



# Kiss Me, Doc

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Ruth Coldwell is the world's worst matchmaker. The truth is, she's a total fraud. She knows nothing about love and even less about actual relationships. But if she can't convince her boss that she's a competent matchmaker, Ruth will end up right where she started—a jobless, hopeless woman with a random doctorate and a broken heart. Her new job as a matchmaker is in danger of imploding, so Ruth does the only thing she can think to do... she claims to have a husband.

Callum Reed just found a fake wife.

When Cal shows up to a speed dating event with the express purpose of reaming out Dr. Ruth Coldwell for her abysmal matchmaking skills, he finds himself with an unusual opportunity instead—she needs a fake husband. He needs a fake girlfriend. It sounds like a match made in heaven, and he proposes a deal. Fake date him, and he'll fake marry her, and both their problems will be solved.

As the lines between fake dating and real love begin to blur, a sinister shadow from Ruth's past emerges, bringing with him a painful reminder. Ruth was never meant for love. And Cal was never meant to be hers.

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## Prologue

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Abreeze chimed across Janice's intuition like sea glass. She looked up through the trees, squinting at their pale, pink buds, and with a little hum of interest, watched the wind tug at the branches. This time of year, there was nothing unusual about a susurrus or two, but this one smelled different. It felt different. It plucked at her instincts like the errant fingers of a toddler over harp strings. "Interesting," she murmured.

Holding onto that ethereal prompting, she turned and entered Kiss-Met, her dating agency. Located on the second floor of the historical, downtown building, Kiss-Met was her dream, her child, and her purpose. It was her past and present wrapped neatly in the promise of the future, and even if her spiritual instincts hadn't nudged her to open the business twenty-two years ago, Janice had an inkling that she would have found her way to this profession regardless.

She loved love. She relished in the warmth that blossomed in her chest when she made a match for lonely souls, and she appreciated the chance to hone her natural talents for intuitive listening.

Some might call it "fortune telling." Janice preferred to call it intentional watchfulness.

Taking the elevator to the second floor, she closed her eyes and gave that little blip of awareness some extra space in her consciousness to take root. Something was

beginning today. She didn't know what, but she had a feeling that it would be rather enthralling. Opening her dark chocolate eyes, Janice smiled to herself. "Veryinteresting."

With her long, boho-patterned, blue skirt swishing around her ankles, Janice greeted the front desk staff and made her way through the modern, minimalist foyer and to the offices at the back of the floor. She had decorated her space with trinkets and mementos from around the world, accented with brightly colored rugs and shawls, and adorned with spiritually enhancing knickknacks that brought her joy. It looked more like a palm reader's place of business than that of the CEO of a thriving matchmaking company in Oregon, but Janice liked to think that her success was due in part to the charm her clients felt when visiting with her.

Then again, it wasn't just her efforts that were to thank for the success of Kiss-Met. Her matchmaking staff had all been chosen with the utmost care, and they had become the beating heart of the operation.

Still smiling over the little kernel of something that Janice knew was about to unfurl, she deposited herself in front of her desk and forced her mind to turn to the essential tasks of the day. It was tempting to linger in the spiritual, to bask in the glow of intuition and kismet, but whatever it was, it would come along in its own due time.

And that time, apparently, was 11:43 in the morning.

As Janice pored over financial records she would much rather forget altogether, one of her best and brightest matchmakers entered the room with a tentative knock. Gemma, who was young and enthusiastic, and possessed a tenacity Janice had rarely seen in anyone, tilted her head at an adorable angle to catch Janice's attention. Her long, blond waves spilled over one shoulder, and she gave a little wave. "Morning."

Janice gave her a welcoming smile. "How can I help you, Ms. Daise?"

Gemma produced a thin packet of papers from behind her bright red, fitted dress. “I have a candidate for the Love Doctor position.”

Janice raised her eyebrows in surprise. It had felt like a bit of a long shot, but she had wanted to find a matchmaking professional with a doctorate to add some much-needed legitimacy to Kiss-Met as they continued to compete with dating apps and online services. Having a “Dr. Love” on staff would bolster their reputation and provide a helpful advertising campaign going into the summer. “You surprise me. Who have you found?”

“It’s actually my best friend,” Gemma admitted, dropping the sheaf of papers at Janice’s fingertips. “Her name is Ruth, and she just completed her doctorate in... human relations.”

Her pause didn’t go unnoticed. Janice hooked Gemma with an arched-brow stare. “Is that so?”

“Mhm.” Gemma began pleating the skirt of her dress like she often did when she was nervous. “She really needs a job. It’s a whole story. Just,” she paused, chewing her full lower lip. “Well, just have a look. I have a good feeling about her.”

Janice glanced at the resume on her desk, and just like that, the little flit of awareness rang a bell in her intuition. Janice ran her finger over the paper, and then looking up, noticed that outside her wall of windows, the wind had picked up. It rattled the budding maple branches and swirled last season’s leaf husks over the busy street. Janice looked back down at the paper. “Doctor Ruth Coldwell.” The woman’s name sang through Janice’s awareness like a favorite tune.

Gemma pressed her dainty hands together. “She’s so smart. I just know she could help us.”

“Janice,” Olivia’s voice said over the intercom. “You’ve got your twelve o’ clock here.”

“Send them back,” Janice replied distractedly. Her mind whirled with a nebulous kind of understanding that she hadn’t fully grasped yet. But could this doctor from Denver really have something to do with such a fortuitous feeling? Hiring a new employee on a gut feeling wasn’t a strange practice for Janice, but this felt like something else. Something more.

“She’s already here in town,” Gemma pushed. “She’s staying with me for a bit.”

Janice nodded slowly. “I will certainly consider her, Gemma. Thank you.”

A couple entered the office then. Polished, stately, and clearly brimming with success and confidence, they entered hand-in-hand, wearing bright smiles. They had contacted Janice a few days ago, desperate to match their son with someone who would give him the love and security they felt he deserved. The mother, Jayla, wore a deep shade of plum that beautifully complimented her darker skin tone, and she reached out a hand for Janice first. “Good morning! It’s so lovely to meet you.”

Janice stood and took the effervescent woman’s warm hand in her cooler one. “A pleasure, Mrs. Reed.”

“Thank you for seeing us,” Mr. Reed added, shaking Janice’s hand with his large, strong hand that matched his tall stature and square facial features. “Our son seems to be often dated but never matched.”

Janice nodded once. “A common occurrence, I assure you.” Turning to Gemma, she said, “This is Gemma, our best matchmaker here at Kiss-Met. I’m certain we can both help you guide your son in the right direction.”

“Good, he needs it,” Jayla said with a pointed flare of her dark-lashed eyes.

“What’s his name?” Gemma asked with a welcoming smile.

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“Callum,” Jayla replied with warm affection. “Dr. Callum Reed.”

That one bell of intuition suddenly erupted into a cacophony of wind chimes and fairy tinkles as Callum’s name rang through Janice’s mind. She glanced over her shoulder at the slim packet of papers on her desk, out the window at the sudden squall of a windstorm, and then back to the pair of hopeful parents in her office.

“Well, maybe a little nudge in the right direction will help fate along,” Gemma offered.

With a symphony of kismet playing in Janice’s ears, she smiled. “Fate indeed.”

Chapter one

Ruth

Ruth

I was the world’s worst matchmaker.

I didn’t need a badge or a medal to prove it—I had a paper trail of failures to announce my lack of skill to the world. Each failed match was like a sad certificate that declared Dr. Ruth Coldwell to be the most abysmal matchmaker to have ever breathed oxygen. Each folder of disappointed clients had been splayed out on my desk in a manila fan, and I couldn’t help but want to douse my entire office in gasoline and set fire to the debacle.

With my head in my hands, I glared down at the sixteen folders that contained disastrous matches that had not only gone awry but had downright enraged our clients. At Kiss-Met, there were eight talented, dedicated matchmakers who found soulmates for lonely romantics every day. And then there was me, the terrible matchmaker who made their lives hell. I wasn't just an unskilled asset to the company—I was a detriment to the effort.

Lifting my head and sighing, I picked up one of the folders. This one was from last week, and I'd thought for sure I had found something quirky and interesting to bring them together. The man and woman had both put on their profiles that they liked pickles. Cute, right? He owned a cannabis farm, and she owned a ranch, so they both worked outside often and clearly had a passion for agriculture. Match made in heaven.

Except he was a vegan and she was a cattle rancher. They'd made sure to relay that fact to me in no uncertain terms ten minutes ago.

Groaning, I closed the file and tossed it aside. "I'm doomed," I said to no one. My voice filled the small space easily because I had a pretty solid suspicion that this "office" had actually been a utility closet before I'd been hired. It honestly hadn't made much sense to me that I'd gotten hired in the first place, and I'd had a hunch that the only reason I'd gotten the job was because my best friend worked here and had pulled some strings. The afterthought-broom-closet office kind of sealed that suspicion with wax and a stamp.

There were no windows in the eight-by-eight space, so I glanced at the clock on the beige wall. It was almost ten, which meant I was due for a caffeine boost and a pep talk. Or a melodramatic meltdown. Whatever happened first. I stood, adjusting my glasses on my nose, and collected the files into a tidy pile.

Suddenly, my door opened, and Gemma leaned in, hanging off the doorway with one



hand and sweeping the door out in a grand gesture. “Ruthie P., my cute little nerd!”

I looked up with a faint smile, tapping the stack of files on the desk to even them out. “I had a feeling you’d show up. Coffee?”

“Always and forever,” Gemma replied solemnly. My best friend had a cherubic face with sweet, pink cheeks, enormous blue eyes, and lush lips that I knew for a fact drove men wild. She had styled her waist-length blond hair into half-up space buns, and she wore one of her signature plaid skirts and ribbed top combos with camel-colored Mary Jane pumps that made her short stature slightly less obvious.

I set down the stack of files. “I might need something stronger than coffee. I just got reamed out by another client.”

Gemma’s sapphire eyes bounced to the side. “Uh oh.” Gemma had been relentlessly optimistic about my ability to figure out this matchmaking thing, but after two months of struggling to understand the intricacies of pairing people together, I was about ready to cut my losses and take a position with a department store or something. Sure, I had a doctorate in humanities and mountains of debt, but the more I screwed up here, the shittier I felt. “Who was it? Were they rude? Do you want me to beat them up?”

I passed by Gemma, heading down the modern office hallway and past a glass-lined conference room. “That’ll help my reputation. I’ll send my thug BFF after everyone who lodges a complaint against my crappy matchmaking.”

“Exactly,” Gemma said like that was the obvious answer to my problems. “Besides, I’m a cute thug. They’ll never see it coming.”

Gemmawascute. That was undeniable. I, on the other hand, couldn’t have looked more forgettable if I tried. I had a whole “sad beige nerd” thing going for me with

tortoiseshell glasses, neutral button-down blouses in various shades of depression, and wool and tweed slacks that did not jive well with the August heat. In my defense, the A/C in our building was completely overkill, and I routinely checked my nose for frostbite by the end of the day.

I did have nice hair; I could admit that much. Shoulder-length and bouncy, my waves usually stayed glossy and soft, and it gave me a smidge of originality in my otherwise drab appearance. Jesus, I'm hard on myself, I thought with a hint of consternation. I wasn't sure when I'd become such a grump, but it probably had something to do with the years of wasted schooling, the lack of immediate family, and the broken heart that was liable to cut me if I tried to pick it up and attempt to put it back together.

And now I had a career that I sucked at. "Maybe I should just have a quarter-life crisis like the rest of our generation. I can move to Santa Barbara and sell keychains on the boardwalk and live in the back of a dispensary."

Gemma gave me a concerned side glance. "That is definitely a choice. Look, I told you, the dating process isn't complicated. You just need to give them options."

"Yes," I sighed, rotating a hand like I wanted to get through Gemma's next lecture faster. "And each stage is a base, but it's up to them to advance. I know. Actually, that's kind of a weird allegory you guys chose. Why baseball?"

Gemma grinned conspiratorially. "Hitting bases means hitting bases, Ruthie P."

I rolled my eyes. "Sports analogies do not help my understanding of the practice, Gem."

We passed by our boss' office, and then we entered the two-story, posh lobby that served as a first impression for Kiss-Met Dating Services. With a company logo mounted on a water feature wall and a semi-circle, glossy white desk right in front of

the elevator entrance, the lobby gave the impression that Kiss-Met was more than capable of solving people's loneliness. And truth be told, with the exception of me, it was. Kiss-Met had an astounding eighty-six percent match rate for their clients. People were practically guaranteed a happily ever after.

We crossed the slick, white tile floors and went to the front desk where Olivia sat clicking away on her computer and helping a client who stood on the other side. "You ready for tonight?" Gemma asked with a tentative glance my way.

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I lifted my hands in an unsure gesture. “I mean, as ready as I can be. I’ve never actually been to a speed dating event, but I read up on it as much as I could.”

“It’s really easy,” Gemma assured me, reaching the elevator doors and punching the button. “And Scarlet has done them before, so she’ll help you. Although, I’m still bummed we aren’t going out for Chinese tonight.” She sighed. “Goodbye rangoons. It’s probably worth it if you’re getting experience, though.”

I couldn’t help but feel like Janice, our boss, was slightly punishing me by assigning me this speed dating event. Originally, another matchmaker—Tess—had been in charge of the event, but she’d called in sick today. I’d assumed Janice would ask the capable, experienced Gemma in her stead, but she’d called me to handle it. I knew less about speed dating than I knew about actual dating. And I had never dated anyone before.

Well... mostly.

I wasn’t sure the painful, pseudo-relationship I’d been in seven months ago counted, but then again, I clearly didn’t understand relationships as a whole if my track record was any indication.

I glanced over my shoulder at the client who was waiting patiently for Olivia to pull something up on her computer. His back was broad and toned, and as he leaned on his elbows, I noted that he had to fold his tall frame into a hunch to reach the desk. Well, he won’t have a problem finding a match, I thought in amusement. I turned back to Gemma. “Either it’ll go great, and I’ll call you...”

“... or you’ll bomb, and you’ll call me,” Gemma finished with a grin. She gasped suddenly. “Wait, I have a dress I need to take to the dry cleaners.”

The elevator beeped happily, and the doors slid open. I held out my hand to cover the sensor on one side. “Do you want me to wait?”

“No, no,” Gemma turned and fast-walked away, shouting across the widening distance as she went. “Just go and I’ll meet you there!”

“Gem!” I shouted back, but she wasn’t listening and scurried across the bright lobby and off to the right where her office was located. I glanced nervously at the client who still stood at the counter. Did he need the elevator? If I held the door, would he think that was weird? It seemed stupid to go to the cafe without Gemma.

“I’m so sorry for the wait,” Olivia smiled at the client. “It looks like Dr. Coldwell has stepped out for a break.” Olivia’s dark eyes flitted to me over the stranger’s shoulder nervously before returning to him.

I froze. With renewed interest, I took in the stranger who had apparently asked to see me. Even from several feet away, I could tell that he was well-built with long legs, a trim waist, and toned biceps that strained against the sage green linen of his button-down.

When he turned, I caught a glimpse of his profile, and Jesus. He was hot. Really hot. His sun-kissed skin perfectly complimented the dark bronze of his swooping, soft hair, and his strong, square jaw ticked with annoyance as he digested what Olivia had said.

“Do you know when she will be back?” His voice lashed through the air like a silk lasso. Full and rich, it wrapped around my skin and brought goosebumps to my arms. Somehow, I doubted this person wanted to see me because they wanted to thank me

for my incredible matchmaking skills. And that meant I'd screwed up. Again.

Olivia was an excellent receptionist. She was kind and welcoming, and often her demeanor put clients at ease and made them feel confident about using our services. However, she didn't have a subtle bone in her body. Her dark brown eyes skated past the man to me again. I made a "kill" gesture with my hand, signaling to her to not give me away. After lingering on me a touch too long, she said to him, "I'm not sure."

He rotated a look at me slowly. Vibrant green eyes latched onto my startled expression, and then his eyelids cinched together. "Is that right?"

Oh hell, I thought with a mental screech of frustration. I stared at him for a beat, and the air between us charged with a current of energy like the crackle of electricity before a lightning storm. It stole my breath and tingled across the raised hairs on my arms. He looked completely pissed.

I considered my options for a split second, and then I settled on the only logical strategy. I whirled into the elevator and punched the "close" button. He pushed away from the desk, crossing the distance with shockingly long strides. I mashed the button faster, but it was no use. Just as the doors began to close, the stranger slipped his lithe, tall body between them to corner me in the elevator. The doors snicked shut just as he loomed over me with folded arms and a thunderous expression.

Which was kind of funny, because all things considered, he looked downright sunny. With a spatter of freckles across his nose and cheeks, long, light eyelashes, and glowing skin, this man looked like joy personified. His anger seemed more like a passing cloud on an otherwise clear day, although that didn't make his ire any less intimidating. The scent of coconut and sunscreen filled my nose as I inhaled sharply and pressed my back against the wall. He gave me a speculative glower. "Dr. Coldwell?"

I could deny it. I could lie through my teeth and escape as soon as those doors opened in ten seconds. But with deflated resignation, I realized that if he really was an upset client, I needed to hear him out. At the very least, maybe I could learn something from whatever mistake I had clearly made here. “Yes,” I said tightly.

The man stared me down. “I’d like a word about whatever abysmal software you’re using to match people in this sham of an operation.”

My jaw dropped. “Software? Kiss-Met doesn’t use software. We handpick matches for our clients, and I assure you, each of our matchmakers—”except me“—are well qualified to find ideal partners for our customers.”

“That’s worse,” he replied, his brows tilting with a touch of incredulity. “You’re telling me that you purposefully matched me with my sister’s ex-wife?”

Sister’s...ex-wife? It took me a full three seconds to actually digest what he had told me. I stared at his furious expression, completely dumbfounded. “I matched you with—”

“—my gay sister’s ex-wife who is bi, yes.” He paused, eyes roving over my bewildered expression. “My God. You really didn’t know.”

My hand covered my open mouth, but I couldn’t seem to formulate words. It was too horrifying. This is it, I thought with lead in my stomach. This is rock bottom. I was duped, dumped, abandoned, and now I’m failing miserably at life in every other respect. It cannot possibly get worse.

I remembered this man suddenly—well, his profile, anyway. Doctor Callum Reed was accomplished, charming, and came from a loving household. I knew that because his parents had been trying to get him to come into the agency for weeks, and when he’d finally relented, I’d set him up on a blind date with...

I closed my eyes. “Oh my God.”

“That’s what you have to say?” he asked blandly. “Oh my God?”

“I’m sorry” seemed inadequate, but it was the only thing I could think to add. So, I whispered it, hand still on my mouth, face flaming, and eyes on his black tennis shoes.



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“What?” he asked, leaning down closer to me.

Did he realize how close he was? Suddenly, the warmth from his body joined the heated embarrassment that had my skin fairly glowing, and I pressed my back harder against the wall. I lowered my hand and risked a look up to his eyes. Bright, summer green greeted my glance, and the vibrancy of his eyes stole the words from my mouth. He was mesmerizing—sunshine and nature and laughter boxed up tight in an irritated scowl. How did anyone talk to this man coherently?

The elevator stopped and the doors opened. My gaze flitted to the doors in desperation, and suddenly, I didn’t care if this man got me fired or hated me or thought I was a monster from Hell. I needed to get away from him. Dr. Reed followed the path of my gaze, and fast as a viper, he smacked the “door close” button on the panel. “Dr. Coldwell, I want an explanation for—”

There was no way I was going to stay trapped in the elevator with this mind-boggling person. I dashed past him, and without even giving him a proper apology, I slipped through the doors just as they closed. I glimpsed a flash of his furious expression, and then the silver doors pressed together. I ran through the lobby of our building to the glass doors.

I was so fired.

Chapter two

Cal

Cal

That matchmaker was so fired.

If she could even be called a matchmaker. What was her doctorate in, fraud? There was no way she had actually paired me with Candy and hadn't noticed who that woman was in relation to me. It wasn't hard to miss who people's previous relationships had been with. Unless Candy had lied about having been married to my sister. I wouldn't put it past her, but if this "matchmaker" had done five minutes of research, she would have found out that Candy Lorensen was not a good match for me.

In fact, that bat out of Hell was the last possible person I wanted to see because she was currently responsible for the most miserable state of affairs I'd had to endure since my residency. It was because my sister had gotten divorced that my parents had swung their beady, baby-hungry gazes to me in the first place.

My shoes ate the pavement like ravenous alligator jaws, and I slammed the crosswalk button when I reached the end of the sidewalk. Lush, low-hanging boughs shrouded the warm sunlight overhead, which dispelled some of the humid heat. August in Eugene, Oregon wasn't terrible, but there were days it felt like I was living in a swamp rather than the Northwest. The sign blinked into a white walking signal.

I crossed the street of historical downtown Eugene, equally as annoyed with the fact that I'd allowed my parents to convince me to go to Kiss-Met as I was with the turn of events after going there. My parents were obnoxiously ruthless about whether or not I was "settling down," and it took every ounce of patience I had to not ask them if they'd been reading too many Regency novels or if they really thought that was a thing people my age still did.

Settling down. Like I was a spinning top out of control. I had been nothing but control since I'd been in middle school. For them to suggest otherwise was simply insulting.

At one point, they'd been on my case for dating but never choosing, and that had largely contributed to abandoning the dating scene in the first place. It wasn't that I couldn't find a date—I probably could if I wanted to put myself through the torture.

But I didn't want a real date. I wanted a convenient date. I'd hoped the dating agency would pair me with someone adequate, they would be up for a double date with my parents, and we could move on with our lives after Mom and Dad realized it was a lost cause.

Of course, my scheme to find a respectable partner for Friday had only added emotional injury to insult when that doctor had paired me with Candy. The mere memory of that awkward encounter had me clenching my fists at my sides. Unbelievable. Eugene wasn't an enormous city, I knew that, but of all people...

I reached the urgent care clinic, and with barely leashed fury, I wrenched open the front door and breezed into the air-conditioned lobby. Annie looked up from her computer screen, probably intending to welcome a patient, and then her eyes sparked with recognition. "Oh, hey Dr. Reed. How was your meeting?"

"Fine," I smiled tightly. Horrible. I want to wring that woman's neck.

"Oh boy," she muttered, her dark eyes bouncing with worry. Annie tucked her brown bob behind her ears, and fighting a smile, turned her attention back to the monitor. She, and most employees in the center, knew about my disastrous blind date. She also knew Kiss-Met was responsible because several of us had joined together for the same reasons. Not to find anyone real as far as partners went, but to get halfway decent dates before we attended an award ceremony at the end of the month.

I passed several people in the waiting area, smiling and waving at them before I opened one of the two doors that separated the cozy, living room-style front office from the back rooms and nurses' station. The nurses' station had been built in the

middle of the back annex like a central hub, and it curved around in a half-circle that gave us a line of sight to each of the seven exam rooms in the clinic. There were four computers set up along the desk, fighting for space with piles of paperwork, filing baskets, and random, mobile medical units.

Annie followed, and her white tennis shoes squeaked against the laminate wood floors as she came in hot on my heels. “He failed,” she announced.

Several people looked up from the nurses’ station. Michael—our newest nurse—groaned from behind his mask, and Lynette sighed in disgust. The other nurse at the station, Harper, shook her head like that was exactly what she’d expected from me. I stopped, rotating an irritated look Annie’s way before glaring at the rest of them. “Excuse me, ‘failed?’”

“They didn’t fix the issue, did they?” Annie supplied.

“How are we supposed to find dates if the person in charge of making dates is garbage?” Harper asked accusatorily, her blond eyebrows lifting with concern over her green medical mask. “You didn’t get answers from her?” Harper looked like she was a sophomore in high school, and she often got questioned about whether or not she was “qualified” to be a medical technician. Her bright pink hair didn’t help that much. She just wanted a date so men would stop erroneously asking her out.

“Okay, wait a second,” I scowled at them all. “No one told me I was going to war for the entire medical center.”

“Obviously,” Michael said sourly. Like me, he had a pair of overzealous parents who wanted him to look appropriately “paired.” Only, according to him, it was “level 9000” because their family legacy was involved, or something.

“I did find the ‘doctor’ in charge of the pairs,” I clarified, my hands on my hips as the

employees faced me in silent criticism. “But she literally ran away from me before I could get any solid answers.”

“So, we’re dateless?” Harper glared.

Lynette laughed finally, the deep wrinkles around her eyes creasing. Michael pointed at her. “We will have silence from the happily married crowd.”

Lynette raised her hands, still laughing quietly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think thirty years of marriage would be an asset at an urgent care center, but apparently, I got lucky.”

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“Yes, you did,” Annie said from behind me, her voice wavering on the edge of laughter as well. “So, hush.”

“Someone has to check in patients,” Lynette reminded us all as she took a pen out of the breast pocket of her brightly patterned scrub top. She clicked it open. “So, I’ll just handle that while you all deal with your single-person crisis, shall I?”

“It’s not a crisis,” I muttered, rolling my eyes.

Dr. Reynolds exited one of the exam rooms, and as she pulled her mask off her soft, round features, her eyes bounced all over our impromptu meeting. Her brows fell in irritation. “Is this the dating site again?”

“Service,” Harper clarified.

Dr. Reynolds rolled her eyes before they landed on me. “You’re the problem here, you know that, don’t you?” Dr. Reynolds looked like everyone’s favorite third-grade teacher with messy, brown hair, a soft body that had brought four kids into this world, and kind, brown sugar eyes. She had a teasing kind of attitude that put patients at ease, and she had easily fallen into the role of “office mom” for most of the employees.

“Balderdash,” I replied easily.

“You’re causing problems,” she said with a point my way before coasting across the nurses’ station in her aqua-colored sneakers. “Fix it, mister.”

“Only because he let the love doctor get away,” Annie reminded everyone.

“So, what do we do now?” Michael demanded. “This was my last shot at finding a date before I redownload Spark.” He shuddered at the mention of the notorious dating app.

“You’re all very dramatic,” I pointed out, crossing behind the nurses’ station desk and looking for my medical bag. “I’m sure they can find me a better match eventually. Although,” I paused, thinking, “I don’t know if that goes for you all.”

Groans echoed through the room. They were cut off suddenly as an older patient exited exam room three. Michael cleared his throat, turning back to his computer, and Harper hurried off to exam room one, presumably to check in another patient. Annie went back to the receptionist’s desk at the front, and shaking my head, I bent over the desk in front of one of the computers.

To my left, Dr. Reynolds—Laura—glanced down at me. “You got three new patients today. I’d say this home care initiative of yours is going pretty well.”

“I mean, it didn’t win us any awards,” I replied with a meaningful smile her way.

Laura returned it wryly. The award ceremony we would be attending in Seattle was for her efforts to make our urgent care center the best in the area. She would be accepting the award for People’s Choice winner of this year’s “hospital” category for best local businesses. We had been up against more than 12,000 other businesses in the area, and it was really due to the locals’ love of her bedside demeanor that we had been recognized.

“Maybe not yet,” she conceded, flipping through a patient’s paper chart, “but I’m sure you will. It was a good idea to begin with, but it’s brilliant in execution. You should be proud.”

I clicked open my patient portal and spared her another glance. “Thanks, Mom.”

She grinned. “We’re the same age, you brat.”

Snickering under my breath, I brought up the list of at-home patients I had to visit that afternoon. My Compassionate Home Visits Initiative started in 2020 when COVID-19 had essentially ground preventative care to a halt, and I’d realized that even before the days of quarantine, there had been plenty of people who were unable to leave their homes for routine medical care. CHVI had started as a way to care for the elderly without exposing them to deadly viruses, but it had evolved to include a wide array of patients who didn’t have access to transportation, or for whatever reason, simply did better with home care. There weren’t many physicians who made home visits anymore, but I was one of them.

Battling with insurance over the necessity of the service was an ongoing struggle, of course. But I was making headway, and I was nearly at capacity with my house call hours. Dr. Reynolds looked up from her chart. “Did you visit Dottie at McKenzie-Willamette this morning?”

“Yeah,” I replied absently, trying to print off the list of patients so I would know what supplies to bring.

“Oh.” Her voice fell a touch. I straightened, raising my brows in question. She winced. “I got the call that she passed away this afternoon. Massive coronary.”

My heart stuttered to a halt. I’d just talked to her this morning after she’d been admitted the night before for chest pains. I smoothed a hand over my mouth. “Damn.”

Dr. Reynolds squeezed my arm. “She loved you, Cal. I’m sorry.”



Nodding, I sighed through my nose and turned to the printer.

Fuck. Losing patients—especially when so many of mine were of advanced ages—should have rolled off my back, but it never did. It always hit me in the chest like a punch to my solar plexus. “I’ll find time to call her daughter later. Did they send over records?”

Dr. Reynolds patted my back as she passed. “She’ll like that, and yeah, I put them on your desk for you.”

Michael shifted a look my way from where he stood at the end of the desk. “Sorry, Cal.”

Nodding, I plucked the three sheets of paper out of the printer at the back of the station and scooped up my brown medical bag. “Onward, right?”

I backed away to go to my office, and with cheeky insistence, Michael added, “Not without dates, bro.”

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I rolled my eyes. “We’ll all have to persevere, I guess. Hey, I’ll be your date.”

Michael lowered his mask to glare at me with dark brown eyes. “Smooth talker is not my type.”

“Ouch,” I grinned. I nodded to a mother bringing her toddler in for what looked like a cold if the globs of snot on the kid’s face were any indication, and then I swerved into my office. A small stack of files waited in the middle of it, and that was to be expected. Usually, when one of my patients went to the hospital or saw another provider, I received a report about the incident. I also had patients who needed to update their medical files which needed to be reviewed at the end of the day.

I ignored them for now, knowing I would have time after my house calls to get the boring paperwork portion of my job done. It made for long hours, but as the disaster with Kiss-Met had perfectly highlighted, I didn’t have anyone to go home to, anyway.

Depressingly.

That brought to mind startled, blue-gray eyes behind tortoiseshell glasses. I scowled at the memory. Dr. Coldwell. Doctor she may be, but expert in her field, she is not. I couldn’t believe she had actually run from me. What kind of professional did that? For that matter, what kind of professional did such a shitty job in the first place? Heat simmered in my blood, and I threw my bag onto my desk more forcefully than I’d meant to.

I had half a mind to march back to that building and hunt her down again if only to vent my frustrations. At first, I’d wanted to know what software they were using and

why they claimed to have someone with a doctorate making matches, but oh no. They did have a doctor. She was just incompetent.

And pretty. Really pretty. Absurdly, devastatingly cute, in fact. If I hadn't been so livid with her, I probably would have been brought up short by those bouncy, shoulder-length curls and blinking, animated eyes. Fortunately, my rage had carried me through, and I hadn't let the fact that she had a bright ring of yellow around her pupils stop me from threatening her.

Stop thinking about her eyes.

Bringing myself back to the present, I threw a few paper records into the side pocket of my medical bag and then snatched it back up to take it to the supply room. I had two elderly patients who needed lidocaine injections in arthritic joints, one disabled patient who was due for a bi-yearly checkup, and a few hospice patients for my rounds this afternoon. Fortunately, that didn't usually require a multitude of supplies, and that was what made my at-home initiative so doable, really. There were so many patients who needed at-home care, and all it took was a provider who gave a damn.

I headed down the hallway, passing exam rooms as I went, and scanned the supply list I'd printed out along with my patients. As I passed by the rounded desk at the nurses' station, Harper gasped from where she sat in front of one of the computers. "Cal! I just got an email."

I paused mid-step. "Okay?"

"From Kiss-Met." Her eyebrows bounced suggestively above her monitor screen. "They're changing the proctor for the speed dating session tonight."

I hated speed dating. Or... I hated the idea. I'd never actually been to one, but they sounded atrocious. Wasn't that basically what we did in college? "Hi, my name is

Cal. I like birdwatching and photography. Yes, unironically. Sure, I'll get the check." My entire undergrad had been one blur of speedy dates that either ended in a one-night stand or with one party more interested than the other and a resulting awkward text later. I'd gotten to the point where I couldn't remember how many partners I'd been with and how many dates I'd been on, but I was definitely more of an expert at dating than abysmal Dr. Possibly Blind in Both Eyes for Missing Obvious Facts Coldwell.

Medical school had brought a couple of long-term girlfriends into the mix, but we had all been doctors. We'd all been too busy to give the time and attention to the other person they deserved, and in the end, my interest in the practice of dating had fizzled out before I'd completed my residency.

I leaned on the desk and peered at her monitor. "So?"

"So," Harper replied with a flare of her fake lashes. "It's the doctor. She's going to be there organizing this entire fucking event. How does that make sense?"

My eyelids cinched together. "Really. They listed Dr. Coldwell as the proctor for the event?"

"Yes." Harper clicked the link, and then she let her fingers hover over the black keyboard. "I can't decide if I want to go out of morbid curiosity or if this is a terrible idea all around."

A devious smile crept up to my eyes. "RSVP for me. I'm going to pay Dr. Coldwell a visit."

Chapter three

Ruth

Ruth

The ice in my frappe had melted by the time I worked up the courage to speak with Janice. It was probably just as bad of an idea to speak with Janice about resigning as it had been to drink a sugary frappe on an empty stomach before lunch, but here we were. I'd made both choices, and there was no going back now.

My stomach gurgled unhappily as I approached Janice's office down the hall from mine. Although our company operated on the second floor of a corporate building, Janice had turned her personal space into a strange oasis that defied time or style. It was, quite simply, Janice. She had placed knickknacks and travel souvenirs from around the world on every available surface, and textiles in bright hues and busy patterns hung from the walls in the form of shawls, rugs, and tapestries. Soft lighting haloed her long, dark hair as she turned my way from where she stood in front of her standing desk.

Even though it was like entering a gentle counselor's office, I couldn't help the dread that tugged at my heart. I gave her a weak wave. "Hey."

"Dr. Coldwell." Janice removed her bright blue reading glasses and balanced them on her head like a headband. "How can I help you? Have you been outside today? The breeze is marvelous. I rather expect it to bring something fortuitous in its wake, don't you?"

Janice was so nice but so weird sometimes. "Eh," I laughed nervously. "Yeah, totally. Hey, can I talk to you?"

"Always," Janice smiled, spreading her arm out to invite me over to the pair of padded damask chairs in the corner. Janice had a very "I eat sugarless granola" kind of vibe to her appearance, with sun-tanned wrinkles devoid of makeup and a thin build she swathed in flowing floral fabrics. Her long, gray-streaked hair hung straight

down her back, and the bangles on her arm tinkled as she let her arm fall. She came to join me, and we both sat in the chairs.

I eyed a particularly creepy-looking bronze monkey statue over her shoulder before forcing my nervous gaze to settle on my boss. “I think I need to resign,” I said without preamble.

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Janice lifted her peppered eyebrows to her hairline. “Oh.”

I pushed at the edge of my glasses’ rims nervously. “I really love working here. You’ve all been so welcoming, and it’s a really cool job. I just...” I felt my features crumple in defeat. “I’m really bad at it.”

“Well,” Janice said, crossing her legs and folding her weathered hands over her knee. “I am surprised to hear such a defeatist statement from you, Dr. Coldwell. It couldn’t have been easy to obtain a doctorate.”

It hadn’t been easy, but then again, I’d been good at it. Even though I’d chosen a degree that ended up being a mistake, I still excelled at academics and enjoyed the challenge. Matchmaking felt like doing a 5000-piece puzzle in the dark... with my hands tied. “I’m sorry,” I replied honestly. “I don’t mean to sound defeatist. I’m more of a realist, I think. And realistically, this is not my strong suit.”

Janice seemed to consider that, and her dark brown eyes looked up in thought. “Hm, I see. Gemma did express some concern initially. She said you might struggle to acclimate, but,” she hooked me with a direct stare, “she also believed strongly that you would eventually excel.”

My writhing insides squirmed to the point of discomfort. “I wish I could live up to what she thought of me. I really do.”

“You have a partner, don’t you?” Janice asked with a tilt of her head. “Gemma indicated that your experience with your personal relationship might make up for your professional inexperience.”

My stomach seized, cramping so hard I thought I might keel over. Gemma, what did you do? I thought with a mental groan. “Oh, uh,” I hedged unhelpfully.

“She didn’t specify if this was a sexual partner or—”

“Husband,” I blurted suddenly. The idea that Gemma was toting me as some kind of sexual goddess with a partner made me want to sink into the ground. But then what I’d said sank into my brain, and I realized it was so much worse. A husband? Oh my God. I did not just say that.

“Husband,” Janice smiled placidly. “Wonderful. Tell me, Ruth, do your husband and you like all the same things?”

I literally did not know the answer to that question. Were we supposed to? Suddenly I felt like I was a third grader taking a calculus exam. I studied Janice’s expression, took into account what she did for a living, and tried to remember some of the things Gemma had tried to impart to me when she’d first trained me. “No?” I guessed.

“Of course not,” Janice agreed with a sage nod. “You know very well that well-matched couples do not always have the exact same interests. In fact, some of the most successful pairs have opposite interests and personalities that complement each other.”

Okay, so I’ve literally been doing the opposite of what I should have been doing. Cool, cool. “Right,” I agreed blankly.

“It’s the same with our careers,” Janice said with a gentle curve of her thin lips. “Sometimes the things that seem like the last thing we need are precisely what our soul longs for.”

“Well, maybe,” I said uncertainly.



“I am so very intrigued to meet this soulmate of yours,” Janice said with a sharp twinkle in her dark eyes.

My stomach gave another crunching lurch. “Uh, yeah. He’s...great.”

“Let’s give it until the company picnic at the end of the month,” Janice said with some finality in her voice. She stood, effectively ending our conversation. “You can bring that lovely husband of yours, and hopefully by then, some of this doubt will have resolved itself.”

I couldn’t even resign effectively. Unbelievable. “Okay,” I agreed reluctantly. “Sure, I’ll keep at it for the month.”

Janice led me to her doorway like a steady stream leading a stray twig to its inevitable destination. “I believe in you, Dr. Coldwell. And I look forward to making your husband’s acquaintance. I’m certain it will be illuminating.”

I wasn’t fired. I was screwed.

## Chapter four

Ruth

Ruth

I stopped the microwave at one second, popping open the door with the flat, white button below the keypad, and a waft of spaghetti and meatballs drifted out in a cloud of steam. I hit the “cancel” button to clear the one second left on the timer, and then blowing away the puff of steam, I took the plastic container out with a pair of potholders. I peered at the yellow spaghetti that was swimming in a thin red sauce, and I thought longingly of Chinese with Gemma. Frozen “healthy style” meals were

starting to get really old.

But with me proctoring the speed dating session, I didn't have time for dumplings and lo mein with my best friend, so I took my little frozen dinner to the couch and set it on the coffee table. My one-bedroom apartment had a long rectangle for a living space, with the kitchen to my right and a glass patiodoor to my left. There was just enough room for a beat-up pleather couch and a coffee table with a TV mounted on the wall across from me.

I checked my smartwatch. 5:43. The speed dating thing started at seven, so I had half an hour to eat and sink into dejected contemplation before being forced to oversee what had to be all nine circles of Dante's Inferno. The diffuser on the small side table to my left released a puff of lavender-scented steam, and I looked around my tiny apartment with the same dispirited apathy I felt about my future in general. The apartment was empty and so were my prospects.

They were maudlin thoughts, I knew that. But as I slurped up bland, lukewarm spaghetti, I couldn't help but despair at what the hell was going on with my life. I was twenty-eight, I lived alone, and I had so much student debt, I was surprised FedLoan wasn't coming for my kneecaps. I had a doctorate in a useless field I'd been fleeced into pursuing, and I had a job I was unqualified for and genuinely sucked at. And I hadn't even been able to resign from it. Janice's warm, comforting smile swam in my memories. Maybe it wouldn't be the end of the world if I took her advice and kept trying. If she wasn't going to fire me, then the only other option was to put more effort into it.

I let my head fall back against the couch, and staring at the slowly turning ceiling fan, I chewed the rubbery spaghetti. One thing was for sure—I had been an idiot to cover for Gemma. How the hell had she thought that would be a good idea to tell Janice I had a partner? Me. A husband. No one wasthatstupid. I could carbon date a three-hundred-year-old manuscript, but ask me to date a human man, and I went brain

dead.

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Sighing, I shoveled the rest of the pasta into my mouth, swigged it down with diet cola, and heaved my tired body off the couch. “Quit moping,” I told myself out loud. I could do this—people could learn to do just about anything, and if fifteenth-century monks could figure out how to make stunning filigree with pencil lead made of soft silver, then I could oversee a damn speed dating session. Nothing to it. I totally had this.

I changed out of my work clothes and into something I hoped would make me approachable but still look like I was in charge of this shindig. Not that I looked unapproachable ordinarily. I had the weird, off-putting personality of a cat on shrooms, but my face didn’t match that vibe. I had a heart-shaped face and high, apple-round cheeks that sloped down to a “cute” chin that made me look younger than I was. I also had naturally curly hair, and I kept it shoulder-length, which only added to the Shirley Temple aura my look gave off. I was also embarrassingly short, and people were liable to step right on me if they weren’t looking.

I dressed my curvy, short frame in a long, gray and white floral skirt, and I tucked in the gauzy black shirt with a belt cinched around my waist. I thought it looked appropriately... romantic. Or geeky. Hard to say for sure. Then I hurried out of the back sliding door connected to my living room because my car was parked across the bright green lawn of the apartment complex. The hot air stole my breath as I hurried across the grass, and sweat gathered under my arms and breasts almost immediately. Summer could go straight to Hell where it belonged. I was a winter girl. Cozy, snowy days and warm coffee trumped sweltering heat and lemonade, or whatever summer people liked. My tits were too big for summer.

I hit the key fob and adjusting the strap of my eight-year-old laptop bag that doubled

as a purse for me, I prepared myself to enter the oven-like conditions of a car in July. As I did, my phone buzzed. I pulled it out of the pocket of my skirt—I literally refused to own things that didn't have pockets—and I saw Gemma's face on the screen. "Hey, what's up?" I asked as I slid into the seat.

"Ew, why are you answering?" she asked caustically. "Just text me back like a normal person."

"You called me," I reminded her, pushing the ignition button on my white 2016 Sorento.

"Yeah, but that was to get your attention because you're ignoring the twenty-three videos I sent you." I could hear water running in the background, and I assumed she was making her dinner. Her giant Doberman, ironically named Mini, barked twice.

"I'm busy saving my job, remember?" I craned my neck, looking over my shoulder to make sure there were no cars coming before I backed out of the parking spot.

"Excuses. Watch the stupid TikToks I sent you or I'm going to dig a tunnel between our apartments, sneak into your house, duct tape your eyes open, and force you to laugh at my sterling humor," she replied with deranged seriousness.

I pulled the phone away from my ear to stare at it for a second before I said, "The shelter really should have put you down when they had the chance."

She cackled maniacally, and I hung up before she caused me to have an accident on the way to the stupid speed dating thing. I actually might rather have my eyes duct-taped open than do this thing.

I navigated downtown Eugene, rolling past verdant, mature trees that lined nearly every street, and as I turned into the historical district, I admired the lush greenery

that the city had hung from pots and allowed to vine along shops and small businesses. The Northwest was known for being rainy and dreary, but Eugene defied that stereotype and bloomed full of color and life. It was what had drawn me to it initially—that, and Gemma. With nowhere else to go after my failure of a research assistant gig, I hadn't had many choices.

I found a parking garage that was within walking distance of the pub we'd rented out for the event, and while I walked there, I turned over the risks and benefits of slamming back a couple of green tea shots before facing this thing. I was still undecided when I found the pub nestled between two brownstone buildings. When I opened the door and found a crowd of clients already gathered around the bar at the back, I made the only logical decision at that moment. I was definitely getting tipsy.

I met our employee, Scarlet, at the back of the pub where the floor had been raised and housed six small tables. She had already set place cards with numbers on each table, and she paused with her tablet in hand to wave brightly at me. "Hi, Dr. Coldwell!"

Scarlet had a sturdy bone structure and like six inches of height on me, but her voice sounded like she'd sucked on a helium balloon, and the dichotomy of that did frizzy things to my brain whenever I talked to her. She sounded like a princess and looked like she could bench press me for a light workout.

"Hey, Scarlet," I smiled wanly. "Where should I set up? We'll be inputting matches into our website, right?"

"Right," she smiled brightly, and a piece of mint green gum peeked out from between her white molars. She had her short, blond hair straightened, and it followed the line of her jaw at a sharp angle. "I've already organized the ladies to sit at designated tables, and each man has their starting point so they can work their way around the room clockwise. All you need to do is welcome everyone, introduce yourself

as Doctor Love,” she winked at that, “and get them going. And field any issues, obviously.”

Easy. No problem. I went to the bar, ordered a green tea shot, choked it back, and buzzed my way back to the tables. Scarlet had put my things over by a small table in the very back of the room where a pair of utilitarian double doors led to the employee area. I sat down for a few minutes, only to jump back up and head back to the bar. One more shot.

Easy. No problem.

Eventually, the clients all gathered and checked in, and I kept myself busy double-checking that they had paid to be here and were already in our system as clients so we could correctly match them up when they “hit it off” with a prospective date. I realized that much of this really might be data-driven, and with that in mind, I felt myself relaxing a fraction. I opened my laptop and focused on the clerical aspect of managing the evening.

And I took a couple more shots. Or a few. I couldn’t remember.

The pub had been built like many of its kind with low lighting, dark, polished wood touches, and soft leather on the seats and booths. It wasn’t overly large, but for the twenty-four clients we had coming for the speed dating session, it was just the right size. Half of the girls would be seated on the lower level where a pool table and the bar were, and the other half would join me on the top level where a short set of stairs led up to a cozy dining area haloed by Edison bulbs and sports memorabilia.

I waited until all but two of the guests were checked in, and after swallowing a few mouthfuls of water—why was my mouth so dry?—I adjusted my glasses and headed over to the bar area.

Scarlet gestured for everyone to gather so we could start. When they were all around the bar, I came to stand at the top of the stairs where the higher level of the floor gave me a good vantage point to welcome them to the event. With two dozen eyes fastened on me, and some of them already whispering and joking with each other, I cleared my throat. “Hi everyone. We’re so glad you could... make it. To this thing you paid for.”

A nervous chuckle rippled through the guests, and I joined them. What had I been so worried about? This was nice. These people were nice. My skin felt nice. “How many of you have never done this before?” I asked. More than half of them raised their hands, and I gave them a self-deprecating smile. “Same.” More laughter, and I felt my nerves unwinding a bit more. Or maybe that was the three shots I’d knocked back. Wait, four? “I’m sure you all know me as Dr. Love, as our website calls me.”

Lots of them nodded, and I could have honestly kicked myself for letting Kiss-Met make such a ridiculous claim on my behalf. These people looked so nice. How many times had I thought the word “nice?” “My real name is Ruth, and I...” I hesitated, my thoughts doing a noodle dance like those wacky inflatable men in front of car dealerships. The bell over the door tinkled, and two more guests entered a bit late. “Well, I’m here to help you. However I can,” I finished.

Some of the girls looked relieved beneath the layers of their makeup and nerves. I gestured to Scarlet, “And this is Scarlet. She handed out cards to each of you, and she’ll explain how this works.”

The bar swam a little, and I tried once more to remember exactly how many shots I had kicked back, but the details were getting increasingly fuzzy. Wait, wasn’t I here to save my job? Shit.

Shaking my head, and then righting my glasses again, I smiled at three girls who came up the stairs to find their tables, then figured it was probably better if I got out of the way. I stumbled back, smiling a little too gooey at each of them, and then I



found my way back to my table behind them all. Everyone looked so friendly. Why were all the girls so pretty? I wished I could look that pretty. I had no idea how they did it.

I fell heavily into my seat, and then with my chin leaning on my hand, I watched with dazed interest as the men took their seats across from the women and Scarlet rang a bell. One of the men, who was wearing a red flannel button-down, glanced over his date's shoulder and gave me a friendly smile. I wiggled my fingers at him. He looked nice, too.

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Scarlet found me and slid a Long Island iced tea my way. “Hey, nice job! They seem really happy.”

“Ooh, drinks,” I gushed before taking a sip.

Scarlet smiled broadly. “It’s so cool to see you in a chill atmosphere, Dr. C. We’re all a little afraid of you, honestly.”

“Afraid?” I scoffed, putting a hand to my chest. “Of me?” I pinched my thumb and forefinger together and stuck one of my eyeballs between the gap. “I’m like this big. What’s scary?”

Scarlet laughed. “True. Okay, I’m going to walk around and make sure everyone is okay. You good?”

I took an enormous gulp of the drink I barely tasted. “So good,” I slurred.

Laughing again, she sauntered away, and I admired the way her red dress swished around her long legs. So cool to be tall. I wished I was tall. Why did I have to be a hobbit? How was that fair?

I watched the couples talk, some of them stilted and nervous, and others open and laughing freely as they chatted. I admired every one of them. I didn’t think I was cut out for the battleof love, but these people were determined, and I had to see the beauty in that. Maybe I should be matching them based on how they laughed. I peered at the couple closest to me, pushing my glasses further up my nose with my knuckle. The guy in plaid was listening intently, nodding along while the girl talked.

He had dark blond hair he'd combed to the side, and he seemed quite attractive.

His eyes shifted to me suddenly, and his features changed from polite disinterest to keen intrigue. Or I was just very drunk, maybe.

The bell rang through the pub, and chairs scraped against hardwood floors as the men all stood to move on to their next table. The plaid guy hesitated, passing by my table. His steps faltered, and with his gaze trained on me, I watched in shock as his body angled my way. Suddenly, a large, muscled form plunked down in the seat opposite from me.

I turned a startled look at the stranger at my table. Only he wasn't a stranger. Dr. Reed placed his large palms on the lacquered table, his summer green eyes fastened on me. He was still wearing the same sage green button-down I'd seen him in earlier, and he looked perfectly composed and put together. His lips curved into a wry smile. "Well, if it isn't Dr. Love."

I blinked at him, stupefied. "Callum?"

"Oh, I don't think we're on a first-name basis yet, Dr. Coldwell," he replied with simmering anger in his sharp expression. "It is 'Doctor,' isn't it?"

"Yes, you are," I replied stupidly. My brain buzzed like a ball of insect wings, and I blinked several more times, just in case my head had conjured him, and he wasn't real.

Callum's eyes fell to the glass between my hands, and then back to my eyes. "Right. But are you?"

My mouth felt numb, and I put my fingers to my lips to make sure it was still there. "Am I what?"

His dark eyebrows tilted up with a fraction of amusement. Slowly, he reached across the table, took hold of my glass, and slid it away from me. “I was hoping this would be a good time to talk, but now I’m thinking maybe... not.”

“Hey,” I scowled at the amber liquid as it drifted away from me. “Thass’stealing.”

“Hm,” he replied, his gaze narrowing on me. “Dr. Coldwell, aren’t you in charge of this event?”

“Correct,” I said, lifting my chin, and adjusting my glasses.

His lips twitched like they were fighting a smile, and I admired how bronze-y and full they were. “Then why are you completely plastered?”

I gasped. “Esscuse me?” I looked around the room, expecting someone to come to my defense. “Plas’stered?” I slurred. Oh. That did sound a little sloshy.

“I like that one because you can never say it when you’re shitfaced,” he grinned. His teeth were so straight. And white. And his dark copper hair was all long on top and swoopy before it faded away to a clean, short buzz along the bottom. Pretty.

I shook my head, straightening my spine and leaning away from him. “What do you want, essact—exscactl—essactly?” I asked sloppily.

“I wanted you to take responsibility for the horrible date you sent me on, and I wanted you to fix it and find me someone who might be willing to at least act like my girlfriend so I can take her to dinner with my parents this Friday.” Callum’s bright green eyes traveled all over me, from my curls to my blouse where I’d spilled a green tea shot. Wait, had I taken five shots? Jesus, I couldn’t remember.

“Now, I’m thinking I might be out of luck,” he finished. He looked so goddamn

amused. What was so funny? “How much did you have to drink?”

I glared at him in affronted outrage. “You’re a ver-ry rude doctor, Callum.”

“Cal,” he corrected. I swiped for my drink, and he easily slid it out of reach again. “Who’s driving you home after you’re done... working?” His lips flattened together, like he was tamping down another smile.

I put my hands on either side of my warm face, pressing hard. “I’m working.” The dawning realization that I was, in fact, totally hammered while at a work event finally sank into my obtuse brain. “Oh, I’m working,” I repeated despairingly.

Cal nodded in mock solemnity. “Poorly.”

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“Oh no,” I whispered loudly, looking around for Scarlet. Had she noticed? “Oh no. This’s bad.”

“I don’t know, it seems pretty great to me,” he grinned puckishly. “Your glasses are crooked.”

I gasped again, straightening them with both hands. I held them in place like they were trying to pedal off my face. “You shh-ould go,” I slurred with wide eyes.

Cal shook his head once, his handsome features pulled into a “yeah right” face.

“I shh-ould go,” I mumbled, scrunching my face in thought. I pushed my chair away from the table, intending to stand and go... somewhere. Anywhere but here. But my chair suddenly sucked up hard against the table with a scrrtch. It pressed my stomach against the edge of the table, and I slapped my hands to the surface to steady myself. I hinged a confused look down at the legs. Cal had reached under the table with his feet and hooked them around the legs, pinning my chair in place. I rotated an open mouth his way. “’Scuse you.”

Keeping one foot hooked around the leg of my chair, Cal sat up and leaned his elbow on the table. His eyes flashed with humor as he leveled his gaze with mine. “I’ve just decided who I’m taking home tonight.”

The speed dating bell dinged like a wedding chime.

Chapter five

Cal

Cal

Somehow, I'd missed it the first time. I'd known the matchmaker was beautiful the first time I'd seen her. I'd taken note of her gray-blue eyes with the ring of sunshine yellow around her irises that reminded me of sunflowers. I'd known she had curly, short hair, but I hadn't realized how soft and springy it was, how it bounced with every little movement of her heart-shaped face. I hadn't realized how captivating she was. Or, maybe I hadn't wanted to acknowledge how strongly it affected me.

As she stared at me with half-lidded eyes and a dopey, confused expression pulling at her features, I found that I couldn't look away. Her glasses were sliding down her straight little nose again, and her cheeks were flushed from intoxication in the most squishable way. I tried not to stare, but she wasso drunk, she didn't seem to notice anyway. She was staring back at me just as cluelessly.

"Home with you?" she echoed. Her lips were that shade of pink that brought to mind English roses and bubblegum, and she had them parted in question. I loved it when brainy types got drunk—they did the most random things. And I'd gotten drunk with a lot of smart people in medical school.

"Well," I clarified, letting my eyes bounce all over her short frame. "Either you're going home with me, or I'm going with you. I'm not going to send you out there on your own, that's for sure."

"Oh,home with you," she snickered suddenly, like she'd forgotten completely that she was sitting across from one of her dissatisfied clients. "I thought you meant, you know," she rolled her eyes, smiling in a self-deprecating way, "homewith you." Like it was absurdly funny that a man would want that.

I knew for a fact that the blond guy behind me would take her up on that second offer in a heartbeat. He'd been about to before I'd cut in. Annoyingly. My reaction to that didn't make a lot of sense, especially having known her for all of thirty caustic seconds beforehand, but that look in his eye had kind of pissed me off. And it had spurred me on to ignore my speed date companion and sit with Dr. Coldwell instead.

Now I was glad I had. She was in a room full of slavering, single men, she was drunk as a skunk, and she looked tastier than a puff pastry in a room full of sugar addicts. "I think I have to change my mind," I said to her, leaning my cheekbone on my fist. "We should be on a first-name basis. Since I'm taking you home and all."

She snorted inelegantly before folding her torso over the table in an effort to reach her Long Island iced tea. "Sure, Cal. Whatever you say." She flopped, stretching her fingers out for the glass, but her hilariously short arms didn't come anywhere near reaching it.

I inched it away from her anyway. "And yours is?"

"Thas a long islan' ice' tea," she slurred, turning her head to hook me with an irritated scowl.

"Not the drink. Your name." I picked it up and took a sip. "Oh God." I pulled a face, angling away from it. "Jesus Christ, did they put the entire stevia factory in this?"

She snorted again and then dissolved into a laugh. Still folded over the table with her round ass hanging off the edge, she let her head fall onto her arms. "That was funny. You're nice. This is very nice."

I peered at the glass. "What else did they put in this?"

She gasped, picking up her head suddenly. It sent her curls flying everywhere, and



they settled over her cheeks. "I'm working."

"So you said. No offense, but I don't think you gave great dating advice sober," I pointed out dryly. "You might need to abandon the effort."

She rotated an irritated look my way. "That was offense... I take... I have offense. Is not hard. There's jus' one date, then two, then you run all the bases and," she made an explosion sound and mimed it with her hand. "Homerun."

"Wow, Shortstop, a baseball allegory. That was deep." I half-stood, and putting a hand on her slight shoulder, I maneuvered her so she sat back in her chair. "Drink some water," I suggested.

"You don't understand," she insisted, and her hands framed her face again like they had before. Her cheeks went cherry red, and her long fingers pressed her glasses against her eyes like she was going crazy. "They'll fire me."

"Who, you? The Love Doctor?" I teased ruthlessly. "No way."

"I'm not a love doctor," she whispered loudly, her long lashes batting in distress. She caught my gaze in a panicked kind of way. "And I don' haf a husband."

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My brows puckered together. “A husband?”

She nodded solemnly and a little too exaggerated to pass as sober. “I told my boss I’m married.” She made a distressed little sound and then let her face fall into her hands. “I’m not married.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed. “So, let me get this straight, Dr. Love. You told your boss you had a husband to prove how good you are at relationships, but you’re both bad at relationships and single? And you got yourself trapped by your own lie?”

She nodded, moaning into her fingers. “Not even my boss’ friend wanted me. If he didn’t marry me, who would?”

Ouch. That didn’t sound great. “I’m sure you’re very, er, lovable. In your own way,” I assured her.

“I’m so fired,” she moaned. “I’m—I’ll lose my ‘parment. Oh my God.”

“There were a lot of ways I thought this conversation would go,” I said, mostly to myself. “But this was not one of them.”

Suddenly, the employee wearing a red floral dress sashayed up to us, and her interest ping-ponged between us. “Hello! I’m Scarlet, one of the Kiss-Met associates.”

I held out a hand. “Cal.”

She shook it. “I recognize you. You came in looking for Ruth earlier today, didn’t

you?”

Ruth, huh? I cocked a look toward Ruth. “Sure was.”

Ruth made a strangled kind of squeaking sound. “Totally.”

A harebrained, ridiculous idea zinged through my mind suddenly. It was absurd, and sober Ruth likely would not thank me for it. But it occurred to me that whatever issues Dr. Coldwell was having might be solved in the same way my own would be. It was massively unethical, and I was cognizant, even in that lightning-quick moment I made the decision, that I was entrapping her into a scheme that leaned heavily in my favor. Still, I simply couldn’t pass this up. I’d never been accused of being a saint.

“Actually, I’m her husband,” I said easily. Ruth choked on air, covering her mouth and gasping for breath. I stood and went to stand next to her, patting her on the back. “She texted me and told me she hasn’t been feeling well.”

“Oh!” Scarlet’s eyes lit up with understanding. “So that’s why you were looking for her.”

“Absolutely,” I lied, still patting Ruth on the back.

Ruth sat up straight, and even in my peripheral vision I saw her mouth opening like she might contradict me. I squeezed her shoulder hard. “Ow!” she growled.

“She doesn’t want to leave.” I leaned forward, lowering my voice conspiratorially. “Doctors, am I right? Workaholics, all of them.” Straightening, I gave Scarlet my warmest, A+ bedside manner smile. “Do you think it would be alright if I got her home?”

“Oh, for sure,” Scarlet said with a wave of her hand. “I can handle things from here.”

“Thank you so much.” I leaned to the side, and with alarming ease, I was able to lift Ruth under her arms and out of her chair. She was so short. Like a pocket-sized nerd with cute hair. “Come on, sweetie.”

She let out another outraged sound, but Scarlet was already hurrying off to ring the bell after the timer on her phone went off. “Feel better, Dr. C!”

“What?” Ruth asked me, pulling against my hold and angling away from me. But whether she meant to or not, she was leaning against me the next second, and her legs wobbled beneath her like a newborn foal.

Judging by the rate she had gone from silly tipsy to fumbling drunk, I estimated she had maybe an hour where her alcohol levels would continue rising. Then they would fall, and the puking would start. I guided her past curious, askance glances from the talking couples. “Play along, Dr. C. I’m saving your job. Which is pretty nice of me,” I went on, helping her down the stairs to the lower level, “considering that you ruined my week.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” she mumbled, swerving and then apparently giving up and leaning against my side heavily.

“Did you even get this job on purpose?” I muttered, wrapping an arm around her waist and dragging her along beside me.

She snorted out a laugh, and with her head resting on my arm, she rolled a dopey look up to me. “How do you guess?”

“It’s my stunning intellect,” I replied wryly. “Whoa, watch that step. It goes down.” We reached the front door, and the concrete step fell away sharply. I hitched her up against me as she stumbled out. Before closing the door, I looked over my shoulder to find Harper, who had come with me to keep the male and female numbers even. But

she was deep in conversation with a dude who had a man bun, so I figured I would text her later.

“It’s still light out?” Ruth demanded as we stumbled into the quiet historical street. The heady scent of magnolias and morning glories drifted through the thick, humid air, but the waning sun had sucked some of the heat from the day, and the shade from the mature trees along the sidewalk dispelled the worst of the lingering warmth.

“It’s like 7:30. Yeah, it’s still light out.” I guided her to the right where I’d parked my SUV. “What’ll it be, Shortstop? My house or yours?”

“Oh boy,” she groaned, grasping my shirt in her hands and pitching awkwardly against me as we walked. “Do you have aspirin?”

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“Yeah, Ruth, I’m a doctor. I have aspirin.”

“Ohright,” she patted my chest and nodded. “Doctorddoctor.”

“That is my name,” I replied seriously. “Dr. Doctor. At your service.”

“‘Do no harm,’ right? So, you won’ hurt me?” she asked with a pout of her pretty features and a finger pointed in my face.

I wrapped my fingers around her digit and lowered her arm like I was pointing the barrel of a gun down. “I’m mildly to moderately concerned by how little you’re fighting your kidnapping, but yes, ‘do no harm’ is a thing. You’re safe with me.”

“Sounds legit,” she mused.

We reached my black SUV, and my watch triggered it to unlock and start as I hauled her around to the passenger side. “Hey, don’t puke on my seats,” I said as I opened the door for her.

“I do not puke,” she declared primly. “I’m not like other drunk girls.”

“You’re a medical miracle,” I drawled. Her soft, curvy body had all but gone limp during the short walk from the pub to my car, and I had to wonder what the hell would have happened to her if anyone else had noticed how sloshed she was. I thought about the eagle eyes on that blond guy, and a slither of anger wrapped around my ribs. Fucking prick.

AndstupidRuth. How old was she? She had to know better than to get wasted without a designated friend or driver therewith her.

Or at all.

I tried my best to ignore how warm and soft her body felt under my hands as I bent to help her into the car. Almost impossible. Her shape did that sexy, hourglass thing that made me want to bite something, and as I maneuvered her legs into the car, she leaned against me and pressed her full breasts against my bicep.

I gritted my teeth, willing my body to behave, and with deliberate care, I took her by the shoulders, pressed her into the black leather seat, and buckled the seatbelt around her. Her head lolled back, dimpled chin tilted to the side and pink lips parted. She ran her tongue along her lips, and I followed the motion with rapt attention. Jesus wept.

Maybe I wasn't the safe choice for her after all. I closed her door and went around to the other side to slide into the driver's seat. The air conditioning had kicked on as soon as the car had started, but I cranked it up and turned on the cooling function for both seats to combat the stifling heat. Ruth rolled her head to glance at me. "Where're you taking me again?"

"Your call. Do you have a roommate you want to call?" I tapped my car's display, fiddling with the volume on the podcast that had connected and started playing through the speakers.

"No," she waved her hand.

"Okay," I replied slowly, tapping the music app on the screen and looking for a song that might be neutral. "What's your address, then?"

"No way," she scowled, pointing a finger. "Nice try."

I rolled my eyes and tapped a “top hits” playlist. “Then, you’re coming home with me.”

“Are you a—a serial killer? Or foot fetish guy?”

I slowly rotated an incredulous look her way. “What exactly are you planning to do if I say yes to either of those?”

She considered that, her dark brown eyebrows tugging together and her mouth hanging open in thought. “Wear socks?”

“Yes, that should keep you from getting murdered. Good plan. For the record,” I put the car in reverse. “Don’t get into the cars of strangers when you’re drunk, Shortstop. They could have a foot fetish.”

“Oh,” she said distantly. Suddenly, she pointed to the silver logo on my dashboard. “Did you know they used to crush up dead people’s bones so the monks could make silverpoint paintings?”

I gave her a concerned side-eye. “I guess... it’s good they were dead people’s bones.”

She gave me a serious stare. “You can’t crush alive people’s bones.”

“I mean, you can,” I muttered, leaning my mouth against my hand and smiling as I pulled out into the flow of traffic. I made my way through town, glancing now and then at the sleepy passenger who had decided to slump in her seat and close her eyes. I wasn’t entirely sure what I was going to do with this woman, but I knew I was glad I hadn’t left her there to her own devices. She could have ended up with someone actually creepy. Although, admittedly, kidnapping a woman I barely knew and taking her to my house probably still fell under that umbrella.



As I left town and headed into the mountainous hills, Ruth's breathing grew deep and steady, accompanied by a soft snore as her head gradually fell back and her mouth hung open. I laughed softly to myself, smoothing my fingers over my lips. Whatever she'd drunk, she had clearly overestimated her tolerance level. The poor thing was going to be miserable in the morning. I could get some electrolytes in her system and give her whatever medicine I had on hand, but there wasn't much I could do to keep those alcohol levels from plummeting and wreaking havoc on her body.

The road tilted up at a sharp incline, and finally, I made a right turn into my driveway. The house had been built up the hill, surrounded by thick, mature trees and crawling plants, and I opened the garage on the bottom level. I'd bought this house five years ago because it reminded me of a tree house. The nine-year-old boy inside of me had really loved that idea. Made of pine planks, walnut finishes, and wrought iron balconies, it crept up the hill and stood tall among the trees.

Which, I realized as I stared at the dark iron stairs that led up two stories to the front porch... would be interesting. I hadn't bought the house with hauling drunk frenemies up the stairs in mind. I slid a look over to my passenger, and she inhaled with a snort before spreading her limbs out like she was hot.

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I squinted one eye, looking up in thought. Well, nothing for it, really. I got out, went around to her side, and opened her door. She almost slumped out of the open door, so I caught her with one arm around her shoulders, undid her seatbelt, and wiggled my right arm under her knees. I lifted her out of the car—not without some difficulty—and managed to get the door closed with my foot. It was like carrying several armfuls of wet pasta. She slid down as I carried her to the open garage door, and I hefted her back up, adjusting my grip on her body.

At least she was short. She didn't weigh much, either, but she started writhing around as I headed up the outside stairwell to my front door, and I had to stop several times to fix my grip on her jelly limbs. Whose idea had it been to buy a house that required a trek up thirty-two steps? The stairs also dipped back down before stretching out to a long balcony porch that really gave the house that treehouse feel high above the foliage.

I reached the front door, and carefully, I set her on her feet. “Hey, Shortstop. Can you stand?”

She mumbled something incoherent in response and slumped hard against me. Grunting, I kept my left arm wrapped around her tightly, trying in vain to ignore the fact that I basically had a palm full of her breasts, and I tapped in the code to my front door before swinging it open. I decided carrying her was easier than dragging her to the living room, so I swept her up again and maneuvered us both through the front entryway.

“Are you always this much of a pain?” I asked, my voice strained as I hefted her down a pine floor step and then down one more level as we went into the sunken

living room.

“Mhm,” she sighed into my neck. Her breath tickled my skin and sent goosebumps rippling over my arms.

Windows surrounded the space, looking out over a rolling ocean of pines and leafy trees beyond it. The house wasn't a normal configuration with one level and then stairs up to another. Because it had been built to follow the natural flow of the hill, the living room sat lower than the kitchen and dining room behind it.

It wasn't huge, either, but I didn't need huge. It was just me here, and I'd slowly acquired furnishings and decor that reflected how very little I cared about the practice. The couches were comfortable, overstuffed modular pieces that formed an L in the middle of the room, and across from it, my entertainment system took up the only wall that wasn't made of windows. I'd mounted a few shelves to display odds and ends I'd picked up while traveling, and a basic rug I'd found in a home improvement store covered the light pine floors. With the sun setting behind the trees, I found the living room dark and swathed in shadows.

Figuring Dr. Love wouldn't appreciate bright lights in her condition, I kept them off as I shuffled across the floors with her still in my arms. I lowered her carefully to the sofa, settling her head on a brocade pillow and making sure she stayed propped up on her side in case she did vomit. She huffed out a little sound of distress, and as I pulled away, she gripped the fabric on my sleeves. I paused, still bent over her. “Ruth? You okay?”

“Wassa door locked?” she mumbled.

“Usually,” I replied, smiling lightly. “That okay?”

“S'locked?” she asked, sitting up in concern. She looked around, bewildered. “Where

are we?"

"My house," I said, keeping my tone even and low. "I'm going to get you some medicine and water. Lie down. You're safe."

Ruth groaned, pressing her forehead to my arm. "Who're you again?"

"Admittedly, not anyone you like. Lean back. Relax. I'll be back in a second with water, okay?" I helped her back down to the pillows, and she puffed out a pained breath.

"Are you—are you going to lock me out?" she asked in a small voice.

I paused, hands on her arms, and I took in her shadowed, worried features. Her eyes shimmered even in the darkness, and she gripped my sleeves like she could keep me from leaving. Slowly, I lowered myself to my knees so our eyes were almost level. "What do you mean?"

She pulled me closer, gaze unfocused but full of worry. "Don't lock me out. Please?"

I massaged her upper arms, coaxing her to relax back against the pillows. "I'm not going to lock you out of my house, Ruth. You're safe here. I promise." What did she mean by getting locked out? Had she gotten drunk once and been locked out by a roommate by accident? If so, I could imagine that that would have been a bad experience. "Did you get locked out before?"

She nodded, eyes wide behind her glasses. "Please don't, okay?"

"Okay," I assured her quietly. My thumbs caressed her arms soothingly. "I won't."

Ruth sighed, letting her head fall back and her eyes close. "This couch is spinning."

“I’ll bet,” I muttered with a dollop of amusement. “I know you’re not all there, but I’m going to get you some blankets and some water, and you can sleep here as long as you need to. I’ll ream you out for being a terrible matchmaker when you’re less drunk. Sound like a deal?”

She nodded, eyes still closed. “Imma verra bad matchmaker.”

“Self-awareness is important,” I agreed, rubbing her arms again before standing. I stared down at her as she melted back into sleep. She had one arm draped over the belt that divided her black blouse and flowy skirt, and she looked like a librarian who had passed out between the shelves. I reached back down to remove her glasses, folding the temples carefully before setting them on the low table beside the couch.

Somehow, I’d ended up with Dr. Love on my couch. Only, as I watched her frown in her sleep, her curls spread around her head like a chocolate halo, I had to wonder at how she’d ended up with that title. If I had to guess, I’d say that Ruth Coldwell didn’t know much about being loved. If what she’d said in the last hour or so was any indication, I might even go so far as to say that she had been badly hurt by someone.

But, strangely, it wasn’t the doctor in me that suddenly wanted to heal her. It was something else entirely.

Chapter six

Ruth

Ruth

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Acaress of cold A/C air washed over my exposed legs, and I groaned, tucking them back under a plush blanket. When had I turned up the A/C so high? That was going to cost me a fortune. I ran my dry tongue over sandpaper lips and reluctantly forced one eye open. Bright sunlight stabbed my retina, and I immediately closed it again.

Wait, fuck. Am I hungover? I don't remember going out with Gemma. When did I drink? Better yet, why would I do that?

The rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee drifted under my nose, and that blipped on my "weird meter." I didn't live with anyone who made me coffee in the morning. I took stock of my body, and as a piercing headache beat against my temples, my memories suddenly caught up with my awareness.

I was not in my own house.

With a sharp intake of breath, I forced my eyes open and sat up. On a couch. A stranger's couch because I didn't recognize the nice, forest-green fabric. Or the rug. Or the wood slab coffee table. I looked around with sunlight poking holes in my brain and making my head slam in tune with my pulse. There were windows everywhere, and wherever I was, it looked like a nice, if slightly unused, living room.

"She's alive," a deep, male voice said from behind me.

I turned to my right, twisting around to look behind the couch. A familiar figure leaned against a wall two levels up and in front of what looked like a modern kitchen. Cal-the-angry-mismatched-doctor took a sip of his coffee from a black mug and watched me with quiet amusement over the rim. The morning light glinted off his

dark hair, illuminating the copper strands that gave him a uniquely sun-kissed appearance.

I looked around the elegant living room, bewildered. “What...?”

Cal crossed the polished pine floors, stepping down two of the levels and coming toward me with another black mug in his hand. “How much do you remember, Shortstop?”

“Shortstop?” I echoed. I glanced down at myself and saw that I was still wearing the same clothing I’d put on last evening, belt and all. An ultra fluffy, soft blanket in shades of gray and white had been tucked around me, and there were definite drool spots on his fancy-looking couch cushions.

“Yeah, you were babbling about bases and home runs, and it earned you a stupid nickname.” Cal handed me the steaming mug with his eyebrows raised a fraction.

I took the mug, my brain sprinting and tripping all over itself to catch up to what the hell was going on here. I let my eyes dance all over Cal’s tall, chiseled body. He was wearing a plain, white button-down shirt and dark blue tie with white specks that made it look like the night sky. He took another sip of his coffee, eyes watching me with quiet, expectant humor.

I dropped a look down to the coffee and then back to him. “Did you... did I make you so mad, that you kidnapped me?”

He choked on his coffee, spitting some of it back into the mug and coughing down the rest. “Ruth,” he laughed, still coughing.

“Because I know I goofed up, and I’m really sorry, but I really don’t think that’s a reason to break the la—”

“You think I kidnapped you?” he clarified, coughing again and wiping his incredulous smile.

“Well, how else did I get here?” I demanded, glancing around, and this time with sharper eyes. My clothing was still intact, right down to my faded, fraying leather sandals. I did have a killer headache, though, and my mouth was impossibly dry. I sipped in a shocked breath. “Wait, did I... did we...?” I stared at him in wide-eyed horror.

He gestured with his free hand, holding his dripping coffee away from his white shirt. “Did we what?”

I couldn’t even say the words. There was no way. No. Think. Come on, Ruth, don’t be an idiot. The handsome—admittedly pissy—doctor didn’t kidnap you so he could give you a cup of coffee in the morning. And he definitely didn’t sleep with you, you radish-brain. Think, think. What happened?

Cal’s pine-green eyes shimmered with mirth. “I didn’t sleep with you, Dr. Coldwell. You really can’t remember anything from last night?”

Right, we definitely hadn’t slept together. Shame, that. I dared another head-to-toe, one-second perusal of Dr. Reed’s kissable lips, wide shoulders, and trim waistline where he wore a black belt over charcoal gray dress pants that accentuated his perfect ass. I shook myself out of those thoughts. Focus. I tried to remember what had happened the night before. I’d had that speed dating thing. I thought I remembered that going well. But... then what?

“Drink your coffee,” Cal suggested, and half his mouth pulled up in amusement again.

Why was this guy always looking at me like I was so fucking funny? He’d done that



when he'd...Oh.Memories plunked across my brain like a sped-up game of Tiddlywinks.Ping, ping, ping. Every embarrassing thing I'd done, every stupid thing I'd said... all of it returned to me in a painful cascade of awkwardness. "Oh," I breathed.

His smile widened, revealing straight, white teeth. "There it is."

"Oh," I groaned, closing my eyes.

"I'm not sure if you remember the part where I made you drink like half a gallon of electrolytes, but I did try. How's your head?" Cal sat on the coffee table across from me, and his springgreen eyes took on an assessing look.

"Uhm," I gusted out, looking down at my coffee and not daring to meet his gaze directly.I remember a lot. None of them are great. I'm pretty sure I told him the thing about bone dust in silverpoint paintings. And accused him of having a foot fetish.

"Hey," his voice took on a breathy laugh. "Ruth, it's fine. The only reason I took you home is because I was worried about your, er, state of being."

I screwed up my features in a grimace. "Yeah. Appreciate it."

"Look at me," he ordered gently.

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Like my eyes were connected to his mouth, I couldn't help but obey. I peeked up reluctantly, only to find him considering me with a gentle smile. "It's fine," he reiterated. "Don't get me wrong; you're still a terrible matchmaker, but I wasn't going to abandon you in a bar with no one there to take you home."

I bit my lower lip. Hard. "Yeah."

"How's your head?" he asked again.

I took stock for a moment. "It hurts, but it's not the end of the world."

Cal nodded, like that was exactly what he'd expected. "I've got another tumbler in there with an electrolyte drink, but caffeine does sometimes help." He gestured to my mug with his. "So off you go."

I took a sip of the coffee and then blinked at it in surprise. "Oh, this is really good."

"You had a ton of stevia in your drink last night." Cal shrugged, taking another sip of his coffee. "I made an educated guess."

I tried not to feel some kind of way about that, but it was so... God. So cute. I drank another mouthful of coffee and then lowered it back to my lap, cupping the warm ceramic between my hands. "Well, uh," I looked around, searching for any thread of something that might make this less awkward. "Thank you. You really didn't have to do all this."

He shrugged again, standing. "Seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Honestly,

I thought you'd be a lot more pissed," he admitted ruefully.

"I assure you," I said with a flare of my eyes, "I'm a lot more preoccupied with the horror of getting sloppy drunk all over a complete stranger."

He made a sound like he was unsure. "I'm going to give you thirty seconds to remember the rest of what I said in the pub." He went back to the kitchen, glancing at me over his shoulder. "Don't hit me in the face. I have to see patients today."

I frowned, watching him go and wondering what the hell he was talking about. I thought back, sifting through memories like an old-school Rolodex and cataloging each one. I'd introduced myself and started the speed dating. Then, I'd watched the couples for a bit, and that was when my tipsy spiral had gone into a tailspin. Things got pretty fuzzy after that. Dr. Hotpants had sat down in front of me and taken my drink away. I realized then how lucky I was that he'd even noticed I was debilitatingly drunk. Scarlet hadn't even noticed.

"You came looking for Ruth earlier today, didn't you?"

"Actually, I'm her husband."

I gasped audibly, dropping my jaw and rounding a horrified stare to Cal. He returned my look with a chagrined half-smile. "And now we've caught up."

I couldn't seem to make my mouth close. A choked sound escaped my throat, and I turned to look forward, hoping my memory would change or correct itself. I had to be mistaken. He hadn't actually claimed to be my husband, had he? "You—" I sputtered finally, looking back to the doctor who was coming my way again with a red drink tumbler in his hands. "Tell me I'm remembering wrong."

"About claiming to be your husband?" he clarified with a placid eyebrow raise. He

reached me and held out the tumbler with the handle facing me.

“Please tell me you were joking.” I took the tumbler, glancing down at my coffee and realizing I now had two drinks I was in no mood to consume.

Cal bent down close to me, and his coconut shampoo wafted around us in a summery swirl. He plucked up my mug but stayed bent, so his bright green eyes stayed level with mine. “I was not.”

I tightened my hold on the tumbler, and my chin jutted out in an enraged tilt. “Are you kidding me right now? You told that to one of my coworkers?”

“I did,” he replied with unflappable calm. Straightening, he added, “because I’m a selfish bastard and I need you to play along with it.”

“You—what?” I shoved the blankets aside, struggling to untangle myself and put myself on—almost—equal footing with this psychopath. “You can’t just claim to be married to someone when they’re too drunk to argue. That’s,” I paused, almost too incensed to formulate coherent thoughts. “That’s unethical.”

“I like to think of it as opportunistic,” he replied before sipping his almost-empty coffee mug. “And you presented me with an opportunity I really couldn’t pass up.”

I finally won the war with my fluffy blankets and staggered to my feet. “You have to fix this.” I tipped too far to the side, and my vision swirled.

Cal whipped out a hand. He grasped my forearm and steadied me, pulling me closer to him. Warmth from his body lined the front of mine suddenly, seeping through the thin layer of my blouse. He held onto me, and the corner of his mouth quirked up. “And how do you suggest I do that?”

I went brain-dead. Those freckles across his nose were mesmerizing. Like paint splatter made of bronze. And why did he have such long, light eyelashes? What guy had a razor-sharp jawline and feathery eyelashes like that? “Um.” I swallowed, glancing down at where his hand had wrapped around my forearm. My body drifted into his, and I lifted my eyes back to his. “I don’t know,” I admitted finally.

His lips twitched, and he skittered a look up and down my facial features. “Here’s the opportunity part. I need a girlfriend. You need a husband.”

“Oh God,” I said, curling my lip. “This sounds horrible already.”

Cal didn’t release me, but he shifted his grip, his hand cupping my elbow and pulling me an inch closer, so we were just a breath away from being pressed up against each other. “Mine is short-term. I promise. Then you can do whatever you want with your fake husband when we’re done. Besides,” he angled a challenging look down to me. “You already had yourself in a pickle regardless.”

I had. It was true. I pursed my lips, pressed the cold tumbler to his chest, and pushed him two inches back. He leaned back, grinning as I tilted my chin up. “I had things handled, thanks.”

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“Oh, well,” he shrugged, releasing me and lifting his hand in surrender. “If you have it handled.”

“However,” I went on, holding his gaze steadily. “Since you already irreparably mired me in the muck pool of my own making,” I stepped away haughtily. “What did you have in mind, exactly?”

His answering smile could have put mischievous Hermes to shame. “I’m so glad you asked.”

Chapter seven

Cal

Cal

The wariness in Ruth’s eyes softened with a hint of hope. Based on what she’d said last night, I had figured she was in some dire straits. But the fast flip-flop from outraged to intrigued made me think that there was more to Dr. Coldwell and her strange job choice than met the eye. She regarded me with a lofty tilt of her chin from behind her glasses. “I’m listening.”

I pushed her tumbler back toward her. “Drink that. I’m already running late, and I assume you want to go home before you stumble back to your office?”

Ruth looked around. “What time is it?”

I checked my watch. “Six-thirty. I have rounds at the hospital at eight, so if we could multi-task...” I gestured to my left where the house trickled down the hill in gradual steps that led to a media room, guest room, and bathroom. “The bathroom is back there, and then I’ll explain everything while I take you home.”

Weariness tugged her eyelids into slits. “Oh. Well... yeah. Okay.” She glanced to her right where the wall of windows continued through a hallway and down to the guest area. “I’ll uh... I’ll be right back then.” She gave me another distrustful glance. “You do have a decent plan, yes?”

“Go,” I smiled mildly. “I’ll explain in a minute.”

With reluctant, stiff steps, like her joints had all rusted over, she headed out of my living room and down the hallway with the red tumbler clutched between her fingers. I went back to the kitchen with my brain turning over the wealth of new information Ruth had just given me about herself. For one thing, she was not what I would call quick to anger. If anything, she had woken up in a stranger’s house and handled it with surprising aplomb.

Also, she was attracted to me. Or I was pretty sure she was. The way she’d leaned into me, the way her eyes had gone round and had—rather boldly, actually—traveled from my chin to my navel had all shocked the hell out of me. And now that made me insanely curious. Who was Dr. Ruth Coldwell under those tortoiseshell glasses and haughty stares? Something told me she wasn’t everything she appeared to be at first glance.

I looked around my kitchen, suddenly wondering what I was going to feed my hungover, bewildered guest. It had been a while since a woman had woken up in my house...

I hated eggs, so I didn’t have any of those on hand. I settled for a toasted whole wheat

English muffin in the hopes that she didn't hate that. I added some turkey sausage leftovers from my fridge for protein, put it all in a plastic container, and closed the lid over it. When I had that done and in a bag for her, I went back through the living room to the foyer. My tennis shoes were the same every day—black and easy slip-on that could be shoved on my feet at a moment's notice. I'd gotten into the habit of buying and wearing various pairs of them during my residency, and old habits died hard.

Ruth tentatively shuffled back into the living room, and she looked a little more alert. Her cheeks were flushed and glistening like she'd splashed water on her face, and she'd adjusted her rumpled skirt and blouse. Still clutching the tumbler to her breasts, she panned a look around the bright room until she spotted me leaning on the wall in front of the foyer. I waved. "Feel better?"

"Ish," she admitted, still letting her gaze rove over the furnishings, sunny windows, and random decor items I had in the space. Her short curls brushed the slope of her shoulders, and she pushed her glasses back up her nose in a nervous gesture. When her eyes settled on me, she seemed to swallow. "So... our plan to lie to my boss benefits you how?"

I gestured with my head to the front door. "I'll tell you on the way." Then I held out the plastic container with the admittedly pathetic breakfast warming the bottom. "I didn't plan on handing out continental breakfasts, but this is something, at least."

"Oh." She started forward, and after stepping up the two levels it took to get to me, she took the container from my hands. "Thanks. You didn't have to. I can eat at home."

"Felt wrong to kidnap you and send you away with no food," I joked with half a smile.



“Very conscientious,” she agreed sarcastically.

I headed for the front door, and double-checking that she had her shoes on and everything she needed in her hands, I gestured her out the open door. “Your phone was going crazy in your pocket. Anyone worried about you? Another fake husband?”

She snorted, walking past me. “Just my friend, Gemma. She thought I ‘went home with a guy’ last night and got a little too excited for me.”

Curiosity nearly pulled the words, “Do you not go home with men often, then?” from my mouth, but I bit them down. “Getting wasted and rescued by your ex-client isn’t as exciting.”

“Ex-client?” she asked, glancing over her shoulder and raising a brow above the rims of her glasses. She was walking along the bridge-like balcony porch made of wrought iron and pinewood, and looking over her shoulder, she didn’t see the incline of steps she was approaching.

I leaned forward and caught her elbow before she could trip. “Watch it.”

She whipped a look over to me in surprise as I leveraged her away from the first step and into my side. When she glanced down and saw the stairs, she looked mildly chagrined. “Oh, shit.”

“Still kind of woozy there, Shortstop?” I teased. Now would be the time to release her, but I didn’t want to.

She didn’t pull away from me, either. “I guess... so.”

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I adjusted my grip on her elbow so it was softer. “I can’t be your client if I’m married to you.”

“I see,” she breathed. She tucked her lip between her teeth, and the way her small, white teeth indented the delicate skin shot straight to my groin.

Oh. Fuck. I yanked myself out of thoughts about her lips and back to the present. With gentle pressure, I guided her arm so she stepped up the first set of stairs. “You asked what I have to gain, and I’ll be honest. My parents are totally nuts.”

She smiled at that. “Ah.”

“Yeah, and beyond that, we have an awards ceremony we’ll be attending in two weeks.” We headed across a short balcony that angled across where my bedroom window overlooked the street, and then we started down the stairs that led to my garage. “I’m not the only one, either. A lot of my coworkers were hoping to find dates for the occasion because it’s our urgent care center that’s receiving the award. In my case, my parents have been pressuring me to ‘settle down,’ whatever that means. They’ve been pestering me to use Kiss-Met, so I gave in to get them off my back.”

“I guess their ex-daughter-in-law would have been a bad choice for that,” she said with a mixture of mischief and chagrin.

I bit down a smile. “They would have flayed me alive.”

“Sorry,” she said with scrunched-up features. “I know I ran that first time you told

me, and I'm sorry for that too. Truly."

"I see." I tapped an app on my smartwatch and the garage door opened with a slow, mechanical groan. "I just had to kidnap you to get an apology."

Ruth laughed, soft and husky. "Nothing comes easy, Dr. Reed. So, in summary, you need a fake date to waylay your parents' machinations?"

I nodded, stopping behind my SUV in the garage. "And you need a husband. Right?"

"Right," she said with a suspicious tilt of her heart-shaped face.

"I'll act like your partner wherever you need me to, and you can be my date once or twice if you're up for it."

"Hm." Ruth went around my SUV to the passenger side. I opened my door, and when she opened hers, she hesitated, not getting in. From across the car, she asked, "Why me?"

Well, there was a loaded question. The obvious answer was that she had been an easy mark. But it wasn't that simple. Had it been the vulnerability in the bar? Or maybe the realization that Dr. Coldwell was breathtakingly beautiful? I leaned my forearm against the car frame. "Honestly? Because you're my type. And my parents will love you."

Her cheeks went cherry blossom pink. "Oh."

I slid into the seat and pushed the ignition button. "That okay with you?"

"It's not like I can argue with that," she muttered, pushing up her glasses in a nervous gesture. She sat down, closed her door, and fastened her seatbelt, all while avoiding

looking at me. “Your type,” she added under her breath. Louder, she asked, “What is your type, anyway, Dr. Reed? Desperate?”

I angled a look to the side. “Are you desperate?”

Her fingers drummed on the metal cup, making a tinny beat in the quiet car. “I’m not,” she said. “But I am, what was the word you used?”

“Opportunistic?” I asked, putting the car into reverse.

“Opportunistic,” she agreed with a nod. “And as long as you don’t loathe me for my gaff, we might be able to come to some sort of arrangement.”

“I don’t loathe you,” I replied easily, stretching an arm across the back of her seat and turning to look over my shoulder before backing out. “Actually, I rather like you, Shortstop.”

She stared at my profile. “You like me.” She said it like a fact she didn’t believe.

“I like you,” I repeated, backing down the hill carefully. “You make me laugh. And you clearly can’t handle your liquor, so that has the potential to be hilarious.”

She clicked her tongue in annoyance, facing forward again. “I can, too. I just got nervous about doing something I’ve never done before.”

“What, speed dating?”

“Yeah.” She took another sip of the electrolyte drink I’d given her.

I shook my head, rotating the wheel and pulling out into the road. “How did you get this job, anyway? Don’t tell me it’s your vast experience with relationships, either.”

She breathed out a cynical laugh. “No. Honestly, it was my friend, Gemma. Kiss-Met wanted someone with a doctorate on staff so they could flaunt that, I guess. Gemma knew I was... struggling... after I finished my dissertation and graduated. She kind of wiggled me in. I’ve been there two months.” She twisted the dark, floral fabric on her skirt. “I know I suck at it. Trust me.”

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“Why were you struggling? A doctorate is no small feat.” I shot a curious glance her way before I returned my attention to the road.

In my peripheral vision, I saw her wince. “Long story. Mostly, I’m an idiot.”

“I’d say idiots don’t become doctors, but I’ve met a few in my time,” I teased. “But I’m sure it wasn’t that bad.”

She scoffed, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “I don’t know. It was pretty bad. Head downtown, by the way. It’s the Blueridge Apartments.”

“Oh yeah, I know the place. Close to where we work, right?” She nodded. I gave her another brief look. “So?”

Ruth groaned. “You really want to know? Seriously?”

“We’re married,” I replied with mock gravity.

Laughing and shaking her curls, she sighed. “So, I got my master’s degree in archaeological science—carbon dating, subsistence strategies, sedimentology, that sort of thing.” She rotated her hand like she was listing off ingredients in a pot of goulash, not listing off highly technical, incredibly intelligent scientific fields that she had apparently taken years of her life to master. “But in my last few months, I met—” she paused, screwing up her face again.

I gave her a fast, pitying glance before making a right turn. “A guy?”

Nodding, she fiddled with her skirt again. “He was a humanities professor. He’d just gotten a big grant for really specific research into medieval art forms. It’s a rare thing to get that sort of funding—it was a shit ton of money that the historical arts don’t usually receive. And I... well, I fell pretty hard.” She said the last part like she was admitting to having a rare skin disease.

“Anyway, to fulfill the requirements of the grant, he needed four postdoc researchers. As far as post-graduation research gigs go, it was amazing, and he lured me in with the promise of half a decade of research in Italy. He convinced me to get my doctorate in humanities, which, he argued, was close to the things I loved doing. The funding was for ten years, which is huge, and I had plenty of time to finish my dissertation and join his research team.”

My stomach got a foreboding, gurgling feeling. “Uh oh.”

“Yeah. I got the degree. I did six months of postgrad research with him, which fulfilled the base requirements of the grant. Then he took all our funding and went to Italy on his own to finish the research.” Ruth pushed her glasses up her nose and sniffed. “And I was left with a doctorate I can’t use.”

And probably a broken heart, I added silently. “Well,” I tightened my hold on the wheel, sneaking one more look at her melancholy features. “What a dick.”

She turned a hesitant smile my way. “Yeah. He is.”

“So,” I summarized, eyes on the road but mind on her predicament, “you gave up on finding a humanities position and took up matchmaking?”

She puffed out another laugh, leaning her head back against the headrest. “I didn’t give up. I just... floundered. He left in November. I had some money saved because everyone knows that postgrad can be a little brutal. But eventually, that dried up, and

my odd jobs weren't doing so well keeping me afloat while I looked for other professions. And let's be real," she shrugged, "finding humanities jobs is like playing the lottery. I knew that, but I—" The words seemed to catch in her throat, and she put her hand to the base of her neck.

"You trusted him," I finished for her. My heart squeezed painfully. Whatever Ruth had done in her life, she certainly didn't deserve that kind of treatment.

She shrugged. "I told you. Idiot. I should have gotten the degree I wanted and not let someone else influence my future."

"Trusting and loving doesn't make you an idiot," I pointed out, stopping slowly at a red light. I looked over at her again. "Although, you matched yourself to someone about as well as you matched everyone else, apparently."

Ruth laughed, and the sound left her lips with a reluctant lilt before she looked down and pressed her glasses to her face. "My survey data is consistent, it's true." She cleared her throat. "Anyway, yes, that's how I got myself in desperate circumstances. But more importantly, we need to discuss some terms, don't we?"

"Terms?" I rubbed the back of my neck. "What terms?"

"Well, you know, like," she gestured wordlessly between us. "What do we... do?"

"What did you do with your dick ex-boyfriend?" I challenged, knowing full well I was teasing her now. It was probably because she'd been unable to ask with her words if we'd slept together last night. I sensed an easy target.

"Hell," she muttered, rolling her eyes up to the car roof. "I mean, how many times do you want me to show up as your date? How much do I need to know about you? Are you usually into PDA, and if we don't touch each other, is that going to tip off your



parents? Do I have to hold your hand or... or should we—”

“Okay, brainy babe, relax.” I reached out my hand and rested it heavily on the top of her head. “Turn your smart noggin off. We’re going on two dates. That’s it. Just do what you usually do on dates.” Without moving her head, she swerved an uncertain look my way. I cocked my head, glancing at her quickly before returning my attention to the downtown street we crawled down. “You did say you had a boyfriend.”

“I said I fell for him,” she clarified in a quiet voice.

I removed my hand, speechless. There was no conceivable way this adorable, intelligent, quippy little scientist hadn’t been snagged by someone at some point. Unless...

“Wait, did you hold off on dating throughout your entire doctorate program for this asswipe?” I asked.

Ruth winced, pushing up her glasses again. “We did hookup. Casually. Sometimes.”

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I pinched the bridge of my nose. “This keeps getting better.”

“I’m just saying, my experience with going on dates is, er, limited. So, I need a little information, okay?” She drummed her fingers on the tumbler again. I wanted to squeeze her hand in mine and calm her nerves. What a disaster.

“Alright,” I said slowly, “in that case, just go with the flow and follow my lead. It’s really not complicated.”

“What lead?” she asked, exasperated. “This is what I’m saying. I have no idea what I’m doing, and I have no experience with this sort of thing. I should just resign and work somewhere else. I don’t need a doctorate-specific position. I’ll just be a waitress. Or a coal miner.”

I snorted. “Will you chill? You don’t need to run for the hills just because you’re facing a date with me.”

Even in my periphery, I could see the half-lidded look of derision she turned my way. “Because you’re so irresistible, right?”

“Because it’s easy, Shortstop. It’s just a date with my parents and an award ceremony. And in return, I’ll act like a doting, handsome, irresistible husband for your boss to take note of. Seriously, what could go wrong?”

Her silence told me that her brain had already conjured a long list of what could go wrong. I pressed my lips, fighting a smile. Of all the harebrained, zany things to happen in my life, this had the potential to top them all by a long shot. And I was in

the mood for zany, apparently. “If you don’t want to do it, it’s fine. We’ll both survive, I’m sure. But if you really think about it—why not? Give it a shot. It might solve both our problems.”

Groaning, Ruth writhed uncomfortably in her seat. “Alright. I guess... yeah, fine. Let’s try it. You said you’re meeting your parents on Friday?”

“Friday night dinner. They live in Newport, but we’re meeting for dinner in Corvallis. It’s about an hour drive.” I turned on my blinker, pulling up to her apartment building.

“That’s fine.” She pushed at her glasses nervously. “I kind of owe you, anyway. Thank you for last night. And this morning.” She glanced down at the plastic food container on her lap and the drink. “I do appreciate it. Sorry I was such a—”

“Don’t,” I cautioned her sharply. “You’re perfectly smart, Ruth. We all get stressed and do random things now and then.” I pulled up to the curb, unsure which building was hers. In the early morning, a light mist trickled across the green lawn between buildings, and some of the residents were getting into cars or sending their kids off to school. Was it that time of the year already? Summer was almost over—I’d blinked, and it had passed. “Which apartment is yours?”

“This is fine.” Ruth set her cup in the cupholder—I noted that she had drunk hardly anything—and put the plastic food container next to it. Hastily, she opened the door and hopped out. “Thanks again. Appreciate it. I’ll see you Friday.”

“Whoa, hold on.” I put the car in park and undid my seatbelt. “I need your number so I can text you, at least. And what do you need me to do for your boss?”

“Nothing,” she replied with rushed indifference. She blinked at me from behind her glasses, those yellow-ringed, gray eyes a little too wide and worried. “Literally,

nothing. In fact, what you did last night is more than enough. I'll just say you're sick for the picnic."

"What picni—"

"Bye!" she waved and then slammed the door. She hurried off, pulling out her phone from her pocket and fast-walking down the sidewalk to the building furthest from me. Those cute curls of hers bounced with every step, and her hips swayed side-to-side as she hurried out of sight between the thick rows of trees that lined the walkway.

I leaned my elbow on the window, smoothing my fingers over my lips. Well. Dr. Love was getting more interesting by the second. My car display lit up with a call. From my mom. "How's that for timing?" I murmured, zipping my seatbelt back into place. I pressed the green button on my phone and put the car back into drive. "Morning, Mom."

"Hey there, handsome," her bright voice responded. This time in the morning, she would be headed to the school where she worked as a school counselor. "I have some news for you," she sang.

I rolled my eyes, looking left and then right before turning out of the parking lot. "What a coincidence. So do I."

"Oh, you first," she said, and I heard the smile in her voice.

"I have a date for Friday night," I replied, bracing myself for the onslaught of bubbly joy that would follow that pronouncement. She didn't disappoint.

My mom gushed, and I heard clapping in the background, and then she put me on speaker phone before asking, "Who is she? How did you meet? Is she nice?"

“Is she hot?” my dad asked with his usual blunt sense of humor.

“Terrence,” Mom chided.

“Jayla,” he shot back.

Smiling, I replied honestly, “She’s beautiful. The way we met is a funny story, but I’ll save it for Friday. She’s excited to meet you both.” A blatant lie, but so was the rest of this charade.

“Okay, but son,” my mom said, and her voice took on that hard, sobering tone that she often took with students who were tiptoeing the line of her patience. “Is this another one-off girl? My heart can’t take this anymore. You’re thirty-six.”

“Yes, I know, and my eggs are drying up,” I joked, leaning my cheek on my fist.

Dad barked out a laugh, and Mom scoffed. “I mean it, Callum. Aniyah has no interest in having children, as you know, and you are my only hope.”

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“Mother,” I replied in monotone. “I’m not having babies with my just-met girlfriend. Take a chill pill.”

“Does she want babies?”

“Do I?” I challenged. “Listen, Mom, I have to go. I have rounds at the hospital. But for the love of God, do not bring up babies to my date on Friday. I’m begging you.”

“God brought you to me, and He knows what He’s doing. And I’m certain He wants me to have grandbabies,” she said resolutely.

“Dad,” I intoned. “A little backup, here?”

Silence reigned for two beats before Dad said, “What your mom said.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” I rubbed my eyes.

“Don’t use the Lord’s name in vain,” Mom chastised. “But I’ll let you go. Love you.”

“Love you,” I sighed and then hit the red button. I beat my head against the headrest. It was an amazing thing to be loved by two parents who had taken me in when no one else had been willing to. It was even better to have parents who were so full of love, they didn’t care that raising a multi-racial family had caused them no small amount of pain and difficulty. But God help me, if I had to hear one more thing about babies...

Still. Ruth seemed to be a perfect solution to my problem in the short term. She wasn’t in danger of falling in love with me, and she wasn’t in danger of feeling

overly put out if my mom did talk about grandchildren because she had nothing at stake. If Ruth were my real girlfriend, she might run for cover. But she wasn't, and she would hopefully take that in stride.

Or she would run for cover. Time would tell.

## Chapter eight

Ruth

Ruth

"I need to hear it again." Gemma popped her head into my office, and her curly hair swung crazily to the side. "Because I still don't believe you."

I lifted my eyes to the ceiling and took my fingers off the keyboard where I'd been tapping away a second before. "Which part? Because it's literally three days later, and you're making me want to invent a memory zapper at this point. I wish it had never happened."

"Ooh, a memory zapper. Like in MIB?" she asked, coming all the way into the office with her chicken pot pie in one hand and an energy drink in the other. "I could use one of those. I flirted with the security guard down in the lobby and he pointed out that my skirt was tucked into my underwear." She plunked her food down on my desk, and I barely managed to maneuver my latest stack of match files out of the way.

"Didn't you do that with the guy in HR last week?" I asked, reaching into my desk drawer to pull out my pathetic lunch of snack mix and a diet cola.

Gemma shrugged and popped open her energy drink. "It's my recurring curse for stealing Mason Aimone's eraser in the third grade. His mom was a witch."

I blinked at her. “She cursed you with that specifically...?”

“Probably.” She sipped her drink. “Anyway, I want to hear it again. I need to. You woke up in his house and he what?”

“Stripped me naked and had his way with me,” I said with bored annoyance. I opened the bag and fished out a bagel chip.

“I wish. You need to get laid. But I need to hear it because I had a thought while I was vacuuming last night.”

“While you were—never mind. What?”

“Don’t you think it’s kind of funny how he was really mad at you, and he showed up to the speed dating thing with the express intent to ream you out, only to take pity on you and bring you into his house?” she asked, raising her sandy eyebrows. Gemma’s eyes looked especially blue today with her bright aqua top bouncing blue tones around her pale face.

I gave her my “granny glance” over the rim of my glasses. “Of course I do. What of it?”

“What if he likes you?” she asked significantly.

I shrugged. “He said he likes me.”

“I knew it.” Gemma stabbed her pot pie with her fork triumphantly. “I knew it. He wants to date you for real.”

“He doesn’t like me in that way,” I clarified, opening my soda. “He just said he likes me, like... tolerates me. Like maybe I’m not as bad as he thought.” I remembered



suddenly that he'd said I was "his type," and my cheeks grew hot.

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“Oh,” Gemma pointed her fork at me. “I see that. You’re holding back. I knew this was juicer than a fake dating scheme. Come on.”

Gemma had been circling in on this all week. It had been three days since I’d gotten irresponsibly drunk and passed out on the couch of a guy who, by all accounts, should have detested me. And it had been three days since the unsettling realization that I found him maddeningly attractive. It had also been three days since I’d closed a car door on him and ran away from any more cheek-burning, leg-squirming interactions with Dr. Reed. Supposedly, I was going on a date with him tonight, but I was so overwhelmed at the idea, that I’d more or less ignored the fact.

I popped a pretzel in my mouth. “Fine. He said,” I paused to chew, “that I’m his type.”

“Oh my God.” Gemma closed her eyes like she was reveling in the stream of a hot shower after a long day. “Oh my fucking God. You’re getting laid. It’s finally happening.”

“What do you mean ‘finally?’ I’ve been—I mean I’m not a—Jesus, Gemma. I’ve had sex before.”

“It’s the stumbling for me,” she joked with a crooked grin. “The way you trip all over the word ‘fuck’ just gets me every time.”

“I say fuck,” I muttered.

“But you don’tfuck,” she amended ruthlessly. “Not since, what, last year? The year

before that?”

“Probably,” I mumbled. I thought back to the last time Vaughn and I had hooked up. Before he’d ditched me and left me penniless, jobless, and heartbroken.

Admittedly, sex had never been Vaughn’s forte. He didn’t enjoy it as much as I did, and he usually participated with some reluctance. We hadn’t hooked up for weeks before he’d left, anyway.

“Regardless, I’m sorry to let you down, but I’m not getting laid. Dr. Reed and I have a mutually beneficial arrangement that ends after his awards ceremony. And honestly,” I barged on after Gemma opened her mouth to argue, “I’m only doing it because he saved my ass in that bar. I don’t know what I would have done, but I don’t think it would have helped my job if Scarlet had realized I was wasted. Also, I really don’t think it would have been safe. So.” I straightened my back and gave her a steely look. “I’m not getting laid. The relationship is not real. Be cool.”

“You be cool,” Gemma shot back, still grinning. “Because it’s cool to get laid by hot doctors who rescue you from lecherous men in bars.”

I tipped my head back in exasperation. “There were no lecherous men.”

“That you know of,” Gemma said with a twirl of her fork. “Bet you Chinese dinner that you get laid. If I’m right, you pay.”

“Okay,” I laughed derisively. “Sure. And when we part ways with my nether regions drier than British humor, then you’re buying me extra rangoons.”

“Uh huh,” Gemma grinned, popping some pot pie in her mouth. “Sure thing.”

My phone rang at my desk, so I put my bag of snack mix aside and answered. “Hello,

this is Dr. Coldwell.”

“Hey, Dr. Coldwell,” Olivia said brightly. “I have your husband here. He’s hoping you’re not busy with a client.”

“My husband?” I asked a little too incredulously.

Gemma made an oval with her mouth and coughed out a laugh. “Well, that was fucking fast.”

I waved her away. “Uh, eh, yeah.”

Olivia hesitated. “Sorry... yes you’re with a client?”

“No, I’m not with a client,” I replied quickly. Wait, did that mean he wanted to see me? Now? I looked down at my black and white polka dot blouse that had yellow egg from my breakfast on my boob and wrinkles because I didn’t own an ironing board. I hadn’t been planning on seeing any other humans today. “I mean yes. I have a cl—”

“She’s on lunch,” Gemma shouted loud enough to be heard. “Send him back!”

“Wonderful,” Olivia said with dripping, syrupy enthusiasm.

“Fuck you,” I mouthed over the receiver. To Olivia, I said, “Thanks.”

Gemma laughed, low and full of snarky glee. “Here comes your hubby.” She popped out of her seat and grabbed her pie and drink from my desk. “I’ll just give the two of you some privacy.”

“No, Gemma.” I stood fast, only to get abruptly jerked back down. I looked down in confusion and found the ribbon from the bow that hung from my collar caught in the

desk drawer. I tugged on it. “Gemma,” I hissed.

“Hey, Dr. Ruth’s husband,” Gemma said cheerfully as she headed down the hallway.

I looked up again and found the tall, toned man in question already leaning against the door frame. He waved to Gemma. “Bye, Gemma.”

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“Wait, how do you know her?” I tugged at the ribbon of fabric again, already getting sweaty from social panic.

“She’s on the agency website.” Cal considered me with a tilt of his head. His hands were in the pockets of his dark gray dress pants, and he wore a white button-down and solid black tie. “You need some help?”

“No,” I replied tersely, tugging again on the fabric before fumbling with the drawer to open it. But the fabric had wedged the damn thing closed. “What are you doing here?”

Cal pushed away from the door frame, sliding his hands out of his pockets and approaching me with measured steps and a pressed mouth that looked like it was fighting a smile. “I hadn’t heard from my wife in three days. What else would you have me do?”

The way he said “wife” made my stomach do a cartwheel. With a furtive glance around, I muttered, “Not like I’m actually your wife.”

“What was that?” Cal asked loudly, and his grin cracked across his face as he traversed the small space and reached me. “Did you say something, sweetie?”

My entire face went July sun hot, and I gave up trying to free my shirt from the drawer to reluctantly angle a look his way. Green eyes, sweeping, dark copper hair, and a handsome smile met my look. I regretted facing him, like I’d decided to look straight into a solar eclipse and would probably go blind for my efforts. I pushed my glasses up my nose in a nervous gesture. “Stop teasing.”

Cal came to stand close to me, swirling me in the scent of coconut and sunscreen and warming the air around me. He reached for the drawer, and with one firm tug, had it open. But he didn't step away. Instead, he brought his long, lean body a breath from mine, and with deft fingers retied the bow at my collar. "Just doing my part, Dr. Coldwell."

I stared up at him in a stupefied trance. "Right."

He tugged the ribbons into a neat bow, grazing my throat with his knuckles. "We had a change of plans. I wanted to run them by you."

"Oh?" I felt a bizarre mix of relief and disappointment at the prospect that we might not be going on a date tonight after all.

Cal let his hands drop and slid them back into his pockets. "My parents got reservations at a seaside restaurant they've been wanting to visit for a while. But it's in Newport."

I let that information settle in my brain. "Oh, so it's like two hours away?"

"Right. I got us a hotel room in case dinner runs late, but you don't have to use it if you don't want to. And obviously, if that's too far, that's fine, too." He watched me with quiet stillness, like he genuinely didn't mind either way. I'd never felt less pressured by the prospect of a date in my life.

"Um," I cleared my throat, running my fingers over the bow he'd tied. "I mean, that's fine. I'll just have to leave work a little early."

Cal looked around my postage stamp-sized office. "Gosh. Whatever will your clients do without you?"

I tightened my mouth derisively. “Very droll.”

Cal chuckled, stepping away. “You’re such a nerd, Coldwell. ‘Droll,’” he mocked quietly. “Where’s your boss? I need to say hello and save your job.”

“Nope.” I darted forward, going around my desk and putting my arms out wide to block the direction of his path to the door. “Absolutely not.”

“Don’t be silly.” He scooped up both my wrists in his one hand easily, twirling me out of the way and then plastering me to his side like we were a couple on a romantic stroll. “We have to make this worth the effort, right? Let’s see. I’ll bet her office has the most windows.” Cal had one arm around my shoulders and the other pinned my wrists between my breasts as he led us out the doorway.

“Cal,” I gritted out, fighting his hold. I would have had better luck defying gravity. “She’s going to know.”

Cal clicked his tongue. “Only if you wiggle around like that. Relax, wifey. We got this.”

“Oh my God,” I groaned. He adjusted his grip on me, dropping my wrists and settling his arm around my shoulders with a relaxed, firm hold as we walked through the hallways.

“Do you need relationship lessons, Shortstop? Lesson one: Chill the fuck out.” He squeezed my shoulders pointedly.

“This is not going to go well,” I whispered harshly. “I’m not a relationship person.”

“Everyone is a relationship person; they just need the right relationship.” He bounced his eyebrows. “Just play along.”



I made a high-pitched, skeptical sound, but soon we were standing in front of the executive office, and if the size and windows didn't give it away, the nameplate on the door certainly did. It read "Janice Kopernick, CEO" in bold black and white lettering.

The door was already open, and Janice looked up from where she stood at her ergonomic desk near the window. Today she had on brightly patterned boho pants that tinkled with beads when she moved, and her blue and purple shawl fell around her shoulders and white blouse in elegant disarray. "Dr. Coldwell, come in."

"Thanks, er," I gestured to Cal at my side. He rubbed my arm up and down in a soothing gesture that nearly sent my thoughts scattering in the wind. "Just... Cal came to visit, so..." I trailed off. You are so fucking awkward, Ruth. Jesus Christ.

"Hey," Cal said with a wave of his free hand. "I'm Cal."

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“Oh,” Janice perked up with bright interest. “Hello. I’m Janice. Nice to meet you.”

“This is my hu—” The word lodged itself in my throat, but I swallowed it down and tried again. “Husband,” I finished weakly.

“Well, it’s wonderful to meet you,” Janice replied with keen interest and an obvious head-to-toe perusal of Cal. Not that I could blame her. The man was a work of art. “Ruth mentioned that she had a husband.”

Cal chuckled. “Well, I am for now. She honestly wanted to strangle me when I asked to say hi.”

Janice came around her desk and held out a hand for Cal to shake. “Our Dr. Coldwell is exceptionally good at keeping her feelings close to the vest, I’ve gathered.”

“Very,” Cal agreed with a charming smile as he leaned forward to shake her hand. “It just makes it all the sweeter when you earn them.”

How was he saying things that were one hundred percent true even while he lied through his teeth? I gave him a genuine, slightly disbelieving smile. “Earn them, huh?”

Janice bounced a look between us. “I admit, I had some skepticism about our enigmatic young doctor and her partner, but I can see that you two are well-matched.”

I choked back a laugh. Good lord. She couldn’t have been more off. “Opposites attract and all that,” I said with a nervous laugh.

“Exactly what I’ve been trying to point out to you,” Janice replied meaningfully.

“Yeah,” I squeaked out.

“Well, we’d better get going, love,” Cal said with a warm smile my way. I could have sworn my heart stopped beating altogether. To Janice, he added, “Oh, sorry. If that’s all good. My parents live in Newport, and we’re meeting them for dinner.”

“By all means,” Janice gestured with an open arm. “We’ll see you Monday, Dr. Coldwell.”

“Have a good weekend,” I replied with a wave. We walked back to my office, and I shot him an askance, squinty-eyed look. “I’m a little disturbed by how good you are at that.”

Cal released me once we were in my office, and completely at ease, he leaned against the wall again. He shrugged with false modesty. “All I did was tell the truth.”

“Right.” I went to my desk and rolled up my snack mix bag. “And you somehow got me off work like three hours early. Smooth.”

“Wait.” Cal pointed to the snack I was shoving into my laptop bag. “Was that your lunch?”

I glanced at it. “Yeah. Why?”

“Woman.” Cal rubbed his eyes. “You make some seriously questionable choices.”

“Like fake dating you?” I asked with an arch look.

He lowered his hand, smiling. “Cute.”

“If we’re going for fancy, seaside food, I’m probably better off hungry anyway,” I said, shoving the food into my bag, picking up my phone, and reaching over to turn off my computer. “Or is it one of those places that I’m going to need a fast-food run after?”

“It could go either way,” Cal said frankly.

“I’ll get a cheese stick from home before we leave.” I zipped up my bag. “What time are we leaving?”

“Cheese stick,” he muttered raising his eyes to the ceiling. He straightened and followed me as I left my office. “I’ll swing back around your place in an hour if that works.”

“Sure.” I tried not to touch him as I passed by, but my body had a mind of its own, and my shoulder brushed his hard chest. It sent goosebumps tickling down my arm, and I wanted to bop myself in the head for it. Was there any chance of keeping my head and heart in line during this whole charade?

I was starting to think there wasn’t.

We parted ways outside the building, and with one last wave, I headed down the historical street to where I’d parked my car in front of a meter along the road. As I hurried through the muggy summer afternoon, passing through a thin crowd of shoppers and tourists, my phone buzzed in my bag. Thinking it was Gemma wanting details about my office encounter with my fake husband, I fished it out as I reached my car. As I glanced at the screen I stopped abruptly.

Vaughn:

Hey gorg. Back in the states. Heard u were in Eugene. Up for a chat?

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I looked up from my phone, but I couldn't see anything. Not really. Like my glasses had been wrenched from my nose and the world had been left reeling and blurry, I stared forward in shock. I'd just been talking about Vaughn three days ago, and it had been for the first time in a long time, honestly. It was like speaking his name out loud had brought him back to life. No, worse than that.

I'd summoned my personal demon to return and torment me.

Chapter nine

Cal

Cal

It was hard to put my finger on it, but something about Ruth seemed off. She looked normal enough when I came by to pick her up. She had on an adorable, short jumper that ended mid-thigh and had straps that tied into bows at the top of her shoulders. The whole thing was black and ruffly, with off-the-shoulder sleeves that caressed her upper arms and fluttered as she walked my way in a pair of wedge sandals. She was also wearing a mini leather backpack, but her hair was the same, bouncy soft bob as she always seemed to wear.

But as I opened the passenger-side door for her, she thanked me with a vacant look in her eyes and barely looked at me as she got in. Maybe it was because she wasn't wearing glasses. That definitely threw me for a loop. She looked beautiful either way, but it had been startling all the same. I went around to my side, and as I got in, I asked, "Everything okay?"

She blinked fast, like she'd forgotten where she was. Her gray-blue eyes met mine, and the bright afternoon sunlight brought out the bright yellow around her pupils. "Oh, yeah. I'm good."

"You sure?" I shifted the car into drive. "You look a little spacey."

A rueful smile tugged at her lips, and she looked forward again. "I'm always a little spacey."

"Okay. Well, I mean, I know I'm a little pushy—"

She snorted. "A lot pushy."

I sent her a reluctant look of agreement. "A lot pushy. But you don't have to go if you're not feeling well."

"Trust me," she said, letting out a soft breath. "I'd rather be distracted."

"Okay." With one last, concerned glance her way, I pulled out of the parking lot and headed for the interstate. "Road trip it is, then." I reached behind me and brought a cloth grocery bag to her lap. "First, snacks. Like... real snacks. Not cheese sticks. You fucking weirdo."

Ruth rifled through the bag, holding up the brand of diet cola I'd seen her drinking on her desk, a few protein packs with meat, cheese, and nuts, and containers with cut fruit in separated wedges. "It's like a car picnic."

"It is a date," I reminded her.

"Not a real one, though," she shot back with raised brows.

I had the insane urge to pull over and kiss her if only to prove to her that she was actually desirable. Sure, we'd agreed to fake date, but... well, hell. I liked her. How fake was it, really? I slid another tentative look toward Ruth. Maybe a lot fake for her. If what she'd said about her PI using her and then ditching her was true, then I couldn't blame her for being wary. Relenting, I said, "Even fake dates deserve food. Plus, you ate empty calories for lunch, and as a doctor, you know I can't let that pass."

With my eyes on the road, I still managed to glimpse her lofty chin tilt. "I don't need a doctor, thanks."

"Everyone needs doctors," I argued.

Ruth squirmed. "I mean, yeah, obviously I have like... a PCP and all that."

"Who?" I challenged.

"Doctor... Rook," she replied, pulling out a tray of fruit and picking at the seal.

"Dr. Rook?" I repeated incredulously.

"You know him?" she struggled with the plastic band around the outside of the package.

"Oh, I know him," I muttered, scrunching my mouth to one side. Fucking Rook. He had the bedside manners of a hangry mammoth. "We did our residency together. But he's not a PCP, he's a GYN. How is he your PCP?"

"I just kill two birds with one stone and get my checkups done at the same time," she said, her voice growing strained as she pulled at the seal. "And I never get sick. How do you get this—it's stuck."

“You should change to our practice,” I said, my brow falling. “Rook is an asshole.”

“Sure he is,” she said, her voice taking on an impatient tint as she tugged at the lid.

“That’s why I chose him. I hate doctors and hospitals, so I picked one who wouldn’t give a fuck about me past what the paperwork says.”



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“Well, someone should care, don’t you think?” I asked with an angry glance.

“Why?” she grunted, pulling hard on the seal.

I reached over, and with one fast tug, broke the seal in half before tossing it to the floor. She turned a surprised look my way. I met it briefly before looking back at the road. “Because it’s okay to ask for help sometimes.”

She reached up like she wanted to press her glasses against her face, but they weren’t there. Her hand halted, and then she laid it back on the fruit tray lid. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” I paused, then asked, “Wait, you hate doctors?”

She pulled an “oops” face. “I didn’t mean that. I just mean, I lived with my grandmother growing up, but she passed away in my early twenties. Cancer. And hospitals and stuff make me feel... I don’t know.”

“Faintly nauseated?” I guessed.

She nodded. “She was so miserable the whole time she was in there.”

“I get it.” I reached over again and popped open the lid for her. The fresh scent of pineapple and cantaloupe filled the air-conditioned car. “I have patients who lost loved ones in hospitals and hospices who get crippling anxiety at the thought of attending something simple like a checkup. It bothered me that something like that would be a barrier to preventative care, so I travel to them.”

“Do you really?” Ruth took a bite of a green melon wedge. “Like, old school?”

I smiled faintly. “Like old school. It takes longer, and we have to fight tooth and nail with insurance to approve it sometimes, but it’s worth it for the patients who can’t get into medical centers.”

“I’m sure they really appreciate you,” she said softly.

I shrugged. “I certainly hope they do. But I mean it,” I gave her another hard look. “Don’t go to Rook. I think he’s a Wendigo in disguise.”

She laughed, putting her hand to her mouth, which was full of melon. “You dislike him that much?”

“I’m pretty sure he eats people’s organs,” I said seriously.

“Which is why he’s a doctor?” she guessed.

“Exactly.” I cracked a grin.

She rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “Okay, but I’m not making you my PCP.”

“Why not?” I asked, offended.

“What, seriously?” she laughed.

I tossed a scowl her way. “Seriously.”

“Um,” she coughed out a laugh. “Cal... no way.”

“Why?” I pressed. “I’m pretty fucking good at my job.”

“I’m sure you are,” she replied, her voice thin. “But... no. Noway.”

A slow smile crept up my face. “Shortstop, are you worried about me touching you?”

“No,” she lied unconvincingly.

In my head, I indulged in a maniacal laugh. She did like me. “Hm,” I hummed, sliding another playful look her way. “Interesting.”

“It is definitely not interesting,” she huffed. She popped another piece of fruit in her mouth. “Do you have like... a podcast we can listen to or something?”

Still smiling, I tapped my car display. “Lots. You choose.”

“Something long,” she muttered under her breath.

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I smoothed my smile away with my fingers. Very interesting.

Chapter ten

Cal

Cal

Two hours passed by much faster than I expected. For the most part, we listened to “Stuff You Should Know,” and chatted about the random facts they discussed. I found out that Ruth had lived with her parents in Colorado for the first eight years of her life, and then after their violent divorce, had been placed with her grandmother for safety. I related to that hardcore. I’d been on my own for years before my parents had found me. But to have lost her only reliable parent in her twenties? Unthinkable.

We finally made it to Newport after passing through rolling green hills swathed in pines and bushy trees. My favorite part about the coast was the way it started off in the misty mountains and then out of nowhere, the terrain grew rocky and sparse before falling dramatically away to the endless ocean. Coming through the mossy cliffs and into the seaside town felt like a warm sheet from the dryer settling over my cold skin. It felt right and comforting.

A lot of Newport had been designed with tourists in mind, from the cute gift shops that lined the narrow streets to the bed and breakfast locations and a plethora of seafood restaurants. A new one had just opened on the docks two months ago, and my parents had been on the waiting list for weeks.

I followed my GPS to the location, rolling slowly through packed streets and narrow, one-way avenues. We finally arrived, and predictably, parking was a pain. We found a paid lot a short walk away, and while I pulled up the app to pay, Ruth looked out her window in interest. “Are those... sea lions?”

I followed her gaze to the docks below us where dozens of blubbery, barking sea lions lounged, swam, and inched along the docks and boulders. I puffed out a laugh. “They are. And they probably just got back from mating. July is usually the only month we get some peace and quiet around the town.”

“You guys just casually live with sea lions? Like they’re pigeons?” She cocked her head, studying the docks and sandbars that were so packed with sea lions, they could be collections of boulders along their surfaces.

“Yes, giant, illegal to feed, definitely do not try to touch pigeons.” I tapped the payment button on my screen. “Okay, we’re good to go. The restaurant is just down there.” I pointed out of my windshield, down a sloping hill to a glass and wood restaurant that had been built on piles overlooking the bay. Sealions barked and rolled under the outside dining area, and guests milled around, pointing to them and talking while they sipped their drinks.

“This is amazing. I’ve never been to this part of the coast.” Ruth got out of the car, and her eyes stayed glued to the orange and pink splashes of color over the seaside horizon.

I followed her, coming around the car to stand at her side. “Yeah, it’s pretty great. I was lucky to live here while I did.”

Ruth turned to me, and the setting sun washed over her skin with an irresistible golden glow that momentarily stole my breath. She raised her eyebrows. “Why don’t you live here now?”

“Um.” My brain pattered and chugged, lagging for a couple of seconds before firing back to life. Goddamn, she was gorgeous. “I did my residency in Eugene, and then I fell into the urgent care practice with my friend, Dr. Reynolds. Once I got going, especially with my at-home PCP service, I just couldn’t find it in myself to derail that.”

Ruth dipped her chin in acknowledgment. “I get it.” Her eyes coasted over the vista below us, darting back and forth as she took in the sunset. “I wouldn’t have changed if I’d had a choice.”

My brows drew together. “You never should have had to.”

As if pulling herself from a memory, Ruth lifted her shoulders and smiled over at me. “It’s alright. I’m now the world’s worst matchmaker, and really, what more could a girl ask for?”

I laughed. “I don’t know. A job you like?”

“That doesn’t sound right,” she mused, starting forward and down the hill. “Adulthood is supposed to be miserable, right?”

For Ruth? Something small and warm in my chest whispered that Ruth deserved nothing but happiness. And it also kind of wanted to be the one who provided it. My parents had found me a damaged, angry, rebellious fifteen-year-old, and they had handed me the world when I had done nothing to earn it. It wasn’t nearly the same, but something in me wanted Ruth to know what that felt like, to know that someone gave a shit about how she felt and what she was going through.

And once that thought had me in its grip, I suddenly found myself unable to escape it. It consumed my mind as we walked down the hill, across a lower parking lot, and across the street to the restaurant. I had a feeling my parents were going to really like

Ruth. I hadn't been kidding when I'd told her she was my type, but I'd left out one little detail—she was their type too. Smart, genuinely nice, and a little on the weird side. My parents ate that shit up. Speaking of which...

“Oh, um,” we paused just outside the restaurant where cars crawled slowly along the narrow road behind us. I curved my fingers around her elbow, drawing her to a gentle halt. “I should probably mention—I'm adopted.”

Her eyebrows jumped up. “Oh. Okay. I mean, that's great.”

“And the only reason it matters is because my parents get weird about food, and they're going to make both of us eat more than we can handle.” I rubbed the back of my neck ruefully. “They adopted me when I was fifteen after CFS pulled me out of my rundown, abandoned house. I was basically starving to death. They fostered me, and it took them years to catch me up with a better diet.”

Her mouth dropped open, and then she quickly closed it. “Cal... oh my word. That's—I mean they must have been...” she paused, her brow furrowing. “Wait a second. So, the expectations your parents have for you are literally that they want you to find someone and be happy because they love you?”

I searched her expression, confused. “Yeah?”

She palmed her face. “Cal, I thought this whole time that you had like... asshole parents who expected too much of you. I was all prepared to march in there and defend your honor or something.”

My mouth curved up to the left in disbelief. “Shortstop, you were going to defend my honor?”

She let her hand slide down her face, heedless of the blush and mascara she'd

applied. “Well, I was. I didn’t realize they were perfectly loving and normal. I can’t do normal. I haven’t known a normal person in my life... ever. My grandma was super weird and then she died. Gemma is basically a feral barn cat.” Her eyes went wide with panic. “What do normal people do? What if I completely embarrass you?”



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“Ruth.” I placed my hands on her bare arms, angling her to face me. “Quit panicking. Look at me.” She did, dancing her eyes between mine in a quick staccato rhythm. “It’s just dinner,” I reminded her.

“Yeah,” she breathed. “Yeah, okay.”

Just dinner, I thought, mocking myself internally. Like they aren’t going to be unbearably embarrassing and gush over this woman in ways she is fully unprepared for. In this case, better to ask forgiveness than permission.

As we headed into the restaurant, Ruth got a text, and she pulled her phone out from the pocket of her jumper shorts. After glancing at it, her features pinched together, and she shoved it back into her pocket. I held the door open for her. “Everything alright?”

“Yeah, good,” she clipped in a way that clearly stated things weren’t.

I skipped a look from her pressed, pink lips to her red cheeks, and my intuition alarms blared in the back of my brain. Something was definitely up with Shortstop. Despite my suspicions, I let it be because my parents had spotted us from their table by the panoramic windows that overlooked the bay.

“Cal, sweetie!” My mom waved from the table, her wide smile as inviting as her hand that gestured for us to join them.

I pulled in a breath and leaned over to whisper in Ruth’s ear. “Ready?”

“No,” she whispered back.

Chuckling, I wrapped her cold hand in mine and led her up a short flight of stairs to the main floor. The restaurant was an older building, probably built in the seventies, but it had been updated several times over the years. The tables had been set with crisp, white linen and twinkling dinnerware. The carpet looked a little older, but it made the space feel warm and inviting, and the restaurant stretched out longer than it was wide and inviting diners to gaze out at the choppy, sunset-drenched water. With every table packed with patrons, we had to weave our way through them to make it to the seaside table my parents occupied. I kept a hold of Ruth’s hand, glancing down at her now and then to make sure she wasn’t on the verge of bolting.

She looked like she wanted to.

My mom stood from the table, gesturing with both her hands for me to come in for a hug. She looked older, somehow, than I remembered. It surprised me every time I’d been away from home, but more and more, Mom’s springy, black hair was being replaced by thick strands of white and gray curls, and the lines in her soft brown skin got deeper, too. She was wearing a loose, plaid button-down, and she wore the same locket she always did—the one I’d given her for her and Dad’s thirtieth wedding anniversary.

I indulged her request, keeping a hold of Ruth’s hand as I wrapped her in a one-armed bear hug. “Hey, Mom.”

“Look at you.” She squeezed her thin arms around my neck before stepping away to look at Ruth. “Hello! You must be Ruth.”

“Hi, Mrs. Reed,” Ruth said, holding out her hand.

My mom, predictably, ignored her proffered hand and swept her into a hug that

forced me to relinquish her hand. “Come here, cute girl. You are absolutely gorgeous.” She set Ruth away with a bright smile. “Call me Jayla. And then tell me how this troublemaker tricked a pretty thing like you into dating him.”

“Oh, here we go,” I muttered rolling my eyes as my dad stood and joined us. Dad had ridiculously bright white teeth that gave away his dentist profession, and he pulled me into a gruff hug. His jet-black hair was going white, too, and he kept it cropped close to his scalp these days. “Hey, Dad. How are things?”

“Oh, you know,” he grinned, pulling away. “Just trying to keep up with your mother.”

“Your father just discovered that furious bird... mad bird... whatever. That app game,” my mom said, waving her hand and going back to her seat.

Ruth rolled her lips between her teeth, clearly trying not to laugh. “Angry Birds? That is fun.”

“That’s like fifteen years old, Dad,” I laughed.

“I like it,” Dad said, pulling out his phone and holding the screen like two feet away as he peered at it. “I like knocking those stupid, fat bubble creatures over.”

“Better late than never.” I held out Ruth’s chair, and she sat down quickly. She gathered her hands in a tight fist in her lap, and I gave her an amused glance before I sat beside her in the seat closest to the window and across from my mom. I pried Ruth’s right hand away from her left and brought it to my thigh. I let my thumb caress the back of her soft, pale hand, hoping to soothe her nerves.

“So,” Mom said, her warm, brown eyes fixed on us with zealous interest. “Tell me all about it. How did you meet?”

Ruth opened her mouth, and I could tell her brain went copy paper blank. I jumped in quickly. “Actually, remember that matchmaker who set me up with Aniyah’s ex?”

Ruth turned enormous, “Are you crazy?” eyes on me.

My mom scoffed. “Yes, how could I forget?”

I forged on before she could say anything insulting about Ruth. “Well, it’s kind of a funny story, but Ruth is the matchmaker.”

My mom’s cranberry-colored lips popped open. She rotated a stare to Ruth. “No.”

My dad chuckled. “Oh, that’s funny.”

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“I went there to completely ream her out for it, and then I just,” I paused turning to look at her. Gray eyes sparked with sunshine yellow drank me in with round surprise. I smirked. “I kind of got tangled up.”

“Oh,” Mom put a hand to her chest, looking between us with a gooey, sentimental expression. “That is absolutely precious.”

Ruth kept her eyes glued to me for a beat. Then, shaking herself loose from her thoughts, she turned back to my mom. “Yeah. I guess you could say we sort of stumbled into this thing.”

“I love it,” Mom grinned.

The waiter came and took our drink orders. With the way my mom was eying Ruth—there was a definite baby-hungry glint there—I ordered an Old Fashioned. My dad gave me a reproving eyebrow raise over his glasses, which I studiously ignored. And truly, by the time our catch-of-the-day meal arrived, I was glad for the drink. It took impossible amounts of patience to run interference between Ruth and my mom’s probing questions.

“How old are you?” Mom asked.

Ruth hesitated. “Well... twenty-eight. Just last month.”

Mom made a surprised sound. “So young for a professional doctor. Was that by choice?”

“Mom,” I groaned. I finished off my drink, grateful for the buzz in my head. It had been a hot minute since I’d had a real drink. “Let her breathe.”

“I’m just asking,” Mom said with an unconvincing attempt at an innocent expression.

Dad made a sound of appreciation after taking a bite of the ceviche. “This is fantastic. Have you tried this?”

Ruth looked massively uncomfortable. It almost made me laugh, but I silently encouraged her to take a bite. She did, and then nodding, she said, “Oh, yeah. It’s really good. Very... toothsome.”

I snorted, coughing out ceviche. I grabbed for my napkin and noticed that my dad was trying not to laugh, and my mom was looking at Ruth like she’d never seen anyone more adorable in her life. “Sorry,” I choked.

Ruth sank her teeth into her bottom lip after swallowing. “I mean... it’s... salty.”

I laughed again, this time, not bothering to hide it. “Guys, I’m pretty sure Ruth hates the ceviche.”

Mom and Dad laughed in tandem, and then my mom reached across the table to pat Ruth’s hand. “Love, you don’t have to like the food. We promise you won’t offend us.”

Ruth grimaced apologetically. “I have a thing about raw meat. I mean, I know it’s not really raw,” she rushed to add, straightening. “But I can’t seem to convince my brain of that.”

“The nerve,” I murmured with heavy sarcasm, angling a smile down to her.

Ruth shot me a half-irritated, half-amused look in return.

“Why didn’t you say so?” Dad asked. “We can order something else.”

“No, no,” Ruth held up her hands. “I’m fine. Really. Cal fed me a ton of food on the way here,” she added with genuine amusement.

I chuckled. “You were eating chips for lunch when I found you.”

“Snooty,” she shot back with an eyebrow twitch.

“I’m a doctor. We’re all snooty.”

“I’m a doctor too,” she said before taking a sip of her water. “I guess some of us are just better behaved.”

“You earned that,” Mom said with a point of her fork.

I grimaced through another smile. “I did.”

After that, Ruth happily chatted with my mom about the sea lions in Newport, which my parents were usually proud to inform people about, and I proved that I truly wasn’t any smarter than Speed Date Ruth when I ordered another Old Fashioned and realized a little too late that my head was swimming.

“Should we go to the pier and get a closer look at the sea lions?” my mom suggested.

Ruth agreed readily, and after we paid—and my dad tipped with cash because he was nine million years old—we walked out onto the wood balcony that had a stairwell leading down to the pier. The sun had dipped almost all the way behind the horizon, and blue swatches of darkness stretched out from the railing and the glowing

building behind us. I tried not to think about how tilted the world had gone. I'd only had two drinks. What the hell?



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My worries turned into soap bubbles, and as they popped and fizzed away, I hooked an arm around Ruth's waist, pinning her to my side. I loved how itty bitty short she was, but curvy and soft at the same time. She was all round curves and sloping sweetness, and it was hard to not stare at the way her thighs filled out those shorts so nicely.

Mom went on and on about conservation and the funds they had raised to build a new pier because sea lions were a little hard on infrastructure, and I moved my gaze down to Ruth's waist where it sloped in but tucked with a little bitable roll, and then up to her breasts. Fucking hell. She was perfect.

Suddenly, Ruth stumbled on the pier, and her sandal caught in one of the planks. I tightened my hold on her, but I was tipsier than I thought, and my balance went askew. We both went down, and I did my best to take the brunt of her fall. She caught herself on my chest and on her knees, and I landed hard on my ass with her half on top of me. I wrapped my arms around her and let out a surprised, "Oof."

Ruth burst out laughing. "Oh my God."

"Ruth!" My mom rushed over, but I had already joined Ruth in her laughter, and we both collapsed to the pier.

I kept my arms around her, and she let her forehead fall to my chest. We dissolved into completely unjustified, goofy laughter. "I'm so sorry," I wheezed out.

"I can't," Ruth laughed, clutching my black T-shirt and pressing her face to my chest. "I can't breathe. I'm sorry. That was me." She paused, her voice thick with laughter.

“That was so funny, though.”

My mom blurted out a reluctant laugh. “Are you two alright?”

Still laughing, I nodded and sat us up. Ruth’s chest was pressed against mine, and I realized it would take only the smallest maneuver on my end to put her ass in my lap. My laughter died slowly, and I let myself drown in her eyes, lined with thick lashes and shimmering with laughter as she looked up at me. I swept one of her stray curls away from her pink cheek. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, and one corner of her mouth curved up.

Mom’s tightly coiled, wild curls bobbed as she tilted her head. “You sure? You fell pretty hard.”

I swallowed, and my eyes followed the heart-shaped lines of Ruth’s face. That little warm spot in my chest blossomed suddenly, and I tightened my hold around her waist. “Yeah,” I said, my voice husky. “I did.”

## Chapter eleven

Ruth

Ruth

Cal was definitely drunk. I could smell it on his breath, but more telling, he was looking at me like he’d found a mermaid on the pier. And a mythical, beautiful creature I was not. I released another breath, ignoring the stinging in my knees, and tried to lift myself away from him. “Thanks for catching my fall.”

“Yeah,” he said, his mind clearly running away somewhere I couldn’t follow.

“Maybe we should get you two a cab,” Cal’s dad suggested with a laugh in his voice.

I patted Cal’s firm chest. “I think that’s a smart idea.”

Cal groaned, sitting up straighter and tightening his hold on me as he stood. He helped me up but didn’t loosen his hold. “Alright, yes. A cab is smart.”

“Cal,” Jayla said with reprimand in her voice. “How old are you?”

“Two drinks old,” Cal grinned shamelessly. “Which is like three drinks less than it used to take. Jesus.”

I laughed under my breath, and as he swayed, I supported him. “He got a hotel already. No worries. Thank you so much for a lovely dinner,” I added. “It was great to meet you.” Ooh, that sounded super normal, Ruth. You’re doing it!

“Ooh, a hotel,” Jayla said with sharp interest.

My mouth went dry. “Not for sex,” I said hastily.

Cal laughed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Ruth.”

I cringed. “Oh fuck.” I paused after I realized I had just cussed, and then I groaned out a sigh. “I mean, sorry.”

Jayla and Cal’s dad, Terrence, exchanged amused looks, and Terrence took out his phone. “Fuck is a well-loved garnish in the Reed house,” Terrence assured me. “I’ll order the cab.”

I clamped my teeth together hard. “Right,” I gritted out.

“Ruth,” Jayla said, coming forward to hug me. “It was an absolute pleasure. I hope we’ll see you again.”

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You won't, I thought with a little pang of sadness. I'd gotten so caught up in getting to know Jayla and Terrence, I'd almost forgotten that none of this was real. I couldn't help but feel that Cal was wonderfully lucky to have been adopted by them. And the obvious fierceness with which he loved them back told me he knew that.

The rideshare came remarkably fast, and after another round of goodbyes, I clambered into a small eco-friendly car with Cal. He had to fold his long legs up in the back seat, and I took a mental snapshot of Cal scrunched up in the back seat like a giant in a tiny house. Cal gave the driver the address of the hotel, and then he sat back, poking his forehead with his pointer finger. "Is'been years since I got drunk."

I flashed my teeth, leaning against the car door with a measure of some satisfaction. "Well, we all get stressed and make random choices now and then," I quoted back to him.

Cal peeked one eye open and rolled his head my way. "I'm just drunk enough to make you pay for that."

A trill of anticipation fluttered through me like a flute aria. "Is that right?"

"Mm." He nodded, closing his eyes again. "Just give me fifteen minutes to get not inebriated."

"Of course," I agreed sarcastically. "That's how that works."

My phone buzzed again, and rather than ignoring it, I pulled it out of my pocket with a dose of trepidation. Sure enough, it was the text I feared it was. Vaughn had texted

me earlier today, but his most recent messages were butted up against the texts from November still. The evidence of his betrayal sat neatly on top the insanity of his decision to text me today.

Ruth:

I just got home. Saw your note. I'm confused. Could you callme?

Vaughn:

About to board for Italy. Sorry. You got this, kid.

Ruth:

What? That's it?? Why is the door locked?

Ruth:

Vaughn?

Ruth:

You can't be serious.

Ruth:

Fuck. You.

Vaughn:

Hey gorg. Back in the states. Heard u were in Eugene. Up for a chat?

Vaughn:

Just landed in Portland. You free tomorrow?

I inhaled slowly through my nose as my stomach swirled uncomfortably. I knew Vaughn was self-absorbed, and I knew he had more confidence than he deserved, but I hadn't realized he was straight-up delusional.

Ruth:

My last msg stands.

I blew out another breath, trying to steady my nerves, but the damage had been done. That slithering, insidious fear, and the sickening rush of adrenaline, hurt, and fury washed over me like a haunting specter. It caused me to shiver and draw in on myself. I didn't know what Vaughn wanted, but I knew it wasn't me. Not really. Because there was a reason he hadn't wanted me to begin with. It was the same reason this date with Cal was fake. It was the same reason I kept to myself and wrapped myself in the safety of that acceptance. I wasn't lovable. I wasn't fun or desirable—I was just easy to use.

We both went quiet as the car drove slowly past warm, gold-lit bars and cozy, mom-and-pop shops, and then we headed a little out of the city proper to a building that had been nestled into the cliffs. It overlooked the Pacific Ocean with a long, thin structure made to ensure every room got an ocean view. The ride pulled up to the hotel, and Cal thanked the driver before getting out and coming around to my side.

He looked put together again, with his pressed, black T-shirt pulling deliciously against his broad chest and his green eyes sparking with humor. He held out a hand to help me out of the car. "Ready for that payback?"

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I gave him a blank stare. “Did you seriously get ‘not inebriated’ in fifteen minutes?”

“Years of residency beat inebriation right out of me,” he grinned lopsidedly.

Okay, so maybe he was just hiding it better. I took his hand, and it was only then I realized my purse was still in his car. Sighing to myself, I followed Cal to the hotel lobby where he told them his name. They gave him two key cards, but the attendant with round cheeks and goth eyeliner only named one room on the third floor.

“Thanks,” Cal smiled in his usual, charming way. Miraculously, he did not look tipsy. Not one bit.

I followed him, bobbing my eyes left and then right. “Um, do I need to get my own room?”

“No,” Cal held up the key card. “We have one.”

“Right, you have one,” I said pointedly.

“I believe I said payback.” Cal got a wicked curve to his mouth, and then he took my hand in his.

“Oh boy,” I muttered. “There had better be a couch.”

“Right, because the room is not for sex,” Cal said with mocking severity.

I pinched my lips between my teeth. “Funny.” That churning in my stomach lessened



some, soothed by Cal's teasing smile and bright eyes as we took the elevator to the third floor. Sure, this was a fake date, but it had still been fun, right? I could have fun. There wasn't anything wrong with that.

Cal finally stumbled a little as we maneuvered into the hotel room. He flicked on the light for the suite, which sported one king-sized bed, a small sofa with a walnut coffee table, and the usual inoffensive but bland artwork, wallpaper, and carpets that hotels managed to consistently choose. Still plastered to his side, I fell sideways with him, and we bumped into the narrow entryway before tripping forward, past the bathroom to the left and into the main space. "Cal," I grunted, grabbing for his shirt and righting him. "What was in those drinks?"

"Apparently," he wrapped his arms around me in a bear hug and walked us both toward the bed, "a little too much of everything."

"What are you doing?" I squeezed out from between his hard arms.

"What does it look like?" Cal wrenched us down to the mattress, and we fell hard, poofing up the coverlet and leaving our legs dangling off the edge. Cal didn't release me. "Hmm, you smell like apples."

"That would be my shampoo," I replied, my voice strained as I pushed against him. It was no use. He had both my arms pinned to my sides, and my face had pressed into the soft cotton of his T-shirt. "Get off me, you massive troll."

He laughed, and the vibration purred through me with a satisfying trill. "I'm the troll under the bridge. Are you going to pay the toll?"

"I'm not under a bridge," I gritted out, still pushing against him as we lay facing each other on our sides. "I'm under five hundred tons of muscle."

“Thank you,” he said seriously.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” I rolled my eyes. Giving up a physical fight, I glanced up at him. With his arms tightly wound around me and his eyes closed, I got a perfect look at the sharp line of his jaw and the way his light-tinted eyelashes fanned out over smooth, bronze skin. I found myself momentarily speechless. We were so close, I could see the little cracks in his lips and the five-o-clock shadow that had grown along his chin and jaw.

Cal opened his eyes, and bright green ensnared me. “You want up, Shortstop?”

Did I? I couldn’t remember anymore. “Yeah,” I replied, my voice breathy.

“Then you have to pay the toll.”

I licked my lips, staring up into his mossy green eyes. I couldn’t help but think that Cal had been made to perfectly mirror the lush landscape of the state he’d been born in. My eyes darted down to his dusky lips and then back to his eyes. “What toll?”

Cal tightened his arms around me, drawing me up his body so my hips pressed into his lower belly and our noses nearly touched. His breath, tinted with alcohol and sugar, fanned over my lips. I swallowed hard, and my heart thudded to life, pattering away at an uneven tempo. How had I wound up in bed with Cal-the-Hot-Doctor Reed? And why, on God’s green earth, was he staring down at me with hooded eyes and an expression like he wanted to kiss me?

“How drunk are you?” I whispered.

“Sober enough to want to kiss you.” His lips pressed, curving into a soft smile. “And drunk enough to ask.”

My lips parted like they were inviting him in without another thought. “I think you’re drunk enough to want to kiss anyone, Cal.”

Cal rolled us, and suddenly he hovered over me, his long, hard body poised just over mine and his knee between my legs. He supported his weight on his forearms, but his body pressed mine into the mattress as he hovered his mouth over my parted lips. “I want to kiss you. No one else—just you. I wanted to do it three days ago, and the time in between has only made it worse.”

I stared up at him, my chest pressing against him and retreating again with sudden, labored breaths. “You don’t mean that.”

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Cal nudged my nose with his. “I do. Kiss me, Doc.”

Desire roared to life inside of me, a latent dragon that had been asleep and curled tightly around my insecurities. But now it was awake and breathing fire through my limbs and up to my face, heating me from the inside and sending want straight between my legs. I darted a look from his lips, so close they blurred, and then back to his striking eyes that watched me with a warm intensity I echoed in my core. I let my eyes flutter closed, and with the barest tilt of my chin, I brushed my lips against his.

That was all the invitation Cal needed. He pressed his lips to mine, soft at first and then teasing as he slid like silk on satin over my lips. I hadn’t kissed anyone in a long time, but it didn’t matter. Kissing Cal was like dancing. It didn’t matter how long it had been—it was effortless. It was in my DNA. I sighed, my body melting under his, and he let out a puff of sound, low and eager, and then he deepened the kiss. My hips arched up, pressing into him, and he slanted a kiss over my lips, coaxing them open and flicking his tongue in a delicious slide across the roof of my mouth and then to my upper lip before plunging in deeper.

I moaned into his mouth, clutching the front of his shirt and then moving my hands to wrap around his solid torso so he could get closer, press even firmer and relieve some of the pressure that was building inside of me. Cal tilted his head, capturing me in a feverish kiss that felt like it had never had a beginning and, please God, might never end.

He leaned his weight onto his left forearm, freeing his right hand to lift and brush strands of hair away from my face and then tickle down to my neck. A ripple of pleasure swept down my arms, and I wiggled under him, hot and needy. He had only

touched my neck and I was about to rip off all my clothing.

Wait. The thought burst through my brain like a cartoon fist through a drumhead. Ruth, what the hell are you doing? This is your fake boyfriend, he's clearly drunk, and you're falling at his feet and begging for physical affection like a pathetic loser. Again. Do not do this again. I gasped, stiffening and angling my head away.

Cal paused, his body tensing, and then he lifted away from me. "Ruth?"

"I have to go," I said thinly. Suddenly, this all felt surreal. There was no way this guy was into me—there was always a catch. Always something lurking beneath their kind words and heated looks. I pushed at him. "Cal, please."

He sat up immediately, removing his body from mine and leaning his weight on one hand to look down at me with assessing eyes. "What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

"No." I sat up too, running a hand down the front of my jumper and then resting it at the base of my throat. I stood up and backed away a few steps. "I'm fine. I'm just—I'll just—thanks for dinner."

"Ruth." Cal's dusty brown eyebrows took on a concerned tilt, and he stood slowly. "What's wrong? Did I do something you didn't want? If I did, I'm sor—"

"Nope." I held up a hand, backing away. "It's really—it's fine. I'm fine. You were fine. I just remembered something." I pulled my phone from my pocket, like that was going to make any sense. He knew this was crazy and I knew this was crazy. But I couldn't help the jitter in my bones and the echo of pain that cried out, hollow and jarring. It's not real. It wasn't real with Vaughn. It's not real with Cal. You don't do relationships. Get out before you make a fool of yourself.

"Ruth." Cal started toward me with confused anger creasing his brow. "Where are

you going?”

“I have to—” I gestured uselessly toward the door. I have to run. I have to get away from you before I make a complete and total idiot of myself.

“Okay, wait.” Cal dug into the pocket of his jeans before pulling out the keycard. He held it up like he was showing me it was harmless and not a weapon. Then he set it on the bedside table. “Stay here. I’ll go.”

“No, I really couldn’t.” I backed away until my butt hit the entry door, but Cal was there before I could reach for the handle.

He took my arms in his hands, and with a slow but inexorably steady pull, he rotated me away from the door. Releasing me and standing between me and the door, he held up a hand in an unthreatening gesture. “Stay here. I’m going to get my own room. Okay?”

My heart thundered, painful and constricting so tight, it was like rubber bands had been twined around it. “It’s really okay, Cal. This is your room.”

“I got it for you,” he reminded me. His eyes danced over my face, and I wondered what he saw. Did I look as crazed as I felt? “Ruth, you’re safe with me. Always. I promised you that when I brought you home from the bar, and I mean it now. Alright?”

I swallowed, but it wouldn’t go down. I was choking on my own stupid, inane emotions. Why was I even reacting this way? He’d kissed me, and somehow, that had led to me falling apart. What the hell? “I know,” I managed to force out.

His hand pressed down on the door handle, and with a little tug, he had it open. Worry and regret swirled in his gaze. “You have my number. I’ll come if you need

me.”

I clasped my hands together tight. “Okay.”

“I didn’t mean to pressure you, Shortstop,” he added gently.

If I could have turned into a sea lion and flung myself into the ocean to hopefully drown myself, I would have done it. I couldn’t possibly have made this more awkward. I rubbed my forehead. “You didn’t. I’m just... me.”

One corner of his mouth lifted softly. “And you’re perfect the way you are. I mean that. I’ll meet you downstairs at nine for breakfast?”

“Sure.” I was starting to feel like there was no oxygen in the room. Like we were in a bizarre vacuum that had sucked all the life and air and normalcy out of the room. But then Cal backed out, closing the door behind him, and I collapsed against the wall.

I thought having him leave would make it easier to breathe, but it didn’t. I gasped and struggled for air, sliding slowly to the floor with my hand on my chest.

I’m having a panic attack, I realized dimly. Why am I having a panic attack?

My knee throbbed, and as I struggled to draw in a complete breath, I stared at it with the faintest realization that when I’d fallen at the pier, I’d gotten a large splinter of wood under the skin. A little trickle of blood had seeped out from the wound, dry now and crusted over.

I hated splinters—nasty, piercing, painful things. I closed my eyes and tried to focus on the pain in my knee instead of the pain from my emotional splinter that was giving me a panic attack out of nowhere. Because that’s really what Vaughn was now, wasn’t he? A splinter that had stabbed through my heart and flared up with pain when

I'd tried to kiss a perfectly handsome, miraculously interested man.



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The pain of what he'd done had been lodged deep in my soul, and seeing a text from him today had only exasperated that pain. It had only brought my attention to that sliver that remained wedged in my subconscious and prevented me from loving or being loved. I opened my eyes again, and with a shaking hand, I picked at the splinter in my knee.

If only the emotional splinters were as easy to remove.

Chapter twelve

Ruth

Ruth

Gemma dunked a crispy fry into a puddle of ketchup, watching me with suspicious, blue eyes. "We should just internet stalk him."

"We're not internet stalking him," I replied dismissively. Around us, the small, cafe-style restaurant teemed with patrons, filled to the brim for lunch. The great thing about Angel's Bistro was that it had the best fries in the city. The problem with Angel's Bistro was that everyone in Eugene knew that. Gemma and I had managed to grab a table for an early lunch, and she had ordered a hamburger and fries while I'd gotten the Reuben... and fries. Obviously. One did not come to Angel's and not order fries.

We were at an inside table, seated along the window wall that overlooked the equally full patio outside. Although it was the second week of August, people were that

desperate to get high-quality sandwiches, apparently. Angel's had a modern, industrial vibe accented with rustic touches that softened the edge of all the black metal, exposed ductwork, and shiny chrome finishes.

I took a bite of the last half of my Reuben, savoring the salt and tangy bread mixed with Angel's signature fry sauce. Gemma gave me a squint. "Because you're ignoring him?"

"Because... I don't want to know," I admitted around a mouthful of sandwich.

"You don't want to know if your ex is successful?" Gemma asked, poking her plate with her fry to punctuate each question. "Or a failure? Or dating someone? Or married?"

I swallowed and gave her a sardonic mouth scrunch. "Why would I want to know that?"

"Because... we just do." She shoved the fry in her mouth.

"I really don't," I insisted. Alright, lied. I'd already internet-stalked Vaughn the day I'd gone home with Gemma after my failed date. I amended that in my head quickly. Failed fake date. The "fake" part was important because I'd totally ditched Cal Reed with a hastily typed text, and I hadn't heard from him since. After I'd managed to calm myself down from my panic attack, I'd called Gemma and begged her to come get me from the hotel. She'd stayed the night with me, and then we'd high-tailed it out of there early in the morning.

But it wasn't ditching him if the date hadn't been real, right?

My conscience didn't seem to think so. The guilt over leaving Cal there after he'd bought me a hotel room for the night kept niggling at me. The embarrassment of

having a panic attack after one kiss was even worse. It was better not to think about it, but I was having as much luck with that as I was with ignoring the fact that Vaughn had texted me out of nowhere.

Our waitress brought our check, and I reached for my purse, only to realize it wasn't there. It was still in Cal's car. Gemma gave me a shrewd look as she pulled her bright pink wallet out of her designer bag. "You going to call your husband and get your purse back sometime this century?"

"Probably not," I admitted. I took a sip of diet cola and swallowed hard. Even the idea of texting Cal again—where it would butt up against the last one that said, "Went home with Gemma. Thanks again."—made me want to shrivel up like a prune. "I'll just... cancel all my cards and get new ones."

"And get a new license?" Gemma's long lashes fell to half-mast. "Really?"

Sighing in disgust, I leaned my forehead against the glass wall to my right. "I don't know. I can't text him again."

"Aren't you supposed to go to like, an award thing with him next weekend, anyway?" Gemma asked absently as she filled out the tip on the receipt.

I waved a lazy hand. "I was supposed to. I seriously doubt he's going to bring that up now. I completely freaked out on him, Gem. Like... psycho-lady freakout."

Gemma sighed, setting down the pen firmly. She gave me an irritated, direct glare. "Unresolved trauma will do that to you. Moron."

"You're a moron," I mumbled back. I leaned back in my chair, pressing my glasses to my face as the embarrassment of Friday night washed over me again. It was Tuesday, now, and I still felt that unease as acutely as I had Saturday morning when I'd left.

Actually, it was almost worse.

“Actually, I take that back,” Gemma said thoughtfully, picking up another fry. “I saw what you did with your newest set of matches yesterday. I knew you had a genius brain.” She pointed the fry at me. “Thank you for proving me right.”

I gave her a hopeful smile. “Yeah?”

“Dude, sending them three options for potential matches was brilliant.” She quoted my colorful, brightly designed email as she waved her fry around. “‘Would you like your match based on astrological sign, matching interests, or physical description?’ I can’t believe we didn’t think to organize it that way.”

I sat up and leaned my chin on my hand. “They all responded, and they all had different preferences, so here’s hoping.” I had spent all weekend distracting myself from my discomfort by launching myself into a new matchmaking plan. What Janice had said, and my experience with Cal, had ignited the idea in my brain. So far, it seemed promising.

“Usually, we just read through their stuff and kind of go off gut instinct, but you got all clever, you nerdy scientist,” Gemma grinned. “Make them choose, and then even if it sucks, they can go with something else they’re in charge of.” She made the “chef’s kiss” motion with her fingers. “Brilliance.”

“Thanks.” I nudged the corner of my glasses with my knuckle. “I might save my job yet.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:54 pm*

I went to cross my legs, and just in time, remembered my knee was in agony. The joint gave a painful throb, and I glanced down at it. My long, yellow, floral skirt covered my legs, but I knew under the fabric, there was a ping pong ball-sized splinter infection on my knee. I hadn't been able to get the entire sliver out Friday night, and I had assumed it would "work its way out" like my grandmother had always told me. But on Saturday it had ached fiercely, and on Sunday it had begun to swell. When I'd woken this morning, I knew something was wrong.

Like a physical echo of my discomfort over Cal and our date, the pain in my knee had grown and festered, and I knew if I didn't do something about it soon, it was going to become unbearable. Only, that required a visit to the doctor. No can do, I thought grimly. I had outright lied to Cal about seeing Dr. Rook regularly. I didn't know the man—had never seen him and had no idea he was an OB/GYN. I'd just seen his name on the nameplate at the bottom of our building and had figured I could get away with the lie. I didn't see doctors.

I stood stiffly, taking the weight off my leg and waiting for Gemma to box up her leftovers. She glanced at me as we threaded through the packed restaurant. Although the hum of voices buzzed in my ears like an angry hive, I distinctly heard Gemma's stony reproval before we walked out of the air-conditioned building and into the sweltering heat. I limped beside her, and she gave me an expression that practically shouted her thoughts across the space between us.

I lifted my hands. "What, Gemma?"

"Are you for real?" She gestured to my knee as we made a left turn down the sidewalk lined with mature trees and pretty business fronts. Gemma ambled along to

my right between me and the car-lined street. “How long are you going to ignore that?”

“How long are you going to pester me?” I shot back.

“As long as it takes for you to knock it off,” she snapped.

I glared, but it was hard to hold it with Gemma giving me that goofy, wide-eyed look that pulled her round, cherubic features into a comical mask. I was fairly certain it was impossible for Gemma to look anything but kind of cute or kind of silly. Her angry face usually came across as pouty and pink, and the incredulous expression she wore now looked just shy of crazed. Coupled with her curly blond hair she wore in two buns on her head, I couldn’t help but bite down a smile. “You’re overreacting.”

“You’re limping.”

I was. As we walked down the paved sidewalk, and a bicyclist barely managed to swerve and avoid us, the pain in my leg had notched up to a twenty out of ten, and the entire appendage shook with the effort to keep my body upright. I kept limping anyway. “It’ll work its way out eventually.”

“That’s a myth,” Gemma said with a roll of her eyes.

“I don’t think it is.” I pulled out my phone and tapped on the browser icon. “I’m looking it up.”

“I’m sorry, wait,” Gemma pressed her palms together and brought them to her mouth, rounding another incredulous look my way. “You’re just now looking this up?”

“I told you, they work themselves out,” I replied, distracted by the search I was typing into the search field. “Why would I look it up?”

“Wow.” Gemma shook her head. “Really, wow. You astound me. I’m amazed at how perfectly crafted your delusions are. You should teach classes: How to Ignore Everything That Has Hurt You.” I did a fast scan of the information that popped up on my phone screen. Biting my lip with a grimace, I closed the screen and slid the phone into the pocket of my skirt. Gemma gave me a cocky eyebrow tilt. “What did you learn, Dr. Coldwell?”

I cleared my throat. “I might need some antiseptic spray.”

“I knew it,” she sighed in exasperation. “Your self-harming trauma responses are finally going to find a way to kill you.”

“You’re very dramatic,” I pointed out.

“I’m a matchmaker,” Gemma said, gesturing at her entire, curvy body. “The fuck did you expect? I’m all about passion. And drama. And anyway, don’t you need your purse back from Dr. Dreamsicle? You should just kill two birds with one stone. ‘Hi there, Manly MD! You have my purse. Also, I have this wound.’” Gemma slid her hands down her waist suggestively. “‘Could you take a look at my body?’”

I leaned over and pushed her nearly off the curb. “Will you stop it?”

Gemma cackled, righting herself and then threading her arm around my waist and supporting my weight on the right. “Fine. But you should take the rest of the day off and go get this looked at by someone. Yeah?” I accepted her help gratefully, leaning against her as we reached the street and hit the crosswalk button. The sun slanted down on my head, angry and sizzling, and it made the ache in my knee grow hot-poker painful.

I swallowed, and although we’d just eaten, my throat already felt parched. “Yeah, alright,” I conceded. “I’ll go to the pharmacy and get some stuff. I think if I get it out,

it'll be okay."

Gemma gave me a dubious look. We were nearly equal in height—both of us were much shorter than average. Her long lashes did a fast blink. "Did you intentionally mishear me or...?"

"Lay off," I said with a side glare. "I will handle it."

"You are horrible."

"You're just as bad," I countered. "Remember when you got your wisdom teeth out, and they told you to bring someone with you, so you didn't have to walk home? And you didn't?"

"Shush," Gemma sniffed.

"Or that one time you got tennis elbow and played actual tennis the next day?"

"Alright, alright, shut up," Gemma gritted out, her eyes flaring. "Point made. You want me to drive you somewhere?"

"No, I've got it. Chill." We crossed the street, moving slowly as I limped and my leg shook. The further we went, the worse I felt. I knew Gemma was right. And she knew why I couldn't find a doctor.



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It was unspoken between us—she'd been there when my grandmother had passed away. She'd stayed up late with me after each tortured appointment, and she'd been there to let me cry or rant. She'd picked me up from the hospital where they had poked, assessed, drugged, and ultimately couldn't save the only parental figure who had truly loved me. Gemma had been there with me while I watched my petite grandmother fade away, her soft face going skeletal and her precious hands curling in and shaking with the effort to stay on this earth with me. Gemma knew why I didn't do hospitals. She knew why I didn't do routine doctor's visits.

It wasn't logical. I knew that much. But I couldn't seem to get around the hurdle that had built itself in my brain. The logic was on the other side, but I couldn't reach it. So, as Gemma had astutely pointed out, I avoided it. Because unlike carbon dating calculations or silverpoint painting facts, trauma didn't make sense. It didn't have rhyme or reason. It didn't have something I could see or grasp. But it did make me feel things, and I didn't want to feel them. So, I ignored them instead.

We reached our building finally, and Gemma disappeared into the double glass doors and into the main foyer, giving me another useless directive to find a doctor "or else," and I waved her off, hobbling to the car that I had parked along the curb in front of a meter. At the very least, I reasoned, I needed to accept my reality instead of hoping it would go away. Gemma was right—I practically had a PhD in Pain Avoidance at this point.

As I got in the car and headed for the pharmacy, I took stock of my situation. As far as the texts from Vaughn went, I was fairly certain that ignoring them was still the way to go. It was tempting to give in and find out what he wanted. A bizarre little part of me, a dancing, internal imp, wanted to know what he would say and what could have

possibly brought him back from Italy early. The more reasonable, logical part of me knew that would be a mistake. Whatever it was, it would only dredge up pain.

As far as my knee went, I simply had to take better care of it. If I could get the damn splinter out, and possibly clean the area thoroughly, then the infection would subside and I might avoid a hospital stay. I could do this. I was absolutely, one hundred percent in control.

My mind wandered over to Cal. Alright, so maybe I wasn't one hundred percent in control. A small percentage of me still whirled around like a runaway top about to skid off the table because that small part of my brain remembered how it had felt to be around Cal. The problem was, I liked Cal, and I'd liked that kiss in the hotel room even more...

I shook my head. No, that was one thing I would simply have to continue avoiding. I could only force myself to grow so much at a time. My psyche couldn't take looking him in the face right now. His handsome, chiseled, green-eyed face.

I made it back to my apartment complex with a grocery bag full of supplies that would hopefully fix my knee. After hobbling across the expanse of grass and sidewalks, and nearly collapsing in the process, I managed to make it to my building. As I rounded the corner with a heavy limp, I drew up short.

A male figure leaned against the siding next to my door, and I recognized his distinctive, square build. Vaughn. He looked up as I approached slowly, doing my best to hide my limp. He wore his brown hair the way he always had, parted to the side and gelled away from his rectangular, age-lined face. Vaughn was fifteen years older than I was, but I didn't remember it being quite as obvious as it was now. He still had rimless glasses that hadn't changed, and he wore a button-down, short-sleeved shirt with a tropical print on the fabric.

Honestly, I had no idea what I'd seen in him.

"Hey, Ruth," he smiled.

I gave him an incredulous frown when I reached him. "How did you know where I live?"

"You left it with the school registrar," he said, hooking a thumb behind him like he was pointing even remotely in the right direction of Denver, Colorado.

"Yes, but how did you get it?" I glared. I folded my arms over my ribbed tank top, waiting for his answer.

He scratched his arm. "Well, I'm technically still your PI."

"The fuck you are." I tightened my arms, but it did little to hold together the wounded pieces of me that were clamoring to escape and shatter to the pavement at his feet. You left me! They shouted. You abandoned me. You tricked me.

"Ruth, listen," Vaughn said, holding out his hands for me. I tried to back away from him, but my knee buckled, and he reached out to catch me. His sweaty palms made contact with my elbows, and to my horror, he managed to pull me close to his body. His brown eyes studied mine with worried intensity. "I know what I did was wrong. Hurtful, even. But you have to understand, I needed to protect our funding."

"'Our' funding?" I hissed through a bubble of angry tears.

He ignored that, which was kind of his best talent. "I didn't know how long the research would take, but it's going better than I expected. So well, that I really do need research assistants. Real ones."

“Right, because all the work I did for you was fake,” I replied icily.

Vaughn’s thin lips pressed into a hard line. He gave me a look over his glasses. “Don’t be unreasonable. You know what I’m saying.”

God, that patronizing look. How had I endured that for so many years? What had I hoped to gain from him? “Let me go,” I bit out.

He complied but didn’t move far. “I need you, Ruth.”

My heart squeezed painfully, and I put my hand to the base of my throat. “Well, I don’t need you. Please leave me alone. I don’t care what the opportunity is—I pass. Goodbye.”

“Ruth,” he repeated, and this time his faded eyebrows met in an angry line. I tried to move past him to my door, but he took hold of my arm and pulled me back to him. “If I don’t get enough assistants, they will pull my funding. I need you,” he repeated.

“You are unbelievable.” I struggled to free myself from his grip, but he was surprisingly strong. “You should have thought that through in November.”

“It’s a five-year contract,” he gritted out. “A real one. I have it in my car and you can sign it right now.”

“Absolutely not,” I nearly shouted. My leg was on fire and my brain reeled, overcome with the impossibility of Vaughn even being here, let alone trying to coerce me into working with him again. “Get your hand off me. I’m not interested.”

“How many humanities doctorates who specialize in medieval art history do you think I’m going to be able to find?” Vaughn insisted, his voice rising and his grip tightening. The lines around his eyes had deepened, and his pale skin mottled with

angry red splotches. “I’ve looked. You are it, which is why I asked you to get your degree in the first place.”

Of course. He hadn’t asked me to get the degree because he’d wanted meat his side. He needed a warm body with the right piece of paper. “Then you should have respected me,” I shot back.

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Vaughn released me with a shove, and I slammed into my front door, banging my right knee against the metal siding. Blinding white streaked across my vision as debilitating pain crackled from my leg to my teeth. I grasped the handle tightly to keep from falling. “Go,” I choked out. “I mean it, Vaughn. My answer is no.”

“You will change your mind,” he seethed. He came up behind me, and crowding me with his body, he slammed his hand against the door next to my face. I gasped, curling inward. He’d never been violent like this... not really. He’d yelled at students and snapped at waiters, but he’d never threatened me physically like this. My hand shook on the doorknob as he hissed in my ear. “You can play hard to get, but we both know you’ll do anything for me.”

I withered on the inside like a torched dandelion. My shoulders shrank inward, and my breath froze in my lungs. “Please go,” I whispered brokenly.

He left, and I fumbled with my keys struggling to open the door before wrenching it open and twisting myself inside. The pain in my knee slammed against the hurt in my chest, and with a sob, I crumpled to the ground. I gave into the tears that had clawed up my throat, and lying down on my side, staring at my kitchen counters, I let them wash away the flood of insidious feelings that had awakened with Vaughn’s return.

It wasn’t until hours later that I managed to move. And then I lost myself in the pain and burning fever that swept through my body.

Chapter thirteen

Cal

Cal

The lines on the chart in front of me blurred, seeping together and merging into a gray, muddled mess. I had my elbow on the desk and my forehead in my hand, and I swiped my hand over my eyes, rubbing them wearily.

“You look like my kids when the Wi-Fi goes down,” Dr. Reynolds commented, coming to stand at the nurses’ station desk next to me. She leaned her elbows on the white surface, craning her neck to look at me.

I lifted my face from my hand and gave her a slow blink. “That was uncomfortably specific.”

“Long week?” She flipped open a chart, making a note and glancing at me again.

“It’s Wednesday,” I pointed out. Actually, I got ditched by my fake date after I for-real kissed her and freaked her the hell out. It’s been an eternally torturous week.

“Are your parents upset that you didn’t have a date on Friday? I know that matchmaking thing didn’t work out.” She licked her thumb and turned a page in the file because Reynolds had kids and apparently didn’t fear germs the way most of us did.

I let out a sardonic chuckle. “It actually did work in a roundabout way. But I scared off my date. She ghosted me.”

“She didn’t show up?” she asked, looking up with a concerned tilt to her brown eyes.

“She ghosted me after the date.” I slapped the file closed. “And I don’t blame her. It’s fine.”

“Wait a minute.” Annie looked up from where she was sitting at the other end of the nurses’ station desk. “Are you telling me Dr. Perfect Datestruck out?”

Of course, she would use a baseball analogy to illustrate how catastrophically I screwed things up with Shortstop. “I lost the fucking game,” I muttered. I reached over the counter and slid the file into a metal file keeper. “I’ve got at-home patients, so call me if you need me.”

“What did you do?” Annie insisted, standing and following me. She had her dark brown bob in a crazy, half-up thing that looked like water spouting from a sprinkler, and her bright pink clogs matched the heart pattern on her scrubs. “Or was she as bad as the last match?”

I sighed, gathering the remnants of my patience. “She’s great. I’m an oaf.” I’d just had two visits with feverish, obstinate kids back-to-back, and neither of them had wanted to get an examination. I’d also had a very cranky octogenarian who’d insisted she had “the thing that killed Dorris,” and she’d had no compunction about letting me know how she felt. I needed this day to end.

Annie halted, tilting her head. “Oh dear.”

“What?” Michael asked, coming out of an exam room. He wore his usual deep blue scrubs and had his hair swooped into a perfectly arranged, black coif that made him look like a C-pop star.

“Dr. Reed whiffed it with his date,” Annie said.

“What is it with all the baseball metaphors?” I asked, dividing a testy look between bewildered Michael and sympathetic Annie.

She and Michael exchanged loaded looks. “It’s America’s pastime,” Michael said



unhelpfully.

Annoyance pricked at my patience like a needle to a rapidly deflating balloon. “Do no harm,” I repeated to myself under my breath, wrenching my office door open. “Do no harm.”

“Did you not even make it to first base, then?” Michael called out before I closed the door on their smothered laughter.

I snatched up my bag from the surface of my desk before ham-handing the stack of files for patients I’d be seeing today. “First base,” I muttered. “First base is what got me into this state.” Or my over-eagerness to ease Ruth over the plate, anyway.

She had seemed interested. I’d let her make the first move, and she’d melted into the kiss in a way that sent my blood roaring just thinking about it. I’d kissed plenty of women, but none of them had felt like Ruth had. Her lips were cashmere smooth and just as pillowy soft, and I’d lost myself in the feel of her.

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But even more than the way she felt or the way her eyes had sparked with heady desire, I found myself craving her. Her wit, her sharp intelligence, and her obvious, natural ability to care about the people around her. Seeing her interact with my parents had only made that desire grow, and I'd really thought for a moment there...

I shook my head. I'd read her all wrong, apparently.

After gathering the supplies I would need for my routine visits with my patients, I fast-walked out of the office again, bypassing the curious but silent looks my co-workers were giving me.

The air outside wrapped around me in a claustrophobic blanket full of latent moisture and boiling heat. Like the burgeoning rainclouds overhead had trapped us in a steam pot, the humid air filled my lungs uncomfortably. I glanced up at the dark gray sky through the trees, and I wondered if this heatwave would finally break and ease us into September with a bit of cooler weather. I hoped so—I wore button-downs and chinos to work most days, and it was getting unbearable spending half the day feeling like I had a humidifier stuck under my shirt.

I passed a few pedestrians covered in the same sheen of sweat that I was, and then I tapped my watch to unlock and start my SUV. Technically, it was a company car, but seeing as I had a share in the urgent care practice, I had chosen the electric, luxury vehicle myself. Silver and sleek, it had all the upgrades that made my job that much easier. It also had plenty of room in the back for the equipment I took from house to house on my rounds.

I slid into the driver's side, and I sighed in relief as the cooling function on the seat

soothed some of the muggy heat that had enveloped my body. As I flicked on my blinker and put the car into drive, intending to pull out into the sparse traffic, I glimpsed Ruth's small, leather backpack on the floor of the passenger's side. I paused, foot on the brake. I really needed to return it to her, even if she had decided she didn't want to see me. Or talk to me. Or, apparently, acknowledge that I existed. I wasn't sure what had gone wrong on our fake-date-turned-real-make-out, and I had even less of an idea what to do about it.

In the past, when I'd dated a woman or hooked up with an interested partner, if things seemed like they weren't going well, we usually found a fairly smooth way to end things. I couldn't remember going on a date and having her just leave so abruptly. I knew that Ruth had seemed terrified and upset, and I'd picked up on the fact that kissing me had triggered it. I didn't want to make her life more difficult, but was ignoring her really the best option?

It couldn't be. I wasn't going to go into stalker mode, but I could return her purse to her workplace at the very least. That decided, I put the car back into park, punched the ignition off, and stooped down to swipe up the small, black knapsack. It was a short walk to her building from mine, so I hauled myself back out into the summer day.

It was like walking through a steamed dumpling. By the time I made it to the four-story corporate building made up of separate suites, my gray shirt had stuck to my back, and I had to swipe sweat away from my neck and forehead.

I rode the elevator to the third floor, which was thankfully air-conditioned, and when it dinged, the doors slid open to reveal the waterfall wall with the Kiss-Met logo backlit at its center. The receptionist's desk was off to the left, curving around in a sleek, white C shape. The receptionist, a young blond woman with eyes that were a little too big for her face, stood up as I approached. "Good afternoon, Dr. Reed. Welcome back. How can we help you?"

I managed to remember just in the nick of time that I was supposed to be Ruth's husband. "Ruth left this in my car," I said, holding it up. "I thought she might need it today."

The receptionist, whose nameplate read, "Olivia," blinked at me with confused, round eyes. "Oh, didn't she call in sick today?"

A stab of worry sliced through my chest. "She did?" I hesitated, thinking fast on the spot. "Oh, I left before her this morning. She said she hadn't been feeling well, but I didn't know she'd called off."

"Yeah," Olivia glanced down at a notepad by her mouse. "She said she has a fever and didn't want us to catch it."

"Right," I nodded slowly. I lowered my arm. "Well, I'll... take this home to her, then."

The receptionist smiled. "Anything else we can do for you, Dr. Reed?"

"No," I waved, turning to go and tossing concerned thoughts around in my head. "Thank you for your help." Ruth was sick? For how long? Had she seen a doctor already? Surely, Rook wouldn't have seen her for a common virus. But she'd said she used him as a PCP.

Knowing full well it bordered on a HIPAA violation, I pulled out my phone, scrolled through my contacts, and pulled up Rook's practice on my phone. As the elevator hummed down to the second floor, his receptionist answered. "Sphere of Life Women's Services, this is Becky, how can I help you?"

"Hey Becky, it's Dr. Reed. Is Rook with a patient right now?" I tapped my foot impatiently as the elevator passed down another floor.

“No, he’s working on patient records at the moment. Should I tell him you—”

“Thanks, I’ll find him in his office.” I hung up, and as the elevator doors opened to Rook’s practice on the second floor—was it a coincidence that he worked in the same building she did?—I headed for the glass door with frosted letters that proclaimed “Sphere of Life Women’s Services.” When I entered the small, corporate-style waiting room with gray padded chairs, nondescript art on the walls, and flat carpet, Becky looked up from the desk that had been separated from the room with a glass panel.

“Oh, Dr. Reed. You’re already here.”

“Yeah, sorry,” I waved, smiling. “I’m just here to see Dr. Rook. I won’t be long.” Rook and I rarely interacted anymore—we’d gone to med school together, and we had both finished our residencies at the same hospital in Portland, but I didn’t like the guy. Unfortunately, our mothers were friends, so that tie remained. At the moment, I was a little grateful for the connection because I had a sinking feeling in my gut that something was off with Ruth.

I went through the door that connected the waiting room to the exam rooms in the back, and already knowing my way around the small practice, I hung a left past a nurses’ station and went down the side hallway that led to Rook’s office.

I found him standing at his desk, which was one of those ergonomic... something-or-other desks that people who hated resting stood at all day. He had a silver clump of tiny, magnetic spheres that he almost always held in his left hand to play with while he thought, and his right hand hovered over the trackpad of his laptop. He looked up, eyes frosted blue and devoid of life... like his fucking soul, I imagined. Why any woman would trust this guy with any part of her body was beyond me.

“Reed,” he said, and one dark blond eyebrow quirked up with interest. Rook had light

blond hair that he combed neatly to the side, not a lock out of place and not any room for disorder. Again—like himself. He always wore the same thing, too: a white dress shirt, black slacks, and his white coat. He'd dressed like that every day since residency, and I genuinely assumed he wore it on the weekends, too... assuming he didn't just go into cryogenic sleep for two days to recharge. "It's been a while."

"It has, and sorry to bother you, but I need to know if you've seen a patient of yours recently."

Dr. Rook twirled the magnetic fidget in his left hand, thinking. "I can't recall any patients of mine who signed release forms to your practice."

"She didn't, but we're fudging things. Did Ruth Coldwell come to see you this week? I'm worried she might be sick." I leaned my back against his open door and folded my arms.

Rook's expression remained smooth, but he hooked me with a direct stare. "That's a HIPAA violation, and you know it."

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I glared. “Rook. You don’t have to give me information about when or why she saw you. I just want to know if she did. You can tell me if you have a patient in your system.”

His eyes returned to his computer, more or less dismissing me. “I can’t tell you because I don’t have a patient by that name.”

I frowned. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure,” he replied calmly, and his voice held all the color of a 1940s film noir. “I have a photo—”

“—photographic memory, yes, I know,” I finished for him, rolling my eyes. “I remember. I’m just making sure because she said she was your patient.”

Knox Rook gave me an implacable look. “Then, she lied.”

So she had. Rook didn’t make mistakes about his patients—he didn’t make mistakes in general. If he said that Ruth wasn’t his patient, then she wasn’t. “Huh.” I chewed on my lower lip, thinking.

“Isn’t this Ms. Coldwell supposed to be your girlfriend?” Knox asked, his eyes back on his screen and his fingers clicking away on the trackpad again.

I started. “How did you know—where did you hear that?”

“My mother,” he drawled, like it was a fact he’d rather forget. “Your meddling

mother and my meddling mother have been talking to a gaggle of other baby-hungry mothers, and there seems to be some kind of conspiracy happening behind our backs to get us all trapped in matrimony.”

“Who is ‘us?’” I asked, horrified. “What do you mean ‘trapped?’”

Rook ticked off names, clicking the magnetic spheres as he thought. “Spencer, Wells, and Frost are the other three whose mothers are in the same reading group, I think.” Our mothers had met at our graduation, and they had connected over the woes of having sons in medical school and residency. They had started a self-help book club, but apparently, from what Rook was saying, it was a twice-monthly scheme session to “nudge” their sons in a certain leg-shackled direction.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” I pushed off the door. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

Glacial eyes met mine again. “I wish I was. Your mother spoke to my mother, and when mine called me last night, she had ideas.” Rook had that disgruntled expression that brought to mind a cat watching a dog chase its tail in circles. “I almost went to find you because you’re to blame for this.”

I flattened my hand against my chest. “My fault? How is that my fault?”

“Because your mishap with the matchmaker gave them said ideas, and now they’re devising things that frankly terrify me.” Rook set the clump of magnetic spheres on the desk with a snap. “The only logical next move is for you to get the fuck away from me and make yourself single again.”

I swept out a hand. “Done, asshole. Ruth and I were never dating. Christ, how do you even have patients? Do you berate them into pushing out their babies?”

Rook lifted his eyes to the ceiling. “Get out, Reed.”



“Gladly,” I muttered. I fast-walked back out of his small practice, slapping the elevator button and waiting impatiently for the doors to open.

Well, now what? For one thing, Ruth didn’t appear to have a PCP. Or if she did, she hadn’t wanted me to know who. I bopped my head side to side in thought. Okay, that might make sense. I’m a stranger and she doesn’t want me to know personal information. Fair. But was she sick, or wasn’t she?

I palmed my face. “Reed, snap out of it,” I mumbled out loud. It wasn’t my problem. Ruth was a grown woman—a smart one—who could make her own decisions. And one of her decisions had been to put distance between herself and me, which meant I didn’t get to dig around in her personal life just because I liked her.

Liked her a lot, actually.

The elevator doors ground open with a loud mechanical whir, but as I moved to enter, Rook’s voice halted me. “Reed, wait.”

I turned, but before I could answer, a person slammed open the fire escape door. A small, female form catapulted out of the stairwell with so much momentum, she careened sideways. Her short body skidded and stumbled straight for the office door where Rook was standing. On instinct, I reached to catch her, but I was too far away. In slow motion, I watched as the girl tripped toward Rook with a straight trajectory into his arms, and my fast-firing brain synapses conjured the inevitability that Rook would reach out and stop her before she hit the glass wall.

Instead, he stepped out of the way.

The girl—Gemma, I realized belatedly—slammed into the glass with a loud bong. A muffled “oof,” escaped her, and she crumpled to the ground with a dazed expression on her face. Rook stared down at her, hands in his pockets. “Running is not allowed

in the building.”

Gemma rotated an incredulous glare up to him, rubbing a red spot on her forehead.

“You...let me hit the wall?”

“I allowed you to carry out your initial momentum. Which,” he added with an icy stare, “wouldn’t have happened if you’d been walking.”

“You—” she spluttered. Her long, blond curls had fallen all around her face in disarray, and she pushed her hair out of the way, struggling to stand in her tight, black pencil skirt. “I could have died, you jerk.”

Knox swept a look from the fire escape door to the glass office entrance six feet away. “Physics would beg to differ.”

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Gemma stumbled with her high heels buckling under her. “Who the fuck do you think you are?”

I closed the short distance between the elevator and the office door, and reaching out a hand, I helped Gemma to stand. “That’s Rook, and he’s an asshole.”

Gemma swiped dirt from her ass and smoothed her ruffled, white button-down as she gave Dr. Rook another pointed scowl. “Yeah, I can see that.” She flipped him off. “Have a great fucking life, loser.”

Knox looked like he was sending up a silent prayer for patience. “Reed, I was just going to warn you that your mother shared Kiss-Met’s services with her friends, and she made it sound like they could go to your girlfriend for matches.” His eyes flitted from me to Gemma, and then back to me. “Thought you should know.”

That was... terrible news. Horrible, in fact. My parents had really liked Ruth, and then I’d gone and ran her off. Brilliant move, Reed. “Thanks,” I gritted out.

“Girlfriend,” Gemma said, as if the word had jarred her memory. “Yes, Ruth.” She reached out and grabbed my wrist in a tight grip that did not match her small stature. Her bright blue eyes captured mine with fervent intensity. “I ran down here to catch you before you left. Ruth needs you.”

My brows drew together a fraction. “What do you mean?”

“Something is wrong with her knee, and she won’t go see a doctor,” Gemma rushed to explain. “I think it’s infected? I don’t know. She won’t let me in to see.” Rook

clicked his tongue in censure, and Gemma hinged an angry glower his way. “Don’t you have a lair to return to?”

“It’s more of a dungeon,” Rook replied seriously.

Gemma’s heart-shaped face twisted in derision. “Ugh.”

But my mind wasn’t on their squabbling. It was on Ruth and what might be wrong with her knee—and most importantly, what I could do about it. I backed away, my mind already making a list of supplies I might need. “If I go there, will she let me in?”

“No.” Gemma gave me a conspiratorial eyebrow quirk. “But her spare is in the bush to the left of her back door.”

“That doesn’t sound legal,” I replied, hitting the elevator button and then bringing up Annie’s number in my phone. I put it to my ear, waiting for my receptionist to pick up.

Gemma folded her arms under her generous breasts. “Are you going to save her or not?”

“Highly unethical,” Rook muttered.

I dithered. It was unethical to show up to a girl’s house after she’d firmly set a boundary in place. But then again, it was unethical to know she was sick or suffering and do nothing about it. Ruth had said she didn’t like hospitals or doctors. Maybe that fear went deeper than I’d known, and perhaps she was just like some of my other patients—the ones who had what we often called “white coat syndrome” that made them unaccountably anxious about entering medical institutions. That was one of the many reasons I’d chosen to give at-home care in the first place.

The elevator doors opened, and Annie answered. “Hello, Goldbrook Urgent Care. This is Annie, how can I help you?”

I met Gemma’s worried gaze, and then I stepped into the elevator. “Hey, Annie, clear my schedule for the afternoon. Put Ruth Coldwell on instead.”

## Chapter fourteen

Ruth

Ruth

My blood had become the molten core of the earth. It raged through my veins, scalding the tissue and burning away my organs from the inside out. I vaguely remembered calling in sick to work, and I’d managed to grab a glass of water from the kitchen, but after that, I’d found myself welded to the couch. And then the inferno had cooled with an icy blast, like the lava in my veins had turned into a glacial fjord, and I started shivering uncontrollably. I wanted to find a blanket, but I couldn’t put weight on my knee after I’d slammed it into the door.

And really, the only thing worse than the fever racking my body in torturous waves was the pulsing pain along my leg. I needed to find a hospital. I knew that. But between the fever and the pain, I couldn’t find the will to overcome my fears. With bleary eyes, I risked a look down to my knee. It had swollen more overnight, and my failed attempt to dig out the wooden sliver the night before had only inflamed it and caused the agony to double. I rolled my face into the small throw pillow on my couch. Not good. It had to subside eventually, right?

Could I die from a splinter? That didn’t seem possible. I hadn’t ever heard of such a thing—death by splinter. Nothing could be more ridiculous than that, and I reasoned that I was simply being dramatic because I had a fever, and the pain wasn’t abating.

Unless there was something I was missing. Not the right kind of doctor, I thought despairingly. I tried not to think about the fact that I was the kind of doctor Vaughn needed. I tried to push away the anger and hurt from his threats, but they knotted around inside of me, festering just as badly as the wood in my knee.

I let myself fall back into a fitful sleep, but it wasn't very restful between the sweating, burning fever that faded away into teeth-chattering chills. I thought distantly that a bath would be nice, but I wasn't sure I could make it to the bathroom. So, instead, I spiraled into dreams with locked doors and silverpoint pens that scratched aching patterns all over my leg until it bled. I dreamed of liquid silver mixing with my blood in a contrasting swirl, draining out of me and onto a medieval stone floor until it reached the feet of laughing giants.

One of the giants made a grumbling sound, muffled even in my dreams, and he reached down to grab my arm in a vice grip. Vaughn? No! Get off me!

I struggled, and the giant pressed his hand to my face. Then, he dipped his massive fingers into his gold goblet to pull out an ice cube. He pressed it to my arm, and I gasped so loudly, it wrenched me from the dream.

I opened my eyes. My blurry living room took shape slowly, and the swinging, faded image of my ceiling fan converged in dizzying sweeps before settling into a solid picture. A soft, hydraulic kind of sound puffed in the quiet room, taking on a rapid rhythm, and it was only then that I realized each clenching sound was followed by an increasing tightness around my arm.

I looked down and saw Callum. I almost passed out. "What?" I croaked.

He was kneeling on one knee next to me, one elbow resting on the brown couch cushion and his hands on my right arm that lay out flat at my side. Somehow, I'd gotten turned from my side to my back, and he had a blood pressure cuff around my

arm. His stethoscope had been pressed to the inside of my elbow, and as his shadowed, green eyes found mine, his lips counted soundlessly. He dropped his gaze back to my arm, still counting as he took my blood pressure.

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“Cal?” I scratched out, trying to sit up. Was I dreaming? What was he doing here?

His watch beeped, and with practiced ease, he lowered the earbuds from the stethoscope and looped it around his neck. He released the pressure on the cuff. Feeling returned to my fingers in a prickly rush. “Oh, good, you’re awake,” he said with a sarcastic pull of his lips. He unlatched the Velcro from the cuff, freeing my upper arm. “If you’re conscious, I have to ask for your consent to treat you. That should go over well.”

I blinked, thoroughly confused. “Is this real?”

“Unfortunately, Dr. Coldwell,” he said, and his expression took on a hard glint, “it is. Believe me, I wish it wasn’t.” Cal had on a light gray dress shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and his dark bronze hair looked a little more disheveled than usual. Although that faded buzz along the bottom kept it neat, the longer top had been swept away from his forehead like he’d been running his hands through it.

If he was here, then... “Gemma?” I asked. Why did my voice sound like radio static?

“Gemma asked me to check on you, yes.” Cal dropped the blood pressure cuff into a leather bag on the floor next to his knee. “Do I have your consent to treat you, Ruth?”

“Uh,” I tried to force my brain to work again. It was like pedaling a bike with the chain off the gears. Gemma had asked Cal to look in on me, which meant she’d told him about the spare key I kept out back. And that meant he was looking at me... right now... in my long nightshirt with no bra. I sucked in a breath. “No. Oh my God.” I put a hand to my scalding forehead. “Oh no.”



Cal's handsome features fell in irritation. "Is this because you don't want to be treated or because it's me doing the treating?"

"Both?" I tried to sit up, but his hands held me back with gentle pressure.

"Ordinarily, I'd say that coercive consent is a no-go, but your fever is out of control, Ruth. Your knee is badly infected, and if you don't get it treated—by me or someone else—then you're running the risk of that infection entering your bloodstream. Do you know what that is?"

"No." My voice sounded small, strained. I couldn't stop looking at him, at the intensity in his expression and the fascinating way his neck moved when he tightened his jaw in anger.

"It's called sepsis. You could die," he added slowly. His dark brown eyebrows tilted up with concern. "Let me help you, Shortstop. Please?"

I lowered my hand, letting my head fall back against the pillow. I held those bright green eyes as they skipped over my face in concern, and I swallowed hard. My fever felt unbearably hot and achy, and I would have gleefully sawed my own leg off if it would have made the pain stop. Yes, my embarrassment might actually kill me after Cal fixed my infection, but at the moment, it took a back seat to the agony my body was in. Sighing, I closed my eyes. "Alright."

Cal reached behind him and brought an enormous, black utility bag over to sit next to his smaller leather satchel. "Okay, give me the quick and dirty of your medical history. Anything of note from your parents?"

"I wouldn't know," I mumbled, lifting my eyes to the ceiling and wanting to just melt into a puddle of misery. Why did I have to see him again like this? It wasn't fair. And he was in my house. Wait, I have dishes in the sink. Shit, my underwear is on the

bathroom floor!

“I relate,” he said as he unzipped the bag. “Any medical conditions? Medications you take?”

“No,” I eked out. This has to be a nightmare. Did I remember to take out the trash? I sniffed the air. It did smell a little stale. Fuck me.

“Allergies?” Cal pulled a bunch of plastic and paper packages out of the bag.

“No.” I forced myself to rise onto my elbow. “Wait, Cal, what are you doing? Can’t I just take some Tylenol and get you to pull the stupid splinter out?”

Cal paused, and his eyes bounced to the wound on my knee, which lay exposed below the hem of my nightshirt. “It’s a splinter?”

“Yeah, from the boardwalk.”

He looked silently horrified. “You... got that because of me?”

“It wasn’t your fault,” I clarified. “It wasn’t a big deal until like... a few days ago maybe.”

“You’ve had this since Friday?” he asked. He looked mutinous. “It’s Wednesday.”

“And tomorrow is Thursday,” I agreed.

“Ruth.” Cal tossed packets of supplies onto the couch between my hip and the back of the couch. He’d gone from sympathetic and worried to flat-out furious. “Even if you didn’t want to see me specifically, how could you walk around with a wound like that for days?”

“Not very well,” I admitted with a bad attempt at humor.

He glared. “If it’s a sliver, then yes, I need to get it out. First, we need to address the infection before it goes septic.”

I spied the IV bag in his hand and covered my eyes again. “This is humiliating.”

“Good,” he replied heartlessly. “Serves you right for ignoring medical care. I told you my practice makes house calls. Even if you don’t like doctors’ offices—”

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“I should have, what?” I snapped, taking my hand away from my eyes to scowl at him. “I should have called the doctor I’d fully humiliated myself in front of?”

Cal didn’t stop working, ripping open packages and placing them in a neat little row along the edge of the couch. But he gave me a gentle glance. “You didn’t embarrass yourself. I don’t know why you were scared, but I understood it. You don’t have to explain yourself to me, Ruth. Your boundaries are yours to make.”

“It wasn’t a boundary,” I muttered, and despite my fever, I felt the blood rush to my cheeks. “It was just a... weird hiccup. I don’t know. But I did... like it. Our date.”

“I see,” he said slowly, his brows furrowing a little as he pulled a pair of latex gloves from his bag. He blinked rapidly like he was banishing a thought, and pulling in a breath, he slipped the gloves on. “I did wash my hands,” he offered with a half-smile, “when I first found you.”

“Oh good,” I croaked. “You saw my dishes then.”

“Underwear,” he grinned crookedly. “I used your bathroom.”

“Fuck me,” I groaned.

Cal quirked a brow. “Not in my usual list of services.”

“On second thought, maybe you should let me die.”

Cal puffed out a laugh, and laying my arm out again, he wrapped a rubber tourniquet

just above my elbow. With the blue vein on the inside of my arm glowing through my pale skin, he swabbed the area with disinfectant. “After you just told me you enjoyed our date, now you want me to let you die? I don’t think so.” He tossed the swab aside and palpated the vein with his black-gloved fingers. His eyes seemed focused on my vein, but he murmured, “And what about our kiss?”

I started, but he kept my arm still. “Oh, uh,” I swallowed hard. “Is this really a good time?”

“What, stabbings aren’t romantic?” he asked, holding up the IV set in its package. I let out a high-pitched sound of uncertainty. Cal’s face broke into a grin, and he peeled the backing off the package. “It’s probably better if you don’t answer that. I’m not sure my ego can take it.” He tore off the rubber tourniquet, and with gentle fingers, he aligned the IV needle with my vein. “Fast pinch.”

I screwed my eyes shut, but he was quick, and in a rapid succession of practiced movements, he had the IV catheter inserted, the needle discarded in a plastic bin at his side, and the tubing taped to my arm. I watched him fiddle with the tubing and a portable, retracting IV stand that he set up a little higher than the couch. He hung a saline bag from it, his face pinched with concentration.

“I liked it,” I said suddenly.

Cal paused, lowering his hands from the bag. His gaze fused to mine. “Did you?” he asked softly.

I swallowed hard. Nodding, I whispered, “I did.”

Cal removed his gloves, bending to one knee beside me again. He tossed the gloves into the plastic receptacle and leaned his arm on his bent knee. “And why are you telling me that now?”

I threaded my bottom lip through my teeth. “I’m just worried about your ego.”

He fought a smile. “Okay. I’ll worry about your body, and you worry about my ego. Sounds like a fair trade.”

“You’re an excellent doctor,” I told him primly. “Amazing. I’d be dead without you.”

“Why is that working?” he murmured, letting the smile escape his tightened lips. He reached up and pushed a stray curl away from my cheek. “Just sit tight for a minute while I get you set up with some broad-spectrum antibiotics.” He grimaced and added, “And on that note, I’ll need to poke you again. Sorry. I want to get CRP and CBR tests to make sure we get you the right antibiotics to fight the infection.”

“I take it back,” I said with fake solemnity. “You are the worst doctor.”

Cal-the-Worst-Doctor actually ended up being anything but. He found me a blanket from my messy bedroom, but I was so grateful to feel a little more comfortable that I didn’t think too hard about what he’d seen. He drew blood samples in tubes topped with purple and red caps, and then he added antibiotics to my IV line. More and more, my living room started to looklike a pseudo-hospital setup with the IV bag on its stand, and then Cal dragged over my small plastic table from the dining area. He laid out disposable blue medical sheets over the surface and arranged things from his bag on it so they weren’t sitting on the carpet.

My heart clenched with discomfort at the tang of disinfectant in the air and the sight of all that blue and silver, but the fact that it was in my living room did take the edge off. By the time half my IV bag had emptied, Cal had brought over a dining room chair to sit between the couch and the table. He’d also washed his hands again, and with a sigh, he gave me a resigned look. “Okay, Shortstop. Let’s fix your knee.”

“You don’t look very happy about it,” I observed, reclining on the couch and feeling

weirdly lightheaded from the painkillers he'd added to the IV line. "Should I be worried?"

"I'd much rather do this in the center," he admitted with a squint of one eye. "But I think your answer to that is probably 'no.'"

"Very smart, Doctor."

Sighing again, he stood from the chair, and moving it further down the length of the couch, he lifted a tray with supplies from the dining room table and placed it on the seat. Then he gently slid his arm under my legs, and I did my best to raise them up for him while he sat on the couch. He placed my knees on his lap and gave me an amused glance. "This is not considered best practice. Just so you know."

I saluted him. "I won't tell."

He angled his body toward me, making it easier to reach the instruments on the chair. My hands trembled as I realized he was actually going to touch that inflamed area, and it was likely going to hurt like a son of a bitch. Cal pulled on another pair of black gloves, and his attention fixed on my knee as his fingers tenderly probed the area. Sharp pain cracked up my thigh and down to my toes.

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I sucked in a breath, tensing. Cal glanced up briefly before returning to the infection. “This is gnarly. What did you do to it?”

“I uh,” I swallowed convulsively, pressing my hands into the couch to support my weight like that might take some of the pressure off my wound. “I might have... poked it. With tweezers, last night.”

Cal’s green eyes hooded with annoyance. “Seriously?”

“I was trying to fix it,” I said breathlessly.

He reached over and grabbed a green medical sheet. With a snap, he unfolded it, and then with the utmost care, he shimmied it under my knee and over his lap. “Well, I’ll do what I can here. But if I can’t get it all out, you’re going to the hospital. Deal?”

“Yeah,” I said thinly. My stomach was roiling around like a tempestuous sea, and I worried that I’d add to my ignominy by barfing all over him.

Cal gave me another look. “You okay? I haven’t actually done anything yet.”

“I get,” I swallowed again. “I get pukey.”

Understanding lit his features. “Lie back, Ruth. Close your eyes and relax.” He pointed to the packages and instruments on the green sheet at his side. “Look, I’ll walk you through exactly what I’m going to do. I’m going to give you a local anesthetic—that’s the only part that should hurt. It might pinch and burn, especially with how tender it is, but after that, it shouldn’t hurt. If it hurts after that, you tell me



right away. Okay?”

I nodded, trying to uncoil my tense muscles. I couldn't make myself sit back and look away. I gave him a worried look. “Then what?”

“Then I'm going to open up this site where the splinter entered your knee initially.” He pointed to where my knee still leaked a thin stream of blood and fluid. “If I can see it, I'll pull it out. If not,” he shrugged, catching my gaze. “We have to go in. Ideally, I'd have an ultrasound of what we're working with. And Ruth, honestly, even if I get this out, we need to get one done to make sure there aren't any foreign bodies left in there. But we'll see how it goes.”

“But for now?” I prompted, my heart thudding in my chest.

He smoothed his knuckles along the shin of my uninjured left leg. “For now, let's get it out. It's a good first step either way.”

“Okay,” I breathed out. I coaxed my body to lie back against the pillows, letting my head relax and my eyes close. “I trust you.”

“God only knows why,” he said under his breath with some amusement.

“You're my husband, aren't you?” I joked with a grin.

His laugh sounded softly through the quiet living room. “If I was your husband, I'd be absolutely furious with you for this. So, count yourself lucky I'm not.”

I picked up my head with a shrewd eye squint. “And what would you do, exactly?”

Cal lifted his gaze to mine, and in those shadowed, emerald depths, I saw a flash of hardness. “Should I show you later?”

My mouth went dry. I ran my tongue along the inside of my lip, and my breathing hitched as a sudden wave of warmth spiraled at my core. Something in his expression hinted at shadowed, forbidden things. Things I wanted to shed light on. “Um.”

His features softened into a smile, and he returned his attention to my knee. He opened a packet with a glistening, orange-tipped swab. “Lie back Dr. Coldwell. You have my ego, remember?”

“And you have my body,” I said distantly, resting my head against the pillows again.

His voice shimmered with mirth. “Exactly.”

## Chapter fifteen

Cal

Cal

Ruth’s dark baby hairs had matted to her forehead, which still gleamed with a sheen of sweat. Her eyelashes lay delicately against her cheeks, trembling as she twitched through a dream. She’d fallen asleep finally, but I’d had to up her pain meds a good amount to ease her out of her nervous shaking and intense pain. Although I’d given her local injections, and the pain should have been mitigated, the entire procedure had been a little harrowing. The splinter of wood had embedded itself in the subcutaneous layers of flesh over her bony knee, and even local anesthetic couldn’t do much for the pressure and prodding involved in getting it out.

Fortunately, I’d had Michael drop off our portable scan lab, and a quick ultrasound while I still had her numbed up had given me peace of mind that I’d gotten all of the debris out. Michael had also taken her blood samples to the lab. Hopefully, they would tell me if the amoxicillin I was running through her IV was sufficient. At the

very least, the fluids and meds were helping.

It was a relief to see her asleep after watching her writhe in pain. I found another fleece blanket in her closet, and keeping my footsteps light over her beige carpets, I returned to her and laid it over her shivering body. The antipyretics were doing a good job with her fever, but intravenous fluids were always a little chilly. I sat in the chair next to her couch, and unable to help myself, I smoothed those baby hairs away from her temples. I traced the soft lines of her face with my eyes, smiling faintly. She had indents on the bridge of her nose from her glasses, and her lips were cracked from dehydration, but somehow, I still found her unbearably irresistible.

My phone buzzed in my back pocket, and not wanting to wake her, I stood again. I went into the kitchen only a few feet away and leaned against her yellow Formica countertop as I answered. “This is Dr. Reed.”

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“Hey, it’s Annie. We have your results back for the CRP and CRP.”

I checked my watch. It was five in the evening, so that had been pretty fast. “What do you have for me?”

“I sent them to your email. White blood count and CRP are elevated, but neutrophil is only slightly over the average range.”

“Hemoglobin and hematocrit?” I asked, putting her on speaker and pulling up my email.

“Normal range.”

“Thank God,” I muttered, tapping on the uploaded report.

“Yeah.” Annie paused. “Dude, I have to know—is this the same Ruth Coldwell that set you up with that shitty date?”

“Yeah,” I laughed softly, glancing up like I might see Ruth. But she was on the other side of the wall of the tiny kitchen. “She was my date Friday.”

“Oh my God.” Annie sounded equal parts astonished and gleeful. “This is fantastic. I mean, not fantastic that she’s sick, but it’s soromantic. You swooped in and saved her all hero-like.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. I’ll fill you in on more later. For now, I need to get her POC squared away before I head out.”

“Sure. Need anything else?”

I ran through Ruth’s symptoms in my head, but I’d come well prepared as it was.

“No. Did you have any trouble rescheduling my patients?”

“There’s one I was hoping you would see,” Annie said, and I heard her clicking her mouse. “Geraldine Sarrow. She reported chest pain, but she says she’s not going anywhere and only wants to see you.”

“Geraldine,” I sighed. She had chronic heartburn that manifested as chest pain, but it was best to make sure it wasn’t anything worrying all the same. “Alright. I’ll get Ruth situated here and head over there. Thanks, Annie.”

“Have a good night, Dr. Hero.” I heard the grin in her voice, and she hung up before I could snap back.

“Not a single one of them respects me,” I muttered, zooming in on Ruth’s report. After reading it top to bottom, and feeling reassured that the amoxicillin would knock out her infection, I returned to the living room. I’d already cleaned up and packed away my supplies after her procedure, so I sat back down at the chair and angled it toward the table I’d moved into the living room. The air conditioner churned to life, blasting my face with a blissful waft of cold air. Ruth’s apartment was so small, it only hummed for thirty seconds before shutting off again and leaving the air cool and tinged with the scent of antifreeze.

I wasn’t sure which pharmacy Ruth used, so I pulled out my prescription pad from my leather bag and wrote her a prescription for antibiotics and another for a decent painkiller. Then I pulled on another pair of gloves before I turned in my chair and clicked the clamp on the IV closed. I knew it would wake her, but I ripped open an alcohol pad and scrubbed the IV port taped against her skin.

Sure enough, her eyes fluttered open, landing on me with bleary confusion. I smiled, waiting for the alcohol to dry. “Sorry to wake you.”

Ruth blinked fast, inhaling sleepily and starting to sit up. “Oh, s’okay. How long was I asleep?”

“About two hours. I’m going to disconnect your saline bag and lock your IV port. I’d like you to keep it in just in case that infection gives us trouble.” I hovered my hands over the tape on her arm. “Sound okay?”

“Sure,” she rasped out. She gave me a sleepy blink. “Are you... I mean if you’re—” She frowned, blinking hard. “Wait.” She patted around her lap until she found her glasses. With her good arm, she slid them back into place. “You’re leaving?”

I nodded reluctantly. “Yes, I have to go check on another patient. Can you have Gemma come over to help you tonight?” I peeled away the tape with as much efficiency as I could, but I knew that part always stung.

“Yeah, of course.” Ruth winced as I removed the rest of the tape. “She’ll insist on it anyway.”

“I can tell,” I said honestly. When I reached for the syringe of saline, she stiffened. I angled a reassuring look her way. “It’s just a saline flush.”

“Oh.” She pushed her glasses against her face even though they hadn’t gone anywhere. “Right.”

I disconnected her primary IV line and connected the extension tubing to her port. Pushing the plunger on the saline flush, I said, “I have a patient who’s asking for me, so I’m going to check in on her. I want you to stay off your knee if you can.” I clamped the saline line, and briskly, I unhooked the syringe before curving the tube

up and taping it back down. “The antibiotics I gave you through the IV will hold you over for the night, but tomorrow morning you need to fill those prescriptions,” I tilted my head toward the table behind me, “and make sure you take them.”

“Sure.” Ruth watched me, tucking her bottom lip between her teeth. I had the sudden urge to suck it right back out with my mouth. “Thank you. I don’t know how insurance works with these sorts of things, but I’ll call your office tomorrow.”

“Don’t. It was my fault you got hurt in the first place.” I gathered everything up, and stripping off my gloves over the papers and packaging, I tossed it all into the red trash receptacle I would take back to the center to dispose of. “I’ll handle it.”

Her face went a soft shade of pink. “I can’t do that, Cal.”

“Ruth.” I took her hands in mine. “You can. And relax.”

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She glanced down at our hands, and then back to me. “I still can’t believe you even bothered to come help me after I ditched you.”

“Ouch,” I grimaced for dramatic effect. “Ditched is such a harsh word. What happened to my ego?” I let go of her hands, but only so I could lean forward and circle her waist with my hands. She noticed what I wanted to do, and started to help me sit her up, but I lifted her into a sitting position before she could accidentally pull at the stitches in her knee. “I’ve got you, Shortstop.”

She pushed at her glasses. “I don’t think your ego needs any help.”

I grinned. “You might be right. I’m a little on the cocky side.”

Her lips twitched. “Good thing, I guess.”

I indulged in another fast perusal of her full lips and gray eyes, following the gentle slope of her heart-shaped face and square chin. My heart clenched at the thought of what might have happened if I hadn’t shown up. “Good thing,” I agreed quietly. A little louder, I added, “I’ll take one more round of vitals, and then I’ll be out of your springy hair.”

Ruth pulled a face, putting her hand to her messy curls. “Yikes.”

I smiled, pulling out the infrared thermometer from my bag. “I like your hair, for the record.”

“Thanks,” she mumbled. She set her hands in her lap, playing with the pilling on the



tortilla-print blanket. I imagined her all wrapped up in it like a cute little Ruth burrito, and I had to fight a laugh.

I pointed the thermometer at her forehead, and her eyes crossed a bit as she looked up at it. I snorted as the display read 103.4. “Better,” I said noncommittally. I entered it into her chart I had pulled up on my phone. “Give me your finger.” She held up her pointer finger on her left hand, her eyes shimmering with a quiet kind of interest as she watched me. I slipped the pulse ox on her finger. “What are you thinking?”

She hesitated, letting her hand fall to her lap and watching the blue light that blinked on the display. Finally, her voice sounded strained as she confessed, “I’m thinking, please don’t put your hand down my shirt with your stethoscope.”

I paused on my way to my bag for my blood pressure cuff. “Pardon?”

“The, you know, the thing.” She nodded toward my bag. “With the stethoscope. I really think you shouldn’t—I mean I might actually light on... fire...” she finished with a swallow.

My open mouth curved into a smile. Slowly, I leaned to my right and then lifted the stethoscope from my bag. I let it dangle between us. “You mean this?”

Her entire face went salmon red. “Yeah,” she squeezed out.

I flattened my lips together, fighting hard against another laugh that might add to her obvious embarrassment. But she was watching me with rapt attention, her full lips parted slightly and her breasts rising and falling fast. She was wearing a faded, heather gray nightshirt that had several buttons undone to the gap in her cleavage, and I wondered how easy it might be to undo the rest of them down to her navel. I glanced down at the pulse ox on her finger, and my smile darkened as her heart rate climbed from 101 to 110 to 119, and kept on spiking. I hooked her light eyes with

mine. Her breath hitched, and her fists tightened around the blanket.

Still doing my best to school my features into a semblance of seriousness, I leaned forward, propping my left knee on the couch at her hip. With the stethoscope bunched in my right hand, I leaned my weight on the back of the couch, and with my left, I reached out with tentative fingers for her jaw. Ruth lifted her chin to meet me, lashes flaring and mouth opening with an inhale of surprise when I cupped her cheek. I leaned over her, reveling in how soft her skin felt beneath my fingers. “You don’t want me to touch you, Ruth?”

“I, um,” she gusted out. She licked her lips, glancing down my torso, and then back up. “I think the problem is that I do.”

I slid my fingers around her neck, cupping the back of her head and angling my mouth over hers. “How about now? You still want me to touch you?”

“Uh-huh.” She sounded as dazed as I felt. Lust roared to life inside of me, crackling along my nerve endings and setting my skin on fire. The small part of her that I had managed to cradle in my palm suddenly wasn’t enough. I wanted her. All of her.

She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth again, and this time, I closed the distance between us and gave in to my impulse. I licked at the tight line pulled taut between her white teeth, and as she sucked in a surprised breath, she released that full lip. I sucked it between my tongue and teeth, drawing her up to meet my mouth. I released her lip, but then our lips sealed in a soft, slow kiss. She let out a little moan that went straight to my groin.

Her hands came up to grasp the front of my shirt, and to my surprise, she tugged me down closer. I shifted my weight to keep from putting any of it on her, deepening our kiss with starving desperation.

Had I been so hungry for Ruth all along? I had, I realized. As her soft lips sucked and explored, I realized that I had been in a famine since Friday night, and this kiss might be bringing me back from the brink of insanity. I slanted my mouth over hers, moving my hand to her neck and down her silky collarbone, following the line of her nightshirt.

She gasped, and her hands tightened on my shirt. I nearly fell on top of her, but my hand on the back of the couch managed to keep my little matchmaker from accidentally flattening her body under my weight. I wasn't about to make her knee any worse than it already was. I flicked my tongue along the top of her teeth, and she sighed, opening her mouth for me.

Je-sus. I'd have lost a bet that wagered Dr. Coldwell was a greedy kisser. It felt good to be wrong. I let her battle for dominance, filling my mouth with her small, pink tongue before I nipped her lip and eased away the hurt with a softened, lingering kiss.

My watch buzzed on my left wrist, startling Ruth. She pulled away with a surprised start, and her lips tucked inward, like she was embarrassed.

Geraldine. Patients. Dammit. Breathing hard, I pressed my forehead against hers and cupped her cheek again. "I'm sorry Ruth. I forgot about my other patient."

She nodded, blowing out a calming breath. "Of course. I'm—I didn't mean to—God, I'm so embarrassed."

"Why?" I pulled away, frowning. "I'm the one who's acting unprofessionally." She sniffed, adjusting her glasses, and stared up at me with those wide, yellow-ringed eyes. I wanted to bury my face in the crook of her neck and unravel her in every way.

"I'm not usually like this," she offered weakly.

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“What, hot as fuck?” I asked with half a grin. I eased away from her reluctantly. The metal from my stethoscope bit into my palm, reminding me that I was supposed to be taking her vitals.

She pulled her mouth to the side uncertainly, looking away. “Right.”

I considered her for a few brief seconds. If what Ruth had told me was true, and she’d endured the worst kind of rejection, then I could believe that she struggled to comprehend her own worth. I still fought with insecurities of my own. For the longest time, I hadn’t felt like I belonged in my parents’ beautiful home. I’d worked harder than my other classmates to prove that I deserved their affection. I had taken control of every aspect of my being from my body to my mind if only to prove that I could be enough. Be worth enough.

It had been a slow, painful lesson to realize that my worth didn’t come from the value others placed on me. It came from me. Only I could decide I was worthy of being loved, and only I could decide that I was capable of offering it. I wasn’t perfect, and my perceived rejection from Ruth had shaken me enough to miss a crucial detail from that night. I remembered the way she had looked equal parts despaired and embarrassed. I remembered the way she’d reached for me with her eyes while pulling away with her body.

Ruth didn’t think it was real.

She didn’t think I was real.

She didn’t think that someone truly adoring her could be a reality.

Ruth expected me to reject her. What she didn't know was that I was more competitive than every med school graduate put together. If I wanted to smash through expectations, then better believe I would barrel straight through them and then some. If Ruth expected me to reject her, then I would simply have to prove her wrong one moment at a time.

I uncoiled the stethoscope and brought it to my ears, watching Ruth closely. When she brought her eyes to mine again, I lifted my eyebrows. "Are you ready for me, now, Shortstop?"

## Chapter sixteen

Ruth

Ruth

I sighed into the hot bath, shivering as it scalded my sensitive skin. I didn't have a huge bathtub, and it was an outdated, mauve color, but oh, it was heaven. My entire body had felt itchy and tight like I was covered in a thin film of dried-on glue. The sticky feeling melted away as I eased deeper into the bubble-filled water. I had my right leg propped up on the side of the bathtub, and I closed my eyes, letting my shoulders relax. I could have sworn I hadn't relaxed one bit since Cal had been here. I hadn't heard from Vaughn again, thankfully, but the stress of knowing that Cal had swooped in to rescue me from the state I'd been in was enough to make me scrunch my features in discomfort.

I cracked open my eyelids and stared at my bandaged knee. I couldn't put it in the bath because he'd had to stitch the spot where he'd made an incision. Cal. The doctor. He'd been here and had not only potentially saved my life but had fixed my knee and then just vanished.

Poof. Like a sexy fairy godmother with abs.

I swiped my fingers under my glasses and over my eyes. It didn't feel real...again. Like Cal was some sort of bizarre mirage that had appeared in my life to torment me with the promise of what I could never have, he kept showing up in all his perfection and then disappearing from my world again. The only reason I knew I hadn't fever-dreamed the whole thing was because he had texted me last night and then again today. He'd also sent a nurse to take my vitals and remove my IV lock this morning. Although I hadn't seen him—he'd had to catch up on all his patients he'd delayed helping me—he made sure to pester me.

Cal:

You're supposed to take amoxicillin with food. Don't forget.

Ruth:

Is diet cola a food?

Cal:

I know you know the answer to that but I still feel compelled to say it. No.

Ruth:

\*angel emoji\*

Cal:

Did Gemma come over?

Ruth:

She showed up right after you did.

Cal:

Is she... helpful?

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Ruth:

This is Gemma. \*middle finger emoji\*

Cal:

Swamped today, but 3x a day. Pls don't forget.

Ruth:

What if I forget?

Cal:

I'll stab u again.

Ruth:

You said that was romantic. Maybe I want to get stabbed.

Cal:

Are you asking me to romance you?

Ruth:

\*dead\* No. Deletethat.



Cal:

\*Evil emoji\* You did it now, Shortstop.

Cal:

I'll be there tonight.

I sighed, staring at that last message on my phone. I scrolled up and down our short history of messages, playing with the screen idly. He was coming tonight, but did that mean like...?

I smacked my forehead with my phone. "You are such a moron," I muttered. I put my phone on the side of the tub and sank down lower until only my nose peeked above the water. At least when he checked on my knee and ensured I was still alive I would smell like "sea breeze" or whatever.

A message from Cal appeared suddenly.

Cal:

Is Gemma there?

Ruth:

No, why?

Cal:

Wrong answer. Unless you haven't moved at all?

Ruth:

It doesn't even hurt anymore.

Cal:

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Are you in the bath??

I gasped sitting up and sloshing some of the water over my propped-up leg. I looked around the bathroom like I would find Cal squeezed behind the toilet tank. I tapped out a rapid response.

Ruth:

Where are u?

Cal:

Living room. ARE U?

“Cal!” I shouted, scowling. “This is incredibly creepy.”

Footsteps sounded, coming from the living room toward the bathroom door. Suddenly, his muffled voice said, “You aren’t supposed to be in the bath.”

“I kept my leg out... also what are you doing?”

A bag rustled. “I brought dinner. I did say I was coming.”

“At night!” I nearly screeched. “It’s four-thirty. And give my key back.”

“No,” he said with obvious amusement in his voice.

“Cal,” I growled. I reached forward to unplug the drain. “Wait in the living room. I’ll be there in a seco—”

“Ruth, let me help you,” he said with a note of censure.

“That’s a ‘hell no.’” I grappled for the towel I’d folded on the floor next to the bath. “Don’t you dare.”

“If you hit your head, I’ll really have to take you to a hospital,” he pointed out. The door creaked like he’d leaned against it. “I’ll close my eyes if you’re that worried.”

I struggled to get out of the bath. It was harder than I’d expected. The swelling in my knee had gone down almost entirely, but the tenderness around the stitches remained, and they tugged painfully as I leveraged myself up to sit on the edge of the tub. I hurried to wrap the towel around my body and then I lifted myself to a half-standing position on one leg.

Cal suddenly added, “I’m just going to get you naked later, anyway.”

I started, and the motion threw me off balance. With a screech, I grabbed the shower curtain. I went down with a loud thunk and then the clatter of the shower curtain hooks as they popped off the shower rod sang through the small bathroom. I landed hard on my ass in the half-full tub. The curtain broke the worst of my fall, and I managed to keep my leg up, but the curtain and rod popped clean off the wall and fell on top of me.

The door flew open, and before I could even gasp in shock at the absurdity of what had just happened, the curtain was wrenched away from me. Cal dove his hands into the tub, and with one swift move had me out and in his arms. He’d swept one arm under my knees and the other around my torso and had me in a fireman’s carry. We both splashed water all over the floor as he backed away from the tub, and I grabbed his

shoulders in mute surprise. “Straighten your leg,” he scowled.

I did, staring up at him in disbelief through a smattering of water that had clouded my glasses. His bright, spring green eyes glanced at my face and then over to my knee. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” I gusted out.

With a sigh, he backed out of the bathroom. Dripping water everywhere, he carried me across the hall to my bedroom, and it was only when the cool A/C air hit my nipples that I realized I’d lost my towel. I rotated a horrified look down.

Yep. Naked.

I slapped my right arm around my breasts and kept my left hooked around the back of Cal’s neck as he carried me across my small bedroom. It had the same beige carpet as the rest of the house, and it was barely big enough for my full bed that had been wedged against the far wall. I had one window to the left and another above my headboard, and with the blinds pulled up, bright summer sunlight bathed the tiny space in a gold wash. My closet to the right had been left open, and clothing spilled out from it, falling off the open shelves. I didn’t have room for a dresser in the eight-foot by eight-foot bedroom, so I kind of lived in a state of near-constant clothing disaster. The wooden chair I had butted up against the wall usually served as another clothing hanger, and my pants dangled from its back.

Cal set me down on my wheat-colored comforter, and I immediately reached for the disheveled knit throw at its foot so I could wrap it around my wet body. Cal’s sleeves were soaked, and as he stood, he peered at them before raising his eyebrows at me. “I told you it wasn’t safe.”

I spluttered, trying to simultaneously keep the blanket in place and wipe my glasses

with it so I could see again. “This was your fault! I was fine until you said you were going to get me naked.”

Cal looked like some sort of bronze statue with his hair burnished copper in the warm sunlight and his freckles illuminated over his summer-kissed skin. He had on the same green, linen button-down he’d worn when we’d first met, and although he must have come from work, he had that slightly disheveled look that signaled he was ready for the weekend. His eyes skipped down my body and back to my eyes. “I fucked your mouth with my tongue yesterday. That surprises you?”

My face flamed. “You can’t just say things like that.”

“I can if I mean it,” he replied with a twitch of one eyebrow. He peered at his sleeves again, and then with a shrug, he undid the top button of his shirt.

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I clapped a hand over my eyes. “What are you doing, Cal?”

“What are you doing?” he asked with a laugh in his voice. “I’m just taking off my shirt so I can dry it.”

I peeked through my fingers. He finished unbuttoning the shirt, and after untucking it, he shucked it off. He had a white undershirt on, and his biceps stretched the hem of his short sleeves in a fascinating way. Lamely, I added, “You can’t undress when I’m already undressed.”

Cal inhaled slowly, watching me with quiet amusement. Deliberately, he dropped his shirt to the floor, gaze hooked on mine. And then, just as calmly, he leaned over me. He eased his body onto the bed, propping his right knee on the edge of the mattress, and bent down so his hands bracketed me on either side. I leaned all the way back, flattening myself to the bed as he covered me in his warmth and the intoxicating scent of coconut and something fresh and male. My heart went haywire as I stared up at him in surprise.

Cal dipped his head, scanning my face. “Would you rather have done it for me?”

He was so close, I could see the freckles that swept over his nose and the way his eyelashes lightened at the tips. I swallowed convulsively, my hands over my breasts. “I’m genuinely confused right now,” I admitted.

His gaze flicked up, like he was searching for patience, and then he returned his focus to my startled features. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No,” I said immediately.

He brought his left leg on the bed, fully bracketing my body with his. His knees pressed into my bare hips, and his toned arms imbued my shoulders with warmth. He tilted his head in question. “How do you feel when I’m this close?”

My heart leaped into my throat. Like my body was smarter than my mind, my back arched to get closer to him, and my chin lifted to angle my lips to his. “I like it,” I admitted in a breathy voice.

“Then why,” he asked, his voice low and his gaze gentle, “would you be confused?”

Good question. “Because... you’re you. And I’m me.”

Cal lowered his lips to my jawline, and his warm breath tickled my skin. A small, satisfied shiver raced down my arms. His lips moved against my jaw as he traced a line up to my cheekbone. “Well, I desperately want to reveal every inch of that gorgeous body with my teeth because you are fucking irresistible, Ruth. There is nothing confusing about that unless you would rather I didn’t.”

I sucked in a breath, and it stalled in my lungs. I didn’t have words. No one had ever said anything like that to me. What was the catch? What was I missing?

He kissed the apple of my cheek before skating his lips up to my temple where my glasses slashed across my face. “Do you want me to stop?”

I shook my head, speechless.

“Good to know.” He pushed away from me, elbows straightening and face lifting over me again. He looked warm and content, smiling softly. “How is your knee?”



“Better,” I whispered hoarsely.

“Fever?”

I shook my head, still dazed. “No.”

“Dizziness? Headaches?”

“Uh-uh,” I said with another shake of my head.

Cal carefully maneuvered himself off the bed so he didn’t knock my knee, and holding a hand out palm up, he said, “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

I gestured to my body. “Can I at least get dressed?”

His answering look before he left the room was unyielding. “Don’t you dare.”

“Jesus,” I muttered, my face so hot, I was surprised I hadn’t steamed up the bedroom.

When he returned, Cal had his brown leather medical bag in his hand. He cleared off the chair I kept by the wall, then set it down facing the long edge of my full bed. He sat in it and patted his lap. “Let’s see your knee.”

I shifted so I sat on the edge of the mattress, and careful not to jar my throbbing leg, I lifted it for him. Cal took my calf in his warm hands, and I almost moaned out loud. His hands were magic. They felt so firm and solid as he cupped the back of my knee with one and pulled apart the dressing with the other. I did my best to keep the blanket around my body, but it pooled at the crease between my legs and left my sides bare. I held it with my left hand and supported my weight behind me with my right.

Cal removed the damp bandage with practiced ease. I watched him in silent fascination as his muscles bunched and shifted with each movement of his arms. I really loved the sharp focus that took over his gaze when he turned his attention to his work. I'd noticed it yesterday when he'd helped me—he went into “doctor mode,” and it was captivating to watch. He bent his head to the side, examining the stitch along the side of my knee, and his fingers gently probed the tender flesh. I gritted my teeth to keep from jerking away, but it hurt like a son of a bitch.

His green eyes flickered up to mine briefly. “Stop pretending it doesn't hurt.”

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“Stop poking at it,” I gritted out.

Not heeding me, he pressed against the area the sliver had been, and I jerked. “I think I got it all out,” he murmured. “And it does look good. You’re taking your antibiotics?” I nodded, wishing he would leave the damn thing alone. It was throbbing again, reminding me that the angry tissue had been sorely abused. Cal’s touch gentled, and he smoothed his thumb along my shin below it, distracting me from the pain. “It does look much better.”

“Are you going to stop fussing about it?” I teased.

Cal gave me an implacable look. “No.”

A long-since buried emotion poked its head out from the ashes of my decimated hopes. That feeling of being cared for. It trilled in my chest, filling me with warmth and caressing my heart. I sat up, carefully pulling my leg away from Cal’s hands, and I fixed the blanket, which had ridden up to the crease in my legs. A droplet of water fell from one of my drenched curls, and it slid down my shoulder.

Cal watched me, his gaze practically heating the air between us. He had his hands resting on his strong thighs, and he tilted his head. “Come here.”

Apprehension and excitement ricocheted inside of me like a drum roll. I knew if I said no, or if I demurred in any way, Cal would drop it. But he was watching me with a quiet intensity that told me he knew—he knew I would. He knew I wanted to, and the barely leashed heat in his gaze told me he wanted it just as badly as I did.

I stood slowly, and the knit throw drooped over my curves, doing little to preserve any real modesty. I lifted myself onto my left leg and keeping the weight off my right, I leaned into him. Taking that as permission, Cal braced his hands on the bare sides of my waist. He eased me onto his lap, and I realized as I straddled him, putting our faces nearly level, this was an ideal position for my aching knee to rest to the side without pressure on the joint. That was so like Cal; he thought of things before I could even consider them a problem.

But it also spread my legs wide, and even with a blanket between us, I found myself blushing at how clearly it exposed me to his gaze. I knew it wasn't anything he hadn't seen only minutes before, but I sank my teeth into my bottom lip and met his eyes tentatively. Cal reached up and pulled down on my chin until my lip released. "That's mine. Stop biting it."

I started to laugh, but then he framed my face with his strong hands, and his lips captured mine in a silky soft kiss. I melted, bracing my hands on his shoulders and angling my hips into him. As if to prove his point, he sucked my bottom lip between his teeth, and the heat between my legs clenched as I thought of his tongue giving me the same treatment where I ached the most. The hard length of his arousal pressed between my open legs, and I angled my hips down to meet his need for need.

Suddenly, the memories of my past sexual experiences surfaced, and I tensed. I tried to give myself over to the feel of his lips on mine, on the way he traced my teeth with his tongue and claimed my mouth. But unbidden, I was reminded of why this wouldn't go well. It wouldn't be as fun as Cal expected.

Like he had to force himself out of a trance, Cal broke our kiss to graze his teeth up to my cheek. "Tell me why you look like you're on the threshold of a haunted maze."

I screwed my eyes shut, and my fists tightened around his shoulders. "It's not you."

“Oh, very convincing,” he murmured with a hint of humor. He removed my glasses, and with utmost care, he leaned over to set them on my cheap, plastic side table. Even with my vision blurred, I made out the concern on his features. He held my face loosely between his hands. “Tell me, Shortstop.”

I clicked my tongue, rolling my eyes. It probably was better to get it out in the open. “Sex isn’t all that fun with me, I think.”

“Who told you that?” he asked with a hint of lethality that surprised me.

“No one. It’s just what I discovered on my own. I—” I scrunched my face, almost too embarrassed to continue. Out with it, Ruth. Come on. He deserves to know. “I take too long. Like... forever. You’ll probably get frustrated.”

“Ah,” he breathed out. His thumbs stroked my cheekbones. “I see.” He sighed. “You’re right. I don’t think we can have sex in that case.”

I froze, staring at him in shock. It was what I had suggested but...

“Ruth.” He tightened his hold, angling my eyes to his. “Can you see me alright?”

I nodded, my throat tight. “My vision isn’t that bad. I’m mostly far sighte—”

“Then look at me.” His eyes had darkened like a misty pine forest. “I will fuck you sideways, upside-down, and counterclockwise from now until sunup if that’s how long it takes to satiate you. Don’t think for one second it matters how long I get to tease you to orgasm. You’ll get there, and I’ll enjoy every fucking second.”

My jaw went slack. “Uh...”

He reached around with his right hand, and flattening it against the small of my back,

he pressed me down on his erection. “You just told me I get to fuck you longer. And you think that’s a bad thing?”

It had seemed inconvenient to others. But the way Cal was looking at me, I didn’t have much choice but to believe him. And I had a pretty good idea that he was going to put his money where his mouth was. Or... his mouth where his mouth was. I didn’t know what to say, but I dipped a look between us, and the sight of his lean body under my soft thighs sent a gush of desire straight between my legs. “If you’re sure,” I breathed out. Please, God, let him be sure. To lighten the moment, I added, “You seem awfully confident.”

“I am confident,” he said with a crooked grin.

I puffed out a laugh, relaxing in his arms. “It’s all your experience with anatomy, right? Doctor Reed.”

Cal got a funny kind of look on his face. His eyes traveled all over my features, dipping down to the drooping blanket over my breasts, and back up. “That’s... a good point. I do understand anatomy. Would you like a lesson, Shortstop?”

Chapter seventeen

Ruth

Ruth

I blinked at him, and my fingers curled around the sides of his neck. “A lesson?”

He nodded with mock gravity. “You do like to learn, don’t you?”

“I do,” I agreed slowly. I wasn’t sure where he was going with this, but I sensed a game.

Cal leaned over to the right where his bag lay open at his feet. With a fast glance down, he tugged two black disposable gloves out of the box before straightening again. “See, the thing with the human body is,” he slipped his left hand into a glove. I watched him with round eyes, and excitement built in a steady thrum at my center. “We have the same parts, but they don’t... respond the same.” His glove snapped as he tightened it over his hand. “You follow me?”

“No,” I gusted out honestly.

Cal pulled the other glove over his right hand and caught my confused stare. “I’ll show you.” He settled me more firmly on his lap, making sure I was comfortable. “Let go of the blanket, Dr. Coldwell.”

Well, it’s now or never. Don’t be a coward. After a moment of hesitation, my fingers released the blanket, and it bared my body. Cal swished it aside, and then he framed my face with his gloved hands. He tickled a line down the bridge of my nose with his right thumb. “This is your nasion, which is the midpoint of the frontonasal suture.”

My eyes fluttered closed, and I felt his touch like a brush stroke that carried all the way down to my lips. "Okay."

"Does that arouse you?"

I startled, opening my eyes again. I was completely naked in his lap, with my nipples hardening against the cold A/C air and insides squirming with latent desire. Of course, his touch aroused me. I blinked at him, unwilling to admit how potently he affected me. "Uh... not really."

He nodded. "Let's try another one." I suddenly saw where he was going with this.

My lips curved into a smile. "Let's."

He traced my bottom lip. "Open your mouth." I gave him a disbelieving blink. He waited patiently, so I obeyed, opening my mouth a fraction. He slipped his thumb between my lips, and pressing down on my tongue, he slid along the center fold. "The pharyngeal reflex is a funny thing," he explained, pushing his thumb deeper into my mouth. "Some people do find that arousing. The nerves here," he explained, pressing hard against the soft tissue, "can be sensitive."

My clit agreed, and I coughed around a soft gag. He removed his thumb, caressing my lip again. "How was that, Dr. Coldwell? Did that arouse you?"

"No," I lied, squirming slightly in his lap. In truth, his thumb in my mouth had made me want to suck it down further. And that made me want to wrap my lips around his cock and push him down far until I gagged on his length.

Cal's lips pressed into a smile. "Okay."

The blush that had started in my cheeks was traveling down my neck to my chest, and



it warmed my insides like I'd swallowed the sun. I wasn't sure I'd ever played sex games before, but I must have been missing out because I was enjoying this thoroughly. The way Cal's eyes stayed glued to my every reaction, the way his left arm circled around me to hold me in place—it was stoking that solar heat inside of me like nothing I could remember.

Cal tilted my chin to the side, exposing the left side of my neck. "There are too many anatomical parts to your neck to name now," he said, pulling me closer and bending his mouth to the side of my throat. "But this part," he whispered his lips across the pulse point just below my jaw, "where your upper jugular moves to your posterior triangle," he licked a line down my neck to the far side just under my earlobe. "This is my favorite."

I shivered, and like the nerves there were connected by a direct line to my core, my open center clenched in response. I suddenly decided that it was my favorite too. I had the sudden desire to have him bite me there.

"Does that arouse you, Coldwell?" he murmured against my skin.

I swallowed hard. "It might."

I felt his smile. "Getting somewhere." He pulled away, straightening and reaching up to his shoulder to take my wrist between his fingers. He brought it between us, and pressing his thumb to the center of my palm he exposed the delicate skin of my inner wrist. Flicking a look up to me, he skated his lips across the sensitive skin. "This is your volar wrist." He ignited a crackle of pleasure along the outside with a graze of his teeth. "Ulnar zone." He rotated it to kiss the inside line toward my forearm. "Radial zone."

Goosebumps erupted along my arm, raising the fine hair along the back. "Oh," I breathed, watching him with mounting arousal that threatened to turn my organs to

ash.

He licked a line up my inner arm until he reached the sore bruise where he'd taken samples from my vein yesterday. He brushed a feather-light kiss over it. "How do we feel about that one?"

"It's good," I said tightly. Breathing hard, I felt a prickle of sweat at my hairline, and that heat at my core flashed through me like a solar flare. "Is it... it's kind of hot in here. Don't you think?"

Cal's expression wavered with amusement. "Is that right? Interesting." He placed my hand on my thigh, but then his fingers stroked the sensitive inner flesh. "Your saphenous nerve runs this way," he said, coasting his gloved finger up the inside of my thigh to my aching center. I gasped in a sharp breath, but he moved back down and curved around toward the top of my thigh. "And your femoral artery here."

My legs shook and I grasped a fistful of his shirt over his shoulder. "R-really?"

"But I think the really interesting anatomy here is your pectineus." Cal skated both his thumbs up my inner thighs, molding his fingers around the top of my legs, until he reached the juncture of my thighs where they were spread wide. He pressed firmly, and an electric shock of desire went straight to my clit. I held onto his shoulders for dear life as he said, "Pressure here should feel particularly good."

It does. Oh my God, I'm going to spontaneously combust. Actually, maybe it's not spontaneous. Maybe he knows exactly what he's doing to me. "Yeah," I agreed with difficulty. I stared down at his thumbs, so close to where I really wanted them, and I decided this anatomy lesson was actually a form of torture. "I think... I think I learned quite a bit. Now if you could just—" I shifted restlessly, flicking up a pleading look to his burning gaze.

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His lips tipped up. “Not so hasty, Ruth. You said it would take too long, didn’t you? Sit still so I can finish, please.”

“Oh God,” I groaned, looking back down.

“Do my fingers here arouse you?” he asked, like he didn’t very well know that answer.

I cinched my eyelids with a defiant glare. “No.”

“Oh,” he pressed his lips in a thinking gesture. “Alright.” Cal turned his hands so his gloved knuckles skimmed up the juncture of my thighs, across my pubic bone, and over my stomach. I sucked in a harsh breath, but he ignored me, coasting all the way to my breasts. The heat at my center went supernova hot, and I struggled to breathe evenly. He caressed a gentle touch around the outside curve of my breasts before his knuckles skimmed the tips of my erect nipples. I released a pained sound, and both my hands bunched the fabric of his shirt above his shoulders.

“Cal,” I eked out.

“I know you’re well aware of your own anatomy here,” he went on, ignoring my distress. He gently pinched my nipples between his bent fingers and thumbs. His thumbs flicked them idly, and sharp explosions of arousal traveled from my breasts to the increasingly sensitive center between my legs. Fluid swirled between my open legs, and I breathed out a moan.

“Cal.”

“But what you might not know,” he continued, and he pinched harder, “is the nerves here form a plexus—”

“Cal,” I growled again. I tightened my hold on his shirt, breathing hard and shifting in needy restlessness on his lap. “You made your point.”

He brought his lips to hover over mine, and the velvet softness of his gloves sent another electric shock to my pussy as he rolled his thumbs over the tips of my nipples. “Have you orgasmed yet?”

“No,” I moaned.

“Then we aren’t done.” He licked a line along my upper lip before kissing me softly. He moved languorously, cupping my breasts and teasing my nipples as he claimed my lips with a kiss that tightened that sun at my core into a dying star on the verge of explosion. I brought my hands to his face, pulling him into me like he might contain the sudden burst of need I couldn’t name or explain.

Cal’s left hand molded my breast in a soothing, massaging motion before he skimmed his palm against my nipple, and that sent such a strong ache between my legs, I let out a desperate sound. His right hand skimmed between my breasts and back down my navel. Breaking our kiss just enough to whisper against my lips he said, “Shall I quiz you, clever Ruth? Your turn. What is this?”

He skimmed the outer curve of my center. I moaned, tilting my head back. “I don’t know. Who knows that? Labia?”

“Outer, yes,” he grinned, clearly enjoying himself thoroughly. “And here?” He moved closer to that core of desire that yearned so desperately for his touch.

“Fuck, I don’t know. Inner labia?”

“Mhm,” he slicked his fingers up and down the drenched skin, bringing me gratification and torture in equal measures.

“Pretty sure you missed my clitoris,” I grated out urgently.

He chuckled, bending to drop a kiss on the side of my neck. “Here?” His fingers brushed against the sensitive bundle of nerves, and I jumped before arching into his touch.

“Oh fuck.”

He pinched it between his first and middle finger, and moving up and down, he pulled the desire at my core so tight, I thought I might splinter. “Oh God, Cal. Please.” I clutched him, moving my hips in time with his fingers and winding up tighter than I thought possible. With each slide of his fingers, I felt my empty center clench with convulsive contractions I couldn’t control any more than I could control how helplessly I wanted him.

He rotated his hand, and slipping it between us, he dipped two fingers inside of me. I breathed out hard, curling inward. “Lean back,” he whispered. His left hand came around to the small of my back, and he supported my weight as I let my head tilt back. It gave him enough room for his fingers to retreat and then slide back inside of me. Something about him wearing gloves and fucking me with his fingers after giving me an anatomy lesson did insane things to my body.

Crazy things. Unbridled, reckless things. I closed my eyes, breathing hard as I tipped my hips to meet each of his slow, lazy thrusts. He added a firm press of his thumb against my clit, and my vision went white behind my closed eyes. I grabbed his shirt again. This time I couldn’t even form coherent words. He picked up his pace, pumping in and then out, faster and with a rhythm that begged my body to give in to the breaking point I was so rapidly approaching.

“Ruth,” Cal said, his voice husky and just as breathless as mine.

He slowed, and I lowered my chin again, opening my eyes in dismay. “Wha-what?”

Bright, coastal green eyes captured my gaze. “Are you close?” He still moved his fingers in a slower tempo in and out, hooking up and then smoothing across sensitive nerves with his thumb on my clit. It was driving me absolutely insane.

“Yes, so please,” I gritted out with a glare. “Don’t. Stop.”

He slowed further with a mischievous tilt to his smile. “But you said forever.”

“Callum,” I snapped.

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“Oh, not the full name,” he murmured, his eyes dropping to my lips and then up again. “I’m going to lie you down on the bed. Don’t put weight on your knee.”

I started to object, but then he withdrew his fingers, leaving me frustrated and empty. After stripping off his gloves and tossing them next to his bag, he wrapped his cool arms around my hot torso, pressing another kiss full of need and longing to my lips. He tightened his hold, and standing with me in his arms, he tilted me back until I lay on the mattress. Before my legs could fall off the edge, he lifted my right leg carefully, and after twisting the chair, he placed the back of my knee on the surface. It kept it bent at a comfortable angle without putting strain on the tendons.

I huffed, sweaty and so acutely desperate to have him inside of me, I almost kicked the chair away. “It’s fine. Cal, it doesn’t even hurt.”

He clicked his tongue in censure, leaning his weight on his hands and bridging over me. “So hasty for someone who takes forever.”

I gave him a tight-lipped glower. “You’re very funny.”

“I told you I’m competitive, Shortstop,” he said low as he lowered his mouth to mine, kissing me softly. “But even if you do take all night, just know I’m enjoying every moment.”

“I’m not,” I gusted out, grasping his shirt at the front and tugging it up frantically. I didn’t have room to think whether I “deserved” this or not. I didn’t have any brain space left for self-consciousness about what he thought of my extra belly fat or my hips that were three sizes wider than the Hollywood standard. I had no room in my

entire, furnace-hot body for anything but him—for anything but wanting him. “I can’t take it anymore. Please.”

Grinning, Cal reached behind him and removed his shirt. His abdominal muscles bunched and tightened as he tore the shirt over his head and tossed it aside.

I stared at him in wonder. He was perfect. He wasn’t like the romance covers would have us believe, with dinner rolls for abs and cut pectorals like slabs of meat. He was smooth and strong, his skin taut over his well-honed body, and the way his arms flexed as he moved made my breath catch in my throat.

Then his hands were at the button on his pants, and he undid it before shucking down his pants. I stared at the bulge at the front of his gray briefs. Is there a sock in there? No way that’s all him.

Cal planted his hands on either side of my ribs, bending over me again and dropping a kiss just above my nipple. “God, you’re gorgeous,” he breathed against my skin. The warmth sent a tingle over my nipple and straight between my legs.

I groaned, twisting under him. “You’re killing me.”

“You’re still coherent,” he replied with amusement, flicking out a tongue over my nipple. “Don’t even start with me.”

Agony. Pure, exalted, delicious agony. That was the only way to describe what Cal did to my body. He pulled my nipple between his teeth, sucking hard, and then gentling the motion so he could flick the bud with his tongue. I arched, gasping and digging my nails into his arms. He worked that nipple for what seemed like forever, ratcheting up my arousal to a fever pitch. Then he moved to the other, and I dug my nails into his firm biceps so hard, I knew I was leaving marks. He flicked and suckled, circling my nipple and then letting off just enough that the next touch would



drive me wild. The muscles at my core clenched, and I felt alarmingly close to breaking into an orgasm. “Stop,” I gasped.

Cal did, lifting away from me immediately with concern in his eyes. The sunlight from the window behind me slanted across his face, illuminating his bronze hair with an ambrosial glow that was only made softer by the natural lack of clarity in my vision. “What is it?”

“I almost... I mean I was about to—” I panted, swallowing. “You know.”

A slow smile crept up to his eyes. “You little liar. Here I thought I’d get hours.”

“I wasn’t lying,” I coughed out with a laugh.

“Well, then your partners were.” He bent down close again, to kiss the spot on my neck that had given me shivers earlier. “I was drawing you out, but now I think I should just go for a home run. How many times can I make you come, Shortstop? Two?” He kissed lower, scraping his teeth across my sensitive skin. “Three? Four?”

“Jesus,” I squeezed out. I lifted my breasts to meet his mouth as he reached my right nipple.

“Five?” Cal lapped at my nipple, and I squirmed.

“I’m begging you for one.” I threaded my fingers through his soft, thick hair. “Please.”

Chuckling again, he reached between us. His hand, so much colder than my feverish body, skimmed down my left thigh until he reached the back of my knee. He folded it up and pinned it to the outside of his thigh. The length of his erection pressed hard between my legs, even through his briefs. He lifted my hips with his left hand and reached between us to lightly smooth his fingers through my slick arousal with the

other. “Hang tight while I grab a condom.”

I screwed up my face. “Oh shit. Birth control.”

He puffed out a laugh, bending to the side to fish a condom out of his pants pocket before standing again. He kept my left leg bent at the side of his hip, spreading me wide and pressing me against him in a way that left me wanting. He tore open the foil packet with his teeth, arching one brow. “I know you aren’t on it. You sent over your records this morning... or lack thereof.”

“That’s a little creepy, Doctor,” I said, sitting up on my elbows to watch him. I was dying to see what he looked like. I would sell my soul to actually feel him.

“It’s a little reckless of you, Doctor,” he volleyed back.

“True,” I muttered.

When Cal freed his length from his briefs, sliding them down his powerful thighs, I had to bite my lip to keep from releasing a sound of surprise. It hadn’t been a sock. It was him—all several, hard inches of him. I reached up to touch my glasses, only to find that they weren’t there. Good thing. They probably would have fogged over.

Cal smoothed the condom over his cock, and I stared in unabashed wonder. “Hey,” I said, my voice cracking. “You uh... did you plan on telling me you had a massive dick or were you just going to impale now and ask for forgiveness later?”

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Cal laughed, and it ended with a satisfied growl as he placed his left hand on the bed again and fitted his length between my legs. “I don’t know,” he said with some difficulty. “Were you going to tell me you had the world’s prettiest tits?” He pulsed forward, putting sweet pressure on my aching clit. “Or were you just going to blind me with them now and ask forgiveness later?”

“Point taken.” I moaned again as he slipped his fingers between us and began a slow, wet rhythm over my clit. I jumped, falling back again as I zapped right back to the top of my arousal. Every nerve lit up with glowing hot desire, and I grasped fistfuls of my comforter in delicious torment.

Cal entered me slowly, letting me pulse and stretch around him as he teased the sensitive bud at the apex of my thighs. I closed my eyes, curving my back as I gave myself over to the rapture of it. Soon he had filled me, and the sensation had my legs shaking before he could so much as slide back out. “I can’t,” I puffed. “Cal, please.”

“Yes, you can,” he replied, his voice tight but laced with an edge of humor. “You can do it, baby.”

I moaned again, my hips moving against him. That star at my center swirled, tightening and heating until I knew it would destroy my world when it exploded. Cal moved inside of me, slow at first, and stretching me so full, I pulsed lightly around him. His thumb pressed just outside of my clit, massaging little circles that quickened my breath. My heart galloped in my chest, and I panted for air, held at the precipice that I both needed and feared falling from.

Then he was moving fast, filling and retreating, and he pumped me so full, I cried

out—for mercy or more, I wasn't sure. My center squeezed, and I realized I had no control. I couldn't have held off if I wanted to. I tensed, finally giving myself over to the relentless pleasure and satisfaction that being filled by Cal brought. When I released, exploding into spasms of delirious pleasure, Cal found a quick rhythm that chased my orgasm and drew it out into mind-melting pulses of ecstasy. He stilled then, releasing his own breath of relief. Cal held my left hip in a tight grip, grasping me hard to him as he found his own release.

Breathing hard, I caught his head to my chest as he collapsed over me, covered in a sheen of sweat that matched my own. I could barely think past the after-spasms that were filling me with wave after wave of blissful satiation.

Cal kissed the slope of my breast, curling his arms under me to hold me to him. “Are you okay?”

“Okay?” I panted. I tried to think of what he could mean. “I’m amazing.”

He coughed out a laugh. “I mean your knee.”

“Oh.” I bent it experimentally. It twinged, but nothing terrible. “Yeah, I’m good.”

Cal lifted me, moving us up the bed. We ended up on our sides facing each other, and he flopped his head onto one of my pillows, drawing me into his chest. I cuddled into him, still trying to catch my breath. He kissed my forehead before laying his cheek on the top of my damp hair. “I should have eaten first.”

I lifted my head with a questioning look. “Why?”

He met my stare with mock solemnity. “I need sustenance... Because that just took so long.”

“Okay,” I glared, swatting his hard bicep. “You’ve made your point. You are the superior lover.”

“I mean, God, I thought it would never end,” he groaned.

“You know what,” I said, pushing at his immovable body and levering myself up on my elbow so I looked down on his sun-kissed, smiling features. “Next time I will make you wait. Just to punish you.”

“Next time?” he clarified, his teeth flashing. “Is that a promise?”

I gritted my molars, pinching his cheek. Through tight lips, I muttered, “You’re so cocky.”

He caught my hand, turning to kiss my palm. He held my hand against his lips, his eyes flashing with mirth. “Do you have a problem with my cock?”

My nose twitched, and I sniffed. A smile pulled at my lips. “I guess I don’t.”

“Good. Then shut up and let me hold you.” He pulled me back down into his arms. “Hopefully your cuddling lasts longer than your lovemaking.”

## Chapter eighteen

Cal

Cal

Ifaced off with Ruth at her front door, scowling down at her short frame as she stood with her hands planted on her hips. She had on a pair of flowy, blue-patterned pants that wrapped around her waist with a wide band, and above it, an indecently enticing

white blouse that cupped her breasts and puffed out from the shoulders like cotton buds. She held her weight gingerly on her left leg because I knew for a fact that her right knee had to be screaming. “Give yourself the weekend,” I argued.

“I’ve never missed this many days of anything, Reed,” she glared. “Let alone work. I’m going.”

“You missed two days,” I pointed out.

“And a half,” she added, lifting one dainty finger. “And I’m making progress. I have to go in and check on myclients.”

I tightened my lips. “Ruth.”

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She pressed her tortoiseshell glasses more firmly against her face with a wide-eyed look. “What are you going to do? Tie me to a chair?”

My lips twitched. “Or the bed.”

Ruth’s neck suddenly glowed pink. “That’s not very practical.”

“No, but it would be fun.”

She leveled a down-tilted look my way. “I’m going.”

“I can see that,” I sighed. I reached over to the kitchen counter and picked up her leather knapsack. “I’ll drive you, then.”

She glanced away. “I guess that’s okay.”

“You bet your cute ass it is,” I muttered, reaching over to her front door and opening it for her. “You’re not driving with stitches in your knee and pain meds in your system.”

“You made me take those,” she reminded me. She limped past me, and the scent of her apple shampoo and all the random products she’d put in her curly hair wafted around me in a delicious swirl. It took a massive effort on my end not to drag her back in and bury my face in the curve of her neck.

As I followed her out, Ruth paused just beyond her threshold, and her head swiveled left, and then right. I followed her gaze, taking in the quiet apartment complex with

the sidewalk that ran between the two buildings, and the thick trees that lined each side. She hesitated, her body tensing, and then she turned to me with a stiff expression. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Just... don’t know where your car is.”

I cinched my eyelids together in suspicion. “You sure?”

She nodded in a jerky motion. “I’m sure.”

I wasn’t sure. Not at all. There were little pieces of Ruth I hadn’t gathered together yet, and they surfaced on her expressive features from time to time. It was all part of getting to know someone new, but I wished she would trust me. I thought back to what I’d blithely said to her boss last Friday. “It just makes it all the sweeter when you earn them.” I’d had a sense of that even then, but it was even more true now. The problem was, I wasn’t gathering anything. I was wrenching them slowly from Ruth’s ironclad defenses one millimeter at a time.

I led her to my car after remote starting it and getting the A/C going. At eight in the morning, heat hung heavy and humid in the air, and the rain the last two days hadn’t done much to cool it down. I handed Ruth her bag after she awkwardly wiggled into the passenger seat with her leg stiff and stretched out in front of her. I hadn’t wanted to say anything in case I caused her to overthink our night, but sex had likely been a bit hard on her.

She sighed in relief as she sat back, and I gave her a suspicious glance. She met it with a side-bounce of her eyes. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what? I’m super glad you’re putting life and limb on the line to help the single folks of Eugene, Oregon,” I muttered testily.



Ruth snorted. “‘Life and limb’ is a little dramatic.” She paused, as if unsure about herself, but then she blurted, “Plus, you need me tomorrow, don’t you?” She zipped and unzipped her bag nervously. “For your award thing.”

I tried to temper my smile, but it curved up in a steady arc anyway. “Are you asking me on a date, Dr. Coldwell?”

“No,” she mumbled, sitting up straighter. “It’s just that I already agreed and everything.”

I leaned my elbow against the window and tapped my lips. “So, you still want to go on a fake date with me tomorrow?”

Ruth cleared her throat. “Sure.”

I sighed loudly. “I don’t know. The last time I fake-dated you, you ditched me.”

Ruth brought her bag up to her face and pressed it against her features. “I already regret this.” But as she lowered her bag, she fought a smile of her own, and my heart gave a happy clench at the thought that I had put it there. “I promise I won’t ditch you.”

“Ruth,” I chuckled, “I’d be honored to have you with me tomorrow. As long as you’re feeling up to it.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said with quiet confidence.

Fifteen minutes later, I pulled up to Ruth’s building first, parking along the curb in front of a meter and putting the car into park. She gave me a confused frown. “You’re parking here?”

“I can walk a few blocks to work,” I shrugged. With a devious glint, I added, “Plus, I’m your husband. I should walk you up to your office.”

“You are way too enthusiastic about that,” she replied with a soft huff.

I kind of was. Disconcertingly, in fact. I got Ruth’s door for her, and then we went into the historical downtown building where the blast of A/C sent a chill down my neck. Ruth went for the elevator, and I glanced around the lobby. My eyes landed on the black and white sign that listed business names, suite numbers, and floors. My brows drew together as I read the only doctor on the list. “Dr. Rook, Floor 2, Suite 2A.”

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I turned the scowl on Ruth as the elevator doors opened. “Did you list Dr. Rook as your PCP because you saw his name in your building?”

She sucked her cheeks in guiltily. “Maybe.”

“Oh my God. You don’t have a PCP?” I followed her into the elevator with an accusatory frown.

“I don’t need one,” she replied pertly.

My thumb mashed the third-floor button a little too hard. “Sure you don’t.”

Ruth folded her arms, and it pushed her breasts up so her cleavage nearly spilled out of her eyelet lace top. “Are you starting a fight over this?”

“Nope.” I drew in a breath for patience. “It’s your body.”

She gave me a dubious look. “Yes, it is.”

I jammed my molars together to keep from listing off the statistics that said seven out of ten deaths are caused by chronic health problems that could be caught in routine exams, or the fact that preventative care would literally add years of longevity to her life. I didn’t point out that her knee was a perfect example of why immediate health care was so important because what could have been a visit with my tweezers and some ibuprofen had become a life-threatening infection and surgical procedure in a matter of days.

“I can hear you stewing,” she drawled.

I pressed my lips together hard. The elevator beeped, and I glanced down at Ruth with a silent look of censure. I took in her still-damp curls and the way her gray eyes watched me with uncertainty like I might blow a gasket. The doors opened, and I hooked my arm around her waist, fitting her to my side. “Relax, wifey,” I said low, glancing through the open doors at the lobby of her office. I tilted her chin up to me, bending down to bring my lips to hers. “It is your body... until it’s mine. And then you’re getting what you deserve.” I kissed her softly. “Make of that what you will.”

I felt her ribs halt, and she froze in my arms. Her hands came up and curled around my dress shirt, but instead of pushing me away, she pulled me in. She deepened our kiss, breathing in deeply, and it was only when the doors began to close, and I had to whip out an arm to stop them, that she finally stepped away. The receptionist behind the desk gawked. Ruth put a hand to her lips, glancing up at me, and then back down. “I should object to that.”

“But you don’t?” I guessed with a smile, leading her out of the elevator.

Her hand moved to the base of her throat. “No. And don’t you dare gloat.”

I grinned. “Sorry, I’m gloating.”

“Of course you are.” Ruth shook her head, scattering her curls down her shoulders, and she walked stiffly up to the front desk. “Good morning, Olivia.”

“Hi, Dr. C!” Olivia beamed at us both, her round cheeks dimpled with a smile. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.” She glanced between us as I came to stand by Ruth again and wrapped my arm casually around her hips. “Y’all are so cute.”

Ruth’s face went tomato red. “Yeah.”

I pinched her hip. “She has a knee injury, so tell me if she gets up and runs around the building.”

Olivia’s eyes widened. “Oh no! I’m sorry to hear that. I guess that means you won’t be participating in the volleyball tournament at the block party next weekend.”

Ruth gritted her teeth, clearly irritated at the mention of the party. “Probably not.”

“Block party?” I asked, rotating a significant look her way.

Ruth refused to look at me. “I’ll be there, though. Of course.”

Sneaky little minx. What was the point of having a fake husband if she wasn’t going to use me? Olivia turned a silent look of question my way, so I said easily, “We will be there. Naturally.”

“Oh!” Olivia turned in her chair, and with perfectly manicured red nails, she picked up three sheaves of paper. “You got some client feedback forms, Ruth.”

Ruth looked surprised but took them from Olivia with such timid care, as if they might have been rigged with explosives. “Are they... bad?”

“Oh, no,” Olivia said, like that was the last thing possible. “Your new three-choice system has gone over really well with the clients. They loved it, and two of them have had back-to-back dates already.”

Ruth put her fingers to her mouth, and her eyes danced down the page before she looked up with happiness lifting her features. “Wow. That’s so great.”

“Three-choice system?” I led Ruth away from the counter and waved to Olivia. “Nice to see you.”

“Same!” Olivia smiled brightly.

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Ruth's eyes stayed on her papers as she walked slowly down the hallway. "Yeah, I... I looked at the data and discovered that the three most common criteria for perceived successful matches were astrological signs, physical traits, and shared interests. So, I've been curating match profiles for my clients with these three choices and three different candidates that match each of them. That's not to say that those criteria make for lasting or statistically significant matches long-term, but those are the criteria clients think they want."

My eyebrows lifted. "Ruth, that's brilliant."

"Oh, well," Ruth looked up finally, and her misty blue eyes locked onto mine. "It was just... data."

"You're using your strengths," I pointed out, following her down the hall to where I knew her tiny office was, tucked in the back.

She limped stiffly and shrugged one shoulder. "I suppose I am. I'm really glad to see it's working."

I hooked my arm around her waist, letting her put some of her weight against me as she made her way slowly past glass-paneled meeting rooms and offices. "Determination and perseverance are definitely a turn-on."

"Because I'm your type?" Ruth taunted with a side glance.

Cheeky. "Yes, you are," I said with a half-smile.

She sighed, stiffening. “Sure.”

I opened the door for her, but as soon as she was inside, I trapped her against the wall. She sucked in a surprised breath as I bent to whisper a kiss along her jaw. I flattened my hand against the small of her back, pressing her to my body. “Is there a reason you’re keeping me at arms-length?”

She melted into me, angling her head to give me better access. With some difficulty, she admitted, “I think there is a reason, but I don’t know what it is.”

I smiled as I moved my lips from her jaw to her mouth. “That was a very scientific answer.”

She groaned, fisting my already wrinkled shirt in her hands. “There’s nothing scientific about what you’re doing to me.”

“There is,” I disagreed seriously. “It’s called hormones.”

She laughed softly. With a shy glance from my lips to my eyes, she pushed up onto her tiptoes and kissed me softly. I pulled her closer, wrapping both my arms around her soft body and feeling the same sense of satisfaction I got from an early morning cup of coffee. I wanted to consume every delicious drop of Ruth she was willing to feed me.

When she pulled away, I skimmed the curve of her neck with my knuckles. “What’s with the block party?”

She groaned, and leaning away from me, she let her head fall back against the cream-colored wall. “It’s a summer company party, but we invited the whole building to ‘collaborate’ and make it a bigger event. We rented the park across the street.”



“And is this something you might have asked your husband to attend?” I asked softly.

Ruth refused to meet my gaze. “Maybe.”

“You are so stubborn, Coldwell. It’s okay to ask for favors, you know.” I cupped her face with both my hands until she met my stare. “And besides, I want to go. If you’re there, then I’m in.”

“Really?” She covered my hands with hers like she didn’t want me to move them. “You’re not just saying that because you—because I’m going with you tomorrow night?”

“No,” I assured her honestly. “I’m not. I want to go.” I kissed her forehead. “Stop worrying so much. Do you remember when I brought you home from the bar that first time?”

She grimaced. “You keep reminding me. How could I forget?”

I moved my hands to her bare arms, skimming them up and down soothingly. “You told me about a time someone shut the door on you and locked you out. I don’t know exactly what happened, but I’m not going to do that. I’m an open door, and you can walk right in and get comfy, Shortstop.”

Her lips trembled, and she pushed at her glasses, looking down. “Oh.”

“Oh,” I echoed with another smile before pulling her into a bear hug that let her bury her face in my chest. “What happened to caring about my ego, hm?”

“You’re fantastic,” she grumbled into my chest.

I chuckled, releasing her. “Thank you. I feel so much better.”

Ruth stepped away, pulling her backpack off her shoulders to set it on her tidy desk. With an uncertain glance, she asked, “So, you’re going to this party thing, huh? It’s next weekend.”

“Definitely,” I said with a dip of my chin.

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“Okay.” She blew a sigh out of the side of her mouth, flicking one of her curls aside. She looked around her office. “Then... I guess we’re still fake married. For a while at least.”

Fake married. I had no idea when I’d blurted that two weeks ago that I would find myself really enamored with my enigmatic humanities doctor. The word “fake” in front of anything that had to do with Ruth Coldwell sat in my gut like a stone-cold weight. There wasn’t anything fake about the way I wanted to throw her over my shoulder, lock her in my bedroom, and have my way with her for the rest of the weekend. And there definitely wasn’t anything fake about the way I lost my breath over her sharp wit or got sore cheeks from smiling around her. I could tell she was reluctant to accept the way I felt about her. I knew what it was like to feel that heavy impossibility that someone might care for you when the past had presented nothing but evidence to the contrary.

But I’d be damned if I let those insecurities win. I hadn’t lied when I’d told Ruth I was competitive. She just didn’t know that I was competing for her. I moved to the doorway, putting a hand on the door jam, and then I gave her a glance with raised brows. “Correction, Shortstop. We’re real dating.” Then I left her with her mouth hanging open.

Chapter nineteen

Ruth

Ruth

Real dating. It sounded like something an elementary school student would come home and tell her mom. “Hey, Mom! Cal and I are real dating!”

And yet, to me, it was everything.

It propelled me through my day on Friday, lightening my steps like fluffy little clouds under my feet. It brightened my voice as I spoke to my clients about their matches, and it painted my successful work in a rose gold glow that kept me flushed and warm all day.

Gemma noticed around lunchtime when she came in to check on me. She caught me in the lobby where I limped toward the elevator doors. Despite my aching knee, I had a dopey, permanent smile on my face that probably looked just shy of creepy.

She caught up to me, dancing around me to block my path before I could make it to the elevator doors. Gemma had her hair in her signature half-up, twin buns style, and it curled around her shoulders and down to her waist where her ribbed black top had been tucked into a burgundy and burnt sienna plaid skirt. She cocked her head as I halted, and she smiled wider. “Wait.Wait.” She leaned forward, her blue eyes boring into mine. “You got laid.”

“Shh,” I chided, looking around the empty lobby, but grinning nonetheless.

“You got some!” Gemma crowed, fist-pumping. “I knew it. I knew it. You owe me Chinese. And extra rangoons. And probably part of your soul because I told you, bitch.”

“Oh my God,” I groaned, reaching for her in an unsuccessful attempt to shut her up.

“Hey Olivia,” Gemma said louder, spinning to face the desk. “Ruth got laid!”

Olivia blinked at us in confusion, which made sense because as far as Olivia knew, I was married. I reached around Gemma, ignoring the twinge in my knee, and clamped a hand around her mouth. “Ignore her,” I apologized. “Obviously I got laid.” Gritting my teeth, I added with a growl, “Because I’m married.”

Gemma cackled. “Sorry, sorry. Yes.” She turned and hugged me, surrounding me with the scent of roses and fresh soap. “You lucky little nerd. All the details. Now.”

I waited until our Chinese dinner that night to fill Gemma in on everything that had happened. I included the bathtub disaster, and skipping over the details she actually begged me for, I admitted that I got thoroughly ravished the night before. Several times.

Gemma sighed, sitting back in her booth with half-eaten rangoons and a plate of lo mein on the restaurant table in front of her. She patted her soft belly with a pout. “No fair, Ruthie P. You get sex, and your boyfriend is a sexy-as-fuck doctor, and I’m on like my thirtieth failed date this year.”

I tilted my eyebrows up in concern, sitting back with a full stomach myself. “Thirty?” My knee was on fire, and my head had started to pound sometime after lunch, but I couldn’t find it in myself to care much at the moment. Everything seemed so sparkly.

Gemma picked up a fortune cookie and unwrapped it sullenly. “I brought a guy home last weekend and he lasted like forty seconds tops before blowing his load. Then he got a look at Mini and said he was allergic to dogs, but I’m pretty sure his pansy little pale ass was afraid of her. That might be a record for fastest fuck and ditch for me.”

Mini was basically a small horse of a Doberman, so I couldn’t really blame the poor guy for being afraid of Gemma’s dog. “You didn’t tell me you had a guy over last weekend. Stop bringing random guys to your place. It’s dangerous.”

Gemma snorted, nibbling on the edge of the fortune cookie. "I'm pretty sure I weighed more than that guy. Mini was there, anyway. The most dangerous thing about it was how bad the sex was."

I smiled, grabbing a fortune cookie of my own. "Was this before or after you rescued me?"

"After. We'd been talking through text for a couple of weeks, and I met him for dinner Saturday night." Her eyes widened with irritation as she cracked the cookie and pulled out the slip of paper. "I'm pretty sure it was the half a bottle of wine that made him look appealing, now that I think about it."

"Oh good, you're getting drunk before you bring them home," I said sarcastically.

"Not a word from you, Speed Dating Ruth."

I grimaced. "Fair point."

Gemma read her fortune and then burst into laughter. She tossed it onto the table for me to read, but said it out loud anyway. "'Letting new people into your space doesn't take up room, but rather, broadens your horizons.'"

I pulled a face. "That's eerie. Don't do that."

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Still laughing, she smashed the fortune slip with her empty soda cup. “Fuck you, fortune cookie. No more randos in my house. I’m officially swearing off men for the foreseeable future. What’s yours?”

I snapped the cookie in half and fished out the slip of paper. My lips pulled into a pout. “I hate when they give platitudes instead of actual fortunes.”

“Oh yeah, me too. Like, I don’t want advice—I want to know when my soulmate is showing up. What does it say?”

“Be a leaf in the wind; let fortune guide you.” I rolled my eyes. “Veryhelpful.”

“Well, at least the food was good,” Gemma chuckled. “Do you need a ride home?”

I glanced at my phone, face-down on the table. My cheeks warmed. “Cal is coming.”

Gemma made an “oooh” sound. “Is he staying the night?”

I shook my head, sliding out of the booth and standing with a stretch. “No, he’s staying at the center late tonight to catch up on paperwork, and then he has rounds in the hospital early tomorrow morning.”

Gemma clicked her tongue, sighing. “Lame. Still, doctors are so hot.”

I thought back to my “anatomy lesson” with Cal and had to agree. They were.

Gemma waited with me until Cal pulled up, and after giving him finger guns, she

sashayed off to her car in the dark parking lot. Cal came around to my side to open my door, but he pulled me into him before I could slide in. He looked tired, honestly. His eyes crinkled at the corners and his hair had gotten disheveled again, but he wrapped me in a hug that soothed my soul and body in equal measures. “You’re limping pretty badly there, Shortstop.”

“Mm,” I hummed into his shirt. Usually, he smelled like whatever shampoo he used, but after a long day, he smelled like male and deodorant with a hint of coconut, and I wanted to lick him. “I’m okay, though. Really.”

He groaned, molding his body to mine so perfectly, it was like we really were made for each other. “You’re making me regret working right now.”

A selfish part of me desperately wanted him to not work, but I knew better. His patients had to come first. “You can make it up to me tomorrow.”

“Deal.” He helped me into my seat, and then when he was buckled and had put the car into drive, he glanced over at me. “How did it go today?”

“Good. Janice is advertising my new three-pronged service, and the clients are responding positively to it. I think the best part is that I’m not matching them, really. They’re matching themselves. I’m just doing the data work for them ahead of time.”

“So, between researching... what was it? Silver painting?”

“Silverpoint paintings,” I supplied with amusement.

“Right. So, between silverpoint painting research and matchmaking, which one do you like better now?” he asked with a fast glance at me before looking at the road.

“Hm.” I thought for a second, running through my memories of doing research for



Vaughn versus how I had felt this one week after getting a better grasp of my job. On the one hand, research was straightforward and uncomplicated. But, to be honest, it was a little boring. I had regrets that I hadn't pursued archaeology science like I had wanted because radiocarbon dating still held a part of my heart and interest. But on the other hand, the science of matching people together had a certain anthropological aspect to it that appealed to me the more I explored it.

After a few seconds, I said, "I think I enjoy matchmaking more."

Cal smiled, glancing at me again. "I love that you take time to think about things before answering. It's very you."

I pushed at my glasses sheepishly. "It probably looks weird, huh?"

Cal shook his head. "Not at all. I like that you take the time to be honest with your answers. We live in an age of instant gratification, and more and more, I think people feel the need to answer things immediately. We text and message rapid-fire, and our patience gets shorter all the time. But you're still methodical and careful with your words. It's admirable."

I tucked my bottom lip between my teeth, nearly glowing. "Oh."

"Oh," he mocked with a smile.

"How about you?" I asked him to take the focus off me. "How did things go today?"

"Good," he sighed, which made it sound like it had been anything but. "Well," he amended with a half-shrug, "it was good until just an hour ago. One of my Multiple Sclerosis patients is in the hospital, and I need to go check on him. I just saw him the other day, so I feel, I don't know... guilty?"

“Like you missed something?” I clarified.

“Maybe.” Cal’s profile flashed brightly from a passing car, illuminating the stress in his features. “I know I didn’t miss anything, but I still irrationally feel like I should have seen the virus coming.”

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I lifted my hand, wanting to reach for him. After a moment of hesitation, I did. I folded my hand over his, which rested on the gear shift. He gave me a fast look before returning his eyes to the road, and I squeezed his fingers comfortingly. “That’s really frustrating. I’m sure you did all the right things.”

He squeezed my hand back, bringing it to his thigh so he could trace circles on the back of my hand with his thumb. “Logically, I know I did.”

“But you still feel responsible,” I supplied, nodding. “I think... maybe it’s okay to feel that way. Sometimes it just hurts.”

Cal gave me a gentle smile and lifted my fingers to kiss them. The sensation skittered down my arm and straight to my heart. “Sometimes it does,” he agreed softly.

“But somehow, you always seem to find the positives,” I pointed out ruefully. “I’m not sure I’m good at that yet.”

Cal inhaled slowly, still holding my hand on his thigh. “I didn’t always. My parents abandoned me when I was a teenager.”

I stared at him in silent shock. I’d known he had been adopted, but he hadn’t told me how or why. “They abandoned you?”

He nodded. “Dad was a trucker, and he’d be gone for weeks at a time at first. My memories of him are pretty spotty. Eventually, his absences got longer, and my mom withdrew from me the older I got. By the time I was thirteen, she started ducking out, too.”

My throat tightened as the horror of what Cal had endured took shape. I knew that feeling. I knew what it felt like to realize your own parents cared more about their own pain than your suffering. “Cal,” I whispered tightly.

“Eventually, she didn’t come back.” Cal let out a breath, glancing at me briefly. “You know how that feels, I’ve gathered.”

I nodded mutely.

“I did my best on my own at first.” I heard the bitterness in his voice, even now. “I ate eggs mostly, and bread if I could afford it with my job as an under-the-table dishwasher at a local pizza place. When I started high school, I had free meals at school, and I forged documents from my parents who weren’t there. Football was the only joy I had that first year on my own. I couldn’t let it go, so I hid my starvation under the guise of keeping fit.”

Tears clogged my throat, and I swallowed them down with some effort. “That’s horrible.”

Cal’s resignation was evident even in the muted light. “I made it work. But eventually, the lack of food and the absence of parental authorities became obvious. Namely, because I got behind on rent and utilities, and then when I did my best to make them up with my puny salary, I ran out of food. CPS got involved, and that’s when I met my parents.”

I couldn’t help but send up a silent prayer of thanks to the universe on Cal’s behalf. What would have happened if Terrence and Jayla hadn’t been the ones who had found him and loved him?

“At first, I didn’t feel worthy of it,” Cal went on, his voice low and soothing in the quiet interior of the car. “I mean, my own parents hadn’t thought I was worth sticking

around for. Why should this perfect, loving, incredible couple care about me?"

I winced as his words echoed the poison I carried in my own heart. Cal gave me a knowing look like he understood what he was doing to me. "It's hard to accept love if you feel unworthy of it."

I scrunched one side of my face. "Point taken."

"I worked harder than the other kids in my grade," Cal added. "I studied harder, played harder, excelled faster. I nearly killed myself proving that I was worthy of their home and their love. It wasn't until later that I realized their love wasn't conditional. That necklace my mom wears?"

I nodded. "I remember it. A heart locket, right?"

"Yeah. I got that for her after I graduated high school and started my pre-med program. I got it after I failed my first test. It wasn't until I had failed that I saw for myself that love isn't earned. It just... is."

A tear slipped from the corner of my eye, and I swiped it away. "You're really lucky."

He pulled into a parking spot in my apartment complex and put the car into park, before turning his attention to me. "I know what it feels like to think you're unworthy of being loved. But Ruth, nothing could be further from the truth. You are extraordinary."

Tears dammed up my voice, and I looked forward uncomfortably. "You don't have to... Cal. I'm fine."

Cal gently guided my chin back to face him. "Stop pretending it doesn't hurt."

I gusted out a sound that was somewhere between a sob and a laugh. Forcing the tears back down, I said thickly, “Stop poking at it.”

“No,” he smiled faintly. “I think you’re beautiful. I’ve thought it since that moment I went to the bar to ream you out and realized there was no way I could go through with it. Not after I saw how intelligent and funny you were, how vulnerable and strong, and definitely,” he added with a leveling gaze, “worth every happiness in this life.” I tucked my lip between my teeth. His thumb tugged on my chin and popped it back out. “Stop hurting what’s mine.”

Desire and belonging mingled in a heady mix, swooping through me and stealing my breath. “Yours, huh?”

Cal leaned forward and kissed me softly. Rubbing his lips across mine with a teasing tickle, he whispered, “Sometimes it just hurts. But sometimes we can make it better, too.”

“What are you?” I whispered with a hint of incredulity.

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“Whatever you need me to be, Shortstop.” He kissed me again, and that time I gave myself over to the warmth of it. I leaned into him, savoring the taste of him, the slide of his lips against mine, and the desire that pooled at my core.

When we pulled away reluctantly, a pang of sadness tightened in my chest. With my hand warm in Cal’s and the safety of his presence wrapped around me, I didn’t want to leave his car. But he had patients, and I would see him tomorrow. I tried to convince myself that was good enough. As I undid my seatbelt, I slipped my fingers from Cal’s hand and reached down to get my bag.

Cal turned to me, his eyes shadowed. “I can stay, Ruth. If you need me to, I can move some things around.”

I leaned against the door, facing him. Cal had on a set of black scrubs, which told me he had to have been in the middle of his hospital rounds when he’d come to get me. He was probably way behind schedule for that alone. I shook my head, smiling faintly. “I’m a big girl, Cal.”

“No, you’re tiny, and adorable, and injured, and it’s killing me to send you into that apartment alone,” he replied, his voice husky.

My smile widened, and I tamped down a laugh. “What if I promise not to take any baths or get drunk at bars? Does that help?”

He blanched. “Okay, but please don’t take a bath. For real. If you fall again and hit your head—”

“Cal,” I grinned outright, reaching across the space between us to take his face in my hands. His five o’clock shadow pricked at my palms, and I held his worried gaze. “I’m fine. And I’m,” I swallowed nervously, “I’m looking forward to tomorrow.”

He covered my hands with his, and his expression turned mischievous. “You mean our real date tomorrow?”

“Yeah, that,” I said, my voice cracking.

He chuckled, and turning to kiss the inside of my wrist, he lowered my hands. “Alright. Fair enough. Tomorrow, then.”

“Tomorrow,” I agreed again. “Thank you for everything.”

“You deserve everything,” he reminded me. “Get some sleep.”

I popped the door handle and opened the door, carefully maneuvering myself out of the car so I didn’t put any sudden pressure on my knee. With another wave to Cal as he pulled away from the parking spot, I turned and pulled my phone from the pocket of my wide-leg pants. It had been a long Friday, but I couldn’t help but retain that silly smile that had pulled at my lips throughout the day.

I made my way slowly through the quiet grounds, passing under shadowed trees and past a walkway with lights that had gone out months ago. It made my building darker than the other ones, but with the moon full and bright overhead, I could see my way to my front door just fine.

As I fished through my backpack for my keys, movement in my peripheral vision sent a jolt of fear through me. I whipped my head to the left. A figure, swathed in shadows and hunched with hands in their pockets, passed between the two apartment buildings. My heart clenched in fear before tumbling into a panicked rhythm. Vaughn



turned to face me, thirty feet in the distance, and features creased with fury.

I stiffened, gripped by fear so potent, it flash froze my limbs and coursed through me in a numbing wave. Vaughn stared at me, unmoving. Even when I forced myself to move, to launch into action and fumble in my bag for my keys again, he didn't engage me. Shaking, I pulled my keys from my bag and felt for the right key. I had to look down to fit it just right, and my panic vaulted into a churning gallop in my chest as I struggled to get my key into the hole just right. It slipped in, and hurriedly, I looked up again.

Vaughn watched, brows drawn and body still.

Still shaking hard, I unlocked my door, swerved inside, and slammed the deadbolt into a locked position. I sucked in a breath, releasing it with a trembling sigh, only to pull in another thin, useless mouthful of oxygen that did nothing to abate the spinning in my head. I leaned my forehead against the door, willing my heart to calm down.

Safe. I was safe. Vaughn couldn't hurt me... or wouldn't. Would he?

With unsteady hands, I pulled my phone from my pocket again. The screen lit up, displaying a generic pine forest background and the time, 9:13 pm. I hovered my thumb over the screen, debating. I wanted to call Cal. I wanted him here where he would cocoon me in the safety of his presence. Cal had a way of doing that. His presence dispelled fears and insecurities, wrapping me in warmth and hope instead.

Be logical, I thought with another calming breath. He's working. You're not in danger. You're safe in your house. The doors are locked, and you can call 911 if you're really in danger. He's busy. You're safe. You're safe.

I told myself that as I checked my windows and patio door, drawing all the blinds shut. I told myself as I brushed my teeth with a trembling hand and shut off all the

lights in the house. I reminded myself after I had crawled into bed and stared blankly at the tiny bedroom stuffed with shadows and reeking of fear.

I told myself, but I didn't believe it.

## Chapter twenty

Ruth

Unknown number:

Blocking me won't do any good. Last chance to speak with me about your future. I know who got you your job with Kiss-Met. And I know they lied about your resume. Talk to me or I'll be making a call to Janice.

Ruth

I dropped my phone onto my bed with shaking hands. Vaughn again. I'd blocked his number days ago, but that clearly hadn't stopped him. I looked over my shoulder, expecting to see a face in my bedroom window. Instead, the setting sunlight filtered through the closed blinds, escaping the white stripes in bands of deep gold. My reflection in the floor-length mirror stared back at me with wide, terrified eyes that were ringed with shadows. I'd dressed in the only formal dress I owned, and it fell in gentle flutters from my waist to mid-thigh. The baby blue dress had been made with soft chiffon layers and an off-the-shoulder neckline that accentuated my cleavage.

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But I didn't look sweet and innocent like I'd hoped when I'd bought the dress last year. I looked scared. I felt vulnerable. I didn't know what Vaughn's plan was, here, but I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach about it. His last text had more or less declared his intent to blackmail me. But he couldn't force me to sign a five-year contract... could he?

A knock at my front door made me jump. My heart clenched so hard, I imagined it wringing all the blood from my body out of it like a sponge. I put a hand to my chest, and as my heart thudded away at an uneven tempo, I tried to force it to calm down. It was just Cal. He was here to take me to the award ceremony.

"It's not Vaughn," I whispered to myself, bending over to slip the backs of my strappy heels over my ankles and make my way through my tiny apartment to the front door connected to the kitchen area. "Be chill."

I opened the front door, and Cal nearly blinded me with his perfection. The golden hour glow behind him highlighted the burnished red in his side-swept hair, and it added a soft tint to his skin that made him look like Adonis come to life. He'd dressed in a simple black suit and white shirt with a gray-striped tie, and the entire ensemble pulled at his muscular frame like it was begging for mercy. I gaped. "Hey."

Cal's mouth quirked to the side like he knew I was ogling. And then his gaze softened as his Irish green eyes roved from my springy hair down my dress and to my shoes. His lips separated, and there was a beat of silence before he found my questioning look and said, "You look incredible."

I fought a smile. "So do you."

“That’s it,” he said, reaching out to take my hand in his. “I’m winning this award next year so I can see you in that dress again.”

I laughed. “Make sure you mention that as the reason when you give your acceptance speech.”

Cal led me through the doorway, closing the door behind me, and I fished my keys out of my black clutch. He looped his arm around my waist from behind, bending down to skate his lips along the slope of my exposed shoulder. “But if I do that, then they’ll all see how beautiful you are.”

I almost dropped my keys as a shiver rippled down my arms to my fingertips. “I really don’t think you’re in danger... of...” I trailed off as my mind scattered like a collection of dropped pins. I lost my train of thought and the key stalled, hovering just before the deadbolt lock.

Cal reached around me, and grasping my fingers, he fed the key into the lock. With a softshuck, he twisted it into a locked position. His breath tickled my neck as he whispered, “I assure you, Shortstop. I’m very much in danger, here.”

I leaned against him, releasing a shivering breath. I’m in a shit ton of trouble. How am I supposed to keep my calm around this man? I angled my neck to give him easier access. He licked my pulse point before kissing it softly, and I almost melted into a puddle. I struggled to find something—anything—rational to say to Cal. “We...” I stalled again, breathing hard as his left hand skated up my ribs. “We’re mostly in danger of being... late.”

Cal laughed against my throat, moving his lips to my ear where he nipped at the sensitive shell. “It’s not even my award.”

I smiled. “Are you saying you want to stay?”

He groaned, and his whole body seemed to sag as he stepped away from me. “No. We should go.”

I turned and patted his chest. “Probably the adult choice to make.”

His eyes darkened as he skimmed his fingers down the slopes of my shoulders again. “I can think of a whole lot of other ‘adult choices’ I’d prefer to be doing right now.”

My lips twitched, and I volleyed a look from his lips to his eyes. “Oh yeah? What kinds?”

Cal’s smile turned roguish as he took my hand in his again and led me to his parked car. “Are we having the kink discussion already? On the second date?”

I frowned, thinking. “Second date?”

“Parents,” Cal said, flicking out one finger. “Award ceremony,” he finished, adding his second finger.

My jaw froze up. Stiffly, I asked, “Wait... I had sex with you, and it wasn’t even a date?”

“You are an incorrigible hussy, Dr. Coldwell. I hate to break it to you.”

“I wonder what a corrigible hussy would looklike,” I mused.

Cal laughed, and as we reached his car, he opened the passenger side door for me. But before I could get in, he swept me against the hard plane of his body before bending down to kiss me softly. His lips moved against mine, unhurried and warm, like he was ready to spend the rest of the night exploring every nuance of our kisses. When he pulled away, he whispered, “I wouldn’t dream of reforming any part of you.

You're perfect just the way you are."

My heart burst like a chattering of starlings. "So are you," I whispered back.

Smiling slightly, Cal gave me one more kiss on my cheekbone. "See? We are a perfect match. Although, you might disagree once you see what I have planned for our ride."

"Should I be worried?" I asked archly.

Cal went around to his side of the car with a sly, silent look. He'd parked close to my building, and although there were cars in every parking space, there were no residents milling around at this hour. The dusky sunset bathed the car's white interior in a brassy shimmer, and as Cal got into his seat and closed his door, I let myself bask in the summer glow. Cal turned to me, and the waning sun streaked across his strong features like refracted amber. "Are you ready to play a game?"

With you? Anything. Especially if you look at me that way while we play. "I suppose that depends on the game," I said with a dubious eye squint.

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“You’re guaranteed to win,” Cal grinned.

“That doesn’t sound suspicious at all.”

Cal chuckled but said no more about it until we were out of Eugene and taking the ramp up to the interstate. Finally, he asked, “What do you have on under that skirt, Shortstop?”

I rounded a silently surprised expression his way. “Pardon?”

As he accelerated on the highway, Cal leaned over and tapped the glove compartment in front of my knees. “It’ll matter when you open that and see what I have planned for our evening.”

Still skeptical, I hooked one finger under the compartment latch and popped it open. A small, black case with a zipper around the edge sat in the drawer innocently. I picked it up and kneed the compartment closed. “What’s this?”

“See for yourself.”

With another side-bounce of my eyes toward affable Cal, I unzipped the cloth and plastic box that was perhaps the size of an old CD case. When I flipped back the top, a discreet, black object made of soft silicone sat in a padded compartment, and next to it, what looked like a silver remote. I rotated a half-lidded look toward Cal like a demonic doll. “What.”

Cal’s teeth flashed white in the golden hour light that streamed through the

windshield. “It’s just that I want to see how long you can hold out. Since you take forever and all.”

“Oh my God.” I glanced back down at the vibrator and its remote. “I never should have told you that.”

“Probably not,” he agreed, still smiling.

I bopped a look between the vibrator toy and him again. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am serious,” he said, sobering comically. “I’ll be very upset if you don’t slip that in your pussy, Ruth.”

“But on the way to an awards ceremony?” I asked, my voice trilling up an octave.

“And during,” he said seriously.

“Oh, no.” I closed the lid of the case firmly. “No way.”

“Ruth,” Cal said, and his voice took on a low warning hum. “You’re not afraid, are you?”

“I...” I paused, thinking. Was I? “I think I’m hesitating because it’s unusual. But I’m not afraid.”

“Of course not. And you wouldn’t deny me a game just because you think it’s unusual, right?” Cal slid a fast glance my way before returning his eyes to the road.

“N... no.” I said at last. “I guess I wouldn’t.”

“Are you a tiny bit curious?” he pressed, his lips hovering on the edge of a smile.



I bit my bottom lip. “I... suppose.”

“Then put that in your pussy like a good girl and let me play with you.”

I squeezed my legs together in response. His voice slipped through me, wrapping around my RNA and embedding itself in my being. I couldn't part myself from my desire for him, and the realization rushed through me like the thrill before a skydive. I was falling for this man, and there was no backtracking from it. I gave him a heated look, eyes on his profile as I flicked open the case. “Would you, by any chance, like the remote after I do?”

A slow, satisfied smile lifted his cheeks. “You might even say I'd demand it, Shortstop.”

I pulled in a silent, steadying breath as I lifted the egg-shaped vibrator from its padding. It had a flexible ring on the end for ease of retrieval, I assumed. “Please don't wreck this car while I do this, Cal.”

“Oh, I'm not the one in danger of losing focus,” he grinned.

The silicone felt soft as suede, but slick, and it had a little blue light on the side that had already been turned on. With an unsure glance at Cal, I spread my knees apart and angled my hips up. Cal glanced down and then back to the road. “On second thought, maybe I am in danger. Shit, you look good.”

I indulged in a coy look his way and then I slipped the egg between my legs. I had to maneuver my lace panties aside, but then it was at my entrance where moisture had already collected just from the mere suggestion that I would be playing a game like this with Cal. I pushed it inside of my suddenly aching center, and it slipped in easily before I squirmed and settled it comfortably. It was just large enough to not fall out, but not so big that I would be bothered by it constantly. In fact, I could see myself

forgetting it was even there. Just in case, I tugged on the little silicone ring to make sure it was snug.

I unclipped the flat, oval remote from the case and handed it to Cal with a skeptical look. “What is your plan, here?”

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Cal clicked the remote button. Buzzing filled my sensitive center, trilling against the nerves that connected to my clit and filling me with a need so intense, I gasped. My palms slapped onto my thighs, and I clenched tight, gripping my legs and tensing upright. “Oh fuck.”

Cal hit the button again, stopping the vibrator, and he looked very much like the cat who’d caught the mouse. “Plan? There’s no plan, Shortstop. I play, you win.”

I relaxed with a huff. “That was shockingly intense. What’s in this thing?”

“Orgasms,” Cal responded with a meaningful look my way. “Good ones.”

Our GPS map said that the drive from Eugene to Portland would take two hours. It felt like twenty years.

Cal teased me relentlessly, pressing the button to turn on the vibrator at random times that I least expected. He would go ten, fifteen, sometimes twenty minutes between rounds—enough that I almost forgot we were “playing.” It caught me off guard every time, even though I knew he had a remote and I knew he would fill my aching, drenched pussy with vibrations that tore at my sanity, I still jumped when it happened. Then he would turn it off, not even stopping his conversation to react to my gasps and moans.

At one point, he kept the damn thing on for a full minute, and I had to brace myself against the door and the back of the seat to keep from launching myself through the car roof. By the time we were ten minutes out from our destination, I’d covered his leather seat in moisture, and my lace panties were ruined. And I still hadn’t had an

orgasm. Because the second I got close, the moment, I rocked my hips and my head fell back, Cal would stop the fucking thing. It was driving me absolutely insane.

“Cal,” I panted after he turned it off for the millionth time. Had we been in this car for eons? Did this trip even have an end? If there wasn’t an orgasm at the end of this car ride, I was going to lose my shit.

“Yes?” he asked calmly. We were in traffic at the heart of Portland, and he leaned his cheek on the fist that had the remote clasped loosely between his fingers. He pressed the button twice.

The vibrator buzzed to life, and I clenched around it, leaping straight toward an orgasm that I was certain would rip me in half like a Valentine’s paper heart. “Cal!” I screeched.

He turned it off, grinning devilishly. “This is literally the most fun I’ve had in years.”

“You are evil,” I puffed, sagging against the seat.

“Oh, come on now,” he replied mildly, returning his attention to the road as the light turned green. “I have a feeling you’ll change that sentiment in—” he glanced at the GPS on his phone. “—nine minutes.”

“What’s in nine minutes?” I panted. My legs were sore. My pussy was sore. My entire soul had been shredded and diced and minced into a souffle of burning need.

“Call it a checkpoint,” he mused. His thumb traced the outline of the button, and I watched it intensely. I wasn’t sure if it was because I wanted him to press it or if it was because I dreaded it.

“This might be my villain origin story,” I groaned, squirming in my seat and

squeezing my thighs together.

“Hm, you would look really good in spandex,” Cal agreed. He took a right turn, weaving slowly through traffic, and although I watched his thumb and that damn remote closely, he didn’t press it again. I knew it was coming, but I forced myself to relax anyway, looking out the window at the traffic as we made our way to the event center.

“Remind me, in what way do I win this game?” I fanned my face, slowly releasing all my bunched-up muscles that had gone tension-wire taut in the last two hours.

“You’re not enjoying this?” Cal asked. “I’m enjoying this.” We went down a decline into a parking garage, and the shade engulfed us, cooling some of the heat on my skin.

I glared. “You know very well that I am both enjoying it and two seconds away from ripping this thing out.”

Cal pressed the button three times, and the vibrator ratcheted to a level that made me spring off the chair. “Oh my fucking God.”

“I doubt He’s listening to this, love.” Cal brought the car around to the back of the parking garage, pulling into a spot against the wall. “But keep praying. I love the way your pleading sounds.”

He still hadn’t turned the damn thing off, and I felt my core tighten and twist, clenching so hard, I was certain I would shatter into a thousand shards of ecstasy. “Cal,” I sang in high-pitched soprano.

Cal turned the engine off, and with a calm, utterly conceited smile, he patted the generously sized middle console. “Lie back on this with your feet on the back seats.”

The console was made of black leather and smooth, but far too small for me to lay on. Or so I thought. But Cal was already exiting the car and sliding into the back seat, and with my nerves firing off like jackhammers, I undid my seatbelt and lifted myself onto my knees.

“I don’t know about this.” I drummed my fingers on the headrest as I watched Cal in his slick suit sit in the middle seat and spread his legs out comfortably. “I can’t f-fit—”

Cal pressed the button again, and this time, the vibrator started an off-beat, maddening rhythm that threatened to rip out my sanity and stomp all over its remains. “Legs here, Shortstop. Tick, tock, you’re wasting precious time.”

“Oh,” I groaned, but my legs had begun to shake, and sweat gathered at my neckline as the car slowly warmed in the shadowed parking garage. I maneuvered myself to the middle console, and to my surprise, as I threaded my feet through the opening and put them between Cal’s, I found that I could actually rest my back along the smooth leather. It wasn’t the most comfortable thing I’d ever done, but next to the torture this vibrating egg was inflicting on my pussy, I was ready to put myself on a rack if it would end the sensation.

Cal lifted my hips, and then I realized why he had wanted me here. It gave him perfect access. He placed my feet on either side of his thighs, and although I had to lift my hips and support my weight by holding onto the bars of each headrest on the front seats, I was comfortably, fully open for him. He swished my sky-blue skirt up to my waist, baring my drenched white lace panties before running his fingers along the top hem. The egg continued that relentless, merciless beat inside of me, pulsing me close to the top of an orgasm but denying me true release.

Panting, I let my head fall back. “Please, Cal.”

Cal's fingers smoothed down the wet crease between my legs. "How can I rush when you look so fucking delicious? Hearing those sounds you made on the drive up, watching you squirm," he smoothed his fingers over my sensitive, aching flesh, and the layer of lace between us made me irrationally angry. "It was a different kind of torture for me."

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I tilted my hips. “I can’t believe I’m begging you to fuck me in your car.”

“I can,” he grinned impishly. “You’re a dirty little scientist, Coldwell. And I knew you’d be interested in an experiment.” Cal’s hands migrated to my hips, slipping under the thin fabric of my panties until he grasped the strips at my hips and ripped. He tore the ruined underwear away.

I gasped, lifting my head. “Did you just—?”

Cal arched one dark eyebrow. “Were you saving those sopping wet panties for something?”

“No,” I groaned. The vibrator tapped against my G-spot, igniting a fire of need with every pulse and buzz. “Take the underwear, my dress—whatever you want. Just please, Cal.”

“God, I love the sound of that,” he grated out, his voice rough and low. He smoothed his hands down my hips, around my thighs, and back to the apex of my pleasure. He ran his fingers through the slick folds with one hand while the other cocked my leg out far and supported my ass.

When he slid to his knees and lifted my hips higher, I sucked in a harsh breath. “No way. You can’t—I’m... there’s fluid.”

“Fluid,” Cal chuckled. “Only you would say that.” He adjusted his position, scooting me back and bringing his mouth between my legs. I fought for only a second, but then my knees were on his shoulders, his hands were under my ass, and I found



myself tipped all the way back with my head bumping the gear shift and his breath puffing cool and soothing over my pussy. “I can, and I will, Shortstop. Now shut up and come for me.”

His tongue swept a slow, luxurious path from my aching center to the bundle of nerves that screeched for release. When he pressed the tip of his tongue against my clit, I was fairly sure I saw heaven. White and blue and bright yellow burst behind my closed eyes like a kaleidoscope of pleasure, and I moaned loudly, my arms bracing against the seats.

I needed more. I needed him to do that again because the symphony of the percussive torture deep inside of me combined with the pressure from his tongue was going to crescendo into something blissfully sweet.

Cal hummed against my sensitive skin, scraping his teeth against my clit and giving me a streak of pain and pleasure. “You taste fucking fantastic.”

“Then eat me like you mean it,” I growled out in frustration.

I felt his laugh against my pussy, and then he sucked me into his mouth. I gasped, tightening every muscle from my torso to my toes, and then all the air left my lungs in a whoosh. “Oh my God,” I cried out.

Cal stopped and licked back down to where the vibrator thrummed inside of me. “Good girl, Ruth. You’re almost there.”

I couldn’t form coherent words anymore. They garbled out of me, unintelligible and full of begging nonsense. Cal circled my entrance with his tongue before sliding back up to my pulsing clit. When he pulled me into his mouth again, I felt and heard the click, click, click of the remote he had in his hand against my ass.

The vibrator went crazy. It stopped its staccato rhythm and revved up to an unimaginably strong buzz that electrified me from the inside out. I screamed, and like it had been wrenched from my soul, I gave myself over to the orgasm that had built so strongly, it went off like a nuclear bomb. Stars and colors and sparks burst behind my eyes just as my center splintered into shards of ecstasy. And while I shook and broke, Cal held me firm in his hands, sucking softer and easing away from my clit so I came long and slow. He turned off the vibrator then, and I almost mourned the loss of it. Then again, I was so drained of energy and feeling, I was surprised I'd noticed.

He lowered me slowly, slipping his hands up to my back and then pulling me upright so I straddled him on the back seat of the car. With my heart still galloping in my chest, I leaned my forearms on his shoulders and rested my forehead against his. "That... was..."

"Fucking gorgeous," he whispered. His hands came up to bracket my face, and he lifted me away just enough that I could catch his shadowed gaze. "Stunning, in fact. Ruth, you are... you are honestly perfection. In every way."

I stared back at him in wonder. "You don't really mean that."

"I do." His voice, although soft and ardent, filled the quiet space and left room for nothing else. "I have never held a more perfect woman in my arms."

I scraped my nails along his jaw, holding his vibrant gaze. I licked my lips uncertainly. "Can I tell you something?"

"Anything." His eyes softened with a hint of concern.

I focused on my fingers as they followed the sharp angle of his jaw to his neck. "I feel safe with you."

His Adam's apple bobbed, and his fingers tightened almost imperceptibly, still framing my face. It wasn't until I brought my eyes back to his that he whispered, "You are."

I swallowed hard, and all thoughts of what he'd done to my body were replaced by what he was steadily doing to my heart. He was stamping it with kindness, one kiss at a time, one word at a time, one selfless, caring action at a time. At some point, those stamps would cover my heart and mark it as his. Completely his.

## Chapter twenty-one

Cal

Cal

I was a goner. There was no other way to look at it. Ruth Coldwell had me so completely ensnared that I barely had room for rational thought. Even though I'd helped her clean up in the car and return her dress to a semblance of tidiness after I'd debauched her in the back seat of my car, I hadn't moved past it. The feel of her softness under my palms, the taste of her, the sounds she'd made—they all lingered and pressed in on my consciousness, clamoring to be savored.

But then again, she was right next to me, and that still took precedence. She had her hand in mine, and her airy, powder blue dress swished against my leg with every step we took through the event center. It was impossible to divert attention from her even for a moment as she talked about her plans for Kiss-Met and the success she'd been finding with her clients. I smiled down at her, taking in the way her curls bounced against her shoulders and her hand fluttered to her face, looking for her glasses that weren't there tonight.

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The building they were hosting the awards at was older, built long before the turn of the century, and full of charm. From exposed brick walls to low ceilings, it felt historical and bright. We were headed down a wide hallway, following signs from the elevators to the main room where I knew from past years they would have a temporary stage set up and dozens of tables and chairs.

She glanced up at me, pausing in the middle of her description about researching astrology. “What is your sign? I know way more about this now than I intended to.”

“Scorpio. I think. My birthday is November first.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “That would be Scorpio, yes. And I’m a Pisces.”

“When’s your birthday?” I asked, fully intending to remember it and embarrass her with a stupid grand gesture.

She gave me a skeptical side-eye. “I’m not telling you.”

“I’ll find out,” I said confidently. “And there will be no escape for you, Coldwell. There will be balloons. And cake. And celebrating, definitely celebrating.”

Ruth looked forward again, fighting a smile. “If it’s anything like your games...”

“Games and birthdays go hand-in-hand,” I said, bending down and lowering my voice.

Her shiver visibly traveled down her spine. “I don’t know if I can handle any more

games. I'm surprised I can even walk."

"Clearly, there's room for improvement if you can walk."

Ruth rotated a look my way. "You are very badly behaved, Dr. Reed."

"Thank you. Although, despite that, I have to know—how do we match up? Astrologically?" I knew she would know. I knew that if Ruth had done research on something like astrology, she had likely memorized every bit of available knowledge on the subject. Ruth's full lower lip slipped between her teeth and her neck turned pink. I smiled slowly. "It's good, isn't it?"

"If one were to believe that sort of thing," she admitted reluctantly, "it... would be an advantageous match, yes."

"I knew it." I squeezed her hand, straightening again as we approached the busy convention center room. "You might be stuck with me, Coldwell. My mother won't let you go if she knows our astrological signs match."

Ruth looked pained. "I have a feeling it would be impossible to say no to your mother."

"Like rearranging stars," I agreed. As we entered the ballroom, with its raised balconies on the left and right of the space already full, and the stage teeming with crew, Ruth hesitated.

"Wow. This is... huge."

"Well, they hand out awards for businesses in a pretty wide radius." I looked around the guests, all of them dressed in gowns and suits. I spotted Rook, who stood nearby with a dark-haired bombshell on his arm. "And apparently," I muttered, trying and

failing to not glare at my med school nemesis, “they’ll let just anyone in.”

Ruth followed my gaze until she found Rook, who stood talking with some of his colleagues. “I recognize him.”

“You should. He’s your ‘doctor.’” I gave her a sardonic, angled glance.

Ruth’s mouth pinched together tightly. “Oh.”

“He must have won something. Pity.”

“You really don’t like him? Even though you went to school together?” Ruth asked as I led her away.

I pulled a disgusted face. “He’s an asshole, and he always did just better than me in residency that it pissed me off.”

“I see,” Ruth said slowly and paired it with a sly half-smile.

“You were second place to a toady villain?” I clarified.

Ruth’s smile grew. “No, I was always first. But I can imagine.”

I reached over and pinched her cheek briefly, and she laughed. “That was mean, Shortstop.”

We filtered into the packed space, weaving through the throng of guests who all wore suits and dresses, and the excited chatter droned through the cavernous room like a busy hive. Each table had been designated for attendees of the respective businesses, so I swept my eyes over each white-draped table as I looked for our urgent care’s logo. I found Laura first, seated with her husband to her left and dressed in a black

dress.

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As I navigated the clumps of guests who laughed and talked, I noticed a single figure standing off to my right in my peripheral vision. He stood out because he wasn't talking. He wasn't visiting with other business owners or even sitting and quietly scrolling on his phone. He simply stood there, hands in his khaki pockets and dark eyes fastened on Ruth and me as we made our way through the ballroom. As soon as I raked my eyes over him, he turned away and walked toward the exits.

Discomfited, I tugged Ruth closer to me and pulled us around the back of a large grouping of older guests to get out of his line of sight. I wasn't sure what he'd been looking at, but I'd make damn sure he didn't do it again without a direct confrontation from me. It was possible he had been just as enamored with Ruth as I was—she was impossible to miss. I glanced down at her, and her silver-blue eyes arced up and over, taking in the chandeliers above and the guests with silent watchfulness.

He had definitely been ogling her. Ruth looked like someone from a storybook. With her gentle curls framing her features, and her gauzy dress fluttering around her legs, she looked like Wendy from Peter Pan, dreamy and wide-eyed in silent fascination. And truth be told, I wished I could steal her away to Neverland and keep her all to myself. I didn't know what fairytale land Ruth had dropped from, or where she'd been my entire lonely adult life, but I knew that I couldn't let her go now that I had her. The stars themselves had written our match, and I wasn't going to deny the cosmos.

We approached Laura at her table, and as soon as she saw us, her features lit up with interest. As she stood, I said, "Hey, Laura. This is Dr. Ruth Coldwell, and Ruth, this is Dr. Reynolds. She's the one receiving the award tonight."



“Hi Dr. Reynolds,” Ruth said and took the hand that Laura had held out to her. “It’s lovely to meet you. Cal told me all about what you did for your center.”

“Well,” Laura smiled, bopping a look to me briefly before looking at Ruth again. “I can’t deny, he’s spoken of little else but you recently, too. It’s wonderful to finally meet you.”

“Oh,” Ruth said, and that pink on her neck crept up to her cheeks.

“This is my husband, Jacob.” Laura motioned to a tall, hefty man who looked more like a linebacker than the systems analyst I actually knew him to be.

His glasses looked far too small on his meaty face, but his smile was soft and genuine as he waved. “Nice to see you, Callum. Hi, Ruth.”

“Glad you could both make it,” Laura said, and for the first time, I detected a hint of breathless anxiety in her voice. Laura didn’t like public speaking or even large events. She often joked that she’d had four kids so she’d have an excuse to stay home from social situations like this one.

“We got here first,” Michael pointed out with a drawl. He was seated at the same table, and Annie next to him. Neither of them had dates, I noticed, but they looked content enough with half-eaten breadsticks on their plates and drinks from the bar in front of them.

“I’m very impressed,” I said deadpan.

Annie stood, and her glittering, red dress matched her personality to a fault. She held out a hand to Ruth. “Hi, I’m Annie. You must be the matchmaker turned date, right?”

“I guess I am.” Ruth’s voice went rubber on rubber squeaky.

“Amazing.” Annie shook her head. “You’re way too pretty for him.” She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Did he blackmail you?”

Ruth laughed nervously. “Uh, not... technically.”

“Hey now,” I cautioned.

But Michael cackled as he shook Ruth’s hand as well. “I’m Michael. Blink twice if you need help, Ruth. We’ll save you from Dr. Suave.”

“You’re both fired,” I said.

They laughed, and Ruth chuckled along with them. “And here, I thought Cal was the charming type who wins over his co-workers.”

“I am the charming type,” I muttered, putting a hand on the small of her back and leading her to a chair at our round table. “I’m also the pushover type, and these two take advantage. Incessantly.”

Annie flashed a pair of straight, white teeth before sitting down again with Michael. “It’s true. We’re terrible to him.”

“There was this one time we made a big deal out of our necks cramping—” Michael started.

“—and we whined about it for days because we could tell it was getting on Cal’s nerves,” Annie joined in.

“Here we go,” I grumbled under my breath.

“And we honestly just thought we were teasing him,” Michael continued, his features

animated and voice hovering over laughter. “But Cal is such a softie, he bought us all heated neck pillows—”

“—with certificates for chiro appointments,” Annie finished. She gave me a cheeky grin. “Sucha good pushover.”

Ruth laughed softly, and her gaze swung from Annie and Michael to me. Her gray eyes softened a touch as she took in my chagrined expression. “I have also found him to be exceptionally kind. I wouldn’t say he’s a pushover, though.” Her eyes twinkled at that, and I knew she was thinking about our exchanges in the bedroom. And the car. And hopefully, anywhere else she would let me.

“True,” Laura chimed in, refilling her water glass. Around us, the other attendees were finding their seats, and the chatter fell to a low hum. “He’s not actually a pushover. He stands up for his patients.”

“Okay, yes,” Annie acceded. “We’re teasing. He’s pretty great all around.”

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Michael made a disgusted sound. “Don’t give in. He’s the only one who found a date, and we hate him.”

I rolled my eyes. “By accident.”

“It certainly wasn’t with my help,” Ruth murmured with a reluctant smile.

Annie squinted, turning her heavily lined eyes into black slits. “I knew he blackmailed you.”

Laura shushed us as the presenter came to the podium at the center of the stage. The room had been simply decorated with banners sporting the area’s business coalition logo, and hues of blue and silver adorned each table. There had to be at least three hundred people in the room, and they all found their seats as the lights dimmed and a spotlight shone on the presenter. He seemed to be talking with someone off to the side about a technical issue.

I leaned over to Ruth and whispered, “I RSVPed for your dinner by myself since I wasn’t sure if you were still coming. You know, after ‘kissgate’ and all.”

Ruth flashed a rare, full smile. “Kissgate?”

“It was an epic fumble on my part. It needed a name.”

She shook her head, still smiling. “Whatever you ordered is fine. I’m not picky.” That fit with my growing understanding of her character. Ruth, who took things in stride, who adapted to challenges with intelligent resourcefulness and flexibility, would be

the one to assure me she didn't mind.

I'd gotten both meals—one for me and the other for her—so she could pick which one she liked. I was doubly glad I had because I was beginning to see that Ruth was the type of person who would forgo her own comfort in favor of another's. She'd silently endure without saying a word. I both admired her strength and worried for her in tandem.

The presenter turned to face the crowd again, and his mouth hovered just above the mic. He cleared his throat. "Good evening, everyone. Thank you so much for joining us here for the 2024 Portland Greater Area Business Bureau Accolades. Or, as we like to call it, P'gabba."

The crowd laughed collectively.

"Before we get started, we have a bit of an unusual circumstance. It's certainly a first for us. A call was put in through the center directly trying to reach a wife whose phone must be on silent. Will Mrs. Ruth Coldwell take a look at her missed calls? Your husband would appreciate it."

Chapter twenty-two

Ruth

Ruth

My name over the mic resounded in my ears in an amplified echo. I felt, rather than saw, Cal rotate a look down to me, and I gripped my simple black clutch with numb fingers. The presenter peered at a notecard he had in his hand, pulling up a pair of reading glasses from a chain around his neck. "At least I think that was the name. My eyes aren't what they used to be."

The crowd murmured a laugh, but I barely registered the words. My mind was taking what he'd said and fitting it into a nasty puzzle box that had demons waiting to jump out from the lid. Your husband would appreciate it.

"Yes, Ruth Coldwell. Best of luck, Ruth! Now, that taken care of, once again, welcome!"

The crowd clapped, and it filled my ears with a jarring cacophony of tinny buzzing. I fumbled with my purse, pinching open the clasp and pulling out my phone. Cal bent his head, angling to face me better. "Who's looking for you?"

My phone screen lit up, and the partial messages from the unknown sender cluttered my home feed. I stood on shaky legs. Lying to Cal was impossible. I didn't want him to worry, but I didn't want to betray his trust, either. "I'll go find out."

As he stood, I put a hand on his shoulder and did my best to smile through my fear. "No, stay. It could be Gemma messing with me. I don't want you to miss Laura's award over that." Not a lie, but not entirely the truth. God, he couldn't really have done that... could he?

Cal's eyes traveled over my features, and I knew in that microsecond that he saw through me. He wasn't going to let me handle whatever this was on my own. Because he was Cal. He was protective and caring and all the things I'd longed for but didn't deserve.

"I'll go with you. Just in case."

"No, really," I sighed. "Give me... ten minutes. I'll go see if it's Gemma, and if I'm not back, then you can come check. Okay? I'll be in the lobby just out there."

"Are you sure?" Cal asked with wary concern.

“For our first award...” The presenter began the ceremony, and my heart beat uncomfortably loud in my ears.

“I really wouldn’t forgive myself if you missed this,” I hissed. “Please?”

Cal looked like he would rather insert a breadstick into his nasal cavity than let me go alone, but he relented with a reluctant head nod. “Ten minutes.”

“I’ll be right back,” I promised in a rushed whisper. I made my way across the enormous room, and blue LED lights striped over my dress as I crossed in front of a projector light. I wove through tables, and as I did, I pulled up the messages.

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Unknown Sender:

Last chance. It doesn't have to be this way.

Unknown Sender:

I know what Gemma did to get you this job. Do you?

Unknown Sender:

Meet me in the lobby. Your friend's job is on the line.

That gasping, panicked monster of terror deep in my heart burst through the surface of my emotions like a zombie hand in a horror movie. It clutched at my lungs, pinching them so tightly, I couldn't draw a full breath.

Vaughn was here. He'd called the actual event center to get my attention, and now he was threatening Gemma. I had to put an end to this.

With the awards ceremony well underway, I found myself alone as I exited the packed ballroom and headed back to the grand foyer at the front of the building. Deserted as it was, it felt like traversing a haunted castle on my own, with art deco accents in the arched doorways and an aged patina to the sandy brick walls and copper inlay veins that ran through the floors. My high heels clacked loudly as I walked at a fast clip, and as I rounded a corner, I found myself in the domed entranceway.



Entirely alone, Vaughn leaned against one of the brick walls with his hands in his khaki pockets. Above him, the rounded ceiling stood in stark, contrasting grandeur to his casual appearance with a reproduction of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel painted along its curved surface. Vaughn pushed off the wall, walking past polished walnut tables and meeting me near the arched entrance. "You got my message."

Behind him, the two-story-high entryway spanned four doors across and up to the Sistine Chapel painting like they were bending to heaven. I didn't give him the satisfaction of feeling smug about his stunt. I went to the heart of the matter instead, folding my arms as I stood in front of him. "You're blackmailing me into taking a job?"

"Absolutely," Vaughn said with easy confidence. He fixed a lock of brown hair that had escaped his side-gelled hairdo. "And as I've clearly shown, I'll follow you anywhere and do anything to make sure you see some sense." He still wore one of those tropical, short-sleeved, button-down shirts he seemed to prefer, and it made him look like a tourist in a turn-of-the-century museum. "You aren't thinking this through logically, Ruth. You're thinking about perceived insults from me to you—"

"Perceived?" I asked incredulously. "You think ditching me with no job after begging me to get a hyper-specific PhD is a perceived insult?"

"You're thinking with your emotions, not your head," Vaughn insisted calmly. His rectangular glasses glinted from the muted lights overhead as he looked away, clearly agitated. When he returned his gaze to mine, it was a glare hard. "You will take this position. You'll sign the papers, come back to Denver with me, and we'll go to Italy together in two months. You'll be paid well for your work, and you'll further your career the way you were always meant to. This," he said with a gesture toward the ballroom down the hall and behind me, "is not you. You are not meant to be some doctor's housewife, and you're certainly not a matchmaker, for God's sake. You're a scientist."

“A housewife?” I echoed. “Is that what this is about? Cal?”

“He’s clouding your judgment,” Vaughn snapped. The lights around the domed ceiling were meant to give it an ethereal glow, but they cast sharp shadows and angry, slashing lines over Vaughn’s time-softened features. “You are more than this.”

“I am whoever I choose to be,” I seethed, tightening my folded arms. “And you don’t get to dictate what that is.”

Footsteps echoed through the hallways softly, and I looked over my shoulder in alarm. A tall, blond-haired man in a navy-blue suit walked by, and his gaze swiveled around like he might be looking for the bathrooms. Then he looked down at his phone and tapped away at it, apparently sending a message as he paused just beyond the foyer. It was Rook, my fake doctor. I turned back to Vaughn and whispered, “You need to leave.”

Vaughn glared. “I’m not leaving unless you’re coming with me. I have the resume your friend submitted to your boss to get you this mockery of a job. I have proof that would get her fired, but more importantly, would end your tenure with this circus.”

My heart sank. Gemma hadn’t told me she’d lied to get me this job. But, oh, that was so Gemma. It was absolutely what she would do to protect her best friend—she’d put anything and everything on the line for the people she loved. It was why she had lied about me having a husband, too, and I could just throttle her for all of it. Except she’d done it out of love for me, and now she was in danger because of my past. I couldn’t formulate a response to the idea that Vaughn might ruin everything Gemma had worked so hard to build. It was too unfair. Too cruel.

Vaughn sensed my fear. His brow fell over his dark eyes, and he took a step nearer to me. Frozen with terror, I couldn’t even find the will to back away from him as the scent of his cologne washed over me in a burning wave. He grasped my arm and

pulled me against his soft body. “I will burn all your bridges, Ruth. I’ll destroy everything you think you’ve built here if it means you have only one place left to go.”

My lips trembled, despite my earlier resolve to end this lunacy. “You sound insane right now. You know that right?” Rook glanced up from his phone as he started walking again. Blue eyes danced over me like he might recognize me, and then he was past the foyer and down the hallway toward the restrooms. I turned my focus back to Vaughn again, whose flaccid features were growing red with frustration. “You can’t ruin Gemma’s job over this. I won’t let you.”

Vaughn released me and held up his phone with Kiss-Met’s website pulled up on the browser. His thumb hovered over Janice’s phone number. “I can leave a message for your boss. How do you think that will go over? I’ll start with Gemma, and when she’s lost her job, and you’ve lost your fake position there, I’ll move on to your new boyfriend.”

My face blanched. “Empty threats. You have nothing on him.”

He paused, thick eyebrows raising. “How confident are you in that? Should we test it?”

Every stubborn nerve in my body seized up in rebellion. I wouldn’t allow this reeking asshole to dictate what I did or didn’t do with my life. I stared at him, my brows falling slowly into a scowl. My brain raced through my options, thumbing through a catalog of probabilities.

I knew Vaughn, and I knew he didn’t bluff. Lie? Yes. Cheat? Clearly. But bluff? I didn’t think so. There was no reason for him to not get me fired, especially because kindness obviously was not something he held in any kind of esteem. Also, the grant for this research was worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Vaughn’s salary alone was well into the six-figure range, which for our field, was coveted. It was worth

taking risks if he met the criteria for the grant and received the money he thought he deserved.

So, all the facts considered, he would absolutely do everything in his power to get me fired. That meant he was more than willing to make that phone call right now. And if I allowed him to do that, Gemma would get fired. Janice wouldn't have a choice, ethically, but to hold her responsible for lying. That would logically lead to my termination as well, and that would leave us both jobless. I couldn't live with myself knowing that I'd lost Gemma the one job she had truly loved and excelled at.

If I went with Vaughn right now, Gemma would be safe. I would be indentured into five years of a working relationship with him, which felt impossible to comprehend. Even now, my heart wanted to beat out of my chest and my breaths were growing thin and strained. The idea of battling panic attacks every single day—out of the country no less—weighed on me like a stack of medieval tomes on my chest.

But Gemma.

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I could tell him I was going to do it, and that might buy me time to work something out with Gemma. Perhaps we could speak with Janice. But that still put Gemma at risk of losing her job, and the second Gemma knew Vaughn had returned and was blackmailing me, she would summon her own personal arsenal of loathing and spite. She'd probably resign and then do something completely out of pocket to get back at Vaughn—most likely something not legal—and that would put her in even worse shape than if I'd simply vanished quietly.

Which left me with the only fair option. And Vaughn knew it. From the tilt of his smug smile to the twitching eyebrow above his dark brown eyes, every micro-expression on his face told me he had already worked through the conclusions. And he knew which path I would take. Vaughn lowered the phone, clicking off the screen and slipping it into the pocket of his khaki pants. "Give me some credit, Ruthie. I know you."

My glare turned arctic. "Yes, you're very clever."

"You're just as clever, which is why I'm going to insist that you come with me now." Vaughn watched me closely, his expression guarded. "I suggest you tell that doctor of yours that you're changing your mind and leaving here with me tonight."

The oxygen in my lungs seemed to dry up completely. "Now? I didn't think you meant literally—Vaughn I'm in the middle of a—" I faltered. A what? A date? Jesus, Ruth. You fucked him twice—one and a half times?—and you think that turned into something substantial?

"I mean, make sure he knows you want to go, Ruth. Otherwise, you'll have a knight in

shining black tie close on your heels, and our entire plan here will go sideways.”

Cal would definitely try to rescue me if he knew. He’d do something rash like tell Gemma or Janice... he might even take it out on Vaughn directly. I was fairly certain that award-winning practices didn’t like doctors who decked people in the face or landed themselves with battery charges. Especially not at the awards ceremony. I ground my teeth. “Fine. Yes. I’ll make sure he knows I want to go.”

“And to make extra sure you aren’t planning to concoct something behind my back,” Vaughn went on, pivoting to put an arm around my waist and hook me to his side, “I suggest you text him, Ruthie. No need to make a scene.”

“This feels dangerously close to a kidnapping. For humanities research of all things,” I said icily, pushing at his arm.

“It’s for our careers,” Vaughn said easily, and his clammy hand stuck to my bare arm like a wet starfish. “And you’ll thank me for it eventually.”

He guided me toward the doors, but I resisted him. “I’m not going with you right this second. I’ll speak to Cal and inform him of what we’re doing first. Get off me, Vaughn.”

“Stop it,” he snapped. We stopped just in front of the doors, and he tightened a vice-like grip around me. Looking down with nothing but anger to be found in his expression, he hissed, “You’ve caused me enough trouble without adding a public breakup to the list. We’re flying out of here Wednesday, and you can send your apologies via email.”

I panicked. I wasn’t sure what I had expected from him, but it wasn’t to be trundled off in silence without telling Cal. Without explaining... something.

I didn't know what I would say to convince him that I wanted this, but I had to give him some justification. Cal and I both knew what it felt like to be abandoned, and it would hurt him deeply. It wasn't that I thought he was in love with me or in any way reliant on me, but Jesus. I'd slept with him and laughed with him and opened up to him. I'd bared my soul to him and he to me, and now I was going to walk away like he didn't matter to me?

Like my thoughts had reeled him in, footsteps echoed through the dark hallway, approaching the foyer. Cal rounded the corner. At first, he drew up short, his expression surprised and bouncing over me, Vaughn, and then his arm around my shoulders. Then confusion pulled his features inward, and he started toward us again. His vibrant eyes latched onto me with worried intensity. "Ruth?"

I stared at Cal in tight-lipped horror. I couldn't do this. I couldn't pretend that being in Vaughn's embrace, that being stuck to his side like an unwilling barnacle was anything I actually desired. What I desired was Cal. I wanted his kindness and buoyant personality. I wanted his teasing smiles and teaching kisses. I wanted all of him. I wanted it so much, I suddenly considered giving up everything—everyone—for the chance to stay in his presence for however long he would let me.

But then Vaughn held out a hand to Cal in greeting, effectively popping my bubble of panic. "Cal Reed? We were just talking about you. I'm Dr. Hormel."

Cal ignored his hand and kept his gaze trained on me. "What's going on?" The silky black of Cal's suit set off his bright green eyes, which were slowly darkening with anger as he turned them on Vaughn. "Get your hands off her."

I swallowed against a dry throat. "Cal."

Vaughn dropped his outstretched hand and gave me a convincingly wry, amused

look. “Oh dear. I thought you told him, love.”

He lied so smoothly. It shouldn't have surprised me, but it only made my insides twist tighter. They wrung themselves together like a wet knot of ribbons in a dryer. “I...” I couldn't find the words. Cal's expression was falling from cautious and angry to downright murderous, and my panic cinched tighter. “I—I couldn't tell you,” I admitted to Cal with some truth.

“You couldn't tell me what?” Cal asked. The line between his brows had deepened, and he flicked a cold glare at Vaughn before returning it to me. “You have three seconds to explain this before I remove his hand for you.”

“It's about her job,” Vaughn rushed to explain, like that should have been obvious. He dropped my shoulders, too, and held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “We have an assignment in Italy? Didn't you tell him about that at least, Ruth?”

Numbly I shook my head. I couldn't look Cal in the eyes. It was torture. Burning, shaming, gut-wrenching torture. “I couldn't tell him.”

“You...do have a job in Italy?” Cal clarified with a dubious tilt to his voice.

I nodded, staring at my high heels. “Always did,” I mumbled. “I just couldn't... I lied.”

“Ruth,” Cal said, and the sound whipped through the cavernous foyer with a sharp intensity that caused me to look up again. He reached for me, but I stumbled away, closer to Vaughn. And then my heart turned to lead because I couldn't believe I'd done that. I couldn't believe I'd avoided Cal and his warm hands, his safe hands, to get closer to Vaughn Hormel. But I had to get away from Cal. I couldn't take the fury and hurt. I couldn't stand to reject him the way I'd been rejected. I knew that was exactly what I was doing right now, but I wished more than anything that I could be



done with this moment and lock it in the basement of my nightmares where it would undoubtedly haunt me for the rest of my life.

“Hey, buddy,” Vaughn said, taking my limp hand in his and tugging me away from Cal. “Listen, I know what she told you, but it’s not what it looks like. Ruth is my girlfriend. And she gets a little... carried away when I’m gone. Ruth,” Vaughn muttered, like he was genuinely embarrassed. “This is your thing. Are you seriously not going to explain yourself?”

My twisting insides snapped like weathered bone. Girlfriend. I forced the tears in the corners of my eyes to hold at bay. “I’m so sorry, Cal. He’s right. I didn’t mean to hurt you, but...” I trailed off, hating myself with a deep kind of loathing that I knew would stain my soul.

“Excuse me?” Cal asked, clearly enraged and incredulous. “This makes no sense. Ruth, if you’re in some kind of situation—”

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Vaughn barked out a laugh. “Right. Let me guess; she was abandoned by her PI and boyfriend. Right? And she told you that I left her all alone and jobless.” Vaughn shook his head, looking up at the ceiling like he was praying to Saint Michael for patience. “You didn’t even change your story this time? Really? Did you not learn from this the last time?”

I wanted to die. I truly, ardently, wished I could cease to exist because this story Vaughn was so effortlessly spinning rang true. It was filled to the brim with half-truths and expertly twisted miscommunication. And it was the only—the easiest—way out of this without the possibility of Cal putting his hands around Vaughn’s neck and getting himself arrested. And the look of agony on my features didn’t need to be hidden. Because it fit either way.

I put a hand to my face. “Oh, God.”

“What are you saying?” Cal asked, and his tone cooled. His body language angled away from us.

Vaughn waited like I might explain. It gave him the illusion of deferring to me. Fuck, he was smart, and I loathed him for it. I hated him so much, I was sure it would seep from my pores and coat his clammy hand in poison. Finally, he sighed. “She does this when I’m on location for a few weeks. She gets lonely, and then she tells a sob story about being abandoned or whatever so she can reel in a new lover.” He chuckled mirthlessly. “And I’m the idiot who keeps coming back. Right?”

I wrenched myself away from his hand and slammed into the door behind me, swinging it open. “I’m sorry, Cal. I have to go.”

“Sorry, man,” Vaughn said with an apologetic wave. “Really, I am. If she and I didn’t work together... well, never mind. It is what it is. Sorry again.”

“Hold on,” Cal said angrily, and the warmth had returned to his voice. He took a step toward me, but I knew. I knew if I stayed, if I let him touch me or truly look into my eyes, he would see through me. And I couldn’t risk that. Not for him and not for Gemma. I hurried away, tripping into the lingering heat that clung to my skin and filled my lungs with thick moisture. The gray clouds overhead hung heavy with impending rain like an omen of emotions to come, and as tears blurred my vision, I stumbled down the stone staircase.

Vaughn caught up to me, and as he snared his arm around me again, he bent down to whisper in my ear. “Well done, Ruthie. Your doctor is safe, and so is your friend. Now let’s leave this all behind and start the rest of our lives together.”

The rain trickled down from the burdened sky, and I turned my face to it. Where my tears began and the rain ended, I couldn’t tell. It was all the same at that moment, and neither could wash away my burning regret.

## Chapter twenty-three

Cal

Cal

My ears rang like I’d been a foot away from a detonated flash bomb. I watched Ruth go, and then I watched another man pull her to his side, but I couldn’t make myself believe it. This had to be a mistake. I started after her, but Ruth refused to look at me. Head down, she hurried down the stairs and away from the event center with purposeful strides that her “boyfriend” matched.

That look of pain and regret on Ruth's face had been real. There was no denying that she felt horrible about being caught with Vaughn. And Vaughn had seemed so sure, so confident that Ruth had been playing games with me. But even with that evidence placed before me like a numerically sound report, I couldn't make sense of the results.

I stood in the doorway, hand on the heavy metal door and heart frozen in place, like it had forgotten how to beat at all. Ruth got into a car parked on the road in front of the center, and then they were gone. But still, I couldn't make myself move.

It wasn't until a burst of applause from the ballroom behind me punched through my consciousness that I snapped out of it. They were long gone, and there I stood, staring at the spot the sedan had been as the copper summer sunset fell into blue shadows. Blinking hard, I released the door and stepped away. It creaked shut, heavy and aged, and when it slammed closed, I pressed my palm against the cool metal-plated detailing on its surface. The bite of cold against my heated skin was the only thing that felt real.

That, and the name that echoed through the empty foyer. "For outstanding patient service, Dr. Laura Reynolds."

Applause thundered through the open doors, rolling over my shoulders and slamming my ears with a deafening roar. With confusion clouding my thoughts, I pushed away from the door and headed fast across the ornate flooring and back to the darkened ballroom where my colleague and friend would be making her way through the crowd to accept her award.

That was real.

I wasn't sure what else was.

When I entered the ballroom, it was just in time to see Laura climb the stairs to the stage and greet the presenters with a gentle smile. She accepted her award, and we all clapped again, but this time, it stuffed my ears like cotton balls. A faint buzzing rattled my thoughts.

She's gone. With him.

It doesn't make sense.

Laura shook the last of the Business Bureau members' hands and then made her way down the other side of the stage. I stood in the doorway of the long room, hidden in the shadows that fell between spotlights and phone screen glares as the attendees filmed the event.

"I didn't mean to hurt you, but..."

I shook my head. It couldn't be true. There had to be an explanation I was missing. But that vibrating anger and hurt had taken over my logical thoughts, and I couldn't seem to piece things together in a rational way.

I still had the scent of her wrapped around my senses. The feel of her hand in mine still burned against my palm. And yet, inconceivably, she was gone.

Laura was making her way back down the aisle between tables, her eyes bright even in the dimmed lighting, and a glass trophy between her hands. I forced myself forward.

I didn't know what was going on with Ruth, but I needed a minute to process everything. I knew that much. Because there was something I was missing, but I couldn't find it because I was drowning beneath years of neglect and abandonment, swallowing choking mouthfuls of self-doubt and trauma that filled my lungs. I tasted

boiled eggs on my tongue, and a surge of abandonment from the past took over my senses.

Left. Forgotten.

That isn't what this is. Snap out of it, Cal.

I reached our table where everyone was standing, hugging Laura and congratulating her. I joined the throng, pulling in heavy breaths and trying to muster my enthusiasm for Laura. I hugged her after she'd been attacked by Annie and Michael, and then she clung to her husband while he whispered congratulations in her ear. The applause died down and everyone readied themselves for the next award.

It was only when Annie gave me a confused glance that I realized I was still standing. Reeling. Fuck, I needed to pull myself together. Leaning down to Laura, making sure to keep my features neutral, I whispered, "Proud of you. You deserve it."

Laura gave me a breathless smile, but then it fell. "Cal?"

Annie and Michael heard her tone and turned sharp looks my way. Even in the low lighting, she'd noticed, then. Hell. I put a hand on her arm. "Something came up. I just need to step out. I'm so sorry."

"How can I help?" she whispered, and the lines between her eyebrows deepened in concern.

I shook my head. "It's nothing. Just bad timing." Understatement of your unlucky year, chump. "Don't wait up for me." I squeezed her arm and made sure she could see the sincerity that managed to surface from under the weight of my monsoon of confusion. "We're lucky to have you. Really."

“Cal,” she hissed, moving to get up. “What’s going on?”

I couldn’t answer her. I didn’t know, myself. I waved to Michael and Annie, and then I backed away, heading straight for the exits. I passed Rook on my way, and he seemed to be coming back from the bathroom, his eyes on his phone screen. He glanced up at me, and like a muted double-take, yanked his attention from his phone to me. I raised a hand in greeting but veered away from him. Of all the people in this room, Rook was the last I felt like dealing with at the moment.

As soon as I stepped out of the crowded space, fast-walking down the tomb-like hallways, I sucked in a desperate breath. Think, Reed. Stop panicking. Whatever your body is telling you this is, it’s wrong. This isn’t middle school. It’s not an empty house and parents who didn’t want you. This is Ruth. Glasses-nudging, lip-biting, smart-talking, quiet-humored Ruth. This is the woman who...

I paused, thinking. Come to think of it, had she said she cared for me? I combed through all our interactions. Ruth was shy, that I knew. She seemed so reluctant to trust, to believe that she was deserving of adoration. And I’d been thoroughly enjoying chipping away at her defenses, breaking her down so I could hold her closer and show her how much she truly deserved.

But what if I’d read her wrong? What if her reticence to admit feelings for me had stemmed from knowing that her heart belonged to another? God, could I really have been that oblivious?

“I feel safe with you.”

No. No way.

Still fast-walking down the halls and heading purposefully for the elevator, I slid my phone from my pocket.



Something was wrong, here. Ruth hadn't declared her undying love for me. She hadn't even admitted that she believed I really cared for her. She hadn't so much as acknowledged that our relationship was real... but I knew. My gut knew. My soul knew it better.

Ruth was my match. If she was gone, then something was wrong.

I pulled up our messages and tapped one out.

Cal:

Whatever is going on, I'm here for you. Trust me.

I didn't wait to see whether she'd responded or not. I rode the elevator to the parking garage. Then I fast-walked to my car, and without hesitation, pulled up her address in my GPS. They only had a half-hour head-start. There wasn't a chance in hell I was going to let Ruth bury herself in whatever fucked up mess this was.

Ruth was in trouble. I didn't know how or why—I couldn't reasonably conceive an explanation for why she would lie and let him lead her away. But as I drove out of Portland and back to Eugene, I had the time to really turn over our interactions in my mind like tarot cards that told a deeper story. I had time to remember the somber discussions we'd had about the aftermath of her hurt. I recalled the tangible hurt she carried around like a mantle, like a barrier that physically prevented her from trusting others.

There was like an eight percent chance I was delusional, but I'd take those odds. Ruth Coldwell had made me crazy since the moment I'd laid eyes on her, anyway. What else was new?

I checked my messages occasionally over the long drive, but she didn't respond. My

text to her sat unread. Frustrated, I focused on the GPS and the interminably long path it marked between her and me. As my icon inched its way south, I went through the positive self-talk mantras my mother had taught me to re-write the doubt and loathing that had formed at the core of who I had been after being abandoned.

They were stupid, really—childish, and in many ways, the equivalent of yelling “Abracadabra!” and expecting something magical to happen. But like conjuring a spell that had been born of positive outcomes and ruthless optimism, they seemed to help.

I am worthy.

I am enough.

I trust my instincts.

I can give love.

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I can receive love.

Five minutes out from Ruth's house, I added another one.

I can keep her safe.

I parked the car as close to her building as the full lot would allow, and without hesitation, without even turning off my car, I ate the distance with long strides on faded concrete sidewalks. I rounded the outdated apartment building, heading for her front door. I knocked hard and insistently.

Nothing.

Blowing out an irritated breath, I tried again. "Ruth!" I shouted.

Nothing.

I took out my phone and checked our messages, but mine to her sat unread still. I beat my fist against the metal exterior door. "Ruth!" I shouted again. Someone poked their head out of their door in concern. Ignoring them, but knowing I was crossing the bounds of decency, here, I pounded so hard, the door rattled. "Open the door, Ruth!"

Silence.

"I'm waking the neighbors, dammit, and I do not give a fuck. Open. The door."

Silence.

I lowered my fist, and my heart sank with it. I stared at the shut door, and as I had at the event center, I rested my palm against the cool surface. I expected it to open any moment. I expected Ruth to answer, pushing her glasses up her nose and explaining whatever logical reasoning she had for squeezing the life out of my heart.

But the door stayed shut.

## Chapter twenty-four

Ruth

Ruth

“Sign the contract, Ruth.” My eyes followed the tablet as it slid across the coffee table.

I lifted a glare to Vaughn. “I’m not signing that.”

He straightened away from the table, slipping his hands into his khaki shorts’ pockets. He had on an actual T-shirt today, horizontally striped and in shades of neon green and navy blue, and he stared down at me from under his rectangular glasses dispassionately. “I’m starting to think you want me to get you and Gemma fired. Looking for a reason to cut ties?”

“Fuck you,” I whispered, my voice thick with tears. I sat back against the too-stiff hotel sofa and folded my arms. “Do it, then.”

When Vaughn pulled his right hand out from his pocket, he had his sleek, black phone in his hand. He had never been one to use protective cases, so the metal exterior glinted brightly in the morning sunlight as he held it up to dial a number.

He's bluffing, I thought desperately. Don't fall for this, Ruth. You can still get out of this.

At first, I'd been gripped in despair and paralyzed by fears I couldn't fully name or recognize when Vaughn had taken me away. Something about the way Vaughn had spoken to me had tangled with my memories and pain, and in a daze, I had followed him. It had felt like the most logical choice at the time.

But then, he had taken my phone from me. He'd taken me to a hotel room, and with detached callousness, had kept me there all day, Sunday. He'd worked on his laptop, on his project—our project—occasionally trying to engage me in the data, in the research, in the amazing discoveries he had made in Italy.

I had watched TV and wondered what the hell I was doing. At least a dozen times, I had decided to get up and just walk out, but then Vaughn had said something, moved—reminded me that he was watching—and I had hesitated. It was staggering the way a man could turn his physical advantage against a woman into a silent threat.

But another sleepless night on the couch had brought some clarity.

There was no fucking way I was doing this. Our plane didn't leave until Wednesday. That meant two more days and two more nights with Vaughn. Alone. And then five years of interminable pain and longing in a country where I would have no one, no resources, no hope of anything but what Vaughn could offer me.

Vaughn pressed a button on his phone screen, and then the phone rang. I watched him with wide eyes. He wouldn't. He just wouldn't. Tactically, it didn't make any sense to release his leverage—at some point, he would realize that he couldn't force someone to work with him.

This is more than that, a small voice at the back of my mind whispered. It's not just

the job. You know this, Ruth. You know him. You know how he prevented you from meeting other people while you were together, even while he denied you the intimacy you craved. He likes the control, he likes the power, and you are weak. I gave myself a mental shake. I had been weak. But I wasn't now.

"Hello?" Gemma's voice asked.

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I sucked in a breath. My eyes flew to Vaughn's, and his thin lips pulled into a smirk. "Gemma, hi, it's Vaughn. I know it's been a while."

Silence permeated the room for a beat, and then Gemma snapped, "Where is she?"

"Who? Ruth?" Vaughn asked, patronizing her even as he confirmed her suspicions.

"I swear to God asshole, if you did anything to hurt her, I will find you and stuff an entire medieval tome up your Victorian-tight sphincter. And if you think I won't find you—"

"Gemma." Vaughn cut her off with a condescending chuckle. "Relax. I offered her a job. That's all. How's your job, by the way? I hear you've found significant success with it."

The sound of Vaughn's voice mingling with Gemma's, wrapping around hers with an insidious slither, made me physically ill. "Stop," I hissed.

"What kind of job?" Gemma asked sharply. "She's not going to work with you, tofu brain."

"Oh, I made her an offer she can't refuse," Vaughn said with a nasty glint in his eyes. "Ruth?"

Pain, stabbing and wrenching, filled my chest even as my shoulders deflated in defeat. He really was going to destroy everything Gemma had built for herself here. I hadn't called his bluff at all. He'd called mine. "Hey, Gem," I said loudly enough for

her to hear.

“Dude,” Gemma’s voice responded in outrage. “Are you fucking for real right now? You don’t show up to work today, and it’s because you’re with that short glass of prune juice? I thought you were with Cal.”

Vaughn hung up. No goodbye, no explanation. Just piercing, supercilious eyes behind thick glasses. “Are we clear, now? Sign the contract, Ruth.”

My heart thundered in my ears, but I held his gaze. Gemma wouldn’t want me to go through with this. Actually, she’d probably murder me before she let me waltz off with “prune juice,” as she’d called him. But Gemma also bought food for her Doberman with the last of her paycheck before buying herself food, so I knew better. It would ruin her life, and she would do it for me. I couldn’t let her.

Still, I couldn’t sign my life away without putting up a fight, either. I’d been stepped on my whole life—used and discarded, abandoned, and taken for granted. Vaughn himself had done much of that, and perhaps a month ago, I might have accepted this as my fate and resigned myself to the life I’d mourned before. I might have even seen the positives in it.

But that had been before Cal, and it had been before I’d invested in myself for once. Before I’d taken this crazy matchmaking job and discovered that my intelligence didn’t stop at a certain degree or type of research. It could expand and evolve.

My heart could, too.

“I’m an open door, and you can walk right in and get comfy, Shortstop.”

If Vaughn was an ironclad prison door determined to shut me up and trap me in my own insecurities, then Cal was the opposite. Cal was a glass door, thrown wide open



and inviting me into a world of light and air. And I'd shut it right back in his face.

I sat back on the couch and pushed the tablet back toward Vaughn with my toe, adjusting my glasses. "I'll sign that when you take me back to my apartment. I want details on where we're going, how long we'll be there, and what I'll need to pack."

Vaughn wasn't stupid. He wasn't going to let me go far, even on an invisible leash. He considered me with a quiet kind of venom that leached through my pores and straight to my aching heart. Finally, he said, "Alright. We have a few days. I'll take you back to pack. You can have an hour in the apartment to pack. We'll be in Denver for three months while I secure our funding and make arrangements for our research team in Florence. From there, it will depend on how our research at the University of Pisa goes." He held out his hands, bowing slightly in mockery. "Appeased?"

I wanted to kick him in the nuts. "Fine. I'll sign that," I said with a flick of my eyes to the tablet, "when I see proof of funding."

"Fair enough," he glared.

I had to get to Janice and tell her the truth about my forged resume before Vaughn did. That was the only way I could see my way out of this suffocating conundrum I'd found myself in. If I made my way to Janice and took the fall—the entirety of it—before Vaughn could hint that Gemma had been involved, then at the very least, I could take the power out of his threats.

But the more I stole glances at my door as I puttered around my apartment, the closer Vaughn loomed over me like a threatening shadow. I tried to ignore him, gathering clothing blindly and stuffing it into a blue duffel bag without really caring what I'd chosen. He watched every movement, his eyes tracking my hands and his arms folded. I felt every slide of his eyes over my body like an oil-slick caress, and I suppressed a shiver several times. The longer this went on, the more insidious it felt.

Fight back, that braver voice inside of me whispered urgently. This is wrong. This is bad. Fight back.

As he followed me to the bathroom where I intended to grab toiletries, I whirled suddenly to face him in my narrow hallway. Although it was noon, and the sun should have permeated the space, the hallway always managed to be indefinitely dark and quiet with no access to windows. Shadows swathed Vaughn's gaze, and he pulled up short.

I dropped my bag onto the floor. "Why are you doing this? You can't be this desperate for a research assistant."

"I'm not," he said quietly. His voice lowered, and its edge nicked my intuition like a paring knife.

I'd suspected as much, but hearing it injected my veins with ice water. "Then, why?"

Vaughn unfolded his arms, dropping them with a shrug. "What's that they say about absence? Makes the heart grow fonder, right?"

"You were never fond of me," I shot back, my voice just above a whisper. "You enjoyed owning me."

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“You’re easy to own,” he replied easily, maliciously.

That dread that had been swirling around inside of me endlessly, suddenly settled into a razor-sharp panic. “Vaughn, I don’t know what happened in Italy, but whatever this is—”

“Don’t try to psychoanalyze me,” he snapped. His hand shot out to grab my upper arm in an iron grip. He dragged me away from the bathroom doorway and down the hall. “I just realized things were simpler with you, Ruth. If I wanted something, I got it. If I asked, you did it. A point you’re going well out of your way to prove wrong.”

He wanted easy? I laughed, letting it bubble out and skitter around the room as he dragged me to the front door. “You want me because I’m a doormat?”

Vaughn paused, pulling me close and shaking me roughly. “You think you’re worth more than a doormat, Coldwell? Look me in the eyes and tell me I’m wrong.”

The manic smile on my lips died. I swallowed a sudden rush of tears, staring up into his doughy soft, unforgiving features. I couldn’t make my mouth move.

Vaughn scoffed, wrenching open the front door. “That’s what I thought. Get in the car.”

I stumbled away from him, pressing a hand to my glasses to keep them from sliding down my nose. But I righted my inner equilibrium faster this time. A comment like that would have thrown me off my axis for days, before. Not now. I saw his words for what they were, and I wasn’t going to let him use them like a cattle prod to force me

into obedience.

But even knowing why he had said those things, I was adrift in my fear, unsure of how I would pull myself back to shore and safety. As I walked numbly to Vaughn's rented sedan, he circled my arm in a firm grip that even I knew wouldn't look normal from an objective perspective. But I doubted anyone would say anything or do anything. Did they ever? Had they when I'd collapsed outside Vaughn's door and wept for hours?

And then I was in the car again, we were pulling away from the parking lot, and I realized that I had been so consumed by my own thoughts, I'd forgotten my bag. I glanced at Vaughn, but his eyes were on his GPS as he followed it to our hotel.

Two days. I had two days to find a way to escape. There had to be a rational way, a methodical way. There was always something. Short of completely losing my cool, short of breaking free of rational decision-making and going batshit crazy, there had to be something that made sense.

Vaughn made a left turn, heading down the main historical district street. In the passenger seat, I leaned my forehead against the window, watching the full trees pass by, and my eyes danced over the thin foot traffic that dotted the brick sidewalks. My eyes latched onto Goldbrook Urgent Care, and my stomach twisted so painfully, I brought my arms around it. Would Cal be in there now? Was he upset? Or angry? Had I hurt him, or had he already forgotten me and added me to the deck of cards that made up his stack of past dates? Maybe he'd been relieved to have gotten rid of me.

Bullshit, that courageous voice argued. You're supposed to be smart. Be smart. He isn't relieved. He was gutted. You saw him. He told you how he felt, and you threw it in his face. Be brave; accept that you are worthy of love.

Traffic lurched forward and we moved from the red light down the street where I

knew we would pass Kiss-Met's building. I almost closed my eyes. I almost let myself shield myself from the hurt, but I couldn't. Gemma was there. The life I'd barely begun to build was there. Cal was ther—

I did a double take. That had to be wrong.

But no, I hadn't been seeing things. There, just outside the charming historical building, was a familiar tall figure in a gray dress shirt, his hands in his charcoal pants, and his copper-brown hair gleaming from a shaft of sunlight that broke through the maple tree leaves. He stared across the street, eyes on nothing in particular, and his mouth turned down in a heartbreaking line.

The image shattered through my doubts. It smashed them to pieces and left them in meaningless shards at my feet. That glass dome of insecurity that had muffled the braver voice, the smarter voice, suddenly fell in a tinkling rain through my thoughts, and it left only one thing.

That voice.

My voice.

Go. Run. Run. Run, Ruth.

The thing about rationality was that it had limits. There were laws and rules, that if broken, led to messy results. It was this fact that had drawn me to science in the first place—there was nothing so messy as disorganized decision-making, but in science, there are systems. Methods. Equations. When solving a problem, all I had to do was choose the most logical course of action, follow through, and achieve the desired results.

But love? Nothing could be less logical. It doesn't have bounds or constraints that

rope actions into predictable outcomes. Love is wild and capricious. It's a riot of color and spontaneity, and it follows no preset coordination to its destination. Love isn't a science. Love is art.

That realization alone turned the voice in my head into a full-out roar. As the car passed that figure, that one body who housed all my hopes for something more, my hand took hold of the door handle. I popped it open, and the wind whistled through the open crack.

Vaughn turned to look at me in surprise. "What are you—?"

The car slowed, but he didn't stop. I didn't care. I unbuckled my seatbelt and gave him one unyielding, determined look. I didn't need words to convey my message.

Fuck. You.

Then I jumped.

Chapter twenty-five

Cal

Cal

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:54 pm*

It wasn't stalking if I was worried about her, right?

You are one-hundred-percent stalking, my inner voice replied wryly. I ignored it, coming to a stop outside Ruth's door again. I'd come here three times yesterday, and although there had been several people milling around outside the apartment complex, none of them had seen Ruth or a person fitting Vaughn's description. I had knocked on her front door, her back door, and her windows, like an absolute creeper, but not so much as a shadow had shifted.

As I stood in front of her faded, scuffed-up front door again, I took a look around the building. It was fairly uninteresting as far as apartment buildings went, and it featured four units in cube-like configurations and continued down the property in long and short layouts. With her unit being on the ground floor, it was easy enough to, well... snoop. But even today, I saw no movement.

I checked my watch. Ten in the morning. It was late enough in the morning for pounding, so that's what I did. I pounded my fist on the door so loud, there was no way she would have missed it. "Ruth!" I shouted.

Nothing.

"Shit," I hissed, stepping away. She hadn't gone somewhere with him permanently, had she? I would throttle her. I would absolutely, unabashedly, wring her gorgeous neck if I found out she'd gone somewhere with that piece of shit and left herself with no resources. "She wouldn't," I muttered to myself, peering up at the white siding and then back down again. "Come on, Ruth. You're smarter than that."

Reluctantly, I left the apartment complex. I had patients to see, but I couldn't seem to keep my thoughts grounded where they belonged. It was like being on Mars where there was a third less gravity, and my thoughts bounced too high and too far from rationality before managing to touch down again.

I managed to keep my head on Earth while I helped a patient with MS and adjusted his prescription, and my thoughts wandered just a little when the older couple I was visiting went on a little too long about which arthritis creams they had tried and liked—they squabbled over the specific names of them, and ultimately didn't end up naming any brand names I'd ever heard of anyway—and by lunch, I knew my agitation was taking over.

I checked my phone again as I parked outside the practice. Ruth still hadn't even opened my message. I was starting to feel a little desperate and more than a bit unrealistically panicked. It wasn't something I could take to the authorities—not if I wanted to remain even remotely respected by the community for my sound judgment. But something was so very wrong. I knew it. Deep in my being and right on the surface of my tongue where it tingled and tempted me to uselessly shout her name until I found her again, I knew it.

A cool wind shushed through the trees, slipping over my skin and drying the thin layer of perspiration that seemed to be ever-present on my body this time of year. I glanced up, watching with detached interest as the breeze picked up, rippling over verdant trees and filling the quiet street with a soothing susurrus that brought with it the promise of autumn. My eyes followed the wave in the leaves, traveling down the row of trees and to the crosswalk that separated our row of buildings from Ruth's.

My eyes landed on the shaded walkway across the street. Ruth wouldn't be at Kiss-Met, would she? No, that was too easy.

But Gemma.



I mentally face-palmed. Gemma. I'd been operating in a hazy, confused panic, but of course, Gemma would have a better idea of what Ruth was doing. I hadn't thought to ask her because I didn't have her number, but it was Monday. She'd be at work. Was it a little obsessive, a little manic to show up at my fake girlfriend's best friend's place of employment to ask if she knew anything about the fake girlfriend running away with another fake boyfriend?

Yeah. That was weird as hell.

But was I doing it? Abso-fucking-lutely, I was. I jogged across the distance, looking left and right quickly to make sure I didn't get my dumb ass ran over in the process, and in minutes, found myself in front of the historic office building smashed between an old-school barber and a gift shop. Wintry, air-conditioned air sighed over my shoulders as I entered, and I hooked right, past the sign with the businesses and their floor numbers, and to the elevator. When it opened, I found Rook standing there, looking down at his phone as usual.

He glanced up, swung a look from my face to my shoes, and back to my sweat-beaded face. "Reed. You look... unhinged."

"Thank you," I panted, coming to stand next to him and punching the third-floor button.

Rook gave me a wary eyebrow crinkle. "What screw came loose and who's wielding the screwdriver? You looked like this Saturday night, too."

"Kind of you to notice," I bit out impatiently.

The doors began to close, but Rook shot out an arm and stopped them. "I have concerns."

“Rook.” I rolled my eyes. “Not now. I also have concerns, but I’m in a hurry.”

“Does this have something to do with that girl from the other night?” he asked. The doors tried to close again, but Rook kept his arm braced, and it didn’t so much as budge.

My brow furrowed, mirroring his expression. “You mean Ruth?”

“That was Ruth?” he asked, looking confused.

“She was my date on Saturday. Why are you asking?”

“I saw her Saturday night talking to another man in the foyer outside the ballroom,” Rook said evenly, like he was delivering the results of a basic metabolic panel. “Is that what this is about?”

“Yes,” I replied slowly. I reached out my arm to hold the other side of the open elevator doors, my focus fully on Rook now. “What did you see?”

“They didn’t look happy.” He looked away in thought like he was trying to remember the finer details. “I caught a few words. Do you have any idea why they might be talking about a friend’s resume?”

The line between my eyebrows deepened. “Not off the top of my head. But you said they looked unhappy?”

“She told him to leave,” Rook said matter-of-factly. “And he said he would burn all her bridges. Frankly, he seemed like a total asshole, and I thought about stepping in.”

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“And you didn’t, because?” I demanded. This was why I could not stand this pretentious asshole. Who witnessed a man making threatening statements to a woman and just walked by like nothing had happened?

“They looked like a couple, and I don’t do relationship shit,” he droned in response. In typical Rook fashion, he looked incredibly bored by this conversation as a whole.

“Wow.”

He shrugged, removing his arm from the doors. “I wasn’t going to say anything to you either, but you seem all,” he gestured to me wordlessly, “this. So, I figured I’d relay it.”

“I’ll nominate you for the Presidential Medal of Freedom,” I drawled, doing the same and stepping back. “Anything else to add?”

He shrugged again before taking a few steps into the building foyer. “Good luck.” He paused, glancing over his shoulder. “For what it’s worth, I hope she’s not with him.”

A fat lot of good that did either of us. “And I hope you get mired in relationship shit, Rook,” I growled as the doors closed. “I hope you fucking drown in it.” The seam between the doors sealed, shutting out his mildly amused expression before the elevator started up. “Asshole,” I seethed. But his words started a mechanical kind of grinding in my mind, sparking ideas about what Ruth might be doing. If it had something to do with a friend’s job, then...

No. He couldn’t be that brazen.

When I reached the main entrance of Kiss-Met, I didn't pause for chit-chat. "Gemma?" I asked Olivia.

She pointed down the hall to the left in the direction of Ruth's office. "She's with Janice at the moment. Could I get you anything while you wait?"

"No need." I gave her a wave before heading straight for where I remembered Janice's office to be. The hallways here were busier than usual, and I passed three harried-looking employees, one of whom was on the phone, and the other two who were in deep conversation. There was a whole vibe here, and it was not a good one.

When I reached Janice's office, I found Gemma inside, just as Olivia had indicated. Gemma's thick, blond hair had been bunched into an untidy bun on her head, and she looked, in a word, frazzled. She had the hem of her loose, peach-colored blouse in her hands, fiddling with it, folding the fabric into a pleated fan before pulling it apart and starting all over again.

Janice stood calmly in front of an enormous panel of glass that overlooked the city, her gray-streaked brows furrowed and her features solemn. Despite that, she looked like a fucking dandelion in a bright yellow dress and accompanying sunshine-tinted shawl around her shoulders.

"... everywhere in town, and I'm telling you she's not—" Gemma stopped talking as soon as she spotted me. Her back straightened, and she gave me a distrustful glower.

Janice angled away from the window to face me. "Dr. Reed. I wondered if that was you on the way."

That was a weird way of saying "hello," but alright. "Sorry to interrupt, but I was hoping to talk to Gemma."

Gemma rounded on me. “Did you have something to do with this?” Gemma might as well have sprouted a pair of eight-foot wings and belched brimstone as she marched toward me with a draconic glare in her blue eyes.

I backed up half a step. “Whoa, shit, hang on.”

“Gemma,” Janice cautioned. “I must ask you again to calm down. I’m sure he is here for the same reasons you are.”

Gemma blew an angry breath from her nose, and I halfexpected to see an arrow-tipped tail lash out from behind her. She looked mad as hell, but I had a feeling I knew why. “She was with you, and now she’s withhim.What did you say to her?”

That little niggle of worry grew sharper. “You know that Ruth is with Vaughn?”

“And how doyouknow that?”Gemma snarled.

“She ditched me at the award ceremony,” I explained slowly. “I thought she might have told you what’s going on.”

“Hm,” Janice turned to look out the window again. “Interesting.”

Gemma wilted. “She didn’t tell me anything. She just disappeared. Then I got a call from her ex this morning.” She resumed the odd ritual of folding the hem of her shirt into a fan-like pattern. “He said he’d offered her a job, and that she’d actually taken it.” Gemma’s cartoonishly large eyes lifted from her shirt to my worried expression. “She would never do that. He was horrible to her.”

“I know,” I replied softly.

“And he said he would burn all her bridges.”

The gears in my brain slowed, winding down with a pneumatic hiss. Then they changed direction and went backward. Maybe he was that brazen. “I know she wouldn’t go with him. Not willingly... Unless he had threatened her with something. What else did he say on the phone?”

“She was there with him,” Gemma scowled. “But I barely even heard her voice. He asked about my job, which was really fucking weird, and then he said he’d made her an offer she couldn’t refuse. Like a mafia boss or something.”

Typical. Anyone with enough gall to kidnap a woman using blackmail likely would feel obnoxiously smug with themselves. Or paranoid. Hopefully for me, a little of both. “He’s blackmailing her.”

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Gemma's dusty blond eyebrows shot up to her messy hairline. "With what?"

Janice nodded. "Oh dear. I believe I know what comes next."

I gave her a pointed stare. "Do you? She told me some of it, but she was under the impression that you didn't know."

"Oh yes." Janice smiled, deepening the lines around her eyes and mouth. How old was she, anyway? Her body looked soft and frail, but she had an odd kind of youthfulness in her voice that threw me off. "You're about to tell me that he's holding Gemma's job over Ruth's head."

Did this woman know everything? "Rook said he overheard them talking about a friend's resume Saturday night," I confirmed with a nod. "And I think it has something to do with Gemma's job and the lie she told to get Ruth hers."

Gemma gasped, bringing her hand to her mouth. "Oh." Realization dawned, and she pivoted a dismayed look toward Janice. "Oh."

Janice nodded. "Gemma's job, but Ruth's resume. Quite a brave infraction to insinuate that your friend's doctorate is in human relations, nothumanities." Janice lifted one brow with a gleam in her dark eyes. "Something a batty old lady could chalk up to a typo, nevertheless."

"Oh no," Gemma moaned. She took a step toward Janice. "I'm so sorry. That was me—all me. Ruth didn't know about it. I was worried you wouldn't give her the job, so I maybe... fudged some of the details on her application. And we should have told

you, I know that, but Ruth needed a job so badly, and I just knew she would be clever enough to figure this out even without the ‘right’ degree. I mean, she’s not me, but like, she’s the smartest person on the planet, and if anyone could go from carbon dating dusty old monk paper to pairing people together, I guess I figured it would be—”

“Gemma,” Janice puffed out a laugh.

Gemma hadn’t breathed once during her tirade, and she sucked in a lungful of air. “God, I’m so sorry. It was horrible. Inexcusable. I really wouldn’t blame you if you fired me.”

Janice held up a weathered hand, and the bangles around her wrists jingled. “Miss Daise, while I appreciate your, erm, ardent apology, it’s not necessary. I knew very well when I hired Ruth what her degree was in and what she was capable of.” Her eyes held an amused twinkle that sharpened in a way I’d never seen before. “I believe my intuition was right about her after all.”

“Wait, so you knew,” Gemma summarized, squinting her eyes, “and you didn’t fire either of us. Also... Ruth’s ex is blackmailing her into working with him? And he’s using this useless information to do it?”

“That would be my guess,” I said.

“Oh, I’m going to kill her.” Gemma’s mouth tightened into an angry line I was pretty sure I’d seen my old man use when he had spanked me as a kid. “She’s so dead. She let herself get fucking kidnapped to protect my job?” She bobbed a fast look to Janice. “Not that my job isn’t... hyper-important.”

Janice waved that away. “Understood.” Her eyes strayed to the window, and she turned to face it again, bringing her hands together. “What brought you here, Callum?”



A thought? A song? An image that passed you by?”

“Uh, what?” I checked my phone restlessly, like Ruth might magically pop up with a text telling me she was back home and fully rational again. “I just figured Gemma would know where Ruth was.”

“Yes, but how did you think to come here?” Janice insisted quietly.

The wind. But don’t say that, it’s stupid. “Uh,” I cleared my throat, looking up again. Don’t. Just because her office looks like a fortune teller’s tent— “It was the wind.”

Janice nodded thoughtfully. “Not all science is rooted in the empirical. Metaphysical energy is not yet quantifiable or measurable, but as with all scientific discoveries, that does not mean it lacks substance.”

I stared at her, blinking. Slowly, I said, “Right.”

Janice gave me a humor-filled glance over her shoulder. “Aeromancy goes back thousands of years. The divination of wind patterns often changes from viewer to viewer, but I have a strong inkling that if you were to leave this building right now, Ruth would appear before you.”

“Wow,” Gemma breathed, her blue eyes pulled open wide. “You actually do tell fortunes.”

“I notice the little intricacies of life,” Janice replied evenly. “There is nothing fortunetelling about it.”

I wasn’t sure what “intricacy” was leading Janice to believe that Ruth would suddenly appear out of thin air, but what I knew for sure was that Ruth was with a

dangerous manipulator that planned to do God only knew what with her, and if I didn't find her soon, I was going to give myself a coronary. "As interesting as that... could be," I hedged, trying not to outright dismiss the older woman, "I would like to examine where Vaughn would go with her."

"Denver," Gemma said immediately. "That's where they were when he left last time, and that's where he'll need to—" she waved her hand around. "Whatever they do for research teams. Then it would be Italy after that. That is what he said on the phone was true."

Denver was a big city, but I pulled up the browser on my phone and typed in research facilities and humanities programs to see what it would pull up. "Thanks, Gemma. Try calling that number again and see if he answers. Maybe we can get through to them that way."

"On it," she nodded.

I started to leave, but I paused, catching Janice's warm gaze. Her lips were turned up at the corners faintly, her body relaxed, but her expression pierced right through me. "Take time to breathe, Cal. You'll find her."

A peculiar tingle crackled in my chest, and I rubbed it absently, nodding. "Sure."

Gemma had the phone to her ear, but I didn't wait for her. As I fast-walked away, I pulled up the humanities division of UC Denver, and then sifted through non-profit organizations I thought could be connected. While I rode the elevator back down to the entrance, I looked up flights from here to Denver. The thought of Ruth silently suffering with a predatory person pulling her strings sent a wave of fury through me, sizzling the edges of my thoughts and fueling my fast pace out of the building.

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It didn't surprise me that Ruth would put her own happiness in jeopardy for her friend. It wasn't even life or death, necessarily, but she wouldn't, for one second, put her friend in a precarious position for her own comfort. It was so very Ruth, it physically pained me to think about it.

As I pushed through the thick glass doors, muggy heat enveloped me in a rush that stole my breath. Had it been this hot before? Sucking in the humid air, I paused to open a tab in my browser with airline ticket offers. Maybe they hadn't left yet, and I could head them off. How long would they be in Denver before leaving for Italy?

A cool breeze sifted through my hair, caressing my heated skin. My fingers stalled on my screen, and I closed my eyes in relief as the autumn-tinted wind swept over me. Taking Janice's unsettlingly esoteric advice, I let my hand fall to my side, lifted my chin, and filled my lungs with air from the breeze. It cooled my panic, swirling around the charred dread inside, and then I pushed it out with a slow exhale. I let my hands slide into my pockets as I stared ahead, unseeing.

"It'll be fine," I said to myself. It would. It had to be.

Cars slowed down on the two-lane street, passing by historic buildings and rows of bushy trees before coming to a stop at a red light. The wind shifted, tugging at my shoulders, and with a sigh of forced calm, I let my feet wander to the curb. If only what Janice had said held any granule of truth. Maybe if I stood here, the wind would drop Ruth into my arms, well and whole.

And then I could shake some fucking sense into her.

Or kiss her until she couldn't breathe.

God help her—if I got my hands back on that little nerd, I wasn't letting go again. I didn't care how hypocritical that made me after she'd essentially been stolen by someone else. She was mine, and there was no chance in hell I would let her forget it.

In the right edge of my peripheral vision, the light at the intersection turned green, and traffic trundled forward. I watched it mindlessly, my thoughts suddenly sluggish and my senses caught up in the feel of the soothing breeze against my fevered skin.

Suddenly, one of the cars slowed down dramatically. A silver sedan that pinged in my memories swerved sharply to the right, its brake lights flashing as the passenger-side door flew open. Time slowed to a surreal blur of panicked realization when a woman's profile came into view. Thick glasses, unruly, curly hair, and a determined set to her brow registered rapid-fire in my brain.

Ruth.

Then she jumped, and my heart stopped.

Chapter twenty-six

Ruth

Ruth

Faded asphalt loomed large in a spinning whirl before my body made impact. Pain erupted up my knees first, and then as I was propelled into a roll, my skin lit on fire. It happened so fast, I barely had time to fully register what I'd done. But then I came to a heavy stop in the middle of the street, and the sound of screeching tires and blaring horns filled my senses.

I jumped out of the car, I thought dimly with shock. Pain blossomed from my right knee to my ankle, and my elbows and arms burned. I jumped out of the car. Wait, shit, I jumped into the middle of the road. I'd lost my glasses in the jump, but I didn't have time to worry about that. I forced myself up and swung a panic-stricken look around me.

I'd aimed for the side of the street, and thankfully, it seemed that my momentum had rolled me far enough that my body had hit the tire of a parked car. That would explain why my shoulder and hip felt bruised. Several cars on the road had stopped behind Vaughn's, and he had made a hard right turn before stopping only feet from me.

Run, my brain ordered. Get up. Run. Get to Kiss-Met. I struggled to my feet, ignoring the slicing pain in my knee, and staggered hard against the dark blue minivan I'd rolled into. Pounding feet sounded behind me, and my heart leaped into my throat. I lurched forward. Vaughn wouldn't be crazy enough to shove me back into the car, would he? Not with witnesses. There were people here...

There was Cal. Cal was here. I turned around, intending to find him. But he was already there. Like my wishes had conjured him from thin air, he came into focus. And he was so close, I could see him clearly—dark copper hair windblown and disheveled, handsome features scowling in worry, and gray button-down wrinkled like he'd forgotten to iron it this morning. I took all of him in, and then his arms were around me. A burst of coconut and sunscreen filled my senses, and I melted into him without hesitation. "Cal."

"Ruth, my God." His arms tightened around me, pressing against cuts along my ribs and what I could only assume was road rash along my right side. I sucked in a pained breath, but my name slicing through the air distracted me from my physical wounds.

"Ruth!" Vaughn's voice called for me, closer than I wanted. I stiffened, only adding to the pain radiating from half a dozen places along my right side.

Either Cal hadn't heard him, or he was ignoring him, because he lowered me to the ground, forcing me to lie back down on the pavement. "On your back, sweetheart." His voice was shaking. Why was his voice shaking?

"Cal, no." I gripped his shirt, my eyes skating over the slightly blurry vision of his determined features. "Vaughn is—"

"I'm aware," Cal snapped.

Oh. He's angry. I did ditch him... twice. Christ, of course he's mad at you, you idiot. And you just dramatically jumped out of a car to get to him. "I just need to talk to Janice," I forced out fast, even as Cal made sure I lay on my back and braced my head firmly between his hands.

"You need to lie right here and not move," Cal countered tightly.

"Ruth!" Vaughn panted, catching up with us finally and slamming his hand against the side of the blue minivan. I jumped, but Cal's hands tightened around my head, keeping me still. Vaughn growled, "What the fuck were you thinking?"

Cal glared up at Vaughn from where he knelt beside me. "Take ten steps back. Now."

"Ruthie," Vaughn forged on. But I heard the indecision in his voice.

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A small crowd had gathered around us, and Cal turned to a person behind me I couldn't see. "I need you to call 911. Ask for an ambulance and law enforcement."

The person complied, and I heard them talking to the dispatcher only seconds later.

"Law enforcement?" I repeated with wide eyes.

Vaughn's feet crunched back a few steps, but I couldn't see him with Cal holding my head straight. Cal glanced at Vaughn again. Never had I seen such potent rage on Cal's features before. It pulled his lips together tightly and slashed his brows into an unforgiving line. "You're lucky my hands are busy. There's probably no use in telling you not to run, but blackmail is a criminal offense." A hard glint sharpened his glower. "Either they'll catch you or I will."

Vaughn's feet turned and scuffed, retreating without another word. I heard the slam of a car door, and then the rev of an engine. All the while, I stared at Cal in undisguised confusion. "What—?"

Bright green eyes simmering with rage fell back to me. I almost flinched, but Cal had me in such a vice grip, I couldn't even if I wanted to. "Do not. Move," he repeated tersely.

I drew in a breath, wincing at the stab of pain it caused along my right side. "Why?"

"You jumped from a car," Cal replied, his tone full of censure and incredulity. "You could have damaged... everything. Jesus, Ruth."

His words scraped over my body like a pain highlighter. My knee throbbed, and the burning sensation along my right arm and side felt like a branding iron to my skin. I held his furious gaze and felt my eyebrows tip up. "Ow."

Cal huffed, his shoulders sagging and his head falling a fraction. "You scared me shitless, Ruth Coldwell. If I wasn't immobilizing your spine right now, I'd shake you."

"Is that what you're doing?" I bounded a look between his arms. "It's kind of hurting me."

"Don't care," he replied immediately. "You can't just jump from moving vehicles. It's completely irrational."

A small smile pricked at the corners of my mouth. "Yeah. It is."

His sober expression wiped away my hesitant smile. His eyes searched mine, and then down my body, like he was looking for mortal wounds, before returning to my round-eyed stare. "I would have found you," he said softly. His thumbs brushed my cheeks with a gentle caress. "No matter what, I would have found you. You didn't need to risk your safety."

"Found me?" I repeated. The phrase looped on repeat in my head. Found me. If he would have found me, then had he been looking for me?

Like he'd heard my thoughts, Cal sighed. "I would have found you because you are mine, Ruth. I'm sorry I let what you said on Saturday make me hesitate even for a second. I know you better than that, and I should have seen the situation for what it was."

I gaped at him. "What are you saying? You should be furious with me."



“I am,” he confirmed, but the gentle curve to his lips softened the statement. “But not because you got all heroic and left with that dickface on Saturday. I’m angry because you didn’t trust the people who love you.”

“Who?” I asked incredulously.

“Me, Shortstop. I love you.”

Maybe I did have a head injury. I could have sworn I’d just heard Callum Reed confess that he loved me, but that couldn’t be right. “You,” I repeated dumbly.

The bloop, bloop of an ambulance siren cut through my stupor, and Cal looked up just as red and blue lights washed over his skin. He glanced back down to me. “As much as I want to double down on that right now, you’re about to have some insistent company.”

It dawned on me then that he wanted me to get in the ambulance. “Hang on,” I protested, starting to get up.

Cal held me steady, his features falling into irritation. “Do that again and I’ll make sure they hold you overnight for being obstinate.”

“Can you do that?” I asked dubiously.

As the clatter of the ambulance doors sounded behind me, Cal gave me a darkly amused look. “You want to test it out?”

Not with that look on his face, I didn’t. The sound of a stretcher clattering over asphalt sounded, and then the EMS personnel were there. As they peppered Cal and me with questions, I floated in a calm ocean of disbelief.

I love you.

Part of me wanted to ask him to say it again, to make sure I had heard him right. But the larger, thankfully rational, part of my brain didn't need him to. Because for once, my head and myheart were in sync. It wasn't just that I knew I loved him, and that buoyed my sense of realism. It was that I knew for a surety that he did love me.

He'd told me.

He'd showed me.

In every kind gesture, in every moment he'd remembered something small about me, in every reassuring touch, Cal had been telling me the same story with only one ending. He loved me. Maybe that was why I'd made the choice that seemed irrational in the moment, because in truth, it had been the only reasonable option. To make my way to him. To do whatever it took to show him that I trusted him.

Being loved was logical.

As the paramedics loaded me onto a stretcher, securing my neck in a brace on the off chance I had damaged my spine from my bounce across the road, I kept my eyes on Cal. I watched quietly as he spoke with intelligent confidence about the injuries he'd assessed at a glance. I watched as he worked with the EMS personnel and kept a professional distance from what they needed to do. And despite the ignominy of being carted off in a stretcher for launching myself from a moving car, I couldn't make myself feel anything but relieved. Even when Gemma showed up and nearly ripped everyone's heads off with her teeth, I floated in a surreal state of tranquility. Because despite the chaos, I'd found solid ground.

No equation could settle more beautifully than the conclusion I'd come to. Closing my eyes briefly, I relished that thought.

"What hurts?" Cal asked as he stepped up into the ambulance with me.

Although the stretcher jostled as they clicked it into place, I lifted one corner of my mouth into a smile and held his gaze. "Nothing," I said honestly. "Really, I'm..." I

hesitated, hardly believing my own words. “I’m good.”

Cal’s features tilted in disbelief. “We’ll get you checked out and back home in no time. You’re safe.”

My smile widened. He didn’t have to say it because I already knew it.

Because I was with him.

Chapter twenty-seven

Cal

Cal

Iran my thumb over the indented scratches on Ruth’s glasses, flinching when the jagged glass bit into my skin. She would need a new pair, so I wasn’t sure why I was hanging onto these. I couldn’t seem to let them go. I glanced up from where I sat beside her hospital bed, eying one of the local police officers interviewing her.

There were six of us in the small hospital room, with Gemma and Rook standing by the sliding glass doors, two officers standing in front of Ruth, and me in a chair on the other side of the wide bed. The accelerated rhythm of Ruth’s heartbeat filled the otherwise silent room before one of the officers looked up from a tablet to address a clearly nervous Ruth.

He had a blocky, frowning face and he tapped a finger against his tablet while his partner jotted down notes on an identical device. “When you say Mr. Hormel detained you, was this with physical force?” They’d already inundated her with questions for over an hour now, and I could tell it was draining her.

Ruth hesitated, her wide eyes bouncing between the two officers. I'd gone back to her house to get her contacts for her, so I knew she could see them clearly even without her glasses. But she still looked confused. "I'm sorry, but I did say he blackmailed me."

"Yes, but did he detain you?" the bulky officer asked.

His shorter, older partner gave him a side-eye. "What Officer Taft means is, did he restrain you with his hands, handcuffs, rope—anything like that?"

Ruth looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Oh, no. Nothing like that."

"Not true," Rook added smoothly. With his bulky arms folded across his chest and his shoulder leaning against the wall casually, he looked more like he was waiting in line at a fucking deli instead of acting as a witness to a crime. "I saw him grab her."

Simmering anger in my chest ignited into an inferno. "And you let him?"

Rook blinked back with icy blue eyes. "It looked like a marital spat. Not my business."

Gemma rounded a furious glare his way. "How about I shove your head up your ass? Will it be your business then?"

Rook angled an amused look down, down, down to the much shorter woman. "Easy, chihuahua."

"Chihu—" Gemma started to splutter.

The taller officer cleared his throat. "Thank you, Dr. Rook. Miss Coldwell—"

“Dr. Coldwell,” Ruth and I corrected in tandem.

The officer sighed, his patience apparently beginning to thin. “Dr.Coldwell. Apologies. Can you confirm what Dr. Rook has just indicated?”

Ruth nodded uneasily. “He did grab me a few times.”

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My fingers tightened around her broken glasses so tightly, I heard the lens crack. The shorter officer gave me a knowing look before addressing Ruth. “And did he physically harm you during these instances?”

Ruth seemed to consider that. I loved watching her think—I could practically hear the delicate, mechanical whir of it. “I don’t believe he did. More than actual physical violence, I felt intimidated by the possibility of it.”

The shorter, older man with a head of silver hair nodded and made another note. “Understood.”

“I believe we have everything we need from you, Dr. Coldwell. We will be in touch if we need clarification. Remember to email us those text records when you’re feeling up to it. Is there anything else you’d like to add?”

Ruth physically shrunk away from that. “No, I’m good.”

Once the officers had exited through the heavy, extra-wide hospital room door, Rook straightened away from the wall. “If that’s all you need from me, I’ll be going.”

Gemma’s ears had gone bright pink, and I was surprised steam didn’t jet out from them. “That is not all. You work in the same building as her.” Gemma threw out her hand, gesturing at Ruth. “And you just walked by some asshole threatening her?”

Rook looked at Ruth, arms still folded, and his expression gentled a fraction. “I apologize, Dr. Coldwell. Truly.”

Ruth looked like she wanted to burrow under her blankets, and she brought them up to her chin. “It’s really—it’s fine. Like you said, it probably looked like none of your business.”

Rook nodded once. “I’ll see you around, then.”

“Oh, I really fucking hope not,” Gemma seethed.

Unperturbed by her ferocity, Rook opened the door and gestured for Gemma to exit before him. “I’m sure Ruth is ready to get dressed and go home.”

Gemma glared up at the tall man. Then, deflating slightly, she seemed to accept his inferred suggestion and gave Ruth a worried look. “I’ll stay if you want me to.”

One corner of Ruth’s mouth quirked up. “I’m okay. I do want to go home.”

Gemma gave me a wary glance before looking back to Ruth. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure,” Ruth assured her. “I’ll call you when I’m home.”

When Gemma looked back up at Rook, I could have sworn I actually heard a chihuahua-like growl come from the short blond woman. Rook cast a long-suffering look up to the ceiling, and then they were gone.

I stood, glancing at Ruth’s monitor to make sure her vitals were still stable. Not one time had they so much as blipped since we’d been here, but it was like my heart had sustained actual bruising from the shock of seeing her catapult herself from that car. It still smarted when I thought about it.

“Stop worrying,” Ruth said gently. I gave her a silent look of censure, sliding my hands in my pockets. She huffed, and the way she looked up at me through her lashes



nearly gave me another heart attack. “I’m fine, Cal.”

I ran my eyes over the angry road rash on her arms, and then on the split down her full lower lip. “Clearly, our definitions of ‘fine’ differ.” She had also opened her knee wound, and the tissue was so damaged from already having been stitched, it looked like she had a baseball hidden under the tightly wrapped dressing.

Ruth blinked once, but for once, she didn’t seem concerned about my reproof. I shouldn’t keep scowling, I knew that, but my worry and anger had returned to a low simmer in my chest, and I still felt like putting my fist through drywall. She gave me a tentative smile. “Want to throw your doctor weight around and get me discharged early?”

Ruth’s scans had looked good—they hadn’t shown any serious damage, and technically, there was no reason for her to remain in the ER. “I can talk to the nurses,” I agreed reluctantly.

Her knowing smile made me want to pinch her cheeks. I’d told her I loved her, and she’d taken that remarkably well considering the circumstances. I couldn’t help but wonder if she reciprocated my feelings, but it didn’t seem like the right time to ask. With one last glance at her picture-perfect vitals, I went out to the nurses’ station to ask Marlene to discharge Ruth.

The older nurse gave me a pinched frown as she handed me the tablet with the discharge paperwork on it. “You seem inappropriately interested in this girl, Dr. Reed.”

I choked out a laugh, taking the smooth tablet from her wrinkled fingers. “I’m offended, Marlene.” When her eyes went squinty with suspicion, I added, “I’m inappropriately in love with that girl.” Several heads turned my way in surprise, but I left before the nursing staff could dive into that confession too deeply.

When I returned to Ruth's room, she was already dressed again in the shorts and blue tank top she'd been wearing before. She winced as she reached down to fit her foot into her sneakers, and I assumed that had something to do with the cracking scabs all along her right side. I closed the door behind me, set the tablet on the counter to the left, and came to kneel in front of her. I moved her hands away and tightened the laces with brisk efficiency. "Why does no one ever want to stay in the hospital? We practically have to tie you stubborn patients down to the beds half the time."

Ruth straightened, cradling her bruised right elbow against her stomach. "You're right. It's such a charming experience being here."

I lifted an amused look up to her briefly before moving to her other foot and helping her wedge her foot inside the white canvas shoe. "I'm here. Isn't that a little charming?" Her fingers sifted through my hair, surprising me.

I glanced up again, and she smiled softly. "Truthfully, yes. I'd stay anywhere you are."

I had to stop my jaw from falling open. I swallowed instead. "So, if I suggested you get admitted overnight for concussion watch—"

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Her fingers tightened in my hair, pulling it at the roots. “Don’t push it, Dr. Charming.”

Grinning, I looked back down and tied her shoe as she released my hair. “Just checking.”

When both her shoes were tied, Ruth bracketed my face with her hands and tilted it up to her. On my knees, I stared up at her in unabashed adoration. Gray-blue eyes held my attention seriously. “You know I don’t say things without thinking them through... mostly.”

I nodded, slipping my arms around her legs and hips, avoiding the road rash on her right thigh. “I know you don’t.”

“And you know I’ve spent a lot of time thinking that I’m,” she swallowed visibly, and her voice broke when she whispered, “unlovable.”

I tightened my arms around her, wanting to bury my face in her lap and squeeze her until she had no tears to shed. “I know,” I whispered back.

Ruth’s hands smoothed across my cheeks, scrubbing the beard growth along my jaw and sending shivers down my neck and back. “What you said about love not being earned, about it just being, I think I know what you mean, now.”

I held my breath, watching her with quiet hopefulness. Her full lips rolled together as she thought again, choosing her words carefully as always. It occurred to me then how much like her own eyes Ruth was. She wasn’t sunshine and bubbles like other

women aspired to be. Ruth was a rainy day, comforting and gentle in its slow pace. She was sleepy mornings and a soothing cadence of clean, pure rainwater. She was tranquility.

Snaring me with that deep, sharp-witted gaze, she whispered, “My love for you just is.”

A torrent of dammed-up emotions filled my chest and climbed up my throat. I swallowed roughly, hoping I’d heard her correctly. “You love me, Shortstop?”

She nodded, and I stood, pulling her up with me. She tugged me down so my lips hovered just over hers. “I love you in the most irrational way possible.”

I gave her a speculative eyebrow raise. “How are we supposed to function if we both love each other like crazy people?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it cancels out,” she said, her breath puffing across my lips.

My lips curved. “Sounds logical.”

“Good. Then shut up and kiss me, Doc.”

I grinned just before she sealed our lips with a desperate kiss. Mindful of her bruises and scrapes, I curved my arm around her waist drawing her up against my body as I deepened the kiss. Starving for her, craving more of her, I took all she had to give and then demanded more. She sighed into our kiss, arms looped behind my neck and body leaned into mine like she didn’t doubt for a moment that I would hold her up.

Because I would. Always.

Chapter twenty-eight

Ruth

Ruth

Cal aimed his long lens into the trees above us, taking a rapid succession of pictures that clicked through the quiet park trail as a finch fluttered away. I lounged on a park bench, watching him with interest. When he lowered the lens, I cocked my head with a smile. “I honestly thought you were pulling my leg when you said you liked bird photography.”

Cal chuckled ruefully and let the camera dangle from its strap around his torso. He rested it on his hip, and he held out a hand for me. “I wish I was. But it soothes me and gives me a reason to get outside. Plus, it’s like hunting Pokémon. I fucking loved that game as a kid. Some of the birds are more rare than others, and catching them is a total rush.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “I can see how that would be. I don’t know anything about Pokémon, but I think I get it. Although, I find that surprising given that you were a jock and played football.”

“I never said I was a popular jock,” he pointed out.

“Now who’s the nerd?”

Cal tugged me against his other side and wrapped a crushing arm around me as we started back down the trail. “Verydroll, doctor.”

I snickered, pushing against his side and causing us to stumble for a moment before he righted us and guided us back to the company picnic. I pressed my glasses back into place, and the serenity of the wooded area gradually gave way to the laughter and collective chatter from the “block party” barbeque. The smell of grilled hamburgers

and hot dogs mingled with the tangy bite of the river water as a gentle breeze drifted over everyone's heads. Cal's arm, solid and comforting, tightened around my shoulders with a squeeze. "How's your knee?"

I glanced at the bruised joint. "Fine, I think. I mean, I have an overqualified nurse fussing over it every night, so," I teased.

"Wow, eight years of med school and residency, and she calls me an overqualified nurse." Cal pinched my waist, one of the few places that wasn't covered in bruises or scrapes. "You have some nerve."

We reached the group of Kiss-Met employees, and I came to stand next to Gemma and Janice. Gemma had her hair in her half-up pigtail buns, and she wore a flouncy white dress that showed off the exaggerated lines of her curves. She held up a drink for me in greeting. "There you are. I was starting to think you were getting boned back there."

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I accepted the glass of wine with a pained groan. “You are so loud when you uncork your crazy. You know that?”

Janice laughed into her own drink, and Gemma sipped hers with dainty grace before saying, “You love it.”

Smiling and rolling my eyes, I turned to Janice. “This is really nice, Janice. Everyone did a great job.”

Janice, brightly colored and impossible to miss with her loud patterns, nodded with a smile. “My pleasure, Dr. Coldwell.”

Somehow, neither of us had been fired. Actually, after I’d shown up on Tuesday banged up and apologizing profusely, Janice had looked strangely unaffected by the whole thing. She’d said something about the issue being a blossom in the wind, whatever that meant. Gemma had been so grateful, she’d burst into tears, and since then, we’d both worked our asses off to prove that we belonged at Kiss-Met. It made enduring social functions like this one almost bearable.

Well, I amended with a glance at Cal where he stood tall and broad-shouldered next to Dr. Rook, a few things make it enjoyable, actually.

Cal turned away from his conversation with Rook and caught me staring. He smiled slow and wide. Then he winked once and returned his attention to whatever Rook was saying. My stomach fluttered like finch wings.

“Ye Gods,” Gemma muttered with her glass of wine hovering near her lips. “You two

are disgustingly cute.”

“Ye Gods?” I echoed with incredulous amusement.

“My new MMORPG is like a fantasy thing, and one of the characters keeps saying it,” she said like that was the most normal thing ever. I gave her a concerned stare. She clicked her tongue. “What? I’m lonely without sex. Smashing things with a giant battle axe is fucking satisfying. You know, in place of satisfying fucking.”

I hadn’t actually expected Gemma to give up on men, but thus far, she had seemed determined to make it happen. “Okay,” I murmured, smiling to myself.

“I thought we hated Dr. Rook,” Gemma noted under her breath, leaning over and glancing at where Cal spoke to the other doctor.

“I thought so too,” I admitted. “But I think they’re working things out after my incident or whatever.” I took a sip of wine, and a burst of sweet and sour slipped over my tongue before I swallowed.

Gemma made a disgusted sound. “How does an android like that end up with a date to a company picnic, and I end up playing video games alone on the weekend?”

I glanced at the tall, stunning redhead at Rook’s side. Rook himself was just as tall as Cal, and his light blond hair had been swept away from his handsome features with perfect precision. He wore a loose-fitting, vertically striped button-down that stretched tightly across his chest, and as he talked, he casually reached over to drape his hand over his date’s hip. The gesture was undeniably sexy.

I had a pretty good idea about why Rook always had dates to things. To Gemma, I shrugged and said, “He probably brainwashes them.”



“Cyborg tricks,” Gemma agreed gravely.

Cal finished his conversation with Rook and then returned to me. Like magnets, we gravitated to each other, and he bent to drop a kiss on my cheek before waving to Gemma. “I’m stealing her again. Rook said he spotted an owl awake early down that other path.”

Gemma’s eyelashes flared with disbelief, and she buried herself in her wine glass again. “Mercy, you’re both nerds.”

“You love it,” I tossed back to her.

Gemma snuffed out a laugh, and Cal tugged me away from the group again. I gave him a questioning glance, but he just took my wine glass, set it on a picnic table where an IT team was standing, and led me away from the crowd toward another trail that curved back into a heavily wooded area.

Cal tugged at his taupe button-down, fanning it away from his sweat-glistened skin. “We’re all roasting out there in the open.”

I had to agree. I’d put on a lightweight, yellow sundress that fell to my knees, but I was sweating under the fabric anyway. “I’m ready for fall,” I confessed.

Cal’s rich, green eyes traveled down from my frizzy hair to my strappy sandals as we entered the shade of the trail. “Ruth in squishy sweaters and fuzzy socks? Sounds like a dream.”

I laughed, and the sound filled the quiet space. “That’s what you’re looking forward to? My schlumpy outfits?”

“Taking them off, yes,” he said with a sharp glance.

I sipped in a fast breath. Holding it, I eked out, “Oh.”

“Oh,” he teased with a half-smile.

The truth was, I still hadn’t gotten completely used to having mind-blowing sex with Cal. All the time. Anytime. So far, he hadn’t grown bored of shattering my sanity with his fingers, his mouth, and his obscenely perfect dick. And the way he was looking at me at the moment had me thinking that I wasn’t going to be disappointed here, either.

When we had walked a good thirty feet into the trail, Cal pulled me off the path and into the trees. Through the foliage and densely packed tree trunks, I could just make out the milling party in the distance. Then Cal pressed my back against a tree and leaned his weight on one hand just beside my head.

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I tilted my chin up to him, skipping a look from his lips to his eyes. He surrounded me with his presence, palming my lower back and eradicating every fraction of distance between us. His erection pressed into my stomach, and I groaned, grabbing fistfuls of his shirt above his shoulders. Cal brushed his nose against the side of mine. “Speaking of removing clothing.”

I huffed. “We’re not undressing in a public park.”

“Why?” he asked, drawing out the word as he skated his lips up to my cheek.

“Public indecency?” I squeaked out. “Jail?”

“Fines at most,” he drawled.

Much like Vaughn, I thought with a twinge of annoyance. They had caught him at the state line, but the authorities had been pretty forthright that although he could be charged with blackmail if I wanted to do that, it would most likely result in a low sentence or fines. But I didn’t care. I thought I would mind more, but that part of my life was over, and whatever schemes had attempted to draw me back into that misery had failed.

That said, a part of me still replayed that murderous look in Cal’s eyes when he’d been a breath away from pummeling the teeth out of Vaughn’s mouth. I replayed it with a little too much satisfaction, and it was probably a good thing that Cal had been more focused on keeping my spine braced.

Cal brought me back to the present when his lips found that spot under my ear that

made my pulse race.Upper jugular to posterior triangle,I remembered with a foggy haze of desire taking over my mind.Might be my favorite.

“You wouldn’t be thinking while I’m trying to seduce you, would you, Shortstop?”

I rolled my lips between my teeth, fighting a smile. “Uhm. No?”

Hetsked against my skin, scraping his teeth against the sensitive flesh. “We can’t have that.”

I shivered, shifting against him restlessly. “I’m thinking our friends and colleagues are within earshot, and this forest make out session is kind of risky.”

“Make out session?” Cal kissed down my neck toward the dipping neckline of my sundress. “Who said anything about making out?”

“Are we... not?” I got out breathlessly.

Cal lifted me away from the tree, arching my back into him and baring my breasts to his wandering lips. He hooked his finger under the edge of the V neckline, and I realized then how stretchy the bodice was. As he revealed my skin to my bra cup, he kissed each inch with deliberate softness. “I’m not sure you could call wooded debauchery a make out session.” He slipped the bra aside, exposing my breast, and then his tongue lashed out to flick the pink bud.

I gasped, my legs clenching together as a shockwave of pleasure rolled through me. “This is a bad idea,” I panted. Cal took my nipple between his lips lightly before flicking it with his tongue again. I moaned. “Then again...”

Cal lifted his head just enough to hook me with a dark, impish glance. “Then again?”

I groaned, moving my hips against his. “If... we’re fast.”

Cal blew cold air on my nipple, still damp from his tongue. It sent another twitch of longing between my legs, and I gasped again. “Fast?” he asked.

“Or slow,” I pleaded.

Chuckling, Cal sucked my nipple into his mouth, and I let my head fall back against the tree trunk, moaning loudly and not caring who heard it. Cal’s left hand still held me steady against his strong body, and his right trailed down my waist and to my skirt. He gently nipped and then licked at my nipple, igniting a fire that burned at my core and sizzled away my inhibitions. He lifted the skirt, tickling it up my thigh before trailing his fingers against my heated flesh.

I adjusted my grip, hooking my left arm behind his neck. That freed my right hand, and even as his fingertips pressed against my slit through the cotton of my panties, I coasted up his thigh toward his erection. Cal stilled, and I opened my eyes just long enough to give him a heated gaze. He stared at me, apparently frozen as my knuckles grazed the hard length of him over his pants. “Slow?” I teased.

His expression darkened with amusement. When his fingers pressed against my clit through the fabric, my knees went weak, and he held me hard against his body. “I think you deserve to be fucked fast and hard. What do you think?”

“Yes please,” I gusted out, and my vision crossed as he rubbed my clit in aching circles.

“You asked.” Cal’s fingers left me, but only long enough for him to spin me and gather my wrists in his left hand. He pressed my palms against the rough maple tree, holding them firmly in place while he bent me over. I braced my weight against the tree, arms straight and ass out. Cal smoothed a heated touch up the back of my thigh.

“Bend over and keep your eyes on that party, Ruth. I want you to know that you’re getting fucked in earshot of your friends.”

I looked through the leaves and blossoming rhododendrons with the dawning realization that I was actually having sex somewhere in public. Sweat beaded between my breasts, and I swallowed my nerves. But then my pussy ached for Cal’s touch, and I danced on my tiptoes in anticipation, because if Cal said he was going to fuck me fast and hard, then I knew he would make good on that promise. And ye Gods, did I want him to.

Cal flipped my skirt over my hips, and it gathered along my lower back and bared my panties. He wasted no time in shimmying them down my legs, kissing a scorching path down my thigh, the back of my knee, and to my calf before he tapped my ankles so I could lift my feet out of them. He straightened again, dangling my already wet underwear where I could see them. “You don’t need these, do you?”

“You ripped my last pair,” I pointed out. “They’re practically disposable at this point.”

“Perfect.” He tossed them into a bush nearby. I didn’t have a moment to be surprised by that, because his left hand massaged my breast, plucking at my exposed nipple. His right hand reached around the front of my bent body and found my slick core. I jumped, moaning again as he found my clit and rolled over it carefully.

He slid down, following a line to my clenching center. Then he circled the entrance, coating his finger in my arousal and causing me to push back against him desperately. Cal bent over me, covering me in his warmth, in his scent, in his strength. Against the back of my neck, he ordered, “Give me your right hand.”

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Leaning my weight on my left hand, I brought my right down, and he took my fingers between his. Deft and sure, he pressed my fingers to my own dripping core. “Play with yourself until I say so.”

I did, rubbing and circling in a familiar pattern that thrummed through me like a harmonic chord in the most satisfying way. Behind me, I was vaguely aware of the sounds of Cal unzipping his pants, and then the crinkle of foil as he ripped open a condom. I brought myself closer to a crescendo, ramping up my arousal to a fevered pitch. I closed my eyes, and the warm summer air gathered sweat at my temples. As a droplet slid down my cheekbone, Cal said, “Stop.”

Reluctantly, I did. “Cal,” I breathed out hard.

“Hands up.” Groaning, I brought my right hand back up to my left. Cal grasped my bare hips, and then the tip of his cock was at my soaked, throbbing entrance. As he slid into me, I shuddered out a breath of relief. My God, he felt like heaven. Like Hell. Like a symphony of perfectly coordinated notes that strummed through me with maddening perfection.

He reached around me again, and this time when he began a rhythm, slick and with perfect pressure, I hummed in pleasure, pressing my ass against him and silently begging him to pull out and slam his cock deep inside of me. Cal obliged, easing out and then thrusting back inside me. I stretched around him, too full and somehow not enough. Releasing a tortured sound, I pushed against him and rose up higher on my toes as his fingers and cock brought me to my breaking point.

Cal found a rhythm, quicker and harder with each passing second, and I barely

managed to keep myself braced against the trunk as he fucked me into such delicious oblivion, I wouldn't have known if someone had walked past us on the path or not. I wouldn't have cared. I was riding a high and chasing a release that I knew would sing through my body and soul with a deafening crescendo.

My orgasm built just as fast and suddenly as Cal's tempo, and I cried out, almost in pain as my core spasmed around him, clenching hard and then releasing into waves of knee-buckling ecstasy. I lost my grip on the tree, but Cal held me up with his left arm around my torso. He slowed and then stopped, burying himself in me deeply as he found his own release. I leaned against him, breathing hard and basking in aftershocks of pleasure that squeezed around his length still inside me.

The chitter of insects and the rush of a sudden breeze through the trees pricked at my awareness. I lifted my head, looking through my disheveled locks and over my askew glasses to peer around the still forest. "Oh," I panted.

Cal's chest rumbled as he chuckled behind me. He dropped a soft kiss on my exposed shoulder where my dress had fallen down. "Oh."

I put my weight back on my feet, and with a furtive glance around the deserted area, I replaced my skirt back over my bare ass and fixed my top. As I adjusted my glasses, I looked down at the moisture between my legs. Even though Cal had used a condom, I had made plenty of a mess down the insides of my thighs. I pulled a face.

Cal snorted and held out a handful of tissues to me when I turned to face him. "Fluids, right?"

I bit my lip, smiling. "How'd you guess?"

"It's like I know you," he mused. He'd already fixed himself, and he tucked my tissues and his in his pocket. "I came prepared for sex in the woods, thankfully."



“That’s specific of you.”

Cal pulled me up against his lean body again, kissing my lips languorously. “I might have fantasized about fucking you in the fresh outdoors... a couple of times.”

I frowned, pulling away an inch. “I’ve known you for like three weeks tops.”

“I have a very active imagination,” he said seriously.

Twigs cracked behind us. I jumped, whirling toward the sound, only to find another couple making their way from the party to our path. Cal shifted me to the right, pressing me against the wide trunk of the maple tree again. It put us mostly out of sight as the couple passed on the trail.

“I think they have a rhododendron garden up this way,” the man was saying.

“Oh, nice,” the girl replied noncommittally, giving away the fact that they clearly hadn’t been together long. Their feet crunched over gravel and twigs as they slowly walked the path at my back. Cal could see them better, and he peered around the tree to track their progress silently.

I ran my eyes over the buttons on Cal’s chest, up the column up his throat, across his bronze-tinted lips, and then up to his gaze. Forest green eyes watched me with shimmering mirth. I’d been caught ogling.

Silently, Cal mouthed, “You like me?”

I cracked a grin, shaking my head. “Love you,” I mouthed back.

His features melted into a contented kind of joy, and he brought his hands up to cup my face on either side. He bent down to kiss my forehead, inhaling softly. “Love you, too,” he whispered.

I leaned into him, which got easier to do every time we exchanged those words. It was a learned skill, trusting. We humans might be born with the inherent need to trust and rely on others, but it was so easily broken and replaced with self-doubts. The more I relied on Cal, and the more I opened myself up to the possibility of belonging, the easier it became.

When we made our way home later that night, it was to a door that opened readily and a house on a hill that welcomed me just as surely as the man who had invited me into it. Before Cal, somewhere along the way, I'd managed to convince myself that I only deserved locked doors and dashed dreams. Cal had rewritten that, and he'd done it in careful, swirling script over my heart. Just as steady and sure as a finely crafted silverpoint manuscript, he had taken care to bring his words to life at the very center of my being.

Because he loved me for me. I loved him for him.

Our love just was.