







# Her Pretend Christmas Date: A Lesbian Christmas Romance

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**Category:** Romance, Adult, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** What happens when a fake Christmas date turns into the real deal?

Laney Sterling has worked her butt off to succeed in the cut-throat photography industry and has no plans of slowing down for anyone or anything. Too bad, her mom didn't get the memo and regularly bombards Laney with requests for grandbabies. When her mom promises to stop nagging for a year if Laney brings a date to her brother's Christmas wedding, Laney agrees. A fake date, one night of deception for a year of peace? Yes, please!

Morgun Hewat knows exactly who Laney Sterling is— the bitch who stole Morgun's dream job. OK, so stole is an exaggeration, and if Morgun is honest, Laney isn't a bitch, but a tough, hard-working, and gorgeous woman. Not that Laney is attracted to Morgun. No, not at all. The only reason Morgun agrees to be Laney's fake date is to get a foot up in the photography industry. Nothing more.

A win-win situation. A practical deal. Zero emotions involved. Until the actual date. Because when sparks fly between the two women, Morgun has to decide how hard she's willing to work to melt the walls around Laney's heart. As for Laney, for once, she's not so sure that choosing her career over love is the right choice.

Will a Christmas miracle happen and bring these two women together?

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# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

Laney

“I’m going to die a shrivelled up old woman before either of my children give me grandchildren.”

“Mom! I’m barely thirty. And Jason is thirty-two. We have lots of time yet.”

“Shrivelled! If I’m not, you will be soon enough. Thirty isn’t the new twenty. All these new age women, that’s who’s ruining it for the rest of the world! They’re the ones that make having a baby at forty or even fifty popular so that everyone wants to do it. What about their poor parents? They have absolutely no consideration for them! They’ll be dead before their children have offspring. You’re going to wind up an ancient old spinster just to spite me. I know it.”

“Mom!” Laney Sterling pushed away the pumpkin pie she’d been working on. Suddenly, she had no appetite, even though her mom’s pie was her favorite.

“What?” Helena huffed. She set her arms on the table and eyed Laney with a piercing mom look. The kind that could shrivel a person in their seat.

“This isn’t the eighteen hundreds,” Laney sighed. “Don’t you know that the word ‘spinster’ is seriously last century?”

“Last century or not, it’s fitting,” Laney’s mom replied, punctuating her words with little stabs of her fork in the air.

“It’s not fitting. I turned thirty just two months ago. Give me a break! I have a career. I’m happy with it. I don’t want a girlfriend, and I certainly don’t want children anytime soon.”

“A career!” Helena screeched. “That’s what everyone says now. You know that being a stay at home mother is a full-time job. Worse than a full-time job! No one ever gives mothers any credit.”

“I know. That’s why I don’t want to be one.” Laney grabbed her half-finished plate and raced towards the kitchen. Unfortunately, her mom followed like a braying hound from hell nipping at her heels.

“What would be so wrong with dating? You could have a career and date. You’re actually in the unique position that maybe your partner would want to stay home with your children while you worked. She could even have the babies.”

“Jesus, Mom. Nothing like using someone else’s ovaries and womb for your own purposes.”

“I didn’t mean it like that!” Helena snatched the plate out of Laney’s hand, scraped the leftover pie into the garbage, and rinsed both plates under the tap. “I just mean that maybe it’s the part about having them that you’re so afraid of. I know you don’t want to stop taking people’s pictures and all that, but maybe someone else could make you happy and would want children, and you’d love her enough to have them with her.”

“Mom! Please. I don’t just take people’s pictures. I have a good career. I make good money. I love what I do, and I worked crazy hard to get where I am. I got good breaks when I needed them. I made a name for myself, and I don’t want to just quit on that.”

“Like I said. She has the babies. She stays at home.”

“Can we please not talk about this anymore? Why don’t you ever harp at Jason to pop out a kid? He’s the one getting married in a week. You never once said a thing about him getting married at Christmas and how much extra stress that is for everyone. Look. You’re already baking pumpkin pies!”

Helena ignored the barb about the timing of Jason’s wedding. “Because Jason isn’t my daughter and Natasha would think I’m a crazy mother-in-law if I told her that she needed to start having babies before I wither up.”

“You are already completely gray…”

“And whose fault would that be? Hmm?”

Laney ignored that and leaned her hip on the kitchen counter next to the dishwasher, just so her mom couldn’t open it without telling her to move. She wasn’t exactly on point with the gray hair and neither was her mom. It certainly wasn’t Laney’s fault. Or Jason’s. Their mom had been completely gray before she even finished college.

“Can I point out what a seriously gross double standard you have?”

“I’ll give you seriously gross!” Helena charged past Laney with the dishes in hand. “Move your butt.”

Laney bit down on her lip and laughed inwardly. Outwardly, she didn’t make a sound. She scooted over a couple inches away from the dishwasher. She watched while her mom stacked the plates onto the bottom rack in precise rows. Everything she did was always so neat and tidy.

When she’d asked Laney to come over to discuss something about Jason’s wedding,

she should have known she was walking into a trap. Helena had also promised pumpkin pie, and it wasn't anywhere near Thanksgiving anymore. In fact, it was the middle of December.

Helena s

lapped the dishwasher closed and straightened. "Promise me you'll bring a date to your brother's wedding."

"Sorry. Nope. I already marked down that I'm flying solo."

"Someone else will cancel! It won't matter. The dinner is a buffet style and they don't have a seating plan. Just promise me that you'll try. I'm worried about you. You haven't dated anyone in years!"

"Career. Busy. Trying to make it in a super competitive industry. Remember?"

"Yes, I remember. How could I forget? Your photos are all over the place. Magazines. Billboards. Bus stops. Everyone knows who Laney Sterling is, but that's not giving me grandkids any faster, is it?"

"Mom, I know what you're getting at. You're worried that I'm going to spend all my life working and miss out on the best years and my chance to find someone and be happy. You're worried that I'm going to stay single until it's too late and then I'll have tons of regrets. It's not too late. There is no such thing as too late."

"Your ovaries say otherwise."

"My ovaries are just fine. Anyway, I could always get a younger partner in my dotage and force the bearing and raising of children on her then, right?"

Helena ground her teeth. “You always have to mistake what I’m saying. Twist it.”

“No, Mom, come on...” Laney begged, seeing now that her mom wasn’t just joking anymore. She was upset. She hated to see her mom look exhausted. She hated to see the defeat in her eyes. Laney pivoted and took one of her mom’s hands in her own. “I know you’re worried about me, but I’m going to be fine. I promise. I’m happy being single. I don’t have time for a partner, even if she did want to have kids. But it’s coming. I’ll find someone and I’ll get married and have a family. I won’t be so busy that I have all these regrets at the end of everything. I swear to you.”

“I don’t have to worry about your brother. He’s been with Natasha for years. They’re getting married. They’re planning on starting a family soon. I know that he’s happy.”

“Mom, I know you were a stay at home mom. I loved that. I loved that you were always here. I loved that we had a snack after school and a hot supper every night. I loved that you made us eat breakfast in the morning. You were always there to help us with anything we needed. You played with us. You taught us so much. You were the best mom in the history of moms. I can’t imagine growing up any other way, I really mean that. But I also am serious about what I’m going to say next too. I’m not belittling the choices you made. I’m very, very grateful that you made them. I’m just saying that it’s not for everyone.”

“How can you say being a mother isn’t for everyone? You’re a woman!”



## Page 2

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“Ugh. Here we go again.” Laney dropped her mom’s hand and turned away.

She stalked off into the living room to grab her purse and keys. They’d had this argument a million times in the past few years. It was like the big three-oh was seriously threatening to her mom. Like she thought Laney was a bomb just ticking down to ovary implosion or something. She couldn’t stay and talk about this, because her mom wasn’t going to listen to anything she had to say. They were just going to end up in a fight, and she seriously hated fighting with her.

Most of all, she hated that she felt like her mom was disappointed in her.

“Laney! Laney!” Helena screamed out the front door as Laney charged to her car. “If you bring a date to your brother’s wedding, I promise I won’t mention any of this again for at least a year.”

“A whole freaking year?” Laney spun around and gaped.

Helena nodded solemnly. Her mom might be many things, but she felt that lying was just about the worst affront in the whole entire world. If she had her word on that, then it would be worth trying to scrounge someone up.

“Yes. A year.”

“Fine,” Laney ground out. “Bringing someone will be worth the peace.”

“You can’t bring a fake date. It has to be someone you’re truly interested in. A real date!”

Her mom must think that real dates grew on trees. Like Laney would just reach up and pick one off and beg her to come to her freaking brother's freaking wedding so her freaking mom would stop freaking begging her to get freaking married and have freaking children.

"Fine." Laney turned and kept her head down until she got to her black sedan at the end of the driveway, but then she forced herself to turn and wave at her mom and blow her a kiss.

Corny? Yes. Cheesy? Totally. Never leaving mad? Worth it.

Her mom taught them a long time ago to not leave the house angry. A person never knew what could happen out there on the road and no one wanted a fight or heated words to be the last memory someone had of them.

Laney always considered herself fairly resourceful. Creative. Innovative. Her personality, her drive, her natural talents, were part of the reason she was so successful. She could employ that creativity and innovation to other areas, couldn't she? Dating sites or a dating app?

Whatever. She was above going to the bar and trying to con someone into going to her brother's wedding. The only way she was going to find someone in a week was to pick some dating sites, sign up, and just go for it.

A whole year of peace would be worth the humiliation a thousand times over.

## Chapter 2

Morgun

"This is not going to work. I don't need a social life. I'm perfectly happy working

myself to death and being incredibly lonely on nights that all my friends are busy with their significant others. It's okay. I can die all alone, without a family to love. I'll be fine." Morgun Hewat could always hope that her best friend would just drop the whole dating thing, but it was clear she wasn't going to be swayed.

Chelsea rolled her blue-gray eyes. "You've got to be kidding me. You're never going to meet someone if you don't even try."

"I have tried. It didn't work out."

"You broke up with Cheryl over a year ago. It was a mutual parting because you guys never really clicked. You've never really clicked with anyone. You're twenty-six and you've never fallen in love."

"Yes, I have!" Morgun protested. She could feel her face heating up.

"No, you haven't. Don't argue with me. We've been friends since seventh grade. I know you. I can see that just about everyone you've ever dated hasn't been right for you."

"Okay, that's not true!"

Chelsea let it drop. Both women were sitting in front of Morgun's laptop on the desk in her living room. As usual, it was cluttered with work paraphernalia so that only a little square of the desk space was usable. Chelsea had come over for girls' night, brought a bottle of wine, and promptly declared that no, they weren't going to watch some sappy romance movie or go out and shop. They were going to find Morgun a date.

She had been talking to Chelsea for months about maybe giving an app or an online dating site a try, but it was more to placate her friend than anything else. Chelsea met

Dave, her boyfriend of three months, online, and they were doing really good. So good that it made Morgun aware that she was lonely.

She'd buried herself in work to the point where she didn't even have time to date, but watching Chelsea find someone perfect for her, watching her best friend fall in love, made her long for something more than her empty apartment and endless hours of work. Plus, it was almost Christmas. So, in a moment of weakness, she'd let Chelsea make a profile for her on some online dating site. As soon as it was done, Morgun wanted to undo it. She was having serious second thoughts about the whole process.

Meeting someone the traditional way, at a bar or something, was out of the question. Morgun always hated the trying. The trying to meet someone. The trying to pretend she wasn't crazy nervous on the first date. Trying to make it work when it clearly wasn't. Her whole life she'd felt like she'd been trying and not getting anywhere. When Chelsea suggested making her a profile a few weeks ago, Morgun caved because she knew she'd never hear

the end of it otherwise.

## Page 3

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Chelsea had indeed made her a profile and shown her how to use the site, but since then, she'd purposefully avoided going on and checking her messages or looking through profiles. It all seemed like a lot of work for something that just wouldn't work out. Maybe that was why people died alone. Maybe that was how people became workaholics and hermits. Because dating really sucked.

Chelsea flicked on the laptop and brought up the dating site. She logged in with Morgun's information and shook her head when she saw that none of the messages in the inbox had even been opened. Instead of giving Morgun a lecture, Chelsea just populated the search with what she saw as Morgun's ideal type, or at least age range, and the fact that she was looking for a female partner, and hit search.

Morgun cringed. She had no idea how narrowing it down that way would lead to someone she'd be interested in. They were going to be doing this all freaking night when what she really wanted to do was watch a movie and drink a few glasses of wine and not talk about her woefully lacking love life.

"Oh my God, no way!"

Morgun's hand shot out as a picture slid past on the screen. She angled the laptop in her direction and clicked on the photo and leaned in to get a better view. It wasn't a good photo—grainy, low light, features intentionally obscured—but there was no mistaking the dark, glossy hair, the sharp, stunning features, or the piercing dark eyes. A wave of shock rolled through her like soundwaves travel through a person standing too close to one of those huge speakers at a club. She could feel it clatter up her backbone.

“Who’s that?” Chelsea asked, popping her gum annoyingly. She leaned further into Morgun in an effort to get a better look. “Do you know her?”

“Know her? This is the...I won’t use the b-word to describe her, because that’s really impolite, but this is the...woman who got the job instead of me.”

Chelsea gasped. “But that was two years ago. How can you be sure?”

“I’m sure.” Morgun clicked on the name at the top of the profile.

Starrynightsky187.

What a stupid name. Is that the best she could do?

“I had no idea she was a lesbian.”

“Well, judging from the fact that she’s in the women looking for women category, I’d say she must be.”

Morgun grunted at Chelsea’s dry response. She knew she should just keep right on scrolling, but before she could go past the profile, Chelsea clicked on it and they were both faced with a brief write up and that same grainy photo.

“Oooh! It says that she’s really just looking to meet someone to go to a wedding with her and then wants to see where things go!” Chelsea exclaimed giddily.

“That’s insane. Who would advertise for that kind of thing on a site like this? She’s just asking for disaster.” Disaster which Morgun hoped would befall her. She wasn’t a mean-spirited person. She was generally way too nice by nature. But Laney Sterling was another matter altogether. For Laney Sterling, disaster was probably too good.

“Jesus, for someone who takes pictures for a living, she sure has a shitty profile picture, and there aren’t any other pictures on here either.”

“I think that’s intentional. She probably doesn’t want people to know she’s basically trying to solicit a date just for a wedding. That’s pathetic. Although, I can see how it would come down to that. She’s not a very nice person. She probably can’t get a date any other way.”

“Why? I mean, I know she got your dream job, but she didn’t do anything cut-throat to get it, did she? How do you know she’s not nice?”

Morgun turned away, suddenly flustered, caught up in her own bitterness, like getting called out for lying online where everyone could see. “No, I guess not. They said that they went with her even though my portfolio was better because she had more experience. I don’t know what that had to do with anything.”

“Do you think she did something to get the job?” Chelsea wiggled her brows. “Like...”

“No! Dear God. I mean, I don’t think so. I don’t know her, but I never thought that.”

“Those assholes missed out on you. It’s their problem. Just because she’s basically a famous photographer now, that doesn’t mean anything. You own your own business! You’re your own boss.”

“She takes photos for magazines that are seen by millions of people. I might be my own boss and it might pay the bills, but it’s never going to make me rich. She probably drives a brand new car every year and lives in a penthouse condo with a pool on the roof that only she gets to use.”

“Does she have a purse doggie too?”

Morgun bit down on her lip to keep a laugh in. “That’s too far. This is Anaheim, not LA. And that would be saying that Laney Sterling is an animal person. She doesn’t look like an animal person. She looks like the kind of lady dogs would growl at and try to bite her ankles, and she’d kick at them and yell for someone to get that mangy mutt away from her.”

Chelsea giggled, getting into the spirit. “Does she wear designer clothes, but only in shades of pink that don’t really go with her skin tone?”

“She’s got an olive undertone. Her hair and eyes are dark. Every shade of pink would work on her.”

Chelsea leaned in a little further across the desk. “You can tell all that from that photo?” She was clearly impressed.

“Yeah,” Morgun said nonchalantly. She didn’t want Chelsea to think that she remembered any details about Laney’s face from that day at the interview or anything.



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Because she had noticed a few things. Laney was the kind of beautiful that people liked to stare at. That people definitely noticed. That people liked to photograph. It was almost an injustice to the world that she liked to be on the other side of the lens. Morgun did indeed remember every one of those details, like they were burned into her brain like everlasting photos.

“I know!” Chelsea said suddenly, making Morgun jump. “Do you think she’d remember you?”

“No,” Morgun rasped. “No, of course she wouldn’t. She probably doesn’t remember any of the people she’s stepped all over to get where she is.”

Chelsea ignored the bite in Morgun’s tone. “You should totally message her.”

“What? Why?” Morgun shifted in her seat uncomfortably. She was sure the temperature hadn’t changed in the past few seconds, but suddenly she was sweating. Could Chelsea possibly know what she’d been thinking? Probably. They had been friends for years.

“Well, it’s obvious. She took your dream job. You should go as her date to the wedding and sabotage everything.”

“I couldn’t do that! Why would you even think that!”

“Because payback’s a bitch.”

“No! Chelsea! God! How could you even think of that? And how does one sabotage

someone at a wedding exactly?”

“Well, she’s probably a high-ranking guest or even in the wedding if she’s not doing the photos.”

“She shoots for magazines,” Morgun stated dryly. “Only I ever get roped into doing weddings.”

She hated photographing weddings. Everyone was always stressed out and that made her job much harder. Somehow, she always got stuck doing the bridezilla, mother of the bridezilla, groomzilla, maid of honorzilla, or randomzilla wedding. It made Morgun vow each and every time that she’d never do another wedding again. Somehow, she always got roped into doing yet another and another. Her problem was that she couldn’t say no. Or she needed a big bump in revenue.

“You should still go. She probably doesn’t even remember who you are! You could go undercover and see what her life is like now. Maybe she needs another assistant. Then you could work for her and learn all her trade secrets and then steal her contacts.”

“Hmm. That’s not a bad idea.” Morgun shook her head. “I mean, yes it is. It’s a very bad idea. I couldn’t do that! I’m not mean enough for that! She’d see through me right away. And I have my own business. I couldn’t just drop that and start working for someone else.”

“Well, your choice. But I say you go as her date and stick it to her. The idea will probably come to you. Embarrass her somehow. It’s not that hard to think of mean things to do if you put your mind to it.”

Good lord, am I really sitting here having this conversation right now?

Just considering the idea made Morgun feel creepy and evil. She didn't like the feeling. She didn't like it when she turned to stare at the grainy profile photo again and a shiver traced down her back. Laney Sterling was too beautiful for her own good.

"Please?" Chelsea begged. "At least message her. I want to see what she does. If she remembers you. If not, then she deserves to have some kind of punishment. She stole your job. She ruined your life."

"Thanks. I thought you said I'm doing just fine."

"But you could have been famous! You could have, like, made it made it. You are doing fine. But she's riding on the top of the world. Come on. Just a little bit evil. You could steal a few of her clients or get a name from someone who would help you break into the industry. Get your foot in the door. Not abandon your business, but try to get her to give up some information. This is what you want to be doing. You are doing fine, but you're way too talented. Seriously. I think that if you have a chance, you should take it. Or sabotage her speech if she has to make one. Perform a wardrobe malfunction on her. Smush cake in her face. It's probably a ritzy ass wedding with expensive food and lots of free drinks. Steal a wedding gift and blame it on her. I don't know. It will come to you."

"I don't know, Chelsea. I don't believe that everything's connected to the nth degree like you do. I don't believe everything happens for a reason. I didn't stumble across her profile just to make my life better by ruining hers."

"Well, I think there's a lot to be said for fate," Chelsea declared stubbornly. "I think we must have co

me across her profile for a reason. And I also think it's your personal mission to figure out why."

“It’s obvious why. It’s so I can point out what a bitch life is, how lucky she is, how I got screwed over, vent a little, pity myself a little, and then keep scrolling.”

“No!”

Before she could stop Chelsea, her friend leaned over and stole the laptop. Morgun squirmed out of her chair and went running down the hall after her. A second later, the bathroom door slammed.

“Chelsea!” Morgun yelled, banging on the door.

“I’m sending her a message. You can’t stop me. I’m putting things in motion. Things do happen for a reason! I’m proving to you that fate is a thing!”

“Please don’t!”

She was silent for a minute, then Chelsea’s voice, high and giddy, drifted out. “It’s too late. I already did.”

## Page 5

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“Fine. I’ll just ignore her message if she sends one back.”

“No, you won’t!”

Chelsea sounded far from resolute. Her voice was more playful than forceful, but Morgun had a feeling her best friend was right. If Laney messaged back, she probably wouldn’t be able to resist.

### Chapter 3

#### Laney

It wasn’t like Laney was desperate or anything. She wasn’t logging into the account she’d made for herself on a huge dating website—she figured there would be more anonymity in a massive database—with dwindling hopes or sweaty palms or a lump in her throat. No, she wasn’t desperate. She certainly didn’t have high hopes for a dating site, fake date or otherwise. She hadn’t lost sleep or anything. She wasn’t distracted at work.

It just happened to be midnight, and Laney found herself logging into the account she’d unfortunately created. She’d chosen not to pay for a premium account, seeing as she planned on using the site only once and then forgetting she’d ever been put in that position.

She wasn’t sure anyone would actually send her a message. How many women would there be on the site, however large it was, looking for other women? How many would respond to her barely discernable photo? Would there be anyone who

recognized who she was?

Dear God, I hope not.

As soon as Laney logged on, she was surprised to see three notifications and the messages icon lit up with the number twenty-one. Twenty-one messages in a day and a half? Was that possible? How many of them were serious? Was she doing this just for some peace? Would her mom even hold up her end of the deal?

Yes. At least she knew that much for certain. Her mom didn't go back on her word. Ever. Even if she suspected that her date wasn't legit, Laney could argue her way into not being badgered about dating and kids for a good while.

So, yes, she really was doing this.

Laney's finger hovered over her tablet. This is stupid. I've never had a problem reading criticism of my work or even getting angry emails. I've never had a problem diffusing a situation. I can get along with anyone, even all the assholes out there in the industry. I can smile and nod and sell the shit out of myself. Why the heck can't I read through a few messages that I don't even have to respond to?

Finally, she forced herself to stab at the envelope icon. The inbox looked just like any other email inbox she'd ever used. Messages. Subjects. Ordered with time and date. Profile names.

Laney pressed the first message. All it said was, Hi.

Who sent a meaningless, one-word message? Disgusted, she deleted it instantly.

The next two weren't much better. They might have had more words, but they meant pretty much the same thing. Most were little more than a, Hey, how's it going? No

information about themselves, no invite to check out their profile, nothing. Laney didn't think it was possible for people who were less serious about dating than herself to be on the site, but apparently it was full of people who weren't really even looking if the level of work put into these messages was anything to go by.

Laney went through the inbox, deleting message after message. She did click on a few profiles, but those women struck her as the hopeless romantic types, not the kind who would meet up with her and let her explain what she was really looking for. She couldn't very well write in her profile that she was looking for a one-off appearance, totally faked, and she was willing to pay. That just sounded bad. Even in person, it would probably sound bad, but at least she could test the waters and explain in a way that someone would maybe understand.

I should have tried the bar. That conversation would go over much better when both people are tanked.

A horrible sensation crept up on her with every single message she deleted. Despair. Maybe even panic. There wasn't a single appropriate response out of the sixteen she'd read so far. She assumed her profile would get more attention the day it was posted. It was already Saturday night. Too late to go out to the bar and find someone. Her brother's wedding was next Saturday. She couldn't just go out on Friday night and try to bring someone to it the next day. She knew she'd be required to participate in the family dinner and the get-together the night before the wedding. She needed someone now.

She knew she should just up and tell her mom to quit bothering her, but she'd done that a thousand times, in a thousand ways, and nothing worked. This was the olive branch, of sorts, that she'd been waiting for, and she'd grasp at it like it was her last hope in the world. And it might be.

Laney deleted two more messages, then clicked on one of the remaining three. It was

from Unicornspooprainbowsandsprinkles498 and was surprisingly lengthy and thorough, compared to the other ones she'd received.

Hi,

Everyone probably starts with hi. Sorry. I don't really know how else to initiate a message on this rather awkward platform. So, I'll start with hi, but I won't end with it. I read through your profile. I have to admit, I'm intrigued. I'm not one of those die-hard romantics, but even I have to admit that I like a good wedding once in a while to remind me that there is indeed hope for humanity, or the heart, at least. I'm not really into making promises I can't keep so I like that you said you'd see where it goes. No pressure. I guess that's why people do the online dating thing in the first place. Or at least why they choose to meet people that way. No pressure. Pressure ruins everything. Things are awkward enough. Everything is hard. Meeting people. Relationships. Feelings. I guess the online stuff is supposed to break the ice in a way that both people can stand instead of floundering and gasping for breath in the cold, cold waters of making an acquaintance. If you'd like to go for coffee one day, even if it's at night, since coffee seems more harmless, while dinner and drinks can turn into disaster, then I'd be up for it. Let me know.

What kind of a name was Unicornspooprainbowsandsprinkles498? She was surprised that it even got past the team who approved names on the site. Maybe they figured it was cute and trendy and not at all offensive. Because if unicorns were real, they probably did poop rainbows and sprinkles. No one could prove otherwise.

Laney considered responding. She gave it a few minutes of thought then exited out and read the other messages. She ended up deleting both of them. She was left with just the one.

She finally clicked on the profile. The only two photos of the woman, who she guessed to be about twenty-five or twenty-six, were selfies. Laney detested selfies.



Even the word was stupid. The woman though? Miss Unicornspooprainbowsandsprinkles498 was beautiful. It was hard for Laney not to look at her with an experienced photographer's eye.

She knew she could make this lady look phenomenal in photos. She had the delicate bone structure and pixie face that would come out perfect in black-and-white shots. Her long, ash blonde hair would frame her face, no fan or sticky hairspray needed. No makeup either, for that matter. Laney would make those small, nearly imperceptible freckles pop right out. She'd make those green eyes come alive, even in black and white. Or maybe she would go with color. Bring out the golden flecks in those jade greens. Laney was sure that either way, this woman would be a natural. She was gorge

ous. It was entirely beyond her why she needed to be looking for a match online when both men and women probably lusted after her regularly.

Maybe she's shy. It's hard to meet people nowadays. Maybe she doesn't like being lusted over. Maybe she finds that as annoying as I do when Mom bugs me about popping out grandchildren like I'm a freaking gumball machine. Insert a quarter, and out rolls a baby. Ha. If only it was that easy. No. Even if it was, I still wouldn't be on board.

## Page 6

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The more Laney studied the selfies, the more she was certain that this woman looked familiar. Then again, everyone looked slightly familiar. Laney met a ton of people through work. She had a fairly active social life. She very well could have run into her in the past. It wouldn't surprise her.

Laney read through the profile quickly, which was quite abstract. No one could learn anything about anyone by reading one of those anyway, no matter how poorly or well written it was. It wasn't like it mattered if they had common interests or not. She exited out of the profile and found herself back at the message.

She chewed on her thumbnail, which she never usually did. She stared down her fridge, which had begun to make a strange buzzing noise a few weeks ago and hadn't really stopped. She made mental notes about the work she'd done that afternoon and about the editing waiting for her tomorrow. She itched a spot on her forehead, then ran her fingers through her long hair, combing it out until it felt slightly oily at the roots from being touched so much.

She picked at a pilly bit on the afghan covering her lap, which was knitted, or maybe crocheted – she couldn't tell the difference – that her brother's fiancé, Natasha had given her for Christmas the year before. She dented in the top couch cushion with her head a little bit harder. She imagined what total, utter, radio silence on the subject of her ovaries, or anyone else's ovaries, would sound like coming from her mom's end.

And finally, she responded to Unicornspooprainbowsandsprinkles498.

Morgun

Morgun wasn't sure how a few messages could end in a very late, eight-thirty meeting at a coffee shop on a Monday night, but apparently they could.

She hadn't expected Laney to respond to the message Chelsea fired off. And it wasn't like she had checked her inbox every hour or anything. When she saw a response, she nearly fell off her chair. Laney said that she'd like to meet in person since she wasn't good at the online stuff. She wanted to know if Morgun was game for it. Morgun's immediate impulse was to delete the message and not respond to it, but she couldn't help herself.

So now she was waiting in an empty coffee shop, cross legged, sipping on a chai latte which was far too sweet and tasted too much like cinnamon for her liking. The place closed at ten, so it wasn't a wonder it was as barren as those old western ghost towns.

Laney was late. Of course, she was late. Why would she ever be considerate of other people's time?

Morgun felt ridiculous. Why was she even doing this? Because Chelsea thought it was a good idea? Because secretly there was some wicked little bit of herself that thought she deserved some sort of vindication for Laney making it while she didn't? Was she just jealous? Did she really want revenge that badly? Did she want to go through with Chelsea's plan and steal contacts from Laney? Or was she simply curious, and unable to stop herself?

Morgun tried to convince herself it was just the latter. She didn't want to think that she'd be able to pull off schemes or want revenge so badly that she'd show up, ready to serve it piping hot. Unlike the latte, which was served to her lukewarm. Maybe that's why it was so syrupy.

In the middle of her internal debate, Laney swept in through the door like an actual freaking hurricane. The place was decked out in Christmas crap and the huge green wreath on the door nearly fell off, the door was swung open so violently. It clattered shut behind Laney, who stood there looking around for all of half a second, probably at the Christmas lights on the wall and the other gaudy décor throughout the place, until her eyes fixed on Morgun.

Morgun didn't mean to, but she shifted uncomfortably on the already uncomfortable wooden chair. She felt her face heat up. Her freckles were probably glowing, which happened when she blushed.

Laney nodded at her, then stalked over to the counter. To Morgun's surprise, Laney didn't hesitate to talk to the guy behind it in a familiar, friendly manner.

"Hey, Jim, how's it going this week?"

"Laney. Haven't seen you in forever. Did you finally buy your own machine like you were threatening and start making your coffees at home?"

"Nope. Just been busy. I'll have the usual."

"Two shots of espresso, coming right up."

Gross. Who drinks espresso at this time of night? Or ever?

Laney waited up at the counter while Jim, a guy in his late twenties who wore a casual t-shirt and jeans that made it very obvious that he worked out, served up her espresso shots in a huge paper cup.

Morgun detested the shop. She'd never been there before. It was far out of her way. She didn't live even remotely close, but when Laney suggested it, without even

asking her what area of the city she lived in, she'd instantly agreed. The place was tiny, tacky, too Christmassy, and Jim was clearly hitting on Laney like he'd hit on Morgun. If he knew Laney, didn't he know he was barking up the wrong tree? Or maybe he didn't care?

Morgun shuddered and hunkered down lower over the drink. She wasn't sure if she could stomach another sip. Or another minute. Why the heck had she ever let Chelsea send that message in the first place?

Laney pulled out a chair across from her and sent Jim a pointed look that told him to get lost and quit listening in. Morgun was more than shocked when Jim scuttled off to the back rather quickly.

"So," Laney said, obviously over-conversational, as she hunkered down in the chair with her double espresso.

Laney tipped back the cup, finished both shots in a single, long gulp, then set it down hard. Her face was beautiful but also crazy intimidating. She was apparently the kind of person who looked another person in the eye like she was ready to take them down, like a hunter targeting its prey.

Morgun gulped. Yeah, Laney was pretty. Gorgeous, in fact, with her long, silky hair that was so dark there were blue highlights in it from all the flashing lights in the shop. Her face was a masterpiece. Oval shaped. Slightly curled nose, sharp cheekbones, full lips, piercingly dark eyes. From her filled-in brows to her cherry red lipstick, her makeup was flawless. She had on a pair of black ripped up skinny jeans and a black blouse that was totally sheer, with a black lace bra beneath. That too was a little bit shocking to Morgun.

If Laney couldn't make a living on one side of the lens, she could easily have done it on the other. Her style was effortless, and she really did have that confident, model

air about her. Morgun wouldn't have been caught dead in what Laney was wearing, but somehow looking at the other woman made her want to rush out and get a pair of her own ripped up black jeans. She'd never worn black jeans in her life. She hated jeans. She was more of a leggings, yoga pants, breezy skirts and long dresses kind of a girl.

"I'll get right to the point, since it's late and you probably have better things to be doing than sitting here drinking that god-awful latte. I can smell it." Laney's nostrils flared. "The lattes here are shit. Way too sweet. Too much cinnamon." Morgun felt herself wanting to get up and apologize to Jim on Laney's behalf. "Anyway, I lied in the profile. I couldn't just write what I wanted to write and expect the moderators or admin or whoever not to delete it. The truth is, I'm only looking for a date for my brother's wedding. It's on Saturday. That's it. There would be no after. No seeing where things go."

## Page 7

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Morgun's hand curled around her cup so hard that the lid looked like it was about to pop off. She imagined it happening, her latte spewing like a volcano all over the table.

"I'd even be willing to pay," Laney went on, obviously misinterpreting Morgun's silence. Then again, maybe she didn't. Morgun had no idea how she was supposed to respond to that.

She wasn't wrong about Laney Sterling being cold-hearted and mean. She'd suspected that she was basically just advertising for a date, but to hear her say it like that, just put it out there the second she sat down, with no preamble...what did she expect the other person to think?

Morgun was disgusted with more than just her latte. She was disgusted with herself for even showing up at the shop. For messaging Laney back. For even considering anything about Chelsea's plan and for her own damn curiosity, which obviously refused to be satisfied after she'd seen Laney's profile.

There was something magnetic about Laney that drew people in. Obviously, something like a vortex or a Medusa or another terrible phenomenon. Morgun could only imagine what getting to know Laney would be like. Did she even have friends? No wonder she couldn't get a date the normal way.

"Um, I think you were on the wrong site then," Morgun snapped. "That site is for dating. Not escorts services."

She wished she could shove her chair back from the table and make a fast exit, or

better yet, pop the top off her latte for real and let it spew all over Laney's stunned face, but of course, her chair stuck fast when she planted her feet to push back, and she went nowhere. And the lid on her latte proved to be on much tighter than she thought because when she squeezed harder, nothing happened.

Laney appeared unbothered by the statement. She just shrugged. "I don't want to bring an escort. It's my brother's wedding. I have my reasons. I figured someone would like to make a couple hundred bucks. It's not for sex and it's certainly not sugaring, since it's not an ongoing relationship. We'd both benefit. I need a date. Someone else would get to go to a fun wedding with great food and make some extra cash. It's Christmas. Everyone probably needs extra cash."

"Who gets married at Christmas?" Morgun dropped all efforts to be polite.

"I have no idea." Laney shrugged. "My brother, apparently. I knew we should have gone out for drinks instead."

Morgun grunted. Did Laney just try to make a joke? Did she think this was funny? That having some weird sense of humor would make any of this better?

"So you're assuming that because I messaged you as a normal person looking for another normal person to date, or at least do some fun stuff with and get to know, that I'd be willing to take cash to go to a wedding where I don't know anyone and basically pretend that we're dating?"

"You wouldn't have to sell it too hard. The stipulation was that I bring a date. Not that I was dating."

"Jesus. What stipulation?"

For the first time, Laney looked slightly off focus. She quickly glanced around and



scowled at God only knows what. The tacky décor? Jim secretly listening in? Life? The world in general?

“It doesn’t matter. I just need a date. The wedding’s on Saturday. It’s one day. From two in the afternoon until it’s over, around one in the morning probably. I’m not in the wedding party. You won’t get left floundering on your own. It won’t be one of those horrible weddings where everyone hates everyone else and people get into quarrels. I’m willing to pay a thousand dollars.”

“A thousand bucks? You think if you pay someone a thousand dollars that they’ll just do whatever you want them to do? Sell out for a grand? How are you not treating me like I’m an escort? I’d be selling myself for payment!”

“Not that kind of selling yourself.” Laney appeared more annoyed than anything. “You’re taking this the wrong way.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, is there a different way to take it? I was expecting some pleasant conversation. Proof that you cared enough about me as a human being to take some kind of interest. You obviously just came here tonight seeing me as this thing you could use as a means to an end. You thought I’d just fall all over the place in a hurry to accept cash? That I’d be so desperate that I’d have absolutely no self-respect?” She laughed. “That’s so like you. Always stepping all over everyone else to get what you want.”

This time, Morgun’s chair did scrape back. She left her latte on the table as a final fuck you and stormed out the door. This time, she was the one who just about knocked the stupid wreath clean off its perch. At the last minute, she thought better of it and whirled around.

“Merry fucking Christmas to you too,” she spat in disgust, then she noticed a wide-eyed Jim leaning near the back wall, out of sight of the tables, but not out of sight

from the door. “And you too, Jim. Have a good one.”

He nodded. “You too,” he called back, quite comically.

Morgun found herself forgiving Jim for listening in and for making her the worst latte in the history of the entire world. She gave him a tight-lipped smile, aimed another scowl at Laney, who probably hadn’t even blinked since Morgun got up from the table, and hurried out the door.

## Chapter 5

Morgun

“I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t just sit there and pretend. I couldn’t even take it. She was so...horrible. Awful. Condescending. Mean. Inhuman. Unfeeling. Weird. Creepy. She wanted to pay me a grand to go to the wedding with her and she made it clear that’s all she wanted. She didn’t even ask me what my name was. She didn’t ask one single thing about me. It was like I was just this thing she could use and bend to her will and she never once thought that I’d have a different opinion about it or actual thoughts and feelings. You know. Like a normal human being.”

“That makes sense.” Chelsea’s voice crackled with sympathy over the phone. “She’s clearly a sociopath.” Then she laughed, which only pissed Morgun off further. “At least she’s direct, if nothing else. It sucks when people just beat around what they really want to say and make you guess at their evil intentions.”

Morgun had called Chelsea as soon as she arrived back at her apartment. “Come on! You don’t seriously think I could just sit there and listen to that, do you? Or that I’d sell myself out for her so easily?”

“No, not easily. You should have made her work for it. Negotiated. If you didn’t want

to take advantage of her and act all schemy-scummy, you could have at least been honest about what you really wanted.”

“Oh, and what’s that? A list of contacts? A step up to where I want to be?”

## Page 8

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“Yes. Exactly. That would have been even better than tricking her into giving it to you.”

“Chelsea! Jesus!”

“I’m serious.”

Morgun huffed loudly. The line hissed and crackled and Chelsea sighed right back with extreme flair, just to be annoying. Soon enough, Chelsea, because she was Chelsea and always had some brilliant idea or other—no one could ever accuse her of not being a quick thinker—was back on a roll.

“I think you should message her back. In three days. On Thursday. The wedding is on Saturday? Make her sweat. I can guarantee she won’t find someone else.”

“I hope she does. There’s no way I’m spending even a minute with her.”

“I think you could. I think you could do a lot of things to get where you really want to be.”

“Now you sound worse than she did.”

“I’m just saying. Your work is amazing. The world should see it. You have a great business, yes, but you’re never going to be happy doing it because it’s not truly what you want to be doing. You shouldn’t just be doing family portraits and all those horrible weddings that no other photographer would ever agree to do—”

“Hey!”

“I’m just saying. You’re worth so much more than that, and if you don’t think anyone is ever going to give you the opportunity, you have to take it! You have to fight for it! I think you could stand spending one night with Miss Wicked Fire Farting Dragon in public, where it would not even be a requirement to do the smallest romantic thing, if it could make your whole career. Please tell me you’ll reconsider.”

“She’ll find someone else. Someone desperate enough to take the money. Maybe she’ll even up the offer.”

“No, she won’t. She’s looking on the wrong platform. Everyone is going to be offended by that. Or by her. No one is going to put up with that and most people hate weddings. Christmas weddings must be extra horrible because everyone is stressed over the holidays as it is. Or everyone is busy. She probably won’t find anyone because almost everyone has plans for Christmas already. I swear, if you leave it to the last minute, she’s going to be so desperate that she’ll give you anything you want.”

“She’s so terrible though! She probably would think of a way out of it. Give me some fake contact or something.”

“Make her arrange a meeting, then. Set it up before you go to the wedding, even if it’s just over the phone. Give you some contacts and have them contact you to prove that she’s good on her word.”

“Hmm. I never thought of that. You’re kind of brilliant at this backstabbing stuff, Chels.”

“I know,” Chelsea laughed. “I am brilliant, but at all things. Not just the backstabbing.” She waited for all of two seconds before she tactlessly pressed on.

“So, are you going to do it? Contact her?”

“God! I don’t know. That’s still three days away. A lot can happen in three days. I’m sure she’ll find someone.”

“I guarantee she won’t.”

“She might.”

“Come on! This is your chance! Don’t throw it away. It’s like, what, ten hours?”

“Probably more like twelve.”

“That’s half a day! You can do it! This could change the rest of your life! If you don’t do it, you’re going to regret it when you’re shooting that crying baby or that disgustingly in love couple or that wedding where everyone is a zilla something or other.”

“You know what I regret? Telling you about every bad day I’ve ever had. And the good ones too.”

Chelsea laughed loudly and slightly obnoxiousl

y again. “No, you don’t. You don’t regret anything when it comes to me, because I’m the most perfect best friend in the entire world and you love me like a sister from a different mister!”

“An annoying mister, who passed down his annoying genetics.”

“Annoying or not, you know I’m right. That’s why you’re getting testy.”

“I’m not getting testy. Don’t use that word with me.”

“Fine. Defensive then. She can’t be that bad...”

## Page 9

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“You don’t know her!” Morgun flung herself down on her living room couch. She’d bought it second hand and she forgot about the rogue spring that liked to stab her in the butt every time she sat on the left side. As it was, it jabbed her straight in the back and she rolled away instinctively, reaching for the spot with one hand, combatting tears, and holding her phone with the other.

Ugh. Even the thought of Laney could be dangerous. Maybe this is karma. A sign that I shouldn’t be doing this.

“No, but I know you. Just think about your future self. Future Morgun will thank present Morgun.”

“Present Morgun does thank me.”

“Yeah, well, present Morgun should suck it up.”

“Why did you ever send that message?” Morgun groaned. Her back still pulsed with fire and she wished right now that she could hang up on Chelsea and call some waste disposal company to come get the cursed couch. She bought it because it was antique. Rusty orange. MCM. All that good stuff. It turned out to be scratchy and springy and mean. Not at all what she’d anticipated.

One day, couch, it’s just going to be you and me and a match. You won’t be so tough then.

“I was thinking about you. About your career. Plus, I knew you’d respond if she messaged you back. You obviously did. That makes you guilty or game or both.”



“I really don’t want to do this. And please don’t say game. I’m not game. And I’m not guilty either.”

She felt horribly guilty for even stopping to peruse Laney’s stupid profile. Chelsea never would have known about any of this if she had just scrolled on past.

“I know, but in life we have to do things we don’t want to do.”

“Gee,” Morgun grumbled. “I haven’t heard that a thousand times before from every annoying person on the planet.”

“Should I go with suck it up, pupple dup?”

Morgun’s lips twitched despite herself. Morgun’s dad was famous for going with the old, terrible, suck it up, buttercup, but Chelsea had changed it in mockery and now it was their own private joke. Morgun even said it in a deep voice, just like Chelsea’s dad used when he brought out the good old buttercup lecture.

“No, that would be much worse! Thank you for not saying that for real.”

“You’re welcome. But, Morgun?”

“Yeah?”

“Suck it up, pupple dup.”

The line went dead.

## Chapter 6

Laney

Jason's wedding was in two days and Laney knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was absolutely, unequivocally fucked.

Two other women basically told her to go eff herself when she suggested going to the wedding with her as a fake date of sorts for payment. They both, oddly enough, shared the same sentiment that Unicornspooprainbowsandsprinkles498 had. In essence, no one liked it.

So now, she was sitting on her computer, out of options. It was too late to go out to a club or a bar or anywhere else to try to find a date. It was too late to get on another site. It was too late to meet up with anyone else.

Laney wasn't sure why she was checking her inbox on the dating site one last time. She would have made fun of herself if she was hearing this story from someone else. She would have called herself ultra-pathetic. Did her mom know that she wouldn't be able to get a date? Was she laying down a challenge that Laney couldn't help but pick up and fail at? Was she so clairvoyant that she knew Laney was going to have zero fight left in her by the time of the wedding and that talk of families and dating and babies would be allowed to continue because she'd lost a bet of sorts?

No. Her mom wouldn't do that to her. Her mom wasn't mean like that. Her mom loved her, even if she was a little misguided with that love. She just couldn't imagine anyone having a career outside the home that they willingly chose over having love and raising children.

Her mom really was the best mom. She'd been a stay at home mom since she got pregnant with Jason and she'd loved every minute of it. That was how their family worked. Her mom ran the household. Her dad worked outside of it. They both contributed, and her mom was right. Often, she had the harder job of the two. Staying up with sick, barfy kids, changing pooppy diapers, listening to the fighting between siblings, cleaning up scrapes and cuts, teaching them both how to read before they

ever went off to school, helping tirelessly with homework, baking for bake sales, doing school projects, crafting on weekends, decorating the house, cleaning, cooking, making lunches, supervising on field trips...

It was all so overwhelming to Laney when she thought about it all like that. She knew that all of it was spaced out over eighteen years, but she just couldn't imagine it. She wasn't even good with kids. She couldn't remember if she'd ever held one of her friends' babies when they offered.

She knew what she was good at. Photography. She'd been interested in it since she took it in high school. Both as a photography class and in physics, when they'd made their own pin hole box cameras and developed the photos in the dark room. All her work was digital, of course, but she'd been hooked ever since she picked up a camera and was challenged to see the world in a different way.

Why wasn't it okay to just be good at that? To want that? To be successful?

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Her mom had accepted everything about her. When she'd come out to her at fourteen, her mom was her biggest source of support. She loved her unconditionally and got her through the rough years of high school. She'd accepted it without so much as a blink and with a huge hug and the kindest words. So why couldn't she accept it when Laney told her that she didn't want to have kids.? She knew she'd break her mom's heart if she was completely honest with her, so she always avoided that discussion.

She'd never seen herself with a family. Then again, she'd never seen herself not with one either. She just assumed that one day, like everyone else in the world, she'd meet the right person, the one she knew was it, and if she wanted to have children, that would be fine with Laney because she might want to share that with her.

It was just that she hadn't found the one yet, so it was impossible to even think about choosing to enter into that world. Everyone she'd ever dated, she'd either done it casually, or known it wasn't going to work out. Her longest relationship lasted six months.

Most people couldn't handle how dedicated she was to her work. They called her a workaholic, but Laney reasoned that it wasn't her fault that her schedule was set at least a year in advance and a lot of it involved early mornings, late nights, tons of extra work, and traveling. In the last two years, the women she met knew that, yet somehow, they still used it as an excuse to end things when it wasn't working out.

Laney wasn't sure why she was logging on or why it even mattered to her so much. Maybe it was because she was never one to let a challenge go unanswered. Maybe she really did crave the peace and quiet that badly.

What does it even matter? I'm never going to get a date now anyway.

When she logged on, she wasn't surprised to see a few new messages. They trickled in daily, fewer and fewer with each passing day, as she suspected, but she was shocked to see one from Unicornspooprainbowsandsprinkles498.

She was tired from work. She had a pile of editing to do, and she had to be up early for a job that she'd agreed to last minute. Plus, there was the added stress of going to the family dinner that her mom had planned for the night before the wedding, not to mention the wedding itself.

Then, like a big bag of poop dropped on her doorstep and lit on fire, Christmas was waiting around the corner. Even though Laney knew that it was Natasha who wanted to have a Christmas wedding, since she wanted the wedding day to fall on the date that she and Jason started dating, Laney still cursed her brother for doing this to her.

Laney only allowed herself to hesitate for a few seconds. Her curiosity made it impossible not to click. She needed a good dose of comedy. If the message was one chewing her out, she could handle that. She'd even be amused by it. Unlike some people, she wasn't easily hurt or offended. Her dry sense of humor allowed her to appreciate the grouchier details in life. And maybe she deserved a good chewing out a little. She had felt bad after that woman left the coffee shop. She hadn't even asked her name before she started in, like an idiot, with her list of demands. Was it any wonder she'd walked out the way she had?

Laney had admired more than the woman's courage. Unicornspooprainbowsandsprinkles498 was even more beautiful in person than she was in her selfies, just as Laney had anticipated. She hadn't anticipated the slight shiver when she sat down or the way she couldn't tear her eyes from the other woman's face. She kept thinking about all the ways she'd like to position her for a photo. No, that wasn't distracting at all. Not at all.

And then Unicornspooprainbowsandsprinkles498 had given Laney a piece of her mind and stormed out. Showing spirit. Grit. A real backbone. It took a lot of courage for anyone to basically flip Laney off without ever raising the bird.

Laney wasn't surprised to find, as she clicked the message, that she had a grudging amount of respect for Miss Unicornspooprainbowsandsprinkles498.

After two years working in her industry, which was both fast paced, competitive, and often involved some out there, cutting edge ideas, very little shocked Laney anymore.

But she was shocked. Because that message from Unicornspooprainbowsandsprinkles498 wasn't one berating her or telling her to go fuck herself again, n

or explaining to her in a detailed format what a bad person she was. No. The message was blunt, to the point, and saved Laney's bacon big time. If she was willing to play. And God, she was willing to play.

She read the message again, then again, then one more time.

I've thought about your offer and I've changed my mind. I don't want cash. That still makes me feel cheap, and I feel like putting a price tag on yourself is vile and degrading. I know who you are. Everyone knows who you are. I knew before I saw you face to face.

The thing is, I'm a photographer too. I've been looking to break into the industry and do more high-profile shoots and work for a long time now. I want the chance to be a true artist. I want to make a better living. I don't need people to know my name, but I do want steady work that pays me what I'm worth. I want more challenges. I want to learn and grow. I don't want to wake up and do the same thing over and over and over. I've wanted to be a photographer since I was three years old.

I'm willing to go to the wedding with you, as your date, and be however fake you need me to be, but what I want in return is a chance. I want contacts. I want you to arrange a meeting with someone who will look at my work. Or someones. Plural. I want proof of this before the wedding, not after. I'm not taking your word for it. I want names. Numbers. At least ten people.

I know you don't understand, because why would you ever think about the people below you, but you owe me. Big time. Anyway, if you choose to accept the deal, you can message me back and we'll hash out the details. If not, then good luck with the wedding, and I really mean that, not in a sarcastic, mean way, but in a real way because I'm a good person who cares about other people, even the bad ones.

Laney appreciated her directness. She never would have guessed that Unicornspooprainbowsandsprinkles498 was a photographer. She felt guilty for the meanness behind the thought, but she automatically assumed that the other woman probably wasn't very good. She probably did the studio style family photos that no one was interested in getting because they were terrible and boring and made everyone look awful.

Can I really give this lady my contacts? Can I have the people who know me and respect me, people I work with, big names in the industry, contact someone who probably isn't very good?

Yes, she decided. She could. She'd tell them she needed a favor. A big one. That if they could just spend a few minutes looking through this chick's portfolio, she'd put in whatever work they wanted her to do for a week, for free. A trade in kind. She'd give them her skill and her art, sans pay, in return for that small favor. Maybe some of them would just do it. She knew a couple people at her agency who weren't bad. They were inundated with samples and requests, but if she submitted something, then they'd be interested and would take a look.

She decided she'd have to see the work first. If it was terrible, then the deal was off. She couldn't stick her neck out that far and risk everything she'd worked her ass off to build. The one thing that mattered to her more than anything. Her name. Her reputation as an artist.

She thought for a few minutes before she responded to the message.

Send me three of your shots. I can't arrange a meeting without having something for someone to look at. I won't give out my contacts to just anyone either. I don't think you would appreciate having to call a stranger for no apparent reason or having your name and number given out to just anyone. Actually, send me five of your best shots. If I think they're good enough to pass along, I'll do it. We can go from there.

Laney exhaled all the breath she didn't realize she'd locked up in her lungs. She hadn't taken a breath the whole time she'd spent typing. Since she was using her tablet, it was indeed a long time. One fingering it on the flat keyboard on the screen wasn't like using a laptop where she could power through.

She was about to exit out of the app when her inbox lit up with a response. She went back to holding her breath and clicked on the message. There was no written response. Just an attachment, which she clicked.

Five photos. Three black and white, two in color. One still of a tumbledown barn and an ancient tractor, almost impossible to find anywhere close to the city, one of a decrepit brick building in some city, and three photos of people. Not models. Regular people.



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All five of them stole what little breath she still had left.

Holy. Freaking. Rainbows. And. Unicorns.

The shots weren't just good. They were incredible. Far beyond what Laney had expected. Some of them were even better than anything she could do. Well, maybe not better, but different. A unique perspective amongst the professionals she worked with. Unicornspooprainbowsandsprinkles498 definitely had a way of seeing things that wasn't like anyone else.

Laney thought about what the woman would be like to photograph, or more on point, how she wanted to photograph her, but now she thought that she wouldn't mind being the one photographed. And Laney hated being the subject. She loved being the one behind the lens but was typically shy about being in front of it.

Laney didn't have to even think about her response. It came to her automatically.

These are surprisingly good. You have a deal. I'll arrange for someone to call you first thing tomorrow and I'll send you a few other contacts within the hour. If you're serious about this, I need to pick you up at one on Saturday. I'll be wearing black, because I don't care that it's a wedding, not a funeral, but you can wear whatever you want. We don't need to match.

Almost as an afterthought, Laney decided to try and end the message on a less demanding, happier, more considerate note. Thank you for doing this.

She clicked send.

A minute later, a response came in with nothing but an address typed out.

## Chapter 7

### Morgun

Now that things were rolling, Morgun was more than a little intimidated by the thought of having to follow through and uphold her end of the deal. She'd received a call from someone who worked at the very agency she'd applied with two years ago, promising to look at her portfolio if she brought it in. They'd set up a date for next Wednesday. She received a list of other contacts, which, Laney claimed, was the best she could do on short notice. Since she had an interview of sorts, Morgun considered it close enough to fulfilling her terms.

She'd been unable to sleep the night before and had finally crawled out of bed at just after five in the morning. She'd spent the time editing photos from a family photoshoot she'd had the day before, making herself a huge breakfast that she didn't even eat, and eventually getting ready.

She was slightly ashamed to admit that she'd literally typed best forms of revenge into an internet search bar. The lists were less than helpful, but she did come across one tip she really liked. The best form of vengeance was to show the other person how well you were doing. That was usually for an ex, but whatever.

Morgun took the advice to heart and spent hours curling her hair into immaculate ringlets, applying a full face of makeup that was done so tactfully a real makeup artist could have done it, and picking out a dress that showed off her body. She might not be as tall or model looking as Laney Sterling, but she did run three times a week for an hour every morning, and she did yoga in her apartment every single day for over an hour as a way to de-stress and help out her muscles, which were often cramped from sitting and editing photos for hours at a time.

She'd picked a long black maxi dress. It totally wasn't something she'd wear to anyone else's wedding. The dress was both flowy and somehow clung to her curves. It was just a plain cotton/poly mix that, when paired with a sparkly clutch, dangly earrings, and her hair and makeup, looked almost nice enough to wear to a much more formal function. She'd done something wicked and decided not to wear panties, since even her thong strap could be seen from the outside of the dress. The thing was floor length so she figured there could be no wardrobe malfunction, so why not go commando?

Laney said she was wearing black. Sh

e said they didn't have to match, so of course Morgun took it upon herself to also wear black. Just because she thought it would annoy Laney.

As she stood in front of the cheap full-length mirror that she'd taped to the back of her tiny walk in closet, Morgun had to admit she looked good. Really good. She'd knock her own socks off, if she was wearing socks. Which she wasn't. She decided to give herself a small break and had gone with a set of black flip flops with sparkly straps. They could hardly be seen from beneath the pool of fabric anyway.

When her buzzer went off, Morgun jumped, then stared at herself in the mirror and giggled. She hadn't given Laney her number to text her. Just the buzzer number. She knew that would probably piss her off too. Having to touch the grimy buzzer. Just having to pick her up from a neighborhood that wasn't trendy or up and coming probably made Laney's hair stand on end.

Good. All the things that Morgun could do to stick little pins into Laney, she was going to do. She might have forgiven her for getting the job she wanted if she had turned out to be a nice person when they'd met at the coffee shop, but nope. She wasn't nice. She was the exact opposite of nice. Raging biotch came to mind, but even that seemed too good to describe her.

Morgun took her time getting to the buzzer. She didn't press the door open, but just spoke into the speaker, promising to be right down. After which she spent a good five minutes gathering up the clutch she'd already packed with her phone, ID, her credit card, a small amount of cash, and her apartment key.

When she finally made it downstairs and out the front door, Morgun took an even greater amount of satisfaction in Laney's red cheeks and tense posture. Laney turned at hearing the door, and Morgun watched her annoyance fade and something else flash across her face. Morgun did know what it was to be checked out. Laney did it, blatantly and appreciatively. She made no secret of looking her up and down, from her feet back up to her face. Now the flush coloring her cheeks was something different entirely.

Holy shit, she's actually attracted to me!

Laney was a photographer with a photographer's eye. She was probably just looking her over, assessing whether she'd be alright to photograph, what light to use, how to position her, Morgun reasoned with herself. Assessment. Not attraction. But for some reason, Laney's dark eyes looked even darker. And wider.

Morgun refused to return the favor. She did note that Laney wore a tight black dress that capped her shoulders and fell to her knees. Laney was tall and slender, with rather large boobs and a nice butt for her sleek frame. It made Morgun slightly jealous. Did Laney Sterling have to have the whole package? She was effortlessly beautiful. She'd straightened her sleek black hair and gone for just about no makeup except for scarlet lipstick. She'd paired her dress with sky high pumps that Morgun knew she wouldn't stand a chance in hell of staying upright in. In short, Laney looked like a freaking model, which only annoyed Morgun because she'd thought so before and she hated to notice.

She hated that twinge in her stomach and her chest which told her that she was,

despite herself, attracted. Whatever. She's beautiful. I can say that with confidence, because beautiful people are usually assholes. That's just a fact. Everyone knows it. I can notice that she's pretty. That her body is killer. I can assess her too. I'm also a photographer, whether I make the big bucks like she does, photographing models and expensive buildings or not.

Laney was able to compose herself remarkably quickly. Probably because in her line of work, she was used to wiping all traces of irritation out of her face and voice and being a professional.

“Ready?”

“Obviously,” Morgun snapped. “Or should I have brought something? A gift?”

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“No. I have that covered. Obviously.”

So, Laney could give as good as she got. Morgun added it to her growing list of things she knew about Laney Sterling. It was just a list of random facts, not good or bad. She wasn't intending to use it for any purpose other than the fact that knowing one's enemy gave one power. The internet said so on one of the revenge lists.

Fuck, am I really that overly nice that I have to look up a list of vengeful things? Maybe that's pathetic. Maybe it's not. It's more admirable to be the nice girl even if you do finish last.

Laney's car was nice. Obviously. It was a sleek, expensive black sedan that three or four sessions for the right clients could probably pay for. Then again, Laney worked for an agency. Maybe it would take her a while to pay it off, just like everyone else. Morgun wasn't sure what the position paid. The job advertisement said it was negotiable mixed with commission. That could vary widely.

Morgun slid into the passenger seat as soon as Laney unlocked the doors. She really had locked the car, even though she'd parked, illegally, right in front of the apartment building, right in direct line of sight, thirty some feet away.

Laney knew where she was going and Morgun didn't see the point of saying anything. She was suddenly nervous but didn't want to give herself away by asking all the questions running through her mind.

Was the wedding big or small? If they were supposed to be dating, shouldn't they know something about each other? Laney had said that it was a more casual thing and

she didn't have to try too hard to sell it. Whatever that meant. How many people would she have to meet? Why wasn't Laney in the wedding party if it was her own brother getting married? Did her sister-in-law hate her that much—she probably had good reason to—or did she just not feel like it and made her wishes clear? When could she go home? When was she going to get her thousand dollars? Chelsea had insisted that she ask for it as a middle finger sort of afterthought.

There were other questions too. Annoying ones. Nagging ones. What did Laney think of the photos she'd sent? Was it good enough to make it in the "big leagues"? What would those contacts think of getting contacted? They were legit. She'd checked. Those were the nagging questions. The annoying ones were the ones where Morgun wanted to ask if Laney had any tips for her or any helpful advice for landing a job and selling herself and her work. She didn't want to want her advice, helpful or otherwise.

Laney broke the silence first. "I guess I should get your name. That's probably helpful. I can't just call you Unicornspooprainbowsandsprinkles498."

"My name didn't seem to matter much to you before."

Laney's lips pursed. "I know," she said, sort of apologetically, but not really. "But I should know it now."

"Morgun," she said too casually. She wasn't good at playing too cool for school.

"Okay, Morgun." Laney took a right-hand corner too sharply. Morgun had to grab for the door handle to keep herself from sliding in the seat. She knew it was intentional. "I want to know how you know me. You said you knew who I was."

Morgun was right. Laney didn't recognize her from that interview two years ago when they both sat in the same waiting room. Morgun had gone first. Maybe if she hadn't, she would have gotten the job instead. She'd speculated about it a million

times. What she could have said or done differently. They'd said they liked her portfolio, but she wasn't experienced enough. What they really meant was that they didn't like her. That's the part she hadn't exactly explained to Chelsea that night when they were sitting side by side at the desk, staring at Laney's profile.

It was too hurtful to contemplate all the ways you could be not good enough, let alone try to explain it to someone else.

"Who wouldn't know you? You're kind of a high-profile photographer. I'm also a photographer. That's how I knew who you were. I recognized your photo. That's all."

"Is that why you messaged me? With the intent of blackmailing me or tricking me into giving you contacts or using me to set up a meeting for you with my employer?"

"No." Morgun somehow managed to say it with a straight face. "You were the one that started in with the arrangement and exchange of services and money, if I remember correctly. I messaged you because I know you're beautiful and attractive and I thought we'd have some common interests, given that we both work in the same field."

"Ha, beautiful," Laney mimicked like it was the worst kind of insult. She turned to Morgun, but Morgun refused to look at her, even though she felt Laney's eyes burning straight through the side of her face. "You think I'm beautiful?"

"I'm sure anyone else would agree. Outwardly, it's obvious. Inner beauty? I think that's lacking. Obviously."

It was then that Morgun realized that some people liked being perceived as hard or bitchy or uncaring. Or that they just didn't give a shit what people thought. She wasn't sure which Laney was, or maybe, surprisingly, she had a good sense of humor, because she just nodded, took another turn too sharply, and gave a confident



response.

“Obviously.”

## Chapter 8

Laney

Laney took back everything she'd thought about Morgun being that sweet, pretty, blonde, girl next door type. She was a little spitfire beneath her charming exterior. Witty, intelligent, knew how to use sarcasm. Probably had a wicked sense of humor. She also had a killer body that wasn't apparent from when they went for coffee or in those selfies, and her hair and makeup made her look nothing short of a celebrity. She was going to draw a lot of attention at the wedding.

Laney realized how annoying that would be, but it wasn't like she had much of a choice. She didn't think that Morgun would wear a dress that shamelessly outlined everything like she was naked, clothed in a gossamer sheet. Even though the dress was totally opaque, it outlined everything. She wasn't sure who wore something better suited to the beach to a wedding, but she wasn't about to say anything. That would be pointing out that she'd noticed.

She also wasn't sold on Morgun's explanation of why she'd messaged her, but she let it slide. Whatever the reason, it didn't matter.

Laney pulled into the parking lot of the massive arts building. It was a gallery

with three stories, complete with tinted glass, wood and metal accents, and towering sculptures of just about every medium on the lush lawn.

“This is where they're getting married?” Morgun exclaimed in disbelief.

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“Yeah. I know. It’s not the most obvious choice in the world, but yes.”

“It’s an art gallery.”

“I know. It’s not a huge wedding, so I guess that’s why they were able to have it here. Believe it or not, they do catering and meetings and other functions. Work stuff, I imagine. Or dinners. That kind of thing. The place is big enough.”

“Yeah, I just...yeah.” Morgun fumbled with her seatbelt, suddenly very clearly nervous. “What are your parents like? The rest of your family? Am I going to get mobbed?”

“Mobbed?”

“Ambushed?”

“Oh. Yeah, probably. Mostly by my mom. We do probably have to sit with them, but don’t worry. She won’t pinch your cheeks. She might try to hug you. A lot. She might also cry.”

“Jesus. Are you that hard up for a date? Is she close to writing you off? Are you a troublesome daughter?”

“No,” Laney snorted. “Actually, yes. And yes. And maybe.” She didn’t want to have to explain this to Morgun, because it should be obvious, but maybe it wasn’t. They were both photographers, but they likely had different schedules and it was clear that their personalities couldn’t be more different either. “She wants me to settle down

and have a family. She doesn't want me to work so much. She thinks I'm getting old and the chance to be happy is going to pass me by."

"I see. But you're not that old, are you?"

"No." Laney found herself cracking a smile. "Not yet. To her? Yes. Ancient. She had two kids long before she was thirty. She was a stay at home mom. The best mom. Her family was her whole world. She did have a couple jobs before she had my brother, but after that, she didn't work outside the house. I don't know if she doesn't realize that a career can be just as rewarding or if she's just worried that she'll never have grandkids or both, but the nagging has become incessant lately. I swear, if she could, she'd order up reports on my ovaries. Then again, she was bugging me about finding someone and having a career, since she might be interested in having the kids and being a stay at home mom."

"Good lord," Morgun groaned. "I can see I'm really in for it."

"Look." Laney slid her seatbelt off too. "The requirement, crazy as it might sound, was that I bring a date to the wedding. That was it. She knows I probably had to bribe my way into it, but if you could refrain from mentioning that, I'd appreciate it. My parents are mostly normal otherwise. No one is going to give you a hard time. We'll get in and get out, and as soon as I can make a clean getaway, I'll pay you your thousand dollars and drive you home and you never have to see me again."

"Unless we end up working together. Or running into each other along the way somewhere."

"Right," Laney said slowly. Why hadn't she considered that? "Yeah. I guess."

"You don't think that I'll get a job anywhere? Was my work so terrible?"

Morgun wasn't fishing for compliments. She was sincere in her self-doubt. How many times had she been rejected before? Laney knew how much that could sting. She knew how it could make a person doubt not only their work, but themselves as well. How many times had she painfully gone over her portfolio, analyzing every single image? She couldn't even begin to count the hours and hours of research she'd done into taking those shots in the first place. She wanted to give people what they wanted, not necessarily what she liked to photograph or how she liked to do it.

"No. No, it wasn't terrible. I looked at your website after. Your photos aren't terrible." She didn't offer any more feedback. No tips and no pointers. She didn't have time, but she wouldn't have, even if she did. She figured telling Morgun exactly what was required to succeed in a certain portion of the industry wasn't going to help her.

"I guess we should go in, then." Morgun produced her phone from the clutch that was in her lap. "It would be really awful to walk in late and we're cutting it close already."

"I know. I did it on purpose. No one likes the ceremony anyway. Everyone just goes to the reception to eat and get drunk."

"It sounds like you hate weddings."

"Nope. Just humanity in general."

Morgun rolled her eyes. "It's not like I can tell or anything."

She opened the car door and tumbled out before Laney. She walked a couple paces ahead of her, to the massive glass front door. Laney let her. It wasn't like this was a real date or anything. They didn't need to be mushy or hold hands. Her mom stipulated that she had to bring someone. She didn't say that she had to fall all over

herself with PDA or even enjoy it.

There was a huge sign with arrows as soon as they walked into the building. The windows let in tons of light and gave the even bigger, wide open area with the white tile and wood and metal steps, and even more open, airy, and fresh feeling.

“Wow!” Morgun exclaimed.

Laney ignored her and took a hard left. She had to admit to herself that she was nervous about how this was going to go over with her parents. She also hated weddings, which was why she resolutely refused to photograph them. Her refusal to do her brother’s wedding led to a blowout between them. Jason hadn’t spoken to her for a few weeks after, but eventually Natasha intervened and found a different photographer who wasn’t too expensive.

Four grand was still expensive enough.

Laney pasted on a look she hoped screamed confidence. It was a look she used to reassure her clients, even when she wasn’t certain at all how the shoot would turn out. She didn’t look back at Morgun until they arrived at the huge reception room on the second floor, where the wedding was being held.

The floor was lined with massive windows and had pieces of art lining either side, but Morgun powered through, knowing that they didn’t have time to stop and look at anything, and joined Laney right at the doorway to a massive room with more of the same windows, white tile, and wood accents.

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There was a defined aisle separating two sides of metal chairs. They were strange and uncomfortable looking. There was a tacky arch set up at the front with toile, fake flowers, and lights, but that was pretty much the only décor. The place was both fancy, well lit, and modern enough. Adding the cheesy, token wedding shit would only make it look worse.

Laney spotted her parents in the front row. She didn't want to sit in the front, but she could just imagine what Jason would say if she didn't. She inhaled sharply, grabbed Morgun's hand, and stalked towards the front, basically pulling her along. She ignored Morgun's slightly raspy, surprised inhale, and the way the heat from her small, slender fingers traveled up into her arm. Laney didn't expect to notice anything, and those pinpricks of heat were quite jarring.

"Mom. Dad." Laney nodded at them as they stared at her in open shock. She kept her face totally bland and devoid of emotion. She wasn't going to smirk at her mom, because that would only prove that she'd done something underhanded to make this date a reality. "These are my parents. Tom and Helena."

"Hi." Morgun nodded at them both shyly.

Helena recovered from her shock quickly and went straight into full on drill sergeant mom mode. "Aren't you just the cutest thing?" Her eyes flicked to Laney, searching, then back to Morgun. "Were you blackmailed into this?"

"Mom!"

"Not really. I actually did the blackmailing." Morgun winked. Both of Laney's

parents laughed.

Her dad said something to her mom about leaving them alone and Laney was able to steer Morgun to the two metal chairs left open for them.

“Only a million more hours to go,” Laney grumbled as they sat.

“You’d think that you didn’t like weddings or something.” Morgun slowly untangled her hand and rested it in her lap.

Laney turned and found her smirkin

g at her knowingly. She swallowed hard. It was like Morgun had her freaking number. She knew what game she was playing. She might hate weddings, but she was being far more curmudgeonly than normal. Deep down, she was happy for her brother and Natasha. Maybe even a little bit jealous.

Okay, she was totally jealous of Natasha’s relationship with Helena. She was closer to Laney’s mom than Laney seemed to be lately. Plus, she was getting married with the whole white dress, sappy everything deal. Then she was for sure going to get down to having a family. Laney could just sense it.

“Oh look! It’s starting!” Morgun sounded totally lovesick, just like the rest of the guests. She was sitting up straighter. Angling for a better view of the wedding party. She was giving off all sorts of sappy, romantic energy.

Which frightened and slightly intimidated Laney. And puzzled her. She should easily be able to scoff at that and even out and out hate it. Except that she couldn’t. Not really. No matter how hard she tried.

Chapter 9

Morgun

The ceremony was beautiful. The bride and groom couldn't have picked a more picturesque venue. The bride, Natasha, was stunning. She was tall and fair, with nearly-white blonde hair. Her makeup was tasteful, her dress perfect, her flowers red poinsettias in a display of greenery as a subtle nod to the season.

As fair as Natasha was, Jason was dark like Laney, with an olive undertone and jet-black hair. He resembled his father closely, in height and build, but didn't sport a beard like him. Morgun thought that both Laney and Jason looked more like their dad, but it was hard to tell without turning her head and staring at Helena Sterling.

After the ceremony, the photographer got the family together for photos outside before she would take the wedding party off somewhere else for their shots.

It was easy for Morgun to see that the photographer was clearly struggling with the family shots. The poses seemed to elude her, and people were rightfully nervous and awkward. It was like herding cats. In short, it was turning into a disaster.

Morgun was dumbfounded that Laney didn't offer to help. She didn't step in, speak up, or offer any pointers. She didn't even try to get her own family to cooperate. Maybe she didn't want to step on any toes—there was nothing worse than a loudmouth photographer telling another photographer what to do when she wasn't supposed to be working—but she could have been more helpful.

The photographer was young. Probably mid-twenties. She was alone, which was hard enough, but she was getting close to tears when the shots weren't working, and people were getting impatient.

Finally, Morgun stepped in. She offered tips. Arranged bodies. Even gave a few pointers about camera settings for the sun that unfortunately had just squeezed



through a layer of cloud. Sun was shit for taking good photos.

Morgun continued to help the grateful photographer, just with posing tips mostly, helping arrange people and corral people into the right place at the right time. She purposely never looked at Laney once. She didn't even feel her hot gaze or her evil scowl on her. But she imagined that maybe she could, because she could also imagine that Laney was annoyed with her for stepping in to begin with.

With a little help, they were able to finish up the family photos and get the wedding party on their way. They only had so much time before the reception, and Morgun could definitely sympathize with how stressful that was.

Good lord, I hate photographing weddings. Please, please, please let me get that job.

Even if she had to work with Laney Painey, it would be worth it.

Morgun smiled to herself at her childish nickname for Laney Sterling. It was so fitting.

When she looked away from the building, which she'd been studying with a photographer's eye, imagining how she'd capture the angles and even going so far as to work through camera settings in her head, she saw Laney striding towards her.

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Whoever came up with that speak of the devil saying had been so on point.

Since everyone else appeared to be distracted, Morgun made up her mind to ask Laney why she was being such a Karen. Morgun had two younger sisters, Katelyn and Katira, and if one of them was getting married, she'd sure be excited about it. Theirs would be the only weddings she'd be thrilled to photograph, and she'd for sure be a part of it, as much as they wanted her to be. What she wouldn't do was sulk and grouch around and make everyone feel on edge.

"Glad that's over," Laney huffed.

Morgun frowned. "Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why you're such a Sour Sally."

"A Sour Sally? Where'd you come up with that? Elementary?"

"If I did, it would still be more mature than how you're acting. Jesus. Why aren't you in the wedding party? And you could have helped out that poor girl. She was almost in tears."

"It's not my fault she doesn't know how to do her job. For four grand, I'd expect that she could handle family photos."

"Weddings are stressful!"

“I know. It’s why I don’t shoot them.”

“See! You’ve probably never done one. You can’t imagine how much pressure there is. I’m always worried that someone is going to hate their pictures and sue me. Or that something will happen, and they’ll all get erased or something.. I bring a backup, but I always have frantic thoughts like that. On top of dealing with all the bridezillas and momzillas and groomzillas, and everyone else, it’s rough. You could have cut her some slack and helped out.”

Morgun expected Laney to blow her off or say something sarcastic and biting, but she didn’t. Maybe she liked to change things up and keep everyone guessing. Or maybe she was just tired of acting like a royal bitch.

“My brother and I got into it about the photos. This was last year. He wanted me to do them. I didn’t want to because I don’t shoot weddings. I told him that. He thought I should make an exception. I said that they’d turn out like garbage because it’s not my area of expertise. He still wanted me to do them. We got into a huge fight about it and he said that it was fine with him if I didn’t want to do them, but I wouldn’t be doing anything else for the wedding either. He wouldn’t let Natasha ask me to be one of her bridesmaids. I said that was just fine with me because—ugh! I’m not going to get into it now.” Laney glanced cautiously across the long, rolling stretch of grass, to where her parents were chatting with Natasha’s parents. “They don’t know about the fight. I’d like to keep it that way.”

“But that’s...couldn’t you just make up and get over it?”

“You don’t know my brother. And you don’t know me. We did make up, kind of. Natasha understood that I didn’t want to do the photos and it wasn’t anything personal. She got that I was worried they wouldn’t turn out well because I wasn’t experienced in weddings and the pressure of doing them for someone close to me would eat me up. She was nice about it and she found a photographer on her own.

She tried to convince Jason to change his mind about having me in the wedding party, but I told her not to worry about it. She's too nice to get all stressed over it. I said it would be easier for me not to be included, since I'd be a shitty bridesmaid anyway. I work too much and travel too much and I couldn't have been there to help her with anything or even attend her bachelorette party. I was in New York when she had it. It all worked out anyway. My brother did me a favor. I guess I hate people having to pay attention to me. I didn't want to give a speech or get stared at while I ate my dinner or stand up there where everyone could study me."

"That actually sounds very human. Maybe the first human thing you've said since I met you."

One thing about Laney, Morgun realized, was that she could dish it constantly, but she could also take it too. She allowed her lips to arc into a half smile. It brightened up her face and Morgun was struck by how beautiful Laney was. She was much prettier when she wasn't scowling. Her eyes lit up when she attempted to be happy. Or maybe that was just the sun peeking out from behind the clouds again, illuminating her face.

"Maybe I'm not such a monster after all."

"Jury's still out on that. I'll let you know by the end of the night."

"Don't say the jury's out. No one says that from our generation. And don't say Sour Sally. Say Karen."

Morgun's stomach pinched at Laney thinking exactly what she had earlier. She didn't want to think common thoughts with Laney Sterling. Laney clearly had a much more devious mind. Morgun thought so, but now, after their chat about Laney's brother and the wounded/exhausted/slight amount of love Laney used in her tone, Morgun wasn't so sure. She hated that she had doubts. It was much easier just to not like someone

and keep it that way.

“I’d like to know what this Karen lady did that everyone hates her so much,” Morgun commented dryly.

“It’s just an expression.”

“I know, but where did it even come from? I swear it just popped up one day online and then it was everywhere.”

“On that note, the reception doesn’t start until five and it’s only four now, but maybe we can convince the bar staff to start serving drinks early. Or maybe they won’t need any convincing. Maybe they’re already pouring.”

“I—”

Laney’s attention was caught and held by her parents, who were moving towards them.

“Quick! They’re coming this way!” She set her hand at the small of Morgun’s back and a strange thrill shot up her spine at the contact, even though it wasn’t skin on skin. Her hand was warm, strong, guiding her at a fast pace across the lawn towards the building.

Ceremony down, only the reception to go. Morgun could get on board with having that drink if it helped her get through the rest of the night.

### Chapter 10

#### Laney

Laney was surprised at how quickly the time passed. She was relieved that for the most part, they were able to evade her parents. She didn't sit down at the table with her family until the last minute, when she noticed her mom giving her the stink eye, telling her to get her butt in the empty seat before it was taken. That was Laney's plan all along, but it hadn't worked out. She had to sit with her family.

Thank God it was hard for her mom to play twenty questions with Morgun when people were eating and then sitting through the speeches and the slideshow. That dragged on, but Laney was thankful for her mom being preoccupied with it. Her parents had to give a speech, welcoming Natasha into the family, and that took up her mom's total concentration.

After that organized part of the evening was over, Laney made another getaway from the table. She just had to get through the drunk hours and the dancing, the cake cutting and maybe even a couple gifts and she could go. Helena, being mother of the groom, had people cornering her to talk with her well after the tables dispersed for the dinner things to be cleared away and the dancing to begin.

Unfortunately, Laney was also caught up by a few family members. Cousins, aunts, uncles, all wanting to speak with her. Morgun disappeared during it, leaving Laney to handle that on her own. After nearly half an hour of making small talk, her face hurt from forced smiling and her throat was so dry she could hardly swallow. Another drink was definitely in order.

Laney found Morgun standing with a group of twenty-somethings discussing politics of all things. She watched with amusement as Morgun didn't notice her hanging back behind the semi-circle. Morgun had a drink in her hand, a vodka cranberry, Laney thought, since that's what she'd ordered before dinner. Her cheeks were slightly pink, since the room was getting warm, and her whole face was animated as she spoke.

Laney's chest squeezed strangely. Like there was something buzzing deep down inside of her.

Laney hung back, unseen and unnoticed, until a lanky guy in a suit which was already getting sloppy, the buttons on his shirt undone at the top, his tie long gone, his jacket shed somewhere, decided to open his big mouth, swipe his shaggy blond hair out of his eyes, and ask Morgun a very inappropriate question.

"So, you ever sleep with guys?" Shaggy Blonde Caveman slurred, already drunk before the real drinking had even started.

An unnatural hush fell over the group. One of the women inhaled sharply. Another cleared her throat uncomfortably. The dark-haired behemoth beside the shaggy drunk asshole laughed and elbowed his friend in the side.

Laney was ready to charge in and save Morgun, but as she stepped closer, Morgun easily held her own. She smiled casually, like she didn't mind being asked a rude question like that at all, and shrugged.

"No. Do you?"

"Ooh," the asshole's friend said loudly, elbowing his buddy again.

Shaggy Asshole didn't take that well. His face darkened. Disgusted, Laney decided to cut in. She had no idea who this guy was or why he was at the wedding. She didn't

recognize him and neither her brother nor Natasha had such shit taste in friends or acquaintances.

“I’ve been looking for you everywhere,” Laney exclaimed, draping her arm around Morgun’s waist. The contact felt jarring and suddenly it was like she’d swallowed a whole swarm of flies, but Laney pressed on. Without explanation or making pleasant excuses to the group, she pulled Morgun away and led her to the bar.

“Thanks,” Morgun sighed.

She was so grateful that she momentarily forgot about Laney’s arm. Laney didn’t forget. She hadn’t forgotten at all. She slowly let it fall away, but losing the contact made her feel strangely bereft. It was like getting the covers tugged off you first thing in the morning when you were nowhere near done sleeping.

“That guy was an asshole.”

“He was just drunk. It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine!” They edged a few steps further up in the line that extended back from the bar. Now that the dinner was over, apparently everyone in the place had developed a massive thirst.

Morgun’s expression changed, growing amused. Amused and all too knowing. Laney could feel the color draining from her face, and she was glad that the lights weren’t fully on in the large room anymore. The lighting was terrible. It was so dark at the back of the open area, and harshly lit at the front near the head table and the dance floor area. The huge windows in the room did nothing for it since it was dark out.

“You know what I think?”



Laney didn't want to know. Morgun, she was sure, saw too much already. Of course, she decided to tell her anyway.

"I think that you care. In fact, I think you aren't this tough, hard hitting, thick skinned, mean, ruthless person you make yourself out to be."

"I just don't want you to think that my brother or sister-in-law or any of my family knows that guy. I've never seen him before. My brother certainly doesn't have friends like that."

"Relax. He's just drunk. Like I said. And I think it's more than that. You do care about what people say and what people think."

Laney stiffened. She felt cold all over, like someone had just thrown in her into a bathtub full of ice cubes.

"What's wrong with being who you are?" Morgun asked, totally genuine.

Laney was about to list the thousand things she could immediately think of just off the top of her head, starting with her parents, the assholes she had to work with and endure every day, and a large portion of the rest of the world, but Morgun took her silence for a non-answer and shrugged, but that shrug said she wasn't fooled.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:20 pm*

She did let Laney off the hook though.

“I could use another drink.” She eyed her empty glass. “Thank goodness they’re free, because they’re not mixing them nearly strong enough.”

“Finally, something we can agree on.”

They waited in line again and grabbed two drinks. Laney was starting to feel slightly lightheaded. Her body was warm, her skin tingling. That was the alcohol, she thought. Just the alcohol. The dancing was starting up. Laney threw back the rest of her drink in a single gulp. Morgun stood beside her, relaxed, natural, like they really were a couple.

Laney glanced around the room anxiously and spotted her mom in the distance. As though her gaze was magnetic, Helena turned her head to study them.

Shit.

Laney knew she didn’t have to sell anything. She’d probably fulfilled the requirements of bringing a date and that was likely good enough, but she didn’t want to take chances. She’d gone to a lot of trouble already, and she was going to shell out a grand for this. She didn’t want it to all be for nothing. That would be extremely annoying.

Helena smiled at Laney from across the room and started to head towards them. Laney panicked. She grabbed Morgun’s arm with one hand and her drink with the other. She set the glass down smoothly and, just as smoothly, like they’d rehearsed it,

she steered Morgun through the throng of people behind them and straight onto the dance floor.

Laney wasn't sure if the first dance had already happened. Maybe? She realized she might be a little bit more than buzzed. She wasn't paying attention and she felt bad. But then, no, she was sure she hadn't missed it. There would have been an announcement. The first dance didn't belong to the bride and groom this night, because there were couples already swaying to the slow country song playing. They were illuminated like shadows in the dimly lit area of the dance floor. It was brighter around the edges of the room.

"What are we doing?" Morgun gasped as Laney's hand settled at the small of her back and the other rested on her shoulder. Morgun was tense, her body stiff and confused.

Laney glided back and forth in slow motion and Morgun fell easily into step with her. "We're enjoying one token dance because my mom is watching, then we'll take a bathroom break or get some air, hopefully where no one will find us for a few minutes."

"Um, alright..."

"Tha

nks for playing along."

"Sure." Morgun was a good follower. She even let Laney believe she was a decent leader.

Their bodies swayed easily together. The heat of Morgun's body burned into hers where they were connected. Laney's heart raced inexplicably. She was also strangely

short of breath. Her head felt like her brain was swimming laps in a sloshing sea. She almost never drank, and there she was with a few glasses totally taking her judgement for a wild ride. It was totally the drinks, because she couldn't actually be enjoying Morgun's proximity, could she?

Laney didn't even like dancing, but she found her body oddly relaxed and at ease with it. And oddly thrilled at the times when Morgun was closer than she maybe had to be.

They swayed together and Laney tried to figure out where she was at with the unexpected surge of heat welling up in her belly, her rapid heartbeat, and her spinning thoughts. She had no clue what she was doing.

She loved her brother and she loved Natasha, she really did, but maybe she just didn't like weddings. For most of the day, she'd dealt with an angry bundle of nerves. She felt stressed and she knew she acted stressed. She should be nicer. Like Morgun said. It was just so hard to be nice when she was so used to having to look over her shoulder. And her mom basically breathing down her neck didn't help.

Maybe bringing Morgun was a bad idea. Not that it was Morgun. Bringing anyone would have been a bad idea. Laney felt extra pressure to pretend that everything was fine. She couldn't relax. She couldn't really enjoy her brother's day. She felt that even though she and Jason worked out their differences over her not doing the photos, she was still a little bit on edge about it. She didn't want to be, but she was.

It's just weddings. I never liked them. I can still be happy for my brother and Natasha and not like weddings, can't I?

"Laney?"

Laney snapped out of it and looked around rapidly like they were going to be jumped

by a pack of jackals before she turned back to Morgun. “What’s that?”

“The song? It’s over? Want to get some air?” Morgun looked like she didn’t mind the idea at all.

Laney slowly relaxed her grip then loosened it altogether. Her hands felt empty. Cold. Morgun’s body heat was gone as soon as she stepped away. Laney could only explain the sensation as something that felt a lot like loss or regret, or some such nonsense. Was it possible she was drunker than she thought? That would explain the irrational thoughts and emotions she couldn’t seem to keep at bay.

“Laney? Are you coming?”

She had to shake herself a second time. “Yeah.”

She followed Morgun through the crowd and made a clean break out of the room. There was a long hall that extended past them. It wasn’t well lit, because it was probably supposed to be mood-lit or whatever. The walls had some token pieces of art behind glass, probably the cheap stuff that couldn’t easily be damaged, the stuff no one drunk from a wedding could damage or would think about jacking off the wall to take home to decorate with.

Morgun glanced left, then right. “I wonder where the bathrooms are.”

“Why? Do you have to pee?”

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:20 pm*

Morgun shot Laney a scathing look. “No, but I thought that you wanted a break.”

Laney suddenly felt daring. She felt reckless. She didn’t feel like herself at all. When she looked at Morgun, the low light filtered down, turning her sandy blonde hair to an ashen color, and her green eyes seemed to glow like a cat’s. A very attractive cat. A sleek, beautiful cat dressed in black, with perfect curves, perfect breasts, gorgeous, delicate features. A cat of the night. Elegant and wild.

Morgun’s lips parted a fraction and her eyes got a wide and startled when she realized just how Laney was suddenly looking at her.

Maybe it was a full moon. Maybe it was the drinks. Maybe it was the dance. Maybe it was because Morgun was beautiful, sexy, smart, sweet, talented—she was a complete package and it was hard as heck not to find that attractive. Maybe it was because it had just been a really long time since Laney had any sort of connection with anyone. Okay, it had been a while for other things too. Her body felt it. She felt it. Her head felt it.

And for once her better judgement wasn’t going to change her mind, because the booze had shot that to shit.

Laney reached out and took Morgun’s hand. Morgun didn’t jerk it away. She searched the hallway with her eyes before taking a few steps and tugging Morgun behind her. Maybe Morgun was too stunned to pull away, or maybe she didn’t mind getting dragged, but either way she came willingly.

Laney tried the first handle. It was locked. She moved on to the second with a giggle

and a heartbeat that echoed in her ears. Her body felt like it was on fire. The handle gave.

The room, whatever it was, was tiny and dark. So dark that as soon as Laney tugged Morgun in and shut the door, she could barely see a thing. Laney's fingers deftly found the small lock under the handle and twisted it. In the dark, she turned, and Morgun was still there, her outline just visible. There was only a moment's hesitation before they reached for each other, the darkness disappearing, the air disappearing, everything disappearing between them.

## Chapter 11

### Morgun

Laney's actions surprised Morgun. Then again, nothing about Laney was boring or predictable. She was starting to realize that the real Laney was hidden away under layers and layers. The real Laney was complex and unfathomable. Morgun didn't know how to read her right up until the point she looked at her in the hallway, her eyes heavy lidded, but clear with desire. There was no mistaking it. The last thing Morgun expected was for Laney to grab her hand and propel her into some room down the hall. Or to lock the door. Or to kiss her.

She had to admit that she wouldn't have thought that kissing Laney Sterling could be nice. But it was so much more than nice. Laney Sterling did not disappoint in the kissing department.

Laney pulled away first, coming up for air. Morgun inhaled so hard she worried her lungs might explode. She felt like the wind had been knocked clean out of her. There was a very real possibility that her nipples were so hard they were going to cut straight through her dress. The decision not to wear panties that morning wasn't exactly the smartest idea, because she was throbbing south of the border. She could

literally feel beads of moisture gathering and snaking down her thighs. She rubbed her legs together indiscreetly, but that only worsened the ache and soaked her dress.

Laney set her fingers on Morgun's jaw and cupped her face tenderly. Morgun's eyes had adjusted to the dark of the room and she could see the twin flames dancing in Laney's dark eyes. She looked at Morgun with an expression that Morgun had never seen from Laney. It bordered on tenderness, but it was all mixed up with her kiss-swollen lips, huge eyes, and heavy breathing, so maybe it was hard to tell. Maybe Morgun was getting it wrong.

But then Laney brushed the side of her index finger over Morgun's cheek, and the touch was so whisper soft and gentle that she knew she wasn't imagining the tenderness and intimacy in it. That single touch caused a chain reaction to explode in Morgun. Laney might as well have been touching her everywhere else, because the throbbing got worse and she could practically smell her arousal.

Her body ached. Her blood surged. Her heart pounded wildly. Her brain checked out and her rationality and inhibitions were already taken care of by the alcohol. She wasn't drunk, but she was definitely buzzed, and the fact that she and Laney were alone in a darkened room with a locked door didn't bother her the way it should have.

In fact, it didn't bother Morgun at all. She could think of a long list of things she'd like to do to Laney in that room, and telling her not to continue touching her and escaping from the room didn't even get close to making it onto said list.

Morgun wanted to strip Laney's clothes away one by one. She wanted to taste every inch of her skin. She wondered what Laney's neck would taste like, her breasts, her belly, lower...

Laney let out a groan like she could either read Morgun's mind or was on the exact same page of the exact same book. She grabbed Morgun around the waist and pulled



her in close. Their bodies bumped against each other hard. Morgun groaned when she felt their pelvic bones grind together. She could feel the heat of Laney too. Everywhere. But especially when her legs parted, and she ground against Morgun. Morgun's hands frantically tangled in Laney's hair and she brought their mouths together again and kissed her desperately.

Laney kissed back furiously. They ground against each other and explored with their hands while their tongues went to war, stroking and igniting fire. Laney was amazing with her tongue and Morgun didn't come up for air until her lungs were bursting. Her lips felt thick and full, swollen from the force of Laney's kiss. She couldn't remember ever being kissed like that.

She couldn't remember ever still feeling starved for more after.

Laney dropped her head and cupped Morgun's breast with her hand. She suckled her right through her dress and bra and the sensation was astounding. She might as well not have been wearing anything at all. Morgun trembled and shivered under Laney's skilled hands. When Laney scraped her teeth over Morgun's nipple, she felt it straight to her core.

When she lifted her head, Morgun nearly cried out and begged her for more. Her nipple throbbed. The cold air hit like a knife and everything echoed so much lower.

Laney steadied Morgun, grasping her around the waist again. She steered her through the darkened room and Morgun went helplessly, trusting Laney implicitly even though she knew, somewhere in this very dim recess of herself, that there was something about Laney Sterling that she wasn't supposed to like.

Dislike seemed far away. Morgun couldn't summon up any if she tried. Then her back hit a wall somewhere in the room, and Laney was sliding down her body, her hands at her waist, then at her thighs, then lower, at her calves and ankles, pushing up

the thin, stretchy fabric of her dress.

How could she dislike Laney? There was nothing to dislike about the heated satin of Laney's hand

s against Morgun's legs. Burning up her calves. Her knees. Her thighs. Laney pushed up her dress until she was completely exposed.

Laney let out a gasp when she realized Morgun wasn't wearing any panties, but she didn't comment on it. She also didn't hesitate. Laney held up the fabric of Morgun's dress with one hand and guided Morgun's legs apart with the other, opening her completely. Morgun moaned and writhed into Laney's touch.

Morgun realized that she should be embarrassed. There should be some kind of hesitation going on in her mind. She was in some random room in an art gallery, at a wedding with people she didn't even know.

This is an agreement. This isn't part of the agreement. She didn't want Laney to stop. She didn't want her to stop any of it. So, what if it's an agreement and this isn't part of it? There's always room for improvement on just about everything...

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:20 pm*

Laney didn't use her fingers first. She didn't take her time exploring or teasing. No, Laney wasn't like anyone else. She dove in, her tongue tasting, lashing Morgun. Her knees went watery and she swore she could have liquefied and slid down the wall, but Laney held her with her one hand, kept her safely against the wall. Morgun's entire body trembled. She closed her eyes, threw her head back against the hard wall behind her, let her eyes roll back, and enjoyed what Laney was doing.

Morgun moaned wildly, thrusting her fingers into Laney's hair as she writhed. She had never felt so unhinged in her life. Laney wasn't afraid to change it up. She knew exactly how to taste and touch Morgun to make her wild. She used her fingers to slowly circle Morgun's straining clit while she thrust her tongue up inside her. She switched that up too, teasing the tight bud with her tongue while she slowly soaked her finger in Morgun's slick folds, then even more slowly, inserted it inside her.

"Fuck, you're tight," Laney groaned.

Morgun just about lost it. Her whole body was felt numb, but it was also glowing with sensation. Every nerve ending felt like it might have been burned off. She was losing it. Losing control. Losing herself. Losing the fight to hold back. Why am I holding back? She didn't know, except that she didn't want it to end.

Waves of pleasure rolled from her toes, mingling with the shivers already gathered in her thighs. Morgun knew it was only a matter of seconds before that tight coil in her belly, her thighs, and her core reached the crescendo and gave way.

Laney probably sensed it too. She didn't change what she was doing, because what she was doing was already pure magic. Morgun could feel her leg muscles tightening.

Her belly trembled then tightened with every new shiver. She wrenched her head back, hitting the wall hard, but it didn't create any more stars behind her closed eyes than what was already there. And there was an entire sky full of them.

Laney did something magic with her hand where she touched Morgun's clit while she kept thrusting up into her. Her tongue explored her folds, lapping at her, suckling her, making noises that should have turned Morgun red with embarrassment, but she was too far gone to even consider it. Those noises were hot. She didn't think it was possible to be more turned on, but listening to Laney eating her loudly, not holding back and with zero shame of her own, was probably the biggest turn-on Morgun had ever experienced.

Her hips bucked wildly, rolling into Laney's hand and face. Morgun tried to keep the volume to a minimum because she did realize that they were in some random room and anyone, probably even security, could come looking for them. There was a point when she couldn't keep her moans and whimpers in, and they crashed and ricocheted off the walls of the room.

And then she came. She came so hard that she had no idea if she was screaming or making no sound at all. The room disappeared and it was just her and Laney and the pleasure. The hot waves were so violent and brutal that they were almost painful, but that was okay. It was so damn good.

Morgun had never, ever, not once in her life, experienced a climax that gripped her entire body. Her fingertips and her toes were tingling. Her legs were on fire. Her arms were heavy. Her stomach and thighs were tight with the aftershocks. She could feel the way her inner walls clenched around Laney's finger. She could feel her whole body throbbing and pulsing. She came until she was totally spent, and even then, the shockwaves and aftershocks continued.

"Oh, my goodness," Morgun panted.

“Same from down here.” Laney stood up. She hesitated for just a second, then kissed Morgun just as furiously and passionately as she had before.

## Chapter 12

Laney

Laney knew her lips were swollen and glistening with Morgun’s arousal, but Morgun wasn’t squeamish about tasting herself. She kissed Laney hard, thrusting her tongue into her mouth and moaning when she tasted the spice of herself there.

The alcohol was still working, and the regrets hadn’t kicked in yet. Not that she should have any. This wasn’t anything permanent. This was a one-off at a wedding. And why not? They were young. They were slightly buzzed. There was attraction there. What was wrong with what they were doing?

What was she so afraid of anyway? Feeling something? Being alive? Having a good time? Maybe Laney wanted the one thing she kept telling everyone she didn’t, even just a little, because everyone wanted it, didn’t they?

When Laney pulled away, she was so turned on by the kiss, by touching Morgun, by tasting her, by just being alone with her, that she was ready for more. So much more. She would have done anything with Morgun in that room. Her eyes were well adjusted to the light and Morgun was looking at her with a hungry, intense stare that said she would do just about anything as well. Her eyes were big and soft. Her whole face was suffused with something that didn’t come from just a really good orgasm.

Laney might have felt the connection as well, but she wasn’t going to admit it. She didn’t have room in her life for feelings. Pleasure, yes. Sex, sure. Relationships...she’d tried that, and they usually didn’t work out. Mostly because her lifestyle didn’t suit one. She just couldn’t see herself getting involved with someone.

That would be giving her family, particularly her mom, fuel for the already roaring fire. Plus, Laney was just too busy.

She thought she could pull Morgun into this room and they could let the sparks fly and enjoy each other. After, they could blame it on the alcohol if they wanted, or whatever else they saw fit, and they could get on with their lives.

Laney was so sure Morgun didn't like her. You didn't have to like a person to be attracted to them. It seemed like a safe idea. Plus, there was always the fact that Laney probably wouldn't see Morgun again and Morgun wouldn't see her. If they were willing to have some fun for a single night, why not? It was nice to unwind sometimes, and weddings and booze definitely had that effect on some people.

But Morgun was looking at her like she wanted more. As in, something beyond the room, beyond physical. She didn't want to blame what happened on anything other than the fact that she wanted it.

Laney had seen that look before. The softness. And she just couldn't go there.

Even if it felt like something sharp and evil digging at her ribs. Errant underwire. That's kind of what the sensation was like. Except from the inside out.

"Look," she whispered. "I think...I think maybe we should get back."

Morgun frowned and her eyes glazed over with pain she couldn't hide. It made the spot behind Laney's ribs ache with even more ferocity.

"But I...I thought..." Morgun bit down on her bottom lip. Her eyes were huge. She didn't blink and Laney eventually had to look away.

"I think you've more than fulfilled your end of the deal. If you want, I'll call you a

cab.”

“A cab?”

“I’m clearly too buzzed to drive.”

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:20 pm*

Morgun got the message real fast. The confusion left her face and her eyes narrowed. A touch of red appeared in her cheeks, but it wasn't a blush. It was just straight pissed off.

"I see. So, you want to just get rid of me after what we just did."

&n

bsp; "It's not like that."

"It is like that. That's basically what you're saying."

"That's not what I'm saying."

"What is it that you're so afraid of? You think that once you cross an invisible line that the whole world is going to implode? Or are you just afraid that something might get under that thick skin you take so much pride in perfecting?"

"I'm just exhausted by the endless questions. I don't have time for it. I don't want to make time for it."

"So, you can touch me, but I can't touch you?"

"I'm sorry. That's not how I planned it. I really did want to do this with you, but I just can't take things any further than this. I can see that you want more and I can't offer it to you. I don't want to hurt you. Honestly. I'm not trying to use you, and I don't want you to feel that way, so I think we should just walk down to my car, and I'll



give you your thousand bucks and call you a cab to make sure you get home safely.”

Morgun steeled herself. She yanked at her dress, adjusting everything back into place. She smoothed back her hair and drew her shoulders back. She turned and wouldn't look at Laney. She marched straight for the door, flipped the lock, and threw it open.

Laney watched her go. She shut her eyes and did a silent countdown in her head so she wouldn't chase after Morgun and make things worse, but also so that she could control her rising...what?

She wanted to say it was anger, but she couldn't really make herself believe that. She felt a sense of something stronger, deeper, more personal and more painful. It didn't make sense. It must be the alcohol playing tricks with her brain. Although she really hadn't had that much. She could usually sort out her feelings, so she knew it wasn't that. It was just easier to say it was. Like it was easier to let Morgun leave.

Laney hurried to catch up with her, because she didn't want Morgun to leave without the thousand dollars she was owed. Laney didn't want anyone to ever say she hadn't upheld her end of a bargain. Her word was important to her and a deal was a deal.

Even if her body was flushed with heat and her heart was beating painfully and she was wildly unsatisfied with how things ended in that room. Not just physically. Even if she'd had crazy hot sex in that room, she still wouldn't be satisfied and that bothered her more than anything.

“Morgun!” Laney caught up with Morgun just as she was flinging the door open to go outside to the parking lot. “Morgun, wait!”

Morgun didn't turn. She kept on walking. She walked with powerful strides, her hips and bottom swaying suggestively. Laney nearly groaned. She knew it would kill Morgun to realize how attractive she was right now when she clearly didn't want to

be.

She stopped in front of Laney's car, crossed her arms, and waited.

Laney wanted to say something. She knew she should attempt to make this better. She had no idea what to say and she knew the words wouldn't come. She was shit with emotions. Talking about feelings wasn't something she'd ever been good at.

"Here." Laney handed over the envelope after reaching into her car's glovebox to retrieve it.

Morgun snatched it out of her hand. She didn't rub salt in the wounds by counting it. She clutched it and gave Laney a foul look. "You're terrible," she informed Laney. "You're horrible and cold and awful."

Laney swallowed. Morgun looked like she meant all of that, and it stung. Even if Laney was used to hearing much, much worse. Seeing Morgun hurting bothered her. It bothered her a lot.

"I really am sorry. I'm just trying to keep you from being hurt. Angry is one thing. Hurt is another."

"Sure. Say whatever it is to excuse you from having to have any responsibility for anything. The wedding was pretty nice. That orgasm was pretty nice too. The only thing that wasn't nice? You. You're not nice. I'm glad I won't see you again after tonight." Morgun wrenched open her clutch and found her phone. "Don't worry about calling me a cab. I've got it."

"Let me pay for it at least."

Morgun shook her head fiercely. "Just go back inside. I'm good. Thanks." It wasn't a

nice kind of thanks. It was a sarcastic, mean, biting thanks.

Laney knew she would probably just make everything worse if she didn't do what Morgun asked her to do and just get out of her space. She capitulated, locked her car, and went back into the arts building. She waited just inside the door where she could see Morgun, standing in the parking lot until a cab arrived and she got in.

Laney liked to tell herself that she didn't care. As a rule, she didn't even like other people. But with Morgun? It was somehow different. She couldn't explain it to herself, but she knew it was true.

She let out a sigh as the cab pulled away. At least she wouldn't have to see Morgun again. She should be happy that they'd pulled off the deal and now she would be free from her family's harassment. She was happy about that. That soft sigh that she couldn't hold back should have just been one of relief, but even Laney had to admit it was tinged with regret.

## Chapter 13

Laney

In the Sterling household, Helena's turkey was legendary. When Laney walked in the front door of her parent's house classically and purposefully cutting it close, the smell immediately greeted her. Her mom told her dinner would be at five. She'd shown up at four fifty-eight.

She found her family gathered in the living room, her mom perched in her favorite rocking chair, ready to fly out of it and straight into the kitchen, her dad on the couch with the remote in his hand, glued to some sports game on the TV, Jason and Natasha on the love seat, holding hands. They all turned to look at her when she walked in.

"Hey..." Laney hated being the center of attention. She almost wished she'd gotten there hours ago, but she'd lied about having some editing she couldn't get away from, just so that her parents wouldn't have a chance to get her alone and question her about Morgun.

"Hey." Natasha beamed at her.

Jason grunted. Her dad grunted too. Both of them were so tuned in to the game that they couldn't be bothered to greet her properly. Laney had a suspicion that if she'd come in with a flame thrower on her back and torched the huge Christmas tree in the corner of the room, they wouldn't have noticed. She nearly smiled at the idea.

She wasn't a fan of the holiday. She basically hated everything about it from the tacky décor to the obnoxious gatherings and the massive interruption to her work schedule. Unlike some people, who got a break at Christmas, things picked up

bigtime for her and she was always run ragged before the day even came around.

Her annoyance with Christmas and the chaos it caused aside, she did like seeing her family, eating her mom's amazing food, and giving out the gifts she'd carefully chosen even though she always said gift giving was nonsense because they were all adults.

Usually, her mom was too busy with the cooking and the gifts and the hosting to get into it with her about grandkids. This year, Laney wasn't so sure, considering Morgun had mysteriously disappeared from Jason's wedding a couple days ago before her mom could put her through any sort of inquisition.

"So? Get any good gifts?" Laney sat down on the other side of the couch, opposite her dad.

Natasha beamed. "We did! Mostly household stuff, which we kind of already had, but that's alright. You can always use a spare, right?"

"Sure." Laney used to get annoyed with Natasha when she first met her years ago. She was always so cheerful, always willing to look on the bright side. It had taken a while, but she'd grown on Laney, and now, Laney couldn't imagine not having her in her life. She'd thought of her as a sister for a long time before it became official.

"We also got some handmade gifts. My mom and grandma worked on a quilt with the wedding ring pattern for us. It's so nice! You'll have to see it when you come over!"

"That's amazing." Laney wasn't crafty. It would take her a lifetime to put something like that together. She was also oddly touched at the thoughtful gift and the slight sheen in Natasha's eyes. She was an only child and was very close with her family.

"It's on our bed right now, but I'm a little scared to use it. It seems even worse to

keep it packed away just to save it though.”

“I’m like that with clothes. I always spend money on something nice and then I’m scared to wear it. Or I’ll get a new bag and I’m so scared of using it. The other one I have is in tatters before I finally have to break the new one out of the closet.”

“It’s so true!”

“It was a nice wedding,” Laney said politely. “I really enjoyed it. You looked amazing.”

“Thank you.” Natasha was very fair, and when she blushed, her cheeks were scarlet. “I saw that you brought a date. I’m sorry I didn’t get to really talk to her. I was so busy with everyone and everything, I was just exhausted halfway through the night and then I couldn’t find her.”

“She had to leave early,” Laney lied. “She’s a photographer too. She owns her own business and had some work to get to.”

“Oh really? Is that how you met?”

“Yes,” Laney lied. “She has a job interview with the agency I work for. Tomorrow or the day after, I guess.”

“Wow! So, you’d be working together?”

“Well, not really. Even if she did get hired, we usually work independently on different jobs, and from her work, I’d say they’d put her on family portraits or weddings, or maybe business or residential or commercial.”

“Crazy,” Natasha breathed. “That’s cool. Really. I’m so happy for you!”

Laney wanted to burrow between the couch cushions. She might have stood a chance of doing it if her dad wasn't parked on the other end. She didn't want to talk about Morgun, and not just for the usual reasons.

She knew she'd screwed things up at the end of the night. She just wasn't sure why it mattered so much to her. She wasn't used to feeling like that. Regretful. Wishing she could go back and change how their night ended. She wasn't us

ed to not being able to sleep at night because she was thinking about someone, not the usual work and family drama.

For once, her mom saved her bacon. Helena burst out of her rocker and sniffed the air before announcing that the bird was done, and everyone should get to the table. No one questioned Helena's nose. She could smell a perfectly seasoned, cooked bird from ten miles away.

Laney and Natasha complied first. There were six chairs around the ancient oval table with the two leaves in to bear the weight of the Christmas feast. Laney's dad and Jason eventually dragged themselves away from the game and took their seats. Jason sat beside Natasha, across the table from Laney, and Tom took the head.

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Helena ignored everyone's offers of help. She always refused to let anyone in her kitchen. Laney tried to help her mom with dinner a few years ago, and Helena got so stressed having her "in her way" that she kicked her out after half an hour, uttering a few extremely rare curses. Her mom never cursed.

Finally, the table was loaded with the perfectly golden turkey, thick gravy, stuffing, mashed potatoes, peas, carrots, corn, and cranberry sauce. The pumpkin pie and cherry pie would come later. Laney's dad hated pumpkin pie—a sacrilege, in her opinion because pumpkin was her absolute favorite, especially her mom's homemade pie—but he loved cherry.

Natasha took Jason's hand on top of the table and looked radiantly around. "Before we eat, can Jason and I say something?"

"Yes! Of course!" Hela stuck a few serving spoons into the dishes and sat down in her spot.

Laney knew that her parents had given Natasha and Jason five grand as a wedding gift and had also helped out a ton with the planning and everything, so she was sure they were going to thank them.

Instead, Natasha looked first at Helena, then at Tom, then gushed, "You're going to be grandparents!"

Tom's jaw basically smacked straight into the tabletop. Jason flushed a little, and he never seemed to get overly flustered about anything. Natasha was also bright red, but most of that flush was likely excitement.



And Helena? She just sat there. Silent. Laney thought her mom was going to faint. She was ready to push back her chair and walk over to her side, just in case. The floor was tile, and she couldn't have her mom smacking into it on freaking Christmas. Or any day.

Slowly, the hugest smile in the entire world split Helena's face. Then the tears came. They came in great torrents, flooding down her cheeks. She sobbed and blubbered, and kept repeating, "Oh my lord, oh my lord, oh my lord," like a Christmas blessing over the food.

"Congratulations," Laney choked out, the first to say it.

Tom and Helena both echoed it, bursting from their chairs and hugging Natasha and Jason. Laney should have been excited. She should have been relieved. She was. She was certain. She had to be. Because to be anything else would be ridiculous.

Her brother and Natasha had done her a huge favor by basically shifting the attention from her to them. She wasn't going to be badgered about producing a grandchild now that there was one on the way. It just hadn't hit her yet. The shock was so great that the relief hadn't taken over. That was all it was, Laney reasoned. It would come.

She just couldn't reason with the tiny pin prick stabbing at her chest or the slightly nauseating feeling in her stomach. She knew what jealousy felt like.

She just needed to get some turkey into her. That would fix everything. That would banish all the wayward, crazy thoughts from her starved brain.

Everyone finally quit their crying and their flapping and hugs. Laney did join in eventually after her parents were done with crushing poor Natasha and back slapping and blubbering all over her brother and filled their plates.

Then the questions started. Helena had a full plate, but she didn't even touch it in her eagerness to know all the details. When was Natasha due? When did they find out? What were their plans? Were they getting a doula? Were they going to be taking classes? Did they need any help? Could she help with a nursery? Could she get them anything? Could she shop for them? After the questions dried up, the unsolicited advice about raising children anywhere from the ages of zero to thirty-two was given freely.

Natasha and Jason both took it in stride. Natasha was too good natured not to, and Jason was clearly just as excited as she was. That blew Laney's mind. Her brother always basically said that he never really cared if he had children or not, and now he was practically glowing with pregnancy hormones himself.

They got through dinner and the gift opening, but Laney felt almost numb. When it was finally time to leave, with one arm full of gifts and another bursting with leftovers that her mom packed up for her, she felt strangely reluctant, but also relieved.

Jason and Natasha were heading out too and Laney hugged them both and assured them she was very excited to have a new niece or nephew. She gave her parents hugs too, piled everything in her backseat, and started the drive back home.

Except that she turned left, heading away from her parent's subdivision. She kept going, her mind a hazy fog, her chest thick and heavy.

Christmas was just a rough time, she told herself. She had no reason to be unhappy. She had a family who loved her, her brother and Natasha were now married with a family of their own on the way. Everyone was healthy. Everyone still had their jobs, their house. She'd just enjoyed an amazing meal and her mom hadn't even once tried to badger her. There was literally nothing to be grouchy or stressed about.

So why was her chest so tight? What was the ache in her stomach? Laney learned the hard way that eating raw cauliflower caused massive intestinal distress. Cooked was fine, but raw was unfortunately not on the table for her, which was too bad because she really liked it. She currently felt like she'd eaten an entire head. But she hadn't. There was no way to explain the pain in her chest and lower, the ache in her belly.

There was also no way to explain why she was driving towards Morgun's apartment. Laney didn't have Morgun's number. She couldn't message her. She probably wouldn't have, even if she had it. She could have brought up the dating app and sent a message, but she hadn't planned this. It kind of just happened. Her body steered the car while her brain was furiously working on something else.

Traffic was fairly light since people were still probably celebrating Christmas with family and friends. Laney knew she was getting close. She remembered the outdated children's park in a small grassy space at the intersection of two busy streets. She recalled thinking that it was hardly a safe place to put a park and she thought so again as she passed it.

She knew that Morgun's apartment was only five minutes away. She could still stop. She could turn around and forget about what she was about to do. Morgun probably wasn't even home. She was likely having Christmas with her own parents. Laney assumed they lived close by, but she could be wrong. She hadn't even asked.

She regretted the way she'd bulldozed into the coffee shop that night. How she'd picked Morgun up for the wedding in a foul mood and hadn't taken more than a second to appreciate her appearance, let alone her company. She had noticed that Morgun looked beautiful, but it chafed her like a thorn stuck somewhere deep in her foot where she couldn't see or reach it. Laney hadn't allowed herself to enjoy it. At least not until late in the evening, when she'd had a few drinks and allowed herself, for a brief span of time, to do something that she truly wanted.

What's wrong with being yourself? Morgun had asked her that at the wedding.

She never got a chance to respond, but the question bounced around in her head for the rest of the night and well into the next few days.

Laney had this ridiculously thick skin. She'd spent years and years cultivating it. It started when she first came out to her parents. She'd expected high school to be extra rough because she didn't keep it a secret that she was a lesbian and that was tough to deal with, in addition to all the other shit that makes high school impossible for people to get through. She'd started that night, building

up the extra thick, protective layers that it took to keep the barbs out.

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It was better in college. Lots of people were into doing all sorts of things and cared far less about what anyone else was doing with their own life or what anyone thought about them. She'd had a few shitty jobs before she landed the one she was at now.

She used that layer of protective padding she'd built up just about every single day. Not because people had an issue with who she did and didn't find attractive, but because being an artist in a fast-paced, competitive, slightly cutthroat arena was tough.

She'd wanted to be a photographer since she was little. She always said that's what she was going to do, ever since she'd picked up a disposable camera of her mom's. She'd hated the many times her mom nagged her about settling down and having a family. She loved her career. She was satisfied with it.

So, what was the sudden empty hole inside herself that she could no longer deny? If Laney had hung her head out of the moving car's window and opened her mouth and gulped in a bunch of the bracing night air, she couldn't have felt more hollow.

Was that why she was pulling up in front of the older apartment building? Morgun's building? Or was it just because she felt bad about how their night ended and it was Christmas, and Christmas was made for peace and warmth, not anger and regret?

She told herself she just wanted to talk to Morgun. To apologize for hurting her with those layers and that gruffness she felt she had to maintain. She didn't want to just send a message. That was too informal and cold and exactly what Morgun probably thought she'd try to do, if she gave Laney that much credit at all.

She shouldn't have been surprised at herself. Laney knew she didn't make impetuous decisions. She'd thought about apologizing for the past few days. It was distracting. It made her feel hollow inside, like she had air bubbles in her blood, and she needed to make it right.

That's why she was here, digging out the leftover food she'd been sent home with as some sort of peace offering.

It was just an apology.

Because Laney did care, even if she pretended and acted otherwise. Even with the bullshit layers and the persona she'd built up in order to survive.

Once she was at the door, she debated about turning around and getting back in her car, but she'd never been a coward and she wasn't going to back out now. She was here. She'd driven all this way. She knew it was the right thing to do.

Morgun probably wasn't even home, Laney reminded herself. The chances of her answering the door were slim. She'd ring the buzzer, say she tried, get back in her car, and send a message in apology and that would be good enough. She could then put Morgun far out of her mind and not think about her again.

What about that hollow space? Are you going to not think about that again too?

Laney ignored that thought, balanced the containers of food in her left arm and hand, and pressed the buzzer with the right.

As she expected, there was no answer. She buzzed again but was met with silence. She shuffled her feet on the concrete step, re-balanced the container of mashed potatoes that was slipping through her arm, and tried one more time. Still nothing.

She blinked hard, tightened her arm around the other container of turkey and gravy, bit down her bottom lip until she tasted metal, then turned and headed back to her car.

## Chapter 14

### Morgun

After going through the usual interview-type questions, Morgun waited while David Wilkes, head of HR, folded up her portfolio and slid it across the table. He hadn't interviewed her the first time. She was floored and honored that he'd taken the time to meet with her. He hadn't sent someone else and that meant something to her, even if his current body language was giving off all sorts of energy that she wished she wasn't interpreting correctly.

He was going to try to let her down gently. She could just tell it was coming.

David folded his hands neatly on the table. He was well groomed, probably in his early fifties. He had a large, athletic build which was still trim and the black suit he had on fit him impeccably, even if it wasn't one of those suits that was tailor made or cost a couple grand. David's salt and pepper hair was neatly cut, and he sported a beard that was trimmed and immaculate as well. He had dark, soft brown eyes that were too kind and sympathetic for someone in his position.

So when he sighed, Morgun knew.

"I have to say that I was intrigued when Laney Sterling sent your profile along to me. She's a rare gem, refuses to give up control of any of her photos for editing unless we specifically ask her to. She's worked for us for a few years now and we couldn't be happier with the time and effort she's put in. She's never once recommended another photographer, so when she sent me your information, I took notice."

“Uh, thank you?”

Morgun shifted nervously in her chair. It was soft leather, stiff and high backed, with wheels on the bottom. It matched the other ten chairs around a long oval table in a classy, tasteful boardroom with expensive art on the walls, huge windows, and whiteboards on the far end. A projector sat in the middle of the table. There were all sorts of cords wound up at the far end of the room. She could only guess at the creativity that went on in here. God, she wanted to be part of that. She wanted it so badly that she knew that when David finally said the words, they were going to sting worse than any wound or injury she'd ever had before.

“Your work is great. Beyond great. You're very talented.”

“But...I'm not the right fit.” Morgun decided to spare David and just say the words herself.

His shoulders slumped inwards. “Look, Morgun. Can I give you some unsolicited and probably unwanted advice?”

“Sure.” She forced a smile because she knew David's job couldn't be easy. “Go ahead.”

“I've been doing this a long time now. Nearly thirty years. I started at the bottom here and I've been at the top of HR for quite a while. I can't count how many interviews I've given over the years. How many people I've hired, and, unfortunately, how many I've had to let go. I'd like to think that I have a good idea of the type of person who is a good fit for us. I know for a fact that you're too nice. It's not just the clients who would eat you alive, but some of your coworkers too. That's not to say that we only hire mean people or condone workplace harassment of any sort. I just see you and I see what a nice, caring young woman you are. I looked through your website and your social media and you have a good thing going. You're your own boss.



There's something to be said for that. I know that the market is oversaturated with photographers, since everyone thinks they can pick up a camera and that's all that counts, but obviously not everyone can make a living at it. You're doing that, even if it takes a while to get established. The grass isn't always greener."

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“I-I can take constructive criticism,” Morgun stammered. “I promise, I can. And I would work hard. So hard. Twice as hard as anyone else here.”

“Tell me, do you think of yourself at all like Laney Sterling? I’m not sure how you know each other, but would you say you’re anything like her?”

“God, no,” Morgun said before she could think better. As soon as the words were out, she wished she could snatch them back, but it was too late.

David nodded. “I know. You’re not like her at all. Laney is a good person, but she’s determined. She has this drive and this fire and that burns a lot of people up. Clients have tried her on and gotten nowhere. She books her own travel. Manages her own schedule, dictates how and what she’d like done for her shoots. She does all her own editing. We didn’t plan on any of that, and at first, we found it hard to work with, but over time we adjusted. The point is, Laney’s survived in a tough industry and it takes that kind of personality and backbone to do it. Here.”

“I could...change.”

“I wouldn’t want you to change. There’s nothing wrong with being kind and big hearted.”

Morgun could feel her eyes welling up with tears. She hated it. Hated that she was proving David right just by sitting here. She’d been so excited about this. She’d been right two years ago, and she was right now—it wasn’t her work, it was her. That hurt worse than anything, because she could always get better, change her work, learn better techniques, but she couldn’t change herself.

“I might have something for you. Real estate, if you think you’d like to try it out. It’s mostly independent work and the clients are more forgiving. Plus, you can always reshoot a building. It generally won’t change from day to day or have anywhere to go. It’s a good way to get your foot in the door. We have quite a few people in that area already though, so it would be very casual. Maybe only once a month, if that, but if you’d like to try it, I can offer you that. Who knows? People are always moving on, finding new opportunities and whatnot. Maybe it could become more regular. I just don’t want to promise you something and then not be able to deliver.”

“I understand.” Morgun blinked hard, her eyes stinging for another reason now. It wasn’t much, but she hadn’t expected even that, and she was grateful. So grateful she felt like she might break down right there. Her lip trembled and she bit down on it hard to keep David from noticing. Her hands were shaking too. She finally got control of herself and broke into a huge grin. “Thank you! Really. That would be great. I really appreciate it.”

“I do have quite a few other contacts in the industry for people who do more family stuff and weddings, babies, that type of thing. I could pass your work along, if you’d like, but if you did get hired there, they’d likely need you full time. They’d be demanding. You’d probably feel overworked. You wouldn’t get to set your hours or choose your clients most of the time. I’m just telling you this because I don’t want you to give up a good thing, your own company, and then end up hating it and wishing you’d never gone down that road.”

> “Yes.” Morgun nodded. She bit her lip again. “Thank you. I’ll consider that. I’ll make sure I ask questions at the interviews, if I get any, so that I can get a feel for the fit. And I’ll consider what you said. About my own company.”

“Your still shots are very impressive. Some of the best I’ve ever seen. You’re very young and you’re very talented already. I think the real estate will be a good fit. Keep up with that and you never know. I know it’s not what you wanted to hear today, and

I'm sorry I can't offer you more."

"No." Morgun stood and pushed back her chair gently. She offered her hand to David, who shook it gently. "I really appreciate you giving me a chance. Any kind of chance. I thought you were going to just up and tell me that I sucked and that I was always going to suck, so thank you for not doing that."

David smiled warmly. "Glad I could help. We have your contact number and we'll be in touch when jobs arise. We'll get your information before the first one and we'll get you to fill out the hire forms. It's a stack, I warn you."

"That's alright." Morgun felt like she was swimming. It wasn't much, but it was something. Something more than she'd had and that meant a lot.

She gathered up her portfolio and tucked it into her mustard yellow tote. It was barely big enough to hold everything, but it worked for her. She slung it over her shoulder and thanked David again before heading out of the room.

She was basically floating as she stepped out into the hallway and walked into the reception area. She treated the receptionist, a different lady than last time, to a smile and walked over to the elevator. She pushed the button to go down and waited. The thing took forever before the light even came on, and Morgun found herself tapping her right foot not out of impatience, but out of habit.

Finally, the metal doors slid open to reveal an empty elevator and Morgun stepped in. She hit the button for the main floor and waited. She was so happy about her new position, even if it was very casual, just once a month, that she didn't even mind that she was in the world's slowest elevator.

All of the sudden, a blur of motion flew through the doors just as they began to close. It shocked Morgun so badly that she dropped her tote off her shoulder and tried to

stab at the control panel to keep the doors from crushing the person, but she couldn't manage to find the right thing to press.

The doors opened slightly, then changed their mind and continued to shut and the blur of motion smoothed back her hair and stood ramrod straight in the other corner of the elevator.

That blur was Laney Sterling, and Morgun just happened to currently be trapped in the elevator with her for the next sixteen floors.

## Chapter 15

Laney

“Morgun, Morgun, wait!” As soon as the elevator door opened, Morgun burst out like she was in there with a deadly snake waiting to wrap itself around her body and squeeze the life out of her. Laney power-walked after her. She had to get through the building's lobby and out the front door before she could catch up with her. “Morgun! Can I talk to you for a minute?”

Morgun turned, more fire in her eyes than Laney had ever seen, and her heart basically stopped dead. It restarted painfully, slamming in ways she couldn't ignore. Her blood surged and her pulse leapt at all her pulse points. Some of them very south of where people usually take a pulse.

“What? Can you please just leave me alone? You got what you wanted, a date for your brother's wedding, and I got my interview. Can we just leave it at that?”

“It went that well, huh?”

“I did get a job,” Morgun admitted. Her cheeks flushed red and she turned to the side,

surveying the busy street like she might consider running between the four lanes of traffic just to get to the other side where Laney couldn't talk to her. "Thank you. It's casual. Doing real estate photos. I'm glad for it. It's a foot in the door, or whatever stupid thing people usually say."

Laney could tell that Morgun was disappointed. She was disappointed for her too, but she could imagine how it went, and though Morgun clearly didn't know it, Laney privately thought that David had done her a favor.

"I shouldn't tell you this, or maybe I should, but honestly, I think that's the best fit for you. Sometimes this job can be, well, draining. It's not for people who have big hearts and really care about their artistry and their clients. That sounds horrible to say, but when I said that you have to have a thick skin to survive, it's kind of true."

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Morgun's eyes flashed again. "Why does everyone think I'm made of glass?" she hissed.

"No one thinks that, but David probably told you that he's seen a lot of people come and go. He has. He knows exactly what kind of person won't last."

"Thanks. That's so reassuring."

"It's not like that. That's not what I'm saying. You're hearing the words, but you don't really understand." A huge truck whizzed by them, the wind throwing dirt and dust into their faces. Laney blinked and rubbed at her eyes. Morgun rubbed hers too, and maybe that grit was well-timed. She seemed totally frustrated, and Laney didn't blame her.

"Then tell me, because I work with draining people already—families, crying babies, unhappy people, bridezillas!" Morgun rubbed her eyes furiously. "I do all my own bookings. My own editing. I have no assistant. I carry all my own equipment. It's just me and me only. How could I not handle it?"

"It's not that you couldn't handle it," Morgun tried to explain, more gently than she could have ever spoken to anyone else. It didn't escape her that she suddenly felt invested. In what, she couldn't quite say. "It's that you'd have those bad experiences that we know will happen and it will ruin photography for you and that's a shame. Really. To hate what you once loved, that's hard."

"Do you? Hate it?"

“No! I love my job. But there are days, moments when I hate it. When I resent my clients. When the demands and the scheduling and the stress and the travel gets to be a lot. If I had a dollar for every time a client was rude to me... People get angry about not getting the position they wanted because their headshots weren’t good enough; the modelling job they were trying out for because their shots showed a blemish, or the lighting was off. People get angry when their house doesn’t sell after a week on the market because their listing photos are clearly to blame. A lot of our clients come to us because they want something that most other people can’t give them. They want perfection. They want what’s unattainable. They think that anything can be fixed with edits and with the right lighting and angle, and most of the time, they’re right and that’s why they pay two or three grand for ten minutes of our time and a few head shots.”

“Are you for real?” Morgun asked. She didn’t look like she believed Laney, but there was enough of her that did, that grain of doubt that brought with it an equal amount of horror.

“Yes. It’s always my fault when a shoot doesn’t go right. If the client wants their money back, they get it back. There aren’t any reshoots. I’m not my own company and I represent someone else, so when my work isn’t perfect and they hear about it, that sucks. I’ve learned not to perfect my art, but to make my art perfection. That’s not the kind of photography that I wanted to do. That’s not what I imagined myself doing.”

“It sounds awful.”

“It’s not. Sorry. I didn’t mean it that way. For me, at any rate. I guess I’ve learned to just deal with it and move on. I don’t really even think about the remarks or the pissed off clients or the irrational ones anymore. For every bad client, there are ten more good ones. I love my job, but if you can’t take the good with the bad, if you can’t handle a pissed off client blaming you for something that isn’t your fault,



insulting your work, and swearing at you, promising to end you in the industry, or even sending you death threats, then you won't make it long."

"Death threats?"

"Yeah. Once." Laney grinned. "Anyway, I'm making it sound terrible, but it's not.

But that's what David means. If you can't deal with that, then you won't last long. He probably told you the grass was greener where you are, and he's right. Aside from the messy newborns and the bratty kids and the bridezillas, I almost envy you."

"What? Me?"

Even Laney looked surprised at that, like she'd just discovered something about herself she never expected to find. Buried treasure of the personal variety. "Yeah. I guess. I don't want to work for someone forever. One day, and one day freaking soon, I want to be out on my own, running my own company."

Morgun grunted. "Want to give me a job, then?"

"Ha!" Laney snorted. "Not a chance." Morgun could see that she was just kidding.

Somehow, during the whole conversation, Laney had softened. To the smallest degree, but it was still there. Like choosing a really bad fabric softener over a good one and noticing that your favorite sweater wasn't so scratchy afterwards and being pleasantly and unexpectedly surprised at the notable difference. It was a difference she could feel.

"Morgun, I didn't catch up with you just to ask about your interview. I wanted to, um, apologize to you for the other night. At the wedding. You were right. When you asked me what was wrong with just being me? I'm not mean and nasty, at least, not

all the time. I don't like to act that way. I love my life and I've been very blessed. I know I got good breaks when I needed them and I'm happy where I'm at. I've practiced it for so long, pretending that things don't matter, not letting anything get to me, that I probably come across as being really terrible."

"Yeah. You do. Kind of."

Laney grasped at that kind of, since it watered down the harshness of the first bit just a little. "I just freaked out. I'm not good with intimacy, I guess, and it was unexpected. I don't usually do impetuous things like that. That doesn't mean I didn't like it. Or that I regret it. Sorry, that came out wrong. Ugh. I'm not good at talking about any of this."

"It's alright," Morgun urged. "Continue."

Laney knew she was probably bright red. She wasn't used to feeling flustered, especially not in public, but there was almost no one around and the traffic rushing down the street obviously wasn't going to overhear them.

"I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to go back on my word about payment of the deal and I wanted to make sure you got home safely. I'd had way too many drinks to drive and I needed to give you money for a cab to make sure you got back okay, since I was originally going to drive you and I couldn't. I didn't mean to make you feel cheap or something."

"Well, it was a bargain in the first place, so maybe I overreacted." Morgun stared down at the sidewalk, but her tone was gentle.

"My brother and my sister-in-law just announced, at Christmas that they're pregnant." Laney couldn't believe she'd just said that. Apparently, neither could Morgun, because her head snapped up and she stared at her open-mouthed. "I know

this is going to sound incredibly stupid and maybe even crazy, but when they told us, I was jealous. I have no idea why. I'm happy with my career. My mom will finally stop bugging me now. There was this feeling that I didn't understand." Laney tore her eyes away from Morgun's.

Morgun seemed to understand. Both that Laney had no idea why she was telling her that, and that she had to look away.

"Do you want to get lunch?"

“What?”

“Lunch? You know. Where you sit down and eat.”

“I-I guess so. I don’t have any appointments. Are you sure? That you want to? With me?”

“No,” Morgun said, slightly sarcastic. “But I’m hungry and I hate going into a place alone. I think it’s sad when people have to have lunch alone or go to a movie alone. And you’re here. So, you’ll do in a pinch.”

“I think that maybe David was wrong about you. You are nice, but your use of wit and sarcasm are commendable. If I ever do get out there on my own and I need to hire someone, you’ll be first on the list.”

“What if I refuse? I have plans to get really famous and in demand before then.”

“I don’t plan on it taking forever.”

“Neither do I.”

“Good. I hope that you do. You’d be a good famous person. Not one of those people who lets the money turn them into a jerk.”

“Thanks. That was nice of you. I’ll take it as a sort of compliment.”

“Good. I meant it as one.”

Apologizing hadn't killed her. Neither did voicing her feelings. She was still alive, so far.

"There's this café down the street. They serve breakfast all day. They also make all sorts of fresh baked goods, soups, salads. It's probably one of the best kept secrets in the entire city. It's only a few blocks that way. Want to try it?"

Morgun frowned. She studied Laney and Laney didn't look away. "Yes." Her brow smoothed over and her full lips tilted back up. It made Laney think about how much she'd enjoyed kissing Morgun. About how much she knew she'd enjoy it again.

"Don't worry," Morgun said, and Laney was suddenly worried that she'd read her mind. "I'll keep it a secret."

"What?" Laney gasped.

"The café. You said it was a best kept secret. I promise to keep it that way. If I like it and it gets overcrowded and I have to wait so long that it deters me from going, that wouldn't be a very good thing now, would it?"

"No," Laney choked out. "No, it wouldn't be."

She was relieved that Morgun hadn't figured out what she was thinking about, but then, right before she turned, her gaze dropped briefly to Laney's lips and Laney wasn't quite so sure that Morgun hadn't known all along.

## Chapter 16

Morgun

Over a huge plate of crispy bacon, scrambled eggs, perfectly browned toast, and

homemade hash browns, Morgun considered everything that both David and Laney had told her. Maybe she'd come out of it with the best deal possible. Maybe keeping her own company going wasn't such a bad thing, bridezillas included.

Not only did she think about that, she went over and over what Laney said about putting on a tough front. Morgun was sure that she couldn't do that very effectively, so maybe that's what David meant about knowing who would make it and who wouldn't.

She considered what Laney would be like if she didn't always have to act tough. Under those layers, Morgun believed she was a good person. She'd caught more than a few glimpses of it at the wedding, and back there on the sidewalk, she'd been quite genuine in her apology.

Morgun took a chance and decided to bring up what Laney had mentioned about her family, just to see if she'd open up to her further. Even if it didn't really matter. Because it shouldn't. Because sort of drunken/buzzed things that happened at weddings in dark rooms should stay at weddings in dark rooms.

Morgun knew she had zero chance of hoping that anything could happen with Laney in the future. Even if Laney was a nice person, that didn't mean they were a good match. Morgun was sure they were definitely not. She also knew that even if they'd kissed and touched when they were sober, that didn't lead to people being able to make it work, day to day. Or wanting to. And all signs pointed to Laney really not wanting any sort of attachment in her life other than her career.

Which was really not why Morgun was bringing up what she'd said on the sidewalk. Because she didn't need hope. She didn't need complications. She certainly didn't need a reminder of why she'd thought about Laney's soft lips, why she couldn't banish the taste of her skin from her tongue or the sounds of her moans and whimpers from her ears...

Stop thinking about that.

Morgun was sure she was blushing, but she went ahead with her question anyway, though she felt less than confident about it now. She was worried that it was too transparent. That she was too transparent. Unlike Laney, she didn't have those layers built up to deflect her emotions.

“What you said about your brother and sister-in-law? Why do you think you felt jealous?”

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Laney's fork paused on her plate. She'd ordered the same thing Morgun had, the ultra breakfast, but she'd gone for sausage instead. She set the fork down without a sound. Her hand moved to her napkin, but she just gripped it between her fingers.

"I don't know. I've been thinking about it. If that's what it really was. I could blame it on hunger, since I hadn't eaten all day. Jason's announcement delayed dinner while it was all laid out in front of me. That would be enough to make anyone feel crazy things, wouldn't it?"

Morgun laughed, but then she realized that Laney was kind of serious. She cut it off with a sick sounding gurgle/coughing noise. "Oh. Uh, I don't know. I'm not one of those people who forgets to eat."

"I just get busy. I don't...I'm not..."

"No. Of course not. I just plan regular meals and when I shoot something, I always have a snack because it is true that a person can't focus and can't put in long hours without some sort of fuel."

"When I'm working, I totally forget about everything else. I could have a shoot that goes for hours, then go straight home and get to the editing. Sometimes I start at four or five in the morning and go until four or five at night before I even remember to eat. Or have some water. I'm like a camel, I guess. I just get so focused on the work that nothing else exists."

"And if it wasn't hunger?"



“Hmm?”

“The feeling,” Morgun pressed. She knew she shouldn’t, because it wasn’t really her business and this lunch certainly wasn’t a date, or even a meeting between friends, but she just couldn’t leave it alone. She had to know. “What if it wasn’t from hunger?”

“I don’t know.” Laney dropped her eyes down to her plate. “I’m not sure why I felt like that. I should have felt relief, and I guess I did, later when I really thought about the silence that is going to come from my mom now that she has a grandchild on the way. My

brother bought me some time. More time than bringing you to the wedding ever would have. I’m also happy for them. Natasha and Jason are going to be great parents. They’re both so excited, and I’m excited to be an aunt. Despite what you think, I’m promising myself that I’m going to be a good one.”

“I think you could be a good one, if you wanted to.”

“Really?”

“Yes! Why not?”

“I don’t know. I guess everyone doubts they’re going to be a good something or other when a new baby is on the way. It makes you think about what you want to teach someone and what you want them to see and know about you. I guess I thought about that too. I thought about you. About what everyone else sees. Even my parents. Jason and Natasha. I’m not sure that I’ve been the nicest I could be to anyone. For a long time.”

“You could always work on that,” Morgun said, to be polite. She thought it was true,

though. Unlike most of the world, she did believe that people could change. Maybe not who they were deep down, but if all they needed was an attitude adjustment, that was different.

“I could. I will.” Laney swallowed thickly. “I don’t know. I have this great career. I have a nice condo. I have a car that’s just about paid off. I have clients booked steadily for the next year and I have no doubt that will continue. I make a killer living. My work is seen all over. It’s everything I could ever have imagined and honestly more than that. I just wanted to do photography. I never cared about getting it seen. I just wanted to be able to make a living doing it. I thought that was all I wanted. To grow this and keep going and keep working. I was totally firm in my conviction too. I wasn’t just doing it to spite my mom or anything. Aside from the whole baby conversation she forces on me regularly, we have a decent enough relationship. I do love her, and I know she loves the heck out of me. So, when Natasha and Jason said they were having a baby, I just...I don’t know. The feeling was weird. It was this strange longing mixed up with the desire to suddenly have that experience. It made no sense, so I just figured it must be jealousy. Of the attention they’ll be getting. Of their excitement. Of the experience. That’s fucked up for sure, because I’ve always said, and meant it, that I didn’t want that for myself.”

Morgun didn’t really know what to do with that. Apparently, when Laney opened up, she really opened up. She was probably one of those people you could ask anything, and she’d give you a straight, honest answer if she was in the right frame of mind. Morgun never really knew how to act or what to say to people who could just drop their guard so completely. She never would have thought Laney was one of them until suddenly she was. Morgun knew she’d never be able to sort through her feelings and put it out there so neatly and plainly like that.

Maybe Laney didn’t really need that much practice at being herself or being nice.

“Maybe you just haven’t met the right person yet.”

Morgun winced. She hated that saying. It was so token. She especially hated when people used it on her.

She just wasn't right for you. She wasn't the one. She clearly wasn't the right person. You just haven't found her yet. You'll know when you do.

"Obviously not," Laney laughed. "I have never had the desire to settle down before. And I've certainly never met someone and thought to myself that I'd like to have children with them." She looked like she wanted to say something more, but then looked away quickly, and for some reason, when Laney picked up her fork and went back to eating, that made Morgun feel all sorts of wild and flustered.

Morgun resumed eating too. Even after she was full, she forced in a couple extra hash browns before she pushed the plate away.

Something had changed. The atmosphere in the little corner café with the tiled floor and soulless tables and chairs was different. The food was amazing, though. Laney was right about that. Morgun could see why she called it a best kept secret. The place didn't look like much, but what came out of the kitchen wasn't just a breakfast special. It was a breakfast special and then some. Like pure magic.

Maybe some of that leaped off the plate to glisten in the air between them. Morgun couldn't say what it was exactly, but something was definitely different. Charged. Electric. She wouldn't be surprised if she stuck her fork into the space between them and got a jolt.

They finished up their coffees in silence, then Laney surprised Morgun yet again by producing a card from her purse and passing it across the table. "Just in case you need to get a hold of me. In case anyone ever tries to fuck with you here or something. Or if you have any problems with the shoot or editing or questions. I know it's only casual work, but I also know you want to do it right. I've been there. The first few

shoots I did for my new position, I was a wreck. A total, freaking, not so hot mess. I don't want you to have to go through that. So, if you need to, send me a text or an email. I promise I'll answer."

Morgun took the card. "Umm, thanks."

Again, she had the feeling that Laney wanted to say something more, but she didn't, and Morgun didn't either.

"Well, good luck. With everything." Laney's lips flattened out and she glanced at the register. "You just go up to pay, but don't worry. I've got it."

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“What?” Morgun had always been under the impression that having someone else pay for her food, unrelated to a job interview or an interview with a client, was a date. This definitely wasn’t a date.

Maybe Laney was just being nice. Practicing, like she’d said. It was only six ninety-five. Was that really so bad? Seven dollars? Could she do it? Yes, she decided. She could let Laney pay.

“Thanks.” She smiled at Laney and slipped the card into her tote. “You too. Good luck. With everything.” Somehow, saying that made her sad. She should have been glad to get away from Laney, but even at the wedding, when she’d climbed in that cab, pissed as all heck, she wasn’t glad.

Laney nodded and Morgun got her things together and walked out. She’d parked a few blocks away and was glad she’d put in money for a couple hours, anticipating that the interview might run longer than the twenty minutes it had taken.

She power-walked the few blocks because she was worried about the time left on the meter after taking so long at breakfast, not because her heart was pounding so furiously and pumping blood so fast that her brain was basically on overload and commanded her body to move fast in response. No. It wasn’t that it all. It was the meter. Parking tickets were expensive.

As Morgun got in her car, with twelve minutes still on the meter, she felt relieved. She’d basically held it against Laney for two years for getting that job that she wanted. It was a long time to detest someone. She’d met Laney and Laney seemed to prove to her that she was indeed deserving of that detesting. She made it easy not to

like her, but maybe that was because Morgun was just primed for it. It's easy not to like someone when you're only looking for the bad in them.

Now she'd seen the good. She'd seen so much more than that.

This time she couldn't blame the meter for her furious heartbeat.

## Chapter 17

### Laney

After giving Morgun her card, Laney didn't really expect her to call. Or text. Or email. She didn't expect to hear from her at all. So she had no idea why she found herself checking her phone more often. Finding excuses to take it out of her pocket. Getting her hopes up when it did ring. She'd given herself hope, and any spark of hope was a terrible thing, in her opinion, especially when it came to another person.

She didn't realize that was what she was doing when she handed over her card. She just wanted Morgun to have her contact info for work. Starting a new job was hard. Morgun was bound to have questions. Laney felt she owed her this for going to the wedding with her. She just wanted to make sure she was able to succeed at her first assignment, and if she needed help, she was there. Everyone should have someone to fall back on because first days sucked. That's why she'd done it.

Not because she wanted Morgun to call for an

y other reason.

It was illogical, what she was doing. Checking her phone. Holding that little spark in her chest and nurturing it. It was never going to turn into a flame, because Laney didn't play with fire.

She wasn't entirely surprised when Morgun sent her a text nine days after their lunch together, asking her if she could spare half an hour to go over the edits from her first shoot. It was a commercial building that was going up for sale and Morgun wrote in her text that she was worried her shots were too artsy and wouldn't be acceptable. She was going to die of embarrassment if she had to ask to reshoot it.

Laney was busy. She had clients booked solid and anticipated a full evening of editing, but she sent a text back asking if seven was okay, and Morgun replied that it was.

Laney made sure she was just slightly late, so that she didn't look desperate or eager. In reality, she'd circled the block no less than twenty times so that she would show up ten minutes after seven. She'd come straight from her last shoot. She still had on her work clothes, which were nicer than what she wore around the house, but she was glad she had an excuse to look good. She was mortified when she lifted her hand to ring the buzzer and found that it was both damp and trembling slightly.

She set her finger on the button she remembered well from the last time she was there. Christmas. When Morgun hadn't answered. It was a good thing she hadn't answered. Laney had no idea what would have happened if she had.

She was about to push the button when a strange noise, a hissing sort of whisper, came from behind her. She whirled, already reaching into her purse for the can of hairspray she kept in it. It wasn't pepper spray, but hairspray was supposed to work just as well, or so she'd heard. She'd never had to use the little travel sized bottle before. Her fingers curled around the metal can, but when she turned, there was no one there.

Laney's eyes dropped immediately to the ground and she let out a shriek.

There was a huge rat! A rat with bristly hair and long whiskers and beady, glowing

little eyes. She produced the can of hairspray, popped the lid and shook it hard. The animal stared back at her and then hissed again, like it had a right to be there and she was the intruder.

“Get back!” The horrible looking rodent was just a few feet from the concrete doorstep. “Get back or I’ll freaking use this!”

The creature blinked eyes that seemed to glow. Laney shuddered. It didn’t move. She didn’t move. It hissed again. Laney shook the can.

“I swear on my freaking life that I will spray you with this if you take a step forward. Hairspray isn’t good for rats. It’s probably lethal. I wouldn’t come any closer, if I were you!”

The creature considered her. It blinked. Hissed again. And took a step forward.

Laney shrieked. She shook the can, but dropped it because her hand was shaking so violently. As the largest rat she’d ever seen, more the size of a cat than a rat, charged forward, Laney spun back towards the door and stabbed at the buzzer over and over again. Finally, there was a crackle and Morgun’s voice.

“Hello? Laney?”

“Help! There’s a wild animal out here! I think it’s a rat! But it looks like it got into nuclear waste or something! Oh my freaking God, it’s huge! It’s trying to get me. It keeps coming closer. You have to open the door!”

The door buzzed without comment. Laney grabbed for it, threw it open, and tugged it closed. The animal charged the door, but stopped and just stared at her menacingly. She could see it hiss, but couldn’t hear it through the glass. She shuddered again. God, it was frightening. She dug out her phone and quickly typed in a search for a



pest control company. They probably specialized in infestations, and one overgrown, very creepy, very feral rat hardly constituted that. She thought again and typed in animal conservation and was flipping through the options when Morgun came charging down the stairs.

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“Wait!” She grabbed Laney’s phone and threw open the door.

“What are you doing?” Laney shrieked. “Don’t go out there!”

It was too late. Morgun was outside. She was approaching the animal. It hissed at her. Morgun put out her hand. She had something in it. Was that food? Morgun bent and sure as shit, she was trying to feed the thing! No wonder it was so big if people from around here fed it!

“Morgun!” Laney cracked the door and leaned out an inch. “What are you doing?”

Morgun ignored her. She fed the creature whatever she had, then slowly reached around and picked it up! She held it against her chest and ran a hand down its back, muttering something soothing to it.

Laney just about passed out. Her breathing shallowed while her pulse accelerated to dangerous levels. Heart attack levels. She threw her hand over the left side of her chest just in case. It did kind of hurt...

“Can you open the door?” Morgun asked from the other side.

“Not a chance!”

“Laney! Open the door. I forgot my keys upstairs. It’s not a rat! This is someone’s pet!”

“What?” Laney slowly, reluctantly, cracked the door again. She was sure Morgun had

completely lost her mind because that was no cat or dog out there and it certainly wasn't a dang Guinea pig. It had a tail. A scaly, scary, rat-like tail.

Morgun rolled her eyes as she stepped inside. "Mrs. Johnson in unit two forty-two found this little guy when he was just a baby. His mom was hit by a car right by the parking lot outside. She called a few wildlife places, but no one would come and help. There were a few other babies in the pouch, but they didn't make it. Chester was the only one who survived. Mrs. Johnson looked after him, feeding and caring for him. We all know about it, but if someone called it in, he'd be taken away, and she'd be absolutely heartbroken. She loves him like a child. She's ancient. She once had a son, but he passed away a few years ago and he didn't have any children. She's all alone. I visit her sometimes, and a few other people in the building look in on her, but she just has Chester, and if she didn't have him..." Morgun's eyes misted over and Laney felt a lump rise in her throat.

"What is it?"

"An opossum!" Morgun laughed softly.

"Jesus. I almost sprayed him with hairspray."

"Hairspray?"

"Well, I'm sure it's not a very good idea to carry around mace."

"Is that even legal?"

"I have no freaking clue."

"I'm glad you didn't."

“I just have it in my purse for emergencies. I’ve never had to use it. Thank God. I dropped it when I was trying to shake it up. I was so scared. It ran towards me when I was pressing the buzzer, so I just wanted to get inside as fast as possible before it got me.”

“Well...” Morgun stroked her hand down Chester’s back. He nestled into her, totally harmless and obviously very happy. “He was just scared. That’s why he hissed.”

“I’ve never seen one before.”

“Really? Not even online?”

“They look different in real life. In the dark.”

“I guess.”

“It hissed. I panicked. I saw the tail. It does look kind of like a rat. You have to admit it.”

“A super cute rat, hey Chester?” Morgun petted the opossum and it seemed to smile as it looked at her.

Dang. Up close it was kind of cute. The way the lips curled up in a sort of huge, soft smile was adorable. The whiskers were long and adorable too. Even the bristly looking hairs and strange ears and long tail weren’t so bad.

“I’d better get him back to Mrs. Johnson. She’s probably frantic by now. I’m not sure how he got out. It’s happened a few times before. He’s super smart and sometimes she doesn’t close her door all the way if she’s gone out for groceries. Once, someone was visiting her and they didn’t shut it properly. It’s lucky that Chester is totally tame. He’s been Mrs. Johnson’s since he was so, so tiny. He doesn’t know anything

but this place.”

“When was that?”

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“Just a year ago. Maybe less. Opossums only live a few years. They have super short lifespans. It’s sad, actually. Usually, they just play dead when they feel threatened or scared, but Chester is so used to people now that he doesn’t bother.”

“A few years?” Now Laney felt bad for the animal. And for Mrs. Johnson. Who she’d never even met.

“Yeah. A few of us who know her have got together and talked about it. After Chester, we think maybe she’d like a rescue cat. One of the super old ones that no one adopts. That’s really sad too. I’ve been thinking about adopting one myself. That’s where I got the idea.”

“Oh. Uh, are you going to take him back?”

“Yeah. Do you want to come?”

Laney wasn’t sure. “Are we going to get invited in for tea and cookies?”

“Probably.” Morgun winked at her. “I can almost guarantee they’ll have either long gray hairs from Mrs. Johnson’s wig in them, or shorter gray possum ones.”

“Well then! How can I refuse?” Laney found herself smiling so wide that her face hurt. She might have even been grinning. Even though grinning wasn’t something she ever did. Just a regular smile, without teeth, was often more than enough for any given situation. She believed anything more was just about redundant. But there she was. Smiling with her teeth showing. And loving it.

## Chapter 18

### Morgun

After returning Chester to a very happy and relieved Mrs. Johnson, who did indeed offer them tea and cookies, in which they only found two hairs, and almost an hour of pleasant conversation, Morgun led Laney back to her apartment. Mrs. Johnson lived on the top floor, two floors above Morgun's small one bedroom.

She told herself not to feel weird about letting Laney in. She didn't want to think about Laney surveying the place and finding it wanting because it didn't have stainless appliances and hardwood floors, or whatever was in

fashion. Maybe there was something better than stainless. Diamond plate?

Morgun also told herself that it didn't matter that her furnishings were hand me downs from her parents and classified ads and garage sales. She'd spent money on the dresser in her bedroom, since it was antique and she'd liked it, as well as a brass bed frame, so that it kind of matched the dresser, but the couch, desk, TV stand, even the TV, and the tiny glass and chrome table and chairs set in the far corner of the living room by the kitchen were all very outdated.

Laney walked over to the couch and felt the red afghan with white snowmen on it that Morgun's mom knitted her for Christmas a few years ago. Morgun used it all year round because she knew it had likely taken her mom years to complete, though she'd never admit it, and also because it was soft and quite warm with its tight stitching.

"This is cool. Did you make it?" Laney asked. "It's really soft."

"My mom did."

“Really? That must have taken forever.”

Morgun smiled and found herself slightly amazed that yet again they seemed to be thinking the same thing at the same time. Was that just coincidence, or did it hint at some deeper sort of connection? Laney was only over because she’d agreed to do Morgun a solid, probably out of some sort of misplaced guilt.

“Uh, the photos.” Morgun pointed at the desk. “I’ll get an extra chair from the table. Or do you just want to go through them? I don’t want to crowd you.”

“No. I’d like you to show them to me.”

“Okay.”

Morgun was nervous, even though she tried to pretend she wasn’t. She just about dropped the chair on her foot when she set it down. The desk chair was nicer, so she let Laney have that. She sat down hard and ran her tongue over her dry lips, trying to unglue them from each other. She’d just drank a whole heaping cup of green tea, liberally flavoured with one mysterious and long gray hair. She shouldn’t have a dry mouth.

She wanted to face-palm her forehead when Laney flipped on her laptop. The thing was as ancient as the rest of her stuff, but it did run the editing software she preferred to work with, so it was good enough for her. Of course, Laney picked up on that.

“Oh. You use the weirdest software. I’ve never even heard of this.”

“That’s because you can buy it for a couple hundred dollars, not a couple thousand.”

“Talk to David. The company buys licences for software if we need them. You could be using the good stuff for free.”



“Really? I’m not sure I’d even know how to use it.”

“What?” Laney gaped. “Didn’t they teach you that in school?”

Wow. Was now the time to admit that she obviously didn’t have the same credentials Laney did? No, it wasn’t. Morgun didn’t feel like getting into it. She wasn’t a photography major. She was a business major, though she’d taken every photography course she could, as well as every computer class she thought would help her. It helped to be experienced with other things like marketing and accounting when running her own business.

“I...”

“If you don’t know how to use it, it’s not a big deal. It’s probably more complicated than I’d have time to show you, but you can take some weekend courses. You should ask David. They might even cover that too.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah.” Laney figured out how to bring up the photos and clicked on the first one. “The company likes to invest in people if they think their work is worth it. I bet David thinks yours would be. It can’t hurt to ask. He gave you this gig because he wants you stick around. I don’t know if that was clear or not.”

“I guess so.” She had never thought about it that way.

Morgun’s chest felt all fluttery. She was jittery too. She didn’t know where to put her hands and she could barely sit still. She wasn’t sure if she was more flattered at Laney’s statement, or if the wild energy had to do with how close Laney was sitting. So close that Morgun could feel the heat pouring off her body.

She was wearing a black blouse and black skinny jeans which were in such a state of ripped up that it was hard to believe someone could sell them, and probably for a shit-ton of money too. The ankle boots Laney had on, black with silver buckles down the sides, didn’t look cheap either. Her dark hair was pulled into a messy bun that she managed to make look like it had come straight from a hairdresser’s professional hands.

Morgun gulped.

Thankfully, Laney started going through the photos, talking about each one. The building was an old warehouse. It used to be a bread factory and Morgun had taken her time with all three floors. There were some pretty neat things inside and she was afraid she'd gone into too much detail with the ancient doors, the hardwood floors, the metal ceiling tiles, the loading bays, the huge ovens, the glass panes in the windows, and hadn't taken enough time with the actual rooms to give a good overall feel for the ancient brick building.

She was so apprehensive that she almost stuck a finger between her teeth and nibbled at her nail. She never bit her nails. She'd done it a few times as a kid and had bitten straight into the pink and walked around with sore fingers for a few days. That had ensured she used nothing other than clippers and a nail file in the future.

"These are really, really impressive. Who are you reporting to?"

"Amanda Howards."

"She'll like them. She might not use them all, but I know she'll get excited about them. The rooms are good, but you went into details that everyone else would miss. You made the place look like it's not just a dump, which is good, because I bet they're asking some insane price."

"I think at least a couple million. They want to sell it to be converted it into condos, but the cost of taking out all the stuff in there would be substantial. I tried to capture the beauty and elegance of the building. I think it's worth saving, instead of just tearing it down and building up something soulless and modern in its place."

Laney blinked her long lashes a couple of times. "You like old things too?"

“Yes! I love antiques, but I can’t really afford them.”

“Are you kidding me? You like antiques?”

“Umm. Yes...” Morgun wasn’t sure if that was a good or a bad thing because Laney was suddenly acting really weird.

“I do too,” she said softly, like it was the most monumental discovery in the world. “I’m really into history, and I have tons of antiques. My whole place is done up with old crap, as Jason and my dad like to call it. They’re not fans. Mostly because it’s heavy and I usually end up calling them to help me move it around. I think no matter what it was, old or new, they’d complain, but the new stuff doesn’t weigh as much because it’s usually constructed out of garbage.”

Morgun just nodded, feeling even more self-conscious about her place. Most of the furniture she owned was constructed out of garbage. She was going to offer to show Laney her dresser, but she backed out of that, relieved that she hadn’t. If Laney collected or liked antiques, the dresser probably wouldn’t impress her. She’d probably just laugh at it.

Laney stared at her. She kept staring, trying to read Morgun’s expression until she squirmed in her seat under the scrutiny.

“Sorry. Did I say something wrong?”

“No,” Morgun quickly assured her. “No. You didn’t. I was just thinking about something.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t know.”

“You were thinking about something, but you don’t know what it is?”

“I forgot.”

“Do I make you nervous?”

Morgan swallowed hard, feeling her cheeks heat up. “Of course not.”

“Can I kiss you?” Laney asked. Her eyes darkened as she studied Morgun, but other than that, there were no visible signs that she was turned on.

“Umm, I...”

“Yes?”

“I g-guess...”

Laney didn't wait. She clasped Morgun's face gently

with those hands she used to work magic with a camera, tilted her face up just slightly, and crushed her lips with the most searing, desperate, most insanely hot kiss of Morgun's life. Well, maybe it was the second most searing, desperate, insanely hot kiss of her life. Because Laney had kissed her before. And she remembered every single detail of it. It was every bit as amazing as this one.

“I really like kissing you,” Laney said when she pulled away. Her voice was different than ever before. Quiet. Sweet. Passionate. Raw. It was her voice. Not her tough voice. It was real. She was open and vulnerable and Morgun saw that whether Laney was choosing to let her see it or not.

Morgun's chest squeezed.

“I liked it before. That night. My brother's wedding. I messed it all up.”

“I shouldn't have gotten mad,” Morgun protested softly.

“Still.” Laney reached out and took Morgun's hand, and shivers snaked up her arm.

“I messed it up. I don't want to mess it up now.”

“I...”

“Can I kiss you again?”

You can do more than that. I want to do more than that with you. I want to do more than that to you. Morgun didn't say it. She was suddenly too shy to say that, but she wasn't too shy to tell Laney yes. She wanted this. She'd thought of nothing else since the night of the wedding. Even though she was pissed off. She wanted that again. That crazy explosive chemistry. She wanted Laney.

“Yes,” Morgun whispered. “Please kiss me again.”

## Chapter 19

### Laney

Laney leaned in until their faces were just inches apart. She drank Morgun in before she tasted her. Goosebumps beaded all over her skin when Morgun's tongue stroked hers. Laney tilted her face and gave everything. She didn't hold back—usually she always held back. Not this time. This time her hands tangled in Morgun's hair, gathering the silky strands. This time she kissed so deeply that she didn't think she'd ever find her breath again. This time, she wasn't going to stop. This time, she was giving everything.

Morgun whimpered and grabbed Laney's shirt. Laney melted when Morgun pressed up against her, curves meeting curves, their bodies a perfect fit. Her whole body felt it. All of it. The hair on the backs of her arms stood up. The ache in her belly pounded fiercely. She could feel herself throbbing between her thighs. Her legs trembled. Her chest felt like it was going to explode. Her heart ran rampant like a wild animal finally uncaged.

When Morgun steered Laney away from the living room, back towards the bedroom, she didn't resist. There wasn't going to be any protesting from her. She didn't just want this, she needed it with every ounce of her being. She'd never needed anyone like this, and that frightened her. It made her want to crawl back under the thick skin she'd made for herself and hide. It made her want to predict that it would end badly, because everything eventually ended, but she ignored those thoughts. She put the lid on her protests and her fears and let her body overrule her head.

Even if it was just one time. One night.

They went through a doorway, kissing frantically, ripping at each other's clothes. The room was small, and the blinds were drawn, but some light from the hall and living room spilled into the entrance. Laney could make out a bed, the usual dresser and nightstand. She realized they were antiques, but for once, she didn't take any time to appreciate it.

At least, she wasn't appreciative of the bed until Morgun tugged her down on top of it. She fell ungracefully enough, but quickly righted herself, straddling Morgun. Laney couldn't help but grind herself against Morgun's leg, but it only sent more shivers and fire racing between her legs. She needed out of her pants and fast.

Morgun grabbed Laney's shirt and tore it up to her shoulders. Laney lifted her arms, helping her get the thing off.

"Can I touch you?" Morgun asked, like Laney had asked her if she could kiss her.

"Yes," Laney panted. "Please. Yes. Absolutely."

Morgun grinned. "I like you from this angle. It's a good angle for you."

"I like you from any angle."



Morgun blushed. She reached around Laney's back and undid her bra and peeled that away. Laney immediately thrust her breast into Morgun's hand and gasped when her small fingers plied her already hard nipple. Jolts of burning heat went spreading through her, gathering between her legs.

Not satisfied just to touch, Morgun leaned up and suckled Laney's nipple. The wet, warm sensation made Laney jerk hard. She might as well have just stuck a knife in a toaster. She'd never done that, of course, but she imagined that the jolt of electricity ripping through her would feel the same. Except this wasn't bad. No, this was anything but bad.

Laney ground her hips into Morgun's leg again. Morgun responded by lashing her nipple with her tongue and scraping her teeth over it. Laney's back arched, and she somehow checked back into herself and realized they had too many clothes on. Far, far too many clothes.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:20 pm*

She rectified that by tugging at Morgun's shirt. Morgun helped too, in between hot, frantic kisses. When her shirt was off, Laney attacked her bra. It was lace and had no underwire, and it was easy to slip over Morgun's head, so she got it off without tearing it to bits like she wanted to. Laney had never felt so desperate. She was willing to chew through that lace just to get it off Morgun.

Morgun's breasts were perfect. Two pale globes with rosy nipples. Laney was sorry she hadn't taken time to appreciate them the last time they were together. She was sorry she hadn't taken more time with Morgun. That she'd taken so long to get here.

"Want to taste you," Morgun demanded. Her hands started tearing at Laney's pants. "Can you take these off?"

"Yes." Yes, she very well could. Yes, she wanted to. If she didn't, she might physically implode within a very short amount of time.

Laney rolled off Morgun and quickly shed her pants. She ripped her panties off too, because they were just in the way.

Morgun made a noise of desperate appreciation and Laney flushed at the desire in Morgun's eyes. No one had ever looked at her like that before. Sure, women had appreciated her, they'd looked at her with desire, but not the way Morgun was doing. Morgun looked beyond her body. She looked inside her. Into the spots that Laney never allowed anyone else to see.

Laney shivered. Not just because she was turned on.

“I need to taste you,” Morgun whispered thickly. “It’s only fair. I didn’t get to last time. I’ve been thinking about it ever since then.”

“Jesus,” Laney groaned.

“Come here.” Morgun crooked her finger. “Please.”

“How?” Laney waited for direction. She never waited for direction. She was very much a take charge kind of person.

Morgun leaned back against the pillows. “Just come here.”

Laney nearly fell straight over when she realized what Morgun wanted. She flushed and hesitated, but eventually she did move. She let Morgun guide her as she straddled her chest. She guided her up, up until she could tuck her arms under Laney’s legs. Laney leaned forward and set her palms on the cold wall above the headboard.

It was an extremely intimate position. In all her experience, she’d never done this. She’d never been so open before. She might be on top, but she wasn’t in control. She was giving that up, and it was hard until the first pass of Morgun’s tongue. Then, Laney forgot all about being slightly uncomfortable or embarrassed, and just let herself enjoy it.

Morgun was really, really good with her tongue. She explored all of Laney, flicking it along her seam, her entrance, her clit. She gathered the beads of moisture there, humming and groaning at the taste, before she worshipped Laney with her tongue. Laney couldn’t not grind into Morgun’s face. It was an automatic reaction for her hips to buck wildly. Her fingers clawed at the walls.

“Holy fuck,” she moaned.

Morgun curled her fingers in response and traced Laney's seam. She mewled and rode Morgun's tongue, rode her face, shamelessly. Because god, it felt so freaking good.

Morgun circled and flicked Laney's clit with her tongue and Laney was ready to jump out of her skin and leave her body altogether. At the same time, Morgun slid two fingers inside Morgun and that was all it took. It might have been record time for her, but she was done. The climax came over Laney, startling her, rocking her with its violent intensity.

Suddenly the room was bright. Behind her eyes there was an explosion of color and her body was rocked with wave after wave of pleasure. She rode Morgun's fingers, her walls spasming around them. She twisted and gyrated on Morgun's face and Morgun kept pace, her tongue doing wicked things to Laney's clit so that she kept coming and coming. The pleasure never stopped. All Laney could do was pant and strain through the unyielding waves.

"Holy...holy fuck!" she panted after she could finally speak again.

"It was pretty amazing from this end too," Morgun said, tone raspy and husky.

Laney knew that if she didn't get Morgun all the way naked now, that if she didn't taste her, touch her, explore every inch of her body, pleasure her, make her thrash and scream and moan right freaking now, she might just explode. Laney slid down until she was straddling Morgun's hips.

She tore at Morgun's clothes, ripping away pants, socks, panties, until Morgun was completely and wonderfully naked.

"Holy shit," Laney gasped. "You're so...freaking gorgeous."

Morgun blushed again. “I, well, thank you.”

“You’re amazing. So sexy. So beautiful.”

Morgun laughed, but she didn’t protest.

It was the truth. Morgun was gorgeous. Glorious. Totally feminine with long, shapely legs, a beautiful curve to her hips, and perfect, pert breasts. All sprawled out on the bed, she was a goddess. A glorious goddess painted with the glow from the hall.

She was the most beautiful creature that Laney had ever seen. The urge to photograph that beauty, to capture it, did occur to her, but barely, as a passing thought she didn’t even giv

e consideration to. The lens would never be able to properly account for Morgun’s sensuality, her beauty, the flush on her skin, the anticipation, the scent of arousal permeating the room around them.

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Laney had never seen anything or anyone that she thought she couldn't properly portray with her camera. Often, people were astounded by her artistry. Often, people said they didn't even look like themselves. They meant that as a compliment.

Morgun was the first. She was the first, and Laney suspected she'd be the last. The only beauty that Laney kept just for herself. The moments they were sharing would be stored away inside Laney, locked away and cherished.

She'd thought to herself that she just needed one time. One time to get Morgun out of her system. One time for both of them and that would be enough. She realized now that it would never be enough. That the yearning she felt wouldn't be sated by just this one time. She already knew that she'd crave Morgun just as badly when she left here as she did before she arrived.

There would be more. She couldn't stop at once. She didn't want to stop at one. She didn't want to get involved, but she couldn't help herself. Morgun was different. Morgun was always going to be different, and Laney knew she wouldn't be able to stay away.

Instead of running, withdrawing, panicking, or crawling inside her shell, she promised herself that she'd enjoy every single minute of being with Morgun until it ended, as she knew it would end, because that's how everything went for Laney. She'd enjoy it. She'd learn from it. She'd make sure that she worshipped Morgun and that Morgun knew she was treasured beyond a doubt.

Laney knew she couldn't have a career and a relationship. Her mom was wrong. It just wouldn't work. The past had proved that to her over and over. But for once she

would let her guard down. She'd let it down and she'd enjoy this. She'd enjoy every single second of it. She'd store it away for the time when she wouldn't have it. She'd capture it with her mind, all those images, just like she did with the camera.

Then Laney would pull it together when it came time for Morgun to tell her that she'd had enough of Laney's schedule, her work, her drive, her personality, whatever it was. When it was over, Laney told herself she'd be fine. She'd get on with her career because that's what she wanted, and she'd nurse the wounded parts of herself back to health. She'd make it because she had to make it.

"You look like you're thinking really hard about something. Overthinking things," Morgun whispered. "Please don't bail on me again. Like you did at the wedding. Don't just check out. We're doing fine. I promise I'm not going to ask you for something you can't give. I want the parts of you that I know are there, the parts you're already giving me. I don't want more than that. Just be here. Don't run away from me again."

Laney shook her head so slowly she could feel every movement in her vertebrae. "No," she whispered. "I'm not going anywhere. I'll stay."

"For a minute? For tonight? Tomorrow?"

Laney chewed on her lower lip until she tasted copper. "For however long we have." She was surprised to hear that truth slip from her lips, but Morgun didn't seem surprised. She wasn't angry. She seemed relieved.

She half sat up, cradled Laney's face in her hands so very gently, and guided her face to hers.

Chapter 20

Morgun

Morgun might not have known Laney very well in terms of minutes or days or even weeks, but she did know something about how she worked. Laney was scared of commitment and had built up walls around herself. She might have been hurt before, or maybe she feared giving up the life she'd built for herself. People generally felt threatened when their core values were pressed on.

Laney wanted a career. She valued it above all else. She didn't want a family. She might not even want a relationship because she was probably afraid she couldn't do both, and maybe people had proved that to her in the past.

But she was staying. She said she would stay. She said for however long they had. Morgun was determined to make that as long as possible.

She'd watched Laney change since that day in the café. She knew all about the walls, the rigid way Laney went through life, the shell she wrapped around herself. She watched it drop right before Laney kissed her. She'd watched it fall away with every second after that.

This was Laney unguarded. The real her. The amazing, raw, wonderful, incredible her. For other people, it might not be much. It might not be enough. For Morgun, it was a start, and she wasn't going to throw it away. She was going to choose to trust Laney. To take those baby steps. To see where they could go. Not because she wanted just the physical, but because she could see there was so much more to Laney Sterling than most people got to see, and for some reason, Laney was giving her a rare glimpse of that.

She smiled up into Laney's face and laughed at herself softly. "Now I'm the one thinking too much."



“That’s okay.” Laney’s face was soft. “I’d really like to make you feel good. If that’s okay with you?”

“It’s definitely okay with me!” Morgun giggled.

Laney bent down and kissed Morgun. Really kissed her. It was the kind of kiss that made her realize that Laney had been holding back before, even if they were the best kisses of Morgun’s life. She kissed her breathless while her hands went to work, caressing and worshipping every bit of Morgun’s body.

Morgun responded, kissing Laney back, but also reaching up to explore her body. Her soft shoulders, the sleek muscles of her arms, her straining nipples, her tight, flat stomach, the soft curve between her ribs and her pelvis. Her fingers brushed over Laney’s smooth skin below her belly. Morgun groaned into Laney’s mouth. Laney obviously invested in waxing. That smoothness could never come from a razor. Morgun knew, because she shaved and even though she was smooth too, she wasn’t that kind of amazingly smooth.

Laney gripped Morgun’s hips and arranged their legs so they could grind against each other, giving each other the friction they both craved. She dropped her head and suckled Morgun’s breast, sending pinpricks of glorious sensation racing through her. Heat gathered between her legs and when her own heat met Laney’s slick wetness, Morgun nearly went out of her mind.

Their legs tangled and their skin glided together. Morgun felt the heat building, the delicious friction sending her skin into a flurry of goosebumps. Laney leaned over and suckled her nipple again, adding to the mix of crazy, swirling heat. She kept rolling her hips, grinding her pelvis into Morgun, and Morgun’s hips did the same, rising and falling on instinct, matching and meeting with Laney’s in a harmony they couldn’t have planned better if they tried. Their fit was nearly perfect. Morgun was afraid to think of absolute perfection, afraid what that would do to her chest and her

resolution to take things one day at a time, slowly and carefully.

But regardless, she felt all soft and melty in her chest. And just about everywhere else.

While Laney rolled her tongue over Morgun's straining nipple, she brought her hand between them. Morgun groaned when she felt Laney's finger slide through her slick folds to her entrance. She rolled her hips against her hand, but Laney teased her, circling her clit and pressing lightly. Morgun groaned. She tried to rock her hips so that Laney's finger went to her entrance. She needed her inside her. Filling her.

That thought made Morgun think about toys. She didn't own a single toy. She'd always wanted to try but was too embarrassed and intimidated before. She'd used them in the past, but she had never purchased her own. What Laney was doing made her think about things she could buy to give them both pleasure. Things they could share together. Private things that only they would know about. It might have started as a random thought, but now that she was thinking it, she felt extra heat coil up tight inside of her and she fairly shook with it.

"Are you okay?" Laney asked when she felt the shiver.

“Yes,” Morgun panted. “Yes, I’m fine.”

Laney’s finger circled her

clit again and Morgun shook. “You’re so incredibly sexy,” Laney breathed. “I love that I get to watch myself giving you pleasure. You have no idea how erotic it is. You have no idea how turned on I am right now.”

Morgun gripped Laney’s neck and pulled her to her. She needed to kiss her. Needed that connection. Needed it because she needed to do something with her lips and tongue and mouth. She was already so close to the edge. Her whole body was straining.

Laney kissed her hard. Her tongue twisted with hers. She suckled her lips, nipped her with her teeth softly. She was all fire. She knew just where to touch Morgun, just how much, when, knew just what combination of sensation to produce. Morgun whimpered and moaned into Laney’s mouth. Her body responded immediately to her touch. When Laney finally took pity on her and ground down into the right spot, Morgun nearly screamed.

And then Laney curled two fingers and thrust up into Morgun and it was game over. Laney knew just how to move her fingers. The right speed to thrust, the perfect curl. The heat coiled madly. Laney kept stroking her with long, hot, wonderful strokes. Morgun’s hips rolled and rocked with a violence that nearly astounded her. Everything inside her tightened. Laney kept rolling her hips too, rolling them into her own hand.

Morgun was just about there, and so she was shocked when Laney broke the kiss and cried out right near her ear. Her body vibrated and shook above Morgun, but she didn't stop thrusting deep into her core. She curled her thumb and pressed into Morgun's clit, and an explosion detonated deep inside of her at the contact. Morgun felt her body clench up tight and then the spasms and waves came with a blinding intensity.

They spiralled together and came together. Shook and vibrated and clenched around each other. Morgun panted and panted. Laney moaned, and that unfettered sound was better than a scream. Morgun let the waves rock over her. The climax was so hot and hard that she found herself clenching her teeth and scrunching her eyes so tight that when she finally released everything, her brow ached.

Laney slowly slid her hand away. She didn't untangle her legs.

"Holy cow and a half," Morgun breathed. "Holy pineapples and pizza. Holy- holy everything. Everything holy. That was...I don't even know."

"Crazy awesome? A little bit good? Slightly pleasant? Needs improvement?"

Morgun laughed. "Definitely needs improvement. Clearly."

Laney propped herself up on an elbow and looked into Morgun's eyes. She smiled at her, a liquid smile that spoke of happiness and contentment. And it was all for her. "Needs improvement, hmm? I'm up for that."

"When?" Morgun panted.

"In about ten seconds."

"Why ten?"

“It seems like a nice, round, even number. I think it will take me about that long to get the bones and muscles back in my body.”

All Morgun could do was smile. It didn't fade. It wasn't going to fade. Her face might crack, but she'd still be rocking that smile. She couldn't stop because Laney wasn't just going to check out on her. She wasn't going to leave. She was going to spend the night with her.

As if to prove it, Laney shifted and pulled Morgun into her arms.

“You know,” Laney whispered contentedly against Morgun's hair. Morgun shivered to hear that soft, sated tone. “I came to your place on Christmas. I buzzed the buzzer, but no one answered.”

“Really?” Morgun thought that, considering they were in bed together and that was shocking enough in itself, that she'd had her quota of surprises for the night. “You did? When?”

“It was late. After I left my parent's house. I drove here. I don't know why. I don't even remember what time it was. I just...showed up. I rang the buzzer. There was no answer. I guess I wanted to tell you that I was sorry about the wedding. Maybe wish you a Merry Christmas. I had leftovers from my parents' house tucked under my arm. You were probably still with your own family, and like you would have wanted leftovers...”

“Oh, I would have wanted them.” Morgun laughed and she felt Laney relax against her.

“There weren't any giant, scary, nuclear-looking, extra-large hissing rats on the doorstep that night.” They both laughed about the incident with Chester. Morgun still found it hard to believe that Laney had never seen an opossum before.

“That’s...wow. So that day I had my interview, I thought that you just bumped into me by accident, sort of.”

“No. It wasn’t an accident. I was watching for you to be done so that I could try to talk to you. I knew that I needed to apologize. Even if it was just that.”

“Just that? You had something else in mind?”

“I really did want to know how your interview went.”

“That was it?” Morgun was so sure Laney would say it was. She was sure she wouldn’t admit to having any other motive. She was surprised yet again.

“No. That wasn’t it. Maybe I wanted to see you.”

“Maybe?”

“Okay, I did. I wanted to see you.”

Morgun smiled, radiant with happiness. She knew it was a dangerous happiness. That going to bed with someone hardly constituted something permanent, but she couldn't help herself. Maybe it was the hormones, the afterglow. Maybe that made a person not want to live in the real world for whatever short amount of time they were allotted.

She had to ask, even though she knew it could blow up in her face. “Are you...do you think that you'd want to spend the night?”

Laney hesitated. “I have a full day booked tomorrow. As usual.”

“Okay.” Morgun told herself not to be disappointed. Spending the night was a huge deal. It was a lot for someone to consider, and it was sudden. Neither of them planned this. it just sort of happened. Like what happened at the wedding. Sudden. Unexpected. Wonderful.

“If you set the alarm for five, that should give me time to get back to my condo and get showered and changed.”

Morgun blinked, then nestled her cheek just a little bit further into Laney's warm shoulder. Her skin was fragrant and silky, and she wished they could remain that way for a good portion of forever.

But Morgun counseled herself not to get too attached. Forever was a huge word. A scary word. A word that a lot of people didn't get. Forever was a mercurial word and she was sprinting her ass off instead of taking the baby steps she needed to be taking. She needed to be careful. Cautious. Not push or rush things or expect too much. She was scared to even hope because hope could be a real bastard. Hope could give you everything, but it could also pull the rug out from under a person and put them on their behind real fast too.

She knew she was bad at living in the present. Her mom often used a saying that sounded like it came straight from the eighteen-hundreds, about borrowing tomorrow's troubles for today. Morgun knew she did that all the time. She needed to stop worrying, stop borrowing trouble. She just needed to close her eyes, wrap her arms around Laney, and enjoy what they had in the moment.

So, she did. And she was surprised at how easy it was to fall asleep when her steady heartbeat was mirrored by Laney's.

## Chapter 21

### Morgun

Morgun knew Laney's time was precious. She was gone so much for work, and when she was in Anaheim, she was just as busy. They might not have been able to spend every night together, or even every other night, but the second Laney buzzed and walked through Morgun's door, they wasted no time before starting in on what they wanted to say or do. And that usually involved far less saying than doing. And they did a lot, on just about every surface and square inch of Morgun's apartment.

She'd never been with a woman as confident as Laney. Or as experienced. Laney made her want to try new things. Different places. Different positions. Even toys. Morgun would never have been able to do that with another person, but Laney made



it feel natural and right. She knew just how to touch Morgun, and if she wasn't sure, she asked. No one had ever asked Morgun where she liked to be touched, or how, or even what she liked.

Laney did. She cared. She stayed the night. She did the intimate things that most people were scared to do, like holding each other after. Caressing hair. Kissing the forehead. Nibbling the earlobe. Running a finger gently over a shoulder. Sleeping wrapped together.

While Morgun had obviously had other relationships, none of them were like Laney. Laney was older. She wasn't shy. She might have been harder around the edges at first, but every day, she softened further. Morgun had never been with another photographer before. It was nice to be able to ask someone else what they thought about a certain camera setting, or a shot, a series of shots, or even a new technique. It was more than just nice.

After a few days in New York, Laney showed up at Morgun's apartment as soon as she'd dropped her luggage and camera equipment off at her condo. They waited all of three seconds after Laney walked in before they tore each other's clothes off and enjoyed each other's bodies like they hadn't seen each other in years.

After, Morgun lay in her bed in a tangle of sheets and Laney's arms and legs, thinking about how she could ask Laney what she'd been dwelling on for the past few days. She wanted to do a photoshoot with Laney, but instead of focusing just on Laney as the subject, which Morgun knew would only make her uncomfortable, she thought they could take turns behind and in front of the lens. She wanted to do something fantasy related, with costumes, hair, makeup, the whole deal.

She could imagine them shooting in a green space, doing a fairy scape, and at night, playing with fire or sparklers with one of them dressed as a fire goddess or a nymph or something. She hadn't really worked through the details, but she couldn't stop

thinking about it. She'd always wanted to try something different, really artsy, but she'd never really had a subject who wanted to do it and she couldn't afford to shell out thousands for a model from an agency.

She wasn't brave enough to ask another photographer to try to execute her vision either. But Laney... Morgun thought that if she pitched her idea the rig

ht way, maybe Laney would get excited about it too.

She was just about to start talking about fire and fairies, when a phone went off. She knew it wasn't hers. Her ring tone wasn't that annoying.

Laney groaned. "Sorry. I forgot to put it on silent."

"What if it's work?"

"I just got back. They can call back later."

It wasn't like Laney to ignore work, and Morgun practically glowed with the warmth of Laney choosing this moment with her over the outside world. That and it was ten at night on a Wednesday. Surely no one could need Laney that badly.

But the phone went off again. And again. And again.

Morgun finally squirmed around in the bed and got her elbow propped up on the pillow. She looked over at Laney. Her nose was scrunched up in annoyance and she had an evil glint in her eyes, like at any second she'd lunge for the phone and throw it out an open window to take care of the problem.

"You could always answer it," she suggested lightly.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:20 pm*

“No, no, I’m sure whoever it is will finally take the hint.”

The phone rang. And rang. And rang.

“Jesus!” Laney flung back the sheet she’d draped half over herself and jumped nimbly from the bed. She found the phone in the pocket of her jeans, which were discarded at the entrance to the bedroom. Just as she picked it up, it rang again. “Oh,” she exclaimed when she studied the screen. “It’s my mom. The incessant calls make sense now. She’s probably worried that I’m dead in a ditch somewhere because I didn’t call her the very second I got home.”

“You should probably answer it. You know, since she’s worried.”

“Okay.” Laney put her finger to her lips before she answered and put the phone to her ear.

It took Morgun a full, stunned minute to realize that Laney was telling her to be quiet. Morgun sat up a little straighter and pulled the sheet over herself, as if someone else had just walked into the room. It was probably just her imagination, but she suddenly felt chilled. The chill must have been internal because there were no raised hairs on the back of her skin, no goosebumps in sight.

Laney went through the usual greetings with her mom. Morgun could hear her mom’s voice drifting over the other end even though the phone wasn’t on speaker.

“Why didn’t you call? Your plane landed two and a half hours ago! I thought you’d at least text your poor mother.”

“Mom! I travel just about every single week. You’d think if you didn’t hear from me because I’m exhausted and jet lagged and just wanted to get in the shower and enjoy a cup of tea or whatever, that you wouldn’t wonder if I’d been murdered.”

“I didn’t think you were murdered. Although, I knew you were in New York, and anything could happen there.”

“Mom!”

“Your plane could have crashed.”

“Mom, come on! I think you would have heard about that on the news, hmm? Plus, I know you were probably following it online and you saw that it landed perfectly fine.”

“I might have...” Laney’s mom changed tactics. “How’s that nice girl from the wedding? Are you still seeing her?”

“Mom! Okay, goodbye! Have a good night! I’ll talk to you again soon, okay? Love you.” Laney hung up and tossed the phone to the foot of the bed. She walked around the bed, put her hands over her face and flopped back against the pillow.

“I’m not a secret, am I?” Morgun’s tone was light and joking, but inside, she felt slightly sick at the thought that Laney wasn’t telling her family about her because she thought there was nothing to tell. They weren’t dating officially, but Morgun felt like sometimes you didn’t need a term or a title to give something meaning.

Just because they hadn’t talked about a relationship didn’t mean that what they had wasn’t a relationship. And it certainly wasn’t meaningless. Not to her, and she wasn’t willing to believe that it didn’t mean anything to Laney. Of course it meant something to her. Morgun knew that, so she hated the pinpricks of doubt that much

more.

“No.” Laney stroked her finger over Morgun’s cheek and Morgun felt the knots in her neck and shoulder muscles untighten. “No, you’re definitely not a secret, but you don’t know what my mom is like. I didn’t want to be on the phone with her for an hour, answering all her questions. The more answers she gets, I swear the more questions she has. If she found out that I was here, she would have wanted to talk to you and you probably would have been here until my phone died, or hers. Mine has a full charge. I’m willing to bet hers does too. I was thinking of you.”

“She’s your mom though!”

“I know! I love her, I really do. I swear it, but I thought I’d keep this time for us and not for an inquisition.” Laney traced Morgun’s bottom lip with the pad of her thumb and Morgun sighed.

Laney was right. She did want to have this time with her alone, just the two of them. She’d been waiting for it all day. Laney’s mom wasn’t the only one tracking her flight—Morgun knew the second it landed.

“Is it alright that I want to keep you for myself? Just for this night?” Laney whispered. She leaned in and licked the path along Morgun’s lip that she’d just traced with her finger before kissing her, suckling her lip into her mouth and grazing it with her teeth. “And maybe a few others too?”

Morgun’s entire body liquefied. “I...yes...” A whole night. In bed. With Laney. Definitely.

This was what Morgun had been waiting for. Every moment of the day felt like it was a thousand years long. She was so wound up by the time that Laney walked in her door, her whole body felt like it was just a giant pile of desire. So maybe she didn’t

want to talk to Laney's mom at the moment. Maybe she could understand where Laney was coming from. And maybe that sick feeling in her stomach had turned liquid and dark and smouldering.

"I have an idea," she rasped out between kisses.

"Yes?" Laney tucked another strand of errant hair behind Morgun's ear. She pulled back and waited.

"It's an idea for a photoshoot. Something different. You know how other photographers do artsy photos? Fantasy? With really cool hair and makeup and costumes?"

"And a massive emphasis on having really good editing skills and backgrounds and pre-sets and all that?"

"I guess so. But anyway. I've wanted to give one a try forever. If we could find somewhere remote, would you be willing to do it with me? Just us? Photographing each other?"

Laney only hesitated for a second. Maybe she just needed that second to think about it before she wrapped her arms around Morgun's neck and pulled her in for a wild, sensuous kiss.

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“Yes,” Laney groaned. “Whatever you have in mind. You find the place. You have my schedule for the next few weeks, so you know what nights I’ll be here and when I’m free. Let me know what you need to make it happen. I have lots of friends and contacts who could lend us what we need.”

“Even their editing skills?”

“I’m pretty good with editing.” Laney’s hand trailed up Morgun’s thigh. “In fact, I’m pretty good with my hands in general. My lips too, come to think of it.”

There was no way Morgun could argue that. Instead, she let Laney stroke and caress her. She melted into her touch, her kiss, and the pleasure of just being with her again after time spent apart. She’d get excited about the photos later. Their project. At the moment, she was more than excited enough to focus solely on Laney and the plans she had for the rest of their night together.

## Chapter 22

Laney

Not many things could make her feel ridiculous after two years of doing all sorts of different and often off the wall photography, but she had to admit she felt strange with her hair done up half in braids, half down in the tightest, frizziest crimps. Her face was stark white with dark makeup around the eyes. She drew some funny looks in traffic. Morgun, at least, had the advantage of having her hair up and woven with pearls. Her makeup was made to look totally natural. She didn’t look like she was getting

ready to go do some pagan ritual.

It was better out of the city. Once they got past the clogged streets, it was tough for people to ogle Laney while going at higher speeds. If they were looking, they weren't doing it for long as they zipped past.

"So, this farm..."

"It's an orange grove. The guy was nice enough to let us do the shoot there and he only asked for two hundred bucks. I was willing to go to five, but he just asked for two. We'll only be there for a couple hours, I figure, maybe less. It seems private. And the orange trees will make for something different. He says there's a big old barn and an ancient old farmhouse on the far side of the yard, just past the orchard, so I thought that would be pretty cool too."

"It sounds like the perfect setting."

"Thank you for doing this!" Morgun had been so excited all day, since early this morning when Laney picked her up to get their hair and makeup done.

It felt weird to think of herself on the other side of the camera, but she reminded herself that it was just for fun. She'd be photographing Morgun too, which excited her. She remembered wanting to do it since the first time she viewed her message and checked out her profile.

How was Christmas only a couple weeks ago? It felt like a thousand years had passed between then and now. Not in a bad way. Laney was used to time disappearing because she was always working. She never felt like she had enough of it. Often she'd dig in, and when she came up for breath, she couldn't believe that sometimes a month or two was just gone. Evaporated.



This was different. She realized that she might be happier than she'd ever been. It's funny, how a person can walk around for years and years with this giant emptiness inside themselves and not even know it's there. Even though her mom was pointing it out to her just about daily, albeit in a very annoying way, Laney had never stopped to consider that there might be something more for her than just her career. Or that she could be happy doing both and that one or the other didn't have to suffer for it.

So far, with Morgun, she was making things work. Morgun accepted that Laney's work schedule was completely crazy. When she had to travel, Morgun didn't give her a hard time about being gone. Morgun didn't ask for terms or labels or demand that they spend every second that they weren't working with each other. Laney felt like she could breathe. She didn't feel stifled. She felt kind of wonderful.

"Laney?"

"Oh. Of course. I want to. I've been thinking about it, and it's something different. I appreciate that."

She should just tell Morgun that she'd been dying to photograph her, but she couldn't. There were still so many times when she struggled with her emotions. She allowed herself to feel them, but emoting them? That was always the hard part.

Laney had a whole day free and so did Morgun. Today was the natural choice and Laney was glad that she'd dedicated her one day off for the next three weeks to Morgun's project.

The outer edges of the city gave way to orchards and landscapes that were green and lively. It was much different than the concrete jungle. Beautiful in a different way. Laney loved the city. She would never pretend otherwise. She'd done the occasional outdoorsy stuff and enjoyed it, but she also liked her condo and the way a city seemed to have a heartbeat, like a real human body.

Who was she kidding? She liked the convenience. She hated having to drive for long periods of time. It was fine once in a while but commuting for long stretches every single day would get pretty old pretty fast.

Eventually, Laney consulted the list of directions and pointed to a turn well up ahead. They'd driven past the orchard for the past couple miles and it wasn't hard to spot the blue farmhouse on the corner or the massive, weathered old barn behind it.

Silas was the old man's name. No one else came out to greet them and Laney wondered if the elderly man lived alone. He was indeed elderly. He had a mane of white hair and a bushy white beard that went halfway down his chest. He kind of looked like Santa, and she wondered, glibly, if he played the part at Christmas in the mall and gave out the very oranges that he grew to kids.

Silas wore a set of ancient overalls that were worn, but clean, and a plaid red shirt below. He smiled a toothless grin, and his eyes lit up to see them.

"Whooo, you girls look strange." He directed that mostly to Laney before pointing out the barn, which rose above the farm like a gray wood mountain before explaining to them that they had the run of the orchard as long as they didn't harm the trees.

Laney wondered what harm they could do, but then maybe Morgun had mentioned something about sparklers, and so she assured him that they wouldn't harm anything. Photos were mostly about the subject, who looked and never touched.

"Well, I'm mighty happy to have you. First request of the kind I've ever got." Silas grinned again. He kind of looked like a happy pit bull, how their whole face basically turns into a gummy mass of pink lips and wrinkles. Laney happened to think that pit bulls were adorable, and she thought of Silas the same way. "When you're done, you should come to the house for some coffee and oranges."

“Mmm.” Morgun licked her lips at the thought of the fresh fruit. “Will do. I have to pay you too.” She grabbed her purse, which she had draped over her shoulder, but Silas waved a gnarled hand in the air.

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“No, no. After. Over coffee. Wouldn’t feel right otherwise.”

“Okay. Thank you. We’ll only be a few hours, if that’s alright.”

“Yes, yes, you go ahead.”

Once Silas went back into the cutest little white farmhouse with red shutters and red trim that ever existed, Laney and Morgun got back in the car and drove towards the barn. They parked there, since it was closer to the orchard.

Morgun got out and shaded her eyes with her hand to take in the rows and rows of trees. It looked almost unending from where they were standing, even though the road wasn’t so far off in the distance.

“I should go first,” Morgun said. “If that’s okay? I mean, not just because this was my idea and I think we’re both nervous and I’ll be the test subject, as is only right, but because I think the wood nymph slash fairy pictures should have more light.”

“Yes. Sure.”

Morgun was right. They had about an hour and a half of good daylight left. While it wouldn’t be dark by any means for Laney’s shoot, one of her friends was going to help her out with the editing after and she assured her that they could shoot in the sunniest of sunny days and still have it come out looking like it was night. They were also going to put in the fire and sparks, so she’d bought a package of sparklers more for fun than anything.

Laney and Morgun shouldered all their gear, including two backpacks with costumes in them, and started through the orchard. It was beautiful and fragrant. Laney had to admit that she wasn't really aware of which season oranges grew best, but she figured in California it was year-round. The heavy, round fruit hanging from the branches seemed to prove that theory correct.

She inhaled the sweet, citrus scented air. She'd never done a shoot like this before and she'd never seen a real orange growing on a tree either. Sure, she'd driven past orchards, but she'd never seen one up close. It was a neat experience. Her mouth watered at the honeyed scent that coated her nostrils and tongue when she breathed in.

"This is pretty cool." She glanced around once, looked up at the sun, then set her bag down with her gear. "I think here would be alright." She finally looked at Morgun and found her looking nervous. Laney understood. She was glad she was going second. "I promise to make this as painless as possible."

"Sorry. It's stupid to be nervous. This was my idea. I'm just...it's weird being on this side of things."

Being there made Laney feel like she was a kid again. When all the problems and trials of being an adult were still a long way off and she was free to just be a kid, doing something she loved in a beautiful place. With someone who meant something to her. A lot to her.

I'm real great at defining the feelings over here.

Laney produced her camera as Morgun slipped off her plaid button-up blouse and jeans and threw on the gauzy green dress. It was totally see through and Laney's friend, Carol, who had loaned her the costumes since she owned a store with rentals and props and stuff like that, assured her that there wasn't supposed to be anything

underneath.

“Dear God,” Morgun exclaimed when she looked down at herself.

“I think you should take off the bra. Leave the panties on.” She had a black lace set on and Laney immediately felt her body heat up. Her palms grew clammy and she had to tighten her grip on the camera.

She’d done a lot of photos of beautiful women before. Many of them were risqué and involved nudity. She’d never once gotten all hot and tingly over them. She supposed that was because for those photos, she had to act like a professional. Popping a lady boner for a client was a good way to get fired, or at least not hired again, and she liked repeat business.

A lady boner? I did not just go there.

Morgun looked around the grove like it might be full of stalkers hiding behind every tree trunk. She made a decision and quickly undid her bra and slipped it through the sleeves of the dress, maneuvering one arm out at a time. She threw it on her pile of clothes, which was set on top of her backpack.

“There are a few different crowns in there and a veil. So I was told. Want to start without them so they don’t mess up your hair?”

“Sure.” Morgun breathed out a sigh of relief at having the direction provided to her. She still had her arms crossed over her chest. “I don’t know if the bra was a good idea. Taking it off, I mean.”

“Don’t worry. We can make it so the dress doesn’t look see through if it doesn’t look good. And you can do some angled away, with your arms placed over your chest. Maybe you can take an orange in your hand for one of the shots. We’ll pay for it

after, of course.”

“O-okay.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I just...” She looked around Laney, off to the direction of the farmhouse. “I think Silas is a nice old man, but do you think he’d have a pair of binoculars in there?”

“Ha!” Laney roared with laughter.

Morgun finally let loose too. She had to wipe at her eyes carefully so she didn’t smudge her makeup. Laney was careful not to touch her face so she didn’t wreck hers either. It was heavy, exaggerating every single facial gesture she made. She could literally see the darkness under her eyes.

“Don’t worry. You look beautiful,” she assured Morgun, and she watched the other woman transform before her eyes. She became automatically more confident.

Laney took out her camera and fitted a lens. She played with the settings for a few minutes, then gave Morgun a grin. A shiver of excitement coursed through her. She was seriously going to enjoy herself.

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Morgun, with her sandy blonde hair done up like that, her flawless skin, lush lips, and high cheekbones defined by makeup, her green eyes popping with the emerald of the gossamer dress, couldn't have been more beautiful. The photos were going to turn out freaking amazing and Laney felt the stirrings of an old excitement that she hadn't felt in a very long time.

Morgun was going to be the most beautiful fairy or nymph, or whatever they decided the pictures should come out as, in the entire universe.

### Chapter 23

#### Morgun

They went through the props. The crowns. The flowing emerald headdress that matched the sheer dress. They went through poses. Under trees. Against them. Shaded. In full, golden sunlight. Sitting. Standing.

There was a point where Morgun realized she was no longer nervous and could just have fun with it. She did things she wouldn't have been able to do even at the start of the session. She stopped worrying about the dress being so sheer, which she knew could be fully edited to hide whatever she didn't want in there. She twirled. She leaped. She danced. She bent her body into crazy positions. She laughed. She smiled. She picked an orange from the tree and held it in front of her like she was considering it for size, ripeness, and sweetness.

It helped to have Laney on the other side of the camera. She encouraged her. Whispered little words like beautiful, amazing, gorgeous, breathtaking, exquisite.



Laney was so genuine that Morgun really believed everything she was saying. She believed that she didn't normally tell her clients things like this.

Halfway through the session, Laney showed her a couple of the raw shots and Morgun was amazed to see herself transformed like that. She barely recognized herself, and not just because of her hair and makeup. Laney was a real artist and Morgun felt like a masterpiece taking shape under her capable hands.

When they were done, Morgun was relieved to be able to get back into her clothes. They walked up to the ancient barn together. It was built of cedar, Morgun thought, though she wasn't sure. She'd just read things about old cedar barns and assumed that it was probably made from that. It was deliciously weathered and didn't stand straight. She wouldn't venture into it for any kind of money. It looked like it might sway violently with the slightest breeze. If a person were to lean against it, it might literally keel off to that side and tumble into a splintery heap.

It did make for a beautiful background.

Laney was stiff and awkward in her clothes, a flowing black dress with leather and faux metal accents. It was beautiful and matched perfectly with Laney's hair and makeup. At least she was fully covered, even if the dress had high slits that showed off her shapely legs and had an even lower neckline and a scooped back.

Morgun got out her camera and encouraged Laney like she'd done with her. She suggested poses and even went to help Laney into them when she was too stiff or when she didn't understand what Morgun wanted.

Laney eventually relaxed and got into it too. She started holding up her hands like she was playing with fire, or holding it, producing it. She danced and leaped, changed her facial expressions, swirled so that the dress flowed around her like dark water.

As the light faded, changing from that bright, sure golden to a darker, richer bronze, Laney went for the sparklers. Morgun adjusted the camera settings. She was used to shooting in low light thanks to just about every wedding reception she'd ever done.

Why people thought getting married in total darkness was a good idea, at least photo wise, was beyond her. It never failed that the bride and groom always wanted their first dance to be all dark, moody, and lit like they were dancing in the moonlight. She was okay with low light. She'd done a few sparkler photos for people before as well, so she adjusted the settings on her camera to what she could remember using before.

"Shutter speed around ten seconds?" Laney couldn't help herself. She had the sparklers ready in one hand, a lighter in the other.

Morgun nodded. "Yeah. Maybe fifteen. It's not dark."

"ISO one hundred? Everyone always says that works best, but that's when it's just about pitch black."

"I'll try that."

"Just tell me when you're ready."

Morgun set the camera. "How good is your friend with the overlays and backgrounds?"

"She's amazing. She can take a normal photo of a kid running and make it look like she's in a fantasy world being chased by a dragon breathing fire all around her. She can make it look black."

"Okay. Just checking."

“I think you’ll be amazed.”

“I wish I could amaze myself.”

“There are always classes. Although, I think Lisa is more of a graphic designer. I’m also sure that she went to school to make video games. She’s incredibly artistic. You should see the digital art she makes.”

Morgun felt two seconds of irrational jealousy, then realized it was totally ridiculous and misplaced. After that, she felt regular jealousy. She wished she could have half that talent, but she realized Laney was right. There were always classes, and even if she couldn’t design a video game, she could learn to play with light and backgrounds.

“Don’t get that sparkler too close to the barn. I don’t want it to go up. That would be the worst. I don’t think my insurance would cover that, although, who knows? But my premiums would be a disaster after I used it for something like that.”

“What’s one of these things even worth?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to find out either.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“It’s awfully dry out.”

“It’s not that bad. I won’t wave it around crazily. Just do an arc above my head with it and out in front.”

“Okay. Are you ready?”

“I’m ready.”

Morgun lifted her camera to her face. “Okay....go!”

Laney lit the sparklers. She threw the lighter away from her so that it wouldn’t be in the photos and started waving the sparklers. Morgun went with it, quickly adjusting settings as she shot. She didn’t look at the raw photos until after the sparklers burned out. They had a couple packs just in case, but she was astounded to see the results.

“Look!” She brought the camera over to Laney, who laughed in amazement as soon as Morgun started flipping through.

“That worked out well, didn’t it?”

“Yes! Oh my God, these are going to look so good!”

“I guess we can start packing up, unless there’s something else you want to do.”

“No, I think we’re good. Unless there’s something else you want?”

“I think I’m good. Silas is probably waiting to serve us tea. It’s been a couple hours.”

“Don’t worry. He knows exactly what we’re doing. He’s watching us with his binoculars, remember?”

Morgun groaned. “Please don’t say that.”

“It was you who came up with it.” Laney laughed. She very unashamedly stripped out of the costume and got her regular clothes back on. She, at least, got to keep her underthings on, and the barn hid them from view of the house.

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p; Morgun felt the same burning heat she always felt whenever she looked at Laney, especially Laney stripped down to just her bra and panties, but she turned and forced herself to start packing up equipment.

“Oh look!” Laney suddenly announced. Morgun whirled. She saw Laney first, slipping her jeans on, and nothing else. “A cat!” Laney thrust her other leg into her jeans and pulled them over her hips. She left her costume on the ground and made cute little kissing noises, calling, “Here kitty. Come here.”

Morgun still didn’t see a cat. Laney obviously hadn’t lost sight of it. She went cooing and kissing around the side of the barn, calling for the cat, which was probably a farm cat and likely feral. Morgun set her camera carefully into its bag, then went trailing after Laney. You’d think that a person who didn’t even know what an opossum looked like and was about to attempt to mace it, albeit with hairspray, wouldn’t be so gung-ho about a wild cat.

“I don’t see a cat,” Morgun whispered behind Laney, now rounding the other side of the barn.

“It was just here. It keeps running up ahead. I saw it. It’s one of those, what do they call them? Tuxedo cats? With the black and white?”

“Oh. Well, it probably doesn’t want to be pet. That’s why it’s walking away from us. We should probably just leave it.”

“Okay.” Laney turned. “Yeah. You’re probably right.” She was about to follow, but then she caught sight of something again and pointed. “No, look. It’s right there!”

Morgun followed her finger and she did indeed see something black and white, but the creature that popped back around the barn’s weathered corner was no cat.

“Ah!” She yelled frantically. Too loudly. “That’s not a cat!”

“What? Oh shit!” Laney could obviously finally see that it was indeed not a cat.

That black and white cute tuxedo was a huge freaking skunk.

“Should we run?” Laney hissed under her breath, trying not to startle the animal, which now was, alarmingly enough, heading straight towards them.

“No,” Morgun whisper-yelled back. “I think that would just scare it. I don’t think they spray unless they’re threatened. We should just back away. Carefully. Slowly. Little steps.”

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She started to move, and Laney followed. They back-peddled slowly. Maybe they should have run, because apparently the skunk was now curious about the two strange creatures creeping back the way they'd come in ultra slow motion.

“What’s it doing?” Laney whispered.

“I don’t know.”

The skunk was acting weird. Turning around in a circle. Stamping its back feet. Stamping its front. It looked like it would flip over onto its face at any given moment. It didn’t make a sound, which was perhaps most frightening of all.

“Should we run?”

“I don’t know!”

The skunk stamped the ground again. Circled around. Stamped one more time.

Morgun’s hair stood up all over her body. “I think we should run!”

It was a good call. Right as she said the words, the skunk stamped one more time and it was game over. The stink bomb that hit took a minute to register, but when it did, Morgun gasped. She was running. Laney was sprinting beside her. They were peeling past the barn, back towards their stuff, but there was no escaping the cloud that followed them. Her eyes watered. Her nose felt singed. Her throat and mouth were thick with the ungodly smell. Her brain could barely process the horror of it.

“Oh my God,” Laney gasped. She made a choking noise. “Oh my God, it’s so bad! How is it that bad? Did we get sprayed?”

“No, I don’t think so. It’s just that bad.”

“There isn’t any wind!”

“I know. But when one gets hit on the road, you can smell it for miles and probably for days.”

Laney and Morgun started grabbing up their bags, the costumes, and their equipment. They both went running towards the car, which wasn’t parked far.

“I can’t tell if it smells or not,” Laney moaned as she bent to smell her bag.

“I can’t either. I think my nose is wrecked for life. I can’t get the stench of it out! I can’t smell anything but the skunk! Ugh, God, it’s making my eyes water. It smells like straight sulphur.”

Laney gagged as she opened the trunk. They threw everything in and turned at the sound of gravel crunching behind them. For one terrible second, Morgun was afraid the skunk had followed them, but it was only Silas. She was afraid he was going to be incredibly angry with them over the terrible smell, and she opened her mouth, ready to plead their case, to say that they hadn’t done anything at all to the creature to cause it to spray, but Silas just slapped his denim covered leg and let out a loud cackle.

“Oh, sweet lord, it’s plain you girls found yourself a bunch of trouble. Did you get sprayed?”

“I-I don’t know,” Morgun stammered. “I don’t think so. But your barn...I’m so sorry!”



“Don’t worry about it. Happens all the time out here. Always creatures going back and forth. I had two dogs, both passed now, poor things, but they couldn’t help themselves. Whenever a skunk came around, they were sure to find it. My black lab got sprayed I can’t tell you how many times. Sometimes twice in a night if there was more than one, or on back to back nights. It got to the point, when I had a family of skunks living out here, that I just gave up on trying to get the stench out of the dogs and let it dissipate on its own. It does fade after a couple weeks. The first couple days are the worst.”

“It smells like sulphur!” Morgun wailed. “I’ve never smelled anything so awful.”

“It is sulphur, I think, that comes out of them. That fades though, and then it’s just the skunk smell after a while.”

“I’m sorry again! We thought it was a cat and went to look. We were backing away and running when it sprayed. We weren’t threatening it at all.”

“I know. Sometimes they just get scared and spray, that’s all. Anyway, no harm done. The barn’s not too close to the house, and like I said, I’m used to it.”

Morgun was sure they wouldn’t get offered tea now, smelling like they did. She was sure she stank higher than high heaven itself. She was already planning on what she would do to get the stench out. She really didn’t want to have a tomato juice bath; maybe there was something else that would work. She’d have to look it up.

Laney’s poor car. The thing probably reeked too. She just hoped that the scent came out of it after they drove away. And their equipment. And the costumes!

Morgun felt like crying, but she bit her lip and reached into the car for her purse. She took out the two hundred dollars and an extra hundred that she’d thrown in just in case.

“Here!” She passed the cash over to Silas. His eyes widened when he saw it.

“That’s too much. We agreed on two hundred.”

“Oh, I know, but, well, the smell...”

“Ain’t no problem.”

“Then for the orange I picked. I did pick one. In the orchard.”

Silas’ eyes lit up with amusement. “Well, that’s the most expensive orange I’ve ever sold.”

Morgun and Laney made a strangled noise at the same time. “I’m so sorry again,” Morgun said as she climbed into the car, but Silas just stood there and laughed even harder.

### Chapter 24

Laney

The car reeked like skunk. Laney didn’t understand it, because they hadn’t gotten sprayed, but maybe the wind carried it, and they just stank by association. Neither of them said anything for a long time. Laney made plans in her head to take her car to get detailed the next morning. Maybe they could use some magic product and get the stench out.

Half an hour down the road, Laney just started laughing. She couldn’t help it. It burst from her as a little giggle, but then got louder and louder until she was laughing so hard that her eyes teared up. Morgun looked at her like she’d lost her mind, but then she smiled, and it wasn’t long after that she started laughing too. They laughed and laughed as they drove back towards the city.

“Well,” Laney gasped out when she’d caught her breath. “That was an adventure. I have to say, of all the sessions I’ve ever done, that’s a first.”

“Between that and Chester, you’re getting incredibly acquainted with the wildlife around here.”

“I hope to not get acquainted with anything else. I don’t know, at the rate I’m going, it would probably be a cougar or something.”

“You like cats?”

“Oh. Uh…”

“You were all excited when you thought that skunk was a cat.” Morgun started laughing again and Laney had to join in.

“I guess I do. I don’t know. Pets are always more fun at someone else’s house. You should get one. You were saying you wanted to adopt a senior cat. You should do it! I don’t think I’m home enough for me to get one and it wouldn’t be fair.”

“But you want me to get one. So you could visit it?”

“Yes!”

Morgun seemed to think about that. She got all silent and Laney had to turn to look at her. She was working her bottom lip between her teeth, staring out the passenger window. It was dark and there was nothing to see besides a blur of the occasional flashing light as they got closer and closer to the city.

“Would that be alright?” Laney pressed on. She realized what it was that she’d said and why Morgun had gone quiet. They hadn’t talked about this. Labels. Terms.

Relationships. Dating. A couple. Those were words that they hadn't used. They came with expectations and, often, with baggage, and it was just so nice to enjoy what they had and not worry about those heavy words weighing them down.

"Yes!" The car was dark, but Morgun's movement was obvious. Laney knew she was watching her, and when she turned her face just a little to look at her, she had a huge smile.

It made Laney's chest ache. Morgun was nice. Too nice. She accepted Laney. She accepted her schedule. She challenged her, made her grow, wouldn't let her get away with any of the usual bullshit. She was kind, smart,

intuitive, inventive, artistic, beautiful... She was really good in bed, but Laney didn't like to add that to the list even though it was a legitimate thing she liked about Morgun. Morgun was good with animals too. Opossums especially. And she'd told Laney to leave that "cat" alone today. If she would have just listened, her car, their clothes, their gear, them, they'd all be a lot less smelly than they were.

"Okay," Laney said softly. "If you want to get one, that would be great. I'd love to be a cat auntie. Or if you don't want to, that's okay. I'm not trying to pressure you into getting one."

"I want to. I've been meaning to do it. Maybe I'll get two, so they can keep each other company. Sometimes bonded pairs come into rescues. Older bonded pairs. It's even harder to find them homes."

"That's really sad."

"I know. I hate thinking about how a lot of living beings are just disposable. I'm not judging their owners, it's sad. I follow some rescues on social media and the stories on there could break your heart. It's like Chester. Mrs. Johnson tried to save his

siblings, but Chester was the only one who made it. She called so many rescues, but no one was willing to help. So she raised him. And then we still tried to get him to a rescue, since we thought he had the best chance there, or at a sanctuary, but still no one would help. I'm not judging them either. I know that they're full and probably have a lot of requests and really limited resources. That's when everyone in the building, including the landlord, made a decision to let Mrs. Johnson keep Chester and none of us would say anything. Not only would it break her heart if the city demanded he be surrendered somewhere, it would probably be to a vet's office or some kind of animal shelter that has no capacity to deal with such an animal and would just put him down."

"That's super sad. And really frustrating. I feel bad for Mrs. Johnson."

"We all do too. She needs the company. Since Chester came along, she's been so much happier. There were some of us who were really worried about her."

"It's good that you have an understanding landlord. I can imagine some would freak out."

"Well, Charlie is going on sixty and he likes Mrs. Johnson. She's lived in the building for years. She always makes him tea and feeds him cookies and I think he's lonely too. He's a good guy. Even if he didn't get the free tea and cookies, he still wouldn't have made her give Chester up."

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“Wow. Your building sounds like the people there totally care about each other.”

“I suppose you thought in a dumpy neighborhood you expected screaming, shouting, drugs in the hallway, holes in the walls...that kind of thing?”

“No!” Laney gripped the wheel, her face heating up with embarrassment. “I never thought that.”

“It’s okay. I know my place is small and dumpy and all my stuff is outdated. That’s not where I want to be forever.”

“No! I know that. I never thought that your place was dumpy or outdated!”

Morgun snorted. “Are you sure?”

“Yes!”

“Okay.” She let it go easily. “I’m just really glad you didn’t mace Chester.”

“The hairspray was a crazy idea. I don’t know where I read that. I should just get real mace or nothing at all.”

“You should not get mace! At least hairspray might not blind someone.”

“Maybe I should just take a self defense class.”

“Yeah!” Morgun grew animated, her voice changing to reflect her excitement. “I’ve

always wanted to take one of those! Maybe we can do one together!”

“I’d probably miss half of them, but maybe I can look at my schedule and pick out the nights I’m free and we could see if there’s anything being offered.”

“Okay. I’ll look around and see if I can find anything.” Morgun switched to another subject naturally and easily. “Is it alright if I give you the card from my camera? Yes, I know I should be using digital and upgrading my equipment so it just magically gets transported onto my computer, but I don’t have a laptop that can handle that, and buying a new camera is really expensive.”

“Sure. I don’t mind.” Laney let out a sigh of relief at Morgun not bringing up the subject of putting a label on them. She was scared to jinx it. What she had with Morgun was by far the most special thing she’d ever had with anyone.

Maybe Laney wasn’t only scared of jinxing it. Maybe she was scared of losing it. Which meant that she cared. A person couldn’t be afraid of losing something they didn’t care about losing. She’d found something rare and beautiful and wonderful, and that was terrifying in and of itself.

Lately, she’d been thinking about what her mom wasn’t saying. She wasn’t calling her and bugging her about dating or grandchildren. There’d been silence on that front, thanks to Jason and Natasha’s announcement, but Laney found herself thinking about, just hypothetically, what it would be like to not have to come home to an empty apartment. What sharing everything with someone would be like. Not just someone—Morgun.

She’d thought about it, especially while she was away. That was the time she missed Morgun most, when she was in another city and she couldn’t just head over to her place to see her or ask her out for a drink or dinner. In fact, Laney thought about Morgun a lot.



She worried she was thinking about her too much, too soon. She was scared of putting a label on them, but there she was thinking about Morgun in that sense of the other half of her, of the person she thought about almost all the time, of that special someone. Of the right person.

The right person that everyone always said she'd never met.

What if she'd finally met her and she did something to mess it all up? Laney was half afraid that she would because this was all new to her. She'd dated before, of course. She'd done both casual and more committed relationships, but she'd never considered someone her other half. She'd never thought about another person to distraction. In a good way. She'd never felt even a tenth of what Morgun made her feel. Which was currently undefinable, partly because she was too scared to try to define it.

"Laney?"

"Hmm?" She shook herself. She'd been paying attention to the road while her mind churned up a furious, messed up storm, but she could see how she'd completely zoned out on Morgun. "Sorry. I was...sorry."

"That's okay. I just said that I think it went well. That it's going to turn out amazing."

Laney nodded. She was somewhere around ninety-two and a half percent sure that Morgun meant the photos they'd done. But maybe she was talking about something else. Maybe she was talking about them, and she knew Laney well enough to leave it in code so that she wouldn't scare her. Which made Laney want to cry because she was so thankful, and because that was totally sad and pathetic on her part.

She needed to do better. She knew that. Morgun was worth it. She was so freaking worth it. Laney didn't have to change. She just had to get better at letting her real self shine through. Morgun was so right. There was nothing wrong with being yourself.

Unless you were an asshole. Then you should try to be better. But Laney knew she wasn't. She was all heart. She needed to start letting that through, making it clear to Morgun how she felt. If she couldn't do that, she might lose Morgun, and that was far more awful than growing a set of lady balls and womaning up and talking about her feelings for a change.

## Chapter 25

### Laney

Laney was walking into the lunchroom to get herself another cup of coffee. She was trying to cut back, but she'd been at the office early, doing some editing that she just wasn't motivated to do at home. It was too easy to get distracted at her house when she wasn't in the mood to sit down for hours and plug away doing edit after edit. She had a cubicle here where she could force herself to do the work that needed to be done, but the temptation of coffee that was always on was too great to ignore.

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She stopped short, just around the corner of the large lunchroom, when she heard snippets of conversation

involving Morgun's name.

"Have you met her yet? She's nice. She's hardly ever here, just doing casual work I think."

"Yeah, she does some of the real estate and commercial shots. I've seen her, but I haven't talked with her."

"She's hot." That from a deeper, male voice. "Do you think she's single?"

"I checked her out on social media," the first female voice said. "You don't have a chance. She's not exactly into dating guys."

"What? Really?" Then a very male groan. "All the hot ones are always taken."

"How about the nice ones? Shouldn't that matter? Who cares if someone's hot if they're an asshole?"

Laney decided to step in, since the conversation was totally benign. Just the usual workplace jabbering. She found Lucky, Kate, and Doug in the kitchen. They'd all been working there a lot longer than Laney had. They were all fairly nice too. Laney liked most of the people where she worked. She had to admit that even though the industry was so competitive, most of her coworkers felt like they weren't competing against each other.

“Laney! Hey! Good timing,” Doug said, and good lord, she knew that she should have just turned around and walked the other direction. “We were just talking about the new girl, Morgun? That’s her name?”

Lucy nodded. “She’s nice. Don’t do it, Doug, really. Don’t say it.”

“If she’s single, you should look her up,” Doug said. He usually wasn’t a jerk and he probably wasn’t into getting fired over workplace harassment either.

Lucy groaned. “Sorry. I made the mistake of telling him that he doesn’t stand a chance because Morgun doesn’t date guys. I crept her online, which I shouldn’t have done, but I was curious, and I shouldn’t have said anything. I wasn’t trying to start gossip.”

“No, of course not.” Laney felt something painful start in her stomach. A clawing sensation that made her chest feel like it was going to burst wide open.

“But you should. If she’s single. I mean, you’re single. If she’s single, you should ask her out.”

“Didn’t you guys do a session together?” Kate cut in. “You and Morgun?”

Laney cursed her contacts for not being able to keep their mouths shut. The photos weren’t even done yet. She’d had a teaser of one and she knew they were going to be amazing. It was something to get excited over, but she wished that it had been kept as a private excitement. Although, she’d never said that it couldn’t be mentioned. Laney found herself not wanting to talk about it. She didn’t like to discuss her private life at work, period, but something about this made the panic she felt that much worse.

“I...no. I mean, yes, we did, but it was just that. She had an idea and I liked it. It wasn’t anything more than that.”

“Are you sure?” Lucy crowed. She was more of the hopeless romantic. She’d been married for twenty years and had two kids and was kind of like Laney’s mom in that she still apparently believed in fairy tale, happily ever afters.

“Yup.” Laney nodded. “I’m sure.”

“That’s too bad! She seems super nice.”

“I’m good with being single right now. I’m too busy to think about dating someone.”

“You should never be too busy to date someone,” Doug cut in.

“I’m happy being single.”

“I’m not happy being single and somehow I never have any luck!” Doug stated. “If I were you, I’d go for it. What could be the harm in asking her out?”

“She’s probably not even single,” Kate reasoned, trying to help Laney out.

Laney gave her an appreciative look. “No one can even breathe around here or team up for an afternoon of photos without everyone assuming they’re doing something after hours.” She rolled her eyes for emphasis, but she couldn’t believe what she was saying.

Why couldn’t she just admit that she and Morgun were dating? They had never called it that, but she could say they were seeing each other and say that she’d rather keep the details private. Her coworkers would respect that. Kind of. They might only bug her now and then for minor details because they were curious, but they wouldn’t make it a big deal.

Why was she saying what she was saying? Was she that desperate to protect herself?

Why was it so hard for her to just admit it? Now that it had popped out, her immediate denial that sprung to her lips from the panic and apprehension taking over her entire chest, she couldn't exactly just snatch it back and tell everyone she'd just lied to them and that yes, she and Morgun were on the verge of being a couple, if they weren't already.

Something about realizing that, about actually thinking it and saying the words, even in her own head, made Laney feel like she was standing on the edge of everything she'd so carefully constructed coming down on her. All the women she'd dated in the past, she'd basically sabotaged all those relationships by working too much. Her drive had always overwhelmed them. Things just didn't work out.

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She was always able to rationalize it and she had never fully invested herself to begin with given that she knew it wasn't what she wanted. She wanted her career. If that was thriving, she didn't really have time for anything else to thrive. She was always honest about that, and the women she'd dated all thought they could handle it, and all changed their minds.

But Morgun? Morgun was different. Laney cared about Morgun in a way that she'd never been able to care about someone else. There was something about Morgun that had immediately dug its way under skin and kept burrowing straight to her heart. Kind of like a porcupine quill or blood poisoning. But better.

People said that caring was better. Emotions. Even love. But was it? Look at the mess most people made of their lives. Look at the way they hurt other people and hurt themselves. It was just so much easier to stick with having a career and enjoying that.

Except that Laney had to admit that she hadn't felt that way these past couple weeks. Not since Christmas. Okay, not since Jason's wedding. She kept trying to lie to herself, kept trying to water down that feeling, and she kept failing. When she was with Morgun, she could be herself. She didn't have to be tough. She could be affectionate. She could let herself dream of something beyond a job and an empty house each night. Morgun blindsided her. Morgun was like the kind of car crash that changes a person's life forever.

Laney knew it wasn't fair and it wasn't right to give Morgun hope, but she herself had started to have hope, and that's why she couldn't just end things. She didn't want to end things. She didn't want to stop seeing Morgun. She didn't want to stop caring about her. She couldn't stop caring about her.

She just couldn't stand here and admit it. It was too soon. Maybe one day. Maybe, if she didn't ruin everything by then. Maybe, if Morgun could be patient with her and give her time to work through the mess in her head. Maybe, if Morgun let Laney take those baby steps, she'd eventually be able to walk and run.

It made Laney feel even more guilty that she was just standing there, listening to her co-workers talking about normal work crap while she had so much going on inside. She wanted to blurt out that she was a liar. That she wasn't tough. That she had something going on with her that completely terrified her. That she did care about Morgun. More than she'd ever cared about another woman. That Morgun made her want things that she'd given up on wanting. No, that she'd always told herself she didn't want because she just didn't know how to make it work with what used to matter most.

Used to. As in, past tense. She wanted to set them straight, tell them that things did bother her. That she wasn't untouchable. That the things she laughed off most of the time did wound her. That she did have a heart and that it beat hardest of all when she was with Morgun. When she thought about Morgun. Which was all the time. She thought about Morgun always, whether it was just subconscious or not.

She wanted to say all those things, but instead she just stood there.

And then, of course, Doug couldn't let it go. Because she was still standing there, and so was he, like she wanted to talk about it.

"I still think you should go for it," Doug said again.

"I'm too busy," Laney mumbled. "And I would never get involved with a co-worker."

"She just works casually."



“Still. I’m just too busy. And that’s just inviting things to turn into a big mess. I hate drama, and drama in the workplace is a thousand times worse. Plus, I really am happy being single. I don’t need the added complications.”

“Complications!” Doug hooted. “Jeez. You really haven’t met the right person if that’s how you think of it.”

Laney wanted to snap out something about Doug telling her what everyone else was constantly telling her, and why couldn’t anyone be original anymore, but she swallowed down the nasty, reactive words, and instead just smiled and shook her head and helped herself to another cup of coffee.

She doubted she could choke it down.

People told her that she hadn’t met the right person yet. Morgun had said that herself. They were right and wrong. She hadn’t met the right person before. But now, she felt like she had, and things still weren’t any easier. Maybe it wasn’t meant to be easy. Maybe that was the point, but Laney couldn’t deny the creeping terror and panic when she truly admitted to herself what she felt.

Her hand shook so hard that the coffee sloshed in her cup, and when she passed her co-workers to walk out of the lunchroom a few minutes later, her smile felt all wrong and wobbly.

## Chapter 26

### Morgun

To say that Morgun was freaking out was a massive understatement. She felt wrecked. Ruined. She’d been in the hallway, ready to go into the lunchroom to get herself a cup of coffee before she met with a new potential client. She was early

because she was nervous, and she still had forty minutes to kill before the meeting. Coffee seemed like a good idea.

It turned out to be the worst idea.

Eve

n from down the hall, she'd heard the voices. Laney's. Others. She'd heard everything they were talking about. She'd heard, clearly and plainly as possible, Laney say that they weren't dating. That they weren't anything.

Somehow she'd sat through the meeting, going through the motions with a client who somehow was still inspired to hire her, though Morgun had no idea why—her work, she guessed, and not her wonderful, vivacious personality. As soon as she got back to the safety of her apartment, she'd let her tears flow.

She hated that she was crying, but she was angry, and upset, and she couldn't help herself. She'd texted Laney immediately, asking if she could go over some edits with her. She knew for sure that Laney had the evening free. She felt like a liar. Like she was tricking Laney, so right after, she'd sent a text asking if they could talk.

Laney responded, saying she'd be free at seven.

So Morgun waited. And waited. The wait was even worse than ever. This time, instead of anticipation, she just felt a sick, creeping dread that saturated every part of her being.

Seven came, regardless of the fact that even the seconds felt like an eternity. It came too soon, and the dread only worsened, clamping down on Morgun's stomach and chest and even her legs as soon as the buzzer rang.

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She let Laney up, unlocked the door, and went and sat on the couch.

Laney expected Morgun to be at the door as she usually was, smiling, offering tea or coffee or water or something. Her guard was up, Morgun could see that, but she couldn't pretend there was nothing wrong.

Laney sat down on the other end of the couch, but it was mechanical. Morgun knew she had to say something. Laney wasn't just going to come out and bring it up. She didn't know that Morgun had overheard her. It was nearly impossible to speak past the giant clump in her throat, her nerves raw and strangling her, but somehow, she started.

"I heard everything today. At the office. I was standing right outside the lunchroom, trying to get some coffee before I met with a client. I heard you telling other people that we weren't seeing each other. That we weren't anything. That I would just be a complication and you were more than happy being single. If that's how you think of us, then we obviously need to have a conversation. I can't believe you'd say those things after we...shared so much. Our thoughts. Our plans. Personal things. We shared our bodies. How can that not mean anything to you? How can you deny everything with conviction like that? Don't you think that's not only insanely hurtful, but also just...wrong?"

Laney maintained eye contact. Her right hand twitched, fingers vibrating, but that was the only thing that gave her outward composure away. "I'm sorry," she said, and her voice trembled just like her fingers. "I didn't mean... I just got scared."

"You got scared? Because admitting that you're actually with me is so scary?"

Morgun snapped sarcastically. “Unless you’re ashamed of me. Unless I really am supposed to be a secret. But you told me that wasn’t the case that day when you were on the phone with your mom.”

“I...”

“You what? Because that sounds like a statement that’s just going to be more of the thick-skinned bullshit. Am I right? You were going to say something along those lines. That you’re just protecting yourself and by protecting yourself you’re also protecting us. Come on. I’m not going to sit here and listen to that.”

“You’re mad right now. I don’t think it matters what I was going to say, it’s going to get turned around on me,” Laney said softly, but there was no mistaking the edge to her voice.

“No! You don’t have a right to put this on me. I’m not so angry that I won’t hear you out.”

Morgun forced herself to calm down. Forced air into her lungs. She didn’t want Laney to be right about her not being willing to listen. She did the elementary school thing for dealing with anger and silently counted to ten while breathing deeply. It helped. Slightly. She waited for Laney to say something, but when she just stood there, sawing on her bottom lip with her teeth, it was obvious that Morgun had been correct about how Laney was going to try to defend herself and justify what she’d done.

“I just can’t believe you could be so calm and lie like that. Didn’t you think once that you’d hurt me, even if I never found out?”

“Yes!” Laney’s hands clenched at her pants reflexively. “I-I did think about that. I did. I just, I don’t know. I couldn’t get the words out. Sometimes, yes, it’s easier to

lie. Sometimes it really is to protect yourself and the person you care about.”

“I don’t think that’s true. Not in this case, at any rate. I work there, Laney. I don’t think I need protecting from my own co-workers. They know you’re a lesbian. They know I’m a lesbian. So, I’m not sure what I’d need protecting from. Because if you said we were seeing each other, what would anyone say? As far as I know, work relationships aren’t off limits. I read through the employee handbook. There was nothing in there about that, and they had just about every policy under the sun covered off. So don’t talk to me about thick skins and protecting me. You were protecting yourself because you’re selfish and you’re scared.”

“Of course, I’m scared! Not of them, but of this! Of us! Of this going to shit, like right now. I’m scared that if I talk about it, I will jinx it and it will vanish. I’m scared that if I admit that we’re going out, even to myself, that it’s going to disappear. That I’ll ruin it. That something will happen, and I won’t have you anymore. I’m scared that someone will do something to try to sabotage it.”

“You’re doing a pretty good job of that by yourself.”

“Morgun! I really am afraid of losing you.”

“That’s not a good enough reason not to admit that we’re dating. There. I said it. Did we magically go up in flames and smoke? No? Hmm. Funny how that works. The day in the car, you basically admitted we were something.”

“You seemed fine with not putting a label on it.”

“I was trying to give you time! I didn’t want to rush you! I didn’t want to put pressure on you, because that would probably make you run. I didn’t want to ruin things either, so I tried to give you time. I tried to respect your space and that you’re a professional with a busy work schedule. I tried not to be demanding or clingy. I tried

to support you. I didn't use labels, but I thought that one day soon, we'd be able to say the word dating. Together. Something like that. I didn't think you'd straight up deny me to a group of people and laugh about it like I'm nothing."

Laney went totally pale. Morgun had never seen her look that way, like she was sick. "You know you're not nothing!"

"Oh, I know!" Morgun seethed. "I know I'm not nothing. I'm just not sure I know that when it comes to how you think of me. I would never, ever deny you in front of a bunch of people, let alone people that I knew! I couldn't. I can't understand how you would do it and there's nothing you can say or do that will justify that to me. I think your fears about us saying that we're dating are incredibly childish and immature. You're scared because you finally found something that challenges how you think and how you hold yourself apart from the rest of the world. You don't like it, so you're trying to ruin it and say that it wasn't your fault."

"That's not what I'm trying to do," Laney said sharply, but there was sadness in her tone too. Defeat. Like she was already admitting that Morgun was right about that.

That stung worse than anything so far.

"Maybe we shouldn't talk about this right now," Laney tried again.

"When should we?" Morgun asked, forcing herself to calm down. She'd wanted to talk rationally and figure things out, not end up in a fight that solved nothing and caused bad feelings. "When should we talk about it? In a week? A month? A year? Never? When do you think you'll be ready?" She wasn't sarcastic. She was asking much more gently now, without anger.

"I-I don't know."

Morgun looked up, back at Laney. “If you don’t know, then

maybe you just aren’t ready. I didn’t go into this with any expectations, but I guess that’s how I’m feeling now. I feel like, at minimum, you should admit that we’re dating and make a commitment to that, since we have been, whether we were calling it dating or not. If you’re not willing to do that, or you’re just not able to do that, then I think we need to stop.”

“No, Morgun...”

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Morgun waited. She waited for there to be more, but there wasn't anything else coming. Laney's lips were pressed tightly together, and even if her eyes were getting big and watery, it was going to take more than that, for once, to get Morgun to change her mind.

This was serious and this was real. It really hurt her. It affected just about every aspect of her life going forward. She couldn't just let it lie or let Laney take the easy way out on the excuse of giving her more time, because she wasn't sure that she'd ever be ready, and she didn't want to be the one constantly waiting, constantly hurting. She'd been through that before and it wasn't fun. Eventually, she had to call it quits because she realized Lindsey was never going to be able to be where she wanted her to be. She'd grown a lot and come a long way, but it was still a massive way away from meeting Morgun anywhere near the middle.

Morgun didn't want to think that this would end up the same way. Laney was older, more mature. Unfortunately, she also seemed to be more set in her ways, but the problem with that was that Morgun was sure that Laney was just more confused because of it. She wasn't exactly set. She just thought she was set. It seemed that deep down she wasn't even sure what she wanted. Or worse, that she was, but she just couldn't go for it because she let her fear hold her back.

"I know you're scared," Morgun said patiently. "I get that. But you should also understand that I'm not willing to settle for that. There's not this magic word that someone can say that can make the whole world implode. It's a choice, Laney. You have to choose to want this. You have to choose to call bullshit on yourself. You have to choose to believe that you can do this and that you do want this and that it can work. If you can't choose that, then I'm not willing to wait around with this big



question mark at the end of every single day, week, month. I value my time more than that and I value myself more than that. I might be younger than you, but I know what I want. Life isn't perfect and people aren't perfect, so I understand that relationships can't be, but I don't want to be in a relationship with someone unless that's what we're really doing. Dating. And that they admit it, because admitting it means that they're proud of me and that they care about me and they're not scared to let people see it. I can't deal with all the doubt and uncertainty and waiting around to see if you feel like you could make this work. I think you know by now and I've given it enough time to at least have you say the word and mean it. If you can't, then I'm sorry, but this isn't going to work out."

"It's not that I can't say it!" Laney burst out. It was obvious that she was really struggling, and it hurt Morgun that she couldn't just give in and comfort Laney, but she couldn't. That wouldn't be right. It would just undo everything she'd said.

"Then say it," Morgun begged. "You could if you wanted to. I know that. I know what you feel, so I'm not sure why you're holding back. I'm not even sure why we're here right now, having this conversation."

"It's just that..."

"You could say you're sorry. That you were scared, but you're willing to get past that. That yes, we are dating. That yes, you want to be with me, and you'll make it right to everyone you told today. You could say that you do care about me and you could ask me if I'm willing to take things slowly. You could explain to me what it is you're afraid of and we could work through that together."

Morgun waited. She didn't think she was being unreasonable. She wasn't demanding. She wasn't trying to coach Laney into saying it. She was just trying to get her to think. To explain. To vocalize something that Morgun could understand. But then she realized that it might be unfair to ask for just one side of the picture.

“Or you could explain to me why you think it won’t work. You could tell me that it won’t, and we’ll stick with that. We’ll see each other around and say hi, and that will be fine.” It wouldn’t, but Morgun was willing to be mature enough to put on a brave face. She hated when people dated at work and brought their drama there for everyone to see when things weren’t going well. After couples broke up and they still had to be in the same space, she hated how crazy cold and awkward it was for everyone else.

“Either way,” Morgun went on, unable to stay silent. “I just wish you would talk to me.”

“I...I just can’t. I’m not good at this like you are. I don’t know what’s going on with me, and it’s hard to put it into words. I don’t know why I’m scared. I just know that I am and it’s not going to change. I want a career, Morgun. You know that. This is...you’re...it’s been...I just don’t think I can do both.”

“No one’s saying you have to do it all right now,” Morgun whispered through the pain. “No one. I’m not asking for a ring and to move in and for a family right now. Or tomorrow. Or for years. I just want some actual commitment.”

“I know.” Laney’s throat bobbed up and down when she swallowed. “I know that. And you’re right to ask for it and want it.” Her eyes filled up with tears that she blinked rapidly to clear. “I’m so sorry. I can’t do this. I thought I could, but it’s not going to work. I know that in the future, you’ll end up resenting me because I can’t give you everything you want and deserve, so there’s no point in going on and wasting time and having you find that out when I can tell you right now that it won’t work for me. With me. I am sorry. I need you to know that.”

“Okay.” It wasn’t okay. She didn’t know why she said that, other than it was expected of her and she had to. What else could she do? “I guess you should go then.”

“I...” Laney blinked. Like she hadn’t expected Morgun to tell her to leave. Like there would be something magical that happened between them and everything would just be fine. Or that Morgun would give in. Would change her mind and ask her to stay.

It wasn’t going to happen.

Laney finally realized that. She blinked rapidly again, but Morgun refused to be moved by the tears. It was done and she couldn’t soften and give in. She was worth more than that. She was worth being treated right. She knew she couldn’t be happy with just a quarter of a commitment. She wanted all of Laney. She was even willing to work with her and wait for her, but not if she was already certain that it wouldn’t work out. Having a fatalist attitude only ensured that things wouldn’t work.

Laney ducked her head and turned slowly. Morgun didn’t call her back. She didn’t call out to her when she walked out the door. She forced herself to walk over and lock it, not fling it open and go running after Laney. She purposely turned her phone off so she couldn’t regret-dial Laney’s number and stupidly pour out her heart or do any begging.

Morgun set her phone on the kitchen counter and walked woodenly to the bathroom. What she needed was a hot bath. A soak in the tub wouldn’t fix much, but at least she could wash away her tears in there.

She was totally numb when she turned the taps. She was still numb when she got in. She barely felt the hot water she splashed onto her face. She told herself she’d feel this way for a while and that it was okay, but really, the level of grief she felt scared her. The heartache scared her.

It was okay to be scared. It wasn’t okay to give up before a person even started. She didn’t blame Laney. From the first, Laney had said she wanted a career. Morgun thought a person really could have both, but only if they wanted to. It was up to them

to change their mind about it. She couldn't do that for Laney no matter how much she wanted to.

She took solace in the only thing she could: hope. Hope that Laney could still change her mind. Hope that maybe the pain she was obviously going through would signal to her that it was worth changing her mind and taking a chance.

That hope fizzled when Morgun realized it would probably do the opposite. If Laney was afraid of hurting, and she was hurting right now, it would probably only discourage her.

Morgun knew she couldn't have done anything differently, but she still mourned the fact that everyone was right when they said that love or other feelings, or the rightness and naturalness of a special connection, sometimes just wasn't enough.

## Chapter 27

### Laney

For twelve days, Laney stewed. She worked. Worked so hard that she didn't have time to think about her personal life. She took extra clients. Extra sessions. She made sure she poured her all into editing, even more so than normal. She didn't watch TV. She worked out in the spare minutes she did have, since exercise seemed to take her out of herself even more than TV did.

On day thirteen, the universe clearly wanted to give her a beat down. Or maybe a karmic sign. Laney wasn't sure how to take it. She'd forgotten that the shoot she had booked in L.A. it was a maternity shoot. The model happened to know her well.

Kirsten Zarkavich worked for a large company in L.A. Laney had done photos with her as the model a couple times, but this was the first session she was doing with

Kirsten pregnant. She was modelling for a line of maternity wear, and Laney would be the first to admit that Kirsten was rocking it. She made Laney's job exceptionally easy. Even eight or so months pregnant, Kirsten was very nimble. She'd been modelling for years, so she knew her body and how to pose and work the camera.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:21 pm*

“That’s great,” Laney encouraged her needlessly, circling around to get a side shot on Kirsten in a light purple maxi dress. Kirsten set her hand delicately on her bump and smiled just the right amount for the shot.

“Oh!” She let out a sudden exclamation and Laney froze, her heart beating wildly. “Don’t worry,” Kirsten laughed, noting her alarm. “I’m not going into early labor or anything. The baby just kicked, that’s all. It was so hard that it startled me. Sorry.”

“That’s alright!” Laney looked closely, and she was amazed to see the dress draped over the bump shiver and ripple with the baby’s movement. “Wow!” she exclaimed. “That’s crazy.”

Kirsten nodded. “I’m looking forward to getting this baby out and to all the sleepless nights and endless diapers and all that. No matter how exhausting it is, it will still be better than being kicked to death from the inside out. And I’ll likely get more sleep when someone isn’t endlessly turning summersaults in my belly, bouncing against my ribs all night.” Kirsten didn’t look at all haggard. She looked beautiful. She was glowing, like most pregnant women. And she certainly didn’t look at all displeased about the kicking like she let on.

“Can I ask you something personal and probably kind of rude?” Laney lowered the camera. “I mean, because we’ve worked with each other for a couple of yea

rs now? You can say no. Or you can choose not to answer when you hear it.”

“Okay. Yeah. Sure.”

Kirsten was a nice person. She was in her mid-twenties. Tall. Blonde. Gorgeous. Even before she was pregnant, she looked like she was glowing. She was married to a guy who made movies. He wasn't a director or anything, but he worked on some kind of production somewhere for movies, and that in itself was pretty cool. She knew that Kirsten really loved her husband, because she'd mentioned things about him during shoots and after, when they were talking casually.

"I-I mean, do you...are you worried about, well, do you ever worry that your career, after the baby comes, that you won't have as much time anymore? For it? I mean? God, that sounds rude. Never mind. You don't have to answer that."

Kirsten just grinned and caressed her adorable bump. She was so tall that even at eight months pregnant, the bump wasn't that big. She was the most beautiful, cute, and sweet pregnant lady that Laney had ever known.

"That's alright. It's a good question. I don't know. My husband is really supportive. My agency is really supportive as well. I don't think the year off will hurt me any and then I do plan on finding good childcare after and getting back into it. If something happened and I couldn't book as many jobs after, well, that would be okay." Kirsten shrugged. "I could always do something else. I'm young and I do have a degree, not that anyone would think about that. I have lots of other interests. Plus, I want this. I've wanted to be a mom for a really long time. I know I'm only twenty-six, and everyone thinks that's young now, but I'm happy. I can't wait for it. So, no, I'm not really all that worried. Family comes first for me. It always has. My career will either be, or it won't be. It's not the be all, end all. When I'm old, I'd like to look back on it and say I had some success at this, but ultimately, that's not what I want to be remembered for. I want to be remembered as a good person. As a great mom." She covered her mouth and flushed. "Here I am giving you a sermon instead of an answer."

"That's alright." Laney raised her camera and they got back to work, but they

continued to talk. “I’m really happy for you. I think you’ll be a great mom.”

“Mike is going to be such a good father too! He’s so excited, even for the birth. Personally, I wish I could skip out on that. I’m kind of scared, since I’ve never done it before and I have an idea of what to expect, but not really.”

“I’m sure that will be fine too. There’s always an epidural.”

“God, yes! I’m not going to be too proud to get it if I need it.” Kirsten angled to the side and posed for a series of shots. “What about you?” she asked, changing positions. “Do you ever want to have kids?”

“I...”

Laney no longer knew how to answer that, because for the past twelve days, she’d done nothing but beat herself up about what happened with Morgun. She missed her fiercely. Why couldn’t she just have explained that she wasn’t just scared of losing Morgun, that she was also afraid of losing herself? Her identity? Everything she’d put in place to define herself? Everything she thought she wanted? If she no longer wanted that, if her career was no longer the be all, end all of everything, what did that mean for her? Where did it leave her?

She wasn’t any good at expressing her feelings, and when Morgun confronted her, she’d shut down completely. That was good to note for the future if she could pull herself up out of her self-pity and self-doubt and do something about getting Morgun back. Laney would remember how she shut down.

She hated it. She’d never felt so helpless in her life. She wasn’t angry with Morgun. She was angry with herself. She felt pathetic. Useless. Wrecked. And Morgun took it all the wrong way, which was completely understandable. When Laney tried to say anything, it came out wrong or backfired on her. Why couldn’t she just say the one



thing she needed to in order to make everything right? Why?

If it came down to it, could she apologize to Morgun and tell her everything she'd been thinking about for the past twelve days? Should she write it down? Not send it, because that sucked, but just write it down so she knew how to put things into words?

It will probably take me the rest of my life to put into words what Morgun means to me already.

Laney shifted, then caught Kirsten looking at her expectantly. Right. She hadn't really answered her question.

"I...yes." That word sounded loud and clear and strong. It bounced off the backdrop and into the lighting and straight back at Laney, whose heart was suddenly pounding furiously. "I never thought that I did, but then I..."

"You met someone, and you changed your mind? That happens. It happens a lot. I've met tons of people who've changed their minds about things like that. One way or the other. I think sometimes, when you meet that person, that special person that you just know is different with every fiber of your being, it's natural to change and to start rethinking things about yourself and find things you'd like to change. Not in a bad way. Not to suit the other person, but just naturally. Because we want to be better. Or something. Jesus, I'm giving a lecture again. Just call me professor over here," Kirsten giggled.

Laney laughed too. It wasn't forced. She wanted to tell Kirsten that she was right. Laney knew she'd been stupid. Stubborn. Scared—not of just Morgun, but of all of it. It seemed pathetic to her. She seemed pathetic to herself when she went over and over it.

Why couldn't she just have gotten her shit together and not hurt Morgun? Why had

she said that stupid stuff in the lunchroom that day? Why had she not just apologized to Morgun and made things right? She wanted, more than anything, to do it now, but was thirteen days later too late?

Since Kirsten was wiser than any professor Laney had ever met, she decided to ask her. “Do you think that if you meet the right person and you do something to hurt them and were very, very, incredibly insensitive and horrendous, do you think that two weeks after the fact would be too late to apologize and try to make it right?”

Kirsten gave her a look that was filled with compassion. Not pity. Just understanding. “Mike and I have had a few fights. We broke up once, a couple years ago. For a few months. I think we needed that time to decide what we really wanted. After, though, we were much better together. No more fights. We worked on our issues. It’s hard being with someone. Combining two lives, not into one, but into two that function together. Life is rough and sometimes that’s hard on love, or whatever it is we feel. I would say that for myself, those few months weren’t too late. But I can’t really speak for anyone else. I’m sorry, that probably isn’t very helpful.”

“No,” Laney whispered, raising the camera back to her face again. “That’s actually really helpful. Thank you.”

Chapter 28

Morgun

Thirteen lonely days after Laney left, Morgun was in the middle of taking another long, relaxing soak in her tub when her phone dinged on the bathroom vanity. There was no way she was going to check it, and she sank even deeper into the hot water. She hated bubble baths. Cranking on the water just about as hot as she could take it was her idea of relaxing after a rough day. She'd soak for a while, then when the water cooled down, she'd reach for the book on the floor by the tub. She'd ruined a couple books that way, but she had an excellent success ratio for reading versus having the books take a plunge.

What a day it had been. Morgun was used to dealing with difficult clients, but holy freaking cheese and crackers. She'd been booked to do a family shoot at a park. Should have been easy peasy, and done in an hour. Instead, the parents were monsters, trying to turn their kids into little robots, but also insisting that the photos look as natural as possible.

The mom was incessant and her poor kids, ages somewhere around five and seven, got more and more upset as time went on. The dad kept demanding to look at the shots right after she'd taken them, then he'd offer her some critiques. It wasn't anything she couldn't handle, annoying as it was, but it grated on her nerves.

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She had to admit those nerves felt constantly raw since the night she'd basically broken up with Laney. Basically, because to break up with someone you kind of had to be dating them for real first. Although, maybe that didn't have to be official. The

fight. The ending. The last time she'd seen Laney. Whatever term applied, Morgun hadn't felt like herself since that night.

She'd tried to be hopeful, which lasted a few days. Laney didn't call or text or change her mind. After those first seventy-two hours passed, Morgun had grown quite despondent. She'd declined invites to have dinner or go to a movie with Chelsea. She hadn't even asked her to come over once, and she realized what a terrible friend she was being.

It was probably Chelsea texting her now.

Morgun sunk lower in the water, until it lapped against her chin. She shut her eyes and inhaled deeply.

Her phone went off again, ruining the perfectly zen state of mind she was trying to achieve. Or as close to that as she could get in a perfectly lit bathroom, in a shallow tub, with no mood music, folded up like a pretzel in a tub that was too small.

When a third text came in, Morgun cracked an eye. She shifted in the tub, sitting up and unfolding limbs that didn't protest, but only because her muscles were so relaxed from the hot water. Morgun stood up and grabbed the towel off the rack. She wrapped the huge bath sheet around herself and dried her feet on the fuzzy red bathmat.

She'd been a bad friend, no doubt about it. Chelsea was probably sending snarky texts and gifs, asking her if she was still rocking it out on the right side of the turf. There was probably a ghost gif—a not so subtle way that Chelsea was reminding her she didn't appreciate getting ghosted. She'd done it before. She could be quite clever with the gifs when she chose to be.

Morgun wasn't sure how to tell her about Laney. Okay, so maybe Laney wasn't the

only guilty one when it came to not mentioning what was going on to friends. Morgun tried to text Chelsea, and call her, but then she didn't want to talk about it over the phone. Chelsea was busy with family and Christmas and New Years and then busy with work after that and they hadn't been hanging out as much. In fact, she'd barely seen her bestie since before Christmas when she'd started the whole thing by sending that message.

Maybe I'm just as bad. But if Chelsea asked me about Laney, I would have told her. I would have told her everything.

Telling Chelsea was going to straight up suck.

Morgun grabbed her phone and her brows nearly nestled in her hairline permanently when she saw who those texts were really from. Not from Chelsea. From Laney.

Morgun's first reaction was to attempt to delete them without reading them. She realized that was stupid and spiteful. She'd been hoping against hope that Laney would change her mind and come around. Yes, what she'd done was hurtful and disrespectful, but Morgun wanted to believe that people could grow and genuinely be sorry and want to learn and change. If no one had ever cut her any slack—and she could think of a few times when she'd been incredibly dumb and made some really awful mistakes—she would be down a few friends. She'd probably be estranged from her parents. Her sisters likely wouldn't talk to her anymore.

She didn't believe in sticking pins in a person to make them pay for what they'd done, she wasn't that mean. But she'd also been taught that life is rough and a person can never fully know what's going on with anyone else, and sometimes people screw up badly. In Morgun's mind, there were few things that were unforgiveable. Sure, they'd sting for a long time, but unforgiveable? No. Not if someone was willing to work hard and show that they were dedicated to changing like they said they would.

That didn't mean she let people walk all over or use her. She really didn't think she was too nice. She'd calmed down after she made Laney leave that night and realized that if Laney was willing to rethink things, apologize, and own her mistakes and her fears, Morgun would be willing to give it another shot. If Laney really was truly willing to change. Change her mind. Change her perception. Change what she wanted.

Morgun also knew that conditions would really have to be right, but it wasn't impossible.

She hated that even in her despondency, pain over what happened, and grief over not having Laney there to talk to, laugh with, hold, spend the night with, or talk photos, she still held out hope. That grain was nestled so deep within herself, she wasn't sure she could just pluck it out and throw it away, even if she wanted to.

Morgun realized she was still standing in her bathroom in a towel, her phone held out in front of her like it was a venomous snake about to launch itself straight into her face. She relaxed her arm, focused her eyes out of their blurry state, and decided just to read the texts.

She had to make peace with the idea of Laney not wanting another chance. Of her not being sorry. Of her not coming around. Of that hope not being realized. No matter how much it hurt, she was going to read those messages, and there were several.

Hey, I know you probably don't want to talk to me right now. Maybe ever. I need to talk to you. Not over text. Not over the phone. In person. I know you'll likely tell me to go fuck myself or turn off your phone, but please. I really need to meet with you.

Do you have time tonight? The little coffee shop where we first met? I should say, where I first messed everything up?

I have something I want to give you. Okay, I'll tell you what it is, and no, I'm not trying to bribe you into meeting with me. I have the finished photos! They're amazing. Beyond anything I even thought was possible. I can't wait for you to see them!

If you don't want to meet with me, I understand. I can drop the photos for you at work. I know you don't have a desk there, but I could leave the USB with the receptionist in an envelope and you could pick it up anytime tomorrow after I get there at nine.

I'm sorry. This is like a novel. I really do want to talk to you. I want to apologize to you, at the very least, and I'm hoping I can do it in person.

Promise I'm done now. Seriously. If you don't want to talk, it's okay. I understand. I really am sorry. Very. Profoundly. Sorry.

And that was it. The texts stopped there. They'd come in relatively quickly, one after the other, but Laney knew that out of habit for work, Morgun was hardly ever far from her phone. If she wasn't answering anything in the span of fifteen minutes, it was probably because she was pointedly ignoring the messages.

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*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:21 pm*

Morgun's heart raced. She had to reach out and steady herself against the vanity. She'd felt something different with Laney right from the start. So what if that something different had at first been something closer to disgust and detest than actual like? Laney was able to stir up emotion in Morgun that she hadn't felt in years. Or at least a depth that she hadn't ever felt.

She'd learned so much in the past few weeks with Laney that it felt like they'd known each other for years. Then again, at times it felt that they'd only known each other for a very short time and that's where the growing pains came from. Looking for someone and for a relationship was one thing. Falling into one and for someone when neither person expects it? That's tough.

Morgun thought she knew Laney. The real Laney who was poking through the tough front more and more often. The Laney who was wickedly funny, sharp as shit, talented and artsy, and most of all, so caring and passionate. That was who Morgun really believed Laney was. Not the Laney who stood in the lunchroom and told people they weren't together. Not the Laney who kept listening to all her doubts and worries, not the Laney who was so overwhelmed by the unexpected that she wavered before she broke.

The phone was slippery. Morgun had no idea why it was slippery, but then she realized that her hand was still a little wet and she was also shaking. Shaking like she was freezing cold, except that the bathroom was warm and steamy. She wasn't cold at all. She was warm. Warm all over with that furious, resilient hope pumping hard like adrenaline through her veins.

She managed to get her uncooperative, wooden fingers to text out something. A time.



8pm?

The little dots danced at the bottom of the screen, then Laney's response came back. Yes. That's perfect. See you there. And thank you!

Laney was too practical to send any emojis and she didn't seem like she'd ever send a gif. She didn't communicate in pictures like Chelsea did, which was odd, considering how she made her living.

Morgun stopped thinking about that when she realized it was already just past seven and if she didn't want to leave the house in a bath towel with her hair half soaked and her makeup smeared, she better hurry the heck up.

She dropped the towel and jumped back in the bath so fast it was a miracle she didn't slip and break something. She calmed down, pulled the plug, and switched on the shower. She hated showers. She viewed showers as unrelaxed and hurried, a quick way to rinse off or soap up your hair when you were

extremely pressed for time and stressed out.

She paced herself, but she was already putting a plan together. She was going to arrive at the coffee shop, wet hair, no makeup, just her. Not in anything fancy, just jeans and a tank top or her comfy crewneck pullover sweater she liked so much. She was going to show up and she was going to be herself. She wasn't going to come with any expectations, and she was going to temper that hope that was driving her crazy.

After that, it was up to Laney.

## Chapter 29

Laney

Laney had spent a couple days after the shoot with Kirsten perfecting the apology of the century. She'd wanted to talk to a few other people first. Mostly her mom. She'd sucked it up and had taken her mom out for dinner. It was nice, just the two of them. She'd gone for coffee with Natasha the next day. That was also nice. Laney was surprised to find that when she was open to it and not already bothered before she even arrived, she enjoyed her family far more. She listened and considered, not just what they were saying, but them as well.

Ugh, I've been such an asshole.

After putting together what she thought she'd say, all those carefully planned words that she thought would come out not at all right, but maybe they'd be some semblance of enough or even a close approximation of right, she lost everything she was going to say as soon as Morgun walked into the little coffee shop.

It was nice that Morgun sat down without getting anything to drink, even though James was hovering around in the background. She gave him a huge smile as if to say that yes, she really was back, and yes, she really was back there with Laney, even after the disaster he'd witnessed last time.

It was also nice that Morgun spoke first, since Laney was having some serious trouble with her throat feeling like it was filled up with glue and sand.

"I didn't realize how close this place is to work."

"Yes, that's why I come here." Laney found she suddenly could make words.

She tried to go for more, to tell Morgun everything she'd come to say, but none of it seemed right anymore.

"Even if the lattes are too sweet." She remembered how horrible Morgun had found

the one she'd been drinking that first night she met her.

"I have something I want to admit," Morgun suddenly blurted.

Laney waited, encouraging Morgun to continue with a nod. She was suddenly worried, because Morgun looked guilty and the strain of it showed in her face. Her beautiful face. A face that Laney hadn't seen in just a few weeks, but it felt like years. She was so happy that Morgun was sitting across from her that it made her feel like she was vibrating.

"I knew who you were that night I saw your profile online," Morgun started. "My friend made me the dumb profile to begin with. She thought I wasn't getting out enough. I had a bad breakup with my last girlfriend. Well, not terrible. No one hated each other or anything, but then I was single for a long time and I was happy with that and my work and my friends. Happy enough. My best friend, Chelsea, she didn't think it was good for me to be single and she went ahead and made me that profile. That sounds pushy, but we've known each other forever and I grudgingly played along with it because I knew she was just trying to help. I didn't think anything would come of it. We were just scrolling one night, because she basically forced me to go on there, and I saw your profile. I knew who you were because we applied for the same job two years ago. The one you got. The one I didn't."

"Oh!" Laney's mind spun and she thought she did remember Morgun from two years ago, but she couldn't be sure. She hated that she couldn't remember every single detail about her from that day, that she'd been too centered on herself to notice anyone else. The way she looked now would be forever burned into her memory though; all the little details, from Morgun's crew neck sweater to her faded jeans, her wet hair to her face, completely devoid of makeup. She looked like she'd stepped out of the shower and rushed over to the coffee shop. She looked stunning. Absolutely stunning.

“Chelsea had this plot for me to be your date and use you for insider secrets. That sounds terrible. Really, I just wanted to get a few contacts from you if I could. Chelsea made that sound so subversive, but after the first meeting, after you told me what you wanted to do, I decided that maybe we’d be able to help each other. She made me change my mind and contact you another time. I was going to give up on all of it because it made me so uncomfortable, so I guess I have her to thank for everything that happened afterwards, even if her own intentions were not so honorable. Well, neither were mine at the start. I’d decided that I didn’t like you just because you got that job instead of me. It was really petty and shitty of me. See? I’m not always that nice.”

“Yes, you are,” Laney said, and she meant it. She didn’t have a drink or anything herself yet, so she tucked her hands in her lap so she wouldn’t fidget with them. “It was just supposed to be an arrangement or an agreement or whatever. It wasn’t that dishonest.”

“I did lie to you though, when you asked me. I’m sorry.”

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:21 pm*

“It’s alright. We didn’t really know each other then. We didn’t even like each other. Or at least, you had no reason to like me. I’m still not entirely sure I’ve given you any reason to like me now. Or be here. I’m glad you are. Here, that is.”

Morgun started to gnaw on her bottom lip and it was her turn to stay silent and nod.

“If that’s your confession, then don’t worry about it. I do understand. All those feelings are in the past anyway. We found something else. Something different. Something...I guess unexpected is a good word. I’m sorry that I didn’t know how to deal with that. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking in the past few weeks. I even took my mom for lunch and told her everything.”

“Really? What did you tell her?”

“I said that she was right all along. That I think a person can want a career and a family too. I guess that kind of makes me right also. But she never said don’t have both. She was always telling me that I could have both and I could still be happy. That I didn’t have to write one off for the sake of the other. I don’t know why I never heard her like that when she was talking to me for all those years. Probably the continual harassment about ovaries. That’s probably what caused the shutdown.”

“What else did she say?”

“Oh, you know, just basically that she was right because moms are always right and when I’m a mom, I’ll get that privilege too.”

“Do you want to?” Morgun’s eyes burned. “Have a family and be a mom?”

Laney inhaled sharply. “I think that I’ve always wanted to. Between my mom nagging me and how busy I am with my job and how much I like it and want to keep getting better at it, I made myself believe that it wasn’t ever going to work.”

“And now you think that it will?”

“I met with someone who was very work oriented and she’s about to start a family and she was certain everything would work out. She was so calm and said that even if her career didn’t work after, she was okay with that. She saw endless opportunities anyway, and she was so excited. It made me think about what I really, really want. Not just what I’ve been telling myself to want, but what I really do want. I realized that I wasn’t afraid of us. I was afraid of having this huge thing that I’ve built up for myself just crumble away and leave me without any defenses.”

“You always had me. I would have defended you.”

Laney clutched at her pants, curling her nails through the black fabric and unclenching them. “Morgun, I...I hope that you still will. And let me defend you too. I thought about how I wanted to make this right. I thought about telling everyone from the lunchroom one by one that I lied and setting everything right, but I wasn’t sure if you’d want me to do that. I mean, I wanted to ask you first. I didn’t want to hurt you by doing something like that without you even knowing. It would seem very...after the fact, and that felt public and like I’d be trying too hard. So, I’m here. And I just want to tell you that I

’m sorry. I’m sorry because I acted like a dumb ass. I’m sorry that I shut down because I’m not good at talking about emotions, because I couldn’t even give myself time to process what I felt or truly wanted. I’m sorry that I was being this fake person, doing the tough guy act and all that. Then I started thinking, if I have to act like that to do my job, do I really want the job at all?”

Morgun sat up just a little straighter, but her expression didn't change. At least it was neutral and not pissed off or totally guarded. It wasn't exactly open or hopeful either. "Do you?"

"I did have an idea. I had this extremely fanciful notion that you'd forgive me and give me another chance to prove to you that I can work on being a better person. That I can figure all that shit out. Give me another chance to treat you the way you deserve to be treated. Another chance at being my girlfriend. But also my partner. My business partner. I know it sounds crazy, but I thought that after seeing the photos that we did together and how they turned out, we could do what I wanted to do all along—start my own thing. I know you already have yours, and I'm not asking you to share that with me if you don't want to. I could work for you, or with you. I just thought that we could work together and have our own thing and it would be amazing because we'd get to spend more time together and I wouldn't have to be gone for work all the time, and we could create these amazing photos together. Doing what we love, together. Maybe even loving each other together too. Eventually."

Morgun blinked. "You said it. The L-word. I mean, eventually. You'd leave room for it? You'd consider it?"

"I'm so, so sorry that I hurt you, Morgun. I didn't treat you right. I acted like a kid and I know exactly why I did it and I'd like to never go back to being that way again. I know that I'm not naturally good at talking about things like this, but I want to get better at that too."

"You're doing a decent job of it so far. Better than expected, in fact."

"Really?" Laney sat up now too.

"Really." Morgun extended her hand like an olive branch and Laney took it. Her fingers tucked into Laney's exactly the way she remembered. Like a perfect fit.

“Will you give me another chance? Will you let me learn and grow with you? That can be exclusive of this crazy idea I have about work.”

“I’d like to do it all. I think we’d be good together. And I already know that we’d work well, even though I haven’t seen the photos yet. Just remind me to stop you from chasing after black and white cats.”

Laney realized she was grinning, but she only clued into that because her face suddenly hurt. “You are too nice. Really. You’re the best person I’ve ever met. I’m sorry that I wasn’t even a quarter of your equal. I promise I will never abuse your kindness or your trust. And thank you. For being so patient. And so understanding. And for just...all of it.”

“Thank you for asking me. I wouldn’t have texted you or called you, you know. I was hoping you’d change your mind, but I knew that only you could do that. I couldn’t make it happen, as much as I wanted to try. And I did want to try. I thought about it endlessly. So, thank you for ending that. It was brutal.”

“I’m sorry I started it.”

Morgun’s fingers twisted in hers and grasped tight. “It’s okay.” She glanced towards the counter where James was hovering, clearly listening to everything they were saying. “Should we get an overly sweet latte, who our wonderful barista dude is going to make not so sweet this time, because everyone has room for improvement and learning, and should we take a walk and talk about what an amazing new photography business is going to look like?”

“I’d like that. Even the latte. And I hate the lattes here.”

They stood up at the same time and Laney pulled Morgun into her arms. Right in front of James, she planted a sensual kiss on Morgun’s lips. She kissed her with



enthusiasm, but tenderly too. She wasn't ever going to hide her affection for Morgun again. Not from herself. Not from anyone else.

When they broke away, they found James blushing.

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“That was nice,” he said. “I’m glad it worked out for you guys. I mean girls. Congrats.”

“Thanks, James,” Laney laughed. “Now, can we please have two lattes?”

“Half sweet, and by half sweet, can we get them like a quarter as sweet as the last ones?” Morgun asked, all sweetness herself.

James grinned. “Two not so sweet lattes, which I’ll probably manage to still screw up because I’m shit at this job even though I do enjoy it, coming right up.”

Laney and Morgun turned to each other while James was making their drinks. Laney hadn’t dropped her arm away from Morgun’s waist and she kept her tucked at her side. “I don’t like this place that much,” Laney admitted. “But I’ll always keep coming here, because now it’s special.”

“I don’t like it either, but that sounds perfect to me. The best.”

### Epilogue

#### Morgun

Morgun couldn’t wait for Laney’s mom to open her gift. They’d told Morgun’s family their news the week before, but they thought it would be most fitting to save telling Laney’s for Helena’s birthday dinner.

Jason and Natasha were there with their two-year-old little girl, Anna. She was totally

adorable and Morgun suspected that any day Natasha and Jason would announce they'd be adding another addition to their family. It wasn't a secret that they were trying for another baby.

"What's this? You don't have to get your mother presents at this age," Helena protested as Laney handed over the gift bag.

"Just open it," Laney insisted. "You'll like it."

Natasha and Jason crowded around. Tom scooped up Anna and held her in his arms. She clung to the beard that he'd grown out. It was her favorite, burying her face in Pappy's bushy, soft, salt and pepper facial hair.

"Okay, then." Helena capitulated with a laugh. "But you really shouldn't have."

Morgun waited. She could hardly contain herself and it was hard not to smile and give it all away. Luckily, Laney's mom wasn't looking at either of them. She was focused on the bag. She pulled out first a lotion and lip balm set, then a bag with loose leaf tea. Laney loved the lotion. She used it all the time, and the tea was Morgun's favorite. She kept going, producing a blouse that Laney picked out and a pair of slippers Morgun thought she would like. She thought she'd reached the end of the bag, but Laney encouraged her.

"Keep going. There's a card at the bottom."

"Oh! I should have read that first."

"We didn't want it to get lost, so we put it in the very bottom," Laney said, grinning so widely it was amazing that Helena didn't catch on.

She reached into the gift bag and pulled out the card. It was a birthday card, with a

picture of a goofy, grinning dog with big eyes on the front. When Helena opened the card, she gasped as a series of black and white pictures fell out.

Her hands flew to her mouth and she turned to them in amazement. “Really? Are you really?”

Laney kept her composure and nodded emphatically. She had tears in her eyes, even though her smile was still huge. “Yes. We’re having a baby.”

“A baby!” Helena said it with wonder. It was clear she had never thought it would become a reality.

“You’re going to be a grandma again,” Laney said.

“Oh my God!” Helena let out a happy scream and burst out of her seat at the table. She’d opened her gifts right after they were done eating. She threw her arms around Laney, who hugged her mom back just as hard. “Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!” Helena shouted. “When?”

Laney laughed and pulled back. “Five months. That’s all you’ll have to wait.”

Helena came for Morgun next and engulfed her in a massive hug as well. Morgun laughed and shed a few happy tears along with Laney’s mom.

“If you look at the photos, you’ll find out if it’s a boy or girl,” Laney prompted.

Natasha and Jason and Tom all stood back with big smiles on their faces, waiting for their turns to offer congratulations. Helena grabbed her card with the photos and studied them for a minute. She blinked. Raised her head. Looked back down. She was clearly puzzled, but then it finally registered.

“Twins?” she gasped. “Oh my God, twins?”

Laney nodded and Morgun set a hand on her belly. There was just the slightest bump starting there. Before the fourth month, she couldn’t even tell she was pregnant, but now, because she knew, she could see it.

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Helena let out another happy squeal and hugged Laney again. Morgun knew that it was all worth it. They'd done in vitro before they'd been married the year before. Laney and Morgun would never tell anyone that the first round hadn't worked and that, sadly, Morgun had miscarried just a month into her pregnancy the second time. It was heartbreaking and discouraging, but the doctors had assured them there was no reason they couldn't have a healthy pregnancy. The third time, finding out they were pregnant with twins was a happy shock. They were worried something would happen and were afraid to hope, but every doctor's visit and ultrasound proved to them that everything was fine, and their babies were healthy and growing as they should be.

"Twins," Tom let out a loud bellow of surprised laughter. "Wow! That's a heck of a surprise."

"We were surprised too," Morgun said. "And happy."

"Congratulations," Natasha said warmly, and she and Jason joined in on the round of hugs.

"Anna, you're going to have two new cousins," Jason told his daughter. Anna probably didn't understand fully what that meant, but she laughed and smiled along with the rest of them.

"Twins," Helena breathed. "I can hardly believe it! Here I thought you'd never give me grandchildren and then...twins!"

"I'm sure you held out hope. You bothered me enough about it," Laney said.

They all shared a laugh about that, because everyone knew it was what brought Laney and Morgun together.

“We’ll help you out,” Helena promised. “As much help as you need! Twins are a lot of work!”

“It will be, but since we own our own company, we can adjust our appointments and take the time we need. Morgun will take the year off. She’ll do whatever editing she can, but we’ve already started scaling back, and then we’ll see.”

“I’m going to miss it. A year is probably all I can handle without doing any photos. Although, I’ll sneak in a few sessions when I can,” Morgun said. They still had to work out the details, but Morgun was definitely taking the full year off. She didn’t want to have to feel pressured about work or worry about it when she had two brand new babies. Her life would be full enough with twins, but it was still hard to think about stopping photography altogether, even just for a brief time.

“I’ll babysit for you anytime!” Helena confirmed, and they all laughed. There was no doubt in anyone’s mind that she would indeed come running whenever they called.

“And of course, you’ll have a thousand opportunities to pick up the camera. Those babies will be the most photographed children ever,” Tom joked.

“That’s true,” Morgun agreed. “They’ll probably get photos done every single day. That would actually be kind of neat, to put a video together with a photo of every day of the first year of their lives to watch how they’ve changed.”

“We’ll do that!” Laney grasped onto the idea and immediately got excited about it.

“Twins,” Helena exclaimed again. “Well! This is quite a birthday!”

Morgun submitted to another huge hug and watched Laney do the same. She thought about how much their lives had changed over the past years and it made her flush with pleasure.

She loved being a part of Laney's family. She loved that since that day in the coffee shop, Laney had indeed been one hundred percent committed to their relationship. They'd started their business together. They were one of those unique couples who could both work together and date each other and never get sick of each other's company. Within the first year, Morgun had moved into Laney's condo, so they lived and worked together. They still never got sick of each other. Ever.

Right after moving in together, they had adopted two senior cats. A bonded pair from a local rescue. Bella and Billy were the most adorable old tabbies around. Probably the most spoiled cats too. Laney and Morgun still went once a week to visit Mrs. Johnson. Sadly, Chester had passed on, but Mrs. Johnson now also had a pair of bonded senior cats. They were seventeen and sixteen years old and still going strong. The cookies and tea still had hair in it, but Morgun and Laney never even thought about complaining.

Chelsea was the first person Morgun told about the pregnancy. Her best friend knew about her other struggles in getting pregnant and about the miscarriage, and she'd been there for both her and Laney all along that hard road, and now through the wonders of this one. Chelsea was the reason that Morgun and Laney were even together. They'd had a very small wedding with no wedding party, but Laney had invited James along to witness for her, and Morgun's witness had been Chelsea. Now, Chelsea couldn't wait to be an auntie.

Morgun knew she was beyond blessed and this was just the start of all the good things to come. She and Laney had their business. They had their friends and family behind them. Now they were going to have their own family. Not one, but two little babies to love and dote on and chase around. It was going to be crazy and busy and they were probably going to be very sleep deprived, but life couldn't be better. It



really, really couldn't.

All the hugs, the tears, the laughter, the smiles, all the love in that room just proved it.

THE END