



Libra

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Description: Who hasn't spent their summer evenings flipping through their monthly Cosmo looking for horoscopes? The fiery, passionate Scorpio. The loyal and protective Taurus. Who are you most compatible with?

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CHAPTER1

JANET

“You know it’s your fault I’m in this mess.” Wyatt tips his beer at me and I smirk, raising my glass. I’m not normally a fruity drink kind of girl, but I won a bet and I’m cashing in. I ordered the most expensive drink on Reggie’s menu and this shit is dangerous. There’s so much sugar and fruit that I can’t taste the booze, but I can feel it.

“Mess? You know how babies happen, Collins. You did this yourself.” Montero laughs and slaps Wyatt on the back. “I knew this would happen when I caught you naked that one time.” We’d given him shit about that for weeks. He and the now wifey got it on in her comic shop and somehow tripped the alarm. Officers Montero and Jones took the call and found them mostly naked in the middle of the store.

“Morgan made me chase Nora, got Pops involved, and now I’m gonna be a dad again.” He tips up the beer, winking at me from behind it this time. He can play angry all he wants, but he’s the one who talked Nora into a baby, and we all know it. A year ago, I definitely didn’t think I’d be out at my ex’s bar celebrating a new baby with my partner and best friend, but here we are. One push to go to speed dating and he’s gone and made a whole human, again. Cruze will be starting kindergarten just in time for a new baby to arrive. He’s so fucking happy he can’t stop smiling, and I can’t blame him. Wyatt Collins was born to be a family man.

“When’s it your turn, Morgan?” Montero, Collins, and Bales all look at me. Forget the fact that we live in a small town with three whole lesbians in it, these guys want

to know when I'm settling down. I wish I could say they're stupid and think I'd pick a man, but they all know better. I run my hand over my hair despite knowing it's in a tight bun and going nowhere.

"My turn?" I eye Reggie at the bar and almost sigh. Once upon a time I thought she was my turn, but she was too busy giving every curious straight woman in town a turn as well. To each their own, it just sucked to be waiting for her at home when she was fucking everyone but me. To her it was no big deal, to me it hurt. I assumed asking me to move in was her way of saying she wanted to settle down, but it clearly wasn't. She just needed help with rent and wanted someone on deck in case a tipsy straight woman wasn't available. We're still friendly, but nothing can get me down that road with her again.

"Your mom told me yesterday that it was a shame that only one of her three kids likes women, but still can't find one." Wyatt chuckled and I had to laugh. My mother adopted three kids in her late twenties and all of us turned out to be gay. Being the loving hippie she is, it doesn't bother her, but she's pressuring us for grandkids and apparently enlisted my partner to help her. Both of my little brothers are busy finding themselves right now, so she's not harping on them to make little crotch goblins, only me. She even emailed me ads for international adoption agencies last week. The problem is that I don't want to be a mom alone. I want a partner right there with me, by my side for all the parenting ups and downs.

"Find me a woman and I'm game." I shrug. Why not? I'm clearly having no luck on my own and I'm sick of driving to the bars in Knoxville to talk to women and not getting anywhere with it. According to everyone around me, I'm a catch. I have a good job, my rent gets paid on time, I have a decent car, and I'm easy on the eyes. Finding a woman shouldn't be this hard, so I've kind of given up. I tried a few times after Reggie. When one woman's husband came home and wanted to watch, I was out. Men are pigs.

“What about apps? There’s an app right?” Montero pulls out his phone and starts tapping the screen with his big meaty fingers.

“Nora still hosts speed dating,” Wyatt offers, and I glare at him. “Right yes, the hetero of it all. My bad.” The speed dating was great, but in a town of so many straight people, it definitely wouldn’t work. I look at my three friends and around the bar. I know they’re just trying to help, and yeah, I’m lonely. I admit it. But it makes me a little sad. Montero has a great woman who works in finance or something and is practically a millionaire, Bales has his first grandkid on the way and has been with his wife for thirty years, and Wyatt has Nora.

Not that life is bad, but at thirty, I really thought I’d be settled down with a wife and maybe a kid by now. I at least wanted a dog, but so far, it’s not happening. I take another long sip of my too sweet fruity drink and lean back in the chair. Reggie catches my eye and tips her head at me in acknowledgment. I tip mine back and look at Collins. He’s glaring at me. I shake my head to let him know it’s nothing to worry about. When I caught Reggie cheating, I spent three nights on his couch crying and eating all the ice cream in his house before I got myself together and hit the gym. I haven’t been upset about it since. Well, not much.

They keep talking, mostly about work, but I pull out my phone and open the app I just said I didn’t want to use. Three messages stare at me, so I tap them. I roll my eyes immediately and delete the first one. I’m not looking to be some gross man’s fantasy by banging his wife in front of him. Not judging, just not my thing. The second one is all the way in Knoxville and told me she likes my pictures. I thank her and move to the next. Not that Knoxville is too far away, but I have the kind of job that takes up a lot of hours at weird times, especially when the Sergeant is my partner. I can’t get a call and make an emergency wait forty minutes because I was hanging with my girlfriend in a different town. When I’m on duty, I need to stay in East Hollow, and it wouldn’t be fair to have a woman driving here for me every time only for me to pick up and go if I need to.

“Maybe I’ll just get a dog. Or a cat? Sad single people have cats, right?” I laugh but no one else does so I put my fruity cocktail down and stand up, tossing a few bills on the table. More than two beers means an Uber for me, and I had a mixed drink as big as my head, so I pull out my phone and tap on the app a few times, calling a car to Reggie’s. Within seconds it tells me that one R. Madison is en route to pick me up. I have about ten minutes, so I sit back down.

“You’re still messed up about being here, aren’t you?” Collins leans over to my ear. I shrug. The truth is, yeah, coming to Reggie’s is hard for me, but we’re adults and it is what it is. Plus, if I want to drink socially, this is it. Reggie’s is the only bar in East Hollow. “I can take you home.”

“I got an Uber. It’s fine. Drinks are on me since I was shit company.” I nod at the money and grab my coat from the back of my chair. “I think the beer made it worse. I should be over this shit, really, but I’m not and I brought the whole mood down.” I back away from Collin’s ear. “Sorry I was a bumner. I’m gonna head out.” Before I can even stand, a woman is next to me, long legs, blonde hair, and skintight jeans.

“So, this seat will be free?” She zeroes in on Wyatt, as they always do, and he shakes his head. He’s good looking in a classic all-American way, if you’re into that kind of thing.

“No, it’s not free.” He lifts the beer and taps his ring against the bottle.

“Sorry to bother you.” The woman looks at me when she says it and we all bust out laughing. It happens all the time, they either think I’m the wife or his sister. I guess I can kind of see the sister angle. Wyatt’s tall, over six feet, and I’m on the taller side at five-nine. We both have blondish hair and strong chins. We also banter like siblings. It happens when you’re best friends and partners for so long.

I feel my phone vibrate and tip my chin at my coworkers, zipping up my jacket.

“Have another one on me.” I point at the money and turn to go, leaving my friends laughing about Collins and I being married.

Outside, the February wind whips around and tears through my jacket. The heat clinging to me from inside is long gone the second I step out the door. My head is a little buzzy from the massive drink I ordered. For a split second I think about canceling the Uber, then think better of it. Last thing I need is someone I know pulling me over. I’d be the headline of the East Hollow Gazette tomorrow. ‘Local cop drives drunk’ is a career ender. I grab my bag from the car, make sure I didn’t leave ammo in the glove box, and check that it’s locked up. I look around to make sure I can’t see anyone I know in the lot before reaching in the side pocket of my bag and pulling out my only vice. I put the cigarette to my lips, grab my lighter, and flick it to life, taking a long inhale and lighting up the night with a tiny orange ember. The first drag has my shoulders relaxing and my teeth unclenching.

My phone buzzes again and I check to see that my driver is five minutes away. I take another drag and savor it. I used to be a heavy smoker, a pack and a half a day, but Reggie made me quit. It was the only good thing she did for me. I started again after the breakup, but on a much smaller scale. I get one a night, and that’s it. I know it’s shit for me but considering it’s my only vice and I’m at the gym every day, I let it slide in my own mind.

A car pulls into the lot, and I look at my phone screen. The map shows a car moving at the same time as the car, so I carefully stub out my cigarette, put the unsmoked half back in the pack and spritz myself with cologne. I also pop in a piece of gum. Not that I care if this stranger smells smoke on me, but I hate smelling like anything gross. I get a text at the same time I start approaching the car.

R. Madison has arrived.

A photo of my driver appears on my screen, and I nearly drop my phone. The woman

looking back at me is gorgeous. Long auburn hair coming from a black beanie, big sea-blue eyes rimmed with the most gorgeous lashes I've ever seen, and a smirk that says she's up to no good. I stop in the gravel between two rows of cars, staring at my phone screen for a beat too long. So long that headlights hit me and a car honks. I take two strides out of the way and the car hurries by. I blink at my phone and look at the car idling a few feet away. I know I'm a little tipsy, but surely there's a filter or something on this picture. Are they allowed to do that when they drive an Uber? This R. Madison is way too pretty to... yeah, I have nothing here, she's just gorgeous. I get a follow up text reminding me that my fare starts when she arrives, and I tuck the phone in my pocket. The car is a black four-door with a shiny paint job and glistening wheels. It's a nice car. I walk around the back, checking the make and model before reaching for the door handle. I pull, and nothing happens. I hear the click a second later and try again. The door swings open and I poke my head inside.

"R. Madison?" I wait for her to turn toward me, and my mouth goes dry. It's definitely her. Same mischievous smirk, same long hair covered by a slouchy beanie, and same gorgeous eyes rimmed in dark liner and thick lashes.

"Are you Janet?" Her voice is high, chipper, and sweeter than cotton candy. I love it instantly.

I really need to get laid or get it together because for a beat I don't answer her.

"Oh. Yeah, that's me." I hold up my phone and show her the app as I slide in the back seat and close the door against the chill outside.

"Great. Buckle up officer and we'll get out of here." She turns back to the front and I grab for the seatbelt, clicking it in place.

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“How did you know?” I look down to make sure I’m not actually in uniform still, trying to gauge if I’m more drunk than previously assessed. “My coat.” I have a huge patch right over the breast with the East Hollow badge on it.

“Your coat.” She echoes with a laugh that makes my knees weak. I rub my forehead and the bridge of my nose trying to get my shit together. “My name is Rowen by the way. Nice to meet you.” Rowen. Rowen Madison. The name means nothing to me, until now, but I guess with all the new businesses opening in East Hollow, there are tons of people I don’t know. Our small town is becoming less small all the time. I used to know everyone, but definitely don’t know her.

“Janet Morgan.” I clear my throat and settle back into the warm leather. “Nice to meet you too.” We fall into a silence while I rack my brain trying to figure out what to say next. Nothing comes to mind that doesn’t sound creepy, or drunk, so I stay quiet. My buzz is pretty much gone, so I’m definitely not drunk, but isn’t that what all wasted people say? While I struggle to find any words, Rowen seems to have them all once we pull onto Main Street.

“So how long have you lived here? This town is so cute, it’s like something straight out of Gilmore Girls. I know a lot of people have hate for that one, but I think it’s a cute show if you don’t look too hard into it.” She has such a chipper voice, and I would normally find it annoying, but not tonight. Tonight, it’s exactly what I need after my pity party.

“Twenty years.” I adjust myself so I can see her blue eyes in the mirror. “Mom needed a fresh start when I was a broody preteen and found the closest small town with all the quaintness of Star’s Hollow she could. I never left and neither did she or

my two younger brothers. She even remarried and opened a business here.” Two of us could speak Gilmore Girls.

“Please tell me she opened an inn.” Rowen’s eyes go all soft in the mirror, darting between me and the road.

“Bakery.” I laugh. “I’m definitely not Rory. How about you? You either haven’t been here long, or you haven’t been in trouble with East Hollow’s fine police force yet.”

“I’ve been here...” Rowen glances at her watch and it lights up. “Exactly twenty-one days. I decided I needed out of a toxic situation and my eccentric great aunt decided to die, so it worked out perfectly. She left me a house, a property, and a lot of other things. Until the rest of the money she left finishes going through all the due process, I have a lot of stuff, but no income, so here we are. It’s not exactly as lucrative to drive people around here as it is in Memphis, but I get the occasional pick-up from the bar or a late night craving. It’ll work until I decide what to do next.” At this point, I’m sitting on the edge of my seat, trying to get closer to her, to this story. East Hollow being what it is, I know or know of almost everyone, and the only older resident to pass away recently didn’t live here. Matilda Covers hadn’t lived here in more than a decade and passed away at the beginning of the year.

“You’re Matilda’s great niece?” We take a leisurely turn into my subdivision.

“Yeah. Did you know her?” Rowen’s eyes meet mine in the mirror.

“I did. Before she moved, I mowed her yard every week as a kid. We lived three houses down. My parents still live there. So, you’re in her old place? I bet it’s a mess.” I pause, putting all the pieces together. Wyatt’s friends outside the department are all his wife’s friends and by extension, mine. Sort of. “You own the bookstore now.” I vaguely remember a panicked call from Nora after Matilda passed that Leo, the book store’s manager, was distraught that he was going to lose the store after

losing the woman who changed his life. He loved Matilda Covers like a grandmother and had run the store since she moved to Florida to retire. It's a complex series of events for our small town.

"I own the bookstore now." Rowen says it with a solemn tone. "It's all really overwhelming. The house doesn't need repairs, well not many, but it's still such a mess and what is one person supposed to do there? It's huge and it's only me. Maybe she thought I'd be married with kids before she died, but I'm not and now I have nine bedrooms. I'm thinking about getting a dog to fill some of the space, but I've been so busy. The bookstore basically runs itself thankfully. The manager is kind of an asshole, but he's so efficient that I let his attitude slide. I'm just glad he's there. It's a lot to take on at twenty-five and with no knowledge of how to do any of this." Her voice starts to crack at the end, and I reach up to rest a hand on her shoulder. "I am so sorry, you needed a ride, not... this." She gestures around vaguely. "Passengers are not free therapy."

"Unloading on a stranger is easier sometimes. I get it." As awkward as this should be, it's not. I could listen to this girl talk all day, all night, forever. "I know Leo, at the bookstore. He's a little, something, but a good guy. You should keep him there. He won't steer you wrong. His whole life has been at Cover to Cover. He loves it." Not that I'm particularly fond of Leo, but he's a good manager and I really like his wife.

"I will do anything for him to stay. Like, literally. I have no idea what I'd do if he left. He said he wanted to stay and would work the same as he always has. My biggest fear is making him so mad he quits." Rowen snorts a laugh and clears her throat as we pull into my driveway. The porch light is on, casting a sickly yellow glow over my front stoop and the hedges on either side.

"I'm sure as long as you let Leo do his thing, he won't leave." I unbuckle and grab my bag. "Thanks for the ride."

“Thanks for letting a complete stranger vent to you.” Our eyes meet in the rearview mirror again and my heart stutters.

“Anytime. If you need any help with the house, let me know. Seriously, I’m pretty handy and don’t mind. We need new people around here and that place has been empty too long.” I unzip the side pocket of my bag and pull out a card. “The bottom number is my cell. Text me and I’ll come help. It’s a huge house, and I can’t imagine cleaning it alone, much less doing repairs.” I flip the card to her and lean between the seats. The faint scent of green apples tickles my nose and I inhale deeper. I don’t even know if this girl plays for my team, but I’m over here laying it on thick and sniffing her hair. I mentally kick myself. I know better than this shit. Normally my gaydar is pretty on point, but this one has my needle going back and forth.

“You would really come help me?” Rowen turns in her seat so our faces are inches apart.

“Yeah.” I have to swallow hard my mouth is so dry. My palms are the opposite which is stupid since I’m a grown woman and I don’t know this girl.

“I can’t pay you until all the money comes out of...probate? Is that the word?” She scrunches her brows and it’s the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.

“Probably, but I don’t need you to pay me. Consider it my good deed for the year. I’ll do this instead of donating to the Salvation Army at Christmas.” I smile and that smirk crosses her lips. It has so much to say without her uttering a word, and I’m pretty sure my intuition is steering me right with this one.

“I’ll text you then. Thank you for needing an Uber Janet Morgan.” Her eyes sparkle in the dim light, or maybe I’m still a little buzzed and it’s my imagination.

“Thanks for driving, Rowen Madison.” I slide back in the seat, open the door, and

step out in the cold February air, closing the door firmly behind me.

CHAPTER 2

ROWEN

Watching Janet walk into the house has me all kinds of confused. I'm definitely attracted to her, that's not the confusing part. I'm confused because I haven't noticed a woman like this in a really long time. The last time I decided to fall for a woman, it didn't go well, and heartbreak for me means swearing off women.

Thankfully, I can switch teams at will and have dated men for the last couple of years, nothing serious. My instant notice of Janet means that maybe my heart is ready to trust a woman again. Or it means my lady bits want to jump her and it has nothing to do with a mended heart. I'm starting to think my lady bits are doing the thinking now. I also haven't let that happen in a while. It just felt easier to have women off the radar completely so my lady bits couldn't persuade my heart into another failed relationship. I rub my temples to relieve the tension.

A light flicks on in the front room of her house and I realize that I'm still parked in her driveway like a creeper. I back out and pull away, watching the curtains sway in the lit room as I round the bend toward town. I know if I go back and wait long enough, another bar patron will need a ride and I'll make a little more money tonight. It's kind of surreal that I don't need the money. Well, I won't as soon as probate is over. I'll never need to work again. I'll have bookstore income on top of all the money she left me, and a free place to live forever. After repairs are made of course. Speaking of repairs, why did Janet offer to help? Does she just have free time? Is she looking for a way to pass time? Or was all that eagerness flirting? Not that I'm stereotyping, but there is no way Janet isn't into women. I'm good at reading vibes, but I'm terrible at deciphering the difference between flirting and being friendly. It makes me sad when I think of how many people I've passed on because I thought

they were being nice.

By the time the bar shuts down, I've taken four more drunk people home and made enough to feed me for another week. I still have savings from leaving my job and cashing in my 401k. Not that it was much. Only working for six years of your adult life means you don't have much of anything, but it was enough to have a nice savings account in case things go south.

I make my way back to the house I now call home with butterflies in my stomach. I can't seem to shake the conversation with Janet. It wasn't anything life altering, but every time I picture her warm hazel eyes in the mirror, I feel like I did when I was twelve and had my first crush on Shelby French. Before twelve, I didn't have crushes on anyone. I was too busy playing in dirt, climbing trees, and being a kid to notice anyone. And then Shelby got boobs and my life changed. It took me years to come to terms with my sexuality, but eventually I realized that if I wanted to be truly happy, I needed to be honest, and honestly, I'm a card-carrying bisexual. Shelby later became my best friend in the world, and unfortunately, she's painfully straight, so I'm stuck in the friend zone forever with her. There are much worse places to be. Shelby is the best human on the planet. That's why as soon as I unlock the huge creaking door to my new house, I pull out my phone and send her a text.

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Rowen: Tell me there was some huge drama at work today.

Shelby: I folded the new sweaters today and still haven't found a new employee since my last one bailed.

This is followed by an angry emoji. Before I left my old life behind to move to East Hollow to live in a massive empty house and own a bookstore, I worked at the largest mall in Georgia at JCPenney's. I was the assistant manager to Shelby's management position, and we worked well together. I think she's still a little salty about me leaving but knows how good this is for me as well, so I get fun passive aggressive comments like this one.

Rowen: They just left? How rude!

Shelby: Right? Such a bitch! So how is Stars Hollow, Tennessee?

I throw myself back on the huge sectional sofa and a cloud of dust takes flight, dancing in the lamp light. I really need to get this place cleaned up. It's just been so overwhelming. The TV across from me is massive and older than I am, but it works and with my Xbox plugged in, I can stream anything I want. I actually tried to move it the other day and almost threw my back out. It's on a stand and has to be pulled out from the wall about a foot because the back end is so huge. First purchase with my inheritance is a flat screen. It doesn't even have to be big. I glance around at the cavernous rooms with vaulted ceilings. Okay, so maybe it will need to be pretty big.

I pick up my phone and decide to call Shel so I can close my eyes and not have to type.

“Is there an emergency? Are you being robbed? Assaulted? Because that is the only good reason to pick up the phone and call someone! This is not the decade for that my friend. Oh my gosh! Is that town like Pleasantville and you’ve gone back to two thousand where people still call?” All of this comes out in one rushed breath.

“I miss you too,” I deadpan.

“Oh, so you’re calling to talk? Is that a thing? You know we can video chat, right?” Shelby shuffles around and then her voice comes out a little echoey. “Do you want to video chat?” I know she put in her ear buds so she can do other things while we talk.

“Not everyone is allergic to phone calls,” I grumble, booting up my Xbox and turning on the TV with a remote longer than my forearm. “I just wanted to hear your voice, not see your face. Relax.” The light from the TV casts a blue glow over the room and the Xbox home screen appears, I wait for it to finish loading and start flipping through my apps and games.

“Fine. I interviewed three people today, one girl was okay. I may hire her if she can pass the drug test. Which is stupid because I don’t care what she does in her free time, but I guess corporate does. Now I’m standing alone in my apartment trying to figure out if I want to turn my empty room into a studio or if I want to rent it out. The problem is that I hate people and don’t want to live with anyone else. It’s a real conundrum when your best friend up and leaves you.” So, maybe Shel is a little more than salty about my move.

“I think you should rent it out.” The words taste sour. I don’t want someone else there with my best friend.

“You do? You’re the most jealous person I know, but want me to rent your room out to someone else?” Her tone says it all.

“I left. I needed to do it for me and for Aunt Matilda, but that doesn’t mean I want your life on pause too. You can make new friends and do things without me, but when you take your week of vacation, your ass will be in this huge house with me.” Saying it is like a punch to the gut, but it also feels mature and like I’m doing the right thing. Shelby is so much fun and so sweet, she should be out making new friends and doing things. Even though the thought of her doing our things with other people makes me want to punch someone.

“Fine. I may find a new roommate, but I won’t like it. Oh, shit Mom is calling. I gotta go, Row. Can we play a game tomorrow night? That way we can talk and kick ass?” Shelby got me into video games when we were kids. Not that she’s a hardcore gamer, but she definitely likes to play and she’s pretty good at it. She kicks my ass every time we play against each other, so I learned to always be on her team.

“Deal. Love you!” I make kissy sounds into the phone.

“Love you back!” The phone goes silent, and I drop it down on the couch next to me, picking up the controller. I’m still in my hoodie and beanie, so I glance at the phone and reach into my pocket. The card Janet gave me is there. I pull it out and stare at it, the butterflies doing their thing again. I set the card on my phone and slide them about six inches away, as if that’s going to make me not think about her.

My thumb tilts the joystick and scrolls along the endless options for entertainment. Nothing looks like what I want, so I give up and turn on Bob’s Burgers. It’s literally my favorite show in the world and I fall asleep to it every night. I decide to start at episode one and press my thumb down to make it play. The familiar theme song echoes around the cavernous room and I’m instantly a little calmer. Bob’s definitely my comfort show. I look at the phone again with the card sitting on top of it and my fingers itch to pick it up. It’s three in the morning and Janet was tipsy, so maybe I should just wait. But if I was getting a vibe from her and it’s not wishful thinking, why not shoot my shot with a text she’ll see when she gets up? I rub my hands

together and decide to wait. I can text her tomorrow when I'm not exhausted.

I pull the quilt off the back of the couch and stretch out, moving my phone to the coffee table and taking off my beanie. The room is chilly. One of the first things I realized when I moved in here is that the heat doesn't work. It's one of those minor repairs I need to get to, so I bought a space heater. I kick off my Vans and let them fall with a thud at the end of the couch and settle in to sleep. While voices of my favorite characters soothe me on screen, I start to slowly warm up, and for a second, I entertain the thought of hefting the heater upstairs to one of the million bedrooms and sleeping on a real bed. I quickly decide against it when my lids close and I'm out.

* * *

"Do you know alphabetical order?" I stare at the man who just asked me this completely absurd question. Leo Stewart is a lot of things. Smart is not one of them. I take that back. He's clearly a genius with the social skills of a... I have no idea what else could possibly have such poor people skills. Wild animals at least have enough respect to stay away for the most part, but this man has the audacity to be right here in the middle of civilization, asking the world's dumbest questions.

"Yes. I think my brain can manage that," I say the words slowly, hoping he wasn't being serious.

"You'd be surprised at the people who don't. The other clerk quit and I can't find a replacement. I tried, but no one will take the job. Can you shelve those?" He points to a gray cart stacked high with books. An employee with a head full of dark curls is at the register with a line at least ten deep and Leo is standing near the office door, eyes darting around looking like an animal trapped in a cage. The sticker on the side of the cart says 'romance' so I assume they go there, in alphabetical order, of course.

"I guess so, I was hoping to have a second to talk, but we can wait until it slows

down.” I start toward the cart.

“You asked what we needed since Matilda died.” Leo’s jaw twitches when he says my great aunt’s name and I can see the pain in his face. “I need more staff. We can afford it, but...” He won’t meet my eyes and takes a deep breath, defeated.

“We can talk later. I’ll shelve the books. Go help her.” I tip my head toward the younger girl at the front who hasn’t stopped smiling once. Leo doesn’t say anything else. He simply turns and leaves me with the books to shelve. I go do just that.

The cart drives like my own worst nightmare, but eventually I get it to the proper section and start shelving. It takes me about five seconds to realize the books are not in any sort of order on the cart, so I’m running up and down the aisle like a crazy person. I stop doing that and sort the cart instead. I make rough stacks in order and then shelve the whole stack, dragging the unwieldy cart along with me until I get done with the first half of the alphabet. By the time I hit M I’m feeling pretty accomplished.

“Wow! You want a job?” It’s a girl’s voice, high and perky.

“Looks like I have one. At least until we can hire someone else.” I look up and see the young woman who was behind the register.

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“Amelia. You must be Rowen.” She squeezes past the car, grabbing a stack and shelving the W books. She’s a little shorter than my five-seven with a mess of dark caramel waves and eyes that match.

“I am. Nice to meet you.” I grab the O books and start shelving.

“You met Leo and stayed to help. That’s impressive. He’s not so bad once you figure him out, or once you see him around his wife.” I nearly drop my stack of books. “Yeah, believe it or not, that man is married to a real person. Tuesday is the sweetest. She’s famous too. Sci-fi author.” I glance back to see Amelia point at the huge display in the center of the store. It’s sprawling with a huge cardboard back drop of a space scene and spaceships. I look back to Amelia and it must be written all over my face. “I know, trust me. He’s really not that bad once you get to know him. Which sounds like I’m some sort of victim, but I’m not. I swear, you just have to learn how to take him. He’s abrasive but doesn’t mean to be an ass.”

“Speaking highly of me again?” Leo’s voice comes from the end of the row of books and I jump but Amelia just rolls her eyes and goes back to shelving. “You got a lot of these done.” He looks from me to the cart.

“Told you I know my ABCs.” I smile at him and get a little hint of a smirk in return.

“Can you talk now?” Leo still won’t make eye contact with me, but I’m learning that it might not be out of rudeness, but a discomfort talking to people instead. I nod, shelve the last two books in my hand, and follow him, leaving Amelia with the cart. He leads me around the huge display of his wife’s books and into a small room to the side of the checkout desk marked ‘office’. It’s barely big enough for all the files and

the desk, but we squeeze in, him on one side, me on the other. It's silent for a few minutes and I finally break it.

"So, you need more employees. How many?" I pick my thumbnail and wait for his response. I have exactly zero experience with this. I've never worked at a bookstore, much less owned one, and all my leadership experience comes from being Shelby's assistant manager. She literally gave me the job because I'm her best friend and all the employees were high schoolers. I didn't do anything extra other than work more hours and lock up some nights.

"We can work with two, but three would be ideal. I...need someone else to conduct interviews and that isn't Amelia's job." Leo is six-foot-something with classic good looks and blondish hair. He's an attractive dude, but he's also really... off putting. "Plus, she's young." His eyes finally meet mine for a split second. "So are you, but maybe you being the owner will hold some authority to conduct interviews. Also, I know you're the owner now and changing hands could mean a new direction for the store. I just...I need you to understand what this place means to me, what Matilda meant to me." I look at him, back straight, eyes forward over my head, lip tucked between his teeth.

I rub my forehead under my purple beanie and prepare to say the things running through my head. I woke up early this morning with new goals and new plans, none of them are very Rowen things to do, but it's time to embrace Aunt Matilda's gift for what it is and use it to my full advantage.

My stomach is trying to forcefully evict the frozen waffle I had for breakfast, but I swallow hard and let the words out. "Okay, here's the deal. I am not equipped for this. Like, at all. Not even a little, but the attorney said you are doing a great job running the place and Aunt Matilda let you have free reign. So, if you want to keep doing things like you have been for the last however long, I am not going to stop you. I want to help. I'm here now. I moved here, this is going to be home, so I need a job

that is more than just sitting in her big empty house and spending her money. I'll be one new part time employee until the repairs on the house are done and I can spend less time fixing things there. I'll switch to full time after that. I can help you interview people and get you some more staff in here, so you aren't running poor Amelia ragged. She already puts up with you, no need to make her hate her job by working her so many hours." I look up from my lap to see him watching me with a smirk. Okay good, the guy can take a joke. I breathe out a sigh and keep going, "I think if you let me interview people with you there, we can get more employees. If you give Amelia a raise, she can train them, and by then they may not find you nearly as terrifying and will stay." I stare at his face until he meets my eyes, and he stands behind the desk, extending his hand. I take it and he gives me a firm shake.

"Welcome to Cover to Cover books, Rowen. I think you'll make a fine addition and I look forward to working with you. If you'll get me your shirt size, I can have some shirts ordered and no hats while at work. Can you start tomorrow? The pay is twenty an hour, if you go full time, you get benefits, and our schedules are pretty flexible." I shake his hand back.

"Glad to be part of the team, Leo. I'll see you in the morning and we can start working on getting more staff. I will not, however, be working without my hat because I'm still the owner." His eyes dart to mine and I smile at him before releasing his hand. He shakes his head and I lead us out of the office.

"Be here at nine," he calls from behind me as I walk to the table with his wife's books. I grab the first in the series and head to the register where Amelia is checking someone else out.

"Just take it but walk straight across the street and get it signed." Amelia looks from me to where Leo is standing.

"Why would I do that?" I glance behind me where Leo is rocking from heel to toe,

hands in his pockets watching us.

“The woman in the cafe, Second Breakfast, is the author. Not the one with blue hair, the other one. Super tall, glasses.” Amelia winks at me and taps the book before I step out of the way for the next person in line.

“See you tomorrow!” I step out of Cover to Cover books and pull my coat tighter around me before hurrying across the parking lot and then the busy street to a strip of shops. A sandwich shop is on the far end followed by a hair salon then a pet store. The smallest spot has a sign with Marshall Law Comics at the top and then, taking up three store fronts is Words for Nerds Comics and Collectibles. Huge murals cover the glass windows, and the lot is full, so I assume this is where I’m supposed to be. I pull open the door and step inside the largest comic shop I’ve ever seen.

CHAPTER3

JANET

I’ve run into a burning building before and tackled a man with a gun. Those should be the scariest things I’ve ever done, but no. The scariest thing is getting out of my car after watching Rowen walk inside first. I sat in my car like a coward and watched her come out of the bookstore, cross traffic, and then go all the way in without making a sound. I have to go in. I’m here, I need to get something inside, and I have to go in.

Last night I was flirty as fuck and today I can’t go in the same building. I look down at my clothes and then in the mirror. I look tired. I am tired. I barely slept last night because I met a girl. You’d think I’m twelve, not creeping up on forty. I check my outfit again and sigh. It’s one of those times I thought this would be quick, I don’t need to impress anyone, and here I am looking homeless. Had I known I’d run into this woman I can’t stop thinking about, I’d have done better than old jeans, boots, and a flannel. My hair isn’t washed so it’s up in a low ponytail and I left with not a drop

of makeup. None. I don't wear a lot, but some concealer would have been my friend this morning. At least the flannel is form fitting and not three sizes too big. I pop the two top buttons making sure the cami underneath shows a little and finger comb my hair before twisting it up in a bun and securing it with a scrunchie. This is as good as it's going to get. I get out and walk to the door. It's bitter cold, so I hurry, leaving my coat in the car of course, because I'm a full idiot today.

Inside is warm and the Zelda theme is just cuing up when I open the door. There's a lot of nostalgia in those notes and it calms me almost instantly. Forget the stress of following a stranger that I have crush on, I'm too busy trying to get Zora's Sapphire and save the princess. Those damn water levels got me every time. Fire and earth were no problem, but every water level took me three times as long.

I'm pulled from my old school video game thoughts when I see her over at Second Breakfast, the cafe in Words for Nerds, talking to Tuesday. Rowen's long hair is down, straight and shining down her back with a purple beanie perched on top. I look down at my jeans, tank underneath and flannel shirt, then to her in the exact same wardrobe. Her shirt is tighter, clinging to her curves and paired with purple converse that match the purple in her shirt and her hat. From the side, I can see the slight upturn to the end of her nose and her top lip is slightly fuller than the bottom. I stand and stare right inside the door for way too long to be appropriate until Tuesday laughs, making Rowen laugh. The sound has me looking away and turning toward the front register. Greer is there, and the new girl, Harlow. Greer sits leaned over a sketchbook and Harlow has her nose completely buried in a Doctor Whobook. I stand at the counter for a solid minute before one of them realizes I'm there.

"Oh! Shit!" Harlow jumps when she sees me and the book closes without her getting the chance to mark her place. "Crap." She holds up a finger and flips through the pages before smiling and tearing off a piece of receipt paper and tucking it inside. "I have boxes and boxes of bookmarks at home, but here we are." She waves the book at me. "Here to pick up?"

“Yeah. How many is that so far?” I point the book in her hand and Harlow’s face lights up. She tosses her vibrant blue hair over her shoulder and smiles.

“Once I finish this baby, I’ve done eighty-two.” Harlow is a pretty girl. Very pretty, with bright blue eyes that match her hair and a button nose that scrunches when she smiles. And she’s all of nineteen. She started at Second Breakfast when Tuesday, also known as bestselling author Tyr Weatherby, was working on the fourth book in her Planet Everywhere Series. Now they’re training Harlow all over the store and she’s loving it.

“Eighty-two? It’s February!” I’m always shocked when I come in and she gives me her number. Last year her total on December thirty-first was more than five hundred. I have my weekly comic allotment, and maybe cover a book a month if one of the girls here thinks there’s one I’ll really like. But I tend to find myself flipping through Instagram instead of reading.

“Yeah, well, can’t disappoint my followers by slacking this year. I’ve even been offered a sponsorship by one of those book boxes that goes out every month. It’s not a lot of money, but everyone loves getting the almighty like.” Harlow shrugs and turns to pull my comics from the set of drawers behind her. Greer finally looks up at me from her sketchbook and blinks rapidly.

“Janet. Hey.” She looks tired.

“Can I see?” I point at her book. Greer is an artist. She doesn’t simply draw, but an actual artist who has a new graphic novel coming out in a few months and a signed contract for a ten-book series that she’s writing and illustrating. The comic press next door is owned by her fiancé, Brian, and once news started spreading of her talent, all the big comic presses came running to sign her. Greer laughed, of course, and now Marshall Law Comics is skyrocketing in the comic world with submissions from big up and comers.

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Greer tips her book so I can see her newest rough draft of the characters in her graphic novel. “This is for book five. Can you believe I’m working on a fifth book? The first one isn’t even out yet. I am so freaking tired.” Greer is one of those people who hyper fixates and will not sleep for days while working on a project unless someone takes it away from her.

“That’s incredible.” I touch the page to follow a line of a character’s face. “It looks computer generated. I can’t draw a straight line to save my life, but you create this by hand. It seems unfair.”

“I hope you can cut a straight line because I’m going to need those expert handy-woman skills you offered last night.” Rowen’s voice from behind me has heat crawling up my cheeks.

“Here you go!” Harlow hands me my comics and her eyes land on Rowen. Her cheeks pink too. “Hi, I’m Harlow. Can I help you with anything?” I can’t blame the girl one bit. Rowen is gorgeous.

“Hey. Rowen.” She reaches for a fist bump and Harlow delivers. “I just came to introduce myself and talk to Janet.” Her shoulder bumps mine and I stop breathing for a second. What the actual fuck is wrong with me. I’m a grown woman, but my body thinks I’m fifteen with my first crush on a girl. Harlow makes heart eyes at her and Greer smirks at me. I pull out my wallet and hand Harlow the money for my three comics, but Rowen picks them up before I can and studies each one in the clear plastic sleeve. Brian’s is the first in the stack, his Agent Immortal series has been my favorite since it came out, then there’s a Batgirl and Supergirl. Yeah, I’m an overgrown child. Rowen smirks at me and my face heats again. This is getting

ridiculous.

I clear my throat. “Rowen owns Cover to Cover now,” I say, trying to take her intense gaze off me.

Greer’s face falls. “I’m sorry for your loss.” We all know about Matilda dying, and we all knew someone would inherit her things, but this was Rowen’s family and that sucks.

“Thanks. I’ll definitely miss her, but we hadn’t seen each other in a while. She was a force in the world for sure.” Rowen blinks and sniffles. My hand moves out and rests on her arm. I didn’t tell it to do that, but here we are, my hand gently resting on her arm.

“Thanks for these.” I hold up my comics to Harlow who’s smirking at me like she knows a secret.

“Bye. Nice to meet you.” Greer waves and goes back to her sketchbook, Harlow opens her novel, and I take a step back, hand falling away from Rowen’s arm in the process. She moves with me, walking toward the front door.

“I was actually going to text you.” She pauses, her steps faltering with her words. “Can I buy you a coffee?” I stop too, turning to look at her. Her cheeks are flushed, and she’s nibbling her bottom lip.

“Yeah. Coffee sounds great.” I back track, turning to follow Rowen to Second Breakfast.

“What’s good here?” She leans in close, almost whispering in my ear, our bodies brushing slightly.

“Do you like coffee coffee? Or coffee drinks?” I whisper back, approaching the counter where Tuesday is staring into space at nothing. To be a functioning member of society, it’s weird how often I see her do this, and considering I’m only here once a week, it’s even more astounding. Tuesday rhythmically wipes down the counter, not paying any attention until we’re right in front of her.

“Oh! Hey! What can I get you?” She tosses the rag in a bucket behind her and smiles at us. I asked her once what she was thinking about, and she said her characters were talking to her and she was listening. I guess being an international bestselling author comes with fun perks, like zoning out to listen to your characters.

Rowen stares at the menu board, clearly overwhelmed. “What’s good?” She looks at me, then at Tuesday.

“Two drinks of the month,” I answer for her, sidling in close so our bodies brush again, sending the surge of electricity through me.

“Which one?” Tuesday points at the other side of the board and my eyes move with her fingers. One side has the As you Whip, a whipped cream topped caramel latte. The other side has the Queen of Tarts, a strawberry tart flavored latte.

“As you Whip,” I say with finality and study the board. The drinks of the month are done in chalk by Greer with Buttercup and Wesley from *The Princess Bride* on one side and the Red Queen from *Alice in Wonderland* on the other.

Tuesday starts our drinks and keeps talking. “February is a weird month when it comes to drinks. Some people love the romance inspired drinks, others get salty because they’re single, especially after speed dating. So, we had to do two options, and this is what we came up with. How do you two know each other?” Tuesday suddenly freezes, a cup in each hand and stares at us, a tilt to her head that makes her look like a curious bird.

“Rowen was my Uber driver last night,” I answer, looking over at her with a smile on my face that I know is transparent as hell.

Tuesday sets the cups down and slides them toward us. “Ah. Well, welcome to the nerd zone, Rowen. I appreciate you not firing my husband for being obnoxious. Good luck working with him, Amelia is a saint.” Tuesday says the words, but her eyes are all starry and in love when she says fiancé. I don’t know the whole story because I’m only here once a week for comics, but it sounds like Leo and Tuesday fell in love when they were kids and finally came together recently. From what I can gather, Leo was way worse before they gave up trying to pretend they weren’t in love. It’s hard to imagine.

“I’ll try not to fire him in the future.” Rowen grabs our drinks and carries them to a small table away from the group of women setting up a card game near the front. We take a seat, and she hands me my cup. “He asked me if I knew alphabetical order this morning. I know I look young, but I did make it through kindergarten,” Rowen whispers so Tuesday can’t hear her.

I almost choke on my latte. “That sounds exactly like Leo. He really doesn’t mean to be that way though. So, what brings you across the street, and why are you working over there?” I lean in, hands around the warm paper cup. Up close and in the light her sea blue eyes have flecks of gray in them, and I am completely mesmerized.

“I grabbed Tuesday’s, Tyr’s, whatever. I grabbed the book.” She pulls a large hardback out of the bag across her chest and sets it on the table. “Amelia said to come here for her to sign it and we started chatting about Leo. Then I saw you come in and here we are.” Her cheeks turn pink again and she sips her drink. “What are you doing here?”

“Collins, sorry, Wyatt, my partner, got me into comics recently, so I come here and grab the new releases once a week. They’re a standing order.” Rowen stares at me

blankly for a second then looks at her cup.

“Your partner. Wyatt.” She nods slowly, chewing her lip. It takes me a solid five seconds to process what she gathered from what I said.

“Wait. No. Partner. Like at work. Sergeant Collins is my work partner. Not my... oh ew. Not that he isn’t great, but I... he’s not mytype.” Rowen’s cheeks go from pink to bright red and her eyes are looking everywhere but at me.

“Yeah, I mean, I know. Obviously.” Her eyes go wide. “Not obviously, but I mean. Fuck.” She shakes her head and drops her head into her hands and laughs. “I made this so awkward.” I reach out to touch her hand, but she raises her head and stares at me, face still red. Rowen eyes my hand on the table, then my face. “So, I was planning on texting you today once I figured things out at the bookstore and to see when would be a good for you to come look at a few things that need fixing up. I’m handy, but this is more than a one-person project and I am so overwhelmed. I’d also really like to sleep in a bed at some point but the heat in the upstairs doesn’t seem to work so I’ve been on the couch with a space heater. The house needs... cleaning. So much cleaning. I was not equipped for what this move meant professionally or personally, and now I’m vomiting my issues all over you.” She stops talking and takes a sip of her drink. “I just don’t know anyone here and I had no idea what I was getting into.”

“I’m off today and tomorrow. It’s still early, and unless there’s a huge emergency, I’m all yours to check it out.” My phrasing isn’t lost on me or her. Her lips pull into that mischievous smirk and my inner lovesick girl swoons. I lick my lips and wait for her to respond.

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“Leo needs me at nine in the morning, but I’ll definitely take you up on the offer to come check it out today. I just need the place to be... I don’t know. I’m so overwhelmed here.” She pauses. “Thank you.”

And then I swoon visibly. My face heats from neck to ears and I can’t hide this stupid smile on my face. I didn’t like Reggie this much after months together. I am so screwed. Developing a crush on the new woman in town who is at least ten years younger than me is exactly what I need. Definitely. It’s all totally going to be okay and not leave me heartbroken. Again. I should back up and stop this crazy train now, but I do the exact opposite.

“We can go now. I’ll make a list of things you want to get done while you show me around and we can prioritize. There’s no reason to be on the couch when you have half a dozen bedrooms to choose from.” I finally let my hand slide the rest of the way across the table and rest on hers. Her skin is soft and warm. I’m really, really screwed.

“Thanks.” She says it quietly, and there is nothing else in the entire building other than Rowen and me.

Until a crash of chairs and a loud grunt comes from next to us and we both jump causing Rowen’s latte to spill. She squeaks, boxes topple to the floor, and I turn to see Noralee standing in the middle carrying a box. “Shit!” I start grabbing napkins from the dispenser on the table to clean up the latte while assessing Nora to make sure she didn’t fall.

“Sorry!” she calls from behind the box she’s carrying. I can only see the top of her

wild black curls and her legs, but she looks like she's dressed as... Peter Pan? Green leggings, brown boots, and a red feather in her hair. Nora is a different character every time I see her. "I'm okay!" She shuffles forward, finds the table, and drops the box on it with a thud. Her glasses have slipped down her nose and her green shirt says, 'I'm so fly, I Neverland.' Definitely Peter Pan.

Rowen is still trying to clean up the sticky, wet, latte mess. I turn back to help her, grabbing more napkins until Tuesday appears with a mop and a rag. I take the mop. "Sorry," Rowen mumbles.

"Nora spills at least one drink a day, either directly or indirectly. It's no big deal." Tuesday points at our Peter Pan and laughs.

"That was my fault, huh? Sorry!" Nora approaches and smiles wide at Rowen before giving me a side hug. I hug her back and stand the mop against my chair until Tuesday grabs it. The mess is gone, and Rowen gathers all the soggy paper towels into a wad to toss them in the trash next to our table. "I don't recognize you. I'm Noralee and this is my comic shop." Tuesday yells something from behind us. "Our comic shop. Tuesday owns half. Are you a friend of Janet's?"

"I'm trying to be." Rowen holds out her hand. "I'm Rowen Madison. I own Cover to Cover Books."

Nora's eyes go quickly from confusion to sorrow. "Oh. I am so sorry for your loss. Leo talked about your aunt all the time and adored her. If you need anything let us know, seriously. We don't just say that around here. We mean it." Nora pats her arm softly and I step aside to go get the box she was carrying.

"Where does this go?" I heft the box up and glare at her. "Don't pick up anything this heavy again."

Nora's eyes go wide. "Are you going to tell Wyatt?"

"Do it again and I will." She knows better than to lift heavy things. If her doctor hasn't mentioned it, I know Wyatt has, and he's probably mentioned it more than once. Very loudly.

"Fine. I promise. I'm so used to doing things, I keep forgetting. By the podium. It's the speed dating stuff. I can't believe I got talked into doing this again." I heft the box higher and carry it past the cafe and some glass cases of collectibles to the podium surrounded by tables. Some nights this whole area is Dungeons & Dragons, once a year for a month of Saturdays it's speed dating, and other times kids are in here playing card games, doing homework, or painting miniatures. I leave the box on the stage area and walk back to see Nora ticking things off on her fingers, but the talking stops as soon as she sees me.

I ignore that they were talking about me. "No more lifting." I give her the face my mother always used on me and the brothers. She nods. "So, if you're done talking about me, Rowen and I are leaving. I'm going to help her fix up the house she inherited." I lean over to kiss Noralee on the cheek and wink at Rowen. It has the desired effect. A blush starts at her neck and creeps up slowly until her cheeks are pink. Nora blushes too.

Nora and Rowen say their goodbyes, I grab my comics and toss my cup in the trash, and we pass by Tuesday before we go. After a few more stops to tell everyone bye, we make it out the door and into the cold. "I am not built for cold." Rowen crosses her arms the second we walk outside and my body reacts. I don't think, my arm lifts on its own accord and wraps around her shoulder. Rowen freezes.

"Is this, okay?" I stiffen, realizing I've crossed a line. Maybe she's not cool with touching, or touching in public, or women touching her in public. I'm pretty sure I haven't misread any signals, but I should have asked first. Her shoulders relax and

she leans into me. I let out the breath I was holding.

“Yeah. Of course.”

I rub my hand up and down her arm to warm her. “My car or yours?”

CHAPTER4

ROWEN

Oh my God.

Oh my God.

Oh my God.

Janet has her arm around me, rubbing my arm, and I am a puddle of goo melting to the ground. Also, Janet is really buff. Like shockingly buff. I can feel her bicep flex along my skin and wow. Looking into her hazel eyes, her arm around me, close to her, and my heart is doing all kinds of weird shit. My stomach is carrying a... whatever a lot of butterflies is called. I know I’m blushing. I always blush. This feels amazing. I’m not even cold anymore.

Janet’s looking at me expectantly and I realize she asked me something or told me something that requires a response, and here I am having a full on freak out because her arm is around me. I should probably tell her I’m not a lesbian. I mean, I am, but only like fifty percent. Well, right now it’s more like eighty percent because her eyes are so intense on mine and her arm is around me.

“Sorry. What?” My words come out breathy and I sound like a total moron.

“We can take mine.” A smile creeps onto her lips and my eyes go there, watching it.

“Okay. I need some things from my car, and it’s over there.” I point to the lot across the street.

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“I’ll drive you over.” Janet steers me to her car and we hesitate at the front end. I need to step forward, away from her, but that would mean she isn’t touching me anymore. What if this isn’t what she intended, what if she doesn’t touch me again? What if she was just being nice and trying to keep me warm? I’m an actual idiot. I finally move and her arm falls from my shoulders, making me shiver. The wind picks up a little, cutting through my shirt, and I hurry to get in. Janet jumps in her side and reaches back to grab two coats. One is her work coat, the other a zip up black hoodie. I stuff my arms in it and she starts the car, immediately pushing buttons and my butt gets warm. I smile at her and snuggle down in the seat. Janet puts the car in drive and we pull out, darting across the street and up next to my sleek black sedan. I groan a little, hop out and into my car to get my bag, my coat I should have worn, and the big keyring from my dashboard. I hurry back to her car, shut the door, and press the button to lock mine.

“Ready?” Janet moves the gearshift to drive and glances over at me. I pull my beanie down and my coat up so I’m barely visible. I’m really not made for the cold. I nod under all my layers, and we pull out toward my house. “Maybe my mom and brothers won’t notice the car. If Dad does, he’ll be over to check things out with us, he has a spidey sense about home repairs but isn’t great at them, so just ignore anything he says.”

For a second, I forgot her family lives right down from my new home. Mom, Dad, two brothers. I’m a little jealous. I have an older sister and a mother who is currently on husband number five somewhere. My sister is some big shot Broadway actress, or so she says. I got by with Shelby since we were kids, and now I’ve left her behind too. I wonder what it would take to get her here in East Hollow with me.

The drive is quiet, the only sound is the tires on the asphalt and the heat blowing through the vents, warming my feet and nose. I eventually lean down and turn it down a little, shedding my coat and adjusting my beanie at the same time. The last thing I want is to start sweating. “So, tell me more about Janet Morgan.” I angle myself to face her and watch her profile while she drives. With the big black work coat on, I can’t see her biceps flexing or really anything about her body, so I focus on her face. Her lips are full, her nose is long, straight, and her cheekbones are high. How is she so freaking pretty? I’d give my big toe for my lashes to be as long as hers.

“I’m almost thirty-six, I’m an officer with the EHPD, I have a cute little house a few miles from here that I rent because I’m too chicken shit to commit to a house. I know it sounds weird, but I just can’t imagine buying a house without being sure about my future first. What if I want kids someday, what if I buy a small house then get a big dog, what if I meet a woman who has ten foster kids and I have a tiny house? Too much commitment in buying a house alone. I have two little brothers. Garret and Lucas. All of us are adopted. My mom couldn’t have kids. I read comics for fun and read sci-fi when Wyatt tells me to.” Janet sucks her lip in her mouth and chews on it.

“So that’s Janet Morgan in ten seconds or less?” I smile and lean toward her a little. “Anything else?”

“I’m gay if that wasn’t abundantly clear. Oh, and I’m a Libra.” She shrugs. “What about you?”

My stomach ties in knots, trapping the butterflies inside. “So you’re all about balance in life. You’re extroverted, friendly, and like to right the wrongs in the world.”

“Regular astrologist, aren’t you?” Janet smiles at me and my skin tingles.

“My sister is really into it, so I learned a few things. I’m a Libra too, but more of the indecisive self-pitying type of Libra.” I shrug and watch her chuckle at my

description. “I’m twenty-five, I have nothing figured out in life, and I have an older sister, Margo. She lives in New York, chasing the bright lights. My mom lives in Florida, and I never see her. I spent a few summers with Aunt Matilda as a kid when Mom was too busy. I have no idea who my dad is. My best friend Shelby is back in Georgia, still managing the JCPenney’s but now she’s doing it without me. That was my life’s big achievement until now. I was the assistant manager of a JCPenney’s.” Not that Janet’s life seems particularly glamorous, it just feels more put together than mine. “I never thought I’d ever own a house, much less one this damn big and now I get to learn how to own a business. No big deal.”

“And that is Rowen Madison in ten seconds or less?” Janet pulls into my drive and puts her car in park.

I swallow. This is the part where every lesbian I’ve ever met has written me off. “And I’m bi, in case that wasn’t abundantly clear.” I watch her face, echoing her words. She glances at me, a smile playing at her lips.

“So, men too?” Her words aren’t mean or biting, but my heart thuds loudly in my chest anyway. I like Janet a lot. And she’s clearly into me, so if the fact that I’m not a lesbian, well, not all the way, is a deal breaker, it’s kind of going to suck.

“Yeah, sometimes.” I shrug.

“And you’re out? Like, people know?” Her question makes me pause. This one isn’t judgmental either, just matter of fact.

“I don’t have anyone to know, not really. My sister doesn’t care, my mother doesn’t care, Shelby knows. She even went to pride with me last year in her Ally shirt. But no one here knows because there’s no one to tell. But if you’re asking if I’m comfortable with people knowing, yeah.” I say the words with weird pauses and the whole statement comes out so strange.

“Cool. Cool. I just don’t want to out someone who isn’t ready. That’s all. Well, welcome to East Hollow where there are very slim pickings for my type.” She winks at me and my cheeks get warm. “Ready to go check this out and see what we can do to get you in a bed?” Janet says the last part with a smile that I want to call flirty, but my brain is too busy trying to dissect her reaction to my sexuality to pick apart anything else right now. It wouldn’t be the first time a woman has shot me down for liking men too, but Janet doesn’t seem to care.

“Yeah. Definitely. Thanks for doing this.” I unbuckle and catch her staring at me. “What?” Janet looks like she has something to say, but only smiles and shrugs. Okay then.

“Nothing. I’m just excited. Haven’t had a project since Wyatt added a patio last year.” Janet throws her door open excitedly and gets out. I watch her jog up the worn porch steps to my huge Victorian house and climb out after her. If nothing else comes of this, I’m making a friend. Although, there is no way this won’t turn into an unrequited love story for me. Won’t be the first time I’ve fallen for someone who isn’t into me and probably won’t be the last.

I jog up and pull my keys out, unlocking the door with the one painted black and shoving them back in my pocket as we step inside. The old wooden floors creak under my feet and we close the door softly behind us, leaving us alone in the cavernous foyer. Janet takes a step forward, head tilted back and hazel eyes roaming over the dust covered banister above us, the chandelier, the dark wood stairs. It’s like the Addams’ Family home, but mine and without the hand running around. The sitting room is to the right of the stairs, all the old furniture still covered in sheets and tarps, straight ahead is the kitchen, and to the right is the living room with a massive fireplace on one end, a huge TV on the other, and a bay window on the front of the house. The furniture in here is newer, a large sectional, the giant TV that took me forever to hook my Xbox to and required an adapter, and the small heater I’ve been using to keep warm. My nest of blankets is piled on one side of the sofa when we

walk in and the urge to clean up is overwhelming when she stares at where I've sleeping.

"This place is awesome." Janet walks over to the bay window and throws back the curtains to look over the yard. The glass is grimy and gross, but you can see out. "What do you want to tackle first?" She turns back to me, a glint in her eye and the dim sunlight silhouetting her from behind.

"The heat? Not that the couch isn't comfortable, but this room doesn't hold heat and I want to sleep in a bed." I tip my head. "Or we can finish the tour first? There's a dining room, bathroom, kitchen, and sunroom still to see down here. Upstairs has a ton of bedrooms, bathrooms, and a library. It's all dusty and cobwebbed, but I'll get around to cleaning eventually. The only rooms I've cleaned are this one, sorta, and the kitchen and bath." I really need to get to the store and buy more cleaning supplies. I went thought three bottles of spray cleaner on the bathroom alone.

"Are you going to rent out rooms or anything? This is so much house. Are you going to sell?" The word sell seems to stick in her throat. I start shaking my head almost as soon as she says it. "Good. I'd have to ask how much you want if you sell. This place is amazing. It's crazy that my parents' rancher is just a few doors down from a gorgeous home like this. Not that theirs isn't nice, but theirs is more seventies classic than gothic beauty." Janet looks so excited to be in the house, hands stuffed in her coat pockets, eyes shining as she looks around. "Need help cleaning? I'll help. This is way better than a patio for Wyatt."

"I'll never say no to cleaning help. Come on, I want to watch you freak out over a claw foot tub." I reach out to grab her sleeve to drag her from the room, but as my hand moves toward her arm, she slips her hand from her pocket and catches my fingers in hers. It seems to happen in this weird slow motion, and my brain is not picking up what she's putting down until she spins her palm against mine and cups our hands together. A warm fuzzy feeling runs up my arm to my chest and I can't

make a single neuron in my brain fire. Not one.

“I...” is all that comes out of my mouth.

“Oh.” At this word, the world speeds up again and Janet tries to drop my hand, but I don’t let her let go. Nope. I hold her hand tightly and my brain catches up. I tug her lightly and we walk from my living room and down the hall with her hand in mine. The knots in my stomach are tightening, making me a little queasy, but I ignore it. This gorgeous woman just took my hand, and I am not letting my fear of anything ruin that for me.

“Wait till you see this.” My voice squeaks a little when I talk. I clear my throat. Smooth, Rowen, real smooth.

Janet stops in the kitchen, and I come to a jerking halt, her hand clasping mine. Her mouth is hanging open and her eyes are wide. The kitchen has blood red walls, black and white tiled floors, dark marble counters, and charcoal cabinets. The appliances are all newish stainless steel and the window above the sink looks out over woods and a small yard. The sunroom sits to the right and the bathroom to the left. It’s like a modern gothic upgrade and fits weirdly into the aesthetic of the house.

“Wow,” Janet whispers and I take a step back to join her at the doorway. I had the same reaction the first time I walked in here.

“It gets better.” I tug her and she walks with me, letting me pull her to the bathroom. It’s the cleanest room in the whole house next to the kitchen. I push open the bathroom door and let her step inside, her hand sliding from mine. Our eyes meet for a second and I smirk at her. Clearly this street is going both ways and that makes my heart happy. It’s been a long time since I met someone I got giddy about, and yeah, it’s been a whole day, but we women like to go for what we want.

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“This house is insane.” Janet looks at me, running her hand over the edge of the tub.

“The bedrooms are even better. I hate that one,” I nod to the door off the bathroom.

“Is there another door?” She reaches for the antique knob.

“Nope, you have to go through the bathroom, but be warned it’s...” I don’t get to finish the sentence. Janet opens the door, shrieks, and slams it closed, taking a step back and covering her mouth with her hand. Her hazel eyes are wide, and her face is pale. “I tried to warn you. It’s a little disturbing.”

“What the actual fuck?!” Janet’s voice is high, shrill.

“Uh huh. I had nightmares when I found it and haven’t gone back in. And I was here alone, so be glad I’m here to help you through this difficult time.” I give her a look and she uncovers her mouth, taking a slow breath through her nose and out through pursed lips.

“How are you sleeping in this house. That is a thing of nightmares. I’m going to scare the shit out of Collins. Can I please have him come over?” Her phone is already out and sending a text. I laugh. “We have to go back in, don’t we?” Janet looks from me to the closed door. I nod. “Shit. Okay.” Janet puts her phone back in her coat pocket. I offer my hand and she takes it, threading our fingers this time. I reach for the knob, turning it slowly and taking a deep breath before pushing it in. We’re greeted with hundreds of eyes, maybe thousands. Apparently, Aunt Matilda had an affinity for dolls. So. Many. Dolls.

“I... there aren’t words,” I stammer, looking around at all the blank faces with painted eyes. I’d never studied them before, but with Janet next to me, holding my hand, I can really look. My gaze jumps from one doll to the next, not staying long and counting the creepy pairs of eyes staring, watching. I hit a hundred and stop counting, reaching for the light switch. A dull yellow glow makes them even scarier, especially when paired with the pink and white striped wallpaper and pink floral bed. Shelves are built into the walls to accommodate more than just what covers the bed and dresser. Janet reaches to open a drawer and makes a strangled sound.

“Are there more?” I imagine opening a drawer to see the lifeless eyes staring back up at me and cringe.

“Nope. But they all have more outfits, in case they have company, I guess.” She shudders. “Did your aunt seem like the type for this?”

“Not really.” My grip on her hand loosens as I spin to see more of the room. There are just so many. All dusty, but perfectly coiffed, styled, and arranged. “Maybe this needs to be dealt with more than the heat,” I mumble, and Janet snorts a laugh. “Okay, let’s go. I may lock this from the outside.” I tug her toward the door, but she stays still, eyes moving over the dolls. “Janet.” I whine her name and she hurries after me, turning off the light and closing the door behind her.

“Please tell me you want to sell those?” She shudders again. “So many eyes.”

“I am definitely selling those. I’d say donate to children, but that seems like a cruel thing to do to kids.” I let out a slow breath and turn to Janet. “Upstairs?”

“Are there more rooms like that? A sex dungeon? A real dungeon? Anything else you need to warn me about?” She gives me a stern look, but then smiles.

“No. The rooms are color coordinated, but not in a creepy way, just in a dated way.

Come on.” I pull her through the kitchen, up the stairs, and along the balcony to the first room. It’s colder up here, but she never drops my hand to tuck it in her pocket. We go from the red room, to the green, then blue, and so on until we’ve seen all the rooms, bathrooms, library, and the closets.

“It’s incredible. Minus the dolls. Fuck that room.” Janet and I head back down the steps and she opens the front door to lead me outside, her fingers still twined with mine as we crunch over the partially frozen lawn to the back of the house. She finds the breaker panel, lifts the cover, and lets go of my hand to stoop below it. I grab the metal cover so she can focus and hold it until I hear a series of clicks. Janet backs out with a smile on her face, and dusts off her hands. “And Janet said let there be heat.” We trek back around to the front and head upstairs to check it out. Sure enough, the decorative black vents are blowing warm air that smells like singed hair. I sigh in relief.

“I’ve been sleeping in the cold all this time when all I had to do was flip a switch?” I adjust my beanie and roll my eyes.

“I have all day if there’s anything else you want to tackle.” Her voice dips low and she steps close to me.

“I could definitely get some cleaning done. If you want to help, I won’t say no.” The chill in the air starts to dissipate as the warm breeze from the vents blows over us. Janet’s eyes are locked on mine and her tongue darts out to wet her lip. I can think of a lot of things to tackle with her help, and this time I’m definitely not misreading signs. I take a step closer; her fingers find mine.

“I’d love to help. Where do you want to start?” This time she moves in closer. I don’t answer. It’s pretty clear exactly where I want to start. My fingers glide across her palm and I move in even closer, trailing my hand up her jacket to her shoulder. She puts a hand on my waist and our bodies are touching. I can feel her breath, smell her

shampoo, and fuck waiting for her to make a move, I lean in. My lips brush hers softly just as the doorbell rings. The chime is loud enough to wake the dead and I stumble back, almost taking Janet with me. She grabs my hip, steadying us both.

“You text Wyatt to come over?” My voice comes out thick and I clear my throat.

“Yeah. Worst decision ever.” Janet laughs, eyes moving over my face. “To be continued?”

I smirk and nod, watching her jog through the house to meet Wyatt.

CHAPTER5

JANET

Clearly, I’m a fucking idiot.

Why the hell did I think Collins needed to come over when I’m here alone with her?

Obviously, I didn’t know I’d have her curves and lips pressed to mine less than an hour after that text, but it was still the dumbest decision I’ve ever made. I could be pulling the purple beanie off her head and running my fingers through her long hair right now, but no, I’m about to take Collins into the doll room. It’s going to be funny as hell to watch him scramble from the room, but I still have better things I could be doing right now.

“Hey. You need my help?” Collins is in jeans, a hoodie, and a hat with a ball on top. I bite my lip and he glares at me, holding up a black and red tool bag.

“Yeah, I’m strong, but the upper body strength is failing me right now. It’s this water heater back here.” Rowen comes around the corner to meet us, breath fogging in the

cold, and Collins moves his gaze from me, to her, then to where her hand lands on my hip. I can feel the heat from her touch through my jeans and regret inviting him over even more.

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“Hey. I’m Wyatt.” He pulls off his glove and extends his hand to her.

“Rowen. Thanks for coming to help. It’s too cold for this and Janet just couldn’t get it.” I give her an appreciative glance and she beams at me. I could shove her against the wall and...

“This house belong to the Addams family?” Wyatt looks up and around, taking it in.

“In a former life.” Rowen slides her phone out and shows me that the camera app is open and recording video. I nod.

“It’s back here.” I push past him and lead the party from the front door, past the stairs, through the kitchen, to the bathroom. The tub catches his eye and he runs his hand along the edge before coming to the door. “Water heater is in there. Let me grab my bag.” I have no bag, but I want to see him open the door and watch him freak the fuck out. It scared me and I’m not afraid of creepy shit. Collins is a giant wuss when it comes to this stuff, though, and I’ll be sharing this video with everyone at work, at the comic shop, and every stranger on the internet. Rowen touches her phone; Wyatt grabs the doorknob and opens the door. Rowen raises the phone and winks at me.

“What the fuck!?” Wyatt jumps back, slamming the door and stumbling until he hits me standing behind him. I grab his shoulders, doubling over in laughter and Rowen snorts, following Collins with her phone. “What the hell is wrong with you Morgan!” His voice is high, squeaky, and I literally snort with laughter. “Who the hell does something like that? No. Just no! You called me out here for that shit?” Collins usually doesn’t swear so much, so this really got him. “There are demons in there! You know that right? Demons!” He looks at Rowen and sees the phone. “Fuck the

both of you!” So, maybe this was a little better than kissing Rowen. I can do that later, but this was once in a lifetime. “I thought we called a truce!”

“Last year, we had a war. Pranks were rampant in the department, and we finally had to stop when an officer had to shave his head because he couldn’t get the slime out.” I’m still laughing too hard to talk but manage to get the words out between me wheezing.

“You’re an asshole.” Wyatt takes a breath and lets go of my arm. “I hate you.” He looks at Rowen whose face is red with contained laughter. “Laugh. It’s fine. Go for it. Did you even need help?” Rowen throws her head back laughing hysterically.

“We need help dusting the dolls. Obviously.” I laugh, clapping him on the back.

Collins shakes his head. “How did you two even meet? No offense, but who are you? How did you get drawn into Morgan’s twisted web of pranks?”

Rowen wipes her eyes from laughing. “I’m the new owner of this house and Cover to Cover Books.”

“She drove me home last night.” I give Wyatt the most obvious look I can manage, and he nods slowly.

“So, you met last night and now you’re here?” That shit eating grin on his face makes me roll my eyes. “Sure, you want my help, Morgan? Looks like you’re doing fine on your own. You had your fun, now I can leave you to have your fun.”

“Funny,” I deadpan.

“Trying to help out my partner.” Shrugging, he turns to Rowen. “I’m sorry for your loss, but congratulations on this inheritance. Besides the fact that the dolls are going

to kill you in your sleep, this is a great place. That kitchen's amazing. If you really need help cleaning, and I don't actually have to go in that room ever again, I'll help. Do you have supplies yet? Need the team? I can call in the troops after eight when the shop closes and we can get enough people to get the whole house clean in one go." Wyatt looks from me to Rowen and back. "You know they'll do it just to be in the house, and Viv can cleanse it. Maybe some sage will get the demons out of those dolls."

Rowen's mouth opens and closes. "I... a team? To clean my house? I can't really pay for that yet, not-"

Collins holds up a hand. "Can you buy pizza? If not, I will. Don't worry about it. We help each other here and a friend of Morgan's is a friend of everyone."

She nods enthusiastically. "Pizza I can do. How many?"

"I'll text orders to Morgan. I need to get Cruze covered for more than a few minutes. You two go get cleaning supplies and meet back here in an hour for everyone not working, the rest can come later. Welcome to East Hollow, Rowen." He claps her on the shoulder and winks at me before walking between us through the kitchen and out of the house. We wait until the front door slams and Rowen turns to face me.

"Is this real life? These people don't know me. They'll actually come clean and only want pizza? I don't even think my bestie would do that for me. I'd at least have to throw some money at her." Rowen breathes a laugh and leans back to sit on the edge of the tub.

"He wouldn't have offered unless he meant it. Do you have enough cleaning supplies? Windex? Clorox? Store run?" I offer my hand and she takes it, letting me pull her to her feet and into me. She sucks her bottom lip between her teeth and nibbles it, her eyes roaming my face and hesitating on my mouth a beat too. I skim

my hand up her arm, the other going to her waist. Rowen steps toward me, her hand comes up to brush where my neck meets my shoulder, working her way below the collar of my coat to rest against my skin. I know my pulse picks up, and she can feel it in my neck. Her smile tells me everything, the smirk I saw in her photo, the one that speaks volumes without a word.

“We should go to the store,” Rowen whispers, smile still on her face. “But...”

I cup her face, tighten my grip on her waist and ease her closer. Her eyes flutter closed, and I press my lips to hers. She tips her head, immediately deepening the kiss, her other hand slides around my back, pulling me closer. Our bodies meld perfectly, her curves pressing to mine. I’m taller, but not much, so everything is right there, aligning perfectly. I slip my hand into her hair, threading the soft strands between my fingers, mouth moving with hers. Heat and desire pulse through me, my whole body humming with a want I haven’t felt in a long time. Rowen pushes to her toes, her tongue teasing my lips. Her heart thuds against mine, her grip on my neck tightens, and I part my lips for her. My back hits the wall but I don’t remember stepping back or pulling her with me. Her hand on my neck moves to the zipper of my coat and freezes. My eyes open and clash with hers, our lips still touching. Her cheeks are flushed, eyes glassy, shoulders moving with each breath. Nothing moves for one beat, two, and then I blink. Rowen eases down from her toes, lips leaving mine in slow motion. I don’t let her move away though, flexing my hand against her waist so she doesn’t step back. She licks her lips and I watch with all my attention.

“Sorry.” I am not sorry. Not even a little. I’ve never been less sorry in my life. Kissing Rowen is electric.

“Liar.” That damn smirk.

“Yeah.” I lean in and kiss her again, quick and soft. “Wow.” I know my face has to be as flushed as hers, my eyes just as glassy, and all I want is to kiss her again, more,

let her take off this coat and everything else.

“Should we go? Or we can keep going?” Rowen clears her throat, eyes darting to my lips and back to my eyes. My brain makes no more thoughts while I entertain the keep going option. Rowen on the sectional sofa, a knee on either side of my hips, her skin against mine, my hand tangled in her hair, kissing down her neck... “Right, so the store?” She pulls me from my fantasy, taking my silence as rejection.

“No.” I pull her closer. “I mean, yes, but I’m not done.” My brain and mouth don’t seem to really want to connect properly, but my body knows to lean in and kiss her again. It’s slower this time, but more sure. I know how my mouth fits with hers now, know how to get her lips to part and how our bodies fit. I work my hand down her waist to the hem of her shirt and under it, my hand pressing into her skin. I rub my thumb over the soft curve of her hip and she whimpers into my mouth. I tighten my grip and feel the goosebumps erupt over her skin. Rowen pulls away first, eyes still closed, and blows out a slow breath. “So, we should go?” My phone buzzes in my pocket, but I don’t check it yet, I know it’s Collins with a pizza order, but I have more important things on my mind.

“Can we pick this up again later? When the only clean surface isn’t the sofa.” Rowen leans in to kiss the corner of my mouth and smiles.

I nod. “Yeah. Definitely.” I brush invisible hairs from my face and swallow the lump in my throat. My hands fall away from her, and I immediately miss touching her. My fingers twitch to make contact again. “I’ll drive.” I reach for my keys in my pocket and realize how stupid it was to say that. Her car is at the bookstore. “I can take you to get your car on the way back?” I don’t want her driving separately, I want my hand on her thigh on our way back here knowing that later, I’ll toss that beanie and her clothes on the floor and kiss every inch of her. It can wait.

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“This is okay, right?” Rowen shuffles a little closer and reaches up to run a finger from my hairline to my jaw. My hands go to her hips instantly.

“Yeah.” I’m saying that word so much, but my brain is mush and it’s all her fault. I know I have a better vocabulary than saying, yeah, every other word, but she’s touching me and nothing else matters. I haven’t felt this in a really long time. Years. I haven’t wanted a woman so bad in years. I never wanted Reggie this badly. Our union was more one of convenience than real attraction. Reggie is hot, don’t get me wrong, but Rowen is something else.

“I don’t think I’ve ever made out with anyone before a first date before.” Rowen’s thumb traces my bottom lip.

“We had coffee this morning.” I nip at her thumb and lean in to kiss her forehead. “That counts.” Her whole-body melts against me when my lips touch between her brows.

“It was free coffee. That doesn’t count.”

“Then I’ll buy the pizza, sit next to you, and hold your hand while we eat. Or you can not care that we haven’t been out yet, agree to go out with me soon, and it still counts.” My phone buzzes in my pocket again and I sigh. “Collins.” I pull the phone out and check the text. Rowen shamelessly peeks at the screen.

Collins: Cheese, pep, and a Hawaiian. See ya in an hour.

Collins: Stop making out and order the pizza. Everyone is coming.

Rowen giggles and I nearly drop my phone. If I thought her smirk was disarming, her laugh is everything. I close the text and switch to the app for the local pizza place, tapping on toppings and finding the best deal while still feeding the entire crew. I know I won't get Rowen alone again until they all leave tonight, and I probably won't see her tomorrow, so I pull her close, leaning her against me while I order.

"If we leave now, get to the store to get cleaning supplies, and grab your car, we can get back in time for pizza and help." I kiss her head again just to feel her reaction and watch her smile.

"Let's go." She grabs her coat on the way out, shoving her arms through and pulling her hair out from the back as we step out into the cold. I start the car and take her hand as we walk and open her door for her. The drive to the store is silent, whatever I had on this morning plays softly on the radio, but I'm focused on her hand on top of mine resting on her thigh. Her fingers trace mine, sending little pulses of electricity up my arm and making me warm all the way through.

I stop at the store first, the only big box store in East Hollow, and Rowen grabs a cart as we go in. Twenty minutes later, we've argued playfully over which cleaner smells best, which color rags to buy, and the best mop for the job. She may never have to buy cleaning supplies again after this. Instead of fighting, we bought my choice and her choice on everything so we have double the stuff. I toss rubber gloves in the cart, a bag of chocolates as we pass, and a case of beer. Once we've checked out, we pick up her car and head back to her new home.

Pulling up the second time in one day doesn't make the house any less breathtaking. With some touch up paint, pressure washed siding, and some landscaping, it can be the most beautiful house in town. I jump out and help her carry all the bags, mops, and cleaners in as the pizza pulls up. I hand the driver a twenty-dollar tip for delivering eight pizzas, take the food and balance it all on the way to her magnificent kitchen. I'm not even a chef, but the kitchen is the best part of the house. At least I

think that until I see her standing in the sunroom we never got to. I leave the pizzas on the dark marble counter tops and go to find her. The room is warm and outfitted with dated wicker furniture and threadbare rugs. The windows are grimy and streaked in dust, but the view over the small back yard and thick tree line is almost as creepy as the doll room, but in a beautiful way. It's dusk out, the sun is hitting the trees at the right angle to cast long shadows over the grass, and it's a haunting sight.

"Wow." I step in behind her and rest my chin on her shoulder, hands going around her middle. Rowen tenses and I start to pull away, but she holds me in place. "Is this, okay?" The realization that I'm probably coming on a little strong hits me. Just because her tongue was down my throat earlier doesn't mean she is as into me as I am her.

"Mmhmm." She sighs and leans her head into mine. "You startled me. I was just thinking."

"About?" I brush her hair back and kiss her neck.

"I work tomorrow morning at a job I don't know how to do, I have this really hot woman hanging out in my house right now, and I own a home. A month ago, I wasn't sure I could pay half the rent on a two-bedroom apartment, had a dead-end job, and was swiping left a whole lot. It's overwhelming." She watches me from the corner of her eye.

"Last month was just like this month, except I was driving to Knoxville to hang out in gay bars." I shrug, making her head move along with mine.

"Can I take you out sometime soon? I mean... If this is just whatever, I'd still like to hang out. I like spending time with you. I'd like to get to know you outside of your cleaning and handy woman skills." I feel her hold her breath and I relax my shoulders. It's nice to hear she wants to spend more time with me too.

“I work tomorrow, night shift, but that has me going in at nine. I can do dinner. Getting to know you sounds great.” A knock echoes through the house and she pulls away to get the door, but I pull her back to press a quick kiss to her cheek before she gets sucked up in all the new friends she’s about to have.

Collins strolls down the hall first, wearing paint splattered clothes and a backwards ball cap. Behind Wyatt is August, a frequent patron of Words for Nerds and professional gamer slash influencer. Trailing in last is Rae, August’s other half. Her hair is in two long blonde braids, headphones over her ears, and eyes on her phone. August gently reaches and takes the phone once they make it to the kitchen. She glares at him and blows a pink bubble as big as her head. I know nothing of the professional gaming world, but Rae is the biggest of big deals. She’s the top grossing Glitch and YouTube streamer currently, followed closely by August. Once they joined forces, they became an unstoppable force that has made all the magazine covers as two of the thirty under thirty most wealthy people.

“I heard you need people to get their hands dirty.” Rae rubs her hands together and her gaze flicks between Rowen and me.

“You’re RaeGunn.” Rowen’s cheeks turn red.

“Hey, you’re my brother’s new boss, right? Rowen? I’m Rae, this is August. Leo’s my asshole older brother.” Rae holds out a fist for Rowen and for as second, I think Rowen might bow down and kiss her hand, but finally lifts her own fist in a bump.

“Leo... is your brother?” Rowen’s voice is a squeak. “RaeGunnReality is in my house?” She looks at me like I might tell her this is a dream. I just laugh. Maybe it’s a generational thing, but the celebrity gamer concept is lost on me. I totally support anyone who can make it happen, but I don’t understand it.

“You a gamer?” August offers Rowen his fist and the conversation about gaming

ensues. I step to the fridge, grab two beers, and take one to Collins. We watch the gamer talk go on for a while, until they all three start laughing and break up the party to grab pizza.

“This place is cool AF. Addams family vibes.” Rae wanders into the bathroom.

“Explore anything you want.” As soon as Rowen says the words, a scream comes from the bathroom and the door slams.

“What in the My Strange Addiction demon hell is that?” Rae comes out, eyes wide, chest heaving. I choke on my beer and Wyatt snorts as the front door opens and Greer comes in. Her first comment is how amazing the house is and talk of a mini-Hogwarts castle. Rae points her to the bathroom and we all standby while Rae traumatizes her friend. Once the early crew is all sufficiently freaked out by the hundreds of doll eyes and pink wallpaper, we hand out cleaning supplies and each person picks a room. Rowen and I go up and pick the largest bedroom to start on together, buckets, hot water, cleaners, and towels ready to dust.

“I love the walls in here.” Rowen runs a hand down the black and gray striped wallpaper. “Ready?” I look from the king bed to the bay window with the same view as the sunroom, and all the cobwebs living in the massive chandelier.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

CHAPTER6

ROWEN

“I feel it all over me.” I’m not the kind of girl to shy away from some dirt, but I am literally coated in a layer of dust. It’s on my lashes, in my pores, all over my poor purple beanie.

“That’s the last load of bedding in.” Janet settles next to me on the steps and leans back. I want nothing more than to go curl into a ball on the sofa and sleep for days, but Rae and August are still working on the formal dining room and Wyatt is outside emptying the Shop-Vac we found in a closet. We found out that the vacuum was a much more efficient way to clean up piles of dust than a rag or broom. Only one vacuum means we had to take turns though, so now it’s midnight and I want to die slowly, but not covered in all this sticky dust.

“You guys are the actual best humans I’ve ever met.” I wipe my face, but my hands are just as dirty, so it’s only smears more on my cheek. Janet laughs and I reach over, rubbing my thumb across her forehead. She lunges for me, tackling me back into the steps and rubbing her face on my shirt. I squeal and struggle to back up the stairs away from her, but she’s stronger and holds me in place. I open my eyes and the look on her face stops my laugh, it stops everything. What did I do to deserve any woman looking at me the way Janet Morgan is right now? It’s lust, curiosity, heat. I start to lick my lip but think better of it. We’re covered in dust and grime, and that includes my mouth.

“Brian and I got the sitting room done, but it... oh.” Greer’s high voice stops, and Janet pushes her body off mine, sitting next to me. I pull my shirt down and sit up, pulling off my beanie to fix my hair and causing a cloud of dust to cover me.

“Ew.” I huff and toss the beanie down next to me. “Thank you, guys, so much. I really can’t tell you how much this means to me.” These practical strangers just came and cleaned my whole house for pizza and beer.

“Anytime. Welcome to the family.” Brian offers me a fist bump and a friendly smile. I touch my fist to his and watch him pull Greer against him. They’re a cute couple. Greer is barely five feet tall with cotton candy pink hair and matching glasses where Brian is at least six feet, dark skin, and a wardrobe that looks like Sheldon Cooper dressed him. “Any boss of Leo’s is a friend of ours. You read comics too?”

Brian and I talk about his comic series, and I promise to come by Words for Nerds to pick up a copy soon. Janet plays with the hem of my shirt, and I struggle to really focus on what Brian is saying. I literally can’t use my brain on anything but her fingers skimming my hip. I wave at Brian and Greer on their way out, we say goodbye to Rae and August, hugging them even though we’re all disgusting. Wyatt came in last, replaced the vacuum, and leaned against the door facing us.

“You know it was only last night I asked when you were going to find a woman. I didn’t expect you to move so fast. There’s a joke about that right? About lesbians and moving fast?” He smirks and Janet flips him off.

“Lesbians do everything faster, Collins, that’s why so many women switch teams.” Janet stands and waves Wyatt in for a hug. He pats her back and reaches for the door. “Thanks for helping and lending your masculine cleaning prowess.”

“Thanks, really, and tell Nora thank you again for me. I know she was tired and came to help anyway.” I don’t stand but smile up at him. Nora told me tonight that she and

Wyatt are expecting their first baby together and she's too tired to function some days. That made two of us, and I'm not building a whole human inside me. Wyatt leaves, giving Janet a wink on the way out, and shuts the door quietly behind him. After having a house full of people cleaning and joking, and music playing for the last several hours, the silence is welcome and eerie.

"You're so dirty." Janet smiles at me, hands in her jean pockets.

"You are too." All the implications of this conversation run through my mind.

"There are three very clean bathrooms in the upstairs alone. Mind if I clean up before I go?" She's still looking at me in a way that says she'd love to undress me, but her words are too matter of fact.

"Totally. Yes. Of course. Need some clothes? I can loan you mine and wash those?" I stutter through, tamping down the embarrassment from misreading her.

"Thanks." She offers her hand to help me up and we head in opposite directions. I go down to the living room, grabbing the duffel bag and suitcase before lugging them both up to the room I claimed as mine. The black room. The aesthetic says creepy and gothic, and I love it. It was my favorite room as a kid too. I drag the bags down the hall, push the door open with my hip, and turn to see Janet. Her flannel shirt is open to expose a thin camisole under it, her jeans are gone, a dusty pile on the floor, and I'm openly staring at every single muscled inch of her. Her legs are long, toned, and perfect from the bottom of her ass cheeks covered in snug boy shorts all the way down to her bare toes. My gaze moves up to the hint of skin between her black shorts and white camisole, pauses, and travels upward to her face. She's watching me watch her and there's something so intimate about it.

"Sorry." I finally manage a word and she reaches up to pull her hair down from the low bun it's been in all day. Blonde hair tumbles in waves around her shoulders and I

want to touch it so bad. Both times I've seen her, it's been back in that damn bun, but now I could run my fingers through it, tug it.

"It's fine." Janet confidently shrugs the unbuttoned shirt from her shoulders and lets it fall to the floor. Her biceps make my knees weak. Muscles flex under the soft skin of her shoulders and back, begging me to touch them. I can't take it all in at once, so my eyes roam over her hungrily, pausing on her breasts peeking out of the top of the camisole she's still wearing. "Are you coming?" My brain answers that question in about fifteen ways, but my mouth only opens and closes.

"Hmm?" I can't form words. Apparently, it only takes a half-naked Janet to kill all my brain cells.

"Saves water." Janet shrugs and walks toward the bathroom. I have never taken off an entire outfit so fast in my life. A cloud of dust surrounds my shirt and tank as I strip them off, my jeans are streaked in all the crud of the day, and my shoes might not be salvageable. I hear the water start running and tug off my last sock, stumbling past the mirror and taking a quick glance at my basic gray cotton bra and panties. At least they match, but hopefully they won't be on long. I pause for a split second to think about the rest of me, not the dirt streaks on my face but the soft curves of my hips and thighs, my fuller breasts. I scan the mirror, chew my lip, and let it go. I look pretty damn cute covered in dirt.

The bathroom mirror is steamed over, and a cloud hangs low in the room, so I close the door quickly to keep it all in. The black curtain is pulled around the claw foot tub, water is clearly hitting a body inside, and I'm standing out here, psyching myself up. She clearly said it saves water and asked if I was coming. My brain went to double entendre there, but what if she didn't mean it? What if it was just teasing? What- Oh fuck it. I toss my bra and panties next to hers on the floor, pull back the curtain, and step in. The hot water stings my skin, but in a cleansing way. Goosebumps cover my skin instantly and I'm overly aware of how... cold the rest of me is until she touches

me and literally nothing else matters. Her wet hands slide up my skin, coaxing me closer, until I'm under the spray with her, water running down my face, dirt swirling around the drain.

"Took you long enough," Janet whispers in my ear, the words barely audible over the water.

"Sorry, had to psych myself up. You naked is a little intimidating." Might as well be honest. Her hands glide from my arms to my waist and cup my ass, a shudder moves from her chest to mine.

"Intimidating?" she mutters, pressing her lips to my throat, and all rational thought is gone. I have no more brain cells. If I thought Janet half naked was impressive, Janet pressed against me and wet is a whole new experience.

"Your thighs could crush my skull." I wipe water from my face and realize I'm standing here with the most beautiful woman I've ever seen touching me while my hands dangle uselessly at my sides. Get it together, Rowen. I curl my fingers around the back of her neck, her pulse jumping beneath my palm, and lean in.

"Play your cards right and you can find out if they can." Her teeth graze my shoulder down to my collar bone and her hands move up my ribcage to the underside of my breasts and I am literally going to die if she doesn't keep going. I run my hands through her damp hair as she moves lower, kissing down my chest and sucking my nipple into her mouth. I gasp, my back arches, and my eyes close. I'm so fucked. She moves to the other side and gets the same reaction from me before gliding back up my body and pressing her mouth to mine. Water streams over us, her hands roam my back, my ass, my hips. I lick the seam of her lips and she opens, tongue coming out to dance with mine. The faint taste of beer lingers on her. My head swims like I was the one drinking and I kiss down her neck to her shoulder, my hands finally roaming over her, exploring all the toned muscles of her back, shoulders, arms, ass.

“Wow.” I press the word into her chest, lower, hands following my mouth’s path down her chest and ribcage to her perfect, pert breasts. I cup one in each hand, running my thumbs over her nipples and feeling her body stiffen, her breathing quicken. Janet runs her hands over the top my head, smoothing stray strands from my face. I kiss across her clavicle, licking her wet skin as I go lower to drag my tongue from one nipple to the other and back before coming up to kiss her again. I grip her hips, her fingers tangle in my hair, and our lips move in perfect fluid unison. An overwhelming heat pools low in my belly, begging her to touch me, begging me to touch her, but I want to draw this out, take my time. What if this is all she wants? What if I get this one time with her? I’m going to make this night last as long as I can.

Janet does not have the same idea. She pulls back, taking my lower lip with her and giving it a light nibble before releasing it. I immediately lick it and watch the wicked smile cross her face. I return it and she wordlessly turns me around so I’m facing the black curtain. Her hands find my waist and pull me into her, my slick back to her front. I reach back and touch her face while she buries it in my neck. Her teeth graze my sensitive skin, hands moving all over me. One hand cups my breast, toying with my nipple, making me squirm. The pressure building between my thighs is enough to make me whimper but Janet doesn’t stop. I tug at her hair, she kisses my neck and grabs my other hand to take it lower with her, letting go at my hip. Her long delicate fingers move even lower, nudging my legs apart enough to slip between them. My breathing halts when she bumps my clit and bites my neck at the same time, her other hand rolling my nipple gently between her thumb and forefinger. She strokes through my wet skin until finally sliding one finger inside me, then two, and curling them expertly. I gasp, eyes closing, head falling back. She slides her fingers out, moving them to my clit and making soft circles there, bringing my body to the cusp and stopping to dip them inside me and then back out. My head swims, my whole body is strung tight, ready to fall apart at her command.

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“Show me what you like.” The words are a low command in my ear, and I move my hand to cover hers, drawing them up to my clit and adding the slightest pressure there. I leave my hand on top of hers, making slow circles on my clit. I add more pressure and the slow building orgasm comes full force. My body tenses, pleasure flooding every cell, every synapse. I grip her hair, my moan bounces through the steamy bathroom, and ecstasy zips through me. My moans slow to gasps of pleasure as she slows, easing me out of my orgasm and back down to earth. I feel weightless, boneless, and completely drunk on Janet.

My breathing starts to slow, and my head becomes less fuzzy when I smell something fruity. “Strawberries.” I say the word all breathy, and Janet laughs. Strawberries would be my shampoo, and Janet is lathering it into my hair.

“It smells amazing.” She massages my scalp and I nearly come again.

“That feels amazing.” My back is still to her and I don’t know what to do with my hands, so I turn to face her, grabbing her hips and pulling her to me. Soapy hands move to my neck and shoulders.

“Do you own a turtleneck?” She raises a brow and I touch my neck.

“I do not.” I step under the spray to rinse my hair and Janet moves, grabbing my shampoo and lathering her own hair. I watch the suds run down her perky breasts, her flat stomach, and hip bones. A perfect thin strip of hair points to the apex of her thighs. I move my eyes back to hers.

“Next time, I want to see your face when you come.” Janet smiles and reaches for

me, switching our places so she can rinse her hair.

“Next time?” I really just want to hear her say it again.

“You heard me.” Yes, yes, I did. Loud and clear.

“I did.” I agree, moving in to run hands over her wet hair and kissing her again. “We should finish up in here. I have no idea how long this hot water will last.” I grab the conditioner, and she picks up the body wash. We take turns wordlessly washing the rest of the dust and grime from each other, stealing kisses, nibbles, and tasting each other as we go. Our skin is pink and mottled from the hot water and scrubbing when we get out, but as soon as I clear the mirror, the hickey on my neck is bright and obvious. I give Janet a look as she wraps a towel around herself, and she shrugs. We take our time toweling off, and I go to the bedroom, cooler air prickling my skin, to get us both clean clothes. I grab two pairs of sweats and two shirts and walk back into the bathroom in time to see Janet bent over drying off her legs. Her ass is on full display, and I have the urge to kiss every inch of her exposed skin, which is all of it. The colder air in the bedroom sucks the steam from the bathroom as we get dressed and I can see her more clearly. She’s so fucking beautiful. I throw my clothes on first and step over to her before she can put the sweatpants on, grabbing her hips and pressing her back into the his and hers sink. Or in this case, hers and hers.

“I like you in my shirt.” I kiss her, backing up when she tries to kiss me back.

“You might not get it back.” Janet drapes her arms around my neck, humming when I kiss her neck, my hands sliding down to her ass.

“I’m fine with that.” I work my way down her body, lifting her shirt to expose abs and muscles that I definitely haven’t seen on my own body. I kiss across from one hip bone to the next, working my way lower until I’m on my knees in front of her. Nerves settle in my stomach, and my hands rub her thighs to keep from shaking. The

last thing I want to give away right now is that I've never actually done this before. I've been with exactly one other woman, she never let me return the favor, and then promptly broke my heart. Janet's eyes bore into me, I can feel them without even looking up. Starting at her thigh, I kiss my way up, skipping all the important bits and moving my lips down the other leg to her knee. Janet lets out a shuddering breath when I drag my tongue all the way up to the apex of her thighs and I love that I can affect her this way. Before I lose my nerve, and with urging from her hands in my hair, I dive in. Janet drapes her leg over my shoulder, blunt nails digging into my scalp as I lick from bottom to top, tongue swirling around her clit before doing it again. It doesn't take long for her to direct me exactly where she wants me, tugging at my hair, heavy breaths of pleasure picking up when I suck her clit into my mouth. Glancing up, I see her head thrown back, chest heaving, and the sight has me two seconds from coming again myself.

"Oh fuck." Janet's normally even voice is high, breathy and her hips buck into my face when she comes. I dig my fingers into her thighs, keeping them apart, making her ride out her pleasure for as long as I can. Her nails score my scalp, the bite of pain adding to how much getting her off is turning me on. I could literally do this all night if she'd let me. I slow my pace, licking her slowly, bumping her clit with my tongue and making her gasp with aftershocks until a sharp tug to my hair has me lowering her leg and climbing to my feet. A slow smile graces her lips and she pulls me into her.

"We should... I should go to bed." I want her to stay so, so bad, but don't want to assume.

"Alone?" She picks up the sweats and steps into them before turning to the mirror and raking her hair into a bun, securing it with a band from her wrist.

"I don't have to go to bed alone." I lean against the sink, watching her fix her hair and nibble her lip.

“It is pretty late, and I did have a couple of beers.” She mirrors my stance, too far away.

“And your Uber driver is off tonight.” My fingers itch to touch her again, but I stay where I am.

“She is. I should probably get her to bed. Big day tomorrow.” Janet smiles and makes the first move, stepping toward me. I let her take my hand and pull me to the bed, turning off lights as we go. She tugs me down with her, a heap of arms and legs and blankets until we’re both on our sides, legs entwined, facing each other. The lamp behind me lights up her face with a dim yellow glow, making her hazel eyes dance. “You... you could be really good for me or really dangerous.” She tucks a strand of hair behind my ear.

“Both?” I inch in closer.

“Both is good.” She winks at me and my face heats. “Dinner tomorrow? I can pick you up from the bookstore.”

“My treat. Since you got the pizza.” I catch her hand as it comes up to touch my face and press a kiss to her palm.

“It’s a date. Now go to sleep.” She leans over me, flicking off the lamp, and settles in closer than she was before, our noses almost touching in the darkness. She’s right about one thing, this is either going to be something amazing, or something terrible.

CHAPTER 7

JANET

“I legitimately haveno idea what’s going on!” Playing a game designed for couples

that requires absolute in sync teamwork is a fucking terrible idea when the person you're playing with is new to your life.

“I’m going to turn this thingy and you run up to the platform. The right bumper swings you across! GO!” Rowen yells the directions like we aren’t sitting in the same room on the same sofa. I press my thumb on the joystick, holding it down to make my little blue haired character dash across the screen and hit the A to jump her up on the platform, hit the button I hope is correct and confetti erupts on the screen. I sag back on the couch in relief, Rowen slumping next to me and letting her head fall on my shoulder.

“I wonder how many marriages have ended over this game about a fictional couple?” I rest my head on top of hers.

“Hundreds. I want to never play with you again, and we aren’t even married.” Rowen sighs. “I really thought this game would be fun, and it is, but does this stress you out as much as it does me?”

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“Maybe more.” I roll my shoulders. “Definitely more.” The new game came out three weeks ago and since I’m not a gamer by any stretch, Rowen thought it’d be the perfect game to introduce me to gaming. I’d have been better off with any game on the planet other than this one. She’s so frustrated with me and I feel like complete garbage because of it.

“You’re going to hate gaming forever now,” she whines, settling the controllers in the floor and moving back to her spot.

“I’m not. I just hate this game. I get that teamwork is the point, but holy shit teamwork is hard. No wonder the couple in the game is getting divorced. They probably played this game, kept dying, and realized it’s not worth it.” I groan.

“Most two player games are competitive. You kill each other, race each other, whatever. Even two player games where that isn’t your goal, one comes out on top, but this is next level teamwork. Thanks for playing with me even though you hate it.”

“I like playing with you. This game is another story though. I’m starting to think I may have an actual heart attack.” I adjust so my arms are around her. “Still on for tonight?” I inhale her scent, resting my face on her head, absorbing as much of Rowen as I can. She nods and I close my eyes. We’ve been at this for weeks now. Eight of them to be exact. It’s strange to think that eight weeks ago, she wasn’t in my life, kissing me, holding my hand, sleeping next to me. Now she is. Not every day, but most days. I wake up next to her, we spend more time with each other than anyone else, except maybe Collins, and it fits, it’s comfortable. Rowen and I work. It’s exactly what I was missing in my life, the void I spent countless hours trying to fill with dating apps, trips to gay bars, and flirting with women I knew couldn’t give

me what I need. Sitting here in her living room, arms around her while she dozes on my chest, I start thinking about what could come next. Rowen's young, fun, figuring out her new life, but I have no indication if she wants more from me, from us. Part of me wants to ask, wants to lay my cards on the table, but why rock the boat? Why mess up this great thing we have going, video game aside, to push for things she isn't ready to give? I let it go, slouching more on the sofa, letting Rowen fall more into me, and close my eyes. Her breathing evened out almost immediately, soft snores coming from her while she sleeps. I learned our first night together that the quickest way to get her to pass out is letting her lie on my chest. It's like a switch flips, and it's lights out.

The chirping of her alarm playing some bouncy tune rouses both of us from our midmorning nap and I rub the pain in my neck as soon as Rowen pushes off me to turn the alarm off. "Ugh!" She flops back, rubbing her eyes. "Four hours of work with Leo then he leaves, and I get an hour with Amelia before I'm out of there and getting ready for tonight." She rolls her head to face me, eyes tired and hair mussed from sleep.

"I can't wait." I lean over to kiss her.

"I have to dress up?"

"It's a nice place, but a ball gown isn't necessary unless you have one handy. I would definitely eat you out under a ball gown if you wore one" I stand and pop my back, offering my hand to help her up.

"I am finding a ballgown as soon as humanly possible." She smooths her hair back and grabs her beanie from where she tossed it while we played. "You're picking me up?" She bats her lashes at me, and I nod. "Yay! I'll see you later then. Expect lots of whiny texts about how terrible Leo is and how I want to kill him in his sleep."

“Don’t tell your-” Her eyes go wide and I back track, realizing I almost used a word we’re actively avoiding. “Your friendly neighborhood cop that you want to kill people. That’s how to commit murder one-oh-one.” I swallow the lump in my throat.

“Damn it. Now I can’t kill him because you’ll know it was me.” She rolls her eyes and brushes a wrinkle from my shirt. “Go do whatever you do when we aren’t together, I need to leave now or Leo will glare at me all night for being five seconds late.” I walk out with her, hand in hand, and kiss her softly before letting her in her car and shutting the door. I watch her back out and head home for my gym bag to work off some of the aggression over that damn video game.

Collins wipes down the treadmill and comes over to stand where I’m curling free weights, that shit eating grin on his face. Without a word, he takes the bench close to mine and joins me. He thinks I’m going to crack under the silent pressure, but I’m not Noralee. She hates silence. I also spend my time with a talker, so I can wait him out forever. His eyes bore into me, both of us not speaking, switching arms, and counting reps silently. I watch the clock, counting the seconds while nothing but upbeat gym music fills the air around us. I set the weight gently on the floor, stand and stretch, still not saying a word. I pop my brows at him, my own smirk on my face, and start to walk away.

“Fuck. Fine. I give.” Collins drops his weight and jogs after me. “I’m here on an intel mission. Nora and the girls want to know if you’re having the talk tonight.” His jaw twitches and his face turns red. I stare at him, mock innocence on my face, and blink a couple of times. “You know, the are we official talk. Apparently, they’re obsessed with this conversation that defines the parameters of the relationship and this is official date number ten. Your potential girlfriend is spending a lot of time with my wife and Rowen didn’t know about the talk. They’ve enlightened her and now they all need to know your intentions.” Wyatt shakes his head, rubbing his forehead.

“Cool story, needs more dragons.” I roll my eyes. Being raised in a house with two

very dramatic brothers, I learned to be levelheaded. Add that skill to my current occupation, and I can keep cool in the most stressful of situations. My face is a perfect mask of bored disinterest, but my insides are a fucking wreck. A bead of sweat creeps down my back, my teeth are clenched, and my stomach is a knot. Rowen wants a commitment. Not a permanent one, but still, she wants something official, lasting, a label. It's been two months, which is no time at all for normal people, but for a lesbian, I should be planning a wedding and naming our children. Hey, some stereotypes have some truth. In a town where out women are a rare commodity, you lock that stuff down fast. Unless you're Reggie, but that's a whole different issue.

"I was supposed to covertly ask you about how things are going and all that shit then report back, but I don't play those games, so I asked outright. Nora wants to know if date ten is the official 'we only see each other' conversation." Wyatt rubs the back of his neck. I want to snap at him, tell him it's none of his fucking business or Nora's, but I know that's just me being an asshole and being scared. I'm falling for Rowen, hard, and if she wants a commitment from me, I'll give it. The problem is, I don't know if this is the jaded past of Rowen's new friends wanting this for her, or her wanting it for herself. Rowen's young, and that doesn't bother me, but it may mean she's being pushed to ask for a commitment from me that she doesn't actually want yet. I'd love to call her my girlfriend, tell everyone she's the forever I've been looking for, but if that's not what she wants I'll end up in another situation where my heart gets broken, and I don't want to do that again. I also don't want to be in a relationship where her goal isn't forever.

"Sorry to disappoint the masses, but that's between us." I clap Wyatt on the shoulder and start to walk away. I want to shower off this conversation, go home, and get ready for my date. I'm taking her somewhere special and need to get dressed.

"What if I just want to know if you're okay? I know last time..." Wyatt trails off. "I'm a guy and I'm not good at being a woman's best friend, but last time, you were a

wreck. I don't want that for you again; I like seeing you happy." I crack a smile and he watches me warily.

"You're a good friend Wyatt. Things are good. I..." I'm definitely falling in love with Rowen, but we aren't quite there yet. "I really like her, we click. We're just taking it slow, having a good time." As soon as I say the words, I know they're not true. I'm not here for a good time. I'm here for a long time. Or at least I want to be.

"I knew I was going to spend the rest of my life with Nora the second she hit me with that door. It scared the shit out of me, not just because I have Cruze, but for me too. You pushed me to go see her, ask her out, and now I live and die for her. Take the chance, Janet. If you're on the fence about it, take the chance. I'm here with ice cream if it doesn't work, but you'll always regret it if you hesitate." He never calls me Janet. He also just read my damn mind. Great. Now Collins is in my head, making me want to change the whole dynamic of our relationship and it's absolutely terrifying. Things were fine. Rowen and I have a good time. We go out, we stay in, we play board games, and cook together. It's all great. The sex is fantastic. Everything is happening in its own time, she makes me laugh, I'm learning things about her. And now I have this seed of doubt in my head that she wants more from me because women like to meddle, and I have no idea if she actually wants a commitment from me or if her friends are telling her she needs this.

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath and head to grab my bag from the lockers before heading home to shower and get ready.

My phone's already ringing when I step out of the shower. I dry my hand, swipe the screen, and press the speaker button. "Hey Mom." I dry off, wiping the steam from the bathroom mirror and think back to the first night Rowen and I were together. Heat pools low in my stomach at the memory and my face heats.

"Are you listening?" My mother's voice dumps cold water all over my memory.

“Yup. Sorry. What?” Mom’s sigh comes through the phone.

“Your brother is bringing home a date to meet us all next weekend. I want you to come. Things are serious with them now.” She says your brother as if I don’t have two of them. “Garret. Sorry.” Collins and my mother are both reading my mind today.

“Yeah, I’ll be there. Text me the details.” I unwrap my hair from the towel and shake it out.

“Why would I text you when we’re on the phone right now?” My mother hates texting, but I hate being on the phone so it’s a slight point of contention.

“Because I’m naked and not going to remember any of this in a couple of hours. If it’s in writing, I can look back on it and not have to call back to get details.” We’ve had this conversation so many times.

“Fine okay. Why are you naked?” And I spend the next twenty minutes talking to my mother about why I answered the phone naked. We talk so long that I’m to the hair stage of this process before I get her off the phone because we can’t talk while I blow dry. It almost turns into a conversation about why I’m blow drying my hair. The whole world knows I don’t blow dry my hair, but here I am, and now Mom knows I’m trying to impress someone tonight. It’s going to get to Lucas and Garret and I’m going to get so many texts. Pressure from Collins about my current relationship status is bad enough, now my family is jumping in as well. Tonight is going to be great.

I dry my hair, letting it stay loose around my shoulders. I put on my black dress pants and a white button down, tucking it in and zipping my pants. I grab my only dress shoes, a pair of red flats from the back of my closet, stepping into those while I sort through the basket under the sink for my makeup. Digging out the hair dryer made a mess and now I can’t find anything. My phone starts buzzing and I reach for it,

groping at the sink and reaching for the makeup bag at the same time and fall on my ass on the tiled floor. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. My hand is shaking, I'm sitting on my ass in the bathroom floor, and I'm kind of a mess now. All because Collins asked me about my relationship. Surely, I'm too old for this shit. No other thirty-five-year-old grown ass adult is this shaken up about having to define a relationship. It shouldn't be this stressful suddenly. Everything was fine, I was excited about tonight, now I'm nervous. I haven't been nervous around Rowen since the day we met. It's all so easy with her. I've let an outsider get in my head and twist things.

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“This is stupid.” I push up from the floor, get to my feet, and turn off my phone. I don’t need my mom and brothers texting me, I don’t need Rowen’s friends, our friends, expecting anything from our relationship. It’s about us, not them. I roll my neck, get out my makeup, and get ready to go out on a date with this girl that I really like, and could possibly be in love with.

The second Rowen steps out of her house in a black dress, red heels, and her hair in long ringlets down her back, I know I’m absolutely fucked. I haven’t even had time to go to the door and knock, so she was watching for me. That alone is enough for me. A black coat is draped over her arm, and she tucks her lone house key and a few other things in the top of her dress as she walks down the steps to my car. I scramble out to greet her and she stops, eyes taking me in from my red shoes to my blonde hair. Neither of us say anything as I move toward her, glad that it’s not so cold that she decided to cover up. Rowen’s heels click on the bottom step as I get to her and I reach for her fingers without thinking.

“You look amazing.” I lift her arm and spin her around, skirt flaring a little at the bottom to give me a flash of pale thighs.

“You too.” She steps closer, her free hand coming to run through my hair. “I will give you all my money to wear it down more often.” That mischievous smile twitches on her bold red lips.

“Anything for you, but I won’t take a dime.” I lean in to kiss her and she meets me halfway. My arm snakes around her waist, tugging her close. Rowen hums into my lips, arms around my neck. In the heels, she’s a couple inches taller than me, which is a nice change of pace. I settle my hands on her hips and tip my head back a little to

see her sea-blue eyes. “Ready?” She nods and I take her hand, lacing our fingers. I open the car door for her before closing her in and getting in the driver’s side.

The drive starts out silent, Rowen rests her hand on mine in my lap and I move them to her thigh. She traces her soft fingertips along my blunt nails up to my knuckles and back down. “You’re quiet,” she finally says, a passing streetlight illuminating her face.

“You too.” I glance at her and sigh. “You look incredible.” The next streetlight shows me a pink in her cheeks.

“Thanks. How was the gym? Wyatt come?” It’s an innocent enough question, but there’s this tiny hint of worry in her tone that assures me she knows about the conversation he and I had.

“It was good. He was there.” I tip my head at her and smile. We’re quiet again until we pull up to the restaurant and into a parking place. It’s a free-standing brick building near downtown, the East Hollow answer to the bigger city’s fine dining. The Copper Pot is a restaurant specializing in fondue with burners set into the table where you cook your own pre-prepared food. I reserved a spot for us, a corner booth with roses on the table and all the food decided for us down to the chef suggested wine pairings. Once I park, we walk in, my fingers barely touching hers as we walk to the table and sit down. She lets me sit with my back to the wall and settles in across from me, eyes on my face for a beat before looking around. The place is open with exposed brick and painted pipes running along the ceiling. Rowen picks up a rose from the table and brings it to her nose before replacing it. Finally, she looks at me again as the server arrives and the smirk is back on her lips. He agrees to bring us two waters, our wine, and the first course, an appetizer of bread and vegetables with cheese. The second he’s gone, I reach for her hand around the copper pot in the center of the table and she places her soft palm in mine.

“Wyatt had something interesting to talk to me about today.” I keep my tone light, but her eyes leave mine as soon as I speak. “Row...” Her nickname brings her eyes back to mine. I don’t continue, hoping she’d chime in, but nothing happens. Her lips stay pressed tight, eyes glistening. I swallow, open my mouth, close it.

“I didn’t bring it up,” she finally says. “We were just talking, and Greer asked how things were, I guess I blushed because it’s what I do, and then there was this rapid-fire conversation about talks and setting boundaries, and I said we were just... I don’t know and it snowballed. I should have just come to you first and not said anything to them at all. By the time Wyatt was involved it was too late. They didn’t mean anything by it, I swear. I-” She blows a frustrated breath through her nose and her shoulders slump.

“Are you happy?” Literally nothing else matters but that one question.

“Yes!” She says it so fast and loud that I laugh.

“Good.” I take her hand in mine and squeeze it. “Do we need to talk about this?” Her eyes leave mine again, darting to the side, and I don’t need to be a cop to read this tell. “We can, Row. You know we can.” A big part of me doesn’t want to rock the boat, to put a label on things, but the rest of me, the part who is falling stupidly in love with this girl, wants her to say it.

“I know we can. Obviously. I just...” Rowen rolls her eyes to the ceiling, “Things are good. I didn’t want to push for too much if you like things the way they are.”

“You want more then?” I sit up in my seat, leaning close enough to the copper pot to feel the heat.

“Not if telling you is going to make you rethink this. I’m happy. I like this, like us, but more would be okay too.” She meets my eyes finally and I can’t bite back my

smile. “Why is this funny? Do you know how stressed those meddling nerds had me about this? I haven’t eaten since they told me we need to have a talk. I tried to tell them that women are different, we don’t need a talk to define things, but I guess we did and now I’m clingy and worried you don’t want to do this anymore.” I stare at her until she’s done ranting and raise a brow. “Say something!”

“I love you.” The knot tightens as soon as the words are out of my mouth and I feel my face drain of all color. I didn’t mean to. I opened my mouth and words fell out, the wrong words. I meant to tell her she wasn’t clingy, and that things are great. But that didn’t happen.

CHAPTER8

ROWEN

I haveto look like a fish.

Janet Morgan just told me she loves me.

I’m sure time is moving normally, there’s food next to me now, and Janet is staring at me like a deer in headlights.

I need to say something, but no words are coming out.

Janet loves me.

There’s no way she said it to appease me, or prove something, or get in my pants. Everything about the way she said those words was genuine, unscripted.

“I-”

“Fancy meeting you here. God that is such a Southern thing to say.” When I look up, a woman with a black pixie cut stands over us, looking down at Janet like she’s the best thing this woman has ever seen. She is, but I’m the only one allowed to notice. She’s my person. Janet pulls her gaze from mine, a fake smile plastered on her face.

“Reggie. How are you?” Janet’s whole body looks tense.

“Good. Here for a friend’s birthday. You look amazing. I’m not sure I’ve seen your hair down in... wow, it’s probably been since-”

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“Reg, this is my girlfriend, Rowen. Rowen, this is an old friend, Reggie. She owns the bar you picked me up from.” Janet still sounds tense, but the word girlfriend makes my hear flutter.

“Nice to meet you Rowen. You’re either new in town or just visiting because I would remember you.” Reggie eyes me, gaze dipping down to my cleavage and back up.

“New.” I offer my hand to shake.

“Ah.” Reggie keeps talking, but I’m not paying a damn bit of attention. Janet loves me and introduced me as her girlfriend. I can die a slow, happy death here in front of her ex now, because there is no way Janet and Reggie didn’t sleep together. This has to betheex. The one who broke her heart. You only have that kind of tension from an ugly break up. Reggie finally leaves, gently brushing my shoulder as she goes and giving Janet a flirty wave. As soon as she’s gone, Janet’s shoulders relax, her eyes go to the food on the table, and I reach for her hand.

“Tell me you slept with her without telling me you slept with her.” I mean for it to be teasing, but my tone is a little harsh.

Janet arches a brow at me. “Row.”

“Janet.” We stare at each other for a few seconds and it’s clear that there’s still some tension hanging out round us. “I love you too.” I say it softly. “And don’t think it’s gone unnoticed that you called me your girlfriend. I didn’t mean to make this whole night awkward. This place is so nice and you look amazing, and you called me your girlfriend.” An idea hits me and while I watch the tension leave her face, a smile

replacing the pressed line of her lips, it falls out of my mouth. “Move in with me.” I pull my hand from hers and cover my mouth. Her lips curve into a sassy smirk. “Oh my gosh. Is this what you felt like when you told me you love me? This is the scariest feeling ever. What is wrong with me? I didn’t mean to say that.” I cover my mouth again and Janet starts laughing. It’s not a quiet chuckle that I normally get from her, but a full-on loud laugh. Her face flushes, her eyes sparkle, and she laughs like I said the funniest thing in the whole world to her.

“We’re idiots. Are you asking me to move in because you’re insecure about Reggie?” she asks in disbelief.

Ouch.

But she’s a little right.

“No. I’m asking you to move in because sometime tonight or in the morning, you’re going to leave, go to your house to your bed and I won’t be there. And also because Reggie makes me a little possessive. Not jealous or insecure. Those are different.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“Lots of revelations tonight,” Janet muses, picking up a tiny skewer and stabbing a piece of food with it. She rests it against the edge of her plate and it goes uneaten. I stay quiet. “Are you ready for moving in? Don’t feel pressured to do things because other people think it’s time.” Is she trying to talk me out of this? The look on my face must say it all. “No. I just mean, I’m happy. This is good, we’re good. If you’re not ready, it’s fine.” Janet nibbles her lip and I watch with fascination.

“I’ve never met someone I’ve clicked with so fast. Yeah, this is good. Great even, but I want more if you’re willing to give it. This is stupid, I’ve never had this conversation before and it’s the worst. I’ve never looked at another human and thought I could spend a really long time with this person and still like them. I even

need space from Shelby sometimes and I'd die for her, but you're different. This is different." I'm bad about going on anxiety fueled rants, but this little verbal overflow is a new level of gushing that I'm not comfortable with.

"Okay." Janet offers me a bite from her fork, and I take it.

"Okay?" I talk around the bite in my mouth. "You'll move in with me? You'll be my person? You're okay with giving this a shot?"

"All of it." Janet offers me another bite and I take it, chewing and staring at this amazing woman across from me in disbelief. "Reggie cheated on me by the way. We got a place together. I practically begged her to move in with me after three dates like a real lesbian cliché. She agreed. We talked about a future, until it got back to me that she was hooking up with every woman at the bar. A lot of them were drunk or married. Everyone knew but me and she crushed me. I haven't been serious about anyone since. So, there's that story." My heart hurts for her because I know that pain all too well. "I've had weird commitment issues since."

"I've only been with one other woman. She thought I was a great plaything and left me for one of the girls on her softball team. If you can call what we had enough to leave me over. It was barely a relationship. I've mostly dated men, and then I met you." I let the story leave me in a whoosh. Janet pulls a piece of rye bread from the cheese dip and eats it, listening intently.

"I'm sorry you went through that," she finally answers and takes my hand again as the server switches out the appetizer for our meal.

"Dessert is the third course." Janet changes the subject and pops a piece of shrimp into the boiling water for it to cook. I do the same with a piece of steak. "Then I think we should go home and really celebrate." Her smile turns wicked and desire hums through me. I like this way more than the stress of the date so far.

“Celebrate what?”

“Our news. I have a girlfriend and she likes me enough to move me into her really cool house.” She feeds me a piece of shrimp.

“That sounds amazing.”

“The fact that we made it past date one without shacking up is super impressive. That’s a stereotype for a reason.” Janet winks at me and my heart melts a little more.

We hurry through the rest of our delicious meal, eyes meeting across the table as we both try to savor the food, but clearly, we’re both focused on one thing. Getting home. Once the chocolate pot is taken away from dessert, Janet pays the bill, and we walk out into the night hand in hand. Janet walks me to the passenger door but doesn’t open it. She turns me to face her and leans in for a slow kiss under the streetlamp. I grip her bicep, eyes fluttering closed to savor the taste of dessert still on her lips. The kiss escalates quickly. Her hands slide up my skirt, mouth on mine, shoving my panties to the side to slip two fingers inside me. She pushes me back into the car, her hand working magic on me, her body blocking the sight from any people walking by. If anyone were to pass, we’d look like a couple who had a few too many, which I did, and couldn’t wait to get home for a lengthy make out session. I moan when she hits the perfect rhythm, my body tightening, legs trembling. I throw my head back into the car, biting my lip to stay quiet while her lips move down my neck to my chest and her fingers pushing me past the point of reason. Heat floods me, battling the cold around us, and there’s nothing in the world but Janet and me and this moment. I grab the sides of her face, bringing her lips back to mine and kissing her hard, teeth clashing, and tongues dancing as another wave of heat floods me.

“Let’s go home.” Her words are deep and thick against my lips and process like honey into my brain. Home. It’s our home now and we’re going to make so many amazing memories in it.

EPILOGUE

JANET

I've listened to Wyatt tell me for so long now that he and Nora were meant to be. I truly had no idea what that meant until I opened a car door and stepped into Rowen Madison's car. I've never believed in fate, compatibility, kismet, whatever... until now.

"See, Shelby is a Gemini, which means she's low key crazy, but we're compatible because I'm all about balance, we fit. We kind of speak the same language." Rowen looks up from her phone at where I'm staring lovingly at her and rubbing her feet. "And with us, we're both Libras, which for other signs can be an issue, but not for us because we're different types of Libras. We balance each other, which is the biggest common denominators among the sign."

I stop rubbing her foot and slide my hand up her long, smooth leg to where her shorts meet her flesh. "Are you rambling for any particular reason?" I slip my fingertips under the hem of her shorts, and she sucks in a breath.

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“Hmm?” Row’s phone falls on her chest and her eyes meet mine.

“You only ramble about that stuff when you’re nervous about something.” I remind her. Rowen is the most compatible I’ve ever been with, but I don’t think it has anything to do with our zodiac and everything to do with finding my soulmate.

“I do not.” She sits up and stretches, flashing me a teaser of pale skin on her stomach.

“You do. Tell me what’s on your mind.” I pat the spot on the couch next to me and she scoots into it, leaning her head on my shoulder. It’s been four months since I moved in. Four months since I showed up with a literal U-Haul and changed my whole life for the better.

“It’s nothing. I just like to remind you that we’re supposed to be together, the stars say so.” She tips her head and kisses my cheek. “Is everyone still coming tonight?”

I sigh. “You can’t just change the subject, but yes, they’re all still coming tonight. They better! There’s enough food to feed the whole town when Tuesday has a book signing.”

The grandfather clock chimes from behind us, and we both jump, listening to five chimes. We have exactly one hour to get prep done before the first Madison-Morgan bonfire of the summer begins.

An hour later, I’m an anxious mess. I think she knows my plan, she’s acting sketchy and weird, talking too much, waving her hands around. I’m not sure that bodes well for me, but I can only hope that if she knows, she’s excited and not dreading it. Row

is flitting around, red shorts barely covering her ass, white tank top showing off enough skin to make my mouth water. She glances back at me occasionally, beer in her hand, cheeks pink with sun.

“Morgan. Flip the burger.” Collins slides in next to me, trying to take the tools from my hand. “She looks just like she did ten seconds ago. Now flip the burger.”

“Fuck off. I can grill without a man’s help.” I move my eyes to glare at him.

Collins throws his hands up in surrender. “Got it. You’re nervous.”

“I am not,” I snap at him, flip the burgers, and sigh.

“Right. She’s not Reggie.” He pulls another water bottle from the cooler and opens it. “She’s going to say yes.” I pat the pocket of my cargo shorts when he says it. The ring I bought last month is tucked safely inside. It’s perfect. A modest diamond, just big enough, but not gaudy. I swallow hard.

“I know she’s not Reggie.” I watch Rowen lean down to pat Nora’s growing belly and my chest aches.

“So don’t stress.” Collins pats my shoulder roughly and jogs over to grab up his son, Cruze, before Nora tries to lift him. Rowen catches my eyes, blushes, and looks away. I start putting burgers on buns, piling them high in a pyramid, and trying not to feel the weight in my pocket. My future resides in the box and her willingness to say yes to what I have to offer.

Music plays from the Bluetooth speakers on each table, neighborhood kids squeal in the middle of a water gun fight, and almost everyone has eaten or is eating when I finally get the courage to reach for my phone and turn down whatever pop country song is in the top ten this week. Before the phone is in my hand, Rowen stands up, winks at me, and climbs up on the bench across from me. She puts her fingers in her

mouth and lets out a high whistle that gets everyone's attention. The chatter quiets and I fumble to turn down my phone and all the speakers along with it. My heart jumps into my throat. I knew I was too obvious. I knew she would find out and spoil it, but I had no idea she'd do it so spectacularly.

"Thanks everyone!" she calls out, her voice shaking. I have trouble swallowing. "I'm Rowen and I'm glad you all came. There's plenty of food so get seconds or thirds if you want it, I just ask you don't litter on the gorgeous lawn my girlfriend mowed last night." She glances at me, face red, and looks back to the crowd. I watch her hand tremble as she reaches for Tuesday sitting next to her. Tuesday puts something in her hand and the lump in my throat drops straight to my toes. "Everyone here was so welcoming when I crashed into town a few months ago. You helped me renovate my house, clean up decades of cobwebs, and taught me how to own a bookstore. I wanted to show my new family how much I appreciate all of you, so I fed you." A few people laugh and Row lets out a dry chuckle.

"Rowen." I'm not sure why her name comes from my lips when she meets my eyes.

"I also wanted to celebrate today with you all for a different reason. I was lucky enough to meet Janet my first few days here and the second I saw her climbing into the back of my car, I knew I was in big trouble. It's been the best trouble I've ever found, and I can't believe I lived so long without her. Now that I have her, I don't want to let her go, and I know she hates this attention so much, but..." Her eyes meet mine again and my whole body combusts. I know we have sixty people on the lawn, watching us, but the tears in her eyes are only for me.

"Row..." I try again, fishing the box from my pocket and squeezing it in my palm.

"I want everyone here to hear me say, Janet Morgan, I love you and I want to be with you forever. Will you marry me?" Rowen opens the box, but I can't look at it. I stare into her deep blue eyes, pull my hand from my lap and flip the top of my box open as I extend my hand to her. The box she was holding nearly falls into a cup of lemonade,

but she fumbles and grabs it. Her eyes go from the box in my hand to my eyes.

“You stole my speech.” I break the silence and a few people chuckle. Rowen hops down into the grass and runs around the long table at the same time I stand, and I catch her as she flies into my arms. Her lips hit mine and there’s clapping and whistles all around.

“Is that a yes?” Rowen cups my face in her hands. I nod. “She said yes!” Rowen screams out and kisses me again. I take the ring from the box and slip it on her finger. She offers my ring to me, and I take it, not moving away from her, and open it. A plain silver band sits nestled inside. I let her slip it on my finger and grab her to kiss her.

“We even think alike. See, I told you.” Rowen’s dangerous smirk makes my heart swell and my knees weak.

“What did you tell me?” I slide a hand around her waist and pull her body flush with mine.

“It was meant to be. And before you tell me you don’t believe in that crap, remember that we are in public, and my emotions are very raw and happy.” Row mock glares at me.

“I’ll never doubt your star thingies again,” I lie and press my lips to hers. I don’t care if it was fate, luck, or the stars. I’m just happy to call the sassy, gorgeous woman in front me, mine.