



Just A Date

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Category: Romance

Description: Juliet: I've been relegated to my best friend's "psych project." Talk about an ego booster. She thinks I need love in my life, but if my parent's divorce taught me anything, it is that I absolutely don't. I'd rather stick with math. Numbers are safer than feelings. But no matter how hard I try, I can't just think of Michael as a number.

Michael: I never thought I'd be locked in a bet in order to get a promotion at my family business. Blame it on stupidity, or my brother, (technically it's both). The bet is simple: fall in love in thirty days. But the girl capturing my heart has sworn off dating, so I'll have to get creative.

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Chapter 1

Juliet

No. You can't be my Romeo.

I've heard the line enough to consider changing my name. Problem is, I don't have the funds to do so.

It sucks that I can't even escape my own name.

What's in a name?

In my experience, disaster, mayhem, and unrequited declarations of devotion. But that's just tonight.

"I'm sorry." I blink, then consider taking off my glasses to clean them on my sleeve. "What were we talking about?" Everything is a little hazy after my date ran me into a beam while dancing about ten minutes ago. Or has it been longer than that?

"I said I could be your Romeo if you let down your hair for me," he says. I haven't bothered to remember his name. I'm sure it was a pleasant name, but in my head, all I can think of is the Three Stooges. His hair is cut short on the side, but the top is a floppy mess of curls. I'm almost positive he permed it. Therefore, his name is Curly.

"Let down... myhair?"

“Yeah.” He swipes one hand through his curls, and I’m surprised it doesn’t get stuck in them. “You know, like the fairytale. You’re Juliet and all.”

Huh. That’s a new one. “That’s Rapunzel.”

He flips around in his chair. “What? Where?”

And... check, please.

On the food we never ordered and dating in general. I’m calling it. Time of death on my dating life: Seven p.m.

This is why I don’t date. Well, that, and the fact that I don’t buy into the outrageous scam known as love. Don’t even get me started on fate. It’s not real. The only thing “love” did for my parents was teach them how to split everything in half. Including me.

Never mind that I don’t know how to flirt or be sexy, and I only ever find guys like this.

I’m sure there are some wonderful men in the world, but I have yet to find them. They must be hiding, probably like my curves and other womanly features I’ve been waiting for years to show up.

At least now I know I’m better off without them. The men, anyway. I’d still accept the curves if they decided to make an appearance... any day now.

“So...” How do I excuse myself in the nicest and most painless way possible?

Fake an emergency or terrible case of indigestion? I’ve never been too fond of my dignity, anyway.

“We can get out of here if you want.” Curly leans over the table. “Go back to my castle, if you know what I mean?”

Yuck. I seem to be experiencing some indigestion issues after all.

“Umm, I don’t think that’s going to work for me,” I say, ready to dive into the list of afflictions my intestines are facing, but he cuts me off.

“Do you want another drink before we go?”

I eye my club soda. It would take something much stronger than this to dull my senses enough to consider taking him up on his offer.

“Actually, I’m not feeling so well. I think I’m getting sick.”

He scowls, and his blue eyes turn to ice. “You looked fine when you got here.”

Now we are at Defcon five. Or one. Maybe ten? Whichever one gets me out of here and away from this creep ASAP.

I listen to true crime podcasts. I know what happens next. One word: bodybag. Or is it two words?

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Never mind. It doesn't matter. He will never take me alive. Or dead.

I laugh awkwardly and grasp at the edge of my confidence. "Obviously you don't understand my irritable bowel like I do. One wrong move, and I can clear this place faster than a pandemic."

I make a little explosion noise paired with the appropriate hand gesture.

The iciness disappears from his eyes, and it's replaced with a look of utter horror.

Mission accomplished.

Chapter 2

Michael

"Fifty bucks says you can't get her number." My brother Sean interrupts my very slow and deliberate process of perusing the bar menu.

I frown and tap my ear.

He rolls his eyes. "It's not that loud in here. You heard me."

I did. I was just hoping he'd change his comment the second time around.

"I was using the grinder all day, I can barely hear anything." I rub my ear just to prove my point.

“Liar. Can you do it or not?”

I drag my attention to the woman in the corner. Her hair is a dark brown, and it's so long it almost reaches the seat of her chair. She's tempting, but—

“She's got a date.” Those ones are off-limits. Though it never seems to stop Sean.

“Not for long.” He motions her way again, and I check out the couple, watching their interaction. I was wrong. She's not on a date. She's in misery, and this guy has no clue.

Hmmm. She needs a superhero, and after completing the Blanding job all by myself today, I do happen to be feeling a little awesome.

“Fine.” I skirt around a group of giggling girls and head for the table.

The girl says something I can't hear, but her eyes read like a newspaper. She's anxious, ready to bolt, but the guy looks like he'd chase after her.

I slow my steps, waiting for an opening, when the guy's smile morphs into a look of disgust, and he bolts from his seat.

This will be easier than I thought.

I saunter toward the table on my metaphorical white horse. “Well, I was coming to save you, but I guess you didn't need a Prince Charming after all.”

The girl sits up straighter, her back stiff and unwelcoming, and then slowly her head swivels in my direction.

“Excuse me?”

“Sorry.” I plopped into the now vacant chair. “I spotted that jerk a mile away and thought I’d

intervene.”

I expect her to smile, but her eyelashes, reward me with a song of praise even, but I get the exact opposite. Her tiny nose scrunches, pushing her glasses into her eyebrows. I never thought glasses could be so cute.

“I don’t need your help, nor do I want it. I’m capable of removing unwanted jerks from my life.” She scoots her chair back so fast it tips over, but it hardly makes a sound in this loud bar.

I shake my head, trying to figure out where I went wrong. It's possible I came off a tad overconfident.

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“I didn’t mean you couldn’t. But you can never be too careful with guys like that.”

Her eyes shoot invisible daggers into my soul. “Because you’d never take advantage of a situation.”

Okay. She got me. “I wasn’t trying to take advantage of the situation; I honestly wanted to help you.”

“Really?” She tugs at a strand of hair. “You had no ulterior motives?”

I can think of about fifty. I clamp my lips together.

“That’s what I thought.”

Dang it, Sean. This is his fault.

“Wait.” I scratch my upper arm. She stops, and for the first time tonight, I really focus on her. Her bright green eyes appear bigger behind her wide-rimmed glasses, and it somehow only adds to her appeal. But there’s something else written in those irises, a hint of pain I can only pray I didn’t put there. And if that other guy did, I want to strangle him. “I...” Words fail me.

“Thanks for validating my reason to quit.” She turns away.

“Quit what?”

I can’t see her face, but I swear I hear her say “love.”

I'm at a complete loss. I didn't think love was something you could simply choose not to feel. But then again, I've never had to worry about that, so what do I know?

"I'm sorry," I say to her back, but she doesn't stop and walks right out the door.

I narrow my eyes at the empty doorway and slump into my chair. I'm losing my edge. I can't believe I skipped working overtime for this. Why did I let Sean hound me into coming out tonight? Come out with me, he said, you work too hard. Have some fun for once.

I can't believe I almost missed out on all this fun.

"I'm not the best lip reader." Sean appears in front of me like a pesky cat that doesn't know when to leave me alone. "But I'm pretty sure she said something like 'You're a tool and get lost.'"

He's not entirely wrong.

"That's not what she said."

"Really? Because you only itch your arm like that when a girl rejects you." Sean smirks.

I drop my hand from my arm. I hate that he is so perceptive.

"Time to pay up." He holds out his hand. "I'm suddenly very hungry."

I roll my eyes but toss over my card, anyway. "Only use fifty this time," I warn him.

Sean shoots me a grin I know not to trust and heads for the bar.

I remain where I am, still wondering where I went wrong.

I should have stayed at work.

The Repercussion

Present Day

Chapter 3

Juliet

My. Brain. Hurts.

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My eyes hurt, and I'm tired. The list of bodily ailments goes on.

The numbers in this equation may as well be letters.

Oh wait, they are.

I slip my glasses off, setting them on the table instead of throwing them across the apartment like I want to.

"Good, you finally stopped doing homework." Karli slides into a chair beside me at the kitchen table, bringing with her the smell of Christmas.

"Why do you smell like a tree farm?" A stronger scent wafts over me, and I hold back a gag.

"It's pine. It came in my oil box this month. You like?"

No. I don't like. It's giving me a headache, and now I'll never be able to finish my homework. "Are you sure it's meant to be worn?"

"Of course," she says, but she scratches her temple. "Anyway, I signed up for a dating app, and I'm going to make you an account, too. Give me your phone."

And this is why I usually work in my room. She always has some new request of me. Let's sneak into that new club downtown. Want to help me egg my ex's truck?

No. The answer is always no. I love Karli like a sister, but I don't indulge in her

unpredictable activities. I would like to make it through college without getting arrested.

I stare at her, which is hard to do without my glasses. I think I'm looking at her eyes.

"You know I refuse to participate in online dating." Or real-life dating. I gave it a go for a minute, so I could say I tried, but it was a bust.

Karli taps her fake nails on the table. "It's just a dating app. What's the worst that could happen?"

I put my glasses on so I can properly give her the crazy eyes that comment deserves. "Are you new to this planet? Catfished, kidnapped, sliced into unrecognizable pieces and scattered across the desert to be eaten by vultures."

"Girl, you need to lay off the true crime." She rolls her eyes. I attempt to protest, but she tilts her head to the side and levels me with a stare. "I saw you almost punch the mailman yesterday."

Oops.

In my defense, who taps somebody on the shoulder when they are clearly listening to the curious crimes of Miles Carrigan?

"It's not an addiction." I jut out my chin. "I can stop anytime I want." I mean, right after I finish the episodes. No one wants to be called a quitter.

"So what? You're going to hide away forever?" Karli asks.

I give her a thumbs up. "That's the plan. I'm quite content in my terrified little bubble with my limbs securely attached."

“You’re ridiculous.”

“I’ve been called worse.”

Karli raises a suspicious brow. “Really. Like what?”

“Like...” Can I really not think of anything? My roommates call me a goody two shoes. Which I find personally offensive. Because I’m totally not. I enjoy doing, you know, good things. Safe things. Just not like all the things. “Like Rapunzel.”

“Wow,” Karli deadpans. “What a tragic life you live.”

“It was a very tragic night.” It wasn’t the worst. I’ve had my fair share of awful dates, but it was the date that turned me into a nun for the past year. The day I decided I don’t need romance, of any kind. I have three semesters left before I finish my mathematics degree. I won’t waste time worrying about pointless stuff like feelings and hormones.

“Come on. Let me set one up for you,” Karli pleads. She’s used to getting her way. If her parents didn’t give it to her growing up, she took it. She’s since matured.

“Don’t make me steal your homework,” she taunts.

A little. She’s matured a little.

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“I promise I won’t leave you alone to become vulture food. We can set up double dates and stuff. It will be fun.” Karli bounces in her chair and grabs hold of my arm.

I remember the last time she said that. I ended up with a needle in my arm, which was not necessarily her fault. I passed out due to dehydration while in the haunted house she made me go in. It obviously had nothing to do with the headless psycho coming at me with a bloody ax.

“I’m not made for fun or dating.” My life history is a testament to that. Specifically, in the dating department. I’ve thrown up on more dates than I can count. I’ve kissed a few guys—not the ones I threw up on. But each kiss was insignificant. There was no foot popping, no heart-stopping. I might not know relationships, but I do know math.

My thirty-seven failed attempts plus my parents’ failed marriage equals one obvious conclusion: love died with the dinosaurs.

“So you’ve had a few rough dates. They can only get better from here.”

Karli is not an eternal optimist, so there must be another reason she wants me to do this.

“I feel like they can only get worse from here.”

“But see, that’s the thing. You can chat online until you’re ready to meet in person,” Karli says her eyes bulging as she presents me with this life-changing information.

“Yes. I believe that was the point.”

“Killjoy.” She mutters. “Come on, please do this.”

I lean back in my chair, rolling my neck and gearing up to tackle the rest of these equations as soon as she drops this ridiculous conversation. “Why do you want me to do this exactly?”

Karli’s eyes dart to the table, then the door, then she picks at her nails.

“Karli...?”

“Fine.” She sighs and props her feet up on the table. “I need a project for psych class.”

My eyes narrow. “So naturally, you thought of me?”

“Before you say no”—she holds a hand out—“you should know my grade is kind of on the line, and this project could be the reason I pass or fail.”

I pull my textbook toward me. “I choose fail.”

I actually do my homework. On-time. And well. It’s not my fault she spends her time on her phone or out partying.

“Jules, please.” She turns her evil puppy dog eyes on me. “My parents are going to kill me if I don’t pass this semester. I’ve already wasted enough of their money. I’m trying to be better.”

I raise an unimpressed brow. “That was a good act. Use it on them.”

“Ugh. Fine. I will...” She drops her feet and looks around the kitchen. “I’ll make your favorite cookies whenever you want.”

Tempting. But not good enough.

“And do the dishes for the rest of the month.”

My leg bounces beneath the table. She’s getting closer. Somehow I always end up with that job. Probably because I have no life.

“And I won’t play my music after ten.” She slaps the table.

“Sold!” I would have done it for that alone. I value my sleep like a koala values... well, sleep.

Karli beams and grabs my phone. “Great. I’ll get you set up right now.”

“Right now? I need to study for exams, and I’ve got mountains of homework.”

Karli raises my phone. “Me too. And I’m already two weeks late getting started. So start chatting.”

I wring my hands together, trying very hard not to go all mom on her. We only have a week and a half before finals. A good friend helps another in their time of need. And that is the real reason I am doing this.

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“Fine.” I sigh. “And then what? What exactly is the purpose of your project?”

“Go on two... I mean, five dates. Yeah, five should be good.” She stops and looks around while twisting a hair tie around her wrist. “I’m supposed to...”

Why does it seem like she doesn’t know what she’s supposed to do?

“Evaluate your current state of happiness from the beginning to the end of the project,” she says finally, finishing with a grin.

I rub my forehead. “That doesn’t sound very scientific.”

Karli stands and, to my amazement, opens the dishwasher. I swear she didn’t even know it existed. “I don’t remember the sciency stuff,” she says with her back to me. “I’m just supposed to introduce you to a new activity and observe what happens.”

I twirl a strand of hair around my finger. “I’m not happy about being coerced into this. But I’ll do it.” I can chat online and consider five dates. If I keep them short, that’s only five hours of my time I need to spend on her homework. “Want me to take notes?”

She waves a hand over her shoulder. “No. Just have fun.”

Fun? With online dating? Not likely.

Chapter 4

Michael

I drop into a chair in the shop break room, and my back audibly pops. I'm completely exhausted from the extra hours I've been putting in lately. But it's a good kind of exhaustion—the rewarding kind. Sawdust falls lazily around me, and I dust it off the table, but my dirty hands add more. The perks of working at a cabinet shop.

I arch my back, working out the tension and inconspicuously glancing around. No annoying brothers or Grant in sight.

I slip my phone out of my pocket, click on the newly downloaded app, and swipe through the options.

No. No. Maybe. Yes. No.

“What's that?”

I don't have enough time to register the voice before Sean snatches my phone from my grasp.

“A dating app?” His face morphs into a grin I know all too well.

“No. I was just...” Ugh, I got nothing. Sean would never understand it. He doesn't have a problem lining up dates for every night of the week. “Looking.”

“Just browsing, huh?” Sean's eyes glint as he focuses on my phone. “Let's see, hot, hot, hot.”

“Sean.” I lunge for him before he sets me up with the entire female population. He tosses the phone behind me, and I spin, but it lands safely in Trent's hands.

“Looks like Michael’s tired of striking out in the real world, so he got himself a dating app.” Sean hoots.

Trent drags his gaze away from the phone and lifts an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

Little brothers are so annoying. “What’s the big deal?” I reach for my phone, but Trent slides it behind his back, and Grant walks in just in time to grab it.

It’s like they practiced that play for this moment.

“A dating app?” my best friend, Grant, asks. He’s not family, but he may as well be. He always seems to know everything that’s said, even when he’s not in the room. “I didn’t know you were desperate.”

I throw my hands in the air. “I’m not desperate. Everyone uses them.” Everyone except the people in this room, apparently.

“I don’t.” Sean and Grant say simultaneously, but Trent remains silent. Suspicious.

“Of course you don’t.” I mutter to Grant. He’s in love with my sister, and everyone seems to know it but the two of them.

Grant furrows his brows. “What does that mean?”

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That's not something I want to get into today.

"That you're an exceptionally good-looking man. Now, can I have my phone back?"

Grant grins. "I know you're being sarcastic, but thanks nonetheless." He drops the phone into my outstretched hand.

Finally.

"Fifty bucks says you strike out with the dating app." Sean says as he retrieves two Cokes from the fridge and hands one to Trent.

I've been a little off my game lately. Okay, a lot off my game. So off my game I haven't had a date in four months. Which is a normal amount of time, but I may as well be a monk where Sean is concerned.

He knows I've been working a lot. I want to take over when Dad retires, whenever that is, and that's my focus for the moment.

"Hundred says I don't." I lift my chin.

All three of them look at me. I'm not usually the one to jump up the bet when it's my money on the line.

Trent stares at me. "To each of us?"

"Sure."

Shut up, mouth. I still have Christmas presents to buy.

“What’s going on, boys?” Dad enters the break room, completing our work family unit.

I glare at Sean, portraying with my eyes exactly what I’ll do to him if he says a word.

Sean shakes his head and leans against the counter. “Nothing.”

Looks like he will live to see another day.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you all,” Dad says and waits until he has our full attention. “Ron is retiring in a few months, which means I need a new foreman. All of my top candidates are in this room.” Ron has been a part of this company since before I was born. He’s got some tough shoes to fill, but I can do it.

My heart rate spikes. I want to be foreman. My dad knows this. Everyone knows this. But Dad has always treated us fairly and provided us with equal opportunities. He’s a good dad like that. He started this business when he was only twenty-four, the same age I am now, and since then has built it up into a successful and highly regarded company.

“Thanks, but I prefer the office side of things,” Trent says. I could have guessed as much. He hates telling people what to do or interacting with them in general.

I’m pretty sure Sean stole the people skills from him when they were in the womb.

“And as much as I appreciate you considering me, I love installing,” Grant says.

That leaves me and Sean. Who will concede. Because he’s not cut out to be in charge. Don’t get me wrong, no one can work as hard or as fast as him, but his heart isn’t in it

like mine is. I'm pretty sure he cares more about lining up dates than lining up cabinet hinges.

Sean looks me up and down, a smile growing slowly on his face. "I guess it's just me and you." He bumps me with his shoulder. He might as well have punched me.

I frown. "You want the job?" He's messing with me. He has to be.

Dad pours a cup of coffee and heads for the door. "We can discuss this more in a couple of weeks, but I wanted to tell you guys first."

He leaves, and I consider following him out to plead my case. But there will be plenty of time for that after I kill Sean.

I turn on the culprit. "You don't want to be foreman."

Sean smirks. "Sure, I do."

"Since when?" I knew the moment my parents brought him and Trent home from the hospital, they would be trouble.

"Since I decided it's time to grow up and be responsible." He shrugs.

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I don't believe that for a second. He's up to something.

"You? Responsible?" I snort. "Thanks, I needed a laugh today."

His eyes harden.

Wait, is heserious?

He folds his arms. "Everyone knows you want to take over but did you ever think one of us might want part of the business as well?"

He wants thebusinessnow? This can't be happening. I can feel my dream slipping through my fingers quicker than sand.

I swallow hard. "Since when do you want a part of the business?"

"Since now." Sean folds his arms and studies me. I've got three inches on him, but he's holding far more weight over me right now. He's right. I never considered that anyone would want the business besides me. Maybe that makes me selfish, but Sean is good at a lot of things. This is where I'm meant to be. "You've been slacking lately, bro."

Me? I've been slacking?

I have scars up my arms from all the times I've been hurt in the shop, and I work more than dad himself.

I'm the one who has gone the extra mile and worked the long hours. I've watched Dad since I was old enough to hold a screwdriver. I've studied the way he works and done my best to emulate him. This job is mine.

"I've earned this," I practically shout. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Trent and Grant moving to the corner. Good thinking, if this breaks out into a fight, they are safest there.

"Why? Because you're the oldest?" Sean scoffs. "That's a bit ageist, don't you think?"

I barely refrain from punching him. He can grow up all he wants, but he will always be an idiot.

"Yes. And because I actually like working here."

A crease forms between his eyebrows. "Yeah, maybe a bit too much."

My head jerks back. "What?"

"No wonder you can't get a date." He taunts. "You're already married."

"What do you mean by that?"

"When did you get in today?" Sean asks.

"Five." The same time I always do. One hour before the guys come, so I have time to work without the distractions.

Sean cocks his head to the side. "And when did you leave last night?"

I shrug. “Eight.” Giving me an extra four hours to work alone.

“Dude, that’s fifteen hours,” Grant says, his eyes widening.

“So?” I like working. Hence, the foreman job.

Sean crumples up his empty soda can and tosses it in the trash. “Don’t you want a life outside of work?”

Of course I do. That’s why I downloaded a dating app. It saves time and energy to talk to people online before I ask them out in person.

I drag my hand through my hair. Why are we even having this conversation?

“Come on, man, what can I do?” I plead with him.

He gets a gleam in his eye, and I already don’t like where this is headed. “Why don’t we make our previous bet more interesting?”

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I open my mouth, but he continues.

“You find the time to focus on someone else for a change, not just work, and fall in love on that little dating app. Then I’ll take my name out of the running.”

“Really?” I could lie and tell him I’m in love in five days. But he’s playing with me, and I’d rather not risk it. “No. I’m going to go talk to Dad.”

I try to turn, but he stops me with a hand on my chest.

“Dad won’t choose between us. He’d rather have us split the job, which you’ll hate.”

Dang it, he’s right. Dad is kind to a fault and has never chosen favorites.

“Fine.”

Sean beams like he’s already won.

Not this time, little bro.

“Let’s put a time limit on it,” Sean says, and he thinks it over for a moment. “You have a month. And no faking it.”

Well there goes my entire plan.

“That’s only thirty days.” I’m confident I can find love, but maybe not that confident.

“The average person falls in love in ninety days,” Trent chimes in, and both Sean and I look at him.

“How do you know that?” I ask.

“It doesn’t matter.” Sean cuts in. “Prove you’re better than the average Joe. You in or not?”

“Fine.” It’s not that unreasonable.

Who am I kidding? This is insane. I don’t have time to fall in love. I need to be working. Dad asked me specifically to make sure the Resten job gets out on time, and it’s huge. I’ll be lucky to find time for dinner in the next couple of days.

Once again, my overconfidence has come back to bite me in the butt.

“Hope you got a girl in mind.” Sean slaps my shoulder and heads out of the break room. Trent follows. Those two travel in a pack. It must be a twin thing.

“Sorry, bro,” Grant says when they are gone. “But online dating, really?”

So glad we circled back to that.

“I wanted to try something new.” I sigh. That’s at least a partial truth.

Grant nods like he understands. “Well, got any leads?”

I open my phone again and find the application waiting for me.

“Not really.” I swipe to the left on the next one, and then stop, my finger hovering over the screen.

That girl looks familiar. She's gorgeous with rich brown hair and bright green eyes.

I tap on her profile, but there are no other pictures. She's a math major who enjoys reading. That's it. Literally, the smallest bio I've ever seen. Which could very well mean it's a fake, and I'm about to strike out on my first choice.

I study those piercing green eyes. It's worth the risk.

Chapter 5

Juliet

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Ding ding.

Eyes dart to me from around the classroom, and I cringe, sliding farther into my seat. I specifically sit in the back to not draw attention to myself.

Ding ding.

It doesn't appear to be working today.

I slip my phone out, switching it to silent before glancing at the notifications.

I've got six matches on the dating app?

I thought it would take a lot longer. I only downloaded it last night, and Karli was the one to swipe through the guys.

I don't even know if any of them will be my type.

Another notification buzzes through.

It's a message from one of my matches.

MichaelB22: I promise this isn't a line, but I feel like I know you from somewhere.

I click on his profile. Attractive is an understatement. He is definitely my type. I mean, if I was into the whole dating thing. I think I'd remember those sky-blue eyes and unruly blond hair. Yet, something about the smoldering expression in his profile

picture lingers in the back of my mind. But I know better than to admit that. Once I do, he will pull some cheesy line about fate or something of the like. I'm not on this app for fate to find me. I'm only here for research.

For Karli.

NotthatJuliet: Sorry. Your profile doesn't ring any bells.

I try to focus on the class discussion, but the equations don't hold my attention like they usually do.

He is familiar. But why?

My phone lights up, silent this time, and I tap the screen to open his new message. I wonder if he's puzzled it out.

MichaelB22: Darn. I thought if you remembered, you'd be more likely to go out with me.

NotthatJuliet: So it was a line?

MichaelB22: No! I'm still convinced I know you, and I'm determined to figure out how.

NotthatJuliet: How do you plan on doing that?

MichaelB22: By taking you on a date?

I scoff.

The classroom goes silent around me, and I shoot my head up, back to real life.

“Do you not agree with that answer?” Professor Martin gives me a look reserved for his least favorite students. It’s never been aimed at me before.

A bead of sweat breaks out on my forehead. “Oh no. I agree. I agree wholeheartedly.” I nod until I nearly give myself whiplash. Slowly, the attention returns to him and the discussion, and I keep my eyes firmly on the front of the classroom for thirty seconds before my annoyance is too much to contain.

NotthatJuliet: Your overconfidence just got me in trouble.

MichaelB22: Really? I’d love to hear more about that over dinner.

Nothatjuliet: Not gonna happen.

Just because I promised Karli I’d go on five dates doesn’t mean I’ll go out with the first guy to ask. That’s how you wind up with a creeper.

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MichaelB22: I think it might.

I tuck my phone away, but I don't hear a word for the rest of the lesson. I know all this stuff, anyway. What I don't know is men. Have we really crossed paths before or is he using an attractive photograph to trick me, like a serial killer would do? Maybe he is a serial killer, and we did meet each other in real life, but I turned him down, so he made this profile to find me.

Not today, Satan. I'm not about to be dragged out to the middle of nowhere and tied to train tracks to meet my demise.

I release the death grip I have on my hair and slip out my phone.

NotthatJuliet: Prove you're not a creeper.

There. That should be a fairly impossible task for a serial killer.

A video comes through as I leave class, and I click on it. Michael is wearing a dust mask, goggles, and ear protection. There's a huge saw behind him, and is that a nail gun in his other hand?

He's not doing well so far.

"Hey, Juliet." His deep voice greets me as the video begins. "I look like a weirdo, I know." He takes off the safety gear piece by piece to reveal a face more handsome and much dustier than the ones in his profile. "But I promise I'm not a freak. Right, Grant?" He angles the camera toward another man.

“That remains to be seen,” Grant says with a smirk.

“Hey!” Michael retorts. “You were supposed to help me out here.”

Grant rolls his eyes. “Well, now she won’t believe anything I say.”

Ichuckleat their interaction.

The camera swings in another direction to reveal a new face. “Trent, am I a good guy?”

Trent scratches his beard but avoids staring directly into the camera. “That’s debatable.”

Michael aims the camera at his face and brushes some sawdust out of his hair. “Apparently, my character witnesses have failed me, so I’ll leave it up to you.”

The video ends with his smile, so handsome it sends fluttersto my toes.

NotthatJuliet: I’ll have to consider it.

I stuff my phone into my pocket.

Maybe this online dating stuff isn’t so bad. It’s kind of nice being pursued. As long as he leaves his weapons home.

A door in our apartment slams shut, followed by Karli’s ear-piercing “Juliet!”

I wince. Before somebody commits to spending their life with her, I should warn

them partial deafness may be a side effect.

“In here,” I holler from the bathroom. I snap my retainer into place and walk out.

“Nope.” Karli runs right into me and shoves me back to the bathroom. “Take that horrendous thing out and get dressed. We are going out.”

“I can’t, I’ve got...” Nothing, absolutely nothing holding me back except my proclivity for sleeping. “A headache.” I try to scoot around her, but my attempt is futile. She’s stronger than me. It’s not much of an accomplishment. I can acknowledge I was made with more brains than muscles. Okay, average-sized brain and zero muscles.

“Take an aspirin and let’s go. There’s a band playing at the bar downtown, and I’ve got a major crush on the bass player.”

“I didn’t hear anything in that sentence that required my presence,” I say with a yawn.

“Me, I need your presence.” She pleads with puppy dog eyes that essentially do nothing for me. Oh “Please?”

I’m not melting in the slightest.

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My knees buckle. “Fine.” Ugh. Why do I have to be such a good friend?

“Thank you!” she squeals. “Now let’s find you something to wear.”

I glance at my pink floral pajama set. What kind of awful place doesn’t allow for comfort like this?

Twenty minutes later, I’m feeling pinched and squished in all the wrong places.

It has nothing to do with the outfit Karli forced me into and everything to do with the number of people in this place. It’s so crowded I can barely breathe. I can’t even lift a hand to twist in my hair, and as much anxiety as I’m experiencing with this many people in my space, I need to do so.

“Isn’t this so fun?” Karli jumps with the rest of the crowd, her top knot bouncing like it’s got its own set of legs.

I don’t join in. “I’m assuming that’s a rhetorical question, and you don’t want my honest answer?”

“What?” she yells back.

Forget it. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

“Okay!” she yells, then starts singing at the top of her lungs, so horribly off-key the guy next to her shoots her a frown and tries to move away.

Why do people enjoy this?

It takes me five minutes to move a measly couple of feet. I'm not claustrophobic, but the fact that I can't get to an exit is kicking my anxiety up a notch... or fifteen.

I focus on taking deep breaths and channel my inner ferocious tiger, which actually looks more like a soft and fluffy kitten, and use my elbows to push through the mass of people.

I only get stepped on four times, but it's worth it to be free.

I find the bathroom and take my first full breath of the night once I'm safely locked in a stall, not being touched or breathed on by anyone.

The deep breath was a mistake, and I gag on the stench of vomit and alcohol permeating the dank room.

I pull out my phone for a distraction. Anything will do at this point.

MichaelB22: Still on the fence about dinner? How about I tell you a few things so you can get to know me? I promise I'm not a creeper, despite what my brother and best friend said.

Hmm. Sounds exactly like what a creeper would say. But I keep reading anyway.

MichaelB22: I have two brothers and a sister. I'm the oldest and most attractive, obviously. I work at a cabinet shop with my family, which is great most of the time, but when my brothers found out I had a dating app on my phone...Well, let's just say, work has been less than fun the last few days.

I smile, trying to picture it. I don't have any siblings, and I was always jealous of my

friends who did. It would have been nice to have someone by my side during the divorce. It was messy and awful, and I never wanted to add to the pain my parents were experiencing by complaining about what I needed. All I wanted was two parents who could talk to each other instead of using me as the go-between. Two people who still showed up and stood up for me. Is that what siblings do?

MichaelB22: Tell me something about you.

My fingers hover over the screen. Do I want a stranger on the internet to know anything about me? I'm a private person. I don't even have social media, but right now, I want to talk to someone.

NotthatJuliet: My parents are divorced.

Shoot, why did I send that? He doesn't even know my favorite color. He definitely doesn't need to hear my family drama.

What do I say to fix this?

I start typing, but a response comes through.

MichaelB22: That sucks. I'm sorry.

It does. I think of the text I received from my dad just a few hours ago. He wants to take me to Disneyland for Christmas... again. Probably so we don't have to sit in his condo in awkward silence for hours. He told me not to mention the trip to my mother. But Mom called me last week, requesting I come home for Christmas and not spend it with "that terrible excuse of a man."

NotthatJuliet: They both expect me to choose them for Christmas and will both be offended if I don't. Am I an awful person for wanting to ditch them and do something

I want to do for a change?

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This is a deep topic for someone I only just “met.” I haven’t even mentioned my thoughts to Karli. She’d invite me to her family’s holiday celebrations in an instant, but I don’t want to be the pity guest.

MichaelB22: No. I support that decision.

I let out a breath, not realizing this was what I’d needed. Someone’s support. It feels nice to be encouraged for a change, instead of being coerced in the direction someone else has chosen for me.

But that’s enough parent talk for the night.

NotthatJuliet: My friend is the only reason I’m on this app.

MichaelB22: Should I call and thank her now or wait until the wedding?

I shake my head at his flirtations and flip my hair off my shoulder, but a strand gets stuck in a curiously sticky spot on the stall wall.

Ew.

NotthatJuliet: She also dragged me out of the house tonight, and now I’m hiding in a horrid bathroom of a stinky bar, but I would rather be at home, asleep.

MichaelB22: Hey same!

MichaelB22: Well, not the stuck in the bathroom part. Or the bar part.

MichaelB22: Okay, so it's not the same thing at all. But I'd rather have a quiet night overjust about anything.

I smile. If I believed in fate, I'd think I'dfound my person.

Chapter 6

Michael

"Dude, get off your phone and come play," Sean hollers.

Every Friday night, my brothers, Grant, and a few old friends play basketball. Lately, itmakes me feel antsy instead of relieving my stress. I should be at work, focusing on one of the many jobs we are currently behind on. But if I can't be at work, I'd rather be home, preferably cuddled up with a beautiful girl while we watch some romant—I mean, action movie.

"Just a sec," I mutter and read her latest message.

NotthatJuliet: Maybe you have a shot after all.

I turn away from the guys, so they can't see me grinning at my phone like an idiot.

I like her. Enough to want to take her out on a real date. I wish I could remember where I know her from. Maybe we dated before?

No. I wouldn't have forgotten someone like her. Maybe we had a class together at some point. But I don't remember much of my college days. I've only been out of school a couple years, but it feels like a lifetime.

MichaelB22: That'sallI need. (I'm a good shot.)

I pick up a ball and send it sailing from my spot on the edge of the court. It hits the corner of the backboard and ricochets off faster than a bullet right into Sean's stomach.

He folds in half and sputters out a choice word.

That's what I was aiming for.

Sean straightens and points a glare at me. "I call guarding Michael," he yells to the rest of the group.

Thirty minutes later, Sean has worked out his anger on not only me but apparently the entire world. Not even his teammates were spared a bruise. Or three.

"I'm out, guys." Grant calls it.

Thank goodness, I didn't want to be the first to quit.

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“Yeah, me too,” I say. If I head home now, I can get eight hours of sleep before work rolls around.

Everyone but Sean agrees, leaving him alone on the court.

“Oh, come on. I’m sorry,” Sean says. “We haven’t even been here an hour.”

“And it would have been less if we’d known you were in a bad mood,” Trent grunts. He’s the only one who can get away with calling Sean out.

“I’m not.” Sean tries, but everyone’s already walking away. “Okay fine.” He sighs. “Lana dumped me.”

“Ah. The age-old tale,” I muse. “Unsuspecting girl meets the heartless Houdini of relationships.”

“Lana was not unsuspecting, okay?” Sean chucks the ball at my chest, but I don’t move to catch it, so it bounces off and rolls away.

Ow. That shouldn’t have hurt. I need to get to the weight room. I wonder if the pull-up bar I put up in the shop is still there.

Grant retrieves the ball and puts it in his bag.

“Sure, she was,” I mutter.

“Whatever.” Sean grabs his phone and keys from the bench. “You up for a drink?”

I can't think of anything worse right now than drinking with this Sean. But we've learned the hard way not to let Sean go to a bar alone when he's in a bad mood.

"I got an exam in the morning," Trent says before I can decline.

Which leaves me. Grant doesn't drink, and we respect him enough not to force him into a bar too often.

"Great. Let's go," Sean says to me and is already halfway out the door.

Looks like I'm playing chauffeur tonight.

This bar was the wrong choice. It's packed. But a bar with this many people—well, women—is Sean's dream come true.

"I'm going to find a table," I say.

He either doesn't hear me or doesn't care. He's already on his way to find a new heart to break.

I don't have to go far to not find a table. There's no hope. Everyone must be here for the band, but they are too loud for my taste.

I pull out my phone and message Juliet. I wonder if she's here. She mentioned a bar. Maybe I could convince her to go out with me in person.

But if she's only on the dating app because of her friend, then I might risk scaring her away. I can't screw this up.

MichaelB22: What kind of music do you like?

I wait, but there's no response, and I'm forced to listen to this metal-banging, headache-inducing crap people call music for the next ten minutes.

My phone vibrates, and I lift it up so fast I almost send it flying across the room.

NotthatJuliet: Anything but country.

Knife to the heart.

MichaelB22: You were perfect until this moment.

NotthatJuliet: Seriously? You actually like that twangy stuff?

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MichaelB22: First of all, is twangy even a word? Second, you clearly haven't been exposed to the right kind of country. In my opinion, there's nothing more romantic.

I'm a sap. I know. I blame it on my mom. She made us watch romantic movies so we would learn how to be gentlemen. Occasionally I still watch them with her and my sister, just to brush up on my knowledge, of course.

I spot Sean just as he sticks his tonguedownsome poor girl's throat. Apparently, he didn't learn as much as I did.

NotthatJuliet: So, you're a romantic?

I think about how to answer that. I wouldn't classify myself along with the fictional and extremely cheesy characters in the romances I've seen. I've often forgotten important dates and details about girlfriends. Yet I can recall almost every dimension for an entire room of cabinets. According to my sister, who has absolutely no qualifications, it's because I didn't care enough about those girls in the first place.

I step away from the wall and right into someone's path. I try to dodge out of the way, but my left foot is too slow. It catches the girl with her head down, tapping on her phone. Her body surges forward, and I snatch her arm and swing her around, using the gravity hauling her down to my advantage. We come to a stop; her head a foot from the ground, and my arm securely around her back like we just finished a ballroom dance routine.

Her eyes are wide and shocked, like she can't believe how she ended up in this position.

Cell phones are dangerous things. I'm about to make a joke about it when she opens her mouth.

"You can pick me up now." She scowls.

"You can thank me now," I retort.

"Thank you? For tripping me?"

I guess I did do that as well. I stand straight, tugging her with me. I barely have her upright before she pushes away.

Do I stink that bad from basketball?

"Clearly, it was an accident," I say. "And I saved you."

She rolls her eyes and flips her blonde hair over her shoulder. "How gallant of you."

Then she turns and stalks off.

I shake my head and return to my message thread with Juliet. Me, a romantic? Please.

MichaelB22: I'm practically a knight in shining armor.

Chapter 7

Michael

Sunday nights are reserved for family dinner at my parents' house. As if I don't spend enough time with my brothers throughout the week. But I'd come home every night for mom's cooking.

I suspect that's not the reason Grant keeps showing up, but regardless, he's been here every Sunday for years.

"Hey, man." He sits by me at the table as the rest of the family falls into their places. Dad and Mom on opposite ends, with Grandma and the rest of us in between. I think everyone has sat in the same seats forever out of habit. It's bound to change someday, but right now I like that everything remains the same. About family.

"Hey," I say, dishing up some food.

Grant grabs a roll. "How's online dating going?"

"Good." Last night I stayed up until two messaging Juliet. I learned she despises the play *Romeo and Juliet*, which means I should in no way refer to her as *that Juliet*. She loves chocolate chip cookies and true crime shows even though they give her nightmares. (The true crime, not the cookies.)

After that, we talked about our days, our frustrations with school and work, roommates, and family. I didn't think it was possible, but I might have a good chance of winning this bet after all. I'll know for sure when she agrees to go out with me, but I have to admit, she seems like the perfect girl for me.

"Falling in love yet?" Grant smirks, taking a drink of juice.

"Whose falling in love?" Mom pipes up from the other end of the table. That woman. She never claims to be eavesdropping until she hears keywords like love, pregnancy, or prison. Then all the sudden it's "Who's pregnant?"

"Grant," I say easily. My sister Lennox's head pops up at this revelation and I chuckle behind my water glass.

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Those two are hopeless.

“Sean bet Michael he couldn’t fall in love in a month,” Grant says.

“Suck up,” I mutter under my breath.

He just smiles and shrugs.

“A month isn’t that long.” My mother muses, twirling spaghetti around and around on her fork. “I better start setting you up.”

Trent snorts so hard water comes out of his nose, and Dad pounds on his back.

“I know a wonderful lady in my chess group,” my grandma chimes in.

So, this is how the night is going to go. Awesome.

Everyone laughs, but I hardly see the humor. My love life, or lack thereof, is not a joke.

“He can’t date an eighty-year-old,” Mom tells her, completely serious. “No one over forty.”

Does she even know my age?

“I have to find someone online,” I say, sparing them, but mostly myself, from the remainder of this conversation.

“Online?” Mom gasps, dropping her fork to her plate. “Why on earth would you go there?”

She’s acting like I’m going to prison to find a priest.

“Don’t give him such a hard time,” Grandma chides. “I danced on the pole once. Very nice ladies.”

Sean gags, and Lennox spews her drink of water across the table.

On me.

Is it across from Lennox.

This dinner has gone from bad to worse.

I swivel until my scowl rests on Lennox. “I’m giving you a head start.”

She jumps from the table and darts for the backdoor.

That’s all she gets. I take off after her, but before I can toss her into the pool, she jumps in herself.

“Coward,” I yell when her head pops out of the water, but I can’t help the smile that finds me. She’s learned.

“Spinster!” She shoots back.

“That’s it.” I leap into the pool, and she screams.

I catch her before she can make it to the edge of the pool and dunk her until she cries

uncle. Then we float on our backs, relishing the warmth of the heated pool. This is how our family dinners end, with someone in the pool. The good ones, anyway.

“Seriously though, why are you doing this?” Lennox lazily swishes her arm through the water.

I stand and push my wet hair off my forehead.

“Doing what?”

She knows why I have to dunk her. It’s my duty as a big brother.

“Betting on love.”

Oh yeah. That.

I sink into the water, so my shoulders are covered. “It’s just a dumb bet.”

“No.” She drops her feet but is too short to touch, so she treads water. “Shaving your head is a stupid bet. You guys make dumb bets all the time, but I’ve never known you to wager over matters of the heart.”

I shrug and start for the edge of the pool. “Maybe it’s time I grow up.”

Lennox paddles along beside me. “Falling in love because of a bet won’t make you any more mature than you were yesterday.”

She’s right. The whole thing sounds ridiculously immature coming out of her mouth.

“Sean’s holding the foreman job over my head.” I scrub a hand down my face. Gosh, I’m tired.

“Ah.” Her eyes widen. “So basically, your entire future is at risk unless you fall in love.”

Not myentirefuture. “He’s just being an idiot.”

She tilts her head to the side. “He might actually be onto something this time.”

I know I've played a lot of pranks on her in the past, but she's siding with Sean? Two years ago, he dyed the right side of her hair purple while she was sleeping. I was pretty sure we were all going to lose a brother that day.

I fold my arms and stare at her. "How do you figure?"

"I think he's helping you get everything you want." Lennox splashes me, and I jerk back, because of the water or her statement—I'm not sure which.

"You mean put everything I want at risk." There's always a risk in these bets, and this time it's a big one.

She purses her lips. "Maybe you'll see it differently in a month."

I rub my upper arm. She's wrong. All Sean's doing is making it harder for me to get the job I was born to do.

Lennox swims to the edge of the pool. "Are you staying tonight? We're watching *A Walk to Remember*."

That's one of my favorites, and she knows it, but I've had enough love talk to last a week. I shake my head. "I need to head home. I've got to get to work early."

She steps out of the pool and grabs the towel off the table.

"You always do," she mutters and walks into the house with the only towel.

I clench my jaw and climb out of the warm water.

I'm not a workaholic. I'm setting myself up for success in the industry I've chosen. There will always be time later to slow down and watch that movie.

Chapter 8

Juliet

I've been messaging MichaelB22 every day for almost a week. About the little things, the nothings, and everything.

"Do you love me yet?" Karli asks after I answer another message from Michael. He wanted to know my least favorite thing about living in Arizona. Easy. The killer cactuses that litter the place.

"I've always loved you," I say. "You're going to have to be more specific."

I place my phone face on the table and take a bite of food.

When did it get cold?

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“But are you in love?” She shimmies her shoulders and the bells on her sweater jingle. “Is my psych project liking her dating prospects?”

I roll my eyes. “A, don’t ever refer to me as your psych project. It makes me feel like I’m in a mental hospital, and B, I never signed up for love.” I don’t add that I don’t want or need it.

She mimics my eye roll, but hers is better.

“A, I’m sorry, and B, I know your parents’ divorce rocked you, but don’t tell me you’ve given up on love.”

I frown at my pizza. It’s usually my favorite food. Not today.

“Even I believe in love still, and I have a broken heart tattooed on my—”

“Yes, I know where it is.” I cut her off. “And I told you more than once it was a stupid idea.”

“But not as dumb as giving up on love before you can even experience the real thing.”

Karli was my best friend through high school when my world fell apart. She of all people should understand my reasons for avoiding romance.

I carry my plate to the sink. “Agree to disagree.”

“Come on Jules, I know I convinced you to do this for research, but nothing would make me happier than you experiencing one of the greatest gifts life has to offer.” She drops her pizza crust in the garbage.

“Oxygen?” It’s kind of hard to enjoy life without that.

“No, dummy, love.”

I fake a gasp. She leans against me and squeezes my side and a bell digs into my arm. She’s such a hugger, something I don’t mind. My parents never hugged me or each other. Maybe that was part of the problem. Physical connection is apparently cathartic. But we Hansens like to keep our feelings and our limbs close at all times.

“Just promise you’ll be open to it if it comes,” Karli says.

I purse my lips. “I promise to consider being open to it.”

“I suppose that will do for now.” She releases me and starts doing the dishes. It’s nice to have the roles reversed for once. Maybe when she’s done, I’ll ask for those cookies she promised.

“So, tell me, is there a guy who’s piqued your interest?” Karli’s voice sounds far too hopeful.

I collapse into my chair and glance at my phone. No new message.

“I’m talking to this one guy,” I say.

“Has he asked you out?” She accidentally flings dirty dishwater on herself. She screams and jumps back. If she’s trying to get me to take over, it’s not going to happen. This is priceless entertainment.

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“I told him no.”

She turns off the water and drops the cup in her hand into the sink. For a moment, I fear she will never pick it up again. It took her so long to find the dishwasher the first time she might forget.

“Why? Don’t you want to get out there and meet someone?”

I pause too long, so she answers for me.

“Of course you do! It’s one date. What could go wrong?”

I consider crouching beneath the table for when the lightning strikes. “I believe we’ve been here before, and you know exactly what could go wrong.” Psychopath. Death. Need I continue?

Karli gives a slight shake of her head. “Okay, yes, being eaten alive in the desert would be awful.”

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I scoff. “Just awful?” That’s worse than being dismembered first.

“But,” she continues like she didn’t hear me. “You could also find love and happiness.”

That’s a whole different fear. “And then lose it.”

“It’s better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all,” she says.

I’ve heard that phrase before, but I don’t understand it. If you know you’re going to lose something, it’s stupid to want it in the first place.

Love, if it truly exists, simply isn’t wise. A smart person, aka me, would avoid it at all costs.

“Give me your phone.” Karli says before taking it without my permission.

“What are you doing?”

“Accepting his date for you.”

“Karli, no!” I try to steal it back, but she swings it out of reach. I don’t want to lead this poor guy on. Our relationship, whatever it is, can’t go anywhere. Even if there’s a part of me, small as it may be, that kind of wishes it could.

“Don’t worry, I’ll hide in the restaurant or wherever and spy, so you don’t turn into vulture food.”

I hear the little whoosh of the message being sent.

“Well, when you make it sound so appealing, how can I not?” I say, deadpan.

I could fight her on it, but she won’t rest until I go out with him. I told her I would go on five dates. Better to appease her now and get this over with sooner. But it doesn’t stop the fear from bubbling up. I’m not really afraid of getting abducted. It probably doesn’t happen that often. Right?

Love scares me far more.

I reach for a lock of hair, and it turns to instant tangles between my fingers.

What if I meet this guy, and he doesn’t live up to the person I’ve built in my mind? Or worse, what if he does, and then he breaks my heart? I’m not sure I can handle either scenario.

Karli grabs my hand, effectively putting a stop to my hair twirling.

“It’s going to be fine,” she says, squeezing my hand.

I eye the ceiling, waiting for the lightning to strike. Why did I agree to her dumb project?

Chapter 9

Michael

I drum my fingers on top of the napkin dispenser. Then force them into my lap, but within moments I’m itching my arms.

Juliet is late. By one minute, but still. There's a lot riding on this date. A job, three hundred dollars, and the chance to prove my sister wrong. I do like Juliet. I'm not just doing this for some bet. I'm not a workaholic either. I'm opening my heart to love because I believe in it. And I need the promotion.

Semantics.

I tip back with my chair to catch a glimpse of the front door.

No one.

What if she changed her mind? I can't fall in love with someone I've never met. Supposedly, people do it, but what if the person they thought they knew turns out to be someone completely different?

I guess Sean doesn't have to know. That's my fallback plan, anyway. Pretending to be madly in love shouldn't be too hard. Lennox probably knows a good rom-com movie that could help me out.

I drop my chair legs under the table and pick up the saltshaker.

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How do they get the salt in through those tiny holes?

Oh duh, the top must come off. I twist the lid and salt spillsover the table. Shoot, I've got to clean up this mess before she gets here.

Hopefully, I have enough time. I tip back to check the front door again.

The snapping noise doesn't register in my brain until my body experiences an almost dream-like falling sensation.

I'm readily aware this is no dream, and reality is only affirmed when my chair and body crash to the floor, my head bouncing off the tile. The wooden spindles jab into my back and there's another snap.

I hope that's the chair.

I gasp for air at the same time someone gasps above me.

Don't let it be—

“MichaelB22?”

Juliet.

I can't tell if it's a question or a hope I'll deny her worst fear. Lucky for me, I can't respond right now even though I want to.

“Sir, are you okay?” A waiter rushes to me. It takes me a moment to recover, but with his help, I manage to stand.

“What happened?” he asks.

Do I tell the truth and look like a complete idiot?

“There was...” I choke out a breath. “...a cat.” I point to the pile of salt on the table as if it will provide further evidence.

Or I can blame a cat like an even bigger idiot.

Come on, Michael.

“A cat?” The waiter’s eyes go wide and frantic. “Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure.” My voice cracks.

“Where did it go?”

“Uh.” I hook a thumb behind me.

“The kitchen? Maybe it will catch the mice,” he says. I think he’s joking, but the worried glances he keeps shooting toward the kitchen aren’t comforting.

“I’d better go check,” he says and sprints away. Only when he’s gone do I risk my first real look at Juliet.

If I hadn’t fallen out of my chair before she came, I would have after. She’s stunning. But we don’t have long before the waiter returns to inform us they are fresh out of cats in the kitchen, and we will have to settle for mice.

“Umm.” I rub the sore spot on the back of my head. “I’m thinking we should eat anywhere but here.”

“Agreed.” She nods. It’s a race to see who can get out of the restaurant first, although I’m willing to bet Juliet is running from the possible mice infestation while I’m running from the lie.

We are halfway down the block, in no particular direction, before we finally slow down.

I’m debating how to apologize for my ineptness when she speaks up. “There was no cat, was there?”

I let out my first full breath in five minutes. “No.” I scrub a hand down my face. “Just an average-sized idiot.”

She laughs, and the sound that springs forth out of her is fresh cinnamon rolls on Christmas morning, hot chocolate on a cold night. It’s beautiful. And so is she.

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In person, her eyes contain a hint of blue, and the sun shining off her dark hair creates a shimmer of light around her head. She may as well have a halo.

Don't even get me started on the dress. It's teal and form-fitting and reminds me of the crystal clear Caribbean S—

A crack in the sidewalk jumps out at me. I trip, narrowly avoiding a face plant with a streetlight.

I right myself and look at her. Her eyes sparkle with humor, and it only makes them more gorgeous. Those eyes carry me back to a dark, crowded bar and a girl in the corner of the room.

She's the girl I tried to save. The one who didn't need saving.

My heart races with the realization. Her hair is a little shorter now, and she's missing the glasses, but she's just as stunning as I remember.

I'm about to mention it to her when another memory strikes me. That night, she said she was giving up on love. But love is exactly what I'm looking for. Maybe she's changed her mind since that first night we met, but with the way she's talked about her parents, and how awful the divorce was, I have assume she hasn't. I'm going to have to do everything I can to convince her to give this a shot. I have a feeling she's worth it.

I rub my arm. "I promise I'm not always a bumbling idiot. You must have that effect on me."

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but being on a date with a bumbling idiot is kind of refreshing.” She places a hand on my arm and pure fire replaces the sting of embarrassment I’ve known since meeting her.

I have no words. Her soft hand is still on my skin, warming every inch of me. She pulls back, and only then am I able to think straight. “Is it okay if we start over and pretend I haven’t already crashed and burned?”

“If you’re asking me to forget you blamed your broken chair on a cat, I’m not sure I can.” Her eyes glint with mischief, and my heart thumps against my ribcage. I like her.

A delicious scent wafts over us. “Could I bribe you with pizza?”

She purses her lips, her very kissable, heart-shaped lips.

I shake my head. I don’t kiss girls on the first date, usually.

“I could be swayed.” She turns and leads us into the little shop.

I could be as well.

Chapter 10

Juliet

I pull up my first piece of extra cheesy pizza to avoid gawking at Michael. I’ve had to peel my eyes off him so many times already tonight my eyelids feel like sandpaper. The contacts I put in at the last minute aren’t helping. His profile didn’t do him justice. He could go to Hollywood and be one of those Chris Evans lookalikes, except his hair is lighter and his jawline has a harder edge.

I never got into the superhero movies, but I may have to give them another go.

I glance to the corner of the pizza shop to ensure my backup is still here. Karli followed me into the first restaurant, then waited a few minutes to follow us here. Just because Michael looks like Chris Evans doesn't mean I'll get the superhero version. He could be the Chris from The Gray Man. And I'd rather not share pizza with that guy, no matter how attractive he is.

Karli waves to me around the menu she's been pretending to hide behind. She puckers her lips and mouths a few words I pretend not to know. Maybe bringing her wasn't such a great idea. She would leave me alone with Gray Man Chris.

I take another bite, chewing slowly. We've already discussed everything from favorite movies, books, and seasons to our families and career goals through the dating app. I jump on the obvious next conversation starter.

"So, the cat..." I say.

He freezes mid-chew, and I bite the inside of my cheek. He thought he was going to get out of explaining that one. No way. I'm here on this date against my better judgment. I believe I've earned it.

To be fair, this has already been the best date I've been on. He hasn't once asked to be my Romeo or quoted some ridiculous Shakespearean line, which, for the record, I hate.

My parents would have done better to name me after one of Einstein's discoveries.

Michael swallows and takes a drink before answering.

"When I was little, my dad told me cats are to blame for everything. I didn't

understand at the time he was referring to his allergy and not that they are basically the devil in disguise.”

I clamp my lips together before I accidentally spit half-eaten food out of my mouth.

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“I used it like currency,” Michael continues. “I also did my due diligence and taught my younger brothers the same principle. Cats are the perfect excuse for everything.” He picks up his pizza. “They have never failed me.”

I swallow my food. “Until now?”

He shakes his head. “It didn’t fail.”

I lift a shoulder. “I caught you in the lie.”

The grin he shoots me has me rethinking this date. If one smile can cause a swarm of bees to take off in my stomach, there’s no way my heart will be safe.

“But you’re still here. So, it feels like a win.” He winks. “It also got us out of a rodent-infested restaurant, so you’re welcome.”

He’s a flirt. But there’s only one way to my heart, and it’s through a dark cave and a haunted graveyard of the past, only to end up in an empty castle.

Something about Michael makes me think he’d still try.

“So, tell me something you’ve never told anyone before,” he says.

That’s not a question I prepared for. “Um.” I tug on the end of my hair, then twist it around my fingers. “You first.”

“Okay.” He grabs another slice of pizza. “But you have to promise not to laugh at

me.”

I bite my bottom lip. “Is it worse than falling over in your chair and blaming a cat?”

“You’re right. Probably not.” He takes another bite of pizza before continuing. “In that case, I’m going to have to swear you to secrecy on both accounts. My brothers would have a field day with this kind of information.”

I bite my bottom lip, excited at the thought of knowing something no one else knows about him. “But what if this goes terribly wrong? I’ll need to complain to my roommates, and I’ll need ammunition.”

Michael fights a smile and loses. I like when he loses.

“Okay, fine,” he concedes. “But you have to leave my name out of it.”

“Deal.” I pop my hand across the table before I can think better of it. He takes it in his and shakes. The movement rocks something else inside me. Something cold and hard around my heart trembles. “Out with it.” I say to him and the earthquake in my chest. I pull my hand from his warm and calloused fingers and rub my palm on the vinyl booth. Get off, tingles. You are unwelcome here.

Michael takes a deep breath. “I only like country music and... Justin Bieber.”

I shrug. “I like Justin Bieber, too. Mostly.” Some of his songs could be better.

Michael scratches at his five o’clock shadow. I wonder what he’d look like with a full beard.

“Well, I went to a concert. By myself. Screamed like a little girl and bought a t-shirt.”

It takes me a full ten seconds to process this information. “Do you have video evidence of this?”

He pulls out his phone and within a minute has a recording of himself, up in the nosebleeds at a Justin Bieber concert, surrounded by women and preteen girls.

I promised I wouldn’t, but I laugh. A little. “I’m sorry.” I cover my mouth. “I can see you are very confident.”

He scratches his arm. “Most of the time.”

It’s a confidence I wish I possessed. He’s not a showoff, but simply content with who he is. Well, mostly. I understand why he felt the need to hide that from his brothers.

“Okay.” He straightens in his chair and picks up his cup. “I’ve embarrassed myself enough for one night. Mind taking some of the pressure off me here?”

I tap my chin. What have I never told anyone? I think Disneyland is overrated. I don’t want to get married.

Yikes, not that.

“I got my bellybutton pierced.”

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That's not what was supposed to come out.

Michael coughs. Water dribbles out of his mouth and down his chin. He reaches for a napkin and coughs into it again.

My body burns with embarrassment. "I don't know why I said that." Clearly, I haven't been alone with the opposite sex for a while.

Michael coughs again. Is he choking? Should I hit him on the back?

"Well, technically my best friend knows since she's the one who talked me into it, so I guess it doesn't count. But then it got infected, so I had to take it out, but I actually kind of miss it." I'm rambling now to try to right my wrongs. What other useless words can I say to make this embarrassment go away? Is it too late to blame a cat?

"I've never been on an airplane before. My friend thinks it's because I'm afraid of heights, but I'm not. I think it would be fun to fly I've just never had the chance." I say.

He takes a long drink. So long I'm worried he's trying to drown himself. I think I broke him. This night was going well, too well actually, so it's really for the best. Better to push him away before he can do the same to me. I check my pocket to ensure my phone and keys are still there. In one minute, I'll excuse myself to the bathroom for another one of my intestinal incompetence excuses, then sneak away.

I didn't want anything from this date, anyway.

He relaxes in his seat and takes a few deep breaths before speaking.

“Interesting.”

That’s it? I told him I used to have a bellybutton ring, and I’m not afraid of heights, and that’s what he says.

“Which one?”

His lips curl up into a dangerous grin that makes me want to throw caution to the wind and kiss it right off his face.

“Oh, they are both very interesting.” He drops a wadded-up napkin onto the table and scoots his chair back. “Want to go for a little walk by the river?”

I freeze, one foot ready to bolt for an exit, the other wanting to stay.

This feels like one of those no-no first date situations—the kind that ends with me at the bottom of the river.

But there’s sincerity in his eyes, making me want to do anything he asks.

The anxiety-ridden side of my brain reminds me that’s probably how serial killers lure their unsuspecting victims to their doom. But I’m kind of tired of letting it control me.

I check the corner of the restaurant. Karli is still here. If I don’t return soon, she will come looking.

I’m pretty sure.

I nod. "Okay."

He pays for the pizza despite my insistence on helping and leads me out of the shop.

We head south for a few more blocks, then turn through a park.

"So," I say, "did you figure out how you know me?"

He slows his pace and studies me. His eyes are so intense I worry he'll see more than I want him to.

"Not yet," he says and faces forward again. "Have you?"

I'd accuse him of being a liar to get me on this date. But there's something so familiar about him, even though I can't place it.

"No."

We emerge onto a beautiful walking path that leads over a river. I've never beendownhere before. The bridge is breathtaking, much too ornate tobe on a running trail. There are wooden slats underfoot and curved cross beams above our heads.

I think we are going to cross it, but he stops in the middle.

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“I helped build this bridge,” Michael says.

I stop. “Seriously?”

He ducks his head. “I mean, I tried. I was only ten at the time. My dad’s buddy was designing it and asked us to help. My dad provided the wood, and I spent three months of the summer working alongside him.”

“That’s so cool.”

He leans on the railing, watching the water move swiftly beneath our feet. “It was my first time really working with my dad, and I smashed my thumb more times than I can count. But in the end, I would have done it again for the satisfaction of the work.”

I run my palm along the railing. I get that.

“That’s why I want to take over my dad’s business. I love it.”

It’s admirable that he has already found what he’s passionate about and is preparing for the future. I have no concrete plans for after graduation except possibly more school. Yay.

“Juliet.” He turns and takes one of my hands. The tingles I thought I left in the pizza shop jump up my arm, playing connect the dot with my pores. “I like getting to know you. Will you give me another date? Another chance to figure out who you are?”

What he’s asking for is so simple. Another date. Another chance.

I push down the urge to run fast and far.

His thumb rubs the back of my hand, and my body melts. Right now, I'd promise him just about anything.

"What if you find out you don't know me, and all you get is a smashed thumb?" I ask, tacking on a thinly veiled warning. Caution: pursuing any hint of a relationship with me is not safe.

He lifts a shoulder only to drop it. "What's meant to happen will happen."

I purse my lips. What will happen is I will run, or he will. Those are the only two options.

"That sounds an awful lot like you believe in fate."

"I didn't think I did until I met you." His eyes glisten.

My face cracks, and I let out a sound somewhere between a snort and a sneeze. I cover my mouth.

"Sorry." He scratches one of his red cheeks. "That sounded a lot less cheesy in my head."

I grin. "Maybe it should have stayed there."

He laughs, and already I can picture myself doing whatever it takes to hear it over and over again.

"So you'll give me a chance?" His face grows serious.

I promised Karli I'd go on five dates. That's the most I can guarantee him. It's hardly enough to fall in love. I can keep the castle walls barricaded around my heart for that long.

"You get five dates."

His brows furrow. "That's very specific."

It is. Crap. I play with a strand of hair. "I have a thing with numbers."

"Cute." His smile reaches his eyes and also some dark, dusty corner of my heart. "I can work with that."

That's what I'm afraid of.

Chapter 11

Michael

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I can't stop thinking about Juliet. I'm so distracted, I almost shoot myself in the foot with a nail gun and try to cut off a finger on the table saw. I knew I liked her from our conversations online, but it scares me how much I wanted—no, needed—her to give me a chance. Maybe I'm finally growing up. Or maybe—and this is what terrifies me—for the first time, I'm dreaming of the possibility of more.

Sean slides another board onto the table for me to cut. "Have you been swept off your feet and into the arms of love yet?" he asks.

I scoff. He's so dramatic. "Of course not. It's only been a week and a half. That would be dumb." I need at least a few more days.

"Well, you might want to pick up the pace. Time is ticking."

I clench my jaw. Sometimes I think Sean's sole purpose in life is to annoy me.

I fold my arms and face him, ignoring his board. "Come on, man, you know you don't want to be foreman."

"Sure do." He lines up the board and cuts it himself.

I wait until the machine dies down. "Why?"

He rubs his chin. "Let me think, a pay raise? A chance to boss you around? The list goes on."

Everything with him has to be so complicated. I run a hand through my hair and

sawdust falls around me. “I’m going to need more time.”

Sean picks up the cut board. “Why? Did you get catfished?”

I knew I wouldn’t be able to reason with him.

“No.” I grunt. “Her parents are divorced. She’s not going to fall in love easily.” That’s why I took her to the bridge last night, and why I didn’t want to admit how I knew her. I’m treading lightly. “I have to be sensitive.”

He stares at me, deadpan. “When I broke my nose, you told me to ‘stick a tampon in it’.”

I lift a shoulder. “As I recall, it stopped the bleeding.”

“Do you know how bad it hurt?” He snaps.

I fight a smile that will no doubt get me into a headlock. Too bad he can’t reach. “I can see you’re still bitter about thi—”

“Bitter? My nose is crooked because of that tampon!” He points at the small jut in his nose.

I snort. “It’s not my fault you pushed it halfway to your brain.”

“Because that’s what you said to do!” he yells.

A few of the guys in the shop turn their heads but appear unsurprised by his outburst. It’s typical Sean stuff.

“Anyway...” He takes a breath, trying to calm down. “I never said she had to fall for

you, just that you had to fall in love with her.”

I study the motionless blade of the table saw. Well, that makes this easier. I’m already halfway there. But I’m falling for a girl who once swore to me, whether she remembers or not, that she quit love. I may as well throw my heart on the saw blade now.

Sean takes my frown as a win. “See? I’m not a hopeless heartbreaker. Unless it’s your heart, then I’m okay seeing it broken.”

“Gee thanks.” With brothers like him...

He studies me, his smile growing. “You should invite her to family dinner.”

“Why don’t I drop her into shark-infested waters instead?” The last person Juliet needs to meet is Sean. And maybe Grandma. That woman’s mouth can’t be trusted.

“I have to meet the girl you fall for at least once,” Sean says, as if he read my mind.

I line up a board on the table. “That was never part of the rules.”

He shrugs. “Rules are meant to be changed.”

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I scowl. “They literally aren’t.”

He lifts a shoulder. “Eh, my game, my rules. I have to make sure you’re not faking it.”

Can I kill him and still be invited home for Christmas?

“I’ll think about it,” I mutter.

“Think fast.” He picks up his board and walks away.

His job could be done so much faster if he didn’t waste so much time talking.

The first thing I’ll do when I become the foreman is create more efficiency in the shop. And more responsibility. The break room ends up nasty every other day. Grown men should know how to clean out a microwave.

While I work, I keep a running list in my head of the things I’ll change. But when I run out, my mind drifts to Juliet. She promised me five dates. Hopefully, that’s all it takes.

Best-case scenario, I fall for her, she falls for me, and I get the job. Worst case, like a country song, I lose it all.

Chapter 12

Juliet

I knew it was a mistake to agree to another date with Michael. Now my fears are confirmed.

I back away from the cliff's edge, not stopping until I hit the solid surface of a large rock behind me. "Nope. Absolutely not."

"It's not that bad," Michael says, looking over the edge himself.

"Yes, actually it is." My legs shake so hard I'm pretty sure I dislocate a kneecap. "I knew online dating would kill me."

He throws his head back and laughs. "I promise you'll be safe. The water isn't as far down as it looks."

When he told me to wear a swimsuit, I imagined a nice indoor wave pool or, better yet, a hot tub.

Not freaking cliff jumping into a natural hot spring. Guess what else is natural in a hot spring? Sharp rocks and dangerous water creatures. I don't know what kind; I haven't had time to research it, but no doubt there's something waiting for me at the bottom of that pool I'd rather not meet.

Why, why, why did I agree to this? I nearly pulled an entire chunk out of my hair this morning due to the stress. Now I'm doing it again. Who needs hair, anyway? Bald is beautiful.

But then how would I calm myself in terrifying situations such as this?

Michael steps away from the few other people gathered up top, waiting to dive. The first guy does a flip off the edge, and the rest take turns jumping, each literally following one another off a cliff.

Am I the only one who heeded the wise words of my parents?

And then we are alone.

He turns and faces me. He folds his arms across his bare chest and I avert my gaze. I'm already unstable. "I heard you when you said you weren't really afraid of heights, and this is the closest way I could think of to let you fly."

Dang it. That was romantic.

"While that's technically true, I am terrified of the dropping to my death part," I stutter.

"I promise it's completely safe. I won't make you do anything you don't want to, but you can't tell me a piece of you isn't curious for a little adventure." The dangerous look in his eyes does funny things to my insides.

A small breeze blows past, and I steady the rock wall behind me. It totally almost fell. "Do you remember what my major is?"

He scratches his chin. "Yeah, math. Why?"

"Because math is reliable, predictable, safe. There's no room for adventure in math." Speaking of which, I have three pages of homework and an exam I should be at home studying for.

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Three soaking-wet teenagers pass by us, ready to jump again, and Michael moves closer until his chest presses against my side.

“Maybe there should be.” His rough voice scrapes against me like a scorching flame. “You said you wanted to do something for yourself this Christmas.”

“Yeah, but I was thinking about taking myself on vacation and eating the cookies meant for Santa.”

He grins and reaches for my hand, and for some reason, I let him take it. “Do this with me?”

I can hear my mother’s voice in my head, warning me about this, about him. He will ruin your life. They all do.

I’ve never wanted to be ruined so bad. He’s trying to help me fly, and maybe it’s time I do it.

“Okay,” I breathe.

“You’re going to love this, Juliet,” he whispers next to my ear.

Love what? The way his breath feels on my skin? The way he says my name?

He tugs my hand, but my body rejects his pull.

“Wait, I’m not ready.”

He stops. “You don’t have to. We can just go down to the bottom and swim.”

I don’t do things like this. I don’t follow a guy up a cliff and over its edge, literally or metaphorically. I don’t make decisions lightly. I plan and deliberate before I decide. And then the doubt creeps in.

I wait for that doubt right now, but all I feel is a tiny morsel of anticipation.

I want to do this.

I bite my bottom lip and glance at him. “Race you?”

He rewards me with a smile so big it could never be captured by a photo, then takes off running.

I run with him, not allowing more time to talk myself out of it. My feet hit the edge of the cliff, and I leave my fear there as I hurl myself into the air.

My body is weightless. For once, nothing is under me or behind me, holding me down and keeping me in place. I don’t want to fall.

But gravity takes me anyway, and I crash through the warm water. Darkness enfolds, but no rocks or little creatures attack, and I come up laughing.

Michael pushes his hair out of his face and swims up next to me. His chest is on full glorious display in the setting sun. I swallow. It is called golden hour for a reason.

“You loved it, didn’t you?”

I peel my eyes away from his chest. “So much.”

“Wanna go again?” His bright blue eyes sparkle against the dark water, and his blond hair is plastered around his face, giving him a boyish charm.

Yes. I want to go again and again. “I thought you’d never ask.”

He’s doing something to me. I don’t know what it is, but even standing sturdy on the rock cliff, I feel like I’m falling for him.

After four more liberating jumps, we call it quits for the night. The sun has almost set, and the coolness of the night is best enjoyed from the warmth of the hot spring.

“So, how am I doing with date one?” Michael swims up next to me on the rocky edge.

I purse my lips. “Oh, this is date two. We already had our first date. Remember?”

His eyes squint. “Eager to get rid of me, huh?”

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He has no idea. “Doing my best.”

He runs his teeth along his bottom lip, and my mouth goes dry.

“When my sister teases me, I dunk her in the pool.”

“But you won’t do that to me,” I say, my breath unsteady.

“Are you sure about that?” He inches closer, and my pulse races. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t.”

I could easily move away—he’s giving me the space I need. But I’m stuck like one of those water creatures I keep waiting for.

His arm snakes around my waist, and he tugs me into him. “Silence isn’t a reason,” he whispers, and then he drags us both beneath the water.

In the blackness, I can only focus on him. My legs intertwine with his, and my heart pounds so violently against my ribcage he can no doubt feel it against his own. His hands are on my hips, pulling me infinitely closer.

And then we popup to the surface.

I take a breath of the cool night air and expect him to let go, but he keeps a tight hold on me, and I have no choice but to grip his arms in return. I certainly don’t want to drown, and those shoulders look like they could hold up a mountain.

“You dunked me,” I say, trying my best to be offended.

“What are you going to do about it?” He taunts.

Oh, I’ll tell him, right after he takes his big hands off my waist so I can think.

“I…” I start as his thumb rubs circles above my hipbone.

“Yes?” he taunts, his eyes dancing with mischief. He leans ever closer until his nose brushes mine.

My lips part, and my eyelids fight to stay open. What am I doing? I can’t kiss him. I barely know him. This is how people get tricked into love. This is not smart—

“Cannonball!”

Water slaps us in the face, and I push toward the rock wall, coughing up mouthfuls of water.

“Are you okay?” Michael swims next to me, concern in his eyes.

A few teenagers laugh and point in our direction.

I catch a breath and turn away from Michael. “I think I’m done for the night.”

“Same.” He mutters and hauls himself out of the pool and holds a hand out. I let him lift me out like I’m a helpless baby animal. Only when I’m on dry land again do I regain strength in my limbs.

Chapter 13

Michael

Ten seconds ago, I was gearing up to kiss Juliet. Now my arms are empty, and I'm cold.

Teenagers are the worst. I was never that immature.

I glance at Juliet as a shiver overtakes her body. "What's wrong?"

"Just c-cold." She wrings out her hair and shoots me a smile. It's not real, like the ones she gave me earlier. This one is forced, preventing her green eyes from lighting up like I know they can.

She walks away from the pool.

"Okay." I'm sure that's all it is.

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Juliet stops and her shoulders tremble. “Didn’t we leave our clothes here?”

I look around the large rock. There’s another large one to the left, and I search around there as well. Nothing.

“D-did somebody t-take our s-stuff?” Juliet’s teeth chatter.

The odds aren’t in our favor. Thankfully, I left my phone in my truck and hid the keys under the hubcap.

I broaden my inspection to every rock in the area but still come up empty.

I trudge back to Juliet; her whole body is shaking now. It’s not warm tonight. I need to get her to the truck before she freezes.

“Come on.” I wrap an arm around her shoulders, hoping to provide her with a little extra heat.

The hike to the parking lot is rough and rocky, even more so without shoes. Every so often, we hit a small patch of soft dirt, only to kick up more rocks. My feet are cut and throbbing, and we aren’t even halfway.

“Ow!” Juliet screams, and she pitches forward.

I use both arms to catch her before she falls and yank her upright, but she sinks into my side.

“I think... I stepped on a cactus.” Her words come out in sharp gasps.

I curse. I drop an arm behind her and scoop her into my arms. She’s wet and shivering against my bare skin, and I hold her tighter to keep her safe. I walk as fast as I dare.

The parking lot and my truck come into view, and I breathe a sigh of relief. Thank goodness our clothing thieves didn’t venture into felony charges. I pop the tailgate and set Juliet on it while I retrieve the keys and start the ignition to get the truck warming. I rummage around beneath the backseat and come up with an old shirt. I don’t know if it’s clean, but at this point, I don’t think she’ll care.

“Here.” I hold the shirt out to her, and she slips it on, then I carry her to the passenger seat and close the door.

Once I’m inside, I flip on the light. Her chin quivers, and her lips are practically blue. I crank up the heat even more.

“Let me see your foot,” I say.

She twists to put her foot up on the middle console.

“I can’t bring myself to look. I hate needles.” She says, wrapping a thick strand of hair around her fingers.

I try to keep an emotionless expression on my face for her benefit, but it’s hard. Good thing she didn’t look. There are five of the biggest cactus spines I’ve ever seen embedded in the ball of her foot.

“I think I have a first aid kit in the glove compartment.” I point in front of her.

She finds the kit and hands it to me.

The kit is old. I think someone gifted it to me when I graduated high school, but I find alcohol wipes, which are probably dry by now, and Band-Aids. I can get by with that.

“Are you going to pull the spines out?” she asks, worrying her bottom lip.

I freeze. “I was going to. I didn’t want you to have to ride home like that, but I can take you to the hospital or something.”

“No, please do it.” She angles more toward me and brings her opposite leg to her chest. She buries her face against her knee, and her fingers wrap so tightly around her leg they have to be creating indentations. “I’m ready,” she squeaks.

I bite back a smile. She’s so cute. I’ve thought so all night, but like a gentleman, I’ve kept my mind out of the gutter and purposely not stared at the way her light blue swimsuit perfectly hugs her body.

“Okay.” I touch her foot, gently preparing her for what’s to come, then wrap my hand around her arch so she won’t pull away when it hurts. I don’t want to make it any worse than it already is.

“Three, two, one.” I pull the first one out as gently as I can, and she makes a sound, somewhere between a scream and a cry, but it’s muffled by her leg. I get ready to pull the second. “Three, two—”

“Just pull it already before I pass out!”

That wouldn’t be ideal in the current circumstances. I yank the next one, and the next. Then stop to give her a break.

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She takes a few breaths, then tells me to hurry and finish, in not-so-nice of words. I don't blame her. Pain tends to bring out the worst in people. But if that's her worst, she's far better than me.

The last two are so close together, I pull them out at the same time. Then dump some water on the dried alcohol pads and dab at her foot. I press some Band-Aids over the holes to keep them from getting infected. Her body slumps against the opposite door, and she leans her head against the window, her eyes closed.

She exhales. "Thank you."

I stuff the Band-Aid wrappers into a cup holder.

"For making you jump off a cliff, letting you freeze, or leading you into a cactus?" I say sarcastically. What was I thinking with this date? Just because she admitted that she has always wanted to fly doesn't mean I should force her off the first cliff I find. Am I pushing her too far and too fast with the dates as well?

Juliet pulls her foot off the console and sits up straight in her seat. "For giving me an adventure and taking care of me."

I shake my head. "Believe it or not, I had a different outcome in mind when I planned this night." My ears burn when I realize what that could have sounded like.

She smiles. "Minus the cactus and the minimal hypothermia, this is one of the best dates I've ever been on."

Now I smile. “So, you’ve never been on a date before?”

Juliet laughs, and the sound of it allows me to relax for the first time since our almost kiss. “Oh, I could tell you horror stories.”

“You’re on. I bet I’ve got you beat.”

For the next hour, we talk about every bad date we’ve ever been on. I love listening to her, watching her eyes light up when she’s gearing up for the funny part of the story, and the little snort she makes just before she laughs. I don’t think she even knows she does it.

Juliet yawns, and I finally look at the clock on the dash. It’s one in the morning.

“Shoot. I should get you home.” I sit up and buckle my seatbelt.

She looks at the clock, and her eyes go wide. “Oh my gosh, it’s so late.” She tugs her seatbelt on. The shirt gets tangled in the straps, and she struggles to get it free. Then she stops, pulls the top of the shirt from her chest, and giggles.

My eyebrows furrow when she unbuckles again and takes off the shirt.

“What are you—”

“What kind of t-shirt did you get at that Justin Bieber concert?” She flips the shirt right side out, and my stomach drops.

I hold up a hand. “Okay, I can explain.”

“Please do.” She’s giggling so hard tears gather at the corner of her eyes as she holds up the shirt. My shirt. The one with a very shirtless and very tattooed Justin Bieber on

the front.

“I paid for one of those shirts with the tour name and dates, but they made a mistake and gave me the wrong one. I didn’t look at it until I got home. So then I...” Stuck it in the backseat of my truck, where it has apparently been hiding for the last six months.

“Uh-huh, sure.” She’s still laughing. If I wasn’t so embarrassed, I would join in. “I definitely need to see this on you.”

I shake my head. “No way. That shirt is officially yours.” Thank heavens Sean and Trent never found it. I would have been shamed into oblivion.

Juliet holds the shirt out to me, dangling it in front of my face. “Oh, come on, just once. For me.” She pouts her lip, and gosh dang it if it doesn’t undo every ounce of masculinity in my body. What’s left of it, anyway.

“I’ll put it on for exactly five seconds.” I unclip my seatbelt and take the shirt, throwing it over my head. “One... Two...”

“Wait, I need a picture!” She pulls out her phone, but I yank the shirt off before she can get it into position. “Killjoy.” She shoots me a teasing grin, then grasps the shirt and puts it on.

Now she’s wearing a shirtless Justin Bieber. “I think I preferred it inside out.”

“Jealous much?”

“Absolutely not. I’m very confident in my masculinity.” Well, I was until about twenty seconds ago. I’ve noticed the little glances she’s given my chest throughout the night. Like the one she’s giving me right now.

“You should be,” she says so softly I almost miss it.

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My biceps flex of their own free will. I swear I didn't tell them to.

I put the truck into gear and drive toward the city.

"So what's your favorite JB song?" Juliet asks, then holds up a finger. "But if you say Baby, I'm flinging myself out of this truck."

Pfft. That hasn't been my favorite in at least twelve years. I mean never. And I blame Lennox anyway. She was the one who used to blast Justin Bieber like he was the only singer left in the world. Then she had to go ahead and grow out of her obsession right when I started enjoying his songs. What good are little sisters if I can't use her as my excuse for things like that?

"Anyone," I say.

She taps on her phone, and the opening notes carry through the cab of my truck.

I knew the song was romantic, but I didn't realize how much until this moment. Juliet faces forward, but I keep stealing glances at her. Her perfect heart-shaped lips, her smooth skin, the tiny mole just below her jaw. It may be Justin's voice, but it's my heart in every word, promising her she's the only one I want.

I do. That much has been clear since she called my bluff on the whole cat thing. I'm falling for her, hard and fast, but I don't know if there is a nice warm pool to welcome me at the bottom of this jump.

The drive to her apartment seems to last ten minutes, but it's nearly two in the

morning when I pull into the parking lot. I don't need sleep. I could work for hours off the energy I feel when I'm with her. But even so, I think I'll set my alarm for fifty tomorrow. Just this once.

"So, will you still give me another date?" I ask as I help her hobble up the stairs.

Her grip on me tightens. "I don't know. This one about killed me. I'm a little terrified of what could happen next."

"What if I promise to roll you in bubble wrap?" I tease, stopping at the front of her door.

She squints. "I have a feeling if I say yes, our next date will legitimately include bubble wrap."

I slide a hand through my hair. "You know me so well."

"That's the point, isn't it?" Her voice drops, and her eyes meet mine and pull me in. All at once, we are back in the hot spring, but this time, no annoying children are around to ruin the moment.

I step closer, careful not to make her move on her hurt foot. I place a hand on her waist and lift the other one to her hair, brushing one of the strands behind her ear.

"I believe so," I whisper, inching my face toward hers. I watch her eyes, wanting to know if she wants this as much as I do. Her lips part, and her eyelids flutter closed. I move closer still, giving her a chance to back away. But if she does, it might kill me.

I can't stand the distance anymore and bend my head to make the last few inches between us disappear.

“Who’s there?” someone yells, and we both jump at the sound. Juliet staggers on her bad foot, and I catch her before she falls into the railing. The door bursts open, and a crazy woman with a bat steps out swinging. Her face is covered in green goo, and her hair is up in a bun. And what is she wearing? Is that a parka?

This can’t be the same apartment I picked Juliet up from.

How tired am I?

I step in front of Juliet, putting myself between her and this deranged woman.

“Whoa, hey, can we put the bat down?” I put up my hand to protect myself and Juliet.

The woman’s eyes glow with rage. “I’ll put the bat down.” She raises it high over her head. “In your face!”

Juliet steps around and puts a hand on the woman’s arm. I’m about to pull her away from the crazed lunatic when she speaks up. “Karli, stop it.”

“Juliet?” The supposed Karli drops the bat, blinks twice, and slouches inside.

Juliet looks at me. “Sorry, I better make sure she makes it back to bed safe.”

The confusion must be evident on my face.

“She was sleepwalking,” Juliet says.

Sleepwalking? There has to be another word for what that woman was doing, because it was not something as innocent as sleepwalking. Sleep raging, maybe?

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“Yeah, okay.” I shake my head and fall back a step. Maybe I’m sleepwalking, too.
“I’ll see you Friday.”

She blinks.

“For our third date,” I clarify.

“Fourth,” she says, and then the teasing grin returns to her face. “It’s already tomorrow. You got two dates tonight.” She walks into the apartment and shoots me a smile before reaching for the door.

This girl is going to kill me.

“You don’t play fair, Juliet.”

“Never said I would.”

Chapter 14

Juliet

I’m completely disoriented when I wake up the next morning. Or technically, the same morning.

My phone alarm drones, and the sound thunders around in my brain like someone is using a bowling ball as a ping-pong ball. I shut it off and rub my forehead. I need water. And aspirin.

I walk, or rather, stumble, out into the kitchen.

Karli is sitting at the table, skimming through her phone, but her head pops up when she hears me.

“Is this your version of a walk of shame?” She wiggles her eyebrows.

“Not even close.” I grab a glass and a bottle of pills.

“Then what is the shirt you’re wearing because you definitely didn’t leave with it? I would have remembered.”

My shirt? I glance down to find Justin Bieber winking up at me. No, seriously, I think he just winked. I chug the water and the pills. Something is wrong with me. Maybe this is my walk of shame.

“It’s Michael’s,” I say, then sit at the table, bracing my head in my hands. I just need the pounding to stop for a minute.

“Michael’s?” She sounds intrigued. “As in the very attractive man who picked you up last night? He owns JB paraphernalia?”

I nod. “He’s also the same one you scared off with a bat at two in the morning.”

“What?” she screeches, and the word reverberates through my skull.

Does she even own a normal octave?

I look at her so I can fully enjoy teasing her. This is my favorite part of her sleepwalking—telling her about the things she did while she was unconscious. “Yep. You came out in your grinch face mask and bat swinging.”

“No, I didn’t.” Her hands fly to her face, as if she’s worried it’s still there. “Please tell me I didn’t. I can never look at him again.”

I hide my smirk behind my cup. “That’s probably for the best.”

She covers her face and mumbles incoherent words for at least thirty seconds. I’m on my second glass of water before she finally looks up.

“Did you at least have fun? Did you kiss him?”

Heat creeps up my neck. “Oh no, your bat took care of that as well.”

“No!” Karli drops her head to the table, and it thumps against the wooden top.

Ow. That hurt my brain.

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“I ruined it,” Karli says. “I’m so sorry.”

It was just one, almost kiss. One I definitely didn’t stay up thinking about after he left last night. “Don’t worry. A cactus and some thieves also made the night an adventure.”

Her head pops up, her eyes quizzical. “You had a good time.”

I shrug. “Yeah.” But did she hear about the cactus and the thieves? That’s some serious stuff.

“Are you going to go out with him again?”

I shrug. What could it hurt?

She leans back in her seat and beams. “You’re falling for him.”

“No, I’m not.” It’s not love. We are just going on a few dates.

“Then why were you out so late?” She cocks her head to the side. “And why are you sitting here at the table with me when I thought you needed to take an exam today?”

Shoot!

I jump from my seat, then drop right back down. I wait for my brain to catch up with the rest of my body and for my vision to clear, then flee the room at a much slower pace, leaving Karli’s questions unanswered. I’d rather torture my brain with a math

final than admit anything to her.

Yes, I like Michael. He's fun and pushes me to do stuff I wouldn't do on my own. Maybe we could even be friends. Being friends with him is safe. I can do that, no problem.

My phone buzzes.

Michael. Of course he'd show up right when I'm trying to banish him to the friend zone.

Michael: I hope your foot is feeling better. I had an excellent two dates with you last night. :)

I slam the apartment door and drop my bag onto the table. My exam did not go the way I wanted it to, and I'll be lucky to pass the class. I can't believe I stayed out so late and risked my GPA for some guy. Why didn't I listen to that annoying voice in my head?

Sometimes she's actually right.

The chocolate chip cookies Karli made for me yesterday are the only thing giving me motivation. I open the pantry door and step onto a stool to see the top shelf. We purposely keep treats there so they are "out of sight, out of mind."

They are gone.

Evidently, we need a new tactic. And more cookies.

“Ugh.” I trudge to the living room and fall onto our couch. I forgot it’s not one of those cozy couches with fluffy arm rests, and my body hits it like a board.

Ow. What’s the point of a couch if you can’t angrily throw yourself onto it?

My phone rings, and despite my bad mood, a tiny flutter of excitement takes off in my chest.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Juliet.” It’s not Michael’s voice that greets me, but my mother’s. And to think, this day was going so splendidly.

“Hi,” I say again, as is typical for one of my mother’s calls. I have to say hello twice before she will dive into the conversation. The extra “hi” serves as our small talk.

“I wanted to confirm you’ll be here Christmas morning at eight. I have the Thompsons coming over for breakfast, so things will be the same as they always are.”

The same? As in, my mom will be taking multiple shots at my dad, who isn’t invited, and gossiping for hours with the Thompsons.

My dad called me two days ago, asking for my itinerary so he could prepare for our trip to California. Which is the same thing I do almost every year I’m with him.

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I think I can do without “the same” this year.

I’m so tired of them fighting over who gets to watch me open presents first. I’m not a child anymore.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “It’s Dad’s turn this year.” I feel like an item being tossed around. Neither of them seems to care for my presence on other days of the year, but they’ve turned Christmas into a bidding war. Mom got me a new smartwatch last year, so dad bought me a new phone. I returned them both. I don’t want to be bought. I want to enjoy the holiday with people who enjoy being around me. If there are any.

Michael seemed to enjoy being with me last night.

“No. I distinctly remember your dad had you last year,” Mom says, as she does every year it’s not her year. “It’s my turn. Your dad can go find someone else to join him for the pathetic holiday he has planned.”

Christmas is in two weeks, but they’ve been fighting over me since I visited them both for Thanksgiving. I’m so done.

“You can visit him in the New Year. It’s not like he ever cared about—”

“Enough!” My volume startles me. “I quit!”

She scoffs. “What do you mean, you quit? Did you get a job I don’t know about?”

“No, I quit Christmas! I won’t be at your house, and I won’t be at Dad’s. I’m done.”

She’s silent as if she can’t believe what she just heard.

I can’t believe I said it. I should feel bad but... I don’t. I think I should have said it years ago. Maybe it would have stopped their bickering sooner.

“You can’t quit Christmas.” My mom scoffs, her tone condescending. “Christmas is a time for family.”

“Which we aren’t.” My voice breaks. “All you guys do is fight, with me or without me. You can do it without me this year.”

“Juliet,” my mother starts, but I can’t deal with this anymore. My headache is back, accompanied by an old familiar heartache.

“I’ve got to go, Mom. Have a good Christmas.” I’m heartless and cruel, but I can’t bring myself to care right now. I can’t do it anymore. I can’t be the chess piece between them. I won’t be the reason they fight anymore.

I feel like I’ve been dunked in a pool again, but this time the fresh air wakes me up from the dream I’m in. This thing with Michael may be fun now, but in six months or two years, what will it be? Feelings like this burn hot and fast until there’s nothing left. That’s why they’re so dangerous.

I don’t want to end up like my parents.

There’s a reason I don’t jump off cliffs, besides the obvious. It’s the same reason I don’t let anyone close. I learned this lesson when I was five, and I have the scars to prove it.

If you get too close to the fire, you get burned.

Chapter 15

Michael

I could have waited a few days to see Juliet again. Well, I could have tried.

But I didn't want to.

I knock on her door and wait.

The door swings open a moment later, and a woman looks at me. She might be the same one who tried to run me off with a bat last night, but it's hard to tell without the green stuff on her face.

"Oh, thank goodness you're here." She grabs my arm and pulls me inside.

Is she sleepwalking again?

"Juliet's in an awful mood, and you need to fix her." She tugs me through the kitchen and into a hallway.

"I don't know if I can do that." I'm not an expert on all things Juliet, even though I want to be.

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“Well, give it your best shot. I’ve already tried and failed. Your turn.” She shoves me through a door, and I blink in the dimness before realizing I’m in Juliet’s room.

There is no evidence of life except the small bump in her bedsheets.

Oh boy.

I hesitate before walking further into the room. What if she doesn’t want me to see her like this? But now that I have, I can’t walk away. I want to know what’s wrong. I want to ensure she’ll be okay.

Does she have a headache? She told me she sometimes gets migraines if she doesn’t get enough sleep. I shouldn’t have kept her out so late.

“Juliet?” I whisper, in case she’s asleep.

She pulls the covers off her head. “Michael? What are you doing here?”

She sounds upset, but I step closer anyway. “I came to check on you.”

“Why? What did Karli tell you?”

My forehead scrunches. “Huh? I was worried about your foot.”

“My... foot?” She sticks her leg out of the blanket and stares at her foot as if she forgot she had it. “It’s fine.”

I rockback on my heels. What now? Is it too insensitive to ask what's wrong? I asked Lennox that one time, and she punched me. But Lennox was raised with three older brothers, so she's far from normal.

"I broke up with my parents," Juliet says, her voice cracking.

I blink, taken aback by her statement, but then remember the things she's told me. I can't imagine what it must feel like to be pulled in different directions by people who are supposed to put you first.

"Good for you," I say simply.

"You're right. Good for me," she says, but she doesn't sound happy about it.

"Should we celebrate?" I ask.

"Celebrate me breaking up with my parents?" Her voice drips with disdain.

Well, when she says it like that, it sounds kind of... heartless.

She swings her legs over the side of her bed and stands. She flips on her bedside lamp, and I'm momentarily blinded.

"Sure, Michael, let's go celebrate," Juliet says, holding the C out like a snake hissing.

She brushes past me, knocking me with her shoulder on the way out.

Well now I'm not sure I want to go anywhere with her.

Juliet rocks at pool. She's not good, or above average. She's awesome. I've tried every trick shot and tactic on her, and I've only beaten her once, by default. I don't know if she's extremely talented or if she's being driven by pure rage. She's spoken a total of sixteen words since we got here, each of them clipped and guarded.

This isn't the same girl who flung herself off a cliff last night. This one is haunted and hurting, and it kills me inside.

Juliet lines up the cue and sinks the eight ball, effectively beating me for the sixth time. In a row. She smiles, probably for the first time tonight. My dignity is long gone, but it was worth it just to see that.

"Where did you learn to play?"

She chalks up her stick. "When my parents weren't busy fighting, my dad taught me."

"When did they split?" I ask, worried I'll probe too much and scare her back into her shell, but wanting to know everything that made her the woman she is today.

“When I was fourteen.”

That’s a long time for a child to witness their parents fighting. “I’m sorry.”

She shrugs. “I wish they would have split sooner.”

I have the primal urge to fix it for her, but I can’t change the past. Some things will forever be broken.

“Wanna play again?” Juliet changes the subject with a smirk, then takes a bite of her last slice of pizza. It’s got to be cold by now.

“And lose seven times in a row. Let me think about it.” I grin and steal the pool cue from her and put it on the rack on the wall. I’m only a gracious loser for so long.

She sticks out her bottom lip. It’s red and delicious looking, like a perfectly ripe strawberry.

I bet it tastes even better.

My mouth goes dry.

“But I was on a roll,” Juliet says.

I slide around her, lingering next to her side for a moment. I lean in to whisper in her ear and allow my lips to skim her cheek. “Don’t I know it?”

Her sharp intake is all I need to know I'm doing something right and that maybe, just maybe, I can convince her I'm worth more than five dates.

But the second I pull away, she darts to the other side of the table.

Was there too much garlic on the pizza?

I rack up the balls so someone else can enjoy losing as much as me.

I freeze. Then turn to her with a grin. "Do you want to be my new party trick?"

Her brows furrow, her glare turning deadly. It's the same one she wore the night we first met, and it still sends shivers down my spine.

"Excuse me?"

"Not like that." I rush to clarify. "What I mean is, do you want to come to my house for dinner on Sunday so you can school everyone at pool?" Oh, the bets I can make with Sean about this.

She juts out her chin. "Like home, home? To meet your family?"

The premeditated victory dance in my head ceases. People only take someone home when they are serious... when they are falling in love.

My heart thuds against my lungs. This was the point of Sean's bet. But until this moment, I didn't realize love is exactly where I'm headed.

I avoid her eyes, so she won't be able to see what I'm feeling. I shrug. "Well yeah, but mostly to humble my brothers."

She twirls her hair around her finger, and I watch the doubts fly across her face. I'm preparing for the no, ready to give her an out when she speaks.

"I guess it could be kind of fun to smoke your brothers," she says, the corner of her lips curling up.

"Mostly Sean," I say.

Juliet salutes me. "Got it. Destroy Sean."

Forget heading in the direction of love. I may already be there.

When I drop her off at home, I pause outside her door.

"So I'll pick you up Sunday?" I ask, hoping she hasn't changed her mind in the last twenty minutes. She seems happier than when we left, but I can tell she's still upset. Every time I get close, she backs away, so I've tried to keep my distance. Which is nearly impossible when she looks so beautiful in that oversized sweater and leggings with her glasses slipping down her nose.

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I love her glasses.

She purses her lips and nods. “For our last date.”

“Nope,” I say, the second the words are out of her mouth. I predicted this and planned for it. “I dropped you off from our last date this morning, which according to your rules, makes it the same date.”

Her lips twitch before she schools her features into a frown. “Fine. I’ll give you that.”

If I thought she was going to give me a chance to redeem our doorstep kiss, I’m wrong. She turns and lets herself in the door.

I step forward to give her a parting hug, or maybe a kiss on the cheek, but the door slams in my face. I’m so close to the door I can smell the rust. She could have hurt me.

Maybe that was her plan.

Chapter 16

Juliet

Michael tricked me, and... I deserved it. Especially after slamming the door in his face a few nights ago. Not my finest moment, but I was angry with everyone, including myself.

I only have to protect my heart for two more dates, which should be easy, since tonight, we'll be surrounded by his family.

I've never been home to meet someone's family before, and the only families I know are completely dysfunctional. Parents who fight at the dinner table (mine), siblings discussing bowel movements while eating (Karli's).

What kind of relationship do Michael and his brothers have if he wants me to embarrass them the first night I meet them? I'm not sure what kind of chaos I'm in for, but there's bound to be something that will make it easier to pull away when the five dates are up.

The second I step through the large entryway into Michael's immaculate childhood home, I have a feeling his family will be different.

"This house is gorgeous," I whisper to him.

He shrugs. "It's home."

It's home? It's like the North Pole exploded, very tastefully I might add. I've never seen so many decorations in my life. Decorative garland on the front staircase, a picturesque scene of glass snowmen on the entry table, and a tree the size of a mini-Eiffel Tower in the front room.

"I warned my family not to be weird." Michael breaks me from my trance. "But I can't guarantee it's not still an option."

"Every family is weird."

The look on his face says he knows something I don't.

“What?” I stop walking and pull him to a halt. “What aren’t you telling me?”

His lips pinch together. “Okay, they can be a bit much. All of them.”

“And?” I reach for a strand of hair.

“And they are going to make bets, probably about us, and tease you for going out with me. But I promise they do it out of love.” He pauses. “I think. I never really know when it comes to Sean.”

“Bets?” Yeah sure, this sounds super normal.

“It will be fine.” Michael leads me into the large kitchen, where seven pairs of eager eyes meet us.

He’s much more optimistic than me.

A guy approaches us. “You must be the Juliet.” He’s a few inches shorter than Michael and has dark hair, but they are so similar in looks they could almost be twins. Except, he’s the one with a twin, right? I think that’s what Michael said when he gave me the five-minute rundown of his family. And what does he mean by the Juliet?

“I’m Sean. The coolest Bentley.” Sean slides an arm around my shoulders and attempts to pull me away from Michael, but Michael grabs my hand and plasters me to his side, which I’m grateful for.

I’ve got to keep my eye on this Bentley.

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Sean then introduces everyone, something that was supposed to be Michael's job, and judging by the stiff set of his jawline, he's none too happy about it.

"Let's eat, and then we will grill the girl," Michael's Grandma Bella says.

"Grandma." Lennox takes hold of her grandmother's arm and walks with her to the table. "We grill meat, not our guests."

Grandma snorts. "Well, I certainly wouldn't eat her. She's skin and bones."

I look at my chest. Is my lack of womanly features that obvious?

"Come dear, I'll make sure you're properly fed." Grandma motions me to the seat next to her.

I turn frightened eyes on Michael, but he just shrugs.

"Sorry," Lennox whispers to me on her way to the opposite side of the table.

I clasp my hands together to prevent them from pulling out a lock of hair. What is the probability of getting out of this evening unscathed?

Michael's dad prays over the food and then we eat. Neither of my parents really cooked. We always ordered in for dinners or special occasions like Christmas. But this... This is amazing. I don't know what Mrs. Bentley did to the mashed potatoes, but I've never tasted anything so buttery and creamy. And the roast is to die for. If I wasn't against falling in love, I'd be falling for Mrs. Bentley's cooking.

“Would you like some salt, dear?” Grandma asks.

She doesn’t give me time to respond before she pours half the bottle over my meat, potatoes, and fruit salad.

It was nice while it lasted.

Grandma jumps into the conversation she’s been having off and on with her son, Michael’s dad, and I gape at my snow-covered meal.

Maybe I can scrape it off?

“Here.” Michael switches our plates. Then he stands up and takes the food to the kitchen, where I assume he will either hose it off or dump it.

He returns with a clean plate and dishes it up like I had it before the great salt debacle, then switches it back.

I peek at Grandma to make sure she didn’t see, then look at Michael. My heart pumps so ridiculously loud everyone must be able to hear it.

He gives me a sheepish smile. I want to be annoyed, but I can’t find a single thing about him to be frustrated with. He’s kind and generous, sweet and caring. All the things I’d want in a man. And for the first time in forever, I can’t believe I might actually want a man. Him. I want his smiles aimed only at me, his hand holding mine.

I glance around at the smiling faces, everyone enjoying one another’s company.

Can they really be this happy together, or is it an act?

It’s ridiculous I’m even thinking that, but I don’t know. I didn’t grow up like this. I

grew up waiting for the other shoe to drop, and it's not a feeling I can pretend away.

My dad told me if you never expect anything, you'll never be disappointed. So I haven't expected anything from anyone. I can't allow myself to hope for a life like this, only to be disappointed. I won't survive it.

I sniff, pushing back the emotion trying to make a very daring escape.

"Oh, don't cry, dear," Grandma says much too loud and pats my arm. "I'm sure Mikey will propose soon."

The oxygen is sucked from my lungs, and whatever did that, also sucked every sound from the house. My erratic heartbeat is a bass drum, booming through the big, echoey room.

Until Sean laughs. Trent covers his own mouth, and I can see Lennox fighting the temptation. Sean hiccups, and the sound breaks up his laugh like a broken trumpet.

"What's wrong with you, boy?" Grandma gives Sean a condescending glare. "Haven't you gone through puberty yet?"

So it's not just my family. This one is dysfunctional too, in a good way.

And then everyone is laughing like Grandma's comment never happened. But I can't stop thinking about it. Does she really think I'd be good enough for Michael?

Michael didn't even let me offer to help clean up dinner before whisking me off for my first competition of the night.

Sean. Color me unsurprised.

"Are we placing a bet on this game?" Sean squares his shoulders and asks Michael. Then he looks at me. "No offense, but I need to fill up on the way home, and I forgot my card."

He's very confident and clearly responsible.

I bite my bottom lip. "I don't know." I glance at Michael. He told me not to reveal myself in the first game, but I'm not sure if I'm a good enough actress to pull it off.

"Eh," Sean waves a hand. "It's just one game. Michael will spot you."

Well, since he so kindly offered the assistance of his brother. "Okay. Will ten bucks do?"

Sean scoffs and gives me a pity grin, like I'm a little girl holding out four quarters, wondering if I have enough for a bike. "In today's economy? Better make it twenty-five."

I don't have twenty-five dollars with me, but I don't plan on paying up. If I do lose, this was all Michael's idea, anyway. Hopefully, I don't let him down.

“Okay.” I agree.

“What do you want to play?” Sean asks as he racks up the balls.

I shrug and twist the cue, acting surprised when it comes apart. “I only know a couple. You choose.”

His lips curl up in the corners. He thinks he’s already won.

I smile too, for the same reason.

“Let’s keep it simple then and start with eight ball.” Sean says, a touch of arrogance lacing his words.

This is going to be fun.

“Sounds good.”

“Do you want to break?” he asks.

I nod and position myself on the short side of the table. “How hard should I hit it?”

I catch Michael covering his laugh from the corner of my eye. For anyone else, I wouldn’t feign innocence in the game. Only for Sean. It seems he could benefit from a generous serving of humble pie, and I’m happy to serve.

Sean’s eyes glint. “As hard as you can.”

Oh, you poor pathetic boy. I lean over the table, playing with my hold on the cue, and taking an excessive amount of time to line up my shot.

Then I send the ball flying, and half of my solids drop into pockets.

I blow out my cheeks, then look up at him. “Was that good?”

Sean’s smile falters. “Yeah, it was pretty decently okay.”

I bite the inside of my cheek and line up my next shot.

I’ll show him decently okay.

“Let’s see, that red ball in...that middle pocket thingy.” I scrunch up my nose as I hit and sink it. Then I get another. And another. Until I’m down to my last ball, and Sean has smoke coming out of his ears.

I line up the cue and send the eight ball sailing into the corner pocket. I stand up straight and grin. “Hey, that was pretty fun.”

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I walk over to Michael, who pulls me in for a side hug. Side hug or regular hug, this is the best hug I've ever had. My body wants to stay right here in his embrace forever.

"I think you're naturally talented." Michael's eyes twinkle, and he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. Tingles skate down my neck and spine like they are on a water slide.

"Must be beginner's luck," Sean mutters.

He insists on another game, a harder one this time, and I agree. One by one, each member of the family shows up to watch. Every time I hit a ball in, a louder cheer erupts from them.

Finally, there's only one ball left. I release the cue and sink the shot.

I look across the table at Sean. "Were we doing double or nothing?"

His frown twitches. "What just happened?"

My face can't hold up the ruse anymore and morphs into a grin. I glance at Michael to find a similar smile lighting his features.

Sean looks between the two of us. "I think I was duped."

I bite the inside of my cheek with a shrug, but Michael is the first to crack, and he chuckles.

“I knew you were in on it.” Sean points his cue at Michael. “You were smiling way too much.”

Michael comes behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. I’m not sure if he’s using me as a shield or if he’s proud of me. Either way, it sends molten lava to my core. My breathing becomes quick and unsteady. I can feel every point of contact with him like his touch is being branded on my skin. I’ve never been held like this. But it seems to come so natural to him.

Because he’s not like you. He’s made for love. You aren’t.

My smile dissolves, and my throat constricts.

My inner voice hasn’t been that mean for a while.

“She’s my secret weapon.” Michael’s breath tickles my ear, and I want so badly to lean into him and let him be my secret weapon against my biggest fears.

“Well, maybe I was only playing nice because she’s already dating a loser,” Sean taunts.

He’s not a loser. It would make this so much easier if he was.

I swallow and face Sean. “So you want to play again, then? For real this time?”

Pink crawls up his cheeks and he looks away with a scoff. “No one likes a show-off, Juliet.”

“I do.” Michael whispers, so soft I can’t be sure if he actually said it.

He lets go of me to clean up the game, but I can’t get my body to move. It doesn’t

want to be separated from him.

That's the problem.

This thing with Michael, the five dates I promised him, it's not working. The guards protecting my heart have left their posts, and I'm fighting this war by myself.

I'm not sure how much longer I can keep it up.

Chapter 17

Juliet

I was prepared to leave after pool, but then Michael's mom invited us to stay and watch their favorite Christmas movie with them. I don't know why, but I imagined sitting in their cozy family room watching something heart-warming and filled with the Christmas spirit, something like A Christmas Carol.

But instead, they turned on Jingle all the Way.

I've never seen it before and now I very much regret it. Or maybe I regret not having a family to watch it with. All the Bentleys are in hysterics over a show they must have seen dozens of times, and I can't help but laugh along.

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“I dated him once,” Grandma says when Arnold Schwarzenegger shows up on the screen, dressed like an action hero.

“Arnold or Turbo-man?” Sean teases.

“Wouldn’t you like to know, you little sissy?” Grandma snaps back. At the beginning of the night, the older woman intimidated me. She still does, but now I think I’d like to be her when I grow up.

“Sure, okay Grandma.” He fires back.

Grandma smacks Mark Bentley's arm. “I gave you perfect genes to work with and these kids were the best you could do?”

“Hey!” Lennox jumps in.

“Oh no, dear, you and Trent are fine,” Grandma corrects herself.

Michael scoffs. “Thanks for the love, Grandma.”

“No offense Mikey, but you came out alittle wonky looking,” she says, then looks at me. “His head was all cone-shaped, and he was bug-eyed. He’s gotten better, though.”

Better is the understatement of the year.

Michael shakes his head but laughs. “Her superpower is humbling people.”

“I like her,” I say.

He grins, then drops his arm behind me. My body’s traitorous reaction is cut short because suddenly Sean whoops, and Grant and Trent groan. Mrs. Bentley tries unsuccessfully to shush them all.

“What just happened?” I whisper to Michael.

He shrugs, his eyes barely leaving the television. “A bet.”

“I didn’t think he’d have the guts to snuggle up to you with the whole family watching,” Trent admits with a serious expression.

My face burns hotter than the gas fireplace in the corner of the room.

“Don’t mind them, Juliet,” Lennox says, rolling her eyes. “They are all immature idiots.”

“Says the girl who’s still waiting for her first kiss.” Sean nudges Lennox with his shoulder.

Lennox’s cheeks turn pink, and I can’t help but glance at Grant, whose jaw is set in an unreadable expression. Everyone acts like he’s part of the family, like a brother. Everyone...except Lennox. It took me two minutes at dinner to see the connection between her and Grant. I wonder if everyone else knows, or if they are all blind.

“Should we place bets on that?” Michael joins in on the teasing. My heart goes out to her. Living with three older brothers was probably a unique form of torture.

“Don’t you dare.” Lennox glares at him.

“Ah, don’t get upset, Lenny,” Michael says. “It was a joke.”

She stands up from the couch. “Everything always is with you guys.” She stomps out of the room, and once again I look at Grant, whose eyes follow her all the way.

I turn on Michael once everyone’s attention has returned to the show.

“Don’t you think that was a little harsh?” I whisper.

He lifts a brow. “With Lennox? Nah, she knows we are teasing.”

Considering the way she ran out of here, I doubt it. “Does she?”

He pats my shoulder. “Of course.”

I purse my lips. “She’s going to get you guys back one of these days.” And they will deserve every bit of whatever she does.

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Michael laughs. “Like she could pull one over on us.”

My new goal in life is to help Lennox do just that. But that would require sticking around and forming a relationship. Relationships come with commitment. And commitments get broken.

There’s a light tickle against my neck, and my body goes limp against Michael’s soft touch.

Maybe for tonight, I’ll let myself believe I can give him the relationship he wants. Let myself want it too. I’ll lie to my inner voice until she leaves me alone.

Chapter 18

Michael

One more date. I have one date left with Juliet. But I want more. A lifetime of dates with her wouldn’t be enough.

I thought bringing her home would be intimidating or awkward. I didn’t know if I was ready for that. But I was surprised by how much I liked having her there. I don’t know how to explain it, but she fit in a space I never knew was empty.

I look up from my clipboard as Grant walks into the break room.

“Hey, I was just coming to find you,” I say.

“What’s up?” He grabs a soda from the fridge and sits down.

“I was going over the plans for that job in Mesa, and one of the cabinets was built wrong. I’ve got Harris working on the new one now, so don’t head out until he’s got it.”

Grant just stares at me, with no acknowledgment of what I said.

“What?” I ask.

“Sorry, I’m just surprised you weren’t out there rebuilding it yourself. It’s good to see you delegating.” He tips his soda toward me.

I frown. “I guess.” That’s what a foreman does. And I want the job, so I might as well start now.

He shakes his head and takes a sip of his drink. “So, you and Juliet. Seems like the real deal.”

I put my clipboard on the table and stretch my back out against the chair.

“That’s how it would seem.” But that stupid expiration date is inching closer and closer. After the dinner with my family, I hoped it might go away, but when I dropped her off at home, she practically ran inside before I could even think about kissing her. I don’t understand. One minute, she’s okay with my arm around her, the next, she’s avoiding me like the plague.

“Are you in love with her?” Grant asks, his expression every bit as serious as it usually is.

If I say yes, then it will make everything more real. But I can’t say no because that’s

simply not true.

“I... don’t know yet.”

“You’ve got some time.” Grant drains the rest of the soda.

I laugh. I have two weeks left for Sean’s deal, but it doesn’t matter if he gave me two years. Juliet is determined to keep me at arm’s length no matter what I do.

“I don’t know if time will do it.” I pick up my pen and draw pointless circles next to the job details. I feel like that’s all I’m doing right now—moving in a pointless circle, waiting for Juliet to let me move forward.

He shakes his head. “What do you mean?”

I sigh. “Her parents are divorced, and I think she’s afraid of ending up like them. I don’t know if she even believes in love or if she wants a relationship.”

If only she could see not everyone is like her parents. That she isn’t like her parents.

“And you do?”

This is far from the regular break room discussions. But I know Grant isn’t trying to goad me like is Sean’s usual purpose.

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“I...” I’ve just never found someone who made me picture a relationship like I do with her. I can see us together in the future, see her laughing at my stupid dad jokes and greeting me each morning with a kiss. “I do.”

He pats me on the shoulder. “Look at you, man. I’m happy for you.”

I would be more content if I knew Juliet wanted the same thing. “Did you miss the part when I said she’s against love?”

“I think everyone says that at some point, but very few people truly believe it,” Grant says.

“I can’t make her want something she doesn’t believe in.”

Grant tosses his can into the trash with perfect aim. “Of course not. But if you ask me, I think she does. She’s just too scared to let it happen. She’s only seen the bad. Show her the good.”

I look at my best friend. He’s seen a lot of bad in his life, which was why he practically lived at our house growing up. But he’s happy being a part of our family.

Maybe I could show Juliet that as well.

“Bring her to the company party tonight,” Grant says.

I rub my stomach, still feeling the effects from last year’s party. The food was delicious going down but quite the opposite coming up. And it came up... a lot.

“I kind of like her. I’d rather not poison her.”

Grant waves off my concern. “Your dad hired a different caterer this year, I’m sure.”

I only have one more date with Juliet, and I don’t want to waste it on the work party. I guess I could try a trick play.

It can’t be counted as a date if I don’t ask her to come.

It was surprisingly easy to convince Juliet’s best friend Karli to trick Juliet into the car and then leave her at an undisclosed location after dark.

I know how that sounds, but Juliet will be fine. And if all goes well, I get a bonus date.

Two headlights appear down the street, and I duck behind the gazebo’s beam, my hands jittery with anticipation.

The car stops, and one door opens. I hold my breath until I hear the second one open and close.

“Karli, I don’t care about a gazebo. If I see a creeper anywhere, I’m not sticking around to save you,” Juliet says, but Karli doesn’t stop.

“Believe it or not, you’re not always at risk of being captured and killed,” Karli says and stomps into the gazebo.

“Says you,” Juliet grumbles, her steps much softer than Karli’s. She must be a few feet behind. “Actually, the mathematical probabilit—”

I push away from the wooden beam. “Hey.”

Juliet, who was supposed to be a good four feet away, screams and launches herself at me like a rabid dog.

Her knee connects with my groin, and a blinding pain drops me to the ground.

“Run!” Juliet screams to Karli. “Don’t get up, you perv. I’m calling 9-1-1.”

I’m hunched over in pain, clearly not going anywhere. I manage a pathetic noise, but it does nothing to plead my case.

“I’m not sure where I am—”

“Juliet!” Karli interrupts Juliet’s conversation with dispatch. “Stop, it’s Michael.”

“No, it’s the police,” Juliet responds. “Yes, I’m still here,” she says into the phone.

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Karli walks over and snatches the phone, holding it to her own ear. “False alarm. But thank you for your service.” She clicks the off button and hands it back to Juliet.

Juliet squeals. “Why did you do that? He tried to assault us!”

I roll onto my knees and hold a hand up. “Actually, I think I was just assaulted.” My voice is barely above a squeak.

“I’ve got pepper spray, and I know how to use it.” Juliet aims something in my direction, and I fall to the ground in complete surrender.

“Dang it, Juliet,” Karli groans. “You just rendered Michael infertile.” The light from Karli’s phone shines down, illuminating me in all my glory.

“Michael?” Juliet gasps. “Oh my gosh, Michael. Why were you waiting out here like some kind of psycho?”

“Being an idiot,” Karli offers for me.

I can’t say I don’t agree. I clearly didn’t think this through. But I never thought Juliet would attack me.

This was stupider than blaming a broken chair on a cat.

“I uh...” I take a deep breath. “Was trying to figure out a way to see you again.”

Juliet scowls. “Most people would use a phone to set up something like that.”

Sure, she makes it sound so simple now. Like she would have just gone on another date with me had I asked.

Why the heck didn't I ask for an extra date, or three?

I take my time standing, grimacing with every inch. She's got some wicked self-defense moves.

Karli's light disappears, and I pull mine out instead. I need to see Juliet, so I can appropriately apologize to her.

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I was dumb." Now I know what they mean when they say love makes you reckless. This was stupid on so many levels. "I wanted another date with you."

She's silent. So silent I can hear the Jazz music Mr. Waters plays every night.

The lights from Karli's car pierce through the darkness, right before she peels off down the street.

Juliet's eyes narrow, and for a split second, I fear she's going to attack me again. I retreat a step.

"Well, it looks like you got a date," she says, folding her arms tight against her, "but I'll have to think about offering another."

"Does my pain sway you in any way?" I give her the best puppy dog eyes I can manage.

"Absolutely not." She shakes her head, her long brown curls swaying around her face. "You deserved that."

“You’re right. I did. Please don’t tell my brothers,” I add as an afterthought.

She frowns. “Your brothers?”

I give her a half smile. “It’s our work party tonight. I need a date.”

She raises a single brow and folds her arms tightly. “I can offer my presence, but I hope you can find your own common sense.”

I glance at my feet. “It’s probably still shattered on the ground with my pride.”

Her lips twitch. “Well, come on. Let’s get this over with.”

I nudge her with my shoulder. “There’s that go-getter attitude I’m so fond of.”

Chapter 19

Juliet

I could have killed Michael. In fact, I still might. I'm not sure whether to be prouder of my quick reaction or furious at him for scaring me half to death. Yet, I'm still walking away from the gazebo with him. It's not like I want to get attacked for real.

"Stop right there!" a loud, gruff voice thunders, and a spotlight blinds us.

It's so bright I lose my balance, and my ankle twists on the edge of the sidewalk. I tumble into the grass.

But I'm not the only one facedown.

I am, however, the only one without a knee between my shoulder blades.

"Michael." I stagger to my feet and look at the officer on top of him.

"Is this the man who tried to attack you?" the officer asks.

"Yes."

Michael's eyes bulge.

"I mean no." I shake my head. Gah, what's happening? If he's taken to jail, his whole family will have to leave the party to bail him out, and then they will all hate me. "It was a misunderstanding."

The officer readies the cuffs around Michael's wrists. "Misunderstanding or not, I'll have to take him in. We tried to call you back, but you didn't answer."

Michael tries to protest, but all he gets is a mouthful of grass.

"No." I pause, tugging at the end of my hair so hard I fear I'm going to pull it out. What can I say to make this stop? Married couples can't be asked to testify against one another in court, so they wouldn't question us here either, right?

It's worth a shot. "He's my husband."

"Husband?"

I'm not sure who asked—Michael or the officer.

"Yes," I huff. "He told me to meet him here, but he forgot I've been listening to true crime shows on repeat. And then he jumped out and surprised me." I roll my eyes like I often saw my mother do when talking about my dad.

The officer slowly backs off Michael and stands.

I help my "husband" up like the doting wife I'm pretending to be. "I'm so sorry for wasting your time, officer. But I'm grateful for your dedication to the job. Had this been an emergency, you would have made all the difference."

The officer scratches his head like he can't tell if I'm lying or not.

I wouldn't believe me either.

"Yes, thank you, sir." Michael slips an arm around my waist, and I try not to appear affected by what should be a very normal touch from my husband. "It's good to know

we have such fine police officers protecting our city. But no need to worry about this one. She can definitely take care of herself.” He squeezes my side.

Electricity sizzles at his touch, and I find myself leaning into him.

The officer ducks his head and finally shuts off the light. “Well, let me walk you folks home, then.”

Home? I don’t even know where we are. There are beautiful houses all around us, but not any I could claim. “Oh, that’s not necessary,” I start, but Michael cuts me off.

“We’d appreciate the gesture, sir.” Michael lets go of my waist to hold my hand and tugs me down the sidewalk. The two of them engage in small talk, but I can’t join in. Why isn’t Michael worried about the home we don’t have?

After we pass two houses, I finally realize where we are. In Michael’s neighborhood. I don’t know why I didn’t recognize it before. If I had, maybe I wouldn’t have almost killed his manhood when he jumped out at me.

The officer nods to us at the base of the stairs.

Michael waves goodbye, then lets out a heavy sigh like he’s already exhausted.

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The poor guy has been through a lot.

“Hopefully, the rest of the night is uneventful.” He turns and leads me up the stairs.

I follow close behind him. Who knows what might jump out at us next? “It’s just a work party, right? How bad can it be?”

He swings open the door to the house, and the image that meets us is on par for how the night is going.

There’s a half-dozen shirtless, hairy chests, and a giant fake palm tree decorated with Christmas lights. But the strangest part is the tiny pig in the Santa suit running straight at us.

I don’t know why I assume it will stop, but it doesn’t. Not until it rams into Michael’s shin.

Michael folds in half and lets out a mild string of expletives.

I grip Michael’s arm, hiding behind him as we enter the house. If there’s another pig around here, I want to be prepared. “What’s happening?” I can barely find my voice over the ukulele music.

This is not the same house I was in on Sunday. The original decor is still up, but it’s been added to. It’s now a very confusing mix of Hawaii and the North Pole.

“Is this... a luau?” I ask.

Michael scratches his head. “I sure hope so. If not, the pig is completely confusing.”

Out of the windows leading to the backyard, I catch sight of a bonfire.

That looks safe.

“My dad goes a bit overboard for the holiday party,” Michael says, avoiding my eyes.

“A bit?” There are people drunkenly hula dancing around the fire, and the guy handing out drinks looks like Santa on a beach vacation. But that’s not all. There are plastic flamingos everywhere. I’ve knocked over two already.

People keep coming up to us, and Michael introduces them as his coworkers and their spouses. But my brain is spinning and unable to retain any of this new information.

I was supposed to be at a movie, gawking at Ryan Reynolds and elbow-deep in a bucket of popcorn right now. But then Karli just happened to drive by the most adorable little gazebo and insisted on a selfie. I will so get her back for this.

A man bumps into me, and a sheen of sweat transfers from his back to my arm.

I love how giving people are around the holidays.

I’ve never been to a holiday work party, but I was expecting a little more... sophistication? And a lot less... skin.

Michael finishes his conversation with sweat-man, then tucks me under his arm and pulls us into a pigless and skin-free corner. “Sorry. My mom used to let my dad run the holidays, but then she realized what he was capable of, and now he only gets this

one night a year to do his thing.”

Speaking of the man. Mark Bentley walks up to us in a Hawaiian shirt and board shorts. At least he’s properly covered.

“Hey, Juliet.” He sticks out a hand, and I shake it. “So good to see you again.”

“Hi. Sorry, I didn’t get the memo.” I motion to my jeans and sweater.

He waves away my comment. “Welcome to the luau.” He surfs his hands through the air like they are riding a wave. “Everything is laid backtonight.”

Clearly. I really hope that woman by the tree is wearing something beneath her hula skirt.

“Dinner will begin shortly. We’ve got the grill going outside, and Kabobs is running around here somewhere,” Mark says.

My forehead scrunches.

“Kabobs is the pig,” he explains.

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Laughter erupts from my chest, and I can't do anything to stop it. Michael got attacked three times tonight, and once by a little piglet named Kabobs.

Mark looks at me like I've lost my mind.

"Yes, we've been acquainted with...Kabobs," Michael says.

I snort. Then quickly cover my mouth, but it's just too much.

"Well, be nice to him. The poor thing has some brain damage. That's why my buddy Jeff let me borrow him," Mark says, then walks away.

That explains a lot.

Once Mark is gone, Michael turns on me. "For the record, I don't appreciate being mocked," he says sternly, but his frown is barely that.

"I'm so sorry." I wipe at the tears running down my cheeks. "But on our first date, you were attacked by a nonexistent cat and now a tiny pig."

"Hey. It might have been tiny, but that thing did some damage."

"So did the invisible cat." I wheeze.

He folds his arms and plants his legs wide. "I don't know why I expected sympathy from you."

“I’m not sure either.” I giggle, and even though he doesn’t “appreciate” my humor, he doesn’t seem to have an issue with me. He hooks a thumb through my belt loop and pulls me closer. The smart part of my brain is telling me to pullback while I still can, but I don’t care what it has to say right now. If love isn’t real, how come my heart race every time he holds me close?

I place a hand on his chest, pinching the fabric of his shirt between my fingers.

There’s a fire in his eyes, burning hotter than the one in the backyard.

“I think tonight’s trainwreck has earned me more dates to learn more about you.” His voice is low and dangerously sexy, and my heart reacts by jumping off a cliff. It’s soaring, free-falling into the rocky bottom without an ounce of concern.

“If you haven’t figured out how we know each other by now, I’m not sure more dates are going to help.” I smirk and lift a brow. “Unless it was a line?” If it was, it was extremely effective.

His fingers skim up my arm, then down. “I’d never use a li—”

“Was I seeing things, or did you guys get escorted here by the police?”

I jump from Michael and ram my elbow into the corner of the wall. What’s with the Bentleys and sneaking up on people?

Michael reaches for my hand, and I let him take it, intertwining my fingers with his. “Only the best for my girl,” he says sarcastically as he rubs slow circles on the back of my hand.

Sean’s eyes glint, and he folds his arms across his bare torso. “And to think, I only brought my date flowers.”

“Where is your date?” I ask, suddenly curious to see the kind of girl Sean prefers. My guess is beautiful, blonde, perky, and obnoxious.

“Over there.” He points to the center of the room where, indeed, a beautiful blonde in a hula skirt and cute Hawaiian shirt is talking with another woman. And is she moving her hips?

She’s like one of those moms who forget they aren’t holding a baby and naturally sways. But her sway looks more like dancing than lulling a baby to sleep.

“She seems typical—I mean nice,” I say, but Sean’s eyebrows shoot up. He didn’t miss my little slip.

Mark announces dinner is ready, and we follow the crowd onto the back patio to dish up, then find a place at the long banquet table set up from the dining room to the sitting room.

The food is incredible. Kalua pork, sticky rice, and pineapple. Even the kabobs are heavenly. Maybe I’m supposed to be an island girl.

After everyone has settled down with food, Mark speaks from the head of the table. But I can barely hear him over Sean’s date, whose name is Chanel, imagine that? We made the horrible mistake of sitting by them, and there hasn’t been a moment of silence since.

“And that’s when I knew I was a psychic,” Chanel says and grabs my arm across the table.

I blink. Was she talking to me?

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“Do you want me to read your future?”

I’d like to listen to Mark, the person everyone else is trying to hear over her. Or at least pretend.

I muster the most serious expression I can and choose the quickest way to end this conversation. “I don’t believe in the future.”

Michael snickers, and I pinch his leg beneath the table.

“What do you mean?” Chanel looks at me in horror, and I feel like I just told a child Santa Claus isn’t real.

“I believe in numbers,” I offer half-heartedly.

“Can I have everyone’s attention?” Mark claps his hands, his eyes directed to our corner of the room. I clamp my lips shut and give him my full attention, but Chanel isn’t finished with me.

“But if you don’t believe in the future, then you’re not going to have one.”

How insightful.

Sean places an arm around Chanel and whispers something in her ear. But she shoves him off and continues to stare daggers into my soul, or maybe my future. Whatever she’s doing with her crazy eyes, she needs to stop. I’ve got a no-trespassing sign around my soul and that applies to everyone.

“Tonight, we’d like to give a special thanks to Ron and his forty impressive years with the company.” Mark raises his voice.

Chanel scowls and lifts her red solo cup to her lips.

The crowd claps, and Mark motions behind us to where I’m assuming Ron sits. “Come on up here.”

“Me?” Chanel drops her cup and water sloshes across the table, completely drenching my food.

Will my food ever be safe in this house?

Chanel jumps to her feet. “I’d love to.”

Mark, and everyone else for that matter, fall deathly quiet, but Chanel can only hear the sounds in her head apparently, and they must be something else because when she reaches the front of the room, she takes off her shirt.

There’s a collective gasp, and I reach for Michael’s hand beneath the table. I grip my fork with my other hand, but the second-hand embarrassment is killing me.

Beneath her floral shirt, she’s wearing a coconut bra and what looks like necklaces around her stomach.

I have a bad feeling about this.

“This is a little something I choreographed this week,” Chanel says, and then she dances. I believe they call it belly dancing, but with the way she’s shaking her butt, it’s really hard to tell.

I grip Michael's hand harder. "Is someone going to stop her?"

He grimaces. "I hope so."

"Sean! Join me," Chanel calls, running back for him.

Sean doesn't move until Trent gives him a less-than-brotherly shove to the back, sending him out of his seat. Sean returns the service with a glare.

But it's too late. Chanel has him in her grasp.

"Like this," Chanel tells Sean. When he doesn't move, she grabs his hips and moves them for him.

Michael releases my hand and gives me a mischievous grin. "I think this night is finally looking up." He pulls out his phone and aims it at his brother.

I doubt Sean gets embarrassed easily, but the poor guy hasn't stopped blushing since Chanel trapped him. I can feel his discomfort from across the room. I almost feel bad for him.

That doesn't mean I'm going to stop Michael, though. It's a free country, after all.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:33 am

“Do you think he’ll consider switching careers?” I whisper to Michael.

He laughs and covers his mouth when Sean shoots a deadly glare in our direction.

“He’d have a promising future.” Michael smirks.

This night has been pure insanity, but I’d be lying if I said I haven’t enjoyed every minute of it.

Finally, Mark stops the routine with an awkward laugh and even more cringe-worthy “thanks for that”. There are a few pity claps from around the room, but it might as well have been a standing ovation to Chanel the way she smiles and skips to her seat.

Then Mark calls up Ron—again—and he is recognized by his coworkers for his dedication to the job. Michael stands and claps, and the rest of the room follows suit. I clap as well, but the admiration in my eyes is solely for Michael. He’s a good man. That much has been clear since I started messaging him three weeks ago. He truly cares about others, and the people around him admire him just as much.

We return to the meal, and I help myself to a less soggy plate of seconds while Sean, Trent, and Grant take it upon themselves to tell me every embarrassing story from Michael’s past.

I’m about to add in my own story when there’s a tickle on my thigh. Michael’s fingers slide off my leg and lace through mine. “Come with me?” he asks, his voice barely above a whisper.

I glance at his brothers, but no one is focused on us. I nod and stand up.

He leads me through the rest of the house and up the stairs. It's dark and quiet until he opens a door to a room and flicks on a light. At first, all I notice is the bed.

My throat clogs. Whatever he thinks is going to happen is not going to happen because I—

“I made this,” Michael says, walking around the room and tapping each beautiful cherry wood item.

There's an elaborate bed frame with matching nightstands, dressers, and an armoire. The wall closest to me is covered in shelves, each shelf containing figurines and mementos from little Michael's life.

I pace the room, fully taking in his handiwork, and he tells me about each piece. The time he cut his hand really bad, and his arm, actually, I think every piece hurt him in some way. But each one has a story. He's talented, but he's also so much more than that. He's passionate and driven. I'm impressed by him. “This must have taken forever.”

“I started my junior year of high school and finished just before I graduated.”

That's a long time to stick with something. I don't think my goldfish even lasted that long. He's chosen the right pathway in life.

“I love it,” he says.

I walk to the shelves and run my fingers along the smooth wood. “You're good at what you do. They are beautiful.”

His hand covers mine. “Trust me, nothing compares to you.”

Electricity glides along my skin, singeing everything in its wake and creating a magnetic charge that pulls me to him. I can’t fight it. I don’t want to fight it. I need to be closer to him. His other hand captures my hip, and he pulls me snug against him, until the space between us is nonexistent. All except for the inches between our lips.

I tip my chin, and his eyes search mine. Whatever he’s looking for, it’s his.

His lips brush mine, softer than a summer breeze. His lips are warm and smooth, sending the perfect amount of fire and fear through me. This could end in disaster. But... what if it doesn’t? I open my lips to him, and he eagerly takes them captive, toying and teasing as the world spins.

He pushes me against the shelves and deepens the kiss.

Have I mentioned how much I adore his work?

I pull on his neck, and he makes a deep rumbling sound.

I kiss him like I’ve never kissed anyone before. Like I’m an unsolvable equation, and he’s the answer.

Maybe it’s just passion, or maybe it’s something far more frightening.

Maybe it’s love.

Chapter 20

Michael

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Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:33 am

Juliet's lips are poison, and I'm a goner. I know it's going to kill me, but I can't get enough of her touch, of her taste.

I'm lost in her kiss, lost in the feel of her hands tugging at my hair. If we stay like this forever, she can't leave me. Won't make up an excuse to end us before we can really begin.

“What are the lights doing—oh!”

I jump back from Juliet and face the doorway that my mother just walked through.

“Don't mind me.” Mom's face turns bright red, and she bolts out of the room.

I'm tempted to pick up where we left off, but Juliet has placed herself on the opposite side of the room.

How did she move so fast?

I rub my chin and walk slowly toward her. Are we going to talk about that amazing kiss? And more importantly, are we going to do it again?

I study her face, waiting for her to look up at me and say something, anything really. I'm a pretty confident guy, but she's brushing me off like it was nothing more than a quick peck she'd give her grandma.

“So, you built all of this but didn't take it with you when you moved out?”

I watch her lips purse, trying to fight the urge to capture them again. I shake my head.

“Yeah,” I rub my arm. “I didn’t want to damage the wood by moving it.” I look around the familiar room. This stuff belongs here in the past, to hold my memories. Or until my mom decides to turn this into a gym.

It’s also insanely heavy. I broke my foot getting the frame up here with my dad.

Juliet absently opens a drawer in the dresser, then shuts it. “Seems like a shame to leave it here without enjoying it.”

I’m enjoying watching her. I really enjoyed pressing her up against the built-ins to kiss her, so I’d say it’s served its purpose.

“Maybe I’ll move it someday.” When I have a place to move it to, or someone to enjoy it with.

I wait for her to speak, but she continues her intense study of the wood grains.

I swallow. There’s been a deadline hanging over my head like a guillotine since our first date, but now I feel it dropping. Inch by inch, getting closer to my skin. The wait is more painful than not knowing if she’s going to drop the blade or not.

That kiss we shared turned my whole world on its head. Can she really, after all this, still walk away?

How do I get her to believe in love? In us?

“Is your arm okay?” Juliet asks.

My arm? I glance down. Crap. It’s so red it’s almost bleeding. I shove my hands in

my pockets. It's fine. Everything is fine.

"Just a nervous habit," I say.

"I have one of those." She smiles.

I've noticed. "I love the way you play with your hair."

She freezes at the word love.

"So that view, huh?" She moves to the window and looks out at what I know to be a very dismal view of the top of the garage. If she likes that, she should wait until someone leaves the house.

Juliet places a hand on the windowsill. She must be seeing something I never did. She's the picture of romance and love.

Everything she's afraid of.

I can hear Sean's voice in my head, ready to laugh at me for losing, or winning, some stupid bet. But this stopped being about the bet a long time ago. Maybe it never was. Maybe I was just using it as my excuse to go after something I've always wanted but never knew how to do until now.

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I pull my phone out of my pocket and click on my music app. I scroll to Justin Bieber and find Anyone, the song I now consider ours. The soft notes break through the silence, and Juliet looks at me.

“May I have this dance?” I set my phone on the dresser and reach out to her.

She bites her bottom lip, the one I now know tastes infinitely better than strawberries.

“I don’t know, Michael.” Her voice is hesitant.

“Are you afraid you’ll fall in love with me?” I mean it as a joke, but I throw it into the air like a boomerang, hoping it will come back to me.

Her face breaks into a grin, and she shakes her head. But she doesn’t say anything, yet.

That’s okay, she doesn’t have to.

“It’s just one dance.” Our first, maybe our last.

“Okay.” She slips her hand into mine, and it has no less of an effect on me as it did the first time I held it.

I pull her into me, much like I did to kiss her, but this time I put just enough space between us to keep her heart safe. It’s too late for mine.

Time to shoot my last shot. If she blocks me, I’ll drop the ball, leave it in her court,

and concede like a gentleman.

“So, did I earn another date?” I ask. Please say yes.

Juliet pulls a hand away to tug on her hair, but I don’t loosen my hold on her. I can see the war she’s fighting inside, the one she’s probably been fighting for years. If she will let me help, maybe she can finally win.

She looks up at me. “I guess another date or two won’t hurt.”

Swish. Nothing but net.

I grin and spin her once, then twice.

“Stop.” She giggles. “I’m getting dizzy.” I pull her to me, right where she belongs.

Juliet plants a hand on my chest.

“Maybe I met you in heaven.” I tease.

She rolls her eyes. “You and fate.”

She is my fate.

I tilt her chin up, angling those perfect lips toward mine. But I bypass them to place a kiss on her cheek. I skim across her lips to kiss her other cheek, and she groans, pinching my chest. I smile and then kiss her, for real this time. If I can only guarantee one date at a time, I’ll make each one count until I no longer have to ask.

Oink.

Did Juliet just snort?

I don't care. She tastes too sweet. Her lips are—

A very familiar pain shoots through my shin, and I stagger back.

I stare at Juliet. “Did you just kick me?”

Her eyes go wide, and she looks down. “I think your buddy missed you.”

Huh?

Oink.

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Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:33 am

I glance at the floor in time to see Kabobs revving up for round three. What is wrong with that stupid thing? And how did it get upstairs?

I jump on the bed, and the pig chases after me, jumping and squealing like some kind of guard dog.

Why won't the little demon leave?

Juliet laughs so hard she has to lean on the dresser for support.

"Wanna help me out here?" I ask, eyeing the little menace running around the edge of the bed.

"It's just a little piggy," she says through her gasps.

No. He's a bloodhound. And he's got my scent.

She stops laughing long enough to walk over to the thing.

"Careful it's danger—"

I warn, but she picks it up, anyway. The little pig curls up in her arms and rubs her with his snout.

"He's harmless." Juliet chuckles as the pig bathes her in kisses.

Now I get it. He's jealous and wants me out of the picture so he can have Juliet to

himself. I don't think so, bub.

I hop off the bed and the pig instantly squeals.

"Let's get you back to the party," Juliet coos, petting its head.

Do pigs even like to be stroked like that? The pig's head lolls to the side, and I swear it purrs. Something is seriously wrong with that thing.

"Maybe we should roast him instead," I mutter.

"Michael!" She scolds me and hip-checks me out of the way to head downstairs. "Don't worry, Kabobs. I won't let him anywhere near you."

Well, there goes the rest of my night.

Chapter 21

Juliet

Apparently, while Michael and I were upstairs...babysitting a pig, Chanel provided the crowd with an additional showing and made Sean lift her above his head. Then he "accidentally" dropped her. She went home cussing his existence, but Sean doesn't seem too stirred. Then the palm tree fell and scared Trent so badly he toppled over the table.

Unfortunately, only one of those things was recorded.

This family is nuts. And I love it.

Look at me using the L word.

I'm changing. I thought I could push Michael away at the end of five dates, but tonight I stayed. For the first time in my life, fear isn't controlling me. I want this. And the realization is exciting.

We stay until the party is over, then help put things away. Kabobs has been running around my feet all night, and as much as I adore the cute little pig, it would be nice if Michael dared get near me again.

I scoop up Kabobs and find Mark. "Where do you want this little guy?"

Mark pats the pig's head, then takes off the Santa costume. "There's a crate in the garage, if you wouldn't mind putting him in there. His owner's picking him up soon."

"Okay." I head down the hall. I'm pretty sure the garage is this way. This is where everyone has been taking the tables and chairs.

The door is already propped open, and I walk inside. It's much colder in here and Kabobs burrows deeper into me. Hopefully his owner is coming soon.

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“Do you think Michael’s in love with Juliet yet?”

I stop. I can’t see whospoke. They must be farther in the garage, but it sounded like Trent.

“He better be if he wants to win the bet.” This time I’m sure it’s Sean.

My blood turns to molten lava. I was a bet? Heat crawls up my neck, threatening to choke me.

Sean and Trent come around the corner and freeze, their eyes bulging out of their heads like a cartoon character getting run over.

Then why do I feel like I wasjust hit by a train?

“Juliet,” Trent starts, but I’m not about to let them get another word in before I do.

“What bet?” I ask. My hands shake around Kabobs, and I hold him tighter.

Neither of them responds.

“What. Bet?” I yell this time. Someone needs to tell me something now before I come unglued.

Trent sticks his hands in his pockets. “Sean made a bet with Michael that if he fell in love in thirty days, he could have the foreman job.”

The air whooshes from my lungs, and there's nothing left to fill them up.

He used me to get a promotion, so he could take over his precious business. Of course. This was all for some job.

"But that's not—" Sean starts.

"No. Just no." I spin and collide with Michael.

"Whoa." He steadies me. "Was someone excited to see me?" The grin on his face is too much. I don't care what comes out of his mouth. Nothing can take away that hurtful realization: I was a pawn in someone's game. Again.

"Yeah. Him." I place the pig on the ground, and he hurls his body at Michael.

Good piggy.

Michael nurses his bruised shin, I sprint out of the house, already searching for an Uber on my phone.

I was an idiot to believe love might actually exist. How can it when people throw it out like candy at a parade, not caring where or on who it may land?

For once, I was hoping it might mean something. That I meant something.

Chapter 22

Michael

I look up from my bruised legs.

Juliet is gone, and my brothers are wearing matching expressions of shock and guilt.

“What just happened?”

Trent and Sean shoot each other warning glances, but neither speaks. Which means it's bad. The worst thing they could tell Juliet is...

“You told her about the bet?”

Trent ducks his head.

“She kind of heard us talking about it,” Sean admits, scratching his jaw.

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I flex my fingers. I'm going to strangle him. I lunge forward, but he dodges behind the trash can. "You can kill me later, but you might want to catch her while you still can."

He's right. "I'll be back for you." I warn and sprint into the house. I don't know where Juliet went. She's not downstairs. I doubt she would go upstairs. I throw the front door open and run outside.

A pop of color catches my eye from about halfway down the block.

"Juliet!" I call, and race after her.

She speeds up.

"Juliet!" I try again to get her to stop.

She whirls, and her hand shoots out in front of her, welding the familiar can of pepper spray. "Don't come any closer."

The anger in her eyes is convincing enough to get me to slow.

I keep my arms plastered to my sides, even though they long to reach for her. "Juliet, please let me explain."

Her hand trembles. "Don't even think about blaming an invisible cat."

Despite her anger, my lips twitch. But it only serves to tick her off.

She takes a step closer to me, pepper spray at the ready, and I stand strong. If she sprays me, I'll take it like a man. I deserve it. "What would you like to explain? How you tricked me to get ahead in your job? How you used me just like my parents?"

"No." I scratch my arm. I need her to know I'm nothing like her parents. But my actions as of late are far from convincing. "I wasn't trying to take advantage of you, I swear."

The anger falls from her face, and she staggers, looking almost haunted. "That was you."

"Juliet, I never meant to hurt you." I reach for her.

She shakes her head. "But you did. Just like you did the night we met in the bar."

I drop my hands to my side. She figured it out.

"I know." I sigh.

The streetlight above us flickers, casting a shadow across her face. "You knew this whole time?" She doesn't give me time to answer. "Just another way you tricked me."

"I didn't trick you. I swear. I only wanted to get to know you better, but I was afraid you wouldn't give me a chance."

"You want fate? I'll give you fate." She stomps toward me, not stopping until the toe of her shoes hit mine. She tilts her chin up, her eyes flashing with anger. "That night we met, was the first time I gave up on love. Now I'm giving up again."

"Juliet, please. I couldn't care less about the bet."

Her eyes narrow to slits. “Really? You’d give up the business then?”

My lips part, but I can’t find the right words. The business is all I’ve wanted forever. It’s been my plan. The only goal I’ve cared about for so long.

“That’s what I thought.” The pain in her eyes is too much to bear.

All of my years studying romance movies, and I still make such a stupid mistake.

A car turns onto the street, and the headlights wake me up from this nightmare.

“Please,” I plead with her. “I just want you.” And not just for some dumb bet.

She keeps her back to me until the car stops beside her, and she opens the door. “I didn’t need you that night, and I don’t need you now. I gave you five dates. Don’t ask for more.”

Her words slice through me, hollowing me out inside.

She disappears inside the car, and then she's gone.

Chapter 23

Michael

My eyes are bloodshot from all the non-sleeping I did last night, but I don't have the choice to call in sick. I want to be the boss. And the boss goes to work every day, even on their deathbed. And right now, I feel like I am. Work is all I've got left.

I tried to call Juliet four times last night. When that got me nowhere, I sent her approximately sixteen texts, asking her to let me explain. To give me a chance. But she made it clear when she left that she had already given me more than she wanted to.

I open the shop door and stumble into the break room. I'm already late, so what's a few more minutes? I pour myself some coffee. Maybe I should inject it straight into my veins. It would at least give me something else to focus on.

"Hey."

I jump at Trent's voice. Hot coffee sloshes up my arm and I curse.

"You okay?" he asks tentatively.

"What do you think?" I mutter, reaching for a paper towel. "Things are over."

“With Juliet?” He doesn’t seem surprised.

“The one and only.” I hang my head. At least it’s only Trent seeing me like this and not—

“There you are.”

Sean.

I hold my coffee up. “Here I am. Would you like to take another shot at me while I’m down, or have you had enough fun?”

He frowns. “Why would I do that?”

Why wouldn’t he do that? That’s what Sean does. Takes away things people love and dangle them over their heads, just out of reach.

I push away from the counter and head for the shop door, but Sean shoves me back. “What happened?”

I knock his hand off my chest and glare at him. “What do you think happened?” I push around him.

“Sure,” he steps to the side, letting me pass. “Just go back to work and pretend nothing else in the world exists. It’s been working out great for you so far.”

I whirl on him. “What do you want, Sean? To see me miserable? Well, Merry freaking Christmas.”

He shakes his head. “That’s not what I wanted.”

My eyes narrow. “Isn’t it? It was all a game so you could get the job, right? Well, there’s one thing you lost. I did fall in love.” I swallow. “And it hurts like hell.”

I turn away.

“Good.”

I freeze, anger pulsing through my body. That’s it. I flip around and take him to the ground. There’s enough pain inside of me to share.

Sean tries to push me off, but I’m not going anywhere. All of this is his fault.

“Hey,” Trent hollers and grabs my arms, trying to haul me off of Sean.

It’s not Trent, but Grant, who pulls me away. No wonder. He’s got all of us beat when it comes to size.

“What are you guys thinking?” Grant’s voice is barely louder than its normal calm. “The men here respect you, but none of them will treat you like foremen if you act like little boys.”

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He's got a point. He usually does.

I roll out my shoulder. Why don't I kiss everything I love goodbye now?

"I deserved it." Sean backs up to the counter and leans against it. He's taking responsibility for something? Sean? "Look, dude," Sean addresses me. "It wasn't for my entertainment or just a bet. I actually care about you sometimes."

He might as well be speaking Chinese. "I'm not following."

"Did you want to find love?" he asks, instead of explaining.

All three of them look at me, and I squirm. We aren't in some heartfelt rom-com. "Why are we talking about this?"

Sean scratches his chin.

"Everyone knows you love your job, but you've been missing out, man. You say you're going to settle down someday, but if all you do is work, someday will never come."

But I like working. I fold my arms and plant my feet. "What's wrong with being passionate about work?"

"There's nothing wrong with that," Trent chimes. "As long as you have other things to enjoy in life, too."

“I care about lots of things.” Like my family, and studying different woodworking techniques, and...well, I’ve never been good at coming up with things on the spot.

“Sean’s right,” Grant says. “Stupid, but right. It’s nice to see you fired up about something—someone—besides work.”

That’s one way to describe what I’m feeling. Fired up. Burned to ashes. Same thing.

“Well, great, I’m glad everyone’s happy but me.” I throw my hands in the air. I can’t believe them.

Sean pushes off the counter. “I never wanted the job.”

I knew it. I’m one second from taking him to the ground again.

“But you’ll be a better boss if you care about more than just the job,” he continues.

I scowl, but I understand what he’s saying. My dad is a good boss because he puts his employees before the job. He treats each one of us with respect, even if we make a mistake. It’s possible I’ve been more friendly lately, instead of trying to get all my work done. Alone. “And the only way to do that was to make me fall in love?”

Sean holds his palms out in front of him. “I didn’t make you do anything you didn’t want to do.”

He’s right. Again, stupid, but right. I fell for Juliet all by myself. I would have fallen for her without Sean’s meddling. He just sped up the process.

“Then I guess I’m the idiot.” I sigh. “Because love sucks.”

I turn and finally make it into the shop.

Late. For the first time in my life.

Chapter 24

Juliet

I thought it wouldn't hurt to walk away from Michael. I'd prepared for it, but a piece of my heart ripped when I left him. If I wanted to, I could trace my pain back to him blindfolded.

Karli steps into my room with a plate full of cookies. "Are you finally ready to talk about it?"

I haul my face an inch off the pillow I've been attached to for nearly the last forty-eight hours.

"If I give you the two-minute version, will you give me the cookies and leave me alone for the rest of the year?"

She gives me a sad smile. "Promise."

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I roll to my side and create enough room for her to sit. When she does, I reach for a cookie, but she pulls the plate back. “Spill first.”

“Fine.” I grumble and tell her about how wonderful the night of the work party had been. The pig, the belly dancer, the kiss. Ending with the grand finale. The bet.

“I’m so sorry, Jules,” she says and finally slides the plate over to me.

I’m so hungry I devour two in five seconds.

“Me too.” Not even warm chocolate chip cookies seem to be able to take the edge off my pain.

“But...” she starts, and I turn an angry glare on her. “Hear me out.” She flings her hands up in front of her. “Maybe there was more to it. It sounds like you didn’t give him a chance to tell you his side.”

“Well no, I didn’t feel like letting him drive a semi over my heart repeatedly.”

“But what if he apologizes—”

“No.” I stop her right there. “It was all a scam. At least now I won’t be stupid enough to fall for it again.”

“Wow.” She leans against the wall, her dark brown eyes fixated on me like I’m an exhibit in a museum.

“Wow, what?”

“I thought you were scared to fall in love because of your parents’ divorce. I didn’t realize you were turning into your parents.”

Karli’s comment sends a sucker punch right into my stomach. I’m not my parents. I’m not bitter and selfish. I was the victim here. Like I always am.

That’s why I put an end to this before things got more complicated, so I didn’t make the same mistakes they did.

“I’m not condoning what Michael did, but you need to hear his side,” Karli says, more gently this time.

“I think it was pretty obvious what he did. He used me.”

“Are you sure about that? You have always hated the way your parents communicated. You said if they would have stopped fighting for a minute and listened, half their problems could have been solved.”

I rub the sore spot in the middle of my forehead. I did say that. Again and again, I’d wished they’d stop arguing their point and listen to the other person for a change.

I didn’t give Michael two minutes to explain.

“I have to come clean,” Karli says, playing with the frayed edges of her ripped jeans.

“Huh?” I shake my head, clearing my thoughts.

“I lied about my psych project.”

I eye her while I reach for another cookie. I stick the entire thing in my mouth; I have a feeling I'm going to need it. "Elaborate." I demand, feeling nothing when cookie crumbs spill out of my mouth.

She scoots a few inches away. "I did have a huge assignment, and I was behind on it, but..."

"But...?"

She looks down. "You weren't the project."

I shake my head, my brain slowly processing what she's telling me. "There was no project?"

She bites her fingernail. Her guilty look if there ever was one. "Well, I wouldn't say that necessarily. Your happiness was more of a...personal project."

I don't know what to say. Should I be a normal amount of mad or livid?

I drop the plate on my pillow and stand. "My happiness belongs to me, Karli!"

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Livid. I'm livid. I stomp to the door, then change my mind and slam one of my dresser drawers.

Karli jumps off the bed and holds up two hands to ward me off. I'm not going to attack her like a wild animal. But I'm also notnotgoing to attack her like a wild animal.

"I know. I know. But you weren't letting yourself be. And if I'm not mistaken, you've been happier since meeting Michael than I've seen you in years. Maybe ever."

I can't believe her.

"Did you ever stop to think that maybe I don't need a man to be happy?" There's a number two pencil digging into my chest. Karli has been the only constant in my life. She was there every time I wanted to escape my parents' fights. I know she only wants the best for me but, this...

Thishurts.

I collapse onto the bed.

"Of course, I know that." She sits on the bed, closer this time, and I accept her hug, even though I'm angry with her. I still need her. I still need someone on my side. Even if she's trying get me to converse with the enemy. "I didn't know how else to tell you I was concerned about your happiness."

I sniff and dab at my eyes. "How about, 'hey Juliet, I'm concerned for your

happiness’?”

She gives me a knowing look. “Would that have worked?”

Probably not. It’s so annoying when everyone’s right but me.

“I’m sorry I used you, but I won’t apologize for the sunshine in your eyes when Michael’s around. Aren’t you glad you met him?”

That’s the question, isn’t it? If I hadn’t met him, my heart wouldn’t be at war with itself. One half trying to feel while the other remains colder than Christmas. Not an Arizona Christmas, more like a Canadian one.

I let him close to me, and it hurt. I’m not sure if I can do it again. But for a moment, I was happy.

More than happy. I was falling for him.

“Hey, Juliet,” one of our other roommates hollers. “There’s some guy here to see you.”

My heart rate kicks up a notch. Could it be?

I stand up, straightening my shirt and combing down my hair with my fingers.

I walk out of the room, but it’s not Michael. It’s Sean, sitting on our living room couch, flipping through the television channels like he owns the place.

How very him.

“Sean?”

He gives me a smile I'm sure has girls clear in Indiana swooning. "Hey, Juliet."

I fold my arms across my chest. "Did you come to get your butt kicked at pool again?"

His eyes narrow ever so subtly.

He really is a poor loser.

"Let's not waste time discussing things of the past. Unless we are talking about your relationship with my brother."

I swallow and rock back on my feet. "We were never in a real relationship."

That much is true.

He tilts his head to the side. "Does Michael believe that?"

A knife slices through my stomach. I think it's painfully obvious now if it wasn't clear before.

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I clear my throat. “It’s nice you came to fight your brother’s battle, but it’s over. I don’t enjoy being used.”

“Which was my fault,” he says, his lips pressing into a straight line.

I’m tempted to show him the door, but maybe my talk with Karli did some good. I can humor Sean for the next five minutes. Then I’ve got to return to my bed. It already misses me.

I sit on the opposite loveseat and tuck my feet beneath me. “Go on.”

Sean tosses the remote to the couch and leans toward me. “I made the bet with Michael a couple of weeks ago when I caught him swiping right, if you know what I mean.”

“I literally don’t.”

He presses his fist to his forehead like this whole conversation pains him. “On the dating app. Anyway, you’ve gotten to know Michael. You know how passionate he is with work.”

Is passionate the word we are sticking with? “Yeah, obsessed enough to use me in order to win.” The words dry out my throat.

“No. That’s not Michael.”

“Really? So why did you make the bet then?”

He lifts a shoulder. “He’s my big brother, and I love him.”

Every word out of his mouth pleads the opposite.

Sean scrubs a hand down his face. “I’ll admit, the bet was a jerk thing to do, but I was testing him.”

Testing him? Maybe it’s a good thing I didn’t have siblings if this is the kind of crap they pull in the name of love.

Sean continues. “He’s too caught up in work, and he’s dedicated his whole life to it. I didn’t want him to miss out on what’s actually important. Since meeting you, he’s spent more time away from the shop. He delegates work to others instead of doing everything himself, and he’s been late.” He pauses at this. “He’s never late to work. The bet was only to get him to realize what he was missing. And apparently, it was you.”

Me? I helped him? No. It doesn’t matter. I refuse to care.

“Well, that’s nice and all, but he still used me.” But even as I say the words, I stop believing them.

Sean props his foot up on his opposite knee. “He fell in love with you. And I had nothing to do with that.”

I suck in a sharp breath. Love. The very thing I’ve been running from. It can’t be real. How would Sean know how Michael feels? “No, he didn’t. It was a lie to win the bet.”

I get to my feet. I need this conversation to end before I start believing in hopeless things again.

“I think you should talk to him,” Sean says, his eyes peering into my soul.

I scoff. “Why? Did you make another bet?” I no longer feel bad for laughing at his belly dancing act.

He stands. “The dude is a wreck. He’s messed up more jobs than he ever has in his life, and last night I’m pretty sure he slept in my dad’s office chair.”

There’s that knife in my stomach again. I hurt him. It’s what we Hansens do. I knew this whole thing was a mistake to begin with.

“I’m sorry.” I sniff.

Sean takes a step toward me and waits until I’m looking right at him. “Do you care about him?”

“Of course.” I rub the toe of my sock along the carpet. “But that’s all I can give him. I’m not made for love. I warned him.”

Sean's head rears back. “What a stupid thing to say. Everyone is made for love. The question is, are you ready to be loved?”

I blink. “Did you seriously just quote a pop star?”

He grins. “Sure did.”

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Someone needs to introduce these Bentleys to better music.

“Think about it.”

I stare at my fuzzy pink socks. I am thinking about it, and so much more.

“But what if—?”

I look up just in time to see the front door shut behind him.

Chapter 25

Michael

I scratch the back of my arm and then force my hand to drop to my side. I don't need to be nervous; it's just my dad. But what if he doesn't agree with me? What if he has a different future in mind?

I stretch out my fingers. I used to be so confident in what I did. Maybe because there wasn't a risk. Now that I know what I stand to lose, on top of what I've already lost, I'm terrified. It's much easier to be confident when there's nothing at stake, but a passionate risk is worth the reward.

At least that's what I keep telling myself about my crushed heart.

For fourteen hours of the day, I can convince myself it was all worth it, but then the noise of the day fades and I have to find another way to distract myself. I've watched,

and rewatched, every holiday rom-com on four different streaming services.

I lift my fist and knock on my dad's office door.

He looks up from his computer and pulls off his reading glasses. "Hey, Mike."

"Hey, Dad." I step inside and sit on the only other chair.

"I heard there was a scuffle in the break room the other day," Dad says, rubbing his chin.

I clench my hands around the armrests, so they don't betray me by digging into my bicep again. "Not my finest moment," I admit. "But I apologized to Sean, and we're good." We are brothers, after all. Our contempt for each other is wrapped in love. Most of the time.

"Good." Dad drums his fingers on the desk. "A great leader knows when to admit he's wrong."

Leader? I look at his eyes, which are almost the same shade of blue as mine.

"Sean told me about the reward for the bet."

Nothing is a secret in this family.

"He also told me what it took to win." He gives me a pointed look. "Which we will discuss in a minute, but right now, let's talk about the job."

The job. The reason I'm here. "Right. I wanted to speak to you about that."

"I'm assuming you want it." My dad looks at me with a stern expression, one that had

me ready to bolt as a kid. But I'm not a child anymore. I'm ready to put my heart and soul into this business.

"And more," I say.

He raises a single brow. "You think you're ready to take over?"

"I am." I pinch my thigh. "When you're ready to let me."

"Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Yes." I sit up straighter. "I want to run the business."

"I know." Dad taps his desk with a fist. "But what else do you want?"

I frown. "What do you mean?"

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“This job is a lot of stress. Where do you think I got all this gray hair?”

I shrug. “I figured it was Sean.”

Dad nods and rubs his chin “It was probably half and half.”

“I’m not afraid of hard work.”

“What a good leader needs is someone by his side to support him when those times get tough. Whether it’s me, your brothers, maybe Juliet... I don’t want you to lose yourself in the business and forget what matters most. I had to learn that lesson the hard way.”

I lean back in my seat. “I guess I had to learn that, too.” Sean’s bet was good for one thing. I know what I want, personally and professionally.

I want a wife and kids. One day I’d like to see my own kids in the shop and teach them how to run a table saw.

Obviously, I won’t start with the saw. That’s only one of the things I will teach them before I help them build their very own piece of furniture. Something that will fill them with pride for years to come.

“I’m proud of the man you’ve become,” Dad says. “We can start discussing my retirement soon.”

Soon? I’m ready, however soon it is. “I’m willing to do whatever it takes.”

“Are you?” Dad tilts his head to the side. “What about Juliet?”

And just like that, my heart collapses in on itself. What does he want to know? How stupid I am?

Dad folds his arms and leans in his chair. “What did you do wrong? Besides betting on love?”

I swallow the lump in my throat and scratch my arm. “That pretty much sums it up.” The room is silent except for the clock in the corner of the room, ticking annoyingly away. Doesn’t it know time stopped when Juliet left me? “I don’t think she felt the same way.”

“Did you ask her?”

I open my mouth to say yes, but I can’t, because I didn’t. I don’t know how she felt.

Did I let her go too easily?

My stomach pitches. What have I done?

“Give her some time. But if she’s the one you want, you fight tooth and nail for her. Like you did with Sean for this job,” Dad says with a knowing smile.

I nod slowly and pull myself out of my chair. Where do I go now?

Work. I go back to work.

“I’ll do my best,” I say.

Dad stands and comes around the desk to clap me on the back. “Do better than that,

son.”

Chapter 26

Juliet

Michael has been on my mind for the last week. I don't think he's ever left. My brain is trying desperately to forget about him, but my heart brings me right back to him again and again. He's like the song I can't get out of my head until I finally cave and listen to it.

But no matter how many times I try to tell myself to let it go, my heart won't give in.

I want to believe the beautiful things he's told me, believe in love. I want to throw my baggage and worries out the window and see if there is a spot for love in my heart. But I'm scared.

Am I ready for love?

I burrow deeper into the couch, but my mind takes me miles away, down a dark dirt road, in the front seat of Michael's truck, pretending I can't hear him singing every word along with Justin Bieber and promising that I'm the only one he will ever love.

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What's wrong with me? Why can't I give him a shot? A real one this time.

I skim through his messages for the umpteenth time—each one read but left unanswered. My thumbs hover over the keypad, but I can't find the words I need.

My doorbell rings and I jump, flinging my phone across the room. Everyone else in my apartment has gone home to be with their families for the Christmas break. Everyone but me.

That's another relationship I can't seem to get right. What my parents put me through wasn't fair, but maybe I haven't been so fair to them either.

It rings again, and I pull myself up. It's not Michael. But as many times as I tell myself that on the way to the door, a piece of my heart still holds onto hope until the very last moment.

I unlock the door and pull it open.

"Mom? Dad?" Both are here. In the same place.

Is the universe playing some weird trick on me?

Mom straightens the silly reindeer-patterned scarf around her neck. "Can we come in?"

"Yeah." I step aside, and for the first time, both of my parents are in my house. Together. And no one is screaming yet.

“Do you guys want something to drink?” I ask, needing something to do with my hands.

“No, we just need to talk to you,” Mom says.

My stomach sinks. That means nothing good. But they’ve already given me the ‘we’re getting divorced’ speech, so what’s left?

My dad adjusts his weight. He seems nervous.

“Okay.” I say hesitantly and lead them to the living room, each step filling me with dread. Is there an age at which you no longer fear getting into trouble with your parents? If so, I have yet to reach it.

I sit on the leather chair, and my parents both take a seat on the couch. Only a foot or so separates them.

Oh gosh, please say they aren’t getting back together. They tried that once. It lasted a week and ended worse than the first time.

A bead of sweat drips down my back. “So what’s up?”

My parents lookback and forth between each other with worried expressions. The silence is killing me.

Did someone die? This is the worst Christmas ever!

Dad clears his throat. “We wanted to say sorry.”

Okay...so not where I thought this was headed.

“We haven’t been great parents to you,” Mom says, her voice soft and sincere.

I want to protest, I really do, but I’ll let them say their piece first.

Mom wrings her hands together. “After your phone call the other day, I realized we’d failed you. So we’ve been talking to each other, and with...” Mom swallows. “A therapist.”

My jaw drops.

“We’ve been selfish,” Dad adds and looks at my mom before continuing. “We realized neither of us has really moved on from the divorce. We needed to find ways to heal, but instead, we continued to hurt each other through you. Which means you always got the worst of it.”

“We are so sorry.” My mom sniffs.

They did. They hurt me. But right now, they are here, waiting for me to speak. For once, they are ready to listen to me.

I twist a small strand of hair. “I hated being your pawn.”

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My shriveled heart has experienced too many emotions this week, and it collapses under the burden. Tears spring to my eyes, then trickle down my cheeks. But I continue.

“I distanced myself from you guys because I didn’t want to be another reason you hated each other.”

“Honey, how could you ever think that?” Mom says and comes to my side. “You were never an issue between us. You were our glue.”

Exactly. I was the only thing forcing them together when they couldn’t stand each other.

“But if it wasn’t for me, you guys wouldn’t have fought all the time.” I look between the two of them, waiting for them to admit my part in this all.

Dad grabs my hand, his large fingers protecting mine. “Your mom and I fought because that’s what we did. From the first moment we met, we fought. Some might say that’s passion, but for us it was a ticking time bomb, ready to blow with the next strike. You had nothing to do with that. Since I met your mother twenty-two years ago, we have only successfully agreed on one thing.” His voice cracks. “That you were our best decision.”

I wipe my nose on my sleeve. If it wasn’t me who ruined their marriage, then it was something else. Love. “So love destroyed you, then?” I glance at my mom. “You said love was just a game people played until they couldn’t play anymore.”

Mom tucks her brown hair behind her ear and sighs. “I was wrong. Love didn’t work for us because we didn’t want it to. But our hearts will never run out of love for you.”

No. How can she claim that if they never had enough love for each other?

I’ve turned my world upsidedown to stay away from love because all it does is destroy. I didn’t do it for nothing. “How can you believe in love after what you’ve been through? I’ve promised myself I won’t make the same mistakes you did, and I’ve pushed everyone away.”

Dad squeezes my hand. “And are you happy?”

My chin quivers, and my eyes turn to waterfalls. “No.”

“Neither were we.” Mom whispers. “But our therapist told us something that has changed our perspective. Love isn’t a give-and-take. It’s a give, and give, and give.”

“Huh?”

“Let me rephrase.” Dad smiles softly. “If love was an equation, it wouldn’t be fifty percent, plus fifty percent, equals one hundred percent.

My eyebrows tug together. I know math, that equation works.

“The only way to get one hundred percent in a relationship is if both partners give it one hundred percent. One hundred, plus one hundred, equals one hundred.”

It sounds so simple when he puts it that way. But there are so many more variables that go into a relationship. So many other forces tearing it at the seams.

“But if Mich—” I freeze on my words, and Dad raises a quizzical brow. I swallow.

“But what if you give everything, and it still doesn’t work out?”

Dad studies my face. “Not everything does. But if you give it your all, you won’t regret trying. The only regret we have is that we haven’t been giving you our all when we should have been. You deserved more and from now on, that’s what we’ll give you.”

Michael’s face fills my mind. I didn’t give him anything close to my all. I held an expiration date over our relationship from the beginning. What could have happened if I hadn’t?

Mom squeezes my hand again. “You have a great mathematical mind, but sometimes the greatest problems aren’t solved with a logical solution.”

Isn’t that accurate? I thought I came up with the perfect formula for not getting hurt, and I still wound up stapling the broken pieces of my heart backtogether. News flash: It only hurt more.

I let out a breath. It’s a relief to admit it, if only to myself. I’m miserable without him. Maybe it’s time to forget about what the rational part of my brain thinks and take a leap off the cliff.

Metaphorically this time.

If falling in love isn’t smart, then I guess I’m ready to try something stupid.

“I know you probably have a lot on your mind, and you wanted to be alone for Christmas, but could we maybe hang out with you for tonight?” my mom asks. The desperation in her eyes breaks my heart. It was the same desperation Michael had when I left him.

I'm truly the worst. Christmas is for families, for love.

A sob rips through my chest. "I don't want to be alone on Christmas."

"Me neither," Mom and Dad say simultaneously, and for the first time in possibly fifteen years, they both laugh.

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I glance between them. “Do you guys want to watch a movie?”

“What did you have in mind?” Dad squeezes my shoulder.

I smile. “How about Jingle all the Way?”

Chapter 27

Michael

Three days ago, dad announced to the guys I would be taking over as foreman. The same men I grew up watching and working alongside patted me on the back and told me I'd do a great job. Ron even gifted me his lucky rabbit's foot, and I promptly gave it back.

Their confidence in me was enough to keep me upright through Christmas Eve. But now it's Christmas, and as ridiculous as it sounds, I was still hoping to wake up this morning and find a gift in the shape of Juliet under the tree.

Santa didn't come through, of course. He never seems to know what I actually want for Christmas.

It's been eight days since I last saw Juliet. Eight days since I kissed her, then watched her leave. Three times I've gone to her apartment, but then I recall the pain on her face, and I can't bring myself to knock on her door. I don't want to hurt her more.

Something hits my ear and I turn, gun held out and ready.

“Gotcha!” Lennox cheers, waving her Nerf gun in the air.

I pelt her with five bullets just for being cocky.

She runs to the kitchen, and I sprint up the stairs. We may be grown-ups now—well, everyone except for Sean—but this has been one of our favorite traditions for years. It’s the only game in our family where we don’t keep score, don’t make bets, and don’t count our wins and losses. We just play.

It’s also one of the games that somehow, despite the softest bullets, ends with the worst injuries.

I hit the top of the stairs, and a bullet pings against my eye.

That has to be Grant. He has wicked timing. Except for when it comes to Lennox.

I take aim and miss. I always miss.

Grant’s gone.

Sean runs past and I fire off my automatic gun. It pelts him hard and fast. He pulls his own gun up to position it at me but misjudges his steps. His foot hits the corner of a doorway, and he trips, face planting into the wall.

His body crumples to the ground like a puppet without a hand, and I can’t control my laughter.

“Oh, man, that was gold.”

He doesn’t move.

“Sean?”

He’s still.

Shoot. I crouch by him and grab his arm. “Sean’s down!” I holler.

His leg twitches, and he mutters something that sounds like, “I didn’t surrender.”

“Whatever you say, little bro.” The overgrown child annoys me like crazy, but only because that’s what brothers are supposed to do. I’d still die in battle for him.

Mom runs up the stairs. “What happened?”

“He kissed the wall,” I say.

Sean cracks open a dazed eye. “Did it kiss me back?”

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I hide my smile. “Sure did.” I don’t have first-aid training, but I’m worried he’s got a concussion. It’s hard to tell though when he says stupid stuff all the time.

Trent joins us, and Mom directs us to help Sean into a bed. Sean can’t seem to help in return. He flings an arm into my face and body slams into Trent.

“You stink, man,” Trent grunts, pushing him upright.

“Trent,” Mom scolds. “He could have brain damage.”

“We’ve known that for a while, and it’s no excuse for poor hygiene.”

Mom punches Trent’s shoulder, and he smirks. Raising three boys taught her a thing or two.

We get Sean into a bed, and Mom begins to fuss over him.

I’m about to leave the room when Sean speaks.

“Dude, Michael,” Sean slurs. “You’re the poor man.”

Did he mean foreman? “Yes, I know I got the job. Sorry, bro.”

“No. You’re the poor man. You lost Juliet.”

It’s good to see that concussed Sean is still a straight shooter.

And here I'd almost forgotten about her for a whole half hour. The first time all day I haven't wondered what she was doing or if she was spending Christmas all alone.

I frown at the wall above his head. "Yes, I did. Thanks for the reminder." The very painful reminder.

"I told her to talk to you, but she didn't. I'm sorry. I tried." Sean sniffs, and two seconds later full-sized tears drip down his cheeks.

"Wait." I blink and step closer to the bed. "You talked to Juliet?"

"Yeah." He wipes his gross nose on the back of his hand, and I jerk out of his reach.

I'll die in battle for him, but I won't take his germs.

"I told her she needed to talk to you because you loved her so much." He makes a kissy face.

"What?" Alarm bells blare in my head. I haven't even told her I love her. "Why'd you do that?"

"It's true, isn't it?" he asks.

I can't respond with the complete reality setting in. I do love her. Why didn't I tell her?

I can't even be mad at Sean.

My arm itches like crazy. I have to tell her.

My dad told me to fight for her. If I don't try to make one last shot, I'll regret it

forever. What have I been waiting for? If a job gets messed up at the shop, I go out and fix it. I do what needs to be done. But I didn't do enough to fix things with her.

I walk out of the room, but Sean hollers after me. "Don't leave. We still have to play Monopoly."

"We can play that in a little bit, dear," Mom tells him.

"But I wanted to win." He sobs as I continuedown the hall.

I'll be back. After I win over my girl.

I pull out my phone and slide to the dating app. I could text her, but it feels more poetic like this. Or maybe I'm just a romantic sap.

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MichaelB22:Are you home? I need to see you. Please, give me one more chance.

Chapter 28

Juliet

“You’re going to pull that whole chunk of hair out if you don’t stop soon.” My mom gives me a knowing look.

“Sorry.” I drop my hands to my lap, but they crave to be right back up in the tangled web that’s now my hair.

Mom flicks off the show. “It’s okay. You can go.”

“Hey! Why’d you turn off the show?” Dad yells, but then he takes a deep breath and fixes us with an apologetic look.

“Go? Where would I go?” I ask innocently.

“Oh, are we talking about that boy you love?” Dad asks.

“Jared, why would you say—?” Mom starts but cuts herself off before she can get mad at him. They aren’t perfect, but it’s been nice to see them trying. It’s been the best holiday I can remember in years. But it doesn’t prevent my mind from straying to Michael every ten seconds.

Dad holds a hand in the air. “I’m assuming.”

I grab a throw pillow and tuck it into my stomach. “I’m not going anywhere. It’s Christmas.” I can’t leave them, especially since they came together just for me.

Mom looks at Dad and squeezes my arm. “And we’ve had a great day. But I think you should go find that boy.”

My hand jumps to my hair. “What if I can’t do it? What if I can’t give him the love he wants?”

Mom pats my hand. “Just give him what you’ve got.”

Just what I’ve got. But will that be enough? I guess I’ll never know unless I try. I release my death grip on my mom’s fancy throw pillow. “Okay.”

Okay. I’m going to do it. I’m going to go find him. Surely he will be at home surrounded by family. I can say my piece and let the cards fall where they may. But if he turns me down, I’ll be crushed. I may be ready to fall in love, but I’m not prepared to be rejected. I’d rather not have an audience for that.

I open my phone and find a message waiting from the dating app. Why haven’t I deleted that thing? It’s probably some random lonely guy on Christmas. Scratch that. A random lonely serial killer...

Not today, Satan.

I delete the app and open my messages.

Juliet: Can you meet me at our bridge? Like, now?

He’s put his heart on the line enough for me, and it’s time to be the vulnerable one and reach for him.

I pull on a pair of jeans and a comfy sweater and head out.

During the drive to the bridge, I wait for my phone to ding with his response. But there's nothing. I can't expect him to come, and I won't blame him for not wanting to. He doesn't owe me anything, but I've got a list I'd like to start making up for.

I don't see his truck when I park, and I take my time walking the trail. The air is cool today, which means I won't last long. Anything less than fifty degrees Fahrenheit, and I go into hibernation mode. But I'll wait for him.

Until I'm at the cusp of hypothermia.

My cute, but uninsulated boots thump against the wooden planks of the bridge as I pace the length of it.

What if he doesn't show up? Should I call Lennox and have her trick him into coming here?

I stop and look out at the river, which is barely more than a trickle right now. On this bridge, I promised him five dates. Now I want to promise him more.

If he shows up.

“You look beautiful.”

I jump at Michael’s voice, his nearness, and the excitement shooting through me. I spin around. He’s got a short beard, and it looks very attractive on him. His blue eyes are focused on mine, watching me warily, like I’ll turn to dust if he blinks.

“You came,” I say.

He’s got his hands in the pockets of his jacket and he raises his shoulders. “A funny thing happened. I messaged you, but you never responded.”

“What? I didn’t get a message.”

“I was trying to be romantic,” he says sheepishly. “So I messaged you on the dating app. The app that put us in each other’s lives.”

Oops. I guess I should have looked at the app before I deleted it. Not all bad things come from the internet. Who knew?

“I showed up at your apartment and banged on the door until your neighbor opened the window and told me to go to the North Pole, find an iceberg, and make like the Titanic.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. It must have been Cindy.

He scratches the back of his head. “But then you texted me.”

“I did.” I nod. “I... uh...” Why didn’t I practice what I wanted to say? I have much to apologize for, and much to ask of him, but I’m not sure where to begin. “I was wrong.”

Michael frowns. “About?”

I bite my bottom lip. “Well, a lot of things. For starters, about dating apps. I thought they were just tools psychopaths used to find their victims.”

His lips twitch. “Well, I, for one, am glad you were wrong about that.”

“I was also wrong to lead you on when I wasn’t sure what I could give you.”

His expression falls flat, and he rubs his arm.

“But,” I continue, “what I was mostly wrong about was love.”

His eyes meet mine, a tiny spark of hope in those blue irises.

“I thought love was long gone. That it didn’t exist anymore. But it’s always been there even when I can’t see it.” I take a step closer to him. “Love is kind of like math. You can’t always see the solution from the beginning, but the process is always worth the outcome.”

The right corner of his lips curl up at my romantic sputtering.

I switch to the scientific side of my brain. “I suppose the sun loves the earth, or it wouldn’t keep it warm.”

Ugh. That isn’t any better.

What am I saying?

Out with it Juliet!

I pull at the bottom of my sweater and look up at him, trying to show him the real me. The one hidden behind the castle walls, full of flaws but ready to be vulnerable. “What I really mean is I’m no expert at love, but I’d like to try. With you.”

He takes a step toward me this time. “This is new to me, too.”

Hope springs to my chest. I know he’s going to be by my side while we figure this out, together. Which is how I should have faced things with the bet.

The bet. I back up a step. I guess I’ve still got a moat that’s not quite ready to dry up. “I have to know. Did you only fall for me because of a bet?” Before I let myself jump, I need to know what’s at the bottom.

“No.” He swallows, and I can see the pain in his eyes. “You were never a bet to me. The only thing the bet did was give me the courage to message you in the first place. Sean told me I couldn’t fall in love in thirty days. I fell for you in twenty.” He inches closer, and my heart picks up speed. “And I suspect I’ll be in love with you for the rest of my life.”

Every ounce of logic is telling me to run fast and run far, but logic is wrong this time.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:34 am

I reach for him at the same time he reaches for me.

My cheeks warm, the only warm part of my body currently.

“I can’t believe we found each other on a dating app,” I say, wrapping my arms around him. And just like that, I’m home.

His eyebrows arch, and then his eyes light up. I already know what he’s thinking. “Huh.” He smiles. “It almost seems like us being together was—”

“Don’t say it.” I press a finger to his lips. “I only just accepted the idea of love. It’s going to take me some more time to buy into fate.” Though the mounting evidence is quite convincing.

He laughs and captures my hand. “You made me lose a bet that night.”

I roll my eyes. “Why am I not surprised?” My stomach drops. “I’m sorry I made you lose the promotion as well.”

His face grows serious. “It wasn’t about if you fell for me. All I had to do was fall for you.”

I frown. “So, you still won?”

His eyes go wide. “I’ll give Sean the job. Nothing matters as much as you.”

I’d never make him do that, but the fact that he would sacrifice his job for me is huge.

I think I'm starting to understand love.

"Heck no, we can't let Sean win." I give him a playful smile.

"I knew I liked you," he says, and his full grin makes my heart beat a little faster.

I knew I liked him, too. It's a Christmas miracle.

He brushes a lock of hair out of my eyes. "Did you have a good Christmas? I couldn't stop thinking about you."

"It's been perfect. I spent it with my parents. Tis the season for family." I grin. "But I was a little disappointed about the presents under the tree." I tilt my chin up.

His smile grows slowly. "Interesting. I had the same complaint." He flattens his palm against my back and presses me against his chest. "I didn't get what I was hoping for."

My pulse thrums with anticipation. "Really? What was that?"

His voice drops. "Something Santa can't give me."

But I can. If love is about giving more than fifty, I'll go the whole hundred.

I arch up on my toes and plant my lips on his. He doesn't hesitate to pull me closer, digging deeper into the kiss. I grab his neck, pulling him closer still. He makes me feel confident, complete.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I swear I hear jingle bells and people singing hallelujah.

So this is what love feels like.

Epilogue

Michael

One year later

I might have to thank Sean.

I usually make it a point to not feed his ego, but I've got to give him credit where credit is due. The man knows his way around a craft store.

I told him to bring some lights and flowers, but he went completely overboard. There are white rose petals scattered across the bridge and a billion twinkling lights along the rails. A few lanterns guide the way to me, and this bridge is now officially the brightest spot in Phoenix. Or at least it will be when Juliet gets here.

My phone buzzes.

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Lennox: On our way!

I let out a breath, but it doesn't take my nerves with it. Juliet ran away after our first five dates. If tonight doesn't go well, she might jump off the bridge.

I should have brought some floaties just in case.

But she won't reject me. We've been together for almost a year now, and every day has only gotten better and better. We've taken things slow. She wants a long engagement, and I'm happy to give it to her, as long as she says yes tonight.

"Crew, go!" a woman calls.

I look around to find a mother fighting with her little boy at the opposite end of the bridge.

Shoot, I forgot about pedestrians.

"But I want to stay here," the little boy whines.

I'd much rather he doesn't.

The mom looks nervously around at the lights and me. "No, we have to leave. Now."

"But I have to pee!"

Welp. There goes the night.

My phone buzzes again.

Lennox: Walking.

I jog over to the lady. “I’m so sorry. I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m proposing to my girlfriend tonight, and she’s almost here.”

The woman looks frantically from her child to me, to the bridge. I hope she isn’t considering jumping off herself.

“I’m sorry, I’m trying to get him home, but it’s way past his bedtime, and he’s being a grump.”

“I’m not a grump,” the boy whines and throws himself face down on the bridge. “I just have to pee.”

By all means, please relieve yourself.

The mom tries to pick him up, but he’s half her size and remains glued to the boards like a sucker fish.

He’s not going anywhere. Wonderful.

If I carried cash, I’d offer it to him to get off the ground, or at least be quiet, but all I’ve got in my pocket is a very expensive ring.

“Michael?”

I whip around.

There she is. The light of my life. My beautiful Juliet. But not that Juliet.

Her hair is curled, and she's wearing my favorite teal dress, the one that brings out the hint of blue in her eyes.

I straighten my suit jacket and walk toward her with purpose. With passion. This is it. This is the beginning of the rest of my life.

"Juliet." I take her hand. Her eyes stay on mine. She knows what I'm going to ask, and she's still here.

So far, so good.

"When I started building this bridge with my dad, I thought we could finish it in a few days. But it took months. Still, every day I was excited to work on it because I knew we were building something great. Juliet, I want to build something great with you."

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I drop to one knee and slip the ring box out of my pocket, angling toward me to ensure the ring is still safely tucked inside.

“Michael,” she breathes, squeezing my hand. Her legs buckle, or is she bouncing?

“Juliet Hansen, will you marry me?”

Twin tears escape her eyes, and she nods. “I will.”

I pull out the ring and slide it onto her finger. Then I stand and draw her into me. “Are you sure? Am I moving too fast?” I murmur before I press a kiss to her lips.

She grabs my face with both hands. “Don’t go changing your mind on me now.”

“I love you,” I whisper.

“I love you, too.” She beams, and I get lost in those green eyes. I’ll never get tired of hearing her say those words.

My lips descend on hers.

Pssssssssss. Drip. Drip.

Juliet jerks back. “What’s that?”

I pinch my eyes close then open them again. “Would you believe me if I said a cat?”

She lifts a single brow and shakes her head.

“Sorry!” the mom calls from behind us.

I smile at Juliet. “Do you want kids?”

The End