



rewrite
the rules

LOVE, ME & THE 303 SERIES

KAY COVE

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This one is for all the couples out there who turned “fun bunnies” into forever.

“Your heart knows the way. Run in that direction.”

— Rumi

rewrite *the* rules playlist

Skin Tight Niykee Heaton

Dear No One Tori Kelly

Fuck Up the Friendship Leah Kate

Wannabe Spice Girls

The Heart Wants What It Wants Selena Gomez

Can't Help Myself Jake Miller

Mascara Niykee Heaton

Because Of You Reba McEntire, Kelly Clarkson

Show Me What I'm Looking For Carolina Liar

With Ur Love Cher Lloyd

Give Your Heart a Break Demi Lovato

The Only Exception Paramore

Classic MKTO

spoiler warning

author note in regards to series

It is not entirely necessary to read the previous books in this series as this is a standalone novel featuring a unique romance, however, for the best reading experience it is highly *recommended*. Love, Me & the 303 is a series of interwoven standalone novels with plots that overlap during the same timeframe. For the best experience, read the series in the order.

Rewrite the Rules is book two in the series and begins **in the middle** of the events of book one, *Paint Me Perfect*. Both storylines conclude around the same time. There are character mentions and appearances from book one that will allude to its conclusion, so if spoilers are a major concern for you make sure to read [*Paint Me Perfect*](#) prior to this story.

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one

...

Adler

september

“Are you here for the sexy pink book party?” One hostess, dressed head to toe in black, elbow-nudges the other beside her. “Crap. Sorry, *secret* book party.”

I bob my head, a little frightened. What could possibly be going on back there in the private event room to earn the title ‘sexy pink book party’? Cue the pool of drool that collects in my mouth every time I enter my favorite farm-style brunch locale. *Mmmmm*. That signature scent—freshly pressed corn tortillas and smoky roasted hatch green chiles. I force myself to swallow before I start dribbling. If it were any other day, I’d stop at the hostess stand, request my favorite booth for one, order my usual, and get lost in the pages of a Tessa Rayne best seller.

But today my best friends have planned something a little more eventful than a Colorado-style breakfast burrito smothered in delicious thick pork green chile. My stomach grumbles loudly. I post a mental sticky note to the inside wall of my mind. ‘*Eat something before work today, Adler.*’

The hostess who did not spill the beans leads me past the ‘Wait Here to be Seated’ sign and we make a beeline to the private event room in the back of the restaurant. “How pink are we talking?”

Her auburn ponytail whips her head around, eyes wide. “They’ve been setting up in there for about two hours...so pretty pink.” She pauses at the party room entrance. “Enjoy and congratulations for”—she twists her wrists in the air—“whatever the heck this is.” She winks and then smiles warmly before turning on her heel. I like her sass. We could probably be friends, but right now I don’t have the energy and my roster is full.

I am barely through the double doors of the party room when several loud *pop, pop, pops* send my heart rate well past the ideal target range straight into the danger zone. The same zone my heart instantly leaps to when I even consider running—which is seldom.

Pink and gold confetti rain over me as I stare—thoroughly unamused—at three sets of eager puppy-dog eyes.

My best friends lured me here under the guise of a simple get-together with a quick champagne toast. Instead, I’m greeted with a full-blown posh extravaganza to celebrate my recent and very off-the-record achievement.

I touch my scalp with four fingers and gently shake at my roots, attempting to loosen the glittery explosion from my hair. “Was that really necessary?” I ask in a pique of annoyance. I nod toward the empty confetti launchers that my friends still hold in their hands—evidence of their grandiose theatrics.

“Sorry, Addie!” Noa grimaces. She shoots an accusing glare to Reese right beside her. “Told you she’d hate the poppers.”

Reese smiles unapologetically. “I never disagreed.”

My favorite people in the whole world are gathered in this meager private party room. Noa, the lovely Polynesian sweetheart, who is as good a mother as Teresa, always makes me feel safe.

Reese, the blonde bombshell spitfire of our group, looks better suited to walk the Victoria Secret fashion show runway than to work in a stale legal office. Whenever I’m taking life way too seriously, she reminds me to breathe.

Quinn is a have-no-mercy, take-zero-prisoners, boss lady. She looks like the love child of Denzel Washington and that elven princess from *The Lord of the Rings*. She protects me. She holds us all together and made sure our sisterhood endured well past college.

We're only missing one of us today. Mani, who I'm sure will join us shortly via FaceTime, is the striking crimson-haired, emerald-eyed kook of our little family. She's a highly intelligent, successful influencer with millions of followers, who still sees a psychic for mental health guidance. To this very day she refuses to wear gray tones when Mercury is in retrograde.

"Cheer up, grump. This is a *party*." Reese is either unaware or unbothered by my lackluster reaction to the surprise welcoming. I step through the threshold and slap on an unconvincing smile.

The room is decorated in a variety of pinks like a well-funded bachelorette party. Thick satin ribbons that masquerade as streamers are strewn across the side of the large dining table and tied in bows around the backs of all the chairs.

Far more chairs than we need.

It's just the four of us. It's *always* just the four of us. Well, soon to be five if you include the iPad perched on the table.

"And no one thinks this is a bit over the top?" I gesture to the balloon arch skillfully composed in a perfect pink ombre that sits in the center of the room where a sprawled-out strip of pink carpet ends.

Am I supposed to stand under there and take vows? *I will*. I will vow to never agree to meet these crazies for a quick morning celebration ever again.

"Not even a little bit." Quinn's eyes narrow at me. "And this is nothing compared to my last birthday party."

"That was different," I argue.

"There was a stripper, Addie. *A stripper*."

"Hey! Pedro is a highly sought-after exotic dancer and he was not easy to book. So again...you're very welcome." I press my lips in a flat line trying not to cave in laughter. Pedro was near forty, rocked a taut six-pack, and had less hair than a dolphin. He looked like a black Emmy award, smooth and so freaking shiny.

Reese bobs her head side to side sending her shiny blonde curls into a rhythmic bounce. "Bear, Pedro's an escort."

She calls me Bear just as I sometimes call her Pieces. Because 'Addie-Bear' and 'Reese's Pieces' requires an unnecessary verbal commitment for friends who are as close as we are.

We all whip our heads around to stare at Reese. *And how in the hell would you know that?* She's suddenly very interested in the overhead lighting and can't possibly tear herself away from the water-stained ceiling to meet our accusing scrutiny.

"Anyways...I digress. Birthdays are a perfect justification for over-the-top celebrations."

"Booooo!" Quinn points her thumb to the ground. Her tongue vibrates against her bottom lip. I don't think I've ever seen her blow a raspberry in our near eight years of best-friendship. That was...uncomfortably unnatural. "I turned twenty-eight. That's not an accomplishment. You wrote a *whole* book. *That* is celebration worthy."

"It's not my book."

Noa shakes my shoulders, causing my crossed arms to fall then dangle at my sides. "To us, it will always be *your* book." She points to the table, which is covered in a feisty, hot-pink, lace cloth. It complements the book that is propped up and displayed, front and center. *Toy With Me*—the culprit of all this unnecessary fuss—is the erotic romance novel that I ghostwrote for one of the most celebrated

contemporary romance authors of our time.

I gave this project my all. My everything.

Toy With Me is all I ate, slept, and breathed for the better part of nine months. I obsessed from conception to its birth—launch day two weeks ago. Call it a writer’s pregnancy, and now all that’s left are the blues—no baby. In the end, I had merely been the surrogate and I had to let it go.

Now, I need my friends to do the same. *Let. It. Go.*

“What did you guys do to this?” I pick up the paperback book and examine the damage. Tessa Rayne’s headshot has been covered with an extra copy of my passport photo, taped securely on the back left corner. I flip the book around and Tessa’s name on the bottom of the front cover is crossed out with a thick black line. ‘Adler Haley’ is scrawled just above in a perfect artistic calligraphy—Noa’s handwriting no doubt. “You guys defiled this thing!”

“We rectified a typo,” Reese grunts as she pushes on the stubborn side of a cork. “They got the author’s name wrong.”

The bottle of champagne pops with the expected bravado, but she lets out a girly squall anyways. The top ricochets off the wall on the far side of the room and the foam topples out of the bottle. The foamy mess engulfs Reese’s hand before dripping onto the floor.

“Dammit, Reese!” Quinn gathers a few hot-pink napkins and throws them on the floor to sop up the mess.

“Whoops,” Reese mumbles but is clearly unconcerned with the spillage. She tops off the neatly lined champagne glasses that are already half filled with fuchsia-colored liquid.

Noa grabs the flute closest to her. “I’ll call Mani.”

I sneak in a panoramic glance at my best friends and let the velvety warmth of emotion bundle me. My tribe. My only real family. The beautiful, strong, brave women who I attempt to emulate every single day. And fail miserably at.

Clink, clink, clink.

Reese taps her hard acrylic fingernail against her champagne glass, commanding our attention. “Cheers to a successful launch of *Toy With Me*. Over one hundred and fifty thousand copies sold thus far, which would be an impossible feat for anyone other than this sexy little piece right here.” Reese nods at me, pinches her fingers together at her lips, and kisses them. “Bear. You’re a visionary.”

“Tessa has a well-established brand and a solid marketing team. It’s a science, guys. It had nothing to do with me.”

Reese sucks the air in between her teeth. “This hell-bent humility thing isn’t cute on you.”

“Oh, blow me—”

“*Ahem.*” Noa clears her throat as loudly as her sugar-sweet voice can manage. Invasive isn’t natural for her. “To our dearest little Baby Bear, best-selling author of the most sensual, sassiest, emotionally riveting book of the year. No...decade. No, century—”

“*Oh, come on!*” My shrieky tone is off-putting. Reese might be right. My whining is unadorable.

Noa continues anyways. “*Toy With Me* is modern-day poetry.”

“Modern-day poetry? There is a picture of a vibrator on the cover.” I really doubt Frost, Dickinson, or Poe would allow an image of a vibrating rabbit—platinum edition—to front the cover of their antique collections.

Pausing humility for the briefest of moments, there’s no denying *Toy With Me*’s success went eons beyond my wildest imagination. It’s still too hard to wrap my head around, maybe because technically, I can’t claim it as *my* success.

“Thank you, guys. Truly. But we agree this stays between us, right? I’m locked under contracts and

NDAAs that I'm sure I've already violated by telling you all." I squirm, remembering the phone conversation I had with Tessa's lawyers. There was less tension at the red wedding in *Game of Thrones*. Tessa is a kind-hearted and generous soul. Her lawyers on the other hand guard the gates of hell with bloodthirsty hounds, eager to attack for the slightest indiscretion.

"So, this can't go on my grid, Addie?" I flinch when Mani's voice rings through the FaceTime screen. For a moment I forgot she was there.

"No!"

"What about an Instagram story? It's temporary."

I scowl at the iPad screen. "No, Mani. I already told you, vault! Out of the question. Hell no."

"Jesus. Calm down, there's no need to start Adlering out."

It is never ever a good thing when your name becomes a predicate. I'm too scared to ask what 'Adlering out' means.

Mani leans in so close to the screen I can see her itty-bitty makeup-free pores. It's nearly nine o'clock in the morning in California. It's basically the middle of the night for her. "How much did you get paid anyways?"

"Plenty," I lie. I didn't get peanuts. My contract got me broken peanut shells. But I'm not admitting that here to this den of lionesses who are ready to go to war for me.

"That's bullshit," Quinn mumbles. "You could've published this yourself and made out like a bandit."

"Do we remember the last time I tried my hand at self-publishing?" I attempt individual eye contact with each of my friends, but they strategically avoid my gaze. *Hmmm*. The bland walls of this event room and the sticky tile floor are *that* interesting, are they?

Silence. *Yeah. Thought so.*

Ghostwriting is safer than owning up to your work. It's so much easier to write when you know you're exempt from the harsh reality of painful criticism and critique. And that's if you can even reach an audience who will give you the time of day. *Toy With Me* exploded because of Tessa Rayne's trademark and following, not because of my writing. She earned the praises, not me. She has the track record, not me.

She is brave...not me.

My writing is like a dog in water. It probably won't drown, but can anyone really say the doggie paddle is graceful?

"Fine." Quinn lets out a reluctant breath. "Let's just put it out there. Murder mysteries aren't your thing." She refers to my epic fail as a debut indie author. I'll admit the story had issues. It was a murder mystery that lacked an actual murder...and mystery. In summary, it wasn't a murder mystery—just a massive mess. The book was a rabbit hole I hopped down after watching one too many episodes of *Snapped*. At the end I just couldn't kill off the husband. After about two hundred pages of his backstory, I got really attached to Seamus. Funny thing about books on murder—the readers kind of expect someone to die.

The Thing About Seamus only sold about twenty units and I have a sneaking suspicion that each of my friends bought multiple copies.

"*It tanked*. The few reviews it got said the writing was sophomoric, the story was painfully boring, and the tone was haunting."

"Haunting can mean something like harrowingly beautiful." Noa offers an empathetic smile. It's been four years and they are still coddling me. We've been through this. I went through all the stages of grief.

I'm now at acceptance.

I've accepted my name will never be printed on another book.

"It's because you didn't know your niche." Reese tugs the book free from my clasp. She waves it in my face. "*This* is your niche. Hey, did you get one of these as a book perk by the way?" She taps the silver sex toy on the cover with her thumb. "Is it worth all the buzz?"

Yes.

"No, I did not." I suck a squeaky breath between my teeth. "But what niche are you referring to? Erotica?"

"Love," Quinn answers for Reese. "It's good, Addie. Like, *really good*. I was late to a strategy meeting because I got caught up in a chapter."

Whoa. Quinn—late to a meeting? Okay, I take it back. I might actually be the Stephen King of romance.

"Guys, I'm glad I'm behind the scenes. I'm happy here. More than happy. Who am I hurting? Can we cut to the end of this intervention, please? I only have a couple hours before I have to hit the real nine-to-five that actually pays for my shitty downtown apartment."

"Gimme one legitimate reason you wouldn't want to claim this masterpiece?" Quinn tugs at the low-hanging loose thread of my nonchalance, trying to unravel some emotion.

"Masterpiece? Isn't that laying it on a little thick? For starters—there's an index in the back to provide further information on all the *devices* the book references. And, as you know, I use the p-word like a cat uses its claws—often and with ferocity." I'm alone in my laughter at my tortured comparison. "Look, I'm sure this book is offending people. But now that's Tessa's problem to deal with."

Reese rolls her eyes behind her thick dark lashes and pairs it with a lofty *pfft*. "Offending who? The pearl-clutching type? There's a warning on the cover and plus, everyone is reading it. I walked in on fifty-eight-year-old senior partner Wanda reading it...she thought she locked her office door...she did not."

"Wait, did you just say 'p-word'? You can write it but you won't say it?" Noa's smile is sly. A sneaky glint in her eye dares me.

"Not in front of you, *Mom*."

Mani's shrill cackle blurts through the video chat. The spotty connection has her on a slight delay. "That's hilarious. Does anyone else find this all so ironic? Leave it to the virgin to write a best seller by blasting the word *pus*—"

Clap, clap, clap!

I smack my hands together like a dancing wind-up monkey with cymbals.

"Okay, enough!" I really don't want my sexual experience, or lack thereof, to become this little shindig's hot topic, yet again. We land on it often because it's bizarre. How can the only virgin in the group be the most candid about what goes on in the bedroom?

Toy With Me is fiction. Just because I haven't experienced it myself, doesn't mean I can't write about great sex. How does that saying go? Those who don't do—write. Or something like that.

"Thank you for the party. I love you all. End of story. Now, let's eat cake and drink this weird pink bubbly shit before I have to go pick up the office team's lunch order down the block." I slam back my mimosa like it's a shot of whiskey. "Why does this taste like stale Sour Skittles?"

"I might've picked up some cocktail mix from the clearance aisle at the big beverage outlet." Reese's smile is brief before her mouth rounds into an 'o' to accommodate the bottle tip. She takes a long swig. "I agree—nasty stuff."

“So, you guys can splurge on all these way-over-the-top decorations but you couldn’t save fifteen bucks for a cheap bottle of prosecco? I’m very concerned about our priorities.”

“Hey. Party beggars can’t be choosers,” Reese manages between glugs. The sour tang that tastes somewhat akin to perfume doesn’t deter her. I’d lecture her about her morning chugging but I know she’s going through hell with her dad’s upcoming appeal. Noa’s getting ready to crumble after her summer romance went very unexpectedly south. Quinn is beyond distracted trying to be a mother to her sixteen-year-old brother while building her father’s empire right on top of her back. Mani is living on a planet far away. I don’t have details, but when Mani gets quiet, it means things are bad.

We’re basically an over-aged, pervier rendition of *The Boxcar Children* just trying to survive life. But there’s no sweet grandpa coming to save anyone. Maybe this party was more necessary for *us* than for me. A little blub of light in dark times. ‘*Celebrate the little wins, they fuel you for the big battles ahead,*’ my grandma used to say.

“First of all, I didn’t beg for this party. You guys forced me to take a half day off of work to come meet you here. And I’m not going to lie—I really thought there would be breakfast tacos...so if that can still happen...I will not object...at all.”

“Why didn’t you take a full day off? We threw you a whole thing.” Quinn rotates her wrist, gesturing to the seemingly *Sixteen Candles* meets *Sex and the City*-themed party surrounding us.

“Did you?” I’m unfazed by her complaint. Quinn’s eyes fall to the floor at her admission of guilt. She shares my workaholic spirit. “Exactly. And actually, Steve wanted me to take the day off mostly because if I don’t use my vacation hours soon, Aura will have to pay them out at the end of the year and that’ll be painfully expensive for them. But you know me. I hate missing a full day. The office falls to crap, Steve gets behind, and then I have to clean up all the mess.”

“Work FOMO.” Quinn shakes her head. *Hypocritically!* “For a job you hate nonetheless.”

“I don’t hate my job.” I’m bored at my job. But who isn’t? Who isn’t mind-numbingly defeated sometimes waiting for the office clock to strike five? It’s normal. It’s called adulting. Everyone who is in that club knows it sucks and no matter how hard I try, I can’t get my membership revoked.

I’m in. Forever.

Real life isn’t full of fantasy. I live my adventures through books, movies, and music. They provide a temporary escape from mundane monotony. And it’s fine.

I’m fine.

I could live this same day a hundred times over and be perfectly satisfied with my life. There are those who are born to achieve greatness. And there are others who are meant to handle the boring needless details of those people’s lives so they have time for said greatness. *That’s me!* Batman, if you’re looking—I promise you I could out-sidekick Robin.

I hold up my pink champagne glass. The girls whoop and cheer in anticipation for my speech. “You are all spectacular. Over the past few months, you have cared for me, fed me, completed around-the-clock sanity checks, forced me to shower and cut my nails. Thank you for getting me through the ups and the downs. You’re always there to push me forward when I’m lagging and to pull me back when I’m going too fast. I love you guys so—Nono! Stop it. Don’t cry—”

“Can’t help it,” she sniffs. She elongates her face like a horse as if it will contain her budding tears. “Just so proud of you.”

I roll my eyes. “Cheers to *this*. Our lives right now. Exactly as they are. Cheers to good enough being...good enough.” I don’t need the validation, the fame, the money, or to live out the stories I spin in my mind. Everything I need is right in front of me.

And as for everything I want? Too easy. I just put it on the secret pages.

Reese blots her glistening eye with the back of her hand, but then scrunches her face in disgust. “Wait, wait...good enough is...good enough? Bear—*what?* Worst toast ever. That’s so lazy and depressing. Ladies, am I right?” She scans the room. Everyone, except me, nods in fervent agreement, protesting my words.

I groan. My palm flattens against my forehead with a loud smack.

Never mind. I recant. I may need new friends.

two

...

Joel

The first thing I learned about Denver is how badly the elevation fucks with me. For the past two days since my arrival, I've nearly keeled over from just looking at a flight of stairs. I now need to carry a handkerchief in my suit jacket to mop up the nosebleeds that are random yet somehow also consistent. I don't know when they're coming—just that they are.

The air is too clean, the sun is too bright, and my body is rejecting this place like an unwelcome cleanse. The smog and filth-filled streets of Manhattan is the poison my body has come to rely on.

But I'll get used to it. I have to. This is my new home—I think. I don't like granola. I've never stepped foot in a dispensary, and I don't share an obsession over microbrews or mountain biking. The Coloradans would've denied my state residency application if they had a choice.

Still, Denver is a welcome fresh start. *Anywhere* is an improvement from Manhattan right now. I made the right decision. It's time to move on. Denver is a smaller, less demanding startup market to fish in. The venture capitalist competition is sorely lacking and I could navigate this business map in my sleep. Maybe I can finally relax for the first time in nearly a decade. At least for now, Denver is what I need.

Day one on the job, Steve McDonough, my new business partner, welcomes me to the Marquis Business Tower downtown, home to over a hundred companies. Aura Ventures leases a small suite on the thirty-third floor.

"Damn, Lewis. Did you take the stairs?" Steve watches me gasp for air in front of Aura's office entrance.

Steve is not fit. He looks like one more French fry could send him into cardiac arrest, yet here he stands, completely unearthed by this goddamn elevation while I barely cling to life.

"No. This is from walking down the hallway," I bark through shallow breaths. "How long does the altitude sickness last?"

"Four days, max." Steve shrugs. Only about thirty more hours of hell. I can do that. I suck in a few quick breaths, trying to gather the necessary oxygen to compose myself. Steve laughs and pats my shoulder. I'm probably fragile enough right now to collapse under the weight of his giant catcher's mitt.

"Welcome to the Mile High City. Actually, getting high might help with all that." Steve raises an eyebrow at me.

"I'll pass."

"Truthfully, this entire office cuts loose together on occasion. Outside of office hours of course, but they are not shy about lighting up. Does that bother you?"

"Does it bother *you*?"

“You have just as much of a say as I do, now.”

“Not really. Keep it legal at the office and then it’s really not my business. I don’t like micromanaging. Based on what you’ve told me, this team knows how to handle themselves. They don’t need a babysitter.”

Steve’s hearty laugh fills the empty space as he leads me down the hallway. “Don’t speak too soon.” He gives me an orientation of the Aura office suite which inevitably will double as my new residence. Newly single, I’m now free to be as much of a workaholic as I please.

Steve opens door after door exposing the team’s individual offices. They are identical, quaint, modern-looking spaces that I will never be able to tell apart outside of the name plaques on the door. Does no one personalize their desks anymore?

“Your senior associates are Brett, Marcus, and Lawrence—but Lawrence is useless. I’m not sure when the last time was that he actually conducted a productive meeting. Your junior associates are Jason and Darnell. HR and Research are outsourced. All their details are in your inbox. And we have no principals, so you’ll be wearing both hats until you promote someone.”

I rehearse the names in my mind. *Brett...Marcus...Lawrence (useless, got it), Jason...wait.*

“Am I hearing this right? There isn’t even one woman on the team? Isn’t that a little—”

“Sexist?” Steve asks. “I agree, but we haven’t had a lot of women interested in venture capitalism come knocking on our door. But don’t worry. It’s not a total locker room here. By far the most important person who works here is a woman. Haley.”

“Associate?”

Steve snorts. “Hell no. Want to see someone instantly fall asleep? Start talking to Haley about investments and ventures. She’s my executive assistant slash office manager slash lifesaver slash the only reason anyone in this office makes meetings on time or eats. She takes care of us all. Word of advice—you want this place running smoothly? Make sure you keep Haley around. The rest of the team is somewhat expendable.”

“Good to know.” *Not good to know.* An expendable team doesn’t exactly scream success to me.

“One small problem,” Steve says as he opens the last door at the end of the hallway. “This is your new office.”

My corner office is by far the most spacious room in the business suite. It’s large enough to fit three offices in one. There is an oversized desk at the far end surrounded by three walls of built-in shelving, filled with books. I step through the door and catch a subtle whiff of citrus.

“What is that?” I sniff around, nose in the air hunting for the source of the spa-like scent. Citrus and lavender, I think. Definitely lavender-something. I take a deep breath in and my mood lightens.

“Haley’s candle shit. I don’t know. All I know is this is the only office in the suite that doesn’t smell like a monkey cage. By the way, this is her office. Or *was*, now that you’re here.”

“Your assistant has the best office? How did that happen?” I peek around for further evidence that a woman resides here. There are no fresh flowers on the coffee table. No neatly lined colored pens sit on the desk. The sticky notes are not pink or in the shape of cutesy woodland creatures.

Steve winks. “I’m telling you—she’s that good.”

“How pissed off is she going to be if I take over this office?” Tempted as I am to let her just keep it, I’ll need the private meeting space.

Steve shrugs noncommittally. “Please. Haley is agreeable to a fault. You’d have a harder time figuring out a way to actually piss her off. With me taking a step back from the day-to-day, she’ll be your assistant now.”

Great. I can run a venture team with ease, but managing an assistant? It’s uncomfortable. In the

past I've swung between too lenient and then too strict, unable to get that working dynamic just right. I eventually decided it wasn't worth the hassle and started managing my own administrative needs. My hours at the office were longer, but at least I didn't have to fire anybody.

"Saves me from interviews, I guess. When do I meet her?"

Steve glances at the mounted clock on the far wall of the office. "Dammit, I'm late for a meeting. Haley should be here in a couple hours. She requested some PTO this morning." Steve shuffles out of the office and toward the reception area with me in tow. "By the way, always approve that girl's time-off requests. She's banking two hundred-some hours and when she cashes out it will bankrupt Aura." A nervous chuckle escapes his lips.

I sincerely hope that's a joke. The financials Steve showed me indicate Aura is in good standing. It's not capitalizing where it needs to and the company has to branch out past antiquated markets, but that's what I'm here for. Aura's bottom lines should be solid enough to afford PTO. *Please don't let me find any skeletons in the financials closet.*

"She doesn't take vacation?"

"She's a workhorse. Hey, do you want to come with me to this meeting? I can introduce you to the team. I'm sure they'd love to hear your story for some inspiration. There aren't a lot of twenty-nine-year-old venture capitalists who manage half-a-billion-dollar portfolios and sit on as many boards as you do."

"You want me to stand in front of my new employees and brag to them about how much money I have? That's a great way to come off like a pompous prick—no thanks. I'd prefer to meet them individually so I can put names to faces. It's better for breaking the ice. I'll wait here and get settled."

Steve crosses his arms and scans me up and down judgmentally. "You know, when I signed half of Aura over to you, I thought you were a New York big dog."

"What does that mean?"

"You're not here to make nice, Lewis. You're here to make money."

I slide off my glasses and pinch the bridge between my eyes. "Steve, *you* reached out to *me*. I'm sure you did your homework first or you wouldn't have asked me to be your partner. We've been discussing logistics for weeks. You're questioning me now? After I've already moved here?"

"I've grown this company on my own for fifteen years. I don't want to see it go to shit if you're just smoke and mirrors. Why would you want to share a partnership, anyhow? You were doing this by yourself in New York of all places—and successfully."

I'm growing tired of this question. People are allowed to leave New York City. Not everyone thinks the Big Apple is the zenith of the world. It's like I committed a felony by choosing to leave Manhattan behind.

"Don't worry about why I needed a change. I just did. Let me do my job. I promise, I'm great at it. You take some time off like we discussed and focus on what you need to at home. Let me handle Aura." I extend my hand. "You can trust me."

The clench in his jaw relaxes and he lets go of the breath he's holding.

Aura is his life's work. I know it was a huge hit to his ego when he decided to accept my help. But perfect circumstance and impeccable timing collided. Steve gave me an excuse to leave Manhattan and in exchange I'm going to make him a very rich man with a very successful firm.

He catches my hand and shakes aggressively. Steve's trust lies in his palms and he forces himself to hand it over. "I'm used to having my guard up in this line of business."

"As you should. Partnership is new for both of us."

"You're all right, Lewis," he says over his shoulder as he heads toward the bank of elevators. The

door closes and on cue, my nose begins leaking like a broken faucet.

Shit. I rip the handkerchief from my breast pocket and cup it around my nose. The yellow fabric square drenches with my blood. It's not going to cut it. I need a sink and an entire roll of paper towels. Tipping my nose to the ceiling, I exit the Aura office using my peripherals to scan the hallway for the sign with a stick figure man. *There.* To the left, ten paces forward.

Okay, Denver. I'm really trying to give this a fair shot. I'm going to need you to cease and desist on the sucking, now.

three

...

Adler

I burst into Marquis Business Tower with gusto, pausing to podium pose, my invisible cape blowing elegantly in the breezeless building. I'm a lone hero with a daunting task. There are 'crangry' (it's necessary to invent a word for *this* level of crankiness and angry hunger) team members stuck in a grueling investment meeting and I am here to deliver their salvation through sustenance. It's past one o'clock so I'm almost certain I'll be greeted by a pack of feral, bloodthirsty werewolves. My silver? Artisan deli sandwiches and freshly cooked kettle chips from our favorite delicatessen on Sixteenth Street.

I back into the conference meeting room on the fifteenth floor, using my ass to effectively prop the door open as I squeeze two giant paper bags of takeout into the meeting room.

"I'm not even here," I mutter while making my way to the table in the far back. The entire team swivels in their chairs, their eyes and their drooling mouths following me, or more accurately, the bags of food I'm holding. The team cheers and I have to fight the urge to bow dramatically.

Steve is at the front of the room pointing to an enlarged screen reflecting a PowerPoint slide with growth charts. *Oh, blech.* I'd rather empty wet wastepaper baskets in an office located in the fiery depths of hell than listen to a lecture about investment projections and returns.

I pull out boxes and place them neatly on the plastic speckled tabletop. They are all labeled with colorful sticky notes—*Brett, Marcus, Lawrence*, and so on. That's good enough for me as far as presentation goes.

Lunch mission accomplished, I hustle to Aura's office on the thirty-third floor of the business center. Remnants of pink and gold glitter float from my hair to the floor as I take hurried steps. I leave an Adler trail from the elevator to the front of suite 3301. *Great.* Glitter bombs are like sand from the beach. I'll be finding leftover granules on my death bed—I'm sure of it.

I walk past the hallway of closed doors and straight to the office at the very back of the hallway.

My office—the big kahuna, with the fancy executive chair. Now, how did I manage that? Because I am a lynchpin in the integral operations of Aura's venture capitalist endeavors and an invaluable asset to the team. *Ha, ha, ha!* I snort out loud even mulling over the ridiculous thought.

Steve felt the space was too bright, too drafty, too *whatever* his excuse was. He hates the confines of an office—period. He conducts most of his meetings over fancy cigars and expensive scotch. This space was vacant for months before I swooped in like an overeager colonial settler before Brett, the next-in-line senior associate, could come up with the same idea.

I open the door and notice two things are very off today. One, the shades are all open. The bright daylight sun is all but fluorescent and nearly blinds me. The second is the strange man standing in the middle of the room. His back is turned, staring out the windows at downtown Denver.

“Hello there.” I try to mask my incredulousness as pleasant surprise. *Um, excuse me? Are you lost? In my office?* Everyone from the team is on the fifteenth floor sitting through an exhausting sermon about maximizing investment returns.

He turns around and my knees buckle.

Holy shit.

I suck in an air bubble in surprise, then swallow audibly, forcing the large airy lump down my throat. I hold my own hands to stop the jittering, but there’s nothing I can do about the nerves ricocheting in my chest like a game of pinball.

He is—how do I explain this eloquently?

Agonizingly, uncomfortably, kind-of-makes-me-want-to-hyperventilate-into-a-paper-bag...*gorgeous.*

This man has the most porcelain features I’ve ever seen. I don’t usually describe men as beautiful but there’s no word more appropriate. The perfectly symmetrical angles of his face look immaculately designed. His light brown hair is neatly cut, matching the tidy bit of scruff that embellishes his face. He’s wearing black slacks and a tucked-in, light-blue-striped, button-down shirt that make him look like he’s a centerfold for *Esquire*’s business-for-men clothing line.

What I really can’t get over are his glasses. They give such a sophisticated and polished-looking man an irresistible boyish charm. Clark Kent over here makes me want to ditch Batman and apply as Superman’s sidekick.

Warm blood fills my cheeks exposing my nonexistent poker face. My reactive skin gives me away every time. When I’m embarrassed—pink. When I’m angry—red. When I’m, for the first time in my life, instantly aroused by a stranger—crimson. Or at least I’m willing to bet. There’s no mirror in this office to confirm my inference.

“Haley, right?” The man crosses the room quickly, his hand outreached. “I’m Joel Lewis.”

“No. Adler.” I barely manage two words. It’s difficult to focus as he walks. I’m hypnotized by all the moving lines of his physique, evident even under his business clothes. I feel like a heat-seeking missile and this man is all infrared. Instinctively, I take a step backwards, overwhelmed by my very uncharacteristic instant attraction to a stranger. He’s not deterred by my retreat. He takes the extra step so we’re close enough again for him to extend his arm and reach my hand.

“You’re Steve’s assistant and the office manager, right? Steve said your name was Haley.”

“Yes, to all that. No, to Haley.” Was that a full sentence? Am I still speaking English?

I accept his handshake and an agonizing tingle runs up my neck, swells around the base of my head, and shoots back down my spine. I stare perplexed at his large strong hand cupped over mine. I’m sure this heady fog is simply the questionable pink mimosas on an empty stomach from my celebration party.

Joel smiles—or smolders, I don’t know. I think they are one and the same for a man who looks like him. “Why would Steve tell me your name is Haley?”

“My last name is Haley. He thinks it’s funny that my first name sounds like a last, and vice versa. Like I should be Haley Adler...it’s a whole thing. Anyways, Steve just calls me Haley because he won’t...not...call me Haley.” *Because he won’t not?* Is there any language in which blubbering idiot translates into suave and sexy? Can I switch over to that dialect exactly right now? I’m normally quick witted and words are my weapon of choice, but I’m thrown off guard by this dazzling presence in my office. Which reminds me...

“Wait, sorry why are you in my office? Who are you?”

The intrusion is not welcome, mostly because I have minimal makeup on and I definitely didn’t

put too much thought into my messy bun which is still speckled with stripper-style sparkly glitter.

“Ah, yes. Context would help. I’m the new managing partner. I just moved to Denver.”

Managing partner. How is that possible? He barely looks older than I am. It’d take millions of dollars to buy in to partnership at Aura Ventures. I’m privy to this information as Steve’s loyal lap pup. So why didn’t I hear about this new *managing partner* before this moment?

“Oh, wait. Is this like a partnership for accounting purposes? Are we being audited?” I ask, trying to piece this puzzle together.

“Wow.” Joel’s eyes briefly pinch closed. “It wasn’t my intention to audit my own company on my first day here. I did my homework. Aura is in good standing.”

“Mhm... WorldCom, Enron, Tyco... all once in good standing.”

“Are you saying I should be concerned? Because if you know secrets, Ms. Haley, I’m all ears.” Joel winks at me. *He winks*. Every cell in my body south of my navel comes to attention as if summoned to the front lines of war. They are armed and ready for God knows what.

I grapple at sassy humor, my usual defense mechanism. “Mr. Lewis, I’ve been at this office for nearly three years and yes, I know where *all* the bodies are buried. And by bodies, I mean lunch receipts. On your first day here as the new boss you should know, this office will bankrupt you off its appetite alone.”

Joel erupts into a hearty laugh. *Phew*. Laugh, so you don’t notice my straying eyes. “Noted. And please, don’t call me Mr. Lewis. It makes me feel ancient. Just call me Joel.”

“How old are you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Twenty-nine.” Joel cocks his head to the side as if my question is unwarranted. I disagree. Steve is pushing mid-fifties which makes sense for a managing partner. Who owns a ventures firm in their twenties? I have no idea how cryptocurrency works, but it’s usually the reason college kids are able to ride around in Rolls-Royces. Maybe Joel’s into Bitcoin?

“What about you?”

I widen my eyes and feign offense. “Oh, see *I* actually do mind you asking.” I bat my eyelashes playfully. “A lady never reveals her age.”

“I could just look it up in the personnel files.”

“You could.” The corners of my mouth pull downwards as I nod in condescension. “But, seeing as I’m the only one with the administrator password to the personnel files, I fear Mr. Lewis, I may have you between a rock and a hard place.”

“You’re going to be too much fun to work with, aren’t you?” Joel throws me a teasing smile which I’m sure is only *accidentally* seductive. He really needs to get that sexy curl at the corner of his lips under control. He’s casting out a dangerous net and who knows what he’s going to catch in Denver.

“I have never once in my twenty-five years been accused of being too much fun. Too little? Absolutely.” I wink right back as if I could have the same effect.

If only. I’ll practice.

“Ah, so twenty-five?”

I tap my nose then point to him like he’s the winner in a game of charades. “Is Steve aware that you’re here? I can go grab him from the meeting room.”

“He is indeed. He showed me around just this morning. He’s dotting some I’s and crossing some T’s before he takes an extended leave.”

“*Wow*.” Four years of being the Robin to Steve’s chubby version of Batman and he didn’t even have the courtesy to tell me he’s leaving. I may be but a lowly servant, but that’s supposed to mean I get the good gossip firsthand.

“What’s wrong?” Joel’s brow furrows as he notices the change in my expression.

“I’m just surprised Steve didn’t tell me. Normally, he tells me everything. Too much in fact. The man couldn’t keep a secret if his life depended on it.”

“Well, that’s not something I wanted to learn about my new business partner.” Joel chuckles but his face pulls in worried lines. “He’s dealing with some personal things.”

Um, who are you telling? I know. I cater to Steve every day. He and Alice will work it out. I know they will. On more than one occasion I’ve used the company card to send Alice flowers from Steve with notes like ‘*Just thinking of you*’ and ‘*Beautiful flowers that pale in comparison to my beautiful wife*’. Keeping their marriage together is about ten percent of my job. Their anniversary? September twenty-fifth. Alice’s birthday? March fourteenth. Her favorite flower? Pink orchids. Her favorite restaurant? Luna’s Steakhouse. Her *actual* favorite restaurant? In-N-Out Burger.

I’ve been pulling the puppet strings for years. Now it’s time for Steve to step up and give his marriage the attention it deserves.

“Steve is going to take a step back and let me run things here. He sings your praises by the way. I think his exact words to me were—and I quote—‘lucky son of a bitch to have Haley here’.”

I nod awkwardly. I am uncomfortable receiving praise, even from Steve. I dodge compliments like Neo dodging slow-motion bullets in *The Matrix*. “Ah, yep. There goes Steve just adding to my name confusion.”

“How about I call you by the name you prefer?” Joel’s eyes rake over my lips, forcing the heat to rise again in my cheeks. “Which is Adler, right?”

My heart flutters annoyingly fast and I attempt to sidestep with humor once more. “Adler, Addie, A-Dizzle, Addie-Bear, Chatty Patty, the original A-D, or if you want to get really personal, Baby Spice. Any are acceptable.”

Joel’s expression briefly blanks before twisting in confusion.

“As in Spice Girls,” I clarify while mirroring his puzzled expression. *Oh great.* Another stuffy suit, just wrapped in a sexy-as-all-hell package. “They were a singing girls’ group in the—”

“Oh, no, no,” Joel interrupts. “I’m a human being on planet earth, so I know who the Spice Girls are. I’m just trying to piece this together. You don’t scream Baby Spice to me. You’re not blonde and I can’t picture you in pigtails and leather Gogo boots strolling around with a lollipop.” A wrinkle of amusement crosses his face.

Oh my God, he’s trying to picture it. *Baby Spice turns your crank, huh?* That’s my name...feel free to wear it out.

“You know a surprising amount about Baby Spice. For your benefit, I’m going to pretend that isn’t super creepy.”

His laugh escapes as a parched-sounding huff. “It’s not like that. I have a little sister who is obsessed with nineties pop. Unfortunately, thanks to her, I can name every Backstreet Boy, NSYNC member, and I’m not proud of this, but I know exactly why New Kids on the Block disbanded. Also yes, I know all the Spice Girls.”

A soft endearing smile spreads across Joel’s face when he mentions his little sister and I have to tell my ovaries to calm the *hell* down, because this is my new boss.

Joel’s sudden amusement catches me off guard.

“What?” I ask.

He squints his eyes and smirks. “You have a redheaded friend you call Ginger Spice, don’t you?”

Whaaat? Nooo. “Oh, come on. Do you really think I’m juvenile enough to assign all my friends a Spice Girls nickname? I’m a little bit more mature than that.” And now Joel Lewis is never allowed

to meet Mani.

“Right. Well then, I’m more than happy to call you Adler on the day-to-day, but how about I put Baby Spice on your annual performance reviews?” His shoulders rise and fall from his breathy chuckle but his asking eyes lock seriously on mine. All we’ve done in this introduction so far is laugh and leer. His smile, those eyes...it’s infectious.

“Yes, perfect. That sounds very professional.” I turn to hang my purse up on the simple silver hook on the back of the door. “Anyways, did you need something in here I can help you find?”

Joel grimaces and I immediately understand his sheepish demeanor. Well, shit.

“You’re commandeering my office, aren’t you?”

He actually looks apologetic. “I’m sorry. It’s just I have to conduct a lot of sensitive meetings and it makes sense to host them in a private space. I’ll help you move your stuff if you’d like?”

I pretend to huff as I walk over to the oversized desk, unplug my laptop from the monitor hookups, and tuck it under my arm. I grab my purse from the hook I just hung it on and nearly choke when I see the corner of a pink paperback book peeking out. I hastily shove it into the depths of my bag and remind myself to hide that sucker in my new desk ASAP.

“Well, that’s about everything,” I reply smartly. “But if you’re really feeling chivalrous you are free to carry my wax warmer to the front receptionist desk where I’ll assume my position as the office coat-check girl.”

“Is that why this room smells so good? Yeeaaaah...I’m keeping that.” Joel’s smirk is contagiously playful.

“Fine, keep it. But I’m not telling you where I store the refill wax cubes, Mr. Lewis.”

“Mr. Lewis?”

“Oh, yes. All pleasantries are out the window after stealing my office and also, please know you are officially uninvited from calling me Baby Spice.” I flip my hair with my free hand, littering the floor with glitter. I swear the specks are breeding in my hair roots.

I don’t care about the office for its grandeur, but I did just lose my writing space. It’s near impossible to write at home anymore. My personal laptop is on its last leg. It barely putters to life even when plugged in to an outlet, so when drafting *Toy With Me*, I took the liberty of using my work computer for creative purposes during down time at the office. Now I might actually have to spend the lull in my day finding something Aura-related to do. I can’t exactly pen another erotic best seller exposed from all angles. I need walls. And a *door*, thank you very much.

Admittedly, it was weird that the least important person at this company had the corner office. It created some pretty unrealistic expectations—like I gave a crap about venture capitalism or something. So maybe, it’s all for the best.

Joel is still chortling as I head to the front of Aura’s business suite to go dust off the reception desk.

Ugh, I hate being up front. I am a zoo animal on display.

Office downgrade aside, my cheeks can’t help but ache from my overenthusiastic smiling. Losing my big desk and privacy seems a small sacrifice for the presence of my new boss. My very attractive new boss who is most definitely the catalyst of the chemical reaction bubbling between my legs.

And just like that, on a Monday afternoon, my dull office assistant job becomes a whole lot more interesting.

four

...

Adler

Within a week, Joel wins over the entire office. Every last person here believes in the Lewis magic. I'm not surprised. I was instantly sold myself. But of course, that had nothing to do with his business expertise. The investment team is impressed and inspired, eager to ride behind their fearless new general into money battles.

It's almost not fair to those on the other side of the negotiation table. If Joel's intelligence and charm isn't enough motivation to sell your soul, his body certainly is. He's the only one in this office who actually utilizes Marquis Business Tower's fitness center, available to all the business property lessees and their employees. Steve worked here for nearly a decade. To this day he cannot tell you which floor the gym is on. It's on the fourth floor. I know this because I visited the smoothie bar there, once. I go to gyms for fruit smoothies...and fruit smoothies alone.

Joel's also far more independent than Steve. I keep offering to pick up his dry cleaning and order his lunches but he keeps my duties strictly business related. I manage his work calendar, I confirm meetings, and I compile the binders for his presentations when necessary. Not to brag, but I've become an absolute ninja with a three-hole punch. And I did eventually show Joel where the wax cube refills are. He's become quite the daredevil, getting bold enough to mix 'Mediterranean Fig' and 'Pumpkin Pie' in the same warming plate.

"You're playing with fire, Mr. Lewis. Pumpkin doesn't pair. Stick to the recommended combinations."

"You have to take risks in life, Adler. I'm nothing if not brave. Hand me the purple cube."

I kept it to myself that it was quite possibly the best scent combination I'd ever experienced. Like a warm plum-spiced pie, perfect for the fall season. Fig and pumpkin, who knew? *Apparently, Joel.*

By Friday, Joel looks worn. His scruff is a little longer like he's shaving every other day. He's still as neat and professional as ever and the extra millimeter of hair around his cheeks is probably only noticeable to those who watch him like an infatuated hawk. *Ahem, me.* Lust aside, I'm actually worried about my new boss. He's been the first one in the office and the last one to leave all week. I wonder how long he can keep up this pace. He's doing too much and I wish he'd let me help more. My days have become far less busy with Joel's business assignments replacing Steve's personal tasks. I never realized until this week how much time I used to spend running random errands.

By Friday afternoon I've finished all my work well before the bell, even after taking a full lunch hour which I used to fill my veins with coffee and scour book reviews of *Toy With Me*.

Fresh. Raw. Relatable. Revelation. Talented. Passionate. Hot! I can't believe these are the words people are using to describe something I created. Between you, me, and the blank wall—yes, they are my words. Yes, the book feels mine. But what am I supposed to do about striking gold? It's

Tessa's trove, her gold mine—even if *I* unearthed the treasure. It's *her* win.

I swivel back and forth in my office chair, twiddling my thumbs, and debate calling Tessa back. She's been hounding me about starting another project after the success of *Toy With Me*, but I need more time to digest this. Technically, the book's success changes nothing for me.

I've been ghostwriting since my first book tanked. I thought I was strong enough to face the criticism, the rejection, and the judgment. But it cut me open. Pouring your whole heart into your craft and then watching people shrug it off wasn't something I prepared for. But I still love writing. My friends say it's a natural side effect from my love of talking.

I ghostwrite everything in my spare time—nonfiction books, mysteries, fantasy, and also countless soulless search engine optimization content articles. My fingers can't get enough. They yearn to dance across a keyboard as I try to collect and organize all the thoughts in my mind in a desperate attempt to connect with the world. Even if that connection is through a three-thousand-word, hyperlinked SEO article about the *Top Ten Desk Toppers to Freshen Up Your Office Cubicle (and Mood)*!

This was one of the few lessons my parents took the time to teach me. Both writers themselves, they believed in uniting people with words. Our hearts hold truths and the written word is the vessel in which we deliver them.

My parents, however, are serious writers—travel writers. They'd never waste their time with fiction. Especially not something as whimsical as romance. Somehow, I wanted to be so much like my parents and yet nothing like them at the same time. Hell. Even if my mind is wired identically to theirs, I'd never know. I barely know them. Tempted as I may be to ask, they can't provide any guidance on the question that's etched in red writing in my mind.

So I turn to my real family. I love my best friends unconditionally. We're not perfect. We fight, we get catty, and we all are monsters on our periods. But we forgive. We're steadfast, we're loyal. I know about *that* kind of love. But what do I know about the other?

Nothing.

What do I know about romance?

Nada.

What do I know about lust?

Since Joel's arrival on Monday—just a little more than I had before.

But it's definitely not enough knowledge to base an entire novel on. I barely have enough material for an opening chapter. All innovative credit for *Toy With Me* belongs to Tessa.

Tessa Rayne. Now *that's* a story worth telling. Once upon a time, one fateful day about six months ago, Tessa Rayne entered my world. More accurately, she plummeted like an asteroid into the surface of my earth with such cosmic force that the dinosaurs would fear a second round of extinction. She blew up my life, shattering the glass wall I built around possibilities. Tessa challenged me to be *great*.

To be like her.

Tessa is one of the most celebrated women's fiction and romance novelists of the decade. She could sneeze on a book and turn it into a best seller. Her words have a presence on the page. Every sentence commands attention.

I thought it was a hoax when I first saw her calling-all-writers post on the platform that I use to scour available ghostwriting jobs. I read all of her books and finding out that she was a fraud would've destroyed me. Luckily it wasn't the case...

Ping!

A text message from Joel distracts me from my contemplative zone-out.

That's odd. Joel is hosting a meeting in his office with Jimmy Denton, some big-time FinTech startup CEO who's seeking a heavy round of investments. Joel is normally laser-focused when he's in meetings like this.

Mr. Joel Lewis: May I ask you a favor?

Me: Yes. Why are you texting me? I'm watching the team chat.

Mr. Joel Lewis: Because it's a personal favor. I need your help.

My stomach backflips at his response. Oh no, Mr. Lewis! What's wrong? Did you feel something bite you? Do I need to bolt into your office, remove all your clothes, and check you thoroughly for ticks?

Me: What's up?

I tap my fingers impatiently against my desk as nerves pulse through me watching that damn response bubble on the message screen populate, then disappear. Joel is typing...then not typing... then typing.

Mr. Joel Lewis: I am starving and this guy in my office, who can't take a hint, is droning on. How good are you at acting?

How good? Well, I've been pretending all week that I'm not remotely affected by your smoldering sexiness, so I'd say pretty damn good.

Me: Oscar-worthy good.

Mr. Joel Lewis: Perfect. Can you barge in here with a fake emergency and save me?

Me: Are you thinking dark, like film noir?

Me: Or something more dramatic, like telenovela?

Me: I am completely capable of faking tears.

Mr. Joel Lewis: Adler. Quit playing. Please. Hurry.

Me: Haha, coming. Prepare to be amazed.

I knock quietly on the office door but don't wait for permission to enter. Joel is sunk into the office sofa, sitting across from a man in a suit that looks too big for him. He reminds me of a chihuahua. He's small, twitchy, and I'm assuming yappy based on the unamused expression on Joel's face.

He turns in his seat to face me with a creepy smile that makes me want to cross my arms over my breasts as a shield. "Hello, sweet cheeks, what a pleasant interruption." *Wow, those are some seriously strong misogynist vibes.* He is shamelessly eyeing me like a piece of meat much to Joel's annoyance who rolls his eyes behind his turned head.

"Sweet cheeks?" I ask and clasp my hand above my chest. "Silly me, I must've grabbed the wrong name tag this morning. I actually go by Adler if you don't mind. It's a pleasure to meet you in person,

Mr. Denton.”

Joel presses his lips together in a hard line.

“Anyways, Mr. Lewis, I’m so sorry to interrupt but I just got a call and there’s been an emergency that needs your immediate attention.”

“What happened?”

“The fire chief wouldn’t give me too many details, but from what I gather, the fire is almost contained but they’ll need you to come down to the station to identify possible suspects.”

“Oh, shit! There’s been a fire?” Jimmy Denton’s face twists in worry and concern.

The look Joel gives me says he’s unimpressed with my lie. *Beggars can’t be choosers, boss.* We blink at each other in a game of chicken, wondering who is going to bust out laughing first. Neither of us breaks.

“Wow—arson. That’s borderline *unbelievable*, Adler.” Joel folds his hands together like a professor who is about to deliver a bad grade. “Are you sure it wasn’t the police chief who called if I need to go down to the station to identify a suspect?”

“Possibly...but I said fire chief, so let’s stick with that.” I narrow my eyes. “It’s probably best not to question the *minor details* during this time of *emergency*.”

“That sounds serious, Joel. Let’s just finish up this meeting later. You should go handle what you need to.” Jimmy stands and I turn on my heel, pleased with my work.

As soon as Jimmy is secured in the elevator, Joel finds me at the front of the office. He leans on the short side of my L-shaped desk. “That’s your definition of Oscar-worthy acting?”

I shrug. “You did not provide a lot of direction. My improv skills are a little rusty.”

Joel chuckles affectionately like he’s watching a puppy trip over its big ears. “You’re something else. But thank you.”

“So, what happened? I thought you were looking forward to that meeting.”

“He had a sound idea on paper but there is something off about him. Something I don’t like. I’m trusting my instincts on this one.” Joel pulls off his glasses and winks at me. I wish he’d stop that. He doesn’t understand the effect it has on me.

“Too bad,” I snark. “It would’ve been nice to see him again. I am a big fan of creepy men who call me sweet cheeks while they lick their lips.”

I mean for him to laugh, but Joel’s eyes lock on mine and I have to immediately avert my gaze. He looks at me like he’s trying to investigate my inner thoughts and he might be appalled to find out he’s usually naked in there.

“Thank you, again. Not just for saving me, but for this entire week. It would’ve been significantly more difficult without you.”

“You are most welcome, boss.” I flash Joel a toothy smile before I swivel back around to face my monitor. He doesn’t budge. His perfect ass is still planted firmly on the edge of my desk.

“Want to grab a bite? I’m starving and I can’t talk to one more person in a suit today. I’m going to cut out early. Want to get off with me?”

I’m torn between responses. I’m not sure which is more surprising. Joel wanting to leave the office early or asking me to go with him. My heartbeat becomes noticeable. *Joke. I need a joke.*

I speak a little louder to cover up the audible pounding in my chest.

“You want me to *get off* with you? I’m sorry, Mr. Lewis, is that your very lewd way of asking me out?”



Joel

I'm speechless.

In a different world under different circumstances, I'd jump at the opportunity to *get Adler off*. She sits in her desk chair with her head cocked to the side, eagerly waiting for my response. She's trying to hold back her laughter. I've learned this week that Adler lives and breathes for these moments. She revels in the opportunity to catch me off guard. It's not as fun for her if she caves with a 'just kidding' before she sees me sweat, so she matches my stare challengingly.

"Um...I didn't mean *get off*...I mean get off work...let me start again. I simply meant I'm hungry and—"

"Joel," she says and starts cackling as she buries her face in her hands. "I'm messing with you. Good grief, man. Look at your face." Adler stands and grabs her purse. "Come on. Are you into Thai food? Because I know the best little place. It looks like a halfway house but I swear it deserves a Michelin star."

"Lead the way."

What the hell just happened?

Why is she bold enough to play with me like that?

She's the arsonist, over here playing with fire. What is the best way to explain to my assistant—who I'm secretly drooling over—that I am on a complete dating hiatus and as much as I'd been fantasizing about laying her tight little body across my desk...it can't happen.

Adler is stunning top to bottom. It's impossible not to notice every alluring aspect of her—especially those full cherry-red lips. They are always stuck in a sexy pout. Her long brunette hair is pulled back in a low ponytail today and I keep picturing how the long strands would fall across her face if I were to tug that little band out. I think about how my hands would feel running through her thick mane. I want to trace my hands around the perfect slight curves of her body.

Steve was very accommodating prior to my arrival. He asked me what I needed to be comfortable in the office and I gave him a very short list.

One. A mini fridge in my office because I'm adamant about only drinking frigid water. I can't drink coffee. I've tried. It makes my arm hair vibrate right off. Cold water is the only thing that safely jolts me awake on really late work nights. Steve had one delivered on Tuesday. *Check*.

Two. A nice view out the window from my desk. Something more inspiring than another high rise because every once in a while, endless concrete walls can feel so soul crushing. The view from Adler's old office is breathtaking with a perfectly picturesque mountain backdrop. *Check*.

Three—arguably the most important. An intelligent, proactive assistant who is already well-versed in business operations. *Check*.

But I failed to give Steve the fine print. I needed this assistant to be someone I definitely *don't* want to see naked. Adler is a special kind of sexy. The forbidden kind which means she's through the roof, smoking hot. A blind man could see that. But the real problem is she's also sweet and charming.

And shit, she makes me laugh.

Really laugh.

Not in the chuckle for her benefit kind of way, but the literal keeling over, grab my ribcage because the heaving hurts, kind of way. She should have her own comedy special. She's too fun to be around, too easy to connect with. That makes a situation problematic for someone who can't do relationships. I may need to strap a chastity belt on her to remind myself how very off-limits my assistant is. *Empty box, un-checked.*

I'm trying to maintain boundaries and be strictly professional, but it's getting harder as my office life becomes more and more uncomfortable in the best and worst way. This was not the plan. I left Manhattan to leave the mess I caused behind. It haunts me every night. I had to put physical distance between my ex-girlfriend, Juliana, and me so we could both pick up the pieces and move on. I can't afford to sonder my fresh new start by getting into another doomed situation, especially with a girl like Adler.

We emerge from the entrance of Marquis Business Tower and Adler turns to face me. The sun catches her from behind and blinds me. I plank my hand across my forehead to shield my eyes.

"Oh, come on, boss man. I'm not that harsh on the eyes, am I?"

She's baiting me. *Just tell her.* She's beautiful. It's not flirting—it's a fact.

"It's just the sun."

I won't. I can't afford to fall under her spell.

She nods to the left. "It's this way." I let her lead as I trail half a pace behind. I mull over this incredible woman who keeps me on my toes. She's a myriad of contradictions. Sarcastic but sincere. Sassy, yet sweet. There's not an overly ambitious bone in her body, yet I get the feeling she could take the presidency if she put her mind to it. I should leave her alone and quit toeing this line. I should just be her boss. But it's getting harder to focus when I'm hooked on everything that comes out of her smart, pouty, lush lips.

Her very off-limits...lips.

five

...

Joel

Adler sits across from me on the opposite side of a wobbly diner table. She pushes the crushed peanuts off of her pad Thai, making a little pile and then scooting it to the edge of her plate.

“What, why are you looking at me like that?” she asks without looking up. She’s cleaning off the flat noodles with the expert precision of a neurosurgeon. Getting rid of the nuts, while sparing the sauce.

“Why don’t you just order it without peanuts?”

“That’s the thing!” Her bright blue eyes lift briefly to meet mine. “I do. Every single time. Without fail, they always put the peanuts on anyways. I’ve accepted my fate.”

“That looks tedious. Let me just order you a new one,” I say as I attempt to stand and head to the register. Adler reaches across the table like the Flash. I didn’t see her arm move, but suddenly her small soft hand is clamped against my forearm, causing goosebumps to raise on the back of my neck.

“Joel Lewis, sit down right now,” she hisses. “I’m a regular here so don’t you dare cause a scene or offend the chef. Wiping peanut crumbs off my noodles is a small price to pay to have the privilege of a little Thai grandma preparing the delectable authentic cuisine of her homeland for me. If she insists on the peanut garnish—just let it be.”

I resettle in my seat with my eyes still glued on Adler’s deep blues. Apparently, it’s all fun and games until you mess with her favorite noodle place. I’ve never seen her look so dangerous before.

“*Yaai*,” I say.

“What?”

“*Yaai* is the Thai word for grandmother. For your mother’s mother. Your father’s mother would be *yaa*.”

“I didn’t realize you were bilingual.”

“I’m trilingual, but I don’t speak Thai. My little sister does. She’s living abroad, helping to teach English to elementary-aged children who don’t have the means to access education.”

“She’s an English major?”

“Yes.”

Adler points to her chest. “Me too!”

“How do you go from English major to working as an executive assistant?”

“Oh, that’s an easy one. It’s called rent and utilities. But tell me more about your sister. Didn’t you mention she calls you from Thailand every week? Isn’t that phone bill astronomical?”

“It’s worth it. I’m really proud of her. It’s not easy to live where she is—she’s basically living as one with the earth, free of amenities. But she’s still enthusiastic. When we talk it’s a Thailand infodump for an entire hour,” I say, tapping my temple. “It’s a beautiful country. I have this picture of

Sunset Beach at Koh Lipe that she sent me.” I pull out my phone and open a recent email from Cami. I scroll to the picture of the golden yellow and orange sky that appears to touch the water. I slide my phone to Adler. “Tell me that’s not the most beautiful sunset you’ve ever seen.”

She scans the picture and her eyebrows arch in surprise.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing...it’s beautiful.” She slides my phone back across the table. “Well, Mr. Lewis, I have to say, I’m impressed.”

“Impressed?”

“You can appreciate a pretty sunset. And you talk to your little sister weekly? Pretty charming. Do I need to worry that your lucky girlfriend is going to misinterpret this late working lunch and go all apeshit bananas on me?”

“You consider this working?”

“Well, we’re not drunk so—yeah. I’d still expense it to Aura.” Adler winks.

“Don’t tell your new boss that.”

“I thought my new boss was cool.”

I harsh a laugh. “By the way, you’re safe from the apes. I don’t have a girlfriend.” And I doubt my ex would consider herself lucky. “I could not be less interested in women right now.”

Adler’s mouth makes a perfect ‘o’. She makes a clicking sound with her jaw as she nods at me. “Oh, I got ya. Totally understood.”

“What’s understood?”

“No judgment here! Actually, my ex-boyfriend all through college didn’t realize he liked men until well after we graduated. But in my defense, he dated another girl after me, so I choose not to believe that I had anything to do with his major change of heart.”

I pinch my eyes in irritation when I realize what she’s insinuating.

“Okay, that’s...a lot to unpack. Let’s start with how you date a guy for years and not realize he’s gay?”

“It’s complicated.”

“How so? Seems pretty clear to me that wouldn’t uh...work.” I prod her for clarity as I take another bite of my crispy but also fluffy fried rice. Michelin-star worthy, indeed.

She rolls her shoulders nonchalantly as if she’s explaining a simple math equation. “Alan and I were always such good friends. We liked spending time together. He made me laugh, he was easy to talk to, he’s intelligent. Come to think of it, he reminds me a lot of you. You’re both really good with people.”

It takes me a minute to really comprehend what she’s insinuating because I’m caught up on the way she’s absentmindedly sucking on her chopsticks with her rose-red lips. It’s enough of a distraction to cause a ten-car pileup.

“Adler, I’m not gay.” I pull off my glasses and touch the temple tips to my lips. “There are ways I can prove it to you.”

Adler’s mouth falls open and her sparkling blue eyes double in size. Panic crosses her face and for once she doesn’t have a witty reply teed up and ready to hit back.

I’ll admit that was a little HR inappropriate. But it’s my company now, don’t I get to make these rules? Plus, Aura’s HR is outsourced. I’d literally have to compose an email to tell on myself.

“I...I...um—”

“Oh my God, I’m messing with you. Look at your face,” I say, laughing, copying her joke from earlier and exacting my revenge.

Adler huffs and rolls her eyes at me before returning to her noodles. “This is turning out to be such a fun little lunch date,” she mumbles, refocusing her attention on removing peanut specks from her dish. “And for future reference, that joke is only funny when I make it.”

“Ha! I disagree. But to clarify, what I meant earlier is that I don’t do relationships.”

“Oh.” Adler can’t hide the disappointment in her voice. Her phone vibrates on the table. She flips it over and grimaces. “Will you excuse me for a second?”

Adler exits the restaurant and I busy myself with my rice to fight the urge to walk up to the register in her absence and order her a new peanut-free dish. I’ve been accused of being a ‘fixer’ in the past. Not in a complimentary way. I force myself to leave it alone. Adler is a big girl, she can handle her own lunch. I don’t need to rescue her.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. And again. Then the quick buzzes become a prolonged vibration due to the rapid-fire messages. I know it’s my brothers before I even check my phone.

Jackson: Where the hell are you baby bro? I’ve been knocking for ten minutes.

Oh shit, that’s who’s been calling me. I didn’t want to interrupt my conversation with Adler so I didn’t bother checking.

James: What planet are you on? He’s in Denver.

Jackson: Visiting?

Jacob: No, he moved, dummy. Hey, can I borrow one of your trucks this weekend?

Jackson: Joel? Wtf? Did you sublet? Whose door am I knocking on?

Jacob: Run. His ex is still living there.

Jackson: @Jake – fuck no. Don’t trust your driving.

James: @Jake – yeah what Jax said. Enterprise it, dude.

Jackson: How do you move from the state and not tell your big bro?

Jacob: You all suck hard. And you’re not our keeper, Jax. Baby bro is a grown ass man.

Jackson: He may be. You’re not. What happened, Joel?

James: Messy breakup and he basically packed up in the night and hightailed it.

Me: Do you guys even need me in this conversation?

Adler returns to the table and slumps heavily in her chair. I tuck my phone away. If there’s one thing my mother taught me, when you’re with a lady, especially one you care about, she gets your full attention.

“Everything okay?”

“Yep.” She tugs on the end of her ponytail, alternating her hands, as her eyes cloud over.

“Adler, is everything okay?”

“You literally just asked me that.”

“I know. You didn’t answer honestly, so I’m trying again.” I set down my fork and lean back in my chair that creaks in protest. I cross my arms and we begin a staring conversation. *‘Let it go’* her eyes say. *‘Not a chance’* mine respond.

I don’t falter.

She caves.

“My best friend Noa and I were supposed to go hiking on Sunday, but she’s going through hell so I let her off the hook.”

Oh. I wasn’t expecting such a tame explanation. She looks like she just found out someone is in the hospital. “You’re that upset about it?”

“I mean hiking is a whole separate thing. But the part that bothers me is she’s in so much pain and I can’t help her. She won’t let anybody help her. It drives me crazy that she pretends she’s fine.”

“What happened?”

“She fell in love with a Hollywood movie star of all people after a crazy PR stunt. I swear I’m not even making this up. Very un-Noa like. Anyways, I thought they were really going to go the distance, but it became clear after one summer together that their lives didn’t fit together. I thought inviting her on this hike would help but she’s still in the bad place. There’s nothing I can do for her except watch her go through it. It’s awful.” Adler retrieves her chopsticks and begins poking at her noodles again. Her eyes fall down and her expression is haunted. The way she talks about her friend makes me think she’s in agony for her. I know that feeling all too well.

“Do you watch football?”

Her face scrunches in confusion. I don’t blame her, that was a hell of a non-sequitur. “Sometimes. Mostly just with my best friend, Quinn.”

“I thought Noa was your best friend?”

“I have four best friends.”

“If you have four best friends, none of them are your *best* friend.”

“I could never pick one over the other. Hence, they are all my best friends.”

“Literally the definition of best is to define a hierarchy—”

“Would you like to get back to football? Because you’re not going to win this argument.” This time Adler leans back in her chair and crosses her arms. Her eyes beam with defiance.

“My *best* friend—and I literally mean best because I only have one—”

“Let it go, Joel.”

“—his name is Cody. He was a tight end for the New York Bandits. Up until a year ago, football was his entire life. In college it was all he lived and breathed. He even asked me to tutor him when his grades started slipping. He’d train for hours even outside of practices, he went to all his classes, and still made time in the library with me. I’ve never seen anyone work so hard at anything in my life. When it all paid off and he got that first-round draft pick I could feel his elation. I was so proud of him it was like a shared win. Just like he felt mine when I sold my first portfolio company for eleven mil—um, money.”

Adler rolls her eyes. She catches my slip. But I’m not about to showboat. I come from a world where all people do is talk—and by talk, I mean brag—about their net worth and the sum of their portfolios. I have to be that Joel sometimes. The top dog that Steve recruited to save his firm. The boss. The closer. It’s necessary for survival in venture capitalism.

But right now, I just want to be the normal guy sitting across from a pretty girl, trying to figure out why she looks like she’s about to cry.

“I’m not trying to calculate your net worth, Joel. I really don’t care.”

“I didn’t think you did. I just—” I take a deep breath. “Back to Cody. He took a hit in the back. First game of the season. Right in the end zone. I was at the game. I saw him all but snap in half right in front of my eyes. The hit silenced the entire stands.”

Adler wraps both hands around her mouth. “*Kartlin*. Cody Kartlin, right? I saw that! I saw that game. He was down for so long. I remember, it was so damn scary, even on TV.”

It was a godawful ten minutes. I knew it was logically improbable, but at the time I thought I saw my best friend murdered on the field. The late-hitting, helmet-led tackler was penalized so hard, I don't think he ever saw playing time again. But it didn't fix Cody's back. Or save his career.

My thumb knocks rapidly against the table as I relive the panicked adrenaline from that memory. "He'll never play in the NFL again. He's lucky he can walk. Right after it happened, he went to the bad place for a while. And I felt like what I imagine you're feeling now. Sucks when you can't save your friend. You feel so—"

"Useless? Like all your silly problems pale in comparison?" Adler reaches across the table and cups her hand over mine. A jolt of energy shoots up my forearm. For a moment I think she's making a move, but then she steadies my thumb that's been tapping ferociously against the unstable table, causing our drink cups to teeter precariously. "You're going to spill our waters." She slowly takes back her soft, cool hand that somehow leaves a burn trail on my skin. "How is Cody now?"

"Better. He went through hell, but he's coming through it in his own time and in his own way. Just like Noa will, I'm sure."

Adler's eyes crease at the corners as a wide smile overcomes her face. "*Wow.*"

"What?"

"When you started that whole story, I really thought I was going to have to pacify you because you're my boss and all—but that *actually* helped. Thank you."

"Pacify? *Such* little faith. Men can have feelings too."

"Hmm," she hums, tugging again on her low ponytail that side-sweeps her shoulders.

"Are you going to go hike by yourself?"

"Nah." Her shoulders slump. "I would but when Noa bailed so did my ride."

"You don't have a car?"

"Nope! I live like ten minutes from the office. I walk or take rideshares to everything. But Manitou Springs is an hour and a half from here and I'm *not* paying for that Uber there and back."

I speak before I allow myself to think this through. "I'll take you." I abandon my fork and opt for a spoon to scoop up my rice.

"What?" Adler's ocean-blues widen in surprise.

"I'll give you a ride, and I'll hike with you if you want."

"You hike?"

"It's walking outside. I don't think I need marathon training for that."

"Joel, when I said 'hike', I meant the Manitou Springs incline which is almost three thousand stairs that take you straight up about two thousand feet in elevation in under an hour. People have had heart attacks up there from the physical strain."

Did she just say three thousand stairs? Heart attacks? Stairs have not been my friend lately. I don't think I'll very much enjoy a heart attack, either. But shit, she's so cute and sweet and all I want to do is make plans to see her outside of the office again.

A hike is safe. A hike between a boss and his assistant is allowed, right? Yeah. It's healthy and good for intra-office comradery...or at least that is exactly how I'll justify this to anyone who asks. "I'm game. How about we call this team building?"

"Do you plan on inviting anyone else from the office?"

No. "Do you want me to?"

"It might be too late. The incline used to be open to whomever whenever. But now because of crowd control you need a reservation and I only have two slots. And they actually check the paperwork before entry. It's nuts. It's a world of difference from when I used to hike it with my

grandma.”

“Your grandma hiked it?” No way I can back out now.

“She raced a fireman up the incline once on a bet—she won. I mean I’m pretty sure she tripped him a little at the end, but point being, she won.”

“Ha! She sounds like a badass.”

Adler’s eyes slightly glisten and she makes an excuse to take a prolonged sip from her cup. One swig is all she needs to compose herself and find that chipper smile. “Well, Joel, I appreciate the offer but I have to warn you, the reservation is for eight o’clock. Noa and I like to hike early. It’s an hour and a half drive and then at least a thirty-minute walk from parking to the trailhead. You sure you’re up for it?”

God, I hope so. “Text me your address and I’ll be at your place at six on Sunday to pick you up.”

“Seriously? This is how you want to spend your Sunday?”

“Yep. I’ll be there.”

“I won’t hold it against you if you change your mind.”

“Not changing my mind.”

“I won’t hold my breath.”

“You can.” *I certainly am.*

six

...

Adler

*M*y phone is not at all intimidated by my bugged-out glare. It just stares back at me in a stalemate telling me it's five 'til six in the morning. *He's not coming.* I've been up since three o'clock because my hyperactive nerves are feisty little shits. They didn't want to sleep. They wanted me up and pacing.

The streets of Denver are quiet this morning. Saturday night partiers have finally exhausted themselves and have retreated back into their lairs. The sky is still the darkest shade of navy and the lights glow against it like a Lite-Brite board picture of a city skyline.

There's no way he's coming. I would've heard from him by now.

If I was hiking with Noa, according to our usual ritual, I would've gotten three texts by now. One message around five o'clock when she'd leave her house with an upbeat—*On my way!* Another about fifteen minutes later asking—*Do you want the usual from Starbucks?* By five fifty I'd get the final text—*I'm outside. Take your time. Also do you have an extra [insert whatever Noa forgot that morning]?*

This is crazy. What am I doing? I mean, I know what I'm doing and it feels a little bit like dancing too close to a well-fueled bonfire. My abstinence has never bothered me before. I can't explain why I'm suddenly like a pent-up, horny moth to a flame.

I checked the employee handbook—there is nothing against office romances. Then again, our employee handbook is pretty much a sticky note from Steve that says, 'don't do dumb shit', but still! There's no real rule because it's never been an issue before. I'm the only woman in the office and I've been wearing a giant 'closed for business' sign around my neck for the past three years of my employment at Aura. It took Brett a little while to take the hint, but even he caught on eventually.

I can't stop thinking about the *way* Joel said he doesn't do relationships over our lunch on Friday.

His eyes went dark behind his frames as he said it. His normal honey-browns sank to an almost dark chocolate as he wrapped caution tape around his pants that screamed 'Adler! Do not cross!'

But why?

There's no wedding ring. No complaints of a bitter divorce. He hasn't mentioned having any religious confines to abide by. As we've established, he's not gay. Is it me? Is he not into me?

I don't do relationships. It's a straightforward command. But I'm the queen at finding loopholes.

We don't have to be together for me to enjoy watching his sexy ass climb about a gazillion stairs today. Provided he shows, I have my plan all mapped out. I'm going to feign a side-stich so I have to lag and then I'm going to enjoy the off-limits view of my new boss's broad muscular back and perfectly formed glutes from behind. Don't judge me. Any woman with eyes would do the same.

Windchimes.

My preset alarm goes off at six o'clock. It's so loud it almost drowns out the sound of a soft knock on the door. My heart jumps right out of my throat. I catch it, swallow it down, and allow it to sink then settle into my chest cavity where it belongs. I open the front door in just a little disbelief.

"You look surprised." Joel smolders—I mean smiles—at me.

His baseball cap is tipped low. His Active Fit athletic shirt hugs his body with a gentle caress. I can make out all the hard lines of his firm chest and tight abs but there's still enough room between his skin and fabric to easily slide my hands right up in there. *Adler, seriously. You're out of control. Stop drooling and form human words...now.*

"I am surprised. I really thought you'd bail. It's early."

"That it is, but here I am. You ready?"

"Are you?"

Joel lets out a heavy sigh. "If this hike kicks my ass, are you going to be able to carry me back down? Like Kevin Costner in *Bodyguard* style?"

I grab my camelback and brush against Joel as I slide out of my apartment. He tenses. "Sure. You're only double my size so that seems feasible. You're not going to be embarrassed of a woman carrying you down the mountain?"

"Not at all. I find strong woman incredibly sex—" He stops, lifts his glasses, and rubs the space between his eyes. "Sorry. Inappropriate," he mumbles.

My back is to him so he can't see me roll my eyes. But then again, I rolled them so hard maybe he felt the ground shake. *'I don't date.'* Ugh! Why? I'm going to get answers before this day is over, I can promise you that.

"Hey, are you not going to lock your door?"

"Nope," I call over my shoulder.

"Isn't that incredibly careless and kind of dangerous?"

Yep. But that's kind of today's theme. "Come on, Joel, we're burning daylight. The mountain waits for no one."



Joel

All right, Denver—I'm *really* going to need you to stop sucking now.

To be precise, we're not in Denver. We're in Manitou Springs but we might as well be in outer space. I've never been at an elevation this high before in my life. I didn't realize I needed a space suit for this hike.

When Adler and I first reached the base of the incline, she started climbing without hesitation. I, on the other hand, stopped to stare at what looks like an abandoned wooden railroad staircase that leads straight into the sky. I think...I can't actually see the end of it. Adler wants us to hike into the beyond—at a sixty-degree angle.

For the first ten minutes, I try to pace with her. I tower over Adler so my stride should easily overcome hers, but I'm in her element. She navigates the clunky, uneven steps without glancing down.

Her toned legs have muscle memory. She's wearing very short teal runner's shorts so I can see her quadriceps bulge and brace her as she conquers each stair. She's balanced and graceful, putting everyone else on the trail to shame.

After ten more minutes, I start lagging behind. I don't mind. I like the view. The sun is in front of us, illuminating Adler's silhouette so it looks like I'm chasing an angel. It's just enough motivation to keep going.

But after another ten minutes it's an entirely different story.

I'm wheezing. My throat is on fire. There's not enough oxygen in the world. I'm certain I'm near seconds away from that prementioned heart attack. I press my palm against my chest to try and slow the angry pumping.

Adler steps to the side of the stairs and watches me basically crawl to her. She doesn't let me slump. She grabs underneath my arms and presses upward.

"Grab your elbows over your head. Keep your arms elevated and breathe slow."

"I swear...I've...exercised...before in...my life." I try to make a joke but it falls flat between my desperate gasps for life.

"Clearly." She chuckles mercilessly. "Save your breath."

A few passersby express their concerns. *'Is he okay?'* and *'Do you guys need help?'* Adler thanks them but ushers them along. *'I got him, we're okay. I'll take care of him.'* She scrambles for the water bottle in her pack and hands it to me. I succumb to the wooziness and slump onto the ground, letting my forearms dangle off my bent knees.

"Here." She hands me a few gummy bears that she must've fished out of her pack. "These will help."

"Sugar...helps?"

"No, sugar distracts. You're huffing like that because you're trying too hard to breathe normally, boss."

"Please...stop...calling me...that."

"Sorry, Joel—Hey! Your nose!"

I feel the blood drip half a second before she says it. Right on cue, because this situation isn't quite humiliating enough.

Adler dives into action. She's dressed in layers so she's still covered when she peels off her outer tank top and shoves it against my nose. "Sorry, probably a little sweaty, but here. Now tilt your head back." She goes rummaging in her pack again and I feel something cold against my neck. The flow instantly lessens.

"What is that?"

"My keys. It's something my grandma taught me. It's an old wives tale but copper on the back of the neck works like a charm every time for me."

"And apparently for me." As I catch my breath and my heart begins to slow, I notice Adler's hands still lingering. One on the back of my neck pressing the cool metal into my skin. One against my chest, feeling my heartbeat. I hop up before the remaining blood in my body can surge downwards and I really *will* have to report myself to HR. I stagger a bit. I swear the ground tilts.

"Whoa there. Slow." Adler clutches my shoulders to steady me. I need her to stop touching me. It's not helping me catch my breath. "Right behind me is the last bailout." She juts her thumb over her shoulder.

"Bailout?" Why does that sound like a challenge to my masculinity?

"We can hop right on to Barr Trail now and take the switchbacks down the mountain. It'd be a

leisurely stroll. Easy-peasy.”

I extend my legs trying to coax out the tension. I am going to be so fucking sore tomorrow. My entire bottle of ibuprofen liquid gels at home might not be enough.

“Or...” Adler holds her hand out. *Of course, there's an 'or'.* “The peak isn't that much farther. I'll slow way down and take it step by step right alongside you.”

“Maybe I should wait at the bottom of the trail for you. So, *you* can finish.”

Adler's face twists in indignation. “Hey, you're my hiking buddy today. Whether up or down—we go together.”

“What do you want to do? This trip is about you.”

“It's actually about *you*. Your first time on the incline will make a lasting impression. Some people bail out and it motivates them to come back and kick ass. Others push themselves to finish and they are so miserable they never step foot on this mountain again.”

“Makes sense.”

“I won't push you. People can get seriously hurt up here if they don't listen to their bodies. But I will tell you the view from the finish line is worth it when you're ready. When your endorphins are going and you stand at the top it's like—” She whistles lowly. “You'll never see anything else like it in your life.”

I blow out a deep breath, disgruntled at the decision I've already made. I grab Adler's hand and stand. Her soft small fingers interlace with mine and give me a reassuring squeeze.

“There's no right or wrong, Joel. Whatever you want to do.”

“Come on, Baby Spice. Let's finish this damn thing together.”

seven

...

Adler

J rest my temple against the cool glass of Joel's passenger side window. I smile to myself as I picture the horrified look on his face barely an hour ago. Not at the peak of the incline—he loved that view. His looks of pure defeat at the false peak. I would've warned him, but there's a rule amongst veteran hikers.

Never tell first timers about the false peak. There's a dip in the trail near the very end. You can't see past the false peak until you're right on top of it. Just when you think you're done—*bam!* You conquer the hill only to see about three hundred more stairs to go and by then it's far too late to turn around. The pissed-off faces of hikers encountering this cruel realization for the very first time have been captured on camera and transformed into wildly entertaining memes.

This chick got mountain tricked!

Joel and I are zipping past traffic heading north on Interstate 25. He is a patient driver. I expected a little more angst coming from a New Yorker, but nothing. He doesn't tail. He doesn't sporadically switch lanes just to get a meter ahead of traffic. No cussing, no honking, no grumbling. I am thoroughly convinced he'd be shocked and horror-struck at my antics in the driver's seat.

The clock is ticking on the car ride home. I thought we'd have more time to talk during the hike, but the poor guy was busy surviving. There wasn't enough oxygen in his lungs to waste on words. But now that we're alone in the car, I need answers. I need to know why we're sidestepping the chemistry between us. I want to know why after twenty-five years of waiting, Joel is the man that's causing the curious new urge south of my belly button to scream '*yup! Green light, go!*' But first and most importantly, I have to know why Joel doesn't do relationships.

"You kind of wanted to punch me when we got to the false peak, huh?"

"I'd never lay hands on a woman." Joel smiles and glances at me in his peripherals, barely taking his eyes off the road. "But yeah, if you were a dude and roughly my size, I'd have been tempted to clock you."

"If you could've caught me. You were riding the struggle bus, my friend."

"Hey now. I found my pace eventually."

"You did. It just happened to be the pace of a turtle moving backwards."

He gasps. "Low blow. It was my first time. Be gentle."

Hm, choice words.

"Can I confess something to you?" I ask.

His finger taps nervously on the wheel. "Uh...sure."

"I thought you'd drive a nicer car."

His thunderous laugh is full of relief. "I thought that was going somewhere else. Why do you think

I should drive a nicer car?”

“Just the way the guys at the office talk about you. About your portfolio worth and all that.” I let the roll of my wrist say ‘blah, blah, blah’. “I just figured you’d be able to afford more than a Lexus.”

“This is a brand-new Lexus GX—it’s a *nice* SUV. It’s not fancy enough for you? My, oh my, does someone have luxurious taste.”

“Oh please. My idea of fancy is cooking ramen noodles on the stove instead of in the microwave. This is beyond a dream car for someone like me, but for someone like you...” I trail off, not sure how to finish my sentence.

“You want to know something I tell the startups I mentor? Just because you can afford it, doesn’t mean you need it. It’s better to find contentment in the necessary things than trying to seek validation from *stuff*. Careless, aggressive spending is how businesses fail in their adolescence. I try to practice what I preach. So, if you’re trying to ask without asking—yeah, I guess I could own a fleet of Lamborghinis, but I never will because...well, what for?”

I sit on my hands so they behave. He’s too much. Too sexy, too smart, too down to earth. I want him way too much right now. “Thanks for coming, today.”

“Sure. Happy to. Although now I’m suspecting you invited me so you could show me up. You schooled me on that mountain.”

“Technically, I didn’t invite you. You ‘voluntold’ me you were coming. And if my grandma was here, she’d tell you that it’s not how you finished, it’s that you did. So, kudos.” *Did I just say kudos? Kill me now.*

“Sounds like you were really close to your grandma.” Joel reaches over and pats my knee chummily but my stomach swoops causing me to flinch. He snatches his hand back.

“I was.”

He lets out a sigh and keeps his eyes fixed on the windshield. I get it, it’s uncomfortable. “She passed?”

“Nine years ago, today.”

The last hike I went on with her we climbed to the top of Pike’s Peak in the middle of winter. We took on the beast at the worst time possible. It took fourteen hours, six pairs of socks, an entire jar of peanut butter, four packs of handwarmers, eight homemade power-protein coconut balls, and our camelbacks were bone dry by the time we finished. Best day of my life.

“Shit, Adler. I’m sorry. I didn’t know this hike was a whole thing—”

“It’s not a thing.” *It is though. It’s a huge thing. Every year.* “It’s just I always miss her a little more on this day. I was raised in the Springs. We used to do the incline almost every Sunday morning, and then we’d go get buffalo tamales and she’d let me have the tiniest sip of her margarita. Then we’d walk around downtown Manitou until she was certain she was sober which was pointless because she never finished her drink. It was an excuse to dawdle, put off Sunday chores, and to buy me retro candy.”

“What is retro candy?”

“You know, like Charleston Chews, bottle caps, and the good kind of saltwater taffy. I fully blame her for my candy addiction.”

He laughs. “I might have some Altoids in the glove box if you need your fix.” The car slows to almost a stop behind what has to be a mile of angry red brake lights. There must be an accident ahead. Joel throws the vehicle into park. “Yeah, we’re not moving anytime soon.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to eat up your whole Sunday.”

“No, it’s fine. I’d just be in the office anyway.” With traffic at a standstill and the car safely

stopped, Joel turns slightly to meet my eyes. “You should’ve told me about all that stuff. I love tamales. We could’ve done like a whole remembrance tour, honoring your grandma.”

“No. I wouldn’t have wanted to do that with you.” Joel looks slightly offended as he raises his eyebrows, so I clarify. I don’t want his incredibly sweet gesture to go to waste. “Oh, sorry not like that. I just mean sometimes I worry all our special things—the moments I treasure—won’t feel the same with someone else and I don’t want to muddle up perfect memories. Does that make sense?”

He bobs his head slowly. “I get it. There’s this French wine, probably my favorite—Le Vol. I don’t necessarily like it when I drink it by myself. But the memories I have of it live in my mind as perfection.”

“Exactly.” *Kind of.* I’m not going to lie, I really still like Charleston Chews and saltwater taffy no matter who I’m eating it with...but sure. We’ll roll with it because I can tell he’s trying to connect. And all I want to do is connect with this man.

“What memories?”

“Le Vol is from a little French vineyard that belonged to family friends. My parents married there when they were young. It was the wine they served at their wedding. It’s the bottle they’d share on every anniversary.”

“That’s really sweet.” I wonder if my parents share any nostalgic traditions like that.

“The vineyard burned down about five years ago. Ironically the same year my parents separated. The last bottles from that vineyard are scattered across the world. They are impossible to find.”

“You know, as your executive assistant, it’s kind of my job to make the impossible...possible.”

“Oh, no, Adler. Don’t even bother. Believe me. I haven’t come across a bottle in ages.”

“I’m kind of amazing at research. Ask Steve how I hunted down that limited edition collector’s copy of *Star Wars* signed by the director.” It involved shameless begging and crocodile tears, but once I pulled it off, Steve bought me and the girls an all-expense-paid weekend in Breckenridge, he was so thrilled.

“I have no doubt you’re amazing.” Joel pulls off his glasses and exposes his dark-honey-colored eyes that make my stomach flip and dip.

The faint sound of honking around us fades away and suddenly there is a spotlight on Joel. Everything except his handsome face is out of focus. I free myself of my seat belt and plant my hand firmly on his knee. Leaning across the center console, I place my lips just inches from his.

Kiss me.

But he doesn’t.

He leans backwards. The lines of his face contort in alarm. “Wait.”

Oh shit. “Um...I wasn’t—”

“You’re my assistant. I don’t want to take advantage of you or make you feel like I’m pressuring you into—”

“Oh! No don’t worry about that. I don’t feel pressured. I *like* you. I want to do this.” I lean forward again trying to put my lips on his to demonstrate the *this* I’m referring to.

This time Joel pulls away so emphatically, the back of his head knocks against the driver’s side window. “I’m really sorry.”

I nestle back into my seat. “Is this about your dating thing, because we don’t have to—”

“I just don’t—”

“I’m not expecting anything serious. I just thought we could have som—”

Joel holds up his hand to stop me. “We should probably stay professional—”

“I checked the rules befo—”

“Adler.” Joel lifts his glasses and pinches the bridge of his nose in one fluid movement before looking down at his lap. “I’m just not attracted to you in that way. I’m sorry.”

Well that effectively shuts me up.

Traffic begins to crawl and I refasten my seat belt. The heat in my cheeks sings my skin from the inside. A dull burning ache in my stomach groans. My subconsciousness distracts me with a painful little skit.

Adler: Tell it to me straight, doc. I can handle it.

Doctor: It’s your ego. It’s in critical condition. I don’t think we can save it.

Adler: Okay, do it. Pull the plug. Let’s shut this whole damn operation down.

Joel pushes slightly on the gas pedal and we inch forward. “Look, that might’ve come out wrong. I meant that—”

“Hey, Joel? Please just drive and forget about all this. Okay? Thanks.”

I fix my eyes on the traffic in front of us. I super glue my gaze forward through the windshield where it remains for the rest of the torturous car ride home.

eight

...

Joel

Cody Kartlin is my only friend from New York who wanted to visit me in the Mile High City. On Friday afternoon, I wait in passenger pickup at Denver International Airport, hoping he hurries his ass along before I have to abandon my spot in the ‘absolutely no parking’ car line. I would’ve opted for short-term parking if there was any space left.

A traffic guard wearing a bright orange vest eyes me warningly and I’m almost certain I’ll need to loop around the airport. But perfectly timed, a mammoth-sized figure emerges from the airport exit.

Cody has grown his blond hair to shoulder-length. He leaves it down underneath his beanie with the Bandits’ logo. He’s visibly sweating. I can see the dampened spots on his white t-shirt under his unzipped hoodie from across the street. The idiot is wearing a winter ensemble. He has what looks like thermal-lined sweats, complete with UGG boots like he’s about to hit the slopes.

I roll down the tinted passenger window so he can see me. “Cody!” I bellow.

He spins around on the curb and in the most embarrassing display of theatrics, prances across the street to my SUV. He leans in, grinning ear to ear. He ignores the honking protests of the cars behind me because Cody moves for no one.

“Get out here and give me a hug.”

“Just get the hell in the car.”

He crosses his arms and leans away from the window, pretending to pout. “You don’t call, you barely text. You run away to a new city and break up the bromance. I don’t know, man. I just don’t feel like your heart is in this anymore.”

“There are people trying to get around us.”

“Am I embarrassing you?”

“Thoroughly.”

“Then you better move quick.”

I step out of the driver’s side to give Cody a fraternal hug. Instead, he wraps me up like a little child’s doll, lifts my feet off the ground, and spins me around like we’re long-lost lovers. A few cars behind us roll down their windows to cheer and clap. “*Good for you guys!*”

I glare at Cody as he sets me down. “Satisfied?”

He can barely respond, he’s laughing so hard. “Totally. But seriously good to see you. You look different.” He slaps my back hard, winding me. He hasn’t trained for nearly a year but still has the strength of a gorilla.

Cody tosses his bag into the back of the SUV and slides into the passenger seat. We pull out of the airport and head straight into the packed highways of downtown Denver. Neither of us complains. This traffic is nothing compared to Manhattan.

“I thought it was supposed to be freezing here,” Cody says as he sheds his zip-up hoodie. I pray he doesn’t take off those boots. I’ve smelt Cody’s feet after a long plane ride and this car is new. It’s not ready to wreck. “It’s Colorado—the snowcapped mountains and all.”

“I was your tutor, so I know that science was never your strong suit but uh...you do understand how seasons work, right?”

“Shut up, man. You miss home yet?”

“This is my home.”

“You’re not serious.” I feel Cody’s eyes lock on me. “I thought this was all just temporary until you saved that Oracle firm.”

“Aura. And I like it here. In New York I spent all my time fundraising, but here I’m doing a lot more consulting and coaching. I get more face time with new startups. I prefer it.”

“Can’t you do that in New York?”

“Sure, but I can do it here too.”

Cody presses buttons and turns dials like a child in an elevator lighting up every single floor. By the time he nearly deafens us both by blasting the music and then turns on my hazards it’s time to intervene.

“What the hell are you trying to do?”

“How do I turn up the air? I’m about to have a heat stroke.”

“It’s that knob right over there. You have your own temperature controls for the passenger side.”

Cody tinkers with the temperature and finds the button for the cooling seats. “So, you like it here? You’re not just running from Juliana?”

“I was never running. It was a happy accident that Aura needed me. Juliana needs space. Every time she saw me around town it made things worse. How is she anyhow?”

“Peachy. According to Sasha, she’s going to fly out here and murder you any day now.”

Nice. Nice to know my absence from Manhattan is helping to cool her rage fire. “Great.” My grip tightens around the wheel until my knuckles lose pigment. “You’re still hanging out with Sasha?”

Cody teeters his thumb and pinky noncommittally. “Look man, time to stop beating yourself up about Juliana. That’s what I came out here to tell you. I was hoping it’d be after a few rounds so your stubborn ass would actually listen to me, but...there it is.”

“I’m not beating myself up.” I keep my eyes fixed on the blue Honda in front of me. It’s easier for Cody to call me on my shit when I’m looking at him.

“You left her the condo on the Upper West Side, the coupe, all your furniture...how does that not scream guilt?”

“It’s just to help tide her over until she gets back on her feet. I put her through enough.”

“Put her through what? I was there. I was literally there when you told her exactly what you were and weren’t looking for. What you said was crystal clear. You can’t help it if Juliana heard what she wanted and not what you said.”

It doesn’t matter. I appreciate that my best friend has my back, but I knew Juliana wanted to settle down, get married, and have children. I also knew she was almost thirty-two and in no mood to waste time. It was reckless. I should’ve known better.

“Lesson learned. I’m not doing that shit again, ever. The aftermath is not worth the companionship. I’m still mad I lost Felices.”

Felices is my pawed compadre that I had to leave behind, because technically it’s illegal to own a Savannah cat in most cities and I wasn’t going to risk bringing him to the airport. Private jet or not, security can be confiscating asses sometimes. He still lives with Juliana who hates him from the

bottom of her heart, but she knows I adore that cat and right now she adores punishing me.

“Just get another cat.”

“Felices isn’t just a cat. He’s an F-1 Savannah. Do you know how long it took me to find a purebred F-1? I have a special bond with him. He’s so smart *and* he can outswim a fish. And he never fights the harness which is really impressive for his age. They don’t fully mature until three years, so the fact that he’s only one and he already knows—”

“See? What do you need a girlfriend for? You’ve got a super disturbing obsession with your cat. Wrong kind of pussy to obsess over in my opinion, but hey if it makes you happy.”

“Thanks, asshole.”

“You’re most welcome.”

We snake through traffic, eventually making it to the parking garage of the Four Seasons. I find the spot with ‘J. Lewis’ marked in clean black block letters.

“You’re still in a hotel? I thought you said you bought a place?” Cody slings his duffel over his shoulders.

“I did. You can own private residences here. I bought the penthouse.”

“*You* bought the penthouse at the Four Seasons?” He lets out a long whistle while he shakes his head from side to side. “Not your usual taste.”

“It was an impulse buy.”

I didn’t want to hunt. I bought the first place the realtor showed me. It’s fifteen minutes from the office. It’s right in the heart of the downtown action. Every restaurant, store, pharmacy, gym—you name it—is in walking distance. It’s in the only area of Denver that feels like a mini-Manhattan. The penthouse is way too big for just me with four bedrooms and five bathrooms, but when the realtor showed me the place for the first time there was something about the spiral staircase and the dripping lights from the ceiling that captured my attention. I bought it in cash and prepaid two years’ worth of the resident service fees. Case closed. Move in and move on.

“Why didn’t you tell me, man? I would’ve come to visit a lot sooner. Do I get my own chef? Do my guests have a private access door?”

“Cody.” I shoot him a look as we walk through the resident access elevators. “Do not bring some skirt to my home who will end up stalking me again. Seriously. Take it to their place.”

Cody grabs his ribs, he’s laughing so hard. “One...time...man. You’ll never let it go. Carmen was a nice girl.”

“Nice? Why’d you bring her back to my place instead of yours then?”

“Because your apartment was nicer...and also, I didn’t want to get stalked.” Cody clicks his jaw as he shoots off his finger guns.

“Exactly—case in point. Again, asshole.”

We bolt up forty-three floors to arrive at the private hallway to the penthouse. After a quick tour and a slew of curse words describing how I’m a privileged son of a bitch who lives in a golden palace, he asks about dinner. He leans forward on the kitchen island as he studies the takeout menus I’ve presented. When he stretches upright he bumps his head on one of the rustic low-hanging lights.

“Tricky bastards. Gotta watch out for those.” He rubs the back of his head as he winces.

“They don’t move, dude.” I shake my head at his clumsiness. Cody is an odd contradiction. He’s a clown day to day, but on the football field he’s all grace and coordination. “Anyway, help yourself. Order takeout or call resident services. Whatever you want, on me. I’ll be back a little later tonight.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. It’s my first night in town and you’re ditching me?”

“I have to handle some stuff at the office.” I pull out my phone to check if Adler responded to my

text from earlier.

Nothing.

Of course not. Every day is a constant reminder of how badly I hurt her feelings over the most ridiculous lie that I thought she'd see right through. But instead, she ate it up instantly. She fought tears the entire drive home from our hike. My stomach aches thinking about it.

"Ah. Office. Got it." He winks and throws the China Village menu at me frisbee style which pelts me right in the chest. "Does this have something to do with your pretty office assistant that booked my travel?"

"How do you know she's pretty?"

"I looked her up on Instagram after she emailed me my itinerary." He wiggles his eyebrows suggestively. "You gettin' yourself into trouble at the office?"

"Nope. She hates me."

"Why?"

Hate might be a strong word. But ever since I lied to Adler and told her I wasn't attracted to her two weeks ago she's been nothing but short and polite. No more inside jokes, no more playful banter. She does her job flawlessly while barely acknowledging me—it's soul crushing. I wish I could explain I was just trying to spare her from all the trouble I cause.

"She's hot...but she's smart and sweet. She's funny too. I don't know. I liked her way too much, way too fast, so *naturally* when she tried to kiss me, I decided to humiliate the shit out of her and tell her I wasn't attracted to her right in the middle of standstill traffic. Let me tell you, that was an awkward-ass *long* ride home."

Cody rubs his eyes. A low throaty grumble of a laugh escapes his lips. "I'd make fun of you for striking out, but you didn't even swing, did you?"

"No and I don't plan to. Even tolerable sex mixed with chemistry like ours becomes a relationship. If I don't date Adler, I can't hurt her. I need women I don't connect with."

"Your logic is to sleep with women you don't like? Good plan, bro. I feel like that's going to work out really well for you."

"Don't question my reasoning. There's a method to the madness."

"I agree it's madness." He throws the entire stack of menus in the air so they shower down on me. Cody is sometimes like the annoying big brother that I definitely don't need. I already have three. They are all equally vexing. "Go to work. I'm going out tonight. You should join me when you're done in that stuffy prison of an office. I'll try to find a total dud of a woman and make sure to tell her all about you. Maybe one with horns and a tail. Does that rev your engine?"

"Shut up, Cody."

"Maybe one who likes to listen to Conway Twitty while doing needlepoint. That should get you all gassed up."

"Shut it."

"Ooh, ooh, how about I find a girl who is doing the baby food diet?"

"What the hell is that?" I gather takeout menus and stack them neatly back on the counter.

"It's where you only eat jarred baby food. Apparently if you eat the same calories as a baby, you'll weigh the same as one too."

"That makes no sense."

"It makes about as much sense as your current dating logic."

Cody continues to ramble about all the women I pray I never encounter as I head out the door. Who am I kidding? There's only one woman on my mind and I can almost guarantee I'm no longer on

hers.

nine

...

My phone vibrates against the hard coffee tabletop. Noa scours the notification before handing it over. “It’s your boss.”

Joel: Thanks for all your help at the office this week. You’re doing a great job.

I take a swig from my Coors and toss my phone back onto the table. It bounces off and rowdily clatters when it hits the ground. Noa raises her eyebrows at me in question. *I know.* My current sourpuss attitude doesn’t suit me. But I’m just not full of sunshine lately. *Okay? Leave it alone.*

“How do I unsubscribe from certain text messages?”

“Like certain people? You block them.”

“No, as in certain hours. I have to respond to him from nine to five.”

Reese’s curls go airborne as she dramatically plops down on my worn sofa. She joins Noa and me in front of yet another HBO rerun with a bowl of freshly popped popcorn. Reese’s ass is barely set on the cushion before two hands are pawing greedily at her lap, grabbing buttery handfuls.

“Animals,” Reese mumbles. “Geez, Bear.” She widens her hazel eyes as I twist the lid off a fresh bottle. “Are you drinking for all of us tonight?”

It’s Friday evening and we’re in the thick of our weekly tradition. Samosas, sangria, and *Sex and the City*. After all these years, season one looks like it was shot with a tripod and questionable camcorder, but the stories still reign supreme. Best friends navigating love in the city? Apt. So we keep the tradition alive through old-school DVDs, DVRs, and HBO Max who had the good sense to house the entire series in their streaming library. This is the only reason they will get my fourteen ninety-nine monthly until the day I die.

As usual, Quinn is in the kitchen struggling with the sangria, so I swim in beer instead. It’s only a matter of time before she inevitably gives up on peeling and slicing fruit with my dull kitchen knives. My kitchen isn’t made for cooking. It’s designed to hold snacks, takeout leftovers, and six-packs of beer. My kitchen knows me. It gets me.

“Leave me be,” I snap. Noa and Reese both flinch. My snappiness is neither expected nor welcome. “Sorry.”

“Ruh-roh, what’s wrong with Baby Bear?” Mani asks from the sofa chair. Mani being in town is a pleasant distraction from my awkward work conundrum. It’s been so long since the five of us were all together. My apartment feels that much snuggier in the best way.

“She came on to her boss two weeks ago.” Reese cringes.

“The idiot shot her down,” Noa adds.

“Dumbass said he wasn’t attracted to her,” Quinn grumbles from the kitchen.

“I’m right here, guys. Wow, please let’s relive this pleasant memory together.” And just like that, my beer is empty. No matter, I pop open another.

“Shut up! Wait! Your boss said you weren’t attractive? He has eyes...and a dick, right?” Mani flies to the edge of the sofa seat.

“I’m positive about at least one of those things.”

“Shake it off,” Reese says, squeezing my shoulder. “It has nothing to do with you.” She kisses my cheek. “You’re prettier than all of us combined.” *Booo*. I hate when this compliment comes from Reese of all people. It feels like hot girl charity.

“It’s not a big deal. I was emotional because of my grandma’s death anniversary and I got caught up in a moment. That’s all.” I fill my mouth with popcorn so I can’t continue sounding so unbelievably unconvincing.

“So how is the office going anyways? How’s he acting?”

“Like my boss—”

“Gross!” Reese shrieks. She and Noa both duck and dodge as popcorn shrapnel flies out of my mouth.

“Sorry.” I raise my hand over my mouth as a popcorn spray defense shield.

“I actually feel bad for the poor sucker,” Quinn says as she joins us in the living room. To clarify it’s about five steps away from my kitchen. I don’t really have rooms. My kitchen is just a corner of the main floor with appliances lined neatly against the wall. Quinn sits on the sofa chair’s armrest next to Mani because we’ve run out of room in my teensy apartment. Why do we do girls’ nights here? I don’t understand.

“Excuse me? Where’s your loyalty?” I throw a handful of popcorn at Quinn’s face.

“You don’t do well with rejection. I can’t imagine how you’re punishing him. You’re scary good at icing people out.”

“Mmmk, ignoring that. But while we’re on the subject of he who shall not be named—”

“Seriously? Your boss is at Voldemort status?” Good ol’ Noa. She still catches my *Harry Potter* references.

“Anyways! Do you guys think that you have to get physical to fall in love? And I’m not talking about over-the-pants dry-humping action. Am I doing this in reverse? Do I have to have sex to know what love is and isn’t?”

They all gape at me like bass on land gasping for air. Reese opens her mouth to answer, but Quinn abruptly cuts in.

“Nobody say anything,” she hisses at the girls before softening her expression and turning her attention to me. “Addie, don’t take this the wrong way but you’re highly impressionable when it comes to this stuff. You can ask all four of us the same question and you’ll get four different answers. Reese and Mani will tell you one thing. Noa and I, another.”

“Hey!” Mani squeals. “Don’t lump me in with maneater over here.”

“The fuck?” Reese shrieks right back. “I’m not a maneater! The only reason I don’t—”

“*Excuse me*. Can we just do my love crisis today? We’ll get to your story later.” I bat at Reese’s curly blonde tendrils. “Anyways, I feel like I’m not able to date like a normal twenty-something because I have this giant awkward elephant that follows me wherever I go. I always thought I’d know when the right one came along...like I’d feel something different.” *And I did. But then he shot me down*. “But now I think it’s time to stop avoiding this. You know? Like a Band-Aid—just rip it off.”

Four sets of eyes blink silently at me.

“Am I allowed to say something now?” Reese asks Quinn who shakes her head solemnly in response.

“You guys suck right now, you know that?”

“How about we go out tonight?” Mani suggests. I wonder whether it’s more for my benefit or Noa’s. I’m not sure which one of us needs a bigger distraction at the moment. *Who am I kidding? Definitely Noa.* I saw the tabloid with her Hollywood-famous ex-boyfriend announcing the end of their relationship on my last CVS run for tampons. “Especially since it looks like you really struggled with the sangria over there, Quinny.”

“That’s the truth. I mean, it’s pretty much just a bottle of red and white mixed together in there.” Quinn nods to the pitcher on the table that looks like red Kool-Aid mixed with too much water.

“How about Rise? I love a good rooftop bar.” I turn toward Noa.

“Sure, why not? Jonah’s with his dad for three more days.”

Reese squeals in excitement and claps like a buffoon. I shoot her a look. “Oh, come on, it’s not that shocking.”

“Bear, a tsunami could flood the streets of downtown Denver tonight...a *tsunami*. From an ocean over thousands of miles away—and you wanting to go out will still be the most surprising part of the evening.”

“Thanks for that, Pieces. Aaand now ignoring you.” I reach over and tap Quinn’s knee. I put on my best puppy-dog eyes. “Can we pop by your place on the way? May I borrow your boots tonight?”

“Which boots?”

“You *know* the boots I’m referring to,” I whisper like we’re exchanging mob secrets.

“I’ll tell you what. If we go out tonight and you actually make it past midnight you can keep my Dolces.”

I gasp. “Keep?” My mouth hangs open. Quinn loves those boots as much as I do. And Dolce & Gabbana have discontinued that particular line in beige so she can’t just go pick up another pair. I have a bit of a reputation for being the first to call uncle during a night out, but it’s eye-opening that Quinn is willing to dangle our favorite suede boots as bait.

“Yes, Addie. *Keep.*”

Goodnight, couch and Sex and the City marathon.



The pounding club music at Rise is giving me a headache. Or maybe it’s all the Tuaca shots. Or it might be the overbearing cologne of the man who is currently attached to my lips.

This is not hot. I really want it to be, but it’s so far from it. I close my eyes as his unruly facial scruff that smells like Irish car bombs and pub mix scratch against my cheek.

“You are so sexy,” he whisper-growls. His hot breath against my ear is making my stomach churn.

“Um, thanks, Derek. You too.”

I don’t know if it’s because we’re kissing in a corner of a rooftop bar right behind the shelves of liquor, or that my buzz is wearing off, but this is painfully awkward. I am completely turned off and am barely tolerating Derek’s lips. It’s not for lack of trying. *I’m trying.* But this isn’t it. I know it. My

gut is screaming at me. He's not the one.

Well deal with it, gut. *The one* didn't want you back.

I'm desperate to find that connection. The must-have, can't-stop, consequences-be-damned, this-is-it, *feeling*. But I come up short every single time. I worry I have unrealistic expectations or maybe I'm too picky. But this is my body and my heart. If I'm picky about anything, shouldn't it be this? Something in me has always told me I'll know when it's right. The signs will be neon green.

My lips halt and I try to lean farther back into the brick wall Derek presses me against. He doesn't take the hint. Instead, he moves to my neck, slurping from my earlobe down to the hollow of my throat. Oh, gross—what is dripping down my neck?

“Um, hey, Derek?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Oh my. Just ‘Adler’ is totally fine by the way. Um, so the thing is I have to be up early tomorrow.” I slide out from the prison Derek has made around me with his arms. His grumbly groan is one of frustration.

“Come on! Stay. We were just getting started.”

Oh, no, no buddy. We're done. I promise you. “Sorry. Like super early. Like before the sun rises early.” I retreat but Derek grabs my hand, pulling me back.

“Now you know you're too damn fine for me to let you slip away. You have to at least give me your number.” He clutches his chest as if I'm breaking his heart. But let's be honest, there's only one part of his anatomy suffering right now.

He's a bartender at the best rooftop bar in LoDo. He's friends with the band. He's tall, handsome, has a very nice body from what I can make out through his shirt, and he also holds the key to all the liquor. I think he'll be all right. Another girl will replace me in about sixty seconds.

“Derek, don't take this personally but I am not going to sleep with you. Not tonight. Not ever. That kiss is as far as it goes. So, knowing that—do you still want my number?”

Derek's brows bow in a rainbow arch at my candid declaration. He smiles. Amused, maybe? “All right. Goodnight, Adler.” It's the sexiest thing he's said to me all night.

I rush down the stairs, through the mosh pit of the crowded bar, and outside onto the streets of downtown Denver. I don't see any of the girls but I tiptoe around the building to avoid being spotted. I really don't feel like having an argument about walking tonight. I can already picture Quinn's scold as she tells me how irresponsible it is to walk home in these thigh-high boots and my bodycon dress. My ensemble was meant as bait, but I caught the wrong fish. Truthfully, I didn't want to fish to begin with. I just wanted a distraction from myself.

The solitude and fresh air help me work on the Adler love-life puzzle in my mind. Derek is handsome and sweet and probably knows what he's doing in the sheets. Not a terrible choice for my first, but I've stumbled my way through twenty-five years by listening to my heart. The mouthy bitch is hard to ignore and let me tell you, she was zero percent interested in the hot bartender dressed in all black.

Me: Guys, I left. Feeling sick. But Quinny, it's 12:03. Boots are mine. See you guys at brunch tomorrow?

Noa: Why didn't you tell me? I would've left with you.

Reese: When did you leave? I just saw you making out with Derek.

Mani: I'm looking at him right now. His tongue is down some blonde's throat.

Quinn: Adler Haley! You better have taken an Uber! Txt the second you're home.

I'm about fifteen minutes into my frigid walk home and my even frostier introspection on whatever is broken inside of me, when I realize I've lost my keys. I fish in my purse to respond to Quinn's incessant text messages about my exact location and don't hear the familiar jingle. *Shit!*

Luckily, I have my work badge and the Marquis Business Tower is only a few blocks away. I make a quick detour to grab the spare key to my apartment that I cleverly keep at work. No one greets me when I arrive at the ground-level revolving doors. The building night security guard is sleeping in his chair by the elevators. I'm not expecting presidential-level security, but still it'd be nice if the man who carries the taser was awake in case of an emergency. I badge in to unlock the after-hours access to the elevator and ascend to the thirty-third floor.

When I arrive at suite 3301, I find the main door ajar. Light shines through the bottom crack of the door of the office at the very end of the hallway.

What the hell is he doing here? Unfortunately, I'm going to have to find out. The spare key to my apartment is taped to the back of the top drawer of my old desk, aka Joel's current desk of occupancy.

I head down the short hallway and pause at the door. I raise my hand to knock and brace myself for another painful impact.

ten

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Joel

*M*y eyes bounce between my dual monitors. On one screen, I study a plummeting growth chart. The downward arrow is at a steep decline pulling my mood down with it. The other screen displays Steve's unwelcome email.

From: Steve McDonough
Subject Line: Aloha

Lewis,

Aloha from Hawaii.

Numbers from your portfolio are on point. Sorry I doubted you for even a second. Everything is on the rise except Rychess Media. That startup has had plenty of time to perform. It's time to bottom out and cut funding.

Let me know if you need an assist with that conversation. I've no problem bringing down the hammer.

Alice says Mahalo for letting me take a break.

Stephen McDonough
Managing Partner, Aura Ventures
303-555-2039
steve@auravc.com

I've worked with Rychess since their business birth, eight years ago. I sit on the board. I've nurtured that company throughout the entirety of its incubation. It's not as cut and dry as Steve thinks it is. And no one tells me what to do with my portfolio. I debate between 'up yours' or 'mind your damn business' as a response to his email when I hear a soft knock on the door that makes me jump in my chair.

"Yes?" I call out through the closed door. Since when does maintenance come by this late?

The knob turns slowly and Adler's head pokes through the small crack in the doorway. "Hey, I saw your light on."

A whisper of her sweet perfume sneaks toward me. My heart pounds with excitement. My wide smile gives away my glee at the most pleasant surprise I could've begged the universe for.

I remind myself to behave. The thoughts I have about Adler must stay in my own head. If not for HR's sake, then at least hers. No one can know how much time at the office I waste daydreaming about her. I should fire myself for piss-poor productivity.

I watched her eat an apple for about fifteen minutes the other day like an absolute psycho. I am aware of how creepy I must've looked just watching her eat lunch, but I was hypnotized. She bit off small chunks absentmindedly while she pecked at her keyboard, oblivious to how salaciously alluring she looked. She'd bite into the apple and hold it delicately between her teeth when she needed both hands to type. I never thought I'd envy a piece of fruit.

I'm so happy to see her I almost forgot how much she still hates me. "Come in. What's up? Are you okay?"

She pushes open the door all the way and I resist the urge to roll my eyes when I see her. Someone up there is enjoying a really sick joke. Her skintight dress and her thigh-high boots hug her perfect body tightly, leaving no curve to the imagination. Her long chocolate-colored hair spills down her shoulders. She's a ten, a complete knockout—straight out of my dreams or more accurately my nightmares. It's the horror of wanting so damn badly what I can't have.

"I was on my way home and lost my keys. Unless you moved it, my spare is still in the top drawer." She points to the left side of my desk.

Out? You were out? The thought of Adler out on the town on a Friday night, looking like that, makes my jaw twitch with jealousy. I hate the thought of some other guy drooling over her, but it isn't my place. I at least find comfort in the fact that she's here by herself looking for her key to go home... alone.

I open my top desk drawer and only see pens and an ergonomic computer mouse. Trying the drawer on the other side, I find extra cords and chargers. "I don't see it."

"It's taped to the back so it doesn't come loose," Adler says as she advances toward me. "Here, let me look."

I roll my chair backwards to give her room. Adler squats down in front of me and pulls my top left drawer open. Most of her arm disappears as she reaches to the far back of it.

"Aha!" Adler pulls out a single copper key with a piece of tape still attached. She pops back up enthusiastically. Too enthusiastically. She catches the corner of the desk. My whole body tenses as I hear a loud tear rip through the quiet office like a foghorn.

My mouth falls open.

Skin. All I see is smooth, lush...skin.



I freeze, too scared to assess the damage. But I can feel it. The cool air engulfs the right side of my body, my ribs, my waist, and my bare ass that my thong definitely does not cover. I'm exposed. My dress is split open, in front of my boss, in his office in the middle of the night. Human Resources would have some serious questions and concerns about this.

I have no choice but to play this like a possum. I am going to lie down on the ground right now and pretend to be dead until this whole mess goes away. Humiliation has a temperature and it's a thousand degrees, hot enough to instantly incinerate me.

This is it, right here. This is how I'm going to die—of embarrassment.

I finally work up the courage to peek at Joel. His eyes soak up my body like it's the last sight he'll see before blindness takes him. He scours every inch of my exposure as if he's in a trance. I am melting underneath his scorching gaze and if this were a man who found me attractive, it'd be our moment. I'd let him rip the rest of this dress off and show me exactly what I've been missing out on all these years.

But it's Joel. Therefore, all I feel is...ridiculous. I tried to kiss him and he said no. So naturally I wait a few weeks and strip half naked in front of him. Clearly, I can take a hint.

I cinch my dress together in one fist. I consider running for the door but I'm the idiot who came out without a coat and I can't walk home in my thong like this. There's no amount of binder clips or safety pins that can salvage this dress. I am going to have to make a very awkward call to my friends and somehow explain why I'm half naked in my boss's office when I was supposed to be on my way home. I can already imagine Quinn's pursed lips, Reese's encouraging head bob, and Noa's hands smacked against her cheeks. *See guys...what had happened was...oh shut it. Just come rescue me!*

"Um, I'm...sorry...it was an accid—"

Joel's undressing.

His eyes glue onto mine as he pops button by button free. His lips part slightly as he forces out a long steady exhale that could inflate a jumbo-sized balloon. I gawk as Joel reveals his firm broad chest speckled with the perfect amount of chest hair. I scrunch my toes in my boots.

Maybe he changed his mind? Maybe under this light I look a little different?

He rises from his executive chair and frees the remainder of the buttons below his belly button. His abdomen is so defined that the grooves separating his six-pack could double as a tiny mouse maze.

He slips out of his sleeves, his eyes never leaving mine. I curl my toes harder. So hard in fact, they begin to cramp sending an uncomfortable pulsing sensation up my calves. I un-bunch my fist and let the loose pieces of my dress fall free. My eager nipples push against the lace fabric of my bra. I can't fight this swell. This heat. This electricity. Damn the consequences, endanger my ego, I don't care. I'm alive.

And I still want him.

"Here," he whispers as he hands me his shirt. He clears his throat and his tone returns. "This should be long enough on you."

Oh...

Well...just...shit.

His words are like smelling salts pulling me out of the haze. He's not trying to be sexy. He's being gallant. He wants me to cover up.

Joel fetches his gym bag in the corner of the office and pulls out a neatly folded athletic t-shirt. He throws it over his head. "I would've offered you this one because it's clean, but I think my button-down is a bit longer... Adler, are you okay?" His brows furrow, pairing with his look of concern. He

nods at the shirt in my hand that I haven't put on yet.

His gaze toggles from my exposed ass to his shirt. His startled expression eventually lands on my eyes, reminding me that I'm basically trying to seduce him in the manner of wild baboons by shoving my bare ass in his face to signal that I'm down to get busy. Although, according to that nature special I watched, in the animal kingdom, females 'present' proudly. I don't believe they die of mortification afterwards.

"Sorry," I mumble as I jump into action. I force my arms through the too-big-for-me sleeves. His top becomes a dress on me. It covers well past the torn hem. I find warm consolation in the smell of his earthy cologne that envelops me as I fasten the shirt buttons as quickly as my trembling fingers allow.

"You have nothing to apologize for." Joel smiles as the flames in his eyes cool to glowing red coals. I hate that he does this to me. I always leave feeling more foolish than when I arrived.

"Well, boss, you just gave me the shirt off your back in my time of need. You're officially eligible for white knighthood."

"I had another shirt for myself so I don't know if it counts, but I'll take all the chivalry points you're willing to give." He winks at me and the familiar swirl in my gut surges. That aching urge that never used to be there—the same one that made its insufferable debut the day I met Joel—returns to take center stage. This feeling was definitely not here just an hour ago when Derek was wrapped around me. If Joel were to touch me like that, I think I would combust. The feeling is so dangerously powerful, I'd succumb. I'd give him anything he'd ask for.

All he needs to do is ask...

"Well, thank you. I'm really sorry about all this." I gesture up and down to the shirt dress I'm fashioning. "I'll get this dry cleaned and returned to you by Monday."

"Dry cleaned?" His face twists like I've offended him. He pulls off his glasses and tosses them on the desk. "Just give it back as is or keep it if it spares you the trouble."

"Okay." I hold up my spare key, now gleaming with my palm sweat. "Goodnight. Sorry...again... for the interruption. And thank you...again for the save." I twist one sleeved arm in the air before heading toward the door, eager to put yet another awkward moment with Joel behind me. Far, far behind me.

"Adler, wait."

I whip around to Joel turning off his monitors, collecting his wallet, keys, and phone from the silver bowl he keeps on his desk. "What're you doing?"

"Driving you," he answers matter-of-factly.

"Oh, no thanks. You know I live less than ten blocks from here. I'll probably be home by the time you find your car in the parking garage."

He crosses his arms, preparing for battle. "I doubt that. I have a dedicated spot. I know exactly where my car is."

"I really prefer to walk." I need the fresh air. I need to be alone.

"Fine," Joel huffs. "We'll walk."

"It's seriously not necessary. This is Denver, not New York City. I'll be—"

"Adler." I flinch at the sudden sternness in Joel's voice. "I'm not letting you walk home alone looking like that. No offense, but you look like a late-night rendition of the walk of shame in my shirt and those boots. So, I'm going to walk with you to make sure you get home safely."

"But—"

"End of discussion. Come on, Baby Spice. Grab your stuff."

eleven

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Joel

Adler's arm brushes against mine as we walk side by side, putting the blocks of downtown Denver behind us. Even through the sleeve of my shirt, it feels like a popsicle. I slide my jacket off and drape it around her. She bunches the sides of it, girding it closed with her fingers. Her voice is chattering as she thanks me.

"You're welcome. Why in the world would you go out tonight without a coat?"

"It's unseasonably cold tonight. Normally temperatures don't dip until November."

"You didn't check the forecast?"

"No, Grandpa. And plus, I hate carrying things into a bar. I always lose them. Hence losing my keys."

We've filled the walk thus far with mindless chatter. Mostly hers. Conversation with Adler is like putting a quarter in a jukebox, closing your eyes, and pressing the first button your fingers find. I never know what's going to play out. She talks about being front row at Justin Bieber's Purpose tour one minute, dissects Kantian ethics the next, then it's on to Harry Potter trivia, and she finishes with the grammatical misuse of effect versus affect. Her thoughts are a jerky roller coaster of twists and turns. A ride I will never tire of.

"I've missed this." I meant to just muse in my head but the words fall out audibly.

"Missed what?"

"How we're talking right now. You've been a little distant since..."

"Since I tried to kiss you in your car? Hm, yeah. I wonder why." Adler half smiles and nudges me with her shoulder. "I was embarrassed. But we're good now."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"Because you don't answer my text messages unless you're in the office. You barely look at me. Last week you risked the elevator doors squeezing the life out of you when you escaped as soon as I stepped in."

"There was a wasp."

"Really?" I widen my eyes. "You were going to abandon *me* in a locked elevator with a rogue wasp?"

She stops and faces me. Her piercing blue eyes lock on mine, then she deadpans, "Absolutely." I belly-laugh at her blatant honesty. "See? You're mad at me." I take the opportunity while we're stopped to collect her hand. She tries to pull away but I lock my fingers in hers. "You know I lied, right?"

"About what?"

“Don’t be coy. You know *about what*. Adler—of course I’m attracted to you. More than you can imagine. I’m sorry I hurt your feelings. I thought by not kissing you I was doing you a favor, but I don’t want my lame excuse making you think less of yourself. I happen to think you’re incredible in every way.” I bring the back of her hand to my lips briefly before I let it go.

“Why would you be doing me a favor by not kissing me? Is this about your relationship thing?”

“Yes,” I answer truthfully but don’t offer more of an explanation. I don’t want Adler knowing what a heartless ass I am. I won’t catch her in the crosshairs of my depressing attitude toward love. She’s still washed in promise. For some other guy.

She takes my not-so-subtle hint and we continue down the sidewalk. The sounds of our steps echo off the buildings as the bustling party-filled streets fade into quiet empty alleyways. I can’t believe she was going to walk this alone at night.

“What were you doing at the office so late?”

“Working on one of my problem-child companies—Rychess Media. I need to decide soon on whether or not to cut their funding or invest further. It’s a little out of the norm for me.”

“How is that out of the norm? Isn’t that kind of the whole point of your job?”

“Yes. But normally I don’t struggle with these decisions. Numbers are clean—black and white. It’s not wise to get emotional in ventures but I let Rychess get too personal. I go way back with the founder. Normally I get gut feelings about this type of thing but right now, I don’t know...”

“I have a trick for that!” Adler’s eager eyes light up. She hasn’t chirped in that tone around me in weeks. I’d hand over my wallet, keys, car, and home just to keep that smile exactly the way it is now. I did not enjoy the doghouse.

“Lay it on me. I’ll take all the help I can get.”

“My life philosophy is to make clear concrete decisions and stick with them. Right or wrong. Win or lose. Ride out the wave either way because there is purpose in every choice we make. Your gut feeling can guide you if you don’t drown it out by overthinking. Hence, you have to completely clear your mind to make good decisions.”

“I feel like all of the investors I work with would aggressively disagree.”

Adler’s eyes fly up then down. She spins in a circle like a puppy chasing its tail. She cups her hand over her ear, driving the point home. “Doesn’t seem your investors are here, Joel. You’re stuck with me. Care to take a chance? My method is foolproof.” She curls her finger in a slow *come-hither* motion while transfixing her expression with a delicate mystique. Like a psychic trying to lure me into a sexy palm read.

It works.

She’s persuasive.

But it has nothing to do with the game she wants to play. It’s that sinfully sweet smile on her face.

“You’re pretty cocky over there.”

“Very. I can guarantee you I’ll get some secrets out of you if you play my question game.”

“I doubt it. I have a strong poker face.”

“I bet I can break right through it.” Adler bats her eyelashes making those big blues flash and sparkle.

“Color me curious. How do we play?”

She wiggles her shoulders excitedly and then pinches her fingers in front of her face right before composing a serious expression. She grabs my hand and stops us in our tracks so we’re no longer walking. “All right, boss man. Close your eyes. This is going to move fast.”

I follow instructions and try my best to keep Adler clothed in my mind. Mostly. I’ll at least keep

her boots on in the privacy of my imagination.

“Don’t think, just say what comes to your mind, okay? I’m going to rapid-fire questions at you. Answer as quickly as you can. Don’t dwell, just speak.”

“All right.”

“Do you prefer French fries or tater tots?”

I open one eye and raise an eyebrow at her. “That’s the question that’s going to help me make million-dollar business decisions?”

“Close ’em,” she growls. “Trust the process, okay? I’ll ask again. French fries or tater tots?”

I shake my head and grumble, “Fine. Fries.”

“Would you rather live on the first floor or third?”

“Third.”

“Would you rather be hot or cold?”

“Cold.”

“Apple or Microsoft?”

“Both? I own stock in each.”

“You’re thinking too much. Coffee or tea?”

“Tea.”

“Weirdo. Cats or dogs?”

“Cats.”

“Showers or baths?”

“Baths.”

“Really? Hmm. Okay, how about...Jordan or LeBron?”

“There’s nobody like Mike.”

“Do you prefer to run or swim?”

“Run.”

“Beer or wine?”

“Easy, wine.”

“Manhattan or Denver?”

“Denver.” *That’s surprising.*

“Rychess Media—cut or fund?”

“Fund.” *Oh, hey now! It worked.*

“Missionary or doggy-style?”

“Missionary. *Dammit—Adler!*”

Shit. She got me again. Adler’s clutching her chest because she’s laughing so hard.

“I...can’t...believe...you...fell for...that,” she forces between chuckles. “I’m impressed, though. Most guys answer doggy-style. I’ve done the surveys. Want to know a secret?”

Well, this conversation just got very HR inappropriate—but, also far more interesting. “Sure do.” My lips curl as I play along with her dangerous little game.

“Most women prefer doggy-style too,” she says flatly, as if we’re talking about the weather.

“*Really?* I would’ve never guessed. And what’s your preference?”



Adler

Hmmm, how to answer?

I could tell him that as a virgin, I don't have a preference. While I've participated in the occasional over-the-jeans dry-humping action and attempted head a time or two with Alan, I certainly don't have the experience to pick a *favorite* position. But this is my boss, and my very recently redeemed crush, so for the moment I'm going to sidestep embarrassing blatant honesty.

"I don't really have one." I pray he lets it go. I continue down the sidewalk to get us moving again. I make a quick right turn at the corner of the final block that leads to my building's main entrance. Joel falls in stride right next to me. His long legs outpace me so I have to hustle to keep up.

"Well, here we are." I nod my chin backwards toward the see-through entrance doors to my apartment building.

"Don't get shy on me now. You're the one who went there." Apparently no one up there is working tonight because Joel's most definitely not letting this go.

Fine. Have it your way.

I stare through his frames into his honey-brown irises. My eyes creep all over his angled features, down past his Adam's apple to where his workout shirt hugs his hard chest and abs. I bite my lip...

Debating...

"I'm on the fence. Want to come upstairs and help me decide?" The words pour out of my mouth as I float away from my body and brace for what is the most tantalizingly daring conversation of my life. He has no idea the magnitude of what I'm offering.

"Is that another joke?" Joel asks, but all traces of humor are wiped from his neatly stubbled face. His eyes dance between mine, urgently. They beg for an answer but I get the feeling he wants a different one than I'm ready to give.

Shit! Too far?

"I um...yes? It can be if you want?"

"Adler, I'm sorry—"

"Seriously? Again, you're turning me down? I thought you just said you lied before—oh, screw it." I don't want to hear the end of his sentence. His rejection is like a burn—it hurts now, and it'll ache miserably later. I don't need any more material to reflect on when I relive this conversation in my mind a hundred times over tomorrow.

I look up at the night sky. There are so many city lights I can't see a single star, but that's not my intention anyways. I'm trying to keep the precarious tears where they belong. That does it. I am no longer going to have private conversations with Joel. All I do is unhinge my jaw and shove my whole foot right up in there.

"Goodnight, Joel." I turn toward the door of my building keeping my eyes fixed on the faded, mismatching brick in different shades of red. *Just get to the door, then through the door.*

"Adler, come on. It's not like that." He trails behind me, easily catching me with his long stride. I spin around. My hair fans out before curling around my neck.

"Please don't patroni—"

He grabs my wrists and yanks me into the hard wall of his chest while pressing his large hand firmly against the small of my back, locking me against him. His cool, smooth lips brush against my ear. "It's *not* like that." His low grumble of a whisper sends a bristly chill down my neck. "I don't want you to feel upset again."

"Then what do you want?"

“What I *want* is to take my shirt back right here, right now, and show you how I really feel about you. I’d erase all that self-doubt bouncing around in your head by worshipping your body all night.”

My mouth falls open and makes an audible pop when I quickly force my lips back together. Did I daydream so hard that it literally came into fruition? I’m going to start dreaming about a gazillion dollars *tomorrow*. My wishes for this evening are spent.

“Um...”

Be brave, Adler. Follow the feeling.

I rise onto my tippy toes which doesn’t do much in these boots. I’m already as tall as I can be and Joel still towers over me. I wrap my hand around his neck and pause for a moment, giving him a final opportunity to stop me.

He doesn’t take it. Instead, he follows my lead and leans down so his lips meet mine. He smothers my body with his, wrapping me in the delicious smell of his cologne. It’s so familiar, like I recognize it from a dream. His hand flies to the back of my head, weaving in my hair as he holds my face against his. He presses deeper. His tongue unleashes. I eagerly part my lips to let him taste me.

This tug. This pang. This swoop. This singe.

Yes.

Joel’s other hand drifts south from the small of my back to my backside. His hand is as greedy as his tongue. It dips even lower and he plays with the tail of his shirt on me, sneaking under it so he can feel the bare skin of my rear. The night air is ice but his hands are on fire. I suspend between the two sensations in perfect balance. I melt right into him.

I want more.

There’s no overanalyzing his lips, his hands, or the feel of his stubble against my cheek. I borrow his breath and then I send it right back as I let a small moan escape my mouth onto his lips. The gears turn in perfect tandem and I click right into place in Joel’s arms, where I think I belong.

“Jokes aside—do you want to come up?” I’m breathless as I reluctantly break our kiss. My heart is racing out of control.

“Adler...” Joel hangs his head. “Believe me, I want to. So bad. But I told you, I’m not looking for a relationship.”

“I just asked if you wanted to come up. I didn’t exactly profess my love to you.” Am I begging?
New low, Adler. New low!

Joel grabs the tips of my fingers and squeezes them one by one, tenderly. “Please understand that I mean this as a compliment. I know enough about you by now to say you deserve so much more than what I can give you. Can we just be friends?”

“Friends?” I swallow, trying to loosen the growing knot in my throat.

“Yeah, is that okay?” A crease of worry stripes across his forehead. He must genuinely feel bad right now. He should. That kiss wasn’t just a kiss. It was full of maybes. Full of hope.

I let his question hang in the air, because for once, I don’t know how to respond.

twelve

...

Joel

october

Only came out tonight as a favor to Cody. He heads back to Manhattan next week and he wanted to ‘bro-out’ (his words, not mine) downtown at least one more time before he leaves. After two weeks of visiting, he’s seen enough to don me an old-ass, anti-social, sex-starved, hermit crab. Again—his words.

Sarah Mc-something or another is a twenty-one-year-old yoga instructor who is not looking for anything serious. She’s just out with her girlfriends at the bar on Saturday night and wants to have a good time. Or at least this is what she’s slurring at me over shots of tequila.

I try to focus on the admittedly beautiful, voluptuous blonde sitting so close to me on the patio-furniture-style sectional that she’s practically sitting on me. It’s like we’re tethered by a rubber band. Every time I scoot an inch to the right to evade her wandering hand on my thigh, she snaps back up against me. And I mean no disrespect. She’s cute, sexy, flirty, and about three shots ago she could hold somewhat of a conversation. But now she’s near belligerent and won’t stop trying to rub me under this table.

I am going to kill Cody for basically wrapping her in a bow and shoving her in my direction. He told her I own a boat. Inaccurate. It’s a yacht and it was a purchase for a charity event. I never use it. Being stranded in the middle of the ocean is one of my top five worst nightmares. I realize I’m being irrational but if boarding a yacht increases a one percent chance of death to two percent...why risk it?

Cody waves at me with two fingers from the bar with a snarky glint in his eyes. I am tempted to wave back with just one of mine.

“You have really green eyes,” I say in an attempt to shrewdly inform Sarah that I’m looking at her face and not her exposed cleavage that she keeps thrusting in my face. Her white tank top is cut so low that nothing is left to the imagination. I’ll just say it...she has great tits. But I am zero percent interested.

“Oh my god,” she swoons. “You’re not like other guys, you’re like so sweet. I was born in May but I’m a spirit Scorpio and I think our energy is connecting, you know? Whoops.” Sarah catches the tequila dribbling from her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Uh...well, I really don’t know what to say to that, Sarah.”

Truth is, I’m not trying to hit on her or be sweet. I was simply noticing how her green eyes are a stark contrast to the blue ocean drops I lose time thinking about daily. Sarah tries to nestle into my arm and the rim of her fedora with the pink ribbon wrapped around it scratches me. I squirm. I don’t know if it’s all the liquor or the fact that she’s eight years my junior but I feel like I could be arrested.

“Maybe you should slow down.” I try to scoot the remaining shot glasses on the table out of her reach. Our hands touch as she tries to pull them back and somehow, she misinterprets this as an invitation to plant a wet sloppy kiss on my lips.

I turn my head so she’s making out with mostly my cheek but her lip still catches the corner of my mouth. “Um...will you excuse me for a minute?”

I bolt from my seat like I’m fleeing a crime scene. Squeezing through the crowd, I spot an empty spot by the bar. I pretend like I’m ordering something and am relieved the bartender is running around

spastically, far too busy to acknowledge me. It buys me more time so I whip out my phone.

I debate a text...no. I want to hear her voice.

It rings just once.

“Hello?” She snuffles.

“Adler?” My heart comes to attention. My girl—I mean my friend—is crying. “What’s wrong?”

I can hear her wiping her tears, and snot, I’m sure with her sleeve like a child. “Nuffing.”

I hear The Rembrandts playing in the background. Yeah, I know what this is. She’s watching *Friends*. It’s Saturday night. Friday night is girls’ night. Saturday is Adler’s introvert night. Sunday is her catch-up day for chores and upcoming week prep which is ridiculous because she’s so hyper organized there’s nothing to catch up on or prep for.

Here’s fun tidbit number eighty-seven I’ve recently learned about my new pal, Adler. She is obsessed with any sitcom where friends are incestuously codependent. The list includes but is not limited to *Sex and the City*, *Friends*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *Big Bang Theory*, and *That ’70s Show*. Friend families resonate deeply with her. It’s also where I think her passion for Spice Girls is rooted from.

I haven’t been bold enough to unwrap that package because there’s probably a specific reason she only references her grandma when she occasionally mentions her childhood. She’s never once brought up her parents yet I know they are both still alive. They are on her work-provided life insurance policy as next of kin. The puzzle pieces tell me Adler’s holding on to painful secrets. Am I curious? Hell yes. Is it my place to ask? Hell no. I’m still building the friendship. I work on it daily. It’s become my new favorite job since I kissed Adler two weeks ago and told her where we had to draw the line.

“You’re crying. Did Ross and Rachel just break up or did Chandler and Monica find out they can’t have a baby?”

“First of all—I’m not crying, it’s called misting. Second of all—stop acting like you know me so well.”

“Am I wrong?” The bartender stops in front of me and taps the counter between us. ‘*Guinness*,’ I mouth. He holds his hands wide apart then pulls them in closer. ‘*Sixteen-ounce*,’ I mouth again. He nods and disappears. I’m sure I’ll see that drink in about twenty minutes.

“Monica and Chandler can’t get pregnant...shuuut up.”

Knew it.

I wish I was with her. I’d scoop her up in my arms and kiss her wet cheek. *It’s just a show, baby*. I’d feel her warm body pressed into mine and we’d fall asleep on the couch. We’d wake up to the reruns playing and stale popcorn on the living room table, still cuddled up against each other for warmth in lieu of a blanket. But these are the luxuries you omit when you don’t do relationships. I glance over my shoulder to see Sarah finishing off the shots at our table and then tucking a lime between her teeth. I bet Sarah doesn’t watch friend-based feel-good sitcoms.

“Where are you? It’s loud.”

“That bar you told me about. Rise. I brought Cody out.”

“Ah. Have you asked him to go steady yet?” She snorts.

“Sure haven’t.” I mentioned to Adler last week that I wanted to ask Cody to move out here permanently. It’s been nice to have my friend around. When he goes home, he’ll only be surrounded by reminders of everything he’s not doing this football season. I need the company and he needs a change of scenery. It’s a sound solution. “There’s uh...a lovely young lady here that has been ‘talk blocking’ me all night. I don’t know where Cody ran off to. He was just here...” I scan the bar area

looking for his colossal frame.

“Go find the bustiest brunette in the entire bar and check her lips—that’s probably where he is,” Adler says. It’s scary how accurate that probably is. Pants is more accurate than lips, but Adler’s too forgiving to say it.

“Do you want to catch a movie?”

“Right now?”

“Yeah. Why don’t you pull up movie times? I’m on the phone.”

“So am I.”

“But I would bet my life you’re on your AirPods. You can see your screen.”

She’s silent for a moment. “Stop doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“Acting like you *know* me.” Ha! I’m right. I’m always right. Because when it comes to Adler, I pay attention to everything. I store every memory of her in the keep folder of my mind. “And what about the *lovely* young lady you’re keeping company?”

I clear my throat and lower my voice. “What’s the gentlemanly way to let her down easy?” I tuck my phone between my cheek and shoulder as I pull out my wallet. The bartender pours my beer and sets the frosty cup in front of me with enough force that the espresso-colored liquid splashes out and dribbles down the side of the glass. He snatches my card hastily and runs it back to the register. He’s probably trying to clear out space by the bar, but there’s no way in hell I’m going back to that sectional. I’m sure by now Sarah is another shot deep and if I go back over there, she won’t stop at over-the-pants petting me.

“How about you wait until you’re both alone in your car, stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic, and right when she leans in to kiss you, tuck and roll into the street.”

I growl in frustration. “I did not tuck and roll. And you’re never going to let that go, are you?”

“Nope!” I can’t see her smile over the phone but I can damn well feel it.

“Come catch a movie with me and I’ll make it up to you. You can choose what we see and I’ll pay for popcorn, the jumbo-sized Coke, and I’ll even buy the nasty chocolates with the white plastic-tasting sprinkles for you.”

“Don’t talk shit about Sno-Caps. They serve a purpose. They balance out the sweetness of Buncha Crunch.”

“I’m buying both candies now?”

“And Twizzlers and I want a red ICEE.”

“What have you eaten today? You get sugar obsessed when you don’t eat protein.”

“I had milk with breakfast.”

“Was it in the form of sugar-laden artificially flavored coffee creamer? We’ve talked about this. Not all dairy is good protein. Eggs are good protein. Milk is—”

“Joel. You’re at a bar lecturing me about dairy. Get back to your date, Grandpa. I’m going to finish my episode and go to bed.”

I sign the tab for my beer and let the pen fall on the sticky bar counter. “It’s *not* a date. I’d rather see a movie with you.”

She falls silent again. I check the screen to make sure we’re still connected. “You said you wanted to just be friends. I don’t think a dark theater after you’ve been drinking is a great idea for us.”

“You sure? I’ll up the ante. I’ll buy you Sour Patch Kids.” I whisper the last line like it’s sexy.

“Oooh, Mr. Lewis. Talk dirty to me. But unfortunately, I have to pass. I’m already in pajamas and if I’m being completely honest, I’m eating Sour Patch Kids as we speak.” She smacks noisily on the

phone to prove her point.

Tidbit number fifty-two about Adler. She bites the heads off of Sour Patch Kids, animal crackers, and gummy bears first, because it's way more humane to off them quickly.

"Of course you are. One day I am going to rat you out to your dentist."

"Go ahead. Dr. Bryson is my sponsor at Candy's Anonymous. I keep no secrets from my dentist, Joel. We're approaching my recovery in phases. I'm not a cold turkey kind of girl."

There's suddenly a whopping impact to my shoulder. My beer sloshes dangerously and had I not already drained half of it, it would surely be pooling on the floor right now. Cody appears out of thin air with an obnoxious smile. The assault on my arm was his version of a playful punch. Even though he hasn't trained in about eight months, he's still two hundred and fifty pounds of solid muscle. I don't know anyone else on the planet who gets more fit amidst multiple back surgeries. I resist the urge to rub my throbbing upper arm.

"Who are you on the phone with?" Cody bellows so loudly even Sarah from across the patio looks over. "Is that Addie-cakes?" He pokes where he punched me and I wince.

Addie-cakes? Come on! Adler and Cody met once. *Once.* He came by the office for lunch. I was stuck in meetings so Adler graciously showed him around downtown Denver and took him to our Thai place. Cody is basically my brother, so I did not research hitmen. But nonetheless it was a wakeup call that I need to get my jealousy under control. Adler's not mine. She's my friend.

I spin around, evading Cody's grubby paws that try to snatch up my phone. "Adler, I have to go unless you want to talk to a tipsy oversized gorilla of a man. And I'm not talking *Planet of the Apes* gorillas with high intelligence and rudimentary English skills—I'm talking the actual, in the zoo, flinging feces kind of gorilla."

"Oooh, no thank you to that. But I will happily call hungover Cody tomorrow bright and early to catch that little ray of sunshine."

I laugh until an annoying realization overcomes me. "Wait. You have Cody's number?"

"Goodnight, Joel. Get home safe."

"Adler—wait. Why do you have Cody's number?"

The line goes silent.



Cody joins me with a full beer at the high-top table overlooking the Denver cityscape. Rise has a stunning view, just like Adler promised.

"What happened to Sam?"

"Sarah," I correct.

"The dancer?"

"Yoga instructor."

"Oh, right. The vegan?"

"Vegetarian—in denial. She told me she doesn't eat any animals except fish. When I asked her if she means she's a pescatarian, she responded by saying she's spiritual, not religious." I glare at Cody but he doesn't notice because he sprays the rooftop ledge with a mouthful of beer. He chokes as he roars in laughter.

“You’re lying.”

“And that was before she was five shots deep. I put her and her friend in an Uber and sent them home. She had that look in her eyes like she was going to vomit. So, thanks for that. From now on, I’ll find my own women.”

“You said you wanted a girl you wouldn’t get caught up on.”

“Yeah, but that was a little extreme.”

“Oh, please. You’re not chasing tail because you’re obsessing about one girl. I was trying to help you get over it. You said you didn’t want Addie-cakes. Leave the poor girl alone. Why are you calling her from a bar on a Saturday night? Hm? You’re screwing with her head.”

I grab at the glasses I’m not wearing. My nervous habit. My fingers find nothing but the skin around my eyes because I opted for my contacts tonight. “I didn’t say I didn’t want her. I said I wasn’t good for her...after I kissed her the weekend before last.”

“*What?!*” Cody hollers, again drawing the attention of several nearby clusters of people. We need to work on his talking decibel. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It’s not a big deal. I told her we should be friends.”

“Friends?” Cody’s skepticism is not subtle in the slightest. My behemoth of a buddy is not good at hiding his opinions. Especially not after he’s taken down half a keg of beer. “Like friends that get freaky?”

“No...like friends that are friends. I can’t do all that with Adler.” I wish I could. But I can’t. After nearly two months, I already feel like I know her. She’s not that kind of girl. “She jokes a lot but I get this feeling she’s innocent and inexperienced.”

“She does give off those ‘take me home to your mama’ vibes.”

My mom would love Adler. She’d love her sass, her quick wit, her sapphire eyes. My mom always told me I’d end up with a blue-eyed beauty, much to her chagrin. She’s Italian so as much as she wanted me to fall in love with a *bellezza* from her home country like all my brothers did, she always said I had something different in store for me. Little does she know the closest I’ll get to celebrating a twentieth anniversary is probably with Cody.

“Exactly.”

“Well, if you don’t want a serious commitment, Sally was a perfect choice.”

“Sarah,” I remind him.

“Whatever her name is, she had D-cups and really plump lips and was hanging all over you. And you sent her home. So, I think you like your assistant way more than you’re letting on. Why not just ask Addie out?”

“You’re a bad influence...which makes this next part harder to say, but I was thinking—how do you feel about Denver? You’ve been here for a couple weeks, right?”

“You know this,” Cody grunts as the bottom of his cup points to the sky. He slams the cup down on the table like a Viking. I half expect him to shout ‘more mead’ to the bartender from across the patio in which case I will leave his embarrassing ass here, right now. “You picked me up from the airport.”

“Do you have anything holding you to New York? You’re not playing this season. All your other friends are still playing in the NFL. My penthouse is too big for just me. Why don’t you move out here for a while until you figure out what’s next?”

Cody’s face twists in surprise. “I have that consult for my final back surgery. There were complications from the first two,” he says, squirming. He hates surgeries. It’s not the procedure. Cody is the poster child of bravery in the face of intimidating situations. It’s the recovery that messes with him. The Bandits’ lead physician told Cody surgery had to happen fast if he wanted to be able to walk

when he was forty. His year was filled with endless referrals, consults, appointments, procedures, and drawn-out in-patient recovery stays. He was there so often even I developed a taste for Jell-O from visiting him so much.

“Get your surgery in Denver. The Olympic Training Center is like two hours south. Athletes flock here. Some of the best orthopedic surgeons and sports medicine doctors in the world are here,” I say simply. “Plus, who is going to help you during recovery? There’s a full staff at the Four Seasons that you can call at any time. I’m here, and you and Adler seem to be chummy. She knows this city better than anyone.”

“Bro, are you kidding?” Cody asks, spluttering.

“No. Serious.”

“Don’t play, because I’ll do it. I’ll call up my insurance tomorrow and see who they cover out here.”

“Even if they don’t. I got you. Don’t worry about money. Just fly home in a few days, pack up your shit, and drive it out here.”

“You are my fucking brother. You know that?” Cody shuffles around the small high-top table and wraps me in a death-grip of a hug. He lifts me off the ground. Several clusters of attractive women clap for us and give their verbal approval. “*So sweet!*” and “*Good for you guys!*”

“Cody, you have to stop hugging me like this or I really will never meet another woman again.”

“Sorry, man, residuals from being on a pro sports team. You forget normal people boundaries.” But he doesn’t let go. He just pats my back in gratitude and relief.

thirteen

...

Adler

Le Vol is not an easy wine to track down. I had to pull out every trick in the bag for this one. After days of obsessive online research, I found an itty-bitty little wine store in the backwoods of Milwaukee that is going out of business. Luckily before they decided to shut their doors permanently, they hired a tech guy to catalog all their remaining bottles.

I nearly choked when I saw the burgundy label with the wispy lines outlining the duck feathers. The only other bottles of Le Vol I could find are scattered in obscure corners of France and between customs and import laws there was no way that was going to happen. I think I hunted down the last bottle in America.

I called the owner of the wine store promptly. They were so eager to get rid of all their inventory that they basically gifted the bottle to me minus shipping costs. I also might've fed them a sob story about unrequited love and trying to win my boss's heart...which is only a partial lie. My lust for Joel isn't unrequited, it's just off-limits.

We're friends. Friends is going...well.

I've kept my hands to myself for two weeks, two days, eight hours, and twenty-seven minutes and I'm *not at all* about to die from my pent-up sexual frustration. I didn't even know it was possible to be sexually frustrated as a virgin. But it is. And I am. And it's very uncomfortable.

Here's the problem—ever since I agreed to just be Joel's friend, his flirtatiousness has known no bounds. I don't think Joel quite understands platonic boy-girl friendship. He hugged me right in front of the team last week. And not an awkward, butts-out, arm barely bent around the top of your shoulders hug. I mean I could feel his partial pressed into my stomach kind of hug when I delivered the team's lunch to the meeting room of Marquis Business Tower's fifteenth floor.

He breathed in my hair and whispered that he liked my perfume. The ravenous feasting wildebeests, also known as our coworkers, were none the wiser that I almost ripped his clothes off and mounted him right then and there. Joel flipped a switch in me that no man has come close to finding before. I'm on. *Always on*. I'm lit up and I can't go back to the dark. My lust for Joel is addicting. Friendship is my nicotine patch.

He even invited me to a movie last weekend. I wanted to go. I wanted to hold his hand and cuddle into him while watching—who cares. But I'm respecting boundaries the best I can. Joel, however? He needs a little practice. These are *his rules* he's not following.

Every single day Joel and I play with the line we've drawn, soaked in gasoline, and lit on fire. One day, I'm tempted to cross, the next day, it's Joel. I imagine it's only a matter of time before one of us chickens will walk through the flames to get to the other side.

On Friday afternoon at the office, I linger. Brett and Lawrence are the last besides Joel and me to

leave the office. Lawrence barely grunts as his sweaty bald head disappears down the hallway. He looks suspiciously sleepy as if the last meeting on his calendar today was with a nap.

“Hey, Addie.” Brett taps my desk. “Working late on a Friday?”

“I’m just finishing up some emails,” I lie. My eyes dart toward the tote to the left of my desk which contains the special bottle I plan to give to Joel once we’re alone. I don’t want anyone getting the wrong, *albeit accurate*, impression.

“Well, have a good weekend.” Brett dawdles. His dark curly hair has so much product in it that even at five o’clock in the afternoon it looks like he freshly showered.

Ding!

Oh, thank heaven. My email notification cheeps loudly like a fire alarm with a dwindling battery. I don’t even care who it is...*thank you* for saving me. Brett looks dangerously close to asking me what my weekend plans are and if they can involve him. *Nope*. It was a no even before I met the man that set me on fire. I’m Joel’s now. Even if I can’t have him. I’m his.

“I need to respond to this ASAP, but you have a great weekend, Brett!” I swivel around in my chair, effectively dismissing him. I wait until the glass door of the front office clicks shut before I actually scan my new email.

It’s a new message from Tessalynn Gorthridge. I am one of the few people in the world that knows Tessa Rayne is a pen name. Gorthridge doesn’t quite flair off the tongue so she adopted a snappier alias.

The subject line reads: *Do not say no to this!*

Sigh. I’m probably going to say no to this...

From: Tessalynn Gorthridge

Subject: Do not say no to this!

Addie,

I know this is last minute but I managed to finagle an extra pass for this invite-only writers’ convention next week. I’m running a romance panel so they gave me a free VIP pass which gets you access to everything.

Come with me! Don’t think, just do it.

I took the liberty of booking your ticket and your room. All details are attached. Yes, I already purchased a nonrefundable flight and hotel room for you...no pressure or anything (but actually, lots of pressure).

Are you thinking right now? Stop that. Start packing!

This conference is a game changer, I promise. It’s how I learned to write. Come network, come learn, and let’s talk about your next project. And if nothing else, it’s in Vegas...so... yeah. Enough said.

I'll see you soon!

Xoxoxo

TG

I blink at the screen as if the words might pop out and scurry across my desk. *What the actual hell?* I was expecting a funny meme or an inspiration quote. Maybe her latest newsletter. But this?

Tessa is my spirit animal. We get along so well because between her sass and snark, it's like looking into a magic mirror that shows me the thirty-eight-year-old platinum-blond version of myself. And guess what? I like what I see.

Tessa is my favorite client of all time. Hands down, no competition. *Her book*, my favorite project.

I've been ghostwriting since my failed self-publishing fiasco senior year of college. It's a tricky field. You encounter every type of personality who needs a ghostwriter. Sometimes they are washed-up former best-selling authors who haven't had a good story idea in decades. Other times it's desperate content pushers who just want to put out a book a week, even if it doesn't contain a single coherent thought. Their ambitious philosophy is something along the lines of—more words, more money. They carelessly release garbage novels while simultaneously bruising the sacredness of literature.

Tessa's request at the beginning of this year was different. She posted on my usual writers-for-hire platform looking for a novelist and I immediately recognized her name. She didn't post a job, she posted a call for an interview. She wasn't going to let just anybody touch her baby. Tessa was already an established author and certainly didn't need help writing. Why she was posting on a ghostwriters' platform was beyond a mystery to me at the time but call me George because I was curious as all hell.

I cried after our first video chat. She was every bit as brilliant as I'd imagined. She needed a third-party perspective for her new book. She couldn't go to any of her author friends because professional writers are too dominant with the direction, or so she explained, and would never share credit. This was Tessa's story and she had a vision but needed it expressed through a non-biased lens. *Toy With Me* was the story of Tessa's divorce. The demise of her first true love.

The project helped her heal. We spent the majority of this past year building a book and a friendship together. She is a big believer in using stories to help you grow and find strength. That's why she writes almost exclusively romance. I hear her beautiful words in my head, every day.

"Addie, love is the most potent and powerful force on the planet. Channeling it gives the author the ability to change the world."

I drafted the story with Tessa guiding me the entire way. Did we take some creative liberties? *Yes*. Did we embellish some details and exaggerate some scenes? *Hell, yes*. We originally named it *If Our Hearts Could Speak*, but the publisher quickly vetoed that. Too many words, too touchy-feely. The heart of the story was the crumbling of a marriage but from it, the birth of a beautiful and peaceful new beginning. But in the current market, the only thing that sells better than sex is *a lot* of sex. Therefore, we developed a slightly embellished rendition of our story.

The publisher opted for *Toy With Me*, made the cover a blushing pink and slapped a picture of a vibrator on it. Boom! Best seller. Highly marketable. Tessa now has a partnership with several adult toy brands. I know this because she won't stop sending me the extra freebies. *Good grief*. The back of

my closet now doubles as a small adult store.

I open the attachments from Tessa's email and look at the flight details. I look up ARIA in a Google search. She even splurged and got me a corner suite. I don't have much experience with Vegas, but the hotel looks lovely and...expensive. *Sheesh, Tess.*

Let it be known that Tessa is an absolute boss bitch. She's a mom of three, and still found a way to become a self-made millionaire in the aftermath of her agonizing divorce. The woman can write circles around me and I'd be an idiot not to jump at this offer.

This is happening.

Las Vegas, here we come. I just need a week off of work at a moment's notice. What a perfect time to butter Joel up with his gift.

fourteen

...

Adler

Joel and I sit side by side on the floor of his office, eating right out of our takeout containers. I meant to leave work hours ago, but girls' night was cancelled so I eagerly volunteered to keep him company. We sit amidst a splattering of opened manilla folders that Joel hunted through like a drug-dog at an LAX airport entrance. He was relentless. All this mess for one tiny Q3 earnings report from ten years ago for a company no longer in Aura's portfolio.

I would've pressed Joel for more details on why that report is so important, but then he might've started talking about ventures, and a lady can only fake so much interest before her eyes fog over and give her away.

I ordered us dinner because I saw the obsessive look in his eyes when I knocked on his door just after five o'clock. He wasn't leaving this office until he found the document and I wasn't leaving until I knew he'd eat something.

"You're a sweetheart," Joel says as he leans over, nudging my shoulder. "Thanks for dinner."

"Um...you know I put it on the company card, right?"

His chuckle is breathy. "As you should've. I mean thank you for picking it up."

"Are you working like this because Steve is gone?"

"Swap me," Joel says, reaching for the square container in my hand and handing me his. We've been eating at the Thai place so often that we've developed a pattern. I order pad Thai, he orders fried rice, we swap halfway through. We always make sure to double up on the steamed pork dumpling order because neither of us is great at sharing those delicious little wonton pillows of wonder. "What do you mean?"

"You're here late every night and most weekends. Don't you get burnt out?" Joel pokes at the noodles with the chopsticks I left in my container. "Do you want the fork?" I ask with a teasing smirk.

"No...I got it." Joel can't use chopsticks. He's brilliant, intelligent, and cultured—but this is his kryptonite. I try to suppress my laughter as he uses the bamboo sticks as scoops instead of pinchers. "You don't really get burnt out when you do what you love."

"You love money that much?"

Joel widens his eyes at me. "The money is the worst part. Money makes people angry. Aggressive."

"Oh, please." I roll my eyes. "You love your golden toilets."

"I don't have golden toilets."

"But you could, right?" This is Joel's only off-putting quality. I love a man who offers to pay for dinner, but the man who can afford to buy the restaurant? It's a little unsettling. Mostly because I will never match Joel's caliber and I'm just not into a Cinderella story. No one talks about what happens

after the fairytale wedding. She's probably bored as fuck in that big ol' castle with the entire waitstaff catering to her every need.

Joel pinches my lips together gently as he laughs. "Hush, woman. I'm not here to talk net worth. That's not the part I like." He brushes the pad of his forefinger across my bottom lip before he takes his hand back.

I fall into a bit of a stupor. I hate (and love) when he touches me like that. "Which part then?"

"Nurturing startups. There are a lot of eager founders out there who have brilliant ideas but have no clue how to foster them into profitable businesses. And sorry to say, but no one will ever reap the benefits of your genius until your company is profitable. That's where I come in. I like to think I'm giving these underdogs a fighting chance."

I touch his bare feet with mine. Footsie is friendly—right? He glances at me from the corner of his eye. *Careful*, he warns wordlessly. I don't care. I swoon.

"That's pretty amazing of you." I smile to myself. That one was for my gut. *See? You have good instincts. He's a good one.* "Oh, and hey before I forget, do you think you could survive next week on your own? Would it be possible to get time off approved? I know it's short notice." I can't watch him struggle with the chopsticks anymore. I grab the white plastic fork off the table in front of us and hold it out to him. "There's no shame in it, boss."

He grumbles as he snatches it from my hand in defeat. "Sure. Where are you headed?"

I grimace. "Las Vegas."

"Funny." Joel's laugh is dry. "Very funny. Where are you really headed?"

I shrug and shoot him a daringly sexy look. "I said what I said."

Joel can't hide his irritation...from me at least. No one else would notice his subtle tells, but I study him all day. His jaw twitches ever so slightly and he clenches his teeth together to control the flinch of annoyance. "Why?"

"Nope. I'm not holding the share bear. And you already verbally approved my time off. No takebacks. But—if it lightens your mood, I do have something for you." I hop up onto my feet.

"Share bear? I swear, Adler. Your mind is that of Hannah Montana. Before she learned to twerk."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I say over my shoulder. *And why do you know Hannah Montana well enough to casually reference that children's show?* Oh, of course, Cami. Could this man be any more endearing?

"It means I have to be careful with you."

I retrieve the bottle of wine from my slumped bag in the far corner of the office. He knows what it is before it's even in his hands.

"Are you serious?" Joel pulls off his glasses and tosses them on the coffee table. He rubs his eyes. "Adler...I...how did you—this is a three-hundred-dollar bottle of wine."

"Really?" Oh, snap. The owners at that wine store must've had no idea. Oh god—I robbed them blind with my sob story. "Let's just say I got a fantastic deal. I promise you I didn't pay that much. But still feel free to applaud. I told you, I'm a research ninja." I karate-chop the air, but Joel's not amused. He looks lost in memories, so I place the bottle in his lap and guide his hands around it—mostly because I'm concerned he'll drop it.

I settle back into my position next to him on the floor, knees hiked up, shoulder huddled against his arm, soaking up the awkward silence.

Still silence.

Still awkward.

Joel is staring at the bottle in his hands with a blank face. I wait as long as I can, which is literally

about seventy seconds because patience throws me off-kilter. “Are you upset? Did I do someth—”

In one fluid motion, he sets the bottle down beside him, pivots his torso, and interlocks his lips with mine. I could drown in this sensation—happily. Our bodies meld together. Instant alluring warmth, like submerging into a Jacuzzi. Holding my head steady, he presses me into the ground, wedging between my thighs, his weight held by one steady hand braced against the floor. His kiss is desperate, filled with urgent need—but it’s over as soon as it begins.

Joel rises, and I growl in frustration. “Joel! You can’t keep playing me hot and cold like this. You said you wanted to be friends.”

“Fuck. I know. I’m sorry. You’re right.” His palm collides with his forehead causing a hearable *smack!*

My chest rises and falls as I recuperate from arousal’s unexpected assault. “What is your problem? If you want to kiss me, then kiss me. I don’t understand the relationship thing. It’s not like I’m asking you to get married right now.”

Joel pulls his knees to his chest and buries his head between them. “That’s the thing, Adler.” He speaks to the floor. “I’m never getting married.”

“I um...” *Never? How can you know that already?*

“That’s my whole issue with dating. When you’re a guy who never wants to get married or have children, it’s hard to form connections that aren’t one-sided.” He clears his throat, but his voice still comes through cracked and strained. “My last relationship ended badly. She told me she was okay with the fact that we would eventually part ways, but she got attached. She changed her mind and when I didn’t change mine, it crushed her. She spiraled. I’m the jerk who took years of her life and still wouldn’t marry her. Do you get what I’m saying?”

“Sure.” I press my hand deep into the rug fibers. I knit my fingers between the strands and grip like I’m trying to tug a whole handful right out.

Joel lifts his head to meet my gaze. His expression turns downwards from the harrowing lines of shame. “And I’m not looking for anyone to change me. My reasons are concrete and I’m tired of justifying them. You need to know that a relationship with me leads nowhere. And I’m learning no one gets hurt if you—”

“Don’t do relationships.” I bob my head. And we come full circle. Call me Sherlock, this mystery solved. Case closed. “It makes sense.”

Joel picks up the bottle and rotates his wrist as he inspects the wine. “This is the most thoughtful gift I’ve ever received. I can’t believe you remembered this. Thank you, Adler. And just so you know, tonight I wish I was a different man. The kind who deserves you.”

Now I ride the silence. I search for words but they evade me. Quiet is not natural for me. When everything is quiet...I can hear myself think.

Dead end. There’s nothing here except a dead end.

But what about the journey?

“What do you need?”

“Sorry?”

“What is it that you need? Maybe if you explain it to me...” I place my hand against his cheek and he lifts his head. The short bristles of his five o’clock shadow don’t budge under my thumb. “I’m not asking you to defend yourself, I just want to know. Why don’t you ever want to get married?”

“It’s a long story,” Joel warns.

I gesture to my ponytail and casual-Friday jeans. “I suppose I can be late to the Met Gala just this once.”

“If you weren’t allowed to use sarcasm, how the hell would you communicate?”

“I couldn’t. These lips would shut forever.”

His eyes transfix on my mouth. There’s no misinterpreting what’s on his mind. It’s clear as day, every minute of every day, he’s been fighting it too. Just like me. We’re living with that carrot dangling in front of our faces, forever eluding us and for what? For this one little reason that now I have to unearth. Maybe Joel’s not the bad guy in my story. Maybe he can still be the temporary hero.

“How about we open this wine and I’ll explain everything.”

“But—I thought you only drank that with your parents. That was intended as a gift for you and your family.”

“I want to open this here, with you.” My heart flurries. I love the sound of those words as they roll off his tongue. *With me.*

“There’s a wine opener in my desk up front.”

“I’ll get it. I’ll hunt down some glasses from the break room too. You can’t drink this stuff from a Solo cup. It’s far too luxurious.”

I scoff. “It has a duck on it, how fancy can it be?”

“It’s a swan.” Joel hands me the bottle, encouraging me to check my math.

“What? I did not get that.” I peer closely at the label to reexamine the swirly silver lines that outline a feathered creature.

“Yeah, look.” Joel taps on the label. “The beak is pointier than a duck’s and it has that little mark down the center.”

“You need your glasses, my friend. That is most definitely a mallard.”

“Are you arguing with me about wine?” Joel shakes his head but grabs his glasses off the coffee table and slides them back on. I catch him glancing at the label one more time to reassure himself.

“No, I’m arguing with you about ducks, evidently. But go ahead, fancy pants, open the bottle. I’m ready to be impressed.” I stretch my legs and wiggle my toes in relief that my answers are coming. Answers prelude decisions. And I might decide to be exactly what Joel needs tonight. “The corkscrew is in my top right drawer.”

“All right. Also, when I get back let’s have a conversation about why my employees are keeping wine bottle openers in their desk drawers.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Lewis.”



Joel returns carrying two wineglasses upside down by the stems in one hand. In the other is the cheap wine bottle opener from my top desk drawer. Neither of those are particularly noteworthy. What sends me into a near heart attack is the pink paperback book tucked under his arm and the devious smile on his face. Oh, sweet hell. No. *Please no.*

I completely forgot I left that here after the book celebration with the girls nearly two months ago.

“I really thought that a bottle opener would be the most rebellious thing I found in your desk, but then I found this.” Joel can’t hide his thorough amusement as I swallow the bile rising in my throat. He sets down the wineglasses and opener on his desk and holds the book up in his hands, waving it teasingly from side to side. “Are you reading this?”

“Perhaps.” I give the book the side-eye and start making a mental rescue-and-escape plan that would make John McClane proud. “It’s a little personal.” Maybe he didn’t notice the creative liberties Noa took on this particular copy.

“Don’t be embarrassed. Reading this at the office? A little risqué but hey, I’m a cool boss.”

“Embarrassed?” My hand slides to my hip and my elbow juts out. “I’m not *embarrassed* about reading it. It’s a decent book.”

Joel snorts. “I know what this book is. A friend of mine felt the need to screenshot me a page of the digital copy.”

My best chance at avoiding an uncomfortable admission is to just play this off cool. “Let me guess, page one-twelve?” I ask, arching my eyebrows.

“No…” Joel stretches out his response as his mouth curls into a salacious grin. “Page sixty-eight. What’s on one-twelve?” He begins flipping through the pages.

“Okay. Enough.” I cross the office with lightning speed and lunge for the book. “May I have my book back please?”

“Not a chance, now I need to know what’s on page one-twelve!”

Joel holds the book over his head. He’s six feet tall. I’d have to fetch a step stool to match his reach and I refuse to stoop to futile jumping antics. Instead, I place both hands on my hips and scowl while testing out my Superman laser vision to see if I can incinerate the book before he catches on.

It did not work in case anyone is wondering.

“Okay, come on, I’m sorry. I’m just kidding. There’s nothing wrong with—wait.” Joel rotates the book and scans the back cover. “Why did you glue your picture on the back of this book?” He lowers his arm to investigate the cover more carefully. I watch the gears in his head turn as he flips it over. “And why did you write your name on top of the author’s?”

Shit. “I didn’t. My friends did.”

“As a cruel joke?”

“Cruel? What does that mean?” *Oh, ho, ho, my friend. Tread carefully.*

“I mean I just feel bad for the author. She probably wanted to be taken seriously at some point in her writing career.”

My mouth hangs open and time stops as I gawk at his audacity. I think my tongue fully dries out before I finally find words. “Excuse me? Is over a quarter million copies sold in the first quarter of its release not serious enough for you? It lives on the top of the best-seller list. It’s literally making history in its category. It’s being optioned for a movie!”

“Oh. Come. On. It is porn on a page.”

“*Porn?!?*” Okay. Now we have problems.

“Sorry, erotica. Lit-erotica? I don’t know. Whatever the term is. Point is, it’s not a real book.”

“Not a real book? You haven’t even read it!”

“Well, I read page sixty-eight. And now I plan on reading page one-twelve. It’s good for one thing at least.”

“You’re such an ass,” I snarl. Blood floods my cheeks, engorging every pigmented cell, but this time it has nothing to do with my arousal.

Joel’s face twists in confusion and surprise. *Yes, you jerk, I am capable of being angry! I’m all sunshine and bubblegum until you insult my freaking book right to my face!*

“How am I being an ass?”

“You sound so dismissive! And… and *narrow-minded!* There is a real story in there, of a journey through love and loss. There are well-thought-out characters. Beautiful word choice and metaphors

that would make Robert Frost jealous. There is tension, conflict, resolution. The characters change and evolve. By every standard definition, it sounds like a freaking book to me!”

Joel eyes me with cautious concern, like I’m a mama bear and he just pet my cub. “You’ve read this in its entirety?”

“Several times. Your point?”

“I took you for more of a sophisticated reader.”

Tink tink. That sound is Joel’s shovel hitting the hard molten core of the earth. And yet somehow...he’s still digging.

“Sophisticated?” My hands ball up at my sides. My fingers slick against my palms that are beginning to bead with hot rageful sweat.

The teasing smile Joel’s worn on and off through this entire conversation finally begins to dissipate. He must be able to feel the fury radiating from my skin. “Why are you getting so worked up?”

“Forget it.”

“No seriously. Why does it bother you what I think of this book?”

“*Because I wrote the fucking thing!* It’s my book!”

Tink, tink, tink. Oooh, just kidding. It was my shovel...my hole. Will someone send down an elevator to get me out of this pit, please? Now would be great.

It’s like word vomit. The words are out before I can stop them. I press both hands over my mouth before anything else spills out. Well, this is great. Just great. I should go ahead and tell him that I’m a virgin now, too.

“You wrote...I um, don’t...what? You’re Tessa Rayne?”

I made my bed, so I guess I’ll slither up under the covers now. Omitting an explanation might be worse than honesty at this point. Joel might be thinking I am a hopeless fangirl who is considering the stalking and kidnapping of a beloved best-selling romance author.

I exhale deeply as my eyes rest on my bare toes. “I’m a ghostwriter. Tessa’s name is on the front, but I wrote every single word. That book that you just called ‘porn on a page’ is my most successful work, ever. So, *thank you*, for your heartfelt critique after reading one page of my ‘not a real’ book.”

Joel blinks at me. “You wrote this whole book?”

“Please don’t announce that to the world,” I clamor as I gather my bag and slip on my flats. “I signed a contract and if my name gets out, I’m in breach.”

“Adler, don’t go.”

The peaks and valley of this whole evening spent with Joel catch up to me in a hurry and I feel the heavy weight on my shoulders. The push and pull with him is wearing me thin. False hope is dragging me down. I’m his puppet, or his puppy. Either way, it’s clear that I’m an object of entertainment. Joel is a seductive dancing flame and I need a break from playing with fire.

“I’ll see you at the office in a week, Joel. Goodnight.”

My heavy steps in the hallway of the thirty-third floor echo. My legs feel heavy and I slow my pace.

Please follow me.

I hold my breath until the elevator dings and opens. I turn around one more time to see nothing but a darkened empty corridor.

fifteen

...

Joel

B eeeeeep!

The electronic lock on my front door warns me of company and I'm startled awake from my nap. I'm not used to anyone having keys to my home besides me. I've adopted my best friend as a roommate and I now no longer have the luxury of total privacy at home. I peel myself off the couch and rub my dry eyes before putting my glasses on.

"Honey! I'm home!" A loud bellow sounds from the foyer.

Cody kicks off his Nikes. He slips out of the strap around his shoulder and dumps his duffel bag on the ground. The bag of Doritos he's holding falls to the floor. A few crumbs topple out. And now I remember why I never roomed with Cody in college. He is a slob and borderline hoarder. My poor housekeepers are going to hate his guts now that he lives here.

"Hey man, welcome back." I collect Cody's shoes and line them neatly against the wall.

"Where've you been? I've been calling for a couple hours."

"I was napping." I grab the bag of chips off the ground. The impact must've broken the bag because as I lift, Cool Ranch dust is sent all over the hardwood entry.

"You don't nap."

When my mind is spinning because the girl I've been pining over for two months straight pulled a Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde on me last night, my solution is cardio. I woke up this morning and punished myself on the treadmill logging four more miles past my normal stopping point. I needed a nap. So what?

I shrug. "I was tired. Anyway, how was the drive?" I fetch the handheld vacuum from the hallway closet.

"Just peachy. Twenty-six hours trapped in a steel box with a vicious beast. Denver is going to have to keep me because I'm not making that return trip anytime soon."

It takes about ten seconds to vacuum up the mess I made yet somehow Cody caused. "Denver may keep you." I hold up the broken tortilla chip bag. "I may not."

Cody's face turns down into a vexed grimace. "You're going to change your tune after you see what I did for you."

I head to the kitchen to grab a water bottle out of the fridge. The cold drink coats my mouth and throat, energizing me, and forcing the last sleepy remnants of my nap to fade away.

"What did you do for me?" I ask to no one because Cody didn't follow me into the kitchen.

A new set of footsteps—more like a soft gallop—sounds from the hallway. I don't have time to question it further because to my extreme surprise and delight Felices leaps onto the kitchen counter and pulls me into a hug by digging his massive paws into my shoulders.

“Felices! Heyyy, buddy.” I smile so wide it physically hurts.

My magnificent boy has put on at least five pounds since I’ve seen him last which doesn’t sound like a lot, but if he gets any larger people will start mistaking him for an actual jaguar.

“How the hell did you get Juliana to give him up?” I ask Cody as he makes his way into the kitchen keeping a safe distance from Felices.

“Oh, I didn’t. Sasha helped me steal him. Brilliant woman. She came up with the whole plan and because he’s not allowed in Manhattan, Juliana can’t say or do anything without risking getting kicked out of the apartment.”

Felices forces his way out of my arms, hops off the counter, and nuzzles against my leg. He’s about as tall as three tabby cats stacked on top of each other so his wet little nose presses just below my kneecap as he uses my shin as a brushing post. His purr vibrates across my feet letting me know he missed me too. I squat down and Felices rolls onto his back immediately to demand a belly rub.

“My funny little buddy who thinks he’s a dog,” I coo.

“Do y’all need a private moment?” Cody asks, unimpressed. He thinks my obsession with Felices is odd, but I’m sure he would not blink twice if my cat was a dog.

“I thought Sasha and Juliana were best friends.” I ignore Cody’s prior comment. He will forever live in my good graces for pulling this off.

“They hate each other now. I don’t know—women...I don’t even...whatever. But the real question is how the hell you’re going to hide him. He’s massive.”

Felices will probably near thirty pounds by the end of the year. He looks more like a jungle predator than a house cat. Hiding him is necessary seeing as it’s illegal to own F-1 Savannah cats in most metro cities. Including Denver. I am normally a rule follower to a tee. This is my one exception. No one is in danger and I take great care of my big baby. And, if my cat is intimidating it’s only his looks. As for his personality? He once cowered, then hid from a miniature poodle. It was not a proud cat dad moment for me.

“I’ll do the same thing I did in Manhattan,” I say simply.

“You’re going to pay everyone off to keep their mouths shut?”

Yup. “No, I’m going to calmly explain that he’s really not that different from a normal house cat.”

Cody snorts obnoxiously. “Okay, let me know how that goes. That thing is a monster.”

I tap Felices’s nose. No, not my little guy. *You’re no monster, are you?*

“He plays fetch and likes belly scratches for God’s sake. You used to get your shit rocked daily by three-hundred-pound linemen and you’re scared of a cat?”

“Not scared. Just common sense tells me never to turn my back to that thing.”

“Can you stay with him while I go get some supplies? I’m guessing you didn’t bring his toys or his litter box?”

Cody’s expression flattens. “He doesn’t need a litter box. The fucker has the back seat of my truck for that. No need to buy a scratching post either.”

Ha! Cody’s decked-out truck with the lift kit is the only love of his life. “You’re a good friend, Cody. I’ll have everything cleaned and repaired for you.”

“Damn straight you’ll—what the hell is that?” Cody spots Adler’s book on my kitchen counter. She left in such a hurry last night and I didn’t know what to do with it. This little five-by-eight paperback might be the unraveling of our entire friendship as we know it. Seemed careless to leave it lying around at the office. “Did you pick up some light summer reading?” Cody’s smile is wide like he just struck gold. I’m never going to hear the end of this.

“It’s neither summer, nor have I read it.”

“It’s good.”

“Cody, stop. You don’t read unless it’s a playbook or Playboy.”

“First of all”—he rubs his hands together in exasperation—“fuck you, because I read. I just read that Dan Grisham thingy last month.” He flicks his hand in a shooing motion.

“Okay, that’s a lie but here—let me help you land it. You’re talking about Dan Brown and John Grisham. Two separate authors, but please continue to tell me how you read.”

“Fine!” he bellows as he picks up Adler’s book. “Sasha had it on her nightstand...I was curious. Binge-read the whole thing in like one day. Like I said, it’s good. It’s not just for women. Everyone is reading it.”

“I doubt that.” I eye the pink cover again that has an aggressive-looking silver vibrator front and center. Adler wrote it...how? Not *my* Adler.

“I’m dead serious. Don’t believe me? Ask your brothers. I’ll bet you the master bedroom at least two of them have read it.” Cody holds his hand out to me. “Care to take a wager?”

“Your room isn’t large enough? It’s exactly the same size as mine.”

“Yeah...” Cody clicks his jaw and bobbles his head side to side. “There’s just something about the main master that feels regal, you know? I’m used to being the king.” Cody pops his pretend collar. Cocky bastard. I grab his hand firmly and shake on what I know is a sure win.

“Fine, I’ll take that wager because no way in hell any of my brothers have read it. What do I get if I win?”

“Two out of three. I promise you. How about something you could never ever purchase?”

“Intriguing.”

“My Superbowl ring.”

I reel. “You’re that confident?”

“Hell yeah.”

I whip out my phone just to see if Cody is bluffing. He doesn’t flinch so I pull up my brothers’ group message.

Me: Have any of you guys read that book by Tessa Rayne, *Toy With Me*?

And now we wait.

“What is it about this book?” I pick up the paperback and drop it on the counter causing a heavy thud to resound. “What kept you reading outside of the obvious?” I hunt through my cabinet to find a pasta bowl. I fill it with filtered water from the fridge and set it down for Felices. He drinks like he’s been thirsty for days. I’m rewarded for my efforts with a thunderous rumble of a purr.

“Y’all make a real cute couple.” Cody twists his face in disgust as he looks down at Felices. “But as far as the book?” Cody fetches a bottle from the fridge and slumps into the short-back bar stool at the elongated kitchen island. “I mean, it’s basically a bedroom playbook for when you need a little inspiration.”

I cross my arms at his admission. “You need help? Like in the form of a little blue pill?”

“Hey, hey—don’t judge. Do you know how hard it is to do a girl right when you’re stressed about three-a-day training schedules, the offensive coach cussing you out daily, your QB claims you can’t keep your routes straight even though he’s throwing short, not to mention chasing endorsements? There is nothing wrong with keeping an ace up your sleeve just in case your mind and your member are in two different places when it’s sexy time.”

“Is the ace the pill or the book?”

“Like peanut butter and jelly, bro. Put ’em together.” Cody pinches his fingers together and kisses them like he has the recipe for sexual success. “Magic.”

“So, this whole thing is just sex?”

“No, it’s a good story. This couple is like trying to work their marriage out and they think they are fighting so much because they aren’t having sex. So, they hire this off-her-rocker sex therapist and do some bananas shit thinking it’ll fix things.”

“Does it?”

“No—turns out they break up. They were dealing with some trauma from their past. One of their kids was really sick for a while, they both thought the other cheated, there was some weird stuff with the in-laws. In the end they realized they were ready to move on.” Cody nurses his beer—more accurately drains it. Those who look like Bigfoot, drink like him too. “Why are your panties all in a wad over this thing?”

“Adler wrote it.”

“Like a review?”

“No, Adler wrote *it*.”

Cody picks up the book to point to Tessa Rayne’s name on the cover when he notices the strikeout. “What is this?”

“She’s a ghostwriter. I looked it up. It’s an actual thing. People hire writers to complete an entire novel. She does all the work and no one will ever know she’s behind the whole thing.” Cody flips the book to the back. “Her friends made that I think as a souvenir. Do you have any idea how much money this book has already made? Millions. Adler doesn’t even have a car.”

“Joel—don’t.”

“What?”

“I see that crazy look in your eyes, man. Don’t go all Felix Fix-it on this whole thing. Let Addie-cakes live her life.”

“But it’s sad, right? You said the book is good?”

“Yeah...”

“And she’s reaping none of the rewards, I mean—”

“Joel—does Addie strike you as a money-hungry kind of girl? I barely know her but she’s really down to earth. She orders water with every meal she eats out to pinch pennies.”

Yes, I know that. Of course, I know that. It’s Adler tidbit number thirty-three. We’ve eaten together probably one hundred times and she always just gets tap water because she can’t stand the soda upcharge. It’s not the three bucks, it’s the principle, she says. Unless it’s at the movies and then I’m pretty sure she’s willing to break the bank for that nasty stale candy.

“Money aside, this book changes everything.”

“You gonna read it?”

“No, I’m scared to.” Felices hops on the kitchen countertop from a standstill, startling Cody so much he nearly falls out of his seat. “Down, boy!” I command, but who am I kidding? That prince answers to no one. He paws at the air telling me to back the hell down.

“Fucking cat,” Cody mumbles. “Why are you so bothered by the book?”

“Because up until now, I’ve had this impression of who Adler is and that’s why I’ve been fighting things so hard. I’ve been treating her with kid gloves like she’s some sort of damsel in distress.” I pick up the book and wave it in Cody’s face. “And now you’re telling me this is the kind of stuff going through her mind? I don’t even know—”

My phone buzzes rapidly in succession, cutting me off. Cody grins devilishly. “Check the messages, man.”

Jackson: Unfortunately, yes. I’m part of Lacey’s stupid book club. Not a bad read.

James: Yup *fire emoji*

Jacob: I am also part of Lacey’s book club...because I am afraid of my sis-in-law. And shut up @Jax – you said you loved it the other day, you pansy ass. Own up.

Jackson: I just said it was not a bad read.

Jacob: Not a bad read and best book I’ve read in years is two different things.

James: Did you guys read page one-twelve?

Jackson: @James – did you memorize the page numbers? You’re an animal.

Jacob: Baby bro, you trying to read about something other than money management?

James: He needs the sex talk. Poor kid learned about the birds and bees from dad. Now he needs tips.

Jacob: Don’t get sex tips from James. It’ll get you an STD.

James: Haters. Shot of penicillin cleared that right up.

Jackson: You should not be proud of that.

Me: You guys are the absolute worst.

I huff as my eyes hit the ceiling. Nope. Screw it. “I’m not moving my shit.” I glare at Cody who is laughing wildly.

“Told ya. Keep your bedroom, man, I’ll keep the win,” he guffaws. “So, what are you going to do about Addie?”

“Hell if I know. She was livid when she left last night.”

I’m right back in the doghouse and this time, it’s raining.

sixteen

...

Joel

Chapter Thirteen: This time there is no stopping. There's pain in his eyes. He's forcing my face into the mattress. He lifts my hips as if it's duty. My soul and my body are separate entities and right now...he only wants one. Yet, still—I'm just as eager. Needy. He's dominant. Frustrated. Passionate. Relentless. Haunted. I can't decide if I like it, or love it—

My office door swings open. In surprise I throw Adler's book in the air. It goes flying across the room as my senior associate, Brett, barges into my office without knocking. He looks at me the same way guys do when you find yourself at a urinal with no privacy dividers.

"Um, sorry—"

"I thought my door was locked." I rub my face in embarrassment. Brett eyes Adler's book in the corner of the room.

"No judgment here. I uh—just bought that book for my grandma. She loves it." *Great. Gross.*

"What's up, Brett?"

"Um...so I kind of screwed up—bad."

Brett proceeds to beg forgiveness after double-booking two of our most important meetings for four o'clock, today. Both parties, which are currently in our tiny office waiting area, are competing for funding so tensions are running high in a very small space. They can either sit on each other's laps or stand awkwardly in the hallway.

I pull my glasses off and toss them on the desk in frustration. Brett flinches at my every move like he's waiting for something abusive.

"One minute. Let me think." I tap my fingers with impatient aggravation against the desk as I mentally sort out the mess. Problems are like Rubik's Cubes. Move one square at a time and the picture becomes clearer and clearer.

Three days. Three damn days is all it took without Adler for my calendar to fall apart, the office to become dangerously disorganized, and for the entire team to turn into unproductive, hangry grouches.

"I've got a plan," I say confidently. The color instantly returns to Brett's pale cheeks. "What? Did you think I was going to tear you a new one?"

Brett shrugs sheepishly. "You can. It's my fault."

"You want to have a team of your own one day, right?"

"Yes."

"Then my leadership philosophy might come in handy for you. Good leaders give out wins and always take the blame. At all costs they protect their people. Your team will never be a *team* if they feel like shit and are afraid of you. So, shake it off. I'm here to help you, not reprimand you."

Brett clasps his hands together like he's praying. "Thank you, boss."

"You're welcome. Now—bring the MerTock meeting in here first. Then, take the RightCheck CEO and CRO down to Hughston's across the street." I whip out my wallet and hand my corporate card to Brett. "Ask for the back room—the one Adler always reserves. Order the nicest bottle of scotch they carry and the entire appetizer menu. Bullshit for as long as you can. Small talk. Do not talk about our portfolio or funding power. RightCheck is on a need-to-know basis only. They tend to put the cart before the horse. I'll be there as soon as possible. And, with any luck, they'll be too scotch-happy to fight the red lines on the contract."

"Got it! Thank you. You're the man!" Brett scuttles out of my office to carry out his marching orders.



After three long hours of schmoozing and boozing and successfully saving our asses, I return to my office from Hughston's Steakhouse to finish reviewing the dividend reports. I try to be productive but my mind is a blown gasket. It's firing on zero cylinders.

I glance around the room and see reminders of Adler everywhere. I see her sitting on the rug, leaning up against the cushions of the sofa looking like a dream even in faded jeans and a plain cap-sleeve t-shirt.

I miss her. I'm tired. I'm pent up. I'm so fucking confused.

She's not just my friend. Friends don't imagine how their friend's tensed tight slit would engulf their throbbing cock. Which is verbatim a line from the book...that she wrote. And here I am worried about chivalry. Is that even fair? Maybe it's all a façade. I know Adler—right? She's the sweetheart with the sunshine smile and the zingy one-liners that make me bust a gut. But this sassy vixen, sex-expert version of Adler? I can resist one or the other. Put the two together, I don't stand a chance at keeping my feelings at bay.

I've respected her space all week. I know she's still so mad at me for the things I said about her book. She wrote a team email that she copied me on—*copied*—so I know she got on a flight to Las Vegas for some type of conference. Her email was vague because the team doesn't know what I know.

What the hell is her deal? What person who can write a best seller like this wants to waste away behind a receptionist desk? Why is she hiding? Although, I should be grateful she's hiding at this office job. It's the reason she fell into my life.

I know it isn't any of my business, but I don't like this office without her. My days are a mix of busy and bland. I resolve to deny any and all future time-off requests from Adler unless I get to skip town with her. I grab my phone and start typing before I can change my mind.

Me: This is not work related. Please respond. Just let me know you're alive.

I glare at my phone for the next few minutes, like sheer determination can prompt her response. After what feels like an eternity, my plea is answered. My heart jolts at the quick buzz of my phone. I pounce on the message.

Adler: I'm alive.

Me: Are you sick of my apologies yet?

Adler: Not totally sure. Try me.

Me: The book is really good, Adler. I'm impressed and very proud of you. I'm sorry. I was indeed an ass.

Adler: You read it?

Me: Every single word. I'm reading it again in fact.

Adler: Perv.

Me: What? You wrote the pervy things.

Adler: Does that bother you?

Me: Yes. But not for the reason you think.

Adler: What reason?

Me: I don't like feeling like I don't know you.

Adler: I'm in a seminar right now. Someone is giving me the angry eye for texting. Do you want to talk tonight?

Me: Yes.

seventeen

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I am mere seconds away from slathering the green goop from my conference ‘shwag bag’ onto my forehead when a loud banging at the door makes me jump. *Dammit!*

The clay-like salve lobs onto the hotel mirror and slides down like a snail, leaving a green trail behind it. *Fuckity fucktastic. Ugh!* That was the *really* good stuff and the sample jar is so tiny to begin with—there’s nothing left. The standard-sized jar of this mask retails at about three hundred dollars and I was excited to savor my teensy *free* taste of the finer things in life.

I don’t know who is at the door, but they are in big trouble for startling me and making me drop my loot.

Thunk, thunk, thunk!

The pounding at the door continues. It’s probably another drunk Vegas partier mistaking my room for theirs. Some of them are aggressively determined and will continue to swipe their key card over and over despite the buzzer sound of rejection. You’d think the red blinking light conveys a clear message, but I guess you have to forgive stupidity in the city where people bathe in vodka.

I fling open the door. My irritation immediately subsides when I see Tessa’s makeup-free face. Her platinum-blond hair is thrown up in a sloppy bun. She’s holding a six-pack of beer in each of her hands.

I swipe my hand over the space in front of her. “Bravo, Tess. I’m loving *everything* about this look.” Tessa crosses her legs and half curtsies. “I thought you were going out with your fun friends tonight?” I ask her, blocking the door. *Do not try and cross the barrier of this doorframe with an entourage. I’m staying in my robe tonight.*

“Addie, I’m three kids and ten years past ‘fun’. If I spend one more night in a dark club listening to EDM while drinking shooters out of fluorescent-colored tubes, I may die here. Want to spend a night in hiding with me?” Tessa holds the six-packs out to me. The world’s most precious offering.

“Night in? Hiding? Those are all the magic words. Come on in.” I relieve her right hand of the six-pack it holds and prop the heavy hotel door open with my foot. “Hurry up before someone ‘fun’ spots you here and I’m dragged into the fray.”

She hustles in like I could possibly change my mind. “You’re a saint, Addie-girl.”

I don’t know why I get along so well with a woman who is over a decade older than me. Ignoring the fact that I share *a lot* of interests with residents at the senior center I volunteered for in college, I like to think it’s because Tessa is young at heart. She’s fabulous, incredibly strong, family oriented, and yet is still a badass businesswoman. I need a new vision board because I think I want to be Tessa when I grow up.

“The panel you ran today was inspiring. Thank you for inviting me. My mind is—” I wiggle my

fingers on either side of my head and make my best explosion noises. “Easily the best week of my life.”

“Yeah? I’m so glad you’re getting something out of it. Addie, you should come every year. I’ve been writing for almost fifteen years and I still learn something new every time I attend. Stuff like this? Meeting other authors and networking. Navigating the market, learning new trends—this is how you grow your brand.”

“Please.” I throw my head back at the ridiculous suggestion. “This is for legit authors. Don’t get me wrong, I’m so appreciative, but I’m just here as a simple fly on the wall. To bask in your glory. To hide in your shadow. To tiptoe around the golden gates of heaven. To stare in the face of my tepid inadequacy...are any of these landing for you?”

“That segment on metaphors clearly made an impression.”

“Clearly.” I waggle my eyebrows. “By the way, what’s with all the free goodies and the open bars? Is this the life of an author? Day drinking and free stuff? Because I could get on board with that.”

Tessa’s expression softens. “I wish you would get on board. I brought you here hoping it’d inspire you to take this seriously.”

My shoulders slump. I must sound like an ungrateful child. “Tessa, I just...I’m an assistant. I *assist*. That’s what I do and I’m okay with it. There are leading ladies and there are sidekicks. I know who I am. I’m content where I am.”

“Would it be crossing the line if I slapped you right now?” Tessa cocks her head to the side.

“It was the same for *Toy With Me*. It’s your story, I just typed it out. Meeting the *real* authors here at this conference is beyond humbling. The way their minds work. The stories they have to tell—it’s inspiring. They are so far out of my league. I can’t do what they do.”

“You *did* do what they do. You *outdid* them, Adler. Your book isn’t a best seller. It’s *the* best seller. Tell me what other author at this conference has done that?”

You...multiple times.

“Tessa, tell me what other author here doesn’t put their name on their books?”

She bows her head. “I wish you would’ve told me what you were really capable of when I hired you. I don’t know...maybe you didn’t know at the time. But I would’ve demanded an amendment to the contract. I could have named you co-writer, given a credit line, hell, even just a damn dedication. By the time you sent the draft to me and my agent...well, I’ve never seen a book go through editing and publication that fast.”

“Yeah,” I breathe. “It kind of got away from us.”

“That’s what happens when you start doing what you were always meant to do. I worked on that book for six years before I found you. Did I ever tell you that? I threw away over six full drafts because I couldn’t get it right. Then you come along. You wrote exactly what I needed to say. You did what I couldn’t. Do you understand that?”

“Tess?”

“Yeah?”

“Can we drink now?” I grab two beers and hold one out. Tessa holds up her hands in defeat before taking the bottle. I am done with this conversation. I’m just me. I’m happy here. Don’t push me to be more.

“Do you have any good snacks here?”

Do I have any good snacks? *Ha!* Does a bear have thick matted tufts of fur that burrow into its skin like a bunny in a hideaway? Does a bird’s feathers dance against the sky? Do the desert winds

conjure sand monsters with their furious flurries? Okay, I *loved* the segment on the art of metaphors and symbolism. I am only speaking in metaphors moving forward. Quinn, Reese, Mani, and Noa are going to hate their lives when I get home.

Tessa rummages through my bag of goodies on the table. She settles for some lemon Oreos and plops down on the pleather hotel furniture that crunches like a plastic wrapper. The sound makes me cringe.

“Enjoy your twenties, honey. By the time you hit my age, each of these little suckers is ten minutes on the spin bike.” Tessa waves the golden cookie in the air before popping it in her mouth, whole.

“Noted.” I have never, nor will I ever own or get on a spin bike. I walk to work every day. I hike. I will occasionally dabble in whitewater rafting. I am perfectly capable of navigating a mountain trail with forty pounds of camping gear on my back. I prefer my exercise to be purposeful and not punishment. I do more than enough to check the ‘active’ box on my annual physicals.

“So what were you up to tonight, anyways?”

“I was about to put that La Mer face mask on from our goodie bags but then...” I make a toss-up motion with my hand. “I wasted the whole damn thing.” *Your fault, Tess.*

“Honey, don’t fret. I’ll send you the entire line when you get home. It’s *good* stuff. It’s the only reason I don’t need serious Botox right now.”

I roll my eyes. Tessa is beautiful and sophisticated and if she ever doubted herself, the fact that she’s still hooking up with twenty-year-olds should be validation enough. Have I mentioned she’s my hero?

“The entire line?” I ask. “How well is *Toy With Me* doing, anyways? I knew I should’ve asked for royalties.”

“You can have royalties...on your next book. That you should write. Under your name,” she demands. I groan. How did we get back here again? “Addie, come on mama, talk to me. Whatever insecurities you have about all this, let me help you with them.”

“Why do you care so much about me, Tess? Honestly? Are you afraid I’m going to spill our little secret and try to ruin you? Because outside of my innermost circle I haven’t told anyone. You know I’m trustworthy. You don’t have to placate me. Look...I tried the whole author thing before. I failed. I’m not interested in that kind of humiliation again.”

Tessa pinches the bridge of her nose and grunts in frustration. “Adler, what’s on my baseball card?”

“What?”

“Let’s call it my writing stats. I *know* you know them. What are they?”

“Mmmm, off the top of my head? You’ve been writing for over fifteen years and you’ve independently published six novels with the remaining twelve picked up by the biggest publisher in the game. You’ve been a best seller on New York Times, USA Today, Publishers Weekly, and several more that escape me at the moment. Three of your books have been optioned for movies. Between sales, merch, and endorsements your net worth is roughly in the ballpark of a gazillion.”

Tessa opens her mouth to speak but I’m not quite done.

“And as far as the miscellaneous details—you still plot your novels by hand in a Five Star binder. You don’t like ice cream but will tolerate gelato. You tell everyone your favorite pastime is reading, but it’s really bingeing *The Real Housewives of Orange County*. And you have a pet guinea pig named Jelly Belly but interestingly enough the name has nothing to do with jelly beans.”

Tessa stares at me the same way she would at a flying shark. It’s the look I imagine any sane person might have when witnessing an aquatic apex predator take flight. She takes a slow bite into

another crunchy lemon cookie. “Gazillion is a major exaggeration. Also, not a word. Also, I’m worried you might be stalking me a bit.”

“A *bit* is an understatement.” I wink at Tessa and shoot her a creepy smile.

“Okay, psycho. Well, what I’m trying to get at is that you have no idea about the collection of short stories I self-published that someone called so terrible I should hire someone to write my resume... for McDonalds. Or, the regency romances I wrote that a professional reviewer said was gut-wrenchingly awful and that my writing style was ridiculously immature as if I was trying to rewrite *Pride and Prejudice* from the POV of the cast of *Sesame Street*.”

“Wow.” I stifle my smile because honestly? A Mr. Darcy puppet would be adorable. *Come on!*

“My point is, once upon a time I didn’t think I could make it as a writer either. That’s why I care. I look at you and I see me fifteen years ago.” Tessa shrugs. “And I got lucky enough to find a mentor who pushed me when I was scared the most. I’m trying to pay it forward.”

I was planning to be snarky. But Tessa is incredibly sweet and I’m unworthy. She’s offering me everything right now. I at least have to explain myself. I refasten the tie around my fluffy robe as I stand to collect two more beers. I twist the lids off both bottles and hand over another round.

“I’d been ghostwriting for a while when you found me. Working with you changed everything. I’d never written romance like that before. *Toy With Me* was so different. It was raw and honest but also fun and sexy. I didn’t know those two could... mesh. It has become the new standard in my world.”

Tessa doesn’t interrupt. She patiently waits for further explanation.

I sigh heavily. “But you spoon-fed me all the scenes. We spent hours on the phone as I dissected your memories and feelings. I never could’ve put that together on my own. Great romance writers, like you, pull from their experiences—their pain, their passion, their pleasure. I don’t have any of those.”

Tessa’s face pinches in a puzzled expression as she takes a long swig from her beer. “As in you’ve never had your heart seriously broken?”

“I’ve never had *anything*. I’ve never had my heart broken. I’ve never been in love. I’ve never had sex—”

A disgusting liquid spray catches the side of my cheek.

“Oh my god. Sorry!” Tessa apologizes for spewing a mouthful of beer all over the hotel furniture, and the right side of my face. I nod as I digest her dramatic reaction. *Yup, that seems about right.* She’s choking at the thought of a twenty-five-year-old virgin. That doesn’t make me feel like a freak at all.

“Sorry again, I just...” Tessa trails off as her eyes bulge. She shakes her head at me in disbelief. “I mean our book...never in a million years did I think—so wait, how did you articulate the details for certain scenes?” The mischievous look on her face indicates the scenes she’s referring to.

I will never ever admit to anyone out loud how much porn skimming I endured to get a clear visual about some of the more elaborate tantric sex positions. I’m willing to bet that’s why my laptop is on the fritz. It probably has a chronic virus that will claim its life any day now. My browser history looks like a horny teenager’s, who finally figured out how to sneak past the child safety internet locks. There’s...*variety*. Let’s leave it at that.

“Um, you know just like...research...interviews...books and whatnot.” I do not sound convincing.

Tessa snorts. “Mhm, suuure.” She fluffs her platinum-blonde bangs and dabs at her mouth with the backs of her knuckles. “So why not? Is this a religious thing? Are you saving yourself?”

“No, I just never could get over the hump—pun very much intended by the way. Every time I’ve

gotten close to going *there* with a guy, I just couldn't shake that awful awkward feeling. And I'm not talking about awkward like nerves, I'm talking about being so far in my head that I'm calculating in ounces how much saliva is pouring from their tongue onto mine." I fake gag as a visual. "I notice how clammy their hands are when they touch me. I notice how long their arm hair is and if it'd be possible to braid it. Every time I get close to something physical with a guy, the least sexy thoughts take over my mind. Like giant red flags. I had a boyfriend for a while in college but the only reason it worked is that he never pressured me to do anything. I thought for the longest time I was broken, or missing some fundamental sexual hardware, until..."

"Until what?" Tessa is practically drooling for my response. She blinks her thick eyelashes at me in expectation. "Until what? Dear god, finish your sentence!"

Finish your sentence. Funny, I thought I'd need more coaxing, but apparently those three little words of encouragement are all I need to spill my guts to Tessa about Joel. Soup to nuts. From our first meeting to our first kiss, to his determination to keep us strictly friends. And my dwindling mastery over self-control.

"So, what's the problem? You're hot for him. He's into you. Smash 'em together, girl!"

"Smash 'em together?"

Tessa arches one of her eyebrows. "Virgin or not, you understand the mechanics of sex, right? You certainly write like you do." Tessa squints one eye in a way that says, *'need I say more?'*

"I'm not questioning the mechanics, just your word choice. But anyways, speaking of the book—that's sort of the problem. Joel read *Toy With Me* and now I can tell something is off with him."

"Off like how?"

"He wants to just be friends because he doesn't want a long-term commitment. He doesn't ever want to get married. But yet we get nervous every time we're alone together because there's just something between us...I don't know. It's like—"

"Addiction?"

"No...it's more like breathing after holding your breath under water for too long. The first time I met him I had the strangest feeling like I was finally reunited with someone I was really missing, yet I didn't know him from Sam. Weird, right?"

"So you want to be with him, but he doesn't want any strings attached and you're not okay with that?" Tessa asks the question I've been asking myself on a loop for the past twenty-four hours.

"I've never had sex, how am I supposed to know if I need the strings? I'm happy around him. He gives me all the attention in the world. He's kind and funny and I'm content with how things are except for the physical aspect. Friendship isn't quite scratching the itch for either of us. I don't know...Joel is a blank space on the map."

An impish smile consumes Tessa, cheek to cheek. She holds out her hand indicating her response is about to blow my mind. "If he's a blank space on the map...*go exploring!*"

My eyes flash in pure delight. *Yes, to awful tortured puns! Amen.* We both crack up. Tessa and I are kindred spirits who find sanctuary inside of a hotel room with a cheap six-pack of beer when the rest of the Vegas-goers are currently lit up under neon lights.

"Have you never heard of a fuck-buddy situation?"

I close my eyes so she doesn't catch them rolling in annoyance. "Yes, Tessa. I've seen every Lifetime romcom, I know what friends with benefits is. I'm just saying—is that allowed when you're a virgin?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, is your virginity attached to some type of nineteenth-century dowry arrangement? Addie! Come on! It's your life and your choice. You're equipped to make this decision without asking

for anyone's permission."

Am I?

Tessa rubs her hands together like she's brewing an evil plot. "Sex is sex. Even for women. Intimacy is great, but you can absolutely enjoy sex without making the world of it. I've had it both ways. There have been men I loved and there have been others I fucked. Both scenarios meant a great deal to me, just in different ways. Hell, your boss could be your muse."

Hmmm. I want Joel. It's as clear as freshly Windexed glass. I've never wanted any man the way I want Joel. The only problem is if I get too attached, he'll run. I don't have to be his girlfriend to know I really like being the girl he talks to. Am I willing to risk it with sex? Then again, do I even have a choice? My lust for Joel is at the helm, quickly taking control. I don't think my logic is capable of steering the ship any longer.

I've been driving myself crazy considering every pro and con. The con column in my mind only has one line, but it's in big fat black Sharpie. Joel means too much to me. Is it possible to only have sex for fun with a man I have feelings for? And what kind of woman am I if I use sex to coax him into a relationship that he definitely doesn't want? But what about what I want? Do I even know enough about relationships to know what I want?

Now that we've come full circle, I have a headache.

My heart and my body are in the middle of a vicious war, and I keep waiting for my exhausted mind to ride in like the calvary and tell me what to do. *Wake up you tired biatch and help me!*

"Is there a way to be with Joel without *being* with Joel?"

"English please?"

"If I have sex with him, will I fall in love with him?"

"Ah. Well, are you running with the pack or are you the weak gazelle?"

"What?" Tessa's question isn't even a metaphor. It's just nonsensical.

"If you're the weak gazelle, as in you are the most likely to get taken down by the lion pack, and by lion pack I mean your feelings, then you have to set some very firm boundaries. You need to stick to the rules to make sure you keep this strictly about sex. Joel doesn't need to be the love of your life to be your sexual awakening."

"Right." I nod. Okay, that sounds good. Whatever gets me closer to Joel and me naked together makes perfect sense. "Just one question—do I Google these rules, or..."

"Ah. I'm going to need that pen and pad of paper and another beer." Tessa rummages through one of my conference giveaway bags and retrieves the writer freebies. I hop up to serve another round.

She scribbles a title on the top line of the notepad. *Addie's F-Buddy Rules for Survival*. She underlines the heading, thrice.

"All right, Addie-girl, here are the coveted rules to having a fuck-buddy relationship the right way." Tessa's pen freezes as she raises a brow at me. "You're going to want to laminate this."

eighteen

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Adler

Me: Can we just text?

I don't want Joel to hear my slurring. One beer—I'm fine. Two beers—I get giggly. Three beers—I start philosophical introspection. Four beers—which is my current predicament—I'm usually doling out sloppy kisses to every cheek in sight, blurring separate words into mega-words, and begging Reese or Quinn to marry me.

Joel: Why? Are you okay?

Me: Yes. About earlier...you know me. It's still just me.

Joel: It was a little jarring to learn there's a whole other side of you.

Me: There's really not. The book is fiction. I'm the real me with you.

Joel: Good. I like the real you.

Me: What if we were fun bunnies?

I squint and reread my text. Something doesn't look right. Damn auto correct. *Why doesn't that look right?* F...u...oh! I got it.

Me: Sorry, I mean fun bunnies.

Dammit! Stop censoring me phone.

Joel: Are we replacing 'n' with 'ck' and buddies for bunnies?

Me: *thumbs-up emoji* *blow kiss face emoji* *pizza emoji* *beer emoji*

Joel: You're drunk.

Me: Yes...but I already thought about this sober. I can handle it. I can take this for what it is.

Joel: We'll talk about it when you get back.

Me: Tomorrow. My place. I'll call you when I'm off the plane.

Joel: Adler, don't play games with me. It's getting too hard to say no to you.

Then don't.



It takes twelve beers over the course of two hours to get Tessa and me belligerently drunk. Twelve is the magic number. At ten beers we were somewhat reasonable. By twelve we're getting noise complaints because our downstairs neighbors are not impressed with our whimsical furniture hopping. *We have to! The floor is lava you assholes!*

Luckily, prior to our downward slip into drunken stupors, Tessa jotted down the ten simple guidelines that will require strict adherence for me to remain just “fun bunnies” with Joel.

The rules are simple. They are custom tailored for the top ten worst habits of fuck buddies who say they are okay just being friends but are secretly trying to flip a script. I am determined to be the exception. I will not push Joel into a relationship. We'll just enjoy toe-curling, heart-stopping, out-of-your-mind romping in the sheets.

Joel will be my introduction to this side of a grown-up relationship. Simply a professor to a student. A Yoda to a Luke. Then, when I finally do meet *the one*, I won't have this very awkward gift to give him.

Brilliant. Perfection. Genius.

Not stupid and reckless at all.

I am winning at life right now.



The F-Buddy Rules for Survival

Rule Number 1: *The condom rule.* Wrap it up before you get wrapped up. No exceptions.

Rule Number 2: *The gift rule.* Do not give each other gifts. Also, do not ever give someone else a gift that is from both you and your F-Buddy.

Rule Number 3: *The baby rule.* No baby talk, no making babies, no buying baby animals. No calling each other baby. When in doubt—no baby anything.

Rule Number 4: *The PDA rule.* It's simple. Stay away from PDA. No “official” dates.

Rule Number 5: *The faking rule.* It's no fun if it's only fun for one. No faking orgasms. Ever!

Rule Number 6: *The tidy-up rule.* Do not leave any of your shit around his place. Do not make space for his toothbrush in your bathroom.

Rule Number 7: *The sleepover rule.* Never sleep over. Always be the one to leave first, even if it's from your own place. Fake a brunch, fake a hair appointment, whatever you need to do to prove that you have no expectations of cuddling.

Rule Number 8: *The friend rule.* No Venn diagrams! Keep your life and friendship circles as separate as you can.

Rule Number 9: *The expiration rule.* F-Buddying is temporary. There's a looming expiration date. Accept that. Seriously—accept that.

Rule Number 10 (special Addie inclusion): Never mention to Joel that you're a virgin. It's more commitment than he can handle and frankly, none of his damn business.



Tessa slides my new commandments into my purse so I don't leave them behind when I check out tomorrow. It doesn't matter though, I'm so drunk, I can't check out. There's no way I'm sobering up in this lifetime. I live in this hotel now—forever. On this bed.

Thump.

Whoops, I mean on this floor.

“Wait, wait, Adderr,” Tessa slurs. “There's jusss one more thing. His thingy.”

“Whaaa?” I squint one eye and suck in a deep breath then blow it out as if I can exhale the inebriation away.

“His *thingy*. You gotta see what kinda 'quipment you're workin' with cuz you're so squeaky new. Give me your phone.”

It's probably not my wisest decision, but due to my current impairment I don't think twice about unlocking my phone and blindly handing it over to Tessa.

“Name's Joe, right?”

“Joel.”

“Found 'im.” Tessa starts typing furiously at my phone.

I lose track of time as the room spins. *Or I spin. I'm not sure.* I'm in a drunken vortex of trippy kaleidoscope colors and numbing tingles that trace up and down my body. The sound of crashing and cresting waves—of beer—in my mind are only interrupted with the occasional *swoops* of sent and received text messages. I drift into the malty tide as tomorrow's epic hangover brews.

Tessa slides my phone across the floor.

“I scroll'd up. Start at the 'ginning,” she instructs as she chuckles.

Oh no. What did you do, Tess? I read the conversation that Joel thinks *I* just had with him.

Me: If we're going to do this, I need to see what you're packing first.

Oh, shit.

Joel: Seriously?

Me: Super-duper serious.

Joel: You know once I send this we can't go back, right?

Me: Pony up, playboy.

Oh, come on! He has to know that wasn't me.

Joel: Okay, you asked for it. I'm going to spend a few minutes thinking about your sexy self so you can get the full effect. *winky face*

I scroll down a bit more to see a full-frontal image of a completely erect—and nicely manicured, I might add—hulk of a penis.

Joel's penis.

We really just went there.

Actually, Tessa went there. Drunk Tessa went there. *Thank you, beer, you may or may not be ruining my life.*

Shock aside, it happens to be one of the most exquisite sights I've ever seen and I will spend the rest of my life comparing all male members to this immaculate testament to man. I blink a few times as I gawk with my jaw hitting the floor—literally, because I'm face down on the hard floor.

"Tessa," I hiss. Her slumped body twitches just a foot away from mine. "You saw this?"

"Yep."

"Am I crazy? Am I so drunk I'm seeing double?"

"What?"

"This picture...that has to be two thingies photoshopped into one, right?"

Tessa snickers uncontrollably. "No, girl. I'm a li'l worried for you. Thas not a good starter penis."

Yup, that's what I'm worried about too.

"If he's not an absolute gentleman, I'll kill him myself," Tessa mumbles right before she succumbs to her booze-induced coma. My phone buzzes in my hand as another message from Joel comes through.

Joel: Your turn?

I call upon the herculean strength within me, which will be necessary to text a lucid sentence to him right now.

Me: What exactly are you wanting a picture of?

Joel: You really want me to type it out?

Me: I will be home in less than fifteen hours and you can see whatever you want then.

Joel: Fifteen hours? Can I put you on an earlier flight?

Me: Goodnight, Mr. Lewis.

Joel: Goodnight, Baby Spice.

I can't fight my heavy eyelids much longer and I won't let us sleep on the floor of this hotel room. I poke Tessa and she instantly stirs and leaps onto the bed with the grace of an antelope in its prime. I, on the other hand, clammer up the other side like I'm trying to scale a rock wall with legs that have the muscular integrity of an overcooked noodle.

After much strain and effort, I plop down on the fluffy comforter, satisfied with my accomplishment. I don't bother getting under the covers. *This is good enough.* I let myself drift seeing only one very vivid picture as my eyelids clamp shut.

nineteen

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Joel

I hate the term ‘twitterpated’—which I only know because of my little sister and her godawful taste in television when we were growing up. It’s a word that belongs in a Disney channel star’s bedazzled diary. But I can’t think of a better description for the way my heart is beating at record speed. A tingle shoots across my palms that I can’t press away. I’ve thought about this moment with Adler for so long. I never thought it’d happen.

I am also shocked, in the best way, that she’s the kind of girl that requests dick pics. I regret admitting this to Cody. His stupid smug smile was torture when I told him where I was headed this Friday evening. He gave some graphic advice I didn’t need as well as made some unwelcome suggestions about flavored ‘dicksicles’. Against his recommendation, I did *not* bring along a jar of Nutella to Adler’s apartment.

Tap, tap.

I lightly brush my knuckles against Adler’s door. No answer. I close my hand and try again.

Knock, knock.

No answer.

I’m at apartment three-twelve, right? *Adler, please don’t stand me up. Don’t be that girl.* I pull out my phone to call her, but instead I see the text that I missed ten minutes ago.

Adler: Hopping in shower, door is open. Make yourself comfy.

Seriously? You left your door open while you hopped in the shower in the apartment that you live alone in? Clearly, Adler has never lived in a city like New York or she’d never be this careless. I turn the knob and as instructed, let myself in.

She must’ve just gotten home. Her suitcase is still by the door. Adler texted me the minute her flight landed and it still wasn’t soon enough. I was burning from anticipation all day.

It’s not the promise of sex. The past week has been grueling without her. Adler has become my workplace sunshine, radiating light and warmth to all the dull and dingy aspects of my day-to-day. I need her more than she understands and I am going to spend all night showing her how grateful I am that she’s back.

I settle into her little couch that is saturated with the aroma of her sweet perfume. It’s light and sweet. Like fruity candy. I could bathe in that smell.

The apartment is tiny. Even for a place in the heart of downtown Denver. It looks like some type of art deco building, patched and renovated in an attempt at a modern makeover, but the inside walls

are still composed of the original mismatched brick. It suits Adler. The stripped hardwood floors and exposed pipes scream originality. It has all the artistic charm to match the writer who inhabits it.

Her bedroom is on what I'm sure this listing tries to pass as a second floor so it can double the cost of rent. It's more accurately a floating alcove encased by flimsy iron rods gapped too far apart. They don't look sturdy enough to support the weight of a butterfly. I can easily see her bed, night tables, dresser, and personal belongings from her living room sofa. She has no privacy upstairs except for the closed bathroom door where steam is currently seeping out of the bottom crack. *She has to run up that construction hazard every time she has to pee?*

I call out as I hear the shower shut off. "Adler, I'm here!" *Just letting you know, seeing as you left your door unlocked and I could be a burglar, or worse.*

"Okay, hi!" she squeaks from behind the door.

She emerges from the bathroom a few moments later in a green pair of shorts and a white tank top that is slowly drenching from her long damp hair. She takes the steps so quickly, she essentially floats. Floating is probably safer on those stairs.

"Hi, sorry. I had to wash the flight off of me."

My eyes trail over her smooth thighs, sculpted with thin lines of muscle. Her tank top is now soaked from her hair. Only Adler could look like a centerfold in gym shorts and a plain top. I normally don't give myself permission to look at her like this, but after our conversation last night, I let my gaze rest on her full tits. I imagine how perfectly they'd fill my hand...my mouth.

She settles on the opposite side of the couch, leaving a cushion between us, and pulls her knees to her chest. I feel the need to ease her nerves...to ease mine.

"How was your conference? We missed you at the office."

"It was incredible. I learned so much. Tessa gave me a lot to think about."

"You're friends with the author who stole your book?"

Adler's face twists in indignation. "Tessa did not steal my book. It's her book and okay"—she exhales deeply—"I don't want to get into it right now. I'm still a little hungover." Adler reaches over no man's land and squeezes my knee in a suggestive way that sends an electric pulse up my thigh.

"I see—it was a vacation. And here I thought your conference was educational."

"Work hard, play hard."

"Is it? Work?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you going to write another book?"

"Technically, I didn't write a book."

"Are you going to answer the question you know I'm asking or keep ducking behind technicalities?"

"Definitely the technicality thing."

Adler abandons me on the couch to rummage through her fridge but returns just as quickly. She sits, omitting the space between us. Her thigh presses firmly against mine.

"I can offer you a questionable banana, tap water from the sink, baking soda, or cold gummy bears." Her cheeks flush a rosy pink. "I wish I was exaggerating."

I smile because she does. It's becoming a habit. Her lips stretch wide, making her bubbly cheeks bunch and I can't help but feel happy.

"You keep gummy bears in the fridge?"

"You don't?"

"I'm an adult, so I don't eat gummy bears. But if I did, I wouldn't keep them in the fridge. That's

like putting gum in the fridge.”

“I do that too.”

“You’re nuts.”

“*Your* nuts.” Adler’s eyes land on my lap before she looks up at me expectantly.

I burst in laughter. “No. No way! That’s your big move?”

“Well one of us has to do something. If I keep waiting for you to kiss me, I’ll be old and—”

I use my lips to end her rambling. Our tongues toy around, askingly. *How’s this? What now?* I weave my hands through her damp hair, holding her steady. She gasps when my tongue trails her jaw line. Then, her neck. My fist closes in her hair and she tilts her head back in response. I press my lips against the hollow of her throat and she whimpers. We haven’t even started but she seems overwhelmed already. She holds her breath like it can control her nervous squirming. I pull away.

“What’re you doing?” she asks.

“Last chance. To stop.”

She rolls her eyes. “All right, this is getting really old. Are you looking for an excuse?”

“Us having sex isn’t going to cause an epiphany for me. Do you understand that? No matter how much I like you, nothing’s changed. Are you sure you’re okay with keeping this just—”

“Joel, stop.” Adler rakes over her bottom lip with her top teeth and quickly releases it. “I already told you how I feel and what I want. So, what do you still need from me?”

My fingers trace her bare thigh. I consider responses and land on honesty. “I need to know this isn’t going to end with you hurt...or hating me.”

“It won’t.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, but since you’re insisting on killing the mood, maybe we should iron a few things out first.”

“Okay. Such as?”

“I realize this isn’t a real relationship, but you don’t plan on sleeping with other women while we’re hooking up, do you? Just for health and safety and whatnot.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” I turn inward on the couch and face Adler head on. I rub the tip of my thumb across her soft cheek and smooth lips. “What about you?”

“Well, it’s complicated...because of that brothel I run. But I’ll see what I can do.” I pretend not to be amused by Adler’s sarcastic humor. She’s like a toddler. I laugh and it just encourages her. “Should we keep things to ourselves?”

“Why? You’re not my dirty little secret. We’re adults, doing adult things.”

“Does that mean you’ll write home about me?” Adler flutters her eyelashes and disorients me with her deep-blue gems.

“Probably not...because I wouldn’t know how to explain things.”

“Mmmm, how about—I’m sliding my mail into my assistant’s slot. I’m letting my assistant handle my briefs. I’m foreseeing aggressive growth at the office...wait I swear I have better ones... something about a stapler?” Adler’s shoulders bounce up and down playfully. This time I break down and laugh.

“You overcompensate with humor when you’re nervous.”

“What?” she squeaks then clears her throat. “I don’t do that.” She forces a lower decibel.

“Sure, Baby Spice. That was very convincing. Tell me honestly, does the lack of relationship bother you? Do you want a boyfriend?”

“It’s Friday night, and you could be out but you want to be here with me, right?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then, that’s enough. But since you brought it up...why are you so adamant against marriage? You were going to tell me before I stormed out the night you found out about the book. I was a little nervous to ask, like it wasn’t my business, but now that I’ve seen your disco stick, it’s all fair game. I’d even ask if you wax your ass at this point.”

“Once...but never again.” I recoil at the painful memory of a lost bet in college. I couldn’t sit comfortably for days. Adler grabs her ribs as she snickers. “But as for the marriage stuff—it’s complicated. I’m not convinced it brings out the good in people. In fact, based on everything I’ve seen, I’d argue it brings out the worst.”

Speaking of mood killers.

“You know what?” Her humorous expression sobers. She places one hand on my cheek and smooths the strained lines on my forehead with the other. “Do you want to table this conversation for another time?”

Adler hikes her knee across my lap and straddles me. She slides my glasses off and neatly folds them before leaning backwards to set them on her coffee table. It gives me the perfect view of her full bust.

“I’d like that.” My words are barely a whisper.

She plants a tender kiss on my lips. Something’s changed. She’s more confident. She traces the back of my neck with the tip of her thumbnail, sending a tremor down my spine. Her perfume smells like sweet, innocent lust. A weird contradiction. Like heaven meets hell.

I wrap my hands around her hips and yank her even closer, so she’s sitting on my growing erection. I can feel the oven preheating between her legs as her breath picks up. She locks her legs around me and we fold into each other like origami. Her damp hair feels glacial against my shoulders, and the sensation is tantalizing. Like ice melting against fire. No. Something more. We’re hotter—super nova.

“I’m going to take such good care of you,” I rasp against her ear. She rocks on top of me as she runs her nails lightly across my hair, tickling my scalp. *Damn, I love that.* My hand shoots up her shirt and under the wire of her bra. I pinch her nipple between my thumb and forefinger. She arches her back so forcefully I barely catch her with my arm before she falls off my lap. I secure her against my chest and growl in her ear. “I’m going to make you come so hard, so many times, you’re going to need to hibernate after tonight.”

For once, Adler doesn’t have a sarcastic reply. She reaches for the waistline of my jeans. She undoes the button and tugs on my zipper.

I shift my hips, allowing enough room for Adler’s hand to slip underneath my waistband. She grazes my length shyly, so I press against her hand with mine, asking her to commit. “Fuck, Adler, I’ve wanted to do this for so lo—”

The handle turns with an audible clank.

Her front door flings wide open.

Adler rips her hands out of my pants.

Aaahhh! Fuck!

I whip my head to the left to see three girls crowding the doorway, looking as mortified as I feel. They didn’t knock, they gave no warning, they just entered the apartment like they own the place. We’re caught in the act.

Adler slumps her head against my chest and lets out small, rigid heaves. At first, I think she’s crying but then she loudly snorts.

“Shit.” She chuckles. “I forgot about girls’ night.”

“We’ll wait outside, Bear.” The curly-blond-haired girl reaches in to close the door. The awkward lull sobers us both.

“We need to talk about locking your door from now on. For more reasons than one.”

Adler cups her hands over her flushed face and buries deeper into my chest. “It wouldn’t matter,” she mumbles against my shirt. “They all have keys.”

“Those are your best friends?”

“Yep. The whole crew, except one. But I can guarantee you Mani is already aware of the situation. Ten bucks says they are on the phone with her as we speak.”

“Your sex life is that big of a deal to your friends?”

“Uh...no?”

“Did they know I’d be here?”

“No. It’s Friday. It’s samosas, sangria, and *Sex and the City* night.”

“I was kind of hoping to have sex in the city tonight,” I tease. Actually, I’m still hoping she’ll let me pull her panties to the side and ride me like a Harley on a bumpy road. But Adler’s body relaxes. The tension strewed across her back from her excitement—gone. Tonight is at a dead end.

“*And the city. It’s Sex and the City, not in the city.*”

“Baby, it’s just a joke.”

Adler flinches at my word choice. I’m unzipped, and still sporting a partial on her couch, but apparently ‘baby’ is crossing the line.

“Do you want me to leave?”

She nods slowly. “Kinda. Sorry.”

I want her so bad, but I think right now she very badly wants to explain herself to her friends. “All right. But I’m going to go home and make a very long list of all the ways I want you to make this up to me.”

“You got it, boss.”

She nuzzles my nose and then reaches behind her to grab my glasses. She places them back on my face, careful not to poke me in the eye. “How much can you see without these on?” Adler teeters her head from side to side, looking at me like a curious puppy.

“I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you take them off, strip down, and go stand over there naked. Let’s see if I can paint you a word picture.” I point to the far corner of the room.

“Ha!”

My glasses and contacts help my eyes from straining too much. They are mostly preventative. I will surely be nearsighted by the time I’m fifty, but for now I can see Adler’s perfect red-rose pouty lips curl into my favorite smile with or without my frames.

She climbs off of me carefully and I rise to compose myself. I zip and button my jeans as I follow her to the door.

“I’ll tell everyone you said hi.”

“What? I’ll at least introduce myself on the way out. Wouldn’t it be rude if I didn’t?” I’m not sure what I could’ve possibly said to make Adler’s cheeks flush scarlet, but her eyes pop wide open in surprise and she stares at me like I just told her I wanted to head down to the river and drown some kittens.

“You want to meet my friends?”

“Yes?”

Her gaze shifts left and right nervously. She shrugs in a ‘what the hell’ fashion before opening the door. All three ladies are sitting, backs against the wall, patiently waiting to be admitted into the

apartment. They stop conversing and stand up when they see us.

“Guys, this is Joel Lewis. My boss...and my friend. Joel, this is Quinn Sabin, Reese Reyes, and Noa Fallon.”

“Good evening, ladies. Sorry to interrupt your girls’ night.” I try to sound charming. These women are my judge and jury. One wrong word from any of them and Adler will probably drop me like a bad habit. I know how girl groups work. “Please don’t be offended by me doing this...”

Adler shoots me a panicked look, unaware of what I mean. I hold up my finger and point from the left to right at the women in front of me.

“Sporty Spice, Scary Spice, and Posh Spice. Did I get that right? Also, do you ladies happen to have a redheaded friend who is missing tonight?”

“He knows Mani?” The girl named Noa outs Adler who is flushing in wild embarrassment.

Ha! I turn to Adler. “Knew it. Ginger Spice does exist.”

“Addie told you about her Spice Girls obsession?” Reese’s brow arches. “You’re close. I’m actually Posh, Noa’s Sporty.”

“I have to ask—”

“Why Addie is Baby Spice?” the brunette named Quinn with the natural-looking tan interjects. The other girls are smiling, but Quinn is looking at me like she wants to drive a pen through my eye.

“Does he know why?” Quinn asks Adler with a perplexed expression. I hate it when women do this. All the damn secrets. Now I really want to know something that is probably none of my business.

Adler hangs her head as she shakes it left to right. “No. No he does not.” They all exchange looks before Quinn patches the awkward silence.

“It’s just because she’s the youngest out of all of us.”

“Yep. Addie is the only freshie I ever roomed with.” Reese taps Adler on the nose as she passes us and heads into the apartment. “Nice to meet you, *Mr. Lewis.*”

The other girls fall in line behind her, leaving Adler and me alone in the hallway. She’s still staring at her bare feet, head hung in shame. Is she embarrassed in front of her friends? Embarrassed of what we’re doing...or what we were trying to do, anyhow.

“Freshie?”

“We all lived together in a three-bedroom apartment through college. Reese and I shared a room.”

“I see. Would you say you guys broke out into pillow fights in your underwear seldom, sometimes, or often? Just for survey purposes of course.”

Adler laughs and pushes my shoulder. “Bye, Joel.”

“Can I see you tomorrow? My place? My apartment is a little bigger.”

“Sure, that’s fine. Thank you for being cool about this.”

I kiss her cheek. “Of course, Baby Spice.”

“You’re a good friend.”

“Don’t speak too quickly. You haven’t seen that list yet.” I wink. “You should start hydrating now.” I pull Adler’s finger to my lips. I pop the tip of her pointer in my mouth and bite it ever so gently. I follow up with a kiss where I nipped. She’s dazed for just a second.

“All right. Take a hike, buddy. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I sense her eyes on me as I walk down the hallway. I look over my shoulder to confirm my suspicions. Low and behold, Adler’s devouring my ass with her eyes with no shame.

“Hey, perv! Eyes up here,” I say, grinning ear to ear.

“Yeah, yeah, just keep walking.”

twenty

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I'm on the stand. I'm not just a witness. *Oh no, baby.* I got caught committing the crime. The prosecution, aka my best friends, cook up their cross examination as I compile a defense. "So?" I ask but they are still reading. Their eyes shift left to right across Tessa's rules while Carrie and Samantha banter back and forth in the streets of New York City on the television screen behind me. I flex my toes as if they could sink deeper into the hardwood floors of my apartment. I don't know why I'm nervous. It's not like I need their permission to do this with Joel. *I want it though.* I don't like being at odds with my family.

Reese finally breaks the silence. "These rules seem pretty on point to me. You might want to add in there no threesomes. That can get messy and confusing. I mean, unless you're into that..."

I press my lips in a flat line. "Maybe I should try sex with one person...before two."

"Smart."

"Addie, you sure this is a good idea? You work for him. He doesn't want a relationship. You're inexperienced. There are so many red flags here." Noa taps the paper in front of her. "Rules aren't going to protect you from your feelings."

Mani chimes in from the speakerphone on Noa's phone. "She'll be fine. There are other assistant jobs in the city if worse comes to worst. I say happy humping my friend. Can someone text me a better picture of those rules?" Bumping music is audible in the background. She must've stepped out of the club to join this oh-so-important conversation.

"Can you move your ass back to Denver, where it belongs?" Quinn snaps at the phone. "Then you could see them clear as day yourself."

"Hey, Quinny, maybe you should move your cranky ass out to my neck of the woods. The Cali sun could relax you."

Quinn's angst is the result of Mani withdrawals. Actually, those two were always at each other's throats regardless of location. I don't have much experience with parent dynamics but I'd liken it to a mom and dad fighting.

Quinn took Mani's move the hardest. She's spent the last year and a half begging Mani to come home. I wouldn't be surprised if she has an elaborate kidnapping plan mapped out for our annual girls' trip at the lodge this year. Quinn values our friendships over everything—family stays close. We all feel that way, but I think somehow Quinn bears the burden of keeping us together.

"Mani, I'd rather bathe in chum and swim through shark-infested waters than move to L.A.," Quinn seethes.

"You're so dramatic. It's not that bad. Nono liked it," Mani justifies.

Noa cringes and holds her hand out flat, teetering her thumb and pinky in the universal 'sorta'

symbol.

“Oh please, there’s only one reason Noa liked L.A.,” Quinn blurts. She mouths ‘*sorry*’ to Noa. We’re still not supposed to talk about her summer with Hollywood heartthrob, Chase Ford. She claims silence is the best way for us to help her move on and forget.

“It’s fine. Can we get back to Addie, please? So, explain this to us again. You’re going to have casual sex with your boss?” Noa asks, eagerly redirecting the conversation.

“That’s the plan,” I answer.

“With no strings attached?”

“Exactly.”

“But you won’t be screwing around with other people?” Reese asks.

“Right.”

“And he still doesn’t know you’re a virgin?” Noa picks back up.

“Is it really that big of a deal?”

“Yes!” Quinn barks. *Oh, here we go. I knew I pissed off mama bear.* “Addie, I’m not trying to be a killjoy, but this isn’t some random guy. I’ve been watching you pine after Joel for months now. And you want your first time to be with someone who doesn’t want a commitment? He is going to break your heart.”

“That’s what the rules are for,” I argue. “Look, guys, if I could replicate the feeling I get with Joel with some knight in shining armor who wanted to get down on one knee and make me an honest woman, I would. But it is what it is. All I know is when I’m with Joel, I know exactly what I want.”

Quinn leans back into the sofa and rubs her eyelids in distress. She grumbles something inaudible. Reese pats her knee. “Bear’s a big girl. She can handle herself.” *Thank you, Reese’s Pieces!*

“Nono?” I ask, like I always do. She’s usually my ally in matters of the heart.

“It’s dangerous, Addie. Like it or not, sex comes with feelings. But how you handle those feelings I guess is the real question.” *I’m going to go ahead and take that as tentative support.*

“Quinny? Are you going to hate me?” I ask.

Quinn contorts her face. Her eyes are gleaming with disapproval. “Adler Monroe Haley,” she says. *Uh-oh.* She just middle-named me. “It’s going to hurt like hell if you fall in love and Joel doesn’t fall in love with you. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, Quinn.” *It’s reckless, I know.*

“But it’s me. It’s *us*.” Quinn looks around and nods at each of my girls who are circled around me. “We’ll be here to help you pick up the pieces when this all goes straight to hell. Which it abso-fucking-lutely will by the way.”

“Put me on FaceTime,” Amani squeals through the speakerphone.

Noa props her phone up against a stack of books on my coffee table. I pounce on my friends and the couch creaks in protest under our combined weight. It may collapse. *Worth it.* Hugs are necessary right now.

My friends are always supportive, but this grace is something more. They all think this is crazy, each for different reasons, but they are allowing me to learn my own lesson.

If they fought me, it might be different. It’s too hard to lie to them and I refuse to be at odds with them over this. If it came down to a choice...well it wouldn’t be much of a choice. *Bye, Mr. Lewis.*

“Baby Bear?” I turn to see Mani screwing up her face on the little FaceTime thumbnail image. She’s dressed in something low cut and sparkly with her bright red hair covering her shoulders. She squints. Her view is an up-close of my ass, as I’m dog-piled half on top of Reese and Quinn.

“What?”

“Were you seriously just about to get it on with your boss before the girls walked in?”

“I think we established that.”

“No, I mean you were going to lose your virginity wearing *that*?! What the hell? You look like you’re about to get on the elliptical. Oh my god, you’re wearing old faithful, aren’t you?”

Crap. Old faithful is my favorite white bra that I’ve had since freshman year. It’s a little worn, a little plain and outdated, but it fits me perfectly. D-cups are way too roomy for me, but I spill out of some Cs. Old faithful is a perfect blend between the two as if it were made just for me. Every woman knows that when you find a bra that hugs you right, you wear it to death.

All four of them bust out laughing as my cheeks heat to a hundred degrees. *Shit.* I didn’t even think of that. Maybe I am already far too comfortable with Joel. Was I supposed to get dolled up? Tessa didn’t write me any rules for that.

“I don’t think Joel really minds that sort of thing,” I reason.

“Did you ever find out if he has a dick?” Mani raises her brow. I respond with one sheepish nod. *Uh, yeah. I think it qualifies as one and a half.* “Then, he minds.” I look around to several nodding heads. In this, they’re all in agreement.

“Since we’re on the subject, I actually do have some questions.” I grab the remote and turn off the television. I could probably watch a few episodes of our favorite HBO series and learn a thing or two, but this isn’t a fiction book, TV, movies, or porn. I need some raw, real-life questions answered from my friends who have far more experience than I.

“What should I do if I’ve never had sex before and Joel has a penis that’s roughly the size of a Louisville slugger?” I blink at their slack-jawed, shocked faces. “I’m not even exaggerating that much.”

Four pairs of eyes nearly pop right out of their skulls before they all start chiming in with suggestions and warnings.

And just like that—it’s officially Friday night—girls’ night. Samosas, sangria, *Sex and the City*, and apparently my sex education.

twenty-one

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Joel

Felices is an angsty little shit today. He brushes up against me, not out of affection, but as a warning. He's as pent up as I am, but unfortunately for him no relief is coming. I've searched for the past year, there are no female F-1 Savannah cats available to keep him company. He'll have to settle for a walk as soon as I'm done with this phone call that I'm trying to hurry along.

"Steve." I drop my phone on my fluffy comforter after pressing the speaker button. "Aren't you supposed to be drunk off piña coladas learning to hula or some shit like that? I thought we had the conversation about letting me handle the portfolio as I see fit."

Steve grumbles into the phone about being sick of Hawaii. His wife Alice is living out her retirement dream, soaking up the sun, moving even slower than island time. Steve on the other hand has the anxiety levels of a front-row audience member at Cirque Du Soleil. He's on the edge of his seat bracing for shit to hit the fan.

"We have an opportunity to distinguish ourselves with a perfectly performing portfolio. What is your attachment to Rychess?"

My perfectly performing portfolio. "What is your issue? The overall returns look good."

"But the investors have questions about the outlier. Rychess is a money pit, surely you can see that. Eight years without turning a significant profit. Let them go in peace, Joel. We can find the CEO another gig."

"And what about all the employees? What about what they've built?"

"Scrap the technology and sell it in pieces, that's the best route to recover some funds."

Jesus. Scrap it for parts like a rundown rusted Impala? "I'm close friends with the founder, Steve. I'm not doing that." Felices jumps on the bed and stares at me menacingly. The slits in his bulging yellow eyes say 'walk me now or face the consequences'.

"Look, Lewis—I know you're some kid wonder hotshot, but I've been in this business a lot longer than you. When you start making decisions based on anything other than the bottom line, your company will fail. I made that mistake one too many times which is why I had to hire some pretty-boy East Coaster to come save my ass."

"Thanks for that," I chide. My left eye twitches. Kid wonder hotshot? How'd I get in business bed with such an ass?

"My point is, you've got the muscle. But do you have the endurance? Investors don't want to play the short game, they want companies that will deliver on dividends long-term. Rychess isn't capable. Make the smart decision. Cut 'em loose. The money pool belongs to the companies that can do something with it."

Instead of telling Steve to shove it up his ass, I tell him I'll think about it. Rychess is my blind

spot. But maybe I don't mind. I'm all about exceptions lately.

Felices's furry face is suddenly in mine as his massive furry paw smacks me across the cheek. Being slapped by a cat that's pulled in its claws isn't painful...just emasculating.

"Are you kidding me right now, you furry asshole?" I push him off the bed but he's unbothered as he lands gracefully on all fours with a light thud. "Don't act like this when Adler gets here, you handsome little monster."

Speaking of which...

I pull out my phone again.

Me: Do you want to do dinner tonight?

Adler: Sure. What'd you have in mind?

Me: Do you mind getting dressed up? I can make reservations at the steakhouse on Sixteenth. But it has a dress code.

I'm planning on wearing her body out tonight. After the tease session last night, the dam has broken. I don't just want her, I need her. The least I can do is treat her to a nice night out first.

Adler: Let's stay in. Pizza?

I dial her immediately. I wait until the line's connected but cut her off before she can speak. "You don't want to go somewhere nice?"

She takes a moment to answer. "Not really. I'm happy with the three Ps."

"Well now I'm intrigued."

"Pizza."

"Mhm."

"Popcorn."

"Okay...and?"

"Pop...as in soda."

"Really thought you were going somewhere else with that, Baby Spice."

The sound of a crinkling wrapper fills my ear. She must be unwrapping some form of candy. Her mouth is full when she responds. "I know you were, perv. But I'm a lady—I don't say that word."

"Have you read your book?"

"What book? You mean Tessa Rayne's book, *Toy With Me*? Of course not. I heard she writes super filthy in that novel."

She loves this. The teasing. She got me all gassed up last night and basically kicked me out. It's not because Adler is cruel. Quite the opposite. She just loves knowing that I want her. And I do.

Badly.

"So pizza?" I ask. "From our usual place?"

"Fine by me. Just don't put any of your weird aristocratic Manhattan froo-froo toppings on it."

"Meaning?"

"No weird shellfish that I can't pronounce, no rare peppers from the Galapagos islands, no cheeses that are made from llamas' milk or something like that."

She makes my admittedly eclectic palette sound like the challenge ingredient basket from a daunting episode of *Iron Chef*. But she's exaggerating. I've never eaten anything that's come out of a

llama.

“Very funny, Baby Spice. Should I just have the chef at Rico’s chop gummy bears up real fine and blend them into the sauce?”

“That’d be lovely.”

“Then we can drop some Skittles in Sprite bottles to wash down your candy pizza.”

“Keep preaching, boss. I’m all in.”

“I have to go to the office and get a little work done today. Come over about seven. I’ll leave an elevator key with the front desk for you.”

“Alrighty. Hey Joel?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for offering to take me out somewhere nice. That was surprisingly sweet.”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I?”

She sucks in a breath like she’s about to respond. But instead, the line is silent for a moment. “See you tonight.” The three beeps in my ear tell me our connection is lost.

In perfect timing too, because Felices hops on the bed and balls up his furry fist again. “Fine. Go get your leash.” I’m not sure if he understands me but he scurries out of the bedroom. I fish my phone back out of my pocket.

Me: Can we make a pact?

Adler: Good grief. You again?

Me: Adler.

Adler: What pact? Is it to follow Spice Girls around the U.S. if they ever have a reunion tour?

Me: No.

Me: Hell no.

Adler: Suit yourself. But fine, what pact?

Me: Let’s promise to stay friends. If hooking up ever gets too complicated, we stop. We just go back to this.

Adler: Okay. Deal.

Me: Good.

Adler: Friends go with friends to Spice Girl reunion concerts though. Just putting that out there.

Fuck no. The sex would have to be really good to convince me to do that. *Like really good.*

twenty-two

...

Adler

I'm out of place at the Four Seasons. This level of luxury is not one I'm accustomed to. The decor is immaculate. The cream-swirled marble tiles on the floor look like they were painted by hand. The grandiose crystal chandeliers hanging above my head glow perfectly, putting the stars in the sky to shame. The Venetian light fixtures that are precisely spaced along the wall look like they came from the Vatican itself. Everything is so romantic and beautiful. But holy crap that's a lot of money spent on stuff you walk on and glance at.

I exit the private elevators and make my way to the only door at the end of the hallway. Yeesh. *Penthouse*. Of course, it's the penthouse.

The front door to Joel's home swings open before I can knock. My fist hangs aimlessly in the air.

"Addie-cakes!" Cody pulls me into a big bear hug, lifting me off the ground and testing the strength of my spine. Over his shoulder an enormous grand piano is in plain view. Not a baby grand. An actual grand. Because this place is large enough to accommodate one. In fact, even from the entry view, Joel's penthouse looks large enough to accommodate an army of grand pianos...comfortably.

"Cody, you live here now, right?"

"Yep. Sure do."

"Just with Joel?"

"Yep."

"And Scrooge McDuck?"

"It's a little over the top, right? Joel normally has simple taste but he said this was the selling point that got him." Cody drags me to the bottom of a solid spiral staircase with curved glass barriers. It's the most sophisticated piece of architecture I've ever seen. The stairs are literally art. Cody positions me at the bottom of the spiral and points up, guiding my gaze through the middle of the circular space that the stairs encompass.

"Wow." I'm completely in awe. From the very top of the ceiling, dripping lights cascade down on invisible wires. "These look like falling stars. Like magic."

"Exactly. Especially at night."

I'm relieved that it's Cody standing next to me. If Joel were here this would be borderline inappropriate—in the realm of romantic.

"Where is—*aaaarghh*."

Something furry torpedoes into the back of my knee causing my leg to buckle. I ungracefully collapse to the ground. I'm suddenly on my back looking into a pair of giant yellow eyes. They blink at me as if to say, 'your move'.

"Damn cat!" Cody shouts but stays as still as a statue.

“Well, you’re awfully forward, aren’t you?” I whisper to the rather large feline...that I’m talking to. Seems about right. A part of me knew I’d always end up a crazy cat lady.

A rough sandpaper tongue drags across my face. He curls up and makes himself right at home on top of my breasts and stomach. He begins to purr so aggressively it’s like I’m holding a vibrating massage pad from Sharper Image.

I mumble in a warm tenor as I stroke his furry head. “You didn’t have to tackle me. All you had to do was ask and I would’ve pet you.” My head knocks against the hard floor and I rest my gaze on the trickling stars above me as my furry new blanket burrows into me.

“Why are you on the floor?” A familiar voice fills the room.

Cody responds on my behalf. “Addie may be concussed because your demon steed attacked her from behind.”

“Off, boy!” Joel commands. “Attacked?” His voice softens as he addresses me. Joel holds his hand out and flashes that charming smirk. The five o’clock shadow he wears makes my stomach flit. I love how his scruff feels brushing against my cheek.

“He was just playing. I lost my footing.” I stand up and adjust my sweater and bra. Accident or not, a cat just got to second base with me. “He’s a sweetie. What’s his name?”

“Sweetie?” Cody scoffs.

“Felices,” Joel answers. He pronounces it slowly—*Fell-ee-sees*.

Hmm, Felices...Felices...why is that familiar? Felices...Felix Felices...Felix the Cat... I mumble incoherently to myself as Joel and Cody watch me in concern.

“Got it!” I exclaim at the end of my detective work. I turn to Joel triumphantly. He did mention that as a kid he read the entire *Harry Potter* series about four times through. “You named your cat Felix Felices after the *Harry Potter* luck potion? That’s pretty awesome.”

Joel smiles warmly. No, proudly. “I’m impressed, Baby Spice.”

Cody looks at me, then Joel, and shakes his head with bewilderment. “Marry her, bro,” he mutters. “She’s the only woman on the planet who thinks that’s awesome. Promise you.”



Much to Joel’s annoyance, Cody joins us for dinner. He pulls two bottles out of the fridge and hands one to me. I almost thank him until I see the red label.

“What?” he asks. “Not a beer kind of girl?”

“Cody-cakes, I realize you are a new resident of this great mountain state so I will forgive you just this once, but moving forward, you can leave your Clydesdales at the state line, my friend. You are officially in Coors country now.”

Joel’s hearty laughter sounds from the kitchen. The butterflies in my chest are flapping wildly but after months of these delicious nerves, I’m used to it. I steal glances at Joel’s body whenever his head is turned. He’s dressed in sexual-casual this evening, wearing dark gray athletic pants paired with a black t-shirt that slightly hugs the washboard sitting below his broad chest. He looks misplaced in this fancy penthouse which only makes him more appealing to me.

Joel joins Cody and me in the living room. He holds out a bottle with the correct label with the icy blue mountains. He winks at me before turning to Cody. “I told you she’s a beer snob.”

“I’m not a beer snob, I’m a brand loyalist. Two totally different things.”

Joel isn’t wasting time with space tonight. He sits right next to me on his oversized leather couch which is so deep and wide it can easily double as a bed. My feet don’t touch the floor if I sit all the way back, so I press my knees together and tuck my legs to the side, ensuring the soles of my shoes don’t scuff up the leather couch. Joel spreads his legs into a wide V so his thigh lines mine, warming me. He lightly traces the long zipper of my boot with his fingertips. Up then down. Like he’s trying to decide between off or on.

“Cody, weren’t you going out tonight?” Joel juts his head to the door and gives Cody an obvious look.

“No. I thought we were all going to hang out, eat some ’za, maybe catch up on *This Is Us*. I’m still on season three and am in the mood for a series binge. It could take *all* night. Addie-cakes, you down?”

“Sure am. But I warn you, I’m on season five and I’m a total commentator. You’ll hear more of my voice than the show.” I don’t mind having Cody around for a while. It takes some of the pressure off.

“Cody, leave. Now,” Joel barks.

Cody retreats, laughing heavily as he swipes his keys off the kitchen island. I’m assuming his intentions were always to leave us alone, he just wanted to provoke Joel first.

“Make good choices, you two,” he calls over his shoulder before disappearing out of the room. The front door slams shut.

“Sorry about him,” Joel says, nuzzling into my ear.

“Sorry for what? He’s perfectly friendly.”

“Hopefully not our kind of friendly,” Joel breathes against my neck. He plants soft purposeful wet kisses from behind my ear to my throat. My stomach swoops. The ache between my thighs awakens instantly as if he has a magic ‘on’ button. He pulls my hips downwards so I’m lying flat on my back then pries my legs apart so he can wedge his body between them. He hovers on top of me and pauses to smile before he gently presses his lips against mine. His arms that are pillared on either side of me hold his weight, but even so, I feel the pressure of his muscled frame forcing me down into the leather couch. I welcome it. I need him here grounding me, holding me to the earth so I don’t float away.

“And then there were two. Finally, just me and you,” he whispers.

I mean to make a Dr. Suess joke but words escape me. My brain fogs over and there’s nothing funny about the way he’s touching me. We’re in the lab and this is chemistry. I’ll study the subject forever. It’s addicting. Overcoming. A lustful drug that immediately shoots through my veins like the best high in the world every time Joel touches me somewhere new.

He explores with his lips, trailing kisses beneath my collarbone. He tugs on the scoop neck of my sweater with one hand trying to expose as much skin as he can. His other hand is already underneath me, firmly pressed against my skin as he unclasps my bra. I decided to wear a matching set of sexy black lingerie tonight. *Thanks for that, Mani*. I shake my head in embarrassed annoyance remembering the conversation.

Joel immediately halts. “No?” His eyes are wide with concern.

“Not you. Sorry. Yes, to you. To all of this.”

Joel pushes up my sweater and forces my loosened bra upwards, freeing my breasts. I whimper when he engulfs me. This is about as far as I’ve been before, but with Joel I’m not dying to turn back. I’m nervous. Shaking, sweating, nervous. But forward is all I want. He swirls his tongue and flicks until my nipples are aching and raw from the attention.

“Your tits are perfect,” Joel says between mouthfuls.

“What makes perfect tits?”

He pulls away, eyes glazed, like he’s caught a thought and is lost. My exposed nipple, wet from his tongue, catches the cool air of the room and I shudder. Joel’s eyes rake over my chest, examining me thoroughly.

“Come to think of it, I don’t really know. I guess...they’re perfect because they’re yours.”

Oh, bravo. “Should we go to your room?”

“Why? Cody isn’t coming back anytime soon.” My expression twists with awkward uncertainty but Joel doesn’t seem to notice. His eyes are burning. “We’ll go in a minute if you want. There’s no rush. What if I want you here?”

Losing my virginity is enough of a hurdle. Losing my virginity exposed in the middle of Joel’s living room under all these lights? Reality sets in and my cool-girl act is finally at the closing curtain. I begin to panic. It’s not sexy, it’s not attractive, and I can’t for the life of me stop it.

My heart races uncontrollably and I try to swallow short heaves. I’m nearly hyperventilating. I subtly take deep breaths as the prickly tension of my nerves needle into my skin like getting a tattoo.

“Hey, whoa, whoa, Adler. What’s wrong?”

Joel removes his hands from my body and rises up so he’s no longer on top of me. I feel so stupid. I thought if you fake it, you’re supposed to eventually make it.

“Hey, talk to me. Are we going too fast?” His face contorts in worry. He blushes lightly as if he’s guilty.

“Oh, no. No, Joel. I want to do this. I *really* want to do this. I’m just a little nervous.”

Joel grabs the throw blanket draped over the couch and wraps it around me when he notices I’m shivering.

“Why? It’s still just me. You’ve seen my dick, Adler. Touched it too. Not too much more I can hide from you.” He smirks.

“You haven’t seen me.” I suck in a breath and hold it. The vulnerability is making me nauseous.

“Is this your first time doing this?” My heart stops. *Definitely, definitely nauseous.* “With a friend, I mean. You don’t normally have sex outside of a relationship?”

I weigh my options. If I stand here perfectly still and don’t respond, if I don’t even blink—is that technically lying? “Why are you asking me this?”

“Because if you think I’m going to treat you like a one-night stand—I’m not. You’re important to me. And the best part of friends with benefits is that we can talk about this stuff without being weird about it.” Joel pats my knee through the blanket.

“Talk about what exactly?”

“What you like, what you don’t like, why the hell you’re so damn nervous all of a sudden.”

“Okay, you want the truth?”

“No, please lie to me.” Geez. My sarcasm is really starting to rub off on him.

“You read my book...”

“Yes, I did. Twice as I told you.”

“It’s just fiction.”

“I realize.”

“It’s not based on me.”

“I know that.”

“So, you read my book and then suddenly you’re okay with the whole ‘fun bunnies’ setup.” He smiles at our inside joke. “I can’t help but notice the correlation. I um...I’m not as experienced as you’re probably thinking.” My knee jiggles nervously, rippling the blanket.

Joel clutches his heart and lets out a breathy ‘*awww*’ that from any other man would sound painfully condescending. But it’s Joel...it’s the way he looks at me. He makes what’s maybe wrong, kind of right. Somehow.

“To clarify, you think I only want to fuck you because you wrote at least ten pages about the most intense blowjob a man has ever been treated to? I think your exact words were ‘spewed out cum like a broken fire hydrant after she grazed him with her te—’”

“*Okay!* Okay, yes, you made your point.” Heat crawls up my neck and face remembering the words I wrote. “I’ve never done that—”

“What? Make a man spew like a broken fire hydrant after—”

“Joel!”

He lets out a throaty laugh. It takes him a few seconds to compose himself. “Let me be clear. I don’t want to sleep with you because of your book. I’ve wanted you since the first time I met you and you told me I could call you Baby Spice. The very moment I knew my hot new assistant was sweet and *brave*—because what levelheaded adult can admit she still loves the Spice Girls?”

I gasp. “You hold your tongue, sir. Spice Girls will rule forever. And if you want to be my lover, you better get on board with the spice magic.”

“There you go. Now you sound more like yourself.” Joel crinkles his nose as he brushes the loose strands of hair out of my face. “I only want to do things that make you feel good. Let’s just be honest and keep this fun, okay?”

“Okay.”

“You still want to do this?”

“Yes.” Now more than ever.

“How about we get a little more comfortable first? Warm up?”

“Sure, like another round?” I kick off the blanket with every intention to fetch another beer and let some liquid courage fill my veins. Joel holds me back. He slides off his glasses and tosses them on the living room table.

“No, Adler.” His eyes fog over with devilish sin. “I mean I want to go down on you right here on this couch. Until your legs are shaking and you’re begging me to stop.”

Whatever it was that just shot through my veins works better than alcohol. *Like, much better.* He kneels between my knees, hooks his fingers around the waistband of my leggings and thong, and urgently pulls them down to the tops of my boots.

“Well, that’s not going to work. As much as I love these boots on you...” Joel slowly unzips my left boot, then my right. He pulls them off my heels one by one and tosses them aside. My leggings and thong go next. The most sacred part of my anatomy is suddenly exposed under the bright recessed overhead lighting.

“Hm...Brazilian. For some reason I really did not expect that,” Joel mumbles almost inaudibly. I fight the urge to cross my legs out of shyness.

“It’s a little bright in here,” I complain.

“Lights dim,” Joel commands and the bulbs in the room do as they are told.

“Voice command. Impressive.”

“Everything in this place is set up on voice command. In fact, let’s see if this works—Adler, come.” Joel looks at me expectantly. I press my lips together trying not to laugh at his mood-ruining joke. “No? All right, I’ll do it myself then.” His mischievous smile is the last thing I see before he dives face first between my thighs.

twenty-three

...

I am somewhere higher than heaven. I never knew this place existed, but I'm here. Every so often I feel Joel smile against my womanhood as I make sounds I've only heard when I was doing my book research. *Ahem yes, porn.* Except, I'm not faking anything.

There are ways a woman can dabble in her own sexuality without actually having sex. It's healthy and encouraged according to every women's magazine of the twenty-first century. But this particular act cannot be replicated even by the world's most elaborate toy. For this, I had to wait until I was ready and *oh my god* was it worth the wait. I think I could fast for thirty days if *this* were my reward.

I switch between moaning in agony and then groaning in delight over and over again. My loudness coaxes Joel along. His tongue moves faster, slicking over every crease and fold.

"You're so wet," he mumbles somewhere below my belly button. I keep my eyes behind my closed lids or on his high ceilings. Joel shifts his weight to his knees so he can use his hands to push apart my inner thighs. It's unnecessary, my legs are already eagerly spread for him. He suddenly engulfs my clit and I instinctively try to slam my legs shut to brace against the overwhelming stimulation. I cry out but Joel's steady hands keep my legs apart as he sucks like he's trying to free a stubborn pit from the center of a cherry.

My orgasm builds like a rocket ship on countdown. I flex my toes, arch my back, I bite on my bottom lip as the launch gets closer. I can't endure it. The tension. I need relief. I grip the leather beneath me but my sweaty palms can't find traction. I'm desperate to hold onto something before I'm drifting in space without oxygen. I reach down and tug Joel's hair.

"I...think...I'm close." My hand sprawls, my nails trailing over his scalp.

"Think or know?" he breathes against me. I lift my hips against his tongue, demanding more pressure.

"Know. I...*know*." I barely manage the words. Oh, I'm there, I can see the finish line...

He slows. Then he stops. He rips his mouth away and climbs up my body so his face is inches from mine. I'm robbed. Abused. Toyed with...and I am not pleased.

"Just so you're aware, I am *not* into edging," I say between angry ragged breaths. My face pulls in frustration and Joel erupts into laughter, angering me further.

"That's not"—he shakes his head—"I just wanted to try something else." His laughter fades away. I expect him to start undressing for the aforementioned 'something else' but instead his fingers inch up my thigh. He sinks his long finger into me with ease and the pressure overcomes me. My head hits the back of the couch. He adds another finger, filling me.

"Joel. Please...don't stop." I think I utter real words. I'm not sure, I could be speaking in Parseltongue for all I know. My brain is so fuzzy, I'm nearly incoherent. All my concentration is on

Joel's fingers that are working me over with expert precision. He knows exactly how to pace to build the tension again. I clamp my eyes shut and bridge my hips as I feel my release building. He must as well, because he slows once more.

"What the hell did we just talk about?" I shriek in protest.

His amused chuckle infuriates me. "Okay, okay. I'm sorry. Open your eyes." I oblige. He's met with sharp daggers. "Do you know why I like missionary so much?"

"I'm not sure if I care right now."

"Because I love watching when I make a woman—sorry, you—I love watching when I make *you* come. The look on your face when you lose it—so hot."

"How would you know? You haven't done it yet," I growl.

I must've challenged him because suddenly he looks like the boss in the boardroom. He has that 'take no prisoners' look in his eyes. Determined. With an agenda.

"Lay back, tuck your knees, and keep your eyes on me. Got it?" His tone is assertive but he pairs it with a sweet peck on my cheek reminding me it's all sexy fun and games. He pushes gently on my shoulders. I lie flat against the cool leather and raise my legs in the air obediently. Joel snakes down my body just enough to allow me to rest the backs of my knees on his hard-muscled shoulders. My hips shift upwards giving him access to a new angle. This time his palm faces up as he sinks two fingers and then curls them inside of me. I exhale and let out a mixture of a desperate cry, breathy gasp, and plea for mercy. A cocky smile spreads across Joel's face.

"Keep your eyes on me," he reminds me when I try to close them. I can't help it, it's sensory overload. I need to shut something off because the feeling of Joel's thick fingers owning me might be the end of me. Not even the writer in me can contrive an adequate description of the high I feel right now. I just want to float in this pleasure and drift away but Joel keeps me here with his eye contact, daring me to endure it all.

"Fuck, you're dripping." He slams his curled fingers into me and pumps relentlessly. He strokes that magic self-destruct button over and over until I clench and detonate around his hand, losing my mind, seeing shooting stars and swirling galaxies before I can't fight it anymore. I sink behind my eyelids finding some solace in the dark as my thighs continue to spasm.

And there it is.

The very first orgasm a man has ever given me. It's a crime that I waited twenty-five years for this.

When I open my eyes, Joel is hovering over me, venerating me like I'm a prize painting at the Louvre. I'm suddenly self-conscious of the fact that I'm completely naked from the waist down with my sweater pushed up to my neck. I'm sticking to Joel's leather living room furniture, glued by my own sweat.

"You are so beautiful." The sensual voracity of his words from moments ago dissipates. His tone changes. It's fueled with intimacy and definitely not 'fun bunny' appropriate. I could melt under this look and be happy here as a puddle, forever.

But I can't. We can't. Once I want more, this is over. And I'm not ready for this to be over.

I tuck in my hips as a gentle hint for Joel to collect his fingers. "Your turn," I singsong, reintroducing the playfulness between us. I need a distraction from that look in his eyes that is borderline loving. "I believe you have a list for me, yes?"

"Come on." He nods to his left. "My bedroom is back this way."

"Give me a minute. I'm right behind you."

Joel walks out of the room, granting me my moment of privacy. I just need a safe space to react.

It's a huge moment. A moment I'm very much alone in. It's not Joel's fault he doesn't know, but I'm more vulnerable right now than I've ever been before.

I'm at war again. My body, my mind, and my heart are all fighting at once. My lust-filled body isn't shy. She has no shame in demanding satisfaction and just a moment ago she was in her element. But once my orgasm fades, my head catches back up and because she's a clever bitch, she calls my heart for backup. They are screaming as loud as they can.

You can't handle this. Stop now. Run.

After what Joel just did to me on this very couch, our relationship is changed forever. We can call it friendship all he wants, but now it's more. The light in which we see each other has changed...it's brighter. What we want from each other is different. What we'll settle for—gone. Now that I know what more is, I'll never stop needing it.

I breathe out deeply, trying to calm the nerves. I play the question game in my mind hoping it'll help me decide what to do.

Wine or beer?

Beer, I say in my head.

Coffee or tea?

Coffee.

Jeans or skirts?

Jeans.

Mountains or beach?

Mountains.

Cake or ice cream?

Cake. Always cake.

Love or lust?

"...I don't know," I whisper out loud to no one but myself.

Joel has seen me naked. He's touched me. He's tasted me. I take a moment to prepare because as soon as I join him in his bedroom...

There's no going back for me.

twenty-four

...

Joel

Too many competing thoughts race through my mind at the same time. I just broke my Adler diet and I opened the floodgates. I want every part of her. There aren't enough hours in the night to satisfy my craving.

I may have to keep her forever.

While I'm waiting, the scenarios assault my mind. I could ask her to take everything off except those boots. I'd love to feel that suede chafing my shoulders as I rut into her until she's begging for release. I could pin her ass against the wall while my head buries into her perfect round tits as she pulls my hair. Or maybe I'll just bend her over my bed so she can feel every inch of me as I admire her from behind.

There's so many options and I intend to explore all of them. But when Adler finally enters my room the expression on her face tells me I'll be doing exactly none of those things.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, of course," she says as she crosses the room to stand in front of me. I scoot to the edge of the bed, pulling her between my legs. I want to lean forward a little and bury my face in her supple chest but something's off with her. She forces a small smile that doesn't reach her eyes. "So, about that list?"

"Something is bothering you," I say straightforwardly. I place my hands on her slim waist then slide them down over the curve of her hips.

"My mind is just on something. It's not a big deal."

"Hey, it's a big deal to me." I duck my head to peek at those deep-blue ocean drops that hide beneath her thick dark lashes.

She groans in frustration. "You're not going to let it go, are you?"

"Sure I am. I got to exactly where I am in my career by being nonchalant and letting things go—come on, woman! Hell no, I'm not going to let it go." I run my hands up her velvety-smooth bare thighs. I can feel a lace elastic band as my hands trail around her backside. She put her thong back on.

Cradling my face, Adler lightly rubs my jawline with her thumbs. She looks in my eyes like she's searching for an answer to a question she hasn't yet asked.

"If you must know, I'm thinking about the rules," she whispers.

"Rules?"

"For what we're doing."

"There are rules?"

"For me. Because I'm the weak gazelle."

"What are you talking about?" It'd be in poor taste if I told her how crazy she sounds, so I don't,

but her cryptic clues are making me feel like Adler isn't as ready for this as I thought. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

She presses her finger across my lips. "Shhh." Adler raises her arms above her head. "Take this off."

I lift the edge of her pale-pink sweater and remove it in one pull. I discard her bra and plant my face in her tits. I tease her nipples with my teeth before sucking on them tenderly. Pressure, then pleasure. Over and over. Adler arches her back and groans like she wants more. No, *needs more*.

Standing, I pull off my shirt then kick off my sweatpants. Her eyes glue onto my briefs that are uncomfortably constricting my erection. She tugs on my waistband like she's ripping off a Band-Aid. "Okay," she whispers to herself, like a pep talk. I mean to ask if she's okay, but she sinks to her knees and I'm instantly in her warm wet mouth. My hips jerk forward out of surprise and she stops to look up at me questioningly. "Did you..."

I scoff, only slightly offended. "Um—you'd know if I did, Adler."

"Right. Of course, I just meant—"

"Please, keep going." I gently weave my hands into her hair, guiding her mouth back to me. She swirls her tongue around my tip teasing me in my favorite way. She knows exactly what I like without me having to ask. Her small soft hand wraps around me and rhythmically strokes the rest of my length until my knees go weak. I grip the bedpost to steady myself.

I selfishly let her go on like this for a while. Her mouth feels so good. Too good. Adler shifts and grimaces, trying to untuck her legs that must be aching by now. I'm sure she wants to relieve the pressure from her knees that are embedded into my hardwood floors.

"Hey." She lifts only her eyes to meet mine, her pouty lips still wrapped around me. "Do you want to get up?" I slide out of her mouth with a *pop*.

"You want me to stop?"

"I don't. But you're uncomfortable and I don't want to go like this."

A singeing devilish smile overtakes her. "Are you close?" She slides her mouth back on me as her eyes stay locked on mine. I bump the back of her throat. *Aaaaahhhhhh*. Fuck. *Yes*. Too close.

"Don't you want to have sex?" I push against her shoulders and step back out of her reach.

"Aren't we? I already got mine."

"Got yours? That was just the opening act. I've got the headliner ready to go." I glance down at my very eager approval. A curious fire flickers in her eyes. A look that says stop and go at the same time. "Are you sure you're okay—"

"Stop asking. *Yes*. I want to."

There are two types of women. The first kind is one who cools down during head. It's a chore, just a trade. The second kind is one who gets even wetter as she slides her mouth over a hard rod. Giving pleasure is almost as good as getting her own. It's the same for guys. Personally, I could not have been harder while I was eating Adler out like she was my very last meal.

"I'm curious about something," I say as I lift Adler by her shoulders off of her knees. I plunge my hand into her panties and trail my fingers down and up her soaked slit. "Ah. My kind of woman."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Nothing." I tug down her black thong. "Lay down." I nod toward the bed as I fetch a condom out of my top dresser drawer.

Adler studies me like a hawk as I rip the foil packet free and roll the rubber over my eagerness. "Huh..."

"Wrong brand? I think I have non-latex somewhere."

She shakes her head. “No. It’s fine.”

“What’s that look for then?”

“I just don’t normally—”

“Use condoms?”

“Um, no it’s not that—”

“We probably should. Safe sex and all.”

“Right. Yes...safe is good. Come here, please.” She pats the bed next to her.

I acquiesce my eyes first. I lie next to her admiring the view of her naked hourglass figure sprawled across my bed. My room is softly lit by the city lights pouring in from the floor-to-ceiling windows. Adler would look flawless under any kind of light—fluorescent, sun, moon, lamppost. Doesn’t matter. Her body is art. I don’t bother drawing the blinds. There’s no one to see us this high up. We could have sex outside under the stars from my balcony if we wanted to. Money doesn’t buy happiness, but it does buy a private penthouse view.

“On your side,” I instruct when I can’t wait another second. I roll her to her left as I spoon her from behind. My lips rest against her ear as I quickly lick the tip of my middle finger and find her clit. She bucks against my touch and gasps. She’s slick, swimming in her own arousal. At this rate she’s going to drench my sheets.

“Do you like this position so I can’t see you?” Adler’s voice is small. I can’t see her face, but I know that question is laced with double meaning. I caress her hip sweetly.

“No. Not at all. You’re just so tight it’ll be more comfortable for you if we start like this.”

“Oh.”

“Then, you can have it however you want.” I smack her ass and she squeals. I push her top knee forward before yanking her hips backwards. She sucks in a sharp breath as I nudge against her entrance. She reaches around for my forearm and squeezes, bracing herself. Adler pants in shallow gasps as I slip in barely past the tip. Not for lack of trying. She’s just so tense. She’s got to relax. I try to think of anything else than how tightly she’s wrapping around me. She feels too good. It’s too hot, too wet. And I want to plunge in fully, now. The only thing stopping me is the godawful thought of hurting her.

“Can you back into me?” I ask, gripping the sheets so hard I’m close to ripping them from under us.

“What?”

“I’m worried I’ll move too fast and hurt you.”

“Oh, sure. I can do it.” Adler’s impatient. Before her tense walls allow, she wriggles her silky ass backwards, taking in more of me.

I push against the side of her hip to stop her. “Slow down.”

“For what?” she asks between gritted teeth. I’m assuming I’m more endowed than the guys she’s been with because it’s clearly the first time she’s encountering this issue. She doesn’t know what to do.

“If you just relax, you’ll adjust faster. Here, baby.” I reach around to find her button again but she stills. I touch between her thighs, but she doesn’t react. “What’s wrong?”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Baby?”

“Yes. Please don’t call me that, especially during sex.”

“I call you Baby Spice all the time...”

“That’s just a joke. This is different.”

“Okay.” I nuzzle into the back of her neck. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.” She doesn’t respond. She takes a deep breath and throws her hips back into me, completely ignoring my caution. *Fuck!* She groans. I grunt. We’re both caught off guard. “Are you okay?”

“Yes—fine.” She can’t form a coherent sentence as I fill her to max capacity. I’m only halfway in when I feel her walls resist again. This is fine. It still feels like heaven as Adler wraps around me, choking the life out of half my cock. This is enough. I could come like this.

“God, you feel good. So good.”

“Is it...all the way?” Adler asks between strained breaths.

“Not even close.” I smirk to myself, somewhat relieved she can’t see my smug expression.

“Why not? Just go all the way.”

“I can’t like this.” I jut my hips forward to no avail. She scoots away before pushing me on my back, climbing on top of me. “Oh, no, Adler. *No.* This is not a good idea.”

She ignores me as she straddles me. Her face pulls with worry and apprehension as she shimmies backwards and positions herself, but she doesn’t stop. I hold my breath and lie perfectly still as she lowers herself over my hardness. When her ass lands on my hips, sword fully sheathed, she leans forward and grasps my pecs, digging her nails into my skin. She lets out shallow throaty gasps. “Hey, are you okay?” I try to focus and fight the euphoria that’s close to pulling me under. She only whimpers in reply.

The way she’s wrapped around me like an angry boa constrictor, I know she has to be feeling every inch of me. She doesn’t move. “Adler?” I try to lift her off of me but she clamps her knees against my hips tightly.

“I just need a minute.” Her eyes begin to water. She shuts them.

The fuck is going on? How long has it been since she last had sex to feel like this? I should’ve never allowed this.

I’m about to force her off of me when her wet walls relax around me. The strain melts off her face and all that remains is pleasure. Adler begins to gyrate her hips and make the sounds that drive me crazy. I lose my train of thought and all my worries. She slides over me, up and down, back and forth. Over and over. She’s in total control so I give myself permission to sink into the mattress and fully enjoy her.

Adler’s a symphony of moaning as she works me over. I pull her long hair to the side so my view isn’t obstructed as her tits jiggle around. But it’s odd. I have perfect breasts in front of me, but I can’t stop searching for her eyes. Mostly closed, but every time she opens them and sees me, she smiles.

“You’re amazing,” I murmur. “Switch me.”

Her eyes protrude into perfect wide circles as she halts. “You don’t like this?”

“I like it. Too much.” I flip her onto the bed and kneel between her legs. I hoist her toned legs over my left shoulder. “Cross your ankles,” I command.

“Why?”

“Just do it, you’ll like it.”

She obliges. I plunge into her and she cries out. Her tightness could suffocate me. I thrust into her slowly, then pick up the pace when I feel her relax around me again. I slam into her, deeper each time.

“*Oooh my god.*”

“Told you,” I rasp. “Fuck, it’s like it’s your first time.”

“What?” she blubbers as panic flashes across her face.

“It’s an expression. A compliment. I mean you feel incredible.”

I pull her legs off my shoulder and let them drop on either side of me so I can press my thumb

against her clit. I rub tiny circles against her pleasure and her thighs tense. “Are you close?” I slam into her so hard my balls audibly smack against her ass. “Ladies...first,” I grunt between thrusts.

“I...I can’t just orgasm on command.”

“Want to bet?”

I pull out and before she can ask why, my mouth is on her little button. The change in stimulation does the trick immediately. Adler erupts so hard I swear she levitates. I sink back into her as fast as I can to ride the waves of her climax as she clenches around me.

Her body calms, the rise and fall of her chest, slows. Her hair is caked against her cheek from sweat. I lean down and brush away the strands.

“How was that?”

“Joel Lewis,” she pants. “I think you might be my new best friend.”

I laugh. *Good.*

“Wait, did you go?”

I jerk my hips forward a little so Adler can feel my still-hard erection resting inside of her. “Not yet.”

“*Oh.* How do you want to...”

I run my finger across my lips. “Anything?”

“Careful,” she warns as her eyes narrow.

“I just want to take this condom off and finish while I watch you touch yourself.”

I half expect her to be offended. I don’t know why this puts off women sometimes. I mean it as flattery. I just want to stare into her gorgeous blue eyes and watch them fill with pleasure as I find my release. My sweet, sexy, one-of-a-kind, bombshell of a friend, nods at me—giving me permission.

“Really?” I ask, impressed. Adler wriggles up, causing me to slip out of her wetness. She nods again. I rip off the condom. “You are a freaking goddess, you know that?”

Fisting my cock in one hand, I use the other to guide Adler between her legs. Her fingers trail over her soaked sex. I study the way her fingers dance around her clit like a quarterback studying plays for game day. I try to memorize her movements so I can replicate later exactly what she likes. She’s suddenly not so shy. She’s determined and the confident look on her face is what sends me over the edge. I feel the tension in my balls. Adler’s finger barely slips into her entrance and I shatter. I come with my hand closed over my tip to spare her from the mess.

I’m wrecked. It was too soon and yet not soon enough. I am never going to get tired of her. I could have her every single night and it won’t be enough.

Once my ragged breath calms, I decide to do something that I’ll probably regret to my dying day—I hold out my unoccupied hand for a high-five.

Adler—justifiably so—stares at me and freezes as if I have a head full of snakes and just turned her into stone. A beat. Then, with a scowl on her face, she gingerly presses her small palm into mine.

“Thank you?” I mean to say, but instead ask.

“You’re welcome...”

Shit.

Awkward.

It’s Adler, I wasn’t expecting awkward. But the urge I have right now is to slump down behind her and hold her. I want to tell her that being with her kind of has me thinking I might want to reconsider the rules I’ve written for my life.

But it’s just because I’m still high off the sensation.

And, how in the hell is that *not* leading her on?

“I’m going to get cleaned up.” I carefully crawl off the bed with my hand still cupped around my tip. “Do you um...need anything?”

She shakes her head before slamming her head back against the pillow. “No, thanks.”



By the time I return, Adler has her panties back on. Her eyes dart side to side on the ceiling like she’s watching little hallucinogenic fairies fly back and forth.

I actually did it. I fucked her senseless.

I slip on my briefs before I lie on the bed next to her. I pull her upper body on top of mine and her breasts smash into my chest. She lets out a low hum as she traces the space between my pecs and down the center of my abs. I stroke her naked back and smile, my eyelids half closed.

For the first time since Adler Haley walked into my life, I am completely satisfied.

Her small frame feels weightless on top of me. She’s got such a big personality sometimes I forget how little she is. I kiss her forehead and, *shit*, I know I’m not supposed to, but I enjoy the intimacy. I hold her tightly. Too tightly, probably, but she doesn’t fight me. Her almond-scented hair covers my chest like a warm blanket. I’m so content right now, everything else in the world that isn’t Adler lying on top of me can go ahead and drift away.

“What now?” Adler whispers.

“You let me rest for twenty minutes and then we go again.” I reach down to grab a handful of her bare ass.

“I may need longer than twenty minutes. You did warn me last night that I’d need to hibernate after you got through with me.”

I jostle her with my laughter. “How’d I do?”

She pretends to snore as she snuggles into me. I touch the soft skin on her arm with the very tips of my fingers. Her breathing becomes heavy. She’s so spent. I wonder if she’s been as pent up as I’ve been these past couple months. I kiss the top of her head. “Are you sleeping here?”

Adler lifts her head and her forehead creases in worry.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want. I’m only asking because I have to leave kind of early tomorrow.” I almost ask her if it’s okay before I remind myself that she’s not my girlfriend and I don’t owe anyone explanations.

“What?” Her expression is doubtful.

“Business. Steve is riding my ass about one of my companies. I have to head to New York first thing tomorrow morning. I’ll be gone for a few days.”

Adler chuckles humorlessly. “Right. Sudden business trip. You could just ask me to leave, Joel.”

“I’m not asking you to leave. I have to be up early and I don’t want to disturb you if you planned on sleeping in. But you should stay. I want you to. I have guest rooms.” Her sparkly blues darken a shade. She shrugs off my arm and breaks free of my embrace before she rolls off the bed. *Dammit*. “I didn’t mean it like that. I was just trying to be considerate. Adler—come on. Come back here.”

She turns her bare backside to me while she pulls on her sweater. “I can’t.”

“Seriously? You’re going to bang and bail?”

“Bang and bail?” She rolls her eyes as she walks back over to me. I scoot to the edge of the

mattress to meet her. “Come on, boss. You can do better than that. It doesn’t even rhyme.” I wrap my arms around her waist and bury my head into the bumps in her sweater.

“Hit it and quit it seems a little lazy. You have something better?” I ask her.

“Smash and dash, pork it and cork it, rock the box then change the locks, plant the seed and pull the weed, pounce and bounce...to name a few.” Adler smiles wickedly.

“I’m concerned about how many of those you know.”

“Tip of the iceberg.” She clicks her jaw. *Oh my god. She’s the female version of Cody.* She plants a quick kiss on my cheek and then steps out of reach.

“You’re really going to go?”

“Yes. There are rules, Joel. I prefer to sleep alone anyways.” *Said no woman, ever. Why is she acting like this?* “Just email me whatever I need to reschedule on your calendar for next week, okay?”

“Okay,” I grumble. I have to admit, I was looking forward to falling asleep with her warm body beside me. Unlike Adler and the lie she just told, I have no problem admitting I hate sleeping alone. It might be one of the main reasons I stayed with Juliana for so long. This California king is cold and empty when I’m in it by myself.

Adler smiles sweetly, but her blue ocean drops are glistening like they are wet. “Thanks, I had fun. I’ll let myself out.” She swiftly exits, closing the door behind her.

After a moment or two, I drag myself out of bed and pull on my sweats. But I’m too late. By the time I make it to the living room she’s gone. I didn’t even hear the front door close. She got dressed and left like an assassin fleeing a hit. I should’ve said something or done something more. But what? What could I have done for my ‘just a friend’?

Felices startles me as he emerges from underneath the blanket on the living room floor. He blinks at me expectantly with glow-in-the-dark eyes. He tilts his head and meows as if to say, ‘you blew it’.

“What?” I snap at him. “What the hell was I supposed to say? *Oooh baby*, best fuck of my life? Marry me?”

Felices trails past me unbothered, no doubt to go reclaim my bed now that Adler and I are done in it.

twenty-five

...

Adler

Me: Sorry for the late text, but I changed my mind. I don't want to be alone. Can you come over? Door is open.

I pull my quilt covers over my head trying to hide from myself. In hindsight, I would've played this evening out very differently. Things got away from me toward the end. I made it out of Joel's place before I completely lost it. I was barely down the hallway before I was in shambles. I'd say I was blubbering like a baby but it was a little more extreme than that. I could've filled a toddler-sized pool with my tears. My eyes were nearly swollen shut by the time I got into my rideshare and the driver knew better than to ask.

Joel wanted me to stay, but I couldn't. He would've been so uncomfortable if I heaved into the pillow next to him all night. The minute we came down off our high, it hit me. I don't know what kind of delusion I built up in my head about my ability to separate sex and feelings, but I got my reality check.

I'm an adult. I've never *needed* a boyfriend. I thought we could just...fuck. Raw and wild and fun. And I tried to keep it only physical. I let him watch me as I touched myself. I sucked him for so long my jaw is sore. In fact, after his pants were down, I don't even remember kissing him again.

I braced for it. No feelings. No expectations. I welcomed a dead end. Because who wants to want what they can never have? But who am I kidding? *I am the weak gazelle.*

Maybe I wanted sex to be awkward. Or disappointing. There would have been my reason. The reason that Joel and I shouldn't be. But—no. It's not just that the sex was incredible. Envious. It's that he was tender and patient. He didn't even know my secret, yet somehow, he respected it. Slow. Soft. Sweet. That was his entire demeanor this evening. He held me like he meant it. Like maybe there was more...no.

Stop.

Why? Why couldn't he have just fucked me? That would've been so much easier.

My heart is failing slowly. I poked a tiny un-patchable hole right through it. Now that I know what I know, I can't go back. All I can do is hide in my bed, under my covers, until I bleed out, itty-bitty drop by drop.

I understand Quinn's warning now. I needed someone who knew what a milestone this was for me and was open to something more. Someone to hold me tightly and let me cry tears of relief, and shock, and happiness against his chest as I crossed over this threshold.

But fuck buddies don't sleep over. They don't cuddle. They accept the inevitable end.

The tears continue to stream down my face as I snuffle into my pillow. I try to close my eyes and let exhaustion take me, but heartache is needy. She demands attention and refuses to give me even a moment's break from this gnawing disappointment. I just have to lie here and take it until the calvary comes to save me.

I bite the bullet and wait, praying my text doesn't go unread.



Joel

I debate calling or texting her, but I don't know what to say. I have questions but I'm not ready for the answers. Was she about to cry when she left? Does she have real feelings for me? What if she wants more? What if I go down this rabbit hole yet again and in a year from now, I'm leaving Denver this time to escape a messy breakup? What if I try a relationship with Adler and I break her heart like I did Juliana's? What if we stop laughing and joking and start fighting?

Where is she? What is she doing? Is she okay? Did she make it home? I should text her. I should give her space. I should stop asking all these fucking questions because she's not actually mine to fuss over.

But, dammit. Wait, isn't she? I don't know what I'm doing anymore.

I let the water from the shower drench over me and close my eyes. I see Adler's sapphire-blues sparkling against her heavy eyelashes. I picture them playfully lit up like when she educated Cody on the importance of Coors over Budweiser. I picture them half closed as she swam in the ecstasy of her orgasm with my hand between her legs and then later with me inside of her. Those blue gems. They are the answer key into exactly what she's feeling.

I know she was crying. *I just know it.*

My phone vibrates against the bathroom counter. I step out of the glass encasement and don't bother drying off. I wrap a towel around my waist and lunge for my phone. But it's not Adler's name I see.

Camilla: In town, have service for thirty. Call me if you can.

I dial my little sister instantly. It's about five in the morning in Thailand. What the hell is she doing in town this early?

"Hey, Joely-Bowl!"

"Hell no. Hard veto."

"Nothing good rhymes with Joel."

"How are you, Cami? You missed our call last week. Everything okay?"

Cami's line cuts in and out as she explains about a flooding issue and the main roads washing out and not being able to get cell service. I think.

“Anyways, I don’t have long. Just in town to pick up some supplies—”

“I’m so proud of you. You’re doing remarkable things for those children. I’m ready to fund whatever they need out there. Let me know how I can help.”

“Awww, Joel—that’s why you’re my favorite brother.”

“I’m going to need that in writing in the family group text.”

“No can do.”

“Why not?” I sit down on my bed and Felices paws at me territorially. When I refuse to move, he settles on rolling over and exposing his tummy, demanding belly scratches. I make a claw with my hand and he wiggles with glee.

“Because I just got off the phone with Jax and told him the same thing.”

“Okay, see...that just hurts.”

“You sound...kind of chill and cheery...you must not know.”

“Know what?”

“Um...well, I’m going to do the bad-news sandwich, okay?”

Oh god. That means it’s bad. Cami likes to layer bad news between what she thinks is good news. When we were growing up, it was not comforting to know that she broke my laptop, but at least Britney Spears finally had a Vegas residency and the show was supposed to be *killer*.

“Let’s hear it, Cami.”

“Well first of all—three of the students I teach had education visas approved for the U.S. and I think my referral letters actually helped. I really feel like I’m making a difference here.”

“That’s great. Again, I’m really prou—”

“Mom and Dad are ending their separation. They are officially getting back together.”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me.” My mouth begins to pool with saliva like I might hurl. Blood begins rushing angrily through the veins of my forearm. I grip the phone so hard I swear I could snap it in half.

“And also, I think they are making a new flavor of Zebra Stripe gum...so that’s pretty exciting.”

“Cami, you should meet my good friend Adler one day. You’ll hit it off because you two are disturbingly similar. But, back to Mom and Dad—who told you this?”

“Mom.”

“And she sounded?”

“Happy. Joel—please. Just let it go. Who are they hurting if they want to get back together?”

No one. They’ve already hurt so many people and destroyed so much with their volatile, toxic forty-year relationship. Who is left to hurt? What’s left to burn?

“Do they plan on telling me?”

“They are making their way down the list.”

“You’re the youngest. Why do you know first?”

“Okay, fine! They are a little nervous to tell you. You practically popped a bottle of champagne right in their faces when they separated.”

“For good reason.”

“Seriously. Please. Let them be happy.”

“I want them to be happy—which is why I don’t want them to stay married.”

She groans on the other line which is the last thing I hear before static consumes the call.

“Cami? Cam?...Hello?...Camilla?”

No use. The line goes silent.

I bury my face in my hands as the childhood memories bubble up. All the yelling and screaming.

Glass shattering. Doors slamming. Cars ripping out of the driveway and the headlights disappearing into the night. All the while, promising Cami it was going to be okay, even when I knew it wasn't.

I can never remember what they were fighting about. I just remember the feeling...and now more than ever, I need a distraction. I need a friend.

I dial Adler, hoping she's still awake. Hoping she'll answer.



Adler

I must've finally fallen asleep because the aggressive vibration of my phone against my nightstand startles me awake. I blink a few times and sit up. Before I can see who's calling, a voice from my living room greets me promptly.

"Hey girl, you up?"

Reese peeks up from her curly blonde mane. Reese really is just all hair. She is nestled into my living room sofa downstairs and has a magazine spread across her lap as she sips from one of my mugs.

"How long have you been here?"

"I got here like thirty minutes ago. You were snoring like a lumberjack so I didn't want to wake you. I was in the building when you texted me."

"Eli?" I ask. Reese's lawyer friend happens to share my building. On more than one occasion she's done the walk of shame up two floors to my apartment.

She doesn't offer an explanation, she simply shrugs before setting down her mug and climbing the rickety stairs. She crawls to the other side of my bed making the springs under my tired old mattress creak in complaint. I've had this bed since college. I've had my favorite bra since college. I have my same best friends from college. I'm the same Adler that I was when I was seventeen years old. Until tonight.

Until everything changed.

Reese fluffs the extra pillow and tucks it under her head. She pats my pillow and I lie back down. Her face is a few inches from mine. This would be borderline awkward for anyone else, anyone who didn't share a tiny bedroom for the majority of four years.

"How do you feel?"

"Tired."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Sort of, but I think I'm out of words."

"Well, that's not like you at all." Reese's eyes bulge as she teases me.

"I don't feel like me right now."

"Did you and Joel go all the way tonight?"

I nod.

"Are you okay?"

"I don't know."

"Did you tell him it was your first time?"

I shake my head against my cotton pillowcase that still smells like my sweet amber-scented fabric

softener. “It didn’t come up.”

She rolls her eyes. “He probably would’ve treated you differently if he knew.”

“That would’ve been ideal.”

Reese’s brows furrow and she sits up. “Did he hurt you?” she hisses. “Because I’ll kill him. Actually, I’ll do worse. I’ll sic Quinn on him.”

I tap her pillow, asking her to lie back down. “Easy girl. He was a perfect gentleman. He was kind and considerate and *generous*.”

“What an asshole,” she scoffs before scrunching her nose. “Why are you crying?”

“Because it was just...I don’t know. We did everything and then I just ran out of there. I came home and barricaded under my covers. I have so many feelings weighing me down I can’t move. I didn’t even shower. I just collapsed.”

“And here I thought that was marshmallow fluff in your hair.” Reese pulls a disgusted face. My hand instinctively flies up to my head. “Made you look.” She laughs. “But since you nominated me for this talk—an honor which I’ll be rubbing in all the girls’ faces tomorrow, by the way, I have to ask..!”

She doesn’t have to ask. “Yes, we used a condom.”

“Good girl.”

“Pieces, did I make a big mistake?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why am I sad? It was really good...I think. He was wonderful to me. So why does it feel like this?”

“Oh, Bear.” Reese strokes my hair sweetly.

“Did I waste my first time? After all this time waiting, did I just throw it away on something that meant nothing?”

“You didn’t waste your first time. It was your first time with Joel. You’ll have another first time with the next guy. It’ll still be new and shiny and you can still have all the champagne, rose petals, candles, and Usher playing in the background.”

“Do you seriously bone to Usher?”

Reese closes her eyes and nods furiously. Her blonde ringlets dance across the pillow. “Like, religiously.” This is why I needed Reese tonight. I needed to laugh and for her to tell me this doesn’t have to be such a big deal.

“I didn’t expect to feel this hollow afterwards. Was it like that for you?”

“Not exactly. The first time I had sex I was madly in love and he loved me back. I thought it was the beginning of forever.”

“Oh.”

“But then he did a one-eighty and fucked me over—bad. I went through some really dark times and *that* felt hollow. My point is, whether it’s now or later, this stuff always comes with consequences. There’s no way around it. It’s give and take, push and pull, beginning and then an end. It gets easier though. You get stronger and I promise it won’t feel like this every time.”

“I don’t understand. I was fully aware this was just casual sex, I just...I...I even have rules! I followed them all. They were supposed to protect me.”

“Bear, those rules aren’t going to keep you from loving Joel. All they’ll do is keep him from finding out that you do.”

I nod and the tears flow again. They ride the bridge of my nose like a slip and slide, landing on my pillow. “Don’t tell anybody. Promise?”

“That you finally had sex or that you’re in love?”

I weigh the options. “Yes.”

Reese lets out a whispered chuckle. “Okay, fair enough. So what are you going to do? Do you think it’d be better if you stopped sleeping with him?”

I shake my head, determined. “The only thing worse than having him like this, would be not having him at all. I know it’s reckless, but I don’t want to let him go. I just have to do this his way for as long as I can.”

Reese opens her mouth but closes it, biting back the advice I know she wants to give. “Okay. You’re going to be okay.” She strokes my hair again. “Do you want me to stay with you tonight?”

I nod, feeling small, like the baby sister I am to all my friends. Reese smiles sweetly before rolling over and stealing the covers like she did for our entire stint at college and every sleepover thereafter. She likes to sleep like she’s wrapped in a tightly sealed burrito. “Try to keep your snoring to a minimum.”

“I’ll try. Hey, Pieces?”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Bear.”

See, Joel? Reese is my friend. She loves me. How hard can it be?

twenty-six

...

Adler

I force my heavy eyelids open and tap the cool glass on my phone. I have so many missed calls and text messages that someone might get the wrong impression that I'm important. I look past my notifications and zero in on the large digital numbers telling me it's well past noon. *Holy hell*. The last time I slept this late was last year when the flu took me down.

I peek over my shoulder to see a curly blonde veil covering Reese's face. She's still in a deep sleep. I poke her lightly and she grunts. *Just checking*. Reese sleeps like the dead. She makes no noise, she doesn't fidget or roll, and I know for a fact that she is capable of sleeping through glaring fire alarms. Sometimes proof of life is necessary when it comes to her.

I wince as I move my legs to get out of bed. My lustful ache is replaced by something new this morning. Losing my virginity to a guy of Joel's er...*stature*, is kind of like competing in a CrossFit competition, without ever having set foot inside of a gym before. Last night my adrenaline was pumping, and when put on the spot I was pretty impressed with what I could physically do. But I got caught up in the moment and pushed my body further than I probably should've. I won more times than I can count last night, but I'm paying for it this morning.

I need ice...or is it heat? Perhaps some ibuprofen. Maybe a horse tranquilizer will suffice. I clench my jaw and force my lower body into motion. I grab my phone before I hobble down the stairs.

I have several back-to-back text messages from Tessa who is urging me to *call her...ASAP...seriously*. Her last text asked me if I was alive because I never sleep this late. I am clearly predictable to everybody on this plane—a creature of habit. *Sigh*.

I duck into the hallway to call Tessa, half expecting her to be in the hospital based on the all-caps text messages.

“Addie! Finally.”

“Hey, Tessa. What's up?”

“Why are you whispering like that?”

“I'm in the hallway because my friend is in my apartment sleeping.”

“Your *friend*?”

“My best friend from college. Reese.”

“Oh.”

“But to answer the question you didn't ask, I had sex with Joel last night.”

“What?!” Tessa chokes. “You actually...how was...okay, you know what—I'm going to have to circle back to that one later because I need every single detail and my flight is about to be called.” Tessa being at the airport explains the obnoxious background noise from her line. “But I needed to tell you something ASAP. Are you sitting down?”

“No.” I wince as I shift my hips.

“Ted landed you a book deal. With a fat advance and everything.”

“What?” I shriek. Which is a lose translation of, *what the fuck? I didn't ask for a book deal.*

What book?

“We pitched the idea for a series covering all the different kinds of heartbreak. Or more like a collection. It's going to explode. We've already got Jess Turner and Apple Kaid committing for books three and four. I don't need to tell you of all people who those authors are. Anyways, at first Ted, my agent...*our agent*...thought you should just ghostwrite the second book too but I dug my heels in. This one is going to have *your* name on it, I'll make damn sure of it. Are you elated?”

Hm. Elated is not the first word that comes to mind. Shock, fear, panic, anxiety, failure, exhaustion, panic again—are the more prominent descriptions I'd use.

“Um...Tessa, I...I don't know what to say.”

“You don't need to thank me.”

Hm, again. I don't really feel like thanking her right now. I'm not one for violence but I'm considering dragging Tessa down with me as I fall from the plank that she just pushed me off of. We can sink to the bottom of the ocean together.

“Thank you, Tessa. I can't tell you what this means to me.” *Mostly because I'd need to shout profanities.*

“There's just one catch. The timeline is ambitious. They want to ride the success train of *TWM*, so we need a pitch and full synopsis as soon as possible. We're pushing for a January launch.”

“What the fuck?!” *Whoops, the profanity slipped right out.*

It took triple that time to get *Toy With Me* ready. And that was with Tessa babysitting me. I still have a full-time job, friends, and a life to live. Also—and here is the real hurdle—I have absolutely no idea what to write about. Unless Tessa has another divorce up her sleeve that she wants to pour her heart out over, what the hell am I supposed to write about? Ghostwriters are given topics and assignments. As far as an original idea? I'm screwed. I've had a sex life for less than twenty-four hours. I don't know love. My college boyfriend is, and probably was when I dated him, gay. That's not even romcom material because hell, neither Alan nor I are really living our happily ever after right now.

“Addie, you can do it. I promise you. You have me. You have my agent, my editor, the entire publishing team is here for you. Don't think about it, just do it. I sent you something for a little encouragement, okay? This is a life-changing opportunity. I'm not saying it's going to be easy, but it'll be worth it. The first time is always the hardest.”

“Yeah—I keep hearing that.”

“Look, I'm in L.A. for the week but when I'm back, I'll set you up with Ted. He's an ass, but he's the best—I *said I'm coming!* Okay, Addie, I have to go. I'm about to throw down with this flight attendant because obviously my purse is not a carry-on, it's a personal item.” Tessa grumbles that last part, not for my benefit. She's too busy arguing so I eventually end the call myself.

I walk back into the apartment like a mime just in case Reese has turned into a light sleeper within the last fifteen minutes. I grab my tired laptop off the small writer's desk in the corner of the living room. I hold it out at arm's length and stare at it expectantly. It suddenly feels so heavy with pressure and expectations I'll never live up to.

My name. My stakes. I don't know what Tessa is thinking.

“Good morning.”

I yelp in surprise and my laptop plummets to the floor, breaking into several pieces. It was on its

last leg and the impact of the fall finishes it off.

Reese is looking down at me from the iron-rod banister that encloses the front half of my bedroom. Her mouth is in a perfect 'o'. She looks shocked like my reaction was not warranted after a simple morning greeting. *It wasn't*. But I was distracted after my call with Tessa and I thought she was still sleeping like the dead.

"Good morning," I huff as I gather laptop pieces. Go figure, right? *Write a best seller, Addie—without a laptop.*

I collect the cracked screen, the swollen battery, and a few scattered keyboard tiles and set them on my dining table. I grab a kitchen towel and give my dutiful warrior a proper hero's burial. *Thank you, my friend, for your service.*

Reese is beside me in an instant. "I'm not taking the heat for that."

"Fair enough. It wasn't entirely your fault."

She rolls her eyes. "It was time for an upgrade anyways, right?"

I can't help but scowl in irritation. I need to start writing *today*. I don't have the money for a laptop *today*. "That's a great idea, Pieces. Did you check the money tree I planted on the way down here? How's the harvest today? Pluck a few bills and let's hit the Apple store."

"Oooh, boy. Someone is sassy this morning. No thank you to that."

She's right. That's not the way to treat my angel of a friend who came over at a moment's notice in the middle of the night to comfort me during my highly anticipated post-sex meltdown.

"Sorry." I hang my head. "That was Tessa on the phone."

"Oh yeah? Hey before I check, is there anything in your fridge?"

"You already know the answer to that."

"Want to go out for breakfast?" Reese checks her phone. "Oh, shit. I mean lunch?"

"Under one condition."

"What's that?"

"If I pay, may I borrow your messy love life as inspiration for the book I now have to write?"

Reese laughs hysterically. "Wouldn't Noa's be better inspiration? I feel like that whole situation with Chase Ford could be a book."

"Oh, good point. Let's rally up the troops? I'm going to need all of you and your war stories."

Reese swipes at her phone with inhuman speed. "Let's go to that one place we can get breakfast burritos all day."

"We live in Colorado. That doesn't really narrow it down."

This is actually turning around in my favor. My mind is so consumed with my daunting new assignment that I haven't had a moment to think of Joel and how instead of waking up on his warm, perfectly sculpted bare chest, I froze my butt off last night as Reese hogged all my covers. I don't have time to think about where he is, what he's doing, or if he's thinking about me. He's gone all week which gives me just enough time to get my emotions in check before he gets back.

"Are you expecting something?" Reese says as she opens my front door. She picks up a large flat box and begins to open it. My best friends and I have never once respected the sacred legalities of official mail. Not since we all shared an apartment. A package is to be opened immediately, regardless of whose name is on the recipient line.

"*Jesus*," Reese exclaims. "She got you the good one." She holds up a brand-new rose-gold MacBook. It's from Tessa, so of course it's pink. "Perfect timing, too." Reese nods toward the laptop graveyard I made on my dining table.

Too perfect. Like planets-aligning and the-universe-calling kind of perfect.

Me: Thank you so much. Please expect a glittery handwritten thank you note in your mailbox. But you know a gift like this is kind of forcing my hand.

Tessa: That was the plan, Stan.

Me: You're the worst.

Tessa: You're welcome.

Me: How are you texting? Thought you were on flight?

Tessa: Data messages, girl. I buy the Wi-Fi.

Tessa: While I have you...how did Joel measure up to his picture? *winky face*

Me: Seriously Tessa?

Tessa: I just bought you the most expensive laptop Apple makes.

Me: Not answering that. But unrelated question: what's better for aftercare when you get hit by a train right in the crotch? Ice or heat?

Tessa: Ha! Knew it. Of those two options? Weed. Hey, does Joel have well-endowed brothers?

Me: I'm not sure. I'll make sure to definitely NOT ask for you.

“Ready, Bear? The girls are going to meet us there. Also, I'm about fifteen minutes away from hanger.”

“Yep,” I say, hopping off the couch. “Let's go.” Reese calls me ‘Bear’, but she's the grizzly monster when she's hungry and it's best not to risk an attack. We slip on our hoodies and our fuzzy boots and trudge forward motivated by exciting new opportunities and a brand-new day and forced determination, and breakfast burritos.

Mostly just breakfast burritos.

twenty-seven

...

Joel

“Give it to me straight, Lewis. You’ve always been a no-bullshit kind of guy. You’re pulling our funding, aren’t you?” Roland Pentley, founder and CEO of Rychess Media, and my dear friend, adjusts himself on the slick pleather of his office furniture as he crosses his ankle over his knee. He pretends to be armed and ready for this conversation, but the way his foot is jiggling—it could snap off at the ankle at any moment.

“Do you want a drink?” I grab the bottle I brought with me. “Do you have glasses?”

“Okay, now I know you’re pulling funding if you’re offering me the good stuff. Is that Macallan?” Roland grabs two crystal cups from the shelf behind him.

“It is. This is an Edition Number One.”

His face drops in awe. “Am I missing something or are you about to open a three-thousand-dollar bottle of whiskey?”

I twist off the lid and pour a double for each of us before handing him a glass. “I am. We’re celebrating.”

“Celebrating this money pit finally going under?”

I chuckle at his frankness. I know I’m torturing him and I need to get to the point, but this is a big moment. A first for me. Theatrics are called for. I grab a folder from my briefcase and toss it on Roland’s lap as I take a seat opposite him. I let the bitter burn of my drink swirl around my mouth. I can taste the difference in an aged wine, but when it comes to whiskey, it’s all the same to me. I don’t drink it enough to enjoy it. I bought this bottle merely to make a point to a whiskey drinker like Roland.

He opens the folder and skims the first page. His eyes fall in disappointment. “All the investors are pulling out.” He solemnly shakes his head. “Every single one.”

“No, I’m forcing them out. I pulled all the funding myself. They’ve been reallocated to businesses that are guaranteed to make a return.”

“Well, Lewis,” Roland says, throwing back a hefty swig of his drink with a *‘what the fuck’* flair. “You could’ve called me to tell me that.”

I adjust my frames as my face pulls in annoyance. People who expect the worst, always get it. A healthy level of optimism is necessary in businesses like ours. “Flip to the back.” I nod toward the open manilla folder, encouraging him to look past the first page.

He nearly passes out when he sees the next document.

“That’s an investment plan. *Our* investment plan. From now on, I’m your only investor and you can stop sweating about returns and margin.” I pull a folded check out of my pocket and hand it to Roland who reluctantly takes it. “And that is for you. Marley got early acceptance into Notre Dame,

right?” I whistle under my breath. “You’re going to need it.”

Roland’s daughter boasts the great accomplishment of making it into such a big-name school, but I’ve always had an issue with the cost of education at Ivy Leagues and prestigious schools. Their exclusivity. The most successful entrepreneurs I know, who are sunbathing on their yachts right below their helipads, are proud community college graduates. Even dropouts. The school’s name doesn’t make the man or woman.

“I can’t afford a loan like this,” Roland says as he unfolds the check, put off by the amount.

“It’s not a loan. That’s a personal check from me to you. So you can breathe for a bit and to buy us time. I’m not going to let Rychess fail, but we’re going to have to play the long game and be patient. That check is for the times you feel the pressure. In the moments you want to give up, know that I got you.”

Roland shakes his head as his thick eyebrows furrow so hard, they nearly touch. “What the hell, Lewis? What is this? You only like to gamble with other people’s money. How can you afford this?” He tosses the check on the table between us.

“First of all, it’s not gambling when you know exactly what the fuck you’re doing. And second of all, shut up and take the check. You’re not denting my account.”

Roland laughs. “Rich, smug bastard. How do I even begin to thank you?”

I lean back. Looking at the relief on his face, I feel like I’m three million dollars richer, not poorer. “Thank me by keeping your chin up during the tough times. That money still won’t be enough. I’m going to look over the financials monthly and provide guidance on where we can try out new strategies in new markets. Rychess is going to turn around, it’s all about timing. But until then, I need *you* to stay in that executive chair, Roland. I trust your conscience. No one else. I won’t work with another CEO. Clear?”

Roland nods. His eyes well and he doesn’t try to hide it. His heavy silence tells me everything I know he’s struggling to say. He takes a moment to compose himself as I swirl the whiskey that tastes like burnt lighter fluid around my mouth.

“And you can keep this bottle,” I say, setting my glass down as I turn up my nose.

“Lewis, let me ask you something. It’s been what? Eight years since your green ass came knocking on my door? You’ve stuck with me this long, but what’s the sudden inspiration for all this confidence in Rychess...and your personal generosity?”

“Well shit. I always thought I was a generous kind of guy.”

“You don’t take personal risks like this. Not since the day I met you.”

“People can change.”

“People can. You though?”

“Pretty mouthy from the man whose company and ass I just saved.”

Roland balks in laughter. “I’m kidding. I’m just in shock. Seems like Colorado suits you.”

It does. My days away from my new home are dim. But it’s not Colorado. I miss her when we’re apart. “Something like that.”

“You head back to Denver tomorrow, right? Do you have plans for dinner tonight?” Roland pours himself another drink and holds out the bottle of Macallan, but I cover the top of my glass with my hand.

“I do now. Why don’t you invite your family? We can go to that hibachi place you guys are obsessed with. Dinner on me.”

Roland holds up the check I gave him one more time. “Haven’t you been generous enough?”

“I’m in a good place right now. Take advantage.”

He's on his office phone immediately, coordinating.

Me: I'm coming back tomorrow. Will I see you?

Adler: Of course you will see me...at my desk. I work for you.

I'd complain but I've learned to love her snark. The day she is serious with me is the day I know things have gone terribly awry.

Me: My flight is later. The office will already be closed.

Adler: Oh, I see. So, this is a booty call?

Me: I'm just asking if you'd like to hang out.

Adler: You're in luck. Girls' night is cancelled tomorrow.

Me: My place or yours?

Adler: Mine. Your home is too fancy and I plan on living in my sweatpants all day tomorrow.

Me: You're going to wear sweatpants to the office? A little unprofessional, no? *winky face*

Adler: You can take away my freedom sir, but not my casual Fridays. That is where the militia draws the line.

"Who are you texting?" Roland crosses his arms, a knowing smirk curling the corners of his lips. I shove my phone in my pocket and stand up in a hurry.

"No one, I was asking my assistant about something. You ready? Were you able to get a table for five?"

"Your assistant, huh?"

"It's not like that." *It's totally like that.* "Come on," I say heading out of his office.

Roland follows behind me and I hear his patronizing snickers. "And this new Lewis is making a lot more sense now."

twenty-eight

...

Adler

J squint at the computer screen trying to gauge if Ted's video stream is frozen.

Ted Arnett is a legend of an agent. According to Tessa, he is a cutthroat asshole with a Midas touch. His bedside manner is lacking, but he knows how to push you to be the best. Which is how I ended up on his calendar this Friday evening. Earlier this week I emailed Ted my character descriptions and a fully fleshed-out synopsis. His return email was simple and to the point: *Pencil me in on Friday at six o'clock. We need to talk.*

Ted puts a fist to his lips and clears his throat so I know this virtual Zoom meeting is not glitching. The connection has not skipped. He's speechless, but not in a way that makes me think anything warm and fuzzy is going to come out of his mouth.

"You hate the idea that much?" I ask as prickly heat fills my cheeks.

Ted pulls back the sleeves of his neat suit with the polished cufflinks. He leans into the screen like he has a juicy secret to share. "Addie, I don't want you to take this personally. I tend to get right to the point. Life's too short, right?"

I nod, horrified. *Not good.*

"It's not that I hate your idea. It's just that there's nothing impressive about it. At all."

"Okay...could you be a little more specific? What's not impressive?"

"The characters, to start. Then the plot. Where they meet. That whole part about their first date on the yacht—ugh. Get rid of that. The twin brother—he's gotta go. Oh, and the big fight over the baked potato—doesn't land for me. And then finally the surprise wedding at the end? Boo. That's gotta go too. But from there you can rework it."

I take notes with my lucky golden pen, but somewhere around the baked potato I stop scribbling. I don't need notes to remember this conversation. "Just to be clear, you'd like me to take out the characters, the beginning, the middle, the end, and then rework it from there?"

"You got it."

"So, start over?"

"That about sums it up."

"Hey, Ted? I'm kind of taking it personally."

Ted roars in laughter, startling me. "Right there! That's what I want, Addie. It was your *voice* that sold *Toy With Me*. This?" He picks up a printed copy of the email I sent him with character descriptions and a painfully thorough synopsis. He drops it back on the desk. "This is trying way too hard. There's no depth. I don't *feel* anything. I don't root for the characters, there's nothing witty or charming about them. I don't care that they exist."

Wow. "Well, at least you're not sugarcoating anything."

He raises an eyebrow and rubs his jaw. “That *was* the sugarcoated version.”

OW. “It’s the best I have on such short notice. I don’t know what you or Tessa want me to do.”

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. A collaborative series with some of the biggest names in the business? There is not a new writer in the world who would be offered this opportunity, and honestly, I don’t think you can do it.”

My shoulders slump as I take his words like a slug to the cheek. He sings my insecurities out loud as if ripping my heart out is merely elevator small talk.

“Well, judging by how much you hate it, you might be on to something. You know, I appreciate the opportunity but I didn’t actually come begging for this. If you don’t think I can do it then—”

“Addie.” Ted’s eyes narrow as he focuses on the screen. They are a little off angle so I know he’s staring right into my eyes and not at the little camera lens. “Prove me wrong. This is the swift kick in the ass you desperately need. I stayed late at the office on a Friday to deliver it to you. *Prove. Me. Wrong.*”

I exhale. For a moment I thought I was off the hook. Getting fired is far easier than getting better. The latter is a daunting road.

“How?”

“That’s up to you to figure out. Look, I’ll push the timeline as much as I can. You need to relax and let it flow. Get me a draft as soon as you can but take enough time to make it good.” *What?*

“I still don’t know what to write about or how to tie a standalone into a series.”

“Let me worry about the tie-in. You worry about the story. I can’t tell a singer how to sing or a writer how to write but let me give you a little advice. When it comes to love, you don’t have to reinvent the wheel. Write what you know.”

“Write what I know?”

“Exactly. That story will be the strongest because it’s yours. Anyway, I’m off to sushi with friends and not to name drop or anything, but I’m planning on having a *marvelous* time. I hope if I’m late I don’t get a *Scarlett* letter.” Ted winks. “Write me a novel I can sell, girl.”

The Zoom pop-up takes over my screen asking me if I enjoyed my meeting.

No. No I did not, Zoom.

When it comes to love, write what you know.

Well, fuck.



A cold red gelatinous bear smacks me square in the chest and sticks like glue. Joel’s arms fly up in the air in celebration like he just sunk a three-pointer right at the buzzer.

“And you say I’m the child?” I peek above my laptop at Joel’s gorgeous, triumphant face. We’re cozy on the couch, my feet wiggling on his lap as he alternates from pinching my toes to playing gummy bear basketball with my collarbone as the backboard, my cleavage as the hoop. He’s begging for attention but I’m still typing away. Hours after my meeting with Ted I began a data dump from my mind. Putting every single scenario on the page to see if anything sings to me.

Joel lobs another gummy bear over my computer screen. I glance down at the blue bear nestled between my breasts.

“Swish, baby!”

“Stop that,” I mumble as I peck away furiously at my keyboard.

“That word or throwing candy down your shirt?”

“Both.”

Joel pulls the laptop from my hands and places it on the far side of the coffee table. He’s been patient since he arrived at my apartment over an hour ago, but it appears he’s hit his breaking point. His hands move up my thigh as he slides up my body. He ducks his head and sucks a gummy bear from between my breasts.

A ripple of anticipation moves between my legs. I try to clench my pelvic floor to shut off the valve before my panties dampen. Joel is on a mission tonight. His eyes are glowing embers. He wants it, and now, but I catch his hand before he can knock on his favorite new door.

“Joel. Slow down.”

He groans in disappointment but being a gentleman, he immediately retreats and slumps on the other side of the couch...pouting.

“You know how some men love when a woman plays hard to get, because they like the thrill of the chase?”

I narrow my eyes. “Yeah...I guess.”

“I’m not one of them.”

Joel thinks I’m hard to get. *Hilarious*. All he has to say is ‘here, girl!’ and I’ll come running like an eager puppy with a bell. You’ll hear me a mile away. I want him, like I always do. The smell of his cologne undoes me. His stubble is exactly the length I love. I can almost feel it scraping the inside of my thigh. He’s right here, he wants it...I want it...but it’s the aftermath I just can’t go through again.

I cried all night last time we were together. I realize it was my first time, but still. *All night*. Even after Reese came to comfort me. I don’t want to go through that again. I want Joel. But *how*? How do I have him without falling apart every time at what I know isn’t mine? How do I sleep with him again without getting attached, especially when I’m pretty certain I love this man? When I desperately want him to feel something too—

Knock, knock...thump!

I jump in my seat, alarmed. Joel is unsurprised at the sudden attack on my apartment. He opens the door and collects a plastic bag sitting on my doormat. He unpacks it right on my coffee table and sets up a living room picnic.

“You ordered food?”

“Yes. I kind of feel like it’s my job to feed you real food now. I talked to your dentist. He said you’re not attending the weekly candy anonymous meetings.” He pats the ground, asking me to join him on the floor. I slump down and duck my head, letting my hair fall over my face. Gentle fingertips cross my forehead instantly, pushing the chunks of hair aside. Joel taps my nose.

“You’re a liar. Dr. Bryson is in Cabo—Oh, I love this place.” I give Joel my most grateful smile when I see my favorite bistro’s logo on the lids of the plastic containers. “What’re we having?”

“A cobb salad for me and ranch soup for you with some lettuce and tomato sprinkled on top.” Joel flashes his perfect white teeth as he removes at least three extra containers of my beloved buttermilk ranch from the takeout bag. “And of course, tater tots because you’re a child and need these with every meal.”

“Did you—”

“Yes, I got extra of their secret sauce too.” He holds up another container of honey-gold deliciousness that pairs perfectly with my crispy tots. “Seriously, woman, it’s a miracle your body is

so smokin' seeing as your entire diet consists of only sugar, additives, and artificial coloring.”

I'd respond but my cheeks are already full. I just scowl like a grumpy chipmunk. I am starving. I didn't realize until Joel shoved food right underneath my nose. This week has been filled with stress and uncertainty over this damn book and I've hardly been sleeping, let alone eating.

I chew in a hurry and swallow. “Thank you. I needed this. I will Venmo you for my half.”

Joel's eyes turn to slits and he tosses his fork down as he leans back against the couch. He removes his glasses and pulls down on his face.

“What?”

“You've seen my penthouse and you're offering to get me back for twenty bucks?”

“This salad cost twenty bucks? What the actual fu—”

Joel raises his eyebrows at me and I stop mid-sentence. “I can't treat you to dinner. You can't sleep over. You won't call or text me first. I can't call you baby. Are there any more *rules* I should be aware of?”

My heart quickens. Joel wears an expression that's somewhere between hurt and pissed. The pressure builds in my chest and swirls in my throat. “No PDA, no talking about the future, no raw dog...to name a few...”

“Raw dog? Jesus, Adler. Why are you being like this?”

“Like what?” I toss my fork on the table as well, suddenly losing my appetite.

“Not yourself.”

“What is the problem? You said you wanted a fuck buddy. We're friends, we fucked. End of story. I'm trying to do you a favor by not getting all messy with emotions.”

Joel pushes the table forward so he has room to pull me into his arms, against his chest. He kisses the top of my head. “I'm sorry.”

“For what?”

“I get it now. You're trying to be a *cool* girl, aren't you?”

“No...” I couldn't if I tried.

“Adler, it's not that I want unattached sex. I'm not some player. And I care about you. A lot. I just can't...take it any further than this. But that doesn't mean we need rules.” *I need the rules.* “Just get rid of them. You can be yourself with me.”

“There's a rule about never faking orgasms,” I garble against his chest as I nuzzle in deeper to the warmth that feels like home.

“Oh, that one I like. You can keep that one. Hm, maybe we just need to rewrite a few of them. Can I see the rules?”

“Literally, never.”

Joel's laughter rings out loudly. “Fine, then from what I gather, how about this? Moving forward, expect that I will pick up all the tabs, because I can afford to and more importantly, I *want* to. We can spend the night with each other whenever we want. When I call you baby, it'd be great if you didn't look like you wanted to hurl. And, for public displays of affection—we'll keep the office professional, but if we're walking to the Thai place for lunch and the sun hits you just right and you're on the sidewalk looking like a dream, I may kiss you right then and there.” Joel's shoulders rise then fall. “As far as the condoms and orgasms—those seem pretty solid as is. What do you think? Good revisions?”

I'm brave in Joel's arms like this. I feel a strength rise in me when he holds me tight, like he wants me, in all the *real* ways.

“I think I can make those work.” I sigh against him.

“Good.” Joel hums in satisfaction.

“Just one more thing, though...I like to kiss.”

“What?”

“The other night was um...fun, it’s just some parts felt kind of...pornographic? I mean, no that’s not right. It felt—” I give him a thumbs-up like the most childish idiot in the world. “It’s just I like to kiss, too. Is that weird? Are fun bunnies supposed to kiss?”

Joel lifts my chin gently so my eyes meet his. His smile is warm chicken soup to an angry sore throat. The adoring look that claims his face is my comfort. His lips that touch mine are my cure. “I like kissing you,” he murmurs into my mouth.

I open my lips and release my eager tongue, but Joel pulls away.

“What if tonight we eat dinner, you turn on your *Sex and the City* reruns like I know you’re dying to, and we can talk about your book ideas and how big of an asshole this Ted guy is.”

I half laugh. Yeah, Ted’s an asshole, but he also gave me a second chance, and so for that, he’s forgiven.

“And after?”

“And after, we’ll just kiss until we fall asleep.”

“Are you sure?” A wave of emotion crashes over me. I don’t want to cry, so I have to release the pressure with some lame joke. “I don’t have a guest room.”

Joel groans miserably. “I’m never going to live that down, huh?”

“Nope,” I say with my chirp returning. This conversation is taking us almost back to normal. I successfully dodge the emotional missile that was headed straight for my heart. “Never.”

“Okay, Baby Spice, eat your food.”

Joel picks up his fork and begins stabbing the crunchy pieces of lettuce. He constructs the perfect bite each time. A little green, a tiny piece of tomato, a few shreds of cheese, and a crouton to top it off.

“What?” he asks when he sees me staring at him like a loon.

“Nothing.” I shake my head and brush off his question because there is no way in hell I can admit that I’m falling in love with him. There’d be a Joel-shaped hole in my wall...in my heart.

“So, tell me—he actually said he hated your pitch?”

“Oooh, no. Ted didn’t say he hated it, he just said he liked absolutely nothing about it. But you know, at least he was gentle when he said my characters sucked and he didn’t care if they died.”

“You’re shitting me.” Joel’s forehead crinkles in both pity and amusement.

“Nope! Then I’m pretty sure he hung up on me to go have dinner with Scarlett Johansson.”

“What? All right, start at the beginning. Tessa called you about the book on Sunday?”

Joel listens patiently as I rattle off every detail about my happenstance luck of the draw. The opportunity that will make or break me as an author. He hangs on every word, offering me encouragement at each turn and cringing at all the painful parts of my conversation with Ted. He holds me and tells me I just need to relax. Inspiration is on the way.

Little does he know it’s already here. The way Joel scrunches his nose every time he smiles at me. The way his heartbeat relaxes with my head against his chest. The way he moans sweetly when he kisses me. The way his hands behave tonight, leaving my sex and my breasts alone, making good on his promise—kissing and cuddling only.

It comes to me in an instant.

That sparkly lightbulb illuminates all the dark, dusty corners of my mind. It’s always been there. I just needed to flick on the switch. I already have all the source material I desperately need about

love. Now, I just have to be brave enough to put it on the page.

twenty-nine

...

Adler

november

I'm on top of the world. Or Denver at least. The Colorado air is known for being thin, but on top of Joel's penthouse balcony the light breeze feels even wispier.

I lean over the glass ledge and let the view take my breath away. The neighboring skyscrapers are lit up by thousands of bright lights gleaming through the neatly spaced windows and doors. The buildings look like art against the dark navy sky. The shadow of the mountains nestled in the background balances the cityscape perfectly. Bustling city meets the mountain wilderness in one picturesque view. Two contrasting renditions of life blended into one harmonious backdrop. This is exactly why I made Denver my home. I have everything here, I don't have to choose.

The sliding door opens then closes. Heavy footsteps approach from behind. I don't turn my head. By now I recognize his walk. I can sense his presence. Ever since the kissing night—as I've dubbed it—I let myself fall. We've been inseparable. He's touched me in every way imaginable. Our bodies have been intertwined nonstop for weeks straight. And it's still not enough.

Joel's had me in every position. I've screamed at decibels only dogs can hear. We're at it daily. More than daily—on most days, twice a day. We were supposed to be professional at the office—we've both bruised our knees on several occasions behind his locked office door. The desire wasn't calming. Our heat—far from cooling. Our hunger was only growing. He's become an expert at toggling between sweet kisses and the dirtiest of talk, knowing exactly how to coax out the most shameless side of me.

Joel wraps his large frame around me, resting one of his forearms just outside of mine on the balcony rail. He is the best windbreaker. His other arm slinks around my hips that are jutting outwards as I bend over and lean into the view that makes me feel like I'm flying. It's like I could just step off right here and soar over the city.

"Shit, Adler. You're freezing." Joel's hand trails over my bare thigh. November is when the Colorado weather really starts to change. Some days are still filled with sunshine and shorts weather, but after nine o'clock the temperature dips dramatically. The long-sleeved formfitting dress I'm wearing tonight does nothing to protect my chilly legs. It's a choice for style, not comfort. Poor Joel endures my ratty sweatpants and messy buns so often, I wanted to give him something nicer to look at tonight.

"I'm okay." I'm shivering which is not convincing.

"No, you're not. Come on. Let's go inside." Joel tugs on my waist, leading me away from the ledge, but I don't budge.

"I just need a few more minutes with this view," I offer as a simple explanation. I watch the cars zip by below. Even the streets are lit up in a medley of colors from the changing traffic lights and pedestrian signals. The whole city looks busy and alive.

"Are you thinking about your book?" Joel breathes into my ear, covering me again with his warm body as my blanket.

He knows some of the sensual scenes in my book are inspired by our adventures. He loves it. Every time Joel sends me over the edge, he asks me if *this* time is going to make it into the story. He

puffs his peacock feathers up whenever I tell him I've run out of pages just trying to do his body justice with my words. The sex scenes, he's great with. The fact that this book is basically a secret love letter to Joel is something I keep to myself. Once I re-pitched the story to Ted, he was hooked.

'I love it, Adler. It's daring, cringeworthy, and there's guaranteed heartbreak. The heroine is so authentically naive. She's going to get her heart ripped apart and the readers are going to really feel it.'

'Hey, Ted—you realize this is my life we're talking about, right?'

'Yeah, what'd I say?'

"Are you thinking about my book?" I laugh as a white puff of air escapes my lips. Joel's growing hardon nudges against the back of my thigh.

"Maybe," he says, smiling into the back of my neck. His breath, now cool, tickles my earlobe. "But tell me seriously. What're you thinking about? You've got an odd look on your face."

"Okay, but it's going to ruin what you have growing down there."

"I'll risk it. What's on your mind?"

"My mom and how much she hates the city. We could be side by side, staring at this view, and we'd see such different things."

"Oh." Joel retreats and I'm exposed against the freezing night air. He walks inside without a word. Talking about parents isn't sexy, but I didn't think he would be *that* put off.

Joel returns with the blanket from his living room. He pushes a button on the outdoor electric fireplace and gets comfortable on the wicker sectional lining his balcony. He pats the green cushion next to him and holds out the blanket.

"Come on, Baby Spice. I've been waiting for this one."

I slip under the warm blanket with Joel and let his hands dance up and down my legs under the covers.

"What do you mean you've been waiting for this one?" I cautiously squint one eye.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but I would need to get two parrots to take on the job of mimicking you. You talk nonstop but never once have you mentioned your parents."

"That's not true...about my parents. The parrot thing...only slightly accurate." I scowl.

"It is true. I know everything about your friends, a little about your grandma, and nothing about your parents. You know about my family. I told you about my brothers and my little sister. You know I'm third-generation French and Italian. You know my parents were separated until recently. You know I went to college in Alabama to get away from their bullshit. Here's everything I know about your family..."

My eyes lift to meet Joel's. "You didn't say anything."

"Exactly. But I know Quinn won't walk on the beach because she has an irrational fear of death by suffocation in quicksand. I know that Noa still has a very large portfolio of all the Pappyland drawings she did as a child. I know Reese's hair grows three sizes in the humidity because even though she doesn't look it, she's a quarter Puerto Rican. Last but not least, Amani has a birthmark above her ankle that looks like a tic-tac-toe board. You guys have filled it out in permanent marker on more than one occasion on girls' nights after she passed out, drunk." Joel squeezes my knee, touching the ticklish spot that makes my whole leg twitch. "How'd I do?"

"I...um..." I try to formulate a response and can't. I have been spilling my guts to Joel like a silly schoolgirl. I pinch my fingers at the corner of my lips and pretend to zip and lock my mouth before I lob my fictitious key over the balcony ledge to plummet to the streets of downtown Denver. "I'm officially done rambling to you about my life."

Joel's laugh comes from deep in his throat. He pulls my legs over his under the blanket and runs his strong hands from my ankles to my knees.

"Tell me about your parents."

"What do you want to know?"

"I want to know something about your parents that even your best girlfriends don't know. I want an Adler secret all to myself."

"That's a tall order. I tell my best friends absolutely everything. Even about the Littlefoot tattoo I have right on my bikini line."

Joel interlocks his fingers and touches his pointers to his lips. "Adler, I have done *thorough* investigations and I can confirm with certainty that you do not have a *Land Before Time* tattoo anywhere on your body."

I wink. "Just testin' ya."

"And you're not a Littlefoot. You're Ducky for sure." Joel opens and closes his hand repeatedly in the 'talks-too-much' gesture. I glare at him with my most intimidating expression, which really isn't saying much. "And isn't *Land Before Time* a little before your time?"

"It's even before *your* time. But my grandma raised me on all the good old-school stuff."

"Your grandma raised you? Not your parents?"

I groan in reluctance. "Joel—"

"Okay, let's make a deal. Tell me about your parents and I swear on my life I will go with you to *one* Spice Girls reunion concert, should it ever happen."

"What?!" I clap my hands together in glee. My goofy grin puts all my teeth on display.

"I can't promise I'll be sober...but I'll go."

"Fine, okay. That's a pretty good offer, Joel Lewis. I'll take it."

"You have my word. One concert. Now spill."

I exhale as my eyes fall on the patterned blanket. I fidget with my fingers as I reflect on the topic I usually try to avoid at all costs.

"My parents never wanted kids. I was an unhappy accident due to faulty birth control. And it wasn't one of those movie moments where my mom gave birth and they realized they wanted a family after all. I arrived and from what I understand they still didn't want a kid. My grandma mostly raised me while my parents traveled constantly. Then she passed and they had to return home and claim me. That was a real summer bummer for them." I laugh awkwardly.

"Adler...what?" I hate the pitying look on his face. This is why I don't talk about my parents. "I thought you were going to say something like—I don't know, I can't even think of anything funny right now. I'm sorry. Do you talk to your parents?"

I blow out a deep breath and prepare myself. Because it's Joel. And he's not going to let it go. "Rarely...over the phone. Holidays and whatnot. To this day they don't take much of an interest in my life. I chose a lot of things they wouldn't have chosen for themselves...like living in a city, working a nine-to-five.

"For most of their lives, my parents were penniless hippies who traveled for a living. It was my grandma who had the financial stability to raise me. My parents were happy to float continent to continent whenever they could scrape up enough cash to do so. When my grandma died, I was sixteen. My parents would come home and check in every now and then, but I mostly just remember them being gone. They left me to raise myself. I always had this feeling that they resented me for existing."

"Where are they now?"

"Germany—their favorite country. I'm named after my dad's favorite pub in Berlin, believe it or

not. Adler's Place. I'm told it's where I was conceived."

"Wow. German, French, and Italian." Joel laughs lightly. "Our kids would be such mutts." We both freeze. Joel's hands lock in place on my leg. A lump rises in my throat and sits right on my windpipe, threatening to starve me of air.

"Um, I didn't—" Joel chokes.

"I'm not—"

"Hypothetically—"

"Just to clarify—" I interrupt him again in a panic.

One of us needs to finish a freaking sentence. I steady my voice. "Joel, I'm not German at all. My parents love Germany, but I'm not German. They are travel writers. They have articles in National Geographic and History. They just as easily could've settled in Brazil or India."

"Oh," he breathes. "Writing runs in the family?"

"I suppose. Of course, my parents would never touch my books. Not their thing."

"I would've never guessed all this in a million years. I pictured you with a picture-perfect suburban situation. A happy family."

"I do have a happy family. I have four big sisters. One of which kind of doubles as a mom."

"Quinn?" Joel chuckles. I tap my nose twice and point at him. "Cody is literally living on her Instagram page by the way. You're going to need to warn her."

I snort loudly. "Yeah right. You warn Cody. Quinn has room for no man in her life except her dad and baby brother." I stand up and nod toward the balcony ledge. "Come here, I want to show you something."

Joel follows me. We lean over the glass rail taking in the panoramic view of the city. I grab his chin and guide his eyes. "You see that building way over there? The rickety-looking one that has all the windows on the top boarded up."

"Yeah."

"That was my home for four years. Quinn gave me my college campus tour when I visited during my senior year of high school. When she found out that I got an academic scholarship but I was thinking of declining admittance because I couldn't afford room and board, she pretty much adopted me. She was going into her junior year and upperclassmen don't ever room with freshmen but she offered me the last bed in her apartment—free of charge. Mani, Reese, and Noa were all already living with Quinn before I got there. They just opened the door, shuffled things around, and made room for me. No hesitation."

"Ah, hence why you're the baby of your friends."

"My point is, don't go feeling all bad for me about my parents. The universe gave me a substitute family that's even better. You see—love is a choice. It isn't always easy. My grandma was basically handed an infant when she was fifty. She chose to be my mom and dedicate her late life to raising me. When I lost her, my friends chose to be my family. We're strengthened by the choices we make, not by the cards we're dealt. Somehow, I find a much deeper satisfaction in that. So, all in all—a happy ending."

"One more thing though—"

"Ugh, Joel," I groan. "I've given you way more than one deep dark secret."

"I just think you should send your parents a copy of your book when it's ready. They should know who you are and what you've accomplished—without them."

"I haven't accomplished it yet."

"But you will."

I don't want to reflect anymore. I'm okay with the way things are with my parents...because I don't think too much about it. I vow that when I have children, it'll be different. I'll spend every single day telling them how much I want them. I see Noa and Wes with their son, Jonah—even in the midst of their divorce. That's what I want. It's dedication and joy. It's what real parental love should be.

I need a diversion. The way Joel's expression has been knitted in care and concern throughout this entire conversation—it's too much. My heart could burst. He mentioned our babies would be mutts... come on...*our babies*? It's not fair. I need a swift reminder of what we really are to each other before I get too carried away by my feelings.

"I'll give you a choice. We can talk some more about my parents, or I can bend over this railing and show you how I'm not wearing any underwear."



Joel

I actually debate it for a moment.

Call me insane, but the haunted look on Adler's face when I first saw her on the balcony disturbed me. There was something in her eyes. Like it could carry her away from me and I didn't like it. But the way she looks in her sexy black skintight dress is too much of a distraction. The blood from my brain rushes downwards and just like that, the decision is made.

I spin Adler around. "Lean forward and hold the ledge."

My hand trails slowly up her thigh and when I reach my destination there is no cotton, no satin, no lace providing any barrier. My fingers crash into her already-wet entrance.

"Naughty. I thought you were teasing me. When did you decide to take your panties off?" I rasp against her ear as I start to stroke her walls and circle my finger around her clit. She shudders and jerks against my hand.

"Why...not...get to the...point?" she says through shallow breaths. Her arousal slicks between my fingers, hypnotizing me. The only thing hotter than Adler...is Adler wanting me. It's like winning the lottery every day. "You just...*ah*...always want them off...anyways."

"Fuck yes, I do."

I smile into the back of her neck as I sink two fingers into her sopping heat. The rest of her body is an icicle. But in here, it's fire. Adler shrieks and groans from the surprise intrusion. I halt and wrap my other hand around her mouth.

"Baby, no one can see you up here, but they sure as hell will hear you if you scream like that."

"Sorry," she huffs. I let her mouth go. She reaches under her legs to push my hand away.

"Hey, hey," I whisper against her ear. "Don't be embarrassed. We just have to be quiet out here. Want me to take you inside where you are welcome to scream my name at the top of your lungs?"

"No." She shakes her head and her hair spills down her shoulders. "I want you to take me right here, like this. While I look at this view."

I nearly choke on my spit. *My little daredevil—full of surprises.* She wants it from behind outside

on the balcony? I am ninety-nine percent sure that no one can see us up here. I quickly scan our surroundings. But, also, I one hundred percent don't care right now. Sometimes reckless is necessary. The bulge in my pants is making this *very* necessary.

I hike her dress up just enough to reveal her sex. I leave as much of her ass covered as possible because she feels like an ice block. I need to do this fast before the poor girl gets frostbite. I had the good sense to put a condom in my pocket when I left the bedroom, just in case Adler wanted to get rowdy on the couch.

She wiggles her hips in anticipation and I can't unwrap the damn thing quickly enough. I discard the foil packet on the ground, unzip and tug my pants down just enough so my full erection springs free. I roll the rubber down and slump into her. *Oh, the relief.* She is so wet that I'm met with zero resistance. She clenches instantly, wrapping up my cock in the most familiar way that yet is always surprising. It shouldn't feel *this* mind-numbingly good. Every single time. Should it?

"*Fuck...you're perfect, Adler.*" I praise her in broken fragments as I continue to ease in and out of her, finding a rhythm that keeps her whimpering, but keeps me from unleashing. *Not yet. She's first. Always.* She just groans in response, unable to form words as she rises to her tippy toes, arches her back, and forces her ass against me. She's begging me to get deeper. I lean over, filling her fully. I hear her swallow her cries.

"Tell me you love it," I breathe against her ear.

"I love it," she groans.

"Do you want to scream?" I tease as I slow the pace. I love to make her beg. I like getting her frustrated to the point she bosses me around and tells me exactly what she wants. She doesn't answer so I stop. Pulling out, I rub her back tenderly.

"Joel."

"What?"

"*Please!*"

"Please what? Tell me what you want," I growl behind her. I'm going to pay for this later, but I don't care.

"Fuck me. Hard. Right now."

"Yes, ma'am. You don't have to be so bossy." I laugh under my breath and tease her entrance with my tip but Adler's not into playing right now. She throws her hips back and takes my entire length in one thrust.

Fuuuck, I will never get enough of this.

I pound into her fiercely and this time, she does scream. *Screw it.* I don't care. Let us get caught. This is a scene out of my sexiest dream. Except it's with Adler, so I know it's real.

I almost ask her if she's close, but her body answers right on time. Adler tenses and I feel her throb and spasm around me. She goes completely silent and holds her breath as she climaxes. She finally slumps her shoulders and hangs her head as she lets out a relieved sigh. She looks back at me over her shoulder. "Go ahead, get yours," she says breathlessly.

I burrow back into her, this time with reckless abandon. The sloshing sounds as I fill and release her are almost as loud as her moans. She clenches and comes again right before I shatter inside of her. I grip her hip hard. Her skin reddens as I pinch but she doesn't squirm. My vision blurs. I don't know if I'm seeing stars, or specks in my eyes as I slowly settle.

The euphoric high fades as quickly as it came. It's chased away with another desire. I wish she wasn't bent over my balcony right now. I wish we were warm, in bed, so I could pull out, pull this condom off, and draw Adler into my arms. I'd fall asleep next to her knowing the world would be

waiting for me when I woke up.

Not even I can deny this thought is way past friendly. Out of bounds. Torturously confusing for her. And me.

I can't blur these lines.

I shake the thought from my mind and instead, I smack Adler's ass before rolling down her dress. I turn my back so she's spared the gory visual of me taking care of this soiled rubber.

"So," Adler says, stretching her arms as she straightens. "What now?"

"We're done here, Baby Spice. You can leave."

She turns ghost white. Her brows cinch and her mouth falls. I keep a straight face as long as I can before I burst out laughing. She shakes her head, pretending to be unamused.

"You're an ass."

"Oh, come on, I'm sorry," I apologize but it sounds a little disingenuous as I'm still cracking up at her tantrum. "How about I let you pick out a show or movie? I'll even make you the popcorn with that disgusting nacho cheese powder."

"You're really brave enough to risk me picking?" Adler's eyes light up as I usher her back inside, out of the bitter cold. I grab the throw blanket off the patio furniture and wrap it around her shoulders before I quickly kiss her plump cherry lips that feel like ice cubes.

"It's Friday night. We both know you're going to make me watch Sarah Jessica Parker chase Mr. Big all over HBO reruns tonight."

"Atta boy," she says, nestling into my couch, wrapping herself in the velvety throw.

"What is the deal with *Sex and the City*, anyhow?"

"My grandma—it used to be our thing. Once she decided I was adult enough to handle it, we'd watch it on Friday nights. My best friends picked up the tradition where Grandma and I left off."

"So, your grandma was a hiking mogul, day-drunk margaritas, and let her teenage granddaughter watch *Sex and the City* with her? I really wish I could've met her. She sounds pretty awesome."

"Joel Lewis—she would've absolutely adored you."

I smile to myself. I get the feeling her grandma's approval means everything to her. It's nice to know I would've made the mark. Although, I inwardly cringe wondering if she'd hate me for the 'fun bunny' situation I'm currently putting her granddaughter through.

"Hey, Adler?" I call her from the kitchen and she whips her head around. Her loose chocolate waves fly across her face. Her big blue sapphires shine as she meets my gaze.

"Yes?" Her sweet smile lights everything up.

I feel it. A pulse. An urge. It's a whisper telling me to jump. I'm at the very edge of the cliff and this feeling is telling me to leap blindly into the ocean. Like the waves of a real relationship will catch and carry me. It'd be so easy to give in to. But I know too damn well that it's merely a trick. There are only rocks below.

I clear my throat. "I'm really glad we're friends."

She tilts her head to the side in confusion. "Yeah, me too, Joel." She spins back around. "Don't skimp on the nacho cheese powder, please."

This is fine. This will be all right. I'll ignore how Adler snuggled up to me on the couch in my arms feels just as good as me spilling into her moments before. This is still friendly.

Somehow, I can still make this work.

thirty

...

Adler

“*Y*ou staying or coming?” I hiss in a whisper at the spotted lump on the bed. “Last chance. I’m closing this door.” Felices springs off the bed leaving a sleeping Joel behind, making his choice. His thunderous purr vibrates the floor as he pads beside me.

“You want some breakfast?” It’s a needless ask. Felices always wants breakfast, and second breakfast, and if there’s time before lunch he’ll squeeze in thirds. I open the fridge looking for the raw food that Joel special orders. It’s not hard to find. The neatly lined packages of perfectly portioned meat chunks take up the majority of his fancy see-through refrigerator.

“Let him loose on the streets. He can feast on unsuspecting pedestrians for breakfast.” A sleepy-eyed Cody joins us in the kitchen. He flinches as Felices hops on the kitchen island, plants his furry ass right on the cool granite, and blinks at me expectantly.

I tickle Felices’s furry little chin and he melts under the attention. “Because this prince only eats organic and free-range.” I speak to Felices the same way I would to a baby bunny, kissy face included. “Who knows what the Coloradans on the street are filled with.” *Weed*. They are filled with highs and good vibes.

“I knew Joel would end up with a cat person.”

“Joel and I have not ended up anywhere. We’re friends. What’s your deal with the cat, Codycakes? Are you a dog person?”

“I’m a pet person.” He points at Felices, perched proudly on the counter. “*That’s* a wild animal.”

I roll my eyes at the big bad football player who is afraid of a little pussy. *Ha, ha!* I laugh to myself at the joke I didn’t say out loud. When Cody looks at me like I’m insane, I clarify.

“Sorry, the voices in my head just made a joke.”

He smiles and taps his temple. “How many are in there? Just so I’m tracking.”

“I’ll let you know when I’ve met them all. Anyways—French press this morning?”

Cody nods eagerly. I’ve recently introduced him to the beauty of French press coffee and it has become our morning ritual. On this rare occasion Joel sleeps in. Normally he’s here in the kitchen, posted on a stool, lecturing us both about our caffeine dependency.

I place a full kettle on Joel’s gas range. The ignition clicks in protest until the blue flames spring to life. I open a bag of the fancy cat food and pull a metal bowl from the cabinet. Much to his furry chagrin, I place Felices’s food on the floor, indicating he should get his big ol’ paws off the counter on which we eat. I grab the electronic coffee grinder and fetch the coffee beans from Joel’s fridge. The pieces to the French press apparatus are in the cabinet just below where I can actually reach. The mugs on the other side of the kitchen require me stretching to my tippy toes. It’s somewhere around the time I’m pulling the cream from the fridge and the sugar from the pantry that I feel Cody’s stare on me.

“What?” I touch my face defensively.

“Um...are we roommates now?”

Oh god. I have been operating in this kitchen for the past few weeks like I own the place. I’m feeding Joel’s cat. I make Cody coffee most mornings.

“Definitely not. I’d say *you* should make the coffee but I can’t trust you around hot things.”

A mischievous grin curls at Cody’s lips. His dimples deepen behind his shaggy blond scruff. “Speaking of hot things—”

“No! I am *not* giving you Quinn’s number.”

“Whyyyyyyy?” Cody’s whine is shrill for a man of his size. It’s impressive he can reach that octave. “I promise I’ll be a gentleman.”

“Because.”

I pour the boiling water into the top of the French press and the loose grounds rise. I shake my finger at Cody warning him to wait. The eager beaver always pushes down on the lever too quickly. The result? Weak coffee.

“Fine. Just give her *my* number. And then I’m going to send you some pictures I’d like you to forward on.”

“Hell no.”

“Why not?”

“Because the other morning I saw women leaving your bedroom one by one like a freaking slutty clown car.”

“That’s an exaggeration if I’ve ever heard one. There were two girls.”

“That’s still one too many, buddy.”

Cody sucks in his lips. “We were watching a movie...”

“That you filmed from your bedroom?”

“Addie-cakes! Denver is my home now and I think it’s time I get serious. Maybe put down some roots. If you give me Quinn’s number, I promise she’ll be the only girl in my bedroom here on out.”

“Mighty cocky over there.” I stifle my explosive laughter at the thought of Quinn entering Cody’s slop of a bedroom. She’d pass out from the visual.

“Please.” Cody blinks expectantly at me. What’s the appropriate way to explain to Cody that Quinn would chew him up and spit him out? I’ve watched men try before...and fail miserably. I place my hands on my hips and scour his face.

“Tell me one thing you like about Quinn and if I deem your answer worthy you can have her number.”

“One thing?”

“Yes. Please tell me why after stalking her Instagram and Facebook you want her number. By the way tits, ass, and ‘lickable’ tan skin are all *unworthy* answers. Impress me, Cody-cakes. Why, outside of getting it in, are you so obsessed with meeting Quinn?”

I tap my foot impatiently against the espresso-colored hardwood floor. Cody’s face twists in contemplation before he answers. *He’s got nothing.*

“She’s not trying to be seen.”

I raise one brow, not sure if I’m supposed to be offended on behalf of my best friend. “What?”

“She doesn’t use filters. No duckface. She doesn’t pose to show off her ass or cleavage. No heavy makeup. She’s never even looking at the camera. She’s completely comfortable and confident in who she is and...I don’t know, I could use that energy in my life right now. I want her number so I can ask her out on a real date. To talk. Not so I can *get it in.*”

Ah...damn.

Cody winks, self-assured. “Nailed it, right? But also, yeah—you want me to lie or something? She’s fucking gorgeous.”

“I’ll text her info later,” I grumble. “But she’s going to handle you like a piece of bubblegum.”

“Ooh, that’s hot.”

“Not what I meant. Quinn is not the type to—well, you know what? You’re a big boy. You can learn your own lesson.” I fill two mugs with coffee and slide one to Cody. “Coffee on the terrace, good sir?” I ask in a horrendous British accent.

“Sure. But leave that thing inside,” he sneers at Felices who is still busy stuffing his whiskered face.

We settle into the balcony furniture and Cody opts for the sectional seat just to the left of me. He raises his legs so his toes are inches from my knee. If I could sum up Cody in one visual, it’d be this. Comfortable with no boundaries.

I take advantage of the momentary lull in conversation to ask a random question. “Do you know how much Felices cost?”

“Why?”

“I might be in the market for a Savannah cat.”

He takes a small sip from his mug. “I’m not sure. *Expensive*. If I had to guess, it’d be like...more than adult braces but less than a Buick Enclave.”

I turn my palm up and scrunch my face. *What?* “What the hell kind of description is that? That’s basically saying bigger than small, but smaller than big.”

His monstrous shoulders rise and fall as he laughs. “Because I don’t know! All I know is Joel doesn’t like to splurge. He said Felices was an exception. Joel doesn’t like living the life he can afford. His humility is charming, right? I’d say it’s a pretty good play to get women, secret millionaire and all, but honestly Joel’s just wired to be down to earth.”

“Um, penthouse much?”

“You’re the only girl who’s seen the penthouse. Joel doesn’t bring women here. Gold diggers sniff him out like bloodhounds.”

I try to hide behind my mug. I make myself very small in my seat as I ask Cody a daring question. “Do you happen to know how long Joel’s been anti-marriage?”

Cody’s eyes fall to his lap. He’s not oblivious, he knows why I’m asking. “Since I’ve known him, at least.”

I take a sip of coffee to delay my response. I’m trying desperately not to sound too interested in this conversation. “Do you know why?”

“His parents did a number on him. Mr. and Mrs. Lewis are really—let’s just call it...passionate. Joel grew up thinking marriage turns people into monsters. His eldest brother Jackson is on wife number three. The brother after him, James, just went through a bitter divorce that was about three years overdue. Then Jacob—he has two children from two different marriages. Even his sister Cami—that’s...um, well it’s a whole other thing, but she might’ve had it the worst.” Cody takes another exaggerated sip from his mug. Whatever memory that just bubbled up is making him extremely uncomfortable. “Addie, if you’re asking because you think it’s just an excuse, it’s not. The guy is broken in a way. Joel has only ever seen painful relationships that always end horribly. His whole life is wrapped around statistics and patterns and I think he’s trying to avoid what he believes is inevitable.”

“Oh.” Poor Joel. His family...well, that’s a lot of evidence to make his point.

“I’m assuming you didn’t grow up with the same experience? You want the whole marriage and children thing?”

I’m a little caught off guard. In all the time Joel and I have been sleeping together, the question hasn’t come up. Because it’s not an option for us. “From the bottom of my heart, I truly believe that if it weren’t for my grandma, my parents might’ve left me at a fire station.”

Cody’s eyes pop open. He flinches at my candidness. It sounds a lot worse than it feels. I’ve had years and years to cry over it. I’m okay.

“But yes. I guess I went the other way. Lack of love made me determined to find it, I suppose.” Cody shoots me a side glance and I scramble to cover my tracks. “I don’t mean with Joel per se. I know where he stands. We’re just friends.”

Something catches Cody’s eye. He looks to the corner of the balcony, then at me, then back to the corner of the concrete and then his eyes land on me once more, wide and teasing. “Friends that fuck on the balcony?” The condom wrapper lies in plain sight.

Cody booms in laughter as I hang my head. I flush so hard my ears burn alongside my cheeks. “Oh my god, sorry.”

“About what?” Cody says as he bangs on his chest. All the laughing causes him to choke.

“It’s just embarrassing.”

“Why?”

“Vault?”

He squints. “I don’t know what that means.”

“As in what I’m about to say is *in* the vault...keep up, Cody-cakes.”

“Ah, got it. Your secret is safe with me.”

I put down my mug on the table and pull my knees to my chin. I point at Cody. “Don’t be weird about this, okay?” He nods and I continue. “Joel brings out an odd side of me. I’m not the girl who wants it in public on a balcony. But for him—I don’t know. I feel like with Joel I’d be willing do anything, and it scares me. And it makes me wonder if he respects me a little less for it.” *If I’m being totally honest it makes me wonder if I respect me a little less for it.* “For all of it—like once you’re a fuck buddy, you’re always a fuck buddy.”

Cody pulls in his lips and closes his eyes. He exhales through his nostrils and I know for my benefit he’s trying very hard not to make a lewd joke. Which is good. I need big brother Cody right now, not ‘that’s-what-she-said’ Cody.

“You’ve got this all backwards. First of all, every man wants a lady in public and then an absolutely insatiable sex vixen in the sheets. That’s the dream.”

“I seriously doubt that’s the dream—”

“It is. But shush, let me finish. Second of all, I don’t care what you guys are calling it, you and Joel are dating.”

“We’re really not.”

“Except you sleep here most nights, he has all these cutesy nicknames for you, and you basically eat every meal together. I caught him watching *Sex and the City* on his own the other day because y’all started an episode and didn’t finish it. I’ve never given someone so much shit in my life. When you’re not here, he’s texting you with that stupid grin on his face. What part of that doesn’t sound like dating?”

“The part where he fucks me like he found me on OnlyFans.”

“And you’re not into it?”

“It just feels a little carnal.”

“So tell him you don’t like it.”

“It’s not that I don’t like it. I just feel like I’m more concerned about what he wants than what I want. It feels a little...off.”

A sliver of sun cuts through the cityscape and a warm stripe of light rests over my leg. I trace it with my finger as the heavy silence between Cody and me remains.

Finally, Cody asks the question I’ve been avoiding. “What do you want, Addie?”

I put my chin in my palms and let my fingers wrap over my face. “If I ask for what I want, then how is that fair to Joel? He told me he doesn’t want a relationship. If I push this any further then I become a woman who is manipulating him with sex to get what she wants. What does that say about me?”

“I think the fact that you care so much about what he wants says a lot about you...and how you feel about him.”

Thud!

Cody and I both jump as Felices slams against the sliding glass door. His furry belly smashes against the glass and his loud meow indicates he’s pissed at the lack of invitation to our coffee date. Cody shakes his head and turns up his nose in disgust. I laugh as this war between a larger than normal cat, and a larger than normal man, continues to ensue.

“You should tell him.”

“Tell him what?”

“How you feel. Look”—Cody groans in reluctance—“I’m a shit friend for telling you this, but Joel loves you. He’s *in* love with you. Like I’ve never seen before.”

My heart flutters and I can’t hide the excitement in my voice. “He said that to you?”

“No.” *Oh.* “But he’s been my closest friend since freshman year at UA. Believe me when I say, *I know.* Try to be patient with him because this is new for him too. He’s a little lost right now.”

I sigh deeply. “If and when Joel decides he wants this to mean more, he’ll tell me. Until then... well, I’m okay for now.”

Cody nods unconvincingly. “Sure. But Addie?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re my friend now, too. I don’t want either of my friends to get hurt. You gotta stand up for what you want as well.”

“I’m okay. Promise.” I hold up my pinky but before Cody can lock promise fingers with me the sliding door opens and closes behind us. Felices comes barreling onto the balcony and dives into my lap.

“Felices, down,” Joel scolds lazily. We all know Felices doesn’t listen to commands. Mostly because Joel is a pushover with his cat baby.

I mimic Joel’s warm smile. He looks like a dream in the morning. My man looks like a Grecian god ascending to earth, gracing us with his presence (okay not *mine* but I can pretend in the safe haven of my mind). Joel finds his place right next to me, throwing his arm over my shoulder territorially and pulling both me and Felices into his embrace. He kisses my cheek tenderly as he whispers a good morning. It’s so natural now to just nuzzle into him. I side glance at Cody’s raised eyebrows that say ‘*See? Told ya.*’

“Bro, how much was Felices?”

“Why?”

“Addie wants to know.”

“Oh, um, I think eighteen?”

“Oh,” I say. “Okay, eighteen hundred is a lot, but not as bad as I thought.”

Joel squeezes my shoulder sweetly. “Thousand, Baby Spice. Eighteen *thousand*.” I sputter and wheeze as I choke on my spit. “Why?” Joel asks.

The reason is because I’ve spent the past two weeks hunting down Joel’s perfect Christmas gift. I’ve talked to almost every single Savannah cat breeder within a five-hundred-mile radius. I now understand why Joel only has Felices. His kind is *fucking hard* to find.

I pulled off a miracle. One reputable breeder in Kansas, one remaining F-1 kitten, and I had to jump before it was too late. In my excitement I stupidly signed a contract without paying attention to the final price. I agreed to a one-thousand-dollar deposit and apparently my firstborn child. I figured my book advance could cover whatever the cost. Now, I’m not so sure.

“Oh, just plainly for ears. No reason. But at eighteen thousand dollars can you ride him to work as well?”

Joel laughs in a honey-sweet rumble—the best sound in the world. Definitely worth the anxiety-ridden call I’m going to have to make to Reese. I need her legal knowledge to figure out how to get me out of this contract in case the kitten I just agreed to buy in cash is the cost of a mid-trim SUV.

“If you keep feeding him every time he begs, I may be able to.” Joel leans into the side of my face and breathes against my hair while his lips rest on the hollow behind my ear. He acts as if Cody doesn’t exist.

“All right, I’m out before you start an encore on the balcony this morning.” Cody rises, mug in hand, smug grin on his face.

Joel snorts but my cheeks flush again. *Dammit*.

“Ma’am?” Cody looks at me, face serious.

“Yes?”

“Don’t forget Quinn’s number, please.”

“I promise to forget it if you ever call me ma’am again,” I shoot back.

“Wait,” Joel says as he pinches playfully at my side. “How the hell did you get her to agree to that? I thought she was taking Quinn’s number to her grave.”

“I’m that good,” Cody responds. He pokes my shoulder as he passes. “Tell him.” With that, he disappears into the condo. Felices purrs on my lap as if relieved. The hate between them is most definitely mutual.

“Tell me what?” Joel pulls off his glasses and shields his eyes against the sun. I trace my fingers against the thin skin under his eyes and he leans his cheek into my palm. There’s no way. This feeling? This isn’t friendship. For either of us.

“Nothing.” I nestle back into his chest. The crisp smell of his cologne is so familiar. Even from the first time we kissed. Like a smell I remembered from another life. I entertain myself watching Felices’s playful tail swat at imaginary flies. We’re almost like a little family. I don’t want to think about disturbing this. Whatever this is. It’s working. I’m happy. There’s no need to rock the boat. “It’s absolutely nothing.”

thirty-one

...

Adler

december

The hot beads of water dampen my hair. It's knotted and ratty from neglect. I massage conditioner into my scalp hoping to coax the tangles free. I hate wrestling my hair with a comb—it's an underestimated form of torture.

The past couple weeks have flown by thanks to my frenzied state of writing. Writer's block is difficult and it's indeed painful to stare at a blank page. On the other hand, there's something I'll call writer's obsession—it's just as daunting. I think it's similar to love. You can't eat, can't sleep, you become so immersed and narrowly focused that nothing and no one else in the entire world matters until you finish the damn thing.

Joel has been incredibly supportive. He's given me space outside of work knowing my deadline is looming. Lately when we see each other, it's brief. Our dynamic is starting to mirror that of a true 'fun bunny' relationship. He comes over, he's in, he's out, and I'm right back on my laptop, tweaking, editing, rewriting, restructuring. I guess myself at every turn. It's not just because of the pressure of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Or the big follow-up to *Toy With Me*.

It's my story with Joel.

I have to get it exactly right.

Quinn is far less understanding about my reclusiveness. After cancelling girls' night for the third Friday in a row, she showed up at my door demanding proof of life about forty-five minutes ago. She all but broke down my door, groceries in hand, and forced me to take a shower. She held my laptop hostage over the filled sink until I retreated to the bathroom.

In this moment, I'm grateful for her persistence and bossiness. The hot water cascades over my head as I close my eyes which desperately needed a break from the screen. By the time I'm clean, dry, and feeling refreshed, Quinn is sitting on my couch in front of a plentiful charcuterie tray on my coffee table.

"You're such a good wife. You always take care of me. Can I just marry you?" I ask.

Quinn smiles. She's pleased that I'm looking somewhat human again. "If I meet any more idiots on Tinder, I may have to take you up on that."

"Speaking of idiots on Tinder," I say as I join Quinn and pick at some cheese and crackers. "Did Cody Kartlin ever text you?"

"He did," Quinn says as she pops an olive in her mouth.

"And?"

"And what?"

My chewing slows as I study Quinn. Her expression is spacey and secretive. Not a look I'm used to seeing on her. "He got to you, didn't he?"

"Please, Addie. No one gets to me. Did you know he's Sawyer's football hero? What a coincidence that he just pops up out of nowhere. They've been spending time together, training. Sawyer is obsessed with Cody and we're getting the inside scoop on University of Alabama. So of course I'm nice to him. He's helping us."

Quinn shrugs like it's just business. Like she's just working deals...but I see it. Something weird

in her eyes...like...distracted? Smitten? *Damn. Cody is good.*

“Are you sure you want to get involved with him? I don’t think Cody’s looking for a hookup.”

“We’re not *involved*. We’re just—you know what? Don’t worry about me. You need to worry about your own messy situation.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Joel and I are fine. You said friends with benefits was bound to blow up and it hasn’t. So tell me—what flavor is that humble pie?”

Quinn shoots me a condescending smile and pats my knee to further her point. “That’s because you guys aren’t friends. You’re dating. You’re besotted. He’s completely whipped. Call it whatever you want but we all see it clear as day.” Quinn throws her thumb backwards over her shoulder. My eyes follow her finger to a full bouquet of flowers and a flat red box sitting on my kitchen table. “Those arrived while you were in the shower.”

“We’re not dating,” I say as I rise to smell the beautiful yellow and cream rose bouquet. “These are the color of *friendship*.”

“Oh, please,” she snarks, returning to the charcuterie board. “And what’s in the box?” The way she asks tells me she’s already peeked. I open the red gift box and notice the seal is broken. I’d complain, but who am I kidding? I’d do the same to her. My friends and I may need to work on boundaries.

I open the box to see a set of hot-pink lingerie. I recognize the brand name from the tag. I’m amused knowing that Joel had to go to the store to pick these out. This boutique shop doesn’t have an online store. I mentally laugh, picturing the looks he must’ve gotten. No doubt there were jealous women eyeing him while foaming at the mouth, wishing they were his gift recipient. The panties are bikini style and tie together at the sides with satin pink ribbon. Even the bra ties together in front, easily undone with one pull. This is exactly Joel’s style. He wants to dress me up like a present that is very easy to unwrap.

I read the little card that’s nestled into the side of the wrapping paper, written in Joel’s neat handwriting: *I know how you are about gifts, Baby Spice, but before you go postal, these are actually a gift for me. -Joel*

I blush and smile like a fool, hardly distracted by my phone buzzing on the table. Quinn, again boundary-less, flips my phone over and makes a puzzled face.

“Why is someone called The Cat Lady calling you on a Friday night?”

“Let it go to voicemail. She told me she’d call to confirm when she got the deposit check,” I say as if it’s obvious.

“You’re getting a cat?”

“No. I got Joel a cat for Christmas.”

“Joel has a cat. Some sort of ridiculously overpriced jungle cat. Cody says it’s evil.”

Good grief. “Felices isn’t evil. He’s a sweetheart and he needs a friend.”

“Addie.” Quinn’s face grows serious and she smacks her hands together, brushing off the remnants of our finger food. “You bought Joel one of his fancy cats? Cody told me the damn thing cost as much as a brand-new Harley Davidson.”

I roll my eyes. But I don’t bother lying to Quinn. Her eyes bulge when I don’t disagree.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she asks, her tone harshening.

“What? They are really hard to find, and I sort of stumbled upon it. Joel mentioned he wished Felices had a friend. And the kitten is a snowy. She’s white with dark spots. Sooo freaking cute.”

“You stumbled across it? Like you stumbled across that wine?” Quinn’s eyes are still wide. “And by stumbling please know I mean obsessively researching and going far out of your way to make

things happen.”

“The cat is a little more than that wine if I’m being honest.”

“How much?”

“One thousand,” I admit. “For the first deposit.” I grimace. “Another two grand for the second deposit.”

Quinn’s eyes slant. “What percentage of the total are the deposits?”

“Fifteen percent.”

“*Adler Monroe Haley!* You paid twenty-one thousand dollars for a fucking cat?” Damn, she does fast money math. “How are you able to afford that?” Her breathing quickens as she works herself into a protective huff. This is exactly the way my mother would react if she could be bothered to act like a real mother.

“My advance,” I say as if it’s not a big deal.

“*Your advance?*” she shrieks and I flinch. “The advance you were supposed to use for *you*? Maybe something to tide you over until you write your next book. Or buy a car. Or maybe take a vacation? And you blew it on a guy you’re calling your fuck buddy?”

“I didn’t blow it, Quinn. And...you’re right. He’s not just my fuck buddy.” My eyes fall to my lap. “I love him.” I finally admit what is crystal clear to everyone else. At least the honesty is a relief from the weight on my heart.

I expect Quinn to start rattling off warnings and ‘I told you so’s’, but instead she pats my knee tenderly. Her voice softens as she argues an entirely new angle. “Adler, you can’t tell someone you love them with a cat.”

“Felices sleeps on Joel’s bed almost every night and he orders his food from a gourmet deli for cats...I kind of think I can.”

“You need to make things clear once and for all. You can’t just avoid this conversation because it’s uncomfortable. Or because you’re scared,” Quinn urges but I shake my head lightly.

“I don’t think I have to. Somehow we just get it. It works. I’m happ—”

“*Addie.* You have to talk to him. This fuck-buddy thing has gone way past too far.”

“Isn’t that a little hypocritical? Have you laid everything out for Cody?”

“Yes. Explicitly. He is fully aware that I will die a workaholic spinster and I have no time nor interest in a real commitment.” She folds her hands together, unfazed.

“And he was fine with that?”

“I don’t make choices based on what Cody is or isn’t fine with. I make my choices based on what’s best for me. As should *you.*”

My heart knocks uncomfortably, squirming under the heavy truth of her words. She’s right. This is just as much about what I want as what Joel wants. “What if I tell him how I feel and he doesn’t feel the same? What if he’s still not willing to be anything more than...this? I’ll lose him.”

Quinn grunts dramatically. She flies off the couch and rummages through my desk drawer. She returns to the couch with my F-Buddy Rules of Survival in hand. “Look at this thing. You and Joel have broken all of these. You *and* Joel. This whole thing means so much more to him than just sex. Don’t you believe that by now?”

I scour over the rules one by one. *Gift Rule?* Yep, broke that one. *Baby Rule?* I just bought Felices a baby sister. *PDA?* Joel and I have definitely kissed in public outside the office. I leave my shit all over the place because I spend the night constantly. Our friendship circles are fully intertwined and I sure as hell can’t accept that one day we’ll end.

Hmmm. Point made. Maybe this whole time we’ve just been *pretending* to pretend. Maybe it’s

been real all along.

“There are a few rules still in place,” I debate.

“Which?” She snatches back the rules and rereads them as she tucks her legs beneath her.

“The condom rule, the orgasm rule, and he still doesn’t know I gave him my virginity.”

“I never thought those should be rules. You shouldn’t decide out the gate how you have sex because it always changes as the relationship grows. And the virgin thing?” Quinn sighs heavily. “He should know what he means to you. You gave him such a big piece of your life. I think he deserves to know. It’ll mean a lot to him.”

Will it? Or will it send him running? Do I even have a choice here? How much longer can I hide my feelings from Joel? How much longer can I lie to myself?

I grab my phone to text Joel, to see if the stars align. Maybe we do need to talk.

Me: Thank you so much for the gifts. The flowers are beautiful. The lingerie is...not subtle.

Joel: You’re most welcome. Anything to get your attention lately.

Me: Are you home?

I twiddle my thumbs as it takes Joel an unusually long time to respond. I grab another piece of cheddar just to fill my hands to resist the urge to rapid-fire text him when I don’t get an immediate reply.

Joel: Sorry, I got a call. I’m still at the office.

Me: Have you ever heard of nine to five?

Joel: I have. I’ve also heard of unicorns, werewolves, and the Loch Ness monster.

Me: I want to see you. Tonight.

Joel: I’m wrapping up here. Should I come over?

Me: Stay there. I’m coming to you.

Quinn is also texting. Judging by the silly smile on her face I have a sneaking suspicion that it is Cody on the other end of that message. I want to give her a hard time about it, but then decide against it. I’m already on the friend shit list. I haven’t been my usual self lately. Between my book and Joel, this is the first time I’ve seen Quinn in weeks. And now I need her to leave.

“I’m going to go talk to Joel.” I don’t even have to ask. She interprets my apologetic expression clearly. She grabs one more olive as she stands.

“Fine. But I swear if you try to bail on the lodge next weekend you will face my wrath,” Quinn warns as she kisses my head and moves for the door.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I call out. The lodge is sacred. The one time a year that’s reserved for our friendships with no distractions. Even Mani flies out for the lodge. Because it’s that important...and because we’re all just a touch afraid of Quinn.

“Hey, Addie, one more thing if you’re still following rules—bring a condom, you know, for your *talk*.”

She blows me a kiss before the door closes behind her. Joke or not, I need to make a pit stop at CVS on the way to Joel’s office.

thirty-two

...

Joel

When I was twenty-three and just starting to get used to my new wealth, I went on a bit of an adventure binge. In the span of just a couple years I saw so many breathtaking landmarks like the Taj Mahal and The Great Pyramid of Giza. I swam in the Great Barrier Reef and Galapagos Islands. I have seen some life-altering, awe-inspiring sights. And none of them, not one, compares to the sight of Adler Haley standing in front of me right now. She's in my office in nothing but my favorite thigh-high boots and the bright pink lingerie I had the damn good sense to buy for her.

I lean against my desk nearly drooling on the trench coat she boldly dropped in front of me moments ago. We've come a long way since the first time we slept together. Adler's no longer nervous around me. She's not shy. She stands there with her hands on her hips knowing in this moment she completely owns my ass.

"Holy shit," I murmur. She smiles at my gawking—her mission accomplished. But she's not trying to tease me or play any games tonight. She's instantly in my embrace and my hands graze over the smooth curves of her body. I touch the pink satin fabric between her legs to see if she's as into this as I am. It's like grazing the glass covering of a furnace. I take her heat as an invitation and pull the ties at her side letting her panties fall to the ground. I try to sink to my knees between her legs, but she pulls me back up.

"I need to ask you something," she breathes.

"Right now?" My eyes dart between hers.

"Later is fine, but I just wanted to mention it before things got away from us...so I don't chicken out."

Adler hoists herself onto the short end of my desk. She lies backwards and tugs on the ribbon in the middle of her bra exposing her perfect tits and pink nipples that are as erect as I am.

"Adler, whatever you want, the answer is yes. You can have my penthouse. My car. My kidney—take your pick." I hungrily lap up the visual of her nakedness.

"No foreplay. Take your pants off. I want you." Adler bends her legs and scoots her ass to the very edge of the desk. "Right now."

It's my favorite command. I pop open the button of my jeans and unzip myself free before an awful realization hits me.

"*Shit.* I don't have any condoms here."

Adler sits up and wraps her hand around my neck pulling my mouth to hers. Her smooth plump lips fall and lock with mine as she runs her fingers through my hair tenderly. She trails kisses across my jaw and then down my neck. She talks against my ear, her lips sending electric pulses down my throat and straight to my hardness. "Do we really need it?"

“What?”

“I’m on the Pill. And I can assure you, I had quite the dry spell before you. Plus you said you got tested recently, right? I want to feel what it’s like without it. Just you and me.”

“Maybe if we were in a relationship. But we’re not—right? Condoms are always safer for hookups, baby—oh wait, I might have some in my car from when we…” I trail off because of the horrified look on Adler’s face. It makes my stomach sink. She reels, like I just slapped her in the face. Even her cheeks flush a deep red.

I scramble to formulate a new response, but Adler pushes me away and hops off my desk. I’m certain she’s going to leave, but instead she digs into the pocket of her coat and pulls out a foil packet. She slaps it against my chest. My hand meets hers to catch the black condom packet. Adler crawls back into her previous position on top of my desk.

“That should be your size, right?” she says with her eyes on the ceiling.

I don’t even bother checking. We are about ten hops past awkward and there’s no way she still wants to do this. *Right?*

“What are you waiting for?” Adler asks, unable to mask the irritation in her voice. “Just put it on and fuck me like we always do it.”

“Are you sure?”

Adler rolls her eyes and sits up. She reaches up to my face and lightly traces my cheek. Her hand slips underneath the buttons of my shirt. She removes them one by one then tugs at the sleeves so my shirt falls to the floor. We’re both completely naked except for the suede boots she’s wearing. She waits for me to roll the rubber on, then lies back and hikes up her legs so I feel the fuzzy suede on top of my shoulders.

“Hey, are you okay?” I hover over her so our eyes meet. I try to tell her with just a look that I’m still here.

It’s still me. It’s still us.

I look in those deep blues for any indication that we’re okay.

“Yes,” she answers simply as she shifts her gaze. I nudge against her entrance and she closes her eyes, letting part of me in while shutting part of me out.



She faked it.

I can’t fucking believe she just faked it.

“Are you okay?” I ask as Adler composes herself, fastening the ties around her panties and bra so quickly, you’d think she was acing a knots practical exam at the Naval Academy.

“Yes, Joel. Quit asking.”

“Did you…you know?” I’m curious to see if she’ll lie to me.

“Yeah,” Adler says as she kisses my cheek. But there’s no affection. Her kiss is a chore. She grabs her coat and covers herself.

Bold-faced lie. I’ve made that pussy explode so many times by now, I know exactly what Adler feels like when she’s coming. I know that her toes curl ferociously and the muscles of her thighs tense so hard they feel like stone. When Adler explodes, it’s dramatic and passionate. I love the way I make

her lose it. Like I'm the only one and I do it best. Like she needs me. When it's over she lies there with all her limbs limp as she revels in the high. I'm always patient with her because it's at least a few minutes before she's willing to hold a conversation again. I know her body better than anyone's. But *why* she's lying to me remains a mystery.

"I have to go."

I roll my eyes as I button my pants. "You want to leave like this?"

"Like what?" she snaps. I've never seen her so on edge.

"Earlier you said you wanted to talk. You should cool down and then come over later. We can talk about whatever is pissing you off so much."

"Excuse me?" Her tone drops to an angry decibel.

"Adler—the whole point of friends with benefits is that we're *friends*. We don't have to fight. What has gotten into you? Is it the condom thing? If it's that big of a deal, I'll fuck you again right now, without the rubber."

"Oh my god, Joel. That's *beautiful*. Is that Shakespeare?" *Great. Angry sarcasm. My favorite.*

And this is the part I hate about relationships. When the honeymoon period is over and we are constantly triggered over God knows what. Where every step we take is careful so we don't crush fragile eggshells. Where we should be making love but instead, we're just making problems. This is not supposed to be happening with Adler. Friends with benefits is full of fun and none of the fighting.

"Can you tell me what's wrong so I can apologize and we can get over it, please?"

She spins around. Her hair fans out and lags before whipping her across the face. At least she's finally looking at me, but I'm not exactly enjoying the contempt in her eyes.

"The whole point of fuck buddies"—she mimics my earlier sentiment in agitation—"is that it doesn't matter. We just fucked and we're still buddies. Okay? That's all you need and all you need to know."

"Fine. Screw it." I throw my hands in the air in frustration. It's like a flashback to my childhood, right down to Adler slamming the door behind her. I put on my shirt and feel the slight irritation on either side of my shoulders from where her suede boots chafed me. I could not have picked a sexier setup. She looked amazing and felt amazing and I was in heaven while I was with her moments ago.

I just don't understand how something that could feel so good to me could end up so miserable for her.

thirty-three

...

Adler

I have the perfect view of the sun poking over the mountains from the porch of the lodge. The freezing mountain air forces me to wrap myself in several blankets. My hands are barely warmed by the steaming hot cup of coffee I'm holding. Inside the lodge is the aftermath of the crazy festivities that we hosted last night. There are still drunk passed-out bodies lying on every couch and chair, and then some sprawled out on the floor.

The reunion rager that kicks off our annual girls' trip is my least favorite part of the weekend. But today, we hike. Just the five of us talking as we take in the beauty of the Rocky Mountain National Forest. Judging by the biting cold of the morning air, I'm going to be met with a lot of complaining and protests, but they can suck it up—it's tradition. I endure the party, they endure the hike. It's fair.

Noa is usually out here with me in the mornings. But I'm assuming after Chase Ford showed up to the lodge last night and professed his unwavering love, she probably was up pretty late and has opted to sleep in. I'll allow everyone at least another hour of sleep before I wake all their asses up to get on the trail.

It's the only real family tradition I have to look forward to each year. After the awful turn in my situation with Joel took last week, I desperately needed to get away. To think clearly.

The patio door slides open, but it's not Noa. "Well good morning, Chase Ford. I did not peg you for a morning person."

Chase points to the empty chair beside me. I nod, inviting him to join me. I'll admit he is as gorgeous in person as in that poster we had hanging in our college apartment. In fact, he might be better looking in person. Even still, I think Noa settled. Chase is a lucky bastard.

"How long are you all going to address me by my first *and* last name?"

I scrunch my nose in consideration. "Until it gets old." We're all still getting used to the fact that sweet little divorcée Noa ended up falling in love with a Hollywood hunk we all used to crush on. Stranger than fiction.

"Is Noa still sleeping?"

"Yeah, she's exhausted," Chase says nonchalantly and then clarifies when he sees my teasing smirk. "From her insomnia."

"Mhm, suuure. But figures, it's been going on a while."

"How long?" Chase's face pinches in concern.

"A while. Quinn had to spike her tea with well...I won't say it out loud to avoid incriminating anybody, but there was no other way to help." A few weeks ago, Quinn suggested some sleeping aids but Noa was adamantly against it. By the third time we caught her in a zombie-like state in her studio, face plastered against her blank canvas, Quinn took matters into her own hands.

Chase rocks in his chair pensively, his face pained. “I’m glad she has you guys. I’m close with my friends, but you all are on a whole different level.”

“Ah, good. So, she told you about the cult initiation and how we all wear a vial of each other’s blood?”

“What?!” His eyes bulge as if he’s genuinely concerned.

Sigh. He doesn’t catch on to these quips as quickly as Joel. “Okay, Chase Ford, you’re going to have to get used to the fact that ninety percent of what comes out of all our mouths is extreme sarcasm.”

“And here I thought it was just Noa.”

“Nope! Sarcasm is our preferred dialect. It’s so much easier if you just join in.”

“Join in? Does that mean I’m in the club?”

“Noa loves you.” I pause for dramatic effect so he knows how serious I am. “She really loves you. So according to the cult rules, we have to keep you. There will be some intake paperwork and then the lab will draw your blood.”

Chase laughs a little skeptically as if he’s not entirely convinced I’m kidding. “Noa mentioned you guys have all been friends since college, except Amani.”

“Right. Noa and Mani grew up together. She was a year older than Noa and met Quinn her freshman year. Their sophomore year they moved out of the dorms and rented an apartment together. Noa moved in with them after high school graduation, the same year that Reese transferred from Atlanta.”

“And you?”

“I met everyone last. Quinn introduced me to the girls after she gave me a campus tour and they adopted me into their little group and their apartment on the spot.” Best day of my life.

“Geez. How big was this apartment?”

I grin at the memories. Our college apartment was a tiny little mouse cage. “Small. I had to share a room with Reese for the longest time.”

“Ah, Reese’s dad is the tech billionaire, right?”

“No, Quinn’s dad. And he’s not a billionaire. His company’s net worth is somewhere in that ballpark.”

“I thought Quinn’s dad was serving a prison sentence for a DUI?”

“No, Reese’s dad. If it helps, I’ll ask the girls to throw on name tags and I’ll fill out some index cards for you.”

My phone buzzes against the glass side table. The vibration causes an ear-splitting grinding sound. I quickly snatch it up before it can go off again.

Joel: Adler, come on. Please talk to me.

I roll my eyes and ignore Joel. It’s been a week of his casual text messages asking me how I am. If I arrived at the lodge safely. He says he wants to see me whenever I’m ready. I answered all his messages...as shortly as possible. They all felt so cheap after our interaction in his office where I put myself out there and he pretty clearly explained where he stood—with a condom metaphor.

“Now that you’re here, are you planning on taking Noa home early?” I continue conversation with Chase to distract myself from my phone.

Chase shakes his head. “No. I’m taking off this afternoon. I want you guys to have your time. I

know how important this trip is. I wouldn't have barged in to begin with, I just couldn't wait any longer to—"

"Hey." I grin at Chase reassuringly. "Seeing Noa's smile when you surprised her last night is the highlight of this trip. It's good you came."

"Thank you, Adler. I think out of all of Noa's friends, you're the easiest to talk to." He relaxes into his chair, letting out a whistle as he takes in the mountain forest view. My phone buzzes again, this time from my blanket-covered lap.

Joel: Please say something.

Me: Why are you up so early?

"Who are you texting?" Chase mirrors the strain that must be on my face. He will fit right into our friend group seeing as he is more than willing to get right up in our business without any boundaries drawn. *Welcome, Mr. Ford. Welcome to the cult.*

"I'm group texting all the girls of course, to tell them I'm officially your favorite," I say absentmindedly as I skim Joel's latest message.

Joel: Because I'm thinking about you. I'm worried. Am I allowed to miss my friend?

Friend. That damn word. The cause of so many issues right now.

"Hey, Chase?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you a question from a guy's perspective? Since you're in the club and all."

"Sure can."

"Do you think you could ever be just friends with Noa? If you guys didn't figure it out, could you just be her friend?"

He lets out a long breath as he considers his response. *Hmm, he actually thinks before he speaks.* He may not fit in with us as well as I thought. "I doubt it. It was hard enough when we broke up and I was states away. It'd be torture having her in my life, but not really *having* her. You know?"

"Yeah, that's what I thought." A sigh of disappointment slips between my lips.

Chase sucks a breath in between his teeth and tongue, making a squeaking sound that interrupts my painful realization. "I'd tell him you don't want to just be friends."

"Hm? Who?"

"The guy you're texting."

Perceptive, this one. I burrow deeper into my blanket, fixing my eyes on the beautiful mountain scenery surrounding me. I soak up all the things I love about this place. The crunch of the snow under my boots. The way the iced-over trees sparkle as the sun causes the branches to drip. Even the way the deer out here aren't afraid of people. They strut around with confidence knowing they own these woods.

"Adler, most men don't read between the lines very well when it comes to this stuff. Whatever you need to say—spell it out for him."

My phone buzzes again, right on cue.

Joel: Still there?

Chase pats the arm of my chair as he stands. “I’m going to make Noa some coffee...maybe. I have no clue how to work the espresso machine.”

“There’s a Keurig in the cabinet beneath the espresso machine. And K-cups in the pantry. Noa likes her coffee pretty much black.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Hey, Chase?” He pauses at the door when I call out to him.

“Yeah?”

“What if I lay it all on the line and he doesn’t want the same thing?”

“In that case, I know a lot of Hollywood actors and I will introduce you to all of them so your guy can eat his heart out.”

I have about ten different snarky comments to respond with, but instead, I just smile and mouth a heartfelt ‘thank you’ at Chase.

I grab my phone and finally respond to Joel, deciding which of all the things I’ve been holding back, I should start with.

Me: Joel, I can’t be your friend like this anymore.

Joel: Is there someone else?

Me: No, just you.

Joel: And you want more don’t you? An official relationship?

Deep breath. Here we go.

Me: Yes.

I know he saw my message. I’ve told him a hundred times he needs to take off his damn read receipts—they’re cruel.

It takes about twenty minutes for me to realize our conversation is over. His lack of reply says it all. But it’s fine—

Things have to change, one way or the other.

I want more.

No, I *need* more.

And Joel isn’t responding.

thirty-four

...

Joel

“Want one?” Cody asks, holding out a beer bottle as he takes a seat at my kitchen island.

“It’s ten in the morning—ah, fuck it. Why not?” I take the open beer from his hand and examine the label before taking a long swig. It’s Adler’s favorite. “Coors, huh?”

“Addie-cakes converted me.” Cody hoists himself up from the bar stool and fetches another. He twists off the top and flicks it across my kitchen island. He thoroughly enjoys the benefit of a daily housekeeping team. He barely wipes his own ass anymore. “Are you seeing her tonight?”

“What do you mean?”

“The girls are headed back from Estes Park today. Shouldn’t you know that? I figured you horn dogs would be counting down the minutes until she’s back.” Cody slumps into his seat, chugging his beer so fast that he immediately pops back out to fetch another.

“Are they on the road yet?” I ask.

“I’m not sure. Some of them are—they took two cars. Their friend Noa had to pick up her son early. I’m not sure which car Addie is in. Why don’t you know all this?”

“Why do you?” I snap in irritation.

“Quinn.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. “Cody, quit messing around with Adler’s friends. I’m in enough shit with her as it is, I don’t need you complicating things even more.”

“Whoa, whoa, brochacho. I’m not *messing around* with Quinn. My intentions are pure for once. But what the hell has your panties in a bunch? What shit are you in with Addie?”

I yank my phone out of my pocket and pull up my text message conversation with Adler from the other day. I slide it to Cody against the granite. He starts scrolling.

“It’s been two days now,” I admit. I didn’t know how to respond to Adler, so I didn’t...and now I look like the biggest asshole in the world. I kind of expected her to blow up my phone, sending a slew of angry texts. I thought I’d get a drunken call, which I would’ve happily answered even if she just wanted to rip my head off.

But nothing.

Adler spoke her piece and then went silent. I’m not used to her being silent. It’s killing me. I wish she would talk for both of us because I don’t know what to say. “She probably hates me now,” I say as Cody slides my phone back to me across the counter.

“I kind of hate you after reading that. What is your problem?”

“She wants a relationship,” I exhale. I hold my hands in the air. “What do I do with that? This is Juliana all over again.”

Cody rubs his face, looking exasperated. My have the roles reversed. I’m usually lecturing him on

his lack of maturity. “How can you even begin to compare Adler with Juliana? You never felt this way about Juliana. And in case you didn’t notice, Adler’s already your girlfriend.”

“No, Cody. We were clear. We’re friends. Good friends...but it was all for fun. We’re just sleeping together—”

“And working together, and spending all your time together, and by the way, basically living together. All her stuff is here. Did you notice that? Real talk—I stole her shampoo from your shower the other day. She uses the good stuff”—Cody runs his hands through his shoulder-length blond hair —“and I like to keep the locks silky.”

I groan into my hands as Cody tells me what I sort of already know. But then why is this next part so hard? “I don’t know what to do, dude. I don’t want things to change because I know I can’t give her what she needs. At the same time, I don’t want to lose her. It’s selfish.”

“Joel,” Cody emphasizes as he snaps his fingers in the air like he’s trying to pull me out of hypnosis. “Just stop saying ‘fuck buddy’ and start saying ‘girlfriend’. Nothing else has to change right now. What woman wants to be reminded every day that she’s just a fling? Do you want to date other women?”

“No.”

“Are you sick of Addie?”

“God, no.”

“So just give the girl a little validation and buy yourself some time until you’re ready to pull your head out of your ass. You’re going to end up with her one way or another. It’s just when. What else are you looking for? Hm? She’s smart, talented, funny. You love spending time together. I hear you guys across the condo at all hours of the night so I know you’re either doing something right or she’s got her fake sex noises down pat.”

“You need to move out.” I glower at Cody, but he just chuckles.

“Bottom line, you say you’re so freaked out about a relationship, but you’re already in one. Is it so bad?”

“I don’t mind the relationship. It’s what comes next. Or the lack thereof. What are we going to do in a year or two when she’s ready for a ring and I don’t deliver?”

I almost forced myself to with Juliana. I was so damn close, out of guilt. What’s next? I’d probably go all the way with Adler, too scared to lose her, and we could spend the rest of our lives fighting and hating each other, just like my parents, just like my brothers and their wives. Marriage brings out the worst in people. Ask Cami.

“Don’t you think the right girl might make you reconsider your whole never-getting-married thing?” Cody belches and pounds on his chest. I can’t believe this caveman is giving me relationship advice.

“My parents got back together. Did I mention that?”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“You know it’s not. How long have you known us now? Apart, my parents are intelligent, kind, and loving people. Together? They are a fucking volatile wrecking ball. *That’s* what marriage does. Take two good people, make them permanently reliant on each other, take away their freedom, and ability to think or make decisions for themselves, throw in some kids and a mortgage and what do you get? Monsters.”

Cody groans before he tips his beer to the ceiling. “Not every marriage is like that.”

“No? Then on the other hand you have Cami—her high school sweetheart treated her like a princess until she took those damn vows and then he decided as her husband he had every right to put

his hands around her neck and his fist in her eye. What about *that* version of marriage?"

"Cami's ex is a piece of shit. And he got what was coming. Didn't Jackson and James both break their fists on his face? But again, that's *one* bad guy, not all marriages."

I shudder at the memory. One of the worst nights of my life. I still regret not taking a swing at that scum of a human being myself, but while my older brothers physically avenged my sister, I was rushing her off to the hospital, worried she was blind in one eye.

"And what about all my brothers' failed marriages?"

"Joel. You are not your brothers. You want the truth? Friend to friend?"

I find Cody's discarded bottle cap on the kitchen island and spin it. The metal clatters against the granite counter as it slows to a flat stop. "No."

"Well, here it comes anyway," Cody says. "You're still mad at your parents. And I get it. They should've done about a million things different while you guys were growing up. But you're exaggerating how bad they are together and you're looking for the worst in every marriage to punish them. Like if you hold out or some shit, you can prove to them how bad they fucked you and your childhood up. But Joel?"

"What?"

"You're the only one who stands to lose."

I reluctantly meet his buggy stare. His assessment hits me like a bullet. Is that true? Is this all about my parents? I'm punishing myself...to punish them? "That was impressive. Very emotionally in tune—for a brute."

Cody flips me off. "I'm reading and watching a lot of TED Talks on self-actualization these days. You'd be surprised how much emotional work you can get done when you aren't training twelve hours a day, six days a week. I picked up a book on crochet too if you ever want—"

"Cody, since you dropped a truth grenade on me, I'm going to do the same." I stand and smack his back chummily. "You need to get a job, bro."

"Dude..." Cody hangs his head. "I know. I binge-watched season one of *Bridgerton* last week. I loved it...I'm getting weird."

I laugh as I grab us another round from the fridge. "What should I do about Adler?" I ask over my shoulder.

"Be in the moment. Quit making all these plans that you can't possibly figure out right now. Who knows, maybe you guys date for a while, she really gets to know you, and she ends up dumping your ass. That'd be a fun twist in the story, right?"

"Again..." I point the tip of my middle finger straight to the ceiling. "...you need to move out." Cody laughs, unaffected. It's a relief to have him here. I don't have anyone else I can talk to like this. Except maybe Adler. But I feel like asking Adler if I should take a chance on officially dating her would be a confusing conversation for her.

"Not leaving. I've become accustomed to your fancy standard of living, my friend. I'll take my escargot on the terrace this morning." I don't know why I'm scared of marriage. I clearly already have a wife.

"Fine. But you need to earn your keep. Tell me what to say to fix this. I'm going to call her—"

"Whoa, hold up. You're not going to fix this by just calling her. You did not come off great in those texts. You need to perform some top-tier romance shit to make things right."

"What exactly does that entail?"

Cody rubs his hands together. "It means, throw down the black card. Flex a bit."

I pull my phone back out, praying there's enough grace left in Adler to at least respond to me.

Me: Hey, how are you?

Adler: What do you want?

“Tell her you’re sorry and you were a complete douchebag and you’d rather run your dick through a woodchopper than spend another minute in a world where you two aren’t together,” Cody says, *helpfully*.

“Yeah, I’m not saying that.”

Me: You. I’m sorry it took me so long to respond.

Adler: I meant it when I said I can’t keep doing this.

Me: You told me you wanted an official relationship.

Adler: And then you ignored me for two days. Point taken.

Me: Not the point I wanted to make. I want to see you tonight so we can talk.

Adler: Just text it.

Me: Aren’t we too old to become girlfriend and boyfriend over text?

Adler agrees to see me, albeit reluctantly, but I can’t blame her at this point. Lucky for us, I plan on pulling out all the stops for redemption this evening. It’s just one tiny step forward. It doesn’t have to mean the world. I care about her more than anyone before. I promised I wouldn’t go there again but...I don’t know...*maybe* Cody is right. In time my heart will catch up.

All I know is that Adler may not love the term friend as much as I do, but to me it’s more the *friends* part than the *benefits* part that has me thinking it’s worth the risk to give us a real try.

thirty-five

...

Joel

Thanks to Cody, I bought a flower shop. All right—exaggeration. But I definitely bought a flower shop out of their same-day available inventory. Every inch of Adler’s apartment floor is covered in rose petals. Bouquets in crystal vases sit on every surface of her home. I also scattered what must be hundreds of candles. I lit them all but they made her little apartment swelter. She’s late returning home so I had to blow them out and start all over again. I never thought winning back my girl would involve so much time screwing around with a little BIC lighter.

The sound of a heavy thump at the door makes my heart jump. It’s showtime. That must’ve been her dropping her luggage at the front door. I hear her shuffling through her purse. A few more moments pass then another thump.

“*Dammit! Are you kidding me?*” Adler groans in frustration.

A distant ring tells me she’s calling someone and I realize what’s going on. She lost her keys and she’s calling—I’m assuming one of her friends—for backup. I roll my eyes as I walk to the door to ruin my big surprise.

I flick on the lights and open the door to see Adler’s petrified face. She drops her phone in surprise. She’s wearing dingy gray sweatpants and an almost see-through tank top with little holes at the bottom. Her hair is flopped messily on top of her head in a bun that’s loosened. Stray hairs spill all over her face. No makeup and she definitely looks hungover. And yet, she still looks incredible.

“You scared the shit out of me!”

“Well, Baby Spice, this is why you need to remember to lock your door.”

“I thought I did.”

“Obviously, you did not.”

She opens her mouth, no doubt to make a sassy comment but stops when she glimpses over my shoulder. She pushes past me to marvel at her decorated apartment. All of the slight annoyances of putting this whole thing together are worth it as Adler nearly bursts into tears at the sight of her home covered in every romantic gesture Cody and I could think of on short notice.

I embrace her, not wasting any time. She slumps her head into my chest as I stroke her back. The feeling of Adler in my arms is like quenching a thirst after withholding for so long. It’s relief and bliss and comfort all rolled into one and the way her body is melting into mine, I think she feels the same.

“Why are you crying?” I whisper against her ear.

“Because these are all red.” She nods to the flower petals on the floor and the bouquets lining the entry.

I grab Adler’s hand and lead her to the kitchen where even more flowers and candles await her eager eyes. I even pull the top off the silver platter as we pass it which contains a small mountain of

tater tots. She throws her head back in laughter before she plants a sweet kiss on my lips.

Sitting on Adler's couch, I pull her between my legs. I take both of her hands in mine. "Adler, I don't want anyone else and I don't want to lose you. Can we just take things slow?"

"Slow? We've literally had sex on this couch multiple times."

"No, I mean slow with our expectations. I need to know that if I can't...be what you want that we're both going to be okay. It's never been about not wanting you...I don't want to hurt you or let you down."

"Slow is okay." Adler leans down to kiss my cheek. The scent of her sweet perfume hovers around us. "You didn't have to do all this. You hate wasting money on unnecessary things. We could've just talked."

"It was for you, which makes it the most worthwhile investment I can make."

I must've whispered the magic words because Adler's lips suddenly dance all over mine. I wrap my hands around her waist and let them slide down to her hips where they lock in place—where they belong.

Her eyes narrow mischievously as she breaks our kiss. "Are there flowers upstairs I should see?"

"Um, actually no. I didn't want you to think I was trying to lure you back into sex by making this official."

Adler holds out her hand and pulls me off the couch, tugging me toward the stairs. "Come on." She winks. "I am dying to know if sex with my boyfriend feels different than sex with my 'fun bunny'."

I breathe out a low whistle and let Adler have her way as she pulls me up her rickety floating stairs. She falls backwards on her bed and bites her lip in anticipation.

Different? God, I hope not.



Adler

Everything is different tonight. Joel is different. The tension between us is changed. The mood is shifted. It's better. It's so much better.

I sit on the edge of the bed watching as Joel takes off his shoes, then his socks. His eyes don't leave mine as he pulls off his glasses and tosses them on my nightstand. He peels his shirt over his head with one hand. The hard contours of his muscles look even more defined than normal like he's been working out some frustration at the gym while I've been away.

Joel stands between my legs as I run my hands across the chiseled marble of his torso. I feel all the strained tension across his chest and abs. And I want to relieve all of it.

I grab at his waistband intending to wiggle off the bed and onto my knees but he catches my hands and stops me.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"You said you wanted boyfriend sex tonight, right?"

"Um, yeah. But I could go survey about ten thousand boyfriends right now and they will all say

they really love blowjobs.”

“Okay, baby, let’s not talk about you interviewing a bunch of other guys about head right now. It’s a mood killer.”

“If you insist.”

Joel runs both of his hands through my hair so tenderly it sends a new kind of shiver up my spine. “Let’s try something different tonight.”

My eyes widen in panic. “What do you mean by *different*? Because if you’re still quoting *Toy With Me*, I assure you I am not ready to act out the rest of that particular scene.”

Joel bursts out laughing and then covers his mouth. “Be serious.” He traces my cheek softly. “I’m trying to set the mood and make love to you.”

I suck in a breath at his words. All humor has vanished from Joel’s face as he pulls my tank top over my head and reaches around to unclasp my favorite, ol’ faithful bra.

“Do you want me to make love to you?” Something about Joel’s raspy voice and the way he’s looking in my eyes like he’s trying to see deeper makes me feel like it’s the first time all over again. The candlelight, the flowers...

The heavy tingle in my chest that swirls through my stomach drops lower. The butterflies that I thought were gone forever are having a family reunion.

“Can we put on some music?” I ask suddenly. “Hang on.” I fish my phone out of my pocket and open my Spotify playlists. My Bluetooth speaker comes to life and Usher starts singing sexy lullabies.

“Really? Usher?”

“It’s a whole thing.” I smile, feeling so full. Like I got everything I wanted and then more. “This is exactly how I imagined it. Except better, because it’s with you.”

“You’re so sweet, baby,” Joel coos against my ear. “I missed you.”

He slides off my sweatpants, trailing kisses on my exposed legs. I scoot up on the bed as he crawls on top of me, but I don’t feel his weight. We’re floating. A different type of passion overcoming us. It’s still needy and desperate. His lips trail all over my body. He grazes over my chest, leaving my nipples achy and angry in want. But he moves on and lands near my ear, his teeth lightly tugging on my lobe. My toes clench as I try to navigate this new kind of stimulation.

My skin is on fire. My underwear is still in place, but the way he’s touching me might send me over the edge. I writhe and buck under Joel as he lowers his bare chest against mine, the scant hair across his pecs tickle me before we’re skin against skin. His lips are on mine. His hands are in my hair. He doesn’t rush a single move tonight.

Intimacy is slow. It’s careful. It’s absolutely luscious.

He’s pushing a whole new set of buttons and if it’s possible, they are even more arousing. I whimper and moan but he doesn’t stop his salaciously languid assault simply touching my body, tasting my tongue.

My eyes roll back as my breathing shallows. My heart is pounding too hard. “Talk to me,” I pant. I can feel Joel’s smile against my neck as he gloats over the way he’s completely in control right now.

“In which language?”

“All of them,” I purr.

“*Sais-tu à quel point tu m’as manqué? Chaque partie de toi.*”

I can’t answer, I just try to keep breathing. I’ve never heard Joel speak in another language. I knew he could, I just didn’t know how sexy it would be. *French. Oh dear god.*

“*Ti voglio. Ho bisogno di te. Resta con me.*”

Italian. I have no clue what he’s saying, but it’s working in all the right ways. I don’t respond. I

mewl and hum letting Joel know he has me entirely under his spell as he flips through dialects, whispering sweet nothings in my ear that I don't understand but love the way they sound.

He reaches between my legs just to tease me, but I'm already close. The earthy and sweet smell of his cologne marks my bed. It's his now.

I'm his now.

It takes a few grazes of his fingertips across the fabric covering my womanhood before I'm lost in a blinding surge of ecstasy. I grip his shoulders, squeezing for dear life. It's the most intense climax I've ever had and we've barely started. Even Joel is surprised and no doubt smug based on the way he's looking down at me.

"Glad you're not faking it anymore." Joel watches my bare chest dramatically rise and fall as I gulp for breath. Here I thought my performance in his office was pretty good. I guess not.

"You noticed that?"

"Yes. And I don't ever want you to fake anything with me. How else will I know how to take care of you?"

He climbs off the bed to remove his pants and I eagerly raise my hips to let him peel off my dampened panties.

"Condoms are in the top left." I nod over to my nightstand.

"How about just me and you tonight? Nothing in our way." He's on top of me, his weight sinking me into the mattress.

I cup his face. "Just us?"

"Is that okay?"

"Yes. More than okay."

He pushes into me slowly and groans. I feel every muscled groove of his manhood pulsing inside of me. I feel everything. He must too because he lets out a sound that's a mix between tortured and relieved. His hand that holds him slips for just a minute and I feel his full weight pressing me deeper into the bed. I don't have time to tell him I love the heaviness, all the pressure—he quickly composes himself and replants his hand by my shoulder.

"Fuck, you feel so good like this. God, Adler." He pumps into me, delicate but intentional, knowing exactly the pace I like and how to hold me close. He grabs my knee and pushes it upward so he can get deeper. My eyes cross as I feel every inch of his length, every ridge, every twitch. He fills me past capacity but somehow I accommodate. My nails dig into his back. *He knows me.* Sweat beads on Joel's forehead and down his chest. *He wants me.* He moans against my lips. *I'm his.* It feels so damn good and I am at the top. I clench, my lower back strains, my heart, my walls, everything begins to throb dramatically.

It feels so good. Too good. But I can't help it. I let myself go...way too far.

"I love you."

Oh shit. Oh no. Please no.

He stills. I reach into the air as if I could snatch back the words and shove them into the abyss of my mind where they belong. Joel said slow. No pressure. No expectations. And so naturally I respected that...for exactly five minutes and then I told him I love him.

"I'm sorry, I was just—"

"Caught up in the moment?"

To my great relief, Joel is smiling at me. He doesn't look as freaked out as I was imagining.

"Something like that. You don't have to say anything back."

He kisses me sweetly. On the forehead. On my cheek. My lips. "Are you sure? Not faking?" He

raises his eyebrows at me.

“I’m sure.”

I waited until I was twenty-five to be with a man, until it felt right. Joel deserves my patience until it feels right for him too. He waited for my body, I’ll wait for his heart. We have ample time to figure things out.

“*Tu es incroyable,*” he breathes. “*Tu es parfaite pour moi.*”

“Oooh yeah, keep going,” I say, settling right back into our lusty passion.

“Speaking in French or making love to you?”

“Yes.”

Joel obliges and it’s not long before I’m tensing again. Maybe just from his words. I bridge my hips to meet him and flex as hard as I can.

“Are you—” He pinches his eyes shut, struggling to speak. “Can I—”

“Yes.” I nod. “Inside.”

I don’t know if he would’ve had time for any other way. Joel groans as he spills inside of me. I always imagined I’d feel it...but I don’t—not really. Just warm. Full. Safe. He collapses to the side, pulling me with him so we face each other. We lay there allowing ourselves to admire the other. My climax has faded, but love takes right over. It’s powerful and postpones my descent back down to earth. I’m higher than high. Overcome...

“Joel?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Boyfriend sex was worth the wait.”

Chuckling, he pulls me into his chest and kisses the top of my head. I barely notice the faded voice of Usher singing something about having it bad.

“Noted,” Joel says. “Only boyfriend sex from now on.”

thirty-six

...

Adler

*M*y sex hangover is absent this morning. I have no regrets or cringeworthy moments that I'm obsessing about as I lie here in bed next to Joel. The way we were together last night felt like something more. I regret nothing. Not even telling him I love him.

"Good morning, Baby Spice. Have I ever told you that your snoring sounds like a freight train on the tracks?" Joel smiles at me playfully.

Okay...one regret.

"You have not. I will add it to the list of compliments alongside 'talks too much' and 'eats like a five-year-old'."

Joel pinches my side and I squeal as I try to wiggle away from his tickle torture. "It's your bed, baby. You don't snore at my place because of the adjustable frame. I always have it set on a slight incline."

My expression flattens. "I don't snore because your bed is already at an incline, or you put your bed at an incline so I don't snore?"

Joel runs his fingers across my face, outlining the slopes of my forehead and nose. He traces the hard lines of embarrassment on my face. "Do you really want me to answer that?"

"Nope."

"Didn't think so. But I want to buy you a new bed for Christmas. I'm partial to Tempur-Pedic, but Sleep Number works well too. What do you think?"

"Nope to both of those."

"Okay. What if we go shopping for a bed you want?"

"Nope."

"Okay. What if *you* go shopping and buy a bed you want and then I just reimburse you? We won't even call it a gift."

"Oh. Okay, well that works." I smile disingenuously.

"Really?" Joel's face lights up in triumph.

"Nope."

"You're impossible." He rolls on his back and tucks his hands underneath his head. I climb on top of him pressing my naked breasts against his warm bare chest. God, this feels good. He smells good. A hint of my perfume is scant across his skin. This is how I want to be buried one day. If this is a dream, stay the hell away with those pinching fingers. Let me be.

"But speaking of Christmas gifts, I actually did get you something. It's a two-part gift." I reach into my nightstand and pull out a long black velvet box and hand it to Joel. "Open it."

"I don't know if I should. Christmas isn't for another week. And you said I can't buy you a bed."

But Joel sits up anyways and shimmies his shoulders in excitement. *Huh. Interesting.* Joel Lewis, the man who can buy himself whatever he wants, apparently likes getting gifts. His eyes gleam with the childlike wonder of a kid at the front gates of Disney World.

He opens the box revealing a silver chain collar with a pink heart charm dangling from the center. His enthusiastic smile fades immediately. I hide my grin. “This is just part one. The rest will be delivered later.”

“This is um...a bracelet?” Joel blinks at the collar, looking incredibly uncomfortable. I could clarify immediately, but I stay silent as he sweats. I bite my bottom lip, thoroughly enjoying myself. He may be my boyfriend now but watching him squirm is no less fun on this side of the equation.

“What do you think, babe?” I smile eagerly at his labored expression.

“Uh...it’s...pretty? Do you think maybe this is a bit more *your* taste?” Joel shifts in the bed as I pretend to scowl.

“You don’t like it?”

“Um...” I grab my phone from the nightstand and pout dramatically. “What’re you doing?” Joel asks.

“Nothing, it’s fine. You hate it. I’ll just see what the return policy is,” I say, pulling up my email app on my phone.

“Adler, stop. It’s fine. You said this was a part-one and part-two gift? Is this a matching set? His-and-hers kind of thing? I’ll make it work.”

“Oh my god, Joel.” I roll my eyes as I place my phone on his chest. He flinches as the cool glass touches his skin. “It’s a collar, you dork. It’s for *her*.” Joel grabs my phone and looks at the picture the breeder sent me. “She just finished her last round of shots. She’s doing great and as soon as she weans, they’ll deliver her but it’ll be well after Christmas so I wanted to give you this now. You’ll get an email.”

“You bought us a cat?”

“No. I bought you a cat. Actually, I did not just buy you a *cat*. I bought you the freaking Rolls Royce of cats.”

Joel’s locked on the screen admiring the picture. His mouth slowly widens as he studies her every feature. “She’s...wow...when did you do all this?”

“I’ve been talking to the breeder off and on for, oh I don’t know, a month now, I think?”

“You did all this before we decided to be together?”

“Of course. Look at your face, look how happy you look.” I smile. My jaw is exhausted from all this joy. “I wanted this for you as my friend or my boyfriend. Either way.”

Joel tosses my phone aside and grabs my hand. He kisses across my knuckles and the back of my hand repeatedly. The pop of each kiss sings to me that I’m adored, treasured, appreciated. I can’t get enough of this.

“What do you think?”

“I think I’m buying you two beds. That’s how amazing this is.”

“Good, I—”

“But how much did you pay for her?”

I let out a groan of annoyance. “We’re not talking about it.”

“Yes, we are. Adler, I sign your paychecks. I know you can’t afford a kitten like this. So that either means you used your book advance or you are laundering money.”

Laundering. Let’s go with that.

“It’s not a big deal—”

“No.” Joel shakes his head adamantly. “No. Adler, no. I don’t want you using your advance on me. That’s insane. This book is about you and what you’ve accomplished, it’s not something I want you to dole out for me, or for anyone else for that matter. I appreciate this so much, I do. I’ve been searching for a friend for Felices and I’ve come up short. You’ve already pulled off the impossible. So please let me do the one thing I’m good for and pay the breeder.”

I place my hands around his face. His short stubble roughs against my hands. I love that feeling underneath my fingertips. “I will let you pay off the kitten if you promise me you’ll never ever again in your life say that your money is the only thing you’re good for.”

Joel’s nod is solemn. *That’s right, buster.* I’m the one with debilitating self-doubt and insecurities. Don’t steal my thing!

“Fine,” he relents. “When and how?”

“The final invoice is in the top drawer of my desk downstairs. I’m going to hop in the shower really quick.”

Joel smirks. “You don’t want to be around when I see how much she costs, do you? You think I’m going to freak out when I find out how much you were going to pay?” *Damn he really does know me.*

“No. I just need a shower after the drive home and our sexcapades last night. Condom free is far more messy. *Oooh!* I’m going to make a bumper sticker...or a meme...perhaps a hashtag. Condom free—more messy. Or something like that. I’ll work on it.”

“Baby Spice, that’ll never catch on,” Joel calls from the other side of the bathroom door. I hear him trudge downstairs, no doubt eager to learn my secret.



By the time I’m out of the shower and put together, Joel is on my living room couch, fully dressed, staring at a blank piece of paper on the coffee table the way Charlie would stare at the Chocolate Factory. I shoot him a quizzical look as I tiptoe down the stairs. His eyes are beaming with glee. “Look what I found,” he says, practically drooling. He pats the couch cushion next to him, beckoning me. I’m not positive why this is such a juicy revelation. I told him exactly where the invoice was.

“I told you she was a little pricey and I don’t expect you to—”

Joel flips the sheet over and my heart plummets out of my chest, past my stomach, slithers down my legs and barricades itself on the floor. I immediately recognize Tessa’s neat scrawl. *The F-Buddy Rules for Survival.*

“It was in the desk drawer right underneath the breeder’s invoice.” Joel is cheesing so hard. He has no idea the storm that’s coming. “I’ve been *dying* to read these.”

“You haven’t looked?” I ask, near breathless. Because if he’s already read them, we’re safe. He’s smiling. Maybe this is okay. *I love him.* This is going to be okay.

“Not yet. Now that we’re a couple, I thought we could laugh about this together.” But he doesn’t wait. His eagerness overcomes him and his gaze breaks from mine as he begins skimming the rules. “Ah, that’s why you were so pissed about the condom,” he mumbles, then chuckles. I take a step forward but he snags the paper defensively and leaps up. “Nuh-uh!” he teases with a smile on his face that reminds me of the time he found my special copy of *Toy With Me*. “Boyfriend privileges. I get to read the rules my girl made about sex with me.” He winks playfully.

I watch his eyes move left to right as he scans a few more lines. His smile, still wide. Every other second, he bursts out in a soft chuckle. “All your quirky shit,” he says in a low hum. “Explained.”

I can’t resist the panic so I let it flood through me. “Joel, wait.”

“Baby, stop stressing. I think it’s cute. But also kind of crazy because we never needed rules, I always wanted—”

He stops.

The color drains from his face as his mouth falls open.

Joel Lewis is a fast reader because there’s no doubt in hell that he’s already made it to rule number ten. The rule that just exposed my awkward little secret.

“That isn’t...” Joel turns his puzzled expression toward me. “You’re a virgin?” He pulls off his glasses and rubs his eyes. “*Was* a virgin? I was your...first?”

Thump, thump. I can’t think or hear over the damn eight-oh-eight beat of my heart. I try to swallow the lump in my throat but it’s lodged firmly, causing me to choke out my words.

“What?” I ask just to buy time.

“Was *our* first time, *your* very first time having sex?” Joel’s jaw twitches in a way I’ve never seen before. He looks like he got the wind knocked out of him. My cheeks must flush a color beyond crimson or scarlet. I can feel the hot blood painting my face from the inside. I don’t think they’ve invented a color deep enough to properly convey this.

“What’re you—”

“Rule number ten. The one that says to lie to me about your virginity because I can’t handle the commitment and it’s not my business?”

Endless chatter begins in my mind. It starts as a low drone and gradually rises to a mob-like roar. *Shh, stop! I can’t think.* My thoughts bounce between panic then anger, defensiveness then fear. Up and down. Forward and back. *Thump, thump, thump.* I open my mouth but no sound comes out. What can I say?

“Adler—what is going on?” Joel slumps back on the couch that looks just as fragile as I feel against his heavy reaction. “You lied to me?” he asks softly. I expected a million different reactions when this moment finally came. But not this...not the hurt in his eyes and I’m terrified to learn why.

I stand a few paces from the couch, frozen. Can’t go forward and sure as hell can’t go back. I dig my toes nervously into my hardwood floor. “How did I lie? You never asked.” My voice is raspy and small. I hate all of this. I hate feeling like this. *I am the weak gazelle.*

“You acted like you knew what you were doing...like you could handle...like you were okay with casual sex. And you—your book?” Joel’s stammering, a weakness I’ve never seen in him before. Uncollected. Unnerved. His eyes are aloof, like he’s not really here. He’s busy searching his mind and stitching all the loose pieces together.

“It’s a novel. *It’s fiction.* I never told you that was my life. In fact, I specifically told you it wasn’t.” *Okay, good, Adler. Those were words. You’re doing fine.*

“Who writes a cookbook without trying out the recipes? You acted like you had experience. Not like you were the most innocent woman on the planet.”

“It was personal. My virginity was sacred to me.”

Joel’s eyes bulge in my direction. A flicker of annoyance crosses his face. “Sacred? Really? Then why hide it? Adler, that first night I asked you to...you must’ve been so...” He buries his face into his hands. “You *cried.* I think about that all the time and now it makes sense. It was your first time, we had sex, and then you thought I tried to get rid of you. You went home alone. You must’ve been—”

“I wasn’t alone. Reese came over.” I suddenly feel cold. I wrap my arms around myself. My

shoulders feel so bare, unprotected by the thin straps of my tank top.

“Did it hurt? *Jesus*—did I hurt you?” His flustered owl eyes lock on mine.

I feel my eyes start to water and I don’t really know why. It’s the truth trying to spill out from within me. I’ve held this in too long. It’s time to be honest. “In the moment, a little—”

“*Shit.*” Joel lets out a deep grumbly breath.

“—it wasn’t anything I couldn’t handle.” I finally will my feet forward. I sink next to him on the couch and he buries his face into my chest. I cradle his head as he nuzzles against me.

“I’m so sorry. Adler—you should’ve told me,” he mumbles and puffs of his breath trace the thin skin beneath my clavicle, warming me. “We blew past a monumental moment in your life, like it was nothing. If you would’ve told me—”

“—you would’ve run,” I finish for him. I laugh lightly.

“Maybe,” he muses. “Maybe not. I don’t know. I can’t imagine being with anyone else now. Missing out on you would’ve been devastating.”

God, he’s sweet. What was I worried about?

I trace my fingertips against his scalp, brushing the hairs on his head backward and forward. “Look how far we’ve come.” I smile. I don’t know what happily ever after looks like...but it probably *feels* like this.

“Hm, indeed.” Joel rises from our somewhat awkward position and leans backwards on the couch pulling me with him. I’m strewn across his chest, nestled like a rabbit in its burrow—safe and secure. My heartbeat finally calms. Everything stills. The world is quiet. And then he asks a question that maybe I shouldn’t answer so honestly.

“Why’d you wait until you were twenty-five?”

“I don’t know...it just never felt right.”

“But it did with me?”

I rest my chin on his pec and stare up at his eyes. “I felt the *thing* I was waiting for. I didn’t even know what it was until you smiled at me in the office that day. I just knew I wanted this forever.”

If the sudden tension across his chest wasn’t enough of a tip-off, the pounding in his chest certainly is an indicator that something is wrong. Couple that with the loud gulp that makes his Adam’s apple dramatically jump. “Forever? Wait...wait.” Joel rises, forcing me upright with him. He holds both of my hands tightly in his. “We’ve been together for less than twenty-four hours and”—he locks his eyes on mine as clear evidence of the realization washing over him—“I was your first, the kitten, you told me you loved me last night...I don’t think...” He trails off.

I wait as long as I can before I all but beg him to finish his sentence. “Don’t think what?”

“That I’ve been seeing this clearly.” He grabs the rules off the table and holds them out to me like a prop. “Adler, what were these for? Why did you need *rules* to sleep with me?”

I let my head knock against the wilting stuffing of the couch. “To keep myself from falling for you. Because I was trying to respect what you wanted. You don’t do relationships...or didn’t do them—I don’t know. I just wanted to have you whatever way I was allowed to. I wasn’t trying to manipulate you if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Joel shakes his head determinedly. “I would never think that of you.”

“Why are you upset?” I ask, my gaze scouring his pained expression.

“Not at you. At myself.”

“Why?”

“Because you spent the better part of four months worried about what *I* don’t want. Have you thought about what *you* want?”

I squeeze his hands tightly. “You. I just want to be with you.”

Joel brings the back of my hand to his lips before releasing me. “Give me a tangible answer. You have me right now...but that’s not what you really mean, is it?”

“What?”

“Marriage...kids...you want the whole nine, don’t you?”

“Not this minute. I can be patient.”

Joel ducks his head and rubs his brows with two fingers. “Answer something honestly for me.”

“Okay,” I barely whisper.

“What if this is as far as it goes and I can only be what I am to you right now?”

“Joel—I’m happy.”

“And in another year? Or two? Or five? What happens if I can only ever be your boyfriend and nothing more? Tell me, are you going to still be happy with that?”

I open my mouth to eagerly agree, just to wipe the strain and concern from his face, but I hear a chorus inside of me. My gut, my heart, my brain, my body—this time they are singing all in perfect harmony. And I can’t ignore them any longer.

“No,” I admit. “But we have time. How can you know how you’re going to feel in five years? I know you have hurts and hang-ups, but I’m willing to wait. You can have as much time as you need.”

Joel sucks in a deep breath and releases it. He leans forward and strokes my cheeks with his thumbs. “Adler—I’ve been here before. I’ve had almost this exact conversation before. And it’s the reason I’m here in Denver in the first place. It only ends one way. Miserable. Bitter. You deserve so much more than maybes and ifs. I don’t know if I’m ever going to get there. In fact, I really doubt I will. And I can’t string you along and take years of your life because selfishly I don’t want to lose you.”

I steady my voice, pretending like I’m not afraid in this moment. “I thought with me it was different. I thought maybe I was the exception...”

He cocks his head to the side and looks at me the way you would a turtle stuck on its back. *Pity*. “I’m still me. I’ve felt the way I do about marriage for about twenty years. You can’t erase that in four months. Adler, you’re amazing but I still don’t want those things. And I didn’t stop to see that you do. So much. And I don’t know if I’m ever going to be able to give that to you. We’re headed straight for a cliff.”

“Then why did you agree to be my boyfriend? Why did we make love last night?”

He looks past my shoulder. His eyes land near me, but not on me. “Honestly? Because I’m *trying*. But they are just words, Adler.”

My ears are ringing. My head swells. “Just words?” I let out a gasp of a giggle. “I’m a writer, Joel. Words are *everything*.”

Joel plants his lips on my forehead quickly. “I didn’t mean—”

“We can figure it out together. I want to be with you. I thought you wanted to be with me, too.”

“I do, but I don’t think we see relationships the same way.”

And then the hollow feeling rises and my sixth sense tells me that Joel just handed me the world last night...and he’s about to shatter it the morning after. “How do you see relationships?”

“As fleeting.” His tongue barely pokes through his lips as he moistens them. “Baby, I’m sorry, but didn’t I warn you?”

“Warn me of what?”

“A relationship with me leads nowhere. Are you honestly okay with that?”

Acid bubbles up in my throat and forms a solid lump. I have to choke down the swell before

speaking. “No.”

He nods solemnly, feeling the compounding pressure of one little word. He wraps his arms around me and tucks my head into his chest and I let my tears wet his shirt, because the way he’s hugging me tightly, urgently, full of fear—I know what this means.

“We can’t do this, Adler. I’m going to hurt you and you’re going to hate me for it.”

There it is.

We’re over before we have a chance to begin.

“Do what?” I sniff into his chest as if I don’t know what ‘what’ means. I’m just savoring him while I can. His smell. His warmth. This moment in time where I almost got everything I ever wanted. He leans away and wipes a tear from my cheek. No matter, another replaces it instantly.

“Be together. Maybe we should go back to being friends. *Just* friends.”

I snort loudly. Joel’s face twists and I don’t blame him because my response is completely inappropriate for the heartbreaking weight between us. But come on—how can he say that with a straight face? *Friends*? We were never friends... How can you be friends with a man you’re head-over-heels in love with? Maybe the rules would’ve protected me...if we had followed them.

“I can’t be your friend, Joel. And you know what else—”

I pause and consider acting rationally. *You’re upset, you’re emotional, don’t—*

“I quit. Aura. I’m done wasting time there and I’m done waiting for my life to happen.”

He flinches with a flicker of anger. Maybe hurt. All the emotions he doesn’t deserve to feel right now. Let’s not forget who is breaking whose heart here. “You need your job, Adler. Don’t quit because of us. Nothing has to change at work. Well, some things...but I still want to see you every day.”

I shake my head, resolute. I see it. Clear as day. Joel and me? It’s all or nothing. And he’s telling me all he can do is *nothing*. “Cody told me about your family a few weeks ago. I’m so sorry your parents had a rocky marriage. That must’ve been grueling when you were growing up. But it sounds like they love you. And your siblings. I have parents who didn’t want me. They tolerated me until they didn’t have to anymore. And it made me terrified of rejection—scared to give anyone an opportunity to tell me I’m not what they want. But you know what? I have to stop being afraid to face my fears and go after what I want.” I gulp and tilt my chin to the ceiling. “Do you love me?”

His mouth parts but nothing articulate comes out. “I—”

“What you want for the future...I understand that might take you time. And I know you’re scared. I never wanted to push you and I’m willing to wait until you’re ready. But after everything we’ve been through, this part you should know by now. Do you love me? Are you ever going to love me the way I love you?”

Joel lets out a deep shaky breath. His eyes fall to his lap before they lock on mine. The look he’s giving me is pleading. He’s begging me not to make him answer but I nod in a subtle commandment. *Answer*. “No,” he whispers, then clears his throat. “I don’t think I will.”

I bite my bottom lip and nod. “Thank you, for being honest at least.”

It hurts. Terribly. Miserably.

But I’m still here.

I’m still standing.

“What about our pact?”

“What?” I ask, barely hearing his question over the knock of my heart.

“We said we’d stay friends. Remember?” He wraps his arms around me quickly, allowing no time for me to escape. “Please don’t hate me.”

“I don’t hate you, Joel.” *Thump, thump, thump.* My heart pounds mercilessly. “But I can’t be around you and not *hope*. So, I can’t see you. I can’t work for you. I can’t live my life at the edge of my seat wishing you’d change who you are. That’s not fair to you, either.”

“Adler...” Joel begins but doesn’t know what to say. He knows. He knows I’m right.

The tears aren’t dripping, they’re pouring. “Will you please leave?”

He shakes his head matter-of-factly. “I’m not leaving you like this—”

“Please.”

“No. I left you alone once while you were crying—I won’t make that mistake again.”

“Joel—you said you wanted to know what I wanted...*this*. I really want to be alone right now. I really need to move *forward*. Even if it’s not with you.”

“Adler, I don’t—”

“*Please*. Leave.” I force the words in a clear staccato.

A swift kiss to my cheek and a light haze of his cologne is all he leaves me with as he obliges my reluctant request. I wait until the door shuts behind him. I count to ten to ensure he’s made it to the stairs. The dramatic thump of my heart eases. The adrenaline no longer holds me steady, so I collapse. Fat droplets fall from my face and melt into the couch.

I didn’t wake up this morning with a sex hangover because I was still drunk. What’s in my veins is far more potent and the fallout from withdrawals feels like death. All this time, I was mistaken. It was never about sex. It was love.

Only losing *love* can hurt this bad.

thirty-seven

...

Adler

The soft knock at my door is just a courtesy. I know who it is and the person on the other side knows it's unlocked. I don't even bother getting out of bed. I just pull the covers over my head to hide my swollen eyes and blotchy complexion.

"Addie?"

"Up here."

I hear bags rustling as Quinn places something down on the kitchen counter. She trudges up the stairs with two beers in hand. She sits up in my bed, on the passenger side, as I like to call it. She'd probably leap up in disgust if she knew Joel was lying there less than twenty-four hours ago. But she's safe on top of the covers, so I won't divulge unnecessary details.

I peek out of the makeshift cave of my comforter. Quinn's sitting up, back against the wall with her long tan legs twisted around the ankles. She takes a long swig from her beer. "Whenever you're ready."

"How did you know?" I grumble. I didn't call or text any of my friends after Joel dumped me in my own home the morning after I said I love you. I just crawled under my sheets and let the pain peel back all my layers of skin so it can really seep into the core organs.

"Cody texted me when Joel got home this morning. I guess he looked so shitty, Cody wanted to know how you were faring. I had no clue what he was talking about. Kind of kills me I heard it from him. Why didn't you call me? I would've been here in a heartbeat. Did you call anyone?"

"Yes," I admit.

"Better not have been Reese," Quinn grumbles.

"I called my mom." I sit up and lean against the brick wall that doubles as my headboard. I tuck my knees into my chest and hold out my hand. Quinn deposits the icy bottle in my palm. "She didn't answer."

"Oh, Addie. I'm sorry. Why'd you call her?"

I tip the bottom of my bottle to the ceiling. The carbonation irritates my throat but I continue to chug. "My mom and dad sucked as parents, but they are really good as a couple. My grandma used to tell me that they loved each other so much they ran out and didn't have anything left over for me."

"Which is the kid version of 'they're selfish assholes'."

"Oh, yeah—absolutely, but I just wanted to know what my mom was like with my dad, you know? My grandma always told me I'm a lot like my mom. Kind of bubbly and chirpy. Obsessed with candy. Loves bad puns. I wanted to know what she was like in love. Was my dad her first love or just her last? I need to know that this feeling..." I push my fist against my chest to show Quinn where it hurts like I'm a child at a doctor's office. "...goes away. I needed to hear it from her."

“Oh, Addie,” Quinn says as her eyes droop. She turns her face forward so I don’t see her eyes begin to water. That’s how much my best friend loves me. She cries *for* me. My mom couldn’t even pick up the phone.

“I really thought because I waited so long, when I found the right guy...well, I was sure it’d be the big one. But I was stupid about this whole thing and you were right.”

“I didn’t want to be right. And you know what? I wasn’t.”

“Spare me.” My voice cracks as I slump to the side and sink into Quinn’s soft shoulder. Her petite frame and baby-soft skin is a stark contrast to Joel’s broad shoulders and muscular arms.

“No, I wasn’t. I’ve been spending a lot of time thinking about this. Do you remember your freshman year when you met Sully? I was a junior at the time and thought I knew everything. You told me he was needy.”

“Sully?”

“Yeah, I’ll never forget it. I asked you what you thought of my boyfriend, and you said he was really nice but needy, like he’d benefit from the companionship of a golden retriever.”

“What?! I honestly don’t remember that.”

“Well, that makes sense—we took you to your first college party and you got so drunk off like half a beer.” Quinn laughs. “But anyways, you turned out to be spot on. Sully needed so much more than I could ever give him. And you told Noa when she first started dating Wes that you felt like he sucked up all the air around her and she didn’t have anything left. You also were the one who told Mani to check James’s phone because you just had this *feeling* that he was cheating. Then with Reese...well you were the one who begged her to kick Petey out of her life for good.”

I throw my hands over my eyes in embarrassment. “Why were you guys friends with me as I sat there and judged all your love lives?”

“My point is maybe you had the least experience, but in some ways, you were wiser than all of us. You had an eagle eye in relationships. That’s why you waited. You trusted your gut feeling. You are so much smarter, stronger, and braver than you see, Addie. You didn’t need Tessa Rayne to write a book. You were just waiting for the story you wanted to tell. And maybe it didn’t end the way we hoped, but it’s still a story worth telling.”

I glance over the iron rails of the alcove. The glow of the laptop screen on my desk downstairs is the only illumination in my current bat cave of my apartment.

“You picked Joel for a reason. Just because some love doesn’t last, doesn’t mean it isn’t real.”

I nod solemnly.

“So, is this what you want to do tonight?”

“What?”

“Sulk under your covers. Because we can. I already called the girls. I just don’t know how we’re all going to fit in this piece-of-shit bed of yours.” Quinn bounces on the bed and the springs groan miserably.

“How long will it hurt like this?”

“How much do you love him?”

“A lot.”

Quinn nods at me and presses her lips together. “Then, a while.” *Dammit*. “But you don’t have to be miserable the whole time. You’ve got a book to launch. You’ve got all your friends here to help you through. Every single day will feel a little better, I promise. But if you want to set tonight aside for crying, that’s allowed.”

I take a few deep breaths and weigh my options. My tears must be radioactive because apparently,

I have this new superpower where I think before I speak. It's miraculous. Batman's not here. It's just me. *Robin*. I need to go save my own Gotham City.

"You know what? I don't want to sulk. It's Friday. And I want to have samosas and sangria."

"No *Sex and the City*?"

"Maybe we try something new tonight. And in the spirit of new, I should tell you, I quit my job."

"What? Are you—"

"Not just because of Joel...I want to write for real. To give this version of myself a fighting chance. I want to put everything into this and see where it goes. Whether I sink or swim." It took a jackhammer to the heart to realize it, but everything I've done at Aura is procrastination. I've been running from my destiny, but no more.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I think it's time to have a little faith in myself. Plus, if my writing career totally tanks, I'm sure Sabin Technologies could use another secretary, right? Would you refer me?"

"I think I could arrange a job." Quinn's recent promotion to Chief Marketing Officer means she holds more power than most at her dad's company. Surely, she could wrestle up some paperwork for me.

"Thank you." I sigh in relief. Leaping always feels a little less scary when there is a safety net twenty feet below. "Let the Joel purge begin."

Quinn slides off my bed and holds out her hand for my empty bottle. "Speaking of which, block his number."

"Why?"

"Because tonight we're getting drunk and you *will* want to talk to him. There has never been a time in the history of the world a woman regrets *not* calling her ex during a night of binge drinking."

I follow her down the stairs, flicking on the lights, allowing some life back into my apartment. The last time I didn't listen to Quinn I got myself into this mess. So, I grab my phone and change Joel (with a heart) back to Mr. Lewis before I block his number. I have no missed calls or text messages from him. Maybe he's started his Addie cleanse as well.

My door swings opens and Reese's curly blonde tendrils dance wildly around her face as she rushes into the apartment, takeout bags in hand. "Bear." She throws her arms around my neck, wrapping me up in a breast-flattening hug. "Do we need to kill him?" she asks Quinn.

"Jury's still out," she responds flatly.

"Ow," I complain but Reese doesn't let go.

It's not too much longer before Mani and Noa pile through the door. We all find our places on my sofa, my sitting chair, on the floor. With Mani here our family feels complete. We huddle around my coffee table and break open samosas and twist open the giant bottle of premade sangria.

"Why do we bother trying to make our own sangria when this bottled stuff is way better?" Reese asks.

Everyone chimes in, but no one has a good response.

"Because...actually I don't—"

"We've always just—"

"Does anyone even like sangria? How the hell did this even get started?"

I smile as this evening starts feeling oddly like every other girls' night we've ever had. Somehow, despite the heartbreak, I find joy in this moment. I find solace in the friendships that have carried me this far and will continue to carry me forever.

As I snuggle into my couch between my family, I silently hope someday Joel will find a way to

have the same thing that I have right in front of me. A relationship that always comes through, that endures every surprise curveball, every up and down—one that never ever has to end.

thirty-eight

...

Joel

january

My dad is aging in reverse. Unless I'm imagining it, he's far less gray than he used to be. I successfully evaded the holidays with my family this year, much to everyone's annoyance. I wasn't motivated to travel. For the past few weeks I've not been motivated to do much of anything.

Adler and I haven't spoken. Not one word, except the resignation letter she promptly sent the Monday after our breakup. I really thought we'd patch things up at the office after cooling down for a few days, but she never came back. She put in her notice and then opted to spend her final two weeks using all the vacation time she'd banked over the past few years. She quit everything at once—her job, our relationship, our friendship. Adler effectively ejected me from her life in one fell swoop.

She even went as far as blocking my number. I try to call her every night after work, just to see if anything has changed. Every night I have hope that maybe she's changed her mind, but my call is always rejected. I can't leave a voicemail. I can't send a text. I'd stop by her place, but if she doesn't want to talk to me, I can't imagine she'll want to see me.

I've never been on this side of the breakup. I normally feel relief when my relationships are over, not empty like this. I keep waiting for it to fade.

My dad's visit has been a happy distraction this week. On his last night in town, he sits at my kitchen island sipping through a bulbous wineglass flipping through the local newspaper. I stare at his hair quizzically. *How?*

"Pourquoi me regardes-tu comme ça?" he asks why I'm looking at him like that.

"Papa, *Anglais*," I respond, reminding him to speak in English. I'm the only one of my siblings fluent in both French and Italian. My older brothers speak broken Italian and my sister speaks too much, too fast—like a damn chipmunk, but all in English and Thai.

"Why? Who's here?"

"No one. You just sound like you're giving a lecture." My dad is a French literature professor at the university I opted not to go to. I could've gotten free tuition as the child of a tenured professor, but the school was pretentious and way too close to home. I hightailed it to University of Alabama, where I met Cody. Best decision I could've made.

"Well, your French is choppy, Joel. You should practice more. *Tu perds la main*."

"I am not losing my touch, Dad. At least I can understand you. That's more than your other kids can say."

"That's why you're my favorite, my boy."

"You say that to all your sons. Sometimes while we're in the same room, so it loses its impact. And we all know Cami is your favorite."

My dad shrugs, not bothering to protest. "She's my baby girl."

"Mhm," I say. "Hey, I want to show you something. Come with me."

My dad follows me to my wine room. It's more of a closet, but every wall is lined with lattice-style shelves. I've created quite the collection and no one can appreciate this accomplishment like my dad. I inherited my wine snobbery from him. I scour the shelves trying to remember where I placed

the bottle I'm looking for.

"Wow. You've created such a life for yourself." He grips my shoulder and squeezes. "Do you know how proud your mother and I are of you? We brag about you all the time." I pause my search and turn to face my dad. "What?" he asks.

"It's just weird to hear you say 'your mother and I'—like it's natural you two are talking."

"Joel, it's your mother. We've always talked."

"The last thing I remember you saying to Mom was *leave your ring on the counter you ungrateful*—"

"Hey, hey. Tensions were high that night, okay? Oh Joel..." He reaches out to pat my cheek. "I know your mom and I didn't always shield you kids from our rough patches. You were always my sensitive one and maybe we should've been more careful. For that I'm sorry. *Fils, j'aime ta mère.*"

"*English!* And you say you love Mom, but you guys were miserable together. I was relieved when you got separated." I continue to scour the shelves. *Where the hell did I put it?*

"I have not been miserable with your mom. Don't get me wrong, she challenges me. She boils my blood and there have been times..." He blows out a frustrated breath and makes a strangling motion with his hands. "But she's my everything. I came here to see you because I missed you but there's also something important I needed to say."

"What's that?" I ask over my shoulder.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what? *There* you are!" I say as I locate the wine bottle in question. I hand my dad the bottle with the burgundy label and the wispy silver lines outlining feathers. "I guess this is perfect timing. You can give this to Mom."

"Oh *mon Dieu!* Where did you find this? I haven't seen this bottle in years."

"My assistant—former assistant." I let out a breathy laugh at the memory of my discussion with Adler about fine wines. "She calls this the duck wine." My laugh weakens and I shake my head as the once-sweet memory now tastes sour.

"Well, that makes sense seeing as there is a duck on the label."

"What? Dad, it's a swan." I grab back the bottle, examining the silver figure on the label. Why does everyone think this is a damn duck? It's a three-hundred-dollar bottle of wine. It's fancy—it's a swan.

"We were friends with the owners of the vineyard before it was lost. Hugo dedicated this wine to his wife. He used to call her 'Ducky'. It's a duck." He twirls the bottle in his hands.

"Well I'll be damned." *A fucking duck.* I immediately want to call her. I want to tell her she was right about the wine, all along. She was right about everything. But it's too late. "I really fucked up."

His face pulls in confusion. "Over a duck?"

"No—Adler. My assistant. She quit and she won't talk to me." I suddenly feel claustrophobic. I need to get out of this room. My head begins to pound and I feel nauseous. I make a beeline to my fridge and reach to the far back to fetch the coldest bottle. I begin to chug as my dad stares at me, concerned.

"Is that serious? Is Denver short on assistants?"

A frustrated huff escapes my mouth. As if my dad should understand a story that I never told him. "No...I'd been sleeping with my assistant for the past few months and after convincing myself that I didn't want a serious relationship, we broke it off. She's something *really* special, and I just let her go. Without a fight. She severed all ties with me. I've been trying to forget about it and move on, but looking at this damn duck wine right now..."

“Son, isn’t this the same reason you left home? You had a similar story with Juliana, no?”

I shake my head. I’m not thrilled about how things ended with Juliana, but the point is I was relieved that they did. This...this isn’t the same. The opposite. Being without Adler is like suffocating...slowly.

“Adler is different. She’s...” I can’t help but smile when I remember all the good about our time together. “She’s gorgeous but kind of shy about it. She’s so talented, but genuinely humble. She’s smart but also goofy and funny. Strong but also sweet and supportive. She was so good to me. We *should* be together. It’s just the way I feel about marriage—”

“Ah.” He hangs his head. “Back to my apology then. Joel—do you remember the night your mother and I got into a fight and we sent you and Cami to Aunt Tia’s for the weekend?”

“Yeah—so you guys could fight it out to the death?”

“Well, you ran away. Tia called us and said you’d escaped the house but we knew exactly where you were headed so we didn’t worry. You snuck back into the house and made your mother and me peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and lit those little tealights on the dining table. You wrote us cards from each other that said, ‘I love you’.”

“I remember the story, Dad.” Albeit, I was ten years old but it wasn’t my manliest moment trying to prepare a romantic date for my parents so they’d stop fighting.

“My point is, you’ve always been a fixer. I’m willing to bet it’s why you were attracted to the career you have now. But as much as you tried while you were growing up...you couldn’t fix your mom and me. I can’t imagine the bad taste that must’ve left in your mouth—”

“Dad, you don’t have to do this. I’m a grown man, I make my own—”

“Joel.” My dad’s unyielding tone echoes around the kitchen. “You are still my son. Grown man or not. And what I’m trying to say is that I’m sorry you felt you had to carry that burden—to fix your mother and me. I’m sorry we set you up for failure. But most importantly, I’m so sorry I taught you that marriage and partnership is such an awful thing. Because it’s not the truth. Yes, love is at times painful. *Yes*, it takes work. But in the end, it’s not just worth it. It’s the only thing in this life that’s worth it.”

His words percolate through my veins, feeling like relief. I think I’ve been waiting for this apology my whole life. I didn’t know until this very minute how badly I needed it. My dad pulls me into a hug and I let my chin slump onto his shoulder. It’s a while before we break our embrace.

He motions to the bottle on the counter. “Do you have a wine bottle opener here?”

“Well seeing as I have a wine room, I’d say yes. I probably do.”

My dad is not amused at my attempts at Adler humor. “Get the opener, Joel.” I do as I’m told and my dad expertly pops the cork on the duck wine that I thought he’d take home as a souvenir. I grab two round glasses from the cabinet and set them down on the kitchen island where my dad returns to his seat.

“I thought you’d want to bring that home to Mom.”

“Your mother hates this wine. She tolerates it for me. You know, this wasn’t the first time we were separated. We broke up around the time you were two. I bet you don’t even remember. Your big brothers hardly do.”

My dad swivels his wine in the cup watching the thin legs of the liquid coat the inside of the glass. Watch the legs, he always told me, that’s how you know if it’s good wine.

“What happened?”

“What happens to every couple. We were stressed, we had four sons and let me tell you, your brothers were not easy on your mother. I was always working, trying to provide for our family and

she was stuck at home catering to everyone else's needs but hers. And we blew up and we fought and we said things we didn't mean."

"Yeah, see? That's exactly what I'm afraid of."

"And then we realized that anger is just a feeling and we chose to keep our family together. We chose each other over our pride. We reconciled and we conceived Cami. And that fresh start was enough to carry us through the next two decades of our lives."

I take a sip of the smooth wine. The kind of smooth that is only accomplished with time. "Until you separated again."

"And who knows, we might separate again before we die. But we've always found our way back together. You think marriage is a finish line? It's the starting point. There's no finish line, Joel. Marriage isn't something you accomplish. It's a choice. Love is always a choice. I'd rather fight with your mother than make love to anybody else."

"Yuck. Did you just say, 'make love'?"

He nods once. "I did. Let me tell you something about your mother—"

"Gross. Please stop."

"Forty years and the woman has not lost a single move in the bed—"

"Gross, Dad. *Stop!*"

It cannot be that simple. All this time? Just choose Adler. That's it?

I miss her laugh, her crazy jokes, and her wild sarcasm. I miss how she makes me think with my heart more often than my head. I love how she's too sweet and forgiving to actually get pissed off about peanuts on her noodles no matter how many times she's asked for them without. If Felices had hands and Adler and I were dangling from separate cliffs, I have no doubt he'd let me plummet to my death. She was patient with all my issues and only ever tried to accommodate what I wanted and needed. It's not right. I should've done the same. I should've seen it sooner. I was meant to be her first. Maybe her only.

If I could rewrite the entire story, I would. From day one. The very moment I laid eyes on her. The first time she told me to call her Baby Spice. How could I be so dim? I should've known what this was from the beginning. We were never just friends.



After dropping Dad off at the airport, I return home to the most bizarre scene. A two-hundred-and-fifty-pound former NFL tight end is lying on his back in the middle of my living room while making kissing noises at the tiny kitten sitting on his chest.

"Cody?"

"You got a delivery while you were out. See, *this* little thing I like. *This* is an appropriate size for a cat."

The little thing Cody is referring to is stunning. She's snow white with the most beautiful spotted markings. And she's ferocious with the heart of a lion. Cody thinks she's playing, but I'm certain she's trying to make him her bitch the way she's slapping him across the face with her tiny paws.

"They just left her with you?" I ask Cody who is using his fingers to pretend-box with the kitten. "Normally these breeders are very cautious about where their kittens go."

“I don’t know.” Cody shrugs his shoulders against the carpet. “They just told me to sign and that Ms. Haley already handled everything. Her papers are on the counter.”

Of course, she did.

I flip through the blue folder on my kitchen island with all the information on the kitten’s parents, her pedigree, her medical history and her care instructions—that I don’t need, it’s not my first rodeo. The final page is the invoice. Vomit almost rises in my throat when I see the bottom-line number and the red ‘*Paid in Full*’ stamp next to it. I completely forgot it in the midst of my fallout with Adler. I meant to handle this and I missed the window. This kitten cost even more than Felices. *Speaking of which...*

“Where is Felices?”

“Your bedroom. Apparently, you’re not supposed to just stick the cats together. They are supposed to sniff each other through a door or some shit, I don’t know. It seemed like a lot of work so I just locked Felices in your room. Little Ms. DeeDee and I needed some space to bond.”

“You’re not naming my cat DeeDee.”

“Why not?” He looks truly offended.

“Because I know for a fact that DeeDee is the name of your favorite Hooters girl back in New York. I really wish I didn’t know that, but I do.”

“Fine. What’re you going to name her?”

“I don’t know. Think I’ll just call her Kitty for now. Adler should name her.”

Cody shoots up into a sitting position and the kitten slides down his chest. She digs her claws into his skin through his thin shirt trying to hang on. “Shit!” he squeals. “Easy, li’l miss. Are y’all talking again?”

“I want to.” I drop the folder on the counter and scoop the kitten off Cody’s lap. She begins purring immediately. *That’s right. I’m your real dad.* I peer into her large glinting eyes. She rubs her head against my hand, demanding attention, just like Felices. I tap Kitty’s nose and she rolls against my chest with her four paws flying straight up in the air. Playful little thing.

“So do it.”

“I know I didn’t get into it a few weeks ago, but I told her some really stupid stuff. I think I really hurt her.”

“Such as?”

“That I didn’t love her. That I never would.” I shrink, preparing for Cody’s reaction. I half expect him to throw something at me, but he merely shrugs. “Nothing?”

“I already knew all that—Quinn told me.”

“You gossip like a woman now, you know that?”

“You’re damn lucky I do.” Cody disappears from the kitchen down the hallway and returns a moment later with a pink paperback book.

“I’ve already read that.”

“No you haven’t.” He hands me the book, cover up. It’s a similar color to *Toy With Me*, but a new title: *Pretend With Me*. “No chance you have because it’s not yet released. This is the author’s advance copy.”

“How’d you get this?”

“Quinn told me to give it to you once you pulled your head out of your ass.”

I examine the worn pages. “You read this didn’t you?”

“Course I did. I’m not working, I’m bored—and nosey as fuck.”

I let out a guttural groan. “She wrote about our sex life in here...I can’t read this. Not after

everything.” Honestly, I’m scared. I asked a virgin to just fuck like it meant nothing. I don’t want to know how awful that must’ve been from her side.

“Give me back the kitten. I want to enjoy her company until she becomes the size of a dinosaur.”

I acquiesce, mostly because Cody still has about twenty pounds of muscle on me.

He takes Kitty and slaps the book against my chest. “Read it. You might be surprised.”

Cody walks out of the kitchen cooing over Kitty. He really is getting weird. I make a mental note to start helping him job hunt next week. I settle into my couch with the book that weighs a hundred pounds in my hands. I try to remember when she finished the manuscript. I think...before we broke up? Did she have time to go back and make changes out of anger?

I skip the front matter and open to the first page of chapter one. Hope knocks. My heart stops when I read the opening: *I’ll admit I was a bit of a late bloomer when it comes to love...but he was worth the wait. He still is.*

thirty-nine

...

Adler

february

The paperback in my hands feels so much lighter than I imagined. The color is exactly one shade off from the cover of *Toy With Me*. When the publishers are finished exploiting this series, all the books neatly lined will make a perfect pink gradient.

I got my way with the title at least. I was not going to allow *My Pretty Kitty* to be on the cover of my first romance book whether or not it was the publisher's suggestion. I put my foot down and shoved *Pretend With Me* right down their throats.

"Not a bad turnout for your first book launch party." Tessa beams at me.

"Tessa, this is over the top."

"It would've been bigger if we had done this in L.A. like Ted and I suggested," she complains. She wasn't thrilled about catching a flight to the Midwest. But *Pretend With Me* is my baby. I wanted to be at home for this.

"Which is why Denver is perfect. I think this is plenty big. It's a little overwhelming actually."

The party is hosted at a local Denver bookstore that Tessa and Ted graciously rented out in my honor. The entire floor is decorated in, of course, pink. Valentine's Day is next week so at the very least the bookstore can recycle some of these decorations. There are foot-wide hot-pink satin streamers lining every surface. There is balloon garland in the colors of champagne and dusty rose draped over every door. The floral table decorations are a combination of spray-painted pink daisies and pale-pink roses. The champagne fountain is spewing out rosé and the bar is backlit with hot-pink flashing neon lights. This party looks more like Barbie's dream wedding than a book launch and signing.

It reminds me of the party my best friends threw me six months ago. Only tonight, there's no hiding. It's *my* name on the banner...on the cover. And on the pens and the bookmarks and the totes and all the other over-the-top swag that Ted insisted on ordering.

"Your friends seem to be having fun." Tessa nods over her shoulder, but I have no clue what she's gesturing to. My girls are scattered in the crowd enjoying themselves.

"Why don't you go stretch your legs—enjoy yourself. Let's get drunk." Tessa bobs her head to the music. She holds out her hands for me, trying to coax me out of my chair behind the author booth.

"Do you remember the last time we got drunk together?"

"I sure do. And from it came the birth of a beautiful book. I have zero regrets." *I have a few. Like that three-day hangover.*

"I have ten more minutes of signings." Then, I'm free. As soon as the clock strikes nine, I have every intention of finding the exit to this party. It's been a grueling few weeks between final edits, the promo, and marketing obligations. I just want some peace and quiet before the book tours start.

"I'll go grab you something from the bar," Tessa offers. "Whatcha want?"

"A beer would be great. Coors?"

"Absolutely! Tequila shooters coming right up." Tessa winks and then leaves me to my little pink table covered in ruffles with a giant sign that says *'Meet the Author'* right next to my headshot on display. There's no cowering behind the cover this time. This book screams Adler Haley.

A young woman in a high ponytail smacks her copy of the book down on my table a bit aggressively. She smells like a walking bottle of Tuaca. “Hey, *oh my god*, I just love your book. I was one of the ones who won an advance copy in that contest. I binged it in one night.”

I slide the paperback over to my side of the table and uncap my pink pen. “Thank you, that’s so sweet. I’m glad you liked it. What’s your name?”

“Keegan. K-e-e-g-a-n. Hey, I have a question for you...” A coy smile creeps across her face and she leans into the table. “Is this book like purely fiction or based on like real-life stuff?”

“All books are inspired by some element of reality, right?” I answer distractedly as I scribble a note into Keegan’s copy of *Pretend With Me*.

“No, I mean like—do you actually know people who did it doggy-style on an open balcony in a high rise in L.A.? Because that’s just freaking amazing.”

I laugh impishly. The majority of the book is inspired by real events. I changed our names and made the setting California, but the entire novel is a raw retelling of the first time I fell in love. My first...everything. “No, I honestly don’t know of anyone who did that in L.A.”

Keegan is too drunk to register my emphasis on *in L.A.* and my clever half-truth goes almost unnoticed. A loud chuckle from right behind us captures my attention and my eyes snap up to see the outline of a man in a perfectly tailored Armani suit with what looks like golden cufflinks.

“Just so you know,” Keegan continues in her slightly drunken slur. “Your book is waayyy better than Tessa Rayne’s. *Toy With Me* is garbage compared to this one.” She hugs her signed copy before she walks away, thinking she left me with a compliment. Good grief.

Ted Arnett, live and in the flesh, is next in line holding a copy of *Pretend With Me*. This is just for show. He has about a hundred stacks of these in his office in L.A.

“You actually waited in line?” I ask, raising a brow. He is still chortling at Keegan’s odd compliment. I knew Ted flew in with Tessa for this little shindig, but he’s been caught up with business all day. This is the first time I’ve seen him in person. I’ve only known him from Zoom calls. He looks so much smaller in person.

“I wait in lines like everyone else. Another thing you may not know about me—I’m a hugger.” Ted steps around the booth and holds out his arms. I eagerly push back my chair and accept his kind gesture.

Validation.

Ted pulls a square red box out of his pocket and hands it to me. I’d feel a little awkward in his embrace if I didn’t already know Ted preferred his men fully bearded and with a lot of chest hair. We’re talking backwoods lumberjacks. I gingerly open the lid. Inside lies a cheap pink plastic button that reads ‘*I proved Ted wrong*’ with a golden star underneath.

“Addie, don’t you get all emotional on me now.”

I blink back tears as I poke the pin through my expensive new Marc Jacobs romper that makes me feel like I’m playing dress-up. Today’s costume? Adult.

“I will wear this as a badge of honor. I will never take it off. Seriously, I’m even going to sleep with it. It’s beautiful. It’s the *wrong* part that really sings to me, you know?”

Ted rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. One question though.”

“What’s that?”

“The dedication.” He flips to the front of the book and reads:

“*Despite everything, I will always love you. Thank you for stepping aside, so I could find better. It was the kinder thing to do.*”

Ted closes the book. “I always meant to ask. Did you and your guy work it out? I know in the book it works out, but I mean in real life. You said he stepped aside so you could find better? This is me by the way, officially interested in your characters.” He smirks at me.

I look at the overhead clock and am thrilled to see the hour hand strike nine. My obligation officially fulfilled. I’ll text the girls later. Let them enjoy the party. I, however, need sleep...and sweatpants.

“The dedication isn’t to any guy.” My relationship with Joel was the key to unlocking the big picture. The lesson I needed to learn to finish my story. After my first love—my first real heartbreak—I saw it as clear as day. So much of love is about forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the real survival guide to love.

“Who then?” Ted’s tone is hushed as he studies the emotion on my face.

“My parents.” I sent them a copy of *Pretend With Me* and a note. I doubt they’ll read either, but I was brave enough to do it. I wish I could’ve called Joel from the post office. It was his idea and he was right...my parents should at least know who they are missing out on. “Anyways, I’m going to sneak out of here. If my friends see me leave, they’ll feel obligated to follow me and I want them to enjoy themselves and the party. I will see you and Tessa for breakfast tomorrow, yes?”

“Sure,” Ted says with a reaffirming nod. “Rest up, Addie. Tomorrow’s breakfast is a planning meeting about the next best seller you’re writing me. I plan on staying a very rich man because of you.”

I roll my eyes. Can a girl get one day of peace? “Insatiable, Ted. You are insatiable.”

“And now you’re stuck with me.”

Yeah, yeah. I sneak out the back of the building and into the crisp Colorado air. I touch my pink plastic button and can’t help but smile as I start my long walk home.

I did it. I proved Ted wrong. I proved myself wrong. We’re finally here at the finish line of an impossible task but somehow, I did it. Somehow, I survived.

I’ve been holding my breath for the past month and a half and I finally let it out. I *breathe* and feel my heart jolt to life as I finally give it permission to beat again.



It’s almost ten o’clock by the time I make it home. I took a detour for a street taco. There was food at the party, but everything was dipped in white chocolate and pink sprinkles. A girl can only eat and drink so much pink. *Yeesh.*

I round the corner to my apartment building when I see a little white fluffball wandering down the sidewalk. Snowy white with spots like a leopard. *Gasp.*

“Hey! I know you! What are you doing out in the street alone, little sweetie?”

I drop my purse and rush over to the kitten. I scoop her up without hesitation. Around her neck is the silver chain collar I picked out, complete with pink charm. Her pink heart matches my pink button. She purrs against me just like Felices. Her tail flicks in a sort-of wag and she paws at my face. I see why these cats are so unique—because they are basically dogs.

“She likes you.” A stranger creeping up beside me would startle me, except I know this cat. And

I'd recognize Joel's voice anywhere. I turn around to face him, with the white puffball still cradled against my chest.

"You let a tiny defenseless kitten roam the city sidewalks alone?"

"I was watching her. We were waiting for you. I swung by your book launch, but they said you'd already left. I came here to congratulate you."

After all this time, the sight of Joel still makes me catch my breath. He's overdressed for a book launch party. He's wearing dark denim jeans and a navy button-down polo, but his sports jacket seems a little fancy for a random Thursday night. I wonder if he is coming from or heading to more interesting plans this evening.

I shiver as the cold night air hits me unexpectedly and here I am, yet again without a coat. As soon as Joel sees me snuggle Kitty closer he slides out of his coat and I'm immediately draped in the fancy fabric that smells like him—earthy and sweet, just like I remember.

"One of these days you will learn to bring a coat, Adler," he scolds me.

"Doubtful." I smile. *God, he looks good.* "But I'm locking my door these days, so that's at least progress. Right?"

"Definitely."

"What's her name?" I snuggle the cat who has become dead weight in my arms. She's fallen asleep instantly against my chest.

"Kitty," he says.

"No, her real name."

"Kitty. I was waiting to name her so I just kept calling her *Kitty* and it stuck. Big mistake."

I snort loudly. "That's good stuff. I could not write a better irony than that. I got the confirmation email when they delivered her. Why did you wait a month to name your cat?"

"I was waiting for you."

My giggles taper off when I see the sincere look on Joel's face. "We're all going to freeze out here." I'm shivering but I suspect it's not just from the chilly wind.

I handled our breakup perfectly on paper. I cried for a month straight. But I didn't lose face. And what did it accomplish? Nothing. Standing here with Joel is like being catapulted back to September. The very first night we kissed when I invited him up to my home and he built up all his walls.

"It *is* cold..." Joel adds.

"Do you want to come up?" Nerves rush through my veins as the question hangs just as heavy as the first time I asked it all those months ago.

This time he doesn't hesitate. Joel picks up my purse and gestures me forward. "After you, Baby Spice."

"What did you think of the party? Have you ever seen so much pink in your life? Not my idea, by the way." I chatter on but Joel is distracted. He rubs his hands together idly as we take the stairs. Kitty is my spirit animal. She snores just like me—with reckless abandon.

We reach my door and for once it's locked. My hands are full of white fluff so I look askingly at Joel. He fishes through my purse and pulls out my keys. He knows exactly which one fits the lock. Like a clear memory. Once upon a time he was more than at home here.

Joel flicks on the lights and I make a beeline to the couch to lay Kitty someplace comfy. She nestles into the corner of the cushion and balls herself up so tightly she makes a perfect circle. "She so cu—"

"I read your book." Joel watches me from the door. He leans backwards, eyes locked on me waiting for my reaction.

“*Already?* It was put on the shelves this morning.”

“Weeks ago. Cody gave me your author copy.”

Ah. I gave it to Quinn—she never gave it back. I thought she was the slowest reader on the planet, but now it makes sense. Quinn Sabin and Cody Kartlin—puppet masters this entire time. “Look...um, I realize it was probably a lot and very emotional, but no one besides our close friends knows it’s about you...or us. I hope you don’t feel like I violated your privacy.”

“You know I lied—right?”

“About what?” We both nervously laugh. *Déjà vu*. We’ve had this same conversation before.

“Did you mean all the wonderful things you wrote about us? Is that honestly how you felt when we were together?”

“Why would you doubt it?”

“Because I fucked it up.” Joel dips his head. “From day one. I think about it all the time. The first day I met you. *I felt it*. Why didn’t I just ask you out? Why did I choose to hurt us both instead?”

I stride over to him. I cup his cheek in my palm. It’s smooth and soft. He’s freshly shaven, like he prepared for this evening. “We were meant to collide exactly how we did. We both had hurts to heal. We both had to grow up a little.”

“You finished this manuscript before we broke up. It’s like I didn’t get to read the last chapter. I’m dying to know...do you hate me now?”

“You were my first love, Joel. Just because it was unrequited doesn’t mean it wasn’t real. Look at what I did with love. I found a way to be the bravest version of myself and finally put my name out there. *You* inspired that for me. I don’t hate you. I’m grateful for you.”

“Loved or love?” He wraps his arms around my waist. My nerves explode, like it’s the beginning all over again. “How do you feel about me now?”

Like riding a bicycle, my body’s muscle memory kicks in and I lean into Joel’s chest. That familiar tug pulls me back, encouraging me to get wrapped up in hope for what I know I can’t have.

“I feel how I always have felt about you. Since day one. But I can’t be what we were.”

“Friends or fuck buddies?”

“Either. I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about this. I want it all. I want the fairy tale. I want to get married one day. I want kids. A real family. I don’t want to have to hide that anymore.” I speak with more confidence than I could ever imagine. And I imagined this conversation so many times over the past six weeks. “I think it’s best we keep our distance for now. But I am really glad I got to see you.” I nod to the fluffy white blob on the couch. “And meet her.”

Joel’s eyes dance all over my face. Up and down, side to side. His brows furrow a bit. “Will you humor me for old time’s sake? Let’s play the question game.”

“The question game?”

“Yes, but this time, I’ll lead.”

forty

...

Joel

Adler looks even better in person than in all the dreams I've had about her lately. She looks a little more grown up, yet the same. Her black business jumper gracefully hugs her body, giving her a sexy sophistication. She looks amazing, but I still love her best in ratty sweats and the sloppy bun thrown on the top of her head. I like it when she's herself. Relaxed. Comfortable. Like all the times before when she used to trust me with her heart.

I meant to do this at the party, in front of all her friends on the most important night thus far of her author career. But everything feels perfect right now. Just Adler and me. In the place we know best. The way it should be.

I want to grab her and draw her to me right now. I want to weave my fingers through her chocolate-colored hair and kiss her rosy plump lips. I missed her so damn much. But I have to play this perfectly if I have any shot at keeping her. Everything I read in her book is giving me hope that it's not too late.

Adler pulls off my coat and hangs it over the back of the sofa. She sits next to Kitty and plops her feet on the table.

"You want to ask the questions?" Adler raises her eyebrow at me. I join her on the sofa and it sinks a little as I sit. A puff of her sweet perfume bursts around us. The smell of home.

"Yes, what is that look for?" I ask when I see the skeptical pull on her face.

"You suck at the question game! You always ask open-ended questions. You're supposed to ask either-or questions."

"Can we play it my way—just this once?"

"Fine. Have at it. I'm ready."

Are you? Am I?

"All right, close your eyes. I'm going to rapid-fire questions at you. Don't think, just answer as quickly as you can."

"I'm aware of how the game works, Joel." Adler shuts her eyes. I can see her eyelids move as she rolls her pupils even against her closed lids.

"Do you prefer French fries or tater tots?"

"You know this."

"I'm just warming up, Baby Spice."

"Tater tots."

"Budweiser or Coors?"

"Joel—"

"Play the game!"

She groans. “Coors.”

“Cats or dogs?”

“Dogs.”

“Wait, what?”

“Just messing with you.”

“Adler, focus please. I’m trying to do a whole thing here.”

“Sorry. Okay, cats.”

“M&Ms or Skittles?”

“M&Ms.”

“Denver or L.A.?”

“Easy, Denver.”

“Beach or mountains?”

“Mountains.”

“Carrie or Samantha?”

“Carrie, of course. She’s a writer too.”

“Did you miss me?”

“See? There you go again. That’s open-ended.”

“Adler.”

“Yes, I missed you. Every single day.”

“Do you know I missed you?”

Her exhale is long and exaggerated. “I secretly hoped.”

“Do you know that I love you?” Adler’s eyes pop open immediately. I lean into her so her lips are inches from mine. “Because I do. More than I’ve loved anybody before. I’m sorry I’m so late saying it.” I stroke her cheek tenderly. “Do you still love me?” I near her lips but she leans away.

“Love is not enough, Joel.”

I duck my head. She’s right. It was never enough. Our entire relationship was about respecting my boundaries, so I couldn’t see the most obvious fucking thing on the planet. Love isn’t enough.

She needed me to choose her...

Over fear.

Over my past.

Over my demons.

“I made the biggest mistake that night. I didn’t earn your heart but you gave it to me anyway. I made light of the most important thing in the world. I thought I was protecting you...but falling in love with you made me realize what a coward I was. I had a hard time facing the real issue, with my parents. And I’m sorry you paid the price for that.” I hold my hand over my forehead as guilt floods through me. “If I would’ve treated you differently right out the gate you would’ve felt safe enough to tell me I was your first. You would’ve trusted me.”

“Joel—”

“And I would’ve done it better. I would’ve cancelled that trip. I would’ve held you all night.” I laugh to myself. “If I knew why you were so nervous, I would’ve asked if you wanted the lights off.”

“Yeah, naked on your couch under the lights was kind of grabbing the bull by the horns.” She giggles then her face sullen. “I didn’t mean to lie to you, I just didn’t want to scare you off.”

“I know. I tried to call you every night to apologize—”

“I’m sorry. I only blocked your number so I wouldn’t be tempted to slip back into old habits. Because I wanted to. So much.”

“I’m glad we had some space. I think I needed it. Missing you hurt. A lot. It woke me up.”

Adler’s shoulders twitch in the smallest shrug. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I said some things…”

“Things I needed to hear. Friends, fuck buddies, fun bunnies—whatever the hell we were calling it, it was *real*. It still is. What would it take for you to give me another chance? I’ll do anything.”

Her smile is guarded. “Is that even what you want? I just told you I need more, and I won’t settle. I want a future and a family. You don’t want those things.”

I nod firmly. “I do…with you.”

She allows her smile to spread. It touches her deep-blue eyes that glisten. “I thought for sure you would’ve moved on.”

Moved on? You can’t move on once you find the one. “I just have one more question for the game.”

“Okay.”

“It’s—well shoot. Will you reach into my coat pocket for me?”

“Is that—*what?* I don’t even know how to answer that.”

“Just do it, Baby Spice.”

Adler reaches behind her and fishes through my left coat pocket and then my right. She freezes. Her bottom lip trembles as she pulls out the tufted leather cube.

“Hey,” I whisper like a backstage command. “May I have that, please?”

She holds out her hands with the box teetering in her palm as I sink onto one knee in front of her. My heart races and the air escapes my lungs like I’m climbing stairs right back on the incline.

“Adler Monroe Haley—”

“How do you know my middle name?”

“Quinn.”

She clasps her hands over her mouth and the tears begin to flow. Now she knows this is for real.

“I debated hunting down your parents and then I realized I needed permission from your real family. Cody and Quinn helped me call all your friends.” I open the ring box and Adler’s mouth falls open as her eyes land on the pink diamond I picked out for her a month ago. I knew in that moment when I talked to my dad. I was biding my time, *but I knew*.

“Joel.” She snuffles but doesn’t say anything further so I continue.

“Adler, I love you and that makes this so simple. I’m sorry I didn’t understand that before. But I promise you if you give me a chance to do this right, I will be exactly the man you need. I will wake up and choose you every single day even through the tough parts, because I don’t just want to love you today. I’m choosing you and us, forever. Will you marry me?”

“Joel.” Adler shakes her head, her eyes frozen wide. She pauses for an eternity. My world goes silent. *Fuck. Oh, fuck.* I really thought I had a chance. I let too much time pass. I cut her too deep. I blow out a shaky breath. “Don’t feel bad. It’s okay—”

“You want to get *married?* Are you really ready for that?”

“Ready?” I ask. She raises her brow doubtfully. I pull the ring free and let the leather box hit the floor. I hold out the pink diamond surrounded by a halo of brilliant whites. A ring as unique as Adler. Subtle, yet demands attention. “It’s not about being ready, baby. It’s about being sure. And I’m sure.”

She takes the ring and slips it on her finger. *A perfect fit.* She allows herself to admire the gem briefly, then quickly pulls it right back off and places it in my palm. My heart fills, then cracks.

“It’s beautiful. But I can’t push you into changing. You also have a right to have what you want—”

“I want you.” I hold out my hand, asking for hers. She places her hand in mine and allows me to slip the ring right back on her finger. “When we fight, I might not know how to fix it right away. When

we're bored, tired, overwhelmed, sick of each other...I won't always have the solution. But I can promise you, no matter what, *I will choose you*. I'll choose us. Always."

Adler snuffles. Her blotchy tear-streaked cheeks twitch as she tries to smile through the sobs. "Okay."

"Yes? That's a yes?"

"That's a yes."

I wrap my arms around her waist. My forearms rest on the top of her ass. I kiss her belly before I stand and draw her into me. She smashes against me. Her lips are on mine hungrily and my arms wrap around her tightly. My hands trace all over her body finding all my favorite places that I've missed so much. Her back, her waist, her ass, her heart, that smile.

Mine. Forever. Ours.

I could kiss her here for hours, but the way she's warming against me, I know neither of us wants to stop at kissing. She toys with my belt. She slides the tail out of the loops one by one.

Adler grabs me with her ornamented hand that makes this real. My heart surges, but not out of anxiety, out of excitement. We're doing this. We're really doing this. We have a future. One that I'm looking forward to.

I let her tow me up the rickety floating stairs for what I hope will be one of the last times. The first damn thing I'm doing as Adler's fiancé is saving her from this construction hazard of an apartment...well, second...

She sits on the edge of the bed and kicks off her short heels and then unzips the top of her romper, exposing her white bra. I stand a few feet away, admiring the view. Pausing in contemplation, she rubs her finger across her lips.

A wicked smile bunches her cheeks. Her halo dangles on her horns—all her contradictions gleam. She's so cute, but so damn sexy. Innocent, yet sinful.

My best friend...my lover...my everything.

Her low whisper sends a satisfying pulse across my chest. "You know, I've had fuck-buddy sex, then boyfriend sex, and now I'm just dying to see if fiancé sex blows them both out of the water."

"Fiancé sex? I love the sound of that." I smile as widely as my lips will allow as I pull off my glasses and toss them onto the bed next to her. "Hey. That'll be a first for me too. Imagine that."

She enchants me with her laughter like she has a million times before.

"Don't worry, baby," Adler says as she pats the bed, beckoning me to her side. "I'll be gentle."

epilogue

...

Adler

one month later

I open my eyes as sunlight pours through the cracks between the bedroom curtains. But I'm unable to move. I'm wedged between two furry bumpers on either side of me. Felices and Kitty are my constant companions. It's actually a little incessant. I can't even sit down without being barricaded. After nearly a month of officially living with Joel, he's starting to get jealous. I'm not sure if he wants more attention from me or the cats but all I know is he's suggested on more than one occasion that the cats should start sleeping in the living room. *Ha!* It's adorable he thinks he has any control over these furbabies. They run this house...they run our family.

The bedroom door latch turns ever so cautiously and I roll my eyes. "I'm up," I call out. Joel barrels into the room with a package tucked under his arm and a steaming cup of coffee for me.

"That was a long nap, baby." He scoops up Kitty and places her on the other side of Felices so he can plant himself right next to me. He brushes my hair from my forehead and gives me a tender peck on the lips. "Did someone push themselves a little too hard on the mountain this morning trying to prove a point to a certain other someone?"

"Perhaps." I shrug. Joel is starting to acclimate to the incline, quickly. It was only his third trip and he was uncomfortably close to pacing with me this morning. I'd like to have one advantage in our relationship. Joel out-earns me, he can cook circles around me, his education and accolades are far superior to mine. Yet somehow, he looks at me every day like he's the luckiest man on the planet. "You know I was kind of thinking for our next trip to Manitou—why don't we make a weekend out of it?"

"Okay," he says. "For what?"

"For buffalo tamales, retro candy shopping, and a quick margarita toast to my grandma. I want to let her know I'm all right. In fact, much better than all right." I scrunch my nose at him as adorably as possible. Mostly to be cute. But partially so I don't cry—happy tears. I never thought I'd want to share memories of Grandma with anyone, but I share everything with Joel. Every part of me.

"I love you, Adler. That sounds like a wonderful idea." He smiles at me knowingly, understanding exactly what I'm offering. We're already getting married but buffalo tamales somehow makes this even more official. "I don't want to ruin a sweet moment here, but this came for you today. It's from Germany." Joel hands over the brown paper mailer he brought in. I sit up, full of curiosity. Something about this package is urgent enough that he wanted to wake me. I flip it over and examine all the forwarding stamps. It must've got stuck in delivery at my old apartment because this was mailed over a month ago.

"My mom," I mumble, looking at the handwritten address. I recognize her calligraphy scrawl.

"Want me to toss it?"

"No." I shake my head. "Of course not."

"Do you want some privacy?" He makes a motion to get up but I grab his arm and hold him back.

"Stay with me? Just in case?" The weight of the package tells me there's a paperback book inside. The scenarios rush through my mind. Maybe she mailed *Pretend With Me* back, unwilling to read it. Maybe she sent over an educational guide on serious writing for *real* authors. I don't know what it is,

but I know I need Joel here, with me. Always.

“Of course, baby. Here,” he says, tearing the top of the package for me. He knows me well enough to know I need the push. “No matter what is in here”—he locks his soulful honey-brown eyes on mine—“you are smart, talented, incredible, and loved. Okay?”

I nod at him and wink. I’m okay—I can do this. He turns the package opening toward me and I reach in, sliding out the copy of *Pretend With Me* that I mailed all those months ago. Tears instantly prick my eyes and then drip down my face. The book is nearly twice as thick as when I sent it. It’s stuffed with sticky notes, tabs, folded pages, and paperclips.

“Why are you crying, baby? What is this?” Joel grabs the book from my hands and looks at it accusingly like it’s a threat.

“She annotated it,” I sniffle.

“What does that mean?” He looks at me apologetically, lost as can be.

I take the book back and my gut tells me to flip to the front page. Therein lies a note just beneath the title.

Adler Monroe, Congratulations.
Our best stories are our true stories.
Your dad and I are proud of you.
Hannah is so proud of you.

I hand the book over for Joel to read the note. He quickly scans and then flips through the pages rapidly. “Who is Hannah? And what the hell did your mom do to this book?”

“Hannah is my grandma. My mother never called her Mom for some reason. And what this *means* is that my mother read every single word of this book. She knows I found love.” I smile at him through my tears and he drops the book on the bed and urgently thumbs away the droplets from my cheeks.

“Are these happy or sad tears?”

I give him a small smile. “They are just tears.”

“Do you want to call them? Tell them we’re engaged?” Joel says delicately. “Should we ask them about when they can travel for the wedding? Although, I’ll warn you, my mom is going to railroad the entire thing. If you think you’re picking your own flower arrangements baby, I’m so sorry—you’re in for a rude awakening.” We both snort, knowing the only thing I care about when it comes to a wedding is the man waiting for me at the end of the aisle.

“Honestly, thank goodness for your mom. That sounds perfect. I can’t wait to meet your family.

Joel, I'm something way past happy." I bring his hands to my lips. "I belong. I'm wanted. And so I'm really not worried about what's in here"—I point to the book on the bed—"but maybe it's a small step forward with her. *Baby steps.*"

Joel touches his lips to mine, but there's nothing sensual this time. Something just as good, if not better. Tender. Intimate. Loving. "You know...baby steps can turn into big things," he says, smiling. He grabs my left hand and kisses my pink ring reminding me of how far we've come and how much further we'll go—*together.*

bonus epilogue

. . .

If you want just a little more of Adler and Joel, [click here](#) (or scan the code below) to access a FREE bonus epilogue for *Rewrite the Rules*.

The bonus epilogue is a dual POV scene that takes place about a month after the epilogue and after Adler meets Joel's parents for the first time. I hope you enjoy!

author note

Thank you so much for reading *Rewrite the Rules*! I really hope you enjoyed spending time with Alder and Joel as much as I did. If you liked the story, I'd really appreciate it if you'd consider leaving me a rating and/or review!

[Join my newsletter](#) to stay up to date on release information for the Love, Me & the 303 Series which will include five full-length standalone romance novels.

about the author

Kay, a former HR professional (survivor), startup junkie, and former CEO of the teeniest, tiniest virtual assistant company, has been writing pretty much forever. She finally decided at age thirty to start writing the stories she loves to read and to actually share novels she poured countless hours, tears, sweat, and coffee into.

Kay writes sweet and steamy contemporary romance novels. Her favorite writing tool? Banter.



also by kay cove

[Love, Me & the 303 Series](#)

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Noa & Chase's Story

[Rewrite the Rules](#)

Adler & Joel's Story

[Owe Me One](#)

Quinn & Cody's Story

acknowledgments

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To my husband, who continues to stand by me through all the ups and down. Through my writing blocks, and my obsessive writing sprints, you love me the same. None of this would be imaginable without you.

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To all you romance readers who have honored me with your time, and have taken a chance on newbie author me—thank you! You make all my days (both the challenging and rewarding ones) so worth it and I am grateful for all the precious time you spend on my stories.

Available November of 2022

owe *Me*
one

LOVE, ME & THE 303 SERIES

KAY COVE

owe me one

Coming November 2022

Quinn is finally enjoying the view from the top in her executive office. Her new position as CMO of a billion-dollar tech company keeps her just busy enough to avoid the gut-wrenching guilt and regret she's been carrying around for three years since the loss of her mother. No one else can see the monster she sees in the mirror as long as she keeps her head down and buried in her work. No one that is until Cody Kartlin comes barreling into the picture, determined to earn her heart by proving that when it comes to high-powered careers—real men aren't afraid to let their women take the lead.

Cody's only had one true love—football. After a career-ending injury, he never thought he'd feel that spark of life again...until he laid eyes on Quinn. Immediately, his new life game-plan becomes a slow play for Quinn's heart.

When Quinn's new promotion threatens to send her overseas, Cody gallantly offers to help her to stop the transfer while keeping her job by exploiting a company policy loophole. The agreement is simple—Cody marries Quinn, and Quinn just...owes Cody one. It's not long before what started as paperwork starts feeling like a whole lot more and right when Cody thinks he's secured a future with the girl of his dreams, his old flame creeps back into the picture.

A second chance at his football career will force him to choose—the girl, or the game.

sneak peek excerpt*

Owe Me One

chapter 1

Quinn

The headlights nearly blind me as I brace for impact. It's always the same. The screeching tires sound like a teakettle, then a thunderous crash and the crunching of metal as I roll in a steel box that shrinks as it pummels into the asphalt. Rolling...over and over—until I wake up. It's terrifying but, by now—predictable.

Yanking open my groggy eyes, I wait for my heart rate to calm. It was just a dream, but my racing heart and the spasms in my legs need time to settle. I know not to fight it, to just let the nerves flow and leave my body. It's always the same—my very familiar nightmare.

My hair curls tightly around my neck, threatening to choke me, and splatters across my mouth to silence me. The white pillowcase I'm planted face-down in comes into clear focus. It's stained with my foundation and charcoal eyeliner—the aftermath of my drunken dumbassery. My wild hair spills across my bare back and shoulders instead of being secured neatly in a bun on top of my head.

I haven't missed my nightly hygiene routine in years, not once. Not after girls' nights that turn into sleepovers after a little too much sangria. Not after coming home dog-tired after working well past midnight with my dad at the office. Not even after the time my little brother and I pulled an all-night *Lethal Weapon* marathon. I might've washed my face, tied back my hair, and brushed my teeth at seven o'clock in the morning before heading to bed, but nonetheless—routine.

I haven't dropped that ball in years.

Until last night...or this morning? Today? What the hell time is it?

A grunt from beside me startles me, and I shoot up in alarm. Shit! There's a giant lying next to me, with shaggy blonde hair that barely touches the tops of his shoulders—Cody. My heart, which had finally calmed, accelerates out of control. The momentary relief of not waking up to a stranger is brief, chased away by extreme panic—Cody Kartlin. Rule number one to maintaining your single, nonattached, free-to-be-a-workaholic, ice-queen lifestyle? Don't sleep with the guy you like. Apparently, a bit easier said than done.

I wrap my arm around my bare chest, but he's still sleeping with his face buried in the pillow. The way his back rises high and falls, not even naked breasts could coax him from slumber.

For fuck's sake. What did we do—what did I do—last night? It's literally taken the strength of Hercules and Achilles combined to keep my curiosity about Cody's body at bay, but I've somehow managed the past four months. And all it took was a little bourbon to ruin everything? The worst part? I don't even remember. Dammit. It's Cody. It probably was worth remembering.

Cody lifts his head and plasters his other cheek against the pillow. Smiling to myself, I resist the urge to lean in and kiss his head. Retired NFL superstar tight-end, Cody Kartlin, is double my weight and towers over most humans on this planet—if only the world knew that his snore is like a kitty's purr.

Pulling up the comforter, I peek under the sheets—I'm wearing underwear, at least. I sneak a glance to the right—Cody is not. His muscular glutes are in plain view. We both smell like a distillery, and I'll take the blame. I vaguely remember the desperate phone call I made, begging him to meet me for a drink, which wouldn't have been that crazy between friends. Except I'm at my

company's annual leadership retreat...in Las Vegas. Grabbing a drink together meant Cody hopping on a plane—which he did.

Denial is my safe haven, and I like it here, so I'll keep pretending we're just buddies. It's not a big deal.

I check the time on my phone. *Fuck...* eleven o'clock a.m.? My empty stomach sinks a foot lower. I missed the executive breakfast meeting. Very uncharacteristic of me. Judging by the seven missed calls from my dad, he probably thinks I'm in harm's way. I can picture his scowling face and the lecture I'm sure to receive.

"You may be a grown woman, but you'll always be my little pigtail princess, and I worry...so answer your damn phone."

He'll do that thing where his lips barely move as he talks because he's trying not to look too emotional. One day, I'll tell him it makes him look like a creepy and untalented ventriloquist.

Sitting up, I subtly shift my hips back and forth, searching for any evidence of what happened last night. Nothing...

Hm, it's been a while. I probably would be a little sore. Actually, if that shoe-size representing penis-size thing is accurate, I'd probably be a lot sore. Cody wears a size 'King Kong' in Nikes. Then again, I vaguely remember drinking my body weight in neon green liquid straight from a plastic boot, so maybe I wouldn't have felt much of anything.

Truthfully, I'd known a meltdown was coming. I'd basically been sleeping in my office since my promotion a few months ago, and there's only so much fun you can stuff down and deny yourself before it rears its ugly head and bites you in the ass. My whole life is confined to the walls of the Sabin Tech building. I escape now and then for my closest friends and my little brother, but even in those moments, I'm just a prisoner on parole. I needed to let loose for one night, but the issue wasn't the partying—it was the company.

Pressing my feet onto the cool floor soothes my aching soles. Aaaaah. Way too many concrete miles trekked up and down the Vegas strip in stilettos yesterday. I should have brought a pair of flats.

I make my way out of the main bedroom into the guest bathroom of the giant hotel suite. Originally, I thought the room was wasteful—a two-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath suite just for me—but now, I'm grateful. Maybe I can clean up and sneak out before Cody has a chance to wake up.

In the shower, the hot drops of water gradually soak my hair. I let the water scald my skin, hoping it will flush out the lingering liquor from my pores. I'm waiting for the pounding headache, swell of nausea, fatigue...nothing. There's a possibility I'm not hungover because I am still very drunk. Closing my eyes, I try to immerse myself in the slurry memories that begin to surface.

There had been so many lights, night may as well have been the day. The fountains of the Bellagio danced behind us as the blaring symphony swelled. Cody could barely hear my pleading. He kept leaning in closer and closer, so my lips grazed his ear lobe.

"Cody. Baby. Please!"

"No, ma'am. I will not. But keep calling me 'baby'—I could get used to that."

"You're such a prude."

"Prude?"

"Yeah..."

"I'd just rather not be arrested for public indecency."

"Cody! Just do it." Pouting like a child, my hands were on my hips.

"You can't use the Nike slogan to boss me into skinny dipping in a public fountain with you."

He wrapped me in the thick iron beams he calls arms to keep me from stumbling in my heels.

"I can, and I will."

Well, that's humiliating. If my drunken memories serve me correctly, I was begging to get publicly naked, and Cody was the source of reason. Definitely a low moment for me. I'm not usually so sloppy, but I panicked. I really panicked.

Being at this conference, with all the lectures and announcements about Sabin Tech's ambitious new endeavors, I saw my entire life until my late retirement flash before my eyes. I looked in the hotel mirror, and hollow brown eyes stared back at me.

Sully's words knocked around in my head—lifeless, selfish, soulless. I hear him in my mind more lately, which is odd. The more time that passes, the louder he gets. No matter how many men I've put between us, no matter how many guys have praised me, promised me, begged me to go out or go down—I can only see myself through Sully's eyes.

Fuck it. Shake it off. Tune it out. Good woman. Not a good woman. Whatever.

I'm still the boss.

I suds up my hair with the orange essential oil-infused spa shampoo. It's a benefit of booking a luxury suite. The hotel toiletries won't strip your hair and skin. This room has the good stuff and has the price tag to prove it. I'm not looking forward to the check-out bill. Judging by the empty minibar—which was most definitely full when I arrived—and the scattered tiny platters on every surface of the suite, Cody and I might've racked up the cost equivalent of a Ford Focus in room service charges last night.

After a final rinse, I rotate the shower handle off and step out of the floor-to-ceiling tiled spa shower, grabbing a fresh, fluffy towel from the elegantly designed two-tier rack. The moment my naked body is concealed, the barn doors at the bathroom entry slide apart.

There he stands in just his black Jockey briefs, looking like a life-size Thor action figure.

"There you are. Thought you ran out on me." He slowly crosses the bathroom, closing the space between us while making a meal out of the visual of me in a towel...dripping. I'm not sure if I should be embarrassed that he's looking at me like this. Is this old news? What did he see last night?

"You want a picture?"

"Got some last night." He winks at me.

My eyes narrow, and my mouth pops open.

Cody throws his head back and laughs. "I'm kidding. How do you feel this morning? I'm surprised you're awake."

"How do I look?" I grumble, knowing I look worse than death.

"Relaxed, like you finally removed that stick up your ass," he teases. I scowl at him as he tucks my wet hair behind my ear. "Relaxed is really pretty on you," he almost whispers.

I have to busy myself in the mirror so Cody doesn't see me flush. He's so good at that—tenderness. Lately, I've been a sucker for his sweet tactics. Sincere and sweet coming from a goliath of a man who should be a pompous, full-of-himself athletic icon is simply not fair—like having to live in a bakery when you're on a diet.

"You seem awfully cheery for being hungover," I say, internally shaking off my momentary swoon.

"I'm not hungover."

"So, we're both still drunk." I laugh as I dot the dark circles under my eyes with a high-end eye brightener, compliments of the hotel.

"I'm not hungover because I wasn't drunk." He gives me a knowing smirk. "I had a few, but I

wasn't on your level. I had to force little bottles of water down your throat and tell you Motrin was candy, so you'd take it. One of us had to keep our head." He leans against the bathroom countertop and smirks at me.

"All right," I say, spinning around, giving him my full attention. "Lay it on me. What happened?"

"You called me, told me to get my ass on a flight, and come entertain you."

"That part I remember." Hanging my head, I watch my toes rub nervously against the cool tile that's slick from steamy condensation. "What happened after the liquor-filled plastic boot?"

He raises one eyebrow. "You sure you wanna know?"

I pinch the space between my eyes as I squeeze them shut. "Yes."

"Quinn, come on. I'm messing with you." Cody's playful expression sobers. "You wanted to blow off some steam and needed a friend. I'm really glad you called me. I plan on thoroughly rubbing it in Addie's face."

Adler—one of my best friends, recently engaged to Cody's best friend, Joel—is the only reason I'm in this mess. She thought it'd be entertaining to play spring fling matchmaker for Cody and me. One and done is my preferred approach. Neither of us actually expected me to like him.

"Please don't tell Addie about all this." I don't want to have to explain myself to my friends. Calling Cody to meet me in Vegas would be a red flag to all of them. To be honest, I don't really know what came over me. I have plenty of friends who could've held my hand through my premature mid-life crisis. Noa, Reese, Mani, or Addie would've met me in a heartbeat...a literal heartbeat. I can always count on my girls. I called Cody last night because...

I guess I wanted to see him, and after drinking my body weight in liquor, my good sense gave out.

"Your secret's safe." He steps past me to turn the shower back on. The water is still hot, and the steam rises instantly.

"You can shower in the master bathroom. It's bigger. I'm in here because I didn't want to wake you."

"Or I can shower here," Cody says, flashing me a wicked grin. He winks as he slides off his briefs, disorienting me.

I mean, I know he's a larger-than-normal person, so naturally, he's packing heavy equipment, but still...holy shit. And why is it so tidy? Does he wax? I spin back around to face the mirror before Cody can notice my gawking. Since when are we friends who see each other naked?

Okay, we definitely had sex last night. *Definitely*.

I want to ask, but my pride stops me. Does it make me look like a slutty hot mess if I don't remember? I don't have to debate it further because Cody somehow reads my mind.

"We didn't."

"Didn't what?" I ask, pretending I'm lost.

"Don't play dumb. Doesn't suit you," he says with a smile.

Damn, he reads me clear as day, like a large-print book.

"We didn't have sex, Quinn."

Unable to hide my relief, I blow out a deep breath. "Oh."

Through the mirror, I see Cody eyes narrowing at me. He crosses his arms, still fully nude, acting more comfortable than anyone should feel in their birthday suit around the girl they constantly flirt with.

"What?"

"You thought we hooked up."

"No..."

“You totally did.”

I turn around and face him, eyes locked on his, determined not to glance down, purposely ignoring the part of his body I’d like to thoroughly inspect.

“Not gonna lie, that bothers me.”

I scrunch my face in confusion. “What bothers you?”

“That you think I’d take advantage of you like that. You were almost blackout drunk.”

Oh. I didn’t think of it like that. Most of my dates are eager to buy me another drink. They don’t care how we get there...as long as we do.

“I didn’t...I don’t think that of you...”

Cody steps toward me, and I all but trip backward and feel the granite ledge of the counter pressing into my back. My breath quickens as he presses against me—his naked body against the towel still wrapped around me. Now? Like this? Technically, I’m sober enough, right? He leans into my ear, his voice low, grumbly, and through-the-roof seductive.

“I’m not the kind of fuck you’d forget.”

I let out an audible gasp, and I know he can feel my heart thumping. He reaches over my shoulder and grabs a small bottle of liquid soap, then steps back, releasing me from my pinned state against the counter.

“Pardon me,” he says.

Good grief. Just another game of his. I try to steady my breath. He holds the little bottle in the air, which looks Polly-Pocket-sized in his hands.

“I prefer this stuff over the bar soap.” With that, his naked ass disappears behind the fogged-up shower doors.

I take a few deep breaths. He’s toying with me. Cody does this a lot—tests the waters, tries to bait me—but for some reason, he won’t make an actual move. He’s flirty as all hell, always suggestive, but he won’t go for it. He’s clever. He wants me to cave first. I can’t reject him if he doesn’t ask. It’s a game of cat and mouse, but I’m not sure who’s Tom and who’s Jerry.

Returning to the mirror, I fish through my makeup and try to make myself as presentable as possible in less than ten minutes. My day is filled with meetings and presentations, and I need to get focused. I don’t like looking unprepared. I’m the big boss’s daughter and the youngest c-suite member. I command a team of five directors, all egotistical males. I don’t have the luxury of slipping up. Missing the executive breakfast was basically skating on a banana peel. Not a great start to my day.

“Hey, Cody?” I ask, tilting my chin toward the shower. He doesn’t respond. He’s humming. “Cody!” I yell. *Oh, come on.* He had to have heard that. He’s ignoring me. I yank open the shower door hastily, and Cody’s eyes bulge in surprise. The sound of water droplets from the oversized rain shower head is deafening. Okay, my bad, he didn’t hear me.

“Need something in here?” He glances down between his legs and tries to swallow a chuckle.

“Stop that.” I glower.

“Stop what?”

“You know what.” Teasing me. “Anyway...are you headed home today, or are you sticking around? I’m here for four more days.”

“Do you want me to stick around?”

“Every minute of my day is spoken for, but I can sneak away tonight. Can I buy you dinner as an apology for having to take care of me last night? I know a steakhouse that serves a ridiculously expensive, dry-aged wagyu ribeye. They call it an ‘artistic culinary experience.’ I bet I can still get a reservation.”

“I hate when you do that,” he mumbles, shaking his head.

“Hate what? What did I do?”

“Try to...I don’t know.” He shrugs. “Buy my time.”

“Because I offered to buy dinner? It’s called a gesture. I wasn’t myself last night and can’t imagine I was fun to deal with.”

“Not just now. It’s been this way for months. You always try to throw money at things as if you’re compensating me. It’s weird.”

“I don’t throw money around.” Placing my hand on my hip, I hope my sass covers my discomfort. “You’re basically Sawyer’s coach or personal trainer or whatever it is you guys do. I’m just trying to show that we appreciate all you do.”

Truthfully, when Cody first contacted me back in November after Addie caved and gave him my number, I was more interested than I’d ever admit out loud. Unfortunately for me, Sawyer, my younger brother, caught wind that Cody Kartlin, NFL superstar and his childhood idol, had crashed into our inner circle and begged me on his hands and knees for an introduction. That was the end of my torrid sex affair with Cody—before it even began.

Cody and Sawyer became fast friends. Cody was the big brother Sawyer wishes I was. He started going to Sawyer’s games and practices and sharing his insight on college ball—scouting, red-shirting, and how to help Sawyer if he really wants to set his sights on the league one day. Cody is helping me to be all the things Mom isn’t here to be.

As much as I want to slide down his sexy ass like a stripper on her favorite pole, what he’s doing for my baby brother is far more important than me getting laid. Sawyer needs Cody, and I need Sawyer to be okay. It’s the only way I know how to do right by Mom. At least, that’s my excuse for keeping my hands to myself.

What’s Cody’s?

Cody crosses his arms, creating a dam for the shower water to pool into.

“Quinn, I don’t need you to show me appreciation, like I’m one of your employees. I don’t work for you...or Sawyer. He’s my friend. You’re my friend, too. I’m here because I want to be. You don’t need to apologize with dinner. In fact, maybe once in a while, let me treat you to something, which I’m capable of doing. It’s not like I was making minimum wage in the league for seven years.”

I roll my eyes. Men and their egos—always intimidated when a woman has money. I’m not trying to showboat. I’m just trying to be kind and generous. Another memory flashes through my mind.

“I let you buy dinner last night.”

“You let me buy you a cheesy gordita crunch from Taco Bell because you were too drunk to pull out your wallet. You annihilated it like a starved coyote, by the way. Impressive stuff.” Ugh. His stupid goofy...sexy grin. The water splashes as Cody uncrosses his arms, breaking the dam. A light spray catches my shins when he dips his head under the shower stream.

“All right, see? You weren’t honest earlier. How bad was I last night?”

“Oh, princess, you got sloppy, but it was great. You were vulnerable for once. Even with your slurring, it was the best conversation we’ve ever had.”

“Vulnerable?”

“Yes, ma’am. You spilled all kinds of secrets.” He flicks his fingers, sending a spray of droplets my way.

I flatten my palm against the space between my eyes. “I’m late.” Shutting the shower door, I storm out of the bathroom, mostly pissed at myself. I knew I shouldn’t have crossed that line. I got messy, was reckless, and—

Wait. What secrets?

Storming back to the bathroom, I rip the door open and can't help when my eyes drop south of his belly button and follow the neatly trimmed trail of sandy hair from his belly button downward.

Cody catches me leering and snickers. "That's subtle. Either get in here or get out. You're letting a draft in."

"I didn't spill any secrets," I hiss.

"Oh, yes, you did."

"Name one." I glare at him and squint as fire grows in my eyes—flames of worry, if nothing else.

"You told me about Addie's F-buddy survival rules for Joel."

"It's not a secret!" I say defensively. "The whole world, including you, has read the damn book she wrote. Besides, you live with Joel, and he probably told you before I did, so it doesn't count."

"Taco Bell is your guilty pleasure."

"I'm not ashamed. I eat there about twice a year, which is allowable."

Cody pumps the sweet-smelling shampoo into his hands, lathers the suds between his palms, then runs his fingertips through his hair. The invigorating smell of citrus that saturated my hair moments ago fills the bathroom once more. I get the sneaking suspicion he spends time at the spa. What do they call that again? Metro? Is that a thing? Can Cody be metro and still all-man? His body is built like his Ford F-150, yet he borrows my collagen moisturizer with the SPF 50.

"How about the letter? The one in the red envelope?"

My heart skips a beat as my breath shallows.

"Ah." Cody notices my shock. "See? There's one. Sounds like a secret to me."

He laughs, but there's no humor on my face.

"Quinn, what—"

"Never ever bring that up to me again. Whatever you may or may not know, keep it to yourself." I hear my own words as if I'm out of my body. My tone is icy and unnecessarily cruel, but I can't help it. Back any animal into a tight corner and threaten it—watch it bite.

"Hey." Cody waits until my eyes lock on his, and his expression softens. It makes me feel like I just kicked a puppy. "Okay. I hear you."

He doesn't question my sudden attitude. He's something else—something I'm really not used to men being—understanding.

How could I slip about that letter? What does Cody know? He can't know too much since he's acting as though he still likes me. If I told him what that letter is—what it probably contains—he'd know I'm a monster.

"So, dinner?" I purposely perk up my tone. "Tonight? You can pay."

"Sounds good to me. Taco Party Pack coming your way."

I snort, then open my mouth to respond with something snarky, but I'm cut off by a ruckus from the front door.

Pound! Pound! Pound! A heavy fist beats on the entry door.

"Quinn Bailey Rose Banks-Sabin, if you're not dead or dying, open the goddamn door!"

Fuck. I should've texted Dad back the minute I was up. His tone is terrifying, and he just full-named me. That's not just anger. That's worry-anger, which is far worse.

"Quinn Bailey Rose Banks-Sabin?" Cody's green eyes pop into circles, and he looks like someone just offered him his favorite candy. "That's your full name?"

I grimace. "My parents had a hard time agreeing on a name."

"So, they just named you all of them?" He chuckles.

“Something like that.”

“Quinn!” my dad shouts again from outside the main door.

“I have to go, or he’s going to bust through the door. Dinner?”

He nods, and I gently close the glass shower door. Damn it. I just saw him completely naked, and now, I really know what I’m missing out on. It also doesn’t help that Cody is so stupidly charming and sweet, or that I’m probably only alive because he babysat me last night. I’ll have to work double-time to keep my feelings at bay, but I’ll deal with that monster of a mess later.

Right now, I have a more important mess to mop up.

*Disclaimer: this is an unedited excerpt. The contents and/or format of this excerpt may be adjusted prior to final publication of *Owe Me One* by Kay Cove.