



Love Off Script

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Description: To the outside world, Caz Montgomery seems like a fearless podcaster who thrives on adventure and spontaneity. She allows her audience to decide her next adventure. When they choose her to become a wingwoman for “Shorty,” a shy woman struggling to talk to her crush, Caz is ready for the task. Little does she know, this journey will be her most transformative yet.

Shiloh Wilbers, timid and unsure of her own self-worth, has spent months admiring her crush from afar. With Caz by her side, the two embark on a mission to build Shiloh’s confidence and charm. As they work together, an unexpected friendship blossoms between them. In a whirlwind of heartfelt moments, humorous mishaps, and surprising twists, Caz and Shiloh’s journey evolves from a mission to help Shiloh find love to a deeper exploration of their own hearts. Can they overcome their fears and insecurities to embrace the love that’s been building between them all along?

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Chapter 1

Caz

I remember when my life was something to be jealous of. I had what everyone wanted: a gorgeous loft, a perfect job, and a dream partner. But it was funny how much could change in ten years, especially your perspective.

After graduating college, I landed a position with KRG, a satellite radio service, where I became an interactive podcaster. Allowing my audience to decide what activities I participated in was all fun and games when I was still in my twenties, but now that I was pushing my mid-thirties, it didn't hold the same appeal. As I grew older, my desire to tempt death lessened and practicality took its place. That was true for more than just work.

Ten years ago, my condo was perfect because it was cozy, super trendy, and located in the epicenter of downtown. Now, it seemed cramped, overpriced, and entirely too noisy. But it wasn't just my living situation that I had outgrown. My definition of love also transformed—pretty words meant nothing if they weren't followed by actions.

Davia and I were together when I first started making a name for myself, and I believed she was my ride-or-die. She pushed me to do more, be more, and want more. But that was all so that she could have more. I was a pawn in her game and blinded by the chaos surrounding me that I never stopped to question anything—like, where was all my money going? Had it stopped at a monetary loss, I could have handled it, but it didn't. There was emotional manipulation on top of constant deceit, which left

me feeling drained and betrayed.

I had spent so much time believing a lie that I now questioned everything and everyone around me. At thirty-four, I thought I would be on top of the world, but that was an illusion I had tricked myself into believing. And now I was paying for it with no savings or transferrable job skills, and heartbreakingly alone. Wow, I was three chords away from a country song.

“Caz, are you ready for your segment?” Matrix, my producer and friend, barked loudly.

I gave him a thumbs-up as I put on my headphones. Today was an audience vote day, and I had to do my best to sound enthusiastic when, in reality, I wanted to crawl under my duvet until I could wake up from this nightmare. I was tired of putting my destiny in the hands of others, but this was my only option, and I would suck it up and do my job.

“Good afternoon, you sexy people. It’s Caz Montgomery, and this is My Unscripted Life. It’s time to pick my next adventure, and you’re in charge. Last week, you had me exploring a haunted prison outside the city. I gotta admit, that was something nightmares were made of. I can handle a scary movie. But sitting in a gas chamber seat where actual death row inmates were executed gave me chills I felt long after leaving the room and made me wonder if a ghost had inhabited my body. So... maybe this week, you can be a little nicer?” I chuckled, but I wasn’t kidding.

I answered the first caller to see if they would heed my advice.

“Hey, Caz. I’m... Shorty,” a feminine voice breathed out.

“Hello, Shorty. What do you want to include in the voting list?” I bit my lower lip, awaiting my fate.

“Well, first, I want to say I watched last week, and you were so brave!” Her voice sounded fan-girlish, but I was used to that. Then I heard a loud crackling noise through the receiver, followed by what sounded like a muffled, “Don’t eat all the cheese poofs.”

“Is everything okay?” I figured I better move this conversation along.

“Yeah, all good. So, as I was saying, you’re amazing, and I love the show.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your support. So, what do you have for me now?” I kept it professional and never flirted with my callers because I didn’t get my clams from the company ocean.

“Actually, I was wondering if you could give me some advice.” That was new, but I’d go with it.

“Well, I have to preface that I’m not a qualified counselor or anything, but I’m more than happy to help if I can. What do you have for me?” I was probably the last person to offer life pointers, but maybe it was something I did on the show before.

“How do you get someone to fall in love with you?”

I nearly choked on my spit. What the actual fuck? Why would she think I knew that answer? Love had never found me, and I wouldn’t look for it, either.

“I don’t think you get someone to fall in love with you. They just do.” That sounded logical and generic enough that I couldn’t get sued.

“Okay. But there is a person I’m head over heels for, and they don’t know I’m alive. I want to talk to them, but I’m too nervous. What should I do?” She wasn’t giving up.

“Ask them out?” I hesitated and replied in a questioning manner.

“I don’t know how to do that.” Well, I wouldn’t be doing it for her, that was for sure.

“Just follow your heart, and you can’t go wrong. Thanks for calling!” I hung up before she could ask something else I couldn’t answer.

“Hey, hey. You’re on with Caz. Who am I speaking to?” I picked up the next caller, ready to seal my fate.

“I’m De... Debby and I have the best idea for you.” She sounded far too eager for me to believe her.

“Oh?”

“Yeah! I think you should help Shorty find love.” As soon as her words were out there, the caller board lit up like a Christmas tree.

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I shook my head even though she couldn't see me. This was a disaster. There was no way I would agree to this. But when I looked into the control room at Matrix, he was nodding while holding a piece of paper, saying, "YES!"

"Umm, can I put you on hold a second, Debby?" I hit mute before rushing toward the window Matrix was safely standing behind. "Have you lost your mind? I'm not adding that asinine idea to the list. I don't give a rat's fuck about love. And I sure as hell can't help someone find it!" My voice was enraged, and I could see his brow furrowing as he frantically scribbled something on the paper.

"Will you stop fart assing around and send me someone with a good idea? I can only keep them waiting for so long." I banged on the glass before I saw what he had written.

"YOU'RE STILL ON THE AIR!"

I darted back to my seat and flung on my headset. "Hey, Debby. Did you hear that practical joke I played? Pretending I didn't like your idea." I held my breath, hoping she would buy that, but I knew it was a flimsy excuse.

"Okay. But I still think you should be Cupid's sidekick for Shorty."

There was no getting around this. I stuck my foot in it, and now I had to live with the smell of shit.

"That sounds awesome. I'll add it to the list and see what gets voted on. Thanks for calling."

I moved on to the next request, and what a surprise—another for me being a love launcher. Having spoken to six other audience members, all of whom expressed identical opinions, I had no option but to resign myself to what lay ahead. My only hope now was that Shorty wouldn't be interested in my services. But when the show ended, I headed into the back room with Matrix, who had all the details I needed to start my next mission.

“Wow. You're lucky no one complained about that little tizzy you threw.”

“That was hardly a tizzy. It was the truth spewing out of me. This idea is stupid. I don't know how to help Shorty.” I said her name with a mild amount of disdain.

“Well, you better figure it out because you're having your first meeting tomorrow.” He handed me a piece of paper with a name and number.

“Who is Shiloh?” I read off the card.

“Shawty.” He laughed, and I rolled my eyes.

“Of course it is. What time are you picking me up?” Matrix usually accompanied me and shot footage from the side, so we had different angles when putting the videos together for the viewers.

“You're on your own, Yoda.” He winked, and irritation crept inside me.

“What? You can't leave me to do this myself.” One, I didn't have the first clue who this woman was, and I didn't want to become a statistic. And two, I didn't know my ass from a hole in the ground when it came to matchmaking. What was I supposed to even do?

“Sorry, Caz. It's out of my control. Shiloh asked that it be one-on-one.”

“You know she’s probably going to kill me, right?” I knew that escalated quickly, but I hoped to scare him into coming.

“Good luck to her. If falling off a ten-foot roof didn’t kill you, I doubt a girl named ‘Shorty’ can.” A boisterous laugh escaped his lips, and it annoyed me how lax he was about the situation.

“Must you remind me of my near-death experience?” Why did drunk me have such loose lips? And horrible depth perception. “Regardless, mine was an accident, which I was lucky to survive. If she pulls a gun and shoots me, there’s no chance of me coming back from that. Unless I’m a ghost, which I would haunt your ass for being an ass.”

With an annoyed expression, he rolled his eyes. “Will you give it a rest? You’re meeting at a coffee shop off Main. Do you think she would do anything with that many witnesses?” he questioned skeptically—but even if the chance was slim, it was never zero.

“Whatever. My blood will be on your hands.” I eyed him back, but he didn’t seem fazed.

“Okay. If that happens, I will give a nice speech at your funeral.” His left dimple popped behind his beard, and he thought he was funny.

“For real, Matt.” I hardly called him by his real name, but he knew when I did, it was time to get serious. “Am I just supposed to find out who she likes and then talk her up? I don’t know the first thing about straight relationships.” I gagged a little at the thought.

“Let’s be honest. You don’t know the first thing about any kind of relationship.”

I wanted to argue, but I couldn't. After Davia left me with nothing but debt, I retreated into self-protection mode, which bordered on hermit territory. But no one knew that besides Matt because, on the outside, I was still living my best life. According to my viewers, I did something new and exciting each week. To the rest of the world, I was fearless, but I was a chicken shit in disguise.

“You’re right. So I shouldn’t be doing this.” If I was going to be incompetent, at least it should be a useful quality to get me out of stuff.

“Sorry, kid. It doesn’t work that way. This girl wants your help, and your fans want you to help. Therefore, the studio says, you’re helping.”

I sighed and knew this wasn’t up for debate. “Fine, but never call me kid again.” The fact that he was three months younger than me made it all the more irritating.

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He held his hands up in surrender. “You got it. But you better be on your best behavior tomorrow. Even though I won’t be there to supervise, we will still have eyes and ears on you.”

“Good, so when they cart me off in a body bag, you’ll have a front-row seat.” I left him with that morbid thought and headed out of the studio.

I knew he wouldn’t have a comeback for that, and I couldn’t resist getting one more jab in. Since I had no control over what would happen, I could at least control my actions, and being snarky made me feel better. That was probably a character flaw I should work on, but it was my only defense mechanism for now.

Chapter 2

Shiloh

“What did I miss?” I questioned as I entered my cousin Sonya’s living room.

Her long legs were sprawled across her roommate Devon's, who was also sitting on the couch. The two cackled like hyenas, which usually meant they were up to no good or high... or both. But I wasn’t asking.

“Shy! What are you doing here?” Sonya seemed shocked to see me, even though it was Saturday afternoon, and we had spent this time together every week since we were teenagers.

“Was I not supposed to come today?” She and Devon sometimes liked to do their

own thing without me, but I figured she would have told me beforehand.

They had been joined at the hip since high school, which was over a decade ago, but some things never changed. Even though I had grown, they seemed to stay the same.

Regardless, Sonya was my best friend-ish, but I wasn't hers. I tried to find other people to hang out with, but Shy wasn't just a nickname—it described my personality. Meeting new people was painful for me, and I tended to stick to what I knew, which was these two perpetual teenagers.

“No. Of course, you were supposed to come. I didn't realize the time.” She dropped her feet to the floor and pulled my arm. “Sit,” she insisted, and I plopped in between them.

“Is everything okay? You're acting funny.” My eyes scanned them both, trying to figure out who would crack first, but they both gave me blank stares.

I wasn't sure if they were acting or if they had genuinely forgotten what they had been laughing about.

“Are you hungry?” Devon asked, and Sonya seemed to jump on that bandwagon.

“Starving!” She reached for a bag of cheesy puffs on the coffee table and tossed a handful in her mouth. That probably meant she was high, but I tried not to let my annoyance show.

Sonya and Devon loved to partake in “medicinal” drugs. They claimed it helped with their anxiety, but I wasn't sure what they had to be anxious over. Neither of them had a stressful job. Sonya played video games for a living, and I didn't know what Devon did. I was pretty sure she worked, but I couldn't guarantee that. Besides, it didn't matter because they never took anything seriously.

On the other hand, I was a ball of nerves all the time and could benefit from extra help. However, weed was not the “medication” of choice for me. I had taken one of Sonya’s edibles one time, and my paranoia had me convinced that a zombie apocalypse was plausible and that we needed to have a plan of defense. Granted, we were watching *The Walking Dead* at the time, but still. I was worse off after taking it than I was before, so never again.

I stared at Sonya, trying to solve the puzzle of her. She was a beautiful, tall, curvy blonde who could turn a lot of heads if she wanted to. But she didn’t seem to care, and when she was at home, she was a total slob.

I watched as she wiped artificial orange dust on her sweats before passing the bag to Devon.

Devon and Sonya could have passed for sisters. Devon had long blondish hair and was also about 5’10”. To say I was jealous of them was probably an understatement. I had short, dull brown hair and was lucky to be 5’1” in shoes. They were both living on their own planet, and I wondered if that was by choice or design.

After Devon grabbed some puffs to munch on, she offered the snack to me, but I shook my head.

“No thanks. I just ate.” I tried not to show my disgust for the processed junk that was trying to be passed off as food.

“More for us.” Sonya yanked it into her lap and crunched on a few more before throwing one in the air for Devon to catch in her mouth, which she did not, and it rolled onto the floor.

“Don’t worry, Flo will get it.” Sonya laughed, and I wondered if she had hired a maid.

Just then, she called to her home assistant, “Start Flo Slut,” and a robot vacuum wheeled into the room.

“You named your vacuum, floor slut?” I stared at her disbelievingly, although I wasn’t sure why I was surprised—she was twenty-nine going on thirteen.

“What? I call it like I see it. She picks up all my sloppy seconds.” She laughed so hard that she stood up, crossing her legs. “Oh my god. I have to pee.” Instead of walking toward the bathroom, she danced around like a toddler.

“Why don’t you go then?” I asked, stating the obvious, and she appeared dumbfounded.

“Gross. I’m not going to piss my pants—again.” She threw her head back as she roared, but finally took off to relieve herself.

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“Obviously, I didn’t mean she should go in her pants.” I turned to Devon, who shrugged, and I wasn’t sure why I bothered explaining myself.

“So, how goes the hunt?” Devon never made much sense, and this was no exception.

I was a vegetarian, so I was clueless as to what she was on about, but I found with her that it was better to play along than ask for clarification because it would inevitably leave me more confused.

“It’s on point.” That seemed to be the right amount of vague.

“Yeah? Well...” She turned toward the bathroom before continuing. “We helped.” She beamed, and my stomach sank.

I didn’t know what that meant, but it couldn’t have been good. The two Tweedles had no idea what would benefit me, so that was the first clue I was in trouble.

“Please don’t do anything. You know I don’t like to ask for help.” Maybe she could take it back, and no harm would come my way.

“Don’t be silly. You didn’t have to ask. We wanted to do this.” Devon appeared proud as a peacock while Sonya strolled in, smiling.

“What did we want to do?” she asked as she sat beside me.

“You know.” Devon eyed her, and then an understanding gaze crossed her face.

“You told her? I thought it was going to be a surprise!” Sonya seemed annoyed, but no one could be more aggravated than me.

“She didn’t tell me anything, but someone better start talking!” I surprised everyone, including myself, with my harsh tone. I never raised my voice, especially not at Sonya, because I still had an inferiority complex around her. But this had pushed me over the edge.

“With anger issues like that, I guess you do need our help.” Sonya tsked, and Devon nodded in agreement.

I took a relaxing breath and tried to calm the rage bubbling inside my soul. “Please, just tell me what is going on.” I stared pleadingly into Sonya’s blue eyes, which were as empty as a crystal ball.

“I don’t think we should tell you.” She crossed her arms defiantly, and I fought my urge to scream.

“So, I’m just supposed to guess what this ‘help’ is?” This was worse than I could’ve imagined. How was I supposed to live my life when I would be in constant fear of how they interfered?

“You’ll know when you know.” Sonya glared at me smugly, and I turned to Devon to see if she would give anything away, but she appeared as confused as me.

“Fine.” I stood up. “I’m heading out. I have things to do.”

“You’re still doing your Sunday ritual tomorrow, right?” Sonya inquired, and my alarm bells began ringing.

“What do you mean by that?” Sure, I was predictable and adhered to a routine on the

weekends, but I needed to know what part she was referring to.

“You know, your crossword at Java Jive around ten.” This had to be where their “help” would go down, right?

“I’m not sure. Will I be left with an unwanted surprise there?” I didn’t want to be skeptical of my favorite place, but I would be on guard until I figured out what they had done.

“No. I was making sure I didn’t bump into you. I have a date, and I don’t need you crashing it.”

“Oh my god. Can you let that go? One time, I inadvertently joined you on a date, but once I figured it out, I bolted it.”

“Yeah, but not before you ordered an appetizer, which caused her to have an allergic reaction because they fried the pickles in peanut oil since you’re a vegetarian.” She said that as if it were a dirty word.

“Well, I’m sorry. No one told her to eat them. Besides, that worked out in your favor, and you ended up dating for a few months after that.” I wished I could raise one eyebrow like the Rock, but my face never cooperated, so I narrowed my gaze instead.

“Don’t act like you had anything to do with that. I landed her on my own. And sure, we were together for a while after that, but we didn’t date. She was so scared of eating something that would make her sick that we never left the house—which is why we ended.” She cocked her head and glared.

I sighed. I should have seen this topic change coming. Any time Sonya didn’t want to fess up to something, she would turn things around to deflect. I wondered if she was aware she did it or if it happened naturally. Either way, I wasn’t getting anywhere in

this conversation, so I needed to go.

“On that note, I’m leaving. Please don’t make any decisions for me while I’m gone.” That warning was too late, but hopefully, it would deter them from doing something else in my “favor.”

“Love you, cuz!” Sonya ignored my request, and I walked out, realizing my life was probably about to take a turn for the worse.

Chapter 3

Caz

Sundays were the start of my weekend, but when I had an assignment, days off weren't a given. I tried to get a good night's sleep, but living downtown in a city that didn't shut up wasn't conducive to that. By the time all the youngsters stopped partying and provided me with silence, it was almost daylight.

Even with my blackout curtains, being on the top floor of a fifteen-story building, the sun seeped into my room with its early morning glow, shining a relentless glare in my eyes that was worse than any alarm clock.

"All right, you dick, I'm awake." I threw the pillow at my window, which only gave the asshole god, Helios, more room to ruin my life.

After about a four-hour catnap, I dragged myself out of bed and grabbed my phone to check my socials. While scrolling through my feed, I started a double shot of espresso. Once my coffee was brewed to perfection, I poured a splash of oat milk and sank onto the plush leather couch. Even though it was expensive, it wasn't the most comfortable, but I had limited choices to sit since my place was so small. The coziest spot in my apartment was my bed, but I couldn't crawl back in there, or I wouldn't get up. And since I had that stupid interview in a few hours, staying in wasn't an option.

Instead, I decided to prep for it, but how? I was utterly clueless about what to do. Who would want me as a wingwoman? I wouldn't. I had a decent radio personality,

but that didn't carry over in person. Sometimes, I was awkward and lacked patience, and I didn't give enough fucks to make small talk. I was an anti-wingwoman. I was probably anti-people, which was worse.

What was Matrix thinking by telling Shorty I was the right person for this job? This would be a disaster in the making, but that was probably why the station forced me to do it—fuckery was ratings gold.

I let out a deep exhale before finishing my coffee. When I was done, I brushed my teeth, then jumped into the shower. Maybe I could wash off this permascowl. I hoped the heat would relieve my tension, but I knew the only thing that would improve my mood was getting out of this week's excursion.

While turning to wash my face, my gaze shifted toward the showerhead, and the refreshing droplets of water cascaded down, awakening my senses, and I realized there was another way to salvage this day. My stall wasn't big, so I leaned against the wall and adjusted the spray to caress my nipples. It was enough to get me aroused, and then I thought about the one thing that always pushed me over the edge—Davia.

It was wrong to still think about her, but I couldn't help myself. She was petite, and I could lift her up and take control, which was a turn-on in itself. I had her pinned against the wall while she used my shoulders and face as a chair. I was tongue-deep inside of her, and it was almost like I could still taste her tangy sweetness in my mouth.

As the need in my body built up—she yanked my hair while digging her nails into my back—and I moved the nozzle closer to my pussy. I closed my eyes and heard my name echoing in my mind from Davia's lips. When her thick thighs squeezed firmly around my head, I pulled her hips closer to my face and went deeper inside. Her wetness intensified as I skillfully pleased her like a guitarist strumming their instrument.

Her moans grew louder, and her body trembled in my arms. I was feeling weak in the knees, but I didn't let up until her breathing slowed. As she reached the peak of pleasure, I pinched my nipple hard and pointed the water directly at my clit, coming down the mountain with her.

When the orgasm finally ended and my pussy stopped quivering, I finished washing off. I let out a long exhale, and I was feeling slightly better. I still didn't want to meet Shorty, but at least I had a smile on my face, which was the best I could hope for.

After getting out, I ran a brush through my hair, leaving it to air dry. My natural wave gave it body and allowed me to be low-maintenance. I hastily applied eyeliner and rummaged through my wardrobe before settling on a casual black tank top and skinny jeans.

I wouldn't be on camera today, so I didn't need to put in much effort—not that I ever did anymore. Being withdrawn had lowered my ability to care about what I looked like or what people thought—silver linings. Once I slid on my Vans, I was out the door.

My condo was only four blocks from Main Street, and since it was a nice day, I walked to Java Jive. It wasn't my go-to coffee place because it was full of college-aged people, and it made me feel like Matthew McConaughey in *Dazed and Confused*.

As I headed down the sidewalk, I texted Shorty so I would know how to identify her when I arrived.

Me: Hey, this is Caz. I wanted to check to see if we were still on. Also, what are you wearing?

I hit send before re-reading it, then realized how pervy that sounded. I didn't know if

I should try to fix it, but a text came back before I could decide.

Shorty: What are you wearing?

She gave me a winky face, which seemed odd given the circumstances, but maybe she was trying to lighten the mood.

Was I supposed to respond? When I saw the dots wiggle around, I felt relief because I didn't want this to turn into a fireable offense.

Shorty: I'm wearing gray, as usual. I'm so boring. This is why I need your help. No one will ever notice me because I'm like a fly on the wall.

I couldn't read her personality. It seemed flirty at first, but now it was self-deprecating. I would have to feel her energy when I got there to know what I was dealing with.

I arrived at Java Jive five minutes before I was supposed to meet her, and I scanned the place through the window before going in. It was more crowded than expected, given how late it seemed the entire Gen Z population stayed out last night. I didn't spot anyone wearing gray, but I couldn't see the back. So, I bit the bullet and went in, but no one acknowledged me, not even the barista.

Was I so out of place in here that I was invisible? Maybe they could only see vibrant, youthful energy, and my "life fucked me over, and this is all that I have to give" aura was shunned.

"Excuse me, miss," I called to the girl behind the register.

She stared blankly for a minute. "Yes?" she finally responded verbally.

“Umm, I’m looking for someone. Do you think you could help me?”

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“Are you a cop?” She studied me with a disgruntled expression.

“No. I’m supposed to be meeting someone, but I don’t know what she looks like.”

“A blind date?” She quirked a brow, but I was done with the twenty questions.

“Sure. Can you make an announcement for Shorty and see if anyone comes up?”

“Shorty?” She appeared to be waiting for more information, but that was all I had.

I knew she had a real name, but I had forgotten it, and the paper was at my place.

“In a gray shirt.” I filled in the missing piece I knew.

“I’m not doing that. Do you want something to drink?” She shot me down way quicker than it took for me to get to the question.

This was why I didn’t talk to people—they just pissed me off.

I sighed. “Yeah, I’ll have a Vanilla Caramel Nitro Coffee with an extra shot of espresso.” I probably shouldn’t have gotten more caffeine, but the effects of my orgasm were fading, and my patience was wearing thin.

While I waited for my drink, the door opened behind me, and a rather nondescript woman in a soft gray V-neck with a crossword puzzle in hand walked in. She made me feel like a giant next to her, and thoughts of Davia quickly bounced around in my head, but I shook them out. Was she Shorty?

I stared at her, but she refused to make eye contact, which made me pause. If it was Shorty, wouldn't she be looking for me, too? She seemed focused on the drink menu and determined not to speak or be noticed.

When the lady took her order, I couldn't even hear what she said because she was so quiet. She couldn't be who I was here to meet. Once I got my coffee, I made a loop around the place, but no one was in gray except the mousey woman, who just sat down in a corner booth by herself. Maybe she was reserved and needed me to introduce myself.

I considered myself introverted, but that was by choice, not nature. I pulled up a chair across from her and sat down.

"Hey." I reached out my hand, and the fear in her eyes made it seem like I was holding a gun to her. "I'm not going to hurt you. I think we have a meeting." I held my hands up in supplication, but her expression didn't change. "Shorty?"

"I don't have drugs." Her response was so low that I wondered if I had heard her correctly.

"Drugs? I'm not looking for a high." I shook my head, as that wasn't my scene—any more.

"Isn't Shorty some kind of code word or something?" She put her puzzle down, and I stared into her warm, amber eyes and couldn't read her at all.

I thought about the call to the station, the texts, and now this person before me, and none of them matched. If this was the same person, she was an enigma.

"Do I have something on my face?" She wiped above her upper lip, and I shook my head.

“No. I’m sorry. I must have you confused with someone else.”

She chuckled. “I can’t say that has ever happened to me before.” Her laugh was soft and airy, like her, but her voice had a little more bravado.

“Well, I’m sorry to have bothered you. I’ll have to keep looking for Shorty.” My lips curled into a genuine smile, and I wished she had been her, because I think she would have made my job easy.

“Good luck.” She turned her attention back to her crossword, and I gave the place another glance before realizing I was stood up.

Was this a prank? I wasn’t sure what they would get out of it, but it wouldn’t be the first time one of my adventures became a misadventure. Oh well, it seemed my wish had come true, and I wouldn’t have to do this stupid task anyway. Now, I could go home and take a much-needed nap.

I would send “Shorty” one more text to show I tried, and then I would message Matrix to tell him we needed to find something else for me to do.

Me: Just wanted to let you know that you’ve disappointed thousands of people by flaking.

I would leave her with a little guilt and me with a clear conscience. I smiled as I returned to my hidey hole to spend the rest of my day not peopling.

Chapter 4

Shiloh

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As I pretended to be engrossed in my crossword, I couldn't help but steal glances at the woman leaving my table. Something about her was mildly familiar, but I was certain she wasn't here for me. I didn't know anyone here—except for my infatuation.

I brought my eyes to Ember, who was behind the counter. She was the reason I came to this shop. I never got up the nerve to speak to her outside of giving her my coffee order, but at least I could enjoy the view.

Before that woman who approached me earlier, no one ever seemed to notice me. She made me feel slightly exposed, and I was glad she left without further interaction because I enjoyed being invisible—at least here. The last thing I needed was someone to realize my motivation for coming.

“What the fuck, cuz?” Sonya's voice shook me from my reverie, and I stared like a deer in the headlights.

Had she busted me? I felt creepy but tried to act natural.

“I thought you had a date?” I stared at her questioningly.

She ignored my comment and sat down. I felt an interrogation coming on, and I didn't like being put on the spot. Surely, she didn't know about my crush. And if she did, I hoped like hell she wasn't here to call me on it.

“Why didn't you talk to Caz?”

I closed my eyes, processing what she said. “Caz?”

“Yeah, your surprise.” She spoke slowly as if I were stupid, and maybe I was because I hadn’t a clue what she meant.

I had been so worried about her confronting me about Ember that I played out an entirely different conversation in my head. And now that she was off-script, I was lost.

“What are you doing here?” It was always best for me to lead the conversation when it came to Sonya.

“I’m here to help you, but you make it impossible.” She rolled her eyes.

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t ask for your help. Is this what you and Devon were talking about yesterday?”

“Caz was going to help you find a lover. What did you say to her?”

“I don’t know a Caz, so I couldn’t have said anything to her.”

“I saw her sit at your table. You said something because she left and sent a somewhat bitchy text.” She showed me her phone.

“Wait a minute. The woman who wanted to buy drugs was who you sent to help me?” How did Sonya ever think that was a good idea?

She knew that was more up her alley than mine.

She barked out a laugh so loud that everyone turned to stare at us, including Ember, and I pulled the crossword up to hide my face.

“What’s so funny?” I hissed.

“That anyone would think you would be stealthy enough to sell drugs. You almost have a panic attack if someone mentions artificial ingredients in food. Let alone something illegal.” She pulled my book down so she could see me. “Caz didn’t want to buy something from you. She wanted you on her show.”

I searched my brain for a minute, then realized where I had recognized that woman before—Caitlin Montgomery. She was a vlogger and podcaster who made quite a name for herself over the years. I didn’t follow her because everything seemed rehearsed and immature, but I’d seen a few things with Sonya and Devon, who thought what she did was amazing.

“Why would she want me to be on her show? None of this makes sense. I don’t even watch her.” Whatever Sonya and Devon had said to her was probably a lie to make me feel stupid.

They had a unique sense of humor, and Caz was probably down for it. I was glad I could foil their plan.

“I know you don’t, but you should. She has some good segments, and everyone voted for her to help you find love. At first, she didn’t seem too happy about the idea, but she came around, and I thought if anyone could break you out of your shell, it would be her.” For once, she sounded sincere, but she still hadn’t answered my questions.

“Look. I appreciate you feeling sorry for me, but I’m doing fine solo. If you must know, I can get my own date.” I didn’t know if that was true because I’d never asked anyone out, but I wanted to believe in myself.

“I don’t feel sorry for you,” she huffed. “But there was no way you’d let me give you advice on that woman, so I thought if I got a professional, you would be more open.”

I refused to ask who “that woman” was, even though I was certain she meant Ember. And if she knew about my crush on her, there was a chance others did, too—such as Ember herself. This was perfect. I had to find a new coffee shop and a new crush. My cheeks were burning with embarrassment, but I tried to keep my cool.

“I appreciate your effort, but I promise you, I’m good. And besides, what did you think she was a professional at? I thought she hosted a dare-type show. What makes her qualified to give dating advice? Not that I need any.” I threw that in for good measure so she didn’t think I was opening a door for her.

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“I guess I hoped she could give you confidence. You’re a catch, cuz. And I hate to see you pining after someone who doesn’t even know you exist. If you got on Caz’s show, people would see you for once, and you’d stop blending into the background.” She took out her phone and snapped a picture of me.

“What are you doing?” My luck, she would use that to create a dating profile or something.

“I’m making my point clear.” She showed me her phone, and I appeared to be a head without a body as my shirt matched the wall perfectly.

“Knock it off. Gray is a trendy color.”

“It’s forgettable. And that’s all you wear. Therefore, it makes you forgettable.” She pocketed her phone, and I studied her outfit.

She was in a pink baby-T with black sweats, tan Uggs, and sunglasses on top of her head. She wasn’t my go-to for fashion, but I loved how she owned her look. She never tried to fit a mold, which I admired. Being the only girl in her family, her parents thought she would be this feminine beauty queen, but that wasn’t the case. She marched to the beat of her own drum and didn’t apologize for it.

I wished I could do that, but my self-consciousness and need to please others left me behind a wall of insecurity. I felt it was better to hide my needs and focus on other people because then I couldn’t get hurt. If I didn’t voice my thoughts, then I couldn’t get upset if someone didn’t do what I expected. If they didn’t know, then their inattention was my fault and not theirs. Sure, the math didn’t always math, but

mostly, it kept me safe.

“It's fine with me if I'm not remembered. I don't need to be the center of attention.” I gave her a pointed stare, and she shrugged.

“Who says that's what I want? I can't help that I catch people's eye.” She was right, though.

People would take notice of her no matter what she was wearing. Her confidence commanded the room.

“Regardless, please back off and let me figure out my own dating life.”

“Shy, you deserve to be happy. It gets hard watching you each Saturday afternoon listen to Devon and me talk about our love lives. I want you to get to join in on the fun.”

I wanted to be angry, but she probably believed what she was feeling—I needed to be with someone to be happy. That wasn't true. Of course, I would like to share my life with someone who gave me butterflies but also calmed me down—someone who loved me for who I was and not what I could do for them. But my fear of rejection was so much greater than my need for acceptance that I found contentment in my comfort zone, which didn't include putting myself out there. There was safety in staying in my bubble, which was worth more than the possibilities outside of it.

“Where is this coming from? Do you think I don't have fun with you?” Sonya and I had contrasting personalities, but ultimately, I knew she loved me and had my back.

“Do you? Because sometimes you sit with us and never even crack a smile. If I'm honest, I feel judged.”

I had to hide my shocked expression. That seemed off base, but I wouldn't invalidate her feelings.

"I'm sorry I've made you feel that way, but I would never judge you. If I'm quiet, it's just because I'm listening." That might have been a half-truth.

If I recalled all my interactions with her, I might have formulated opinions about her decisions, but I never said them out loud. Did that make me a liar?

"It's fine. I probably do need to be smacked upside the head from time to time. But I'd rather live the life I want than worry about what others think—it's freeing. And I want that for you." She was adamant that I needed to change, but change was scary, and I didn't want to do it.

"Thanks. But can we drop this? I'm good where I'm at." I let out a weighted breath because the more she talked, the less I believed the lies I was telling myself.

"I'll let it go."

"Thank—"

She cut in before I could finish my sentiment. "If... you meet with Caz. Even just once. Let's see what she has to offer, and then you can decide how to handle things." That wasn't unreasonable, and it would be worth it if it got her off my back.

"Fine. But only one time, right?" There was no way I was signing up for anything else.

"Yes." She held her hand out for me to shake, and I was glad this inquisition was over without any further reference to why I was here.

“I’m meeting Devon for lunch. You want to come?” Sonya stood, waiting for my reply.

I peeked toward the counter and realized Ember was gone. She could have been on break, or maybe she was off for the day. Either way, I hated that I missed her and wished I could have said goodbye—at least in my head.

She turned in the direction of my gaze and sighed. “Coffee chick will be here next week. Let’s go.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I slid out of my seat, trying to be nonchalant. But despite my efforts, I could feel my face betraying me with a flicker of emotion in response to her accusation.

“Right. Of course not.” She put a finger to her lips, like she was keeping a secret that everyone knew.

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I pushed away the thought that Ember was likely aware of my feelings and concentrated on the possibility that Caz might help me win her heart.

Chapter 5

Caz

After leaving Java Jives, I went straight home and put my pajamas back on. Even though I felt like I needed a nap when I was out, I think the caffeine had kicked in because now I wasn't tired. My body always seemed to work like that, though—I couldn't sleep when I wanted to, and I couldn't keep my eyes open when I needed to. Go figure.

As I turned on the television and wrapped myself in a warm blanket on the couch, the angry growl of my stomach reminded me that all I'd had today was copious amounts of coffee. I had little food in the house, so I ordered in. It was easier than cooking for one, and I didn't have to talk to anyone because I could do it all online.

I placed an order at a local bistro for my favorite charcuterie board. Sure, it was equivalent to an overpriced adult Lunchables, but I loved all the different meats and cheeses, and it seemed like a better option than fast food. The older I got, the more inclined I was to be healthy.

When I was younger, I didn't worry about what I put into my body. I had many vices that stemmed from not giving a fuck and Davia. I didn't blame her for my choices, but she loved to party, and I loved her, so I found myself doing shit I never imagined. Getting drunk and high were her normal activities, and eventually, they were a part of

my routine.

It didn't help that my job put me in strange situations, and I became reliant on something outside of myself to calm my nerves, which usually involved alcohol or weed. But when Davia and I split and I realized how much money I had spent and how many days I had lost due to blackouts or memory loss, I didn't want that life anymore. Besides, if I went to my old haunts, I would inevitably run into Davia, and she was the last person I wanted to see.

I enjoyed seeing her in my mind when I needed a release, but it was a hard pass in real life. Davia was like a painting: visually captivating, yet lacking depth that could engage more than your eyes. I thought I loved her, but it was more of a superficial infatuation that lasted five years longer than it should have. Most of the impractical things I owned today were to impress her.

She told me I could be a star if I lived like one, and I believed her. I thought she had my best interests in mind and was supporting me. I didn't realize she wanted me to rise to the top and bring her with me. Not out of love for me, but out of selfishness. She thought I could help her earn money just by being beautiful. She didn't need me to tell people she was gorgeous. Anyone with eyes could see that.

It wasn't about how she looked but about who she knew, and I had the connections she needed. Once she made a name for herself, I became redundant, and she was gone. I continued to see her face everywhere, which used to hurt when she first left. But I have healed somewhat, and now I passive-aggressively thought about fucking her. Maybe that wasn't healthy, but it had to be better than being hurt or angry.

It wasn't like I wanted her back, but I also didn't want anyone else, so it seemed like a justified response.

When I heard a tap on the door, I waited a few minutes to ensure they were gone

before I retrieved my food. I had told them no contact on the app, but sometimes they would linger, so I learned not to rush to get it.

That sounded like I hated everyone, which wasn't exactly true. I could only have my people persona for so long, and I used that all up for work. Being off was my only time to recharge, and I had to do that alone.

After I grabbed the takeout, I started to text Matrix to let him know about the change in plans, but before I could message him, someone sent me something first.

Shorty: Sorry about earlier. I would like to reschedule if you're down. I got cold feet, but I'm feeling better now.

The excuse sounded weak, and it didn't seem sincere.

Me: You stood me up. How do I know you're not playing games?

Shorty: I didn't stand you up. I just didn't properly introduce myself.

Was that an implication that she was the girl I had spoken with? My suspicions were high.

Me: Video call me.

At least this way, I wouldn't have to get out of my house, and I'd be able to tell if she was lying.

Shorty: Now?

Me: Yes.

I saw the dots move about, then stop, then start again. What was so hard about this request? It was one button she had to push.

Me: Never mind. I'm done. Good luck to you.

Shorty: Wait!

A heavy sigh filled with frustration escaped my lips. My phone rang as I put a piece of brie in my mouth. Shit. It was her. I didn't think this through. I was in PJs, but I shouldn't look too unprofessional if I swallowed my food and kept the video on my face.

"Hello." I eyed the screen to see a beautiful blonde staring back at me.

"Hey, I'm sorry about the mix-up earlier. I'm Sonya." She was confident and not afraid to show off her body in that teeny, tiny, tight shirt.

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I didn't remember Shorty being Sonya, but it made sense.

"It's okay. Care to tell me why you lied to me?" She had made me look stupid chatting up someone else by not telling me what she was actually wearing.

She pointed to herself. "No, I didn't lie. Technically, I pretended to be someone else, but that wasn't lying."

Did she not know the definition of the word? What was she playing?

"That makes no sense. Are you Shorty or not?" I was too old and tired for these games.

"Yes and no." She moved her head from side to side, and I glared, hoping for a solid answer.

"Give me that." Someone else took the phone, and the woman in the gray shirt appeared. Her eyes were wide, like she was frightened, but there was an edge in her voice that sounded like anger. "I'm sorry for my cousin. She set up this meeting but didn't tell me. So when you showed up at my table, I didn't know who you were or what you wanted." She offered a half-smile, and I noticed the slightest dimple in the corner of her mouth, making her seem even more innocent.

"So, you're Shorty?" I needed to figure out what the hell was going on.

"No. I mean, I guess." She narrowed her eyes to someone off-camera, probably the blonde. "I'm Shiloh, and my cousin was trying to be helpful in her own way, but

sometimes she misses the mark.”

Matrix could be like that, too, but I wasn’t sure he was technically trying to help as much as mitigate situations that my big mouth got me into.

“Well, I’m Caz, and I host a show called My Unscripted Life. The audience voted for me to be your flight attendant.” As much as I wanted to get out of this situation, it wouldn’t be so bad if this was her energy all the time.

There was something relaxing about her. She was poised but quiet. Usually, people caused me anxiety, but everything about her, from the muted color of her hair and wardrobe to the tone of her voice, was calming.

“Yeah, Sonya filled me in. I’m not looking to hook up with anyone, so this probably won’t be good for the show. But I appreciate your time. I wish you luck with helping someone else.” Her words took me by surprise, but not as much as my own did.

“I’m only doing this if you’re in. If not, I’m canceling the segment this week.”

“You can’t do that. Your audience will miss you,” Sonya called out from the side, and Shiloh stared at me with puppy-dog eyes as if asking if it was true.

“It doesn’t matter. I only agreed to do it for Short—Shiloh, but if she doesn’t want to, then the gig is up. There will be a vote for something else next week.” It was weird to say that because I’d been doing this show for a decade and never missed a week.

And, to be honest, I couldn’t afford to miss a week. As much success as I had, I still had bills on top of bills from years of being careless and letting someone else dictate my finances.

“I don’t want to upset anyone.” Shiloh’s voice was small, like it had been at the

coffee shop.

I hated seeing her shrink down like that. “Fuck that. If you don’t want to do it, don’t do it. Who cares about everyone else? You shouldn’t put your boundaries at risk to please others.” I was unsure why I was now trying to talk her out of it, but I wouldn’t put anyone in an uncomfortable situation for money’s sake.

“See, this is why you need her. She can help you be assertive.” Sonya stepped back into view. “I want you to help Shy grow a pair and then help her use them to get lai?—”

“Will you stop?” Shiloh shook her head while closing her eyes, and I wanted to save her from embarrassment.

“Do you want to talk privately?” Even if Sonya meant well, she was making this painful.

“I don’t know.” Shiloh shrugged, and Sonya jumped in.

“She does. I’ll text you her sch—” Shiloh pushed her away to shut her up.

“Will tomorrow work for you?” Her gaze locked with mine, and I sensed a hidden strength inside her.

“Yes, why don’t you give me your number, and we can work out the details?” It was time to cut out the middleman and figure out what we would do.

I wasn't sure how I found myself on this ride, but strangely enough, I wasn't upset about it.

Chapter 6

Shiloh

It aggravated me when I first learned that Sonya and Devon interfered with my life, but I had been texting with Caz for the last two hours, and it was nice. I had never had a close friend before. I wasn't saying that was what we were. But having someone other than family to talk to was a welcomed change.

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Caz was opposite me in many ways, but she also seemed like a kindred spirit in others. She was bold but reserved. It was a weird combination, but it worked for her, and I hoped I could learn to be more like that. I didn't want to be exactly like her because my personality wouldn't allow me to be that firm, but if I could get a smidgen of her confidence, I would be happy.

Caz: I know most of the basic stuff about you, but what exactly are you looking for in someone else?

Sometimes, our conversation felt like a questionnaire for a dating app, but during our casual chat, it felt like a real friendship could form. But I was still keeping my guard up because this was a job for her, and I didn't know if she felt the same vibe I did.

Me: I don't have a type.

That wasn't technically a lie. I definitely had someone in mind who was the epitome of perfection in my eyes.

Caz: That's bullshit. Everyone has something they want. Even if it's not looks, something attracts you to another person. If you won't tell me, I can't help you. I don't care if it's some weird fetish. This is a no-judgment zone.

It was that directness that I wished would rub off on me.

Me: I don't have a weird fetish. I like who I like.

Caz: Okay. So who is that? I'm going to be honest. The only thing I know about men

is how to repel them. So I might not be very helpful to you.

It took me a minute to realize what she thought.

Me: What gave you the impression I was after a man?

My style was pretty basic, which didn't show my queer tendencies, but I figured she would have picked up on that. I could tell right off which team she preferred to bat for.

Caz: So you're after a woman? That will make my job much easier. I know how to speak tongues. She put the wink eye emoji face with its tongue out.

It reminded me of Sonya. Only when Caz did it I laughed instead of rolling my eyes.

Me: I just want to talk—no tongue necessary.

Caz: Girl, tongue is ALWAYS necessary. But I get it. You take things slow, and there's nothing wrong with that.

I liked how she could be funny but also serious. She seemed to understand me and didn't make me feel stupid for the way I was. Sometimes, Sonya made fun of me for being reserved. And that was another reason I kept things to myself. I didn't like to be the butt of jokes all the time.

Me: So, basically, there's this girl I have my eye on, but I haven't had an actual conversation with her. Could you help me figure out how to talk to her?

That might have been a challenging task since I wasn't sure if someone could teach social skills. However, Caz's poised and assured demeanor made me hopeful that she could offer me useful opening lines.

Caz: Let's meet tomorrow, and you can give me more info on this bird. It's getting late, and my bed is calling me.

I checked the time and realized it was after midnight. This wasn't like me. I usually stuck to my schedule, which was in bed by 10:00 p.m. But what was ironic was that I wasn't even tired. I could have talked to her longer if she hadn't said anything. The conversation flowed, and, for the most part, I was having fun.

Me: Okay. I'll text you tomorrow. Sweet dreams.

Caz: G'night.

After ending the conversation with Caz, I checked my phone to see I had a string of messages from Sonya. I didn't want to read through them all, so I fired off a quick response, telling her I would talk to her later. But before I even crawled into bed, my phone rang.

"Hello?" I knew it was her without even checking.

"What the fuck? Why did you ghost me? I've been trying to talk to you all night." Sonya sounded annoyed, but if the shoe was on the other foot and she was busy, she wouldn't have stopped to message me, either.

"I didn't ghost you. I just had things to do." I tried to keep the petulance out of my voice.

"What things? And why are you still awake? Wasn't your bedtime hours ago?"

I ignored the first part of her questions because she would want a play-by-play of everything Caz and I talked about, and I didn't have that energy right now.

“It is past my bedtime, and that’s why I’m trying to get to sleep. But you called so...”
Hopefully, that would guilt her into letting me go.

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“What have you been doing?” I should have known she wouldn’t think of anyone except herself.

“I’m getting ready for bed. What are you doing?” If I could get her to talk about herself, it might satisfy her.

“I’m playing Call of Duty, but that didn’t answer my question.” Typically, she was oblivious, but now she was Enola Holmes?

“I was getting stuff ready for my meeting with Caz tomorrow. She has a lot of questions she needs me to answer. I’ll fill you in more after I talk to her.”

“Hmmm.” Her response was suspicious, but I hadn’t a clue as to why.

“What does that mean?” I should have fought the urge to inquire more, but my curiosity wouldn’t have let me sleep if I left that unanswered.

“It doesn’t mean anything. It was just a comment.” I could hear her button smashing in the background, and I would take her for her word that she was distracted, and it wasn’t directed at me.

“Okay. Good luck with your game, and I’ll talk to you later.”

“K. You better call me.” She mumbled some curse words at her game.

“I promise. Goodnight.”

“Night, cuz.” Her expletives were louder now, probably assuming I had ended the call for her, which I finally did.

After I had settled under the covers, my mind thought about tomorrow's events, and I should have been more anxious. It wouldn't take Caz long to know I was out of my league with Ember, which might cause her to back out. But then I remembered all the encouragement she had given me, and I smiled.

Even if she was doing this for ratings, she seemed committed to the process, and I needed all the help I could get.

Chapter 7

Caz

“I'm meeting Shiloh before I come in today,” I screamed into the speakerphone while getting dressed.

“You don't have to yell. But make sure you record it, and if it doesn't seem like it's going anywhere, I have a backup in place.” Matrix still thought I should work with Shiloh even after I told him about Sonya, but I had finally convinced him that there was a good chance this would go tits up.

I should have been happy that he came up with an alternative, but I had messaged him before I had a chance to text Shiloh. The truth was, after our hours-long conversation, I didn't want to give up on her—I felt compelled to help her.

She had a way about her that made me feel instantly comfortable and at ease, which was hard to resist. She was reserved but slipped inconspicuous sarcasm into the conversation, making me laugh. I genuinely enjoyed our chat, which was why I hadn't realized we had been going back and forth for so long. Working with her

would hopefully be fun and seem less like a job.

“Sounds good. Just so I know, what’s Plan B if this doesn’t work out?” Not that I thought it wouldn’t.

I believed I could assist Shiloh because she already had a lot going for her. I didn’t need to do much—just give her a boost. She had the elements of a She’s All That makeover with her simple look that could be elevated with little effort. And she was the girl-next-door pretty. She reminded me of Joey from Dawson’s Creek—attractive but aloof. She seemed to hide her light, as if she were scared to be seen.

All I would need to do was scope out who she liked and figure out the best way for her to strike up a convo. And once she had her foot in the door, she could surely close the deal. If not, hopefully the other woman would at least take pity on her and not embarrass her on the show.

“The Pepper Parade,” he said, shaking me from my internal visions.

“What is that?” I stared in the mirror at my hair and realized it would be a hat day.

“Well, you start with a pepper at zero Scoville Heat Units and work your way up to two million.”

Was he kidding? He didn’t sound like he was, but he must have lost his mind.

“Right. Let’s take that out of the rotation unless someone else is doing the testing because I’m more of a sadist.”

He laughed, but I was serious—at least about the first part. “I get it, but it was all we could come up with at the last minute that would be easy to incorporate without needing extra hands or videos. We could do it right in the studio. Unless you have

something else, we're going with that." He seemed apologetic, but that didn't change my thoughts.

"I'll make sure the Shiloh thing works out. I'll see you in a few hours." As long as she was receptive, I figured we could get a decent piece for the audience. It would have to be good enough because I wasn't about to have a burning ring of fire.

We hung up, and I finished getting ready. I didn't know if I would meet Shiloh's crush today, but I wanted to look presentable. I wore a white tank top and black skinny jeans with a red and black flannel tied around my waist. After donning my black slouchy cap and slipping into my trusty Vans, I wasted no time leaving.

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I hadn't ever been to the place Shiloh suggested we meet, so I ordered a ride. I didn't want to get lost and make a terrible impression. However, we seemed to be over the niceties. Last night, we bypassed much of the small talk as I shifted into interviewer mode. I only hoped she didn't feel I had put her on the spot. But now that I knew how much my ass was literally riding on this, I would wingwoman the hell out of it.

The car dropped me off in front of a strip mall. I didn't immediately see my destination, and I turned around to say we were in the wrong place, but he sped off before I could stop him.

Since I couldn't leave, I moved to the sidewalk and searched the storefronts. When I was about to give up, I saw what I was looking for: a tiny sign that read, "Sprout and Sprigs." The moment I opened the door, a cacophony of unappealing smells hit me, making me wrinkle my nose.

I looked around, and a woman with pink hair and an eyebrow ring approached. She was far too happy to see someone, and I wondered if I was their first customer—not that I would ever shop here.

"Hey! Welcome to Sprout and Sprigs, your one-stop shop for vegetarian cuisine. How may I assist you today? We have some delicious new meals prepped and ready for consumption, or we can set you up with Shy, our menu planner, who can give you ideas specific to your tastes and needs."

As she bombarded me with information, my mind performed mental gymnastics, trying to find a polite way to express my severe disinterest.

“It’s okay, Yoni. She’s here to see me.” Shiloh approached, wearing a darker shirt than yesterday but still gray.

She brushed her bangs off her forehead, and something between a grimace and a smile appeared across her lips. I wondered if she was in pain for a second, but then she settled on a closed-mouth smirk, and it was clear it was discomfort.

“Oh, okay. But if you want to try something on your way out, we have sweet treats, too,” Yoni said, and I had to stop myself from laughing on so many levels.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” After locking eyes with her, I winked, and a blush filled her cheeks.

I wasn’t a big flirt myself, but I knew the art of making someone feel special. It was the simple things that people wanted, and maybe seeing how easy it was would inflate Shiloh’s titties enough for her to put it into practice.

“Why don’t we go to my office?” she said curtly, letting me know she wanted to get this show on the road. “May I grab you a drink first?” she questioned before opening the door to what appeared to be a storage closet but must have been what she was referring to as an office.

It housed two folding chairs and a small end table, which left no room to maneuver. Our only option was to sit, and it was so cramped I worried we might run out of oxygen.

I shook my head in response to her offer, not that anything else could have even fit in the space with us. “This is quaint.” I tried to keep my breath steady and not let the claustrophobia take over.

“We are just starting out and couldn’t afford a bigger place.” She appeared

embarrassed, and I hated that.

I knew what it was like trying to get established. Before making a name for myself, I did almost anything for ratings. Thinking about what I was doing now and what I would have to do if this assignment didn't work out, I guess not much had changed. But at least I was making better money for allowing people to dictate my life.

"I get it, but you've got a great space here. And I could always drop the name of your shop on the show to see if it will get you more business." I probably shouldn't have said that because I had sponsors who paid a lot of money to get mentioned, but seeing the defeated look in her brown puppy-dog eyes saddened me.

I wasn't normally a bleeding heart, but it was impossible to sit in front of her without feeling a pang of sympathy. The energy she exuded was genuine but heavy. She seemed to control the emotions of the room somehow, and I realized she was completely unaware of her power.

"Yeah? That would be amazing. But..." She didn't complete that thought.

Maybe I should have let it go so Matrix wouldn't be mad at me for doing a free plug. But something inside me wanted to know what she was thinking.

"But what?" I asked.

"I don't want you to offer fake support, especially if I'm not paying you." She was so earnest, and that was rare.

"I'm guessing Yoni would pay me with her muffin." My innuendo made me laugh, but Shiloh's reaction made me wonder if I had crossed the line. "I'm sorry. That was inappropriate."

She snickered under her breath. “It was funny and definitely true.” She stared at me as she hid behind her long eyelashes.

“I’ll try to keep my commentary to a minimum. Sometimes, my mouth becomes the life of the party before my brain is invited.”

“I don’t mind your off-color humor. I just don’t always know how to respond.” She stared at me as if it was my cue to say something.

“I get that, but I’ll still try to be on my best behavior. Most of the time, I’m encouraged to push the envelope, and I don’t have a lot of experience in one-on-one situations.” That was more open than I probably needed to be, which meant it was time to direct the conversation to her. “So, back to the topic at hand. Why don’t you tell me what you do, and maybe I can promote your services.”

She ran a hand through her hair again, this time causing her bangs to flop in her eyes. Then she jerked her head to the side, trying to get them to fall back into place. She didn’t have much luck and used her fingers to tuck them behind her ear. If she added a playful smirk to that move, she would instantly become irresistible to women.

“I help people come up with meal ideas based on their specific needs: dietary needs, time restrictions, flavor profile... you name it.”

I stared at her blankly because I forgot I had asked her a question and was playing catch-up. “Oh, that’s great. You can start with me. I hate cooking. I’ll eat anything...” I paused and mumbled, “That’s what she said,” then continued, “and I don’t like hot things.” I shivered thinking about the Pepper Parade.

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“Did you say, ‘that’s what she said’ to eating anything?” She raised both brows in my direction.

I didn’t make a mental note of saying it out loud, but it sounded like me. “Probably.” I chuckled, and she shook her head. “Sorry.” I didn’t realize how bad my filter was, but it must be one of those things: if you don’t use it, you lose it.

“You don’t have to keep apologizing. I’m not a prude. I like it when you are just yourself. It makes it easier for me to talk to you openly.”

“Phew.” I faked wiping sweat off my brow. “That’s a relief because I was struggling to keep myself in check.”

“Well, if that’s reining it in, I’d be curious to hear what you say without restraints.” There was one of those sarcastic comments she let slip, and I could feel the energy shift—she was loosening up.

“All right, tell me about this girl you have an eye on. I have to do some recon before I can offer useful advice. And even then, it’s questionable.” I laughed, but that was one hundred percent the truth. I pulled out my phone before continuing. “Do you care if I record this part for the show? I need to document our journey.”

She chewed on her lower lip. The lightheartedness was gone, and in came the uncomfortable storm. It was almost frustrating how much I could feel from her.

“I can just do audio if you’d like. But I have to give my producer something so he knows this is legit. After he found out about Sonya being the one who called this in,

he came up with something unsavory for me to do instead.”

“I don’t want you to get in trouble with your boss.” She was genuinely concerned, but I didn’t want to guilt her into doing something.

From her reactions to things, it seemed like that could have been a common occurrence for her with other people in her life.

“It’s okay. We don’t have to do this if you’re having cold feet.” Despite the potential consequences of a firewater fountain shooting out my ass, if she chose not to proceed, I wouldn’t continue for my benefit.

“No, I want to do this. And I need to be more like you.” She swallowed hard, and I had to correct her right there.

“That’s not true. You don’t need to change for anyone. And I promise you, I’m not a role model. I have more issues than a nun at an orgy.”

The corner of her lip hitched into a smirk. “That’s what I mean. You are direct and don’t hold back. That’s more of how I want to be. I’m not saying I want to be you, but I’m hopeful I can pick up a few things.”

“That’s something you have inside of you already. You are just more subtle about it. Why don’t you work on my menu, and I’ll see what Yoni has for me to eat.” I tried to hold back my snicker but failed.

“But what about the footage you need for the show?” Concern laced her voice.

“I’ll take care of that. It’s obvious you need to take this slow, and if the audience wants me to help you, they will have to be okay with me doing it right. Pushing you off the edge without a parachute isn’t an option.” I nodded, impressed with

myself—maybe I was better at this mentor shit than I realized.

“Are you sure?” She was so meek, and I wanted her to put herself first.

“If I said no, what would you do?” I cocked a brow in her direction.

She shrugged. “I guess I’d buck up and try to overcome my stage fright.”

I stood and grabbed her by the shoulders. “No. You tell me to fuck off because you’re not ready yet.”

She stared up at me, and I realized I was practically smashing my tits in her face as I shook her.

“Now you should tell me to back up and stop making you motorboat me.” I released her shoulders and opened the door so I could breathe and give us both the space we needed.

She appeared scared, but apparently, I was wrong. “Technically, it was probably closer to a paddle boat.”

I wasn’t sure if she was mocking my breast size or saying I hadn’t shaken her fast enough to qualify for that speed rating, but I couldn’t keep myself from laughing. “See. You have a strong personality inside you. We need to get you to release it. How about I send you a list of questions, and you can text me the answers? This will prepare us both for our meeting tomorrow, and maybe we can move forward with a game plan.”

Her face brightened, and I could tell she was relaxing again. “Sounds good. And I will work on ideas for your meals, but even though it’s vegetarian, I’m not putting you on a pussy diet.” Her tone was so serious that it took me a second to realize how

funny it was.

“You will get the girl in the end.” I walked out, chuckling to myself. It didn’t matter if she was never ready to do the show; I wanted to see this through.

She deserved happiness, and for whatever reason, I wanted to be part of that.

Chapter 8

Shiloh

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I felt terrible for not being more accommodating with Caz taping us. It hadn't occurred to me that this was part of the deal, but it should have. I had done a quick binge of her antics before work this morning and saw that she left nothing out. She had the camera everywhere and knew how to command the screen.

If she videoed us together, I would look even more invisible than I already did. Caz exuded natural assuredness, and for lack of a better word, she was cool. She could wear anything, say anything, or do anything, and people would be receptive to it. I envied her, but I appreciated how she always built me up.

It was weird being around someone who was part of the in-crowd but was kind and funny instead of a jackwagon. She thought her crassness offended me, but really, I was trying to think of something witty to contribute. I hoped she would want to be around me.

She saw a version of me that others didn't, and it made me want to be that person. I kept a low profile when I was around Sonya and Devon because they were more over-the-top. It was a balancing act with them.

As I looked at the questions Caz had sent me, I was glad I had time to think about them before responding. Had she put me on the spot and recorded it, I would have felt like an idiot. The first one alone was embarrassing enough: Why did your last relationship end?

Technically, my last relationship wasn't a relationship, and it didn't have a definitive ending. Yoni had asked me out, and we went on several dates, which made me think we were together, but I found out the hard way she was non-monogamous when

another person walked into the shop and kissed her right in front of me.

I didn't let on that I was upset, but I stopped accepting her invitations. What made it even more disheartening was her complete indifference to me. We slid back into the friend's zone as if we had never left it. That was six months ago, and it almost felt like I had imagined the entire situationship.

The following questions also threw me for a loop: What do you and your crush have in common? What are her favorite hobbies and interests? What are yours?

Ember fascinated me with her quirky personality and fashion sense. She seemed like a free spirit and someone I would love to get to know more, but that was the problem. How did I do that? I had been going to the coffee shop for months, hoping she would initiate a conversation and give me an opening. But she seemed shy, too, as she wasn't overly chatty with anyone.

Maybe Caz could get her to open up. She made people feel comfortable, and it was easy to talk to her. But knowing my luck, Caz and Ember would hit it off, and I'd still be standing on the sidelines, wondering when it would be my turn to get into the game. Argh. I hated it when my mind went to negative places.

Since I met Caz, all she did was build me up. I couldn't imagine her trying to take Ember out from under me—not that she was mine to steal... or under me. I didn't even know if Ember was queer or single. Maybe I was wasting my time pining over someone unavailable. I was probably wasting Caz's time, too.

I sighed. I wouldn't get anywhere with these questions. Caz wanted answers to things I couldn't give her. What I needed from her was a more profound understanding—something that went beyond the surface. If she could teach me how to flirt, maybe I could find out the information she wanted. But was that a learned behavior? Or was I just a lost cause?

I closed my eyes and placed my head in my hands, wondering what was wrong with me. I hated how socially awkward I was, but that wasn't something I could change—at least not permanently. Ember had swagger, and it was magnetic. Anyone who entered her orbit had to be drawn to her undeniable charm. But I was mundane—boring.

She was completely unaware of my existence. I had been going there every Sunday for three months, ordering the same thing, and she still had to ask me what I wanted. I shouldn't have been offended by that. She probably took many orders, and it was hard to get them all straight, but the difference was that I remembered everything about her. At least, the things I could see.

Depending on the day, her eyes would transform into different shades, switching from green to blue to gray. They appeared to mirror the ups and downs of her mood, and green seemed to be when she was the happiest. She also scrunched her nose in this cute way when she appeared confused and twisted her gorgeous mahogany hair around her finger when standing around with nothing to do. Every move she made was on my radar, even though she probably wouldn't notice if I were gone.

I was not in a good headspace right now, so instead of focusing on all the things I lacked, I would work on Caz's meal plan. I could do that without doubting myself, which was much better for my emotional well-being.

When I opened my laptop, there was a knock on my office door.

"Come in." I would have gotten up to answer, but this was a tight space, which made it harder for them to enter.

"Hey." Yoni poked her head inside, and I hoped that meant I had a client and she wasn't trying to chat.

“What’s going on?” I didn’t make eye contact and pretended I was busy, just in case this was a social call.

I wasn’t angry with her about the past, but I had different boundaries now, including being professional.

“Nothing really.” Her words didn’t match her actions as she lingered in my doorway.

“Okay. Did you need something?” I tapped on my computer, even though I wasn’t typing anything.

“I wanted to check on you.” Those words caused me to pause. She never showed concern for me, not even when we were pseudo-dating.

“I’m doing well. Thank you. Is that all?” I probably should have asked how she was, but it was my turn for indifference.

She cleared her throat. “Yeah, I guess so.” Her voice sounded deflated, but I wouldn’t ask why.

“Good deal. Let me know if I get any clients. Thanks.”

She shut the door without further response, and a slight smile played across my lips. Whatever she was going to say probably had to do with Caz, and I didn’t want her to go there. I was fine with Yoni bringing in her parade of flings, but Caz wasn’t here for her entertainment. She was here to help me, which would be a full-time gig.

Before I could let my fears run wild in my mind, my phone chimed with a message.

Caz: Hey. You want to grab dinner and get a jumpstart? My producer’s worried.

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He wasn't the only one who was. How could I face her after letting her down earlier? Not only that, I would probably do it again. I wasn't any closer to overcoming my fears, and I had nothing to offer Caz. I was sinking the ship, and she was better off pushing me overboard. But I sure hope she didn't, because I couldn't swim.

Chapter 9

Caz

Matrix seemed pissed that I didn't get any video today, but what was I supposed to do? Make Shiloh uncomfortable to the point where she backed out of the entire thing? She was skittish. I knew skittish people had to be handled delicately. And with my ass on the line, I would play it safe.

Besides, I would still have material I could use for the show, especially once I got more background information from Shiloh. I could record myself talking about my findings and then throw some later footage in there. I wasn't worried about that. My fear was more about what would happen if I couldn't help Shiloh come out of her shell.

I had never been a flight attendant for someone before, which meant I had more to prove to my audience. They wanted to hear about a success story, and it was my job to give them that. But even more so, I wanted Shiloh to have that, too.

The day flew by, which was good, but I wasn't done yet. I still had to have dinner with Shiloh, which wasn't a hardship, but I was tired of being out. When I initially asked her, I had Matrix breathing down my neck. Now that things had settled a little,

I regretted making plans that didn't involve sweatpants and my bed.

This happened every time I scheduled something. The idea sounded appealing beforehand, but as the time drew nearer, I desperately tried to devise an exit strategy. Since it was work, it wasn't as easy for me, but Shiloh seemed easygoing, and maybe she would roll with a more casual meeting.

As I left the studio, I pulled out my phone to give her a call. Surprisingly, she answered instead of doing what I would have done: send it to voicemail.

"Hello, this is Shiloh Wilbers, Meal Planner Extraordinaire for Sprout and Sprigs. How may I help you?"

Ah, of course, that was why she answered. A part of me wanted to play a trick on her, but since I didn't know her well enough, I kept it more formal.

"Good evening, Shiloh. This is Caz. I was wondering if you'd be okay with a change of plans?"

"Hey. Sorry. When I'm at the store, all my calls are transferred to my work phone, so I didn't see it was you."

"No problem at all. So, you haven't left for the day?" Maybe she would want to cancel altogether. That wouldn't help me with Matrix, but I wouldn't hate it.

"Nope, I was shutting my stuff down now. I was..." She stopped midsentence, and I checked my phone to see if I had lost her. "Never mind. It doesn't matter. But I'm flexible. What did you have in mind?"

I stopped myself from saying, "That's what she said," and focused on the fact that she often left a lot of things unsaid. Did she feel it wasn't important, or was she

embarrassed? Either way, I wished she would speak up and stop caring what other people thought. It was something we could work on, but I wouldn't call her out now.

"Would you mind ordering in? I don't know how much more of the outside world I can handle today." That was more honest than I should have been, but maybe she felt the same way.

"That's good with me. Talking might be easier when other people aren't around anyway." Her voice faded as she finished her sentence, and I wished she would command the attention and respect she deserved. Again, that was something to discuss in our meeting.

"All right. I'll text you my address, and we can order when you get here. To give you a heads-up, I can't stay in these thigh shackles all day, so it's yoga pants for me. Feel free to change before coming—no need to be uncomfortable."

"Oh, okay. I probably won't change unless it will make you feel better if I do." She was people-pleasing again, and if she kept this up, she would get taken advantage of.

"So, my feelings are more important than yours? Why?" I had tried the tough love approach earlier in her office, but it didn't sink in. I needed to figure something else out before we went on the prowl.

She paused for a minute. "Um, I guess I don't have strong feelings about it, so I didn't think it mattered."

"Just meet me at my place in whatever you want, and we'll talk then." I shook my head at how much she needed to learn about herself.

"Okay. See you soon." She sounded nervous, but we would work on that, too.

I immediately texted the address as I walked home, but wondered if I had made a mistake inviting her to my sanctuary. With it being a studio, there weren't any covert spots. Not that I had stuff to hide, but everything was out in the open—including my clothes. There were built-in shelving units that were supposed to be minimalist and sleek, but without closets, it left my life on display.

There was a reason I never invited anyone back to my apartment: I was too exposed. When Davia picked this place, I assumed it would be our home until we were ready for a change of pace. But when she left me with bad credit and a mountain of debt, I didn't have many options.

I arrived well before Shiloh because I was only blocks away, and she had miles to go if she was just leaving work. As soon as I got inside, I removed my shoes and went to the bedroom area. It was offset from the rest of the space but still wide open. I changed into black stretchy pants and a shirt that said, "I Do Dumb Things for Cool Stories." Matrix got it for me, and it always made me laugh.

After picking up the unwanted stuff lying around and shoving it in either the laundry hamper or the dishwasher, I felt better about what she would be walking into. From an outside perspective, she shouldn't be able to tell what a mess my life was. Not that I wanted to keep things from her, but how would I be a credible source if she knew how hopeless I was?

As soon as I folded the blanket I had on the couch, I poured myself a glass of wine and sat down at the dining table. I had no more than a sip when my intercom rang, and I got up to buzz her in. As I waited, I wondered if I should have had a glass ready for her, too. But she was knocking before I could decide.

I opened the door, and Shiloh stood there, her hair mussed as if she had run her hands through it, which I had now associated as her style. She was holding a bottle of wine, and I smiled.

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“This is for you.” She handed it to me, and I moved to let her in. “I like your shirt.” She chuckled, and I was glad it could break the ice.

“I’m glad it could make you smile. And thank you for the wine. I was going to offer you a glass because I already have some open.”

She walked inside, and instead of appraising the place like I had feared she would, she slid her shoes off and sat at the table. “I’m okay. Thank you. I might have a drink after I eat, but there is no way it would sit well on an empty stomach.”

I eyed her and chuckled. “I’m sorry, but you work around prepared meals all day. Why on earth haven’t you eaten?”

With a single swipe of her hand across her face, I sensed an energy shift as if a heaviness had washed over her.

“I was avoiding Yoni.” She didn’t elaborate, but there was more to the story.

Should I pry? Or give her the space to fill me in on her own time? I still struggled with how to handle her. So I put the wine in the fridge to buy me some time. When I turned back to the table, she sighed.

“It makes me feel immature, but being around her can sometimes be trying.” Her shoulders dropped, and relief seemed to wash over her after that confession.

“That’s not immature. You know you can’t be the person you want to be when she’s around, so you’re choosing not to be around her during those times. That’s called

boundaries, and it's more than okay to set them."

Her eyes shifted around like they were following a clock, but her face lightened. "I like that perspective. I was worried my past hurt was causing me to be resentful."

I rolled that sentence around in my head but couldn't dissect it. I needed clarification, so this time, I directed the conversation. "Past hurt from her?" I pulled out the chair across from Shiloh, not wanting to get in her personal bubble.

I needed to keep things casual so she didn't feel like this was part of the show—technically, it wasn't—but maybe I could find some quotes in there that would show growth by the end of the week.

She nodded almost imperceptibly, and I thought there might have been a story there by the interaction today.

"Do you want to talk about it?" My approach tonight would be more open-ended. The direct questions I had asked in the past didn't provide me with many solid leads. But if I could get her to talk freely, maybe I could pick up some things to further the conversation.

She hitched one shoulder up. "I don't know that there's anything to say. We dated for a while, but now we're strictly coworkers."

That had to be awkward. I couldn't imagine having to spend unwanted time with Davia, especially because she was a massive flirt like Yoni. I wouldn't want to see that—not because I wanted her back, but because it would make me sick to my stomach that I was so wrong about someone I once loved. It would make me question myself, which didn't sit well with me.

"She likes to play the field, and I like to be settled inside the dugout. We are better off

as business partners and nothing else. She and I aren't good on paper or in person." She forced a smile, but she seemed over it, which was good.

"I get that. Sometimes, our choices aren't based on logic. Words, actions, or even potential can trick us into thinking something is a good idea when it isn't."

"I think mine was convenience," she said deadpan, but I laughed.

"What does that mean?" I smirked, and she finally broke her seriousness.

"I didn't have to make an effort. Since we worked together and she had made the first move, it seemed like an easy choice. She was the decision-maker, and I liked that. It took away some of my anxiety." She shrugged, but that probably happened more than I knew.

"Well, let's hope this new person, what's her name?" I figured it was time to focus on why she was here, and this seemed like a good segue into that.

Her lips curled into a wider smile, and a blush crept into her cheeks. "Ember," she responded in that low voice that was barely audible.

"Alrighty. Well, I hope Ember is more your type, then." I pulled out my phone, and she froze.

"Are you recording this?" Her eyes got wide in panic, and I shook my head.

"No, I was going to figure out where to get food so we could eat while we talked. I told you I wouldn't do anything until you're ready. Please view this as two friends hanging out and discussing the chicks they like—that's it."

She tilted her head as if questioning something. "So that means you have someone to

talk about, too?” Of course, she took my words literally.

“I don’t, but I would tell you all about her if I did.” That seemed safe to say since I knew it would never happen, but hopefully, it would also get her to realize that this wasn’t just a job for me.

There were very few people I didn’t get drained by being around, and so far, she was one of them. She wasn’t talking to me because she thought I was “famous.” In fact, she would probably like me better if I wasn’t. I didn’t have to worry about her intentions, which was refreshing. So many people thought they knew me because of my show and social media, which made being in public downright exhausting.

How could I explain that my podcast persona wasn’t me? It was me, but an amplified version of me to engage the listeners. I didn’t want to be “on” all the time, which was how most people thought of me.

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Shiloh seemed to accept me as I was, and that was something new. I hoped she felt the same sense of belonging when she was with me.

“Oh really?” Her question caught me off guard because she appeared skeptical, and that was the last thing I wanted.

“Yes.” I stared at her quizzically.

“Did Yoni ask you out?”

I bit my lower lip because knowing their history now made it awkward, but I didn’t have anything to hide. “She did. But I turned her down gently.” I gave her a cheeky smile, hoping it would keep things relaxed.

She shook her head slightly. “Go figure. She came to talk after you left and probably wanted me to help her out with you, but I brushed her off.” There was a softness when she brought her caramel eyes to mine. “But I don’t want you to not go out with her because of me. I’m over her.”

I didn’t even know they had been together when I turned Yoni down, but I wasn’t looking for someone anyway—not to date or to have fun with. My life was better in the small world I had created for myself. If I tried to fit anyone else in it, I would probably suffocate.

“I appreciate your approval, but I’m not interested in Yoni. And even if you are over her, it’s okay not to want me to date her. I’m your friend, and I don’t think it’s kosher to be with your ex, no matter how you feel about her. And I think you should speak

up more. Don't just say what you think the other person wants to hear. Your feelings are valid, even if you don't have 'reasons' for them." I didn't mean to turn this into a TED talk, but it was something she needed to learn sooner than later.

We all had things we could work on to improve ourselves, and Shiloh could put this into practice in all aspects of her life—not just dating. I wanted to pat myself on the back because maybe my years of therapy made me more qualified than I thought.

Chapter 10

Shiloh

As I stared into Caz's caring blue eyes, I realized she wasn't putting on a show for me. She wasn't placating me and telling me what I wanted to hear. She seemed so genuine, which lowered my guard a little.

"I appreciate your honesty and validation. Yoni isn't someone I want to be with, but as my friend, I wouldn't want you to be with her, either. But that's only because I think you deserve better."

Before tonight, I didn't want Yoni to be with Caz for somewhat selfish reasons, but now I realized that Caz wasn't here to help me get a date. She was teaching me how to look out for myself.

"I don't know about that. I probably don't deserve anyone, but I appreciate how you see me." She winked, and I could see why Yoni fawned over her when she did it.

There was this sparkle about her that made you feel like you were the only person in the room. Granted, I was the only person in the room, but when I was around her, she never made me doubt she wanted to be with me. She didn't scroll through her phone, interrupt me, or zone out completely.

Sonya and Devon did those things a lot, but in their defense, they were high most of the time. Was that an actual defense? Probably not, since it was a choice, but it still changed how they responded to me.

Caz, on the other hand, was attentive and thoughtful. She had an acquired sense of humor, but I enjoyed it. In the two days I'd spoken to her, I felt more like myself around her than I did with my own family. Was that happy or tragic? I would go with the bright spot and say it was good.

"You know how you want me to speak up? Well, there's something I want you to do, too."

She quirked one thick brow in my direction, and I almost lost my train of thought. I was so jealous of her ability to do that.

"And what is that?" she prompted, and I was embarrassed I had been studying her face.

"Sorry. Yes. I would like you to see yourself through my eyes. You said you didn't deserve anyone, but that's absurd. You are here, helping me out of the kindness of your heart."

"Technically, it's for the show, but I am enjoying it."

"Not all of it is for the show. You are helping me with my shyness, getting me to stand my ground and set boundaries. And you haven't taped one thing for the show, but you keep giving me your time and attention. It means a lot to me."

She hung her head for a minute, then exhaled deeply. "I believe in you and don't want to see you taken advantage of."

“And that is why you’d make an amazing partner for someone. You want to bring out the best in them, and I hope you can see the best in you.”

The compliment seemed to make her uncomfortable, and she waved her hand in front of her as if trying to brush it away. “Enough sappy talk. Let’s order food and get down to business.”

I could tell she wasn’t used to the praise, and I understood that, so I dropped it. “Sounds good. I’m starving.”

“What’s your favorite place?” She picked up her phone and waited for my reply.

“I don’t care. Anywhere you want is fine.” I wasn’t super picky as long as they had meatless options.

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The way she looked at me was confusing. “Is that so? I choose Rib Shack.”

I now understood her expression was smug.

“Stop saying you don’t care when you do. I asked you what you wanted, and your opinion matters, so don’t let me or anyone else dictate your life.”

If I voiced my thoughts, they were out there for people to judge or argue with. But if I kept things to myself, I wouldn’t have to face scrutiny or risk upsetting someone. However, she had a point. I was allowing others to determine what I did or didn’t do. It wasn’t really living, but there was a comfort in it.

“I appreciate you pushing me to be more assertive, but I genuinely don’t care. I’m sure Rib Shack has some vegetarian options.” For obvious reasons, it wasn’t a place I had eaten at before, but I didn’t even know where I would pick if the decision was on me, so this felt easier.

“Why are you afraid?” Her words shook me from my thoughts.

I shrugged. “I just don’t see the point in arguing when I can go with the flow.”

“And you think it will be an argument if you tell me what you want... when I was the one who asked you?” She set her phone down and locked her gaze on mine. Her eyes appeared as sharp as sapphires. “I don’t know who made you feel so small, but fuck them. You are worthy of being heard.” She always added a little color to her advice, but it always made me feel better.

“So, you want me to pick a place on my own?” The weight of my anxiety was suffocating, but I took a slow, deep breath, trying to find some peace.

“Yes. You are in charge.”

I was sort of on the spot, but there was one restaurant I hadn’t tried but always wanted to. “What about Green Cuisine Café? I’ve heard their food is incredible.” I smiled, and she scrunched her nose as if smelling something rotten. “Or we could go somewhere else that you might like better.” I hated seeing her disapproval.

“That was all it took for you to cave? We have work to do.” She shook her head while releasing an exasperated sigh. “Green Cuisine, it is. Do you know what you want, or do you need to peruse the menu?”

“I don’t know what they have because I’ve never eaten there, so I’d need to see my options.” I felt stupid for suggesting it while basing my opinion solely on word of mouth.

“All right. Get over here, and we can search together. I’m a virgin, too.” She tugged my chair, scooting me closer so I could see her phone at the same time.

I couldn’t tell if she was put out by my choice because she wasn’t saying anything while she scrolled. The silence was heavy, so I broke it. “Do you want to look somewhere else?” I didn’t want her to get upset with me for asking that, but I also didn’t want her to suffer because of me.

“I’m getting the Cauliflower Steak. Have you decided?” She ignored my prior insecurity, and I picked the first thing I could remember to avoid irritating her.

“Jackfruit ‘Pulled Pork’ Tacos, please.”

“Done. Was that so hard?” she questioned, but it didn’t appear to be rhetorical.

“No. I guess not.” I was uneasy during the process, but in the end, nothing bad happened.

“Tell me more about this girl you like.” She set her phone down and gave me her undivided attention.

I swallowed hard because I had read her questions, and I wasn’t qualified to give her the answers. “She works at Java Jive, and she fascinates me.”

She drummed her fingers on the table. “May I offer some advice?”

I chuckled because she had been doing that since I met her, but now she was asking for permission? “Please.”

“Get to know her before you decide to be with her. We can build people up in our heads, but they rarely meet those expectations.”

“I want to do that, but that’s where I struggle. I get too nervous.”

“What fascinates you, then?”

I didn’t want to say the obvious because she might think I was superficial. “She has a unique personality, and I like her... style.” That was more encompassing than her physical beauty.

“Do you have anything in common? Friends, interests?” She appeared unimpressed by my responses, but I didn’t blame her.

“I don’t know.”

She rubbed the back of her neck, and I wondered if she was getting annoyed. “Do you follow her on social media?”

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I shook my head, feeling the embarrassment flood my body.

"Tell me her name, and I'll investigate." She stood up with her phone in her hand.

This escalated quickly. Was she going to friend her on some platform? Slide into her DMs? Those thoughts were absurd, but I knew Ember was better suited for someone like Caz. They were both enigmatic, beautiful, and full of confidence. They would probably be drawn to each other like magnets. You always saw those power couples—that could be them.

She stared at me expectantly, and I had a choice to make. Would I do what I always did and hope for the best? Or would I do what she told me to do since we met: stand up for what I wanted—or what I didn't want, which was for her to talk to Ember?

"I don't know her last name," I lied, but she didn't question it.

"Okay. Tomorrow, we'll go to Java Jive and see if she's working."

That was better than her having a conversation behind my back, but what if being with Caz made me even more nonexistent in Ember's eyes? Maybe I could get out of this. But that would be tomorrow me's problem. Hopefully, we could work on my flirt game tonight, and I wouldn't have to worry about being noticed.

I couldn't help but let out a soft chuckle, mocking my own unrealistic wishful thinking.

Caz

“Hey, buddy. How’s it going?” I greeted Matrix as I walked into the studio.

Even though we only aired two segments a week, I came to the studio daily to give him my updates and the footage I recorded. But I didn't have anything yet, and I knew I would never hear the end of it. So, to avoid any further arguments, I came with a peace offering.

“I brought you something.” I handed him a triple shot of espresso and a bear claw.

“Let me guess, this is the only thing you brought me?” He was unimpressed, but he took the gifts anyway.

“I don’t have any recordings from her, but I will do something insightful tonight, documenting my role in the process. I’m also supposed to meet her and potentially her crush this afternoon. So keep your boxers out of a bunch.”

“And when will I have these supposed videos? Friday? The day before we’re supposed to post them? I’m not staying up all night editing because you’re too chickenshit to do your job.”

“Oh, you think calling me names and insulting my character will get me to do it quicker?” I glared at him, but he was unbothered.

“I am calling it as I see it.” He laughed, but I could sense he was serious.

“I promise to get you something before Friday. And if I have to pull an all-nighter with you, I will.”

He sighed as he shook his finger in front of me. “I’m holding you to that.”

“Fine. Because I meant it. Do we have anything on the list for our next adventure?”

“If you don’t get me something useful soon, you can start on the Pepper Parade.” He winked, and I didn’t know if that was a joke or not, but I ignored it.

“I just got an idea. What if I went around and scoped out possible first-date ideas and recorded them? That could be helpful, right?” I should have thought of it sooner, but I had been so focused on getting Shiloh ready that I didn’t even think about what would happen if Ember said yes.

Technically, my job was over after she asked her out, but as nervous as Shiloh was, she probably needed a play-by-play.

“Sure, that’s not the worst idea. And I have a spot we could test out tonight. There is this new Glow-in-the-Dark Mini Golf course/bar that I’m going to, and you could come. I could bring my camera and get some professional shots. What do you think?”

What did I think? I thought that sounded like a horrible idea. Drunk people playing golf in the dark was an ER visit waiting to happen. Besides, I wasn’t planning on actually peopling when I mentioned it. I was going to do some online research, then maybe some drive-bys. But since I had already let him down, I figured I owed him one.

“Why not?”

He appeared surprised, and rightfully so, but nodded in agreement. “It will be great.”

“I’m sure it will. Text me the address and time, and I’ll be there. But I’m going to head out now. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Okay. Can’t wait.” He let out his evil laugh as if he had accomplished something

devious, leaving no doubt in my mind that he had tricked me—well, maybe not tricked, but guilted me into doing what he wanted.

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Oh well. One night out probably wouldn't kill me.

I searched for some places Shiloh could take Ember on a date; however, not knowing what Ember was into made it hard. I knew Shiloh enjoyed anything healthy, so I thought about one of those couples' cooking classes, but you had to sign up a few weeks in advance, which I went ahead and did just in case.

The next idea I checked out was a hot-air balloon ride. I thought it was a perfect date idea because you got to be outside and away from others. But if either of them feared heights, it was a no-go.

Before I wasted more time, I messaged Shiloh to see if she wanted to take her lunch break and hit up Java Jive. I was shocked when she responded that she was already there.

I phoned her, and she picked up immediately.

“Hey, sorry to come here without you, but I thought I would get a jumpstart on the recon.” Something was off with her voice, but I let it slide.

“No worries. So, she's there?” I wanted to make sure I was needed before showing up.

“Yeah, she's here, and she appears to like chocolate chip cookies, or they might be raisins. I can't tell.”

I shook my head at that random non-information. “Cool. I'll see you soon. I'm a few

blocks away.”

As soon as I made it inside, I looked at the spot where I had met Shiloh the first time, and sure enough, she was there with her crossword puzzle as her guise. I didn’t wave so I wouldn’t blow her cover, and instead, I headed to the counter.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes when I noticed it was the same rude girl who gave me the third degree on Sunday. I did my best to smile but almost choked when I read her name tag. She was Ember?

Even as I approached her, she didn’t acknowledge me. If she wanted a standoff, she better buckle up because this would be a long ride. I cleared my throat, signaling that the game was on, but I refused to speak. It was her job to be personable, not mine.

She was better than I had given her credit for. She stared at me smugly as if to say, “What do you want?” but I wasn’t answering until those words came out of her mouth.

I noticed someone joining the line out of my peripheral, but that didn’t change my stance. Ember and I were playing chicken with our eyes, and I had the focus of an unblinking cat until the person behind me tapped on my shoulder, ruining my concentration.

“What?” I turned around to see Shiloh holding her hands up in surrender fashion. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s okay. I was checking to see if you needed something. You’ve been up here a while.” She peeked at Ember, who appeared unaffected by anything as she twisted her hair around her finger.

“No, I’m good. Just trying to order a drink. I’ll join you in a minute.” I offered a

playful wink, but her cheeks instantly turned a deep shade of pink, and she scurried off to the table.

When I faced Ember again, she was staring in Shiloh's direction, and it seemed like it was the first time she noticed her. Maybe she was one of those people who wanted a toy if someone else was playing with it first. Interesting. When she brought her gaze back to me, she still stared blankly, and I realized she didn't even know what I was waiting for.

I released a frustrated sigh and wondered if she was that oblivious or too self-absorbed to care. Either way, Shiloh deserved better than that. I questioned what she found fascinating about her when all I felt was annoyance. I mean, she was physically attractive. She had a retro 90s punk-girl look, with choppy hair like Courtney Love, pale skin, and dark lips. If Ember and Yoni were anything to go on, Shiloh had a type.

"Can I get a caramel latte?"

"Do I know you?" Her words caught me off guard, but it wouldn't be the first time someone had recognized me.

"I don't think so." I no longer wanted to glare at her. Instead, I tried to hide my face to get out of this conversation.

"I think I do. Have you come in here before?"

Why did she choose to be attentive now? Five minutes ago, when I wanted her to ask to take my order, she acted like she could see right through me.

"This isn't my normal coffee shop. I'm here with someone." I pointed to Shiloh, hoping she would direct her focus on her.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure I’ve seen her before. What’s her story? Are you two...” Her gaze stayed on Shiloh a beat too long if she thought she was my girlfriend.

Out of spite, I almost said yes because I wanted her to have regret. But I wouldn’t put up a beaver dam because Shiloh deserved happiness. Even if I couldn’t see what Ember had to offer, it wasn’t my choice. I was here to help, not hinder.

“No. I’m not sure if she’s seeing anyone right now, but she’s a catch.” I watched as Shiloh sipped her drink but kept her eyes glued to her puzzle book.

“Hmmm,” she was pensive, which I would take as a good sign.

“I could maybe put in a good word for you.” I didn’t know how we had gone from a who’s-the-bigger-alpha showdown to me offering to hook her up, but it was organic, which usually yielded better results.

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“Nah. If I see something I like, I take it. I don’t need handouts.” She gave a half-hearted shrug, and I hoped she developed a zit on the corner of her mouth.

“Right. How about that caramel latte?” This conversation was over, but now I didn’t know what to say to Shiloh.

How could I, in good conscience, set her up with this egomaniac?

“Sure, name?”

I told her and waited to the side. When Shiloh finally looked up, I smiled at her, and she returned the gesture. She was too sweet, and Ember would eat her alive.

“Fuck,” I mumbled, and just then, Ember called out, “Cat,” knowing full well that wasn’t what I had said.

Great. Not only was she full of herself, she was the typical mean girl who had to get the last word. But she had no idea who she was messing with.

Chapter 12

Shiloh

Ididn’t know what was happening in the line, but Caz had been taking forever. She appeared to be studying Ember, and I wondered if my biggest fear had occurred—she realized how amazing she was and wanted to be with her, too.

I didn't stand a chance against that competition. Maybe if I went up there, I could break the spell, and she would remember why she was here.

I stood behind her for a minute, but she didn't acknowledge me. She was so consumed by Ember that it was like no one else was in the room. I tapped her shoulder, but she appeared so angry at the interruption that I cowered down. She did apologize before winking at me, but something was off.

I quickly returned to my table, purposely avoiding any lingering glances in that direction. Not having any information about what was going on made my mind run wild with worst-case scenarios, which only added to my awkwardness.

As I sipped my coffee, I tried to work on my crossword, but I couldn't even read the clues as everything felt too heavy to function. When I finally gave up, I peeked in Caz's direction, and she smiled. But it was off—too big—fake. It made me think she felt guilty. I tried not to jump to conclusions, but that was how I got most of my exercise.

When she had her coffee in hand, she joined me, but I pretended to be still engrossed in my puzzle.

"Is this seat taken?" Her voice sounded normal—no nerves or anything.

Maybe I had let my mind run away, and nothing had happened.

"By all means, please." I waved my hand in front of the chair, and she pulled it out, sitting across from me.

"So, have you gotten any other information that might be useful?" She took a big sip of her coffee before looking like she wanted to throw it up.

It seemed like her throat was fighting her to swallow, but eventually she must have won as she opened her mouth, gasping for air.

“Will you excuse me?” she seethed through gritted teeth, and I nodded, confused. She marched up to the counter, and Ember wore that breathtaking smile. I, again, was juggling assumptions like it was a full-time job.

Was she pretending her drink was disgusting so she could get more time with Ember? It would be an excellent ploy to keep me from being suspicious—if I were someone else. I picked up my book to cover my face, but they were in my direct line of sight.

Ember’s ethereal laugh floated through the air, and I saw Caz place her hand on her forearm. There was no doubt they were flirting, and neither was paying attention to me, so I quietly collected my things and snuck out the door. There was no reason for me to stay here and watch my supposed friend try to secure a date with my dream girl.

None of it mattered. I knew this would happen, and it was time to return to reality. Besides, my lunch break was over, and work was waiting for me.

I was halfway down the block when I heard, “Shy, wait.”

I knew it was Caz’s voice, but I had never heard her call me that. She probably realized she had screwed up her program, and now she’d come to beg for forgiveness. I was tempted to feign ignorance like I didn’t hear her, but I was afraid she would be upset, so I stopped.

“Hey, where are you going?” She reached for me, but I pulled back.

“Sorry, I got a work emergency.” Why couldn’t I have come up with something more believable than that?

“Oh really? What?” I couldn’t tell if she was calling me on my lie or if she was genuinely curious.

The only problem was I didn’t have an answer.

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“It’s confidential.” I nodded as if that was completely logical, and now she appeared skeptical.

“A confidential emergency in the meal planning industry?” She put her hand on her chin. “I guess I better let you get to it, then.” The fact that she didn’t stop me further bolstered my conclusions about Ember and her.

If I were gone, it would make it easier for the two of them to chat uninhibitedly.

“Thanks. And I wanted to let you know you’re off the hook for helping me. I don’t think I’m interested in Ember anymore.” Something inside of me felt the need to release her from guilt, even though she broke my heart with what she did.

“Oh? Just because you don’t want Ember doesn’t mean we can’t find someone else.”

She was so quick to dismiss Ember as an option for me that it affirmed what I already knew: she wanted her for herself.

“That’s okay. I’m good on my own. I’m sorry to have wasted your time. Have a good day.” As I turned to leave, her fingers gently grasped my elbow, stopping me in place.

“What’s going on? We were making progress, and now you want to give up? I’m not gonna lie. I could see why you might not want Ember, but there are other people out there for you.” Her eyes searched mine like she was looking for something, but I didn’t know what.

I already gave her permission to go after Ember. What else could she possibly want from me? Did she need me to be with someone to clear her conscience? Or did she need me for the show? Either was a plausible option, but I had learned something from her—stop doing what I didn't want to do.

“Really. I'm good. But thank you.” This time, I broke free from her grip with a determined tug and confidently strode off.

Leaving her hanging like that felt weird, but what was I supposed to do? Giving in to everyone got me nowhere. I'd already conceded so much by giving her Ember on a platter. Not that she needed me to back down. She could have taken her from me even if I had put up a fight. I told myself that was more out of self-preservation than people-pleasing. Regardless, what I had done seemed selfish, and I thought about turning around, but I stayed firm and got in my car.

As I drove off, I saw her still standing on the sidewalk, and I wondered if she was waiting for me to disappear completely before going back into Java Jive to claim her prize.

When I stepped into Sprout and Sprigs, I was relieved to see Yoni engrossed in a conversation with a customer, allowing me to slip away to my office. I closed the door behind me and sank into one of the folding chairs, trying to make sense of the overwhelming information swirling through my mind. I had already pieced the puzzle together, but the “why” still plagued me.

Why did Caz do this to me? Why did she go after the person she was supposed to help me win over? Caz could have anyone she wanted—so why her?

These thoughts didn't do me any good, so I flipped up my laptop to start work. My eyes were immediately drawn to Caz's meal plan, and a wave of nausea washed over me. I opened my email to check on other clients, but my phone dinged.

Caz: Hey, I'm sorry about today. Can we talk later and work something out? I hate to see you unhappy.

Wow, that was rich, considering she was the reason for my mood. I wouldn't typically leave her on read, but I was too overwhelmed to find the right words to respond.

As I worked through my emails and replied to customers, my phone rang. I wanted to ignore it, but it could have been work-related.

"Hello, this is Shiloh. How may I help you?" My tone was harsher than I intended, but I had a sneaky suspicion about who it was.

"Okay, Shy. Why do you sound like your dog just died?" Sonya's voice rang through the receiver, which was better than Caz's, but I didn't want to talk to her, either.

After all, she was the one who got me into this mess in the first place. Without her intervention, I could have pretended to remain oblivious that Ember didn't echo my feelings. I would have silently continued to cherish her from the comfort of the coffeehouse. But now that I know she and Caz probably have a thing going on, I had to move on. Not that it was a good idea to be hung up on an unrequited love anyway, but still. I was forced to make that decision instead of coming to that conclusion on my own.

"What do you need, Sonya? I'm at work." I sighed into the speaker, and she returned the sentiment.

"You need to chill your nips. That attitude is unbecoming." She laughed, and I rolled my eyes. She was such a juvenile.

"Seriously. Why did you call?"

“Can’t I want to talk to my cuz?” I could hear Devon saying something in the background, which was a sign of trouble.

“You don’t usually call unless you want or need something. So...” I hoped she would stop trying to play it off like she missed me, and this was a catch-up call.

“So, Devon and I thought this new place would be fun to check out, and we wondered if you’d want to go.”

There was more to it than that. I didn’t know what, but there was.

“I appreciate the invite, but I’ll have to pass. It’s been a busy week, and it’s only Tuesday.” I didn’t even have to feel guilty about saying that because it was one hundred percent true.

“Pleaseeeee...” she whined into the phone, and I fought the urge to hang up on her.

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“Why? You and Devon will have fun without me.”

“We will have more fun with you.” She was buttering me up. “And if you drive, we’ll pay your way in.”

There it was. They were looking for a DD.

Did I want to do whatever they were planning? No. But did I want them to be safe? Yes. I knew they could get a rideshare, but it was more than that. I didn’t trust that either would look out for the other. When they were drunk or high or both, they made stupid decisions, and the other one was usually the encourager.

“What’s the place?” I conceded.

“You’re going to love it. It’s called Illumi-Links and Drinks.”

“What is it?” Nothing in the name sounded appealing, but I already agreed and didn’t want to disappoint her.

“You’ll see. I promise it will be so much fun! Come to my place when you get off.” She made a kissy noise through the phone. “Bye! Love ya!” She hung up without letting me respond, probably so I didn’t have time to change my mind.

I closed my eyes and breathed out, “Why do I do this to myself?”

A voice replied: “You’re a glutton for punishment.”

My eyes shot open, and I nearly fell out of my seat, but I was alone. Had I imagined that?

“May I come in?” It was Yoni from behind the door.

“Yeah,” I called out, and she sat down before I even offered.

“Hey.” I didn’t ask what she was doing because she would fill me in without prompting.

“Hey, yourself. I wanted to tell you I have a date tonight, so I’ll be leaving early. I realize it probably doesn’t matter because you usually stay late, but I still wanted to tell you.”

This didn’t need to be face-to-face; an email would have been sufficient.

“Okay. I might leave early, too. I have plans tonight.” Sonya had said to come after work, but Yoni didn’t need to know that.

“Oh really? What?” Her disbelieving expression annoyed me, but I couldn’t blame her.

I was more of the stay-at-home type of person. But she didn’t have to act like me doing something was so far removed from reality that it must be a lie.

“I’m going to a new place with some friends.”

“What place? And which friends?” Was she that skeptical, or was she fishing for other information?

I could have made up anyone because we didn’t hang out in the same circle. The

chance of her knowing any of my friends was slim, especially considering I only had one and she was a relative.

“I don’t think you know her, and the place is called something and Drinks. I can’t remember the first part.” That wasn’t me being coy. I honestly forgot the nonsensical name.

“Huh.” She cocked her head, and her pink bangs partially concealed her eyes.

“Yeah, I’m excited. It should be a good time.” Something about her cynicism made me want to hype this up.

The evening promised to be more work than play, but Yoni didn’t need to know that.

“That’s great. I’m so happy for you.” Her fake smile made me believe otherwise, but I had done nothing wrong, so I wouldn’t apologize like I normally did.

“Thank you. I’m happy, too. Please have a good evening, and I’ll talk to you later.” I was done with the conversation, and she surprisingly took the hint and left.

Maybe the parts of Caz that I hoped would rub off on me had. The problem was, I couldn’t tell if this was me being assertive or if I was letting my inner bitch out because of the day I’d had; it was a fine line to walk, but it seemed to be getting easier.

Chapter 13

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Caz

It was clear that Shiloh was upset, but I wished she would have talked to me about it. Ember was a See You Next Tuesday, and I was happy Shiloh came to that conclusion on her own, but it still had to hurt. When I figured out Davia wasn't who I thought, various emotions flooded my body and caused me to shut down. And if I were honest, I never fully opened myself back up.

Even though I had met Shiloh as part of a gig, she was the first person I had spoken to about things other than work in over a year. Sure, we spent more time focused on how to help her, but that didn't mean I wasn't also benefiting.

I had spent so much time angry at myself for allowing Davia to get away with the things she had done to me. I didn't realize other people had it worse because they were even more naïve than I was. Being around Shiloh helped me see I didn't have to be so closed off because good people were still out there—I just needed to find them.

But now she wasn't returning my texts, and it worried me. I wasn't even upset about the show. My only concern was her well-being, especially emotionally. She was a sensitive soul, and I could see the hurt in her eyes when she walked away today. Maybe I should have told her how she made a great escape by not trying to pursue things with Ember. However, she didn't appear receptive to anything at that time.

I almost sent another message, but after four unanswered texts, I figured I should give her space. Besides, I had to meet Matrix tonight at that glow golf thingy. The introvert in me was crying that I didn't get out of this, especially now that the wingwoman thing wasn't happening. But it would be better to face my doom sooner

than later.

I would have to tell Matrix that Shiloh was out and the Pepper Parade was in. My ass puckered at the thought of what it would go through later, but I had to push that aside. I was supposed to meet Matrix in less than an hour, but I didn't know what to wear.

Since I would be moving around, I wanted to be comfortable, but I also needed to be presentable because we would socialize. Gross. I didn't even like that word crossing my mind, but a promise was a promise.

I settled on my go-to look: a white crop top, a flannel tied around my waist, and black distressed jeggings. As I stared at my hair, I was reminded of my post-breakup bang phase, which was a real thing, but I didn't know—it was the worst idea ever. Too bad I didn't have anyone to talk some sense into me before I made the drastic change. That decision left me with only one option now: a half-pony to keep my not-quite-long enough hair out of my eyes. It wasn't my favorite style, but since we were golfing, I needed to see.

Once I was ready, I was out the door in plenty of time, as long as it didn't take long to get a ride. There was no way I was driving, and I didn't walk anywhere after dark. As I checked the app, I saw a car five minutes out, so I should still arrive on time-ish.

I checked my notifications while I waited, but still nothing from Shiloh. It was weird not talking to her. We had spent the last two days in constant communication, so not hearing from her felt like my day was incomplete.

Finally, the car showed up, and I pocketed my phone and hopped in. Upon entering, I immediately noticed a pungent odor partially masked by the artificial pine scent emanating from the air fresheners. There was tape on the center console, and a low, chanting tone played through the speakers. This would be the last time I opted for this app simply because it was cheaper.

Luckily, the drive was only about ten minutes, but as I exited the car, the smell still lingered, and I worried it was somehow stuck to me. I hadn't come with anything to combat it besides some breath strips, and I wasn't rubbing mint flavor all over me. Maybe the wind would air me out.

When I reached the back entrance, the sea of people stretched out before me was overwhelming. Loud music with a thumping bass blasted through speakers, and black lights lit the way. This place should come with a sensory overload warning. Finding Matrix in this mess wouldn't be easy; maybe I could use that as an excuse to leave.

But he wouldn't buy that since I had him on my 360 app, so I tried to hype myself up before meeting him. It was hard, though, because being around this type of crowd was my personal hell. While I gained my composure, I felt a light tap on my shoulder. I spun around to find him grinning at me, his body covered in marker illuminated by UV light.

"Why did you do that?" I pointed at him, but he held his hand to his ear, signaling he couldn't hear me. I shook my head.

There was no way I was going to yell over the thunderous music. I still had a show this week and couldn't do that if I were hoarse. The only good thing about it being so loud was that I didn't have to talk much, which was fine. If I played a round of golf and had one beer, I would consider my obligation fulfilled.

"You want to get inked?" He screamed while showing off his arms, but I laughed and exaggeratedly mouthed no! He shrugged and reached for my arm to pull me through the masses.

I scanned the place as we walked, and it reminded me of this rave I had gone to in college—minus the copious amounts of drugs, at least that was visible. However, the way everyone was dancing and writing all over their skin made me think some

outside influence was at play, and probably more than alcohol.

Once we got inside the bar, the noise was deadened a little, but the vibrations were still present, causing my equilibrium to be off balance. This was not a good first-date idea. To me, it was a bad idea altogether. I didn't want to come to begin with, but now that I had, I wanted to be here even less.

"Isn't it cool?" He was still yelling, but I wasn't sure if he could hear himself, as he was much more boisterous than he needed to be.

"It's definitely something." I smiled, hoping he wouldn't push me for my actual thoughts.

"This is some opening day. I think everyone in the city is here." His shouting, on top of the other sounds, was causing my head to throb.

"Possibly." I nodded but quickly stopped as it added to my dizziness.

"So, golf or drink first?" He pointed in both directions, and the thought of going back outside almost gave me a panic attack.

I figured the further we got away from those doors, the better it would be. And also, maybe some of the people would clear out, and my anxiety would settle.

"Drinks would be good." I walked toward the bar, and he followed, waving to everyone he saw.

I didn't usually spend time with him in public places, but his actions seemed like he was running for mayor or something.

"Yo, TBJ," he flagged down the bartender, who was swamped with customers but

came running like he was waiting on the president.

“Whose ass have you been kissing?” I raised an eyebrow at him, but he paid no attention to my question.

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“Hey, buddy. You’re killing it!” He grabbed the bartender’s hand and pulled him over the counter halfway for a weird bro-hug.

“We could use some more help, but I like what I’m seeing from the staff so far.” He let Matrix go and whipped out a rag to wipe up the mess in front of me. When his dark eyes locked on mine, he smiled brightly. “Hey, pretty lady, what can I do for you?”

“Who says I’m a lady?” I didn’t even care if he was flirting for tips. He didn’t know me or how I identified, so his reference was insensitive.

“I’m sorry, miss. I didn’t mean anything by it.” He slung the towel over his shoulder and looked at Matrix.

“It’s okay. But you want to make sure the customers feel comfortable. And you should never assume their gender.” Matrix was a good person. Even though he identified as he/him and looked like a typical “guys-guy,” I appreciated his ability to break the stereotype by being perceptive.

“Oh, sure, boss. I didn’t know.” He seemed genuinely apologetic, but the “boss” comment took me off guard.

“No worries. But being inclusive is always something to think about.” Matrix tapped his temple, and the bartender nodded before turning to me.

“Definitely. What would you like to drink, beautiful person?”

I stared at him, still annoyed, and realized it wasn't just the lady part that bothered me so much—it was the reference to my looks. But that shouldn't be surprising, considering it was coming from someone full of testosterone.

I wanted to scold him, but I'd let that slide if he focused on embracing diversity. "I'll have a vodka tonic, please."

"And for you, mate?" He looked at Matrix, and I was impressed with how quickly he picked up on it.

"I'll do the same. And thanks again. I appreciate your effort... with everything." Matrix offered him a high-five, which he slapped hard before going to work on our order. "I'm sorry if he offended you."

"Nah. I'm just pissy. A lot has happened today." I waved it off, but I was pleased that Matrix stood up for me.

He bumped my shoulder. "What's up?"

TBJ returned with our drinks and set them down quickly to help serve the rest of the mob.

"Why did he call you boss?" I took a sip through the tiny straw.

"Why did you ignore my question?"

"Why are you ignoring mine?" I countered, and our laughter filled the air.

"How about this? Tell me one reason you're upset, and I'll answer you. A little tit for tat, if you will." He downed half of his drink in one gulp while awaiting my response.

I swirled the ice in my glass before finally summoning the courage to speak. “Shiloh pulled out, so I guess the pepper thing is on.” I gave him a side-eye to see his reaction, and he appeared... disappointed, maybe.

“I’m really sorry, Caz. I know how much you were into helping her.” He patted my forearm, and I wondered why he was comforting me about that instead of the fact that I would have to swallow the flames of hell.

“It’s okay. I’m more worried about burning my stomach lining.” I chuckled, and he rolled his eyes.

“You don’t always have to make jokes with me. You can talk to me seriously.” He finished his beverage and pushed it away.

“What? I was telling the truth.”

He tilted his head and stared. “Are you going to play dumb right now?”

I wasn’t playing. I was perplexed. “You’ll have to explain because I’m not picking up what you’re laying down.”

“You’re upset that you don’t get to help Shorty because you liked her. She was the first person you hung out with when you didn’t have to. You even protected her over doing your job, which I’ve never seen you do.” He narrowed his eyes to drive home his point. “But I didn’t even mind because I was happy you had made a friend. I’m awesome, but you need someone other than me around.” He nudged me with his elbow, and I leaned into him.

“You’re right. I saw a kindred spirit in her, but she’s too sweet for her own good. I wanted to make sure she had the tools to protect herself from those who might exploit that vulnerability.”

“Are you sure that’s all it was?”

“What are you getting at?” I didn’t know where his line of questioning was going, but I wished he would come right out with it.

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“I’m not accusing you of anything. It seems you might have been interested in her... as more than a friend.”

A chuckle escaped my lips before I realized he was serious. “You have to know better than that. Dating and me don’t mix. I’m jaded and prickly, like a porcupine. That doesn’t bode well for the people who try to get close to me.”

“But you let your guard down with her,” he rebutted, although he had no idea what he was talking about.

“Where are you getting your information? You haven’t heard our convos, and you’ve never seen us together. I think you might be living in a dream.”

He lifted a shoulder nonchalantly. “Okay. If you say so, I’ll believe you. But you’ve never put so much time and energy into something that wasn’t important to you. You used to do the same thing for Da?—”

“Remember, she is the one who shall not be named.” I mimed, zipping my lips.

I needed control of when she popped into my head, and after the breakup, Matrix and I made a deal that we wouldn’t discuss her unless I brought her up.

“Sorry. But I don’t think it’s bad for you to get back out there. It’s been years since you’ve tried getting to know someone.”

“Why are you suddenly concerned with my love life?” Something seemed off, and I wanted to know what it was.

“I just want to see you happy. That’s all.” A faint smile crossed his lips, but there was more he wasn’t telling me.

“Being alone makes me happy. I love myself and trust myself, which is more than I can say for others.” I tipped back the rest of my drink because I wasn’t interested in continuing this discussion.

I stood up, signaling I was done, and he followed suit. Getting this golf thing over with was best so I could go home. As we headed toward the door, I saw a tall blonde who looked familiar, but I couldn’t place her. She whooped loudly and ran toward the bar, leaving me face-to-face with someone I would know anywhere—Shiloh.

My pulse raced, and for a second, I wondered if Matrix was right. But I quickly shook that thought away. No, it was more likely a mixture of anger and excitement, knowing she was okay since she hadn’t responded to me all day. When we locked eyes, I could see a darkness there, and my heart sank.

Something happened, and my first instinct was to find out how I could fix it. What the fuck did that mean?

Chapter 14

Shiloh

When I agreed to be Sonya and Devon's DD, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. The struggle to find parking was just the beginning. As soon as we got out of the car, the constant high energy and enthusiasm of the place drained me completely. Exhaustion hit me hard as we pushed through the mob, and I wished I was at home, recharging.

Sonya was living her best life, chatting and waving to the people we passed. Every

time we went out, she charmed everyone around her while I stayed in the background, trying to be inconspicuous. Luckily, it wasn't just her personality that was giant—she was, too, and I could hide behind her effortlessly. That was until she took off running.

I didn't have the energy to follow her, so I waited by the door until she got her drink. Most people seemed half-past tipsy, so I pretended to be on my phone and avoid eye contact. But I made the mistake of looking up and instantly regretted it when I saw Caz's piercing gaze fixed on me.

She was the last person I wanted to see right now. Anger pulsed through my veins, but her expression was unreadable. There was a softness in her eyes, and it was probably shame. I glanced around to see if Ember was with her, but from what I could tell, she was alone. I shouldn't jump to that conclusion because she could have been meeting her outside for all I knew.

As she stepped toward me, I darted in the opposite direction, fleeing like I'd seen a ghost. I bumped into people left and right, but I didn't stop to apologize. I hoped she wouldn't chase me and I could get lost in the chaos.

Once I felt a safe distance away from the door, I slowed my pace and collected my thoughts. What was I doing? I was better than this—better than practically ghosting someone. I needed to have a conversation with her and tell her how she hurt my feelings but now wasn't the time.

When I looked over my shoulder, I couldn't see through the bodies, but she was no longer in front of me. I quickly texted Sonya to let her know I had moved because I didn't want to lose her. However, I didn't need to say anything because, as I turned towards the bar, I could see her dancing on top of it.

These were the poor decisions I had hoped to keep her from making, but I didn't

realize they would happen so quickly. By the time I reached her, Caz was already there, helping her down.

“Hey. You’re a good dancer, but you don’t want to show off those moves for free.” Caz was speaking to Sonya like a child, which she sort of was.

“You think I should become a stripper?” Of course, Sonya went there. She had always been an exhibitionist.

Caz laughed, and I missed that sound. If I were honest, I missed her. As mad as I was, I couldn’t blame her, could I? Ember was magnetic, and Caz probably couldn’t defend herself from her womanly wiles—I knew I couldn’t.

“No. That’s not what I meant. I think you might regret letting people tape you when you don’t know what they will do with it.”

“Oh, you think they’ll sell it and not pay me?” Sonya had no idea what Caz was protecting her from, and I decided now was my time to step in.

“Thank you.” I offered Caz a shy smile. “But I can take care of it from here.” I grabbed Sonya’s arm and moved her away from the bar.

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“No problem. I don’t want to see someone get taken advantage of.” She did a two-finger salute and started to walk away.

“Wait.” I couldn’t believe I had stopped her, but something felt final about her leaving, and I wasn’t ready for that. “I’m on babysitting duty tonight and obviously not up for the job alone. Would you want to keep me company?”

She glanced over her shoulder, then turned back to me. “Um?—”

I was probably right, and she was meeting Ember. “It’s okay. I’m sure you’re here with someone. Go have fun.” I waved her off, but she didn’t move.

“I am, but let me text him to see if he’ll be okay flying solo.” She pulled out her phone, but the pronoun she used wasn’t lost on me.

There was a reason my therapist told me not to assume. It wasn’t because I would make an ass out of you and me. It was because my instincts were hardly ever accurate. That didn’t mean I was wrong about Caz and Ember having a crush on each other, but maybe I was wrong about Caz jumping on it. I didn’t know what to think, but I needed to talk to her to find out the truth.

“I’m all yours.” Caz raised one eyebrow as she smiled widely, and I was taken aback for a second.

With just one glance, she could stir up intense emotions in others, and I wondered if that trait could be taught or if she was born with it.

“Hey, I thought you wanted to go home with me tonight?” Sonya slurred a little, and I steadied her as I judged Caz’s reaction.

“I hate to disappoint you, but I will always go home alone.” Caz took Sonya’s other arm, and we walked toward the exit.

“Hold on!” We all stopped as I just realized something. “Where’s Devon?”

“Devon?” Sonya asked as if she didn’t know who I was talking about.

“Yeah. Your roommate. The other tall Barbie blonde who came with us.”

“I know who she is, but why are we looking for her?” Sonya didn’t appear concerned, which was a prime example of them not watching out for each other.

“Because she’s part of our group.” I sighed heavily, wondering how worried I needed to be.

“She’s with her boyfriend.” She acted like that was common knowledge, even though I didn’t know she was dating anyone.

“Okay. So she’s safe?” I double-checked, and she rolled her eyes.

“Of course she is. She just texted me a picture of the two of them.” Sonya showed me Devon, who was covered in marker and had a mischievous smile on her face, just like her “boyfriend.”

Caz’s eyes went wide as she caught a glimpse of the photo. “May I see that?” She tilted Sonya’s phone toward her, and she shook her head. “Wow!”

I couldn’t read her expressions at all. Who was the exclamation for? The man or

Devon? I thought she was only into women, so by the process of elimination... But when I studied her face, it didn't seem like she was commenting on her beauty. I was too tired to keep playing this guessing game with myself.

“What?” I posed the question in an open-ended manner, hoping she would share her thoughts.

“That’s my friend, Matrix. The guy I came with.” She didn’t appear hurt—more surprised. “Maybe that’s why he was hoping I would be ready to date.”

Her words seemed more for herself, but they begged a question for me. If she wasn’t ready to date, did that apply to Ember, too?

“Oh yeah? He’s the reason we’re here. He owns the place.” Sonya wiggled out of our grip while Caz and I were preoccupied. “Hey, why don’t we go golf?” That brief respite must have given her a second wind.

“Oh.” That wasn’t what I wanted to do, but I figured I should stick to my word and keep an eye on her. “Sure.” I stared at Caz expectantly. “Would you want to do that?”

“I think I might head out.”

I wasn’t sure what was going on, but something had shifted.

“Boo!” Sonya chimed in, and I glared at her. “What? You can’t leave when the party just started. That’s like quitting after foreplay.”

“This isn’t everyone’s idea of a good time,” I scolded, but she wasn’t bothered.

“Then why don’t you go, too?” Sonya put her hand on her hip, and had I not been worried about her, I would have.

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“Because if I leave, it will give you an excuse to do something stupid. Someone has to hold you accountable.”

“I’m going to be with the owner of the bar. You think he’s going to let me fuck something up?”

“Matt is trustworthy. I’ve known him for a decade. I think she’ll be safe with him.” Caz’s tone was melancholy, and I wanted to offer her support or a listening ear... something.

“How do I know you’ll even find him and Devon? If left to your own devices, you’ll inevitably end up back on top of the bar, treating it like your personal stage.”

“We can walk her to them. I have him on 360 and can see his precise location.” Caz showed me a pin that was him.

“See, Mom. You can hold my hand until I get there.” Sonya reached for me, but I swatted her away.

Caz led the charge, Sonya in the middle, and I ended the train. Outside, the music blasted at an ear-splitting volume, causing my temples to throb like a vise squeezing my head.

Fortunately, they were in the clubhouse with fewer people and less fluorescent lighting.

“Hey!” Caz’s friend called out, seemingly surprised.

Meanwhile, Devon and Sonya held hands, spinning around in a circle like they were playing Ring Around the Rosie.

“Hey, yourself.” Caz smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “This one is now your problem. Please make sure she makes it home safely.” Her voice was stern as she pointed to Sonya.

“Of course. Are you okay?” He reached for her, but she shook him off.

“Yeah. But I’m heading out. Super tired.” She yawned for emphasis, but it seemed fake. “Have fun.” She waved without waiting for a response from anyone.

I didn’t want to interrupt Sonya and Devon’s playtime, so I offered a head nod to Matt and rushed after Caz so I wouldn’t lose her in the cluster. I was a few paces back, but I wouldn’t push my way through as long as I could see her. Once we reached the parking lot, away from the people and the noise, I called out to her.

She turned around wearily. “Did I drop something?” She patted her pockets and clutched her phone.

“No. I guess I thought you might want some company.” Something was wrong when she left, and I wanted to make it right.

“I appreciate you checking. But I’m good. You can go spend time with them.”

“What if I don’t want to?” I was embarrassed about how I had acted earlier and because of my prior thoughts.

Caz was a sincere person, but I had put her in a box with all the other people who had hurt me, and that wasn’t fair. And right now, something was bothering her, and I wanted to be the one who helped her through it—like she had been there for me.

“I’m going to be honest. You probably don’t want to be around me, either. I’m in my head right now, and I’m not sure it’s a good place.”

“I don’t care. That’s what friends are for.” I smiled, and she gave a half-shrug. “Do you need a ride home? You can maybe get some of those feelings out?”

“A ride would be great, but I’m not the sharing type.” I nodded because I had noticed that before, but I thought it was because she wanted to focus on me for work.

“That’s okay. We can sit in silence, too.” My goal was to show her the person I was, which was the loyal type, not the leaving type.

“Thanks.” Her expression was somber, but there appeared to be a slight smile behind her eyes, and I hoped I caused it.

Chapter 15

Caz

I probably shouldn’t have gotten into Shiloh’s Prius with her because my mind was a mess. When I first saw her tonight, I felt relieved she was okay, but then my conversation with Matrix popped back into my thoughts, and I wondered if he had been right. Did I have more interest in Shiloh than just helping her?

Was I on edge because so much appeared to be changing for Matrix and I was standing still? He was the only person I ever opened up to, which wasn’t a lot, but finding out he had been keeping so much from me made me feel even more alone. And it wasn’t like they were small events—they were life-changing. Then, I questioned if he would continue to produce the show. Did I even want to continue with the show? I spiraled down a rabbit hole of doubt, wondering if there was a path back to reality.

I turned to look at Shiloh while she focused on the road. Her hair was tucked behind her ear, and she was wearing her standard gray shirt. It was different from the one this afternoon. This one was tighter and closer to the black family. She must have felt my eyes on her because she peeked my way.

“Can I ask you something?” I didn’t want to make things awkward by her catching me staring, so I figured if I spoke, she would think that was why I had been looking at her.

“Of course.”

“Is there a reason you always wear gray?” I had become accustomed to it, yet my curiosity persisted.

“Do you want the real answer or the answer I give most people?” Her voice sounded nervous but slightly playful, which I enjoyed.

“How about both?” If I were honest with myself, I would have enjoyed learning about her, regardless of the topic.

“Okay. Well, I tell most people it’s because it’s versatile and matches my shoes.”

That seemed reasonable, but now I wanted to know the truth.

“And...” I prompted her to continue.

“Well, it’s slightly embarrassing. But I have sensory issues, and too many colors and choices overwhelm me, so I stick with what keeps the peace inside my brain.”

“That’s nothing to be embarrassed about. Lots of people experience difficulties with sensory processing. Like I don’t handle loud noises very well.”

She laughed. “I’m not sure anyone does.”

“Sonya didn’t seem to mind,” I challenged.

“Well... Sonya is an exception to every rule,” she breathed out teasingly.

She was probably right. Sonya’s life seemed to be a choreographed dance to music only she could hear.

“Fair enough. Why don’t I share something personal so you don’t feel alone?”

“You can tell me anything, but you don’t have to do it because you feel sorry for me.”

“What? No. That’s not what I meant. I realize you have shared a lot with me, and even though I’m not the type to normally reciprocate, I want to with you.” That was more honest than I probably should have been, but I didn’t want to take it back.

“Okay. But only if you want to.” She was so polite.

“I’m a recluse,” I said awkwardly.

She chuckled. “I didn’t realize you were going to tell me a joke. I should have known, though. You said you weren’t much of a sharer.”

“I’m serious, Shiloh.” I didn’t know if she could tell from the tone in my voice, but she stopped laughing.

“What do you mean? You work with the public; you were out at the biggest bar opening I’ve ever seen, and you spend time with me.” She sounded confused, and I could see why.

“Two things can be true at the same time.” Many people thought they knew me based on my radio personality, but the only person who got to see my genuine self was Matrix, and now... Shiloh. “I haven’t gone on a date in three years. I rarely leave my

condo unless I have to do something for work. Being alone brings me comfort.”

She didn’t say anything for a minute, but neither did I. It took a lot out of me to say that, and I was having sharer’s remorse.

“Did something happen?” she questioned.

Shit. This was another reason I didn’t tell people things. Because a nugget of information was like an onion. You had to peel back all the layers to get to the core before people were satisfied.

At this point, I could say yes without elaborating, which would be the safer choice, or tell her what had been weighing on me for a while now and see if getting it off my chest would make me feel lighter.

Most of the time, suppression was my go-to. But look where that had gotten me—a life filled with isolation and nothing to show for my efforts.

“My girlfriend broke up with me and took the best part of who I was.” That sounded so pathetic, but it was true. I was a shell of a person pretending to be whole.

When I felt a sudden touch on my thigh, I let out a piercing scream and jolted in my seat.

“I’m sorry.” Shiloh yanked her hand back so fast that she jerked the car but safely righted it. “I didn’t mean to do that. I was trying to let you know you’re not alone.”

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“It’s okay. You don’t need to apologize. I do. I’m just jumpy. It’s been a long time since anyone... comforted me.” I guess that was what she was doing, but my mind was already jumbled.

And when her soft fingers brushed against my bare skin in one of the holes of my jeans, it sent my body into fight-or-flight.

“I’m keeping my hands on the wheel.” She had it firmly gripped at ten and two. “But, Caz, please hear me when I say this. You have not lost the best part of yourself. Do you realize the impact you have on people? You can make someone’s day with a wink. You ooze charisma; underneath that tough exterior is a kind-hearted, loving person.”

I was unsure how to respond. No one had ever seen me as the heroine. If anything, I was the smartass who needed to watch her mouth—at least, that was what I had heard for most of my childhood.

Emotions sloshed around inside of me, and by the time she stopped the car in front of my condo, I realized they had moved outward in the form of tears. I never cried, but my eyes were leaking, and I couldn’t seem to stop.

She turned toward me, but I hoped she couldn’t tell what my face was doing since it was dark. “Do you want me to come in or leave you?”

I was afraid to talk because my voice might give it away, but it didn’t matter. There was only one thing I needed right now: her.

Chapter 16

Shiloh

Caz was struggling, but she seemed to like to suffer in silence. The last thing I wanted to do was pressure her to talk, but I also didn't want her to feel alone after she unleashed something so heavy. I figured I would give her the option, but after I asked if she wanted me to stay or go, she sat there, unmoving.

"I'll let you get to it." I didn't want her to feel guilty about telling me to leave.

"Please stay." Her words were choked, and if I didn't know any better, I would think she was crying.

"Are you sure?"

She wrapped her fingers around mine, and she was cold, but warmth shot through my core, and I wanted to hug her—to tell her it was okay to cry on my shoulder. But I patiently waited for her next move.

"Yes," she whispered and removed her hand, but I missed the contact immediately.

She said nothing else as she opened the door. I turned off the car and followed suit. Once we got into the elevator, I could see the sheen from the wells in her eyes, but I didn't point it out. We rode in silence to her floor and then went inside.

She turned on the lights and looked at me. "Would you like some wine?" she asked as if this were a friendly visit.

"No, thank you. Can I do anything?" Seeing this person, who I thought was so full of confidence, seem so lost right now was heartbreaking.

She stood there, shaking her head, but her eyes were blank and unfocused. I did the only thing I knew and wrapped her in a hug. Standing on my tiptoes, I reached around her neck, pulling her closer. She stayed limp, and I wanted to squeeze her tighter but restrained myself. I read somewhere that hugging someone could boost serotonin and improve your mood. After holding her for a few beats, she awkwardly dropped her forehead to my shoulder.

I rubbed her back and neck to relieve the tension I could feel, but this wasn't a good angle. "It's going to be okay. Whatever you're feeling is okay."

Her body silently shook, and I could feel wetness against my skin. I was used to being the caregiver, but most of the time, it was for people who wanted to be cared for—that wasn't Caz. She was uncomfortable in this embrace, with her head being the only real point of contact with my body. Her arms were still at her sides, but I moved closer this time. She stiffened, so I released her and guided her to the oversized couch.

"Sit." I gently urged her, and she did so without resistance.

I slid to her side and started kneading the knots in her back.

"What are you doing?" she questioned in a slightly accusatory tone.

"It's called a massage." But I tilted my head to look at her.

"I'm aware, but why are you doing that?" At least her sadness seemed to disappear, but I felt rather stupid.

"To help?" Maybe it made her uncomfortable. Or perhaps she thought I was hitting on her when she was vulnerable. "I'm sorry. I'll stop."

“You don’t have to, but don’t think I’d be good at returning the favor.” She chuckled, probably deflecting her feelings.

“Well, lucky for you, I won’t ask you to do me next.”

“That’s not what she said.” The words flowed from her lips so effortlessly that I didn’t think she realized she had said them.

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“Will you knock it off and let me do my thing?”

“I don’t know. I guess it depends on what ‘your thing’ is,” she teased, but it was good to hear her joking, even if it was at my expense.

“Why do you have to make this awkward?” I nudged her arm.

“I’m sorry.” She bit her lower lip. “My therapist says I use humor as a coping mechanism.”

“That’s evident.” I dug my fingers harder into the tight muscles, and she let out a low moan. “Did I hurt you?”

“No. You hit the right spot.”

“That’s what she said.”

She threw herself back against me with a burst of laughter, and I couldn't resist joining in.

“This is what you need to do.” Her words caught me off guard.

“What are you talking about?”

She sat forward and looked at me. “When you’re relaxed, you lose some of your shyness, and your true personality emerges. This is how you need to interact with people. Let them see the real you.” She was done opening up and returned to my

problems.

“I appreciate that. But it’s easier said than done.” I had to feel comfortable with someone to let my walls down, and even then, I still kept many things to myself out of fear of rejection.

“I get that, but we can work on it. I know you no longer want to go after Ember, but maybe there is someone else you’d be interested in?”

Since this was where the conversation had gone, I wouldn’t fight it. Besides, maybe I did still want her advice. She might have thought she was a loner, but she couldn’t deny that she was inherently a people person.

“To tell you the truth, I still like Ember.” Knowing that Caz wasn’t interested in her brought back my prior feelings. It wasn’t like they had just gone away, anyway. But it appeared safe to voice them again.

“Oh?” She seemed surprised, but not in a good way.

“Is that a problem?”

Did I read the situation wrong? Maybe Ember hit on Caz, but Caz didn’t return the sentiment like with Yoni. And maybe Caz didn’t want to tell me that because she knew it would hurt my feelings.

“No. That’s not a problem. What happened to make you change your mind?”

How honest should I be right now? I took a beat before responding but figured it was better not to lie. Caz had been nothing but understanding and patient with me, and if I misled her, how could she help me?

“I thought you had a crush on her, and I didn’t think I could compete with you, so I dropped it.”

She sat there stunned, and I wondered if I had unknowingly brought those feelings to the forefront of her mind. She covered her mouth and exhaled deeply through her nose as she shook her head. “No. Noooo. Nope. Not even a little.” She was so adamant that I thought maybe she protested too much. But then she began chuckling, which confused me.

“What’s so funny?”

“Sorry. Ember and I would never be a good match. We appear to both have forceful personalities.”

I wasn’t acquainted well enough with Ember yet, so I was curious to find out what she knew. “You think she’s like you?”

“God, no. I think she is... confident?” Her voice lilted up on the last word as if it were a question.

“Have you dug into her socials?” Where was she getting her information?

I didn’t question Ember’s confidence. She had every right to feel that way because she was striking and alluring.

“No. I have done nothing without you. I’m basing it on my interaction at the coffeehouse.”

“What did she say?” I could tell I was missing something, but I wasn’t sure if she wanted to fill me in.

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“It wasn’t what she said as much as how she acted. I read energy, and hers wasn’t... on the same wavelength as mine.” She spoke cautiously, and I was tired of reading between the lines.

“Do you think I have a shot or not?” I wanted her to come right out and say what she was thinking.

“You have more than a shot. Don’t you realize how incredible you are? If Ember doesn’t want to go out with you, that’s her loss—not yours.”

Although her words were touching, I remained skeptical that Ember would share the same perspective. Caz knew me, so she would see me in a better light. Did that mean Ember would give me the same consideration? Probably not. However, was the chance worth the risk? I guess I’d have to see for myself.

Chapter 17

Caz

I recalled how, when Davia had left me, my tears became a constant companion for two months as I watched my world slowly unravel around me. After my uncontrollable crying, I sternly reminded myself that I needed to be stronger and not let my emotions consume me like that ever again. But tonight, without my say-so, they slipped down my cheeks while Shiloh comforted me.

My life had become an impenetrable fortress, but she managed to sneak through my defenses, which made me uneasy. And when she began massaging my back, my mind

wandered to places it shouldn't have—especially once I found out she still had a thing for Ember.

Shiloh wouldn't be interested in me romantically if she were into the vapid type. So, we had made it full circle, from her taking care of me to me supporting her desire to ask out Ember.

It wasn't the best situation for me when I was already emotional, but I would switch off my feelings and persevere. That was what I always did.

"So, are you still up for being my Yoda?" She stared at me with her gentle caramel eyes, and I hoped Ember would handle her heart with the care it deserved.

As much as I thought she could do better than Ember, it wasn't my place to say so. But I thought it would be better to have me involved than not. That way, if anything terrible happened, I would be there to pick up the pieces. I knew all too well what it felt like to deal with rejection alone.

"You got it." I offered my best, genuine smile, even though I wasn't quite feeling it. I needed to change the subject before she questioned my reaction. "Is this for the show or just as friends?" I would do it either way, but I wouldn't be mad if I didn't have to do the Pepper Parade after all.

"Well, you need content, and I want to help you, too."

"I appreciate that, but it's only if you want to. There is no pressure, okay?" I didn't selfishly want to let her do something just to please me.

"You've never made me feel pressured. You have been so understanding that I feel guilty for not overcoming my fears." She was contrite, but she didn't have a reason to be.

“Hey, it’s fine. But why don’t you talk to me about what you’re afraid of? Maybe that will make it better.” It was apparent she was shy, but there might be more to it than that.

She sat there for a minute, her eyes blankly fixed on a point across the room. “I get embarrassed easily. I feel stupid a lot, and I’m afraid to be the butt of the joke. And if this goes south, it’s not just you, me, and Ember who will know about it—but thousands of people who listen and watch you.”

Those were legitimate fears, and I couldn’t necessarily fix them, but I might be able to lessen their impact.

“I’m never going to allow you to look foolish. Even if something went sideways, I wouldn’t shoot anything live. People are interested in the journey, the fairytale, and that’s what we’ll give them, regardless of the outcome.” I wasn’t saying we would lie, but this was how the media worked. We dictated the narrative.

“Do you think it will be bad?” Her voice was so small, and her energy shifted.

“No! I think Ember is fucking lucky that you want to give her the time of day.”

She shook her head. “You’re just trying to build me up.”

I was doing that, but not falsely. I believed what I was saying. “Please trust me. You have a lot to offer.”

“I don’t know about that.” She hung her head, and I needed more to go on than just my feelings.

“Tell me three things you like about yourself.” I held up one finger, encouraging her to start.

“What kind of things?” She furrowed her brows.

“It doesn’t matter. It just has to be something you like.”

She raised her shoulders dismissively. “I don’t know.”

“That’s not good enough. I can start if you need me to.” I stared at her pointedly.

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“Well, of course, you’ll have three things to say about yourself that you like. You’re... assured.”

“First of all, I was talking about you. And secondly, I’ve told you I was a hermit after my breakup, which happened three years ago. What part of that makes me sound confident?” I didn’t mean to be self-deprecating, but I needed her to understand that we all have struggles, which was okay.

“Yeah, but you have done that by choice. If you wanted to go out into the world and talk to people, you could. You have all the skills inside you to make anyone like you.” The corner of her mouth hitched into the slightest smile, and her tiny dimple showed.

“And anyone would be crazy not to take the time to get to know you. You are quiet at first, but you have so much personality dying to get out if you could get over your insecurities. You are a sweet, smart, and... funny person.” I had to stop myself from finishing that alliteration with sexy, but the way she was looking at me now, so intensely, that was a word that floated through my mind.

“You might be the only one who feels that way.”

“Do you disagree?” I challenged her.

“Oh, I don’t?—”

“Don’t you dare say you don’t know. What adjective did I use that was wrong? There are so many others I could say, but that won’t make you believe them. You have to

come to those conclusions on your own. So... tell me your thoughts.” Taking a compliment could be hard, but giving yourself one was even more difficult.

I understood that, but I wouldn’t back down on this. She was so close to a breakthrough. I could tell.

“I agree that I’m the things you said—sometimes. But there are many more things I could work on to be better.”

“That’s true for everyone. We all have to choose to grow. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t give ourselves credit for where we are.”

She nodded imperceptibly, and I wondered if it was finally sinking in. “I’m a hard worker. I try to be open-minded, and I’m forgiving.”

“Those are great things to be, and I’m so proud of you for acknowledging your worth.”

“You make me feel like I’m a different person.” She let out a heavy breath.

“No, this person has been inside you, but somewhere along the way, you have taught yourself to suppress them.”

“That’s called self-preservation.” She chuckled, but I could tell she didn’t think it was funny.

“Maybe that was the case before, but you are resilient. You’ve been through stuff but came out of it stronger, and you no longer need to hide. You don’t give a fuck what people think because you are doing the best you can.”

Now, her laugh turned into something real. “I think you’ve confused me with

yourself, but I'll ride your coattails if you let me."

I grabbed her by the shoulders to make sure she was looking directly at me. "You do not belong in anyone's shadow. You are the light. Remember that." My therapist had beat so many of these mantras into my head, but they didn't resonate with me until now. "Say it."

"Say what?" She licked her lips nervously, and I needed to give myself space.

I pulled her off the couch so she was standing. I thought it might make her feel more powerful, and it gave me an excuse to back away from her. "Say I don't need to hide. I am the light."

"Okay." She appeared deep in thought, and I sighed.

"Out loud!" I scolded, and she spat it out quickly but quietly. "With conviction—I don't need to hide. I am the light!" My voice filled the small space, reverberating off the walls, and I worried I might get a noise complaint, but if it would empower her, it was worth it.

"I don't need to hide. I am the light." Her tone wasn't as powerful as mine, but it was above a whisper, so I called it a win.

"Exactly. Now, tomorrow, you'll invite her on a date." I almost choked on that last word because I couldn't see them together, but I was helping Shiloh live her best life, not the life I envisioned.

"That soon?" Her uneasiness was back, but I wasn't having it.

"Yes! So tonight, we better get down to business and figure out what she likes to do." My excitement for her stepping outside of her comfort zone was overflowing, but the

weight of what that meant was crashing down on me.

Chapter 18

Shiloh

I had seen Sonya go from aloof Barbie to online detective in seconds. It didn't matter who she was digging up dirt on. She had an uncanny ability to discover their life story in the blink of an eye. But the funny thing was, Caz and I came up with nothing when we tried to gain intel on Ember.

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How were two knowledgeable people so incompetent? If someone made all their socials private, how did you learn about them? I knew who I could ask, but I didn't want her involved any more than she had already made herself.

Caz and I spent hours finding only two public posts, and neither of them told us anything about her. One was a repost for some business, and the other was a picture of a beach with the caption: Don't be salty. The only thing we gathered was that she was private, which wasn't a bad thing because I was, too.

However, Caz still thought it would be a good time for me to ask Ember out, and I didn't want to keep putting her off. She had a job to do, and my reluctance was making it harder for her.

I made my way to work, and Yoni was already there. "Good morning." I waved, but I didn't plan on stopping.

"So, when were you going to tell me?" Her words stopped me in my tracks, and I did a slow spin on my heel.

"You'll need to be more specific." I couldn't imagine what she was referring to.

"Oh, I don't know, you and Caz?" Her voice had a bite to it, but I didn't know where it came from.

"What about Caz?" Did she know she was my Jedi Master? I wasn't about to spill anything until she spelled it out.

“I saw you last night—at Illumi-Links. Did you think I wouldn’t figure out where you were going?”

“I didn’t care if you knew. Besides, I didn’t go with Caz. I went with Sonya.”

She shouldn’t be mad at me for Caz blowing her off. I had nothing to do with it.

“Right. She just happened to show up and leave with you?”

“How do you know she left with me?” The way her eyes bore into mine left me uneasy.

“You’re not denying it.” Was she throwing out random accusations, hoping I would confirm them?

“What’s going on, Yoni? I’m not keeping anything from you, and if you have a problem with Caz, you need to take it up with her—not me.”

“This has nothing to do with her. It has everything to do with you.” Her tone was sharp, and I didn’t know where her anger came from.

“What about me?”

“Do you think you can do better than me?” Her question came out of left field.

“Yoni, we’re not together. What do you mean?”

“But we were, and you never ended things. You just stopped accepting my advances. I assumed it was because you weren’t ready to date someone, but now you’re out with two gorgeous women on the same night.”

Gross, one of those women was my cousin, and the other was quickly becoming my best friend.

“Yoni, you are poly and don’t mind dating other people at the same time. Why are you getting upset with me?” It wasn’t like I was dating someone behind her back. She and I weren’t anything to each other besides coworkers.

“Yes, but I wanted you to be my core.” She stared at me like I knew what that meant.

“Look, I’m not sure how relationships work for you, but I only want one person to spoil, shower with affection, and care for. I don’t need a parade of people to be happy.”

“I never said I needed that. But I have a big heart. I can love more than one person at a time, so is that a sin?” She seemed to think I was judging her.

“No. There is nothing wrong with how you choose to live your life, but that’s not what I want for mine. And if I didn’t make that clear and left you confused, I’m sorry. I honestly didn’t think we were even together since you were dating so many other people. And that’s why I didn’t officially break up with you.” That might have been naïve of me, but it was the truth.

“I cared about you. You made me feel special. That’s why I didn’t sleep with you.” Her statement was baffling, but I didn’t ask for clarification.

“Okay. I should have communicated better. I hope you find what you’re looking for, but I’m sure it’s not me. Our beliefs are too different.” This wasn’t the ideal way to begin work, and I hoped it wasn’t setting a precedent for the rest of my day.

“What if it’s you I’m looking for?” She had to be kidding right now.

We had been working together for six months since we stopped “seeing each other,” and now she was interested? At one point, I thought Yoni and I could have been something, but that ship had more than sailed—it was lost at sea with no chance of rescue.

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“I don’t know what happened from when we went out to now, but you deserve someone who sees relationships the same way you do, and that person isn’t me. We can work together because we are focused on a healthy lifestyle. But I think we are on two different pages when it comes to the big things.” It was more like I was in a novel and she was in a coloring book, but I didn’t need to be harsh.

“So, what are you saying?”

How could I be more transparent than by saying that we didn’t belong together?

“I think you are a wonderful person, but you’re not my person.” Was that straightforward enough for her?

“But you think Caz is?” Her words were full of venom.

What was she talking about? She was the one who had asked Caz out, not me. All of her aggression was misplaced.

“Caz and I are just friends, so can we please let this go?” I shouldn’t have had to defend myself, but I didn’t want her to believe her reaction was justified.

“Sure. Consider it dropped.” She glared at me, and it felt anything but that.

However, I was so anxious about asking Ember out that I had no energy to deal with her drama. Without another word, I walked to the back and shut myself in my office. I needed to recenter my energy.

I repeated the mantra Caz gave me, trying to convince myself that I had the strength I needed, but my mind and body were locked in battle.

With every deep breath I took to relax, a different negative thought popped into my head. I had now worked myself into a frenzy and was ready to call it quits until my phone rang, distracting me from my inner demon.

“Hello, this is Shiloh Wilbers, Meal Planner Extraordinaire for Sprout and Sprigs. How may I help you?” I recited on autopilot, but a sense of calm washed over me when I heard the voice on the other end.

“Hello, Ms. Wilbers. I hoped to meet with you before the main event to get some footage. Would that be okay?” Caz’s voice was breezy, and the tension lessened with every word she spoke—until I processed what she had said.

“Did you say tape me before?” The nerves were getting the best of me, but I couldn’t keep letting her down. I wouldn’t allow it. She deserved better, and I wanted to be better.

“Not unless you want to wait.” Her patience with me seemed to be unending.

“No, we don’t need to wait. Tell me when you want to meet, and I’ll be ready.” Saying it out loud was the only way to hold myself accountable.

“Awesome. I’ll text you after I meet with Matrix. I hope you have an amazing morning, and I can’t wait to see you.” She was charming and made me smile, but she quickly added, “Because we have a lot of work to do. But don’t worry; we’ll get it done.”

It had made me happy that she wanted to see me, but my heart sank a little once she said it was just for work. I shouldn’t take it personally because it was my fault she

was pressed for time. Some of me liked the idea of having someone excited to be in my life—even if it was just a friend.

Chapter 19

Caz

Waking up this morning, I should have been grateful that Shiloh wanted to continue the segment because that meant she was literally saving my ass. But a part of me would gladly put myself on the Pepper Parade hook if it meant I could talk some sense into her.

However, at this point, if I told her my true feelings about Ember, she might misinterpret my intentions since she already did that once. She would probably assume I was warning her off so I could sneak in and take a shot. I shuddered, thinking about it.

Ember's vibe reminded me so much of Davia that being around her triggered me. She was one of those beautiful people who were ugly the more you knew about them. It was probably her conceitedness that turned me off the most. That was the same with Davia. There was a line that you shouldn't cross with confidence—cockiness.

To be fair, I could have been projecting some of my negative feelings about Davia onto Ember, but I didn't think I was wrong. Reading people was something I did very well, but Shiloh had known Ember longer, so I would refrain from putting in my two cents. Although I wasn't sure "known" was the correct word, it seemed like infatuation was more appropriate. Again, I shouldn't let it bother me.

My job was to help Shiloh find a date. It wasn't my duty to decide who would be a suitable candidate. The only outcome I could wish for was that Ember didn't embarrass her or hurt her feelings. If those two things didn't happen, my emotions

would remain neutral—at least on the outside.

But as I rolled out of bed, a knot tightened in my stomach, and the unease was overwhelming. Something told me this was a bad idea, but it wasn't my idea, so what could I do? Maybe if I called Shiloh, I'd be able to gauge where she was, lessening my worry.

I grabbed my phone and walked into the kitchen to start coffee. It was almost nine, and I had slept through the relentless glare of the morning sun. But now that I was up, a throbbing ache pounded behind my eyes that only caffeine could cure.

As the aroma of espresso filled the air, I cleared my throat and dialed Shiloh's number. I didn't have a plan for what to say, but when I heard her voice, my inner turmoil returned with a vengeance. It was more than I was afraid she would get hurt by Ember—I didn't want her to date Ember at all.

Ember didn't deserve her, but then again, neither did I. However, that didn't stop my big mouth from telling her how much I couldn't wait to see her. Hopefully, I covered it with work, but I had to end the conversation before anything else slipped out.

After getting off the phone, nothing was resolved, and now my head and heart hurt. Her enthusiasm was palpable as she spoke, making it impossible to miss. I was sure it was mixed with nerves, but she was getting ready to ask out the woman of her dreams, and from what I could tell, Ember would say yes.

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“Ahhh.” I let out a frustrated growl, which only made the pain inside me worse.

How did I get here? As I drank my espresso, I couldn't help but notice the way my hands trembled. I wanted to curse Matrix for putting me in this situation, but how could I? He tried to warn me that I might have feelings for Shiloh, but I ignored him. I thought by convincing myself that I was still broken, I could prevent anything from happening. But last night, while she was rubbing my shoulders, I knew I was in trouble. The emotions were stronger, and the more I told myself to pull away, the more my body craved to be near her. The worst part was that I couldn't tell her how I felt, or I would be a selfish prick.

I probably wasn't in a place to date, especially not Shiloh. She deserved a Cinderella: an eternal optimist whose life hadn't hardened her. Shiloh was a caretaker and needed to be with someone who would do the same for her. No matter how much I longed to be that person, I couldn't deny the truth—I wasn't. All I could offer was my support, and I'd silently hold on to everything else.

I felt like shit and thought about canceling, but Shiloh had agreed to the interview today, so I needed to put on my best happy face and get it done. But when I entered the bathroom and saw my reflection, with the deep lines etched on my forehead, I grimaced. My only hope was a shower could eliminate some of my dread.

I turned the temperature up as high as it would go and the steam covered my image in the mirror. The moment I stepped into the stall, the scorching droplets acted as sensory overload, momentarily numbing my emotions and intensifying the physical pain. I stood there, hoping it would erase the invisible stains of stress and anxiety, but it didn't.

Whenever I found myself in such a heightened state, the one thing that always soothed me was a release. I lowered the heat and adjusted the nozzle to pulsing. The intermittent stream glided across my nipples as my thumb delicately circled my clit. My arousal was building as the various sensations enveloped me, causing a throbbing to radiate from deep within my core.

As my pleasure intensified, my mind seamlessly filled in the gaps, painting a complete picture of ecstasy. I took a finger, teasing my entrance as images of Davia played in my head. I urged her into my favorite position—on all fours—while I trailed my nails down her back. As she moaned loudly, her sounds causing my wetness to turn into a pool. Then I sunk my teeth into the meaty part of her ass. She loved it when I teased her from both ends. As she bucked her hips, my hands squeezed her cheeks, spreading her open so my tongue could tickle her crevice.

The memories were taking me to the edge, and I adjusted the showerhead's spray to caress my lower lips, which ignited a rush of desire. As I leaned into the water, I slid a finger inside me while visions of my strap-on penetrated Davia from behind. My free hand instinctively went to my chest, massaging it as I rolled my hardened nipple between my fingers. I pictured myself slamming deeper inside of her dripping wet pussy. But as my excitement reached its peak, it wasn't Davia I was fucking. I tried to take a step back and prevent the climax from culminating, but I had already crossed the point of no return.

My hands were moving frantically against my breast and my sweet spot, and before I could keep my thoughts to myself, "Shiloh" rolled off my tongue while we both rode the wave of pleasure together. The aftershocks kept coming, and so did I.

The intensity of the orgasm was overwhelming, and as it washed over me, Shiloh vividly flooded my mind: her chocolate eyes, her purposefully messy hair, the little dimple at the corner of her mouth, and the way her short stature would make it so easy for me to pick her up and have my way with her.

“Fuuuuuuck!” I opened my eyes and pulled myself out of this trance.

This wasn’t what I needed to relieve my anxiety. In fact, it made it worse. As if being wound tight wasn’t enough, I also had a sick feeling creeping up on me. What was I going to do? How could I be professional and a good friend when I wanted to have sex with Shiloh?

I had to cast away those troubling mental images and move forward. After toweling off from the shower, I opted for my favorite sky-blue button-up shirt, which made my eyes pop, and paired it with tailored black dress pants. I again left my hair to air-dry, giving it more wave and body. Then I cuffed my sleeves to my elbows and slid on my white leather Vans. Once I spritzed on some of my favorite cologne, which was citrusy but woody, I was out the door.

Usually, I walked to the studio, but I wasn’t sure where Shiloh would want to meet before the coffeehouse, so I decided to drive. It took me longer to park than it did to get there, but I didn’t mind because at least I didn’t have to deal with the wind that inevitably would have caused my hair to rat up.

As I entered the third floor, I saw Matrix talking to our head boss, Mr. Tolken, in the sound room. I hoped he wasn’t getting in trouble because I hadn’t given him anything to produce for the show this week. But from his body language, he didn’t seem like a scolded child. Quite the opposite. He was smiling widely and supportively patting Mr. Tolken’s shoulder.

I watched as the encounter ended. There was an overwhelming urge to hide, but I was in an empty hallway with nowhere to go. As Mr. Tolken stepped out, he offered a curt nod.

“Ms. Montgomery. I take it you have a good show planned?” He kept walking, not waiting for a response, which made it appear more of a threat than a question.

“Yes, sir. As always,” I called out, but I didn’t like feeling bullied. “Fuck,” I mumbled under my breath.

“You ready?” Matrix asked from behind me, and I jumped.

“Ready for what?”

He stared at me as if it were obvious, but there was too much chaos in my brain for me to read between the lines. “The challenge. I have the peppers and the cameras set up.”

Damn it. I had forgotten to tell him Shiloh was in again. “I’m sorry. We don’t need to do that. I will have some footage from Shiloh for you today. I already confirmed with her this morning.”

I felt bad for forgetting, but in all fairness, he probably still would have prepped because, so far, this had been a wishy-washy segment that was causing everyone anxiety—for various reasons.

“Wait a minute, so you’re back to helping her get laid?”

“No!” I screeched too loudly. “I’m helping her ask someone out. No one said anything about what they would do after that.” I wanted to scrub my eyes with bleach, thinking about Ember being near Shiloh the way I had been earlier in the shower.

“Okay. But getting her a date could most definitely lead to sex, so it’s just semantics.” He shook his head and chuckled, then a knowing look crossed his face. “Caz. Do you like her?”

“I already told you I wanted to be her friend. That’s not new.” I tried to shrug him off

and go into the booth, but he was hot on my heels.

“Don’t start this again. You have feelings for her. Like more than friendly ones. I can see it in your eyes.” He pointed at me, and I pushed past him to the comfy chair.

“You can’t see anything because nothing is there. These eyes are a blank canvas.” As I tried to get my mind to sell him my lie, it betrayed me by conjuring up images of Shiloh, causing a noticeable blush to creep across my cheeks.

“I knew this would happen!” He seemed so pleased with himself until he realized my dilemma. “Oh. This is bad. Are you going through with it?” His voice held a sense of sorrow, but I didn’t want to feel his pity.

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“It’s nothing but a crush that doesn’t mean anything. So, yes, I’m doing the show, and I’m already over it.” I casually shrugged, feigning disinterest.

“Caz, don’t lie to me.”

“You’re a fine one to talk. When were you going to tell me about your girlfriend? Or that you have another job?” Maybe if I threw the conversation back on him, he would drop this third-degree.

“Don’t you dare do that. I would have told you a while ago about both things, but every time I asked you to come out with me, you bailed at the last minute. I didn’t want to discuss my personal life at work, especially not my other venture. But I just told Tolken today, and I was for sure going to talk to you about things, too.” He rubbed the back of his neck, which I knew meant he was stressed.

“Are there other things you’re leaving out?” My heart raced as the thought of him leaving me floated through my mind, and I began to feel lightheaded.

“Caz, let’s produce this show and make it the best it can be. We can discuss both of our situations later.” But he didn’t have to say anymore.

I knew what was happening. He thought if he let me off the hook, then I would do the same for him. But it didn’t matter. I could see through him. He was leaving, and this would be his last show. No wonder he had been so annoyed by not having the footage he needed. He didn’t want to go out on a low note, and I didn’t want him to go at all.

“So, what’s the game plan today? Do you still want to shoot the pepper footage for

backup?” He remained focused and professional while I had already mentally checked out.

I could hardly handle the Shiloh situation, and losing Matrix pushed me over the edge.

“What the fuck!” I yelled so loudly that people in the next city over probably could have heard me if we had not been in a soundproof room. I buried my face in my hands, trying to force the tears back into my ducts.

“Caz, please don’t.” Matt sat on the arm of my chair and wrapped me in a hug. “You don’t need me. You are the face and the voice of this show. Whatever you put out, your fans eat up.”

“I hate you.”

He squeezed me tighter. “That’s understandable. I make it easy.”

I curled into his arm, and he rubbed circles on my back, which reminded me of last night when Shiloh did the same thing. How had I gone from needing no one to crying in the arms of two people who I was supposed to protect—not the other way around?

“Is this your last show, then?” I sniffled but composed myself enough to ask the question.

“Technically, yes, but I’m going to help for the next two weeks to train someone new. Since your show is so popular, they will probably pull another producer from a different podcast and give them a promotion. Hopefully, that will be good for both of you because that means less training on the technical side, and they just need to learn how to work with you.”

While I knew many talented producers in the industry, I had only collaborated with Matrix. The idea of establishing a connection with someone else was soul-crushing.

“What if I quit, too? Do you have a job for me at Illumi-Links and Drinks?” I wanted to lighten the mood, but I also didn’t want to think of a time when I wouldn’t be working with him.

“I’m pretty sure I can’t afford you.” He bumped me with his elbow. “But if you come there, drinks will always be on me.” A smile lit up his face as he was fully aware that the chances of me staying in public long enough to make him regret his words were almost nonexistent.

“I don’t like it.” That was the only thing I could think of to say.

He inhaled deeply before releasing it slowly. “I’m still going to be here for you.”

I tilted my head. “It’s not the same, and you know it.”

“You’re right. But it doesn’t make it less true.” He locked his puppy-dog eyes on mine, and I had to get out of here before the floodgates opened again.

I stood from the chair, and he did the same before wrapping me in a bear hug. I breathed in his scent, a blend of sweetness and earthiness that I would forever associate with him.

“I’m not doing that pepper challenge. I promise to get some good footage today, and we will end this era with a bang.”

“Of course we will. When have we not?” His smile was faint, and I could tell he was fighting back emotions, too.

“I’ll talk to you later. I better go meet Shiloh and get her prepped.” That job wasn’t much better, but the show must go on regardless of how I felt.

Chapter 20

Shiloh

I spent the rest of the morning hiding in my office. It wasn’t like I didn’t have things to do, but there was no way I would subject myself to Yoni any more than I had to. But as it started getting closer to lunchtime, I was afraid my sanctuary would have to end.

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Caz said she would message me after her meeting with Matrix, but I had no clue when that would be. For some reason, I assumed it was this morning. But since it was nearly noon and I hadn't heard from her, my stomach didn't care if I was trying to stay under Yoni's radar. It wouldn't shut up long enough for me to finish the meal plan I was working on.

I never brought my lunch because owning a business that provided pre-packaged meals was a perk. However, if Yoni kept making things uncomfortable, I would have no choice but to reassess that decision.

After saving the work on my current project, I stood up to stretch, feeling the stiffness in my muscles. I had been in this cramped space for hours now, and I needed to get some fresh air. But as soon as I opened the door, I heard the bells chime, alerting me that someone was there.

I thought about hanging back while Yoni dealt with the customer, but then I realized that was probably the best time for me to make my great escape. If she was busy with someone, surely she wouldn't make a scene in front of them. So I crept up to the front, but of course, my luck wouldn't allow me to get out of here unscathed—the person talking to Yoni was Caz.

I almost turned around, but Yoni spotted me. "Oh, would you look at that? It's your friend," Yoni seethed.

"Hey, Caz. What are you doing here?" I ignored Yoni's energy and tried to keep things as calm as possible. Caz always seemed to pick up on things, and I didn't want her to feel as uncomfortable as I did.

“Did I dream this morning?” She appeared confused, but she picked the wrong words.

Yoni grunted and put her hands on her hips as if she were about to scream, “I knew it!” But I preemptively cut in.

“What are you talking about?” I understood where Yoni’s accusation came in because what Caz said sounded suggestive.

“The conversation we had. Didn’t we agree to meet this afternoon?”

“You mean on the phone?” I clarified, but Yoni still seemed pissed.

“Yes?” Caz’s uncertainty didn’t help the situation, but I couldn’t blame her for not understanding.

“Right. And you had said you would message me first?”

“Shit. I’m sorry.” She sighed heavily, and I hated making her think she needed to apologize, but it was the only way to keep Yoni from attacking.

“No worries. I was making sure I didn’t miss something. But I was getting ready to take lunch. Do you want to come?”

“I didn’t think you liked eating out?” Yoni questioned, and I could tell by the expression on Caz’s face that she was about to say something inappropriate, so I cut in.

“We are working on something for Caz’s show, and it requires us to be somewhere else. I will see you when I return.” I stared at Yoni until she understood that this conversation was over. “Let’s go.” I grabbed Caz by the arm and tugged her outside.

“What was that about?” She looked over her shoulder through the glass, but I didn’t let her stop and stare.

“Yoni thinks you and I are together, and that’s why she and I aren’t.”

Caz’s body stiffened at the comment, and I wanted to make sure she didn’t think I put that idea in Yoni’s head.

“Don’t worry. I set her straight. But Yoni is the type of person who doesn’t think anyone can resist her, so when you told her no, she assumed it was because of me. Then she told me she thought if you were out of the picture, she and I could give it another go.” I chuckled, but Caz didn’t join in, which wasn’t like her. “I know that you and I are only friends. Please don’t be upset.”

She slowly removed her arm from my grasp. “Of course, I’m not upset. I’m sorry she put that on you. But once you start dating Ember, she’ll see it’s a me thing.” Her voice was strained, and I couldn’t help but question if she believed me.

Instead of continuing this unsettling interaction, I walked silently to the parking lot, and she did the same. Once we arrived in front of my car, I stopped.

“So, are we going straight to the coffeehouse, or should we do the video somewhere more private?” The last thing I wanted was for Ember to see me being recorded.

“The coffeehouse is perfect.” Her words were rushed, and I could still feel the tension between us.

“Okay. Do you want to ride with me?” I jerked my thumb toward my vehicle, but she shook her head.

“No. I have a lot to do afterward, so I’ll drive, too. Thanks.” She waved and was on

the move before I could reply.

As I got into the driver's seat, my stomach was roiling. I couldn't tell if it was nerves from anticipation of what was to come or dread about Caz's behavior. To be honest, it was probably both. I wasn't looking picture-perfect.

My outfit wasn't as sharp as Caz's. She knew how to choose clothes that suited her body and enhanced her natural beauty. That shirt made her eyes even more piercing, and I was sure the camera loved her. The one good thing about it was that no one would even notice me standing next to her, so I shouldn't worry as much about my appearance.

As I drove, that thought brought me less comfort because that probably also meant I wouldn't capture Ember's attention, either. Oh well. There was no way I was backing out. Caz was counting on me, and I wanted to make things right. Her demeanor had changed, and the last thing I wanted to do was ruin our friendship. She was the first friend I had made on my own as an adult, and I didn't want to lose her.

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But then doubt crept in, and there was a chance that we weren't as close as I thought. This could be a one-sided thing, and Caz was only hanging around for work. I replayed our prior conversation, with her practically saying those exact words. This wasn't helping my anxiety. So far, this entire day had been a disaster, and now I was about to do something that was probably stupid, and it would be recorded.

I finally arrived at Java Jive, but I didn't get out of my car. My energy was off, and I needed to recenter myself. I took some relaxing breaths and practiced my mantra again. It worked for me earlier, so I gave it another shot. My heart was calming a bit, but the tap on my window sent it into overdrive.

"Oh my god!" I jumped in my seat, and Caz stared at me from outside.

She backed away so I could open the door. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you." She adjusted the bag she was carrying over her shoulder. "I figured we could shoot some video outside here. The natural light loves you." She smiled, but it quickly faded. "Over there, on that bench." She pointed as she took off.

"Are you okay?" I questioned as I tried to keep up, but her long legs kept her a few paces ahead.

"Yeah. All good. Sit here, and I'll get set up." She was curt, and with one motion, she unzipped her pack, revealing a portable tripod ready to capture this shoot.

I did as she had asked, but I wasn't a fan of this spot. The sun's rays were blazing down, making my gray shirt cling to me from the trickles of sweat dripping down my body. I lifted the hem to dab at my forehead, and the sound of metal clanging against

the concrete caused me to jolt.

“What happened?” I dropped my shirt and saw Caz picking up the tripod from the ground.

“I wasn’t paying attention to where I was setting it, and it toppled over. No biggie. You ready?” She had it in place and was securing her phone to the stand.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” I offered a closed-mouth smile.

“Great. So, I’ll ask some questions, and you answer them honestly. If you’re unhappy with how anything comes out, we’ll either reshoot or edit it out. Sound good?” She was so matter-of-fact and almost cold with her delivery—it wasn’t comforting.

“I guess.”

“Hello, you sexy people. It’s me, Caz Montgomery, here. Thank you for joining me this week on My Unscripted Life. The votes are in, and after my near-death experience in the haunted prison, you had mercy on me this week.” She beamed at the camera with one raised eyebrow, exuding a charm that would probably have all the girls at home swooning.

“My task was to help Shorty, this beautiful creature to my left, tell the woman of her dreams that she wants to be more than friends. But first, we should get to know Shorty better so you can send her all the good vibes when she asks this woman out.” As she turned my way, a wave of fear washed over me, leaving me paralyzed.

“So, tell us about yourself.” She opened the floor, but I still couldn’t find my tongue. She sat there for a few more seconds before realizing I was drowning. “You’re twenty-nine years old, right?” She promoted, and at least my body cooperated and allowed me to nod. “We got a youngster here.” She winked at the phone.

“You’re also a business owner?” Her melodic voice had a calming effect that eased my tension.

“Yes. I’m part owner of Sprout and Sprigs, a meal-prep and meal-planning business that focuses on vegetarians, but we serve everyone.” I couldn’t believe I got those words out, but it would be great advertisement if we kept that in there.

“Did you hear that? She’s smart, good-looking, and ambitious. What does she need my help with?” She laughed, but I could tell she was playing it up for the camera, and my cheeks were hot from more than the sun. “Even though Shorty is a catch on her own, she and I worked together to prepare for this big day. We scoped out possible first-date locations, discussed potential conversation starters and common interests, and the biggest piece of advice I offered was for her to relax and be herself.” She placed her hand on my shoulder, but it had the opposite effect on me as I stiffened.

If she noticed, she didn’t let on as she continued. “So, I need you all to wish our girl, Shorty, here good luck—not that she needs it.” With one more smoldering look into the camera, she ended the recording. “You did a good job, but you need to breathe.” She squeezed my arm, and I loosened a little.

“I’m really nervous.”

“No shit? You had me fooled,” she joked, and I cracked a smile. “Everything is going great. Now, all that’s left is popping the question.” She squared my shoulders and pulled me to standing. “You got this. Ember would be an idiot not to see how amazing you are.” Her fingers gently brushed my skin as she tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear, sending a shiver down my body. Her touch lingered, and her eyes locked on mine.

It felt like something passed between us for a second, but just as quickly as it started, it vanished.

“All right, go get your girl.” She stepped toward the tripod and began putting it away. “I’ll stand to the side, taping, but I promise not to interfere or be in a location where you can see me. Is that okay?”

It was weird how quickly she moved from one thing to the next. Sometimes, she was on to something else before my brain processed what had happened, but I was trying to keep up.

“Yeah. But if she laughs at me, do you promise not to air that?” Rejection was bad enough, but humiliation would be worse.

“If she laughs at you, I’ll bitch slap her,” she deadpanned, and I smiled at how protective she was.

“Well, you don’t need to get an assault charge over it,” I quipped, and she shrugged.

“You’re probably right, but I never want to see you get your feelings hurt—especially not by...” Her words dropped off, and she put her bag over her shoulder. “I’m going to put this in my car, and I’ll be inside. Why don’t you go ahead of me so you won’t be as aware of the camera?”

I nodded and moved toward the door. This was it—the make-or-break moment. I should have been excited, anxious, scared, or something. But as I walked inside, all I could feel was numb. Was that a sign?

Chapter 21

Caz

As much as I hated pushing Shiloh into the coffee shop, I knew it was the right thing to do. She deserved a shot at happiness, and if Ember was that person, I would support her. But so help me, if Ember did anything to hurt her, it would be the last thing she ever did.

Shiloh might have thought I was kidding when I said I would bitch slap Ember, but I was already itching to get my hands on her. And if she caused Shiloh any kind of pain, that was all it would take to push me over the edge.

What was wrong with me? Since when did I become the fighting type? I wasn't a vigilante. I needed to get myself together before going in there.

"She's just a friend. She's just a friend. She's—" My phone rang, interrupting my chant. "This is Caz," I barked into the phone, and Matrix's laugh echoed from the other end.

"Going that well?"

"I was in the middle of something. What do you need?" I shouldn't have been short with him because I knew this was the last time we would really get to work together, but I wasn't in the right frame of mind right now.

"I didn't need anything. Just wanted to check on you and make sure you were okay. Sorry to disturb you."

“No, you’re fine. I need to get inside, though, so I can tape Shy asking Ember out.”

“Shy? Is that your pet name for her?” He was teasing, but it pissed me off.

“Shut up. I heard Sonya call her that before, and it just came out. Do you want to give me more shit about it, or do you want your footage?”

“By all means, continue. I’m glad you’re getting something useful.”

“All right. I’ll talk to you later.” I was about to hang up, but his voice stopped me in my tracks.

“Don’t sacrifice yourself for the sake of this show.”

“Since when do you believe that?” I scoffed.

“You know I care about you, and I don’t want to see you hurt. Do what’s going to make you happy.” He was sincere, and I fought back my emotions because I had a job to do.

“Same. Everything will be okay, but I better go.” I abruptly ended the call before he made me cry.

After finishing my last, “She’s just a friend,” I took a beat, then headed inside. The place was unexpectedly busy for a weekday, which would help me go unnoticed. Since I had a Lavalier microphone, which worked as an extender for audio when I recorded on my phone, I could stay out of the way without missing anything.

Everyone seemed concerned with themselves, so I had no reason to be worried about being spotted. I stood in the back corner, diagonal from the counter, and out of Shiloh’s sight. I pressed record as she stepped up, and Ember approached. Even

though she and I couldn't find out much on Ember's social media, from my assessment, it seemed like she was self-absorbed. Of course, I didn't use those words when talking to Shiloh about her. But my advice was to lead with a compliment because I figured she would eat that shit up.

I waited patiently, hoping one of them would talk, but it seemed they were in the same staring contest Ember and I had been in before. Although I wanted to say something to break the awkward silence, I had to stay in the shadows. Finally, Shiloh opened her mouth.

"Hello."

So much for flattery to win her over. Maybe she would follow it with something sweet.

"Flat white, please." She pulled out her money and stepped aside without making further eye contact or small talk.

Was this part of her tactic? Was she playing hard to get? I mean, that might work, too. Ignore her to the point where she begged for attention? It was possible.

When Ember called Shiloh's name, notifying her that the drink was ready, I zoomed the video in. I watched as Shiloh ran her fingers through her hair, causing it to fall in that effortlessly seductive way. My breath hitched, but I remained calm. That was until I saw Ember's reaction. She looked like a smitten kitten, and I thought I might get sick.

This was what Matrix meant by not sacrificing myself. It was excruciating to witness someone unworthy fawn all over her. When I saw Ember touch Shiloh's fingers as she handed her the cup, I'd had enough. I stopped taping and headed out. Maybe Shiloh could tape their date. All I knew was that it couldn't be me.

Once I got to my car, I drove off, not knowing where to go. I should have called Matt and told him what had happened, but I was afraid of what he might say. Instead, I wandered around downtown, aimlessly planning my next move. But I didn't have one. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a sign that read, "The Hideaway," and I pulled over.

I wasn't sure what the place was, but it was like a beacon, so I got out and went inside. As I entered, everyone's heads turned and stared. I scanned the place, and the bar was filled with women whose gaze was fixated on me. By the pride flags and female empowerment symbols, it was evident this was a queer bar, and I was either fresh meat or out of place.

Hoping to divert attention away from myself, I hurriedly sat on one of the stools, and the bartender immediately approached.

"What can I get ya?" The lady was probably in her mid-fifties, but there was a youthfulness to her light-colored eyes.

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“Um, I’m not much of a drinker, especially not during the day. What would you suggest?” One way to fit in was to be friendly with the workers.

“Well, what brings you in here? You lost?”

I wondered if her question was deeper than surface level, but I kept my response in the middle. “I think I’m where I’m supposed to be, but I’ve had a rough day.”

“Okay, well, do you want something like a Mind Eraser, or are you looking more for a Leg Spreader?”

I cleared my throat, trying not to show my shock at the two ends of the spectrum. “Well, I haven’t tried either, but maybe there’s something in the middle?” I had no clue what that would be, but surely one drink wouldn’t knock me on my ass.

“All right, a Tight Snatch coming up.”

I gazed at her curiously, wondering how that was a compromise between my prior options, but I wouldn’t argue. As she made my drink, I spun around on the stool and noticed that most of the once curious gazes were now diverted. But a group of three women in the back were facing my way.

The low lighting cast shadows over them, obscuring their features, but they were possibly staring at me.

“Here ya go. One Tight Snatch.” I turned back to the bartender and tried not to laugh.

The thought, “That’s what she said,” floated through my mind, but it made me sad now because it reminded me of Shiloh.

I picked up my drink, which was pink and fruity-looking, and used the little umbrella to stir it. I started slowly, taking a small sip to ease my tastebuds into this new experience. It was sweet but enjoyable. While I nursed the drink, I pulled out my phone and saw a load of notifications, mostly from Matrix but a couple from Shiloh. I wasn’t ready to go back to the real world, so I turned off my phone and focused on pushing the unwanted thoughts out of my head.

As I took my next drink, someone approached the bar and sat beside me. I peeked in her direction but didn’t make eye contact. I assumed she was placing an order, so I focused on my glass, avoiding any potentially awkward conversation.

“I’m sorry to bother you.” Her voice was throaty but soft.

Now, I had no choice but to acknowledge her. “No bother. What’s up?” I took a sip and waited for her response.

“You’re not Caz Montgomery, are you?” She seemed overly curious, and I wanted to roll my eyes.

Typically, that was an opener for someone to start flirting or ask for a favor.

“I am she.” A fake smile played on my lips as I prepared for what she would say next.

“Did you used to date Davia Mikaelson?”

What the fuck? Where did that come from? Shock and nausea surged through me, making my face burn with an intense heat. I gulped down the remainder of my drink, desperately seeking relief from these unsettling feelings.

“Why do you ask?” I came here to escape the thoughts of Shiloh and Ember, but I didn't want memories of Davia to take their place.

“Because I didn't believe her when she told me.” She glanced over her shoulder, and I followed her line of sight—the table in the back.

She was here... right now? Of course, she was. Why would I expect anything different? The universe had a PhD in being an asshole.

Chapter 22

Shiloh

When I looked into Ember's light-brown eyes, everything Caz had coached me to say went out the window. I didn't know what to do, so I ordered and moved to the side as usual. Being with Caz felt natural and easy, and she increased my confidence. But now, I stood here like a fool, and she wouldn't get the footage she needed for the show.

Once my coffee was ready, Ember called my name, and I hoped to redeem myself, but when her fingers touched mine, there wasn't a coherent thought in my head.

“Thank you. Your eyes match that coffee stain on your apron.” That probably wasn't the compliment Caz had meant for me to say.

“You're funny.” She giggled as she twisted her mahogany hair around her finger.

I hadn't meant to make her laugh, but I savored the sound as it reverberated in my ears. While it lacked the same comforting vibe as Caz's, it still brightened my mood.

“I get off at two today.” As her eyes danced with excitement, a smile tugged at the

corners of my lips.

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“That’s good. I hope you enjoy your afternoon.”

“Shiloh.” Her voice softly whispered my name, sending chills down my body. “That was an invitation.”

I nodded as if I understood but was unsure that I did. “Oh? You want me to join you?”

“Yes, silly.” She wrote something down on a napkin and handed it to me. “Let me know when you’re free.”

I stared at the number with a heart at the bottom and couldn’t believe this was happening. Caz would get her story, and I would get my happy ending. I didn’t even make myself sick with nerves.

My endearing awkwardness was probably wearing thin, so I needed to end the conversation. “I’ll talk to you soon.” I offered a small wave and turned to leave.

Usually, I would have sat in the back and nonchalantly continued to watch her while she worked, but now that I had a date coming up, I needed Caz even more.

I briefly scanned the room for her, but she wasn’t around. Not wanting to draw attention to myself, I headed outside to see if she was waiting there, but she wasn’t. When I reached the parking lot, I noticed her car was gone, so I pulled out my phone to see if she had messaged me, but nothing.

She had been off all day, and now I was worried. I shot off a text asking her where

she was, but she didn't immediately read it, which was odd. Maybe she was driving back to the station? I called the studio and was told that Caz was out on assignment. When I asked to speak to Matt, they said no one worked there by that name.

"I could have sworn that was what Caz called him." Then I remembered she also used another name, but my mind was blank.

I messaged Caz one last time before realizing she wasn't answering. I sighed deeply, fully aware that I was left with no other alternative but to pursue my last resort. I dialed Sonya's number, hoping I could get information about Matt from her or Devon.

"Hey, cuz. How's it going?" She was eating something as she smacked into the phone.

"Um, it's going. Do you know where Devon is?" I wanted to cut to the chase because the longer Caz didn't read my messages, the more concerned I became.

"Why do you want to know?" Who was she—her gatekeeper? She was acting like I was a cop or something.

"Because I need to speak to her."

Devon and I were only friends by association. We didn't have that type of relationship where we talked on the phone.

"About what?" Sonya was so nosy; I should have known this wouldn't be a simple task.

"It is personal. Do you know where she is or not? Or can you give me her number so I can call her?" I tried to hide my annoyance, but it was hard.

“Chill out. She’s right here.”

“Hey,” Devon’s voice sounded through the phone, and I was slightly grateful.

“Hey. Can I have your boyfriend’s number?”

“Why?”

I was in the same loop of hell with her.

“For the love of god, please give me his number so I can find out where Caz is!” I had lost all patience, and my voice was loud enough to echo in my ears.

“Calm thy juice box.” I couldn’t handle Devon’s nonsense today, but I had to play nice to get what I wanted.

“I’m sorry for my outburst. Can you help me?”

“Sure, I texted him your number and told him to call you. Good?”

It wasn’t what I had asked for, but that was probably as close as I would get. “Perfect. Thank you.”

“Welcs. You want Sonya back?” Before I could respond, my phone beeped, and hopefully, it was Matt.

“Gotta go.” I hung up on them to pick up the other call. “Hello,” I breathed into the receiver.

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“Hi, this is Matrix. I work with Caz.” His tone was peaceful, and he didn’t seem like he would give me the same trouble as the Tweedles.

“Hey, Matrix, I’m so sorry to bother you, but Caz was with me, then she wasn’t, and now I can’t find her.” I sounded like a frantic parent who had lost their child.

“Oh wow. Umm, let me check her location.” He disappeared for a second. “It doesn’t show her current location. Either her phone is off or her battery died. Where was she when you last saw her?” There was concern in his voice, and I knew he was the right person to contact.

“We were at the coffeehouse.”

“Did anything happen between you two?” His question threw me a little, but I answered.

“We did my interview, then I went to talk to Ember, and when I was finished, she was gone.”

“Hmm.” Did this mean he knew something, or was he just making noise?

“What?”

“Nothing. Let me do some digging, and I’ll get back to you.”

“All right. Is there anything I can do in the meantime?” My mind was racing to the worst possibilities, but I was helpless to stop it.

“You can go about your day. She probably got called away. Don’t worry. I’ll let you know what I find out.” He ended the call, but something wasn’t right.

If it was work-related, wouldn’t he have already known that? He was keeping something from me, but what? And why?

He wanted me to go on with business as usual, but how did I do that? He had told me not to worry about Caz, but I was. How could I not be? But would I let her down if I didn’t go on this date with Ember? She had helped me so much, and giving up before the finish line seemed ungrateful.

The thought of going at this alone almost made me as nauseous as asking her out. However, that worked out in my favor, and I didn’t have to do the heavy lifting. Maybe the date would go just as smoothly without me overthinking and messing it up. That seemed highly unlikely, considering my mind was already a hornet’s nest.

My phone rang, shaking me from my jumbled thoughts.

“Hello?” I picked up without seeing who it was.

“Hey, cuz.” For once, hearing Sonya on the other end filled me with a glimmer of hope.

“Hey! I need your help.”

She loved a good project, so I had no doubt she would be on board.

“Of course you do.” She didn’t even question it.

“Aren’t you going to ask me with what?” I laughed.

“Why would I? I feel confident I can fix any problem you have.” It was evident she believed that, too.

“Are you free now?” Maybe getting a jumpstart on my date preparations would eliminate some of my jitters.

“I can be. But you’ll have to come over here. I’m going to take an edible, and I don’t feel like leaving.”

Of course, she didn’t. “All right. I’ll be there in fifteen or twenty minutes.”

“Sounds good. Will you stop and get some cheesy puffs?”

“Is that why you called me?” I rolled my eyes as I got into my car.

“I thought you called me?” Oh my god. She might not be able to help me after all.

Chapter 23

Caz

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I tried to remain neutral about the fact that Davia was in the same vicinity as me. But I hadn't seen her since that fateful day when she left, and I couldn't stop my brain from replaying that scene:

"Hey, babe, I'm home, and let me tell you—" I stopped midsentence as I saw Davia holding an overnight bag. "Are you going somewhere?"

She appeared shocked to see me but quickly turned her surprise into anger. "I can't do this anymore. You're not my forever person. I feel like you're constantly trying to change me." She picked up a small box, which was already conveniently packed.

"Davia, what are you talking about? I love you for you. Where is this coming from?" I pleaded for her to let me explain—to work it out.

"We are two different people who want two different things. I can't keep lying to myself, pretending I'm happy." Her cold, unfeeling gaze was on me as tears stained my cheeks.

"Please, don't do this. Tell me what I can do." My heart frantically pounded in my ears, each beat echoing my fear.

"Don't you get it? There's nothing to do. Our time is up. Don't make this harder than it has to be." She glared at me like I was the one ruining her life. "I'll have someone come and get the rest of my stuff while you're at work tomorrow."

My only response was a waterfall flowing from my eyes and my body shaking with uncontrollable sobs.

“For what it’s worth, I hope you have a nice life.” Her voice sounded robotic, and I didn't even bother to turn my head as she walked away...

“Davs, come here!” The woman's words jolted me to reality from the nightmare I was reliving, and I clenched my stomach to suppress the churning nausea.

I sat stoically, keeping my eyes forward. I was no longer that sad, pathetic person who had begged for her to love me. My therapist said I couldn’t get blood from a turnip. Davia didn’t know how to love anyone but herself, so even if she had stayed, it never would have been a reciprocal relationship.

I gave myself a silent pep talk while waiting for what would come. As soon as her fingers grazed my back, I recognized the cold, familiar touch without looking. I fought the urge to shiver and pretended not to notice. But then she sat in the empty seat beside me, demanding my attention.

I casually glanced in her direction and gave a slight head nod as I finished my drink. "May I have another, please?" I motioned to the bartender, but I still didn’t fully engage with Davia.

“A Tight Snatch, coming up.” The bartender picked up my empty glass, and I hoped the poor lighting would hide the slight blush I felt at hearing those words.

“That’s what she said.” The sound of Davia's giggles filled the room. But instead of joining in like I usually did, I clenched my jaw.

Had that been something we both used to say when we were together? I didn’t remember that, but I had intentionally blocked out a lot from that time. If she wanted those words now, she could have them. They only served as a reminder of Shiloh, and I came here to take my mind off of her.

“That used to make you laugh.” Davia’s voice cut through my thoughts.

“Well, I’m a different person now.”

“So, you two did date?” Her friend leaned in to look at us both.

“I told you we did, Carleigh.” Davia rolled her eyes, and the two of them were invading my personal space.

“Excuse me. Why don’t I get out of the way so you can continue your conversation in private?” I pushed on the bar to slide back, but Davia stopped me.

“Wait. It’s been so long since we’ve seen each other. I was hoping to catch up.” She fluttered her lashes, trying to charm me with her gaze.

In all fairness, that used to work, but now all it did was annoy me.

“Well, you have my number. You can always text me.” That was a lie because I had blocked her, but she didn’t need to know that.

“Caz, please? I’ve changed, too. And I’d love for you to get to know this version of me. When we were together, I made a lot of mistakes.” She stared at me with those icicles for eyes. “I hate how we ended things, and I’d like to make amends.” Her tone sounded sincere, and that part of me who loathed her for what she had done would appreciate an apology.

Maybe it would give me some closure so I could finally close that chapter of my life. It wasn’t that I was hung up on her or wanted her back; it was more that I was holding on to resentment that I needed to let go.

“Fine.” I was fighting an internal battle, but my body won and kept me planted in my

seat.

“Here ya go.” The bartender placed the drink I had forgotten I ordered in front of me.

“Put that on my tab,” Davia stepped in, which was odd because she’d never paid for anything before, but maybe this was the new version she was talking about.

“You don’t need to buy my drink.” I didn’t know why I said that.

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She could have bought me a thousand drinks, but that wouldn't make up for the money she stole.

“Stop it. It's one drink. It's the least I could do.” Truer words couldn't have been spoken, and her smirk confirmed that she knew it, too.

I didn't want to prolong this interaction any further, so I decided to drop it. “Thanks.” I took a sip and focused on the little umbrella in my cup. “So...” I figured if she wanted to catch up, I would let her take the lead.

“So...” I could feel her eyes, and I glanced her way. I wasn't a fan of the intensity of her stare. “You look... incredible.” She licked her lips, and I swallowed hard.

I had fucked her so many times in my head over these past three years, but something about having her right in front of me and giving me that thirsty gaze turned me off. Maybe I only masturbated to her as a form of revenge, because I definitely wasn't interested in anything from her now, no matter if how reformed she was.

Sometimes, too much had happened that you couldn't come back from, even if you wanted to. A grand gesture wouldn't make me consider giving her a minute longer than it took to finish this drink.

“What did you want to talk about?” I ignored her comment and hoped that would show her I wasn't interested.

“Hey, I have an idea,” Carleigh spoke up, and I turned to face her, realizing she was still there. “What if we play twenty questions?”

I firmly shook my head, signaling that I had no desire to expose myself to either of them. “No. I’m not playing games.” I reached for my drink and downed the rest of it.

“Why don’t you give Caz and me some space?” Davia glared at Carleigh, who sighed angrily before getting up.

“I’m going, too. Thanks again for the drink.” I stood up, but Davia quickly pulled me back down.

“You can’t leave. I want to know what you’ve been up to these past three years.”

My body was feeling a weird heaviness, and I wondered if the alcohol was already going to my head. I looked down and noticed Davia’s hand was rubbing circles on my forearm. I tried to focus on what she was doing, but her hand appeared alien, with far too many fingers.

Something was happening. Heat coursed through me, and the room was spinning.

“Talk to me, baby. I’ve missed you.” Davia’s lips weren’t synced with her words, and I wondered if I was imagining this.

“Shomethin wong?” That didn’t sound right, but I couldn’t get my mouth to cooperate. Oh shit... I reached for my phone and pounded all the keys, but I couldn’t get it to dial. As I swayed in my seat, someone kept me from toppling over.

“Caz, baby. You’re okay. Let me take you home.”

Who was talking? Where was I?

“Mm g’d.” Was that a word?

“Rita, close out my tab. I’m going to get this one off your hands. You must have made those drinks extra strong.”

There was laughing and other noises I couldn’t make out. Then two arms wrapped around me, one on each side of my body, but I was limp. I tried to force my feet to move, but they dragged the ground like anchors.

“Come on. We need to get her out of here before they realize it wasn’t the alcohol.”

What wasn’t the alcohol? Did I say that out loud? Who was I with again?

The last thing I remembered was the sound of a door shutting, and then it was lights out.

Chapter 24

Shiloh

On my way to Sonya’s, I stopped by the store to grab her cheese puffs. Normally, it would have put me out to be her errand bitch, but since she was helping me, I let it pass. It only took an extra ten minutes out of my way, so I still arrived with plenty of time to prepare for my date with Ember.

Since she had told me she got off at two, I wasn’t sure if that meant the date would start then or if that was the time I was supposed to call. Either way, I needed coaching on what to say, what to wear, and how to act. Ember was someone I wanted to impress, and I could use Caz’s charisma right about now, but I still had no information on her. Matrix said he would call me back, but that was going on forty-five minutes ago.

As soon as I arrived at Sonya’s, I saw her and Devon gaming on the couch. That was

Sonya's job, and Devon usually joined her. I didn't understand how someone could get paid to play video games while people watched, but leave it to Sonya to find a non-job to make a living.

"Hey, I got your snacks." I waved the bag in the air, and she said some explicit words into her headset, which I assumed weren't directed at me.

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“And that’s what you get, mother fucker... Boom!” She dropped her controller like it was a mic and then looked at me as if just noticing my arrival.

“When did you get here?” No wonder she stared at me, confused.

“Right now.”

“Oh, yay! Thanks for the goodies!” Her eyes lit up when she saw the bag.

I tossed them to her, and Devon gave me a little nod.

“So, Caz...” Devon waggled her eyebrows, and a wave of confusion washed over me—as usual.

“Yeah. I’m still unsure where she is, but Matrix said he would let me know.” I assumed that was what she meant.

“Huh?” she questioned, and I figured she was high, so I dropped it.

“Okay. I need your help. I’m supposed to have a date in an hour, and I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Sonya opened the bag and stuffed a handful into her mouth. “Who goes on a date at two? Is it an afternoon delight?” She sucked the orange off her finger in a suggestive way, and I wanted to puke.

“Will you grow up? It’s not like that. We are going to get to know each other better.

That's all."

"Oh, right. The only people I go out with before dinner time are someone I want to fuck or someone I'm embarrassed to be seen with. Which is it?" She turned to Devon, who nodded in agreement.

"She asked me out and told me she was off at two. What do you think that means?" It had to be the latter.

Ember was a breathtaking beauty who could have anyone she wanted. She probably felt sorry for me. Or what if Caz paid her to do it so I didn't get humiliated? Would she have done that? Surely not. This was not the way to start my date. Sonya was the wrong person for this job.

Just then, my phone beeped, and I picked it up.

"Hey, Shiloh. It's Matrix. I wanted to let you know that Caz's phone is back on and she is in her apartment. So, there's no need to worry."

"Oh, thank god. I appreciate you telling me. Do you think I should check on her before my date?"

"Nah. She's a big girl." His deep laugh bellowed through the phone, and Devon must have recognized it.

"Hey, babycakes!" she called out.

"Well, I hope you have a good time. Can you tell Devon I'll call her later?"

"I will. Thanks again." I hung up and turned to Devon. "Babycakes will call you later."

“I know. We have plans.” She stood up from the couch. “Later, chicas. I need to get shit done.”

“You’re leaving before the makeover? You’re no fun.” Sonya threw a cheese ball at her, and she swatted it away.

“Flo will get it,” Devon chuckled. “You don’t need my help. Shy is good as is.” For the first time, she made sense and was complimentary.

“Thanks. I appreciate that.” Caz was the only person who ever made me feel like I didn’t need to change, but maybe Ember would think the same.

“Shy is good, but once I’m done, she will be great!” Sonya’s words weren’t as reassuring, but whatever she offered was better than I had, so I would take it.

“Whatever. I’ll see you kids later.” Devon waved and headed out the door.

“Are you ready?” Sonya clapped her hands together, sending cheese dust flying.

“What did you have in mind?” I braced myself, afraid of the laundry list of things she would say.

“How about... we pick a shirt with color?”

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“That’s it? Change my shirt?” That couldn’t be all.

She said she was going to make me great. A different shirt wouldn’t do that—would it?

“Shy, Devon was right. You are amazing the way you are. But sometimes gray is sad. You need something happier—upbeat—flashy!” She jumped off the couch and rushed to her room. “Come on. I have the perfect top.”

I reluctantly followed and sat on her bed while I waited for her to fish something out of her closet.

“Found it!” She came out holding a white short-sleeved button-down shirt with shiny gold pinstripes.

“Well, I would be swimming in that since you’re so much taller than me.” The shirt was busy, but not as bad as some of her clothing.

“Will you relax? We’ll tie it up at the bottom and leave it open with a crop top under it. It will be perfect.”

“Yeah? You don’t think that would be showing too much skin?”

“No way. It will be hot. Trust me.” She held out the shirt, and I could tell she wouldn’t stop until I took it.

“Okay. I’ll try it on, but if I don’t like it, I have veto rights?” I wasn’t sure why I

asked it as a question. Caz would have told me to be more assertive, but luckily, I didn't need to be because Sonya agreed.

“Of course. I won't let you leave here unhappy. Now put it on and let's see.”

I was already wearing a black sports bra, so I removed my gray shirt and slid hers on. She came over and situated it before knotting the bottom and cuffing the sleeves. Then she tousled my hair and stepped back.

“Wow! Shy, you are a little hot shawty.” She laughed, but this time, it wasn't directed at me.

I stared in the mirror. It had been so long since I had seen myself in anything other than a solid color that it took a second for my eyes to adjust, but I didn't hate it. It seemed like something Caz could pull off, and maybe it would help me channel her energy.

“Should I put on makeup or something?” I sometimes wore eyeliner and lip gloss, but that was about it.

“No. You have gorgeous skin and don't need to cover it with anything. Now, it's getting close to two. Do you know what you're going to say? You mentioned she asked you out. Where are you going?”

I stared blankly. “She didn't say. It was more like, I get off at two—call me.”

“Then you better plan something. If you don't, she might think it's a hookup. Unless you want it to be that, then just text her.” She nudged me, but I brushed her off without a second thought.

“So, should I ask her to meet me somewhere? Ask to pick her up? Or give her options

to choose what we do?" I realized this was the first time I had ever been in charge.

I hadn't dated a lot, and most recently, it was Yoni, whose idea of going out meant coming to my place. She probably did that so she wouldn't run into her other "partners." But that didn't matter anymore. This was a different situation, and I had to figure out what to do, but I was spiraling.

"Calm down." Sonya's voice cut through my mini-panic attack. "Be chill for like five seconds and let me think."

I shouldn't compare, but none of this would be an issue if Caz were here. She would probably have the date set up for me already. Maybe I should text her again.

"Okay. I got it."

I set my phone down to listen, but she stopped talking. "What do you have?" I prompted.

"Shit, sorry. It drifted away before I could grab hold of it. Let me try again."

I was so screwed right now, so I decided to text Caz.

Me: Hey, remember how we went over those date ideas? Which one do you think would be the best option?

I saw the thought dots for the first time this afternoon, and relief coursed through me. She would give me something I could use while Sonya stood over there grasping at the air, trying to "catch" an idea.

Caz: I'm back with Davia. Delete my number.

Davia? Was that the girl who had broken her heart? Why would she give her another chance? Why did I need to delete her number? Was our friendship over? The nausea returned, and I could feel the uncomfortable churning in my stomach. Why was this happening now?

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“Hey, maybe I shouldn’t go on the date. I’m not feeling well.” I looked at Sonya, and she stopped waving her hands around.

“That’s the nerves talking. Take her to Illumi-Links. It’s vibin’.”

I rolled my eyes. It was something, but I wouldn’t take a date there unless I was intentionally avoiding conversation. That place assaulted my senses with an overwhelming mix of sights, sounds, and smells. The atmosphere was anything but conducive to romance.

“I’ll figure something out.” I didn’t know what, but this wasn’t it.

“Why don’t you call her on speaker, and I can help?”

She and I had a different definition of that word.

“I should probably do it alone. If you’re there, I might get flustered.”

“Suit yourself. I’m gonna grab a snack. You want anything?”

“Thanks, but I’m good.” Once she had left the room, I reached into my pocket and unfolded the napkin Ember had given me.

I couldn’t resist running my finger over the hand-drawn heart at the bottom. I sucked in a deep breath through my nose, inhaling the flowery scent that filled Sonya’s room. As I released a long exhale, I dialed Ember’s number and waited. It rang and rang before finally going to a generic voicemail.

Had she given me a fake number? Was this all a joke? I checked the clock, and it was five till two, so maybe that was why she didn't answer. I watched the time on the phone tick by and thought about calling again as soon as it struck two. But would that make me pathetic? My number was already in her call log. Maybe the ball was in her court now?

"Psst," Sonya whispered from outside the door.

"It's fine. She didn't answer." As I flopped onto the bed, a heaviness washed over me, weighing me down.

I wished Caz was here. Her presence had a way of soothing my soul and making everything seem lighter. Her text replayed in my head, each word echoing with the weight of uncertainty. The thought of her potentially being out of my life forever left me raw and powerless.

"What do you mean she didn't answer?" She walked in carrying a pan of brownies.

"That's what I mean. It went to voicemail."

The moment the velvety chocolate touched her tongue, she couldn't help but moan. "Did you leave a message?"

"No. I don't think I'll call back, either. She has my number now." I reached over and took a chunk. The gooey sweetness coated my tastebuds, but there was a hint of spice in it. They were different, but not bad. When I reached for another piece, Sonya's eyes went wide, and I sighed.

"Sorry." I pulled back. "I was stressed, but I won't eat your food again." Despite my gesture of surrender, she remained motionless, her mouth hanging open like a puppet.

I waved my hand in front of her face, trying to get her attention. “Are you okay?”

She was slow to react but finally spoke. “Yeah. Just so we are clear, I had asked if you wanted something before I left.”

“I know. And I didn’t, but that looked good. It was literally one piece.”

She was so weird when it came to food. She wasn’t the sharing type.

“Okay. As long as I’m not on the hook.”

I didn’t understand what she meant, but I shook my head. “Nope. I chose to eat your junk food, and I will handle the consequences.” I should probably go on a cleanse tomorrow anyway.

“Deal. Now, back to your problem. Maybe since she didn’t answer, it’s a sign that you shouldn’t go out today.” I couldn’t help but wonder what had prompted such a dramatic change of opinion, and worry started to seep into my system.

“You think?” Maybe she knew something I didn’t.

“It might not be a bad idea to make her wait. Hot girls like a challenge. Trust me.” She pointed to herself, and I pushed off the bed onto my feet.

“Maybe I’ll let fate decide. If she gets back to me, I’ll go. If not, it wasn’t meant to be.” Honestly, at this point, I didn’t even care. I was more concerned with what was happening with Caz that focusing on a date seemed trivial.

“Okay, but if she reaches out, tell her you’ll do it another day when you have something good planned and make it for the evening so it counts as a real date.”

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“Why have you changed your tune so quickly?” Her responses were out of character.

“When I went to get something to eat, I heard the voice of reason, and she said, ‘If you’re not ready, take a chill pill and sleep it off.’”

“What does that mean?” I stared at her quizzically, and she shrugged.

“What does anything mean?” She was making my head spin, and for a second, it seemed like I was talking to Devon.

“I’m going home, and I’ll let you know what happens.”

“Are you okay? Can you drive?”

I wasn’t that upset, so I didn’t understand her apprehension. “I’m good. It’s only five minutes away. I think you’re paranoid. You might want to slow down on the edibles.” I shook my head disapprovingly.

“Good idea. Be safe.” She got up and pulled me into a tight hug. “Oh, here’s your phone.” She put it in my back pocket, which was super weird.

“Thanks. You could have just handed it to me.” I removed myself from her embrace.

“Noted. I’ll do that next time.”

I wasn’t sure this day could get any more bizarre. But the only thing I wanted to focus on was making things right with Caz.

Chapter 25

Caz

I woke up, and my eyes felt strained as if they hadn't fully rested. Tiredness persisted, even though I thought I had been sleeping. I rolled over, and the bitchy sun was shining low but bright. What time was it? It didn't appear to be the morning glare.

I tried to recall the last thing I remembered, and a wave of disgust rolled through my body when Davia popped into my head. That was right. She was trying to convince me that she had changed and was a better person. Why did it matter? I didn't care if she was Mother Teresa. What she did in the past would still make me see the devil in her.

I reached for my phone on my nightstand, but it wasn't there. My brain felt like it was swimming through mud, and my body was heavy. This wasn't like any hangover I'd ever had. I stretched my arms above my head, preparing to get up, but couldn't find the strength. So I burrowed under the covers and let the darkness take me once again.

Chapter 26

Shiloh

After leaving Sonya's, I thought about going to Caz's, but I didn't want to pop in without getting the green light. So I figured the best thing to do was head home and see if Ember called. However, when I got out of my car, I went to open my phone, but my passcode didn't work.

"Whyyyy?" This day hated me, and the feeling was mutual. But after closer inspection, I realized this wasn't my phone. "Sonya, you dumb-dumb." I hopped back in the car to return from where I had come, but my mind must have been on autopilot

because the next thing I knew, I was sitting outside Java Jive.

It was scary when you arrived somewhere but had no idea how you got there. Road hypnosis was a real thing. I thought about turning around and heading to my original destination, but maybe ending up here was fate. Before exiting the car, I glanced in the mirror to say my mantra: I don't need to hide. I am the light.

I finally got out, but everything was different. The birds' harmonious melody was louder and longer—clearer. The air was thick with the smell of roasted coffee, its dark-chocolate scent overpowering even from a distance. It was such an intense sensation that I could almost taste it on my tongue.

When I walked inside, I saw Ember clocking out.

“Hey! I didn't expect to see you, but dayumm!” She took my hand, spinning me around, but it seemed like it was in slow motion. “You dress up nice.” She seemed genuinely happy to see me, so maybe she wasn't blowing me off earlier.

“You always look good enough to eat.” With a sheepish expression, I covered my mouth. “I'm sorry. I have food on the brain.”

She chuckled and hooked her arm through mine. “Why don't we grab something to eat, then? I just got off, and I'm starving.”

I had worked myself up so much earlier for nothing. This was easy. “Sounds good. Where to?” I motioned for her to go first, and she gracefully slid out the door. But with my slow reflexes and her carelessness, it slammed into my face, catching my foot underneath it. “Holy hell.” I tried to jump back on my good foot, but my toes were stuck, and my coordination was off, causing me to bust ass inside the shop.

While everyone else stopped to take notice, Ember remained blissfully unaware as

she continued on her merry way. I got up as gracefully as I could, which was not at all, and leaned against the glass while trying to wiggle my toes. My entire foot was aching, but I had no way of knowing how bad the damage was without examining it. Given the level of pain, it wouldn't surprise me if something was broken.

"Are you okay?" a patron standing next to me asked while trying to hide his huge smirk.

"I'm perfect. Thanks, asshole," I mumbled that last part as I limped outside, but it made me feel better saying it, even if he couldn't hear me.

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“Hey, you. Whatcha doin’?” Ember turned around to see that I was way behind her.

“Just stopped to talk to someone for a minute. Be right there.” I hated lying, but if she knew how clumsy and uncool I was, she probably would end the date before it started.

“Well, get up here. You’re not supposed to talk to anyone but me.” She giggled, but her eyes made it seem more of a threat.

Was she possessive over me? Or did that mean I wasn’t giving her enough attention? I did my best to keep my gait steady, but I couldn’t bear weight equally.

“Why are you like a Weeble Wobble?”

“I’m a little stiff. I’ll be okay if I walk it off.” The thought of standing any longer made me wince, but then I realized it was my right foot, and I wasn’t sure if I could even drive.

“Okay, well. I ordered us food.” Her concern had passed. “It was \$42.39. I’ll send you a Venmo request. What’s your phone number?”

Between the throbbing ache and the sluggishness throughout, my brain wasn’t firing on all cylinders. Was that the total for both of us, my half, or was I to pay it all? Didn’t she have my number? I rattled it off before remembering I didn’t have my phone.

“My phone is at my cousin’s house. Do you mind if we stop there first, and then we

can pick up the food?” When I got to my car, I unlocked the doors and sat down, relieving some of the pressure.

“Umm, do we have to? Baby gets hangry. Could you do it after, when you’re alone?”

Was she baby? And I guess she had no intention of this being anything other than an eat-and-run thing.

“Of course. Just let me look at my toes, and we can go.”

“Your toes? That’s gross. If you take your shoe off, I’m likely to get sick. Baby has a weak stomach.” She covered her mouth like she was holding back nausea.

“Right. It can wait.” I gritted my teeth, hoping it would give me something else to focus on besides my agony.

She got in the passenger seat, and I started the car. The first thing she did was change the radio station and crank it up, but the pounding of blood in my ears made it impossible for me to hear anything anyway. I pressed the pedal as lightly as possible and prayed I wouldn’t have to slam on my brakes.

“Where are we going?” I shouted over the thumping bass.

“Rib Shack.”

Was this a joke? Maybe I was dreaming. This conversation gave me déjà vu. I’d lived this before, right?

I lowered the music, allowing me to think—sort of. “Did you say Rib Shack?”

“Yeah, it’s my favorite. I ordered us both a full rack with pit beans and bacon.”

My anxiety was rising, my head was floating, and my foot was pulsating. Something had to give. I pulled over to the side of the road, hastily opened the door, and immediately felt the bile rise in my throat. As I purged the contents of my stomach, it felt like I was cleansing my soul. I took a deep breath of fresh air and settled back into my seat to look for something to wipe my mouth.

When I made eye contact with Ember, she had a look of disgust on her face. “Oh my god. Baby’s going to be sick, too.” As she leaned out her window, the unpleasant sound of retching once again filled the air.

She wasn’t lying when she said she had a weak stomach. As she brought her head back inside, she stared at me sheepishly.

“Sorry, that went down the side of the door.” With a casual shrug, she grabbed the napkin I was offering her.

I didn’t say a word as I drove off. The pain still flowed through my body, but at least I was less woozy.

When I arrived at Rib Shack, I parked the car and turned toward her. “Do you want to run in and get it? I’m not feeling great.”

“Really? Baby isn’t either. And if I open the door and see the vomit, I might get sick again.” She pouted, which I used to think was endearing, but now it just grated on my nerves.

But I wasn’t arguing because the quicker I got out of here, the quicker this date could be over.

“Fine.” My voice was tight, and I shuddered as I stood, trying to keep the pressure off my right foot.

As I hobbled into the place, I waited in line for my order, wondering why I hadn't listened to myself and Sonya when we both thought this would be a bad idea. And then my mind drifted back to Caz, imagining how everything would be different if she were here. She would never have let the door slam on me, and if she did, she probably would have picked me up and hero-carried me to the car.

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Even though Caz tried to come off as a hardass, she was one of the kindest souls I'd ever met. She stood up for the little people like me and gave us a voice. She made me see myself from a different perspective—a better one. And when I was with her, I liked who I was. I didn't have to put on a show or try to be cool. She knew who I was, accepted me for me, and liked me for me.

Oh my god. How had I not seen this before?

Ember wasn't my dream woman—Caz was.

Chapter 27

Caz

I groaned and peeled my lids open. The light was stabbing through the edge of the curtain, and I could hear people talking. Were they outside? What day was it? I was groggy, and I felt like I had a never-ending hangover.

The voices were louder than before, and they sounded closer. I twisted to see the rest of my apartment, and I thought I saw two bodies in the kitchen area. That couldn't be right. Who would be here? My hand searched for my phone, but it wasn't in its usual place.

If I didn't know better, I would think I was being held hostage. In my own house, though? That didn't make sense, but who were those people, and what were they saying?

I strained my ears, but it was still white noise. Then it appeared like they were coming closer. I quickly shut my eyes and played dead—well, asleep. Unless I was supposed to be dead, maybe I should hold my breath just in case.

“Just check on her, will you?” That sounded like Davia’s voice.

What the actual fuck?

“Why do I need to check on her? She’s your ex?” another person questioned.

I didn’t recognize them, but I was right about Davia.

“Do you want part of the money?” Davia snarled, and I bit my tongue.

What money? Were they robbing me?

“I helped you get her here. If you cut me out now, I’ll go to the cops.”

“Oh yeah? And tell them what? I got back together with my ex and have every reason to be here, and what’s your excuse?”

Got back together with me? Bitch, please. Nothing in this world would make me take her back.

“I’ll tell them you drugged her.” This voice had a slight niggling of familiarity, but I couldn’t place it.

“How will you prove that? Everyone saw Caz drinking with us. I’ll just tell them she was ready for a wild night, and we already have the pictures to prove it. You’re better off keeping your mouth shut, and we can sell the photos to some trashy rag mag.”

Pictures? Of me... with her? Or worse, both of them?

I peeked one eye open, and I saw the taller girl approaching. I think I remembered her as Carrie or Charlie or something like that. Once she got closer, I pretended to be sleeping, and I felt a warmth getting closer to my mouth. Holy shit, was she going to kiss me? I looked just in time to see a hand, but thankfully, she wasn't paying attention.

"She's still breathing," she called out, and I wanted to bite her.

What did she mean, still breathing? There was a chance I wouldn't be?

"She's been out for a few hours now. How much did you give her?"

"I don't know. I'm not a scientist. When she turned to look at you, I had to act fast. I didn't measure it out." So much for Davia turning over a new leaf. If anything, she was worse than ever.

"Should I try to wake her?"

"Why would you do that? I grabbed all the valuable stuff that we could pawn. And since she's still alive, we can leave guilt-free." Of course, she wouldn't have remorse for drugging me, stealing from me, or exploiting me. As long as her victim lived, Davia didn't care how her actions affected them.

I would have burst into action like a raging bull if I had the energy. But my body felt as heavy as lead, chaining me to the bed while they slipped away without the punishment they deserved.

"All right. Should I call the police and have them do a wellness check?" At least the C person had a conscience.

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“You just did that, dummy.” Davia’s voice was scathing, and I had no idea how I ever found her attractive. “Let’s go.”

I could hear footsteps as they marched across the tile floor, but then a loud pounding sound startled me.

“Caz!” Matrix’s voice boomed.

Oh my god, was he going to save me?

“Go away. She doesn’t want to see you,” Davia screamed through the door, and my muscles started to come alive.

“I’m going to use my spare key if you don’t open this door!” He wasn’t backing down.

I didn’t know what brought him here, but I was thankful.

“What do you want?” Davia seethed, but I heard the door slam open.

“Caz?” Matrix’s tone echoed with concern.

I opened my eyes and propped myself up as best I could. “Over here.” I was weak, and my throat was scratchy, but I could see my house was full of people. I couldn’t make everyone out, but I could tell the bad ones were pinned to the ground by two big blondes. “Hey, what are you doing here?” I asked him as he rushed to my bed.

“Shiloh.” All he said was that one word, but it profoundly affected my racing heart.

“Is she here?” I needed to see her, but he kept me from moving.

“I’m here.” She limped toward me, and I wanted to sweep her into my arms and carry her.

“What happened? Are you okay?” My voice was still strained, but seeing her caused the blood to flow through my body again.

“I’ll leave you two alone. I have to make sure my girl doesn’t break anyone’s arm.” Matrix chuckled as he headed down to the entryway, where it appeared Devon and Sonya were making a citizen’s arrest.

“Don’t worry about me.” Shiloh’s hand floated lazily through the air, and I wondered if my vision was off or her movements were. She continued shuffling toward me until she sank onto the bed beside me. “Turns out I’m a little high.”

“Hey, I think I might be, too.” We both laughed, but I wasn’t even sure what was funny. “Is your leg okay?” I could tell she was in pain from the look on her face, but she also appeared dazed.

“Yeah, I might have broken a toe or two, I’m not sure.” She rested her head against my chest, and I wrapped my arm around her.

“Want to talk about it?” I urged her to relax on the bed, and she curled up next to me, leaving her sore foot dangling off the edge.

As I held her close, I could feel the steady rhythm of our heartbeats syncing, creating a sense of calm in this chaotic moment. Maybe it was our impaired state, but there was no awkwardness or anxiety about what this meant or why it felt so right. It was

comforting to have someone who brought me peace, and I wanted to keep that as close to me as possible.

“Ember is wax fruit.”

I nodded as if I understood that completely, even though I hadn’t the faintest idea what that meant.

“She looks tasty from a distance, but when you bite into her, you get the ugly truth.” She sighed and closed her eyes.

“I think that’s Davia, too.” I mindlessly played with her hair.

“Why do we fall for fake shit?” I didn’t know if that was a rhetorical question or not, but I was feeling philosophical, so I decided to answer.

“Because we’re scared of real shit.” That sounded better in my head, but it was the truth.

Deep down, I knew Davia wasn’t good for me. I knew she wouldn’t ever give me the things I needed, but for some reason, that felt safe. It was like if I kept my expectations low, then it wouldn’t hurt as bad when it ended. That was total bullshit that I fed myself because I was pretty sure it had hurt worse because if someone I didn’t count on for anything still didn’t want me, then who would?

“I’m not anymore. Scared, I mean.” Her words didn’t quite make sense, but I was glad she felt better.

“Good. You shouldn’t be, because I won’t let anyone hurt you.” I was good at being a protector, and I wanted to be hers.

“You won’t hurt me.” She opened her eyes and stared into mine.

I shook my head.

“I know, and that’s why I’m not afraid. Because you are in my life to keep me safe.”

Her heart began pounding against my chest, causing mine to quicken, matching hers. She licked her lips, and she was so close I could almost feel the moisture against mine.

I gently placed my hand on her cheek, captivated by the intoxicating aroma that surrounded her. Her presence was like a breath of fresh air, revitalizing my soul. I moved slower than usual, but the second our lips touched, a surge of energy coursed through me. When I tasted her, it was like savoring nature's candy, a delightful sensation that filled my senses.

Her tongue brushed against mine, causing my head to swim. I held on tighter, hoping she would keep me from floating away. I had been waiting for this moment for what seemed like forever. Kissing Shiloh was more than a physical desire—it was pure intimacy where our minds and bodies intertwined. Being with her reaffirmed the notion that it wasn’t the duration of the connection that mattered but the way the person influenced your emotions.

Shiloh brought something into my life that I never knew existed—euphoria. She always filled the room with warm and inviting energy. And her gentle touch soothed my worries and had the power to transform my bad days into good ones. She was like a happy pill that intoxicated my senses, and I couldn’t get enough of it.

Shiloh

I didn't know how I hadn't seen this before. Caz was the epitome of the perfect person. Underneath her quick wit and sassiness, she was a kind and understanding human who seemed to bring out the best in me. Not to mention, she, by far, had the best lips I'd ever kissed. It was easy to get lost in her until the mayhem became unavoidable.

"Police!" The loud voice ruined the moment, causing me to pull away and nearly topple out of her bed.

"I got you," Caz whispered, tightening her grip around me. "I promise never to let you fall." The gentle touch of her breath on my skin sent waves of goosebumps down my body.

"I don't know if you'd say that if you knew how clumsy I was." I laughed, but she stared at me with such intensity.

"I'm ready for the job." After gently kissing my forehead, she quickly sat up as the sound of approaching footsteps filled the air.

"I'm looking for the owner of this place." The cop's scolding tone sent a wave of anxiety coursing through me, so I cautiously slipped out of bed to allow him to speak with Caz alone.

I hobbled toward the rest of the gang, but that still didn't give them much privacy. "Where's Davia and her accomplice?"

"Devon and me had them pinned to the ground, but then the po-po came and cuffed them before hauling them away. We were badasses." Sonya puffed up her chest like an alpha.

“Do we know everything that happened?” I looked at Matrix, hoping he would answer because he seemed to be the most sensible.

“Not really. The cops said they would search their vehicles for any stolen goods, but they would need to take Caz to the hospital for tests and then see if she wanted to press charges.” Matrix didn’t take his attention off Caz as she spoke to the officer.

We couldn’t hear what they were saying, but I hated the idea of her having to continue to deal with this situation. Being drugged was bad enough, but having to relive it was probably worse, especially if she had to do it alone.

Just then, she and the policeman joined the rest of us, and I rushed to her as fast as my injured foot would allow me.

“Are you okay?” I questioned, with pain in my eyes.

“If I’m honest, I think I’m doing better than you.” She nodded toward my foot, and I sighed.

“I don’t care about me. I’m worried about you.” And that was the truth. I was hurting physically, but I’d get over it. But what if this event emotionally scarred her? Would she ever be the same?

“I promise you, Shy. There is nothing to worry about. Davia will get what’s coming to her, and I will start living my best life with you next to me.” My heart raced like a hummingbird fluttering against my ribs as she wrapped her arm around me.

“We need to get her to the hospital and collect statements from all of you.” The cop pointed to Caz and the rest of the group.

“She’s coming, too.” Caz squeezed me tighter as she spoke. “She’s injured, and I

want her to get checked out,” she demanded, and my cheeks heated with embarrassment because I didn’t need a doctor, but I didn’t want to leave Caz’s side.

“Fine. She can ride in the ambulance. The rest of you should make your way downstairs and provide your account of what happened.” The officer ushered us to the elevator, and Caz slid her hand into mine, holding me tightly.

Was it possible for someone to evoke both a sense of nervousness and a feeling of complete security? That was how I felt with Caz near me. It was somewhat unsettling, yet comforting, how natural our connection was.

Caz and I loaded into the back of the ambulance while Sonya, Devon, and Matrix stayed behind.

“So, do you know what happened?” I asked her, but she shrugged.

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“Not really. I mean, Davia drugged me, but I’m not sure what she did while I was out. Something about pictures and stuff to sell, but the cops said they would confiscate her phone and check her car. But what happened to you?” She squeezed my hand, and I rested my head against her shoulder.

“It’s really nothing. My foot got caught in the door of Java Jive, and I might have broken my toe.”

She turned her ocean gaze on me. “Please say this was because you tripped running from Ember?” There was a lightness in her voice, and I buried my face in her neck.

“I wish I had been that smart.” I shook my head, and her fingers gently combed through my hair.

“Aww, you’re just a learn-the-hard-way kind of person. At least you won’t have to go through that lesson again because now you have me, and I’m obviously who you were looking for.” Her laughter was contagious, and I couldn’t help but join in.

“That is true, but was I who you were looking for?” I pulled back to stare at her as I waited for her response.

Her fingers gently cupped my cheeks, sending a warm sensation through my skin. “Shy, you might speak softly, but you leave a lasting impression. From that first conversation, I already sensed a spark between us, and I didn’t want that connection to end. I thought I was helping you, but I had it all wrong—you were the unexpected answer to a question I didn’t even know existed within me.”

She was so damn perfect. Was this reality, or was I on a trip? As soon as our lips connected, a surge of adrenaline coursed through my veins, and I knew I was alive.

“Oh my god, I want that.” A sing-songy voice interrupted us, reminding me we weren’t alone. When Caz and I broke apart, the EMT put her hands over her mouth. “I’m sorry. Did I ruin your fairytale?”

Caz stared at her, and I could see the wheels turning. She was about to say something sarcastic, but I put my hand on her forearm.

“No need to apologize. We got tied up in the moment.” I didn’t want her to feel bad for our indiscretion.

“That’s what she said,” Caz muttered, and I gave her a side-eye. “What?” she mouthed.

“You two are adorable. How long have you been together?” Her question caught me off guard.

Did I tell the truth and say an hour? Or did I say what it felt like, which was, since before we met? Both answers were ludicrous. Caz was someone who was meant to be in my life, and how long I knew her was irrelevant. What mattered were our interactions and how she made me feel.

Caz never made me question who I was or who I was supposed to be. She encouraged me to embrace my awkwardness. And with her near, I felt empowered to make bold choices. She wanted me to step outside my comfort zone and helped me overcome my self-doubt.

“Long enough,” Caz replied, not waiting for me to get my thoughts in order, but I was happy not to have to answer. She laced her fingers through mine, and thankfully,

the ambulance stopped before we had to make any more small talk.

“All right, we have two adult females. One needs a drug and rape kit, and the other needs a possible x-ray,” the EMT spouted to the people holding wheelchairs outside of the lift.

“Do you think Davia raped you?” Nausea bubbled in my stomach upon hearing those words.

“Are you kidding? If I wasn’t giving, I was useless to her.” She rolled her eyes as the man standing below helped her down. “I can walk myself.” She waved him off, but he didn’t take no for an answer.

I gladly took the seat because the less pressure I put on my foot, the better.

“We’ll get you checked in, but the police are here to talk to you,” the woman pushing me stated.

“Okay.” I turned to Caz, who had her hand over her face, probably trying to hide who she was.

Once inside, they took us to separate locations, and I didn’t like that. I wanted to be there for her and know how she was doing.

The woman wheeled me to the X-ray room and left me with someone in scrubs. “Hi, I’m Stacy. I’ll take the images of your foot. Is it all right if I take off your shoe?”

I nodded, but I just wanted this to be over. I knew Caz didn’t think Davia did anything physical to her, but when the cops told her everything they knew, it would be emotional.

After sliding off my Converse, she peeled off my sock, but it was coated in blood, and I flinched. “I’m so sorry, but the cloth has dried to the skin.”

“Rip it off quickly.” I closed my eyes, but they popped open when she screamed.

“Oh my god, the nail came off.” She covered her mouth, and I peeked down at the black-and-blue toe that was covered in red.

No wonder it hurt so badly—it looked like something from a cartoon.

“Let me get your foot up here.” She positioned me in several different directions and took the pictures she needed. “The doctor will be with you shortly to review the findings.” By the grimace on her face, I didn’t need a doctor to tell me it wasn’t good.

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“Thanks.” I left my sock and shoe off, and a nurse came and wheeled me to a private room. “Where is Caz?” I questioned before she could leave me there alone.

“I don’t know who that is, but the police need to speak with you.” She shut the door, making me feel like I was about to be interrogated.

There was a knock, and the door opened before I could tell them to come in.

“Ms. Wilbers, I’m Officer Babbs.”

“Hello. Is Caz okay?” Hopefully, he would be more helpful.

“I’m here to discuss Davia Mikaelson.” He opened his notebook and positioned his pen in place.

“What do you mean?”

“How long have you known her?” His voice was laced with suspicion.

“I don’t know her.” What was he getting at?

“Tell me how you knew she was there and drugged Ms. Montgomery.” He tapped his pen impatiently.

“I didn’t know any of that. When I showed Matrix the text from Caz that said she was back with Davia, he said something was wrong and he was going to check on her. But I wasn’t about to let him go alone because Caz is... special, and I wanted to make

sure she was okay.”

“Interesting.” He wrote something down.

“Am I a suspect or something? Ask Caz. She’ll tell you I’m her...” How did I finish that?

I definitely wouldn’t say girlfriend after two kisses. Even if they were mind-blowing, I wouldn’t be the one to jump the gun.

“Don’t tell me how to do my job, miss.” He gave me a stern look, and I buckled.

“No. I’m not.” Hot tears rolled down my cheeks. “I just want to be there for her, but I feel like I’m somehow in trouble.” I didn’t handle punishment well, especially when I didn’t deserve it.

“Please don’t cry. I’m sorry.” He handed me a tissue. “It’s my first day on the job, and I want to impress the boss.”

I sniffled. “By making me cry?”

“No!” He shook his big bullhead. “If I caught something they missed, it would make me look good.” He hitched a shoulder up nonchalantly, and I narrowed my eyes.

“So you have no authority to interview me in this manner?”

He appeared scared as his eyes widened, and he swallowed hard. “Miss. I was merely asking the questions that seemed relevant. I want to clarify that I wasn’t accusing you of anything.”

“Then let me see Caz, and I won’t report you.” I had no idea if I could report him or

not, but the emotional blackmail seemed to work because the next thing I knew, he was wheeling me to her room.

“Are you okay?” I questioned as soon as I saw her lying in bed, staring at the ceiling.

“Dandy. How are you?” She shuddered as she took in my foot.

“It looks worse than it is. What did you find out?”

“Nothing I couldn’t have guessed. There was ketamine in my system. The cops found some embarrassing photos of me and them on their phones, but I was still in the clothes I had on, so they don’t think there was foul play.” Her voice was almost robotic. “Oh, they also took my underwear.”

“Oh my god. I’m so sorry, Caz. How do you feel... emotionally?”

She shrugged. “I guess... stupid for believing Davia could ever change. And violated.”

That was what I had been afraid of. What if the kiss was a trauma response? Or drug-induced?

“You’re not stupid, and this isn’t your fault.” I moved my chair toward the bed, but I didn’t touch her.

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She needed a friend right now, and I didn't want her to think I was taking advantage.

She sighed and reached for me. I hesitated, but she didn't give me the option as she pulled me closer.

"I know I'm not the one to blame, but I don't want to be Davia's victim again. She doesn't deserve that power over me." Her crystal eyes were watery, but there was a glimmer of joy inside them, which brought a smile to my lips.

"I don't think anyone has power over you." I let out a soft chuckle, but she just shook her head.

"That's not true." As she leaned in closer, the sweetness of her taste replayed in my mind. "When I'm around you, I have no control over myself." She eliminated the space between us, crashing her lips against mine.

I had to know something before I could give in to this kiss. "Are you sure this is what you want?" I asked against her mouth.

She drew back and stared at me. "Are you having second thoughts?"

Now, I put doubts in her mind. "Not at all. I know a lot has happened, and I wanted to double-check to make sure it wasn't a trigger response."

"Hmm." She appeared to deeply contemplate what I said, and my worst fear was coming true. "Will you stop overthinking for one fucking minute and just kiss me?"

I didn't need to hear anything else. Caz was self-assured and knew what she wanted, which, for some reason, was me. I might not understand it, but I definitely wouldn't fight it. Instead, I would thank the universe for putting Caz in my life and teaching me to accept the good things without question.

Epilogue

Caz

The older I got, the quicker time seemed to pass, and the more life changed. But why couldn't things stay the same? If something wasn't broken, was there a need to go and DIY it for fun? But I guess if I hadn't opened the door to new possibilities, I wouldn't be where I was today—which was overwhelmed, but surprisingly happy.

Everything began changing for me last year when I got a surprise phone call from “Shorty.” Needless to say, when I found out that Matrix, Sonya, and Devon had been playing matchmaker by calling into the show to get me to help “Shorty” find love, I wasn't pleased. They all thought Shiloh and I would be perfect together and took it upon themselves to interfere in our lives—nosy bastards.

However, how could I stay mad at them when Shiloh was by far the best thing that had ever happened to me? Besides, it wasn't like I could easily cut them out of my life. I had to see them regularly because Matrix was my friend and Devon was his girlfriend, so they were in by default. And Sonya, well, I never would have believed it, but she became my producer once Matrix officially quit.

As flighty as she was, she was damn good at her job. She could record and edit things—dare I even think it—better than Matrix. Not to mention, she was on point with audience engagement and even joined me on air sometimes. It was working out better than I could have imagined and wasn't what was causing me stress.

And after the incident with Davia, where she was charged with administering a controlled substance without consent, attempted blackmail, and theft, a judge sentenced her to a year in prison and awarded me a handsome sum of money as restitution. Sure, she would probably be getting out soon if she hadn't already, but I wouldn't worry about her as long as I got my monthly payment.

So, I was in that situation where I again felt like my life had it all. But did that mean it was time for the other shoe to drop? They always said that things would happen when you least expected them, but did that mean they had to occur at the same time? I never thought I would say this, but there could be too much of a good thing—if you couldn't keep your head above water to enjoy any of it.

And even though most of the events in my life were positive, any kind of transformation was hard. It meant something had come to an end, which in turn meant something new had to begin. It was like a double whammy of anxiety.

Right now, I was closing on my condo with some unsuspecting twentysomething hipster who thought they were getting a steal of a deal for prime real estate, and I was washing my hands of the more-than-minor inconveniences that place caused me. Was I happy to be out of that overpriced box? Most definitely. Was I scared as hell to be moving in with Shiloh? You better fucking believe it.

Yes, Shiloh and I were still going strong, but we hadn't lived together—we hadn't had to face the problems of co-parenting, which would now be a thing since we adopted a three-year-old pit. She was the cutest blue nose I'd ever seen, but how would I be as a full-time dog mom? I didn't know. It was one more thing that added to the uncertainty that hung over me like a dark cloud.

Oh, and did I mention I completely revamped my show? Instead of My Life Unscripted, Shiloh and I started Shorty and Caz's Journey of Love. Shiloh still did her meal planning business in the comfort of my studio instead of being trapped with

Yoni, who wanted to sabotage our relationship. With Shiloh's notoriety on the show, she didn't need to work with Yoni anymore, so she quit. Now, she and I were building an empire of sorts, and I adored every moment.

She and I went together like chocolate bacon. She was by far the sweet to my salty, but we balanced each other. Our exchange was simple yet profound—she coated my crispy edges with her soft gentleness. The two of us have had something that inspired others, and I wanted to share that hope.

The audience loved our story, and our witty banter kept them tuning in. We answered callers' questions, but we also focused on the problems we had faced and how we worked through them—issues that many people were too afraid to admit they had.

For example, the first fart. It wasn't something people discussed, but I found out that if I stayed over, Shiloh would give herself horrible cramps by holding in her farts. If I was supposedly her person and loved her more than I could fathom, why did she think she needed to hide the fact that she had a gassy ass? Did she think I believed beautiful creatures like herself emitted delicate fragrances? It wasn't a conversation she enjoyed having over the air, but I found it helped many people become more comfortable with the aspect of living with someone and how to broach those unsavory topics.

But we also turned the tables and discussed a subject everyone loved—sex. Even though my show no longer let the audience decide what ventures I would take, I polled their input on sex toys and positions to try. While there were some big flops, Shiloh and I were not the cause. Our chemistry was incredible, and as awkward as we could be in public, we were like synchronized swimmers in the bedroom. Any catastrophes we had were caused by misunderstanding the directions for the position or using a toy that a man engineered.

Regardless of the journey, the outcome for us was always the same: the best sex we

ever had. I knew that sounded corny, but it was the truth. When you were with someone who you could laugh in the bedroom with but then turn around and fuck them speechless, how could you not enjoy every time you were with them? There was nothing off limits for us because we had trust and safety, and we only wanted the other person to feel good. If that wasn't happening, we would throw in an audible and make it work—which was where we were today.

“Okay, spread your legs wider, and here, let me lift your ass.” I easily put her in position. As I studied the picture, I slid two pillows under her back. “Okay. How does that feel?” I stared into her mesmerizing eyes, and she giggled.

“Am I supposed to feel something? I’m just lying here on a couple of pillows.”

“Well, I haven’t started the magic yet. But I wanted to check to see if you were comfortable first.” I gave her a raised eyebrow that she was so jealous of because she couldn’t do it. Then I kneeled between her legs and took two fingers, gliding them along either side of her clit. My strokes were slow and deliberate, while my free hand gently squeezed her nipple.

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“Fuck,” she breathed out in pleasure, and I skillfully intensified my movements.

Her hips were rocking to the rhythm of my fingers, and I reached for the suction toy.

“Here, you can use this.” I turned it on before handing it to her.

“What are you going to do?” She stared at me while I kept dragging my nails up and down her wet lips.

I leaned between her legs, getting close enough for her to feel my presence without physically touching her. “Why don’t you wait and find out?” When I exhaled, my warm breath brushed against her glossy core, making her tremble.

Then I waited for her to place the suction where my fingers had been. Once she had the toy in the desired position, I playfully traced my tongue along her entrance, causing her to gasp. Then I opened her wider with my fingers to let myself fully taste her pool of desire. I moved deeper inside while her hips rocked toward my face. I glided my nose up and down her slit, making sure to use every part of my face to please her and arouse every one of my senses—she was irresistible.

By the time her juices dripped off my chin, she was ready for some deeper penetration. Three fingers easily went inside, and she shuddered.

“Oh shit.”

As I applied pressure to the front wall, her pussy tightened around my fingers. The connection between us was electric. Every caress of my fingers caused her body to

surge with anticipation. Then, with a quivering sigh, it appeared her body surrendered to the overwhelming pleasure, releasing a torrent of liquid ecstasy that enveloped us. Her body trembled incessantly, as if aftershocks were surging through her veins.

I stayed inside as she rode out the sensation, but she threw the clit sucker behind her as she flopped her arms above her head limply. When she appeared completely spent, I removed my fingers and gently glided through her slick juices, arousing her already tender nerves.

“You have to stop. I’m going to pass out.”

“Well, I’d say we found a winner, yeah?” I wagged my brows, and she couldn’t even formulate a response. “I’ve never known you to only go one round.”

“Yeah, well, you’ve never made me squirt before.” She let out a deep exhale, like it was her dying breath.

“Touche. But that sounds like a challenge.” I laughed.

“I would hit you if I could move. But I think all my energy was tied up in the orgasm.”

I curled next to her, kissing the sensitive spot on her neck that always made her giggle, but she took her chin, pushing me out of the crevice. “Why won’t you let me in?”

She whispered exasperatedly, "That's what she said," and I burst into uncontrollable laughter.

“Oh my god, I fucking love you.”

“I’m not saying that right now. You know I do, but if I die, I don’t want you to

constantly wonder if I loved you or what you did to me.”

“That makes no sense. If you die, you’d rather I not hear you say those words at all. Then I’ll constantly question if you actually loved me. It seems like the reason doesn’t matter as much as the fact that you do.”

“Will you stop arguing and kiss me?” Instead of letting me have another witty retort, she silenced me with her lips.

This was the thing about us. From our lighthearted banter, the intensity between us would quickly ignite into a passionate and insatiable desire. As I allowed myself to get lost in this moment, I realized how complete my life was.

All the pieces of my puzzle were in place, and she was the reason. If it wasn't for her, I would have remained trapped in a comfortable hell, oblivious to what living truly meant. And together, we get to embark on a new story, where the sound of our laughter filled the air and love surrounded us—this was the unknown heaven.