







# Love Off Limits: A Lesbian Mother's Best Friend Romance

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**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Older, married, and straight, Scarlet has been Neera's forbidden crush for years. Now single and out, she is still breathtaking and still Neera's mom best friend. Will she always be off limits?

Heartbroken. Jobless. Forced to move back home. This Christmas came with all sorts of gifts Neera didn't want. At least her impossible, teenage crush on her mom's best friend is a thing of the past. Right?

Wrong.

The moment Neera lays eyes on Scarlet again, her old feelings burst to the surface. Scarlett is still the same golden-haired goddess who robbed Neera of her breath years ago. And she's just as married - and straight.

Or is she?

Finally free from her unhappy marriage, Scarlet is done hiding. She's gay. And eager to embrace it.

What she isn't prepared for is the hurricane that tears through her life – and heart - Neera. She's nothing like Scarlet remembers. Gone is the rebellious teen. In her place is a gorgeous woman with killer-curves and a smile that lights up the world.

She's everything Scarlet wants. And she's off limits. Until Neera makes the first move, and the chemistry between the two is impossible to resist.

Can Neera convince Scarlet to love again? Can Scarlet overcome her fears? Or will the taboo of their forbidden romance tear them apart forever?

**Total Pages (Source):** 47

# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

Neera

Neera was in the middle of raking her hands through her hair, power walking away from the airline counter, when her phone rang. She pulled it out of her purse, grateful at least that wasn't lost. For someone who thought she had it all worked out, her life sure had become a shit storm over the past month.

"Hey, Mom." Neera closed her eyes and winced when Elodie James' happy, shrill tone drifted over the phone. Not even the clamor at the airport right before New Year's could dampen the loudness pumping through the phone speaker and she turned it right down.

There was a special kind of hell when it came to traveling, and Neera had somehow landed herself right in the thick of it. The murk between Christmas and New Years was when everyone was either flying in or flying out.

"You're here!" Elodie shrieked loudly as if she could picture the cacophony behind Neera. Actually, she could probably hear it through the phone. "Oh my gosh, I'm so excited. Why didn't you call?"

"How did you know that I was even off the plane yet?"

"Oh, well, the flight times are posted, honey. I knew the second you touched down. I thought you'd be ready to go by now. I was worried when I didn't hear from you."

“The airline lost my bag. I don’t exactly know how that’s possible, but they did. I had to go to the desk and describe my bag and give them all my information so when they find it, they can send it to me.”

“Ach! What?” Elodie’s volume nearly blew out Neera’s eardrums. “That’s terrible! I hope you had your laptop and phone and stuff with you.”

“Yeah, of course, I did. I only packed the essentials, you know, a change of clothes and my makeup and stuff in there. Things that I can easily replace if I really need to.”

A young mother trying to corral four little kids who all looked to be under the age of eight glanced up from the spat over a teddy bear that she was trying to break up and gave Neera an understandingly frazzled look. Neera returned a shy, sad smile and hurried on towards the exit. Her bag was MIA, and it was going to have to stay that way because there was nothing she could do about it.

“So, I should leave now?”

“I thought you said the flight times were posted.” She tried hard not to make that sound accusatory.

“Well, I don’t know. Sometimes things happen and flights run late. I didn’t want to leave the house and have to sit at the airport for hours and hours.”

“Right. Okay. Don’t worry about it. I’ll just take a cab.”

“No way! I’ll be there in thirty minutes. A cab would cost sixty dollars or more. I’m leaving now. Grabbing my keys. Hear that?” A jingling sound came through the phone.

Neera cut through the throngs of people crowding the place. The airport was big, but

during the holidays it seemed to shrink in size. People turned into short-tempered, travelling maniacs, and flights were scarce and overbooked. The airport was like a big, packed soup of broiling, short-tempered humanity.

“Neera?”

“Oh. Yes, that’s fine. It’ll probably take me more than thirty to get to the doors anyway. It’s freaking packed in here.”

“Okay, I’m getting in the car right now. Hold on. Shoot, I’ll have to brush off the windows. They’re frozen over and full of snow. Is more like forty-five minutes, okay? That’s if the streets aren’t icy. Oh, I know they’re not icy. I didn’t realize that it was snowing out. I should have checked earlier, but I was reading, and I meant to put it down, but then I got lost in it, and you know how it goes.”

“It’s fine, Mom.” Neera closed her eyes. She stopped walking and was nearly bowled over by a guy in a suit carting a wheeled briefcase thing behind him. He gave her a foul look as he sidestepped and continued on his way. “Totally. Fine.”

“I detect dryness. Sarcasm. Is it not fine?”

“No, no, it’s fine. Sorry. You know that I love having to leave San Jose, which was all warm and nice and pretty this time of year, to come back here to frigid winter and snow and storms. Speaking of which, my life has become one big shit storm. I was just thinking about that. My girlfriend of the past four years surprising me with an early Christmas present in the form of, oh, by the way, I’ve been cheating on you with your friend from work for months and I know she’s a legit nurse, but we still do nurse roleplay with the skimpy cliched costumes and everything. You know. That’s probably the dryness you heard.”

“Oh, sweetheart, I’m sorry that you had to walk in on that vile scene, but at least you

know the truth. I know it looks bad, but I promise things will get better. You're home. It's going to be a brand-new year. You'll find a job here and a place in no time. Things are going to work out. Plus, that Stephanie was a butt waffle anyway. I'd like to kick her in the junk."

"Umm, Mom, you do know butt waffle isn't a saying?"

"I know. I'm trying to use decent language."

## Page 2

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“But saying you want to kick her in the junk is okay?” As Neera passed by a group of packed chairs, an elderly lady gave her a confused look. She decided to lower her own volume and walked faster, picking her way through the crowds and dodging people who were walking at a much faster rate than she was. “I thought you liked her. You always said you liked her.”

“I did,” Elodie protested. “Until she cheated on my daughter and wasn’t one bit sorry about it. Really? Nurse roleplay. You’d think she could get a little bit more creative. And telling you that things were stale? What kind of an excuse is that? Seems like she just doesn’t want to take responsibility for being totally dishonest.”

“Mmmhmm.” What was stale supposed to mean anyway? It made Neera feel like a package of old, soggy crackers left open and suddenly found after months. The kind of crackers that no one in their right mind would be able to gag down.

Needless to say, after finding out that Steph was cheating on her and breaking up with her, she wasn’t feeling at her sexiest. She knew she wouldn’t be able to find somewhere to stay on such short notice, especially with the holidays coming up. Her job was fine, but it wasn’t her dream job or anything. She’d taken it because she wa

nted to stay in San Jose and be near Steph. It was Steph’s apartment she’d moved into years ago. It was crazy strained having to be there for two weeks while she worked her last shifts and packed her things, but at least Steph had provided one small mercy and decided at the last minute to take her new girlfriend to Switzerland for the holidays.

Mercy my ass. She never went on a vacation with me.



“Okay, the windshield is good to go. I’m pulling out now,” Elodie said. Neera could hear the car noise starting up on the other end of the phone as her mom was driving. “Roads look good. Thirty minutes now. I’m sorry I didn’t leave sooner.”

Neera hoisted her heavy backpack up a little higher on her shoulders and tucked her purse in at her hip. Her back was starting to ache, and the neck strain was giving her a headache. Or maybe that was just having to think about the past month in general.

“No, that’s alright. I’m glad you’re coming. Thank you for picking me up and offering the house for me until I find somewhere else.”

“My gosh, you don’t have to thank me! You’re my daughter. It’s always been just us, and, who knows. It might be fun.”

“Fun?”

“I didn’t tell you! You know that Scarlet’s divorce finally went through?”

Neera froze. She stopped dead in her tracks. There was a scuffle of sneakers on the tile right after and she was roundly cursed out by a teenager who had been apparently shadowing her. Right. Don’t stop dead in the middle of rush hour airport pedestrian traffic. Her heart hammering wildly, Neera dodged over to a free spot in front of one of the many stores in the airport. She pretended to be enthralled by postcards so she wouldn’t feel guilty loitering.

“Uh- okay. No, you didn’t tell me, but that’s cool.” That’s cool? Really? That’s what you have to say for something that you haven’t stopped thinking about for a year? She’d been going for casual because this was her mom she was talking to, and no, it would not be cool if her mother found out that her daughter had a crush on her much older best friend. A lifelong crush.

Alright, so Scarlet Hunter was basically Neera's first love. A very one sided, all consuming, slow burning, unrequited first love.

"Yes! It just went through," her mom's excited voice pulled her out of her head. "And guess what! She's been having some experiences since she separated from Bryan. He was hooking up with his nineteen-year-old secretary which actually turned out to be the best thing that could have ever happened. When you get older, as a woman, you become freer. Free from bad marriages. Free from the constraints of socially acceptable norms. Freer with your body and your sexuality."

"Mom!" Neera's heart raced faster than the occasional person who was full tilt sprinting past where she was standing.

"Hey. Forty is the new twenty. Don't you forget it. Besides, Scarlet still has a couple years before she gets there. She's two years younger than me, remember? And she was never happy with Bryan. He was a dolt. Everyone knew that. She knew that. I knew that. If I could only recount to you the years of misery--"

"Okay, I get it. So, she's had some experiences. That's good for her."

"You sound a little breathless, honey, are you okay?"

Damn it. "The airports just really crowded. I was walking fast to try and keep up with the pace."

"Yes, that's the holidays for you, I guess. But, back to Scarlet, I think she's a lesbian! I mean, she thinks she might be a lesbian! Now she's not just doing it to get back at Bryan. Isn't that great? Maybe you can give her some pointers."

Neera didn't realize she was leaning a little too far forward into the rack of postcards until she felt like she was teetering and then she had to reach out to stop herself from

falling as black dots leaped out in front of her eyes.

“Aah!” She grabbed the rack at the wrong angle, and the whole thing went crashing down. She went airborne, gravity became that bitch everyone talked about karma being, and the next thing she knew, she was lying in a heap of postcards and metal racks- because of course, it would have to come apart into six different pieces when it fell, her backpack at an odd angle and her purse nearly choking her with the strap.

“Neera? Neera? What’s happening?”

Somehow, she’d managed to hold onto her phone when she fell. “Nothing, I’m good. I’m going to have to call you back, though. Actually, my phone’s almost dead. I’ll just stand outside and watch for you, so you don’t have to park. Just pull up. I know where you’ll be. Same spot as always.”

Neera hung up and stuffed her phone back into her bag after she untangled it from around her throat. She picked herself up just in time to see the store employee come racing out with a scowl on his face.

“I’m so, so sorry,” she said. “I’m all good. Don’t worry about me.”

“Worry about you?” the man sniffed. He was wearing a maroon turtleneck and very tight jeans. When he angled to the side, she could see them riding up his butt cheeks. “What about my merchandise, you clumsy oaf? You think you can just wreck everything and not pay for it?”

Neera was astounded. So much for the Christmas spirit and all that. Technically, it was already over, but still. Plus, the guy’s pants were really tight. Maybe that’s what he was actually so pissed about. The whole wedgie, ball squish thing he had going on couldn’t be comfortable. “I’m truly sorry,” she whispered. “I’ll pick everything up. I don’t think anything’s wrecked.”

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“You had better hope not.” The guy clapped his hands. “Well, get to it. Start picking it up.”

She barely resisted the urge to bite out a sarcastic yes, sir as she scrambled to pick up the endless postcards. The store worker picked up the metal rack and between the two of them, they had the cards sorted out in short order.

“Next time, be more careful,” he snapped at her as a parting shot.

“Next time secure your display so someone doesn’t get hurt and sue your ass,” she quipped, at her breaking point for niceness. The past few weeks had worn her down. As a nurse, she was used to dealing with difficult people. She knew she should do better, but she just couldn’t help herself. “Have a great day.” She walked fast, putting distance between herself and Mr. Cranky Tight Pants.

Whatever. Maybe the dude’s life was going to straight up shit too. What did she know? She felt bad, thought about going back and apologizing, but knew she didn’t really have time. She really should be where she said she was going to be when her mom got there or Elodie would worry endlessly and panic and drive around in circles and cause a lot of traffic chaos.

Scarlet Hunter. That’s who Neera really couldn’t stop thinking about. Was she just experimenting? Expressing her freedom as a newly single, smoking hot woman who hadn’t had her needs properly met in a very long time because her husband really was a tool? Or was she serious?

What does it matter? You have zero chances. Mom’s best friend, remember? Huge

age gap. Totally off limits. That's the Scarlet Hunter you know and love.

Neera was walking so fast she nearly tripped over an elderly man's cane which was sticking out in the walking area. She apologized quickly as she managed to catch herself in time and not do another faceplant.

Stop thinking about Scarlet and get your ass out the door and safely into your mom's vehicle without another mishap. You don't need more mess in your life. No need for more mess in my life. Stop. Thinking. About. Scarlet.

Neera had been telling herself that for years, and for years, she'd never been able to actually follow her own advice.

## Chapter 2

### Scarlet

"It's cold enough to freeze your arse straight off," Elodie said as soon as Scarlet was parked on the big cuddle chair, a huge round thing that could fit an army of cats if Elodie had liked them. As it was, she was extremely allergic. She'd always wanted one, though.

A nice cuddly cat would be the perfect touch to a frigid winter's morning, Scarlet mused. "I just about lost my arse walking over, and I only live

four minutes away."

"Doesn't bode well for our New Year's party."

"I doubt that anyone would refuse to come because their cars won't start. They generally cab it over here anyways."

“Good point. Coffee?”

“Yes. Please. Where would we be without our morning fuel?”

“I was thinking for the warmth, but the fact that it does double duty doesn’t hurt, does it?”

Elodie’s house was as it always was. Warm, safe, and just a little bit cinnamon scented because Elodie loved candles. She switched out her vanilla and fresh rain and fruit scents during the holidays, opting for the more traditional flavors of trees and cinnamon, and even eggnog. Scarlet’s eyes flicked to the coffee table. Sure enough, there was a big red jar candle burning there, even at ten on a well-lit Sunday morning, the only day that Scarlet had off because the boutique was closed.

Elodie returned bearing three mugs. She had a coffee tray, one of those fancy things that she loved using. She was even using the cream and sugar deal, a mismatched fine China set. One had roses and the other was an iridescent blue.

Scarlet raised a brow at the third mug. “I didn’t know that Neera got home already. I thought she wasn’t planning on coming back until after New Years?”

“She switched her flight. Got an earlier one and got home last night. I picked her up late from the airport. I’m just glad she got home safe.”

“Glad for what? Come on, you guys, you can’t start talking about me as soon as Scarlet walks in the door,” Neera swept into the room. She took a seat on the couch, leaving the spot closer to the cuddle chair for her mom. She curled her knees into her chest and gave Scarlet a somewhat shy smile. “I’m fine. Err, well, I’m going to be fine, at any rate.”

Scarlet knew she shouldn’t stare, but she couldn’t look away. Neera James had

always been pretty, but wow! Maybe it was just that Scarlet hadn't been paying attention properly before. Maybe her head was always somewhere else, mired in the problems with her marriage, in running her boutique, in the thousand other things that demanded attention. Maybe it was more because Neera was Elodie's daughter and she'd known her since she was literally, well, before she was even created, that she'd never noticed her before.

It was suddenly quite alarmingly clear to her, at first glance as she walked into Elodie's living room for a friendly visit, a chat about their book club book, and a cup of tea, that Neera was back, and she was all grown up.

Her long, dark hair hung in naturally curly waves around her shoulders. Her amber eyes flashed with new, glistening flecks. Her skin was flawless even though she currently didn't have a stitch of makeup on, and the curves that Scarlet really didn't remember ever being there, made fluffy purple unicorn slippers, skinny jeans, and a knit sweater look like high-end fashion.

Neera had always been a fixture of their lives. Always. So why did it feel like she was seeing her for the very first time?

Elodie took a seat beside Neera and set her hand on her daughter's knee. "Things are sometimes tough. Finding out I was having you when I was seventeen nearly gave my parents a heart attack. My sister was so outraged too. Doing it on my own wasn't easy, but everything worked out. I wouldn't trade it for anything. You just have to get over that hump."

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“God, don’t say hump,” Neera said. She shuddered, but then she grinned at her mom teasingly. “I’m kidding. You can say hump. I know that everything sucks now, but it’s going to be okay. Honestly- I...” She looked like she wanted to say something, but then she cut herself off. Her lips pressed into a hard line. “Maybe this was for the best.”

“Maybe? Ask Scarlet! There’s nothing worse than being in a relationship with someone who checked out a long time ago.”

“Ouch! Mom!”

“That’s alright.” Scarlet reached for a mug of steaming coffee and doused it with cream from the little floral jug. “I’m used to your mom’s bluntness. We’ve been friends for over two decades.”

Scarlet had been best friends with Elodie’s younger sister. She was actually two years younger than Elodie, but she’d been friends with Marla for so long that she knew her well. When Elodie got pregnant at seventeen, she was already in grade twelve. She was horrified at her older sister and never could get over herself long enough to realize how immature it was to be embarrassed over something like that.

Marla was so ashamed of Elodie that she would pretend that she didn’t even know her at school. She distanced herself from her as much as she could, given that they were sisters. Scarlet had been horrified at her best friend, and Elodie obviously needed someone in her corner. Not that her parents weren’t. They were initially shocked and angry, but then they supported her decision to have the baby, alone, because it was clear that Elodie’s boyfriend at the time – a guy she’d been dating in



secret who was three years older than her – wasn't going to take responsibility. Her parents wanted to press charges because Elodie was only seventeen, but she wouldn't even tell them who he was.

It was a crazy time, but Scarlet had been in awe of Elodie's strength. Yes, she was afraid to be young and have a child on her own, but that wasn't going to stop her from making the best life she could for her baby. She loved her child instantly, even through the roughest of storms. They'd become friends when just about everyone else deserted Elodie. After she graduated and had Neera, Scarlet began hanging out at the James' household even more often than she had when she'd been besties with Marla.

"Still." Neera elbowed Elodie gently. "Filter, mom. Filter."

"We should have a party!" Elodie declared. She got so excited that she nearly spilled the coffee in her hands. She grasped the mug more carefully. "A divorce party!"

"I'm good with the New Years' party, but thank you." Scarlet sipped at the hot liquid. She still wasn't thawed out from the walk in the bitter cold wind.

Sunday mornings were a tradition. They always did something together. She was expected at Elodie's for coffee and a catch up and there was no way she was going to let the cold weather stop her, even if it was so cold that her car was sitting in her driveway like a frozen block of ice.

Elodie set her coffee down on the table and slapped her thigh. Neera eyed her warily. "Tattoos! That's what we need. Ones that say 'fuck men'."

Neera nearly leaped off the couch. "No! That could mean something else entirely! No way."

"It would be so fitting, given my luck with them and with Scarlet's husband, and

well—”

“Yeah. I don’t fit the bill. Not getting that. No way. Getting a tattoo to celebrate or memorialize something is fine, but getting one spur of the moment is not cool. You’ll regret it for life.”

“I can’t believe that you’re not the mother right now,” Elodie sighed. “When did you get so grown up?”

“Just because I don’t want to ink something like that on myself doesn’t make me grown up.” Neera’s lips twitched. “It just makes me not want to have a tattoo that could be horribly misconstrued.”

“We should do it,” Scarlet said suddenly. She was surprised at herself. She’d never even considered doing something like that before, and there she was, suddenly quite eager. “A best friend’s thing. Something matching. Something cute. Something that could also be a mother-daughter schtick if Neera wants in. Just, probably not the ‘fuck men’ thing.”

Scarlet had no children. Bryan had never wanted them, and she’d been so busy with her boutique, building it from scratch and turning it into a thriving business, that there had never really been time for the discussion. Neera was like a daughter to her. Scarlet could remember the day she first held her, half an hour after she was born. She remembered her first tooth, her first step, her first fever, her first word, just like Elodie did.

So why was she suddenly looking at Neera like she didn’t know her? Neera had been away in San Jose for five years. She’d left at eighteen and she was twenty-three now. Scarlet hadn’t seen her often in all that time, only on holidays here and there, and sometimes Neera was too busy with work and with school to even come home.

This person seated beside Elodie wasn't a baby, a child, or a teenager anymore. She was an adult woman, grown, mature, and beyond gorgeous. Scarlet could only blame all the things she'd been worried about and distracted by for not taking notice sooner. Work. Her failing marriage and her unfaithful husband. The fact that she had never once felt comfortable in her own skin until her husband left her, and that newfound singleness spurred her to make choices that she never would have dared to make otherwise.

It was a jarring shock to Scarlet, and she felt a strange heat warm her from the inside out when she discreetly studied Neera. A warmth that she didn't think was from the coffee.

"I'd be more in for that," Neera said reluctantly. "I think it needs some more consideration. Thank goodne

ss it takes time to find a good artist and a good place to go. That time is used to help people not make spur of the moment decisions."

Elodie giggled. "Like getting a potato tattooed on your butt cheek?"

"Why on earth would you get a potato tattoo at all?" Neera sighed, pretending to be exasperated with her mom.

"Because they're cute. And delicious."

"What would that have to do with friendship or a mother-daughter thing?" Neera was genuinely confused, and Scarlet wanted to know the answer as well. Elodie was always coming up with quirky things.

"It would be symbolic. As in, when we saw it, we'd think of each other."

Neera laughed. “Oh, my lord, let’s just drink the coffee.”

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“Don’t oh my lord me. I’m your mom,” Elodie couldn’t keep a straight face. “Alright, so maybe not a potato. It’s good to have you home. You keep me from making bad, impulsive tattoo decisions.”

Neera shook her head. She looked down into her coffee cup instead of at Scarlet, which was a little bit strange. She seemed suddenly shy, or maybe she was just tired after a long flight and a crappy month. Scarlet knew all about Neera’s girlfriend cheating on her and their subsequent breakup. She felt every bit of that pain for Neera, having gone through a humiliating time herself and dealing with the fallout of her divorce.

“How’s the boutique going?” Neera asked, still not looking up.

“It’s fine. Actually, it’s doing great,” Scarlet replied. She tried very hard not to look at Neera’s lips. Why am I looking at her mouth? What is wrong with me? “The store was protected in the event I ever got divorced, so I didn’t have to worry about that. Bryan makes tons of money, and he didn’t want me to go after it, so he left me the house without a fight. He took everything else, but I was fine with that. I didn’t want any of his things or his money. I just wanted to move on.”

“Good riddance,” Elodie echoed. “Although I must say, you should have taken out the Bryan trash a long time ago. Or flushed him down. That’s where turds belong. In the sewer.”

Scarlet forced a smile. There was no reason not to be honest with her best friend, and Neera was also used to hearing all the details of her life. Why did she feel flustered, like she’d said far too much? She passed it off as being uncomfortable talking about

the divorce. It wasn't a pleasant time, and since it was done and the papers were officially signed, she just wanted to put it behind her. Digging up old, uncomfortable, shitty memories never helped anyone.

"Well, now that we've talked about the uncomfortable, humiliating parts of our lives, we can get onto the good stuff."

"The New Year's party, your first month of freedom, random tattoos, or Neera being back?"

Neera nearly choked on her coffee. "I don't know if that's a good thing," she muttered.

Elodie shook her head. "Trust me, it's a good thing."

"Don't be like me and waste your life with someone who doesn't love you, who you also don't love. Don't make the mistake of getting trapped into something that you feel like you can't get out of. It's better to start over and be happy than waste half your life doing the opposite because you're afraid." Scarlet nearly dropped her mug when she went to pick it up, her hands were trembling so badly. "I— I wish that I'd had more courage a long time ago. I wish that I'd known myself better."

"I don't know that I know myself at all," Neera said softly. "It was just— well, finding out sooner than later, which mom already said. I didn't choose it. I didn't even know. I would still probably be blissfully unaware, thinking that I loved Steph. Was that love? Did she love me? Was it ever right or what did all those years we spent together even mean?"

Elodie wrapped her arm around Neera's shoulders and drew her in. "Those are hard questions for a Sunday morning. I don't know if you'll ever be able to answer them."

Neera offered her mom a shaky smile. “Sorry. I’m being morose. I just need more time, I guess.”

“You need more time and more fun in your life, starting with the New Year’s party. Let your hair down. Rock out a little. Take a chance and get a potato tattooed on your butt cheek. This isn’t just starting over. This is living life to the fullest. We’ll help you figure out how to do that! I’m not just your mom, I’m also your best friend, and you’ve been away for a good long time. I’m sorry you’re back because you got hurt, but this is the start of something new and awesome. I’m going to make sure of it!”

“Okay, Mom.” Neera hugged her mom and moved back onto the couch. “Now, coffee. For all those cold, woeful mornings. Or just the woeful ones. And, also, because sleeping well isn’t an adult thing.”

Elodie set her hand on Neera’s knee. “You’re both single now. New Year’s is a great time to meet people.”

Neera’s eyes widened. “The party is with people we all know!”

“I didn’t mean the party,” Elodie clarified. “I just meant that it’s a whole new year in general. A time to start fresh. A time for great things to happen. So what if we’ve all had shitty shots at love? We haven’t been broken. We are strong, independent women. Everyone needs their practice run.”

“Maybe single is the way to go,” Scarlet finally said. “At least for me. Truly independent.”

“I second that,” Neera said, but for some reason, she barely met Scarlet’s eye. There was a strange current of tension in the room that Scarlet didn’t quite understand.

Neera was probably just out of sorts. Her breakup had been messy and painful.

Scarlet had the past year to get her ducks in a row and her divorce finalized. Neera had just quit her job, lost her long-term girlfriend, and moved back across the country, and none of it was of her choosing. Not really.

“I don’t think I’m ready to find someone,” said Neera. “I’d rather just focus on finding a job and getting my own place. No offense, Mom. I love being here and I love you.”

Elodie smiled softly. “Oh, honey, I know that. Plus, it’s always when you’re not looking that you find someone. You can stick to that and be hopeful.”

“We’ve been crazy busy at the boutique,” Scarlet said, jumping at the opportunity to change the subject. “If you were looking for casual hours until something else comes up, I could use a hand.”

“Oh, I-”

“She’d love to.” Elodie interrupted before Neera could finish. “That’s a very generous offer. What days and what times?”

Scarlet could tell that Neera actually didn’t want to, though her face was totally neutral. She wasn’t giving off I hate clothing and boutiques aren’t my thing vibes. There was just a subtle shift in her posture, a slight stiffening that Scarlet definitely didn’t miss. “I mean, if you don’t want to, that’s fine, I was just—”

“Nonsense! You’re a nurse,” Elodie told her daughter cheerfully. “But until you get another job, you need something. That training won’t go to waste if you put in a few shifts helping people find awesome outfits.”

“I already sent out some resumes before I got here,” Neera protested. She paused when she saw how disappointed Elodie obviously was and turned to Scarlet. “But if



it's just casual and you know that I could get another position at any time, I could help."

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Elodie nodded and smiled at both of them like she hadn't basically just forced Neera into doing something she didn't want to do. Scarlet knew she'd have a chance to talk to Neera at the party coming up. She'd find her and she'd make sure that she really wanted those shifts. If she didn't, she certainly wasn't going to have hurt feelings.

Working in retail wasn't for everyone. Neera had just spent four years taking nursing, which was a tough course. It was no surprise to Scarlet that she wouldn't leap at the opportunity to hang clothes on racks, steam out orders, do inventory, and help customers.

"Now that the hard stuff is decided, can we talk New Year's parties and fun tattoo ideas?" Elodie whipped out her phone and was already searchin

g for tattoos before anyone could say anything.

Scarlet swore she saw Neera sink just a little further into the couch. Her smile looked altogether too forced. There seemed to be something wrong that went above and beyond the breakup Neera had just been through.

She wasn't Neera's mom, but she had known Neera since she was born. She could talk to her. Maybe she could help, although her own life was a hot mess. Maybe that's what made her the best candidate. She could understand everything Neera was going through.

A strange thrill shot through Scarlet when Neera caught her eye and offered a small, private smile meant just for her. Scarlet picked up her coffee, which was barely lukewarm, and blamed it on January chill encroaching on December and settling in

early.

## Chapter 3

Neera

Neera never thought she would be waking up early on a Monday morning for a job this soon after getting home, but after Scarlet's offer the day before, and Elodie's enthusiasm about it, she found herself steaming out garments from freshly unpacked boxes in the back of Scarlet's shop.

It wasn't the first time she'd been in Scarlet's boutique. More like the thousandth. Over the years, Elodie had stopped in for just about any reason, and it was rarely for shopping. When Scarlet bought the small space, Elodie had spent hours helping her renovate it. Neera had been ten at the time and she vividly remembered getting covered from head to toe in paint because she wanted to help out, eating dinner on the cement floor before the tile went down, and her mom's and Scarlet's laughter and joy as they made plans for the space together.

Now I'm working here.

Neera hoped it wouldn't be for long. She ran the steamer down a sheer, seafoam green dress and shuddered at the color. Honestly, she didn't mind retail. Yes, she'd rather be working as a nurse, but until she had some interviews, that wasn't going to happen. Yes, she could always use the money, and yes, she did want to help out.

She sighed to herself and chewed the inside of her cheek as she set the dress aside and started on another, a black cotton type deal that was wrinkled beyond anything she thought possible and was going to be a real chore to bring back to boutique worthy glory.

Neera had always been up for a challenge, so she tackled the dress with a sort of delight at smoothing out the creases and wrinkles. The challenge of being so close to Scarlet, alone a lot of the time? That wasn't something that Neera was sure she was up for.

She'd made it her mission, since she was sixteen and had developed an incurable crush on her mom's best friend, never to be alone with her. Honestly, Neera didn't trust herself. She didn't trust herself not to slip up and say something stupid or start staring at Scarlet and forget to stop. She didn't want it to be obvious, because that would have made things so much more than uncomfortable. The disaster that followed would have been of more than epic proportions, not to mention the fact that she'd never be able to look Scarlet in the eye again. And also her stupid crush would probably break up a lifelong friendship.

Six years later, it was obvious that what she felt was more than a crush. Now Scarlet was divorced, single, and apparently more open-minded, though she hadn't said anything of that nature so far. Neera wasn't sure if what her mom was saying was right, but if Scarlet had gone on a date with a woman, that meant something.

While Neera wanted Scarlet to be happy, it also stung her that she wasn't the one to go on that date with her. That she'd never been the one, because she could never, ever tell her how she truly felt.

The buzzer at the back of the store went off, and Elodie looked up at the black and white footage on the monitor screen in the back room. It displayed the store, split into four different views. She could see Scarlet out front, working on an order she wanted to place, standing behind the register, browsing and clicking away on the store's computer.

Neera almost glanced back down at the dress she was only half finished steaming, but something about the customer's stature and posture made her take a double look. The

store sold only women's clothing, but it wasn't unusual for men to come in.

It was, however, unusual to see Bryan, Scarlet's ex-husband, walk through the door.

Neera dropped the steamer wand and had to scramble to pick it up as it shot water all over the floor. She switched off the machine and walked closer to the front. She wasn't sure about leaving Scarlet alone up there. She knew that she could handle herself, but something told her to be within hearing range just in case. She watched covertly from the side of the back door, which was left open a crack.

Bryan was already at the front counter, and there was nothing friendly in his posture. His body language was already screaming hostility before he even opened his mouth.

"Where's the ring?" he barked, not bothering to moderate his tone since there was no one in the store that he could see but himself and Scarlet. "That was part of the deal. I gave you everything, the house, your business— I didn't try and touch any of it. The least you could do is return my mother's ring like you said you were going to. My lawyer was expecting it over a month ago."

Scarlet backed away from the computer a step, putting a little bit of distance between herself and Bryan. She wasn't scared, and she wasn't going to stand down, but she wasn't going to fight back and cause a scene that any one of her customers could walk in on either. "I— I totally forgot. I'm sorry. The business has been so busy and—"

"I'm going to ask Charlotte to marry me. Can't very well do that without my mother's ring, now can I?"

Neera's stomach sloshed wildly, and her mouth gaped open in surprise. Bryan was getting married? To the woman he'd been cheating on Scarlet with? He had the nerve to come in here and demand his ring back, and tell Scarlet what it was for? Why

couldn't he have just called?

She couldn't see Scarlet's face, but she could hear the hurt in her voice, even though it was obvious she was struggling to keep a neutral tone. "What? Marry her! It's been like—"

"Real love doesn't have a time limit," Bryan snapped. He leaned on the counter casually, and there was no mistaking his twisted smile. He was enjoying digging the knife in. This wasn't about a ring at all. "We're also expecting a baby, and I want to get the wedding done before too much time goes by. It's only the right thing to do."

"A child! Good God! Bryan! A baby? You— you never even wanted kids!"

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“No, it was you who didn’t want to have kids. Now you’re a dried-up old prune. You’re a workaholic. This store was always your life. Don’t blame me because you didn’t have a chance to do everything that you wanted to do in your life. That’s not classy. Not tasteful either.”

Neera had heard more than enough. She wasn’t going to stand there and let Scarlet be insulted by a turd of a man who had never loved her properly. She knew all about Scarlet’s marriage before it ended.

The mistress that Bryan had cheated with was only one in a long string of many before that. The only difference was that Scarlet had found out about this one. Finally. Maybe because he wanted her to. Either way, to Neera’s mind, it was a mercy. It made her think of Steph, cheating shamelessly with one of her girlfriend’s friends, saying after, in her defense, that it was because she was bored, and things were feeling worn out.

She hadn’t tried to talk about it before. Hadn’t even brought anything up. She’d never once said that she wasn’t feeling it anymore, that they should talk to someone, that they had issues to work out. It made Neera feel like an imbecile that she hadn’t seen it coming.

It only took her a minute to reach the back counter, but when she got there, she was steamed up, ready to fight for herself and for Scarlet and for women everywhere who got the shitty end of the stick. “Hey, Bryan,” she said, misleadingly sweet. She might be ready for a fight, but she also hoped that he would just leave.

Bryan’s face reddened. He was older than Neera remembered, but then, she probably

hadn't seen him in three or four years. His hair was dyed too black, and it couldn't disguise the fleshiness of his face, the way the skin stretched and sagged with age. He was six years older than Scarlet, but while she looked like she was in her early thirties, he looked ten years older than he really was.

"Oh. Neera. I- I didn't think there was anyone in the store."

"Hmmm. So that's why you thought it was okay to waltz in here like you own the place, which you clearly don't, because it was Scarlet who put all her hard work and dedication into making this business flourish, while if I remember correctly, you said that it would never work. Guess she proved you wrong. So, if there's anything tasteless, it's you coming in here instead of going through the lawyers or at least acting like a civil person."

Bryan swallowed thickly. He was wearing a dark blue dress shirt with black pants and a black jacket— bad choice, navy and black, but then it was always Scarlet who had the fashion sense— and the collar was buttoned too tight against his bulging neck.

"You're both crazy," he spluttered, looking between them. "Don't t

hink I haven't heard how you're running around like a teenage slut making up for lost time, Scarlet. Trying to be young again. Boston might be a big city, but it's not big enough. People are talking. Let's see how this place goes downhill once everyone finds out who you really are"

Neera was so far from amused. She crossed her arms and appeared as casual as she could. "Who she really is? As in, a lesbian? Or just experimenting because she's single and has every right to do that? I don't see anything wrong with that, either way, so it must be more that your masculinity has somehow taken a hit. Are you angry that some people might perceive you to have been not manly enough? People



can be rather ridiculous, thinking that a person can be turned into a lesbian by a bad sexual experience, and not because it's a real orientation. You do know, as an educated person, that a lot of people have to lie to themselves, or spend years hiding who they are, living their life in fear because of hurtful, ignorant comments like you just uttered? Or maybe they just legitimately weren't sure. Most of the time, it's the shitty societal expectations that stifle a person, though. But anyway. You're really going to go there and start right in with the homophobia? Because what you said sounded really, really bad."

"I wasn't implying that," Bryan spluttered, turning at least three shades redder than he was before the lecture.

Neera's hand shot to her throat, pantomiming unbuttoning a shirt, hoping Bryan would take the hint before he hyperventilated and passed out. "But you did just say that her store was going to suffer because you know she's slept with a woman after you officially were divorced."

"That's you putting words in my mouth."

"Is it though? I'm pretty sure it's what you meant. And the security system has sound, just so you know. You're literally on tape, so is everything you've said and how you treated Scarlet. I think you should apologize and just leave. If she has anything that belongs to you, I'm sure it was a legit oversight, because I know I wouldn't want to hang onto baggage that should have been thrown out when the rest of the trash saw fit to take a hike. It was so good to see you again. Really. Have a great life B-dog. Oh, sorry." Neera clapped a hand over her mouth and rolled her eyes. "I know you thought you were cool for having cheated on your wife over and over again. Does knocking up a nineteen-year-old admin assistant not count as being cool nowadays?"

"I'll get the ring to your lawyer's office first thing in the morning," Scarlet said, clearing her throat. She seemed to have temporarily recovered. "I really did just

forget about it. In the future, if there's something you need, can you just email me to remind me? I'd like to have a written record of these things."

"You've turned into a real raging bitch, Scarlet, you know that?" Apparently, Bryan wasn't going to be outdone. He wasn't going to meet rational with rational. "Who are you to talk to me about who I'm with when you're clearly doing the same thing with your best friend's daughter? You're a sickening hypocrite."

Neera nearly rocked back on her heels, but she caught herself in time and struggled to keep her expression from giving her away. "Bye, B-dog. Better go before you embarrass yourself trying to use any more big words. Enjoy being a dad. I think you're stellar material. A real natural. And by the way, I send my condolences to that poor girl. I expect she'll find the first full moon and go full on 'raging bitch' in no time. I think it's a side effect of being married to you. Take care now."

Bryan's eyes nearly rolled back in his head. He pointed a finger at Scarlet. "If I don't have that ring by tomorrow—"

"You will. Now, I think it's a good idea for you to leave." There was no mistaking the authority in Scarlet's tone, and just because she wasn't yelling didn't make her quiet words any less menacing. She was fully in control of herself, and the situation, and that was incredibly... hot.

Neera realized that Scarlet probably hadn't needed her to come out and fight her battles for her, but she was glad that she had anyway. Scarlet didn't need to put up with that nonsense. And, watching her stare her douchebag ex-husband down? It was so, so worth it.

Bryan actually did heed Scarlet's advice and made a fast exit. He was puffing hard when he pushed through the door. Neera turned to Scarlet, expecting her to appear triumphant, but instead, she sagged against the counter.

“Oh, my God,” Scarlet breathed. “That was— I’m so sorry.”

Neera took a step closer, her hand outstretched, but she stopped just shy of touching Scarlet’s shoulder. “Are you okay? He’s just an asshole. Don’t let him get to you.”

“Why would he say that?” Scarlet gasped. “About the dating thing? If Elodie heard...”

Neera’s stomach twisted, and a stitch formed in her side like she’d just run a long distance. She almost panted and choked at the same time. It was a good thing for her that she’d had lots of practice hiding how she really felt. It wasn’t easy for her to force a smile and appear unaffected, but she thought she did it convincingly. She hoped so.

“She’d know exactly where it came from and why. He’s a prick. A sick prick dick. Come on, give it a try. Childish name calling with rhymes is guaranteed to put a smile on your face, at least this time. Bryan is a special case. Actually, I can’t think of anyone more deserving.”

It was stupid, but it worked. Scarlet straightened up and offered her a shy, relieved smile. “Thank you for coming out here to help. I could have handled him, but it would have been much uglier than what you heard.”

“Did he say things like that when you were married?”

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“About being a lesbian? No. He never would have thought it. About everything else under the sun? Yes.”

“What a steaming turd.”

Scarlet choked on a laugh. “Ahh, yes, a steaming turd. I haven’t heard that in a while. It’s really good having you back home, even if the circumstances weren’t what your mom or I would have chosen for you. I’m glad you can be back for your mom’s party.”

“The party. Yes,” Neera sighed. “I still don’t have anything to wear for it.”

What she really wanted to ask Scarlet was if she actually did think that she might be a lesbian, but of course, she didn’t. That was personal, and the question would be rude. Neera didn’t want to pry.

And what would she say after? Oh wow, that’s freaking amazing because I’ve had fantasies about you since I was sixteen? I’ve wanted you since I basically knew how to want someone? I’ve thought about you endlessly for years? Yes, I was in a relationship, and I was happy, but it always felt like there was something missing, something empty inside of me and maybe that’s the real reason things went stale?

Ummm, no. Just no.

It was better not to talk about it. Safer. Especially after what Bryan said. He was just being a jerk, but he’d hit really close to the truth. Well, not the truth, but maybe what Neera wished in her wildest dreams and darkest fantasies could be the truth.

“Oh!” Scarlet exclaimed, and for a second Neera was panicked that maybe she’d slipped up and let something show, or even worse, muttered something out loud. “I totally forgot. I ordered something for you last week when Elodie mentioned you’d be back for the New Year’s party. I wasn’t sure if it would come on time, but it was in one of those boxes that that came this morning.”

“Seriously?” Neera was amazed. She very much wanted to see what Scarlet would have picked out and ordered for her. “I— I can’t really afford it, but thank you for thinking of me. That was, just— thank you.”

“It’s free,” Scarlet assured her. “Your mom and I don’t do Christmas gifts, and she wanted me to keep my promise that I wouldn’t do gifts with you either. We like to save our money for experiences, and that’s what she always wanted for you, but think of it as a gift. And as a work bonus.”

“I really shouldn’t. I know everything here is expensive.”

“Maybe you won’t even like it.” Scarlet changed the subject. She walked to the back, and

Neera trailed after her, inhaling the subtle scent of her gardenia perfume. It made her ache.

Had Scarlet really been with another woman? Was there more than one? What had she done? Was she just blowing off steam after Bryan? Experimenting and having fun? Was it more than that? What did she look like?

Jealousy stabbed at Neera in all the spots she really didn’t want it to. What was worse? Knowing Scarlet wasn’t a lesbian and was married, or finding out that she might indeed be and was now single? Either way, it was torture. Sheer. Torture.

No, the latter was definitely worse, because that included a heady and unfamiliar amount of temptation that Neera didn't know how to deal with.

Scarlet went to the boxes that still needed to be unpacked and pulled out a gorgeous, gold, shimmery dress. Neera could tell that it would be more of the figure-hugging variety, and also that it would fit perfectly. There was no way she had anything that nice in her wardrobe.

"Oh," she breathed. "Oh, my God, it's gorgeous!"

Scarlet handed it over. "It's yours. When I saw it online, I knew it would be perfect. I was hoping against hope it would get here on time."

"I don't know if I can accept this," Neera protested.

"You can." Scarlet grinned. "You definitely can. Sometimes all you need to feel pretty again and get your confidence back is a lovely dress. That's part of the reason I own this place. So, so many people come here to buy clothes, and it's so much more than the clothes themselves. They want an outfit for an interview, or a special occasion. Something just right and memorable. I'm glad that if I can give just a little bit of confidence or make someone feel gorgeous in their own skin, then I'm making the world a better place, I'm not just selling clothing."

Neera took the dress from Scarlet and held it reverently in her hands. The fabric was light and smooth. She'd half expected something that sparkly to be a bit scratchy, but it wasn't. It was perfect.

"I always thought you were just selling clothes," she said jokingly.

Scarlet laughed. "Well, now you know. And you're here, working, so you're doing so much more than that too."

Scarlet's smile was radiant. Bryan was all but forgotten. Neera would have done anything to see Scarlet smile like that. Not just at her, but in general. If that meant wearing the dress to her mom's party, then she'd dang well wear the dress. If it meant putting up with the constant ache in her chest whenever she was near Scarlet and pretending like she always had, that everything was fine, then she'd do it in a heartbeat.

She'd do it. Always. She just wished it wasn't so damned hard.

## Chapter 4

### Scarlet

Elodie's New Year's party was something that they'd been doing together for the past eleven years. Eleven years ago, Scarlet was newly engaged. It happened on December tenth, which was also her birthday. Bryan killed two birds with one stone that night. Elodie was happy for Scarlet, but even back then, she'd warned her against marrying Bryan.

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When Scarlet had said she was certain, Elodie took her at her word and never mentioned her doubts or her overall dislike of Bryan again. She did say that she was sad that she was going to be losing her best friend to marriage, the great big sucking vortex that chews people up and spits them out, never the same again.

Yeah, it was safe to say that Elodie wasn't a fan of marriage. It wasn't just Bryan. Scarlet had laughed it off, promising Elodie that she was still going to be the same fun-loving, loyal, there for her whenever she needed it, best friend that she'd always been. Elodie had insisted that marriage makes one dull. To prove her wrong, Scarlet came up with the idea for a New Year's party. Since Bryan was building a brand-new house for them and they were living in a tiny apartment, Elodie offered to host it for friends and family alike.

Scarlet hustled around the kitchen, wiping up spilled drinks and rescuing Elodie's wood table from sticky bottles. They'd set out a plastic tablecloth on top, but still. It never hurt to be proactive on the clean up. Elodie's small bungalow was overflowing with people, but the only time anyone strayed into the kitchen, which was set off from the rest of the house by a not so open concept floor plan, it was only to check to see if there was any alcohol remaining. There was. Barely.

Maybe it was what Bryan had said, but Scarlet found it hard to be cheerful. His comment about Neera had stuck with her like a burr, working its way under her skin, under her bones, until it was all she could think about because it hurt.

She would never do something like that.

Had she noticed that Neera was beautiful? Okay, yes, she had. She was young,



vibrant, smart, gorgeous, and alive. It was hard not to notice and even harder not to be in awe of Neera's radiance. Scarlet loved both Elodie and Neera like an extension of her own family. What Bryan had said was thoroughly unfair and unsettling.

Why? Because my thoughts of Neera haven't been in a safe range ever since she got back?

Scarlet grabbed a roll of paper towel and tackled the sticky mess on the tabletop. Someone had spilled over a bottle of red wine and though it had been partially cleaned up by a well-intentioned individual, there was still a puddle on the floor that needed to be addressed.

Scarlet got down on her hands and knees and cleaned up the mess. The house was vibrating with laughter, low volume music, and the hum of conversations. Mostly laughter, which was a good thing. The sound of it ringing out, loud or high, a deep gut laugh or a short, soft, musical lilt, made her smile.

If Elodie realized that she was missing out on the fun, she'd be appalled, but that didn't stop Scarlet from wanting to hide out in the kitchen. She'd spent the evening celebrating, and it was only in the past half hour that she'd needed an escape.

A set of gold heels came into view from underneath the table and Scarlet straightened. She stood up, holding onto a sopping bundle of wine-stained paper towels, to come face to face with the very person she was trying not to think about.

Neera.

Her eyes were sparkling, but also a little bit bleary and unfocused. She teetered in her heels when she tried to step forward and had to grab the table's edge. She was stunning in that gold dress. Scarlet had pictured Neera in it when she'd ordered it, but no vision of hers could do the real thing justice. Her thick, dark hair had grown out

while she was gone. She'd curled it into an array of waves. Her makeup was on the heavy side, but from her heavy eyeliner to her scarlet lips, the look complimented the shimmering gold dress and was perfectly suited to a New Year's party.

"What are you doing in here all alone?" Neera asked, then she noticed the paper towels soaked with wine. "You're cleaning up? Why? It's almost midnight. You should be out there with everyone else."

"I'm alright. The year will shift over whether I'm cleaning up messes or lifting a drink and counting down."

"Yes, but— Mom would be so sad if she found out you weren't having a good time."

Scarlet smiled softly. "I'm having a good time. It was just a huge mess in here and I thought I'd get a head start. Maybe this year we won't be cleaning until four in the morning."

Neera frowned. "Still. I think you should leave it." She held up her empty glass. "I was coming for a refill, but I now realize that it's probably a shit thing to get drunk at one's mother's party just because one's heart has been thoroughly stomped on."

"I don't know. If you're going to need to do it at least once, I'd say that one's mother's party is the safest place."

Neera set her empty plastic cup on the table. "I'm not really drunk." It was obvious that she was. "I'm just slightly buzzed."

Scarlet eyed the cupboards. "Can I get you a glass of water?"

"That would be nice, thank you."

She turned and took down a glass from beside the sink before running the tap until the water was cold. She filled the glass and passed it over to Neera, who took it with so much care that Scarlet wondered if she was seeing double or if she was just worried about dropping it.

“Have you heard anything from anyone?” Scarlet asked, searching for something to discuss.

“No.” Neera shook her head. “It’s the holidays. Messes everyone up. I’m sure someone will call me back soon.”

“Would it be terrible of me to admit that I hope they wait just a few more days? It’s nice having you at the boutique. You do the work of ten people. You’re very organized and very efficient.”

“I think it’s because I’m a nurse,” Neera responded. She gulped down half the glass of water. When she pulled it away, her lips were wet, water beading on her scarlet lipstick. A jolt shot through Scarlet and that burr that Bryan had planted worked its way into the painful soft spots, irritating her when she should have been able to easily dismiss it. “I’m used to working in a crazy fast paced environment. I wanted to do neo-natal. Did I ever tell you that?”

“No. No, you didn’t.” Scarlet thought sadly of Bryan’s mistress, slash soon to be wife. Was it true she was pregnant? Bryan really had said that he never wanted children. She’d tried not to think about any of that, but she had to bite down on the inside of her cheek, hard, so she’d have something to focus on other than the burn at the back of her eyes.

Neera nodded. She finished the water and set the glass on the table. “I wanted to work with babies. This girl in my class was telling me about the ER and I thought— I don’t know. I guess that I figured that I could— that maybe it would be less heartbreaking?

I don't know why I thought that. I've seen a lot of people die." Her hand shot to her mouth. "Oh, my God. I don't know why I just said that. I'm sorry."

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“That’s okay. I imagine nursing is one of the least easy professions, even if no one dies. You still have to deal with people who are in pain or people who are sick. That’s tough. Elodie couldn’t believe you wanted to be a nurse. I was surprised too, but I could see it.”

“Yeah. You were the one who convinced her that I’d be okay. She was really freaking out when I was in grade twelve and told her that I didn’t want to do econ anymore. I can’t see myself as a business major now. That was a crazy thought. I love what I do. Really. Despite the hard parts.”

Scarlet’s eyes felt hot and a little shiny again and she found herself blinking fast. “That dress looks incredible on you,” she whispered against her better judgment.

Neera’s smile lit up the room. “Thank you. I would never have gone for something like this. You’re good at what you do. Actually, you’re amazing at it. I’ve seen women come into the store before when I’ve been there with Mom, and you make them go from doubtful about their bodies to loving every inch of themselves. You might not be a lifesaver for real, but body positivity is a lifesaver in other ways.”

Scarlet couldn’t hide her surprise and she didn’t even try and stop her smile. The warmth that spread through her was so much more than a simple compliment warranted.

“Are you actually a lesbian?” The question came out of nowhere, blindsiding Scarlet.

“Uh— I...”

“Never mind.” Neera waved her hand in the air, then did it again, trying to focus on it. “Oh, my God. I had four drinks, which was four times more than I normally have. I guess I should stick to a glass of wine and call it a night from now on. Then I wouldn’t be blurting out really terrible questions like that. I’m sorry.”

Scarlet just stood there, a tingle starting in her feet, spreading up her legs. She could feel her cheeks getting hot. If only she’d had more than one drink herself to blame it on.

“You should come back and join the party,” Neera said, trying again. “It’s almost midnight.” She fished at her backside for something then whipped around, confused. “Shit. I just remembered I’m not wearing pants. I have no idea where my phone is.” Her eyes, when they landed back on Scarlet, were dancing. “I really like your hair. Have I ever told you that? I like that you dye it that crazy almost white color.”

“You know that’s because I started to go gray when I was seventeen. Being in high school, that wasn’t cool. Platinum blonde, though? That was acceptable.”

“It looks good with your eyes. The green looks greener. I think. Maybe it’s the bob. I like that, by the way.”

Scarlet shrugged, trying to be casual when really, on the inside, she was in complete chaos. “Elodie calls it my divorce hair. I cut it off after. I thought it was time for a change. Bobs are popular right now. After I got it done, I regretted it. It’s kind of matronly.”

“No!” Neera’s eyes widened. “It’s not! You couldn’t look matronly if you tried. You’re the most beautiful woman I know. Any twenty-year-old would be jealous of you. You’re tall, slim, and yoga has done wonders for you.”

Scarlet nearly toppled over on her heels, and she wasn’t the drunk one. “I— well,

thank you. That's very kind."

Neera's eyes burned through her, strangely bright and intense. "It's more than kind. Do you know how beautiful you are? Because I swear if Bryan ruined that for you, I'm going to find him and cut off his—"

"Ten, nine, eight..." The New Year's countdown came out of nowhere. Scarlet froze. Neera grasped the table and took a step forward, teetering again.

There was a strange glow lighting Scarlet up from the inside out. Her body was doing so much more than tingling. Neera took another step, and another until she was right in front of Scarlet.

"Seven, six, five..."

When Neera looked up at Scarlet this time, Scarlet could swear there was something in her face that was close to desire. She shivered and had the strangest sensation. Neera had never looked at her that way before. She'd never seen Neera look at anyone like that.

She's drunk. She's not into you. Just very, very inebriated. That does things to the brain, you know. Silly things.

"Four, three..."

Neera reached out, her hands landing on Scarlet's waist. Their gazes locked and Scarlet's breath rushed out of her lungs like she'd just toppled from some great, impossible height.

"Two, one, Happy New Year!"

The chant went up through the house, echoing off the walls, filling up the place with cheers and raised yells of mirth, with glasses clinking and laughter roaring out.

“Happy New Year,” Neera whispered.

Her hands left Scarlet’s waist and cupped her face gently. Neera leaned in and before Scarlet could process what was happening, her lips were on hers. The contact was like an explosion between them. Scarlet whimpered and parted her lips. She was frozen, but Neera took over, wrapping her arm around Scarlet’s neck, pressing herself against her.

Neera was shorter by a few inches, but their heels evened out the difference. She was curvier, and when her breasts pressed into Scarlet’s chest, her brain short circuited. Scarlet tilted her face, giving Neera better access. She devoured her lips, kissing Scarlet until she couldn’t breathe. She pressed into her hard, and then her hips ground against Scarlet’s, setting off a spark shower behind her closed eyes.

Neera’s lips were perfect. They were plush and soft, scalding hot. She tasted like sweet soda and whisky. Neera’s tongue swept between Scarlet’s parted lips, touching hers almost tentatively. Where the heck had Neera learned to kiss like that?

Where did she learn to kiss like that? When she was away at school? Dating her age-appropriate girlfriend? Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. This was wrong. Stop. Stop. Stop. Now.



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Scarlet broke the kiss with a gasp. She stumbled back, putting a foot of distance between them after she'd wrenched apart. Neera stared at her, her eyes heavy and swimming with desire. She ran her tongue along her bottom lip and closed her eyes like she was savouring that last taste of Scarlet she'd just licked off.

Scarlet was panting. There were alarms blaring in her head. Her gut churned. She'd just kissed Elodie's daughter. Her best friend's daughter. It didn't matter that Neera was different now. That she was entirely womanly and that she had graduated college and had been an adult for a long time. She was still Elodie's daughter. She was always going to be Elodie's daughter.

"Neera, I—"

Neera smiled at her softly, her eyes blazing like twin ambers with fire at their depths. "Happy New Year, Scarlet," she whispered, then she turned and walked out of the kitchen.

It was just a New Year's kiss. People kissed each other on New Years. I've kissed Elodie before. On the cheek. Not on the lips. Just for fun. Because we're like sisters.

That kiss? There was no way that kiss was friendly. It wasn't innocent. That wasn't just a New Year's thing. But Neera had been drunk. Maybe it was impulsive, and she got carried away. It didn't mean anything. In the morning, she'd probably wake up and remember almost nothing, or maybe she would remember, but she'd laugh it off.

Scarlet though? She was totally sober. She'd remember. She'd remember that kiss until her dying freaking

breath.

The fact was, she was attracted to Neera. She'd known it since the second she saw her again, rubbing sleep from her eyes, sitting down beside Elodie that Sunday morning. It was the first time she'd allowed herself to notice. The first time they were both single. After her divorce, she wasn't just experimenting. Bryan was wrong about that. He was maybe right to be angry because she'd always known that she wasn't someone who should get conventionally married or be in that type of relationship, but her parents were extremely strict, and she was afraid.

After Marla had basically dumped Scarlet as a best friend when she'd been disgusted by her befriending Elodie, Scarlet's parents hadn't wanted her to hang out with Elodie either, but she'd refused to listen. She'd lectured them about kindness and about the hypocrisy of that thinking until she'd gotten her way. The one thing she hadn't been able to do? Be strong enough to tell them who she really was.

That was going to change. She was thirty-eight years old, and she was damn well ready to live life on her own terms. What she was not going to do? Fuck up her entire life and her best friend's life, and her best friend's daughter's life, because she suddenly had feelings she couldn't seem to control.

That kiss was just a New Year's, spur of the moment thing.

She couldn't even begin to consider that it might be anything else.

## Chapter 5

Neera

“Hey, sweetie! Just checking to see how rough things are going this morning. How many ibuprofens and how much orange juices do you need?”

Neera groaned as she rolled over in bed towards the wall. She grabbed her pillow and thrust it over her head like she used to do when she was a kid. Her mom wasn't having it.

"It's nearly noon," Elodie prodded. "It's time to get up."

"Mom! What does it matter? It's a holiday. Holidays are meant for sleeping in, especially New Years Day because everyone is hung over."

"Orange juice? Pancakes? Water?"

"Ugh." Neera removed the pillow from her head and blinked up at the bright light flooding the room. It wasn't just the lightbulb that was the culprit. Her mom had opened all the blinds as well. The light pierced her head like a thousand little needles. Opening her eyes was like jumping into a frigid lake.

Holy shit. Last night. Oh, my God. I kissed Scarlet.

Neera jolted upright in bed and studied her mom. Did she know? Had she seen anything? Her stomach roiled at the thought, and the ache in her head got even worse.

"Now is a good time to say that you're never drinking again and not mean it because it was New Years and if you're going to have a few drinks to get over all the crap you've been through in the past months so you can forget about it and start fresh because it's a brand-new year, then that's exactly the time to do it." Her mom was way too cheerful for someone who had probably spent all morning cleaning up.

Cleaning up.

"Shit," Neera said as she ran her hands down her face, trying to blink away the throbbing pain going on behind her eyes. "You probably cleaned everything up by

yourself.”

“Actually, after everyone left and after you went to bed, Scarlet helped me. She didn’t had very much to drink and neither did I really. We got it all cleaned up before she headed home.”

“Oh, my God.” How could I have kissed her? She wasn’t drunk. She. Wasn’t. Drunk.

Neera had never been the get drunk, lose control, kiss her mother’s best friend type. She had actually very actively not been that type. Until last night. But it was New Years. It was a party. She was clearly drunk, and Scarlet would have known that. It was just a thing people did at midnight. They kissed each other. She could pass it off as that.

Dear God, did I sloppy kiss her? Did I slobber on her? Did I drool? Did I do it badly? Why can I remember kissing her, but not the details?

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How unfair was that? You'd think that if one did something that one had been desiring to do since one knew that one could desire, they would bloody well remember every single freaking second and minute detail of it.

Neera remembered that her head spun and felt light in a completely different way than being buzzed did. Okay, drunk. She was more than buzzed. She remembered the cramp in her stomach smoothing out and the feeling that she was, for the first time in her life, truly free. The actual physical details of the kiss? Maybe she'd been too lost in her own head. Maybe it was the alcohol that made her unable to remember properly how it felt physically. Maybe it was more than a physical thing. Maybe it was a transcendent kind of experience that was so not physical that those details got erased somehow.

Even though Neera knew she should be banging her head against the wall- not literally because nothing would be worse for a hangover headache than that— she also wanted, very much, to kiss Scarlet again.

“Oh, my God?” Elodie asked, confused. “It was no problem. Don't worry. We wouldn't ask you to come clean up. It's our party. We can be responsible. Don't feel bad. You had a lot on your plate. You deserved to let loose, just for a night. I'd rather you do it with me, safely, than at some club somewhere where I don't know what's happening.”

“Mom, I'm an adult. I've graduated from college. I'm a nurse who is responsible for other people's lives.”

Elodie sat down on the edge of the bed. She pulled Neera in for a hug and let her rest

her cheek against her shoulder. “You’re not a little girl anymore. I get that. I’m not even going to say you’re my little girl because that’s not how I see you. I’m proud of the woman you’ve become, but no matter how old you are, I’m always going to worry. Not because it’s my job, but because a mother always wants their children to be okay, living their best lives possible.”

Neera’s eyes burned. Her stomach churned as her head ached, but she also knew it was guilt there, taking root in her belly, making her feel sick. Guilt at what she’d done because it was so much more than any holiday token kiss. Because she wanted to do it again, so she could get the physical details right in her head. She wanted to do it again just because she freaking wanted to. She couldn’t tell her mom any of that and it was probably the one thing that she’d ever kept from her. A secret that felt all wrong.

“I’m fine,” she said instead in a soft, wavering voice. “I’m all good.”

“I’m glad.” Elodie rubbed her hand down Neera’s back. “I’m glad you’re home. Have I said that too many times?”

Neera pulled away and offered a shaky smile. “No. That’s okay. You can say it as many times as you want.”

Elodie glanced around the room, then located the dress that Neera had worn to the party the night before. It was crumpled in a heap on the floor. She bent and picked it up and another wave of guilt shot through Neera.

“Sorry. I would never have just thrown that on the floor-”

“I checked in on you last night to make sure you were okay. Even nurses need someone looking out for them. You were in bed, sleeping soundly on your side. You looked fine. I saw the dress and I never thought to pick it up either.”

“I was so exhausted. I don’t even remember falling asleep. Thank goodness the room didn’t spin. Ugh, I haven’t drunk that much in so long. Actually, probably never. I promised I’d be responsible when I left, and I was. It was the mixing things. Don’t mix things. That’s a bad idea.”

“That’s probably why your head hurts so much.” Elodie clicked her tongue as she picked up the dress and shook it out. Miraculously, the lovely fabric wasn’t wrinkled at all. She set it on the end of the bed. “It’s probably a dry clean only, but you can ask Scarlet tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow. Right. Work.”

Elodie grinned. “You’ll be good as new by then, I’m sure.”

Neera had no idea how she was going to face Scarlet. Did she hypothetically want to kiss her again? Yes. Yes, she did. Had she wanted to kiss her for years? Yes. She’d always held off. It was always a fantasy. Until she made it real. It was real now, and it was out there and the only excuse she had was the thin veil of a party and having had too much to drink and a tradition that some people followed through on. She’d said Happy New Year, hadn’t she? Yes, she was pretty sure she had. Even drunk, she’d had the presence of mind to cover her ass.

Pathetic. That’s pathetic. I should have told her that she was wonderful. That she was gorgeous. That that kiss would change my life. That she’d already changed my life. I should have told her...

No. No, I should not tell her any of that.

Neera decided, as she got out of bed and followed her mom to the kitchen for a glass of juice and some pills for her headache, followed by some pancakes to settle her rocky stomach, that she would just not say anything at all. If Scarlet wanted to talk

about it, she would let her. If not, she would just go to the boutique and steam the shit out of racks of clothes, or whatever else she was supposed to do. She would do her job and she

would do it well and she would hope like heck that she got a call back for a nursing job soon. It was what she was meant to do. It was what she wanted to do. It would also get her out of Scarlet's domain, out of her store, out of her presence.

Her presence meant temptation, and now that Neera had crossed a boundary that she promised herself she'd never cross, she wasn't entirely sure that she could just go back to pretending, at least to herself, like nothing had ever happened.

## Chapter 6

### Scarlet

Scarlet half expected that the next few days at the boutique with Neera would be awkward, but it was like nothing had happened. Neera didn't mention the kiss and Scarlet wasn't going to bring it up.

She'd spent the entire holiday worrying about what she'd say to Neera about it. She wanted to apologize. She didn't want to apologize. She wanted to explain. She wanted an explanation. She wanted to tell her what she'd felt. She knew she could never tell her what she'd felt.

She didn't even know if what she'd felt was real because it was so taboo. Even if it was real, she couldn't let it be real. She'd never struggled with anything so hard in her life, and that was saying a lot, considering her failed marriage to an uncaring, thoughtless, unfaithful husband.

She was also slowly coming out to friends, and she had yet to come out officially to



her family. Thinking about that was even easier than thinking about talking that kiss through with Neera.

After a few days of working together, both of them going about their business, the atmosphere a little bit strained, but more because it felt like there was a buzzing between them that hadn't been there before, Scarlet knew she had to do something about it, at least from her side.

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For Neera, it must be exactly what she'd said it was. Just a kiss at midnight on New Year's, like a lot of people shared. It was a token. It didn't mean more than that. It obviously hadn't kept her up at night for multiple nights. It hadn't made her knees feel like they were going to collapse. The memory of that kiss hadn't made her break out in a cold sweat and gasp for air because there was so much pressure on her chest and so many sensations swirling through her body that she couldn't catch her breath.

Scarlet had to do something, and that something was to keep herself busy. She threw herself into work and when that wasn't enough, she decided to put herself out there in a way she hadn't ever before.

In a world of technology, she downloaded a few dating apps and made herself profiles, and actively tried to meet someone. It was hard and strange, and it even felt a little bit wrong, but then she met Sarah, an age appropriate single mother with a young son who had been divorced a few years ago and was just starting to date again.

They chatted on the app. Scarlet found herself intrigued. She liked Sarah. She seemed genuine and nice, and they had something in common in that they'd gotten married and had gone through all of that, then when they were divorced, they were ready to admit to themselves that their marriages wouldn't have worked for more than one reason.

Sarah's coming out story was a lot like Scarlet's, even though Scarlet hadn't fully got there yet. She knew, but she hadn't told everyone who mattered yet. Sarah was encouraging. She was kind. She was incredibly patient. Her stories about her son were hilarious and supportive and it was clear she was a loving mother.

After a few days, Scarlet was comfortable enough with Sarah that when she asked her if she wanted to get a more informal style dinner together, she'd agreed.

She agreed because Sarah checked all the boxes. She was the right age. She was kind. She was ready to start her life with someone. Scarlet found her attractive. She found Scarlet attractive. They chatted so easily online. Why not meet in person?

"Scarlet? Are you okay?"

Scarlet whirled around, dropping the stapler she realized that she'd been trying to insert a row of staples in for the past twenty minutes. The boutique was experiencing its usual January, after Christmas lull, and she'd been lost in her thoughts for a long time, standing up at the front counter, probably looking like a zombie.

She bent and quickly picked up the stapler, rammed the row of staples home, and snapped it shut so quickly that an errant staple shot out the front right at Neera. That quirk in her brow only deepened as she dodged the flying projectile.

"Umm, yeah." Scarlet set the stapler down quickly before she could do any more damage. "Sorry. I was just thinking about— yeah. Stuff."

"Stuff? Work stuff? Or Bryan stuff? Because I swear if he's still bothering you, I'll come with you to your lawyer, and we'll get him sorted out and—"

"I have a date tonight, actually." Neera's mouth literally dropped open. She was so shocked that Scarlet didn't know if she should be offended or not. She laughed it off instead. "Yes, even me. It's with a woman I met on an app. She seems very nice." Why can't I say that and mean it? Sarah is nice. She truly is.

"Oh. That's— that's great." Neera stammered. She smiled, but it wasn't her usual bright smile. It was more the kind of smile of someone who has just stepped in

something questionable. Something that looked like mud but might be worse.

Scarlet angled towards the computer, slid the keyboard out towards her, and brought up the order she'd been working on earlier, just so she could have some sort of distraction, so she didn't have to look at Neera. Scarlet was sure her face would give her away. "You don't think it's a good idea?"

"Oh..." Neera sounded like she was gargling on rocks. "I don't know. It's not really any of my business."

"Do you think I'm crazy for wanting to be with someone after Bryan? I know that he was a man and that my new partner would be a woman, but people are fundamentally people whether they're men or women."

"I don't know," Neera said again. "I don't think that you can judge anyone based on Bryan. He was a toad. Not the kind you kiss that turns into a prince either. Actually, I like toads and frogs. He wasn't a toad. He was more of a trash bag. Yesterday's coffee grounds. Smelly rotten apple cores. A wart in a place where there shouldn't be warts."

Scarlet bit down on her bottom lip before she burst out laughing. "A wart in a place where there shouldn't be warts," she whispered. She clicked fast on the order, but even concentrating on something else, she could still feel her lips tremble beneath her top teeth with a suppressed giggle.

"If you think she's nice then she's probably great."

"I don't know. Look at my track record."

"You might have made a mistake once when you were a lot younger. Also, people change. The man you married might not have been the one you divorced. I want to

think that just because I got cheated on doesn't mean that I'll pick someone who would cheat on me again next time. I want to think that I can learn from my experiences going forward."

I statements. I statements were a good thing. It turned the attention back off of someone and onto someone else. Instead of feeling like she was the poor deer about to be plowed over,

Scarlet now felt something entirely different. She thought about Neera dating someone, finding someone who made her happy, falling in love one day, getting married, even having children, if she wanted them. It made her legs suddenly feel watery. She couldn't deny there was a bitter taste at the back of her tongue.

What she also couldn't deny? That she had any right to those feelings at all. Feelings of wistfulness and longing and outright jealousy that were so hot they scorched everything they touched.

"I hope that I can do that," Scarlet said in the smallest voice. "She seems nice. She has a son, actually."

"Oh really? That's great. I didn't believe what Bryan said for a minute. You love kids."

"Maybe I always was too busy with the boutique. Maybe I made it seem that way. Maybe—"

"Maybe you're not responsible for another person being a jerk and an asshole and wanting to punish you because he thinks he's entitled t

o do that, like making you feel small will make his dick any bigger."

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This time Scarlet had to cover her mouth with her hand to keep from laughing. It would be totally inappropriate to laugh, wouldn't it?

"It's okay to think that's funny," Neera said in a dry tone.

Scarlet finally let loose. She clicked the final few clicks on the order and backed away, laughing as she did. She found Neera watching her, almost carefully, she thought, but she started laughing too when Scarlet did. They laughed until Scarlet had to wipe tears from the corners of her eyes.

"Oh my gosh," she whispered. "I needed that. I had no idea how badly I needed that."

Neera nodded. "We both did. My mom keeps saying it's a brand-new year, time to make new memories, blah, blah, blah, the usual, but maybe she's right. No one should keep living in the past. Nurturing past wounds never lets them heal. We can't change who we were with or what happened. We can just make better choices moving forward."

"Or different mistakes."

"Better mistakes, I hope. There is such a thing as happy mistakes."

Scarlet's pulse thrummed rapidly at her neck. Was Neera thinking about that kiss? The kiss that they hadn't talked about because for Neera it had been a non-issue? The kiss that wasn't really a kiss at all? To Scarlet, it was so much more.

She should say something. She should tell Neera what it made her feel. What she was

feeling now. She wished she could say that she was only on a dating app because she needed to stop thinking about her. Because she hadn't stopped thinking about her.

That would be wrong.

It would ruin everything.

"Happy mistakes," Scarlet whispered instead. "Let's hope for those."

Neera couldn't keep the slightly skeptical expression from her face. She did give Scarlet the double thumbs up, though. "I hope you have a great date tonight. I hope it works out. You deserve to be happy."

"So do you, Neera." When Scarlet said it, she meant it, but it was far too easy to insert herself into that picture of Neera she had in her mind. Far too easy and far too wrong.

She blinked. "I think we might be the only people who don't believe that. About ourselves, I mean."

"It's hard to be impartial. It's easier to give hope to everyone else, I guess."

"Hope." Neera thought about that. "I guess if my mom was here, she'd tell us to stop being mokey and get on with it. Plenty of crappy things have happened to her and she's always got on with it and been cheerful. She would tell me to get my head out of my bottom and apply for more jobs and work hard at what I have and be thankful for it in the meantime, and that everything was going to work out soon enough and be awesome again before I knew it. She'd tell you that you'd rock any date you want to go on because you're awesome and you're smart, beautiful, compassionate, and that you have so many gifts to share with someone who deserves you. Then, she'd say something about lattes or cinnamon buns, because what can't a good coffee fix, and

we'd feel so much more hopeful because she has that never give up vibe that rubs off on everyone she meets."

"That's very true. Elodie would set us straight." She'd also kick my butt for even thinking about her daughter in the way I have been. It would be friendship suicide. I can't risk that.

"I don't have to wish you good luck then, with your date. I'll just ask you tomorrow how it was and expect to hear all the wonderful things that you have to tell me."

Scarlet forced a smile, even though she hoped that Neera wouldn't ask her about her date. She wanted her to know that she was putting herself out there so that a wall could go up between them and that there was zero chance of anything ever happening that resembled that kiss again. But what if she really wanted Neera to realize that she was putting herself out because she was ready? Ready to move on. Ready to start a new chapter in her life. Ready to have her entire universe rocked by another life-altering kiss.

"For sure." The words were scraped out from a scratchy throat. "Wonderful things. Yes. Tomorrow." She needed to change the subject, and fast. "And soon you'll probably have awesome things to tell me about job interviews and new opportunities."

They needed that encouragement. It felt good. To be there for each other, talking it out, even if that's not how it started. Scarlet realized that's where she was at. Aside from the kiss that kept hovering over her head like a dark cloud of temptation, aside from the whole dating as a distraction thing, she did feel better. It appeared that Neera did too. She went off to the back to finish the order and she seemed lighter, like nothing was weighing her down. Maybe Scarlet was imagining that.

Or maybe they were good for each other, some ways by accident, and in other ways



she'd never expected.

## Chapter 7

Neera

Dating. Scarlet was dating.

How many dates had she been on with Sarah over the past week? Neera wasn't sure. She didn't want to ask. After the first morning, when Scarlet arrived at work glowing and happy, Neera's heart turned into a rock in her chest. She'd been carrying that rock around with her, wedged behind her ribcage and in her throat, for seven days.

She couldn't talk about it. She didn't feel like it was right to ask Scarlet about her new girlfriend, if that's actually what Sarah was, or about their dates. That was private, and Neera didn't want to dig. She didn't want to seem too interested. She also didn't trust her acting skills at all and it would probably be very obvious that she wasn't happy about it.

Was she happy that Scarlet was happier? Yes. At least, she wanted to be. Was she happy that it wasn't her getting to be that source of happiness? No. No, she was not.

It killed Neera to think about Scarlet sharing things with another person. Intimate things. Details of her life. Details of someone else's life. She was forging bonds that were new and unstable, but bonds that could deepen and last a lifetime, and they had nothing to do with Neera.

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By the end of the week, Neera's determination to be happy for Scarlet and let her live her life without interfering in any way was wavering.

Neera's arms ached from steaming out almost an entire new order, but she wasn't ready to give up. She welcomed the physical distraction. The burn in her shoulders and arms gave her something else to focus on other than the endless parade of thoughts that bombarded her brain.

What if I'd talked to her about that kiss?

What if I'd followed up that kiss with another one?

What if she doesn't know how I feel?

Could it work if she did? Could they make it work? Could there ever be a scenario where they could be an 'us', not as Elodie's best friend and Elodie's daughter, but as Scarlet and Neera?

Neera had been so worried about wrecking everything and making a mess of everything, but what if it was too late now?

Neera unfolded a long black dress out of the last box she was tackling. She hung it on the rack for steaming and started at the sleeves, which were somehow the worst of it. The thing looked like it had been stuffed into a ball in the back of a closet for a decade instead of folded neatly into a box.

The pain in her back from having to bend over for most of the afternoon wasn't

anything compared to the pain throbbing behind her eyes. If she could just stop thinking about the same things, the thoughts a relentless march through her brain, she'd be so relieved.

Tell her the truth.

Was it worth living a tortured existence just to keep the truth safe? How long would it be before she got another job, and she didn't have to work so closely with Scarlet again? She knew that wasn't the reason she couldn't stop thinking about her. It was easier when she was far from home, in another city, with someone else, working a job that often left her exhausted. She wasn't in that situation anymore. Everything had changed.

What would Scarlet do if she told her? If she admitted to having feelings for her? Would she laugh it off? No, she wouldn't. She wouldn't laugh. She would cry. No, she probably wouldn't do that either. She'd likely just be serious, sit down, and talk Neera out of any such thing, presenting facts logically, then they'd agree not to mention it again, and things would go on as always, but be strained and tense, probably until the end of time.

Sometimes the truth sucks. Honesty isn't always the best policy. Sometimes the best policy was getting a job and staying busy and getting on with it. Haven't you been trying to do that for years now? Neera wished she could have a helpful internal conversation. A nice voice, like some people had, not the argumentative, devil's advocate crap that kept coming at her.

Neera got lost in her head again as she finished steaming the dress, and when she was just finishing the back, she heard footsteps behind her. Even if more people were working in the store, she would have recognized the click of Scarlet's heels anywhere. She straightened up and turned around, shutting off the steamer.

“I just closed up

,” Scarlet announced. She walked over to the empty boxes, her mouth parted as she took in Neera’s work. “I can’t believe you finished everything. That’s crazy.”

Neera flushed with embarrassment. She would never say that she was working her butt off because it was better that she stayed busy. “I guess I’m getting more efficient.”

“I’ll say. It usually takes a normal person three days to steam out an order that size.”

“I totally lost track of time back here. I didn’t realize it was even close to closing up.”

“That’s okay. I’ve shut everything down so many times I could do it blind.”

Neera unplugged the steamer and set it in its regular corner where it wouldn’t take anyone out who happened back there in the dark. Accidental death by tripping over a steamer would be uncool. She turned around and found Scarlet looking at her with a naked, almost vulnerable expression, and her breath caught. She was so stunned that she said the first, stupid thing that came to mind.

“How are things going with Sarah?” I guess I could have said worse. Much worse. She was even further surprised when Scarlet’s red lips pinched, and she closed her eyes just a fraction of a second too long to be a blink.

“I guess that we’re not going to see each other anymore.”

Neera didn’t know what to think. Scarlet seemed sad, but she didn’t actually sound it. There was a heavy tone to her voice that was confusing, but she was almost sure it didn’t have anything to do with Sarah.

“I’m sorry things didn’t work out.”

“No, it was me mostly. I wasn’t sure I wanted to, and I didn’t want to lead her on.” There it was again when Scarlet took a deep breath. A yearning, strange vulnerability about her that Neera had rarely seen before. One of Scarlet’s most attractive features was her natural confidence.

Neera blinked a few times, but that expression was still there. Were Scarlet’s eyes just a little bit darker and heavier, or was it just the lighting in the room? Her eyes focused on Scarlet’s lips, and she couldn’t tear them away. They were perfect. Lush. Her lipstick the same shade as her name. Neera wanted to devour those lips. She wanted to mess that lipstick up. She wanted to kiss Scarlet until her mouth was naturally bruised that red.

As Neera watched Scarlet, her eyes moved too, to focus lower, on Neera’s mouth. Neera was sure she wasn’t imagining things. Her pupils were blacker. She was studying Neera while Neera studied her. The air seemed charged like there was about to be an electrical storm inside the building. Scarlet took a step forward as if she was transfixed, and Neera didn’t hold back. Like at the New Years party, she went for it.

She closed the distance between them and stood on her toes because Scarlet was tall, and Scarlet in heels was the height of a goddess. She wrapped her arms around her neck, and instead of kissing her, she backed her up a few steps, towards the change rooms. The curtains were peeled back, and they stumbled into the first one, Scarlet’s hands cupping Neera’s face.

She bent her head as they slammed up against the wall opposite the wall with the mirror, away from the hooks to hang clothes on, and her mouth slanted over Neera’s. Scarlet’s lips were full and warm, and Neera feasted on her mouth like it might be the last chance she ever got to taste her.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:12 pm*

She didn't repeat her mistake from New Years. She wanted to remember every detail. How soft Scarlet's lips were. How her tongue danced between her own lips and tempted Neera to do things she'd only ever dreamed of. Scarlet's hand swept around and cupped Neera's hip, then her bottom through her black pants.

Neera whimpered and poured all of herself into the kiss. She let Scarlet deepen it by tilting her face back. Scarlet led, teaching Neera what she liked. She tasted like the peach juice she liked to sneak into her metal water bottle and pretend like it was water and not a sugary beverage.

Neera's head spun at the sweet taste. She wanted more. She wanted everything. Scarlet's tongue stroked hers, setting her on fire throughout her whole body. Neera's nipples were hard points, aching as badly as she was between her legs. She angled into Scarlet, pressing her body up against hers, curves meeting curves. Neera set her hands at Scarlet's hips, but then let one hand trail boldly lower, reaching for the hem of Scarlet's dress. Scarlet whimpered into the kiss as Neera pushed the soft, silky fabric up. Her back arched and her hips thrust forward, into Neera's hand.

Neera slid her hand up Scarlet's bare leg, hissing at the satiny warmth of her skin. She kept going, letting her fingers tease at her panties at the inside of her thigh. When her fingers swept over the drenched satin at Scarlet's core, a jolt of desire rocked Neera's body so hard that her teeth chattered, and she let out a groan.

Scarlet recaptured her lips immediately and rocked her hips into her hand. Neera ached between her thighs. She wanted to guide Scarlet's hand there, beg her for her touch, for release, but she didn't. She focused instead on touching Scarlet above her panties, on the sharp, little whimpers of pleasure she made as Neera skimmed over

her satin clad clit.

God, she wanted to taste her. She needed to taste her. She wanted to get on her knees and sweep Scarlet's legs over her shoulders and feast on her until she was writhing and moaning and coming on her face.

Neera didn't want to scare Scarlet off. This was already more than she had ever hoped for. Instead, she went slow, pushing the fabric of Scarlet's panties aside so that she could run her finger over her there without any barrier at all between them. Scarlet's hips slammed into her hand, and Neera swallowed her whimpers in a kiss. She was so wet already. She was so perfectly smooth. Neera ran her finger through Scarlet's slit, gathering the moisture there before she swirled it gently over her clit.

Scarlet threw her head back against the wall and gasped. She grasped Neera's shoulders, digging her nails in through the thin fabric of Neera's blouse. Neera was so lightheaded that she nearly felt dizzy and giddy with disbelief that this was real. She was really doing this. She brought her finger lower, to Scarlet's entrance, and she only hesitated for a second before she pushed inside. She thrust gently before pulling out and adding a second.

"Oh God," Scarlet moaned. "Oh fuck, Neera..."

Neera's eyes shot open at her name, and when she took in the sight of Scarlet, spread wantonly against the wall, her head thrown back, red lips parted, her breath coming in short pants, her nipples beaded tight against the silky fabric of her dress, she nearly came just from that sight alone.

She'd remember this moment for the rest of her life. She thrust harder, filling Scarlet as her tight walls throbbed around her fingers. Scarlet moaned, her hips writhing into Neera's hand. Her head thrashed from side to side. Neera could feel how close Scarlet was to coming undone, and she trembled with it, with the fact that she was going to

make Scarlet shatter.

The silence shattered first.

A shrill sound burst up between them, shocking them both. Neera tore herself away and stepped back, her mind reeling. She was so confused for a few seconds about what the sharp sound was that she didn't even feel her phone vibrating in her back pocket as it rang.

She finally realized what it was and snatched it out to silence the most inopportune call in the history of inopportune moments. She went to stab at the screen when she saw who was calling and her heart ground to stop. She made a decision at the last moment and swiped the screen. She tried to regulate her breathing and sound perfectly calm and normal when she answered.

"Hello, this is Neera."

"Neera," a pleasant voice came warmly over the phone. "This is Edith Johnson. You sent us a resume a few weeks ago. I apologize, with the holidays we've been slower at calling back than we should have been."

"That's alright," Neera said, trying not to gasp for air. She was still panting, and her heart was still slamming against her ribs.

"I was wondering if you wanted to come in for an interview tomorrow afternoon."

"Yes! That would be great. What time works for you

? I can arrange to make pretty much anything work for me."

"Is two alright?"



“That’s perfect.”

“Great. If you come to the front desk and tell them you’re there for an interview, they’ll direct you from there or page me. Thank you again.”

“Yes. Thank you as well.”

Neera hung up, and when she turned back around to face Scarlet, she was still breathless. She was panting, but Scarlet had already pulled down her dress and was smoothing her hand down her messed up hair. She did meet Neera’s gaze, though. It wasn’t in Scarlet to hide from anything.

Neera had no idea what she could say, but maybe words weren’t best. Maybe there was no right thing to say. She’d been searching forever to find the right words, and maybe all along she should have kissed Scarlet like she’d done just now. Instead of speaking, she put her phone away, then she slowly raised her hand to her mouth and inserted her fingers between her lips. She closed her eyes and hummed out a sound of genuine pleasure as she tasted Scarlet on her fingers.

Scarlet made a strangled noise. She didn’t even begin to filter out the desire on her face. She was panting, but she still tried to be firm. “That can’t happen again.”

Neera wasn’t going to give up. She could tell that Scarlet didn’t mean it and she knew exactly why she was protesting, why she was freaking out on the inside.

“I’ve wanted you since I was old enough to have any clue what was going on with me. We’re both single. It’s not wrong, Scarlet.”

Scarlet shook her head. “It’s wrong if it hurts other people, and this would hurt other people. We both know that.”

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Neera was prepared for that. “My mom would come around,” she countered. “I would talk to her. If we honestly cared about each other, she would see that.”

“What if it didn’t work? What if it’s just a passing phase, or I’m not what you really want?”

“No!” Neera had anticipated that too, but it still stung. She never wanted to hear Scarlet say that, or even think it. “No, you’re not a phase. You’re not something that’s passing. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted. You’re the only one I’ve ever truly wanted.”

Scarlet took a wavering step back. She bumped up against the wall, her lips parted in astonishment once again.

“Don’t say that, Neera. You have no idea what saying that means. You’re young, and I’m not saying you’re too young to feel or to understand what you’re feeling or to know what you want, but I am saying that you have no idea what something like this could do to the people around us. You’re too young for me. Far too young. This would— it would just be a way to make myself feel younger.”

Neera didn’t even blink. “No, it wouldn’t. I know you’re trying to chase me away with reason, but it’s not going to work. Is that true? That you just kissed me to feel young?”

Scarlet wasn’t a liar. She hated lying.

“No,” she finally admitted in a whisper. “No, it’s not true.”

“I know. I know that because you’re not capable of feeling or doing something like that.” Neera could see how scared Scarlet was, and she knew she shouldn’t push any harder. “I have an interview tomorrow afternoon. Can I take that time off to go to it?”

Scarlet was visibly relieved at the change in conversation. This, at least, was something that she knew how to deal with. “Of course.”

“Can I come over and talk after you’re off at the store? We might both be able to think clearly then. I’ll tell my mom I’m going out with some old friends.”

“That’s exactly what I don’t want to do. To start lying, especially to your mom.”

“I know, but we need to talk about this. I’ll cover my tracks once, then never again. I know you don’t like it, but we need to figure things out. Actually, I could come here after my interview. There would probably be time. We could talk here after we close up. I won’t have to lie then. Is that alright?”

Neera could tell that Scarlet didn’t like it at all, but she nodded anyway. They did need to talk. They couldn’t just ignore what they’d done in the back before Neera’s phone interrupted them. No matter how badly Neera wanted to be nursing again, she was horribly disappointed at the timing of that call. Maybe Scarlet was relieved. How much further would they have taken things?

“Okay,” Scarlet agreed. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

She wasn’t the type of person who ran away from anything, but she clearly needed space. She left the changeroom quickly and went to the office in the back to gather her things.

Neera silently grabbed her purse out of one of the small lockers in the back, then left out the back door. She didn’t want that space or that time, but she didn’t want Scarlet

to feel like she'd rushed or pressured her. If this was going to happen when she thought it would never, ever happen, then Neera wanted it to be right.

She was nervous about her interview, but she was absolutely a wreck as she thought about coming back to the store after and talking to Scarlet.

She might get one shot at this. One shot, if Scarlet didn't talk herself out of it before she got the chance to try and make a case for them. She was going to make sure that one shot was the best shot she'd ever given anything in her life.

## Chapter 8

### Scarlet

Scarlet spent all day at the store, by herself, trying to keep busy. She'd already realized it was her go to when she needed to feel in control of things that she had absolutely no control over. No matter how hard she worked or how fast her hands flew, how overly helpful she was for every single customer who came in, how many new clothing lines she sourced and new designers she looked into, or how much inventory she completed, she couldn't keep her mind from going to the one place she knew it shouldn't.

### Neera.

There was nothing to think about. Nothing to consider. Nothing to talk herself out of. What happened in the back of the store the day before should never have happened, and it could never happen again. They couldn't date. Even if Neera wasn't Elodie's daughter, she was half her age and that wasn't something that Scarlet saw ever working out, no matter how mature Neera was.

Scarlet had momentarily lost herself. It happened because she hadn't been able to get

that kiss at New Years out of her head. They should have talked about it. She should have set down some rules. Made it clear she wasn't interested. Instead, she'd said nothing, and the tension had finally exploded between them.

When the door chimed to signal that someone else was entering, right near closing time, Scarlet was ready. She looked up, fully expecting it to be Neera, but her heart still surged with a strange joy that she couldn't deny when she caught sight of her walking towards the counter where she stood.

The store's lighting was excellent, and it brought out the red and gold highlights in Neera's usually dark chestnut strands. She'd curled her hair for her interview, and the loose waves bracketed her face. She was wearing more makeup than normal, and even though she'd gone for a fresh look and nothing heavy, it was still obvious. Her lips were fuller, her lashes longer, her amber eyes a shade darker, with more smoke in their depths.

Scarlet nearly choked when she tried to swallow, and she had to reach out and grasp the front counter hard. She could remember so, so many moments of Neera's life, but all those memories were at odds with this woman who stood in front of her now.

"How was your interview?" Amazingly, that question came out evenly, in an almost normal tone.

Neera's smile transformed her. It was clear just how much she missed nursing. "It was really good. They have to check my references and they had a few other interviews, but I think they might call me back."

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:12 pm*

“That would be amazing.” It made Scarlet relieved to think about Neera not being so close, not being a constant source of temptation, and somehow irrationally sad as well. She’d never thought about them working together before. It obviously wasn’t just losing Neera as an extremely efficient, hard worker that made Scarlet’s eyes feel like they were on fire. “That’s great,” she whispered, then walked out from behind the counter. “I’m just going to close up.”

“I’ll help.”

“No, that’s okay. I-if you could just wait in my office, that would be— that would be great.”

Neera hedged, but then she gave in. “Okay. I’ll be back there.”

Scarlet was very well aware of that fact after Neera walked away and she started shutting down the register and batching out the debit machine, turning off the sign, and locking up. She eventually inhaled a sigh that was so big she felt overinflated, like her lungs could burst before she let it out and headed to the back, clutching the day’s cash and paperwork to slip into the small safe in her office.

She honestly wasn’t the kind of person who cried often, but as she walked into her office and saw Neera’s back, ramrod straight, as she sat in the chair in front of the big wood desk that took up most of the space, Scarlet felt her emotions riding so close to the surface that it was impossible to push them back

down to writhe through her like they had all day.

Scarlet bent and put in the code to her safe, then slipped everything inside, even though she usually was organized and entered everything into the accounting software on her computer daily before she left. That could obviously wait.

Neera had gone to her interview in black slacks and a white blouse. She looked every inch like the capable, professional woman that she was. She'd even worn a pair of black pumps, which she hardly ever sported. Scarlet let her gaze linger for a moment, soaking up Neera's effortless beauty like the warmth of the sun before she realized what she was doing, tore her eyes away, and sat down in the chair behind her desk.

Scarlet opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She was so struck by Neera's fresh-faced youth, and at the same time, the old kind of soulful vibe she often wore about her like an expensive perfume, that she couldn't say anything at all.

Thankfully, Neera started. "I know that you've been convincing yourself all day that what happened last night was a mistake."

"No." Scarlet shook her head. She clasped her hands under the desk and inhaled deeply again until her lungs were painful in her chest. "No. Not a mistake. Just something that can't happen again."

"Because you think my mom would freak out."

"Because it would be hurtful. Weighing the potential destruction of a meaningful friendship, the respect of my family, my reputation as a business owner, even, is a serious consideration. There's also your feelings to consider."

"You have feelings too," Neera whispered. "Not just me. I know you're probably used to numbing things out and just getting on with it because of Bryan, but you don't have to do that anymore. What you think and feel matters."

Scarlet tore her gaze away because Neera's voice was too intimate, and she was scared to look at her. She was scared she might burst into tears at any moment because Neera was so perceptive.

"Wanting something physical is one thing. Being an adult and making responsible choices to minimize pain and damage is another."

"What if it wasn't pain and damage?"

"I thought about that too," Scarlet admitted. "I did give it fair consideration. You're too young, Neera."

"I'm an adult. You only think that I'm too young because you knew me growing up."

"I'm not just saying it for that reason alone. I wouldn't go on a dating app and look for someone half my age to date. I wouldn't go out anywhere, to any social setting, or to any function and try and pick someone out of a crowd who was as young as you. Not because I'm afraid of how it would look, but because when you get older, you need someone who is on the same page, at the same point in their lives."

"No." The word exploded out so forcefully that Scarlet had to wrench her eyes up from the desk's surface. "I refuse to believe that. Okay, yes, everyone wants someone in their life who is a good person, a good match, who gets them, but I don't think age has anything to do with that. I'm not someone on a dating app and I'm not some person in the bar who comes up and asks to buy you a drink. We've known each other for a long time, and that doesn't have to be a bad thing. You also haven't known me for a few years, and I've grown up. We have good chemistry, Scarlet. You can't deny that."

"Chemistry isn't everything."



“It doesn’t hurt any.”

“No.” Somehow now she was trying not to smile. “It doesn’t hurt, but that’s not nearly what a relationship should be based on, and no, we can’t have a relationship because I’m thirty-eight and you’re twenty-three. I’m going to get old and you’re going to be just starting to be in the prime of your life. You’re going to lose interest, not just because of the physical changes, but because you’re young and you have things you want to do with your life. I’ve already been there, and I’m settled.”

“That’s such a load of trash,” Neera scoffed. “You haven’t done half the things you wanted to do because you had the store to worry about, and Bryan the other half the time. You want kids, Scarlet. I know you do. Bryan was an imbecile, and that was just one of the many things that you want that he denied you. We could do those things together. I don’t necessarily want to go off and see the world. Am I ready for a family? I don’t know. With you, I could be.”

“Neera!” Scarlet stood up suddenly, shoving back her chair. She rubbed small circles at her temples where a headache was starting. “No. It won’t work. It can’t.”

Neera slowly raised one foot, setting her heel on the edge of the desk, then she joined it with the other. She set her hands behind her head and looked directly at Scarlet. “I’m in love with you, Scarlet.”

Scarlet’s heart ground to a slow, screaming halt.

“It’s only grown with time,” Neera admitted. “It’s dug into me, put down roots, infected every part of me in a good way. There’s not one bit of me that’s been left untouched. You deserve to be loved and appreciated. You deserve it and if you fight for it, we can make it work because I would fight for you. I would never give up. You’ll always be beautiful. You’ll never be too old. Your dreams? I want them to be mine too. I’ve tried to talk myself out of this so many times. I’ve actually tried

everything. I'm not shrinking away from it anymore. I can't just move on. I left because I needed to have time apart, to try and get over it, but it's been years and even when I was gone for years, I never got over it. What I feel has never gone away."

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:12 pm*

“You were with someone else! You were in love with her!”

“I was with someone else, and I did try to love her, but I couldn’t fully love her, and maybe that’s why things didn’t work out. Maybe it really was truly all my fault. Not how it ended, but that it did end, that she had to look for that in someone else because I couldn’t give her all of me when it’s always been with you.”

Scarlet’s breath caught. She felt dizzy, but the room didn’t spin around her. Everything solidified into a clear arrow that was aimed directly at her chest. She tried to say something, but all that came out was a gasp.

What could she possibly say in the face of such an admission? She’d tried to tell herself that what Neera felt was just a passing thing, a crush, something surface level that was purely physical. The excitement of doing something she shouldn’t with someone she shouldn’t because she was young and that’s what she thought she wanted. That wasn’t it at all.

Neera wasn’t going into this with her eyes shut, with the intent of charging ahead because she was young and reckless and didn’t understand the terrible consequences of her actions. This wasn’t some surface cut that ached because it had nicked a nerve. This was the kind of wound that a person bled out from because it was that deep and it couldn’t be stitched up or repaired.

Scarlet slapped a hand over her mouth to keep in the sob that threatened to escape. She was scared. she was staring down not the Neera who she thought she knew, but a completely unexpected grown, gorgeous, determined woman who knew what she wanted. Her legs felt watery, and she had to take a step forward and grasp the desk

with the hand she didn't have thrown over her mouth.

She didn't know what she could say and the only other option that seemed left to her was escape. She tried to move past the desk, tried to take a step forward and flee the room, just to give herself space to breathe, but as soon as she let go of the desk, her body betrayed her, her legs became water, and she stumbled.

Neera was up in an instant, her arms coming around Scarlet, bracketing her before she could fall. For someone who was curvy, but also slight, Neera was strong. She'd had practice moving, lifting, even carrying patients as a nurse, but there was probably also a good amount of adrenaline backing her movements, adding to her strength.

Scarlet collapsed against Neera, her hands on her shoulders as Neera lowered her down to the floor. She looked into Neera's eyes as her back was suddenly against the wall, shimmying down inch by inch, and she felt like she was drowning in that sea of honeyed amber.

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"Whoa," Neera said gently. "Let's just sit down and breathe."

Scarlet's ass hit the floor. Her heels and legs tucked up under her, folded neatly. Neera's arms stayed around her shoulders and her hand smoothed small circles over Scarlet's back. She'd worn a particularly flowy dress, which was easy to sit in, but the fabric was so sheer it felt like it wasn't there at all, and the heat of Neera's palm, of her body, of her closeness, radiated through Scarlet.

She took in the glorious beauty that was all Neera's, and she just couldn't believe that she could ever have done anything to have the love of a woman like her. Neera might be young, but Scarlet believed her now. She believed that what she called love was indeed love. It made her breathless, the impact of that knowing, the same way it

would have knocked her windless if she'd fallen to the floor in her office.

“Let me talk to my mom.” Neera’s breath was warm against Scarlet’s ear, and she shivered. “We don’t have to ruin anything. There’s a good chance she’d be happy.”

“Happy?” Scarlet choked. “What if we did pursue this and then we broke up? She’d be right in the middle between her best friend and her daughter. She’d always be in the middle anyway.”

“That middle doesn’t have to be a bad thing.”

“It might not be such a good thing either.”

Neera curled her arm instinctively around Scarlet’s shoulder and Scarlet couldn’t stop herself from wanting to draw comfort from that touch. Neera smelled sweet— not like perfume, but like honey and apricots. Natural scents that were sweet and gentle. Scarlet dragged in another wavering breath and in the next instant, Neera was cupping her face with her warm, small hands. Hands that had helped save lives. Hands that knew how to love. Her fingertips splayed over Scarlet’s cheeks, holding her prisoner in the loosest of touches.

“Yes, if we did this, we might get some criticism. Some people who only see the age gap and wouldn’t understand. Yes, it might be hurtful, but I’ve also encountered that my whole life. I know this journey is kind of brand-new for you, but being a lesbian isn’t always easy in and of itself. You get a lot of people who find it easier to misunderstand and to straight up hate than to try and be kind. People are really complicated always. We’ll have some good and some bad. That might include what my mom thinks, but I do know that she loves us both and if we were happy, she’d be happy. She might need an adjustment period and okay, she might even be angry or annoyed, and she might lash out and tell you that she doesn’t want to be friends, but I know that if we could ride out the storms and stay strong, it would even out.

Turbulence only lasts for so long, and that's just life."

Scarlet opened her mouth, but still, no words would come.

"You know the one thing I've learned, over and over again, as an ER nurse? Sometimes I'm the one with people in their last moments. That's the reality of my job, even if it's a brutal one and not the outcome we ever want. The one thing I've learned is that life is the one thing there is never enough of. Time. It's precious. People, in their last moments, if they can speak, they talk about their loved ones. Or they talk about their regrets. Usually love, but the regrets are the hardest to hear. I know I'm young, but I've had a crash course in growing up through work and through my experiences, and I've always felt like an old soul. My mom never told me that I had to fit in so that I could be accepted or loved. She taught me that I could love myself even if I never fit what someone wanted to think about me. I've had that engrained in me. Everything over my whole life has made me tough. I'm not giving up, because I can tell that you want this too."

"Just because I reacted physically doesn't mean—"

"Okay, tell me it's just physical then." Neera didn't let go of Scarlet's face, and she didn't try to pull away. They blinked at each other slowly, measuring one another. Scarlet knew she couldn't lie, so she was the one who turned her eyes down to the floor and said nothing.

She wasn't sure what it was. She was still in shock, but she was anything but numb. Just because she couldn't define or organize what she felt didn't mean that it wasn't there and it didn't mean that she could say it was just physical, because that was the one thing she was sure wasn't true.

"We're going to cause a lot of pain if we do this and it works out," she whispered. "Pain can be the toughest thing for a person to handle. Sometimes, there is no

forgiveness and no coming back from it. Sometimes it takes a long time. Don't expect everyone to come around in a neat and tidy timeframe."

"So, you're not saying no?"

Scarlet wanted to cry. She wanted to say no. She wanted to be tough and deny herself, but Neera was so right when she said the one thing that everyone needed was to be loved. Loved for who they were. Loved properly.

Scarlet had spent a lot of years married to someone who couldn't love her the way she needed and that wasn't entirely his fault. She'd spent a lot of years being dishonest about who she was as well, and what she really needed. She'd used the boutique as a way to cope with her own unhappiness. The one other thing Neera was right about? Regret.

It would be so, so much easier if Scarlet really did feel nothing at all when she was with Neera. When she wasn't with her. When she thought of her. When she'd kissed her. If there had been nothing there but the pleasant experience of a good kiss. It was more. She didn't know how much more or how to define it exactly, but she knew that it was always going to be more.

"I'm going to cry." The ache in Scarlet's throat and the sting pricking her eyes made it obvious.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:12 pm*

“Don’t cry,” Neera urged her. “Unless they’re happy tears.”

“I don’t know what kind of tears they would be.”

“Then let me help you figure it out.”

Neera leaned forward and slanted her mouth over Scarlet’s. She ran her tongue along Scarlet’s lower lip, tasting her and groaning in pure joy as she did. The sensations that swirled through Scarlet made her gasp. Neera tasted divine. She was sweeter than the honey or fruit she smelled like.

What they were doing might still feel wicked and taboo, but Scarlet couldn’t help herself. She had to respond to that kiss, the most sensual kiss she’d ever received in her life.

Neera’s hands plunged into Scarlet’s hair and tugged her closer. Her tongue plundered her mouth, stroking hers like a hot brand. Scarlet found that her limbs were like water again, and she went willingly, plunging into the churning, dark waters that were Neera because they offered peace and solace under that turbid surface.

When Neera finally pulled away, there was a question in her eyes. One that Scarlet couldn’t deny her. Nothing could have prepared her for the force of that kiss. For the way it undid her and tilted her reality. For the way it opened her eyes and prepared her for what was yet to come because there was so much more to come. She shivered as she leaned into Neera’s warmth, searching for it after she pulled away.

Could she accept that maybe, at the present time, as adults, they were made for each



other?

Neera leaned in again, but this time, instead of claiming Scarlet's lips, she placed feather light kisses along her cheek, trailing them to her neck, then lower, then to the shell of her ear. She brought their foreheads together after and they sat like that, on the floor of Scarlet's office, forehead to forehead until Scarlet couldn't take it anymore.

She swept her hand to Neera's hair, dug her fingers into the dark waves, tilted her face back, and claimed her mouth, kissing her in the way she'd always longed to kiss the right person. The person who unlocked everything she was straight down to her soul, to her deepest, tangled desires.

## Chapter 9

Neera

It wasn't enough. It was never going to be enough.

Kissing Scarlet was like coming home. It was like walking through the door of a place you'd been searching for your entire life, never finding it no matter where you strayed, and suddenly realizing that you were already there.

There was a sense of peace and ease and rightness so profound that Neera's whole body was revitalized, every nerve ending awakened. Then there was the pleasure. The overwhelming sensations that she never wanted to stop, even if they threatened to tear her apart because they were so vibrant, so right, so consuming.

Scarlet kissed her in a brand-new way than she had before. She kissed her like she now had the right to kiss her. Like she was shucking the careful restraints that had tied her up for her whole life and now she was free. She kissed with abandon, for the

absolute joy of it. She kissed with purposeful intent, and Neera had no doubt that she was what Scarlet wanted.

Scarlet's hands swept through Neera's hair, tilting her face back just enough that she could claim and plunder Neera's mouth. She whimpered against Scarlet's lips, the only sound she was able to make. She t

ook her time like she was now free to do so, like Neera's fight for her had given her the permission she needed to grant herself. She kissed her like the office was their domain and they had every right to be there, to take that moment for themselves, to claim it for each other.

After years and years of yearning, Scarlet was finally hers and she could be Scarlet's.

Scarlet's hands didn't stop at Neera's hair. They roamed down Neera's blouse, pulling at the buttons, freeing them so that she could cup one breast above Neera's bra. She'd worn a white lace one, and the blouse was thick enough fabric that it was professional for her interview.

Scarlet moaned like that lace was something special, even though it was more plain and industrial than anything. She tugged the cup of the bra down, and then it was Neera who was moaning as Scarlet's fingers found her nipple, hard and aching for her touch, and circled it until she was nearly half mad with the shivers and white-hot pleasure that rippled through her.

She kissed her breathless as she circled her nipple. All Neera could do was keep her hands tangled in Scarlet's hair and hold her to her while she surrendered to the white-hot need spreading through her body.

Scarlet tore her lips away and Neera panted. She bent her head and claimed Neera's nipple, suckling at the bud until Neera was arching her chest into her mouth, biting

down on her bottom lip hard enough to draw blood to keep a scream from bursting forth.

When Scarlet lifted her head, it was because she wanted to taste Neera everywhere. She opened the buttons of her blouse, one by one, and trailed kisses over her belly. Her lips were scalding, her tongue even hotter when she tasted Neera's skin.

Neera mewled and fell back, dragging Scarlet down with her to the floor. The carpet in the office was industrial and hard, but she didn't care if she ended up with the worst rug burns in history. She was doing this, and she was doing it here.

"I love the taste of you," Scarlet groaned in a voice that barely sounded like hers, it was so thick with desire.

Neera's hands fumbled with her skirt, pulling it up above her knees, then above her thighs, then higher. She didn't care how inelegant or wanton she looked. She spread her legs, revealing her black lace thong. "Taste me everywhere, Scarlet. I need you."

Neera thought that Scarlet would protest or that she might be pushing too hard and that she'd stop altogether. Instead, she took charge, her hands hooking under Neera's legs to push them gently just a little further apart. She leaned in, her hair tickling the sensitive skin at Neera's thighs. She was trembling, her lungs pumping like billows as she struggled to catch her breath. She shivered against the floor, her hips arching up.

"Are you sure?" Scarlet asked, hesitating just slightly in her forward motion.

"Scarlet, God, yes..." Neera wrapped her fingers in Scarlet's hair all over again, tugging her to her. The sound of her name on her tongue did something to her.

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She inhaled deeply and sighed. “You smell amazing. My mouth is already watering to have you on my tongue.”

Neera threw her head back against the floor. She pulled her skirt up higher with one hand that she freed from Scarlet’s soft hair, then brushed her panties aside. She was so heated that the warm air in the room actually felt chilly. She shivered as Scarlet looked at her.

“Perfect,” Scarlet moaned. “So lovely.” She smoothed her finger over Neera’s core, gathering her wetness there before she reared up and smeared it over Neera’s bottom lip in a move that shocked her. “I want you to enjoy yourself while I’m savouring you.”

Neera’s tongue peeked out and she gathered the salty arousal off her lips while Scarlet ducked back down. She didn’t hesitate this time. She parted Neera with her fingers, then she pressed her mouth to her core, finding her clit immediately and lashing it with her tongue mercilessly.

The scream that tore out of Neera’s lungs wasn’t a sound she’d ever heard herself make. She writhed against the floor, bucked up into Scarlet’s face, and licked the taste of herself off her lips, letting it blossom over her tongue like an explosion. Scarlet knew what she was doing, and she was incredibly good at it. She feasted at Neera, eating her loudly. Neera thrashed against her, crying out when her tongue found her entrance and filled her up.

She was so close to coming, and she was truly shocked when Scarlet tore away. She climbed over Neera gracefully, rucking up the skirt of her dress and puling her

panties to the side as she angled herself over Neera's face.

Neera didn't need any further instruction. It was wicked as hell, dirtier than she'd ever anticipated, hotter than anything she could ever have imagined. It thrilled her, excited her, it made her feel like she could shatter without even being touched.

She tasted Scarlet, and she knew that she hadn't been wrong about anything. Scarlet was it. She was the sweetest thing on earth. She tasted rich, like dark purple cherries, like a sweet strawberry, like a perfect plum just picked. Scarlet rode her face while she ate at her from beneath her spread thighs, thrusting her tongue inside of her to gather that sweet nectar, letting it run down her chin, finding her clit and suckling it into her mouth just to be rewarded with Scarlet's whimpers of pleasure above her.

"Touch yourself," Scarlet panted. "I want you to fuck yourself with your fingers while you eat me until I'm coming on your face."

Neera's whole world was rocked. She'd heard dirty talk before, but she'd never, ever imagined Scarlet would talk like that, and she never truly believed that she'd hear it for real, in anything other than her mind in the heart of her fantasies. It was the sexiest thing she'd ever heard, and when she brought her fingers to her weeping sex, she nearly sent herself over the edge at just the slightest brush.

She circled her clit gently, but even the faint, light movement made shockwaves rip through her body. She didn't want to come first, to have it all be over. She went slow, but she tasted Scarlet with a wild abandon, using her tongue to do things to her that she'd also only ever dreamed of doing. She loved the taste of her as she coated her mouth, loved the rich, exotic way that spice lingered on her tongue like a heady wine.

It was only a few minutes more and neither of them could keep going. Scarlet came first, thrashing against Neera's face, drenching her lips and her mouth as she threw back her head and chanted Neera's name in her throaty voice, over and over again. It

was more than enough to send Neera into a spiral of her own pleasure. She got sucked into the vortex and it swirled over her, the waves crashing one after another as she circled her clit with her index finger, plunged it into her entrance, then teased herself almost cruelly again by pinching her clit.

She'd made herself come before many, many times, but it had never felt like that. Her body was wrung out with pleasure, her legs weak, her stomach quaking, her chest heaving.

Scarlet climbed off gracefully, even though she was still trembling too. She tugged down her dress and knelt beside Neera on the floor.

Neera searched her face, wanting her in her arms, wanting to be wrapped in her arms, wanting to be closer than they were. She searched her face for traces of regret, but there was just a warm glow there. Not a smile exactly, but not a frown either.

"Are you okay?" Neera asked tentatively. She reached out and smoothed a hand down Scarlet's hair. Her neat bob was mussed all over the place, and Neera tucked a strand back behind her ear. Scarlet looked young that way. Not that it mattered to Neera. She wanted Scarlet exactly as she was, but flushed, her lips swollen, her eyes huge and heavy, she looked more youthful than Neera had ever seen. The bob made her look even younger, not more distinguished.

It took a minute, but Scarlet bit down on her bottom lip, then nodded. "I'm okay."

"I'm okay too," Neera whispered. "We're going to be okay, Scarlet." She adjusted her skirt, pulling it down, and doing up the buttons of her blouse slowly. She was well aware that Scarlet traced every movement with her eyes.

Neera would have liked something more

intimate after. She wanted Scarlet to hold her. She would have made the first move herself, but Scarlet seemed a little skittish now, and she didn't want to scare her off.

They'd already done more than she ever dreamed. Holding each other after? She knew they could work up to that. To a level of trust and intimacy that was so much more than sex, or at least, was as good after as it was during. Things were still new and raw and Scarlet's nerves were probably grated to a pulp over what had just happened. That she wasn't running or panicking or listing out reasons why it was a bad idea and couldn't happen ever again, was a massive win.

Scarlet adjusted her clothing then finally stood up. She leaned against the wall, waiting for Neera. It felt weird to get back on her feet, but Neera did, even if she teetered a little before she found her shoes and stepped back into them.

"I never thought, um, you're really..."

"Was it too much?" Scarlet's hand wavered at her neck like she was ready to swat off an imaginary insect. "Was I too much? Or not enough?"

"Not enough?" Neera's eyes felt like they were going to pop out. "Oh, my God, never. I was a little bit surprised at how you were ready to take control. I liked it," she quickly added. "I was just a little bit—I didn't expect that."

"I guess when you get older, if you know what you want and you know your body, you shouldn't be ashamed to take it. Isn't that what everyone says? That women are in their sexual prime in their later years?"

"Later years," Neera shook her head. "I think that's just people trying to put other people into a box. You were perfect. More than." She took a chance and crossed the room. She was smiling as she took Scarlet's hands. She held them gently, then brought her forehead to hers. She kissed her there before kissing her lips. She still let

out a small gasp, but then her hands cupped Neera's face and she welcomed her like she was coming home.

The kiss was slow and sensual. It didn't stop Neera from wanting to back Scarlet up against the wall and strip all of her clothes off and have her all over again. It was everything she wanted for after. It was a hug and a cuddle, limbs wrapped up in each other, pleasure slowly fading, skin cooling, all in one delicious, slow meeting of their mouths.

"Can I still have time to think about how we're supposed to do this?" Scarlet rasped after she pulled back.

Neera nodded. "I think we both need that."



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“I don’t want to lie. Ever. It’s not right. I want this to be right. I want this to be good, not tainted with having to sneak around. I don’t want this to have its basis in hurt and causing other people pain.”

“That’s not what I want either,” Neera said. “We’ll talk. Together. We’ll go slow if we need to go slow. I don’t want to lose this, Scarlet. I don’t want to lose you. You were it for me from the start. After we get through all the hard stuff, I want you to feel that and believe it. We’re not just great together like— like this.” Neera pointed between them, meaning the sex. “I want to be great with you in all ways.”

That seemed to scare Scarlet more than anything, and she wilted up against the wall a little, drawing in on herself. “That’s going to take some time,” she did manage to say.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Neera promised. “Even if I get that job. Even if things are rough. Even if it looks like we should quit because the whole world is against us. We do have to care about the details because it would be totally irresponsible not to care or at least consider them, but I’m not going to let that define me. I’m not a label and neither are you.”

Scarlet crossed her arms and gave Neera a fierce look, one that was mingled with humor, a tilt to her lips, and a frown all at the same time. “It’s fine to say that, but another thing to live it. Day by day. I think that’s the only way we can go for a long time.”

“Okay,” Neera agreed. “Because one day, we’ll reach a point where there has been so many day by days and all the hard stuff is behind us, and it will just be the future.”

“That’s idealistic.”

“I don’t know. I’m quite a realist, actually.” Neera gnawed at the inside of her cheek, then decided to just go for it. Scarlet knew everything else. “You’ve changed my entire life. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen and ever known, and I mean that in every way. You’re a good person. I’m in love with you, but I’ve never got a chance to love you until now. I plan on doing whatever it takes to honor this chance.” She couldn’t say anymore, because she felt like she was repeating herself and words wouldn’t make the difference.

Time would. Commitment would. Hard work would. Their combined decisions would. Also, her heart was swelling up way too much in her chest, cutting off her ability to breathe, let alone talk. Her eyes were stinging. Fresh tears sprang into Scarlet’s eyes and tracked down her cheeks in silvery, shining trails.

“I do believe in choice,” Scarlet whispered. “But this is an entirely new path for me, and I just need a minute to catch up.”

“Okay.” Neera understood that.

She couldn’t rush things. No matter how her heart was leaping with joy and singing and celebrating, Scarlet was still stumbling and raw and wounded in so many ways, and that tripped up Neera’s happiness. She wanted Scarlet to feel that kind of elation too, but there were still so many hurdles.

Scarlet had a different past. She’d had to hide who she really was from her family and maybe even from herself for years. She’d been married to a man, trapped in a marriage that was loveless, at least for the past number of years. She hadn’t even come out to her family yet. Now, she was risking everything. She was standing at a precipice and Neera was on the other side, a huge cavern between them, and Neera had no idea how to guide her over to safety except to construct a bridge for them to

cross over whenever they wanted.

She didn't want their relationship to be built on confusion, guilt, or fear. Scarlet was still stumbling. She hadn't spent years loving Neera, at least not in that way. For her, she was the older one. She was the one who was supposed to set examples and guide, lead, and know better. She wasn't supposed to fall in love, or lust, or even into the smallest amount of attraction, with her best friend's daughter.

It would take time for Scarlet to learn how to view Neera as someone else, someone entirely independent of everything she used to know.

"There's no rush," Neera kissed Scarlet's cheek, inhaled the sweet scent of her hair one more time, then she stepped back. "We'll get it right, if that's what we want."

Neera just hoped that it was what Scarlet wanted, or that she was what Scarlet could come to want if she realized that she could want it and gave herself permission to go for it. Fear drenched her like an ice-cold shower when she thought about Scarlet giving up before they even got started, but she was entitled to change her mind and them choosing each other was what would make them strong. She just had to hope and not give in to the wash of icy terror and doubt that churned her stomach.

She could tell that Scarlet didn't know what to say, so Neera smiled warmly, offering what comfort she could with it. "I'll see you at work tomorrow."

"Maybe only for a few more days. If you get that job."

"A few more days or not, no matter what happens, we'll always be family, won't we?"

Scarlet didn't hesitate to nod, which made Neera's heart leap with joy. She quickly tempered it, as she turned and walked through the back to where she'd parked behind

the store earlier, in the few parking spots designated as the boutique's private stalls.

It felt strange that she'd ever doubted coming back here. That she'd once thought about it with trepidation and anxiety. She had been genuinely hurt over the breakdown of her relationship. She hadn't wanted to give up her job and move back home. She'd doubted herself even more when it came to being close to Scarlet, but somehow, it had all turned around.

Her car was out of the storage spot in her mom's garage. She was driving it again, and even if it was old and crappy, it was hers. She'd just had a job interview for a great position, and it had gone well. She'd taken a chance, finally, when she'd always cautioned herself against it, and even that had the most unexpectedly wonderful consequences.

She might only be a fraction of the way there, and the biggest battles were yet to come, but she was a fighter, and the one thing she couldn't make go slow was the rapid pounding of her heart.

## Chapter 10

### Scarlet

What on earth am I freaking doing here?

Scarlet had never asked herself that question before. She'd never felt like Elodie's house was anything but a safe, comfortable place. A refuge where it was always the two of them against the world, no matter what was going on.

When Neera got the call that she got the job and they wanted

her to start right away, Scarlet was thrilled for her. She okayed her leaving whenever

was best, but Neera insisted on finishing out the week at the boutique, putting in the two days until it was Sunday, and the shop was closed.

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Neera started work on Tuesday morning. Elodie was so excited that Neera had found a job that she'd gone ahead and made a celebration dinner, even though Neera told her it wasn't necessary. Elodie had invited Scarlet and she couldn't say no, especially not when she'd never turned down dinner before or a chance to get together with her best friend.

Elodie knew she wasn't busy because she knew just about exactly what Scarlet's schedule and routine would be. She couldn't think of a legitimate excuse, and she didn't want to disappoint anyone, so she agreed to come.

Now that she was sitting across from Neera at the table in Elodie's kitchen, she wondered if it was a good idea. Actually, she knew it was a terrible idea. She should have used any excuse she could have to get out of it. What she should have done was say that she had to go to her family's house for dinner, but she just couldn't bring herself to lie. It was exactly what she'd never wanted to do with Elodie.

"Are you excited?" Elodie passed a heaping plate of barbequed chicken drums across to Scarlet, but the question was actually for Neera.

Neera was already busy spooning out mashed potatoes and reaching for a bowl of peas, but she took the chicken plate as soon as Scarlet passed it over. Elodie had gone all out, with gravy and fruit salad and a pie for dessert.

"I'm excited enough," Neera said. "I don't know. Yes, I'm excited to have a job and to be able to work as a nurse again. I don't know if excited is the right word when it comes to sick and hurt people coming into the hospital, but I guess, yes, I'm excited to do what I can to help."

Neera grabbed the gravy boat and poured the rich brown gravy over her mound of mashed potatoes after she'd hollowed out a hole for it. She'd eaten them that way since she was a little kid.

Scarlet's throat closed up almost violently and she nearly dropped the bowl of peas. "This looks great," she said, her voice like gravel, while she tried to look Elodie in the eye. She failed and had to go for her chin instead. Elodie didn't notice.

"I know, I know, I made too much. Don't tell me we'll be eating leftovers for days. I already know that. I just was so darn happy when I heard the news that I couldn't help myself. We haven't had a dinner as a family in a while and I kept thinking of something else to make or something else you liked."

Dinner as a family.

Scarlet's pulse throbbed at her neck. She grabbed her fork and started pushing food around.

"The hospital isn't that far from the house," Neera said, breaking the silence that seemed unnatural to Scarlet. Other than smile her way when she'd come in, Neera had been perfectly composed and discreet. Scarlet had no idea how she was keeping it together when it felt like she was fracturing inside. "I should be able to commute no problem. Plus, they give you a parking spot, which is amazing. In San Jose, they didn't, and you had to either rent one from someone in the neighborhood who was charging crazy prices for their driveway or park a million blocks away and walk."

Elodie set her fork down and frowned. "You never told me that. That doesn't sound safe at all."

Neera grinned at her mom. "It was safe enough, and I never told you because I knew that you'd be worried and you didn't need one more thing to worry about. Anyway,

that's done, nothing ever happened, and now I have a parking spot, so we don't have to think about it again."

Elodie huffed, but said nothing else, and everyone went back to eating.

Scarlet was a little amazed at how Neera anticipated and handled Elodie's worries. She'd never really thought about how she was doing that before, or the process of it, or that she'd have to do it at all, but obviously, there were many things that Neera wouldn't share with her mom, along with all the things that she did. She'd been away from home for years before she moved back. Yes, she'd grown up in that time, but it seemed like she'd also become even more adept at reading Elodie's moods and emotions, maybe because they were further away from each other.

Maybe when Neera said that she could talk to her mom and that Elodie would come around, maybe she was right. Scarlet hadn't quite given up on talking Neera out of it. They'd hardly said much to each other at work over the past few days, other than work-related stuff. Neera was giving Scarlet space, and Scarlet was desperately clinging to that gap in time before she had to make a decision.

"I'm glad they're training me on day shifts. Or at least starting me on day shifts. It's nice to get broken in easy. Nights are the worst. All the crazy stuff and the hard stuff happens at night. People tend to get sicker at night, and somehow they manage to hurt themselves, or each other, so much worse under the cover of darkness. Plus, it's nice to be on days for two weeks straight. Not that I don't like working nights, but everyone knows how rough night shift work is."

"I knew it was rough," Elodie said as she tore bits of chicken off the bone with her fingers, making a heap on her plate. "But you always said you were fine."

"I was. Days are just nice, that's all." Neera grabbed a drum and bit into it like she was at a medieval feast, nearly growling and then moaning as she bit into the



perfectly cooked, perfectly seasoned meat. “Oh wow, Mom. This is amazing.”

“You’re deflecting,” Elodie said, sounding only mildly annoyed.

“Yes, but this chicken. Wow. This is what I’ve been missing all these years. Mom’s chicken.” Neera waved the drum, which was bitten down to the bone in a few spots, around as she looked up at Scarlet. She could feel her face heat up before Neera’s gaze even reached her. “Is this not the best chicken you’ve ever tasted in the whole darn country?”

Scarlet grabbed a piece of her own chicken and took a bite. “The whole world, actually.” At least now she could contemplate her chicken and not the woman across from her or the woman to her left between them.

“Oh, you two. You’re too much.”

Elodie’s phone went off on the kitchen island, only a few feet from where they were eating. They all started, jumping a little in their chairs. Elodie ignored it, but when it rang a second time, she rolled her eyes, pushed back her chair, and got up to switch it off. She paused when she grabbed it, then did something she never did, and answered during dinner.

“Hey,” she said. “Oh. Yeah. Oh wow, I had no idea you guys were putting in overtime today. Sorry, I never looked at the schedule. Yes, that’s rough. I’m actually having dinner but I— okay. I can be there soon. Like twenty minutes, if that’s okay? Alright, bye.”

“What’s going on?” Neera asked when Elodie hung up.

“I didn’t realize that anyone was putting in overtime today, but I guess that on Friday, Marlene scheduled a few people to start on this huge order we have to have done for

tomorrow morning. I was perfectly fine getting at it myself when I got in, but I guess Marlene thought it was too much for me, and rather than ask people to come in at five in the morning when I get there, she thought this would be easier. Except that she's away today and Jan, the only person who has a key besides me, got out of her car and dropped her keys down the storm drain and now they're all locked out, Marlene is out of town, and they're calling someone to try and get Jan's keys back."

"Oh my gosh." Neera tactfully tilted her face downwards because grinning about something like that wasn't appropriate, no matter how comically bad it might be.

"Sorry. I'm going to have to go over there. I might stay for a few hours, actually, and make sure everything is good to go for when I get there tomorrow. I know Marlene was just trying not to ask me to come in because I'm there so early and I have enough on my plate, but I don't mind putting in a bit of extra time and I know she won't have a problem paying it."

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Elodie loved the bakery. She'd been there for fifteen years. Her shifts weren't alw

ays early. Not until Neera was old enough to stay home alone in the mornings and get herself off to school. When she was, Elodie finally took that promotion that had been waiting for her for a long time and became the bakery's morning baker and opener. She started at five, which was ungodly early considering commute time and everything, but she always said that she was used to it and that she liked having the rest of her day free, since she got off at two in the afternoon.

"I'm sorry to spoil your dinner, honey," Elodie said. "Are you mad at me? I could just go and open up and come right back."

Neera stood up and walked over to hug her mom. "Not one bit. You go ahead. Stay as long as you want or think you need to. I'm just fine. The food is amazing. Thank you." She kissed Elodie's cheek, then sat back down at the table while Elodie rushed around the kitchen, grabbing her phone, her purse, and her keys.

"Be back in a couple of hours then," she promised. She waved at them both before taking off out the front door.

Scarlet and Neera sat frozen. Neither of them said anything. They weren't eating either. They were just sitting, like two statues, staring at their plates. Neera was the first one to break the silence with a rough cough.

"This really is good. It's just crazy awkward, I guess. We should eat though, or Mom will be all worried when she gets back and she'll have questions. I swear, she'll take inventory of the leftovers."

“Are you serious?”

“No. Probably not. But she would be hurt. She would think her chicken was off or her potatoes were soggy, and Mom takes that pretty seriously.”

Scarlet knew Neera was probably right. She managed to shovel half her potatoes and peas into her mouth in record time, then probably broke another world record for how fast she consumed the two drumsticks on her plate. After, she pushed away from the table and took her dish to the sink. She scraped the bones into the trash and rinsed her plate off.

“I should probably go,” she said. There wasn’t any probably about it. She knew she should go. It would be weird sitting there with just Neera, although they’d spent plenty of time alone together in the past.

A few weeks ago, it wouldn’t have been awkward. A few years ago, it certainly wouldn’t have been. But this wasn’t a few weeks or a few months or a few years ago. It was now, and everything was vastly different. Scarlet would rather have gone streaking down the street wearing nothing but a string bikini in the dead cold of frigid January than sit there with Neera, waiting for Elodie to come home.

Mostly because she didn’t trust herself, and god help her, she was not going to do anything with Neera in her best friend’s house, while her best friend was gone, like a couple of raunchy teenagers who fully subscribed to the whole when my parents are away, of course we’ll play theory.

Neera stood up quickly. “You don’t have to go. You could stay. We could talk.”

“Talk?”

“I could make tea.”

Scarlet felt like she was swallowing a bowling ball and her mouth tasted like ash. “I feel like I’m betraying Elodie just by being here. By not saying anything.”

“Nothing else happened. I don’t even know if anything else will happen,” Neera said evenly, without the heat of emotion, but then her tone softened. “If I knew what you wanted to do, then I would talk to her, but I can’t do that yet. You heard me say that there are things I haven’t told her because I think she’d worry too much and that’s the truth. It’s because I don’t want to hurt her. If you don’t want to do this, then I won’t say anything. That would be best. If you do, though, or if you’re telling me that you’re not sure and to wait awhile, then I’ll wait. Or I’ll talk to her. But you aren’t betraying her. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Other than eat her daughter out, you mean.”

Neera gasped. “That’s kind of crass. But I— I kind of like it.”

Scarlet threw her hands up in front of her because that was the only thing she could do to let out her exasperation. “I’m going. It’s not safe for me to be here.”

“We worked together the past few days just fine.”

“Don’t you think that was torture?” she demanded. It had been. Raw, aching, horrible torture in every sense of the word.

Neera’s lips parted and her brow furrowed as she frowned. “Why didn’t you say anything? You don’t have to suffer in silence.”

“That’s me, though. The strong, silent type.”

“You don’t have to be that way with me.” Neera rounded the table, and she was there, reaching for Scarlet’s hands before she could say anything or make a break for the

door.

It was cold out and she would still have had to put on her boots, and the damn things were laced up and took forever anyway. It wasn't like she could have grabbed her jacket and made a run for it. Maybe it was better to hash things out than to turn tail and flee into the night.

"I said it would be okay before," Neera whispered as soon as Scarlet raised her head and looked at her. She had no makeup on, and her hair was pulled into a messy bun, but she was so ultra-gorgeous it both hurt and warmed Scarlet to look at her.

She'd probably always feel that way. Time changed things, but it would probably never change the way Scarlet felt, now that she was aware of it. "It will be because we'll work like crazy to make it that way. Things just don't magically become okay. it takes a lot of time and effort, but I'm willing, if you are."

"Time," Scarlet said in low tones. "Time doesn't erase things and it doesn't heal wounds. It just makes them more stitched together than they were before, or it creates scars. There isn't anything that we can leave untouched if we do this, including my friendship with your mom and your relationship with her."

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Neera clenched her hands gently, applying the smallest amount of pressure, and her expression changed, to one of profound peace that reassured Scarlet even though she knew that Neera was probably using her nurse face on her, which she had perfected to assure patients that they were going to be fine. She still felt the knots inside of her belly start to unravel. She wanted to do something she hadn't done a lot of, at least not when it came to romantic partners— trust. She wanted to trust Neera.

God, it's been a long time since I took a chance on anything. Since I was honest with myself. Since I was honest with everyone in my life. It's been a long time since I made an investment in myself. Since I gave even a fraction of my heart.

Maybe that's why it was easier to stay with Bryan than it was to ask for a divorce even though she should have, even though she knew his secretary wasn't his first affair. It was easy because it was easier to be with someone she didn't love than take a chance on someone she did.

If you love a person, everything is harder. If you care, everything is harder. If you have a spark, everything is harder. You could get hurt. But being afraid isn't a legitimate reason to not do something. That's being a coward. Cowards suck more.

“Everything feels different for me,” Scarlet confessed. “I feel like a traitor, like a backstabber, like a horrible person. My anxiety is getting out of control. But I also—I just—I can't say no. I can't tell you no. It's the one thing I know that I have to do, but I can't do it. If that's not stupid, I don't know what—”

She didn't get to finish. Neera clasped her hands a little tighter, and drew her against herself, until Scarlet was tumbling forward. Neera caught her easily, and her arms

closed around her comfortingly. She hugged Scarlet tightly, and when she pulled back, a new set of twin flames glowed in her eyes. She tilted Scarlet's face with one hand and came to her, slanting her mouth over hers in a kiss that started out gentle and reassuring but quickly turned to fire.

"You've always been it for me," Neera panted against Scarlet's lips. "Since the beginning of fucking time."

"Oh God," Scarlet moaned.

"I mean, well, since uh— okay I get it. I get why that sounded wrong and not romantic. But stop thinking about it. From now on, there isn't Scarlet and Neera of the past. This is us now. Fresh. A fresh start. You and me. As we are now. Here. The two of us. If it's right, then it's right now. Don't fraction off or splinter me into parts. I'm Neera, and yes that Neera existed before, but the Neera right now? The one who is an adult, a nurse, a woman through and through? That's the Neera telling you are for me. You. Are. It."

Scarlet knew the truth of it. She felt it in the very essence of her being. The fact that she couldn't deny. The reason she couldn't say no. The truth turned her inside out, burning her, damning her.

Because she was starting to understand that Neera might not always have been it for her, but as she said, here in the present, and maybe in the future, she was profoundly right in a way that Scarlet had been waiting her whole life for. Profoundly it.

## Chapter 11

Neera

Neera knew that things could go wrong, and that Scarlet staying was a risk, but she



didn't want her to lea

ve. She didn't want to let her go. Honestly, she wasn't sure if she could let her walk out that door. She knew the risks, but she also knew that true magic needed faith, and if kissing Scarlet wasn't magic, then she didn't know what was. That was the magic she believed in. The kind of fairy tale that could come true for both of them.

This was going to happen. It was going to happen with them. finally. Neera had been waiting her whole life and she wasn't going to slam on the brakes and control herself now. Not now, when Scarlet was finally kissing her back. Not a hesitant kind of kiss where she held parts of herself locked behind a glass veneer, but fully, with all the pain and fury of longing coming undone like pulling the bow off a gift and watching that ribbon unravel.

Neera broke the kiss, but only to wrap her arms around Scarlet's waist and set her face at the crook of her neck by her ear so she could inhale the sweet scent of her. It brought her to life, that delicate perfume, the scent of Scarlet's skin.

"God," Scarlet moaned, and Neera couldn't stop herself from claiming her mouth again.

She stamped her lips like a brand, bruised that sweet, petal soft mouth until it was marked as hers. She kissed Scarlet until she angled her face back as a signal to deepen it, until their tongues were warring, hot and wild, until Scarlet was groaning into Neera's mouth because she wanted more, more, more.

"Let me take you to my room," Neera panted. It was taking a risk and she knew it, but she didn't want to stay in the kitchen. She felt Scarlet tense and instead of letting her go, she kissed her more desperately, with more yearning, with all the longing she had inside of her. She felt her own lips getting sore and swollen from the force of it.

Instead of answering, Scarlet buried her fingers in Neera's hair and licked at her bottom lip, breathing raggedly. Neera steered them both down the hall, bumping against the wall several times until she cleared the door of her room. She didn't flick on the light. She managed to get the door closed and locked behind her, then she guided them over to her bed.

Scarlet's last bit of resistance gave way on a sharp whimper when Neera plundered her lips again. Her fingers tightened almost painfully in Neera's hair, and they tumbled onto the bed together. Scarlet bit down on Neera's bottom lip and Neera hissed at the painful sting. Neera's hands were moving under the hem of Scarlet's sweater, tearing it off as Scarlet's hands tore at her own clothes. They were furious, shucking clothing, tearing buttons, wrenching open zippers. They stopped after they were almost naked except for bras and panties, and Neera decided she wanted to slow things down.

She rolled away and switched on the lamp on the nightstand, bathing them both in light that was too gold and too bright at first. They were both left blinking until their eyes adjusted.

"I want to see you," Neera said, her breath hard and her voice husky. "I want to watch you as I make you come."

Scarlet's chest heaved up and down. "Oh, my God."

Neera couldn't stop. She didn't want to stop. "I want to taste you. Every inch of your creamy skin. I want my tongue on you. Inside of you. I want every bit of you melting under every bit of me."

Scarlet seemed frozen for an instant, but then she closed her eyes and nodded. Neera shifted, looming over her on the bed. Scarlet didn't do things halfway when it came to clothing, and she was wearing an expensive, dainty looking pink lace bra and

panties with little flowers and butterflies woven right into the lace and applied on top. Her underclothes were a work of art and Neera was glad that she hadn't torn them off in her haste, and that she'd turned on the lamp. Scarlet was a goddess in her bed, far more beautiful than anything she ever could have imagined or dreamed up, no matter how many times she'd thought about this night.

She set her knee between Scarlet's legs and gently forced them apart a few inches so that she could crawl up. She bent her head and ran her tongue along the length of Scarlet's elegant throat. She arched her back in response, her swollen and bruised lips parting on a long exhale of pleasure. Neera kept going, licking, biting a little, suckling, tasting. Scarlet's skin was the headiest thing she'd ever tasted. She was sweet and salty, not like a nut mix. More like flowers in spring and early morning dew. More like chocolate fudge with caramel sea salt drizzled on top.

Neera pressed open mouth kisses to Scarlet's chest, right above the cups of her bra before she carefully peeled one down, exposing one hard, raspberry hued nipple. She blew softly before she set her mouth there, kissing and rolling that hard bud until Scarlet was arching right off the bed, shivering and whimpering.

Neera took her time, pulling away to look at her handiwork before she did the same to the other nipple. She left the bra cups turned down, left Scarlet exposed to the air and her scalding gaze as she drank in the lovely sight of her, stripped down, flushed, and wanton in her bed.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:12 pm*

Neera sank back, crawling down, trailing kisses over Scarlet's chest, her belly, down her thighs. She rained them over her pretty pink panties before she took the elastic between her teeth and tore them away like an animal.

The fabric ripped right along the elastic edging and Scarlet's eyes flew open. "Oh, my God," she gasped. "Did you really just bite those?"

Neera nodded. She smoothed her hands underneath the silk and wrenched them off. She didn't wait for Scarlet to get shy or try and shut her legs. She tucked her hands up underneath her knees, fitting her shoulders between Scarlet's silky thighs.

Her sex was gorgeous. So smooth and perfect that it was likely compliments of an expensive wax and Neera could appreciate every cent that had gone into it. Scarlet was extraordinary. So gorgeous that Neera knew that tasting her would come close to breaking her.

She'd already tasted Scarlet, but this was different. This time, she wasn't just going for it. This time was about taking her time. About pleasure. About worshipping her goddess girlfriend.

She traced a pattern on either side of Scarlet's smooth skin before she got bold and swirled her finger over her already swollen clit. She was wet all along her slit, the beads so daintily gathered there that it made Neera's mouth water.

The second Neera ran her tongue over Scarlet, gathering her juices up, she nearly wept at the perfection. She couldn't control herself. She parted Scarlet's legs further and feasted on her, coating her lips and her tongue. She lashed her clit until Scarlet's

back was completely off the bed, until she was trembling and begging, until her legs were shaking around her shoulders. She waited until Scarlet was on the verge of coming apart before she thrust her tongue inside her.

Scarlet screamed. She didn't even try to smother the noise and it was hot as hell, having her thrash her hips against her face, riding her chin, grinding against her tongue. Neera finally gave her the release she was straining to take. She lashed Scarlet's clit, suckling it hard until she shattered. She bucked and rode Neera's face, gasping out the sweetest mewls of praise. She throbbed and rocked and came and came against Neera's tongue. She was soaking wet, and Neera licked up every droplet.

"Do you trust me?" Neera asked thickly as she circled her index finger around Scarlet's entrance.

"Fuck, I- I- yes." Scarlet forced her eyes open and nodded. "I trust you."

Neera nodded. She slipped off the bed and opened up the bottom drawer on her nightstand. She took out a box and pulled out a toy. Scarlet made a noise in her throat, but Neera couldn't tell if that was a good thing or not.

"We don't have to use this if you don't want to. I just— I really want to be inside of you like this." She turned the toy over, showing Scarlet the smaller end. "You can wear it if you want. It's double ended. This part here—" she smoothed her hand along the smaller end of the double ended strap on. "This part goes inside of you while you wear it, and this part goes inside of me. We can both have pleasure while we're using it."

"You want me to wear it?"

"Only if you do."

Scarlet took the toy and turned it

over in her hand. “It’s actually really soft. I thought it wouldn’t be.”

“It’s made to feel real. I have lube too, if you need it. I’m so wet that I don’t think I’d need any.”

Neera knelt on the edge of the bed and took Scarlet’s other hand and guided it to the plain cotton panties she preferred. They weren’t sexy, but the white had turned totally see through where she’d soaked through the fabric.

Scarlet moved her fingers away immediately, but when she pressed them to her mouth and then slowly licked them off, Neera nearly fell off the bed.

“I’ll wear it if you want me to wear it,” Scarlet whispered. “I’ve never done anything like this before.” She glanced at Neera. “But then, I guess neither of us have.” She meant them. What they were embarking on. “But I want to. I want to be inside of you. I want to watch while I pleasure you. I want to make you scream and come and come again. I want to do all the things I never let myself do or want. If you unlock those things in me, it’s like unlocking all my secrets. Once I start giving them, I might not be able to stop.”

Neera bracketed Scarlet’s face in her hands. “I don’t want you to stop. There’s nothing you could want to do to me that I wouldn’t want, no matter how dirty or taboo you think it might be. If you’re not ready for toys yet, it’s okay. We can go slower. Take our time. We can work up to toys when we get tired of everything else.”

Scarlet actually grinned. “I don’t think I could ever get tired of the other things.” She glanced back down at the toy. “No, I want to. If you’re sure.”

“Oh, I’m sure.”

“Okay. Then I’m sure too.”

“Do you want me to help you put it on?”

Scarlet hesitated, but then she leaned back against the pillows. “Okay.”

The trust she gave Neera wrenched at her heart. She was throbbing so badly as she took the toy and fitted the straps around Scarlet’s legs that she felt like she could come without any provocation at all. Scratch that. She’d already had plenty of inspiration.

“Do you want me to use lube?” she asked when she’d finished with the straps.

Scarlet shook her head. “It’s not that big. I feel like I’m drenched as it is.”

“Oh God.” Neera gulped hard when Scarlet spread her legs and she could see the moisture pooling there. Her own core was aching so badly that she felt like her belly and her legs were getting heavy with it. She was shaking, she realized. Trembling with need. She didn’t think that she’d ever ached so badly in her life.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:12 pm*

Scarlet boldly reached down and took the toy from Neera. “Watch me,” she instructed. “I want you to watch while I take it inside of myself. Watch me and I’ll watch you.”

Neera’s breath faltered and her heart skittered unevenly. She felt like she was going to burst. She wanted to reach down between her legs and touch herself, but she didn’t.

Scarlet let her legs fall open. She arched her back and watched Neera’s face the whole time. She inserted the toy slowly, gasping at the first bit, then moaning as she pushed it slowly inside of herself.

“Are you okay?” Neera asked breathily.

“It feels really good,” Scarlet groaned. “Better than I thought it would.”

“How would you like to—”

“On your hands and knees. Grab the headboard. I like that its metal. There’s space for you to hold onto.” There was a new, commanding note in Scarlet’s voice and Neera scrambled to obey.

She was so eager that when Scarlet moved out of the way, she nearly tripped over her own arm where she planted it on the pillows as she arched up and grabbed the headboard. She wriggled her hips, splaying them out behind her.

The sharp smack of Scarlet’s palm on her backside stunned Neera. She let out a yelp and cranked around to stare at her, open-mouthed.



“Sorry.” Scarlet blushed. “I don’t know why I did that except that you have the most perfectly round ass, so ripe and gorgeous, and I wanted to do it.”

“That’s okay,” Neera panted. She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth together. “You can do it as many times as you like.”

“Can I take your panties off?”

“Yes,” she moaned. “Yes. Take them off.”

Scarlet complied, sliding them down Neera’s thighs, then off one leg, then the other. She made a noise low in her throat, a humming of sheer desire that fired Neera’s blood. “So sexy. So wet. Soaking through your panties for me. It’s running down your thighs. You’re going to make a mess of your bed.”

“Fuck.” Neera grasped the headboard.

“I’m going to fuck you now, Neera. I’m going to put this inside of you and fill you up and we’ll both be full. When you come, I want you to scream my name.”

Scarlet tilted Neera’s hips up further, then she dragged her finger over her slit from front to back. Neera vibrated at the touch, so close that a mere brush nearly sent her over the edge.

Scarlet fit the toy to Neera’s entrance. It was fairly small, but still big enough that when she pushed inside slowly, inch by inch, Neera still gasped at the painful way it stretched her. She glanced down between her thighs while she clung to the metal headboard, metal that was growing warm and sticky from her tight grasp. She watched the toy disappear inside of her, and knowing that it was inside of Scarlet too, made her want to burst. She clenched down on the toy as Scarlet pushed in all the way.

“Oh God,” Neera whimpered. “Oh God, Scarlet, I think I’m going to come.”

“Not yet,” Scarlet commanded as if that could stop it from happening. “I want you to come with me, Neera. At the same time.”

She rocked her hips, making both of them curse. Shockwaves of heat rippled through Neera. She was so full, so fucking full, and one single movement from Scarlet made her see bright lights. She squeezed her eyes shut and ground her teeth. She wanted to bring her hand up between her legs. Wanted to twist or strum her clit to give herself the release her body so desperately needed.

Neera whipped around to look at Scarlet. She nearly went right there, seeing her eyes wide, watching her lips purse with concentration, seeing how enraptured she was, how excited, how mystified she was at this new discovery, at all the new sensations they were experiencing together.

Neera wriggled her hips when Scarlet moved again. She couldn’t help it. Scarlet moaned and soon they were gyrating their hips together, bumping up against each other.

“Wait!” Neera panted. She very slowly worked the toy out of herself, then turned around to face Scarlet. “Let me kiss you while we come. I need you. Need you inside of me while I’m inside of you. I want you to taste your name on my tongue when I come.”

“Okay,” Scarlet panted. “Okay.”

She eased the tip of the toy to Neera’s entrance again, then pushed inside. Neera threw back her head and cried out, but Scarlet grasped her hair and pulled her close, sealing her mouth over hers in a brutal kiss. Neera could feel herself dripping down her thighs. She could feel the spasms coming, the pleasure about to burst over her.

She knew she was going to explode. She rocked wildly against Scarlet, taking and giving, kissing her brutally while their hips ground against each other, while they drove the toy deeper into each other with every movement. Neera grasped Scarlet's hips while she clung to her shoulders and she drove the toy hard into herself, pulled back and did it again. She was so wet she didn't feel the burn anymore, just the pleasant sensation of being filled. She was starting to sweat, the beads rolling down her chest and back, mirroring the beads wetting her thighs.

"Scarlet..." she moaned. "Oh, my God, please. I'm going to— I can't hold back anymore."

"Come," Scarlet commanded. "Fuck, Neera... I'm coming too."

Neera splintered into a thousand pieces, shattering with her climax. Scarlet gripped her hips and thrust the toy into her hard while she bucked against it. She threw back her head and panted and moaned. Neera whimpered Scarlet's name as the waves of pleasure took over. Her legs could barely hold her up. She clung to Scarlet, digging her nails into the soft skin at her shoulder, breathing hard at her neck. She bit down there, into the tender skin, because she had an urge to do it. Scarlet hissed and her body pulsed harder. She vibrated against Neera. They came until they were both sticky with sweat, their thighs soaked, until they could barely hold each other upright.

Neera took charge after, gently sliding off of the toy and helping Scarlet remove it. She set it on the bed beside them and wrapped her arms around Scarlet, tugging her down and curling up against her. She barely had any energy left, but she made sure they were both comfortable, their arms wrapped around each other, holding each other like the force of the world couldn't separate them.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:12 pm*

She was falling asleep, lulled by the warmth of Scarlet's body and the peace of their surroundings, by the sweet, exhausted, sated feeling inside of her. She knew she was smiling, but she couldn't help it. She nuzzled against Scarlet's neck.

Scarlet brushed back her hair, but she sighed. "I should go."

Neera knew that she should indeed go, but she

nestled just a little bit tighter, held Scarlet that much closer, and gave a contented sigh of her own.

"Soon," she whispered. "In a few minutes." Her heart was beating all over the place, pounding too fast, even though her breathing had settled in. She'd dreamed of this, but she wanted more. She wanted to fall asleep with Scarlet. To spend the night with her. To be by her side until morning. She wanted to come home to her, to make a house with her, to make a life with her.

There was still so much to come. So much that they'd have to fight for. She just wanted to close her eyes and enjoy the beauty of their moment before the world came at them hard, throwing twists and turns and all the hard stuff their way that they were going to have to face.

When Neera thought about it, it seemed like an insurmountable obstacle, but she had yet to meet a hurdle that she couldn't tackle, no matter how slow she had to climb it.

"Okay," Scarlet agreed after a long time. "Okay. In a few minutes."

Neera kept her eyes closed and breathed deep, forcing her body to map and remember every detail. Scarlet smelled so sweet, like warm peaches over vanilla ice cream. She loved the feel of her body against hers, the warmth and the heaviness of her limbs, the way she was also light as air at the same time. The tickle of a strand of her soft hair against her cheek. The more delicate tickle of her breath. She loved the way her curves fit against her own. There wasn't a single thing about Scarlet that she didn't love.

As Neera was pulled deeper and deeper into a relaxed state that threatened to become sleep, she knew that Scarlet was hers. She'd already fought so hard, for so many years against herself. She'd take on the rest of the world if she had to, in order to keep her, in order to have this moment and a thousand others like it. She wanted forever with Scarlet and if Scarlet wanted that too, Neera vowed that she'd find a way to make it work, no matter what came for them and how hard and how much.

## Chapter 12

Scarlet

"Scarlet? Neera? I'm home."

Scarlet jerked awake, adrenaline shooting through her veins like she'd just had a near miss with a car careening towards her. She felt like she was about to be run over, but that car wasn't being driven by anything other than fate. Or perhaps fault was a better term. She'd made her bed and she was going to lie in it. Everything was going to go to shit.

Elodie was home. She was home and she was looking for them and they were tangled up in Neera's bedsheets in her bed because they'd fallen asleep into a sweet stupor.

"Neera!" Scarlet hissed, shaking Neera awake. She blinked sleepily and stared at

Scarlet in confusion.

“What? What’s going—”

“Your mom’s home!” Scarlet hissed. She raced around the bedroom, gathering up her clothes. She’d worn leggings and a sweater, but the leggings were suddenly tight as hell and refused to go on when she shoved her legs through them. She pulled and struggled, jumped, and nearly banged into the bed. She frantically grabbed up her bra and slipped it on as Neera threw back the sheets and started doing the same rapid routine.

“I locked the door,” Neera hissed as she flew by Scarlet. “Don’t worry.”

“Don’t worry?” Scarlet whisper screamed as she slammed her arm through one sleeve of her sweater. “Don’t worry? Your mom is out there and we’re in here, together, with a locked door.”

“She doesn’t know it’s locked. Just act natural and—”

“Natural? Oh, my God. Oh, my God, this is it. I’m done. I knew this would go down badly. I knew that this would be a disaster. I knew that this was a terrible idea. I can’t do this. I’m going to have a heart attack, Neera.”

“Hey.” Neera gripped Scarlet’s shoulders, forcing her to wrench her eyes up.

Somehow, Neera’s amber orbs were reassuring, and her face was composed. She was used to dealing with trauma and chaos. She was a nurse and she worked in the ER. This was nothing for her.

“Trust me,” she whispered. “We’re going to be fine. No, we weren’t supposed to fall asleep, but just act normal and when you’re gone, I’m going to talk to her. This is

going to come out okay, because we'll work our asses off and do what we have to do to make it that way, remember? Just take a breath."

Scarlet tried, which resulted in a snort of air going up to her nose. She wanted to cough like she'd just inhaled water and threw a hand over her mouth.

"Oh, by the way. Your sweater's on backwards."

"Fuck," Scarlet hissed.

Neera got dressed in a quick, methodical way while she turned her sweater around so it wouldn't be a dead giveaway.

"You could always go out the window." Neera pointed to the small window on the other side of the room. "Kidding. It's freezing out and you don't have your boots and coat and there's no way you'd leave without them. That's a summer only trick."

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:12 pm*

“Fuck,” Scarlet hissed again. She only resorted to cursing when things got bad, but this was one situation where multiple fucks would be more than excusable.

“We’re good.” Neera hovered closer and smoothed down Scarlet’s hair. She smiled reassuringly again. “We’re good, Scarlet. Just— we were— reading.”

“Reading?”

“Okay, that’s not a good excuse. I was asking you for care tips on that dress you gave me. I came in here and I couldn’t find it. I know that my mom took it and hung it in her closet next to the clothes she gets dry cleaned, but maybe I forgot.”

“With the door locked?”

“She doesn’t know it’s locked.” Neera raced to the door and twisted the handle so fast that the lock couldn’t be heard clicking. So fast that she beat Elodie’s steps by a good twenty seconds.

“Hey!” Neera peeked her head around the hall. “I was just asking Scarlet about that dress she gave me. The New Years dress. I have no idea how to wash it. I thought I hung it up but it’s not in my closet.”

“Oh. Yeah, no it’s not. You were probably too hung over to remember, but I hung it up in mine. I read the tag. It says dry clean only.”

“Thank goodness you’re ahead of the game.” Neera laughed. She talked so easily, like she hadn’t just been doing what she’d been doing and been caught completely



unaware.

It made Scarlet's stomach sour and her mouth taste like sawdust to hear how easily Neera lied.

What are we doing? She's going to tell Elodie. She's going to tell her. Tonight. I'll make sure that she does it tonight. Tonight, or it's no deal.

I can't do this. I can't do this. I can't do this.

"Scarlet?" Neera popped her head back into the room and motioned with her hand. "Mom's back. And that dress is all good."

Scarlet was more nervous than she'd ever been in her life when she walked past Neera into the hallway. Elodie was standing there, wearing her uniform since she must have changed at work. They wore white uniforms. Scarlet knew that Elodie had an apron and an adorable little hat thing that went over a hairnet, but she never wore those home.

"How was work?" Scarlet asked, a little in disbelief over how her voice was totally neutral. She still felt like she was going to throw up and she wondered what her face looked like.

"It was fine." Elodie didn't notice anything was off. "Jan got her keys back. It was quite a bit of a struggle, and they had to call and call until someone answered and came and fished them out. The grate actually wasn't that deep, and they could see the keys. The city wasn't going to do anything about it after hours and on the weekend, and the fire department couldn't send someone down just for that until tomorrow. Jan's neighbor is a mechanic, and he came and fished them out with a bunch of tools he put together. It was pretty cool actually. And we got a lot of stuff done for that big order tomorrow, so I guess I don't have to stress when I get there."

“I’m glad.” Scarlet gulped. “Well, I should probably go.”

“Are we still on for Tuesday?”

“Tuesday?” If she stood there any longer,

she was going to have to grasp the wall to hold herself up. How on earth had Bryan lied to her for years about being unfaithful? Was it this hard for him at first? Did he feel like this, like the world was going to tilt on its end, spilling everyone upside down? Did it get easier and easier the more he did it?

“We’re going to that movie?”

“That’s right. I— um— if you want to go, I’m still good for it.”

If Neera talked to her mom tonight, which Scarlet was going to insist on if she could manage to get another moment alone with Neera somehow, she doubted that Elodie would want to go anywhere with her for a good long while.

Elodie trusted her. She trusted her because they’d been friends for more than half their lives. Was it worth throwing everything away for an infatuation? For a crush? For what everyone else would probably call a mid-life crisis?

Yes. Yes, it’s worth it. And that’s not what this is. You know that’s not what this is.

I don’t believe in fate. I don’t believe in fate. I don’t believe in fate.

Maybe it believes in you.

“Be careful walking home,” Elodie advised. “It’s wicked cold out there and it’s starting to snow, so it’s probably getting slippery.”

“I only have a few houses to go.”

“I know, but I worry about you. Do you want to take some leftovers?”

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:12 pm*

Scarlet wasn't sure if she could actually physically take the torture anymore. Elodie was such a good person. She was turning into a liar and a cheat and a bad person. Her best friend deserved so, so much more from her.

"Sure." She nearly winced as she said it, but Elodie was already turning around down the hall and heading to the kitchen, and she didn't notice.

Scarlet forced herself to walk to the door. Neera still hadn't appeared, and she wondered where she was. Maybe she was worried that if she got too near, Scarlet would start making demands right there on the spot and everything would go to unplanned shit versus her sort of planned shit.

"Here you go." Elodie came back with a container of food as Scarlet was slipping her boots on. She waited, a container in hand, as Scarlet took her coat out of the front closet with the big mirror. She slipped into it, holding her breath so that she had to let it all out at once in a noisy, hard rush.

Thankfully, Elodie didn't notice that either. She just handed over the container with a smile.

"Goodnight," Scarlet forced herself to say. She was so close. Just a few more steps and she'd be out the door.

She might be able to make an escape, but then the real purgatory would start. She'd spend all night wondering if Neera was talking to Elodie. Wondering what she'd say or what she had said, or if she'd said it at all. She'd start wishing that she'd done it herself, told Elodie like she wanted to.

It was because she cared so much for her best friend that she wanted to let Neera do what she thought was best, even if she didn't agree with the way she was going about it.

If I cared about my best friend, I wouldn't betray her.

"See you Tuesday." Elodie stepped over and held the door open for Scarlet. "I'm so excited for that movie. I've wanted to see it forever."

"I'm excited too. Good luck with your order tomorrow." The words rang hollow in her ears as Scarlet stepped outside, into the night that was so cold, it stole her breath.

Elodie waved and shut the door behind her. Scarlet tucked in her head and walked down the sidewalk, shivering hard as she did, but not really from the cold. The burn in her belly could have kept her warm through even the most frigid night. Big snowflakes were descending down from the blanket of black above. How it could be so cold and still snow was beyond her. She swore that there was a scientific thing against that, but apparently the rules didn't apply in January. It snowed if it wanted to or not.

Every step was a torment to her. Half of her screamed to turn back around and confess everything to Elodie, beg her to forgive her, and maybe even to one day understand. The other half kept telling her to put one foot in front of the other. Probably her base survival instinct kicking in.

She made it to her house without turning around or falling on her bottom, even though the sidewalk was indeed turning into a sheet of ice. She had her keys out of her pocket in an instant. Juggling the container in her hand, she had one slipped into the lock when a soft voice said her name.

"Scarlet."

“Ahh!” Scarlet whipped around, ready to use the container of leftover chicken and mashed potatoes as a weapon if she had to.

She was that on edge that she didn’t even recognize Neera’s voice, but there she was, standing just a few feet behind her, on her steps, her arms crossed over a black peacoat.

“Oh, my God, Neera.” She lowered the container. “What are you doing out here?”

“I snuck out the back door. I only have a few minutes.”

“Are you serious?”

“You only live a few houses down. Mom’s having a shower. She says that the bakery makes her smell like bread.”

“That’s probably logical. Bread smells good, though.”

“I guess it doesn’t when you smell it all day. Anyway, though, I wanted to make sure you were okay. I’m going to tell her. I promise.”

“Tonight,” Scarlet insisted. “I can’t keep doing what we’re doing. I almost had a heart attack back there.”

“I’m sorry. That wasn’t supposed to happen.”

Scarlet sighed and watched her breath dissipate above her head. “Maybe none of this was or is supposed to happen at all.”

Neera climbed the steps and stalked across the porch. “I’m not buying that. I know that you want this, and I know that you’re no coward. Everything I said still stands.

It's okay to be scared. I am too, but I'm not backing down. I want you too much for that. Just have faith in me and in my mom, if in nothing else."

It was too cold to stand out there arguing and they didn't have time. Scarlet had already raised every objection she could think of and still, Neera stood certain and unafraid in the face of them all. She had the strength of a giant and the courage of a hero, and Scarlet had no idea where that had come from. Neera had left a child and come back a woman who was willing to move mountains and fight battles and come out a conqueror, and all for her. It made Scarlet feel dizzy.

The amount of emotions and thoughts pinging around her skull and rushing through her made her feel dizzy too.

"It's cold," she whispered, even though she didn't feel it.

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“Yeah.” Neera took Scarlet’s hand, the one with the keys wrapped around her fist, and loosened her cold fingers. She took the keys next and found the house key, realizing instinctively which one it was because it was red and the others were all silver, and threaded it through the lock again. She opened the door for Scarlet like she couldn’t manage to do it herself, then stepped back. “This isn’t where the world ends,” she whispered. “This is where it starts.”

“That’s some pretty big philosophy for a situation that is about to turn into a huge mess.”

“Huge messes can be grand messes.”

Scarlet realized she would never win by slinging protests. Neera would only turn them back around, reinvent them as poetry and feed it back to her as something sweet and nourishing.

As she stepped through the door, Neera’s hand landed on her arm. She paused, breathing hard, her breath steaming out in clouds around both of them. Neera’s was much more contained, her clouds smaller, but just as white as her breath mingled with Scarlet’s.

She didn’t say anything else, she just leaned in and slanted her lips over Scarlet’s in a gentle, burning kiss that made Scarlet realize just how cold it was because Neera’s lips were a thousand times hotter.

“Goodnight,” Neera said after she pulled away. She still wasn’t breathing hard. She squeezed Scarlet’s shoulder and she walked away, down the steps and back down the



street, towards Elodie's house.

Scarlet stood in the doorway and watched to make sure that Neera got in before she turned and walked through her own door. The heat made her skin prickle painfully as she shed her coat and took the leftovers to her fridge.

The tingles only reminded her of her own numbness. A numbness that she'd felt for a very long time. A few years into her marriage, she lost all faith in love, partly because she realized just how wrong she'd been to marry Bryan, and not because it was all his fault. She'd numbed herself out further to get through the next years.

Now she was single again. She was making her own choices, being who she always knew she truly was, living life on her own terms

. Neera was coaxing her towards her light, and Scarlet was going, going towards what could also be the darkness waiting just beyond that golden sheen. She was waking up slowly, with every kiss, with every touch, with every heated glance.

That waking up hurt as much as thawing from the cold did, the burning tingles consuming her entire body.

## Chapter 13

Neera

"If I told you something because it's really important to me, would you promise to keep an open mind?"

That was basically the same way that Neera had come out to her mom, years ago in high school. She didn't believe in the don't get mad thing. She couldn't control how another person felt, and she couldn't control how they reacted, but asking someone to

consider before reacting was something that Neera had always found worked well.

Well enough.

In this case, she doubted that well enough was going to count.

Elodie shifted on the couch, tucking her legs up under her. She was wearing her favorite pair of pajama bottoms—the fluffy blue ones with the pink hearts on them. She'd just showered, and she was having a cup of apple cinnamon tea. She looked relaxed, and so Neera took a chance before the night ran out. She knew the tea was her mom's countdown to bed ritual.

Elodie cupped her mug, wrapping her hands around the bottom for warmth. She inhaled the cinnamon and spices, then peered at Neera over the rim. "Sure. You know you can tell me anything."

Her mom was maybe too relaxed. She wasn't going to see it coming and that would be the worst sucker punch of all. "I know I can tell you," Neera started. She tucked her legs up under her too, like that could make her stay because it would be harder to make a getaway with them folded like that.

"It's always been the two of us," Elodie said patiently like she usually did when Neera was about to steer the conversation to deeper depths. "Well, the two of us and Scarlet."

"What if— what if that changed?"

Elodie shrugged. "It's never going to change. There's the family you have by blood, then there's the family you choose. I think of Scarlet as my soul sister."

Fuck, this is going to be bad. Neera didn't want to let the panic creep in, but it was

creeping alright. It was trickling in like water into a leaky basement, filling it up slowly, one stream at a time until it was flooded.

“What if Scarlet fell in love? Like, what if she wanted to give herself a chance? Not the way she did with Bryan.”

Elodie didn't hesitate. “I would love that. She was unhappy for a long time. Longer than she admitted even to herself. I could tell. I could tell that there was something else going on that she didn't want to talk about. Something that wasn't caused by Bryan, and then later, when he started having affairs, that was all him. When Scarlet told me that she thought she was a lesbian, I wasn't that surprised.”

“Were you surprised when I came out?”

“No. Not really. I guess you kind of know these things about the people you're closest to. Scarlet never really bothered to hide herself from me. She didn't need to pretend with me, and neither did you. I was honored that I was the first person you both chose to come out to.”

“She hasn't even told her family yet.”

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“I know. Her family might be tough, but maybe not. They were strict and traditional before, but Scarlet is much older now and knows her own mind. Her parents accepted her divorce readily enough.”

Neera wasn't sure if Scarlet thought the same thing about her parents or if Elodie was making some assumptions. Neera swallowed down the wet lump rising up to block her airway. “Umm, what if I fell in love again?”

Elodie blinked. She set down her cup, studying Neera the entire time. Neera felt naked under her mom's scrutiny. Her happy scrutiny. She was beaming. “Sweetie, that would be wonderful. I just want you to be happy. Some people are happy on their own. I always was, but I guess I was never on my own. I always had you. I had a family. I had Scarlet. I guess I didn't need a romantic partner. Did you meet someone?”

“I— I was more asking just in the hypothetical. Kind of.” No, I'm not. God, I need to tell her already. “What if I did meet someone and she was a lot older?”

“I don't think that age really matters. I mean, maybe there's a limit, but who am I to say? It's not my business. You're my daughter and I would love you and support you no matter what.”

Neera shut her eyes tight. She knew that was her moment, but she also knew that her mom wasn't expecting her to come right out and say that she'd fallen in love with her best friend. Her best friend who was part of a sacred sisterhood. Neera now fully understood Scarlet's objections. She'd thought she had before, but now she got it. She really got it. That lump in her throat started to burn. She felt feverish, the room too

hot.

“I did meet someone,” she blurted, doing it all wrong, with her eyes still shut. “I’ve known her for a while. I’ve been in love with her for a very long time. With Steph, I— I was never able to fully give her everything. I guess that’s what went wrong. It was me. I couldn’t love her the way I should have because I was always in love with someone else. Someone I couldn’t forget. I know you’re going to think it’s wrong, and that I’m crazy, but it’s real. It’s truly real. I need you to understand that.” She wrenched her eyes open and forced herself to look at her mom.

Elodie was surprised, but repulsed? No. Not yet. Angry? No. Her lips were working like she was trying to find the right thing to say, and she was obviously waiting for her head to catch up. She just stayed silent and bit down on her lip instead, waiting for Neera to say what she had to say.

Neera had never felt anything like what she felt at that moment, sitting right there on the couch beside her mom. It was a unique feeling, a feeling between elation and horror, terror and certainty. Her palms were soaking wet. Her tank top was plastered to her body under her sweater. She was hot and cold all over.

“It’s Scarlet,” she choked, then she spilled everything in a rush. “I’ve loved her since I was a teenager. It wasn’t her. You have to believe me. She didn’t want anything to do with it, but I pursued her. I talked to her. I basically seduced her. I know she’s your friend. I know that. Please don’t hate me, because I didn’t do this to spite you. I would have chosen anyone else if I could. I know how wrong it must seem to you. She never wanted to lie to you. I made her not say anything so that we could talk first because I thought you needed to hear it from me. I thought that maybe I could make you understand, even though I know it’s probably impossible for you to do that. Just please, don’t hate her. Don’t take it out on her. It isn’t her fault. If you want to be mad at someone, be mad at me.”

Neera shut up. She stopped the flow of words before she gagged on them. She was turning into a wreck sitting there. And Elodie? She'd never seen her mom so quiet. So utterly still. It was like she was made of stone. She could have been a living statue.

Neera's heart thundered in her ears and beat wildly at her ribs. She waited. Watched her mom's face for the slightest hint, the smallest giveaway, a window into what she was thinking and feeling, but there was nothing. Nothing except the smallest purse of her lips, a slight pinch in her brow from the strain, but Neera had seen her mom look like that after a long day at work. She was sure that this time it wasn't exhaustion.

Elodie blinked. She blinked again. Then slowly, she stood up from the couch. She said nothing and Neera watched her, frozen to the spot as her mom had been.

Elodie traced a pattern to the kitchen, one step then another, one foot in front of the other. She dumped her tea in the sink, then she came back to the living room. Neera heard those steps behind her and braced for it without turning around, braced for whatever her mom was going to say.

But she said nothing.

She walked past the couch. She didn't sit down. She didn't hash it out or ask for an explanation. She didn't rage or rail or cry. She was so stoic that Neera started to feel like she could gag for rea

1. Her mouth was suddenly horribly dry.

She was totally confused when her mom walked to the front door. She flung it open and stepped out in her blue pajamas and her pink fuzzy slippers. She was wearing an old black t-shirt on top, and that was it. She stepped right out into the night like that with no sweater, no coat, no nothing.

Elodie was not the kind of person who ever left the house in her pajamas. Ever. No excuses. Period.

Neera leaped off the couch and ran after her mom. “Mom!” She shouted out the open door. Her mom’s hair was still wet from her shower. It was freezing out there. “Mom!”

Elodie didn’t turn around. She was in a daze, in her own world, in a fog. She was going to get hypothermia out there. She might be in shock, or she might be fuming mad and that’s what was keeping her warm, but she was going to make herself sick out there.

Neera wrenched open the closet door and tore her mom’s coat off the hanger. She threw hers on and then bundled the other one over her arm and tore out of the house. She was careful on the slippery sidewalk as she ran.

“Mom!” she yelled. “Mom!” Her voice was shrill, the cold night stealing it from her with its frosty fingers. “Mom!” She tried one more time, shouting herself hoarse.

Elodie didn’t slow one bit in her trajectory.

She headed straight for Scarlet’s house, on the warpath if Neera had ever seen it. She forced herself to run faster. She was wearing slippers herself and she just about slipped and fell. She sped on regardless, sliding her way over the icy sidewalk when it wasn’t even safe enough to take a real step. “Mom!” she screamed.

She finally caught up with Elodie right at the base of Scarlet’s steps. Elodie was about to go up them when Neera grabbed her arm and wrenched her around.

“Mom!” She threw her mom’s coat over her shoulders, arranging it so that it blocked out the cold, holding it closed together at the front. “Mom, what are you doing?”

You're going to make yourself ill out here. This is crazy. We have to go back inside."

"I'm going inside," Elodie confirmed in a perfectly flat calm voice. "I'm going inside there. I'm going in there," she lifted her arm from the coat and pointed at Scarlet's front door. "And I'm going to make this right."

Neera clasped her mom's coat around her tighter, caging her in. "It is right, Mom. It is. You have to believe me. Please, let's just go back home and we can think about this, and we can talk about it."

"I'm not talking about it until we're all talking together. All of us. I'm protecting you. You're my baby. You're a child. You're a— a— Scarlet is not for you. She's done something to your mind. She's fucking bewitched you or some nonsense."



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“I’m not a kid.” Neera didn’t sound petulant. She sounded firm. So firm that Elodie raised her chin to peer up at her. It was kind of strange, realizing at that moment that she was more than a few inches taller than her mom.

“I’m not a kid,” she said again, with more force. “I will fight for this. For Scarlet. You can’t talk to her right now because you’re going to say things like that. Things you don’t mean. Let’s go home. If you want to rage, take it out on me. I can tell you though, that you’ll never set me right. You’ll never change my mind. And if this is a not under my roof thing then I’ll find a place to live that isn’t at your house. I’m not giving up either of you. I’m not ruining your friendship. This is a path that we can all take together. It might look different and be all shadowy and full of menacing trees and bushes, but in the light of day, they’re just bushes and they’re just trees, and it’s a perfectly nice path that we could all get used to walking.”

Elodie wrenched her arm free before Neera could stop her, with such force that she was stunned for a few seconds. A few seconds was all it took for Elodie to reach the door. She banged on it loudly, shouting out into the night, “You come out here you—you—you daughter- fucker, and you face me woman to woman!”

## Chapter 14

### Scarlet

She’d ran through the list of scenarios in her mind ever since she’d left Elodie’s house, but never in her worst imaginings and terrible ruminations did she think that Elodie would be outside screaming out the words ‘daughter’ and ‘fucker’ in the same sentence. Back-to-back. Daughter-fucker. It could be one word, if a person tried hard

enough. Elodie was really trying.

What a terrible term.

What a horrible thing to be.

But it was true.

God, she really was a daughter-fucker.

“Scarlet, you come out here,” Elodie yelled, banging harder on the door. “I know where you live. I know where you work!”

Before things could get out of hand, Scarlet raced to the door. She didn’t want the whole block hearing their business and getting involved but answering the door and facing her best friend’s wrath was also the right thing to do. She was putting on her big girl panties and she was going to do what she had to do and that was going to be that, because she couldn’t take back what she’d done with Neera. She didn’t want to take it back.

She tugged open the door right as Elodie was about to pound on it again. She found her friend with her fist raised and her face a storm of wrath like she’d never seen it before.

“Daughter-fucker,” Elodie hissed. “You traitor! You backstabbing wench. We are no longer friends. This stops here. You aren’t welcome at my house. Don’t come around. Don’t you even think about getting in contact with Neera. You aren’t going to see her again. You aren’t going to mess with her head so that she thinks it’s her fault—”

“I don’t think it’s my fault. I don’t think it’s Scarlet’s fault either. It’s not anyone’s fault because there’s no blame to assign. No blame needs to be laid.” Neera stepped

up behind her mom and crossed her arms. She wasn't wearing a coat. Scarlet wanted to tell them both to come in before they froze or got sick, but she knew that Elodie wouldn't step a foot inside in her current mood. Maybe not ever again.

"You see? You've messed with her head already. Filled it up with thoughts about this being right when it's so, so, SO wrong."

"It's not wrong," Neera interjected calmly. "Not one bit. And I already told you that Scarlet didn't want anything to do with this. It was me. It was all me. I could have helped myself. Controlled myself. But honestly, I'd then go to my grave with all the regrets in the world. I could have met someone else and loved them halfway for the rest of my life, but how would that be fair? I came out to you when I was a teenager and you accepted that I was gay without any fuss. You told me you'd always love me no matter what, and being gay wasn't anything that I had to be ashamed of or worried about. You supported me and you never looked at me differently. You loved me unconditionally. This is the same thing. I'm telling you now that if I hadn't told Scarlet how I felt then I would have been living a half-life the same way I would have been living a half-life if I had never told you or anyone else that I was a lesbian."

Elodie huffed. "Not the same thing at all, Neera. You're practically a child. Scarlet's twice your age."

"I'm not a child. She's not twice my age either. It's only fifteen years."

"Well, almost! That's just semantics!" Elodie was breathing so hard that her head was covered in a cloud of white fog. It would have been kind of funny under any other circumstance, but Scarlet was in no mood to laugh.

"Semantics or not, it doesn't change how I feel. I tried to change it. I tried to change myself. I tried going away. I tried loving someone else. I tried running. I even freaking tried therapy." Neera nodded when Elodie made a wet noise in her throat.

“Yeah. That’s right. Therapy. I went. For six months. It didn’t help. I thought I could stay away, but I couldn’t. I thought I could make a life with someone else, but I couldn’t do that either. And then I got back here, and Scarlet was single, and I just—I was so tired of lying and pretending and getting on with something that could never be got on with. So, this is who I am. If you don’t want to see Scarlet again, then that would be the saddest, worst decision you could ever make. She’s your best friend and this isn’t going to change that. She loves you, Mom. I know you love her. You just need some time. Which is why we shouldn’t be out here.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Elodie said, stubborn like she sometimes was.

Scarlet knew she should say something, but it felt like her lips were sealed up with glue. The kind you should not get on your skin under any circumstances. Half of her wanted to say that she got everything Elodie was saying, and she wasn’t wrong. She even fully supported her going into angry vengeance mode. The other half wanted to try to be rational like Neera was trying to be and talk Elodie down before things got too far gone and their friendship was irrevocably damaged.

She stayed silent, half because of the lump lodg

ed in her throat and her unworking tongue and lips, and half because she knew that anything she could say would be disregarded in the moment. This wasn’t her moment. This wasn’t her and Neera’s moment. This was Elodie’s moment, and she needed to have it, get it out and get it done.

“You aren’t unfriending Scarlet.” Despite Neera’s desire to stay calm, her nostrils flared slightly. “You’re not in the mood to say things that you actually mean right now, so we need to leave.” Neera tugged at her mom’s arm.

Elodie turned her face from her daughter and gave Scarlet a scathing glare that made her pulse ratchet up. “Neera isn’t moving out and you’re not coming near my house

again. Don't call me. Don't text me. Don't freaking ask me to go to the movies. Oh, and I want my leftovers back! You don't deserve to eat my chicken."

"Mom!" Neera was beyond horrified.

Scarlet didn't know what to say. She leaned against the doorframe while she debated going and getting the container out of her fridge, but Neera, her cheeks pink with more than just the cold, grabbed Elodie's elbow and turned her around. "Come on. Scarlet's keeping the chicken, and you need to cool down. Let's go."

Scarlet thought Elodie might dig in and stand there, her mouth puckered, quietly trying to come up with something else to shoot out to quell the fires of rage inside. Scarlet had expected nothing less, but she'd hoped that Neera's quiet confidence was well founded.

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“Sorry.” Neera cranked her head over her shoulder as she steered Elodie away from Scarlet’s door, her hand tight on her arm, but the other was at Elodie’s back, gentle and reassuring. “Don’t hold this against her.”

“I never would. Never,” she croaked, her voice like a rusty chainsaw coming to life after ten too many years on a shelf in someone’s garden shed.

Elodie made a strangled sound and tried to turn around, but Neera looped her arm over her shoulders and made it impossible for her to turn. “Let’s go, Mom. We can talk about it more at home, where it’s a normal temperature and where neighbors aren’t tuning into our family drama like it’s their favorite late night TV show.”

“Garp,” Elodie choked. “Are you for real?”

Neera giggled, but it was clear she was on edge. “None that I can see, but who knows who is being stealthy behind their blinds? Also, you have to work early tomorrow.”

“There’s zero chance I’m ever sleeping again,” Elodie moaned. “Or letting you out of my sight.”

“Tomorrow’s a new day, Mom.”

“Tomorrow’s the same damn day. And the day after and the day after, and the day after that.”

“You’re going to get bored, and you’ll miss your bestie. You’ll actually call when you think about it instead of telling yourself not to. You’ll text when you want to

instead of forcing yourself to still be mad. You'll let go of your anger because I know you, and you won't stay mad forever. You're too nice. You're kind and forgiving and you'll see that just because things are different doesn't mean that they're wrong."

"Ugh, don't talk to me about this anymore," Elodie moaned, her voice barely discernable, they were so far from Scarlet's house now. "I can't take it tonight. I need some tea."

"Tea is good," Neera said softly. "I'll make us some."

They were quiet after that. Scarlet watched until they made their way down the block, then as they went back inside and were swallowed up by Elodie's house.

Scarlet ached. She ached with a brand-new pulsing pain that was as acute as anything she'd ever felt before. Neera and Elodie walking off together, mother and daughter. They were there for each other. They had each other. They were inseparable, the familial bonds stronger than anything between them.

She would probably never have that. Even if she did date Neera, it wasn't like she'd want to have kids right away, and then she would be too old. How old was too old to start a family? Scarlet had given that up.

Yes, she wanted kids. No, she had never wanted them with Bryan. He said he didn't want them either, which made it easy on her. If she'd had kids, she never would have done any of this. She probably wouldn't have divorced Bryan. She never would have come out to anyone at all. She would have lived for her little ones and made sure they had a home where their parents at least appeared to have their shit together.

And she would have been utterly miserable.

But there would have been that bright spot in her life. Her children. The ache inside

of her which was normally just a small burn was raising its head, roaring out at her to take notice. She didn't fully understand it, and she didn't want to stand in the doorway and ruminate on all the things she should or shouldn't have done in her life.

Scarlet turned back inside, slowly shutting her door, but not before she made a quick glance around the street to see if she could catch anyone behind their blinds. Thankfully, there wasn't so much as a flicker, and no one was openly staring her down.

Hopefully, no one would take it upon themselves to avenge Elodie and put a steaming bag of something foul on her doorstep. Hopefully, Elodie didn't get creative either. Not that she'd ever done anything like that, but they used to joke about it, particularly when it came to Bryan.

Scarlet shut and locked the door. She made it to the living room before she collapsed on her couch. She had her favorite plaid blanket draped over the leather back and she pulled it down, curling up inside of it, realizing just how chilled she was from standing at the door for so long while the cold air rushed in and around her.

She shivered violently, her teeth knocking together. Her eyes welled up too, but she squeezed them shut tight and told herself not to cry. She'd cried enough already just thinking about what was going to happen because she knew it would happen. Crying wouldn't fix anything. She needed to direct her energy into thinking about what she could say to Elodie. What she could do. How to move forward. How to start repairing their tattered friendship, and what she was going to do about Neera.

Even after seeing how disappointed and hurt, confused, enraged, and saddened Elodie was, Scarlet couldn't wish Neera away. Did she wish that she could be anyone else? Yes. Did she wish that she hadn't had to hurt Elodie? Absolutely. But it was Neera, and she was who she was, and the hurt was inevitable. Instead of wishing for things to be different, she had to wait until Elodie was feeling better about everything, then



work hard at making it different.

The hard truth was their relationship would never be the same as it was before. That didn't mean it couldn't be better. Scarlet wouldn't stop trying until it was. The urge to walk over to Elodie's house and demand that she come out and submit to a hug was so strong that Scarlet almost laughed at herself. No, there would be no more marching down the street between each other's houses tonight.

She shifted the blanket and opened her eyes, and when something moved, she screamed. She leaped out from under the blanket and ran across the room.

A spider. What the heck was a spider doing out in the house in the middle of the winter?

"Farge!" Scarlet yelped. She pointed angrily at the creepy black, eight-legged devil. "How can you do this to me? Now? Of all the times? When I can't call Elodie to deal with you?" Her finger wavered and she stood there, breathing heavily, watching the spider as it nestled up in her blanket and just sat there, claiming it for himself. "Fine then," Scarlet fumed. "You just— just stay there! I'm going to the bedroom. You can have the couch. You stick to your side of the house, I'll stick to mine. Deal?"

The spider didn't move. It didn't scuttle away. Scarlet left the room, making a mad dash for her bedroom, where she closed the door. She didn't think it would keep the spider out if it decided to break their agreement though.

She was terrified of them. They were just so— so spidery. So hairy and fast and sketchy and utterly despicable.

This is it. This is how the universe is choosing to get back at me. This is karma's version of payback.

Elod

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ie had always been fine. She was a great spider remover. Remover, because they didn't kill them if they didn't have to. Most of the time Elodie just trapped them and threw them outside. Scarlet didn't know how she would have dealt with this one. She probably would have laughed over the phone and told Scarlet to leave it alone and it would be gone by morning.

She could almost hear that advice. Almost.

Almost would have to be close enough until they got things sorted out between them. Between all of them.

## Chapter 15

Neera

“Mom, you need to call her. I can't keep walking on eggshells around here. I know you're still mad and you're hurt and everything else, but we need to work it out. We can't keep feeling like this. It isn't healthy and it isn't good. It's not going to stop me from going over there myself or going out with her someplace else. It's going to happen. I've been putting it off for days to try and respect you and give you time, but it's been a week, and I'm not going to put it off any longer. I want to be honest about that. I need to be honest about it.”

Elodie stood up and walked into the kitchen. Neera had just got home from her shift, and after checking her phone when she was off, she knew she needed to talk to her mom. She'd been planning what she wanted to say on the drive home, but when she walked in the door, all she could do was blurt out a string of very unpoetic, imperfect

words that probably had the opposite effect. She'd planned on coaxing her mom into the conversation. Being gentle and patient.

Neera hadn't even changed out of her scrubs yet, but she followed her mom in. Elodie took down a mug and started making tea. It was nearly eight, and Neera was starved. She opened the fridge, more to compose herself than to look for food even though her stomach was rumbling with thunder-worthy groans. There was some kind of casserole in there, and she pulled it out and set it on the counter. When she took the lid off and smelled the tuna, she nearly gagged. When she saw the gelatinous noodle, cheese, fishy nastiness, she slammed the lid back on in a hurry.

"You were at work," Elodie said defensively. "I made it for myself. My guilty pleasure."

"Ugh, I'm glad I missed the tuna takeover of the house." Neera stuffed the dish back into the fridge. She bit down hard on her bottom lip before she turned around. "Scarlet texted me earlier today. She had dinner with her family. She told them everything. They basically disowned her."

Elodie flipped the kettle's on button down just a little bit too hard. She looked towards the kitchen window, but Neera could still see the side of her face and she knew what she'd said had registered.

"She told them that she was a lesbian, then she came totally clean and told them about us dating. Um— even though we haven't had a real date yet. Even though we haven't seen each other in over a week. That's what we're doing. Dating. I need to go over there and talk to her. She's upset. I'd rather do it with your blessing. I'd rather you come with me and you two make up. She needs her best friend right now, probably more than she needs anything. You're not just her bff, Mom. You're like a sister."

“That was before,” Elodie said sharply.

“No, it’s still true. No matter how mad, disappointed, sad, or whatever else, it’s always going to be true.”

Elodie whitened and her hand grasped the counter. “Some things change.”

Neera crossed her arms. She was losing her patience. It was apparently time for some hard love, which was strange, coming from her as the daughter.

“Scarlet was there for you at a time when people were sad, angry, disappointed, and even ashamed of you. She wasn’t even your best friend at the time, but she stuck by you. She was way closer to you than Aunt Marla was. She supported you and she loved you, even if other people were talking about you behind your back all the time. When no one else even tried to understand, she tried. She was at the hospital when you had me. She was the first person other than my grandma to hold me, and that was only because grandma had a change of heart and wanted to be your person in the room with you when you were in labor. It was all Scarlet before that, and even after things were okay between you and grandma and grandpa and Marla it was still her.”

Elodie let out a shuddering sigh. “I know all that,” she said quietly, her voice as wobbly as their kitchen table used to be before Neera’s grandpa came to fix the one leg. “I just don’t know how to reconcile the fact that Scarlet is family. She’s like a sister to me and an aunt to you, a friend to both of us. How could you fall in love with someone so close to us for so many years?”

“I know it seems kind of weird, but I think that’s the reason I did fall in love with her. There are tons of best friends who eventually fall in love with each other. There are also tons of romances that happen between people who get close, even if the world thinks that it shouldn’t. I’m not asking for your acceptance before you can truly give it. I’m just asking that you reach out and start the process because Scarlet needs you.

She needs you more than anything or anyone. Right now, you're probably the one person left in her corner. If I go over there, it's not going to be the same without you. She'll probably feel worse, not better. I can't let that happen. I want to be there for her, but even more than I want that, I want us both to be there."

"I just don't know that I can."

Neera walked over to her mom. She set her hand on her shoulder. "You can be mad and still love someone. You can be there for one thing and still not want to be there for another. You've been treating me just the same though, Mom, and I can't say that's right. You think that you need keep me safe and be the protector here and that the enemy is Scarlet, but that's not the way it is. If you're mad at her, you should be way angrier with me. Just because I'm younger shouldn't make me immune to your wrath and your judgment and whatever shade you're throwing at her. Some of that should land on me too. It's not fair that she has to face it alone. I know I'm your kid and everything, but in this case, I'm equally to blame, if not more so."

"So, I should be mad at you too? I shouldn't speak to you. I should be disgusted with you as well?"

"Yeah." Neera nodded. "Exactly. Or you could take a breath and let the rage fizzle out and feel a lot better for it, and then treat Scarlet like you're treating me now."

"That's not possible. She's not— she's not you."

"I get that. You haven't once in this whole week been mad at me, though, and I think you need to be. It's not healthy to pretend like I'm the innocent one, that I didn't do anything. That's not real. I did things. A lot of things."

"Stop." Elodie grabbed the kettle, lifting it off the base. She poured water into her huge unicorn mug. It was her favorite, a gift from Scarlet a few years back. Neera

wondered if her mom saw the irony in that.

Neera reached for the sealed teabag on the counter and ripped open the package. She tucked the bag into the steaming water to steep. It floated on top for a few seconds before it sank down to the bottom. “It’s true. There isn’t a bit of our lives that Scarlet hasn’t touched. Trying to shut her out is like trying to stop breathing. I can’t stop breathing any more than you can. We’re just breathing in different ways now.”

Despite everything, Elodie’s lips trembled, but that waver turned into a reluctant smile. “Do you remember when you used to say that you were a nurse and not a poet? That there was a reason you did medicine and not English?”

Neera grinned. “Yup.”

“What happened these past few years then? You came back home and you’re a different person and now you’re talking like you could write a whole volume of poems.”

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“I don’t know. I guess I grew up.”

“Sometimes it’s hard for a parent to see their child that way.”

“I know. I do understand, even if you don’t think that I do or that I could. The thing is, Scarlet understands too. She knew this was coming. She never wanted to have to choose between us, but if it was a choice, she would have picked you. I promised her that she wouldn’t have to, and she believed me. She believed in me.”

Elodie threw up her hands and spun around to grasp the sink like she needed it to hold her up.

“I just don’t understand,” she moaned. “You and my best friend. You’re so different. The age difference is so big. You don’t even seem like a good match for each other. You’re a nurse and she likes clothes. If you told me that your girlfriend was fifteen years older than you, I’d be concerned no matter who she was. I’d ask what you could possibly have in common right now, let alone years later. I’d be just as worried.”

“But you wouldn’t be mad. You wouldn’t blame her.”

“No. I don’t know. Maybe I would, since she should know better. I’d need some time, I’ll give you that.”

“Sometimes opposites attract. That’s what everyone says, but sometimes it’s not always that people are opposite where it counts. Scarlet has a good heart. She’s kind. She’s wise. She’s smart.”



“She can’t be that smart or that kind or very wise if sh

e’d let you talk her into any of this, thinking that it was going to work out.”

“Mom,” Neera said, a little too sharply. She softened her words by taking her mom’s hand. “Let’s just stop. Okay. Let’s take a break from the crappy feelings and try happiness now. Let’s see if things work. Your best friend seriously needs you and I know that you’re not the kind of person who can ignore that. I know you’re torn up inside. Let’s just call a truce for now and go over there and be a family together, like we always have been.”

“That would be faking it.”

“No. No way. That part would be totally real.” Neera clutched her mom’s hand a bit tighter. “And for what it’s worth, I’m truly sorry. Not that I fell in love with Scarlet or that I chose her, but for the hurt that I’ve caused. I’m a nurse, but I’m also a daughter, a friend, and just a regular human being, and I don’t want to cause people pain.”

“If you continue on with this, you know that it will only cause more. Your grandma and grandpa will shit bricks. Marla will probably lose it for good and blacklist us both.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time that I got you into that situation.”

Neera was swallowed up by her mom’s strong, warm arms faster than she could comprehend. “Don’t say that,” Elodie whispered brokenly. “Never say that. Having you was the best thing I ever did. The best, you hear me, Neera Jane James?”

Neera’s throat got all thick as her heart swelled. “I hear you,” she breathed. She clung to her mom like she was a kid again and soaked up that comfort.

All week she'd had her doubts, but right then she knew that whatever dumpster fires were coming down the bend because that was just life and there was always one fire or another cropping up, they'd be okay.

"There probably isn't a single person in any lifetime or era that hasn't known heartbreak, shock, loss, or even betrayal at some point," Elodie sighed. "I don't want to be a soapy family. The kind that constantly has drama. I want to be a happy family with good friends and lots of love."

Neera's eyes stung and she angled into her mom's shoulder so that the bridge of her nose was pressed up against her mom's sweater. It helped in holding back the tears. "I want all the good things. For all of us."

"I don't know if that's possible right away, but I'll try. I can't talk you out of it, so what other option is there?"

Neera pulled back. "Thank you." She broke into a beaming smile. "Thank you for saying you'll try. Thank you for saying you can't talk me out of it. It's like trying to change my mind about tuna casserole. It's not going to happen. Ever."

"I know that. You're as stubborn as I am."

"You're not stubborn. Not all the time. Just sometimes."

"Can we head over there now?" Elodie glanced longingly at her cup of tea. "As soon as I'm done that is. I need some warmth before we go out in the cold." She paused, her face pinched. "Do you think that Scarlet will think we're crazy, coming up there together? Or- because of the other night? I can't believe I actually did that." She pulled the bag out of her tea and threw it in the trash, then took her mug in hand and sipped.

“I don’t think she believes you’re crazy. Not any more than usual, anyway. She knew it was coming.”

“But screaming down the neighborhood? Pounding on her door like that?”

“I think she knows what you’re capable of.”

“I never get in a fighting mood. She’s probably never seen me mad like that before.”

“Well, that was a day of all moods.”

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“Do you think if our friendship remains in the it’s complicated mode for a bit longer that Scarlet won’t be able to forgive me? I don’t know how to uncomplicate things when my best friend is dating my daughter. Dating. Oh God, that word is hard to swallow. Like liver and onions.”

Neera shuddered. “Ugh, liver. Do I have to be compared to liver?”

“I said it was hard to swallow. Not that you were liver.”

“Duly noted.”

“You know, maybe it’s easier if she comes here. Do you think she’d want to come here? I could make tea here. I could— I’d be more comfortable if she was here. But then, what if things get weird and I have to force her to leave?”

“Mom.” Neera almost cracked a smile. “I’m sure she’d come over. It’s not going to be weird. Maybe just a little bit, but not what do I do if I can’t get her out of my house weird.”

“Oh goodness, I called her a daughter-fucker.”

“You did.”

“Like a motherfucker, but worse.”

“I think we all got that, yup.” Neera inhaled sharply. “I hope you know it’s not the two of us against you. I want to be a badass threesome. I mean, not that way. Oh, my

God, not that way. A trio. Like a duo, but better. No third wheels. I want adventure. I want real life. I want you to be right there with us when we're forging streams and scaling mountains—I'm not being literal here. No mountains. I would be a terrible mountain climber. Well, maybe a small mountain sometime, even though we've never actually gone camping before and we'd be the worst citified people and it would probably be hilarious. Point is, I want you there on all our adventures. In our lives. I'm not going to disappear, and neither is Scarlet. Both of us are the same people still, even if the dynamic has changed."

Elodie wrapped her arms around herself, which made Neera's heart hurt. She hated that she was hurting her mom. That she was putting up walls between them and divisions, tearing holes in a relationship that had always been the most important one in her life. "I just don't know if I can go over there right now." Elodie bit down on her wavering bottom lip and she wouldn't look at Neera. "But if you do, I will understand."

"Okay." Neera let out an exhale. "I'm going to go over, and I'll tell Scarlet where you're at. Which is that you don't hate her, but you're just not ready to see her yet, but soon. You still love her, but loving someone doesn't mean that a person doesn't get mad or doesn't need their space."

"That's very accurate."

"I'm going to head over there now then."

"Don't you want something to eat?"

"I'm good. I'll just grab something when I get back."

"I could make something for you that isn't tuna." It was a kind offer, but more than that, it was her mom offering to take care of her, and Neera knew an olive branch

when she saw one.

Her reassuring look changed to something softer. Something that she hoped her mom took for understanding. Neera wasn't going to push. If Elodie wasn't ready, she wasn't ready. "I'll just make a grilled cheese or something if I'm hungry."

"You'll be back, though, soon?"

Neera gave her mom a reassuring smile. "I will. An hour or two."

Elodie bit the corner of her lip again and blinked hard, but then she nodded. It wasn't even halfway to a blessing, but it was something, and something counted. It really, really did.

## Chapter 16

### Scarlet

Scarlet knew that Neera was coming because she texted that she was heading over to her house, so she scrubbed her face in the bathroom and checked her reflection in the mirror. She'd done something she rarely ever did and closed the boutique for the day. She'd posted on the social media sites and the website that the store was closed due to staff illness. She could have called someone in, but with staff coming and going, she really hadn't trained someone for the day shift, since she was always there, generally without fail.

She realized how silly that was. She used to have a day person who helped at the boutique full time alongside her, but then Sarah had quit. Scarlet had part-time and full-time seasonal help before Christmas, but most people only applied for the jobs because they knew they were temporary, and they wanted extra money and work for the holidays.

After, with January being so slow, she hadn't got around to hiring someone. She'd had Neera, and

she'd put off doing interviews. She hadn't trained any of her evening or weekend staff, who were part-time, to work day shifts because most of them were on schedules where they wouldn't be able to fill in anyway due to school or other jobs or having families.

She stared at her red rimmed eyes in the mirror. Her face still felt puffy even after soaking it with cold water. She felt like she hadn't stopped crying since she left her parent's house the evening before.

What did you expect? You knew that was how they would react.

The doorbell cut off her pity party before she could get into it full swing. She dabbed at her face with a soft towel then walked to the door. She knew she probably looked like leftovers warmed up and then put in the freezer, then taken out, thawed, and warmed up again. She almost didn't want to answer, but it was Neera out there, and honestly, Scarlet was tired of being alone. She was tired of putting on a brave face for everyone. She was tired of being something and someone that she wasn't.

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It was her fault that she'd lived that life with Bryan, and no one else's. It was her choices that had led her to have that huge, empty void in her chest that was always there, no matter how well the boutique did or how many people she surrounded herself with. Having Elodie as her best friend over the years definitely helped, but Elodie couldn't be everything and Scarlet had never wanted her to. She didn't tell Elodie the half of it, because she didn't want to be that burden over and over again.

But now, everyone knew pretty much everything, and she was so, so tired of being alone.

So, warmed up leftovers or not, she still pulled open the door. And she still walked into Neera's arms the second she opened them, the cold of the night still clinging to her black peacoat, her skinny jeans stiff with it.

Neera wrapped her arms around Scarlet, and cold or not, they felt so good. She smoothed her hand over her hair and kept one on her shoulder. Eventually, Scarlet had to pull back so Neera could take off her coat. Instead of giving it to Scarlet, Neera hung it on the peg by the door herself. She slipped off her boots, then rubbed her arms over her cherry red knit sweater and did a little it's freaking cold out there shimmy dance that involved her whole body.

"Thanks for coming," Scarlet said quietly. Her voice sounded scratchy like her throat was swollen too.

"Of course!" Neera studied Scarlet. "My mom honestly said that she wasn't ready yet, but I think she's going to get there soon. She still loves you. You should know that. She's still mad, but it's fading fast. She said that she was okay if I came here.



We had a good talk before I left.”

“Oh. I— that’s really nice to hear.”

“I mean it. She’s going to come around. I think she wanted to come with me, but she couldn’t make herself do it. She just needs more time. It’s going to be okay. You’re not going to lose her.”

“That’s good.” Tears burned up Scarlet’s nose. No matter how many she cried, there seemed to be an endless supply waiting. “That’s really good. I don’t think I could bear that right now.”

Neera’s hand settled on her chest, and she rubbed the spot right above her heart like it was hurting. She let out a shuddery breath. “I think you need another hug.”

Scarlet was afraid to go in for one, but Neera stepped forward and wrapped her arms around her and squeezed her hard. Scarlet clung to her. She smelled like vanilla and laundry soap and something slightly stronger, probably a disinfectant or sanitizer from work. Scarlet was instantly soothed, even though she was afraid of hugs because she was afraid that if she was held, she might not ever want to let go. She did pull back, no matter how much she wanted to stay in Neera’s arms.

“Do you want some coffee? Or something to eat?”

Neera shrugged. “I’m okay. We can just talk if you want.”

Scarlet raked her hands through her hair. Her fingers snagged on multiple knots, and she realized that she hadn’t even brushed it. She’d curled it the night before, to go and have dinner with her family, and the blonde tresses were probably a tangled mess.

She had to step back and lean against the wall for support when visions of the dinner

the night before played over in her mind.

“Whoa.” Neera was right there, her eyes burning with worry. “Are you okay? No. Of course, you’re not okay. Let me help you.”

Scarlet shook her head. She was used to taking care of herself. “That’s okay. I— I’m good.”

“You’re not. You’re not good and you’re not fine and it’s okay to be that way. There’s lots going on right now. Lots of hard, painful things. Telling my mom, then telling your family and having it feel like no one is in your corner and being totally alone... I— I’m here. You don’t have to be by yourself.”

Scarlet tried to pick herself off the wall, but honestly, it felt so good to lean there. She was tired. Exhausted, actually. She hadn’t slept at all the night before, but even all week, she’d barely got more than a few hours at a time. “I’m older than you. I’m the one who should be taking care of you,” she sighed when Neera’s hand landed on her shoulder.

Neera shook her head, rolled her eyes, and offered a small, humorous smile that said she was calling bullshit on that.

“That’s nonsense. You can deny that you need someone or that you need help all you want, but at some point, everyone does. It’s okay to be sad, to be tired, to be a mess, to be human. You don’t have to be tough all the time, and certainly not for me. You might be older, but that doesn’t mean that you have to be the only responsible one. I think, in a relationship, people are supposed to be there for each other, even if there’s an age difference. I don’t want you to be my mom, Scarlet. I want you to be my girlfriend.”

It might be illogical, but Scarlet leaned off the wall and grasped Neera’s shoulders.

She pulled herself in and rested her head there. She knew that nothing was fixed by the act of being held, but it felt so, so good.

Neera pulled back after a few minutes and tilted Scarlet's face up. Instead of looking at her with pity, she looked at her with purpose and it was reassuring. "Everything is going to be okay. We're here for you. Mom and me. Always. Your family, I'm sure they'll come around. I know you probably expected a blow out."

"I did," Scarlet admitted. "It didn't make it any easier when it happened, though."

"No. We all hope for the best and that's crap about being prepared for the worst." Neera's eyes assessed her face, then trailed lower, to the gray sweats and the oversized black pullover she was wearing. "You offered me something to eat, but have you eaten anything?"

Scarlet didn't want to admit that she hadn't. Food was the last thing she wanted, but it might also explain why she felt so nasty physically. That and the lack of sleep. "I'm okay," she still insisted, because she was basically programmed to say it.

Neera knew better. "I think you've been taking care of other people for a long time. You've been telling people what they want to hear, and no one has asked you what you want. If you're taking care of everyone else, and I know you did that with Bryan for years, who is taking care of you?"

"I..."

"I know you got used to it, being in a relationship with someone who treated you like you weren't even there, always being last, shoving aside what you really wanted, but you don't have to be tough for me." She took Scarlet's hand and squeezed it. "I'm going to run you a bath. A nice, warm, full one. Then, after a good soak, we'll have something to eat. I'm hungry too, actually. I'll make something for both of us, so you

can't protest. Deal?"

Scarlet felt her face heat up. Did she really look that awful? "I can pour my own bath. You don't have to—"

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“I know I don’t have to. And before you start thinking that you’re anything less than beautiful, don’t even go there. You’re gorgeous. You’ll always be gorgeous because you’re you and I love you. I’m not saying you need to clean up. I’m saying that when things are shitty, some pampering sometimes makes us feel better. I can’t fix your family for you. I’m not sure I can fix much of anything, but what I can do is pour you a bath and make you dinner.”

Crazily enough, Scarlet found her lips twitching. “Okay.”

Neera didn’t drop her hand. She led her away from the door and down the hall to the bathroom. She turned on the light and efficiently put the stopper in the tub, turned on the water, and checked the temperature while the tub filled.

She was methodical, but she did everything with care. She wasn’t in nurse mode, but Scarlet realized how comforted Neera’s patients must feel when she was around. She didn’t think of Neera as anything less than a woman any longer, but she realized just how grown up she was. She was way older than her twenty-three years, that was for certain. She was trained that way as a nurse, but she was also wise, and she knew what she wanted, and that was incredibly attractive. No one had ever fought for Scarlet before. How could she not feel the force of that love and take a minute to bask in

it?

When Neera turned around, it was like she knew what Scarlet was thinking. She didn’t offer to help her undress. She didn’t try to make their encounter sexual. This was about care and support and for the first time ever, Scarlet knew what it was to

have a romantic partner who truly saw her and understood her. More than anything, Neera's tenderness told her that this wasn't just a fling. It wasn't a novelty for her. She wasn't a novelty.

"I want to know all of you," Neera said, her voice little more than a hum. She leaned in and grazed Scarlet's forehead with her warm lips. "I want to know everything about you. I know that I've known you all my life, but I haven't known you as my partner. I haven't known you as someone who could share anything and everything with me. I'd like to undress you and make love to you in that bath until you're screaming out my name, but we have time, and I can wait. You have other needs, and I want to meet them all. We can take things slow. We don't have to rush into anything. We're dating, but we had a rough start. Let's build something that's not so rough. Something beautiful. Something that's going to last. I'm not just here because I think you're sexy. I'm here because I think you're so, so much more."

The last of Scarlet's doubts and worries vaporized like the thin tendrils of steam curling off the bathwater. Would a bath and dinner fix anything? Maybe not more than the tired feeling dragging her down. Would kind words repair the relationships that were important to her and were hanging in shreds? Maybe not, but they'd help her move forward.

The fact that Neera was there at all meant more than Scarlet could say. Did she think she was crazy over this past week they'd been apart? Yes. More than once. Did she doubt herself? Plenty. Did she doubt Neera? No. She really hadn't, but hearing Neera say those words and mean them helped more than she could say.

Neera was there. She was there because she wanted to be there, with her. It made Scarlet feel energized and refreshed, recharged, and absolutely terrified too, because opening herself up to someone and having a healthy relationship wasn't going to be easy. They faced a ton of added difficulties, but that didn't mean they couldn't make it.

Slow and honest. Slow and honest sounded just right.

“I told my mom I’d make a grilled cheese when I got back home and that she didn’t have to worry about me. She tried to feed me tuna casserole and then felt guilty, I think.”

Scarlet laughed just a little, unexpectedly, and it felt good. “I know how much you hate that. It’s Elodie’s guilty pleasure.”

“Most people like chocolate or wine or freaking chips as a guilty craving, but nope. Hers has to be tuna. Anyway, now that I told her I’d be fine with a grilled cheese, I have a craving for one. If I make us that, is that okay?”

Scarlet’s mouth actually watered. She was surprised to find that her stomach was clenched up with something more than tight, nasty knots, and sick, churning worry mingled with guilt. “That would be great.”

“With pickles?”

“Always.”

“Do you have bacon and tomatoes?”

“I didn’t know we were going all the way gourmet.”

“Only the best for you.” Neera’s tone was lighthearted, but she meant it. She leaned forward and brushed Scarlet’s lips softly with hers. Just that touch was enough to warm Scarlet’s entire body. “Enjoy your bath.”

Neera left, shutting the door behind her, and Scarlet had to sit down on the edge of the tub at that final gesture. Neera was giving her privacy, her own space, letting her

feel and take things at her own pace. She wasn't just trying to keep the warm air in the bathroom. She respected Scarlet and that was more than she'd ever truly had in a relationship.

Neera was showing her too, that she could take care of her. That just because Scarlet was older, didn't mean that she'd rely on her to do it all, or that she expected her to be a certain way. It was freeing and it made her feel like she could do this. Like she could move forward, no matter what was against her. It was exactly what she needed after a painful, vulnerable day of aching and doubting herself.

She was so primed to think that she wasn't worthy. That she couldn't trust because people betrayed trust. She'd had it done to her time and again in her marriage, and she'd been feeling extremely hypocritical about betraying Elodie's trust, even though it wasn't the same thing. She'd felt like she didn't have anyone in her corner. She couldn't give Neera her blind trust, no matter how hard she wanted to, but she realized that Neera didn't want that. She wanted to earn it. She wanted to build it together. She was strong and she wasn't going to give up on Scarlet because things were rough for her too.

Scarlet undressed and slid into the bath. The warm water was just the right temperature. It chased away the chill in her bones and soothed her aching, tired muscles. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back and thought about everything that Neera had done since she'd first got back. Scarlet thought it was impossible that Neera could truly see her, but she believed it now, after everything they'd gone through in a short period of time. Neera coming over tonight, her tenderness, and her care, had proved to Scarlet that she didn't need to be perfect. It wasn't expected. Neera wanted her just the way she was, and she was utterly okay with being wanted that way too.

It sounded so simple, but it really wasn't. No one was like that. Happy with themselves. Easily accepting. Loving of the imperfect.



It brought tears to Scarlet's eyes again when she thought of Neera in the kitchen, probably waiting to start their dinner so that she could enjoy her bath first. Neera, smiling and patient and ready to listen. The lovely Neera who had loved her for so many years and wasn't complete without her.

The truth was, Scarlet wouldn't be complete without her either. Not one bit.

## Chapter 17

### Neera

After working her training shifts one after another, back-to-back, with a few days off, Neera had to admit that even the day shift grind was getting to her. She and Scarlet still hadn't had an official date that they could call a date where they went out and did something together.

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It was obviously on Scarlet's mind as well, because right after Neera was off and she pulled her purse out of her locker and checked her phone, she saw a string of texts.

I keep thinking that we haven't had a real date. Yes, we've done things. Were those dates? I don't actually know. I think we might have skipped a few steps. I'm not conventional, but I would like to take you out.

I know what time you get off. I know where you work. I may or may not be sitting in the visitor's parking lot right now, racking up a big ticket because I wanted to be romantic and I thought this would be special.

The visitor's parking lot on the East side. Is there two?

My car is a black sedan. I think you know that?

Of course, you know that, but not to be confused with all the other black sedans parked here in this massive lot, I'm by pillar 3B, parked between a bright red minivan and a white convertible.

Who puts their top down in JANUARY?????? Maybe it's broken. Maybe that's the reason they're in the hospital, because they drove here like that and froze their nose off...

You do get off at seven, right? Or maybe you're working overtime and you're going to find your phone later. That's okay. I can wait until seven-thirty and if you're not out by then, no worries. I know things happen. You're saving lives. That's incredible. I can change our appointments. Oh, btw, I made us hot appointments at the spa to get

massages. I thought that would be nice. And then dinner after? If you want?

Okay, I'm starting to worry that maybe I should have given you some notice and being spontaneous isn't a good thing.

Neera checked the time on her phone. It was seven-seventeen. The last text had only come through a minute before. She didn't want Scarlet to leave, so she quickly wrote a response.

Sorry! Shift went a bit late. I'll be right out!

She stood there in the sta

ff changing room, grinning like a fool for a second before she typed something else.

I like surprises. Spontaneity is good. The only thing better than getting a good surprise is a massage and getting a massage as a surprise is best.

She tucked her phone into her bag, threw on her coat and mitts, and walked out of the hospital, still grinning. She probably looked funny, but what did it matter? She was happy. Not everything was perfect. Her mom still hadn't made up with Scarlet. Scarlet's family hadn't reached out either. Scarlet was having issues finding staff for the store and was putting in long hours mostly by herself, but Neera still had hope.

If everyone was wrong about time healing or that taking it slow was a good thing, she wasn't sure what she'd do. She'd heard that time might not heal anything, it might just create scabs and scar tissue, and that taking it slow actually never won a race ever, but she wasn't subscribing to that. She knew one thing and that was that hard work did pay off. She'd seen it over and over again. Since she was a nurse, she'd watched people heal. Time did do wonders for some, and she hoped she and Scarlet were included in that category.

The wind was bracing, so cold that it gave Neera a brain freeze, but she ducked her head down and walked to the parking lot. She saw Scarlet's car right away, still sandwiched between the van and the convertible.

It had to be broken. No one would have made it anywhere in it. But they also wouldn't have just put it down when they got to the hospital. Did they wear a helmet? The kind people wore on snowmobiles in the winter? Neera started grinning all over again and she didn't stop as she slid into the passenger seat of Scarlet's car, shivering at the change in temperature since the car was running and the heat was pumping.

"Hey." She bent over and clasped Scarlet's face in her hands, even though she was wearing knitted mittens, and leaned in to kiss her. Scarlet met her halfway and what was supposed to be a peck on the lips turned into a much more scalding, heated, melt them both into their seats kind of a kiss. "Wow," Neera panted as she pulled away. "That's a great start to our first real date."

"Maybe I shouldn't have said real date. I did say I wasn't conventional, didn't I?"

"You did." Neera slipped her seatbelt on as Scarlet reversed.

"Can I bring you back for your car after?" Scarlet asked. She drove up to the ticket machine and slipped it in, then sighed at the crazy price. "Goodness sakes, how do people afford to visit anyone here? That's crazy."

"I know it is. Parking is bad everywhere. Expensive, I mean."

Scarlet swiped her credit card in the machine and then the gate lifted, and they were free to go. "At least I get a parking stall. I wasn't kidding when I said that it was a serious issue in San Jose."

"It would bankrupt you otherwise."

“You’ve got that right.”

Scarlet was a good driver, and the late traffic wasn’t an issue for her. She had winter tires on her car and despite the icy sheen on the streets, polished by the wind, they had no issues getting to the spa.

“I can’t say that I’ve ever been for a massage at a spa before. I’ve always gone to like medical places and that was only when I helped one of Stephanie’s friends move in San Jose and I kept having to go up and down stairs all day. I was so sore. I’m used to being on my feet, but apparently five flights of stairs up and down for hours on end will do a number on your calves. The Charlie horses were out of control. The massage hurt more than it felt good, but I could actually walk again. It was basically a magic trick.”

“I’ve never had one for pleasure. Just if I hurt or tweak something too. They have hot stones. And they probably have something that feels good, but isn’t a deep tissue massage. I don’t even know what I’m talking about. I just booked us in for an hour couples thing. We can probably choose.”

She was nervous, Neera realized, and that was entirely adorable. She reached over and took Scarlet’s hand when she parked, bringing it to her lips to kiss her knuckles like in old fashioned movies and romance books.

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“Thank you for this. I’m super excited to do this together. I’m not a surprise kind of person, but seeing all your messages as soon as I got off, finding out you were waiting out there for me to do something together, that’s pretty cool.”

Scarlet’s cheeks got a little pink, which was even more adorable.

“Should we go in?”

“Should I have changed?” Neera glanced down at her scrub pants.

“Nope. You look perfect. I’m proud that my girlfriend is a nurse.”

“Say that again,” Neera whispered breathlessly. “Say that I’m your girlfriend. Sometimes I still can’t believe it.”

The blush deepened on Scarlet’s cheeks and her eyes darkened, but her smile was quick to come. “You’re my girlfriend.”

Neera let that sink in for a few minutes before she unbuckled her seatbelt and grabbed her purse. She loved the sound of that. Life was crazy when the real stuff was better than the stuff she could ever have dreamed up.

The spa was warm and cozy and had that professional vibe. The floor was tiled, the walls were done in stone, and there was a small pond behind the sleek white reception desk. Spa-like nature themed music played over a set of hidden speakers. The chairs in the waiting area beside the reception desk were modern and somehow cozy looking too, and there was a coffee machine set up at a bar on the far end of the

spacious area.

“Hello!” They were greeted as soon as they walked in by a young receptionist with fire engine red hair and makeup skills that Neera envied.

She didn’t wear makeup to work, and on days off she hardly bothered, but this lady? Wow. She could have been a makeup artist. Maybe she was. She had the artsy kind of makeup that somehow worked on her even though it looked like she was heading to a fantasy style photoshoot right after work.

The girl’s hair was amazing too. She smiled at them sweetly. “How can I help you today?”

“We have an appointment for a massage,” Scarlet said. “Together.”

“Oh! That’s great! A mother daughter massage.”

Scarlet had been digging in her purse for her wallet, but she froze. Neera also stilled. The air in the place seemed to go completely frigid, just like the wind outside.

Neera grasped Scarlet’s hand and clung to her tightly. “It’s actually a couple’s massage.”

The receptionist’s eyes widened, and she looked properly shocked and terribly mortified. “Oh. Oh shoot. I’m sorry. Yes, that’s right. Scarlet Hunter?”

“That’s right.” Scarlet’s voice was clipped.

Neera’s heart squeezed and sunk. This was supposed to be a fun date for them. Their first date together. She’d been so excited, and so happy. Scarlet, it seemed, had felt the same. She was so sure that nothing could ruin it, but here they were, and things

were already tense and strained before they even started.

Neera hoped that the massage would help things, but no matter how relaxing of an experience it was, by the time they were finished, Scarlet was still tense. She paid and she tipped everyone generously, but Neera could tell that something was wrong as they walked out to the car. She waited until they'd slipped in before she said anything.

"Are we still going to go for dinner?"

"Are you hungry?" Scarlet asked the windshield.

"I have to say I am."

"Right. You worked a twelve-hour shift. I can be really dense sometimes. I should have taken you for dinner first, then the massage. Or maybe skipped the massage altogether and just done the whole dinner thing, since that seems to be the extent of most people's creativity now."

"Hey." Neera reached across the console and set her hand on Scarlet's. They were both resting in her lap while the car warmed back up. "What the receptionist said? It doesn't matter to me. You don't look like my mom."

"Maybe not now, but one day, I'm probably going to. Maybe not in the next few years, but what about five years from now? I'll be a granny and you'll be in the prime of your life."

"Nope. We've already gone over that. I'm not trading you in for some newer, younger model. Never, Scarlet. We can't change when we were born. All we can do is live right now. I'm choosing you. Even when you do look older, I'll still be the luckiest woman in the world. You'll always be beautiful to me."



“I’m the lucky one. I have a hot young girlfriend and a nurse to boot. At least you can look after me in my old age. That’s actually a good investment, if you ask me.”

“Scarlet!”

Scarlet turned at the sharpness in Neera’s voice. She wasn’t joking around anymore and that was obvious. Her heart hurt because Scarlet was hurting. “The massage was amazing, despite the whole mother daughter comment. We’re probably going to get that from time to time. I don’t give two shits and you shouldn’t either. We’ll get used to it. As for being a hot nurse, I’m glad you think I am. If you think I’m a good investment, I’m glad of that too, actually. If I’m someone you invest time and emotion and care and love into, then yes. As for looking after you? Always. Everyon

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e thinks I'm a pervert for liking older women anyway. I'm never going to un-pervert. I can say that for a fact."

"Pervert?"

"Oh yeah. I used to get that all the time. For real. When I was sixteen and I came out and I told people I was attracted to women twice my age, like in the thirty-year-old range, they thought there was something wrong with me. When you get older, it's more acceptable. In a couple years, no one is going to make jokes or tell me I can't want what I want. I think they were just jealous anyway, because I was young and dumb, and I still knew what I wanted more than any of them ever did."

Scarlet's hand came up and her index finger traced Neera's bottom lip, stilling her. "You were never dumb. I know that."

Neera paused for a second, then she broke into laughter. Scarlet's eyes creased at the corners and her lips wavered and then she was laughing too. Neera took Scarlet's hand and kissed it, then she cupped her face, leaning in to kiss more than her knuckles.

She grazed Scarlet's lips with her own, before going in for a full kiss. Scarlet's eyes slammed shut and she moaned into the kiss. Neera's eyes closed too, and she kissed Scarlet without holding back. Soon, the kiss wasn't just lips on lips. Scarlet's tongue swept into Neera's mouth, exploring, demanding, and Neera's hands tangled in her hair and held on as the taste of Scarlet's lips transformed her from someone who had just enjoyed a rather relaxing massage, into someone who was half wild with lust and need.

They finally broke away, and Neera laughed between her hard, heavy breathing when she saw that the windows were getting foggy. Scarlet switched the car's heat setting and in a minute they cleared.

"Are we still going out for dinner?" Neera asked again, a little more cautiously. "I'd really like to take my sexy, wonderful, thoughtful, kind girlfriend out for a steak dinner."

"Oh, a steak dinner?"

"Or tacos. Or ice cream. Whatever you want. Your pick. I'm down for anything, as long as it's with you."

"And if I knew a place that only made tuna casserole?"

Neera burst into laughter. She threw back her head and let the sound bounce around the car. She laughed until she had to wipe tears from her eyes, and she was so, so glad that Scarlet joined in.

"Oh my gosh, I guess that if you really wanted it, I would suck it up and I would go and I would get a soda and call it a night while trying not to pass out from holding my breath against the tuna fumes."

"You know, as tempting as finding a tuna only place might be, I'd love a good steak if you would."

Neera could have told Scarlet that she'd eat tuna or wade through a pile of dung for her if it was required, but instead of starting another fit of laughter, she settled for kissing the woman of her dreams again.

Chapter 18

## Scarlet

When Scarlet got to the mail at the boutique mid-morning, there was a letter waiting for her from the building's owner. She wasn't the only shop in the place. The old warehouse had been converted into a series of shops, and offices above those, and she recognized the letterhead immediately. She saved it for last, like she already knew it was going to be bad news before she read it.

She stared hard at the type after reading it, like that could change anything.

The guy who owned the building wanted to raise rent by almost double within six months. Scarlet didn't stumble back. She didn't lean over the counter. She didn't let out a moan of despair. She was already calculating how that would eat into her profits. Or, more accurately, how there would be very little profit left.

She'd been in this building for years and years and she'd never seen anything so ridiculous. She silently debated, as she stared down at the single page of white paper with the flowing green letterhead, if she could band the other shop owners together for some kind of protest.

After she thought about that, she thought about Neera.

About last night, how when she drove her back to the hospital, to the staff parking lot to get her car, Neera had cupped her face in both hands and stared her down earnestly. She was so young, but she knew what she wanted. She had Elodie's tenaciousness without most of the stubbornness.

She was a complex, wonderful, compassionate, old soul wrapped up in a beautiful package. She had that spark that people spent their whole life trying to find in themselves, but she'd found it early and she'd nurtured it. She had to have fears, but she came across as being afraid of nothing because she was strong enough to conquer

and overcome just about anything. Neera had whispered in Scarlet's ear, her voice thick with emotion and warmth.

"I've tried not to love you and I've failed. I failed the first day I realized what it was, and I failed all the other days after. I don't have to worry about failing anymore, because I don't want to fail. Now I just get to love you. All my secrets are out there, and I can be just a regular person with you. If you have other secrets, things you haven't told anyone, let me earn them. Share them with me. Let me be the first person you think about in the morning and the last before bed. Let me be the one you want to call or text first. Let me be that one for you. That's what I want for us. An extraordinary, ordinary life. Me loving you. You loving me. End of time. End of story. Beginning of a new story."

Scarlet leaned hard against the counter. Did Neera talk like that to anyone else? Did she say beautiful things to reassure people on a day-to-day basis, or did she save it all for her?

She picked up the letter and waved it like a fan in front of her. She wanted to call Neera, even though she knew she'd be at work. She wanted to tell her. She wanted Neera to be the first to know. She wanted her advice. Even if she didn't know what to do, she just wanted to hear the sound of her voice.

Scarlet bent underneath the counter and reached for her phone. She wouldn't call, but she would send a text, even just to let Neera know she was thinking about her. She was in the middle of trying to type in something that seemed equally as profound as anything Neera had ever said, when it went off in her hand. She let out a yelp and dropped it on the counter. Her shoulders shook with her held breaths and her pounding heart as she stared at the screen. Her hand flew to the hollow of her neck, which she did when she was agitated.

Her mom's number was on the screen. It was hardly the time to answer a call from

one of her parents, especially not after the dinner they'd had not very long ago, but Scarlet grabbed the phone up and answered anyway.

“Hello? Mom?”

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“Scarlet.” Her name came out in a panicked tone. “It’s your dad. He collapsed at home just now and I called for an ambulance. They’re taking him to the hospital. I’m on my way, following behind them.”

“What? Mom, what?”

“Your dad. He collapsed. We don’t know what’s wrong. I called for an ambulance right away and they’ve already come. I’m driving to the hospital right now.”

Scarlet didn’t have to think about her response, even though she was totally in shock. She was surprisingly strong. She didn’t feel like she was going to wilt or fall over. She was already going into action mode, which she supposed was indeed another form of shock, but a much more take charge, productive one. “I’m on my way. Which hospital?”

Her mom rattled off the name, which wasn’t the one that Neera worked at. Scarlet nodded into the phone as her mom gave a few more details, then hung up after Scarlet promised again that she was walking out the door that second.

She was already pocketing her phone as she locked up the front and switched off the open sign. She went back to the desk and quickly wrote a sign about being closed for an emergency and taped it to the glass of the front door. She would update the social media sites and the website from the hospital. It was the second day that the store had been closed in a week, but she wouldn’t let herself think like that. If she lost business, she lost business. Her family came first. She needed to learn that she should come first too. She’d been putting herself last for so long without even fully r

realizing that's what she was doing that it was a hard habit to break.

I might not even have a store in six months anyway.

Scarlet let her worries sit with her during the ride to the hospital. It was a lot for one morning. She thought about signs. Stuff from the universe. She'd never been inclined to think in that direction, but lately, it was hard not to.

These aren't signs. This is just a lot of crap coming down all at once because that's what crap sometimes does. This is not a sign. It has nothing to do with me personally. This isn't karma. This is asshole landlords doing what they do best. It's bad timing. This is my dad's health failing, which doesn't have one single thing to do with my relationship. This isn't the universe trying to get back at me for trying to finally, finally be truly happy as ME. Neera doesn't need to keep talking you down. You need to take responsibility for what you want and stand up for that.

After calming herself down with a few deep breaths, Scarlet parked and went inside. She was directed at the front desk and was shown by a kind nurse, the way to the correct waiting area, since she was totally and utterly overwhelmed at the size of the hospital.

When Scarlet saw her mom, who seemed to have aged ten years in the past few days, she nearly broke down in tears. Her eyes burned, but she resolved to be strong, and she blinked them away while offering a shaky smile. Her mom's eyes got wet at seeing her too, but she blinked the same way to clear her vision. She was hunched over, her shoulders shaking with every breath that seemed to rattle through her like she was abandoned building. Her skin was too pale and there was no color at all in her cheeks. She didn't look like herself, but she was worried and stressed, and Scarlet supposed that was enough to transform anyone into looking unhealthy.

Scarlet took a seat in the chair beside her mom. The waiting area was smaller, but still



like any other, with chairs lined around the wall, a coffee table in the middle, and a vending machine just down the hall.

“How is he?” Scarlet asked, even though she could barely make her voice function or her throat work.

Her mom let out a gusty sigh. “I don’t know yet. They’re doing an MRI to make sure he didn’t hit his head or anything when he fell. His neck was sore, he was saying, when he came around right before the paramedics got to the house. I kept him still.”

“Oh, my God. Is it— do you think it’s because of his blood pressure? I don’t know if it would have been high or low, but I’m guessing if he passed out, it would have been low.” Scarlet didn’t want to think about other outcomes. High blood pressure could mean anything, but he knew the dangers.

Her mom shook her head and shrugged. “I don’t know.” She paused, and Scarlet could just see her gathering herself to let her have it. She knew it was coming, and of course, it did. “If it wasn’t for the stress, he wouldn’t have had to be on his blood pressure medication at all.”

“Stress? He’s been on those meds for two years now.”

“Well, stress isn’t good for him. That’s why he retired early.”

Scarlet barely kept herself from rolling her eyes. She very nearly lost the battle, so she looked towards the other side of the room. They were pretty much alone, but it was a very small area.

“It was your divorce,” her mom went on, steamrolling right over Scarlet’s feelings. “That’s what triggered it.”

“That was last year that I said anything. He was still on it before.”

“Well, he had an episode then. He was watering the plants in the flower garden, and he said he felt dizzy.”

“Mom. It was hot out. You can’t just— you can’t blame me for anything bad that happens.” Scarlet faced her mom, her shoulders wavering as she drew in a breath. “I’m sorry for the stress and the heartache I’ve caused. I truly am. I’ve made mistakes just like everyone else. I want you to know that I’m happy now, or at least I’m trying to be. I’m trying to make less of those mistakes and figure out who I am and how to be okay with that, or even proud of it. I love you both. Really. I just hope that one day, that’s enough for you. You’re my parents, and we might disagree, but I’m always going to love you. What I’m not going to do is change my mind. I’m in love with a woman because I’m a lesbian. I know that’s a shock. I know it’s going to take a long time to process it. It’s taken me a very long time to be able to say that, but it’s the truth. Neera makes me happy. I want to make her happy. I’m not going to change my mind. That’s all I can say about it right now.”

There. It was out. The big, grand speech that she’d wanted to give ever since dinner. She’d been thinking about it, what she’d say if she ever got the chance to sit down with her mom and have her truly listen. It was sad thing that she doubted that it might ever actually happen. She wasn’t sure if the hospital was the right place or the right time, but she was glad that she’d said what she needed to say and she could stop letting it well up inside of her day after day, hour after hour, minute after minute.

They were silent. The kind of silence that weighs on a person like a pile of heavy blankets, heaped on one by one until they’re collectively too many and become stifling.

When it was clear that Scarlet’s mom wasn’t going to respond, they just sat that way, in silence, until a nurse finally came to talk to them. The woman was middle aged,

wearing the same pale green scrubs as most of the other nurses Scarlet had seen walk by.

“I wanted to say that your husband is in one of the rooms now, with the doctor, and you can go in and see him.”

Scarlet’s mom leaped up, letting out a small sigh of relief that she obviously meant to contain. Scarlet felt that same relief right down to the pit of her soul. She followed the nurse and her mom down the hall to a room filled with machines hooked up all over the place, beeping and whirring. Her dad was there in bed, in a hospital gown, the sheets pulled up to his waist. He had an IV in one arm, and his doctor, a tall, young man with dark chestnut hair and an athletic build, was talking to him about wearing a heart monitor for a day just to make sure everything was okay, but the CT was normal, and he was good to go. It also seemed like his medication might need some adjustments to the dosage, but they would figure it out.

After the doctor left, Scarlet’s mom took the chair at the side of the bed and grabbed her husband’s hand tightly. She was barely above having a bit of a breakdown. Scarlet had never doubted that her parent’s love was real. It might have been subdued, melted into a more relaxed way of living and loving after so many years, but it was there, and now she knew just how strong it was. Just because her parents had never believed in being overly affectionate with each other in front of their children, didn’t make their bond any less strong.

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“I’m so glad you’re okay,” Scarlet’s mom said with watery eyes and a watery voice.

“I’m glad too.” Scarlet stepped closer to the bed. She cleared her throat and smiled down at her dad. “I’m so glad you’re okay. I don’t know what I would do if anything happened to you. Or to mom. I hope you’re both going to be okay.” She wasn’t just talking about blood pressure. She was talking about what her mom had said to her. How it might have been her fault for stressing her dad out with her divorce then again by coming out, then further upping it by telling them who she was dating.

Her dad smiled weakly. He looked tired, but at least his color was good, and he looked well. “Come here, sweetheart.” He held out his arms and Scarlet leaned over the edge of the hospital bed for a hug. She let her dad stroke her hair like he had when she was little. “I’m good. I’m going to be just fine. Don’t worry about your mom and me. We’re always going to be there for you, no matter what.”

Scarlet backed up and brushed at her eyes. There was so much she wanted to say, but her dad’s eyes looked heavy, and he probably needed to rest more than he needed to talk about things with her right that very minute. They would. She’d make sure they did.

“Why don’t you go get a coffee, Brenda?” Scarlet’s dad suggested.

Her mom straightened. “I might just do that.” She looked over at Scarlet, and it was clear that coffee was a code for something else. “Do you need one?” It was her mom’s way of offering that first step, that hand of understanding, that first plank in the bridge that needed to be reconstructed between them, and Scarlet knew that.

“I’d love one,” she said softly, her eyes finally starting to leak a little, but she was smiling through it all. “I’d really, really one.”

## Chapter 19

Neera

Neera was washing the dishes, late because she’d just got home, while her mom had a shower after working an extra and unexpected shift at the bakery for yet another huge order. Even though dishes were Neera’s least favorite thing, she was taking one for the team after seeing how exhausted her mom was. Double shifts trumped even twelve-hour nursing shifts. Elodie got the shower first. Neera readily tackled the chores.

She almo

st didn’t hear the soft knock at the front door. Almost. Her heart did a bit of a skip and a jump, because only Scarlet ever knocked that way. Yes, after years, she knew the exact sound.

Neera set a plate in the clean bay of the double sink, rinsed off her hands, and grabbed a tea towel to dry them on. She realized she was holding her breath and that she wasn’t just walking. She was running to the door. She pulled it open and along with a gust of frigid, windy, snowy air, there was Scarlet, her hair windblown, her cheeks and the tip of her nose pink, and her arms full.

“I should have called or texted, but I thought the answer might be no, and I wanted to drop this off and say something, if I could.”

“The answer isn’t no from me.” Neera made a hand gesture, indicating the room. “Get in here. It’s freezing out there.”

“Tell me about it. I think I have a brain freeze that is going to last for the next century.”

Neera shut the door since Scarlet’s arms were full.

“Neera, who—” Elodie trailed off and Neera turned around to find her mom standing there wearing pink bathrobe over her pajamas, a fluffy purple towel twisted up around her wet hair. “Oh,” she said. She glanced at Neera like she wanted to know if she’d known that Scarlet was coming over, or if she’d invited her and said nothing, and of course Scarlet noticed.

“She didn’t call me. I came on my own.” She held out the box in her arms. “I wanted to bring you this.”

Elodie crossed her arms as the stubbornness set in. “I’m not sure that I’m ready to want anything from you yet.”

“Mom!” Neera protested.

“That’s okay.” Scarlet set the box down. She started pulling out items one at a time. “If you’re going to say this is a peace offering, you might be correct.” Scarlet produced a cheesecake and Neera could see from behind her that it was her mom’s favorite cherry flavour from a diner on the other side of the city. They weren’t cheap and the place wasn’t easy to get to from where they lived. Scarlet would have had to go way out of her way. She set the container on the floor and pulled out a six pack of canned tuna. “For tuna casseroles. Your other guilty favorite.”

“Gag,” Neera said, trying to ease the tension. “Ugh, so wrong.”

Scarlet pulled out a jar candle next, and it was also the one Elodie liked the most. She produced a box of microwave popcorn, but the expensive organic, lightly salted kind.

“Since you said that you never wanted to go to the theatre with me again, I already rented the movie. It just came out actually, and I know you probably haven’t gone to it yet. If you log into my account, then we can watch it at the house. Maybe. If you want to. When you’re ready. I have the rental for a month before it expires.” She kept going, pulling a bouquet of sunflowers out of the box. They were wrapped in cellophane to keep them safe from the elements, and those Scarlet handed to Neera. She almost couldn’t take the softness on Scarlet’s face. Neera wished that she could throw her arms around Scarlet and kiss her, but that wasn’t going to happen in front of her mom.

It didn’t stop the fact that in her pumps from work, her legs clad in black stockings, her shapely curves outlined by a black pencil skirt, and then her black dress jacket, that she was stunning, as per usual. Neera’s pulse thrummed wildly as her heartrate sped up. She couldn’t control the way her body wanted Scarlet. She’d barely controlled it before, but now, now that they were together officially, it was almost impossible.

Scarlet passed her over a clothespin next. An old fashioned wooden one. “That’s for you as well. For when your mom makes said tuna casseroles. You can escape the smell that way and it will be like they never happened.”

Neera knew it might be too much, but she couldn’t help it. Clutching the flowers, she stepped forward and hugged Scarlet. She brushed her lips over her forehead, which was still chilled from outside. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Thanks for coming.”

Scarlet let her pull back, and her eyes were glistening. They both looked over at Elodie, who was still hanging back. Her expression was totally unreadable, but Neera was certain that she wasn’t disgusted, which was a major step in the right direction. She wasn’t protesting that hug or clearing her throat or calling Scarlet a daughter-fucker again. She wasn’t throwing that jar candle back at Scarlet. She was still distant, a few steps away from them, hanging back uncertainly, which sucked.

Neera walked over to her mom and put her arm around her shoulders. “I think Scarlet is waiting for you to say something.”



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Scarlet spoke first. “Actually, I wanted to tell you both something. It’s about my dad. He had a bit of an episode today. He’s on blood pressure medication and the dose was apparently a bit strong, even though he’s been taking it for quite awhile. They’re going to adjust it because it made him pass out. It freaked my mom out so bad that she called an ambulance and he had to go to the hospital for tests.”

“Oh, my God!” Neera gasped. “You should have called me! Was it my hospital?”

“No. No, it was a different one. One closer to where they live. My dad’s going to be fine. I actually went straight from the hospital to get this stuff.” She pointed at the box and the gifts before looking back at Neera and Elodie. “I wanted to say that whenever something like that happens it just makes a person start thinking. Not that I wasn’t already, but I guess it made me think faster. About our friendship. About how much you mean to me. About how we aren’t guaranteed another minute. I know I said I was going to give you time and wait until you came around, but I wanted to come over now and tell you how much I miss you, Elodie. I don’t want to rush you or make you forgive me if you’re not ready, but I did want to say that I talked to my parents today, and we’re starting to make up. Things probably won’t be right for a long time, but I’m not going to stop trying. I’m not going to stop trying with you either, Ell. We’re best friends. We said we’d always be best friends no matter what. I know that neither of us saw this coming, but I still want that to be true. I know that no matter what might take a few more days or weeks or even months in coming, but I wanted to tell you that I can wait, but I needed to say how much you mean to me and how much I love you.” Her eyes scanned Neera’s face and darkened almost imperceptibly. “How much I love both of you.”

Elodie was stunned into further silence, and all Neera could do was smile. She was

so, so happy that it hurt, but in a good way. She was stunned herself, astounded, because Scarlet hadn't told her that yet, but she was so happy at the same time.

Also, those sunflowers? They were her favorite, and they were the first bouquet she'd ever got from a girlfriend. She was going to dry them out and keep them forever. Was it possible to dry sunflowers? She was dang well going to try.

Scarlet just said that she loved her.

Neera was sure that the flipping in her stomach and the wild pounding of her heart meant that she could probably do a series of backflips across the room. Alright, so she wasn't going to try that, but she was beaming. Shining. Glowing. Her eyes were wet and burning, and that was okay. She'd probably cried way too much lately, but these were happy tears, and she had no problem letting them slide down her cheeks.

"And while I'm telling you my truths, I think I should tell you something else. I got a notice today that the rent on the boutique is doubling after six months, which I guess is the amount of time that a landlord has to legally give for notice. I called my corporate lawyer after I left the hospital and he said there basically wasn't anything I could do. I could try and get the other store owners together to fight it, but then I started thinking that maybe it's a sign. A good sign. A sign that means that change is okay. I've been there for a long time, but maybe it's time for something new. The store is established. I might lose a few customers by changing locations, but I might gain a heck of a lot more. It might be a good thing, even if it didn't seem like it this morning."

Neera was still holding onto her mom and now they looked at each other. They were both surprised, that wa

s for sure. Neera turned back to Scarlet after and she wasn't sure what her face had going on, because she felt a thousand things at once. She was so proud, and she

hoped that was clear. Proud that Scarlet could just take charge like that. Proud that she could change the way she thought about things. Proud that she could change her entire life. Neera knew that Scarlet was saying more, and it wasn't just about the boutique. It was about them too.

And Scarlet said that Neera was always saying pretty things. It turned out she was pretty dang good at it too.

All of a sudden, Elodie let out a sob. She detached herself from Neera and closed the distance between herself and Scarlet. Neera watched, with tears hot on her cheeks, as her mom and Scarlet threw their arms around each other and hugged each other hard.

"I missed you," Elodie confessed as she sobbed. "I missed you so much."

"I'm sorry," Scarlet said as she rubbed Elodie's back. "I'm not going anywhere. You're still my best friend. You're always going to be my best friend."

"You even brought tuna," Elodie laughed and cried at the same time.

Scarlet smiled through her tears as well. "I did. The jar candle is to erase the smell. I didn't just get it because it was your favorite."

Scarlet's smile kept growing until it was unstoppable. It lit up her face, making her look radiant and gorgeous, but then, she was always those things to Neera. She'd meant it beyond a doubt when she'd told Scarlet that she was always going to be beautiful no matter what she did. No matter how many years passed.

"I'm going to go and get dressed and we can watch that movie," Elodie said, pulling back and wiping at her eyes. "We'll make popcorn too. Or eat cheesecake. Whatever you want. Or maybe both."

“I vote for both,” Scarlet said.

“Me too.” Neera put in her vote. “As long as it doesn’t involve tuna.”

“Tuna free night it is.” Elodie swiped at her eyes again, came and gave Neera a hug, then left to go get dressed. Neera was sure she actually just meant take the towel out of her hair. With Scarlet, in their own house, late at night, pajamas and a housecoat was a perfectly acceptable dress code.

Neera kept smiling even as Scarlet walked over to her and took her hands. She felt seen. She felt special. She felt like things were going to work. She felt happier than she’d ever been in her life. She kept thinking that, that she couldn’t get to another level of it, but she was wrong. She didn’t think that this moment could be topped, but she hoped, at the same time, that she was wrong about that too. It would be nice to keep getting pleasantly surprised.

Scarlet was smiling too as she leaned in and kissed Neera. Neera’s whole body reacted, and she barely stopped herself at just unbuttoning Scarlet’s coat and taking it from her to put it in the closet. She wrapped her arms around Scarlet after and they walked into the living room. They sat down on the couch together, their hands still linked. It might be pushing it, but Neera had a feeling that it was fine, so she didn’t stop. She wanted to hold onto Scarlet forever. Hold this moment forever. Draw it out and make it last, at least until the next special moment, and then she’d hold onto that one too.

“I used to dream of the life I wanted,” she told Scarlet as she brushed back a strand of errant blonde hair, tucking it back into place. “This was it. Just the simple things. Watching a movie together. Holding hands. Having my mom be okay with it. Having you say you loved me. I really thought that was always going to be dreams. Something I played out in my head. I know this is real, even though it seems too good to be true. I’m going to hold onto it forever. The memory of this night. The way I

feel.”

Scarlet squeezed her hand back. “I was just thinking that too, but I guess I never dreamed it. I feel a bit like I’m dreaming now.”

“That’s good.” Neera set her fingertip on Scarlet’s lips and kissed her again before she could say anything else. Scarlet made a noise low in her throat and Neera couldn’t keep herself from deepening the kiss, crushing their mouths together, until the sound of Elodie’s footsteps in the hallway made her stop.

She had to work hard on controlling her breathing. She was sure she was probably blushing. Were her lips swollen? Was her mom going to notice? She relaxed right after, though, and smiled at Scarlet. She didn’t need to panic. They were fine. Everything was good. She could kiss Scarlet now. She could tell her that she loved her. She could hold her hand. She could do something she’d always wanted to do and spend the night with her.

They might feel like they were in a dream now, but the best parts were still coming, and Neera knew that she’d hold tight to every single one of those moments, until they turned into memories that she’d hold onto the same way. Memories that wouldn’t be just her and Scarlet, but Elodie too, and hopefully even Scarlet’s family eventually.

They’d always been family.

They’d always be a family.

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Sometimes, family just changed the way it was defined.

Epilogue

Neera

Six months later

“Okay. We’re doing this.” The buzzing of the tattoo machine in the background confirmed Elodie’s tremulously spoken words. For someone who had been so insistent for so long on getting the tattoos, she was having a hard time now. She was sitting in the black leather tattoo chair, fidgeting wildly.

“Mom,” Neera gripped Elodie’s hand. She was allowed to sit on the stool beside her. There was only one person allowed back into the artist’s booth at a time, and Neera thought it should be Scarlet, but Neera reasoned that since Scarlet was up next, she didn’t want her to chicken out on getting her matching bff tattoo. Neera could sit with both of them, since they were going in back-to-back. “You want this. You’ve been bugging us for months and months to get it. Scarlet finally caved, then she came around to the idea. Now, she’s actually excited. You can’t bail now.”

“Oh, I know.” Elodie shifted uncomfortably again. “I’m not going to bail. I’m just—you know. First times and all that.”

The guy behind her, a mid-twenties, heavily tattooed, athletic guy with neon green hair and a ton of facial piercings, grinned at Neera from behind Elodie’s shoulder. He was still getting his machine set up, the little pods of black ink set out on his tray.

Neera grabbed her mom's hand. "You bet. I'm a nurse. I see a lot of people's first times. First stitches, first broken bones, first needles, even, at least that they can remember. First blood tests, first tooth knocked out, first— okay I'm stopping. But those are all bad, not so fun things to have to get done. I still talk them through it and they're fine on the other end. Well, maybe not that moment, but they will be. If I can talk them through that, I can talk you through this."

"It's going to hurt. I know it is. I don't know why I suggested this. I'm terrible with needles."

The artist— his name was Nathan, Neera remembered, from when they walked in, finally leaned in. He had his black gloves on, a spray bottle of disinfectant, and he was ready to go. He carefully applied the soap and water mix to Elodie's shoulder, rubbed it off, then sprayed another antiseptic solution. Neera could smell the biting tang of it.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked. "I promise this isn't going to be as bad as you think it is. There isn't much meat on the shoulder, so it might feel a little bit funny at first, but it usually goes numb pretty fast after that. It's a bit of a pinch and a sting, but it doesn't feel like needles. It's more like a bit of a sting, then a bit of a burn, then just vibrations and more burn."

"Okay," Elodie whispered. She clasped Neera's hand a little more tightly. "I think I'm ready."

"Just try and stay as still as you can. I know up on the shoulder here, it can feel a bit strange, and things can feel like you need to jump or move around, since I'm up here close to your back as well and there are nerves there that you're going to feel, but I promise if you can just keep still for the first part, you'll settle in. Just don't give up after ten seconds. Wait until the five-minute mark and it'll go a lot faster after that you'll be done before you know, back here wanting a sleeve."

“What’s a sleeve?” Elodie asked. She eyed Neera like she didn’t believe that there was any part of the tattoo that was going to be done and over with fast.

“A full arm tattoo,” Nathan explained, and laughed. “You never know.”

Neera grinned at Nathan, then gave Elodie her best nurse reassuring look. Nathan turned on his machine, dipped it in one of the tiny little plastic ink pots, then splayed his other hand out on Elodie’s back. She stiffened, then gasped when he touched the tattoo gun to her skin.

“Ouch!” she whimpered. “That does hurt.”

“Five minutes. Give me five minutes.”

“Of all the things we could have picked, I like this one best,” Neera said, mostly to take Elodie’s mind off what was going on. Nathan had promised the whole thing wouldn’t take more than half an hour to an hour, but she knew from experience as a nurse just how long time could seem when a person had to undergo pain they weren’t used to.

“It’s much better than ‘fuck men’.” Her eyes flicked to Nathan’s face and saw that he was biting down on his lower lip to keep from laughing.

“Much better. I’m glad you talked me out of that one.”

“And a potato on the butt cheek.”

“That would have been unique,” Nathan volunteered. “I haven’t done that one before. I actually think I might draw one of those and make it an option.”

“Don’t encourage her,” Neera groaned. She turned to Elodie. “When you really knew



that you wanted to do this and you were serious and Scarlet actually agreed, you suggested butterflies, but Scarlet didn't like butterflies. You both looked at designs for months and you finally settled on getting each other's names in that nice, pretty script, that I had suggested in the first place."

"Yes, well, we had to be sure that there weren't any other options."

"This one is going to look amazing. The prettiest script for the prettiest ladies that I know. You both have the best hearts and I'm so, so lucky to be loved by both of you."

Nathan quirked a brow from behind Elodie. Neera knew that she didn't have to explain, but for some reason, she found herself doing so, with more than a small bit of sassy humor in her tone. "Scarlet's my girlfriend. She's also my mom's best friend."

"Whoa," Nathan exclaimed. "I've heard lots of things doing this job. Lots of sad things, angry things, not so happy things— anything and everything you can imagine." He glanced at my mom. "Just don't come in here asking me to cover this up. I know it's a best friends thing, so I agreed, even though I don't normally put other people's names on people's bodies."

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“We’re not breaking up anytime soon,” Elodie said confidently. “We might have had our dips in the road and finding out that my daughter was in love with my best bestie was one of them, but we worked through it. She’s like a sister to me. She’s been there for me through everything. When we didn’t do our Sunday morning tradition, having coffee and talking about nothing, I missed it more than I can say. I missed everything during that time when I wasn’t talking to her. It made me realize just how much I need to have her in my life. So, no we won’t be needing a coverup. I’m proud to have her name inked onto me for life. Even if I covered it up, it would always still be there, just like she’ll always be.”

Nathan blinked. He might even have sniffled a little, but he covered it up with the sound of the gun and a rough throat clear. “That’s sweet,” he said. “That’s really sweet. It might be one of the best things I’ve heard. This is why I love my job.”

Neera brushed at her own eyes and Elodie blinked hard so that she didn’t have to move. She did flex her fingers against Neera’s, though, letting her know silently that she’d always be there for her too, no matter what.

“You could have got family written on there,” Neera pointed out. “We never thought of that.”

“Darn it,” Elodie laughed. “I guess that’s for next time. When you finally agree to join us.”

“You don’t have any yet?” Nathan asked.

Neera shook her head slowly. “No. I don’t. But maybe soon. Maybe one day. Family

is so token a thing. I know that as an artist, you probably hate putting regular old, boring stuff on people. I told Scarlet once that I wanted a basic life. Meaning that I just wanted what everyone else takes for granted. The freedom to love who you want, no matter what. Now I have that. We've been through a lot, all of us, through all of our lives, but somehow, we still ended up here, together, healthy, happy, and living this amazing life that we've all made. I think that deserves a tattoo. You know. In a few months from now, or something."

Nathan blinked hard again as he worked. "I don't hate tattooing anything. If something means something to someone, I'm not going to tell them that they can't get it because I don't like it. I might not choose that for myself, but it's not my body. I'd be proud to put my art on you, and on you again."

Elodie smiled softly. "I'm glad we picked a good one. See? I told you this guy was amazing."

"Glad to hear it. That's very kind."

"And humble too."

Nathan grunted, but he was actually blushing. On someone with neon hair and more piercings than Neera could count, she found that utterly touching. "See? I told you that you'd settle in just fine."

Elodie had. She sat through the tattoo without complaining, and when Nathan was finished and he smeared some kind of goo on the back and put a bandage on, she stood up, her eyes shining. "Thanks. That wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it would be. You're right. I'll be back soon. Whenever Neera agrees to it."

"And then the sleeve?"

"I don't know about that. Maybe. We'll see."

Nathan nodded. "I'm just going to clean up here and get set up again, then I'll call your friend in."

Neera walked back with Elodie to the reception area up front where Scarlet was sitting. The chairs were all chrome and black leather. Every inch of the walls was covered with artwork from the artists at the shop, and from others. There were even masks and skateboards and boots that had been painted. The coffee table between the chairs had portfolio books displaying the artist's work. The music was louder up front, the metal pumping through hidden speakers.

Scarlet leaped out of her chair as soon as she saw them. She raced over to Elodie and looked her over like she'd just been through some harrowing experience. "You're done? You survived?"

"I'm done," Elodie confirmed. "And I survived. The first minute hurt, but after that, I basically couldn't feel it. Nathan is nice. You're going to do fine."

Scarlet bit her lip and nodded. "It feels silly to say that I'm kind of scared."

"It's not silly at all. I just about wet myself when I went back there."

Elodie hugged Scarlet and Scarlet hugged her back, careful of the fresh bandage sticking out from under her tank top.

"This might be the best Saturday I can remember," Neera said softly, looking at her mom and Scarlet, who were both smiling at each other. "Especially because after this, we're going for cheesecake, even though it means driving across the city. We have to celebrate and we're doing it right."

Elodie grinned slyly. "The cheesecake was what kept me going all this time."

Scarlet rolled her eyes. "Mrs., I Want A Tattoo, I'm Not Going To Stop Begging

Until I Get One And You Get One Too?”

“See? I was right. It looks awesome. He showed me in the mirror after he was done. I know it’s awesome. You’re going to love it. Maybe it’ll be you getting the sleeve.”

“What’s a sleeve?”

“A full arm tattoo,” Neera explained.

It only took a minute for them to all burst out laughing, filling up the reception area with the metal blasting, with the strains of their giggles.

THE END