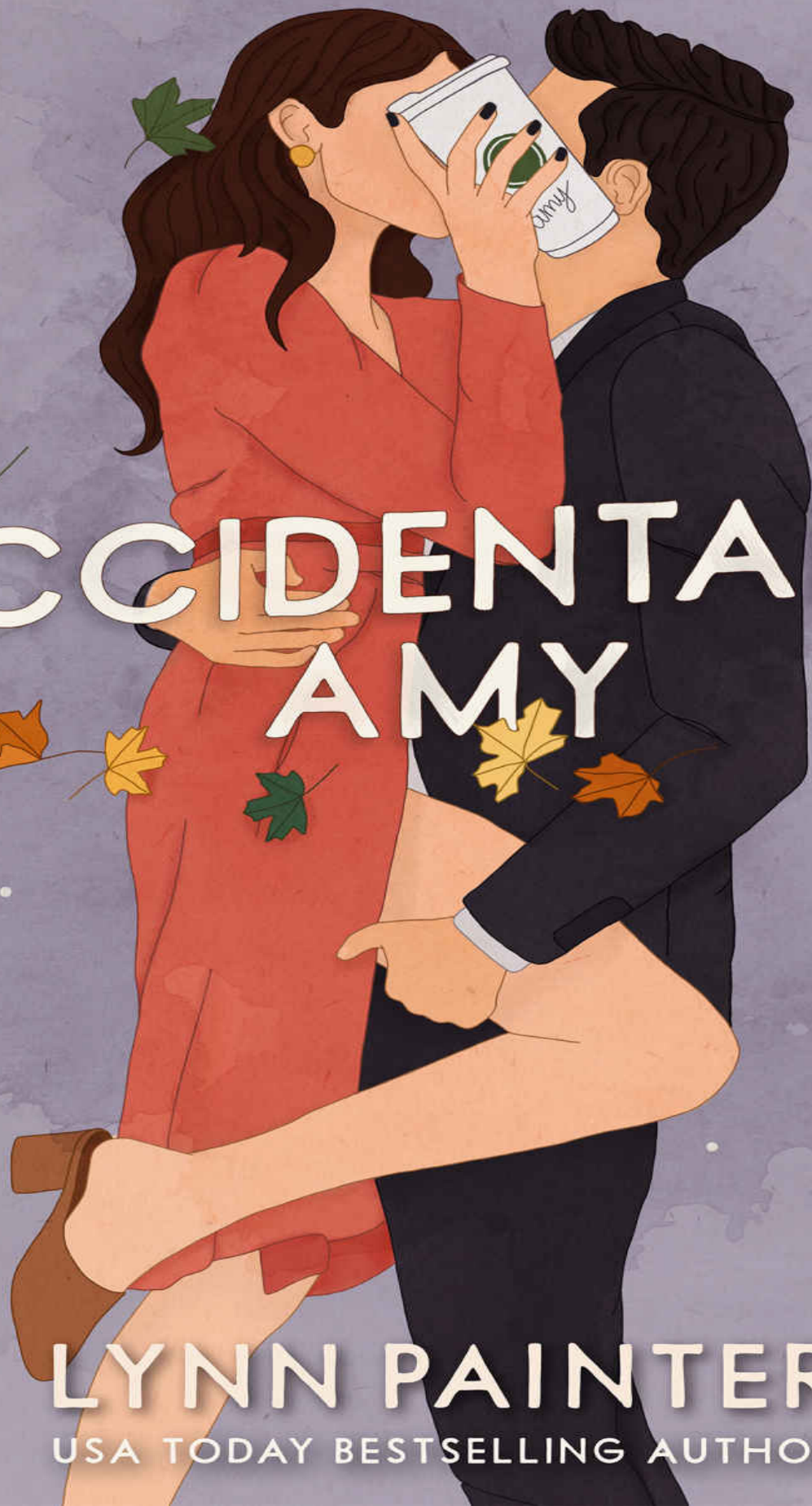


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# ACCIDENTALLY AMY

LYNN PAINTER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# *Accidentally Amy*

**Lynn Painter**

**Kirkle**

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## *Chapter One*



“Amy?”

The barista yelled out the name before setting down the cup. Isabella Shay saw that it was a venti pumpkin spice latte, the same drink she’d ordered, and she found herself wildly jealous of PSL Amy, whoever she might be.

Because Izzy wanted - no, needed - to get her drink and get the hell out of there.

If she were a responsible adult, she would’ve seen the long lines and opted NOT to get a coffee that morning, but she was not responsible. It was the first day of the PSL – way later than usual because of supply chain issues - so her annual vice refused to be denied, regardless of the fact that she was starting a new job in T-minus 30 minutes.

Yes, she was taking quite the moronic risk.

Her new employer - Ellis Enterprises - was a big tech company, with a reputation for being environmentally-conscious and employee-friendly. They had workout facilities, a childcare center, free cafeteria, 4pm daily

happy hour; Ellis was renowned for being a great place to work, so Izzy was definitely going to punch herself in the face if her lack of self-discipline made her late for her very first day.

“Amy?” The barista said it again, and Izzy looked around the busy coffee shop. There was a group of women at a big table on the other side of the store, all dressed in workout clothes and looking like Barre fitness models; perhaps one of *them* was Amy.

Izzy felt like PSL Amy was quickly becoming her nemesis.

She glanced down at her phone and stifled a groan. *Shit, shit, shit.* If they didn’t call out Izzy’s name in the next three minutes – and they probably wouldn’t because there were a LOT of empty cups sitting in front of the espresso machine, waiting to be filled - she was going to have to kiss that six-dollar drink goodbye and abort her mission for caffeine.

“Amy!” The barista said it again, sounding agitated this time, and before she had time to think, Izzy heard herself mutter --

“I’m Amy.”

And she reached out and grabbed the cup.

She knew it was wrong, she really did, but she needed to go and she needed that drink and she’d already paid so it wasn’t really stealing, right? She put her palm over the word AMY, closed her fingers around the cup and turned, ready to sprint out of the shop as fast as her patent leather heels would take her.

But when she turned, she rammed right into a wall.

“Oh!” *Ohmigawwwwd.* It wasn’t a wall, it was a rock-hard chest, encased in a starched white dress shirt and a charcoal tie. She stared in horror as her cup crushed on impact, the lid popped off, and hot pumpkin coffee splurged all over the chest. “I’m so sorry!”

She looked up and --*whoa*.

You know how in movies everything can freeze when a character sees The Big Thing? Well, that was happening to Izzy as she made eye contact with Mr. Chest. He was looking down at her with dark eyes, really intense dark eyes that weren't so much brown as they were the richest shade of burnt amber. His eyebrows were black, his hair was black, his well-maintained scruff was black and even his suit was black, which all worked together to form some sort of contrasting frame for his face's ridiculous bone structure and perfectly-shaped mouth.

He was like Roy Kent's taller American brother or something, and Izzy didn't think she was physically capable of closing her mouth at that moment.

Until she felt the scalding coffee seeping into her own shirt (thank God it was black).

That made the moment un-freeze itself. Izzy muttered *gahhhh*, tossed her crumpled cup (RIP PSL) into the trash hole, and grabbed a stack of napkins from the end of the counter.

"I can't believe I ran right into you," she babbled, rubbing the clump of napkins over his shirt with one hand while she dabbed at her own with the other. She was kind of mashing the napkins against the man's chest, patting and dabbing and trying to do anything to make the huge splotch of coffee disappear. "One minute I was grabbing my drink, the next I was ramming your chest with boiling latte. I'm not even sure--"

"It's fine." His voice was dark, too, rich and baritone and a little bit raspy. Izzy glanced up and he was giving her a half-smile, like he was amused as she rubbed his pecs, and something about that look made her knees weak. He said, "I hated this shirt anyway."



She coughed out a laugh, relieved he wasn't mad. "I did, too, but I didn't know how to tell you. Hence the PSL."

He gave a little laugh. "Subtle, but effective."

*Dear lord.* Izzy realized she was still feeling him up. Having secured second base with the stranger, she stopped her groping, set the napkins on the bartop beside them and bit down on her lower lip to stop herself from smiling. *Because she should feel bad about scalding the man, right?* "I really *am* sorry. I'd be happy to get it drycleaned for you or something...? A better person would offer to replace it, but I have a feeling it's out of my price range."

He did the half-bark, half-laugh sound again that Izzy could feel in her toes and he said, "What makes you say that?"

"It's soaking-wet and I still can't see through it. That has to mean it's quality."

"Were you trying to?" he asked.

"What - see through your shirt?"

He gave a nod.

Izzy shrugged. "I wouldn't say I was trying, per se, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't checking for a third nipple."

He didn't say anything for a minute, still half-smiling but now with a tiny wrinkle between his brows, and she knew her cheeks were turning red. He cleared his throat and said, "I promise there isn't one, not that there's anything wrong with having three."

She did smile then. "I mean, the more, the merrier, right?"

His mouth split into a slow, wide smile that she really liked a lot. "Are we sure that applies here?"

“Definitely not, but I couldn’t let a moment pass without speaking,” she said.

“Yeah, I can see that about you.”

“Hey,” Izzy said, “Just because I boiled your chest doesn’t mean you can insult me.”

“I feel like it actually *does* mean that. And technically,” he said with a sly grin, “you insulted yourself. I, being a polite individual, merely agreed.”

“Fair.” She rolled her eyes and said, “I’ll even give you one more. Go.”

He let out his breath and raised his eyebrows. “This feels like a trap.”

“Do it,” she said, crossing her arms. “Go. Slam me, bro.”

He gave a little chuckle - he didn’t look like someone used to being called *bro* - and said, “Fine. I’m surprised you can see out of those glasses - they’re *very* dirty. Like a crime scene. No wonder you walked into me.”

Izzy laughed out, “Wow, you actually did it.”

“You told me to,” he said around a grin, and then he gestured with his hand - very big, not that she noticed - for her to hand over her glasses.

“No.” She narrowed her eyes and knew her eyebrows were all screwed together. “Seriously?”

“Come on. Hand ‘em over.”

“Okay,” she said, laughing at the ridiculousness as she took her glasses off and handed them to the complete stranger. “Here you go.”

He reached into the inside pocket of his suit jacket - *verry* nice suit, by the way - and pulled out a microfiber cloth. He looked down at her glasses (which *were* always dirty) as he buffed the lenses, and Izzy wondered what in God’s name was actually happening. She said, “They’re usually not--”

“Yes, I think they probably are,” he teased, without looking up.

“Yeah, they usually are,” she agreed, smiling as he handed them back. She slid them up her nose, tilted her head and said, “Ohmigod, you’re a man.”

He moved his head, a little nod acknowledging her joke, and he gave her full-on eye contact. *With a jaw flex.* The moment held, and she felt like she was being physically pulled closer to the guy, like some bizarro gravitational pull was in play, when the barista shouted, “Blake!”

Both of their heads whipped toward the Starbucks employee, and Izzy thought she might’ve audibly gasped at the interruption but she wasn’t sure.

“Um, that’s me,” he said, his eyes narrowing on her for a split second - like he was thinking something *about her* - before he pointed and leaned forward to reach around her for his cup. The faint smell of cologne hit her as he grabbed his coffee, cologne that smelled expensive and subtle, and Izzy had the inexplicable urge to nuzzle his throat.

*Get it together, dipshit. Be cool.*

He turned to face her, leaning down so she could hear him over the noise of the crowded coffee shop, and his deep voice found her ear with, “Do you want to grab a table--”

“Oh, no - what time is it?” The word “table” jolted her into real life. He might’ve said the time, but she was too busy pulling her phone out of her pocket to hear him. She looked at the display, panic surging through her, and said, “Ohmigod I’m late I have to go.”

She fished her keys out of her pocket and he was still watching her with *that* look on his face. She had to say something, so she uttered as quickly as she could, “I come here every morning around 7:45, so if you want to be reimbursed for the drycleaning, or, um, anything else, I’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Ok--”

“Gotta run - nice meeting you!” She ran for the door, literally sprinting around tables in her three-inch pumps. And as she pushed it open, Izzy heard that intensely-masculine voice say from behind her--

“I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, then, Amy.”

*Amy??*

*Oh, nooooooo.*



## *Chapter Two*



Izzy hitched her tote bag over her shoulder and headed for the elevators, feeling downright giddy over the way her first day on the job was going so far. She'd spent all morning with her team, shadowing the HR Generalist whose position she was filling, and it'd been - no joke - fun.

Seriously.

Everyone in the department seemed to get along, the work seemed challenging but not too stressful, and she actually had an (incredibly small) office with her name on the door.

In addition to that little nugget of fantasticality, Incite Fitness - the city's hottest health club - was located on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor of the building next door, and Ellis employees were able to use it for free. *For. Free.* So Izzy had just run three miles on the treadmill, and now she was ready for Part 2 of her amazing day.

She saw the elevator doors starting to close and called out *wait*, just in case someone was listening and wanted to be nice. She expected nothing, so

she very-nearly squealed with delight when she saw a big hand reach out and stop the doors.

Could the day *get* any better?

“Thank you,” she sang as she ran over and hopped into the elevator.

“No problem,” the guy inside said, “What fl--”

“Ohmigod.” Izzy’s mouth fell wide open as she came face-to-face with Mr. Chest from Starbucks. He was still wearing his fancy suit (sans coffee-stained shirt), but the tips of his hair were wet, like he’d just showered, and she could literally smell his soap. *Mmm - fresh*. She breathlessly said around a laugh, “It’s you.”

He looked just as surprised to see her, but then his mouth turned up into one of those toe-curling, genuinely happy smiles that bumped an exceptionally-handsome man right up to a work of art. He said in that ridiculously deep voice, “Talk about your small worlds.”

The elevator doors slid closed, and he gestured with his thumb to the floor buttons.

Izzy managed, “Oh. Yeah. Lobby, please,” even though she was so shocked she could barely remember how to form words. All morning, she’d been forcing herself *not* to think about Mr. Chest because not only did she need to focus on the new job, but there was also no way in hell a Starbucks meet-cute would ever pan out into something real.

But now - here he was.

*Dun-Dun-Duuuun.*

“So, um,” he asked, “Do you work around here, or do you belong to this gym?”

“I was working out,” she started, but then he nodded and cut her off with-

-

“Okay, I don’t normally do this sort of thing, but someone’s going to get on this elevator any minute now so I have to talk fast.”

His face was purposeful and intense, but his mouth was relaxed, like he was slightly amused by the situation. Izzy watched the numbers lighting up on the display over the doors as they descended.

11-10-9...

*Please don’t stop, please don’t stop.*

“I know we’re strangers,” he said, his eyes so focused *on her* that she felt like fixing her hair or fidgeting with her lip gloss. “But--”

8-7-6...

Izzy reached out and hit the emergency button behind him, making the elevator car jolt to a stop.

Mr. Chest stopped talking as she stumbled in her pumps, which propelled her a little closer to him, and his eyes narrowed just a fraction. A wrinkle appeared in-between his brows and Izzy shook her head.

“No, no - I’m not stopping for creepy reasons. I swear I’m not that bunny-boiler from *Silence of the Lambs*, trying to seduce you in an elevator or something. I just--”

“Fatal Attraction.”

“What?”

“The bunny boiling was in *Fatal Attraction*,” he said, and the wrinkle of concern that’d been between his brows disappeared as his mouth twitched into a tiny smirk.

“Oh, yeah - *Fatal Attraction*; duh.” She rolled her eyes and said, “I just want to hear what you have to say without reaching the ground floor first. That’s all this little stoppage is about.”

“What I have to say.” He stepped a little closer, but not in an intimidating way. It was more...intimate. It reminded her of the way Darcy said *Mr. Wickham?* and stepped closer to Elizabeth during his rain proposal in the hand-flex version of P&P, and Izzy thought she might faint dead away for the first time in her life. He put his hands in the pockets of his suit pants and said, “Is. I have meetings all afternoon, but can I *please* call you later?”

“On the telephone?” Izzy noticed he had perfect eyebrows as she said, “Like a psycho?”

“Well, I’m shit with the emojis,” he said, looking half-serious and a little boyish.

“Send a lot of accidental eggplants?”

“No,” he laughed.

“Use the same tired cry-laughing smiley for everything like a total wank?”

“Is that a wank thing to do?”

“Absolutely it is.”

“Well, then, um, yes.” He cleared his throat and said, “But my absolute wankiness aside--”

“Wankitude. Or is it wankery?”

“Wankiness,” he said, rolling his eyes as he continued, “I rather like hearing the voice of the person I’m talking to.”

Izzy made a noise in her throat and felt like she needed garlic or some type of dagger she could plunge into Mr. Chest’s chest as protection, because statements like that were a straight-up assault on her ovaries. He *rather liked* hearing the person’s voice?

*Just take my heart now, you gorgeous wank.*



“I’ll give you my number,” she said, trying not to seem too eager. “But I make no promises on the whole phone-talk thing. I fear I may start mashing the numerical keypad and shouting emoji names at random out of confusion.”

“Eggplant, eggplant?” he said, with an absolute straight face.

“Our conversation will have to take a pretty wild turn for that to be my emoji-shout of choice, but you never know.” Izzy looked down at his shirt. “Do you have a closet full of fresh shirts at your office, or did you have to go home after I drenched your Calvin Klein?”

“I ran home.”

She still felt bad about that. “Please tell me you live close to Starbucks.”

“You seem pretty interested in my personal information,” he said, his eyes getting a teasing glint that made her want to ruffle his hair. “You sure you’re not a bunny boiler?”

Izzy tilted her head and wondered if he had pets. “Do you *have* a bunny?”

An eyebrow went up. “Why do you want to know?”

“I’m fascinated by the pets people keep,” she said, her eyes wandering all over his face, “And if you told me you had a bunny, I think I’d find you to be the most interesting man in this elevator.”

He smiled a little more and his dimples popped.

Fucking dimples.

*I’m going to need that dagger STAT.*

He said, “Words cannot express how much I regret to inform you that I am not one in possession of a rabbit.”

Izzy bit down on her lower lip to hold in the laugh. She looked up at him and said, “It *is* tragic, but perhaps you might consider adopting one...?”

He leaned a little closer and just like that, there was white-hot electricity in that elevator. Their faces were close, and Izzy was very aware all of a sudden that they were alone in a stopped elevator car. Her oxygen was now his freshly-showered scent and she wanted to breathe it in until she hyperventilated. His voice was quieter, huskier, when he said, “Swear to God if I didn’t already have a cat, I’d be begging you to go with me to the shelter to pick out a bunny this very minute.”

“You have...a cat?” she asked in a near-whisper, defeated with the realization that even a dagger through the heart couldn’t protect her if Blake was a cat guy.

“I have two,” he said, and then he grinned.

A dirty grin.

He *knew*. Somehow he knew he was killing her and her lady parts.

“You’re the worst,” Izzy said, unable to hold in the smile.

“I’m gonna need that number,” he replied, pulling out his phone and waiting.

She barely got out all ten digits before the red phone in the elevator car started ringing.

“We should probably turn this thing back on before the authorities arrive,” he said, his jaw doing a little clench/unclench thing that Izzy felt like she could watch for hours.

“Yeah,” she said, taking a step away from him and touching her lips. “I don’t want to have to answer that phone.”

“Afraid of panicking and screaming *evil smile*?” He asked as he depressed the emergency stop button.

“Yep.” Izzy watched the number display start counting down again as they resumed their descent, and she wondered what he’d do if she reached

around him and pressed it again.



## **Blake**

Blake hit “save” on the spreadsheet and glanced at his watch for the tenth time that hour. It was 5:15, he’d just finished his last meeting, and he needed to wrap up a few things before he could take off for the night. He usually worked late - at least until seven - but he hadn’t been able to focus since running into the girl from Starbucks in the elevator at Incite.

What in the hell were the odds?

The last thing he was looking for was a relationship. He and Skye had just called off their engagement three weeks ago, and he planned on staying single for a long-ass time.

Forever sounded pretty fucking awesome to him at that point.

But there was something about the Starbucks girl. *Amy*. After so much dishonesty from Skye, so many little white lies that piled up as teasers to her Big Ass Lie, it was refreshing to be around someone who seemed so open. He’d only met her for a total of five minutes, so technically he knew nothing about her, but compared to his *just-let-me-explain* former fiancé, she felt...real.

And it was kind of blowing his mind.

Blake hated small-talk - and most people in general - yet talking to her had been *fun*. After they’d gone their separate ways earlier, he’d sent her a quick text, just so she had his number.

*Testing 1-2-3.*

She'd responded immediately. *NOW who's the bunny boiler? I JUST left the building and you're already texting. Obsessed much, Joe Goldberg?*

He'd stopped walking to reply: *Did I mention that one of my cats is blind?*

Because the look that had crossed her face in the elevator when he'd said he had cats was fucking golden.

She replied: *You are a menace and I should probably block you for that sort of filth. Also, on a random side note, when you call tonight, make sure you have the kitties nearby so I can hear their little meows.*

Dammit, he was really looking forward to calling her.

Fucking lunacy, that.

"Knock-knock."

He looked up and Pam Carson - the HR manager - was leaning into his office.

"Hey, Pam," he said, hoping this would be quick.

"Hey." She smiled and said, "Listen, Isabella Shay, our new generalist, started today and I just wanted to introduce you before she goes home. If you have a second."

"Sure," he said.

Blake didn't really give a rat's ass about the new generalist, if he were being entirely honest. Pam - and the entire HR department - ran like a well-oiled machine. Technically, on the org chart, they were part of his team, but unless something unusual was going on, the HR Director handled everything and he had very little contact with them.

Except when Pam showed up at his door every few months to introduce him to a new-hire.

"Isabella, this is Blake Phillips, one of our AVPs."

Pam stepped sideways in the doorway and a brunette smiled and raised her hand in a casual wave. He opened his mouth to say *nice to meet you*, but the girl standing just outside of his office looked exactly like - *no, holy shit, it was* - Starbucks Amy.

What in the actual hell?

Izzy

“You have *got* to be kidding.” Izzy knew she was beaming like a toddler looking at an ice cream cone, but what else could she do but grin? Fate was literally throwing this man at her. She said, “You *again*?”

“This is getting ridiculous.” Blake looked super important, sitting behind the huge desk in the huge office. He was giving her a smile, but that wrinkle was back between his eyebrows.

“Do you two know each other?” Pam asked, smiling inquisitively and swinging her gaze back and forth between the two of them.

“I kind of spilled coffee all over Mr. Phillips at Starbucks this morning.” *And also gave him my number.* “It’s a shockingly small world.”

Blake leaned back a little in his chair and crossed his arms, looking every inch the executive. A very expensive-looking watch peeked out from under his right cuff. “Pam called you Isabella.”

“Yes...?”

“So I thought you said your name was Amy.”

*Awww, crap.* She’d been so locked in on the pretty of his face that she’d forgotten all about the stolen coffee. Her face felt warm as she muttered, “Oh. Yeah. So funny thing. I didn’t *actually* say my name was Amy. I think you made an assumption after seeing my cup.”

She smiled and tried making him laugh with, “You know what happens when you assume.”

He *didn't* laugh, and instead asked, "Is Amy your middle name or something?"

She suddenly felt like she was on trial. He looked like a stern judge - *hot thought to be revisited later* - and Pam was like a juror, quietly watching the cross examination. Izzy opened her mouth and was about to consider grabbing onto his middle name excuse like the liar she'd apparently become, when Pam said,

"No - her middle name is Clarence. Right, Izzy - isn't that what you told me when you filled out the I-9 form?"

Pam laughed and said to Blake, "I think she said it was her grandfather's name. Isabella Clarence - can you imagine?" Izzy rubbed her lips together for a second - *shit, shit, shit* - and then she said, "Amy isn't actually my name at all. It's, uh, kind of a funny story."

Blake's head tilted just the tiniest bit. She said, "Just let me explain."

Pam kept smiling, looking at Izzy like she was waiting for a hilarious tale, but Blake was doing that jaw-clench thing and absolutely not smiling anymore.

He kind of looked pissed.

"Okay, so, I was running a little behind and didn't want to be late for my first day at Ellis. I paid for my drink, but the line was super long. Like, so long that I was going to have to bail before I even got my coffee, right?"

Pam was still into it, listening in amused anticipation, but Blake just looked impatient, like he knew the rest and wanted her to shut the hell up.

She looked down at her feet and rushed out the words, "So after they called for *Amy* three times, and no one came for the drink, I, um, I might've told the barista I was Amy."

“You did *not*,” Pam said, glancing at Blake while laughing uncomfortably.

Izzy tried giving Blake her best playful smile as she said, “It didn’t pay off, though, because I ended up spilling the drink all over Blake here.”

“Um.” He cleared his throat. “Are you saying that you took someone else’s drink?”

“Well, I mean,” Izzy said, trying to make him understand. “I *paid* and we ordered the same thing, so--”

“So does that make it *not* her drink then?” He looked at her like she’d just confessed to beheading a puppy. “Amy’s drink is fair game for anyone who prepaid for the same order, is that what you’re saying?”

“It was a very uncool thing to do, I know,” Izzy said, mortified by his offended reaction.

“I don’t know about uncool,” Blake said, his eyes pinning her in place like he was the hawk and she was the mouse he found too annoying to eat so he just wanted to play with her until she was dead. “But it was definitely dishonest.”

“So very, very dishonest, *Mr. Phillips*.” Izzy gritted her teeth and forced herself to stay calm because she wanted that job more than she wanted to tell off the ultra-hot, uber-judgmental Chest. She crossed her arms, breathed in through her nose, and said, “You have no idea, at this moment, how much I regret every single thing that transpired today in relation to that dishonest cup of coffee. If I could go back and undo all of it, every single moment, I absolutely would.”

His eyes stayed on her, unwavering, and his expression was unreadable.

“I’m going to take off and let you get back to work,” she said, raising her lips so her baring of teeth looked like a smile. “It was very nice meeting

you.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Was it?”

“Of course,” Izzy said, coughing out a little laugh and smiling at Pam to make sure she knew that everything was fine. But the second Pam looked away from her, Izzy couldn’t stop herself from giving Blake a tiny head shake and mouthing the word NOPE.

That made his jaw clench and his eyes narrow just the teensiest bit, which made Iz feel like she'd scored some sort of point.

“We’ll get out of your hair now, Blake,” Pam giggled, and Izzy let Pam lead her away from the office and out to the elevators. She knew she’d just gotten herself fired, and right as she thought that, Pam explained that even though he could sometimes be perceived as arrogant, Blake Phillips was actually a really nice guy.

He was just very serious and incredibly focused.

Izzy rolled her eyes.

Focused.

*Was that what it was called?*

It seemed to Izzy that he was focused on being a total dick.



## *Chapter Three*



“Iz, your cat’s in my apartment,” Josh yelled from upstairs as she checked her mailbox.

“Seriously?” Izzy sighed and rolled her eyes, wondering who’d been in her apartment since she’d left that morning. She glanced in the direction of her door, and yep - it was ajar.

Thank God the general entrance to the building required a key.

Her grandparents owned the apartment house - it was their “investment property.” An older building, it sat in the middle of a mid-century middle-class neighborhood, offering four one-bedroom units. But instead of leasing the apartments to college students and young professionals to make a pretty penny on premium rent, all four units in the building were leased at a discounted rate to Millie and Burt’s grandchildren.

Izzy was grateful for the sweet deal on rent, as well as the landlords who adored her, but it came with a few less-than-ideal caveats. First, she’d lost count of the number of times she’d come home to find her grandpa tinkering in her apartment or her grandma “tidying things up a bit.”

Also, to make things “easier for everyone,” her grandparents had given each of them a copy of the master key so they didn’t have to mess around with individual locks.

Sometimes it felt like she lived in a big house with her cousins instead of her own apartment.

Her younger cousin, Emily, beautiful and funny and right across the hall, could often be found letting herself into Izzy’s apartment, borrowing her clothes and leaving notes that said things like “I have your black shoes - will return later.”

Daphne, her other cousin, lived upstairs and was generally a quiet person aside from the occasional cosplay party she hosted for her fellow larpers. Did she sometimes let herself into Izzy’s place when she was out of food and didn’t feel like going to the store?

Yes, yes she did.

But did she replace the food she borrowed?

No, no she didn’t.

Josh was the best building-mate cousin out of the trio. He was an IT workaholic, so she rarely saw him at all aside from the occasional laundry room run-in, and he only got into her stuff when he ran out of beer and didn’t want to go to the store.

Izzy ran up the stairs and retrieved The Darkling, apologizing to Josh for the black fur deposits her cat had left on his fancy white sofa. He said “it’s cool” in a huge cloud of smoke, because her favorite cousin was also a total vape hound.

By the time she finally got inside her apartment and kicked off her shoes, she was ready for a *lot* of inactivity.

Because her day, in and of itself, had been a LOT.

She changed into her pajamas (yes, at 6:10pm), grabbed a Diet Coke and went into the living room, where the McDonalds bag was now soggy and grease-stained in the bottom of her purse.

She grabbed the remote and turned on the TV, needing escape as she pulled out her dinner. The Darkling walked back and forth on the back of the couch, stepping on her neck and being his usual dickish self, and she let out a huge sigh.

What was she going to do?

She unwrapped her hamburger and kind of wanted to cry. She'd finally found what seemed like the perfect job, with a company that was considered to be the best place to work in the entire freaking world, and she'd totally blown herself up. She'd somehow managed to lie to - and insult - a freaking Vice President on her very first day.

As if that weren't enough of an aww-shit sandwich, she was so profoundly disappointed in AVP Blake's awful character arc that she could cry. He'd started off the day like some dashing hero in a rom-com, attractive and charming and filled with promise, but then, in an instant, he'd shown himself to be a pompous, arrogant, judgmental jerk.

A jerk who would most likely be firing her the following day.

And yes, she knew the whole thing was her fault.

She shoved a fistful of fries into her mouth before grabbing her phone.

She knew it was a bad idea, but she had nothing to lose.

She clicked into Blake's last message and texted:

*Hi. I will lose your number after this, so don't get freaked out that an employee is texting you. But I have a question.*

She waited for a response, but after about two minutes, she texted:

*Okay - obviously you're ignoring me, which I get. Because AVP. Still...  
can I talk to you for a sec?*

She waited a few more minutes.

*Hello...?*

She counted to ten, and then texted:

*Okay, well, I'M going to talk, even if you choose to ignore me.*

Izzy began what could best be described as a rapid-fire text assault of Blake's phone, hitting send after every word. She wasn't sure if it would be seen as adorably persistent or the final straw, but as she typed, she accepted both outcomes.

*I*

*Am*

*Sorry*

*About*

*The*

*Misunderstanding (i.e. the liberation of Amy's coffee even though she clearly didn't want it after her name was called 3x and I did order the same thing and paid for it. I even left a tip for the barista, and you KNOW the real Amy did not)*

*I*

*Am*

*A*

*Very*

*Honest*

*Person*

*Who*

*Simply*

*Lost  
Her  
Head  
For  
A  
Second  
When  
Panicking  
About  
Possibly  
Being  
Late  
On  
Her  
First  
Day—*

Feeling like she'd made her point, Izzy ended the barrage and began typing in normal, grown-up paragraphs.

*I've never stolen anything or lied about my identity.*

*\*Well actually I had a fake ID my freshman year of college that said I was Connie Brockman, but it was so bad that I only used it once because when the bouncer looked at it for more than five seconds, I confessed and went home.*

Right as she hit send, AGAIN, her phone started ringing, which made her scream. She looked at the display, and it was Blake. *Or was it Mr. Phillips??* What was he to her?

*AAAAAAAAAAHHHH.*

She raised the phone to her ear and said, as calmly as possible, “Hello?”

“I seriously didn’t know someone could be *that* textually irritating.”

The man had the deepest, sexiest voice. Such a shame. She replied, “What, that? That’s only scratching the surface.”

“As much as I enjoy hearing my phone ping every five seconds, I feel I must inform you that I will not be responding to your messages.”

She rolled her eyes and popped another fry in her mouth. “Because you have fat thumbs and can’t keep up?”

“Because it would be unprofessional for me to be texting an employee.”

She said, “I see. What if I was texting that I was too sick to work?”

“A call to the office would be the best course of action,” he replied.

“What if I was texting to tell you the office phones weren’t working?”

She heard him clear his throat and wondered what he was wearing. His deep voice sounded polite and business-like when he said, “Miss Shay, is there something I can help you with?”

“*Miss Shay?* Oof.” Izzy sat back on the couch and said, “Listen, I just want to say that if you’re going to fire me for the lie – which I totally regret - and for when I was kind of a jerk to you, can you please just do it now? I can’t deal with it hanging over my head.”

“I have no plans whatsoever regarding your employment.” He sounded like he thought she was absurd when he said, “Pam is your manager, so she’s the only one who makes those decisions.”

Izzy said, “But you’re her boss.”

“Yep.”

“And I flipped you off.”

“Wait - when did you flip me off?”

*Shit.* She said in a slow, apologetic tone, “You know what? It’s not important.”

He made a laugh-like sound, a deep noise of surprise like he hadn’t expected to be amused by her, and said, “I guess I missed that.”

“I’m very quick with obscene gestures - my special gift, really.”

“So it would seem.”

“To summarize,” she said, unable to wrap her head around it, “You’re telling me that you’re going to do *nothing* about my questionable behavior.”

“Correct.”

“Wow.” She couldn’t believe it; she still had her job? She said, “I feel like I should thank you.”

“So...?”

“So thank you. Truly.” She took a deep breath and said, “Now, um, can I talk to you as Izzy from the coffee shop, not Izzy from work?”

“The girl I met in the coffee shop wasn’t named Izzy,” he said, sounding terse, “So I don’t actually know how that game would work.”

She thought about that for a second, got an idea, and pressed the END CALL button.



## **Blake**

Blake looked at his phone in disbelief. *She hung up on him?*

Before he could even process that, his phone started ringing.

He sighed and answered. “Hello?”

“Hi, is this Blake from Starbucks?” she asked.

“What are you doing?”

“You may not remember me, but do you recall recently getting coffee spilled on you by a breathtaking stranger?”

“Yeah.” He picked up the bottle of Dos Equis that was sitting beside his chair and took a long drink, irritated by the ridiculous situation he suddenly found himself in. Not only was Amy a liar who wasn’t actually Amy at all, but she technically worked for him.

Talk about a lose/lose scenario.

Even if he was cool with casual dishonesty, which he so fucking wasn't, Starbucks Girl was on his payroll, so she was simply an employee. Nothing more, nothing less.

She said, “I know you said you were going to call me, but I couldn’t wait. I rather like hearing the voice of the person I’m talking to.”

“Is that right?” he said, leaning back in his chair and lifting one corner of the beer's label with his thumb nail. Even though he'd never seen her before that morning, he could picture her face perfectly.

“It is.” She cleared her throat and said, “And for some reason, your dumb face keeps popping into my head.”

That made him smile, even though he didn’t want to be amused by her. “Maybe you’re just bonkers.”

He heard the giggle in her voice when she said, “Maybe, but I actually think it’s your eyes.”

“My eyes make you bonkers?”

“Your eyes make me think you’re a vampire,” she corrected.

“So you *are* bonkers.”

“You just have intensely villainous eyes,” she said. “They stick with a person.”

“I have no idea how to respond to that.”



“Either *I beg your pardon* or *thank you* will suffice.”

“Do people ever know what you’re talking about?” he asked.

“I don’t know - I never ask them, but I’m going to go out on a limb and say rarely.” Her voice changed, then, the teasing tone gentling into sincerity. “Listen, Blake, we are strangers who happened upon each other multiple times in one day. I’m certain you think I’m a creep because of the coffee lie, but in my life, I’m usually honest to a fault. Klutzy, but rigidly honest. So to prove my non-creepitude, I’m going to tell you five embarrassingly honest things about myself.”

“Okay,” he said, knowing he should stop her but too interested in hearing the five things to actually do it. Goodyear walked up to the desk, bumped into it, then started meowing and walking in circles until Blake picked up the visually-impaired cat and set him on his lap.

“First of all,” she said, “I think you should know that even though I’m an adult, I still sleep with my baby pillow. It’s nothing freaky - I’m not into wearing onesies and pretending I’m a baby - but my mother never pried the pillow out of my sticky hands like she should have, so I still need that little lumpy rectangle in order to get a good night’s sleep.”

He was smiling again, damn her. “Wow. Noted.”

“The second thing - I have a large pizza delivered to my apartment at least four times a week, even though I live alone.”

“What do you watch while you eat it?” he asked, wondering what kind of apartment she lived in.

“I’m very much a creature of habit, so it’s one of two things. I either turn on *New Girl* and re-watch episodes I’ve already seen - comfort TV, or I watch *Little House on the Prairie*.”

“You’re shitting me.” His grandma loved *Little House* and sadly, he’d seen nearly every episode.

“I shit you not. My grandma loves that show,” she replied, “So I grew up watching it every time I went over to her house. I swear to God that Charles Ingalls has ruined men for me by being so damned perfect.”

“That is a high man bar, isn’t it?”

She said, “The Mount Everest of man bars, for sure.”

He heard a bag rustling and asked, “Is that a fast-food bag I hear?”

“Charles Ingalls would never put me on the spot like that, as a gentleman never asks,” she said, “But if you must know, you are correct - McDonalds is in my lap this very minute.”

“Lucky.” He couldn’t think of the last time he’d had fast food. “I had a Clif bar for dinner.”

“As someone who recently dabbled your chest for an uncomfortable, yet not unenjoyable, length of time,” she said. “I can say with certainty that there is no way would your pecs be that spectacular if you filled them with trans fats and French fries.”

“Did you just compliment my pecs?”

“Settle down - it’s just an observation. No different than *there’s a book, that is a car, those are spectacular pectorals.*”

He wasn’t sure how she was making him laugh when she’d stressed the hell out of him earlier, but he scratched Goodyear’s head and said, “I’m taking it as a compliment, no matter what you say.”

“Suit yourself. Honest question - can you do a one-handed push-up?”

“Probably...?”

“Fascinating. I will file that little morsel away to revisit later.” She made a noise in her throat and said, “Okay - third fact about me. Also, I hope

you're preparing yours."

"My what?"

"Your five facts, Phillips. This is important."

"I never said that I would--"

"*Number three*," she said, using the same tone a teacher would use if a student were interrupting, "I'm a little obsessed with Reylo fanfic."

He said, "I'll be honest - I don't know what those words mean."

"You don't know what fanfic is?" she asked.

"I mean, sort of," he said. "It's just, like, people making up new stories about existing works, right?"

"Yes." She sounded a little impressed as she said, "And Reylo pertains to stories about Kylo Ren and Rey."

"From *Star Wars*?"

"Yes."

He didn't really understand, but he said, "Ah. Okay."

"Obviously you don't understand and that's fine. I'll be sure to say "Ah - okay" about your number three when your turn comes around."

"I'm not--"

"*Number four*," she barked out, a smile in her voice, "I grew up here, have one older brother who finds me to be generally annoying, and I was briefly famous in eighth grade when a video of me falling down my school's stairs went viral."

"I will need a link or it isn't true," he said, turning his head so he didn't get a mouthful of tail as Goodyear started walking in circles on his chest, trying to get comfortable.

"Sending right now," she laughed, and his phone buzzed with a text notification. "But if you make fun of my hair, I swear to everything holy

that I will shank you with an ice pick.”

“Do you *have* an ice pick?” he asked.

“Of course not - does anyone? Has anyone in the history of life ever needed an ice pick, other than, um, ice harvesters?”

“I don’t think ice harvester is a thing,” Blake said.

“Agree to disagree. Okay. Are you ready for number five?”

“I don’t know - am I?”

“You can’t be.”

“Then I’m not.”

“All right.” It sounded like she let out a huge breath before she said, “Number five. I totaled my car last year when I sneezed on the interstate.”

He shook his head and couldn’t *not* smile. Again. “Yeah - I’m gonna need more information.”

“My foot involuntarily slammed on the brakes when I sneezed,” she explained, “which caused a Honda CRV to rear-end my Civic, which pushed me into the side of a Ford Expedition.”

“Is it weird that I’m impressed by your recollection of the makes and models of the vehicles involved?” he asked, laughing against his will.

“Not at all - I am incredibly impressive and you are right to feel that way.”

“Not what I said,” he countered.

“I know it’s what you meant,” she replied. “Okay now you.”

“No, thank you.”

“Then I’ll *ask* you five questions.”

“Do I have a choice here?” he asked, knowing he needed to end the conversation and get off the damn phone. But - *dammit* - there was just something about her that made him want to linger.

“Okay – number one. Where did you grow up, and where did you go to college?”

“That’s two questions,” he replied as other cat appeared in the doorway.

“Since I included both in one sentence, it is one question.”

“Sure it is,” Blake said, moving his arm so Hole could jump on his lap. “I grew up in Omaha, and went to college in Minnesota.”

“Were you in a frat?” she asked.

“No frat but I played basketball.”

“Shut up - so did I!”

“Really?” She hadn’t struck Blake as looking particularly athletic, but maybe that was because he’d been obsessed with her legs in those high heels and had been a little oblivious to pretty much everything else. “Where?”

“LaVista Junior High.”

“So...not in college. Got it. Not entirely relevant, but I’ll allow it.” He was smiling again, dammit. “Tell me everything.”

She told him about how she only went out for basketball in ninth grade because her friend Lindy wanted to, and how she scored a whopping two points over the course of the season. She rambled about running hundreds of laps because of missed free throws, and finished the story with, “Yes, the coaches hated me, but I feel like I might’ve taught them a little something, too.”

“I think they probably just hated you.”

“Can it.” He thought he heard the *Little House* theme song in the background just before she said, “Okay - number two. Were you mad when I spilled coffee on you this morning? Honest answers only.”

God, had that really been the same day? Talk about a long one. He reached for his beer and said, “The honest answer - and I’m only saying this because we will *not* be talking after tonight - is that you spilling coffee on me was a fucking lovely surprise.”

Her voice was quiet when she said, “It was?”

“Sure. It’s not often that a funny, charming, beautiful girl – though no longer beautiful to me because she’s now just an employee - appears out of nowhere and starts rubbing your chest in a coffee shop.”

“I *am* all of those things.” He heard a breathless laugh as she said, “Including the no-longer-beautiful employee.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, feeling oddly unsettled by that.

“Okay, um, number three,” she said. “What is your--”

“Number *three*?” he scoffed, startling Hole with his raised voice. “How is this number three? I’m beginning to have serious reservations about our hiring process.”

She laughed again. “Shhhh. Number three--”

“Number three. When you stepped into the elevator at *Incite*,” he interrupted, “I had an instant daydream about hitting the stop button and seeing what transpired. So when you actually did it...hell, it felt like a Big Fate kind of moment.”

She didn’t laugh, didn’t say anything, and he let his head fall backward so he could stare at the ceiling and fucking regret his idiotic mouth for actually saying those words out loud.

After a moment, he said, “You there?”

He heard her clear her throat. “So is there any way for us to go back--”

“No.” He looked out the window, out at the city lights, and felt a heavy load of disappointment settle over him as he said, “There are rules, and I

have ethics. Regardless of the Amy thing, Isabella Shay is on my team, therefore off-limits.”

“But I--”

“Actually, I should probably go now.” He grabbed Goodyear and Hole, stood up, and walked toward the kitchen. He needed to feed the cats and get on with life sans Starbucks Girl. He said, “You know we can’t text and call anymore, right?”

“Um,” she said, and something about her tone made him stop walking. He listened as she said, “Isabella Shay is your employee, so you definitely shouldn’t be communicating with her after hours. But if, from time-to-time, you were to get a random text from Amy, a girl you met at Starbucks, would that be such a bad thing?”

*Shit-shit-shit-shit*, he thought, knowing what the correct answer was. There were no grey areas regarding ethics in the workplace - he wholeheartedly believed that. So he didn't know what the fuck was wrong with him when he heard himself say, "I suppose not."

"Okay - I have to go now. Bye."

Before he could say a word, the call ended. He shook his head, went into the kitchen and grabbed the cat food, holding the guys against his chest as he wondered who Isabella Shay really was.

And just as he was setting the bowl on the floor and putting down the cats, he got a text.

*Hi, it's Amy from Starbucks.*

## *Chapter Four*



### **Izzy**

“This isn’t something you’ll normally be involved in, but since you’re shadowing me, it’s your lucky day.”

Izzy grabbed a notepad and her coffee before following Pam toward the conference room.

“Boring?”

“If you make it to lunch without nodding off,” she said, giving Izzy a look, “I’ll be surprised. Be sure to bring a large cup of coffee with you.”

Izzy wasn’t looking forward to sitting through a boring meeting, but she *was* a little interested in the process. It was the annual benefit renewal strategy session, where their current insurance advisor would be reviewing their options for the upcoming year, which Pam would in-turn review with Ellis’s board of directors, who would ultimately finalize the plan. Exciting? No. Interesting? Izzy kind of thought yes, but she’d always been into administrative red tape; as a kid, Businesswoman With Many Files was her absolute favorite game of pretend.



Pam introduced her to the advisor - Kelli - who would be presenting before they took their seats around the huge conference table. They were early, so Pam chatted with people as they filtered in while Izzy doodled on her notepad.

Just before the meeting was about to begin, she heard *his* voice. He was talking quietly, but her ear definitely picked up the Blake in the room and it took every bit of discipline she had not to turn and look toward the doorway. She'd texted back and forth with him for a couple hours the night before, nonsense texts about TV shows and house pets, but she was Izzy in HR now, not Amy from Starbucks, so there was no point in even looking his way.

Kelli launched into her presentation, projecting slide after slide of workplace trends, benchmark data, and cost analysis of what their plans had cost the year before, as well as projections for the upcoming year. Izzy took copious notes at first, but after a couple hours, she lost her verve and switched to mere listening.

Pam's advice regarding the large cup of coffee was now making more sense.

Just when her eyes were getting heavy, a question came from the other end of the conference table. "Do those numbers reflect the mid-year change? I didn't see that in the data." Since everyone looked at the question-asker, Izzy allowed her eyes to seek him out. She turned her head toward Blake's voice, and her stomach dropped when she looked at him. *Awwwww, geez.*

What was he, the freaking king? He was sitting in a conference chair, just like everyone else, but there was something about him that just screamed LEADER. Maybe it was his posture, the superhero-esque girth of his

stupendous chest, or the confident intelligence in his stare; she didn't know what "it" was, exactly, but the man held the room.

He was dressed impeccably again - perfect suit (charcoal this time), pressed shirt, tie - but he was wearing glasses that day. A pair of stylish frames sat atop his strong nose, making him look like the most intelligent human hottie in the cosmos. He looked smart and so sexy that she wondered how many women in that room were fantasizing about him that very minute.

She would guess all of them, and could definitely confirm one (her).

As if hearing her thoughts, his eyes locked on hers. Kelli answered his question, and he appeared to be listening, but his eyes were just a *little* to the left of Kelli's location, wholly focused on Izzy while his jaw did that little flex/unflex thing.

*Whoa.*

If the man was intriguing when he was being charming in an elevator, he was downright mesmerizing when looking at her as if a myriad of thoughts he was unwilling to share were being tossed about in his mind. Izzy rolled in her lips and met his gaze, lifting her chin a little just to make sure he didn't think he intimidated her.

"Does that answer your question, Blake?" Kelli asked.

He gave a nod. "Yes - thank you, Kelli."

Izzy looked back at her notepad before picking up her pen and going back to note-taking. She had to do something, anything, or else she'd probably just stare at Blake until someone confronted her for the harassing implications of her licentious stare.

When the meeting finally ended, she followed Pam out the door, wondering how many people were exiting between her and Blake.

Was he still lingering in the back of the conference room, discussing data with the people who cared about data, or was he exiting right behind her, his big body mere inches from hers?

A tiny shiver slithered down her spine at the thought, and she rolled her eyes at her idiocy as she headed back toward her office. Unfortunately, the tie on the back of her straightjacket sweater caught on the door hinge, jerking her backward.

“Gah!” She looked down at where she was connected to the door just as Blake was approaching the doorway, talking to two other well-suited executives.

She looked over her shoulder, reaching a hand around to un-tether herself as quickly as possible.

“Izzy?” Pam said, stopping and turning around.

Blake and his cohorts reached the doorway at that moment, and Izzy watched his eyes absorb her situation in a split-second. He almost looked like he was going to smile - almost - before he said, “Hang on.”

He stepped closer, his cologne swirling around her sensibilities like some kind of olfactory roofie, before he said, “Looks like you’re stuck.”

“Little bit,” she said, feeling like an idiot.

“Here.” If it were anyone but Blake, she knew she wouldn’t have felt his fingertips. He unhooked her tie from the hinge in a half-second, freeing her; his touch was purely utilitarian. But his left hand - just the tippiest tips of his fingers - had rested on her lower back for the millisecond it’d taken for him to disengage her from the door.

And now she’d be reliving that tiny bit of fingertippy non-foreplay for the rest of the day.

“Thanks,” she said, smiling politely before taking off in the closest thing to a sprint she could manage while wearing three-inch pumps.

The rest of the day was blessedly uneventful, with nary a Blake sighting, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Pam had intimated on Izzy’s first day that they didn’t see him very often in their department, and even though he was droolworthy eye candy that made her fantasize about hot sex in storage closets, she was glad to hear it.

Because men like Blake turned women like Izzy into bumbling idiots, and she had no interest in playing that part. She felt as if Ellis could be a career launchpad for her, a place for her to build her professional foundation and begin her climb, and she wasn’t going to let AVP Blake’s hotness screw it up for her.



## **Blake**

Blake pulled out his phone and texted: *I just finished cleaning up cat vomit, in case you’re wondering how my night is going.*

He sat down on his sofa, feeling restless. He wasn’t sure if it had to do with seeing Izzy/Amy at work, not hearing from her since he’d gotten home, or the real-life reality that he’d just cleaned up four separate spots of disgusting cat vomit, but he felt like he needed to *do* something.

His phone buzzed.

*Amy: Take solace in the fact that I am wildly jealous that you’re in your warm abode right now, cleaning up yack. That sounds heavenly.*

He texted: *Where are you right now?*

*Amy: Let's just say I'm taking a walk.*

He glanced toward the wall of windows on the back side of his condo and texted: *In the rain?? In the dark??*

*Amy: It wasn't my number one choice, but I'll be home soon and will probably drown to death in the hot shower I will refuse to ever leave.*

Thunder rumbled, and he watched lightning flash through the sky. He messaged: *Are you serious right now?*

*Amy: It's no big deal. My car died, but I'm almost home.*

Not only was it pouring, but it was kind of a violent electrical storm, and she was out walking in it? Alone? In the dark? He texted: *How close are you?*

*Amy: I'll be home in twenty.*

He responded with: *Twenty minutes?*

He grabbed his keys off the coffee table and stood.

Texted: *Drop me your location.*

*Amy: No - I'm fine.*

He went into the hall and grabbed a couple towels from the linen closet, and a hoodie from the coat closet. *I'm headed out already so it's NBD. Just drop me your location.*

*Amy: AVP Blake cannot give Starbucks Amy a ride. I'm almost home - no worries. Thanks, tho.*

He didn't know why, but his stress was through the roof at the thought of her out in the storm, all alone. He texted: *Blake from Starbucks is going for a drive, dumbass. Tell me where you are.*

*Amy: My hero! You know that Burger King that's right off the interstate on Dodge?*

*Blake: You're at the BK?*

*Amy: I should be there in ten minutes.*

*Blake: Where are you this second?*

*Amy: Walking on the side of the interstate, somewhere between the Dinkers exit and Dodge.*

She dropped her location, and she wasn't very far from his place. He got in his car and flew in that direction, struggling to see through the deluge, even with his wipers on high. *I can't believe she's walking in this.* Why wouldn't she have called someone? He squinted, searching everywhere for her when he got close to Burger King, and then he saw a blurred silhouette in the darkness.

She was walking on the side of the interstate, a dark, huddled figure barely visible on the freeway shoulder. He threw on his hazards and slowed, rolling down his window so she could see it was him and not some creeper as he stopped beside her.

"It's me - get in!" he yelled.

He couldn't see her face through the rain, but she must've seen all she needed because she ran - literally - at his car. She threw open the front passenger door and looked ready to jump inside when she stopped short. Her eyes looked down at his seat and she yelled over the sound of the storm, "I'm soaked - I don't want to ruin your nice seats."

"Get in," he shouted, wanting to grab her arm and jerk her into the dry car. "They'll be fine."

She got in the car and slammed the door, and as she sat, he saw just how drenched she was. Her hair was dripping and her clothes were saturated and her face was wet as she wiped it with wet hands. She was shaking - her body wracked with tremors, and he reached between the seats and grabbed a towel and the hoodie out of the back, handing them to her.

“Ohmigod, I love you so much,” she breathed, taking the towel and rubbing it over her head before just wrapping it around her like it was a blanket. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” he said, concerned that she kept shivering so violently. “Maybe you should put on the hoodie.”

“I’m fine,” she said around chattering teeth, “My apartment is on 50<sup>th</sup> and Sullivan. Thank you again, by the way.”

Blake put his car in gear and pulled back onto the road. “So where exactly is your car?”

“Probably about a mile back,” she replied. “I got it mostly off the interstate, so it isn’t a hazard.”

“You’re soaked to the bone,” he said, worrying about her tremors. “You need to take off your wet shirt and put on that dry hoodie.”

He expected a smartass comment, but she was clearly in the throes of hypothermia because all she said was, “Keep your eyes on the road or I’ll kick your ass, Chest.”

“You have my word,” he said, relieved she was willing to take his suggestion.

He cranked up the heat as he drove toward her neighborhood, ignoring the shirt removal that was going on next to him. Obviously she was so cold she no longer cared about privacy, because she wasn’t even trying to duck down or hide herself from other vehicles’ line of sight. Not that anyone could see anything, between the darkness and the downpour.

He drove a little faster, desperate to get her home before she froze to death, but his peripheral vision was picking up on her hands, wrapped around her back and unhooking her bra.

*What the hell is wrong with you? Focus on the road, dipshit.*

“Turn at the light,” she said, pulling the hoodie over her head. “And then take your first right, onto Price Avenue.”

“Got it,” he said, hitting his turn signal and clearing his throat.

“My building is the red brick four-plex, way down on the corner; it’s about a block up.” She pulled her hair out of the hoodie and leaned forward to hold her hands up to the dashboard vent. “I didn’t want you to come but I’m so incredibly happy that you did.”

“Why didn’t you call someone?” he asked. “I can’t believe you didn’t just sit in your dry car and wait for help.”

“I tried my brother and he didn’t answer,” she said, putting her face mere centimeters from the vent. “And I wasn’t that far from home.”

“Not that far?” It was unfathomable that she’d been strolling alongside the interstate where anyone could’ve run her down. “It would’ve taken you forty-five more minutes to get home, if you didn’t get hit, murdered or struck by lightning first.”

“Hey. You’re not allowed to scold me unless you know my middle name.” There was a teasing in her voice when she said, “Since you don’t, Mr. Chest from Starbucks, you should--”

“Clarence.”

He heard her gasp, and she was smiling with her mouth wide open when he glanced over. She said, “I forgot that you know that.”

“This it?” he asked, pulling to a stop in front of an apartment building. It looked old but well-maintained, surrounded by a lot of tall trees, and for some reason, he could picture her living there.

“Yes.” She reached for the car door with shaking hands. “Thank you so much for coming to get me.”

“No problem,” he said.



“Do you want to come in for a slice of the hot pizza I will be ordering the minute my fingers thaw?”

No. NO. Of course no, the only answer was no. He set the parking brake and killed the engine. He pulled the keys out of the ignition and said, “I’ll order while you drown in the hot shower. Deal?”

“Deal so hard,” she replied, sounding pleased with his idiotic answer.

They made a run for the door, which seemed like a moot point when she was already drenched. He took the keys from her shaking fingers and unlocked the building door for her.

“Okay.” The dim light in the building entryway seemed brighter than the sun after so much darkness. She looked up at him through a wet face of smeared mascara and said, “Don’t judge me for my furnishings.”

“I would never.”

“You say that now,” she said, opening the obviously unlocked first door on the right, “But wait until you see it.”

When she pushed open the door, it was like walking into someone’s grandmother’s apartment. She had a pink sofa, two matching pink and gold velvet side chairs, and a huge painting of a garden scene hung on the wall behind the couch. Crochet doilies sat on both end tables, and he was honestly surprised to see a normal TV on the other side of the room, and not a big 70s console with old school rabbit ears.

“You’re into retro,” he said, looking around at the turn of the century décor.

“You’re kidding, right?” she said, dropping the towel on one of the chairs and turning on a floor lamp. “When I moved in here, my grandma surprised me by furnishing the entire place for me; it was her gift.”

“Wow.”

“Right?” She crossed her arms, looking tiny in his XL Bears hoodie, and said, “I’ll tell you the whole story after I shower. Remote’s on the coffee table, beer is in the fridge, and my credit card is in my purse if you want to order the pizza.”

“I’ve got it.” Did she usually make a habit of not locking her front door and letting people she just met rifle through her purse? “Go shower.”

“God bless you,” she said, and then she disappeared down the hallway and into the back of the apartment.

“What toppings?” he yelled.

“Anything but pineapple.”

“Combo?”

“Yes, please, but no mushrooms. And don’t pick a bad pizza joint.”

Blake flipped on the TV, turning to an NFL game before walking into her kitchen. He pushed an order through on his favorite pizza app, and he heard the shower start as he opened the fridge and grabbed a bottle of Mich Ultra.

*How could someone function with only condiments, chocolate milk, diet soda and beer in their refrigerator?*

He went back into the living room, and was about to sit down when a guy walked through the front door. A guy with a bushy beard, Adidas joggers, no shirt and no shoes.

He stopped short, looking surprised to see Blake.

Then his eyes went down to Blake’s beer and he said, “You drinkin’ my beer?”

Blake opened his mouth to respond but the guy laughed and said, “Just messin.’ Where’s Iz?”

“Shower,” Blake said, wondering what the dude would make of that.

“Good - I need to steal a few things. Don’t tell.”

Blake watched as the guy went into the kitchen, grabbed three beers and an unopened bag of Cool Ranch Doritos, then turned and headed for the door.

“Is she okay with this?” Blake asked, feeling like he should step in or something.

“Yeah - she owes me,” the guy said, smiling like it was no big deal. “Tell her The Darkling puked on my bed today, so I’m collecting.”

*What the hell had she named after General Kirigan?* “And you are...?”

“Oh, my God, clearly an asshole,” he said, and shifted the stolen items to his left hand. He extended his right and said, “I’m Josh - her cousin. I live upstairs.”

“Blake,” he said, hating the relief he felt that the guy who was clearly very familiar with Izzy was family and not something more complicated. “Her car broke down on the interstate--”

“I told her!” Josh shook his head and said, “I told her, after her starter caught on fire, that she needed to get a new car before she got stranded. But you know how she is.”

Blake actually had no idea. “Maybe now she’ll listen.”

“Maybe,” Blake agreed.

“Well, it was nice meeting you,” Josh said. “Hey - will you come grab The Darkling?”

Blake was pretty sure the answer was a hard *no*.

“I’m sick of her cat,” Josh said, walking toward the door, unconcerned with Blake’s lack of response. “Please come gather the beast.”

Blake felt like he was in an episode of The Twilight Zone as he followed the guy up the stairs and was handed a cat. The cat scaled Blake’s chest with all of his claws – *dick move* - but by the time she (he still couldn’t

think of her as Izzy or Amy, so she was *She* at that point) came into the living room, the cat was purring on his lap.

She stopped and looked at him, eyebrows crinkled together. “The Darkling is sitting on your lap.”

“Why does that conjure the unfortunate image of Ben Barnes reclining on my thighs?”

She smiled. “He hates everyone - even me, half the time.”

He wasn’t sure how she managed to look hot in sweats, wet hair and fuzzy socks, surrounded by gaudy retro furniture, but he was uncomfortably attracted to her at that minute. She just looked so...at home, like she was freshly-showered and ready to settle in for the night.

*What the hell was wrong with him, thinking idiotic thoughts like that?*

“Josh said you owe him because this guy puked on his couch.”

“That mooching dick.” She shook her head and said, “If Josh didn’t feed him sushi all the time, The Darkling wouldn’t puke. Did he take my beer?”

“Only a couple. Does he babysit the cat for you or something?” Blake asked.

The door buzzer buzzed, and she held up a finger. “I’ll tell you the whole story of this building after I get that.”

“The tip’s already been charged to my card, so we’re good, by the way,” he said.

“First the ride, now this. Thank you,” she said, opening the apartment door and going out to the stoop to meet the pizza guy. Blake heard her say *hey, Austin*, and he shook his head as he heard the pizza delivery driver talk to her like they were lifelong friends.

He wondered why - what the hell was wrong with him - her unorthodox *everything* was charming the hell out of him. Shouldn’t he be

annoyed, or at least marginally put off, by half-dressed wandering cousins and antique store furniture? Why did those things just make him hungrier to learn every little thing about her?

He needed to get his shit together and get the hell out of there. He'd given her a ride to be nice, and because he was worried, but nothing good could come from hanging out at Isabella Shay's apartment. He was going to get in his car and forget that he even knew where she lived.

Just as soon as they finished the pizza.

## Chapter Five



### Izzy

Izzy carried the pizza into her apartment, her stomach empty of food but also filled with butterflies. Because - holy crap - Mr. Chest was sitting on her couch, The Darkling in his lap, looking like the centerfold of a hot-guys-who-like-cats calendar.

He was wearing jeans and a black sweater, the soft kind of garment that hugged his pectorals, and she blinked and closed the door behind her, trying to be cool. But - *shit* - what the hell was up with the universe?

This man, this incredibly charming and attractive man, kept getting thrown in her path.

It was bad enough when they were just randomly running into each other in public places, but when he'd shown up on the side of the freeway in her time of need, she almost hadn't believed her eyes.

Because at first, when her car died, she'd been calm. She'd tried calling her brother, and she'd tried calling her cousins. When none of them had

answered, she'd decided to just wait it out. Surely a cop would pass eventually, see her flashers, and rescue her.

Then her flashers quit working and her phone battery dropped down to 2% power. She'd started imagining all the things that could happen; a car slamming into her car, a serial killer happening upon her, lighting striking, water rising enough in the ditch beside the shoulder to submerge her car. She'd begun to panic, ultimately deciding to get out and walk.

After five minutes of stumbling through the downpour, she'd realized the enormity of her stupidity. She'd been bawling and freaking out when she got the text from Blake and he literally rescued her from the thunder and lightning.

So if she believed in fate and that sort of meant-to-be nonsense, *and she SO did not*, she'd be freaking out right about now. She could feel his eyes on her as she set the pizza box on the coffee table and went to the kitchen for two plates, and she didn't know what to say.

She didn't feel awkward, like one of those times where she was searching for words, but she felt like she needed to address the "what are we doing" elephant in the room.

But by the time she'd pulled herself together and walked out of the kitchen, Josh was there. He was sitting next to Chest, shoving half a piece of pizza in his mouth while he told Blake about a game we made up called Billboard Assholes.

"Oh, look - it's you. Quit taking my beer and also put on a shirt." Izzy set down the plates and rolled her eyes as Josh ignored her and kept talking. She grabbed a slice and looked at Blake, who was genuinely grinning as he listened to Josh expound upon the rules of the game.

“Okay, that sounds hilarious,” he said, and Izzy was surprised that he could look so fun. He’d been so hardcore businessy in the conference room that she never would’ve guessed he’d be laughing like their idiotic made-up game was genuinely funny. “Good, because you’re playing,” Josh said.

“Dude, no,” Izzy replied, shooting Blake an apologetic look before telling Josh, “He just came by to save me from drowning. He’s not really a Billboard Asshole kind of guy.”

“How would *you* know?” Blake asked, giving her a knowing look.

“Because I know - trust me. Stakes are high, and you won’t win.”

“Whoa,” Blake said, scowling. “What makes you think I’d lose?”

She pulled a piece of pepperoni off of her slice and said, “You’ve never played - just trust me. You’d lose.”

“I think you could totally win,” Josh said, rolling his eyes at Izzy like she was ridiculous.

“Shut up, moron,” she said to her cousin as she popped the pepperoni in her mouth, and then she sighed and said to Blake, “Come here.”

She went into the kitchen and he followed. Once they were out of Josh’s earshot, she said, “You’re right - I don’t know you. And I’m sure you win at nearly everything you do. But not this game.”

Wow - he was so tall. He *towered* over her, which was probably why she felt fidgety and frazzled. Surely it had nothing to do with his attractiveness, and everything to do with human survival instincts.

An amused look crossed his face, a slow smile, and it looked ridiculously good on him as he said, “I’m sure I can--”

“You’re not listening.” She cut him off. “You’re an AVP who wears suits that probably cost more than our rent every month. Billboard Assholes is not for you.”



“Well, I’m in,” Blake pronounced, giving her bossy eye contact that made her a tiny bit flustered. Probably because he was standing close enough for her to smell his cologne and stare directly at his throat, which was somehow very appealing. “And you’re going to be my partner.”

“Whoa - this is *Partner* Billboard Assholes?” Izzy shook her head and said, “No way - that’s even worse. I can’t let you play.”

“What are you--”

“Shhh.” She cut him off with a violent head shake and said, “These guys are cutthroat, and they play for high stakes. If you lose, there’s no getting out of paying the price.”

“Are you trying to *protect* me?” he asked, his eyes narrowed marginally.

“Kind of.” She cleared her throat and said, “See, Josh and his friends bought a few billboards around town as an investment package a few years ago. But there’s one billboard that’s in a terrible location so they can never lease the space.”

“So...?” he said, his eyebrows cocked together.

“So they use it for their own entertainment.” She tucked her hair behind her ears and said, “The loser of Billboard Assholes gets their face put on the billboard for an entire month.”

“No shit?” he said, his mouth sliding into a grin. Wow - there really *was* a mischievous side to him that she wouldn’t hate exploring if he weren’t her boss and she wasn’t a company peon. He asked, “What does the winner get?”

“To write the caption.”

He started laughing, which made her smile, but then she said, “No, no - I get it. It’s hilarious. But now you can see why someone like you can’t play.”

He looked irritated by that. “Someone like me.”

“My face was up on the billboard in August 2021 with the caption *The Face of Herpes Can Take Any Form - get tested.*”

He looked horrified as he laughed and said, “Dear God.”

“Very *not* vice presidential, right?”

He seemed to consider that for a moment before saying, “Well I’m not going to lose.”

She rolled her eyes. “No, you totally will.”

“How could you know that?”

“It’s a very complex game,” she said, wishing the overconfident hottie would just trust her.

“Hey.” Josh came into the kitchen and said, “In or out? We want to get started.”

Izzy looked at Blake, who winked at her before saying, “We are so in.”



“Wrong.”

Kyle, Josh’s best friend, smiled from across the kitchen table and said to Blake, “Haribo eventually found success with gummi bears, but Hans Riegel’s first product was actually hard, colorless candies.”

“Dammit,” Izzy muttered, impressed by Blake’s knowledge of trivia but irritated by his unwillingness to consult her before just blurting out an answer.

“That means the point goes to us,” Kyle said, looking smug as he put the card back into the box. “Unless you want a physical challenge.”

“We’ll take the physical challenge,” Blake said, looking unfazed. He probably assumed it was something easy, a random athletic task that

someone muscular like him could do in his sleep.

“No, we won’t,” Izzy said. “We’re only down by one - no need to panic.”

“Too late - he said it,” Kyle said, reaching into the red box for a card. “Physical challenge it is.”

Izzy groaned.

“I’ve got this - no worries,” Blake said.

Izzy just shook her head and sighed. *Typical man, assuming he knew something about something he knew nothing about.*

Kyle said, “Your challenge is as follows. The two of you must crab walk *down* the stairs, side-by-side, without falling. You must have hands and feet on the same steps at the same time. For example, four hands must be on the same stair at all times, as well as four feet on the same respective step. Also, you may not speak to each other during the challenge; non-verbal is the only acceptable form communication.”

Blake asked, “Did you say crab-walk *down* the--”

“Also,” Kyle continued, ignoring Blake, “you must sing *Someone Like You* by Adele throughout the entire challenge. Any questions?”

Blake looked speechless, which made Izzy want to scream *I told you!*

Blake asked, “What if I don’t know that song?”

“Only one team member has to sing. But how do you not know that song?”

Blake looked at Izzy and said, “Do *you* know it?”

She looked offended by the question. “Of course I do - how do you not?”

Josh started singing Adele at the top of his lungs, and everyone else - who wasn't Blake or Izzy - joined in. There were a total of 10 people

playing - Izzy knew four of them - and they'd definitely all hit the booze harder than Blake and Izzy.

"Can we have a one-minute conference before time starts?" Izzy asked.

"Forty-five seconds," Kyle said.

"Can you show us the crab walk?" Izzy knew what a crab walk was from gym class, but hopefully this was some sort of forward-facing deviation she was unfamiliar with.

Josh dropped to the floor, propped himself up on his arms and started moving backward. He looked ridiculous, pale and shirtless and crab-walking around the living room, and if she weren't so tense, she'd be cracking up.

"You're going to die," Ella said, shaking her head. She was Kyle's girlfriend, and usually stayed home on game night. "There's no way you can do it backward down the stairs."

"Her legs are so much shorter than mine," Blake said, as if that would matter to any of them. No one even responded, because the game was all about having to do the impossible.

"Okay," Kyle said, "Ready for your forty-five?"

Izzy said to Blake, "We have to talk fast, all strategy. Got it?"

He gave a nod, looking as serious as he had in the boardroom.

"Okay - we're ready," Izzy said.

Josh set a timer on his phone, and Kyle said, "Forty-five second strategy starts...now!"

"We go slow," Izzy said, "I'll nod every time we should move down a step."

"*I'll* nod," Blake corrected, and for some reason, Izzy trusted that it was the right call. He said, "And we rest our asses on each step - that's the only

way not to fall.”

She verified, “So hands-down, ass rest, feet down, and so on?”

“Bingo.” Blake flexed his jaw before adding, “And total eye contact - only look at me - so we don’t get dizzy.”

“Okay. And I’ll sing super slow to set the tempo.”

“If you start to fall,” Blake said, “Forget about the game.”

“Ditto.”

“Time’s up.”

The entire party left the apartment - door wide open - to stand on the landing and watch the event. It was just one flight of old wooden stairs, covered with thin carpet that would do nothing to soften a fall.

“It’s only one point,” Josh said to them, looking serious for a second. “You sure it’s worth it?”

“Every point counts,” Izzy said, focused and ready.

“Agreed,” said Blake, giving another quick nod.

They looked at each other, and Izzy wanted to laugh because it was obvious that he was just as stupidly-competitive as she was. For someone wildly unathletic, Izzy had a hard time ever saying no to a challenge.

Hence the herpes billboard.

Blake and Izzy sat down at the top of the stairs.

“The challenge starts...NOW!” Kyle yelled.

“*I heard,*” Izzy sang, looking at Blake. He gave the nod, and they each propped themselves into a crab position before moving their hands down to the first step. “*That you’ve, settled down.*”

He gave another nod, and they both slowly moved their hands down yet another step. Izzy felt like she was going to topple ass-over-feet down the

stairs, but she kept her eyes on Blake's face and focused on their synchronized movements.

He was so much bigger than her that she barely had any room on the step. She had like an eighth of the space, and her entire right side was smooshily-glued to his left side.

She sang, "*That you - found a girl, and you're - married nowww.*"

The group at the top of the stairs started singing along with Izzy, which wasn't surprising because Josh and his friends went to karaoke nearly every weekend.

Blake nodded again, and they slowly moved their asses to rest on the next step. Another nod, and they slowly moved their feet.

"*Old frennnnd,*" Izzy belted out, "*Why are you so shyyy?*"

She looked at Blake, but instead of nodding, he grinned at her song, a full-on smile that showed all of his teeth and those gorgeous dimples.

Dimples so gorgeous, in fact, that her cheeks warmed and she laughed, which made her hand slip, and then in a split-second, she was somersaulting and falling rapidly backward down the stairs.

"Izzy!" She heard Blake yell her name - *had he ever said her actual name before?* - just as she fell to a stop against the door at the building's entrance.



Thankfully, Blake was incredibly good at trivia.

After losing that point - and stopping the game for ten minutes so the entire group could tend to the cut by Izzy's eyebrow, they got back into it.

Blake sat beside Izzy at the kitchen table, and they proceeded to win the next eight points.

Team Bliz - her name choice, not his - was now surprisingly in-synch. Every time they got a question, they put their heads together and quietly conferred for their full fifteen seconds.

Of course, the more she drank, the more aware she became of the size of him, the smell of him, and the deep, rumble sound of his voice. And also the shocking existence of his playful side. She was having *fun* with her teammate, comfortable as if they were actual friends.

When they got Ted and Wally's ice cream flavors as a topic, Izzy said, "I've got this one - step off."

To which Blake replied, "Your knowledge of junk food is truly staggering. I defer to your genius."

She laughed and flipped him off, to which he responded by reaching out and physically lowering her finger. Which made her laugh even harder and say, "You saw it this time."

It was as if they were already old friends, even though they were far from it.

Just after midnight, the game reached an epic finish point where there was a three-way tie.

"Physical challenge decides all," Josh said, grinning at his friends. "The way the game was intended."

Applause broke out, though most of it came from the people no longer in the game.

"I won't let you down this time," Izzy quietly said to Blake, leaning close enough to breathe in his cologne.

Her eyes wandered down to his chest, because *that chest*, which made him lean in even closer and purr, “My eyes are up here.”

She looked up at his smirk, just above hers, a breath away. The flirty moment held, their eyes locked, and Izzy felt like she couldn’t breathe for a second.

“Time to draw numbers, folks,” Josh shouted, breaking the moment as Blake looked away from her and toward her cousin.

*Was it hot in there or was it just Blake?*

The six of them drew their challenges from a stack of handmade cards, and Josh and Kyle were first up.

Their physical challenge was to run - while piggybacking - down to the stop sign *waaaay* down at the corner in under ten seconds.

“Impossible,” Blake said, looking out the big bay window. “That’s impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible,” Kyle said, looking like he truly believed that. “If you want it badly enough.”

Blake looked at Izzy in a way that made her feel a little *something* in her stomach, but the moment got swallowed up by everyone bolting for the apartment door.

Blake went with them, and she followed close behind. The rain had let up and it was only sprinkling now.

The entire group cheered as Kyle climbed onto Josh’s back. *When had he put a shirt on?* Their strategy was for Josh to only focus on sprinting, not holding Kyle, and Kyle was going to focus on doing his best to hang on.

“It’s an interesting strategy,” Blake said, talking to Izzy while he watched the contestants. “Although I feel like I’m flying high and loose with the word *strategy* here.”



“Yeah, I give them five steps - tops,” she said, allowing herself to drink him in while he watched her idiot cousin get ready to race down the block.

She’d realized while they’d been playing trivia that it wasn’t just his good looks that made her a little swoony around him. No, it was the one-two-three punch of intelligence, confidence, and charm. She was certain if someone screamed “Ohmigawwwd it’s the zombie apocalypse,” Blake would know exactly what to do to keep everyone safe and would delegate appropriately.

While being polite.

Of course, in her mind, he’d also have to do a lot of shirtless wood-chopping. There was no end to the amount of wood they’d need if zombies were afoot.

“On your marks. Get set. GO!”

Izzy laughed as Josh took off running, swinging his arms as hard as he could. Kyle struggled to hold on, choking Josh for a brief moment before grasping at his back, and then slowly falling off, pulling Josh down with him. They both ended up tumbling to the pavement, looking like dying June bugs stuck on their back as they laid on the pavement. After a solid minute of groaning, they sat up and checked to see just how badly they’d scraped their elbows.

“Are you ready?” Blake asked.

She looked away from them, and Blake was watching her from his spot to her right. His voice had been quiet and low when he’d said it, and it had to be the beer that made it sound suggestive. She took a deep breath and said, “Oh, yeah - I am *beyond* ready.”

Then she and added, “As ready as I can be. Um, when faced with a Billboard Asshole Physical Challenge, that is.”

It felt like his gaze sharpened when she said that, like her words showed him exactly what was happening in her perverted little mind. He gave a terse nod and muttered something that sounded like, “Fucking A right,” but she couldn’t be sure because he turned and walked toward the building the minute the words had left his mouth.

*Oh-kay.*

“So what happens if we all lose the physical challenge,” Ella asked as the group went back to the apartment.

“Rock-paper-scissors,” Josh replied.

“You’re kidding me,” Izzy said, touching her tender forehead with her index finger. “We risk a trip to the ER for a game that boils down to a playground game of rock-paper-scissors?”

He laughed and looked pleased with himself. “Well, our version includes an actual rock, a sharp pair of scissors, and a wall-sized sheet of fly paper.”

She shook her head. “God help us all.”

When they all made it back inside, the next physical challenge was floor lava. Ella and her friend Claire had to make it to every room of the apartment without their feet touching the hardwood floor. It might’ve sounded simple, but alas, it was not. They each fell hard enough to make even Blake laugh-cry as they leapt from the couch to the kitchen table like incredibly clumsy flying squirrels.

As soon as the laughter died, Josh reached for their challenge card.

“Okay,” Blake said to her, leaning closer. “It’s do or die time. The other teams failed, so we just have to complete this one tiny challenge and we win.”

She wanted to mock him, but she found it somehow sweet that he thought winning a physical challenge was even possible. It was so

optimistic.

“Okay, Team Bliz.” Josh read the card and smiled. “Super simple. One competitor does fifty pushups with the other competitor on their back. The ride-along competitor has to bounce a tennis ball - one bounce per pushup. Pushups must be continuous, as does the bouncing of the ball. You lose if you stop or if you lose control the ball.”

*On his back.*

“Also, the spectators will be shooting Nerf foam bullets at you the entire time.”

“C’mere,” Blake said, grabbing her sleeve and pulling her off to the side. That intense look was back as he said, “So you’re going to want to lie on me face-down, which I’m sure you’ve figured out. That way the balance won’t hinder the pushups, since you’ll be glued to my body, and you can bounce the ball in front of us fairly easily.”

“You want my...um, chestal parts imprinting upon your back?”

That made him bark out a laugh and his dark eyes crinkled at the corners. “I guess you could say that.”

She asked skeptically, “Do you think you can do fifty pushups with me on your back?”

He shrugged and seemed chill about it. “Maybe. Let’s go.”

“How do I, um,” Izzy said, feeling a little foolish. “Embark?”

That made his smirk return, only this one was a little bit filthy. His dark eyes were all over her when he said, “I’m going to lie down, and then you can climb on top of me. Cool?”

She couldn’t manage words, so she just nodded.

Blake effortlessly dropped to the floor, lying on his stomach with his hands under his shoulders. Izzy got down on her knees, at his side, and got

the giggles because of the ridiculousness. Six people stood around them, Nerf guns in hand and trained on them, while she tried to figure out the best way to mount her boss's boss.

"We can do this, Iz," Blake said, giving her a face full of confidence.

"That's twice," she said, quietly so no one else could hear, "That you've said my real name."

"Well, hop on and make me say it again when we win."

*He didn't mean that suggestively, did he?* She knew the answer, but he just made her so fucking aware of him. She said breathlessly, "Okay - boarding."

Izzy climbed onto his back, her legs on his legs, her chest on his back. Josh handed her the tennis ball, and she lowered her face to Blake's ear and said, "Are you good?"

"Fine," he said, his voice tight, "Let's do this."

"Okay," Josh said, gleefully, the little prick. "On 3, 2, 1 - let's go!"

Blake started, and Izzy gave the ball a tiny bounce as Josh's friends unloaded their guns. Blake did push-ups faster than she would've imagined, and she carefully gave the ball another bounce, glad he'd had a solid plan. The ball was right there, in front of her, so as long as she kept the bounces small and controlled, they might pull it off.

The Nerf bullets were annoying, but light enough where they just kind of bounced around. She asked, "You doing okay, Blake?"

"Never better," he said in time with the push-ups, and it almost felt like he meant it. His pushups were so smooth, fast and flawless that she stopped feeling guilty about her weight on him; obviously he could handle it.

"It's totally unfair," Josh said to his friends as they scrambled to reload their guns, "That this particular challenge was drawn when Izzy brought the

fucking Witcher to our party.”

Izzy kept her concentration on the tennis ball, but she was impressed as hell as he pounded out the pushups. When he reached 40, she started getting excited. *Holy shit - they were going to win a physical challenge!* The group started counting loudly, shooting and reloading faster and directing their aim at Izzy’s face once it became clear that Blake was unshakable.

She was the weakest link.

When they hit fifty, Blake collapsed face-down on the floor with Izzy lying on top of him. She started laughing and said into his ear, “You’re a damn hero, Mr. Chest. Now say my name.”

He started laughing while gasping, still face down, and groaned *Izzy!* at the top of his lungs.

She smiled and nodded. “That’s right, baby. You say it.”



## **Blake**

“It seems like a different night than when you rescued me.”

“Yeah.” Blake pulled his keys out of his front pocket as Izzy walked him to his car. The party had just broken up after a very painful-looking rock-paper-scissors battle to determine which loser would end up on the billboard, and the residential street was incredibly quiet. “It’s been a surreal few hours.”

“I warned you,” she laughed, and Blake just looked straight ahead, not looking at her. He couldn’t. Because what he’d learned while playing the world’s most ridiculous game was that the way she wrinkled her nose when she laughed made him...*distracted*.

He'd found himself staring, watching her, just waiting for the charming little crinkle. Like a fucking idiot.

"Yes, you did," he said. "I have no regrets, but now that I know, I appreciate what you tried to do."

He cleared his throat and stopped at his car.

"Listen. Blake." She set her hand on his arm, a wordless request for eye contact. He looked at her – *damn, she was short* – and she grinned. "Thanks a lot for saving me from the storm. You have no idea how badly I was freaking out when you arrived."

"No problem," he said, his eyes getting caught on the bow of her upper lip.

"It's probably my buzz talking," she said, and Blake felt a rush of satisfaction when her nose crinkled, "But even after cracking my head open, I had a great time tonight."

He had to smile at that. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I did, too."

"I know everything with us is all tied up in work restrictions – and that's fine," Izzy said, "but since we're both a little tipsy, there's something I want to say."

Blake wasn't the slightest bit tipsy. He'd had one beer at her apartment while she'd showered, and that was it. But he also wasn't about to correct her when he was dying to hear what she had to say, so he just said, "Okay."

Was her upper lip different than everyone else's upper lip? What was it about that tiny little valley that made him marginally-obsessed? He couldn't keep his eyes off of it.

"I absolutely know that we cannot, um, have any sort of romantic relationship." Her mouth fell a little open and she blinked fast, awkwardly

adding, “I mean, not relationship, I don’t mean relationship, like you want a relationship, I just mean--”

“I get it.” S

he sighed and nodded. Popped a nervous little grin and said, “So I guess I just wanted to tell you that, um, I think we should behave as if tonight never happened, like we never hung out outside of work.”

“Agreed,” he said, his nose finding her soft, still-soapy scent amongst the smell of the rain.

“You were just being a good Samaritan. Nothing more.” She took a step closer, close enough that he could see by the glow of the street light the tiniest freckle on the bridge of her nose, and her voice was soft and breathy when she said, “But if this night never happened, would it be that bad to maybe, um, just once, to see what it would’ve been like to--”

“Are you suggesting we kiss?” Blake was surprised by how calm he sounded when he was actually torn between screaming *fuck yes holy shit* and *I gotta go*. She gnawed on her bottom lip and nodded.

It was a terrible idea. It was a terrible idea and he needed to shut it all down. He looked at her upturned face, where her blue eyes were a little heavy-lidded, but the only words he managed to get out were, “*Fuck, yes.*”



## **Izzy**

His lips came down on hers, just as confident and sure as every other thing about him. His big hands cradled her face and his teeth nipped at her bottom lip before he angled his head and went deep.

Opening his mouth wide over hers, his tongue slid inside as she raised her hands to his chest, flexing her fingers against his pecs. He made a growling sound that she could feel under her palms as he fed her unbridled kisses, the kind that felt more like he was trying to consume her than kiss her, which she was SO fucking there for.

Their breathing was loud, labored, and she wanted every little thing his mouth was giving her. Holy *shit*, they were on fire.

His hands moved down to her waist and he pulled her closer, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and fell into it. He nipped at her lip again, which made a shiver slide down her spine, and she heard herself make a noise when he traced her upper lip with his tongue.

*More.* She just wanted more as his mouth moved over hers as if they were alone, in the dark, all stretched out on a bed.

His kiss was all sex – really good sex – and she curled her fingernails into the back of his neck as she pressed her body into his, into his hard wall of a chest. Her knees almost buckled when his hands slid down to the curve of her ass and pulled her flush against him. *Dear God.*

“Dammit,” he said, lifting his head just enough to give her a white-hot look. He looked like a fantasy villain, all dark eyes and crackling intensity, and she wanted to inhale every bit of that dark intensity.

He said, “Why the hell is it so good with us?”

“Wha...” she breathed, not wanting to stop for conversation or a freight train bearing down on them or even a world war. All she wanted was Blake Phillips, all over her.

But her eyes caught his tortured gaze again, and she realized she was an idiot. Nothing good could come from dipping her toes in the pool of how-



good-they-might've-been. It would only take another minute of mouth sex and they'd be back in her apartment; she could totally feel that.

And even if the night was fire - *and yes, it SO would be because holy shit if he could do push-ups with her on his back what the hell else could he do gawwwd* - it would only delay the inevitable.

Blake Phillips had principles, and they were way more important to him than chemistry.

She inhaled a shaky breath, dropped her hands to her sides, stepped out of his embrace and breathily said, "Okay. Well. Now we know, right?"

His expression changed, going from intense to confused, and then he swallowed. Gave a nod of agreement as he put his hands in his front pockets. His voice was gravelly when he said, "Yes, we do."

"Thanks again for the ride, and I swear this night never happened."

"Um, you're welcome," he said, his face unreadable. "Yeah."

Izzy turned and went back into the building, not daring to glance back at him over her shoulder. She felt ridiculously, foolishly emotional, and she just wanted to climb into bed and fall asleep for the whole weekend. She locked the door and leaned back on it, lost in her thoughts, before finally disposing of the pizza box and putting on her pajamas.

She'd just climbed into bed and turned off the light when she got a text notification.

She fumbled for her glasses before grabbing the phone from the nightstand. She read it in the dark, then read it again.

*Mr. Chest: I had the WEIRDEST evening, Starbucks Amy. Do you have time for a bonkers story, or are you busy?*

Izzy sat up in bed and texted: *First of all, don't be an idiot - I ALWAYS have time for bonkers stories. Second of all, does this mean we can be*

*friends, even though our counterparts have decided to go their separate ways?*

Three seconds later, her phone started ringing. Blake was calling, and Izzy didn't know if she should answer or not.

## Chapter Six



### Blake

Blake's phone buzzed, and he pulled it out of his pocket. *Izzy: Running late - SO SORRY!* Blake wanted to laugh as he responded with: *Yes, I'm aware. We were supposed to meet fifteen minutes ago.* When he'd arrived at Starbucks, he'd briefly considered ordering a PSL for her but thought better of it. The whole point of this meeting was to discuss whether or not they could be friends outside of work, so buying her things probably wasn't a good idea. *Izzy: I thought I could ride a bike faster than I actually can. 5 more minutes.* Blake texted: *Wait. Are you texting and pedaling?*

*Izzy: Not really. Every time you text me I have to stop and respond. You're making me more late.*

He pictured her stubborn face and responded with: *Nah.*

*Izzy. In fact, even though we just started this text conversation, I'm sure the whole reason I'm late at all is because of you. Now leave me alone so I can pedal.*

Blake set his phone on the table and lifted his coffee to his mouth. In the short time he'd known her, Izzy had consistently surprised him. And that was putting it mildly. Less than 12 hours before, when he'd called her after their unexpected night, she'd ignored his call and sent him a text, instead.

Blake picked up his phone again and scrolled through the exchange (for probably the tenth time) as he waited for her to arrive.

*Izzy: I'm not answering because I need to think.*

*Blake: Um...?*

*Izzy: Imma b honest w/u. I like u and want 2 b ur friend.*

*Blake: Wtf happened to your texting? Are you a middle schooler now?*

*Izzy: I'm trying to jot down some ideas before I lose them so that was my attempt at quick-texting.*

*Blake: So I repeat my original Um...?*

*Izzy: I'm preparing some notes on how we can be friends without jeopardizing your career. Would you be interested in meeting at Starbucks tomorrow morning to review?*

*Blake: 8am?*

*Izzy: Perfect. Our Starbucks?*

Blake set his phone down again. *Our Starbucks.*

At that moment, he saw her through the front window. She was bent down, locking up an old, ugly bike that looked to be something she might've picked up at a junkyard. She was wearing a black pullover with black leggings, and she had a messenger bag slung across her body.

When she straightened and took off her helmet, the sight of her face made him feel something in his stomach.

Holy shit, were those fucking butterflies? They were - they were fucking butterflies.

God help him, he was now the equivalent of a hormonal adolescent.



### **Izzy**

Izzy could barely walk as she entered Starbucks, her legs like jelly. Since her car was currently impounded because the city had towed it before she'd had a chance to get it towed to a garage, she was currently car-less. She'd foolishly thought *no big deal, I'll borrow Daphne's bike*.

Theoretically, she ran five miles every day so riding a bike would surely be easier, right? Wrong. She didn't know if it was the bike, the hills, or her pathetic thighs, but she'd almost given up three times during her wayward journey. It was only Blake's villainous eyes and hilarious texting that forced her to power through the wicked leg shakes.

She ran a hand over her ponytail and ordered a PSL, refusing to search for Blake until she caught her breath and had her drink. She needed to focus on her goal and not be distracted by his ridiculous good looks.

*Side note: Freaking Blake had been in her dream last night, wearing long flowing robes and a dangerous vibe that made her wake up empathizing with Bella Swan's vampirious propensities. WTF, right?* Her goal that morning, in truth, was lame. Like, so super lame that she felt, well, pathetic. Because her goal, in a nutshell, was to convince him to be her friend. That was it - please be my friend.

*Hello, first grade Isabella - some things never change.*

"Izzy?" The barista yelled, reading the label.

“Thank you.” She grabbed her drink and immediately saw Blake, sitting at a table in the back.

*Daaaaamn*, that man was ridiculous.

He was wearing a black hoodie, which should’ve made him look casual, but something about him just screamed *important*. The watch, the good haircut, the big hands - well, okay, the big hands didn’t make him important, per se, but her eyes sure enjoyed them; the whole package just shouted *successful*.

“Good morning.” Blake smiled up at her in a way that made her smile back, and she was glad he wasn’t one of those guys who stood up for a woman. She knew the gesture came from a traditional, respectful place, but it always made her feel awkward and like she was a little less of an adult than the man.

“I am so sorry I’m late.” She pulled off her bag, set it on one of the extra chairs at the table, and sat down. “As it turns out, I’m a terrible cyclist.”

“I could’ve picked you up,” he said, his dark eyes warm as he wrapped a big hand around his cup.

*She really had to force herself to stop thinking about those big hands on her face as he’d kissed the everloving shit of her mere hours before.*

“Nope,” she replied, reaching over to unzip her bag. “Against the rules.”

“We have rules?” he asked with an eyebrow raised.

“The most important part of my plan, actually,” she said, taking out her laptop and turning it on. “Are the unflinchingly rigid rules.”

“Did you sleep at all last night?” he asked.

Izzy looked up from her computer, and he was asking it so sweetly - paired with such a concerned look - that she swallowed hard. Good lord, questions like that - from him - could totally destroy her.

She looked down at her computer, feeling a little shaky, and said, “Yeah, I only need four hours so I’m good.”



## **Blake**

As he watched her unlocking her laptop and clicking into files, Blake thought it was cool that she wasn’t wearing makeup. Not in a sexist “she doesn’t need it” or “I like the natural look” way - hell, he didn’t give a rat’s ass who wore what - but he was glad she didn’t feel compelled to put it on in order to meet him at Starbucks. It made him feel like she was comfortable with him.

“Okay. So.” She turned her laptop so he could see the display and said, “Scooch closer.”

Blake wanted to laugh when, after he followed her directive, she said, “Good boy.”

She opened a PowerPoint file and started talking. “As we both know, you are my boss at Ellis, which means we cannot have any sort of romantic relationship - or contact - whatsoever.”

“Correct,” he said, even though he didn’t like the way it felt in his mouth. He *did* like the big red X she’d put over their names on her slide, though; that was pretty funny shit.

“Since that is non-negotiable,” she said, advancing to the next slide, “We can never be alone together.”

Blake coughed out a laugh. “That seems a little extreme, don’t you think?”

He regretted it the instant he said it, because she looked embarrassed. But before he could backtrack, she said, “Do you trust us to finish this meeting in your car? Or at my apartment?”

Holy shit, she was right; they could never be alone together. He’d been staring at her mouth since the moment she’d sat down, remembering the way it’d felt to kiss her. “Touché,” he said. “You’re right.”

She nodded very seriously. “So rule number 1 - we’re never alone.”

“Okay,” he said. “I read the entire Ellis employee handbook last night,” she said, rubbing her lips together like she needed Chapstick, before adding, “And there is no rule that says an executive cannot be friends with a subordinate outside of work.”

Blake tilted his head and watched her resolute face. *I read the entire handbook.* Thirty seconds ago he would’ve made a joke about it being her job to read the handbook, but now it sunk in – she’d read the entire handbook to prepare for this conversation.

“So if you’re interested in pursuing a casual friendship - and it’s totally fine if you’re not - I have some ideas on how we can keep it within the rules.” Her blue gaze moved from her computer to his face, and he wondered if it were possible for him to say no to her, when she was giving him that eye contact, even if he wanted to. Which he didn’t.



## **Izzy**

Izzy looked at him, feeling like a total derp.

She felt like she was begging him to be her friend, and as much as she didn’t want to do that, she also knew she’d regret not throwing it out



there. Just in case he did. Because the truth of it was, Izzy felt like she didn't know how to make friends.

Maybe she had at one time, but she clearly didn't know how to do it as an adult. In high school, she had the friends that she'd always had, since kindergarten. In college, she'd immediately started hanging out with her dorm-assigned roommate, who'd been her bestie for all four years. But when she moved to Omaha after graduation to take a grown-up job, things were different.

She had a lot of nice co-workers, but she'd never put herself out there to make those relationships anything other than workplace acquaintances. Like, how did that work? *Hi, can I play with you guys?* The idea of doing that made her too anxious, so she'd just said goodbye to those people every day at five and went home.

Rinse and repeat until now.

Thank God her cousins were fun. It was pathetic that at the moment they were her only friends, but that was, in fact, her reality.

But she'd connected with Blake in such a natural way. She was totally herself and had a blast with him, and she didn't want to lose that.

His eyes were on her face, intense enough to make her nervous, and then he said, "Keep talking, Iz."

*Iz.* Oh, God. She cleared her throat and said, "I come to this Starbucks every morning. Mostly at seven, if I wake up on time. So if you ever want a coffee on a weekday and happen to be here, and we run into each other, it's totally acceptable to sit down and have a coffee together, right?"

His mouth twitched, like he wanted to smile, but he gave a nod, instead.

"Now," Izzy said, encouraged that he was staying with her. "I go to The Bookworm after work every Tuesday to look at new releases. If I ran into

you there and we happened to chat while book shopping, well, that would be absolutely above-board.”

“Agreed.”

“This way, nothing is a lie. If we see a co-worker, we actually *did* run into each other so it’s completely legit.”

Blake did grin, then, and said, “They have an incredible happy hour at Upstream that I often hit after work on Thursdays. I usually belly-up to the bar and have a pizza for dinner, and if you happened to show up on the stool beside me, also eating, that would just be a wild coincidence.”

Izzy couldn’t be cool - she beamed at him. “I love Upstream!”

He grinned back. “Same.”

They spent the next ten minutes sharing their habitual schedules, tossing out a handful of occasions where they might possibly run into each other. Izzy created a spreadsheet and added them all, emailing a copy of it to Blake (his personal email, of course), just in case he wished to reference it at a later date.

“So we should probably cover texting next,” she said, taking a drink of her PSL.

“You have texting rules. Of course,” he said, and his small smile reminded her of Edward in *Pretty Woman* when he was negotiating Vivian’s payment.

“Well, I think that if we both agree to never discuss work, never discuss people from work, and never text during working hours, then texting is probably a feasible form of communication.”

“And phone calls?” he asked, his dark eyes twinkling with amusement.

Izzy was happy *he* had asked, because she really liked talking to him on the phone. Which was weird because she was an avid phone-talking-

hater. "I think the same rules would apply, don't you?"

"Same rules," he agreed, nodding yet again.

"So," Izzy said, closing her laptop and resting her chin on her hand. "Did we just become best friends?"

"Depends," he said, giving her a smirk.

"On?"

"On what it means to you." His hands were wrapped around his cup, and Izzy noticed he had nice fingernails. He said, "If you want someone to bail you out of jail or be your blood brother, I'm not the guy."

"I'm not that guy, either," Izzy agreed.

"But if it means I get to come get you when your car breaks down in the rain, then yes, we are."

"Nope - sorry buddy. Can't be alone together."

"Come on - there have to be exceptions," he said, his eyebrows going down.

"I don't think that's wise," she reiterated.

"Are you sure?" he asked, mimicking her by putting *his* chin on *his* hand. "Because a best friend who can give you and your landfill bike a ride home would be pretty handy right about now, wouldn't it?"



## **Blake**

Blake watched as her eyes got soft, as she smiled a dreamy little smile. "That *would* be nice, but I think we have to keep these lines clear."

"You're telling me that if I called you, stranded on the side of the road, you wouldn't save me?"

She rolled her eyes and said, "You have a very nice car, Blake. You don't need me because you have roadside assistance."

He pursed his lips and tried again. "If I called you because I was too drunk to drive...?"

"I'd get an Uber for my bestie Blake."

He sighed, irritated, which didn't make a damn bit of sense because she was right. "Fine. You can ride all four miles on that garbage bike."

"You saw it?" She sat back in her chair and gave him an embarrassed grin. "It's pretty bad, right? I'll probably walk it half the way back, to be honest."

"Izzy--"

"Nope." He clenched his jaw, not used to feeling powerless. "There's no convincing you?"

She shook her head and said, "Afraid not."

"Well, what if I drive your bike home and call you an Uber?" The obsessive part of him that always needed to find the solution to a problem was spinning in circles.

She looked like she wanted to say yes. She asked him, "Would you mind dropping the bike at my building and I'll just run home?"

"Deal."

"You're such a great best friend," she said, grinning, and he wondered why he was playing with fire while at the same time knowing he wasn't ready to stop anytime soon.

"So about this friendship." He reached for his cup and said, "Is it something we talk about?"

"What's the first rule about Fight Club?" Izzy asked.

"In my case, it would be to watch Fight Club."

She squinted at him and said, “You haven’t seen Fight Club? Isn’t that in the man charter or, like, pledge you take every day?”

“I know of no such charter or pledge,” he said, trying to remember how many days it’d been since they met. Because somehow, just like *that*, he felt like he’d known her forever.

“Well, everyone knows the first rule of fight club is not to talk about it.”

“Don’t you think, since it’s a fight club, that the first rule should be something savage like *there are no rules*, or maybe *the only way out is through death*?”

“Blake. Focus,” she said, feigning exasperation as she slowly shook her head. “What I’m suggesting, clearly with the wrong analogy, is that we probably shouldn’t talk about it at work.”

"Agreed."

They relaxed a little after that and had another coffee, discussing the NFL matchups that day and discussing potential fantasy trades they each might make. Ironically, they both had teams in Ellis fantasy pools, just different leagues. When it was time to leave and Blake was loading her bike into the trunk of his SUV, he heard himself say, “Izzy, what if you sit in the back seat?”

“What?” She set her messenger bag in the trunk, since she couldn’t run with it, and gave him a look. “What do you mean?”

“If you sit in the back seat, nothing can accidentally transpire between us.”

She furrowed her brows and tilted her head, considering the idea. “Hmmm...I’m not sure.”

“For the love of God, Iz,” he said, slamming the back door closed and looking down at her like she was a child. “Get in the damn back seat.”

Her eyes narrowed and he thought she was going to debate yet again and make him lose his mind, but then her mouth - goddamn, *that mouth* - slid up into a sexy grin. She gave her head a shake, shrugged her shoulders, and said, “My best friend makes me sit in the back seat of his car like I’m a little bitty baby child. Nice.”

She walked around him, opened the passenger-side back door, and climbed into his car. And all he could think, as he got in and buckled his seat belt, was *I fucking love my new best friend*.

## *Chapter Seven*



### **Izzy**

Izzy looked at her watch – almost noon.

She ignored the growl in her stomach and wished time would move faster. Her breakfast - a can of Rockstar and a chocolate pop tart - was no longer doing the trick and she needed sustenance. She usually ate lunch at 11 a.m. like a senior citizen, but that day, she was holding out until 12:30.

*No reason - she just felt like waiting*, she thought as she got out her compact and added a little blush and lip gloss to her face.

Thirty minutes later, when the alarm on her wrist buzzed, she stuck her debit card in the pocket of her skirt and stood. Grabbing her black pea coat, she slid her arms into it as she left her office, heading for the exit like her ass was on fire.

She felt nervous as she rode the elevator down, which was ridiculous because she was just grabbing food. It's what people did at lunchtime, right? Nothing weird about that. Just because she knew that *certain people* enjoyed the Monday specials at Caniglia's food truck, and they

usually took their lunch sometime between 12:30 and 1:00 – well, that shouldn't make her nervous. *Lots* of people did that.

She pulled out her phone as she walked the two blocks to the mobile Italian restaurant, snuggling deeper into her coat. It was one of those early October days where the sun was warm, the leaves were bright, and the chill in the air kissed the tip of your nose.

*No texts.* It wasn't a surprise, really, that Blake was radio-silent during the workday; he was all-business, after all, and they'd just agreed upon their rules.

Yesterday, however, after he'd dropped her and the bike off at her building, they'd pretty much been in an endless texting conversation for the entire rest of the day. But it was a weekend day – totally legal.

She'd texted him while they each watched the same football game, she'd texted him as she'd gone down into the creepy basement to do laundry, and she'd texted him while she'd given The Darkling a bath. For someone so above-board-executive-like in person, he was surprisingly fun on the phone.

This morning, when she'd been walking toward the Ellis building (she had to take the bus downtown because her car was still impounded), she'd felt her phone buzz in her purse. When she pulled it out, Blake had texted: *I can see you from my window.*

The Ellis building was an all-windowed skyscraper, and even though she knew Blake worked on the 15<sup>th</sup> floor, she had no idea where exactly that was on the face of the building. So she'd stopped and responded: *You have to be lying.*

*Blake: Black tights, black boots, black coat, red purse and -- is that a piece of toast in your hand?*



She laughed and texted back: *A Pop Tart. Put down the high-powered binoculars, creeper.*

*Blake: I was simply looking out the window, and there you were. Shocked the hell out of me, tbh.*

*Izzy: Can you tell what I'm doing now?*

She'd switched Pop Tart hands so she could hold up her arm and flip off the building.

*Blake: Not very HR of you.*

*Izzy: Can you tell what I'm doing NOW?*

She started hopping on one foot.

*Blake: Making a spectacle of yourself.*

*Izzy: No one is watching me but you.*

*Blake: The man behind you begs to differ.*

She turned around, but no one was walking behind her.

*Blake: Made you look.*

His idiotic texting put her in a great mood as she'd breezed into work, and it hadn't waned all day. But now, for some reason, she was nervous to see him. Even though they'd shared their frequent whereabouts with the sole purpose of possibly running into each other, what if he didn't want her there? What if he'd changed his mind and didn't want to be her sort-of friend?

Really, it was just a little nerve-wracking, being the first one to casually happen upon the place that the other one happened to mention they might be visiting. Felt a little stalker-y, if she were being honest.

It was no big deal, she told herself as she turned onto the next block.

He probably wasn't there, anyway.



## Blake

He could tell it was her, even though she was still a half-block away. He leaned against the front of the building and thought it was the same as when he'd happened to glance out his office window that morning and immediately spotted her down on the street below.

Fucking weird, that.

He put his hands in his pockets and allowed himself to watch her, because there was no way she could see him yet. Her hair was down, blowing in the fall breeze, and she reminded him of Meg Ryan in *You've Got Mail* with her dark tights, skirt, wool coat and scarf.

*She should have a damn pumpkin under her arm and a coffee in her hand*, he mused.

But as he watched her walking in his direction, he felt them again.

Fucking butterflies.

What in the hell was *with* that?

Nope. Fuck that. Not butterflies, no way. If he were interested in her, the way his stomach felt at that moment might possibly be butterfly-related, but he wasn't, was he? In all actuality, what he was feeling was just, shit, uh... gladness.

*Seriously - gladness?*

Yes, he was just glad to see a friend. Lunch with a buddy was better than lunch alone, so he was simply glad to see her.

That was all.

Blake straightened and walked over to the food truck, getting in line. He looked at the menu board for a solid ten seconds before he heard,

“Blake?”

He turned around, and *shit*. She was smiling up at him with that mouth, those lips, and the soft smell of her perfume was coming at him like some kind of a...uh...*shit*, something he couldn't ignore. Or something.

*What the fuck was wrong with him?*

Her cheeks were pink, her eyes bright, and his chest felt a little tight as he looked at her lipstick.

“I thought that was you,” she said with a teasing glint in her eyes.

“It is me,” he replied, unable to stop himself from grinning back. “Are you out trolling for calzone, too?”

She leaned in a little closer and said, “To be honest, I’ve never been a fan of the dough-dome pizza that they call calzone. I like my slices big, open, and melty. Just like my men.”

“Did you seriously just say that?”

“I know - ew. I was trying something.” She crinkled her nose, narrowed her eyes and said, “I don’t think I stuck the landing.”

“I don’t think so, either.” Blake turned his attention back to the menu and said, “Their fried ravioli is good.”

“Is it ricotta cheese-filled?” she asked.

“I think so,” Blake said, looking at her. “Why? Is that bad?”

She nodded and said, “Ricotta is lumpy and disgusting, like curdled milk mixed with cottage cheese. But if you like spoiled food, who am I to judge? Enjoy.”

“Oh, I will,” he replied, thinking of her pop tart – and empty fridge - and wondering if she was a picky eater. But as he looked at her – as she looked

up at him, wearing a shitty little grin – it held for just a moment too long. Something passed between them, a memory or an awareness, before she cleared her throat and turned her attention to the menu.

Said, “Do they have good spaghetti?”

Blake just looked at her profile, his brain slow to move on and comprehend her words. When she didn’t turn to him, he said, “No one knows the answer to that question because who would be stupid enough to order spaghetti from a food truck?”

“I would,” she said, still looking at the menu. “I love spaghetti and spaghetti is on the menu, so judge me not.”

“But you can’t walk and eat spaghetti at the same time, dipshit.”

*That* made her look, and then her grin was back. “Now I have to - challenge accepted - which will be a colossal mistake for which I’ll blame you all day. Every time someone looks at the blobs of marinara on my shirt, I shall curse your name.”

“I thought that was a dress,” he said, and the look she gave him - forehead crinkle - made it clear that she was just as shocked by his asinine awareness of her attire as he was. *What the fuck was that?*

“Yeah, um,” she said, raising a hand to push her hair behind her ear, “It’s a skirt and top.”

“Ah,” he said, gave a nod, and stepped up to the order window, needing an escape from that moment of idiocy. He lowered his voice and ordered. “Could I please get the spaghetti?”

He heard her quietly laugh and then she stepped beside him and said to the second cashier, “I would like the spaghetti, and can I also get a slice of cheese pizza and a piece of garlic bread, please?”

He opened his mouth to comment when Izzy whipped her head toward him, pointed a finger and said, “Don’t say a word - I’m hungry, okay?”

He didn’t know why, but he couldn’t *not* smile. He looked at the freckles on her nose and said, “What would I even say, Iz?”



### **Izzy**

“So let me get this straight,” Blake said, his face relaxed behind dark sunglasses as he walked beside her. He was looking straight ahead, his hands in the pockets of his perfectly-pressed suit pants. “The house that you accidentally “forked,” which I can’t even believe is a thing, was being watched by the FBI.”

“Yep.” Izzy took a sip of her soda as they walked back to work. “Forked the wrong house, which turned out to be the residence of some questionable members of a satanic cult. So not only did we get picked up by the feds, but we were questioned at the station and also got MIPs because we had a bottle of vodka in the trunk.”

“Wow.” He looked at her then, and even though his eyes were covered, she knew they were squinting because his dimples were out. “Your high school experience was *very* different from mine.”

“When there’s nothing to do, you make things happen, Phillips.” Izzy saw the Ellis building at the end of the block, and she was bummed it was time to go back. Even though Blake was her polar opposite and the kind of guy (hot, successful) who usually made her nervous, she felt totally comfortable around him.

She had *fun* with him because she was able to relax and be her uncool self.

“I forgot to ask,” he said, glancing over at her as they walked around a woman and her dog, a French bulldog who was sitting on the sidewalk with zero intention of moving, “Did you get your car back?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Izzy said, rolling her eyes and looking over at him. “In order to get it out of jail, I have to take the title to the impound lot *and* pay a few hundred bucks.”

“Oof,” he said, and she could feel his gaze on her, even though his eyes were covered by Ray-Bans.

“Oof, indeed,” she replied. “Because after that, I get to have it towed to a mechanic, who will probably tell me it’s going to cost a fortune to fix.”

“No idea what’s wrong with it?” he asked.

“Nope,” she said, looking down at the scarred sidewalk as she tried not to think about how little money she actually had in her bank account at the moment. “But I didn’t hate taking the bus today, so perhaps this is a chance to reexamine my vehicular needs.”

“Yeah, but how far is the bus stop from your apartment?”

“Only a few blocks.”

“Do you really want to have to hoof it a few blocks in the snow?” His voice was full of adultly concern as he added, “In the dark? In the rain?”

That reminded Izzy of the dark and rainy night where she’d kissed Blake, and her stomach did a little flip of its own accord. She cleared her throat and said, “No, but I’m also not going to throw a lot of coin into a car that’s fifteen years old.”

He looked at her - she could see his eyes through the sunglasses now because the sun was hitting the lenses just right - and it felt like he was

having some sort of internal conversation with himself as he just watched her. He didn't say anything, and when they stopped at the corner to wait on the light, he said, "What are the rules about car repairs?"

"What?" Izzy tossed her cup into the trash can next to the crossing light and put her hands in her pockets. "What do you mean?"

The light changed, and they started walking again. Blake said, "If you wanted to have it towed to my place, I could take a look at it."

That made Izzy stumble in the middle of the street, which made Blake grab her arm and say, "Easy, Shay."

*Easy, Shay.* Good God - what was he trying to do to her? Since the moment she'd met him, his entire existence had been an assault on her ovaries. And now he was going to add car-fixing and stumble-stopping to the dopamine equation?

She needed holy water or garlic STAT, although that fleeting sarcastic thought brought to mind an image of Blake having *unholy* water poured over his massive chest like some kind of *hot guy wet t-shirt contest* participant.

*So garlic it is.*

Izzy was disappointed when he released her arm, which was a ludicrous reaction, so she said, "I don't think that's probably allowable. But thank you."

He gave her an eyebrow raise and said, "Why not?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, it just seems too personal."

He grabbed the sleeve of her coat and tugged. It startled her, the jerking motion that moved her a little closer to him, but his mouth slid into a smirk before he started pulling her along behind him as he walked toward the alley to their right.

“What are you doing, Phillips?”

“Getting you to listen to reason before we go back to work, *Shay*.”

He let go of her sleeve once they were out of foot traffic. He took off his sunglasses, and she *felt* the gold flecks of his intense brown eyes as he said, “Hear me out. I’m still all-in on rule-following for us, but you’re my friend, Iz. If I can fix your car and save you a fortune, why wouldn’t that be okay?”

*Because it would feel like...something. Something from a daydream about boyfriends working on their girlfriend’s car.*

Side note: Every time he called her “Iz,” a sex angel got its wings.

“Because of money, maybe?” She couldn’t think all of a sudden, but she knew there was a reason. *Reasons...reasons...what were reasons again?* She cleared her throat and said, “You’re my boss, so there’s got to be a rule about me paying you for services.”

“Like I’d charge you,” he said, sounding disgusted and his eyebrows slammed down.

“Well *I* would have a rule about that, then, Blake,” Izzy said, tucking her hair behind her ears and looking up at his perfectly-trimmed stubble. “No way would I let you fix my car *without* paying you.”

“Then you can pay me with a favor,” he said, and she watched as it hit. He’d said it innocently, casually offering to work for nothing, but his eyes got hot when he realized. His voice sounded deeper, rougher, when he responded with, “I’m sure I can come up with something.”

The air in the alley suddenly got thick and quiet, like they were underwater. The city sounds disappeared, and Izzy swore she could hear her heart beating and her breath catch. She swallowed, and her voice was husky when she said, “I’m sure you can, too.”



“If we were alone,” he growled, his voice nearly a whisper as his mouth lowered to her ear. “I think we could negotiate a very good deal.”

“I know we could,” Izzy said, her eyelids heavy as she felt his breath on her neck.

Every nerve ending in her body was crackling and straining toward him, and she was almost lost to it when she heard a car horn in the distance.

*Yes, you're in an alley, dumbass.*

Izzy's eyes went wide and she sucked in a breath. “Which is why we need to get back on the sidewalk *now*.”

He lifted his head and smiled down at her. “We're in the center of the city during lunchtime on a weekday - far from alone. I think we're safe.”

“You don't think this alley feels private?” She blinked, feeling disoriented as he pointed that gaze at her, and she breathed, “I feel all alone in the dark with you here.”

The instant it left her mouth she regretted it, because Blake's languid smile dropped away. His jaw clenched and he just looked at her for a few seconds before he said, “Izzy--”

“Ohmigosh - I have to get back.” She pasted a grin on her face and took a step back from him, mortified. Obviously she'd been the only one on the verge of combustion, and she needed to get the hell out of there. Her voice was too loud and perky when she said, “You may be able to take long lunches because you're Mr. Fancy VP, but this lowly generalist has to be on time. I'm going to sprint back and I'll see you later.”

His eyebrows went down again. “Iz--”

“Bye!” Izzy turned and literally started slow jogging, knowing she looked like a moron but unable to stop herself because she needed to put space between herself and Mr. Chest.

All she wanted in her quiet little life was to keep her friend Blake and to embark upon a promising career at Ellis, but if those things were going to happen, she needed to find a way to be cool when she was close to him.

There had to be a way to speak to him without melting into an endorphin-riddled puddle of goo, right?

It wasn't until she got back to her office – sweaty and still embarrassed - and sat down behind her desk that she saw he'd sent a message.

*Blake: I have a Plan B, Iz, so don't freak out. Can I call you at six?*

Plan B? What did that mean? Izzy sighed and contemplated not responding, but texted: *I'll be dining with The Darkling, but I suppose he won't mind if I take a call.*

*Blake: Excellent. Also, you looked VERY cool slow-jogging through midtown in high-heeled boots, FYI.*

*Izzy: Oh, I know.*

Izzy logged back into her computer and was just getting started on a headcount report when her phone buzzed again.

*Blake: I just found a marinara stain on my tie, so I think I've proved my point about spaghetti.*

She smiled and shook her head, even though she was alone in her office.

*Izzy: Serves you right - the whole thing was your fault (it didn't have to be like that). I have an orange, Saturn-shaped stain in the center of my shirt, so your tie is child's-play. #CountYourBlessings*

*Blake: Have a good afternoon, Starbucks Amy.*

*Izzy: Same to you, Chestie McBestie.*

## Chapter Eight



### Izzy

Izzy took a bite of her pizza, set down her plate and lifted the ringing phone to her ear. “It’s 5:55 - you’re early.”

“Want me to call back in five?” Blake asked.

She wiped her mouth with a napkin and said, “Nah, but you’re going to have to listen to me finish this last piece of pizza and it’s so good I’m making bedroom noises.”

“Gah – please no. Pizza *again*?” He laughed into the phone. “It’s only been a few hours since your last piece.”

“Your point?”

“Forget it.”

The Darkling meowed from his spot on the floor, wanting her lap, but she had no interest in cat-hair pizza. “What did *you* have for dinner, Phillips? A brick of kale? Fifteen chicken breasts? Something from the tofu family?”

“Those are seriously your guesses?”

“I used to work with this super swole guy, and he literally ate five chicken breasts every day at work.” She couldn’t remember his name, but one time he’d showed her a video of himself lifting weights and then he’d been pissed when she’d laughed at the noise he made. *It was a really weird noise.* “He ate one breast during each fifteen-minute break, and three for lunch.”

Blake said, “Do people still say swole?”

“I don’t know, but they should.” She finished her last bite of pizza, wiped her hands on her napkin and flipped on *Little House*. “So okay - I bet you had a veggie burrito and sweet potato tots.”

His deep, quiet laugh caused her to snuggle a little deeper into the sofa cushions. He said, “That’s *really* specific.”

“And right?”

“And wrong. I had a turkey sandwich.”

“So basically the same thing.”

“Sure.” Izzy could hear dishes clinking as he said, “So listen. I was thinking about us.”

Izzy’s fingertips got tingly and her heartbeat picked up. *Us*. God, did he want there to be an *us*?

“Yeah?” She said casually, gnawing on her lip and waiting for more. The Darkling jumped on her lap and quickly voiced his displeasure at having to wait.

“Yeah. I appreciate your Starbucks presentation and value its merits, but I think we’re making things too complicated.”

“You do?” She glanced at the TV and watched Ma Ingalls walk into Olson’s Mercantile with a basket full of eggs on her arm.

“Sure,” Blake said, and it sounded like he was pounding on something.  
“We’re both adults, right?”

“Right...?”

“So I think we can handle it.” Blakes voice was cool and confident as he said, “Just because we have a little chemistry doesn’t mean we’re at the mercy of our basest instincts, right? We’re not animals.”

“Animals,” she repeated, unsure of his point.

“There’s no reason we can’t be friends who do regular friend things. Saying we can’t ever be alone is completely negating the fact that we’re grown-ass people capable of ignoring the occasional spark.”

So he saw their burning, palpable attraction as an *occasional spark* - good to know.

Izzy didn’t know what to say, so she asked, “What is that pounding noise?”

“What?”

“The pounding,” Izzy said, irritated she felt wholly disappointed that Blake’s discussion of *us* wasn’t a desire to find an *us*. “What is that pounding?”

“Oh,” Blake said, sounding confused. “I’m making homemade cat food.”

*He is killing me*, Izzy thought. Dagger, holy water, garlic - all of it would never be enough. The man was making homemade cat food; there was no protection strong enough. She said, “You know they sell cat food at the store. Bags of it. Ever heard of Meow Mix?”

“Too old and pukey for Meow Mix,” he replied.

“Ah. Well you’ll have to give me the recipe.”

“Really?”

“Geez, Phillips. No.”

“Is there a reason you changed the subject, Shay?” he asked, his voice quiet and serious in her ear.

“Not at all,” she said, a little too bright and cheery. “I totally agree that we’re not animals.”

He coughed out a laugh. “Oh-*kay*, but what about the rest?”

She exhaled before saying, “I mean, yes - of course we can handle it.”

“You have my word, Iz,” he said, gravely serious, “that no matter how alone we are, I will always behave as if we’re standing in front of the board of directors.”

“Oh.” *Always*. “That makes me feel so much better. Thank you.”



## **Blake**

Blake had thought getting it out in the open would make him feel better, but it didn't.

The way she definitively said *that makes me feel so much better* confirmed what he'd suspected; that Izzy would never be comfortable being friends with him if she were afraid of something physical happening. He'd meant to assure her that she could let her guard down, but he felt...fuck, *something* about how relieved she seemed.

“Now that we’ve got that out of the way,” he said, scooping the cat food out of the mixing bowl and pressing it into the air-tight container with a rubber spatula. “Let’s talk about your car.”

She sighed, and the speaker phone sent her breath across the expanse of his kitchen. “Let’s not.”

“Iz, listen to me. I don’t want to get in your business, but my dad is a mechanic. I grew up around cars. There’s a good chance I can fix it.”

“Oh, my God, you have a dad? I assumed you were scientifically-engineered in a lab.”

“Cute.”

“Blake, I appreciate the offer – I really do – but I just can’t.”

“I thought of something you can do for me,” he said, grabbing a towel to wipe the outside of the Pyrex bowl. “If you need that to make it okay.”

She said, “I’m scared, but lay it on me.”

He put the cat food in the fridge, then took the bowl to the sink and started filling it with soapy water. “I have to go to Boston on Wednesday, and you could take care of my cats while I’m gone.”

She didn’t say anything, but he thought he heard her squeak.

He said, “Did you hear me?”

“Yes. Um.” She cleared her throat and said, “What exactly would that entail? Because pouring food into a bowl is not the equivalent of labor-intensive automobile repairs.”

“Oh, trust me.” He washed his hands, then turned off the water and let the bowl soak. “They’re very high maintenance.”

“Tell me everything,” she said, sounding interested, which made him smile.

He went into the living room, sat down on the couch and turned on the TV. Both of his cats were immediately on his lap; it was like they waited for him to sit. They liked to paw around to get comfortable, but he put his hands on their backs and helped them settle into a sit so they didn’t drive him crazy. “As you know, Goodyear is blind, so everything has to be

routine or he just walks in circles, meowing, because he can't figure out what's going on."

"That is the sweetest thing I've ever heard," she said.

"When you walk in the door, you have to say his name a few times, so he knows you're there. I usually pick him up and pet him when he finally appears, just to ensure he knows everything is okay."

Izzy squeaked again, which for some bizarre reason, made him happy as he scratched Goodyear's head and looked for something to watch.

"He likes his food - which I keep in the fridge - warmed up. He also needs his food and water to be in the exact same spot at all times, or again with the circles."

"I'm so in love with your cat, Phillips, you don't even know," she said.

That made him grin, like a dipshit, all alone in his living room. "He has pills that I have to crush and put in applesauce, which he licks off of a plastic spoon."

"While you hold the spoon?" she asked.

"Why do I feel like this is a cat-lady version of phone sex?"

She started laughing - hard - and she said, "Oh, it so is, Blake. *Tell me what you're wearing when you're holding the spoon. Does he lick it fast or slow?*"

She started cackling, and he couldn't help but fall into laughter right along with her as he switched and gave Hole's chin a scratch. "You little deviant, quit using my elderly cat's needs to scratch your weirdo itch."

"My apologies." She cleared her throat and said, "Please continue."

He flipped past *Little House* and wondered if she was watching. "My other cat, Hole, is diabetic, so he needs two injections a day."

"I'm sorry, did you just say *cat hole*?" she said, still laughing a little.



“No,” he replied, then added, “Well, yes but no. My other cat is *named* hole.”

“This is very incredible,” she said, and he could hear the smile lingering in her voice. “Also please explain your cats’ names.”

Blake stopped on *SportsCenter* and said, “I found Goodyear under my tire in the parking garage, and I found Hole in a hole behind my parents’ house.”

“Your lack of naming convention inspiration is truly remarkable.”

“Thank you.”

“Not a compliment.”

“Sure, it was.”

“I am *dying* to see what your little guys look like,” she said, sounding excited. “Sign me up for the catsitting - I’m a thousand percent in.”

“Side note: I can barely move at the moment because they’re all over me.”

“What color are they? Are they fluffy?”

“You really *are* a cat lady, aren’t you?” He looked at the boys and said, “Want to flip to Facetime so you can see them?”

Izzy

Yes.

No.

*I don’t know!*

Izzy was dying to see his cats, but could she just Facetime without preparation? She stalled with, “Can you do that, mid-call?”

“Sure,” he said. “You just hit the button.”

She did a quick self-appraisal - sloppy bun, glasses, YOUR MOM t-shirt. She was a mess, but since he’d admitted to feeling nothing for her except

friendship and a random spark, what did it matter?

“Show me the cats, then,” she said, feeling nervous as she waited for the switch. FaceTime did its magic, and then--

*Oh, dear God.*

There was Blake, only he looked *nothing* like VP Blake. His dark hair was messy, like he'd changed shirts and hadn't cared to fix his hair afterward. He was sitting on a beige couch, wearing a faded red KC t-shirt that said 0:13 in yellow letters. The cotton tee looked soft and worn, and it showcased that beautiful pec-cleavage-ridge thing that put the Chest in his Mister.

But worse than all of that gorgeousness? There were two cats curled up against his abs, one gray and one black, and his big hand was wrapped underneath them, holding them in place.

*Is it hot in here?* It felt hot to her all of a sudden.

“Nice shirt,” he said, smirking as his dark eyes crinkled at the corners. “Where's The Darkling?”

She raised her phone so he could see the cat sitting on the back of her neck. That made his lips slide into a full-on grin. She said, “So tell me which one is which.”

"This little pain in the ass is Hole," he said, gently lifting the gray cat's chin to the phone. "He's a hairball nightmare and likes to sit on my ear when I'm sleeping, so I really should've dumped him back in the hole a long time ago."

She only half-heard his words because she was obsessed with his face. The way big, powerful Blake looked at his feline friend as he talked shit on him made her a little weak in the knees.

"And this is Goodyear." Blake raised the fluffy black face to the phone and said, "I'm fairly certain the universe dropped him under my tire as some sort of punishment for my sins."

"Or as a reward for the one good thing you've done in your life," she said.

"Not possible. And there's more than one," he said.

"That sounds made up."

"So," he said, re-settling the cats against his midsection. "Are you watching *Little House*?"

"You know it," she said, a little surprised he remembered.

"Is that your plan for the rest of the night?" he asked. "Charles Ingalls and pizza?"

"Oh, I'm sure I'll switch to binge-watching old seasons of *Top Chef* soon, but Charles is always with me in my heart."

The cats jumped off his lap and ran out of her line of sight. He shook his head and said, "Bird just landed on the railing of my deck. Somehow Goodyear always knows something's happening and blindly follows Hole, literally."

"Show me your deck," she said, then laughed when he gave her an eyebrow raise.

She re-enunciated, "D-e-c-k deck."

"Ah," he said, and then he stood up and was moving. He was walking as he looked into the camera and said, "I'll show you my big deck, and then we're going to make a plan for your car."

"Bossy much?" she said, a little hypnotized by his Facetime eye contact and his deep voice saying *my big deck*.

"Only to the stubborn," he replied.

She heard him open the sliding door, and then he turned the camera around.

“Wow,” she said, a little in awe of the high-rise, downtown view. He obviously lived at the edge of downtown, way outside of her price range. “I bet you could kill someone with an apple from that height.”

He turned his phone back around and gave her a *you are ridiculous* look. “Now about your car.”

“Okay – my car. I will take the title to the lot after work tomorrow and get it out of jail.”

“I can give you a ride, if you want, and then I can have it towed to my garage.”

Izzy still felt weird about that. All of it. “Um, okay, as long as you promise your cats will be awful for me while you’re gone.”

“Oh, absolutely they will. They are the bane of my existence,” he said, sounding like he loathed them while they sleepily purred against his body.



## **Blake**

“What the hell is that thing behind you?” Blake asked, knowing full well what it was. Izzy looked behind her at the workout tower she never used. “That? It’s a workout *thing*.”

“A *thing*, huh?” It was almost midnight, and they’d been Facetiming for hours. It hadn’t been intentional, but they’d started watching the same episode of *Top Chef* somewhere around nine and had essentially been binge-watching together ever since.

*Sidenote: Izzy was pathetically Team Sam, even though Blake had told her all the reasons the guy wouldn't win, whereas Blake was intelligently cheering for Ilan, the obvious frontrunner.*

He said, "I bet you don't even know how to use it."

She scowled at him. "Yes, I do."

"You have scrawny arms – can't believe you. Sorry."

She rolled her eyes at him through the camera, then stood. *Like he knew she would.* "Watch and learn, Mr. Chest."

Things went blurry for a minute and then he was staring at the workout tower, so she must've propped her phone against something. He watched her come into view in that stupid t-shirt and black leggings, and he leaned back against the couch and grinned.

"Now, don't be jealous of my strength, Blakeley," she said, dancing around like a boxer getting ready for a fight. "This isn't something everyone can do."

"Right."

It was weird, he thought as she acted like a dork in front of the camera with her messy hair and nerd glasses. His former fiancée was charming in a perfect sort of way (when she wasn't lying to him). Skye was gorgeous and elegant. He'd been crazy about her, ready to marry her, but he'd never felt this...*charmed* by her.

It was probably just because he actually had *fun* with Izzy. He was *friends* with her, whereas he hadn't really been with Skye.

Izzy wrapped her hands around the handles and brought up her legs in front of her. Said, "You lift your legs, Phillips, and it strengthens the core. See?"

She brought her legs up and down.

“*That* is how you’re using that thing?” Blake shook his head as she beamed proudly while dangling from the exercise apparatus. “What about the other side?”

“What?” She dropped her feet to the floor and let go of the handles.

“You’re supposed to grab the top of the other side and do pull-ups.”

She looked up at the pull-up bar, then back at the camera. “I mean, I suppose you *could* do that if you’re a pathetic little workout monkey, but this machine is for your core, dumbass.”

“It is not, *dumbass*.” He crossed his arms and said, “It’s for pull-ups, and the part you’re using for your core is for back pull-ups.”

“That doesn’t even sound real, back pull-ups,” she said, walking toward her phone and carrying it with her as she sat back down. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I have the same machine, Shay,” he said.

“Then show me or it’s not true, Phillips,” she replied, her stubborn chin raised.

Blake stood and started walking toward the spare bedroom. “Fine, but you’re about to feel *really* stupid.”



## **Izzy**

*Holy crap – his bedroom.*

Izzy saw it in a flash as he walked down the hall with the camera facing forward, but it was too quick for her to register anything other than a very big bed.

*Of course* he had a big bed.

He flipped on the lights in another bedroom that appeared to be an office/workout room. There was a big desk, along with a treadmill, an exercise bike, and a workout tower exactly like hers.

He set the phone down – she assumed on the desk – so it faced the tower.

“Ohmigod - am I going to see the chestal secrets of Mr. Chest’s chest?” she asked.

“You wish,” Blake said, and then he reached up with his long arms and grabbed the pullup bar. Without a word, he started doing pullups as if they were the easiest thing in the world.

“Booooo,” she said, giggling as her eyes were treated to Blake’s Feats of Strength. “That’s lame. Total weak sauce.”

“I haven’t heard that expression since middle school,” he said while not slowing or ruining his perfect form.

“I haven’t said it since then.” Izzy couldn’t help but notice the hard strip of stomach that was exposed by his raised arms. Not only that, but his shorts hung low on his hips, so low that she could see that jutting hipbone thing that was pretty much an anatomical aphrodisiac.

*Sweet holy hipbones, she needed smelling salts.*

“Stop it, you pathetic loser, before I puke,” she said. “Your form is atrocious.”

He dropped himself to the floor and beamed at the camera, smiling in a way that made her feel like he knew how hot she was for him. “Sure it is.”

“What about the other part?” she asked, but she felt like a perv as she said it because she was basically just requesting that he perform another Feat of Strength. “I think you made up something called a *back* pull-up...?”

He went around to the other side and started doing dip-down things that made her want to bite his apple-bottom biceps, so she said, “Oh, those. I did

like a hundo this morning.”

He dismounted, winked and said, “Okay, Iz.”

She rolled her eyes and said, “Don’t you have some chickens to eat or something?”

“Trying to get rid of me?” he asked, turning off the light and heading back in the direction of the living room (or so she thought from this initial Facetime visit to his apartment).

“I probably should - it’s pretty late,” she said, not wanting to get off the phone but knowing it was the responsible thing to do.

“Yeah - I suppose you’re right,” he replied, a serious expression crossing his face for the briefest of seconds. His eyes seemed to search her face as he said, “I’m sure you have more pizza to eat, anyway.”

“There *are* a few leftover pieces,” she agreed, and there was something so warm and comfortable about their mutual teasing that she was already homesick for it, even though they weren’t even off the phone yet.

They made plans for him to pick her up the following day, after work, to get things rolling with her car. But after the call was disconnected, Izzy couldn’t settle down enough to even consider sleep. She was wired, all keyed-up from hours of Blake, and she kind of didn’t know what to do with herself.

She turned off the lights, laid down, and was trying to force sleep when her phone buzzed on her nightstand.

She rolled over and picked it up.

*Blake: You awake?*

She grabbed her glasses and slid them back on her nose before responding. *Sadly, yes. Wide awake.*

*Blake: Good.*



*Izzy: Mean.*

*Blake: I was thinking - you should probably come over to my place tomorrow.*

Izzy gasped and sat straight up in bed. *Whaaaat?* He wanted her to come over? How was she even supposed to respond to that?

*Blake: I leave for Boston really early Wed. morning, so I should probably show you everything you need to know about the cats.*

That's right - the cats. She rubbed her fingertips over her eyebrows and sighed. Texted: *That works - after we go to the impound lot?*

*Blake: Yeah. I was thinking I can order a pizza for you to inhale while you meet the boys.*

Izzy was trying to keep her brain from overload, but she was going to be eating dinner with Blake tomorrow. Just she and Blake, alone in his apartment. With his very big bed. And his pull-up abdominals.

*Gahhhh.*

Also, trying to remember that she could only like him as a friend – that they would only ever *be* friends – was incredibly difficult when she was more attracted to him than she'd been to anyone.

Like, ever.

In her entire life.

She was trying to get a grip on her whirling Blake thoughts when he sent another text.

*Blake: Would you consider staying at my apartment while I'm gone? I hate to ask, but I hate leaving Goodyear alone even more. And this way you won't have to keep coming and going; way easier.*

Stay at Blake's apartment?!

Stay. At. Mr. Chest's. Apartment. She thought  
*jiofqpwhehtp8439qghiea;igdg.*

She responded: *Um.*

*Blake: It's close to work, too, so you won't have to mess with the bus.  
Three minute walk.*

Izzy wanted to say yes, but it felt like a bad idea. A terrible idea. Her phone buzzed yet again, and she felt her cheeks go warm when she read his message.

*Blake: I AM BEGGING. I'll even let you sleep on my brand-new (being delivered Wed.) California king (with adjustable firmness) that is touted as the equivalent of sleeping on a cloud - that's how desperate I am.*

Staying at Blake's apartment. Sleeping in Blake's bed. *What in God's name was happening?* Was she having a dream? She slapped her cheek and no – not a dream.

*Izzy: Can I use your building's amenities?*

*Blake: Of course.*

*Izzy: Can I eat pizza in your new bed?*

*Blake: Of course NOT.*

She pulled back the covers and got out of bed. She might as well go grab a book, because there was no way she was going to go back to sleep now. Life just got really interesting and her brain was preparing to explode.

She texted as she walked into the living room: *I'll do it, but I'm very afraid of falling in love with your cats.*

It took a few minutes for Blake to respond, and his words did something to her already riotous belly.

*Blake: Don't be scared, Iz. Just take a deep breath and let yourself fall.*

## *Chapter Nine*



“Do you want a receipt?”

*Hell, no*, Izzy thought, depressed by the amount of money she’d just paid to get her non-working car out of jail. She put her credit card back in her wallet and said to the guy behind the counter, “No, thanks.”

“Young’s Towing will be picking up the vehicle within the hour,” Blake said, all business, and Izzy looked at him. When had he called the towing company? He was still in suit and tie, all VP vibes, and there was something ridiculously attractive about the authority he exuded.

“Sounds good,” the lot attendant said, nodding. “They know where it’s going?”

Blake answered in the affirmative, but also gave the guy the address of his garage, just in case.

Izzy looked down at her dirty Chucks, which were right next to his perfect butter-soft leather dress shoes. She knew she looked like a total wreck next to him. But she’d decided, when she got home from work, that a

wise thing to do would be to change into scrubby clothes, wash her face, and pull her hair back into a ponytail.

It had been less than a day since Blake told her he'd never make a move on her – and she totally believed him – but she figured she'd be less inclined to overthink their “spark” if she knew she looked awful.

“Ready?” he asked, one eyebrow raised, and she nodded and turned toward the door.

Once they were in his car, she said, “You live downtown, but the address you gave for your garage is out in Springfield. Isn't that like twenty miles from your house?”

“I don't work on cars that often,” he said as he maneuvered through traffic, “So I opted for the less expensive option a little further away.”

“So, it's not the garage you park in every day. Got it.”

His big hands turned the steering wheel as he went around a corner. “My building has a garage for parking, but the Springfield bay is just a little project stall for repairs.”

“Oh,” she said, trying not to imagine him leaning over the hood of a car with his hands wrapped around wrenches. “Do you have coveralls?”

That made him glance over at her. “No.”

“Gloves? Safety glasses?”

“What are you doing here, Shay?”

She giggled and said, “Just trying to picture you working on cars but it's impossible because you're so...”

She waved a hand, gesturing at his GQ looks and the interior of his luxury SUV.

“Well, you won't have to picture it for long,” he said, switching lanes, “because I'm going to make you keep me company when I work on your

sad little car.”

She crossed her arms and said around a laugh, “What if I don’t feel like it?”

“Too bad,” he said, his mouth in a little smirk as he kept his eyes on the road. “I expect you to feed me, entertain me, and assist me while I bring your car back to life like some sort of mechanically-inclined god.”

Izzy snorted. “Oh, I’ll be doing *something* to you while you work,” she said.

*Gahhhh - not what I meant! I meant physical harm, not sex acts!*

He didn’t say a word, but his jaw clenched, and she felt like acknowledging what she *didn’t* mean would make her suggestive suggestion even more suggestive.

Or something.

*Shit.*

“But be careful what you wish for,” she charged forth with, refusing to let it get weird. “Perhaps I shall read aloud from my favorite novel or sing the entire *Hamilton* soundtrack.”

“Why does this suggestion not surprise me?”

“Because you can tell I’m artistic?”

“Because I can tell you like to irritate me.”

“Hey, do you have one of those little scooter thingies that you lay down on with the wheels so you can roll under cars? Because I think I’d like to play with one of those.”

That made him glance over with a *you’re-a-child* smirk. “Creeper.”

“No,” she said, rolling her eyes. “It’s not like I want to scoot under *you*. Somebody thinks pretty highly of himself.”

“That’s what it’s called – a creeper.” He shook his head and said around a smile, “And yes, I have one.”

“Well,” she said, “Dibs on the creeper.”

Blake pulled into a parking garage in the center of the city, leaving Izzy to assume he lived in the high-rise above it. She got out of the car without a word, trying to act like she wasn’t crazy-impressed by his address.

She followed him to the elevator enclosure, and when he pushed the up button, Izzy asked, “Can your cats have tuna?”

He looked over at her. “Why?”

“Just curious,” she said, pulling the pouch of Starkist out of her hoodie pocket. “Can they?”

“Yes, they can have pocket tuna,” he said, “But they already have food.”

“This will buy their insta-love for me, though,” she said.

“I wouldn’t hold my breath.”

The elevator dinged, and the doors slid open.

“Why?” Izzy asked, watching as he stepped in after her and pushed the button for the twelfth floor. “They don’t like tuna?”

“They don’t like people,” he said.

“Oh, well, I’m not people,” she replied, watching the doors close. Floor numbers advanced on the display as the elevator went up. “And all cats love me.”

“We’ll see,” he said, pulling his phone out of his pant pocket and unlocking the screen.

“Yes, we *will*,” Izzy muttered.

That made Blake look up from his phone. His eyes were a little squinty, like he was thinking as his eyes moved over her face, and he asked, “Pepperoni or combo?”

“Pepperoni,” she said, looking down because sometimes his eye contact was a little *too* direct.

When the elevator reached the twelfth floor and the doors slid open, Izzy followed Blake down a long hallway with ivy-patterned grey carpet. Modern sconces on midnight walls illuminated their way like fairy lights on a dusky garden path. He stopped in front of 1213 and pulled his keys from his pocket.

“I like your door,” she said, then wanted to smack her hand over her mouth for sounding like a child. *I like your door - who said that?* But it was ridged with heavy wood panels and a huge brass knocker, like it was the entrance to a grand estate instead of an apartment door.

“Thanks,” he said, unlocking the door and holding it open for her. “Is it weird to say that the minute I saw it, I knew I was going to lease this unit?”

“Not at all,” she said, breezing past him and into his apartment. “That’s cute.”

“For fuck’s sake, it’s not *cute*,” he muttered, and she felt the tiniest of shivers crawl up her back as he hovered somewhere behind her. She heard the door close and tried to tell herself that it was no big deal, being alone with him in his apartment.

“Fine,” Izzy said around a smile, stepping over so he could lead her further into his apartment. “It’s totally lame.”

He stopped beside her. Gave her a questioning eyebrow and asked, “Did you just call me lame?”

“Did I stutter?”

He looked like he was going to smile, but instead he put his keys on the table just inside the door and said, “Hey. Goodyear.”

Izzy turned and stared, looking for the cat. Blake walked farther into the apartment, and she followed at his heels, reaching into her hoodie pocket to open the tuna pouch.

“I’m home, buddy,” Blake said, and Izzy shook her head from her spot behind him. The man was seriously a fearsome thing to behold as his deep voice called to the cat in sweet softness.

*Silver bullets, maybe?* Perhaps silver bullets were her only chance for survival.

A cat meowed and came around the corner, a sweet little fluffer who headed straight for Blake as he lowered his big body to a deep squat and said, “Hey, buddy.”

Blake scooped up the cat and stood, turning to look at Izzy. She smiled as he rubbed the cat’s head, and she stepped a little closer.

“Hey, Goodyear,” she said, reaching out a hand to pet him.

He hissed and made a little cat-growl noise, instantly backing her up.

“Told you,” Blake said, sounding pleased as he kept rubbing Goodyear’s head.

“It’s only because we just met,” Izzy said, rolling her eyes and pulling the tuna out of her hoodie. “He’ll love me soon enough.”

“No, he won’t,” Blake said matter-of-factly.

“Are you going to show me around your apartment or what?” she asked, waving the pouch of seafood around in hopes of a feline response.

“Oh, don’t be snarky,” he said, treating her to a full-strength smile. “If he could see your face, I’m sure he’d love you.”

“He’ll love me anyway.” The cat seemed entirely unmoved by her fishy stench. “Where’s the kitchen?”



“Follow me.” Blake set down his cat, then led her through a living room that had huge windows, a gorgeous buff-colored turn-of-the-century sofa, a wall of bookshelves and a thick off-white area rug that looked like nap perfection.

“That view does not suck,” she muttered to herself, looking out at the city as she followed at his heels.

When they walked into the kitchen, Izzy had two thoughts.

The first: Blake was an entirely different kind of adult than she was. His kitchen was large, modern, and didn’t have any random items sitting out. No empty pizza boxes, no cans lined up beside the sink, waiting to be recycled, and not a single dish was resting in the sink.

It occurred to her that she should be mortified by the fact that he’d visited her small, *not* pristine apartment a few days ago.

She *should* be, but for some reason, she wasn’t.

The second: he had to have a cleaning service, right? There was just no way a young, busy guy had time to make his place shine quite that brightly.

She was a big believer in the five-second rule, but in Blake’s kitchen she’d go a full thirty.

Minutes.

“So this is where you’ll find their food.” He opened his chef-quality refrigerator and pointed to the bottom shelf. “The orange containers.”

“Is the color indicative of something? Is orange cat-specific?”

“No,” he said, pulling out a container and opening it.

“I thought maybe the “O” for orange stood for something like *oh-no-it’s-not-for-people*. Or *oops-this-is-horsemeat*.”

That made his mouth kick up just a little. “*Only for felines?*”

“Exactly.”

He looked at her for a long second, his dark eyes all over her face, and she was about to ramble incoherently to ward off awkwardness when he said, “The boys like their food warmed up - which I know is ridiculous so spare me the mockery. I put it in this microwave for forty seconds.”

He gestured to the sink, and when she followed his finger, she saw that just to the left of it, under the counter, was a built-in microwave that looked old and crappy - it had a turn-dial, for God’s sake. He opened the door, put in the food, and started the noisy old machine.

She raised her eyes to his in disbelief. “Do you...have a separate microwave for them?”

He gave a casual shrug and looked a little uncomfortable. “It felt wrong to cook cat food where you cook human food, so I bought an old microwave at Goodwill to use for their dinner.”

She couldn’t *not* smile at him because he was beyond adorable. “Did you know that you’re a cat lady underneath your fancy suit?”

“I am not,” he said, flipping her off before taking the food out of the microwave.

“Oh, I think you are. This level of pet care is seriously--”

“No.” He raised his eyebrows and gave her a Stern Daddy look. “I hate these little pains in the asses, but it’s easier to just do what they want so they shut up and leave me alone.”

She tried not to smile, but it was impossible. “If you say so.”

“I do,” he said in kind of a loud, booming voice, and she coughed to cover her laugh.

He walked the food over to a mat in the corner, where he set down the bowl. Goodyear was there in an instant, and Hole – Blake’s other cat - appeared out of nowhere to join the feast.

“I think I can handle this. Doesn’t look too tough,” she said, watching them go to town on their food. Izzy glanced over at Blake as he was loosening his tie. She felt frozen for a second, immobilized by the movement that seemed intimate, like something she shouldn’t be seeing.

She said, “If you want to go change out of your work clothes, I promise not to rifle through your things. Much.”

“But can I trust you?” He teased, pulling off the tie and unbuttoning that restrictive top button. She heard his words, but her eyes were stuck on his strong neck. They didn’t want to move, for some reason, but she blinked fast and forced them up.

“Sure,” she said.

“Okay,” he said. “But if I catch you digging, there will be consequences.”

“So intimidating,” she quipped. “Byeee.”

His phone rang as she said it, and when he took it out of his pocket and looked at the display, he made a little groan noise. “I have to take this - it’s work.”

“Perfect. Go take it in your room but shut the door so I can rifle in peace.”

He gave her a look that was *almost* a smile before raising the phone to his ear. “This is Blake.”



## **Blake**

When he walked into the kitchen twenty minutes later, Blake didn’t expect to see *that*.

Izzy was sitting on the island, dangling her legs back and forth while eating a piece of steaming pizza and watching another old episode of Top Chef on his TV.

It wasn't that she was doing anything unusual or wrong, it was that she looked so unbelievably at home. Like she belonged there.

Blake got that fucking buzz in his gut that he'd been interpreting as an annoying "don't be a dipshit" alarm bell as he approached her.

"You're lucky I saved you some, slowpoke," she said, grabbing a half-empty bottle of Stella from the counter and lifting it to her mouth. "Want one of your beers?"

"Yes. Thank you so much." He walked over to the fridge and grabbed one, then returned to the island. The bottle opener was beside Izzy on the counter - *right* beside her, and her smell came at him as he grabbed it and uncapped the beer.

What the fuck was that - shampoo? Lotion? Perfume? It was like vanilla and baby powder but somehow sexy.

"Your cats love me now, by the way," she said, and he had no idea if she was serious or not.

But it was always that way with her.

"Do they," he said, opening the pizza box and grabbing a slice.

"Well, no - but they will - I have a plan," she said, picking up a crust from her plate.

"And that would be...?" he asked, raising the piece to his mouth while watching her nose crinkle as she grinned at him. *He was still fucking obsessed with her nose crinkles.*

She tilted her head. "That is between me and the boys."

“Is that right?” Someone on the TV was crying because their pork belly was too dry, and Hole was weaving in-between Blake’s feet, but all Blake could do was stare down at her smiling face.

Dear God, she was so fucking pretty.

It wasn’t about her looks, though, as asinine as that sounded. She was pretty because she was alive and chaotic and funny and smart. Her eyes sparkled and her nose crinkled and her mouth slid into smiles as if that was its default.

He looked at her lips and remembered what it’d felt like to kiss her. How it’d felt to have her sigh into his mouth and hold on to him as if she, too, was fighting the battle of endless imaginings.

“When do you medicate the fluffy guy?” she asked, her voice breathy as her eyes traveled all over his face.

“Whenever I want,” he replied, telling himself to move back while leaning a bit closer and resting one palm on each side of her on the butcherblock counter.

“Do you think he’ll take it from me?” she asked, her voice even quieter.

“I know he will,” he said, hypnotized by her mouth and her words and the way her eyes looked a little heavy-lidded at the moment.

“Good,” she said in a near-whisper, and he could almost feel the softness of her breath against his lips.

“So, um,” she said, blinking fast before breaking eye contact to look up at the TV. “*Shit*. Um. Where do you keep the applesauce?”

*Applesauce. Applesauce. What is applesauce again?* He straightened, took a full step back, and felt like he was waking up from a dream.

“Applesauce,” he repeated, his brain scrambling to catch up. “Is in the fridge.”

What the *what* had just happened?

He went over to the fridge - *what the hell what the hell what the hell*, opened the door and got out the jar of applesauce and Goodyear's meds. Without looking back at her, he grabbed a plastic spoon and empty yogurt container from the drawer and went to find the cat.

"He's in here," he said, finding Goodyear on his chair. He took a deep breath. *Nothing happened. Izzy probably hadn't even noticed that you were a millisecond from kissing her.*

He heard her feet as she jumped down from the island, and she looked totally normal and not freaked out as she came out of the kitchen and walked toward him. Yes, her cheeks were pink, but it was warm in there.

Really fucking hot, actually.

"Okay, show me how you slip the cat a mickey." She shifted her weight to one leg and crossed her arms.

"Okay." He showed her how he smashed a pill in the bottom of the yogurt container, then stirred in applesauce. When he picked up Goodyear and sat down in the chair, Izzy said--

"Wait - you do this in an off-white chair?" She looked horrified. "What if you spill?"

"I don't," he said, wanting to laugh as she continued to look aghast.

"Note to Iz - sit on floor when you do this," she muttered. "Continue, please."

"Thank you." He scooped up the medicated applesauce and held out the spoon, to which Goodyear immediately lifted his fuzzy little face and started taking it down. That little guy had a thing for applesauce.

"He *really* likes applesauce," she said, dropping to a squat beside them and watching Goodyear go HAM on the spoon. She reached out a hand and

petted his head, which made the cat give her a closed-mouth growl while he kept licking.

Blake *did* laugh at that, and Izzy looked up at him, grinning and crinkling her nose.

He felt like he couldn't breathe.

And when she took the spoon from him - *let me have a turn* - he realized he'd made a terrible mistake.

A gross miscalculation.

Because having Iz in his home, surrounded by his things and sleeping in his bed and leaving her what-the-hell-is-that-amazing-fucking-smell smell all over the place - well, that had the potential to change everything, regardless of whether or not anything physical happened between them.

And there was a tiny part of him that didn't hate the idea of that change.

Dammit, he thought as that traitorous cat started purring.

It was just so fucking hot in that apartment.

Wasn't it?

## *Chapter Ten*



*Blake: Fun fact - I hate flying.*

Izzy looked at her phone and smiled as she waited in line at Starbucks. She texted: *That's because you're a control freak.*

*Blake: A. No, I'm not. B. I don't need a diagnosis, I need a distraction.*

*Izzy: You think I'm free to just drop whatever I'm doing to entertain you?*

*Blake: Be honest - you're in line for coffee, aren't you?*

*Izzy: That's terrifying. Did you put an air tag in my purse?*

*Blake: No, I stuck it to your back like a modern-day "kick me" sign. Also, you go every day – wasn't tough to figure out.*

Izzy ordered her coffee, swiped her card and moved over to the waiting spot. Josh had dropped her off because her car was waiting on a part and she hadn't wanted to ride the bus with her overnight bag, the bag she was hauling to work because she was going to Blake's swanky apartment when she got off work.

She still couldn't believe it. She was excited about the view, the challenge of making his cats love her, and walking to work in the morning like she



was the fashionable protagonist in an NYC sitcom, but she was also nervous for some inexplicable reason.

She looked down at her phone and texted: *Do you have a window seat?*

*Blake: Nope. Wedged in-between a talker and a hummer*

Izzy snorted and texted: *A talker, a chest and a hummer walk into a bar...*

*Blake: Funny girl.*

*Izzy: Thank you. What time is your new bed being delivered, btw?*

*Blake: Sometime before two. NO PIZZA on the bed.*

*Izzy: Duh, Blake – I'm not five. Anyway. I've already planned out my meals for your bed. Tonight is spaghetti and meatballs. Tomorrow is babyback ribs, followed by fondue. And don't worry. I'm going to be eating a lot of powdered donuts and Cheetos to soak up anything that might drip on the bed. #perfectcatsitter*

*Blake: SHAY.*

*Izzy: Chill, PHILLIPS. I am open to changing my bed menu.*

*Blake: I WILL KNOW.*

*Izzy: You're adorable when you use all-caps. VERY POWERFUL.*

*Blake: I'm Facetimeing you tonight at 6:01 and I expect a detailed visual tour of the bed.*

*Izzy: I'm Facetimeing YOU tonight at 6:01 and I expected a detailed visual tour of your ass.*

She quickly fired-off a follow-up text.

*Izzy: NOT LITERALLY. "Your ass" as in a "your mom" joke. You get it, right? If you moon me via Facetime I shall report you to the FCC.*

*Blake: I don't think you need that coffee. Also. Maybe while I'm gone, you should look up what the FCC does, since you clearly have no idea.*

*Izzy: You're not the boss of me.*

*Blake: I am quite literally the boss of you.*

*Izzy: #stillgonnadrinkthiscoffee*

*Blake: Have a good day, Iz.*

Nicknamification, in her opinion, was the absolute sexiest. Call Isabella Shay by her last name, or "Iz," for the love of God, and she melted like pat of butter on a pile of mashed potatoes. She let out a dreamy sigh in response to his *Iz* before responding with: *You, too, Boss.*

"I still don't understand why it's ten o'clock there, and the plastic is still on," Blake said. "What are you waiting for - are you a night owl?"

Izzy was definitely *not* a night owl, and she was getting very sleepy on his big, comfy couch with his cats snuggled in a pile against her, but she just hadn't been able to bring herself to unwrap his new bed yet. It just seemed...obtrusive. *He* should be the one to pull off that protective plastic - not her. "No, but I'm far too comfy on this sofa to get up. And these guys might revolt if I do."

"Traitorous little shits. You can't keep buying their love with chicken, you know."

"Why not?" She listened to their purring and said, "They go crazy for it."

"We're paying you too much if you can afford to feed chicken breasts to the cats every day."

"Technically, you're paying *you* too much, since I fed them *your* chicken breasts."

He made a face at her - they'd been FaceTiming for exactly one hour and forty-two minutes - and leaned his head back on the headboard. "It has to be hot as hell in there if you're still running the fireplace *and* the boys are on you."

"Nah - I've got the patio slider open," she said, wishing their call wouldn't have to end soon. Because in addition to the fact that he was pretty much her favorite person in the world to talk to and play with, she was kind of enjoying the view.

Yes, he was handsome; the man could inspire pornographic letters-to-the-editor with the way he looked at work. *It was late, and the only other person in the office was the ultra-hot billionaire CEO.* But Izzy found herself marginally-obsessed with the fact that when put-together VP Blake wasn't working, he was kind of a mess. His hair was always tousled, like he'd forgotten it existed once he removed his tie, and the man seemed to live in faded t-shirts and hoodies.

It was such a contradiction, like beefy Superman being a nerdy reporter, that she felt kind of lucky that she got to see the tousled side of him.

She suspected not many people did.

Or maybe she just *hoped* that not many people did.

He narrowed his eyes and said, "You're seriously opening the windows and running the heat at the same time?"

"I just love the sound of the city, and hate being cold," she said, shrugging and looking over at the windows. There was something about the lights and the downtown sounds that made her never want to go home.

Well, that and the fact that his apartment was straight-up ridiculous.

For starters, he had an obscenely huge bathtub, as well as a shower that was the size of her entire bathroom. As if that wasn't fantastic enough, there were built-in Bluetooth stereo speakers wired throughout the place, so she could turn on her favorite playlist and have it stream across every single square foot of that dreamboat apartment.

Monstrously-large TV, world's cutest cats (next to The Darkling), a massive kitchen; why would she ever want to leave? Perhaps instead of vacating when Blake returned, she might just barricade herself inside of sexy Number 1213. Surely she could get in an extra 12-14 hours of luxuriating before the SWAT team finally kicked down that beautiful door and pulled her ass out.

"It's genius, if you think about it," she said, snuggling under the blanket as the autumn breeze blew through the apartment. "Sorry not sorry."

"That's an on-brand statement for you," Blake teased, and Izzy thought he looked tired. She should probably let him go so he could sleep. Whatever he was working on in Boston was confidential - he wasn't able to share anything with her - but important, so he needed to be rested.

"Listen, I'm going to go flood your bathroom by overfilling that decadent tub, so I really have to go. Are you planning on text-bombing me all day tomorrow, too, or was today just a one-time annoying event?"

*Please say yes.* They'd spent the entire day in a meaningless text thread of sarcasm and meme-besting, and it had been amazing.

He sat up in the bed and leaned closer to the phone, so he was all face, and said, "First of all, I did not text bomb you all day. It's called micromanaging – I have two cats to worry about."

"Um--"

"Second, since I can see that my deck door is still open behind you, obviously the micromanagement is a necessity."

"Debatable," she murmured.

"And finally," Blake said in all his AVP glory, "Yes. Based upon what I've witnessed today, I have little reason to believe that you can handle this

without my constant supervision. So you *will* be hearing from me every 3-5 minutes tomorrow.”

She tried to play it cool, but failed miserably. She was beaming into the phone when she said, "God, no, that would be the *worst*."



## **Blake**

Blake had never been so happy to see his building. He held his key card up to the security pad, rolled his suitcase through the lobby, and impatiently waited for the elevator, which seemed slower than usual.

The trip had gone well, and the acquisition was now official; everything had gone according to plan, work-wise.

What hadn't gone according to plan, however, had been Izzy.

He'd sent her that first text to tease her and to get his mind off of the flight, but he hadn't intended on opening a new corridor of their relationship. Though they'd had plenty of random text conversations *before* his trip, the discussions had usually begun with a purpose. A legit reason for them to be texting.

Although – wait.

*Had* they often had legitimate reasons? Yes, they'd been texting with purpose *at times*, but since their meeting at Starbucks, hadn't they each been sneaking in little immaterial reasons to connect?

Regardless, a full transition had occurred.

They were now rando texting buddies.

(Okay - he fucking hated that idiotic moniker, but Iz had said it fifteen times over the past few days, just to irritate him, and it had taken root.)

She texted him about what she was wearing, the noise her co-worker made when she chewed potato chips, the macaroni and cheese she'd made in his kitchen and her thoughts on the mayor's plan to launch a streetcar project.

He texted her about Patriots fans, airport bathroom hand dryers, the book he was reading, his grandmother's phone calls and his opposing views on the mayor's streetcar proposal.

They'd texted the entire three days he'd been in Boston and FaceTimed every night. Basically, she'd become like one of his buddies - hell, he was just as comfortable talking to her as he was his best friend, Nick, only with her he got little gut punches when she did certain things. Smiled, laughed, talked about his bathtub, snuggled with his cats; shit like that made him get a pinching pain just below his heart.

But it was that word – buddy – that had begun buzzing in the back of his mind, even when he didn't realize it. It was there, silently bouncing around in his head.

Blake knew the rules that he and Izzy agreed to. He knew why they were so important, and at a certain level, he still agreed with them. That being said, there was just this feeling he had when he was with her that was so not buddy-like.

He was too excited to be home to work it out now, but it was obviously something he needed to work out.

Blake pulled out his phone and tried texting her again as he got into the elevator. *I am in the building now.*

He'd been texting her since five a.m., when he'd decided to change his flight and come home a couple hours early. But she hadn't responded. He

didn't want to scare her by showing up unexpectedly, but he was also dying to get home and get started on the weekend.

Of course, the only real plans he had was to go for a run, watch football and fix Izzy's car, and after the past few days of nonstop work, that sounded fucking amazing.

He unlocked the door to his apartment, opened it slowly and said, "Iz?"

He stepped inside and closed the door behind him. He could hear the TV, but no movement. He said - loudly, "Izzy? Goodyear? It's me - I took an earlier flight."

Was she asleep? Perhaps the new bed was *that* good, so comfortable that it rendered the sleeper comatose.

He took two steps into the living room and said "Iz - I'm ho--"

*Shit.* His mouth snapped shut when he saw her.

He quietly walked over to the sofa and for some reason, the sight of her sleeping made that pinching feeling she gave him inside burn so strong it almost hurt. *Fucking fuck.*

Her hands were tucked under her cheek, her hair wild across his pillow - *his* pillow, and a disconcerting emotion he couldn't identify settled on his chest like a brick as he looked down at her. Longing? Fondness? Wishfulness?

Also – had she slept there all night? Why hadn't she slept in the new bed?

Something about seeing her there, though, cocooned in his blanket, asleep on his couch, made him homesick for...*something.*

Fuck, he was a mess, and he was also a total creep, watching her sleep like he was goddamn Joe Goldberg.

"Izzy." He dropped to a squat, moved his mouth a little closer to her ear and said, "I'm home, Iz."

"Blake." Her mouth turned up into a smile, even though her eyes stayed closed. She turned her head just a little and pressed her lips against his.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

Before he could think, she kissed him, her mouth soft and warm as she opened her lips under his. He steadied himself against the couch and swallowed, unsure of what to do. Was she even awake?

And how did she taste like chocolate already?

"Kiss me, Phillips," she said against his mouth, a smile in her voice. "Unless you don't want to."

She moved her hands down to his neck, and the movement threw his squat off balance. He caught himself by bridging one arm over the back of the couch and one on the front, and Izzy apparently took that as a move. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pulled him closer, and all of a sudden he was on his knees beside the couch, his upper body poised over hers as she bit down on his lower lip.

*I'm done*, he thought - maybe even said out loud - as he opened his mouth wide over hers, wanting to fucking consume her. She made a noise in the back of her throat that sent heat through him as her hands moved to his chest and her mouth went wild.

She kissed like sex and battle and sport, like domination and competition, like going all out and leaving nothing on the floor, holy *shit*. He wanted more - wanted all - as he felt her fingertips flexing - gripping - the front of his shirt.

Blake's hands clenched on the sofa as her smell - vanilla - burrowed into his senses and made him drunk on fumes. He opened his eyes, needing



visual confirmation that this was really happening and Izzy was destroying him like he'd imagined her doing a hundred fucking times.

*Hell, yes.*

He nibbled on her bottom lip and said her name - no, he *rasped* her name because apparently he'd lost the ability to speak, and her eyes fluttered open.

They seemed absurdly blue as she blinked up at him, a sleepy grin on her mouth

But then her forehead got a tiny crinkle, just between her eyebrows, and the smile disappeared.

"Ohmigod, Blake," she said, blinking fast and removing her hands from his body like it'd been burning them. She sat up on the couch, gave her head a tiny shake and said, "Shit, shit, *shiiiiit*. I am so sorry."

## Chapter 11



### Izzy

Izzy pushed her hair out of her face, cheeks on fire, and had no idea what to say.

*Shiiiiiiit.*

Had she seriously just launched a full-scale mouth assault on Blake's face without his consent? *Seriously??* He calmly sat down beside her on the sofa, like she hadn't just behaved like a maniac, and she wondered what time it was.

What time it was, and also if there was a time machine to launch her back to five minutes ago.

What the *hell* had just happened?

One minute, she'd been having a sexy dream about Blake. He'd been kissing her – the world's hottest kiss, for the record - and in her dream, he'd said her name in a total sex voice.

But then she'd opened her eyes and he was there – leaning over her – looking down at her with hungry dark eyes as she freaking clawed at his

chest like...*shit*...like some aggressive something with claws that she couldn't name because her brain was no longer functioning.

*Oh, Gawwwwwwd.* She wanted to die of embarrassment.

"I was having a dream and it was super realistic," she blurted out, not expecting him to believe her, but desperate to convince him. She didn't want to lose him, so she had to make him understand that nothing had changed between them.

His jaw was hard, his eyes intense on hers as she started rambling incoherently.

"I didn't hear you come in and I don't even know how you got to the sofa but somehow my brain thought your presence there was part of the dream. I kissed you," she said, her cheeks getting even hotter as she tried to convince him, "but I was kissing someone else in my dream, I swear. Please believe me that I would never, ever break our agreement."

She realized as she said it that she was lying.

If he wanted to break it, she would shatter it in a hot minute.

He didn't say anything, just swallowed with that distracting Adam's apple of his, and she knew she'd ruined everything.

"Blake – say something. Tell me that you aren't mad, or grossed out, or ugh – that I didn't make you feel violated. This was just a very surreal – very bizarre – mistake, a misunderstanding of epic proportions, and things with us are technically no different than they were last night when we watched *Top Chef* together on Facetime."

"Izzy."

She talked over him, her embarrassed nerves making silence impossible. "I meant it when I agreed with you that we're both adults and can control

ourselves, and this spontaneous moment of macking was entirely the fault of my unconsciousness.”

Blake looked at her intently, his jaw clenching and unclenching, and she hated that she’d put that serious expression on his face. She cleared her throat and said, “If I could take it back I would, but I can’t. I swear it--”

“Okay. Who was it?” he asked.

Izzy blinked and took a deep breath. “What?”

His voice softened when he said, “Who were you kissing in the dream, Iz?”

She bit down on her lower lip and squinted her eyes. He was watching her, waiting for the answer to his question, and she hoped everything would be quickly fixed if she just spewed out a name. *Think, think, think.* But just like that, every name on the planet was erased from her mind. There had to be millions of names in the world, but the only one she could think of was Blake.

She cleared her throat and said, “You don’t, um, you don’t know him.”

She rolled her eyes. At herself. *Izzy, you suck under pressure.*

“But you do?” he asked.

For a split second, she wondered what was the worst thing that could happen if she told him the truth. Fortunately, her brain quickly responded with *You would destroy whatever this is with Blake; is that what you want, dumbass?*

Honestly, her brain could be so mean sometimes.

She sat up straighter on the couch and turned so she was facing him. “Just a celebrity. No big--”

He tilted his head. “Which celebrity?”

“You’re going to make me say it?” she asked, wanting off the hook and also wanting to simply vanish from existence.

“Just say it.”

“You want a name?” she stalled, “You want me to say his name?”

“Name him, Shay.”

She groaned.

His mouth slid into a smirk and he said, “If you don’t tell me his name--”

“Fine. Tom Colicchio!” She nearly shouted it, and then she crossed her arms over her chest. Nodded her head and said, “Yes, I was kissing *the* Top Chef.”

“Tom.” He stared at her, slightly smirking, making her feel marginally better. “Colicchio.”

She nodded again. Rubbed her lips together. Added, “I guess you could say we were having our own little quick fire.”

He barely let her finish before he said, “So are you ready?”

“What?” *What?* “Wait. For *what?*”

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and glanced at the display as he said, “I’m starving, so I thought we could drive-thru Bruegger’s when I take you home. Bagels sound good?”

Good lord, the quick shift in conversation was giving her emotional whiplash.

*And he was sure in a hurry to get her out of his apartment.* She nodded, but couldn’t stop herself from saying, “So we’re okay?”

“Of course.” He put the phone back and held out a hand to help her up.

“Thank God.” Izzy grabbed his hand and let him pull her to her feet, but every cell in her body ceased to exist except for those in her fingers. His

big, warm hand swallowed hers and the slide of his hot skin on hers was electric and sexual and--*shit*.

It made her literally look down at their hands.

Before quickly letting go.

WHAT WAS WRONG WITH HER? She needed to calm the crap down.

“But Iz?” he said, his voice quiet and deep.

“Yeah?” She shook out her fingers at her sides.

“The way you kissed Tom Colicchio,” he said, his dark eyes hot on her, “Was fucking sinful.”



“Dude, come *on*.” Josh held his arms out at his sides before letting loose with a high kick. “That seems like bullshit. Work is a flimsy-ass reason for you both to be alone.”

Izzy ducked her head as her cousin swung his leg around. She was sitting in the grass of their front yard while Josh and six of his friends practiced some sort of martial-arts yoga-stretching thing. They were all silent as they meticulously followed the leader’s movements, so she took the opportunity to sit beside him and tell Josh everything about her and Blake’s situation.

Captive audience and all that.

“I know it sounds that way, but it actually isn’t,” Izzy explained, burrowing her chin into the top of her hoodie. Fifty-five degrees was nice, but a little on the chilly side when you were just sitting in the cold grass. “He’s this, like, established big-wig who totally believes in the values and

ethics that go along with his role. He would never get involved with someone who reports to him because it's *wrong*."

"Is he religious?"

"No - I mean, I don't think so. I think he's just a good human with a career to look out for."

"Well if it's that perfect between you two," Josh's pink-haired friend to her right said, hissing out his words as he slowly lowered to a squatty-lunge, "Why don't you just find another job somewhere else?"

"Butt out, Stan," Josh said, raising his left leg and rotating it out. "She shouldn't have to quit."

"Dude, I didn't say she *has* to quit," Stan muttered, giving Izzy a know-it-all look. "But it does sound like a quick, somewhat obvious fix, right?"

"Yes," Josh replied, also lowering his body toward the ground, "But she's found a job she likes with a solid career path. Does she really want to jeopardize that for a man?"

Izzy wrapped her arms around her legs, resting her chin on her knees. "You're missing the point."

"We are?" Stan asked, his limbs shaking as he held his pose.

"What point did we miss?" Josh said, letting out a long, quiet groan as the sun reflected off his forehead.

"If I were to quit my job, which I totally don't want to do because I love it, what would that say to Blake?" Izzy pictured his face when he'd leaned over her on his couch and she sighed. "Wouldn't it seem...desperate, that I'm willing to quit my job for him even though we've never even gone on a date?"

"No," Josh said, at the exact minute Stan said, "Yeah - totally."

She gave Josh a look, which made him point at his friend and say, “No one ever listens to him. Stan’s always wrong.”

Stan raised his eyebrows at her, giving her a long, meaningful look.

*Was Stan right?*

“I am totally stealing your I-swear-it-was-a-dream move, by the way.” The group leader smiled as he effortlessly held his leg up against his ear like he was a Rockette. “Sounds like a patented Roy move.”

"Who's Roy?" she asked.

"He is," Josh said.

"Shut the fuck up and breathe, Roy," Stan said before doing what appeared to be the splits.

Somewhere deep inside her, Izzy knew better than to listen to advice from a bunch of guys doing ninja-yoga outside in the middle of the day. Still, the situation with Blake consumed her and she had to get it figured out somehow.



## **Blake**

Blake slid his feet into his running shoes and was reaching for his keys when the phone buzzed. At a glance he could see who the email was from, and he didn’t want to open it for multiple reasons.

For starters, it was Sunday morning. *Ever heard of work-life balance, Brad?* He had a lot of respect for his boss, but the man worked 24/7 and Blake was *not* about that. Blake worked his ass off, too, but he also valued his free time and refused to let it get polluted by constant emails and phone calls.



But more importantly, he was on his way to pick up Izzy and go work on her car. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't excited to see her, even as he knew he *shouldn't* be excited.

But the kiss - holy shit, THE kiss.

The kiss had been playing on a constant loop in his head, and a large part of him wanted to just forget the world and find a way to make it happen again. And again.

And yeah - a-fucking-gain.

But it wasn't that easy.

He'd worked his ass off for his career and it meant a lot to him. It'd taken years to get where he was, and it was foolish to risk everything when he and Izzy had never even been on a date, right?

Right?

Maybe they were destined to be just friends, or some other bullshit platitude that was destined to fucking kill him.

Blake grabbed his keys and headed out, thinking of Izzy's *I like your door* comment as he locked the deadbolt.

Even though he knew better, he opened Outlook and started reading Brad's email as he walked down the hall and got into the elevator. He hit the "G" button, the doors slid closed, and Blake clicked on an attachment titled New Org Chart, Final Draft.

Now that the acquisition had gone through, and because the company was nearly doubling in size as a result, there would need to be a certain level of re-organization.

But when the color-coded chart opened and he looked at his division, his ears started buzzing.

Human Resources had shifted, and that department no longer reported to him.

When the elevator doors opened, Blake sprinted to his car.

## Chapter 12



### Izzy

“He just pulled up.” Izzy watched through the window as Blake got out of his car - God, he was huge - and slammed the door. He was wearing jeans and a grey sweatshirt that made his chest look ridiculously wide, and of course, his hair looked like he’d driven all the way over with his windows down. She let go of the blinds she’d been peering through and turned around. “He’s here.”

The Darkling stared at her from the couch as if she bored him.

*Stupid cat.*

Blake knocked on the front door.

“Gah!” Izzy froze and gasped and whispered, all at the same time. “What do I do?”

*Stop talking to the cat, for starters, you dipshit.*

Izzy tugged on the bottom of her shirt - she’d selected her fuzzy red sweater and boyfriend jeans - and tucked her hair behind her ears. She was hella jittery at the thought of facing him after the couch kissing. Yes, they’d

texted all day so things were okay between them, but what if it was weird face-to-face?

She sprinted over to the couch, grabbed the cat, and went back to the door. Somehow, holding The Darkling felt like protection. Or a distraction.

Or...something.

Izzy shifted the cat in her arms and pulled open the door.

“Hey.” It was a small word, a casual, one-syllable utterance, but the way Blake said it made her breath catch. It was fast and breathless as his dark gaze moved all over her face, like he was searching for something specific. He looked tense, intense, and she couldn’t stop herself from glancing at his mouth and remembering how it’d felt on hers.

“Hey,” she replied, turning her attention to the cat in her arms because looking at him without thinking about the kiss was impossible.

“Listen, Iz, I need to talk to you.”

She nudged the door open all the way so he could come in. *Be cool, Izzy*, she thought as he came inside and she closed the door behind him. She intended to sound normal, but heard herself say, in a weird, surfer-variation of her voice, “What’s up, bro?”

*Gah – yeah, that’s not weird at all.*

Blake took a small step closer, crowding her against the door. Instead of looking up at him, she looked at The Darkling, instead. In fact, she became incredibly interested in petting his fluffy fur.

His voice was thick and deep when he said, “Why won’t you look at me?”

Izzy blinked and rubbed her lips together. Said, “I’m not--”

“Isabella Shay.” He moved, and before she knew what he was doing, he took the cat from her arms and set The Darkling onto the floor.

She sighed and looked up at him.

*Oh, damn.*

“Blake Phillips.” She meant to say more, maybe, but her heart started thumping as he stepped a little closer. She looked up at his hot eyes and felt a little light-headed when he said—

“I’m going to fucking lose my mind if you don’t let me talk to you.”

“So talk,” she said, intending to sound unaffected but failing to pull it off when her voice came out breathy and almost a whisper.

“Izzy,” he said, setting his palms on the door, one on each side of her. “We’re about to play a bit of a trust exercise. Okay?”

“Hard pass,” she said, her every cell focused on the way his body had hers caged in, against the door. “The last time I did one of those trust things, Josh let me fall and I bruised my tail bone. I couldn’t sit comfortably for weeks, the wang.”

“Not that kind of trust exercise. This is more of a *look into my eyes and just trust me* sort of thing.”

“Oh-kay,” she said, raising her eyes to his, feeling like gravity was pulling her toward him. Her voice was gruff when she said, “I’ll play.”

“Good.” Blake swallowed and said, “So we both know there are rules that have prevented us from...getting closer.”

Izzy tried for casual again by saying, “Employee handbook, thou art a beotch.”

“Right.” His eyes moved all over her face for a moment and then he said, “I can’t – I won’t –give you any details at this point, but I think we can be more than friends. If we want to.”

“*What?*” Izzy *had* to be misunderstanding. “How? What does that mean?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer any questions at this time,” he said, looking a little uncomfortable. “Trust exercise, remember?”

She watched him, her eyes memorizing every handsome plane of his face as she knew she’d go along with anything he wanted. She *did* trust him.

His Adam’s apple dipped when he swallowed, and then he said, “I’m fine with staying the way we are, though, so no pressure if that’s what you want.”

He watched her and wowww - she nearly melted from the look. His jaw flexed and their breath mingled and the world held still for a second when their eyes locked. They moved together the tiniest bit, a nearly imperceptible sway, as if one was a magnet, the other steel.

Izzy’s throat felt dry as her eyes traveled over his face. She managed to breathe out the words, “I, um, I would very much like to explore more than-”

His mouth cut her off, landing hard on hers as he inhaled sharply, like he’d been woken from a dream. He angled his head and went deep, and Izzy forgot what every kiss before this felt like. She couldn’t hear or see or breathe anything but him; he was her center.

His mouth went wild on hers, kissing her like it was the only thing he’d ever wanted to do, and she raised her hands and set them on his chest. Grasped at his sweatshirt, needing to get closer. To get more.

His palms stayed planted on the door as his body pressed against hers, as he stepped even closer. She could feel the heat of him, of that solid, warm body, and she felt hungry. Starved. She fisted his shirt and bit down on his lower lip, which made him grunt and press closer still.

“That kiss yesterday fucking gutted me,” he said against her lips. “It’s all I’ve thought about since.”

“Was that you,” she said breathlessly, without opening her eyes, thrilled at the thought of him being even half as obsessed as she’d been. “I dreamt about it last night.”

“Tell me,” he said, moving his mouth down to lick at her neck.

“Can’t,” she said, melting as he nipped her skin and made her burn all over. “Too embarrassing.”

“Come on,” he said, his tongue sliding over the spot.

She sighed, letting her head fall back to give him better access.

“Tell me anyway,” he growled, his voice raspy in her ear as he nipped her earlobe. “Where were we?”

“In your room,” she said, struggling to form words as he kissed her throat. “New bed.”

He raised his head and looked a little wild-eyed. “Naked?”

“So naked,” she said, and the look on his face when she said that told her they were about to have sex against her front door.

And she’d never wanted anything more.

Her hands found the bottom of his hoodie and slid underneath, touching the taut, hot skin of his shredded stomach - holy shit. He sucked in a breath as his palms gave way to his forearms on the door, putting his body flush against hers without the tiniest bit of space between them.

“Iz.” She felt the heat of his gaze before his mouth went back to hers, feeding her unbridled kisses that made her push herself against him. He picked her up and she wrapped her legs around his waist, taking every hot kiss he delivered as he carried her toward the hall. Her fingers drove into his hair and she wondered how it was possible to feel so much.

She was weakened by it, the power of her want, while at the same time feeling strength in every meeting of their mouths. She wanted nothing in the

world but Blake, nothing in the world but the two of them in that moment.

It didn't seem possible, but he was everything to her in that white-hot minute.

He made a sound in his throat, but instead of walking into her bedroom, he turned.

He walked through the kitchen - or it seemed like the kitchen but she was too lost in his lips and the way his teeth toyed with her lower lip to worry about geography - and then--

Then he set her down on the kitchen table.

She opened her eyes - which was far more difficult than it sounded - and he was looking down at her with so much sex in his eyes that she felt dizzy. His face was flushed as he said, "I have an idea."

Holy shiiiiiiit, Mr. Chest wanted kitchen table action? She tried to sound chill when she removed all ten fingers from his thick hair and casually said (as her blood pressure hit what must've been a catastrophic range because her hands started shaking and her lips felt tingly), "Change of plans, Phillips?"

"Yeah." He ran a thumb over her cheek and said, "I want to take you out."



## **Blake**

He watched that little wrinkle form between her eyebrows, like she was confused.

Yeah, he got that. He was alone with Izzy and they were finally free to do whatever the hell they wanted, yet he was pumping the brakes. Idiot much?



But the thing of it was, he really liked Iz. He liked being friends with her, regardless of the shape of her body (perfect) and the pretty of her face. He liked the smell of her hair and the way her nose squinched when she grinned, but he loved her smartass fuckery even more.

So much so that now, on the eve of their interpersonal possibilities being suddenly green-lit and wide-open, he was nervous that rushing to sex might somehow screw everything up.

He said, “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but zero-to-one-hundred seems unwise. Should we maybe stop for dinner?”

Izzy blinked up at him before she said, “Wait. You’re hungry?”

“No,” he said, soothed by the fact that she looked just as disoriented as he felt. “I’m asking if you’ll go to dinner with me tonight.”

“Well, I don’t know,” she said, blinking faster. “Where are you going to take me?”

“Wherever you want,” he said, and he realized he meant it. He looked at that upturned face and felt a little unnerved by how willing he was to give her whatever she wanted, do whatever she requested.

“So Paris for dinner sounds good,” she said, reaching out a hand to tug on the strings of his hoodie. “But only if we wear berets. Do you have a beret?”

“Negative. No one looks good in a beret.”

“Audrey Hepburn did,” she said.

“Debatable,” he replied. God, he was so into the way he never knew what was going to come out of her mouth that it had become problematic. He texted and called her way too often, but honestly - talking to her was all he ever wanted to do. He said, “And no berets.”

“Fine.” She grinned, giving him her full-scale smile as she leaned back on her arms. “How about dinner in Tuscany?”

You’re picky,” he said, leaning down to rub his nose against her collarbone because something about it was driving him wild, “And real Italian spaghetti is nothing like what you’re used to. I’m afraid you’ll starve.”

He lifted his head and wondered how a smartass smirk could make him feel so unbalanced.

“So Italy is out, then, because obviously spaghetti is the only possible dinner item.” She pursed her lips, like she was seriously considering their options, and said, “Then all that’s left is Johnny’s Steakhouse down on L Street, I guess.”

“Perfect,” he said, needing to kiss her again. He lowered his mouth, hypnotized by the way she looked at him, and just when his lips touched hers she said,

“But I can’t go with you to your garage now.”

He pulled back from the kiss. “Why not?”

“You know.” She shrugged and rubbed her nose against his, soft and slow as her breath touched his lips, and it caused a bizarre physical reaction. The movement made something in his chest pinch, and now he was convinced he was losing his mind, because fucking chest pinches in response to physical contact were not a real thing for grown-ass adults.

“I do not know,” he managed, and pulled back a little farther. “You’re bailing on me?”

“Here’s the thing, Mister Chest,” she said, scooting over on the table just enough to drop her feet to the floor and stand. He watched as she tucked her hair behind her ears, took a deep breath, then hit him with, “If I see you in

coveralls with a wrench in your hand, there's no telling where the afternoon will go. And as lovely as that...imagining sounds, I really want to go on a date with you tonight."

"Dammit, Shay," Blake bit out through gritted teeth as sexual images of he and Izzy on the trunk of her car came at him, "I told you I don't have coveralls."

That made her snort and tap her forehead with her index finger. "But you do up here."

He couldn't hold back the smile, just like he couldn't stop himself from reaching out and giving her ponytail a tug. "So I have to go to Springfield by myself because you're a little pervert?"

She shrugged again and said around a giggle, "So it would seem."

"That's not fair."

"Life isn't fair."

"You're an asshole," he said, pulling his keys out of the front pocket of his jeans. "Did you know that?"

"An asshole who will Facetime you through the entire repair." She slid her fingers through his and pulled him behind her, through the kitchen and toward the door. Her small hand in his, tugging him along, caused that fucking idiotic chest-pinch thing again, which would've pissed him off if she hadn't made him laugh by saying, "The only difference will be that I cannot digitally goose you while you lean over my engine."

"You would've goosed me?" he asked, releasing her hand to mess with the tendrils around her face that had fallen out of her ponytail. "Digitally?"

"Ohmigod, you know what I mean," she said, laughing and batting at his hands. "I was referring to the method of communication, not the method of goosing."

She went up on her tiptoes and kissed him then, and he was still grinning like an idiot when he climbed into his car and put the keys in the ignition, twenty minutes later. He was about to pull away when the phone buzzed in his pocket.

He expected it be his little smartass, but it was an email from his Brad, instead. He was miles away from caring enough to read it - it was Saturday, for God's sake - when he saw the subject line.

Re: Reconfigured Org Chart - V.2 (revised)

"Sonofabitch." Blake got that feeling in his gut, the one that told him he was going to fucking hate that message, and he rubbed his temple with his fingers. Shit, shit, shit.

But just as he was about to click the link, he closed the email app, instead.

"Nope," he muttered to himself, putting the phone back in his pocket and buckling his seat belt. He pulled away from the curb, stood on the gas pedal, and made the decision to ignore his messages until Monday morning.

## *Chapter 13*



### **Izzy**

“Yeah, baby, right there,” Izzy moaned.

“Shut up,” he grunted through gritted teeth.

“But honey, the way your shirt is riding up so I can see your lower back is just working for me,” Izzy said, really doing her best to sound disgusting. “I know I told you I’d stop, but it’s impossible for me to keep from losing my shit when you’re tossing all of this car-fixing-porn in my face.”

“Has anyone ever told you,” Blake panted, obviously struggling to do something to the new alternator he was installing in her vehicle, “that you’re an obnoxious pain in the ass?”

“Oh, tons of people. All the time. But don’t change the subject.”

He made a laugh sound but kept working. “And the subject would be...?”

“How aesthetically-pleasing this whole video chat is.” Izzy looked at the Facetime display and saw they’d been talking for over almost two hours - basically the entire time he’d been working on her car.

It felt like five minutes.

She'd never - in her entire life - had as much fun as she had with Blake. It was like their brains were in-sync or something; he always got her weird sense of humor and played with her in the most delightful way.

Which was probably what made their whole maybe-taking-this-to-the-next-level thing so petrifying. What if it ruined everything?

"I can't tell you how glad I am that my work is getting you off," he said, and her stomach dipped.

Somehow hearing him say *getting you off* was a turn-on.

But everything about him was a turn-on.

"Listen, bruh, I've got to go," she said, clueless as to what she was going to wear that night. She wanted to look good, but not trying-too-hard good. "I've got a date tonight with a guy I met at Starbucks, and I want plenty of time to get ready."

"Is that right?" He looked away from her engine and directly into his phone, which he'd propped on top of his rolling toolbox, and pointed at her. "Good lookin' fella?"

"You could say that," she said, smiling like a lovesick teenager.

"Smart?" He set down his tools and wiped his hands on his thighs.

"Oh - not at all," she teased, laughing when he gave her a shocked look. "He requested a physical challenge during Billboard Assholes, if you can believe that, and he also puts chia seeds in everything. I mean, who does that, right?"

"How the hell do you know about the chia?" he asked, looking amused.

She shrugged. "When I took care of your cats, I couldn't help but notice you had the industrial-sized bag in your pantry."

“You snooping little shit,” he said, picking up the phone so he could move it closer to his face. His eyes were twinkly when he asked her, “What else did you notice?”

“Okay - confession,” she said, amused that with Blake, she wasn’t even embarrassed. “I did snoop, but like, quick glancing looks into drawers - I didn’t touch or rifle through anything.”

He gave her a look like he didn’t believe her and said, “What’s the coolest thing you found?”

Izzy thought about that for a second before saying, “Your drawer full of glasses. I took a picture of myself in every single pair.”

That made his lips slide into the teasing grin that she’d decided was her favorite of all his smiles. (The current top five were 1. Teasing grin, 2. Sexy smirk, 3. Sarcastic near-smile, 4. Full-on sunshine, and 5. You’re-an-idiot-but-it-amuses me lip twitch.)

He said, “So when you say *I didn’t touch or rifle through anything*, you mean besides wearing all of my glasses and violating my chia privacy.”

“I didn’t wear them, I tried them on,” she said, feeling as if the clarification mattered. “And who has eight pairs of nice glasses? I think you might be a sociopath.”

“I wear glasses every day, even if I wear contacts for a few hours, so eight pairs for 365 days seems minimal to me.” He tilted his head and said, “If you ask me, the person with only one pair is the sociopath.”

“No need for name-calling, and no one asked you.”

“So what’s the least cool thing you found, then?” he asked.

“Aside from the buttload of chia?”

“How much chia constitutes a buttload, Shay?”

“Count the ones in your pantry and that’s the answer, Phillips.”

“Naturally. Weird thing. Go.”

“Okay - the thing I found troubling in your apartment was the geriatric sex book.”

He coughed out, “Excuse me?”

Izzy grinned at his horror. “There’s a book in your hall closet that looks like it came out in the 1950’s, and it’s called Delicious Sex. I mean, I’m all for honing your craft and reading all the resources, but I don’t think--”

“Holy shit - was it on the bottom of the closet, in that stack of books on the floor?” he asked, pressing his fingers into his temples.

“Yeah.”

“Awwww, gawwwwd - those books belong to my grandparents.” He looked queasy as he squinted and said, “There’s seriously a sex book in that stack?”

Izzy started laughing. She’d been about to accuse him of lying, but he looked too disgusted for her not to believe him. She said, “Not just a book about sex, but a book about delicious se--”

“Stop it.” He shook his head and pointed at her, feigning anger. “Your snooping has ruined Nana and Papa for me, you little shit.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna go now,” she said, her laughs simmering to a smile. “See you at six?”

His fake rage slid into a nice smile. “See you at six.”



## **Blake**

*Blake: I can see you peeking through the blinds.*



Izzy smiled as she watched him walk up to the stoop, looking down at his phone. Stepping away from the window, she texted back: *I'm watching for my hot date, Egomaniac. Not everything is about you.*

*Blake: Open the goddamn door.*

Izzy took a deep breath. Just hours earlier, she'd been nervous to see him because she'd been embarrassed about kissing him. Now she was nervous because they were going on an actual date and would likely be doing even more kissing by the end of the night. She was tied up in anticipation and excitement and terror, because something about the night felt big.

She slid the phone into the pocket of her tweed skirt (new and cute and perfectly matched to a white ruffly pirate shirt with an open cardigan), crossed the living room, and pulled open the front door.

*Gawwwwwwd.* Blake stood there, looking beautiful, which was nothing new. Good hair, knee-weakening cologne, and a V-neck sweater/button-down shirt combo that showcased the hell out of that mile-wide chest and spectacular pecs; the man could serve a look.

But those things were nothing - nothing - compared to the way he was looking at her. He looked like she felt, like he was filled with anticipation and intensity, and that was enough to make her want to faint.

Especially when he was holding a bouquet of bright yellow daffodils.

And smelling like something she wanted to bite.

"Hi," she said, feeling breathless and incapable of words.

That made him smile and hold out the flowers. "Hi."

"Ohmigod, thank you. I love daffodils. Did you know that?" She tried remembering if she'd ever told him that as she took them from him.

"I did *not* know," he said, his voice a little quieter than usual. "But you're welcome. My mother always said that daffodils are like two flowers in one,

so, uh, that is why I chose them, I guess.”

She nodded. “Let me just put them in water,” she said, walking away from him and trying to find calm as she headed for the kitchen. “And then we can go.”

“Sure,” he said. He cleared his throat, and then he added, “I also have some other flowers that the florist talked me into. I, ah, I don’t think they’re really a thing for a dinner date, but she was kind of bossy and insisted you’d want them so I...”

And he just trailed off.

That made Izzy stop in the kitchen doorway. She turned around, and Blake was still standing just inside the door, holding a...wrist corsage?

“Is that for me?” she asked.

He looked embarrassed and gave her a little half-shrug. “Yeah, but it’s totally fine if you don’t want it. The lady--”

“Oh, I want it.” She rushed back to him and looked down at the pretty yellow and white roses. She hadn’t gone to any formal dances in high school but had always wanted a corsage. “It’s gorgeous.”

“Really?” He was looking down at her with wrinkled eyebrows. “Are you messing with me?”

“No,” she said, getting a little sidetracked by the curl of his black eyelashes. “I love it. And I love that you couldn’t tell the florist no.”

“Well, let me put it on, then,” he said, his eyes on hers as he lifted her wrist with his free hand and attempted to slide on the corsage. But the elastic band got hung up on her ring, and then again on her pinkie finger.

She looked down and - dear God - saw the tiniest shake in his hand.

“Are you...nervous?” she asked, unable to believe it as she looked up into his face.

“No,” he said, dismissively, and immediately followed it up with, “Actually yes. Fuck.”

That made Izzy smile through her nerves. “Me, too.”

“It just feels important,” he said, looking down and straightening the flowers on her wrist. “Tonight, that is.”

Izzy nodded. “Weird, right?”

He returned his gaze to hers. “Very.”

“But that’s dumb,” she said, her nervous energy taking over. “Because it’s not.”

“It’s not?”

“No,” she said, rubbing her lips together. “You’re just feeding me because I’m amazing, and I just happened to wear make-up and a proper bra for the occasion. No bigs.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Proper bra?”

“An undergarment,” she explained, shifting her weight to one foot as her big mouth took over. “With wires inside of it to push the ladies up and make them more appealing to the male gaze.”

He looked like he wanted to smile. “And you don’t usually, um--”

“Yeah, no.” She waved a hand and said, “I don’t have a lot to work with upstairs, so I’m all about comfort. Jog bras and bralettes are my jam.”

Shut up, you idiot! Izzy always rambled when she was nervous, but this was perhaps her first overshare of which foundation garments were her fucking jam.

Blake cleared his throat. “I see.”

“Ohmigod - did I just ruin the illusion?” Why was her mouth so freaking vomitous all the time? She said, “Was my admission akin to a man opening a date by sharing the details of his micro penis? Should we just call it a

night now, before you have to spend money on dinner when you know you don't want micropeen?"

"For fuck's sake, Iz," he said, sounding irritated.

"Oh, my God, I did!"

"I don't give a shit about your micro penis, okay?" He grabbed the front of her cardigan in both hands and pulled her closer, frustration and amusement shining in his brown eyes. "I spend hours every day obsessing about all of you, every little bit."

"You do?" she said, her voice barely there.

"Yes, I fucking do," he said around an exhale. "So you can't talk about your underthings without making me crazy. Without making me think about your skin and your body and the way you'd look in goddamn lace."

Dear Lord. She felt winded, instantly rendered oxygen-deficient by the forceful heat behind his words.

She rested her hands on his chest and said, "How did you manage to tell me I have a micro penis, yet still make me want to give you a standing ovation?"

"I'm a hell of a good presenter."

"I'd say so," she said. "No wonder they sent VP Blake to Boston."

"Yeah." He got a wrinkle between his eyebrows, like he was distracted by his thoughts, and he swallowed.

"I'm ready to be fed now," she said, and that seemed to remind him to forget about work. "Unless you're just stalling because of the--"

"Swear to God if you say micropenis one more time--"

"Fine," she whispered.

They left the apartment, and when Blake opened her door for her, she rolled her eyes. "I appreciate the chivalrous gesture, Phillips, but I promise

you that I know how to open a car door.”

That made his mouth split into the Full-on Sunshine. “Noted.”

His face was right there, right above hers, and she desperately wanted him to kiss her.

“By the way,” he said, lifting a finger and tracing her eyebrow with the softest touch. “It is killing me not to kiss you, but I don’t want to mess up your pretty red lipstick.”

“Please destroy it,” she blurted out, “Unless you’re chick--”

All ten of his fingers slid into her hair - thank God she’d straightened it, not that she would’ve cared - and he kissed her like it actually *had* been killing him. She raised her hands to his strong face and kissed him back with everything she had, hoping to make him feel even half of what he delivered whenever his lips met hers.

Going up on her tiptoes, Izzy pulled his head closer, taking the lead as she attempted to consume every addictive bite of Blake that she could get. He growled into her mouth, his fingers flexing, and the heat of it all made her burn.

Kissing Blake was so much more than just kissing, and she suspected nothing would ever compare. It was teeth and tongue and lips and breath, teasing and sliding and utter oral chaos - an onslaught, and hands-down the most erotic activity she’d ever participated in.

Aside from sex itself.

“Get your ass in the car,” he said, his lips barely above hers, so close that she could still feel their impression, “Before we get arrested.”

“Kissing isn’t illegal,” she whispered, rubbing her lips against his.

“But what your kisses make me want to do against the side of my car is.”



## **Blake**

“So I was thinking,” Izzy said, and Blake could see in his periphery that she was turning toward him in the passenger seat.

“God help me.”

“On a normal first date, the two people get to know each other slowly. But since we already know each other, maybe we should do an information speed-round.”

Her mind was always whirring. It was dizzying and fascinating, all at once. He sighed, “Please explain.”

“Okay, so usually there are things that date-ees want to know but cannot ask. About exes, family stuff, how many babies the other wants; off-limits topics that make you sound crazy or desperate if you ask them, right?”

“Right...?”

“So how about, at dinner, we allow all questions. Because obviously if you ask me about an ex, I know you aren’t a potentially-jealous psycho. And if I ask you if you want to get married someday, you know I’m not trying to tie you to the altar and baby you up.”

“I don’t think that expression is right.”

“But you feel me, right?”

“Sure.” Blake pulled up to the red light and looked over at Izzy. Yeah, he fucking felt her.

She looked so incredible that he’d had to force himself to stop looking at her at every opportunity. If he didn’t make a conscious effort, he might

never stop staring. And he would never want her to think Date Izzy was any better than every other version.

Because Izzy was the sexiest person he'd ever met - all the time. In her messy ponytails and dirty glasses, in her skirts and heels at work; he was painfully attracted to her, no matter what. It had way more to do with the crinkles in her nose and the sound of her laugh than anything else.

But tonight - holy shit. Her long hair, that lipstick, those legs in that skirt; all of it together would tempt anyone with eyeballs. But combine it with the punch of her quiet perfume and the fact that she'd gotten dressed to go out with *him*, and he was fucking on edge.

"Okay," she said, leaning forward to turn up the volume on the radio. "As soon as we order, it is on."



"Are you close with your family?" Izzy asked, breaking her roll in half. "You already know my only-child family history, so now I need yours. And give me the ugly truth."

Blake picked up his lowball glass and gave her a look over it, like he was disappointed in such a datey question. "I'm close with my parents and my grandparents on my mom's side. Only talk to my dad's parents at holidays. I have two younger brothers who bug the shit out of me, so I guess you could say we're close, as well."

She nodded. "Interesting."

"Not in the slightest," he said, and he took a drink of his Scotch.

"Next question, then," she said, rolling her eyes at his tone. "Have you ever been in love?"

He set down his glass. "No."

That made her tilt her head and narrow her eyes. "Really?"

He let a quick breath out his nose. "I was engaged not that long ago, but after the fact I was able to see that it wasn't the real thing."

"Really?" Izzy grabbed her wineglass, fascinated by the thought of Blake with a ring. "What happened after the fact?"

He stared at her for a long minute, like he was weighing his thoughts, and then he said, "I realized that I had stronger feelings for one of my friends than I ever had for her."

"Oh." She stared back at him, her heart beating in her forehead. "Is that right?"

"It is."

"Mmm, interesting," she managed, feeling so flustered she didn't even know how to string words together.

"My turn." Blake leaned forward a little, the light from the table's candle reflecting in his dark eyes. "Have you ever been in love?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Never. Not even close."

He raised his eyebrows, waiting for a story, which made her shrug and say, "I've never even gone out with someone more than twice since high school, so I'm - as Halsey would say - bad at love."

"Who?" he asked.

"Halsey," she replied, taking a bite out of her roll.

"Is that a friend of yours?"

"Ohmigod, she's like a huge rock star," Izzy said, trying to politely talk with roll in her mouth. "You've seriously never heard of Halsey?"

"Does she sing anything I'd know?"

"Um, *Bad at Love*, for starters."



That made him smirk as he watched her chew. “Which is your theme song. Full circle right here, ladies and gentleman.”

She rolled her eyes.

He said, “Why don’t you date?”

If she hadn’t been Question Game’s creator, that might’ve felt intrusive. She shrugged and said, “I’m not big on talking to people I don’t know.”

“But you never shut up.”

“Because I know you.”

“Online dating?”

“I’ve tried the apps but I’ve never done more than scroll.” She felt like a loser, like it was obvious she was a total loner, so it was time for the next question. “Kids and marriage - in or out?” she asked.

“Holy shit, are you trying to tie me to the altar and baby me up?”

“I don’t think that expression is right,” she said, laughing. Which made Blake laugh, too, and that was the end of the question portion of the date. They fell into themselves after that, leaning on the sarcastic banter that was their natural language of choice.

It wasn’t until their plates were cleared and they were enjoying a post-dinner glass of wine that things changed. Blake was talking about one of the new machines at the gym, and Izzy said, “Y’know, I haven’t gone back there since the day I saw you in the elevator.”

“Why not?”

She shrugged. “They didn’t have heavy enough weights for me, I guess.”

That earned her a cocked eyebrow. “Really.”

She knew she shouldn’t overshare, but the wine and relaxed dinner had loosened her tongue. She ran a finger over the rim of her glass and said, “Because if I go all the time, my routine visits will gradually dim the

memory of that first time. And I don't want to ever forget that chemistry-filled elevator ride."

His smile disappeared and he looked serious.

"I mean, I know it's a no big deal thing now - you're Blake and I'm Izzy. We're friends or whatever. But at the time, it was like this great cosmic coincidence, that I would run into Mr. Chest from Starbucks, and I always want to remember the magic of all that crackling potential."

He didn't say anything. At all. He just watched her.

"Obviously I'm buzzed," she teased, rolling her eyes and lifting the glass to her lips. "I shall shut up now."

"Don't," he said. "I think about it every single time I step into that elevator. It's *our* elevator."

"You do?" she asked, unable to be cool. "It is? Seriously?"

"Hell, yes," he said, his jaw flexing. "I rotate between the memory of what it was, and the fantasy of what it could've been."

"You fantasize about the elevator?" Izzy leaned forward on her elbows. "Ohmigod, I do, too. All the time."

His eyes dipped down to her mouth as he said, "About you hitting the stop button?"

She ran her tongue over her bottom lip. "That's where it starts."

"Tell me where it finishes, Shay," he said, quietly and calmly. No one around them would ever guess that he was asking her to share a sexual fantasy. No one who'd ever known her would guess that she would.

"With my hands on the wall," she said, stuck somewhere between embarrassment and total arousal. "And with you behind me, most of the time."

He raised his eyebrows like he was amused, but his jaw was rigid. “Most of the time.”

“It varies, y’know?”

“Yeah, I fucking do know,” he said, and Izzy's stomach dipped.

“So tell me, Chest,” she said, intimidated and totally turned on by his hot eyes. “Where it finishes for you.”

She didn’t know what she’d been expecting – Blake wasn’t the kind of guy to back down from a challenge so of course he'd answer – but it wasn’t, “Your back against the elevator wall, your legs wrapped around my waist, and my name on your tongue.”

“Ah,” she managed, unsure of how to behave as her body spontaneously combusted. “I, um, I think I like yours better.”

“Do you want more wine?” he asked.

“No, thank you.”

“Do you want to go?”

“Yes, please.”



## **Blake**

Blake pulled into the parking garage as Izzy rambled about the song on the radio. The entire drive to his place had been off, with Izzy babbling as if silence would kill her while thoughts of sexual fantasies pinged through his head.

Izzy tried to jump start a conversation, but it wasn’t meant to be. He was fucking incapable of thinking about anything other than the image she’d put into his depraved mind. When they got out of the car and walked to the

bank of elevators, Blake couldn't help himself. He grabbed her hand and laced his fingers through hers, needing to touch her.

That made her grin at him and say, "You couldn't stay away, could you? You just had to touch me."

He just looked at her, because she wasn't wrong.

Izzy hit the up button, and she rubbed her thumb back and forth over his hand as they waited. "I think the boys will be happy to see me."

"Nah – they'll hate you again. Short-term cat memory." The doors opened and they stepped inside.

"There is no such thing, and those two are hopelessly devoted to me."

The doors slid closed.

Izzy pressed the button for his floor with her free hand. "I wish I had tuna in my purse."

"Said no one ever," he replied.

The elevator started moving, and it hit Blake like a freight train. Blake watched the numbers lighting up, hyperaware of Izzy's scent and how close she was and the size of her hand in his. In the fucking elevator. She looked at him then, and something in her eyes was different.

"Blake," she whispered, like she was going to say something, but she didn't.

He turned toward her, just the slightest bit, and he knew she was thinking the same thing. He could feel it in the way she looked at him. The air crackled, they watched each other for a long second, and then everything exploded.



## **Izzy**

Blake's huge hands came up to her face as his mouth came down on hers. She kissed him back with ferocity while she pushed her body into his, moving him – both of them – closer to the stop button.

“Fucking yes, Iz,” he said against her lips as she reached around him and depressed the button. The elevator jerked to a stop, causing them to stumble a step. Blake took advantage of the impetus to move, turning them and pushing her up against the wall.

Was. This. Really. Happening? Was Izzy really pinned against him, in the freaking elevator, while he kissed her like he wanted to eat her whole? She kissed him back with the same unhinged intensity that he was giving her, snaking her arms around his shoulders, crazed with lust.

His hands slid up the back of her thighs, stopping at the bottom of her skirt as he whispered, “Is this okay?”

“Don't you dare stop,” she said, needing him like she needed oxygen at that moment. Every nerve in her body was buzzing and connected to the points on her skin where his hands were resting.

“Shay,” he panted, his fingers tightening on her skin before sliding higher. She bit down on his lip and moaned into his mouth when he touched her - holy hell the man knew what to do with his hands – and she lost the ability to formulate logical thoughts as he made her fucking climb.

Gawwwwwd.

It got frantic as the alarm started going off, reminding them of their limited time before maintenance arrived. A cacophony of zippers and wild hands and ripping wrappers joined the jangling elevator bell as he lifted her in his hands and then —



## **Blake**

“Oh, God,” Izzy moaned, her heels bringing him in closer as her head fell back against the elevator wall.

“Holy shit.” Blake gritted his teeth and froze, his knees nearly buckling from the feel of her surrounding him. Nothing had ever felt that good, and when she opened her eyes, he felt her gaze in his every molecule.

“Chest,” she bit out as he started moving, her eyes closing as she met him move-for-move. He could feel her gripping fingertips through his shirt and sweater, and it made him fucking burn. She’d been in every one of his fantasies since the day they’d met, but the reality of sex with Izzy was incomparable.

She breathed, “You do not suck at this, Phillips.”

“Nor do you,” he quipped, his entire body overcome with that annoying emotional pinch as he looked down at her face. He was in the middle of the hottest sexual encounter of his life, a mind-blowing escapade against the wall of an elevator, yet he desperately wanted to kiss the tip of her freckled nose.

“Iz,” he said, rasping out her name through a clenched jaw. Every fucking muscle in his body was tense and taut as their pace got faster, hotter.

She pulled his face down to hers and started kissing him, desperate and hungry and wild, and that’s when things caught fire. He stopped hearing the deafening alarm as every one of his five senses – his entire consciousness – narrowed in on that one spot where they were joined.

“We should probably stop,” she said, panting, sounding like someone absolutely not interested in stopping. “Before we get arrested.”

“I just. Want,” he started, and then – like a sex goddess - she gave him exactly what he’d been waiting for. All ten of her fingernails pressed into his shoulders as her entire body tightened and flexed around him, making him growl out *fucking thank you holy shit* before following her fucking amazing lead.



“He totally knew,” Izzy said, laughing beside him in the hallway as he pulled out his keys.

“Of course he knew,” Blake replied, relieved she was able to laugh that security had opened the elevator doors a mere three seconds after they got their clothes readjusted. He slid his key into the deadbolt and said, “I know *I* couldn’t stop grinning like a dumbass, which made the elevator-stuck scenario pretty tough to believe.”

“Yeah, you suck at lying,” she said, chuckling.

“Totally do,” he laughed, turning the lock.

He looked down at her, grinning up at him with maximum nose crinkle, and he knew he loved her. It didn't make a damn bit of sense, but he loved her so fucking much that it terrified him.

It was total lunacy.

It was way too soon to feel that much - impossible to love her already - but he knew it with absolute certainty.

“By the way, Mr. Chest,” Izzy said, giving him a total smartass smile that made him want to pick her up and throw her over his shoulder, “Have I told

you how happy I am that you're no longer the boss of me?"



## Chapter 14



### Izzy

Izzy scratched Goodyear's head and watched Blake freak out.

Technically he was just standing beside her in the living room, holding his cat after injecting it with insulin. But his jaw was doing that flexing thing, he kept pulling at his shirt collar, and he hadn't given her shit since they'd walked in.

In fact, he'd been incredibly polite to her.

*Do you want something to drink?* he'd asked. And then he followed it with *Let me know if you change your mind.* What the hell did that even mean? Was he regretting their impetuous elevator liaison and trying to think of a gentle way to tell her that he was not at all interested in a sleepover?

"Y'know what?" he said, barely looking at her as he moved the cat out of her arm's reach and onto the floor. "This shirt is driving me crazy. Bad detergent or something. I'm going to go change."

"Okay," Izzy said, narrowing her eyes and watching as he nearly ran to his bedroom.

*Shit, shit, shit.* She felt queasy, literally queasy, as she wondered what exactly was up with him. Did he regret the elevator sex? Did he not respect her now? (If that was the case, screw him, but still - ouch) Was he nervous she was looking for a relationship?

Holy crap – *was she?*

She started pacing, and as she walked toward the big windows with the gorgeous view, she realized that it mattered too much to her. The why of his strange behavior felt like everything at once, like the world would end if he remained aloof and distant.

Dear God, she cared way too much about what he thought. No, no, no. Cared way too much and also felt mildly panicked at the thought of screwing things up with him.

Wait - was she in love with him?

Izzy shook her head and muttered nope into the empty living room. *More than friends* was light years away from *in-love*, and she was just getting confused because she hadn't been *more than friends* with anybody in, like, an eternity.

She hadn't known him long enough to know if he was worthy of sharing her favorite banana bread, much less her heart.

*Just be cool, moron, and be casual.*

Sure, she thought, biting down on her fingernail and staring out over the city. No problem.



**Blake**

Blake yanked his shirt off like it actually had bad detergent, even though his irritation had nothing to do with his oxford. No, his irritation had to do with his conscience and the fact that he had to open that fucking email before he could move forward with Izzy.

As blissful as ignorance had been - seriously it'd been a top five day - it couldn't be his excuse.

Especially when Izzy had no idea that everything was likely about to change, which he was. Beginning to realize made him an asshole. A huge asshole. He wanted to be with Izzy and he knew she wanted to be with him. But was all they'd done since he received that email just him being a selfish prick? The more he thought about it, the more he began to have second thoughts about everything that had transpired.

Shit.

Blake was freaking out. Although he didn't know what the email said, more than anything, he knew he would never want to be the reason that Izzy was sad, or mad. Fuck, could his heart even handle seeing her face do anything but smile?

What the hell had he done?

He grabbed a Henley from his closet, pulled it over his head, and as soon as his arms were through the sleeves, he grabbed his phone. He couldn't wait any longer.

Blake opened the email, dread settling into his stomach. Somehow, he just knew it wasn't going to be good. He clicked on the link, and--

"Can't," he said under his breath, through gritted teeth, swiping out of the attachment before he had a chance to see it. He set his phone on the dresser - face-down - and stepped away from it with his hands up like it was a loaded gun.

Shit, shit, shit. He knew looking at it was the right thing to do, but the part of him that wanted to fall asleep wrapped around Izzy wouldn't let him. He was too drunk on her, too lost in every crinkle of her freckled nose, to give up the chance to finish the perfect day with a long, perfect night. It was lazy and selfish - he knew that - yet he wasn't strong enough to stop himself.

He dragged a hand through his hair before opening the bedroom door and going back out into the living room.

"Detergent crisis averted?" Izzy asked, and he was surprised to see her standing next to the door, looking down at her phone with her purse over her shoulder like she was waiting around to leave.

"Are you...leaving?" he asked, disappointment slamming into him.

"Yeah," she said, looking at him. Her mouth turned up into a smartass grin that didn't reach her eyes, and her nose didn't crinkle. Still, she teased, "Our elevator workout made me sleepy, so now I must go crash. And The Darkling needs to be fed."

He let his gaze move all over her, taking in every square inch that he'd hoped to worship. "But didn't you feed him just before we left?"

"Well, yeah," she said, absentmindedly rubbing a finger over her lower lip. "But, um, you know."

"Ah." Blake scrubbed a hand over the top of his hair and swallowed hard. Apparently he and Iz were feeling entirely different about the night. Noted. "Let me go grab my phone and I'll take you home."

He went back in his room and slipped the phone into his pocket, but when he returned to the living room, Izzy was crouched down, petting both of his cats while talking to them in the fucking sweetest voice.

That pinching feeling returned with so much force it nearly brought him to his knees, and he couldn't stop himself from biting out the words, "Holy shit, you are so fucking beautiful."



### **Izzy**

Izzy gasped as she looked up, which made her lose her squat and drop back onto her butt.

Gawwwwd, the way he'd said it.

The way he'd said it.

He'd said the words through gritted teeth like he meant them so hard. And his intense expression didn't soften as she smiled at her own klutziness. His mouth was firm, his eyes so fierce that she felt the look from head-to-toe.

"You mean graceful," she teased, because she was not equipped to receive incendiary compliments from someone like Blake.

"I know what I meant," he said, crossing the room to stand above her. He held out a hand to help her up, and when she let him pull her to her feet, he held onto her hand and didn't let go. "You are so fucking pretty that I have a hard time not staring. Obsessively. Every second that I'm with you."

"Ohmigod," she said, blinking and hoping she didn't sound as flustered as she felt, "You just can't say things like that to me."

"Why not?" He dropped her hand and ran a knuckle over her cheek, killing her with eye contact as his big body seemed to hover in front of her, surrounding her, as his scent snaked around her head and made her hyperaware of his sexy throat.

Her eyes closed of their own volition, and she swayed just the tiniest bit before forcing them open. She didn't know why her voice came out as a whisper when she said, "Because it makes me want to believe it."

"Iz, believe it," he said, his voice quiet as he stepped closer. "Your face is all I've thought about since you scalded my chest with your PSL."

"Amy's PSL," she corrected, her heart beating a little faster as his hands wrapped around her waist and pulled her closer.

"I will take you home if that's what you want," he said, lowering his head to give her neck THE softest kiss. "But if you're interested in staying, nothing in this world would make me happier."

"What about a lotto win?" she asked, moving her head so he had better access. "I bet that'd make you happier."

"Wrong," he growled, scraping his teeth against her skin. "I want you more than millions, though it's quite likely I'd regret that decision in the morning."

That made her smile and put her hands on the back of his head. "World peace would surely make you happier."

"You can't pin world peace on me," he said with false indignation, his fingers unbuttoning the top button on her pirate blouse as his tongue licked over her throat. "World peace would - of course - be sublime, and I would choose it over you because I'm not a selfish monster. But all I want tonight, Isabella Clarence, is this."

"I cannot believe you remember my middle name," she said around a laugh.

"It's so bizarre that it's unforgettable." He unbuttoned another button. "Just like you."

Izzy stepped back - well, as much as he'd let her - and said, "Well before I can decide on the sleepover, I'm going to need to see Mr. Chest's chest."

His hands stopped moving on her buttons and his head came up. "You just see me as a piece of meat, don't you?"

"No, but I just really want to see it," she said, feeling on more solid footing when they weren't being serious. "I feel like once we start getting busy, I'll be too distracted to look."

"Did you just say getting busy," he asked, reaching over his shoulder to grab the back of his shirt.

"It's better than the alternative."

"Which is?"

"The nasty," she replied.

He pulled the shirt over his head and dropped it onto the floor.

"Holy *shit*," she said through clenched teeth before her mouth literally dropped wide open. Mr. Chest's chest was chestal perfection.

"The nasty is not an alternative at all," he said, reaching out to return to his previous unbuttoning task.

"How about banging?" she asked, setting her hands on his sternum and slowly sliding them up toward his shoulders. It was sinful and wrong and wrong and sinful that he should look so beautiful. It's like they super-sized his hot genes when the universe was stringing him together or something.

He was a freak, honestly.

"Too pedestrian," he said, "We're better than banging."

"Please don't say making love," Izzy objected, watching her fingers move over his sculpted pectorals. "That's so disgusting."

"I would never," he said, flicking open her remaining buttons. "Do I look like a douche?"

“You look like a sex dream,” she said, then sucked in a breath when he leaned down enough to drop a hot kiss on her cleavage.

“As do you.” He raised his head, his mouth in a mischievous grin as he said, “This proper bra is incredibly hot, by the way.”

“An optical illusion that really makes my micropenis pop.”

“That’s it,” he said, grabbing her waist and tossing her over his shoulder as if she were...well, something one would carry on their shoulder. Izzy squealed, staring at his super-muscly back as he said, “If you call your breasts a micropenis one more time...”

“What?” she asked, overcome with giggles as her silky shirt slid off of her upside-down torso entirely and dropped onto the wood floor. “Whatcha gonna do, Phillips?”

“Not sure,” he said, his arm tightening across the backs of her legs as he started walking. “Tape your mouth shut, maybe?”

She kept laughing as he walked through his bedroom doorway, and she said around a cackle, “But then you’ll be denying yourself the magic of my mouth, Mr. Chest, and you don’t want to do that.”

She’d meant it as a lighthearted tease about kissing, but realized it sounded filthy.

Blake stopped his forward motion and set her back on her feet a little roughly. His hot eyes were burning every little bit of her when he said, “Your mouth is the very best part of you, Iz.”

How did he do that? How did he manage to say things that made her heart swell up in her chest? She tried diffusing the moment with, “I’d say same, Blake, but those abdominals--”

“Izzy.”

She stopped rambling. “Yeah?”



“No jokes.” His eyes were just above hers, the planes of his face the center of her existence as he said, “I’m trying to tell you that I--”

A huge crash cut him off, the sound of ceramics shattering from the other side of the doorway, making both their heads turn in that direction.

“What was that?” she asked, suddenly hyper-aware of her shirtlessness.

“Fucking cats,” he growled, putting his big hands on her upper arms and moving her just a little. His eyes were all sex as he moved his face closer, so his nose touched hers, and he said, “Stay right here and don’t move.”

“I’ll do what I want, Phillips,” she said, ruining her attempt at sass by her inability to not beam up at the man.

His mouth twitched and he said, “If your shirt is back on when I return, there’s going to be hell to pay.”

She thought she saw a quick flash of something in his eyes, his face. It wasn’t what he said, just how he said it.

But he was shirtless and she was powerless, so she quickly let it go.

“Not scared,” she said as he walked out of the room, and then she laughed when he held up a hand and flipped her off without looking back.

No, she wasn’t scared, she thought as she watched him go into the kitchen.

She was terrified.



## **Blake**

“Whoa - watch the claws,” Blake muttered under his breath as he swept up the broken remains of a glass bowl. He was holding both of the little

shits with one arm so they didn't step on any of the shards, and the broom with his other as he attempted to sweep up their mess.

His reflection in the adjacent window mocked him.

Dress pants, no shirt, two cats - fucking cool, bro.

And talk about your shitty timing; he'd finally had Izzy smiling again. He'd been tempted to just ignore the crash and hope for the best, but then he remembered Goodyear's circle-walking and he couldn't risk the cats getting cut.

Fucking cats.

Just as he finished sweeping the glass, his phone buzzed in his pocket and he knew - beyond a reasonable doubt - that he was not going to check it. An email from the office would destroy his resolve to ignore work until Monday and hope that the powers that be were on his side.

But the damn thing buzzed again.

And again. And yet again.

"Fuck," he growled, setting down the boys before propping the broom against the pantry and pulling out the phone.

But - it wasn't an email. It was a text. Multiple texts.

From Izzy.

*Izzy: I'm taking a poll. Are you between the ages of 20 and 40?*

What the fuck was she doing?

He responded: *Yep. You know I'm 20 feet away from you, right?*

*Izzy: Shh. Is your name Blake Phillips?*

He texted: *Yep.*

*Izzy: Okay so random poll question - are you still nervous?*

Blake glanced toward the bedroom but couldn't see more than the doorway.

Izzy was so unpredictable - he never knew what she was going to do or say next - and for some reason, it made him fucking out-of-his mind over her. He was obsessed with the randomness of her brain.

He answered honestly: No.

*Izzy: Oh.*

A second passed. *Izzy: Yeah, me, either.*

Blake wasn't letting her off the hook. He texted: *Why are you nervous?*

*Izzy: So I'm not nervous exactly, I don't know...?*

Blake reached down and scratched between Goodyear's ears and replied: *It's ME. Last week you FaceTimed to prove to me you can do the Napoleon Dynamite dance. If you can do that on camera, you cannot be shy.*

*Izzy: No. NO! I think it's just us after a date. It's new. Not at all like US in our normal habitatary.*

He stood. *I get it. So...btw. Still 20 feet away. I can almost hear you typing.*

*Izzy: Ignoring that. So if we're going to continue, ehrrm, amorous activities when you come back, perhaps we should text a little, to remind us of our Iz/Blake friendship roots.*

He was smiling again, like a damn fool. He responded with: *You want me to text you before I sex you?*

*Izzy: Maybe.*

*Blake: Okay. So HEY, DIPSHIT, you didn't put your shirt back on, did you?*

*Izzy: THIS is revisiting our Iz/Blake friendship roots?*

He responded with: *Shirt?? I'm waiting...*

*Izzy: I actually just buried myself under your covers sans bra.*

Blake felt the blood rush from his head. *To clarify - you are half-naked in my bed?*

*Izzy: Negative. I'm all naked now. Just me and a comforter.*

*Blake: And I'm 20 ft away holy shit.*

Blake tried to focus on his phone and not the images she was putting in his head.

*Izzy: And you're just now telling me? ;)*

It was getting hot in the apartment again. He texted: *May I ask you a question?*

*Izzy: I'll allow it.*

*Blake: How would you like me to proceed?*

*Izzy: Confession - the thought of you and I together in this bed makes it hard to breathe.*

Something about her confession made his heart twist in his chest, maybe the fact that he felt the same way. He texted: *Confession – the thought of you and I together in my bed makes it hard to breathe.*

*Izzy: Really?*

*Blake: So hard.*

He walked to the bedroom, stopping in the doorway. Izzy was lying on her stomach in his bed, covered by his comforter. Her shoulders and upper back were visible, bare except for the thin black strap across her back, and she was looking down at her phone.

Holy hell, he wanted that so much. Not just the obvious, but the mundane. He wanted Izzy in his bed, scrolling on her phone like it was an ordinary occurrence, all the time.

He texted: *I am 5 ft away.*

He heard her inhale sharply before she responded. *Are you in the doorway?*

*Blake: Yes. I dare you to remove that bra.*

She cleared her throat and texted: *I cannot pass up a dare, can I?*

*Blake: I sure as fuck hope not.*

His skin felt hot as he watched her slim fingers reach around her back, unhook her bra, then fling it off the edge of the bed. She raised herself up, onto her elbows, and texted: *How far away are you now?*

His eyes were stuck to her bare back, to her pale, naked skin that set fire to every one of his fantasies.

The reality of Izzy was a thousand times better.

He texted: *I'm ready to pounce. Is it weird that I want to lick every bump of your spine?*

*Izzy: Not as weird as how badly I want to bury my face in your pillow and let you.*

*Blake: My phone and I are about to die.*

*Izzy: Please lose the pants before you do.*

Blake had never unbuckled and unbuttoned faster in his life. The room was so quiet that the click of his belt buckle hitting the floor confirmed he'd done as she'd asked. She responded with: *Good boy.*

"That's it," Blake said, dropping his phone and charging over to the bed. "I'm coming in."



**Izzy**

She screamed – a cackling laugh of a scream - when Blake’s big hand wrapped around her ankle. He dove under the covers and crawled up her body – well, up the back of her body – but the laughing stopped when she felt his hands on her hips, his mouth on the small of her back.

She shivered and let out a sigh that might’ve been a moan as his lips and tongue moved up her spine, his big body poised above hers with the space of a breath between them. When his mouth hit the back of her neck, he rasped her name in a way that made her toes curl.

She could feel the rumble of his voice on her skin, and she wanted to see his face. Needed to see his face. Izzy turned over underneath the bridge of his arms, and the sight of him hovering above her, with his hair tousled, his eyes all heavy-lidded and hot, made her realize it was the first time she’d ever been knocked breathless just from looking at someone.

“Hey,” she said, her voice almost a whisper.

“Hey.” He swallowed.

“Listen, um,” she started, rubbing her lips together and trying to think of something to keep it chill, but then he cut her off by kissing her. His lips came down on hers, somehow different – yet again – than every other time they’d kissed.

Blake Phillips apparently had an entire dossier of kisses at his disposal and dispensed them with the utmost care. So far she’d had sweet, sexy, and hot, but this one was dirty. Filthy. She’s thought the Billboard Assholes kiss was a sex kiss, but no.

This was a sex kiss.

His mouth was just as hot and hungry, but it had the patience that went along with having all night. It felt like foreplay and tantric marathon sex, all at once, and Izzy stopped thinking and held on for dear life. She brought

her arms up and around him, letting her fingers flex into the muscles of his back, needing to bring him closer.

He made a primal noise deep in his chest – a growl or a groan or a grunt – as their bodies pressed together. She could feel every inch of him – chest, stomach, thighs – and she bit down on his bottom lip, instantly impatient for everything his body had to offer her.

That was apparently the green light he'd needed, because it was on. His greedy mouth moved lower, licking down the column of her throat in a way that had her pressing and straining to feel more. Her arms fell to the bed when his mouth moved south, worshipful with the kind of enthusiasm that made her feel like her chest was everything he'd ever fantasized about.

He made a noise and delivered a nip that made her squeal, a squeal that turned into a pornographic moan as his mouth continued the onslaught that was making her wild. *How is he so good at that?* He only got better as he moved down her body, kissing every bit of her and making her writhe, tremble, gasp and scream.

It wasn't just that he was skilled at the tasks he was performing or the way she was fairly certain she had an extraordinary hickey on her hipbone. No, it was that everything he did, every move he made, shimmered through her entire body like waves in a pool.

His fingers sliding over her skin – she felt them where he touched, but she also felt them in the depths of her chest, the racing of her heart, and the heat of her cheeks.

When he kissed her belly, she felt the heat of his mouth on her flesh, and also in the pit of her stomach.

And when he came back to her and looked down at her face, his face was so full of...*something* meaningful, something important, that she felt it in

the backs of her eyes.

Blake swallowed, opened his mouth like he wanted to say something, and she realized that she was waiting for a profession of love. His flared nostrils and flushed cheeks made him look like a man ready to spit sonnets, and she felt like she couldn't bear the disappointment of what he wasn't going to say.

So she grabbed his face and brought it to hers – hard – and tried showing him how she felt by kissing the everloving shit out of him, swallowing down the stupid tears that for some reason were really close to the surface.

He sucked in a breath and went even harder, kissing her like a storm, surrounding her with passion that was inescapable and wild, where shelter was nowhere to be found.

She wasn't sure she was going to make it.

Izzy let go of his jaw, slid her hands down the front of his body, and touched him. Finally. He hissed her name and froze, tension hardening every muscle in that big body. He ground out the words, "Holy. Hell. Yes. Iz. Fuck."

"Come on, Phillips," she said against his mouth, overcome with need.

"So impatient," he replied, lifting his head to give her a smirk.

She raised her hips and slid her body against his in response.

Apparently, that was all it took. His hands left her long enough to open a drawer and rip into a wrapper, and in a matter of seconds, he was sliding inside her body. She squeezed her eyes shut and felt all of him, so incredibly good and right and full and hot and gawwwwwwwd.

But then he said her name.

"Iz."



She opened her eyes and he was watching her, looking like every wicked fantasy she'd ever had about him.

She swallowed. "Hi."

That made him smile, the sweetest, most affectionate little grin, and he said, "I fucking love you."

Her chest burned, her ears buzzed, and she wanted to freeze that moment forever.

But then Blake started moving, dominating her body with that sexpertise of his, and she lost the ability to think. She wrapped her arms around him and held on tight as he made her burn. She might've blacked out at one point, and she definitely forgot how to form words for a solid ten seconds as he showcased just how good he was at pushing her to more than she'd known was possible, but she never wanted it to end.

Nothing in her life had ever felt quite that exquisite.

Well, until fifteen minutes later, when Blake wrapped his big body around hers, pulled the heavy comforter over them, kissed the top of her head, and turned out the light.

She felt like she was home.

And just like that, the worries that had plagued her disappeared. It was too late to turn back, so she was just going to listen to Blake.

*Don't be scared, Iz. Just take a deep breath and let yourself fall.*

Really, what else could she do, now that she was already in love with him?



**Blake**

Blake sat down on a kitchen stool and opened Outlook.

The clock on the microwave said 2:15, but he was still wide awake because he was haunted by the possibility that this could all come crashing to an end. Izzy, on the other hand, was totally out when he left her, looking adorable with her face buried in his pillow and his shirt on her back.

The sight of her there, sound asleep under his blanket, made him want so many fucking things.

But he couldn't have them. Not yet.

*Only...what if he could?* He had to read the email.

He took a deep breath and opened the email attachment, ready to accept whatever he found.

## Chapter 15



### Blake

Blake paced around the kitchen as he texted: *I know it's the weekend, but is there any way we can meet up tomorrow? It's important. Your office, Starbucks, your house - wherever.*

He knew Brad wouldn't respond in the middle of the night, but that man had bothered Blake after-hours so many times that he didn't even feel bad for--

His phone buzzed. Holy shit - that was fast. Blake opened the message.

*Brad: Can't - at the lake house with the fam. Is everything okay?*

Dammit. Blake sighed and responded: *It's fine, I just need to talk to you ASAP.*

*Brad: Early meeting on Monday? I can meet you at the 15<sup>th</sup> St. Starbucks at six.*

Blake was usually the second person in the office every day; Brad was always the first. Six-thirty was his normal start time, which was probably why the man was on his third wife and had chronic high blood pressure. He

replied: *Six o'clock it is, but let the record show that I texted you the minute after I opened the updated org chart.*

*Brad: Noted.*

Blake swiped out of his messages and plugged the phone into the kitchen charger. Hitting the lights, he exited the kitchen as the room plunged into semi-darkness. The city lights outside of the window provided a little illumination, which usually made him feel less alone when he couldn't sleep.

But tonight the lights didn't matter.

Because Izzy was wrapped in his blanket, his shirt on her body and his socks on her feet. He felt...whole. That seemed far too dramatic, fucking romantic, even, but whenever he was with her, he wanted nothing else. He thought of nothing else. Everything else ceased to exist. When he was with Izzy, he was with everything.

He walked through the living room, and even that looked different with her there. Her bag on the couch, her shoes on the floor, her shirt lying on the area rug as if she'd undressed on the way to bed.

It was strange, he thought, because he really liked tidiness. For some reason, though, seeing her things felt right. His apartment somehow felt more like home.

Shit, she was making him weak as hell.

When he walked into the bedroom, though, those feelings were amplified. Because there, on his nightstand where he usually set his glasses when he went to bed, were her glasses. It felt polarizing, staring at her tortoise shell frames with the smudged lenses, and he had the overwhelming urge to do something to keep them there indefinitely.

Yeah, he was clearly losing it.

He went around the bed and climbed in beside her, doing his best not to wake her. She was out - dead to the world - sound asleep with her hands tucked under her cheek on his pillow. He wanted to look at her, to watch her sleep, but he was pretty sure that was another level of creepy that he needed to steer clear of. So he rolled over, settled onto the other pillow, pulled the blanket up, and closed his eyes.

Even though he had less space with her in his bed, it somehow felt bigger and warmer with her there, like a bed he never wanted to leave.

“Everything okay?” he heard her ask, her voice slurred and a little gravelly with sleep.

“Fine,” he replied, his eyes still closed.

“You took away my warmth when you left,” she said, scooting closer until she was curled into his back. He felt her breath on the back of his neck and her knee snaking between his as she murmured, “Mmm, better.”

He felt every muscle in his body relax like he’d been given the sweetest sleeping pill, and he took a deep breath of Izzy air. Holy shit, she was right - that was way better.



## **Izzy**

Izzy couldn't believe that Blake was still asleep.

It was nine o'clock, she was dressed and ready for a run, while Blake lay face down on the bed as if comatose. She would've imagined him as one of those doing-burpees-at-five-am dudes, but apparently he liked sleeping in.

For some reason, that contradiction was adorable. She wanted to jump on his back and bounce up and down, just to irritate him awake and see his

sleepy scowl.

Instead, she fed the cats, left him a note, and quietly left the apartment. She still had his code from when she'd cat-sat, so she didn't bother with a key. It wasn't until her second mile that she finally heard from him. His notification silenced the Post Malone that was blaring through her Air Pods and he texted: *Where did you go?*

She stopped and replied: *I'm under the bed.*

Blake: *You don't seriously think I'm going to look, do you?*

Izzy: *In my head, you did.*

Blake: *But your head is a scary place. Was I wearing coveralls, little perv?*

Izzy snorted and moved off of the sidewalk and onto a bench. Texted: *First of all, it's LIL PERV. Second, no coveralls this time. This time you're only wearing that pretty chest and a very-precarious sheet.*

Blake: What makes it so precarious?

She grinned and pictured naked Blake, sound asleep in his big bed. Texted: *The way it's SOOO close to sliding off and exposing your junk.*

Blake: *Have I ever told you that you have a way with words?*

Izzy: *Don't have to – I know it.*

Blake: *So AGAIN – where did you go?*

Izzy: *I'm running. Well, I WAS running until you texted. Now I'm sitting on a bench outside of a barber shop.*

Blake: *In your skirt?*

Izzy: *The clothes I left at your place after catsitting.*

Blake: *How much longer will you be running?*

She texted: *Two more miles. But the time varies GREATLY.*

*Blake: Greatly??*

*Izzy: Well, it depends on if I'm feeling lazy, or if I see a dog, or if I got railed last night and am sleepy - that sort of thing.*

*Blake: Did you get railed?*

*Izzy: Isn't it weird how many words there are for sex that don't really sound like a good time was had by all? Pounded, drilled, nailed. I mean, it sounds like you're building a house.*

*Blake: Correction – did you build a house last night?*

*She grinned and noticed that the man sitting at the bus stop was looking at her like she was out of her mind. She texted: Ohmigawwwwwd, Chest, you wouldn't BELIEVE the night I had.*

*Blake: Good?*

*Izzy: I wouldn't want him to know and get a big head, but this man was unbelievably good.*

*Blake: He knows.*

*Izzy: Oh, he does not.*

*Blake: Trust me. You make this noise that sounds a little bit like a sexy guinea pig and you get super-bitey; it definitely lets a man know how he's doing.*

*Izzy: So you know it was good for me because I became vermin-like.*

*Blake: YUP.*

*She figured she should be offended but with Blake, she rarely was. She texted: Well you make this growly noise that rumbles in your chest and your fingers get all grippy, so I know you liked it because YOU became a cat.*

*Blake: You also know I liked it because I came so hard I nearly blacked out.*

*“Ohmigawwwwd,” she squealed, gaping at her phone, and the bus stop dude clutched his grocery bag like he knew she was coming for it. She responded with: I have to go run before Bus Stop Man calls the cops.*

*Blake: Why? What are you doing?*

*Izzy: It’s this perverted little cackle, like I’m turned on and also very amused. I imagine it’s mildly unsettling to a stranger.*

*Blake: Do you want company on your run, Weirdo?*

*Izzy: Well yes, but I feel like you might be slower than me and hold me back.*

*Blake: I promise to try my hardest.*

*Izzy: I’m sitting in front of Alliance Barber Shop. You’ve got 20 mins.*

*Blake: I’m still in bed - how am I gonna run two miles and be there in twenty minutes?*

*Izzy: Sprint, dumbass. Or drive.*

*Blake: Drive, she says.*

*Izzy: Yes! Drive here, we run, and then we drive to breakfast after.*

*Blake: I was going to MAKE you breakfast.*

*She felt all gooey inside, like she was about to just melt into a thick puddle of happy honey. She texted: You were?*

*Blake: Homemade pizza because I know you hate breakfast food.*

*Izzy: Oops I just made the guinea pig sound.*

*Blake: On my way.*

*Izzy: YESSSSS.*

*Blake: I seem to recall you saying that a lot last night.*

*Izzy: I pretty much chanted it.*

*Blake: Fucking amazing night, Shay.*

*Izzy: That reads like a verb. Also - agreed, Phillips.*



*Blake: I'm pretty sure I saw God that last time.*

*Izzy: No, that was me, silly.*

*Blake: My mistake, Goddess.*

*Izzy: #newnickname*

*Blake: #youwish*

*Izzy: #drivecarefully*

*Blake: #iwill*

## Chapter 16



### Blake

“Pleeeeeease?” Izzy squealed, shaking his arm with both her hands as she grinned up at him. “Come on; you know you want to.”

Blake looked down at her upturned face and wondered if he was capable of telling her no. “You *just* told me that your legs cramp if you don’t run a slow mile cooldown.”

“But,” she said, blinking fast as she tried to convince him. “I ran slower than usual today so I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“*That* was slow?”

“Sure,” she shrugged, clearly lying through her teeth.

The run had been entertaining, with Izzy trash-talking the entire time about how fast she was while simultaneously telling him to slow down. *So she could beat him.* She was competitive and quick, childish and funny, and he kind of never wanted to run alone again.

But he’d made the mistake of convincing her they should run to the Old Market, which was his favorite route on weekend mornings, but and now he

couldn't get her to move.

Because it was the first day of the fall festival.

The brick roads of the downtown area were all shut down, transformed into a cacophony of autumnal offerings that were punctuated by hay bales and scarecrows. Vendors lined the streets with their gourds, pumpkins, face painting and potted chrysanthemums, and small crowds of people were already strolling the area with steaming cups of hot apple cider and freshly-brewed coffee in-hand.

"Look," she said, pointing to a food stand on the other side of the road. "If you do this, Chesty, I will buy you one of 'Paula's Protein-Packed Breakfast Sandwiches.' I bet that sounds yummy to someone like you, right?"

She grabbed his hand, lacing her fingers through his, and begged, "Come on, Blake – festival with me."

Something about the feel of her small hand, sliding against his and squeezing, made his chest tight. He looked down at her freckled nose as she squinted up at him, and he wondered if she could see everything he felt for her on his face.

He swallowed and said, "First of all, festival isn't a verb."

"Debatable," she said as she started walking, pulling him along with her. A woman with a golden retriever in a pumpkin costume walked past, and two kids with footlong corn dogs ran in the other direction.

It seemed to Blake that corn dogs before noon was a mistake.

"Second of all," he said, "I *love* Paula's PPBS's and will absolutely take you up on your offer. I'll even buy one for you."

"Ugh, no, thank you," she said, wrinkling her nose. "I'm holding out for a donut."

“You can’t get a donut,” he said, clueless as to how she could stand eating so much garbage. “Everything here is either seasonal or organic.”

“Says you,” she muttered, leading him toward a bakery booth. “With God as my witness, I *will* find a donut.”

And she did. Five minutes later, she sprinted down the block to the gas station and emerged with a cold, hard, day-old donut that made her beam.

“Doesn’t count,” he said, shaking his head. “Not a festival donut.”

“Really?” she said, taking a huge bite and saying with a full mouth and laughing eyes, “Because I think it does.”

“Did you actually eat half of a donut in one bite?” he asked, genuinely in awe of her as she attempted to chew the enormous mouthful.

She just nodded and chewed.

After that she bought him his sandwich, and he was eating the last bite when Izzy stopped at a booth full of fresh flowers. She was standing on her tiptoes, pointing toward a huge bouquet of sunflowers – damn, her legs were gorgeous – when the vendor pointed at Blake and said, “It’s you!”

Izzy looked back and forth between the vendor and Blake with raised eyebrows, and he stopped chewing and felt his face get warm as he realized who she was. The woman working the flower stand was the woman he’d bought flowers from the day before.

“Hello,” he said.

“Did she like the flowers?” she asked him, then turned her attention to Izzy and repeated, “Did you like the flowers?”

Izzy’s mouth slid into a wide smile and she nodded, looking like she wanted to laugh. “I *loved* them – they were gorgeous.”

“Of course they were,” the woman said, speaking to Izzy in a conspiratorial tone, as if Blake wasn’t there. “He was a real poo-poo about

picking them out. I showed him four bouquets before finally finding one good enough for this guy.”

“Is that right?” she asked, giving Blake a huge grin and handing the woman a ten dollar bill.

He rolled his eyes.

Izzy did laugh, then, grabbing the flowers. “He *is* a poo-poo about his flowers.”

Blake grabbed her free hand and yanked her away from the booth, saying, “Come festival with me, Shay.”

That made her cackle, a sound that made him burn.

She got a calf cramp on the next block, which was how he ended up giving her a piggyback ride. Never, in his wildest dreams, would he have imagined that hauling a woman with an armful of flowers around on his back while dodging face painters and balloon-animal artists would go down as one of his very best days.

But it would.

## Chapter 17



### Blake

“How old were you?” Blake asked.

“Five,” she replied, toeing off her shoes in the entryway as Blake shut the door behind them.

“Seems like you should’ve been old enough to know better,” he said, wondering when the hell he’d become the kind of guy who liked hearing childhood stories. He usually didn’t give a shit about preschool antics, but with Izzy, he could listen all day. *You told me ‘bout your past, thinking your future was me* - the lyric came at him out of nowhere.

“Maybe Scotty was a little shit - did you ever think of that?” she asked, her nose crinkled as she pretended to be pissed. “Did anyone?”

He watched her pull the ponytail out of her hair, then dig in all ten fingers to shake it out. Those little mannerisms were somehow something to him all of a sudden. He wanted to learn every single one. He crossed his arms and said said, “But you said he cried every time he saw you coming.”

“Are you going to talk about Scotty the Shit all day, who probably deserved my bites, or are you going to show me how to work your fancy showerhead? I only used the jetty tub when I watched the cats.”

He grabbed her hand, linked his fingers through hers and pulled her toward the master bathroom.

“You know,” she said as he flipped on the bathroom light, “It’d probably be best for the planet if we just showered at the same time.”

“I do love the planet,” he said, opening the glass door and turning on the water.

“I knew it,” she said, leaning down to pull off her socks.

“But I think you just want to see me naked.”

She straightened and shook her head. “That’s a mighty big ego you have, sir.”

“I think you want to see my mighty big--”

“Shhh.” She covered his mouth with her hand, giggling. “Don’t say it.”

“Say what?” he said from behind her palm, feigning innocence even though they were both remembering the night before.

The things she’d said.

The things he’d said.

She leveled a look of warning at him before dropping her hand.

“What?” He squinted and said, “You can’t say it now? Because I seem to recall that pretty mouth saying some filthy things in my bedroom.”

Her eyes sparkled with humor, with challenge as she stepped out of her shorts and pulled off his t-shirt, then stripped down to nothing. “I’d rather use my mouth for other things. You coming?”

She walked around him and stepped into the shower. He just stood there, frozen, looking at naked Izzy as she turned away from the shower stream,

so the water was hitting her back, and she leaned her head all the way back to get her hair wet.

Because she hated getting her face wet. *You told me 'bout your past, thinking your future was me.*

He was naked in a second and stepping into the shower, his hands reaching for her waist to pull her close. She grabbed the back of his head, pulling him down to her level and kissing the *hell* out of him. The hunger of it, the want, nearly buckled his knees as he squeezed her waist and tried keeping up with her.

Hot water poured over them as warmth pulsed through his veins. This... this he could do forever. He reached around her to grab the body wash, not breaking contact with her mouth as he squeezed out liquid soap and started lathering her back. His hands traveled all over her slick skin, back-to-front, head-to-toe.

He was a junkie for her responses. A sigh was great at first, but then he needed a moan. When his hands made her moan, his adrenaline spiked and he could barely breathe from the burning need to hear her scream. And when his mouth delivered that sound, he finally felt like he had his fix.

Until she slid down his body, her fingers scraping down his thighs, and she proceeded to make him lose the capacity to think at all.



## **Izzy**

“Seriously? You really think Patrick Mahomes is the guy?”

“Not only can the guy pass and scramble, look at how he just creates things on the field. Makes stuff happen. This goes way beyond his



quarterback rating. Just look what he did last week,” Blake said, cracking open a peanut shell. “It’s a no-brainer.”

“Last week is last week, this week is this week,” she said, tugging on the bottom of the Beastie Boys T-shirt she’d stolen from Blake’s closet and had been wearing all day. *After all, they’d fought for her right to party, and she wanted to pay them respect for that.* It was getting chilly and she was going to need to put on pants soon, but the game had just started and she was too comfy to go all the way to the bedroom.

“Wow.” Blake gave her a look and tossed an empty shell in her direction. “SO profound.”

“Profundity is my forte.”

“Profundity isn’t even a word.”

“Googling, dipshit.” Izzy laughed and opened Google, intent on proving him wrong. They were each sitting on opposite ends of her couch - because she’d forced him to scoot over as punishment for calling her fantasy football team weaksauce - but then The Darkling had ruined everything by settling on his lap so he couldn’t come back to her.

She loved what a closet cat lover he was.

“Boom - profundity,” she said, reading the definition aloud, but he just shook his head and tossed more peanuts in her direction.

After the shower at his place, he’d brought her home so she could feed the cat and, well, go home. But instead of saying goodbye, she’d invited him in to watch football and they’d been doing that the entire day. Sunday Night Football was just about to start, and Izzy was bummed that the weekend was coming to an end. It’d been so perfect it was terrifying.

“I need a soda,” she said, getting up. “Want something?”

His dark eyes were all over her, a smile on his lips, and she muttered *pervert* before rolling her eyes and going into the kitchen. Blake walked in when she was closing the refrigerator, and the sight of him, in his socks in her kitchen, made her happy. Incandescently happy.

So weird, right? But VP Blake in his stockinged feet was a glorious sight to behold. Sweats, messy hair - man, she wanted it all.

“You want a Dr. Pepper?” she asked.

“Actually, I should probably take off. Tomorrow is going to be a stressful day at work, so I should be a good boy and get a decent night’s sleep. Y’know, since *someone* kept me up all night.”

She couldn’t stop the disappointment, even though they’d both said over their living room pizza picnic that they needed to stay at their respective apartments with work hovering in the morning.

“Yeah - get out,” she said. “I’m done with you anyway.”

“Nope.” He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed, tightly, lifting her off the ground as he added, “We’re only getting started.”

She tried to be cool, but it was impossible not to smile at that because she just freaking adored him. She adored him and wanted everything.

So she looked away from his face before he could see her adoration and she changed the subject.

“Did you know that when you set me on the table yesterday, I kind of thought you wanted to sex me up? On the butcher block dinette?”

His gaze moved over the span of her face, like he was trying to see if she were serious or not, and then he lifted her higher and carried her over to the table. Her heart started racing as he gave her that look, plopped her on the table, pushed her knees apart and stepped closer.

“Were you into it, Iz?” His voice got quiet quiet and a little growly as he dragged his mouth along her jawline, as his big hands slowly slid the oversized t-shirt up her hips. He raised his head and asked, “Were you down for some table action?”

“Yes,” she sighed, looking straight into his eyes. “I seem to be into everything when it comes to you.”

Something in his face changed when she said that. All at once he looked sweet and serious, and he leaned closer and rested his forehead against hers. He swallowed and said, “I know the feeling.”

“It’s bizarre, right?” she whispered, raising a hand to his stubbled jaw.

He closed his eyes for a half-second, leaning into her touch, and when he opened them, they were bright and hot and intense. “Bizarre and so perfect, Iz, I can’t even.”

His mouth found hers as his big hands made quick work of her clothes, and she took care of his pants and the task of wrangling his wallet from his pocket while never breaking contact with that power kiss.

She briefly thought *front door*, because anyone could come in at any time, but things were so intense with Blake that she was willing to risk it.

In mere seconds he was right where she needed him, sighing into her mouth as he crashed into her on the kitchen table, and she felt emotional as she locked eyes with him, somehow homesick for him at that very moment even though the moment hadn’t yet passed. He moved, rocking into her, making her wrap her legs around him to hold him closer, squeeze him tighter, to try and lock-up his body the way he’d locked-up her heart.

“Fuck,” he hissed, sliding his hands underneath her and changing the angle to where it was no longer physically possible for her eyes to stay open. Or for her to think. He was so good, so in tune with every little thing

that she didn't even know she wanted, that Izzy just dug in her heels - and her nails - and let herself fall into the blissful escape.



## **Blake**

*Izzy: You awake?*

Blake smiled as he looked at her message. Yes, he was lying in bed, in the dark, but he was definitely still awake. He texted: *We literally hung up the phone four minutes ago.*

*Izzy: Well you fell asleep really fast last night, so...*

*Blake: No, that was you, Princess Snore.*

*Izzy: I don't snore.*

*Blake: No comment.*

*Izzy: I don't!*

Blake pictured her, lying on her stomach, sound asleep beside him. He texted: *Isabella Shay, I'm not saying you snore, but if you did, hypothetically, it would be the most adorable sleepy sound ever heard. Like an adorable kitten. With a deviated septum.*

*Izzy: Flipping you off.*

*Blake: Grabbing your finger and doing nasty things with it.*

*Izzy: ABORT MISSION! THIS IS NO WAY TO GET SLEEPY!*

Blake sat up, grinning like a dipshit, and fluffed his pillow. Texted: *Is that why you texted? So you could get sleepy?*

*Izzy: No. I texted you to say that no matter what happens, this weekend was perfect.*

What the fuck was that? Did she know? He texted: *“No matter what happens??” Trust exercise, remember?*

*Izzy: I know, I know.*

*Blake: I’ll be able to share soon, I promise.*

*Izzy: LOL I trust you. I just mean that regardless of any other thing that happens in my life, in the world or in the universe, this weekend will be preserved in my heart as perfection.*

Well, shit. Blake felt that in the pit of his stomach, in his heart, in his everloving mind, because it was exactly how he felt, too.

I love you. He wanted to say it. He wanted to tell her a hundred times that even though it was too soon, he was gone. Head over heels. Out of his mind for her.

Fuck, maybe he’d tell her tomorrow, after he talked to Brad and figured things out.

I love you, Iz. It’s what he felt in his very core, but instead he texted: *I love your profundity, Iz.*

*Izzy: And I love hearing you acknowledge the word profundity. Goodnight, Mr. Chest.*

He laid back on his pillow, looked out at the city lights, and texted: *Goodnight to you, Starbucks Amy.*

## Chapter 18



### Blake

*Izzy: Two things. Number 1 - I miss gas station donuts and co-ed showers.* Same, Blake thought as he stepped out of his car and hit the lock button on his keyfob. There was a chill in the early morning air, the subtle fall warning that winter was on its way, and he was glad he was wearing a suit jacket.

*Izzy: Number 2 – Have a great day - we should pizza tonight.*

Blake paid the parking meter and started walking toward Starbucks, wondering if it would be celebratory pizza, or something else entirely.



“Are you kidding me right now?” Brad sat back in his chair, looking at Blake like he’d lost his damn mind as the sound of steaming milk suddenly seemed deafening. It’d been nice when Blake had been discussing Izzy - a foamy layer of privacy - but now it just added to the tension in his neck.

Blake cleared his throat and asked, “Which part are you referring to specifically?”

“All of it – *shit*, Blake.” The older man gave his head a shake. “You moved in fast as hell after the first draft, didn’t you?”

“I know, I know,” Blake said, remembering how he literally ran when he thought he was safe to date Izzy. He reached up and tugged at his collar, which suddenly felt tight. He hated sharing his personal life with anyone from work, but since he wasn’t willing to lie and hide their relationship, it was the only way.

He told Brad everything (well not *everything*) about he and Izzy’s relationship. The good thing was that he considered Brad a friend, even though he was his boss. He knew he could count on Brad’s discretion, regardless of what the man’s business decision would be on the matter.

Brad said, “You never talk about your personal life, so I’m assuming this must be important to you.”

“So important,” he said, a little surprised by just how strongly he meant that. “Honeslty, Brad, I wish it wasn’t, but it is.”

Brad crossed his arms over his chest. “Well, then, I have good news and bad news.”

Blake clenched his teeth - gnashed them together, really - before saying, “What’s the bad news?”

Brad’s eyes narrowed as he looked at Blake and said, “The same as the good news. As you know, we’re eliminating some duplicate positions, post-acquisition.”

“Yes.” Blake never liked letting anyone go, but the reality was that when Ellis acquired other companies, they usually ended up with redundancies

within roles at all levels and certain uncomfortable decisions had to be made.

“As you know, most of the support functions for Danovich can be managed from here, instead of Boston, so most of the cuts will affect that location.” Brad picked up his coffee and said, “However, there are some support roles that we can split between our locations for efficiency reasons.”

Blake knew this already. “Brad, I was the one who--”

“Isabella Shay is a new employee, with far less experience than the generalists in Boston. Because we already have multiple layers of HR support here, unfortunately, she is one of the roles we’ve identified with multiple redundancies.”

Blake felt like he’d had the wind knocked out of him. “Oh, shit. No.”

“You signed off on the plan when you were in Boston, Blake.” Brad wore a patient smile as he took off his glasses and adjusted one of the bows. “But the spreadsheet only had employee numbers, not names.”

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.* “Holy shit, I didn’t know.”

“That’s right - you didn’t.” Brad put his glasses back on and glanced at his watch. “Think about that. You knew - and still know - that it’s the right business decision if you take emotions out of the equation. There isn’t a single solid reason why we would change the plan.”

Blake dragged a hand through his hair, frustrated because *shit* - Brad was right.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but maybe this is a good thing, since you really like this woman. Now you don’t have to worry about your professional lives getting in the way.”



*Not helping.* Blake seriously felt sick to his stomach because he already knew there was nothing he could do. If he tried to save her job, it would be seen - rightly so - as a conflict of interest and the byproduct of his emotional attachment to her. Brad might be his friend, but he wouldn't overlook the obvious.

"Listen, I have to go." Brad picked up his coffee and stood, "I'm sure I don't need to remind you that regardless of your relationship, this is confidential until Human Resources executes the plan tomorrow morning. When do you plan on informing Pam about the cuts?"

"I was planning on discussing it first thing this morning," he said, a huge knot in the pit of his stomach. "She should be informing her team about the acquisition right at eight, so I'll try to catch her after they wrap up."

*Pam's team...with Izzy.* Brad left, and Blake just sat at the table, feeling numb.

What was he going to do? Blake wanted to slay the dragons in Izzy's life, not *become* one. But he was the one who'd stared at the spreadsheet for hours before making the decisions. He was the one who'd be directing Pam on how the separations and severance packages would be handled. Ellis was generous with severance, and he was proud of the kind, helpful way his HR team provided assistance to departing employees. He hated layoffs, but the way the company took care of people had always made him feel better.

But only marginally. The way it worked - the way it'd always worked - was that everyone in the know kept it entirely confidential until conversations with those affected began. That way no one could be tipped-off in advance and do something out of character they'd regret later; he'd seen it all. He knew firsthand that the key to separations running smoothly was keeping everything quiet until the meetings began. Confidentiality,

respect and genuine empathy were required. After all, they were affecting the livelihoods of people like Izzy, who'd done nothing wrong but work for the company during an acquisition.

Under normal circumstances, this would be gut-wrenching. But how the hell was he supposed to *not* tell Izzy? He'd always looked at the integrity of his role through a simple lens. It wasn't uncommon for him to have to give depositions and represent the company under oath; mergers and acquisitions, state and federal filings, managing compensation, the benefit plans, the 401(k), leading employee investigations and terminations, workplace injuries – those fell under the umbrella of Blake's responsibility.

And he took his responsibility to the company and its employees seriously. So he'd always purported himself as if every decision he made could be questioned under oath. *Because it could.* If he were always honest and followed the rules and regulations, he'd never have anything to hide. It had always seemed remarkably black and white to him. Gray existed all over business, but not within these specific areas. He could testify under oath that he'd never shared confidential information with an Ellis employee because he never had. But how could he keep this confidential when it was Izzy?



## **Izzy**

Izzy walked into the conference room and grabbed the seat at the far end of the big table. She still had no idea why Blake had decided it was okay for them to be *more than friends*, but she trusted him. He was Mr. Integrity, so he obviously knew something or was working on a way to make it all okay.

The only problem was that her brain didn't like mysteries. When she'd been with Blake all weekend, work had seemed a million miles away and she hadn't cared about the *why*. Dark eyes and a deep voice had been her entire universe, providing every little thing she could ever need and shutting out the rest of the world.

Since walking into Ellis that morning, though, a tiny twinge of unease had settled into her belly.

She trusted him implicitly, but couldn't wait to find out the *how* of their relationship. The *why is it okay now when it wasn't before*.

Pam came into the conference room with a stack of files, closed the door behind her, and proceeded to explain that Ellis had acquired a company in Boston – Danovich Holdings. Izzy listened, fascinated, because her previous jobs had all been with small companies who definitely *weren't* acquiring other businesses.

Izzy felt a weird little spark of pride as she realized that must've been what Blake had been doing in Boston. *He* was the one of the people Ellis had sent to acquire a multi-million dollar corporation. How cool was that?

Her Blake was a Boss.

After giving a high-level overview of the company they'd acquired, Pam began to describe the similarities and differences between their two benefit plans. Izzy took a lot of notes, as this was going to give her quite the workload, but she couldn't wait to begin.

Izzy went back to her office and opened the Excel spreadsheet of all the new employees that she'd need to reach out to. She had a *lot* of work to do all of a sudden, but she was still in love with her new job so she didn't mind. She got lost in the paperwork and reports, forgetting everything but work. Pam was in meetings somewhere else in the building, so it was easy

to just fall into the work without interruptions. But when her stomach growled and she looked at the clock, her mind went right back to Blake. Because it was Monday - Caniglia's Food Truck day.

She stretched, smiled, and texted: *I'm on my way to Caniglia's for spaghetti, FYI.*

There was no guarantee he'd be there, but after their weekend, she'd be surprised if he didn't show. She grabbed her coat and bag, pulled on her gloves, and headed for the elevator.



Six o'clock. Izzy stared at the clock, still stuffed from the Blake-free lunch she'd had. He hadn't been at Caniglia's, which wasn't a big deal, but he hadn't sent her a single text all day, either. There was no reason to be concerned, yet – why in the hell hadn't he texted? She grabbed her phone and sent: *Are you still at work, Chest?*

He responded almost immediately. *Blake: Yup*

Izzy didn't like one-word answers with zero punctuation; that made her inexplicably nervous.

She replied with: *Was the day as stressful as you thought it'd be?*

*Blake: Worse*

She really, really, *really* needed an emoji or a superfluous exclamation point to ensure her that everything was fine.

She texted: *I'll stop bugging you so you can leave.;)*

*Blake: Tks*

Ugh. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong, that he was distancing himself from her. Which was ridiculous. *He* had been the

one to initiate their *more than friends*, so that didn't make any sense at all, right? She scarfed a piece of leftover pizza before going for a run with Josh, who was always down to accompany her if it was getting too dark. But when she got back and there was still no text from Blake, she knew something was up.

She showered and tried to stop checking her phone, but his absence gnawed at her. The combo of her not knowing *why* he suddenly thought they could date and his disappearing act after they actually *did* date left her very uncomfortable. She texted again before bed, a lowkey nothing message: *The Darkling vomited on Josh's couch and now he's holding my pillows and blankets hostage until I clean it up.*

It was true - *that dick* - and it was something that would amuse Blake. But an hour later, still no message.

And that kind of pissed her off. And scared her. She understood a stressful day, and she also understood that his obsession with ethics might prevent him from continuing their relationship if he'd been wrong about his mysterious whatever, but why in the hell would he ghost her? He was obviously home from work by now and capable of using his huge fingers to smash out a polite response.

After putting in a few hours on the benefits paperwork, Izzy plugged in her phone and went to bed. As she laid her head on a throw pillow from the sofa and covered herself with just the sheet (because she didn't want to clean the puke, dammit), she figured that if he decided to nut-up and text her overnight, she didn't even want to know. On a random side note, she really wished she could vent about him to her best friend, Blake.



## Blake

“What the fuck are you looking at?” Blake glared at the cats, who were huddled together on the couch and staring at him as if disapproving of his behavior. Well, okay, Goodyear technically *couldn't* be staring, but both of their faces were turned toward him like they were judging him.

He was sitting at his desk, sipping a scotch neat- as he had been since he'd arrived home - while trying to figure out what to do next. He couldn't tell Izzy. He *couldn't*. And it wasn't like he was choosing his job or career over her. It was just the principle of the thing. But internally, the struggle was real. His feelings for Izzy tugged hard on his values.

And at the moment, he wasn't sure which one was winning. Ignoring her all day was killing him nearly as much as the knowledge that her job would end tomorrow. Because he knew Izzy. He felt like he was almost a *part* of her. He knew what she was probably feeling at the moment, with him being distant, and it was killing him to do that to her.

But he couldn't in good conscience do the whole banter thing, laughing with her like everything was fine while knowing what was in store for her.

He sighed and stared into his glass. It was almost midnight, and he was still clueless. Because if he continued to avoid her until after she was terminated, it's not like she wouldn't know that he'd known. She *would* know, and odds were good that she'd be very pissed that he hadn't warned her or at the very least responded to her messages.

So what was his plan? Wait until he knew she'd left the building with her severance agreement, then text *whaddup?* All he knew for certain was that

he missed her so fucking much. It'd only been 24 hours, yet he was dying to see her face and smell her hair and listen to her fucking awesome takes on the world.

*Fuck it.* Izzy was more important than his job, God help him. Blake picked up his phone and sent her a text: *I really need to talk to you before work tomorrow and it's important.*

## Chapter 19



### Izzy

The buzz of her phone woke her up, though she'd been in the lightest of sleeps since turning in. She looked over at it in the darkness, and - it was him.

She sat up and swiped through the lock screen. *Blake: I really need to talk to you before work tomorrow and it's important.*

*Wonderful.* Izzy turned off the phone and set it back on the nightstand, the knot in her stomach getting tighter. In her experience, people never said *I need to talk to you* when they wanted to discuss good things. She had no idea what had happened, but she was fairly certain they were over.

Why else would he behave that way?

They were texting buddies – he'd made fun of her multiple times for saying that – yet he wasn't texting her anymore.

She blinked fast, trying to push back the sad disappointment that surely was going to knock her on her ass.



She'd respond to him because she wasn't a jerk, but not tonight and probably not before work in the morning. If he could ignore her for hours, she could do the same.

And if she was getting dumped, it'd be on *her* timeline, dammit.

Only when her alarm went off at six a.m., she saw that he had sent three more texts.

2 am: *Please call me first thing in the morning.*

4:15 am: *I'm already up, so you can call whenever.*

5:30 am: *It's important, Iz.*

*Duuuude.* She felt the *Iz* in the very core of her heart. He'd ignored her all day yesterday, and now he casually dropped that nickname? *Screw him.*

She silenced her phone and dumped it into the bottom her purse when she went to grab clean underwear out of the laundry basket. She didn't really need to have the phone handy since Blake was the only person who texted her, right? She showered and got ready for work, and pretty much felt miserable the entire time.

*She was pathetic.*

But when she got to Ellis and stepped into the elevator, she realized that she wanted to text him. To hear what he had to say and give him a chance. Blake had always been a good person – a good friend, so she supposed he'd earned her trust and patience. There was no reason to assume the worst.

Even though she felt like it was inevitable. She rifled through her bag until she found her phone. She tried to keep things light by texting: *What's up, broseph? You get tired of ghosting me and need an Izzy fix?* She kept her phone in her hand, expecting a quick response.

What she hadn't expected, though, was for Pam to be standing outside of her office when she got off the elevator, pacing like she was waiting for

Izzy's arrival. "Hey, Pam. Did you have a good weekend?"

Pam frowned before saying, "Honestly, no. Can I talk to you in your office?"



## **Blake**

Blake pulled his phone out of his pocket as he exited the conference room.

*Izzy: What's up, broseph? You get tired of ghosting me and need an Izzy fix?*

Holy shit - she'd responded. He felt his pulse kick up as he clicked on her contact info and hit the button to call her. It went directly to voicemail. *Shit.*

He glanced at his watch - 9:30 - and realized he was probably too late. The plan was to speak with all the affected employees first thing in the morning. Noting that Izzy was a part of the human resources team, he assumed that she would have been the first one spoken to.

Blake pushed through the door to the stairwell and started down the stairs toward Izzy's floor. It was a stupid move, going to her office, but he felt like he had to know that instant. He quickly descended four flights of stairs before straightening his tie, checking his phone, then coolly stepping onto the HR floor, trying his best to look casual and professional.

"Blake," said a tall guy – *John something?* - with a nod, walking down the hall as if it was entirely normal for Blake to be popping out of stairwells.

"Adam," Blake muttered in response. He turned the corner and --

“Hey, Blake.” Pam stopped walking. “I was just coming to see you.”

“Yeah?” He said, looking past her in the direction of Izzy’s office.

“Yes. We finished all twelve of the separations.” That made his gut clench, which was stupid because he’d *known* it was happening.

He tried for detached when he said, “Everything go okay?”

She nodded. “The Danovich employees didn’t seem surprised post-acquisition, for the most part, and I think they appreciated the severance package and support we’ll provide them in securing employment.”

“Good,” he said robotically, not even recognizing that he’d responded to Pam.

He couldn’t stop thinking, worrying, obsessing over Izzy; it was impossible for him to think about anything other than her at the moment.

“I felt really bad for my new generalist, though,” she said, pursing her lips. “She seemed shocked.”

He rubbed the back of his neck and wondered if he had any more Tums in his desk.

He said, “It’s never easy, is it?”

He swallowed.

“So what brings you down to our floor?” she asked.

“Uh.” He tugged at his tie and seemed unable to come up with a word. Any words at all. *What the fuck was wrong with him?*

He said, “I misplaced my phone and thought I’d check down here.”

She glanced down at his hand, where he was clearly holding the latest iPhone. He said, “I have to go now.”

Once he was in the elevator, he pulled out his phone and texted: *Are you okay?* He hadn’t realized how certain he was that she wouldn’t respond until the vibration of his phone scared the shit out of him.



## Izzy

*Was he kidding with that?*

Izzy shoved her phone into the pocket of her coat.

Nope. She definitely wasn't okay.

Because getting fired was terrible. She felt embarrassed, rejected, sad, and stressed about her future. But what was even worse – devastating, honestly – was the fact that Blake had known.

Perhaps if she didn't work in HR, she might've been able to delude herself into thinking he hadn't been aware. She might've assumed he was too important to be in the weeds of a workforce reduction.

But Blake was the AVP. He was the one *in charge* of things like this. If he hadn't been the one to make the decision, he'd at the very least signed off on it.

So when she'd been burying her face in his neck at the farmer's market and thinking about forever with him, he'd been fully-aware that she would only be employed for a few more days.

She looked out the window, at the steady autumn rain, and the question came out of nowhere, nearly knocking the wind out of her.

Had her termination been the *why* and *how* of their relationship? Had Blake known she was getting fired, and that knowledge made him okay with *more than friends*??

*Had she been fired SO they could be more than friends?*

She shifted the box on her lap as the bus's squeaky brakes squealed to a stop at the end of her block. Her cheeks burned as she stood and walked

down the center aisle, hyperaware that every eye on that bus knew she'd just been fired.

And when she stood on the curb and watched the bus pull away, it somehow felt like yet another rejection.

Izzy pulled the hood of her jacket a little tighter as she walked in the rain. Everything sucked, but she was going to try her best to be positive.

*It's a gorgeous autumn morning*, she told herself, letting her eyes wander over the rain-dampened yellow leaves that were covering the sidewalk. *You have your health*, she thought as she catalogued the lack of physical pain existing in her body.

*You will find anoth—*

“Oof!”

She tripped on a raised section of sidewalk, falling forward and all the way down to her hands and knees, spilling her *I-just-got-fired* box all over those wet leaves.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she whined, though no one was even around to hear her.

It was a Tuesday morning. Everyone else was at work.



## **Blake**

After an hour, she finally responded.

*Izzy: Fine. HBU?*

Yeah, she wasn't fine. He responded with: *I just saw Pam.*

*Izzy: Haha samesies*

He hated this. He didn't want work to ruin what they had. He didn't want this hanging between them.

He texted: *So again - are you okay?*

*Izzy: I'm fine. Ellis is very generous with their severance packages.*

He didn't know what to say to that. He texted: *Can I call you?*

Instead of answering, his phone started ringing. Izzy was calling *him*. He lifted the phone to his ear. "Hey."

"So I have three questions," she said, sounding uncharacteristically serious. "I don't want to be a hardass, especially since you're kind of my favorite right now, but I need answers."

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.* "Right. Of course."

"Okay." She cleared her throat before saying, "When did you find out Ellis was firing me?"

"You didn't get fired, you were part of a workforce reduct--"

"Blake." Her voice was tight. "When?"

Fuck, he didn't want to answer that. He sighed and said, "Yesterday morning."

"Oh - wow." She did a breathy cough-laugh thing that was definitely not good. "More than twenty-four hours."

"Well I was--"

"Question two," she interrupted, sounding like her teeth were gritted. "Did you have any part in the decision that I should be one of the eliminated?"

He felt even more queasy than he'd felt before. "Yes."

He heard her shocked inhalation through the phone. He said, "But I didn't know that--"

“Nope. Blake.” She talked right over him, her voice stiff and weird. “You have no idea how much I respect your honesty. I’m sure you made the right business decision and didn’t let your personal feelings interfere.”

He didn’t know if she was being sincere or sarcastic, so he said what was in his heart. “Please let me bring you a pizza.”

“No.” She cleared her throat again and said, “I mean, no, thank you. I have to go.”

“Wait.”

“WHAT?”

He didn’t know. He only knew that if she hung up the phone, things would get worse. “What was your third question?”

She growled. “Once it was decided that my position was being eliminated, which was evidently done by none other than you, is that when you told me that we could be more than friends?”

He hadn’t expected that. Holy shit, did she really think he was that big of a jerk? She had every right to be pissed at him, but he felt wounded when he said, “Are you asking me if I eliminated your job so we could be together?”

Her voice was clipped when she said, “Dear Lord, Blake. You’re an intelligent man. Don’t make me repeat the question.”

“Izzy, of course I didn’t--”

“Forget it,” she interrupted. “Doesn’t matter?”

“Are we okay?” he asked, feeling like he needed to brace his arms on his knees and put his head between his legs so he didn’t pass out.

“I don’t know. I don’t really think so.”

“Iz.” For the third time that day, he had no fucking idea what to say. “Please tell me we can be okay.”

“I can’t.” Her voice was louder now. “Because no matter how I look at this, we’re not okay. Either you fired me to get what you wanted, or you knew I was getting fired but didn’t tell me. I hate both scenarios.”

“I texted you,” he said, hating how desperate he sounded, how desperate he *felt*.

“In the middle of the night,” she snapped, “And all you said was to call you. That’s not a warning.”

“You have to believe me that I didn’t know you were on the list until Brad told me yesterday morning.”

“But you said--”

“I was looking at employee numbers and data when I made the decision - no names,” he said, wondering if that would even matter to her. “It wasn’t even until I talked to him about *us* that I realized you were affected.”

“Wait. You told him about us?”

“Yes.” *Fuck. I was totally blowing it.* “I met with him Monday at six a.m. to discuss it.”

“Ohmygod, Blake - what if that’s why?” She sounded even angrier as she said, “Or were you just ensuring that I couldn’t be removed from the list once Brad knew?”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“I have to go.”

*No.* “Can I come over?”

“No.”

“Iz. Come on,” he begged, feeling desperate. “*Please.*”

“I need to think, okay? I have to go.” She disconnected the call, and Blake stood there for the longest time, just staring at the phone in his hand.





## Izzy

“To Izzy,” Josh shouted, holding up his shot glass.

“To Izzy,” his friends repeated, and they all tossed back another shot. When she’d come home in the middle of the morning, crying and carrying her wet box of belongings, her cousin had gone into full-on supportive bestie mode. He’d taken her shopping to try and help her forget about her joblessness, and then he’d called all of his nerdy friends to meet them for day-drinking.

On a side note, she didn’t know how Josh’s friends were able to just ditch work for an impromptu afternoon party, but she was sure glad they were. It’d been a good distraction, but not good enough to make her *not* think about Blake.

Every time he entered her mind, she’d get that adrenaline shot to her system, the weird chemical mixture that made her feel love, hate, worry and dread, all at the same time. But the thing of it was, she wasn’t sure how she really felt. He might’ve handled it poorly, but he’d never lied to her. He had always been honest to a fault, so if he said he hadn’t known he was choosing her for elimination, he probably hadn’t. She still didn’t know where they stood, relationship-wise, but --

“Drink, drink, drink!” they all chanted over the noise of the bar, and she did. She tossed back the Vegas Bomb, happily allowing her tipsiness to catch a buzz that she hoped would morph into full-scale drunkenness. Because it’d been a *very* shitty day that she’d like to forget. Josh and his friends forced her to play darts with them, then pool,

and it wasn't until she was good and tipsy, on the way home, that the conversation turned 100% in her direction.

The whole group was piled into the back of their DD's minivan when Josh's friend, Chuck, turned around in his seat and told her over the headrest that she was too good for Blake.

Who, over the course of the afternoon, had been renamed The Douche. "I like ethics as much as the next guy, but you can't keep a secret like that. Not if you really care about the other person." He stroked his pencil-thin mustached and said, "You deserve better."

Josh nodded in agreement from his spot beside her in the back row, his words just short of slurry when he said, "Quick point of clarification, Chuck. You told at least thirteen lies while we were at the bar. You've told two since we got in the van and we've only made it five blocks. You wouldn't know ethics if it bit you on your big rosy ass."

Then he turned toward Izzy and said, "But Chuck is right. You deserve so much better than The Douche. He can kiss Chuck's lying butt."

Chuck added, "And he should've asked you before he told his boss about your relationship. Total dick move, not talkin' to you first."

She nodded and said, "Honestly, I'm dying to know what he said. Like, word-for-word, I want to know."

"Ask The Douche," Chuck said, gesturing to her phone. "Make the asshole tell you."

Izzy giggled. "Should I?"

"Yes!" they all said in unison. She gnawed on her lip before unlocking her phone and texting: *What exactly did you tell Brad about us?*

His response was almost immediate.

*Blake: I told him that I started dating you the second I saw a post-acquisition org chart draft showing HR would soon begin reporting to someone else. Obviously that changed, but at the time I thought we were fee and clear. Man, Iz, my heart exploded.*

That sounded really good to her, even though Chuck and Josh were talking about how douchey of a move that was.

*Blake: Can I please call you?*

She was about to text "yes" when Josh yelled, "NO!"

"Give me that," he said, snatching her phone from her fingers. "No matter what your ultimate decision is, you have to be aloof in right now. You can't let The Douche think you'll forgive him that easily."

She pictured Blake's face and felt melty. *Yeah - she was definitely ready to consider being easy on him.* Still, she said, "I don't want to run the risk of losing whatever this is that we have, assuming I want to take him back."

She looked around the van and noticed they were waiting on her to do or say something.

She cleared her throat and said, "Assuming I want to take The Douche back."

Cheers and clapping erupted in the van.

"You won't," Chuck said. "Just let him spend the night thinking *he* might lose *you*. Trust us on this."

She looked from Chuck to Josh and decided that yes, she would trust them. She sucked at love and relationships, so they had to at *least* know more than her, right?

"Fine," she said, noting a light slur in her own voice. "Keep my phone and don't let me have it back, even if I beg." "Donezo."



## **Izzy**

She regretted that the minute she woke up the next morning. She reached for her phone, only to discover it'd never been returned. *Awesome*. She sat up and looked out the window, her head pounding, and sure enough, his car was gone.

Josh had gone to work and left her phoneless.

A week ago, she'd have just gone up to his apartment and retrieved it, but after The Darkling puked on his stuff, he'd started locking his door. "Dammit," she groaned, her head aching as she flopped back onto her pillow. She laid there, feeling devastated about Blake. Her fuzzy brain was having a hard time keeping track of whether she was mad or sad, but there was no question that there was a massive aching emptiness without him.

An instant later, she remembered she was unemployed.

"Gawwwwwd." One of those things would've been the worst, but the two of them together? This was nuclear-bad on her heart. She rolled over onto her stomach and buried her face in her pillow, but that wasn't comforting because it made her think of the way Blake's pillow had smelled like a combination of him and bleach.

After a half-hour of crying in bed, she decided to get up and eat. She was wickedly hungover, and the only cure was going to be cold pizza. She climbed out of bed and shuffled toward the kitchen. She grabbed a slice and a Red Bull from the fridge, and took them over to her desk.

After waking the laptop that she always forgot to turn off, she plopped onto the chair and logged into - *ugh* - LinkedIn. Because as much as she'd

like to spend the day loafing, the tiny balance in her savings account was pushing her to start job hunting immediately. She clicked on the search window and typed human resou-- before noticing the little inbox notification on the side of the screen.

*25 New Messages.* She knew they were all spam, but clicked into the messages, anyway. The first one was sent at 8am that morning, from someone named Ashley Lea at MOA. Izzy was familiar with the huge insurance company, but no one named Ashley. *Hi, Isabella. We currently have an opening for an HR Generalist, and a little birdie told me that you might be looking. If you're interested, please call me - I'd love to chat.*

Izzy took a bite of pizza and read the message again. It looked like a legit message, but that was just a little too good to be true, wasn't it? She moved down to the next message, which was also sent earlier that morning. *My name is Emily Carson, and I'm with Price-Harper Corporation. We're looking for a Senior HR Generalist, and your name was mentioned with a glowing recommendation. Would you be interested in discussing?*

Izzy dropped the cold slice onto the table and leaned closer to the laptop screen. What in the actual hell? She started clicking through the rest of the messages, and they were ALL legitimate, I'm-not-dreaming employers, reaching out to *her* about jobs. She couldn't believe it. Pam must've made some calls on her behalf - it was the only explanation. The woman was the *sweetest* and felt horrible when she'd let Izzy go, so that *had* to be it.

But talk about going above and beyond. Over half of these jobs were better opportunities than the one she'd just left. Izzy grabbed the heavy old rotary phone that sat on her desk, a throwback relic that her grandparents kept connected to a landline because *you never knew*. As long as she'd lived there, Izzy had never used the old phone. Not even once.

Now, however, she was grateful as hell for its existence. Izzy lifted the phone to her ear and dialed the number from the first message she'd received. It was a direct line to Ashley, the VP of HR, and when the woman answered, she behaved as if she'd been dying for Izzy to call.

She said she was *thrilled* to hear from her and would love to chat in-person. Two hours later, Izzy had six interviews scheduled, six very promising interviews. She couldn't believe her good fortune; like, what were the odds? *How is this even happening?*

She made a mental note to ask Josh if she could borrow his car for interviews since Blake still had hers. But when she was on the phone with the seventh, a Lori Anderjaska at Citibank who was going to rearrange her entire schedule in order to fit Izzy in, it all started making sense. Lori slipped and mentioned Blake's name - *when Blake called* - and Izzy made the woman slow down and tell her everything.

And that was the moment she knew.



## **Blake**

Blake pulled up in front of Izzy's building. He shut off the car and texted: *I have pizza, McDonalds, flowers, a six-pack, a gallon of chocolate ice cream, a bottle of wine, your better-than-new running car, and a thousand apologies. If you'll let me come in, I'll give you all of it.*

She hadn't responded to him since the night before, when he admitted he'd told Brad about them. And honestly - he couldn't blame her for being pissed. He should've asked her permission before going to the top with their

relationship, but he'd been so fucking desperate to somehow have both Izzy and his integrity that he'd been impulsive.

And he was never impulsive. Although, to be fair, he felt wildly desperate and maniacally impulsive at the moment as he sat there in a car full of bribes and a gnawing in his gut that worsened every time his brain said *it's too late - you've already lost her*.

*Lost her.* As if he'd ever had her.

But he had the promise of what they could be.

It wasn't the idea of her, it was the reality of them. They hadn't been together long, but it was long enough to know that losing her was more than he could handle.

When Skye had lied to him, resulting in their broken engagement, he'd been pissed and disappointed and felt like an idiot. But somehow today, the possibility that he might've lost Izzy felt far more devastating than a lost fiancé.

He got out of the car, grabbed the mountain of shit from the passenger seat, and walked up to the stoop. It couldn't hurt to try the buzzer, right? Technically he had the building code, but there was no way he'd be that creep who just let himself into someone else's apartment.

He shifted the stack of stuff and hit the buzzer, but after three times, gave up. He lowered himself to the ground and sat, knowing that if he went back to work he'd just think about Izzy and accomplish nothing. He might as well wait for her. She couldn't be gone for that long, right? He stretched his legs out in front of him and settled in to wait her out.



“What the hell happened to you, Mr. Phillips?” asked Bob, the doorman.

The short man with the silver hair grinned and looked down at Blake’s loosened tie, rolled up shirtsleeves, and soaking wet dress shirt. *Definitely not his usual style*. Blake just shook his head and kept walking.

He’d sat on her stoop for two hours, like a chump, hoping that if he could just see her, just talk to her face-to-face, he could convince her. But she never came home.

And he might’ve deluded himself into thinking maybe she wasn’t getting his messages, but right about the time it’d started raining, he’d seen conversation bubbles. Finally - *holy shit* - she was typing. He’d stood there in the rain, his heart pounding out of his chest as he stared at his phone and waited for her words.

Only the words never came. The bubbles disappeared and she doubled-down on her radio silence, which made him finally drop all that shit into the dumpster and walk home.

Blake was cold and fucking sad as he stepped into the elevator and rode up to his floor. It was barely five o’clock, but all he wanted to do was take a long, hot shower and fall into bed. He untucked his wet shirt and pulled off his soaked tie, throwing it over his shoulder as the doors opened and he stepped out.

He was on autopilot as he shuffled down the hallway, lost in his own head. A million miles away in his own pathetic thoughts. He was so *gone* that he very nearly stepped on Izzy.

“Holy *shit*,” he muttered, coming *this close* to trudging right over her. What the hell? Izzy was sitting in front of his apartment with her back against the door, her legs stretched out in front of her. Her head was leaned



all the way back and her eyes were closed. She was asleep. Blake was scared it was a mirage as he lowered to his haunches.

How was she there? Moments before he'd been filled with disappointment and exhaustion, but now adrenaline was pumping through his veins and he was wide fucking awake.

Hyper-focused.

*On her.* Her breathing was soft and her vanilla scent made him breathe deep as he looked at her face. He reached out a hand and traced the curve of her cheek with his fingertips as he said, "Izzy."

Her eyes fluttered open, bright and blue with butterfly wing lashes, and she looked...introspective. Her eyes were everywhere on his face - his nose, his chin, his lips, his forehead - before she said, "Why are you dripping, and where the hell have you been?"

## *Chapter 20*



### **Izzy**

Blake's expression was unreadable - dark - as his brown eyes seemed to be looking for something in her face. His gaze stayed on hers when he said, "I was at your apartment."

"You were?" Izzy couldn't look away from his intense eye contact, which was exactly at her level as he crouched beside her. "Why?"

His forehead got a little crinkle, just between his eyebrows. "Didn't you get my texts?"

He'd been sending messages? "Josh has had my phone since last night."

"Ah." He did that flex/unflex thing with his jaw, looking terribly serious. His voice was low and a little gruff when he said, "I thought you were ignoring me."

"Why are you all wet?" she asked, watching a drop of water roll down the side of his face.

"I dropped your car off at your place," he said. "Walked home when you weren't there."

“Why did you contact all those HR people on my behalf, Blake?” She hadn’t meant to just blurt it out, but the question was eating away at her. “It had to have taken you hours to connect with that many business contacts. Why on earth would you do that for me?”

He looked at her mouth. Swallowed. “Don’t you know?”

“Guilt?” she asked, feeling a shiver shimmy up her spine.

“Try again.”

She drew in a shaky breath and wished she hadn’t opted for the t-shirt dress, because her legs were getting goosebumps. The ability of Blake’s face to deliver chills made the comfy-cute garment totally weather-inappropriate. “Charity?”

“Iz.” Blake leaned a little closer, where his lips hovered just above hers, and he murmured, “Don’t you know that I’d do anything to make you happy?”

Izzy felt the world shift as she looked at Blake’s honest face and saw that he meant it. “You should get out of those wet clothes.” She climbed to her feet, grabbing his hand and pulling him up with her. “Give me your keys.”

He watched her, and without a word, pulled his keys out of his pocket and held them out.

“Thank you,” she said, taking them from his fingers, but she felt a little ridiculous when her hands shook as she unlocked the door.

The smell of his apartment when she pushed in the big, wooden door - clean and somehow totally his - felt like a welcome.

“I’m going to change,” he said, still looking solemn.

“Don’t go anywhere.”

“I won’t.”

His eyes were bright as he said, “Better not.”

“You know,” she commented, remembering what he’d said about sending her messages. “You could let me use your phone to read the texts I missed while I wait.”

He kind of froze when she said that, which made her regret it. “Forget it. It doesn’t matter--”

“No.” He pulled the phone out of his pocket and dragged his big thumb across the screen. “I just, uh, I guess you could say I was a little in my feelings while I waited for you.”

That made her smile. “I cannot believe you just said those words, Phillips.”

“Right?” He made a self-deprecating laugh-cough. “I’m a fucking idiot now.”

“Now?”

He finally looked like he might smile - but he didn’t. He paused, looking at her, running his eyes all over her face, before he held out his phone and said, “Just don’t judge me too harshly until I get a chance to defend myself.”

She took his phone and felt like she’d won something. “Deal.”

He disappeared down the hall, and she walked into the living room and leaned her backside against the couch’s armrest. She found her name in his messages - SBUX AMY - and started reading from the last text she remembered getting from him.

Blake: Can I please call you? That was the text she’d received while in the van with Josh and his friends, just before he’d taken her phone.

The next message was from 8am that morning. *Are you awake?*

An hour later: *Can I buy you breakfast and we can talk? Please?*

An hour after that: *I get that you don't want to talk to me and I respect that. But I really wish you'd give me five minutes. Just hear me out, and then you can go back to hating me if you want.*

Two hours later: *I have pizza, McDonalds, flowers, a six-pack, a gallon of chocolate ice cream, a bottle of wine, and a thousand apologies. If you'll let me come in, I'll give you all of it.*

Twenty minutes after that: *I'm waiting on your porch. Please don't think I'm a stalker, but I can't focus on anything but you - us - so I might as well just wait until you get here.*

Ten minutes later: *There is a squirrel approaching and he looks hungry. I'm scared.*

Ten minutes after that: *Fuck, here's the thing, Iz. I like you more than I've ever liked anyone, okay? I love the language you use and the weird way you think and the smell of your hair and the way you make me laugh and the way you eat pizza more than any human ever should and I miss you.*

One minute later: *My apologies for the run-on sentence. Also I KNOW that it's stupid to miss you when it's only been a day, but somehow I do.*

Two minutes later: *I will do whatever it takes to fix this because I think I love you. I know it's too soon and swear to God I'm not some pathetic clinger, but I just*

*"Still reading?"*

Izzy looked up from the phone and there was Blake, wearing grey sweatpants and a Cubs t-shirt, and the strength of the feelings she had for him was kind of overwhelming. He watched her, looking... nervous, actually, and she felt a little lightheaded.

So she just nodded and blinked back the tears in her eyes.

He said, "If you need more time--"

“I think I love you, too,” she blurted out.

If it weren't for the way his Adam's apple moved when he swallowed, she might've thought he didn't hear her. His expression didn't change one bit before he said, “What did you just say?”

She felt like an idiot. “Well, I mean, I'm sure--”

“Fucking say it again,” he said, closing the distance between them. In a second he was wrapping his arms around her waist and adding, “But slower, Iz. Please, God.”

She set her hands on his chest - the Chest. Where it all began. She said, “I. Think. I. Love. You. Too.”

He set his forehead on hers. “It's weird, right?”

She let her eyes close and she whispered back, “It's always been weird with us. Since the very beginning.”

He pressed a light kiss to the tip of her nose.

“So where's all my stuff?” she asked, very nearly purring as he rubbed his nose against hers.

His mouth slid into a big smile - finally, and he said, “The dumpster behind your building.”

“What?” She pulled back to give him her best scowl. “You threw it all away?”

“Baby, I was depressed as fuck in the pouring rain,” he said, teasing but also sounding serious. “I threw your stuff away with a shit-ton of force and a litany of sad curses, actually.”

That made her ridiculously pleased even while she felt sorry for him. She tilted her head and said, “Wait - am I baby now?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Do you want to be?”

She grinned and squinted, like she was thinking hard. “Will you please say the words *Are you lost, baby girl?* Just as a sample so I can see if I like it?”

“You little pervert,” he said, squeezing her waist and giving her mock anger. “I will not table read from your favorite porn.”

She started laughing, unable to believe he remembered their discussion about the spicy Netflix movie. “*365 Days* is NOT porn, for the record; I already told you that.”

“Just because you say something doesn’t mean it’s a fact.”

“Sure, it doesn’t.” “Iz.”

“Huh?”

He said through gritted teeth, “Can we stop talking now?”

“I don’t know if I can--”

He cut her off with his hands, which pulled her tighter against his body, and his mouth, which landed hot and wild on hers.

Yeah - he didn’t have to tell her twice. Izzy kissed him back like a wanton, her body infused with a heady cocktail of relief, gratitude and primal lust. She panted like she was running as he opened his mouth wide over hers. His big hands came up to the sides of her face, his fingers flexing on her skin, which made her purr.

“Your dress is cute,” he said against her lips, “And needs to be gone. I’d take care of it but I don’t think I can do it without fucking ripping it off.”

She reached around to the back and undid the zipper, letting the dress fall to the floor as they continued kissing each other like they’d been kept apart for decades. Her hands found their way to his thick hair and then he was picking her up, his mouth still feeding her heat as she wrapped her legs around his waist and he led them down the hall.

“I love how big your hands are,” she breathed, feeling his palms under her ass as he carried her like she weighed mere ounces. “So fucking sexy.”

“I love how strong your thighs are,” he said, lifting his mouth from hers and giving her a dirty grin. “And the way you always tighten them when I do this.”

He lowered his head and bit down lightly on her neck, which made her clench every single muscle in her body, which made him laugh and groan, all at the same time. She somehow managed to pull off his t-shirt as he carried her into the bedroom, and when he climbed onto the bed with Izzy wrapped around his body, her feet managed to plant on the back of his calves and pull down his sweatpants.

“Fucking industrious,” he said, laughing as he rolled onto his back (carrying her with him) and used his own feet to finish the job. “See, this is why I think I love you.”

She felt warmth bloom, from the tips of her toes all the way to the top of her head, as he grinned up at her. She settled on top of him, sitting up and letting her knees lower to each side of his hips as she grinned right back. “Because I can take off your pants with my feet.”

“No.” His smile dropped away and he raised his hands to the back of her neck, pulling her face closer to his. It felt like his dark eyes were her whole world as his fingers burned her skin. He swallowed and said, “I mean, yes. But no. Because you’re this fucking gorgeous perfect weirdo that I am obsessed with.”

Her throat was tight, because for some reason it felt like the most perfect love declaration she could ever imagine.

“It’s way too soon to say this, but I know I love you, Iz, just like I know Goodyear needs insulin to live and that I’m allergic to cashews.” He was



beautiful and earnest as he looked into her eyes said, “I don’t expect you to --”

“But I do.” She blinked back tears – what the hell was that – and nodded. “I know it, too.”

His jaw muscle tensed and his nostrils flared before he pulled her mouth back to his.

And then everything changed.

He was still delivering white-hot hunger with his lips and tongue, but it somehow felt deeper, as if they were signing their names to an unspoken agreement, committing to something bigger via kisses and sighs. His hands tangled in her hair and he sat up, like he couldn’t get enough and needed to be closer, and she wondered if she could die from an overdose of lust.

She felt like she could and also that she’d be absolutely fine with it.

*What a way to go.*

Blake Phillips was killing her, and she never wanted it to stop. He turned them again, so he was above her, and she reveled in the feel of him; the weight of his big body on hers, the slide of his leg hair against her own opposing smoothness, the heat of his skin.

The hardness of his body – every ridged, straining muscle – made her wild with need.

She trailed her fingers up his wide, shredded back, her nails pressing into his flesh as she urged him closer. More. She needed more.

Him.

Now.

“Blake,” she said against his lips, shamelessly digging her heels into his soft sheets, rubbing against him as he continued treating her mouth as if it were a gourmet meal and he’d been deprived of food for a month. She

managed to pant out now and please without interrupting the delicious onslaught, and then she hissed yessssss when she heard his big hand rifling in the nightstand.

But Blake - Blake didn't stop. No, he continued inhaling her, devouring her, even while suiting himself up. Hot damn, she thought, delirious with want. VP Blake is a fucking Rockstar at multi-tasking. She closed her eyes and kissed him back with every single piece of her, and when he pressed inside her body, filling her so perfectly, she already couldn't remember what it felt like to not love Blake Phillips.



## **Blake**

“Come on, Shay – you don’t really want to go home, do you?” Blake asked, yelling from the bed as she fetched them snacks from the kitchen. It was midnight, and not only was he exhausted, but he really wanted Izzy to sleep in his bed all night.

“Of course I don’t,” she yelled back, clinking dishes. “But The Darkling needs food.” “Can’t you call Josh?”

“He’s got an early flight in the morning,” she said. “He won’t help.”

Blake kicked back the covers, got up and walked into the kitchen. “What’s his number?”

“Whose?” Izzy glanced at him as she sprinkled shredded cheese all over a huge stack of tortilla chips. “Have I ever told you how good you look in a pair of boxer-briefs, by the way?”

“You have not and thank you. Now - your cousin.” Blake sat down at one of the counter stools and watched as she bent her knees – to be at nacho

eye-level, he was assuming – and surveyed her chip mountain. “What’s his number?”

She spouted it off, still focused on her snacks, and he texted: *Can you feed Izzy’s cat?*

The response was almost immediate. *Is this The Douche? You’ve got some nerve. Unless Izzy has forgiven you, in which case, Blake – what’s happening?*

Blake half-smiled at that; who were these weirdos, anyway? He stood and went to find Goodyear in the living room. He texted: *It IS Blake. I’ll give you fifty bucks.*

*Josh: No I’m pissed at you. Douche. Unless I have permission to not be. Do I have Iz’s ok?*

He full-on smiled at that, scooping up the cat and texting: *You have her ok. She’s sleeping over. We’re good. But for the record, Josh, I apologize to you, as well.*

*Josh: Thx. If you promise not to dick her around, this one’s on the house.*

*Blake: You’re too kind. Josh: Right?*

*Blake: Later, Josh.*

*Josh: Peace out, Physical Challenge.*

Blake set Goodyear on the leather recliner – stupid cat loved to sleep there but couldn’t get up without help – and he saw Izzy through his sliding door. She was standing on the balcony, looking out at the city, looking like a fantasy in just his t-shirt and argyle socks.

Okay – looking like his idea of a fantasy.

When he pulled open the door, she didn’t turn around. She leaned on the railing and said, “I love it out here.”

“Same.” He stepped closer to her, wrapping his arms around her waist and trapping her between his body and the railing. He lowered his head, inhaling the sweetness of her neck as he said, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” she said, a smile in her voice as she ground her backside against him.

“Minx,” he muttered, nipping at her neck. “Do you think you can keep the noise down if I were to lift that t-shirt, slide down those panties and bend you over the balcony?”

“Hell, yes,” she said in a near-whisper, sounding half-amused and half-aroused.

“You sure?” he asked, biting down on her earlobe as his hands found her soft thighs. He slowly slid his fingers up the backs of her legs – fuck she had the softest skin – until he was lifting the hem of the shirt over her perfect ass. “Because you’re kind of noisy, and I have to live here.”

“Well,” she said, her voice a breathy rasp that made his blood boil. “I guess you have a choice to make, Chest. Risk versus reward.”

She removed the sexy layer of lace and presented him with a beautiful choice.

“If I say I love you at this moment,” he started, feeling dizzy with lust as he shed his own layer of Calvin Klein cotton so damn fast.

“It won’t count,” she said, widening her stance and making any remaining blood drain from his head.

“Grab the railing,” he said, done playing. “And lean down a little.”

“You’re not the boss of me anymore, remember?” she said, looking at him over her shoulder, and then she moaned when he slid inside her.

No - it wasn’t a moan. She sighed, but with volume.

He didn't know what it was called, that noise, but he knew it set him on fire.

“Do you have any idea,” he said, clenching his jaw as he grabbed her hips and started moving, “How many times I've imagined this exact scenario playing out in my office, on top of my desk, and I was absolutely the boss of you?”

Her breathing was erratic, her fingers tightly wrapped around the railing, but the smartass still managed to say - no, she breathed, “VP Blake is unethical in his perverted fantasies.”

“Only about you,” he said, and then he didn't say anything else at all. It got too hot, too good, too overwhelmingly potent for him to remember what the hell words even were after that.

## Chapter 21



### Izzy

How was Blake's bed so unbelievably comfortable?

Izzy opened her eyes and sighed happily, her head on the downy-soft pillow, her body buried by the heavy down duvet. She was floating in a sea of dream bedding, bobbing in an ocean of warm comfort that smelled like bleach and Blake, and she didn't want to ever get up.

She rolled over, grabbed her glasses from the nightstand, and put them on. She was alone in the bed, in the dark, but when she sat up, she could see that Blake was in the huge walk-in closet on the other side of the room.

He was standing in front of the full-length mirror in suit pants and a dress shirt, tying his tie. *Dear lord, the breadth of that perfect chest.* His hair was damp, his feet were bare, and she found herself incredibly smitten as she watched him. *So, this is how Blake transforms into VP Blake.* There was just something so...*intimate* about watching him ready himself for work.

She froze, careful not to move a muscle and ruin the routine by interrupting. She wanted to memorize every mundane task for future mental

playback. He turned to a stack of drawers that were built into the closet and pulled out a rolled-up pair of socks.

“Good morning, Shay,” he said, not looking at her. His voice was scratchy, like he hadn’t used it yet, and something about it made her breathless.

“How’d you know I was awake?” she asked, pulling up her knees and wrapping her arms around her legs. “I was so quiet.”

He exited the closet, giving her a look as he walked toward the bed with only that sliver of light illuminating the room. “That’s how I knew. Are you aware of the fact that you are never motionless – like, ever – when you’re asleep?”

She shrugged. “I maybe toss and turn a *little*.”

“I damn-near got sea sick,” he teased, sitting down on the edge of the bed beside her.

“Did I keep you up?” she asked, wondering how he could look so perfect at 6:23 in the morning.

“Nah. Your constant motion just served as a reminder that Isabella Shay was in my bed, which made me sleep like a baby.”

That made her smile, and then her heart skipped a beat when he leaned closer and gave her a sweet peck on the mouth, the kind of kiss a man placed on his partner’s lips every morning before their days began.

“So, what are your plans for today?” he asked, turning his attention to his socks. Blake unrolled the pair, propped his left foot on his right knee, and pulled on the first sock. “Pizza in bed?”

Izzy switched on the lamp and got up, stretching before walking over to the master bathroom. “I’m going to apply for as many jobs as I can, go for a

long run, and perhaps take a nap because *someone* didn't let me get any sleep last night."

She flipped on the bathroom light and looked in the mirror. Gah – her hair was everywhere. Izzy grabbed Blake's brush and attempted to get her bedhead under control.

"I'm not sorry, and also, I was thinking I can walk to work today so you can use my car."

Izzy glanced over at him through the doorway. "I'm not going to take your car."

"Why not?" He got up from the bed and walked back over to the closet. "You can use it all day, and then I'll just force you to pick me up after work and stay over in my bed again."

She'd be lying if she said that didn't make her blissfully happy. "You shouldn't have to walk to work, and also, um, you drive an Audi."

She heard him doing something in his closet as he barked, "So?"

Izzy turned on the water and put soap in her hands. "So it's too nice."

She started washing her face, in love with the smell of his soap, the clean minimalism of his bathroom, and even the fact that his expensive watch was sitting on the vanity beside a bottle of cologne. She felt like she was surrounded by Blake and it was perfection. She was just leaning down to splash water over her cheeks and wash away the suds when he appeared behind her in the mirror.

"Is it weird that I'm kind of *into* the idea of you borrowing my car?" His eyes were crinkly around the edges, his mouth soft as he met her eyes in the mirror and said,

"Yeah, it's weird." She turned around, her face covered in soapy lather, and she said, "Do you know how busy I want to get with you when you're



weird?”

That made him full-on smile and give his head a shake. “Didn’t we talk about the phrase *getting busy*?”

Izzy grinned back at him, running a hand over his tie and the hard chest underneath it. “Sorry. What I meant to say was - do you know how bangable you are when you’re digging me?”

“Digging you.” Blake put his big hand over hers, trapping it against his sternum. “What if you drive me to work, then take the car to your place?”

Izzy could die of happiness when Blake stood there like that, *not* trying to be cool about wanting to see her again. She said, “I guess that works, but only if you promise not to get mad if I drive too fast.”

He laughed, a rumbly chuckle that came from deep within his chest. “I cannot make that promise.”

“Well then I cannot-”

“For the love of God, Iz, rinse off the soap,” he interrupted, laughing a little harder as he put his big hands on her shoulders and turned her around. “Before you get foam in your eyes.”

Izzy laughed, too, when she saw the big blobs of soap that were dangling precariously, about to drip off of her face. Her giggles got stuck in her throat, though, when she raised her eyes to his. Heat, warmth, and something more – wonderfully, perfectly more – hovered between them.

“I’m going to go take care of the boys before you distract me and make me late,” he said, kissing the top of her head. “Think you’ll be ready to go in twenty?”

She nodded and turned the water back on. “Yep.”

“Want to stop for a PSL on the way, Amy?”

“You know that I do, Chest.”



**7:45 a.m.**

*Blake: You home?*

*Izzy: Yep. Just got here.*

*Blake: And my car...?*

*Izzy: Totaled.*

*Blake: Thank you for taking such good care of it.*

*Izzy: I'm seriously obsessed with it. All I want to do is drive.*

*Blake: You can, y'know.*

*Izzy: I fear I might accidentally commit GTA and disappear from the area if I spend any more time with him.*

*Blake: HIM?*

*Izzy: That car is a sleek, fast, sexy bastard. TOTALLY a dude.*

*Blake: Agree to disagree.*

*Izzy: How's work btw?*

*Blake: Fine. I think I might miss you (or else I need some Tums).*

*Izzy: Can't you miss me AND need Tums?*

*Blake: I miss you and need a Tum.*

*Izzy: I can bring you one.*

*Blake: Without GTA temptation?*

*Izzy: Hmmm....*

*Blake: It's only been 30 minutes since you dropped me off. I say we hold off on the Tum delivery.*

*Izzy: LMK if you change your mind.*

*Blake: Will do. I have a meeting in a few minutes so I should probably go.*

*Izzy: I think I'm going to miss you. Or need a Tum.*

*Blake: Not "think," Iz – you KNOW. Try it again – all together this time.*

*Izzy: I know I'm going to miss you, Phillips.*

*Blake: Ditto, Shay.*



**11:15 a.m.**

*Izzy: You should come over for lunch. I'll make you something with the ketchup, soy sauce and American cheese in my fridge if you're nice to me.*

*Blake: Damn, girl, you really know how to tempt a guy.*

*Izzy: Right? And I'm wearing my grandma's housecoat at the moment, so I'll even look sexy AF while I cook.*

*Blake: SO tempting, but I have no car, remember?*

*Izzy: I could come get you...*

*Blake: I have a meeting at 1:15, so there isn't really enough time.*

*Izzy: What if I make you ACTUAL food and I wear ACTUAL clothes? Then would you be interested?*

*Blake: Baby, you could wear any-fucking-thing, serving any-ass-food, and I would be frothing-at-the-mouth interested.*

*Izzy: Ooh – I'm "baby" again. Will you say it NOW?*

*Blake: NO.*

*Izzy: Pleeeeeeeease?*

*Blake: What do I get if I say it?*

*Izzy: My mouth on your—*

*Blake: .....my what?? My WHAT, SHAY????*

*Izzy: Say it and I'll tell you. B*

*lake: SIGH. Ahem. "Are you lost, Baby Girl?"*

*Izzy: Gawwwwwwwd. {fans self} Get your ass over here, Chest.*

*Blake: No car and meeting at one, remember?*

*Izzy: Yes, that's right (wipes sweat beads off upper lip). Listen, don't take this the wrong way, Phillips, but I can't wait to see you at 5. I'm literally counting the hours until I can pick you up. Weird, right?*

*Blake: Absolutely bizarre, yet I feel the EXACT same way. I think we might've eaten spoiled meat or something.*

*Izzy: For sure. This whole thing is either love or spoiled meat.*

*Blake: Well, then - I spoiled meat you.*

*Izzy: I spoiled meat you, too.*



**Blake**

**11:45 a.m.**

Blake pressed the buzzer and waited. And waited. He knew she was home because his car was parked out front, but she wasn't answering the door. He texted: *What are you doing?*

*Izzy: Job applications.*

*Blake: Aren't you going to answer the door?*

*Izzy: That's you??*

*Blake: Yup.*

The door opened and there she was, looking at him with a crinkle between her eyebrows. “What are you doing here?”

He straightened from his doorway lean and held out the bouquet of daisies. “My 1:15 meeting was cancelled, so I decided to take the afternoon off. Pizza’s on the way.”

She kept squinting at him. “Who was the meeting with?”

“Brad,” he said.

“Why did he cancel?”

“He didn’t,” he said, and he watched as her eyes moved all over his face. “I did.”

“You cancelled your meeting.” Her face changed then, morphing from confusion to straight-up fucking sunshine. Her nose crinkled and her green eyes squinted and her lips slid into a huge grin. “Get your ass in here, Chest.”

Izzy grabbed the flowers and went inside. Blake followed. “I’m going to get a vase for these,” she said, walking toward the kitchen. “Be right back.”

Blake started to follow, but she stopped, put out a hand and said, “You can turn on the TV or something. I’ll be right back.”

“Oh-kay,” he said, watching as she disappeared into the other room. He paced around the living room for a minute and petted The Darkling, but he couldn’t ignore the noises from the kitchen. It sounded like she was chasing a mouse or something, like she was running and bumping into walls and knocking things over.

He quietly approached the doorway, and then he got that feeling in his chest again, the pinch, only it was the hardest it’d ever been. That pinching feeling almost brought tears to his eyes as he watched her try to hide... everything.

“Iz,” he said, and she froze.

“This, um, is just...” She looked around at the kitchen, obviously trying to formulate some logical explanation. “Like a cleanup effort--”

“Did you go get all of this?” he asked, not meaning to sound so gruff. She looked at him like she didn’t want to admit it, but also like she knew he could see the answer.

“I don’t really think that’s any of your business.”

“Why?” He walked toward her, *at* her, crowding and stalking and just needing to be *closer*. She took a step backward, but he didn’t stop until her back was against the counter, her front pressed to his. “Did you actually get *in* the dumpster?”

She gnawed on her lower lip and shrugged.

He took her chin in his thumb and forefinger, raising her gaze, loving every expression that crossed the expanse of her face. “Is that the bottle of wine? And the pizza box?”

Some of the things he’d brought her the day before – the wine, the gallon of ice cream, the flowers – had apparently been rescued from the dumpster. The flowers were wilted and shredded and limply bending over the sides of a vase she’d put them in. The bottle of wine was in the sink, the label soaked because she’d clearly washed it; there was still a soap bubble on the dark glass. The empty ice cream container, the empty pizza box – they were each sitting on the counter, scrubbed and drying.

Izzy sighed and rolled her eyes, embarrassed. “I just wanted to be able to save them, okay? I threw away the gross stuff, um, but...” ’

That pinching feeling; fuck, it was going to kill him. He felt almost paralyzed by the strength of it as he looked at his dream girl, surrounded by his gifts that she’d dug out of a dumpster because she *wanted to save*

*them. God help him.* “Isabella Clarence, I love you so much that I can barely breathe. Please never change, okay?”

Her mouth curled into the sweetest smile and she said, “I won’t if you won’t, Blakely, um...shit, I don’t know even your middle name. What’s your middle name?”

“Clarence.” He looked down into her face, smiling up at him, and he tried counting the constellation of freckles on her nose. One. Two. Three. Four— “Shut up – you are lying!”

He laughed, still just as shocked as the first time he’d heard it, and he knew he’d never get sick of the wild animation of her face. She gaped at him, her pretty mouth wide open, and he said, “Swear to God.”

She blinked fast, then gave her head a shake, then wrapped her hand around his tie and gave it a tug. “This is – by far - the most shocking thing I’ve ever heard. Do you believe in fate, Mr. Chest?”

Blake swiped his thumbs over the soft skin of her cheeks – five, six, seven – and said the absolute truth that he felt in the very center of his soul. “I didn’t until I met you, Starbucks Amy.”

## Epilogue



“I refuse. I will not do it, no matter what you say.”

“Come on, Iz,” Blake said, kneeling in front of her. “Just say yes.”

“I would rather die,” she said, turning her head away from him. She couldn’t look at him when he was like that, gorgeous and half-dressed and giving her that hopeful look that was nearly impossible to deny. “And I probably *will* die if I do it.”

“I won’t let you die.” Blake glanced at his watch before saying, “Pleeeeeeease?”

Izzy rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Why did I ever give you Josh’s number?”

“Because you wanted to have sex all night and needed him to feed The Darkling, if I recall.” Blake stood from where he’d been crouched beside the couch and extended his hand. “Get up and come with me.”

“Have I ever told you that you look good in boxer-briefs?” she asked, letting him pull her to her feet.



“A hundred times, but flattery won’t get you out of this. Come shower with me, and then let’s go kick some ass.”

“How can someone so smart be so incapable of learning?” Izzy muttered to herself as Blake led her toward the bedroom. She moved in with him a few months ago, probably too soon for normal people but perfect for them. Everything had been amazing since the day she’d hung her Target outfits in the closet beside his GQ suits, and she’d never looked back.

She had a great job at Google, working in HR, and Blake had been promoted to an EVP at Ellis. Their office buildings weren’t that far apart, so on most Mondays, they still met at Caniglia’s food truck for pizza and calzone.

Honestly, the biggest challenge for them so far had been the cats.

The Darkling didn’t like either of Blake’s cats, and poor Goodyear hid under a chair for the first week that Izzy and her furball lived there, terrified. The felines were finally co-existing as of last month – basically because The Darkling never left the bedroom – so peace had kind of been restored.

Josh moved into her old place, thrilled to have an upstairs apartment *and* a downstairs apartment like a total boss. She didn’t talk to him quite as often since she moved, but he and Blake texted all the time. Hence the Billboard Assholes challenge that her boyfriend was apparently too weak to refuse.

“Your cousin’s idiot friends keep talking smack, Iz, saying that our win was rigged because I’m good at pushups or some bullshit like that. Josh needs to clear his name with his nerd squad, and we need to prove that we can beat them at *any* challenge.”

“But we can’t,” she said, and when Blake stopped beside the bathroom door, Izzy raised her arms so he could remove her shirt. “The game is impossible and dangerous.”

“Shay.” He gave her a smile, one of those sweetly-patient grins, and took off her top like he was her caretaker. “We won before, and we can win again.”

“Doubtful,” she said, but then it was her turn for shirt removal. She slid the Chiefs t-shirt up, letting her eyes and fingertips enjoy the pectoral exposure. Once it was off, she grinned and said, “Although...I kind of feel like I’m winning at the moment.”

“Same. And the night we won at Billboard Assholes, Iz?” He pulled her close, his big hands covering her backside and pressing her flush against him. “The game wasn’t the win - the kiss was.”

She smiled, remembering. “That was going to be our one and only, just to see what it was like.”

He made a noise that mocked their foolishness. “It was the gateway drug.”

“Are you saying my kiss got you hooked?”

He raised a hand and pushed her hair off her face. “Honey, I was hooked the minute you felt me up in Starbucks, checking for a third nipple in those dirty-ass glasses.” Izzy laughed, but she felt the same.

She’d belonged to Blake since the very second she’d stolen a PSL and accidentally became Amy.