do you one better than storing those in the basement. We’ll light us a bonfire tonight.”

“*Toxic fumes!*”

I manage to get a glimpse too, and I gasp. I don’t know if it’s horror or delight or somewhere in between, but I know that the Dr Pepper is giving me a caffeine buzz that’s distracting me from wondering what Luca’s doing and how he’s coping and if Nonna got rid of his father or if he’ll know his dad is in the stands at the game tonight.

Gah. Now I’m thinking about it *all over again.*

No. Nope.

Concentrate on the bag of stolen stuffed fireflies.

“Why would they make those?” I whisper as I point to the bag.

“Giveaways to fans. But justice has been done, and at the next home game, twenty-thousand fans will get stuffed Fiery the Dragons instead of these abominations. No one will have to pick anything less than the best.”

“I am so in love with you right now,” Marisol whispers.

Mackenzie grins. “I know. I’m a little in love with me too. Though my dads are pissed at how much space the other nineteen thousand of these puppies are taking up in their dressing room at the club...”

“Girl. You are *goals.*”

“I’m a fan doing what any fan would do. Probably. Oh! Did I tell you that my dads know someone who can set up a black market auction, and then we can donate all the proceeds to charity?”

“Like a charity to train baseball owners to not give bad mascot choices?”

“Yes.”

We all crack up, because we know she means a real charity.

At least, I think that’s the joke.

We stash the stuffed Glows, and then we dig into the noodle feast that Mackenzie brought from her dads’ lounge. “How’s Emilio doing with his dad on the road?” she asks Marisol.

“They’re bickering like always, but he’s loving it. Like, if they don’t argue over whose music is better, have they actually seen each other? What about Brooks? Is his dad all *look at my new granddaughters*, or has he paused to remember that he’s supposed to pretend he cares that he has a few sons who haven’t given him grandkids?”

“He’s pretty much all *look at my new granddaughters*, but since Brooks is lowkey hoping for six or seven baby girls himself, he’s cool with it.”

“Brooks wants kids? Like, right now?”

“He’s conflicted. He does have at least a decade’s worth of having sex to make up, which I am completely here for, but when he talks about the babies...” Her smile goes dreamy for a moment, then she blushes and shakes her head. “We’re still working on getting through this season and having the wedding and then not cursing ourselves or the team with anything first.”

“Aw, you two are adorable. Can Brooks maybe rub off on Emilio?”

I lunge across the table to hug Marisol, because I know that feeling.

I’m giving it up, but I know that feeling.

She squeezes me back. “Is Luca’s dad traveling with the team?”

“Ah,” I start, but Mackenzie coughs and shakes her head.

“No way. Management wouldn’t do that to him.”

I lift my brows at her.

She ruffles hers together. “You don’t know?”

Have you met Luca? doesn’t seem like the brightest answer if I’m going to keep insisting we’re happily dating. “I know he doesn’t get along with his dad, but we don’t talk about serious things yet...”

She rolls her eyes. “You mean he’s pulling a *man* and refusing to talk to you about it whenever you bring it up, like it doesn’t color his entire world view?”

I nod. “Yes. That.”

Marisol cracks up in her drink and has to wipe her chin and nose, which I totally appreciate, since that’s usually me. “Men. I swear.”

I lean into Mackenzie. “So what do you know?”

She bites her lip, then leans in too. “You know he was engaged?”

I nod.

Marisol nods.

“He was playing for New York with Brooks that year. He found out on his wedding day that his fiancée had been paid to go on dates with him.”

“Oh, that’s bad,” Marisol whispers as my heart drops to my toes.

Lyle dated me because he wanted an in at my father’s bank. That metaphorical slap in the face when I found out—I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.

And Luca, who was already sensitive to the dangers of falling in love after being abandoned by multiple father figures in his childhood, must’ve gotten punched in the heart with it.

Mackenzie’s frowning like she’s afraid of putting bad vibes out in the universe when the team is so close to the playoffs, but she still keeps talking. “He gave an interview about how love was for suckers, and his agent thought it looked bad, so...”

“His *agent* paid a woman to date him?”

“Yeah. Brooks said Luca found out hours before the wedding when his dad

let it slip. Apparently the same guy was his dad's agent back in the day. Mr. Rossi and Luca started reconnecting once Luca went pro and signed with the guy."

Oh my god.

My heart demands that I open my chest and let it take wing to fly up to Boston and hug him. It's one thing to know your dad's a very busy man, like mine, keeping a bank running so people can borrow money for homes and cars and build their nest eggs, but it's another to be treated like you're worthless until you achieve the practically impossible and become an elite pro athlete, merely to get smacked in the face with the idea that no one could love you unless they're paid to?

"Nuh-uh." Marisol leans back and shakes her head. "No parent is that heartless. Are you sure you're not feeding us a story?"

Mackenzie goes pink. "Don't underestimate my ability to do research when it comes to baseball players. I...might've found out way more than I should've about *all* of the Fireballs' new players over the winter."

Poor Luca.

But I can fix this. I can— "No."

My two friends shoot me startled glances, and now I, too, am undoubtedly turning pink. "I mean, that's not right."

"I got my story wrong? Or you don't want the gossip?"

"No! I'm sure you're right, and I want *all* the gossip. Luca and I are still enjoying...you know...the easy benefits, so we haven't exactly shared all the deep and meaningful stuff yet—though I know we will—but that's so *cruel*. And wrong."

"He fired his agent the same day. And he was mid-negotiation for exercising his contract option with New York, which is part of why he got traded. Everything stalled too long, and his new agent had higher aspirations. It's worked out well, I'd say—the new guy's the one who was like, 'start growing your hair enough that we get a few good shots for me to sell to shampoo companies.' Kinda ruthless, but also admirable, I guess?"

"Paid off," Marisol mutters. "Emilio can't even get endorsement deals for used car lots."

"Emilio needs a new agent too. Oh! Game time! Where's the popcorn? And I promised Brooks we'd do the wave together for good luck, and do you mind if I light a few candles? We're so *close*. I need to smell fall. I need to smell fall and *believe*."

Yesterday, I would've thrown my whole heart into helping Mackenzie with her superstitions.

Today, I feel wrong being here when I suspect Luca's struggling in Boston.
And when the pre-game show starts on Marisol and Emilio's television, and the camera pans to the entire Fireballs' team with their hats off for the national anthem, we all gape.

"Their hair," Marisol gasps.

"The dads did *not* do that. Ohmygod, this better not be bad luck."

"Nonna," I whisper.

This has *Nonna* written all over it.

But that's not the worst view of the pre-game show.

Nope.

The worst view comes when the cameras pan to the fathers.

Nonna's sitting with them, naturally.

But it's when the cameras switch and identify an arguing couple in another part of the stands that I leap to my feet.

Should I go to Boston?

Not if I want to keep up this whole charade for Luca that I'm not falling for him.

But *am* I going to Boston?

You're damn right I am.

Luca

LOSING SUCKS.

We're not out of the playoff race—far from it—but we haven't clinched our spot yet either.

“Shouldn't have rushed the dye job,” Robinson grumbles as we climb off the bus and file into the hotel after the game, all of us in matching rainbow hair.

“Shouldn't have brought the fathers,” Max mutters even more softly to me. “Fucked with the routine.”

He's starting tomorrow.

This isn't a good headspace.

“Forget it,” I mutter back. “You know how to pitch a ball. Just do it.”

“Do it *despite* the universe being a dick,” Brooks agrees on his other side.

“Elliott's right, man,” Cooper agrees. “And if there's anyone you should listen to about superstitions, it's the guy who waited until he was thirty to get laid but can *still* hit a baseball despite giving the universe the middle finger.”

“Get some sleep,” I tell them all. “We'll get 'em tomorrow.”

We're sneaking in a back entrance, because sleep—not groupies—are what we all need.

But I still don't relax until I'm in the elevator, because I know my father's lurking somewhere.

Lurking. Waiting. Wanting to be someone again by proximity.

Is it weird that I want to call Henri?

It is.

It's weird. I should want to hit something, but I want to call Henri, because I

know exactly what she'd do.

She'd start rattling about the time Confucius thought he was a goner because he was facing down a horde of angry elves with cursed vampire stakes ready to hex them all and send them through his heart, and instead, he gathered the strength he needed to overcome being cursed by his nemesis to shift into a bat—instead of a turtle—one last time and pull some bat ninja moves, because that's what heroes do when their backs are against the wall.

And now I feel better, because we're fucking heroes.

Baseball heroes, not vampire heroes, but still heroes.

And I still want to talk to Henri.

She has this brightness that she spreads everywhere she goes, and I'm struggling—hard—to understand how five different men could walk away from her.

I swipe my keycard over the lock to my room, push inside, and pull out my phone, ready to make that call—her book will be live in Europe by now, based on how she was explaining the timing of books going live the other day—when I smell it.

Eau du hatred.

The official smell of my family when the two sides clash.

“Luca. There you are. Tell your grandmother to get out of the bathroom before I piss all over the carpet.”

“This is a hotel room for two, not three, and you can pay for your own damn room in another damn city,” Nonna yells from inside the bathroom.

My mother points at the bathroom door. “Are you going to let her talk to me like that?”

I look at the door.

Back at my mom, who's one more person who's not supposed to be here.

Over at my bed, where there's enough luggage for a king's three-week safari tour piled exactly where I'd like my tired body to be.

“What are you doing here?”

“I was mother *and* father to you, so I'm here for my official role to support you for fathers' week.”

“I'm filling in for his father,” Nonna yells from inside the bathroom.

“You failed to make his father leave.”

“Don't you start with me. You know I did everything I could for Luca growing up—”

“Yes, he noticed all the times you had to leave to fly around the world.”

“I was a pilot! That was my *job*! The one that kept him in baseball cleats, if you recall.”

Mom ignores her, naturally, because she always does. “And now you think you can interfere with his love life, because that’s always gone so well for him? And *look what you did to his hair*. If you ruin his endorsement deal—”

“He’s living his best life, and you’re trying to squash his spirit!”

“You’re ruining his financial prospects and his self-respect by disfiguring parts of his body.”

“It’s *hair dye*.”

I turn, grab the door handle, and leave the two of them to rip each other to shreds without me.

I still want to call Henri, but leaving my phone on means endless calls from my mother and grandmother to settle their disputes, so as soon as Brooks opens his hotel room door with the *what the hell?* expression of every man ever interrupted during phone sex, I power off my own phone.

I shrug at him. “Sorry, man. My room got invaded. My mother and grandmother are doing the Italian Eye version of the next world war.”

He glances at the ceiling, and you can tell he’s doing the same mental gymnastics I did before heading to his room. *Who else on the team would make a good roommate?*

On a normal trip, he’s it. Everyone else either has family or a significant other traveling with them, they’re junior enough with crappy enough contracts that they already have a roommate, or else they’re out hitting the bars looking for action.

If they even have to leave the hotel lobby.

No idea if having the dads along is impacting anyone’s post-game game, but I know I’m going for the safe bet.

Especially since his father is rooming with Cooper’s father.

Plus, the fact that Brooks’s fiancée loves the team as much as she loves him means he can’t turn me away without risking her wrath, and while I’ve never seen Mackenzie’s wrath, I’ve lived long enough to know it’s the happy ones you need to worry most about.

I’ve also seen the lengths she’ll go to in the name of the Fireballs winning.

She’s hardcore.

In the best way.

“I don’t know where my father is either right now, but if he finds me, I’m gonna play like shit tomorrow.”

Brooks grunts. “Get in here. You need to deal with your family issues, man. Also, you get the rollaway. And go stand in the bathroom with the water running in the shower until I tell you it’s safe to come out.”

“Deal.”

I sleep like crap for the next seven hours or so, which will be no excuse for a shit game tonight, because baseball is life.

It's also my job.

I'm visualizing myself hitting a grand slam at my first at-bat today as I head back to my own room to kick out Mom and Nonna so I can take a shower in peace first thing in the morning, but as soon as I open the door, I realize something's different.

It's the smell.

Gone is the doom coupled with the scents of hell and arguments, replaced by peach ice cream and sheets dried in the wind and a hint of a hurricane.

Considering the new voice added to the mix, I'm not surprised.

Am I smiling?

I do believe I'm smiling.

Until I wonder if she brought my father into the mix.

"Morgan. Now it's your turn. I want you to look at Irene and tell her you're sorry."

"I will *not* apologize to—"

"Ah-ah-ah. She told you she's sorry for raising the crap bag who left you for another woman, and that took strength of character. Do you want me to think that Luca got all of his charm from his grandmother, or do you want to be the bigger person and own up to what you've done wrong in your relationship with her too?"

"I raised him *all by myself* while she pretended to help two days a month, at most, when she'd tell him stories about her fabulous life and make me look like an even bigger loser, and now she thinks she can force him to marry you when *look what's happened to both of you when people interfere.*"

"Life sucks sometimes, but it's never too late for a fresh start. Do you *like* this cloud of bitterness hanging around? Jerry doesn't. My sunshine was the one thing he loved most about me. So either he was a liar and he's playing you too, or you should try adjusting your worldview to freaking *get along with your son's grandmother and quit giving him heartburn.*"

My jaw hits the floor.

Nonna cackles.

Henri's angled so she can't see me as she lectures my family, whom I can't see because the bathroom wall is blocking my view of the bed, but I'm positive she knows I'm here.

Not like it's easy to sneak into a hotel room.

"I am *not* the one who gives him heartburn," my mother declares.

Henri stomps a foot. "Listen. Both of you. I don't like to be rude. I might

have a heart attack and die in a minute here, because I'm on the verge of hyperventilating over some of these things coming out of my mouth, but Luca's a good man, and he deserves to be able to dream of whatever life he wants, with or without a companion by his side, without all the baggage you've all thrown on him. That's completely unfair of both of you, and if there's one thing I hate more than rudeness, it's unfairness. Now, apologize to each other and promise to be friends, for Luca's sake, before I name my next witch *Morgan Irene* and hex her with a mushroom infection under her armpits and a habit of exploding acid out of her vagina every time she sneezes. And then you're going to tell me where I can find the man known as his father so that he and I can have a heart-to-whatever-he-has too."

She jams her fists onto her hips.

I could never live with myself if Henri had a heart attack while defending my honor, so I stride down the short hallway, bend and wrap my arms around her waist, and kiss her cheek. "Hey, sugarplum."

She sags against me, and holy crap. Her heart is racing, which I can feel *through her back*, and she's shaking like I did at my first major league at-bat. "Hi, honey," she says faintly.

Nonna's smiling like a freaking Angel of Chaos whose work is done. Mom's glaring at her. If I listen closely enough, I'll be able to hear the moment when her molars all crack, which is understandable, since she would've gone *Bringer of Death* on the last person who manipulated me into a relationship if I hadn't threatened to never talk to her again if she was imprisoned for murder when me firing my agent would be enough.

"Go away," I tell them both while I tighten my grip on Henri.

Nonna's rubbing her hands in glee. "Are you gonna throw her on the bed and strip her and forget a condom?"

"Don't be crass, Irene. He's only dating her to get out of your stupid fake curse. And what kind of a grandmother does that to her grandson?"

"The kind who's protecting him from a mother like you."

"Or maybe you're both afraid Luca's going to choose one of you over the other when if you'd *freaking get along*, he wouldn't have to choose at all? How about *what the fuck are you both doing to him?* Oh, god. Oh, god, I'm going to have a stroke too. And you made me say the fuck word. I *hate* when people make me say the fuck word."

"Shh," I murmur. "It's okay. Here. Come sit down. Then I'll open the window and take care of the problems."

"Promise?"

"I've wanted to throw them both off a tall building for a few years now. And

we're only six stories up. That should do significant damage without resulting in murder charges."

"We can hear you," Mom says dryly.

Pretty sure she knows I'm not serious, but I still give her the *go away* look. "Good. Leave." I sweep Henri up into my arms and carry her the two steps to deposit her on top of the disaster of a bed.

If I didn't know my mother was having hot flashes and my grandmother never got over hers, I'd think they had some kind of fling in here last night for the way the bedclothes are all tangled and twisted.

Shit.

I can't make out with Henri on this bed. It has my mother's sweat in it. And my grandmother's.

"You're adorable when your whole face twitches like that," Henri whispers.

Mine might be twitching, but hers is as white as the chalk lines before a game, and it doesn't matter that my dick is hard as steel for the first time in weeks, and that I want to make out with Henri despite my mother and grandmother being here, and all of their cooties being all over everything.

There's something bigger taking control of my body.

It's an organ in my chest that rarely gets the kind of metaphysical workout everyone thinks it's supposed to be for.

I touch her cheek. "Are you okay?"

She opens her mouth, and a full, loud, whiney *meow* comes from beside the bed, accompanied by the sound of claws on canvas.

She brought her cat.

Of course she did.

Dogzilla meows again, which is the freakiest thing I've ever heard. That cat's too lazy to meow, and now she's done it twice in a row. She'd be too lazy to breathe if it wasn't an automatic body function.

I shoot my family another look while I bend over to rescue the cat from its carrier prison.

Nonna shoves Mom. "C'mon, then, Morgan. Let's go hit on some of Luca's friends and get you a personality transplant."

"While we're at it, I'll buy you a drink."

"Arsenic won't kill me, if that's what you're thinking."

I hand the cat to Henri, and they blow out matching sighs of relief as Henri hugs Dogzilla to her chest.

There's no costume on the cat today, but it's weird enough seeing Dogzilla alert and putting a paw to Henri's cheek like she's asking if Henri's okay.

"Is that a shapeshifting cat?" I ask. "Or a cursed former lover?"

And then I realize how far gone I am if I believed for a minute that either of those things could be real.

“Somebody’s been reading too many books.” Henri grins at me as the door slams shut behind my bickering relatives.

Her color’s coming back, but that little divot in her throat where her pulse is fluttering is still operating at warp speed.

“You told off my family for me.”

“I know. I’ve never done that before. For anyone’s family. I don’t get it. Families love me, but yours...yours doesn’t. Not at all.”

“Nonna likes you. And my mother would, but she’s highly suspicious.”

“I saw your mom and dad fighting at the game last night,” she whispers.

My shoulders bunch, and I force myself to let them loose. “They do that on occasion.”

“Are you okay?”

She peers up at me, and *fuck*.

There *is* something real about this.

Something clogs my throat, and I can’t get it to go away. “You flew all the way here to ask if I’m okay.”

“That’s what friends do, right?”

This is fine. It is.

I won’t propose, so I won’t be one more guy to break her heart. I’ll pretend like this is fake for another month—or more, if we can get to the playoffs and keep going—and then when we hit the off-season, I’ll thank her and give her whatever she needs to be on her way.

Hell.

I might even try actually *dating*.

It’s been unexpectedly nice having someone I can tell the weird shit.

But I’m having a hard time reconciling the word *dating* with the image of anyone other than Henri.

She ducks her face into her cat. “I overstepped, didn’t I? Sorry. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come. You can handle this. Of course you’re not going to have a massive meltdown and need me to hold your hand and give you a pep talk so you can get back in the game today, and you didn’t need me to tell off your mom and grandma for bickering, and you don’t need me to stand guard to tell your father what I think of him and his ugly absent butt either, if I were to happen to run into him in the lobby, which I didn’t, no matter what you might hear otherwise. You’ve got this. You’re strong. You’ve been doing this all your life.”

I stare at her while she drifts into silence and continues to hide her face in her cat. Her hair’s a crazy mop of curls again, but it’s not making the devil horns

thanks to whatever Mackenzie's dads had their stylist do to her short cut, and she looks so vulnerable hunched over like that.

Like maybe she needs me to need her.

Like maybe Nonna's curse is working.

And if it's working, is it working because this is *right*, or is it working because Nonna's a witch and this isn't as real as it feels?

Witches.

Devils.

Shapeshifting cats.

"Oh, shit. It's your release day. I sent flowers. You're not there to get them."

She jerks her head up. "You sent me flowers?"

Heat floods my face. "I heard it's a thing you're supposed to do."

"You sent me flowers." Either she has something in her eye, or sending flowers was the exact wrong thing and it's making her cry.

Hello, panic mode.

"You sent me flowers," she whispers again, and then she flings herself at me, wrapping her arms around my neck and peppering my cheeks with kisses. "Luca! That's the sweetest—thing—anyone's ever—done—for me."

I grab her and hold her back, because that can't be right.

It can't.

"Your fiancés never sent you flowers on your release days?"

"Winston Randolph was super busy with the family business, and Kyle and Lyle were both, well, not that into my career, and Barry had this calendar blindness thing where he didn't know Sundays from Thursdays, and by the time I met Jerry, I'd accepted that I only date men who aren't...the type."

It's a good thing I wouldn't recognize four of her five previous fiancés, because my baseball bat and I would probably have something to say to them, and then my career would be over.

Also, *Winston Randolph*? Is that his first and last name, or his actual full first name that he goes by every day?

And where does Henri find guys like this?

And what does it mean about me that she found me next?

I shake my head. "What about your parents? Don't they send release day stuff?"

She winces.

"Or your sister?"

"Writing books is hardly saving the world, and Elsa saves the world every ___"

I need to quit silencing her with kisses, but right now, I can't help myself,

because how does a woman find herself engaged to five different men and related to an entire family of people who don't give a shit about the important days in her life?

It would be like my mother not calling after a game where I hit a walk-off home run. Or like Nonna not emailing after my team sweeps a series.

Or like none of my cousins showing up for the playoffs that year that I was playing for Colorado when we clinched the division pennant.

My family drives me insane, but most of them are also there for the important days. And the everyday days too, like a random Wednesday when they read a BuzzFeed article that they think I'd enjoy, rather than a random Wednesday when they need me to talk to their pet bird and make everything about *them* and never about me.

So yeah, I'm kissing Henri.

I'm kissing her to make up for every damn book release she's ever had that the rest of her family forgot.

I'm kissing her because she needs to know that she matters as a person with her own hopes and dreams and purpose, which isn't to be there for everyone else.

I'm kissing her because I like her books. They're hundreds of pages of laughter and joy and the best kind of utter ridiculousness.

I'm kissing her because she tastes like dessert and she feels like home and kissing her makes me see an entire new side of the world that I never would've known existed if she hadn't come into my life.

And the longer I kiss her, the more I want her.

Not as the woman who's easy and here.

But as the woman who's been the ray of light that showed me how dark my life has been up until this exact moment.

She's not my forever. She's my first step toward a new tomorrow.

And I don't know if that makes me one more asshole using her, but I know I don't want to think about tomorrow when she's here, kissing me like I'm the last man on earth and the fate of our very existence depends on the two of us getting it on *right now*.

I claw my shirt off as she's tossing hers across the room. She dives for the button on my jeans while I reach for the clasp of her bra.

God, her breasts are magnificent.

And if my junk did shrink at any point in this *Eye-ing* process, it's not having any problems growing back to its normal size today.

And then some?

Yeah.

Definitely *and then some*.

I shuck my jeans and boxer-briefs.

Henri wiggles out of her pajama pants.

“Condom!” she shrieks.

I grab the spare from my wallet, and then we’re rolling on the bed again, kissing and touching and petting and exploring until I’m on my back with tangled sheets making a weird lump under my back and my head hanging over the edge of the bed while she centers herself over what’s quite possibly the proudest woody I’ve ever had in my life.

“Oh, god, Luca, tell me to stop,” she pants as we both stare at the tree trunk growing out of my pelvis.

“Have you ever had release day sex?”

“Not for release day sex’s sake.”

“Then no way I’m telling you to stop.”

“But—”

“Henri, I swear to fuck, if you don’t ride me *right now*, I’ll never forgive you.”

Her eyes go wide, and then she’s laughing as she lowers herself, taking me deep inside her while her eyes cross and my body shudders with the otherworldly, intoxicating sensation of being squeezed by Henri in the most intimate way.

“Oh, god, Luca,” she whispers.

I grip her hips while she pumps them and I thrust up into her, both of us shaking the bed and making me slide more off the edge, shoulders first, with every roll of her hips, until I’m on the verge of coming inside her while clenching my abs to keep myself from falling off the bed, and I don’t know if it’s the precarious position making my cock harder and more primed than I’ve ever felt it, or if it’s Henri yelling at my family for me, or if it’s pre-game jitters, but every time she gasps my name or tells me I’m so big or that I feel so good inside her, all the sensations from the pit of my stomach to the tip of my dick are so intense, I believe this could make me go blind.

“Henri—” I grit out.

“Oh, god, Luca, I’m there,” she gasps. “I’m...*right...there.*”

Dogzilla yowls in what’s either pain or pleasure, but the noise fades as I pump into Henri once more, and her pussy suddenly squeezes me so tight that everything inside me bursts open, and she screams my name while I groan out hers and Dogzilla yowls again, and the hotel room explodes in a burst of color, and lights dance behind my eyes, and everything’s spinning, and then Henri’s screaming again, except this time, she’s also sliding off my hard-on, and

everything's upside down, and my head's hitting the floor and she's skidding over my face, breasts first—glorious, glorious titties—as she shrieks and reaches for something to hold onto while we fall off the bed, and her cat's yowling and *oh, fuck.*

Where *is* the cat?

My balls are exposed, and I'm both squished in this weird upside-down position with Henri plastered crooked across my shoulders and face, and also on an orgasm high that's rapidly crashing into a suddenly very real fear that her cat is the type who likes to play with a stick and balls.

Henri tumbles off me and rolls to the side, getting stuck momentarily between the bed and the AC unit before she finishes a somersault and comes up on her knees.

“My dick,” I crow as I cover the family jewels and pull my legs in, which makes me tumble backwards into a yoga pose that's probably not good for a beginner.

“Oh my god, did I break it?” she gasps beside me.

“It's not a toy!”

“I thought you wanted me!”

“I did! It's not a toy for your cat!”

“My cat doesn't like dick!”

I stop and peer at her, which isn't easy when I'm contorted like a pretzel and she's Henri, which means she's flying over the room to rescue her cat, but I can see her bending over, with her bare ass, and that glimpse of her glistening wet pussy, with her breasts dangling too, and fuck me, I'm getting hard again.

And not hard, but oak tree hard.

No, not oak tree. Wrought iron.

Yeah.

I'm a wrought iron fence post here.

“Henri?” I pant, a chuckle growing deep inside me that pauses as I look at her again.

She peers at me from between her legs, because she's that kind of flexible, and I swear my cock grows another inch.

Naked Henri.

Bent over.

Looking at me between her legs while she strokes her cat, who's shuddering like she's also coming down off a post-orgasm high, but that's not the weirdest part.

The weirdest part is how much I want Henri again.

Right now.

The woman who was all the insanity and chaos in my life a month ago has somehow become the one woman I desperately need again.

“Luca?”

So this is what tongue-tied feels like. A million things want to come out of my mouth at once. *Pet the pussy between your legs too for me, baby. You’re so damn hot. Thank you for the most fun sex I’ve ever had. Life isn’t boring with you. Stay. Come sit on my face. Can I fuck you again in the shower?*

And I can’t say any of that to Henri, because I’ve promised her I won’t.

So instead, I blurt out a grunt that I hope sounds like I’m asking if she’s okay, and after she stares at me for a long minute like my body’s been invaded by those yellow cartoon characters that are always yammering nonsense unless they’re talking about bananas, she slowly nods. “Yeah. I’m okay. That was... nice. Are you okay? Are you stuck? Do you need help? That doesn’t look good for your back, and you have to play a game in—oh my gosh, do you need to go? When do you have to be at the ballpark? Are you going to be late? Is there a bus? There’s always a bus, right? Do you need me to leave? I have a room at a hotel down the street, and I—”

“Henri.”

She sucks her lips into her mouth like she’s realized she’s talking too much.

Except she’s not talking too much.

She’s talking a Henri amount of talking, and it’s exactly right.

But I can’t say that either. Again, because I’ve promised her I won’t.

I clear my throat. “You should probably stand up before all that blood running to your head makes you pass out.”

She blinks twice, then bolts straight up.

Which means she bangs her head straight into the TV stand.

“Shit!” I roll and leap to my feet, trip over the sheets that enabled our slide off the bed, and end up on my side next to her while she plops down onto her ass between the bed and the TV stand. “You okay?”

She’s rubbing the back of her head as she shifts her eyes to look at me.

Dogzilla leaps onto her knee and balances there, which is impressive for what has to be a fifteen-pound, lazy-ass cat.

And as I lay there, with a carpet burn starting to make its presence known on the side of my ribcage, my dick torn between wanting to ask for another round and go into hiding in case the cat notices and wants a play toy—and yeah, that’s my excuse, and it has nothing to do with worrying that there’s a connection between my dick and my heart—I start to snicker.

Henri’s lips twitch.

And I want to kiss her.

I don't care if we screw around again.

I just want to sit here, laugh with her, and kiss her.

It's becoming crystal clear to me why she's been engaged five times. Because Henri Bacon is the kind of woman who makes it so very easy to fall in love.

Not that this is *love*.

But I'm willing to concede to feelings of affection stronger than I've let myself feel in years.

"You had breakfast?" I ask her.

She shakes her head, that smile still lighting her pretty brown eyes.

"Then let's go celebrate a book launch."

Henri

Wow.

I had sex. With Luca. And it was fun, and it was good—so good—and I want to do it again, and I also want to ask him to marry me.

But *I am not going to ask him to marry me.*

This was my next test. The logical next step in my training to learn to *not ducking fall in love.*

And yes, I mean *ducking*, because I've already used up my quotient of the other word for the week, and—

No.

You know what?

Fuck it.

That's right.

Fuck it.

Elsa might think that a person shouldn't use the fuck word, but that doesn't mean that I, Henrietta Leonora Bacon, have to follow her rules too.

I write books.

Words are tools. And if I want to use the fuck word, I will use the fuck word.

"I don't know what you're thinking, but please stop," Luca says over omelets at a greasy spoon down the road from the hotel, where we're having a peaceful breakfast away from all of his family while they work out their own problems. "Whatever it is, it's not worth hyperventilating over."

I square my shoulders, look him in the eye—which is hard when I all want to do is stare at his rainbow hair—and let it all come out.

Kind of. “I was thinking I should say fuck more often.”

A woman at the next table gasps and covers her toddler’s ears, and I wince. “Sorry,” I whisper to her.

She glares at me.

Luca coughs behind his orange juice.

Gah, he’s so handsome when his eyes crinkle like that.

“Maybe we save you saying that lovely word for the next time we’re alone,” he whispers, and I swear he’s whispering at exactly the right decibel level for the lady with the toddler to hear, and I *know* he’s putting that seductive quality in his voice for the benefit of every woman with ovaries who likes to spontaneously have orgasms in public to enjoy with their eggs and hash browns this morning.

I fan my face.

He grabs his phone, which he’s been checking obsessively since we ordered our food. I bat at it. “Put that away.”

“*Nora Dawn has outdone herself. I never thought I could love another vampire as much as I love Confucius, but Adonis is my new book boyfriend forever and ever with beet sauce on top.*”

My cheeks go up in flames and I have to grab my shirt and fan my own armpits with it, because hearing the good reviews always makes me sweat.

“They’re saying that because—”

“Because you’re smart and talented and funny and people like your books,” he interrupts. “Say it with me, Henri. *I am smart. I am funny. I have jam on my cheek.*”

“Ohmygosh, I’m wearing my jam?”

He licks his thumb, reaches across the chipped Formica table and swipes it over my cheek. “Not anymore. Now, the other two parts. *I am smart. I am funny...*”

“I know I’m smart and funny. I just don’t know if I’m...”

He lifts a brow, and I realize his brows are still that lovely shade of chestnut rather than rainbow-colored like his hair.

“Never mind.” I dig back into my omelet, because no good will come of telling Luca that I don’t know if I’m lovable.

He’ll either tell me I am, or he won’t, and neither will fix the fact that I need to get over liking him.

He’s not my forever.

I snort softly to myself, because *no man* is my forever.

Luca’s not eating when I glance up again.

No, he’s staring at me like I’m a puzzle and he’s going to find my missing piece.

It's you, Luca Rossi. You're my missing piece.

The thought makes me drop my fork, and dozens of eyeballs turn to stare at us as my fork clatters not once, but four times as I try to grab it—and miss—over and over again until I almost knock over my tea mug too.

“I should hurry up,” I blurt. “I haven’t spent much time in Boston, and you probably need to get to the ballpark, and I can explore the city. It’s a good thing to do to distract me on release day. Otherwise I’ll obsess over reviews and charts and all kinds of things that I don’t need to obsess about. Oh! And I should see if I can get a ticket to the game, since I’m here. Unless you want me to go back to Copper Valley. I can catch a flight home. It’s no problem. I’ll—”

“Henri.”

I can’t look at him as I mumble, “Yes?”

He doesn’t answer right away, and when I finally look up at him, he’s frowning.

Of course he is.

I’m annoying. I talk too much. I’m not pretty like Mackenzie or Tanesha or Marisol—I’m plain, lumpy, weird-haired, boring-eyed Henri with a job that isn’t even a *real* job.

But I guess being a baseball player isn’t a *real* job either, is it?

I kinda doubt my family would judge Luca for that though.

“What do *you* want?” he finally asks.

You. “Ohmygosh, I forgot to feed Dogzilla.”

Yeah.

I’m a big ol’ chicken.

But this isn’t about avoiding Luca. Not entirely.

It’s also about avoiding myself.

Henri

THE NEXT SEVERAL days are weird. I fly home from Boston with the team, including Nonna, but not including Luca's parents.

His dad apparently left town not long after I ran into him in the lobby. I didn't think *I'll put you in a book and make you a deadbeat vampire dad too* was a real threat, so it's likely Nonna or Morgan were responsible for him leaving, but I still feel like I did my part.

Especially since I doubt either one of them added *it's never too late to have a real relationship with someone, but only if you're planning on giving more than you receive, because that's what you owe a child you've disappointed for this many years.*

Maybe I shouldn't have meddled, but considering Luca has lots of pictures of his mom and his nonna and his aunts and uncles and cousins with him in that box I found in the basement when I was looking for duct tape, but none of him with his father, I don't think I got it wrong.

Luca and I go back to sleeping in the same bed with our backs to each other and occasionally making noises like we're having sex, while not touching, though there's a layer of awkward that wasn't there before Boston, and I don't know how to get rid of it.

Possibly breaking up with him would work, except that thought makes my heart do that thing where it feels like I'm on an out-of-control roller coaster and one of those little hills takes me by surprise when we go over it too fast.

I don't want to break up with Luca.

I'm not ready for that.

During the day when I'm not hiding in his basement writing and he's not at the ballpark, we've had some fascinating discussions where neither of us touch the flaming elefantasaurus in the room that is this weird tension between us.

For instance, I've learned that he likes to jog through the zoo a few days a week during the off-season to get his animal fix, and that he's always wanted pets but feels like it's unfair to them given how much he travels. He spends a few hours a week helping out at food pantries or animal shelters or visiting with kids at the children's hospital. If he can't sleep, he'll binge watch *Sherlock*. He's three classes shy of a degree, because he took classes during the winter when he was in the minors but couldn't decide what he wanted to major in, since he knew he wanted the big league paycheck and needed to put his primary emphasis on continuously improving his body until it was in major-league shape.

And he's usually much further along in his fixer-upper projects at this point in a season, but he likes Copper Valley, and he's stalling on the project for fear that when it's done, the universe will know it's time to trade him again.

So the baseball player who doesn't seem to have any superstitions on the field has them after all.

They're in his home life instead of at the ballpark.

Considering it doesn't feel like he's even started, I'm guessing Luca's hoping he'll get to retire in Copper Valley. Not just stay another season, but fully retire.

Nonna's still staying with us, and she's filled in a few blanks. I get the feeling she likes me more since I told her off.

And I'm sad that *that's* what it takes to get accepted by part of his family. I don't want to take sides. I want everyone to get along for Luca's sake.

But I still appreciate knowing that his dad didn't pay the child support he was supposed to after the divorce, and that by the time Nonna realized it, Morgan was so pissed with all of them that she told Nonna to take a flying leap.

Naturally, Nonna didn't listen, or she wouldn't be here, but things are still tense between them.

She also told me people worth having in your life are worth fighting for.

Wisdom from Nonna.

Maybe one day I'll ask her how I managed to get engaged *five times* to men who couldn't go through with marrying me.

She'd probably tell me because I'm a ducked-up basket case.

Yep.

Ducked-up.

I'm back on the struggle bus with using my big girl words.

Luca leaves for a week-long away trip, and after two days of staying in

Copper Valley with me, Nonna heads out to Vegas for a thing with one of her new TikTok sponsors.

The Fireballs clinch a spot in the playoffs on their first away game after Boston, so everyone in all of Copper Valley is riding this amazing high. Mackenzie randomly bursts into tears during Lady Fireballs meetings.

So does Tanesha.

And Marisol.

I cry the happy tears with them, because how can I not?

This is a big deal. Luca told me the Fireballs only won something like thirty-nine games out of over a hundred and fifty last year, so to make the playoffs is such a drastic turnaround that even my dad texts about seeing it on the news.

My family knows I'm taking a time-out from life in Copper Valley. I don't think they follow small-time gossip pages enough to have picked up on the fact that I'm fake-dating a baseball player, which is fine.

Really.

It's better this way, because I don't have to answer the questions about if Luca makes enough money to pay for *this* wedding, when there won't be a wedding, which is the whole point of me getting to know him in the first place.

I take myself out of Copper Valley and drive an hour or so to reach the Blue Ridge Mountains and go hiking for an afternoon after that, because I need the break from my break.

It feels like both seventeen years and also like a blink of an eye by the day Luca's supposed to be home again.

Kids are back in school. The weather's getting comfortably chilly at night, and the kitchen is the perfect spot to sit and write with the windows open now that we're well into September.

And that's exactly where I am when my phone rings near dusk.

It's Elsa, and her due date is approaching, so of course, I drop everything and answer.

And I immediately wish I hadn't.

She's not in labor. No one's hurt. Nothing like that. No one's dying, no children were stung by bees or fell down a well.

It's just...

Well, it might be Elsa being Elsa, and this time, she's completely broken me.

I manage to hold myself together until I can get her off the phone over an hour later, and as soon as I've hung up, I wish Nonna was here, because I need a hug.

I need a hug *so bad* that I'd ask Nonna to be my Nonna for five minutes and hug me.

Okay, confession: Nonna's not my first choice of who I'm wishing was here. But I'm pretending like she is, because I can't handle wishing for Luca on top of handling the bomb that Elsa dropped.

I could call Mackenzie, or Marisol, or Tanesha, except they wouldn't get it.

Not the way my writer besties will. So I log onto my computer and send an SOS to a couple close professional friends.

In ten minutes, I'm huddled at Luca's kitchen table, a fan blowing on me because I'm so upset I'm sweating despite the cooler temperatures, my favorite glittery *Addicted to Love Stories* coffee mug filled to the brim with hot chocolate, and my laptop open while my three friends log onto our video chat.

Dorothea is first, and yes, *that* Dorothea. The one that Luca nicknamed Granny Romance, the one whose blow job paragraph I accidentally sent to him, and the woman who's responsible for half the hot flashes around the world.

Katharine James-Taylor follows almost immediately. She's British, in her mid-forties, married with two kids, living in Montana—don't ask—and writes dark romantic suspense that makes me worry about her sometimes.

Last to join us, though only by like four seconds, is Jen Persimmon, pen name Jack M. Hughes, and yes, I mean *that* Jack M. Hughes who writes legal thrillers, and if you tell anyone he's actually a woman, I'll never speak to you again. Jen and her wife, Lin, just adopted their third baby, so I didn't expect her to hop on so quick, but here we are.

"Henri, I love you, but if you're telling us you're engaged again—" Jen starts.

"Wait, that's my line," Dorothea interrupts.

"Elsa's writing romance novels," I say, and then I burst into tears.

It's ugly.

I'm embarrassed.

I know I'm overreacting, but all three of my friends gasp and stare at me in horror through the computer screen, and maybe I'm not overreacting.

"No." Katharine leans closer to her camera. "Why—*when*?"

"Right?" I sob.

Jen leans back and crosses her arms, tapping her fingers slowly over her biceps. "I've met a hacker or two. Want me to take care of her computer?"

"Not necessary." Katharine smiles, and she manages to smile in a way that's both deviously terrifying and also as soothing as her voice, which I could listen to basically all day, with or without the accent. "She'll find out soon enough that writing a book is harder than it appears."

"*Romance novels*," I repeat. "She could've written self-help. Or a yoga book. Or a memoir. Or a new kind of planner. But no. She says she has to write

romance novels. But none of that silly paranormal stuff. She's writing a modern-day romance *where the heroine dies*."

Katharine drops her teacup, mutters *what the fuck* in that lovely British accent that makes it sound like she's asked if you'd like to take a stroll through the park, and disappears from view.

"Isn't the whole point of a romance novel that they all live happily ever after?" Jen asks.

I'm hiccupping now. I'm crying so hard I'm hiccupping. "She's going to be—*hic!*—famous and—and everyone—*hic!*—will think she writes b—bet—better romances than me when—*hic!*—she doesn't write romance at all."

"Psh. She'll get six hundred words in and give up," Dorothea says.

"Elsa never fails at anything."

Dogzilla hops onto my lap, then tries to climb my chest, which is awkward in all the ways it can possibly be awkward, not the least of which is that she's dressed in her alien costume today and her tentacles are going up my nose.

Katharine pops back onto the screen, wiping her arms with a cloth napkin. "What did you say to the twat when she told you what she was about?"

Usually I love her soothing accent as she lets out a solid *twat*, but today, the question itself makes me sob harder. "She asked—*hic!*—me for a—aad—advice."

Jen leans right into the camera. "Tell me you didn't give it to her."

Katharine's leaning in too. "Tell me you did, but you gave her awful advice."

I reach for my hot chocolate. "I can't doooooo thaaaaaat," I sob.

The front door slams.

Dogzilla jerks while she has her claws in my chest, yowls in terror, and leaps onto my laptop, but she misses and hits my arm, which sends my hot chocolate flying everywhere.

Everywhere.

"No!" I leap to my feet.

Towels.

I need towels.

I can't lose my laptop. *I can't lose my laptop.*

"Henri?" All three of my friends blink and stare, and then everything goes black.

"Nooooo!"

"Henri?" Luca calls. "What's—oh, shit."

Dogzilla yowls again, looks up, sees Luca, and then collapses on the floor like she's realized we're not being invaded by Nonna, or Luca's mom, or Elsa and her family, or something not quite as terrifying like an angry hoard of bees

on steroids or a pack of saber-toothed tigers that have traveled through time to eat us, and my cat has officially checked out of duty.

Luca's leaping all over the kitchen. He throws me a towel, then skids on the hot chocolate on the floor as he grabs another towel.

I lunge to wipe off my laptop.

He stops next to me and tries to pat down my arms while I'm trying to use them to clean up my laptop.

And I can't stop sobbing.

"Henri. God. Are you okay?"

I nod. "I'm *fiiiiiiiiine*."

"Jesus. No, you're not. Did someone die?"

"No—*hic!* I—I'm okay."

"This is *not okay*."

Well.

When he puts it like that, the only thing I can do is sob harder.

"Don't cry, Henri. Don't cry. I'll buy you a new laptop. Do you use a cloud back-up? Tell me you use a cloud back-up. Never mind. Not important. I'll pay for your hard drive to get recovered. Oh, shit. *Shit*. You named it, didn't you? You named your laptop and now you've lost a friend and *shit*. I can't fix this."

Ohmygosh.

I didn't name my laptop.

I didn't name it, and I should've, and now it's gone to the great laptop heaven in the sky, and it was my friend and I didn't even give it a name.

I'm a complete and total laptop mama failure, and my sister's going to be a bestselling author in like two weeks, probably without naming her laptop either, except she's Elsa, so of course she'll remember to name it, and it'll be something beautiful like Violet Sparkle von Gorgeous, and I can't even have a proper pity party.

Also, Luca's hair dye is fading, and it should look like a light brown rainbow of poop, but instead, it's utterly adorable, like a chestnut wave kissed by a unicorn that would look spectacular on one of the billboards on the interstate where his current billboard holding Kangapoo resides, whereas my hair is once again at that perfect length where I caught myself having devil horns when I glanced in the mirror three hours ago.

"It's something else, isn't it?" He pulls back, his green eyes going wide and worried. "Did someone die? Fuck, Henri. Tell me how to fix this."

I shake my head and grip his forearm, and *holy crap*, his forearm is solid.

Also, I'm not sure we've been this physically close since the hotel room in Boston—at least, not when someone else wasn't watching—and I like it.

Especially when he throws his towel on the table, mutters, “*Screw it,*” and grabs me in a giant Luca hug.

It’s not a normal hug, because it’s bigger and stronger and like being cradled by a giant teddy bear that acts like a tyrannosaurus rex but only because he’s been taught for so long that it’s the only way to keep his heart safe.

He squeezes me tight and buries his nose in my crazy hair and all of my panic and insecurities and sobs slow until I’m a giant blob of worn-out muscles and jelly bones.

Check that.

I’m an *embarrassed* giant blob.

“Elsa’s writing a romance novel,” I whisper.

His body goes so tense that the hug shifts from a teddy bear cuddle to trying to rub myself against a steel refrigerator door. “Your sister Elsa?”

I nod into his chest.

“The Elsa with the twenty-three kids and ten pets and forty-three volunteer organizations and her own YouTube channel? That Elsa?”

Once more, I nod.

“Why *the fuck* is she doing that?”

I swallow hard and don’t answer.

“Because you write romance novels?”

There’s a deadly calm in his voice that should probably make me worry, but it’s hard to worry when I’m snuggling a steel door with a heartbeat getting stronger and faster under my ear, and when I suspect *he gets it*, and I like that he would instantly understand why I’m upset about this, when I shouldn’t. It’s a free world, and if Elsa wants to write a romance novel, I shouldn’t stop her. I know how it feels to have people try to keep you from your dream, and even if I’m horribly jealous and broken and neurotic, that’s no reason to make her the same way.

“Henri?” Luca’s voice rumbles through the kitchen and makes me shiver in the good way. “Tell me she’s not doing it because you do it too.”

“She has everything else. Why does she need this too?” I shudder and try to grab the words back. “If this will make her happy, of course she should do it. There’s plenty of room in the world for her stories too. And I always say every story has a reader.”

“Christ on a tortellini,” he mutters. He pulls back again, grips my arms, gets right in my face, and growls, “Stay.”

And then he turns and marches out of the kitchen, pulling his phone out of his pocket and giving me a view of his rear end that I’ve been trying very, *very* hard not to appreciate every time I watch a baseball game, because that ass ain’t

mine.

To quote...someone.

Probably.

As soon as he disappears from view, I remember my friends, and I drop my own phone trying to pull it out to open the video chat app and get back to them.

Katharine, Dorothea, and Jen are still there, Jen bouncing the baby now, and they're all staring intently at me while my phone takes sixty-five years to fully engage the app.

"Are you okay?"

"What happened?"

"Tell me that rugged baseball player you're shacking up with came home and threw you on that table and had his way with you until you can't feel your legs."

"*Dorothea*. She's upset. She doesn't need penis."

"Penis wouldn't hurt. But then, she wasn't gone *long*, so maybe that would've hurt."

Jen makes a face. "Is your laptop toast?"

"I'm okay," I tell them. "At least, I think I will be. I'm sorry I overreacted. I ___"

"Oh my god, Henrietta, *you are not overreacting, and stop apologizing for it*. You're allowed to have feelings when someone you love dismisses and pisses all over what you love simply because they're jealous that you've done something they can't."

I open my mouth to defend Elsa. I don't think she understands what she's doing, except isn't that what I've done with her entire life?

Have I?

I don't think I've ever dismissed her life to her face. And I wouldn't, because her life makes her happy.

I'm just...well, jealous.

And I don't like that about myself, even though I know it's a natural human reaction.

I wanted *one thing* that I could be better at. Just one.

And my career has always been it.

"Where's Mr. Big Bat?" Dorothea demands.

"He's—"

"Right here." Luca squeezes my shoulder as he appears in the screen behind me, and he only does a brief double-take when he spots his Granny Romance. "Let me know when you're done."

"We're done," she says instantly. "Clearly, Henri has better things to do."

Video chat makes it hard to tell, but I'm positive she's ogling Luca.

Katharine fans herself, and if it wasn't for the simple gold wedding band on her hand, I'd think she was fanning herself over Luca.

But maybe she is?

Being married doesn't make you blind, does it?

Jen shifts the baby. "Henri, sweetheart, he's not my type, but I think it's time for you to end this call and go tend to whatever it is he needs, which is hopefully to tend to your needs. Men always get that part wrong, I swear."

Luca lifts a brow. "I'm not getting that part wrong."

"Oh, gosh, my dog has to go out. Gotta run. Henri, ping us if you need anything." Katharine waves, and Jen and Dorothea sign off too.

And then it's only me, Luca, and Dogzilla left.

My cat is much happier now that I've stopped crying.

But I don't think Luca is.

He's frowning. And when he frowns, he gets this adorable crease between his eyes that I want to rub away with my finger, except I'm afraid to touch him, because if I touch him again, I'm not going to stop.

He starts to reach for me, then stops. "I called a computer repair shop. Their after-hours line should call us back soon."

"Oh. Um, thank you. I could've—"

"You're not happy."

"I'm happy. I am. It's hiding under a few clouds, but I'm fine. Really. Completely overreacting. Did I tell you Dogzilla got a new costume? It's—"

"Do you want to go to a party?"

The question shouldn't sting, but I was hoping he'd silence me with a kiss fit for a movie.

And instead, he wants to go somewhere with other people.

And not be alone with me. Or talk to me about my feelings. Or cuddle until he's sure that I'm completely over the tears.

Of course. Naturally.

Because this is all pretend.

If I were bolder, I'd kiss him and tell him what I want, but it's the exact opposite of what I *need* to do, so instead, I do what I've always done.

I plaster a bright smile on my face, fully aware that I probably look like a crazy lady with a blotchy face and insane hair that I should almost definitely cover with a hat before we go out, and while I'd love to tell him that he should go without me so that I can have my private pity party with my good friends Ben and Jerry, instead I nod enthusiastically. "I love parties."

His eyes narrow briefly, like he knows I'm faking my excitement, but then

he nods. "Great. Let's go."

"Now?"

"Oh. You need to go to the bathroom?"

I jerk a hand up and down my body.

He starts to grin, and *gah*, stupid ovaries. They've completely forgiven him for not wanting to cuddle me.

One simple grin, and he's back in my good graces, and, unfortunately, I want to kiss him even more.

"What's wrong with your pajamas?" he asks.

"*These aren't party attire.*"

"But they match today. You could wear your panda slippers and complete the ensemble."

I huff.

He grins bigger. "Okay, okay. You can have a few minutes to get ready. Gotta find your matching panda hat, right?"

That man.

He'd take me to a party while I'm in my panda pajamas.

And unfortunately, that makes me like him all the more.

Luca

SEEING Henri crying is like seeing all of the happiness in the world sucked away by an evil demon of darkness who needs to take a baseball straight between the eyeballs and a bat between the legs.

And I don't *ever* believe in racking a dude, but in this case—yeah.

I'd rack the ever-loving shit out of whatever took Henri's happiness away.

But since I can't rack a pregnant woman, I did the next best thing.

I texted Nonna.

She calls me back while Henri's in the shower, and I give her a quick rundown on what I need her to do.

Also?

Nonna's cackle should be terrifying. I can hear what she's thinking even though she's currently in Vegas with a spotty cell signal.

It worked. The Eye worked!

Joke's on her.

Probably me too, because the last thing I'm going to be is the next guy to ask Henri to marry him. I promised her I wouldn't, and why would she even believe I was serious if I did?

But if Nonna will help Henri in the meantime, she can think whatever she wants.

Henri's laptop won't boot up, so I wipe it off as best I can and pack it up to take in for repairs.

Or recovery.

Whatever the computer shop can do for it.

And then I wonder what's taking so long, because throwing on a clean Confucius T-shirt and jeans shouldn't be a forty-five-minute affair.

I'm about to head up the stairs when I hear them squeaking.

"There you—*whoa*."

Henri—*my* Henri, the Henri who lives in funny pajama pants and expressive T-shirts, the Henri who covers her hair with a bandana or my Fireballs hat when it gets unruly, the Henri who lives in mismatched pajamas and doesn't own makeup, is a fucking bombshell.

She freezes above the trick step. "Is this a cow-tipping party? Did I overdo it? Should I go change again?"

Her short hair has been tamed into submission and is an organized mass of curls *without* the devil horns. Her lips are painted like cherries, her eyes are smoky, and she's in a fancy, soft purple lace tank top showing enough cleavage to catch a man's interest—namely, *my* interest. She's covered it with a classy white cardigan that's doing nothing but make me want to see her bare arms, and her white jeans are making me itch to peel them off her hips too.

She might not fit the definition of a classic beauty, but Henri Bacon is friggin' gorgeous to me.

Her brown eyes are wary as she inches back up a step. "Or is it because I'm wearing white after Labor Day? I know—my mother would have a fit too. But I like these jeans, and they're the only ones that fit me, because I have those five extra launch week pounds that I'll work on next week."

"I—no. You look—you look amazing."

She rolls her eyes. "Yes, I'm now fit to stand beside you on that Kangapoo billboard downtown."

"Hey." I snag her by the waist and pull her down off the stairs.

Her hands fly to my shoulders. "*Gah*. Warn a girl."

"I fucked up."

"Luca. It wasn't your fault. You didn't know the door would scare me, nor did you know I had hot chocolate in my hand, and—*mmph!*"

And here I am, fucking up again.

Because I'm kissing Henri.

Again.

And god help me, she's kissing me back.

There's only so much I can resist, and Henri thinking she's not attractive isn't something I can let go.

Especially when my fuck-up is that I haven't told her she looks amazing when she's wearing her pajamas. Or when her hair's crazy. Or when she's smiling so big it looks like her face can't possibly hold all that happiness without

cracking.

She doesn't have to get dressed up to be her own brand of gorgeous, yet here I am, being the asshole who waits to tell her until she fits herself into the mold of what society says is pretty.

I turn to press her against the wall, trip over the damn philodendron that my mother insisted on putting in here for me, and we break apart, panting, while I make sure Henri doesn't fall. "You okay?"

Her gaze meets mine, and she immediately looks away. "Yes. Yes! Perfect. We should take a selfie or something to send to Nonna, since you're wearing my lipstick now. Super smart. *Really* smart. Here. We can use my phone."

She fumbles and drops it, and I want to grab her chin and make her look at me and tell her I like her, but what happens then?

Nothing good.

She doesn't want forever.

Hell, *I* don't want forever. I want to play baseball and—

And not ever hurt a woman again the way she's put herself up to be rejected *five times*.

She's not being paid to be here. She knows about Nonna's Eye. She's *asked* me to not fall in love with her.

She's not Emily.

She wouldn't hurt me.

But I'm terrified I'll hurt her.

"Why did you do it?"

"Drop the hot chocolate?"

"Get engaged. Why did you let yourself get engaged to five assholes who weren't good enough for you?"

Her cheeks go pink as she dives for her phone. "You say that like I'm the victim of five proposals."

I press my lips together and fist my hands in my own hair, because if I don't, I'll either grab her and kiss her again, or start ranting about everything she deserves and what idiots her former fiancés are, and that's not what she asked me to do.

She asked me to help her learn to *not* fall in love.

"There we go. Here. Smile for your Nonna. She'll love the little lipstick touch."

Her phone screen displays the two of us, me looking like I want to go punch a hole in the fabric of the universe, her looking like she might want to puke, and the two of us fake the most awful, unconvincing smiles I've ever seen.

"Now, you promised me a party."

Only Henri could dig deep enough to find that much cheer and enthusiasm for a party that neither of us wants to go to right now.

But if my options are staying here, alone with this woman who's maddeningly more attractive with every breath, or heading out to be surrounded by people on our first chance to celebrate making the playoffs, then I'm heading out to the party.

"Yeah. Let's go."

She says goodnight to Dogzilla, and we take off.

I don't argue about climbing into her small SUV instead of the two of us squeezing into Fluffy Maple, who's in desperate need of a tune-up, and she doesn't argue about letting me drive.

Thirty long, painful minutes later that are full of listening to her chirp about everything that's on her mind except herself and me and us together, we pull into a downtown parking garage, and I wish we could sit down here so I could listen to her for another hour, which is the exact wrong thing to wish.

She. Needs. Not. Me.

I don't do love.

I don't do marriage.

And Henri? One day, Henri will find her Prince Charming, a man who deserves her, who recognizes her for the sparkling diamond she is, and who will spend his life making her happy.

I'll hate him. But he'll be better for her than me and all of my fucked-up baggage could ever be.

On our elevator ride up to the penthouse, she tells a story about Dogzilla waking up in Nonna's laundry basket, startling herself, and then freaking out even more after jumping out of the basket with one of Nonna's bras hung around her neck.

I can't laugh. Not when I'm struggling to figure out how to simultaneously protect Henri from all the assholes in the world while helping her find the happiness she deserves. And she's acting like it's completely and totally normal for me to be a distant asshole, even though the image of Dogzilla racing through my house with a bra dangling behind her while Henri and Nonna tried to corner her is hilarious.

This isn't normal.

It's not normal at all.

But my brain is stuck in a loop that I can't get out of.

When the season's over, Henri's leaving. It'll be *over-over* without a doubt as of November first, because best possible scenario, we make it all the way to the championship series, which can't go any later than November first.

I'm down to mere weeks before this fake relationship is over, and before I have to face the Nonna music.

But it's not facing Nonna that makes me want to ask Henri to stay. It's *Henri*.

I can't ask her to stay without telling her how I feel, and telling her how I feel means admitting that I don't *want* this to be fake, except a real relationship implies commitment, and it requires her to take a leap and want to date me too.

I could live with myself if Henri tells me I'm not her type.

I couldn't live with myself if I asked her to stay, and then became one more guy who lets her down.

Her laughter at her own story dies away, and her brows furrow as she studies me.

The elevator doors open, and the sounds of a party in full swing invade the antechamber.

Her inquisitive brown eyes light up. "Oh my gosh, is this Cooper's place? Mackenzie told me he has a super cool apartment, but she also said she hasn't been there yet, so we looked at pictures and it was pretty. And fancy."

"No, it's—"

"Oh my god, it's Beck Ryder!"

I wince. "—Beck Ryder's place," I finish.

"Luca, man. Welcome." The former hometown boy band guy turned international underwear model and fashion mogul grins at us and gestures us deeper inside. Playing professional sports has its perks. Like hanging out with the rich and famous. Bonus when they're good people. "Beer? Water? Steak? Cheese fries? A few chicken breasts? Piña colada? You hungry? Thirsty? I'm starving. Great game, man. Great game. Hi. I'm Beck. You must be Henri."

He holds out a hand to my fake girlfriend, who's gawking.

"Can I sniff you?" Henri asks.

Beck's brows go up. "Like, my hair? My clothes?"

"Your armpits. I have a writer friend who swears you wear the best deodorant. It's for research. Cross my heart."

"Ah, let me check with my wife. If she doesn't care, I'm good with it." He shoots me a look. "If it's cool with you too."

"Lift your arm, Ryder. If my girlfriend needs to do research, she needs to do research. You don't get in the way of an author in need."

Henri beams at me, and I feel like I just ran a marathon and then hit four grand slams and set a deadlift world record.

That is, elated but also very tired, and also suspicious that I've been using steroids or something, because no mortal man could do all of that in a single day

without artificial assistance.

Beck lifts his arm, and Henri leans in. “Wow. You *do* have good deodorant.” Hell, now I’m curious.

I lean in to sniff too, but Ryder shoves me away with a laugh. “Don’t think so. C’mon. Get some food.”

“Henri!” Marisol charges into the entryway. “I didn’t know you were coming! Get in here—the Thrusters’ wives and girlfriends are here too. They want to meet you, because the Thrusters have a book club. A *romance* book club. Plus, chocolate fountain. *Chocolate. Fountain.*”

I swear, Henri blows out a relieved breath before she gives me an apologetic smile, starts to leave, comes back, hesitates, then goes up on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. “Text me if you need me, okay?”

And then she’s gone like she’s glad to get away from me.

Not that I can blame her.

“Whoa, Luca, did your Nonna shrink your junk again?” Francisco asks as he pops his head around the corner too.

Beck ushers us both into the kitchen, where most of the rest of the team is gathered around the massive island loaded with food. The chocolate fountain is on a side countertop, which I can only tell by the number of women surrounding it and leaving with plates loaded with chocolate-covered fruit.

Brooks glances at me, then at Henri diving into the chocolate fountain crowd like it’s her salvation. “I don’t know what you did, man, but I recommend figuring out whatever she likes most in the world, and doing a *lot* of that.”

“Junk problems?” Emilio asks it, but every last one of my teammates who’s here is watching me like they were all thinking it.

I ignore them and glance around the penthouse, looking for Henri again.

She’s near the television in the next room, surrounded by Copper Valley royalty. Athletes, both soccer and hockey. Their significant others. A token rock star and movie star. Cooper’s sister, who should be famous, because that would annoy him.

And they’re all gathering around Henri because she’s a beacon of joy, and when she lights up and starts talking, it’s impossible for anyone to resist wanting to be closer to her.

So *how the fuck* has she been dumped by fiancés *five times*?

“Eat a sandwich.” Cooper shoves a plate into my chest. “It’ll help the hangries.”

“I’m not hangry.”

“Trying to help so they quit thinking of your shrunk junk, man,” he stage-whispers.

“I don’t give two shits about you all thinking about my junk.”

Cooper lifts a brow. Beck does one of those subtle *gotta go check on something* motions and slips out of the open kitchen and down a hallway. Brooks and Emilio share a look.

It’s one of those *dude’s got it bad* looks.

I glance at Henri again, feel my blood pressure rise as one of the single hockey players angles closer to her, which she’s naturally oblivious to, because she’s Henri, but Marisol steps in and glares at him before I have to go rack him in the nuts—which, again, I’m morally opposed to, because that shit hurts, but not when it’s a dude hitting on Henri.

Yeah.

I have it bad.

And I don’t want it.

I don’t *want* to be the guy who teaches her how to not fall in love.

She falls in love with the sunrise every morning, with the weird shapes in her toast at breakfast, with the way a bird shakes itself off after flying into a window, and with basically anything that isn’t evil.

Henri falls in love.

Not only with men, but with the world.

Every. Single. Day.

I can’t be the person who helps her figure out how to *not* do that.

I won’t.

Because she wouldn’t be Henri if she didn’t fall in love.

I glance around again. “Doesn’t Ryder have a big game room?”

Cooper grins. “You feeling like getting your ass whooped in some Pac-Man?”

“Hell, yeah.”

Beats getting my ass whooped by myself.

Henri

I OWE Luca so big for tonight.

Not that I expect him to let me pay him back—or that I expect he wants anything to do with me given how weird he’s acting—but I do.

I owe him.

Maybe I’ll get his stairs fixed for him.

Or maybe I’ll make him my famous waffles for breakfast in the morning.

He’s off tomorrow—it’s the team’s last day off before the end of the season—and so I should—

I should *not* make him waffles.

Nonna isn’t around.

We’re not honestly dating.

And since he kissed me earlier, he’s been acting like I gave him cooties.

Or like I should’ve brushed my teeth better, or possibly like kissing me gives him psychic visions of the end of the world, and the fate of humanity rests on the two of us never boinking again.

“Henri?”

I blink at Marisol and realize I must’ve stopped talking mid-sentence, because seven people are staring at me expectantly. I swirl a strawberry in a pile of chocolate on my plate and smile like she caught me doing something bad. “Oh. Sorry. Plot bunny. It happens sometimes. I’ll be in the middle of a sentence, and *poof!* A new idea comes up.”

I am such a Liar McLierson.

“For Confucius?” Tillie Jean asks.

I shake my head. “I can’t talk about it yet. I have to see if it has merit first.”

“Y’all back up and give Henri some room.” Marisol flaps her hands at the three guys who’ve leaned in closer. “Shoo. Go on. Somebody bring this poor woman a drink. You’ve been asking her to talk nonstop for an hour, and all she’s had is chocolate and strawberries.”

“An *hour*?” I whisper to her while one of the hockey players dashes off to do her bidding.

“At least,” Mackenzie agrees. I’ve finally gotten to meet her best friend, Sarah, who’s married to *Beck Ryder*, and who wasn’t at all bothered by me asking to sniff his armpits, though in retrospect, I’m a little concerned that I did that.

It’s possibly not quite normal.

But it was the first thing that popped to mind when we got off the elevator after Luca was so growly and silent the whole way here.

Honestly, I would’ve signed up to go to a party anywhere, with anybody, to escape the weird tension that’s settled between us tonight.

It’s worse than the tension after Boston.

Much, much worse.

And now I’m talking too much.

Way too much.

“Sorry,” I murmur to my friends. “I didn’t realize I was being an attention hog.”

“You’re hilarious,” Mackenzie assures me. “I’m a superstitious crazy-pants baseball nut raised by two drag queens. I’ve seen some super hilarious things—”

“And you’ve done some pretty hilarious things,” Marisol interjects.

“Yes. That too. But I’ve never scared myself into thinking a coatrack was an intruder.”

“Or written a book about it,” Tillie Jean chimes in.

“You could though,” I tell Mackenzie. “You’re funny too. I’ll bet you have a book in you!”

And that’s not guilt talking because I don’t want my sister to write a book.

I want *everyone* to write a book. I love writing books.

Just not Elsa.

And now I feel like crap again.

“Watermelon?” a handsome hockey player in the cowboy hat asks as he returns with a giant bowl of fruit.

“Oh, I love watermelon! Thank you!”

We all grab smaller bowls and forks and dig in, and wow.

“This is the best watermelon *ever*,” I tell Mackenzie.

Check that. This is the best party ever.

There's music, but it's not so loud that you can't hear anyone else talking, and no one's trying to out-dance one another on the coffee table, and there's anything you could possibly want to eat or drink, and Luca and I look like we're here together, even though he disappeared down a hallway a while ago and I haven't seen him since.

I've stopped talking, mostly, and I'm listening now to Marisol whisper about how she caught Emilio talking to his mother on the phone about how he couldn't go home for all of December because he's taking Marisol on vacation.

"To *Thailand*," she repeats. "He told her he's taking me to *Thailand*."

"Is that a good thing?" I have to clear my throat, which is getting scratchy like there's air freshener that's annoying it or something.

"I've wanted to go to Thailand since I was seven years old. It's like, *dream* vacation. And he knows it." She pauses and frowns. "At least, he better know it."

"I know nothing," Mackenzie says.

Tillie Jean nods. "Same. Cooper's oblivious, and even if he wasn't, he wouldn't talk about it at home. Gossip and Cooper only go together if it's family, since he thinks it's bad luck to gossip about his teammates."

My gut grumbles, and something sour twists halfway between my mouth and my belly, and my lips are starting to itch. "Is it warm in here?"

"No, it's—ohmygod, Henri."

I wiggle my nose.

It doesn't wiggle back, but there's a tell-tale tickle in my sinuses that have my eyes both watering and going round at the same time.

I know what this is.

I know *exactly* what this is.

"Do you need to sit?" Tillie Jean asks.

"Sit? Honey, she needs a doctor." Marisol grabs my hand and lifts it so we can all see the flush spreading across my skin. "Are you allergic to—oh, *shit*. Somebody get Luca."

"Already on it," Mackenzie calls as she darts away.

Tillie Jean grabs my plate and sniffs the watermelon, then nibbles on one of the strawberries at the edge of the chocolate pool from the chocolate fountain.

"Henri, how much of this did you eat?"

"Jus a li'l," I slur.

Mostly because my tongue is tingling and won't work right either. "I di'nt tay it."

"I didn't taste it either, honey," Marisol says. "That's some high-quality stuff

right there. Emilio? *Emilio!* Go tell that man to hurry his butt up and get out here.”

“I’m okay,” I manage to say like a normal human being who isn’t having an allergic reaction to alcohol.

Oh, god.

Oh god oh god oh god.

If I’m wheezing, I know what’s next.

“Bathroom,” I squeak.

“Wha—”

I grab Marisol by the collar of her adorable sequin top and drag her close to me, speaking carefully to get the enunciation right. “I need. To ged. To da bafroom.”

Her dark eyes go wide, and she nods emphatically. “Yeah. Let’s get you to the bathroom. *Now.*”

She and Tillie Jean heft me back to my feet, which is silly, because I can still mostly feel my feet, and they drag me toward the hallway where Luca disappeared, only to make a sharp turn into a powder room as he pops out of a room down the way. “Henri?”

“She had vodka-infused fruit,” Tillie Jean explains.

“Oh, fuck.”

My stomach gurgles again, and I shove Marisol and Tillie Jean out of the bathroom, because they don’t need to witness this.

They *really* don’t need to witness this.

In fact, it would be best if the entire penthouse cleared out entirely for the next couple hours.

Preferably so that I can lie down on the floor and die of embarrassment in peace.

Luca catches the door. “Henri—”

“*Out!*”

“But—”

“Benadryl!” I screech.

Oh god oh god oh god, I need him to leave, because he can’t be witness to what my stomach makes me do when I’ve had alcohol.

He steps back far enough that I can slam the door shut and flip the lock.

And now I’m in a fancy marble powder room, alone, just me and my *very* unhappy belly and my hot face and my tingling tongue, and I probably shouldn’t be alone, and Luca clearly agrees, based on the way he’s banging on the door.

He’s not coming in here.

Period.

But I know he's worried so after I get myself situated with the toilet, I pull out my phone and call him.

"Henri? I'm coming in."

"Not if I 'an 'ill talk," I shriek. "Ooo 'an't 'ee me now!"

My voice echoes through the bathroom, and I cringe, but I hold firm.

"You need a doctor." Luca's voice is calm but determined.

I shake my head. "Benadryl," I manage to make my tongue say.

I don't think I'll go into anaphylactic shock.

Probably.

Never have before.

"Doctor," Luca repeats.

"Ben-a-dill fust."

"Christ on a cannoli," he mutters.

I should care that he's worried. I *want* to, but the simple truth is that he shouldn't have to be saddled with me tonight.

I'd rather have Marisol or Tillie Jean or Mackenzie or Tanesha—who's home with the baby—in here instead.

Correction.

I'd rather have Luca *want* to be in here with me because he wants me and he doesn't care about the embarrassing things my body is about to do.

But this is all fake.

All pretend.

And so, I'd rather have my girlfriends.

Luca

MY HEART IS GOING to pound out of my chest if Henri doesn't open this door *right the fuck now*.

I bang again as I yell into the phone like that'll help her hear me. "Henri. I have Benadryl. Let me in."

"Side it unna da doe."

I growl at the phone. "I'm not sliding it under the door."

"I *fye*, Wuca."

"You are *not fine*."

She huffs.

I huff.

I also breathe easier. If she couldn't huff, she couldn't breathe, but she can huff, which means she can breathe.

"Henri, *I'm* not fine until I see you," I hiss into the phone.

I jerk my head in greeting at someone who mutters my name as they pass me in the hallway.

"*Ya ya ya*," Henri says, and that does it.

I'm breaking down this door.

"*Nooooo*," she moans.

"Henri—"

"Oh my god, scoot. *Scoot*." Mackenzie shoves me aside. "Henri? It's me. I'm coming in, and I haven't told you about that time that my dad accidentally tried pot thanks to the same woman who accidentally fed it to Brooks too, but trust me when I say, I've seen it all, and you're about to be in very good hands."

I try to butt my way back in, and Brooks gets in my face and growls.

I get right back in his and point at the door. "That's my girlfriend."

He lifts a brow.

A single, *go on, tell your story* brow, and my skin flushes so hot ice would sizzle right off me.

"I've got her, Luca," Mackenzie says.

She steals the Benadryl, twists the knob, and within two seconds, she's disappeared into the bathroom.

Henri let her in, when she won't let me.

"She seriously can't catch a break, can she?" Brooks mutters.

He's right.

She's a walking disaster.

And I love her.

I stumble backwards against the wall as the thought races through my head.

It can't be right, except while I have no intention of ever falling in love—yes, I hear myself—it's Henri.

How could a person get to know her and *not* love her on some level?

I do have a heart.

It might not get much use, and this love might not be fairy tale love, but I have one, and I care about her.

Brooks grins. "Ah, I know that look. You need a drink, man?"

I scowl at him, because the only thing keeping him from falling in love was a stupid superstition.

What's keeping me from falling in fairy tale love?

Baggage.

So much damn baggage.

I lift the phone to my ear again, and *dammit*.

She hung up on me.

I dial her phone again. I'm not going to stand here and yell through the door if I don't have to.

"Hey, Luca," Mackenzie says cheerfully on the other end. "Henri's okay. She's breathing. I've got her."

"I need to talk to her."

"Can you give the Benadryl a bit to work?"

I hear a whimper in the background, and my heart stops.

Dead stops.

This is worse than getting home to find her in tears. It's worse than that look on her face every time she thinks I'm not looking after she tries so hard to get Nonna to like her, or when she drifts off on her ramblings with that *right, he*

doesn't like me look on her face.

Also, Nonna's dead to me right now too for making Henri feel like shit, and I swear, if she did it on purpose to make me like Henri, I don't care how many Eyes she flings at me, she's waking up with raw cod in her bed next time she comes to visit.

"Tell 'im ay 'on't wann bahver 'im," Henri says to Mackenzie.

"She's not bothering me. I want to take care of her."

"Aww, Luca, that's sweet." Mackenzie pauses. "But maybe you should've shown her that before bringing her to a party where all of the alcoholic snacks weren't labeled as well as they should've been."

She's right.

This is my fault.

Henri doesn't want me because I'm a massive bag of dicks. I'm not one dick. I'm all of the dicks.

"C'mon, Luca." Brooks claps me on the shoulder and turns me back toward the party. "Let's get you a big glass of water and round up all the married guys. We'll get you through this."

I glance at my phone again, and once more, the ladies have hung up on me.

Henri doesn't *want* me.

I'm not what she needs. Not for the kind of life she's always dreamed for herself, anyway.

And Mackenzie's right.

It's my own damn fault.

Question is, where do we go from here?

Henri

BECAUSE MACKENZIE IS A GODDESS, she stays with me in the bathroom through the ugly and the very, very occasionally funny for *two hours*.

I'll have a rash for at least a week, but the worst of my reaction has passed.

And no, you don't want to know what went on in that bathroom.

Let's just say Mackenzie's getting a very nice thank-you gift. And either we're fast friends for life now, or I need to move somewhere deep in the jungle, befriend some local wildlife, and never look another human being in the face again.

The party noises are fading when we finally unlock the door and slip out.

And immediately trip over Luca.

He leaps to his feet and reaches for me, then stops.

I cringe, waiting for him to recoil at the hives all over my cheeks and neck.

Instead, the frown lines on his face deepen, and he oh-so-gently brushes his fingertips over my skin. "Christ, Henri, I'm sorry. Does it hurt?"

I shake my head, which is starting to ache, because insta-hangover is a thing.

He sets a hesitant hand on my shoulder, like he's aware that I'm rashing out all over. "C'mon. Let's go home. Dogzilla's probably worried."

The ride back to his place is different than the ride to the party was, and for the second time tonight, I want to curl up in a ball and cry.

I ruined his night out during his first opportunity to celebrate going to the post-season.

My laptop is toast.

I don't know if I'll ever be able to look any of the Lady Fireballs in the eye

again because I'm so embarrassed. It's been a few years since I've been to a party, and I didn't know I was allergic to alcohol the last time I encountered vodka-soaked fruit, but I still should've known to be wary tonight.

Luca holds my hand the entire drive, letting go only when he needs to shift the car into gear or then into park when we reach his driveway.

And he's not merely holding it.

He's cradling it like it's an ancient porcelain doll that might break if someone breathes on it wrong.

I don't want to be something that breaks easily.

I want to be strong. I want to be fearless. I want to experience life and live it to the fullest, even when it means I accidentally have alcohol at a party, because these are the kinds of stories I want to tell my grandkids someday.

But every day that passes—and every wedding that passes—that future of sitting in matching rocking chairs with my one true love on the front porch of our farmhouse overlooking rolling hills while dozens of grandkids frolic in the yard slips further away.

And so do all the memories I wanted to make in the meantime.

Luca crosses around the car and opens my door. "We're sleeping in Nonna's room."

"You don't have to—"

"It's air-conditioned. We're sleeping in Nonna's room."

Once we're inside, he takes me up to the guest bedroom and makes me sit on the folding chair in the corner. He sets Dogzilla in my lap and won't let me lift a finger to do anything other than pet my cat while he strips the bed and puts on fresh sheets.

I catch sight of my cardboard Confucius still taped to the window in here, remember my laptop, and start to tear up all over again.

"Your pajamas—Henri? What's wrong? Where does it hurt?"

Luca squats in front of me and takes my chin, making me look at him. He doesn't have to try hard, because I don't want to fight him.

"I'm sorry I'm a disaster."

"The world is a disaster, Henri. Not you. You're perfect exactly the way you are."

"Perfectly disastrous. I ruined your night."

He squeezes his eyes shut, and I feel his sigh in the deepest parts of my very being.

Annoying someone is not an unfamiliar feeling.

But I don't understand why it hurts more when I annoy him.

"Sorry," I whisper again.

“Stop apologizing. It’s not your fault.”

“It is. I should’ve asked—”

“I should’ve asked, because *I*’ve been to parties with all of those people before, and *I* should’ve known. This is *my* fault. You shouldn’t be suffering because I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not—”

“Oh, believe me, I really, really am.”

Right.

Because he thought asking me to play his girlfriend would be *easy*, when there’s nothing easy about me.

I shift on the seat and start to pull myself up. “I’ll get to bed then.”

“Henri—”

His eyes are haunted, and I don’t know what’s bothering me more—that I’m wreaking havoc all over his life, or that he feels responsible for it.

But he shakes his head and holds out a hand. “What else can I get for you? Water? You need more medicine by the bed? Does Dogzilla need pajamas?”

Never in all of my engagements has a man asked me if my cat needs pajamas.

But this man thinks of everything.

And it’s all a sham so that he can teach me how to not fall for the siren’s lure of the kind of love that I need to accept only happens between the pages of a book, while he fends off his grandmother’s curse until he can deal with it properly at the end of baseball season.

He pauses as I grab my pajamas off the bed, like he’s wondering which of us should offer to leave so I can have some privacy.

Awkward has never been more awkward. And I know awkward.

I know *so much* awkward.

“I’ll go—” I start as he mumbles, “I’ll let you get—”

We both stop and stare at each other.

I thought it would be the best plan ever to ask a man who has no qualms poo-pooing love to teach me how to learn better, but I’ve gone and done the Henriest thing I could do.

I’ve decided he’s more than pretty hair and a bad attitude about love.

And no matter how many times I tell myself I’m wrong, I still want to be the woman who shows him that he can have love too.

“Bathroom.” My head hurts, but my heart hurts more. “I’m going to shower.”

“Need help?”

The shiver starts in my toes and goes all the way up to my roots, pausing on

its way to give extra good tingles to the best parts. “You don’t have to do that,” I whisper.

“I want to.”

“That’s not part of our deal.”

“Fuck the deal. I won’t break you, Henri. The world needs you exactly the way you are. And if that means I need to make sure no other asshole ever breaks your heart again, that’s what I’ll damn well do. Understood?”

My heart stutters out a protest that would be bigger if today hadn’t been the doozy of a day that it’s been. I should argue with him.

He can’t protect me forever, and the implication that he wants to suggest we’re both insane.

But I don’t want to argue.

I want to indulge in the fantasy that is Luca Rossi wanting me.

Not only wanting me, but wanting me on a night when I’ve basically been at my worst. Jealous, sobbing, breaking out in hives, my tongue swelling, my entire body revolting...and he’s still standing there with his eyes dark and hooded, glaring at me like I’ll be the one breaking *him* if I refuse to let him protect me from myself.

“This isn’t real,” I whisper.

“Fuck real.”

Fuck real.

I can do that.

For one night, at least.

So I hold out a hand to him, and I leave my pajamas on the bed, and I tug him down the hall to the bathroom.

He peels back my light cardigan, wincing as every new bit of rash is exposed. “Does that itch?”

“The lace—”

“I hate this shirt.”

“You liked it a few hours ago.”

“I was an idiot a few hours ago.”

“Luca—”

He skims his fingers along my belly as he tugs at my lacy tank top, and I wordlessly lift my arms so he can pull it off.

And then he stares.

I don’t know if he’s looking at my bare breasts, or the rash all over them, but when he speaks, his voice is low and husky. “You weren’t wearing a bra.”

“It’s built-in. Small miracles. That would’ve itched like a mother.”

His lips quirk in a half-grin, and that little bit of seeing him relax is enough

to make my shoulders sag with relief. I didn't realize how tense I'd gotten. He leans back, lifts an arm to grab his own shirt by the back collar, and pulls it off in one smooth motion, and my tongue swells up and goes dry again.

Not because of the alcohol, or the Benadryl, or for any other reason than that I will never not go tongue-tied watching Luca Rossi strip.

He leans into the tub and twists the faucet handle, then shucks his pants.

Did I say tongue-tied?

I'm whole-existence-tied.

Dogzilla wanders in, and Luca gives the cat a side-eye that makes me laugh for what feels like the first time in decades. "She doesn't like *toys*." I gesture to his hard, thick, proudly-standing-tall length, and heat rushes to my cheeks.

It's not that I'm a prude.

It's more that it's still astonishing to me that a man like him—strong, athletic, attractive, on top of the world—could be turned on by *me*.

He wasn't the first time we showered together. And I haven't seen him look at another woman with the intense, determined, *you are mine to take care of* look in his hooded green eyes in the entire time I've known him.

My breath catches.

Does he—does he actually *like* me?

Or does he have a fetish about women with whole-body rashes?

"In the shower, Henri. You'll feel better." He closes the distance between us and tugs at the waistband of my jeans.

Not pulling them down, but giving me a nudge. The *I want this, but not if you don't* nudge.

I want.

I very much want.

I unbutton my pants and nod, and when he slowly lowers my jeans over my hips, I catch his face in my hands and kiss him.

It's a cautious kiss. An *I want to thank you but I don't know if you want to be thanked* kiss.

A *please don't hurt me* kiss.

Because I don't think Luca's been cranky tonight because I'm annoying him.

I don't think I annoy him at all.

And that's by far the most terrifying thought I could have.

Every last one of my fiancés was looking for love.

Luca, though?

He doesn't want it.

He's not looking for an easy path to love. He's not looking to make his family happy or to get a good job at my dad's bank, nor is he having a

professional crisis, and he doesn't have any hang-ups about only sleeping with women he intends to marry.

He doesn't want to get married at all.

But tonight, he wants *me*, in all of my messy glory.

I kick off my shoes and tug my pants the rest of the way down when it becomes clear that he'll have to stop kissing me if he's going to finish the job. There's no stumbling to get into the shower—it's all easy, smooth movements, like we're a professional dance pair who's been together for years.

The spray is borderline cool and gentle on my sensitive skin, and I sag into the relief that comes with being exactly where I'm supposed to be.

This isn't forever, Henri, I remind myself, and then Luca's pulling back, gazing down on me not like I hung the stars, but like I'm the one star he's been searching for his entire life, and now that he's finally found me, he can't look away.

"I'm not trying to seduce you tonight, Henri," he whispers thickly. "That wasn't the plan. I just want to take care of you."

"What if I seduce you?"

He visibly swallows. His pupils are so big I could count the galaxies inside them. "I'm here for whatever you need."

I need you to love me.

Yep.

I've done it again.

Of course I have.

But right now, I don't care.

Because when I'm eighty-five, rocking in my chair on my porch at my farmhouse, watching all the neighbors' grandkids that I've adopted as my own, I'm going to tell them all about the time that I fell in love with a baseball player who was hiding his massive heart behind walls that other people built for him, and about how he loved me the only way he knew how, for one night, when I was at my worst.

"I need you, Luca. I need you."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"I'll tell you if you get too close."

His eyes call me a liar.

As they should.

He's already too close.

I tell myself we're both talking about physically hurting as I wrap a hand around the back of his neck and pull him closer for another kiss.

He doesn't resist, and I swear his body melts into mine in relief.

Like he wanted me to want him.

While he devours my mouth, I reach between us to stroke his hard-on against my belly. His silky skin is wet and slick, and touching him makes my clit ache with need, especially as his breath comes faster and he pumps into my touch as though he's trying to stop himself, but he can't.

I want to taste him. I want to lick every inch of his body and memorize his scent and permanently imprint the feel of his skin on my fingertips.

I want to make him lose control.

He soaps up his hands and starts rubbing slow circles over my back, and my nerves light up like they're fresh sprouts reaching out of the ground to be kissed by their first ray of sunshine.

I arch into him, and he stills. "Too much?" he pants against my lips.

"Don't stop."

He doesn't.

He circles my rib cage until he's cradling my breasts with his soapy hands, his thumbs brushing the tips of my pebbled nipples and making me moan and squeeze his cock harder, because I need something to hold on to.

He groans too and drops his head to my shoulder. "Fuck, Henri."

"Yes, please."

He lifts his head and smiles at me, and I have no idea how any woman, ever, could resist that full-on Luca Rossi smile. His fading unicorn hair is wet and tumbling in his eyes, his green eyes are crinkling at the edges, and his entire body is vibrating with an energy that screams *you are the only woman in the world to me*, and if that's not a turn-on, then I don't know what is.

"I missed you," he whispers before he leans in for another kiss, his palms and fingers and thumbs still teasing my breasts and sending thunderbolts of extra-strength lust straight through my heart and to the pit of my belly, where my clit isn't the only thing aching now.

I need him inside me.

I need him inside me *now*.

As if he's reading my mind, he draws one hand down my belly, cups my mound, and strokes me between the legs.

My eyes cross.

I gasp in sheer pleasure.

His thumb finds my clit as he pushes two fingers inside me, crooks them *just right*, and I'm suddenly coming so hard and fast that fireworks explode behind my eyelids and my legs go numb and I scream his name while I double-fist his cock and hang on for dear life, riding the sensations rocketing through me.

I need more.

I don't know if I can take more, but I need more.

I need *all* of him.

Tonight.

Tomorrow.

Every day.

My legs go numb.

His fingers are still deep inside me, coaxing my orgasm longer while my clit pulses in undiluted pleasure and he pants heavy against my shoulder and his hard-on twitches in my hands like me getting off is going to send him over the edge.

"Inside—me," I order.

I'm not bossy. Not usually.

But if I don't have Luca *right now*, this fairy tale is going to fall apart and I'll never have him again, and I'm not ready to be done with him.

I'm not ready to be done with the way his brows crease like I'm a little nutty but he likes it when I'm talking about my characters. I'm not ready to be done with listening to his rhythmic breathing deep in the middle of the night when I jolt awake and don't remember where I am until I hear him, and then know I'm safe.

I'm not ready to be done with a man who thinks to ask what my cat wants to wear today, or who sends me lunch randomly in the middle of the day when he knows I'm writing and might have forgotten to eat, or who has an electric tea kettle delivered to his house even though he doesn't drink tea, but because he knows I do and that there's a better way to make tea than by heating water in an ancient microwave or in a rusty tea kettle.

He says he doesn't do love, but love is in the little things.

And Luca Rossi's little things mean more to me than any engagement ring ever has.

"You're so damn sexy," he growls as he turns me against the shower wall and lifts me.

"I'm a raspberry shaped like a woman."

"You're *you*."

My legs go around his hips, mostly because he helps me get them there, because I still can't feel them post-climax, and he pauses. "Does this hurt?"

"Being empty hurts."

He squeezes his eyes shut. "Fuck, Henri." And then he's driving inside me, with the cool shower wall against my back and his hot, hard body against my breasts, and his long, thick cock stroking me deep inside, hitting that secret, magic spot over and over, pumping hard and fast while I grip his shoulders and

rock my hips against his, feeling that glorious coil spiraling tighter with every thrust, his tip teasing me right where I love it most while he pants my name, tells me I'm beautiful, that I feel so incredible around his cock, that he could drown in my sweet pussy, until I'm falling over the edge again.

I don't know my name.

I don't know what planet I'm on.

I don't know if time and space exist.

All I know is the blinding hot passion that's turning my body into a massive flaming ball of euphoria as Luca strains into me, groaning out my name as his cock twitches out his release while my orgasm rips through me.

My legs shoot straight out.

My toes curl.

My stomach drops and my nipples tingle with so much pleasure that I almost can't stand it.

I love riding Luca's cock.

My body has never, *ever* felt so sated.

Until this moment, I've always been the caterpillar.

But loving Luca has turned me into the butterfly.

Tears touch my eyeballs, and I let them fall as Luca sags against me. "Henri? Ah, baby. You're crying."

I suck in a shuddery breath that I feel in every cell of my body, but especially in the cells still cradling Luca's cock. "Sometimes joy leaks out my eyeballs."

He shifts until he's holding me, dropping soft kisses to my neck and shoulder. "So that was good?"

"The utter best."

He kisses my shoulder again. "Thank god. I thought Dogzilla was giving me the *you're doing it wrong* look."

I blink my eyes open, and then start laughing, which makes Luca suck in a breath as his cock twitches inside me.

My cat's in the shower with us.

She loves showers. It's a thing.

But right now, we're getting a heavy dose of stink-eye from Dogzilla, which makes me laugh harder.

"There's my happy girl," Luca murmurs.

Happy?

Yes.

Definitely happy.

I don't know how long it will last, but for this moment, I'm happy.

Luca

CUDDLING ISN'T MY THING, but I spend the entire night wanting to wrap myself around Henri.

I don't—I'm too worried I'll irritate the allergic rash that she insists will go away in a few days—but I want to.

It's an odd sensation.

So is the relief that comes when she rolls over in the middle of the night, finds me watching her, and then straddles me for another round of sex.

I refuse to think about what it might mean that she's embedded herself so firmly in my life, and how much I *like* it, because if I think about it, I'll start thinking I can offer her things that I've never thought I could offer any woman ever again. That I *shouldn't* offer any woman ever again.

I'm up early the next morning, because I can't sleep with all the plans taking shape in my head to figure out how to keep Henri safe from the world and herself while not offering her things I can't actually give her.

A nebulous plan is taking shape, and the harder I think about it, the more I wonder if it might actually work.

Why couldn't it work?

It's working today. It worked yesterday. It can work tomorrow.

We'll just take the timeline off our arrangement, and I'll keep protecting Henri from any other assholes out there, and she'll keep living in my house, which I will immediately get to work on finishing so it's livable long-term, and we'll just fall into both of us being happy and safe.

If she goes for it.

That's the part I'm not certain about.

However, I know Henri loved the French toast from this local joint in a strip mall not far from the computer repair shop where I drop her laptop off as soon as they're open, so I pick up an order.

Okay, fine.

I take home seven orders of French toast, because she mentioned once that she likes to reheat them in a skillet, and I want her to have her favorite French toast every day.

I might also charm the hostess into talking the chef out of his magic ingredient.

Not because anything I can make will be that good, even with the magic ingredient, but because it's the thought that counts.

Henri's the type of woman to appreciate the thought.

She's sitting up in bed when I poke my head into the guest room, rubbing her hair, which is curling in all directions and making her utterly adorable. Dogzilla is nestled between her legs, dressed like a furry cowgirl already, and she opens a single eye to give me the *don't make my human unhappy or I will shred your charging cords in the middle of the night* look.

I'd be concerned, except Henri's frowning at her phone as she thumbs over the screen, and that takes priority over worrying that her cat is secretly plotting to ruin my chargers.

Henri's eyes are puffy over the blotchy rash still staining her cheeks, and I don't know if she's been crying or if this is a normal post-allergic-reaction look, but she looks up, sees me, and immediately shoves the phone under the covers.

Caught.

I start to grin. "Somebody's acting guilty."

Her face floods with more pink, and *god*, I could wake up to that every day for the rest of my life.

It should be a terrifying thought, except this is Henri.

She's the last person on earth who would ever pull the bullshit that I watched man after man pull on my mother until my early teenage years, who would abandon her family when it got too hard, or who would date me because someone paid her to.

The bigger issue will be convincing her that she can count on *me*.

Good thing I have a week or two to figure out the best way to suggest she stay when the season's over.

Her nose wrinkles. "Family."

That puts me on alert like nothing else can. "Which family?"

She mumbles something, and I narrow my eyes at her. "Your sister?"

More mumbles.

And now I'm getting irritated. "Henrietta, I forbid you to give your sister writing advice unless you're giving her bad advice."

Swear to god, the cat snickers.

But my bigger concern should be Henri's narrowing eyes. "You *forbid* me?"
"Yep."

Here it comes. She's settling in for the laser beam eyes and the harping and the secret messages to her cat to hock up a hairball in my cleats.

But as soon as she gets her eyes good and narrowed, she sighs and drops back onto the pillow, scratching idly at her face. "You're right. I shouldn't give her advice. Because I'm telling her that everyone loves a straight-laced hero who likes to eat oatmeal for breakfast every day, occasionally forgets to use his blinker, and spends hours meditating by himself."

"That sounds..."

"Boring and unappealing?"

"I was going to say ballsy and sexy of you." I shouldn't be smiling bigger, but damn if Henri being underhanded isn't making my cock ask if she can play games with us too.

She pulls the phone out from under the covers, pausing to scratch her arms.
"I need to apologize."

"You need to come eat so you can take your medicine."

"Are you taking care of me?"

"Yes."

"Hm."

"Henri, this is what friends do for each other. C'mon. Breakfast and Benadryl. Then we can discuss if you're putting on clothes."

She peers at me for a long moment, and I swear I can hear the questions in her head. *Are we friends? Are we something more? Am I still leaving when the season is over? Are you going to hurt me?*

This is what her exes have done to her.

They've taken Happy Henri and turned her into a mass of insecurities.

I don't like it.

And no, I didn't know her then, but you can't tell me that the woman who showed up on my doorstep asking me to help her learn to not fall in love after five failed engagements hadn't hit a breaking point.

I also know that it's *my fault* she thinks I wouldn't want to do this for her. Because I've screwed up too.

I'll do better though. I will.

"Thank you," she finally says softly.

I nod.

Starting right now, this very minute, I will be everything she doesn't even know she needs.

Henri

LUCA and I spend the last weeks of the regular season texting and talking on the phone while he's on the road for the team's last away series, and having a lot of sex and talking about everything except what's going on between us when he's home and not at Duggan Field.

Denial becomes my second-favorite hobby, but since the tension involved with denial is so much more comfortable than the tension of not trying to touch each other, I'm okay with this.

I'm embracing denial, which might also explain why I've had five failed engagements.

Utter refusal to acknowledge everything that was wrong right in front of my face.

Also, I'm worried that Luca's put renovating the house at the top of his list when he's not playing baseball or talking me out of my pants, checking off projects like fixing the broken stair—which had someone's rock collection beneath it, and yes, I'm serious, and also, now I want to write a story about a fairy who fell in love with a pet dog and couldn't tell him since they didn't speak the same language, so instead, she left him rocks in their special spot.

But back to Luca.

He's also having flooring installed in the living room and getting estimates on having an air conditioner re-installed before next summer and he asked if I had any ideas for what to do with the kitchen, like he somehow knew I would've thought about it, and now he's having a builder draw up a formal plan based on my favorite idea.

It's like he's accepted that the season is coming to an end, and if the Fireballs don't renew his contract, then he'll be ready.

I don't like it. I can justify staying in Copper Valley when the season is over, but I couldn't justify following him if he's traded to a new team, and he told me himself that it's fate that as soon as he finishes a house, he gets traded.

I don't want him to get traded to a new team. He seems so *happy* playing for the Fireballs.

And it's not even that they've won so much, though I'm sure his happiness is just as tied to the winning as the winning is tied to his happiness.

It's more that he fits with this team, which is even more apparent when he takes me to Mackenzie and Brooks's wedding on the day between the last regular season game and the first game of the playoffs.

Yeah.

Luca and I *go to a wedding* together.

And as we're taking our seats before the ceremony starts, we look at each other, and we both start laughing.

And laughing.

And laughing.

We are legitimately the last two people *anyone* should want at their weddings, but there's something comforting in knowing that *this* wedding will go off without a hitch—though, naturally, it comes with plenty of tears, as every good wedding does—and that Mackenzie and Brooks are exactly the right kind of crazy for each other.

We both get another fit of the giggles as the groom kisses the bride.

It's like we're both thinking *so this is what the end of the wedding looks like*.

As though neither of us have ever attended one before.

We're ridiculous.

And it fades fast, because everyone's a bundle of nerves at the small private reception inside the locker room at Duggan Field after the wedding.

They're still *happy*. You can feel the joy radiating throughout the room, and the brotherhood amongst the players as they tease each other but also grab one another a beer or an extra piece of wedding cake, or come to each other's defenses when the mascot contenders get too forward.

Yes.

All of the mascots are at the wedding.

It's Mackenzie's wedding, at Duggan Field.

Of course the mascots are here.

And what's even funnier, which I didn't realize until the reception starts, is that all of the players are in matching mascot socks under their formalwear.

“Is that bad luck?” I whisper to Luca, because I can see Glow and Meaty and Firequacker and Spike on his socks, but not Fiery.

Luca’s grinning as he shakes his head. “To walk all over the horrible mascot options at Mackenzie’s wedding? Nope.”

The team’s owners stop short of telling us which one will be the next mascot, and I swear that unites the guys on the team even more.

“It means we still have a chance to get Fiery back, no matter what,” Robinson tells me.

“Fiery forever,” Francisco agrees.

Luca’s at my side the entire time. He tests the punch before he lets me have any, which makes Mackenzie roll her eyes, because of course her punch won’t be spiked.

She also sends Glow over to give him what-for, which is funny, because Luca’s seriously creeped out by the firefly.

“Do we need to talk about this?” I ask him.

“No, we need management to pick the damn meatball so Mackenzie can move on to the next phase of her plan and we can get Fiery back,” he replies in a mutter that I swear has the Fireballs’ owners turning to look at him from all the way across the room.

“Did they hear you?” I whisper.

“No way. And even if they did, they have to know something’s coming. Mackenzie hasn’t given them a single week of peace all season without something going wrong with their mascot contest.”

“Mm.”

He eyes me.

I smile brightly.

“You know something.”

“Merely a fraction. I *am* a Lady Fireball. We talk. But we all have secrets too, and I’m almost certain Mackenzie’s keeping the most from all of us.”

He cracks up, and then we spend the rest of the reception dancing and laughing and talking, and in a weird way, I’m glad that I’ve had five failed engagements.

They’ve made me appreciate *this* wedding, and my date to it, all the more.

I’m already planning to stay in Copper Valley when the season ends. Maybe I’ll move into an apartment over near the aquarium, and Luca and I can stay friends.

It would be horrible to *not* be friends when we’ve come this far.

And maybe we can be friends who have sex a few nights a week.

Or...every night.

That's normal, right?

The reception ends early, because the team's first game is tomorrow evening at Duggan Field, and we head home to change Dogzilla into Fireballs pajamas and tumble into bed like horny teenagers.

But the Fireballs lose the first game in their five-game division championship round, and the next week is a whirl of tension, baseball, and nerves.

"Explain it to me one more time?" I ask Mackenzie as we camp out at her apartment with Tillie Jean and Marisol and Mackenzie's dads and Beck Ryder and his wife, watching the fourth game. Baltimore is up, two games to one, and I know if they win tonight, the Fireballs are done.

But if the Fireballs tie the series, we're heading to...somewhere?

"If we win tonight and tomorrow and clinch the division, we play whoever wins the series between Seattle and Boston. *That* would be a seven-game league championship series. And if we win that..." She pauses and fans her shiny eyeballs. "Then we'd go to the World Series for the first time in Fireballs history."

Now I'm getting wet in the eyeballs too. "That would be so amazing."

"I wasn't even alive the last time they made it this far. So I won't complain about *anything* this post-season. It's one day at a time. One moment at a time. Just soaking it all in. And I really, really, *really* wish I was in Baltimore right now."

Same.

Same.

It's a nail-biter, but the Fireballs eke out the win.

Luca gets home in the middle of the night. He has a day off before the final game of the series, and he's keyed up, so we head out to the mountains and spend the day hiking. I tell him stories about some things I think my characters have probably done after their happily ever afters, and we end up falling into a creek and laughing until we're both crying.

And then kissing.

And making love on the side of a mountain.

Yes.

Making love.

This crazy, talented, smart, wounded, funny man has completely captured my heart.

And it's not like the last times I've fallen in love, because I didn't want this.

He wasn't supposed to be attractive.

I had to dig to find it, because he stood for everything I could've never

believed in, or so I thought. I had to put the worst parts of me on display and not hide my feelings, not hold back saying what I wanted to say for fear that it would be the thing that would make him leave me.

And yet, he's still here.

Not talking about how our agreement could formally be over tomorrow night, or, best case, in another three weeks. Not talking about Nonna and her Eye.

But instead, talking about a new restaurant we should try when the season's over.

I tell myself it's because we've become friends. I can't go to that place where I start to believe in the dreams of the fluffy white dress and the dashing man in a tux and the mascots dancing at our reception, because that's not our future.

And for the first time in my life, I'm okay with a future without that milestone.

I was chasing the trappings, when what I need is the bone-deep love.

The next night, we're all gathered together in the Fireballs' Family and VIP suite.

The family, I mean.

Clearly, Luca's on the field with the team.

Max is warming up on the mound. Luca's playing catch with a kid in the outfield. The mascots are reveling in having another home game to audition for their role as final official mascot for the Fireballs, and they're in party clothes today, which looks totally weird on the meatball, but Glow—dude.

Luca's right.

It's not normal to see a large ball of yellow flame sticking out from behind him in normal times, but today, when he's dressed like he's going to an eighties party?

No. Just no.

The only person not with us is Mackenzie, because she insisted on sitting in her normal season ticket seats on the third base line where that bird attacked me and my sequin hat.

Marisol's pacing the carpet.

Tanesha and the baby are both fretting.

Lila and Tripp, the Fireballs' owners, who have been incredibly kind every time I've met them, pop in a few times before the game to check on us.

Cooper's whole family is here, and Francisco's grandmother, and some of the other guys' parents or siblings.

Nonna's here. Luca's mom is here too, and the two of them have been acting

like long-lost sisters, which is the weirdest thing ever.

So is Luca's mom taking the seat next to me in the first inning and asking if we can trade phone numbers so she can do the awkward thing where she texts me to ask questions about Jerry, because he's been calling her, and she might be considering agreeing to pursue something serious with him, because it's been a long time since a man's been this persistent when she's done nothing but show her ass to him.

It's literally the only thing all night that makes me laugh, but it feels so damn good to realize I've moved on from Jerry.

He was a step in my climb, not the end goal.

The end goal—you know what?

I don't know what the end goal is.

But I know I'd rather get there with my best friend by my side than bend who I am to try to squeeze into one more wedding gown.

It's a good thing the suite is big, though most of us are gathered on the porch outside, all of us biting our nails through every single pitch.

"Are you crying?" Marisol asks Tillie Jean.

"No," Cooper's sister lies as she swipes at her eyeballs.

"Hell, *I'm* gonna cry if they win," Cooper's brother tells Marisol. "Cooper's been dreaming of this day since before he was old enough to talk, and none of us ever thought we'd see—"

"*Rawk! Shut your pie-hole, motherfucker!*" his grandfather's parrot interrupts. Yes, parrot. Pop Rock—the patriarch of Cooper's family—is dressed like a pirate and has a parrot. It's a long story.

"You tell him, Long Beak Silver." Tillie Jean fist-bumps the parrot, and that simple act relieves the tension that's been building for three more innings now.

Definitely a good thing I didn't bring Dogzilla.

Not that my cat would attack the parrot.

Most likely the other way around.

"It's okay to cry," Tanesha tells us all. "Being this close to your dreams is emotional. Darren's played for the Fireballs for four years, and we never thought we'd see the day. Never. Neither one of us can make it two hours without tearing up right now, and that's not just the sleep deprivation."

Marisol leans around Tillie Jean to peer at her. "Why'd he stay?"

"Old owner couldn't get enough for him in a trade." She rolls her eyes. "Wasn't our choice, but our hands were tied, and there was nothing his agent could do. So we waited. And hoped. And now..."

She cuts herself off as her voice gets thick, and Tillie Jean bursts into tears again.

“Aww, group hug!” I reach for all of them—all of my new friends—and we squeeze in tight as the Fireballs take the field at the top of the fourth inning.

Luca and Darren are trotting to the outfield together, chatting about who knows what. I asked Luca what they talk about on the field, and he told me sometimes Mario Kart, sometimes what they each thought of last week’s episode of *Stacey & Lacey: Twins on a Mission*, and sometimes if their pants make their butts look big.

When we have our “The Fireballs are Going to the League Championship Party” after we win this game today, I’m totally asking Darren what they talk about to see if he tells me the same thing.

Considering the outfielders mostly stand around until they have to make a diving catch or leap up to keep a ball from going over the wall to steal a home run from someone, I can believe they’re not talking serious strategy or baseball.

Below us, chants of *Bring Back Fiery!* roar to life, and we all smile, because there’s no doubt where it started.

But all smiles cease as the game resumes.

It’s up.

It’s down.

The Fireballs give up a run.

The Fireballs get a run.

It’s down to the ninth inning, with our boys all tied up at three, when Cooper steps up to the plate to start us off.

“Go to the bathroom!” Marisol and I shriek together.

We look at each other, then down to Mackenzie’s seats, which we can’t see completely clearly, but we do see a dark-haired woman bolting up the stairs.

Mackenzie’s best friend.

She’s being sent to the bathroom.

Marisol and I share a look.

“What are you waiting for? Both of you!” Tanesha hands the baby to Darren’s mom and grabs us each by an arm. “We’re *all* going to the bathroom!”

It’s a thing.

Mackenzie swears Cooper hits better when her best friend is in the bathroom, and when I sat with her, she made me go to the bathroom when Cooper was up to bat too.

It’s one hundred percent a thing, and I swear it works more often than it doesn’t.

I grab Tanesha’s hand in my right and Marisol’s hand in my left, and we make a baseball prayer circle over the toilet, and not three seconds later, the entire family suite erupts in screams of joy.

We trip over each other getting out. “What? What happened? Did he do it?”

The baby’s crying, but everyone else is jumping up and down.

Seriously.

Jumping.

Even Pop Rock and his parrot.

Tillie Jean’s sobbing and hugging her mom. Francisco’s abuela is crying and hugging everyone. Someone I don’t know well grabs me and hugs me. Marisol and Tanesha both shriek at the same time and hug each other, jumping up and down as they do.

The Fireballs did it.

They won.

They won their first division championship in I don’t know how long. According to Mackenzie, it’s been fifty years since they last got this far.

The guys are all circled up at home plate, hugging and leaping for joy. Security escorts Mackenzie onto the field, because she’s been their good luck charm all year. She high-fives every one of the mascots as she dashes to join the players, who swallow her up into their group.

“Our baby girl did it,” her dad says beside me.

Her papa nods. “She believed. She believed for all of the whole damn city.”

Am I crying?

Oh my gosh. Yes. Yes, I’m crying too.

We’re hustled down to the locker room via a set of private elevators that staff use to get around, and soon the entire place is one mass of joy.

Emilio and Marisol are laughing and hugging. Francisco gets mauled by his grandmother, and Cooper’s proudly wearing his grandfather’s parrot while we all pull *Fireballs, Division Champions* T-shirts over our heads and someone pops the champagne.

“Nuh-uh, not you.” Luca grabs me and plops safety glasses onto my eyes, an umbrella hat on my head, and ties a Fireballs bandana around my head to shield my nose and mouth.

“You’re being ridiculous,” I tell him with a laugh.

He sweeps me up in a hug and twirls. “And you’re going to enjoy the hell out of this party.”

When he sets me down, he frowns, then he lifts the bandana and captures my lips in the sweetest kiss ever. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

And dammit if that doesn’t make me tear up. “Me too.”

“Henri—”

He cuts himself off as he gazes at me, his green eyes searching for something while his grip tightens on my hips.

I must look crazy, like a cross between a mad scientist and a train bandit, whereas he's in his baseball pants that make his butt look amazing, wearing his hat backwards, which is stupidly adorable, but he's gazing at me like I'm the most beautiful, precious sight he's ever seen.

This man.

He *sees* me.

He sees me, and he's still here, not despite who I am, but maybe, possibly, *because* of who I am?

"Marry me," he says suddenly.

I momentarily freeze—my toes, my fingers, my face, my heart—and then I suck in a surprised breath so hard that I get the tip of the bandana caught up in my mouth and have to spit it out, because I forgot how my hands work.

His grip tightens. "Henri—"

"No," I gasp, because I'm seeing my future so clearly. Me, in another fancy dress. Luca, sweating profusely next to the minister. His nonna cackling. His father crashing the ceremony. His mother whispering the question about if he wants to do this to make his grandmother happy, and then he'd be running, and this time, it wouldn't be a wedding ruining my dream of what I think love should look like.

This time, it would be a wedding ruining something that feels more real than any love I've ever experienced.

This isn't *I could settle with you and be happy* love.

This is *I don't ever want to live without you* love.

This is *you've set the bar for what love should be* love.

"We're perfect." He leans down to eye level, and he's a little blurry between the tears and the goggles fogging up, but I can still *feel* his gaze. "You don't want to have another wedding, and I don't want to go through all of this ridiculousness again with Nonna, so we'll have a quiet little thing at the courthouse, and we can both escape the whole dating scene and be good friends who have amazing sex and laugh and—"

"No."

"But—"

"Do you love me?"

"Henri—"

"Do you? Do you love me, or do you simply like me enough to settle?"

"I—" He stops, and with all of his teammates cheering and celebrating and spraying champagne and kissing and hugging their loved ones around us, he chokes.

He can't say he loves me.

He can't say he loves me.

“I asked you to help me learn to not fall in love, Luca Rossi. And you did one better. You helped me realize what love is. What I *deserve*. What every human being deserves. But this? *This*? I never would've expected *this* from you. Not even when we first met.”

I don't wait for him to try again to say something he doesn't feel, and instead, I hand my hat, my goggles, and my bandana to the security guy on the way out the door.

I thought being left at the altar was the worst thing that could ever happen.

Turns out, I was wrong.

I was so very, very wrong.

Luca

I CAN'T GET to Henri fast enough. People keep getting in my way.

Nonna wants to hug me. Mom wants to hug me. My teammates and their wives and girlfriends want to hug me.

And I want to catch up to the light in my life that's slipping away.

"What's wrong with you?" Mom asks as I try to dodge her. "This is what you've been working for since you were so little you couldn't even hold a bat."

"Henri—"

She lifts a brow.

Nonna cackles behind me, and I spin on her. "This is *your* fault. You and your fucking meddling and your Eye and your ziti—you made me fall for Henri."

And now she's leaving, because I fucked up.

I got swept up in the moment, asked her the one thing I promised I'd never ask her, and then I *choked*.

Mom rubs my back. "Let her go. She'll realize her mistake soon enough."

"The good ones always do," Nonna agrees. "She's a good one. I like her."

"She didn't—"

Fuck.

I duck and dodge and finally reach the hallway, but when I race to the parking garage, she's gone from there too. So I leap into Fluffy Maple and crank her engine, and—nothing.

She doesn't start.

My damn car won't start.

I'm still in my cleats. I'm soaked with alcohol. I'm using my spare key that I hide under the wheel well because my wallet and driver's license are back in the locker room, and the one woman who's come to mean the entire world to me thinks I don't love her because I can't say the words, and if I can't say the words, do I truly love her?

Do I?

Do I love her, or am I taking the chicken way out? Offering to keep her from getting hurt by anyone else, while making sure I won't be either?

We fit.

We fucking *fit*, but I said the wrong two words, and now she's gone, and not only is she gone, but I can't get my damn car to start.

Why won't my car start?

"You need a jump, Mr. Rossi?" The parking lot security guard jogs over. "Your lady tried, but—"

I whip my head up. "Henri tried to use my car?"

"Yes, sir. Flipped the hood open, tinkered a little...oh. Huh. Hm. You want me to check your battery cables, sir?"

I thunk my head against the wheel, but only once, because time's wasting. "You know anything about distributor caps?"

His face lights up. "Sure do. You must'a pissed her off good if Miss Henri broke your car. She's one of the good ones. Brought me a box of chocolates last week. Said everyone deserves a thank you."

God.

That's Henri.

She notices everyone.

I glance at the guy's nametag, because I've never done that before, and why haven't I? *Why haven't I?*

My conscience answers that one for me.

Because you're an asshole.

"Thanks, Phil."

He nods. "No trouble."

I can't tip him, because I don't have my wallet, but I make a mental note to send him a fruit basket.

Shit.

A fruit basket?

I need Henri.

I need my light, and I need my balance, and I need my Henri.

But when I get to my house, she's gone.

She left a suitcase and her glittery coffee tumbler that spells out exactly

what's wrong and right with her—*addicted to love stories*—but she took her cat.
She's *gone*.

I sink to the floor in my bedroom, and all I can see is Henri.

Henri tangled in my bedsheets. Henri pounding furiously at her laptop keys in the closet. Henri getting stuck under the bed trying to do “research.” Henri contemplating what the ceiling fan would say if it could talk, and then getting freaked out when it broke and had to be replaced a day later.

Henri sleeping.

Henri sitting up in bed and yawning with her short, crazy hair all over the place.

Henri talking to Dogzilla when she thought I wasn't listening.

My bedroom is an empty shell without the one voice that used to annoy me and now I can't imagine going a day without hearing.

I grab my phone to call her, except I don't have it.

I don't have my phone.

Jesus.

Fuck.

It's at the ballpark with my wallet and keys.

I reach for it again to text one of the guys to bring it to me, but *I can't text without my fucking phone.*

Jesus.

Jesus on a cannoli.

Where would she go?

Where would Henri go?

Where *wouldn't* she go is a better question. The Henri I know is as likely to go sit at a diner and make new best friends with someone who will want to hear her life story as she is to head to the airport and decide that right now, she needs space, and that space will come in the form of heading to Europe for the weekend.

Or for the next seven months.

Or until she meets a yodeler in Switzerland whose lederhosen fit just the right way and she decides she's in love.

Fuck.

I'll find her.

I will.

I race back to my car, which starts *fine* this time, and I head to the usual spots. Her favorite diner. Her favorite ice cream shop. Her second favorite bakery, because it's closer than her favorite bakery, which I also hit when every other place yields no Henri.

I cruise hotel parking lots. I check out parks.

And at three in the morning, I give up and head back home.

Max is waiting for me in my driveway. “Forgot a few things,” he says dryly, holding out my wallet and phone.

I lunge for the phone.

No calls from Henri. No texts. No emails.

I blink.

I have a computer.

I have a computer.

I could’ve video called her phone from my computer, and instead, I’ve been driving in circles in a giant-ass city, trying to guess which of the four hundred hotels or seven million food establishments she might be at.

“This gonna affect your game?” Max asks.

I scrub a hand over my face. “No.”

“You sure?”

“I’m a fucking professional and I can fucking compartmentalize, but it won’t be a problem, because I’m getting her back.”

I am.

I’ll get her back.

I’ll take back the proposal. And all the idiotic things that fell out of my mouth next as I was struggling with realizing that she was going to continue saying no, because *marry me* is the very, very worst thing I could’ve ever said to Henri, even if having Henri by my side for the rest of my life is the only thing I’ve ever wanted as much as I want baseball.

I fire her a quick text.

I’m so sorry. I know better. Call me. Please? I’ll make this up to you.

She doesn’t answer immediately.

The small message beneath the text doesn’t change from *delivered* to *read* either.

Shit. *Shit.*

Max pushes off his Mercedes SUV. “Look, Luca, you need to do whatever will make you happy, but all this shit your family’s putting you through? That’s not love, man. That’s not what anyone needs. You want neutral ground where no one’s giving you shit or trying to tell you how to live your life, you know where I live.”

“She’ll text me back. She’s probably—”

“I don’t know shit about love beyond what I see in movies, but even I know you don’t want your live engagement photos to happen when you look like your bride-to-be lost a bet over who could most look like they belong in a mental

institution.”

“Shut your fucking mouth.” I’m slamming him against his car before my brain can process that he’s grinning.

It’s a dark grin, but it’s a grin. “Yeah. Thought so.”

“Screw you.”

“Not enjoying your pain, Luca. Making sure you’re good enough for her.”

I’m not, and we both know it. “I don’t want another dickhead hurting her by giving her dreams about forever when they don’t deserve a forever with her. Nobody does. She’s too—she’s too good for all of us.”

“Any woman who’ll send a teddy bear bouquet to a guy’s nuts after he gets racked by a line drive really is.”

I gape at him.

He shrugs. “Stafford told me. While he was sitting on an ice pack after that game in Philly. Didn’t want to tell you so you wouldn’t get jealous. Or get her in trouble if she’s using your credit card.”

“What’d she do for you?”

He doesn’t answer.

“Cole. What did she do for you?”

He sighs. “You remember the father’s trip?”

“Do any of us not?”

“She found my first tee-ball coach. Had him call me. Offer to come next year if I wanted.”

“That’s…”

“The nicest thing anyone could’ve done. And she knew because she listened, and she’s a freak when it comes to finding things out. So, yeah. She’s too good for all of us.”

I stare at my phone again, where Henri still hasn’t texted back.

She could be asleep.

Or she could be hundreds of miles away by now.

She left an entire house behind once. Why would she worry about a piece or two of luggage and some clothes and a coffee mug, when she has everything she needs—her cat and her computer—already with her?

Max is right.

I don’t deserve her.

Luca

IT'S BEEN EIGHT DAYS.

It's been eight days since I saw Henri. I stopped calling, texting, and emailing her four days ago when my mother called me a stalker and my grandmother agreed.

My grandmother and my mother are new best friends.

I don't know what happened, but they've both decided to let bygones be bygones, to move in with me and help with my renovations, and to sit up and play cards all hours of the night, and they suddenly agree on everything from which brand of jelly is best to what's best for my life.

Fine. I know what happened.

Henri happened.

Henri happened, and she left my life better for having been here, which I'm not thinking about, because I need to concentrate on baseball.

Our first two games of the league championship are in Seattle. We come home with the series tied.

Every time I run into the Lady Fireballs, Henri's missing.

Of course she is.

She left.

I spooked her, and she left.

And every time I see one of the Lady Fireballs, I start to ask if they've heard from Henri, and they give me one of those looks, and I walk away.

I don't want to know.

I don't want to hear that she's moved on. That she went to a remote cabin in

the Blue Ridge Mountains for a few days to collect herself, and a shapeshifting bear man stumbled into her cabin and she tended his wounds and got engaged and he left her because he, too, realized he could never be good enough for her.

I seriously need to get a grip.

But at least my game's not suffering.

Much.

It's almost harder being at home, because between innings, we have control of the video screen, and every time a kid starts doing the Gel, I think of Nonna, then I think of Henri.

When the mascots get up to their antics, I think of Henri smashing a pie in Glow's face, and then Henri cutting my mascot socks and sewing them into itty-bitty mascot socks for Dogzilla so that the mascots could also be subjected to the litter box.

When I hit a home run in the bottom of the eighth during game three, I think of coming home to Henri and her excited smile. *You hit a home run! You hit a home run and you won!*

And where the baseball stadium has always been my happy place, all I see is what I've lost.

We lose our second home game, and then our third, and then we're on the road.

Back to Seattle, one loss away from being kicked out of the playoffs, or two wins away from making it to the final round that could crown us as baseball's number one team.

We're six wins from going from zero to hero in the span of a year, and nothing about this feels anywhere near as good as it should.

Mackenzie quits her job and comes with us to Seattle. "Win or lose, I'm there," she informs Francisco as she's boarding the plane when he asks if she's afraid of changing the routine. "I was going to quit anyway since *clearly* it's good luck for you all to have me in Florida with you for spring training. Just moved it up a few months."

Her gaze lands on me, and she opens her mouth like she wants to add something else, then shakes her head and moves past me to claim a seat two rows back.

I give Brooks the *what the hell was that?* look.

He ignores me. "Hey, Torres. Saw Marisol's necklace. About time, idiot."

I whip my head around, and I'm not alone.

Emilio's grinning like an goofball. "She's my boo. Made her wait long enough, and I don't wanna—"

He cuts himself off as his gaze lands on me, and we all know what he's

thinking.

I don't wanna fuck it up.

Marisol didn't want a diamond engagement ring.

She wanted a necklace that reminded her of her favorite novel from her teenage years.

And Henri didn't want a ring, or a wedding, or a husband at all, but I got so wrapped up in the idea of keeping her forever that I thought proposing a different kind of wedding without all of that love crap would be exactly what she'd like, when in reality, I basically offered to be the next guy to humiliate her.

Fuck.

I'd never humiliate Henri. I love her.

I. Love. Her.

I lean into the aisle. "Elliott. I need to talk to your wife."

"Can't hear you."

I glare.

He gives me the *suck it up* shrug.

And then Glow the Firefly drops into the seat next to me.

"Smile, Rossi," our team photographer calls. "Wait, don't. That was a better expression."

"Team yearbook!" someone crows.

I spend the entire flight from the east to the west coast with Glow sitting next to me, and now I'm wondering why the mascot didn't need to at least go to the bathroom *once*.

Mackenzie spends the next day and a half avoiding me.

It's mid-October.

There are Halloween decorations everywhere you look, and I can't even run to the corner drugstore for a freaking candy bar without seeing rows of costumes that all make me think of Henri and Dogzilla.

I'm about to get a cat.

I'm seriously in danger of walking into a shelter and leaving with a cat.

I miss the cat.

I miss Henri's companionship. I miss her smile. I miss the way her lips move when she's typing, and the way she gets excited over sweet corn from a farmers market, and the way she sometimes misses her mouth when she tries to take a drink of tea while she's writing because she's so into her scene.

Tell me to fall in love, and I'll fight you all day.

Give me unconditional love that *fits*, that's worth the effort, and I'm still the idiot who doesn't know what he had until it was gone.

We take the first game in Seattle, which leaves the series tied.

One more win, and we'll be league champions, headed to the World Series for the first time in Fireballs history.

We all wear our Fireballs capes and our Fiery thongs over our pants onto the field for warm-ups. It's a joke from earlier in the season, and we're feeling like gods when we start the game with three runs in the first inning.

Without the thongs and capes, for the record. Those were just for warm-ups.

But things start sliding downhill in the fourth, because we're getting too cocky.

By the seventh, we're tied at five.

At the top of the ninth, Brooks takes a pitch to the arm. He shakes it off and heads to first, but I follow him and roll us into a double-play on a ball I shouldn't have swung at.

Darren strikes out.

And on Stafford's first pitch in the bottom of the ninth, Seattle's catcher slams it out of the park so high up that neither Darren, nor Robinson, nor I could've leapt high enough to rob him.

Not even with springs in our cleats.

The three of us stand there in the outfield, staring dumbfounded at the scoreboard sixty feet up as the ball pummels the screen and Seattle knocks us out of the running while their fans cheer and scream so loudly, the ground is probably shaking all the way out to the San Juan Islands.

"Fuck," Robinson whispers as he and Darren converge on me.

"Rookie," Darren replies like a man who's earned a hell of a lot more than standing here, watching another team's fans celebrate the win we so desperately wanted.

He salutes the bleachers. "If you're gonna beat us, go win the whole damn thing," he murmurs.

He slaps my ass, then Robinson's. "Let's go home. We fought hard. Got farther than we had any right. And next year? Next year, this is *ours*."

We're all silent on the flight home.

None of us call each other out for any tears that are shed.

Stafford sits by himself. I don't have to ask if we're setting up a rotation to check on him. Just have to sign up for a time when Cooper plops into the seat next to me and shoves a calendar at me.

He nods when I hand it back. "Winter training. My place."

He's taking the loss best of all of us. Don't have to know Cooper long to understand why.

Of course he wants to win the whole damn thing. But being part of the Fireballs this year, when the team went from the worst team in baseball to one of

the top four?

It's nearly all his boyhood dreams come true, and he's too much of a Fireball at heart to ever consider that he won't have another chance next year.

We land back in Copper Valley so late, it's almost morning.

But the airport isn't empty as you'd expect for four am.

The minute we step through security, a mob of people greet us.

"Dude...we fuckin' *lost*," Emilio mutters.

Cooper shoves him. "Idiot. *We won. We won their hearts.*"

Shit.

We did.

There are young people. Old people. Black, white, and brown people. People using walkers, and people in wheelchairs, and able-bodied people, and people so young they're barely able to walk. People in old school Fireballs shirts with Fiery the Dragon. People in Firequacker the Duck shirts, in Meaty the Meatball shirts, in Spike the Echidna shirts, and in Glow the Firefly shirts.

And they're cheering. Cheering and waving signs.

We love the Fireballs.

Next year is OUR YEAR.

Fireballs Forever.

Cooper for Mayor.

Jimmy Santiago, Will You Marry Me?

Coach goes red in the face when someone points that one out.

Cooper's having trouble with his eyeballs getting leaky. I move in to clap him on the shoulder, but six other guys beat me to it.

Because I'm the one who's always a minute behind when it comes to taking care of people.

Shit.

Security clears a path for us, but we all take our time, signing balls and jerseys and bats, talking to the fans who are here *despite* the loss, who believed so hard that they carried us to the playoffs when baseball's commissioner nearly disbanded the team a year ago.

Henri would love this.

And I'm going to find her.

I'll find her, and I'll show her what she missed, and promise her that we'll do it all over again next year.

I catch sight of Lila Valentine heading to the exit, so I duck away and trot after her. "Hey!"

She turns and smiles like she slept well on the plane, and yeah, she probably did. Her goal this year was to make us be not-losers, and she more than achieved

that, even if we didn't go all the way. "I'll say this again later, but I'm very, *very* proud of all of you. Great season, Luca. Thank you for taking a chance on us."

"Don't trade me."

One brow lifts, and Tripp Wilson, her co-owner and fiancé, joins us. "Why would we trade you?"

Shit. Now I feel like an eight-year-old asking my mom's boyfriend not to leave. "Everybody does."

"Their loss is our gain. Fireballs are family. Don't ever forget it. And don't do anything stupid this winter."

They both say goodnight and slip away after reminding me to check my messages whenever I wake up, since the season isn't officially over until the new mascot is revealed, leaving me standing there with more Fireballs fans approaching and my eyes getting hot, because *this* is what it feels like to belong.

And I can't celebrate it with the one person who'd understand.

I'm still signing balls when Brooks and Mackenzie try to slip out a side door to hop into a car. I say my apologies to the fans, and once again, I'm darting after someone. "Mackenzie."

Her shoulders bunch, and she turns to me with a fake straight face.

You can always tell she's faking it because she usually chews on her bottom lip at the same time. "Luca! Hey! I was hoping to say goodnight to you. Or good morning."

"Where's Henri?"

She winces.

"Swear to fuck, don't tell me she's engaged. Please don't tell me she's engaged."

"Do you think so little of me as a friend that you could possibly believe I'd let that happen?"

"Stop talking," Brooks adds to me in an undertone. "If you want to live, stop talking now."

"I don't do love, okay? Not with the big public displays and the I heart you forever schmoopsie-poops and the poetry. I never even told Henri I'd hit a home run for her. But she's the best part of me. And I told her wrong. I want one chance to do it right. Just one. If she hates me and never wants to see me again after that, then I'll never bother her again. Swear on getting Eyed by Nonna every day for the rest of my life."

Mackenzie's eyes narrow. "You used her to make your nonna think her curse worked."

I hang my head. "Yes."

"How do I know you're not using her now?"

My eyes are getting hot again. “You don’t.”

“Hm. I’ll consider your request. Go home. Get some sleep. I might text you later.”

I bite my tongue to keep the *are you kidding me?* inside while she slips into the waiting car.

Brooks nudges my shoulder. “It wasn’t a no. And she’s right. You don’t want to fuck up your last chance because you’re tired and dumb.”

“You think I can sleep like this?”

He grins. “I’m sure she’ll keep that in mind.”

Henri

FOR ALL THE emotions that keep leaking out of my eyeballs, you'd think I was the one who pushed two babies out of my vagina after leaving my husband and flying all the way across the country with three other children under the age of five, and also her pets.

And yes.

Elsa *did* deliver her twins naturally.

Here in Copper Valley.

Right on their actual due date.

Because that's what she does.

"No, Rosa, you tell Roberto that if he *ever* wants to see me and our children *ever* again, he'll learn how to mop a damn floor until it shines, and he'll learn that *I hate pancakes*, and he'll learn that the way to this woman's heart is through changing fucking diapers."

Tatiana stares wide-eyed at me, like I'm supposed to explain to her that her mommy is having a breakdown and it'll pass before she starts kindergarten in a year.

Probably.

Titus whips out his penis, announces, "Potty," and then pees on the floor next to Elsa's hospital bed.

And Talia, who's barely eighteen months, bursts into tears.

"Oh, sweetie, it's okay." I try to beckon her to my lap, but I'm balancing Jake and Ruby, the newborn twins, in both arms too, and so far Talia isn't a fan of being a big sister.

So she drops her diaper and pees on the floor too.

While screaming.

I'd leave with the older three, except Elsa has basically begged me to not ever, *ever* leave her side, and she's also forbidden me from calling Mom for help, because *I don't want her to know I'm a failure.*

That would sting if I hadn't realized in the week since Elsa crashed my new and unexpectedly tiny apartment with her whole perfect life imploding around her, that the only reason Elsa looks like she has everything all put together is because she's been burning herself out making it seem perfect when she's completely and totally miserable.

And basically alone, since Roberto works like sixteen hours a day and doesn't give her any orgasms.

I lied, she sobbed that first night after all three of her kids had gotten up for their seventh drink of water or trip to the potty or, in Titus's case, to dash around my small living room on all fours while shouting that he was a leopard. *Roberto never gave me any orgasms. He didn't even care. He just wanted a hole to stick his dick in for two pumps, and that was it.*

I'm never thinking of my brother-in-law the same again.

Though I did have to stifle tears of my own every time she said *orgasm*, since I'll probably never have any of those in my life ever again.

But it's for the best.

If Elsa can't make her marriage work, who can?

Not me.

I left a man who never said he loved me, but *showed* me in all the little things that I was important, that he paid attention, and taught me that I deserved better than someone who'd give me lip service and leave me.

I freaked out and ran away from the one man who finally got it better than all the men who could say the words, but didn't know how to actually show them.

I don't deserve a happily ever after either, do I?

Luca Rossi, the man who hates love, whose family broke it for him, who's been abandoned by father figures and baseball teams for years and has no reason to believe in love, loves me.

I know he does, but I don't think *he* knows he does.

Not if he'd propose merely because us being married would be comfortable and convenient.

Which means our future would be full of me trying to convince him of something that his entire childhood taught him was a lie. I can't *not* believe in love, even if I can believe I'm not meant to have it.

So instead, I'm concentrating on what my life is today, and probably for the

foreseeable future, and that's my sister and her kids.

Maybe, between the two of us, we can do something right so they're not just as ducked up as we are.

So they know they deserve flowers on release day, and being cared for when they're sick or having an allergic reaction to alcohol, and that they owe it to that person to tuck a card into their luggage before they leave so they'll get a smile when they find it, and to stand up to the people who hurt him when he's too tired of fighting that fight for himself.

So they know that love has nothing to do with the size of a person's bank account, and everything to do with the size of their hearts.

And so they know that when their significant other loses the most important game of his life, they should *be there for him*, and not making excuses about how they can't go anywhere because they need to stay in a hospital holding someone else's hand.

Luca.

My Luca.

Is he alone? Is he afraid the Fireballs will trade him? Is Nonna scouring dating sites for him? Is his mother the type who'll find his favorite cannoli to console him, or will she even be here with him?

And what if they wouldn't have lost last night if I'd just said yes and sorted everything else out later, after the season was over, instead of running away like a panicked woman who thought that being left by five fiancés meant she'd also be left by the sixth, when it's the sixth who's settled deeper into her heart than she thought a man could ever get?

"Aunt 'Enni, you cwyng?" Tatiana asks.

"No," I sob.

Talia cries harder with me. Titus starts crying. The babies both erupt in baby wails, which are soft and scratchy and so, so perfect, and I'll never have babies of my own, and then Elsa's sobbing, which makes Tatiana sob again too.

"That woman was so right." Elsa flings her phone across the room, where it bounces gracefully off the wall and tumbles to rest against the Boppy on the floor, never in danger of hitting anyone, because despite her marriage crumbling, she *is* still Elsa. "It's never right to pretend things are okay when they're not, and it's never okay to fill your love well with hobbies and causes that won't love you back."

"What woman?" Crap. Dang it. Now I'm going to start hiccupping.

"TikTok Nonna," Elsa wails.

I freeze.

My eyes go wide, and I choke on a hiccup. "You met TikTok Nonna?"

“I didn’t want to tell you because you hate when I talk about meeting celebrities.”

We’re both bawling, yelling over her children crying, and a nurse pops her head in. “Oh, gosh, we need to take the babies to get their bloodwork. And then we have a special surprise!” She squats down to Titus’s level. “Do you like baseballs?”

Baseballs.

I sob harder.

Not *baseballs*.

Two more nurses rush in and relieve me of the babies. “We’ll send up someone from the new mom support program,” she whispers. “It’s always nice to talk to someone when all those post-partum hormones hit. Completely normal and natural, sweetie.”

“I didn’t have a baby.”

“I know, honey, but family needs support too.”

We are such a disaster.

“Baw?” Titus asks.

The first nurse beams at him. “Yes, you handsome little devil. We’ll get you a ball. But you all have to put your privates back in your diapers, okay?”

“She means put your penis away, Titus,” Tatiana says through sniffles. “Can I have a ball too?”

“Oh, yes, of course!” The nurse points to Titus’s shirt. “I only asked him first because he’s wearing one.”

The nurses all depart, and we try to pull ourselves together. “You met TikTok Nonna?” I say again to Elsa.

“She was filming outside my mommy-to-be yoga class, and she stopped and looked at me and said, *Do what you need to do for your own happiness, not what everyone else is doing for theirs*, and it was like, *oh my god, I have to leave Roberto.*”

Oh my god.

Oh my god, Luca sent his Nonna to ambush my sister. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“Because I meet all the cool people and you just have this virtual life where you don’t do anything, except you seem so happy with it.”

He sent Nonna.

He sent Nonna to make Elsa not write romance novels.

“Oh, god, Henri, don’t do that. Don’t start crying again. I take it back. You have the coolest life ever because you don’t have to fit into anyone’s mold and you’ve been jilted five freaking times and you still have this unstoppable

optimism and I kinda hate you for it, but I also want to be you so badly because you don't apologize for being who you are even when Mom and Dad shit on your dreams—don't say *shit*, Tatiana and Thalius and Tittia—and oh, fuck, *I can't even say your names right.*"

"Fuck," Talia yells.

The door opens, and a large man in a baseball uniform with perfect hair and worried green eyes cautiously pokes his head in.

I gasp.

Elsa sits up straighter, then winces and adjusts her donut.

Luca's gaze connects with mine, and *god*, do I ever *not* look like I'm having a breakdown when he's around?

Check that.

Am I ever not having a breakdown?

"What are you doing here?" I whisper.

He visibly swallows. "Heard there are some future sluggers in here."

I blink, spot Francisco out in the hallway with Darren too, and I realize this isn't Luca coming to find me and forgive me and tell me he loves me and can't live without me.

It's horrible, terrible, very bad timing for a public relations visit to the hospital by the home team. He pulls out three baseball stress balls adorned with various mascot contenders from a drawstring bag and goes down on a knee entirely too close to me to hold them out to Titus.

How do I always forget how much room this man takes up? And how good he smells? And how fabulous his ass looks in—and out—of his uniform?

And how much I want to touch him and apologize for running out of the biggest celebration of his life, and how sorry I am that I wasn't there for him in Seattle last night, and how much I cried when they lost, and how hard it was to hold Elsa's hand through her contractions and pretend I was crying for her pain, and not my own?

"You wanna pick one, little buddy?" he asks.

Titus points to the one with Glow and screams in terror.

It should be funny, but seeing him react the way I know Luca wants to react to the firefly makes my eyes leak more.

"You have excellent taste, little guy," he says thickly.

He puts the Glow ball in his back pocket and offers Titus a squeezey baseball with Fiery on it instead.

"I want the dragon!" Tatiana yells.

"Duck! Duck!" Talia chimes in.

Luca smiles at my youngest—no, formerly youngest niece—and hands her a

ball with Firequacker, then gives the older two each a Fiery ball.

“That’s so kind of you. Thank you,” Elsa says.

He shakes his head. “I’m a man with ulterior motives.”

Still down on his knee, he turns to me. “Henri—”

My breath catches.

No.

No.

Not again.

“Wait.” He grabs my hand and squeezes. “Please. Wait.”

“Luca—”

“You know him?” Elsa interrupts.

His face twitches, and it’s so familiar, and so Luca, and suddenly I’m laughing through my tears.

Why am I doing this?

Why am I resisting him?

Could he hurt me? Of course. But is it worth hiding from life to never hurt again, when the trade-off is missing out on all the joy in between?

He squeezes my hand again, briefly closes his eyes, and when he opens them again, he gazes at me like I’m the only thing in his life with meaning. “Henrietta Bacon, will you do me the honor of letting me love you for the rest of my life?”

My breath leaves me.

My heart tries to leap out of my chest and into his arms.

And all I can manage is a whispered, “*Oh.*”

“You taught me how to love, Henri. Let me show you. I don’t care what the world calls us. I don’t care about the formalities. I don’t care about anything but having you by my side. Please, Henri. Please let me love you.”

And there go my eyeballs again as I wrap my arms around his neck and inhale his delicious scent and soak in the warmth of his skin and the strength of his grip while he hugs me back.

“You—you came here for *me*?”

“Losers don’t usually invade maternity wards, but when I finally got one of your friends to break and tell me where you were—”

“You are *not* a loser.”

“I lost you.”

Oh, Luca. “I’m so sorry I ran away.”

“I’m sorry I scared you. *God*, I miss you.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there last night.”

“What’s going on?” Elsa asks. “Henri? What is this? Do you know this man?”

“She said yes!” Francisco hollers in the hallway.

A dozen people shush him, because babies are sleeping, and new moms are trying to get a few minutes of shut-eye too, and suddenly half the Fireballs are crowding into the hospital room while my sister and her kids gape at all of us.

“But I didn’t—” I start.

“You don’t love me?” Luca asks.

“Oh my gosh, I love you so much it hurts, but I’m not marrying you. You said I didn’t have to. You promised. Wait. Oh my gosh, I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. If it would make you happy, Luca, I’d plan a thousand weddings to you, even if I said I never wanted—”

Huh.

Look at that.

He *does* like kissing me to make me be quiet.

I should talk more.

I should definitely talk more.

“You don’t have to talk to encourage me to kiss you,” he says against my lips, because he knows me.

He knows me, the good parts and the bad parts, and he still wants all of me.

I pull back enough to bring his beautiful face into focus, and there’s so much hope in the wrinkles in his forehead and the tilt of his mouth and the intensity in his eyes, my heart couldn’t swell bigger if it were blessed with all the magic that I’ve been struggling once again to write about.

“I love you, Luca. I love you more than I’ve ever loved anyone in my life. Anyone. Ever. And you don’t have to say it back, because you show me. You show me every day.”

“Then let me show you by telling you too. Henrietta Bacon, I—”

Titus shoves between us. “An ’Enni, I eat da baw.”

He holds up the squishy baseball with a bite taken out of Fiery.

Darren lifts Titus. “I got this.”

Elsa’s still gaping. “Are these men actual baseball players, Henri?”

“No. They’re some friends I paid to entertain the kids,” I reply. “Dance, gentlemen. Just like you rehearsed.”

Francisco, Robinson, and Emilio share a glance, then look at Brooks and Max, who are standing like deer facing down alien spaceships coming from all directions.

“*Hey, Macarena!*” Robinson yells, and all five of them start doing different dance moves.

Talia dives into Elsa’s lap, sobbing, and tries to crawl under the covers.

“You do it wrong!” Tatiana says, pointing a finger at Max.

Luca drops his head to my shoulder. His whole body's shaking with laughter. "Never boring," he says.

"Will you have illegitimate children with me too?"

"Yes." He lifts his head and cradles my cheek. "A million times, yes."

"We're adopting after what I watched Elsa do last night."

"Can we pretend like we're not in the meantime?"

"Several times a day, please. I miss you."

He rises to his feet, lifts me out of my chair, and tosses me over his shoulder. "Brooks. You're on kid duty until Nonna gets here. Elsa. Lovely to meet you. If you talk to your parents, tell them Henri's busy until they learn to send flowers on her release days. Little squirts, we're gonna spoil you rotten at the holidays. Excuse me. I have a woman to satisfy."

He marches me out of Elsa's room, and I swear my shoulders start relaxing in a way I hadn't realized they've needed, and I don't know if it's having Luca back in my life, or if it's getting distance from my sister, but by the time we reach the elevators, my eyes are leaking again.

"Henri." Luca sets me down, takes one look at me, and as the doors slide shut, he wraps me in his arms. "Beautiful angel, don't cry."

"I'm never beautiful during the good moments," I sniffle.

"You are to me."

"Luca—"

"I love you, Henri. All of you. All of your moods. All of your characters. All of your heart. And all of your cat's various personalities too."

I'm still laughing and smiling as he loads me up in Fluffy Maple in the parking garage, pausing to kiss me many, many times before he finally turns the key in the ignition.

His car sputters once, sputters twice, and then a cloud of black smoke rolls out from behind us.

We both turn and stare, then simultaneously look back at each other.

"Um, Luca?"

"Let me guess. That's Confucius's sign that he approves?"

I crack up and kiss him again.

I've always known life wasn't boring.

You can't have five failed engagements and *not* know it.

But I have this crazy feeling that not-boring is about to exist on an entirely new plane.

And I can't wait to share my life—and all my love—with this man who couldn't be more imperfectly perfect, and exactly right for me.

EPILOGUE

Henri

THREE MONTHS after Luca came riding into Elsa's maternity ward like my knight in baseball armor, we're on a private island in the Caribbean, taking a break from our families, whom we love dearly but sometimes need to be away from, because no one's perfect.

But we're not here on vacation.

We're here to celebrate some of our very best friends as they formalize their own forever.

Marisol and Emilio's wedding takes place at sunset on the beach, with the entire Fireballs team and most of the coaches in attendance, plus the bride and groom's extensive families, old friends, and former teammates too. They kiss under an arch of tropical flowers with their feet in the wet sand at the edge of the water while the sun lights up the sky in a burst of pinks and oranges, and it's such a beautiful setting for two people who deserve all the happiness in the world that my eyes are leaking.

Luca kisses my hair as he passes me his handkerchief. I didn't bother with mascara today, because I knew it would dribble all over my cheeks between the wedding tears and the humidity before this moment.

Okay, fine.

It's also the third handkerchief he's handed me, and I know he has at least four more stuffed in his pockets.

This man knows me very, very well.

I've gotten to know him pretty well too, and I'm very comfortable saying that this wedding is easier on him than it would've been a year ago.

I like seeing my friends find their happiness, he told me last night while we were walking on the far side of the island. And I like having my own happiness right here. I don't care what we call it, Henri, so long as I can call you mine.

He is the absolute sweetest man ever.

He's also shiny in the eyeballs as Marisol and Emilio walk down the aisle as husband and wife, both of their smiles so brilliantly happy, they look like they might take flight.

Their smiles, I mean. Which would be weird, but seriously, I don't know how a body can contain that much joy and not radiate some of it up to the heavens.

Luca slides a glance at me and starts to smile too, like he knows there are weird thoughts going on in my brain, and I tip my head back and laugh.

"Only you," he murmurs.

"It wasn't *that* weird. Comparatively, I mean."

He's laughing now too as he pulls me to follow the crowd to the patio outside the mansion where so many guests are staying. We scored a private bungalow on the beach not far from Brooks and Mackenzie's private bungalow, and we're staying for a few more days, unlike the newlyweds, who'll be off for their honeymoon—not to be confused with the month they already spent in Thailand for the holidays—before we all have to be back in Copper Valley for Fireballs Con. Soon after, we'll head to Florida for spring training.

We dance. Marisol and Emilio cut their cake and then start a cake fight partly for fun, partly to horrify their parents. I eat chocolate-covered strawberries until my stomach hurts, but *only* from the table clearly labeled ALCOHOL-FREE FRUIT.

Not that there's any fruit soaked in vodka at this party, but Marisol was kind enough to think of me when she arranged catering.

The party's winding down when Marisol suddenly shrieks, "My garter!"

"Shit, yeah!" Emilio yells. "Let me under that skirt!"

Pretty sure that's also meant to horrify their parents, but the next thing I know, I'm being shoved into the center of the dance floor, surrounded by all the single women, while Marisol skips to the edge of the patio with her bouquet.

Seriously?

"Excuse me," I murmur to Marisol's cousin.

She glances at my ringless hand, then lifts a brow at me as she blocks me from leaving the dance floor. "You're single. You have to be here."

"I'm in a very committed relationship. Luca and I have a pending common-law marriage."

Emilio's grandmother, a lovely widowed woman who promised to teach

Luca and me how to make the best empanadas tomorrow, snorts in my direction. “*Pending. You stay.*”

As if I’m going to steal the bouquet from another woman who would appreciate the thought that she’d be the next woman to get married.

I make the “I give up, I’ll stay,” gesture for the sake of the women around me—also, is it weird to anyone else that they’d *want* more competition?—and formulate my escape route.

It’s simple, really.

The crowd starts counting down from three as Marisol warms up to throw her bouquet over her shoulder.

I wait until everyone yells *one!*, and then I squat to the ground.

I’ll probably get trampled, but Luca’s watching, and I know it’ll only be a moment before he dives over the mass of women lunging for the bouquet to drag me to safety.

Probably.

Unless he’s getting ribbed by his buddies about me being out here when we’ve told everyone that we’re in a committed relationship without the mess of formalities that are completely unnecessary for both of us. I know he’s not actually fretting that I’d catch the bouquet, nor is he fretting that I’d suddenly want a wedding if I did.

Everyone above me moves in a giant human wave, and I duck walk backwards as everyone’s leaping up to reach for the flying bouquet. I turn to glide into the open spaces between the women—as much as I can, anyway, with everyone bumping around me—and that’s the only explanation I have for not seeing what’s coming.

Specifically, Marisol’s giant bouquet.

It crashes down on my head, throwing me just off-balance enough that I end up tumbling forward on the concrete and I’m very, very grateful that this was a barefoot wedding, because I don’t want to know what would happen if everyone around me was in stilettos.

“It’s mine!” someone yells.

“No, I got it!”

“MINE!”

“ALL ME!”

I’m buried under thirty-four bodies. I’m the tight end tackled by the entire opposing team at the goal line. I’m the base of the cheerleader pyramid that fell apart.

And I’m squishing the bouquet.

The pressure on my body relaxes as, I assume, people are pulling the other

women off the pile of bouquet wanna-be owners, until a familiar chuckle hits my ears and familiar hands grip me under the armpits and lift.

Luca's face is contorting into eighty-nine different emotions, ranging from worry to horror to absolute, utter hilarity.

His green eyes sweep up and down, then catch on the ground as he asks, "You okay?"

"Yeah. Think so," I pant. I suck in a full breath, verify nothing's broken, and I nod as I glance down at what he's staring at.

It's Marisol's bouquet.

I crushed the ever-loving duck out of Marisol's bouquet.

"Oh," someone murmurs to my right.

"I don't think I want that now," someone else murmurs to my left.

"Is it cursed?"

"She's wearing it. She has to keep it."

Luca's shoulders are shaking, and while his head is ducked, he's taller than me, which makes it easy for me to bend over and stare him in the face. "Are you laughing?"

"No."

"I can see you laughing."

"But I'm trying very hard not to."

We both look at my dress, which is smeared with tropical bouquet flower guts.

I pinch my lips together, which makes my laugh come out my nose, which is *not* attractive.

Luca's managing to not snort, but I know that won't last much longer.

"Oh my god, Henri! Are you okay? Who made you get out there? *Who did this to my friend?*" Marisol stomps a foot and turns to glare at all of her friends and family, who all back up.

She snorts as she bends to grab the bouquet.

Everyone who wanted it so badly just a moment ago takes another step back.

"I'll keep it," I tell Marisol.

"We will," Luca agrees. He coughs, snickers, and tries to school his features into something of a neutral smile, and fails miserably. "We're the keepers of relics of weddings gone wrong."

I giggle.

Luca visibly stifles another laugh.

Marisol hesitates, then hands me the trampled bouquet with a shrug and a laugh. "Only you two could appreciate this."

Luca folds me into his arms and buries his face in my neck. It tickles as he

laughs. "My life was so boring before I met you."

"I know. You're welcome."

He laughs again, and we spend the rest of the reception cracking up every time we look at each other.

This man.

He *gets* me. I love him more than I've ever loved anyone in my life.

He *is* my heart.

And I'll never let go.

BONUS EPILOGUE

Luca Rossi, aka a guy who almost forgot to tell you this part of the story, which happened a few months before Emilio and Marisol's wedding

Exactly one week after we're knocked out of the playoffs, six days after I finally found my Henri and convinced her to come home with me forever, we're all back at Duggan Field.

It's the day.

The day.

The only day that matters in the rest of this baseball season.

Mascot Day.

My teammates and I are all in uniform, and our families are with us on the field. Considering everything Mackenzie and the Lady Fireballs have done to support the team and the city, of course they're invited.

Everyone's families were added because we *are* family.

All of us.

I don't know if my father will be in the stands—probably not, since we lost in the playoffs—but Henri and my mom and Nonna are by my side, and that's what matters.

Jerry's here too, which is its own kind of weird, but other than him stammering when I asked what his intentions were toward my mother, and then me growling at him when he got within touching distance of Henri, who's taking this way better than I am, it's not *bad*.

It's weird, for sure, but Mom's acting like a teenager, which is moderately adorable, so I can handle this.

Also, it's the first time in almost a week that I've gone more than two hours without hearing babies or toddlers or preschoolers who need something, and

while my respect for mothers has gone up a thousand-fold, it's nice to have a small break from Elsa and her family.

It's possible Henri's sister is growing on me now that she's letting her guard down to show her less-than-perfect side.

It's possible she's growing on Henri too, though Henri's so patient with everyone, you'd barely know when she's frustrated or tired.

I know, though.

And I'm glad she has a break today too. Especially a break that comes with seeing her Lady Fireballs friends for the first time in a week.

We're lined up along the baselines, with Tripp and Lila and their kids at a podium at second base, the stands full of fans who were given free tickets to come and meet the newest official member of the Fireballs team. Lila's speaking about what this town has come to mean to her since she inherited the team a year ago, and I'm getting as antsy as Mackenzie on my other side. She and Brooks brought along their dog, who's being very well-behaved despite how every single minute feels like it's taking twenty-six years.

Henri squeezes my hand. "It'll be over soon, and whatever happens, I've got your back," she whispers.

Mackenzie leans around me to peer at her. "I don't know if I can take another hour of this. I just need to go somewhere and cry."

"It's not over," Brooks murmurs. "You have too much blackmail material on *all* the mascots now. I don't care how much gray hair they put on Fiery. They'll have to bring him back."

"I've been writing mascot porn between helping with Elsa's kids," Henri whispers. "Like, porn written by the mascots. Glow's story is especially offensive, and you'll never believe who Meaty gets it on with. If your blackmail material isn't enough, I've got phase two ready to launch."

"She's truly terrifying, Luca," Mom murmurs. "I approve."

Nonna turns and grins at me. "Did I ever tell you how hard I laughed when you put out that fire on my ziti?"

"What? *No!*" Henri gasps.

Then she claps both hands over her mouth while Lila pauses and looks at us, and it's clear the Fireballs' owner heard her.

Possibly half the stands did too, since Lila's staring straight at Henri as she continues. "It's true. I never considered selling the Fireballs, despite what you might have heard."

Max starts coughing on my other side. Brooks has to turn around while he gets his snickers under control.

"I'd laugh at that but I'm too close to crying," Mackenzie whispers once Lila

picks back up with what was clearly her original speech. “Is this supposed to feel like a funeral?”

“You are my hero,” Mackenzie’s dad says to Henri. “She should’ve sold the team if all she was going to do was replace Fiery.”

“She also invested heavily in coaches, talent, and the city to save the team from being shut down by the commissioner,” her papa points out.

“Tomato eggplant.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“And that’s why you love me.”

“I love *you*,” I whisper to Henri as I loop my arms around her from behind and rest my chin on her head, which is covered with my old Fireballs hat from that fateful day when she got attacked by birds.

And now I’m smiling again.

Life with Henri is amazing.

“Yep,” Nonna says. “Laughed my tuckus off, because I knew.”

“I like you, Irene, but you’re being annoying,” Mom tells her.

“That’s not nice,” Jerry chides Nonna, then shrinks as Nonna eyes him.

And that’s why Henri and I keep looking at real estate in the country.

So we can build the Mom-and-Nonna Ho-mance house on the far, far edge of a large goat farm.

Plus, lots of land to bury Jerry if he breaks my mom’s heart.

And I’m adding an extension to my house in my original Copper Valley neighborhood, because Elsa and her kids aren’t moving back to California, and if Henri wants to help her sister get back on her feet, then that’s what I’ll help Henri do.

“One last thing before we meet our new mascot,” Lila says. “All of Copper Valley owes a special thank you to Mackenzie Montana-Elliott, who is, without a doubt, our biggest cheerleader. We had *hundreds* of write-in votes for a Mackenzie mascot, but we could never replace her for being exactly who she is, bad aim and everything.”

“Ohmygosh, that’s amazing,” Henri says as the entire ballpark erupts in cheers and whistles for Mackenzie, who bursts into the tears she’s been holding back, turns, and buries her face in Brooks’s chest.

He flashes Lila a thumbs-up.

And we all keep cheering, because Mackenzie’s earned it.

Lila waits until the noise has almost died down, and then she signals someone in the visitors’ dugout.

Appropriate, considering Firequacker became a contender when a real duck attacked her there not long after she took possession of the team.

Long story.

Spike the Echidna emerges, followed by Meaty the Meatball, then Glow—*shudder*—and finally, the duck himself.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it was a hard-fought battle this year,” Lila says. “Firequacker, you will forever hold a special place in my heart because of the inspiration for your existence. Spike, we’re so proud of you for introducing so many people to your namesake from Australia, and we’re also proud to announce that the Copper Valley Zoo will be adding an echidna display next spring for further education. Meaty, you’ve brought us hours and hours of joy with your travels and exploits. And Glow, we’ve been so pleased to feature a mascot of such high character who stands for the belief that everyone is valuable, no matter the number of arms they have or the size of their pants.”

“Ohmygod, is she picking *all* of them?” Mackenzie moans. “She is, isn’t she? *I can’t take this for another year.*”

“You won’t be alone,” Henri assures her. “We’ve got your back. And I haven’t even begun to put all my good brain cells to use on this problem.”

How could I not love this woman?

She’s unstoppable.

Lila eyeballs us again like she knows exactly what we’re thinking, takes a deep breath, and then it happens.

A slow gasp rolls through the entire ballpark.

The hairs on my arms stand up on end, and I can feel Henri’s arms sprouting goosebumps too.

She goes up on tiptoe as it becomes obvious people in the stands are pointing to the outfield.

But to where?

The bullpen entrance? The stands?

“Fiery?” Mackenzie gasps.

“I can’t see.” Henri’s twisting this way and that. So are Mom and Nonna and Jerry in front of her.

I yank Jerry’s collar and make him stand behind us.

“Right. Sorry. Sorry, Luca. Sorry, Henri,” he mutters.

“No way!” Francisco yells from the first baseline.

Marisol shrieks and turns to leap into Emilio’s arms, but not before flashing us the biggest thumbs-up.

Lila’s smiling so brightly, she’s making me nervous.

“Mascots,” she says, “it’s been a pleasure having you at Duggan Field this year, but it turns out, Fiery had one last surprise he hadn’t told us about before his announced retirement.”

The scoreboard screen flickers to life, and—

“Is that an egg?” Mom asks.

Holy shit.

It is.

It’s a giant egg, scaly and orange, and it’s leaping up and down.

“What? All this fuss about mascots and they’re going to bring in a *chicken* at the last minute?” Nonna shrieks.

We all ignore her, because it’s obvious what’s going on.

“Ohmygosh, baby dragon,” Henri whispers.

“Baby dragon,” Mackenzie echoes.

“Baby dragon,” the crowd murmurs.

The shell breaks free, and a small, chubby, adorable baby version of Fiery bursts forth at the same time that the doors to the bullpen in the outfield open fully, revealing what half the crowd has apparently already glimpsed.

A baby dragon, racing in from the outfield.

“Ladies and gentlemen of Copper Valley,” Lila says, “meet Fiery’s daughter, Ash, the official new mascot of the Fireballs.”

“Luca. *Luca*. Can we get a baby dragon? *Please?*” Henri turns, and her eyes are leaking again, but hell, so are mine.

Hard not to when Mackenzie’s sobbing next to us. “Baby dragon! Ohmygod, *baby dragon!*”

Ash starts her victory lap by sticking her fingers in her ears and wiggling them at the other mascots, then trots to first base for high fives and fist bumps from the entire Fireballs family.

“Did you know?” I ask Brooks, who’s also wiping his eyes.

He shakes his head. “Not a damn clue. Glad management isn’t as dumb as I was afraid they were.”

Ash rounds home plate and heads for Max, whom she tackles in a massive hug. He pats her back and shakes his head, but I know he’s enjoying himself. Mom gets a high five. Nonna gets a hip-bump that’ll undoubtedly end up on TikTok before the day’s over. Henri gets a full-body hug. “Ohmygosh, *I love you,*” she squeals. “Welcome to the Fireballs. We’re so glad to have you!”

I get a two-handed high-ten, and then Ash moves on to Mackenzie.

The new mascot spreads her chubby baby arms, and if there’s a dry eye in the ballpark as Mackenzie latches on to that dragon, I’ll eat my cleats.

“Eat your vegetables and exercise *every single day* so you can grow big and strong and one day be as big as your dad but never have to retire, okay?”

Coco Puff barks, and his collar yells an excited, “*I love you so much! We should always be friends!*”

And Mackenzie hugs the mascot, and hugs the mascot, and hugs the mascot, until we hear Brooks mutter, “If she shits that diaper because you won’t let go, you’re cleaning it up.”

She cracks up.

Henri wags a finger at him, but she’s laughing too. “You be nice, or I’ll make you change *real* diapers.”

Lila leans back into the microphone as Ash finishes her victory lap. “Fiery has graciously agreed to act as Ash’s mentor. While he’s unable to continue fulfilling all the duties a mascot should, he loves the Fireballs deeply and wants to see his little girl succeed. Firequacker, Spike, Glow, and Meaty, we invite you to stay at Duggan Field as long as it takes for you to find new teams.”

Henri gasps in outrage. “Oh, no, she didn’t. She really is picking all of them! You know no other team will hire them after everything they’ve done here this year. They’re too Fireball-ish.”

Mackenzie starts to gasp too, but it turns into a laugh. “Bring it. Next year is going to be so much fun.”

It will.

And I’ll still be here, with the Fireballs, for all of it.

With Henri by my side.

We might never get formally married, but I’ve been saying vows of my own to her every day.

You make my life brighter.

I didn’t know what it was to live off the field until you.

I will always make the effort to love you.

It’s odd to know that the one gift I can give her is to *not* propose, but it doesn’t change the fact that there will never be another woman that I will love the way I love my Henri.

She’s real. She’s funny. She’s heart to her core.

She’s not only the reason I believe in love now.

She *is* love.

And she’s my world.

Dear Reader,

Thanks for reading! If you want a super special bonus epilogue, then I have good news for you! Click [here](#) to download your copy and eek just a little bit

more time in with Luca and Henri (and Dogzilla!). As a bonus, you'll get an opportunity to subscribe to the Pipster Report, which is basically so much fun that it should be illegal.

If you're the awesome type of person who likes to leave reviews, here are quick linkies for you to [Amazon](#) and [Goodreads](#). And keep reading for a sneak peek at [***Flirting with the Frenemy***](#), which will take you back in time to the start of the Pippaverse!

If you're curious about that crazy little town where REAL FAKE LOVE opened, the one with the wedding cake monument, I wrote a seven-book series set there when I was writing as Jamie Farrell. You can find book 1 of the Misfit Brides [here](#). And you can find book 4 [here](#). (I mention it since it's a reader favorite.)

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you had as much fun with Luca and Henri as I did.

Hugs and cookies,
Pippa

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Visit Pippa's website at www.pippagrants.com for the most up-to-date book list, suggested series reading order, and more.

SNEAK PEEK AT FLIRTING WITH THE FRENEMY!

*Love enemies to lovers with a history, brother's best friend, and military single dads? (Swoon!! I do!!) Keep reading for a sneak peek at **Flirting with the Frenemy**, which has all that and more!*

Ellie Ryder, aka a woman in need of more than ice cream to fill the hole in her heart

WHEN I RULE THE WORLD, peppermint crunch ice cream will be available all year long, because assholes who break people's hearts don't restrict their assholery and heart-breaking to Christmas.

Unless, apparently, they're *my* asshole.

Check that.

My former asshole.

I stab my spoon straight into the cold carton that I grabbed at the store on the way here and ignore the twinkling holiday cheer on my parents' gigantic tree in the living room. It's late, so I didn't tell them I was coming over, but I don't want to spend one more night at my house this week.

Alone.

Sleeping in the bed where Patrick screwed me—and then screwed me over—just two nights ago.

Merry Christmas, Ellie. I'm in love with my neighbor.

I leave them a note taped to the coffee pot to let them know I'm here, then stomp down the stairs—softly, so I don't wake them—and turn the corner into the rec room, where I pound the light switch up.

And then almost scream.

There's a lump of a man sprawled on the couch watching a black-and-white

movie, and as soon as the lights go on, he winces and throws his arm over his eyes. “*Christ,*” he snarls.

My heart backpedals from the precipice where it was about to leap, then surges into a furious beat all over again. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Wyatt Morgan drops his arm and squints at me. “Oh, good. It’s Ellie. Drop in to rub some salt in the wound?”

I inhale another bite of ice cream while I glare at him, because I didn’t ask *him* to be here, and he’s scowling just as hard as I’m glaring. “Beck’s place is downtown. Go get drunk there.” Even as the words leave my mouth, guilt stabs me in the lung.

Not the heart, because first, I’d have to *like* my brother’s best friend for my heart to be affected, and second, because I’m not sure I have a heart left.

I’m in a shit-tastic mood—who dumps their girlfriend *on Christmas Eve*?—but even in the midst of my own pity party, I know why Wyatt’s sitting in my parents’ basement, stewing himself in beer and watching *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

He doesn’t even roll his eyes at my order to get out.

“Beck’s having a party,” he informs me. “Didn’t want to go. Guess you weren’t invited. Or you prefer to add to the shit pile here.”

He tips back his beer, and another guilt knife attacks me, this time in the liver.

It’s entirely possible he has bigger problems than I do. I lost a boyfriend that I’ll probably acknowledge soon enough—for real, not just in a fit of anger—that I’m better off without.

The courts just handed Wyatt a final divorce decree that means he only gets to see his kid once a month.

If he travels five hundred miles to do it every time.

“Shove it, Morgan,” I tell him. “I don’t kick a man when he’s down.”

“Since when?”

“Oh, please. Like you can talk.”

It’s been like this since we were kids. My brother’s childhood best friend is the only man in the entire universe who can get under my skin and bring out my ugly faster than you can blink, and I swear he takes joy in doing it.

A ninety-five on your math test, Ellie? Why not perfect?

Nice shot, but you’re still down by eight.

Who taught you to hold a pool cue, a blind monkey?

And damn if all that taunting didn’t make me try harder every fucking time.

Because when he wasn’t taunting me, he was the first one holding out a hand to pull me off the pavement or out of the mud when I inevitably got trampled trying to keep up with Beck and his friends in soccer, street hockey, basketball,

and whatever else I swore I was big enough to do with them.

He eyeballs my breasts, and my whole body lights up like the Christmas lights all over downtown.

“You gonna eat that whole carton?” he asks, and *fuck*, he’s not looking at my chest.

He’s looking at my ice cream, and here I am, getting turned on at the idea that he’s finally noticed I’m a woman.

I have issues.

I fling myself onto the couch next to him. “It’s loser ice cream, so yeah, I am,” I grumble. “Here. Have a bite, you drunk asshole.”

Those gray eyes connect with mine, and *dammit*, that’s straight lust pooling in my belly.

He’s sporting a thick five-o’clock shadow, and even sprawled out on the worn flowery couch in my parents’ basement, he exudes power and masculinity in a way I never would’ve expected from the skinny pipsqueak peeking out from behind his grandmother’s legs on the front porch twenty-some years ago.

Or maybe it’s the tight black T-shirt, with his biceps testing the limits of the cotton and detailing his trim stomach, even sitting down, and the gray sweatpants hinting at a more substantial package than I ever would’ve given him credit for.

Plus the knowledge that Pipsqueak Wyatt grew up to join the Air Force as some kind of badass pilot who flies untested aircraft, which takes a hell of a lot of guts, if you ask me when I’m willing to admit something like that about him.

Which is apparently tonight.

You used to like him, my subconscious reminds me, because it’s forgetting its place.

I’d tell it to shut up, that I don’t go for guys who don’t appreciate me, except isn’t that what I just spent the last two years of my life doing?

He reaches for my spoon, and our fingers brush when he takes it. A shiver ripples over my skin. I look away to watch the movie while I hold the carton for him to dig out a scoopful.

George Bailey is arguing with Mr. Potter on the TV, and I can feel the heat off Wyatt’s skin penetrating my baggy Ryder Consulting sweatshirt.

I snort softly to myself.

Of course he wasn’t staring at my chest. He can’t even see it under this thing.

You’re holding the basketball wrong, Ellie.

It went in, didn’t it?

Yeah, but you could be more consistent if you worked on your form.

Damn him for sneaking into my head. Damn him for taunting me.

Damn him for being right.

Because I did work on my fucking form, and Beck—who's three years older than I am—quit playing ball with me after I beat him in a free throw contest when I was twelve.

He said it was because he was *working on other stuff with the guys*, but I knew my brother better than that.

I *knew* he quit playing with me because I beat him.

Wyatt still took the challenge though. He'd tell me I got lucky when I won. He'd tell me what I did wrong when I didn't.

And I worked my ass off getting better and better until I beat him *every time*.

And then he lost interest too.

I take the spoon from him and grunt softly while I dig deeper into the carton. "You were such an asshole when we were kids."

He grunts back and snags the spoon again. "*You* were such an asshole when we were kids."

"You were just insecure about getting your ass beat by a girl on the basketball court."

"You just hated that you wouldn't have been half as good without me."

I take my spoon back and shovel in. My extra-large bite of ice cream makes my brain cramp, but fuck if I'll let him see me hurt.

Not that I can hide it. I know my face is blotchy from crying before I drove over here, and my eyes are that special kind of dry that comes after too many tears.

I can count on one hand the number of times I've talked to him solo since he and Beck and the guys graduated high school. He's changed. His voice is deeper, if that's possible. His body definitely harder—*god*, those biceps, and his forearms are tight, with large veins snaking over the corded muscle from his elbows to his knuckles—his square jaw more chiseled, his eyes steel rather than simple gray.

And it's not like he lost custody of his kid because he's an asshole.

Beck was blabbering all about it at Christmas dinner yesterday. *Dude got so fucked. The military gave him orders here, so Lydia moved first, with Tucker. She hated military life. But then his orders got changed last-minute so he ended up in Georgia, she filed for divorce, and he's been fighting the military and the courts ever since to get back to where he can be closer to his kid. He's in fucking hell right now. And if he cuts bait on the military, they'll toss him in jail for being AWOL. He's fucked. He's SO fucked.*

There goes George Bailey, leaving Mr. Potter's office to go get drunk.

Wyatt tips back his beer. A holiday brew. Like that can take away the misery

of hurting this time of year. I don't know why he's here instead of taking advantage of every last minute with his kid, but then, I don't know much about divorce either.

Maybe this isn't his Christmas to see his son. Maybe Lydia's being an asshole.

One more bottle sits on the end table next to him, but just one.

Drowning his sorrows with a broken George Bailey.

"I'm sorry about your shitty divorce," I say.

Sullenly.

Just in case he thinks I might have a twinge of sympathy for him. That won't do for either of us.

He sets the bottle down and grabs the spoon again.

"So you're sharing because you feel sorry for me."

"Maybe I'm sharing because I'm not a total asshole."

"But I still am?"

I heave a sigh. I don't want to be sitting here with Wyatt Morgan any more than I want to give in to the urge to go running over to Patrick's swanky condo in the Warehouse district and beg him to give us another chance.

I was supposed to be getting engaged this Christmas.

Not dumped.

And I can't tell if that searing pain in my chest is my heart or my pride.

Or both.

Probably both.

It's not like the sex was even *good* the other night, and he rolled over and checked his email right after, so logically, I know I'm not missing anything.

But my fucking heart still hurts.

"Misery loves company more than it cares what the company is," I tell Wyatt.

He looks at me while he shoves the spoon back in the carton, then waves a hand in a circle, gesturing to me. "*This* is you being miserable?"

"I know, I make it look good."

"I thought you looked like this all the time."

"Asshole."

He smirks, but it's a dark smirk. Like he *wanted* me to call him an asshole, but it didn't make him feel as good as he hoped it would. "What the hell do you have to be miserable about?"

"I broke a nail."

He snags my hand and lifts it, turning it to inspect my perfectly trimmed, newly manicured nails, and tremors skittle out from the point where his thumb

rests inside my palm.

It's like he's turning me on.

Patrick hasn't turned me on in *months*. That's what's supposed to happen, right? You settle down with one person and get yourself into a rut and the sex becomes routine instead of exciting. It's normal, right?

Or you were an idiot who should've dumped him a year ago, my subconscious helpfully offers.

I snatch my hand back, but I'm still ridiculously aware of Wyatt beside me.

The hitch in his breath.

The subtle scent of cinnamon and beer wafting off him.

The way his gaze is still trained on me. "So you got dumped too," he muses.

"Shut. Up."

That would've been more effective if I'd been able to say it without dribbling peppermint crunch ice cream down my chin and my voice wobbling.

He reaches out and wipes the drip off my chin, and I realize he's leaning into my space.

My heart's pounding. My breasts are getting full and heavy. My mouth is going dry, even with ice cream still lingering on my tongue, and I almost choke when I swallow.

"Merry fucking Christmas to us," he says. His nose is inches from mine, and his lids are lowering over darkened eyes.

"There's no *fucking* going on," I point out, my breath getting shallower as I glance down his just-barely-off-center nose to his stupidly perfect lips.

"There's not, is there?" he muses while his gaze darts to my lips too. "There's only getting fucked over."

Every time he says *fuck*, I get a shot of heat between my legs.

"You're in my bubble," I whisper.

"Maybe I'm trying to annoy you to make myself feel better."

"Maybe if you wanted to annoy me, you should take your clothes off."

Holy shit, I just said that.

He holds my gaze for half a second, and then his shirt goes flying. He settles back against the couch, still leaning into my space, but now with acres and acres of hard chest and sculpted stomach and cut hips and that perfect trail of hair arrowing down to disappear under his sweatpants.

"Now, what are you going to do to annoy me?" he asks.

I *should* dump this carton of ice cream on his head.

But I *want* to do something else.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pippa Grant is a USA Today Bestselling author who writes romantic comedies that will make tears run down your leg. When she's not reading, writing or sleeping, she's being crowned employee of the month as a stay-at-home mom and housewife trying to prepare her adorable demon spawn to be productive members of society, all the while fantasizing about long walks on the beach with hot chocolate chip cookies.

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