The Art of Pining for Another

by Coffee_Flavored_Kisses

Summary

Chris Evans is on a worldwide press tour for his latest film, in which he stars with his beautiful costar, Greer MacFarlane. Greer and Chris have a history, but when Sarah Dixon discovers this, she isn't too concerned. She's only his stylist, after all. Or is it more than that?

Notes

If you read my other stuff, you might think to yourself, "Hey... isn't this like Scarlett and Sweaters?" Yes, there are similarities. But I assure you this story is different in many ways. Hopefully you'll enjoy it!
Chapter 1

It’s not easy touching Chris Evans every day.

Let me rephrase…

It’s not easy touching him the way that I have to for my job. I’m a stylist, and when I touch him, it’s strictly business. I don’t imagine many women are able to say that.

Don’t get me wrong – the interaction with him every day is incredible. He’s honestly the sweetest, kindest, most respectful celebrity I’ve worked with by far. And of course he’s attractive. I mean god, he’s hot. So as unprofessional as it sounds, the eye candy is nothing to take for granted. But there are some problems involved as well, and since you may find that hard to believe, allow me to explain:

I don’t think he knows my name. I’m not entirely convinced that he realizes I’m the same person in and out of his hotel room on this press tour, which has been going on for over a week now. It’s not his fault, of course. There are always hordes of others in the room with us, or rather, with him until I arrive, style him, and exit. He’s asked me my name four times already, and each time I’ve answered back “Sarah,” and each time he’s told me it was nice meeting me.

Now I’m not offended at all. He’s very busy, and in his defense I’m pretty sure he sees enough women day in and day out to make him forget nearly anyone. But come on, dude! There’s a reason women love you! It’s because you look good. And who makes you look good?

Me.

Well, at least I can take some of the credit. I didn’t, you know, contribute any DNA or anything.

This is getting weird, so I’m gonna change the subject.

There’s another reason that working with the man I consider the most attractive on earth is kind of a pain in the ass. And her name is Greer McFarlane.

She’s gorgeous, and I can’t hate her for that. She’s young and hot and pretty much perfect, and ever since this film started shooting, people have been assuming she and Chris are a couple. I mean, I guess it makes sense that they would make this conclusion – two young, hot, talented people working together for that length of time, the chemistry they share, the way they look at each other, their inside jokes, little elbow nudges, almost a secret language it seems… yeah. I get it.

I don’t hate her. I have to keep telling myself that.

We were settled in a hotel in New York City, and I had chosen a pair of dark jeans and a deep blue sweater for the man of the hour. Everywhere you looked in that neighborhood, it was lights. Neon, spot, flash, street, every kind and color, in the sky or along the sidewalks or lighting the way around the rooftop for the part we were all preparing for. Greer’s stylist had chosen a fantastic midnight blue cocktail dress for the occasion, and I had to be sure Chris would wear something to compliment her outfit. I watched the young starlet make her way down the hall to Chris’s room just as I stepped out of the elevator. I’d wait a few minutes before knocking. They’d probably need their alone time.

I stood, garment bag in hand, with my back to the wall in the hallway outside his door, occasionally peering at my watch to see if I could wait until the last possible second to interrupt them. I’d only been there a moment, however, when his door opened and someone stepped out to join me. He crossed his arms in front of him, leaning against the wall as I was doing, and looked at me before he
spoke.

“They’re not even trying to be subtle anymore, are they?”

I recognized him as Alex, the man who’d been styling Greer on this tour. “Hey, it’s none of my business,” I returned. And it really wasn’t.

“Still,” he sighed. “She needs a little touch up and she tells me not to bother with her makeup until she’s done ‘talking’ to Chris, and then she literally pushes me out the door. Now what do you think that could possibly mean?”

I shrugged. “I think we all know, but maybe it’s best not to talk about it.”

“You’re new to this aren’t you?” He asked, turning his body so that his shoulder was resting on the wall. “How long have you been doing this?”

“I’ve been a stylist for about five years,” I answered proudly. I certainly didn’t consider myself a rookie.

“No, I mean how long have you been working for these guys?”

“What guys?”

“Movie stars and stuff,” he answered. “Can’t be long.”

“Oh,” I answered. “This is my first big job, I guess. I’ve worked backup on movie sets before, but I never got to deal with anyone famous.”

“That’s what I thought,” he replied, his back finding its spot flat against the wall again. “I’ve been doing this for twelve years. You have to talk about it or you’ll drive yourself crazy. Trust me.”

“I don’t like to gossip,” I told him. “And I realize that makes me sound extremely judgmental, but it’s just the way I feel about it personally.”

“Cocky little thing, aren’t you?” He mumbled under his breath. “Fine. And here I was gonna volunteer to swap info with you about them because as you may or may not know, we have a long month ahead of us. And you’re going to be sick and tired of doing nothing but shopping and dressing him all day every day.”

“I doubt that,” I said, even giggling a little.

“I give you three days before you’re coming to see me about all the hot gossip.”

“But…”

“Three days tops,” he insisted. “You’ll see.”

I shook my head, but didn’t say another word. And thankfully it was only another minute or so before the door opened again, and Greer came tumbling out, hair and makeup surprisingly still intact.

“Must’ve been a quickie,” Alex mumbled with a self-righteous smirk as he headed toward his star. “Are you going to let me get you ready or what?”

“You’re so impatient!” Greer smiled. “It’s like you think I’ll turn into a pumpkin or something!”

I only watched them walk away for a moment before I turned back to the door and knocked softly.
Of course he’d known I was out there, so it was only a second before he answered, day-old beard and sweatpants in tow.

“Sorry about making you wait,” he greeted me. “Come on in.”

“Oh, it’s no problem at all,” I answered dutifully. “It’s not like I had anywhere to be.”

“What was your name again?”

I held back the exasperation I wanted to express. “Sarah.”

“Right, right,” he said, shaking his head. “Sorry I’m just really not good with names.”

“It’s okay, I understand.” And before I let the feeling sink in that we were completely alone for the first time ever, I handed him his clothes. “Those boat shoes would look good with this,” I said.

He looked as though there was more he wanted to say, but he accepted the bag and left to the bedroom to change anyway. A minute later he emerged, and he did indeed look just as good as I’d imagined he would.

“Are you sure about the shoes?” he asked. “Because there are some black ones that I like, and I think they could work.”

“You’re not wearing those black shoes with this sweater,” I said firmly, though I tried to maintain my smile so as not to seem too bitchy. “You wore them three times last week and even though they’re great shoes, you’re going simple tonight. The Sperrys will suffice.”

A little smirk traced his lips as he walked to the closet to retrieve the shoes. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot,” I answered.

“Are you going to be coming along for this whole trip? I mean when we do the Europe tour and everything, too?”

A sickening feeling smacked me in the gut. He didn’t want me around. I corrected his taste in shoe and now he didn’t want me around. I was out of a job. I’d never work again!

“I, uh… yes. If that’s okay.” I just knew it wasn’t. First rule of styling: Never piss off a star.

“Oh, thank god!” He breathed, his face lighting up. “I need someone who knows what they’re doing and can deal with my habits. Thank you.”

“Habits?” I asked, and I wondered if I should have.

“I get into ruts, you know,” he explained. “I’ll wear the same thing a lot especially. In the past they’ve just let me because they’re afraid I’ll get upset, but you don’t mind. Thanks. It’s what I need.”

Obviously this wasn’t what I expected, but there was no way I could complain. “It’s my job,” I said.

He slipped into his shoes and moved over to the desk, which was currently serving as a styling station. He looked at the bag of hair products and tools that I had laid out, and then back at me. “I don’t think I have enough hair to need all that.”

“For now you do,” I joked. “Enjoy it while it lasts.”
I started with a styling paste and combed his hair to the side, and he rubbed his hand over his scruff. “I forgot to shave,” he told me.

“It looks good. You can keep it if you want.”

“Actually I’ve been thinking of growing it out again. What do you think?”

I’d seen him with a beard, and I’d seen him without. Without, he was the boy next door, captain of the chess team, hot nerd extraordinaire – especially if he wore a cardigan. But with a beard he was sex god, baby-maker, hung-like-a-horse-and-he-knows-it.

“Yeah, let’s try it out,” I said with an assuring nod. And as long as my loins could take it, I figured we’d be okay.

“What about G?” He asked.

“G?”

“Greer?”

“Oh. What about her?”

“What’s she wearing?”

I finished his hair and reached into my bag to pull out the photo of the dress that she would wear. “It’s on loan, so don’t you guys go making a mess of it or anything!”

I knew as soon as the words escaped my mouth that it was an inappropriate thing to say. I was joking, and I thought that if I smiled maybe that would make it evident. But he only looked up at me.

Now I was fired.

“So does everyone know?” He asked.

“About what?” I knew what, but there was no way I wasn’t going to pretend.

“Me and her? Everyone knows?”

“You know how it is,” I shrugged. “People talk. It’s no one’s business, including mine.” I began assembling my bag. Maybe if I left quickly enough, he wouldn’t have time to fire me.

“It’s just that I don’t really like to have my private business—”

“I know, I understand. I’m sorry. I promise no one is telling anyone, it’s just that Alex and I were talking before, and he said something, and I promise I told him I didn’t want to talk about it.”

“I know people who are working with us are gonna know. I just need to know that I can trust everyone here to be discreet.”

The way he said it made him seem almost childlike, as a blush phased his cheeks and he had a hard time making eye contact.

“You’ll never hear another word out of me on the subject. I promise.”

“It’s just that people make assumptions, like they know everything that goes on between two people.”
“No assumptions here,” I assured him.

“Because it’s not what everyone thinks.”

I didn’t need to know, and I really didn’t care. I couldn’t care. Not when I was working for the guy. “I won’t say a word to anyone.”

When he looked up to thank me, he seemed so sad. His eyes weren’t their usual half-moon smiles, but wide and wandering. “Thanks, Sarah.”

I gripped my bag and smiled. “Anything else before I go?”

He thought for a moment, then shook his head. “I think that’s it.”

I left the room feeling like I’d probably redeemed myself, though I was still worried. I guess there’s a part of me that always worries in this type of situation, but I needed to push that aside for the sake of remaining professional and getting the job done. Back in my own room, I put everything in order, packed my suitcase, and prepared for the long flight ahead of us in the morning.

…

Around eleven that night, there was a knock at my door. It was strange for this time of night, and especially so because there was no one I could imagine would be here for me, but I answered anyway.

“Come with me,” Alex said, pulling me by my wrist into the hall.

“What? Why?”

“Because there’s a party on the roof and there are drunk people and you do not want to miss this!”

“Let me grab my coat at least!” I laughed, and I managed to do so just before he pulled me out of my room again.

We walked up to the roof, and even though we weren’t invited, we were able to make our excuses to the staff as to why we should be allowed in, and then we stayed far enough away so that no one would notice us. Sure enough, the party seemed to just be getting into gear.

“Why are we up here?”

“Because no one will remember this tomorrow except for us,” he smiled. “And the only interesting thing about this god-forsaken job is the fact that you can remember stories about celebs that they never will. You’re welcome.”

Okay, so he had a point. It was fun to see A-list stars dancing on diving boards and swimming in the pools fully-clothed. I could name names, but just imagine all your favorite stars who live in New York. Chances are they were there. Everyone was.

Alex managed to find a couple of glasses of champagne, a plate of hors d’oeuvres, and a blanket. Only he could have done so. We seated ourselves among the decorative shrubbery close to the exit and watched. And for the first hour or so, it was divine.

“I don’t see a certain couple of lovebirds,” I pointed out finally.

“Oh, they’re probably freaking in an elevator or something,” he said. “Jealous?”
“Jealous?” I laughed. “No, no, no. In fact, I promised him I wasn’t going to talk about the two of them, so I need to shut up, but since I’ve had some champagne, and since it seems maybe you’re not such a dick after all, maybe I’ll tell you a little something.”

“Whatever you tell me stays between us,” he said. “I promise.”

“So he and Greer are a thing, but he doesn’t want anyone to know. Isn’t that crazy?”

Alex gave me a sort of disappointed look. “Not really, since I already knew that.”

“Well, okay… but he says no one knows how it really is with them, which means it’s complicated.”

“Of course it’s complicated,” he shrugged, looking back to the crowd for his entertainment. “It’s them.”

“He calls her G.”

At this, Alex finally returned to his previous excitement. “Serious?”

“Absolutely.”

“She calls him Chrissy!”

“Oh my god… there is no way he’s okay with that!”

We had a laugh about it, and just when he was about to elaborate on the details, we spotted them returning from the gardens with another couple. Chris was subtly reaching for her hand, and she was less subtly rejecting it.

“Trouble in paradise,” Alex said.

They weren’t fighting or anything, but there was an obvious difference in affection between the two of them. “I don’t think she likes him as much as he likes her,” I said. “Don’t you think?”

“I think they’re just fucking,” he answered. “End of story.”

But it wasn’t. I could tell.

“What time is the flight tomorrow?”

“6:15,” I said. “But only for us.”

“Which is why they get to stay up partying.”

“I think they get to stay up partying because they’re rich and famous.”

Alex finished the last of his drink and set the glass beside him. “And on that depressing note, I’m going to bed. Care to join me?”

My eyes grew wide and I stopped breathing for a moment. “Excuse me?”

“No, not like that! I mean I’m going to go back to my room. Are you going down, too?”

That wasn’t much better, but I understood his point. “Yeah, I guess.”

We walked to the elevator and made our way back. “Only four hours before we have to wake up,” he said.
“Don’t remind me!”

We stepped into the hall and toward our rooms, which were beside each other. “How do you like working with him?”

“I like it. He’s nice. I mean, he’s sort of forgetful, but he’s nice.”

“And hot.”

“Yeah… but that’s the name of the game. You must know how it is with Greer and all.”

“Yeah, but she’s not exactly my type.”

“Not your type? How?”

He laughed and hooked his arm through mine. “Because I’m more of an Evans guy,” he winked.

“Oh… well then you understand what it’s like for me. That boy is glorious.”

“Yes he is. But you know the rules. No sleeping with the clients.”

“Don’t worry. That’s not gonna happen.”

“If I had a nickel for every time I heard that I’d be rich enough to get invited to rooftop parties.”

“Well, I mean it. I’m a professional.”

“So am I.”

“You mean… you’ve done it with clients before?”

We reached my room and he smirked a little. “What’s the first rule of this job?”

“Never piss off a star,” I responded.

“Second rule?”

“Never sleep with a star.”

“Third rule?”

“Privacy is paramount.”

He smiled at me and moved toward his room. “Good night, Sarah.”

“I’m not gonna sleep with him!” I called out, then remembered there were other people in that hotel and that maybe I should shut up.

“See you in the morning,” he said before he disappeared behind the door.

Fourth rule of styling: Everything is art. Remember that when you screw up.
Chapter 2

We were on our way before the sun rose over the city, and as I looked out over it all, I knew I would kind of miss America. Kind of.

I had once been to France – Cannes, specifically – and enjoyed the film festival from the makeup trailer. Even though I’d seen the likes of Brad Pitt, Robert Downey, Jr, and David O. Russell, I hadn’t been fortunate enough to meet any of them. I’m pretty sure Joaquin Phoenix waved at me, but I’m not sure.

Besides that, however, I’d never been to a foreign country. I grew up in Minnesota, a mere three hours or so south of Canada, and yet I’d never even been there. It was the excitement and the allure of travel that drew me to this job initially. When I found out that I’d be working not only alongside of, but also directly for Chris Evans, I knew I’d found my true calling.

Alex’s possibly drunken words of caution, if that is indeed what they were, still stuck with me from the night before. He warned me about the dangers of sleeping with the celebrities, and I was confident that wouldn’t happen. After all, Chris had Greer. And even if he didn’t have Greer, he obviously hadn’t even the slightest interest in me. I was me. Teeth too big, thighs to big, everything too big except my boobs which were never quite big enough. A blob in comparison to Greer, even if I’m not hideously ugly. Everyone is hideous next to her.

I was trying to relax, but the Atlantic Ocean is still daunting even on the calmest, bluest of days such as today. I know it was early, but I took advantage of the drinks being served and helped myself to a glass of wine to calm my nerves. It was difficult to judge whether or not this had prepared me for the day, so just to be sure, I had another. And then a third because it tasted just so very fine.

It was dark when we left New York, and it was dark when we arrived in Tokyo. Never had I been in the air so long, nor had I been aware of how very small my bladder was. According to Alex, we’d had a layover, but I don’t remember. The entire trip was a blur, and by now I wasn’t really sure how much I’d had to drink. All I knew was that the way there had better not be indicative of the way things would go in this country, because if it was, I was done for.

“Had a little much on that plane, did you?” Alex joked, and I literally had to cling to him just to make it up the foyer stairs at the hotel.

“I get nervous when I fly,” I told him. “I had a couple drinks.”

“A couple? You smell like a bachelorette party!”

When I finally made it to my room, and Alex was sure I was safely to my bed and that my luggage was all accounted for, I noticed a bouquet of flowers on my bedside table. They were a gorgeous display of orchids in a large yellow vase, and atop the arrangement sat a note with my name on it.

Welcome to Japan.

Thanks for everything.

Chris

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The first thought I had was that this was an extremely thoughtful gesture for someone so busy to take time to acknowledge his employee. But then as soon as I had finished that thought, another more terrible one flashed through my brain.

He wants to sleep with me.

This couldn’t happen. It could not. I had worked too hard and put up with too much shit to fuck the first attractive man who sent me flowers at my place of employment, which was exactly what this was. No. He would not get the satisfaction of making me fall to my knees just because he spent a few bucks on me. No, sir. Not me. Not this girl.

Enraged, I tossed them immediately into the trash. I wasn’t about to become a victim of his charm. I wasn’t going to let him break my heart, which was inevitably what would happen. I mean sure, I could probably sleep with him every now and then, have my cake and eat it too. Work for him and fuck him. That sort of thing. But we would be back in the states in a few weeks, and then what? I’d go back home to Owatonna, and he would go back to his own place, and we’d probably never see each other again. I didn’t want to deal with that.

But then again, he was obviously very good at keeping things discreet. Maybe it wouldn’t be quite so rough. Maybe he could treat me well, keep it a secret, and leave me with no hard feelings when all was said and done. Maybe it was possible. Maybe I could.

But no. No, this was crazy. No.

I wanted to unpack because I knew the next day would be one of the busiest so far, but I barely unzipped my suitcase before I came to the harsh realization that I was about to pass out. I lay back on the bed, promising myself that I would rest for two hours, then wake up and unpack. Power nap, I said.

Six hours later, the evil sun was shining through the too-big windows and reminding me of the previous day’s mistakes.

I rushed to my feet and panicked when I saw the time. I knew I was due at Chris’s room in less than an hour, and not only did I look like hell, but I also hadn’t taken the time to find his outfit. I hadn’t coordinated anything with whatever Greer would be wearing. And now my only hope was Alex.

I didn’t sign up for this.

I grabbed my phone and texted him to ask what Greer would wear, and he texted back a picture of a complicated floral dress and the caption:

You’re fucked, aren’t you?

I didn’t have time to respond to that. I slipped into the first pair of jeans I could find, whipped my hair back into a ponytail, and pulled a white blouse over my head. Maybe I could at least look like I was going for a grungy sort of look. Then I rushed to the closet where Chris’s clothes had been waiting for me and scrambled for something decent.

To my surprise, and probably Alex’s too, I made it to Chris’s room with three minutes to spare. Luckily, he answered looking as though his night had been even rougher than mine. I knew better than to comment on that, so I simply smiled, held up the garment bag, and stepped inside.

“I haven’t showered yet,” he grumbled, looking over the suit I’d prepared. “Can you give me ten minutes?”
“Sure,” I nodded. “I don’t think that’s too unreasonable.”

Before he closed the bathroom door behind him, I could see him stripping off his shirt, and it was torture. And that was when I remembered the orchids. I wondered if it was something I should have mentioned to him. Maybe I should let him know as calmly as possible that I had no intentions of sleeping with him. Maybe I should just inform him that I was a professional, hard-working, young woman, and that my career meant too much to me to jeopardize it in a moment of weakness. Or maybe I should just thank him and then see what he had to say on the matter.

I took the time to set out his styling station before I seated myself on the couch and waited. I thought about the flowers a little, sure, but more about Chris in general. I looked at the pile of luggage in the corner and wondered where his assistant was and why he or she hadn’t yet organized the mess. I looked at the TV, still on from the evening before, and saw that he’d been watching infomercials. The bed was a mess. He was a mess. In fact the only thing in the room that looked half-way organized was a pile of three-by-five cards on his coffee table.

I could hear the shower still running, so I gave in to my curiosity and reached for the pile. On every card was the name of someone working on the press tour – his assistant (who, I remembered once I saw the name, was a man named Matt), me, Alex, Charissa, the makeup artist, and our transportation manager, Lorne. Under each name was the number of the room we were currently staying in, and the specific type of gift he had ordered to be sent.

So much for being special, I thought.

I heard the stream shut off, so I gave in to my curiosity and reached for the pile. On every card was the name of someone working on the press tour – his assistant (who, I remembered once I saw the name, was a man named Matt), me, Alex, Charissa, the makeup artist, and our transportation manager, Lorne. Under each name was the number of the room we were currently staying in, and the specific type of gift he had ordered to be sent.

So much for being special, I thought.

I heard the stream shut off, so I promptly set the cards back down just in time. Out of the bathroom he came, towel tied tight around his waist, water still dripping from his hair.

“Forgot my underwear,” he giggled.

That fucker.

He rummaged around in a suitcase until he found a pair of boxers, then returned from whence he came and disappeared again for another few minutes. As he was in there, Matt arrived, let himself in, and looked over at me.

“Where is he?”

“Changing,” I answered. “He’ll be out in a second.”

He sighed much more dramatically than called for, then sat beside me. “You should probably leave before someone sees you.”

“Leave? Why?”

“Because he has to maintain a certain level of dignity in this job, and you’re not exactly part of the plan.”

Still unsure what he meant, I asked again. “Why?”

“Look,” he started, a fake smile adorning his face. “I’m sure you’re very nice and all, but Mr. Evans doesn’t like to mix business and pleasure, and I have the unfortunate task every now and then of asking girls who stay over to please move on before the day’s work begins. But if you give me your number, I’ll be sure to let him know to call you.”

“So let me get this straight: you think I’m… what? A hooker? Someone he picked up last night?”
“I never said hooker,” he returned quickly. “And again, I’m sure you’re very nice—”

“I’m his stylist, Matt. I work for him. Or, well, I work for the company that works for him. How do you not know that?”

He didn’t even seem fazed. “Have we met?”

“Twice,” I reminded him. “Two separate times. And both times I introduced myself. What is it with people that they forget me the second they’re done talking to me?”

“What’s going on?”

We both looked over at Chris as he emerged in a sleek navy suit and white shirt, top button undone. I was immediately rendered speechless. Matt, however, had plenty to say.

“You’ve got press from eight ‘til noon,” he said, showing his clipboard to Chris. “Then you have lunch and Skype interview with Ted from Warner Brothers at one. At three, you have an appearance at the Tokyo Hilton. Then at seven, dinner with Greer. Got it?”

He accepted the tie I was offering him, nodding his way through Matt’s instructions. “Is she still on for dinner? She said yesterday that she may end up attending a fashion show or something.”

“As of an hour ago, she’s still on. Should I call her again?”

“No, no. Don’t bother her. If she said she’ll be there, she’ll be there.”

“Reservations are all set, and you’ll have a driver waiting at the hotel for you at six-thirty.”

“Sounds good.” He looked at me, then down to his feet as he knotted his tie. “Shoes?”

I handed him a shoebox, and when he sat on the couch to put them on, I assisted him with his tie.

“So I’ll see you downstairs in ten minutes, okay?” Matt told Chris. “Do you want info on Greer’s progress through the day or what?”

“No, it’s fine. She’ll be with me for most of it, won’t she?”

“She will. Alright, see you downstairs.”

As he left, Chris gazed up at me, his freckles clearly visible now that he was mere inches from my face. “Thanks, by the way. I feel so high maintenance.”

“You are,” I smiled in reply. “All you hotshots are. But I don’t mind. It’s why you pay me the big bucks.”

“How did you like the flowers, by the way?”

I blushed a little from the embarrassment of what I’d assumed from the kindness of the gesture. “They’re gorgeous. Thank you.”

“I wasn’t sure what you liked, and since it was such short notice, I just had Matt send whatever he thought you might like.”

“Matt?” I scoffed. “Matt didn’t even know who I was when he saw me.”

“Sure he did! He just likes to mess around. He probably just pretended he didn’t know you.”
“He thought I was someone you picked up last night,” I told him. “And he really did think it, too. He wasn’t joking.”

“How do you know?”

“I know these things,” I said with a smirk as I finished his tie. “It’s okay, I just really thought he would remember me. I’ve met him enough times.”

“It took me long enough to remember your name,” he reminded me. “Some people just have a hard time with it.”

I didn’t want to push the subject, so I simply shrugged. “Stand up and let me look at you.”

He stood, and I brushed the lint from his lapel. “So… dinner tonight, huh? Where are you taking her?”

“McDonald’s,” he smiled.

“Seriously,” I asked. “It’s not like I’m gonna tell anyone.”

“I am serious,” he giggled. “I’m taking her to McDonald’s.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I think it’s funny! We’re not gonna eat there, we’re just going to go there beforehand as a joke. Then I’m gonna take her somewhere amazing.”

I brushed my fingers through the front of his hair. “She’s going to kill you.”

“I don’t think so. I think she’ll have a laugh, especially when she realizes it’s just a joke.”

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you,” I told him. “Sit down.”

“So you don’t think she’ll find it hilarious?”

“No, I don’t,” I told him honestly. “I think she’ll think you’re an asshole, excuse my language.”

“Okay, well if you’re such an expert, where would you take her?”

“I don’t know. I’m not the expert. Besides, I’ve never been to this country before. I don’t know what there even is to do.”

“I’m going to respectfully argue that she will, in fact, enjoy it, and that it’ll be the most fun she’s had in a long time. In fact I’d bet on it.”

“I’m not going to take you up on that bet because I have no money.”

“So we won’t bet money. We’ll bet… what?”

“There aren’t many options. Like I said, I’m poor.”

“Okay I’ll tell you what. If I’m right and she loves it, you let me make my own wardrobe choices for one week. If you’re right and she hates it, I’ll help with your duties for a week. How does that sound?”

“Impossible,” I answered.
“Why is that impossible?”

“Because you are way too busy to take time out to help me with my work when I win.”

He laughed heartily, and nudged his foot against mine playfully. “I’m not worried about that.”

When I finished with his hair, I looked over his sprouting beard approvingly. “It’s coming in nicely, but you may want to give it a trim tomorrow.”

He looked into the mirror and ran his hand over his chin. “Whereabouts?”

“Where it’s getting kind of scruffy over here,” I said, and I moved my fingers to his neck to lightly graze the area I’d indicated. “You don’t want to be a neckbeard.”

When he let out a little giggle, I could feel the vibration of it through my fingers and remembered how glad I am that girls don’t get erections. I didn’t know what to say after that, so I just moved away from him and started packing up.

“What’s she wearing today, anyway?” He asked.

“Flowers. Lots of colors.”

“Oh okay. Well this should do the trick, then. Thanks.”

“Of course, it’s my job. Anything else?”

“Yeah, actually. Let me get your number.”

I pulled my bag over my shoulder. “Why?”

“Well it occurred to me while we were talking that I don’t really get to see you except when you’re working, so I thought that if I ever need to ask you a question or anything, you’re just a text away.”

I walked to the coffee table where the pile of cards sat, and I picked the one with my name. On it, I scrawled my number at the bottom and handed it to him. “There. Now you have it. Anything else?”

He smiled, tucked the card in his pocket, and shook his head. “Nope. That’s everything.”

I left his room realizing two things: One, I could no longer deny that I had an actual, real crush on the guy. And two, it was just possible that he saw something in me as well.

Both were equally terrifying.

…

My evening was spent as I suppose most women spend their evenings – eating, watching bad romantic flicks on my laptop, drinking wine, and trying to forget that Chris Evans is an actual human person who exists in real life.

I surprised myself with how well I was able to do as far as organizing my room and therefore my life. Chris’s clothes for the following day were already laid out, ready to be steamed and delivered first thing in the morning. My own clothes were neatly folded in their drawers so that the next two days of my life could be at least a little bit assembled, and I had photos of Greer’s clothing for the next two weeks so that I knew what to order and have waiting in the next country we were to visit. I was feeling pretty good about myself, altogether. In fact, I was beginning to feel too good. When I feel this good, it’s rare that it turns out not to be a cruel trick that life is deciding to play on me.
And when I heard the knock at my door, I knew I was right.

It was Alex, of course. The look on his face was every bit as jovial as it had been in days previous, but instead of pulling me out of my room this time, he let himself in. “Hot gossip time,” he winked. “You first.”

“Nothing to report, sir.”

“You disappoint me,” he frowned, leaning back on my bed, then helping himself to a sip of my wine. “And besides, I don’t believe you.”

“Well I mean it,” I said. “According to his assistant, today is pretty typical. He had all his press stuff, an interview, then dinner with ‘G.’ I still can’t believe he calls her that.”

“Dinner, huh? Well I’m a little bit surprised. Just the two of them?”

“That’s what it sounded like. In fact…” I wondered if I should tell him about McDonald’s. “Never mind.”

“No, no, no, no,” he whined. “You have to tell me.”

“It’s nothing. Look, you know I said I promised him that I would keep everything private. It’s in the rules for god’s sake!”

“But I’m a fellow confidant. You can tell me.”

“He thinks it’ll be hilarious,” I started, still hesitating a little before I continued. “If he… takes her to a fast food place as a joke. Then he’s gonna take her out somewhere nice after.”

“After what? After she kills him?”

“That’s what I said! There’s no way she’s gonna think it’s funny, right?”

“No way. Not her. Not Greer. The girl was born in a bathtub of Dom Perignon.”

“I told him she wouldn’t go for it, but the big dummy seems to think she’ll be a good sport.”

“Look, I love the girl,” he said, shaking his head in despair. “But he’s a damn fool.”

I agreed with him. “Well that’s it. That’s the gossip. Time to go away now, okay?”

“Don’t you want to hear what I have to say about her?”

It was tempting, but I couldn’t. I was foolishly invested enough as it was. “No,” I said firmly. “I can’t.”

“Even if I told you she has a little side piece back home?”

“Side piece?”

“Looks like someone’s interested…”

I moved to sit beside him on the bed. “Fine, I admit I’m curious. Now tell me.”

“All I know is that she has a boyfriend person, may or may not be anything serious, and that they’ve been together on and off since college. I heard them talking on the phone this morning and it was
I didn’t know what it was that Chris felt for Greer, if anything, but to me it seemed like she meant something. She was more than just a fuck, more than his costar, more than just a beautiful girl. Maybe it wasn’t love, and god I hoped it wasn’t now, but I was sure that a guy like him wouldn’t be playfully taking her on dates if he knew she had someone waiting back home. Or anywhere else for that matter.

“Should I tell him?” I asked.

“Are you out of your mind? Privacy is paramount!”

“Does that really apply here, though? I mean, this is something that he should know, isn’t it?”

“If there is one thing I’ve learned, it’s not to meddle in the affairs of these people. In fact, don’t think of them as people at all. Think of them as pretty dolls we get to dress up. Don’t form emotions or attachments.”

“But you said yourself that you absolutely love Greer.”

“I love my mother, too, but I’m not gonna tell her that capri pants are out. There are some secrets that just have to stay secret, end of story. Eventually these things work themselves out.”

I felt just awful. Like crap under dirt under more crap under a pigpen. “But—”

“Don’t do it, Sarah. Whatever you do, don’t you dare do it.”

“Pretty dolls, eh?”

“Beautiful dolls with delicate hearts and fragile egos. Let them deal with it all after we’ve moved on to bigger and better things.”

I supposed he was right, and that was that. We bullshitted each other for another ten or so minutes, and then he went back to his room.

If it hadn’t been for the severe jetlag and half a bottle of wine, I know I would have had trouble falling asleep that night. Just the thought of Chris ever having to hear about this girl he seemed to care about being with someone else was absolutely heartbreaking for me. But then, I supposed I could deal with it in the morning.

And speaking of morning, that was the next thing I remembered. Waking up twenty minutes before my alarm was set to go off. Someone was at my door again. I swore I’d kill Alex. I’d absolutely kill him.

I opened the door half-awake and cursing the world. “What the hell, dude?”

“You won.”

The response did not come in Alex’s voice, but in Chris’s. And sure enough, when I took the time to notice, the man himself stood before me.

“Oh my god, I’m sorry.” I pulled my robe tight around me. “Is everything okay?”

“You won,” he repeated. “So are you gonna let me in or what?”
Chris Evans wanted to come into my hotel room. What did I win? Life?

Speechless, I opened the door and let him in. And slowly the pieces of the day before came back to me.

“So you were serious?” I asked. “You meant it?”

“If there’s anything you can count on me for, it’s keeping my word. Now where would you like to sit while I dress you?”

How about my casket? Because I’m pretty sure I fucking died and went to Heaven.
Chapter 3

I wasn’t sure how serious he was, nor how serious he possibly could be, given all the work there really was involved in my day-to-day.

“Come on,” he grinned. “Where are your clothes?”

“They’re in the dresser drawers because I’m a civilized human being,” I told him. “And by the way, are you crazy or something?”

“A bet’s a bet,” he answered simply. “I’m just fulfilling my end of things.”

“I have your clothes all set out and waiting, so this is useless. I thought we were only joking yesterday. I didn’t think you’d actually show up here and do all of this.”

“I didn’t think I’d be here this morning, either. But you were right. She didn’t find the joke funny at all.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m sure that wasn’t very much fun for you to have to deal with.”

His back was turned to me as he looked through my drawers playfully. “Eh, it’s fine. This is not very sexy underwear.”

“That’s extremely inappropriate!” I scolded. “Please close that drawer right now!”

He quickly obeyed, and when he turned to face me, he was all apologies.

“It’s not that it bothers me, it’s just that this isn’t… well, I’m not used to this, you know? My clients in the past haven’t really been the playful types. Your being here in my room is highly unusual, if not other things.”

“I understand. Sorry.”

I walked to the bathroom and removed the garment bag from the shower curtain rod and brought it out to him. “Do you want to steam this? That gives me a few minutes to enjoy a little longer shower than usual, and that would actually be pretty nice right now.”

“No problem at all, Boss,” he smiled.

He was a little bit ridiculous, but not enough for me to mind. I waited just until I was sure that he knew how to work the steamer before I stepped into the shower and let it wake me up slowly. It really was a pleasant change from the way things had been rushed the day before, and when I finished and returned to my bedroom, he had not only steamed his outfit, but changed into it as well.

“I wasn’t sure how long you’d be, so I decided to go ahead and get dressed,” he said. “That okay?”

“That’s fine,” I told him. “I had you wearing the black Chucks with that if you want to go ahead back to your room and get them on. I can meet you there to do your hair.”

“But I want to help. I haven’t done enough to make up for my end of the bargain.”

“You don’t have to do anything else,” I assured him. “You did plenty. And besides, if Matt goes to your room and you’re not there, he’s going to kill you.”
“I’d like to see him try,” Chris joked. “He’d have to find me first.”

Somehow or other I convinced him to leave my room, and after I’d fixed my own hair and makeup, I grabbed my bag and headed up to him. When I walked in, he was on the phone, and as soon as he noticed me, he hushed his tone a bit. I could tell he was arguing, or at least something close to that. I couldn’t make out what he was saying, and I suppose I’d be lying if I told you I wasn’t trying to.

I waited until he ended the call before I spoke. “All set for hair?”

He smiled, but it wasn’t anything near genuine. “Sure thing.”

As he sat at the desk, I watched his movements, which were nothing like they’d been mere minutes before. He was slouched and slow, and his fingers tapped nervously on his thighs as he sat.

“Everything alright?” I asked.

“Course it is,” he shrugged. “Just been a long couple of days.”

He wasn’t wrong. This had been a rough start to the overseas stretch of our journey, but I knew we’d get over it in time. “I’d think you’d be used to this kind of travel.”

“You never get used to this stuff.”

“Maybe after this you should take a long vacation,” I suggested, combing back his hair. “Where do you like to go to relax?”

“Home.”

“I mean for vacation.”

“I prefer home over vacation any day. I think when this is all said and done, I’m going to get in bed and sleep for three days.”

“So you’re a homebody, huh? That’s nice. I guess I prefer being home to being most places, too.” At this point, I was really just making desperate conversation, but I still preferred it to the alternative: uncomfortable silence.

“What about you?” He asked. “What do you have going on after this?”

“Don’t know yet,” I answered. “Hopefully I can get another job, something steady and with a little longevity to it. Something like this.”

“You live in LA?”

“No,” I sighed. “I wish I could afford it. My mom’s cousin has a home in the Valley, so I stay there when I’m working. But I can’t afford my own place in California yet.”

“So where do you live?”

The fact that he was actually asking me questions about myself was almost as surprising as the fact that he genuinely seemed interested in the answers. “Minnesota,” I said. “Southern part. Teeny tiny farm in a teeny tiny town.”

“You have your own farm?” He asked.

The details of that story were ones I was definitely not ready to share, so I simply answered, “Yes.”
“What kind of animals do you have?”

I was taking way too long on his hair, so I finished it quickly. “Just cats. I can’t keep anything bigger than that while I’m away so much. My neighbor friend comes over to feed the cats every day.”

At the end of my sentence, and even just before I’d quite finished it, Matt burst into the room as seemed to be his way. And honestly I was grateful. Talking to Chris about my home life was one thing. Getting into details was another.

“You’ve got six minutes,” Matt announced. “Where the hell were you an hour ago when I got here?”

“Getting my clothes,” he answered calmly.

“I’m calling bullshit. I know they bring you the clothes. Were you in Greer’s room? Because if you were, and if anyone saw you, we have to tell Marta to prepare for damage control—”

“I wasn’t in her room, okay? I was getting my clothes, I told you!”

Matt looked at me. Chris’s rare moment of frustration shocked me speechless. I nodded.

“See?” Chris told him. “Now I’m ready, I wasn’t in a girl’s room, and we’ve got three minutes to spare. Ready to go?”

It seemed that Matt, too, wasn’t used to this sort of behavior. “Yeah,” he muttered. “Let’s go.”

I was still packing my things, and I had yet to raid Chris’s closet for the clothes I would need to return the following day.

“Just make sure the door’s closed behind you,” Chris told me finally as he slipped out. I was still speechless, but it didn’t matter. He was gone before I could reply anyway.

I think it took me a full minute to get my bearings and actually remember what it was that I needed to do. When at last I did remember, the temptation of his adjoining bedroom overwhelmed me too much to allow me to focus. I would blame the fact that I gave in and snooped on Alex’s negative influence. After all, I was a professional, and I had always been exceptional at remaining so. But if I had something fun to relate – a pair of panties, say, or a condom wrapper strewn carelessly to the side of the bed – I’d earn Alex’s undying affection. And as much as I hated to admit it, he was right. Three days in, I was already desperate for the gossip.

And sure, maybe that had something to do with the fact that I had a hopeless crush on Chris. But I knew what the truth was. I knew he’d never be interested in me. So gossip seemed like the next best thing. At least I could live somewhat vicariously through his no doubt legendary, bed-rocking, scream-inducing lovemaking.

I promised myself that I wouldn’t touch anything. At least this gave me a sense of doing-the-right-thing-ness. I had to get to his closet anyway, and that was through the bedroom. I was justifying reason after reason in my mind as to why I wasn’t completely out of line in snooping here, but I suppose looking back, I really didn’t need to be. The fact was that I belonged here, more or less. This wasn’t wrong, it was just… unnecessarily thorough.

His covers showed clear evidence that he was the only one who’d slept in the bed the night previous. He also slept very near the edge of the right side of the bed, as that was the only part of the covers that was messed.

On the bedside table sat a book of quotations of some sort and a half-empty mug of tea. So he was a

So I could deduce now in my Holmesian fashion that he had returned to his room at a decent hour the evening before, that he’d gone to bed with enough time to enjoy a book and a cup of tea, and that he’d slept alone. I have to admit this surprised me somewhat. I thought he and Greer were the personification of the natural human urge to hump the best-looking thing in sight. And yet here was the proof that they hadn’t been so. At least not last night.

And then I remembered the phone call, so ominous and secretive, his ending the call as I entered his room, obviously distraught. Could this really have come from the events of the night before? I mean, could this all be because she couldn’t take a joke? Why the hell would she let something like that become the cock-blocking tool of the night? He could have taken me to the city dump and I’d have laughed it off if it meant that I got to ride him into the sunset like a prized stallion.

Was she really that petty?

But now wasn’t the time for this talk. I would consult with Alex later to find the details of his side of things, then compare notes.

Oh, this could be so much fun.

…

I’d returned the clothes I needed to bring back, gone back to my own room, and begun the process of planning his fourth and final outfit when my text alert sounded. I didn’t think much of it, even leaving it unattended in my pocket while I starched the collar of his white shirt. But when it sounded again, I had to answer.

From: Evans
I need you. Iwasaki Studios Suite 14.

From: Evans
Really really need you. Pass at front desk. Bring date outfit.

From what I could gather, Chris needed me to bring him a new outfit for a date. But according to what I’d heard from the day’s plans, Greer wasn’t available for a date tonight. So when he said he needed me, did he mean… he needed me?

Or did he need me?

Was there a difference? I wasn’t sure. What I was sure of, however, was that I was to bring him a date outfit which he would wear for someone. To go on a date with someone. Me, possibly. Probably not, but… what if?

I looked through my own clothes, trying to find the perfect outfit that said “potentially a date outfit but also possibly just a work outfit.” There aren’t many clothes in the world that fit the bill for some reason, but I was able to settle on a black skater dress, strappy heels, and burgundy leather jacket. In case of date, remove jacket.
For my Mr. Evans I chose the very white shirt I was currently caring for, then added with it a fine grey suit that would fit any occasion well. He isn’t one for suits, but when he wears them, yes.

Just yes.

I called a cab and headed to the studio. As promised, my pass was waiting at the front desk. As quickly as I could, I headed toward the suite, or where I understood it to be, and straightened my dress all the way. I don’t know what it was that possessed me, making me believe that this might be something more than business, but for some reason that was the thought I had. And when I found him in the green room, shirt off, trousers covered in some sort of orange goo, I think all thoughts – any thoughts I’d ever had in my life – went blank. And all I could see, all I could think of, was him. Shirtless. Dirty. Needing me.

“You’re a godsend!” He exclaimed, moving toward me and accepting the garment bag. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

I swear I tried to look away while he dressed, but there was so much going on in front of me that I just couldn’t. Not as much as I should have. “No problem,” I managed to say. “What – what happened, anyway?”

“Oh, there were some fans with these squirt guns full of something… anyway the host of the show dared me to taunt them, more or less, and I did, and then I got it. And it would have been okay if I didn’t suddenly remember I had a date tonight.”

“A date? So she’s not still mad at you?”

“She wasn’t ever really mad, exactly,” he explained, zipping up his pants while I desperately attempted to maintain eye contact. “She just didn’t get the joke, and then there were a lot more people that recognized us than I had expected.”

“Cameras and stuff, then?”

“Oh yeah,” he nodded. “A shit ton. Which of course she was upset about, then she was talking about, you know, what if pictures get out, what if there’s gossip, yadda, yadda, you know.”

“Why would it matter if some pictures got out?” I asked. But then I knew why. Or at least I knew one reason. Maybe whoever it was back home that had Greer’s fancy would get a look at the cold hard truth in the fact the she was seeing Chris on the regular. Okay yeah, privacy privacy, but that didn’t explain her motives. This was a girl who’d posed full nude in three separate magazines, done two seasons of reality TV with her then-fiancé, and who actually tipped off gossip columns about other celebrities.

Okay yeah, I’d done some research on her. So sue me.

“I guess she just knows I like to keep things to myself, especially that sort of thing,” he replied. “And I can understand that.”

“Of course,” I nodded in agreement. “I just thought she had some sort of engagement tonight.”

“I don’t think so,” he said, sliding his tie through his collar. “She said she wanted to see me tonight since last night didn’t work out.”

“It’s just that I was talking to Alex, and I could swear he mentioned something about her having a fashion show to attend tonight or something.”
He thought for a moment. “No, I’m sure she said she was meeting me tonight. In fact, she should be here in about ten minutes, so you got here just in time.”

I moved close to him and reached for his tie, knowing he never really was very good at them on his own. “Where are you taking her tonight, then?”

“Place I was planning to take her to last night before I fucked everything up.” He waited until I finished his knot. “Excuse my language.”

“I really don’t mind,” I smiled. “You should hear me some days, although I guess that’s not a very professional thing to say, is it?”

He grinned down at me, and even though he’s only about six inches taller than I am, he seemed to be towering. I was so close to him that I could feel his breath against me, and as my hands rested on his tie, the urge to wrap my arms around him and reach my lips to his was almost too much to resist.

Almost.

I backed away wisely and put the garment bag over my arm. “Anything else?”

“I don’t think so, but I feel bad that you had to come all this way just to bring me a change of clothes.”

“It’s the job,” I shrugged. “I don’t mind.”

“You know, you seem pretty cool. We should hang out sometime, get a drink.”

“That could be nice,” I said. I didn’t know what else to say.

“Have a good night, Sarah.”

“I will,” I told him. “Thank you.”

His smile made me want to stay. Everything about him made me want to stay. I grabbed the bag of soiled clothes and headed back out. And it was as simple as that.

An hour later I was back in my room, and I had just finished picking out his next outfit. By now it was a little too early to go to sleep, but not early enough to actually go out and do anything. Even Alex had managed to have something of a social life tonight, as he wasn’t answering his phone. I settled for heading down to the hotel bar for a drink. At least I could have a drink and wash away the stress of the day.

I’d not been down there ten minutes when I heard the hullabaloo that comes when a celebrity is spotted in the hotel. I assumed Chris and Greer must have come back early, opting out of sushi and instead going right to dessert, to borrow an already overused euphemism. But it was only Greer, accompanied by Alex, heading to the elevator as she relayed loudly to a reporter how she anticipated things would go at the fashion show that she was, in fact, scheduled for in just an hour.

She must have told Chris, I figured. How could she not have? But just to be sure, I texted him. I didn’t want to seem like I was prying, gossiping, or otherwise nosing in, so I made up something about needing him to do a fitting in the morning if he wasn’t going to be available tonight.

From: Evans
I can come by tonight, no prob. G never showed.

I didn’t ask for an explanation. I didn’t need one.

Greer was playing a little prank of her own. The thing she didn’t realize, though, was that this one was bound to hurt him. What he did to her only hurt whatever she had with what’s-his-name back home, and that’s on the off-chance that he’d actually see a random shot of her with her coworker in a public place and assume the worst.

I told Chris not to bother, and that I would meet him in his room. I figured I might as well make things easier. To keep up with my lie, I found a suit he’d wear on our next location, and I brought it to his room when the time came.

I found him sulking, still wearing the shirt and trousers of the suit when he answered his door. I didn’t comment on the Greer situation because for one thing, it was none of my business, and for another, he didn’t need more salt in that wound. As he emerged from the bedroom in the suit, I did in fact find that the sleeves needed altering. And finally as I pinned them up, he spoke for the first time.

“I think she’s worth it,” he mumbled.

I didn’t comment. I didn’t agree with him, and I didn’t think anything I had to say would help.

“So we’re even now, me and her,” he continued, unprompted. “I know we’re flying back tomorrow and all we have is the premiere, so maybe I’ll get a chance to take her out some time before we go.”

“Flight’s at two in the morning,” I told him. “You need to be on the red carpet at four. There will be easily an hour of prep, an hour of commute, and who knows how long Matt will take with you making sure you say the right thing at the press conference, making sure you and Greer don’t sit too close to each other, making sure your diaper’s on nice and tight…”

“Hey, come on.”

“Sorry.” That was out of place, but as the words escaped me, I knew I really was just that frustrated. “I could never do what you guys do,” I told him. “Having everyone else run your life, decide where you go and when, what you wear, who you date. I couldn’t do it.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“No?” I asked, finishing one sleeve and moving to the next. “You’ve been a miserable mope all day except for when you thought you had a date tonight. This work is making you miserable.”

“It’s not the work,” he said firmly. “It’s the people. It’s like you said, the people telling me what to do and everything.”

“So it’s not worth it, is it?”

“No, it is. And honestly I know that I do kind of need people telling me what to do most of the time when it comes to this stuff. I get all… nervous and out-of-control sometimes. Not in the crazy celeb spinout ways, just personally. My mind tends to go a million miles a minute, and if I didn’t have people like you and Matt and Marta, I wouldn’t be able to do this job. Sure, it gets to be a lot, and sure, sometimes I have to work with an asshole or two, but it is worth it. And so is she.”

“Oh, so we’re still talking about her?”
He looked at me, and I knew again that I was speaking out of place. “I’m sorry, but yeah. I know I talk about her a lot, but I’m crazy about her.”

“I know you are,” I sighed. I finished with the jacket sleeve and stood behind him to help him remove it carefully. “And I can see why. She’s gorgeous.”

“And she’s smart,” he said quickly. “She’s just amazing. I just wish…” he paused, letting me finish packing the clothes back up. “Never mind.”

“What?”

“I just get the feeling it isn’t the same with her toward me,” he said in a rather resigned tone. “But I hope I’m just crazy.”

I wanted to tell him he wasn’t, but I valued my job. “I’m sure you’re just being paranoid about it all,” I said. I needed to try to be reassuring, but it wasn’t working very well. “Some girls just don’t show affection like that.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“How do you show affection, like when you like someone?”

I scoffed, helping myself to a seat on his sofa since it seemed like it was about to be one of those kinds of conversations. “I’m not her. It really isn’t relevant.”

“Just humor me. Tell me that some girls are just distant, even when they like a guy.”

“I told you already that’s how some girls are.” I waited for him to say something, but he didn’t. “Do you want me to tell you that I am? Because I’m not. But that’s just me.”

“So tell me how you are.”

“Why?”

“Like I said. Humor me.”

I rolled my eyes, thought for a second as I crossed my arms in front of me.

“I can make an art out of it,” I said. “When I fall for a guy, I fall hard. I can get a little overbearing, so I need to watch myself. I check up on him a lot, write him notes, make him things. I get old-fashioned and romantic and pretty… I don’t know… typical. I’m a romantic, I guess.”

“I think I am, too,” he nodded. “Like you said, I make an art out of it.”

“But unlike you, I don’t usually get the attention in return. I think that makes me kind of easy for guys to use, because they know I’ll do anything for them. I’m trying to get better at it.”

“I hope this doesn’t come across as super creepy, but to me you don’t seem like the kind of girl who’d be hurting for attention from guys.”

“Oh, I’ve had boyfriends,” I said. “I’ve had lots, I guess. But no one serious.”

“Never?”
I hesitated to answer. This wasn’t a topic I was hoping to explore with him.

“Once.”

“And what happened?”

I smiled away what I knew would soon be an unhappy subject. “He died.”

I watched the expression on his face quickly fade into a mess of “sorry” and “oh-god-what-have-I-done,” and I attempted to put it to an end. “It’s okay, I’m fine. It was eight years ago, so I’ve had time to heal and all that crap.”

He smiled a little again, a relieving sight to see. “Probably shouldn’t have asked,” he grinned.

“Like I said, it’s fine.”

And then we were quiet. But it wasn’t an awkward silence as we had too often experienced before. It was calm and comfortable, as if we were finally becoming friends. Confiding in people does that, I guess.

“We could go out for that drink now if you want,” he said at last. “God knows my schedule’s clear.”

“I wish I could, but I’m just way too busy with everything that’s going on tomorrow, you know? I should get back to it.”

“Oh. Well anytime when we’re both available, we should do that.” He showed me to the door, and we said our goodbyes, and I headed back.

In all honesty, I didn’t have that much work to do. But I had told him something that was true. My crushes on men was almost an art form for me, as I was so practiced at it. Falling any further for him than I had already done would be too much. It would be the crush I’d be known for forever.

He would be my Mona Lisa.

It was no surprise that Alex was waiting for me when I returned. The surprise was in how he managed to get a copy of my key, help himself into my room, and snack on my combos that I had bought specifically for the flight the next evening.

“What’s the hot gossip?” he asked.

I sat beside him on the bed and buried my face into my pillow.

“Oh, hon,” he whispered, reaching over to pat my back. “I’m so sorry.”

“For what?” I asked through my pillow.

“I know when a girl’s got it bad. And you, my dear, have got it so bad.”
I don’t know how it happened. I was standing in the airplane restroom, hands nervously clasping the edge of the sink as he slid in between me and the wall. His breath fell against my neck, his lips grazing my ear as he whispered, “This is how I’ve wanted you since the second I laid eyes on you.”

I couldn’t believe what was happening. The palm of his hand fell on my waist, making me feel so tiny next to him. His light beard scratched against my chin, the bulge in his jeans hard against my thigh while his free hand slowly pulled my skirt up over my hips. I tried to recall how we’d gotten here, what circumstances led to this, and for the life of me I couldn’t recall a thing. Who cared? Here we were now, my underwear suddenly becoming an easy burden to lose, my blouse falling open, his mouth against my collarbone as my fingers inched closer to his zipper…

And if it hadn’t been for my damned alarm clock, I might have had the most incredible dream sex of my life.

I let out an audible moan as I opened my eyes. All I wanted in the entire world was a cup of coffee and a good fucking to get him out of my system.

After about ten minutes I finally sat up and got on with it all. I showered, I dressed, I applied makeup and sprayed perfume and brushed teeth, and I just wanted not to feel like this. I wanted to feel somewhat normal. That’s all. Not like the girl with the hopeless crush on the unearthly magnificent being that is Christopher Evans.

The thing that kept getting to me, though, was that this felt like more than a crush. In fact, calling it a crush at my age seemed almost childish. Yes, I thought he was pretty, and no I wasn’t in love with him. That would be crazy. I mean, I hardly knew him, really. But there was some middle ground there, and whatever middle ground that is called, that’s where I was. I couldn’t stop thinking about him. And it wasn’t just that I was thinking about him in bed with me, fucking me, making me scream, giving me rolling orgasms and making me forget my own name. I was thinking about taking him to Minnesota, showing him the farm, telling him about it. I was thinking about Greer and how there was some other man in her life somewhere, and how incredibly unfair that was to him. I was thinking about the end of this press tour when I would say goodbye to him and that would be it.

I was thinking too much.

I found the outfit he would wear and brought it up to him. When I found him, his eyes were dark and sleepy, his voice deep and gruff and evidently still getting used to the day as was the rest of his body. He said a small hello, excused me to give him time to shower, and I laid out a few products for his hair until he emerged, fully dressed but looking no more prepared for the day than he had been before.

“Excuse me for saying so,” I said almost in a whisper, “But you look like shit.”

He cast me a sideways glance but ultimately nodded. “Didn’t sleep much.”

“I’m sorry.” I sat him at the desk and looked him over, wondering how he’d feel if I put a little treatment under his eyes to help with those circles. “Have you tackled that beard lately?”

“Huh? Oh… no, I guess I haven’t really. Does it look bad?”

“It’s okay,” I smiled. “I can take care of it, just give me a second.” I went to his bathroom and retrieved his bag of shaving supplies.
When I returned, he was scrolling through his phone. “She didn’t even text me,” he chuckled, and it was obviously out of discomfort than any actual humor in the situation.

“I’m sure she will explain everything today,” I said. “Sit back.” I leaned his head against the wall, tucked a small pillow under the back of his neck, and placed a hot towel over his face.

I could see his body relaxing under the warmth of it, and maybe he’d even fallen asleep. Carefully I wrapped a towel around his shoulders and over the front of him, lathered the shaving cream over my hands, and smoothed it over him after I pulled away the hot cloth.

His eyes were closed now, so I didn’t speak anymore. He did seem to be sleeping, or at least very relaxed, so I held extra caution when I slid the razor down the edge of his jawline and wiped it on the dry towel on his chest.

Listen, I’ve shaved guys before. I style them, I make them up, I take care of them. It’s part of the job, and honestly, it’s a part I never really cared for. For one thing, you have to get so close to them, and usually they want to talk the whole time. Every so often there’s a guy who hasn’t brushed his teeth in way too long.

You get what I’m saying.

But this was different. Chris stayed still and let me do my job. His breathing was so soft, and if he was sleeping, he wasn’t a snorer. As I was just inches from his face, I could see every freckle, the constellations they formed across his cheeks, the length of his lashes and the subtle pink of his lips. Every bit of him was perfect. I looked for a flaw, but there was none. This close to him, the way his jaw was shaped as if it had been molded by the gods from the most holy mountaintops… I could have kissed him there. And there. And there.

I wiped away the remnants with the warm cloth and finished him off, even taking this opportunity to fix his tie as I guessed I would always do. It wasn’t until I fixed the dimple in the knot that he opened his eyes again, and when he did, he was just looking at me.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

He nodded. “I’m just tired.”

I ran my fingers over his whiskers, smiling at the final result. “Gorgeous,” I said. “Perfect. Good.” Now I was just looking for a word that didn’t make me seem thirsty for him.

Next I worked on his hair, which didn’t take long in comparison. I kept feeling like there was something I needed to say, that I should fill the silence somehow. But there was nothing I could say that would make it easier to deal with what I was feeling. And no words would be enough to wake him up.

Matt walked in just as I began applying a caffeine-based solution to his undereye circles. Immediately he began spewing appointment after appointment, Chris smiling up at me and rolling his eyes because he knew I could now understand how annoying, even if necessary, a personal assistant can be.

“Oh and Sarah, you’re gonna have to come with to the press conference,” he said after everything else that was on for the day had been told.

“I know. I already have the travel outfit waiting, and I’ll have an employee from Marrano with me to return his suit from the premiere.”
“Wait, are we all leaving straight from the press conference?” Chris asked.

“Yeah, I literally just said that, Chris. Weren’t you listening?”

He was still looking at me, both of us grinning behind Matt’s back. “Yeah, Chris,” I whispered playfully.

I could see a hesitation in Chris before he asked his next question. “Greer too?”

“Everyone,” Matt replied impatiently.

I wiped away the solution and used just a dab of base under his eyes to hide the evidence of the previous night’s woes. “That should hold up until I give you a touch up before the premiere,” I said. “I’ll give you a little powder and you’ll be fine.”

“Don’t forget my lipstick.”

“I put it in your purse.”

“You done?” Matt interrupted. “Because if so, we need to get going. We’ve got some press stuff to do before tonight.”

“Anything else?” I asked, trying to ignore Matt as best I could.

“Jeans and flannel,” Chris told me. “I miss my me clothes.”


“You’re the best, Dixon.” He reached out his fist to pound against mine.

They discussed plans as I found Chris’s travel clothes, and when I left I was smiling uncontrollably like an idiot because I had never told Chris that my last name was Dixon. He found that out all on his own, and that was nothing short of fucking adorable.

Alex asked me to meet him for lunch, and we met at a questionable restaurant in a questionable neighborhood because that was what we could afford in a place we could both easily direct our driver to take us. I told him about everything with Chris, how he’d been stood up, how he’d been so sweet to me, his woes, his freckles, the way the shade of beard varied slightly from the shade of his hair and how cute I thought that was. And he listened patiently, eating away at the grey-colored fish on his plate while I picked at my greens.

“Greer is definitely with someone back home,” he told me. “She was just talking and talking about him. And the shit’s about to hit the fan big time.”

“What do you mean?”

He sighed, shaking his head in obvious disgust of her. “She’s meeting up with him when we get to France. I guess they’re gonna be together for the London stuff, too, and then he’s going back. But you know what that’s gonna mean for Chris.”

“Man! She’s actually gonna flaunt him in front of Chris when she knows how he feels about her!” I tried not to get too emotional about it, but I was pissed at her. Was he so terrible that she couldn’t at least humor him for a few weeks? It wasn’t as if she was blowing him off. She was sleeping with him.
“She says he won’t even notice that there’s someone with her,” Alex explained. “She said that’s not how it is with them, and I believe her.”

“But he’s been gushing about her! He talks about her non-stop, he thinks about her, he makes dates with her… he told me she was worth everything even after she stood him up. Trust me, he’ll notice.”

“So… what? You think he’s in love with her?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “If he’s not, though, he definitely has feelings.”

“Are you saying she leads him on?” The tone in Alex’s voice indicated defensiveness, and I didn’t need that now. Not on top of everything else.

“I don’t know. I feel like saying that will come off a little sexist or something. But she goes on dates and has sex with him on a regular basis, and I don’t know what you would call that, but yeah, I call it leading him on. If she doesn’t have any feelings for him, then why is she doing that? Especially when she knows – she has to know – how he feels about her.”

He wiped a bit of sauce from the corner of his mouth and pushed his half-consumed meal away in disgust. “You don’t know her. And really, you don’t know him, either. I would bet good money that there are more layers to that burrito than you or I will ever know.”

“I guess you’re probably right.” But I was still pissed. I didn’t see that stopping any time soon.

“And what about you?” he asked. “You gonna be okay with him? I mean, with your whole impossible crush and everything?”

“I’m a professional,” I scoffed. “Of course I’ll be okay.”

“How bad is it really?”

“It’s fine,” I insisted, drinking my tea.

“Sarah…”

“It’s fine!”

“Sarah…”

“I shaved him today,” I resigned, my face in my hands as I let the embarrassment wash over me.

“You shaved him?”

“His face,” I corrected quickly. “You sicko.”

“I wasn’t saying anything else.”

“It was torture. His skin is so pretty, his eyes are like… ugh… and his freckles! I knew he had them, but I didn’t know how magnificent they were. And you know, his beard looks so coarse, but it’s soft, like… like cashmere or something. And he’s so sweet, Alex. He’s so fucking sweet I just want to die.”

“You sound like you’re 16.”

“I feel like I’m 16.”
He let out a rancid belch, an unusual thing for him to do, and excused himself to the restroom. And all the time he was in there, I could only think of how exciting it was that I would be seeing Chris again in just an hour.

When Alex returned, and after we’d left the restaurant and started for the theater, I thought again about Chris because I was always thinking about Chris. But this time I thought about my dream from the night before, and I felt the lust that comes from wanting him, and I thought of how he might touch me, how he might kiss me, how he might tell me he wanted me. I thought of what my name would sound like coming from him in moans, how his eyes would feast on my body, how soft his beard would feel against the inside of my thighs. I thought about him, his body, his cock, my hands gripping his firm ass, how I wanted him and how I needed him in the filthiest ways possible. And when we arrived and I saw him in his navy suit, hair slightly mussed as he lay on the chaise in his dressing room sound asleep (this time undoubtedly), I knew I wasn’t okay.

I closed the door behind me, walked over to where he lay, and reached my hand to his shoulder to shake him.

“Chris, it’s time to get changed.”

He opened his eyes slowly, looking up at me. I was smiling. I was probably smiling too much.

“You look cute like that,” he whispered.

My eyes grew wide, but I tried not to read too much into it. “Are you drunk?”

He laughed a little as he sat up. “No, I’m just tired. Was that inappropriate?”

“You have to do more than call me cute for me to get offended. At least when it comes from you.”

He accepted the clothes I had brought, peeled back the jacket of his suit, and I turned my back to him as he dressed.

“You’re sticking around, right?” He asked.

“Only until everyone on our flight is done here. Then we’re all leaving together to go to the airport.”

“Oh, you guys leave tonight?”

“Yeah, you know how it is. We have to leave early to set everything up for you guys.”

“We must be a pain in the ass, huh?”

“No, no,” I answered. “Not at all. It’s the job, and I’m just grateful for this opportunity. I don’t think I’d ever have gotten to take these kinds of trips if I wasn’t doing this. If you ask me, this is the best job in the world.”

“I’m glad you think so,” he said, finally walking around me to face me. “Because you’re very good at what you do.”

I moved to the garment bag and didn’t say a word, even if I wanted to.

“So I’ll see you in Paris, right?”

I nodded.

“Everything okay?” he asked.
I nodded again. I was lying that time.

“Tired?”

I nodded for the final time.

“Have a good flight, Sarah.”

“You too. And good luck out there.” I walked out, hung the bag with the rest of the items to be returned, and wandered the theater. I figured I would watch them all talk about the movie until it was time for me to go.

Everyone was in the large room relatively soon after I arrived to stand in the back. First the director, his assistant, then Greer, then her assistant, and then Matt. But as everything began, Matt leaned over to the microphone and said in his quick, impersonal manner,

“Chris Evans will not be joining us tonight, but he sends his apologies.”

At this, I was shocked. Not ten minutes before, he’d been so sweet and conversational, even more than I had been. I left the room since he was the only reason I was even there in the first place and walked to his dressing room. Maybe he’d gotten sick, maybe an emergency came up – I had no clue. But clearly something was wrong, and I just had to check in and see that he was alright.

He wasn’t in the room. I looked in Greer’s room, and he wasn’t there, either. I looked in every dressing room in that hall, looked backstage, looked outside, but I couldn’t find him.

Finally as I walked the ramp back to reenter the theater, I saw him. He was sitting in one of the hired cars, fingers sifting through his hair and a look on his face that I’d not seen before. I debated whether or not I should approach him, but before I could consciously conjure an answer, I was standing at his window, rapping softly.

It seems I startled him, but when he realized it was me, he smiled and rolled the window down. A light rain had begun to fall, and as I asked him what was wrong, he shook his head and gestured for me to walk around and get in the car with him. The rain was hitting him in the face, and unlike me, he didn’t seem to enjoy how that felt.

“I’m sorry to bother you, I was just wondering if everything was okay.”

He was breathing heavily, twirling his phone around in his hands. “Uh,” he said through staggered breaths, “No. Not really.”

“Anything you want to talk about?” I offered.

He avoided eye contact, a few more “ums” leaving his lips almost inaudibly. “I don’t know if it’s something I can really explain.”

“I’m sorry. I just don’t like seeing you upset, which you clearly are. Is it Greer?”

“No, no,” he answered quickly. “No, it has nothing to do with her. It’s just something that happens sometimes. Not often, thank God, but it happens.”

“What is it?” But as I asked I remembered his issues with anxiety. He’d even warned me about it indirectly a week before. So when he told me he’d had a panic attack, I wasn’t very surprised.

“I think I just haven’t been sleeping much, and then I had a rough night last night, and it all just sorta
caught up with me, ya know?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "I get that. I'm sorry."

"I just can’t get my heart to slow down," he chuckled, almost laughing. It sounded like one of those nervous laughs, one he let out only because he was struggling to control his emotions at all.

"Deep breaths?" I guessed. I felt so fucking inadequate.

"Yeah, I’ve been trying to do that. I mean, I have done it. I just keep getting all…" He made a motion with his hand around his head as if he were saying he was crazy. “Days like this fucking suck.”

"Do you want me to go?"

"No, definitely not. Talk to me."

"About what?"

He thought for a moment. “The farm. Tell me about the farm.”

“Okay,” I started hesitantly. “Um, well, I grow green beans and tomatoes, some herbs. The dill won’t stop growing, so my whole backyard smells like dill, but I guess there are worse things. And once I grew pumpkins. They turned out really good, but they were sort of hard to maintain, so I didn’t try this year. Uh…” I tried to think of something even mildly interesting, but I was obviously the most boring person on earth. “I don’t know. That’s about it, I guess.”

He leaned his head against the window and closed his eyes. “What town did you say you were from?” He asked quietly.

“Owatonna.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Well, it’s just over the state line, but it still gets plenty cold in the winter. We get a few blizzards every winter, yet it’s like no one ever sees it coming, you know? Everything closes down and everyone goes into a frenzy. But I think it’s worth it. It’s such a clean little place, small-town-like. There are about ten thousand people in the town and neighboring areas, but everyone still knows everyone else’s name. There’s definitely a city life, but it’s also a lot of farmland, and I have a place with a little under ten acres. My absolute favorite thing is to go outside towards the end of summer, lie in my hammock, and just stare up at the stars. It’s so clear. You can see everything.”

“Sounds gorgeous,” he whispered.

“It is. It’s amazing. I wish I could show you, because I can’t even begin to do it justice in how I describe it.”

“Well then maybe I’ll have to visit you some time.”

He and I both knew full well that that would never happen, but it was still sweet of him to say. “Yeah,” I said. “Maybe you will.”

He reached his hand over and clasped mine firmly, squeezing it while his eyes remained closed and his head still pressed against the window. After just a minute, he was asleep, and out of the corner of my eye, I could see a familiar figure approaching the vehicle.
Matt talked to our driver first, then glanced back and happened to see me just after I’d slipped my hand away from Chris’s.

“What the hell are you doing?” He spat. “Who told you you were allowed in here, huh?”

“He did,” I answered calmly. “But don’t worry. I’m leaving now anyway.”

After I stepped out, Matt went on about how crazy I must be, how he should report me to the others for stalking, how I had no business here and blah, blah, blah.

“Besides, you’ve got a shit ton to do now that Alex isn’t gonna be coming!” He finished.

“Wait, Alex isn’t coming? What do you mean?”

“I mean what I said. He isn’t coming.”

“Why not?”

“Do you just not check your messages or are you too stupid to understand them?” he pulled out his phone. “Look, this was what he texted us all.”

I read the mass text in shock:

I’m in the hospital. Food poisoning. I’ll catch up when I can. In the meantime Dixon has agreed to usurp my responsibilities.

“I never agreed to anything!” I rebutted. “I didn’t even know he was sick!”

“Well whether or not you knew anything or another, you’re working for Greer MacFarlane now. Your itinerary should have been emailed to you by now by her assistant, but if not I’ll make sure it is. Now get out of here and get on your flight before you make some major fucking mistake, okay?”

I felt like shit after Matt spoke with me. Matt always made me feel like shit. But rather than argue, or even try to understand how the hell I was going to work for both major stars on this tour, I just turned and left.

I don’t know what was going on with Chris. He’s a man’s man, big and strong, social butterfly it seemed. When he mentioned in passing a while back that he occasionally had issues with anxiety, I thought he was just joking, or making a mountain of a molehill. But now I knew there’s a side of him that no one sees. There’s a side of him that’s almost childlike, but handled with the wisdom of an adult. He fell asleep holding onto my hand, and I wasn’t sure how I was such a comfort. Maybe he was just that tired.

That had to be all it was.

Right?
Chapter 5

When we landed in Paris, I was immediately rushed to Louis Vuitton. There I had to pick up several accessories that Greer, who was to soon be their newest living advertisement, would be sporting throughout the next week. As soon as that was over, I met with a designer in a chic little shop to retrieve his latest creation for her to wear that evening at a party. And finally, before I could even attempt to settle into my hotel room, I had to coordinate a new wardrobe for Chris with the few items that I was given before the rest of his things were shipped on the back order from L.A.

I would need to dress her first, since she required more work, and then Chris. That meant that since they had to leave for the party at 6, that I would need to be in his room no later than 5, and hers no later than 3.

It was now 2:14, and I had just arrived at the hotel. I wished so badly that I might be able to enjoy the absolutely spectacular view of the city that awaited just outside my window, but that would have to wait, unfortunately. Now that I had the magnificent chartreuse and orange floral A-line cocktail dress, LV handbag, Louboutin heels, and designer jewelry on loan, I could prepare her. Without having had any real time to prepare myself at all.

I found her in her room, chatting away on her phone as she let me in. I waited for several minutes while she finished her conversation out of earshot in the bedroom, perusing her brand new LV luggage and the gorgeous clothes that she had only started to unpack. Everything about her seemed so perfect. I hated that.

Finally she emerged, smile on her face when she saw the adorable handbag she would use that night. She asked about my experience with the store, asked whether I’d chatted with anyone important, and then of course wondered aloud whether they’d made much mention of her. I answered as prompted, and then I unzipped the garment bag to show her the dress.

“Oh my god…”

“I know, right?” I smiled proudly. “I picked it out myself from everything he had made for you. Honestly, if I had someone making me custom couture clothing, I think I’d just die.”

She shook her head violently. “No, no, no. That wasn’t a good ‘oh my god.’” She walked over to it, fingering the hem of the dress with a look of disgust on her face. “This is hideous. I don’t do yellow.”

“It’s…it’s chartreuse…” I started weakly. “And it’s not as if the entire dress is that color. It’s got the orange color too, which I picked specifically because I think it will bring out your eyes.”

“No,” she said again. “No. Alex knows I can’t do this. Did he not tell you I won’t wear anything yellow?”

I could feel my heart racing, my palms getting sweeter by the second. “He didn’t tell me. I’m sorry.”

“Just get me something else, okay?”

“I-I didn’t choose anything else. This one was so pretty, I thought you’d be alright with it.”

“Pretty?” She howled, sitting at the vanity and brushing her long, auburn hair. “That’s the ugliest dress I’ve seen in a while. Stick to dressing guys, okay?”
It wasn’t my place to talk back to her the way I wanted to. Actually, I wanted to say “Are you fucking kidding me you prissy-ass piece of shit?”

But I didn’t.

“I could get you something different to wear from the collection you already have here,” I offered. “It just won’t be from the designer, and we have a contract with him. I think maybe we could negotiate, though, and if you wear something of his at another event, he prob—”

“Oh my god, I don’t care!”

She didn’t exactly yell at me, but there was no mistaking her frustration, either.

“I’ll just have a look in your closet then. In the meantime, if you want to start getting dressed, that would be a good idea.”

The dress was beyond gorgeous. And thinking of the way she would look in it… it was a stylist’s dream! It was my dream! She looked amazing in anything, even here in a robe without makeup. I thought – no, I was sure – that she would be able to appreciate the dress as well.

Evidently not.

Luckily, she had a simple navy blue dress in her closet that I thought would work well. Sure, it wouldn’t have the Wow Factor that the other did, but it was something. It was certainly better than nothing.

After she dressed, I began on her hair. I rolled the hot curlers through every lock, paying careful attention to her long layers. All the while, she answered phone call after phone call, and at last said to someone or another that she needed a new assistant because her current one was “completely useless.”

She let out a sigh and looked up at me in the reflection of the mirror. “I’m sorry. You must think I’m a bitch.”

“Oh, no. No, of course not.”

“With Alex gone and now Lucy fucking up… sorry… I need a new assistant, and that will be my fourth in as many months. This is frustrating!”

“I understand.”

“No you don’t,” she scoffed.

“I guess that’s true.” No, she wasn’t a bitch. But I didn’t like her.

I have to admit, though, that painting her eyes felt as intricate a procedure as sculpting a masterpiece. Her eyes were shaped like the wings of a bird, her lips like a butterfly, her cheekbones like waterfalls. Her features were delicate yet undoubtedly strong, and as I brushed the pale pink powder over her stark white skin, I couldn’t help but stop and smile to admire her beauty.

“What? Something wrong? I don’t have a pimple, do I?”

“Hm? Oh… no. No, you actually have perfect skin,” I told her, now working her lipstick. “What’s your secret?”

“Good genes,” she replied.
And by the way, no matter what any celebrity ever says, that is always the truth.

“Well you’re one of the lucky ones, then,” I smiled. “Now for the lashes, and we’re all set.”

She relaxed as I finished, and the final product only accelerated her natural beauty. I beheld the final result of her, dressed in a still lovely dress, all made-up and reminding me once more that I never had a chance with Chris if this was the kind of woman he was into.

“Oh by the way,” she said as I packed my bag. “There may, uh… be someone… here in my room with me through the rest of the week. I really hope I don’t need to tell you to be discreet?”

“Absolutely,” I assured her. “I won’t say a word.”

“Not to anyone,” she added. “Not to reporters, not to friends. Not even to other clients or whatever.”

“To no one. Promise.”

She didn’t seem relieved at my vow, but she sent me on my way with nothing more required. She wasn’t even slightly subtle about the fact that she didn’t want Chris to know about her person, whoever he was.

After I left, designer dress in hand, I thought of what a shame it was that no one would ever see the creation, or at least not on the one it was specifically made for. It would, I was sure, have an audience at some point, but on a lesser-known, no doubt. And when I got to Chris’s room just a few minutes later, he could see I was sad.

“It’s nothing,” I told him when, of course, he asked. “I’m just not very good at my job, it seems.”

“What are you talking about? You’re the best!”

“Well thank you for saying so, but apparently not.”

“G’s not giving you any grief, is she?”

“No, of course not.” I couldn’t tell him what I thought of her. “And honestly, working for her is going to be amazing for my resume.”

He smiled proudly, as if he had something to do with it. “So what’s going on?”

“Jetlag,” I answered. “I’ll be back on track soon.”

He stepped into his room to change, but with the door open as I sat in the living space, I could hear him continuing his conversation with me.

“You know what you need?” he said. “You need to get out. Don’t we all have the day off tomorrow?”

“You guys do. I have some shopping, but otherwise I’m not committed. Why?”

“You should go out tonight. Actually…” he paused, stepping out of the room buttoning his shirt and dressed otherwise only in his boxers and socks. “Come with us tonight.”

“Tonight?” My mind was still trying to recognize what was going on. Trying to remember what it was that I was even preparing them for.

“Yeah. The party.” He stepped back to his room. “There’s gonna be a shit ton of people there, most
of them boring as fuck. It’d be nice to have a normal person hanging around.”

“Am I a normal person?”

“Far as I can tell.”

“I don’t know… Am I really even allowed to do that sorta thing? I mean, isn’t that more for you, uh, normals?”

He laughed a little, stepping out now fully dressed. He looked so good – so fucking good – that I remembered why I preferred dressing men.

“The Converse,” I managed to say, gesturing to the shoes.

“Please come? Please?” His puppydog eyes were impossible to say no to.

“Fine. I have some calls to make, but if I get all of that done, I’ll come along.”

“No, no ifs. I can do my own hair, I can trim my beard, I can do all that crap. You go right now, make those calls, dress in something snazzy, and get ready to pick up a random Frenchman and have the fun you deserve.”

“Pick up a random Frenchman?”

“Yeah, you know. All that stuff they say about the French…”

“I don’t know about that,” I said. I probably blushed a little. “But it could be nice to have a few drinks and relax. And to have something to rub in Alex’s face when he gets back.”

“That’s the spirit! Now go on, and we’ll meet up at the party.”

“Okay!” I smiled excitedly, feeling the ever-growing butterflies accumulating in my stomach. “See you there!” I opened his door to leave, but before I’d even gotten more than five feet down the hall, he called out to me. “On second thought, why don’t you just meet me here? We can go down together.”

I found myself just stopped there, staring into his eyes, hating myself for having feelings for someone so completely unattainable. I wanted to say “HELL YES,” but I settled for “Sure.”

…

Of course I wore the dress. Someone had to.

My hips and thighs were bigger than they should have been for the dress, but thankfully it was forgiving in those areas. My waist just barely fit, and I honestly don’t know how. I was holding my breath to sit down in it, but I figured I’d just sit for as little time as possible. When I looked in the mirror, I was satisfied with how I looked, even if I wasn’t incredibly pleased. I didn’t like my arm fat and that way it seemed to pool at the bust of the dress, which was too tight for my boobs, but again, I managed. For a moment I considered wearing a cardigan or a jacket, but that was clearly never what the designer had in mind for this creation. And I wanted to give him something to be proud of. I couldn’t give him Greer, and I was a cheap knockoff as it was. I couldn’t insult him anymore than this.

I would have regretted saying yes to this if it didn’t mean extra time with Chris. Alex would chastise me when he caught up, but he wasn’t here now, so who gave a shit. I got to his door, knocked, and
waited for him to answer.

He didn’t.

Matt did.

“Oh, what the fuck do you want?”

I was speechless. I shook my head, turned around to leave, and headed back to the elevator. But then I remembered Alex. I thought about what he would do. He wouldn’t walk away silently.

“You know what? No.” I turned back on my heels and headed to the room again. “I’m here for Chris. He asked me to meet him here.”

“Bullshit.”

I pushed him aside, worked my way into the room, and sat on the couch in protest. “I’ll just wait here.”

At that moment, Chris came from the bedroom, and when he saw me…

I’m not saying he was attracted to me. I’m not saying he was looking forward to seeing me. I’m not saying I had any kind of effect on him at all.

But when he looked at me, his eyes grew to the size of quarters and his smile seemed a mile wide.

“Ready?” I asked.

He nodded, and I could see him calming down a bit. “Yup. We good, Matt?”

Matt looked his way and nodded politely. “All good. What’s going on here?”

“Going to the party,” he answered. “What are you up to?”

“I have a date,” he answered defensively. “I’ll see you here in the morning. Early.”

Chris and I walked out, headed to the elevator, and made our way downstairs. Neither of us spoke, though I had to sneak a few more glances. He was just so damned beautiful. He was a fucking god.

When we got into the car that was outside waiting for us, I expected more people. But there we were, just the two of us, riding in the back of a limo and enjoying the complimentary champagne.

“You look amazing,” he said, and I was so glad he finally spoke.

“Thanks. So do you. Compliments to your stylist.”

“She’s not so bad,” he winked.

Before the night went any further, I absolutely had to know that this wasn’t a date. “You know, it would be easier for me to meet someone if I was formally introduced, so if you actually happen to know someone who might be available here at this party…”

He smiled. “I don’t think I know any of the guys, but I’ll try to make fast friends with someone.”

“I’m not actually that eager,” I shrugged. “I’m just teasing.”

“You don’t have a boyfriend though, right?”
“Nope.” We’d been over this before.

“I know that this is extremely unprofessional, but—”

“I wouldn’t think of this as a professional venture right now,” I interrupted. “This is just two friends having a night out, right?”

He paused, but ultimately smiled. “Right. Friends.”

“So what were you gonna say?”

He took a long sip. “Eh, it can wait.”

“God, I hate when people do that.”

“Do what?” He asked, as if he didn’t know.

“When they start to ask something or say something that seems important, then chicken out at the last second. You know it’s all I’m gonna be thinking about, right?”

He nodded, shrugged, kicked back another swig. “Fine, fine. I was just gonna tell you that if you get hounded by anyone you don’t particularly favor, maybe we could work out a signal, and I can come get you out of it.”

“You would do that?” I asked.

“I do it all the time. It’s probably why most of my friends are female.”

I thought about it for a moment. “I don’t know. I don’t think it’ll be a problem. This sounds like a small party, and considering the kind of people who will be there, I’m not sure I’m gonna be the center of attention. Not by a long shot.”

“In that dress?” He said, hands open in admiration of it. “Everyone’s gonna notice you!”

“So you hate it, too?”

“Hate it? Nah, I don’t hate it. It’s just bright. Actually, I think it’s perfect on you. Brings out your eyes.”

Greer and I have exactly one thing in common, and that is the deep brown color of our eyes. My instincts were right, it seems.

“It was handmade for Greer,” I told him.

He looked it over again, not a hint of lust in his eyes the way it would be with most guys who looked a girl up and down like that. “Well I think maybe it’s better this way.”

“Yeah? So you don’t mind it?”

“Oh yeah, I totally hate it.”

If he were one of my friends from back home, I’d have punched him in the arm and told him to shut up in response to his sarcasm. But instead, I smiled. “Great minds think alike.”

We arrived at the hotel just a little bit late, which was precisely how one should arrive at a party. Even though it was in the penthouse of a 24-story building, we could hear the music from the ground
“Deep breaths,” he said as we headed to the elevator. I couldn’t tell if he was kidding or not.

I had heard that this would be a small party. But if this was their idea of a small one, I hoped I’d never be dragged to a “real” party. People were everywhere – laughing in corners as they watched something on an iPad, having drinks at a white marble bar, making out on couches (though… alright, to be honest this only happened once that I saw). Chris walked up there and was immediately pulled into a group of socialites. I could see Greer just inside the open patio talking to all of the men in the room. A celebrity heiress, one whose name I think I shouldn’t mention, was puking over the side of the building, then apologizing in broken French. And there I was in my loud dress without a bag to occupy my hands, so nervously wringing them instead as I looked for a seat.

“You’re new,” I heard behind me. He spoke in an accent, though not a French one. I didn’t know where he was from, but when I turned to look at him, I didn’t care. He was gorgeous.

“I am, yes,” I answered. Suddenly I could feel my heart beating at an untrackable pace. “I’m a guest of Chris Evans.”

“Oh?” He wandered around the couch, sitting beside me. “His girlfriend?”

“Girlfriend? No!” We stopped as a tray of hors d’oeuvres came our way, and both of us selected something. I don’t know what the hell mine was, but it had an olive in it. I hated olives, but I couldn’t just sit there holding it, so I popped it in my mouth anyway.

“So just a guest?” He continued. How could anyone make eating tiny pieces of raw meat look so tempting? “How long have you been in the business?”

“A while,” I mumbled, trying to chew the intolerable mouthful. “But I’ve only been working with him for a couple weeks now.”

“You two are filming a movie?”

“Press tour,” I corrected, then tried to swallow the god-awful thing.

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m his stylist—” I started, but I could feel my throat closing around the appetizer, my eyes watering, my lungs cursing the foreign object and forbidding it from entering.

“Oh my god,” I heard him say, more disappointed than worried. “Are you choking?”

I nodded furiously.

“Well don’t make a scene, there are people around.”

Really heartfelt. Thanks, mister.

I pressed my hands, fisted together, under my ribcage and forced myself to cough up the mess. By the time I caught my breath, Mystery Man was nowhere in sight. And I was there with a hacked-up piece of olive in my hand, wishing I’d never been born.

I knew that had been my one chance, and I blew it.

After a period of time that seemed like an eternity, I decided to find Chris and inform him that I was going to go back. I couldn’t stay here now, not after that. Not after not knowing who saw me do
how much of that, or worse yet, heard me coughing and spitting in that way. I’d been able to enjoy – and I use the word loosely – a good hour or so of the party. Now I would leave. And hopefully everyone I’d come across that night would forget I even existed.

I walked through the bar area, and I could see him in a corner sipping from a glass. People were everywhere, taking up as much space with their small bodies as they could to allow for their presence to be known. I tried slipping through, avoiding the urge to shove everyone aside in my haste. And when I finally got to him, he was talking to Greer. No big surprise.

But then I looked beside her. He was tall, dark, and handsome. He was smiling, his arm bent around Greer’s waist. He was Mystery Man, and he was Greer’s… person.

I hesitated to approach him further, but at this point, I had to leave. I tried sneaking behind Chris, thinking that maybe I could just tap his shoulder and let him know I was leaving. But then Mystery Man – not such a mystery anymore – caught sight of me. He smiled. I smiled back.

“Chris, I’m gonna—”

“Oh, hey! Hey, this is Sarah Dixon, my stylist! She’s the fucking best, you know? She’s the fucking… she’s the shit! She picked this out for me!” he pointed down at his outfit. “She’s a genius!”

Drunk Chris was very nice, but not exactly the person I felt comfortable ditching. It wasn’t that I didn’t think he’d be okay… he had teams of people there solely to make sure he was. But I thought about how we’d come here together, how even if he was drunk, he was saying some nice things to me. And then I thought about how staying might just bring me some stories Alex would kill to hear.

“We’ve met,” all three of us said in unison, and Chris thought that was just about the funniest thing he’d ever heard.

“Is that my dress?” Greer said.

I looked down at it. “No, not since you don’t wear yellow.” I was being coy. I thought she would appreciate that.

“That was designed for me. I was supposed to wear that tonight. And it’s chartreuse, not yellow. I would think you’d know that.”

I honestly didn’t know what to say. She’d hated that dress. She wouldn’t shut up about how much she hated it. I thought about Anastasia when Cinderella went to the ball in her sash.

“You guys don’t wear the same size,” Mystery Man said. “Maybe she had it altered?”

“I’m only one size bigger,” I responded defensively. “Maybe two. And anyway, I was under the impression that you hated this dress, Miss MacFarlane.” Alex told me how few people could call her Greer, and even if it was a mouthful, I was trying to respect that.

“I do, but that doesn’t mean you get to wear it. Look at you in it! It’s not even made for you!”

“Well I think she looks sweet,” Chris said. “Let’s all calm down and get more drinks.”

“When is Alex getting back?” She asked me.

“Day after tomorrow I think. So lucky for you, you won’t have to deal with me much longer.”

“She’s a mean drunk,” Chris said.
She didn’t disagree. And I think she was actually drunk, as they all seemed to be much faster than I’d seen any group able to get drunk in my entire life.

“It’s fine, seriously,” I lied. “I really did kind of screw up, and this is technically her dress, even if she didn’t like it this afternoon when I tried to get her to wear it…”

“Are you insulting my taste?” She asked flamboyantly, angry eyebrows and hands-on-hips in tow.

“Now let’s all calm down, alright?” Chris interrupted. “Why don’t we get you a drink, Dixon?”

I’d had a drink, and I didn’t particularly want another. But any excuse to have Chris escort me in a direction opposite Greer was a good one.

“You okay?” I asked him.

He shrugged, knocking back a long sip of something. “Sure. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Just… you know… him?”

“Him? Him who?” He looked in Greer’s direction. “Oh, you mean Henry? Why would I have a problem with Henry?”

I wanted to explain what I was sure he knew, but I didn’t. “It’s none of my business. Never mind.”

“You have to tell me! Didn’t we just have a discussion about this in the car?”

I sighed. He was right. “I just know how you feel about her, and I wasn’t sure if seeing him would be hard for you.”

“Why would it be h—- Oh… you think he and G are a thing, don’t you?” He let out a laugh.

I knew they were. Why was he laughing?

“Nah, that’s her cousin.”

“Chris, I’m telling you. I don’t know what they are now, but he’s not her cousin. Did she tell you he was?”

I could tell he was thinking for several seconds, his confusion obvious. “I don’t remember what she said.”

That wasn’t surprising. She’d probably been keeping it vague on purpose, mistaking Chris’s kindness for ignorance. “Just… be sure that he’s not with her if you have any more plans of fucking around with her.”

“Sarah…”

“Sorry.” Okay, that was out of place for me to say. “I’m just not sure I want to hear from Matt about how this will be my fault. Because you know he will find a way for this to be my fault.”

“Yeah, he really does hate you. What’s up with that?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

He looked over at them again, biting his lip. “You wanna know something? I hate parties. Because shit like this always happens, you know? Some social situation is going on, everybody’s just minding
their own business, and then bam!” He set his drink firmly on a table full of people neither of us knew. “Sooner or later there’s some sort of drama, and by the time it comes around I’m too confused or too drunk to participate in any of the fun stuff. This isn’t fun anymore. I wanna get back.”

It wasn’t the worst idea to get him back to his room before he said something or did something he shouldn’t have. Maybe by doing damage control, Matt would start to like me.

“Should I call our driver?” I asked. “I’ll go back with you.” I didn’t have much choice, I figured. After all, I was his guest.

“Nah, let’s get a cab. We call the driver, the driver calls Matt, Matt yells… I don’t wanna go through all that right now.”

We took an elevator down to the lobby, and as had been the case earlier, and as I had feared, neither of us spoke. I hailed a cab while he leaned against a lamppost trying not to puke, and once we were both in the cab, he complained about how hot he was. He was sweating, tore back the leather jacket he wore, and laid it on my lap. Considering the fact that I was wearing a strapless dress and the current temperature was closer to freezing than comfortable, I donned the jacket myself. He leaned his head on my shoulder and complained some more. I just wanted to go to bed.

Finally as we neared the hotel, his hand slipped into mine. He squeezed it tight, intertwining our fingers and causing my entire body to freeze in place. “You’re beautiful,” he whispered. “Seriously.”

He was more drunk than I had thought. Goddamn, it must have been longer than an hour that we’d been there.

“I don’t want you to be jealous of G. She’s beautiful, too, but…” I gave him my most threatening stare, waiting for him to understand that I needed him to just stop. “But you…” he continued, staggering over each word, still too sick to sit up straight, “You’re a different kind of beautiful from her. You’re like… normal.”

“That’s not a very nice thing to say,” I told him. “I sound so generic.”

“No, no, no,” he insisted. “I mean it in the exact opposite way. You’re pretty. But like… like when a guy thinks of the girls of his dreams, you know, the girl he wants to spend his life with? A guy can’t just think up someone like her. She’s not something a guy sees and thinks, ‘That’s the girl I always imagined.’ They look at her and think she’s hot, ‘cause she is. But with you, a guy doesn’t think that.”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to cry or slap him but I know it took everything in my power not to do both in that exact moment. We got to the hotel, I paid the cabbie, and hand-in-hand (because he wouldn’t or couldn’t let go), I took him to his room.

“Are you gonna be okay getting dressed and stuff?” I asked. “Because if not, I can call Matt.”

“Ugh, no. I don’t want to see him.”

“Well then I’m gonna leave you here to manage.” I helped him with the key, practically pushed him inside, and walked away.

“Wait!” he called, and even though I shouldn’t have, I turned around.

“What?”

“Are you mad at me?”
I released a sarcastic laugh, but there wasn’t much I could do to be subtle right now. He wasn’t gonna get it. “You just told me I’m pretty, but I’m not hot.”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Doesn’t matter, Chris. It’s a shitty thing to say.”

“Oh man, I feel like an asshole…”

“Good!” I replied, walking closer to him. “I know I told you that we could talk to each other about whatever tonight because we weren’t going to be professional, but I’m thinking now that maybe we should keep it professional. No more deep talks, no more drinking together, no more complimenting me and then taking it back like a fucking asshole. Okay?”

I decided I wasn’t going to feel bad for saying these things. It didn’t matter how big and puppy-like his eyes got, or how disappointed he seemed with himself. I had said how I felt, and I wasn’t going to take it back.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “I didn’t know it sounded that way. I guess you’re right.”

“I know I’m right,” I responded quickly. And now we were standing there in the threshold, my hands crossed over my chest, his hands in his pockets, the jacket overwhelming me, and sweat stains peeking out from under each of his arms.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said finally. “I have to drop some things off in the afternoon.”

I didn’t leave right away. His eyes, so much clearer than they’d ever seemed before, were looking straight down at me. There was something pitiful about him. Something sweet.

I backed away, walked back the way I came, and didn’t look back. I had made that one mistake I told myself I’d never make. I’d let someone get in the position to actually hurt me.

And he did.

…

The morning brought me a brief moment of clarity. Though I was still upset at what he’d said, I decided that maybe I had been a bit harsh. Maybe his being drunk caused him to say those things. And so what if that’s what he thought of me? I can’t be mad because a guy doesn’t find me attractive, can I?

All I had to do that day was pick up the back order that had arrived during the night, do just a little bit of shopping, and then deliver the clothing. And even though I told myself the night before that I was done pining for someone who obviously saw me as nothing more than a barely pretty face, something in me still couldn’t wait until I got to see him.

It was well into the afternoon before I was able to return to the hotel. Greer was absent from her room when I arrived, as was her person. I promise I wasn’t snooping on purpose when I noticed the name CARSON, HENRY on the luggage, and assumed that was his full name. He had been there, or at least some man had. That much was evident in the small collection of men’s suits hanging beside her gowns in the closet.

With a shudder, I left the room. I couldn’t possibly allow myself to be repulsed by her actions. I mean after all, he was supposedly her boyfriend from back home, and after all, what she does in her private time is her own business. And then I found myself at Chris’s door, knocking. When no
answer came, I let myself in.

I didn’t see him around, but I called his name anyway. I wheeled the rack of clothing into his sitting room, opened the door to his bedroom, and ventured straight through the suite until I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye.

“I’m sorry,” I told him. “I didn’t know you were here.”

He rolled over in the bed, half-clad in bedsheets but fully clothed. “No, I’m sorry. I knew you were coming, so I shouldn’t have tried to take a nap right now anyway.”

“You can go back to sleep,” I said. “I’m just bringing your clothes.”

He sat up in the bed and rubbed his eyes. “What time is it?”

I looked at my watch, then continued hanging clothes on the rack. “Almost 3.”

“I only wanted to lie down for a few minutes,” he groaned. “I thought I set my alarm.”

“You in a hurry?” I asked. As I spoke, I knew my tone was far more harsh than it should have been, but in a way I hoped he’d notice that. I hoped he’d say something.

“No, not particularly. I just didn’t wanna oversleep or else I won’t be able to sleep tonight.”

“Still sleeping off last night?”

He hesitated. “That, and jetlag. And… about last night, I know I was a dick. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” My answer was easy and short and not entirely true.

“No, it’s not. And please, give me a minute to just say something?”

I hung up the last sweater, sighed deliberately, and turned to him. “Really not necessary.”

“Yes it is. Please. One minute to talk uninterrupted, and if you’re still pissed at me after that, I’ll never bring it up again.”

I braced myself against the door of the closet, looked at him still seated in the center of his bed, and nodded. “Go ahead.”

“I had this friend once,” he started. “She was amazing. I’d known her for forever, and we were like best friends, ya know? And we’d been friends for years, and one day I just looked at her, and I thought, why am I not with this girl? What’s wrong with me?” He shifted to the edge of the bed. “And every time I knew I was gonna see her that day, I told myself I was gonna ask her out. And then I’d see her, and she was just so… perfect. I thought she was too good for me, so I never got up the nerve to ask. And then she had to go on this trip, and I didn’t see her for months.”

I shuffled my feet. He needed to bring this conversation around to me soon or I was going to just leave.

“When she came back, and after weeks and weeks of us trying to work out a good time to see each other, we finally met up. And she tells me she’s engaged. And the guys she’s with, I met him, and he’s awesome. I know he deserves her. And to this day, even though I don’t have feelings for her anymore or anything, I still think of her as the one that got away. And I’ve dated a little bit since her. I’ve even fallen in love. But every time I meet someone, I think about her – her name was Stacy, by the way – and I think of Stacy, and I think of that rush that she used to give me every time I saw her.
And if I don’t get that kind of rush with a girl I’m dating, then I know she’s not right for me.”

“What’s your point?” I finally asked.

“My point is that when I think of her, I don’t think about how beautiful she was, or how funny she was, or how smart she was. I mean, she was all of those things, but so are lots of girls. I think about the rush I got whenever I saw her. And there are very few girls who have that effect. And you’re one of those girls.”

I honestly didn’t know what to say. I still don’t know exactly how I felt when he told me that. I was just… breathless.

“So if it sounded like I was comparing you to G, or like I was saying you’re not hot, that’s not what I was doing. I was trying to put something into words when I was too drunk to remember a good third of my vocabulary.”

I nodded. I didn’t know what else to do.

“So… I’m sorry again. Please let’s just forget this whole thing, okay?”

I couldn’t forget he said that. I could never forget that.

“Forgotten,” I lied.

A silence fell between us. I was still where I was, and he was where he was, and we were just so quiet. I know what I wanted to do. But what I wanted to do was unethical.

“Everything’s in here for the week,” I spoke at last, somehow finding my voice. “This grey suit here on the end is for tomorrow’s press event. I’ll come by around six in the morning to do your hair.”

“Are you busy for the rest of the day?”

“This was the last thing,” I told him. “I think I might Skype with Alex and see if he knows when he’s arriving, but that’ll be later. Why?”

“Because I need coffee. And I don’t want to go alone.”

Coffee.

“You look like a hobo,” I told him. “You don’t have a problem going out looking like that?”

“Not if you don’t mind being seen with a guy who looks like me.”

Who in their right mind would?

“I think I can manage to put up with it.”

He grabbed his key card from beside the bed, his jacket and ball cap from the top of the dresser, and began walking toward the door. “Let’s go.”

And just like that, I’d fallen for the guy all over again.

I’m such a fucking idiot.
He seemed to know his way around the city pretty well. We soon came upon a small café; a place where he could sit in relative anonymity even in a city so big. He ordered something stronger than anything I’m used to, and I ordered the closest thing to a caramel frappuccino that existed on their menu.

He and I sat in the corner, a habit of his I suppose. Outside, there fell a mist-like rain that reminded me of spring back home. And he looked out through the open door as the street began to shimmer, and he smiled.

I realized very quickly that he could take pleasure in such seemingly insignificant things. He wanted to know about my home, about my cat, about my family. He listened to me as I explained dull detail after dull detail. I talked about how we were anticipating a heavy snowfall in the coming winter since the two previous had been so light in comparison to others. We sat there for thirty minutes talking about the weather, comparing Minneapolis to Boston, and arguing why the Twins are better than the Red Sox in almost every way.

Of course, he offered the opposite opinion. But his opinion was wrong.

After we’d talked the hell out of weather and such, we found a silent patch of time that sneaked up on us unexpectedly. Silence bothers me – it always has – so I needed to say something.

“So, okay…” I started. “You told me a little bit about a girlfriend you had, or I guess she wasn’t a girlfriend, but you know. Anyway…” I looked up at him to make sure that he was alright with where we were headed in this conversation, and he seemed to be. “Are you dating anyone right now? I mean, are you and Greer actually dating, or what? I’m curious and, I have to admit, totally confused.”

He smiled a little. “No, we’re not dating. I can’t call it dating.” I watched as he ran his finger over the handle of his mug. Maybe he was nervous. Maybe he was uncomfortable. Maybe she was a comforting thought for him. I don’t know. “We have fun. We – we fuck sometimes. But we’re not putting a label on it.”

“Do you want to?”

“Are you asking if I want to be in a real relationship with her?” I nodded. “I don’t know. I used to, but lately it feels like there’s just nothing between us. I don’t know what’s been going on.”

“So you’re not interested in her anymore?” I guess there was probably a tinge of hope in my voice, no matter how I tried to disguise it.

“You’re using a lot of different terms,” he said. “Interested in, in a relationship with, dating. The only way I think of it is as what it is.”

“So what is it?” I had to ask.

“We started sleeping together while we were doing the movie. And then she told me that she didn’t want to do it anymore because she met someone, and I told her that was fine. I told her that we were just fooling around anyway and that she didn’t owe me any explanation or anything.”

“And I assume you weren’t okay with that?”
He thought for a moment. “I think I wanted to be. I wanted to, but we were always together. And then this press tour started, and we never had a discussion about it. We just started… doing it again!”

He was almost laughing about it, and I had to laugh along. “So, what? She just came to your room one day and jumped your bones?”

“Nah, we had to meet at an office to talk about travel arrangements and such, and they made the mistake of leaving us alone for ten minutes, and—”

“In the office?” I asked in shock. “Are you fucking serious?”

“I swear it just happened! I don’t know how!”

“I think you know how…”

“Yeah, but I mean we literally didn’t say two words about it. We looked at each other, and next thing I know I’m bending her over the desk.”

“I didn’t need to know that.”

He chuckled, took a sip of coffee, and then looked at me thoughtfully, obviously waiting for my next word.

“Are you in love with her?”

I said it before I came up with the good sense to tell myself not to say it. I asked myself if I even really wanted to know, or if I was only asking to fill the silence. Either way, he answered.

“No. No, I don’t think so.”

I shouldn’t have cared, but I did. I was so happy. So fucking happy.

But then he continued.

“Maybe we will one day. Who knows? I think with us, we need to take it slow. I think maybe that’s why it’s a good thing that she and I haven’t been together in a couple weeks.”

“Well, whatever works for you,” was all I could say. “I wish you guys the best, whatever you decide.”

“What about you? How’s your love life?”

“Nonexistent,” I answered. “And complicated, and full of long, boring stories which, God knows, we’ve had enough of today.”

“But you’re such a great person. I just don’t get it.”

“You don’t get why I have bad luck with guys?”

“Just in general,” he said. “Why don’t you date more? How?”

“I’m not sure I should get into details.”

“I want to know.”

“Well believe it or not,” I started, and I couldn’t believe I was saying it. “I was married.”
First, his eyes opened in surprise. But then I could see how uncomfortable he felt when he started to piece that together with things I’d told him before about my only serious relationship.

“We were high school sweethearts. Actually, we met in junior high, but we didn’t date for real until freshman year. We were just inseparable,” I gushed. “We fell in love, like, immediately. And then we got married two weeks after graduation.”

He smiled, scratching his beard and leaning forward in his seat. “That’s adorable.”

“Now, we were dirt poor. I mean, we had days where we weren’t sure where our next meal was gonna come from. We were paying our own way through college, both of us working full-time, living with his parents. And finally, finally, we scraped together enough money to buy the little farm. And we moved in at the absolute worst time of year – middle of winter. January. It’s negative twenty every night before the wind chill, ice and snow everywhere, blizzards falling every other weekend. And so the first night I slept there, he was stuck back at his parents’ house. And the big dummy…” I stopped myself to try not to cry. “He thought it would be so sweet to show up at the farm house in the middle of the night with a bundle of flowers and surprise me.”

Chris waited as I made sure I was ready to continue. He reached his hand across the table and rested it on mine.

“As soon as I heard the sirens on our road, I knew what had happened. They found the bouquet in the back seat, and he had been in the process of texting me that he would be home in ten minutes. And somewhere during that text, he slipped on the ice and ended up flipped over and thrown from the car. They said he died quickly. That’s really the only good thing.”

“I’m so sorry,” Chris said softly. “Wow.”

“It has been a long time,” I told him. “I don’t talk about it, but not because it’s hard. It’s just a part of my life that I’m past now.”

“Yeah, but it’s still a big deal. And I can see why you haven’t dated since then.”

“I’ve dated,” I told him. “I just haven’t had a serious relationship. I keep waiting to meet someone who makes me love them as much as I loved Luke, and I haven’t had that yet.”

He didn’t say anything. He just nodded. I was grateful for someone who listened to me without immediately turning the conversation around to themselves.

“The longest relationship I’ve had since then lasted about two months. I really liked him, and he was very good to me, but there was something missing, you know? Kinda like you were talking about. With Luke, I knew the day that I met him in seventh grade that I’d marry him one day. I didn’t feel that with him.”

“Well maybe that’s not how it always works,” he said. “Maybe you don’t need to find someone you love more, just someone you love better. Someone who gives you everything Luke gave you and more. Because whoever the next guy is, he’ll also be able to give you that feeling that it’s okay to move on and be happy again with someone else.”

“I’m happy being single.” I felt I always had to tell people this. Like it’s impossible to be single and happy.

“I know, but I mean specifically with someone. Moving on is hard enough when it’s just a breakup. I can’t begin to imagine how it is for you.”
“Okay, okay, enough of the pity party. I really am fine.”

He smiled. “Okay. Good.”

We let the quiet return, this time welcomed even for me. Outside, the rain had started falling even harder, and passersby in raincoats and umbrellas mimicked a scene out of a fantastic Hepburn film. Paris. Rain. The most attractive man I know sitting in a twenty-by-twenty café drinking the most delicious coffee I’d ever had. And he smiled at me. He smiled at me a lot.

“Must be nice to get away, huh?”

He nodded. “I left my phone in my room on purpose. I know Matt’s gonna kill me, but I don’t care.”

“He won’t kill you. He needs the job. He’ll kill me, but that would just be for fun.”

“I wish I knew why he hated you so much.”

“It’s okay,” I assured him. “I can deal with him.”

“I have no doubt! I’m sure you can hold your own against most people.”

“How long has he been your assistant?”

“About two years. Right after Rebecca resigned.”

I’d heard of this Rebecca person, but not from him. I’d read her name a couple years before. She had been a rumored girlfriend of his. I could have gone into that with him, I’m sure, but we were really running short on time. Even though neither of us had anything else to do that day, I had to call Alex and he had to get back to his phone to let everyone know he wasn’t dead.

“Well if you’ve put up with him for two years, I think I can put up with him for two more weeks.”

“He’s very organized, and he’s the best at getting me going when I’m not in the mood to do everything I have to do.”

“Then he sounds like a good fit for you.”

He agreed, and after another minute, Chris left to pay for our coffees and grab a pastry from the booth. “I know people who will kill me for eating this, but you had to have one. And I knew if you were gonna have one, I was gonna have to have one, and so I will just blame this on you. Matt already hates you. I figure my nutritionist might as well, too.”

We stood nibbling at the snack in the narrow doorway as we watched the rain, as if watching it would make it stop enough for us to leave. But after a moment, Chris simply slipped out of his jacket, tossed it over my head, and walked outside. I lifted it up enough to watch where he was going, and with his hands deep in pockets he raced across the street to stand under an eave. He stopped to turn around and watch me, and I followed – though much slower – and rejoined him across the street.

“Don’t get that wet,” he said. “It cost me a fortune.”

I looked at him in shock. “You’re the one who threw it on top of my head, you big—”

“Totally kidding!” he laughed. “Wow, you are extremely gullible!”

“Well it’s not my fault. I handle clothing for a living, and I know that sometimes you have to be
careful with certain materials. If this really was an expensive jacket…”

“Nah, I’ve had it forever. I’m not even sure it’s mine. I don’t remember where I got it from.”

When we got back to the hotel, and after we’d found our way up the elevator, we stopped on my floor and he walked me to my door.

“Thanks for the coffee,” I told him. “It was nice getting to know you. Maybe you’re not such an asshole after all.”

“Maybe,” he smiled. “And thank you for coming. I’m really glad we got a chance to talk.”

I slid the key card and opened my door, and he held it open for me while I entered. “Want a drink?” I asked him. “I may or may not have a couple of bottles from the limo tucked in that jacket of yours from last night.”

He laughed, looked at his watch, and shook his head. “Nah, not tonight. Maybe tomorrow night? I know we have an early day tomorrow, but I can keep the night free for you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he shrugged. “Why not? You’re fun and you’re nice and… I don’t know. You’re kind of peaceful. Like a break from the people I love but that I’m so used to working with. You’re more like my friends from back home, you know?”

I leaned against my doorframe, his hand bracing the metal beam beside me. I purposely stood close enough to him that our arms were touching, and that I could smell the rain still dripping from his hair. “That’s really sweet of you to say,” I told him, almost whispering. It seemed he always rendered me speechless.

“So tomorrow night?” he confirmed.

I nodded.

He leaned forward, his arm reaching out, drawing closer to my waist. I stopped breathing for a second. Was this really happening? Was this another dream? As his eyes looked into mine, his body, wet and sloppy yet still somehow perfect, drew closer to mine, I couldn’t hold back anymore. I didn’t think about it. I didn’t take a second to gather my thoughts. I went in for that something, that one special something I had waited for so long. So what if he carried a torch for Greer? So what if Matt hated me, if people would hate me for doing this? Screw them. Screw them all.

I leaned my head, lips first, closer to meet his, and I closed my eyes as softly, sweetly, my mouth, only slightly opened, landed…

…On his chin.

Wait… what?

I opened my eyes, and there I was, lips and a little bit of tongue settled on the bottom of his face. And there he was, his hand on the doorknob, his body language now clearly pointing to the fact that he wasn’t coming in for a kiss. No, no. He was closing my door for me.

I think his intentions were simply to keep me from being embarrassed as he very quickly gave me a goodbye peck on the cheek. Too late, Christopher. Too late.
I watched the door close, and a sickening feeling, a nausea like none other, instantly socked me in the gut. I fell to the floor, not even feeling the pain from my ass hitting the carpet as I gave in to absolute destitution.

Well, that was embarrassing.
Chapter 7

I could have died. I could have absolutely died.

I sat there on the floor in a heap for longer than I can recall. In the back of my mind, I knew I still had to call Alex, but every time I tried to move, I couldn’t help but think how comfy this carpet seemed to be, and how nice it would be to morph into a piece of the fibers so that I would become something incapable of feeling everything I was feeling right now.

When finally I found it in me to get up and get on with my night, I could only send Alex an email. I didn’t explain what happened – I vowed I would never tell him – but I did ask when he’d be back. The sooner the better, as far as I was concerned. With both of my clients due at early interviews, I would have to be up long before dawn, and that didn’t appeal to me in the least at this point.

I thought that if I could make myself cry, I could rid myself of that uncomfortable, shaky feeling that happens when you’ve made a complete ass of yourself. But then, if I cried, I would wake up all puffy, and that’s not acceptable. So long story short, I was fucked in all ways but the good ones.

The only solution was to talk to myself. Naturally.

I reasoned that since he hadn’t said anything to me after the kiss/hug/most embarrassing moment of my life/career/anyone’s life, that must mean he didn’t even realize what I was doing. Maybe he just thought that was how I kissed on the cheek. Maybe he thought it was some weird cultural custom, or that no one had ever properly taught me how to kiss someone on the cheek. Maybe he thought it was hilarious, and not at all stupid or sad or any of the things I felt it was. And maybe he just didn’t say anything because he didn’t want me to feel bad.

But…

Then maybe the reason he didn’t say anything was that he couldn’t think of anything to say that wasn’t rude or demeaning or a nice way of saying, “I’m going to have you fired, you creepy piece of shit.”

And as I talked to myself, and as the evening turned to night, and night became the witching hour, and the witching hour led to the prequel of the dawn, I knew I hadn’t really resolved anything. I was only making things worse.

And so without sleeping, I got out of bed, took the longest shower I’d taken in almost three weeks, and cried just enough to let the emotion out, but not enough that those little red marks I get on my temples when I cry would show.

I grabbed Greer’s things first. It was almost five now, and I was sure that whatever assistant had been found for her had woken her up and shooed her Mr. Carson out of the room, or at least out of sight. At least I hoped so. I had enough to deal with without adding her and her person – and who he was to her exactly was still something of a mystery – to the mix.

I knocked. After only a second, Greer answered. She looked more beautiful than anyone should be allowed to look at that hour, and to my surprise, she smiled and welcomed me inside her suite. She pulled her pink silk robe tight around her slender waist and walked to the bedroom. “I’ll be right back, hon. And do you think I could wear my hair up today?”

“Yeah,” I answered. “Sure.” I hung the dress beside the vanity and her shoes in front of her chair, laid out my bag of tricks, and waited for her.
“Ah, Sarah!” I turned when I heard my name, and noticed Henry there emerging from the bedroom. “It’s Sarah, right?”

“It is. Henry?”

“That’s right.” He was lounging in flannel trousers and a plain white t-shirt, and he looked somehow more handsome this way than he had looked the other night in his $3,000 suit. To me, this is always when men are most handsome, for some reason.

“I’m just waiting,” I told him, standing awkwardly at my station while he circled me like a lion at prey. “Waiting for Gre – for Miss McFarlane to come out here and get ready.”

“I know,” he answered. “She’s just having a shower. You could sit and talk with me, if you’d like to.”

“Oh, uh… no thanks.” I knew if I did, I would regret it for one reason or another.

“Suit yourself.” He reached for a pack of cigarettes and lit one, dramatically puffing the smoke into the air and allowing it to fill the relatively small space. I coughed a little because I couldn’t help it, and I looked over at the no smoking sign prominently displayed over the closet. It was in French, of course, but it was obvious what it said.

“I won’t tell if you won’t tell,” he winked.

I was already sick of him.

I never thought I’d be relieved to see Greer, but when she joined us, letting her damp hair down from the towel atop her head, I smiled in relief, and I offered her the chair so that we could get this all over with.

“Honey, I told you I don’t want you doing that in here,” she told him. “I need to return this dress after I’m done, and if anything happens to it, I’ll have to pay a lot of money. Isn’t that how it works, Sarah?”

I agreed.

“Nothing’s going to happen to it!” He insisted. “I’m all the way over here!”

“Well I’d feel better if you’d leave,” she told him adamantly. “So why don’t you go down and smoke on the patio outside, and maybe grab me something for breakfast. Rebecca’s not going to arrive until after my first interview, and I’m hungry. So until then, you’re my new assistant, okay, Love?”

“Wait, Rebecca?” I asked. It couldn’t possibly be the same Rebecca… the one who’d worked for Chris. The rumored lover. Rebecca was a very common name, after all, and what were the odds? It would be the biggest coincidence on earth that this girl he’d just mentioned to me in passing the day before should return to work for Greer.

“Yeah, you know her? She used to work for Chrissy.”

Oh my god.

“I’ve heard only good about her,” I said. And it was true. “I’m glad you were able to find someone new.”
“So go on,” she repeated to Henry. “Get going. I’m hungry!”

He moved over to us, leaned forward to kiss her cheek, then slipped into shoes and left the room. As soon as he did, Greer looked at my reflection in the mirror and asked how Chris was doing.

“He seems good,” I said. “I saw him a little bit yesterday. He was tired, but he’s alright. Why?”

“I just wasn’t sure how he was doing with the whole… well, anyway. I guess you don’t really know everything about us, so I don’t know why I’m bringing it up.”

I didn’t answer. How could I?
“Henry and I have been friends for ages,” she offered.

Again, I stayed silent.

“Yeah, I know what you think. You think I’m a cheater or something. You think I’m just playing Chrissy, don’t you?”

God, what I would have paid for her to stop fucking calling him Chrissy…

“No, no, no. What you do in your own time and in your personal life makes no difference to me at all, Miss McFarlane.”

“It does,” she said. “Don’t lie. You’ve got your sense of loyalty with him, I can tell. And you’re judging me for having someone else in my life even though he and I were fooling around, too, right?”

I turned on the hair dryer, held it close to her head, and tried not to brush too hard.

She shut up about it all as I finished her hair. I wished that either she’d let it go entirely and believe me when I said I didn’t care (so what if it was a lie?) or that she would stop defending her actions. But complete silence, I decided, was acceptable. I waited for her to dress before I applied her makeup, and when she sat back down – namely when I started on her lashes – she spoke again.

“Are you and Chris fucking yet?”

I stopped what I was doing. “Why would you ask that?”

“Because it happens with every girl he works with sooner or later. Every single one. It’s only a matter of time.”

“Well I don’t know why you would assume that about me. I like to conduct myself a little more professionally than that.”

“Are you saying that people who sleep with their coworkers aren’t professional?” She asked, one lashed eye open while the other remained closed, waiting for me to finish my job.

“Not in every case, no,” I answered. “But if you think that someone who’s only known him a few weeks would jump in bed with him simply because I could, then you’re wrong. There are rules against that kind of thing.”

“Unwritten rules,” she corrected. “I know the game.”

“Okay, fine. Unwritten rules. But I still like to abide by them if I can, and in this case, it’s no problem. You’ll be glad to know I haven’t even had opportunity. He hasn’t asked, he hasn’t hinted, and he’s…” I hesitated, continuing my work on her before I finished. “He’s stuck on you pretty
She seemed disappointed, but it was hard to tell for sure. “He’s gonna need to get over that,” was all she said.

And that seemed as final as anything to me.

“Have you informed him of that?” I asked. I figured we were way past boundaries now, so why the hell not ask?

“I told him I’m not looking for a relationship. That seems to be what he’s after.”

“Does he know about your… temporary roommate?”

“I don’t know what he knows,” she said, seemingly pissed off now. “It shouldn’t be that I have to write everything out for him.”

“I agree, but if he thought that you guys were exclu—”

“You know, none of this is any of your business. I don’t need to talk to you about this and then have you talking to him like we’re in middle school. I can handle everything myself.”

“Apparently not, if you can’t even tell him that you’re sleeping with someone else.”

“You better watch what you say to me!” She almost shouted. “I could have you fired!”

“I know you could,” I replied calmly, finishing her makeup and beginning to fold up my bags. “But after today, I don’t work for you anymore, and Chris won’t let them fire me while I’m working for him.”

“Sure he won’t,” she scoffed. “Not until he’s done with you. So I guess you should keep your legs closed if you still want to keep working.”

“That’s never been a problem for me, Mac,” I assured her. “Anything else I can do for you before I leave?”

She looked at me crossly, and I avoided eye contact. I could stand up for myself, but beyond that I wasn’t very brave.

“No,” she said, now resigned to the situation. “You can go.”

I closed the door behind me, taking a deep breath and trying not to cry. It seemed crying was my go-to reaction lately, whether I was scared or worried or even happy. Usually I could let myself cry as much as I needed, but not when I had to go to Chris’s room directly after. I let the tears fall as I took the elevator to the next floor up, but I was already running behind as it was. My only option now was to hope he didn’t notice.

And he didn’t.

When he came from the bedroom dressed in the grey suit I’d set out for him the day before, I knew I had minimal work to do to get him in shape for the press conference. I combed his hair as he went on about the funniest story he’d ever heard from Matt about another person staying in the hotel, and I wished I was listening better. But I wasn’t. Chris fucked every girl who worked for him. I was nothing special. He hadn’t even hit on me yet.

I wasn’t even special enough to be nothing special.
“We still on for tonight?” He asked finally.

“Tonight?”

“Yeah. You know, drinks and stuff in your room.”

“Drinks and stuff?” It was coming back to me now.

“Well by stuff, I mean… I don’t know. I could get takeout or something.”

“Oh, right,” I answered absently. “Yeah, if you want. I don’t have anything to do, so I’ll be in there.”

“Did you ever get around to talking to Alex to see when he’s coming back?”

“I sent him an email. I would have Skyped with him but by the time I got around to the whole idea of contacting him, I was too tired.”

“Yeah, and I know he would have kept you up,” he laughed. “He’s a talker, that’s for sure. I guess that’s why he and G get along so well.”

“Is she much of a talker?”

“Well yeah.” He answered as if I should have known just as well as he did. “She talks all the time. About everything. I think that’s one of the funniest things about her.”

“She didn’t talk to me much, except about-” Nope, couldn’t tell him that. “Fashion,” I lied.

“Well if anyone knows fashion, I guess it’s her.”

No, it’s the people who style her. That woman didn’t know couture from cottage cheese.

“Anyway, she’s got the most amazing laugh. Have you ever heard it?”

“Can’t say that I have,” I said. “But she’s perfect in every other fucking way, so why the hell wouldn’t she also have the perfect laugh?”

The look he gave me showed that he wasn’t sure if I was being sarcastic or actually wondering.

I backed away from him. “You’re gonna need another trim job on that beard tomorrow. It’s really starting to fill in.”

“Aren’t we leaving tomorrow?”

“Yeah, but not until the evening. And I think besides a couple of fittings, you’re not otherwise engaged, but of course Matt would know better than I would.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” he responded. “So what time?”

I thought about it as I packed my things. “I don’t know for sure. I’ll check my schedule and let you know when you come by tonight, okay?”

“Okay,” he smiled. “And just so I know, what kind of stuff do you like?”

“Excuse me?”

“Well I don’t want to get any food you’re not good with, so…”
“Oh, oh… um… I don’t care. Anything. I miss American food, so if you find a burger joint —”

“Done,” he decided firmly. “Burgers and fries.”

“I’ll see you tonight, then. Seven o’clock?”

He nodded, looking himself over in the mirror. “Looking forward to it, Dixon.”

...

Even as I entered my room, my computer was alerting me of a call. Of course it was Alex, and I welcomed him. I thought I’d have a more difficult time with it this morning, but I didn’t. I actually wanted to talk. I wanted to tell him about Chris, and yes, even the embarrassing stuff. But mostly I needed to tell him about Henry, and needed to know what he’d do if he were in my shoes.

“Don’t tell him,” he said. “Absolutely not. It’s none of his business.”

“But Chris has a right to know that she’s seeing someone else, doesn’t he?”

“Honey, there are rules. And rule number one is…”

“Privacy is paramount,” I sighed.

“Exactly. Greer’s actually a very cool person, you just hate her because Chris likes her.”

“That’s not true!” I affirmed. “I don’t hate her. I just think she and Chris shouldn’t be canoodling if she’s got another guy, too. That’s all.”

“Maybe that’s just what works for them,” he said. “Maybe they’re into polygamy.”

“Well that never works out.”

“And you’ve always been monogamous?”

“Always,” I replied proudly.

“So tell me about all of your successful, monogamous relationships. Go on. I’m listening.”

“Fine. Point taken.” I propped my elbows up on the desk, and my face fell into the palms of my hands as I gave up. “But… what if Chris doesn’t even know?”

“Then it’s his problem, not yours.”

He was right. God, I hated that.

“What do you think of her, though?” he asked.

“Greer? I don’t know… she’s sort of evil, but at the same time, she’s… I don’t know what to call it?”

“Charismatic? Addictive?”

“Sort of. She has a certain charm, I guess. She’s beautiful, but like the kind of beautiful that could hypnotize you.”

“I couldn’t agree more. So you see why I adore her, even if you don’t feel the same.”

“Greer MacFarlane was created by God, molded from the marble gates of Heaven, and placed on
this earth to be adored. Plain and simple. Even I can’t deny that.”

“There’s a reason they call them idols,” he said.

I was done talking about Greer. Every time I thought about her, I realized how hopeless I was. Of course the professional in me decided long ago that I wouldn’t sleep with Chris no matter what. But then Reality came by and slapped me in the face with a jolly “not even if you tried.”

He told me that he’d meet me in London the day after next, and that since I only had to send a few dresses back, it was unlikely I would have to have another close conversation with Greer. That was a very satisfying thought; so satisfying, in fact, that I cried again – this time in relief – when I closed the laptop after our conversation.

Alex was right. Gossip would become my life on this trip, and whether or not I would ever be willing to admit it, I needed Alex and he needed me. Otherwise, sanity would be nigh on impossible to come by.

…

I watched the clock as if Chris were the type to show exactly the second he said he would. With every minute closer to seven, it seemed the seconds passed faster. Atop my nightstand, I had set five bottles of one thing or another that I had lifted from the limo’s bar, a large bottle of merlot that I had bought earlier that day, and the champagne the hotel had gifted to the staff of our tour group. I hadn’t thought to order glasses until it was past time for Chris to arrive, so I used the tumblers provided in the hotel bathroom. And then I sat crossed-legged on the edge of my bed and stared at the door. Maybe staring at it could make him arrive sooner by sheer power of telepathy.

Around fifteen minutes after the hour, I finally heard his knock. It was soft and quick, and if I hadn’t been listening for it, I’m sure I wouldn’t have heard it at all. When I opened, there he stood with two bags of burgers, grease evident at the bottom of each one. Never had anything felt so much like home since we’d been gone.

“I’m going to blame this on you, too,” he grinned. “Because there are people who would literally kill me for eating this.”

“Blame me all you want,” I laughed, letting him in and inviting him to the desk to sit. Inviting him to the bed would come later, I decided. “I’m just so hungry I could eat a horse.”

“And I know a place where you could get some around here,” he answered. He set the food out – burgers, fries, two slices of chocolate mousse pie, and a heap of napkins. “Will this work?”

“Well I hope that’s enough, or I’ll be very disappointed in myself.”

“Yeah, I heard this is the best American food in the area. A guy at the premiere was telling me all about it. Worked out nicely that that’s what you happened to be craving, huh?”

“I would say so,” I replied, fries making their way to my mouth. “Remind me to tell that guy I love him.”

He took a bite of his burger and let out a moan that shouldn’t have made me think about his sex noises, but it did. “I think I might marry the guy,” he chuckled through the mouthful.

I have found in my time on this earth that you can judge just how good a meal is by how quiet everyone is while they’re eating. And if that’s true, this meal was practically manna.
I was sitting atop the desk and he in the chair when we finished. In the background noise of our chewing sounds, I had the TV on a popular talk show, and even though the volume was low, we were both alerted as soon as we heard the name “Chris Evans.” Without saying anything, both of us moved to the bed, leaning toward the set as I turned up the volume. I don’t know why I did – neither of us could actually understand anything that was being said. But clearly the hosts were discussing the film, and when they showed the interviews that had been filmed just days before, Chris laughed at the voice that dubbed his English language.

“That guy’s voice is way too low to be mine!” he insisted.

The too-deep voice continued on, narrating what Chris had said about the time they’d taken to film, the relationship between those on set, and plans for the upcoming Marvel installation. I could sort of hear Chris’s words that had been practically muted, but I didn’t need to know what he was saying to understand that it had to do with his career. His face lit up on that television set, his eyes creased into half-moons when he spoke about his family. Everything he loved was written all over his face. And expressed in the words of a French baritone.

“I think I looked pretty good there, Dixon,” he said once it was over, leaning his shoulder against mine, nudging me playfully.

“You looked very good,” I replied. That was my toned-down response, of course.

Once it was over, he reached beside the bed, handing me a mini bottle of vodka, then choosing the same for himself. “Are we drinking this straight?” he asked.

“I don’t have anything to mix with it. I have ice, but that’s about it.”

“Ice is for wimps,” he joked. And just like that, he unscrewed the bottle, leaned his head back, and downed it in less than five seconds.

“Holy shit…” I murmured.

He shook his head and three-pointed the tiny bottle into the trash can across the room. “I’m no rookie.”

“I didn’t realize you were this much of a drinker. I think this is the fourth time I’ve seen you drinking in just two weeks.”

“Sometimes I drink to pass the time, especially at parties at stuff.” He eyed the rest of what was on the table, obviously choosing his next victim. “Other than that, I might have a beer at a ball game or something, but I don’t drink all that much. And besides, you’re sounding a little judgmental for someone who steals bottles of champagne from the community gift basket.”

“I’m not judging,” I insisted. “Just being observant.”

“Well if you had to spend as much time as I have to with some of those people, you’d drink more, too.”

“They can’t be that bad…”

“You don’t think so?” he asked, working on the next bottle, this time slower.

I actually did think so. I knew so. “Okay, but aren’t there other ways of coping with people? You’re getting into writing and directing movies and things, aren’t you? Don’t you think maybe some of these awful people would make good character studies?”
He looked me square in the eyes, didn’t break the stare or blink, and took a very long sip from the bottle.

“None of my business,” I nodded. “Sorry. I get it.”

He broke character then, laughing at how embarrassed I seemed to be, and leaned his body against the headboard. “You might be into something with that character study stuff,” he said. “Maybe I could bring a little notebook and stand in people’s conversations, writing down the horrible things they say to incorporate into the dialogue of my next script.”

“Maybe you could!” Two could play at this sarcasm game.

“No problem, then. I’ll bring a notepad to my next party. Thanks, Dixon.”

“Writing can be very therapeutic,” I told him. I was trying to start incorporating some form of authenticity into my words now. “And sexy.”

“Sexy?” he scoffed. “Writing is sexy?”

“Can be, sure. I think that when a guy takes the time to write down a few words and give them to a girl, well it’s liable to give a girl the warm and fuzzies.”

“Really?” he asked in seeming disbelief. “Writing letters gets you hot?”

“In the right moments, sure. Why’s that so hard to believe?”

He just looked at me, as if I were something strange. As if I, and not the fact that he was here with me in my room and in my bed, was what made this evening odd.

I moved close to him, daring to sit just two inches from him. I pointed the remote control at the TV and searched for a movie, but honestly that was the last thing on my mind.

“You’re ridiculous,” he told me quietly. And when I looked at him, he was smiling from ear to ear.

“You’re drunk,” I replied.

“Not yet. Not even close. And there you haven’t even started yet.”

I sighed as I settled on an Abbott and Costello film that, of course, was also dubbed in eloquent French. “I’m tired,” I told him truthfully.

“Well if you’re tired, I didn’t have to come over and ruin your sleepy time.”

“Sleepy time?” I laughed. “How old are you again?”

He nudged me with his shoulder once more, but this time he kept it close to mine. So close, that familiar warmth of his body began to envelope me, inviting me to curl up beside him, use his shoulder as a pillow, and fall asleep.

“You can leave if you want,” I told him. “I might doze off, and according to several people I used to know, I’m something of a snorer.”

“You?” he asked. “You snore?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never been awake to hear it.”
He laughed, clicking his tongue and shaking his head but keeping his eyes forward on the movie. “Absolutely ridiculous,” he repeated under his breath.

I wanted him so badly. I couldn’t remember the want for him ever being greater before. I couldn’t understand how a man could have such raw sex appeal. No man had ever done this to me, and I knew it was likely none ever would again. But I was so tired – so goddamn tired – that as I leaned over in an attempt to get him to kiss me, all I could manage was to lay my head on his shoulder, loop my arm through his, and fall asleep.

I cursed myself when I woke up nine hours later to the sound of my alarm. Sure, I was grateful for the extra sleep, but he was gone now. And there I lay, drool seeping from the corner of my mouth, sleep crusting my eyes, hair a foot high on my head, makeup smeared. I was a mess, and he was gone. Of course he was. I would have left, too.

I walked to the bathroom, figuring a shower seemed as good a place as any to cry it out. But when I looked to the mirror, I saw a note tucked in the frame.

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Dixon –

Is this how it works? Are you getting the warm and fuzzies yet?

- Chris

P.S. You do snore. And it’s adorable.

.

With a smile on my face, I stepped into the shower. But what I did in there, well… it wasn’t crying.
Chapter 8

I knocked at his door, three suits in hand to try on him before I packed them up and shipped them on to our next destination. I couldn’t get that stupid grin off my face for anything, and every time I thought about how lucky I was to have this job, I audibly giggled. God, I was pathetic. But if he didn’t mind, then neither did I.

“Oh, it’s you…”

“Yes, Matthew. Is Chris in? He has a fitting scheduled.”

“Scheduled for ten, and it’s nine minutes ‘til. Go away.” He shut the door in my face.

I knocked again.

“Sarah, for the love of god, will you please go?” He didn’t seem angry, but he was still persistent. And to be honest, I didn’t care what his feelings were in this moment. I’d had enough of his shit.

“What the hell is your problem?” I asked.

He moved to shut the door again, but I held my arm out to stop it.

“Matt, I’m serious! Why do you hate me so much?”

He looked behind him, and the brief silence gave me the chance to hear that Chris was still showering. “Because,” he said quietly, “If I have to deal with one more girl crying over Chris, I’m going to shit myself. I will literally shit all over myself.”

“That’s… harsh,” I replied. “I don’t even know how to respond to that.”

“Just do your job, Sarah, and nothing more. No late nights here in his room or him in yours. I’m his damage control, and this is me controlling any inevitable damage. And if you two screw around, I will have more work to do. So don’t screw around. I don’t want to clean up any more messes.”

“Chris and I aren’t screwing,” I told him. “And we aren’t going to. Now let me in!” I stepped inside, past Matt and his judgmental attitude, and to the couch.

“If I had a nickel for every girl who told me that…” he scoffed.

I elected to ignore him. He seated himself beside me – right beside me – until Chris stepped out of the bathroom, bedroom, and into the sitting room.

“Oh,” he smiled at me. “Hey, Sarah. You just get here?”

“I answered. “Couple minutes ago,” I answered. “Matt and I were just chatting.”

He looked over at Matt, his gaze skeptical as well it should have been.

“Chop, chop!” Matt suddenly exclaimed, clapping his hands in my ear. “We’ve got a full day! Let’s get this over with.”

I handed Chris the first suit. “Try this on and let me see,” I told him. “These are those new Italian suits you’re supposed to wear to the London events.”
“Ah!” he grinned, his impish expression nothing short of adorable. “Be right back.”

He took the first suit, a single-breasted, triple-pocketed grey pinstriped Armani look, into the bedroom. Matt moved closer to me.

“I swear to god, if you don’t stop treating me like crap,” I muttered, “I will make sure Alex and I both report your harassing actions to Chris’s agent.”

“Alex?” he asked. “You and Alex are friends?”

“Of course,” I answered. I may have been overplaying it.

He went quiet. And subtly, he moved slightly away from me.

“That’s better,” I nodded. “I hate to threaten like that, but you have no idea how frustrating you can be.”

“I’m… I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

I looked at him curiously. “Uh… I… It’s okay. Just cut it out.”

Chris emerged from his room, dressed in the suit and his arms extended. “How do I look?”

“Bellissimo!” I chuckled. I walked around him a couple times, felt the armpits, eyed the inseam (strictly as a professional), and checked the hems. “Fits like a glove,” I smiled, handing him the next suit. “Here ya go.”

“Be back in a flash,” he answered.

As soon as he left, Matt looked up at me. I could tell he was trying to be nonchalant, but he was failing miserably. “Speaking of Alex,” he started, desperately avoiding eye contact, “How is he?”

“He’s fine. He’s meeting us in London.”

“Right,” he nodded. “So you’ve talked to him?”

“Talked to him yesterday,” I said. “Why?”

“Just because he said he wasn’t sure when he’d be back, and I haven’t heard from him in a while. I was just curious.”

“Yeah, he’s… he’ll meet us… and…” he was being too weird. I couldn’t ignore it. “Dude, is there something I should know here about you guys? Is there some sort of dispute against you or something?”

“No, nothing like that,” he answered. “I actually don’t even know Alex all that well.”

“So why are you being so weird about this?”

“I’m not being weird,” he retorted childishly. “You’re being weird.”

I almost replied with an I’m-rubber-you’re-glue type of response, but that was when Chris came out in the next suit.

“Gorgeous,” I nodded, looking him over. Pretending I was only talking about the suit.
“It’s a little tight in the back,” he said. “I didn’t want to button it because I was afraid I might rip something.”

“Smart.” I took out my pad and pen, made a few measurements, and sent him back with the final suit. “Okay, I’ll have this altered by the time you need it. One more.”

When he left for the last time, Matt looked up at me as he sat on the couch and I stood with my arms crossed over me. I was waiting for an explanation, and he knew that.

“Is Alex seeing anyone?” he asked timidly.

“So that’s what this is about?” I exclaimed. “You’ve got to be joking! All this time you could have been treating me nicely if I’d only talked to Alex about you and put in a good word?”

“No!” he answered hastily. “No, I just wondered if he was seeing anyone, that’s all!”

“I swear this is the most juvenile display of characters on this tour that I have ever seen in my entire life.”

“I am not juvenile!”

“No, not you. Well, not just you. I have had the pleasure of working with Greer, after all.”

He sighed in disgust and relaxed into the couch. “Don’t even get me started on that mess.”

“What the hell is even going on with them, anyway?” I asked. “Because as far as I can tell, the entire situation is a cluster fuck of problems waiting to happen.”

“Not waiting,” he said. “Happening. Do you have any idea what it’s like chasing those two around, tracking their movements, trying to direct them away from paps, controlling Chris’s weird obsession with her? He’s always worried about where she is, who she’s with, what she’s doing, and I’m expected to tell him. I’m always checking in with whatever assistant she has, and that’s when she actually has an assistant. And I don’t think it’s that he likes her so much as she has fucked him over so many times, he’s gotten paranoid.”

“He can do better.”

“What, like you?” he scoffed.

“Maybe!”

When Chris came back out in that final suit, Matt and I both found ourselves speechless. Navy blue is his color, no doubt about it. And that smile.

My god, that smile.

“Pants are a little long,” I commented as soon as I could speak again. “Shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Hey, what do you think about these pants with that grey sweater?” he asked. “I’m not trying to do your job or anything, but don’t you think it would look good?”

“You don’t put those pants,” I said slowly, making my way toward him as I tried to hide my smile, “With a sweater. You wear that as a suit, or you don’t wear that at all.”

“I guess that’s why you’re the boss,” he shrugged.
“Does it need alterations or not?” Matt interrupted. “Because either way, we need to get a move on. Your flight leaves soon, doesn’t it?”

I looked over at him sternly. “There’s time,” I told him through gritted teeth. He knew better at this point than to push. I turned Chris to face me fully, placed my hands on his shoulders and held him in place. “You look incredible. I think this one is definitely the winner.”

“Great!” Chris beamed, already slipping out of the jacket. He seemed anxious to do so, and it was as if being in a suit was thoroughly discomforting for him. “Are you gonna stick around for a while?”

I had sort of planned to, but at this point, I thought perhaps it was best to leave Matt alone. Chris and I would have plenty of time in London. “I should go,” I nodded, looking at my wrist as if I were wearing a watch, forgetting I wasn’t. “Greer’s new assistant is going to be on the flight, and I need to coordinate our schedules and get her back on track.”

“Oh, okay.” He looked a bit disappointed, but I chalked it up to his general dislike of Matt’s eagerness. “Well I guess I’ll see you tonight?”

“Absolutely,” I smiled. “I’ll be by as soon as your wardrobe arrives, and I’ll probably lay out the day’s look for tomorrow.”

“It’s Graham Norton,” Matt spoke up. “Make sure you dress him comfortably. He’ll be sitting on that couch the whole show, you know. That’s how Graham does it.”

“I’m aware,” I replied curtly. “And anyway, I have the perfect outfit planned.”

“Cardigan?” Chris asked with eager eyes.

I gathered the suits and headed toward the door. “Cardigan,” I confirmed.

…

Until about three minutes before boarding ceased on our flight, I wasn’t sure Greer’s assistant would even arrive. Besides being her assistant, of course, there was the fact that she was Chris’s old assistant and rumored flame. And as I waited watching the portal to the land I left behind, I imagined that perhaps it would be for the better if Rebecca didn’t show. Better for conversation. Better for Rebecca’s sanity.

She did, however, rush on board just in time. As soon as I saw her, I recognized her from the gossip magazines I used to waste my time with. She was even taller, thinner, more beautiful than the pictures made her seem. She carried with her such an elegance, and as she found her seat beside me and bowed her head to greet me, her long, blonde hair fell loosely to one side of her head and I could see why everyone had always made such a fuss about her.

“Rebecca,” she smiled, extending her hand. “Rebecca Gable. And you’re Sarah, aren’t you?”


She laughed lightly and sat down in her seat, crossing her long, ivory legs that shone from the shorts she wore. “I’m Irish, actually,” she told me. “Never confuse that with being British.”

“Sorry,” I shook my head. “Of course, I just… I didn’t know. I’ve only ever heard about you, but I’ve never heard where you were from or anything.”

“It’s alright. Most of my people would be more offended at the mixup, but you’re safe with me.” She
was easy to talk to. Maybe I was wrong – maybe she’d be perfect for Greer. “You’ve only heard good things I hope.”

“Only good,” I replied, not thinking about the tabloids. “Chris and I were just talking about you the other day, but that was before I knew you would be coming to work with us.”

“Oh, how is Chris? I haven’t talked to him in ages!”

“He’s well,” I tried not to let my jealousy distract me from being courteous. “Busy, but aren’t we all?”

“I know what you mean. I’ve done these tours way too many times, and I know how grueling it can be. Especially now as you’re, what is it? Three weeks in?”

“More or less. Another two weeks to go.”

She nodded. “That’s about when the homesickness gets really bad. You must miss it.”

We continued our small talk for a while, neither of us discussing Chris at all as we zipped right into the business part of the conversation. We arranged Greer’s fitting schedule, talked about events coming up and how she would need to talk to Alex once we actually arrived at the hotel. I told her to feel free to ask any questions at all about her new boss, and she didn’t hold back. She wanted to know her personality, her sleep schedule, her favorite foods. She wanted answers to questions I never thought to ask, and I let her know that maybe I wasn’t the right person to consult for certain bits of knowledge. But I can say that she was thorough, professional, and diligent. No wonder she’d always come so highly recommended.

When we finished discussing work, I found myself out of conversation. Well, I suppose that’s not entirely true since I actually did want to talk to her about something, but I’d only just met her. This wasn’t exactly the time to ask whether there was any truth to those rumors. Besides, I wasn’t even sure I wanted to know. And if I did, why?

“So who did you prefer working with?” She asked, and I was thankful.

“Should I be picking favorites?” I giggled nervously.

“It was Chris, then, wasn’t it?”

I looked at her and smiled a little. “I don’t want to say it out loud.”

“So let’s say there’s a scale from one to ten, one being the best possible experience and ten being the worst. Where does Chris rank for you?”

“This is my first big job,” I explained. “I don’t have much point of reference.”

“Okay. Well then just tell me if you have any complaints about him.”

“That’s not very professional.”

“Oh come on, I worked for the guy for forever! You don’t need to worry about saying anything out of line about him. I suppose I know him just about as well as anyone.”

“Oh, it’s great!” I gave in, almost interrupting her in my excitement to gush about him. “I haven’t got a single complaint. He’s sweet and generous and so good to me. Honestly, I couldn’t have asked for a better person to work with on a daily basis.”
“And Greer MacFarlane?” She asked. “Complaints?”

I thought for a moment. “No.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re lying!” She laughed. “I think I’ve learned pretty well how to spot a liar by now.”

“Fine,” I sighed. “She’s sort of awful. And yet you look at her in all her glory and you don’t want to complain. You make yourself think it’s just the way you’re misinterpreting her, you know what I mean?”

“Not really,” she told me. “If a person’s awful, she’s awful. End of story.”

“But she’s not just a person,” I explained. “She’s like this… this goddess or something. She’s incredibly beautiful and smart and unlike anyone I’ve ever known. It’s no wonder Chris is so enamored with her.”

She looked at me curiously, during which time it occurred to me that she probably didn’t know about the whole Chris/Greer thing. So I gave her the lowdown on it all as quickly yet thoroughly as I could. Even though she never asked.

She was quiet after I told her everything. I couldn’t tell whether she was surprised, upset, or indifferent. She seemed to be pondering the idea of Chris with someone he worked with, and maybe that was because she’s been through that before with herself. Maybe it was because she hadn’t, but she wanted to have been. Maybe she wasn’t surprised at his actions but rather at the fact that I, as a trusted member of the group, was so quick to spread intimate gossip like wildfire.

“Sorry,” I spoke. The silence was killing me. “I shouldn’t have told you about any of that. It’s just that I know you and he go way back, and I figured telling you wouldn’t be that big a deal, and I thought you’d want to know about it.”

“Don’t apologize,” she said. “No one will know I know, and I’m glad you told me. I’m happy to know he’s kept himself busy.”

This sounded to me like the words of a bitter ex. And I speak from some experience.

She looked over at me next to her, squinted her eyes a bit, and smiled. “You’re wondering if it’s true, aren’t you?”

Damn, she was good.

“Wondering if what’s true?” I asked, playing ignorant.

“About him and me during our work relationship. You’re wondering if any of the stuff the papers said was true, right?”

I opened my mouth to say, “Not at all!” but what came out was, “Was it?”

She folded closed the book she had been reading and turned her body slightly toward me. “No,” she whispered. “But that’s just between us, alright?”

“So you want people to think you guys were fooling around?”
“No, but he and I agreed at the time that we’d never confirm nor deny to anyone in the press whether or not we were together. It was more fun that way.”

“Fun? I can’t imagine having your lives dissected by total strangers across all forms of media being fun.”

“Oh, it’s not,” she told me. “But it just kills them not to get confirmation, so we decided we’d never give it to them. It was our one power over them. Besides, even if they knew the truth, they’d still write whatever they wanted.”

“I guess that’s true.” And it didn’t surprise me that they decided that either. How like Chris that was to refuse to speak about something like that. What did surprise me, however, was that there was no truth at all to those rumors. “So in two years that you worked with him, you never once did anything with him?”

“People never believed that all those nights I spent in his hotel rooms and even in his home were anything less than sexual. Everyone assumed it had to be more than just a business relationship. And they were right.”

I was confused. “But you said…”

“Just because it was more than business doesn’t mean it was sex. We became friends – best friends. We talked about everything. We gave each other advice and companionship and talked each other through breakups. We were absolutely inseparable. But it was never sex. It couldn’t be.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because he’s not my type.” She said it casually, as if he could ever not be someone’s type.

“Well if you two were so close, why did you resign?”

She seemed to get a bit sad now, her countenance falling as she shifted her body slightly. “I saw the lengths he had to go through just to cover up the truth about him and me, and it was too much. It was too much for both of us, really, but mostly him. He gets into relationships of any kind and he gets too invested. He hates giving up, so he works his ass off even long after it’s no longer worth it. That’s just how it is. And it wasn’t fair to him.”

“How did he take it when you left?”

She smiled fondly, closing her eyes so that, I assume, she could picture the moment. “We cried together a little and promised to keep in touch. But that was right before the whole Marvel fiasco began, and I guess he just got too busy to keep up.”

Chris somehow made more sense now. He’d admitted he wasn’t in love with Greer, and yet as much as she had put him through, he still seemed to want to see it through to the end. I hadn’t understood before why he was doing that. But Rebecca explained everything about what he’d put himself through for a fake relationship, and I could only imagine how much more he must stress over Greer.

“You should come see him tonight,” I suggested. “I have to go to his room to bring him his things and give him a shave. You should creep in behind me and surprise him.”

“I’d love that!” she beamed. “God, I miss him… he’s got a beard now, huh?”

“Yeah, it’s just growing out a bit. Looks good!”
We continued to talk about Chris in a sort of abstract context until we landed. At that time Alex greeted us at baggage claim and immediately took Rebecca under his wing. I guess I was old news now.

…

When I received word that night that Chris had arrived at his room, I went to see Rebecca and let her know. Wheeling the cart of wardrobe and cosmetic supplies for me, she waited patiently at his door until he answered.

“It’s okay,” he greeted me. “Matt’s not here.”

“Oh thank god!” I laughed. “Oh hey, I brought you something.” I stepped inside his room and he watched the rack wheeling in behind. As soon as he saw her, he smiled like a kid at Christmas and reached for her, scooping her up into his arms and lifting her off the ground.

“You asshole!” She laughed violently, grabbing his face and kissing his cheeks.

Not her type. Sure.

They caught up on the usual “How ya been” and “What have you been up to” and the laundry list of other catching-up questions that old friends do. And I tried not to be jealous, failed at not being jealous, reminded myself that I had no reason to be jealous, and then made my way to the closet to hang up all of the clothes I’d brought.

When I returned to the sitting area, Chris and Rebecca were holding hands, facing each other as they gushed about how good the other looked. She seemed like a nice enough girl – and definitely an improvement on Greer – but there was still something in me that made my stomach turn at the sight of them.

Selfishness. That’s what it was.

“Well I have to be off and catch up with my new boss,” she told him finally. “I can’t believe it’s actually you still! I mean you, here, with me!”

“Me either, man! God, this is… this is awesome.” He looked over at me and smiled, finally letting go of her hands so that he could move close to me and hug me. “Thank you so much, Sarah. I owe you big time.”

“I didn’t really have any part in her being Greer’s assistant,” I told him truthfully. “All I did was deliver her to you.”

He was still hugging me. And even for me, it was a little too long a hug. “Well even that was awesome. You rock, you know that?”

I pulled away gently, too shy or whatever it was to look him in the eye. “Well thank you. I’m glad you think so.”

With a final parting kiss on Chris’s cheek, Rebecca was off to meet her new boss, and subsequently her faith in humanity. As soon as the door closed behind her, I looked over at Chris, whose scraggly beard reminded me that I still had work to do, even if his childlike smile wanted to distract me from that fact.

“Isn’t she just the best?” he asked me.
"She’s really sweet," I told him, still avoiding eye contact and still not sure why.

"Man, I missed her," he continued as I gestured him over to the chair. "I haven’t seen her in years, and I always thought she’d hate me for losing touch with her."

"She should," I said, draping the salon cape over the front of his body. "I would. That’s a dick move, just losing touch with someone you were in a relationship with."

I set up the towel steamer and laid out the shaving supplies. He was quiet for a moment, and I knew it was because I said the “r” word.

"We were friends," he said at last. “Just friends. Best friends.”

“I know. I heard it all from her.”

“You know she’s gay, right?”

I looked over at him, finally maintaining eye contact again. “Goddammit! Am I the only straight person left in this place?”

He laughed. “She’s out and everything, I’m just guessing she kept it from you to have a little fun with you. That’s how she is.”

“Well she’s a peach,” I replied, shaking my head at (mostly) how foolish I felt. “Lie back. Shaving time.”

“Yes, nurse,” he winked. I could have strangled him.

I laid one hot towel over his face and waited as it did its work. "How was your flight?" Changing the subject seemed ideal.

"Not nearly as long as the last few, thankfully. I took a little nap.”

“So you’re feeling rested?”

"Why? Do you have plans for me?"

I kicked at his ankle. “Sexual harassment.”

"That was a perfectly innocent question,” he mumbled under the cloth. “I thought maybe you wanted to get dinner or something, because I’m pretty hungry.”

"Are you asking me to dinner now?” I asked.

"Have you ever had fish and chips?"

"Probably at some point in my life I have.”

"Yes but fish and chips in the land of fish and chips?"

I removed the cloth. “No.”

"Then that settles it! We’re going out tonight, just the two of us.”

“I have work to do,” I informed him as I slathered the shaving cream under his chin. “And don’t you as well?”
“Nope,” he smiled. “All of my work is with you, and I think that was just those fittings we did this morning.”

“It’s late,” I said. “What is it? Almost nine? And we have a talk show tomorrow. There’s no time to get out.”

“Then tomorrow night. Dinner.”

I slid the straight blade under his chin, holding him in place just inches from me. I could have kissed him so easily. I could have straddled him in that chair and run my fingers through that thick hair and gotten that shaving cream all over me. But I didn’t, and I remembered that I couldn’t.

“I’m not in the habit of going to dinner with people I work for.” It was the best excuse I could come up with.

“You don’t work for me. You make me. Without you I’d look like shit at these things. You know how I dress.”

“Yard chic,” I laughed.

He couldn’t answer until I’d finished trimming his beard. But the way his eyes smiled up at me, I could feel something else. Something that wasn’t just a look from a guy I worked with.

“The problem is,” I started, finishing him up with another hot towel, “It seems that whenever you work with someone, you want to be friends with them. I mean, my only two examples are Rebecca and Greer I guess, but look at how those turned out. Yes, you’re on good terms with both of them now, but not without some bumps in the road in-between. I removed the towel and looked down at him. “I’m not really in the mood for any road bumps, you know?”

“In neither of those situations was it my choice to change the way things were going. And besides, you can’t really count G. She and I were fucking, not friends.”

“So you and I aren’t going to fuck?”

He sat up straight and looked me dead in the eye and that’s when I knew I’d said too much. “You tell me.”

I wasn’t sure how to get out of this. Should I tell him I was joking? Was I joking? Either way I didn’t know what to say. I’d never wanted Matt to suddenly barge in more in my life.

“I-I think I should probably go,” I said at last.

“Fuck… was that out of line? I’m sorry!”

“No, it’s fine. You’re fine. It was me. I shouldn’t have said that about you and Greer.”

“You weren’t wrong,” he shrugged.

I couldn’t answer right away. I packed up my bag of tricks, laid everything on the cart, and began wheeling it toward the door. He jumped in and helped, of course, and when I got to the door, I turned toward him and spoke.

“We could go to dinner.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I said casually. “I mean, why not, right? We’re going to be working together, not going to
be fucking, and we need to get along. And getting out of here is always good for our sanity, isn’t it?”

“Well when you put it like that,” he chuckled. “Tomorrow night?”

“Tomorrow night,” I confirmed. “What time do you think Matt will be done with you?”

“We always run through the next day’s stuff the night before, but I wouldn’t think it’d be too late. I could text you.”

“Okay. I can deal with that.”

He helped me as far as the elevator, but at that point I had to be alone.

Mostly, I suppose, to remind myself that he and I were definitely, absolutely, positively, under no circumstances going to fuck.
Chapter 9

Chris was in such an amazing mood from the morning’s work that he was all smiles all day. A smiling Chris meant an unhappy Matt, and an unhappy Matt meant a Chris eager to get away from him. And in this case that was the very thing that was going to work in my favor.

I had been coordinating outfits with Alex and catching up with him about, in his case, life in Japan, and in my case, life in France. I told him about Rebecca, the mysterious ex-assistant who was now the apparent bff of our beloved Mr. Evans, and how it seemed I was the only straight person working on the tour staff.

“What about Matt?” he said nonchalantly, perusing the row of cashmere sweaters lining my closet. “He’s straight, isn’t he?”

Matt. Oh, Matt. Matt with the crush on Alex. Matt who was sort of awful and who I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.

“He… isn’t, as it turns out,” I said cautiously. “Seems he fancies you, in fact.”

He stopped gazing at the sweaters and turned toward me. “Bullshit.”

“I wouldn’t lie about that,” I told him. “It was a whole thing yesterday. He told me.”

“He just told you? Like that? I thought you said he hated you.”

“He does hate me.”

“Why?”

I sighed, returning to folding argyle socks of varying colors. “I don’t know. I guess he finds me annoying.”

“I can see that,” Alex nodded. “I thought you were annoying when I met you.”

I looked over at him sternly, but he was unfazed.

“What? I think you’re dandy now! And you’ve got the gossip thing down perfectly. Didn’t I tell you you would? I’m always right about those sorts of things.”

“You’re not right!” I defended myself. “I’m not a gossip.”

He folded his arms in front of him. “So what was it you were saying about Matt?”

“Oh, well he was giving me shit for all kinds of stupid reasons, and the second I mentioned your name, he stopped.” God, Alex was right. I was a filthy rotten gossip.

“Yes, but did he actually say he was into me? Because I might entertain the idea.”

“Oh god! You’d actually go out with him?”

“I said I’d entertain the idea,” he corrected. “Besides… he’s hot.”

“He’s a horrible person. Very judge-y.”

“Well I’m not saying I wanna marry the guy. He’s hot. We’re all alone here for another two weeks.
What’s a boy to do?”
“Not Matt.”

He selected the sweater he wanted to coordinate with Greer’s dress and brought it over to me. “Even if it gives you free time with You-Know-Who?”

I could feel my pathetic self blushing. “For your sake, I still say no.”

He sighed, stepping over to my bed and allowing himself to lie down in it. “Oh well. I suppose it’s for the best anyway. You’re not going to fuck Evans, right?”

“Of course not.”

“And you wouldn’t even want to have the opportunity. Because you never know how hard it might be to resist that kind of temptation.”

“Right…”

He sat up and moved closer to me, holding my hands in his. “Look, kid, I’ll level with you. I think if you did fuck him, it would be a mistake. A terrible, awful mistake. But at the same time, it would be nice to get details.”

“It’s not gonna happen,” I said firmly, pulling away from him to resume my work.

“But you’re going out with him tonight. And behind Matt’s back, right? So what else could that mean if not sex?”

“Ever hear of a thing called friendship?”

“Between a straight hot guy and a straight hot girl who’ve only known each other a couple of weeks and are sneaking behind people’s backs just to be together? No.”

I was silent until I finished my outfit selection. I didn’t know what to say.

“Look,” he said at last, “If you’re really serious about nothing happening between you guys for whatever reason, let the guy at least know. Because knowing guys, it’s not just friendship. Not for him. And knowing you, it’s not that way for you either. Fucking him? Huge mistake. Stop it before it happens.”

“Either way, I’m gonna need time alone with him. So I’m still gonna hang out with him tonight.”

“Are you going to tell him it’s just platonic or what?”

I thought for a moment, but ultimately decided he was right. “Yeah… I guess I have to…”

“Then I’ll make sure you don’t have Matt to worry about. I’ll take him out.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“No, but I’d do it for me.”

I smiled, knowing it would take a lot more for Alex to actually admit he was my friend. “Thanks,” I said, kissing his cheek.

He wiped it away hastily. “Please! I need to keep this face clean for my date tonight!”
I tossed a pair of socks at him. “I hope he falls in love with you. That’d serve you right!”

8:33 PM

Hey I’m in the room with Matt and he won’t leave. I know it’s late and I’m sorry but I’m working on it I promise.

9:08 PM

Oh my god he won’t leave he keeps making up excuses…

9:34 PM

How does one politely say “fuck off” to one’s own personal assistant?

10:01 PM

Okay you don’t HAVE to reply, but can you at least tell me if you have any ideas to get him out of here so we can hang out????

I smiled down at the last text, having long ago changed into my sweatpants and convinced myself that he and I wouldn’t be going out tonight. I texted him back that it was perfectly fine if we couldn’t get out, and that we could just catch up the next night if he still wanted to.

10:06 PM

NO. We’re hanging out tonight even if he has to come with us.

I told him to tell Matt that Alex was going to be in the lobby bar for his nightcap soon, and that he should talk to him. I told him to make up some bullshit reason, and then add that he would be going to sleep so that Matt wouldn’t just decide to return to the room as soon as he finished chickening out and not flirting with Alex. And then as soon as I finished texting him, I changed into jeans, slipped into boots, and zipped a tight leather jacket over my pajama top before I headed to his floor – taking the stairs, of course.

As I hoped, I arrived on his floor just in time to spy from a distance as Matt rushed to the elevator, a shy smile creeping at one corner of his mouth. It was almost unsettling to see him smile, yet at the same time almost sweet. Almost.

As soon as he was out of sight, I walked briskly to Chris’s room to retrieve him. I knocked, and he
answered with an exaggerated look of frustration on his face, almost running out of the room as he took me by the hand back toward the stairwell.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here before he comes looking for me!”

I couldn’t help but laugh as much as I was able to do so as I was dragged down thirteen floors and out a side exit. “Do you think he’ll come back soon?”

“I’ve got a couple hours, I think,” he answered. We looked down the street until a cab came our way, and he hailed it as he explained. “I gave him a couple of errands to run, and then said that if he got back and the lights were out, that he should just put the stuff on the sofa and stay out of the bedroom because I’d be asleep.”

“You really have it all planned out, don’t you?”

“Well you were right about the Alex thing,” he said, sitting beside me and directing our cabbie to the destination he had chosen. “He left the room so fast I thought there was a fire.”

“Yeah, I thought he might.” I looked outside the window, finally able to admire the view of the city at night. “God, it’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

It took him a moment to see what I was talking about, but he looked outside as well and quickly agreed. “It really is. Any time I drive through a city at night I think of home. Even if we’re, you know, ten thousand miles away from it.”

“Not quite ten thousand,” I giggled. “I don’t get to spend much time in city life unless I’m working, and even then it’s mostly within the confines of a hotel, or I’m too busy working to really take it in.”

“So what does remind you of home?” he asked. “Because you’re a country girl, right?”

“Country girl implies I grew up in the south, which I absolutely did not.”

“Well excuse me,” he joked, prodding me with his elbow. “What do you consider yourself, then?”

“A Midwesterner,” I answered proudly. “Corn and wheat and plain old plains.”

“And that’s the type of thing that reminds you of home?” He asked. For some reason, he seemed interested. Actually interested, and not just making conversation to be polite.

“No, mostly a clear night sky is what reminds me of home,” I answered. “Of course, I haven’t seen one of those since I was home last, but every now and then when I’m on a road trip, I drive through the mountains or the desert miles and miles from civilization, and I’ll pull over to the side of the road and get out of my car and just look up.”

“You an admirer of a clear night sky?” He asked. “Because so am I.”

“No, what you are is a nerd,” I told him. “Which, although adorable, is not how I’d describe myself. You were closer with the whole ‘admirer’ thing.”

“What’s your favorite constellation?”

I laughed, couldn’t stop laughing for a little bit. “Favorite constellation?” I repeated in surprise.

“What? You don’t have one?”

“You do?”
“It’s a tie,” he answered, as if it should be so simple an idea that he might have favorites. “Between, I guess, Cassiopeia and Orion.”

“Why those two in particular?”

“Well Cass is, like, this beautiful and powerful goddess, and yet so simple. You look up at her and she’s just this handful of stars in this sort of abstract formation, and yet she’s stunning!”

We had reached our destination by now, and I side-eyed him as he went on about his description. “And Orion?” I asked cautiously.

“Well Orion’s just badass,” he answered.

He ordered the same dish for both of us, a box of fried fish and French fries, which I had to call chips simply because of our location. We took our food outside, walking through the fog that seemed even thicker due to the lights of the street that surrounded the pavement.

For the brief time we had, he talked about home because I asked him to. I wanted to hear him talk more about the things he loved. Even those things that seemed absurd – things like having a favorite constellation – were pure poetry when set to the words and enthusiasm that only he could voice. He told me about his upbringing, praised his parents, told me of his favorite haunts around the city and named first names of friends in his stories as if I were just supposed to know who they were. Then he would remember that I didn’t, of course, and he would explain further.

“Sorry,” he said at one point. “Sometimes I forget I’ve only known you a few weeks and I forget we didn’t grow up together.”

To him, saying something like that was something he’d chalk up to no more than a lapse in memory. To me, hearing him say something like that was like a first kiss, over and over and over again, new with excitement and anticipation every time.

Just as he started asking me about home, turning all of the conversation back on me and reminding me once again that my life is completely boring, or else depressing, I looked down at my watch. “Oh wow,” I said, having barely gotten into my “haunts,” even though there was really only one, and it was my grandmother’s living room. “We’ve already been gone an hour and a half. Shouldn’t we get back?”

He took my now empty box from my hands and tossed it in a nearby trash bin. “That depends,” he said coyly.

“On?”

“On where we’re going next?”

In text, these words don’t seem like much. But the way he looked at me, slightly smug, eyes twinkling fondly as he looked me over, I knew there was more to it than just the simplicity of his words.

I stood about three feet in front of him, facing him, unsure what to say and therefore saying nothing. A cab slowly passed us, and I reached out to call it near before I spoke to him. “That kind of depends,” I said once we were inside.

“Does it?”

I reached into the pocket of my jacket for a mint. I had just eaten fish, after all. And if I was going to
kiss him, I didn’t want it to taste like battered fish. And I was absolutely going to kiss him.

He held out his hand as if asking for one as well. I acquiesced.

Another few seconds passed, seconds spent not looking up at the lights this time, but over at the shine of his jeans under the yellow of the ambience outside. The way his long legs stretched along the back of the cab, then bent as he moved closer to me. His hand slid across the vinyl, fingers curling over my thigh, gripping it as he leaned in. This time there could be no mistaking his intentions. Kissing him could be wonderful – would be, for sure. But kissing him wouldn’t just be kissing him. It would be an invitation for more, and I wasn’t certain that was a good idea.

I let him continue moving closer to me, bending my neck over to the side so that he could kiss my neck. He could read the cues my body gave him like an expert, and I supposed that by this point in his life he was. As soon as I felt his breath against me, my hand almost subconsciously shifted over his, guiding it from my thigh to my crotch, and he wasted no time utilizing the size of those paws to touch me thoroughly, delightfully, fucking lustfully…

His mouth fell against my skin, not kissing as much as simply grazing me with his lips. I closed my eyes, wishing I could beg for him to take me here, pull my hips close to his, rip off my clothes, and just.fucking.take.me. And if it weren’t a simple five-minute drive left to our hotel, I suppose I would have.

When we got back, I paid for the cab while he tried to calm himself enough to be able to walk out the few steps in public before we would reach the elevator. I wanted to run inside, but I controlled myself. I didn’t even walk closely to him. I just looked at him, and he looked at me, and calmly the two of us made our way upstairs with those in the elevator around us completely oblivious to what was occurring between him and me.

We were on my floor now, an almost-empty hallway keeping us from canoodling out there as we made the way to my door. I wasn’t sure we’d get the chance again, so when I had unlocked my door, I pulled him inside, braced him against the door once it had closed, and kissed him.

It was softer than I meant for it to be, but so was he as a whole. He was surprisingly gentle for someone so big in comparison to me. His hands were soft, his beard was soft, his kisses, the way he held me in his arms, all of him.

Well, almost all of him…

I pulled back his jacket and whipped his shirt off of his body faster than I meant to. We hardly stopped for breath between our kisses, barely had a break from the kissing to even consider breathing. His fingers found my zipper and pulled it down harshly, then stopped, cringing and scared he’d damaged it.

“It’s fine,” I told him, pulling his face into another kiss. “Whatever.”

“Is that… is that a Care Bears tee?”

I had forgotten I was wearing my pajama top. It wasn’t like I anticipated things going this far tonight. “Uh… yeah… and It’s vintage, so maybe you should be more careful with this actually.”

He chuckled, shaking his head as he kissed me. “You’re adorable,” he whispered. He slipped his hands carefully under my shirt, sliding it off and then, thinking he was just oh-so-hilarious, meticulously folding it and placing it down on the chair beside my bed.

When he returned to me, I stroked his face, looking up into his eyes and unsure what to say. I knew
that whatever I did say, it would determine the mood of the room. It might even determine whether things would actually go further than they were.

“Are we really doing this?” I asked carefully.

“Only if you want to,” he answered. “We can take it slowly.”

“Let’s,” I nodded. “If that’s okay.”

“Of course it is,” he told me, kissing me again. “And I’m sorry. I know I can’t stop kissing you and it might be annoying.”

“It’s not annoying,” I assured him, reaching behind myself, opening my bra, and tossing it aside.

“Oh… uh… okay, I thought we were taking it slowly…”

“Taking off my bra has nothing to do with slow or fast. Every girl who wears bras looks forward to getting home and taking it off,” I said.

“It’s a shame the same doesn’t go for pants,” he joked.

I called his bluff, opening my fly and shimmying out of my jeans right in front of him.

I didn’t understand why this didn’t feel awkward with him. It had always been awkward before, or else just plain uncomfortable. But with him, it was right. It was fun. It was easy.

He shrugged, pulling his belt away from his pants. “I guess if you’re gonna get naked, I might as well do it, too, right?”

I crossed my arms. “Seems only right,” I winked.

Suddenly we were both in front of each other in only our underwear, catching each other checking the other out, both of us unflinching at the newness of it. It really did seem that this was something that was always meant to happen. He made it easy and fun and hot all at the same time.

“Oh, wait!” He said suddenly, reaching for his jeans. He fished through the pockets until he found a condom, and he tossed it onto the bedside table.

So he was planning this. Interesting.

I moved closer to him, catching myself biting my lip which I stopped doing as soon as I realized. It’s not my best look. I reached my arms around him and squeezed him playfully, eliciting a laugh from him that caused me to do the same.

He looked down at me, his fingers trailing down my back until they were sneaking under the waistband of my panties. I nodded to let him know that he could move them down, and as he did, it occurred to me that I should be doing the same to him. So I did.

I tried not to stare, but I certainly allowed my fingers around his shaft, sliding up and down slowly to coax him harder, which didn’t take very much work.

“Bed?” I asked, kissing his ear just after I whispered into it.

“Oh hell yes,” he answered in the same manner.

As soon as I lay on the bed, he smiled down at me, kissing my lips so sweetly, it was a massive
contradiction to the ideas I had planned for us in my head.

“Turn around,” he whispered, his lips still close to my ear.

Without hesitation, I flipped over to my stomach. So he liked to do girls from behind… okay. I like that position just fine, too…

But then I felt his hands, palms pressed firmly at the crook of my neck, slight pressure applied as he began to knead at my muscles and relax me at the surprising warmth of his hands.

“How’s this?” He asked.

Honestly, it was shocking. The very last thing I expected was a neck rub. But I wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth. “Feels good,” I cooed.

His hands continued working their magic, his fingers curling perfectly over the curves of my body. His hands moved lower, caressing my shoulders while he shifted his body so that he was in a proper position to touch me in this way. Slowly the idea of fucking him didn’t leave, but I certainly tucked it away for the moment. It became, I guess, less urgent. He apparently had other talents, and it would be a crying shame to waste them.

When his hands had moved as low as the small of my back, another sensation sent a pleasant shock through my body – that of his lips pressed against the back of my neck. I could feel his chest, bare and warm, moving with his body down mine, hands not neglecting a single inch of my back, allowing the tension to cease as effortlessly as our clothes had just moments before.

His hands were on my hips now, no longer massaging, but holding me firmly while he kissed down my spine. Every few seconds he would lick me only slightly in the areas he knew were more tender for me. God, he knew exactly what he was doing, and I loved that. His mouth met the curve of my back with pleasure, that beard so much softer than I thought it would feel there. And then he kissed me even lower and lower…

“You’re kissing my ass for a change,” I giggled.

Sometimes I say stupid shit at inopportune minutes when I’m nervous.

He didn’t stop, didn’t miss a beat, simply humming an acknowledgement of my words as he continued. One hand slipped underneath me, prompting me to boost my hips up so that he could cover more ground, so to speak. And he did.

Good mother of all that is holy, did he ever…

His tongue licked a line over my ass like he was sampling the evening’s appetizer. Once he’d had a taste, he continued, even biting me just a little to make me jump. He loved my reaction, was spurred on by it, in fact. He played one finger at my vagina as he kissed me even more thoroughly, then slowly rubbed circles around my clit while his body moved back up and he peeked around to catch my reaction.

By now I was back in the state of wanting him desperately. If just one finger felt this good, how much better could that cock be? That cock, thick and hard and proud and ready to do exactly as it was made to do. He wanted me. I wanted him. Surely now he was ready to give it to me!

He flipped my body over roughly, burying his face in my neck, his fingers – two now – pounding into me mercilessly as I opened my legs wider, begging silently for more. I was wet, and I could feel myself almost dripping on the sheets the faster his fingers moved. His rough, hard, relentless kisses
moved from my neck to my shoulder to my chest, between my breasts, then alternating from one to the other. He licked my nipples teasingly, not spending too much time on them because he had another destination in mind. And this I knew because he skipped almost completely over my stomach and went right for it, lifting my legs over his shoulders and opening his mouth wide over me.

His eyes kept shifting up to me as if he was watching to see what areas of me elicited the best reactions. His tongue lapped over my lips, pulsing inside me, both of his hands now firmly embedding their fingers into the flesh of my thighs. He let out soft, eager moans every time his lips pursed around my clit, and the way the tone vibrated over me was ten times better than any toy I’d ever used. I was holding his hair with one hand, propping my body up with the other, and when he started sucking at me harder and faster and his humming increased, and when I saw from the dim light of the bedside lamp my cum glistening on his beard, it just flipped a fucking switch inside me and I screamed!

I pushed his head away because it was too much now. I was trying to recover from the high he’d just given me, panting and opening my eyes back up just in time to see his proud smile from a job well done. I pulled his hair harder to guide his body back up on top of mine, grabbed his face, and kissed him. I could taste myself on him, and it was absolutely unreal.

“Want me to go again?” he whispered.

“Fuck me,” I answered, and not nearly as quietly. “Fuck me now.”

He reached over for the condom and opened the packet, pausing long enough to roll it on before he leaned in to kiss me again. He guided himself easily inside me, then moved his hands into my hair, our foreheads pressed together as his hips rocked into me. The gentle curve of his dick hit me exactly where I wanted it, and I reacted in such a way that he was well aware of his effect. He moved faster, harder, but I whispered up to him that I wanted him to go slower. He did. He listened, and he never questioned.

The slow build of friction, his hot breath on my neck, my lips, my chest, had me sure that I would come again, and this time perhaps even more intensely. I curled my legs around his body, the heels of my boots probably digging into him more than was comfortable, though he never complained. I kissed him again because he was perfect, and then I whispered, “Make me come…”

He rolled over so that I was on top, allowing me to take control and move at whatever pace I pleased. I sat up on him and gripped his shoulder, scratching slightly down his chest, closing my eyes. His hands moved up to my bouncing tits, caressing them, moving up a little to kiss them again. I leaned my body back to get a slightly better angle, and then that was it. I didn’t scream this time, but I certainly said more than a few filthy words.

He was so fucking proud of himself that I almost wanted to slap him for his arrogance. But then I realized he should be proud – he was doing a phenomenal job. I had expected nothing less.

“One more?” he asked with a grin, then biting his lip while he guided my hips over his.

“You too,” I answered. “I want you to come, too.”

“Are you ready?”

I nodded.

He sat up suddenly, wrapping me up in his arms. In this position, he had control over my movements, and I never had to wonder for a second whether that was what I wanted. It absolutely
was. He thrust up into me roughly, looking me in the eye as his expression began to change. I could
tell he was close, so I ground my body down on him in faster, harder motions. I was coming again,
coming hard, unable to do so much as keep my eyes open at the sheer intensity of it. And as I came
that final time, I could feel the heat of him as he finished, soft groans leaving his body while he once
again burrowed his mouth against my neck and kissed me softly.

It took us both a moment to move, but he had to remove the condom and dispose of it before much
time could pass. When he left the bed, I curled up into the covers, tucked the pillow under my head,
and caught my breath, admiring his naked, rugged form as he moved to the next room.

When he returned to the bed, he bent over me to kiss me. “You okay?” he asked carefully.

“I’m good,” I told him. “You?”

He kissed me again, then again. “I’ve gotta get back to my room before Matt comes looking for me.”

“Oh…” I had expected him to stay for at least a little while. “Okay, well… I’ll see you tomorrow I
guess.”

He buttoned his pants and searched hastily for his shirt, “Yep,” he said absently. “What time?”

“Seven.”

He found the shirt, threw it on himself inside-out, and grabbed his shoes and belt. “See you then,” he
told me. He made his way to the door. “Good night.”

When he left, I wasn’t sure what it was I was feeling. I didn’t regret what we’d just done because it
was so fucking good. But then he just sort of left. And I didn’t know how I felt about that.

Either way, I knew there was nothing I could do about that. And so I closed my eyes, too worn out
to stay awake.

If this was, as Alex had warned, a mistake, then it was a mistake I would gladly make again.

I mean, it’s not like I had actual feelings for the guy or anything.

Right?
Chapter 10

There’s a strange sort of pleasure in waking up with beard burn chafing your inner thighs. On the one hand, it reminds you of the previous night’s events, sends a chill up your spine – the good kind.

On the other hand, it can make it kind of hard to walk.

Not that I minded.

When he’d left the room so abruptly the night before, I worried. I couldn’t worry long, of course. I’d been thoroughly worn out from our activities, and I’d been awake for almost twenty straight hours by that point anyway. But while I did worry, and when I awoke the next morning to that same worry, I was reminded of the unpleasantness of it all.

If I were to go to Chris’s room that morning and he didn’t mention a thing, didn’t make any sly double entendres, didn’t flirt or wink or touch me in any manner besides that which was of a professional nature, it would be difficult to deal with, but not impossible. He’d be a fond memory, a fun story for the grandkids, and, for the next day or two anyway, a rash between my legs. And that’s enough.

But what if he did mention it? What then? Would I do it again? The pros and cons were equally endless. Would it only be physical? Were feelings even an option for either one of us? Did he expect me to do it again? And if so, why? Was I becoming “that type of girl”? You know… the one that guys know is always down for a good time.

Maybe I was overthinking this…

I grabbed his navy suit, which he would be wearing for the premier that evening, and headed to his room. As for my own style, I wore a simple black skirt and white tee. I looked sophisticated, yet not too sexy. Attractive enough that he might see me and remember why he’d chosen to go to bed with me, but not so attractive that he would think I was just trying to get his attention.

It seemed this particular elevator ride was the longest one of my life. And yet somehow when I arrived on his floor, it was too soon to approach his door. Behind it I knew would at least be Chris, and if not only him, Matt would be there to hate me.

Oh god. What if he told Matt…

He wouldn’t…

I stood in front of his door for a full minute before I worked up the courage to knock. When no one answered, I knocked again. Could he possibly still be sleeping? Had I done that good a job on him that he had been that worn out as well?

I slid the key through the lock and let myself in. But when I opened the door, I could see why no one had answered. No one could hear me.

There were easily fifteen people in there, and possibly more. I didn’t count. I couldn’t. Most of them were hurling questions at him in varying volumes – none of which were subtle. Beside him at his desk sat Matt, who was running his fingers down the face of an iPad and shielding some of the questions as they came Chris’s way. Behind Chris stood his agent, whom I recognized from the itinerary we’d all reviewed before the trip. And over in the window sat Rebecca, feet tucked underneath her as she leaned her long torso against the frame, glasses sitting primly at the edge of her
nose, and she read from the pages of an Anne Rice novel.

I made my way to her because she was the only one who didn’t seem immediately preoccupied with Chris.

“What’s going on here?”

She looked up at me, smiled, and moved over to invite me beside her. “He just signed on for that JJ Abrams movie everyone’s been talking about,” she answered in a whisper. “These are reporters, if you couldn’t tell. Jim over there is from Entertainment Weekly, Sue is from People, and that short bloke with the funny hair is from Facebook. I don’t know any of the others.”

“So this is big news?”

“Oh this is very big news,” she said. “Nerds everywhere are creaming their pants at this news. Even I’m excited!!”

“How much longer is this gonna keep up?” I asked. “We have a job to do, after all.”

“Don’t I know it?” She gestured over at Matt. “He’s got them on a timer,” she explained. And now I could see why he had the iPad. “Looks like they’ll be gone in a little over three minutes.”

“And why are you here?” I asked on, understanding immediately how rude that must have sounded. “Not that I mind. I’m actually glad to have at least one ally in the room.”

“Greer sent me down here to get the scoop on what sorts of things they’re asking him. If anything about her comes up, I’m to send her a text whilst also blocking them from asking anything about her.”

“Has anyone brought her up yet?”

She laughed a little. “Of course not. That woman thinks much more highly of herself than she ought to.”

“So I take it you’re not as captivated with her as the rest of us?”

“There’s no denying she’s a beauty,” she said calmly. “But a body like that doesn’t automatically grant you likability.”

“Seems it does…”

“Not with everyone,” she said quickly. “Not with me, anyway. Or maybe I’m just so used to pretty people that I’ve gotten to the point where I can look past it to see what they’re really like before I let it cloud my judgment.”

“I envy that talent,” I told her truthfully. “I think I’m too shallow for that.”

“Nah, you can’t be. If you were that shallow, you’d have fallen in love with Chris by now. He’s just about as pretty as they come, isn’t he?”

Ironically as she asked this, I looked over at him, and he glanced at me briefly. I know this sounds childish, but I felt those goddamn butterflies I’ve always heard you feel when you like someone.

“He’s not so bad,” I answered at last.

“Time!” Matt suddenly announced. One of them kept talking, and it seemed Chris wanted to answer,
but Matt was having none of that.

Rebecca left the window and moved over to Chris as everyone began filing out. She whispered something in his ear, something I probably couldn’t have heard anyway if she’d said it out loud because of all the chatter surrounding me. She kissed his cheek and he hugged her close before she left, leaving me with Chris, Matt, and the agent – whose name I wasn’t sure of at the time – alone in the room. And in peace for a moment before the agent spoke.

“I’m catching the 9:35 home,” Agent told Chris. “I’ll be accompanying you to the premiere tonight, but I can’t stay. We’ll catch up when you get home next week. In the meantime, anyone asks you anything about the film, you say ‘no comment.’ Got that?”

Chris nodded, silent and obedient as I suppose he’d been trained to be by this point.

Austen! That was his name… Allen Austen! As soon as the realization hit, I let out a relieved sigh, which was apparently loud enough to be heard by all in the room.

“When did you get here?” Matt asked.

“Like five minutes ago, dude. You didn’t see her?” Chris smiled.

Allen walked toward the door. “I have to go back to my room and do an interview. See you tonight.”

“So nice of him to acknowledge my presence.

“And I have to get your food,” Matt continued, ignoring me as quickly as he’d realized I was there. “Those assholes were a full hour early.”

“At least it’s over,” Chris told him, obvious relief in his expression. “And can you keep it light today? I’ve got a nervous stomach and I don’t wanna upset it.”

Matt barely looked at me before he left. “I’ll be back in, like, five minutes. Think you’ll be done by then?”

“Art takes time,” I told him, my tone deliberately cheerful just to irritate him.

Once he left, I laid out my things on the desk in front of Chris. “You feeling okay?” I asked, not having the nerve to actually look at him while I spoke.

“Yeah, just… well you know how it is. I wasn’t really expecting any of this, and then about an hour ago all hell broke loose in the lobby. I guess there was some sort of hack at the company and an email got out that I signed on for the project. No one was supposed to know for another month.”

“I’m sorry. But hey, at least it was good news.”

I dared to look back at him, but only for a moment. And only to see if he was looking at me. He wasn’t.

He made a sort of noise like he was agreeing with me, but it wasn’t really a word. I was still setting out pastes and combs, and I motioned toward the suit hanging on the back of the door. “Uh… you can go ahead and change if you want. Then I can do your hair after.”

He stood and moved closer to me. I held my breath, not sure why. Nerves, I guess.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly.

I was confused. “Sorry?”
“About running out on you last night. Looking back, that was kind of a shitty thing to do.”

I smiled, running my hand gently over his forearm comfortingly. “It’s okay. You had to get back before Matt found out you’d been gone. I get it.”

“I should have stayed,” he said.

I looked up into his eyes. They reminded me of home.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I was suddenly aware that my hand was still on him. I removed it. “I’m fine. Seriously, it’s all fine. We had fun, and it was what it was. That’s fine.”

“Say ‘fine’ more.”

I blushed, sheepishly grinning up at him and again not sure what to say. “You’d better get dressed,” I whispered.

“Would it be totally inappropriate to kiss you?”

“Yes,” I nodded, leaning into him and kissing him.

He moved away from me and grabbed the suit from the door, heading toward the bedroom. “Wanna watch?” he joked.

I stuck my middle finger into the air and flaunted it in his direction.

I heard the shower running, and for some reason, I couldn’t stop smiling. He kissed me. That was good. But he didn’t seem to want to talk much about last night besides apologies for leaving. That wasn’t as good. But as I’d told myself before, that was okay. It was all okay.

It had to be.

Within minutes, Matt returned with Chris’s breakfast and set it on the coffee table. He was so quiet, not even speaking to ask why the hell I was still there instead of having, I don’t know, magically evaporated at some point while he was gone. He nibbled on a piece of toast, and I stole a handful of blueberries from Chris’s plate.

“Those are for him!” he scolded.

“He won’t mind.”

He went silent again, and when the shower stream turned off, he downed that bread like he needed to hide it from Chris.

“How’d it go last night?” I asked.

He shot a look my way, obviously surprised that I knew.

“I had a little talk with Alex yesterday morning,” I shrugged. “He said he was hoping you’d come see him at the bar last night. And knowing how much you like him, I assumed you must have shown up.”

“Assume all you like,” he answered. “I didn’t talk to him.”
“But did you see him there?”

He looked away, ashamed of himself. “Sure. But I didn’t know what to say.”

“You could try saying hi,” I suggested. “I know it’s a complicated word.”

“You’re a complicated word!” he shot back.

Chris entered the room at this moment, towel wrapped around his waist. He could hear Matt’s remark, and he furrowed his brow in confusion. “Good one.”

“Something wrong with the suit?” I asked him.

“Nah, I just forgot my underwear.”

The bastard had done it on purpose. I just knew he had.

I moved to the dresser and found some for him, tossing them across the room to him. “Hurry up.”

He looked at Matt again, then back at me. “Everything okay here?”

“Yes!” we answered in unison.

He returned to his bedroom, closing the door behind him.

“Can you just talk to him again?” Matt asked timidly. “Tell him that he needs to be the one to come to me first?”

“How is that even possible? You are so abrupt and so confrontational and so rude! How is it even possible that you don’t have the guts to say hi to a guy you’ve had a crush on for however long?”

“Three years,” he said.

Once the phrase set in, my jaw dropped. “What?”

“Three years,” he repeated. “I met him through Greer at a party three years ago. And ever since then I just don’t know what to say to him.”

“That…” I started, choosing my words carefully, “…Is the cutest fucking thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“Oh shut up!”

It’s funny how some things never change no matter how much we grow up. Like having a mutual friend talk to a crush, or butterflies when you think someone’s cute, or that Christmas morning-type elation that I felt when I saw Chris in that crisp white shirt, tie knotted at the collar, jacket in hand. If he’d been any bigger that shirt would have popped right off of him.

“About damn time,” Matt complained.

I gestured for Chris to sit, which he did obediently. I worked the product through his hair slowly, and Matt scooted the plate of food in front of his boss, both of us admiring the beauty of this man. This raw, masculine, delicate beauty.

For a few moments, no one spoke. I was busy trying to work a decent part in his somehow uncooperative hair, he was eating, and Matt was trying to find something to complain about, I
suppose. Once in a while, my fingers would slip down and graze Chris’s ear since I remembered how sensitive the skin there had been. Every time I did so, he pursed his lips to hold back a smile that he didn’t want Matt to see. And there was something certainly wicked in the way he and I had our secret. Only our secret, and no one else’s.

“Hey, Matt?” Chris said at last. “Can you do me a favor? I hate to ask you this, but can you go up to Allen’s room and ask him if he’ll give you a rundown of his client list? If he asks you what it’s for, just tell him it’s a favor for me.”

“What is it for?” Matt asked.

“It’s a favor. For me.”

I wanted to laugh, but that would have been rude. So I just smiled. He sighed. “Fine. Be right back. And please, God, tell me you’ll be done by then?”

“She will,” Chris answered for me.

As soon as Matt left, Chris stood up from his chair, lifted me into his arms, and sat me on the desk. His hands gripped my face, and he kissed me deeply, filthily, lustfully. One hand quickly then met my thigh and worked its way up under my skirt, fingers teasing me. I opened my legs wide, and when his fingers were inside me, he moved his free hand over my mouth to suppress my sounds. As soon as I regained my composure, I took his finger into my mouth and began sucking on it – hard. The deeper I took it into my mouth, the deeper his other fingers went into me, and I arched my back to give him better access. He just looked straight at me, all business in that suit while he didn’t speak a word. He knew I couldn’t do much to him while he was dressed for the upcoming events, but he could wreck me and use me however he wanted. And he was doing just that. And I was letting him.

With two fingers inside me, his thumb began to rub my clit. I wanted to reach for him, but instead I gripped the edge of the desk and bit my lip to keep myself from screaming. I nodded furiously to let him know he was close – and he had done so faster than anyone had managed to do before. As I came, I couldn’t help but moan, but he quieted me this time by placing his mouth on mine, bracing my jaw in his clutch, and riding it out with me slowly until I was finished.

He removed his fingers from me, placed them in his own mouth, and licked them clean. I couldn’t move. Calmly he moved to where he’d laid the jacket, and he slipped into it. After that, he placed the hair products back into my bag for me, zipped it up, and looped the handles around the hanger where the garment bag had been. Then he stepped close to me, held me in his arms, and moved me carefully off the table as if I might break. And I wasn’t entirely sure that I wouldn’t.

“I… um… I’ll be back to-tomorrow for the, um, other thing. What is tomorrow again?”

“Top Gear,” he answered.

“Right. Okay. Yeah… I’ll have something more casual for you then.”

“Or you could come by tonight,” he whispered, as if there were anyone around to disapprove.

I grabbed my things from the door. “I’ll text you,” I told him. And then I left, passing Alex on my way back downstairs.
“You okay?” he asked me.

“Yeah. Why?”

He laughed. “You’re as red as a beet.”

“Beets are purple.”

“Fine. You’re as red as whatever kind of fruit is as red as you are. Better?”

I smiled. “I’m fine. I’m just hot.”

“Go take a cold shower, then. You’re freaking me out.”

I went back to my room and I followed Alex’s advice.

It changed nothing.

I watched from my window as Chris left for the premiere. He texted me some hours later to ask if I’d like to come over. Part of me certainly wanted to, but then another part of me knew that it could only lead to trouble. And not the good kind.

.

To: Chris 11:58PM

Rain check?

.

From: Chris 12:00AM

No problem. See you tomorrow. Sleep tight.

.

Definitely not the good kind.
Chapter 11

Chris has never struck me as the vain type, so when he called me early the next morning to complain about what he believed would be a major wardrobe issue, I certainly found it strange.

“Hello?”

“I scratched my cornea.”

I looked at the phone, confirming that this was, in fact, Chris calling me. “And this is my problem because?”

“Because for the next three to five days, I need to wear glasses.”

“And?”

“Glasses, Dixon. I have to wear glasses. With this beard I’m gonna look like a hipster.”

“I think you’d look cute.”

“Well of course I’d look cute. But isn’t that gonna be a problem for the photoshoot?”

“Photoshoot?” I looked over at my schedule. “You don’t have a photoshoot.”

“Yes I do. Matt said I have it tomorrow morning at sunup.”

“Well Matt never put that in the itinerary.”

“Maybe you should call him.”

“No!” I almost shouted. “Goddammit, how long have you had this scheduled? He said nothing to me about it.”

“Well he was talking about it last night when I went to the eye doctor. He wouldn’t shut up about how it was gonna ruin the shoot, how he didn’t want to cancel—”

“Is he with you right now?” I asked.

“No, but he’s gonna be soon. He had to make some calls. I guess I can’t do the star-in-the-car thing, which really sucks.”

“Is it that bad?”

“It looks like my pupil just gave birth.”

“That’s disgusting!” I had to ask. “How’s your vision?”

“Blurry, but okay. Honestly, I don’t think I should go out at all today, but I have to be at the show.”

“They can’t postpone?”

“After this, I’m booked for thirteen straight months. So no.”

“Jesus Christ…” I checked my watch and wondered how bad my damp hair looked, and whether I should risk letting him see me like this. “I’ll be down there in a minute.”
I ended the call and tucked the phone in my pocket, swooping my great glob of hair into the ugliest ponytail ever as I grabbed his outfit and headed out.

When I saw him, he wasn’t exaggerating. “Holy shit,” I said upon greeting him at the door. “How did that happen?”

“He was trying to sneak out,” Matt’s voice came from behind Chris.

“I went for a walk last night,” he said, moving so that I could join them. “It was windy, and I guess I got something in my eye. I kept rubbing and rubbing thinking it would come out, but it didn’t. And then this is what happened.”

“Two o’clock in the freaking morning,” Matt added, one of his hands still clutching a phone close to his ear. “That’s what time we got out of the hospital.”

“You went to the hospital?”

“I woke up from the pain!” Chris explained. “It was burning. I thought I went blind or something.”

“So dramatic,” I laughed. I was aware that it was rude to laugh at his situation, but I had to. “Okay, so you look homeless.”

“I know, I know,” he nodded, scratching at his beard, which was almost as untidy as his hair was now. “Do you think it would help more to wear glasses or an eye patch?”

“Ah yes, the classic choice between hipster and pirate. A veritable Sophie’s Choice, if you will.”

“Just tell us what we’re doing here, smart ass. I’m on hold with the show and I need to tell them what we’re doing.” Matt asked in frustration.

“Oh, hey, when were you gonna tell me about that photoshoot?” I asked him right back, moving Chris out of the way so that I could step closer. “Is it really tomorrow morning? Why is it on none of my schedules?”

“Because I just heard about it myself last night. Apparently Allen set it up while he was in town.”

Chris turned to me and grimaced. “Dude, I’m sorry. I didn’t know that you didn’t know.”

“Well it doesn’t really matter that much. They can photoshop the eye problem. The lights will be an issue, so hopefully they don’t make you look directly at them.”

“But he looks like a hobo,” Matt reminded me.

I reached my hands out for Chris’s, held them tightly, and looked sympathetically into his eyes. “I’m sorry, but it seems we have just one choice.”

He squinted his eyes. “Dare I ask?”

“You’re gonna have to lose the beard.”

“No!” He shrieked, moving one hand from mine to cover his mouth dramatically.

“I’m sorry, but it’s our only option.”

“Can you two stop playing house and do whatever it is you have to do to make him look presentable?” Matt interjected. “And what do I tell them?”
“That he’ll be there, and he’ll drive.”

“He can’t drive!” Matt yelled.

“Can I drive?” Chris asked.

“You can drive. It’s a controlled course, you’ll be wearing a seatbelt, you still have your depth perception, and one good eye if you stick a lens in it. You’ll be fine.”

Apparently not caring what Matt would think, Chris quickly and jubilantly kissed my lips and hugged me tight. “You’re the bomb!”

“The bomb?” I giggled, leading him to his chair. “Is this 1992?”

“When the whiskers are gone, I’m gonna look like I did then, so…”

Matt paced around the room negotiating with Allen on one line and the show on the other. Over his yelling and chatting and general ass-kissing, Chris and I began to talk about the walk he’d taken the night before, how gorgeous and misty the streets were, how he’d meant to send me a picture he’d taken from his balcony before he realized he had an eye issue, and how he’d really wished I’d been with him.

“If you’d been there we could have gone to a pub and gotten shitfaced like half the city was last night,” he said.

“I guess we’ll have to do it another night, then.”

“Tonight?” He asked eagerly.

“You want to go get soused when you’ve got a sunrise photoshoot in the morning?” I wrapped the apron around his shoulders and plugged in the razor. “You’re not using your noodle.”

“Then what about the night after?”

“Tomorrow night we’re heading back to the states,” I reminded him. “At least I am. I think you’re coming back the next day.”

“Why do you have to leave a night earlier than I do?” He asked. “What is so urgent that you can’t stay behind just one more night?”

“I have an entire wardrobe to pick up from various stores in Beverly Hills, then I have to bring them to the hotel, organize them by day and event, coordinate them with the weather forecast, then with Greer’s clothing, then call Neil Lane about those cufflinks you’re to wear on Friday night at the gallery opening…” I paused and smiled at him. “Need I go on?”

“Well why don’t you have Alex do it for you?”

“I can’t just put that all on him!”

“Why not? You got stuck with all G’s wardrobe duties while he was out with food poisoning. Compared to her, I can’t be that much work.”

I was, selfishly perhaps, grateful that he took a jab at Greer, however light a one it may have been. “You aren’t,” I agreed.

“Then have him do it!”
“And what should I tell him is the reason?”

“Tell him I want to take you on a date,” he shrugged as if it should be no big deal. “Tell him the truth. He owes you one.”

I looked carefully over at Matt, who was still too busy on the phone to overhear any of our conversation. “So you’re really okay with telling people we’re going on a date?”

“Not people. Just Alex. And come on, it’s not like he doesn’t know about us, right?”

“He doesn’t,” I told him. “Didn’t I tell you I would keep anything between us a secret?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t think you meant from Alex.”

“Why the hell wouldn’t I mean Alex? Just because we work closely together doesn’t mean we’re best buds. Not everyone develops friendships as easily as you do with your coworkers.”

“Then make up an excuse,” he sighed. “Lie if that’s what you want to do. But just find a way to stay. I mean, if you want to.”

“Of course I want to.” I combed his beard slowly, softly, mostly just caressing him. “I just don’t understand why you want to.”

He looked at me as if he were confused. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you have Greer here. If you wanna get laid you don’t need me.”

At this precise moment, Matt ended his call. “Okay, they said as long as we have the insurance to cover anything that might happen, they’ll let you drive.”

Chris was still looking up at me. Still confused.

“Thanks, Matt! You’re a lifesaver! I don’t know what I’d do without you!” Matt imitated – poorly – Chris’s voice.

Finally Chris snapped out of it and turned to face Matt. “Sorry… uh… yeah seriously thank you. I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me,” Matt answered, surprisingly humble in tone. “This is what you pay me to do. But if you want to buy me a Rolex for Christmas this year, I won’t say no.” He then mumbled something about needing to go to the desk downstairs, and he left, without so much as an announcement about how quickly he’d return and a reminder that by whenever it was, I should be gone.

As soon as the door closed, Chris looked back at me. “What?” I asked, clicking the razor on and trimming down the beard.

“I don’t want to get laid,” he said. “Well, I don’t just want to get laid. I want to spend time with you.”

“Why?” I was almost laughing at how truly ridiculous the thought was.

“Because why not? You’re fun and you’re cool and you don’t take all of this as seriously as some people would.”

“Because it’s not serious.”
He went silent, but he was smiling at me.

“No smiling until I’ve got you short enough for the blade.”

He smiled wider.

“Asshole.”

When I was done trimming, and after I’d switched off the razor, he spoke again. “You like me, right?”

I paused. I had to. I couldn’t believe he actually had to ask that. “Of course.”

“I mean, you like me, like you think there’s something real between us. Not just fucking.”

I rolled my eyes. “We’re having fun.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Are you asking if I’m romantically interested? If I have feelings? Because it seems a little soon to be having that talk.”

“So it’s too soon for you to tell?” He asked. He wasn’t smiling anymore.

“Not exactly. I just didn’t think thinking about it was an option.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Because this is all over in a couple weeks, and I’m never gonna see you again.”

“Says who?”

“Says the schedule.”

“No, I mean who says we’re never gonna see each other again?”


“We don’t have to stop seeing each other just because we won’t be working together.”

“I mean, I guess so…” he had me confused. And a bit scared. “Honestly, I didn’t think about it before now. Like I said, I didn’t think it was an option.”

“Well just for the sake of argument, let’s say it is. So now that you’re thinking about it, what do you say?”

I looked at him intently, seating myself on the edge of the desk. For the first time, I actually did start thinking about him and me after this tour was over. What it would be like if I ever ran into him again. Even more, what it would be like if we never parted ways. He said he liked me, but what did that mean? I know what it would have meant in seventh grade, but this was hardly Harper Middle School. Well. I guess in some ways it was. But the more I thought, the more I looked at him. And the more I looked at him, the more I wanted to laugh.
“I’m sorry,” I said at last, shaking my head. “I just can’t take anything you say seriously when you look like that.”

I removed myself from the desk and continued working on him. By now I guess Chris got the hint that anything even remotely in the realm of feelings was out of the question for us. He didn’t bring it up again, and I didn’t want him to. We were having fun. That was all. That was enough.

“So what time are we leaving in the morning, then?” He asked after a few minutes of uncomfortable silence.

“But we,” I told him. “You and Matt, I guess, but not me. All I’m doing is coming by to bring you your clothes for afterwards.”

“I thought you were styling me for the shoot.”

“I doubt it.” I laid the razor on the desk and prepared a hot towel. “I’ve yet to see a major magazine do a shoot without their own stylist on set.”

“All the more reason for us to go out tomorrow night, then,” he said. “I won’t be seeing you much, it sounds like, and I’d like to. I’m sure I can get you on my flight with me. Hell, I’ll cover the ticket myself if that’s what it comes down to.”

Honestly, it was tempting. Almost an entire day with Chris, just the two of us. We would be going on what he actually admitted was a real date, back to his room, fucking the brains out of each other until well into the next afternoon. It wouldn’t be disappointing, that’s for sure.

“Let me talk to Alex and see if he’ll take you on just for that one day. If so, I’m in.”

A look of pure elation spread over his now baby-fied face as he smiled up at me. “For real?”

I laughed, wiping the shaving cream from his face before I wrapped it in the towel. “For real. Now, you’re going to wait here while I call him. I can let you know in two minutes.”

I stepped out into the hall and took out my phone. As soon as I dialed Alex’s number, he answered. It was like he was waiting for a call with absolutely nothing better to do.

“What’s up?” He greeted.

“How much do you love me?” I asked.

“On a scale from one to ten?”

“On a scale from Vladimir Putin to Ricky Martin.”

Without hesitation he answered, “Tyra Banks.”

“Awesome! So you’ll do me a solid in return for all the work I did for you not too long ago?”

“Well now that you put it that way, I think I might demote you.”

“Don’t you dare!”

I could hear him sigh emphatically, along with the distinct sound of hangers swishing down a curtain rod. “Fine, fine. What do you need?”

“I need you to take over my Chris duties for tomorrow night and the day after.”
“What?” His voice was at a pitch I was certain only dogs could hear. “Are you crazy? That’s Beverly Hills and rich people and actual diamonds on loan!”

“And I had to deal with Greer for how long while you were eating sushi and languishing on bidets?”

“One does not languish on a bidet,” he said. “Do you even know what a bidet is?”

“Please do this for me? I’m begging you!”

“Why? Why am I doing this?”

I didn’t want to tell him, but I couldn’t lie. Not to him. “I have a date,” I admitted. “With… with Chris.”

“Chris who?”

“What do you mean, Chris who? Chris, you asshat.”

“A date? Or a fuck session?”

“Does it matter?”

After a very brief moment he answered, “Not really. I completely understand.”

“So will you do it?”

I heard just then the muffled, indiscernible words of what sounded like an angry Greer in the background. “Ugh, fine,” he answered. “But that makes us even, right?”

“Obviously.”

Greer’s voice again. Something about heels…

“I have to go, love,” Alex said. “Have fun on your date. I’ll see you in a couple days.”

“Thanks so much! I love you!”

“How much?” He asked.

“On a scale from Old Creepy Guy at my gym to Idris Elba, you’re a solid Rob Lowe.”

I could hear the smile in his voice. “I hope you remember that when you’re breaking all the rules and regretting it in the depths of your soul.”

“I have no soul,” I told him. “If I did, I could never do this job.”

“Well put,” he said. “Gotta go.”

We ended our call, and I returned to the room. Chris had removed the towel from his face, and had donned his glasses in prep for his excursion.

“It’s all set,” I told him. “We’re on.”

He simply smiled, and honestly, he’d never been cuter.

…Postnatal cornea and all.
I decided it would be best to just set out Chris’s outfit for the next day the night before his photoshoot. In so doing, I could sleep in as long as I wanted, get actual breakfast from room service, and even go out to get my hair cut. I had real plans for that morning, and none of them involved working. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to see Chris. It was that I thought that if I could start my day off right, I might end the night on a much better note than he or I had done before. Not that we’d had very many nights to start or end the way I planned, but… well… you know what I mean.

However, this is not how things went.

At around a quarter past three in the morning, my phone rang. I cussed at it, knocked it on the floor accidentally while I was trying to answer it, and then decided not to answer it at all when it finally stopped ringing. I could fall back asleep before it went off again, though, and when I heard Matt on the other end, I wished I’d turned my phone off before I’d gone to bed that night.

“We’re leaving in five minutes. Why aren’t you here?”

“Because I brought his clothes last night,” I answered. “You don’t need me this morning.”

“Yes we do. I told you yesterday that we did.”

“No you didn’t!” I racked my brain, trying to remember whether he had told me or not. I was sure he hadn’t.

“Well you should have assumed!” He replied harshly. “Four minutes, now. Hurry up!”

“I haven’t even showered!” I told him. “I don’t have makeup on, I’m not dressed, I’m half awake…”

“Not my problem!” he sang annoyingly. “I’m taking Chris down to the car now. Meet you there in four minutes.”

As soon as he ended the abrupt call, I threw my phone against the wall. I knew as soon as I threw it that that was a terrible idea, and it was surely as broken as my dreams of sleeping in now were. I knew I looked like shit, and I never let anyone see me when I looked like shit. Not only did a less than acceptable appearance make me highly uncomfortable, but it was also not the best thing for my reputation. Since I was already pretty disgusting, I was faced with either missing out on this photoshoot and costing Chris and his personal team god-knows-what from his lack of whatever it was that I was supposed to be doing for him, or I could be seen as I now was.

And of course, I chose the latter.

I dressed in jeans and a sweater, but brought along the clothes I’d originally planned to wear that day. Maybe I could find a place there to shower. Maybe Chris would be sleeping or otherwise preoccupied in the car and wouldn’t notice how I looked. Maybe he was one of those guys who thinks a girl is most beautiful when she wears no makeup and hasn’t showered yet and is wearing ill-fitting clothes.

Maybe unicorns exist.

It was as black as it had been when I fell asleep just before midnight, but I wore sunglasses anyway to hide my tired, dark eyes. My hair was held up in a messy ponytail that I could only hope I was pulling off well enough to look sexy instead of homeless. And over my shoulders, I had draped a
poncho that, while possibly the most comfortable garment I owned, had gone out of style almost ten years before. At least it hid my wrinkled sweater. That was one last thing to worry about for now.

But of course Chris was awake. And of course he noticed how I looked. And of course he seemed disgusted by it.

“Forgot to set that alarm, did ya?” he asked.

Matt snickered.

“I didn’t think I needed to come with. I’ve literally never heard of a single shoot that didn’t have its own staff on site to style their models. If you ask me, this entire thing is bullshit.”

“Make sure you mention that when we’re there,” Matt told me sarcastically. “Make sure you tell every single person there how incompetent they are.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that I needed to be there when we were talking yesterday?”

“Can you guys not get into a scuffle right now?” Chris asked us. “It’s way too early for that.”

“I didn’t even get to shower,” I explained.

“I can see that,” Matt started, and I could tell he had more to say. Before he could, though, Chris stopped him.

“There’s probably a shower there, Sarah. If you want you can just take care of it there. I see you brought clothes for yourself.”

“Yeah, that’s my plan if it’s possible. But who knows? Maybe since they don’t have a stylist on site, they won’t have a shower either. By the way, how’s your eye?”

“A little better today.” He took his glasses off and opened his eyes wide. “How does it look?”

“A lot better,” I told him, looking it over. “A lot less red, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah, I thought so too but I couldn’t tell for sure. Are you feeling okay?”

“Like I said, I’m tired. But otherwise I’m okay. Why?”

“Because you look like shit,” Matt said. When I looked over to give him my best “fuck you” stare, he was smiling. Not rudely. Not smartly. It was as if he were only teasing me. Like I was his friend. I was confused by this. It was way too early to be analyzing his inner monologue.

“You don’t look like shit,” Chris said. “You look… uh…”

“The word you’re looking for is ‘natural,’” Matt interrupted.

Chris nodded, suppressing a laugh. I had to smile and agree. Natural is a prettier word than shit.

“So what did you bring for the shoot?” Matt asked.

“I brought nothing,” I answered. Frankly, I was surprised he was asking. I thought it was obvious that I had brought no clothes for Chris with us on this excursion.

“No, but I mean what is he going to wear when we get there?” he clarified. Though I was still
“What he’s asking is what kind of wardrobe did you send ahead for me to wear when we get there?” Chris said.

I looked at them both, my mouth surely gaping. There was no way they were serious… right?

“Are you asleep behind those shades?” Matt teased.

“No… b-but I’m pretty sure you’re just pulling my leg. You’re pulling my leg, right? You are. You totally are.” I began laughing a nervous giggle. “You guys… you guys are hilarious.”

“When I sent you the memo, I told you to tell me what kind of wardrobe you were sending. It wasn’t absolutely necessary for me to know, but it helps. When you didn’t answer, I just assumed you hadn’t gotten back to the magazine’s creative directors yet. So what did you send?”

I stared at Matt as the words flowed so effortlessly from his admittedly perfectly proportionate lips. What a silly thing to notice about him at a time like this…

“Sarah?” Chris asked. “You did send wardrobe, didn’t you?”

“I never even got your memo, Matt.” I hated to say it, could hardly believe I was, yet there it was.

“Sarah Eloise Dixon, if you’re telling me my boss has no clothes to wear at this shoot we’re going to be arriving at in less than five minutes, I swear I will pimp choke you until those tiny little eyes of yours pop so far out of your head that people will think you’re a Margaret Keane painting.”

“First of all,” I stopped him from continuing, not in the least worried about his threat, “My middle name is not Eloise.”

“Well I didn’t know what it was so I made one up.”

“Second, don’t get all worked up, okay? Maybe this two-cent wannabe magazine doesn’t have their own personal stylist on set for Chris, but I promise you they have wardrobe. In fact, I remember sending Chris’s measurements to a tailor last week. They had called saying that they represented a private business that would be dressing him for an upcoming event. That was probably them. Now cool it and let me have my morning, or at least as much of it is left.”

“And what if you’re wrong, Sarah?” Matt asked, Chris looking straight forward, wisely keeping out of our conversation. “What then?”

“If I’m wrong,” I started bravely, “Then I will personally run out and find something for him to wear. You’d be surprised the kind of things I can do on short notice. After all, I am a professional.”

Chris finally looked at me, a smirk ghosting the corner of his mouth. “You’ve got my measurements memorized, have you?”

I tried not to smile. He knew as well as I did that even if I didn’t know the numbers, surely I could take a close enough guess by just remembering how he felt in my arms. And for me, that was a sure enough way to measure him.

“I told you, Chris,” I said, “You’d be surprised.”

We found ourselves then at our destination, a small, two-story office building with nothing much to brag when it came to the car park. The concrete was cracked and rugged with weeds growing in
every corner of the lot, dark, patched-in half-repaired holes throughout, and crooked yellow lines that
seemed to be hand painted. The façade on the building did not seem to have been updated since
some time in the seventies, and there was what appeared to be a bullet hole just above the doorway.
It was hard to tell, though.

When we stepped inside, however, it was quite another story altogether. The walls were a cool grey
color decorated in minimal contemporary art pieces that, though nothing to be shown in museums,
was steps above the typical hotel art in most lobbies. The seating was comfortable, sleek, and showy,
and the front desk was clearly an antique piece that had been recently reprised. Though the entire
space had something of an eclectic feel, it was also surprisingly well put together. There was a
certain flow to it all that I could appreciate. I’d never seen anything like it.

We were not greeted at the door. In fact, there was no one else in the building as far as we could see.
Suddenly a shadow passed the doorway to the side that seemed to lead to more office buildings, and
then that shadow backtracked into the doorframe upon realizing there were people waiting at the
desk.

“Are you with Chris Evans?” the young lady asked.

“Only when absolutely necessary,” Chris answered.

She couldn’t have been much more than twenty, short and thick, and remarkably beautiful. Her rich,
northern accent made her almost difficult to understand, but thankfully she spoke slowly.

“Could you sign in here please?” She asked us. “All of you?”

We took turns signing a paper marked “Visitors.” After that, we received badges that said the same.

“Have a seat,” she told us. “Mister Hoskins will be with you soon.”

We turned around, still none of us speaking about how clinical and dry this experience seemed thus
far. Not to mention how odd it was that this young girl, who was surely part of the target Chris
Evans demographic, didn’t seem to recognize him. Or even know who he was.

We were quiet, either too tired or too confused to speak. I sat next to Chris, who sat next to Matt. At
some point, I leaned my head onto Chris’s shoulder, and he laid his head on my head. I think I dozed
off. I know he did.

“Chris!”

The voice was booming and overwhelming, even with just that name being said. We startled, all of
us surprised to see a man who seemed far too young to have a voice like that. He was older than the
receptionist, but still younger than… well… me, probably. His hair was so blonde it was almost
white, and his teeth matched almost exactly. As soon as Chris stood, the man hugged him tight as
though they were old rugby mates.

“You have to excuse the place,” he told Chris, who seemed to be the only person he noticed. “I
know it’s a bit rough on the outside, but I think you’ll see that we’ve got plenty to show off on the
inside.”

We walked through winding halls that seemed far too long and too whirlly to be contained within the
building we’d walked into just minutes before. As we passed offices, each was full with someone
hard at work, papers and papers – old issues and rejected columns, I assumed – stacked in tidy piles
occasionally, and large posters of models – some of them famous – in ads and cover shots for the
magazine, which I could see now was called “RAGE.”
Mr. Hoskins, or Vern, as he preferred to be called, was as cordial as ever as we made our way to the basement for the shoot. It seemed they had their own studio, which is no surprise. Most magazines do. What was surprising, though, was that they didn’t have one single stylist there to work on Chris.

They had three.

Two women and a man stood beside a lighted vanity and begged Chris over immediately upon our walking into the room.

I looked over at Matt, who refused to look at me. Too proud, I suppose. Embarrassed that, for once in his career apparently, he was wrong about something.

“Excuse me?” I called to the stylists after Chris joined them. “Did you need anything more from me?”

The man looked at me quizzically, then asked, “And who are you, exactly?”

“Mr. Evans’ personal stylist,” I answered. “I was asked to tag along today.”

“No thanks, ma’am,” he answered. “We’ve got it covered.”

I turned around and looked at Matt. He still wouldn’t look me in the eye.

“Do you have a private shower for Mr. Evans to use?” I asked the group.

“Of course,” one of the women answered. “His dressing room is through that door behind you.”

“I’ll just be waiting in there, then,” I told them all. No one seemed to care, and that wasn’t surprising.

The dressing room, like the rest of this building, was full of surprises. Not only did it house a shower, but it also had a full-sized bed, a couch, a vanity big enough for three, and plenty of room to spare. There was more room in there than I’ve seen in most New York apartments.

They hadn’t even begun applying Chris’s makeup, and with his eye the way it was and still another hour and a half or so before sunrise, I knew that if I was going to shower, it would have to be now. I opened my bag, removed the clothes I planned to wear, set them on the bed, and undressed. For a few minutes, I enjoyed just being naked. It was a rare treat that some may not enjoy, and still others might find a strange thing for anyone to look forward to, but being naked is fun. Especially when you happen to be in the dressing room of the man you are currently and happily fucking.

At last, I moved to the shower. Inside, the stone floor heated under the steady stream of hot water pouring over me. My skin turned a dark pink with the contact, but I happily accepted the scalding. We had yet to stay in a hotel that had this kind of hot water and water pressure. I was in shower heaven. Ironically, shower hell is very cold.

Wet and satisfied nearly thirty minutes later, I felt as though there could be no better way to relax now than to lie in bed and sleep until I absolutely needed to wake up. I helped myself to the complimentary bathrobe and brushed my hair. And before I lay down, I decided to peek out and see the progress they were making with my favorite person.

Chris was wearing a tight, white t-shirt and a tattered pair of designer jeans, his face made up to look as though he’d been greasing up a car or something. His hair had been combed into a sort of unruly style, and he was laughing it up with someone that I couldn’t see. Whoever it was, they were standing behind a pillar that blocked my view. And then almost as soon as I really started to look at anyone or anything else, the creative director began yelling about everyone needing to stand outside.
on the set. He didn’t want to lose the light.

Satisfied that no one would be anywhere near, I disrobed once again and sat at the vanity in just my underwear. Because, you know, sitting on someone else’s furniture in no underwear at all would be gross. And then I dried my hair, applied my makeup, and relaxed. This was nice – a taste of the life of a big-shot. So this is the kind of things stars get treated to all the time. This is nice.

I started to slip into my dark blue dress when I heard the director yelling for Chris to turn his head a certain way. Apparently the studio was situated very close to the dressing room. I could hear the yelling, a few of the louder words, but nothing more. At one point I’m positive someone asked Chris “what the fuck” was going on with his eye. I needed to see more.

I finished dressing, actually satisfied with the way the jewel tone complimented my skin, but then reminding myself not to be vain on company time. I slipped back into the gym shoes I’d worn there, and walked out to see the action. I was not disappointed.

Chris was, sure enough, posing alongside an old jalopy. His greasy skin shone just magnificently against the rising sun, and lounging across the hood of the car was none other than Cindee M, one of Britain’s fastest-rising models. She was awkward and beautiful, all limbs and lips, the grease on her body strategically placed over barely-there clothing. She was one of the most unconventionally beautiful women I’d ever encountered, and there was no denying she was the sexiest creature for miles around. As soon as I saw her working there, I knew exactly why she was such a hot commodity.

“Touch him more!” the director shouted. “Reach out to his leg!”

She did as directed, and not a single shot could have possibly failed.

Chris seemed more than comfortable with the contact. He maintained his straight-laced, boy-next-door persona, but he absolutely oozed that masculine sex appeal that I’ve always craved in a man. When she touched him, he lit up. He became the actor, the genius, the man who stole a billion hearts with a single look. Suddenly I looked down at myself and wondered how the hell he and I were ever in the same room together, much less the same bed.

Between shots, Chris caught a glimpse of me standing beside Matt just off set. I couldn’t really read the look on his face, but it seemed like something clicked when he noticed me. I don’t know. Maybe I’m crazy.

But god, there was something about the way she touched him. It ignited something in me that I couldn’t quench, something hot and panting and every cliché of every bad RomCom all in one. I wanted to tackle him, fuck him, ruin him right there in front of everyone present. I wanted him dirty, rough, and in that mud beside that car under those lights. Something about the way she touched him… it didn’t make me jealous or anything. It was just hot. It brought him into a whole new light for me. It took him from Chris to Chris 2.0. It made me go from wanting him to needing him. Now. Here.

There’s that annoying little voice inside me – the one that tells me when a thing is a good idea or a bad one – and I wanted to kill it right now. That thing told me that Sneaking back to the dressing room to settle my frustrations alone was a bad idea. But Chris’s glorious body told me otherwise. I needed a release.

I ran back to his room, closed the door, and pulled back the covers of the bed. Carefully I slipped my panties down my legs and left them looped around one of my ankles as I bent my knees up. I knew I needed to be fast, but since I could still hear them outside the room, I knew I had time. I tried to focus
on listening while also focusing on the task at hand, and I found that doing both was difficult.

But, thankfully, not impossible.

I closed my eyes and imagined Chris in those clothes, his hands holding me firmly in place on the bed. I imagined his greased cheeks brushing against the inside of my thigh, his lips pressing softly against my labia, teasing me relentlessly, making me squirm with anticipation. I allowed my fingers to guide my imagination where I supposed his tongue might travel – from my clit to my entrance and then back up again. I kept the pressure light, happy to know from experience just how he felt. And then the memory of his fingers inside me invaded involuntarily, though welcomed it was. With two fingers inside me, mimicking as best I could his motions, I began feeling that familiar buildup of excitement, and the relief of knowing that soon I could get this over with came along just as I started whispering his name.

Or at least I thought I was whispering…

I was almost there. Goddammit, I was so fucking close. I was pumping my fingers in and out so fast and so roughly that my hand was starting to cramp, but I kept going. I knew that all I needed was another minute, or maybe my vibrator because it was longer than my fingers and would get the job done quicker. Oh well, the hell with it! I was almost there… almost there… almost…

“Holy fuckin’ shit, Sarah!”

At first I thought I was still imagining his voice, but it was too real this time. Too loud.

He was here.

I looked over and saw him standing wide-eyed inside the door, which was closed behind him, thankfully. My heart was racing, both from the pending orgasm and the scare of seeing him so suddenly, and I thought I might pass out. I was embarrassed at first, but then turned on again. The way he was looking at me wasn’t in a way that told me that he was disgusted at my depraved actions or that he thought me inappropriate, unprofessional, or slutty – all things which I now fancied myself. He was looking at me like I was the tree and it was Christmas morning. Or maybe Christmas Eve, bringing the anticipation and elation of things to come.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, pulling my dress down only far enough to cover what was necessary. “I’m sorry, Chris, I know this is gross, I just… um…” I tried to think, and think fast. “I don’t have a good excuse. Did anyone else see me?”

“No, but we all heard you,” he smiled. “Everything okay?”

“Of course it’s okay, aside from the fact that I’m never going to be able to face anyone ever again and that I now want to die.”

“No one knows that you were doing… this.” He locked the door. “Now, did I disturb you, or…”

I opened my eyes wider in shock, relaxing into the bed once again. “You looked so good out there.”

“Well so did you,” he said. “That dress looks amazing.”

I covered my face, pulling the covers over me. “So do I resign now?”

He laughed. “Your secret’s safe with me, buttercup.”

“You don’t judge me?” I asked through my hands.
“Never,” he said. He pulled them away from my face and leaned down to kiss me. “Honestly when I saw you I thought you had done it on purpose. I thought you were surprising me.”

“Um… would that have been a good surprise?”

“Mm-hm,” he nodded. “And it was.”

“Then… surprise!”

“I thought I was going to take care of it for you later tonight, that’s all.”

“You still can,” I told him. “It’s not like it’s one and done a day for me, you know.”

“So are you finished now, or do I need to help you out?” he winked.

“Are you serious?”

He shrugged. “If you want.”

I thought about it for a moment. “Did everyone really hear me?”

“They thought you were in pain. And since you were calling me, they sent me to check up on you.”

“So they don’t know?”

He laughed. “No. But if you want me to tell them, I’m sure they’d love to hear a good story.”

“No!” I almost shouted.

He leaned down and kissed me through a smile. “I’m gonna shower, and then I’m taking you out. No way I’m letting that dress go to waste.”

“Where are we going?”

“I don’t know,” he said. He stood and took off the shirt quickly, then worked on the pants, placing them both in the bag specifically set aside for that purpose. “I figure we’ll get a map of the tourist areas, close our eyes, point to a place, and go there.”

I rose from the bed, moved to the vanity, and fixed my hair and makeup. “Is that how you always choose where to go on dates?”

“Not always,” he winked, heading toward the shower. “But then, I figure you’re special. I’ll do something different.”

It was a passing comment made by a man who’d just caught the woman he is currently sleeping with masturbating in his bed, and who was now walking naked to take a shower. But it stuck with me. I was special.

I guess that’s one word for it…
Chapter 13

It wasn’t too long before we were able to ditch Matt—much against Matt’s wishes—and get out on our own. Fortunately Chris knew the city fairly well, and even though I would have loved to have learned about the history of this building here or a haunting in that building there, I was a bit distracted. I’m sure you can understand why.

“Are you hungry yet?” he asked.

By this point we’d been walking for most of the afternoon, which wasn’t easy in my heels.

“Starving,” I told him. “I wouldn’t mind just sitting down, either, though.”

He looked down at my feet, and I could see that he felt bad for never noticing how much trouble it had been for me.

“Oh my god! I’m sorry! Here, let’s stop here for coffee, okay?”

We were at that moment just passing a little coffee shop, and upon entering, we were both pleased to find it empty. I hobbled in as sexy a way as possible to a back booth, remembering that was the place he preferred to sit. In a minute, he was with me. We sat wordless and exhausted trying to make out the view through the early evening fog beginning to form outside the window, and the only sound from our table was the sipping of coffee from lips deprived of loving for too long.

“Where are we getting dinner?” I asked at last. Honestly, fuck dinner. I wanted to get back to the hotel. I wanted to get an early start on what I planned would be three rounds at least.

“Oh, did you not like my map idea?” he asked cheekily.

“Were you actually serious?”

He shook his head and smiled. “Nah, we can find a place. There’s a restaurant a couple blocks over that has an amazing roast lamb. Honestly you’ve never had anything like it, I promise.”

“Or,” I started, my best sultry tone in tow, “We could order room service.” I slid my leg over next to his and rubbed my ankle across his shin.

“We could,” he shrugged. “But I don’t think they have lamb. We could check out the restaurant at the hotel. They might have something good. You just can’t get everything through room service. Who knows, though? Maybe Matt can make a call and see if we could get something special sent up.”

I couldn’t tell if he was onto me or not. Was I not sending strong enough cues? Was I too subtle? I let my foot travel all the way up his leg into his lap, gently stroking the zipper of his pants. “I think we should stay in the room as much as possible, don’t you?”

He bit his lip briefly and looked over at me. “You’re not hungry?”

“Oh I am,” I whispered.

“Something you should know about me,” he said, almost as quietly as I had spoken as he leaned in closer, “Is that I like to make sure I’m properly fueled for the task at hand. With you, for example, I don’t just plan to take you back to the room and fuck you.”
I furrowed my brow, giving him a curious glare.

“I’m going to see to it that you get everything you deserve. Understand?”

I didn’t really. “Um…”

“I want to give you the best night of your life. I wanna see you walking funny for a week. I wanna spend so long going down on you that I’ll need to take scuba lessons. You get it?”

I gulped hard. “Mm-hm,” I managed. I moved my leg from his lap and placed my foot back on the floor.

“So would you like a coffee or something?” He asked as if he hadn’t just said the things he had just said.

“Coffee, yeah,” I muttered. “Extra cream, no sugar.”

He ordered for us and sat back in his seat comfortably across from me. For a full minute we just sipped our hot drinks and gazed around us at the dismal view. Though it seemed an eternity before he reached across, I found it to be well worth the wait.

“I still don’t know enough about you,” he said.

I just looked at him, curious and confused as to, frankly, why he gave a single shit. “What do you want to know?” I asked.

He shrugged, his brick house body shifting in the seat as he made himself more comfortable. “I don’t know. Everything, I guess.”

I laughed lightly. “If you try to be more specific, I’ll answer the best I can.”


“What about them?”

“How many? What are their names?”

“Five. Alice, Max, Gabby, Laura, and Amanda.”

“How old are they?”

“40, 39, 37, 35, and 34.”

“And you’re the youngest?”

“Yes,” I answered, feeling calmer now. “And in case you’re too scared to ask, I’m 30.”

“So the biggest age gap is between you and the next youngest… 4 years?”

“Yeah. Max used to call me ‘Whoops.’”

“That’s mean,” he said. “He doesn’t seem like a very good brother.”

“He’s my sister,” I laughed. “Maxine.”

“Ah. Well then I don’t blame her for going by the name Max. I would, too.”
“We’re all named after family,” I explained. “She picked the short straw and got my great-grandma’s name.”

“Who are you named after?”

I smiled proudly at the thought. “My mom. It’s her middle name.”

“Are you guys close?”

I hesitated. “I guess. I mean, considering everything we’ve been through, we’re about as close as we’ll ever be.”

“What do you mean?” He leaned forward and stirred his coffee as he asked.

It wasn’t something I wanted to talk about. Not here. Not with what I had planned for later. “It’s a long story. We just had a falling out a while back after Luke died, that’s all. We’ve made up, but it’s still uncomfortable sometimes.”

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

It was sweet of him to ask. Very sweet. Asking me about my family was more than most guys had ever done by the time they’d known me this long, and then to actually seem interested… I don’t know. It was different. Good different.

“Not now,” I smiled. “Maybe some other time.” But some other time would never happen. Telling him that we could talk about it some other time was my way of telling him he didn’t need to know.

“Suit yourself,” he responded. “What about the rest of the family?”

“Yeah, we’re alright. We get along, we just don’t talk very often. They’re all kinda doing their own thing.”

“Yeah, I know how that gets. Seems like if you have more than one or two siblings, it’s just too hard to keep tabs on everyone.”

“So you have trouble, too?” I asked.

“It’s not so much that we’re all doing different things,” he told me. “It’s just that I’m busy, and I hate that even when I have a free weekend, it’s almost impossible to get everyone together. Everyone tries to revolve around my schedule and… it sucks, you know? I feel like such a dick expecting everyone to work around me.”

“You’re not a dick,” I said. “I’m sure they understand.”

“They do, I think. At least they seem to. And it’s not like that’s how it always is, but I guess it just seems like it.”

He went on about his family, how they each have some individual gift or talent, and how he believed that any one of them could easily be as famous as they’d each like if they wanted to. He spoke of their humility, their kindness, how they had always put family first, and how he believed family was the most important thing in the world. And as he talked, suddenly I wasn’t in such a rush to get to the hotel. Suddenly it seemed we had all the time in the world.

I don’t know exactly how much time we spent there. I just know that when we finally took the time to look outside again, both of us with more coffee than blood running through our veins, the sky was
dark and foggy. It was a true London night, the last one we would spend in the city together. Probably the last time I’d ever be here. And without a doubt, I had fallen in love with this city. Even with the smell of rot and the sight of drunks barreling down the main streets en masse on the weekends, there was a romance and charm here that I would never forget.

Or maybe that was just him.

“Wow, okay,” he laughed, looking down at his phone. “Yeah, we should get going. Matt called me six times. He’s probably freaking out.”

I excused myself to the bathroom while Chris called Matt back. While in there, after taking the world’s longest pee and washing my hands, I braced my hands on the sink and stared at myself in the mirror. There I was, pretty and presentable but nothing especially special. I was no Greer MacFarlane. I was hardly even believable as someone that a man like Chris would look at twice. What did he see in me? My boobs? I have nice boobs. I’ve got a pretty face even if it’s nothing to write home about. I’m not hideous, and I know for a fact that I’m damn good in bed. But what would make him want to take me to bed in the first place? What the hell did this man see? And why couldn’t I see it?

I stepped back out and found him looking pleased with himself. “I told him to go to sleep and he didn’t even question me,” he grinned. “I think he’s starting to like you.”

“Yeah?”

“He doesn’t talk nearly as much shit about you as he used to,” he said. “And yesterday I even caught him complimenting you. He said, ‘She’s not as annoying as I thought she’d be.’”

“Wow!” I laughed. “Coming from him, that’s really something!” We walked outside and toward the street for a cab. “Wait, so you guys were talking about me?”

“Sure,” he shrugged.

“Why?”

He looked down at me and kissed my forehead. “Why wouldn’t we?”

“He doesn’t exactly love me,” I said.

“Yeah, but I do, so who cares what he thinks?”

It was at this moment that a cab stopped for us. Of course it happened at that moment. And sure, it was a teeny tiny comment made with obvious little thought ahead of time, but he still said it. And you just can’t say those things to a girl you’re fucking.

On the way back, he babbled on about tomorrow’s schedule. I didn’t mean to ignore what he was saying, but I was understandably preoccupied. Besides, I already knew the schedules like the back of my hand. I tried desperately to block out what he’d said. He’d probably said it to dozens or hundreds or however many women before. It’s one of those things guys say to get women in bed. It shouldn’t matter what he said, but it did. Goddammit, it meant so fucking much.

I was somewhere between biting my lip to suppress how much I was smiling and working out a way to explain away his words when we arrived at the hotel. He paid the cabbie and took me by the hand, guiding me to the special side entrance reserved for his kind. All the while, I squeezed his hand tight, proud as punch to be by his side. Maybe he didn’t really love me. Maybe all of this would end in a couple weeks. Maybe I’d never see him again. All of those things were possible. All of those
things were probable. But there I was with him now, heading to his private room now, going to fuck him. Now. To be fucked by him. To kiss his lips and taste his tongue and run my fingertips over his chest. If in ten years he was nothing but a memory, he would still be my favorite memory. The one that no one would believe. But it didn’t matter if anyone believed it. I knew it to be true. I was touching the story, flesh and blood. I could taste and smell and savor the story. Besides that fact, I didn’t give a fuck about anything.

When we got to the room, I assumed things would be business as usual. Not that the business was bad, mind you, but it was still business. It would still be good and satisfying, but we would be somewhat limited in this 13’X13’ bedroom with walls far too thin. He would lay me down, touch me, and fuck me. And afterward, we’d remember how hungry we were and probably send Matt out for a midnight snack. My expectations were only that.

But as the door closed behind us, Chris shifted to the bathroom and ran the shower right away. When he returned, he was already naked with the exception of his boxer briefs, and I had yet to even take off my shoes.

“I don’t know about you, but I need a shower. You don’t mind, do you?”

I didn’t need a shower, but I sure as hell wanted one now. “May I join you?”

He moved close to me and smiled, leaning his face close to mine until the tips of our noses met. “Turn around.”

I did, and his fingers trailed down my back as he unzipped my dress. It fell down around my ankles, and I stepped out of it, my aching feet still confined to the stilettos that made me look nothing short of Liz Taylor-level hotness. His hands took hold of my hair and gathered it in one fist, lifting it off my neck to kiss me there. I was already fit to burst, and I didn’t give a shit about showers. We’d both just showered hours earlier, anyway. But this fucker… he knew exactly what he was doing.

“You smell like coffee,” he said, his whispers teasing my skin.

I turned around and wrapped my arms around his neck. My eyes were closed and my heart beating faster with every passing second. It was the anticipation of what was coming. It was his scent, his smile, his eyelashes brushing against my skin. It was his sun-kissed skin and the freckles that now stood out more prominently. It was all of him—every inch. He cast a spell on me.

“What if we don’t make it to the shower?” I whispered, kissing along his jaw.

His hands cradled my face, and he leaned his head to the side as I kissed him. “What a shame that would be.”

My lips moved over his lips, my hands in his hair. I wanted him so desperately that I didn’t want to wait. I didn’t want foreplay. Looking at him for the past twelve hours was foreplay enough.

He scooped me up into his arms and carried me toward the shower. On the way, I kicked off my shoes and nuzzled my face in his neck, kissing him, biting him lightly. I was still in my bra and underwear, and he was still in his boxers, but he walked me right on into the shower anyway and leaned me against the wall when he set me down. His hands wrapped around my wrists as my desperate lips reached for his mouth again. He raised my hands over my head and let the steaming hot water soak through my clothes. He pressed his hips against mine and I felt his need for me.

Slowly, the dominance I had held over him with my kisses gave way to his lead. With his body firm against mine, I closed my eyes again to let him do as he pleased. I knew that by now there must be
mascara staining my face, lipstick smudged, eyeshadow nonexistent. I must look like a mime, I thought, and as silent as one, too. I wanted to be powerless, to let him take over. I wanted exactly what he was doing. I wanted him in whatever way he wanted me.

He let his hold ease on me as he kissed down my body. His mouth left marks at my throat and across my breasts, reminders that might only last a day out loud, but that would constantly remind me of what he had done. His teeth set into my skin and sucked until the dime-sized marks were made along the trail that led his way south. The last one landed on my hip before his fingers curled under the waistband of my panties and folded them, wet with more than just water, just low enough to give him access.

First, he kissed me. He kissed me from my navel down to my lips and back up again. His kisses were slow and deliberate, strategically placed. This man was experienced and god I loved that. He kissed my labia again, this time opening me with his tongue, tasting me generously in one slow lick. And during the process, he stripped my panties completely down and left them dangling at my ankles.

He looked up at me as best he could with the water falling in his face. “Open up,” he smiled, urging my legs further apart.

How could I resist?

When I had opened my legs, he took hold of my thighs and buried his face against me. I was thankful that his hands were big enough to hold so much of me, but more so that he didn’t shy away from giving me pleasure. His tongue only continued softly tasting me, thoroughly covering the most sensitive areas of my body. He was so keenly aware of how I liked to be touched, and I could see him making mental notes of which sensations I enjoyed the most. Like when his tongue rolled over my clitoris or when he stuck one finger deep inside me and twisted it upward against me. I grabbed a hold of my breasts, tugging at my hardened nipples to increase the sensation.

“I like when you touch yourself,” he told me.

I looked down at him. He’d stopped what he was doing and was just watching me.

“Keep going,” he said. He backed away from me and stood again, and the look of eager expectation in his eyes rendered me helpless. I had to do as I was told.

“You too,” I told him. I wasn’t going to be the only one. And besides, I was curious about how he liked being touched, too.

He leaned his weight against the wall of the shower beside me and touched himself as I had requested. I don’t know why, but for some reason, this was turning me on like nothing had all night. I let one of my hands slide down between my legs, rubbing myself slowly as I watched him. The way he moved his hand along his shaft, slowly and tightly, paying special attention mostly to the tip and the base and occasionally massaging his balls let me know that this was what he liked. He wasn’t going easy on himself, and neither was I now. I moved my legs slightly back closer together, allowed my fingers to circle my clit, picking up the pace until I knew I was going to come. But just when I had closed my eyes to meet my release, I felt him moving back to his knees in front of me, his mouth taking over for me, sucking and licking and fingers pressed against my pubic bone. He wanted to finish me off and it was exactly what I wanted, too. I grabbed a hold of his hair—probably too tight a hold—and let out a moan that probably sounded like torture to whatever poor soul was renting the room adjoining his. I had never had anything like this, nothing so intense in my life. When it was over, I looked back down at him, and he was still touching himself while he pleased me.
“I made you squirt!” he laughed. “That’s a first!”

“For you, maybe,” I winked. But now my legs were so weak that I could barely stand. “Your turn.”

“My turn?”

I pulled him to his feet and stripped myself of the bra that was now stretched around my waist, then pulled his boxers off completely. “I want cock.”

He laughed and wrapped his arms around me. “That’s direct,” he nodded.

“Please?”

“Don’t you want to come again?” he asked, slipping his hand between my legs.

The sensation made me jump a little, and my still-sensitive clit was screaming for attention. “You want to do that again?” I asked.

“Maybe I could do what you were doing,” he said. He circled his fingers around me as I’d done. My breathing shifted again, and I knew I was going to come. “Faster,” I begged.

He obeyed.

“Harder… don’t go easy, baby, I can take it…”

He pressed his fingers harder against me, then his whole palm. He pressed harder just as I’d asked, and moved faster, like my own personal human vibrator.

“Yes!” I shouted. I was never much for words when I came, but I wanted to let him know that this was what I liked. This was how to touch me.

After I came again, he kissed me deeply and allowed me on my knees. His cock was rock hard and tall, ready for relief from the anticipation, I was sure. I started out just as eager as I was, controlling my gag reflex as I allowed him down my throat as far as I could get him.

“Easy, Dixon,” he cooed, his hand clearing wet strands of hair from my face. “Slower, baby.”

I did as I was told, holding him in my hand and seeing how much he liked that before I put him in my mouth again. His mouth formed an O as he steadied his breathing, obviously trying to get the most out of this experience. I knew that I could make him come in three seconds if I wanted to, but he deserved more. Still, knowing I had that kind of power was intoxicating. I could literally make this guy jizz his pants, probably.

I kissed the tip of his cock before I started on slowly again. I let him ease himself into my mouth as he pleased, and tapped my hand on his ass to let him know he could face-fuck me all he wanted if he preferred. At first, he took me up on the offer, swaying his hips back and forth gently at the pace he wanted. And when he stopped doing that, we both knew that now I knew how he wanted it. And the reward of seeing how his tortured face contorted at the way I made him feel was worth every bit of time we took to discover each other before.

I released him only long enough to lick his balls, massaging them the way he’d done to himself. This seemed to drive him absolutely crazy, sending his body into hyperdrive. Every muscle in his body tensed and hardened, and he gripped my hair and guided me back to his prick so that he could finish. He couldn’t take any more, and it was lovely. I had made this guy completely helpless to my touch.
This time he wanted me faster, and that’s what I gave him. I eased him deep into my throat with some sort of gusto I never knew I had, my lips tight around him while my teeth avoided contact. As soon as I bobbed my head back and forth, I felt the heat release in my throat, and I swallowed gratefully right away. My hands rubbed slowly his inner thighs as he caught his breath again and tried to settle down. And with both of us wet and satisfied, we finally managed the strength to take a proper shower, soap and all, before wrapping ourselves in towels and making our way to the bed.

We both fell into it completely exhausted. We didn’t say a word, but moved close to each other and kissed before staying on our sides just looking at each other. I hadn’t realized until just then that we were holding hands, and he began twisting and twirling his fingers playfully around mine, smiling as he spoke.

“These fingers,” he said softly. “I like these fingers.”

“Me too,” I answered. “I’m rather attached to them.”

He smiled and kissed me again, then again. I could kiss him forever, I thought. I could die this way.

“You know, it’s not even all that late,” he said, looking over at the clock. “It’s just about half-past six.”

“We’ve been awake a long time,” I said. “And participated in some tiring activities.”

“Fun activities,” he replied with a wicked grin.

And then we fell silent again, only smiling. I thought about how my hair was wet and that if I didn’t get some product in it soon, I’d be sorry in the morning. I thought about how my outfit for the next day was still back in my room, and wondered how I’d get it. I thought about Chris’s eyes, how unbelievably blue they looked tonight. How they reminded me of Lake Owatonka just outside town. How he reminded me of home in general, somehow.

“I’m hungry,” I said. “Please tell me it’s not too late to get room service.”

“For you? Anything is possible! Say the word and it’s yours!”

“Another kiss?”

“With pleasure, ma’am!” he moved to his hands and knees and leaned over my body, kissing me chastely.

“And now a steak,” I said with a laugh. “Rare. Sautéed mushrooms and a Caesar salad would be nice, too.”

“As you wish!” he exclaimed, his jubilant, boyish behavior nothing short of adorable. He moved to the phone and placed the orders for our meals, and we weren’t surprised to find that they were more than happy to make an exception for us.

While he prepared the room for food and slipped into some sweatpants, I moved to the bathroom and began combing through my difficult hair. The bathroom was a mess, with soaked undergarments and the smell of sex surrounding me. With every run of the comb, it seemed another sweet memory of my time with Chris sprouted in my mind. Of course I was still in shock that he ever noticed me, but the undeniable proof of how much he enjoyed my company was as clear as I could ever hope it to be. But what now? What happens after all of this?

L.A.
But after L.A.? After that, what? There was a chance we would make another New York appearance before the tour was over, but it wasn’t yet confirmed. If that was the case, at most I had another two weeks with him. Actually, 13 days. 13 days until I said goodbye to him. 13 days to convince him that I’m more than a fuck. 13 days to convince myself he was, too.

As soon as I had finished with my hair, Chris arrived at the bathroom door with one of his shirts. “You didn’t bring your jammies,” he smiled.

“And you want me to wear a six hundred-dollar Italian cotton shirt to bed?” I asked.

“Six hundred bucks?” he repeated in disbelief, eyes wide. “I thought this was the crappiest one in the closet!”

“It is,” I laughed. “Those aren’t exactly going-to-bed shirts.”

“Then here…” he fished through his already packed personal carry-on and found a t-shirt and boxers, tossing them to me.

“You don’t want me to be naked? I would think this would be the ultimate opportunity for you.”

“Come on, you’re not gonna be comfortable walking around naked all night.”

“Why would I be walking around all night?” I asked.

“Well you certainly won’t be getting much sleep if I’ve got any say in it.”

The thought sent shivers of pleasure through me. “What is it with guys loving women wearing their clothes?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “Probably some sort of macho thing. All I know is it’s fucking cute.”

I pulled on the boxers and moved close to him before I put the shirt over my head. “They’d kill me back home for wearing a Red Sox shirt.”


“Is baseball really as much fun as boys like us to think?”

“Don’t pull that shit. Plenty of girls love it, too. Haven’t you ever been to a game?”

“Couple times,” I said. “Double dates or school activities. Never for my own personal pleasure.”

“Well then,” he started, leaning close and kissing me softly. “Looks like I’m just gonna have to take you one of these days.”

At this moment, the food arrived. It was lovely, beautifully plated and as scrumptious as it looked. While we ate, we watched TV, talked about the next day and being back on American soil. I listened as he went on and on about how beautiful the coast looks from the plane, especially at night. He spoke of how blue the ocean was over there, how it sparkled. Couldn’t be anything compared to his eyes, I thought.

And then somehow it was midnight. I was lying on my stomach and he on his back, both of us swapping stories about high school pranks and senior ditch days. I don’t even remember how we got on that subject. And then I was kissing him. I was leaning over, giggling, kissing him, kissing his ear between whispers of tales from way-back-when. His fingers played along the now dry and frizzy...
strands of hair at my shoulders, and then it was happening. He was caressing my face, slipping me out of the boxers and looking into my eyes as I straddled him. He cooed his request for me to move slowly. He told me he wanted to watch the way I moved. He told me I was so beautiful in the moonlight.

Something about him, the way he spoke to me that night, made me rethink so much about the past few years. I’d had crushes. I’d dated. I’d fucked. I’d even become attached to a guy or two along the way, but he was different. I could almost cry at the way he touched me. It felt like a symphony singing my senses awake. He knew me already, how to touch me, how to talk to me. He could see how I loved the way he looked at me, the places of me I longed to be kissed. My neck. My jaw. My stomach. It was like I’d been looking for him all this time, and I had no idea until he found me. And now I was realizing the truth I never wanted to believe.

I was falling in love.

Neither of us slept much, as one could imagine. We dozed off on occasion, and my once cute snoring made him wake me up a time or two to ask me to roll to my side. But before either of us desired to, we were boarding a flight home. Well, sort of home. The Homeland, as he called it.

“Thank god this is a nice, long flight,” I told him in a yawn. “I need to sleep.”

“You need sleep? Who do you think it was that kept rolling you over?”

I jabbed at his arm, trying to remember I couldn’t kiss him in front of Matt.

“Hey, Sweets, can I bother ya for a second?” Rebecca’s soft voice spoke close to me.

“Sure. What’s up?”

She looked back toward where she’d been sitting beside Greer. “I’ve had a hell of a time these coupla days, and I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind switching seats with me? I haven’t had a chance to catch up with Chrissy yet.”

I laughed a little, thinking she was only looking for an excuse to playfully call him Chrissy.

“You don’t mind, do ya?” she asked again.

Oh.

“Um… n-no, I guess not. You guys really should catch up.” I couldn’t deny either of them the chance. Besides, it was early. Greer would probably be sleeping the whole time, too.

“Thank you so much!” She waited for me to stand, and as she sat in my place, she rested her hand on my arm. “Oh, and I should probably warn you,” she added, looking back toward Greer again. “She’s taken some pills for her nerves and she’s already had a drink or two. So she might be a bit on the gabby side.”

Fuck.
Chapter 14

I eyed the back row of first class, cursing Rebecca in my mind for pulling such a filthy trick. I knew I had no choice but to sit with Greer. All other seats were taken.

She was reclined comfortably, sipping merlot and humming something that may have been a show tune in its former life. Maybe she wouldn’t notice me, I thought. Maybe she’s too high or too drunk to recognize me. Maybe I’ll die on the way to her seat.

In that moment, any one of those scenarios would have been acceptable.

I was disappointed, of course, when she greeted me not only with a “Oh… it’s you,” but also with a sort of gagging sound effect I could have done without.

“Rebecca wanted a few minutes to talk to Chris,” I told her. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Mind? Why would I mind?”

She knocked back the rest of the glass. My god, we hadn’t even left the city yet.

“Well, I know we didn’t exactly part on the best of terms, and judging from the way you just received me, I’m guessing your feelings about me haven’t changed.”

She furrowed her brow, looked me over and smiled.

“Wait… who are you again?”

“Sarah Dixon. I’m his stylist.”

“Oh! Right, right, right. You’re the one he’s currently fucking.”

“Well, you accused me of that, but I wasn’t sleeping with him.”

Again she looked me in the eye, this time skeptically.

“How? You’ve been working with him for almost a month now, and he hasn’t found a way up your skirt yet?”

Sure, I could have told her the truth. I could have rubbed it in her face that her trash was my treasure, that not only were we fucking, but it was the best sex of my life. I could have gone into a descriptive dialogue referencing every detail that only someone very familiar with his naked body would know. I could emulate the moans he makes. I could go over to him right this fucking second, straddle him, and fuck him right there in front of God and everyone if that’s what she wanted!

Okay, whoa… I’m getting ahead of myself.

Anyway, I found it best not to tell her the truth. I’m not a liar, but when I do lie, it never works in my favor. For one thing, I have roughly a dozen tells, each of them easily recognizable even by complete strangers. For another thing, my mom taught me better. I’m a Sunday school girl, after all.

“No, Miss MacFarlane. He hasn’t.”

“Impressive,” she nodded proudly. “Are you gay like that one?” She asked this while very obviously pointing at Rebecca.
“No,” I answered simply, trying to ease her hand down.

“So what is it? Hasn’t he tried?”

“You know, I’m not really in the mood for this conversation…”

“It’s for the best anyway,” she said, shaking her head. “He’s not especially good at it.”

Instinctively, I laughed, almost spitting out the water I was drinking. Very funny, haha, let’s move on to the next joke.

“He isn’t,” she repeated.

Okay, but she’s an actress. She has professional training. She could totally be playing a joke on me, and she’d be very convincing. Because, you know, she basically lies for a living.

“Are you… you’re kidding, right?”

She shook her head. She was too messed up to be joking, and I could see that now.

“I hope you don’t mind my asking, but what is it exactly that makes him bad at it?”

“Ooooh,” she dragged out the wretched sound as she started to explain. “Well, for one thing, he’s always trying all these weird positions that I’m not really up for. And he wants to talk dirty, and I don’t want any of that. I just want to do it and be done.”

“Why?” I asked. “Don’t you like him?”

She looked over at him fondly and smiled. “Yeah, but when we were fucking, it was just fun. Then he wanted things to get serious, and I couldn’t do that.”

“He wanted things to get serious?”

I shouldn’t be asking. By doing so, I was inviting more information than I really wanted. Hearing about their sex life didn’t bother me because he and I had that. Hearing about him wanting more with her, though… well, that part was going to be considerably harder to bear.

“That’s how he is,” she said.

Somehow, it seemed a sort of clarity rose in her voice, and the things she said as she began to describe him sounded like the words of a lover, not an ex-fuckmate. She went on about how smart he is, how he loves such strange things. How he looked her in the eyes anytime he was talking to her. How he held her hand whenever she’d let him. How one night after a late scene was shot, he told her he thought he was falling in love with her.

I don’t know how much, if any, of this information was true. But abiding by the rules of in vino veritas, I had to give her the benefit of the doubt.

“And you were never in love with him?”

Again, no idea why I insisted upon asking questions that would surely one day ruin my life.

“It’s a tough question to answer,” she replied, flagging down the attendant for another drink. “I had Henry. Henry was the love of my life.”

“Was?”
“Yeah, I dumped his sorry ass last week. He was always cheating on me!”

Is this irony, I wondered, or is this karma?

“He was bringing home women every night, and he thought I’d never know! But I had people watching his ass, watching out for me… I had neighbors and friends – my real friends – monitoring him for me. And I didn’t even have to pay them very much to do it, either!”

Her argument, if that’s what it was, was so loud that half the cabin looked back at us. Chris and Rebecca, however, remained ignorant. That’s what happens when you talk to him.

“I… I hope you don’t mind my asking you something personal,” I started, treading lightly. “Something about you and Henry?”

“Hm?” she sipped a bit and leaned further back even than before. “Personal? About me and Henry?”

“Well, only if it’s alright. I’m not trying to pry.”

She thought for a moment, then shrugged. “Ah, what the hell. Go on, ask.”

“You guys were, um, dating before, right? Before you and Chris got together?”

“Yeah. Why?”

I could see by her sneer she assumed I was judging her. I guess I was.

“Did Chris know about him?”

She looked down, almost as if ashamed, but as it turns out, she was only watching a drop spill from her glass into her lap. “Good thing this dress is purple, right?”

“Miss MacFarlane?” I asked to get her attention. “Greer? Can I call you Greer?”

“Sure,” she smiled, still not looking at me.

“Look, I know how it is. I mean, uh, I know how it must be. You and Chris were working together, close contact and love scenes and everything, and one thing led to another. I totally understand if you gave in without letting him know you were already with someone.”

“Henry doesn’t care if I sleep around,” she said firmly, loudly, looking me in the eye in a frightening suddenness. “He never did.”

“But you cared that he did?”

“That was our relationship,” she said. “It worked for us. Or it did for a long time, anyway.”

“I really don’t care about the arrangement you and Henry had. That’s your business. I’m just wondering if Chris knew.”

“How is that your business?”

I couldn’t tell her. And honestly, when it comes right down to it, it wasn’t.

“I’m just curious,” I said. “I guess I’m gossiping.”

“I recall you telling me very firmly that you weren’t a gossip,” she reminded me.
“I just thought that if I were actually talking to you rather than about you, you wouldn’t mind.”

Somehow, this logic made sense to her. It didn’t even make sense to me, but then that didn’t really matter, did it?

“Fine,” she said. “No, he didn’t know. I never told him, and I don’t think it matters much now, anyway.”

So as far as I was concerned, he was a standup guy. It probably wouldn’t have completely ruined him for me, but I would have been disappointed in my classic, judgmental way.

“And now that we’re broken up, maybe we can have a fresh start. Maybe he was right for me all the time, anyway.”

“What the fuck?” Crap, I said that out loud. I definitely didn’t mean to do that. “You and Chris? You want to have a fresh start? You want to be with him again?”

She set her now empty glass over for the attendant to grab, and pulled the blanket she’d cradled in her arms over her shoulders.

“I’m considering it.”

“But what about all those things you said about him only being for fun? About the sex being bad?”

“He’s got potential,” she smiled, closing her eyes. “And the sex wasn’t bad, just… I don’t know… he always wanted to make it more complicated than it needed to be.”

“Well wouldn’t that be a problem for you again?”

“Mm… no, I don’t think so. Not if I was honest with him upfront and told him how I wanted things to be.”

“But just to be clear, you’re talking… you’re talking about more than sex, right? You’re talking about dates and stuff? Love? Like, really actually being in a relationship and all that shit?”

“It’s not shit if you actually have a good partner.” She reached over blindly and rested her hand on my arm, patting it twice. “Just because your love life has been a mess doesn’t mean everyone’s is.”

And if the bitch hadn’t been all messed up on drugs, I’d have punched her lights out.

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We landed at LAX in the late afternoon. Rebecca never did return to save me, but thankfully after Greer’s last comment, she passed out, so I didn’t need to reply.

I couldn’t sleep. From where I sat, it seemed as though Chris and Rebecca had fallen asleep for a while, alternating whose shoulder the other would rest on. Cute. Domestic. What I should have been doing.

If I hadn’t known what I did about Rebecca, I would assume she and Chris were in love. I would have been jealous, and I was, really. I was jealous because I wanted what she had, this close relationship with Chris complete with inside jokes and secret language. I wanted him to be that interested in me. I wanted him to want me more than her. More than Greer. I was almost ready to stop speaking to him altogether because I was so upset that there was anyone he cared for more than me! But now I was just being childish.
Pull up your big girl britches, Sarah. Get to work.

In my mind, I had complained about the night air in some of the cities we’d visited. I’d complained that it was a boring sight at best, and a filthy environment at worst. I complained about everything from the sound of sirens to the thickness of the fog. I complained about people who were unfriendly, rude, downright mean, even.

But I didn’t mind any of that here, somehow.

Once I had checked in and double-checked to make sure that Alex had made all the proper arrangements, read my emails, and called around to let staff know I was in town, I decided that a shower and a good night’s rest would do me good. Surely I would wake the next morning realizing that Greer hadn’t been serious about getting back together with Chris, that Rebecca and he were nothing more than platonic, never would be, that neither of them wanted more, and that Chris was just as crazy about me as I’d believed him to be the day before. Surely I would feel better. Surely I was simply jet-lagged and sleep-deprived, in a bad mood due to… PMS I guess. I don’t know. All I knew was that I needed to sleep, and everything would be better in the morning.

But despite all of that, sleep seemed impossible.

I tossed and turned, had a headache, had cramps. My period decided to start in the middle of the night and the pain and emotions overwhelmed me. I tried taking a bath, taking NyQuil, drinking tea, listening to sounds of rain on an app. Nothing worked. Everything kept reminding me that Chris, my Chris and no one else’s, had better options than me.

Suddenly it was morning, and I was waking up. I hadn’t set an alarm because I didn’t need to. Chris and Greer had an appearance on The Late Late Show, but that wasn’t taping until the early afternoon. Pre-interviews didn’t start until noon, and my job wouldn’t need to be done by then. I could show up at the studio to dress him. He would understand, even if no one else did.

I ran a shower and groaned out loud to relieve my suffering, or at the very least, effectively express it. As I started picking out my outfit, I figured I might as well check my phone.

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Come over tonight. I miss you.

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The text had been sent the night before, sometime around midnight. I have no idea how I didn’t see it, and now I wanted to kick myself.

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I guess you’re probably sleeping. That’s okay, but I wanted to say thanks for letting me and Becca catch up.

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Finally, he’d sent a text that morning.

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Come to my room. We’ll order breakfast.
By the time I got the text, breakfast hours were over. Just as well, I guess. It’s not like we would have fucked, and that’s all he needed me for. Probably to get some sort of Rebecca-fueled frustration out of his system.

I didn’t bother texting him back, but since we had some time left before he needed to leave, I thought I might visit him in his room anyway. Maybe we could talk. I could let him know that I had slept through his texts so that he didn’t think I wasn’t still interested.

I took my time getting ready, armed myself with an arsenal of tampons in my clutch, and headed to his room. It was a strange feeling going there knowing this meeting was neither ending in sex nor in dressing him. It was strictly friendly. I was his friend.

He didn’t bother with formalities when he answered the door. He cracked it open, looked me over, and asked, “Are you okay? I’ve been texting you.”

“Yeah, I’m… I’m fine, I guess. Tired. Can I come in?”

He looked behind him, then back at me. “This probably isn’t the best time. I figured you wouldn’t be coming over since you never asked me.”

“Is Matt in there? Because if you’re worried about Matt being an asshole to me, upsetting me or whatever, don’t. I’m in absolutely no mood to–”

“It’s not Matt,” he answered. “It’s Greer.”

He’d never called her Greer before. This must be serious.

“Oh…” I was surprised, and yet I wasn’t. If that makes sense.

“We’re kinda talking right now,” he continued. “Can we just catch up at the studio?”

I didn’t have a choice, really. What was I supposed to say?

No, we can’t fucking catch up at the fucking studio! Get that bitch out of there right now! She’s using you! She did nothing but complain about you the entire time here! She wasn’t honest with you! She knew how you felt and betrayed your trust! She kept secrets from you! She’s emotionally abusive! You deserve better than her! You deserve me!

“Yeah, Chris. That’s fine.”

I turned away, and as soon as he closed the door, I began bawling. I wasn’t just crying, weeping, sad. It was like I’d suffered a personal tragedy. It was a complete overreaction, and I knew that. But the worst thing was that I couldn’t control it.

I laughed at the sight of myself in the mirror when I returned. I was mascara-stained and swollen-faced, looking like I’d been crying all night in just the two minutes between his room and mine. Why was I crying, I wondered. This was ridiculous. He and Greer weren’t together. And what if they were? So what? Was that really such a surprise? And then I stopped, wondering why I was laughing now. I was heartbroken, whether for the right reasons or not, and that’s not funny. It’s fucking wrenching.

With another hour yet before we had to leave, I turned off my phone, tucked myself in bed, and decided to take a nap. My emotions had caught up with me. I was exhausted, physically and
emotionally. I fought the need for sleep, but the need won.

The need always wins.

“Sarah… Sarah… Wake up…”

“Fuck!”

“That’s pretty language. You kiss Chris’s dick with that mouth?”

“Alex, what the fuck? What the fuck? What time is it? Is it… Is it fucking dark outside?”

Once he’d finished laughing at me, he rested his hands on my shoulders, shushing sounds quietly leaving his lips as he calmed me.

“It’s okay, it’s fine. I covered for you.”

“Seriously,” I asked. “What time is it?”

“Almost eight,” he said. “I’m only waking you up to let you know how things went today.”

Eight? I’d slept nine hours? Nine?

“How did things go?” I asked, starting to calm down.

“Things went great. Your husband asked about you, but I told him you were sick. Time of the month, right?”

“How the hell did you know that?”

“It’s a gift,” he shrugged. “You feeling okay?”

“I need Midol,” I said. “And ice cream.”

“I brought Advil,” he said, gesturing to the bottle on the table beside me. “And I can get you ice cream if you want me to.”

I smiled to him, resting my cheek against his chest when he sat on the bed with me.

“Thank you for being so good to me.”

“That’s what friends are for.”

“How can I ever repay you?”

I heard him pause, and that should have let me know.

“Aw, honey, you don’t have to. I mean, if you just wanna talk for a while, that would be fine.”

“Talk? You want to talk to me?”

“Of course I do, sweetheart,” he patted my back. “I wanna know all about your day off with Chris.”

I backed away from him.
“You’re being good to me in exchange for gossip?”

“Do you have any idea how boring Greer is? She didn’t even make breaking up with her person interesting. Literally all she did was she tell him that she was breaking up with him when he was on his way out the door to head back home. And then all he said was ‘Okay,’ and that was that. I actually witnessed it. She’s the most boring person in the world, and I need details. Sex details.”

“No.”

“How big was it?”

“Alex…”

He held his hands about six inches apart. “This big? Bigger?”

“Alex!”

He spread his hands apart another inch, then another. “Just tell me when I get it right,” he said.

“Alex, I’m not going to give you details about Chris’s glorious, thirteen-inch cock in exchange for favors!”

His mouth gaped open. “Liar!” he said, hoping I wasn’t one.

“Yes, I’m exaggerating. But seriously, I can’t talk about it. At least, not until I talk to Chris. I need to explain myself.”

“I told you, I covered for you.”

“No, I want to tell him the truth. I don’t want to lie to him about anything. Ever.”

He seemed to understand. “Fine. But we’ll catch up eventually, right?”

“Of course we will, babe. But I need to call him first. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

He let me go to do what I needed to do, not without first kissing my cheek, then whispering, “All the juicy details, remember,” in my ear to make me giggle.

After he left, I stared at my phone for a few minutes, planning what to say. But by the time I finally picked it up, I still wasn’t quite sure what I wanted to say.

“Hi.” His voice was as comforting as my favorite pillow.

“Hi,” I answered.

“I heard you weren’t feeling well,” he said.

I thought about how to explain it, wondered if I should even bother trying. “I’m better now,” I told him.

“That’s good.”

I went silent for a moment. I kind of forgot why I was calling him.

“You there?”

“Yeah,” I answered. “Sorry, I was thinking.”
“Thinking about what?”

I couldn’t tell him just yet. “How was the show?”

“Fun,” he said. I could hear the smile in his voice. “We did a little skit. The show airs tomorrow night. You should watch it.”

“You and James Corden?”

“Yeah, and G.”

Oh. Now she was G again.

“So you’re feeling okay now?”

“Yeah,” I lied. “Much better.”

“Do you wanna come over?”

Did I? “What are you doing?”

“I’m about to go to sleep,” he said. “I miss you.”

“You keep saying that.”

“It’s true.”

His voice was so calm, his replies so quick. I had the feeling he was actually being honest with me.

“I miss you, too.”

God, I’m pathetic. My throat was starting to get that squeaky feeling. Wet stuff was getting in my eyes.

“Come over,” he whispered.

“I’m not… um… I can’t have sex with you tonight.”

“Okay. Come over anyway.”

“Why?”

I could hear him laughing a little. “Because I fuckin’ miss your crazy ass.”

“I look like shit.”

“Impossible.”

I was just about to say yes, head over to his room, and sleep in his arms. Just like that. Drop the subject and move on.

Just about to.

“Chris?”

“Hm?”
“What’s going on with you and her?”

When he didn’t answer right away, I knew I’d hate myself for asking.

“It’s more than I want to deal with,” he said quietly. “It’s the exact reason I chose to move on.”

“So am I, um…”

Don’t do it, Sarah. Don’t ask that.

“Am I just your way of dealing?”

“No,” he answered, again quickly. Again quietly.

“Then what am I?”

“You are…” his words trailed off. I could tell he was thinking. “You’re the best part of my day, every day.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. No one had ever said anything like that to me.

“Will you wake me up long before Matt is due in your room in the morning?”

“I will,” he promised.

“I’ll be right over.”
Chapter 15

I felt his kisses, soft and slow, trailing along the back of my neck before I even opened my eyes the next morning. His arms were around my waist, and for a moment – just a moment, mind you – I was in Heaven.

His lips moved to my ear, and then he whispered, “Matt’s gonna be here in about fifteen minutes.”

And just like that, the moment was over.

“Fuck, are you serious? You said you’d wake me up well before he was due here!” I was racing to my feet and rushing to the bathroom so that I could leave as soon as possible.

“He just texted me,” he yelled through the door. “I guess there was some change in plans or something that he needs to go over with me.”

After a moment, I moved out of the bathroom, hastily stepping into the flats I’d worn there the night before. “And is this a change that I should know about?” I checked my phone in case anyone had texted me, but no one had.

“No idea. You could stick around and see.”

I looked at him, conveying my best “are-you-fucking-crazy” glare.

“Why not? It’s not like he doesn’t know.” Chris was looking right at me as he said this, as if it was no big deal.

“He already makes comments about you and me,” I said. “The second he actually has proof, and I mean aside from assumption, everything’s only gonna get a thousand times worse. Neither one of us needs that right now.”

“Fine, fine,” he finally agreed. “I’ll see you in a couple hours, then?”

I moved over to kiss him before I left, then looked down at the time on my phone. “Yeah, about two hours,” I said. “And you’re wearing that pinstriped suit that’s hanging in your closet right now.”

“The blue one?”

“The blue one,” I nodded. “See you later.”

I felt like crap that morning, still suffering from cramps and nausea as usual, and now stressing over whether this supposed change in schedule had anything to do with me. I hoped it didn’t, of course, but for some reason I felt like it probably would.

After showering, dressing, and making myself look somewhat presentable, I gathered the bag of Chris’s hair products and headed toward his room. I didn’t need to be there for another hour and a half yet, but I was impatient. Sure, I’d just come from his room, but I needed to head back. Now.

“Did you hear?” Alex’s voice was clear behind me.

“What?” I stopped before we reached the elevator. “What did they do to us now?”

“Nothing bad,” he smiled. “We’re getting time off, actually.”
“Time off?”

The thought brought a smile to my face. I could use a break from everything. Time to relax. A mani-
pedi, even. My hope was that we were getting at least two days.

“Greer MacFarlane went AWOL last night,” he laughed. “Apparently she was partying pretty hard
and giving the paps plenty of glamor shots—the up-the-skirt kind.”

“Gross,” I commented. “But how does that affect me?”

“It affects all of us. We’re supposed to get an official memo at some point today, but I got the scoop
from Matt this morning.”

I finally stepped into the elevator with him and smiled. “So you and Matt are having fun, eh?”

“I’ve said too much,” he answered in a sort of faux shame.

“So Greer’s… where? In the wind?”

“She’s officially taking time to rest as she’s suffering from… what did he call it… I don’t know.
Exhaustion, I think. None of the pictures ended up getting leaked, but it was pretty traumatic for her
still.”

“Yeah, I can understand that,” I answered. Greer wasn’t my favorite person in the world, but no one
deserved that. “So how long are we getting?”

“I’m not doing anything until New York,” he said. “If you guys aren’t doing New York, then I guess
you’re done after today.”

My heart sunk. No. It couldn’t be over that soon.

“But I guess it all depends on what Lorne says today,” he continued. “He should know by now if
Chris is doing GMA.”

As the elevator door opened, I found myself praying for the first time in years. Praying that we were
doing NYC. Praying that I had another couple weeks with Chris.

“I have to go pack her things now,” he told me in parting. “Meeting’s at three in Conference Room
B, but you’ll probably get a text soon telling you so. See you then, love.”

He kissed my cheek and made his way down the hall, the opposite way in which I was headed. I just
stood there, watching him. I didn’t want this to be the last day I had with Chris. I wasn’t ready for
that. I gulped hard, braced myself, breathed deeply so that the tears wouldn’t come just yet, and
looked at his door. Oh my god. This could be it.

When I finally knocked, he answered and pulled me playfully inside, kissing me before the door
could quite shut. The kiss took my breath away—quite literally—and perhaps normally I would have
broken the kiss after a moment. But not now. Not today.

His hand was still cradling the back of my head when our lips finally parted.

“Hi,” he whispered. “Missed you.”

“Where’s Matt?”

He opened his eyes and gave me a stern look at he slowly released me.
“You’ve ruined the moment,” he said teasingly, retrieving the bag from over my shoulder. “He went out for breakfast. Why?”

“Just wanted to make sure he wasn’t here.”

“Do you think I would have kissed you like that in front of him?”

I cocked a brow. “I don’t know. Would you?”

“Probably,” he grinned.

He was coming close to me again, presumably to kiss me. But I turned around and quickly set the things out on the vanity.

“Has he said anything to you about the change of plans?” I asked.

“No. What change? Another surprise shoot?”

“Actually, no.”

Before I could tell him, it occurred to me that he probably didn’t care nearly as much as I did. I could be all morose and upset over something that wouldn’t even affect him.

“So… what is it?”

I looked back at him. “I don’t know. Maybe nothing. I think Matt should be the one to tell you.”

And as I spoke of the devil, there he was walking through the door.

“Bagel and omelet,” he announced, handing a Styrofoam dish to Chris. “Kay had me on the phone for twenty minutes making sure I got your order right, so please tell her I did even if I didn’t.”

He smiled, thanking Matt as he took a bite.

“Oh, hi.” He looked me over with a smile that I didn’t understand. “You’re early.”

“A little. I thought I would see if you’d informed Chris of the change in plans yet.”

“How did you know about—” but he stopped himself. He must have known how I knew, and that the trail led back to him. “Well, anyway, I haven’t told him yet. I thought I’d wait to see how the meeting with Lorne goes first.”

“Why all the secrets?” Chris asked loudly through a mouthful of food. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing major,” Matt told him quickly. “I don’t even know the details yet. I just know that part of the tour has been cancelled due to the fact that Greer has taken a leave of absence for an undetermined amount of time.”

“Is she okay?”

The concern in Chris’s voice was sweet, and then suddenly unnerving.

“She’s fine,” he said. “She’s a bit exhausted, but that’s understandable. You know she’s doing everything you’re doing, but with longer hours. People don’t take into account that she needs to wake up at least an hour earlier just to have hair and makeup done. You, you’re showered and dressed in ten minutes!”
It was as if I was hearing the words coming straight from Alex’s mouth.

In fact, I think they had.

Chris’s face said everything he wouldn’t. Not in front of me. Well at least he was aware of my feelings.

“You’re not even dressed yet!” Matt announced. “Chop, chop!”

Chris stepped back into his room with the remainder of his half-eaten meal. I was alone with Matt suddenly, and I looked at him, waiting for him to speak.

“Thanks for letting me tell him,” he said quietly. “Coming from you it would have sounded like gloating.”

“I wasn’t gloating,” I said. “I feel bad for her, honestly. The only reason I didn’t tell him was that I didn’t think he’d give a shit, and if I told him I’d probably start crying just thinking that this could be our last day together.”

“How do you think I feel?”

It was painful the way he said that. It seemed that everyone on this tour was hooking up, but Matt had real feelings. And I hadn’t even stopped to consider that.

“I’m sorry,” I told him. “Really.”

“It’s okay. I think we’re doing New York. At least, that’s my gut feeling.”

“I hope so. For both our sakes.”

Wait, were he and I bonding? What?

When Chris came out, dressed to the nines in pinstripes and plum, I waited a second before speaking. I needed to savor him like this, smiling, happy, looking for my approval. It could be the last time.

“Your tie…” I noted. “Here, let me get it.” I stepped closer and undid the knot.

“I have to make a call,” Matt said. “I’ll come back.”

When he left the room, I decided I might just get to like that guy after all.

“You okay?” Chris asked me.

I didn’t look at him, but rather at the difficult knot I was fixing.

“No.”

I didn’t mean to tell the truth but, well, you know.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“You said you’re not okay.”

“I’m not.”
“So what’s wrong?”

“Nothing!” I repeated, and I tied the tie a little too tight, I think.

“Whoa, hey!” He set his hands on top of mine. “Talk to me.”

“Greer taking time off means we might not be seeing any more of each other after today,” I answered. “It depends how much of the tour is cancelled and whether or not we do New York, but basically the possibility that this is the last time I work with you is making me want to stick a fork in my eye just for the sake of having something else to think about right now!”

When I finally looked up into his eyes, I was pleased – and perhaps that was wrong of me – to see that he looked sad as well.

“That soon?” he said.

“Possibly.”

“I don’t like that.”

The way he said it made me smile, and I snuggled close to him as he held me tight.

“If I’d have known, I’d have fucked you sooner,” I joked.

Okay, maybe it wasn’t a joke.

“Okay, so… so maybe this is the last day we work together. It doesn’t mean this is the last time we see each other.”

“Sure, yeah, I guess.” I pulled away from him, dragging him to the vanity so that I could do his hair. “But how likely is that? I live in Minnesota, roughly two thousand miles from either city you call home. It’s not an easy commute. And god only knows when I’ll get another job like this, not to mention one where I’m working with you again.”

“And you’d never consider moving to Cali for your job?”

I paused from combing his hair and looked at him skeptically.

“It would have to be one hell of a permanent job offer, and there just aren’t that many.”

“Then we’ll just have to visit each other. Simple as that.”

It was a bullshit thing to say, and I was pretty sure he knew that. He’d never be in Owatonna, and I’d never be in Boston. We’d be as uncomfortable in the other’s territory as fish in a birdcage.

“It was nice knowing you, Mr. Evans,” I said. I decided I would go have a nice, long cry in my room later.

“Not yet, it wasn’t,” he said. “We don’t know that this is the last day. We could still have New York, and that’s not for another week and a half yet. We could have plenty of time.”

“Well, I guess we’ll know at three o’clock.”

He looked toward the door as if he could see Matt through it and then looked back at me. He moved to the door, locking it from our side as he’d never done before. He pressed his back against it, took a deep breath, and looked down at the floor. I’d never seen him like this. Was he upset about the time
off or the reason for it?

“I don’t really… say things… the way I should,” he said quietly, obviously not intending for Matt to hear any of it. “It’s a mistake I’ve made a lot in the past, and it’s one I don’t want to repeat again.”

I stayed where I was on the opposite side of the room.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you’re more to me than just… you know. Sex. You’re more to me than that. And I’m really scared that you don’t know that.”

“Chris, you don’t have to say this.”

“Yes I do,” he replied adamantly. “Yes I do. I need to say it and you need to know it.”

“Why?”

“Because if we’re not doing New York, and if this is our last day together, I’m not ready. Not where you’re concerned.”

He sounded like me.

“So what? It’s not like we can do anything about it.”

“I have nothing on my schedule for at least a week, right? I mean, it was all supposed to be talk shows and interviews, wasn’t it?”

I shrugged. “I guess. I don’t know. I’m not your schedule-maker.”

“Stop being a smartass and listen to what I’m saying.”

I perked up at his remark. He had my undivided attention.

“If I have a week free,” he said, “And you have a week free, we’re spending it together.”

“Chris…”

“If you want, I mean. No pressure.”

No pressure. Sure.

“Your agent’s gonna have a cow,” I said. “That’s their job, you know. They have to keep you working.”

“Not for the next few days at least. Not if I don’t want to. Not if you don’t want me to.”

At that moment the door budged, Chris’s back hit it, and Matt could very faintly be heard saying, “What the fuck…”

“Do you want me to?” he asked.

“You’d better let Matt in,” I said.

“Answer me first.”

“No,” I said firmly. “Let Matt in. When we know what’s going on, I’ll give you my answer.”
He waited a moment, as if he thought I’d change my mind or something. When I said nothing more, he turned around and calmly, slowly unlocked the door.

“You guys okay?” Matt asked. “Beating each other up?”

It was his attempt at good humor. I kinda missed the old, grumpy, nasty Matt.

“Just talking,” I said. I turned and packed the bag.

I could feel Matt looking at me, probably wondering what the hell had been happening. In my mind, Chris was humoring me. I don’t know why I thought that or felt that, but I did. I couldn’t help it. I guess I felt he was just trying to prove he could, not that he wanted to.

“I’ll see you at three, I guess,” Matt said as I left. “I just texted you the details.”

“Thanks,” I nodded. I looked over at Chris and smiled. “Anything else?”

His eyes were large and sad and begging me to stay. But he told me that no, nothing else was needed.

…

Three o’clock seemed to take four days to arrive, and when it did, Lorne didn’t. I was sitting in the conference room with the few others, Alex beside me and Matt behind him to keep from seeming conspicuous, and my feet perched on the seat of the chair in front of me.

“Do you wanna put money on it?” Alex asked me quietly. “My bet is four days off, GMA and The Tonight Show.”

“No bet,” I answered.

“Come on, you have to bet something. How many days?”

I didn’t want to think about it, and I told him so.

“Well someone’s on their period,” he joked.

I looked at him, stared him down, in fact.

“I wasn’t serious!” he replied quickly. “I think that’s a douche thing to say and I’m sorry!”

But I couldn’t hold my stare. I started laughing because it wasn’t untrue.

“Six days,” I said. “I think they’ll tell us we’re coming back for GMA, but then they’ll cancel. I think today is our last day.”

“Debbie Downer,” he mumbled. “More like Debbie Doomsday.”

“More like Debbie Shut-the-fuck-up,” I snapped. “This whole thing is grating enough without having to deal with your idle chatter!”

“Seriously, what the hell is wrong with you?”

I bit the inside of my mouth nervously and looked around to see that no one could hear us.

“He told me he wants to spend time with me while we’re on the break,” I said. “I think he wants to
come to my home.”

“Seriously?” His face lit up like the proverbial Fourth of July. “That’s awesome!”

I looked at him sternly, cocking my head to the side.

“It’s not awesome?” he continued. “Why isn’t it awesome?”

“Because he’s just saying stuff at this point,” I explained. “He’s trying to make me feel good for no reason. He’s making all of these pretty little promises to me that he’s either never going to be able to fulfill or that he’ll soon decide he doesn’t actually want to. And then where does that leave me?”

He thought for a moment. “Why do you think he doesn’t actually like you, again?”

“Because…” I tried to keep my sniffling to a minimum. “He’s… him. He’s the kind of guy who dates Greers, not me. Not a widow his own age who lives in the middle of Buttfuck, Minnesota.”

“I don’t know. Sounds like a fun place to me.”

Ignoring his comment with some difficulty, I continued.

“This break she’s taking is just what they need to get their relationship back on track. Maybe he’s seeing a different side to her now – one where she’s sort of sensitive to public opinion rather than what she’s been painted as in the past.”

“A bitch, you mean?”

“Maybe underneath all of that bitchiness, though, she’s sort of… I don’t know… soft and sweet. Maybe she’s smarter than she seems. Maybe the whole thing with her whatever-he-was taught her something about how to view relationships. Maybe she can actually make him happy this time around.”

“How is it that you’ve already got them picking out baby names when he just asked to spend time with you not six hours ago, hm?” He shook his head, and it seemed he was actually angry at me. “You’re in love with the man. For god’s sake, woman, give it a chance! So what if he’s got other options? So do you! So does everybody! That doesn’t mean he wants them.”

“I’m not in love with him,” I said quietly, trying to get him to follow after my tone.

“Yes you are. And you know how I know that?”

I shook my head.

“Because you would rather see him with that witch than yourself just because you think it might make him happier. Why does she deserve your happiness? What right does she have to it?”

I opened my mouth to explain all my supposed reasons, but he didn’t let me actually get anything out.

“None.” His voice was sharp, the word escaping him in one harsh point like a hammer hitting a nail.

“She’s Greer MacFarlane,” I said weakly.

“And you’re Sarah Fucking Dixon. You’re sexy and smart and not at all bitchy. Excluding today, of course.”
The thought brought a smile to my lips. I still wasn’t sure I fully agreed, but it was the first time anyone had ever said anything affirming like that without there being any possibility of wanting something out of it for themselves.

“Fine,” I said at last. I tried to act like it wasn’t exactly what I wanted. “If he wants to spend the break with me, I guess I’ll let him.”

“Thank you.”

He smiled, too, and I wasn’t sure if it was because he won the argument or because Lorne was finally entering the room, but it didn’t matter either way.

“And give me the details, dammit.”

Lorne announced that, to the shock of none in the room, we would be taking a break from the press tour to allow Greer some time to rest. In exactly one week, she would return to her duties, making an appearance on a Tampa-based talk show before meeting the rest of the crew up in NYC. And then, eight days from today, the tour would resume for just three days of New York press before we wrapped. At the end, Lorne added that there was some negotiating still being done to carve out time for Chris’s obligatory Boston appearances, but that most likely these would occur at a later date during which Chris’s team, myself included, would no longer be under contract.

Basically, we had a week off, then three days of New York before I had to say goodbye for good.

Alex squeezed my knee just as the meeting ended. The look he gave me needed no words, but he used them anyway, as is his style.

“He’s a good guy, Sarah Dixon. You’ll be glad you did this.”

These were things I already knew, but the kindness was still appreciated.

…

Once back in my room and packed, I texted Chris to let him know what was going on. I decided that I wouldn’t go out of my way to see him, and that if he wanted to see me, ask to see me more, or invite himself to my home, he could do that completely unprompted. I would eagerly agree, but I wouldn’t initiate.

As I pulled the phone from my pocket, I was a bit surprised to see a text from him waiting for me.

.

Hey, Gorgeous.

.

I answered back that I was just about to text him. Then I went on to tell him that I was catching a flight very early in the morning to the Twin Cities.

.

So I won’t see you tonight?

.

Nope. =( 
I’m gonna miss you.

I know. Who wouldn’t?

Eight days is too long. We need to see each other I think.

I think so, too. When?

As often as possible. I could get a hotel up in St. Paul. I’ve stayed there before.

My heart beat faster. I couldn’t breathe for a moment. He was actually inviting himself to my home turf to see me. He was asking to come home with me, essentially. I hurriedly texted back:

Or… I have a couch. I’d let you share the bed with me, but I tend to kick.

Not to mention the snoring.

Asshole.

So do you want to?

Obviously. I have some loose ends to tie up tomorrow, but I can come out there on Wednesday. Will that work?

Wednesday works. You’re sure about this?

Open the door.

I looked at my door. He was outside?
I opened the door and saw him standing there, hoodie and jeans, and growing back his beard at last. His glasses were atop his head, his eye finally looking healed, and in the free hand that wasn’t holding his phone, he held a bouquet of pink roses.

“I know it’s corny, but they reminded me of you.”

“You didn’t have to buy me flowers,” I said, accepting them as he stepped inside.

“I didn’t. They were in my dressing room. But they reminded me of you.”

I kissed him slowly, knowing I had a few days before I’d get to do this again.

“Sorry about this morning.”

“No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed you’d automatically be okay with everything. You’re right – we haven’t had a chance to talk about things. We should do that.”

“Yes we should, but not now.” I placed the flowers in an empty jar that once held hair gel. “We’ll have a good three or four days to do all the talking we want.”

He walked close to me, held his hands out to cradle my face, and kissed me again.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“About what?”

“About everything. About every confusing, shitty thing that’s happened since this started.”

I didn’t think he even knew how confused or shitty I’d felt, but apparently I was wrong.

“It’s okay, Sweets. It’s not like it’s your fault.”

“Do you wanna sleep over tonight?” he asked me.

“I have to leave around three in the morning. It wouldn’t be practical.”

“Can I sleep here, then?”

My eyes widened. I could see the caution in his eyes. It seemed that again he was trying not to be presumptuous.

“I won’t be much company,” I told him. “I’ll be putting on the sleep mask and knocking out as soon as possible. Also, as you know, I do snore.”

“I’m gonna have to get used to it eventually,” he smiled.

After that, I had to let him stay.
Chapter 16

I stepped out of my car and into my garage. It still smelled like lumber from the pile of firewood I left in the corner – firewood that had been there merely existing and nothing else for the past five years. The oil stains on the floor were still there. My cat, Grace, still occasionally hunted birds from the perch I made her in the window. I could see that from her muddy prints that led to and from. Nothing had changed – not one damn thing. Sure, I’d only been gone a month. But for some reason I thought I’d come home to something completely different.

Outside the garage, the morning’s rain gave evidence of the traffic my lawn had seen. Our mailman, Ted, had clearly been by, his track of grassless yard somewhat steeper today. A family of deer must have come through and nipped at the dill on the side of the house. And of course my neighbors, any one of the Miller family members, had come to feed Grace and clean her box. I hadn’t told them I was coming, I remembered suddenly. Oh well. I’d call them when I got inside and settled in.

My house was old. Very old. Not the cute, shabby-chic kind of old that lends itself to young couples looking to up the charm in their lives. It was completely unlivable the day Luke and I purchased it. Over the years, there were certain things I absolutely needed to fix: the roof, the walls, the plumbing and electricity. But beyond that, the only projects I actually finished on my own were the fireplace and the picket fence outside. And I only finished those because my mom had volunteers from her church spend a week with me to help.

My walls weren’t just bare; they were unfinished. The corpse-grey color on the wall was only interrupted with the now yellowing spackle that patched over the seams. The fireplace was functional but boring. None of the rooms had any personality. None, that is, except for the master bedroom, which had been serving as my storage room for the past decade.

But enough about that for now…

Somewhere in one of those wildly vivid dreams I’d been having while away, I must have imagined I’d come home to a colorful, properly-furnished home. I’d have more than just the futon and television in the living room, more than a bed and dresser in the bedroom, and more than a card table and folding chairs in my dining room. In my dream, I had chandeliers and sconces instead of strategically placed halogen lights. I’d have curtains that weren’t bedsheets, flooring that wasn’t stained from the leaks in the roof, and candles in my spa-like bathroom.

But instead, what I had was reality. One in which I still had a home that was a flipper’s wet dream.

Speaking of wet dreams, Chris was going to be here in three days. The thought sent a panic through me – one I knew I’d have to deal with once I got home and realized what my home actually looked like. I never thought in a million years that he would judge me for how it looked. I mean, it was clean at least. But I couldn’t imagine he’d had to function in an environment like this in a very long time. Maybe ever. Point was, I didn’t want him to see it this way. I couldn’t change much, but I’d have to change something. Maybe I’d get new sheets for the bed. Maybe an area rug or two to cover some of the larger stains. Ugh, I had shopping to do…

I called my neighbors, who actually lived close to a mile away, and explained that I’d be home for a week so that they didn’t need to come by. Okay, so that was one task down. No unexpected visitors while Chris was over. Next, I went through every room and took an inventory of what things I would actually need to buy – groceries, spare blankets, that sort of thing. I spent the rest of the day unpacking and doing laundry so that I could do nothing the following day but clean. The third day, I would buy what I needed and have it set up before he got in town that night and I picked him up.
from the airport.

Easy peasy, right?

For the most part, it was. I made my list, cleaned, and even got so far as getting dressed to go into town to buy what I needed. But then it occurred to me.

A movie star is going to be staying here.

I’m going to be cooking for him.

I’m going to be fucking him. Hopefully.

I’m going to have to entertain him for four days without anyone knowing he’s here.

I can’t do this.

I looked at the time and knew he wouldn’t even be boarding his plane for another hour at least. And then he had four-plus hours after that before he’d land at the Twin Cities. He’d already said he had a hotel in St. Paul that he liked, so if I called him now, he could get Matt to make a reservation in time before it would be too late. Yeah, so I’d have a couple hours’ commute every day. So what? I could do this.

Shit. I can’t. I can’t do this.

I reached for my phone, freaking out because it wasn’t on the kitchen counter where I thought I’d left it. I immediately assumed it must be lost forever. I’d never find it. I’d never find it, never call him, never show up to the airport and never see him again and never have another Hollywood job and my life was over. I would grow old and die in my unfinished home in a cheap guest bedroom double bed unloved and alone until my mother discovered my body because I didn’t show up for Thanksgiving and I always show up for Thanksgiving. I’d want to be cremated, of course. The first song I’d like them to play at my funeral would be “In My Life” by The Beatles, followed directly by “Maneater” by Hall & Oats. My ashes would be sprinkled over the Mississippi river as a symbolic gesture. Symbolic because I’d always been afraid of crossing that river in life. But in death, there is no fear. My mom would tell everyone how beautiful the service was, and there would be tears. The President would write my mom a letter telling her how touched he was by the viral video she made in my honor. At least I’d have a legacy.

But then I realized that the phone was in my pocket, so I called Chris.

“Hey,” he answered, too cheery for my taste. “How’s it going?”

“Um… Not well.”

“Yeah, I know. I didn’t wanna text you the past couple of days because I figured you’d be catching up with all your friends and stuff, and I wanted to just give you that time to yourself. But it wasn’t easy.”

It was hilarious the way he thought I had friends. “Listen, Chris, here’s the thing…”

“Miss you,” he interrupted.

“Sorry?”

“I miss you. I just wanted to say that. I really missed you.”
“You missed me?”

“Yeah. But that’s all, sorry. Go ahead.”

“Oh, uh… well… I was thinking, you know, about how when you’re here I’m gonna have to make meals for you and stuff, and I know you’re on a special diet, and I’m not much of a cook anyway…”

“Nah, no diet. Not this week.”

“No? Does Kay know?”

“I’ll just hit the gym twice as fuckin’ hard next week,” he said. I could almost hear his casual shrug and careless grimace. “Don’t worry about anything. This week is about you, right?”

“About me?” I hadn’t been informed of this.

“Sure. I mean, I’m staying at your place. I’m the asshole who invited myself over. Least I can do is make it easy on you.”

“It’s not just the meals, though.” I didn’t want more excuses. For god’s sake, he’d just given me an out! I could have ended the call and gone back to blissful ignorance! “The bed is really small. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“What is it, a twin?”

“A double,” I said. “But we’re not exactly small people.”

“You got a couch, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright, if it gets cramped, I’ll stay on the couch. I don’t mind.”

He’d given me another out. I’d be an idiot not to take it.

“I don’t have cable,” I told him.

“Damn. Guess we’ll have to find other creative ways to spend our time.”

Okay, he won. He won, goddammit.

“Anything else?” he asked. “Need me to bring anything?”

“Just this positive attitude of yours,” I told him. “You’ll need it.”

“You bring it out in me.” The way he said it was so playful. I liked that he didn’t take any of this too seriously. He could have, and I wouldn’t have blamed him.

“So I’m picking you up at eight?” I asked as if I didn’t already have the time, gate, parking lot, fucking directions already memorized.

“If that still works,” he said. “I can get a cab if you want, too.”

“No, no, it’s fine. See you then. Should I come in for you, or do you want to find my car?”

“Which would you prefer?”
“I don’t know. You’re the big deal. I would think you’d have a pretty good idea whether or not people are likely to bother you there.”

He was quiet, thinking. I almost thought he hung up. “Ya know, maybe you should come in. We can walk together. I don’t think I’ll have to worry about anything, but just in case I get in an uncomfortable situation, I’d rather have you with me. You don’t mind do you?”

“Of course not. I’ll be waiting at the gate at eight sharp.”

“Can’t wait.”

I felt better after that. I remembered that the guy I worried about seeing my unfinished house is the same guy I’d seen go through a panic attack in the parking lot at a press conference. A guy I’d helped calm more than once before. A guy who’d fallen asleep holding my hand after an exhausting trip. This guy who’d intimidated me just minutes before suddenly became refreshed in my mind as the guy who liked to be the little spoon sometimes, and other times liked to kiss the back of my neck until I fell asleep in his arms.

Also, you know, once we’d seen each other naked, I think a lot of our insecurities went out the window.

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I was at the gate just as I promised, waiting as his plane landed and as the passengers exited into the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes. He was one of the first off, and when he saw me, his blue eyes opened wide from under his ball cap, and he rushed toward me, scooping me up in his arms like he’d been away at war for the past year.

We didn’t kiss, both of us too mindful of our environment to do so. A flight in from LAX on a Wednesday night yielded few movie buffs, thankfully, and as far as he could tell, no one knew who he was. No one was following us. No paps were screaming, flashing lights in his eyes. He didn’t need to watch his back constantly or worry about what a magazine might have to say the next day. Sure, we were in a big city. But compared to where he was used to spending his time, it might as well have been the middle of nowhere.

“Luggage?” I asked, and he took my hand as we went to baggage claim. He didn’t really grip my hand, but rather played with my fingers, caressing them, twirling them around his fingers, fidgeting with them. It was cute in its own charming way, but when he finally wheeled his bag behind him on the way to my car, I grabbed his hand and squeezed it tight, too eager for a kiss to do anything less.

“Excuse my wheels,” I said, feeling the need to apologize. “She’s not exactly the flashiest ride.”

He laughed at the sight of my green Chevy Venture, a few years old and bearing the signs of a well-loved vehicle.

“Cute!”

“That’s a very polite word.”

“Nah, I’m serious. I just hope we get home in time for you to get a good night’s rest.”

I eyed him skeptically.

“Well,” he continued, “I mean, you have to drive the kids to soccer practice in the morning, right?”
I hopped in the car and locked the doors, pretending I was going to leave him there. He didn’t seem fazed, and I know of course he knew I wouldn’t do it. But his reaction to the minivan was exactly what I knew it’d be. I just didn’t think he’d have a sense of humor about it.

Once he got inside and we were actually on our way, and once I finished telling him about the meals we would be having and making sure they were alright with him (which they were, naturally), he went silent. I noticed him trying to be subtle as he looked over the car, which still had a tape deck that the previous owner had actually installed in place of the CD player that came with it when it was new some fifteen years ago. He didn’t say anything about it, but I could read his face like a book. He couldn’t have thought I’d be rolling up in a Lambo, but he couldn’t have expected this, either.

“My uncle gave it to me after Luke died,” I volunteered. “Obviously I didn’t have a car at the time, so he gave me this to get me by until I found something better.”

“And in ten years you haven’t found anything better?” he laughed.

“No, smartass,” I answered. “I just didn’t feel like making the change. This car may be a little dinged, but it’s only got a hundred thousand miles on it. I don’t have to use it all that much, so it pretty much runs like new.”

“Well then if you like it, then that’s what matters, right?”

“Exactly. And I’ve got a stack of tapes in the basket behind my seat if you’re in the mood for some music. The… radio doesn’t work, so… tapes it is.”

He grinned and shook his head. “You actually have a tape collection? This I’ve gotta see.” He reached behind me for the basket. I could smell his cologne. It smelled like memories of hotel pillows.

“Alanis Morissette’s Greatest Hits,” he read. “Barenaked Ladies, Third Eye Blind, Ricky Martin…” he paused to laugh a little. “I have to say your taste is very eclectic.”

“Shut up. There’s not much available on cassette anymore, so I have to make do with what I’ve got.”

“Oh, hey!” he pulled out a tape from the bottom. “Bruce Cockburn! Lovers In a Dangerous Time! I actually like this one!”

“Wanna put it in? There are some other good ones on there.”

He looked through the rest of the basket quickly, foolishly believing there might be something better in there. “Yeah, sure,” he said, popping the tape in the deck after a couple tries of getting it in the right position. “Why the hell not?”

The song started playing, and he sang along quietly, more interested, it seemed, in mocking the guitar than the vocals. I wished I could watch him better, even make a video of him on my phone. I would have shared it with the world so that they could all see the dork who’d chosen to spend his one free week this year with me. But then I realized that it was fine that I couldn’t. This image, this memory was all mine and no one else’s ever. I was more than okay with that.

As we got closer to home, I passed the exit for Owatonna that most people take. I always pass it, and I never think twice about that. But I could see Chris notice, and as soon as his head turned back toward the sign, I knew I had to say something.

“I take the Dodge Center exit,” I said. “It’s faster.”
That second part was a lie. He didn’t have to be familiar with the neighborhood to know that.

“Is that where it happened?”

I knew the thought must have occurred to him, but I didn’t think he’d ask. Not on his first night in town, before he’d even gotten to the house.

“No. It was closer to the house than that. It’s just that if I take that exit, I have to go down that road. I like to avoid it when I can.”

“Makes sense.” Again, he didn’t judge me. It was a stupid ritual attached to something that happened forever ago, but he understood. “You okay?”

“Of course.”

And I was. The thought of it all didn’t make me cry anymore. Not ever. But there’s just those… rituals, I guess. Is that what they are? You don’t mess with those. Even when you’re sure you’re over something, you don’t. Mom used to tell me, “You don’t fuck with the Universe.” My mom was sometimes right about things.

“So I was reading this thing,” he said as if he hadn’t just been talking about my dead husband, “And I don’t know if you’ve ever done it, but I guess there’s this cave thing over in Delaney. It’s supposed to be pretty cool. Something like the biggest cave in the state or something. You wanna do that?”

“Maybe.”

“Also, there’s a lake right around that area where you can camp out, but it’s not too primitive. They’ve got, like, campers you can rent and that kind of thing. Maybe we could stay a night out there and spend the whole evening looking up.”

“Looking up? Like… being positive?”

“No, like looking up. Stars and stuff.”


“It’s just, I know you said you weren’t sure what we would do to keep ourselves entertained, so I looked some stuff up.”

“That was nice of you. I’ve never done those things, so we could definitely consider it.” I could feel him looking at me, and I glanced over at him after a silent full minute. “What?”

“You okay?”

No. We were almost to my house. It was a piece of shit. He was already so bored with me that he was thinking up alternative places to go.

“Yep,” I answered.

He knew better than to rebut. He continued talking, though I don’t specifically remember what about. All I knew was that I was now less than a mile away from home and he was still in my car. I couldn’t wish away the embarrassment I was about to experience. Even if I could, I wouldn’t wish him away.

“I have a cat,” I said, not sure why that was what I chose to bring up. “She mostly lives in the barn or the garage, but she likes to come inside on cold nights and sleep on my face. Will that bother you?”
“A cat sleeping on your face?” he asked. “Won’t bother me.”

“And it’s sort of muddy right now. We’ve been getting a lot of rain and I don’t have a proper walkway or sidewalk. Is that okay?”

“Mud? Yeah, dude, it’s fine.”

“Also if you want to eat or drink anything, about ninety percent of my dishes are plastic, so make sure you rinse and recycle. There’s a box on the back porch.”

“Got it.”

“Let’s see…” I was mumbling, and I knew I was, but I couldn’t help it. “Oh, there are towels for the shower in the hall closet but some of them have, um, okay most of them have holes. I’ve had them for a long time and I’ve never really sprung for new ones, so I’m sorry.”

“Sarah, it’s fine.”

Oh god. He could tell I was freaking out. We were pulling into the garage, only a few steps before he saw just why I was freaking out, and I didn’t even have time to stop myself from freaking out.

“Let’s just get inside, have a drink, and get to bed.”

I shut off the car and took a deep breath. “That actually sounds really great,” I said.

Before I could slip back into my heels, he had the door open for me to exit. He helped himself to the bags in the back and walked beside me to the outside of the garage. I didn’t have an automated door, so as I pulled it down, he wandered down the gravel drive to take in the beauty of life in this godforsaken neck of the woods.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” I asked.

He was awe-struck, literally unable to speak at the scene.

“This is what sold me on the house, to be honest,” I told him. “We don’t have to go to a campground to look up.”

He took his eyes off the stars only long enough to acknowledge me. “I can’t remember the last time I’ve seen a night so clear. Must be… I don’t know… months, at least.”

“You can stay out here a while, if you want. I’m gonna go in and put some slippers on.”

“No, I’m coming,” he said, still gazing into the heavens in wonder. “This is the kind of thing that a picture just never does justice to.”

Like him, I looked up. He was right. I hadn’t ever really thought of it before, but he was right. It was a different view not only because it was so animated – lights blinking, stars shooting – but also because there was a sort of feeling to it. It makes you feel so small, looking up there. Better than that, though, it makes all your problems feel small. And that’s a feeling I could get used to.

He pulled himself away from it, looking over the acres of yard surrounding the house and seeming pleased with it. But then, the outside was never what I was worried about. We sloshed through the mud that, though much improved from the past couple of days, was still enough to urge us both to abandon our shoes at the door.

Fuck. This is it.
I opened the door and walked inside, barefoot and empty-handed, which somehow made me feel even more helpless. He was right on my heels, careful about his luggage not bringing mud tracks in, setting it on the welcome mat immediately after the door closed behind us. “Where do you want my jacket?” he asked.

It wasn’t like there was really anywhere for him to set it, and I had no hall closet. “Just on the couch for now,” I answered. Though I don’t know what I planned for him to do with it later. I kept mine in a box in the master bedroom. And there was no way in hell he was going anywhere near that room. “I’ve got merlot in the fridge. Want some?”

“Sure.” He glanced at the fireplace. “Does this thing work?”

“Actually yeah. I just used it the other night.”

“Mind if I start a fire?”

It was nearing ten, and honestly I was getting tired. I thought we could have a drink, fool around, and maybe fall asleep before he realized what a dump I lived in. Seemed he had other plans.

“Knock yourself out,” I said. “Hungry?”

“Nah. But if you are, I’m not one to mind if others are eating around me.”

“I’d do it even if you were,” I joked from the kitchen. I could hear him messing around by the fireplace, but I wasn’t paying much attention. “Oh hey, I meant to ask you something.” I pulled two wine glasses from the cabinet (of the few real glasses I have, many of them are wine glasses). “Does Matt know you’re here? I mean, does he actually know you’re at my house with me?”

“I think he kind of guessed I was,” he answered. “I didn’t tell him directly. Matches?”

“In that little box on the mantel.”

“Thanks.”

“He didn’t have anything smart-assed to say about it, then?” I brought the glasses into the living room. The view of him bent over starting a fire was a glorious one.

“I told you he likes you now,” he smiled back at me over his shoulder. “There. That should get going pretty quickly.”

“I see this isn’t your first fire?”

He smiled proudly and wiped a bit of soot from his hand before he took his glass. “I like to think of myself of something of a fireplace connoisseur,” he joked. “Now… what should we toast to?”

“To four days of uninterrupted peace,” I proposed, raising my glass.

“And to clear skies and brown eyes,” he added. “Two of my favorite things.”

I wanted to call him on his bullshit, but instead I said “Cheers,” and clinked our glasses together.

We sat on the couch and talked about the flight, about the past few days and how we’d both prepared to see each other tonight. I waited for him to mention my makeshift curtains or unfinished walls or something, but he didn’t. He just sat at the opposite end of the sofa, sipping slowly with his feet propped in my lap, looking me in the eyes as he listened with his undivided attention. I don’t remember what I was talking about, but whatever it was, I know it couldn’t have been anything
fascinating. And yet there he was, looking at me like I was Confucius. Like the wisdom of the universe was being imparted to only him.

“It’s late,” I said at last, having nothing more to say and wanting to touch him so badly it hurt.

“Tired?”

“A little. You must be, too.”

“A little.”

I glanced down the hall toward the master bedroom. “Okay, I have to be honest with you about something, and if you think it’s weird, that’s fine because it is.”

He sat straight up, still listening. “Shoot.”

“There’s a king-sized bed in the master bedroom. I’ve never used it. It was the last thing delivered to my house the day I moved in.”

“That’s not weird.”

“Let me finish.” I took a breath and prepared myself. “I’ve never actually slept in that room. It’s all set up and everything, but I’ve never slept in there. Actually, I’ve never even been in there except to put storage in there or take some out. It’s not a functioning bedroom, and it never has been. So when I say there’s a double in the bedroom, there is. But it’s the spare bedroom. And it’s technically the spare bed.”

He nodded as he followed along, and though he didn’t give me the typical “aww you poor soul” look, he did seem to care about the reasons why. “Is it a matter of you just never getting around to doing it, or do you never intend to?”

“It’s at the bottom of a very long to-do list for the house,” I answered. “As you can see, there’s plenty more to do, and to me, I’d rather get the rest of the house presentable first.”

“How long did you say you’ve been living here?”

“About ten years. I know. I should have gotten around to it by now. But in my defense, I work a lot. Plus, it’s not that I haven’t done anything at all!” I went on to explain about the fence and the fireplace. And that hey, at least it wasn’t leaky and moldy anymore!

He looked around the room, and I think it was the first time he had done so all night. I could see him taking note of everything that had been neglected, everything that had been completed, and everything that he probably figured I could easily have done in a weekend. Things like painting and installing screens in the windows.

“It has character,” was all he said.

I looked around at everywhere he had looked. “That’s what you see?”

He looked around again. “That crown molding is original, right? You had them remove it and then put it back after the drywall was installed?”

“Yeah. I had them do that with all the original woodwork throughout the house.”

“Character,” he said again. “Formica countertops from a 1950’s redecorating job, right? I hope you don’t plan on replacing them. That cherry red color is too cool.”
“So… you know a little about houses?”

“I hang out with some guys who do house stuff for a living. Flipping, restoration, that kind of thing. I’m no expert, but I’ve learned some stuff along the way.”

“And that means you can look at this dump and say it has character?”

He laughed a little, but then spoke. “It does. And it’s not a dump. And I know you know it’s not a dump because you made them keep the original woodwork.”

He made me smile with his simple affirmation. “I just know this house is a diamond in the rough.”

“Well then it should be polished!” He looked down at his empty glass. “I’m way too enthusiastic for just having had one glass. I think you’re right – it’s bedtime.”

I took his glass and set it in the sink with mine before shutting off the lights and taking him back to the bedroom. “Did you want to get your jammies on?” I smiled.

“What for?”

We got into the bedroom and I could see his reaction at the sight of a nearly-empty room. I explained again about why it hadn’t been finished, how I could never decide on a paint color, how furniture shopping is expensive and tedious. But as soon as I finished – and I’m honestly grateful he let me do so – he stepped closer to me and wrapped me up in his arms.

I remembered this. It was nice.

“You’re such a nerd,” he whispered, kissing my ear. “Such a beautiful, beautiful nerd.”

“Why am I a nerd?”

“It’s the way you talk about things,” he said. “You get so obsessed and you think it’s embarrassing. But it’s not. It’s adorable.”

“I just want to know that you’re going to have a good time here. I’m a little worried that you’re gonna be too distracted by the mess to think about relaxing.”

“If I’m going to be distracted by anything while I’m here this week,” he smiled, “It’s going to be you.” And then he finally did it. He held my face in his hands and kissed me the way I wanted him to when he first swept me into his arms that night at the airport.

He was right. Distractions aren’t always bad.
Chapter 17

Maybe it was the fact that I’d been on a strict schedule for the past month. Maybe it was that he was lying next to me, both of us naked. Maybe it was the nonstop list of to-dos racing through my mind all night. But whatever it was, it had me waking up at the crack of dawn. And since I got to watch him sleep for a while, no longer having to worry about anyone suddenly walking in, I decided that waking up at this hour did have its benefits.

The dim light shining through the orange sheets lining the window gave just the right shade to accentuate his freckles. His lashes, longer than I’d ever seen them, fluttered as he must have been dreaming. His lips were pink, a bit dry, parted slightly as he breathed. His hair was untidy, and some of that was probably due to the treatment I’d given him last night. And all I could think as I looked on him was that he was the most beautiful person in the world, and I couldn’t believe he was all mine.

For today, anyway.

I kissed his nose, but when he didn’t wake up I chose instead to shower. He probably didn’t get to sleep in much, either, so I’d give him a break. After my shower, I figured I’d cook him breakfast – homemade waffles, scrambled eggs, orange juice – and then drink coffee out on the porch. We could sit on the steps and watch the morning dew sparkle against the spectacular view of the plains outside my front door.

And so I showered. I tied my hair up in a loose bun high atop my head and rushed through the process so that I could wake him up to the smell of food cooking. Isn’t that supposed to be every man’s dream? I wrapped myself in my pink terrycloth robe and stepped into slippers before peeking in the room to see if he was still asleep. He was, so I headed to the kitchen.

I mixed a batch of waffle batter and plugged in the waffle iron. As it heated, I whipped up the eggs and poured them into the pan, trying not to let them burn while I formed the waffles. I alternated from one cooking device to the other, hoping that he’d get out of bed even if only to help me. But by the time I finished cooking, he was still asleep.

At this point, I didn’t care as much what he wanted as far as sleep was concerned. I’d made breakfast. I was bored. He was going to have to wake up now.

“Hey!” I shouted at him from the doorway. “Breakfast!” I returned to the kitchen to get plates and cups, etc.

I set the table and plated the food on the counter so that he could serve himself as he chose. Once again, I looked down the hall, and once again, I was disappointed that he wasn’t awake yet.

“Chris!” I shouted. “Breakfast!”

I served my own plate, and then stomped angrily toward the bedroom. I don’t know what it was that had me so on edge on this particular morning, but it was probably at least partially due to the fact that I hadn’t actually made an actual breakfast for an actual guest in years. And he wasn’t even awake to enjoy it.

As I rounded the corner into the bedroom, he was sitting upright in the bed running his hand through his hair and adjusting to the morning. “Did you hear me?” I asked, this time quieter, but still sternly. “I’ve been calling you.”
“I heard ya,” he smiled sleepily at me. But there was more to that look. There was something wicked underneath it all.

“Okay… Well, what’re you waiting for?”

“Come here,” he said.

“I told you I just made breakfast.”

“So? It’s not going anywhere.”

It was obvious what he wanted, not only from his words, but also from the tented sheet between his legs. I turned around, not wanting him to see my smile but refusing to answer him. No, he wasn’t going to get his way. He wasn’t going to fuck me while the food went cold and then have us just pour ourselves a bowl of cereal.

“You really need to take a lesson in how to wake me up from Matt,” he called. I could hear him shuffling out of bed and then walking behind me. “If you’d tried his method, you would have had me awake right away.”

I turned around once we got to the kitchen. “Why are you naked?” I laughed when I saw him. “I know it’s just the two of us, but have some decorum. Please.”

He held out his hands until they were on either side of my face, and he pressed his body close to mine while he kissed me.

“Good morning,” he whispered.

“I hope this isn’t how Matt wakes you up.”

He laughed, then kissed me again. And by the next kiss, I could feel my ass hitting the edge of the folding table.

I stopped and looked up at him. I’d never seen want like that.

One hand reached down to my belt and pulled it open. His fingertips played around my navel, and his lips sucked on the skin of my neck.

“I made breakfast,” I whimpered, though I had no intentions of actually stopping. “It’s gonna get cold.”

He moved his hand away from my waist and reached for a waffle. He stuck it in his mouth, eating it without any toppings, without cutting it, without sitting down, even.

With the waffle half-hanging from his mouth, he dropped my robe back off my body and lifted me quickly on top of the table. He chomped away at it, his free hand falling down my body, thumb tracing around one nipple, then the other until they were hard. His cock was hard against his body, and now it was in front of me as he stood between my open legs. His eyes looked over my body, then to my eyes, then back to my body. My slippers were still dangling off my feet. I felt foolish.

“You don’t want syrup?” I asked him.

He finished off the waffle and smiled with his mouth full. “Mm-hm,” he nodded, his eyes bright. He reached over to the counter and picked up the syrup bottle. “Lie back,” he mumbled, gently pushing me down onto the table.
Syrup. Thick, sticky, sugary syrup. I didn’t want this on me. I remembered the few times I’d leaned a little too close over my breakfast and gotten some in my hair. It’s disgusting.

But as he poured it between my breasts and down my body, I couldn’t move. He stopped just at my belly button, set the bottle beside me, and placed his mouth on my collarbone.

It’s okay. This is what showers are for.

His lips kissed over the syrup, stuck to his whiskers and making quite a mess. I could have laughed, but I didn’t. His hands took hold of my wrists, lifting them over my head and pinning me to the table. His tongue began to lick the syrup slowly off my body. With his face between my breasts and his hands over my head, I wrapped my legs around him and urged him to let me feel him between my legs.

Suddenly he stopped and looked up at me. “What’s the rush, baby?”

I couldn’t answer, only able to throw my head back and close my eyes as he continued. I wanted him to fuck me simply because I figured he was trying to get me turned on, and he did that. I was rewarding him, I figured. I was telling him that he could do what he wanted to do. It was just hard for me to believe that he actually wanted to do this.

He made his way halfway down my torso, just inches above my belly button when he stopped again. His hands released me, and he moved up against me to kiss me. I could taste the syrup all over him, could feel it on his hands when they cupped my face. With our bodies pressed together this way, we were fused by this condiment between us, sticky, disgusting, sweet. And when his fingers pressed into the skin of my thighs and encouraged me to adjust into position for him, I did so eagerly and without stopping to clean up. Why the hell would I bother?

He pushed into me slowly – agonizingly so. He was still looking into my eyes, smiling wickedly, and I could read his satisfaction on his face. My impatient hands moved into his hair and pulled tight, even pulling him down against my throat as he began moving faster. The table was wobbling underneath us; it could break at any moment but I didn’t give a shit. My chin was pressed into the top of his head, but no matter how uncomfortable that must have been, he kept on going. He hadn’t made noises like this before – grunts, moans, “yeah-baby” babbles against my skin. It was the hottest fucking noise I’d ever heard. I felt so wanted, so beautiful, so special. My mouth formed a smile just from the thought of how much he loved fucking me. The thought was pure intoxication and nothing less. We were the only people around for miles and we could make all the noise we wanted.

I started by saying his name in a whisper. It was only his name, and yet it seemed to spur him on that much more. It was so freeing to say what I wanted now. I could call him baby. I could tell him just how good it felt. I could say no words in particular and just moan and groan at every movement. I could ask him to spank me, I realized, and then I could shout at the pleasant shock of his hand on me. But I didn’t want that. Not now.

The louder I got, I found myself only that much more aroused. I sounded like a porn star, but, you know, realistic. I couldn’t keep my eyes open or my mouth shut. He had overwhelmed all of my senses in the best possible way, and just as I felt myself about to come, my name left his lips so sweetly, so quietly. It was like a prayer. And it was that prayer that sent me over the edge.

He always got so fucking proud of himself every time he made me orgasm. This time was no exception. He looked back up at me and smiled briefly, then kissed my lips before returning to his place tucked under my chin. He was sweating profusely, sticky from that, combined with the most unfortunate condiment he could have picked. I could see the syrup pulling at his chest hairs every time he moved and I knew it had to hurt. Did he enjoy that? Exactly how kinky is this motherfucker?
“Let me come on you,” he asked without hesitation. “Please let me come on you.”

I nodded, and he pulled out, stroking his cock with one hand and rubbing my clit with the other. It occurred to me in that moment that he actually got off on me getting off. I didn’t think that was a thing that existed. No man I’d ever been with gave two shits about my satisfaction, and that includes the man I married. Yes, I was coming again, but I wanted to give him a real show to indulge in. I opened my legs wide, grabbed my tits, and let the orgasm dictate my speech. I shouted words that don’t exist in the dictionary, closed my eyes tight, curled my toes, and felt him hot on my stomach just as I was calming down.

He braced himself over me, standing now but leaning on his arms, one on each side of me. We were filthy.

“Shower?” I asked.

“In a minute,” he said. He took a few steady breaths, then kissed me again. “Okay, yeah. Let’s go.”

I had a bit of trouble getting up, but he hoisted me over his shoulder and carried me off. I took my time in this round, even washing my hair. At one point when I was ready to leave but not particularly eager to be without him, he seemed to read my mind, pulling me close and holding me under the shower stream. He didn’t say anything, and for once in my life, neither did I. We were both clean enough to come out, and probably weren’t doing our best for the effort of water conservation, but somehow I didn’t mind.

He pressed the water off and reached outside the shower for the towel. Wrapping it around me, he grabbed my face again and kissed me. I wasn’t used to this kind of affection, but I could be.

We dressed, ate cold eggs at the counter, and then went outside to drink our coffee on the porch. That wasn’t only due to the fact that I’d wanted to watch the view, but more to that of not finding my table exactly appropriate for dining at the moment. I told him about the neighboring farms and what they grew. I told him about the horses that lived at the Millers’ farm. I told him about Sundays and walking to the market on the edge of town. It was only a four mile round trip, and it was so worth it when the weather allowed.

“What do you want to do today?” I asked him at last.

“You mean aside from what we’ve already done?”

I looped my arm around his and leaned my head on his shoulder. “Aside from that, yes.”

“I don’t know. What do you want to do?”

This. All day, this. “I don’t know.”

“You said something last night about a to-do list,” he said, rubbing his beard and gazing forward. “Do you feel like tackling some of that stuff?”

My to-do list was all full of things I needed to do to the house. I needed rooms painted, floors redone, furniture bought. It wasn’t at all what I felt like doing. And not just now. Ever.

“I’m not going to run chores with you on your only week off,” I told him. “We talked about that.”

“But I kinda want to. I don’t know… I never feel like I actually just get to do fun stuff like that.”

“Fun? Like painting? Painting is fun?”
He shrugged. "Yeah. It can be."

I let go of him and stood, walking in front of him. "Fine. Let’s go."

He looked up at me. He seemed surprised. "What? Just like that?"

"Did you want more of a fight?"

"Kind of."

"Get off your fucking lazy ass and help me paint my goddamn house."

He smiled. "Yes, ma’am. And incidentally, you could bring some of that spirit into the bedroom tonight if you want.”

I asked him if he was sure that he wanted to go out to the city for paint, and he said he didn’t mind. He wore one of his ball caps pulled down low, a sweatshirt, jeans, and boots that I was sure would be covered in paint by the time the day was done. We decided that if he was noticed, we’d be polite, let him stop for pictures, and move on. Owatonna, though technically a city, isn’t the kind of place to cause a fuss over a guy doing some home improvement. No matter how famous he is.

Down on Lake Street, we pulled into the lot of my favorite hardware store and went inside. Even though it was unusually busy for a Thursday afternoon it was mostly men, the lumberjack kind, and this was typical. Actually it was one of the biggest reasons I didn’t like going to the hardware store. I always felt like “the little woman,” everyone in town either knowing about my story or assuming something else. My town, as much as I love it, is full of old-fashioned thinking and outdated ideas. Women just don’t go to the hardware stores. Not without a man to explain everything to her. If I actually knew the first thing about home improvement, I wouldn’t mind as much. But to me, it felt as though these men weren’t just saying and assuming things, but they were also right. I had no idea what the fuck I was doing.

Luckily, paint doesn’t seem to be very complicated. I figured it was nothing more than finding a color I liked, picking out the right amount of gallons to be tinted, and moving on. Right?

Apparently not.

“So what’s the difference between flat and satin finish?” I asked Chris, hoping he would know.

“I think satin is easier to clean,” he said. “But I don’t really know. We could ask someone, I guess.”

“No!” I looked around. “It’s bad enough you’re out in public without a wrangler. We don’t need to actually draw attention to you.”

He smiled and looked toward the older gentleman at the paint counter. “He won’t know who I am,” he said surely. “It’ll be fine.”

“What if he does?”

“So what? What’s he gonna do?”

“Annoy you.”

He wrapped his arm around me and pulled me closer to the man at the counter. “Excuse me, sir,” he called. “My wife and I are looking to paint a house, but we’re not very handy. Could you help us out?”
“What are you doing?” I asked between my teeth, pretending I was only smiling.

“Just go with it.”

“Why?”

He looked down at me. “Acting!”

“Sure,” the man, who was named Franky according to his name tag, said happily as he approached us. “What can I do ya for?”

I didn’t know Franky, thankfully. This could have been so much more awkward.

“We just bought a little house over off Cork Drive. We’re wanting to get it all set up, but we don’t know what the heck we’re doing.”

“No problem,” he said cheerily, walking toward the paints. “How long you two been married?”

“Little over a month,” Chris said. “Just come back from our honeymoon, actually.” The more he talked, the more I realized that he had adopted a regional accent.

“Well ain’t that somethin’,” Franky beamed. “Now why don’t you tell me what rooms you’re plannin’ on doin’.”

“The whole house! Living room, kitchen, dining. The whole shebang.”

Franky told us about the different brands and types, and then handed us a few of the more popular color palettes to review.

“I like this blue,” I told Chris. “What do you think?”

“I think if you like it, I love it, honey.”

I tried to keep myself from laughing. “I only like it if you love it.” Two could play at this game.

“Aw, shnookems, I love anything you love and you know it.” His voice had gotten ridiculously high-pitched. Alex would pay to see this moment.

“You two are so goshdarn cute,” Franky grinned, hands folded in front of him. “Where’d you honeymoon?”

“Paris,” I interrupted.

“And London,” he added. “And Tokyo, Sydney, then L.A.”

“Well that’s an impressive honeymoon! No wonder it took a month!” Franky pointed to the kinds of paints he believed would best suit each room, then looked at us again. “Yeah, you guys’ll wanna get all that togetherness out of the way before you have babies. You plannin’ on havin’ babies?”

While I was about to tell him that was none of his business, which is what I used to tell people who asked me that in my former life, Chris again interrupted. “Not for about eight more months,” he whispered as he placed his hand over my belly. “We haven’t told our folks yet, though.”

I looked at him angrily, and he kissed my cheek. I went to kiss his in return, but instead whispered into his ear that I was going to kill him later.
We picked out that blue shade for the bedrooms, and then a sort of goldenrod color for the rest. With the grey and navy blue accessories I planned to use later, it shouldn’t be too overwhelming a color. And unlike Greer, I actually happen to like yellow. It’s a fucking cheerful color, goddammit.

Franky waved goodbye to us as we left, my face bright red in embarrassment. As soon as we had finished packing the ten or so gallons of paint, then the brushes, rollers, and trays into the back of the van and gotten inside, I punched him in the shoulder and told him just how much I didn’t appreciate that little display he pulled.

“It’s fun,” he laughed. “Come on… you joined in, too.”

“Because I had to!”

“No you didn’t. You coulda been a total priss, and you had every right to be. But you weren’t.”

I would have crossed my arms as a symbol of my unhappiness, but I was driving. “I hope you’re ready to paint the shit out of my house,” I said.

“Absolutely.”

We got home and carried in all the supplies. As I set them down by the door, I looked around and realized I didn’t know where to start. I’d be a fool to think we could finish this all in a few days, but even the living room at this point seemed daunting.


“I think we should start with the biggest room and work our way down. If we both go at it, I think we can get everything done by bedtime.”

“No we can’t.”

He stripped off his shirt and tossed it onto the couch. “Yes we can.”

“No we can’t. You cannot change my mind just by taking your shirt off.”

“I’m not just taking my shirt off,” he said, stepping out of his shoes and kicking them across the room. “I didn’t bring paint clothes.”

As he started taking his jeans off, I picked up two gallons of the living room color and brought them close to him. “How about you take this room since it was your idea?”

“What about you?”

“Wasn’t my idea.”

“But you’re gonna help, right?”

He looked especially pitiful in his boxers for some reason. “Yeah, yeah,” I sighed. “But you get started. This has me thinking I should get the floors in here done, too, so I’m going to see if I can get an estimate.”

He began pouring paint, and I excused myself to go outside. Call after disappointing call had me mad at the world. No one would drive out as far as I lived and give a free estimate, and when I asked what they thought it might cost for a house of this square footage, not one believed I could replace the floors for anything near my budget.
“That’s just too much,” I told the last one. “Isn’t there any way I can get a better deal? Do you have any flooring that’s on sale or anything?”

“The only way you’re gonna get it cheaper is if you do it yourself,” he said. “Well not you, obviously, but your husband.”

I hung up as soon as I heard that.

When I returned to the living room, he had put a coat on one wall and was starting the next. “I guess the floors can wait.”

He looked at me, frowning. “No luck?”

“I don’t have that kind of money,” I admitted. “Of course, I could always get my husband to do it, according to the last guy I talked to.”

“Well gosh, hon, I’d do it but I just don’t think we have the time,” he joked, the accent returning along with his character.

“There was a flooring class being taught last month at that hardware store,” I told him. “I almost signed up before I remembered I’d be working.”

He reached for another roller and handed it to me. “We’ll figure something out,” he assured me.

I got to work to keep my mind off of the disappointing things in life and painted in silence. To my amazement, we were able to finish the living room, dining room, and hall before dark. The color was absolutely perfect, though far more cheerful than I personally felt at the time. Still, I looked at him when we were done and smiled.

“I can’t believe how much we got done.”

“You and me,” Chris said. “We get shit done.”

We washed up and changed into more comfortable clothing. He settled for sweats and I slipped into flannel pajamas. It wasn’t bedtime, but we were spent. The day had been a long one – too long – and all I wanted to do was relax.

“I saw you have a hammock up outside,” he said as we munched on cheese and crackers for our dinner. “Is it functional?”

“Yep. Why?”

“Because it’s a clear night,” he said. He peered out the kitchen window. “I thought we could go out there and look up.”

“I think that sounds amazing. But you know what would make it more amazing?”

“Booze?”

“Booze.”

He zipped up a hooded sweatshirt while I brought the bottle outside. The hammock hadn’t been used since probably the summer before, but aside from a few leaves scattered around, it was in fine shape. He lay in it first, then I lay beside him. He kept one arm around me constantly while his other grabbed the bottle of wine from me and sipped on occasion. I waited for him to say something. Teach me something. Show off that nerdy side that I’d heard so much about. But he just stared into
space and smiled, his eyes studying every star so closely that I was actually jealous that he wasn’t looking at me that way.

“How’s your eyesight, Dixon?”

“My eyesight?” I asked. I wasn’t sure if I heard him correctly. “Um, fine. I mean, probably average. I don’t wear glasses except when I’m reading.”

He reached his hand up and pointed at the small cluster of stars that had conveniently planted themselves just over my hammock. “Did you know that you and I can see things up there that are at a distance of almost twenty million billion miles? You can see that far… farther than you or I will ever reach in this lifetime. But we can see it. It’s like it’s so close, you know? We can see it, but we’ll never touch it, you and I.”

“That’s sort of a depressing thought,” I said. “Sort of a ‘so-close-and-yet-so-far’ type of thing, right?”

“If you want to look at it that way, sure. But I think it’s sort of amazing that we even get to look at it. We get to look up and see how vast and beautiful it all is up there, even if we’ll never go into space ourselves.”

“Does Chris Evans have plans to touch the stars?”

He smiled a little, still looking up, fascinated by it all. “No. Touching the stars would get me burned. I think it’s better just to look, don’t you?”

Was he trying to use an analogy here? Was he trying to tell me through metaphor that I wasn’t good enough for him? Because that was literally all I could think of. He was waxing eloquent about the night sky, and I was thinking about him. Typical.

“You said you have a favorite constellation, didn’t you?” I asked. “Where is it?”

“Well in this season,” he started, pointing now to a different area. “That one right there.”

I snuggled closer. Fuck, he was cute.

“What’s your favorite constellation?” he asked me.

I moved my thumb over his cheek to the only freckles on his face that were still obvious. “Right here.”

Without redirecting his gaze, he grabbed my hand and brought it to his lips, kissing it. “You win.”

With his attention on something that had nothing to do with me, I thought I might ask him a question that would seem far too serious in any other setting. “So that little character you played in the store earlier…”

He leaned his head close to mine. “Yeah?”

“Is that anything like you? I mean, do you ever want to be that guy? Married? Kids?”

“Of course.”

I waited for him to elaborate. “Really? You wanna be that guy?”

“No, not that guy,” he smiled. “But married. Kids, probably. If she wanted them.”
“But what do you want?”

“I want it all.” He looked at me, and it was almost unnerving. “I want to be a husband. I want to come home to a woman who’s been all I could think about that day. I want to take her places. I want it all.”

“So how come it hasn’t happened yet?”

He laughed a little, as if it were a ridiculous question. “Because we don’t all get married when we’re twelve,” he said.

“Okay, fair point. But you’re in your thirties now. With the mile-long list of women you’ve fucked, how hasn’t a single one of them been the one?”

“The list of women I’ve fucked isn’t the same as the list of women I’ve dated. And even that isn’t the same as the list of women I’ve loved. If you saw that last list, it would probably make more sense.”

“So you haven’t been in love very many times?”

“A couple. It’s never ended well.”

“And yet you’re not burned by that? You haven’t decided to boycott marriage because you’ve had women break your heart?”

“Is that what guys do?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I’m told.”

He just smiled, then looked up again.

“Thanks for your help today, by the way. I probably wouldn’t have gotten around to it if you hadn’t encouraged me.”

His fingers sifted through my hair playfully. “What are fake husbands for?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had one before. But I have to say, I’m liking it.”

He closed his eyes. Was I boring him?

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I literally have never been better,” he said. “I can see why you don’t want to move.”

Ah, yes. I don’t want to move. Another reason he and I are doomed.

“It’s my favorite place, despite its faults.”

“I can see that,” he said quietly. He was falling asleep.

“Do you want to come to bed?”

He shook his head. “I want to stay here until I wake up.”

“Or until a coyote gets a hold of you, which is more likely.” I sat up. “I guess I’ll leave you to it, then.”

“No,” he opened his eyes and moved his hand down to mine, squeezing it tight. “Please stay.”
I looked into his eyes. This was the man no one else gets to see. Not like I saw him now. “You sure?”

He nodded. “Please.”

I reclined back as I was, turning toward him and snuggling to his side. He closed his eyes again, and then so did I. in the cities we’d stayed in, we had learned the lullaby of the city siren. But here, the crickets, frogs, and owls sang us to sleep. Not a light but those above illuminated us. No cars would travel down our road at this hour. No music, no parties, no angry pedestrians. Just us. Just us with the world to ourselves.

When he fell asleep, as much as I wanted to stay, I was just too cold to do so. I went inside to retrieve a blanket for him, then settled myself in bed. For the first night since I’d owned this place, I was able to put my head to my pillow, close my eyes, and fall asleep immediately. Happily.

Satisfied in more ways than one.

Around two in the morning, I felt him slipping into the bed with me. He was still in his jacket and sweats, feet cold and rubbing against each other as soon as the covers were around his body. His back was to me, but I moved close to him and rested my arm on his body. I pressed my lips to his back, and I curved my body against his. I even let my warm feet find his cold ones, mingling them until he was comfortable.

“Goodnight,” I whispered. But he was already asleep.
Chapter 18

I didn’t dream that night because I didn’t have to.

Every so often through the night, he would shift his position. There wasn’t a lot of room in the bed, and he knew it would be like that. I felt sorry for him, even considering moving myself to the couch for the night a few times. But then I would look at him and remember that I only had a week left with him. I pressed my nose against his clothing and inhaled. I felt the way his hand found mine even in his sleep and I knew I couldn’t leave.

My sleep, despite the waking up on occasion, was satisfying. I heard my phone alarm go off at six, and I couldn’t believe it was still set. Chris reached to turn it off for me, then told me to go back to sleep. He’d barely finished the sentence before I obeyed.

But no matter how amazing the sleep, I remember hating myself when I woke up and saw that it was almost ten. I’d slept more than twelve hours! And honestly, if it hadn’t been for the buzzing noise coming from somewhere in the house, I probably would have stayed in bed.

Chris was gone. I figured he’d woken up and had something to eat, or at least I hoped he had. Maybe he was out on the couch. Maybe he had left – my snoring, my bed, my spooning more than he could handle at the moment. I stood to my feet and scrambled for a sweater before I left to see what was going on.

“I had no idea it would be that loud, honey,” he greeted me. For some reason he was doing that accent again, and all I could do was look at him quizzically, trying to figure him out.

“Aw, there’s the missus!” I looked over to see Franky emerging from the kitchen, coffee in hand. “Yeah, I warned him that the buffer would be loud and wake you up, but he insisted.”

“What’s going on, honey bunch?” I asked, feigning a smile at Chris. “Why are you buffing the floors?”

“I went down to see our pal Franky here from the store yesterday. I told him what happened with the floor guys.”

“Yeah, them guys are always trying to gyp everyone down to their last red cent.” And despite Franky’s use of an outdated and somewhat racist term, it occurred to me that he was only trying to help. “I only had to cover for another guy for a couple hours this morning, so afterward your hubby and I drove up here to see if we couldn’t do it ourselves.”

Hubby. I fucking hate that word. It’s the verbal equivalent to a sore throat.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I told them both. “I probably just had to wait another year and could’ve done it then.”

“Yeah, but Franky says these floors can be saved!” Chris was so happy, so proud. He almost went out of character to give me the news. “We just need to do a little buffing, a little this and that, some stain. Good as new.”

“That’s right. You won’t know these floors when we’re done.”

I looked at them both, my smile fading as the realization struck. “And how much am I out once this is said and done?”
“Equipment rental was only $150,” Chris explained. “We haven’t bought the stain yet because we wanted to see what you’d like first.”

“We?” I asked. “Who’s we?”

“You and me, honey,” Chris said, standing tall. “From our little savings we put aside.”

“Well we have to pay you something for your trouble, Franky,” I offered, but he stopped me.

“Some coffee and good company’s all I need,” he insisted. “Don’t have much for friends these days. All these people are moving now that the Somalians are coming in town in such big numbers.”

A deafening silence filled the room, and Chris and I locked eyes. We didn’t want to correct this man for the things he was saying. Not while he was working for free. But then we felt we had a duty. This is one of those ethics things are teachers always told us we would face someday. But we never believed it.

“I’m gonna go to town and get a few things while you men are working,” I said. If you can’t beat ‘em, get the hell away from ‘em.

“This won’t take long,” Chris said. “Can’t you wait so I can go with?”

“No, honey. This is woman’s work.”

Franky laughed. He would.

I couldn’t tell if Chris was actually disappointed or if he only acted that way to stay in character. But fuck his character. I had shit to do, and if Chris was going to bring another man to my house to do work, then I was going to leave. I think the idea of it sounded better in Chris’s head than it actually played out.

By the time I left, shopped for the rest of the things I needed for the living room, and ate a quick lunch, it was well into the afternoon. I thought that it was probably safe to return home at this point, even though Chris hadn’t texted me anything. Pulling up to the house, I saw that Franky’s car was gone, and unless Chris had hitched a ride, he would be inside waiting for me.

“You didn’t even ask to use my car this morning,” I greeted him. “You could have asked.”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

I looked around and was shocked at the difference. The floors had all been stripped naked, light and virgin and begging for color. I could hardly believe that they had accomplished finishing not only the living room, but the rest of the place as well.

“It looks amazing in here,” I said. “You guys really did a good job.”

“I have some stain here,” he explained, pointing toward several small cans in one corner. “And we put some over there so you can see which stain you like best.”

“Where’s my couch?”

“Barn.”

“Why?”

He stood up from where he’d been sitting on the floor and walked closer to me. “Because tomorrow,
we’re going furniture shopping.”

“I can’t afford that.”

“Yes you can. Look how much money you saved on flooring!”

“And exactly how much did I save?”

“Everything. It only came out to a few hundred. I put it on a credit card.”

“You didn’t need to do that.”

“It was my idea.”

“I’m paying you back.”

He smiled. “Okay. Deal.”

I walked over to the stains and looked them over. “This one,” I said with an indicative gesture. “It matches the trim.”

Without a word, he moved to a pack of special towels he had nearby, and he started opening the stain.

“You’re going to do this now?” I asked as he started.

“Unless you have something better for me to do.”

I didn’t. I mean, I did, but I didn’t. You know what I mean.

I left him to it, moved all my bags to the bedroom and settled in. As Chris continued working, I asked him what he wanted for dinner, and he chose from the options. I cooked up a batch of lemon chicken, occasionally peeking out to see his progress. He was moving faster than I expected. It was starting to look like a real house.

After about thirty constant minutes, he took a break. He came to the kitchen for some water and stood by the sink. He seemed preoccupied. He seemed distracted.

“Everything okay?” I asked him.

He nodded. I wasn’t sure I believed him.

“I didn’t ask you to do this, you know. I wasn’t bitching about the floors last night because I expected you to do them.”

“I know,” he said.

I stepped in front of him and pressed my palms to his chest, sliding them upwards until I had encouraged him to look me in the eye.

“I want this,” he said.

“You want what?”

“This.”

“To lay flooring?”
“To lay flooring for you.”

I smiled graciously. “That’s very sweet.”

His hands moved to my hips and pulled me close. “I don’t want to leave,” he said, almost whispering. “I want to stay here until that list is done.”

“Now you see why I didn’t want to tackle it. I knew that as soon as I did, I’d be unhappy settling for less than the finished product.”

“Let’s finish the list, then,” he said with a shrug. Like it was that easy.

“You only have one more day here. You really want to spend it as a handyman?”

“As your handyman…”

I laughed it off a little. “You’re getting sappy, Evans.”

“You asked me last night what I wanted. I’m just answering you.”

“I asked you what you wanted long-term. Not while you were here.”

He just smiled.

It might normally be uncomfortable to look someone in the eye at all, and especially for as long as we were doing. But I couldn’t look away. I was mesmerized. I was hooked. I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to fuck him. I wanted to hold him in my arms and cry and I didn’t understand that.

“Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes,” I said. “How much can you get done tonight?”

“All of it.”

“No you can’t.”

“Yes I can. Watch me.”

I reached my lips to his and kissed him. “I think I might.”

He walked away only when I released him to do so. I returned to the dinner while he did what he was doing, and I almost hated myself for letting us be this stereotype. Almost, until I realized that for us, that’s what worked. That’s what made us happy.

He had finished the living room by the time dinner was served, and afterward he set to the kitchen and hall, which were the only other rooms that needed to be done. I felt awful for not helping, but I just didn’t want to. My artistic tendencies only kick in when they help someone else, apparently. Helping myself is just plain selfish.

I retreated to the bedroom to read while he finished up. Seriously in all the time I had to think about how he and I would spend these few precious days, it was never me sitting on my bed reading while he stained flooring. But it felt good. It felt right. And hey, free labor.

“I think I got it all,” he said at last. He held out his hands for me to see that in spite of the gloves he wore, some stains were left on his fingers.

“You must be tired.”
“A little.”

“Why don’t you come to bed?”

He began stripping his clothing and heading for the bathroom. “Sounds good, but I’m gonna shower first. I feel like I smell like a sweaty pine tree.”

“Want company?” I asked.

“If you want.”

Of course I did. I’d been craving him all day. I’d been in need of his touch since I’d last felt it, just as it always was with him. I had my clothes off before he’d even reached the handle, and as soon as the water was on and warm, I stepped inside and waited for him.

He was slow about joining me for some reason. He removed his belt and unbuttoned his pants like it was a science. At first I thought maybe he was hurting or tired, but it was more than that.

As my head stuck out from behind the curtain watching him, I finally smiled enthusiastically. “Water’s gonna be cold by the time you get in at this rate.”

He looked up to me and smiled briefly, and there was something of a lie to it.

“You okay?”

He pulled his boxers down and stepped closer to me, and as he joined me, he reached his arms around me and held me close. His lips were against my forehead, his toes against my toes, our bodies touching not sensually, but in a manner not too different and that I can’t explain. He wasn’t kissing my forehead, but rather resting there. He was holding me close under the water. I expected sex. I expected tired. This was neither.

After a full minute, I gently pulled out of his arms and kept my hands on his chest. “What’s wrong, baby?”

He closed his eyes and smiled. “Nothing.”

“Something,” I rebutted. “Tell me.”

“Nothing,” he smiled again. “I promise.”

“Then why are you so…” I couldn’t find the word. “I don’t know…”

“Peaceful?”

I thought for a moment. “Is that what this is?”

“If it’s not for you, I can stop,” he said. But as I looked up at him, the water raining over his shoulders, dripping between us, I realized that this was exactly what it was.

“I’m in no hurry to stop,” I answered back.

And so we stood there. He found the shower comforting, probably due the steady rhythm and temperature. He found peace in me, too, and that part was what I found really confusing. And finally he had said he wanted to stay here. Maybe he meant with me, or maybe he specifically meant in this house. Maybe both.
I closed my eyes and pressed our bodies together again. His steady grip was like a security blanket, and I wanted to cuddle up in it forever. And suddenly we were kissing. Long, slow kisses. Kisses with breaths between. Kisses that made me feel so strong somehow.

It didn’t escalate to sex. Not yet. I reached for the soap as our last kiss concluded and washed us over. We giggled a little when we got in each other’s way. We slapped each other’s asses sometimes. His whole demeanor seemed so relaxed – so at home. It made me want this to be his home.

We stepped out and wrapped up in towels. I was wringing out my hair and he was checking his phone because he knew that one of the conditions of his taking all this time off was him checking his phone as often as possible. I slipped into a t-shirt and shorts, and he just wore his boxers. We went to the kitchen for wine. We talked. We laughed.

And as we sat on the bed (because the sofa was gone), I found myself just looking at him. It was probably the kind of look he would have found creepy if he’d actually caught me, but currently he was looking down at the cards in his hand, plotting his next move. It wasn’t that he had said anything unusual or special because he hadn’t. It wasn’t the way he looked because he looked like he always did – perfect. It wasn’t the wine because I’d barely had more than a few sips.

It was just… him.

“Skip Bo!” he exclaimed, snapping me out of it.

“You don’t yell Skip Bo when you use a card from the deck,” I told him.

“Oh. Well what do I yell?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Well that’s no fun.”

“So it’s not fun, this game?”

He laughed and looked up at me. “Of course it’s fun. You’re always fun. I just wish I could yell something.”

“So yell something!”

“Skip Bo!”

“No, not that! Something else.”

He thought for a moment, picked up the card again, and slammed it down. “You’re fucking beautiful!”

“That’s cheesy as fuck,” I laughed. “But I’ll accept it.”

“Thank you.” And then after he said it, he dropped the card in his hand, moved his body swiftly over the cards between us, and kissed me.

I put my hands on his face and pulled him over me, cards be damned. We were making out in this mess like two horny kids in high school. We couldn’t wait. We couldn’t keep our hands off each other.

With his body over mine and our lips hardly able to find independence from the other’s, we settled ourselves into the quilt and I wrapped my legs around him. I whispered in his ear, egging him on,
telling him how good he felt, telling him he was amazing. Telling him to fuck me harder, faster, don’t stop…

And suddenly he halted. His body, heaving breaths from exertion and passion, stopped over mine and he looked at me. He looked me in the eye in a way I can’t describe. No one had looked at me like this. It wasn’t lust and it wasn’t hate and it wasn’t anything I really understood. But there he was, looking at me. He wanted to say something. I just knew he did.

“What’s wrong?”

He shook his head silently, then bowed over me, his lips on mine.

“Chris…”

“I mean it,” he said in reply.

“You mean what?”

“I don’t want to leave.”

My fingers caressed his cheek. “I wish you didn’t have to.”

“I’ve never felt like this,” he whispered, kissed me again. “It’s never been like this.”

“Like what?” I was asking in reference to both statements.

“Don’t you feel it too?”

Feelings. Feelings are scary. I don’t like them.

“I think I might,” I answered. Fuck. That’s not what I should have said.

He kissed me again, and then I figured my answer was alright because he continued. He wrapped me tight in his arms and thrust slowly, beautifully into me. He was so graceful, so considerate. It was different this time.

Afterward, we both lay there in each other’s arms for a long while. We didn’t say much, but I pet his arm and he kissed the crown of my head until we’d settled down. I could tell there was something on his mind. Feelings again, probably. I wished he’d say something.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I wasn’t sure what he meant, so I asked.

“Just, I mean it must still bother you, since you haven’t used the master bedroom all this time.”

Oh. That.

“I’m okay,” I shrugged. “It’s been a long time.”

“Yeah, but… but why is it a storage room now? It’s all furnished and painted and everything. Why is it storage?”

“I never got around to it,” I said. “Like I told you, it’s at the bottom of the list.”

“So if we finish the list, and if we get down to that, we can work on it?”
“We?” I stopped and moved away from him so that I could face him. “We aren’t working on it, Chris. I am.”

“Right, but… But I mean, is it something you really plan on getting to, or are you still not ready?”

“I don’t know!” I was getting testy. Unreasonably so. And I knew it. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Maybe what?”

“Maybe I’m still not ready. I probably won’t know until I try.”

“So why don’t you try? Maybe tomorrow while I’m hanging pictures or something? And if you need help—”

“No!” I moved out of the bed and threw my shirt back on. “Come here. Come look at this.”

As I marched to the bedroom, he joined soon after. I opened the door, revealing what he already knew was there. Piles of clothes that either didn’t fit, were out of style, or were damaged all sat piled almost to the ceiling in one corner. The bed was full of boxes – the contents of which I wasn’t sure, but it didn’t matter. In another corner, my books were piled in several short piles. And finally around the floor, luggage of all size and color and designer sat full of clothes from trips I’d never unpacked from.

“I need boxes, bookshelves, dumpsters, bins, closet space…” I started to explain. “And that’s just for the stuff you can see. I’d want a new bed, too, with new linens, and new paint in this room. Everything would have to go. It’s a huge project, Chris. I could probably spend a week in here and only scratch the surface.

He looked around for a minute, then at me. “Okay. Sorry.”

In relief I sighed. “Thank you.”

“But are you okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“About the whole thing? Are you okay with it now?”

“Are you asking if I’m okay with the fact that my husband died? Because I hate to break it to you, but I’ll never be okay with that.”

“No, no, of course I don’t mean that,” he said, shaking his head. “I mean, are you okay to… to, you know…”

“To what?”

“To move on?”

I walked out of the room, and once he was out, too, I shut the door. “Move on how, exactly?”

“Do you see yourself getting married again?”

I rolled my eyes at what I deemed a ridiculous thing to think about. “I don’t think I’m getting married any time soon.”

“Didn’t say you were. Just asked if you were ready.”
“It’s not really a conversation I would have unless I was in love with that person.”

“So you won’t even talk about it with me?”

I laughed in an admittedly smart-ass way. “Are we in love?” I started walking down the hall away from him and back toward the spare bedroom.

“I am,” he answered.

I stopped dead in my tracks, but I couldn’t face him just yet. I thought for a second that maybe I could pretend I didn’t hear him, but for one thing, I was only about three feet in front of him, and for another thing, I had stopped. I had acknowledged his words. I couldn’t just not respond.

I turned around slowly. He was almost pouting, it seemed. He had leaned against the wall, hands behind his butt, looking down at the floor.

“Chris…”

“I am, Sarah. I’m sorry, but I am.”

“Why are you sorry?”

He looked at me slowly. “Because you’re obviously not ready to hear it.”

“There you go again with the whole ‘ready’ thing, like it’s something I have to take classes for!”

“I just don’t wanna rush you…”

“What do you think this is?” I asked him. “We’ve known each other a month. We’ve been fucking half that time, only. This is the first time you’ve been to my house and I’ve never been to yours. We don’t know each other’s friends or family. We don’t know anything about each other! If you’re not trying to rush, you should have told yourself that a long time ago.”

“It doesn’t feel like that to me,” he explained. “I feel like this is what I’ve always been looking for.”

“What? A young, poor widow with an eye for fashion and a dilapidated house?”

“You.”

I was able to keep a straight face for all of three seconds before I burst out laughing. “You’ve been drinking too much.” I turned away again and headed to the bedroom.

“I had as much as you did.”

“Then you’re tired. You’re overworked. You’re… I don’t know… You’re high.”

“I didn’t propose marriage, Dixon. I just told you I loved you because I do. I figure you should know.”

And do what with that information? “Okay, fine. Thank you. Now I know.” I stood in the threshold of the door and waited, but he didn’t move.

“If you don’t feel the same way, that’s fine. I’m in no rush, okay? Just like you, I’m more than happy to take things slow. But a few minutes ago in there you told me you felt something, too. And when I try to find out more, to see what I can tell you, you say you won’t know if you’re ready until you’re in the situation. Well I’m telling you I’m in that situation. And I’m asking you to be in that with me.”
“A situation? You want me to be in a situation with you?”

He smiled a little, obviously embarrassed. “You know what I mean.”

I smiled, too. I wasn’t mad at him. I wasn’t frustrated. Once the initial defensiveness wore off, I could see where he was coming from. I still didn’t believe he knew what the hell he was talking about, but I understood.

“Come here,” I said.

He moved closer to me until his hand was in mine. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Don’t be. Just… this is something I need to figure out on my own. I’m supposed to tell you first, you see?”

“Tell me what first?”

“That I love you. If I love you. I don’t know what I feel right now.”

“And that’s okay,” he said sincerely. “I understand as much as I think I can, but obviously you have some things to work out still before you make any more decisions on this.”

“Exactly.”

He wrapped his arms around me and hugged me close. “I won’t say it anymore,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry if it made you uncomfortable.”

“It’s okay. I wasn’t.”

As he let go, and we walked to the bed, we started picking up the cards and placing them on any nearby flat surface just to keep them from inducing paper cuts throughout the night. Occasionally we would catch each other’s glance and smile sheepishly, and thankfully it wasn’t awkward when we fell asleep beside each other.

I knew, deep down, that a lot of what he said was true. He had a point. But the fact of the matter was that I really, truly, hadn’t even considered a future with another man after Luke. It just wasn’t in the cards for me. I’d dated, I’d fucked, all that. But then Chris came along. Perfect Chris with his blue eyes and his perfect teeth and the way his hands liked to skim up my thighs while we kissed. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

God, I wish he’d been drunk.
I’d never seen so many fucking sofas in my life. I had no idea this was how it goes, ordering furniture. I hadn’t ever done it, unless we’re talking Target clearance or the occasional Ikea table when I could spare the cash. But this place – a place he picked personally in I don’t even know what free time he had – was on a whole other level.

I started by flipping through samples of various materials that were available, then through the colors, patterns, and shapes of couches. It was a never-ending showcase of furniture, and after being here an hour and a half, I think I had finally decided on my couch.

“So that’s a Bridgewater in navy,” the salesman noted. “Wise choice, Mr. Evans.”

“This is her choice, not mine. She’s the one with the good taste.”

“So she’s designing for you?”

I just watched the exchange with a smile.

“It’s her house she’s doing,” he answered back patiently. “I’m just here for moral support or whatever.”

“Oh…” he looked at me, half-surprised, half-disgusted. “Well then I assume you’ll want hire a consultant to assist with the accessorizing?”

“Nope,” I shook my head, looking around. “Already know what I want.”

“Are you sure? Because it took you all morning just to pick a couch.”

“Listen, man,” Chris interrupted. “She knows what she’s doing. She does this for a living.”

The man apologized profusely, but only to Chris. I’d probably have to get used to this if our relationship continued. But then, that wasn’t going to be happening, was it…?

Let’s get off this subject.

“I like that coffee table there,” I said, pointing to something that appealed to me. “Do you have matching end tables?”

“Francois Garibaldi doesn’t do matchy pieces,” he spat, as if I should know. But then if Chris had been telling the truth about my doing this for a living (which in his mind I think he was), I would know that. “The table can easily be paired with any number of selections from our side table collection, but there is no such thing as a matching set.”

“So that table, this sofa, and a couple of side pieces. Do you have anything in pink?”

“Pink?” he almost laughed at me.

“They have those white ones,” Chris pointed out. “We could just paint them pink.”

“We could…”

“You can’t!” the salesman exclaimed dramatically. “Those pieces are French provincial revisions!”
“See, the fact that French provincial had to be revised at all says that it’s a fad that goes in and out.” Chris was smiling, but trying to contain it. It was as if he was trying to give this man a heart attack.

“I’m begging you, please preserve the integrity of the wood,” he pled to us. “Or else there’s a very fine shop down the road that will do for such intentions.”

“You mean Wal-Mart?” I asked.

Chris laughed and walked around until he was in front of me. “How much for the table and the sofa?” he asked.

The salesman didn’t have to check the price. He had all of this memorized.

“Eleven thousand, six-hundred. Plus tax.”

“Shit!” I cried.

“You can afford it,” Chris reminded me. “You can use the floor money you saved, plus the furniture budget you already had.”

“Still leaves me short.”

“How much?”

“About ten grand.”

He laughed and reached inside his jacket pocket.

“Nah, man, fuck that. You’re not paying for this.”

“I don’t mind,” he assured me.

I looked over at the salesman. “How much for just the couch?”

He sighed and thought for a moment. “If I pull a few strings, I could probably let it go for around six thousand.”

“You can buy me the couch,” I told Chris. “But it’s a housewarming gift, not a loan. I’m not paying you that shit back.”

“And the table, too?”

I shook my head. “No, I’ll find something else.”

Chris placed the order while I stepped outside and checked my phone. I had downloaded an app a long time before that one my friend told me about. It tells you where to find all things secondhand, be it antiques, thrift stores, or yard sales. Saturday in the Twin Cities yielded more results than I could have hoped for, so when Chris finally joined me at the car, I was all smiles.

“Get in the car, bitch. We’re going thrifting.”

He walked around the van with a smile on his face, and once we were in, reached over to kiss me. “There’s another place on Main that probably won’t be as snooty…” he suggested kindly.

“There’s also an antique mall called ‘Shepherd’s Inn.’” I answered. “I’ve heard good stuff about it.”
“Antiques? Won’t that be even more expensive?”

“We’re not talking seventeenth century Antiques Roadshow shit,” I explained. “Just, maybe, some cool midcentury stuff, or a coffee table that doesn’t cost as much as a black market kidney.”

He told me about the store setting the delivery date for well after I’d be back from work, so even though I didn’t have a couch now, I would have one by the time I was done with this tour. He explained to me all the ways he thought I should arrange the room, what would look good where, stuff I seriously never thought he’d give two shits about. But then I figured he must have been talking to people, Renner, maybe. His buddies who, as he once told me, do this stuff as a hobby.

“Let’s get lunch,” he said at last. “I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.”

“You’re not starving. You’re just hungry. Until I can see your ribs, you’re not starving.”

“Spoken like a true Catholic,” he laughed.

“It’s my mom that’s Catholic. I just happen to agree with the philosophy.”

He went silent a moment. I just figured he was looking for a restaurant. “I’d like to meet your mom,” he spoke at last.

The fact that he’d like to meet the mother of someone he said he was in love with was no surprise. The fact that he wanted to meet her, and the thought of her actually meeting him, and vice-versa, took me back a little.

“No you don’t,” I smiled.

“I don’t?”

“I love the woman, but no. You don’t.”

“And why don’t I?”

I found one of my semi-usual haunts, a Greek place with amazing gyros. As I pulled into the drive-thru, I looked at him. “Because she’s completely insane and not in the cute way.”

“In what way, then?”

“Gyro?”

“Sure.”

“Sweet peppers?”

“Pepperoncini.”

“Could we get two gyro specials, one with sweet peppers and one with mild, both with Sprites?” I called into the speaker.

“In what way?” He repeated.

As soon as I was given the total and told to pull around, I answered him. “Certifiable,” I said. “Fits of rage followed by fits of joy followed by severe, deep depression like you’ve never seen. Anxiety attacks like the rage of a thousand stormy seas, as my grandpa once put it.”
“So… that’s how you know how to handle me when I get a little… out of hand?”

I reached to the window with my debit card. “You’re nothing compared to Mom.”

“I wanna meet her.”

“Why? You wanna compare ailments? You wanna have a little talk with her about it all? Because my mom is not the type, trust me.”

“No, nothing like that. I just want to meet her, that’s all. You talk about her sometimes and I want to have a face to put with the stories.”

I accepted the food and we drove to a parking space to eat. “I’ll show you a picture, then.”

“So who can I meet, if not your mom?”

“You can meet my cat.”

“Already met Gracie.”

“Then congratulations! You’ve met the family!”

He unwrapped his sandwich with a smile and shook his head. “Fine. But why? They can’t all be too crazy. I mean, you turned out okay. How bad can they be?”

“I’m probably making it into more than it is, in all honesty. But I still don’t want you meeting anyone.”

“Holy shit.”

“What?”

“This is the best thing I have ever put my mouth on.”

I smiled as he ate the sandwich.

“Second best,” he quickly corrected, winking at me. “I’ve had gyros before, but never this good. Fuck, so many people are going to kill me for eating this meal.”

“You’ll die happy.”

I was glad to be off the conversation. He didn’t bring it up anymore as we ate, so when we finally made it all the way to the antique mall, I thought I’d successfully put that behind us.

That is, until we stopped to check out an excellent midcentury kidney-shaped coffee table.

“These scratches are fixable,” I noted aloud, feeling over them with my thumb. “A little sanding, a little stain, good as new.”

“Let’s get it, then!” he smiled. “So why don’t I get to meet anyone? All those siblings and I don’t get to meet anyone?”

I sighed loudly, hoping he would get it. “I just don’t want all the questions. I’ve never had them meet anyone since Luke, and there wasn’t even a formal meeting with him. He was just always sorta… there.”
“Okay,” he shrugged. “Makes sense.”

“And you’re obviously someone they all know. I don’t want to deal with that. And the questions. And the things they’ll say when we go our separate ways.”

“Why are we going our separate ways?”

I looked at the forty-dollar price tag and smiled. “Because you know why. Here, come take this to the counter.”

He picked up the table and followed after me, and after setting it down, continued with me through the store. “You’re so fucking sure about that, aren’t you, Sarah? It’s almost like you want this to be over. Is that what you want?”

He’d raised his voice a little, for the first time showing actual emotion on the subject. “Chris…”

“I tell you I love you, and twelve hours later you’re talking about us splitting up.”

“We can’t be splitting up if we’re not together.”

“In what way are we not together?” He was almost shouting now. I was thankful for the low in-store traffic. “Because I haven’t asked you to go fucking steady with me? Is that what you need? You need the formal asking out shit?”

“A month ago you were all gooey-eyed over someone else. A month before that, there was probably some other chick lined up. And a month before that, and so on.” I moved closer to him, trying to keep my voice low. Trying to urge him to keep his lower, too. “So when I say that I don’t consider us to be a couple and you say you don’t know why, then I encourage you to look at your history. See if it doesn’t tell you exactly why.”

“But you’re different,” he said quietly. “There won’t be anyone in a month, or two months, or three, or years after you. There won’t.”

“And how many of them did you say that to?”

He reached his hand to my hair and brushed it from my cheek. “None of them. And that’s the truth.”

His words were too perfect, too scripted to be believed. He had it all down, right to the fingers-in-the-hair bit that they teach in Shitty Romantic Movie Acting 101. I considered our surroundings. I considered that this was our last full day together. I considered how redundant this was all becoming. Truth be told, I did love him. God, I loved him. But telling him that would give him the satisfaction that I had decided to deny him. Although it did give me cause to stop the arguing.

“If we’re together in a year…” I started, but then paused to reconsider. “Actually, if we’re together in six months from now, I’ll let you meet every single person in my family, every friend, every boss I’ve ever had, and I’ll take you through the neighborhood and introduce you to every neighbor in a four-mile radius.”

He smiled a little too big, then his hand found mine. “So that means we’re together now?”

“If that will get you to do all the heavy lifting for me, I’d be an idiot to say no.”

“Sarah, I’m not going to date you on a dare, even if it is your dare. Is this something you want or not?”
And right there at Shepherd’s Inn, I had to make the decision.

“I do, but…”

He frowned a little, but he hugged me tight. “You know what?” he whispered. “Never mind. This is a bad place to discuss it. I’m sorry.”

“Please don’t be mad at me.”

“How could I be mad at this face?” he laughed, squeezing my chin in his hand. “Come on, let’s find some pink tables for you.”

On the one hand, it was a wonderful feeling to be home that night with new furniture – tables, end tables, even a dining room set, and more. But on the other hand, it was almost painful watching him all day with that smile, convincing to probably most people but never to me. It was in his eyes that I saw the truth. It seemed that perhaps he did actually love me. Want me. Care for me in so many ways. I had believed before that he was just caught up in a moment, or he was lonely, or it was his way of getting back at Greer. But it was those little things he’d do, like holding my hand when we were just standing together, or pointing out everything with elephants on it because he knew they were my favorite. It was in the way he closed his eyes when he kissed me, made me feel beautiful, danced with me in the car when my favorite song came on. He would belt Queen songs at the top of his lungs and ask me to join. He took pictures of me in his phone when he thought I wasn’t looking. He was telling someone about me, I think.

Everything was in the house now except for the couch. It still smelled like fresh paint, but at least it looked like a seasoned home. My TV now had a console to sit on, no exposed wires, comfortable seating around despite the one obvious absence. Some repairs, painting, staining, that sort of thing would need to be done over the coming months. But everything had a place. My list was getting closer and closer to the bottom, and that was both terrifying and exciting.

I hooked up the laptop to the TV and watched Friends reruns with him that night. We went through two bottles of wine and three bags of microwave popcorn. I could see the absent strict diet taking its toll in the bloating of his tummy, which on any other man would of course still be far beyond the average body type. The fireplace gave a new glow to the room in this lighting, these colors. I knew I would never be in this room again without feeling his presence. Without his scent surrounding my thoughts. Without my lips whispering remembrances of these few, perfect days.

It was well past midnight now, and we were probably too drunk to know any better, so we started kissing. They were slow kisses, soft ones. Warm ones. Reminiscent of those first few we’d shared. There was something familiar about them, and I don’t mean in that we’d kissed before because of course we had. There was something here on our lips, something mingled in there with the wine and the salt and the lust. There was a feeling that I know I’d felt before, but not with him. With someone I had long ago pledged to love until I died. Or until he did. And I did.

I’m not saying he reminded me of Luke, but there was that feeling. That love. That unmistakable passion that I could try with everything in me to deny, but I knew I’d never be able to. I felt like I did then. I felt like I’d known him my whole life. It felt like the old days when I still believed in soulmates and fate. It felt like faith. It felt like it was actually meant to happen.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and cried. He held me tighter as if I might run away, and whispered in my ear that everything would be alright. He didn’t tell me not to cry, and in fact assured me that it was good to get it all out. I was overwhelmed with this emotion. I was feeling things that I
thought I’d never feel again, and I was feeling them tenfold. I was reliving the loss I’d suffered, then relishing this new love. I was wishing I believed in us more, wishing I had a reason to. He’d given me every reason to love him, every reason to trust him, but every time I tried to do either, I hated myself. Maybe it was guilt. Maybe it was that I was broken somehow. I don’t know. But I know it hurt when I started crying, but the longer he held me, the more it began to feel like I could never love anyone like him again. Because no one like him exists.

“Please don’t leave,” I whispered back between sharp breaths bookended by tears. “Please, please, don’t leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he assured me. “It’s okay. I’m right here.”

I’d never cried over Luke like this. I’d never let myself. And I wasn’t even sure that’s what I was doing. But I couldn’t tell what else it would be if it wasn’t that. And if I was crying over a man who’d been dead nearly a decade, I had no business letting myself love anyone else.

“It’s… it’s never gonna be the same,” I whimpered.

“What isn’t?”

I moved away from him slowly and wiped away the tears. Mascara was everywhere. I was drunk and overemotional. But I felt like I was saying the right thing.

“I’m never going to be able to love you the same way I loved him.”

He let me go as I moved even further away, and eventually to the kitchen. I needed water.

“I know,” he said, following after me. “I’m not asking you to.”

“You don’t deserve any less than that.”

“The fact that it wouldn’t be the same kind of love doesn’t mean it will be any less.”

I was trying and failing at sorting my thoughts. As he spoke, I found myself just sort of looking at him.

“‘There are all kinds of love in this world but never the same love twice.’”

“Shakespeare?”

“F. Scott Fitzgerald,” he answered.

“So what does that mean to you?”

I was standing at the sink, one hand reaching over to my new breakfast table as I slid into a seat. He stood with his back to the counter, watching me. “It means that it’s none of my business who you’ve loved before me or who you love after me. If you love me, I accept that it’s the right kind of love for us in that moment, and I’ll never compare it to anything else that you or I have ever experienced before.”

“So you think I love you?”

The corner of his mouth was the ghost of a smile. “I think you do, yeah. I just think you feel guilty about it. You’ve all but admitted it.”

“I have nothing to feel guilty about!” I argued defensively. “I know what I’m doing!”
He nodded, his smile growing bigger. “We’re too drunk to talk about this now.”

“Too drunk? You just quoted Shakespeare at me!”

“Fitzgerald.”

“Whatever! We can talk about this now!”

“No we can’t,” he said firmly. “That would be as bad as if I took advantage of you physically. Taking advantage of what you might say or feel right now wouldn’t be okay, and I’m not gonna do it.”

His words may have been a little slurred, and his eyes only half-opened, but he had a firm grip on what he was saying.

“What time do you have to leave tomorrow?” I asked.

“I should probably head to the airport around noon. What time is your flight?”

“Tomorrow night.”

He nodded and sat across from me. “Our first day in the city, we’re doing pre-interviews, and that’s all. We could talk there, where it’s less emotional and less drinking has happened.”

“And what about tonight?”

“Tonight, we sleep,” he said. “We sleep, and we wake up, and it’s a brand new day.”

“You sound like Anne of Green Gables.”

“If I start calling you Marilla, we should quit drinking forever.”

We walked to the bedroom, stripped down to almost nothing, and fell into bed. He kissed my forehead and held me close, and once his eyes were closed and his breathing paced slower, I looked up to him and smiled, admiring his beauty before I spoke.

“I love you, Chris,” I whispered when I could see that he was asleep.

I settled into him, turned around so that he was spooning me, and closed my eyes.

“I love you, too,” he said.
Chapter 20

It was hard for me to sleep, as you might imagine. I knew this wasn’t the last time I’d see him at all, but it was the end of an era. Can four days be considered an era?

I turned to face him as soon as the sunrise provided the light. Slowly I trailed my fingers up his arm and over the curve of his shoulder. His skin was so soft, so warm. I wanted to kiss him even now. I wanted to cry. I wanted to keep him here with me forever, and something – something quiet but furious as it traced over the corners of my mind – told me that he wanted that, too.

I finally left the bed and made my way to the kitchen. Still new. Still fresh. But now with all this gorgeous old furniture and the feelings of home. My little breakfast table sat begging to be had, and once I’d brewed a pot of coffee and poured myself a mug, I acquiesced.

Owatonna isn’t boring. Not to me. Sure, it’s old and outdated and there are neighborhoods like mine where the views lack in the way of content, but it’s a beautiful place. There’s a night sky that rivals most anything I’ve seen in my lifetime, plains and woods and the creatures they bring, the scent – and there is an actual scent – of fresh air. If you want a social life, there is a downtown area, and some of the historical buildings are so gorgeous you’ll never look at architecture the same way again. There are little country churches that are perfect for weddings. There are little league clubs for when the kids come along. It’s the perfect place to raise a family. And it’s my home. It will always be my home.

I could hear his steps approaching from the bedroom, and I sat straight up to see him. His eyes were half-closed and his hair was a mess. He wore his glasses again, too tired just yet to bother putting his contacts in. He’d pulled a sweatshirt over his head and sweatpants on his legs. He was cold. He was tired.

But he was in love with me.

“Hi,” I greeted him. My voice was quiet. Maybe the wine had had more of an effect on him.

He just smiled and sat across from me.

“Sleep well?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Coffee?”

He shook his head.

I reached my hands across and held onto the tips of his fingers, and he looked down at the way they played with each other. He had something on his mind, obviously. He was always quiet before he had a lot to say.

“Are we going to talk about it?” he asked humbly.

“About what?”

He looked up at me. “The big-ass elephant in the room.”

“Cat’s out of the bag,” I shrugged. “So I love you. So you know it. So what?”
“I want this,” he said, repeating a phrase he’d been using a lot. “I want to be with you. I want it official, and I want it for as long as you’ll have me.”

“Two weeks,” I said, almost interrupting him. “That’s how long we’ve been together.”

“And what’s your point?”

“My point is,” I paused then. What was my point? “It’s not enough time. Not when it’s two people with all kinds of issues like us. We need to take this slow.”

“So let’s take it slow.”

“No, I mean we need to take it slow. Really slow. Like… Like, maybe we don’t make it official, we stop with the mushy stuff, no more sex. Maybe we should make sure that we really know each other before we go making commitments.”

He nodded, then stood to move to the cabinet in search for a mug.

“I think you can understand why I say that,” I said.

He couldn’t find a mug, but found a Styrofoam cup and decided that would do. “Yeah, but Sarah, you never let yourself have anything. You don’t. And I’m a little worried that’s going to happen here. You’re going to decide you do want a relationship, but you’re not going to have one because you don’t do nice things for yourself.”

“Since when don’t I do nice things for myself?” I asked defensively.

“All the offers I gave to pay for things, to help you buy things, to use my credit cards…”

“Because I don’t want to owe you anything!”

“You really think I’m the type of person who would hold that stuff over your head?”

“I don’t know! Because I don’t know enough about you yet!”

“Gut feeling, though,” he said, pouring his coffee. “When I tell you I love you, do you believe me?”

I didn’t answer.

“Do you believe me?” he repeated.

“Yes,” I admitted.

“And when I say I want to be with you, that I see us being a thing for a long time, what do you think?”

“I think you probably mean it,” I said.

“So when I tell you you wouldn’t owe me anything by accepting a few gifts, do you believe me?”

“Money’s different than feelings,” I said. “Money’s more personal.”

He laughed a little and sat back across from me. At least he had a sense of humor about it.

“You laugh, but it’s true,” I said. Good. Things were starting to lighten up.

“We’re not talking about it until tomorrow when we’re in the city together, right?” he asked. “Isn’t
that what we decided?”

“Yes it is,” I smiled. “And I think it’s a good plan.”

“So what do we do between now and noon, when I have to go?”

The thought was almost depressing. “Pack?”

“Done,” he said. “Well, almost done. Just the last minute stuff is left.”

“Then I don’t know. What do you want to do for the next five hours?”

He twirled the cup around in circles, looking down at it. “I’ve got a few ideas. I’m sure you can use your imagination.”

“I’m sure I can,” I said.

Suddenly he stood from his seat and leaned across the table, his hands on the back of my neck suddenly as he kissed me. The coffee had spilled, his glasses were poking against my face, and I could hardly breathe from the contact, but none of that mattered. I reached for his glasses and pulled them away, tossing them onto the table, into the coffee, my hands now on his body, pulling at his clothes to urge him to take me elsewhere.

He left the seat and came closer to me, our lips never leaving each other’s even as he took me from my seat and hoisted my into his arms. I wrapped my legs around his body, finally managed to remove his hoody, and tasted the coffee on his tongue while he set me on the counter. When I was on a solid surface, his hands pulled down my pajama bottoms, then his sweatpants. Still kissing, he moved my ass closer to him until I felt his tip against me. From there, I guided him inside me as quickly as I could.

He slammed his body into me roughly, the fingers of one hand entwined in my hair while I felt the moaning of his pleasure on my mouth. I begged him to fuck me harder, faster, not to stop, to make me scream…

And then his arm pulled me back onto his body, and we fell to the kitchen floor before he could walk me to the living room chair, which I’m sure is where he was headed. The misstep didn’t halt us, and he absolutely pummeled me with his body. I’d have bruises on my back to show for this tomorrow, and the thought had me even more aroused than before. I would wear something backless, I decided, so that everyone could see. So what if they didn’t know how the marks got there? I did.

The pain on my back and the pleasure inside me had my body so overwhelmed with sensation that I couldn’t control myself any longer. I shouted his name in sweet agony, cursed like even I didn’t think I was capable, and made an absolute mess of the floor under us. When I opened my eyes, the look of pride in his face at what he’d made me do was nothing short of pure porn, and within moments I was coming again. Nothing had ever felt like this. Nothing had ever been so spontaneous, so lustful in nature. I never knew that I liked this sort of thing until now.

I rolled him to his back just then and held his arms to steady my aching body while I rode him. My movements were probably a little more choppy than I would typically be, but it didn’t seem to matter to him. He watched my body move over him and told me over and over again how fucking beautiful I was, how fucking good I felt, not to fucking stop. I wanted him to curse more, be dirtier, grittier, less reserved. I wanted more of this animalistic side of his that I knew was hiding behind the polite love-maker he prided himself as. Don’t get me wrong – I loved that tender side of him. But this… This was what I’d wanted since the first time he actually remembered my name on his own.
I could feel him growing closer to his finish. By now, I’d gotten to know his body just well enough to recognize the way his body worked. As soon as he closed his eyes and leaned his head back, I leaned over him, kissing his mouth as it let out a long, relieved sigh of ecstasy.

After he finished, his hands returned to my face, holding it gently, kissing me, allowing me to coax him down from his high. There we lay, two half-dressed, post-coital bodies in a swath of our own sweat and lust, as we waited to regain our speech. His chest heaved up and down, his eyes still closed while I looked at him. The things he could do to me, I thought, should be illegal.

“Still four hours and thirty-seven minutes left,” I laughed at last.

He smiled, opened his eyes, and looked at me. “Give me fifteen minutes and a glass of water.”

I assumed he was joking.

We got up from the floor, cleaned up the various and sundry messes we’d made through the kitchen, and then trudged to the shower to clean ourselves. We stripped down and stepped in, and after the usual routine when I thought we were done, I pulled back the curtain to step out.

But I felt his hand on my arm, and he pulled me back close.

“Come here,” he said, pinning my body against the wall.

He kissed me again, and this one was long and tender. How sweet to have him show this loving gesture. How sweet that his hand is around my body.

How sweet that his other is between my thighs…

His hand rubbed against me softly, and he opened his eyes, looking into mine for approval.

“I wanna taste you,” he whispered against my ear.

I nodded, widening my legs a little as he fell to his knees.

He kissed my legs, inside my thighs and upward until he reached my lips. Water ran over us, and the image of all those times we’d enjoyed this sort of time together flooded my mind. It had been in a shower that I showed him how I liked to be touched. He showed me how he liked it, too. I wanted to touch him again. I was growing impatient.

But disturbing my thoughts came the feeling of his tongue over me, teasing my inner lips and circling my clit over and over as the sensation built inside me. His fingers rested on my hips, and for some goddamn reason all I could think was that my hips were too big and he must hate them. But how could he hate them? There he was, down there hanging out with them. He was well-acquainted with them. He was fast becoming their best friend. And so I rid myself of that insecurity for the moment and focused on the way his lips were sucking at me now, and the fact that the only warmth in here now that the hot water was almost out was located where his mouth was making music on me.

I was so close, even to the point of having my hand in his hair and my other hand against the wall to steady me. He was going at it now, eating me with that ferocity I’d fallen in love with just a few minutes before, but I couldn’t come. I just couldn’t.

It felt good. I didn’t want him to stop. There was nothing wrong with how he was doing it, but my mind was racing too fast. He’d been down there for a while now, and I was worried he would end up getting lockjaw from this.
“Stop,” I told him carefully. “It’s not working.”

He looked up at me, his eyes full of worry. “What am I doing?”

“Nothing. Nothing wrong, I mean. It’s me.”

He stood up and hugged me close. I was embarrassed, and he was too, probably. But then I had an idea.

“Take me to the bed,” I told him.

We stepped out and fell into the bed dripping wet. I asked him to crawl over my body and kiss me for a while, and he did. I asked him to touch me all over my body, and he did. I asked him to tell me he loved me, and he did.

I gripped his hand and placed it back between my legs. “Play with me for a while,” I smiled. “Then try again.”

He traced his fingers between me, fondled familiar paths on my body and pressed the palm of his hand against my pubic bone as he kissed me again. Opening my legs wide, I begged him to put his fingers inside me, and when he did I knew I was ready to try again. But he pumped his fingers inside me only more, two, then three, faster and harder, digits curved upwards against me until, I suppose, I made the telltale signs too. At this, he placed his mouth on me, and it was the touch of just his lips that made me come. And there he was, so proud of himself for finishing the job he started.

By now, we were both out of energy. Understandable.

He slipped my hand into his and held me close. “Is there time for a nap?”

I looked at the clock on the nightstand. “Three and a half hours.”

He sighed and the way it felt against my neck was divine. “Hardly worth it, then.”

When we’d cleaned up after the kitchen incident, I’d brought his glasses back to the bedroom and set them on the dresser. When I saw him looking at them, I stood and left the bed to bring them to him, then searched around my drawers for something to wear. After all, this was autumn in Minnesota. The naked-in-bed thing is only cute until the frostbite sets in.

When I got back to the bed, he was relaxed there reading the book I’d had on the table beside him: The Tough Girl’s Guide to Depression. It was a book I’d bought almost a year ago at a thrift store. Far be it for me to actually seek out a book of this nature, but for twenty-five cents at the book sale, I figured that the worst thing that could happen from it was equivalent to one of the many times I’ve lost a quarter down the sewer drain.

“It’s just some crap I read to put me to sleep,” I commented. “I’m fine.”

He didn’t look at me, still naked and bespectacled as he read and commented, “Course you are.”

“You can keep it if you want,” I told him. I was half-joking, but not completely. With that book gone I would have other, more important things to focus on. And truth be told, I’d almost forgotten it was there. This whole week I’d just had it sitting there in case the visit went badly and I’d need a sleep aid.

“But I’m not a tough girl,” he answered.
“Let’s go get breakfast,” I told him, reaching into his suitcase for a pair of jeans and a shirt, then tossing them on top of him. “I’m hungry.”

“How about IHOP? There’s one right across the street from the hardware store.”

“Okay,” he nodded. “One sec…”

But I didn’t want him reading the book, seeing the parts I’d marked, reading about the signs of depression and recognizing them in me if they showed. I just wanted pancakes.

“Please put the book down,” I told him. “Please. Let’s go.”

He set it down and said nothing. I was worried he was gearing up for a speech, but apparently not. He dressed and walked toward me, kissing my cheek as he took my hand and headed for the door.

On the way into town, we talked about movies, about food, about hobbies. It was small talk, but the good kind. He didn’t talk to me about the book, didn’t bring up any of the many unfortunate subjects that he could have and, to be honest, that I was sure he would have. I had prepared myself to brush it all off, and to convince him thoroughly that I was not depressed. But though I had prepared to convince him, I had yet to convince myself.

We finished our meal, waddling out of the restaurant full of pancakes and, again, surprised not to have been noticed. Once inside and on our way, he looked over at me and I could feel his stare. I think it was the silence of it that made it so searing.

“What?” I asked.

“I’m gonna miss that face,” he sighed.

“And that’s all you’re gonna miss? I’m disappointed in the impression I made on you.”

He laughed a little, but he reached his hand over the center console and onto my thigh. “Oh trust me, I’m gonna miss a lot more. But that face… that’s gonna be tough.”

“It’s only ‘til tomorrow morning,” I giggled. “I catch my flight later and I’ll see you before lunch to set up your wardrobe.”

“But that’s, what? Almost twenty-four hours after I board before I see you again? Do you have any idea how many times we could fuck in that twenty-four hours?” His hand was sliding higher.

“I’m starting to understand,” I answered frankly. “Are you going for a world record today or something?”

By now we were on a long stretch of road just off the highway. We were still about three miles from home, but only barely within the confines of Middle-of-Nowhere-land.

“Pull over,” he said.

“What?”

“Pull over. Pull over… there. There’s nothing there.”

“This is the Miller’s property, even if it may not look like it belongs to anyone. They’re good friends and I don’t want to ruin that friendship.”
“How much time do we have?”

“Two hours exactly.”

“Pull over.”

“Chris…”

“Fine. You find a place.”

His grip on my leg was firm and longing, and I was exhausted just thinking about what he wanted to put me through. But would I find it to be worth it? Of course.

Fuck it.

I pulled down a hunter’s trail just on the edge of the Miller’s property. The gravel path was meant for nothing bigger than a four-wheeler, but as it had been a while since the last rain, I figured I would easily make it in and out of the area in the van.

He was already in the back seat before I put the car in park. “Come on,” he coaxed me playfully when I looked back at him in the mirror. “We’ve gotta be fast, right?”

I took one last look around before I unbuckled my seatbelt. “Fine. But very quick, okay?”

He reached for the button of my jeans immediately, but I pushed him back into the seat and crawled on top of him.

“I think it’s your turn,” I told him.

He’d taken good care of me earlier. With effort, he probably could have made me come again, but we didn’t have time for effort.

He pulled me into a kiss as I tried to balance myself on his body, both of my hands undoing his belt and fly. He jerked and pulled his body into position to try and help me, but even in a minivan, we didn’t have a ton of room to work with. I kept bumping my foot against the window and popping it open, he kept reaching up and switching the lock on, my head hit the ceiling at least four times. But despite the laughter, the bumps, the ungraceful approach to my oral sex techniques, at last I was kissing his cock and he was propped up against the door watching me.

I realized at some point that even though blow jobs had been a sort of means to an end before for me, I actually enjoyed it with him. He didn’t face-fuck me, pull my hair too hard, or push my head down when I took a break for air. He watched me and admired, relaxed into it and enjoyed it. Every sensation showed in his eyes, in the way they crinkled and sparkled, in the way his mouth opened a little to gasp when I took him in especially deep. In this particular moment I wanted to take it slow and really show off my skills, but we were on the Miller property, and as a devout Mennonite family, they probably wouldn’t appreciate this sort of tomfoolery taking place on their land.

As I moved faster and faster, trying to get him to come quickly so we could go, he reached down and tugged at my shirt collar. He watched my tits bouncing over him, and my mind immediately went to wondering whether they were too floppy or droopy or if they looked weird at this angle. He reached his hand down my shirt and cupped them one at a time, and I wondered if they felt weird or saggy or old. And then he let go and moved his hand up to my cheek while I stopped to breathe. My hand moving on him during the pause.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous,” he said.
If I’m so fucking gorgeous why haven’t you jizzed already?

But I didn’t answer out loud, and I pumped his dick and looked him in the eyes the entire time.

“Don’t stop…” he told me, and he was so loud that I worried someone nearby might be able to hear us.

“Come for me,” I begged him quietly before I put my mouth back on him.

My plea was answered quickly as he shot into my hand, cum dripping from my hair before I realized where it was headed. I’m usually so good at judging these things, but this time I was a bit distracted.

He didn’t have time to sing his usual after-sex praises before I hopped back up front, started the car, and headed off of their property. He lay in the back, his pants still around his thighs, exhausted expression on his face even while we pulled out of the pathway.

“We have time to get your luggage and head back up,” I told him. “Need me to grab it for you?”

“I can get it,” he said. “Do you want me to just run in? I can lock up for you.”

“Yeah, you can run in, but there’s no need to lock up. I’ll be right back. Besides, I don’t think I’ve locked my door once since I’ve lived here.”

“Must be nice,” he hummed.

I watched the mirror and wanted to make sure he was decent before I headed toward the main road.

“What do you mean?”

“Living in an area where you don’t have to lock the front door when you leave. It must be nice.”

“It is,” I said. I guess I’d always taken it for granted. “Back to normal?”

“Can a guy catch his breath?” he asked me with a laugh.

“Not until I know I’m not going to get cursed for pleasuring you.”

“Cursed?”

I shook it off. The Miller “curses” were an inside joke from long ago, and I simply didn’t have time to tell him the whole story now. “Zip up and get up here.”

I sat in the makeshift driveway while he arranged himself. But while I was looking at him lying there along the seat waiting for a somehow more opportune time to make himself presentable, I heard a rap on the window of the van.

I looked beside me to see Tim, the middle child of the seven Miller children, twelve years old and in love with me since his life began. His blonde hair blinded me before his smile could, and I was thankful that he hadn’t hit puberty yet. A growth spurt would have made him just tall enough to easily see into the back seat.

“Oh… hi, Timmy!” I said. I could hear Chris shuffling as I rolled my window down.

“Hi, Mrs. Parker,” he giggled. “What’re you doing here?”

I stuttered through my response. “Oh, uh… Well. I thought I saw a turkey, and I wondered if it was one of your turkeys that had gotten loose from its pen, and I thought I would try and chase it back.”
“Mother was going to go to your place today with a pie she made for Mrs. Anderson,” he said. “We took the pie to congregation this morning, but she wasn’t there.”

“Sounds yummy!” I told him. “But tell her to wait, will you? I have some errands to run in town and I might be gone for a while.”

“Why don’t you come up to the house, Mrs. Parker? I’m sure Mother would appreciate that.”

I knew that Chris had to be decent by now, but he hadn’t hopped up front with me. I glanced back, and he was hiding on the floor of the back seat.

“I will stop by there after my next stop, I promise. Alright?”

Tim twisted his thumb through a belt loop on his jeans and continued smiling up at me. If he wasn’t a child it would have been a lot creepier. “Okay. I’ll let her know.”

I slowly but surely got out of the drive and headed back toward my home. As soon as we had left Tim’s sight, I let Chris know he was safe to join me again.

“Kid’s got a crush, huh?” he teased. “Adorable.”

“You’re not the only one with fans,” I smiled. “And by the way, that’s the exact reason I don’t like fooling around in the car.”

“You’ve got to live a little,” he said. “The risk is worth it!”

“I don’t want twelve-year-olds catching me in a compromising position. Had he shown up five minutes earlier, this could have been much worse!”

“Oh course,” he insisted, “Obviously. But I mean, sometimes you just… you see the person you love, and you just… you need to have each other right where you are.”

“That’s lust, not love.”

“Can’t it be both? I run out of words to describe how I feel and all that’s left is actions?”

“If you’ve already run out of words by this point, I’m not too optimistic for our future.”

“Call it a momentary lapse in articulatory skill.”

“You with your fancy-schmancy ten-dollar words…”

We were pulling into my garage now. “How much longer?” he asked.

“One hour, thirty-four minutes.”

“Fuck, I’m gonna be rushing. Okay… I’ll run in,” he said. “Need anything from inside?”

“No. Make sure you get everything, though. I’m not turning around.”

“If I forget anything, you can bring it when you get there.”

“Just hurry up.”

He ran inside and was back in the car in less than two minutes. On the way up to the airport, he mostly held my hand and closed his eyes while he leaned his head back on the seat. I’m not gonna lie
– I sped. I sped a lot. I broke every speed limit on the way up, and I zipped around cars in illegal ways, but I got him to the airport with thirteen minutes to spare.

I had to wake him when we arrived, and then I assisted with his luggage for as far as I could.

“Well,” I sighed. “This week was… productive.”

“This week was probably the best I’ve had… ever. Seriously. I had an amazing time.”

“You should come here more often.”

“Why do I have a feeling I probably will?” he smiled.

Somehow it didn’t make sense to kiss him right now. I wanted to, of course, but I knew I’d be seeing him soon. Very soon. It wasn’t a parting of ways, exactly, and my emotions were surprisingly under control. I hugged him tightly, though. And I stayed there with my arms around him for as long as I could.

“Hey, um… Sarah?”

I let go of him and looked into his eyes. “Hm?”

“If you ever want to talk, please talk to me.”

“I do talk to you.”

“I know, but… But if you ever have a bad day. You know. A really bad day.”

That fucking book.

“I’m fine,” I told him.

“Of course you are.” He was obviously humoring me. “But if that ever changes, even if you’re just lonely. Or if you need to talk at all, seriously I’m right here for–”

“I know,” I interrupted, kissing his cheek. “Thank you.”

He smiled, seemingly satisfied with my answer. “Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes you will.”

“I love you.”

My heart stopped for a moment. It felt like the first time I’d ever heard those words.

“I love you, too.”

He headed back his way, and once I’d watched him until he was out of sight, I went back to my car. He wasn’t the first man to offer to be the ear that would listen, but it was the first time that I felt like a man actually meant that. It was a pleasant feeling.

I was just outside when my phone rang, and it was him.

“What now?” I answered. “I thought I got rid of you.”

“I fucking miss you,” he said. “I saw you three seconds ago and already I fucking miss you.”
“I fucking miss you, too,” I laughed. “Now go away.”

“Is Parker your married name?”

Why would he ask me this now? “Technically it’s still my legal name,” I answered. “I changed it when I got married and I never saw the sense in changing it back.”

“So why are you going by Dixon?”

I opened the door and sat inside the van before I answered. “Because I needed the change. Also, there’s already a Sarah Parker in Hollywood.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Why?”

“Curious,” he answered. “That’s all.”

“No, I mean why are you asking me this now?”

“Oh. Well… because I asked you enough uncomfortable questions today. I wanted to save this one.”

“Save it for what? For three minutes after I’d dropped you off?”

He laughed a little. “It’s ridiculous, isn’t it?”

“No,” I told him. “Okay, maybe. But you know I don’t mind, right?”

“I know,” he said. “And I’m glad.”

We were just talking for the sake of talking now. I didn’t have anything else to say. I told him so.

“Just stay until I have to turn my phone off, okay?”

I set the speakerphone on and set the phone in my lap. “Okay.”

For a very long three-hour drive back home (a trip that shouldn’t have been more than two hours, honestly) he described every person he saw in the terminal, and then on the plane. He told me about strange smells and unusual sounds people were making. He complained about the heat being up too high. He sang Sweet Caroline under his breath while everyone was boarding. And finally he said goodbye and ended the call. I didn’t really see the point of the call until I got home and looked around and realized he wasn’t there.

I found his glasses on my bed when I finally went back there, and I knew he’d left them on purpose. Even if I hadn’t known, when I picked them up, I saw the note he’d left behind.

Now you have at least one reason to see me tomorrow. Come by my room and I’ll give you another.

-Me

Having someone to talk to when the bad days do happen is very important. This was not news to me. The news was that the someone I wanted was him. The news was that he wanted to be that
someone. The news was that I knew that someday it might not be news anymore. It might be habit. And that news was equal parts remarkable and terrifying.
Chapter 21

I happen to know a lot of people personally to whom I could have gone for advice on my relationship. I could have gone to my mother, my old boss Gloria, any of my siblings, or even Mrs. Miller. I could have asked Alex what he thought, but then again, he would probably end up just telling me anyway whether or not I was interested in hearing. I thought about my feelings on the subject of our relationship, and sometimes I knew that I was being absolutely childish.

You only live once, isn’t that how it goes? When else would I get the chance to date a man this amazing, this beautiful, this good? On the other hand, would the love we exchanged and the feelings that grew between us be worth the inevitable heartbreak when he eventually broke up with me?

These were the thoughts in my mind for three hours in the air.

Finally, I found myself at JFK, people rudely bustling around me as I quickly remembered the atmosphere here. Going from Owatonna to New York in that short a time is an absolute culture shock. People walk where they’re not supposed to walk, smoke where they’re not supposed to smoke, pee where they’re not supposed to pee – you get the picture. I mean, I love me a good city, but I wasn’t in the mood for this right now. It had been a hell of a week, emotionally.

I found the driver that was waiting for me and made my way to the limo that would escort me from the airport. A limo wasn’t the usual ride, but GMA insisted on providing luxury transportation and accommodations for all of us. It was a nice touch, but when the driver opened the door for me, I couldn’t help but find myself disappointed. I don’t know why, but I’d half-expected Chris to be back there waiting for me.

It must have taken us thirty minutes just to get out of the airport property, and then at least another thirty to the hotel. It was three in the morning, and I was tired, sad, almost crying at the thought that this was our last gig together. I mean, this was actually it. All of the relationship bullshit that I’d pretended to believe would last would be proven after these three days. The thought made me sick.

The hotel suite was nicer than anything I’d stayed in on this trip. Or… ever, actually. First of all, it was a suite. The kind that Chris and Greer had been staying in at our other locations. Second, it had views of the city that made my head spin. Gold leafing in the décor, fancy sheets, heated towels, plush robes, complimentary room service (all orders to be charged to Good Morning America). It was heaven. I guess if I was going out, I was going out in style.

On my pillow, I found the itinerary for the stay, and noted that Chris would have one pre-taped interview the following evening. Awesome. So our little talk we had scheduled for the next day would be pretty much impossible. Just one last disappointment before I fell into the bed, face first into my pillow, and fell asleep.

…

He was in his room when I arrived earlier than I’d told him I would. I think I had said noon, or lunch, or something like that. But around nine-thirty, I was at his door, three outfits in hand, and knocking as I tried to hold back tears.

Chris answered with an impish smile on his face and let me in with a cheery good-morning greeting. He must have noticed I was down, but his attitude was upbeat all through my process of placing the clothes in his closet and explaining which ones were for which days.
“And the cardigan is for tonight,” I ended. “With the dark jeans and white t-shirt.”

“I have something to tell you,” he beamed. He still hadn’t touched me. Things were already digressing.

“What?” I asked.

“We’re getting a party on Wednesday!” he said. It seemed he could barely contain it. “It’s gonna be a big deal. We’re getting all suited up and going to the Trump and having this big shindig in honor of the US premier.”

I looked at him after that, expecting more.

“Well you’re my date, obviously,” he concluded. “Which means you get to go shopping and buy yourself anything you want. Unlimited budget!”

“And what do you wear? Do I have to find that, too?”

“Nah, they’ve already provided a tux. I’ll be taken care of. That night is your night, too, okay? You get to doll up and drink and relax along with everyone else, isn’t that awesome?”

“Why are you talking to me like I’m a fifties trophy wife?”

“Am I? Sorry…” his excitement lessened, which was fine by me. “I just thought you’d be as excited about this as I am.”

“Why are you excited? You hate parties.”

“Because this tour is finally over!” he said with a laugh. “You and I can just spend the evening together as a couple and not worry about our obligations.”

“I assume there will be press there?”

“Nothing that I have to worry about.”

“Photographers?”

He thought for a moment. “Probably. Why?”

“Chris, you know you can’t take me to that.”

He sat on the edge of the chaise lounge in his sitting room and looked up at me, disappointed.

“What? Why not?”

“Greer,” I answered. “Greer is every reason why not.”

He sighed and seemed annoyed by my response. “I told you, it’s over with her. She was just a fling.”

“I’m not even talking about that,” I told him.

In a sense, that was true. Not in the sense of my constantly thinking about the two of them of course, but in this context, I was telling the truth.

“You just released a movie with her. You two were a confirmed couple in the press… and I’m no expert, but even I know that once a couple is confirmed in Us Weekly, it’s Hollywood official. If you don’t go with her, you’ll have all kinds of questions about the two of you, which will lead to
questions about whether or not the two of you got along during filming, which will lead to people
assuming you’ll have no chemistry in the film. That’s how these things work.”

He looked away. He said nothing.

“And that’s just if you don’t go with her,” I continued. “You bring along some other floozy, and then
there’ll be stories about you cheating on her, what an asshole you are, how no one should support the
movie because the directors and producers couldn’t even keep the cast out of each other’s
bedrooms!”

“Okay, okay!” he blurted. “I get it. I just thought…”

I waited for him to finish his thought. “What did you think, Chris?’”

“I thought it would be nice to have you there. To… you know…”

“To what? Say it.”

He looked at me and shook his head. “To show you off.”

“I didn’t get me, Chris. You haven’t won me, and I’m not yours.”

I turned away from him and headed to the door. I could hear him following after me, and when he
gripped my forearm, I turned to face him.

“You know what I’m saying,” he said calmly. “Don’t make my words into something they’re not
just because you’re looking for an excuse to dump me.”

I pulled my arm away, which didn’t take much effort, and I headed out the door. At first I thought I’d
go down to my room and cry for a while, but I made it the length of about ten feet before I realized
what an idiot I was being.

But, you know, pride.

Instead of marching away like I wanted to, I walked slowly, regretting every step away from him that
I took. I reached the elevator and took one last look toward his door. I don’t know why.

I took out my phone and scrolled to his number. I looked to his door again as I pressed send.

“Dude…”

I smiled at his answer. “Okay, yeah. I overreacted.”

“Come back here and talk to me.”

“Do you really think I’m looking for an excuse to dump you?” I asked him.

He was silent for a moment. “Obviously you’re not crazy about the idea of being with me.”

“And what makes you think that? The ‘I-love-yous’? The crazy coffee-covered sex?” I stopped
speaking as an elderly lady stepped off the elevator, and I hoped she hadn’t heard me.
“You just seem to have a lot of excuses for why we shouldn’t be together, and yet you insist you want us to be. I’m just confused.”

“So am I,” I told him softly. “Trust me.” I sank to the floor and sat there beside the first elevator, my eyes on Chris’s door. It was easier talking to him this way right now.

“Will you come with me?” he asked. “Please?”

“Your people are going to have a problem with that. I promise you.”

“I don’t care. I want to be with you.”

“But you don’t belong with me.”

“Why? What makes you say that? Give me one good reason.”

“This is your movie. Yours and Greer’s. You should be with her.”

“So I’m not allowed to be with anyone but her? If I was dating someone else, would I not belong with them, either?”

“If that someone else was someone you’d literally just met, yes. It would be too soon to be going around with anyone else.”

I could hear his breath against the phone. “We need to talk about us, you know?”

“I know.”

“We should probably do it now.”

“Probably.”

“Well I know my stance on the subject.”

I laughed. “And what is that?”

“That you and I should be a couple.”

“And what does that mean to you?”

“It means we go out on dates, on trips, meet each other’s families. We love each other.”

“And what does that mean?” I asked him.

“What does what mean? Love?”

I nodded.

“It’s different for everyone, I think. There’s no single kind of love.”

“Enough with the philosophy, Evans. What do you mean when you say you love me?”

“I don’t think I can sum it up like that, but…” he paused. “It started when all these little things kept reminding me of you. You know, all this piddly shit that shouldn’t mean anything, but it did.”

I smiled at the thought. “Like what?”
“Coffee,” he said without hesitation. “Are you aware that you actually smell like coffee? Maybe it’s your hair or something, I don’t know. But you smell like coffee. I noticed that the first time I met you. And then before I knew it, I would smell coffee and suddenly I’d think of you.”

The news of my scent was startling enough to make it so that I couldn’t remember to remind him that thinking of someone isn’t love.

“Then it got to where I would go places, and I’d be doing something, and in the middle of it, I’d think, ‘You know what would make this better? Sarah being here.’”

“That’s a crush at best,” I told him.

“Ah, but then…” he started dramatically, “Things got more intense. I’d be talking to you and I’d sort of… I don’t know… lose myself. I’d picture the two of us doing something completely unrelated to what we were doing in that moment. Like when we were at that Parisian street café just talking, and all I wanted to do was take you home and watch bad horror movies. You seemed like you’d be down for that.”

I was still listening to him, but I bowed my head in my hand and let myself cry just a little.

“Or this one time you were fixing my tie, and I looked in your eyes and I saw us together. I saw us happy, you know? I mean, yeah I was picturing you naked and bent over a chair getting spanked like the filthy girl you are, but…” he chuckled, “… but also I saw us holding hands, walking the boardwalk at dusk, laughing at all the drunk little Guidos.”

“You’re not from Jersey.”

“I still enjoy laughing at drunk people who make fools of themselves. Doesn’t matter where you’re from, that shit’s fun.”

I sniffled, wiped some snot on my sleeve and then hated myself for that.

“But why me?” I asked. “Why not someone who can put up with you a little better than I can? Someone with a better understanding of your lifestyle?”

“My lifestyle?”

“Yeah, you know. Your schedule, your people, your life. Someone who isn’t an idiot and actually accepts your money.”

“Maybe I’ve got a weakness for brown eyes,” he said.

“Seriously.”

“Seriously. There’s something about you, Sarah. I can’t shake you, and I don’t want to.”

The elevator opened again, and this time it was Matt. He looked down at me, tray of coffee in hand and a curious look in his eye.

“Hey, um… I have to go,” I said. “I’m sorry. And I’m sorry about the way I acted, I’m just going through some stuff.”

“Come by tonight,” he said. “I’ll leave a key at the desk for you.”

“Okay.” I looked at Matt as I stood. “Later.”
As I ended the call and wiped away tears, Matt’s face seemed, for the first time, concerned.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

I widened my eyes in surprise that he should express any interest at all.

“No. I don’t know.”

“Was that him you were talking to?” he gestured toward Chris’s door.

I nodded.

“You know he’s in there, right? You could just knock.”

Matt and I take our coffee the same way, so I grabbed his cup marked with extra cream and no sugar and helped myself to a gulp. It burned. I loved it.

“No, no, why don’t you just keep that…”

“Sorry,” I told him. “I’m a mess.”

“Things didn’t go well in Podunk, huh?”

I smiled. “No, they went well. They went very well, actually. That’s the problem.”

There wasn’t much I liked about Matt, but one thing I admired was that he could tell a situation from just a few key words and an angsty glare. I delivered on both ends, and he reached a hand sympathetically to my shoulder and squeezed.

“Do you need me to talk some sense into him?”

“No,” I smiled. “It’s fine. Just one of those days.”

He nodded and left for Chris’s room without another word. I stepped in the elevator and went down two stories to my floor. No matter what my stature, I would always be below Chris. That was just the facts. I would never understand his life and he’d never understand mine. I’d never be a Hollywood person, and he’d never be a country person. Not for life. And when it comes down to it, one of us would have to compromise if we were to be together for any considerable length of time. He couldn’t compromise – not with his job. And I wouldn’t. Not with my memories.

The day passed slowly but surely, and George Stephanopoulos was there and back again as I watched from my window the vans and cars and news teams in the building. When I was sure everyone was gone, I left for the front desk, received the key Chris reserved for me, and headed to his room. I let myself in, and there he sat at the desk, laptop open as he squinted at the screen.

“Hey,” I called.

He turned around and smiled when he saw me. But he wasn’t as aggressive as usual.

“Hey.”

“I brought your glasses,” I told him, and I walked closer to him, knelt in front of him, and placed them on his face.

He looked down at me, still smiling. “Thanks.”
My hand stayed on his temple for a moment, rubbing over the scruff of his sideburn while I looked into his eyes. “I love you, Chris.”

“I love you too, Sarah,” he said.

“I’m sorry I’m dumb sometimes.”

“Same here.”

“Two more days, huh? That’s it?”

He nodded, crouching closer into my touch and pulling the tie from my hair carefully.

“Yes. Two more.”

“I… want you to go to that party without me, okay?” I told him. “Even if you don’t agree with my reasons, I want you to respect them and trust me. Go. You’ll have a perfectly good time without me.”

He set his lips to mine and kissed me softly. “Okay.”

“You have to leave here at three in the morning. I might as well stay.”

He smiled, then pressed that smile against my lips again.

“And then tomorrow afternoon…” I kissed him. “Fallon…”

“Yes, baby, keep talking about Fallon while I kiss you.”

I pulled away from him and stood just long enough to pull him up close to me and toward the bedroom.

“Come on, Sport. Give me a reason to stay, huh? Just like you promised in that little note you left for me.” I crawled into the bed and propped myself on my knees, holding onto his hands with mine as he stood at the edge, just looking at me. “What? What’s wrong?”

He shook his head. “Nothing’s wrong. I just… I really don’t think you get it, do you?”

My eyes widened. Either we were about to fight, or he was about to say something really sappy. Both could very well ruin the moment for me.

“What don’t I get?” I asked.

“I don’t want anyone else. I don’t think anyone else even competes with you. You’re just,” he stopped, kissed me again, and then wrapped his arms around me. “You’re so beautiful. You’re so, so beautiful.”

My arms found their way around him too, and I closed my eyes as I leaned my head on his shoulder. “Am I?” I think I’m pretty, sure. But pretty enough for him to say these things?

“What? What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I don’t want anyone else. I don’t think anyone else even competes with you. You’re just,” he stopped, kissed me again, and then wrapped his arms around me. “You’re so beautiful. You’re so, so beautiful.”

My arms found their way around him too, and I closed my eyes as I leaned my head on his shoulder. “Am I?” I think I’m pretty, sure. But pretty enough for him to say these things?

“Look at you,” he said. “You’ve got everything. You’re my dream, you know that?”

“Your dream?”

He backed away from me and looked into my eyes. I’d never felt this sort of thing before.

“I would take you away right now,” he said. “I would take you as far as I could get you, find a cozy
little spot in the middle of nowhere, and I would spend as long as you’d let me showing you just how perfect you are.”

“That sounds like it would take a while.”

“Hopefully,” he whispered in my ear, kissing along my jawline.

“And you don’t think you’d get tired of that?”

“Never,” he said against the crook of my neck.

“You’d never get tired of me?”

His mouth met my collarbone. “We could always give it a try and see,” he smiled.

I pulled him into the bed over my body, let him kiss me as he removed my clothing piece by piece. With every kiss, I felt how true his words were. I could sense his feelings as his hands rested on me. I closed my eyes and started to picture it, too. I could spend so much time with this man before I tired of him. I could probably do it forever. Like he said – I’d give it my best shot.

When morning came, or at least, morning for us, I woke him up by kissing his chest and running my hands through his hair. He grabbed me roughly and rolled over me, pinning me to the mattress with an energy I respected so much at this hour.

“Good morning, Miss Dixon,” he said.

“Good morning. Sleep well?”

He kissed me, then trotted to the bathroom to begin the day. I began getting ready, too, and when I slipped back into my jeans from the night before, I pulled the phone from the pocket and checked it as I always do in the morning.

I had a missed call that I hadn’t expected to get. Not ever. A mix of excitement and panic rushed through me just as Chris emerged from the bathroom. I could hear the shower running. I could hear his voice. But it took him a few tries to get my attention before I realized he was asking me into the shower with him.

“I’m… sorry…” I said. “I have to go.”
Chapter 22

Pictures just don’t do him justice. Even those artsy shoots, complete with close-ups and color enhancements, can’t give you the actual experience of seeing him. Looking into his eyes under the light of dusk, studying the pattern of freckles over his cheeks just after he’s gotten some sun, gazing at the stubble on his throat when you’re going in for a kiss…

You just can’t get that on google image search, you know?

I sat there at the laptop just staring at him. Photos were already sprouting up online from his London photoshoot, and of course he looked incredible. The model that was all over him paled in beauty by comparison. He was all brute strength and fierce brows and kissable lips. But they missed something. And it wasn’t just the red eye they airbrushed out.

They missed the man who’d begged me to stay with him the day of that shoot. They missed his laughter, his words, his inflections. The way he slipped back into his accent when he talked about home. They missed the way his hand can swallow another’s into it, hold it tight, and make you never want to let go. They missed the way his kisses fall on every perfect place, how he hugs like it’s the last time every time. They missed him. All of these photos missed him. But I didn’t.

I’d gotten text after annoying text between the time I’d left his room that morning and now, just after lunchtime. Some were from Alex, asking if I could meet him for lunch, which I didn’t. Some were from Rebecca, telling me to please answer Chris’s texts. Which means of course that the remainder of texts were from Chris.

•
4:02 AM
You okay?

•
4:35 AM
Hey

•
5:09 AM
I assume I’m wearing this blue thing, then?

•
5:15 AM
[attachment.jpeg] This one?

•
7:55 AM
The interview was fun. Wish you were there. When will I see you?

•
10:00 AM Lunch today?

•
11:15 AM Alex says you’re in your room, so I’ll assume you’re just preoccupied. Sorry about bugging you, I just worry. Talk to me when you get a chance. Love you.

•
It had been a little over an hour since the last one, and I knew I had to answer him. I’d have to tell him the news sooner or later.

“Hey!” he answered. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. I’m sorry. Did everything go okay this morning?”
“It was tough, but somehow or other I figured out how to comb my own hair. It wasn’t easy but I made it. I’m in the process of selling the movie rights to the story, but I don’t—”

“I need to see you,” I told him. “When can I see you?”

He was silent for a second. “Please tell me now if it’s bad news, okay?”

“It’s not bad news. It’s good news. I want to tell you in person.”

He told me that he could meet me if I came down to 30 Rock. He was filming something for the show that evening, and since the taping for the episode itself would begin in a little less than two hours, it was the only time I could see him. Technically I was supposed to be there anyway.

So I told him I’d meet him at his dressing room and discuss everything before the show started. Next on the agenda was a quick text to Rebecca to tell her to calm her tits. And lastly, I called Alex. Maybe he and I had a lot of differences, but we were truly friends these days. I owed him an explanation, too.

…

I opened the door to his dressing room and there he was. He was everything perfect and everything good, the things that little girls dream of when they picture their prince. I couldn’t believe that this was a man who kissed me. You know, of his own free will. No one was paying him, no one had cameras pointed at him for it, no one had scripted it. He kissed me, touched me, loved me, and made love to me because it was what he wanted. He did it. This man. Here.

He didn’t say anything when he saw me, but as the door shut behind me, he rushed toward me and hugged me close. One of those hugs. I’d miss these.

“Are you alright?” I asked him.

“Am I?” He laughed a little. “Yeah, Dixon. I’m peachy. Where’d you run off to?”

“I had to make a call,” I said, moving carefully over to his dressing table to set down my things. “A very important one, actually.”

“Well as long as you’re okay now, I guess that’s all that matters,” he said. I could hear him beginning to undress as he walked closer to the garment bag that hung on the door. “I was kinda worried about you for a second there.”

I turned around and watched him as he stripped down to his underwear, tee, and socks, and I smiled at the sight of him. I’d seen him like this so many times and in so many places, but as I watched him now, I savored him in a different way.

“What’s wrong?” he asked when he caught me looking. “I’m not gonna keep the tee on, I promise. It was just cold.”

“No, it’s not that,” I said, shaking my head a little.

He grinned nervously while he stopped dressing. For a moment we just stood there. My smile faded and his fell and we were just there, six or so feet across from each other, the words that should have been said never forming.

I took a step closer to him and began chewing anxiously at the inside of my cheek while I spoke. “I need to tell you something.”
He nodded. “Okay…”

By now I was close to him. Very close. I could feel the heat of his body. I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. I was looking up at him, all of this so absurd and dramatic. I wanted to tell him that I loved him. That I was sorry. I wanted to tell him everything that I was thinking. But then at last when the words escaped, they weren’t the words I wanted to say at first. But once I said them, I can’t say I regretted it.

“Touch me,” I whispered.

He placed his hands on my waist and pressed his forehead against mine. “Sarah…” he said quietly. “Talk to me, okay?”

“Kiss me.”

He kissed me. He kissed me deeply and longingly and satisfyingly. And when our lips parted, I gently pushed him back toward the couch and down into it. He ripped the shirt from his torso as I straddled his lap and pulled my dress up until the hemline was around my waist. His hands fumbled underneath me to line himself up against me, and then finally I felt him inside me. His hands gripped my hair and held me close to his body while I moved.

“Slow down,” I told him, rocking my hips gently. “Kiss me again.”

I probably didn’t need to tell him to kiss me, as his lips were already against my throat and my jawline, but he took my head in his hands as prompted, and he kissed me over and over and over again as I swayed over him.

I closed my eyes and hugged him close, my mouth finding his ear now as I let out the exhales urged from my arousal. I was looking for a distraction when I’d started talking to him earlier, and I thought this was the very thing I needed. But all I could say was what I was thinking. That I wanted him to fuck me like it was the last time, because it was.

His hands in my hair again, he pulled me away from where I was and looked into my eyes. He was thinking what he was afraid to ask, at least now. I was asking him to make it like the last time, and he knew I must have been saying that for a reason. He kissed me again, his hands sliding down my body and up my legs. The tension had me gasping, but there were tears in my eyes. I couldn’t tell him. I just couldn’t.

“I love you,” he whispered at last. “I love you, Sarah…”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. I didn’t want to be one of those people who cries during sex – not for any reason. And no matter how long we stayed on that couch like this, no matter how good he felt underneath me, no matter the fact that he said everything right, I couldn’t come. I was so determined to make this count that I couldn’t relax. I could tell he was disappointed in himself.

“Come for me?” he asked me, his begging whispers doing nothing to encourage it.

By now I’d given up trying.

“We have to hurry,” I answered. “Let’s just finish.”

It was not romantic. It was not touching. And it was not how I wanted to remember him.

At last he wrapped himself around me once more as he came, and I held onto him as if he might fall apart if I let go. I sniffled a little as quietly as I could, then wiped the tear that had managed to fall to
my cheek before I let him see my face again. His eyes were worried, desperate. Sad.

“I love you, too, Chris.”

He kissed me again before I moved away and let him dress. There was no post-sex cuddling or giggling as usual. There was no conversation. Maybe it was best this way.

“I’m leaving,” I told him at last.

He was knotting his tie at the time, and he stopped as it swung around his neck loosely. “Why? Where do you have to be in such a hurry?”

“No, Chris. I’m leaving. Like… leaving.”

“For how long?”

I widened my eyes, but then looked away. “I’m going home.”

“What, now? Tonight?”

“After this,” I said. “I have a flight booked already. Car waiting. It’s all set.”

He shook his head. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s a job offer,” I said. “It’s something I’ve always wanted to do, and if I don’t take it, I’m probably never going to get this opportunity again.”

He walked closer to me. “I thought you were going to take a long break after this? A trip? What happened to those plans?”

“Plans don’t always work out. I got an offer I couldn’t refuse.”

He looked at me expectantly.

“It’s not the mafia.”

“Fuck, Sarah. I know it’s not the mafia. But…”

“You said I never do what I want to do. You said that.”

He didn’t seem to appreciate being reminded of this.

“I submitted my resume to this theatre company a million years ago, and they called me. They want me to head wardrobe design for the entire company.”

He found a chair at the dressing table and slumped into it. He said nothing.

“I’ve had a great time, Chris. Really. You’ve been amazing, this experience has been amazing, the travel—”

“Yeah, it’s been amazing. I get it.”

“Are you actually angry with me?” I asked him in disbelief. “What did you think, that this was going to be forever?”

“Maybe!” he blurted. “I thought at least we could try!”
“There is no ‘try’ here, Chris.” I was proud of myself for remaining so calm. “In this situation, it’s all or nothing.”

“And you’re choosing nothing.”

I sighed. “I’m choosing my dream.”

“Okay, fine. But that automatically means I’m not a part of it?”

“Yes,” I told him firmly. “I wish it didn’t, but yes. It does.”

“Why?” He seemed so… insulted, almost.

“Because tomorrow night, you’ll be there with her. And people will be taking pictures, and she’ll be making nice with all the press, and she’ll be touching you. And you’ll be touching her. And I can’t be there to see that. I can’t go back to the days where you were all gaga over her, okay? It’s hard enough just thinking about it.”

“I never loved her, Sarah. You know that. She means nothing to me anymore. Not compared to you.”

“Well maybe I don’t want to be compared to her.”

I couldn’t help it now. My eyesight was suddenly dimmed with tears, and they slowly spilled over to my face, one-by-one, and I hated them all.

“Sarah,” he started, quiet again now. “This is hurting you. It doesn’t have to.”

“I can’t lose you, too,” I told him. “I’ve fallen in love again and all I can think is that I’m going to lose you. And when I do, it’s going to be so much more painful than the last time I lost someone. At least he didn’t leave me for someone else.”

“So when it all comes down to it, you don’t trust me?”

I moved toward the door and leaned my back against it for support. “I don’t know. And I don’t have time to sit around and find out.”

“What have I done that makes me seem distrustful?”

Nothing. He’d done nothing. He was perfectly wonderful and sweet and I did believe he loved me as he said. But as my mom always said, if it seems too good to be true, it probably is. And mom would know.

“I can’t be distracted right now,” I said. “I’m going to be working solid through every day probably right up until the season starts in March. That’s months, Chris. Months that I won’t be able to give you. That’s not fair to you.”

“But I asked what I did to make me untrustworthy.”

I shook my head. “Nothing yet. But I think it’s best to stop this before that changes. I’d like us to still be friends.”

Suddenly, I felt a sharp pounding on the door against my back, and I opened it to see the stage manager. “Ten minutes, Mr. Evans,” he said, peeking in at Chris.

When I closed the door, I felt the need to say more, but now I couldn’t find the words. I just stared at
Chris, the tears finally halting, and I watched as his posture became more stooped with sadness. I probably shouldn’t have told him this right before the most upbeat show in late night, I realized.

“So this is it?” he asked. “This is the last time I see you?”

“Maybe not,” I said in a sort of forced half-smile. “Maybe I’ll be around again someday.”

“You know what I mean, though,” he said.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “I know.”

“I’m gonna miss you, Dixon.”

“Gonna miss you too, Chris.”

Neither of us moved in for a hug. Neither of us were satisfied with this ending. We were putting on a show. We were trying to make it amicable.

“Could I call you sometime?” he asked.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Well. You know where to find me if you change your mind.”

Of course I did. But I had determined not to change my mind.

“What time does your flight leave?” He asked.

“Nine.”

“Can I help you? Can I take you to the airport?”

“I don’t have much to take. Alex is returning everything for me tomorrow and wrapping up my duties, so it’s just the one bag and the carryon.”

He stood from the chair, grabbed the comb and paste, and started working it through his hair on his own. I suppose that was his last gesture of “I can do this without you,” and that was alright.

“Five minutes!” the voice called at the door once again.

“I should go,” I said. “Goodbye.”

He looked at me through the mirror’s reflection. “Don’t do this, Sarah. One more day.”

“I can’t. I have to be there in the morning.”

“Then let me call you.”

He still couldn’t turn to look at me. He was getting anxious. I couldn’t help him this time.

I turned and opened the door. My back was to him. I considered looking one more time, but then I remembered Lot’s wife. Best to leave things as they were.

“Thank you,” I added quietly, halfway out the door. “Seriously.”

He didn’t answer.
The airport was dry and cold and way too crowded for a Tuesday. I’d spent so long making sure that I had everything I’d needed to bring home that I arrived just in time to board with my fellow passengers. My bag, lighter than it had felt this whole trip thus far, hung off one shoulder, and over the other arm I held my jacket. I couldn’t wait to get into my seat and warm up. I couldn’t wait to sit and cry in front of strangers for three hours.

We were almost done boarding when a familiar face came down the center aisle. I looked up at him and tried to think of how exactly to ask him what the hell he was doing here, but all I could manage was his name.

“Matt?”

“Sarah Dixon,” he stated. “Is anyone sitting next to you?”

“Not yet.”

He helped himself to the seat and crossed his arms in front of him. He carried no luggage, and I knew there was no way he was actually going to take this flight. “This is for you,” he said, handing me a coffee. “He made me bring it to you. Said you’d be tired.”

“Extra cream, no sugar,” I mused aloud, a smile on my face. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“I didn’t. But you told him he couldn’t, so I had to come in his place.”

I let the smile drop, remembering what I’d said to Chris. “Yeah, well… It wasn’t easy for me if that’s what he thinks.”

“Look, Sarah, I’ll level with you, alright? Chris told me that I should try to get this coffee to you if I could. Those were his words. But then I got here and you weren’t around, and I knew you must be on board already. I had to buy a ticket, Sarah. And as long as I spent three hundred bucks on a last minute commercial flight, I might as well tell you what I really think of you.”

I braced myself for the worst, setting the coffee down away from me. It was probably poisoned.

“I can’t tell you how many girls have come and gone in that man’s life in just the couple of years I’ve known him. Seriously, you name it. All shapes and sizes and colors, all personality types. Wackos. Weirdos. Groupies. Bloggers. Everything. I’ve seen it. The ones who actually stick around more than a night or two, though, well…” he rolled his eyes. “Those are the worst. Do you know how many times I’ve had to clean up after them? How many women I’ve had to force from Chris’s side because he was so obsessed with them? Maybe obsessed isn’t the word…”

“Just make your point, Matt.”

“He falls, Sarah. He falls fast and he falls hard. And you, much to my surprise, were no exception.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“I’ve never seen him like this. I’ve never seen him so completely enamored like he is with you. I don’t know what it is, but it’s there. And then it hit me.”

“What did?”

“You’re the only one I haven’t had to clean up after,” he said.
I didn’t know how to take that. I told him so.

“You actually left the relationship making a better person of him than he’s ever been. You were there for him. You made him more… I don’t know… human. He gets so stressed with work stuff that sometimes he just zombies out. And then you’re there to literally hold his hand through it all, and he makes it through without incident. You did something to him. Something good.”

I looked down at the coffee, this time taking a sip. I needed it. “That doesn’t make me obligated to stay with him,” I said. “Even in a perfect world where I could have it all, I don’t owe him that.”

“No,” he said. “You don’t. But does that mean that in your perfect world, you’d still be with Chris?”


“Greer is nothing,” he said. “Not compared to you.”

Someone came by just then and stared down at him. Obviously that was their seat.

“I have to go,” he said. “But even though Chris sent me, it was my idea to tell you all the mushy crap, okay? I guess… I was wrong about you.”

I smiled proudly. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “And I hate that.”

He said no more, not even a parting goodbye. He simply stood from his seat and left. I’d kind of miss him, I guess.

…

The flight was too short. I couldn’t nap. I couldn’t think. The couple beside me kept chattering away and making anything involving brain usage impossible. I couldn’t even think about Chris. And maybe that was a good thing.

As soon as I was back on solid ground, before I even called a taxi, I decided I would text Matt and thank him. I would tell him to thank Chris. Being a couple thousand miles away from them gave me an opportunity to say the things I hadn’t thought to say before.

I reached into my pockets, then my purse. I rifled through my carryon and my luggage. I looked everywhere. My phone was gone. In it had been every number from the tour. Matt’s, Alex’s, Greer’s, Rebecca’s.

Chris’s.

I panicked for a few minutes, but then I looked around. A thin layer of frost covered the November landscape. The air, even here in the city, was the cleanest I’d smelled since a couple days before, and for weeks before that. Everyone was nice. Everyone was normal. Everyone was just the average amount of beautiful, and maybe that’s the way it should be.

I’m not the best at acknowledging God. I’m not even sure he exists. But I looked up into the heavens that night, cried a little, and smiled anyway. A lost phone was the best way to cut off contact, I decided. The temptation would be gone. I could close the book on the final chapter. Chris would be, as I’d always ever wanted him to be, the best memory of my life. Nothing more, nothing less.

Well…
Nothing less, anyway
I liked that I was good for Chris. He needed someone good.

I was so sure I’d sleep fine that night. Closure, I decided, was exactly what I got and exactly what I needed. The drive back to the house reminded me of drives with him, even though he’d been exactly four days of the thirty years I’d lived here. Things kept popping out at me – the perfect night sky he so admired, the hunter’s path off the Miller’s property, my own home. Everything. He’d ruined it all for me.

Yes. Ruined.

I knew before I opened my front door that I was going to be bombarded with memories. This was the floor he stained, the walls he painted, the furniture he helped me pick out. We’d had sex here and here and there. This was where he said he loved me. That was where I said it back.

I looked at the walls of the bedroom we had slept in and smiled at the way the blue matched his eyes. I simply couldn’t have two bedrooms that were unlivable because of memories and lack thereof.

Somehow I forced myself to go to sleep that night in spite of everything. My book was still beside the bed. The moonlight shone so brightly over the plain outside my window that I had to pull the shades down. His pillow smelled like him. It had only been a couple nights since he lay here last, but it felt like it had been centuries.

I still didn’t cry myself to sleep. I couldn’t decide if that was a good thing or not. Obviously I’d prepared myself for what would no doubt be months and months of getting over him, and that started before even now. But did crying mean I was off to a good start, or that it hadn’t yet hit me just how permanent a decision I had actually made?

I stepped out of my bed the next morning and couldn’t wait to get my hands on that master bedroom. I owned a barn, for Christ’s sake. I didn’t have animals to keep in there. It was a storage space, and it should be used as such. The master bedroom was my bedroom, after all. It was my bedroom, and I was going to take it back.

I spent three days clearing it out, changing the decorations, and making it mine again. Finally I could take out the bedsheets I’d bought when I first ordered the bed. I could hang up the curtains my mom made me. I could live. I could finally live. All of this was done between meetings and fittings at the absolute most inconvenient hours of the day and night. But I could tell that this job was going to be fun. Once I actually got down to design itself, it was going to be fun.

When I was back to using the master bedroom, things were definitely better. I wasn’t sleeping all curled up against one side of the bed to avoid his scent that still lingered even after I washed the sheets. They were new sheets. It was a new bed. To me, anyway. It was all fresh and un-Chris’ed.

But then the moment I left that room, he was everywhere else.

I considered at one point late in the week that I might sell the house. The market for old, beautiful homes in the area was definitely ripe, and I could easily make a profit off the home that Luke and I had bought for chump change all those years ago. I could make good money, buy a hip condo in the city once things got a little better for me, and have my country home as well to raise pigs and ride
horses. I could live the dream.

But I had lived the dream. I’d loved the dream. He’d loved me. And I dumped him in a 20x20 dressing room in New York.

Another week passed, and with that, more memories I was sure I would forget soon. I hoped I would, anyway. I found that I was able to cope as long as I was distracted, and thankfully work provided that opportunity. But at the same time, it was problematic for me. I would find myself catching a glimpse of a man who looked very much like Chris from certain angles, chasing him around the theatre until I could see what he looked like, and then finding myself completely heartbroken when it was not, in fact, him. And most times, the man looked nothing like Chris at all except perhaps his height or hair color. I was obsessed with him. As obsessed as Matt had told me Chris would get with everyone he dated. I was becoming Chris’s Chris.

I didn’t think I would be able to make it through what happened on the Friday of that week, though.

I was at home in the early afternoon, trying to catch up on my sleep on the new couch. When the doorbell rang, I was surprised. Very surprised. The doorbell never rings. I never have visitors, I have a PO Box for my mail, and the neighbors, when they are obligated to come over, just walk right in.

I answered the door hesitantly to find a man with flowers. Beautiful flowers. The biggest pink roses I’d seen arranged around green and yellow flowers of an unknown nature. Pink roses, I recall having told Chris, were my favorites.

I barely listened as the flower delivery man asked me to sign for them, and instead reached into the bunch for the card. Holding it up close (the tears made my vision difficult) I read the words in sloppy writing, and though I didn’t know for sure that it was his, the words told me it had to be:

I never said congrats.

I broke down right there in the doorway, hastily scribbling my name on the electronic dotted line and thanking the poor soul profusely for making everything better. As soon as I could manage to stand, I placed the vase on the entry console, and I reached for my phone to call him.

But it was my new phone. His number wasn’t in here anymore. And I never listened to my friends who told me always to back up my contacts. No, I had to have the prepaid phones. The burners. Because, you know, I lose every-fucking-thing I touch and I didn’t want to waste money on an expensive phone with a contract because if I lost it, it wouldn’t be a big deal. Nothing I lost was a big deal. Everything was replaceable. Everything but Chris. Fuck! I’m such an idiot!

I was somewhere between googling his fan mail contact info and arranging the roses when I suddenly realized that I was losing my shit over nothing. I had laid the card face-down beside the vase in my search for the non-existent phone, and in so doing, revealed the name of the sender. One Karen Brighton.

My mother.

I cried again, but this time because I had fallen for another of Life’s cruel tricks. And in so doing, the stored love and emotion I’d been able to share with Chris before, but that I had now been keeping inside for weeks, came spilling out over me like Fibber McGee’s hall closet. I had given up a man I was in love with. A man who was in love with me. I had given it all up because I hated myself, and I didn’t believe I deserved him.

I called my mom and thanked her for the flowers, and the motherly instinct that I had trouble
remembering ever existing in my youth was uncovered.

“Something’s wrong, isn’t it?”

“How do you know?”

I heard her knowing sigh on the other line.

“I’m your mom. Tell me.”

By now the overwhelming and rushed feelings of these past few minutes had reduced me to a sobbing ball in the corner of the room. “I just miss everything,” I said calmly. “I have no one here.”

“You have me,” she said. Her voice was soothing. This wasn’t like her.

“You sent flowers,” I spoke, looking over at the bunch across the room. “And they’re beautiful. You’ve never given me flowers.”

“They spoke to me,” she said. “You had to have them.”

My thumb traced over the mouthpiece of the phone. I missed her. “You could have come by,” I said. “I didn’t go anywhere. I haven’t moved.”

“You always get mad when I come over.”

“No, I get mad when you point out the fact that my house looks like shit.”

“It does look like shit,” she countered.

I gazed proudly at everything surrounding me. I gazed through tears and smiled and inhaled deeply. Everything was him.

“Not anymore,” I spoke quietly.

“You’ve fixed the place up, then?”

“Come see for yourself,” I told her.

Surprisingly, she took me up on the offer. Within the hour, she was at my home. I waited for the reaction from her as I opened the door to let her in, and I was not disappointed.

The furnishings were, admittedly, simple. The color on the walls may have been somewhat outlandish for her taste, but I could tell she liked it. It worked. It was me.

“Sarah, Sarah, Sarah…” she said slowly and finally, minutes after entering. “What did you do here? And when?”

“I had it done,” I told her. “A friend helped me out.”

“You don’t have friends.”

Her reply was rude, but it was true. I didn’t have friends. Not really. Not the type who would help me like this.

“It was a new friend,” I said. The smile on my face quickly turned to a frown, then tears. I diverted my attention to the kitchen, and I started a pot of coffee for us. Also, you know, she didn’t need to
“When did you have time for a new friend?” she asked. “You’ve been out of the country for the past month.”

“Exactly.”

She stood from the couch and walked up to me. She was behind me, making her presence obvious with grunts and throat-clearing while I refused to turn around.

“Honey, you can only put so many scoops of coffee in that basket before you start brewing up straight mud. Look at me.”

I closed the cover, switched the machine on, and turned to face her carefully.

She looked at me. And her deep green eyes felt darker in the moment.

“Oh Sarah…” she groaned. “Who is he?”

Moms know. They just always know. Even moms who are kind of terrible at their job most of the time. I’ll probably never understand.

“He’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” I told her. I should have thought that through before I presented it, but there it was. “And now it’s over.”

“I thought Luke was the best thing that ever happened to you,” she retorted. Luke had always been her favorite – before and after his death. She liked him better dead than she liked me alive. “You got someone new, huh?”

“Not intentionally.”

“So… what? He just fell and his dick slipped inside ya?”

Mom has no tact. She’s from the city.

“It’s more than that, Mom, but I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

“Why wouldn’t I understand?”

“Because you’ve never been happy! You go from guy to guy and start dating and marrying before the last one knows it’s over, and you have kid after kid with anyone who looks at you! You think love is this… this thing that you can mold and break and bend over and over and over again, but it’s not! People are bendable and breakable, Mom, but love isn’t.” I walked away from her, pacing and breathing and trying not to be mean. “You can abuse people, but not love. Because love keeps going no matter how many times you spit in its face. That’s the thing about it.”

She gave me a sour expression and opened the cabinets, presumably for mugs. “Where’d you read that? Some hippie shit?”

“I didn’t read it, Mom. I’m telling you this. It’s how it is. How do I know more about love from a four-year marriage when I was basically still a child than you do from… what is it now? Four marriages? Five? Were you ever actually married to the last one? You don’t even bother changing your name anymore!”

“Men are men and love is the same every damn time. It’s nice until it’s not anymore. That’s how it is. You think you and Luke would still be together if he was alive? You think he wouldn’t have realized
after about two more years that you were a selfish little hippie brat who doesn’t know how to be grateful for a man who worked his ass off to give you this house, just for you to fuck a guy into fixing it up for you?”

My face sank to the palms of my hands, elbows propped on my knees. I was exhausted. I didn’t want to cry anymore. I didn’t want to fight. I said nothing.

“He’s nothing special, whoever he is. They’re all the same. It’s love until it isn’t anymore, and you’ll never find a man who’ll give you the kind of love that Luke did.”

She walked back into the kitchen and pulled two Styrofoam cups from the cabinet. I watched in silence while she poured creamer in mine, and then creamer and sugar into hers. Once she poured the coffee, I spoke again.

“‘There are all kinds of love in this world, but never the same love twice.’”

She rolled her eyes at me. “Another Sarah Dixon original thought?”

“A hippie named F. Scott Fitzgerald,” I said.

She set the coffee in front of me, and took hers to the door. “You can be mad at me all you want,” she told me, slipping into her coat. “But I’ve been around the block a few times. Hell, I’ve been in most of the houses, too. I know what I’m talking about.”

“So I’m supposed to just… what? Find someone else?”

“You’ll feel better about yourself,” she shrugged.

“I don’t need a man to make me feel good about myself.”

“Then why are you crying?”

“Because,” I started. I knew trying to explain anything to my mom was a horrible idea. “Because for the first time in years, I found someone who actually got me. You know? Understood me. Loved me. All of that. And I ruined it all just because my example of marriage is you. Well, you and my own, but mine doesn’t count.”

“Marriage?” she asked. Suddenly she didn’t seem so eager to leave. “So this was serious?”

“Could have been,” I said. “Maybe. Yeah.”

“What can I tell you? Guys get bored easy.”

“He didn’t get bored. I dumped him.”

She widened her eyes, then rolled them again childishly. “So you’re telling me that you broke up with him, and you’re the one crying? How does this make sense?”

I shrugged and shook my head. I said nothing.

Mom sighed in that way she does, and she gripped her purse tight and coffee tighter as she opened the door.

“Mom?” I called.

“Hm?”
“You loved Dad, right? I mean, my dad. You loved him, didn’t you? You had to. You were with him until the end.”

“He was with me ‘til the end,” she said. “There’s a difference.”

“But were you in love with him?”

She smiled, and I thought she would leave silently. But then she looked at me thoughtfully and spoke. “I wouldn’t have dumped him and then felt sorry for myself about it, that’s for sure.”

It wasn’t much. But it was advice.

“How did you get over it when he died?”

“You don’t get over these things, Sarah. You live, and you live, and you live some more. Sometimes the pain goes away, and sometimes you just get used to it to the point where you don’t even feel hurt anymore. You feel numb. That’s what I did.”

I nodded.

“That’s not what you did, though.”

I looked back up at her.

“It hurts you every single day,” she said. “And you know why? Because you won’t deal with it.”

“I’ve dealt with it.”

“No. You’ve moved on. You skipped right over it and got so wrapped up with getting over it that you forgot to pick it up and tend to it on your way over.”

I stared at her blankly, unsure how, if at all, to rebut.

“I have to go, Sarah. This was… nice.”

As she walked out and shut the door behind her, I realized she was right. It was nice. For us, anyway.

…

I never dealt with it.

I didn’t know how, though. That was the thing. I didn’t know how to confront this all and make peace with the tragedy. It had been what defined me for so long that now I felt that I would lose my identity if I even attempted to deal. I had no problem dating, fucking, or even falling in love, apparently. And yet there was that stretch of road on which I still could not travel. There was the bedroom that was only livable now because the other room had become unlivable. There was a pit in my stomach – guilt, I later realized – that pained me every time I felt things for Chris that I hadn’t felt with Luke. I felt a loyalty to the man. The dead man. The man who haunted my heart and my bedroom dresser top and wouldn’t let me sleep.


And I could almost hear him saying, “Make me.”

I picked up that wretched book, that quarter book with the cheesy sketch of a “tough girl” on the
cover, and I read my way as far as chapter three before I couldn’t take it anymore. After that, I skinned over to the part that explains how I could get help. Therapy, it said, was the first step. And with any luck, things would only get better from there.

Sessions were ridiculously expensive, but with my new job and benefits, I was able to pay. It took a full month before I admitted to myself that I was definitely improving, and within three months, I could see a light at the end of the tunnel. I found that I could move on while also dealing with what had happened. It opened a lot of old, scabbed-over wounds along the way, but this time around, the scars were more a point of pride.

Look how tough this girl is.

And yes, I still thought of Chris. I thought of him whenever I would walk inside my home and look around at what he’d done. I thought of him whenever I drank coffee – something that he said would always remind him of me. I thought of him when the Miller kids came over. I thought of him in the shower. I thought about him in the car. I thought about him at work. I thought about him until I thought I couldn’t take it anymore. And then I thought about him some more.

Sometimes, as had been the case ever since I moved back home, I would think I’d seen him somewhere near. Somewhere just in the corner of my eye. I would turn and follow and it wasn’t him. It was never him, and yet I fell for it every time.

One of those times was when I was out in my driveway sweeping the bits of sticks and debris out of the way after the most recent snow had melted. It was mild for February, but the ice and cold was still enough to remind me where I was. I could swear I’d seen him driving by in a cheap red coupe. I could swear he was looking at me as he passed, his beard now back to its full glory. I could swear he was smiling. I could swear he passed me three times now. I needed this to stop, and it was driving me insane.

The next time the car passed, I took notice. It’s rare I get more than three cars passing in a day, much less within the same ten minutes. I stood at the end of my driveway waiting, looking down the street and waiting for the bastard to come by. I didn’t care if he thought I was crazy. Maybe I was. But I was going to let him know what his presence was doing to my sanity.

“Hey! Hey, fuckwad!” I yelled this at the top of my lungs the literal second I saw it. I stood, hands over my head and waving them side to side rapidly, flagging him down. There’s no way he’d be able to miss me.

The car came closer, and for a second I thought it might hit me. Finally, though, it slowed, and I looked at the windshield and yelled my grievances for a solid two and a half minutes, staring at my own reflection and half-blinded by the sun reflecting over my shoulder.

“I’m trying to sweep here, and all you can do is circle around and around, making the mess that much bigger for me! Huh, asshole? What, you’ve got the guts to drive around in circles and fuck up the driveway but not to get out of the car and let a girl tell you what she thinks? Do I threaten you?”

The door opened, and I panicked. I didn’t mean to make him mad. Temporary insanity, I would plead. Visions of lawyers danced in my head.

“You might wonder how I could miss your driveway three times in a row when you’re the only house on the fucking block,” he answered.

Finally I dropped my arms to my sides. I was speechless.
It was him.

“What’s wrong?” He asked. “Everything okay? I came as soon as I could?”

He was walking closer to me, and there I was in the middle of the road in way too many layers. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

“Sarah, please. Tell me what’s going on. I’ve been freaking out since this morning.”

With every step he took closer to me, my heart beat faster.

“Sarah?”

There he was. Unmistakably Chris. In the flesh.

“What… what are you doing here?” I know I said it out loud, but it felt like a whisper.

“Your text,” he said. “It worried me. And then you didn’t answer and I knew I had to come.”

“My text?” I asked. “I didn’t text you.”

He searched his pockets until he found his phone, and after scrolling for a moment, he raised the screen for me to see.

6:03 AM

COME TO MY HOUSE IMMEDIATELY. 911.

I had to read it several times, even if it was only a few words.

“I didn’t send that to you,” I said. “I lost my phone in New York before I left.”

“Sarah, look. It’s from you. That’s your number.”

“That’s my old number, yeah. But like I said, I lost it months ago.”

He looked down at it for a long time. Like it might confirm the truth or something.

“Wait,” I said, the truth setting in and awaking me from my daze. “You got that at six this morning?”

“Yeah, but I don’t understand how…”

“And it’s not even five in the evening yet. And you’re here.”

“How did I get this text if you don’t have your phone?”

“How did you get here so fast?”

His confused eyes looked at mine, and then away quickly as he shrugged. “I flew.”

“At the very last minute? Must have cost a fortune.”

“Not really. Cheap flight. Took the first thing available.”
I looked him over. He was wrinkled, sloppy, and somehow very unlike his usual self. “Why?”

“Because you said it was an emergency.”

“So let me get this straight,” I started, a faraway look in my eye. “You get a text from someone who is supposedly me, and you just get on a plane and fly out here to see if I’m okay? Just like that? No questions asked?”

“I asked questions,” he answered meekly, showing me his phone again. “You just never answered.”

“And you came out here. You, with your schedule, you came out here because of one vague text?” Slowly he tucked the phone away again. “Yeah, well… as it happens, it was my day off.”

“Lucky,” I smiled.

He smiled too, but then the smile changed a bit. “Fuck.”

“What?”

“It wasn’t lucky,” he said. And as he seemed to be thinking it through, he began to laugh. And he laughed all the way back to his car until he sat back inside the driver’s seat.

“Chris, what? What’s going on?”

“You said you lost it in the city before you left, right?” he snickered.

“Yeah. So?”

“This is Matt!” he blurted. “This is so Matt! He did this!”

“How? I don’t understand.”

“He stole your phone, Sarah. He stole it, and he waited until I had a day off, and then he sent this text. I swear to you that’s what happened.”

“He stole?” Despite Chris’s obvious sense of humor in all this, mine was lacking. “How could he do that to me?”

“Are you regretting it?” he asked, still chuckling a little, but mostly just smiling wistfully.

I bit my lip and crossed my arms defiantly in front of me. “No. Not really.”

“Do you wanna talk?” he asked. He was starting to show his serious side again.

“You flew a long way. Flew coach, from the looks of things.”

“Yep. Might as well stick around for a while, huh?”

“Pull into the driveway. I’ll put on some coffee.”

I went inside to do just that as he cleared out of the street. Within minutes, his distinct footsteps were heard trapesing through the living room and to the kitchen. He peeled back his coat and hung it on the hall tree, and by the time he was near me, the coffee was ready.

“You just left,” I said, mostly to myself. “You got a text, and you just left. Just like that.”
“Yeah, well. You know.”

I watched him drink his coffee. I was glad he didn’t look at me because the stare I gave was probably pretty creepy.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Me too.”

“I shouldn’t have left like that.”

“I shouldn’t have let you,” he said. “I should have fought harder.”

“You had five minutes,” I said. “How much can you fight in five minutes?”

He just smiled and sipped again.

“How’s everyone? How’s Greer?”

He shook his head. “I haven’t really kept in touch with her,” he said. “Saw her at the party, took a few pictures, and then she left with that Henry guy.”

“So that’s still going on?” I asked.

“That’ll always be going on. Whatever they have, it’s weird. But it works for them.”

“And everyone else?”

“Well Matt’s apparently dabbling in the arts of kleptomania,” he joked. “And Alex. He’s into that, too.”

“So Alex is doing well?”

“He’s obsessed with my assistant and often keeps him from work on Friday nights, which is annoying,” he said. “But yeah. He’s doing really well.”

“And Rebecca?”

“Back in Ireland,” he laughed. “Working with Greer for a month will drive anyone away.”

I drank a bit of coffee, and I savored this moment. Just the two of us, butts against the counter, coffee in hand. Catching up. Friends.

“Hey listen,” he said at last. “I never really thanked you properly for everything. I should have done that.”

“You said thank you,” I reminded him.

“I was being a smart ass. But now I’m genuinely grateful.”

I looked up to him and grinned. “You’re welcome.”

“So are you, uh…” he traced his finger over the mug. “Are you seeing anyone?”

I looked down at my drink, as embarrassed to be coming up with an answer as he was asking. “No.”

“Yeah, me either.”
“You’ll meet someone soon,” I said. “I mean, come on. It’s you.”

“You first,” he said. “Just maybe don’t go looking for a husband in musical theatre.”

“And what’s wrong with men in musical theatre?” I asked sarcastically.

“Nothing! Nothing at all, just… you know… they’re sort of, uh…”

“Gay?”

“Particular,” he answered.

“That’s a stereotype.”

He laughed. “I happen to know many, many men in theatre and all of them are.”

“They’re all gay?”

“They’re all particular.”

I slapped his arm. “I’m not really looking anyway.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I think I reached my peak with you.”

“You think that’s bad, try getting set up with girl after girl, each one of them with just the regular amount of caffeine-based scent.”

“I don’t smell like coffee.”

“You do sometimes. You’ve ruined the drink for me.”

“Am I such a horrible memory?” I teased.

He didn’t answer. I feared maybe I’d spoken out of line or something, unsure how. I looked back at him, and he was looking at me. Our eyes met, and I wanted to cry. I missed this. I missed him.

“Are you happy, Sarah?”

The question seemed to come out of nowhere. I wasn’t prepared to lie, and so the truth happened.

“Sometimes.”

“Yeah,” he answered. “Me too. But something’s missing.”

“Something’s always missing, though, right? Isn’t that life?”

“Is it?”

I chuckled a little. “I don’t know. That’s what they say.”

“I just wanted to make you happy,” he said. “That’s all I wanted. I think that’s what made it so hard when you left. I knew that you’d be happy without me, and I wanted to be the one to give you that.”

“I wasn’t happy without you. I was miserable without you.”
“But you’re happy now,” he said. “At least, sometimes you are.”

“Because we had what we had. When I miss you, I can think of those times. It helps.”

He seemed surprised. “You miss me?”

I set my cup down on the counter and turned toward him. “Yeah. A little.”

He set his cup down. “Yeah. Me too. A little.”

“I can’t stop thinking about you.”

He seemed overwhelmed with emotion. It seemed from his body language that he wanted to jump me that very second. And months before, perhaps, he would have. And I would have let him. But now, he seemed so controlled. Like he’d rehearsed this.

“I can’t promise you forever,” he said. “I can’t tell you that this is going to be a marriage, or that I’m the love of your life. Those things aren’t in my control, you know?”

He was letting me down easy. This time, I didn’t mind. I could understand.

“If you need that, I can’t do that. Because you’re right, Sarah. We’ve got issues. We’ve got a lot to learn about each other, and we’ve got baggage. I get that.”

Where is he going with this?

“But I love you, Sarah. Do you know how many times I woke up wondering if you ever got around to putting in the storm windows? Do you know how many times I wanted to call you, but I had to stop myself because you told me you didn’t want that? Do you have any idea how much I hated myself for not putting up a fight?”

I started to cry. “I think I have an idea,” I said.

“I want this. I want it today, and I’ll want it tomorrow. And you can tell me to leave right now, and I’ll go. I’ll leave. You’ll never hear from me again if that’s what you want, okay? But I’m here today telling you that I love you. I love you in a way that I can’t even understand. I love you so much it keeps me awake, wondering how this happened and wondering if it’s ever going to stop hurting that I don’t have you in my arms every night when I fall asleep. I will never love anyone this way, and I don’t want to. Because this is my love for you, Sarah. And no one else deserves that. Even I don’t deserve that. I don’t deserve you, but I know I’d be a fucking idiot not to try at least one more time to ask you to give this a go.”

I had the entire speech prepared, complete with the opening line of “In a perfect world,” and closer of “We’d be better off this way,” but as he spoke, I found myself losing the words of the speech in fragments, then chunks, then whole pages until all I could mutter was, “I love you, too.”

He didn’t touch me. I think he was afraid to.

“Your job is ending soon right?” He asked at last. “Come back with me. Stay with me. Meet everyone, please. Let me show you off like I wanted to do in front of the world those months ago.”

I reached my hand to his cheek and slowly pet along his jawline.

“I can wait on showing the world, but my family will actually kill me if I don’t at least show you off to them,” he said.
“I’m scared,” I told him. “What if it fails?”

“But what if it doesn’t?”

I could resist no longer, and pulled at all ends by this urge to show him my love, I kissed him.

And suddenly, ruby slippers be damned. I was home.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading. I'm still undecided as to whether or not I'll do a sequel, as I'm in the middle of several other works and I would like to have those published first. I have taken (and am still taking) requests for oneshots, though, and those can be found here: http://renntastic.tumblr.com/tagged/chrisandsarah

Thanks again! Please send me your feedback, leave kudos and comment if you enjoyed, and share this with your friends!

-V

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