



# PROFESSOR FEELGOOD

Pleasure comes in many forms,  
and he's an expert in all of them.

LEISA  
INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
RAYVEN

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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

## **PRAISE FOR *MISTER ROMANCE***

“No one is writing modern romance as well as Leisa Rayven.”

– **Alice Clayton, *NYT & USA Today* Bestselling Author of *Wallbanger***

“*Mister Romance* is the perfect balance of laugh out loud hysterical, vaporize your panties hot, and tissue crumpling emotional.”

– **Helena Hunting, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *Pucked***

“A superbly written modern love story. I’m not sure how Leisa Rayven will top Max and Eden’s romance but I can’t wait to find out when book two comes out.”

– **Harlequin Junkie**

“Utterly UNPUTDOWNABLE! This is definitely a top recommendation for every romance reader!”

– **Aestas Book Blog**

“I think Max Riley may have reached a new level of book boyfriend that I didn’t know was possible.”

– **Paperback Reverie**

“The beauty of this story lies in not only Rayven’s exquisite prose, but her snappy dialogue and sharp characterization. Everything flowed effortlessly, creating a story that felt more film than book, making it utterly addictive.”

– **Glass, Paper, Ink Book Blog**

“Sometimes we come across a book that reminds us of why we love romance so much and this would be it.”

– **Totally Booked Blog**

“Top fave of 2017! *Mister Romance* is everything. I’m so in love with this book!”

– **Shh Moms Reading**

“Max Riley is EVERYTHING. If you did not believe in true love, romance and HEA you will now.”

– **AC Book Blog**

“Leisa Rayven has penned one hell of a phenomenal story here. With such a complex and intricately laid out story line, the execution of *Mister Romance* had me salivating. Pure. Freaking. Genius.”

– **Read and Share Book Reviews**

“*Mister Romance* was a hilarious, sexy, and breathtaking journey cover to cover. I was absolutely BLOWN AWAY.”

– **Shayna Renee’s Spicy Reads**

In a time when it’s hard to find a book with an original idea, Rayven delivers a unique and fascinating romance that I know I will be rereading in the future!

– **Rachel Reads Ravenously**

“Leisa Rayven’s writing is one of the most glorious treasures I’ve been fortunate enough to experience. Yes, she delivers a story I think everyone can get lost in and every reader will fall in love with, but the way Rayven writes EVERY book is what keeps me coming back. I’m addicted.”

– **Angie & Jessica’s Dreamy Reads**

“I already suspected that Leisa Rayven could do no wrong, and she has proven herself yet again with this amazing book! Wonderful characters, great dynamics, sensational banter and dialogue, and a gorgeous, chemistry-filled love story with just the right amount of angst.

– **AJ's Reviews**

“Leisa Rayven has a way of making her story feel fresh and brand new, almost as if this trope had never been done before. There is something very different and unique about her writing that draws you in like a magnet. This book was absolutely phenomenal from beginning to end, the perfect romance novel!”

– **Biblio Belle's Reviews**

“Not only is this story completely different from any others, but Leisa Rayven's writing is phenomenal! She has the ability to write with such a great mix of humor, entertainment, and angst that it leaves you addicted and not wanting to put her books down!”

– **Three Girls and a Book Obsession**

“I'll admit that when I imagined Max Riley [...] I knew that I would love him because ... hello, Ethan Holt and Liam Quinn. But I didn't expect that he would be the fictional character to set the standard for every fictional, and non-fictional man from here on out.”

– **Fiction Fangirls' Book Review**

“Leisa absolutely kicked it out of the park with Max, she wrote my dream book boyfriend. Right now, he's my favorite male character EVER.”

– **The Bookish Sisters**

“*Mister Romance* is so much more than romantic comedy, showcasing Rayven's artistic cleverness in creating a magically unique storyline that is unlike anything I've seen before.”

– **Chezshayonline**

“A great book is one that you think about when you put it down. It's one where you find yourself thinking about the characters when you have to pause in your reading. An amazing book is one that keeps you up at night, that makes you ignore work in the morning, because you just can't put it down. I

was awake until 3am with Max and Eden. It was amazing.”

– **Booked All Night**

“This was phenomenal. 6 stars! Incredibly entertaining and funny with this great mix of tension that had me on the edge of my seat.”

– **About That Story**

**P R O F E S S O R  
F E E L G O O D**

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L E I S A R A Y V E N



**This is a work of fiction. All the characters, organizations, and events that are portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.**

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## DEDICATION

For my father-in-law, who read every one of my books multiple times, loved every character

like they were long-lost friends, and filled our family with infinite generosity, joy, and grace.

I'm sorry you didn't get to read this one, Dad, but please know that your light and love will continue to inspire me.

Always.

In the story of our lives, we're our own storytellers, but the tale we tell isn't always the truth. Our fickle memories invent alternate realities. We make the highs more buoyant and too-bright. But even worse, we carve our many lows into the bark of our *Tree of Regrets*, until there are whole forests, silent and gray, creaking and groaning in the thick, bitter air of our subconscious.

I don't want to be my own unreliable narrator. I want my story to be the truth, even if the line between villain and hero is hazy and indistinct.

No matter how much I want to erase my mistakes and start over, I know that's not possible. Our old beginning is the only one we get. But we can change our ending. That's still being written.

*Excerpt from The Story of Us by J.A. Stone*

# ONE

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## Feelgood in My Pants

WELL, THIS IS MORTIFYING.

Here I am at 7.30 on a Monday morning, more turned on than I've been in all my twenty-three and three-quarter years. But am I with the man of my dreams? Am I being wined and dined and romanced out of my pants? Am I in an exotic location involving sand, sea, and half-naked waiters serving drinks with tiny paper umbrellas?

No.

I'm sitting at my desk at Whiplash Publishing, surrounded by an empty office and the faint clicking of the water cooler, as I'm bombarded with very bad thoughts about a man I've never met.

*This is not good.*

I hear a banging sound coming from down the hallway. The only other early bird here today is our Scottish finance manager, Fergus, who has an antagonistic relationship with our ancient photocopier and doesn't care who knows it.

"*Youuuuu base creature,*" he bellows, his thick brogue rising in volume as I hear more banging. "*You foul, fetid fucker.*" His words are punctuated by the sound of ripping paper. "*Just ... fucking ... staple it, you fecking cock-swaddling dick-licker!*"

There's a loud beeping sound, followed by Fergus screaming in frustration. I'd offer to help, but I can't drag myself away from my word-porn high. Also, Fergus is always extra cranky when he's compiling the end-of-quarter profit/loss projections, so I'd like to stay out of his orbit as much as possible right now.

As the copier abuse continues, I cross my legs under my desk and glance around to make sure I still have the main office area to myself. If anyone saw me right now, would they be able to tell how turned on I am? Would they know that the blood flooding my bright, blushing face fades into comparison with the blood rushing to lower parts of my body?

With a cleansing exhale, I stand and head toward the bathroom. The rest of the crew will be here any second, and I seriously need to get myself under

control before that happens.

I push into the ladies' room and run my hands under cold water before patting myself down. When I look up at my reflection, I shake my head. No amount of water could get rid of my ridiculous bright-pink blush.

"What the hell are you doing, Asha? Seriously. You want to lick a man you don't even know. Worse, a man whose *face* you haven't seen. You're out of control."

This isn't like me.

I'm a romantic. I want flowers and dinner dates, and long slow kisses in the moonlight. I'm not into random hook-ups and indiscriminate sex. I never understood how my big sister could gain so much satisfaction from one-night stands. I've tried them. They're awkward and full of self-consciousness. I prefer to know the men I allow into my body. To me, there's nothing sexier than a man who wants to be in a relationship.

But I guess that's the main reason I've developed intense horn-dog cravings for a total stranger. My mystery man has lost the love of his life, and he's unashamedly telling the world about it. When I read his words, I find his passion contagious and, apparently, stupidly arousing.

After taking a deep breath, I head back to my desk. Once there, I grab my mouse with every intention of getting a jump on the giant pile of work on today's agenda, but instead, I end up taking one final scroll through the Instagram feed of the man who calls himself *Professor Feelgood*. Goddamn, he got the name right. Although he probably should have added 'in my pants' to be accurate. Right above his name on his profile is a picture of Harrison Ford as Han Solo, and below it is his bio, which reads, "*A recovering asshole engaging in brutal introspection one day at a time. I'm a collection of bad choices masquerading as a semi-functioning man.*" Well, apparently, a whole bunch of people relate to his bad choices, because he has over three million followers.

I stumbled across his feed a couple of weeks ago when someone I follow reposted one of his poems, and ever since, I've fallen down a rabbit hole into his world. There are grainy, arty photos of him, all taken at angles that make it impossible to see his face. Some have been taken overseas in front of famous landmarks, while others are so close to his taut, muscular body I feel like I'm caressing him just by gazing at them.

But more than the provocative images, it's his words that slay me. His sometimes sweet, sometimes sad, always-sexy words about love and loss seem to bypass my brain and speak straight to my soul.

*I want to be inside you, surrounded by your warmth  
Trembling muscles and cloudy brain as I thrust, and thrust, and thrust.  
I want to be inside you, wrapped in your limbs  
Hot skin and oh-God-sweet-Jesus moans echoing around us  
I want to be inside you, making your body dance, and burn, and fly,  
But really, I want to be inside you  
because you've been inside me from the moment we met  
and now,  
it's my turn.*

I've read this one about ten times now, and it's just the tip of the iceberg as far as his talent goes. The more I read, the more obsessed with him I become.

I scroll up to the beginning of his timeline, trying to figure out exactly why he stimulates me so deeply. Yes, there's a physical response to his pictures, especially those featuring him half-naked, because seriously, his body is insane. But there's more to it than that. All of his posts feel like deeply personal confessions. I think part of why he's so popular is because he's pulling apart his issues, mistakes, and regrets for the whole world to see, and the bravery and honesty that leaps off the screen feels like injecting liquid passion straight into my heart. It's playing sweet havoc with my blood pressure.

I jump when an exceptionally loud bang echoes down the hallway. I look up to see Fergus walking out of the photocopy room, a badly cracked document feeder slung casually under one arm.

He walks past me and nods in my direction. "Morning, Asha." With his accent, it sounds like 'moorning.'

"Hey, Fergus. Everything okay?"

"Oh, aye. Just grand. Going for a wee walk."

I'm pretty sure he's not talking about taking a bathroom break as he strolls to the other end of the office and pushes through to the stairwell that leads to the roof. I briefly wonder if I should be concerned that he's going to launch the document feeder over the side of the building and into the river.

I'm about to follow him to make sure he doesn't do something foolish

when my phone lights up with a picture of my big sister smiling as she flips me the bird.

Such a delicate flower. “Hey, Eden.”

“Hey yourself. You’re at work already? Max was going to cook you breakfast, but you were gone before we got up.”

“That’s not true. Judging from the sounds coming from your room, Max was up at least twenty minutes before I left.”

Eden chuckles, and I smile. Her happiness is well-deserved. She finally left behind her cycle of one-night stands with mediocre guys and found a real man. And now, for the first time in her life, she’s in a real grown-up relationship. I just wish I didn’t have to hear the full-on sexcapades that go along with it.

“I’d apologize for my man not being able to keep quiet,” she says, exuding smugness. “But I enjoy his noises too much.”

“Yeah, I got that from all of *your* noises. Seriously, I have no doubt that you woke up old Mrs. Eidleman on the fourth floor, and we both know she doesn’t put in her hearing aids until nine.”

Another bout of laughter from Eden. Honestly, as aggravating as it is to hear other people having amazing sex when you aren’t, I’m over the moon that she finally has a serious boyfriend. Up until a couple of weeks ago, I thought she might have to be buried with one arm poking out of the ground, so she could eternally give the middle finger to love and commitment. But falling for Max Riley has changed all that. Now she’s so far gone, I practically see cartoon love hearts floating around her every time he’s near.

“I still can’t believe you landed Mister Romance as a boyfriend,” I say, leaning back in my chair and twirling around to face the office. “And to think, you owe it all to me.”

“Yeah, yeah. Here we go again.”

“Well, can you deny that you wouldn’t have even known Max existed if I hadn’t told you? Not to mention I set you up on your first date. You both owe me, big time. But don’t worry. I won’t hold it over you forever. Just a decade or two.”

She groans. I know she tries to hide how sappy and lovesick she is, but it’s beyond obvious. And honestly, I don’t blame her. Max is pretty special. Until recently, he was the best kept secret of New York’s social elite. He was a professional escort who provided women with something way better than sex: swoony dates that gave healthy boosts to their self-esteem. He may have been

able to keep his alter-ego on the down-low for a couple of years, but ever since Eden's story on him went viral, he's become a full-on celebrity. I still find it strange that the guy I see on all the talk shows is the same one who unclogged our kitchen sink yesterday.

As I finish that thought, I shift my gaze to stare out the window, and that's when I see what looks suspiciously like our photocopier's document feeder plummeting toward the ground.

*Oh, Fergus. What did you do?*

I make a note on my day planner to call our Xerox repair dude ASAP. A few seconds later, I turn to see Fergus emerge from the stairwell with a huge smile on his face. I guess some days, you take your wins wherever you can get them.

"If you've finished your daily 'told you so'," Eden says, bringing me back to our conversation, "can we move onto something more important? I feel like we haven't had a real conversation in days. Are you okay? How are things going with your French boy?"

I let out a happy sigh. "Aw, fantastic, Edie. He's amazing. I really think he could be the one."

"Ohhhh," she groans, as if she's watching a skateboarder fall off a handrail straight onto his crotch. "That bad, huh?"

I lean back in my chair and cross my legs. "What are you talking about? I just told you we're great. He's checked more boxes than any man I've ever dated."

"Uh huh. You realize having a checklist for guys isn't realistic, right?"

"It's not a checklist." I ignore her scoffing laugh. "It's a list of *guidelines*. General characteristics that help me refine my search for true love."

"No, little sister, it's a list of *specific* characteristics you use on *every guy you date*. If they dare deviate from your must-haves, you dump them."

"Not true."

"Oh, really? Let's review, shall we?" She clears her throat. "Your dream man must have a college degree, be employed and at least moderately successful, love kids, like Aaron Sorkin dramas—"

"That one's a soft limit."

"—be romantic, have great taste, say all the consonants in the words 'recognize', 'entertainment', and 'frustrated'—"



“Excuse me for liking diction.”

“He must never use the word ‘drug’ as a verb instead of a noun——”

I throw up my hands. “‘Dragged’ is the past-tense verb! It’s not that hard.”

“And every time you’ve dated a guy long enough for your pretty rose-colored glasses to smudge, you go into a weird period of denial, because you’re too proud to admit that you’re about to torpedo yet *another* decent guy. You’re at that point with Phillipe now, right?”

I fake-laugh for a few moments before winding down like a tiny female air-raid siren. “Oh, Eden. My poor deluded sister. You couldn’t be more wrong.”

Of course, she’s mostly right. Damn her for knowing me so well.

I met a guy in Paris recently and had the type of whirlwind romance I’d always dreamed about. But even though I adore him and have an incredible time when we’re together, the issue I always have with my boyfriends is rearing its ugly head, and I can’t figure out how to fix it. Mind you, it’ll be a dry day in Atlantis before I admit that to my smartass sister.

“Let talk about something else,” I say, as I head to the break room to brew some fresh coffee. “Anything else.” I hear a noise and realize Eden is making coffee, too. Great minds, and all that.

“But seriously,” she says. “You have to break this cycle, Ash. It’s getting ridiculous. Tell me again why you broke up with the guy before this one? That Gary person.”

“You know why.” I shove a crisp filter into the machine and fill it with coffee.

“You claimed he was too clingy.”

“Exactly,” I say, while pouring in the water. “Never mind that he considered our Jersey/Brooklyn living situation a ‘long distance relationship’, but calling me *ten times a day* ‘just to hear my voice’? No thank you.”

“Uh huh. And the guy before him ... John? He wasn’t clingy enough, right?”

“Yeah. So?” The machine coughs and splutters as the steaming coffee dribbles into the pot.

“And further down your list of rejects there was Pablo – too short; Damien - too tall; Bartholomew - too blond.”

“You know why I can’t do blond guys”

“And then there was poor perfect Peter who you dumped because he

manscaped.”

I grab a clean mug from the cupboard and scoop four sugars into it. “Hey, *you* didn’t have to look at his perfect eyebrows all the time. It was off-putting how arched they were. And he had *zero* hair below his waist. I mean, come on. I don’t mind guys keeping it tidy down there, but he was totally *smooth*. I tried to get past it, but it was like dating a Ken doll.”

I can practically hear Eden’s eye-roll. “Have you ever considered that maybe the reason you can’t maintain a long-term relationship is because you don’t really want one?”

I give her an extra-loud eye-roll in return. “Yes, of course, dear sister. That’s definitely my motivation for spending time with all these men. To never have a loving, fulfilling relationship and die alone.” I don’t mention the real reason I dumped all those men. It’s too embarrassing to discuss, even with her.

“But then why do you find weak, lame-ass excuses to break up with every guy you date? Did you ever consider you’re too fussy?”

“I’m not fussy. I just know what I want in a relationship, and I’m not willing to compromise my standards for a guy who isn’t exactly right.”

Eden makes a noise of protest before going suspiciously silent.

“What?” I say, pouring in some creamer and stirring my coffee. “What sarcastic quip are you suppressing right now?”

She clears her throat. “I was going to say that there isn’t a man alive who could live up to all of your impossible standards, but then I realized there is at least one, and I’m dating him.”

I make a triumphant noise. “Exactly. You have your perfect guy, and yet you’re encouraging me to give up on mine? Shame on you, Eden Marigold Tate.”

After throwing my stirrer in the trash, I grab my coffee and head back to my desk.

“Okay, you have a point.” Eden says. “Anyway, I just wanted to check in with you. I know I’ve been spending a lot of time with Max recently, and ... well, I miss you. Are you sure there’s nothing you want to talk about? No other possible guys on the horizon? No celebrity crushes you want to share?”

As I slide onto my chair, I click my mouse on Professor Feelgood’s feed once more and fan myself with my notepad. “Nope. Nothing and no one. I’m all good. Just ... busy.” *And about to solve the world’s energy crisis if I can figure out how to fit a thermal generator into my underpants.*

Eden pauses. I know she's not totally buying my casual attitude, but she doesn't push it, either. Knowing my sister, that won't last long.

"Okay, then," she says, "See you tonight. Love you."

"Love you, too."

When I hang up, I let out a deep sigh. I know she's sensing my growing unease with my boyfriend, but that's not the only thing on my mind.

Recently, I've been feeling ... off, and I don't know why. Is there such a thing as a mid-twenties crisis? I'm turning twenty-four in a few weeks, so that could be part of it, I guess. But I've been plagued by a niggling wrongness, as if I'm walking the incorrect path wearing someone else's shoes. And even though they're half a size too small, as long as I don't think too hard, I'm able to ignore the discomfort and carry on.

The Professor's posts make me want to have a good hard look at the wrongness. He gives me the sudden urge to be brave and find the right path, along with a comfortable pair of shoes.

If only I had the first clue how to do that.

# TWO

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## A Challenging Challenge

BY 8.30AM, THE OFFICE has gone from barren and silent to a hive of chatter and activity.

With the Professor's browser tab safely closed, I get on with my to-do list for the day. It's crazy long, and I have no doubt that after everyone else goes home this evening, I'll still be here, slaving away.

Around nine, I look up from my computer and stifle a groan.

It's day 523 of working at Whiplash, and here comes Devin Shields to hit on me for the five-hundred-and-twenty-third time. As usual, his white-blond hair is slick and perfect, and he's wearing a bright, patterned shirt underneath his slim navy suit. I'm not sure if he's going for a Draco Malfoy vibe on purpose, but it's there, nonetheless. If only I could *Expecto Patronum* his ass.

"Tate."

"Shields."

I keep my eyes on my computer screen, but in my peripheral vision, I see him lean against the top of my cubicle. I continue to work, hoping he'll get the hint that I'd rather finish this sales report than deal with him. Also, I know that if I look at him right now, I'll catch him taking a luxurious assessment of my cleavage, and I'm not in the mood to hold myself back from stapling a Post-it reading *MY EYES ARE UP HERE, ASSHOLE* to the middle of his forehead.

Devin truly believes he's the stud of the editorial assistants in our plucky little publishing house, and because the rest of us are women, he's right by default. A lot of the girls fan his ego by vying for his attention, and I suppose he has some visual appeal, in a metrosexual, slicker-than-Vaseline type of way. But he looks too much like the cheating asshole I dated in high school for me to ever consider him hot. The sad truth is, even after all these years and dozens of failed relationships, blond men still give me hives.

"You dress like this to torture me, don't you?" Devin says. "The pencil skirt, the tight little shirt. It's all designed to drive me crazy."

I give a solemn nod, still not making eye contact. "Yes, Devin. My first thought whenever I get dressed each morning is how it will affect you. It has

nothing to do with what's clean and fits me. You've found me out. Darn."

"I knew it. And to make matters worse, you're looking extra fine today. Are those new glasses?"

"Nope. Same pair I've worn every day for the past two years, but good job on those burgeoning observational skills." They probably look new to him, because he's more used to staring at my chest than my face. I sometimes think I should wear a jaunty pair of plastic boobs on a headband to help men bring their gaze north. I could sell the idea on *Shark Tank* and make millions from women who are sick of their nipples getting more attention than their eyeballs.

"Well, I like the specs," Devin says as he sits in the chair beside me without an invitation. "Very ... sultry."

I ignore him and keep typing. I don't actually need glasses, but I've always felt more comfortable wearing them in a literary environment. Being female and curvy in any industry will automatically lead to people making assumptions about one's intelligence, as if bust size is inversely proportionate to IQ. So, I started wearing horn-rimmed glasses in college to give myself some sort of reverse street cred. Librarian cred, if you will. I feel like people take me more seriously when I wear them.

Clearly, Devin is the exception to the rule. I could wear a full-length turtleneck Snuggie, and he'd still find some part of me to objectify. "Wow, *Tate, those ankle knobs are hot. Looking good, girl.*"

"So, tell me, Asha," Devin says, blithely ignoring my complete lack of interest. "Is this the week you cave in to our intense mutual attraction and go out with me?"

I finally turn to look at him and give him a patient smile, which is more than he deserves. "Devin, I've told you before, you're not my type. But even if you were, you know I'm seeing someone."

"Yeah, but he's in France, right? Those long-distance things never work out."

"Maybe not, but we're giving it a red-hot go."

My boyfriend's not actually in France right now, but that's the story I'm telling everyone. I naively thought Devin knowing I was off the market might give me some respite from his daily visits, but nope. Just one more kink in the irritable bowel of my current life plan.

"Well," Devin says, while leaning closer and lowering his voice to what he probably considers a 'sexy whisper'. "If things don't work out with your

Frenchman, let me know. I may not speak the language, but I'm an expert in their style of kissing."

He finishes with a wink.

Gross.

I grit my teeth in a vague approximation of a smile. I'm not as good as my sister at shutting down a guy with a withering gaze or well-worded ego burn, but it's on my list of things to work on, along with my carb-addiction and obsession with secondhand designer fashion.

"I'll try to remember that."

Devin looks around to make sure no one can overhear us then says, "Did Serena tell you that the company is looking to promote someone to editor?"

Serena is the supervising editor and my direct boss, so I'll wager I knew about it before he did. "Of course."

"And you've thrown your hat into the ring?"

As if he didn't already know the answer to that. "What do you think?"

I've made no secret about my desire to be the youngest editor ever at Whiplash Publishing. In fact, I think my brazen ambition in my interview is what got me my job as an editorial assistant when I was straight out of college and greener than Kermit. For the past two years, I've been doing everything in my power to prove I have what it takes, from helping Serena with major edits, to ghost writing whole chapters on manuscripts that just weren't working. After all the long hours and extra miles I've traveled to make myself indispensable, this promotion has my name written all over it. Or, at least, it should have.

Of course, Devin is also supremely confident, mainly because he's the nephew of our CEO, Robert Whip, which means his upward career trajectory is pretty much guaranteed. Devin's not a bad editor, but he's not great, either. The thing that sets him apart from pretty much everyone else here, though, is his supreme self-assurance. In the words of my wise grandmother, "Oh, Lord, give me the confidence of a mediocre man."

Despite his family connection, I doubt Mr. Whip would go full-on nepotism and give Devin a promotion he didn't deserve. And yet, Devin's wearing a smug expression that triggers my early-warning system.

He crosses his legs. "What Serena didn't tell you is that Uncle Robert has turned the interview process into a challenge. The candidate who brings in a project with the most potential to be a *bestseller* gets the job."

I stop typing and turn to him. This is new information. “What?”

This is not good. In regular circumstances, I have absolute faith I’d get that job in a heartbeat, but finding a bestseller? That’s like asking me to pull a leprechaun out of my armpit. Some of the most experienced editors here still haven’t landed a bestseller, and they’ve been trying for years.

Why do I get the impression that Devin had a hand in helping Mr. Whip come up with this cockamamie plan?

“Yep,” Devin says as he reaches over to pick up my Shakespeare bobblehead. “Serena will be issuing a memo any minute now.” He twangs Willy’s head and watches it bounce. I grind my teeth. I don’t like anyone touching my Willy. Also, once when I quoted *Macbeth* to Devin, he thought it was *Game of Thrones*, so he absolutely doesn’t have the right to fondle the Willmeister.

Just in time to avoid incurring my growing wrath, Devin puts Willy back on the desk and stands. “Anyway, just thought you should know. Seems like it’ll be you and me duking it out for that job. It’s a good thing your crappy taste in books means I’m likely to get the win.”

I glare at him. “My crappy taste in what now?”

“Aw, come on. You know you have a soft spot for that romance crap. I see you devouring it every lunch hour and coffee break. Personally, I wouldn’t be able to stomach reading the same unrealistic bullshit over and over again, but if mommy-porn is your thing, who am I to criticize?”

A flush of anger hits me, and I stand to face him. “If you’d ever *read* a romance novel, Devin, you’d know that there’s a hell of a lot more to them than just erotica. They empower and inspire women. They comfort us, and yes, they sometimes arouse. I can’t believe you have so many ignorant preconceptions about an entire genre, especially considering ‘that romance crap’ is what keeps this publishing house afloat. Year after year, romance sales *prove* that the purchasing power of women is —“

Devin holds up his hands. “Whoa, okay, okay. Settle down, sweetheart. I didn’t realize dissing your precious romances would unleash the beast. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you get so fired up before.” He leans forward. “It’s incredibly hot.”

For the first time ever, I put my hands on Devin Shields, specifically, on his shoulders to push him away from my desk. “Get out, Devin. I don’t have the patience to deal with you today.”

He gives me a hurt expression. “Are you mad? Because if that’s the case,

I'd be more than happy to meet you in the supply room so you could punish me."

I let out a breath and push my glasses up my nose. "It'll be punishment enough when I get this promotion. Now you should probably leave before I call HR and inquire about our sexual harassment policy."

That gets me a bit of a sneer. "Jesus, Tate, learn to take a joke. I think you're just uptight because you know I'm going to get this job over you. Don't worry, I'll be a benevolent boss when I get kicked up the corporate ladder." He smiles again, but this time it's less friendly. He knows damn well I'm his main competition and that I'll do everything in my power to beat him. However, he does have a major advantage over me, with his relatives working at three of New York's major publishing houses. I have no doubt he's already put in calls to every one of them in the search for the golden manuscript.

I feel like I'm walking into the Thunderdome with a banana nailed to a stick while he's toting a giant bastard sword.

"See you later, Tate. Oh, and good luck."

Devin takes one more glance at my boobs before heading back to the other side of the office where his desk is located.

I'm still glaring in his general direction when a memo about the challenge hits my inbox. As I read it, a sick sense of dread settles in my stomach. All the editorial assistants have two weeks to find the project we want to present, and then Serena and Mr. Whip will look at the submissions and judge them on projected sales and originality.

I grab my current shortlist of manuscripts from the file on my desk and head into Serena's office. Her work space is much like her: slick, modern, and pale. She looks up, unsurprised by my presence.

"You read the memo."

"Yes."

She gestures for me to sit. "Do you have any leads?"

"Not really. These are the most interesting manuscripts that have come in recently, and none of them have set my pants on fire."

I hand her the flimsy single sheet and then sit.

Serena presses her cherry-red lips together as she scans my list. With her platinum bob glistening in the morning light, and her dress being in her usual palette of cream, beige, and white, she looks like a beautiful fashionista angel with blue-rimmed glasses. I've never met a woman as put-together as Serena.



She seems to float through life with never a hair out of place or even a hint of a stain on her pristine, pale clothes. It's both inspiring and irritating.

Personally, I go for more of a pre-loved, vintage chic, and end up eating off my crimson lipstick within five minutes of applying it. I've learned to never wear white, because whenever I do, I spill things on myself with the regularity of an uncoordinated toddler.

After reading through my list, Serena carefully places the sheet of paper on her desk. "These are hardly exciting prospects."

*Tell me something I don't know.*

"I'll keep looking. But honestly, Serena, this challenge is ridiculous, right? It's like saying that someone who's lucky enough to buy a winning lotto ticket should become a financial advisor. It's not a logical way to choose a new editor."

She nods and takes off her glasses. "I know you were counting on this promotion, Asha, but my hands are tied."

When she hands the list back to me, I scrunch it into a ball. "I know you can't do anything, but ... I'm the only junior you've trusted with some of your biggest authors. Devin took three weeks to edit the new fire drill manual. He'd need constant supervision."

"I know." She scans the office through the glass wall behind me before leaning forward and lowering her voice. "Asha, you're streets ahead of the other assistants, but Robert always has to do things his way. Unless you find something that blows him away, I'll have no leg to stand on. So, you have to deliver, okay?"

I nod, even though I'm not feeling optimistic. "Don't suppose you have any hints on where I'm supposed to find an elusive bestseller."

She gives me a sympathetic look. "If I had something with any sort of potential, I'd absolutely give it to you. Unfortunately, nothing exciting has crossed my desk in weeks. But even with the bestseller landscape seeming barren right now, I have faith in you. You're clever and have good instincts."

"To be fair, the same could be said of Devin. Plus, he's part of the Shields/Whip cartel of publishing heavyweights, so he'll have eyes and ears on every slush pile in the city."

"Devin doesn't have your ingenuity. That's where you can beat him. Bring us something left of center. Something we haven't seen before."

*Like that's an easy task.*

“Okay, thanks, Serena. I’ll do my best.”

She smiles. “You always do. That’s why you’re my favorite.”

Unfortunately, being her favorite means jack squat in this situation.

As I return to my desk, I run my hands through my hair. I regularly mine the depths of the company slush pile, but finding anything with gold-star potential in the mountain of unsolicited manuscripts is like diving headfirst into landfill and emerging with a pristine Chanel handbag.

I could trawl through the plethora of free fiction online and see if I can find any talent there, I suppose. More than a few bestselling authors have been discovered that way, but it doesn’t show much in the way of originality.

I’m still deep in thought when my friend Joanna appears beside me. By the look on her face, she’s already heard the news. Then again, Joanna has a way of finding out things no one else can. If these were war times, she would have made an awesome spy. She seems to have networks of informants everywhere.

“Devin already emailed Sandra Larson about submitting a new book,” Joanna whispers as she sinks into the chair beside my desk. I open my mouth to say that’s a ridiculous idea, but Joanna’s already shaking her head. “I know she hasn’t published for five years and everyone thinks she’s retired, but Devin’s brother at Random House knows her, and he swears she’s writing again. She’s almost done with the first draft of a new book set in the *Rageheart* universe.”

The tension in my stomach ramps up a notch. *Rageheart* was a massive fantasy trilogy that was not only an international bestseller, but also spawned a blockbuster movie franchise. How the hell am I supposed to compete with a series for which there’s a whole set of action figures, for God’s sake?

“Surely she’d have to offer it to her current publisher first,” I say. “Why would she move to us? We’re so much smaller.”

“Word is she’s been unhappy there for a while and is looking for a change. Devin might just be the boy to sweet talk her into going with us. You know that silver tongue of his is the only reason he gets laid.”

My mind reels. “If he pulls it off, he’ll get that promotion in a heartbeat.”

Joanna nods. “Yep. So, we have to find you something better.”

I take off my glasses and rub my eyes. “Better than a spin-off of a wildly popular fantasy series? Like what?”

Joanna shrugs. “I don’t know, but you can totally do this. I can feel it in my

boobs.”

That makes me smile. One thing I love about Joanna is her positivity. She seems to have a never-ending well of optimism and is content to share it around.

“Well, as long as your boobs believe in me ...”

Joanna takes my hands and pulls me around to face her. “Listen, I don’t tell many people this, because it scares them to know how powerful I am, but I often get strong feelings about events and people, and I know that if you grab this opportunity with both hands, it’s going to have a major impact on your life. Trust me on this. My boobs are never wrong.” She gives my hands a squeeze then stands. “Now, get to work. I’ll go and grab you some coffee. You’re going to need it.”

As she leaves, I lean back in my chair and close my eyes. A surefire bestseller. Two weeks. No problem.

I take a quick look beneath my armpits. Sadly, no leprechauns appear.

Looks like I’m on my own.

# THREE

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## Bestseller Hunting

AFTER SITTING ON MY BED for hours with my laptop resting on my thighs, I roll my neck and wince as it cracks. Over the past couple of weeks, Serena has forwarded seventeen manuscripts to me in an effort to help with my bestseller quest, but nothing has set my creative loins on fire. Now it's two days before our presentations are due, and I'm desperately skimming through the last few books on my list in the vain hope I'll find a rough diamond.

I have a spreadsheet open in which I've made notes on everything I've read and have color-coded their potential. Red means "use for lining litter trays or starting fires". Yellow is "read while drinking or high, it'll hurt less" and green stands for, "My God! I don't hate this! I think I just came a little!" Of course, I don't have anything marked in green. I have one that is a greeny-yellow, but I've classified it as my fire alarm manuscript: Use only in case of emergency.

I've read so much in the past fourteen days, I'm practically cross-eyed. Dozens of books and millions of words have filtered through my brain, but to no avail, and now I'm out of time.

*Goddammit.*

I open a new document and rage-type my feelings about my search for the *Next Great American Bestseller*. I start out intending it to be some kind of epic poem, but as my fingers fly over the keys, it comes out sounding more like Dr. Seuss.

*I searched through towering piles of slush,  
I searched through libraries full of shush,  
I plundered high-brow magazines,  
and witnessed word crimes quite obscene.  
I waded through fanfic and genres galore  
I tried to go on through boredom and snore  
but alas, nowhere was the grail I sought*

*Nothing cried out to be lauded and bought  
And so I'm now tired, distraught and despairing  
I'm out-of-time running and pulling-out-hairing  
For the book I need is mythically rare  
and resides safe and sound in the land of Nowhere.*

I shove my laptop away and lean back against my headboard. I can't believe this is happening. After years of bending over backward to prove myself, this promotion is going to come down to a stupid challenge I have no chance of winning. The rumors about Devin and Sandra Larson are true. All week he's been crowing about it, like the giant cock he is.

Beside me, my phone buzzes on the nightstand. It's a text from Joanna.

*<Be there in twenty. I have alcohol.>*

Great. She's coming to help me fine-tune my presentation, and right now I have a big fat pile of nothing.

I'm about to go back to finishing off a sci-fi novel that's basically a badly written version of *Pride and Prejudice* in space, when Miley Cyrus's *Wrecking Ball* blares from my phone. At the same time, a picture of my grandmother appears on the screen. Her gray-streaked red hair is in two Leia-style buns on either side of her head, and she's grinning and curving her hands into a love heart.

That picture sums up Nannabeth's personality perfectly. In other words, a thirteen-year-old girl living in a seventy-five-year-old woman's body. I sometimes wonder if there's a poor high school girl out there somewhere who body swapped with her during a full moon and now complains about how 'the kids these days know nothing', and gauges when it's going to rain by the pain in her trick knee.

The thought makes me smile.

Despite her youthful demeanor, I wouldn't trade my Nan for anything. She's unique, and one of the two people in this world I'd trust with my life.

I jab the answer button and put the phone on speaker. "Hey, Nan. What's up?"

"Asha," she says in a familiar panicked tone. "It's Moby. I think he's dying."

"Again? That's the third time this week."

Nannabeth is completely devoted to her pet duck, Moby. (Yes, *Moby Duck*. An epic name for an epic bird.) Next to me and Eden, Moby's the most important relationship in Nannabeth's life, and let me tell you, there isn't a more spoiled fowl on the planet. Nan always fusses over him like she's a mother hen.

"Asha, I'm being serious here."

"I know, Nan, but I doubt he's dying. He's probably just acting for attention."

"He's making a strange noise when he sleeps."

"He snores. You know that."

"Well, yes, but this sounds different. Usually, it's like this." She makes a sound like a gerbil with a head cold. "And today, he sounds like this." She makes exactly the same noise.

I sigh. After our father walked out on us when I was a toddler, and Mom died while Eden and I were still in grade school, Nannabeth stepped up and became both Mom and Dad to us. She's our everything, and I love her more than life itself, but that doesn't mean she doesn't drive me crazy sometimes. In my experience, it's the people we love the most who are the best at pushing our buttons.

"Nan, I have no doubt Moby's fine, but if you're concerned, then call Dr. Solley. He'd be only too happy to make a house call." Dr. Solley has been Moby's vet since Nan got him, and I'm certain he's renovated his entire Park Avenue pad on Nannabeth's vet fees alone.

"You're probably right," Nan says, sounding a little calmer. "I just hate thinking that something could happen to him."

"I understand. But he's a tough bird. He'd never go out to something as lame as sleep apnea."

Nan may be neurotic about her beloved duck, but I get it. She's lost a lot of people close to her, including her daughter, so her fear is a natural reaction. One I understand only too well.

I hear some rustling and can picture Nan snuggling up in her bed next to Moby, one arm draped protectively around him.

"So what are you up to tonight, sweetheart?" she asks, quietly. "You going to Facetime with your French man, perhaps? Or do some ... what's that word? Sexting?"

"Nan!"

“What? That’s what you kids do, isn’t it? There’s nothing to be ashamed of. Your grandad and I used to do our fair share of sexting when he was alive, but of course, back then it was called writing letters.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “Nan, please. You know how uncomfortable I am when you talk about sex with grandad.”

“Oh, honey, don’t you think old folks deserve a decent orgasm every now and then, too? Even we oldies have needs.”

*God, my brain. Send bleach. STAT.*

“So, anyway, Nan, to answer your question about my plans tonight, I won’t be talking with my boyfriend. I’m working. And I have a major deadline on Monday, so I’ll have to keep this short.” I shove my phone into my cleavage, so I can keep typing as we talk. Eden always gives me crap when she sees me doing this, but that’s only because her boobs are too small to make it work. Her slim, straight body may look better in clothes than mine, but her boobtastic hands-free kit is pathetically lacking.

“Oh, darling,” Nan says. “Having to work on a Saturday night is tragic. Is this still for that promotion challenge?”

“Yep.”

“Ahh. So, how’s your search going for the next great American novel?”

“Not great.” I type the name of the manuscript I’m reading into the yellow column of my spreadsheet. “My pile of rejects just overtook the Freedom tower as the tallest structure in NYC.”

She laughs. “Well, I should let you get back to it, then.”

“Sadly, yes.” I pull the phone out of my boobs and hold it close to my mouth. “Give Moby a hug for me, okay? And I’ll see you next week for dinner.”

“Absolutely, honey. Talk soon.”

“Love you, Nannabeth.”

“Love you, too.”

I hang up and rub my eyes. I’ve been going for five hours without a break, and my eyeballs feel like they’re made of sandpaper. Without even thinking about it, I tap on my Instagram app and bring up the Professor’s page.

“Just a quick hit before I get back to work,” I say to myself. “No big deal. I can quit any time I like.”

While browsing his posts, I immediately feel more relaxed. And more than

a little horny. “Come to momma, Professor Brawny Word Porn. Let me bask in your brilliance.”

I don’t have a huge presence on social media, and the accounts I do have are mostly for the purposes of lurking. But the platform where I’m most visible is Instagram, and I use it to highlight my favorite vintage designer fashion from flea markets and secondhand stores. No selfies, just shots of clothes, bags, and shoes, and even though I’m not great at posting regularly, *VintageBrooklynGrl* has nearly two-hundred followers. I guess there are some folks out there who dig my thrift shop finds as much as I do.

Something I never do on Instagram, however, is leave comments. Yes, I’ll drop likes all over the place, but I always feel awkward writing messages to my favorite posters. Like, why should they care what a nobody like me has to say? My opinion means nothing, and honestly, some of the other commentators are so rude, I’d rather not add to the noise.

But right now, I’m seriously contemplating leaving a note on one of the professor’s new posts. It’s a picture of him from the back, shirtless. His head is down, dark hair wet, and his hands are wrapped in boxing tape as he cradles his head. As usual, it’s impossible to see his face, but the picture has power. It speaks of someone tormented but trying not to be.

Underneath is the caption:

*I tell myself to let go, to stop pinning my hopes on the impossible.*

*I try.*

*I meditate myself into a stupor and then finish the job with liquor.*

*I punish a punching bag until my knuckles bruise, then bleed words onto an empty page.*

*I rearrange my whole world, so I can barely see the places where you once were.*

*And yet, every time I turn around, there you are.*

*Haunting the corners of my memory.*

I don’t know why I have an urge to say something to make him feel better, but I do.

I take in a breath and try to come up with the perfect comment, which is stupid considering I’m writing to someone who probably won’t read it.



*“Amazing post. Thank you for sharing. You make me want to be brave.”*

I quickly jab enter before I have the chance to chicken out, and then I screw up my face as my message appears at the bottom of the thousands of other comments.

*Oh, only thirty-six thousand others posted before me? Good, then.*

I blow out a breath and prepare to shut the app, when I get a notification.

*No way.*

Not only did the Professor like my comment, but he replied.

I stop breathing as I read his words.

*“@VintageBrooklynGrl Do it. Be brave. Go after what you want with all the passion you possess. Nothing hollows out a heart more thoroughly than regret.”*

Whoa.

All of a sudden, my heart rate has doubled. There’s something so very wrong with me that a few words from a complete stranger can affect me so deeply. I know this is just a silly crush on a web celebrity, but it’s more powerful than anything I’ve felt before, and to be honest, it’s kind of concerning.

Still feeling high, I like his comment and try to think of something profound to say in reply. When I still have nothing after five minutes, I type a rushed, *“Thank you for the encouragement. I’ll try my best.”*

Within seconds, he’s liked that, too, but doesn’t offer any more pearls of wisdom. Scanning through the comments others have left, I can’t find any that he’s liked or replied to. Even though it may mean absolutely nothing, it makes what just happened feel special. I have no idea why he singled me out, but I’m grateful.

That’s when I realize I’m smiling lovingly at my phone like a total doofus.

Why couldn’t I find something like this? A book version of his passion and honesty. *That* I could have sold. Hell, it would have sold itself.

As I take one last pass over his words and pictures, I feel something ignite inside me; the ember of an idea so crazy, it might just be a glimmer of genius with bad hair.

*Why have I been blind in not considering this before?*

As the idea coalesces, I look at the professor’s posts through the eyes of an editor rather than a besotted fan. Each one pushes away my mental fog and

makes me feel like I've been punched repeatedly in the chest.

*My God ... this could really be something. This could be my leprechaun!*

I keep scrolling and reading, and I soon become aware that I'm chewing on the inside of my cheek as excited tension fills my muscles.

I always thought the feeling of being hit by lightning while a choir of angels sings, would happen when I met my one true love, but right now I'm having a stronger sense of destiny looking through the professor's feed than I've had with any boyfriend. I may have searched high and low, but perhaps I was looking in all the wrong places. The land of Nowhere actually exists, and there's a single resident who's crazy-popular enough to become an instant bestseller.

Hot diggity. I may win this thing yet.

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I lean forward as I watch Joanna's face. She's gripping her phone tightly, mouth open as she scans the screen.

*God, please let her confirm my opinion, otherwise I'm just a crazy person who's grasping at straws out of desperation.*

She takes her time, and I don't know if she's keeping her face passive to drive me insane, or if she genuinely has no reaction to what she'd reading. If it's the second, I'm sunk. If it's the first, I'm going to beat her viciously with my Chris Hemsworth body pillow.

I hear the door to the apartment open and close, followed by the soft murmuring of my sister and her boyfriend arriving home. Normally, I'd go out and greet them, but right now I have more important things to do. Like holding myself back from shaking Joanna until she tells me what the heckity-heck she's thinking.

Just when I'm starting to believe the power of Professor Feelgood is all in my head, I see the exact reaction I'd hoped for: Joanna's face goes a deep red, and then there are random shallow exhales every time she clicks on a new post.

Yessssss!

This is *major*. Despite working together for two years, I've never seen Joanna lose her cool. But in this moment, her perfect blonde curls and flawless makeup can't hide how gobsmacked she is.

"Oh, my God," she says, her gaze flicking to me and then away.

"Right?"

Her chest rises and falls rapidly, and her fingers are almost shaking. “Oh ... my *God*.”

“I know.”

“*Oh*, my *GOD*.”

She starts fanning herself with her hand, and I know exactly how fast and hot her blood is pounding. How her skin is screaming from too much sensation.

I get up the courage to ask her my most burning question. “Tell me you’re feeling what I’m feeling.”

She nods. “I absolutely am.” When she glances up at me, her mouth is agape. “Holy hotness, Asha.”

I lean back against my headboard, relief tempering my erratic heartbeat. “Just to be clear—you’re turned on, right?”

She goes back to her screen. “Sooooooooo turned on.”

My sister Eden pokes her head around the edge of the doorway to my bedroom and eyes us suspiciously. I’m not sure what she expected to find, but I’m certain it wasn’t me and Joanna sitting on my bed, caressing our phones.

“What the hell, you two?” she asks, eyes narrowed. “Are you watching porn together?”

I smile and beckon her over. “In a way.”

I hand her my phone and watch her face to gauge her reaction. As she thumb scrolls through his timeline, I know that Eden will be the real test here. Her innate cynicism and lack of patience means she’s immune to most forms of emotional manipulation. If she digs the Professor, then I’m home free.

I hold my breath in tense anticipation. Roughly thirty seconds later, I get my answer.

She frowns, her mouth opens, and then the apples of her cheeks brighten with color.

We’ve both inherited our late mother’s peaches-and-cream coloring, and even though Eden’s auburn locks are curly, and I work hard to keep mine straight, there’s no mistaking how vibrantly our cheeks light up when we’re embarrassed. Or aroused.

“Oh, my God,” she says.

Joanna nods and points. “There it is.”

‘Oh ... my *God*,’ Eden says again, eyes working overtime as her voice becomes breathier every second.

I feel myself beaming in vindication. “It’s amazing, right?”

“*Oh*, my *GOD*!”

She jumps a little when her large, handsome boyfriend appears in the doorway.

“Okay,” Max says, narrowing his green eyes at Eden. “I’m usually the one who makes you sound like that. What the hell is going on in here?”

Joanna leans over and whispers, “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to seeing Mister Romance in your apartment. He’s, like, a unicorn among men. So freaking gorgeous, inside and out.”

I nod. “I know, right?”

Eden beckons him over, and when he’s next to her, she hands over my phone to show him what we’re looking at.

“It’s the Instagram feed of a guy calling himself Professor Feelgood,” she explains.

Max frowns as he scrolls through. “Whoa. Three million followers. How the hell is some guy I’ve never heard of so popular?”

Still running on excess adrenaline, I type the Professor’s name into my spreadsheet and highlight it in the brightest, most neon green I can find.

“Believe it or not, Max, but there are heaps of people who are massively Insta-famous but otherwise anonymous. Fashion bloggers, makeup artists, hot doctors and lawyers. But this guy? He’s got something ... indefinable. It’s fascinating.”

As Max continues to scroll, Eden grips his bicep, and I don’t miss the way she strokes it lovingly.

“What do you think?” she asks.

Max shrugs. “Not really sure what I’m looking at. Arty photographs, lots of pics of international landmarks. Some angsty poetry.”

“It’s a journey of discovery,” Eden says, pointing to the screen. “If you start at the beginning, you’ll see he’s trying to find himself by traveling around the world. Then he meets someone he thinks is his soul mate, they have a passionate relationship, and he loses her. Now he’s trying to find ways of coping without her.”

Max nods. “Okay.” He looks between me, Eden, and Joanna. “Wait ... you

all find this sexy?”

We answer almost in unison. “Oh, my God, yes!”

“He should have called himself Professor Feelgood *in my pants*,” Joanna says, fanning herself again.

“Right?!” I say, nodding vigorously.

Eden laughs. “Absolutely.”

Max raises his eyebrows and turns to his girlfriend. “Is that right?”

Her smile falls, and she clears her throat before stretching up and kissing him gently. “Don’t get me wrong, no one will ever be as sexy as you, but ... I can see the appeal. Good-looking guy, broken-hearted and pining for the woman of his dreams? That’s pretty attractive.”

Max hands the phone back to me. “How do you know he’s good looking? There are no pictures of his face.”

“Oh, he’s good looking,” Joanna says, still staring at her screen. “Just from the few flashes of that scruff-lined jaw, you can tell he’s a freaking dreamboat.”

“But what he looks like isn’t the point,” I say, glancing up from my laptop. “It’s his *words* that affect us, so much more than his body or face. They’re just so ... soulful. Overflowing with passion.”

Joanna hands Max her phone. “Look, here’s a prime example. Read this out loud.”

Max looks at us all dubiously before holding up the phone and reciting what’s on the screen.

*If people were colors, then she’d be bright yellow, like sunshine.*

*I’d be charcoal gray, like the sky before a storm.*

*But whenever I was with her, it was like I was standing in full sun,*

*bright and happy.*

*I was yellow, too.*

*I liked being yellow.*

*I tried to stay that way when she left. To keep her light inside of me.*

*But I’ve always been made of storm clouds, and eventually, she faded  
and the gray descended again.*

*Sometimes, I hold my hand up to the sun,  
and the warmth always reminds me of how it used to feel  
when I held her fingers between mine.*

When he finishes, Joanna and I let out deep sighs.

Eden has a more ... physical reaction. She looks at Max like she's three seconds away from tearing his shirt in half and licking his chest.

Max doesn't miss her wild expression. "You know, if you're into this sort of thing, I have a ton of angsty poetry at my loft that I wrote a few years ago back."

Eden moves closer and touches his abdomen. "Is that right?"

When Max nods, she puts her arms around his neck and pulls him down so they're face to face. "Then it looks like you'll be giving me a private reading later tonight."

Max kisses her, and Joanna and I sigh again. It's both wonderful and terrible being around people so in love. On the one hand, I'm over-the-moon happy that my sister has finally found someone worthy of her. On the other, they make love seem so easy and natural, I wonder if there's something wrong with me for taking so long to find it.

After a few seconds of sucking on each other's lips, Max pulls back, looking self-conscious as he shoves his hands in his pockets.

Oh, please. As if I'm not used to his body's reaction to kissing my sister by now.

"Okay," he says, giving Eden a final peck on the lips. "I gotta go supervise some new staff members on their dates tonight. See you at my place later?"

Eden nods. "Definitely."

"Aw, Max," I say. "You're not staying for dinner? But I've already put in our pizza order. Extra pineapple, just for you."

Max narrows his eyes. "You're a monster, Asha. You know that, right?"

His loathing of fruit on pizzas is almost as passionate as his love for my sister, and that's saying something.

Joanna laughs as Eden drags Max from the room. "Come on, big guy. We're not getting into the pizza debate again. You get way too intense about the whole thing."

“I’m not intense,” Max says, his voice fading as Eden pushes him toward the front door. “There’s a right and wrong way to eat pizza, and you and your sister do it *wrong*. End of story.”

As I continue typing up some preliminary notes expanding my book idea, I hear the apartment door open, and then some soft moaning and whispering. I have no doubt Max and Eden are saying their goodbyes by sucking face.

After a couple of minutes, I hear the front door close, and Eden comes back in and drops into the chair beside my bed with a deep sigh.

“Okay,” she says, pushing her hair away from her face. “Now that I’m free from a giant, man-shaped distraction, give me all the deets on this professor guy. Can I assume from you almost bouncing in your seat that you’re thinking of him for your bestseller project?”

“Maybe,” I say, trying to play it cool. “Do you think it’s totally crazy to try to publish this guy?”

Beside me, Joanna makes an excited noise as Eden’s eyes light up. “Not so much crazy as brilliant. His whole timeline reads like a like a sexy guy version of *Eat, Pray, Love*. If you can work with him to conjure up some kickass narrative, you could easily get a book out of it.”

Joanna nods enthusiastically. “Yesssss.”

“That’s what I’m thinking,” I say, allowing myself to get more excited. “And with how many followers he has, it’s sure to be a hit, right?”

Joanna sits up straighter. “Absolutely! Even if only one percent of his followers buy the book, he’d still storm onto the *New York Times* bestsellers list.” She waves her hands in excitement. “I’ll do up a spreadsheet for projected sales. I’ll even color code it so a blind man could see how amazing this could be.”

I smile. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Despite Joanna’s obsession with all things fashion and pop culture, I’ve learned she’s an absolute demon with numbers. I guess that’s what comes from managing her own international wealth portfolio since she was eighteen. I suspect she has no financial reason to even work at Whiplash, but she does have a genuine love of books.

“Let’s do this,” I say, typing furiously. “If I’m going to win this proposal, I need to make the good professor seem like the goose who lays the golden eggs. Or more accurately, the man who writes the golden books. I don’t know that even with this guy’s following I’ll be able to compete with a new Rageheart book, but at least now I’ll go down swinging.”

“Shouldn’t you contact him first?” Eden says. “You know, in case he’s some sort of weirdo who doesn’t want to be a bestselling author?”

“Huh. You’re right.”

That puts the brakes on my momentum.

Someone knock on the front door.

“That’ll be our pizza.” Eden jumps up and leaves the room. After some murmuring with the delivery guy, I hear her laugh.

When she comes back, she’s smiling. “It seems Max accosted the pizza guy in the lobby.” She holds out the pizza box, and I see that Max has written in large, heavy letters, “THIS PIZZA IS AN ABOMINATION! CHANGE YOUR MONSTROUS WAYS BEFORE IT’S TOO LATE!”

All three of us laugh. Then, the smell of delicious melted cheese reaches me, and my stomach growls so loudly, the other two look at me in surprise.

“I skipped lunch,” I say with a shrug.

“Okay,” Joanna says as she stands and moves over to Eden. “You message the professor, and we’ll get cocktails organized.”

As they leave, I call after them, “Whatever you’re drinking, I’ll take a double.”

When they’re gone, I sit and stare at my phone for a few minutes and just breathe. I don’t know why, but I’m stupidly nervous about messaging the professor. I think part of it is because I’m scared he’ll say no to the project, and another part is terrified he’ll say yes. This could be huge for me, or it could get me laughed out of an industry I love.

My finger hovers over the screen as I try to think of how to word my request.

*“Hi, complete stranger! Please let me plunder your talent-mine of words and picture porn, so I can get a promotion and scream, ‘In your face!’ to Devin Boob-Ogler Shields.”*

Hmmm. Not bad. May need some refining.

Something else I need to consider is that someone with that many followers probably gets a crapload of crazies invading his inbox every day, and I don’t want him to think I’m one of them.

I lean over and pick out my letters carefully with my forefinger. I start the message several times before deleting and doing it over. I don’t think of myself as shy, but there’s something about how honest and passionate the



professor is that makes me desperate to impress him.

*Ugh. This is taking forever.*

I blow out a breath and decide to just go with the facts.

*<Hi, Professor Feelgood. My name is Asha Tate, and I work at Whiplash Publishing. I found your Instagram feed a short time ago and think it has huge potential to be transformed into a bestselling novel. Have you ever considered becoming an author? You have a wonderfully passionate way with words, and it's clear your posts resonate with a lot of people, myself included. I'd love to help you reach an even broader audience, if you're interested. Please message me back at your earliest convenience, so we can discuss the matter further. Warmest regards.>*

I include my phone number just in case he'd like to call instead of message, and I don't miss the way my whole hand shakes as I press send.

I slump back and close my eyes. God, that was more stressful than my last pap smear.

*Please let him say yes, please let him say yes.*

If I miss out on this promotion I'll not only be disappointed, Devin will technically become my superior, and that's not cool in any universe. But beyond that, I think that the professor has a real, authentic voice and his potential book might actually inspire people. That would be even more satisfying.

*"Come on, Ash!" Eden calls from the kitchen. "The pizza is getting cold. And your margarita is ready. I put it in our largest vase. Hope that's okay."*

I launch off the bed and go join them. If I must be in hell while waiting for the professor to reply, I might as well get buzzed while I'm there.

# FOUR

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## Pizza and Passion

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, OUR coffee table is a mess of plates, bits of half-eaten pizza, napkins, and smears of grease. Joanna and I are at opposite ends of the couch, each clutching huge margarita-filled tumblers that we sip through super-classy bendy straws. We're onto our second refill, and already most of the bottle of Patron that Joanna was kind enough to donate is gone. Did I mention that my sister makes the strongest cocktails in the world?

Having fulfilled her bartending duties, Eden is slouched in our giant easy chair, her bare feet on the coffee table as she slowly sips her drink and rubs her belly.

"My man has a lot of amazing qualities," she says. "But his pizza preferences are narrow-minded and wrong." She closes her eyes and leans her head back. "Pineapple and pepperoni is the best. I'll fight anyone who says otherwise."

"Yeah!" I say, throwing up my hands. "Screw the patriarchal pizza system!"

Joanna bursts out laughing. Over the course of our friendship, I've come to recognize that we become equal parts judgey and giggly when we drink.

"Now, listen," Joanna says, and I can see that it's time for a judgey rant. "You know I love men ... but let's talk about unsolicited dick pics. I mean, seriously."

I screw up my face. Having been dick-picced on more than one occasion, I know how weird and uncomfortable it is. "Why do men do that? Especially with girls they hardly know. Do they honestly believe it turns us on?"

Joanna nods. "I once had a prominent European royal send me a penis pic. It wasn't the first time a foreign security force detained me so they could delete images off my phone, but it was certainly the most awkward. Those security agents did *not* want to see their boss's peen."

"Oh, God," Eden laughs as she grabs the dirty plates and takes them into the kitchen. "You just gave me a mental image of Derek sending me a picture of his junk. I bet it's all red and angry, just like him most days."

Derek is Eden's hardass boss and the two of them have one of the most

confrontational professional relationships I've ever seen. At the mention of his name, I take a long sip of alcohol. Personally, I've always found Derek to be quite handsome.

Joanna slumps back into the couch and sighs. "We should make a pact that the next dude who sends us unwanted junk photos receives a bombardment of huge, gargantuan donkey dongs that will make their average dicks seem like cocktail wieners."

That makes all of us laugh, and I stifle more giggles as I watch Joanna chase the tip of her straw with her tongue and completely fail to capture it.

"Oh, goddammit," she mutters before grabbing it with her fingers and shoving it in between her lips. After sucking down a huge mouthful, she leans over to the table and taps a few keys on my laptop to add the finishing touches to her spreadsheet.

"There," she says with a flourish. "Epic professorial profit projection - done."

She turns the screen so I can see it. It's a thing of beauty.

"Joanna, how on earth can you whip up a crazy-good spreadsheet so fast while totally drunk?"

She leans back and smiles. "Practice, dear friend. Now we just need the professor to come onboard our bestseller train to Editorville."

I take another sip of alcohol and check my phone for the hundredth time.

Damn. Still no reply.

*Come on, Professor. Put me out of my misery. Either say yes or tell me to go jump in the Hudson. Just let me know.*

I switch back to his timeline and study his latest post again. As I read, my face heats up, and I don't think the alcohol is helping

*I want to slide my tongue over yours  
until you understand all the reasons I love you  
that I can't put into words.*

God, what he does to me. I've always enjoyed writing, but I can't come up with anything as visceral as his prose. I wonder what he's like as a person. His bio says reformed asshole, so I'm guessing he's no angel, but there are a

million different stages of douche. I wonder where he falls.

I'm also fascinated by the story of what happened with him and his woman. Did she end it? And if so, why? Most of his followers are women, so I know for sure he wouldn't be short of female company if he so desired, but all his posts suggest he's single, brokenhearted, and pining. Goddamn, that's attractive.

I sip at my drink as I ponder what it must be like to love someone so much that you're ruined when they leave. Some sick, curious part of me wants to find out. Huge heartbreak means epic love, right? I've only had one real heartbreak in my life, and that was back in high school. Even though I still think about that relationship, I doubt my pain is in the same league as the professor's. I wonder if he'll ever love again after losing his soulmate, or if all women from now on will play second-fiddle to the one who got away.

"Ash?" I look up to find Eden returning to her chair and staring at me. "Did he reply yet?"

I shake my head. "Still waiting."

"Then what's that expression you're wearing?" Eden sits forward, her eyes bright. "Holy shit. You totally want to sex this guy, don't you?"

"Eden — "

"No, don't try to deny it. It's written all over your face. This guy has you under his thrall. Right, Joanna?"

Joanna doesn't look at me but nods anyway. "Yep. Very thrall-y."

"Not that I blame you," Eden says, stirring her drink with her straw. "Even I'll admit that he's a damn fine specimen. Plus, any guy who rips open his chest to show how damaged he is definitely rates as extra-boneable. You should offer to soothe his poor heartsick soul, with like, your mouth around his cock."

I roll my eyes. "I want to publish him. Not screw him."

"Can't you do both? He's hot. You're hot. Have good time together."

"No, thanks. Not really my thing."

Eden flops back in her chair. "Ash, can't you just put aside your stupid man-checklist for once and allow yourself some pleasure for the sake of it? I mean, I'm not advocating that you take after the pre-Max me and *only* have meaningless sex, but every now and then, there's zero shame in enjoying something that's purely physical. Life's too damn short."

"In case you've forgotten, I have a man for sex."

“No, you have a man in a different country with whom you’re texting and emailing. There’s *zero* hot sex happening between you two.”

*Well, that’s true. And also, false.*

“You haven’t heard of something called phone sex?” I say.

“Heard of it,” Eden says. “Tried it. Hated it. Right now, I can get more action than you by riding the Coney Island carousel, which is just plain sad.”

“Funny story,” Joanna says, picking up the thread of the conversation. “I had my first orgasm during a riding lesson when I was twelve, so yeah, one of those hard, wooden carousel ponies would definitely do the trick.”

Eden nods. “That’s what I’m saying. Having a hot man in a different country is like a pencil with no lead.”

When Joanna frowns, Eden whispers, “Pointless.”

They both laugh, but I can’t bring myself to join in. As usual when Eden brings up my boyfriend, I try to change the subject. If she found out I’ve been lying to her all this time, she’d pummel me. Avoidance seems the best tactic.

“Regardless of my relationship status,” I say as their laughter dies down. “I’m just not interested in sleeping with guys I barely know. Removing my clothes in front of a guy is traumatic enough without it involving strangers.”

“But don’t you ever just meet a guy and want to ...” Eden mimes climbing on a horse, then does a pelvic thrust thing accompanied by an arm wave and sexual grunting that makes me cringe and Joanna laugh.

“Eden, the last time I felt that way about a guy, it turned out to be *your* soul mate, so clearly I can’t be trusted to follow my hormones.”

She gives me a dismissive wave and flops back into her chair. “Pfft. Wanting to do Max is a natural female reaction. No straight chick with a functioning vagina is immune to that hot piece of man.”

I still grimace when I remember the night I first laid eyes on Max. I thought he was the most gorgeous guy I’d ever seen, but it didn’t take long for me to realize I wasn’t the Tate sister in which he was interested.

“What about you, Joanna?” I ask, desperate to shift the attention away from me. “You hardly ever talk about guys.”

Joanna smiles, and it’s clear from how long she takes to blink that she’s reached the drowsy portion of her drunkenness.

“Well, I’ve taken a vow of chastity for the past year to protest the sexualization of women and girls in media, so right now, guys aren’t really on

my radar. But honestly, after my divorce from Prince Abdulla, I just needed a break from relationships for a while. He may have been an asshole, but that doesn't mean I don't miss him. I can't even look at a camel anymore without remembering how we made sweet love in the dunes on our honeymoon."

When she's done talking, there's a moment of silence in which Eden and I share a look. There was a time when we thought Joanna was a compulsive liar, because most of her claims were too crazy-over-the-top to be true. But the more we got to know her, the more we realized her life should be fictionalized and turned into a crazy-hot series for HBO. Some of the things she's done and seen are extraordinary, and yet she continues to drop these little pearls of knowledge, such as, "I'm voluntarily celibate," or "I've received royal dick pics," or "I used to be married to a prince," as if we've always known them.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't get a kick out of it.

"A real-life prince?" I ask. "Please tell me he rode a white horse."

She nods. "He *only* rode white horses. Arabians."

Eden's still processing, but eventually she finds her voice. "How the hell are you old enough to be married and divorced already?"

Joanna takes a sip of her drink. "It's not a big deal. I went over as part of a youth diplomatic core when I was eighteen, had a fling with a hot guy... and suddenly, boom. Next thing I know I'm getting married in the royal palace. Could have happened to anyone."

"No," Eden says. "These crazy things only ever happen to *you*, and I don't understand how you can be so chill about it. You married a *prince*."

Joanna leans her head back and closes her eyes. "Yeah, but a prince can be a douche as much as any other guy, and Joe Average from Smalltown Nowhere can turn out to be better than any royalty on the planet. It's all relative."

Eden and I share another look. Our lives are definitely more interesting because of Joanna. I'd have a better chance of choosing winning lotto numbers than predicting what's going to come out of her mouth on any given day.

"Gotta pee," Eden says, heading toward the bathroom. "Don't have fun while I'm gone."

As she leaves, my phone buzzes on the coffee table. When I grab it and check the screen, I smile.

"Well," Joanna says, "are you going to share?"

I turn my phone around so she can see it.

<*I miss you, mon Cherie.*>

Joanna gives me a sappy look. “Awww. Look at these texts.” She scrolls up my messages, and I don’t stop her. “‘Can’t wait to see you again.’ ‘I’ve been thinking about you all day.’ ‘Sitting here remembering how beautiful you are and how it feels to be with you.’” She looks at me. “So swoony.”

I nod. “He’s sweet, and romantic, and thoughtful, and handsome, and ...”

She frowns. “And ... what?”

How do I tell her that personality wise, he’s the most fascinating and wonderful man I’ve ever dated, and while we’re clothed, things are hot and heavy, but as soon as my naked skin hit the air, my usual hang-ups kicked in? Just once I want to be able to let go enough to have amazing sex. I’d hoped that things with him would be different. I mean, we get on *so well*.

“Jo, this guy is amazing and *hot*, and perfect for me, and yet ...”

“He doesn’t rate on the vagina meter?”

I snort. “Vagina meter?”

“Yeah. You’ve got the heart meter, which is the gooey romantic stuff. The brain meter measures how much they stimulate you mentally. And then there’s the vagina meter, also known as the how-hard-he-can-make-you-come scale. Most men will get high marks on only one meter, which is why there are so many single girls out there. If you get someone who hits two, then grab them with both hands. That’s pretty rare.”

“This is my quandary. He does hit two, but that’s not enough for me. I want all three.” And my greatest fear is that I’m so sexually uptight, I’ll never get that.

“Well, wanting all three is just greedy,” Joanna says, echoing my fear. “Maybe we should settle for two and be done with it.”

“Yeah,” I say, slumping in my seat. “Maybe that’s the best we can hope for.” I should probably stop dumping perfectly good guys because of something they have no control over.

Joanna stares off into space, her eyes going soft and unfocused. “All three is the dream, though, right? Three means your soul mate. I’d like a soul mate.”

“Me, too.”

Eden plonks back into her chair and sighs. “Do you two know you look

totally stoned right now, or ...?"

We're all startled when my phone buzzes.

"The Professor?" Eden asks as she sits forward.

I check the screen. "Nope. Boyfriend."

She deflates in disappointment. "Damn."

I swipe the message.

*<I wish you were in my bed right now. The things I would do to you ...>*

I clear my throat and stand. Our real sex may be lackluster, but our cybersex is pure dynamite. Sure, it's totally backwards, but right now, I don't have the energy to care. Thanks to the professor, I'm drunk, horny, anxious, and in need of whatever relief I can get.

"Okay, it's getting late," I say, grabbing my drink. "I'm going to turn in."

Now, it's Joanna and Eden's turn to share a look.

"Have a good one," Joanna says with a snort. "See you at work on Monday."

After giving her a quick hug, I head into my bedroom. I've just shimmied out of my clothes and have crawled into bed when my Facetime rings.

My handsome man appears on the screen, and as he takes in my appearance, a slow smile spreads across his face.

"*Bonjour*," he says and pulls his own phone back, so I can see him shirtless, sitting up in bed.

I smile. "*Bonjour*, yourself."

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I rub a towel over my damp hair and pad into the kitchen in my robe in search of leftover pizza. If I could maintain a sexual relationship with a man on Facetime sessions alone, I'd be set. But I know damn well no man would ever be satisfied with that, and I shouldn't expect them to be.

Eden wasn't wrong when she said I find excuses to break up with guys. I know I do, but the reasons I give everyone else are just diversions from the truth. The real issue is, I could have the most attractive man in the world in my bed and still only get a lukewarm response from my body when naked, and I have no idea why it happens.

It's not like I'm not capable of arousal, because I totally am. Porn does it for me. Romance novels, too. Hell, even Sprinkles Cupcakes.



But as soon as my clothes start being removed, some switch inside me flips and my excitement turns into anxiety. I've tried to figure out why it keeps happening, and my working theory is that my high school boyfriend was a terrible lay. At the time, I thought awkward, clumsy encounters that only lasted a few minutes were normal for teenage relationships, but we were together for a few years, and it never got better. It was clear he really wasn't interested in my pleasure, and when he started subtly saying it was because it was impossible to get me off, I believed him. It didn't help that on more than one occasion, he reminded me I was too high on the chubby scale to have a truly banging bod. I'd always had insecurities about my too-big boobs and curvy frame, and so his frequent digs made me dread taking off my clothes.

Having that experience during my sexual awakening must have thrown a spanner in my lady-works, because this hang-up has plagued me ever since. It's the main reason I've never liked casual sex. Or sex with another person at all, if I'm being honest. As hard as I try to enjoy it, I just don't, and so I just lie there and wait for it to be over.

These days, my preferred method of sexual satisfaction is masturbation. Not to toot my own horn or anything, but I'm amazing at tooting my own horn. Without a doubt, I'm the most satisfying sexual partner I've ever had, which is a sad state of affairs.

The only bright point in my current situation is that Facetiming with my man offers me an amazing compromise. I'm comfortable being naked, because he only sees what I want him to see, and because I'm touching myself, I can orgasm in record time.

So, yeah. Even though I've come to accept that having sex with a guy and feeling sexually satisfied are two different and somewhat mutually exclusive exercises, with cyber-sex, I get the best of both worlds: A hot man to turn me on and my own experienced hands to get me off. Win/win.

The big downside is that I know this can't last. No man is going to want to continue a relationship with a woman he can't touch. Unless I can work out my issues soon, this relationship will be as doomed as all the others, and the thought of that happening is so odious, I push it to the back of my mind and try to think of other things.

I snag a piece of cold pizza from the fridge and take a bite as I check my phone again to see if the professor has contacted me.

Nope.

I sigh as I chew. I could always submit my book idea without his permission, but that could get messy if Serena and Mr. Whip love it, and then

I can't deliver. Not only would I not get the promotion, I'd also be seen as unreliable.

When I get back to my room, I'm surprised to see Eden there, nabbing a cardigan from one of my drawers.

"Hey," she says. "Is it okay if I borrow this? I'm heading out to Max's soon, and it's getting chilly outside."

"Sure." I sit on my bed and flip through my phone. Yet again, I find myself going back to the professor's feed. Man, I'm starting to understand how an addict feels. Just a few posts. That's all I need. Something to reignite the frisson in my blood.

*Being with you was as easy as breathing. Until it wasn't.*

*One day without any warning, I looked at you and all the air went out of the room.*

*I hate that my feelings changed.*

*And I hate even more that yours didn't."*

I sigh in pleasure and flip to the next post.

*I built a house around you inside my heart,  
and then I burnt it to the ground,  
because I'd rather see it crumble to ash  
than live in it alone.*

God, how sad. And amazing.

Eden pulls on the cardigan and sits in the chair next to my bed to lace up her boots.

"The Professor message you yet?"

"Nope."

"Well, if it doesn't pan out with him, I know another awesome book idea you could submit." She shoots a look toward my closet.

I shake my head. "Don't start with me. You know that's just a hobby."

“Yeah,” she says as she finishes her laces and sits up. “But it’s a hobby you’re *really* good at.” She pushes out of the chair and opens my closet. On the top shelf is a pile of banged-up notebooks that she pulls down before turning back to me.

One by one, she throws them on the bed. “This one is fantastic, but you need to flesh out the characters. This one has huge potential, if you’d just get off your ass and write an actual ending. And this one ...” She holds up the notebook labeled, *All the Things I Feel But Can’t Say* and presses it against her chest with a sigh. “This one is my favorite, and please know I’m going to hassle you about it until your dying day. Or until you finish it. Whichever comes first.”

I grab the notebooks and place them on my nightstand. “Do you know how much crap I’d get at work if I let anyone know I write? There’s already a misconception that editors are just frustrated authors.”

“Well, in your case, it’s kind of true. You wanted to be a writer when you were a kid, right?”

“Yes, but I also wanted to be a professional chocolate taster, Indiana Jones, and a kangaroo, so ...”

She puts her hands on her hips. “So you’re telling me you don’t want to be a writer anymore? That you spent hundreds of hours working on your stories because ... what? You needed to practice your handwriting?”

I grab my hand cream off the nightstand and squirt some into my palms. “I’m saying that I have about as much chance of becoming a successful author as I do of turning into an Australian marsupial. Now, you have a hot man waiting for you a few blocks away. Do you really want to waste more time dissecting my career choices?”

She pauses for a moment before leaning down and kissing the top of my head. “Okay, fine. I’m going. But you need to know that if and when you publish your own work, you’ll have at least one customer who will buy everything you write.”

I wave as she leaves, and while I finish rubbing cream into my hands, my gaze goes to my pile of notebooks. There was a time when I spent every spare moment writing. It was a form of therapy, exorcising all of my angst and frustration onto the crisp pages. I also have a few that Eden hasn’t seen. They’re my version of screaming when a train passes, and they helped me through some dark times. These days I’m too busy with my job to even consider indulging again.

I grab the notebooks and stack them back neatly in the top of my closet. It’s

easier to ignore my creative urges when I put them out of sight.

I can't be bothered drying my still-damp hair, so I strip out of my robe, grab my phone, and crawl into bed. In contrast with my hesitance to get naked with other people, I love sleeping in the nude, and I sigh in pleasure as I feel the cool sheets on my skin. When I'm comfortable, I go back to the Professor's timeline, and lo and behold, there's a new post.

I sit up in excitement. It's a sweaty picture of him in a tank and shorts. His muscles are gleaming in the sultry black and white shot. I notice he uses black and white a lot. It makes everything seem shadowy and mysterious, and that only adds to his appeal.

I scroll down to read the caption.

*I run to quiet my mind,  
and as I force my feet one in front of the other, my dark thoughts trail behind  
me  
like an oil leak.  
I run to purge. To punish myself. To push thoughts away.  
I run, because whenever I stand still,  
the suffocating, life-ruining love I feel for you  
catches up with me.*

Yet again, a chill runs up my spine. Goddammit, I need to publish this man's words. I have a burning desire to shape and frame them, and gift them to the world. It *has* to happen.

Even though I've just had a pretty decent orgasm, the Professor makes me feel like I could start in on round two.

I quickly type out a message. I don't know if he's even gotten my last note yet, but I want to strike while I know he's online.

*<Hi, Professor. It's Asha Tate again. I messaged you earlier. If you're around, I'd love to chat. Sorry to hassle you, but I'm kind of on a deadline.>*

I hit send and then chew on my thumbnail. *Come on, guy, reply. Read the message and reply. Now, please.*

It's nearly a minute later when I get his response.

*<J, stop. Whoever's phone you've hijacked, this isn't funny. I'm not playing this game with you.>*

I frown at the screen and tap out. *<This isn't a game. I'm very serious about this project.>*

*<Sure, you are. Also, you're an asshole. Quit it. Now.>*

Okay. Unforeseen glitch.

*<Professor, this is absolutely not J, whoever that is. As I mentioned, I'm an editorial assistant at a publishing house, and I plan on submitting your work to my bosses tomorrow with a view to turning your Instagram feed into a book. I'd like to talk about the details with you. Please don't think this is a scam or a joke. >*

Still nothing.

*Okaaaaaay.*

*<Sir, I understand that you must get some strange messages considering your number of followers, but I assure you, I am who I say I am. You can go to the Whiplash Publishing website and find me on the 'Our Staff' page. I have red hair and glasses. If you'd prefer to communicate by email, my address is [atate@whiplash.com](mailto:atate@whiplash.com).>*

I go back to chewing my nail while I wait. This time it's five minutes before anything happens.

*<Directing me to a picture on a website is a new strategy, I'll give you that. But do you seriously have nothing better to do with your time than screw with me? That's just sad and pathetic.>*

I let out a frustrated exhale. Damn, I knew he'd be used to receiving messages from crackpots, but this is getting ridiculous. How the hell do I convince him I'm me?

I get a flash of inspiration and go to his previous post, so I can take a screenshot of our brief, but seemingly meaningful interaction. Then, I post it in our chat.

*<Professor, I'm not sure if you remember, but you and I had a brief interaction on your timeline earlier. I have no doubt that J has nothing better to do than screw with you, because quite frankly, he/she sounds like a dick. But my time is precious and quickly running out. Please call me, and you'll see that you're not being catfished. Hell, we can even Facetime if you like. Whatever it takes to convince you I'm on the level.>*

Yet again, I press send and wait. Minutes pass.

*Come onnnnnnn.*

When my phone eventually rings, it's so loud I jump. It takes me a second to register he's taking me up on my Facetime offer, and one more second to realize I'm still 100% naked.

"Shit!"

I jump out of bed and mutter, "Wait a second! Don't hang up!" while yanking on my robe. "Almost there! Stay on the line. Don't you dare hang up!"

The instant I get my robe tied, I sit on the bed, swipe my clammy hair away from my face, and jab the answer button.

"Professor? Is that you? It's Asha Tate here."

A tiny rectangle showing me appears in the corner of the screen, and I cringe that I look like I've been dragged backwards through a hedge in the rain. I haven't even brushed my hair since washing it earlier, and it sits around my face in thick, damp curls. Not the first impression I would have chosen for myself.

I scan the screen for the professor, but it remains black.

"Hello?"

When I'm greeted with silence, I check to see if we're still connected. "Professor?"

"Asha Tate." His voice is deep, dark, and husky, and if I'm being honest, pretty freaking sexy. My skin prickles in response.

"Yes! Hello." God, my voice is weird. I'm breathing so hard from my speed-record in gown donning, it sounds like I have asthma.

I swallow and try to regain some semblance of composure. I might be speaking to the man who has been the inspiration for several lengthy masturbation sessions, but that's not relevant to this conversation. If only my galloping hormones understood that.

"So," he says, "You're Vintage Brooklyn Girl."

"Yep," I say, too brightly. "That's me."

"You live in Brooklyn?"

"Uh huh. Born and raised."

"You've been following me for a while." Every time he speaks, there's a weird intimacy to it. I bet he'd be amazing at phone sex.

“Yes,” I say. “Nearly a month.” *A month in which I’ve stalked you excessively.*

“And? What do you think?”

I try to keep my face passive, even though his voice is affecting me in new and exciting ways.

“I think that you ... uh ... have a gift for marrying words and pictures ... describing emotions. You always leave your audience wanting more.”

That last one is an understatement. If I wasn’t on camera right now, I might be thigh-hugging my Hemsworth-pillow’s face.

“You’re wet,” the professor says quietly, and I almost choke on my own tongue.

“Uh ...what? No. No, I’m —”

“Your hair, Brooklyn. It’s wet.”

“Oh.” *God, help me.* “Yes. Sorry. Shower. I mean, I showered earlier. Hence, the ... uh ... wetness.”

“I’m happy for you.” Sarcasm. Also, weirdly attractive.

I laugh nervously, but there’s dead air all around me. I’m screwing this up, but I don’t have any clue how to stop.

“Uh, so anyway, it’s great to talk to you. Uh ... just letting you know, I can’t see you.”

“My camera is off. The point of this chat is me seeing you, yes?”

“Right. Of course. And as you can see, I’m not J.”

“No. You’re not.”

“Who is that, by the way?”

There’s a beat. “Someone I’d rather not discuss.”

“Sure, yeah.” I clear my throat and tuck a thick curl behind my ear. “So, about this book proposal —“

“I’m not an author.” His tone is short. Almost angry.

“Perhaps not, but you have an incredible way with words, and it wouldn’t take much to build up a narrative.”

He lets out a scoffing noise. “And you’d help me do that, would you, Asha Tate?”

There’s an edge to how he says my name. Something familiar that I can’t

quite put my finger on.

“I’d like to, yes. Of course, it would be up to my bosses to make that call, but first I have to sell them on the idea. Just say yes, and I’ll take the concept to them first thing Monday. If they pass, you lose nothing. But if they say yes ... well, it could open doors that might change your life.”

Another pause, this one longer. “What if I’m happy with my life?”

“Well, I’ve been reading your timeline, and that’s not the impression I’m getting. It’s more like you’re finding it hard to purge memories of a woman you can’t stop thinking about. Maybe this book could help you move forward. Or even help you get her back, if that’s something you’d be interested in.”

I stop breathing as I wait for his reply. My blood is pounding so hard in my ears, I feel like he can hear it.

When the silence stretches out to an uncomfortable degree, I lower my voice and say, “Look, Professor, from what I can tell, you’ve been on quite a journey over the past few years, and I think your words could really help others who are working through similar issues. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain, right?”

“And what would you gain?” he asks, his voice just as quiet as mine. “I doubt you’re doing this out of the goodness of your heart.”

The edge of bitterness in his voice isn’t lost on me. Reformed asshole, indeed. This guy clearly still has some issues.

“If my bosses like the idea, well ... I may get promoted. And if that happens, then I’d work my ass off to get this book onto as many bestseller lists as possible.”

“I see. So, when you say I could help people, what you mean is, I could help *you*.”

All of a sudden, I feel like I’m taking advantage of him, and I don’t know why.

“Professor, I’m not going to lie and say this wouldn’t be incredible for my career, because it would. But even if there was no promotion attached, I’d still believe this is a worthwhile project. Your words are just so ... *visceral*. They’re full of passion, and longing, and pain, and how you write ...” I shake my head in awe. “It *affects* people. And *that’s* what the best art should do. Art shouldn’t make us happy and comfortable. It should challenge us. Dare us to step outside our comfort zone for a while.” As I’m saying this, I realize I’ve never spoken about a project with such passion before, and I mean every word. “This book could be ... well, it’s the kind of book that could inspire



people to be more than they thought possible. Earlier, you told me to be brave and follow my passion. Well, I'm passionate about you and your words. Please let me share them with the world."

When I finish, the line is silent, and I'm aware that the tension of this conversation is making my breathing too fast and my face too hot. I want this, and I'm a bit put off by the feeling the professor doesn't.

I make an effort to slow my breathing, and that's when I notice I can hear his exhales. They're uneven; a little frustrated. Like I'm forcing him into a decision he doesn't want to make. I wish his camera was on. I'd love to be able to see the expression on his face. It might help me read him better. Also, I'm dying to know what he looks like. I wonder if his face is as stunning as his body.

After what feels like an eternity, he says, "Brooklyn, while I appreciate you agreeing to Facetime to prove your identity, I'm sorry to say that —"

"Wait, Professor, don't say no." I grip my phone tighter. "Just, please, don't. I know this is probably out of your comfort zone, but it could be amazing. Even if you don't believe in yourself, please know that I believe in you."

There's another beat of silence, and then he says, "While I'm giddy with excitement that you believe in me, I wasn't saying no to the book. I was going to tell you that your robe has fallen open, and I can see your breasts."

A white-hot blush hits my face as I gasp and look down. Sure enough, my nervous squirming has loosened my robe enough that it's gaping open, exposing the majority of my breasts and just a touch of nipple.

*Shitballs!*

My image was so small on the tiny screen, I didn't notice. Quick as a flash, I grip the edges of the silky fabric together and hold the camera closer to my face.

"Oh, God. I had no idea. I'm so sorry."

"Are you? Or was this some sort of sexual enticement to work with you? A taste of things to come?"

Just when I thought I couldn't get more embarrassed. "No! God, no!"

"It wouldn't be the first time a woman has claimed to want to help me, only to pursue a sexual relationship. Is that what's going on here? You're trying to seduce me?"

I'm nearly apoplectic with embarrassment. "No! Professor, I assure you, I

hold myself to the highest professional standards. I would never do that! I'm mortified this has happened, but please ... it was an accident. I sincerely apologize and —"

"Relax, Brooklyn," he says, and I'm not sure, but I think I hear a hint of a smile. "I was joking. I believe your wardrobe malfunction was unintentional."

"Oh." I laugh weakly. "Good." I take a deep breath and push through my savage blush. "This project is incredibly important. Not important enough for me to flash you, but still ..."

I expect him to laugh, but he doesn't. Instead, there's another pause.

"So, if this happens," he says, "we'd be working together?"

"Yes, that's the idea. I'd be your editor. I'd help you shape the direction of the book, suggest changes, and liaise with you about the cover and marketing. I'd expect the whole process to take at least nine months. Maybe more."

"That's a long time. What if it turns out I'm an insufferable asshole you can't stand to be around?"

I smile. "I doubt that's going to happen."

"It might. After all, you don't know me. You haven't even asked if I'm the guy in the pictures. For all you know, I'm a sixty-five-year-old retiree with a beer gut and male-pattern baldness."

Damn, he's right. I've been so focused on proving who I was, I didn't even think to ask him to do the same.

"Well, are you the guy in the pictures?" I ask, nervous about his answer.

"Does it matter? You want me for my words, right?"

Here's a snag I hadn't thought of. Part of my confidence about the potential popularity of this book, hangs on the extreme physical attributes of the professor. If that's not his hot musculature in the pictures, then ... well, I'd have to find a different way to sell it.

"Listen, professor, I won't lie and say that your ... uh ... physical appeal wasn't a factor in what drew me in, but it's certainly not the main reason. Still, before we go any further, I should know exactly what I'm dealing with. If that's not you in the pictures, that's fine. Just let me know. It won't make me back away from this project, I can assure you."

Yet again, there's a long pause, and the only sound is his breathing. Then I hear muffled noises, and within a few seconds, the screen comes to life. I see muscular, tattooed arms and wide, hard pecs. I see abdominals for days, and a square, scruff-lined jaw above a strong neck. No face, though. As usual.

“This is me,” he says. “Proof enough for you?”

I swallow and nod. “Ah, yes. That’s ... fine.” God, so very fine. I have a real concern I’ll be able to work with him every day without devolving into a horny, blithering mess. Right now, saliva is pooling in my mouth faster than I can swallow it. This is a new and disturbing twist to how he affects me.

I swallow twice more before finding my voice. “So, uh ... you don’t want to show me your face while we’re exposing ourselves?” I realize the bad wording as soon as I’ve said it, but what the hell. He knows what I mean.

“Not tonight, Brooklyn,” he says, and I get a glimpse of his bottom lip as he talks. “I like my anonymity. Ironical, really, considering I might soon lose it.” He sighs, and I swallow again when his bicep bulges as he runs a hand across his cheek.

“If everything goes well,” I say, “you’ll be a household name before you know it.”

“Great.” Sarcasm again. “What I’ve always wanted.” Something beeps, and his posture changes. “So, that’s it, then. You have my blessing to pitch your book, for whatever it’s worth. I have to go.”

Before I have time to say goodbye, the line goes dead. I look at my phone for a second, and despite the shock of the nip-slip and his distinct lack of enthusiasm, I stretch out on my bed and flop around like an excited fish. I don’t even care that my boobs both pop out and jiggle around.

*Goddamn freaking hell yessssss!*

This is going to work. I just know it.

My phone buzzes. When I check the screen, I find a text from Joanna. <*The professor said yes, didn’t he? My boobs are tingling!*>

I shoot off a reply to confirm that I’ll be including her projected sales spreadsheet in my pitch on Monday, and then I start work on what I expect will be the greatest book proposal in the history of publishing.

## FIVE

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### Nailed It

THE CONFERENCE ROOM AT Whiplash Publishing is nicknamed ‘The Fishbowl’ for good reason. It’s in the center of the office and made of glass. I’ve read dozens of romance novels in which couples screw on giant mahogany conference tables, but if someone tried that in here, they could make a tidy profit from selling tickets. The whole office would have ringside seats.

Now, as I try to ignore my hammering pulse and give a killer presentation, I’ve never been more aware of how often people check out what’s happening in the fishbowl. I keep getting distracted by faces appearing over the tops of their low-walled gray cubicles, as if they’re a colony of meerkats on the lookout for hungry predators.

I swallow and click to the next screen in my PowerPoint presentation. “Here are just a few examples of Professor Feelgood’s work. I think you’ll agree his style is quite ... stimulating.”

I keep talking as I watch the faces seated around the table. When Serena asked about what I was presenting, I told her I wanted it to be a surprise, and judging by her expression, I succeeded. Her gaze moves across the screen, and I don’t miss the way she leans forward slightly. By the time she’s read the second and third screenshot, her mouth has dropped open.

*Excellent.*

Having her on board is half the battle, and I can tell she’s excited about the concept in more ways than one.

Mr. Whip doesn’t have quite the same reaction, but then I wouldn’t expect him to. He’s a guy. This book is going to live and die based on the incredible purchasing power of women. I’ve been through the Professor’s follower list, and I know that there are only a few lonely dicks out there in a sea of devoted vaginas.

As I go through the breakdown of projected sales, I see our marketing manager, Sidney, mirror Serena’s reaction. His chocolate skin makes it hard to see if his cheeks are showing extra color, but knowing Sid’s taste in men, I’m sure the Professor is right up his alley: dark, rough around the edges, and rocking a six-pack.

Next, I glance at Devin, who's watching me carefully as he leans against the side of his cubicle just outside the conference room. If looks could kill, he'd be melting my body with acid in a bathtub right about now.

*Not so cocky now, are you, sport?*

Despite the positive feeling in the room, I'm not stupid enough to think I have this thing in the bag. I spied on Devin's presentation earlier, and it pains me to admit he did an amazing job. His graphics were slick, elegant, and enticing, and let's face it, if he were able to land a sequel to *Rageheart*, it could be written in crayon and barely legible, and people would *still* buy it. His proposal equals money in the bank. But mine has edge, and that's going to be our big point of difference. Does Mr. Whip want something that's traditional and safe, or risky and exciting? I'm hoping it's the second option.

I click my controller again, and the profit graph flashes on the screen. "As you can see, these projections are conservative. If only ten percent of his followers buy the book, we're still looking at having a major hit on our hands. But to be honest, I'd expect the sales numbers to be significantly higher. I think word of mouth is going to make this book a viral sensation, and the professor's style would appeal to a broad cross-section of readers."

I can hear my voice trembling as I speak, but I think it's more from excitement than nerves. I haven't stumbled over any words or accidentally flashed anyone, so overall, I'm calling it a win.

I glance at the screen as I bring up a final montage, featuring some of the professor's most striking photos superimposed with his powerful words.

*Okay, girl, bring it home.*

"There are certain defining moments in the history of publishing. Those in which the right book comes along at the right time and speaks to the hearts and minds of a generation. I truly believe *this* is that book. And I would be honored to be given the opportunity to make it the new flagship in the armada of Whiplash success stories. Thank you."

I let out a shaky breath as I finish and then stand there as I wait for feedback. Serena is practically beaming at me, and Sidney gives me a subtle thumbs-up.

Mr. Whip takes his time before he says anything. He flicks through the hard copy of my presentation once more, and then stares at me for a few seconds before giving a small nod. "Well done, Asha. A very creative idea. We have a few more presentations to see before we make our decision, but I think it's safe to say you've impressed us."

My smile is so big, it hurts my face. “Thank you, Mr. Whip. I appreciate that.”

“Please send in the next candidate.”

I quickly gather my materials and hustle out to where Kandace, one of our veteran editorial assistants, is nervously waiting. “They’re ready for you. Knock ‘em dead.”

She gives me a tremulous smile before heading into the lion’s den.

When I get back to my desk, I collapse into my chair. God, this promotion is so close, I can taste it. Everything just feels right, like I should email our office manager and tell her to order my new business cards.

My phone buzzes with a text from Joanna. <*You NAILED THAT! You’ve got this promotion in the bag, baby!*>

I text back a range of happy/nervous emojis, and then look up to find Devin standing in front of me.

“Not bad, Tate,” he says as he shoves his hands into his pockets. “There were a couple of moments there I thought you were going to ralph on your notes, but you managed to keep it together.”

“I just kept thinking about how much I wanted to beat you, Devin, and my stomach was more than happy to cooperate.”

He smooths down his tie. “It’s a big risk, gambling everything on a guy who isn’t even an author.”

“I think there’s a small leap from being a writer to being an author, and this guy is definitely a writer. Not much of a gamble in my mind when he can describe emotions so well. People are going to lose their minds over him.”

He gives me a condescending smile. “Did you see my presentation? Sandra Larson. She’s a pretty big deal, right?”

“Absolutely. Your presentation was excellent.”

“But you think you have me beat?”

I shrug. “I think Whiplash is ready to showcase an author *they’ve* discovered. It’s beyond overdue. Professor Feelgood could be their guy.”

Devin’s face twitches. “You keep telling yourself that when I’m sending you to get my coffee.”

He slinks away, and I marvel that all I had to do to get him to stop flirting with me was compete for the job he wants. So simple, and yet, so effective.

I stand so I can spy on what's happening in the fish bowl. Poor Kandace looks like she's about to pass out.

After sitting back down, I wake up my computer and try to concentrate on work for a while, but the second I hear people emerging from the conference room, I stand to see Serena coming back to her office.

She gestures for me to follow her. "Pretend we're chatting about the Delaney book, and keep your face neutral," she says in a low voice.

I nod as she hands me a file. "Okay."

She shuffles papers around her desk as she talks, barely looking at me. "I can't say anything officially, but you blew us away, Asha. Your presentation was excellent, and I think you convinced Robert that you're the right person for the job. I'm talking with finance about what sort of offer we can put together for the professor, and I'll contact him tomorrow to get the process started. Do you have a number for him?"

I nod. "I'll text it to you. What about Devin and Sandra Larson?"

"Robert doesn't want the hassle of getting her out of her current contract; it could take months. Plus, we can't afford her. It would blow our entire budget for next year. She'll no doubt go with one of the big five."

I keep my face neutral, but I can't help the edge of excitement that creeps into my voice. "My God, Serena, I'm really going to be an editor?"

She scribbles something on her day planner and flashes me the briefest of smiles. "Looks like it, sweetheart. Are you ready to publish a bestseller?"

"Hell, yes!"

"Good. Now, get out of here and act like I didn't say anything. Don't even tell Joanna. Once I've locked down the professor, Robert will make the formal announcement. Oh, and be prepared to help me find someone to replace you. You're a pretty hard act to follow, young lady." She shoots me another look, and I pull down the corners of my mouth as I nod and head back out to my desk.

Acting as natural as I can, I shoot off a text to the professor's number.

*<My bosses LOVED the idea of your book. Nothing is official yet, but if it all goes as expected, someone will contact you tomorrow to sort out the details. CONGRATULATIONS! You're going to be a published author!>*

As I send the message, I can feel a giant smile threatening to reveal itself, but at the last second I press my lips together and head it off at the pass.

Across the office, I see Devin leaning against the doorway to the break

room, staring at me. I'm positive I'm not giving anything away, but I don't miss the slight frown he gives me before he salutes with his coffee cup and goes back to his desk.

Wow, I'm really not going to miss having him drop by every day. Soon I'll have a real office with a real door, and Devin is going to have to get used to it slamming in his face.



## SIX

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### It's All Good, Eventually

THE NEXT MORNING AS I stroll down the bustling streets of Brooklyn on a particularly glorious autumn day, I swear I can hear the strains of “Walking on Sunshine” following me around. I’m having one of *those* days; the kind where you have the world on a string, and it feels like nothing can derail your positive momentum.

Today is going to be kickass. To quote Joanna, I can feel it in my boobs.

“Morning, Asha!”

“Hey, Mrs. Eidleman!” My octogenarian neighbor is power-walking her two Shih Tzus wearing bright pink sweats with the word *JUICY* emblazoned across the ass in large silver letters. “Looking good.”

“Don’t I know it? You too, honey.”

I give her a humble smile, but I know my outfit is working it. I may feel self-conscious naked, but wearing the right clothes, I feel like a queen. Today’s ensemble is a cherry-print blouse, tight black pencil skirt with a thick black belt, all topped off with a vintage Burberry trench I found at the Brooklyn Flea for just twenty-five bucks. Even my hair is on point. My usual auburn mess has been blow dried smooth, and it swishes around my face as I walk. I couldn’t appear more editorial if I tried. Now, I just need to practice my surprised face for when they offer me the promotion.

“Asha, hey! Beautiful day, right?”

“Sure is, Randy.” My favorite barista hangs out the fast service window of my local coffee house and holds out my regular order, right on time.

“Large green tea and a no flour, low-carb spinach cake.”

I hand him a ten and grab the cup and bag without stopping. “You’re the best, Randy. Thanks!”

“You’re welcome. And have a great day.”

I sigh happily as I head down into the subway. Life is good.

There were times in the past when I felt like I had to fight tooth and nail for every decent thing I got. Being poor and having dreams of going to college were mutually exclusive concepts in our neighborhood, but both Eden and I

worked our asses off in high school to secure scholarships. And now, even though we're not doing much more than scraping by, at least we have good jobs. And with the pay raise I'll get as an editor, I may even be able to start paying back Nannabeth for the innumerable loans she's given me over the years. I know she couldn't care less about the money, but for me, it's the principle of the thing.

I bounce through the rest of my trip to the office, and when I step into the elevator and find Devin there, I try to keep a lid on my smile.

He eyes me warily. "You look smug this morning, Tate. What's going on?"

"Nothing. What's going on with you?"

His confidence all but explodes out of him. "Oh, I'm getting a promotion today. Count on it."

I clench my teeth to stifle a laugh. "You don't say? Well, good for you."

He turns to me, his face too close and his aftershave too strong. "You really think you have this in the bag, don't you? Do you honestly think they're dumb enough to gamble on some social media poser when they have a literary phenom like Sandra Larson waiting in the wings?"

I shrug. "I think they have a lot of factors to consider. You might be surprised."

He snorts. "Yeah. Right. I think one of us will be surprised today, but it won't be me."

The elevator opens on our floor, and we split up to head to our respective desks. I look over to see Serena already in her office, which is unusual considering I'm always here at least a half an hour before she is. She's on the phone with the door closed, which is another rarity. I frown as I slip off my coat and hang it on the nearby rack. When I reach my desk, Serena flashes me an irritated look before facing the window as she continues her conversation.

Okay. This doesn't look good. Maybe the professor had a change of heart.

*Please, God, no.*

As I'm about to sit down, Joanna appears right behind me, a concerned expression twisting her flawless face.

"It's not my fault, I swear."

"What are you talking about?"

"I didn't tell anyone about the professor. Well, okay, I told my manicurist, but that's it, and she mainly speaks Vietnamese, so I doubt if she had anything

to do with what's going on."

"Okaaaay. What's going on?"

Before Joanna gets a chance to tell me, I hear Serena's door open and turn to catch her walking toward me.

"Come with me," she says, gesturing for me to follow. "We need to talk."

I glance at Joanna as Serena and I head toward the elevators. When we pass Devin, he gives me a casual wave.

"Where are we going?"

Serena pushes the call button with more gusto than usual. "Up to see Robert." The tone of her voice makes my panic prick up its ears.

"What's wrong?"

The elevator arrives, and we step inside. As soon as the doors close, she turns to me. "Asha, I hate having to ask you this, but we have a situation, so it's imperative you're honest with me, okay?"

"I'm always honest with you."

"I know that, but ..." She sighs. "There's been an accusation that Professor Feelgood book wasn't your idea."

My mouth drops open. "*What?*"

"Apparently, Robert went to an industry event last night and someone said they'd heard about your presentation and that the professor is already in negotiations with another publishing house. Understandably, Robert was furious. He was impressed with your presentation, but now with the possibility you didn't come up with it on your own ... well —"

I say try to stay calm even as my face flushes hot. I'm horrified that my integrity would even be questioned. "I contacted the professor myself. When we spoke, it seemed as though he'd never even considered publishing before." I think back over our conversations to make sure I hadn't missed something. I guess it's possible someone else saw the potential in him, but surely he would have mentioned it. "He didn't say anything about already having a publisher."

"Do you have a record of your conversation?"

"I have some Instagram messages, but our main communication was verbal."

"So you can't prove he *didn't* say he was with another publisher?"

"No, but I wouldn't lie to you, Serena. Or Mr. Whip."

When the elevator doors open onto the executive floor, I look out to the short corridor leading to Mr. Whip's office. Right now, it's as horrifying as something out of *The Shining*.

"Asha, Robert thinks your ambition got the better of you," she says in hushed tones. "That you would rather cheat than lose out on the promotion."

"Well, he's wrong," I whisper back. "We'll just contact the professor and get his side of the story. He'll tell you the idea was mine."

"I called the phone number you gave me and received no response. Robert's assistant is on the case now, trying him every five minutes."

"What about talking to someone from the alleged other house?"

"Done that, too. They said they won't comment on something that might affect ongoing contract negotiations, which does nothing to disprove the story."

"This is crazy. I did nothing wrong. I found a great lead and worked my ass off on my presentation. What you saw in that conference room was all my work, no one else's."

"I believe you. But Robert is furious, and I'm working overtime right now just to convince him not to fire you."

I shake my head and scramble to organize my thoughts. I can't believe how quickly this day has gone to crap.

Devin's words in the elevator float back to me. "*I think one of us will be surprised today, but it won't be me.*"

"Devin," I say quietly. "He did this."

Serena raises an eyebrow. "That's a serious accusation."

"Well, think about it. Who stands to gain the most if this falls through? And who has family members working at other publishers? It wouldn't take much to set this up."

Serena looks past me toward the office doors. "Well, perhaps you'd better keep your suspicions to yourself, until we can find out more. The only thing Robert will take worse than one of his staff borrowing ideas from someone else is unfounded allegations against his nephew."

I nod, and we continue down the hallway toward Mr. Whip's office. I'm so shocked and angry, my hands are shaking.

I always knew Devin was a douche, but to actually sabotage my career? That's a level of low I hadn't expected.

There has to be some way to fix this, and dammit, I'm going to find it.

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Mr. Whip doesn't get angry often, but when he does, you can feel it in the pit of your stomach. I'm not sure what radiation sickness feels like, but if it's anything like standing in the vicinity of Mr. Whip's quiet fury, then it's hideous.

He's sitting at his desk while Serena and I stand in front of him, and I feel like a high school kid who's been caught scrawling obscenities on the principal's car.

"It's embarrassing enough that I made a fool of myself talking about this book and what an original concept it was. But then to find out a competing house already thought of it and approached the author—"

"*Allegedly*," Serena interjects. "This could all be a misunderstanding, Robert. We at least need to find out the whole story before we jump to any conclusions."

"This development puts Asha's whole promotion in doubt," Mr. Whip says. "The challenge was for *you* to find a bestseller. But if you just presented another editor's idea ..." He looks at me and sighs. "Asha, tell me I'm wrong about this."

"You are, sir. One-hundred percent. I would *never* disrespect you or Serena by presenting someone else's material. I have no idea how this rumor got started, but I can assure you, when we get in contact with the professor, he'll back my version of events."

He nods. "Then you'd better hope we can get through to him soon, because the longer this rumor continues, the more damage it does to our brand and *your* professional reputation. To put it to rest, we need to get a contract signed as soon as possible. Your projected sales figures were impressive, and if you've figured that out, then others have, too. We can't afford a bidding war."

There's a light knock on the door, and then Craig, Mr. Whip's assistant, enters nervously.

"Sorry, sir, but I just received a call from someone at *Publisher's Weekly*. They're trying to confirm reports that Whiplash is in some kind of bidding war with the big five for the *Professor Feelgood* book."

Mr. Whip's face goes red as he turns back to me. "Goddammit!"

"I have no idea how this is happening," I say, feeling more helpless by the second. "But I promise I'll sort it out."

“You’d better,” he says, before turning to his computer. “Your future here depends on it.”

With that, he excuses Serena and me, and we walk back to the elevators in shocked silence.

“This is bad, Asha.”

“I know.”

“I’m afraid you don’t.” Serena glances at me. “Whiplash isn’t doing well, and hasn’t been for a while now. Robert was counting on this book to drag us out of the red and into the black, and if it falls through ...” She takes a breath and watches the digital numbers above the elevator doors. “It won’t just be you on the line. We could all be looking for new jobs.”

That news makes me shudder. “Things are that bad?”

She nods. “He’s been putting off dealing with our bottom line for nearly two years, because this company is his life, and he loves all of his staff like family. But the publishing industry is in dire straits, and unless we can find something to keep the wolves at bay, Whiplash as we know it will cease to exist.”

We step onto the elevator, and as the doors close, the pressure to fix this whole situation makes me feel claustrophobic.

As soon as I get back to my desk, I grab my phone and try the professor’s number. It goes straight to a message bank.

“Dammit.”

I call a few more times, but the result is always the same. Either he’s avoiding me, or he’s on the phone to another publishing house. Both are crappy options.

I tap out a quick text.

*<Hi, professor. Could you please call me at your earliest convenience? We need to talk.>*

After sending the message, I toss my phone onto the desk and rub my forehead. I’m starting to get the impression that for whatever reason, I’ve been played. I felt so confident about this whole thing, but now it seems I’m being hung out to dry like a handkerchief in a hurricane.

A large coffee cup lands in front of me, and I look up to find Joanna is sinking into my extra chair with her own *grande* cup.

“If you need Valium,” she says as she crosses her legs, “I can hook you

up.”

“It’s tempting. But what I really need is answers. No one can get through to the professor, and everything is falling apart.”

“Well, there are a million reasons why he might not be answering his phone.”

“Such as?”

She ticks points off on her fingers. “His phone fell on the subway tracks and got smashed by a train; he was hit by a cab, got amnesia, and is in the hospital; he was kidnapped by Armenian pirates. Or perhaps he’s engaging in a spontaneous marathon masturbation session in the shower and isn’t taking calls. The possibilities are endless.”

“Or,” I say, leaning back in my chair, “he’s being courted by other publishers and is too much of a chickenshit to tell me.”

Joanna takes a sip of her coffee and nods. “Well, sure, if you want to go with the darkest timeline. Personally, I’m rooting for the shower scenario.”

I rip open four packets of sugar and sprinkle them into my cup. “If this falls apart and another editor signs him ...” I shake my head. “I might actually kill Devin. I mean, I’m not usually violent, but right now all I can think about is kicking him in the crotch so hard his scrotum explodes.”

“Quite the mental image. Especially considering you don’t know if it was him.”

“Oh, come on. Who else could it be? He’d do anything to secure that promotion. Plus, since I got back from Mr. Whip’s office, he won’t look at me.”

“Sure, but that might have something to do with how you’ve been glaring at him like you want to destroy his scrotum. You could ask him about it.”

“What’s the point? He’d just deny it.”

Joanna’s phone buzzes, and as she checks the message, her face falls. “Oh, butts.”

“What is it?”

She keeps looking at the screen, brows furrowed. “After this whole thing happened this morning, I put out some feelers to my contacts. I’ve just heard from a friend at Macmillan. She confirms that there were hurried meetings this morning about the professor. If they haven’t already made an offer, then one is imminent. She said that there are at least two other houses who’ve contacted him. Looks like this bidding war is a thing after all.”

“They’ve *contacted* him? That means he’s just dodging calls from Whiplash.” I drop my head down onto the desk, and it makes a loud *thunk*. “That’s it, then. Game over.”

“Not necessarily.”

I lift my head and look at her. “Come on, Jo. You know as well as I do that we can’t compete if the big kids decide to get involved. We don’t have their distribution, connections, or deep pockets. What could we possibly offer him that they can’t?”

“You.”

“Oh, that’s right. Here he can get a rookie editor who’s never had a solo project before. That’s sure to work in our favor.”

Joanna puts a hand on my arm. “Listen, if he passes over working with you for mere money, then he’s a tool. The man who values money above all else is the poorest among us.”

I shoot her a look. “Spoken like a true rich person.”

“Ash, *you* discovered this guy. *You* were the one who truly believed in his talent. If he goes with a publisher who just cares about their bottom line, then he’ll regret it, mark my words. I once sold a beloved manuscript to the highest bidder, and the bastards butchered the hell out of it. I barely made the New York Times bestseller list, which wasn’t how I saw my debut novel going, believe me. Thank God I’d insisted on executive producing the movie. If they’d screwed that up, I would have rage-quit the whole industry. And if that had happened, then I wouldn’t have an Oscar sitting on my mantle.”

I’d call her out on her claim, but I’ve been to her apartment. She does have an Oscar. I just assumed it was a fake.

“Okay, I see your point, and just to be clear, we’re coming back to that story later. But for right now, what should I do?”

She smiles. “Fight for him. Prove that passion is worth more than money.”

I take a swig of super-sweet coffee and nod. “You know what? You’re right. He’s my author, and goddammit, I’m going to take him back.”

I grab my phone and type out a text.

*<Dear professor, if you’re screening me because other publishers are chasing your book, please don’t. I deserve a chance to prove I’m the one you should sign with. I would appreciate you not shutting me out of this process.>*

“Nice,” Joanna says, reading over my shoulder. “Go get him, girl.”



I give her a smile, then head into Serena's office. "Have you and Mr. Whip figured out an advance for the professor?"

She leans back in her chair. "No. We were going to talk about it this morning, and then everything went to hell."

My phone buzzes in my hand. When I check the screen, I see a text from the professor.

*<Not dodging you. Busy. Will call in ten minutes.>*

*Hell, yes.*

"Serena, crunch those numbers now, and do it fast. We're going to have one chance to land this guy, so give me a figure that will keep us in the game."

I've never told Serena what to do before, so this is a new experience, but I need things to happen fast. Judging by how quickly she calls Robert and tells him to hightail it to the conference room for an emergency war council, it seems my sense of urgency is contagious.

When we're all together, the two of them sit down and discuss dollars, while I wait for the professor to call. I use my time to pair up my phone with our conference call device in the middle of the table.

"Asha?"

I turn to see Mr. Whip looking at me.

"We're going all-in on this." His eyes sparkle with either excitement or anxiety. It's hard to tell which. "Three hundred-thousand dollars."

My mouth falls open. "Are you serious?"

He nods. "That's more than double our existing record for a debut author, but I think that figure will at least make us competitive."

"Okay." My mind is blown. A year ago we spent a hundred-and-thirty grand on a debut, and Mr. Whip was so worked up about it, we had to call the paramedics to check his blood pressure. Now, he seems fine with blowing that figure out of the water. I guess if the company is truly in as much trouble as Serena claims, then Mr. Whip would rather go out with a bang than a whimper.

"Would the others offer that much?" I ask.

Serena shakes her head. "I wouldn't think so. Not for the *idea* of a book. If there was a manuscript that everyone was losing their minds over, then, sure. So, even if the professor has been contacted by someone else, I have no doubt

this advance will give him second thoughts.”

We all look at the phone.

After a tense minute, Serena says, “Unless, of course, he’s already signed a contract.”

I shake my head. “He didn’t seem like the type of guy who’d make snap decisions. It took me nearly fifteen minutes just to convince him to let me *pitch* a book. I think he’ll call.”

The words are barely out of my mouth when my phone rings. I take a deep breath and tap the answer button.

“Hi, professor, thank you so much for calling.”

“What did you do?” He sounds tense.

That takes me by surprise. “I’m sorry?”

“Did you offer my book around to the whole of New York? Publishing people have been hounding me all morning. What’s going on?”

“I honestly have no idea. I think someone here leaked information to our rivals.”

He makes a scoffing noise. “Is that the kind of company you work for?”

“Not at all,” Mr. Whip says. “Sorry to barge in, professor. This is Robert Whip, and next to me is our senior editor, Serena White.”

“Hello, professor,” Serena says. “Great to speak with you.”

“Yeah, you too.”

“We’re all fans of your work,” Mr. Whip says. “This is my company, and I can assure you this whole incident is extremely out of the ordinary for us. We had every intention of contacting you today with our formal offer, but then events occurred that were beyond our control. I deeply apologize.”

There’s an exhale. “Okay. So, what happens now?”

I lean toward the microphone. “Well, before we go any further, can I just clarify something with you? Another publishing house has accused me of poaching you. In other words, they’re claiming they came up with the idea of you writing a book and had already offered you a contract. Is that true?”

I’m confident that the idea was mine, and yet in the three seconds it takes for him to answer, my heart is in my throat.

“What the hell kind of people work in publishing? The first person who suggested a book was you, Brooklyn. But this morning, three other publishing

houses made formal offers.”

Mr. Whip swears under his breath. “Have you accepted any of them?”

“No. But I’m not going to lie, the amount of money they’re talking about is tempting.”

“Well, then, allow us to formally throw our hat into the ring.” He shoots me a look. “Asha? Would you like to do the honors?”

I nod.

Okay, here it is. My very first author negotiation.

*Just be cool, Ash. Woo him with your passion.*

“Professor ... uh, sorry. Would you like me to address you by your name?”

There’s a long pause. “Professor is fine for now.”

“Okay.” I clear my throat. “Professor, I haven’t made a secret of how much I respect you and your talent. I think your poetry is remarkable, and I have no doubt that if you set your mind to writing a novel based around your travel experiences and losing your lady love, it would be equally poignant and powerful. Whiplash may not be the biggest publishing house in New York, but we’re passionate about our authors, and we’ll work around the clock to make you happy.”

“Good to know.”

“If you choose to sign with us, I would be honored to be your editor. I know your style, I understand your rhythm, and I truly believe I’m the best person to bring your words to life.”

“Okay.” I can feel an air of impatience.

I take a breath. *Dear professor, prepare to have your mind blown.*

“With all that in mind, Whiplash would like to offer you the largest advance we’ve ever given a debut author. How would you feel about three-hundred-thousand dollars?”

There’s silence on the other end of the line.

Serena, Mr. Whip, and I share a look. Not the reaction we’d expected. Maybe he’s shocked into silence.

“Professor?”

“Yeah, I’m here. Just ... thinking.”

“Okay, of course. I understand this is a big decision. That’s a lot of money.”

“Uh huh.”

I’ve met some laconic men in my life, but I think the professor is the king of them all. Most people would show at least a hint of excitement when confronted with a small fortune, but I’m quickly learning that this man isn’t most people.

“Uh ... if you need more time, you can always get back to us later today. Or ... tomorrow?”

Another pause, followed by a noisy exhale. “Yeah, okay.”

“Okay. Great. So, just give us a call when you—”

“No, I mean okay to the deal. I’ll sign with Whiplash.”

There are a few seconds of shocked silence, during which we all share a surprised look. Then Mr. Whip clasps his hands together in delight.

“That’s fantastic news! We’re thrilled to have you on board.”

“You won’t regret it, professor,” Serena says. “Asha is going to do wonderful things with your words. I have no doubt.” She beams at me. “I’ll start getting the contract together and give you a call later today to sort out the details.”

“Sounds good.”

“Well,” Mr. Whip says, smiling at me. “I know Asha is keen to get started as soon as possible. Are you available to come in tomorrow to meet the whole team? And afterward, you and Asha can get your heads together about some content ideas.”

“Sure.”

“Great. I’ll organize everyone for a nine a.m. round table. I look forward to meeting you in person then.”

“Yeah. Me, too.”

Mr. Whip and Serena head out of the conference room, leaving me to sign off.

I’m so excited and relieved that this whole sucky situation has had a positive outcome, I feel like hugging someone. Preferably the professor.

“Okay, then,” I say, sinking into the chair. “This is turning out to be an amazing day after all. Professor, I can’t thank you enough for joining the Whiplash family. I’m really looking forward to working with you.”

“Yeah, until you find out how difficult I am. Then you’ll run for the hills.”

I don't know if he's joking or not, but I laugh anyway. "Nothing short of a major felony is going to turn me off, believe me."

"We'll see about that."

I look up as Joanna sneaks into the room. She grins and silently mimes a touchdown, accompanied by a ridiculous celebratory dance.

I suppress a laugh. "So, professor, before you go, do you have any questions for me? Concerns?"

There's a long pause during which Joanna comes over and sits beside me. We both stare at the phone. After about thirty seconds, the professor says, "Yeah, there is something we need to talk about, but I'd rather do it in person. Can you meet me tonight?"

Joanna's jaw drops and she mouths, *Oh my God, he wants you!*

I wave her off as my mind races. Yes, the way he said it was stupidly sexy, but we're entering into a business arrangement, not a relationship. Besides, I already have a wonderful man in my life, and if I can just figure out how to have mind-blowing sex with him, I intend on locking him down.

"Brooklyn? You still there?"

"Uh ... yes. Sorry. Of course we can meet tonight. It would be a great way to celebrate our new partnership. Just say when and where. The champagne will be on me."

"I'll text you."

"Fantastic. Talk to you later."

"Uh huh."

As soon as I disconnect the call, Joanna gasps. "Oh, dear heavenly sex voices. You're going to see that hot piece of man in person tonight. I have spare panty liners, should you need them."

I roll my eyes as I grab my phone before we both leave the conference room.

"It's a business meeting, Jo. No panty liners necessary."

"Whatever you say. But what if he tries to kiss you?"

"He won't."

"He might. You're freaking gorgeous. In any case, wear something smoking hot. If he falls madly in lust with you, then so be it."

"Jo, I'm taken, so I'm going to wear something appropriate for a business

meeting.”

She makes a disappointed sound but doesn’t push it further.

When we reach my desk, she sits back in the extra chair. I quickly check my inbox and see that Serena has already sent a slew of emails about the professor coming into the office tomorrow. She’s also asked me to brief everyone before he arrives, so we’re all on the same page. As I read the memos, I feel myself grinning.

I turn to find Joanna smiling, too. “Your first author, Ash. How cool is that?”

I nod. “Pretty freaking cool.”

“I’m so stinking proud of you.”

I grab my phone with the thought to call Nannabeth and Eden to tell them the good news, but then a text buzzes through from the professor.

<*Clydesdales on E9th St. 8pm.*>

A shiver of excitement runs through me as I shoot back, <*Seen you then.*>

Joanna fans herself. “And the countdown to debilitating hotness begins in three ... two ... one ... *now.*”

I’m still laughing at her when Devin scurries past us on his way to the lobby.

## SEVEN

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### So Very No

AS I SIT IN THE CROWDED bar, I judder my leg under the table. My nerves are making me feel sick and hot, and no matter how hard I try to settle down, nothing seems to help, not even the über-strong cocktail I'm sipping.

As I smooth down my hair, I glance around and try to avoid looking like I'm desperate. There's only so long you can sit by yourself in a bar before people start throwing sympathetic glances your way, knowing you've been stood up. Right now, I'm straddling that line. The professor is more than fifteen minutes late, and I'm starting to seem like a social pariah.

A clean-shaven blond guy approaches me, but I shoot him down before he even opens his mouth.

"I'm waiting for someone."

I'm thankful when he nods and veers past me to a couple of college girls.

I subtly reach beneath the table and tug down the hem of my dress. Earlier, I'd tried on nearly every outfit in my closet before settling on a sleek, black pencil dress. Like most of the items in my closet, it's form-fitting, because I've learned that the best way to minimize my curves is to not add extra bulk, but the hemline and neckline are conservative enough to give it a polished and professional air. I'm hoping I look like a fuller-figured version of Audrey Hepburn; classy, stylish, and confident.

I'll admit that I'm abnormally nervous about tonight's meeting. I'm deeply attracted to the professor's work and therefore him, but more than that, I have a powerful need to impress him. I really hope I rise to the challenge of doing his words justice. Even though I've only seen small glimpses of who he is through our conversations, I know without a doubt he possesses some sort of stark, brave integrity I haven't encountered often in my life. He knows who he is, and even though he doesn't seem to like himself very much, he's not hiding behind some kind of perfect facade. He freely admits his flaws and puts them on display for the whole world to see. There'd be less bullshit in the world if more people did that.

I wonder if I could ever be brave enough to follow suit. Be my real, authentic self.

"OMG, he didn't say that!" cries a girl at the table next to mine, before she

and her two friends devolve into a fit of giggles. “That’s amazing. You’re so lucky to have him.”

I sip my drink as I watch the group. Everything is amplified with them, and their fake exaggeration grates on me. And yet, the thought of dealing with a man like the professor who oozes sincerity is making me break out in a cold sweat. What the hell does that say about me?

I check my watch before going back to scanning the faces of the men circling the bar. I chose a table reasonably close to the front, so the professor could find me easily. After all, he’ll have to make first contact, because I have no idea what he looks like. Well, that’s not strictly true. I’ve ogled his pictures so often, I could probably pick his abs out of a lineup.

The one thing I do know is that I’m looking for dark hair and a killer jawline covered in scruff. How dark, I have no idea, so every brown-haired guy who passes within my orbit is scrutinized so intensely, I’m certain I’m giving off desperate-stalker vibes.

I check my watch again. Okay, now he’s twenty-five minutes late. This isn’t cool. Even if he has a good excuse, I’d at least expect a text.

Or maybe he’s just bailed altogether.

I grab my phone and type out, *<Hey, just letting you know I’m here, waiting for you. Everything okay?>*

I press send and watch the screen, but he doesn’t reply.

*Crap.*

I drain the rest of my drink and sigh. To leave or not to leave? That is the question.

I’m contemplating whether to give him the benefit of the doubt and move onto my second cocktail, when I see a guy walking toward me, squinting through the dim light.

*Okay, here we go. About time.*

I sit up straighter as he approaches.

Dark hair? Check.

Facial hair? Check.

Hot body? Eh. Hard to tell considering he’s wearing a Matrix-style knee-length leather coat, but let’s go with *maybe*. The thick glasses are throwing me off, but still. The fact that he seems to recognize me indicates he’s my guy.

“Wow,” he says, giving me an appraising look. “Your picture really didn’t



do you justice. You're so much hotter in person."

I'm thrown by his words, even though his tone is more surprised than flirty. It's less 'pick-up line', and more 'here are my thoughts without a verbal filter.' Of course, he's only seen my cheesy profile pic on the Whiplash website and a drowned rat on a grainy Facetime feed, so I guess I can give his comment a pass, especially since I do look decent tonight.

"Sorry I'm late," he says. "It's been one of those days."

His voice is higher than I remember. Or maybe it just sounds different in real life as opposed to the sexy darkness he exudes on the phone. He's certainly more smiley than I'd anticipated from his angsty posts. In fact, my mental image of the good professor is nothing like the reality.

"No problem," I say as I offer my hand. "Thanks for meeting me."

He picks up my hand and presses his lips against the back of it. The action makes me cringe, but I endure it. Kind of a weird thing to do when meeting someone for the first time, especially in a business relationship. I have to believe he doesn't intend it to be as creepy as it comes across. Even so, I can't help the shudder that runs through my arm.

"Oh, it's my pleasure, m'lady. And I have no doubt that will be the first of many pleasures tonight."

I give him a confused smile and take my hand back.

*Jesus Christ. M'lady? Pleasure? What's happening right now? How have I so completely misjudged this man?*

The guy is attractive, sure, but in a nerdy, somewhat awkward way. Considering he has no qualms about showing off his ripped, tattooed body, I'd expected him to be rougher; more confident. Maybe even a little arrogant.

Instead, he looks nervous as he carefully slides onto the stool next to me. "So ... uh, how are you?"

"I'm well. You?"

"Good, good."

There's a brief pause, after which we both go to speak at the same time. Then we laugh, and he gestures for me to go first. I'm not going to lie, I'm a little relieved that meeting him in person has caused the crazy lust I felt while trawling his timeline to evaporate. Even though he's not what I expected, having no real-life chemistry while we work together will help me stay objective. That's a good thing for my blood pressure, not to mention my professionalism. And yet, another part of me is disappointed. How on earth

did my mental image and the real man land so far apart? I think my hot-dude meter is busted.

“So,” I say and clear my throat. “We should talk business.”

He nods and pulls an envelope from his jacket pocket. “Of course. You’re a busy woman. Let’s get down to it.” He glances around before sliding the envelope over to me. “I think you’ll find it’s all there. And just to clarify ...” He leans over and whispers, “I’ve included the extra two-hundred we discussed for the ... uh ...” He winks. “... optional extras. Speaking of which ...” He eyes my empty glass. “Shouldn’t you be drinking more? I mean, that’s a thing, right? You need to fill up your bladder so you can, you know ... shower me with your —”

“Oh, my God,” I say, leaning back so far I almost fall off my stool. “What the hell, dude?! Who do you think I am?”

He blinks in confusion. “Is this a test? You’re Mistress Trinity, of course, and I’m your worthless servant.” His face lights up. “Oh, wait, is this part of your plan? Did you want to punish me here? Because I haven’t done public humiliation yet, but I’m very open to it.” He whispers. “I even have my own collar and leash.”

“Holy shit.” As embarrassment and disbelief duke it out to see who can make me blush more, I look around to make sure there aren’t some snickering frat boys in a corner, laughing at my expense. A quick scan of the room suggests I’m alone in this bubble of mortification. Well, not entirely alone. Submissive Neo is looking at me expectantly, awaiting further instructions.

“Look ...” I slide his envelope back over to him and vaguely wonder how much cash would make it feel that thick. Obviously, I’m in the wrong line of work. “I think there’s been a mistake ...”

His face falls. “Oh, God. I’ve screwed it up already, haven’t I? Come on too strong. Been too weird. Please, just tell me what I did wrong. I can do better.” He leans forward again, excitement lighting him up. “I’m such a bad boy, mistress, but you can train me. Punish me as hard as you like. I can take it. Please take me home with you. Make me your slave.”

He kneels on the floor in front of me and bows in submission, and even though my head is on a swivel as I try to find someone else to witness this zaniness, not one person nearby is even batting an eyelid. In NYC, I guess everyone’s so jaded by constant weird shenanigans, a groveling Keanu-Reeves-look-alike is almost boring.

“Please get up,” I say, tugging on his sleeve. “I’m sure you’d make someone a wonderful slave, but I’m not who you think I am. Come on, now.”

I'm startled when a woman appears beside me. She's wearing a leather bustier over black skinny jeans and stiletto boots, and her red hair is pulled back into an immaculate ponytail that's so tight, it looks painful.

"Um, hey there," she says, giving me an apologetic smile before turning to Neo. "I think this one belongs to me."

Neo glances up in surprise, and then frowns at me before beaming with adoration at the other woman.

"Mistress!"

I flinch when she slaps him hard across the face.

"How dare you offer yourself to another!" She glares at him before subtly taking the envelope from the table. "You're going to regret your transgression, you pathetic toad."

Neo lets out a low groan. "Oh, yes, mistress. Please, make me regret it."

She slaps him again. "Get your ass outside and wait for me, worm. I'll deal with you shortly."

Neo beams like a kid on a sugar high before scrambling to his feet and pushing through the crowd.

*Yep, just a regular Tuesday night in the East Village.*

After he's gone, the woman turns to me with a gentle smile. "Sorry about that. Men, right? One redhead is obviously interchangeable with another. I really need to start wearing a pink carnation or something."

"This has happened before?"

"Oh, yeah. All the time. I told him I'd be at the *back* of the bar, and really, the leather should have been a dead giveaway, right? But nope. Oh, well. At least I don't have to invent a reason to punish him. Poor baby isn't going to be able to sit down tomorrow."

She smiles as she shoves the envelope into the top of her boot. Then she pulls a bottle of water from her purse and downs half of it in three giant swallows. When she's done, she looks at me sheepishly.

"Gotta keep those liquids up, am I right? Anyway, better get moving. His penis isn't going to cage itself. Your glasses are super cute, by the way. Have a great night!"

"Uh, thanks. You, too."

She grins. "Oh, I will."

She strides out of the bar like a badass bitch as I gesture for the nearest waitress to bring me another drink. At least tonight hasn't been boring. Wait until I tell Eden and Joanna about this. They may very well piss themselves just as much as the Mistress.

I check my phone again, and a jab of disappointment hits me when I see there's still nothing from the professor.

*Damn.*

Getting stood up is humiliating at the best of times, but it's even worse when it's someone you're really looking forward to meeting. Obviously, he had somewhere more important to be tonight. I just hope this level of unreliability isn't indicative of what's to come.

"Well, well, well," a deep voice behind me says. "Are my eyes deceiving me, or did little Asha Tate grow up to be a kinky sex freak?"

The voice sends a shiver down my spine, and when the man walks into my line of view, I frown in confusion. He's familiar, but also not. As I scrutinize him, a prickle of recognition sparks in the corner of my brain. But then my gaze travels to his short beard and how tall and broad he is, and the name floating in my brain turns pale with disbelief. It's a face I know as well as my own, but not in this form; and certainly not in this body. It's the face of someone I've both loved and hated, and sincerely hoped I'd never see again.

With recognition comes a blast of anger.

"Jacob." My voice is so tight, his name sounds like an accusation

His hands are in his pockets, shoulders bunched, eyes wary. He looks mildly amused by my discomfort, as well as annoyed to be in my presence, which was pretty much the status quo for us all through high school. With the way tonight has gone, I shouldn't be surprised I'd randomly run into the guy who made my entire high school experience a living hell, and yet ...

"Hello, Asha. Or would you prefer me to call you *Mistress* these days?"

"That depends. If I get to inflict physical pain on you, then call me whatever you like."

He tilts his head. "Are we talking normal pain? Or sexy lingerie-and-stilettos type pain? Because I'd consider the second one for the laughs alone. However, if we're taking just a regular old ass-kicking, then I'm pretty sure I could take you."

As usual, he stares at me with such off-putting intensity, I feel a familiar simmer of anxiety start up. The last time I saw Jake, he was slamming out of my house, cursing my name while I called him a selfish asshole. Back then,

he was tall and lanky, with long hair and a shitty attitude for days. Now, he may look wildly different from the teenage douchebag I used to know, but the tension he inspires hasn't changed. If I didn't think it showed weakness, I'd rush into the bathroom and allow my stomach the violent purging it's begging for.

"So," he says, scanning me from top to toe with his usual piercing gaze. "You look ... different. Grown up." He points to my face. "You need glasses now, Grandma?"

"Yes. I mean, no." I take the glasses off and put them on the table as I swipe a hand across the cold sweat that's prickling the back of my neck. "They're for my job. Camouflage."

"Right." He nods. "So, fake. Some things never change."

I ignore the barb. I've had plenty of practice. "Well, you have. Graduated from peach fuzz to big boy facial hair, I see."

"It's laziness. Shaving is a burden."

"Uh huh. That's fascinating." I give him my best bored expression. He counters it with a condescending smirk. Asshole.

"Well," I say, not giving him the satisfaction of showing how he's affecting me. "I'd say it's nice to see you, but we both know that would be a lie."

His lips curl more. It's not quite a smile, but it's enough to make me even more irritated. "I was about to say the same thing. How long has it been? Six years-ish?"

"About that, and yet also not long enough. For the record, I'm really not in the mood for you to tell me to go screw myself tonight, so if that's what you were planning ..."

"I wasn't planning on it, but the night is young and you seem like you're angling for a fight. Let's just see what happens."

I can still remember how betrayed I felt after our final argument. Right before it, part of me held out hope that we could perhaps get past the years of mutual animosity and at least be civil to each other, but he made it clear he wasn't interested. That was the moment I buried the last stubborn remnants of affection I'd felt for him and plastered a giant 'FU' on his mental portrait.

Jacob's living proof that assholes gotta asshole.

"Anyway," I say, "this has been appropriately excruciating, so now, if you'll excuse me, I'm waiting for someone."

I may have given up hope that the professor will show up at this point, but

I'm hoping my dismissive tone will give Jake the hint that our conversation is done. It's amazing how seeing him again makes the past six years seem like they never happened. He needs to get the hell away from me, so I can stop feeling like an angst-ridden teenager all over again.

"Aw, come on, now," Jake says as he flags down a waitress. "Surely you have more time for an old friend than that. And since you practically begged me, I'd love to have a drink. Thanks."

He throws his jacket over mine, which lies on a spare stool, and makes a move to sit. On instinct, I hold out my hand to stop him. I don't have time for Jacob Stone's bullshit today.

"Don't be a dick, Jake. I know it's your natural state, but for once, try to resist. That seat is reserved."

"I know. For me."

I breathe through my frustration as he slides onto the stool, and a waitress appears beside him. When he orders a bourbon, a part of me squirms because he's not old enough to have hard liquor. But of course, that's not true anymore. Come to think of it, adolescent Jake never cared much for the legal drinking age, either.

When the waitress leaves, I fix him with my most potent glare. "As tempted as I am to hear about whatever bullshit you've been up to since high school, I'm going to have to take a hard pass on this get-together. I have a business meeting."

He looks at me like I just told him gravity is real. "So, let's talk business. Is it cool if I also pay for 'optional extras' from you, mistress? I mean, the golden shower thing isn't really my bag, but I'm sure we could work out something else. What's your position on spanking? Yes? Or, hell yes?"

*God, give me strength.*

"You know what?" I shove my phone back into my purse. "You want to be an ass? No problem. You do you. But I'm going to move to another table." I give him an insincere smile. "So glad we bumped into each other, Jacob. Let's never do it again, okay?"

When I slide off my stool and turn to go, his hand closes around my arm.

"For fuck's sake, Tate, were you always this clueless? Sit your ass back down."

"I beg your pardon?"

He lets out a frustrated sigh. "Sorry, that was rude. Sit your ass back down,

*please.”*

I pull my arm out of his grip and resist wiping it clean of Jake-germs. God, I really am living in a time warp tonight.

“First,” I say, leveling a finger at him. “Don’t touch me. Second, don’t tell me what to do. Your bullying tactics don’t work on me anymore. And third, *don’t touch me.*”

I can’t stand the clammy handprint on my skin any longer, so I quickly wipe away the tingling sensation. “I know this will probably come as shock to you, but you were a douchebag in high school, and you’re a douchebag now, so no, I’m not going to submit to one more moment in your presence. And here’s another newsflash — I’ve completed three-and-a-half self-defense courses at my local *Tae Kwon Do* dojo, so believe me when I say that if you lay your giant gorilla hands on me ever again, I will fuck you up.”

He stares for a second, seeming beyond shocked that I’ve stood up for myself for once. To be honest, I’ve surprised myself. This reaction is the result of the countless times I fantasized about what I should have done or said to him in high school, instead of suffering in silence.

Still, I’m not used to being so forceful with him, and my heart is thrumming so hard, I can feel the vibrations in my feet.

Jake is still staring at me in stunned silence.

*Holy shit. Is this what it’s like to beat Jacob Stone? Can it be I’ve finally learned the secret to defeating him and his annoying bullshit?*

Three seconds later, my chest-warming sense of satisfaction dissolves in a puff of humiliation when he breaks into a low rumble of laughter.

“Damn, Tate,” he says, in an awestruck tone. “That was *terrifying*. Please don’t fuck me up, tiny woman. I’m young and have so much to live for.”

I make a disgusted noise then snatch my glass up and take a step toward a free table a few yards away. Unfortunately, I don’t get far, because in a flash, Jake’s out of his seat and blocking my path.

*Okay, wasn’t expecting someone so big to move that fast. Inconvenient.*

“Tate, come on. You can’t leave. I don’t have enough cash on me to pay for *professional* comedy tonight.” Even though Jake has always preferred brooding to smiling, it’s clear he finds my irritation hilarious, and accordingly, I get even more irritated.

*Goddammit.*

“You know,” I say, drawing myself up as tall as possible, which in these

heels is about five-foot-eight. “Maybe you’re right. You should hang around and meet the guy I’m waiting for.”

“Oh, yeah? Why’s that?”

“Because he’s honest, down-to-earth, and emotionally aware in ways you’ll *never* be. He’s someone who doesn’t have to hide behind bullshit and sarcasm. He’s real, and sincere, and writes with the sort of raw vulnerability you’ll *never* understand. So, go ahead and laugh at me all you want. I don’t give a crap about what you think. As far as I’m concerned, you’re nothing more than a speed bump on a shitty highway I left behind years ago.”

Jakes expression darkens. Can it be I’ve finally hit a nerve?

He pauses, and a muscle tics in his jaw. “Is that right?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

There’s a saying about how people ‘stare daggers’ when they’re pissed. With Jake, it’s more like machetes. His eyes have always been the darkest brown I’ve ever seen; almost black. But whenever he gets angry, they seem to hide some sort of internal fire. Tiny flecks of amber play tricks with the light. They’re what make his glare so debilitating.

How he’s staring at me now? I experienced it way too often in high school, and it always made my lungs seize up, as if I were riding a roller coaster that plummeted to its lowest point in a millisecond.

In the past, it would have sent me scurrying away as quickly as possible before he could say something to make me feel stupid or small, but not tonight. Despite my whole body going nuclear, I lift my chin in defiance and deploy my most epic-level glare. “Now ... if you’ve finished your macho-bullshit routine for the night, let me pass. As usual, I have far more interesting people to spend time with than *you*.”

There are those flickers in his eyes again, more of them this time. I know I’m hitting below the belt, but I refuse to go back to being his punching bag. I have enough self-loathing about our past, and I’m determined to never be that girl again.

Jake stares for a few more seconds, and I know he’s fighting the urge to bite back. But in a surprising show of restraint, he presses his lips into a line, gives a tight nod, and steps out of my way.

“No problem, Mistress Tate. I’m so sorry to have ruined your evening with my presence. I should have known better. By all means, leave.”

With a breath to steady my nerves, I go to move past him, but I stop dead when he adds, “Although, I’d hoped for a warmer reception tonight,



considering I'm now your star author."

I stop breathing as the gears of my mind screech to a sudden halt. When I turn to face him in slow motion, I vaguely wonder if he can see all the blood draining from my face.

"What ... did you say?"

"Oh, yes, Brooklyn," he says, his tone getting as hard as his stare. "I normally don't find desperation attractive in a woman, but today when you practically begged me to sign with you ... well, that was one of the most satisfying experiences of my life."

His voice has changed. Dropped in pitch and darkened in color. It's not Jake's anymore. It's *his*.

*Dear God, no.*

My scalp prickles as goosebumps crawl over my skin.

The sarcasm I'm so used to seeing on his face has disappeared, and all of a sudden, he's deadly serious. I'm starting to feel like an insect stuck in a web.

"Wow," he says, studying my expression. "Can it be I've finally left you speechless? Or are you just trying to figure out a way to take back all those nice things you said about me and my writing? By the way you were gushing and groveling, I'd swear you were harboring a pretty major crush on a man you despise. Wouldn't that be the ultimate irony?"

I stare at him, dumbfounded. My eye twitches. "No ... you can't be. You just ... no."

He looks at me impassively, waiting for me to accept the inevitable.

Why didn't I see it before? All the clues were there.

Dark hair. Sharp jaw.

I glance at his arms. The long sleeves on the tight t-shirt he's wearing are pushed up, showing firm muscles and intricate ink. Not only that, I can practically see his abs through the thick fabric. I didn't notice before, because it was Jacob, and it will be sweater weather in hell before I appraise his body with anything but disdain. But now ...

I feel like a whole bucket of ice has been thrown down my back.

"No," I say, willing reality to morph into anything that isn't this.

"Yes."

*Sweet Jesus, this can't be happening.*

“No,” I say again, more to myself than to him.

“You can say that all you like,” he says, irritated. “But it won’t make it not true.”

I stare at him for a few more seconds, trying to reconcile the conflicting concepts that are head-butting inside my brain.

*Jacob Stone* is Professor Feelgood.

*Professor Feelgood* is Jacob Stone.

*Sonovagoddamnbitch.*

# EIGHT

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## The Mongoose and the Cobra

I DON'T REMEMBER SITTING back down at the table, or ordering the waitress to bring me a whole bottle of tequila and four shot glasses, but here I am seated next to Jake again with a burning thirst for a metric ton of booze. I will my stupid hand to stop shaking as I fill the glasses. When I'm done, I throw back two shots in quick succession. If I ever needed alcohol to calm me and dull my senses, it's right now.

I have an urge to just grab my purse and leave, because that's my default mode around him; to remove myself from the discomfort that being with him always brings. But then I get an image of Serena and Mr. Whip, and Joanna, and Fergus beating up the copier machine, and goddamn Devin the Deceiver thinking he's better than I am, and suddenly, my ass feels like it's super-glued to the seat.

Jake's watching me with the intensity of a mongoose scoping out a cobra. I have no idea why. He's the one full of venom. Why the hell else would he have pulled this stunt?

I throw back a third shot.

He takes the fourth before I can. "I would have thought you'd offer your new author a drink to celebrate our glorious union, but no. Not a great start, princess. This is going to come back to haunt you when I fill out your performance review."

I scowl and refill the three glasses still in front of me. "Jacob, unless you feel like confessing that this whole Professor Feelgood ruse is a joke, and you're not him and he's not you, kindly shut up. You've done enough to ruin this night."

He downs the shot in front of him and hisses as he swallows. "Man, you got bossy in the past six years. And mean. What happened to you, Asha? Who hurt you? Is it someone local? Can I shake his hand?"

I level him with a glare. "What did I just say about not talking?"

I try to quell the disappointment and anger I'm feeling with another shot, but I don't think anything short of full-on alcohol poisoning is going to make this go away. Sure, my head is spinning, but it's less from the booze and more from this viciously unexpected turn of events.

My thoughts stutter and stall, full of U-turns and contradictions. I despise Jacob Stone and all the ways he hurt me. But I respect the professor and all his raw brilliance

They can't possibly be the same man, and yet the more I stare at Jake, the more I can't deny the truth.

What the hell should I do now? What do I say?

With the way my stomach is rolling, you'd think I was suffering from motion sickness. Well, that's not too far from the truth. The good ship Asha has just pulled a gut-churning one-eighty, and it's going to take me a moment to get my bearings again.

Jake waits impatiently for me to speak. When I don't, he nods and gives me a bitter smile. "That's what I thought. Not so keen to publish a book now that you know it's me, right?"

I'm still trying to get my brain to function around the huge cognitive dissonance that's sitting in front of me.

"What do you expect me to say, Jake?"

"I don't know. You could go on for a bit more about what a great writer I am and how you believe I can help people, but I guess those sentiments only apply to someone who isn't me."

"I'm still trying to grasp that those words came out of you. Did you even write all that stuff? Or is this some sort of sick scam? Passing off someone else's stuff as yours?"

Now he morphs from irritated to plain old angry. "Christ, Asha, we've known each other since we were three years old. Do you honestly think I'd do that?"

I bite back a smartass reply. For all of Jake's faults, I can't deny he has his own strict moral compass. I don't think ripping off another writer's work would ever occur to him, which is too bad. If he'd plagiarized, it would have left the door open to my disturbingly detailed sexual fantasies being about someone who isn't him.

Ugh. No such luck.

"So," I say. "You're telling me that your whole tortured ex-lover schtick is real? Jacob Stone was actually stupid enough to fall for a woman and get his heart broken?"

"Is that so hard to believe?"

"Considering your impressive roster of girlfriends during high school, yes."

He gives a halfhearted shrug. "What can I say? When you meet the right person, you just know."

"And who was this unfortunate lady?"

He hesitates, then looks down. "Someone I met while I was traveling. A fellow backpacker."

"Name?"

"Ingrid."

"So why'd she leave? Did she witness you peeling off your man-suit at the end of the day and emerging as a giant snake?"

He pauses, his expression darkening. "You know, your enjoyment of my heartbreak says a lot about you as a person."

I pour myself another drink. "I'm not going to apologize to be reveling in your karmic bitch-slap. You deserve it for countless reasons, not least of which being tonight's little prank." Another shot goes down the hatch.

He steals my remaining glasses, so I'm just left with the bottle. I tighten my grip on it as he glares at me.

"In case you've forgotten, princess, you approached *me* about the book. If anyone had cause to believe they were being pranked, it was me. I mean, come on. Of all the people in the world, what are the odds of *you* calling me out of the blue and offering me a book deal? It's ridiculous."

"You could have leveled with me on the phone. Told me it was you."

"Then you would have hung up on me."

*The truest of truths.*

"So, instead you concealed your identity until I handed you a once-in-a-lifetime deal? You must have been laughing your ass off this whole time."

"Not entirely. I still have plenty of ass left."

"But surely the ultimate comedy payoff would have been revealing yourself to me in front of my bosses tomorrow morning. Why bother asking to see me tonight?"

After sizing up my expression, he exhales and gives me a contemptuous look. "I have no fucking clue. I guess ..." He shakes his head. "I guess I wanted to see if you were different. If we could be different." For the briefest of moments, there's a flash of something in his face—a younger, gentler version of him. But then his jaw hardens, and he's back to his signature glare. "Clearly, we can't."

“I gave you an opportunity for us to be different years ago, and you threw it back in my face. If we’re stuck in this pattern, it’s because of you. Not me.”

“So, the woman who set the house on fire wants credit for hosing it down? Sounds about right.”

He takes a mouthful of liquor, and I join him. Maybe getting well-and-truly hammered will make this situation less bleak. Perhaps it will help me block out the knowledge that the deep, emotionally spectacular man to whom I’ve felt so attracted recently is, in fact, the world’s biggest jackass.

Out of nowhere, a laugh bubbles out of me.

Jake frowns. “You find this funny?”

I shake my head. “Not at all. But part of me isn’t surprised. I finally have the chance to work with an author I’m truly passionate about and ... it’s you.” I laugh again, but it sounds more sad than happy. “Of course it is, because, why not? Nothing’s ever easy for me, so why should this be any different?”

The laughter gives way to tighter, less flippant emotion, and I look down so he won’t see it. There was a time when I trusted Jacob Stone with every thought and feeling that floated through my young brain. I’d never admit this to anyone, least of all him, but he used to be my fallout shelter when I had nothing and no one else to hold on to. Then puberty hit, and he morphed into my personal nuclear storm.

I slam back the rest of my drink. My brain cells are slowly becoming blurry and soft. My anger is still there, though, simmering beneath the surface. I can feel myself smiling, but I know for certain I don’t look happy.

“Okay, Asha, how about you slow down,” Jake says as he catches me off guard and manages to pull the bottle out of my grip. “I haven’t seen you vomit since you were thirteen, and I’m not keen to relive the experience. You’re an ugly regurgitator.”

“And you’re an ugly person, Jacob. Oh, sure you have all your fangirls swooning over your hot new body and your flowery words of lost love, but they don’t know you like I do. If they did, they’d run a mile.”

“So much bitterness, princess. Are you still pissed that you kissed me at senior prom and I wouldn’t kiss you back? Is that where all this anger is coming from?”

I let out a laugh that’s way too shrill. “Yeah, right. Is that what you think happened?”

“Oh, I was there. I know it was.”

I glare at him in disbelief. “Screw you, Jake. You kissed me, and you know it.”

He shakes his head in awe, and his gaze ratchets up about fifteen notches in intensity. “Wow. The lies we tell ourselves really do inform our reality, don’t they?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

He stares for a few seconds then shakes his head. “Nothing. Never mind. The past is dead. No use wasting our time giving CPR to its rotting corpse. Besides, there’s no arguing with you. You’ll always think you’re right, even when you’re not.”

I shake my head over his delusion, and my reaction to it. How can we slip back into these roles so seamlessly? It’s as if no time has passed between us. We’re both as angry with each other as we ever were, which is quite the accomplishment considering how much time has passed.

“I can’t believe how little you’ve changed. Even at your worst in high school, I always thought your asshole attitude was just a phase. Something you’d eventually outgrow.”

“I thought the same thing about your self-righteousness, so I guess we were both wrong. Don’t you ever get tired of thinking you’re better than everyone else?”

“Not everyone. Just you.”

“Oh, that’s right. I’d almost forgotten.”

Jake downs the two remaining shots in front of him in quick succession. Then he runs his fingers through his hair in frustration. “Okay, well, I’d love to stay here all night and trade insults like old times, but I have a meeting with my new publisher in the morning, so I need to get my beauty sleep. I want to make a good impression. I hear my new editor is a real bitch.”

That makes me burst out laughing.

“Oh, no,” I say. “If you think I’m going to edit this book now that I know you’re the professor, you’re insane.”

He stands and pulls on his coat. “Too late. We’ve already sealed the deal, remember? Serena sent me through the contracts this afternoon.”

“Yes, but it doesn’t stipulate a specific editor.”

“Yes, it does.”

I stare at him as a prickle of unease hits me. “What?”

“Oh, yeah,” he says as he pulls some paper from his jacket pocket. “Right after our little conference call this morning, I had a private chat with Serena and told her I wanted it written into my contract that you would be my editor or the deal was off. She was more than happy to oblige.”

He slaps the papers down on the table and points to a provision in the contract where my name is printed, clear as day. “I signed them and emailed them back right before I came here to meet you.” He flicks to the back page, and there it is, his signature and today’s date.

He folds up the papers and slides them back into his pocket. “So as you can see, starting tomorrow, you’re contractually obligated to be nice to me. This is going to be fun, right? You and me together again, just like the good old, bad old days.”

I’m too shocked to say anything, and when he sees he has me beaten, he gives me a smug smile.

“Okay, then, princess. See you in the morning.” He leans down, and whispers in my ear, “And if I were you, I’d stop drinking now. Don’t want you to make a bad impression on your new author by showing up hungover, right?”

With that, he turns on his heel and strides out of the bar.

I sit there with my mouth open in shock for five long, fury-building seconds before I grab my phone and purse and hurry after him.

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Trying to hustle down a busy Brooklyn street is bad enough, let alone in a super-tight pencil dress and four-inch heels. But when you’re slightly drunk and trying to catch up with a man whose legs are roughly the length of the Mississippi, things get plain ridiculous.

“Stone!”

He doesn’t stop, even though I’m damn sure he heard me.

I move faster, and the chill in the air makes me suddenly aware I’ve left my coat back at the bar.

*Shit, damn, crap.* That one was my favorite.

As if to punish me for my forgetfulness, a gust of icy wind blows off the East River, whipping my hair around and making me shiver. I consider letting the Jake thing go for the sake of rescuing my beloved Burberry, but I’ll be forced to be civil with him tomorrow, and I have a few dinosaur-sized bones to pick with him before that happens.



“Jacob Anthony Stone! Don’t act like you don’t hear me. It didn’t work when we were five and it’s not going to work now.”

He stops, and with a frustrated hunch of his wide shoulders, turns to face me.

“Go home, princess. I have nothing more to say to you.”

I stop in front of him, embarrassingly out of breath for power-walking such a short distance. Damn my pathetic fitness levels.

“Well, I have a crapload to say to you. The most important of which is to stop calling me princess.” That used to be his go-to insult back in the day. I’m annoyed it still needles me. “Also, I don’t know if you remember the past half hour or so, but you and I can’t stand to be in the same room together, even with alcohol. So how the hell do you think we’re going to survive working on this book for *months* on end?”

He shrugs. “People who hate each other work together all the time.”

“Not writing a book. For this process to work, we need trust, and ... God, I don’t know ... a certain level of *intimacy*. We don’t have either of those things.”

He frowns. “Are you propositioning me again, princess? I mean, I let the whole boob-flash thing go because there’s a *slight* possibility that it was an accident—”

“It *was* an accident!”

“Sure it was. And now you’re saying you want to be *intimate* with me? Well, that’s just a level of unprofessionalism I’m not comfortable with.”

“Oh, have no fear, Jake. You could point a gun to my head, and I’d still find it impossible to be attracted to you.”

“That’s not how you felt on prom night.”

“For the last time, I didn’t kiss you!”

Another gust of wind hits me, and I suppress a full-body shiver as I adjust my position so that he’s blocking the worst of it. Of course, he’s wearing a sheepskin-lined coat that probably feels like a field of warm puppies on a summer’s day. It’s bad enough that I’m trying to maintain the high ground while staring up at him. That my fingers and nose feel like they’re turning blue isn’t helping me project fierceness.

“Damn,” Jake says, touching my frozen fingers. “You’re freezing.”

I pull back my hands and shove them under my armpits. “I’m fine.”

The wind whips around us, stirring up random trash from the gutter. Now I'm so cold, my teeth chatter when I breathe.

Jake frowns at me. "Where the hell is your coat?"

"Left it at the bar. Doesn't matter. Jake, please, let someone —*anyone* else—edit your book. I'm begging you."

Ignoring my pleas, he shrugs out of his jacket and holds it out to me. "Take this before people start thinking you're a tiny, red-headed ice giant."

"Nope," I say. "I'm good." Normally, I'd give a guy props for referencing Thor, because he's one of my favorite superheroes. But coming from Jake, it's just irritating.

"Asha, you're shivering."

"And you're changing the subject. Promise me you'll go in there tomorrow and tell Serena you want a different editor."

"No can do. Take the jacket."

He stares at me, and I stare back. Yes, his jacket would be crazy-warm, but I'd Lady Godiva my way through an arctic blizzard before allowing myself to be indebted to him.

He moves toward me. "Okay, I guess we're doing this the hard way."

I hold up my hand. "That's close enough. I think you've forgotten my extensive *Tae Kwon Do* training."

He ignores my threat and steps well inside my buffer zone. "And you've forgotten that I'm about a hundred pounds heavier than you and could snap you like a twig."

Without waiting for permission, he roughly drapes the coat around my shoulders. As he pulls it into place, he mutters, "You always were too goddamn stubborn for your own good."

I look up at him. "Unless you want me to start calling you Mr. Pot, maybe don't chime in on the stubbornness of others."

He steps back and points to the coat. "Put your arms through."

I try to resist, but the wool is so soft and deliciously warm, I last a grand total of two seconds before shoving my hands through the sleeves. I almost sigh in relief when I'm engulfed in his lingering body heat.

As my shivering ceases, he looks at me expectantly. "Better?"

I give a shrug. "I'd say thank you, but you'd probably mock me for it."

“I probably would.”

He starts walking again, and I scramble to keep up. “Wait, we haven’t finished our discussion.”

“Yes, we have. I’m going home.”

“So, you’ll do it, then?”

“Do what?”

God, he’s infuriating. “Tell Serena to assign you a different editor.”

I briefly consider recommending Devin to burden Jake with an equally annoying alpha male, but then I realize they’d probably get on like a house on fire, so I keep my mouth shut.

“Oh, that,” Jake says. “Nope. Sorry.”

That’s it. I’m not usually an impatient person, but this man is pushing me to the limit.

I grab his arm and pull him around to face me. “Listen, Jacob, I’m actually glad you have a publishing deal, because as much as I hate to admit it, you have talent. But *I* was the one who made this happen for you, so how about showing some goddamn gratitude by taking my name out of that contract?”

His expression hardens. “Gratitude? Really? That’s the card you’re playing right now?”

“Considering it’s the only one I have, yeah.”

He laughs, but it’s bitter. “Woman, you have balls of steel to lecture *me* on gratitude. You have no goddamn idea what that word means.”

“How do you figure that?”

The disbelief on his face intensifies, and the golden flecks in his eyes are going crazy.

“I could have signed with anyone today,” he says, anger simmering in his voice. “But I chose you. I have no fucking clue why. Probably because of some misguided sense of loyalty from our childhood.”

“Are you kidding me right now? You signed with us because we gave you a *truckload* of money. If we’re going to argue about who’s the most ungrateful, at least be honest.” If he doesn’t drop to his knees and kiss my feet for getting him a six-figure deal for his debut novel, then he’s the most ungrateful prick on the planet.

“Oh, you want honesty?” His expression hardens. “Okay, then.”

He steps forward and leans down so his face is just inches from mine. The heat from his body sends my pulse racing.

“The ‘shitload’ of money you offered? Didn’t even come *close* to the other offers I received. So, if all I’d wanted was money, I would have gone with anyone *but* Whiplash.”

I blink in disbelief. “We offered three-hundred-thousand dollars. For a debut author, that’s unbelievable.”

“The others offered more. One in particular offered *much* more.”

“Define ‘much’.”

“The exact figure is confidential, but I can tell you it rhymes with my favorite actor’s last name.”

He stares me down. It’s a test. Do I still remember useless crap about him? Sadly, I do.

“Your favorite actor is Nathan Fillion.”

“Bingo.”

I pause as creeping disbelief makes a home on my face. “A *million* dollars? That’s what another publisher offered you?”

“Yes.”

I feel like all the blood in my veins freezes. “You’re lying.”

“I’m really not. So don’t act like you’re my beneficent benefactor, showering down cash from on high. If anyone owes a debt of gratitude here, it’s you to me.”

“A *million* dollars.” I breathe out the words like an asthmatic in need of oxygen. Suddenly, our paltry three-hundred-grand seems pale and sickly in comparison.

“Why?” I ask, looking up into his face. “Why would you pass that up to sign with us?”

He leans back a little. “Maybe I thought the opportunity to torture you every day was too good to ignore.”

“You sacrificed seven-hundred grand to *annoy* me?”

“Oh, but princess, the value of annoying you is *priceless*. And besides, you can’t talk. You’re proposing sacrificing a major career promotion to *avoid* me.”

He has a point, but no promotion is worth the amount of angst working

with him would bring.

“There’ll be other promotions,” I say, with a lack of conviction.

He looks up as if praying for patience, then back to me. “Well, you’re stuck with this one, because I sacrificed more money than I’ve ever dreamed of today, so *you* could help me write a goddamn book. Not someone who’s never met me. Not someone who doesn’t know every single fucked-up thing about me. *You*. So stow whatever shit you have left over from our past and bring your A-game, because if I crash and burn on this thing, I’m taking you with me.”

We glare at each other for a few seconds, but it’s clear that no matter what I do, I’m not changing his mind. He really is the most stubborn ass I’ve ever met.

Well, screw it. I give it a week of us working together before he realizes what a mammoth mistake he’s made and begs Serena for a different editor. If that happens, then I’d get to keep the promotion *and* my sanity.

This isn’t over.

I break eye contact and slip off his jacket before holding it out to him. “Fine, then. I guess we’re done here.”

“Don’t be stupid, Asha. You’ll freeze. Give it back to me tomorrow.”

“No, thank you. Besides, the stench of your cologne is giving me a headache.”

That’s not even a little true. Whatever mannish scent he uses is divine. Damn him straight to hell for smelling so good.

With a weary shake of his head, he grabs the coat. “Fine. Can’t wait to see you gush about me in front of your bosses in the morning.”

“Well, I did do that year in drama club. I have some experience with pretending.”

He throws me one last glare before turning away and striding down the street. He’s only gotten a dozen yards when he comes to a dead halt, and for a second I think he’s going to come back and yell at me some more. But after a few tense seconds, he clenches and unclenches his hands and then continues on his way.

*Oh, that went so very well. Good job, Ash. You should join the UN Peacekeepers.*

Angry, embarrassed, and more than a little annoyed at myself for falling back into old confrontational habits, I stare at his back until he disappears.

Then I drop my head and let out a noisy breath, which blooms into an expanding cloud in the cold air.

I wrap my arms around myself and look back the way I came. I'm several blocks from the bar now, and I have to decide whether I should brave the cold to go back and grab my coat, or go down the stairwell right in front of me to the warmth of the subway station.

I decide on the latter.

I can always call the bar and see if I can retrieve it tomorrow. If only regaining my dignity in the face of tonight's epic professional meltdown was so simple.

# NINE

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## The Butthole Next Door

EVEN THOUGH MY SUBWAY stop is only an eight-minute walk from my apartment, by the time I get home, I'm frozen to the bone. As I shiver through the front door and into the living room, I'm surprised to find Eden and Joanna there, halfway through a bottle of Shiraz as they watch a dating show.

Eden glances at me with concern when I hightail it into my bedroom to grab my blanket. Within seconds, she appears in my doorway.

"Hey, what happened to you? How did the meeting go with the professor? Was he as hot as you thought? Want some wine?"

I wrap the cover around my shoulders and kick off my shoes. "To answer your rapid-fire questions in order: Forgot my jacket; horribly; hell, no; and fuck, yes."

I shuffle out and collapse onto the couch next to Joanna as Eden grabs another glass from the kitchen.

"What do you mean horribly?" Joanna asks, as she pulls her knees up to give me more room. "Did you two not get along?"

"Not in the least." I can still feel the tension in my muscles. God, what a debacle.

Eden fills the wine glass nearly to the brim, and when she passes it over, I take it gratefully with both hands. The cold weather seems to have completely sobered me. Can't have that.

"Well, that's just crazy." Eden sits on the edge of the closest chair and scowls. "What the hell is wrong with this professor guy? You're freaking gorgeous, smart, and funny ... how could he not like you? Are you sure you weren't misreading things?"

"Oh, I'm sure."

As I take another sip of warming wine, the blanket falls off my shoulder. Joanna leans forward and pulls it up. "So, he wasn't a scorching epitome of manhood with the petal-soft soul of a poet? How can that be? His pictures were like an encyclopedia of hotness. That jaw. That body. That poor, wounded heart."

I let out a shuddery sigh as feeling finally returns to my fingers. “You’d probably think he was hot, Jo. Personally, I’d be more attracted to any member of the Insane Clown Posse.”

Eden narrows her eyes at me. “Whoa. He must be a piece of work.”

“Oh, my God,” Joanna says, clutching her chest. “Don’t tell me he was a ... *hipster*? Did he wear a vest with no shirt? Dress shoes without socks?” She takes in a horrified breath. “Oh, dear sweet holy Apollo, did he wear meggings and a man-dress?”

“He’s not a hipster, Jo.”

“Serial-vaper?”

“No.”

“Metro-lumberjack.”

“No, God, stop.” I run my fingers through my hair. I can’t believe I wasted thirty minutes styling it in an effort to impress the professor. That’s time I’ll never get back.

“Then what?” Eden asks, almost as uptight as Joanna at this point. “Seems to me that up until now you were harboring a serious crush on the guy, physically and mentally. What did he do that put him on your shit list?”

I take another swig of wine and swallow hard. “He turned out to be Jacob.”

For a moment, Eden is confused. “Uh ... is that a new term I’m not familiar with? What’s a Jacob?”

“*Jacob*,” I say, pointedly. The words *My Jacob*, echo in my brain, but I clamp my mouth shut before I can say them. “How many Jacobs do you know, Edie?”

Eden’s eyes widen. “Oh, shit. *Jacob*, Jacob.”

Joanna leans forward and whispers, “Is his name really Jacob Jacob? Because that’s weird but fascinating.”

Eden’s still wearing a stunned expression. “Last time I heard about Jake, he was off backpacking through Europe and Asia.” She claps her hand over her mouth. “Oh, my God. All those pictures of famous landmarks on the professor’s timeline.”

“Yep.”

She points at me like she’s Inspector Poirot at the end of an Agatha Christie novel. “He took those photos on his travels. Jacob’s the professor!”



“Oh, my God, Eden. Could it have taken you longer to get there?”

Now she seems even more confused. “But Jacob is all gangly. Long hair. Looks like an urban vampire. Not tall, ripped, and inked.”

“Well, apparently, he’s been hitting the tattoo parlor and gym while he’s been travelling, because he was huge.”

Joanna is starting to get frustrated. “Who the hell is Jacob Jacob? Please spill.”

“Damn,” Eden says, shaking her head. “Of all the assholes in all the gin joints in all the world, you had to develop a literary crush on The Butthole Next Door.” She throws a look at Joanna. “That’s what Ash used to call him.”

“For the love of Hera’s boobs,” Joanna says, throwing her arms in the air. “Would someone please enlighten me about this Jacob Jacob person before my curiosity gland explodes?!”

Eden picks up the wine bottle and distributes the remaining contents between our three glasses. “Jacob Stone used to live next door to us. He and Asha were besties when they were little.”

I nearly choke on my wine. “Slight exaggeration.”

“Really?” Eden says, fixing me with her sarcastic expression. “From the ages of three through eleven you were practically joined at the hip. People thought you were brother and sister, for God’s sake. He spent so much time at our house, everyone in the neighborhood thought mom had three kids. He was like family.”

I pull my legs underneath me so I can wrap the cover around them. “Yeah, well, that was a long time ago.”

“Oooh,” Joanna says, her eyes lighting up. “So, give me the juicy gossip. Was he the boyfriend-next-door who broke your heart?”

“No,” I say, a little too defensively. “Jake and I never had romantic feelings for each other. We were just friends. The boyfriend-next-door was his step-brother, Jeremy.”

Eden gets up and goes over to a nearby bookcase. “Oh, the tension in our neighborhood between the three of them. It was straight out of a John Hughes movie. Former best friends turn into bitter enemies when girl starts paying attention to boy’s despised brother.”

“Step-brother.”

“Whatever. Even before the smack-talk started, I had no idea how anyone could be friends with Jake. He was a little shit to everyone except Asha. But

then, when he became an angsty teen rebel, he stopped being nice to her, too. I mean, I know he had a crappy family life and all, but he really turned into a prime slab of A-grade dick.” She grabs a thick photo album from the bookcase and comes back over to the couch. “Make room, bitches.”

She squeezes her narrow butt between me and Joanna before flipping the album open. “Now, let’s see if we still have some photographic evidence of Mr. Teen Dark-and-Stormy.” She flicks through the pages until she comes to a picture of me and Jeremy. We’re standing in his front yard, our arms around each other, beaming like teenagers in love generally do.

“Here we are,” Eden says, as she carefully pulls the photo free. Then she unfolds the left side of it to reveal a young Jake, standing behind his brother’s shoulder, sneering and flipping the bird.

I remember the day this picture was taken. Jeremy had just told me he loved me for the first time. It was also the day I let him touch my boobs for the first time. I’m guessing those two events were linked.

In that moment, I thought no other girl on the planet could love a boy more than I loved Jeremy. Now, the thought makes me cringe. If that was as good as it gets as far as my love life goes, I might as well just give up now.

I flick my gaze over to Jake. Flipping the bird was his main hobby in those days. I don’t think I have a single photo of him over the age of twelve in which he’s smiling. Not that he smiled much before then, either, but it was around that time we drifted apart.

Looking at his face, I can recognize the scaffolding of the man I saw tonight, especially in the darkness of his hair and eyes, the strong eyebrows, and the sharp cut of his jaw. But in the picture, it’s clear he’s still a boy. I don’t think teen-Jake had even started shaving when this photo was taken.

I turn my attention to the other face in the picture. Ah, Jeremy—the boy who looked like he belonged in a Disney movie. The blond-haired, blue-eyed jock. A picture-perfect boyfriend.

As it turned out, also a total prick.

“Wow,” Joanna says as she takes the photo to get a closer look. “Look at you, Ash. Always gorgeous, of course. And this Jeremy guy ... wowzers. He was quite the babe.”

I sip my wine and look away from the photo. “Yep, but as my aunt Judy always said, it’s the good-looking ones you have to watch out for.”

“How long were you guys dating?” Joanna asks as she glances up from the pic.

“For most of high school.” It’s annoying how tight my throat still gets when discussing Jeremy. I always believed there was special innocence to first love, like it’s a pristine notebook in which you write an epic love story. Then you realize there are faint scribbles between the words. Hidden messages that you could probably read if you tried hard enough, but you don’t, because they’re not the story you want to tell.

That was my relationship with Jeremy. His fine print was unexpected and painful, and now, whenever I think about the bright, shiny book of my first love, I realize it’s the crap in the margins that tell the true story.

“Yeah,” Eden says, sensing my discomfort. “Jeremy was gorgeous, but he turned out to be a cheating asshole, so he can go suck on a bag of dicks, forever. Jake may have been a douche, but he never pretended to be anything else. Jeremy was a wolf in sheep’s clothing. If I ever see him again, I owe him a spinning fan-kick to the face for the way he treated Ash.”

Joanna looks crestfallen. “Well, crap. So, your former-best-friend-turned-Frankenteen shows up tonight and admits he’s Professor Feelgood, and ... what? He’s still an ass?”

“Very much so.”

“Does this mean you won’t be editing for him?”

“Unfortunately, he had it written into his contract just to annoy me.”

Eden makes a disgusted noise. “That little shit.”

“You could go to Serena,” Joanna says. “Tell her the real story.”

“And say what? That I don’t want to work with the guy they just spent a *fortune* securing *at my request*, because we have a rocky past? She’d laugh me out of her office. Oh, yeah, and the other nugget of news I discovered tonight was that Jake didn’t sign with us because our advance was the largest. No, apparently, another publisher offered to make him a millionaire.”

Both girls’ jaws drop.

“What?!” Eden expression is so gobsmacked, it’s comical.

Joanna’s eyebrows have disappeared into her hairline. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Not kidding. Clearly, I’m not the only one to see the potential sales in his millions of followers.”

“Holy crap,” Eden says, her eyes glazing over. “A *million* dollars.”

I nod. “That was my reaction, too.”

Joanna's expression morphs into awe. "So ... he chose passion over greed. You over the money. Are you sure this man hates you?"

"Very," Eden and I say in unison.

"So what was the big event that turned you two against each other? I mean, apart from dating his brother."

"Step-brother," I say, more out of habit than anything else. "There was no big event. Just years of escalating animosity. The constant drip of our ill-will slowly wore through any bonds of friendship we'd built." I sip my wine. "And this whole book situation is some form of sick vengeance. I'm trying to find a way out of it, but in the meantime, I have to figure out how to work with him without hiding all sharp implements."

"You'll be fine," Joanna says. "I have a feeling it will all work out in the end. Just keep reminding yourself that he's there for the right reasons. If he was an unredeemable dick, he would have taken your book idea to another publisher and trashed your name around town. The fact he didn't is a point in his favor. Remember that when the urge to hurt him arises." She gives each of us a crushing hug. "Goodnight, sweet Tate sisters. See you on the morrow."

We bid her goodnight, and after she leaves, Eden and I fall into silence and gaze dumbly at the TV.

"You wanna talk about him?" she asks, not looking at me.

"Nope."

"Okay."

Talking about Jake and all the ways he annoyed/hurt/humiliated me was never my strong suit.

After draining the rest of my wine, I retreat to take a quick shower. Any lingering cold is melted away by the hot water, but my simmering tension remains.

When I'm done, I wrap myself in my robe and head into Eden's room. She's writing on her laptop, but when she sees me, she stops. "Want snuggles?"

"Do you have time?"

"Sure. Max will be doing staff training until late." She pulls back the sheets. "Jump in."

I climb into bed and rest my head on her shoulder as she goes back to her work.

“You okay?” she asks, while tapping out some story ideas for the coming week. “You’ve been pretty subdued since you got home. Are you disappointed about the whole Jacob thing?”

“Of course. I mean, I thought I’d finish the night in triumph, having signed a brave new literary voice, and instead I ended up being transported back in time and having a shouting match with Jake in the middle of the sidewalk.”

“Ugh, really?”

“Yep. I don’t think we know any other way to be anymore. Old habits die hard.”

“Are you sure you can’t convince him to get a different editor?”

I push myself up on my elbow. “Edie, it’s Jake. Even if I had an extra million dollars to offer him, he’d still insist I be at his beck and call, just to spite me. You know how he is.”

“Yeah, he always did get some sort of sadistic pleasure from pressing your buttons.”

“The thing I’m most afraid of is that we’ll implode in an atomic cloud of toxicity, and not only take the book with us, but put Whiplash out of business in the process. That’s a lot of freaking pressure on a first-time editor who hates her author.”

Eden shuts her laptop and puts it on her nightstand before snuggling down and wrapping her arm around me.

“Ash, if anyone can do this, it’s you. Just try to remember what you liked about Jake when you were kids. Maybe you can even get back to being friends.”

I turn and look at her. “Seriously?”

She shrugs. “Okay, that’s about as likely as your Hemsworth body pillow being cast in the next Thor movie. But I’m trying to be optimistic.”

“I know.”

“If things get too bad between you guys, let me know. I’ll be only too pleased to come and insert a giant cactus up Mr. Stone’s ass.”

The mental image makes me laugh, and Eden gives me a squeeze before we both sigh and go quiet. For a few minutes, we just lay there, both lost in our own thoughts.

I’m starting to think Eden’s dozed off when she says, “Ash?”

“Uh huh.”

“Uh ... I know it’s a touchy subject for you, but ... your birthday is coming up, and—“

I immediately tense up. “Edie, please don’t go there.“

“... Nannabeth thinks you should have a party.”

“No.”

I should have known this was coming. Nannabeth has been dropping hints for weeks now, and no matter how many times I try to change the subject, she’s like a dog with a bone and refuses to let go.

“Ash, come on. Just a few people. Me, you, Max, Toby, and Joanna. We all want to celebrate with you. Nan has bought Moby a special party hat and everything.”

“Well, she shouldn’t have. You know the rule. No party. No fuss. Please.”

Dammit, Nan should know better by now. I don’t do birthdays. I haven’t since I was nine. Every year they try to change my position, and every year I shoot them down. I really wish they’d get the hint that birthday celebrations are a hard limit for me.

Sensing my familiar pig-headedness Eden relents with a soft sigh. When she speaks again, I can tell she’s choosing her words carefully.

“Ash, I know we all have our baggage, and God knows I have just as much as you. But one thing Max has taught me is that all that stuff from our past ... we have to deal with it at some point so we can let it go. It’s not healthy to hang onto things like that. We tell ourselves it doesn’t affect our lives and our relationships, but it does. Sometimes we need to purge the past so we can achieve our future. I’m slowly learning how to do that, and I think you should, too.”

I don’t answer her, because I don’t have anything to say. I agree that we all have our issues, but telling someone to get over it is pointless. Some events are written in permanent ink on our psyche, and no amount of mental scrubbing will erase them.

I give her a final hug and climb out of bed. “I’d better go. Don’t want Max to come in and find me Goldilocking in his spot. The man has an impressive glare when the mood takes him.”

“Please don ’t be mad.”

I turn back to her. “I’m not. Honestly. I’m just tired. And for that reason, when Max gets here, please remember that these walls are thin, and I can’t un-hear certain sounds, even through my ear plugs.”

I can see the shadow of concern still coloring her expression, but she gives me a smile anyway. "I'll try my best. Lord knows that man makes it difficult to keep quiet. See you in the morning."

"Yep. See you then."

I pad back into my bedroom and turn out the light before taking off my robe and climbing into bed.

I'm plugging the charger into my phone when a message flashes on the screen.

*<How was your day? Is life as a newly promoted editor everything you thought it would be?>*

I shake my head and type a reply. *<Not exactly. My new author will be a challenge, but I'll figure out how to deal with him.>*

*<Of course you will. There's nothing you can't do. Beautiful, talented, endlessly resourceful. He doesn't stand a chance. I'm just jealous he gets to be with you every day. Lucky bastard. I miss you.>*

I smile as warmth fills me. After such a shitty, stressful day, that's exactly what I needed to hear. He really is the sweetest man I've ever met.

*Then why can't you get past your crap and let him make sweet love to you?*

I shake off my negativity. *<I miss you, too. So very much. I'm totally wiped tonight, but we'll talk tomorrow, okay?>*

After sending the message, I shut off my phone and let out a sigh.

My dad used to have a saying: "There are only so many machetes someone can juggle before they start losing fingers." I later found out he was talking about attempting to deal with multiple women without mom finding out, but now I think that saying is relevant to life in general. I wonder how much longer I can keep my boyfriend in the dark about my sexual dysfunction before someone ends up getting hurt.

I flip onto my side and stare at the wall. After the clusterfuck of today's insane events, all I want to do is sleep, but my brain is spinning with a montage of memories from my childhood. Three-year-old Jake, staring at me from his yard the day he moved into the house next door; five-year-old Jake who makes me giggle by making lightsaber noises while he spins and parries with a broken broomstick; twelve-year-old Jake who seems to get angrier every day and starts coming over less and less; fourteen-year-old Jake who doesn't talk to me anymore, and sneers the first time he makes me cry.

It's hard to reconcile the twenty-four-year-old man he's grown into with

any of those memories, and it's even harder to accept that any version of Jake is the hot-as-hell Professor Feelgood, but that's the reality I have to live with, whether I like it or not.

The only thing that consoles me as I finally drift off to sleep is that tomorrow can't possibly be any worse than today.

Predictably, I dream of falling machetes.



## TEN

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### It Gets Worse

“SHIT.”

I wipe away a smear of eyeliner as I try to complete my makeup in record time. “Shit, shit, shit.” Of course, on the most important day of my entire career, I slept through my alarm for the first time *ever*. Just another addition to my ever-growing file of *Random Things That Suck*. I’m now running super late for work, and as usual when I’m in a mad rush, nothing is going my way.

“Here,” Eden says as she comes into the bathroom and shoves some toast into my mouth. “And Max has made you coffee. It’s on the bench.”

“Shanks,” I say, speaking around a mouthful of toast. I quickly stroke on a light layer of mascara and brush on some powder before running barefoot to my room to grab my shoes and purse.

“Oh, crap. Eden, I left my coat at the bar last night. Can I borrow one of yours?”

She flashes past my doorway and returns in a few seconds with her red trench. “Here. Anything else?”

“Nope. I’m outta here.”

She follows behind me as I dash into the kitchen to grab my coffee. I take a quick mouthful and set the cup down. “No time to finish. Thanks, though.”

Max is there bent over Eden’s laptop. “Ash?”

“Yeah?”

“Uh, before you go, you’d better look at this.” He turns the screen so I can see it. “Forewarned is forearmed and all that.”

A popular publishing blog is splashed with the headline, *Whiplash Steals Social Media Star from Major Publisher*. In addition to the lovely headline, the article takes a swipe at me personally by saying that Whiplash is gambling their six-figure investment by “entrusting the high-risk project to a novice editor with no experience.”

Not untrue, but still ... it makes me feel like crap.

“Goddamn Devin,” I mutter, before pointing aggressively at the screen. “And for the last time, we didn’t steal anybody. *I discovered him!*”

Either Devin doesn't understand the precarious situation Whiplash is in right now, or he's determined to get a few hits in against the woman who took his promotion. Either way, he's a petty little man.

Max gives me a sympathetic look. "Sorry."

I sigh. "Not your fault. All good. Thanks, Max."

Eden gives me a quick hug. "Have a good day." It sounds more like a question than a statement.

"Unlikely, but I appreciate the sentiment."

I head out of the apartment and hit the button to call our creaky elevator. When I step inside and the doors close, I drop my shoes onto the floor and push my feet into them. Of all the mornings to be late. It's going to be weird enough to introduce Jake around to my colleagues like he's a stranger, but I'd hoped to have some quality time with Serena, so I could pick her brain about how to approach the narrative for Jake's book.

When I thought he was someone else, I had no trouble imagining myself steering this ship in the right direction. But now ...

I'm hoping against hope that a good night's rest might have brought him to his senses about us working together. I realize it's not likely, but a girl can dream.

I fish around in my purse to find my lipstick as the ancient elevator makes its creaky descent to ground level. I should have taken the stairs. I've just finished swiping on some bright crimson, when my phone rings.

"Shit." I groan when I see Serena's name flashing on the screen. "Oh, goddamn double shit."

When the elevator opens, I answer the call as I struggle to shove my arms into Eden's coat.

"Serena, hey. I'm so sorry I'm not there. I had an alarm mishap this morning, but I'm on my way."

I push through the doors leading to the street and pull up short. It's raining. Hard.

"Are you kidding me?"

"Asha, what's going on?"

I take a breath and hold my vintage Fendi handbag over my head before making a mad dash to the subway station. "Well, I didn't realize it was raining, so I don't have an umbrella."

“Not with the weather. The whole team is in the conference room, waiting for you to brief them about the professor.”

“Oh. Right. Yes, well —”

“Did you see *The Pub Hub* this morning?”

“Yes, I did, and I’m mad as hell about it—”

“People are already judging us for entrusting this project to you. Don’t prove them right by dropping the ball. You should have been here half an hour ago.”

“I know. I’m so sorry, I just —”

I’m hurrying down the subway stairs when I slip on the wet tiles. As I let out a shriek, my phone and bag go flying, and I tumble heavily down the remaining steps. I grunt when I hit my knee and elbow as I fall, until I finally land in an inglorious heap at the bottom.

“Goddamn freaking shit!” People crowd around me, asking if I’m okay as they help me up. I quickly grab my purse, but when I look around for my phone, it’s nowhere to be seen.

“Did any of you pick up my phone?”

Having done their bare minimum duty to help a stranger in need, the members of my rescue party mumble various versions of ‘no’ before scurrying off to catch their own trains. As they leave, I scan the area again, and when I almost fall again, I realize the heel has snapped off my shoe. I nab it from the bottom of the stairs before doing one final search for my phone.

“Honey?” There’s a female cleaner standing nearby holding a mop. Ironically, she’s right next to a ‘Slippery when wet’ warning sign.

*Too little, too late, sign.*

“Are you looking for a phone in a bright yellow case?” she asks.

“Yes!” I cry, limping over to her. “Did you find it?”

“No, but I saw a young punk with a hoodie and backpack running away with it right after you fell. I tried to grab him, but he was too quick.”

“Oh, my God, seriously?”

She points to a set of stairs a short distance away. “He went down there. You want me to call security?”

“Ah, no, no time. Thank you.”

I stride off as quickly as I can with one crippled shoe.

“Honey!” the cleaner calls after me. “Don’t bother. He’s long gone by now.”

I ignore her and head down the stairs, but keeping true to karma’s determination to screw me over, I see the train speeding away into the dirty tunnel, just as I get to the bottom of the stairs.

“Ballsucking nippleslut! Are you kidding me with this?”

I slump in defeat. My life was in that phone. Now I’m late, wet, one-heeled, no-phoned, and bruised in several places. And to top it all off, my boss probably thinks I just hung up on her while she was chewing me out for being tardy. Well, at least this day can’t get worse, right?

*Did you forget you’ll be spending most of the day with the King of the Assholes?* a tiny voice whispers in my mind.

“Shut up,” I hiss under my breath. “You shut your filthy mouth.”

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“Serena,” I mutter to myself as I approach the Whiplash building, “I’m sorry about being late, but you see, Professor Feelgood is actually my old nemesis from high school, and last night somewhere between revealing his real identity and calling me a self-righteous bitch, Jacob Stone put a whammy on me, so now, everything in my life is turning to crap.”

I know I can’t logically blame my current run of bad luck on Jake, but since he came back into my life, it seems as if every good thing is counterbalanced by something shitty, so I’m pointing a finger in his direction. He’s like my personal, one-man wrecking ball.

As if to underline my theory, I’m waiting at the crosswalk opposite the Whiplash building when a bike messenger flies past, hits a nearby pothole, and splashes filthy street water all over me. I squeal in surprise and say several curse words regarding maternal fornication as the grossness drips down my face.

By some minor miracle, the teenage girl standing *right beside me* is completely spared. Of course, she has an umbrella. It’s bright yellow and features a bunch of smiley emoticons. I despise it intensely.

When I take off my glasses and shake the murky water off, she looks at me with amusement trying to pass itself off as sympathy. “Wow. Bummer, dude.”

I give her a glare. “Ya think?”

She turns away a second too late to hide her smile, but the happy faces on her umbrella taunt me with their nylon grins.

I grumble under my breath and hobble across the road. After I throw my glasses into my bag, I don't even bother trying to shield my head anymore, because seriously, what's the freaking point? Rain streams down my hair and over my face as I limp the last few yards to the Whiplash lobby. When I finally step into the warm dryness of the elevator, I sigh as I drip onto the patterned carpet.

Right before the doors close, Devin Shield steps inside.

I look up at the ceiling and try to stop myself from screaming in frustration. *Dear God, why are you torturing me like this? Whyeeeeee?*

Devin does a double take when he sees me.

"Holy hell, Tate, are you okay? Did you get mugged or something?"

I push my shoulders back and try not to look as defeated as I feel. "I had a minor altercation with a stairwell. I'm fine."

"Really? You're bleeding."

"What?"

He touches my forehead then shows me his finger. "See?"

"Huh," I say, staring in confusion at the congealed red glob. "Unusual I'm bleeding from the head considering you keep stabbing me in the back."

He ignores that and reaches into his jacket to pull out a clean handkerchief. Predictably, it's embroidered with his initials. "Here."

I'm about to take it when he pulls it away. "Actually, you know what? As much as I'd like to be a gentleman right now, because honestly, you look like you just crawled out of a dumpster, this is Egyptian cotton, and blood stains would ruin it." He puts it back in his pocket. "Sorry."

I give him a death-glare. "Seriously?"

He shrugs. "These things are a hundred bucks each, babe. Can't just give them away."

"Sure. Unlike company secrets, right?"

He trots out an unconvincing surprised expression. "Uh ... What was that?"

Thank God the doors open, and I stalk away from him before my anger can manifest into violence.

I hobble over to the coat rack and deposit my dripping trench with the collection already there. Because my hair is sopping wet, my entire outfit is soaked. Guess I picked the wrong day to wear a black bra under a white

blouse. Not that it was a conscious choice. Being late meant grabbing the nearest clean clothes.

When I turn to go to my desk, I find Joanna standing a short distance away, gaping at me.

“Oh, my God. Were you mugged?”

I limp past her to my desk. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You’re drenched!”

“I’m aware.” I collect my notebook and pen in preparation for attending the meeting I should have been chairing forty minutes ago. Being so late has put me under the gun.

“Are the briefing kits I prepared yesterday already in there?” I ask Joanna.

She grabs a handful of tissues and attempts to soak up some of the water dripping off my face. “Yep. As well as sales projections and a basket of muffins from that little bakery in SoHo. Everything’s ready to go.”

“Great. Also, my phone was stolen.”

“I’ll try to track it down.”

“Thanks. Let’s do this.”

“Uh ... Ash? Do you maybe want to clean yourself up first?”

“No time. I only have fifteen minutes to brief everyone before Jake arrives.” I head toward the conference room, and Jo falls into step beside me. “I’m not sure I can encapsulate the awesomeness of the professor and the accompanying terribleness of his real-life persona in that time, but I’m happy to give it a try.”

She keeps dabbing me as we walk. “So, you’re going to tell people your history? Is that a good idea?”

I think for a second. “Actually, no. If I admit we know each other, either I look like an idiot for signing him before I figured out who he really was, or it will seem like I colluded with him to get the biggest advance possible. Either way, it looks bad. Let’s just keep it between us.”

“Is Jake onboard with this plan?”

“Uh, good point. Can you text him? Tell him I asked to keep our history under wraps for now.”

“Got it.” She taps out the text and hits send. “Done.”

“Excellent,” I say as my stomach becomes weird. “Crisis averted.”

“Sure. Good job.” Jo’s trying to be supportive, but I’m not buying it. Even she knows that having Jake here is going to be like swimming with a shark. There’s a good chance that at some point, he’s going to turn on me.

“Oh, I do have some bad news,” Joanna says.

“Not surprising. That seems to be the theme for the day.”

“I called the bar where you left your coat last night, and they said they couldn’t find it. Seems like someone might have taken it home.”

“Why wouldn’t they? That coat was freaking fabulous.” I get a twinge of sadness, but I have no time to dwell on it now. There’s more at stake today than mourning a coat.

When we reach the glass doors, I push them open and greet the small assembled group. A few of them do a double take, but I don’t have time to stop and explain. “Good morning, everyone. Sorry I’m late. Please take a moment to flick through the info packs in front of you, and then we’ll get started.”

As I sit next to Serena at the head of table, I glance over to find her mouth agape.

“Good God! What happened? I knew something was wrong when I heard you scream and then the line went dead. I’ve been calling your phone every few minutes, but got no answer. Were you mugged? Are you alright?”

*Man, why does everyone think I was mugged. How bad do I look?*

“I’m fine, Serena. I need a new phone, but otherwise—”

“They mugged you for your phone?! Shameless.”

“No, I just—” I take a breath. “I’m fine, really.” I don’t sound convincing, and with good reason. Despite trying to act normal and get on with the task at hand, there’s a deep ache that starts in my elbow and goes down to my knee where I hit them on the stairs. Not to mention the dull pounding that’s taken up residence behind my left eyeball. People are throwing questions at me about what happened, but I cut them off.

“Honestly, don’t worry about me, guys. Please, let’s just get through this meeting before the professor gets here.”

Our team today consists of our in-house promotional guru, Sidney, his second-in-command, Shawna, and our social media director, Dominique. There are also three girls who are interning with us for a few months, and I notice how they exchange glances when they open the dossier and see pictures of a semi-naked professor. It’s funny how favorable reactions to him

used to make me feel great about this project, but now that I know it's Jake, I just want to yell, "Stop! Don't find him attractive! He's a butthead!"

"So," I say, while opening my own dossier. "A few of you are already familiar with our latest author, but for those who aren't, let me introduce Professor Feelgood."

"Terrible-looking man," Sidney says, clucking his tongue. "How does someone cope with a hideous body like that?"

"And untalented," Shawna adds. "I've been trawling his Instagram feed for the past twenty-four hours, and ... well ..." A bright blush starts on her neck. "He really needs to learn how to string a sentence together."

Serena smiles. "I'm glad to see no one here is immune to the professor's charms."

I consider mentioning that at least one person here finds him gross, but what would be the point?

Serena gestures to me. "Asha has done a fantastic job finding us a rare and special gem in the professor, and we need to make sure we capitalize on this opportunity to bring home a monster hit for Whiplash."

"Have you guys met him yet?" one of the interns asks. "Is he as amazing in real life as he is online?"

"No," I say, a little too quickly. "Uh ... what I mean is, we haven't met. That's what today's for. To introduce him to everyone, answer questions, and generally welcome him to the Whiplash family."

"Well, one thing the bidding war did was give the professor some invaluable publicity," Sidney says. "I was chatting with some media friends last night, and they're all clamoring to find out more about the man who sent the publishing world into a tailspin. There's already quite a bit of jostling to get early interviews and photo ops."

Serena nods, impressed. "That's fantastic news. Getting buzz going early is going to drive the popularity of this book. The more pre-sales we can get, the better." She turns to me. "Asha, is there anything else you can tell us about the professor?"

So very much, but little that would be relevant to this conversation. "Well, I know he's a twenty-four-year-old Brooklyn native. He went to a local high school, and his father was a police officer at a Brooklyn precinct."

I'm trying to make it sound like these are things I haven't known most of my life, but it's tough to fake non-familiarity with Jake. I know every major milestone of his life, including his first kiss and when he lost his virginity. Not



things I necessarily want to know, but nevertheless, know them, I do.

“Okay. Local boy. That’s a good angle,” Sid says. “Did you warn him about me grilling him today?”

Damn. I’d forgotten that one of Sid’s favorite tricks is to run comprehensive interviews with all our authors, so he can unearth interesting personal stories he can sell to media outlets to gain exposure. He has a way of getting people to tell him incredibly personal anecdotes, but I doubt Jake will succumb to his charms. When it comes to divulging details about his personal life, Jake is about as forthcoming as a steel trap locked in a cast-iron filing cabinet that’s stored in the basement of a condemned building.

Still, if Jake does decide to cooperate, I hope he has sense enough to keep me out of it.

“No warning,” I say, trying to seem unrattled. “I guess we’ll just see how things go.”

“Excellent,” Sid says in his best Bond villain voice. “I like to take my prey by surprise before cracking them open like a walnut. Hopefully Mr. Stone will have some fascinating stories about his life and upbringing.”

Serena starts a conversation with Sid about which photographer to use for Jake’s upcoming photoshoot, but their voices fade into the background as I rub my head. It’s starting to ache, and I need to down some painkillers before I have to deal with him. He makes my head feel like it’s exploding with rage on a good day, so I’d hate to see what happens when my cranium already feels like it’s splitting open like an egg.

“Okay,” I say. “If there are no other questions I’ll leave you to read over the information in your packs for a few minutes ...”

“Asha, you’ve spoken to this guy on the phone, right?” the short, dark-headed intern asks.

“Uh ... well, yes.”

She leans forward. “Does he have a sexy voice? It seems like he would.”

“Well ...” Aaaaand here’s the quandary in which I’m going to find myself throughout this entire process. How can I make objective comments about a man I subjectively hate? Whichever way I go, I’ll be denying some version of the truth.

“His voice is ... that of a man.” Awesomely dodged.

“But a sexy man?” the brat presses.

“Uh ... Some would find him attractive, I guess. Not me, but some.”

“Seriously,” the girl says, holding up a picture of the professor’s ripped physique. “You’re telling me you don’t find this sexy?”

A few days ago, I would have licked that photo and relished the taste. Today, it makes me cringe away like Gwyneth Paltrow from junk food.

“The thing is,” I say, rubbing my head again. “Sexiness is in the eye of the beholder, right? I mean, what I find sexy, you may not, and vice versa. For me, a man has to have an amazing personality to be sexy. He can have the best body in the world, and write prose that would make the angels weep, but if he’s an ass, then for me, that cancels everything else out.”

Even as I say it, something inside me whispers, *Liar*.

When I stop talking, I notice no one is looking at me. They’re all focused on a point over my left shoulder.

I freeze. “He’s here, isn’t he?”

Everyone nods, and I turn to see, Mr. Whip walking toward the conference room with Jake in tow.

*Great*. He’s early, and there’s no way I can avoid him seeing me in this state without some David Copperfield-level trickery. Damn me for never having the foresight to invest in a smoke grenade.

As Mr. Whip opens the door and beckons him inside, Jake’s eyes lock with mine. Then, confusion spreads over his face as he takes in the rest of me.

Mr. Whip’s reaction is more sudden. The second he registers my appearance, his face drops. “Good Lord, Asha. What happened to you?”

“She was mugged,” Serena says quietly. “They stole her phone. Don’t make a big deal out of it.”

He seems taken aback. “Oh, dear. Are you all right?”

“You were mugged?” Jake says, doing a decent job of faking concern. Amazing what he can pull out when he has an audience.

“Not exactly,” I say. “However, someone did steal my phone. Other than that, I’m fine, Mr. Whip. Thanks for asking.”

Jake frowns at me. “You don’t look fine.”

“You really don’t,” Mr. Whip agrees.

*“Don’t worry about me,” I say, ignoring the pounding behind my left eyeball. “I’m sure everyone’s looking forward to meeting our special guest. Perhaps we should begin with introductions.”*

“Of course.” Mr. Whip glances around the table, as if he’d forgotten about the small audience watching our exchange. “Everyone, please give a warm welcome to our Professor Feelgood, Jacob Stone.”

Everyone applauds and waves, and I don’t miss the appraising looks Jake’s receiving from the group, Sidney included. Shawna in particular looks like she’s having a hot flash, and I’m not talking about in her face. I almost feel sorry for her. There’s nothing more disappointing than lusting over a man, only to find out he has the personality of an ill-tempered Wolverine.

As if to prove my point, Jake reacts to the wave of warmth thrown at him with an awkward facial expression that I’m guessing wants to become a smile when it grows up. It’s accompanied by a muttered, “Hi.”

*Wow. Huge effort there.*

Not deterred by his aloofness, Serena comes over to shake his hand. “A pleasure, Mr. Stone.”

Jake gives her a nod. “Likewise. Call me Jake.”

Mr. Whip gestures to me. “And of course as you’ve no doubt guessed, this is the young lady who’s responsible for bringing your talent to our attention, Asha Tate. It must be nice for you two to finally meet in person.”

“Yes.” I plaster on a smile and grudgingly hold out my hand. “Welcome, Mr. Stone.”

Man, it feels so wrong to show him respect. My teenage self is in a corner somewhere, rocking and whispering, “Ew,” over and over again.

“Oh, come now, Miss Tate. Why so formal?” Jake wraps his fingers around mine then turns to Mr. Whip. “Didn’t you hear? Asha and I are old friends.”

“You are?” Mr. Whip raises his eyebrows.

Serena joins him in giving me a quizzical look. “Asha, I thought you two didn’t know each other.”

“Uh ...” What the hell is Jake doing? Maybe he didn’t get Jo’s text. Or maybe he did and just can’t resist the temptation to mess with me.

*Warning: Shark attack imminent.*

Jake lets me flounder for about three seconds before cracking out his wannabe-smile again.

“All I meant is that Miss Tate and I have spoken on the phone so much, I feel like we’ve known each other since we were kids.”

He’s still shaking my hand, and I hate how wet and clammy mine feels

wrapped in his. I pull it back and let out a halfhearted laugh as Mr. Whip and Serena smile.

“Haha, it sure does.” I flash a subtle look to Jake as I wipe my hand on my skirt. “Anyway, please excuse me for a few minutes. While you do introductions, I’m going to clean myself up.”

“Of course,” Mr. Whip says, giving my shoulder a sympathy pat. “We’ll keep Mr. Stone entertained until you get back.”

“Great.”

Without looking at Jake, I brush past him to the door then head out.

“Ow, ow, ow.” With every step I take, my knee and hip twinge with pain. When I reach my desk, I rifle through the contents of my purse, desperate to find some painkillers. Glancing back to the conference room, I see everyone is on their feet, milling around Jake in animated excitement. He towers over them, and true to his normal demeanor in social situations, he looks as if he’d like to be anywhere else. He once told me his idea of purgatory would be making small talk with a bunch of strangers for eternity.

*In that case, welcome to hell, pal.*

After grabbing some Advil and my emergency makeup kit from my purse, I hobble to the ladies’ room. When I get inside and assess my appearance in the mirror, I see why everyone assumed I’d been attacked.

“Oh, mothertrucker.” Not only is my face filthy, my mascara has run everywhere. and my lipstick has morphed into a messy crimson smear that covers half my face. Add to that the small patch of drying blood near my hairline, and my crime-victim image is complete.

I cringe at myself. “You are so busted up, girl.”

As I wring excess water from my hair, I imagine what sort of smartass remarks Jake will have for me when we’re alone. Or maybe he’ll just give me one of those incredulous stares that needs no words at all to make me feel like a pathetic loser. He specializes in those.

After I squeeze as much water from my hair as possible, I grab my comb and drag it through the damp mess. In the process, I must hit whichever spot was bleeding earlier, because I get a sharp pain, followed by the unmistakable feeling of a thick, slow drip working its way down my scalp.

“Oh, come on. Gross.”

I halfheartedly dab at the sore spot as I pop out two Advil one-handed and swallow them down with a handful of water from the tap.

After that, I spend a good thirty seconds scrubbing my face with my hands to remove both the grime and the bad mood that came with it. Of all the ways I imagined my first day as an editor going, this wasn't one of them. I'd call it a day from hell, but even Satan would think this was several overcooked crap burgers too many.

After turning off the faucet, I give my face one last swipe, push my hair away from my face, and straighten up. I almost scream when I see a huge figure looming behind me in the mirror.

"Jake! Shit! What the hell?" How did he get in here so quietly? Is being a Ninja-Douche a thing?

He pulls a bunch of paper towels from the dispenser and hands them to me. "Were you really mugged?"

"I already told you I wasn't."

"Then what happened to you?"

I put my weight on the leg that isn't throbbing and pat my face dry. "Rough crowd at the coffee cart. Now, please get out."

He moves forward. "You're hurt."

"I'm fine."

He frowns as he gazes at a spot near my hairline. "You're clearly not fine, genius. You're bleeding." He grabs a paper towel and presses it to my head.

"Jacob, what are you—?"

"Could you shut up for five seconds and hold still?" He steps forward and slides one hand around the back of my neck as he presses the wadded paper harder against my head. The action is so unexpected, and his proximity so alien, I instinctively try to move away, but the bathroom counter prevents my retreat.

"Don't move," he orders, voice low. "We need pressure on the wound, not you being an idiot."

"Your face is an idiot," I mumble. *Please, painkillers, kick in. The sooner the better.*

"Oh, reverting to the old 'your face' insults? Are we nine again?"

"Some insults never go out of style. 'Your face' works in any situation."

"You're ridiculous."

"Your face is ridiculous. See?"

He pulls the paper away from my head and gently parts my hair, looking for the damage.

“So, if you weren’t mugged, how did this happen? Don’t tell me you just went ass-over-head of your own volition.”

I try to keep my features impassive. “No comment.”

He chuckles. “Damn, woman, you’re clumsy. I remember one time, you tripped over your own feet in the school cafeteria.”

“Yes, and I remember you laughing so loudly, everyone knew about it and joined in mocking me.”

He glances down at me with a smirk. “If you thought that was my fault and wasn’t due to the spectacular leaping spread-eagle you attempted, then you’re not remembering it right.” He finishes his examination of my scalp and presses a fresh paper towel over the wound. “The good news is, you don’t need stitches. The bad news is, the injury isn’t severe enough to cause a major personality change. The worst you’ll get is a headache.”

He’s not wrong about that. The dull pounding from earlier is becoming sharper with each passing minute, despite the painkillers.

I send positive thoughts to the Advil in my stomach, willing them to dissolve faster. “You shouldn’t even be in here. It’s the ladies’ room.”

“Well then, technically you shouldn’t be in here, either.”

I ignore the jab. “You know you have a whole room of people waiting for you, right?”

“I told them I needed to go to the bathroom, which is true. It just so happens I got sidetracked by you looking sad and pathetic.”

He grabs some more paper towels and places them against the existing wad. “And I know you’re all about pleasing me these days, because I’m your star author and all, but I could have done without the roadkill impersonation.”

When I frown up at him, he turns me and gestures to my reflection.

“Dead emo raccoon,” he says. “Uncanny likeness.”

Crap. By scrubbing at my face, all I’d done was smear my long-wear mascara and eyeliner *everywhere*. I look like something out of a Japanese horror movie.

I drop my head in defeat before grabbing some towels and wiping around my eyes until they’re sore and puffy.

“Much like you,” I say, weariness coloring my tone, “this day can officially

go screw itself.”

Jake chuckles, and I’m suddenly aware his chest is mere inches away from my face. He’s so big these days, he makes the space around me feel small, and his thick t-shirt is doing nothing to camouflage all his stupid muscles.

*You don’t find him sexy, I remind myself. Notsexy, notsexy, notsexy.*

Despite my new mantra, parts of me react to his closeness favorably. And when I say favorably, I mean with vicious and unwanted arousal.

I throw the paper towel I’m gripping into the trashcan and close my eyes. If only there were a Snapchat filter that could make this grown-up, crazy-hot version of Jake seem gross and disgusting.

*God, technology, get with the program, please. You’re no help.*

Even with my eyes closed, his nearness is dizzying. The scent that infused his jacket last night is wafting over me, all citrusy and clean. I’m getting more uncomfortable with this whole situation by the second.

“Hey.” He shakes me a little. “Look at me.” He cups my cheek and tilts my head up.

“What?” I open my eyes, but focus on the dark scruff on his jaw.

“Asha.” He bends down so he can look into my eyes, and the second our gazes lock, a whole mess of memories tangle together, trying to struggle to the surface. I get flashes of him as a boy, dabbing at my bloody knees after I fell playing basketball. Him pounding on Kelvin Stott for shoving me into a patch of mud at school. Him holding my hand every time we crossed the street to make sure I was safe.

*Protector Jake.* It’s been a long time since he’s emerged. Part of me has really missed him. I’d forgotten how much I used to crave his comfort. So much so, I have to close my eyes again to block him out.

“Hey, don’t fall asleep. You might have a concussion.”

“I’m not sleeping. I’m just ...”

After everything that’s happened this morning, the thing I’m most distressed about is how Jake taking care of me and pressing his warm, lemon-scented hand to my head is making my throat tight and my eyes prickle. The world is officially backward today.

“Jake ... stop.”

“Why?”

“Because ...” I take a breath and push him away. “I can take care of

myself.”

He stares at me for a second, his jaw tense. I stare back, trying to appear stronger than I feel.

Honestly, being around him is exhausting. And it’s not because of our constant enmity or verbal sparring matches, even though those are draining. It’s because we’re being crushed beneath the weight of all the things we’re not saying. All the topics of conversation that lead down paths that have been torn up and paved over.

Jake stares for a few more seconds, then passes me a fresh paper towel. “If you say so.”

I press the towel to my head, and when I pull it away, there’s barely any blood at all. Thank God.

“See?” I say, showing him. “My super-human healing has kicked in. You can go back to the meeting.” *And vacate this tiny, enclosed space where I can’t get away from you or the confronting things you make me feel.*

I turn back to the mirror to finish my facial fix-it job, unsurprised when he doesn’t leave.

“One of the reasons I came to find you,” he says, “was to talk about the text Joanna sent. You want to pretend we don’t know each other?”

I open my small makeup bag and apply concealer to my puffy face. “No, but I think it would be for the best. Our history isn’t relevant. And honestly, with me campaigning so hard for you, and then you having it written into your contract that I have to be your editor ... it would look bad.”

“Okay. I see that.”

I look at him in the mirror. “This whole process has already been full of drama. I don’t want any more.” His mouth twitches at that, so I clarify, “If Serena and Mr. Whip found out you catfished me, it would throw this whole deal into doubt.”

He takes a step forward. “Catfishing means I misrepresented myself. I didn’t.”

“Not exactly true. The professor *seemed* to be someone unique and amazing when in fact he was just ... well ... *you*.”

In the mirror, I see him lean back against the stall and cross his arms over his chest. “Ever consider that I’ve always been unique and amazing, and you’ve just failed to realize it?”

“No. But then again, I never believed in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny



due to a lack of evidence, so ...”

I’m used to Jake looking at me with disdain and scorn, but right now, his expression is unfamiliar. If I had to take a guess, I’d peg it as a mixture between smug and patient.

“In that case ...” He reaches down to grab something from the floor then places a crumpled paper bag onto the counter next to me. “Merry Christmas from the Grinch.”

I frown at the package. “What’s this?”

“Open it.”

With a distrustful look, I pick up the bag and carefully pull it open. Knowing Jake, it’s probably a dead rat. Or maybe a rattlesnake.

When I see what’s inside, the pounding in my head doubles. I look over at Jake, perplexed and more than a little surprised. “How did you ...?” I reach into the bag and pull out my beloved Burberry coat. I thought I’d never see it again. “Jake ... I—”

He shifts his weight, seeming uncomfortable with my impending gratitude. That’s understandable. We’re more used to living in a state of constant adversarial angst than exchanging normal human pleasantries.

“Don’t go all soppy on me, princess. I ended up going back to that bar last night to meet someone, so I picked it up. There’s nothing more to it. If you froze to death in the coming weeks because you didn’t have a coat, I wouldn’t have an editor, and that would be inconvenient. So, it was more for me than for you.”

He picks up the collection of soggy and bloody paper towels from the counter and scrunches them into a giant wad. “And you might want to use that coat to cover up before going back into the meeting. Your shirt is totally transparent.” He tosses the towels into the trash.

He turns to leave, but I touch his arm.

“Jake, wait.” He looks at my hand, then turns back to me. “Part of the meeting today will be an in-depth interview about your life. It’s standard practice for our publicity manager.”

He shifts his weight, and it’s clear how uncomfortable he is already. “Is it mandatory?”

“Nothing’s mandatory. Just thought you should know.” He returned my coat. The least I can do is warn him about Sid.

He gives a tight nod, then without looking at me again, pulls open the door

and stalks out.

As soon as the door closes behind him, my tension level drops fifty points and I slump back against the bench. Why the hell does everything with him have to be so difficult? I know there was a time when we were as easy as breathing, but it was a hundred years ago, and I can't remember how it felt.

I hold up my coat, still gobsmacked he got it back for me. Then, I touch the warm patch on the back of my neck where his hand was. Caring-Jake always melted my heart, but then Cruel-Jake came along and replaced him, and honestly, now I only remember how to deal with the second guy. If the first guy starts showing up again, things around here are going to get messy, fast.

Pushing errant memories back where they belong, I check my reflection. I thought my shirt might have gotten more opaque as it dried, but nope. My bra is definitely the star of this ensemble.

I pull on the coat and belt it over my damp clothes. Then I push my hair back, wipe one last stray smear of eyeliner from my cheek, and pretend I'm feeling a whole lot better than I am, both mentally and physically.

"Okay," I say to my slightly less-disheveled reflection. "Time to kick ass and chew gum, and I'm all out of gum."

## ELEVEN

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### Oh, No He Didn't

BY THE TIME I GET back into the conference room, Sidney is in full flight detailing his kazillion point plan for getting the word out about the professor. His face lights up as he talks, and Jake seems impressed. He can probably tell that like a lot of people here, Sidney truly does enjoy his job.

I take my seat as unobtrusively as possible, ensuring I don't interrupt Sid's flow.

"We plan on announcing the book deal later today, and we'll reinforce that Asha was in fact the person who discovered you to put to rest all the rumors to the contrary." He smiles at me then turns to Jake. "As soon as the official release hits the news outlets, you can tell all your fans."

Jake gestures to his phone. "Seems like the coverage about the bidding war tipped them off. My phone has been blowing up with messages all day."

"Well, great," Sid says. "The more buzz, the better." He passes around copies of the draft press release. "This is what we'll send out in a few hours. And Jake, we're going to need to organize a photo shoot with you ASAP, to get publicity shots. I'll liaise with Asha to make sure we slot it into the schedule."

After everyone has a copy of the release, Sid shifts in his seat so he's fully facing Jake, and I can tell we've reached the deeply-personal-questions portion of today's meeting. "So, Jacob ... in the spirit of getting to know you better, tell us about yourself."

Jake blinks a few times, and I can feel the tension from across the table. "Not much to tell."

Wow, four words. This is going to be even worse than I thought.

"What about your family?" Sid prompts, with the calm, encouraging demeanor of a seasoned therapist. "Tell us about your parents."

Jake shifts in his seat. I've never seen an author flat out refuse to answer personal questions before, but there's a strong possibility it could happen today.

As if sensing Jake's unease, Sid's tone becomes even more soothing, and he talks to him like he's a wild animal preparing to bolt. "It's okay. You don't

need to share anything you don't want to. But as soon as your real identity is out in the world, your private information is going to be fair game to press and fans. We've found it's best that we control the flow of information right from the start."

There's another few seconds of awkward silence on Jake's part, and then he says, "I grew up in Brooklyn."

"And your dad raised you, yes?"

He shoots me an accusing look, no doubt guessing I've already spilled some of his personal details.

"Yes. He was a police officer, but after he got hurt on the job, he retired on disability a few years ago."

"Are you and he close?"

He doesn't even hesitate before saying, "No." That says everything about how things are with his dad.

They never had what you could call a congenial relationship. A big reason Jake spent so much time at our place when he was a kid was so he could avoid his dad after he'd been drinking, which was often. I know I had issues with my dad being absent from my life, but that was preferable to Jake's situation. His was constantly on his back about something or other. He never talked, he only yelled. On more than one occasion when Mr. Stone was drunk, Jake would climb through my bedroom window with bruises, a busted lip, or a black eye. My first experience with makeup was stealing Mom's concealer, so the kids at school wouldn't ask Jake too many questions about what happened.

Of course, as soon as Jake got big enough to fight back, the beatings stopped. At least, I think they did. It was around that time we started drifting apart. His dad met a new woman, and suddenly, Jake had a new stepmother and brother.

Jake hated Jeremy so much, he went berserk when we started dating. Perhaps it was for the best. We'd reached that awkward point in a boy-girl friendship when it was obvious we were biologically incompatible to be friends anymore.

"And what about your mom?" Sid asks, still with that soft vocal tone that invites confession.

"Never really knew her," Jake says, acting flippant, but I can see the slight tick in his left eye. "She left when I was three."

Jake doesn't talk about his mom. Never did. Doubt he ever will. He and I

shared the pain of an absent parent, but we rarely discussed it. Even though I resented my dad for leaving us, at least he made it clear he loved me, and his leaving wasn't my fault.

For Jake, it was the opposite. On more than one occasion, I heard Mr. Stone yelling that Jake was the reason his mother abandoned them. His battle with alcohol started after his wife left, and the breakup was the reason Mr. Stone moved them back to their family home in Brooklyn. I also think she was the reason Jake's been angry with the world for as long as I can remember.

"No sisters or brothers?" Sid asks.

Jake shakes his head. "Nope."

Okay, so we're just not even acknowledging Jeremy's existence now? Understandable. To be honest, I have no idea where Jeremy and his mom are these days, and my care factor about their whereabouts is in the negative digits. They were both peas in a rotten pod, and I hope that somewhere, karma is making their lives hell.

"Anyone else of note during your upbringing?"

Jake shoots me the briefest of glances. "I did have a best friend when I was growing up."

"Oh? Tell us about him."

"Her, actually." *Okay. That's all we need to know. Move on.* "She lived next door."

*Stop talking, Jacob. Stop talking now.*

Sid leans forward. He smells a meaty story. "That's sweet. Is she still in your life?"

Jake pauses, and in that moment, I imagine approximately forty-seven ways I could murder him with my pen before he rats me out.

Thankfully, after a tight sigh, he says, "No."

Sid tilts his head. "That's a shame. What happened?"

"Usual story. We outgrew each other. At least, she outgrew me."

"How so?"

Jake's clearly uncomfortable, and I hope he'll fob off the answer or change the subject. However, after a moment of clenching his jaw, he continues. "When we hit high school, she decided I wasn't cool enough to hang with her anymore, so we fell out."

*Oh, no he didn't.*

"Really?" Shawna asks. "She was that shallow?"

Jake shrugs. "She had an opportunity to be a part of the in crowd, and she took it. I thought she was better than that, but I was wrong." He looks right at me as he says it, and I cough as dozens of indignant protestations catch in my throat.

"That sounds like a pretty subjective take," I manage to say. "Surely there was more to it than that."

Jake cocks his head. "Like what?"

"Maybe she was feeling insecure and looking for validation. Maybe she just wanted to expand her world to include more people."

"Maybe," Jake says. "And maybe she was trying to ditch her past at any cost, regardless of who she left behind."

I pause. If we were playing Battleship, that would have been a hit.

"Wow," one of the interns says. "Some people are the worst. I can't believe a so-called friend treated you like that. So cold."

Jake looks down at the table. He doesn't mention that he was the one who demanded I choose between his brother and him. When I refused, he chose for me.

Sidney is staring at Jake with a frown, and I can practically hear him formulating narratives about this mysterious female 'friend' in his head. "Was there anything romantic between you?"

Jake's lip curls. "No." An image of prom night swims to the surface of my memory, but I weigh it down with cement shoes.

Sid isn't convinced. "Did you want there to be?"

Jake turns to him. "She was my best friend. The closest thing I had to a sister."

"Well then," Sid says, disappointed he didn't land anything juicier. "Let's move on to more recent times. How did you become Professor Feelgood and bare your soul on the internet?"

Jake leans back in his chair. "When I started travelling after high school, I posted pictures on Instagram as a kind of journal. Then, I met a girl, fell in love, and when it ended ..." He clasps his hands. "I felt like my emotions were choking me, so I started writing poetry. But writing it wasn't enough. The only relief I got was by posting online. Kind of like screaming into the

abyss, I guess. I never expected anyone to read it.”

“But read it, they did,” Sid says. “And clearly, your passion for your lady love resonated with people. How long were you two together?”

He looks down. “A few months, but it seemed like longer.”

“Tell us about her.”

He shakes his head, and the tension is back in his shoulders. “Talking about her is ... tough. She’s hard to describe. She’s like no one I’ve ever known.”

“Why did you break up?” Joanna asks gently.

Jake blinks a few times before focusing. “Uh ... lots of reasons, but the main one was she didn’t love me as much as I loved her.”

Shawna is shocked. “How can that be?”

He pauses for a second, as if weighing up whether to continue. Then he sighs and says, “I’m not the easiest person to get along with. I know that. When we met, my track record with relationships was abysmal, and ... it showed. She’d just broken up with a guy. He’d wanted to marry her, and she thought things were moving too fast, so she freaked out. Then, she met me. Even though we had a real connection, I knew I was a rebound. I fell in love with her anyway.”

“So, what happened?”

He shakes his head. “What happens when any two people don’t work out? We wanted different things, and there came a point when we couldn’t ignore that anymore.” He pauses for a second, his face drawn. “There’s nothing worse than falling for someone and realizing you don’t have all of their heart. It’s even worse watching them realize it. The first time she told me she loved me, she also admitted she wasn’t over her ex. I tried to get her to stay with me, but she couldn’t. Her life was elsewhere with another man, and I had to respect her wishes.”

The room is silent for a second, and then Joanna says, “Wait ... she went back to the other guy?”

Jake glances at her. “I assume so. We agreed it would be better for us to not stay in touch, so I don’t know for sure. If she’s chosen to have a life with him, I don’t want to screw things up for her.”

There’s a heaviness in the air. Tension from Jake seeping into the rest of us.

Serena puts down her pen. “Do you ever think she made the wrong choice?”

I expect Jake to blow off the answer, but he doesn't.

"Of course. There's not a day goes by I don't wish she'd chosen differently."

"Maybe there's still a chance for you guys," Jo says, voicing what I was thinking. If this were a romance novel, there'd be some big twist where she shows up on his doorstep one day and admits her mistake. Then they'd declare their love for each other and live happily ever after.

"What if she tells you she loves you and begs your forgiveness?" I say, curious to see Jake's reaction. "What would you do?"

Hearing that, Sid's eyes light up. I know he's thinking if there were some way to orchestrate that sort of fairy tale ending, it would create a hurricane of publicity that would catapult this book into the stratosphere.

Jake stares at me, eyes hard. He probably thinks I'm goading him, but I'm not. I genuinely want to know.

After a couple of seconds, he swallows and looks away. "If she wanted to be with me, she would have chosen me. As much as it sucks to say, some people don't get a happy ever after."

Joanna gives him a sympathetic look. "There's always a chance things will still work out. I mean, you love her, right?"

That makes him stop dead. "Even if I do, it doesn't matter. Whether or not you love someone is irrelevant. The difference between heaven and hell is them loving you back. If they don't, you can't do a damn thing about it except pack up your heart and move on."

"And have you?" Serena asks. "Moved on?"

Jake gives her a rueful smile. "You've seen my Instagram. Clearly, not. But I'm trying."

The room goes quiet, and I notice everyone is leaning toward Jake a little more than they were a few seconds ago. Even I have a twinge of sympathy. As much as Jake gets on my nerves, I wouldn't condemn anyone to live without their true love. I believe everyone deserves happiness. Even him.

"Well, then," Mr. Whip says, clearly impressed by Jake's candor. "One final question: Why did you choose to call yourself Professor Feelgood?"

Jake sits up straighter, and I can see him trying to shake off his emotion. "After everything went down, I tried to purge the bitterness I felt over losing her. Mediation, yoga ... everything I came across. Calling myself Professor Feelgood was part of it. Trying to reinvent myself, I guess." I'm thinking



about how non-Zen he is when he glances at me. “I’m a still a work in progress.”

*Understatement.*

“Well,” Mr. Whip says with a chuckle. “That seems like a good note on which to wrap this up. Sid, I’ll leave you and Asha to work out upcoming promotional events for Mr. Stone. Thank you very much, everyone. I look forward to us all working together to make this project a huge success.”

There’s a buzz of chatter as we all pack up, and after Mr. Whip and Serena say their goodbyes to Jacob, they usher everyone else out of the room.

“Okay,” Sidney says with a sparkle in his eye. “We have a bunch of promo appearances in the pipeline for you, Jacob, and the first one is tomorrow night. I’ve managed to get an invite for one of New York’s hottest events. Do you happen to own a tux?”

I almost snort. The only time I’ve ever seen Jake in a suit was prom night, and that one belonged to his dad. Jake in a tux would be like asking a lion to wear a tutu.

“No,” he says. “No tux.”

Sid writes something on his notebook. “No problem. I’ll organize one for you.” He looks Jake up and down. “You about a 42 long?”

“I have no idea.” Jake glances at me, then back to Sid. “What’s this for?”

“A fantastic event to launch a new matchmaking app. There’s going to be a ton of press there, and considering the romantic nature of the app, the event is very on-brand for your book.”

I immediately tense up. “You’re not talking about the Romance Central event?”

“That’s the one. Your lovely sister was kind enough to include Jacob in the celebrity lineup.”

Jake looks confused. “What’s Romance Central?”

I look at him. “My sister’s boyfriend runs a successful dates-for-hire business. In a nutshell, you can hire professional boyfriends and girlfriends for special events and companionship.” Jake’s eyes widen, and I know what he’s thinking. “There’s no sex. Just romance and companionship.” He gives me a skeptical look but doesn’t say anything, so I continue. “Part of their business model is a new dating app. Our friend Toby came up with this crazy-good algorithm, and the success rate is incredible. From everything Eden and Max have told me, the launch is going to be huge.”

“Which is why,” Sid says, “getting Jacob on that red carpet would be worth its weight in gold.”

“Well, great,” I say, a little weirded out that Jake will now be going. “Hope you guys have fun. Good luck with the photo ops.” I’m sure I can avoid him. The Four Seasons ballroom is huge.

“But you’re going, right?” Sid asks.

“Uh ... yeah.”

“Great! Then you can chaperone Jacob.”

*Um ... what now?*

“Don’t you usually chaperone authors?”

He sighs. “I’d love to. But Shawna and I are representing Whiplash at the Brock awards that night.”

“There’s no one else from your department available?” I ask. “I mean, I’m just an editor. I’m sure Mr. Stone would prefer someone with publicity experience.”

He closes his notebook. “You’ll be fine. I’ll give you instructions. All you need to do is steer him in the right direction and be your usual warm and supportive self.”

Jake looks at me. “I think it would be a good opportunity for us to bond, Miss Tate. Unless you have a problem with that.”

I smile over gritted teeth. “No, I just thought you might be more comfortable with someone ... else.

“I wouldn’t. I’m your author, and when I signed with Whiplash, you promised to do everything in your power to help me through this process. Was that all talk?”

“No, of course not,” Sid says, throwing me a look. “We’re all devoted to making this as painless as possible, right, Asha? Besides, you’d be great for the optics. You’re gorgeous. He’s gorgeous. A gorgeous couple writing a book together is hot.”

I almost choke on the speed of my reply. “We’re not a couple.”

“I just meant a couple of people. No judgment on your private life.”

“I have a boyfriend, Sid.”

“Oh, that French guy? Really?” He leans closer. “But it’s been a couple of months. You’re due to break up with him, right?”

I blink a few times and take a breath. "Email me what you need. I'll get it done."

"Great," Jake says. "Then it's a date."

I give him my most insincere smile. "Well, it's a business function."

"Wonderful." Sid packs up his stuff and stands. "I'll get everything sorted from my end and let you know final details tomorrow." He goes over to Jake and shakes his hand. "A pleasure, Mr. Stone. We'll talk soon."

Once he's gone, Jake and I are alone. We sit on opposite sides of the conference table, which is good, because if he were next to me, I might be tempted to smack him.

"Are you always going to find ways to humiliate me in front of my work colleagues?"

"Not always," he says, blithely. "I mean, after the first few hundred times, it's going to get stale, right? Then I'll have to move on to humiliating you in front of strangers. And anyway, your coworkers have no idea about our history."

"Well, they all think your childhood best friend was an asshole."

"They came to that conclusion on their own."

"When presented with your alternative facts. And now with the Romance Central event."

"That was Sid's idea, not mine. And I was genuinely trying to get you to do your job. If I was any other author, you wouldn't think twice about being my chaperone. Trying to dodge the responsibility made you look unprofessional."

I stop, because as much as I hate to admit it, he's right. For any other author, I wouldn't have a problem guiding them through interviews. But the thought of spending an entire evening with Jake gives me hypertension.

"Besides," Jake says. "I figure that if I have to go to a stuffy event and wear a monkey suit, you should have to endure it with me."

"You realize that if this book is as big as everyone thinks, you're going to be invited to a lot of these kinds of events."

"Then I hope you have a nice range of gowns, so I don't get sick of seeing you in the same old rags."

I sigh, and collect the leftover dossiers. Part of me is pissed, but another part is grateful that Jake has returned to his dickish ways. At least I know how to deal with him like this.

“I would have thought you’d prefer to take a date of your choosing rather than be lumped with me all night.”

When I struggle to nab a stray schedule in the middle of the table, he stands and grabs it before placing it on the top of my pile.

“Hanging with you is easy. I don’t have to try to impress you or make small talk, and because your opinion of me can’t get any lower, I can just be myself.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t really work for me. Could you try being one of the Hemsworths instead?”

He’s about to reply, when his phone buzzes. He checks the screen, and in a second, his whole demeanor changes.

“I gotta go.” He folds up the press release Sid gave him and shoves it into his pocket.

“What? Why?” I barely have the words out before he’s pushing open the conference room door and striding away. I hurry after him, my sore hip and knee causing me to limp. “Jake! What’s going on?”

“Nothing that concerns you.”

“Considering you’re walking out on our meeting, I’d say it does. We have a ton of work to do.”

“I’ll make up the time tomorrow,” he stops at the coat rack and grabs his jacket. “Just tell me where and what time.”

“Uh ... Your place. Eight a.m.” I continue to follow as he walks over to the elevator and pushes the call button. “Jake, what the hell is so important that you have to walk out on your first day?”

“A personal matter.” He jabs the call button a few more times. “I’ll text you my address.”

“I don’t have a phone, remember?” The elevator doors open just as I thrust my notebook at him. “Here, write it down.”

With a huff of frustration, he scribbles down his address then steps into the elevator.

I shake my head. “Guess I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

He pushes a button, and as the doors close, I hear him mutter, “Can’t wait.”

When I turn around, Devin is standing there with a smug expression. “Your new author has an amazing work ethic. And I’m impressed that it’s only been a few hours, and yet he already has zero respect for you. That has to be a

record.” He laughs. “Oh, this is going great.”

“Shut up, Devin.”

I limp back to my desk and collapse into my chair, supremely exhausted and in need of a large glass of wine and a whole-day nap.

“He left?” Joanna says as she sits beside me.

“Yeah. Something came up.”

Joanna grabs the mints dispenser I keep on my desk and helps herself to one. “I feel there’s an erection joke in there, but considering your history with him, I’ll spare you.”

“Thank God.”

“So,” Jo says, leaning forward and lowering her voice. “Were you thinking what I was thinking?”

“That you wanted to murder Jake? Totally.”

“No, I mean about his lady love. What’s her name again?”

“Ingrid.”

“Right! Don’t you want to track her down and see if she did get back with her ex-boyfriend? I mean, maybe she’s pining and miserable like Jake is? And if that’s the case, we have to do something about it.”

“Jo, no. If Jake knew I was meddling in his love life, he’d hit the roof. I don’t need any more tension in our working relationship.”

“Okay,” she says, more subdued. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t do some snooping. In my time off, of course. What else can you tell me about her.”

“Nothing. I literally have zero information other than her name.”

“Well, when you find out more, let me know. I’m determined to give that boy a happy ending.”

I smile. “I feel like there’s an erection joke in there somewhere, but I’ll spare you.”

She stands and hands me my purse. “And now, you should go home and get some rest. And shower. I love you and all, but you smell like gutter water. I’ll let Serena know where you are.”

I take my purse and give her a hug. “You’re the best.”

I limp over to the elevator and press the button.

Okay, so ... one day from hell done and dusted. Several hundred to go.



## TWELVE

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### Broken Hearts and Invisible Walls

AFTER A NIGHT OF RESTLESS sleep and Jake-centric dreams, I try to start the morning with a positive attitude. Sure, my knee and hip hurt like sons-of-bitches, and I'm forced to cover the spectacular bruising with jeans, but at least my head didn't start bleeding again when I washed my hair this morning, so, you know ... I'm calling that a win.

I breathe in the cool October air as I limp-stride down the street toward Jake's apartment. It's a gorgeous day in Brooklyn, even with the distinctive roar/thump of cars crossing the bridge providing the most unmusical background noise imaginable. But despite the sunlight glinting off the Hudson, I feel a sense of unease curling through my mind.

Part of it has to do with Jake and his unpredictability, sure. But even without his presence, there's so much about autumn that puts me on edge.

Fall used to be my mother's favorite time of year. She loved how the trees all went from boring green to an infinite range of reds and oranges, and she had the uncanny ability to predict the first winter snow by studying the giant tree in Jake's front yard. I have no idea what type of tree it was, but it was beautiful, especially in autumn. I'd often find Mom on our tiny front porch in the mornings, sipping her coffee and gazing at the shimmering foliage.

"That's the tree of love," she'd say every year. "See how she's all red, like a love heart? Every day, she reveals a little more of herself to us. Each leaf falls like it's in love with the ground, and then one day, there she is, her barest self, naked and unashamed." She gazed at me with her kind blue eyes, framed in a face made old before its time by heartbreak and working three jobs to support us. "That's what it's like to fall in love."

I was always surprised by how wistful she got whenever she talked about love. Even as a toddler, I wasn't blind to how often my parents fought. I heard the mostly-whispered but sometimes-yelled arguments. I knew that they struggled to put on a brave face for me and Eden.

And yet, mom always seemed like part of her was living in a romantic fantasy. One in which dad never disappeared for weeks at a time. One where she didn't feel the need to close her door at night, so we couldn't hear her cry.

Even with all her problems with dad, she'd talk about love like she'd never

been hurt. She told me that a soul mate is someone who sees all the parts you're ashamed of, and loves you anyway.

When I asked her if that's how she felt about Dad, her eyes would cloud over, and she'd say, "The only thing worse than not finding your soul mate, is finding him and realizing you're two parts of the same train traveling in different directions."

It was the only time I remember Mom saying anything negative about Dad to me and Eden, and that always infuriated me. We knew how much he hurt her, but she was too damn stubborn to admit it. I guess that's one thing she passed down to her girls: We Tate sisters aren't great at admitting our vulnerabilities.

I'm not sure if the way Dad treated Mom is one of the factors that has prevented me having a fulfilling, intimate relationship with a man, or whether there's part of me that's just not wired right. I thought I'd finally had a sense of soul-mate-dom when I met my current man, but it evaporated every time we got naked together.

Whenever I see girls my age embracing the power of their sexuality and taking pleasure wherever they can find it, I feel a little more broken; like a walking sexual defect whose body shuts down as soon as a man sees the entirety of it. I keep waiting for that magical moment when I stand naked in front of someone and don't want to flee the room, but so far, it hasn't happened. Sometimes, I wonder if it ever will.

As I continue past converted warehouses and too-trendy cafes, I absently go to pull out my phone to check if I'm going in the right direction. Then I remember it was stolen, and the old iPhone Eden loaned me last night feels clunky and ancient in comparison. Guess I'm going to have to save up if I want to replace it in the near future.

I'm about to put it away again, when it buzzes with a text. It's from my sister.

*<Hey, sis! Are you still okay to meet me this afternoon to style me for tonight? I need your hair and makeup skills.>*

As one of the organizers of the Romance Central event tonight, Eden wants to do Max proud by looking her best. However, her idea of formal makeup consists of mascara and lip gloss, so I've offered to do her face.

*<No problem. See you at your office around 5.>*

I put the phone away and sigh. I'm glad to have an excuse to swing by her office. I've been meaning to do it for a week, but the whole Jake thing has



distracted me.

By the time I'm standing in front of the building I think is Jake's, I've officially landed in an area that's too dilapidated to be cool, even for the most passionate poverty-chic Brooklyn hipsters.

I take a breath before I head up the stairs and push into the tiny lobby. *Not locked, and no hint of a doorman? Color me shocked.* The building in which Eden and I live might be dated and not in the best condition, but it looks like the Versailles compared to this place.

I climb up six flights of stairs then knock on what I hope is Jake's door.

There's no response.

As I stand in the filthy hallway, I check the address Jake scrawled yesterday to make sure I have the right place. Unfortunately, I do. I bang on the door for a second time. It echoes down the hall and through the entire stairwell. I'm not sure, but I think I hear the faint scratch of rats somewhere below me.

"Dear Goddess," I whisper. "If you get me out of here without me getting murdered or catching some form of bubonic plague, I'll be eternally grateful."

I adjust my heavy laptop bag as I look around warily. The entire place looks like it should be condemned. Several of the doors are boarded up, and I have no doubt this is the former residence of a plucky horde of serial killers. Or crack addicts. Or crack-addicted serial killers who trained rats to kill people and then eat the evidence.

*Yep, just keep thinking like that, Ash. What you need right now is more fear.*

I knock again, and still, no one answers. Is this another one of Jake's stupid jokes? Send Asha to an abandoned building, and laugh when she gets murdered? Hilarious!

I hit the door with more gusto. "Stone! If you're in there, you'd better open up. I'm too young and pretty to be rodent food!"

I hear a faint noise on the other side of the door and then shuffling steps getting closer.

*Oh, God. It's not Jake at all. It's going to be the love child of Hannibal Lecter and Leatherface, isn't it? He'll chainsaw me, and then I'll be served up as taco meat to unsuspecting diners.*

I hold my breath when I hear latches being freed then take a tentative step back as the door swings open. My breath rushes out of me in relief when I see Jake's blinking, barely awake face. Then I become completely breathless

when I notice he's naked except for a pair of black sweat pants that are barely hanging onto his hips.

*Sweet mercy.*

Yes, I've seen his body in Professor Feelgood photos. And yes, his shoulders and arms were in close proximity to my filth-covered body yesterday. But now that I'm exposed to the full force of his naked torso mere inches away, I despise how fast my blood pounds in response.

*Oh, Lord, help me look away. Do not let me stare at his ripped bod. Nothing good will come of it.*

I drag my gaze up to his face to remind myself that it's Jake, the Annoying.

"Sorry, lady," he says, while stifling a yawn. "But you've got the wrong apartment. I didn't order a screaming shrew wake-up call." He goes to shut the door, but I put my hand on it and push.

"Funny, because I didn't order an ill-tempered jerkwad, and yet, here you are. You couldn't set an alarm?"

"Could have. Forgot to."

"At least tell me you're not hungover."

"Nope. In fact, I think I'm still a little drunk."

I look at him in disgust. "Good to see you have your priorities straight. Can I assume that you bailed on me yesterday so you could socialize with women of questionable taste?"

He leans one arm against the doorframe and rubs his head, thus turning his thick, dark hair into a chaotic mess. "You know me, Tate. Total party animal. Dancing 'til dawn with my extensive harem is my mission in life."

I resist laughing. I don't know anyone less likely of having a good time than Jake. The only school dance he ever attended was senior prom, and even then, he ruined the entire night for everyone he encountered.

*Ah, good times.*

"So, are you going to invite me in?" I ask. "Or do you expect me to pole vault over your giant landmass of a body to get inside?"

He takes a halfhearted step to the side. "Sorry. I forgot vampires can't enter without being invited. Come in, Succubus. Mi casa, and all that."

As I walk past him into the apartment, I promptly stop short. I'm not sure what I was expecting based on the crappy state of the building, but it wasn't this. The apartment is huge, but it's been completely gutted. There are no

interior walls, just bare wood framing denoting where the bedrooms and kitchen would be. It's bizarre. Like an apartment version of a skeleton. No skin or muscles, just bare bones.

There's only one real room, and that's a small, dated bathroom near the door. The rest of the space looks like someone ran out of money halfway through renovations and then Jake moved in.

"Wow. I love what you've done with the place."

Jake yawns and closes the door as I look around. Beneath a huge bank of windows, there's a sitting area with two shabby couches, an easy chair, and a coffee table that looks like it literally fell off the back of a truck. A few yards away is a queen-sized bed in a beat-up wooden frame that seems way too small for someone of Jake's size. On the floor beside it are a collection of boxes and baskets. The only other area of note is what I assume to be the former kitchen. Now it's empty, except for a table, a single burner hotplate, a small collection of cups, plates, and pans, and the kind of tiny bar fridge they have in cheap motel rooms.

I've heard of Spartan living before, but this is extreme.

"You should really have a word with the homeowners' association," I say. "Are they aware someone stole your walls?"

Jake brushes past me on his way toward the 'kitchen'. "Stow your judgment, princess. Not all of us need to live in castles."

"No argument there, but do you have to live in a demolition site?"

"The rent is reasonable, and I have plenty of room to practice my swing dancing. What more could a guy want?" When he gets to the table, he fills a small saucepan with water from a gallon bottle. "I'd offer you coffee, but I know you don't drink it."

"I do, actually."

He turns to me with a doubtful expression. "Since when?"

"Since senior year. Four cups a day, every day."

"But you hate it."

His assumption that he still knows anything about me grates on my nerves. "Just because I once said I hated coffee when I was eleven, doesn't mean I don't like it now. I know this will be a radical concept to you, Jake, but people change."

He turns back to set the saucepan and mutters, "Yeah. Some more than others." He grabs two cups. "So, how do you have it?"

I walk over to the couch and put my computer bag on the table. “Weak, white, four sugars.”

He grunts. “Yeah, clearly, you *love* the taste now. It’s like you’re an entirely different person.”

I ignore him as I take off my coat and unpack my laptop and notebook. Against my will, my gaze occasionally wanders over to his naked back. The ink I’ve seen glimpses of in his pictures is on full display, but I can’t see it clearly enough to make sense of it. I can only assume he’s had, “I’m a dick,” inscribed in several different languages and various pictograms.

I tilt my head and wonder how many hours of exercise he has to subject himself to in order to keep his body in super-human shape. I mean, I doubt he got all those muscles from occasional bouts of Prancersize.

As I watch, he rolls his neck before stretching his arms behind him, completely indifferent to me being there.

It’s so weird to me how guys have such confidence in their bodies; even ones who don’t look like Jake. So often in New York when the mercury is firmly in the red zone, guys of all shapes and sizes just wander around shirtless, without exhibiting an ounce of self-consciousness. As girls, we’re told not to wear certain types of clothing unless we’re a certain size. “*No chick bigger than a size two should wear booty shorts/tank tops/miniskirts.*” Meanwhile, guys are all, “BEHOLD MY JIGGLY MAN BOOBS AND BEER GUT IN ALL THEIR NAKED, SWEATY GLORY! HOLD YOURSELVES BACK, LADIES!”

I aspire to be so bold someday.

“Just out of interest,” I say after a particularly shameful few seconds of focusing on the two dimples above his butt, “do you plan to put on clothes this morning?”

He turns and leans back against the table. I try to ignore his physique, but dammit, it’s all *right there*.

“Oh, I thought our business relationship was clothing optional. I mean, you exposed your chest to me, so I thought it only fair I return the favor.” He gestures to his pecs. “Sure, I have a little more hair than you, but still, can yours do this?” He makes them dance, and I give him a well-practiced eye-roll. If he’d witnessed me doing the boob-a-copter in my bathroom mirror, he’d be embarrassed to even compete.

“Of course,” he says in a condescending tone. “If you’re having trouble concentrating because of your enormous physical attraction to me, then ...”

I let out a short laugh. “You know what? Forget I said anything. Doesn’t matter to me if you’re wearing a snowsuit or a star-spangled jockstrap. Your body holds zero appeal for me.”

When he doesn’t say anything in response, I look up to find him staring at me, an amused expression on his face.

“What?” I ask, feeling immediately defensive.

“You think you’re fooling me, but you’re not. It was beyond obvious you had a thing for the professor before you knew it was me.”

I look straight at him and don’t even blink. “I do not now, nor have I *ever*, had a ‘thing’ for you, Jacob Stone, no matter who you pretend to be. Feel free to take that to the bank.”

I sound so convincing, even I start to believe it.

*Take note Streep/Pacino/De Niro. This is how it’s done.*

He shakes his head in disappointment. “Well, you may look different these days, but there’s one thing that hasn’t changed about you.”

“And what’s that?”

This time, he’s the one who stares me down. “You still can’t lie for shit.”

I look away from the smug curl of his lips and go back to setting up my laptop. I know color is blossoming in my cheeks, but there’s not a damn thing I can do about it except pretend it isn’t happening.

“Now I understand why he doesn’t have any walls,” I mutter to myself. “He needed the extra space to squeeze in his gargantuan ego.”

“What was that?” Jake says as he scoops what looks like the world’s cheapest instant coffee into two mugs.

“Nothing. Just talking to myself. Let’s get started.”

“Okay. How?”

I open a new file in my writing app and label it *Professor Feelgood Book*. “Well, first, we need to establish a narrative in which we can frame your poetry. So, stories from your life, moments of interest in your development. You know, things that will inform your journey up until you met your lady love.”

He glances over his shoulder. “Stories from my childhood? Are we going to sanitize it? Or go with the NC17-rated version?”

I shift in my seat. Any detailed examination of Jake’s childhood is going to

require a large can opener and some extra-strength worm killer, especially when it comes to our shared history.

“Uh ... well ...” I clear my throat. “No need to decide on that right now. We can circle back to it later.”

*Or, never. Whatever.*

Is it possible to feel oneself developing an ulcer? Because right now it feels like my stomach acid is trying to burrow through my skin.

“Do you have more poetry? We can use some of the stuff from Instagram, because that’s what made you popular, but it would be great to have some fresh verses as well.”

He points toward a storage box beneath the coffee table. “In there. Knock yourself out.”

I open the box to see it’s almost full, stuffed with dozens of sheets of loose paper, some napkins, torn sections of cereal boxes, Metro cards, and bar coasters from locations I’ve never heard of. Clearly, Jake writes on whatever-the-hell is in front of him when inspiration hits.

Looking at this trove of words, I feel like a stoner who’s found a giant, unexpected stash of medicinal-grade hash.

*Lord ... so many poems.*

The moment I found out the professor was Jake, I quit his daily posts, cold turkey. But now that I’m faced with this buffet of wordy goodness ... how can I resist?

I have the strongest urge to just sit here and immerse myself in his words. Bathe in their literary richness like Scrooge McDuck bathes in money.

I pull out some of the pieces of paper to examine them more closely. Everything has been written in Jake’s small, neat writing, and each one has numbers written in the bottom-left corner. “You’ve dated all these?”

“Yeah.” I look up to see him frowning. “Not sure how accurate all those dates are, though. I wasn’t always sober.”

“Still,” I say, “It will be useful for us in establishing a timeline for the narrative.” At least that’s something.

I smooth out a particularly crumpled piece of paper and read what he’s written.

*Hollow bones and lonely skin. Muscles stiff with lust and aching for touch.*

*Blood pounding, throbbing,  
Everything growing tighter and harder with thoughts of you.  
I could have other hands, but I don't.  
I could hold other hearts, but I don't.  
You could haunt other minds, but you don't.  
I tug at trails of swollen memories,  
And as I arch and spill my love for you in tight, sharp groans,  
I should call out someone else's name ...  
But I don't.*

*Jesus.*

I realize my mouth is open and dangerously close to overflowing with saliva. I clamp it shut and swallow hard.

I place the poem facedown so I don't accidentally read it again. Damn, that stuff is dangerous. I thought the ones he posted online were hot, but they all look like nursery rhymes compared to some of this hidden cache. I swallow again as I skim over phrases about sliding, and thrusting, and how much he wants to watch his woman's face as he makes her come.

I close my eyes and take a couple of silent breaths.

*Okay, I can't read this stuff when I'm around him. I really can't.*

I want to be immune to how his poems make me feel, but there's something about him pining over a woman like a lovesick fool that I have zero defense against. And beneath the layers of involuntary arousal and rising self-loathing, there's another emotion worming its way to the surface. One more odious than anything that's come before.

*Jealousy.*

Even giving it a name makes me feel ill.

It's the type of jealousy that has so many facets, it's hard to recognize them all. Part of it is Jake finding true love before I have, and part is being jealous of this Ingrid woman. I mean, how amazing must she be to make a man as closed-off as Jake obsess like this? I wonder if any of my ex-boyfriends have boxes full of sex poems about me? Unless they're writing about how the seemingly confident woman turns into an anxious mess during sex, then I highly doubt it.

Unlike me, Ingrid is a sexual goddess with a magical, hypnotic vagina. Why else would Jake write so much about making love to her?

I pull out handfuls of poems and lay them on the coffee table. I think it would be best to sort and catalog them back at my place, in private. Preferably with a full bottle of wine, a tub of ice cream, and my vibrator on standby.

I breathe shallowly as I sift down to the bottom of the box, urging my blood pressure to return to normal.

Below all the loose poems is a stack of five notebooks, all filled, cover to cover. It doesn't escape me that they're the same brand of notebook I've been using all these years for my stories.

I hold one up. "Blanco? Really?" When we were kids, we used them every year for school. They were an ugly shade of mustard and had paper so thin you could see through it, but they were the cheapest notebooks around, and that was all we cared about.

Jake shoots me a look as he pours steaming water into the cups. "Why not? They do the job, right?"

I rifle through the pages. "Yeah. They do." There are so many words, it's dizzying to see how prolific he is. "When did you start writing? I never knew this was a thing for you."

"It wasn't." After stirring in creamer and sugar, he brings over the mugs and places them on the scratched table.

I look at him in shock. "What? No coaster? But you'll ruin the finish."

He narrows his eyes in contempt before sitting beside me. "To be honest, I always thought you'd become a writer, not me. You were the one who wrote plays for us when we were little. I was just the chump who acted in them. I didn't get into writing until after high school, and once I started ..." He shrugs. "I couldn't stop."

"You never thought to write a novel?"

He takes a sip of coffee. "My brain doesn't work that way. I get flashes of scenes, not whole chapters. Snapshots of emotions or thoughts."

"Well, we're going to have to work on that. Where's your computer?"

He stares at me, deadpan. "Oh, my twenty-seven-inch iMac is right over there, next to my butler's pantry and media room."

"You don't own a computer?"



“Look around, princess. I don’t own most things.”

“So, is this you just trying to out-Brooklyn all your friends? Impress everyone with your apocalypse chic?”

“Yes. As usual I’m on the cutting edge of style. Nearly everything I own was found on the street.”

With a shudder of disgust, I look down at the couch upon which we’re sitting. “Oh, my God. This is a dumpster couch?” I can almost feel the bedbugs crawling inside the cushions.

Jake puts his arm up on the back, wearing an expression of amusement. “Chill, woman; I’m joking. I bought all this stuff from a reputable second-hand dealer. Minimal bodily fluids, I can assure you.”

I should be placated by that knowledge, but I’m not. In fact, the longer I stay in this apartment and the closer I am to him, the more uneasy I feel. Being near Jake always makes me tense, but seeing him living like this ... There are some things you wouldn’t wish on your worst enemy. This ‘apartment’ is one of them.

Jake studies me, and it’s clear my concern is showing in my expression. “For the record, I’m happy living like this. I don’t need your pity.”

“I don’t pity you.”

“Sure you do,” he says, his tone becoming hard. “Because you judge others by what *you* value. You always have.” He grips his coffee cup tighter. “I hate to burst your bubble, princess, but not everyone wants a McMansion in the suburbs with a white picket fence.”

“Who says I want that?”

“Well, when you were five years old you did a whole series of crayon drawings titled, ‘My Huge House in the Suburbs with a White Picket Fence,’ so ...”

“Once again, I’ll remind you that I’m not five any more, and my hopes and dreams may have evolved from what I wrote in crayon.” I gesture to the apartment, irritated with his condescension. “So are you telling me this is your dream home, then?”

“It suits me for now.”

“Jake, it’s autumn in New York city, and you don’t even have insulation in here, let alone heating. What the hell are you going to do when winter hits?”

He stares me down. “Well, since I’ll still be working with you in the third level of hell, I’m sure I’ll be toasty warm.”

I glare at him. When we were seven, we each chose a soul animal. Mine was an otter. His was a dragon. Over the years, those animals morphed, and now it feels like we're both rams, knocking heads out of habit, like the obstinate idiots we are.

With a curl of his lip, he puts his coffee cup on the table and begins sorting loose poems from the box into piles. "I don't know why you're so snobby these days. There was a time when you would have thought this place was cool. It's similar to our loft. Or have you forgotten where we used to spend all our time from the ages of four through ten?"

A prickle of tension crawls up my back. I haven't thought about the loft area over his dad's garage for years. It used to feel magical, but it had nothing to do with the decor.

"That was different," I say, not looking at him.

"No heating there, either, and back then, all our greatest treasures came from other people's trash."

I pretend to read something on my screen. "We were kids. We didn't know any better."

When he doesn't say anything, I turn to see him staring at me, wearing an expression that's half-incredulity, half-nostalgia. "Or maybe we just found more wonder in the mundane back then. When you have nothing, you learn to appreciate everything."

I turn away and take a long sip of coffee. It's hotter than I usually like, but I'll endure third-degree mouth burns if it means avoiding this conversation. I don't reminisce about my childhood, because I prefer to block out most of it. Being around Jake every day is going to make that more difficult. I need to step up my efforts to subvert and avoid.

"We should get to work."

"You really hate it, don't you?"

I grab my notebook and write today's date at the top of a fresh page. "Hate what?"

"Thinking about how things used to be. You. Me. The old neighborhood."

I stop writing mid-word. It's too early for this conversation. And several years too late.

"We're here to work, Jake, not reminisce. Besides, I'd rather live in the present than revisit the past." I push my hair away from my face and turn to him. "So, tell me more about this woman of yours. How did you two meet?"

What does she look like? Was it love at first sight? Or did she need to overcome a natural aversion to your personality?”

Jake leans forward, and even though his expression is neutral, I can feel anger simmering in him. He may have gotten better at hiding it, but it’s still there.

“Asha,” he says, the tension in his jaw in contrast to the quietness of his voice. “One day soon, we’re going to have to talk about our shit. You know it as well as I do. I’ll give you a pass for today, but at some point, we’re going to clear the air.”

I act as clueless as possible. “About what?”

Angry flecks light in his eyes, and I know I’m pushing him, but I can’t seem to stop.

“Goddammit, stop acting like you have chronic amnesia about our entire friendship. You can’t be that self-deluded.”

“Jake, if you want to clear the air by apologizing for all the crap you pulled in school, fine. Knock yourself out.”

His stare intensifies, and the way his expression hardens makes me feel like he sees every version of myself I’ve morphed through since I was three. “We both know that’s my line, not yours.”

The words hang in the air like a gust of stale crypt air. So many skeletons on both sides in our past. And he’s trying to bring them back to life. Try the door. Rattle it a bit to see how strong the lock is.

“How many times have you told yourself our friendship fell apart because of me?” he asks, his patience as thin as onion skin.

“Jake ...”

“No, really, I want to know. Because if you repeat a lie often enough, it becomes truth. How many times, Ash?”

A cold hand squeezes my heart, making my pulse run fast. “We did fall apart because of you.”

“So, you were blameless?”

My voice rises with my blood-pressure. “*You* turned into an asshole.”

“And *you* had nothing to do with that?”

I lean away from him, just like I did back then.

He notices and shakes his head. “You once told me that in the story of our

lives, we're our own flawed narrator. You think I'm the bad guy, and I think you are. Our memories are subjective, and we rarely remember ourselves as the villain, even when we were."

I push back into the arm of the couch, as far away from him as I can get. "Don't you dare throw this back onto me. You *were* the villain. If you'd embraced the role any more, you would have started wearing a black tengallon hat to school instead of a beanie."

My voice is shrill in the empty space, and my heart is pounding so fast, it feels like a roar in my ears.

*I can't do this*, a small voice whispers inside me. *Stop it. Stop talking. Just stop.*

I don't know what he sees in my expression, but after a few more seconds of searching my face, he drops the box onto the coffee table and goes over to the bed.

"Okay, princess." He grabs some clothes from the baskets on the floor. "If it helps you sleep at night to remember our past that way, go ahead. Stay safe in your delusion." He walks over to the bathroom and stops when he reaches the door. "But if you ever want to talk about the way things really were, give me a call."

Then, he disappears into the bathroom and slams the door.

I'm still breathing heavy when I hear the water start.

# THIRTEEN

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## Write On

WHEN JAKE EMERGES FROM the bathroom fifteen minutes later, he's fully dressed. The steam that wafts out the door might smell delicious, but it's clear he's still tense. That makes two of us.

I make myself look busy and unaffected, but the longer I spend around him, the harder it gets.

"Your phone rang while you were in the shower," I say, not looking at him. "Several times. Someone's eager to see you. When you didn't answer, they sent a text."

He walks over to the upended apple crate he's using as a nightstand and picks up his phone. I watch without being obvious. After he checks the screen, he taps something into it and holds it up to his ear.

He glances at me. "Is checking my phone part of your duties? Do I need to start paying a secretarial fee?"

I focus on my computer screen, adjusting the rough timeline for our writing sessions. "Nope. I didn't touch your phone. The insistent beeping gave it away."

"Hi, it's Jacob Stone," he says quietly into the phone as he walks to the opposite side of the apartment. He keeps his voice low, but unfortunately for him, the lack of walls means this place has amazing acoustics. Even from a dozen yards away, I can hear him clearly.

"Uh huh." He glances over at me. I act like I'm not watching and listening. "I can't get there this morning; I'll swing by this afternoon." He pauses for a second, listening, then says, "Yeah, okay. See you then."

Wow. Such a smooth talker.

He hangs up before walking back toward the bed.

"Everything okay?" I ask, blithely. "Will your booty call survive without you?"

"What makes you think it's a booty call?"

"The only reason a phone rings that many times is because someone really needs something. A guy friend would never call that much."

He slides the phone into his pocket, then grabs a couple of notebooks from beside the bed. "For the record, I don't do booty calls."

"Oh? So, you're a monk these days?"

"No. Just not really into meaningless sex."

"That's new. You used to bounce from woman to woman without breaking a sweat."

"Yeah, then I became an adult." He walks over and stands beside me. "What about you? I don't see an engagement ring, but I have no doubt you're making some poor guy miserable in your spare time. Are you as bossy in bed as you are in business?"

"I'm not talking about my sex life with you."

"Is that because you don't have one, or ...?"

That one hits too close to home, and my face blushes hot.

"Oh, I see," he says. "You're having bad sex. Got it. So, I take it your taste in men hasn't improved since dating my step-brother then."

As if this conversation has prompted it, my phone beeps with a text message, and of course, when I flip it open, I see it's from my boyfriend.

*<Hey, beautiful. How's your first day going? Wrangled your headstrong author yet? I'm sure you're knocking it out of the park. Give me a call when you can. I'm going to be staying in Manhattan tonight. Late dinner? I need to see you, mon Cherie.>*

I think I'm angling it away enough that Jake can't read it, but when he whispers, "I'm headstrong? How dare he? Also, his name is Phillippe? *Mon Cherie? Mon dieu!*" in a deep, mocking voice, it's clear I've failed.

I turn the phone upside down and point to the easy chair. "Sit down, and zip your lip. We have work to do."

He folds his large frame into the shabby chair opposite me and leans his arms on the sides. "So, 'ow long 'ave you been dating zeess *Phillipe* person?" His French accent is ridiculous. He sounds like Lumiere in *Beauty and the Beast*.

I pretend I can't hear him. "I think we should aim for a weekly goal of ten-thousand words. I've done up a rough deadline of three months for the first draft, but I'm sure Serena will want to check our progress before then." God, just thinking about spending three months with him has made my armpits cry. "Of course, I can do light editing as we go, so hopefully the second draft won't take too long."

When I don't get a response, I glance over at him to make sure he's listening.

He cocks his head. "So, what I'm hearing is that Phillippe is a total snore. Got it."

I exhale. "Did you hear anything about our schedule? Or are you solely fixated on making fun of my boyfriend?"

He looks offended. "You don't believe I can do both? Well, that's just hurtful." When I glare at him, he pulls out his phone and starts tapping the screen. "Ten thousand words a week, three months, light editing, I got it."

"We're working. Can you put the phone down?"

"Can I? Yes. Will I? No."

"Are you that intent on inflicting yourself on the nearest hottie on Tinder? Or are you sliding into the DMs of some of your faithful fans?"

He stays focused on the screen. "Neither. I'm on a new app called *Whiner*. It locates the most insufferable nag within a four-block radius." He looks at me in mock-surprise. "Holy shit, would you look at that? It's pointing right at you."

I'm about to go off when my phone rings. It's Serena. After placing my laptop down on the table, I head out to the landing before taking the call. I close the door behind me for good measure.

"Hi, Serena."

"Good morning! I thought I'd call to see how your first day is going."

"Oh, fine," I say, trying to sound untroubled. "We're just sorting out a few details before our first writing session. You know, laying the groundwork and all that." *Constructing the scaffolding upon which our mutual torture machine will be built.*

"Good to hear. How's Jacob coping?"

I want to reply that he's coping by annoying the crap out of me, but I bite my tongue. "He's okay, I think."

"Are you guys getting along? Over the years, I've discovered that the best editor/writer relationships involve a certain amount of chemistry. Are you feeling anything?"

"Ahhh, I'm definitely feeling something, yes." *Severe irritation. Mild disgust.*

"Great. Well, the best piece of advice I can give you is to try to get to know

him first. It's hard to draw words out of someone who's a complete stranger."

*Perhaps, I think, but it's even harder when you've know them for most of your life.*

"Jacob is new to novel writing," Serena continues. "Try to be patient with him."

I almost laugh. Being patient with Jake has never been my strong suit. Looks like I'll be getting all sorts of on-the-job training in my new role.

"Will do, Serena. Thanks."

"You've got this, Asha. Make me proud."

I take a breath and try to absorb her confidence. If I can last a week without murdering Jake, then I'll be proud as hell.

After we sign off, I head back inside to find Jake holding a notebook and pen, looking at me expectantly.

"When you're finished with your personal calls, we should get started. Man, your unprofessionalism is spectacular. Get it together, Tate."

*God, give me strength.* I grind my teeth as I sit and place my phone on the table. While I drain the last of my lukewarm coffee, I try to collect my thoughts.

I've sat in on enough author meetings with Serena and edited enough manuscripts to know that getting the most out of an author usually involved a combination of ego stroking and discipline. If I tried that with Jake, he'd laugh me out of the room. The best I can do is just be straightforward and hope for the best.

"Okay," I say. "First, we need an introduction to bring us into the atmosphere of the book. Some sort of declarative statement about why you're writing. Are you trying to work through your issues? Maybe describe your emotional turmoil since the breakup."

He nods in understanding then frowns. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

I reach into my bag and pull out my well-loved version of *Eat, Pray, Love*. It's one of my favorite books, and if I wasn't mostly broke, I would have jumped on a plane the moment I finished reading it and taken my own around-the-world sabbatical.

I hold it up to show Jake. "Have you read this?"

He gives me an incredulous look. "Of course. What self-respecting man



hasn't read an in-depth psychological treatise on the romantic odyssey of a neurotic white woman with attachment issues and a lady-boner for culturally appropriative armchair philosophy."

I blink a few times. "I don't even know if you're joking right now."

He stretches out his legs and crosses them at the ankle. "I'm not. It was one of the only books at a kibbutz where I stayed for a few months. The choice was between that or an abomination written by Sean Penn, so ..."

"Great. So, I see your journey kind of like Elizabeth's, but in reverse. She was inspired to travel the world to find herself after a bad breakup, while you traveled the world to find yourself, met your soul mate, *then* had a bad breakup."

"A simplistic version of the truth, but okay."

"From the start, we need to become invested in you as a person, so we can sympathize about your heartbreak."

"We?"

"The readers."

His face stays placid, but I notice his fingers curl around the arms of the chair. "So, you're including yourself in that group? Because I'm pretty sure you're incapable of sympathizing with me about anything."

"If you want someone who'll overlook your personality disorders and treat your ego with kid gloves, then you could always request a different editor." I give him a bright smile.

"I could do that. It's becoming clear that Mussolini would go easier on me. But if I requested someone else, wouldn't that kill your credibility? I mean, being taken off your first solo project would make you ... now, what's that term the kids use these days? Oh, yeah ... an *epic failure*?" He leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees. "Do you want to be a *failure*, Asha?"

The quiet serenity in his expression makes my face flush hot. He's Biff to my Marty McFly, taunting me and calling me 'chicken'. And just like Marty, my reaction is hard-wired and predictable.

"I don't *fail*, Jacob. Ever."

"Well, that's a matter of opinion, but, okay." He sits back and crosses his legs.

I swear to God, if my brain were a case of dynamite, this whole apartment would be a charred mess right now. That we're together in this bizarre push-pull arrangement makes my head spin.

I breathe out through my teeth. “Pick up your notebook and pen, before I beat you to death with my laptop.”

He grabs the items off the table and looks at me expectantly.

“As I was saying, we need to give the readers a jumping-off point, so they can relate to you and your ... emotional devastation.” I admit, it feels good to describe him that way.

“You don’t have to be so perky about it. I understand that seeing me suffer is like a day at Disneyland for you, but try to disguise your enjoyment.”

“It’s not that I enjoy seeing you suffer. It’s just refreshing to see your ego take a hit.” I pull my computer into my lap. “So, let’s try a quick exercise. Write down the first thing that comes into your head when I tell you to write your story. For the sake of the exercise, start with ‘once upon a time’. It should only be a paragraph or two. Go.”

Jake puts down his coffee cup and slides his butt to the edge of the couch so he can rest his notebook on the table. He frowns at the blank page for a few seconds, his pen hovering over the paper.

I have an urge to take a photo of him in this moment; to capture him in the middle of his creative process. I’m sure Sidney would love some behind-the-scenes material to use for social media and promotional purposes. Of course, that would require me to own a phone with a functioning camera.

“Stop it.”

I blink in surprise. “What?”

“Don’t look at me when I’m trying to write.” He stays hunched over the notebook. “I can feel you staring, and it’s weird. I usually write alone. It feels like you’re watching me masturbate.”

A shudder runs through me. “Oh, gross. Plus, did you just equate your poetry to wanking? Probably isn’t the first time that connection has been made, I suppose.”

His expressions darkens.

I hold up my hands. “Fine. Wank in peace.” I stand and wander around the apartment, trying to step lightly, so my footfalls don’t echo too loudly in the empty space. It’s strange to walk through an apartment filled with see-through walls. Is this what it’s like to be Superman?

I stop near his bed and glance around. I wouldn’t call his style neat, but it’s certainly tidy. All of his stuff is in piles that are orderly, if not organized. There’s an asymmetrical stack of milk crates he’s turned into a DIY storage

unit. As I move closer, I see an early Nikon digital camera in a box with a collection of lenses, along with a stack of black-and-white photos. I pull them out and leaf through them. Most are travel pics, and I must admit, just like his Professor Feelgood photos, these have a level of lighting and composition that make them more than just amateur snaps. They're artistic. They capture a moment in time, along with a punch of emotion: a street market in what looks like India; an ancient, toothless Asian woman throwing her head back in laughter; a small child and a skinny dog hugging on a door stoop, each looking hungrier than the other.

I'm marveling over how impressed I am by Jake's photographs when I come across a picture of something so rare, only a few people have ever witnessed it. It's an image of Jake smiling. Not only that, but I'd go so far as to say he looks ... joyful. He's lying in bed, and it's clear from the angle of the picture that it's a selfie. Beside him, a woman with tousled, blonde hair is burying her head in his shoulder, seemingly camera shy. I can't see her face, but it's clear from the way she fills out her tiny black bikini that she has an amazing body.

*Hello, Ingrid. Nice to finally meet you.*

I go back to studying Jake's face. It's been so long since I've since him smile that wide, I'd completely forgotten about the dimple in his left cheek. It only ever came out when he was full-on laughing, which was almost never.

Underneath the pic are more of the same; Jake laughing as Ingrid hides from the camera. I wonder what was going on in this moment. Was he always this free with her? Is that what made him fall in love?

I hear a noise and turn around to see Jake standing right behind me.

"What are you doing?"

I freeze and cringe. I couldn't feel more shameful if he'd caught me rubbing his underwear on my face. "Uh ... snooping?"

He takes the photos from me. "At least you didn't try to lie about it, I suppose." His tension leeches into me. "While you're at it, do you want to see my browser history, too?"

With a heavy sigh, he flicks through the pictures and stops on the last one. In it, he's throwing his head back, and Ingrid's face is in his neck. Is she kissing him? Biting him? It's hard to tell.

"So, I take it that's Ingrid?"

They look like any young couple in love, except I know Jake, and being that relaxed with someone wouldn't have come easy. He'd have needed time

to get to know her; feel comfortable with her. She would have needed infinite patience to break through all the static he carries in his brain.

“Yeah,” he says, looking over the image. “That’s her.”

He stands still for a moment, and the way his eyes glaze over makes me wonder what’s going through his head. Does heartache always stop you in your tracks? Does it bend time and take you back to the exact moment someone punched a person-shaped hole in your chest?

“Where were those taken?” I ask, moving a little closer.

“Bali. It was the week we met. Everything was still new, and ... pure.”

“She looks beautiful. What I can see of her, anyway.”

His thumb moves along the side of the photo. “Actually, she had a huge scar on her face from a car accident. That’s why she’s hiding her face. She hated having her picture taken.”

I look back at her, shying away from the camera. “Oh, my God. The poor thing.”

“Yeah,” Jake says with a sigh. “Her face may have only been a four, but she made up for it by having a body that was a full-on ten.”

I flush with anger on her behalf and punch his arm. “What the hell, Jake?”

He pulls away from me. “Damn, Asha, it was a joke. Like everything else, her face was goddamn perfect. I’m not allowed to make fun of the woman who destroyed me?”

I must learn to take everything he says with a grain of salt. I should know by now that he’ll make a joke out of anything, even the woman he loves.

“So, this Ingrid must have been a pretty spectacular woman to crack your flinty facade.”

“She was,” he says, flipping through the pictures again. “Is.”

“Were you being serious yesterday when you said you’re not going to contact her? And what if she does turn up and beg for forgiveness? Could you get over the hurt she caused and take her back?”

He glances at me, eyebrows raised. “Look out, princess. For a moment there, you actually sounded interested.”

“I am interested.”

“But just for the sake of the book, right? Not because you care about my wellbeing.” He turns his back on me and walks over to sit on the edge of the

bed. "I don't know if I'd be willing to risk everything again. Not after how it felt the first time."

He glances over at me, maybe expecting I'd ridicule him for being so open. It's tempting, but honestly, the expression on his face is so raw, I feel sorry for him.

He shrugs. "Loving someone is the easiest thing in the world. Making them love you back is the hard part."

I nod, and he looks away. For a few seconds, he seems lost in thought, staring off to the side of the room, brows furrowed.

"You ever lose someone you truly loved?" he asks quietly.

"Yeah," I say, looking at the floor. "Once."

He nods. "Right. Jeremy. Stupid question."

*Even stupider assumption.*

My next words are out of my mouth before I think them through. "How's he doing these days?"

His focus flicks to me, lips pressed tight. "You really want to know?"

I don't, but some sick part of me enjoys seeing Jake become uptight about his brother. They always had a fierce rivalry, and when Jeremy and I started dating, it only got worse.

"I'm vaguely interested."

In a second, all of Jake's vulnerability is gone. He stands and walks over to the milk crate storage unit, his movements sharp. "You seriously want to discuss my stepbrother? We had a pact to never talk about him again."

"We're not discussing him. I'm just wondering if you two ever mended your relationship."

"No, but that's because he's a garbage human, something that was reinforced to us both on prom night. Or did you block out the part where we found him fucking my girlfriend? Your friend."

My stomach tightens. Just one of the many memories I've blocked out.

I never did find out exactly how long Jeremy had been cheating on me with Shelley, but part of me didn't want to know. I felt stupid enough not realizing they were jumping each other right under my nose. Under Jake's nose, too.

Jake was even more furious than I was. He and Shelley had been dating for a few months, and even though I never got the impression she was the love of

his life, I know he had real feelings for her. I wasn't surprised when Jeremy came to school with two black eyes and a broken nose the next day. In fact, I got sick satisfaction from it. Jake also had his fair share of cuts and bruises, but if you stood him and his brother side by side, you could tell Jake came out on top.

"Is he still in New York?" I ask. "Or did he and his mom move back to Michigan?"

He shoves the collection of pictures back into their box. "I'm not talking about Jeremy with you." He stops and fixes me with a challenging stare. "Are we done here?" The set of his jaw makes me turn away and change the subject.

"I guess. Did you finish the writing exercise?"

He walks back to the living room and slumps into his chair. "Yes. If you consider finishing as having come up with a bunch of crap."

I walk over to the couch. "I'm sure it's not as bad as you think." From everything I've seen so far, he's incapable of writing trash.

I pick up the notebook and read his paragraph aloud. "Once upon a time, a bossy queen tortured a sweet, innocent prince by forcing him to dredge up painful memories from his past. The prince tried to do as he was told, but every word felt like his pen was made of razor blades, and he was slicing the bitter truth straight into his heart. In the end, the prince gave up his excruciating self-evaluation and went and made himself a sandwich. The end."

I lower the notebook. "Really?"

He shrugs. "I'm hungry. It's a swing and a miss."

I rub my temples. Another headache is brewing, and this time it has nothing to do with my injury.

# FOURTEEN

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## Snark and Smart-Assery

I STRIKE MY RED PEN through the tenth consecutive page of Jake's half-hearted ramblings and throw the notebook onto the coffee table. "Dammit, Jake, stop screwing around! I don't want snark and smart-assery! I need you to focus and get in touch with whatever well of awesomeness you usually tap into when you write."

"I don't usually have a fucking audience, and I only do it when the mood hits me! Right now, you're expecting me to get a literary boner with a penis-eating Rottweiler standing over me."

I stand and put my hands on my hips. "Don't call me a dog!"

He stands, too. "Then stop barking at me!"

Our voices ring loudly in the empty space, and I take a breath to calm myself. We're both feeling the pressure of uncharted waters, but I'm the one who's supposed to be steering this ship. Right now, I'm aiming us at a giant iceberg.

"Okay," I say, as I take my seat and try to shed some tension. "Let's both just take a break." I flip to a fresh page and put the notebook back on the table. "Would it help you concentrate if I left the apartment?"

Jake rubs his eyes and sits on the edge of his chair. "I don't know. Maybe." He looks over at me, frustrated. "This writing-on-command thing isn't easy, you know. Have you ever tried it?"

"No," I say, "but I'm not the writer here. You are."

"Bullshit. You've written more words than I ever have."

A mental image of the notebooks in my closet flits through my mind. "Why do you say that?"

"Did you think I never saw you scribbling away during study hall or in classes when you'd breezed through all the work and had time to spare? I always wondered what you were writing about."

I feel creeping discomfort knowing my secret writing habit hadn't been so secret after all. "Nothing. Juvenile stuff." At the time, it had seemed important and big. If I didn't purge how I was feeling into those pages, I felt like I'd

explode. I guess it's similar to what Jake said yesterday about his emotions choking him. Writing it down helped. I just never considered posting my stuff online like he did.

"Having you watch over me is the problem," Jake says. "What if we both tried to write something? We could set a time limit, get as many words down as possible, and then check out each other's work, *quid pro quo* style."

I get simultaneous shivers of excitement and dread. This is a wonderfully terrible idea. "Once again, this is the part where I remind you I'm not a writer."

"Then you have nothing to lose. Just think of it as a technique for motivating your author. Slap some words on a page in an attempt to show me how it's done."

I must admit, the idea of challenging myself around Jake is enticing. Right now, I feel like all the respect in our relationship is tipped in his favor. It might make it easier to whip him if he respects the hand holding the leather.

"Okay," I say, becoming excited about limbering up my creative muscles. "You're on. Give me a prompt."

"How about the day we met?" He seems sincere, but I know there must be more to this. Nothing is ever that simple with Jake.

"Wouldn't that be boring reading considering you were there?"

"True, but I want to see how you remember it. If your truth stacks up to mine."

And there it is. He's testing me.

"You're so sure that your version of our history is the right one," he says, making the challenge clearer. "Prove it. Put it in writing."

I know very well this is a trap, but I'm also aware I can't refuse without him calling me out. So, despite my better judgment, I hold out my hand.

"Deal." He looks at my hand for a second before reaching out and clasping it. We both seem shocked by the contact. Yesterday, we shook hands in the meeting because it was required. This time, it's voluntary and it feels alien and confronting. When we pull back, we glance away.

"Time limit?" I swallow and open a new document.

"Ten minutes." He pulls the notebook off the table and props it up on his thigh. "Prepare to have your ass beaten."

"Title of your sex tape," I say, quoting my favorite comedy show. I watch



him bring up a timer on his phone. “Aaaand, go.”

He taps the start button then leans over the notebook and gets off to a cracking start.

Okay, wow. This is working.

Feeling the pressure, I stare at my blank document and will some words to come.

*Okay, the day I met Jake. Easy. Just close your eyes and remember. All my memories have been pushed into the dark for so long, letting them see daylight again isn't easy. I have the hazy outline of what happened, but that's no good for a descriptive paragraph. I have to remember details, smells, colors, feelings.*

Gingerly, I crack open the door in my mental basement and head down the stairs.

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“Time.”

When Jake's voice cuts through my concentration, my fingers are flying over the keys, and the sudden distraction causes me to hit all the wrong letters. If my writing flow were traffic, Jake just caused a ten-car pileup.

“Just a sec,” I say, backtracking so I can fix the slew of typos. There's no way I'm giving him an opening to criticize my grammar.

I finish up correcting the paragraph and then exhale. “Okay, done.”

I look up at him and hold out my hand. “Show me what you've got.”

He shakes his head. “Oh, no. Ladies first. I insist.”

He gets up and comes to sit beside me before pulling my computer onto his lap and scrolling up to the top of the page. He starts to read it out loud, but I hold up my hand.

“God, no. Too weird. Silent reading, please.”

He nods and turns back to the screen. I feel too embarrassed to watch his reaction, so instead I scan the words again, just to make sure I caught all the mistakes.

*The first time I laid eyes on Jacob Stone, he was peeing on my mother's favorite rose bush. There was a chain-link fence that separated our broken-down row houses, and when I came out onto our lopsided porch, there he*

*was, tackle out, squinting as he gave mom's favorite Arctic White a good watering. He was three with dark, unruly hair, and even darker eyes. He stared at the rose bush as he relieved himself, and the intensity of his expression made it seem as if he was angry with the world.*

*When he'd finished, he fixed himself up and then looked over to examine me with a combination of curiosity and wariness. It was the same way I studied insects in my bug catcher, always trying to figure out if they were harmless or harboring hidden stingers. In nature, as in life, there's a fine line between friends and foes.*

*I was fascinated by the depth of his dark eyes, but his intensity made me nervous. I remember saying a silent prayer that he would like me.*

*After a few moments of frowning scrutiny, Jacob seemed to come to a decision. He stepped forward, tipped his chin at me, and in a clear, strong voice said, 'Hey'.*

*That was it. No introduction. No smile. Just, "Hey."*

*That's all it took for us to be friends.*

*I guess Jake and I read at the same pace, because as I finish, so does he. He pushes the computer back over to me, weird tension in his shoulders.*

*"So, that's how you remember it?"*

*"Yes, because that's how it was."*

*He nods, but the way he grips his hands together tells me he doesn't agree.*

*"Not bad. Decent word count. A solid seven out of ten."*

*It feels so odd that he's the one giving writing feedback and not the other way around.*

*"Okay, then, Dostoyevsky," I say. "Hand over your brilliance."*

*"Sure." He hands me the notebook. I look down at what he's written.*

*Wow. He's filled an entire page.*

*Dear Malevolent Overseer,*

*Right now, I'm writing mindlessly, because I can feel you watching, and there's no goddamn way I'm going to sit here and admit that even direct competition with you isn't opening my wordy floodgates. You'll probably chew my ears off for engaging in this Theater of Deception, but fuck it. I can't give*

*you silk if all I have is sawdust.*

*As for you, this challenge seems to have lit a fire under your ass. You're typing a mile a minute, and you're doing that thing you always did when you were concentrating on something super hard. I call it 'thinking tongue.' You plant your tongue in the corner of your mouth so a little bit pokes out, and if you're really focusing, you kind of chew on it a bit. It looks ridiculous, by the way. It always did. Still, you seem to be getting a decent number of words down, so the tongue thing must be working for you. Maybe I should try it.*

*Honestly, sitting here trying to give my story any sort of coherent beginning is torturous. Did it start when the woman I loved left me? Or is that when it ended? Have all the words I've written since served as the eulogy for a dead relationship? And at what point does the bitterness and loss that I bleed onto these pages enable me to just let it the fuck go?*

*If you could answer any and all of these questions, then you might earn some semblance of gratitude from me. Until then, you need to figure out how the hell to make the clusterfuck of my life into something people want to read, because I sure as hell can't.*

*Anyway, time is almost up, and yet again, I have nothing valid to say. I blame you. It's probably not your fault, but I blame you anyway. That's what you get for being the boss.*

*I think the best course of action right now is for us to go eat. I haven't had breakfast, and I'm starving. You want words? Feed my brain. I'm thinking the 10th Street deli and that you're buying.*

*Let's go.*

I close my eyes and sigh. "Jake ..."

He grabs my computer and shoves it into my bag then hands me my coat and heads toward the door.

"You can yell at me on the way to the deli. I'll have a foot-long sub with everything and a Diet Coke. Got to watch my carbs."

I'd bother arguing if I thought it would do any good, but it's clear this morning's writing session is a bust. Also, with all this talk of food, I have a wicked hankering for a roast beef bagel.

"Fine. I'm letting you do this, but right after lunch, we start afresh."

He pulls the apartment door closed behind us and leads me down the stairs. "Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say, boss lady."



# FIFTEEN

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## A Tax on Hope

JAKE PUSHES AWAY HIS plate and wipes his mouth with a napkin. He ended up eating a foot-long *plus* a cheeseburger, then topped it all off with a piece of apple pie and ice cream. If I ate that much, this restaurant would look like the chest-bursting scene out of *Alien*. As it is, I barely made it through half of my bagel before I unfurled the white flag.

Jake gestures to what's left on my plate. "You going to finish that?"

I roll my eyes and push it across to him, then roll them again when he attacks it like he's been on a month-long hunger strike.

"Where the hell do all those calories go?" I ask, incredulous. "How does a gluttonous pig such as yourself have three percent body fat?"

He smiles around a mouthful of food. "Self-loathing burns a lot of energy."

I cross my arms and mutter, "Tell that to my thighs. I've loathed them for years."

He swallows and wipes his mouth. "Don't do that."

"What?"

"Be the girl with the perfect body who trashes herself so others will contradict her."

I almost laugh. "I've never had a perfect body. That honor went to Eden."

He stares at me. "You're joking now, aren't you? It's hard to tell, but you must be." He takes another bite of food. "Fucking ridiculous statement."

On the table, both of our phones buzz at almost the same time. We pick them up to check the screens, then look at each other.

"Sidney's sent out the press release about the book," I say. Suddenly, my lunch sits in my stomach like a block of wood. "In a few hours, the news will be everywhere."

If possible, Jake looks even queasier about it than I do. "Great. Just in time for this event we're going to tonight. You cool if I drink myself into a stupor?"

Almost immediately, his phone starts buzzing with dozens of notifications

arriving in quick succession.

“Looks like the Feelgood Fans are celebrating,” I say. “That bodes well for sales.”

“Uh huh.” He turns off the phone and places it facedown before taking a sip of water. He looks a little green.

“You okay?”

“Yep.”

He wipes his hands on a napkin and stares at the table. The carcass of what’s left of my sandwich lies forgotten on the plate.

“Jake?”

He wipes his hands again, before gripping his water glass so tightly, I fear for its structural integrity. “I know this is probably just your average Thursday, but don’t you find it goddamn terrifying that they’re announcing a book that hasn’t even been written yet?”

“It’s not something that happens a lot in publishing, no.” I sound more confident than I feel. “But for books by celebrities? Yeah ... it’s a thing. It’s a way to get fans fired up and excited to fork over their cash.”

“Celebrities. Right.” He runs his fingers through his hair, and somewhere in all his hand wiping, he missed a piece of bagel crust that’s now clinging to a few strands. “And what happens if we figure out I can’t write a book? That all I’m capable of is a bunch of poems?”

I can’t drag my eyes away from the hair-crumbs. It’s big. How does he not feel it? “That’s not going to happen. Don’t get discouraged about this morning. It’s day one. Nobody expects you to hit the ground running.”

Not entirely true. Serena, Mr. Whip, and I are expecting big things from him, and the prospect of him not delivering is making me sweat in inelegant places. Of course, if I were more experienced, I’d be more successful drawing words out of him.

He shakes his head then drains his water glass before refilling it. “I don’t know what the fuck I was thinking when I agreed to this.”

“Maybe you were thinking that your words touch people. Over three million people, to be precise.”

Unable to ignore it any longer, I reach over to brush the crumb out of his hair. Super quick, he grabs my wrist and frowns at me.

“The fuck? Personal boundaries, please.”

I twist my arm free. "Says the man who was all over my injured head yesterday without permission. Chill." I pluck the crumb and show him. "See?"

"How is your head by the way?" he asks, raking his fingers through his hair, I'm guessing to dislodge any other rebellious crumbs.

"Never had any complaints." It's out of my mouth before my brain can stop it.

*Oh, sweet Jesus. I just made a blowjob joke in front of Jacob Stone. Just kill me.*

Jake's eyebrows raise. "Wow. Happy for you, but no need to brag."

I cringe. "Eden and I always use that old joke whenever someone mentions head. It's force of habit. But to answer your question, my *cranium* is okay."

He gives me a dubious look. "Uh huh."

We lapse into silence, and I use the opportunity to gesture to our waitress to bring us the check. When I look back at Jake, he's staring out the window with a troubled expression I've seen many times before. In this situation, any normal person would have some self-doubt, but Jake has a habit of strapping his ever-present self-saboteur to a mental gurney and blasting it full of gamma rays.

"Listen, Jake ..." I take a breath before my next sentence, because I haven't given him a compliment in a long time, so the words feel foreign in my mouth. "I know this process is going to be demanding, but second-guessing yourself is pointless. No matter how I feel about you as a person, I *love* your writing, and I know that if we get this book right, it's going to be huge. And I'm not alone in thinking that. It's the reason there was a bidding war. You write from your heart, and people respect that. Hell, even I respect that."

He turns to me. "You love my writing, huh? That sounded almost sincere."

"It was. You may be a jackass, but you're a talented jackass. Now please, stop doubting yourself, because it feels strange and uncomfortable giving you this much positive reinforcement."

"But that's your job now, right?" he says, unwinding a little. "You have to pump me up, like a coach before a big game."

"Yes," I say, with a half-hearted fist pump. "So, you go hit that home run thingy through the goal posts, and make a hole-in-one for the home team ... bucko."

He blinks a few times. "You never did understand a single thing about

sports, did you?”

“Nope. Not at all.” Our waitress places the check on the table, and I grab it. “Now, let’s get out of here. We need to unlock your creativity, so we can score a touchdown with some words.”

“Awful.” He stands and waits as I leave some cash on the table. “Like, hilariously wrong and bad.”

“Title of your second sex tape,” I say as we exit the restaurant.

We head down toward the water and end up in Bridge Park. Without discussing it, we both choose a bench near the river.

“So,” Jake says, turning his face up to catch the sunshine. “What’s your grand plan for unlocking me?”

I put my bag beside us. “I guess the first thing we should do is talk about your lady love.”

He glances at me warily. “You sure you’re up to it? Listening to my issues was never your strong point.”

“That’s filthy slander, but I’ll let it slide. Start at the beginning of your romantic journey, please. Leave nothing out.”

He stares at me for a few more seconds before releasing a noisy breath and looking out at the water. “I met Ingrid in Bali. We were both working at The Zen Farm, because they paid cash to foreigners. After that, we traveled together to Thailand, and then—”

“Wait a second, go back.” He glances at me, confused. “You can’t just say you met her. I need details. When did you first see her? What did you think in those moments? Was there an initial attraction? When did you act on it? You need to make us fall in love with her as much as you did.”

He leans his elbows on his knees and rubs his eyes. “Talking about this stuff isn’t fun, especially not with you.”

“Well, this is our new normal, so you’d better get used to it. If it helps you feel more comfortable, close your eyes. Pretend I’m not here.”

He gives me another doubtful look before crossing his arms over his chest and closing his eyes.

“Take your mind back. Try to relive those past moments and describe them as honestly as you can.”

The muscles in his jaw tighten as he takes a few breaths, and then he begins.



“After high school, I needed to get out of New York. Everything aggravated me, so I took all the money I’d saved in four years working at the bodega and bought the first international ticket I could afford. I tooled around Asia for a while, taking odd jobs that paid me cash under the table, until I got enough money to move onto the next destination. When I got to Bali, I found this place called the Zen Farm. They loved employing foreigners, and when we weren’t working in the garden, the owners ran mindfulness and meditation classes.”

I think I’ve successfully suppressed an urge to mock the idea of Jake existing in such a Zen place, but I must make some kind of noise, because he snaps his eyelids open. “What?”

“Nothing. I just find it hard to ... uh ... so, you meditated?” I try to imagine him there, cross-legged and serene, but it’s not possible. “Is there some kind of brooding, angry meditation I’m not familiar with?”

“They used guided mediation to take us out of our anger.”

“I know. So, you would have been like Mr. Everest to the instructors, right? Did they give up trying to conquer your anger? Did you break them?”

He sits back and gives me a contemptuous look. “Do you want to hear the story or make fun of me?”

I hold up my hands. “As someone once said, I’m hurt you think I can’t do both.” His replying glare is vicious. “Okay, fine. I won’t mock. Please continue.”

With a noisy exhale, he looks over my shoulder. “I was coming back from lunch when I first saw Ingrid. She was standing on the steps of the bunkhouse, looking over at the flower garden. And ...” He looks down. “I was gone. I don’t know what it was about her, but ...” He stares at the flowering bush in front of us. The bees must have gotten the memo that winter was on the way, because they seem frantic as they buzz from flower to flower.

“So, it was love at first sight?”

“If you want to call it something totally corny, then, I guess.”

I get a flash of bitter envy that Jake, one of the most unromantic people I’ve ever met, has had that sort of experience and I haven’t. Life really isn’t fair.

“What did it feel like?” I ask.

He goes quiet for a second, lost in thought. “Have you ever listened to a song, and even though you know you haven’t heard it before, it still sounds

familiar?”

I nod.

“That’s how it felt looking at her. I’ve always felt angry, for as long as I can remember. But that day, when I saw her ...” He shakes his head in awe. “Something shifted; made all the red, angry parts inside me different. The black parts. The gray parts. It made them all ...”

“Yellow?” He looks at me in surprise. I duck my head, ashamed I’m about to give away how often I read his stuff. “One of my favorite poems of yours talks about you being made of storm clouds while she’s sunshine. You called her yellow. You liked being yellow with her.”

He looks down at his hands. “Yeah. She was yellow. She glowed. At least, it seemed like she did, even if I was the only one who could see it.” He sits back a little and watches the bees. “The second I introduced myself ... that was it. I knew she was my soul mate.”

“How?” I ask. Surely there was a lightning bolt or dizzying wave of revelation. Some sort of giant, revelatory event.

He shrugs. “It’s like asking how you know something’s intrinsically right or wrong. There’s a part of us that just knows.”

“And did she feel the same way?”

“I thought she did.”

He goes quiet as a young couple walks past us, holding hands. “Are you going to taunt me now about how pathetic I am?”

If only he knew how pathetic I was when it came to men. I hesitate to expose the full tragedy of my sexual dysfunction for fear he’ll literally bust a gut laughing, and then I’ll have to rush him to the hospital for emergency surgery.

“I’d never think someone was pathetic for falling in love. I actually have slightly more respect for you now. A few years ago, I wouldn’t have thought you capable of a real, loving relationship.”

“Yeah, of course you didn’t. You were too busy believing I was the anti-Christ.”

“That’s not true. At the most I considered you to be Satan’s assistant. You never had the ambition to be head Devil.”

The sun is now beating straight down on us, so I grab my coat and bag, and stand.

“Moving to the shade?” Jake asks, taking the hint.

“You know it.” He understands that, like any true redhead, I can only bear direct sunlight for a short amount of time before I explode into flames.

“One thing that strikes me as odd,” I say as we walk down the esplanade toward a row of benches shaded by trees, “is why you just let her go. You didn’t fight for her at all?”

“You shouldn’t have to fight for love, Asha. That’s the whole point of it. If two people love each other, there shouldn’t be anything that can keep them apart. But that only works if both of them feel the same way, at the same time. And no matter how much of a romantic you are, you have to admit the odds of that happening are woeful.”

I put my gear on our new bench and sit. “You only think that because you’ve been hurt.”

Jake sits beside me, tension creeping into his posture. “No, I *know* that because the one subject I was good at in high school was math.” He turns to me. “A lot of people say they don’t gamble, but of course they do. We all gamble every day. It might not be on blackjack, or the slots, but you bet on whether or not that work deal will pay off, or whether all that expensive gym membership will actually motivate you to be healthier. And if you fall in love, then you’re taking the ultimate gamble. You’re betting with your heart, and that shit’s deadly. Might as well play Russian roulette with live rounds, because let me tell you, most of the time, that heart is lost. Smashed to pieces.”

“That’s pretty pessimistic.”

“Maybe, but it’s the truth. People who fall in love time and again are the ultimate compulsive gamblers. They keep looking for that rush. The *Big Win* that makes them feel like they’re not meaningless meatbags sitting atop a giant rock that’s hurtling through space. And even though they might only get that special feeling for a little while before everything falls apart, they keep going back, because they believe the myth that one day, they’ll meet someone who’ll make that feeling last forever. They’re blind to the fact that they’re more likely to win the lottery than to find true love.”

My throat tightens as I listen to him. Is that what I do? Lose myself in the giddiness of new relationships and then bail when the high wears off? Is my sexual issue just an early warning system that I’m with the wrong person and I should move on?

“So,” I say, trying to clarify my thoughts as well as his. “You think people should give up on love and play the lottery instead?”

He leans back and lays his arm along the back of the bench. "Might as well. Lotteries are a tax on hope, and so is love. Before you even gamble on a 'special someone', you have to dig through the landfill of the dating world and try to find a diamond amid all the garbage; and let me tell you, not all of that stink comes off. Some of it is toxic. Long after you've crawled out of the cesspit of a bad relationship, the smell of all the shit you've been through still lingers."

He stares out at the water, his voice becoming softer. "It sits in your brain, and chest, and reminds you over and over again that you're a loser. And sometimes, the stench is so overpowering, that even when we win at love, we're so damaged by our screaming, festering failures, that we're deaf to the sound of a sweet-smelling soul telling us we've finally hit the jackpot."

He goes quiet, and from his expression, I'm guessing he's thinking about Ingrid again. Clearly, she's the key to unlocking his words.

Just when I think he's done, he leans his elbows on his knees and clasps his hands together. "So, yeah ... for me, *that's* the difference between gambling with money and gambling with your heart. Sitting at a blackjack table, even when the cards don't go your way, you keep putting in chips, because you think the next hand will be different. You're always waiting for the win."

He shakes his head. "With love, most us are mindlessly betting everything we have, over and over, with the certain, unshakeable faith that we're destined to lose."

When he finishes, his cheeks are bright with color. Before I can say anything, he looks at the ground, as if he's embarrassed to have shown so much of himself.

I'm glad he's looking away. Not only am I reeling from his unexpected but completely-brilliant outburst, I'm also turned on and confused, along with about fourteen other emotions that are swirling inside me. I peel off my coat to let out some of my sudden body heat.

When he glances over at me. I do my best to hide my body's unwanted reaction.

Jake narrows his eyes. "What's wrong with you?"

"What? Nothing. Why?"

"Because I just laid out the most anti-romance argument in the history of words, and you're not disputing any of it."

I cross my legs. "Why would I dispute it?"

"Because you're the president, secretary, and fundraising officer for the

Hopeless Romantics' Society."

"So not true."

"Asha, please. Your favorite song is *My Heart Will Go On*."

I want to deny it, but the truth is, when Celine goes into that key change, I can't help but swoon. Every ... damn ... time.

I clear my throat and dig around in my bag until I find a notebook and pen. "Maybe I'm not disputing it because even though it's a pile of cynical horseshit, it's exactly the sort of passionate opinion your book needs."

He leans back. "Seriously?"

"Yes. It's real, and imperfect, and full of flawed-but-fervent logic." I pass him the notebook and pen. "Quick, write it down."

Still seeming confused, he takes the items out of my hands. Then he opens the notebook, rests it on his thigh, and stares at the blank page.

"Jacob, write!"

"Jesus, give me a second, woman. I can't remember all of it."

"Doesn't matter. Just get down the bits you can."

He starts to write, and I sit there and watch, making sure he's not faking it again. To my immense relief, he writes actual decent content instead of filler and excuses.

"You're staring again," Jake says with a frustrated sideways glance. "What did I tell you about watching me write?"

With a sigh, I push off the bench and walk over to the railing near the river.

Okay, we're out of the gate. Now, we just have to keep the momentum going.

I take a few deep breaths, trying to use the crisp river air to purge some of the tension I've been holding in ever since Jake revealed he was the professor. It works, but only a little.

Staring at the calm river, I can almost imagine a time when tolerating working with him becomes easier.

Almost.

## SIXTEEN

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### So Boss

I'M WAITING AT A CROSS-walk when my phone lights up with Joanna's smiling face.

"Hey."

"Hey! All done for the day?"

"Yeah, I'm on my way to meet Eden at work. She's heading straight to the Romance Central event early, and I promised I'd help with hair and makeup. Where are you?"

"Stuck in traffic. Ignore the yelling in the background. All the idiot drivers are out today, and Gerald isn't happy." Gerald is Joanna's chauffeur. He's very blond and quite British, and it's hilarious when he unleashes his impatience with New York traffic.

"*Selfish!*" I hear him yell in the background. "*That's an appallingly uncouth and selfish move, Mr. Mazda! Appalling!*"

I laugh. I think he needs some lessons in American road rage, or at least a few good swear words.

"So," Joanna says. "I'm dying to find out how your first day went. Did you both come out unscathed? Or was there bloodshed?"

I suppress a groan. "Not quite bloodshed, but working with him was exactly as excruciating as I predicted. After a whole lot of bickering, we got a grand total of six-hundred words down for the day. If we keep this up, my stomach will be a magical wonderland of ulcers, and we'll miss every one of our production deadlines."

"Surely things will get better with time. You'll eventually wear away each other's sharp edges."

"We managed to not do that for years when we were teenagers."

"Yes, but you weren't forced to work together every day back then."

"But right now, we can't interact for five minutes without snapping at each other like a couple of cranky Pekingese. I mean, I want to be the bigger person and not bite back, but ... God, Jo ... he makes it impossible." It's easier to get angry with someone than admit they hurt you.

“Uh huh. And how’s that crush going? Bet that’s also making things tough.”

“What?” I jab the cross-walk button a few more times, way harder than before. “I already told you, I never liked Jake in that way —”

“So you keep saying. And even if I believed you, that was before he turned out to be the hot, passionate professor who firmly rezoned your panties into a flood area. Annoying or not, your surly teenage neighbor has grown into a damn sexy man.”

“Jo ...” I want to tell her she’s being ridiculous and way off base, but I can’t deny that my unwanted attraction to Jake is an issue. I considered unloading to Eden last night, but I had to defend my relationship with Jake so many times when we were kids, if I now admit I’m attracted to him after all our animosity, I wouldn’t blame her if she stitched *IDIOT* into all my clothes.

“Look, you don’t have to admit anything to me,” Joanna says, letting me off the hook. “But I think you guys need to find a way to bury the hatchet.”

“Yeah, that’s going to be easier said than done.”

“I know that you’re both pig-headed, but there are ways to purge all that bad blood.”

“Maybe for regular feuds, like the Hatfields and McCoys, the Montagues and Capulets, vegans and bacon lovers ... but me and Jake? Yeah, I have my doubts.”

“Trust me. I once got Taylor Swift and Kanye to have a couple’s colonic together. It can be done. Maybe this event tonight will give you an opportunity to purge some ghosts.”

“It’s a work event, Jo.”

“Yes, but it’s based around Romance Central, and they’re all about bringing people together and making them feel good. Maybe you and Jake will benefit by association.”

“Hmmm.” Sounds unlikely, especially considering my night is going to have more than one stress factor, but I can always try to keep an open mind. “Anything’s possible, I guess.”

“Okay, well, if I can help at all, let me know. I’ll be there around nine.”

“You’re coming? I didn’t know Whiplash was sending other staff.”

“Oh, they’re not. I promised Sarah Jessica I’d be her plus-one.”

“Sarah Jessica? As in Parker?”

“Oh, yeah, you didn’t know? She’s my Godmother. She has a bunch of single girlfriends, so she’s hoping this new matchmaking app might turn around their tragic dating lives. I forgot to ask, did you learn anything more about Jake’s woman today?”

“A little. They met somewhere called The Zen Farm in Bali.”

“Holy crap! I’ve been there. Amazing place. I’ll take you one day.”

I could use a trip there now if it helps me find even a little inner peace.

I hear Gerald say, “We’re here, Miss.”

“Sorry,” Jo says. “About to go into my life drawing class.”

“What? I didn’t know you could draw.”

“I can’t. I’m the nude model. Time to get my naked on. Later!”

I shake my head and drop my phone back into my purse. If only I could live her life for just one day.

She’s right, of course. I need to find a way to deal with Jake, so we can have a more productive working relationship. But apart from full personality transplants, I just don’t see how that would happen.

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Ten minutes later, I head up the stairs to my sister’s office, inside the bustling hub of Pulse magazine.

When I open the door, I’m not surprised to see the usual flurry of activity. The online news and entertainment site employs a few dozen people, and since my sister was promoted out of the clickbait department to take over as head of features, they’ve increased their readership by more than twenty percent.

You’d think that would be a good reason for her hardass boss to be grateful and go easy on her, but as I nod to the receptionist and head into the main area, it’s clear that’s not the case.

I can see Eden in Derek Fife’s office, hands on her hips in what I recognize as her stubborn stance. Derek is matching her, both hands flat on his desk as he chews her out about something or other.

As I get closer, their voices come into focus.

Derek levels his finger at my sister. “I told you to drop the goddamn story, Eden, because it would cost us advertisers, and it did!”

“And I told you that I wasn’t pulling it! Some stories are more important



than money!”

“And some aren’t! Good luck publishing your passion pieces when we go out of business!”

Derek spots me and straightens up. Obviously, he doesn’t care if his staff witnesses their regular spats, but an outsider is another thing.

“Your sister’s here. We’ll finish this later.”

Eden’s face lights up when she sees me lingering awkwardly in Derek’s doorway. “Ash! Hey.” She gestures to me to come in then gives me a quick hug. “I’m running a little late.” Wow, she’s able to go from being mega-pissed to smiley in just a few short seconds. I’ll have to ask her how she does that. “I just have a couple of things to wrap up, and then I’m all yours.”

“No problem.” I notice Derek is watching us. He still looks irritated. I give him an apologetic wave. “Sorry for the intrusion.”

Eden laughs. “Thank God you interrupted us. I have no time to get busted for murdering my boss today.” Derek shoots her a dirty look then takes a seat behind his desk. I guess the verbal sparring match is done for now.

Eden grabs a file off his desk and turns to me. “So, do you want to wait for me in the break room, or ...”

“She can wait here,” Derek says as he grabs his tablet and taps the screen. “I doubt she can be any more annoying than you.”

Eden makes a scoffing sound. “Clearly, you don’t know her very well.”

I swat her arm. “Hey! And just for that, I will prove I’m not as annoying as you by staying here with Derek and not yelling at him.”

Eden looks at me dubiously. “Are you sure? There aren’t any bears with anger issues you can spend time with? No rabid dogs? Sociopathic mountain lions?”

Derek glares at her. “Get out.”

She gives him a warning glance. “Okay, but you’d better be nice and pretend you have manners. I’ll be back in ten.”

She hurries down the hallway toward her office. I look over at Derek. He glances up from his screen and frowns. “Are you going to sit down?”

I check out the leather chair in front of his desk. “No, thanks. I’m good.”

“Suit yourself.” He clicks a button on his desk, and the glass walls of the office instantly go opaque.

“Neat trick.”

“Close the door. We don’t want all the animals who work here gaping at you.”

I do as he asks. When I turn around, he’s staring at me.

“How was your day?”

“Hellish. Yours?”

“About the same.”

He places his tablet on his desk then comes and stands in front of me. He’s so close, the hairs on my arms stand on end. Despite Eden’s endless vendetta against Derek, I’ve always found him attractive. Sure, he’s older than most of the men I’ve gone out with, but he has an air of power that’s undeniably hot.

“I feel like I haven’t seen you for years.” He moves forward, and I instinctively push my back against the door. He places his hand next to my head and gives me a thorough once over, from head to toe.

“It’s been so long since I’ve seen you in person, I’d almost forgotten how beautiful you are,” he says, his voice dropping. “I’ve been thinking about kissing you all day.”

He leans forward to brush his lips against mine. A rush of warmth hits me as I put my hand on his chest. “We can’t. She’ll be back soon.”

“I don’t care.” He pushes his head into my neck, and his warm breath tickles my skin. “We need to tell Eden the truth about us. She’ll understand.”

When he slides his hand into my hair and tightens his fingers, I make a noise and pull him down to kiss me. It’s a cautious we-could-be-caught-at-any-moment kiss, but it still leaves me breathless.

“You’ve met my sister. I’m sure she’ll have no problem with me lying to her for months about the identity of my French lover. Who’d run *Pulse* if she bludgeons you to death with her fake Pulitzer?”

“She’ll get over it. I’m tired of being Phillipe.” He presses against me, and I revel in the weight of him. Why can’t I tear his clothes off and have my way with him like a normal woman? Why is my body already manufacturing tension at the thought of having sex?

When I’d run into Derek at the Paris Book Fair, I knew how much Eden disliked him as a boss, but in a foreign setting, I’d found him charming, attentive, and way hotter than I’d remembered. Dinner together on the first night of the fair turned into the sort of connection I haven’t felt for a long time, and it was clear he felt the same. We ended up spending every spare

moment together. When I realized I was falling for him, I'd prayed to any deity that would listen to allow us to be intimate without my brain interfering.

If only.

Despite him being an amazing, patient lover, my body failed to cooperate. Too ashamed to admit my problem, I pretended to enjoy myself. And now, here I am, stubbornly clinging to the hope that my feelings for him will override my stupid cockblocking anxiety issues.

"I want you," he whispers. "I miss you."

"I know." I stroke his handsome face. "I'm sorry. Work is ... crazy."

"How's your new author?"

"Talented, but infuriating." I haven't told him the full story about me and Jake. It's too exhausting to go into that much detail. "Today felt a hundred years long, and it's not over yet."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Buy me copious amounts of grain alcohol and Valium?"

"Done." He gives me a soft kiss, and for a moment, I forget about all the ways I'm letting him down.

He pulls back and leans his forehead against mine. "You're one of the most intelligent, driven women I've ever met, and I know you love what you do. I have faith you can figure out how to make even the most untenable situation work."

Yeah, any situation that doesn't involve sex is a walk in the park. Figuring out how to be intimate, however ...

There's a knock on the door, and Derek and I step apart before he grumbles, "Come in."

The door opens to reveal Eden's best work buddy, Toby. He looks at me in surprise. "Hey, Ash! I didn't know you were here. How are you?"

"Great, Tobes. And you?"

"Great!" He smiles down at me with way too much interest, like a giant, cardigan-wearing Golden Retriever. I've always known Toby had a crush on me, but I never encouraged it for the exact reason I shouldn't have let things develop with Derek: He works with my sister, and the last thing I need is to be the source of any kind of awkwardness between my sister and her colleagues.

"Waiting for Eden?" Toby asks.

I nod. "Yep."

He glances at Derek. "In here?"

Derek levels him with a glare. "Did you have a reason for being here, Jenner?"

"Oh, yeah." Toby holds out a folder. "These are my stories for next week." Derek is old-fashioned when it comes to running his online magazine. He still insists all the writers submit their drafts in paper form. Eden thinks it's because he loves the power of wielding his red editing pen like a weapon. She often conflates Derek's overbearing management style with the theory that he's somehow compensating for having a small dick. I can attest that she's very wrong.

Derek takes the folder and peruses the documents inside. "Do you want a medal for doing your job? Get the hell out of here."

Toby nods then looks at me. "See you tonight?"

I give him a smile. "Absolutely. Can't wait."

Toby has been moonlighting at Romance Central as their technical director, and is the coding genius behind the new matchmaking app they're launching. Eden has always said he's the smartest person she's ever met, and now, he's proven it. Even before the app hits the market, he's being hailed as the next big programming superstar.

As Toby goes, he gives me one last wave. When he's gone, I close the door and turn to Derek.

"How is that you're so sweet to me and such a hardass to your employees?"

He takes my hand and kisses it. "I learned a long time ago that no one respected me when I was nice. It's screwed up, but it's a fact."

"But they think you're a dick all the time. Eden has a theory that you get your grump on every morning by kicking puppies before breakfast."

He shrugs. "I don't care if my employees think I'm an asshole. My family and friends know I'm not. You know I'm not."

In France, we'd had long discussions about how his marriage had broken down, and I was surprised that he was still on good terms with his ex-wife. They were high school sweethearts who simply fell out of love. No cheating. No animosity. Further proof that in a world of petty men, he's a rare exception.

He gives me one more kiss before throwing Toby's folder of articles onto his desk. "Do you think there's any way we can blow off this event tonight

and just spend some time alone?”

I shake my head. “Even if I didn’t have to babysit my author, Eden would kill me if I didn’t go. And you’re one of the major sponsors for the event, so there’s no way you can’t make an appearance.”

He nods but doesn’t look happy about it. “I’d rather slice off my ears than attend, but if I don’t go, your sister may actually nail me to my office door.” He puts his arms around me. “Of course, if we come clean about our relationship, I could go as your date. I’d be able to pick you up, bring you flowers ... dance with you. That alone would make going worthwhile.”

The romantic inside me swoons. I can just imagine how handsome Derek would be, all decked out in his tux. I get a mental image of us dancing in slow motion, all eyes on us as we gaze at each other.

I stroke the back of his hair. “Your text earlier said that you’re staying in Manhattan tonight?”

He smiles. “I’ve booked a suite at the hotel.”

“Then, maybe after you’ve fulfilled your sponsor obligations, and I’ve finished with my author, we can leave the party early. Eden will be staying over at Max’s, so she won’t notice if I don’t come home.”

“I love the way your mind works.” He kisses me, slow and sweet. Making out with him is fabulous. It’s when we go further that I get worked up. Which is why I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s not going to get better unless I attack the issue head on. So, tonight, I’m determined to make love to this man until all my intimacy issues pack up and go home. I don’t care how long it takes. I need this relationship to work, because if a man as amazing as Derek can’t check all my boxes, then what hope do I have?

There’s a knock on the door, and we break apart right before Eden enters.

She frowns at us. “Why’s the door closed?”

Derek gives me a look, and for a second I’m terrified he’s going to expose us. But then he composes his face into an expression of disdain.

“I was trying to keep out people who annoy me, but clearly you didn’t take the hint.”

Eden gives him a sarcastic smile. “Stop making me fall in love with you.” She holds up her makeup bag. “Okay, sis, let’s hit the bathroom, so you can work your magic.” She waves at Derek. “See you tonight, boss.”

“Yeah, see you then.” He glances at me. “Nice to see you, Asha.”

The affection in his gaze gives me goosebumps. “You, too, Derek. See you

around.”

As we leave his office and head toward the ladies’ room, Eden nudges me with her elbow.

“Okay, so ... tell me about today. How awful was it? Did you end up murdering Jake? And if so, do you need help hiding the body?”

I laugh then launch into the details of my horrible first day. Eden listens intently and makes appropriately snarky, sympathetic comments in all the right places.

# SEVENTEEN

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## Burn Book

I GRUNT AS I DESPERATELY try to zip up my vintage Valentino dress. The damn thing has stuck halfway up, and no matter how much I contort myself trying to budge it, I can't.

"Come on, baby," I say. "I've been saving you for a special occasion. Don't do this to me, tonight of all nights."

It's a gorgeous, sapphire-blue floor-length gown I found for a bargain basement price at one of my favorite retro stores, but alas, zippers in second-hand fashion are notoriously unreliable. Usually, I'd have Eden on hand to assist me, but she's already at the event helping Max set up. Another bummer is that this is the only formal gown I own, so if I can't get it to zip, I may be arriving in my underwear.

"Come on ... you ... sonovabitch!" I tug it so hard, my arm spasms. "Ahhh. Damn it!"

I slump onto the bed and massage the twitching muscle. This night was supposed to be a time for me to leave the tension of the last few days behind. Now I have to top off the stressful day I've had with Jake with an equally stressful night.

I stand and stretch my arm in preparation for zipper-tug, 2.0. When I turn, I catch my appearance in the mirror. My hair is swept up and fabulous, and my makeup is on point. All I need is to get this gorgeous dress zipped up, and I can be on my merry way.

I hope Sid organized a tux for Jake. If he arrives in jeans and a t-shirt, Eden will hit the roof.

I reach behind me to grab the zipper again and pull with all my strength, but it still refuses to budge.

*Okay, bitch. Now, it's personal.*

I grab a wire hanger and slide the hook into the hole on the zipper. "Let's see you resist this." Even though I gain some extra leverage, the zipper remains stuck. I'm in the middle of an impressively long string of curse words when my phone rings.

It's Jake. I roll my eyes and put him on speaker.

“What?”

“Wow. Is that any way to greet your date?”

“You’re not my date. You’re my responsibility.”

“And also your favorite author.”

I change my position and pull the zipper from another angle. Still, nothing. “Jake, I know that what I’m about to tell you is true for every moment we interact, but believe me when I say, I’m not in the mood for your crap tonight.”

“And yet, you’re professionally obligated to put up with it. What time do you want me to pick you up?”

I laugh. “Never. I’ll meet you there.”

“Sidney wants us to arrive together. Photo ops, remember? I’m not wearing this tux for my health.”

I shake my head and press my lips together as I give the zipper another yank. “Then I’ll meet you at the Starbucks near the venue in half an hour.” *Providing I’m fully clothed by then.*

“Yeah, that doesn’t really work for me. I’ll pick you up at your place. Sid’s organized a car for us.”

The zipper moves a tiny bit then stops again. “Jacob, I don’t care if Sid has organized an F14 flyover by the British Royal Marines. We’re not going together. This isn’t a date. Do not come here.”

It’s bad enough that he’s invaded my place of business. I’ll be damned if he invades my home, too.

He pauses for a second then says, “Too late.”

There’s a loud knock at the door.

No. No way.

“Jacob.”

“Sorry. Gotta go. Have to pick up my date.”

The line goes dead as another loud knock echoes through the apartment.

“Jesus,” I mutter. “Now I know how the three little pigs felt.”

I stride down the hallway and look through the fish eye in the door. It’s dark.

“Do you have your hand over the peep hole?”



“No.”

“How do you even know where I live?”

*“I have my ways.”* I hear a rustling sound, and then Jake’s voice is softer. *“Also, there’s an elderly woman out here with no teeth giving me the stink eye. She has a broom. Open up.”*

I have two elderly neighbors: Mrs. Eidleman who’s almost as cool as my nan, and Mrs. Levine, who likes to police our hallway like it’s a demilitarized zone during the Cold War.

Through the door, I can hear Mrs. Levine’s crotchety voice. *“What are you doing there? How did you get in here? Are you George Clooney?”*

*“No, ma’am.”*

She’s also a little senile.

*“Rock Hudson?”*

*“No, ma’am.”*

*“Are you sure? You look like Rock Hudson. With a beard.”*

*“Ma’am, I’m sure I’m not Rock Hudson. He’s dead. He has been for a long time.”*

*“What? Why you little creep. I’m calling the cops.”*

Also, she’s paranoid.

There’s another, more frantic knock. *“Asha, open the damn door. I’m not sure what the penalties are for not being Rock Hudson, but I don’t want to find out.”*

I roll my eyes and unlatch the chain. When I pull the door open, my breath catches in my lungs.

Jake’s there, looking tall and lean. He’s smoothed down his hair and even trimmed his beard. But it’s the tux that does me in. The thing fits like it was made for him, and the crisp white shirt and sleek black tie make him look like every James Bond fantasy I’ve never had until now.

“Uh ...” He frowns as he takes in my appearance, and his assessment is lengthy and obvious. His gaze finally ends on the neckline of my gown which is gaping because of the open zipper.

“Uhhh,” he says, finally and keeps looking at me, then away, as if he wants to avert his gaze but can’t. It gives me a thrill. I’m used to Jake having an intensity about him, but the heat in his gaze is new.

“I ... uh ...”

I don't think I've ever seen him lost for words before.

I wait a few seconds, and when he's still non-verbal, I sigh in frustration. “Are you going to stand there all night and stare?”

He moves forward and leans on the door frame. “I was considering it. Why? Would that be weird for you?”

“At least blink.”

“I'm trying, but that's quite a dress you're almost wearing.”

I grab his arm and pull him inside before closing the door behind him.

“Since you've inflicted yourself on me, at least be useful and help with the zipper.” I turn my back to him.

There's a pause, and then I feel him behind me. “Asha, I'm flattered you want to strip for me, but we don't have time right now. Maybe later.”

I push my elbow back into him. “Zip me *up*, Jake.”

“That's not nearly as much fun, but okay.” He grabs the wire hanger and hands it to me. “Here's your first problem. You're supposed to remove these things before getting dressed.”

Instead of attacking the zipper, he sidesteps me and heads into the living room. “So, this is your place.” He moves around the room, taking everything in. “Not what I expected.”

“Well, I have walls, so ...”

“Honestly,” he says, examining the knick-knacks on the sideboard. “I thought that by now you'd be married to some sleazy hedge fund manager and be living on Park Avenue. Finish the upward mobility you started in high school. Isn't this a little low-brow for you?”

“It's what I can afford.”

He does a quick assessment of the kitchen and bathroom then proceeds to head toward my room.

“Oh, no.” I rush to stand in the doorway and puff out my chest to seem as intimidating as possible. “No way. This is my private space.”

He steps forward and looms over me. “Are we talking about your bedroom now? Or the vast swath of cleavage you're thrusting toward me?”

I hug the dress to my chest. “I could fix the cleavage if you'd zip me up.”

“I’ll take that under advisement.”

There are many reasons I don’t want Jake in my room, but even more than the fear that he’ll discover the extensive range of sex toys in my nightstand is the terror that he’ll spy the stack of notebooks sitting on the chair in the corner. Our morning writing spree spurred me on to re-read my old stories, so I pulled them all down when I got home. To my surprise, I discovered they were better than I remembered.

However, at the bottom of the pile are a few notebooks I didn’t get around to reading, and they’re the ones I haven’t let anyone else see. During my dark days, I spilled my most private thoughts onto their pages. A lot of those bitter and thorny sentiments were about Jake.

“Be honest,” Jake says. “You’re barring me from your bedroom in case I find the corpses of all of the men you’ve drained after having your way with them, right?”

He couldn’t be more wrong. I’ve never had a man in my bed. All my failed sexual exploits have happened elsewhere.

“Actually, I just want to keep you out of there in case you get the urge to try on my dresses.”

His face drops. “That was *one time* when I was six, and in case you’ve forgotten, I looked fucking fine in that little white number.” His eyes widen. “Jesus, is that your old bed?”

Before I can stop him, he slips past me into the room. In a flash of panic, I quickly grab my robe and drape it over the pile of notebooks while he takes a seat on my well-loved double.

“I can’t believe you still have this.”

Seeing him there gives me a pain in my head. When I blink, I get a ghost image of a much younger Jake in the same position.

“Huh.” He sits there for a few seconds, a perplexed expression on his face. “It seemed bigger.”

“That’s because you used to be smaller.” *Much* smaller.

Back then, we could both lie there and still have room left over. Now, it would barely fit him alone.

I swallow as I’m hit by a memory of us hugging in that bed. It was my ninth birthday, and I’d buried my head in his skinny chest and cried so hard, I never thought I’d stop. He didn’t try to shush me or encourage me to ‘let it all out’. He just held me. If it hadn’t been for how he’d wrapped me in his arms,

I would have fallen apart that night.

“A lot of good memories in this bed,” he says quietly. “Okay, that came out creepy, but you know what I mean.”

I do. Nothing sexual ever happened with Jake there. Not physically, anyway.

“It’s held up well.” He runs his hand across the shelving that makes up the headboard. Nan gave me this bed when I was just a toddler. In the place of a regular headboard, this one has bookshelves. Over the years it’s housed my most prized possessions. Once upon a time it held pictures of Jake and our collection of rescued treasures. Now it’s full of my favorite books, most of them romance novels.

I cringe as Jake peruses the titles, bracing for the barrage of mockery that’s no doubt coming my way. If I thought Devin gave me crap about my preferred genre, then Jake will eviscerate me.

“Big Lainey Bergerac fan, are you?” He touches the spines of my favorite series. “I loved the first two books, but the third made me so frustrated, I wanted to throw it across the room.” He pulls one out and flips through it. “The final book in a trilogy is supposed to wrap everything up, not introduce a bunch of new plot points and characters. It felt like she was setting up an entirely new trilogy rather than concluding an old one.”

When he turns, I have no doubt he can read the shock on my face. “You don’t agree?”

“I do, it’s just ... uh ... You’ve read Lainey Bergerac?”

He slides the book back into place. “Read her, loved her. Maybe written a few pages of fanfiction here and there.” He says it with zero sarcasm or shame.

My gob is well-and-truly smacked. Right now, Zeus himself could come down from Olympus and dance naked in front of me, and it would be the second most surprising thing I’d witnessed today. Lainey’s books are wildly popular, but due to them having a female protagonist and an epic romance, her audience is primarily women. That Jake has not only read them but loved them, is a massive surprise.

Jake frowns. “Are you having a stroke? Why aren’t you breathing?”

I shake it off. “I’m just weirded out that we have the same taste in books.”

“Why? It’s not the first time. We both binged on Harry Potter when we were ten. Also, Terry Pratchett and Douglas Adams. I’d be more surprised if we didn’t have books in common.”

“Yes, but unlike all those others, Lainey’s books are romances.”

“So? Most classic literature is about epic love. *Great Expectations*, *Gone with the Wind*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights*.” He narrows his eyes. “Wait, are you being sexist and implying men shouldn’t read romance?”

“Not at all. I’d love for men to read romance, but most don’t.”

He lies down on the bed and puts his hands behind his head. His feet hang over the edge. “Maybe we should. There’s a reason women are so drawn to those stories, and if we figure out what it is, we might have a chance at understanding them more.” He glances at me. “Why do you enjoy them so much?”

I struggle for a moment, totally unprepared for this conversation. “I ... well ...” I take a breath. “It’s how they make true love seem inevitable. Like some people were just born to be together, and no matter what obstacles are thrown in their way, they’ll find a way to overcome them.”

He stares at me, unblinking. “Is that so?” There’s a challenge buried in his tone, but I don’t take the bait. “Is that how things are between you and your Frenchman?”

*I wish.* My life would be so much easier right now if that was the case.

“I take it from your earlier rant about the hopelessness of love that you don’t believe in destiny.”

He stares up at the ceiling. “I used to. But after everything that went down with Ingrid ... I think people who were born to be together can still end up alone.”

If life were a romance novel, Ingrid would realize she couldn’t live without Jake and move heaven and earth to be with him, and the feelings I have for Derek would translate into a sex life so spectacular, it would make the angels weep. But life isn’t like a romance novel, no matter how much we wish it was.

Jake swings off the bed and stands. “So, do you have a favorite genre? Dark? Rom-com? Men in kilts? Vampires?”

I check his expression for mockery, but the only thing I find is curiosity. “Uh ...”

He runs his finger along the spines of some of my other titles. “Let’s see what we have here. *Masterful*, *Only His*, *Blissful Submission*, *Train Me*.” My face is getting redder every second. “So, you like BDSM?”

Again, I wait for the mockery.

He clocks my skepticism. "I'm not judging you, Ash. Your fetishes are nothing to be embarrassed about. Except, of course, if your kink is being humiliated, in which case you should be thoroughly ashamed of yourself, you filthy little pervert."

He says it with so much sincerity, it takes me a second to register the joke. It's so unexpected, I come dangerously close to snorting. "How long have you been saving that one up, waiting for a chance to use it?"

He fights a smile. "Just thought of it now. Hand to God." He stands and puts the books back where they came from, then steps forward, close enough that the air between us feels charged. "But seriously, if you ever desire a good, solid spanking, I'm here for you. God knows, you deserve one."

Out of nowhere, my whole body flushes. I try to keep my face neutral to hide it, but I can feel every inch of skin, from my cleavage to my forehead, go red hot.

Jake notices, and he seems both surprised and pleased. "Interesting."

I look at the floor, beyond embarrassed. Yes, I like to read BDSM, among other things, and yes, the thought of a man dominating me turns me on, but until this second, I hadn't considered trying it in real life. But now that Jake's towering over me with those dark, penetrating eyes, the mental images are coming thick and fast.

*Jake spinning me around, lifting my dress. Jake curling his fingers into my hair as he swats my bottom with an open palm. Jake ordering me not to move as he slides my panties down my legs.*

*Jesus, brain, stop. Not here, not now. Certainly, not in front of him.*

I pull myself together and glance at Jake. Not a good move. He's staring at me in a way that makes me feel completely naked.

"I know what you want, Asha. Turn around." His voice is quiet, but it reverberates through every muscle and bone.

What the hell is happening? Does he really intend on spanking me? And if so, am I going to let him?

He stares me down. "Face the mirror. Now."

I swallow hard then slowly turn to face my dresser. He steps closer, and I squeeze my eyes shut as my whole back explodes in goosebumps.

"Stay still." I feel hands gripping my dress.

*Oh, God. He's going to do it. He's actually going to spank me, and there's a very good chance I'm going to enjoy it.*

Mind still reeling, I open my eyes and watch his gaze fall to my back. Then, my dress shifts as he yanks on the zipper.

He tries again, but still, nothing. "Yeah, this thing isn't going up." I take in a breath as he pulls it all the way down, exposing my whole back.

"Relax," he says, quietly. "I was joking about the spanking. Maybe. For now. But hang tight while I dominate the fuck out of this zipper." He leans around me and grabs one of the vanilla candles off the dresser. "This might work." There's a weird sensation, and from his movements, I figure out he's rubbing the candle along the metal teeth. When he's done, he tries again. There's a sharp tug, and then a satisfying sound as the zipper slides all the way up.

I'm relieved about being fully dressed, even if my heart is still pounding from the thought of him putting his hands on me.

Goddamn this crazy stupid crush.

*This is the real reason you two stopped being friends, my inner voice whispers. Everything else is just an excuse.*

I try to push the thought away, but it persists. That's the thing about the truth. You can never completely bury it, no matter how hard you try.

In grade school, no one cared that my best friend was a boy. That we had differing genitalia was never an obstacle. But everything changed during puberty. One way or another in life, genitalia always becomes an obstacle.

*Words to live by.*

I push out a breath and mutter a thanks to Jake.

"Anytime." When I glance up, he's staring at me in the mirror. "Don't take this the wrong way, because you're still one of the most annoying people I've ever met, but ..." We lock eyes. "You look ... good." He screws up his face and lets out a tight sigh. "Amazing, in fact. Beautiful."

A chill runs through me. I don't think Jake has ever said I look beautiful before. I could get used to it.

"Well," I say. "Take this with a grain of salt, because if your ego expands any further we're going to have to move to a bigger planet, but ... so do you."

There's a weird shift in the air, and I get a flash of what it would have been like if things had gone differently in the past. For so many years, I've blamed him for everything that went wrong with us, because it was easier than

confronting the flaws inside myself. But when he looks at me like he is right now, and I can see the pain that lives behind his eyes, I curse myself for not making different choices.

I know we all lie to ourselves sometimes because the truth scares us, but while some lies are inconsequential, others can be such whoppers, they change the bedrock of who you are. The lies I've been telling myself about Jake are total foundation-shifters, and I know that before long, they're going to cause an earthquake.

"What happened to us, Ash?" he says, softly. "We used to think we'd be friends forever. We dreamed so big it hurt our brains. And now ... The biggest thing we have in common these days is our anger, and I have no goddamn clue how to change that."

A wave of vertigo hits me. I feel like I'm standing on a precipice, and as much as I don't want to fall, I know I'm going to. How is it possible to feel so many conflicting emotions about a single man? How can I love him and hate him at the same time? How can I want to never see him again and want to beg him to never leave my side?

If only there was a way to reset our relationship. Erase all the hurtful things we've said and done and start over. Reboot all our regrets.

Jake looks down for a second, and rubs his hand over his jaw. "Listen, Asha, I —"

He's cut off by loud knocking.

"Police. Open up!"

I drop my head back. *Damn you, Mrs. Levine.*

"Hold that thought," I say, before turning toward the door. "I'll be right back. Don't touch anything."

I head down the hallway and pull open the door to reveal a black, female police officer. Poking my head out, I can see her partner working the doors at the other end of the hallway.

"Evening, ma'am," she says with a nod. "There's been a report of a strange man roaming the building, bothering residents. Just wondering if you've seen him. The suspect is described as —" She reads from her notepad. "Six-three, dark hair, muscular build, wearing a tuxedo." She looks at me. "Seen anyone resembling that description? And if so, can you point him in my direction?" She lets out a hearty laugh that makes me smile.

"I'm sorry you were called out on a false alarm, officer. Old Mrs. Levine saw my friend Jake in the hallway and ... well, she spooks easily and has the



local precinct on speed dial.”

She glances toward Mrs. Levine’s door then back to me. “I see. So, this Jake person is in your apartment?”

“Yes.”

She lowers her voice. “Ma’am, if you’re in distress or being held against your will, blink twice.”

I frown. I’m in a little distress, but it’s not the kind she’s talking about.

“I’m fine, really. This is just a misunderstanding. Look, I’ll show you.” I call out. “Jake? Can you come out here, please?”

After a few seconds, Jake steps out into the hallway and walks toward us. I hear the female officer mutter under her breath, “Dear God in Heaven.”

He stops next to me and nods to her. “Officer. Everything alright?”

The female officer stares at him. “Oh, yes. Everything’s fiiiine. Are you two married?”

I almost choke on my tongue. “God, no.”

“Dating?”

“No.”

“So, friends?”

“No,” Jake says, emphatically.

“Huh,” the police woman says. “So, you’re single.”

Jake frowns. “Technically.”

“I see.” She stares up at him in awe.

*Yep, I sympathize, lady.*

“Well,” she says, smiling. “I’d better move along, then. Sorry to disturb you folks. You have a nice night, okay?”

After she leaves, I close the door and turn to Jake.

His hands are in his pockets and his shoulders are hunched. “We need to get moving. Grab your stuff.”

I take in his change in tone. “Wait, are you pissed Mrs. Levine called the cops on you? Because it will probably happen again. Next time, just say you’re Rock Hudson and be done with it.”

He doesn’t look at me. “Asha, we’re running late. Let’s go.”

“Okay.” I head into my bedroom and slip on my shoes, but when I go to grab my clutch, I stop short. The stack of notebooks is uncovered, and one of them is lying on the bed.

*Oh, God, no.*

I remember the day I’d scrawled the title onto the front cover with a thick black Sharpie. “100 THINGS I HATE ABOUT JACOB STONE.” It was the day I’d finally accepted that my former best friend was gone forever. I’d bawled my eyes out. I’d cried not only because I missed him so much everything hurt, but because I knew ... I *knew* I could have fixed it if I’d tried. If I’d done things differently. If I’d stopped being afraid.

“I’m surprised you could only come up with a hundred.” I turn to see Jake standing in the doorway, his face half covered in shadow. “Or is there a sequel in that pile somewhere?”

A hum of anxiety starts in my veins. This book was for my eyes only. It was a private confessional. Self-hypnosis.

“How much did you read?”

He goes over and picks it up. “I’ve only skimmed it, but that was enough.” He grips it so hard, the cover warps. I want to snatch it from him and burn it, but the damage is already done.

“Jake, I can explain.” *Can you?* a bitter voice whispers. *You can barely admit the truth to yourself, let alone him.*

He flips the book open. “Number one: I hate his face. The way he’s able to make every expression some kind of sneer. Two: His eyes. Not even brown anymore. Just purest black, like his soul. Three: His stupid, smart mouth. Always spewing putdowns and sarcasm. I want to slap him most days. Smack his words back behind his lips. Make him bleed.” He glances up at me. “This goes on for a while. You don’t address my fingernails, but other than that, you cover all my physical traits.”

“Jake —”

“Don’t stop me now. After that you really hit your stride.” He flips forward a few pages. “Number twenty-seven: I hate the way he stares at me, like a serial killer dreaming about peeling the skin from his victim. Doesn’t he know he’s already flayed me to the bone? How can he not understand that because of him, I’m just a giant walking wound?”

“Jake, stop.”

“Wait, I’m getting to my favorite one.” His anger is showing in his voice, and his movements are jerky and stiff. “Number thirty-three: I hate his heart.

His black, withered, toxic heart that is incapable of love and compassion.” He pauses and clenches his jaw, eyes trained on the page. “No wonder he doesn’t have any friends. Who the hell would want to hang around with that worthless, remorseless monster?” My throat closes when he looks up at me. I’ve seen him in pain before, but nothing like this. His expression is a portrait of hurt and betrayal.

“Worthless, remorseless monster.” He says it softly, with an air of reverence. “Wow. I don’t think I’ve ever really understood how much you hated me until now.”

I take a step forward, desperate to explain. “Jake, that’s not what I ... All that stuff, it’s not even real. When I wrote it, I was young, and bitter, and ... *stupid*. It felt good to just spew garbage onto the pages. It helped me breathe. Didn’t you ever write nasty things about me during that time?”

“No.” He drops the book onto the bed. “I was angry with you. I never hated you.” He stares at me for a few seconds, as if he’s going to say something else. Then he breaks eye contact and turns toward the door. “Let’s go. We’re going to be late. The car is waiting outside.” He walks out into the living room.

“Jake ... wait ...”

By the time I grab my bag, and hurry into the hallway, the front door is open, and he’s gone.

# EIGHTEEN

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## Eventful

AS WE HEAD INTO THE hotel, I struggle to keep up with Jake's long strides. The ride over was quiet and tense. I apologized several times and tried to draw him into conversation, but he just stared out the window and gave one-syllable answers.

I feel sick that he read that journal, but right now we have a job to do, and I intend to make sure we do it well.

I check Sid's email and move as quickly as my heels allow. "Sid's advice for photos is to not move too much. You don't have to smile, but if you do, make sure it's sincere. If you're asked questions, only answer the ones you're comfortable with. If you choose to not answer, be polite about it."

"Got it."

"If you have any problems, just look at me, and I'll intervene."

He stops suddenly and holds out his arm for me. I look at it in surprise.

"Just take it," he says. "Watching you gallop after me like a baby giraffe is annoying."

I slip my arm through his and ignore the tingles that break out as we continue at a more subdued pace.

"Eden and Max have also included you in some fun activities, and Sid wants you to participate. There'll be photographers circling all night, and he wants you to be in the mix."

"Great. Do I have to look like I'm enjoying myself?"

"Preferably."

"Then you'd better keep the alcohol coming."

When we reach the red carpet outside of the ballroom, I'm staggered by the number of people milling around. There's a sea of gowns and dinner suits, and the excitement and energy is palpable.

"Shit," Jake says under his breath. "You want me to wade into that? I can't undergo some nice waterboarding instead?"

I squeeze his arm. "You'll be fine. Just stay calm."

“So I shouldn’t stare at them like a serial killer dreaming about ripping off their skin? Damn.”

His sarcasm is at an all-time high, and I can’t say I blame him. If I’d read something that nasty about myself, I’d be pissed, too. It’s just one more layer of crap we’ve never talked about, and it feels like our tumultuous emotional weather pattern is brewing into a hurricane.

When one of the red-carpet wranglers sees us, she guides Jake to stand in front of a Romance Central marquee. As soon as he’s there, the flashbulbs go berserk. There are paparazzi everywhere, and Sid must have worked his magic in priming them about Professor Feelgood, because right away, people are yelling his name.

*“Jacob! To your left! Turn left, pal! Come on, Jacob!”*

*“Professor Feelgood! Right here! More to the right! Great! Hold it there!”*

After some initial squinting at the barrage of flashes, Jake handles the attention surprisingly well. He composes himself and slides his hands into his pockets like a pro. For someone who’s never been in this kind of environment before, I’m impressed with how patiently he poses and takes direction.

*“This way now! Jacob! Over here!”*

I hover behind him, trying to seem professional and in control. Inwardly, I’m freaking out. Everywhere I look, there are famous people. Right now, Jake is sharing the red carpet with three Oscar winners, two-Grammy Award-winning recording artists, and an ex-first lady. I knew Max had a bunch of high-profile clients, but this is ridiculous.

“Jacob! Can we have a picture with you and your girlfriend? Bring her over.”

I get ready to tell them I’m not his girlfriend when Jake says, “Get over here.” He takes my hand and draws me into his side. “Sid specifically said he wanted pictures with both of us, so pretend I’m one of the guys from your romance novels rather than a monster and smile.” He winds his arm around my waist, and the warmth of his hand gives me goosebumps.

Contrary to his earlier statement, Jake stares at each photographer as if he’d like to murder them. Luckily, intense and pissed-off works for him, and I don’t miss the cavalcade of approving looks he gets from passers-by.

Finally, when my cheeks are starting to ache, a staff member leads us to the huge double doors of the ballroom.

As we step inside, we gape at the room in awe.

“Damn,” Jake says, taking it all in.

The room is teeming with activity, and everywhere I look, there’s something new and fabulous. Up in the ceiling, a dozen performers dangle from long lengths of silk; around the outside of the room is a digital archery range emblazoned with neon cupids, and at the front is a huge stage with an orchestra and a dance floor. All in all, it’s like a mixture between a high-tech carnival, a dinner club, the bat cave, and Cirque du Soleil.

“Unbelievable,” Jake says.

I look over at him, and for once it’s easy to see the boy he used to be within the framework of the man he is now. One time they were having fireworks in a park near our neighborhood, and Jake and I crawled out onto my porch roof to watch them. It was the first time either of us had seen fireworks, and the expression on his face back then mirrors how he looks now.

When he notices me staring, he frowns. “What?”

“Nothing. It’s just ...”

He turns to me. “Just, what?”

*Every now and then I get a flash of my childhood best friend, and it leaves me with a pang of longing so severe, it takes my breath away.*

“Nothing. Never mind.”

He stares for a second then shakes his head and turns away. “So, who the hell are all these people?”

“Romance Central clients. A bunch of New York singles. People looking for love.”

“And they think an app is going to help them find it?”

“They’ve probably tried everything else. What do they have to lose?”

“Everything.”

My attention is drawn to a tall man in front of us who looks familiar. When he turns, I’m shocked to see that it’s Toby. I’m used to seeing his face framed by his long, shaggy hair and messy stubble, and I’ve never seen him in anything but skinny jeans and cardigans. But sometime between when I saw him this afternoon and now, he’s had a haircut, and his face is freshly shaven. Not only that, he’s tugging at the collar of a very slick dinner suit.

Objectively, he’s a total babe.

“Toby! Hey.”

He sees me and smiles. "Hey, Ash! You look incredible, as usual."

"You, too. Did you have a makeover?"

He glances down at himself. "Uh, yeah. A friend said I needed to be more sophisticated for tonight." He gestures to the suit. "Hence this monstrosity. I have a hunch this collar is trying to kill me, but what do I know?"

He glances at Jake. "Hi, I'm Toby Jenner. You must be Phillipe. I've heard a lot about you."

Jake takes his hand. "Nice to meet you, but I'm not the boyfriend." He doesn't say 'thank God', but it's implied in his tone.

"This is Jake Stone, Tobes," I say. "We're working together on a book."

Toby looks relieved for a second before recognition sparks. "Wait, you're that Professor Feelgood guy, right? There's a whole bunch of girls at work who are obsessed with you."

Jake smiles, but it seems forced. "Uh ... tell them hi from me."

"This HEA app is Toby's brainchild," I tell Jake. "He's a genius."

Toby shakes his head. "Not really, but thanks anyway. I just hope it helps bring people together. That's what life's all about, right? Finding meaningful connections." He beckons us to follow him. "Come on over and I'll get you guys set up." He leads us over to a bank of screens, and after he guides us through setting up the app on our phones, he points to a graph.

"So, the whole thing is based on a new type of algorithm I've developed that you can use to test different types of compatibility." He swipes the image. "The first step is to complete the questionnaire, but this is the real game changer." He holds up what looks like clear plastic stickers with a pattern of silver foil inside them. He peels off the stickers and places them on the backs of our phones. "Any app can create a probable match based on random variables. That's easy. But what they can't account for is chemistry. No one really knows why we're attracted to certain people. But with this bio film in your palm, the app will read your biological and electrochemical reactions to someone and add that into the compatibility equations."

He hands our phones back then gets out his own. "So to demonstrate, Ash, open your app." When it's open, he taps some settings into both phones. "And now, we just stand close together." He moves forward until we're almost touching. "Just keep breathing. It will take about thirty seconds."

I stare at Toby's chest and wait for the bio reader to do its work. It feels strange being this close to him. Not unpleasant, but also not comfortable.

“The app is reading the changes in our heart rate, breathing patterns, blood pressure, pheromone production, etcetera, and then ...” Both our phones ping at the same time.

Toby reads his screen. “Okay, so, this will come as no surprise, but I’m extremely attracted to you, and ...” He looks at my phone. “You’re ... not extremely attracted to me.”

I glance at the blue circle that’s flashing ‘62/100’.

Toby shrugs. “To be honest, that’s better than I was expecting.”

I give him a smile. “Well, you do look extra fine tonight.”

I think I see a hint of a blush as he points to another feature on the screen. “When you add your attraction score to the results of your questionnaire, you get your overall compatibility, and then, *shazam*. You’re on the road to finding your soul mate.”

Toby’s phone beeps, and after he checks the screen, he sighs. “Well, no rest for the wicked. The boss man needs me, so I’ll have to catch up with you guys later. Have fun.”

I wave as he moves through the crowd. “Bye, Tobes. Thanks.”

When I look at Jake, he’s frowning down at his phone.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing. Just doing my questionnaire like a good little sheep.” His mood is still dark. I wish I knew how to lighten it.

*You could go back in time and make different choices.*

I bring up the questionnaire on my phone and work through it. “What would happen if you found someone here tonight who was your perfect match? Would you date them?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m still recovering from the last person I thought was my perfect match.”

I lean back against the bench, and we’re both quiet as we answer the questions. It covers a huge range of topics and hypothetical situations. Not sure how they all work together to form a personality profile, but according to Eden, Max is an expert at this. No doubt he worked in tandem with Toby to develop the whole thing.



After a few minutes, Jake sighs deeply. “Done. Why do I feel like I just had a prostate exam?”

I finish my final question and press ‘complete’. “I guess they want as much information as possible to get an accurate prediction.” I’m tempted to bump his phone to see how compatible we are, but I fear knowing will be worse than blissful ignorance.

Jake flags down a passing waiter and grabs two glasses of champagne before handing one to me. We both drink deeply and then stand there in silence, watching the action in the room. I hate that things are so tense between us. Damn me for having those notebooks out, and damn him for finding them.

“How long do we have to endure this?” Jake asks. “And how drunk am I allowed to get?”

I watch people mingle and bump phones. Seems like everyone but the two of us is having a good time. “Sid wants us to stay for a couple of hours.”

“Not the party,” Jake says, turning to me. “Us. The way we are together. It’s exhausting.”

I’m taken aback. I’ve been lamenting about our bickering so much, I didn’t realize he was feeling the same way.

“Maybe you were right about me needing a different editor,” he says. “I’d hoped that enough time would have passed for us to let go of all the shit we’ve put each other through, but I was wrong.”

I’m becoming more tense with every word he says, which is crazy. Yesterday, I would have been thrilled to leave this project and get away from him, but now that it’s happening, it feels hideously wrong.

“Is this about the journal? Because if you want me to apologize again, I will.”

He looks down at his empty glass. “The journal is a symptom, not the cause. I thought I could keep all the angst from our past as background noise while we worked together, but ... I can’t. It’s deafening. Every time I’m near you, I can’t hear anything else. That’s why I can’t write.”

“Jake, it’s been one day. We need to find our footing together. Tomorrow will be better.”

He looks at me. “Will it? Or will we just continue to let our issues drag us around in circles?”

“If we both try to find a better way, then absolutely not. I don’t know about

you, but I hate being angry at you all the time.”

He gives a bitter smile. “I’ve been angry at you for so long, I don’t know how to stop.”

“Have you tried?”

“Yes. Have you?”

I want to say I have, but I know it’s not true. Part of me has been avoiding letting go of my anger, because when it’s gone, I’ll have to deal with a whole world of feelings I’m not ready to face. Is my anger even real? Or is it the name I’ve given to the sensation of my heart trying to push out pain and loss?

I grab Jake’s arm and pull him toward the bar in the far corner of the room. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“We’re going to talk through everything we’ve done to each other and see if we can finally get some closure. But before that happens, I’m going to need a real drink.”

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Everyone remembers their childhoods differently. I have a few snapshots of smiles and melting ice creams in summer, or running through the park and swinging on branches of trees that probably don’t exist anymore. In those quick cinematic flashes, I’m happy. But they don’t tell the full story.

The bulk of my memories are harder to remember and not nearly as much fun. Those images are dark and grainy; a film noir of a kid struggling to find her way in a world that seemed to keep taking things and people away from her without ever giving anything back.

There are very few people that feature in both versions of my memory, but Jake is one of them. Bestie-Jake was the one who made me laugh, and swung from branches higher than I would ever dare reach for. And caring-Jake was there when my dad left; when my mom died; when moments of melancholy hit me so hard, all I could do was curl up in a ball and disappear for a while.

And now, when I remember those times, I’m hit by an overwhelming sense of sadness, because our friendship was so easy, I assumed that’s how all connections were: Instant and powerful. And if I screw things up tonight, I’ll never have a friend like him again. And that would be tragic.

In the hopes of helping to facilitate our self-inflicted intervention, we’re doing tequila shots.

“Go!”

We slam our glasses down on the bar before shoving lime wedges into our mouths and sucking.

“Is there a rule for how much alcohol we need to consume before we address our emotional trauma?” he asks, dropping the lime into his glass. “Because I’m not feeling the urge to share yet.”

I gesture to the bartender for another round. “Maybe there’s a formula. One shot for every year we’ve been estranged?”

“So, what? Six shots each? After that much tequila, I wouldn’t be able to find my ass with both hands, let alone carry on a coherent conversation.”

I want to start the process, but I feel like I’m sprinting through a minefield. If I say the wrong thing, there’s a good chance Jake will think even less of me than he already does, which would suck.

Jake looks just as uneasy. “Why the hell is this so hard?”

*Because there’s so much at stake.*

“Professor Feelgood?” A group of young women come over to Jake. “Sorry to bother you, but we’re big fans. Do you mind taking some pictures with us?”

Jake gives me a surprised look then turns to them. “Uh ... okay. Why not?” It must be weird for him to go from being anonymous to unmasked. And the number of people recognizing him is only going to increase.

The lead girl turns to me and hold out her phone. “Could you?” All of a sudden, another five phones are thrust at me.

“Sure.”

The girls crowd around him, talking about which poems are their favorites and posing each time I raise a camera. I know why they’re drawn to him, but none of them have any idea about who he really is. The heart of him.

That’s one thing I used to know.

“Last one.” I hold up the phone and ignore the tightness that’s starting to infect all my limbs. Nostalgia achieves nothing but to make you second-guess every crappy decision you ever made.

“Ash!” I turn to see Eden walking toward me. Jake notices and seems relieved to have an excuse to extricate himself from the ladies.

“Hey!” Eden says as I give her a hug. “You look gorgeous.” When she pulls back she gives Jake a not-so-subtle once over. “Well, well. Little Jakey Stone is all grown up.” Somehow, she manages to seem both friendly and

intimidating.

Jake tips his chin. "Eden. Good to see you again."

Growing up, Eden treated Jake like a little brother, which is to say, she antagonized the hell out of him. To be fair, he gave as good as he got, but it was always clear they had real affection for each other. Unfortunately, their relationship was collateral damage when he and I fell out. It's bizarre seeing them interact again.

"If you plan on being a dick to my sister again, let me know ASAP, because hitmen are expensive, and I'll have to start saving."

Jake gives her a tired smile. "Some people are born dicks, and some have dickishness thrust upon them. I'm trying hard to be neither."

"Good." She glances at me. "The universe has worked hard to bring the wonder twins together again. Don't screw it up."

Jake sighs. "Easier said than done."

A waiter offers us a tray of cocktails, and we all take one. My limit is fast approaching, so I need to make this drink last.

"Guys! Over here!" Eden waves at someone behind us, and when I turn, I see Max and Derek walking toward us.

*Oh, Lord.*

As soon as Derek sees me, his eyes light up, but then he glances at Eden to make sure she didn't notice. Keeping up our secret tonight is going to be so not-fun. Dealing with Jake is taking up all my energy. I'd almost forgotten about my other mission.

After Eden and I greet the boys, I gesture to Jake. "Uh, Max ... this is Jacob Stone, our latest Whiplash author. Jake this is Eden's boyfriend and CEO of Romance Central, Max Riley. He's the one who's organized this incredible event."

"Well, I've had a lot of help." Max holds out his hand, and Jake shakes it. "Hey, Jake. Good to finally meet you."

"And this is Eden's boss and ... uh .... major sponsor for tonight, Derek Fife." I don't know why I'm so nervous introducing Jake to Derek. For some reason, it feels like a disaster waiting to happen.

The two men shake hands, and Derek gives Jake a solemn nod. "Congratulations on the book deal, Jake. Asha's told me you're really talented."

Jake seems surprised I've mentioned him. "Uh ... thanks. That's nice to hear."

While Max and Eden draw Jake into a conversation about his Instagram fame, Derek takes the opportunity to lean into me and whisper, "My God, you're stunning. You take my breath away."

I smile and whisper back, "You don't look so bad yourself." He really does fill out his tux beautifully.

He surreptitiously holds out his phone for me to bump. "Just for fun."

I glance over to make sure the other three aren't looking then pull out my phone and bump it against his. There's a quiet 'ping', and I check the results.

"Ninety-one percent," I say, my heart sinking. Some part of me had hoped that I was imagining how great we were together, because then, my body's reaction could be rationalized. But no. We're exactly as compatible as I thought. Dammit.

"Huh," Derek says. "I actually thought it would be higher." He slides his phone into his pocket. "Only an hour to go until we can sneak away. I can't wait to stop pretending. Finally."

I take a swig of champagne. "Same." Now that we're here, my nerves are kicking in, but I can't chicken out now. Aversion therapy may be my only chance to obliterate this stupid quirk. I've seen arachnophobes submit to having tarantulas crawl all over them, or people with a fear of heights rappel down a building. I just have to get naked with an attractive man without losing my mind. Easy.

When I glance at Jake, he's frowning and looking over at Derek. Then he raises his eyebrows at me.

*Oh, shit.*

I down the rest of my drink and sigh. In the immortal words of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, don't panic. Maybe he'll keep his mouth shut and not make trouble. And maybe I'll grow that third arm I've always wanted.

"We'll have to catch up with you guys later," Eden says. "It's almost time for Max to give his speech, and Derek, you have to limber up your atrophied smiling muscles for when he thanks you."

Derek scowls at her. "Do I pay you extra for being an insufferable smartass?"

"No," she says with a grin. "I'm happy to provide that for free."

“Lucky me.”

After they all say goodbye, Derek lingers for a second. “See you later?”

I nod, aware Jake’s watching. “Uh huh. I’ll be around.”

When they’re gone, I can feel Jake’s mental gears ticking. I gesture toward the stage. “We should go support Max’s speech, and afterwards, we can talk.” Without waiting for his approval, I move through the crowd.

He falls into step beside me. “I take it your sister is unaware you’re banging her boss.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“Because I have eyes in my head, and you have zero poker face.”

“Jake —”

“You’ve been lying to Eden? Do you understand how pissed she’s going to be when she finds out?”

“Yes, so I’d appreciate you not saying anything. I’ll tell her when the time is right.”

“Which will be when? On your wedding day? Perhaps at the birth of your first child?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

The lights dim as a spotlight comes up on Max standing at a podium in the middle of the stage. Everyone applauds.

“Good evening, everyone,” Max says with a smile. “I want to thank you all for coming to the launch of Romance Central’s new matchmaking app, Happily Ever After, or HEA. At Romance Central, we believe that everyone deserves to be loved, and with HEA, we can help find your perfect partner.”

Jake and I stand at the edge of the dance floor and join in another round of applause. As Max talks, I see Eden at the side of the stage, beaming at him.

“If you haven’t yet tried the app, we invite you to come down to the tech station near the dance floor and allow one of our assistants to take you through the process. You never know. Your soulmate might be in this very room.”

Another round of applause, this one louder than the others.

Derek is standing next to Eden, and at the mention of soul mates, he looks at me and smiles.

I smile back, but it feels forced.

“A huge thanks to our resident tech genius responsible who developed the app, Toby Jenner, and give it up for our major sponsor, Derek Fife from *Pulse* magazine.” Derek gives the crowd a wave.

Max goes on to talk about some of the features of the app, but I can’t stop thinking about everything that could go wrong tonight. I feel like I’m on a game show.

*Continue lying to Eden about my boyfriend, OR come clean and have a huge argument with her at a high-profile event.*

*Manage to have an amazing orgasm with Derek, OR run screaming from his room and check myself into a nunnery.*

*Work out differences with Jake, OR lose him from my life, forever.*

I rub my temple. Too many machetes in the air.

“The obstacles that prevent us from finding love are many,” Max says. “And a lot of them are within ourselves. If you’re having trouble maintaining a lasting relationship, it may be because of an event in your past. And it doesn’t even have to be a romantic issue. It could be something unresolved with a friend or family member.”

Without thinking, I look at Jake, only to find he’s looking back at me.

*Yep. That makes sense.*

“That’s why HEA comes equipped with a help line that will connect you with one of our qualified therapists. Several of them are here tonight, so if you think there’s something holding you back, seek them out.”

A dating app that offers professional help? That’s freaking brilliant.

Max steps out from behind his podium and comes to the front of the stage. “Now, to help me demonstrate some of the features of the HEA app, I’m going to impose on one of our special guests to join me onstage. He’s a man who’s been brave enough to share his relationship struggles with his three million Instagram followers, and he’ll soon be a published author. Please give it up for Professor Feelgood, Jacob Stone!”

Jake turns to me as the crowd goes wild. “Did you do this?”

“No,” I say, horrified on his behalf. “I think this is one of those activities I mentioned earlier. Or else Max is trying to give you free publicity.”

“He’s just met me. How can he hate me already?”

The crowd starts chanting ‘Feelgood’, and Jake runs his hand through his hair. “Fucking hell.” He takes in a breath and heads up onto the stage, and as soon as the ladies in the audience get a good look at him, they start screaming.

*Jesus, you’d think they’d never seen a gorgeous lovelorn poet before. Get a grip, ladies.*

Jake gives a self-conscious wave as he crosses the stage to shake Max’s hand.

“Thanks for helping out, Jake.”

“Yeah, no problem.” He sounds relaxed, but his face is telling a whole other story.

“So, you’ve downloaded the app and filled out your questionnaire?”

“I have.”

“Great. Are there any single ladies out there who’d like to test their compatibility with Professor Feelgood?”

The resulting screams almost deafen me. Every woman around me shoots her hand up so fast, I’m surprised it’s not followed by a sonic boom.

Max chooses ten ladies to come up onto the stage, and as they gather around Jake, he shoots me a look, like a condemned man praying for a phone call of reprieve. Alas, I can’t help him. I just hope he plays along and keeps his cool.



# NINETEEN

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## The Whole Truth

“TWO LADIES TO GO,” Max announces, and the crowd cheers like they’re watching a gladiatorial match. So far, none of the ladies have had above fifty percent compatibility with Jake, and their reactions have been comedy gold. As for Jake, he’s been as charming as I’ve ever seen him. He greets each woman warmly and manages to always look disappointed when their scores bottom out. I know he’s probably in hell, but he’s doing a good job of hiding it. I’m surprised to discover I’m proud of him. If Sid were here, he’d be jumping out of his skin. The HEA app may be destined to be a worldwide phenomenon, but the star tonight is definitely Jake.

“Hey, you.” I turn to see Joanna smiling at me. “How’s it going?”

“Jo!” I hug her more tightly than I intend, but damn, it’s good to see her. I’ve been treading water all night, and at last my life raft has arrived.

“Oh, shit, ow.” She pulls back. “Steady on, She Hulk. Human bones break easily.” She looks up at the stage. “So, your boy is killing it up there. Was this planned?”

“Not by me. But to whoever organized it, I’m grateful. It’s amazing exposure.”

Jo scans the crowd. “If some of these ladies had a touch more alcohol in their systems, Jake would be drowning in an avalanche of flying panties. At the very least, he just got a stack of new followers. Even Sarah Jessica is intrigued. She wants to know if he’d be free to take part in a charity bachelor auction she’s organizing. I told her that you’ll have him chained up in his writing cave for the foreseeable future.”

My face must give away what Jake and I spoke about earlier, because Jo looks confused.

“What did I miss?”

“Jake has realized I shouldn’t be his editor. I thought it would take a week for him to see the error of his ways, but apparently a day in my delightful presence is all it took.” I try to hide how crappy that makes me feel, but there’s no fooling Joanna.

“Ouch. So you have to go from begging to leave to begging to stay?”

“Yes, and I feel like an idiot. I don’t know what the hell I want any more.”

Her mouth sets into a determined line as we watch Max finish his presentation. “Asha, let me tell you a little story.” She links her arm with mine. “When I was a kid, I had this teddy bear that my grandma gave me. His name was Vlad the Impaler, and I loved him with all my heart.”

I frown. “You named your teddy Vlad the Impaler?”

“It was this whole thing. Bram Stoker played bridge with my great, great grandfather, blah, blah, blah. Anyway, when I was visiting my uncle who’s the head valuer at Christie’s auction house, he noticed Vlad was a Steiff.”

“A Steiff?”

“Steiff bears are the most valuable in the world, and Vlad was a particularly rare one. My uncle said that if I decided to put him up for auction, he could go for a few hundred thousand dollars.”

I pull back. “Seriously? For a teddy bear?”

She nods. “I couldn’t believe it, either. I mean, I’d had Vlad for years and had totally taken him for granted, and then suddenly, BAM. I see him with different eyes, because someone reminded me how unique and precious he was. Amazing, right?”

“Yeah,” I say, seeing right through her. “That is amazing.”

She looks over at Jake with a smug smile for a few seconds before turning back to me. “Just making sure you realize that what I’m saying is a metaphor for you and Jake. When you were kids, you took him for granted, but now, even with all the drama you guys have been through, you’re starting to realize his true worth.”

“Yes, Jo. I got that. Thanks.”

“Good, because my boobs have all sorts of feelings about the two of you, so I’m going to need you to sort out your crap. Either that or spring for some erotic massage for my chest, because I’m totally uncomfortable with all this sensation.”

I laugh. “So, teddy bear story was bullshit?”

“No. Vlad was very real. He just wasn’t worth three-hundred grand.”

“I thought that was nuts.”

“Yeah, in the end, he ended up being sold for one point three million.”

I laugh as Max finishes his presentation. After the crowd gives Jake a huge round of applause, he exits the stage, but before he can get to us, he’s mobbed

by people wanting pictures with him.

“I’d better go rescue him so we can talk,” I say. “It might be too late to change anything, but I at least have to try.”

Jo nods. “There’s no easy fix for you two. Just suck it up and stop snarking long enough to really listen to what the other has to say. Hopefully you can let the poison out of some old wounds.”

*So many old wounds. So little time.*

“What are you waiting for?” Jo asks, giving me a gentle push in Jake’s direction. “Go claim him. Speak your truth. Own your mistakes. Woman up.”

I hand her my clutch. “Hold this. I’m going in.”

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I take a deep breath and pull my shoulders back before striding over to where Jake’s trying to extricate himself from his fans.

“Excuse me, folks,” I say and slide my hand into his. “I need to borrow the professor for a while. Look out for his book coming soon from Whiplash publishing. It’s going to be amazing.”

I pull Jake toward the dance floor, trying to ignore how hot his hand feels around mine.

“Thanks for the save.”

“You earned it. You got through that whole demonstration without cursing anyone out. I was impressed.”

“Good to know I can still impress you. Why are we heading to the dance floor?”

“Why do you think?”

When we get to the middle of the dance floor I turn and face him. He glances over to where the orchestra is playing, “The Way You Look Tonight.”

“Surely, you can’t be serious.”

“I am serious, and don’t call me Shirley.” It’s an old joke but one that always made us laugh. I have no idea what’s going to happen when we open up the floodgates to our rocky past, so I figure easing into it is the best tactic.

I take a step toward him. “Dance with me.”

His expression makes it seem like I just asked him to strip naked and sprint down Fifth Avenue.

“You know I’m not much of a dancer.”

“Me, neither. Let’s suck together.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Careful, Princess. You’re turning me on.”

“Roll with it.”

I tentatively put my hand on his shoulder. He glances at it then steps forward and slides his arm around my waist. “Okay, but know that if you succumb to some kind of twirling incident, I’m absolved of all responsibility.”

I put my hand in his, and he pulls me close. When the front of our bodies connect, I feel the warmth of him in every cell. The sensation is so overwhelming, I take a step back. Keeping a little air between us will help me concentrate.

When I look up at Jake, he’s clenching his jaw. “This is closer than we’ve been in a long time.”

“That’s the idea.”

Touching him is filling me with so many emotions, I can’t sort the good from the bad.

“Jake ...” God this is difficult. Breaking something is easy. Putting it back together is infinitely harder. “I don’t ...” I blow out a breath. *Come on, courage. Come at me.* “I don’t want to lose you.”

He frowns. “As an author?”

“Yes, but also ...” Damn, every word catches in my throat. It’s like I’ve stopped myself from saying them so many times, they fear the open air. “I miss ... what we used to have. I know you think we can’t work together, but ... we used to be an amazing team. I have no idea if any part of what we had is worth saving, but if there is ... I want to try.”

I feel so exposed by everything I just said, my instinct is to shut the whole thing down. But avoiding this conversation isn’t an option anymore. It’s time.

We move to the music in the most basic way, but none of the couples around us are doing much more. Jake’s shoulder is tense beneath my palm, and his other hand is squeezing mine in a vague, erratic pattern.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asks.

“What do we have to lose?”

The concern in his expression implies he thinks we have farther to fall, but I don’t see how that’s possible.

“Okay.” He stares off into space for a few seconds, as if he’s rehearsed what he’d say in this situation hundreds of times and is trying to figure out which thread to pull first.

“Did you ever wonder why I call you princess?” he asks at last.

“Because you knew it annoyed me?”

He looks guilty, which tells me I’m partly right.

“It’s because you were obsessed with princesses when you were a kid. Don’t you remember all those times you play-acted that you were Cinderella, or Jasmine, or Snow White? One of the only fights we had was when you were pretending you were Sleeping Beauty. You were lying there, begging me to kiss you awake, and I refused. Man, you chewed me out over that.”

I remember everything about that day. “Well, you acted like I’d just asked you to ingest raw sewerage. No girl wants to feel like she grosses a boy out.”

“We were seven. Like most boys that age, I was allergic to kissing stuff. Plus, your sister was watching, and you can bet that she would have given us hell if I’d done it.”

“What’s your point?”

He slides his hand up to the middle of my back. “As you grew older, your favorite books were comics, and you wanted to be Wonder Woman. And yet, you clung to those princess fantasies for years, and on some level, I understood.”

“And what’s that?”

“It wasn’t about finding your true love. It was about someone coming to save you from your life. And I got it, because having someone save me from mine sounded pretty freaking cool to me, too.” He looks down. “Some nights when dad was drunk and raging, all I wanted was to run out that front door and never look back. Leave that whole shitty neighborhood and start over. But I never did, because that would have meant leaving my best friend behind.”

There’s an accusation buried in his words. “Is that what you think I did? Left you behind?”

“As soon as you started hanging out with Jeremy and his friends, you became a different person.”

“That was the point.” I stare at the buttons on his shirt. The hardest things to say are those truths you’ve always known but refused to admit. “High school was a chance for a fresh start, and for once, I didn’t want to be the poor girl everyone pitied. The one who had a dead mother and an absent

father. The one who'd spent her entire life wearing her big sister's hand-me-downs and cutting her own hair. I wanted to see what it felt like just being a regular kid for once. To brush my problems into the background."

He furrows his brows. "And I was one of those problems?"

"Of course not. You were the only thing I wanted to keep. I wanted you to come with me, but no matter how many times I tried to include you ... invited you to parties, asked you to hang out with us ... you wouldn't even try. As soon as I started dating Jeremy, you took the nuclear option and declared war on both of us."

"Can you blame me? Dammit, Asha, you could have dated *any* of the boys from the neighborhood who were in love with you."

"And that would have been okay with you?"

"Of course not, because they were all fucking animals, but at least they weren't my goddamn step-brother. How the hell did you expect me to react? From the moment Jeremy and I met, that asshole tortured me every day for *years*. You knew that ... you witnessed it. You were supposed to be on my side."

"I was on your side! I defended you all the time."

He looks across the room, away from me. "But then he started flirting with you, and it was like you forgot everything he did to me. You found someone to pin your princess fantasy onto, and I faded into the background. And then, to have to watch you mooning over him like he was your dream guy ..." He shakes his head. "I couldn't be around that. And I was pissed that you expected me to be. Did it never occur to you that Jeremy knew dating you would destroy our friendship, and that's why he did it? That asshole had a million friends. I had one. Of course he had to take you away from me."

A sharp pang of guilt twists inside me. Was I so wrapped up in my stupid adolescent fantasy, I failed to see what Jeremy was doing? If his ultimate goal was to hurt Jake, then of course I would be the most effective weapon. I thought that when he slept with Shelley on prom night, he was a selfish ass who wasn't man enough to be faithful to me. But what if it wasn't about me at all? What if his only goal was to hurt Jake?

"I ... I didn't realize."

He gives me a contemptuous look. "Yeah, you did. Jeremy never hid who he was, but you were blind to that side of him. It was like you saw us through completely different lenses. When you looked at me all you saw were my mistakes, and with him, you saw the person you wanted him to be."

I look down. When we'd started dancing, we were quite close, but now there's a ton of space between us. Jake's staring over my head, and judging by his expression, he still has some venting left to do.

"I thought I'd go to my grave being angry at you for that, but then, out of the blue, you messaged me about writing a book, and ..." He takes a breath and looks down at me. "When I got that first message and saw your name, I almost threw my phone across the room." I give him a questioning look. "I thought it was Jeremy screwing with me. He's done it before. Created a whole Facebook profile pretending to be you. Sent me a ton of messages about how much you wanted to reconcile, just so he could see my reaction when he revealed it was bullshit."

I shake my head in disbelief. I feel sick knowing that Jeremy's cruelty didn't end with high school. I hope that asshole gets what's coming to him one day. And what's more, I hope it's Jake that gives it to him.

"That's why you were so cautious."

He nods. "I'd resigned myself to believing you were out of my life forever, but then ..." He gets a pained look in his eyes. "I called, and you appeared on the screen, and ... fuck, Asha. I thought I was having a heart attack. I wanted to feel happy to see you, but I wasn't, because you weren't reaching out to me because you missed me or wanted to make up for the past. You were contacting the professor. If you hadn't stumbled onto him, you would have continued going about your life, not giving a shit if I lived or died."

"That's not true."

"Isn't it? When you asked about pitching a book, had every intention of saying no, because part of me didn't want to deal with you. But ..." He sighs. "I don't have a college education like you do, Ash. I have no skills, no job. All I have is an unrequited passion for a woman who ruined me and a head full of words. So, when you offered me that book deal ... I realized that was the only Cinderella moment I was going to get, and I would have been stupid not to take it. That advance money will set me up for life."

"But you got other offers. Better ones. If you didn't want to deal with me, you could have gone with someone else."

"Believe me, I tried to take the logical option, but ... I couldn't. Money can't buy everything." His hand tightens around mine. "That night at the bar, you asked me why I gave up seven-hundred grand to work with you, and the truth is ..." He smiles like his reasoning was ridiculous. "I thought that if there was any chance in hell we might get past our bullshit and go back to being friends, it would be worth it." He clenches his jaw, and I can see the

effort it's taking for him to keep his emotions in check. He takes a few deep breaths, and I squeeze his shoulder as he holds his fraying edges together.

"And here's the truly pathetic part. Over the past few years, I've had a shitty time. I tried to reconcile with my mom, but she wanted nothing to do with me. Then, the whole thing with Ingrid happened, and Dad's drinking finally killed him." He looks at me, and my chest constricts when I see wetness in his eyes. "There were days when I really needed a friend, Asha. My *best* friend. And fuck you for not being there. And fuck me for still needing you so much after all this time."

By the time he's finished, my heart is aching and my throat is tight. I try to stop the tears pooling in my eyes, but I can't. He's the same, so I take his hand and lead him behind the stage. It's dark and deserted back here, so if either of us loses it, at least we're away from prying eyes.

Jake leans back against the wall, and swipes the wetness from his cheeks. Seeing him like this ... knowing I'm responsible ... everything I've ever felt for him rises up, filling my chest and throat. I can't remember the last time I felt so emotionally volatile. He's always made me feel too much, but now it's at a whole new level.

"Say something," he says quietly. "Tell me I'm wrong. Tell me you regret nothing and hate my guts. Just ... say something."

In romance novels, there comes a point when people have to speak the truth of what's in their heart instead of dancing around it. That's the thrilling part. The reason it's so satisfying is because it rarely happens in real life. People don't usually crack open their chests and wait for the other person to decide whether they want to skewer your heart or claim it. But that's what Jake just did. He had the courage to lay it all on the line, and now, I have to do the same.

I take in a tight breath. "You're not wrong. I regret everything, and I definitely don't hate your guts." My voice wavers, but I'm determined to keep going. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you, Jake. I wish I was. There are days I would have given anything to have you in my corner again, and it's ridiculous that it's taken this long for us to admit we missed each other. I've missed you so much." The pain in my chest is making it hard to talk. "None of it was your fault. It was all me. My choices ruined us."

He shakes his head. "That's not true. I did my fair share of ruining. I wanted to hurt you as much as you hurt me, and I never thought I succeeded until I read your journal tonight. Reading your words ... that was ... brutal. I know what it's like to have to write your way through pain, because I do it all the time. And I hate that I was the cause of yours."



I can't look at his face. It's hard enough to dredge up these truths without witnessing how much damage they've done. But he's right about us both writing for the same reason. We were both mourning the loss of our soul mates, I just didn't realize it at the time.

For our entire friendship, Jake treated me like a sister, and at first I treated him like a brother. But as we got older, deep down, I knew I felt more. I just didn't have a name for it back then.

I mean, no one expects to meet their soul mate when they're three, but I did. And then life taught me that the people who were important to me would leave, and those I loved with all my heart would die. It gave me the gift of Jake then whispered that loving him would end him. Or me. Or both of us. And the bitterest irony is that by trying to protect myself from that, I made it happen.

From watching Mom and Dad's relationship, I learned that meeting your soul mate isn't enough. Knowing that someone should be yours doesn't make it happen, and Mom made it obvious that having them and losing them was worse than not having them at all. And so I never told Jake how I felt. Even though he loved me, I knew it wasn't the same way I loved him, and I couldn't stand the thought of him ruining me like Dad ruined Mom.

But how do you protect yourself from the person who was born with an all-access pass to your heart? How do you keep them at a safe distance so they don't become your everything? In my case, you date his reviled step-brother, and then, when he feels so betrayed he destroys your friendship, you convince yourself it was his fault all along.

Trying to keep myself together, I do my best to look at him. I've never admitted these things to anyone, and I'm so deeply ashamed, I can barely breathe.

"I was the one who screwed up, Jake. I'm sorry for hurting you. For choosing Jeremy. For leaving you behind. For blaming you for everything." I wipe my nose. "Fuck, I'm a terrible person. No wonder I was terrified of you leaving me. Why the hell would you want to stay?"

"Asha ..." He strokes my back, and I've missed him comforting me so much, it takes all my energy to stop myself from crumbling. "You're an idiot. I would never have left. You were my family."

"And you were my whole world. And because I screwed everything up, I've spent a lot of years building another world without you in it. And it sucks."

I can't hold the tears in any longer. It hurts too much. And when he wraps

his arms around me and squeezes me just like he used to, it makes me cry even harder.

This is the biggest truth I've kept buried for so long. My endless quest for love had nothing to do with romance, or sex, or some stupid checklist. The only thing I've been searching for in all the men I've dated is this feeling of absolute rightness that I have with Jake. The bliss of being in his arms is both hypnotizing and terrifying, because even though one part of me never wants it to end, I know it will, and I haven't learned to silence the inner voice that warns me to get out before it does.

I wrap my arms around his neck, and then his head is on my shoulder, his breath hot on my skin. "I'm sorry," I say, pulling him as close as I can. I keep repeating it, just in case he doesn't understand. Because him not forgiving me is not an option. My heart is pounding so fast, I feel like it's going to explode. I feel like the little pockets of darkness I've been carrying around for most of my life have evaporated, and the buzz of grief and loss isn't ringing in my ears anymore. Instead, it's the electrical storm of having Jake's body pressed against mine.

"Fuck, I've missed you," he whispers, his voice strained. He pulls back a little, just enough that his cheek is pressed to mine. "I've missed you for years."

I don't remember sliding my fingers into his hair, but I must have, because suddenly his mouth is a breath away from mine, and I can't stop wondering how he would taste.

He stares back, a pained expression on his face.

This is new for us. We don't do this. The one time our lips met on prom night, it was so brief I barely felt it. Now, I desperately want him to kiss me, but it's like we've just walked from a room labeled 'enemies' into one named 'friends', and all the doors are locked and the windows are nailed shut. There's no path to 'lovers'. And even if there were, it would be stupid for us to go there.

"Ash ... I —"

His nose brushes mine, and I close my eyes and inhale. God, I want to kiss him, but I can't. This isn't real. He doesn't want me. He's just relieved our feud is over, and that's manifesting into whatever his hands are now doing as they graze over my body.

"Asha ..." He sounds like he's in pain. When he pulls me against him, I can see why. There's no way to misinterpret his body's reaction. I can feel him, hard and long against my stomach, and my mind explodes. The intense

attraction I've felt up until now has just become exponentially more problematic. I have to get out of here. Letting myself feel him like this is insane. The only thing taking this further will achieve is to make me want things he can't give.

In contradiction to everything my body is telling me to do, I pull myself out of Jake's arms and step back. He stands there, only a foot away, breathing heavily and looking confused.

"Asha ..." I don't know what he's reading on my face, but it makes him look at me with a kind of longing I've never seen before. "That was —"

*A mistake.*

"It was just us getting caught up in the moment." I can still feel his body heat lingering on my skin. "We just had an emotional outpouring and ... the ... other stuff was a side-effect. Right?"

He brushes his fingers across his lips like he's wiping them free of sensation. "Is that what you want to call it? A side-effect?"

"Jake ..." I sigh. "That's what it needs to be. We've just untangled ourselves from years of heartache. Do you really want to go down a road that could land us there again? Not to mention, the only reason we reconnected was because of your heart-wrenching poetry about a woman you're obviously still hung up on. I'm not interested in being anyone's rebound."

He runs his fingers through his hair, still seeming shell-shocked. "And even if we remove Ingrid from the equation, let's not forget you have a boyfriend."

There's an edge to his tone, as if he could tell that for the few minutes he was wrapped around me, Derek ceased to exist.

"All good reasons for us to keep our distance," I say as I take a step back, still feeling an irresistible urge to go to him. "The main thing is, we're back to being friends, and that's ... amazing. It's what we both want. Anything else could destroy us all over again."

No friendship in the world is immune to the fallout of a sexual fling gone wrong. Certainly not one as fragile as ours.

Jake sighs so deeply, his shoulders drop. "You're right. The goal was to be friends again, so ..." He exhales. "Let's do that. Close, platonic... *friends*." He looks at me. "Have I mentioned how much I missed you?"

I smile. "You have. And the feeling is entirely mutual." I glance over at the curtain we pushed through to get back here. "So ..." I gesture with my head. "Shall we?"

He shoves his hands in his pockets. "Yeah, you go. I'm completely on board with our friends plan, but parts of my body aren't, so ... I'm going to need a minute."

I don't mean to look at his crotch, it just happens. And as fast as I look away, it's not quick enough for the long line of him pressing against his pants to not be seared into my brain.

"Okay," I say, smoothing down my dress. "I'll see you back out there, friend."

"Uh huh."

Even when I turn away, I can feel the heat of him watching me leave.

---

I don't retreat into the ladies' room just because I'm feeling conflicted after my time with Jake. It's also to ensure that after my session of ugly crying, I don't have anything disgusting smeared across my face that would horrify fellow party-goers.

At least I learned my lesson from my day from hell earlier in the week and invested in waterproof eye products. My face is puffy, and my eyes are red, but at least I'm not goth girl.

I hear the door open, and when I look up from washing my hands, I see Eden standing behind me.

"What's up with you and Jake?"

My heart skips several thousand beats. "What? Nothing. Why?"

*Did she see us? Or maybe someone else did and squealed?*

"Damn, settle down," she says, passing me some paper towels. "I just mean when I saw you on the dance floor, it looked like you were having words. Is everything alright? Did he upset you? Do I need to hit him with my shoe?"

I dry my hands and let my panic deflate. "He upset me, but I deserved it. We actually sorted some stuff out."

She crosses her arms and gives me a look of surprise. "Really?"

"Yep." I throw the towels in the trash. "We're going to try being ... uh ... friends, again." Even saying it feels weird.

"Huh. And yet, there wasn't anything on tonight's weather report about hell freezing over. Weird."

I nudge her with my elbow as we head out the door. "I'm not saying we're

going back to being besties right away, but ... we really talked through things for the first time, and ...” I stop and turn to her. “You know the other night when you said we all have to deal with stuff from the past that’s holding us back?”

“Of course. It was amazing advice.”

“Well, I think that’s what we did tonight. I didn’t realize how much space all my Jake issues were taking up. I mean, I still have some guilt over the choices I made, but ... we actually admitted we missed each other.”

*We also came dangerously close to kissing, but that’s not relevant right now.*

“Does that mean you guys are going to team up again and draw monsters all over my bedroom wall? Because that wasn’t cool.”

I think for a second. “Hmmm. We have no immediate plans beyond finishing his book and behaving like adults for a change, but we’ll see how it goes.”

She pulls me in for a hug. “Well, I’m thrilled for you. I have to admit, it was easier to deal with your neuroses when Jake was around. It’s really a two-person job.”

I laugh and push her away. “Let me tell you a little story about a man called Shut Up.”

She smiles and hands me my purse. “Joanna asked me to give this back to you.”

“Did she leave?”

“Not sure. I saw her talking to Toby earlier. She’s probably around somewhere.”

We head back over to the bar area, and as we approach, I can see that Derek’s there, chatting with Jake.

*Oh, God. This isn’t good.* I’d almost forgotten that even though I’ve put out one fire tonight, the rest of the forest is still burning.

“I’d expected Derek to have left by now,” Eden whispers. “He usually hates these things. I kind of hope he’s cruising for a woman. God knows, if anyone needs to get well and truly laid, it’s him.”

I almost choke on my tongue.

“Hey, guys.” Eden says as she grabs two glasses of champagne off the bar and hands one to me. “What’s the news?”

Jake glances at me, then at his shoes. Okay, so we've officially reached the awkward phase of our new friendship. I wonder how long it will take for that flash of lust backstage to fade.

"Just talking to Jake about his travels," Derek says. "Fascinating stuff. I hope you have an interview organized with him for Pulse."

Eden rolls her eyes. "Of course. Sid promised us the first major feature on Boy Wonder, so be prepared for an argument next week on how many words you're going to give me."

Derek smiles and shoves his hands in his pockets. "Our arguments are the favorite part of my day." He pulls a room key out of his pocket. "Well, as much fun as this has been, I'm heading out." He looks at me. "I have the Ambassador's Suite, and I intend to make the most of it."

Eden cocks her head. "Is that code for watching porn in your bathrobe?"

Derek gives her a tired smile. "Goodnight, Tate. Tell Max he did a great job." He shakes Jake's hand. "Nice chatting with you, Jacob."

Jake nods. "You, too."

Finally, Derek turns to me. "Asha. Always a pleasure."

I smile and try to hide that my body is still buzzing from another man's hands. "Likewise."

Oh, how much do I suck? Let me count the ways.

When Derek walks away, Eden makes a snorting noise. "Ash, he totally just checked you out. As if you'd ever give it up for his grumpy ass."

Jake shoots me a look, and I know he's urging me to level with her about Derek, but I shake my head. Tonight has already been a marathon of emotional upheavals. I can't deal with another one. Not yet.

"Well, it's been great," I say. "But I think I'm going to call it a night."

Jake finishes the rest of his beer. "Me, too. Thanks for having me, Eden. and just for the record, it was your idea to get me onstage, wasn't it? A little payback for historical crimes against your sister?"

Eden feigns shock. "What? How dare you? I would never stoop so low. And I didn't enjoy your extreme discomfort in the slightest

Jake buttons his jacket. "Glad to be of service."

We say goodnight to Eden, and after I hug her, Jake and I head out of the ballroom. Even though our backstage catharsis has eased a huge portion of the anxiety that's always existed between us, what happened afterward has

opened the door to a whole new world of tension, one in which the merest brush of his elbow against my arm sets my entire body onto high alert.

“So,” Jake says as we stop near the elevators. “I take it you’re not coming with me.”

I know he’s asking about our transportation arrangements, but I still find the question hot.

“I have to go see Derek.” Jake frowns. “Is that okay?”

He shrugs. “He seems like an okay guy, but I get the definite impression you’re nervous around him. Why is that?”

I tug some hair behind my ear. I haven’t felt comfortable confiding in anyone about my sexual hang-ups, so why the hell am I seriously considering telling Jake? If I’m being honest, taking a small piece of the attraction I feel for Jake and transferring it to Derek would have me breaking land-speed records to get to his room. As it is, I’m not sure I should even go.

Jake moves closer and takes my elbow in his hand. “Ash, I know we have to take this friends thing slow, but if there’s anything you want to tell me ...”

I take in a shallow breath, and right away he steps back and removes his hand. “Shit. Sorry. Distance.” He clenches his hands at his sides. “Just reassure me this guy is good to you, because if he treats you the way he treats your sister, he and I are going to have a conversation.”

“No conversation necessary,” I say, still blushing from his touch. “Derek treats me like a queen.” That’s what makes this whole thing so damn difficult. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He lingers for a second. “You sure?”

“Yeah.” I give him my most confident smile and step back from his addictive warmth. “Very sure.”

I push the call button for the elevator, and when it arrives, I get in and select the suite level. Jake stands outside the doors, hands in his pockets. It’s clear he still has concerns, but he doesn’t say anything. He just watches me until the doors close.

As the elevator speeds upward, I let out a sigh and slump against the wall.

“I can do this,” I mutter to myself, steeling my resolve. “I have to do this.”

## TWENTY

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### Just Friends

THE NEXT MORNING, I climb the stairs to Jake's apartment with a pounding head and a heavy heart. The last thing I want is to bring my personal issues into our writing sessions, so I'm hoping dark glasses will shield me from the light, as well as Jake's scrutiny.

I knock as gently as I can to ensure my head doesn't explode, and after a few seconds, he opens the door. At least he has the decency to be wearing a shirt today. My defenses are at an all-time low as it is. Resisting his half-naked sex appeal would be a bridge too far.

He studies me for a second then says, "Morning." It's quiet and friendly, and kind of off-putting. It's going to take some getting used to with him not snarking at me all the time. We've had the same pattern for so long, different feels new.

"Hey." My voice sounds as retched as I feel.

"Sexy rasp you have going there."

"Glad you like it. Now please stop yelling at me." I hand over one of the coffee cups I'm holding and walk past him.

He closes the door and follows. "I wasn't yelling. I was speaking at my regular volume."

"Then your regular volume is too loud. If you're serious about being my friend, you'd whisper. Or write me notes. Either is good." I walk over to the couch and dump my bag before putting my coffee down and sinking into the ugly brown fabric.

"Are you hung over?"

"No. And by no, I mean yes." My sunglasses are blocking out most of the glare, but this apartment with no walls is still way too bright, so I lean my head back and close my eyes.

"I didn't think you had that much to drink last night."

"I didn't with you. But Derek bought a bottle of Cristal for us, and it would have been rude not to drink it." Also, I wanted to drink it. I thought it would help. Of course, it didn't. Nothing could have.



I hear creaking and figure Jake just sat down on the couch opposite me. He's quiet for a suspiciously long time, and when I crack my eyes open, he's sitting forward on the edge, studying me.

"What?"

"Are you okay?"

"My head feels like it's going to split open, so not really."

"I'm not talking about your hangover, Ash." He's doing that thing where he bypasses all my deflection and sees straight into my soul. "What happened last night?"

My skin prickles. "With you and me? We've talked about that. Heat of the moment."

"Not with us, although that's something we also need to discuss. I mean what happened with Derek?"

How does he always know? Why am I incapable of keeping secrets around this man? It was annoying when we were kids, but now it's just plain rude.

How can I tell him what happened without giving all the reasons behind it? I already feel humiliated. I don't want to go through it again with him.

"Jake, please ... I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay. But how about you take off the glasses."

I sit up straighter. "What?"

"Your sunglasses. Take them off. I want to see your eyes."

"Are you trying to kill me? These glasses are the only thing preventing the sun from exploding my retinas into tiny pieces." And from you seeing that I've been crying for several hours.

Jake's getting more agitated by the moment. "Did he hit you? Force himself on you?" He looks spring-loaded, as if the moment I admit to something, he'll fire out of here to administer his terrible wrath. "Because if that son-of-a-bitch laid a single abusive hand on you, I'm going to —"

"Jake, nothing like that went down. What the hell?"

"Don't you think I can tell when you've been crying? I've seen you fall apart more than anyone else on the planet, and I know the signs. So, if Derek didn't do this to you, who the fuck did? And don't tell me you're fine, because I can tell you're not."

I press my lips together to stop them from trembling. Protector-Jake

doesn't accept deflection. He requires the truth and someone to punish, but that doesn't work in this situation. I gingerly take off my glasses and try to avoid direct sunlight.

Jake leans forward. "You have been crying. What's going on?"

"That's the pathetic part. I did it to myself."

Before he can respond, my phone buzzes with a text from Derek.

*<Hey. Hope you're feeling okay this morning. You put away a lot of champagne, but there's no shame in that. I just want you to know that I appreciate how honest you were last night. It couldn't have been easy to tell me about how you've been feeling about our sex life. For what it's worth, I don't think you're broken. I think you're a beautiful, amazing, spectacular woman, and one day you'll find a guy who'll make all your obstacles a distant memory. I'm just disappointed it wasn't me. Don't be a stranger, okay? I'll always care about you. And we'll always have Paris, mon Cherie. x>*

By the time I finish, I'm in tears, both the good and bad kind. In a second, Jake's beside me, pulling me into his arms. I thought I was all cried out, but it seems I was wrong.

He strokes my back and waits. He was always good at that. Knowing that sometimes words can't help as much as a good, cleansing cry.

I'm relieved to discover I don't have much left.

"Ash," he says quietly, his hand cradling my head. "What happened? Is it your grandmother? Eden?"

I pull back and wipe my face. "Derek and I broke up."

He strokes my back. "God, I'm sorry. He did it over text?"

"No, it happened last night." I'm too tired to explain everything, so I just hand him the phone. "He was texting to see how I was."

I lean against his shoulder and close my eyes while he reads.

When I'd gone up to Derek's room last night to explain about everything that had been holding me back, he was amazing and supportive, but I could tell he was surprised. I'd hidden my secret well. No matter how much I tried to reassure him it wasn't his fault, I could see he blamed himself. The champagne helped take the edge off my guilt, and when I ran out of apologies, he'd just held me until I went to sleep. I woke up this morning to find him gone. I'd thought it was a sign he was mad at me, but I guess not. It was probably better he left early. We said all our goodbyes last night.

"What is he talking about? You think you're broken?"

I keep my eyes closed. I'm just so tired. Why is it that open, honest, adult interactions can feel like guerrilla warfare?

"Ash?"

"Jake, can we not talk about it right now? I can't. Later, okay?"

"Yeah, of course." He puts his arm around me and strokes my arm. "Whenever you're ready."

I snuggle further into his side as a familiar sense of contentment washes over me. It's the same feeling I got when we were kids. I could read by myself and be happy as a clam, but it was so much better when Jake was there. We didn't even have to talk. Just having him in the same room was enough. He was like my security blanket. A walking, boy-shaped pacifier.

His presence is so soothing, I don't realize my eyes have drifted closed.

"Ash."

I sit up with a start. "Hey. Hi. I'm awake."

He pushes some hair away from my face. "I'm going to be writing for a while. Why don't you go and sleep in my bed?"

I look over at his crisp white sheets and fluffy pillows. "That wouldn't be weird?"

"We used to sleep in each other's beds all the time."

"Well, yeah, but that was before we grew up and had ... urges. If I take a blacklight to your sheets, will they glow like a neon rave party?"

He laughs. "I'm flattered you think I'm getting that much action, even by my own hand. But my sheets are clean. Mostly." He picks up his notebook and pen. "Go sleep. I'll wake you up when I have something worthwhile for you to read."

He doesn't have to tell me twice. I take off my coat, kick off my shoes, and make my way across the room. "God bless you, Jacob Stone. I take back every bad word I ever said about you."

He raises a fist in victory. "About time."

When I reach the bed, I climb beneath the thick comforter, snuggle down into the Jake-scented pillows, and let out a long sigh. Within seconds, everything fades to black.

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I slowly become aware of someone stroking my hair. It feels like I've just

dozed off, so I'm reluctant to open my eyes. Also, I love having my hair stroked, so I'm in no hurry for it to stop.

"Ash."

It's Jake. Oh, yeah, I'm in his bed. Only fitting since I just had an incredibly erotic dream about him.

I hug a pillow and sigh. My God, he smells good. He always did.

"Asha."

"Hmmm."

The stroking fingers move from my head down to my arm. I break out in goosebumps.

"Are you awake?"

I stay silent. The soft caresses feel amazing. Everything is becoming warm. I move my hips and make an approving noise.

I reach out and find him. He's close. Soft fabric. I move my hand down, and then push beneath the fabric, where there's warm skin and ridges of firm muscle. It feels amazing.

He makes a noise. "Asha, touching me like that isn't a great idea, unless you want to redefine our friends pact."

I crack one eye open. Jake's right next to me, propped up on pillows, a notebook in his hand. "So you are awake?"

My hand has slipped under his t-shirt and is pressing against his stomach, dangerously close to the waistband of his jeans.

He's looking at me with the same heat he had last night, and it's no less thrilling and frightening today.

"Serious question," he says, his voice strained. "Are you trying to drive me insane? You've been making all kinds of sex noises, and now with the touching ..."

I pull my hand away. "Sorry. I was just ..." I shake my head and cringe from the pain behind my eyes. "You felt nice. Warm. I was half-asleep. Sorry."

He pushes out a breath. "Don't apologize. It's just that a woman hasn't touched me like that for a long time, and my body was getting excited about finally getting some action."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. Not just the unexpected admission that I

turn him on, but also the unlikely news that he's not bedding dozens of women on the regular.

"How long has it been for you?" I say. "I'd assumed that part of your quest to get over Ingrid included copious amounts of hot sex. After all, it's not like you don't have millions of women lusting after you." Every time I think about how many women want him, I get deeply uncomfortable. In my mind, my attraction to him is unique and special, but perhaps that's what everyone who fantasizes about him believes. "Your inbox must be overflowing with offers. You were never tempted to accept any of them?"

He leans his head back against the headboard. "No. Meaningless hook-ups don't work for me anymore. I tried a few one-night stands when I got back from overseas. They were awkward as hell. I've come to the conclusion that I need more than just a physical attraction." He turns to me. "If I can't connect with someone on a deeper level, there's no point in even trying."

As he says this, he looks into my eyes, and the rush of desire makes the pain in my head fade into the background.

"What about you?" he asks softly. "Are you planning on getting over Derek with some hot-sex therapy? I'm sure you'd have no shortage of volunteers."

I laugh. *Yeah, tons of guys are lining up to date the woman who turns into a cold fish the second they get her into bed. It's every man's dream.*

"Uh ... no. It's not really my thing, either."

He goes quiet, and for several long seconds he seems to study me as if he thinks he can find the meaning of the universe in my face. "What is your thing, Ash? What turns you on more than anything else?"

Before I can stop it, a singular answer forms in my mind.

*You.*

"Uh ..."

It's immediately followed by quick, intense mental flashes.

*You touching me. Kissing me. Slowly peeling off my clothes and putting your mouth on me.*

"I, uh ..."

*You climbing on top of me. Pushing apart my legs as you sink into me. You making a low noise as you push all the way inside.*

"Jesus ..."

*You making love to me. Thrusting and groaning and making every part of*

*me belong to you.*

The flood of scenes comes so thick and fast, I have to squeeze my eyes shut to block them out. My head pounds with the effort.

The bed moves, and before I know it, Jake's cupping my cheek. "Asha?" I grip his arm. "Are you okay?" He places his palm on my forehead. "Shit, you're burning up."

"Headache," I mumble, trying hard not to give into the urge to pull him on top of me. "Bad one."

"Are you going to be sick? Do I need to get a bucket?"

I pull away from him. "I'm fine. Probably just dehydrated."

My brain is still churning, projecting what it would be like to feel his hands all over me. His mouth. His tongue.

Dear Mother Mary, his tongue.

"Asha?"

I climb out of bed and head toward the bathroom, trying not to look at him. "I'm fine. I just need a second. You just ..." *Kiss me, lick me, fuck me.* "Uh ... keep going with your writing. I'll be right back."

"There are painkillers in the bathroom cabinet."

"Got it. Thanks."

I close the bathroom door behind me and collapse back against it.

*Shitting shittiest shit.*

I let out a long exhale. *Well, that escalated quickly.* I can't even discuss what turns me on without thinking of him in the most pornographic terms possible? Not acceptable.

I run the cold water and splash some on my face.

"Fuck me!" Jake's cold water must reach Brooklyn via the Arctic, because it's goddamn freezing. On the upside, the extreme cold makes my excruciating blush feel better, and subsequently, my hangover is slowly fading. There's still an extreme-fire-danger warning in my nether regions, but I'm not stripping off to splash that area with water.

I open the cabinet over the sink and grab a couple of Advil before downing them with a handful of water. Better safe than sorry.

I put both hands on the vanity and drop my head. There must be some defense against the insanity of what he does to me. And if it's out there, I

have to find it, because I'm not going to survive feeling like this for much longer.

My priority right now needs to be getting this book finished. That's it. All other distractions need to GTFO.

I dry my face with a sweet-smelling hand towel, take a deep breath, and pull open the door.

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"Can I see it, please?" There's a touch of whine in my voice, but that's what happens when he insists on delayed gratification.

"Not yet. Have some patience, woman." His hand moves faster.

"Jake, you've been teasing me for an hour. Come on. Put me out of my misery."

He groans. "God, I love it when you beg. Do it again."

"Jacob!"

He smiles and finishes with a flourish. "Okay. Keep your pants on. Or not. Whatever makes you more comfortable." He comes and sits next to me, then passes over his notebook. "Be gentle. My ego is fragile."

"Yeah, fragile like titanium." I flip through the book and am surprised to find he's written ten pages, front and back.

I look over at him. "You wrote all of this today?"

He nods. "Amazing what I can achieve when you're not yelling at me. Is that going to be enough to satisfy Serena?"

"Definitely. Although I think it's a little unfair to ask for this on day two."

Earlier, we'd received a text from Serena requesting some sample pages to see how we were doing. Jake thinks she's checking in to make sure her three-hundred grand investment isn't a lemon. I think she's making sure her editorial protégé isn't a dud. Either way, the pressure is on to get her something impressive enough to put all her fears to rest. If there's nothing in these pages that will knock her on her ass, we only have a few hours left to come up with something else.

I chew on my thumb nail as I read the first few pages of the new material.

*Oh, shit. Game on, Serena.*

"Jake ... this is good."

"Yeah?"

I sit up straighter and read the rest. “Yeah.” Maybe it was our dysfunctional relationship holding him back after all, because whatever mental block he was having yesterday has disappeared. What he’s written is passionate and thought-provoking, and he’s settled into an interesting literary style that incorporates the imagery of his poetic elements. The last couple of paragraphs give me the shivers.

*Anger is a powerful emotion. It makes everything simple. You can take fear, anxiety, humiliation, disappointment, and loneliness and distill them down into one singular, potent form. And if you let anger have its way, you’ll never have to worry about feeling anything else. It’s a balm for the broken-hearted. A shield for the vulnerable. It’s the cozy blanket of deniability that convinces you nothing was ever your fault.*

*When you’re terrified that you’re too broken to be loved, anger reminds you that you don’t need to be.*

*And when you burn down the world and stand in the smoldering ruins of your life, anger is still there, congratulating you. Insulating you. Convincing you that the smoke in your lungs isn’t slowly killing you.*

I turn to Jake who’s clasping his hands in front of his mouth, elbows on knees, waiting for me to say something.

There’s only one thing I can say. “Holy Mother of Shit. You nailed it.”

“You think Serena will like it?”

“Jake, she may very well orgasm and send you a fruit basket.”

His smile is instant. “Outstanding.”

“I can see your dimple,” I say, touching the indentation in his cheek. “It’s been a long time since that happened.”

He tenses at my touch, and I pull my hand back. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been this happy.”

“Not since Ingrid.”

He looks confused. “What?”

“In that photo of you guys together, your dimple is showing. You were happy with her.”

He glances over to the storage unit that holds his photos. “That seems like a lifetime ago.”



*But it wasn't, I want to say. And even though I want to believe your love for her isn't going to stifle your future relationships, I know it will. One more compelling reason for me to ignore how you've been looking at me all day.*

I pass back his notebook and stand. "Well, you should keep going while the word gods are on your side."

"Asha, wait." He takes my hand and looks up at me. "I ... ah ... I don't think I ever thanked you."

"For what?"

He strokes my fingers, and I take in a sharp breath. It's something he used to do when we were young, but it never felt like this.

"For believing in me. For giving me this chance to do something I can be proud of. All of this is because of you."

I'm mesmerized by the soft brush of his skin over mine. I normally wouldn't count my fingertips as erogenous zones, but with him they absolutely are.

"I just opened the door, Jake." I pray he can't tell how intensely my heart is pounding. "You're the one who had the talent to walk through it."

I pull my hand back and clench it a few times to get rid of the tingling.

He looks at it then clears his throat. "Friends can't hold hands, either?"

"Not when it feels like that, no."

He gets up and stands next to me, almost touching but not quite. I will myself not to look up. If I connect with those dark, passionate eyes of his, I'm done for.

"You know," he says quietly. "I thought going back to being friends with you would be as easy as breathing, and in some ways, it is. But we used to touch each other all the time and not even notice. Now, just being in the same room with you feels different."

I glance at his neck. His pulse is racing, and it pleases me more than I'd like.

"But the last thing I want to do is screw this up, Ash. It's taken too long to get back here. So, I need you to keep telling me when I cross the line, okay?"

I nod. "Of course."

We both go quiet, and after a few seconds, he says, "Friends can't stand this close to each other, can they?"

“Nope.”

He steps away right as his phone rings, and as soon as I’m free from his thrall, I let out a sigh and flop back into the couch. I swear to God, my body can’t take this much stimulation every day. Pretty soon, blood vessels are going to start popping, and I’ll bleed out in a cloud of smoldering lust. The one good thing about this crazy-hot attraction is that standing next to him is the best cardio workout I’ve ever had.

I steady my breathing as he answers his phone and walks over to the huge picture window, while I start typing up today’s words. I only need a few pages to send to Serena, so once I get everything into the document, I’ll choose my favorites.

I don’t try to overhear what he’s saying on the phone, but it’s impossible not to in this space.

“Yeah, I can’t get there ’til around five ... You sure? ... Okay, great. See you then.” He hangs up and walks back over.

“You have a hot date later?” I’m just kidding around, but even so, I think my eye twitches.

“Uh, yeah. Sort of.” He sits beside me. “I need to head out a little early today to get to the crematorium.”

I stop typing. “You’re taking a date to the crematorium? That’s ... morbid.”

“I guess. The date is with my dad. I’m going to say goodbye.”

“Your dad ...?”

“He’s being cremated tonight. I asked if I could be there.”

I turn to him. “Wait, last night when you told me he’d died, I just assumed it was a while ago. When did he pass?”

“Day before yesterday.”

I think for a second. “But that was ... that was your first day at Whiplash. That’s why you left right after the meeting?”

He nods. “The hospital called. Said he was fading and I should get there as quickly as possible.”

Just when I think I can’t feel worse for not being there for him, I find out I can. I bitched him out for running off to be with his dying father. “God, Jake. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. He’d been sick for a long time. I knew it was coming.”

“It’s a shame he won’t be around to see you become a published author. Did he know about the book?”

“Yeah. He thought I was lying about the advance, because in his words, ‘What kind of idiot would pay that much money for your stupid goddamn love poems?’”

Ah, yes. Mr. Stone was always warm and supportive. I remember the time Jake told his dad he wasn’t going to follow in his footsteps and become a cop, and Mr. Stone had shoved him into the kitchen wall so hard, it cracked the plaster. Jake was ten.

“Well, at least he was consistent to the end,” I say.

“Yeah.” Jake picks some fluff off the sofa cushion. “He did one thing that surprised me, though. When I told him I’d be working with you, he said two words.”

“Let me guess - Get out? Quit now? Do drugs?”

Jakes stands and looks down at me. “He said, ‘Marry her.’” He shakes his head. “He may have hated my guts, but he always loved you.”

I sit in stunned silence as he gathers up empty coffee cups and half-eaten pastries from the coffee table and takes them over to the trash.

“Jake?” He turns to me. “Do you want some company tonight? I wouldn’t mind saying goodbye to your dad, too.” No matter how rocky their relationship was, I know that this is something he absolutely shouldn’t do alone.

“Are you sure? It’s Friday night. You probably have a million more important things to do.”

I shake my head. “Nothing’s more important than this. I wasn’t there for you in the past, but I sure as hell can be now.”

He nods, and I don’t miss how relieved he seems. “So, friends can’t hug or hold hands, but they can attend the ritual incineration of recently deceased family members?”

I smile. “They absolutely can.”

# TWENTY-ONE

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## No Regrets

ALL FRIENDSHIPS ARE DIFFERENT. Some are so strong they can weather any storm, while other are so fragile, they'd disintegrate in the mildest breeze. Then there are those that defy definition. They straddle an invisible line like a circus performer on the high wire, and you're not sure if you're craving the comfort of making it safely to the other side, or the stomach-tingling exhilaration of an unexpected fall. It's those friendships that can either result in lifelong bonds, or a sudden and inglorious curtain call.

That's where Jake and I have been living for the past few weeks—right in the middle of a teetering balancing act that could go either way at any second.

Since our close call last month at the HEA party, the pressure to be our past selves isn't a problem. Despite our years of animosity strung together by hurt feelings and blame, spending time with him is like putting on a favorite record; I may not have listened to it in a while, but I know every note and lyric. He still makes me laugh like he used to. He still has a giant heart, fluctuating levels of patience, and a stubborn streak as wide as the Grand Canyon. We still fit together in so many important ways, but there's also a lot that's different. Like the way I can't help but stare at him when he's not watching; the tight pull in my chest every time he writes about his time with Ingrid; the subtle dance of distance we engage in to ensure we don't stand close enough to trigger tense moments of mutual longing.

I'm constantly reminding myself that despite my extreme attraction to Jake, some lines just can't be crossed. Sleeping with my author and best friend would be unprofessional and risk everything we just got back. And of course, sleeping with a man who's still in love with someone else is just begging to have my heart broken.

But even if all those issues magically disappear, and I'm free to act on my most base urges, let's not forget my pesky intimacy disorder that would bring any sexual activity to a screeching and embarrassing halt. Falling for Jake amid all of these obstacles would be emotional suicide, and yet ... I can't help wanting him.

Is it any wonder I've started making Mylanta part of my morning routine?

There's a saying that love is just friendship on fire, and it couldn't be more true. Right now, I feel like I'm living in a burning building, and even though

there's a chance I'll be incinerated, I'm just sitting here roasting marshmallows and humming the chorus from "Disco Inferno" to drown out the sound of sirens.

"You sure you don't want to join me?" Jake asks. He's shirtless, sweaty, and holding some sort of crazy inverted yoga pose that makes all his muscles pop in the most distracting ways. I don't know how he can only be wearing long shorts this morning. Even with him unintentionally raising my temperature, my gray fleece sweats are only just keeping out the chill.

"Totally sure. Thanks for asking." The one time I'd agreed to try yoga with him, he'd guided my alignment with gentle, electro-charged hands. "*Lift this arm a bit. Rotate that leg. Get your butt as high as you can.*" He'd said that last one while standing behind me with his huge hands gripping my hips. After that, whenever he said the name of the position, all I could think of was Downward Doggy style, and then I couldn't stop blushing. Of course, that meant I kept losing my line, which in turn led to him putting his hands on me more, etc, etc. In the end, I only made it through fifteen minutes of slow-moving sensual torture before I tapped out.

Now, he usually does this stuff before I arrive each morning, but I wanted to get an early start today, so here we are. I try to keep my eyes on my computer screen, but my head seems to turn of its own volition. He may be on the other side of the apartment, but because of his stupid non-walls, there's nothing to block his insane physique from my view. I'm sure he has an unnatural number of abs.

"Stop counting my abs," he says in a tired tone as he lowers himself into a position where he's holding himself off the floor with just one arm. "I've already told you, I'm not abnormal."

"Well, that's debatable. You don't like cake. That makes you a total weirdo."

"Yeah, well you're a coffee-hater who's addicted to coffee. Glass houses, lady."

I salute him with my coffee cup before finishing off the dregs. God, how can something with four sugars and a bunch of creamer still be so goddamn bitter? If my brain didn't scream for its regular hits of caffeine, I would have given it up years ago.

Redoubling my efforts to keep my eyes off Jake and his magnificent body, I go back to typing up his work from the previous day. Despite the constant simmer of sexual tension between us, the book is starting to take shape. Both Serena and Mr. Whip have been receiving chapters as we finish them, and

they're pleased with our progress.

My computer emits a low beep as an instant message pops up on my screen. It's from Joanna.

*<Heyyyyy. Watcha up to?>*

*<Not gawking at Jake doing hot yoga, that's for sure.>*

*<Ugh. You have the toughest job. Got time to give me a call? I did something you may be angry about. Don't call until you're sure Jake can't hear you. I'll be waiting.>*

*Well, that's mysterious and intriguing.*

I glance over at Jake. He's doing a plank position with his feet off the ground. My God, his core strength must be off-the-charts.

I grab my phone and purse and head toward the door. "Going to get snacks. You want anything?"

He lowers himself to the ground. "Cheetos, M&Ms, Oreos, Cool Ranch Doritos, Fruit Loops, Snickers, a couple of tubs of Betty Crocker frosting ... you know. The usual."

I shake my head in disgust. "How do you not have every single type of diabetes?" I open the door and step out onto the landing.

"And Diet Coke!" he yells right before I close it behind me. Seriously, the man has the metabolism of a hyperactive Cheetah.

As I head down the stairs and out onto the street, I call Jo. She answers after the first ring.

"Howdy. First things first – did you get any video of Jake doing yoga?"

"No. He didn't take it well last time I did that."

"Did you tell him it was for me?"

"Yeah, but strangely, he still glared."

"Huh. Unexpected. Anyway, remember you told me how he and Ingrid met at the Zen Farm in Bali?"

"Yeah."

"Wellllll, my cousin owns the Organic Chocolate Museum not far from there, so I got her to do some subtle sleuthing. She got back to me today with Ingrid's last name. I may or may not have emailed you the link to her Facebook feed."

I stop at a cross walk and press the button. “What? God, Jo —”

“Wait, just hear me out. Jake’s never gotten any closure with this chick, because he has no idea if she went home and married her ex, right? Well, now we can find out for sure what Ingrid decided by snooping through her timeline.”

As I reach Jake’s local bodega, I grab a basket and head toward the snack aisle. “But he’s made it clear he has no interest in finding out, and we have to respect his wishes.”

“Do we? If he had a disgusting boil on his perfect body, would we let the infection continue to poison him? Or would we lance the damn thing, dress it in gauze, and then oil him down?”

“Oil him down?” I grab Jake’s requested snacks one by one and throw them into the basket.

“It’s my nurse fantasy, and in it, we most definitely oil him down. Several times. Then we give him a sponge bath and oil him down some more.”

I laugh and pull a bottle of Diet Coke from the fridge. “Jo, I’m telling you, if we do this, he’ll be furious.”

“Only if he finds out, which he won’t.”

I load everything onto the counter and wait for the cashier to ring it up and bag it. “So, if she’s not married and she’s posted a whole lot of ‘I left my one true love in Bali, and all I got was this lousy t-shirt’ pics in which she’s crying and pining for him, we don’t tell him?”

“Ah. Now I see the flaw in my whole, ‘He never needs to know’ plan. Because if she regrets leaving him, and he still loves her, then ...”

*Then they should be together.* Even thinking it makes me break out in a cold sweat.

“But if she’s *married*,” Jo says, “which is the more likely option, then you can let him know and help him close that door, once and for all.”

She has a point. How can he ever truly move on without closure? And yet, going behind his back doesn’t feel right.

After paying the cashier, I grab my haul of junk food and head back toward the apartment.

“Jo, I know you’re just trying to help, but I don’t think I can do this. It feels like a betrayal, and I’m trying really hard to be his friend.” *And nothing else.*

She sighs. “Yeah, I totally hear what you’re saying. I won’t push you.”

“Thanks. And I’m grateful that you went through all that effort. Your heart is in the right place.”

“Actually,” she says, “I have *situs inversus*, which means my heart is on the opposite side of my chest than normal, but I appreciate the sentiment. Talk to you tomorrow.”

After we sign off, I scroll through my emails on my way back to the apartment. When I see the one containing Ingrid’s Facebook link, I hover over it for a few seconds. Then, before I can change my mind, I send it to the trash and hope like hell I’ve made the right decision.

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I’m in the middle of unpacking Jake’s supplies in the kitchen when he emerges from the bathroom rubbing a towel over his damp hair. I breathe a sigh of relief when I see he’s dressed in a white t-shirt and jeans. It’s always easier to cope when his muscles and ink are covered.

“Coffee?” he says, throwing the towel over a crate before filling a saucepan with water.

“You know you have the money to buy a coffee machine now, right? You don’t have to continue to live like a reality show contestant.”

He sets the saucepan on the hotplate and fires it up. “You and your love affair with fancy gadgets. Coffee machines, computers, functioning walls. You’re soft, Tate. Soft, I tells ‘ya.” He brushes past me as he grabs two mugs, and that’s all it takes for a buzz to start in the deepest parts of me. There’s a change in him, too. His relaxed demeanor takes on an edge, and his voice gains a slight hint of irritation.

“One day,” he says, “I’ll take you trekking through the Peruvian rainforest, and then you’ll understand that while you were wasting time with your precious coffee machine, you should have been learning how to safely remove leeches from your private parts.”

As he scoops coffee into the mugs, I put his Diet Coke in the fridge. “Please tell me this is not something that happened.”

“I could tell you that, but it would be a lie. No man has known true terror, until he looks down while pissing and sees a giant Peruvian leech staring up at him.”

I close the fridge and smile. “I worry about you. I really do. I can’t believe the crap you did for fun when I wasn’t around.” I lean back against the bench and watch him work. He adds creamer and sugar to the cups, and when he’s done, he shakes his head, his jaw tight.



“What?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

It’s clearly not nothing, but I’m almost scared to ask.

He concentrates on the saucepan of water like he can make it boil with the force of his stare.

I clear my throat and straighten up the silverware on the counter. “By the way, Serena emailed earlier requesting more detail in that last chapter about Ingrid.” Her name always feels wrong in my mouth.

Jake crosses his arms and grunts a response.

“Don’t be a diva,” I say, moving closer. “As great as your writing is, you always shy away from the emotion of your interactions with her. I know she’s a painful topic, but that’s the point. Readers want to experience your angst and heartache.” *No matter how much I could do without it.*

“Why?” He keeps staring at the water. “Who are these people who get off on the suffering of others?”

I shrug. “In any good story, there’s no satisfaction without struggle. The more adversity a hero has to overcome, the more we root for him to win in the end. It’s the only way he earns his happy ever after.”

“Yeah?” He turns to me. “So, how are we ending this book, then? What’s my happy ever after?”

“Well ...” I get an image of him reconciling with Ingrid and riding off into the sunset. “Uh ... we’ll have to figure that out. It could be your skyrocketing career. Or your ability to touch people and help them with their own emotional struggles.” I look down. “Or ... you getting closure on the whole Ingrid thing. The sunshine after the storm and all that.”

When I glance up at him, he’s staring, and the darkness of his eyes is more immutable than usual. “Uh huh.”

There’s so much subtext in that simple ‘uh huh’, I have no idea what he’s trying to say. Is he agreeing with me? Disagreeing?

“Are those my only options?” he asks quietly. “At the end of most stories, doesn’t the hero usually get the girl?”

I blink for a few seconds, certain I’m misconstruing what he’s saying. “Well ... if you’ve rethought your decision to not contact Ingrid, then —”

“I’m not talking about Ingrid, and you know it.”

Heat starts at the base of my neck and begins to climb. I don’t want to keep

staring at him, but I can't seem to look away. He's not touching me. He's not even standing particularly close. And yet, every hair on my body is standing on end as a shiver of possibility prickles my skin.

"Tell me what you're thinking." His voice is low, but there's a hint of demand. "For once, let's just both be honest about what we want."

My lungs feel tight. Admitting what I want is difficult. I might not be the only one with something to lose here, but I'm the one who'll lose the most. At worst, I'm a rebound. At best, second choice. Neither option is great.

When I continue to hesitate, he comes over and stands in front of me, so close I can feel his warmth and smell his shampoo.

"Do you know what I'd like to talk about?" He moves closer, just inches away. As he looks at me, his jaw flexes, and the tension in his body mirrors my own. "Let's address the absolutely fucking insane chemistry we have. We can't keep ignoring it, Asha. You know it as well as I do." He drops his head, and for the first time, I notice how tired he seems. "Every day when you walk through that door, it takes more and more effort for me to stay away from you, and I can't keep doing it. It's too goddamn draining."

He looks at me then cups my cheek, and I suck in a shallow breath as his thumb draws a soft arc across my skin.

"If you want me to stop, say the word. If you think I'm wrong, tell me. But if you feel the same way and want to quit fighting this, then ... talk to me."

"We talked at the HEA party." I try not to lean into his hand, but it's warm, and I want to. "We agreed it was a bad idea. We had our reasons."

"They don't apply anymore, Ash. You broke up with your boyfriend. The book is going well. There are no excuses now."

"You're not over Ingrid."

He pauses, and I think I die a little in that moment. "I am."

"I don't believe you."

He locks eyes with me and takes a breath. "I swear to you, I am. Can't you tell that when I'm with you, no one else exists? Not even Ingrid."

I take his hand from my face and hold it. "But she'll always have a part of you."

"Well, you had part of me first." He puts his hand on my neck and leans his forehead against mine. "Remember when we found that old pocket dictionary in Mrs. Garcia's trash? We'd flip through it together, amazed how circular it was? That every word needed other words to describe it."

I don't trust my voice right now, so I nod.

"*That's* how I feel when I'm with you. You're the person who describes me. You give me meaning. Even when we were fighting, I felt it. You're the one thing in the world that helps me make sense."

He slides his other arm around my waist and pulls me closer. When my breasts brush against his chest, his mouth drops open as he inhales.

"What if this doesn't work out?" I whisper.

He shakes his head like I'm not seeing the most obvious outcome. "What if it does? We've tried being enemies. It sucked. We've tried being friends, and it's not enough. The way I feel about you isn't platonic anymore. It's primal. And no matter how much I try to talk myself out of it and rationalize it away, I can't. Can you?"

I put my hands flat on his chest, and his t-shirt is soft, but the muscles underneath are thrumming with a heavy, hammering pulse. "No." It feels so good to let myself touch him, my breath catches.

*Nothing hollows out a heart more thoroughly than regret.* That's the message he sent when we were online strangers.

"If I'm going to have regrets," I say. "I want it to be about things I've done, not things I wish I had."

I put my arms around his neck, and we both feel a shift. All the restraint we've been clinging to for the past few weeks is dissolving, and the raw, overwhelming suppressed need is rising and replacing it.

Touching him now, I don't know why I ever thought I had the strength to fight it. Desire doesn't care if you want it or not. It just lights up inside you, like a box full of fireworks all going off at once. And sometimes it's like a slow-burning candle, setting fire to all your nerves ending before leaving your body a melted mess of wax.

The way Jake's looking at me now? I'm melting.

I slide my hand up along the side of his neck and into his hair, and he pulls me closer with an impatient groan. Then he leans down and brushes his lips against mine so gently, it makes me shiver. He stays there, not quite kissing me but also not moving away. He has one hand on my face, one arm around my back. As we linger there, I drown in the exquisite sensation of wanting something so desperately, there's pleasure wrapped in pain.

"No regrets," he says, as if it's a certainty.

My body is vibrating, begging me to do something. Anything. I let out a

shaky breath and tighten my fingers in his hair. “No regrets.”

At last, he presses his lips to mine, and we both stop breathing as time stops. My heart is beating so hard and fast, I’m trembling.

Dear God, we’re doing this. Jacob Stone is kissing me, and I’m kissing him back. And even though I can feel the irreversible tectonic shift from the safety of our friendship to the unexplored jungle of what lies beyond, my blood is singing with the thrill of what comes next.

Jake makes a noise, and then he pulls back and kisses me again. His lips are open and soft, but everything else about him is wire-tight. I feel like he’s holding back from crushing me under the force of his need. When I feel the soft sweep of his tongue, I groan and search for more, and then, whatever tether that was holding him back snaps, and I’m hit by the full force of Jacob Stone’s passion.

Hooking his hands beneath my arms, he lifts me onto the high kitchen bench. Then he steps between my legs and kisses me, hard and deep. Our mouths tilt and slide, and his hands are everywhere, strong fingers alternating between gentle and rough. There’s so much sensation pulsing through my body, I feel dizzy and high. When he grabs my butt and pulls me tight against his erection, I gasp and wrap my legs around his waist.

This should feel strange. I’ve known this man for practically my whole life. I know he has a birth mark on his left ankle and that he got the short scar above his eyebrow running into a tree in third grade. I’ve touched and held his body a thousand times in a thousand different ways without feeling a fraction of what I’m feeling at this moment. And now, the boy I loved so dearly is a powerhouse of sexual energy who touches me like he’s always known how. Who kisses me like he’s mapping the exact shape of my mouth.

I’ve had amazing kisses during my lifetime, and others I’d rather forget. But kissing Jake ... he makes me feel like everything else was pretend and this is the first time it’s been real.

“Asha ...” He kisses me like it’s painful for him to stop, and then he wraps his arms around me and carries me over to his bed with long, determined strides. I unlock my legs, and he lowers me onto my knees. In a second, my hoodie is unzipped, and he pushes it down my arms. My tank is next, and I barely register he’s removed it until the cool air hits my skin.

With a grunt, he pulls off his own shirt before moving me back into the middle of bed. When I lie down, he positions himself above me, hips between my legs, rocking and pressing as I touch as much of him as I can.

Everything is perfect, until I feel him slide his hand beneath me to grip the

clasp of my bra. Suddenly, a claxon starts up inside me, and cold fingers of panic squeeze my stomach and close my throat.

*No, no, no, no. Please ... not now. Not with him.*

*Please ...*

I press the heels of my hands into my eye sockets and wish it away, but I can already feel the numbness setting in.

“Asha. Stop.” Within seconds, Jake pulls my hands away and presses them into the mattress beside my head. “Look at me.”

I open my eyes and see him above me, his expression intense and concerned.

“Whatever you’re doing right now ...” he pants. “Whatever voice is trying to talk you out of enjoying this ... don’t listen. The only voice you’re allowed to listen to is mine. And I’m telling you I need you. Every part of you.”

I swallow and glance down, embarrassed that he can see through me.

He tightens his grip on my hands. “No, don’t look away. You stay with me. Look into my eyes.”

I go back to him, and his remarkable face is full of so much affection, it’s mesmerizing.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

“Then let go. Stop thinking. Stop being afraid. I’m not some asshole who barely knows you and just wants to screw a hot girl. I’m the guy who’s been crawling through your bedroom window since he was five-years-old. No matter what happens next, you can’t disappoint me. Do you understand?”

I nod, and I don’t know if it’s the way he has me pinned to the bed, or the edge in his voice that implies he’s not going to tolerate me closing myself off, but I take a few deep breaths, and then ... I surrender. I give up my power. My expectations. I make myself a blank slate and wait for Jake to write upon me.

He releases my hands, and I lift up to allow him to reach my bra clasp again. When he releases it, I wait for the sharp hum of anxiety to pull me out of the moment, but it never comes. As he sits back on his heels and gently slides the bra down my arms, I search for the building tide of panic, but it’s nowhere to be found. And when he gazes down at my naked breasts as if he’s seeing the face of God, for the first time in my life, my body lights up instead of shutting down.

*Ohhhh, yes. Finally.*

“You’re perfect,” he whispers. “You always have been.”

I close my eyes as he trails soft kisses along the top of my breasts, and when he closes his mouth over a tight nipple, I tangle my fingers in his hair and moan his name.

“Part of me can’t believe we’re doing this,” he says, kissing from my sternum down to my stomach. “And another part can’t believe we didn’t do it years ago.”

When he reaches my sweat pants, he looks up at me as he grips the waistband and slowly pulls them down. My panties are next, and he keeps eye contact as he slides them off my legs.

“You have no idea how much I’ve been dreaming about this.”

He grasps my hips and drags me down to the end of the bed. Then he sinks to his knees, drapes my legs over his shoulders, and kisses a path up to where I’m aching so fiercely, I’m willing to beg for relief. I barely have time to grab onto the thick comforter before his mouth closes over me, and the moment he starts flicking his tongue, I buck away from the intensity of the pleasure.

“Keep breathing,” Jake says, pulling me back into place. “I’m just getting started.”

He goes back to work, alternating between licking and flicking, and dear Lord in heaven, I’ve never felt pleasure like it. Just when I think he can’t make it any more intense, he adds more suction, and when he moans against me, the vibration winds me even tighter.

At some point, my brain checks out, and when the first tendrils of my orgasm start to coil, I want to stay quiet, but I can’t. I think I say ‘Please’. I’m sure I say ‘Yes’. And when Jake grabs hold of my thighs and pulls me more firmly onto his hot mouth, I’m certain I say ‘Fuck.’

“Oh, God ... I’m going to come. Ohhh, God. Oh, God.” I hold my breath as everything speeds up, and then I just whisper Jake’s name, over and over again.

This is how it’s supposed to feel. *This* is what I’ve been waiting for. After all these years of numbness, Jake has brought me back to life. He’s the first. I’m so grateful, emotion catches in my throat.

*I’m not broken after all.*

When the rush starts, I look down to where Jake’s head is moving between my legs, his hands squeezing and caressing my thighs. I’m gasping for air as I

teeter there, waiting for the final, thrilling fall, and when he looks up at me with his soulful, passionate eyes as he gives a final roll and flick of his tongue, I come, violently. Every muscle spasms in unison, and when the pleasure dissipates and everything becomes heavy and soft, Jake's there, kissing my head, wrapping his arms around me, pulling me into the warmth of his embrace. It's only when I notice the wetness glistening on his chest that I realize I'm crying.

## TWENTY-TWO

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### Exposed

AS I PUSH THROUGH THE haze of my post-orgasmic high, I realize Jake's draped the comforter over us. There's warmth, all around me. Strong arms and soft skin. I'm tucked beneath his chin, and he smells so good that all I want to do is press my nose into his neck and breath him in forever. We're facing each other on our sides, and he has both arms wrapped around me. Never in my life have I ever felt more satisfied. Or safe. Or *right*.

He's still wearing his jeans, but I'm completely naked, and even though I'd usually be desperate to climb back into the safety of my clothes, the way Jake makes me feel ... I may never wear clothes again.

I crack my eyes open, and find myself looking at his Adam's apple. When he senses I'm conscious, he leans back so he can see my face.

"Hey."

I give him a blissful smile. "Hey."

"Are you okay?"

"More than okay. I feel incredible."

"Yes, you do." He just looks at me for a few seconds, as if he's trying to figure out a great mystery.

"What is it?"

"This," he says stroking my arm. "You. What we just did. I've never felt like that with anyone before."

"Like what?"

He grazes his hand up my neck and traces a fingertip around my jaw. "Like I knew how you'd react the second before I touched you. Like I'd done that to your body a million times before. Tasted you. Watched you come." He brushes his thumb over my lips. "Do you have any idea how spectacular you are when you come?"

A rush of tingles pebbles my skin. I can't believe he's saying this to me. Not the words themselves, but that it's him. "You're talking about how I look when I come, and I'm not even blushing. What's happening between us?" I run my fingers through his hair, and he closes his eyes and hums his approval.



“I don’t know, but I never want it to stop.”

“A few weeks ago, being naked with a guy would have sent me into a meltdown, and now, here I am with my best friend ... a man who just gave me the best orgasm of my life ... and I have zero shame.”

He pushes my hair away from my face. “Why would you feel shame about this? And what do you mean by meltdown?”

I take a breath and tell him all about my problem. The panic, the numbness, the inevitable shutdown. He’s supportive but also sympathetic.

When I finish, he pushes up onto his elbow and gazes down at me. “So, what happened when you dated guys? You just didn’t have sex?”

I shrug. “I still had it. Rarely. I just didn’t enjoy it.”

“Jesus, Ash. So you’ve never —” He mimes an explosion. “—before?”

I laugh. “I orgasm all the time. Just not with other people. I was beginning to think it would never happen.”

“And you thought that was your fault. That’s why you told Derek you were broken.” When I nod, he sighs. “I’m no sex expert, and I certainly don’t have enough experience to give you hard numbers, but I can tell you without a shadow of a doubt, you’re not alone. There are *millions* of women out there who don’t come with their partners, and sometimes ... yeah, sure it’s because they find it hard to relax. But sometimes ...” He shakes his head. “No, screw that. A *lot* of the time, guys are just shitty lovers. If men had to make women orgasm to get them pregnant, the world’s population would still be in double-digits.”

I laugh. Trust him to say the perfect thing to make me feel better. “Women need to talk about this more, so we don’t all feel defective.”

“I agree. Why didn’t you talk to me about it?”

“Because I didn’t want you to think I was a freak.”

He grabs my waist and pulls me closer. “Woman, I once watched you fit twelve packets of Hubba Bubba in your mouth at once. I was the only mourner at a two-hour funeral you threw for a dead caterpillar. One summer, you spent an entire week randomly moving stuff around my bedroom in an attempt to convince me I was being haunted.”

I put my hand on his chest and run my fingers across the light smattering of hair. “And it worked. Remember when I hid behind your door covered in a sheet, and when you walked in, I jumped out and made you pee?”

“For the last time,” he says, feigning annoyance. “It wasn’t *pee*. I was

carrying a glass of water. For *you*. And you made me spill it.”

“Uh huh. Sure I did.” I graze my fingers lower, over his abs.

His eyelids flutter for a moment, and when he speaks again, his voice is strained. “What are you doing?”

I move down lower and finger the waistband of his jeans. “Nothing. Just wondering why you’re still wearing these.”

He watches with wary eyes. “Because if they come off, I’m going to spend the rest of the day making love to you and not writing. And then, my gorgeous, sexy-as-hell editor would kick my ass. No matter how much I want it, satisfying my need to be inside you does nothing for my deadlines.”

I lift the comforter and look down. Even under the covers, I can see his erection straining the denim. “Wow, that looks uncomfortable.”

He gives me a wry smile. “If you think I’m not used to being constantly, painfully hard around you, then you haven’t been paying attention. This is my new normal.”

I graze over the long ridge in the denim, and his eyes burn into me. This is thrilling. The power I have to make him look like that.

“When was the first time I gave you a hard on?” I ask, continuing to feel the shape of him. “At the HEA party?”

He keeps his eyes on my face, but his breathing is getting more and more ragged. “No comment.”

“Was it before that? In the bathroom when you were tending my head wound?” He just stares, trying to hide the pleasure that’s playing out on his face, but failing. “Further back than that?”

“Much further back.” His voice is tight.

I sit up so I’m facing him and continue with light, teasing touches. “When?”

His gaze drops to my breasts, and a look of pain crosses his face. “When I was fifteen. I was out on the porch roof one night, and ... your bedroom curtains weren’t as opaque as you thought.”

“So, you spied on me getting undressed?”

He looks mildly ashamed. “Not intentionally. But when it was happening, I was physically incapable of looking away. You had the most beautiful body I’d ever seen. You still do.”

I get a flash of Ingrid in that tiny black bikini, but I push it away and try to

concentrate on the way he's looking at me. The way he makes me feel.

"That was when we were fighting, Jake." I apply some pressure, and he makes a low noise. "You ogled a girl you hated?"

"I was angry with you. I wasn't dead."

I don't know if it's normal to feel this turned on by giving him pleasure, but my need for him is growing by the second.

"I'd be outraged about this, but ..." I look down and grip him through his jeans. He watches with hooded eyes. "I spent a lot of time on that porch roof, too, and you didn't even have curtains." When I stroke him gently, he digs his fingers into the mattress. "One night when I was out there, it was late, and I couldn't sleep. I was staring up at the stars when I heard ... noises ... coming from your room. So, I crept over to your side of the roof and ... I could see you, lying in bed. And you didn't look like a boy anymore. You looked like a man." I press my whole palm against him, and he groans. "And you were ... touching yourself." I look up at him. The expression on his face is bestial. "It was the most arousing thing I'd ever seen. When I got back to my bedroom, I thought about you. That was the first time I made myself come."

"So, you objectified me?" he says softly, his voice rough. "You masturbated while thinking about me but wouldn't talk to me?"

I push up onto my knees and lean over him. "I was angry with you. I wasn't dead."

With an animalistic sound, he flips me onto my back, and within a few seconds, his jeans are off. He kisses me so hard, I can't catch my breath, and then his hands and mouth are everywhere at once. With his jeans gone, I'm finally free to touch him, and Lord, it feels good. Knowing he's this hard because of me, makes me feel like a goddess. The power that I feel makes all the doubt and self-consciousness disappear, and I begin to see myself as he sees me.

I push him onto his back and kiss my way down his body, and then all thoughts fade away as I take him in my mouth. He responds by groaning so loudly, it echoes through the whole apartment. In the same way he knew exactly how to please me, I know what's going to blow his mind. I don't think, I just go on instinct. I read his noises, note what makes him grip the bed or tangle his fingers in my hair. I feel the ebb and flow of his pleasure and know the perfect time to straddle his hips and slide down, inch by breath-stealing inch.

When he's fully inside me, we both freeze, and I have no doubt the awe I'm seeing on his face is mirrored on mine. How can it feel like this? How can

I accommodate all of these intense emotions and him at the same time? It feels impossible.

I have so much I want to say to him, so many questions to ask, but right now I just kiss him and try to make the passion I'm feeling speak for me.

When he pulls back, all I can do is watch his face, because there's nothing more mesmerizing than Jacob Stone in the throes of pleasure. The way he squeezes his eyelids shut and throws his head back is the same image that was burned into my brain as a teenager. I suspect it's lurked in my subconscious for years, helping to sabotage interactions with men who weren't him.

Taking my cues from his responses, I increase my speed and lean over to kiss his chest and neck. The noises he's making rise in pitch, sounding more desperate every time I sink back down. Then he looks at me with a tight jaw and determined mouth, and even as I'm dragging him toward completion, he's taking me with him. He touches me as I ride him, and when he picks up the pace, I can't control my rhythm any more. Everything becomes uneven and out of control. We're both clinging to each other, grasping and panting, coiling each other tighter. I close my eyes and stop breathing, trying to hold on as the pressure becomes too much. And as I press my chest to his, and he starts groaning my name, I grip the back of his neck while circling my hips in jagged, desperate arcs.

I don't know if he comes first, or if I do. But after the shock waves fade, I collapse onto him and don't move for a long time.

I hug him as we both pant our way back to reality, and after a while, he mutters, "Just so you know, as soon as I can feel my legs, we're doing that again."

I rub my cheek against his. "Yeah, we are."

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Discovering our insane sexual chemistry is both the best and worst thing Jake and I have ever done. All the tension we felt before we experienced each other's bodies fades into obscurity beside the overwhelming need that devours us whenever we're together. And our deepening feelings only feed the flame.

I'd often dreamed of what a soul mate connection would feel like, but never in my wildest dreams had I imagined the all-consuming passion it would unleash. And it seems Jake feels the same. Every now and then I wonder if he had even more potent chemistry with Ingrid, because I can't imagine that any couple in the world is having better sex than we are. That's why it's so hard to control.

We start out each day vowing to work for the whole morning before rewarding ourselves, but we never last, and neither of us knows the definition of a quickie. Our lovemaking is always prolonged and multi-orgasmic, and we don't care where we do it: Kitchen, bathroom, living room, in his bed, against the wall, bent over the couch. As long as he's inside me, nothing else matters.

We've had to resort to spending days apart, just to get some work done. Today was not one of those days

"Ash? Hey."

I wake with a start. I'm sprawled face down in the middle of Jake's bed and look up blearily to find him sitting next to me, freshly showered and fully dressed.

I sit up and rub my face. "Hey. How long was I asleep?"

"A couple of hours. If I didn't have to go to this blogger thing with Sid, I'd still be in there with you." He puts a fresh cup of coffee next to me. "I've made it extra strong, so drink it, and then look over those edits I did yesterday. There's something not right about them, and I need your incredible brain to tell me what I'm doing wrong."

"Yeah. Okay." I still feel dazed. I've never done a lot of drugs, but I can imagine that an orgasm hangover is much like coming down from a high. Everything hurts in the best way possible, and all I want to do is order takeout, snuggle with Jake, and binge-watch something on Netflix.

"Ash? You're awake, right?"

"Totally." I flop back and then arch as I yawn and stretch. Jake's focus tries to roam everywhere at once.

"Dammit, woman." He leans over and kisses my hip bone. "Turning me on before I have to get on the subway ..." He kisses up the side of my ribcage. "... could get me arrested." He finishes by cupping my breast and planting a light kiss on my nipple. "Put that weaponized sexiness away. At least until I get home."

He pulls the comforter up to hide my nakedness. And when he grazes his fingers over my cheek, I take his hand and kiss his palm as I work up the nerve to ask him something. There's been a thought niggling at me for a while, and I've put off asking him, because I know I might not like the answer, but I can't avoid it forever.

"Before you go, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

I look at his fingers to avoid his face.

“I know you said you’re over Ingrid, but ... do you ever think of her when we’re together? Maybe wish she was here with you instead of me?”

Jake’s face falls. “Jesus, Ash ... no.” He’s denying it, but I can tell he’s not telling me the whole truth.

“It’s okay,” I say, feeling stupid for asking when I knew it would make me feel like crap. “I get it. She’s your soul mate. You spent a year writing poetry about her. In a couple of months, you’ll be the published author of a book about her. I just know that when it comes out, the only thing people are going to want to hear about is that relationship, and ... well, I’ll be standing in the background like some sort of consolation prize.”

He takes both of my hands in his. “Asha, you’re no one’s consolation prize. Ingrid is past history. You’re my future.”

I look at him. “But you don’t know for certain she’s over you. I can’t shake the fear that she’ll read this book and decide she wants you back. I mean, the way you write about her ... the obvious passion in your words. How could any woman read that and not be moved?”

Jake looks down at our hands, his expression conflicted. His jaw is tensing like crazy, and he keeps looking like he’s about to say something but then stopping himself.

Finally, after a few hitching breaths, he looks at me and says, “I’ve been so wrapped up in this whole thing - the book, having you back in my life ... I didn’t even think how the Ingrid thing would affect you. I’m such an asshole.”

I start to disagree, but he stops me. “Ash, this is on me. Not you. There are things I should have told you a long time ago, and because I didn’t ...” He shakes his head like he’s angry at himself then looks me in the eyes. “I don’t have time to get into it now, but let’s talk tonight. Meet me at Dad’s place. Eight o’clock.”

I nod. “Okay, but why there?”

“Just meet me, okay?” He looks at the clock and swears under his breath. “I gotta go.” He takes my face in both hands and kisses me with so much tenderness, it takes my breath away. “See you tonight.”

He grabs his keys and wallet and heads toward the door. When he opens it, he turns back to me. “And for what it’s worth, my feelings about you are in a different universe to how I felt about Ingrid. There’s no comparison.”

He closes the door behind him, and I wait until his footfalls fade before padding over to the bathroom and turning on the shower. I know he was trying to reassure me, but that last statement could be taken either way.

Standing under the warm spray, I let my thoughts twist around themselves until they come up with the most pessimistic outcomes. I'm not usually a paranoid person, but when you love someone as much as I love Jake, a certain amount of suspicion comes with the territory. I've never really dealt with the jealousy I felt over Ingrid being so important to him, and those thoughts keep prodding at old bruises, making them ache.

After getting dressed, I throw myself into my work to keep my mind busy. I speed through Jake's chapters, red-penning the areas he needs to rewrite or refine, and then I look over the final production schedule that Serena has sent through. All of the artwork for the book is now completed, and we only have a week to complete the final edits and formatting before it heads to the printers. If we're going to have any chance of getting this thing done in time, Jake and I are going to have to spend most of our days apart.

After I'm done replying to all my emails, I rub my hands together and go over to the bed. As the weather gets colder, it gets more and more impossible to work in this place without bundling up. I grab the comforter, and as I pull it off the bed and wrap it around my shoulders, I manage to knock over a stack of Jake's storage crates.

"Oh, you sonuvabitch."

When they hit the floor, their contents explode everywhere, and I crouch down to make sure I haven't broken anything. I check his camera first. The lens cap came off, but otherwise it seems okay. As I'm gathering up all of his photos, I notice a loose piece of paper, so I pick it up. It's a handwritten letter.

*Dear Jake,*

*I can't believe this is goodbye. These past few months with you have been the happiest of my life. I thought I'd never find someone like you, and after everything with Roger, I wasn't even looking. But as I peered out from the deck at the Zen Farm, there you were, and from the first time I saw you, I knew you were meant to be mine. You're the first man to whom I've given everything: My heart, mind, body, and soul. And no matter where you go, or what you do, you will always carry part of my soul with you.*

*I wish I could convince you to stay. I know you have your reasons for going home, but I feel like we're ending before we even began, and whenever I think of you getting on that plane, my heart splinters and breaks.*

*Every day we're apart, I'll pray you change your mind about us. And if you ever do, please know, I'll be waiting.*

*All my love, always,*

*Ingrid.*

When I'm done I just sit there, staring at the letter, trying to force it to make sense.

After five minutes of rereading, I still have no explanation as to why Jake's account of their breakup and this letter seem to be polar opposites. All this time I've been telling myself that she's out of his life forever because she chose the other guy. But she didn't. She chose him. And he's been lying about it this whole time.

I grab my phone off the coffee table and hesitate before making the call, but I know I need to do it.

"Hey, Jo. Do you still have that link for Ingrid's Facebook? I need it."



## TWENTY-THREE

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### House of Cards

THERE'S A COLD BREEZE AS I walk through my old neighborhood, but I'm angry enough that I don't feel it. Whatever Jake has planned tonight, I'm going to need a shitton of answers.

After a few minutes, I'm standing on the sidewalk in front of the house in which I grew up, and a strange sense of inevitability washes over me. It's as if little pieces of me have been making their way here ever since Jake walked back into my life, and now the rest of me is catching up.

We reminisce about this place all the time, replaying moments from our childhoods, but the home in my memory bears little resemblance to the house in front of me. That's the porch where Mom had her morning coffee, but it's narrower than I remember. There are the front steps where Jake and I would stage terrible one-act plays, but I'm sure they were bigger. Even the Tree of Love in Jake's yard seems stunted and less vibrant.

They say you can never go home again, but that's not true. You can, but you'll always be astounded by how small everything seems. Jake's dad stayed in their old house until the end, but I don't even know who lives in ours these days. Both houses are dark, so maybe Jake's not here yet.

I tilt my head when I hear music, and right away I know where it's coming from. For years Jake and I shared walls and porches, backyards, and beds. But the one place that was truly ours stood by itself.

I walk around the side of the house and down the driveway. At the end, huddled in the shadows of a huge oak tree is the garage. Because Jake's dad didn't own a car, it was used for storage, and there was an attic area that Jake and I claimed as our own. It was dank and musty, but to us, it was the most magical place in the world. When we were little, we used to steal any spare blankets and pillows and carry them up the rickety ladder. And then we added books, and toys, and pencils and paper. One time, Jake found some old fairy lights that one of the neighbors had thrown away. Somehow, he got them working, and we draped them over nails in the roof, so we could pretend we were somewhere exotic, lying under the stars.

Right now, light is spilling out of the garage windows, and as I get closer I can make out that the music is an old Natalie Cole album. It was one of Mom's favorites, and it's what we used to listen to when we wanted to smooth

over the rough edges of our lives.

I pull the door open and step inside, and the sight that greets me isn't at all what I expected. In the space that used to be packed with storage boxes and old holiday decorations, there's now a large Persian rug topped by a huge wooden desk; the kind that would have looked at home in a lawyer's office in the fifties. On the desk are stacks of notebooks, similar to the ones at Jake's apartment.

My first thought is that if they're all full of words, Jake's more prolific than I ever imagined. But then I realize there's no way he filled all these books in the last couple of years. He's been writing a lot longer than that.

I glance over to where Jake's leaning on the edge of the desk. When he sees me, he stands, hands in pockets, shoulders hunched. When I go over to him, he tries to take my hand, but I pull back. I need to hear what he has to say before I let him disarm me.

He nods like he understands. "I've run through having this conversation with you a thousand times in my head, and it was never easy. But I don't think I ever thought I'd feel like I want to throw up." He rubs the back of his hand on his chin. "Ash, I haven't been honest with you, and I hate that my lie made you feel like you weren't the most important thing in the world to me, because you are." He looks at my hand again but doesn't touch me. "I know you're worried about Ingrid changing her mind and coming back, but that's not going to happen. Ingrid didn't break up with me. I left her."

"I figured that out already." When I pull Ingrid's letter out of my pocket and hand it to him, he crumples it up.

"I wasn't snooping," I say, as if it matters how I found it. "I knocked over your storage boxes, and it fell out."

He drops it on the desk, agitated. "Goddammit. I'm sorry I didn't come clean with you before. It's my fault for waiting so long."

"I also looked through Ingrid's social media today. You're all over it. As recently as a few days ago, she was re-posting a memory of you two and saying how much she missed you and loves you. What the hell, Jake?"

He drops his head. "I was so stupid to lie about it, but I didn't know what else to do. You were sold on the story of me pining over the soul mate I lost, and Ingrid was the obvious choice."

"So, it's all been bullshit? All the poems ... those beautiful, passionate poems were just words? You made up a false narrative to make them seem more profound than they were?"

He stares at me for a few seconds, like I've connected the dots but failed to see the picture they formed. "Those poems weren't fake, they were from my heart. Every emotion in them was real. I just didn't write them for Ingrid." He takes a deep breath. "They were about you."

My heart falters as the memories of all those incredible words flood my mind. I'm too shocked to form a reply.

"It's always been you, Asha. How do you not know that by now?"

I'm trying to piece everything together in my mind, but I can't. "So, the travel ... Ingrid ... the poems didn't start until after her."

"I left Brooklyn to get away from you, but I was an idiot thinking I could outrun how I felt. Instead of pining for you here, I sat in front of the Taj Mahal and did it. I stared out from the top of the Eiffel Tower and wanted to show you the view. I longed for you on every continent, in front of every piece of art that made me grateful for life. But it all ended up meaning nothing without you there to share it."

He gestures to the crumpled note on the desk. "And then I met Ingrid, and I thought, my God, finally. A woman who might be able to take your place in my heart. And I tried with her. I did everything in my power to give her just one small piece of myself. But it was no use. You owned me. All of me."

Everything is clicking into place in stages, but none of it makes me feel better.

"All this time I believed she was your soul mate and I was your second choice. Do you have any idea how that made me feel?"

He comes toward me cautiously. "Ash, I never wanted to hurt you. That was the last thing I intended. Haven't you ever gotten yourself into a lie so deep, you didn't know how to get out? I sat in front of you and your bosses and spun a whole mess of crap about Ingrid. And then I had to continue it, because I knew that if I admitted what I'd done, you would have looked at me like you're doing right now. Disbelief. A little disgust." He takes my hands. "I'm so sorry. I hate that I deceived you."

I pull away, too angry to be touched. "Not just me, Jake. Everyone. We all bought your story. Your fans literally bought it. You sold us all a lie. And I look like the biggest idiot of all, because you're the person I thought I knew everything about. No one is going to believe I wasn't in on it. My reputation will be dragged through the mud along with yours."

"You didn't do anything wrong. This is all on me."

"No, it's not, Jake. That's the problem. This is on all of us. Every single

person at Whiplash. This book was supposed to revive our failing company. You were going to be our savior. There are hundreds of thousands of pre-orders all over the country, and now ... all of that is trashed.”

“What if we change Ingrid’s name? Make her a fictional character.”

I sit in the chair behind the desk and drop my head into my hands. “The reason this book has gotten so much buzz is because everyone thinks it’s autobiographical. There are a million fictional romances out there. This one was supposed to be the real deal. If someone finds out it’s fake, and they will, we’ll all be labelled frauds.”

We fall into silence, and I feel like we’re a high-wire duo who’s just come crashing to earth. Everything was going so well. The book. Us. And now I can’t see a way forward. Every mental path I try to go down rips us to shreds.

Jake puts his hands flat on the desk and looks at me. “There must be something we can do.”

“There is,” I say, tiredly. “I go to see Serena in the morning and tell her the truth. She’ll cancel your contract, order you to repay the advance, fire me, and then probably announce that Whiplash is closing its doors due to bankruptcy.”

Jake’s nostrils flare. “That’s not an acceptable outcome.”

“Well, that’s the only one I can foresee.”

“And what happens to you and me?”

I shake my head, unable to form cohesive thought about anything, least of all us. “I can’t even think about us right now.”

“Listen, Ash, I’m not going to let my stupid mistake ruin us or your career. I’m going to fix this.”

“How?”

He pulls out his phone and dials. “Still working that out. Leave it with me.” He heads out the doors, and as he goes, I hear, “Hey, Serena. It’s Jake Stone. We need to talk.”

I rub my eyes and roll my neck. I don’t see any way for this situation to be redeemed, no matter how confident Jake seems. If he can talk Serena into some sort of compromise, it will be a miracle.

I glance over at the ladder leading up to the attic space. The fairy lights are on, and they take me back to a simpler time, when my most complicated issue was whether to have an apple or grape juice box.

I walk over and scale the ladder, mindful that I’m a lot bigger than when I

was here last. When I get to top, I smile despite my shitty mood. Not only does it look exactly as I remember it, but Jake must have spent time cleaning up and washing all the pillows and rugs, because I don't think I've ever seen the place look so spotless. On the upturned trash can we used as a table, there's a book. When I go pick it up, I see it our old dictionary, the one we found in Mrs. Garcia's trash. I think about what Jake said, that every word needs another word to describe it. Right now, if there was an entry for "Jake and Asha" in there, the definition would be 'totally and utterly fucked.'

I hate that he lied, and I hate that everything could go to hell because of it. What was he thinking? Did he really believe it wouldn't come back to bite him in the ass one day?

Somewhere deep inside me there's a tiny sliver of relief that I'm not his second choice after all, but right now, it's buried beneath layers of anxiety and fear, not just for myself, but for all my friends who will lose their jobs if Jake doesn't make things right.

I go over to the thick carpet in the middle of the space and lie down. Without thinking, I put my hands on my stomach and cross my ankles; our default pose for stargazing. I close my eyes and pretend none of this is happening. I'm in a faraway land, dozing under a starry sky, not a care in the world apart from juice boxes.

Below me, I can hear the low rumble of Jake talking on the phone, and by his volume and tone, I can tell he's fighting hard. After a while, I hear the ladder creak, and then I feel the warmth of him lying beside me.

"Well?" I say, opening my eyes.

He gazes at the lights. "She's pissed, understandably. As far as she's concerned, the book is dead, but I convinced her to set up a meeting with her and Robert in the morning to discuss it further. If they delay the release date by a few months, I can deliver a totally new book."

"Changing release dates is a major issue, Jake. Especially this far into the production schedule. I'll go with you to the meeting."

He turns to me. "No. This isn't your screw up. It's mine. And I'm going to fix it or die trying. I'm not failing you, Ash."

He's adamant enough that I believe he's going to try, but I'm not confident enough to think he'll succeed.

He goes back to looking at the lights, and I join him. It's clear we're both tense, but we're hoping our old sanctuary will lend us some much-needed magic.

“So, you never thought you should mention to me that I’m your soul mate?” I ask.

“It’s not something that came up naturally in conversation. You didn’t tell me I was yours, either, even though I know damn well I am.”

“True.”

There’s a pause, then he says, “So many times during high school I almost told you how I felt. I almost knocked on your door in the middle of the night. Thought about climbing through your window. I almost gave you one of the dozens of letters I wrote in which I declared how stupidly and irrevocably in love with you I was. So many ‘almosts.’”

“Why didn’t you?”

He turns to look at me “Because I was almost positive you’d reject me, and no matter how much it hurt to suspect you didn’t have those kinds of feelings, it would have killed me to know for sure.”

He continues gazing at me, and dammit, I can’t help but stare back. I should still be angry, but it’s almost impossible to block out our connection when he’s so close. It’s like all the good times we had here are infusing us with nostalgia, inviting old secrets to be confessed.

“I wish you had knocked on my door,” I say. “So many nights, I’d lay awake, knowing you were just a few yards away.”

He moves his arm so his hand is right next to mine. “Do you remember the night you and Jeremy had a huge fight about how flirty Shelley was with him? You barged into my room and slammed the door in his face.”

I remember it well. “I was so furious he couldn’t see why it was a problem, I had to get away from him.”

“And you knew running to me would piss him off.”

I blink, surprised he was so far off about my motivation. “That’s not why I came to your room.”

“Then why?”

“Because ... I missed you. And I knew I’d screwed everything up between us and I hated it. And because I knew ...” I link my pinky finger over his. “I knew that if I’d chosen you, I would have never been treated like that.”

He gets the faintest hint of a smile “You didn’t say a word to me. You just climbed into bed beside me, turned your face to the wall, and closed your eyes.”

“And you ignored me.”

He makes a noise. “I can assure you, I didn’t ignore you. The moment you stepped into my room, everything else ceased to exist.”

“You didn’t talk to me. Or comfort me.”

He slides his fingers between mine. “I couldn’t. If I’d touched you, I wouldn’t have wanted to stop. If I’d talked to you, I would have confessed everything.”

“Maybe if you had, I wouldn’t have gone back to Jeremy.”

“And maybe you would have. And I wasn’t brave enough to take that risk.”

We stare at each other for a few more moments, then go back to looking at the ceiling, our hands still linked.

“I’m sorry I screwed everything up,” Jake says. “But I promise, I’m going to fix it. I used to be okay with being alone. I’ve had plenty of practice. But finally getting to have you and then losing you? Not going to happen.”

Maybe it’s the attic, or the lights, or the optimistic child in me, but this time when he says it, I believe him.

## TWENTY-FOUR

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### The Impossible Dream

I KNOW I PROMISED JAKE I'd stay away from Whiplash this morning, but how could I? There's more than just the book or my job on the line; the future of the whole company is in jeopardy. Everyone here has been working their asses off to ensure the launch for the Feelgood book would be as massive as possible. Hundreds of bloggers are ready and waiting, the press has been foaming at the mouth to release excerpts and previews, millions of fans are literally screaming for it, and retailers are already talking up exclusive in-store promotions. I feel sick when I contemplate them all finding out that the book's not coming. Even delaying it for a few days would cause a massive cascading meltdown that would put the final nail in Whiplash's financially-strapped coffin.

That's why I need to be here. If this situation explodes, and I know it's going to, I have to take my share of the fallout.

The smart choice would be to keep my head down in my cubicle until the final verdict comes down, but I'm too nervous for that. Instead, I'm pacing, all the while keeping an eye on the elevators. Jake and Serena went up to Mr. Whip's office over an hour ago. Is the fact they didn't throw him out on his ass after five minutes a good sign? Or should I be concerned that all they're doing is talking in circles? Not preventing the inevitable crash but simply delaying it.

"Can I get you anything? Coffee? Whiskey? Horse tranquilizer?" I turn and see Joanna standing a short distance away, watching me wear a path in the carpet.

"You heard?"

"Everyone has. Devin made sure of that. He was almost gleeful about it."

"I'm sure he's loving seeing me fail, considering I 'stole' his promotion."

"Yeah, maybe that's part of it. But I think he's even happier to see Whiplash fail." She gives me a look that implies she knows something I don't.

"My curiosity is officially piqued. Spill."

She comes over and looks around to make sure no one can overhear us.



“He got smashed at the Excellence in Publishing awards. Went home with a friend of mine from Little Brown. After he completely failed to get her off and blew his load in record time, he started dropping hints that his days at Whiplash were numbered. When she prodded him, he admitted that he and his brother, who works at Random House, have been planning on starting their own company. Devin is furious his uncle hasn’t recognized him for the rock star he considers himself to be, and he’s sick of being a soldier instead of a general. Of course, if they set up their own shop while Whiplash is still in the picture, there’d be all sorts of family drama. But if it goes under ...”

She doesn’t need to finish the thought. I used to suspect Devin was sabotaging the Professor Feelgood deal, and now I’m sure of it. Taking away the life preserver that’s keeping his uncle’s company afloat is a great strategy to clear the way for his own publishing house. Asshole.

“Anyway,” Jo says, “I’ll let you know if I hear anything else. Right now, I need to head out.”

“Where are you going?”

She presses the elevator call button. “To fetch Devin his favorite double mocha latte. After all, he’s not going to ingest these high-potency laxatives I just happen to have in my pocket of his own free will.” She gives me an innocent smile. “Can I get you anything? Apart from bowel-exploding vengeance, of course.”

I smile as she gets into the elevator. “Nah, I’m good. See you when you get back.”

She waves as the doors close, and after she’s gone, I lean against the wall and sigh. Stressing this much is exhausting. I wish I could crawl under my desk and sleep for a week.

As I’m standing there, the strangely comforting strains of Fergus swearing at the photocopier echo down the hallway, and it makes a lump form in my throat. Whiplash is more than a company. We’re a family. And if we’re forced to all go our separate ways, a lot of people are going to be hurt.

I step away from the wall when I hear the elevator arrive, but when I stand in front the door expecting to see Jake, I’m confronted with a stern-faced Serena instead.

“He’s still talking to Robert,” she says as she passes. “My office. Now.”

I’ve never seen her like this, and knowing I’m partly to blame makes sweat prickle my spine.

I follow her into her office and close the door before sitting in the chair

opposite her desk and waiting as she works on her computer. From her expression, I can tell she's not getting the answers she's looking for.

"Do you know why we have deadlines, Asha?"

"Yes. Because there are a thousand moving pieces that need to fall into place before a book can be published."

"Exactly. And now I'm forced to put unprecedented pressure on our staff and suppliers in order to try to save this company. But if Jacob can't deliver what he's just promised, I can't guarantee anyone that our doors will still be open this time next month."

"What has he promised?"

Her printer starts up, and she turns to look at me. "An alternative book in seven days. One which completely eliminates the Ingrid narrative."

I stare at her for a few seconds, my face hot with disbelief. "Serena, that's impossible. Ingrid was all through that book. Trying to remove her sections and still salvage anything worthwhile would take weeks of rewrites, at best."

"I know that, and you know that, but apparently Mr. Stone doesn't. He's insisting that if we put our trust in him, he won't let us down. Both Robert and I would love nothing more than to cancel his contract and move on, but we don't have the financial luxury of flushing the vast amount of time and money we've already invested in him down the toilet. Like it or not, he's committed to pulling off a minor miracle to salvage this situation, and we have no option but to support his efforts."

"What can I do to help?"

"Nothing. We've all agreed that it would be best for me to take over as his editor."

"Jake agreed to that?"

"It was his idea." She drops a heavy manuscript onto the desk in front of me. "Besides, you'll be busy with this. On the slight chance we don't go out of business, this is our next book. I want your first round of edits next week."

I can feel how angry and disappointed she is right now, and I hate it. She's always been in my corner, and I betrayed her trust.

"Serena, I'm sorry. This was my project, and I have to take responsibility for it blowing up like this."

"Mr. Stone was adamant in his defense of you this morning. He takes full responsibility for the Ingrid deception and the consequences." He gaze softens. "But you chose to not inform me that the two of you had a history, or

that you'd become involved. I expected more from you, Asha. I've always been your most ardent supporter. That you didn't trust me enough to be completely honest ... it hurts."

For the first time, I can see that despite Serena's Ice Queen image, she's just as vulnerable as anybody else.

"Serena ... I'm so sorry. You're my mentor, and I should have come to you but I didn't, and I will always regret that. You have given me everything, and I let you down. If we get through this, I promise I'll make it up to you."

She takes off her glasses and rubs her eyes. "I hope you're given the chance. Make no mistake, the margin of error on this alternate book is zero. If Jacob is even an hour late delivering that completed manuscript, it's all over, for all of us."

"I understand." I pick up the book she wants me to work on and stand. "I'll get you my edits by Monday." Making comprehensive notes on this seven-hundred-page beast might mean working around the clock, but right now I'll do whatever it takes to redeem myself. Even if I end up losing my job, I need her to know she wasn't wrong to see potential in me.

When I get back to my desk, I slump into my chair. I have no idea what Jake was thinking promising a new book in a week, but apart from having a magical time-spinner, I don't see how he's going to pull it off.

"Shouldn't you be updating your resume?" I look up to see Devin leaning against my cubicle. "If you hurry, you may be able to run off some copies on the company dime before they come to repossess all the office equipment. How bad are you feeling about that? Super guilty? Or crushingly, mind-numbingly guilty?"

"I feel horrible. But I guess you wouldn't understand guilt, considering you're willing to screw over your own uncle to soothe your poor, fragile ego."

The grin slides off his face. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I think you know. Careful about what you admit to women you fail to sexually satisfy, Devin. They have no qualms about confirming that you're a dickless wonder."

His surprise at me talking back for once quickly transforms into anger. "If I do start my own house, don't humiliate yourself by applying for a job. I'll only be taking on editors who don't fuck their authors. I honestly didn't think you had the balls to do something so incredibly unprofessional, but it seems I was wrong."

I stand with my hands on my hips, determined to take him down several

thousand pegs. “So, you frown on me sleeping with a coworker? Is that why you relentlessly hit on me for the past couple of years? Or are you just pissed I slept with someone who wasn’t you?”

He gives my body a long hard ogle, then sneers at me — the evergreen fallback for a guy like him realizing a woman he’s used to objectifying is no longer willing to take one more ounce of his shit. “I wouldn’t waste my time with you, Tate. Your tits aren’t bad, but other than that, you’re not much to look at.”

“Ow,” I say, deadpan. “I’m crushed to be held in such low regard by a knuckle-dragging one-pump chump.”

He lets out a disgusted noise and leans close. “Say whatever you like, but I’m not the one whose author-wannabe boyfriend fucked this company. That’s all on you. And it’s proof that Uncle Robert was incompetent in deciding to promote you over me. Did you sleep with him, too? Because if so, good job killing your remaining credibility, Tate.”

When he says those final words, he makes the mistake of dropping his slimy hand onto my shoulder. The combination of his uninvited contact, a couple of years of Tae Kwon Do training, and my tolerance levels being at an all-time low, makes me act before I think. Quick as a flash, I grab his fingers and twist them back until he falls to his knees.

He makes a noise, like a cat when you step on its tail, and I lean over so he can hear me over the sound of his pathetic whimpering.

“Devin, I’ve put up with you being a disgusting pig for too long, so listen up. Maybe Whiplash will go under, and maybe it won’t. But until it does, I’m your superior in every way. So, you will speak to me with respect, you will never again gawk at my breasts, and you will not lay one goddamn finger on me unless you want it broken in several places. Are we clear?”

“Fuck, yes! Let go, let go!”

I drop his hand and he climbs to his feet, rubbing his fingers. Then he takes a step forward as if he’s building up steam to retaliate, and when I step back in response, I feel a hard body behind me.

“Take another step toward her, asshole, and I’ll throw you across the room.” Even before I turn to see Jake staring at Devin like he wants to tear his arms out of their sockets, I can hear the fury in his voice. He steps in front of me, and Devin shrinks back. Standing next to Jake, who seems even taller than usual in this moment, Devin looks exactly like the cowardly weed he is.

“If you hit me,” Devin says, tipping his chin like a petulant child. “I’ll sue.”

“If I hit you,” Jake says, his voice dark. “Your first call will be to your dentist, not your lawyer.”

When I put my hand on Jake’s back, I can feel his muscles bunched, ready for action. Thankfully, before the situation can escalate, the elevator doors open, and Joanna steps out carrying a full tray of lidded coffee cups and inserts herself between the two men.

“Hey, guys, what’s up?” She completely ignores the tension in the air and acts like we’re just all standing around having a polite chat. “Devin. Wow, you look pale. You know what’ll make you feel better? This tasty double-mocha latte I just bought for you.” She hands him the drink and shoots Jake and I a wink as she herds him toward the break room. “No need to thank me. My treat.”

When they’re gone, Jake rolls his neck. “Too bad. I would have enjoyed hitting him.”

“From what I understand,” I say, taking his hand and pulling him into the side hallway, “you have zero time to pick fights. Serena just told me what you offered, and it’s insane. It can’t be done.”

“It can, and it will. I was thinking about it all last night. I know exactly what I want to write and can salvage a little of the more general stuff from the existing book.”

“Even so, you’re used to writing two-thousand words a day, not ten. And Serena said you don’t want my help.”

He takes my hands. “It’s not that I don’t want it, it’s that ... when we’re together, it’s impossible to concentrate on anything but you, so if I’m going to have any chance of getting this done ...” He sighs and looks down as he strokes my fingers. “I need to lock myself away for the next seven days and have zero contact with you. It’s the only way. If I know I’m not going to be with you until I’m finished, that’s all the motivation I’ll need.” He looks into my eyes. “I’m aware of what’s on the line here, Ash, and failure isn’t an option. If it’s going to take writing a bestseller in record time to make this right, that’s what I’m going to do.”

I put my arms around his neck and hug him. “I think you can do anything you set your mind to, so I’ll keep my distance, if that’s what you want.”

He pulls back to look at me. “What I want is to spend every waking second with you, but right now, this is what I need. Along with this ...” He kisses me deeply, like he wants the memory of this moment to last as long as possible. When the heat we’re generating becomes too much for a public hallway, he pulls back, breathless. “I’ll call you next week when it’s all over.”

We walk back around to the bank of elevators. When the doors open, he steps inside and turns to me. “It’s only a week, right? We can do this.”

I nod and smile, trying to seem more confident than I feel. “Right. It’ll be over before we know it. Good luck. May the words flow free and fast.”

He smiles as the doors close. “Don’t need luck. Just need you.”

## TWENTY-FIVE

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### The Story of Us

A WEEK WITHOUT JAKE IS harder than it sounds. I'd gotten so used to seeing him, kissing him, and making love to him, that after just two days, I'm irritable. After four, I'm downright twitchy. By day five, I've started day-drinking.

"Ash, ready to go? Nan's expecting us at six."

"Almost. Just let me finish this chapter." I'm into my second round of edits on the monster manuscript Serena gave me. I think she was impressed I've gotten through it as quickly as I have, especially considering the first-time author has only a passing acquaintance with spelling and grammar. The entire manuscript may look like a bunch of red pen strokes, but at least I've clawed back a little of Serena's respect.

I finish the final line and drop the manuscript on the bed. "Okay. Let me just grab my stuff, and we can head out."

Eden hovers in my doorway holding a tote bag containing champagne and a gift box. "I can't believe I finally get to give you a birthday present tonight. And that you've agreed to a party."

"Not a party," I say, pulling on my shoes. "It's just dinner. One step at a time, okay?"

Ever since my mom died on my ninth birthday, I've refused to celebrate. It always seemed disrespectful to me to have people giving me presents and cake, as if they were glorifying her death rather than celebrating my birth. But with all the progress I've made in the past couple of months addressing how issues from my past contributed to bad decisions, I figured this is just one more thing I need to work through.

"You know Nan had her heart set on a surprise party, right?" Eden says. "She wanted to deck the whole roof garden out with lights and a jukebox, and invite all our friends. She was crushed when you knocked it back to just dinner in her kitchen with the three of us and Moby."

"And Joanna," I say, grabbing my coat from the closet. "She had something to go to first but said she'd come after."

I pull on my coat and turn around to see Eden staring with a sympathetic

expression. “So, Jake’s definitely not coming? I would have thought he was on the top of your to-do list for your birthday.”

I walk over to her. “He’s still in lockdown.”

“You didn’t want to at least tell him about it?”

“I promised I wouldn’t contact him, Edie. He’s working his ass off to salvage something good from this whole book debacle, and I don’t want to distract him.”

“Do you think he’s going to succeed?”

“I think he’s going to try.”

We walk toward the front door. “I don’t know as much about writing books as you do, but Jake’s a passionate guy, especially when it comes to you. If he said he’s going to break into heaven and rearrange the stars to spell out your name, I wouldn’t underestimate him.”

I know she’s right, but it doesn’t stop the low-level anxiety I’ve had all week. Right now, all of us at Whiplash are living with a giant blade hanging over us, and Jake is the only one who can stop it from falling.

As we head out of the apartment and down to the street, Eden links her arm in mine.

“Have you gotten around to telling Nan about everything that’s been going on yet?”

“No,” I say. “And I feel terrible about it. Every time we’ve spoken over the past few weeks, I was reassuring her about Moby’s health. I haven’t told her anything about the drama that’s been going on at work since I told her I got the promotion.”

“So she doesn’t even know Jake’s your author? Or that you’re dating?” When I shake my head, she lets out a low whistle. “Whooo, boy. I’m glad I’m bringing alcohol. Tonight is going to be a bumpy ride.”

I feel bad about keeping Nan out of the loop, but it’s not like I’ve had a lot of free time. And honestly, the whole Jake thing has had my head spinning from day one. If Nan knew the surly kid from next door was my author, she would have bombarded me with a whole bunch of questions about how I felt about working with him, and I wouldn’t have had an appropriate answer.

I know that I have to tell her Jake and I are involved tonight. I just don’t know how she’s going to take it. He was like family. It could get weird.

Eden and I head down the subway stairs, the location of my infamous back-breaking fall, and jump on the train to Nan’s. We grab some seats near the



door and both check our phones. From the sappy look on her face, I know she's texting with Max. I can't do that with my man, so I do the next best thing: I check the Professor Feelgood Instagram feed.

While we were working on the book, Jake stopped posting every day, but since we've been apart, he's started again. Of course, now that I know all of his previous poems were about me, I've reread them with new eyes.

His latest poems are a little different in tone, and it's like he's telling me how he feels without actually talking to me.

Tonight, I smile when I see the picture he's posted. It's the two of us when we were five. I'm grinning into the camera, and Jake's hugging me from behind and gazing at my face with pure affection. I remember the day Mom took this. She printed out two copies, one for me and one for Jake, but I haven't seen mine in years.

Beneath it is the caption:

*I should have run my jagged reasoning through a can opener  
and pulled back the tinny facade.  
Then you could have seen the messy truth -  
That I'm still the boy who thought you were the stars and moon,  
the teen who burned for you like a vengeful sun,  
the man who circles you like a lovesick moon,  
the lover who'll worship you 'til the end of time.  
I can't take back the mistakes I've made,  
But I can make this solemn vow:  
Peel back my skin and muscles and bone,  
and you'll find a lovingly rendered portrait of you  
painted on my soul.*

I don't know if it's the words, or the picture, or that I miss him so damn much it's like I can't breathe right, but I blink back tears as I finish reading.

Eden puts her arm around me and leans her head against mine. "You okay? I know you miss him."

I nod and swipe my cheek. "It's ridiculous. It's only been five days."

She squeezes me. “I’ve been there, and I know that a few days can feel like forever.” When I glance over at her, I’m surprised to find her eyes are also wet.”

“God, Edie. I’m sorry. I know that seeing me cry sets you off.”

“It does, but that’s not what’s going on here.” Her lips tremble. “I’m just so glad that my gorgeous, intelligent, loving sister has finally found someone worthy of her. And I never have to worry about Jake hurting you, because he knows if he does, I will murder him in his sleep and dump his body in the river.”

She’s half sobbing, half laughing by the end, and we hug like two emotional saps.

When we pull back, she says, “Now, no more being sad about your absent boyfriend. Tonight, we’re having cake, and cake cures everything.”

She continues chatting all the way to Nan’s building, making sure to keep my mind off Jake. I don’t know what I’d do without her.

“Nan, we’re here!” she yells as we walk through the door. Five seconds later, a very excited Moby Duck waddles out to greet us. He quacks excitedly and flaps his wings, probably thinking we’re going to give him something to eat. I almost squeal when I see he’s wearing a tiny polka-dot party hat.

“Oh, my God, Mobes! You look adorable.” After I dump my coat and bag on the wall rack next to the door, I run my hand along his feathery back. “You’re hungry, huh? Where’s your momma? Is she cooking?”

Nan’s voice rings out from the kitchen. “In here, girls! And don’t let Moby convince you he hasn’t had his dinner yet, because he has. The lying little oink.”

Moby gives a petulant quack.

Eden joins me in petting him. “Mobes, you have a meal-worm problem. You know this right?”

Moby quacks before turning on his heel and heading toward the kitchen.

“Hey, don’t walk away,” I say. “The first step is admitting you’re a fatty boombah.”

We follow him into the kitchen. Nannabeth turns as she continues stirring a pot to give us her signature sunshine-smile. “Hello, gorgeous granddaughters.”

“Greetings, gorgeous grandmother.” Eden gives her a kiss on the cheek, and then I follow suit.

“My birthday girl,” Nan says, cupping my face and giving me an extra kiss. “Because I love you so much, I’m making your favorite.”

I glance at the braised lamb hocks in the pan. “Huh. That doesn’t look like mushroom risotto.”

She frowns and looks at the saucepan. “What? If it isn’t you who loves lamb hocks, who is it?” Eden raises her hand, and Nan pulls a face. “Oh, damn. Sorry, sweetheart.”

“It’s fine, Nan.” I kiss her cheek. “Everything you make is delicious. Can we help with something?”

“You could do the salad. The first batch of lettuce I prepared has mysteriously disappeared.” She gives Moby a pointed look. He stares her down, unblinking. For about fifteen seconds, Eden and I suppress our laughter while we witness an epic old lady/duck standoff. In my mind, the theme song from *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* starts to play. Finally, Moby lets out a tirade of quacks before angry-waddling out of the room.

“Ignore him,” she says with a wave of her hand. “He’s in a bad mood, because I cut off his television privileges.” She looks toward the living room. “You could be watching *Animal Planet* right now if you hadn’t pilfered the lettuce! Actions have consequences, young man!”

More uptight quacking echoes down the hallway.

Gran puts the lid on the saucepan and shakes her head. “Grumpy little monster.”

Eden pulls out the bottle of champagne she brought. “Time for some bubbles?”

Nan smiles. “Yes, please.” Eden works on opening the bottle while Nan grabs some glasses from the cabinet. I don’t know if it’s a hangover from years gone by or Jake not being here that makes the thought of having champagne seem bittersweet. Still, I try to feel happy as we all hold up our glasses.

“Tonight,” Nan says, “We’re going to start a new tradition. It was far too long ago that I lost my daughter, and even though I would give anything to have her here with us, I wouldn’t trade the time I spent raising her beautiful girls for anything. So every year, we’re going to push aside the pain of losing her and celebrate her legacy.” She looks at Eden and me. “How I wish she could be see you two and the amazing women you’ve become. I have no doubt she’d be just as proud of you as I am. Maybe even more so.”

She raises he glass. “To Lizzie.”

Eden and I share an emotional look, then raise our glasses. “To Mom.”

“And to Asha,” Eden adds. “Happy birthday, darling sister. May this be the first of many future celebrations.”

We all clink glasses and sip our drinks, and for the first time since I was nine, I’m able to think about my mother on my birthday and smile.

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“Open mine first.” Eden clears some dirty plates to make room for her gift. “Well, technically, it’s from Max and me, but he’s not here, so I’m taking all the credit.” She puts the plates in the sink and rushes back to sit beside me.

“I’m telling him you said that.” I pull off the lid and rifle through layers of tissue paper to find another box. When I realize what it is, my mouth drops open. She’s given me the brand new, top-of-the-line iPhone, and I know damn well Derek doesn’t pay her enough to be able to afford it.

“Eden, this is too much.”

She waves me off. “Nothing is too much for my baby sister. Plus ...” She lowers her voice and mumbles, “... one of Max’s clients is a wholesaler who gave us a really good deal, so it really wasn’t that much.”

I stand and hug her. “You know you’re my favorite sister, right? This will make my life so much easier. Thank you.”

“My turn,” Nan says, as she places a gift-wrapped rectangle in front of me. “This isn’t as fancy as carrying the sum of all human knowledge in your pocket, but still ...” She shrugs. “I hope you like it.”

I give her a smile as I tear open the paper and pull it back. When I reveal what’s inside, it takes a moment for my mind to comprehend what I’m seeing, and then...my heart stops.

“Oh, damn,” Eden whispers beside me. “That’s gorgeous.”

It’s a picture of me and Jake from the HEA party. It must have been taken while we were on the red carpet, and it has echoes of the photo Jake posted earlier. Jake has his arm around me, and while I’m smiling at the wall of photographers, Jake is gazing down at me with an expression of total adoration.

“You two make a beautiful couple,” Nan says quietly.

I look over, concerned she’s upset I didn’t tell her. “Nan ...”

She pats my hand. “I’m not angry with you, sweetheart. You’ve had a crazy couple of months. I’m just glad you two kids finally sorted yourselves out.

You've been in love with each other since the day you met, and I was starting to lose hope you'd ever admit that."

I have so many questions, I don't know which one to ask first. Nan gives me an enigmatic smile and takes the rest of the plates to the sink.

"Nan, how did you get this photo? And how did you know about Jake and me? And if you knew we loved each other, why didn't you say anything?"

She runs water over the plates. "Sweetheart, knowing something and being able to do anything about it are two different things, and you two needed to be pulled apart before you were ready for the truth. Losing the thing you love most teaches your heart about its true value. And because you now know what it's like to be without each other, I guarantee that you and Jacob will never take your love for granted."

I run my fingers over Jake's face in the picture, and I see her point. Having experienced life without Jake, I never want to be without him again. "Okay, but how did you know we were together?"

Nan gives a non-committal shrug. "Did you forget that boy spent so much time at your house, he was practically part of the furniture? He and I became close after your mother passed. And then when the two of you fell out, we still kept in touch."

"Kept in touch?"

"Some phone calls, and he sent a few postcards from overseas. Oh, and he bought a whole bunch of furniture from me about a year ago."

I put my elbows on the table and rub my forehead with my fingers. Jake bought all his furniture from Nan? This is too much information.

"You okay, Ash?" Eden asks.

"Yeah. Just fending off a headache from having my mind blown."

Nan comes over and rubs my back. "Sweetheart, you've been working way too hard. Eden and I can finish up here. Why don't you go up to the roof and get some air?"

*Yes, please.*

The combination of three glasses of champagne and finding out about my grandmother's omnipotence is making me feel claustrophobic. Nan's roof garden is one of my favorite places in the whole city to go and de-stress.

I stand and pack my presents away. "Are you sure you'll be okay for a few minutes?"

Nan and Eden share a look and in unison say, “Definitely.”

*Okay, that was creepy.*

“Thanks. I’ll be back soon for cake.”

I grab my coat and pull it on as I head up the stairs to the roof. Over the past few decades, Nan’s transformed the barren space into a lush oasis, filled with garden beds and potted plants. There’s even some bee hives and a special pond for Moby. Another major feature is its great view of Brooklyn. If I squint just right, I may even be able to see Jake’s building.

Just thinking about him gives me goosebumps. In two days’ time, I’m going to love on him so much, there may be bruising.

When I push out of the stairwell door and into the cool night air, I stop short as I take in the scene before me. The entire garden has been decorated with fairy lights, and in the middle of it all is an old jukebox, all lit up playing soft jazz.

I shake my head in disbelief. “Oh, Nan, you couldn’t resist, could you?”

I hold my breath for a moment, worried that a whole bunch of people are going to jump out and yell ‘surprise!’, but the only other creature up here is a fat pigeon huddled next to the water tank.

I wander through the garden, so happy with how beautiful it looks draped in the tiny lights. It gives the whole area a magical feel. That’s why I used to love the garage attic so much. It’s impossible to have a bleak outlook on life when confronted with a world that sparkles.

I turn left past the rose bushes and just about jump out of my skin when I see a tall figure silhouetted against one of Nan’s antique coach lamps. I’m about to run back to the stairwell when he walks into the light. The second I make out his familiar features, my heart beats out of my chest.

“Jake?”

He smiles, and it’s the most dazzling, joyful, incandescent sight I’ve ever seen. With adrenaline coursing through me, I run to him as fast as I can, not even slowing down before launching myself into his arms.

He grunts when he catches me, and then his arms close around me as he buries his face in my neck.

“Hi.” He breathes deeply before letting out a groan of relief. “I’ve forgotten how incredible you smell.”

I squeeze him so tightly, I hear joints creak. “God, I’ve missed you.”

“Not as much as I’ve missed you.” We just hold each other for a while and breathe, and all the restlessness I’ve been feeling while we’ve been apart dissolves in the warmth of his body pressed against mine.

“How are you here?” I ask at last.

“Nannabeth reached out to me. Said you’d finally agreed to a birthday celebration.” He lowers me to my feet and leans his forehead against mine. “So, birthday dinner, huh? That’s a big step forward.”

I stroke his chest through his shirt. “I figured it was time to let go of whatever trauma I was carrying from Mom’s passing. If she were here, she’d kick my ass for letting it affect me for so long. Nan convinced me that we could celebrate me and honor her at the same time.”

“She told me that, too. Which is why I have something to show you.”

He leads me over to the roses, and I notice there’s a new tub there containing a freshly planted Arctic White covered in blooms. On the edge of the planter is a brass plaque that’s been engraved.

*In loving memory of Elizabeth Iris Tate. Gone from our arms, but not from our hearts.*

I turn to Jake, lost for words.

He stares at the plaque. “I thought it would be nice if she had a presence here with the rest of her family.”

I slide my fingers between his, and I’m surprised to see him holding back tears. “Jake, you didn’t have to do this.”

He runs a fingertip over one of the roses. “Yes, I did. She may not have been blood, but she was more of a mother to me than my birth mother could ever be. She was the one who loved and nurtured me. Who ran interference when Dad was raging. I miss her and wanted to honor her. Also, she gave birth to the love of my life, so for that alone, I’ll be forever grateful.”

I pull him into a hug and stroke the back of his head. Between the two of us, Jake was always the strong one. It’s easy to forget that even the toughest among us carry scars.

“How long can you stay?” I ask, pulling back. “I love having you here more than anything, but if you need to go and write, I’ll understand.”

He pushes my hair away from my neck and smiles. “I’ve finished the

manuscript. I emailed it to Serena this afternoon.” He can’t disguise his joy. “She loved it. In fact, she thinks it’s better than the original book. Naturally, it needs editing, but she’s confident she can get it done in time. Whiplash is moving forward with the publication as planned.”

I beam at him, more proud than I can say. “You brilliant, brilliant man. I never had any doubt.”

“Yeah, you did, but that’s okay. So did I. It’s amazing what one can achieve with the right muse. Which reminds me.” He walks over to Nan’s serenity bench and comes back with a gift-wrapped box. He holds it out to me. “Happy birthday, Ash.”

With a rush of excitement, I lift the lid. Inside is a thick wad of paper secured with a huge bulldog clip, and the sight of it makes me want to hug him all over again.

“Oh, Jake.” I take the manuscript out of the box and weigh it in my hands. “This is incredible. Do you have a title yet?”

He nods. “Take a look. Whiplash wanted an epic biographical love story and, well ... this is it.”

I open the front page and read the dedication.

*To Asha, for always being the sunshine to my storm.*

I look up at him, already on the verge of tears.

He smiles. “Keep going.”

I turn the page and hold my breath as I read the preface:

*The day I met my soul mate, I was pissed at the world. I may have only been three, but I already knew my place in the universe, because everyone kept pointing it out to me. I was the one who ruined mom’s modeling career by being born; I was the one Dad saw as a walking, talking inconvenience. I was the inconsiderate boy-shaped wedge who drove my parents apart, causing my dad to drink every night and punish me for the sin of existing, until he passed out on the couch.*

*So, when dad bundled me into our crappy car and spent the entire five-hour trip to our new house in Brooklyn complaining about how everything that was wrong in his life was my fault, I was tired, angry, and had an intense*



need to pee.

*As soon as I climbed out of the car, I walked over to the chain-link fence on the side of our yard, took aim at the neighbor's rosebush that had sprouted a slew of pure white flowers, and relieved myself.*

*When I was done, I looked up to see a little girl staring at me from her porch. She had bright blue eyes and even brighter red hair, and in that moment, I thought she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Looking at her made everything else fade into the background. I forgot about mom and dad. I forgot about how I ruined everything I touched. I even forgot about my anger.*

*The only thoughts in my head were of her. I wanted to run over and touch her face, just to make sure she was real. And if she was, I wanted to ask her name, and how old she was, and how many comic books she had, and if she liked LEGO, and so much more. And as I stared, bombarded by all the ways I needed her in my life, there was a small, lonely hole in my heart that saw her standing there and whispered, "Oh, there you are."*

*This is the story of us.*

I look up at Jake, tears streaming from my eyes. "You wrote our story?"

"This is what it should have been from the start. It's the only story I want to tell." I flick through the pages, skimming sections as I go.

"It's all in there," Jake says. "Our whole childhood, Jeremy, high school. I even talk about the true story of Ingrid. There's just one section left to write, but I need your help to finish it. Can I get your opinion on the ending?"

I flip to the back of the manuscript and read the final page.

*Anyone who says true love is easy has never felt it, because there's nothing easy about loving a person who's as necessary to your life as breathing. There's nothing easy about being so terrified of losing them, you'll make a thousand wrong decisions before you figure out that risking everything is the only right one.*

*Asha and I never had an easy love. Our journey has been littered with pain and loss, deflection and half-truths, self-preservation and flat-out denial. But no matter how severely those things frayed our connection, they never broke it. And that's what true love is. It's not being so perfect you never have problems. It's understanding that no problem will ever be so vast that you can't overcome it together.*

*Asha once told me that there was no satisfaction without struggle. She said that in the art of storytelling, we need see the hero broken and bleeding before he earns his happy ending. Well, if that's the rule, I figure we've both struggled enough for one lifetime. With my heart full, I climb the stairs of an apartment block in Brooklyn, praying to any deity who will listen to grant us our reward.*

*I've loved this woman for my entire life, and I know that I'll love her until my dying day. So, as I stand on a rooftop on a cool October evening, surrounded by a thousand stars, I ignore the frantic pounding of my heart as I kneel before her and beg her to make me the happiest man in the world .*

I suck in a sharp inhale, and when I look up, my heart stops, because Jake is down on one knee in front of me, holding out my mother's engagement ring.

"Asha," he says, and takes in a rough breath. "I do a lot of things badly and a few things well. But I do one thing better than anyone else on the planet, and that's love you. I want to spend my life with you. Have babies with you. Grow old with you. And if you agree to be my wife, I promise that I will adore you with every fiber of my being each and every day, until I draw my final breath. Will you marry me?"

I can't be strong in this moment. My mind is reeling, and every emotion I've ever felt for him is pouring out of me with such force, all I can do is nod and sob before he stands and pulls me into his arms.

"I take it that's a yes?"

I cry harder. "Of course it is."

Even though my face is a mess, Jake patiently wipes away my tears. Then he slides Mom's ring onto my finger and kisses me. That's when I hear applause behind us, and I turn to see a huge group of people near the door to the stairs. I recognize a bunch of my friends from Whiplash including Sid and Serena, as well as people I know from Romance Central and Pulse. There are even some of Nan's friends who live in the building.

At the front of the group is Max, Eden, Toby, Joanna, and of course Nan. Even from this distance I can see tears on her face.

"You're not allowed to be mad at me," Nan calls out. "You vetoed a birthday party. You didn't say anything about a surprise engagement."

I laugh and gesture for them all to come on over, and after a lot of hugging and tearful congratulations, Nan programs a bunch of love songs into the

jukebox, while the rest of us make the area next to Moby's pond a makeshift dance floor.

One of the last to offer congratulations is Serena, and when she hugs me, I squeeze her tightly.

"You're a very lucky lady," she whispers. "Have you read the full manuscript yet?"

"No."

She throws a glance at Jake. "You're in for a treat. Your fiancé is a talented man, and his love for you leaps off the pages. This book is going to blow people's minds. Reading it even made me want to rethink my single status and try to find the kind of love you two have."

I raise my eyebrows. "Well, if you ever want me to introduce you to a fantastic man who'd treat you like a queen, let me know. Eden's boss is a total catch, and I know you two would get on like a house on fire."

She smiles. "You have me intrigued. We'll talk about it more next week, but right now, I have to get home. I have an incredible book to get ready for publication."

After she bids us goodnight, Jake pulls me into his arms, and we sway to the music. I smile when I see Mom's ring glinting on my finger in the low light.

"Nan gave you this?" I ask.

He rests his cheek on the top of my head. "Yes, when I asked permission for your hand. She told me she always knew I'd end up with it someday. Do you think Eden minds? It probably should have gone to her."

I gaze over at Eden who's beyond blissed-out dancing in Max's arms. "I think Eden's just happy we're happy." She sees me looking at her and smiles, and I smile back. In this moment, I think the world's happiest people are right here on this rooftop. Even Toby and Joanna look cozy.

I look up at Jake, and his expression confirms my suspicions.

"I love you," I say, so only he can hear. "Thank you for choosing me."

He leans down and brushes his lips over mine. "Loving you isn't a choice. It's who I am. Don't you know that by now?"

We keep dancing as we kiss, and I realize that loving Jake will never cease to thrill me to my core. He's like a thunderstorm and the sweet calm that follows. He's a blazing fire, as well as the smoldering coals. And even when what I feel for him shakes me to my very foundation, I know one thing for

certain: I could read every romance novel on earth and still not find a tale as compelling, satisfying, and passionate as the one I'm living.

The story of us.

*To the world,  
you may be one person  
But to one person,  
you're the world*

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D R . S E U S S

# **ALSO BY LEISA RAYVEN**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this book was a difficult journey. As any writer will tell you, we're not immune to the pressures of real life. Health problems, family tragedies, crazy schedules, and garden variety stress can all stifle creativity. And we're certainly not immune to crippling bouts of self-doubt which convince us we're rubbish, and our books are trash, and that cat drawing we did in the third grade was total, amateur crap. (Okay, the eyes were cool, but otherwise - GARBAGE.) And even though there was some of all of that behind the marathon creation of this book, that wasn't the main issue.

My problem from the very start was something I'd never experienced before: I made the horrible mistake of falling in love with my characters. I'm talking deeply, creepily in love. I started obsessing about Jake and Asha's history, and wrote pages and pages of scenes from their childhood, fights from their high school years, snarky pain-filled arguments between their adult selves who were trying to filter their undeclared love through too many layers of unresolved resentment. I got to know these characters more intimately than any others I've ever created, and that became a problem.

All of a sudden, I was so deeply invested in their story, I was terrified of telling it wrong. I wanted to do them justice, and was desperate for the readers to love them as much as I did. And so every word was a struggle, every scene was a trial. I can't even tell you how many extra chapters I wrote, just for the experience of exploring other parts of their lives.

In the end, I had to block out what I wanted to show and resign myself to letting Jake and Asha guide me. And guide me, they did. They showed me the deepest parts of themselves, opened themselves to being vulnerable and raw, and in the end, they made sure I gave them the happiness they deserved.

Even though I can still see so many of their special moments playing out in my mind's eye, the only way I can honor them for bringing such joy into my life is to share them with you. I hope you treasure their story as much as I do.

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day, every chapter, scene and word worthwhile. You are the beating heart of what I do and why I do it. And I'm honored that you bless my words with your time and passion. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for taking this crazy, amazing journey with me.

I love you all.

Leisa x