



# Starstruck

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**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Amelia has poured her heart and soul into her dream of becoming an actress. All her sacrifice is about to pay off when she's offered her first leading role, but there's one catch: it's the lead in the lesbian romance movie *Real Love*. Amelia's never so much as looked at another woman, and she can't help but feel intimidated at the prospect of faking intimacy with a girl. Especially when she finds out who the other star is...

Heartthrob Jessica Black is known for her luscious curves, cheesy movies, and flings with actors—not for her acting talent. But the dates are all fake and sometimes she feels her entire life is just a publicity stunt. The only real relationship in her life is the one she has with Cleo—her rescued puppy. Jessica wants to create a film that will make the world a better place. But when she signs up to star in a lesbian romance movie to raise awareness for equality, she faces resistance from her publicist, her agent, and even her own family. And to top it off she seems destined to clash with her feisty, short haired, vintage suit wearing co-star Amelia. When the two decide to work out their scenes with some private rehearsals, their relationship only grows more complicated.

"The kiss was supposed to be practice, but it felt real."

As friendship grows between them, it starts to seem like it could be something more. But with pressure from the public, and their own insecurities to work past, their relationship encounters one challenge after the next. Can Amelia and Jessica work through it all to create their own happily ever after?

**Total Pages (Source):** 54

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm*

1.

Amelia

“Bastard!”

I rammed my hand against the horn as yet another driver cut me off on my mad race to reach Aorta Studios before my audition started in—shit, in twenty minutes. I stopped looking at the clock because it was making my heart race so fast I could’ve died of a heart attack. Wouldn’t that be just my luck? I finally land an audition for a movie and I die on the way to the studio at the tender age of twenty-three.

Or maybe the L.A. traffic would kill me first. I slammed the horn again, resisting the urge to rage out on the driver flipping me the bird. Breath, Amelia. Breath. This definitely was not the head space I wanted to be in right before trying out for my big break.

But maybe a small part of me was relieved at the thought of never making it to my audition. Sure, the movie might make my career, but there was one little catch. Actually it was a huge catch. I’d have to kiss a girl. Not just kiss her, but whisper in her ear and make googly eyes at her for the several months it took to film a romantic comedy.

Yes, I was auditioning for a lesbian romance movie.

No, I wasn’t a lesbian. Though it’d been hard to convince my mom that I wasn’t when I’d told her about the audition over the phone. She’d been awkwardly

supportive—all, You'll always be my daughter. I'll love and accept you no matter what.

Which was sweet and all, except I wasn't a lesbian! After explaining three times, she finally reiterated that her love and support was unconditional. Frustrating, but I guess nice to hear.

It wasn't a new accusation. Because of my short hair and the way I preferred tailored suits over dresses, people tended to make stupid assumptions about my sexuality. But I'd never even considered women as an option—no matter how many loser guys I'd dated.

Truthfully, I was terrified about the prospect of faking attraction to a woman. I'd already been to two auditions for the film, and this was a call back to do a “chemistry test” with the other lead. Would I really be able to let a woman put her mouth all over my face and pretend to like it?

I turned on the radio to distract myself from that thought, because I was freaking myself out again. The DJ on my favorite station was droning on about celebrity gossip.

“Rumor has it,” he said over a cheesy whispering sound effect, “Jessica Black is dating her Maid for You co-star, Oliver Colt. Hasn't she broken enough hearts already?”

I rolled my eyes. A week later, Jessica would be photographed cheating on Oliver, and then there would be rumors that she and Oliver were broken up, followed by whispers that they were engaged. Why were people so obsessed with this crap? I hated the thought of making it big if it meant my life became a stupid spectacle.

Just as I thought that, an ugly groan erupted from my car. Shit! I felt the car losing

speed as more disturbing noises grunted from somewhere under the hood. I flipped my blinker on, begging one of the asshole drivers to let me get off the freeway before my poor car straight-up died in the middle of the road. I barely made it to the gravel before she pattered to a sad stop.

I told you about my bad luck, right?

But people with my horrible fortune don't have time to sit around and feel sorry for themselves. I unclipped my seatbelt, leapt from the car, and started sprinting. Thank God I've always been a converse girl—there was no way I'd make it to the studio in heels.

I leapt over the guardrail and stumbled through long grass toward the street Aorta studio was on. I ran until my lungs burnt with every breath. I was a sweaty mess when I saw the small studio in the distance. Three minutes to spare. Yes! I bolted down the sidewalk even faster, fire tearing at all my muscles—when a puppy skittered out in front of me, running between my legs. I tripped, trying not to stomp the little thing, and stumbled off the curb in the process. Pain seared up my arm as I used it to catch my fall, barely managing to avoid scraping my face on the pavement.

I was sweaty, scratched, bruised, and late.

“Ruff!”

I looked up to the little white face nuzzling at my cheek. If I didn't know better, I'd say the thing felt bad for what she'd done.

“Ruff!”

“Yeah, yeah, don't worry about it.” I pushed myself up, wincing as I put pressure on my arm. I didn't even know why I was still trying to make it to the audition when I

was going to be this much of a mess. I guess I realized then how much the opportunity had meant to me.

“Ruff!” the puppy cried after me as I broke into a new sprint.

“I said don’t worry about it!” I called over my shoulder, but she was still running after me. If she thought we could be friends even after she’d nearly killed me, she’d be disappointed to learn I was seriously allergic to dogs.

I ran faster. Pushed harder. It was always about pushing myself. Even when months went by without booking an audition and I had to choose between electricity and groceries. Even when I received rejection after rejection. The only thing I could do was push myself. Relief washed over me when I tore open the door to the reception room. Only two minutes late. Maybe there was a chance they’d take pity on the poor mess that was me.

“I’m here to audition for Real Love,” I said to the receptionist. “My name is Amelia Earhart.”

“Wonderful!” The woman smiled sweetly with lips painted a sugary pink. “We haven’t started yet, so you can just take a seat.”

Was this really happening? Had I actually stumbled into some good luck?

“Do you have a restroom I can use?” I asked.

“Right through that door on the left.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm*

I sighed with relief as I walked down the hall into the bathroom. I wasn't as much of a disaster as I thought I'd be. Sweaty, ruffled hair, but not a complete hot mess. I rinsed my face, washed the blood and dirt from my elbow, and took a comb from my pocket to smooth my hair. I wasn't vain, but I knew I wouldn't get anywhere if I didn't look good.

Growing up, I'd always hated how my looks lead people to underestimate me. With my heart-shaped face and full pink lips that stood out against green eyes and brown hair, my features were so feminine it hurt. I guess that's why I'd always liked defying expectations by keeping my hair short and going for menswear over fussy dresses.

I dried off quickly, returned to the reception room, and waited....

And waited...

And waited...

I scratched my nose, my eyes feeling itchy, as if just that brief encounter with the puppy had sent my allergies flaring up. It must've been my nerves. My body was reacting as if the room was teeming with dog hair. I tried not to sneeze as I waited....

And waited...

And waited...

"Is there an issue?" I finally asked the receptionist after I'd been si

tting for over twenty minutes.

“Errr.” The woman hesitated.

Just then, a door opened down the hall and I heard a shout. “I can’t do this until we find her!”

The receptionist's eyes darted back to the door where the shout had erupted from. “Look, I’m not supposed to tell anyone this.” The look of glee said that she couldn’t contain the secret. “We’ve already booked one of the romantic leads.”

“And?” I said to fill her dramatic pause.

“It’s Jessica Black!” She literally squealed with excitement.

No way.

No fucking way.

Jessica Black? It couldn’t be the Jessica Black. She had way better roles to be filling than this small-time movie that would be lucky to make it to a couple film festivals. And besides, her brand was built on selling the idea of romance to cheap magazines with headlines like “A Bazillion Ways to Please Your Man!” Barf! She’d dated every single actor from her romance blockbusters. Jessica Black was the last woman on earth anyone would expect to see in a lesbian romance movie.

That thought was interrupted by an enormous sneeze that made the chair shift under me.

“But of course, the star gets what the star wants,” the receptionist continued, giggling like it was all amusing to her. “She insisted on bringing her puppy to the set and it got

out of her dressing room. She's saying she won't start until we find her."

Of course.

Of course with my luck there would be a dog at the audition. If there would even be an audition. What a diva to not only insist on bringing her puff-ball, but refuse to start until it was by her side. How did someone with that little professionalism even make it this far? I blamed it on her stupid good looks. Must be easy to get ahead when you have every guy on the planet drooling over your curves and every girl trying to look like you.

Well... I also had to admit that she was a good actress. I set my lips in a hard line. That didn't change how much I resented her for the trivial way she was treating this whole film. After everything I'd gone through to get here. All the literal pain I'd endured. First my car, then the mad dash, then the—wait a minute.

"What does her dog look like?"

"Oh, she's the sweetest thing! Fluffy white fur and the biggest blue eyes you've ever seen!"

"Will you wait for me a minute?" I asked, already jumping up.

"I don't see us starting anytime soon." She still seemed amused by all this. Must be nice to be paid by the hour and have a guaranteed source of income.

I stuffed that bitter thought down as I dashed out the door and retraced my steps, searching for the ball of fluff that'd bruised my wrist. I found the bush I'd seen her scamper out of and called out, "Hey, umm... Marshmallow." That was probably her name, right? What else could you call something that white and fluffy? "Marshmallow! Here girl."



I was on my hands and knees now, getting dirtier by the second as I searched under the bush. I had no idea why I was even doing this when every second that ticked by made me want the role less and less. Did I really want to spend months working with a diva like Jessica Black?

I sighed. Diva or not, I needed this break. And the fact that Jessica Black was co-starring in the film only made it even more enticing as the opportunity that could rocket my career to the next level.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm*

I got down lower to search further into the bush for that damn dog.

I was actually relieved to know that my co-star would be another straight girl. I wasn't sure why it'd made me nervous to be kissing and making eyes at a gay woman. I just, well, I wouldn't want her to develop feelings or anything.

I know, I know, I sound vain as hell, but off-screen romances developed all the time between co-stars. I guess it made sense. Actors are chosen not just for their ability as individuals, but for the chemistry they have together.

Hell, Jessica was currently dating the actor from her upcoming straight romance, and had dated every co-star before him. (Okay, you caught me, I do follow her in the tabloids. But in my defence, it's hard to avoid news about the biggest star in cinema.)

Well, if chemistry was what would win me the role, I already considered it lost—just like this poor puppy that I was feeling worse and worse for, even as the perspiration of searching for her stung the scratches she'd given me when she'd knocked me from the pavement.

“Marshmallow!” I called out. “Marshmall—” My words cut off as another sneeze ripped through me.

“Ruff!”

I turned, joy washing through me the moment I locked eyes with that sweet little marshmallow. She sat wagging her tail, yapping cheerfully like she wanted me to come play with her.

“Hey, girl.” I held out my hand for her to sniff, silently begging her not to bolt. “Sorry I was rude to you earlier, I was just in a hurry.”

She approached with a clumsy little pounce and nuzzled against my hand. I scooped her up and she immediately curled against my chest. My racing heart seemed to calm at the contact, even as I felt my eyes already beginning to burn with irritation.

For the second time that day, I ran to the studio. I threw open the doors and shouted breathlessly, “Is this her?”

The receptionist looked at me for one agonizing moment. (Imagine if I went out and grabbed the wrong dog like a crazy person.)

“Oh my gosh!” She raced towards me. “I can’t wait to tell Jess!”

“Tell me what?” A slender form appeared in the doorway, sending a jolt of intimidation down my spine. She wasn’t just intimidating in her height, which in four inch heels, made her tower over me. Everything about being in the same room with the real Jessica Black was terrifying. Her perfectly curled blonde hair, glowing skin and piercing blue eyes made me so aware of what a fucking mess I must’ve been at that moment.

“We found Cleo!” The receptionist turned, taking Marshmallow from my arms to show Jessica.

“Oh my God!” Relief washed over her features as she practically threw herself towards us, snatching the puppy from the receptionist. “I’m so sorry.”

At first I thought she was apologizing to me for this fiasco, then I realized her babbled apology was directed toward the dog. Of course.

“Where did you find her?” She looked up at me for the first time. “I just left the room and she was gone!”

“I found her outside on the way here.”

“What were you doing outside?” She looked at the puppy incredulously and I really wished I could say the interaction wasn’t adorable. I still wanted to hate Jessica, but when she pulled me into a huge hug, my frustration with her melted as one thought ran through my head.

I’m being hugged by Jessica Black. No fucking way.

Then I remembered I’d be doing a lot more than hugging her if this audition went well. I swallowed hard as I inhaled the sharp cinnamon of her perfume before she pulled away, leaving me a mess of burning eyes and stuffy nose. I could practically see the dog hair floating around her like a halo.

“What are you doing?” someone shouted from the door behind us. “Get in here.”

“I guess we should get started, huh?” she said sheepishly.

Part of me wanted to respond with a bitchy remark like, yeah, we should’ve gotten started forty minutes ago. But I couldn’t actually respond with anything, because a sneeze tore through me. I turned and covered my face in the crook of my elbow just in time to avoid sneezing all over Jessica and the receptionist.

“Are you feeling okay?” Jessica eyed me suspiciously, no doubt wondering if she was going to get sick from our proximity.

The voice returned with more urgency, “Let’s go!”

I followed Jessica down the hall into a fairly standard audition room. A long table was set up at one end with a large open space in front of it for the actors to move around. Marshmallow jumped out of Jessica's arms and onto a little pillow in the corner that had apparently been set up for her. I tried not to roll my itchy eyes.

Three casting dir

ectors sat at the table looking justifiably cranky. I groaned inwardly that Jessica had already exhausted their patience. Of course this was all a joke to her, but my entire future rode on this audition.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm*

“Thank you for joining us, Miss Earhart,” a large, red faced man said without looking up from the notes he was making. Braelyn Guss, the director. Next to him, was a woman with tightly pulled back hair, Emily Harp, the producer. I’d met them in my first auditions and memorized everything about their careers, but I was pretty sure none of them would remember my name if it weren’t scrawled on the headshots in front of them.

“We want to test your on-set chemistry,” Braelyn continued. “So if you could just run through the lines we supplied you with.”

“Ummm.” I froze. “Lines?”

“Didn’t you receive an email with the script?”

I shook my head. Numb, exhausted, bruised, eyes burning from that Marshmallow. This might’ve been the worst day of my life.

Emily sighed, leaned back in her chair and let her arms fall defeated to her sides. Clearly she was having as frustrating a day as I was. If that was possible.

“Hell, since you helped find that damned dog, I’ll give you a break.” Her eyes scanned me up and down, lips tightening. “Frankly, you look like you need it.”

“Uhh... thanks.”

She held out a script to me. “Just read for the character of Jordan and do the best you can.”

It felt like this whole thing was a courtesy at this point. I'd helped her out with the princess so she felt bad sending me packing. I really just wanted to go home, crawl into my bed and never come out again.

My jaw set. No. That wasn't how I did things.

I took the script, scanning it quickly. As I took in the dialogue, I felt myself coming alive. The energy of a performance took control of my muscles. I flipped a page. The more I read about Jordan, the more I felt myself becoming her, fully inhabiting the role. I was ready.

I set the script back on the table.

"You don't need to read from it?" Braelyn asked.

I shook my head. "I think I've got it, thanks."

"Jessica, are you ready?" He shot a piercing look over her shoulder at the grown woman laying on the floor playing with a puppy.

"Been ready for ages."

I watched her walk towards me, and as she did, she ceased being Jessica and became Gail, the sassy cowgirl stealing my heart. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. I didn't come this far to just go halfway.

I opened my eyes. "Why the hell are you getting this close to me?"

A cheeky grin spread across Jessica's face. "Because you don't want me to stay away."

She kept moving closer, each footstep bringing out another thump in my chest until my own feet were moving backwards.

“You think you’re pretty smart, don’t you?” My back pressed against the wall.

“No.” She pressed a hand against the wall and leaned into me until our chests were almost touching. “But I don’t need to be smart to figure you out.”

Her breath fell against my cheek. Suddenly, I became so overwhelmed by Jessica’s closeness that I forgot my next line. Then I remembered there was no next line. This was the part where she kissed me.

My mind screamed, and I lost my character completely as I panicked. My eyes itched so bad from the dog hair that I was tearing up. When she reached down and grabbed my bruised wrist, pain forced the tears to actually fall. A warm trickle melted down my cheek and she wiped it away, letting her hand remain on my face, thumb gently stroking my jaw.

Time slowed and then seemed to stop as I stared into her blue eyes. She was so near that I could take in every minute detail of her face. Even this close, she was perfect. Not a wrinkle or a pore to mark her glowing skin. Even though she was fair, dark lashes covered her hooded eyes. My breath rose and fell heavily in the pregnant silence between us.

Then I noticed the distance between our lips was disappearing. My breath caught. My lips tingled in anticipation.

A sharp ring tore through the moment, making me start from the trance I’d been thrown into. Jessica backed away, looking sheepishly at the table as she took her phone from her pocket.



Emily rolled her eyes. “You know what, that’s great for today. Thank you so much for coming out, Amelia.”

I pressed my lips together to keep from cursing and muttered a tight, “Thank you.”

## Page 5

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Jessica walked away, phone already pressed to her ear. Five minutes from now, she'd never think about me or the chance she'd ruined for my career. She didn't care about anyone but herself and her stupid Marshmallow.

I sighed as I found my way out onto the street. The craziest thing? When I was looking into her eyes, waiting for her to kiss me, there had been one second when I'd thought I might be able to do this.

2.

Jessica

“Bastard!”

I groaned into the phone again. Cleo's big blue eyes looked up at me with concern, and I stroked her soft fur until she nestled back into my lap.

“Sorry.” I sighed. “I get that he's my agent, but he can't just tell me what to do. None of you can.”

“I explained to him how important this film is to you,” my publicist said patiently over the phone. “But he insists it's going to kill your career.”

“Well what's he going to? Drop me as a client?”

Samantha laughed dryly. Of course there was no way my agent would let me go. I was the biggest client he had.

“He could be right,” she said hesitantly.

“Not you, too.”

“Well, I’m just saying, your image is built on the romantic dream of happily-ever-after.”

“That’s why this film is even more important!” I gripped my hair in frustration. “People need to see that two same-sex partners being together can be as normal as a man and a woman.”

“I know, I know, you don’t need to explain it again.”

“Apparently I do, because you just interrupted an audition to ask me to drop out of the movie.”

“I’m just asking you to think about what this could mean.”

“I know what this could mean! It could mean that a lonely kid in high school will know someone’s standing up for her. It could mean a guy confused about his sexuality could have some context to understand himself. This movie could mean a lot to a lot of people.”

Her voice was quiet. “I see your point.”

“Please don’t ask me to drop out again, because it’s not going to happen. I’m already funding half the film.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m sorry I asked. Look, can you do me a favor and go out somewhere with Oliver tonight? Somewhere you’ll be photographed? Meanwhile I’ll try to think of how to keep this from blowing up.”

“Let it blow up!”

“And here I thought you were my easiest client.”

I said goodbye and tried not to be annoyed as I hung up. I’d gotten opposition from my PR firm since I’d first gotten involved with this movie. My publicist seemed to think it would hurt my image if I appeared in a lesbian film, and that alone showed me how necessary it was for me to do this.

My best friend Sara had come out of the closet when we were teens, and the hard time she’d gotten since infuriated me. So what if she loved women? Why the hell should that matter to anyone? After all the betrayal and backstabbing that’d followed me on my rise to fame, Sara was the one friend who I’d always known I could count on. I wanted her to feel like I had her back as much as she’d always had mine.

When this movie came on my radar, I knew I had to do it. Sure, I’d never kissed a girl before, but I didn’t see any issue with it. I’d faked it with plenty of actors, so this shouldn’t be any different.

I stroked Cleo’s soft fur as she looked up at me as if to ask what I was thinking about.

“Just about how awful and stupid the world can be,” I answered. “Which you already know too much about.”

Her furry little head tickled me as I planted a kiss between her ears. I’d felt like such a failure when I’d thought I’d lost Cleo. I’d been about ready to break down when I realized she hadn’t had her medication yet. What if that actress hadn’t found her for me? I made a mental note to remember that I owed her big time. And to ask what her name was.

I opened a small orange bottle and nestled a pill into a pâté of food in her dish. She

sniffed curiously before digging in. I lay out on the carpeted floor to watch her cute little teeth go to work.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm*

It broke my heart that someone had just abandoned her in a cardboard box on the side of the road. When I'd found her huddled and wet on my way home from filming my last movie, it had been love at first sight. I wasn't sure what breed of dog she was, but her fluffy fur made me think she might have some pomeranian in her... I just hoped she wasn't a breed that would get too big. I stroked her silky fur, making her look up at me curiously.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt your dinner. Go back to eating."

Being left alone was really hard on her. I'd tried leaving Cleo with friends when I was working, but every time I left her for too long, she developed separation anxiety and stopped eating. I was so grateful that Aorta Studios had allowed me to bring her with me. If I had to choose between Cleo and the movie... well, I wasn't sure what I'd do.

I sat up reluctantly and thumbed through my phone again. It had been a while since Oliver and I had hung out in public and if we didn't keep up the image, the press would start spreading rumors that we'd broken up.

Hah.

If only they knew.

My 'relationship' with Oliver was just one of the many publicity hoops we'd jumped through for our film that would be premiering in a month. The public loved swooning over this type of fluff, pretending everything we said to each other in the movie was real, so we gave it to them.

As far as fake boyfriends went, Oliver was great. He and I probably would've been friends even if we weren't forced to hang out with each other as a hazard of the trade. Of course, neither of us were crazy enough to actually date a co-star. When those relationships went bad, they had the ability to destroy an entire film and send careers spiraling into the dust.

Still laying on the floor, I rolled onto my back and sent him a quick text to ask if he wanted to get drinks. He responded quickly.

>Oliver: Publicist on your ass again?

>Me: You know me all too well.

>Oliver: Hah. I can meet up with you at ten.

As I was texting Oliver, I saw another call coming in. My mom's number. I chewed my lip and sighed before ignoring the call.

Oliver and I chose a bar to meet up at and I texted my best friend Sara to ask if she'd come over to my house to spend time with Cleo while I was out, to which she responded with an enthusiastic, yes! With that settled, I decided to go over the script some more, but when Cleo nuzzled up to me, I melted into a big puddle and couldn't resist taking quick a nap with her.

I left my phone in my dressing room and scooted into the room where props and costumes were stored. There was something about a dark prop room that felt so peaceful to me. I pulled down some heavy coats to make a comfy bed for me and Cleo behind a row of long dresses. It was a trick I'd picked up to get me through early rehearsals as a kid, and for some reason I never slept as well as I did in prop rooms. It was a safe place where no one could find me.

I bundled a jacket under my head and pulled another one over me as a blanket. Cleo batted at a fluffy dress before turning to me and nestling into the soft space under my chin. As much as she needed me, sometimes I needed her even more. I breathed a deep, relaxed sigh as all the stress of the world disappeared and I slipped into warm sleep.

3.

Amelia

I sighed as the mechanic wrote out the bill for my poor car. I didn't even know if the heap of junk was worth the three-hundred bucks it would cost to fix. I did know I didn't have the money. The club I worked at had cut my shifts back and cash was tighter than ever.

Thank God for credit cards, I guess.

Though I was quickly sliding into a deep pit of debt that I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to dig myself out of. Unless I landed a big role.

I tried to hold my frustration in as I thought of the opportunity I'd lost that morning. This movie could've made all the difference in my future.

Damnit, I wouldn't think about it.

Wouldn't think about Jessica Black and her stupidly adorable dog or her unprofessionalism. I wouldn't wonder how such a diva could get any role she wanted.

I swallowed another sigh as I snatched the receipt from the mechanic and headed for the bus stop just in time to see a bus pulling away. Perfect. I took a seat on the bench, hoping I'd get home in time to change for work.



Waiting for the next bus gave me plenty of time to practice not thinking about Jessica. And I definitely needed practice, because my mind circled around her the entire half-hour I had to wait.

And for the hour it took the bus to meander to the crummy end of town where I lived. It was dark by the time I began my walk home, and still, somehow, I couldn't get that woman out of my head.

I unlocked my apartment and opened the door carefully to avoid tipping over the table next to entrance. My studio apartment was so small that I could barely move without knocking something over. Before I'd moved into the little hovel, I'd rented a place with two other girls who were also pursuing careers in acting. We'd gotten along great.

Until the day we all auditioned for the same role.

Well, I can't really say I auditioned, because one of the girls swiped my alarm clock to keep me from getting up and just in case that wasn't enough to prevent me from making the audition, she nabbed my car keys.

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She got the role—I got a new apartment. Ever since, I’d lived alone.

The real kicker was that she was doing really well these days. I tried not to be bitter about it whenever I turned on the TV and saw her in the latest sit-com. I tried not to be bitter about a lot of things.

Then there had been a boyfriend who I’d planned on moving in with, but that had ended badly... to put it mildly.

“Don’t be bitter,” I reminded myself for the thousandth time that day.

I opened my cupboard and dug out the bag of rice that sustained my meager existence. I’d only have time to gulp down a bit of food and change before I had to get to work.

While the rice cooked, I slipped out of the neat dress pants and reluctantly into my ratty jeans. I had fewer and fewer reasons to dress nice these days. As I iced my bruised wrist, I gulped down the plain rice, not bothering to scoop it into a bowl, which I’d just have to wash. I’d be doing enough washing up tonight.

I was exhausted by the time I arrived at my job, the thundering music of Club Echo assaulting my ears. I evaded my supervisor and set to work taking out trash, scrubbing bathrooms... menial, mind-numbing work.

Did the people around me in \$500 t-shirts have any idea how lucky they were? Club Echo was one of the ritziest spots in the area, and I’d been excited to get a job there as a chance to meet celebrities in the business. But lately, I’d found that being around

people whose lives were going well just depressed me.

My shift was only half over when my bruised wrist was throbbing too much to continue, and I had to beg my supervisor to let me go home early. I could tell by her expression that I might be going home permanently. I was too tired to care. Too tired of it all.

“Fine. But I need you to mop up one of the VIP booths before you go home,” she finally conceded with an annoyed sigh. “Someone smashed an entire bottle of Patron.”

Great. Now assholes were dumping their billion-dollar tequila all over the place. When I’d wheeled my mop and bucket through the crowd of writhing bodies, I stopped and did a double take at the couple in the booth.

Jessica Black.

Was she haunting me or something?

She lounged comfortably in the VIP booth, heels kicked off, whispering and laughing with her boyfriend Oliver. Maybe if that morning had never happened, I would’ve been stoked to stand next to Jessica Black and Oliver Colt. But as it was, I couldn’t even look at her.

I kept my head down as I quickly swept up the smashed glass. I wasn’t sure what I’d say if I had to talk to her. Good thing most of the people I worked around never even looked at me.

I had to get closer to her to sweep under her feet and the familiar scent of her cinnamon perfume permeating the overwhelming scent of alcohol instantly brought back memories of her proximity to me that morning.

“Sorry about the mess.” She laughed. “My fingers got really slippery from squeezing limes into my glass.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said as sincerely as I could, which wasn’t very sincere. I should’ve just kept my gaze down, and I definitely shouldn’t have looked up to glare at her.

“Hey, it’s you!” she exclaimed with an excitement that suggested she didn’t even notice my death stare. “Funny seeing you here.” Her plump lips pulled into a dimpled grin that I’d seen staring at me from dozens of movie posters.

“Yeah, funny.” I looked back down and grabbed my mop, swishing it around the floor.

Jessica leapt to her feet. “I gotta admit, I’m pretty excited to start filming this movie.”

The mop clattered to the floor. All my annoyance, all my frustration, came bubbling up in that one uncontrollable moment.

“Yeah, I was pretty excited as well. Too bad I won’t be in it, thanks to you.”

“Huh?”

Was I going to get fired for

this? Definitely. But I was pretty sure I’d already lost my job for asking to go home early, so I really had nothing to lose at this point. “Did you ever consider some people might be allergic to dogs?”

“Huh.” She got a thoughtful look, shaking her head. “No, I didn’t.”

My voice dropped to a low hiss, and I leaned in so close to her that the heat of our bodies mingled. “And you really had to interrupt the audition to find your precious pet? Waste everyone’s time and exasperate the casting panel before I even got in the room?”

“She needed her med—”

“And then, on top of that—on top of all of it!—you didn’t even shut your phone off!” My jaw was clenched, lips pressed against her ear so close that I could feel the tiny hairs prickle with every poisonous word I spat. I’d officially lost it.

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My voice dripped with all the disappointment I could no longer contain. “You have no clue how much this movie meant to me.”

With our bodies pressed so close, I could feel the electrical impulse that shot through her at those words. She put her hand on my shoulders, pushing me far enough away that I could see into her face. The infuriating woman was still smiling from ear to ear.

“I didn’t realize you felt so passionately about the movie!” Her grin widened even more. “It means a lot to me too!”

I lost her attention as a server returned with another bottle of overpriced booze. Somehow Jessica’s cheerful dismissiveness made my blood boil even hotter.

“If it means that much to you, why didn’t you at least turn your phone off? You didn’t even do what we were actually there to do, which was kiss.”

She blinked a moment before looking back at me, her grin turned crooked and she punched me lightly in the arm. “Hey, if you wanted to kiss me so bad, all you had to do was ask.”

My brain short circuited as fiery rage tore apart every cell in my body. How arrogant can you be? She flopped back down next to her boyfriend and started pouring out glasses of booze. She held one out to me, saying, “Cheers to Real Love.”

My first instinct was to push her outstretched hand away. On second thought, I took the shot and downed it before turning and bolting the hell out of there.

I was done.

Done with my shitty job. Done with scraping by. Done with my stupid dream of being an actress. Done with Jessica.

\*\*\*

My head ached as I sat up. The bottle of cheap wine I'd drowned my misery in was not being kind to me. Memories of the night before flashed in my mind. I let out a groan as I remembered telling Jessica off and storming out of work. With my luck, she'd be telling everyone in the industry to never hire me—actually, I was pretty sure she didn't even remember my name, so maybe I was safe there.

'If you wanted to kiss me so bad, all you had to do was ask.'

Ugh, the self-centered princess really did think the world worshipped at her feet—that men and women alike would die for a chance to mash faces with her. Give me a break. I rolled over again, groaning. Had I been too much of a bitch?

I sighed. It wasn't really her fault I'd blown up. I didn't know what had come over me. Sure, I'd always been hot-headed, but I'd completely lost it on someone who probably didn't deserve that from me. Lately my life had just felt so... hopeless.

I was one missed rent payment away from being forced to move back to New Hampshire and live in my parent's basement until I could find some soul sucking corporate job to rot away at until I turned a billion years old. Actually, that didn't so bad compared to my current situation. I was so exhausted by scraping by.

My phone started ringing, making my head ache even more. I didn't have the energy to engage in conversation, so I let it go to voicemail. When I played the message back, I almost dropped the phone at the sound of the voice of Emily Harp from Aorta

Studios.

“We loved your audition. The tears you conjured for the performance were so authentic! We’d love to have you play the love interest of Jessica Black in Real Love.”

4.

Jessica

Oliver was still sleeping in my guestroom the next morning. He often stayed the night to give the paparazzi opportunities to photograph him leaving my house. It was almost sad how easy it was to fool them. I guess people will always believe what they want to believe, and the public adores a love story.

Sara had been passed out on my couch when Oliver and I had stumbled in past midnight. She was still there, so I was trying to be quiet. My home was cozy, which I loved, but it also meant there wasn’t a lot of room to make noise when people were sleeping.

I’d been up since six, barely able to sleep because I’d been so excited. I’d called Aorta and told them we had to book the spunky woman who’d auditioned the day before. I’d been impressed by her acting, but when she’d declared how important the movie was to her, I knew I’d found the actress I’d been looking for. I wanted someone who felt the same as I did about the movie, not just someone looking to fill an open role.

I didn’t want to jump to any conclusions, but her short hair and stylish suit made me think she might be into women—well, that and how badly she’d wanted to kiss me. That was kind of a give away. It was great that she’d feel as passionately about the movie as I did. I only hoped I could bring the same level of authenticity. That spunky



girl had become one more person I didn't want to let down with this movie.

I sat at my desk highlighting and adding notes to my script, but I had so much gleeful energy exploding from me that I couldn't resist spinning in my chair. When the spinning came to a dizzying halt, Oliver was standing in front of me, rubbing his eyes sleepily, hair still stiff with gel from the night before and sticking up in odd places.

"You're having a good morning." He laughed.

"Sure am!"

"You're scaring your poor puppy." He pointed to Cleo who was eyeing me suspiciously from behind Sara's sleeping body on my couch.

"Oh, she's used to it." I patted my knee and Cleo ran to me, digging her claws into my sweatpants as she clambered up onto my lap. I looked up to Oliver. "Are you hungr—wait, why are you laughing?"

"I'm not." Oliver covered his mouth before bursting out, "What the hell are you wearing?"

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“I like to be comfy when I’m at home.”

“Jess, those ratty sweatpants are ten sizes too big for you and torn to pieces from Cleo.”

“And I look adorably casual in them, thank you very much.” I stuck my nose in the air.

“I’m with Oliver on this one,” Sara mumbled sleepily from the couch. “Not your best look.”

“Hey, screw you guys!” I crossed my arms over my chest. “And here I was going to tell you I had breakfast waiting for you in the kitchen.”

“Forgive our transgression!” Oliver threw himself posterior on the floor in a groveling bow.

Sara’s head shot up from the couch and she and Oliver bolted into the kitchen so fast they practically left a cloud of dust behind. Cleo bounded after them, curious what their excitement was about. I laughed and joined them in the kitchen where I’d left bacon, eggs and toast warming in the oven.

Oliver and Sara scarfed down the breakfast, laughing so hard that they nearly choked. That was another thing I liked about Oliver. He and Sara always got along. As a rule, we didn’t even tell family about these fake relationships, because you never knew who’d let a secret slip. But Sara was closer than family to me and the only person in the world I’d trust with any secret. Besides, I hadn’t told her Oliver and I weren’t

dating. She just knew me so well that it was obvious to her.

I'd 'dated' a few actors in the past who'd really gotten along badly with my best friend and it made the whole ordeal a nightmare. If they had been real boyfriends, I would've just broken up with them, but somehow it was more complicated when spending time together was a professional consideration.

"What're you two laughing about?" I asked, scooping a bit of omelette into Cleo's bowl.

"Just planning our breakup," Oliver said around a mouthful of toast.

"Oliver's gonna tell the press you cheated on him." Sara snorted into her orange juice.

"Hey, don't make me look heartless."

"She's kidding." Oliver shook his head. "But we do need to think of something. *Maid for You* hits theatres next month and I'd really like to actually start dating someone—no offence."

"Can't we just say we grew apart?" I shrugged.

"Sure, if you're afraid of a little drama." Sara wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

"No, no drama!" I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck. "My publicist is already on my ass about generating bad press."

"Is this about Real Love?" Sara picked at the crust on her toast.

"Sorry, I shouldn't've said it like that."

“Sorry you’re getting a hard time about it.” She frowned. “People are idiots.”

“Cheers.” Oliver clinked his glass against Sara’s. “Hey, maybe we should tell the press we broke up because you’re into women.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” My eyes went wide.

Sara laughed. “I’d be more than happy to be an accomplice in the lie!”

“Shut up, both of you.” I sat down sulkily in the corner with my only ally, Cleo. “No one would even believe it when photos were taken of me with my next boyfriend.”

As I said that, a small pang hit me in the heart. Funny, I spent my days surrounded by the sexiest men in the world, but I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had a real boyfriend. I mean, I wasn’t exactly lonely. I had Sara and Oliver, who was amazing as a friend, but we didn’t click on that deeper level that you did with a soulmate.

I hadn’t felt a soulful bond like that in a long time. Probably not since I’d been a teenager, and in retrospect, who knew if those feelings were real or just hormones playing tricks on my mind? I’d actually stopped dating, for the most part. Maybe it was hard for me to know who to trust these days.

“Is y

our phone ringing?” Sara grabbed my buzzing phone from the table, swallowing heavily as she said, “Uh, it’s your mom.”

She set the phone gingerly back on the table and pretended she hadn’t seen it. Oliver gave her a quizzical look, but she shook her head subtly.

“What if you dumped me because you thought you were holding my career back?” I

said to change the subject.

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“Hey, I like that!” Oliver exclaimed.

“Just promise we can still be friends.” I winked.

“Oh, I can’t wait to be rid of you for good.” Oliver grinned. “But I’ll probably run into you when I’m hanging with Sara.”

The two clinked glasses, laughing, and I scowled, but couldn't help laughing too. Sometimes my fake boyfriend and best friend got along a little too well.

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The next month and a half blurred by quickly as I poured over scripts and prepared for the premier of Maid for You, which unfortunately didn’t end up being the blockbuster the producers had hoped for. I guess the public wasn’t as hungry to see me scrubbing floors as Paramount had predicted. When Oliver and I ‘broke up,’ it was rumored that we’d fought over how badly the movie had done.

Truthfully, I wasn’t all that consumed by how much the movie flopped. I put my best effort into everything I did, and that alone was enough to make me proud. But I’d come to a point where I had a hard time caring about silly comedies. I wanted to create a film that would make a difference in someone’s life.

Real Love took over my mind until I could say the lines in my sleep. Literally. Oliver woke me up one morning because I was shouting out lines from the climatic moment of the movie. That had actually sparked our ‘breakup,’ because he couldn’t stand staying over in my apartment when I talked in my sleep. We didn’t have to stay

together for the movie anymore, so there was nothing forcing us together.

Of course my publicist wished I'd stayed with Oliver a little longer, but whatever.

I was completely single-minded when I arrived at Aorta Studios for our first table reading. I was going to devote every bit of energy I had to this movie.

Cleo yapped from her carrier as I sat in my chair next to the director, Braelyn, and waited for the other actors to arrive. It was an extremely small cast, most of the scenes taking place exclusively between me and... err, I'd forgotten the woman's name. Was it Maria?

A loud sneeze echoed behind me. I turned to see her green eyes all scrunched up. Amelia! That was it. Amelia Earhart.

"You brought the dog?" she groaned.

"Was I not supposed to?" I put a protective hand on Cleo's cage.

"Forget it, I'll pop some Benadryl."

Then I remembered her mentioning that some people were allergic to dogs and I realized with embarrassment that she'd meant she was allergic to dogs. She sat down, looking exhausted and took a packet of pills from her pocket, popping one without any water. She ran a hand through her stiffly gelled hair, messing up what would've been an extremely tidy style. She wore a grey suit that hugged her slim frame and gave off a vintage vibe. Despite having such a beautiful face, Amelia didn't seem to have any interest in looking prissy or feminine. She had the kind of unique look that would've turned heads wherever she went, just for how confident it made her seem.

"I'll check and see if the others are waiting out front," Braelyn said, popping up out

of his chair.

Amelia and I sat in awkward silence. There was something about the way she was looking at me that wasn't right. Like I put a bad taste in her mouth.

"So is Amelia Earhart a stage name?" I asked curiously.

"No. It's my real name," she said tensely before casting us back into heavy silence. Finally, she sighed, dropped her gaze into her lap and muttered, "I'm sorry."

"What?"

"I'm sorry I was rude to you when I saw you at the club. I hope there won't be any awkwardness between us, considering..." She swallowed heavily. "Considering we'll be working together."

"Huh?" I shook my head. "Sorry, but I don't remember you being rude to me."

"So you don't even remember running into me?" She pressed her lips together. I really had no idea what was making her so angry.

"Of course I remember you talking about how important this movie was to you, but I don't remember you being rude to me."

One of her brows raised and she looked at me like Cleo was tap-dancing on my head.

Braelyn rushed back into the room and flopped back into his chair. "Looks like the rest of the cast isn't making it. There was a bad traffic accident."

"Is everyone okay?" My mouth fell open.



“Yeah, yeah, no one’s hurt, but there are huge delays.” He waved his pen around dismissively before tucking it behind his ear. “We’re just going to skip ahead to one of the more intense scenes between the two of you. Jessica, could you start reading from the fifth line on page twenty?”

I knew the script well enough that I didn’t even have to flip to the page before I started speaking. My voice dropped to a slow, sassy tone that I felt matched the care-free character.

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“I just want to know what it is you’re so scared of,” I said.

“You already know,” Amelia shot back without missing a beat. “You act like you know everything about me.”

I grinned cockily. “I wanna hear you say it.”

“You wanna hear me say it? Fine. I’m scared I’m gonna fall for you and you’re gonna leave me with nothing but a broke-ass heart. That what you wanted to hear?”

I looked over to Braelyn, who was frowning.

“Could we get the two of you closer?” he said, eyes squinting. “I wanna get a feel for the chemistry in this scene.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

Instead of running around the long table to sit next to Amelia, I did a half-leap and slid over it into the chair next to her. She practically jumped away from me. Were her hands shaking?

“Okay, Amelia, read your last line again.” Braelyn said, arms crossed over his chest.

Amelia’s voice shook this time, but it only made the line sound better. “I’m scared I’m gonna fall for you and you’re gonna leave me with nothing but a broke-ass heart. That what you wanted to hear?”

“Just the first part.” I grinned, putting a hand to Amelia’s cheek. Her eyes went huge and darted down to my lips.

“Well I meant all of it.” Her voice shook even more now. There was something so perfect about the fear in her eyes. The tension between us felt beyond real. We were only doing a table reading, but it felt so right to go all the way with it. I let the space between our lips grow smaller and smaller as I prepared to deliver my next line.

“Sorry I’m late!” The door burst open and the older woman who was supposed to play my mother rushed in.

Amelia leapt up from her chair. “I need some water. I need to use the bathroom. I need...” Her words cut off as she ran out the door.

5.

Amelia

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. This isn’t a big deal. You’re just going to walk back in there and kiss another woman. Nothing huge about that. Drunk girls do it all the time at parties. Why shouldn’t I be able to do it too?

My legs felt weak again and I had to lean against the wall next to the water cooler as I gulped from the little paper cup. Why the hell was this so hard for me? Was it kissing a woman that was getting to me, or was it that the woman was—

“Hey, there you are!” Jessica jaunted down the hall, blonde hair bouncing with each step.

“You didn’t leave because of Cleo, did you? Sorry, I totally didn’t realize you were allergic.”

“Forget about it.” I drained the last of the water and crushed the paper cup in my fist.

“What’s wrong?” Jessica’s brows knit together. “You’re not sick or something, are you?”

“How is it so easy for you?” I blurted. “I mean, you were just about to kiss me without even thinking tw

ice!”

“Ah!” Realization spilled across her features. “I get it. You’re afraid to kiss me!” A huge grin spread across her face that made heat spread through my body.

“I’m just... I’ve never kissed a woman before, okay?”

“So it’s scary for you?” She looked like she was stifling a laugh. “That’s the cutest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“How is it so easy for you? Did you practice or something?”

She actually did laugh this time. “Well, I’ve kissed a lot of men for movies. Kissing a girl isn’t all that different. Sure, I’m not attracted to women, but I haven’t been attracted to all the actors I’ve kissed either. It’s just work.” She leaned against the wall and folded her arms over her chest, a serious look taking over her face. “That’s a big reason why I want to do this movie. I want people to realize that two people of the same sex being together, well, it’s just not a big deal. My best friend is a lesbian, and she’s always been there for me. I’d love if I could make the world just a little easier for her to live in.”

“Oh.” I blinked, as if seeing her in new light. “Wow. Umm, that’s kind of amazing.”

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“But, hey, if you need to get over your fear, I’m happy to help you practice.” She put a hand to my shoulder. “Why don’t you come over after rehearsal and we can knock this out together? It wouldn’t be a bad thing for me to get used to kissing someone with lipstick.”

“Umm, sure.”

Did Jessica Black just ask me to come over to her house and make out with her? Did I just agree?

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Nerves didn’t begin to describe my anxiety as Jessica’s car sped down the highway with me in the passenger’s seat. I was grateful she’d offered to drive, seeing as I’d sold my car to pay for rent that month. I hadn’t gotten fired from my night job after all—apparently Jessica never told management about my regretful outburst—but my shifts had been cut back to almost nothing since I’d asked to go home early. Tiny as my paychecks from this movie would be, I couldn’t wait for them to start rolling in. An extra couple hundred bucks a week would be a godsend to a person in my position.

The day had been long, full of rehearsal, costume measurements, and boring paperwork. I really wanted to be going home right now, but I’d stupidly agreed to... I didn’t even know what I’d agreed to do, but now I was sitting in Jessica’s car, driving to her house to... kiss her, I guess. Putting that much planning into a silly kiss felt absurd. It all felt absurd.

The air from the open window rustled Jessica's blonde hair and she tapped her hand on the steering wheel to the beat of the hip-hop music playing on the radio. There was no sign that she was freaking out as hard as I was—or at all. She just looked happy to be driving home from work. Somehow, that made me lose my shit even harder.

Her phone started ringing in the cupholder between us.

“Would you mind checking who's calling?” she asked without taking her eyes from the road. “If it's the Aorta, you can put it on speaker.”

“Uh, it says, mom,” I said after checking the ID.

“Never mind.” Her lips seemed to curl down. “I'll, uh, I'll call her back later.”

When we pulled up to her house, it wasn't quite what I was expecting. It was a gorgeous modern building covered in glistening windows, but it wasn't huge.

“I don't like having a ton of empty space,” she said, as if reading my mind.

“Your house is gorgeous,” I replied as we got out of the car and walked up the perfectly manicured garden walkway lined with cheerful pink and yellow flowers.

“Thanks.” She smiled warmly. “We can practice by the pool if you want. I can lend you a swimsuit.”

Somehow learning to kiss a woman in a swimsuit was the most awkward thing I could imagine. Jessica seemed to sense this and I realized that despite her ditzy demeanor, she was really quite thoughtful.

“Or we could relax a bit first,” she said, throwing her bag down on the marble floor of her foyer. “Pop in a movie and open a bottle of wine.”

“That sounds awesome,” I said, and meant it. “Do you need to call your mom back first?”

“Uh, no, it’s fine.” She ran a hand through her hair looking upset for just one second. “What kind of wine do you like?”

“What kind of wine do I not like?”

Jessica laughed hard at my stupid joke and said, “I think you and I will get along just fine.”

For the first time, I felt that was true. Jessica wasn’t the ditz I’d first taken her for. I mean, I couldn’t honestly claim she seemed like an intellectual, but she was nice. Really nice.

After settling Marshmallow in her bedroom, she closed the door, which I was grateful for. As much as I was warming to the mutt, allergy meds could only do so much. And the small gesture of putting the dog in a room away from me made me realize that Jessica really was a considerate person. Just a bit silly and forgetful.

I took a seat on the modern leather sofa, reminding myself not to spill anything on it because it probably cost more than I’d ever made in my life. Jessica grabbed some popcorn, threw on a rom-com and we downed a couple glasses of wine, laughing about the cheesy lines and bad acting.

“You know, it’s probably not good to laugh at other actors.” Jessica said after drowning a long laugh with a mouthful of wine. “To be honest, when I look at some of the dumb stuff I’ve starred in, I’m a little embarrassed.”

“The stuff you act in isn’t dumb—okay, well, fine it is, but that’s the point. Fluffy movies are an escape from reality and there’s no shame in that.”

“I never thought of it that way.”

“You’ve helped millions of people—myself included—escape from their crappy lives for a couple hours. You should be proud of that.”

“Did you just call your life crappy?”

“I was speaking figuratively.” I chewed my lip, hoping she’d drop the subject.



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“I just really hope this movie makes a real difference.” Her blue eyes met mine with a burning passion that I had to respect.

“I hope it does too.” Why was my heart racing? Why were my palms sweaty?

“Should we practice now?” she asked.

“Umm, sure.” The galloping in my chest intensified. I scooted a little closer to her, wiping my palms on my pants.

“Maybe I’ll brush my teeth first.” She licked her lips. “I probably taste like popcorn.”

“It’s fine.” I tried to dry my hands on my pants again, but they seemed to have become bottomless swamps. “I mean, I probably taste like popcorn too, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Sure.” She moved closer to me until our thighs were touching. My bones turned to Jell-O. I wanted to do something with my hands, but I couldn’t seem to move. Jessica’s face got closer and closer to me, the wine on her breath mixing with her perfume to create a completely intoxicating smell. Her lips were so close to mine that I could feel the heat of them—and then she burst out laughing.

“Sorry, sorry.” She didn’t stop laughing as she tried to speak. “It’s just you feel like my friend now, and it’s weird to kiss my friends.”

After all that tension she was laughing? I scowled, but it only made Jessica howl even more and I couldn’t help smiling too.

“I’ll get us a few more drinks,” she said, rising. “That always gets sorority girls making out with each other, so it should work for us, right?”

I laughed, but my mind was strangely stuck on a specific detail: Jessica had just called me her friend. Why did that feel so good? I couldn’t even begin to name the emotions churning with the wine in my stomach when Jessica flopped back down beside me and handed me another drink. I sipped slowly, because I already felt like my head wasn’t on right.

An hour later and nothing had happened between us—well, not nothing. A lot more laughing. That weird feeling that I’d felt when she’d called us friends had spread through my entire body, creating an unfamiliar warmth.

After the first movie ended, Jessica put on Kung Fu Hustle, not even knowing it was my all time favorite. It was an odd realization that this was the best day I’d had in a long time. Jessica got up to pop some more popcorn and when she came back, she sprawled comfortably on the couch, one leg resting heavily over my lap. With the warm buzz I had going, I didn’t even flinch. I felt... comfortable.

“I’m starting to think this kiss isn’t going to happen.” I laughed awkwardly.

“Yeah, maybe it was a dumb idea,” she admitted. “It just feels weird to do it outside of rehearsal.”

Her attention was lost when a fight scene exploded across the screen. Her posture tensed and she leaned towards the TV excitedly, but her concentration was suddenly interrupted by her phone ringing. She looked at it, sighed and tucked it back into her pocket. I just had enough time to see it was her mom calling again.

“Do you not get along with your parents?” Why did I ask that? Was I really that drunk?

“No.” To her credit, Jessica didn’t evade the question. “We get along. Well...” She ran a hand through her blonde hair. “You know how this business is. Sometimes people you thought you could trust...”

“I get it,” I said quickly. “I’m sorry for prying. I know what that’s like. I mean, sort of.”

I told her the story of my roommate sabotaging my audition. I’d meant to show her I understood, but the more I spoke, the more it felt like I was getting something off my chest. I realized I’d never told anyone that story before.

As I finished speaking, I became aware of how close Jessica had gotten to me. Our shoulders were pressed against one another, faces turned so they were only inches apart. My glass was almost empty, but I drank from it anyways just to have something to do with my lips.

“My mom was the one who pushed me into acting.” Jessica played with her hair, but didn’t look away from my eyes. “She gave up her own career to help me pursue mine, so I guess I should be grateful. It’s just...” She chewed her lip for a moment. “She started measuring her success by how well my movies did. Her whole world revolves around me. When I have a movie that doesn’t exceed

the last one’s success, she loses it on me, which is—well, bad—but whatever. But now she wants me to drop out of this movie, because there’s no way a lesbian romance is going to be a blockbuster. Real Love means so much to me that I just can’t stand to talk to her right now.”

When had I put my hand over hers? Jessica looked down at our overlaid palms, then back up at my face as if to ask a question I definitely didn’t have the answer to.

“So I think you know how I feel,” she continued, speaking slower and slower, her

concentration seemingly stolen by something in my eyes. “Sometimes it’s like this business wrecks your ability to connect with people in a real way.”

I had no clue what I was doing until my lips were on hers.

I felt the electric shock jolt from her skin to mine, but she didn’t move away. Her lips parted so I could taste the wine on her tongue. Her hand was in my hair, pulling me down onto the couch as she kissed me deeper and deeper. Our rhythmic breathing became deafeningly loud. The softness of her lips was strange, but not entirely unpleasant. My body seemed to have no clue how to react until she pulled away, blue eyes heavily lidded.

Her hand was still on my cheek, legs intertwined with mine. We just stared at each other. What just happened? Was that practice? It sure as hell hadn’t felt like practice. Why had I kissed her? Maybe there’d been one flashing moment when I’d just felt so bonded to her? Or, hell, I didn’t know!

Finally, Jessica laughed.

“I’m so tired,” she said with a slightly drunken slur. She closed her eyes and slid her arm down to lay heavily over my shoulders. Actually, it felt like we were cuddling.

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I couldn't move, even as her breathing became slow and heavy. What the hell? What had we done? What were we doing?

Whatever it was, it felt... awesome.

Maybe it was the wine, or the long day, but I relaxed into Jessica's arms and let the soft rhythm of her breathing lull me into deep sleep.

6.

Jessica

Amelia was still sleeping when I sat up groggily. I untangled my legs from her and tried to piece together what had happened.

We'd kissed.

Okay.

That had been the point of inviting her over, hadn't it?

Something had felt... weird about it. Or, not weird, exactly, but it was something. I'd felt something.

I stopped that thought—Cleo! I'd left her in my bedroom all night! I bolted to my room, surprised Amelia didn't wake from all my movement. When I tore open my door, Cleo was sleeping peacefully on my pillow. There were no signs of separation

anxiety like scratching or making a mess on my bed. She raised her head, blinking sleepily.

“Hey, did you spend the whole night all on your own?”

She stretched out her adorable little paws and rolled onto her back for me to pet her stomach.

“Wow, I’m so proud of you!” I nuzzled her soft fur. The first night I’d brought her home, she’d sat on the other side of my bedroom door whining until I let her in. Since then, she hadn’t dealt well with being separated from me for more than a couple hours, so spending the night on her own was a huge milestone.

I tiptoed out to the kitchen and quietly put some food in her dish. As Cleo ate, I peeked back into the living room where Amelia was sprawled unconscious on my couch. Had we actually both squeezed onto the sofa together? We’d really been pressed close all night.

I figured I should make the girl some breakfast for when she woke up, but I couldn’t concentrate. I ran a hand through my hair, feeling like I needed to take a run to help sort out the strange knot building in my stomach. Cleo was now cheerfully chasing around a tennis ball, so I slipped on some work-out clothes and snuck out the door.

I always felt better with the adrenaline of a run pumping through me. I ran down the tree-lined path behind my house until all the kinks from the night before eased themselves out of my body. Then there was just the kink in my mind to work out.

Something had happened last night, and I didn’t know what it was. Maybe Amelia had been right, maybe kissing a woman was a bigger deal than I’d thought it would be. But it wasn’t just the kiss, it was spending time with her, telling her about my mom—why had I told her? I never talked about my mom, let alone complete

strangers.

Opening up had just felt... right.

And then the kiss, well, that had felt right too.

Which was a problem.

I pumped my legs harder, feeling the satisfying burn spread through my muscles as I sped past trees and brush. The kiss was supposed to be practice, but it had felt real. Even though I couldn't quite say I was attracted to Amelia, the emotion had been there in our kiss. Fuck. That wasn't supposed to happen. Was never supposed to happen between co-stars.

A twig snapped violently beneath my running shoe. I was making a bigger deal out of this than I needed to. Amelia had shown me something last night that had made me see her as a potentially great friend. The kind of friend that you have to kiss for work. Just like I'd kissed Oliver for work and tons of men before him. Maybe Amelia and I just had that extra bond because we were both women.

Yeah. That was it.

I stopped to pant breathlessly, bent over with my hands resting on my thighs. I hadn't even realized how hard I'd been pushing myself. But like always, it'd helped to sort out what was going on in my head.

I let myself jog at a more leisurely pace on the way back. Why had I made such a big deal out of my kiss with Amelia? It made me want to laugh now! Just a kiss. Just two sets of lips meeting one another. Well, and my hands in her hair—but still. Not a big deal.

I dried the sweat from my face on one of the towels left out by the pool before pulling open the sliding glass patio doors. If Amelia still wasn't up, I'd shower, then cook us some breakfast. Hopefully she liked scrambled eggs and bacon, because that was the extent of my culinary abilities. I checked to make sure the fridge was stocked before I looked in on her.

I almost considered telling her about what a big deal I'd made of our kiss, because it felt like a joke now. I went into the living room to check on her and—

The couch was empty.

"Amelia?" I stopped to listen and only heard Cleo playing with a squeak toy in the next room. Then I noticed her shoes were gone from the front door.



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Oh.

Okay.

I'd thought we'd drive to the studio together, but she must've had somewhere to get to in a hurry. Too bad for her, I guess, because she missed out on breakfast.

Why did that make me feel so... I didn't even know. Something told me I'd be taking another run that day. Something about our interaction felt unfinished, like she'd bolted after a one night stand. Except what'd happened between us definitely wasn't a one night stand. We'd done normal friend stuff. And then kissed. And then cuddled all night.

Definitely going to need another run.

\*\*\*

With Cleo doing better apart from me, I left her with Oliver for the day to see if she'd be able to spend more time away from me. It was just as well. I rarely got into a bad mood, and I didn't want her around to see one.

I felt awkward arriving at the studio that afternoon to start rehearsal. For some reason, I wasn't sure how to deal with Amelia. I'd thought I'd figured everything out, but then she'd just... left.

It had felt, well, I didn't want to say rude, but I dunno. I was kinda hurt. Maybe that was a dumb way to feel. But I couldn't sort things out or explain what I felt when I

saw her leaning against the wall, waiting to start rehearsal.

Amelia had been reading a book and when I entered the room. Her eyes darted up to mine before looking quickly back down. Was she mad at me for some reason? I shifted from one foot to the other and tugged on my shirt. I wanted to go up and talk to her, but somehow she made that feel so hard. Since when had I ever been shy?

“Okay, Jessica, Maria, we’re going to start from the top with the scene between Tabby and her mom.”

I h

ad to get my head in the game. This was why co-stars didn’t get involved. Not that Amelia and I had gotten involved, but I mean hypothetically, that was why we wouldn’t. Well, that, and the fact that I’d never been into women.

I wondered if Amelia was. She’d said she’d never kissed a girl before, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t attracted to women. I wondered what that all could mean.

Enough! I couldn’t let myself get distracted. I pushed all my feelings for Amelia to the back of my head as the rehearsal got underway.

7.

Amelia

I wanted to watch the rehearsal, but I couldn’t risk meeting Jessica’s eyes. I’d known kissing her was weird, but I didn’t think it was going to be a big deal. I realized how freaked out she’d been by my behavior when I’d woken up and she was gone. Just fucking vanished—no note, no text, nothing. Her message was clear: she wanted to pretend the kiss never happened.

Jessica had said herself that kissing outside of rehearsal felt weird. So why had I gone for it?

Because apparently I hated myself, that was why. It seemed my subconscious felt I deserved to wallow in awkwardness. And boy was I wallowing.

I burned with embarrassment like there were fire ants crawling under my skin every time I looked at Jessica. I had to get over this. If I didn't stop feeling so uncomfortable, I was going to screw up the whole rehearsal. Our scene was coming up. Could I handle it without exploding in a fiery spectacle of regret? Stay tuned to find out.

I dared a glance at Jessica, who was fully immersed in the scene. She looked different, having taken on the sassy persona of her character, Tabby. Her words were clipped and terse. None of her cheerful ditziness showed on her face. I would've laughed at how brooding she looked if it wasn't downright convincing.

My eyes fell to her downturned lips. The lips that I'd kissed. The lips that I was going to kiss again. The lips I wanted to kiss again. My heart thundered against my chest at that realization. Why did I want that? I wasn't into women—was I?

My eyes roamed down Jessica's body. She definitely wasn't bad looking, but that wasn't why I wanted to feel her body pressed against mine. It'd just felt... good.

Jesus Christ, I had to stop thinking that way.

It hadn't felt good. Nothing felt good. I felt awful as I watched Jessica walk off the set to complete the scene. Why was I even having these weird feelings? I wasn't even attracted to her, so why did I want to kiss and cuddle with her?

Maybe it'd just been that long since I'd had any kind of intimacy in my life. Was I

that lonely? I needed to find a boyfriend.

“Did you hear me?”

I looked up to see Braelyn waving at me. “You missed your cue.”

“Sorry,” I apologized.

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My palms sweated as I approached the set. Oh God, I didn't want to have to do this with her. I walked onto the rehearsal stage, a lead weight expanding inside my stomach, sinking down to my feet until I could hardly take another step toward Jessica.

"What're you doing on my property?" I called out as I got closer to her.

"So this whole fancy place belongs to you?" She whistled.

"Yes. And you're trespassing."

"Not trespassing if you invited me in."

"Are you crazy?" The squeaky noise coming out of my throat didn't sound like my voice at all. "I never invited you in."

"Because I've been so rudely talking and haven't given you the chance." She pushed past me, shoulder brushing mine. I couldn't remember my lines. I glanced at Braelyn, who was smiling approvingly.

I stammered out a jumbled version of my next line. "If you don't get out, you're going to be leaving with a boot in your ass."

She turned sharply, a laugh on her lips. "You seem awfully interested in my ass."

Fuck.

Fuck.

I couldn't do this.

I missed my next line and Jessica saved me with a laugh before slipping into her next bit of dialogue. I couldn't get back into character. I wasn't Jordan, she wasn't Tabby. We were Amelia and Jessica, two straight girls who'd shared a weird kiss and cuddle session and now had to work together.

Jessica took a step towards me and I went rigid. I wasn't hearing whatever garbage came out of my mouth when I opened it. I could only focus on how close she was to me and how much I wanted this to stop.

"Well, I can't wait for your next invitation," she said just a little awkwardly. Was she losing character because of how much I'd tripped up, or was she as uncomfortable as I was?

"Can we do that scene again?" The director frowned. "But this time, I want to feel the tension in your proximity. Tabby has come to town and learned Jordan is a young gay woman living a life of solitude. I want to feel that curiosity towards her."

The way Jessica's eyebrow raised suggested she really was curious about me.

The second try went even worse. My discomfort had rubbed off on Jessica and we both went through the scene woodenly, barely able to make eye contact. I practically jumped away from her when she brushed past me this time. The director was scowling by the time we got to the end of it.

He pressed her fingers to his temples and asked us to do the scene again. And again. Finally, we moved on after the fifth try.

My heart was in my feet. I struggled through the rest of the rehearsal, knowing how badly things were going. I couldn't seem to regain my confidence for the rest of the scenes, even the ones without Jessica in them. We hadn't even gotten to the physical stuff, but I could barely even look at her. By the end of the day, I was exhausted and felt like shit. I was going to ruin this whole movie just like I'd known I would.

When we broke for the day, I didn't give Jessica a chance to get mad at me for screwing everything up. I grabbed my stuff as quickly as I could and bolted for the bus stop. It was raining. Perfect. Pedestrians bolted for cover, but I just sat there in the downpour because I already felt so awful that being soaking wet wasn't going to make it any worse. It couldn't get any worse.

Oh wait, yes it could.

A gorgeous red sports car pulled up and stopped in front of me.

"Hey, do you need a ride?" Jessica asked as the window rolled down.

"I'm good."

"You're soaked."

"I said, I'm good. I don't want to get your car wet."

"Sorry, but I'm not the kind of person who leaves her friend at a bus stop in the rain."

There was that word again: friend.

"Fine." I got up, suddenly feeling cold and uncomfortable.

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I slid into her car and gave her my address, which she punched into a GPS. We sat in silence as Jessica pulled back out into the road. The swish swish swish of the wipers seemed to amplify the tension in the car, ticking off each awkward second. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore.

"Look, I—" I started at the exact same time Jessica opened her mouth to break the silence as well. "Sorry, you go first," I said.

She shook her head. "No, you go first."

"I wasn't going to say anything."

"I don't know what's making you feel so weird." She sighed. "This is about that kiss, isn't it? It's not something you need to feel awkward about."

"I'm surprised you're even acknowledging it, considering you disappeared this morning." There was more edge to my voice than I wanted there to be. Had I really been that offended?

"Me?" A look of realization dawned on her face. "Oh! I went for a jog this morning. Sorry I wasn't there when you woke up. I was going to cook you breakfast."

Could that be true? The thought of Jessica being so thoughtful towards me made something warm roll over me. I decided I had to be honest with her. "I felt weird about what I did. I thought you were freaked out too and wanted to pretend I'd never kissed you."



“I wouldn’t say freaked out.” She flicked her blinker on and pulled off the highway. “But maybe kissing a woman is a bigger deal than I thought it would be—scratch that—kissing you is a bigger deal than I’d thought it would be. I dunno if it’s because you’re a woman or not.”

Well how was that supposed to make me feel?

Her GPS was leading us closer and closer to my apartment and things still felt just as uncomfortable between us. We were outside the brown brick building when I squeaked out the craziest idea I’d ever had.

“Maybe we just need more practice until it feels comfortable.”

Jessica raised an eyebrow.

Words spluttered out of my mouth so fast I could’ve choked on them. “I mean, I think we both found that kiss weirder than we were expecting. Maybe it’ll take more time to get used to the feeling of kissing a girl.”

Jessica just stared at me, brows closed in, showing she was thinking hard about what I’d said. Oh God, why had I said that? She was going to think I was a weirdo, first kissing her, then trying to lure her into doing it again. Not that I was luring her into anything. I just wanted the movie to go well and that meant working out whatever was going on between us.

She still wasn’t answering. Fuck.

Finally, she turned the ignition of the car off and unclipped her seatbelt.

“Yeah, let’s do this.”

8.

Jessica

“Right now?” Amelia’s eyes went wide.

“Well, when were you thinking about doing it? Do you want to suffer through another awful rehearsal?”

Amelia stared at me, seemingly unable to respond. Poor thing was really freaked out.

“Okay,” she said quietly. “Yeah, let’s do it.” She closed her eyes and looked to be waiting for something. It was only when I looked down to her pursed lips that

I realized she expected me to kiss her.

“I was thinking we could go up to your apartment,” I said.

Amelia’s eyes snapped open. “Oh yeah, of course. Umm, it’s not exactly fancy...”

“I’m sure your apartment is as charming as you are.”

Amelia’s big eyes got even bigger and her cheeks turned pink. I would’ve laughed, except I’m not that mean.

I was right to assume her apartment would be charming. The building was old, but in a way that had character. The elevator rattled as we ascended to the seventh floor where Amelia unlocked the door to her apartment.

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“Brace yourself,” she said as she opened the door. “And try not to knock anything over if you can.”

Tiny didn’t even begin to describe Amelia’s living space. Between the stove, the table and the futon bed, there was just enough room for us both to stand without touching one another.

“Wow,” I couldn’t help saying.

“Yeah, I know it’s small.”

“It’s awesome.” It really was. I’d always liked cozy space, and there was something about the place that oozed with Amelia’s personality. The textures of the rough brick walls and polished wood floor together reminded me of her. Despite the limited space, it was extremely tidy, much the way that Amelia always looked carefully groomed. Posters for *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Misérables* took up most of the available wall space. Above the bed was a shelf lined with rows of books and plays. It really felt like a place you could hide from the world in.

“Hey, you read Madeline Stevens?” I grabbed a hardcover copy of *To Swim with Swans* off the shelf and turned it over in my hands.

Amelia looked just a little embarrassed to have her personal belongings examined. “I got really into her books after a bad breakup last year,” she said.

“Sorry to hear that.” My heart melted at the broken expression in her face. Whatever happened last year clearly still hurt her. I waited for her to say more about it, but she

didn't, so I just slid the book back on the shelf, adding, "To Swim with Swans was there for me during a hard time in my life, too."

I realized Amelia was fidgeting with the buttons on her shirt as I surveyed her apartment and I remembered what I'd come up for.

"So..." I walked over to the futon. "Do we just..."

"I guess so." Amelia approached me, green eyes wide with fear, but I also swore I saw determination in her face. She really was gorgeous. Her soft features contrasted with her drastically short hair and masculine clothes to create a look that was all her. Sure, she could probably get more work as an actress if she sold herself as hyper-feminine like I did, but Amelia didn't seem like the type of person who was interested in changing herself. She was perfect as she was.

His plush pink lips parted just a bit as she stood right in front of me. I put my hands on her hips and swallowed loudly. She started to lean in to get her face closer to mine, but as she did, she forced me backwards until I flopped onto the futon, pulling her down with me. Her lean body pressed against mine, her legs between my knees. My breath felt hot as it gushed in and out of my chest. Why was this so completely unnerving to me?

As I looked into Amelia's nervous eyes, I realized there was something in them that resonated with me, and that connection was the reason why I was a mess of sweat and nerves. The thing I saw in Amelia's eyes, well, it made me want to get closer to her. It made me want this.

I put my hands to either side of her face and pulled her lips the rest of the distance to mine. Our tongues met hesitantly at first. My thumb ran a slow circle over her earlobe to the rhythm of our shy kiss. Amelia pulled away, but only to nip at my lip in a way that brought a moan from my chest.

I was kissing a girl and moaning over it.

My body was so confused as I inhaled her floral perfume. The sensation of her skin against mine made my pulse race, but as my hands grew bolder, the strange curves of her feminine shape kept me from getting too comfortable. My brain kept screaming, It's a girl! You're kissing a girl! As if I needed to be reminded.

Woman or not, Amelia was an amazing kisser. Even as we grew more comfortable, she kept a languid pace. Her hands slid up my neck, into my hair and she pulled my lips tight against hers. I felt like I could melt into her kiss. When she let out a little moan of excitement, heat surged between my legs that shut my brain up for good. Apparently my body didn't care if Amelia was a woman when she had lips like that.

She pulled away slowly, eyes clouded over, lips flushed and glistening. God, she was gorgeous.

"Well..." She swallowed and laughed nervously. "How was that?"

"That might've been the best kiss of my life," I said honestly.

"I'm sure you say that to all the girls." She snorted, button nose wrinkling adorably.

"No, really. That was, umm, it was a great start."

"Start?"

"Well, I mean, we're going to have to get used to a little more than that. You read the script. I don't need to tell you about the shower scene."

Of course, there would be no full nudity in the movie, but there would be scenes where we'd have to be very comfortable with each other.

Amelia's eyes bulged out of her head. "You're not suggesting..."

"It couldn't hurt." I smiled innocently.

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Is this how you trick all those poor unsuspecting actors into bed with you?"

"What? No! I've never—" I cut myself off just as I was about to say, I've never done anything like this with a co-star before. I'd almost forgotten that Amelia, like the rest of the world, thought I'd actually dated Oliver and the men who'd come before him. I suddenly felt uncomfortable about lying to Amelia.

"You're right," she said, taking a deep, bracing breath. "We're going to have to show some skin in this movie, so we might as well get comfortable around each other now. I really don't want a repeat of today's rehearsal."

Why was I grinning?

“Why are you grinning?” Amelia echoed my own question.

“I dunno. This is fun.” I sat up from under her and stripped my sweater off. “It’s like fooling around for the first time again. It’s all scary and weird and that makes it kinda exciting.”

“Okay, but we’re not fooling around!” Amelia’s face flushed, eyes glued to my tight t-shirt. “We’re just getting used to doing stuff we’ll have to do for the movie. There’s not gonna be any—” She dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Not gonna be any funny business.”

I didn’t want to laugh at her, but I had to. She sat there with a scrunched-up, grumpy face as I held my sides and howled.

“Forget it. This is dumb.” She stood, face red. “The whole idea was stupid.”

“Hey!” I grabbed her hand and pulled her back down on the futon. “I’m sorry I laughed at you.”

Our bodies were on top of one another again, lips so close together. It just felt so natural to kiss her. I was getting so used to her body and if I was being honest with myself, I wanted to know more about it—more about her. I wanted to know what’d put that seemingly permanently serious expression on her face, wanted to know what fueled her passion for theatre. I wanted to know what made Amelia Earhart moan.

“Now can we practice that scene?” I murmured into her lips.

“Okay, but no funny business. I mean it this time.”

“Promise.”

I made a silent vow to myself to never laugh at Amelia again. Something about her fragile ego made me think she’d endured a lot of bullying in her life. I knew from being friends with Sara that cruelty like that could stick with you.

“Guess we should head to the shower,” she said looking more than a little nervous.

I felt so much more tenderness toward Amelia as I followed her into her bathroom. There was something so lonely, and maybe even a little broken about her. But she really was sweet and sensitive. She made me want to cud

dle her until she stopped scowling.

If the apartment had been small, the bathroom room was microscopic. We were squished so close in the square foot of space we were practically kissing.

“Umm, do you want me to step out to give you some space to undress?”

“It’s fine.” Amelia swallowed.

“I really am sorry for laughing at you.”

“I’m sorry, too.” She toyed with her earlobe. “I know I have a temper. I get moody. I hate that about myself, but I can’t seem to do anything about it.”

“Hate it? It’s what makes you so adorable. You’re just sensitive and that’s sweet.”



She blinked at me a moment, cheeks turning pink again. She seemed to have lost the ability to speak for a moment, but finally she swallowed and said, “Actually, would you mind stepping out while I get undressed?”

9.

Amelia

Shit! Shit! Shit!

What was going on with me? I took deep breaths, trying to get my pulse to slow down, but it was no use. I didn’t even understand whether I was turned on or scared or both. All I wanted was to feel Jessica’s body against mine again, and yet, in that moment, nothing seemed more terrifying. I’d been fine when we were making out—it was weird at first, but I got used to it—why was I freaking out now?

It was that damned compliment.

It was what Jessica had said and the way she looked at me that made me go all squirmy inside. Why did she have to go and be so sweet? I’d just been getting comfortable with her and now...

My whole body turned hot at the thought of how badly I wanted to get closer to her.

Breath, Amelia, breath. Just take a minute and calm down.

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Except I knew we didn't have much time. Jessica had been checking her watch, and I knew she was worried about her puppy being without her. (A trait of her that had become less annoying and more irresistibly sweet.)

Fuck, don't think about that. Don't think about how kind and thoughtful Jessica is! It's only making this harder!

I had to do this now or Jessica would walk out my door and I would lose this chance. Scared as I was, I stripped quickly and jumped under a stream of cold water. The bracing shower seemed to help cool everything boiling inside of me. I cleared my throat and hoped my voice wouldn't crack as I called out, "I'm ready."

I shivered under the frigid stream, watching the door, waiting for it to open. Finally, Jessica opened it slowly. She was still wearing a pink bra and panties, and she looked at me quizzically. "Oh, I didn't think you'd get totally naked."

I practically shrunk against the shower. Of course she'd meant for us to leave our underwear on.

"Sorry, I—"

"No, this is good." She stuck her thumbs into the waistband of her panties, stretching it as she lowered them. "If we can get naked together, we can do anything together."

Anything.

Oh God.

Her body looked exactly like it did on magazine covers. Rounded shoulders and soft breasts flowed into a perfectly flat stomach and curved hips. Damn, and here I'd believed it was all photoshop. She seemed so comfortable in her skin as she approached me.

"See, nothing to be afraid of." She let out a nervous laugh as she stepped into the shower, but her smile faded as she felt the water. "Brr! What are you—cold-blooded?"

She cranked the temperature on the water up until it steamed off our skin. We were so close that I was sure she could hear how hard my heart was pounding. I had no idea how she made me feel. A few days ago, I hadn't been attracted to women at all, and now Jessica was making my body react in completely unpredictable ways. I tried to keep my eyes on hers, but when she turned around to let water stream over her chest, I couldn't keep my gaze from slipping down the arch of her back. Two dimples pressed into the small of her back to match the dimples in her smile. And below that...

"What is that?" I asked.

"What? You never seen a butt before?" She grinned over her shoulder.

"I've never seen a heart tattooed on a butt, no." The little pink heart tattoo on her left butt cheek was about the size of a quarter and completely ridiculous.

"Do you look at a lot of girl's butts?"

"No!" I said much too quickly, looking away from her tattoo. "I mean, I feel the need to set the record straight and let you know I'm not into women."

She took a step towards me, making me feel caged in the small space. "Are you sure about that?"

“No.” The word choked out of me.

I thought she was going to laugh at me, but she just put a hand to my cheek, making me look into her eyes. “If I’m being honest, I’m a little bit freaked out by what I’m feeling for you, too.”

My heart stopped. I watched a drop of water slide down her perfect cheekbones and drip off her jaw. How was she as gorgeous on the inside as she was on the outside?

“But you don’t have to be worried or scared about being attracted to me. Just don’t think so much about it.”

Then her lips closed over mine and I didn’t think about it. She leaned against the tiled wall and pulled me into her body. Heat throbbed between my legs and a jolt of excitement ran through me as I pressed against her and felt her hard nipples against mine.

And then I took her advice. Didn’t think about it. Just let her hands run over my body, let my lips stray from her to kiss over her jaw and neck. Even in the shower, I could taste the light perfume and something that was so uniquely her on her skin. I let out a long moan that was more expelled tension than pleasure. But also pleasure. Extreme pleasure. When Jessica’s hand slipped between my legs, I wondered if it was possible to die from bliss.

“I love feeling you against me,” she moaned into the crook of my neck as she slid a finger inside of me. Her thumb found my clit, rubbing in circles, drawing more pleasure from me than I’d thought possible.

My knees became weak. I leaned into her as she made my moans echo off the shower walls. Why did this feel so right?

Jessica kissed up my neck, finding my mouth again as her hand slid down her body, between her own legs. Gasps of pleasure exploded from her lips, as she touched us both with a needy urgency. Everything that had been building between us needed to find release. I put my hand over hers, feeling the way that sent a tremor through her.

“I just wanna watch you open up, Amelia.”

Her words undid me. I gripped her shoulders as a moan tore from my throat. I pressed our bodies together, bucking against her hand as I came in waves that I thought would never end.

Jessica lost control, slamming me against the wall with a hard kiss as she stroked out her own climax. Her lips trembling against mine was the most amazing sensation I’d ever experienced. It was like I was absorbing each quake of pleasure that shook through her. As her climax subsided, her arms slid around me and she stroked my back tenderly. I’d never been held like that before, but it felt good.

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We finally pulled apart to look into one another's eyes, panting heavily. There was nothing weird or awkward about what we'd done. It was holding back that had made it awkward. When we let go of all our hesitations, this all felt so right.

"Should we, umm, go through the scene?" I asked.

Jessica shook her head, turning off the water. "I'd call that a successful rehearsal. I should get home."

"Right." I watched her step out and dry off on the towel and wished I could ask her to stay. Having her in my apartment made the space a lot less dank and depressing.

She let out a satisfied sigh as she pulled her clothes on. I dressed as well and followed her out to the main area to watch her tie her shoes. What did all this mean? I guess I liked women, or at least one woman, which didn't have to be a big deal, but what would this mean for me and Jessica? I was growing to really like her as a friend, and it was one thing to fool around with a pal, but developing romantic feelings was the surest way to doom a friendship. Unless Jessica returned those feelings...

Her phone started ringing and she didn't answer it, which made me think it was either her mom or her publicist calling. Thinking of her publicist made me frown. Jessica had never been to an event without a guy on her arm, and that was such a part of her image that I had to wonder if there any way she'd ever date me.

Date me?

Where had that thought come from? I'd hated Jessica just days ago and now I

couldn't get her out of my head. How had Jessica gotten to me so fast? I thought of the night we'd cuddled on her couch, and honestly, I would've done anything to spend another night like that.

She looked up from slipping on her strappy heels, a huge grin on her face. "Guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yup." I held my hands behind my back to hide how much I was fidgeting. Jessica stood with one hand on my door, looking me up and down. Her smile widened and she pulled me into her arms, planting a kiss on my lips that made butterflies stir in my stomach. Everything about the way she touched me was just so open and kind. I couldn't help the way that made my knees go rubbery.

"I can't wait," she said with one last wink before walking out the door.

The butterflies in my stomach turned into giant man-eating moths. I felt a whole new type of nervousness, because I realized I had very real feelings for Jessica. She was kind and thoughtful and caring and she just made me happy. At the rate my feelings were developing, I wasn't sure if I could be just friends with Jessica. But I also doubted that being more than friends was an option. There was no way Jessica Black would actually date a woman. And even if she would, it was a stretch to think that she would date me.

I curled into the soft blanket on my bed. I wished she didn't have to go. I wished I could spend the whole night in her warm arms again.

10.

Jessica

A huge weight had lifted from my chest as I walked into rehearsal the next day. All

the tension between me and Amelia was gone. When she saw me enter, she looked up with a huge smile that I returned.

It definitely wasn't normal for me to get physical with a co-star, but with Amelia, it'd felt so natural. And it wasn't like we were messing around with a relationship. We were just two pals fooling around in a shower. Could anything be more innocent?

I was excited when the director said we were going to spend the day rehearsing mine and Amelia's scenes. There were the silly, confrontational scenes, and then a tender date scene where I got to sit across a table from Amelia and watch her blush as she delivered her lines with the shy affect of her character. I loved that look on her. She could be hot-headed, but there really was a lot of tenderness under that and it showed in her acting.

I played footsie with her under the table to make her blush even more, except that made me choke down a laugh and we had to start the scene over again. I definitely didn't mind. I looked to Braelyn for notes, but he just said, "This is perfect, the mood between you is great."

I looked back to Amelia to see her cheeks pinken even more. I wanted to reach over and squeeze them. This first half of the film was full of hand-holding and stolen pecks, fun little affections that seemed to make Amelia blush and stutter.

I couldn't wipe the smile off my face as we went through our scenes together—until we came to the shower scene that Amelia and I had tried to practice the night before.

Since this was just a rehearsal before the filming started, there would be no undressing. Part of me really wished there would be. Fooling around with Amelia in the shower had been electric. My skin still tingled from the memory.

As we ran through the scene, both of us standing close in the shower, my mind kept



running back to the night before—Amelia’s gasping breath, her shy moans and then unrestrained pleasure. I wanted all that again.

Amelia licked her lips as she delivered her lines and I knew she was thinking the same thing. I couldn't help getting turned on when I pulled her in for a kiss, our bodies pressed together so firmly. Amelia’s hands roamed unapologetically down my back and over my ass as I kissed her deeper.

I pulled my lips away, but kept my forehead pressed against hers as I said my next line.

“I think I’m falling in love with you.”

Lightning crackled in Amelia’s eyes. I kissed her again. This was the part in the script where things got physical. Very physical. I was supposed to press Amelia against the wall and our bodies would move with a synchronized rhythm. Oh man, I wanted that. Something about her felt so good.

“Okay, that’s great for now,” Braelyn announced.

I swore I heard Amelia groan.

“We can work out the physical stuff on camera.” The director stood from the crouched position where he’d been observing and giving notes. “Let’s break for today.”

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“But we’ve only been going for...” I glanced at my watch. Oh, wow. We’d put in a nine-hour day.

Everyone started slowly meandering out of the room, but Amelia seemed as reluctant to move away as I was. When no one was in earshot, she spoke in a hushed, excited tone.

“Hey, do you want to come by afterwards and practice that scene?”

Her eagerness could’ve made me come right then and there.

“You know what they say.” I bit my lip to hold back a grin. “Practice makes perfect.”

Amelia’s face lit up, all of her seriousness melting away. I had the urge to pinch her cheeks again. One of these days, I was really gonna do it.

“I have to head back to my place to check on Cleo,” I said. “Do you wanna come over?”

“No offence, but I can’t imagine getting hot and heavy with all that dog hair floating around.”

“Right. I’ll come by your place after I go home to see how she’s doing.”

She looked like she wanted to kiss me again, but was too shy to do it in front of other people. I felt the same way, but contented myself by reaching out and finally pinching her cheek. I gave it a little shake, which made her face scrunch up angrily. I reminded

myself that I'd sworn never to laugh at her again, but damn, it was hard when she was so freaking cute.

"See you soon," I said, unable to keep a grin from spreading across my face.

I still couldn't get my hormones in check once we'd parted ways and I was in my car. What was between me and Amelia was just so hot. There was that tension and nervousness that I rarely experienced anymore and beneath that, a genuine connection.

I swallowed. No, better to forget that last part. There was no connection. There couldn't be. Co-stars getting involved was a terrible idea.

But this wasn't two co-stars getting involved, it was just practice. And stress release. How were we supposed to film with all this sexual tension between us? We had to let it out somehow.

I thought I might explode if I didn't get my hands on her soon. The long drive to my house gave me plenty of time to revisit our time in the shower. How far would things go this time? I definitely wouldn't have minded if she wanted to put her amazing lips on places other than my mouth. The thought of going down on her was hot too—intimidating for sure, but I loved the thought of making her moan.

I was still fantasizing about where I'd like to touch her when my phone rang. I checked the missed call when I pulled into my driveway, sighing as I saw it was my publicist, Samantha. Well, I couldn't put her off forever. I dialed her number back. She picked up immediately.

"We're on full emergency!"

"What?" My shoulders straightened in alarm.

“Sorry, not you—Oliver. I need you to help handle it.”

“You’re going to have to explain.”

“That psycho he dated is telling Stars Tonight he’s utterly destroyed by the break up, begging for her to come back to him. She’s making him sound pathetic.” Samantha sighed wearily. “I need you to go out and be photographed with him to show the public that he never cared about that backstabbing piece of trash.”

“Of course I’ll help Oliver out. I’m free tomorrow night.”

“Jess, I need this done, like, yesterday.”

“I have plans tonight.”

“Oliver’s reputation is on the line.”

I chewed my lip before letting out a sigh. “Yeah, I get it. No problem, I can rearrange my schedule.”

“You’re a doll.” She made a kissing noise into the phone. “And hey, it’s looking like Real Love might not be the career killer we thought it would. People are talking about it really positively online.”

“Yeah, of course they are.” I rolled my eyes. Why couldn’t the people in this industry see what I saw? This was a movie people wanted.

I hung up with Samantha and sighed as I texted Oliver to say I’d go out with him. It didn’t matter how much I reminded myself that things between me and Amelia were casual. I wasn’t looking forward to telling her I couldn’t come over. Especially since I was still horny as hell.



Amelia

Perspiration wetted my brow as I finished cleaning. I didn't want to be caught off guard like I'd been the last time Jess came over and saw my hovel in all its grimy glory. The small bunch of yellow flowers I'd picked up on the way home helped to make the place less dreary, but there was no hiding the fact that I lived in a mouse hole.

Well, she hadn't judged me the last time she'd come over. That was something I loved about Jess. She never seemed to judge anyone. Ever. Even when I acted like a complete jerk, she just smiled and shrugged it off like she hadn't even noticed. It was almost terrifying how comfortable she made me feel. I mean, it was terrifying how much I loved it. Wanted more of it. And of her.

I plucked the Madeline Stevens book off my shelf, remembering how Jessica had said *To Swim with Swans* had meant something to her at a dark time in her life. What dark time had she been talking about? It made my heart hurt to think she'd gone through anything horrible. Maybe she'd been hurt by a breakup like I had.

I tried to read as I waited for her to knock on the door, but I was so nervous and excited, I cou

ldn't focus on the words at all. I was still a little scared of what might happen between us, but I knew I wanted it. That day during rehearsal had been so hot, and sweet—and, well, fun. I liked having fun with Jessica. And it just happened that our idea of having fun was making out and fooling around.

Unable to pretend to read anymore, I got up from the futon and wiped down the table again, then rearranged the flowers, then double-checked to make sure I had clean wine glasses. Suddenly it occurred to me that I should have something to offer her to eat. Horror struck me as I realized the only food in my house was a bag of rice and a pack of hot dogs. Not even any buns, because who could afford hot dog buns?

I picked up my phone to check my bank balance, hoping I had enough money to order a pizza or something. Which was when when I saw her text.

>Jessica: Sorry, something came up. I'll have to take a raincheck. :(

Suddenly, even the cheerful flowers couldn't lighten up my dreary apartment anymore. I tried to reign in my disappointment as I texted back.

>Amelia: No worries. Maybe we'll reschedule some other time.

It took a while for Jessica to respond, but when she did, the little smiley emoticon in her message made my own face light up in a grin. What the hell was it about her that could make me smile so easily?

I sighed, wishing she were here right now. Something had probably come up with her puppy. She'd drop everything for that little thing. I wondered what it would be like to be an important person in her life. She seemed like she would do anything for a girlfriend... err, I mean, boyfriend... partner...

I made myself some rice with sliced-up hot dogs and sat down in front of Netflix. Wanna take a guess at what movie I put on?

Maid for You wasn't nearly as bad as the reviews made it out to be. Sure, the plot wasn't winning any Oscars, but Jessica pretending to be a maid, scrubbing floors and doing dishes? C'mon. The movie was fucking adorable. And maybe it meant

something more to me now that I knew she really was as sweet as she acted in her movies. I couldn't believe how dumb Oliver Colt was for breaking up with her. Did he have any clue what he'd given up?

Maybe he was allergic to dogs too.

When the film moved to the more romantic (okay, fine, sexual) scenes, I felt a twinge of desire as well as an odd jealousy. Those were the things Jessica and I should've been doing right now. There was one particular scene where they were kissing in the rain. Normally, I'd be looking at how the water made Oliver's t-shirt cling to his biceps, but I couldn't take my eyes off Jessica, or the way she held him passionately as they kissed, the way her hands got lost in his hair.

My breathing sped up as I fought the urge to touch myself. Then I realized—why was I fighting it?

'You don't have to be worried or scared about being attracted to me. Just don't think so much about it.'

My mind went blank as I slid my hands down my pants. I paused the video on a scene of Jessica and Oliver in bed together, except only she was in the frame, looking down as if it were me she was on top of. Both her dimples showed and her sweet blue eyes twinkled with kindness.

I grabbed for the vibrator in my nightstand, teasing it against my clit as I imagined what Jessica and I might've been doing if she were there right now. Her hands in my hair, our lips locked together. Ragged breath hitching, giving way to moans. Pressed so close.

All the tension and desire exploded out of me in waves as my muscles shook with my climax. Oh God, I wished she was here.



Her smile filled my vision as I came down from my climax. I buried my face in my pillow, grinning. When had anyone ever made me feel this way?

With perspiration cooling and becoming sticky on my skin, I got up to shower. You can probably guess where my mind went once I was under the stream of hot water.

After I'd dried off, I flopped into bed. Usually this was the part of the day where I'd lay awake, thinking of all the mistakes I'd made and what a horrible abyss my life was, but an odd peacefulness settled over me.

I took out my phone and re-read the last text Jessica had sent to me.

>Jessica: looking forward to it. :)

How could a colon and a parenthesis bring a smile to my face? And more than that, peace to my mind? All the anxiety that usually devoured me was silent. Was this what happiness felt like? I could see why people liked being happy.

I pulled open a browser on my phone and typed "Jessica Black" into a search bar. Photos of her gorgeous smile populated the top of the screen. I clicked through a couple that led me to her twitter account. There was a photo of her in a restaurant with Oliver Colt where she looked just gorgeous, tight dress, winning smile. She really couldn't take a bad photo. Then I did a double take at the date. A cold chill washed over me. The photo had been taken less than an hour ago.

I read the caption: 'No place I'd rather be than out with my guy.'

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All the happiness slowly drained from me as I stared at his arm around her. So that was why she'd canceled. Somehow, that was a lot less cute than needing to take her dog to the vet. I shut my phone off and flicked out the lamp next to my bed, overtaken by a sudden urge for darkness and silence. I curled up under the blankets.

I guess Oliver had realized his mistake.

12.

Jessica

"We might need to go home if you're just going to cry into your prime rib all night." I handed Oliver a tissue as he returned from the bathroom. We'd gone out to dinner at an intimate restaurant to help show the public that he was over his ex, but I'd never seen anyone such a mess.

"Who's crying around here?" He dried his nose with the back of his hand and downed the last of his large glass of wine.

Somewhere in the restaurant, the flash of a camera went off. I smiled and gave Oliver a quick kiss on the cheek as several more photos were snapped. As much as I hated canceling on Amelia, I was glad I was here with Oliver now. There was no way he could handle this alone. He'd fallen hard for Mel and she'd stabbed him in the back. My heart broke just looking at the broken expression on his face.

"Come on, they got their photos. I think we should go home," I whispered in his ear, fishing some cash from my purse to cover the bill.

He nodded, sighing. He'd been brave to even attempt to go out. He was at the stage of the breakup where he really just needed to put on a movie, eat a bucket of ice cream and scream at the top of his lungs. We've all been there.

He blew his nose on the tissue I'd given him as we walked out of the restaurant and into a waiting cab. I told the driver to take us both to my place. When we finally got through my front door, Oliver let out a long groan and said, "Love sucks."

"I know." I sighed.

"Who does that to a person?"

"Assholes, that's who."

"Did you read what she's been saying about me?"

"I don't fill my head with that junk." I took his coat from him and hung it in my closet.

He let out another long, frustrated groan.

"Shh, you're gonna wake up my dog-sitter," I whispered with a finger to my lips.

"I'm already up." Sara appeared in the hallway, Cleo cuddled in her arms. The puppy leapt from her as soon as she saw me, and I scooped her up, nuzzling my face into her soft fur.

"I take it things didn't go according to plan?" Sara raised an eyebrow.

"They went fine." Oliver sighed. "The vultures got their photos. Mind if I shower and hit the sack? I'm exhausted."

I nodded. “There should be clean towels in the bathroom. Let me know if you need anything.”

Oliver disappeared into the bathroom and Sara and I were left alone.

“Poor kid.” She shook her head. “Breakups are brutal enough without everyone gossiping about your heartbreak.”

I nodded. “But, hey, while you’re here—I, umm, I wanted to talk to you about something.”

Sara raised an eyebrow. “This sounds juicy.”

“Obviously this stays between me and you.” I lowered my voice.

“You don’t even need to tell me that.”

“I know,” I said, feeling so much warmth towards my friend. She really would take my secrets to her grave. I continued, “So, I guess this all started when Amelia and I decided to do some, umm, practicing for the movie.”

Sara’s eyebrows raised. “This sounds really juicy.”

“Oh fuck off.” I punched her in the shoulder. “All we did was practice some kissing and umm, ended up fooling around a bit.”

“Wow. And?”

“Well, it’s just that I liked it. Really liked it. And now I can’t stop thinking about her. I was supposed to go over there tonight to do it again... and maybe more.”

“So the problem is....?”

“I’m just a little confused,” I said honestly. “Does this mean I’m bisexual?”

“It might.” Sara shrugged. “If that’s a label that’s meaningful to you and helps you to identify your sexuality, then sure.”

“But I’m not really attracted to women. I mean, if I was, how come you and I never...”

“Eww, don’t be gross.” She held her hand up to silence me.

“Sorry.” I laughed. “I just mean, as a general rule, I’m not attracted to women. So what is it about Amelia?”

“Sometimes you just have that connection with someone and gender becomes an afterthought.”

“That’s exactly what it is!” I threw my arms out wide in excitement. “It’s like I just feel so close to her and when I’m around her, I want to express that.”

“And if that makes you feel that bisexuality is a meaningful label to apply to yourself,

then use it.”

“Hmm, I dunno.” I toyed with a lock of hair. “Something about it doesn’t seem like it fits.”

“I dated a girl who was usually attracted to men, but liked to identify herself as fluid or heteroflexible.” Sara shrugged. “And I’ve dated other women who didn’t find labels meaningful to them at all. It’s all about what you’re comfortable with.”

“I’ll have to think about it more.”

My brows closed in.

“What will you have to think about?” Oliver re-emerged, toweling his hair.

“Umm, just Amelia.”

“Amelia? Oh, the girl from your movie?”

“Yeah.”

“What about her?” Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “If she did something to you, I swear she’ll pay for it.”

“No!” I raised my palms. “It’s nothing like that. Amelia’s amazing.”

My face must’ve said everything, because Oliver’s suspicion switched to horror. “Oh, no! Jess, you’re joking.”

“I didn’t even say anything!”

“You have feelings for her.” His mouth fell open.

“Do I?” Sure I liked spending time with Amelia and messing around with her was hot, but did that mean I had feelings for her?

“It’s all over your face!” He practically threw himself at my feet. “Jessica, please. I can’t let you do this to yourself.”

“I’m not doing anything—I mean, Amelia and I aren’t doing anything.” I chewed my lip. “Just a little fooling around. It’s not like we’re dating or anything.”

“Don’t lie to me and don’t lie to yourself.” Oliver’s features became suddenly stern. “You see how brutal my breakup with Mel has been—now imagine that with someone you’re contractually obligated to see every day. See, kiss, and whisper I love you to. Try faking a romance with someone when looking at them fills you with a fiery rage. It doesn’t work.”

“Maybe that wouldn’t happen with me and Amelia.”

“Maybe not, but if you and Amelia are meant to be together, you can at least wait until the filming’s done.”

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“You might be right.” I chewed my lip, really not liking the idea of ending things with Amelia before they’d even really started.

“I’m right. Trust me.” Oliver clutched my hand desperately. “Promise me you’ll put some distance between the two of you. For both of your sakes.”

“I promise,” I said, feeling my heart sink. That was the last thing I wanted.

After I made sure everyone was tucked in, I curled into my own bed with Cleo. Had I been kidding myself thinking that what Amelia and I were doing didn’t mean anything? I thought of how I’d feel if Amelia were fooling around with someone else... Not great, to say the least. That jealousy wasn’t a good sign. It made it clear: I had real feelings for Amelia.

I cuddled a pillow to my chest—then stopped—because I realized I was pretending it was her. Oliver was right. Amelia and I couldn’t keep getting closer as long as we had the movie to shoot. A real relationship with a co-star was too much risk. And I realized, now, that a real relationship was exactly what I wanted.

But as much as I wanted to think that Amelia and I could start a relationship that might last forever, I had to be realistic. This was my career on the line. And even more, everything the movie represented was at risk if things between me and Amelia blew up. I hadn’t fought the pressure from my publicist, my parents—everyone—just to ruin this movie.

I sighed, rolling onto my back. I’d just have to put some distance between me and Amelia. We could still be friendly, but no more inviting her over, no more pinching



her cheeks, and no more ‘practice’. I groaned at that last one, because honestly, just thinking the word ‘practice’ had me wishing she were in bed with me.

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I woke to my ringing phone and rolled over with a sigh. I couldn’t ignore my mom’s calls forever.

“Hello?” I said sleepily into the phone.

“My credit card was rejected last night.” Her voice came through firm and awake even though it was only six in the morning.

“Sorry, I must’ve forgotten to pay it off.”

“Are you having financial issues, Jessica?”

“No.” I sat up, rubbing my eyes. “I just forgot. I’m sorry. I hope I didn’t cause you too much trouble.”

“Trouble? I was shopping online and had to reset my entire cart. So yes, I would call that trouble.” She sighed. “Maybe next time, I should buy you a calendar to help with your forgetfulness.”

“I won’t forget again.”

“Are your finances really in order? You know, I wouldn’t have to ask if you hadn’t removed me from your account.”

I winced. Separating my mother from my finances when I turned eighteen had been one of the hardest things I’d ever done, but I couldn’t let her keep indulging her

shopping addiction with my bank account. It wasn't good for her and it wasn't good for my future.

"What is this indie film even paying you?" Her tone was accusatory. I guess she really did think I'd gone broke.

"They're not exactly paying me. I'm sort of financing the movie." I toyed with the hem of my PJ shirt.

"Excuse me?" Her voice was flat. "Did I just hear you correctly? Surely you didn't tell me that you're paying for the privilege to appear in this flop."

"I'll earn back ten percent of the profits."

"Profits? Hah!" She was hysterical now.

"Don't worry about it. I'll pay off your credit card and I won't miss a bill again, I promise. I have to go. We start filming today."

"Just you wait a minute, Jessica—"

"Love you, bye."

I hung up. It felt awful, but I had to be firm on my boundaries. That was something I'd learned in counseling back when I'd first freed myself from my parent's firm grip on my life. I'd become pretty depressed at seventeen, feeling like I had no control and no real relationship with my parents.

I didn't resent my mom. I was grateful that she'd pushed me into acting, even though I'd hated it when I was younger. I had the career of most people's dreams, and I'd always make sure my parents' bills were taken care of. But I couldn't let them

steamroll over my life anymore.

I quickly paid my mom's credit card bill—wincing at the amount of shopping she'd done—before showering and getting dressed. As I ate breakfast, I reminded myself repeatedly that whatever had been blossoming between me and Amelia was over for now. The more I accepted that I could develop serious feelings for her, the more I realized that Oliver was right. I couldn't put this movie at risk by exploring what I felt for Amelia. I just couldn't.

There was a buzz in the air when I arrived on set for the first day of filming. I couldn't see Amelia anywhere. Additional bodies milled around the sets, holding lights and other equipment. Extras chattered excitedly, taking out their phones to snap pictures of me as I walked by. A few asked me to take selfies with them, so I was late getting to makeup. I apologized for my lateness to the team of stylists as they slathered my face with sticky gunk. When I stumbled out of my dressing room, I glanced around for Amelia, but still didn't see her. I told myself to stop looking for her.

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The director was shouting to be heard as he told the cinematographer to adjust the lighting on the set. Despite my disappointment that I'd have to distance myself from Amelia, I couldn't help catching the excitement of the first shoot. The set was a domestic scene. My character, Tabby, was supposed to be having dinner with her mother after coming back to her hometown to take over the family farm in the aftermath of her father's death.

It took about an hour of telling camera and sound men where to stand and how to move before we were actually ready to do the scene that would only run about five minutes. It was crazy how much preparation had to go into every second of filming. Once everyone was finally in place, it took another three hours before the director felt he'd gotten the shots he needed.

I took a quick walk around the large room, stretching and searching for Amelia. I hadn't seen her all morning. I guess she figured that since she wasn't in the first scene, she didn't have to be there first thing. But still, it made me uneasy.

"Jessica!" The director called me back to the set where I went through the next scene. Anxiety built inside me the whole time. What if Amelia was sick? What if something had happened to her? What if she—

> "Jess, I need you in this scene with me." The director frowned as he called me out for being absent-minded.

"Sorry," I said to him and everyone whose time I was wasting by not giving my best performance. My day had sure started with a lot of apologizing.

Eventually, we got through the scene. By now, I'd been on set for almost six hours and we only had two scenes done. But the first days were always rough as the camera crew got a feel for the director and the team learned to work together.

Finally, it was almost time for our first scene together, and I sent Amelia a text.

>Jessica: Where are you?

>Amelia: I'm right behind you.

I spun around, finally seeing her way in the back of the room, pretty much hidden by the swarm of extras. Had she been here all day? I looked down at what she was wearing. Maybe I'd missed her because she was in costume and looked so unlike herself.

There was something about the way Amelia dressed and presented herself that was unusually stiff for her age. Cardigans and suits. But now she wore a casual t-shirt and jeans, her normally gelled hair hanging loosely around her face. It made me smile, but then I heard Oliver's voice in my head telling me not to fall for her. Geez, couldn't I just smile at the girl?

She stepped forward to join me on the set and the crew swarmed around us. This scene was supposed to be the front of Jordan's house. Cool blue lights shed a twilight glow over the veranda as I took my seat on the steps. My character, Tabby, had come to investigate the loner who'd moved into town during her absence.

"We're rolling!" the director called out.

I sat, chin resting on my hand as I stared up at the make-believe stars. The screen door burst open behind me, actually jolting me even though I'd expected it.

“What’re you doing on my property?” she called out angrily.

“So this whole fancy place belongs to you?” I kept my gaze towards the sky.

“Yes. And you’re trespassing.”

“I’m not trespassing if you invited me in.” I stood and turned to her.

“Are you crazy?” She backed away from me. “I never invited you in.”

“Because I’ve been so rudely talking and haven’t given you the chance.” I pushed in past her and she seemed to jump out of my way like she was afraid of accidentally touching me.

As we went through the scene, I sensed something strange. There’s a chemistry when two people act together, and ours was off. Even though Amelia’s character was supposed to be angry in this scene, I felt something real underneath it. Something burning to come out of her. Was she mad at me for standing her up last night?

I tried to pull myself back into the scene. This was exactly why co-stars didn’t date. We couldn’t allow ourselves this kind of distraction. I closed off all my emotions towards Amelia as we redid the scene. Again. And again. The shoot was the longest of the day and by time we were finished, I was exhausted.

The filming wasn’t fun like rehearsals had been. The magic between me and Amelia had fizzled out. By the time we finished, I was sure she was mad at me. She didn’t say anything as she walked off the set.

The producer was watching the shots back on one of the cameras, a slight frown on his face. I was ruining this movie, I knew it. I couldn’t afford to mess up something so important.

I ran after Amelia. I wasn't sure what I'd done, but I had to make it right.

I called after her as I watched her walking to her bus stop. I could tell by the way her shoulders tensed that she'd heard me, but she didn't turn.

"Amelia!" I called out again.

She finally turned to me with a fiery glow in her eyes. "What do you want?"

I stopped in my tracks. "I, umm, just wanted to say I'm sorry for canceling on you last night."

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“Well, you shouldn’t be.” She turned again. “You had more important things to do.”

She kept walking, but I caught up with her at the bus stop. “No, I upset you, so I should be sorry, and I am.”

The look on Amelia’s face was killing me. I hated disappointing people.

“Look, that’s not why I’m upset, so just drop it.” She sat down heavily on the bench next to the bus stop.

“So you are upset.” I sat down next to her. “You don’t have to keep it to yourself. If I screwed up, you can tell me.”

She looked at me as if weighing something in her mind. Finally, she said, “I saw you were out with Oliver last night.”

“Sorry, I guess I should have told you why I had to cancel.” Was that the only reason she was angry? Something felt off.

She kicked at a candy wrapper someone had left on the ground. “How long have you two been back together?”

“Oh. Umm...” I didn’t really know how to answer that question. Oliver and I hadn’t gone over our story, and to be honest, I didn’t really feel comfortable telling Amelia we were together when that technically wasn’t true.

“Let me rephrase that.” Her lips pressed together. “Were you dating Oliver when you



and I fooled around the other night?”

“What?” Gears slowly clicked into place. Amelia couldn’t be suggesting what I thought she was, could she?

“I don’t like cheaters.” She rubbed the back of her neck. “Remember that breakup I told you about? My boyfriend cheated on me. Worst part was that he acted like nothing was going on for months. Even talked about moving in together before he finally left me for one of the other girls he was seeing. So, to reiterate: I don’t like cheaters.”

“Amelia, it’s not like that at all. What you and I did was just—well, it was just practice.”

That seemed to hurt her even more. Her brows closed in and she looked away from me. “So the two of you were together?” Her jaw clenched. “I hate that you involved me in something like that.”

“No!” I wanted to grab her. “That wasn’t what I was trying to say. Oliver and I weren’t together when you and I, umm, rehearsed privately.”

That was as close as I could come to telling the truth. This secret belonged to Oliver as much as it did me and I didn’t have a right to tell anyone without his permission. Besides, even if I trusted Amelia, I didn’t want her to be responsible for keeping this quiet. Her eyes scanned my face like she was deciding if she could believe me. I couldn’t take it. I grabbed her in my arms and pulled her tight to my chest.

“I’m sorry,” I said into her ear. “I’m sorry I had to cancel last night. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I was going out with Oliver, and I’m sorry for anything else I did to upset you.”

I felt her body relax into mine, her head resting against my shoulder. I just wanted to keep holding her like that. Which was why I had to let go. I slid away from her on the bench, the tiny space between our thighs feeling like a canyon.

“Sorry I lost it on you.” Amelia wiped her nose on the back of her hand and I realized there were tears in her eyes. “I know I have a temper.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I put my hand to her back before moving it quickly.

The rumble of the bus loomed up the street and Amelia stood, fishing out some change from her pocket.

“Let me give you a ride home.”

“It’s fine.” She smiled at me, but her eyes seemed sad. “I’ll see you later.”

“Later.” I gave a half wave and watched her board the bus.

I wanted to grab her back, stuff her in my car and cuddle her to pieces. But I knew I couldn’t do that. Aside from the fact that we worked together, I’d already built a foundation of dishonesty that was no place to start a relationship. I sighed. I guess I’d settle for cuddling Cleo to pieces when I got home.

13.

Amelia

I’d been so stupid for lashing out at Jess. Of course she would never cheat on Oliver. Jessica would never hurt anyone. Not intentionally, at least. I looked at my sad reflection in the mirror as I dressed.

Jessica's only flaw was that she was flawless. Of course everyone would want to be with her. But not everyone could, and obviously she would pick Oliver over me. She was open-minded enough to fool around with me, but that didn't mean she'd actually consider dating a woman. Especially a woman like me. I mean, what did I have to offer her? I wasn't a big star. I was broke and bad-tempered, and Jessica could do a lot better than that.

The next two weeks of filming went fine. I guess. The director and producer seemed happy, and it all went smoothly. Jessica and I didn't have anymore private rehearsals, but I couldn't say I didn't look forward to our scenes together. Sure, she was dating Oliver, but that didn't make it wrong that I got a thrill out of holding her hand or having her whisper in my ear, did it? Besides, it was all just pretend.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm*

We still hadn't filmed the shower scene. The one Jessica and I had 'practiced' in my apartment. The one that hadn't felt like practice at all. It'd felt real. But it was so hard to tell what was real and what was fake with Jessica.

Truthfully, it all felt real. Every kiss and every word she spoke in the script felt like she was putting genuine feeling into it. It was driving me out of my mind. How was she that good at acting? No wonder she'd landed so many roles. Forget the audience—she could even convince me she was in love with me.

Today's filming had been extra hard. We'd gone on location to film a pool scene. It was supposed to be the first time we kissed on screen and Jessica's character was taunting mine with her usual sexual innuendo. There was the tense locker room scene where we stole glances at each other. Then, as I came out of the water, she grabbed me in a kiss that was so passionate, it was impossible to tell myself that none of this was real.

I couldn't stand it! Couldn't stand having Jessica for a few hours, then going home alone to my dank, dark hole. I tried to remind myself that with the small paychecks coming in, I could at least afford to feed myself a little better and the stress of being behind on bills had stopped choking me

so much.

I should've been happy.

And I was.

For the few hours a day I was with Jess.

But all the other hours? Those ones, I just missed her. Because not only had Jessica and I stopped ‘practicing’ together, we’d stopped hanging out at all. I guess she was busy with Oliver. There were new photos of them almost every night. They were always smiling and laughing and looking at them fucking killed me.

I needed to find that for myself, I thought as I walked home alone after filming. This crush I was developing on Jessica wasn’t good for me. It was completely messing with my head, and even though I was in heaven for the moments I was with her, it then became miserable to know that it was all fake. Like waking up from the same beautiful dream to come back to my shitty life. And then doing it the next day, and the next.

It was Friday and I was exhausted. All I wanted to do was collapse at home but I decided that I had to go out. I had to go somewhere and meet people who I could form real relationships with. I couldn’t curl up with a Madeline Steven’s book every time I felt depressed. That wouldn’t solve anything.

Instead of cuddling up with my own misery, I headed out purposefully to a night of clubbing. I had one thing on my side: my determination. I was completely dedicated to getting over this Jessica thing. I wanted my thoughts back—the ones that didn’t revolve around her. If I was going to become obsessed with someone, it might as well be someone I could actually have.

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The line to get into the club seemed to stretch forever in front of me, making me wish I’d used the bathroom before I’d left the house. I’d chosen the most exclusive club on the strip, either as an example of my determination, or because I secretly wanted this to fail.

Another group of people walked past me after being turned away by the bouncer. Why had I thought this would be a good idea? Standing there doing nothing only gave me more time to think about... that girl I wasn't supposed to think about.

I'd texted a couple of my friends, but I didn't hold out hope that they would respond. Or they'd say they would come out, but it would be a lie. People could be so phony. Yet another thing I loved about Jess. She wore it all out there for everyone to see.

I bit the inside of my cheek as I caught myself going there again. I would not think about Jessica, or about how sweet she was, or about how happy she made me with her ditsy smile. Nope, wasn't going to think about it.

When I finally reached the front of the line, I gave the bouncer my I.D.

"Amelia Earhart?" He looked up at me. "Like the pilot?"

"I guess so." I tried not to look annoyed. That joke had gotten old by the time I was ten.

"Oh!" His face lit up with recognition. "You're the girl from that gay movie."

"Uhh, yup. You've heard of it?" Would that be how people remembered me from now on? As the girl from that gay movie?

"Yeah, looking forward to seeing it." He held out a meaty fist, which I awkwardly fist bumped, noticing the tattoo across his knuckles that read: FK H8.

The bouncer passed my ID back to me and stepped aside for me to enter. Damn. That kind of thing never happened to me. Who would have thought being the girl from that gay movie would come with such perks?

For all it's exclusivity, the club was exactly like every other club I'd ever been in. Too loud. Too crowded—hell, I needed a drink. But first I needed a bathroom.

I scanned the crowd as I fought my way to the restrooms. I was keeping my eye out for a guy I might find attractive, but maybe I should've been looking for a woman?

I still hadn't quite figured that part of my sexuality out, to be honest. I knew I liked Jess. A lot. But was it just her personality that attracted me to her or could I really be interested in women for their bodies? I'd have to keep an open mind, I guess.

I found the bathroom, made quick use of it, and came out with a new determination. I ordered a vodka and cranberry at the bar and looked out at the room of writhing bodies, seeing a world of possibilities. Any one of these people could be my soulmate. All I had to do was approach them.

Just as I took a bold step forward, I spotted the last person on earth who I wanted to see. No, not Jess—my ex—the guy who cheated on me. The guy who currently had his arms around two different women. I couldn't believe I ever actually dated Chad. How had I not realized what a loser he was?

Just seeing him made my stomach sour, and I suddenly wanted to go home, but his eyes met mine and he made a beeline for me. Fuck. What the hell was he doing approaching me after he cheated on me for months and dumped me like a sack of trash?

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:09 pm*

“Amelia!” He said, sauntering up to me. “It’s so awesome to see you here—hey, I heard you’re finally starring in a movie.”

My eyes narrowed. Was that why he was talking to me? Because I’d finally gotten a role in a well known film?

“I came here with friends, so I should get going,” I said curtly.

“Wait.” He grabbed me by the wrist as I moved to squeeze through the crowd. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry for how things ended between us. What I did was wrong and you didn’t deserve that.”

“Oh.” I paused. “Well, thanks... that actually means a lot.” I hadn’t even realized what a hit my self-worth had taken, but hearing Chad acknowledge that he’d treated me wrong felt like I was getting a piece of myself back that had been lost for a long time.

“I was thinking.” He moved a little closer to me. “Things were really good when we were together.” He brushed a hair from my face. “Maybe we could give it another shot.”

“Excuse me?” My blood turned hot and I barely resisted the urge to shove him hard. “Accepting your apology does not mean I’ll take you back. Ever. I would rather die alone than go back to someone who treated me the way you did.”

“Geeze, I didn’t realize your ‘fame’ had gone to your head already.” He rolled his eyes. “You sound so full of yourself.”



“Full of myself?” I took a step toward him, voice raising. “You mean because I’m showing some self-respect?”

“And there’s that temper again,” he chided.

I gripped my cup in my hand, unable to hold back the rage seething under my skin. He’d always been like this when we were together, treated me like garbage, then told me I was being childish when I got angry.

“You wanna see my temper?” I didn’t give him time to answer before thrusting my arm forward, throwing my drink in his face.

He gaped down at the red stain spreading over his white shirt. I turned, not wanting to give him a chance to say anything else, but his voice rang in my ears as I retreated.

“You’re gonna make some lucky guy really fucking miserable some day— that is if you don’t end up alone for the rest of your life.”

I bolting through the crowd as if I could run away from his words. Why did I still let him hurt me so much? He was an arrogant cheating loser. I didn’t have to listen to a word he said. And yet...

My chest felt tight as I squeezed through the room, searching for the exit, but finding it hard to see through the tears building in my eyes. I finally found a back exit and stumbled out into a dark alley.

It wasn’t just Chad’s words that had left me shaken. I was exhausted. Tired to the bone of searching for love and getting hurt over and over. Maybe he was right. Maybe I would never find anyone to share my life with. I slumped against the wall. First I’d given my heart to someone who lied to my face and left me struggling to trust anyone ever again, now I was falling for a make-believe romance. Was it too

much to ask for something real?

When I heard the doorknob fumble behind me, I dove behind a dumpster, pressing myself flat to the wall. Jesus, I didn't want anyone to see me out here sobbing my face off. I wasn't nearly drunk enough to be the girl crying outside a bar.

The door opened and slammed shut. Then I heard a man's voice. One that I recognized.

"You're so bad." He laughed. Where had

I heard that laugh?

"Just one kiss." A woman's voice. "No one's around to see."

"Stop it." He laughed again. "I don't want the headlines to say that I'm a cheater."

Suddenly it hit me who was speaking: Oliver Colt. Jessica's boyfriend. But the girl's voice definitely wasn't Jessica's. My heart started racing again. I crept forward to get a better look.

"Fine." He was leaning into her, their bodies pressed together, the distance between them growing smaller. I wanted to jump out and throttle him. But instead I took out my phone, snapping a photo just as their lips met. I had plenty of time to take more, because the kiss went on forever. Finally, I couldn't look anymore.

I snuck back into the shadow of the dumpster and curled my knees up to my chin. Why did this hurt so bad? I thought of Jessica's face when she found out Oliver had betrayed her. Would I tell her? How could I not?

His annoying voice rang in my head, 'I don't want the headlines to say that I'm a

cheater.'

I scrolled through the photos I'd taken, jaw clenched. Cheater was the kindest thing anyone would be calling him. First he dumped Jessica, then he took her back but cheated on her. What kind of sociopath acted like that? He'd hurt Jessica twice and that was two times too many. That bastard was going to pay. How many movie deals would Oliver get when all his fans knew what a horrible person he was?

The door to the club opened and closed again. I sat silent for a moment until I was sure I was alone, then I slipped out of my hiding spot.

As I waited for the bus back to my house, I searched on my phone for how to submit photos to tabloids and found out that there were actually agents who would broker deals with magazines. Given the exclusivity of the photos, I could be looking at getting paid a couple grand.

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I practically salivated at the thought of all that money. I could buy a new car, wouldn't have to take the bus everywhere. I'd probably have enough leftover to pay off some debts too. The amount of relief that thought brought me was amazing. I clicked on one of the submission forms. Not only would I get to ruin Oliver, I'd be getting paid.

But I froze when it was time to hit submit, my finger hovering over my screen. Was it right to be making money from something that was going to hurt Jessica? It felt even more wrong that a small part of me was happy about what I had to tell her. Because Jessica would probably be devastated, and yet all I could think was that if she broke up with Oliver, she could date someone else—like me.

14.

Jessica

"I have to show you something." Amelia grabbed me after filming, pulling me away from the set. "I don't think you're going to like it."

"What's up?" My brows furrowed in concern. "Everything okay?"

"Yes—well—no." She chewed her lip so hard I was afraid she'd bite through it. Her face was white and I realized she was shaking.

"Hey, are you sick or something?" I put my arm around her to help support her, feeling a sigh run through me. Staying away from Amelia was killing me.

“No.” She leaned into me. “I’m just really upset. I—I need to tell you this, though.”

“You’re shaking.” I put my hand to her face just to make sure she really didn’t have a fever.

His cheeks flushed at the contact, but she pulled away. “I’m not sick.”

Well, she certainly didn’t look well. Something was stressing this girl out big time. “C’mere, whatever this is, you can tell me. I know a place where you can relax.”

I guided her away from the people still milling around the set, keeping my arm around her as I led her to the room full of costumes. I tried not to enjoy how close our bodies were. I was just taking her back here to help calm her down, not because I couldn’t resist being alone with her.

“Back here.” I walked past rows of clothes, grabbing some coats from their hangers as I moved. When I reached the row of women’s gowns, I parted them and slipped in behind, throwing the bundle of coats onto the floor and nestling into them.

“What are you doing?” Amelia looked at me like I was crazy.

“This is where I always like to be when I’m upset.” I patted the spot next to me. Amelia looked hesitant for a moment before slipping in and closing the curtain of dresses, secluding us in our own little world.

“I used to hide in dressing rooms when I was a kid and my mom would yell at me in rehearsals.” I squeezed her shoulder. “It feels safe, right?”

“Yeah, it does.” Her body relaxed a bit. I could smell her warm cinnamony perfume and it made me want to scoot closer to her, but I resisted the urge. Barely.

“Now what did you want to tell me?”

“I’m so sorry I have to tell you this.” She pulled her phone from her pocket, tapped a couple buttons, and handed it to me.

I took the phone hesitantly, wondering if Amelia was showing me some bad results from a medical test or something. She looked like she’d just found out she had cancer. When I looked at the photos, it took me a second to realize what I was seeing. When it all clicked together, cold concern washed over me. What the hell had Oliver been thinking?

“Who else have you shown these photos to?”

“No one!” she said quickly. “I mean, I was going to sell them, but—”

“Delete them!” I said. “Now.”

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I know it was wrong of me to think of selling them.” Her hands were still shaking as she deleted the photos. “I hate that I had to tell you this.”

“Hey, it’s okay.” I chewed my lip. It was touching that she cared so much about me, but it hurt to know my lie had upset her so much. I remembered her saying she’d been burned bad by a cheating ex. She seemed like she was reliving all those feelings now. I exhaled a sigh. “Oliver didn’t cheat on me.”

She cocked her head in confusion.

Now that I’d started, I couldn’t help telling her the whole truth. I couldn’t lie to Amelia anymore. “We were never dating. It’s all just pretend.”

The confusion on her face intensified. Finally, she just echoed back, “You were never

dating Oliver.”

“I, uh, I haven’t actually dated anyone in a long time. All my red carpet dates—it’s all just part of the show.”

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“That’s... completely surreal.” She looked back down to her phone where the image folder was now empty. “How do you lie like that?”

I winced at her wording. “Well, if you want to call it a lie, everything we do as actors is a lie. I mean, audiences want us to spin them a story and convince them it’s real.”

“This is different.” She tucked her phone into her pocket. “You lied to me.”

“I’m so sorry.” I put my hand in hers because it just felt right. “I didn’t want to. Can you understand the position I was in? Sometimes you do stuff for work that you don’t want to, but have to.”

“That’s pretty sad.” She looked at me with genuine sympathy. “I can see what you meant when you said this business wrecks your ability to connect with people in a real way.”

She intertwined her fingers with mine and we sat in silence, something unspoken floating in the air between us.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. “I hate that I betrayed your trust and made you sick over nothing.”

“I’m sorry too,” Amelia said. “Sorry that this is the world you live in.”

She parted the dresses in front of us and exited the safe hiding place without looking back.



I wanted to be relieved that I'd told Amelia the truth, but I couldn't get past the look in her eyes. It'd been more than betrayal. She'd looked disgusted. I tucked my knees up to my chest and breathed in her lingering perfume. Would she ever forgive me? It didn't seem fair that she'd fault me so much for something that was just a part of my job.

I sighed. I'd hurt her. That was the only part that mattered. And I had no idea what to do about it now.

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The next time I saw Amelia was two days later on set. I'd known from the filming schedule what we'd be filming today: the notorious shower scene. The "clothes" I'd be wearing had been left in my dressing room. Tiny beige skintight briefs and strapless bra would be all I'd have on for most of that day. After I'd dressed, the stylist team came in to slather my entire body in makeup and sealant to help keep it from washing off in the shower scene.

I zoned out as the stylists fussed with my hair. I'd been up late thinking about what Amelia had said. She'd been right. My world appeared glamorous on the outside, but what was underneath all the fancy cars and exclusive clubs? Nothing. There was nothing real about my life.

When I saw Amelia on the set, she was clutching her robe tight to her body. I hadn't even bothered to hide myself with a robe. It would just rub off the make up, and besides, everyone was going to see everything anyway.

I still didn't know how she felt about the day before. My fake relationship with Oliver. My fake life. But when I looked into Amelia's eyes, I swore I saw excitement. There was something about her face that was so expressive. With a lot of actors, you never knew when the acting stopped, but there was something completely authentic

about Amelia.

She inhaled deep breaths as we took our positions on the set, her hands shaking slightly.

“Don’t worry.” I threw her a wink. “We practiced this one, remember?”

Shock and amusement played on her face and she snorted a laugh. Her nerves seemed to subside and she slowly slid her robe from her shoulders, exposing her skin inch by inch. My eyes followed the round curve of her shoulder, down to her protruding collar bone and toned arms. She wasn’t exactly curvy, but her pixie-like frame made her utterly breathtaking. The only thing hiding Amelia’s dignity from the camera crew was a pair of beige briefs and bra identical to mine. I wished we were alone so I could strip them off her.

From behind us, Braelyn shouted, “Action!”

As Amelia began to speak her lines, she never lost that feeling of authenticity. Her emotions felt real. And as I delivered my dialogue, it started to feel real to me, too. There had been times when doing s

scenes with Amelia had been torture, because I’d been trying not to get attached to her. But this moment, right now, felt perfect.

She turned on the shower, sending cascades of hot water rippling down her glowing skin. I ignored everyone around us as I pressed my lips to hers. It was just me and her. None of this sad, fake world.

I kissed down her neck, moaned into her skin, ran my hands through her hair. This moment was what I’d been aching for. She pulled my face back up to her and kissed me ferociously. With all the water between us, our lips slid so easily against one

another.

I'd been so lost in Amelia that for a second, I'd forgotten we were doing a scene. I came back to reality with sharp focus, gripping Amelia by the arms and pushing her against the wall.

I breathed into her neck as I pressed into her. I'd filmed dozens of these scenes, but nothing had ever felt like this. It was usually so awkward, but my body moved with Amelia's in a perfect mimicry of sex. When I leaned into her neck to whisper, "I'm falling in love with you," into her ear, I felt every hair on her body stand on end. Was this really all just acting?

We did the scene over three times, the pressure building inside of me with each shot. How was I supposed to stay away from her? The day was both exhausting and exhilarating. By the time I put my clothes back on, my mind was reeling.

I had to see Amelia again. I might explode if I didn't. I had her number in my phone, but it turned out I didn't need it, because when I stepped out of my dressing room, she was standing there.

She was fully clothed, wearing one of her tidy white dress shirts, hair combed into that slick style that looked distinctly vintage. The girl was something else.

"Hey," she said casually, as if she hadn't been standing there waiting for me. Did she think she could play coy with me? I grinned.

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“Hey,” I said back. “Think the shooting went well?”

“I dunno. I hope we practiced enough. You know, in case they want to try it again.”

“Yeah, we might not’ve gotten it right the first time.” My grin widened. “I’ve never been with a girl before, so who knows if I knew what I was doing?”

“I think you’ve done enough sex-scenes to know what you were doing.”

“Believe me, nothing I’ve ever done felt like that. You...” I swallowed, trying to keep from saying the words that were pushing their way out of my mouth, but I couldn’t hold back any of what I was feeling for Amelia. “You make me feel a lot of things I’ve never felt before.”

Amelia’s eyes went wide and she stared at me for a moment. She took a step towards me, hesitant at first, but then her gaze dropped from my face, down my body and she licked her lips. She’d kept her distance while she’d thought I was dating Oliver, but now? She looked like she was about to devour me. And I didn’t think I was strong enough to stop her. When she looped her arms around my neck, I knew I should’ve been telling her to stop, that this was a bad idea, but instead I just kissed her. Hard. With no restraint.

We practically fell backwards into my dressing room in a flurry of lips and hands and moans. Everything I’d held back for weeks came pouring out of me as I hurried to shut the door. I ran my hands up Amelia’s sides as she kissed me. I had the sudden urge to strip off her tidy exterior. I wanted to see Amelia messy and panting.

I wanted to go so much further, but Amelia pulled away just as I was reaching up her shirt. She went silent for a minute and I could tell she was thinking about something before she said, “Are you sure you don’t feel this chemistry with all your co-stars?”

Did she really doubt the way I felt for her? All I could do was tell her the truth.

“Amelia, I don’t think I’ve ever felt this way about anyone before.”

15.

Amelia

Ever since I’d found out Jessica wasn’t really dating Oliver, I’d started carrying allergy medication in my wallet on the crazy hope that she’d eventually invite me over. I guess kind of like how guys carry condoms in their wallets on the hope of getting lucky.

Well, I sure as hell felt lucky as I stepped through Jessica’s front door. Her house still had the familiar warmth that I’d experienced before. There was just a good energy in the place.

Her puppy came running up to us as soon as we opened the door and I was glad I’d popped those allergy meds, because honestly, there was no way anyone could resist cuddling that little marshmallow.

Jessica handed her to me and moved into the kitchen. “I figure I owe you dinner before I take things any further.” Her dimples pressed into her cheeks as she smiled. “Hope you don’t mind takeout.”

My face turned hot, and I stuttered out a squeaky, “Sounds good to me.”

The thought of where she might want to ‘take things’ made every cell in my body tingle. I still didn’t know what to make of the fact that she’d lied about being with Oliver, but I knew that being with her made me happier than I’d ever thought possible. And she’d come clean and told the truth. That had to count for something, right?

A small voice inside of me whispered that I was setting myself up to get hurt again. This is Chad all over again. I told the voice to shut up. I couldn’t let myself be paranoid just because I had one bad relationship. Jessica was different. She was the sweetest, kindest person I’d ever known.

And I really, really didn’t want to let her go.

Once we were sitting on the couch in front of slices of piping hot pizza, she suggested watching the movie adaption of *To Swim With Swans*. “I’ve never seen it, have you?”

“No, to be honest, I was afraid I might hate it since I liked the book so much.”

“Same.” She laughed. “But at least if it’s not good, we’ll have a shoulder to cry on.”

“Look, umm, I don’t want to ask anything you don’t want to answer.” I scratched the back of my neck. “You said you’d read the book when you were going through a dark time. I mean, don’t answer if you don’t want to...”

“It’s fine.” She set down the pizza she’d been about to bite into. “I went through some stuff with my parents.” She looked down at her hands with an expression that was so vulnerable, I couldn’t resist scooting close and putting my arm around her. “I had to separate myself from them financially at eighteen because they were spending us into a hole. It didn’t matter how much I made, my mom couldn’t stop shopping and my dad couldn’t stop gambling. My mother had the impression that because she

helped so much with my career, everything I earned was her money.”

“Jesus.”

“They didn’t see why I insisted on keeping my earnings in accounts they couldn’t access. I still want to support them, but I want a future too. They were burning through the money like a forest fire.”

“I’m so sorry.” I stroked up and down her back. How had someone with such horrible parents turned out so sweet and considerate?

“It just sucks because I love them so much, and I can’t stand when they yell and tell me what an awful daughter I am for stealing their money.”

That made my skin turn cold. How could anyone say something like that to Jessica, let alone her own parents?

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“I’ve been seeing a counselor on and off for a couple years, and she says I need to cut them out until they can respect me and my boundaries, but it’s hard when you love someone... anyway, sorry to be a downer.” She picked up her slice of pizza and bit into it, speaking around a mouthful of crust and cheese. “We can watch a lighter movie if you want.”

“No, Jess, I appreciate so much that you shared that with me.” I ran my finger along the hair at the nape of her neck. “I realize now that maybe I was waiting to watch *To Swim With Swans* with someone I could really share it with.”

She stared at me, swallowing her pizza heavily before she pulled me into a kiss. It was slow, gentle, but there was an intense passion to it nonetheless. That connection I always felt when my skin came into contact with hers.

We ate, then watched the movie with Jessica’s head in my lap.

I loved thinking of how many people wished they could be me right now, running their fingers through The Jessica Black’s hair. Except she wasn’t The Jessica Black to me anymore. She was just Jess.

“You know I actually auditioned for this movie?” she said.

“No shit!” I stared down at her head in my lap. “Why didn’t you take the role?”

She snorted a laugh. “They didn’t offer me one.”

“You mean you were turned down? I didn’t know that happened to you.”



“You’re adorable.” She looked up at me, dimples pressed deep into her cheeks.

By the time the movie finished, my head was drooping. It’d been a long day and allergy meds always made me drowsy.

“Do you want to come to bed?” Jessica asked before adding quickly, “I mean, just to sleep. I don’t want you to think...”

She let her words trail off and I wished she’d finished. I wanted to know where she planned on taking this relationship... sexually speaking. Because I’d go anywhere with her... sexually speaking.

I was too tired to broach the subject though, so I just said, “Sure. Thanks.”

She led me into her bedroom which was just as cozy as the rest of her house. All her decorating involved soft carpets, warm colored paintings and extra blankets thrown over the backs of chairs. Nothing in her bedroom seemed overly expensive, but all the colors and textures worked together to give an impression of wealth and good taste.

Of course, I wasn’t looking at anything but Jessica’s body when she stripped her shirt off and let her pants fall to the floor.

“Mind if I sleep in my underwear?” she asked. “I get kinda hot when I sleep.”

You’re kinda hot all the time... I shook my head and stripped my own clothes off, feeling a little self conscious of my less voluptuous frame, but the way Jessica’s eyes followed every inch of skin I exposed made me feel... well, it made me feel sexy.

We tumbled into bed exhausted, hands roaming one another’s skin affectionately, but not exactly sexually. It was a king-sized bed, but there was hardly an inch of space between us. There was something nice about just being close to her, feeling the heat

of her body, the soft rhythm of her breath. I took a deep, relaxed inhale, loving that I was close enough to smell her fruity shampoo.

I was about to slip into sleep when I heard the door creak open, followed by little padding feet and then Marshmallow jumped up onto the bed, nestling in between us. Even though the allergy meds had started to wear off, and I felt a twinge of itchiness in my nose, I couldn't ask the sweet snoring puppy to leave. I stroked a hand over her back, laughing as her snoring synchronized to match Jessica's sleepy breathing. I could've stayed like that forever.

\*\*\*

I woke to itchy eyes, a runny nose and an empty bed. I sat up and grabbed a tissue from Jessica's night stand. Why had I thought it would be okay to let the dog sleep in the bed?

I let out a huge sneeze, fumbling in my discarded pants for another pill that would help alleviate this hell. I swallowed it down with a gulp of water from the master bathroom.

Where was Jess? I pushed open her bedroom door, stopping when I heard voices.

"I appreciate you coming to me with this, but I'm not interested in something like that right now. I'm focusing on filming Real Love."

"Do you think this little cinematic novelty is going to fix your money problems?"

"I told you, I don't have—"

"The director was very excited when I told her you would audition for this film. Do you expect me to go back and tell her that you let her down?"

“I didn’t let anyone down, because I didn’t promise anyone anything.” Jessica sounded frustrated like I’d never heard her before.

I crept forward quietly to see who she was speaking to and guessed immediately by the woman’s appearance that it was her mother. Same blonde hair, same dimples, same strong jaw. The woman had a small frame that was draped in so much clunky jewelry that it looked like it could’ve crushed her to death. Her manicured fingers drummed against her leather handbag.

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“I just don’t know why you’re not taking your career seriously anymore.” Her red lips turned down into a frown.

The tiny muscles in Jessica’s jaw flexed and released. “I’m taking my career incredibly seriously. I tried to explain to you. I want to make a difference in people’s lives.”

“And what about the difference I made in your life?” The mother’s lips thinned. “Are you just going to ignore all the sacrifices I made for you?”

“No, I appreciate—”

“Oh, yes, you’ve said it so many times before, Jessica. Yes, you appreciate everything I’ve done for you.” She rolled her eyes. “You know what your words are worth to me.”

My blood felt like lava in my veins. How the fuck did she think she could talk to Jess like that? Jessica was way too nice. But I wasn’t.

“Sorry, but I’m not going to let you speak to Jessica like she’s a piece of trash,” I said, storming into the room with my fists clenched.

“Excuse me?” The mother’s penciled on eyebrows raised.

“I said, you’re being a bitch.”

Her lips fell open and she looked from Jessica to me and back as if to say, Are you

going to let this happen?

I was worried I'd gone too far, but Jessica didn't look angry. She looked as shocked as her mother, but not angry.

The mother's eyes narrowed. "You're that little imp starring in the soon-to-be flop with my daughter, aren't you?"

"If you gave a shit how much the movie meant to your daughter, you wouldn't talk about it like that. Do you even care? Do care about Jessica at all beyond her ability to provide you with tacky jewelry?"

"How dare—"

"How dare you come into your daughter's home and disrespect her." I felt like I was breathing fire.

"I suppose I should leave if I'm going to be spoken to this way." Her lips thinned as she looked at Jess, as if expecting her to disagree.

"Amelia's right." Jessica rubbed the back of her neck, eyes glued to the floor. A pained expression flickered across her face when she spoke again. "Sometimes you treat me like shit, mom."

Genuine hurt crossed the woman's face. "I only want the best—"

"For you." Jessica finished for her. "You only want the best for you. My needs and wants come second in your mind. They always have. And I can't have a relationship like that anymore."

"Well," she started, then closed her mouth. After a long pause, she finally said, "I

think this exchange has left us both with a lot to think about.” She straightened her handbag over her shoulder, pausing one more time before finally turning and walking out the door without another word.

16.

Jessica

I collapsed on the couch, arms splayed. “Geez, that was exhausting.”

“Sorry I cursed out your mom...” Amelia said awkwardly, a look of genuine apology on her face. “I know I get a bit... explosive sometimes. I’m trying to get a handle on it, but I just lost it when I heard her talking down to you.”

I struggled not to laugh at how upset she looked. “To be honest, it felt sort of good to hear you say all that. Sometimes I start to feel like I’m crazy and imagining all these things about my parents. It was good to hear that I’m not.”

Amelia curled up next to me on the couch, wrapping both arms around me. Despite her reserved nature, she had a ferocity that would intimidate anyone. I wondered if that same passion came out when she loved someone too.

No, no, no. I wouldn’t let myself get too deep with Amelia while filming was still going on. It was one thing to hook up and cuddle a little, but thinking about love was out of the question. We were just hanging out. Nothing serious. Certainly nothing that could compromise the movie if it were to blow up in our faces.

Right?

I just loved spending time with her. And touching her. And kissing her. And the way she’d stood up to my mom left me more than a little in awe.

“Let me take you out somewhere,” I said suddenly.

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“Where do you wanna go?”

“Anywhere!” I kissed her on the lips. “I’ll take you anywhere on earth.”

“I saw an awesome looking pet store that just opened. We could take your little marshmallow on a shopping spree.”

“Are you serious?” I cocked my head. “I was going to take you to Paris for the weekend, Tokyo, literally any place you want, and you pick a pet store?”

“Well, the flight to Paris would take almost all weekend, for one.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot.” I frowned.

“And besides, I love watching you play with Marshmallow.”

“Marshmallow?” I picked Cleo up from the floor. “Her name is Cleo. Like Cleopatra.”

Amelia’s face scrunched up. “I think Marshmallow suits her better.”

I laughed, wanting nothing more than to take Amelia in my arms and never let her go.

“I love that you want to spend time with her, but what about your allergies?”

“I’ve got Benadryl.” She shrugged. “And watching you be so sweet and nurturing is honestly a pretty huge turn-on.”



I blinked, sure I was blushing, and stuttered out, “Well then, what are we waiting for?”

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Cleo sat inside the large cart that I pushed, batting around a squeaky ball and jumping back shocked when it bounced off the sides and whacked her in the nose. The pet store was massive, housing everything a spoiled pooch could dream of. As I grabbed another fun-looking toy off the shelf, Amelia was drawn to a pen of puppies in the middle of the floor.

“I always wanted a dog,” she admitted. “But it just wouldn’t work with my allergies.” She rubbed her nose like it was itching.

“That’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard.”

She snorted a laugh.

&

nbsp; “No really! Have you ever considered allergy shots?”

“Are you kidding?” She bent over the cage and ran her hand down a spotted puppy’s back. “Do you think I’ve got an extra couple grand sitting around to pay for that kind of thing?”

“Oh, right. Sorry, I didn’t mean to be a jerk.”

She shook her head. “It was a good idea. But to be honest, I can barely afford to keep buying the little pills that keep my allergies at bay for a few hours.”

I squirmed uncomfortably, thinking of Amelia's tiny little apartment and of how she had to take the bus everywhere. It didn't seem fair that I had more money than I could count and hard working people like Amelia could barely afford the medication they needed.

"Would you let me pay for the shots?" I asked, holding my breath in case she got mad.

"What?"

"I mean, I want keep spending time with you, and it seems like even the dog hair on my clothes makes your eyes itchy sometimes. It just doesn't seem fair that I make you uncomfortable."

She looked at me in shock for one moment. "You might seriously be the sweetest person I've ever met." Then her cheeks flushed. "Do you really want to keep spending time with me?"

"Yeah, I really do." I gave her hand a quick squeeze, not sure who might be watching or what kind of rumors holding hands might lead to.

"Then we can talk about doing the shots." She nodded.

Cleo yipped from inside the shopping cart, looking more than a little jealous about all the attention I was getting from other dogs who were clustering towards us curiously. I laughed and grabbed a stick with a tennis ball dangling from the end of it. Leaping into the pen, I started dragging the ball across the floor until a dozen furry heads perked up and soon I was being chased by a mob of puppies while Amelia held her sides and laughed hysterically.

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My cheeks hurt from smiling by the time we left. I pushed the full cart with one hand and Amelia moved to slip her fingers into my free hand. I looked down at our clasped palms just a little awkwardly.

“Maybe we should go easy in public.” I said gently. “There are people with cell phone cameras everywhere.”

“Is that a problem?” Amelia asked with just a little edge.

“I don’t know.” I scratched the back of my head. “Technically, I’m still supposed to be dating Oliver, so it might look a little weird.”

Amelia looked like she was about to say something, but she just moved her hand and closed her mouth instead.

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Filming with Amelia became magic. Everything flowed so easily. And even better, after filming I got to take her home and recreate some of that magic at my place. I’d slowly phased out my “dates” with Oliver, but Amelia and I were still keeping things low-key in public.

I kept telling myself this was nothing serious. We were just hanging out. Just two co-workers who got along as friends, and also shared a bed most nights, and also made out, and also got each other off. Friend stuff. Co-worker stuff. Nothing to worry about. It wasn’t like the fate of the film hinged on our deep, but fragile connection.

Everything was fine.

We were spending a lazy Saturday evening on my couch, Amelia rubbing the sore spot on her arm where she'd started getting allergy shots. After only three weeks of getting the shots, her symptoms seemed to be improving. I could tell by how much more eager she was to cuddle up with Cleo. It made me smile to know that I had done that for her. And that she had let me do it.

"Maybe you'll even get a dog of your own at this rate." I tickled her in the ribs with my socked foot.

"And replace this little girl in my life? Never." She grabbed my foot and held it in front of Cleo's face so she could bat and chew at my toes.

"Ow, ow, okay, cut it out!" I tried to wriggle away from Amelia's hold, but that only made Cleo's attack more ferocious. She started to yank at my sock with her sharp little teeth and I cried out, "Mercy!"

Amelia let go of my foot, laughing, and lay out on the couch beside me to give me a kiss. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her tight. Spending time with Amelia was better than the best. It was pure bliss.

"Hey, I have a surprise for you." She grinned into my lips. "Wait here."

She leapt up from the couch and dug through the messenger bag she'd left by the door when she'd come in the night before. I waited patiently as she brought a small plastic bag over to the couch. She knelt in front of me and handed me the bag. It was somewhat heavy as I weighed it in my hands.

"Is this a gift?" I asked.

“It’s just stupid.” She bit her lip and looked down. “I saw it and thought of you.”

Well now I had to see what it was. I opened the bag, slowly unwrapping the tissue paper inside to reveal a ceramic mug. A picture of a fluffy white puppy was painted on it with the words: #1 Mom.

I couldn’t help it, I burst out laughing. I caught myself, holding my breath as I remembered that Amelia hated being laughed at. I stared into her blue eyes, terrified that I’d offended her. Finally, her face slowly cracked into a grin and a chuckle poured out of her mouth.

“Glad you like it,” she said.

“I love it.” I looked at it and laughed again, unable to stop even when Amelia started kissing me. Cleo took one look at us lunatics and leapt off the couch to hide in some other room.

Amelia’s lips were flushed and glistening. She looked so fucking good I could’ve just eaten her. A sudden rush of nerves hit me, because I wanted to take this so much further than the kissing and touching we’d been doing, but I had no idea what Amelia was ready for. I took a deep breath. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you for a while.”

Amelia’s eyes opened, and her face lit up with anticipation. I pressed my lips to her ear, uttering the words that had been boiling inside me for weeks. “I want to feel your lips between my thighs.”

Amelia exhaled a long moan, gripping me tight. “Jesus, I’ve been waiting to hear you say that for so long. I want to taste you so bad.”

I crushed my lips to hers, sucking, biting, licking. Somehow we ended up in my bed,

clothes discarded, naked skin pressed together, kissing so deeply I could've drowned in Amelia.

“I need you. Now.” The desperation in her voice was so real and I couldn't help wanting to bring out more of that.

I slid my hands down her arms, pinning them to the bed. She let out a small whimper as I kissed her hard, pressing down on her with my chest, loving the way she let herself be dominated by me. I pushed my thigh between hers, spreading her legs open and feeling how wet she was.

“Oh, God, Jess, you have to stop teasing me like that.” She pulled away, but I forced her lips back into a kiss. “I've waited too long for this.”

A shiver ran up my spine. As much as I wanted to get to the main event, I loved seeing Amelia overwhelmed by her desire. I grinned wickedly. “Maybe if you ask nicely.”

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“You’re pure evil.” Her hips arched up off the bed.

I nipped her bottom lip. “I’m just trying to teach you some manners.”

“You know what’s bad manners? Asking someone to go down on you, then torturing them until they die.”

“I just wanna hear you beg for it,” I said in a low voice.

Amelia swallowed back a moan. “Oh God Jess,” she murmured. “Would you please, please let me taste you?”

She leaned her head back, giving me her neck to kiss. Each sighing breath that left her lips inflamed my need. I needed more of this. Of her.

Goosebumps prickled under my fingers as I slid them down her neck and circled her peaked nipples. I didn’t wonder about why I was so attracted to another woman. It was Amelia. Of course I would be attracted to her.

Our bodies moved together gracefully, like they were meant to fit together. I positioned myself on my back, Amelia on her knees, thighs pressed around my head, wet pussy inches from my face while she kissed down my thighs.

I slid m

y hands up the back of her legs and tentatively ran my tongue over her pussy. Amelia, however, had no intention of taking things slow. She slid a finger inside of me,

licking and moaning between my legs.

If I'd thought she'd been a good kisser, it was nothing compared to this. Hot moans poured from her lips as she teased me with her tongue. I was shaking within seconds.

I plunged my own tongue inside of her. I couldn't let her make me come before I'd even tasted her. The muscles in her thighs tensed, but the pleasure only seemed to drive her passion.

"What is this, a competition?" I moaned, head falling back.

"Yeah." Amelia grinned against my thigh. "First one to come loses."

"Oh God, that's not fair," I groaned. Amelia was already bringing me so close to the edge.

I found Amelia's clit with my thumb, and began working slow circles in time to my tongue thrusting in and out of her, hoping I could regain some ground, because I was at a massive disadvantage in this fight. Amelia's breathing became faster, her moans more urgent. That's it. I stroked her clit faster, moaning as I felt her body tighten with pleasure. A shudder ran through her, followed by a broken gasp.

Oh yeah, I've got you right where I want you, baby.

My own body became wracked with spasms as she slid another finger inside of me, sucking my clit with an intense need. She'd never been one to hold back.

Fuck, I had to make her come fast or I wasn't going to last. I grabbed her ass with both hands and held her tight as I teased her with my tongue, not allowing her to escape from the pleasure I was giving her. Every cell in her body seemed to tremble as I licked her perfect pussy. Her lips fell open in a moan as her muscles tensed and I



knew I almost had her.

17.

Amelia

Pleasure overwhelmed my senses. Not just physical pleasure, a deep, throbbing emotional bliss of being so connected to Jess.

“God, Jessica, I—” I choked on a moan, not thinking about what was pouring out of my mouth. “I love—” I stopped myself, realizing I’d been about to say I love you, feeling shock at my own almost confession.

“I love this, too,” She moaned back from between my legs. “I love everything about this. I never want it to end.”

Suddenly, I felt her spill over the edge, her body tensing as she moaned out my name. I couldn’t hold back anymore. It was like my body was giving in to Jess. Groaning, groping, grasping, I came with a desperate need, feeling her give in to the same pleasure as she came with my lips pressed against her pussy.

Every shudder of her body was more delicious than the last. Finally, we both lay panting in a pile of sweat and satisfaction. I nuzzled up close to her, resting my head on her chest. It rose and fell heavily with each breath and I could hear her heart drumming madly. I smiled. Something about that just felt perfect.

She trailed a hand through my hair. “I really thought I was gonna make you come first but then you... you... wow.”

I laughed. “I couldn’t let you win.”

Jess looked over at me and grinned. “I’ll get you next time.”

She led the way into the massive shower in her marbled master bath. As hot water poured down us, our hands roamed freely over one another’s skin. Jessica squirted a plop of shampoo onto my head and started rubbing it in for me.

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“Hey, you’re going to get soap in my eyes.” I swatted at her.

“I will if you keep wriggling. Hold still.”

I folded my arms over my chest as I waited for Jessica to finish grooming me. Which took a long time. After she rinsed the shampoo from my hair, she felt the need to condition it. Then she wanted to rub her expensive body wash all over me. I let her. How could I not? It seemed to make her so happy to take care of people. Even these little things brought a smile to her face.

As she scrubbed the soap into my body with a fancy looking sponge, I remembered what I’d been about to say when we’d been in bed.

“I love you.”

Why had I wanted to say that? It couldn’t be true, could it? I swallowed. Sure, I loved spending time with Jessica. I loved thinking about her. And I definitely loved having sex with her. But that didn’t mean I was in love with her, did it?

Did it?

Maybe those words had just felt so natural after I’d said them so many times for the film. It was just a reflex. That must’ve been it. Yeah, that was definitely it.

“All clean.” Jessica smiled up at me from the crouched position she’d taken up to scrub my feet.

Of course she had to dry me off afterwards, and I didn't even complain about the rough way she toweled my hair. I'd never be able to smooth it now that she'd fluffed it up, but the only one who'd see me was her, so I guess she could deal with it.

Marshmallow was already snoring on the bed when we walked back into the bedroom. Jess and I flopped into the blankets, arms around one another. I'd never felt closer to anyone in my life. Not even previous boyfriends. Maybe what I felt for her was love. As I dozed off in her arms, I knew that if I didn't love her now, it would only be a matter of time before I did.

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I woke to Jessica's phone ringing. I rolled over and hid under the pillow to drown out the melodious ring tone. Jessica reached for it groggily, not even lifting her head as she said into the phone, "Hello?"

I could just barely make out a woman's voice on the other end. I heard my name and my ears perked up.

"Me and Amelia?" Jessica sounded sleepily confused. "No, we're not dating. What photos?"

Not dating? The words stabbed in my chest. Sure, we'd never labeled our relationship and that had been fine with me for now, but to hear Jessica outright deny it hurt more than I'd ever thought possible.

I strained my ears to catch pieces of the woman's speech. "Holding hands at a pet store... out to dinner five times... piles of photos."

"Amelia and I are just friends," Jessica said between yawns. "There's nothing to worry about."

I couldn't listen anymore. I pressed the pillow against my ears to drown out everything Jessica was saying. After what we'd done last night, after what I'd almost said to her, she wouldn't even admit that we were dating?

She finally got off the phone and cuddled up to me. I pulled away, only for her to scooch close again. I sat up, throwing the pillow off the bed.

"Who were you talking to?" I asked.

"My publicist," she said without opening her eyes.

"Why did you tell her we're not dating?"

She finally opened her eyes, looking concerned and even a little scared. "Because... we're not?"

"Then what the hell do you call this?" I gestured between our naked bodies.

"We're just... really good friends."

"What the actual fuck, Jess?"

"Look, I don't date co-stars, okay? There's too much risk of a relationship blowing up and ruining the movie."

Did she really think that calling this something other than dating would change the fact that we had real feelings for each other? At least... I had real feelings for her.

"I think I should go." I stood, grabbing for my clothes.

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“Amelia, I’m sorry.” She moved to wrap her arms around me, but I pushed her off.

“It’s not because of that.” I sniffed, rubbing my eyes. “My allergies are flaring up.”

“Are the shots not working?”

“I need to go.” I pulled my pants on and slipped into my shirt. “And I mean, it’s not like we’re dating, so there’s no reason for me to stay and hang out.”

“I hurt your feelings.” Jessica sat on the edge of the bed, face crestfallen.

“No, I get it. I get the sad, fake world you live in. You lie to the public, you lie to me, and hey, now you’re even lying to yourself. Great job, Jess! You’re really succeeding in the world of acting.”

I took one last look at the shocked pain in Jessica’s face, feeling my own stomach twist with agony at how I’d hurt her, then I tore open the door and stormed out.

18.

Jessica

“Amelia!” I shouted as I ran down the street. She was already way ahead of me, practically jogging. “Would you just wait a minute?” I panted after her. “I’m sorry. I just want to talk to you.”

I sped up, bare feet slapping against the hot pavement. Amelia moved faster too.

Geez, this would make for a bad photo-op if anyone happened to be around to catch it. I probably shouldn't've been chasing her, and I definitely shouldn't've been chasing her in just my underwear and the oversized t-shirt I'd snatched off the floor, but I couldn't let her go after the hurt I'd caused her.

"I'm sorry I was a jerk," I said between panting breaths. I was right behind her now, both of us running.

"Would you leave me alone?" Amelia snarled.

"It was stupid and inconsiderate of me to say we weren't dating. The truth is, you're so important to me, Amelia."

She stopped so fast that I knocked into her, barrelling her over. I had just enough time to grab onto her and twist onto my side mid-fall to keep her from whacking her face on the sidewalk. Her weight crashed down on me. Pain seared up my arm as my bare skin hit the pavement, scraping against it brutally.

"Holy shit, are you okay?" Worry replaced all the anger on Amelia's face.

I winced as I sat up, hand going to my upper arm and coming away bloody. "Guess that's what I get for chasing people down the street."

"It's certainly what you get for chasing people in your underwear." She extended her hand to help me up. I took it and didn't let go. She still had that fuming energy, but I'd won her sympathy for now.

"Did you mean what you said?" she asked. "About me being important to you?"

"Every word."

“Let’s get you cleaned up.” She frowned.

“We can talk about this afterwards.”

Amelia helped me hobble back into the house. Then she told me to sit on the edge of the tub while she played nurse, carefully cleaning off my scrapes with a wet cloth and applying antiseptic. By the time she was done, the raw skin running down my left arm and leg didn’t even hurt anymore.

“The makeup crew is going to murder me on Monday.” I shook my head at the mess I’d made of myself.

“It’s weird.” Amelia’s brows closed in. “The way everything you do, every little action you make, has to be considered for how it will affect your career.”

“About what I said.” I chewed my lip. “It was beyond stupid. I’d been denying that we were dating in my mind because I was so scared that if we were dating, we could break up and the fallout could ruin the whole film.”

“I know how important this movie is to you.” She nodded, but still looked uncertain.

“But denying a label can’t change the way I feel about you. And what I feel for you is, well—” Amelia’s face looked so expectantly that I didn’t know how to finish my sentence. How could I describe everything she made me feel?

“It’s intense,” I finally finished. Amelia’s face seemed to fall just a bit. I wasn’t sure why she looked disappointed, but I added, “And amazing. And I don’t want it to end.”

“But your publicist thinks it should?” She crossed her arms over her chest.



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“Well, no, that’s the thing.” I stood up, excited. “Turns out there’s been a lot of online excitement with people speculating that we’re dating. This movie’s getting huge attention!”

“So now you want to tell people we’re dating because it’d be good for your career.” She went silent for a moment before finally saying, “I’m not sure how to tell what’s real with you, Jessica.”

“You’re not serious are you?” I took her hands in mine and looked into her eyes. “You don’t really doubt the way I feel for you, do you?”

She looked down at the floor for a long time before finally saying without looking up, “It’s hard to tell sometimes. Like you said, this business can wreck your ability to truly connect with people.”

I inhaled a sharp breath, pulling Amelia into my arms. I’d been so horrible for denying our relationship. I wasn’t sure how she would ever forgive me, but I had to start somewhere.

“Will you let me take you out today?” I begged. “I want to show the whole world how much I care about you.”

Amelia looked hesitant before finally nodding. “As long as you put some pants on.”

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I took Amelia to an amusement park that afternoon. I hated roller coasters, but I knew

she loved them and I would've done anything to make her happy. I just wanted her to give me another chance to show how much I cared about her.

Admitting to myself and everyone else that Amelia and I were dating felt amazing. I'd always been self-conscious about grabbing her hand or kissing her in public before, but now I went for it whenever I wanted. Which was most of the time.

As we walked into the amusement park, three camera phones popped out to snap photos of us. I smiled and waved, holding on tight to Amelia's hand. In a few days, every magazine would be plastered with photos of our interlaced fingers.

"You sure are liking this attention," she noted, shifting uncomfortably as she took in all the eyes directed at us.

"I love having our relationship out in the open." When I saw her lips press into a line, I asked, "Don't you?"

"So now that the public's called it a relationship, it's a relationship?"

"Are you still upset?"

"No... I dunno." She didn't seem happy, but didn't look like her usual serious self either. She just looked... sad.

"Let's get some cotton candy!" I said excitedly, knowing that Amelia had an uncontrollable sweet tooth. The cotton candy actually seemed to do the trick. As we waited to get on the largest rollercoaster in the park, Amelia's bad mood melted like the sugar in her perfect mouth.

"If this cotton candy were white," she said between bites, "it would look just like Cleo."

I snorted a laugh. “Maybe we should bring some home for her.”

“Jess.” Her expression turned to alarm. “You can’t feed dogs cotton candy.”

“I was joking.” I ruffled her hair and heard the snap of a camera somewhere in the distance. She batted my hand away and took the comb from her pocket to smooth her hair back out. My lips quirked into a smile.

Ahead of us, the attendant signaled for us to board the roller coaster. As we waited to be buckled in, I could already feel my stomach beginning to drop. I swallowed, telling myself I was doing this for Amelia. I took her hand in mine and heard the snap snap snap of several more cameras.

“Why are you being so touchy with me today?” She pulled away, keeping her eyes averted from the cameras.

“Can’t a woman be touchy with her girlfriend?” I said loud enough for anyone around us to hear.

Her eyes went wide. She was about to open her mouth when the car jerked forward, cutting her off. The light around us disappeared as we slid into a tunnel, the the darkness filling with the slow tick tick tick of the cars ascending the track.

“Will you tell me something honestly?” Amelia whispered into my ear. “Would you have called me your girlfriend if it were just the two of us? No cameras. No one to gossip online.”

“Of course!” I held on tight to her hand as we tipped back further, mounting higher and higher in the pitch darkness, my stomach preparing to drop out of my body.

“It’s just, you say one thing when we’re alone and another thing when we’re in

public.”

“What I said when we were alone was wrong.” I stroked her hand, silently begging her to forgive me. Maybe getting involved with Amelia had been a bad call, but I couldn’t bring myself to regret it. I wished I’d just accepted our relationship for what it was instead of being an enormous ass. Amelia was so sensitive. I should’ve realized how badly I could hurt her.

Anything else I could’ve said was silenced by the sudden jolt of the car. Wind rushed through my hair. I gripped Amelia’s hand tight as we sped through the track, twisting and flipping at a dizzying pace. I wanted to be sick. I wanted this to be over. My head spun as we finally jerked to a stop.

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“Well, today has been quite the ride.” I laughed, squeezing Amelia’s hand, wanting to feel her squeeze back, but she just looked at me with uncertainty.

We unbuckled ourselves and stood, and from the corner of my eye, I saw a camera coming out, so I went for it, taking Amelia by the waist and pulling her into a deep kiss. When this photo was plastered over every magazine in the country, Amelia would know she was the most important thing in the world to me.

Except instead of melting into the kiss, she pulled away.

She kept her eyes on the ground as she said, “Maybe we should just head home.”

19.

Amelia

Jessica looked shocked and hurt, but she covered it quickly, smiling for the camera that’d been snapping photos of us kissing. Jessica always smiled for the camera.

“We could go out for dinn—”

“I feel a little sick,” I cut in. “I just want to go home.”

It wasn’t a lie. I did feel sick. But not from the rollercoaster. It was Jessica’s actions that were making my stomach uneasy.

Just hours ago, she’d completely denied our relationship and now as soon as the

cameras were ready, she couldn't keep her hands off me. She'd even called me her girlfriend.

Girlfriend.

I wanted to cry. Because it felt so good and so horrible all at once to hear her say that. I couldn't tell what was real with her any more.

She took my hand in hers as we walked out to the parking lot and I didn't pull away, because I just wanted to hold on to her. Even as I was waking up to the fact that none of this had been real, I was still clinging to the warm, happy dream. The dream where J

essica might've loved me back.

"Are you okay?" she asked when we were in the car, driving back to her house.

"Can you actually take me to my apartment?"

Her lips pressed together as she made a quick turn. She was silent for a minute before asking, "Are you mad at me?"

I'm not mad at you, I'm in love with you, I wanted to say, but couldn't, because I wasn't ready to face whatever she might say. If she said, "I love you too," could I trust her after her denial this morning? And if she didn't say it back...

That morning when she'd denied our relationship so easily, I'd felt the cracks running their way through my heart, and now, it felt like I was barely holding it together until I could be alone.

"Amelia?" She cut into my thoughts again. "Can you talk to me? Is there anything I

can do to make whatever this is better?”

I closed my eyes and took in a deep, painful breath. “I think your no-dating-co-stars policy was the right call.”

“What?”

Was the hurt in her face real? I looked out the window so I wouldn’t have to face that question.

“I think it’s a mistake for us to date. To hang out. To...” I’d been about to say fuck, but a lump in my throat cut me off. It hadn’t been fucking to me. It’d been something so, so much more. And I never wanted it to end.

But it had to.

“You were right. This could all fall apart and ruin the movie.” My voice dropped so that it was barely a whisper. “Especially if one of us develops feelings that the other doesn’t share.”

Jessica’s eyes went wide. “Are you saying—”

“I’m saying I don’t want to do this anymore.” My hands balled into fists and I willed myself to get angry. For any emotion to replace the pain and sadness cutting through me. But for the first time, my temper had left me and I just felt crushed.

I dared a glance back at Jessica. Her face had gone completely blank, like she couldn’t comprehend what I was saying.

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Finally she sighed, and without looking at me said, “If that’s what you want.”

I couldn’t respond to that, because it wasn’t even close to what I wanted. I just didn’t want her to hurt me again.

I was dizzy as we approached my apartment. It felt like as long as I didn’t get out of the car, I could still take it all back. Tell Jessica I was in love with her, go along with any charade that would let me keep being close to her. The car stopped in front of my building and I found my eyes locked with her deep blue ones. They were so beautiful. For a second, I thought about pressing my lips to hers, feeling her warmth one last time. The longer I stared into her face, the more sure I felt sure she was thinking the same thing.

My pounding heartbeat seemed to fill the entire space of the car. All I had to do was lean in. Take it all back. She could be mine. Even if it was all just pretend.

“Thanks for understanding.” I opened the car door, fresh air breaking the spell between us.

“Yeah, I get it,” she said quietly, staring down at her lap.

“See you on set?”

“Of course.”

I slammed the car door behind me, not really feeling my legs as I found my way up to my apartment and collapsed into my bed. I thudded down hard on the mattress,



knocking down a book from the shelf above, which fell against my skull with a painful thump. I rubbed the back of my head and looked at the spine of the offending book. To Swim With Swans.

All my memories with Jessica flashed in my mind, and the warmth of being with her swallowed me up for one unbearable moment. If it had all been fake, how could it feel so good? I'd never felt as happy as I had with Jessica. Could I really go the rest of my life without kissing her? Touching her? Talking to her?

And then I remembered what should have been so obvious: we still had two weeks left of filming. Of course I would kiss her again.

20.

Jessica

I'd barely made it home without pulling over. I felt like I was on the roller coaster again. Sick. Dizzy.

Cleo pranced to the door when I walked in, tennis ball clasped in her little teeth, but when she saw me, she dropped it, her posture suddenly looking concerned.

"Yeah, I didn't have a great day," I said, bending down to scoop her up.

I kept imagining that I could just say 'cut!' and re-write the scene where Amelia said she didn't want to be with me anymore.

"What else could I have given her?" I stared into Cleo's blue eyes. She stared back, blinking. Even though she couldn't talk, I always felt like she understood me. We curled up in my bed, her snuggling helping to ease my broken heart.

I hadn't realized Amelia didn't feel the same way that I did. I'd thought she'd be happy to have our relationship public. But obviously that'd just made her doubt her feelings for me.

'Especially if one of us develops feelings that the other doesn't share.'

It hurt so bad, but I knew Amelia was only trying to spare me a broken heart. Too bad she was a little late. I'd fallen hard for Amelia, for her persistence, her sensitivity. I loved the way she dressed and the way she'd subconsciously smooth her hair as she talked. I loved the way she always bit my bottom lip when we kissed. I loved everything about her... I... I loved her.

"Oh, shit." I closed my eyes, a new wave of loss washing through me. Cleo cuddled into the space under my chin and my breathing relaxed just a little.

I hadn't even realized how much I'd felt for Amelia until I couldn't have her anymore. I would've done anything to have her back, but I couldn't force her to love me.

My phone rang, jangling me out of my trance. The caller ID was from my publicist, and I sighed as I answered it.

"You really took my suggestion and ran with it," she said incredulously. "The internet is blowing up with photos of you and Amelia."

"Yeah," I said awkwardly, "Maybe I shouldn't have—"

"No, it was absolutely perfect!" She'd never sounded more enthused. "I have a contact from Stars Tonight wanting the two of you on their show tomorrow."

"I don't know—"

“I already called Amelia and asked her to take part, so I just need you to clear your schedule.”

“Wait, Amelia said she’d do the show?” I sat up, shocked.

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“Yeah, she said she’d be happy to talk about your relationship on TV.”

My insides squirmed. What did Amelia plan to say?

“So if you can make time tomorrow—”

“Yeah, I can do it,” I said quickly.

“Perfect! So you need to be at the Stars Tonight studio at noon tomorrow.”

“Yup, I’ve done it all before, I know the drill.”

“This is gonna be huge!” she beamed through the phone.

“Yeah,” I agreed, feeling sick as I hung up.

What would tomorrow have in store for us?

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I'd never been so nervous in my life as I stood backstage, blinded by the studio lights pouring off the set of Stars Tonight as I waited to be called on stage. I kept glancing around for Amelia, but apparently she was still in makeup. Maybe she wouldn't even show. I'd been too scared to call her at first, and when I finally worked up the nerve, she hadn't answered. Our relationship was a mess and I had no idea what was going to happen when we got on stage.

I felt a tap on my shoulder, and turned suddenly, but the person standing in front of me wasn't Amelia. The woman was even taller than me, and strikingly beautiful, but with a shy affect. She seemed embarrassed to be approaching me, so I guessed she must be a fan.

“Hey,” she said, clearing her throat. “I hope you don't mind me coming up to you like this.” She extended her hand. “El.”

“Not at all.” I tried to smile for her and shook her hand.

“I just wanted to say thanks for making Real Love.” She seemed to grow even more bashful, glancing down at her feet as she said, “I had a hard time coming out and I want you to know that this movie really means a lot to people like me.”

For one moment, I forgot about the mess I was in and a real smile spread across my face. I pulled the woman into a hug. There was no way she knew how badly I needed to hear that.

I pulled away to see another woman who I vaguely recognized standing behind us. I was pretty sure I'd seen her on the news, and she was some kind of CEO or something. Though it was hard to be sure when I looked at is shirt and saw that it read, “Sorry I'm late. I didn't want to be here.” Would a CEO wear something like that?

“El, quit hitting on Jessica Black.” She snorted a giggle. “We have to go back to the dressing rooms for makeup.”

“We're not pretty enough already?” El's grin turned crooked.

“That's what I said!” The other girl threw her hands up like she'd been arguing the fact to death.

“Thanks again,” El said to me.

“No, thank you. Really.”

“Enough flirting.” The other woman grabbed El by the hand and dragged her away. I couldn't help laughing. They seemed so happy together. It actually made part of me sad, because I'd thought I'd had that too.

I'd been so distracted that I almost hadn't heard the host of the show call my name. Just as I was stepping out onto the stage, I saw her. Amelia. I felt her name on my lips as she walked past me out onto the stage. The cinnamon smell of her perfume hit me and I desperately wanted to pull her into my arms, whisper in her hair, and tell her the truth: I was in love with her.

But what would be the point? Telling her I loved her when she didn't feel the same way would only make her uncomfortable.

I plastered a smile on my face as I followed her out onto the stage and took a chair next to her. The host was a gorgeous dark-haired woman, Tabatha Ashton. I'd met her when I'd been on the show before and she greeted me with a familiar smile.

“So glad to have you back on the show, Jessica.”

“Thank you for having me.”

“And yo

u, Amelia Earhart—is that your real name?”

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“Yup.” Amelia fiddled with the pearl cuff link on her charcoal black suit, not really making eye contact with Tabatha.

“So I guess your parents planned for you to be a pilot, not an actress.”

“My parents always encouraged me to follow my dreams,” she said, her tight smile relaxing a little.

“Even when your dreams involve making out with gorgeous movie stars?” she asked with a saucy grin. “Let's talk about those photos that were taken of you two at the amusement park this weekend.”

Amelia's eyes met mine, as if we were both begging the other to answer the question.

“About those photos,” I started, not really knowing where I was going, but feeling the need to say something. “It was just—”

“Just the two of us messing around,” Amelia cut in. “We became friends when we were working on Real Love and it's not weird for us to touch and stuff. It doesn't mean anything.” She put her hand in mine, the contact sending electrical impulses down my spine. Could Amelia be telling the truth? It hadn't meant anything to her? Since when?

Tabatha raised an eyebrow. “I dunno, I think it's a little weird to kiss your friends.”

“Then I feel sorry for your friends,” Amelia shot back with a grin.

The audience burst into laughter and Tabatha joined in.

“So really, the two of you aren't dating?” She pressed.

Silence.

“No,” I finally said, “We're not dating.”

A sigh of disappointment rose up from the crowd and I felt it echoed in my own heart.

“Too bad. You two would make a beautiful couple.” Tabatha shook her head. “So are you dating anyone right now?”

“Not at the moment.” I tried to keep my smile bright and directed my gaze right at Amelia. “Though I'd like to be. I'd love to have someone who I could share my life with.”

“Any takers?” Tabatha threw out to the audience which erupted with applause and hollering. “And what about you, Amelia?”

“I'm not looking for love right now.” She was fiddling with her cuff links again, keeping her gaze glued to the floor. “I've been cheated on before. I've been lied to. I've been treated as a prop by people who made me think they cared about me.” Her next line felt directed right at me. “So no, I'm not looking to go through that again anytime soon. I'd rather be alone.”

Her words twisted in my gut. Was that really how I'd made her feel? I opened my mouth to say something, but then closed it. I kept my head down, unable to look at her or the audience anymore.



“Well, that's certainly honest,” Tabatha said with just a little awkwardness. The audience didn't seem quite sure what to make of Amelia's confession either. An odd silence fell over the set.

“Well, up next are two women who are definitely looking for love—in each other. I have former BluTech CEO Taylor Lyle here to talk about the high school sweetheart she gave up her empire for.” She turned back to me and Amelia. “Thank you so much for coming on the show. I'm looking forward to see Real Love when it hits the theatres.”

I shook her hand, and maybe thanked her, though I was hardly listening to my own voice. Amelia's words just kept replaying in my head as I watched her walk off the stage.

21.

Amelia

The interview had gone better than I'd expected. As hard as it'd been to go on TV and talk about our relationship, I'd wanted to avoid headlines speculating about me and Jessica dating. I couldn't bear the thought of having that in my face. Subtly calling her out for being a complete phony had been... unintended to say the least. She'd tried calling me a few times before the interview, but afterwards? She'd barely even looked at me.

I made it through the next two weeks of filming by becoming completely numb. Thankfully, Jessica and I didn't have many scenes left to film together. Just one. The last day of filming, we were going off set to a nearby ranch.

I told myself not to feel anything when we arrived at the rambling estate. I stepped out of the van to see Jessica, already in costume, ripped, dusty jeans and a plaid shirt

that hugged her curves as she moved.

Relief and sadness overwhelmed me at the thought that this would be our last day of filming. After this, I'd never have to see Jessica again outside of promo events where I could keep my distance from her. Was that what I really wanted? Distance?

Of course it was. I couldn't deal with the strength of my emotions for her. Not when she seemed able to switch her feelings on and off so easily. How did she do it? Was she just that good an actress?

The day started with the crew getting shots of Jessica riding around on a horse. I tried not to watch as she handled the large animal with so much ease. I tried not to notice how gorgeous she was with her long blonde hair blowing behind her. I didn't want to feel any of the things I was still feeling for Jessica.

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I'd been an idiot for idolizing her. I realized that now. Maybe I'd been lying as much as Jess had. Desperately trying to convince myself that what we'd had was real. Telling myself that Jess was perfect, that she would never hurt me. I'd only believed what I'd wanted to believe.

Maybe I'd deserved to get hurt.

The crew finally finished filming Jess on the horse and my stomach twisted into knots because this was the part where we had to do our scene together. I'd have to kiss her for the first time since we'd... broken up? Had we ever really even been together? I sure felt broken up about whatever had happened between us.

I willed myself go numb again as the director walked us through the blocking of the scene. I let my lines roll off my tongue, pretending I was alone in my room, that I wasn't talking to the person I still wanted more than anything.

The sun was setting, glinting off Jessica's blonde hair. She pressed closer to me, making me step back until I was pushed against the stable wall. The fruity scent of Jessica's perfume wouldn't allow me to pretend she wasn't there anymore. I looked up into her eyes, my heart aching as I whispered my next line.

"I love you."

Her warm, soft body pressed against mine, enveloping me with everything I knew I couldn't have. She pressed her lips to my ear and murmured back, "I love you too."

My mouth closed over hers and I clutched at her back, holding on to her, to that

moment that I knew wasn't real, but wanted more than anything.

'I love you.'

I replayed the sound of her voice in my head over and over as I lost myself in her kiss. Her hands slid down my neck, drawing goosebumps from my skin and I melted into her.

'I love you.'

'I love you.'

'I love you.'

I wished I could just say it for real.

Jessica pulled away, blue eyes clouded over, lips glistening. She stared into my eyes, as if she could read every thought in my mind. Would it really be so bad to go back to what we were? Even if I couldn't be sure what was real between us, at least I'd hold on to this.

"That's great!" the director shouted excitedly, snapping me out of the moment.

The crew brightened their lights to adjust for the growing twilight, but the director waved a hand. "I think we're done. That take was perfect."

A cool breeze rustled my hair as Jessica stepped away from me. I resolved, in that moment, not to grab her back. What we'd just shared—everything we'd shared—had just been an act. Part of the show. I had to let go.

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It was weird to wake up Monday morning and have not have to hurry off to the bustling studio. No makeup crew to fuss over me. No last-minute script changes to memorize. No filming. No Jessica. It was all over.

In two months, I'd have to fly out to Rosebridge, New Hampshire to attend the premiere of Real Love at IndieFest, but until then, there were just a handful of interviews I had to attend—without Jessica, thankfully.

So what now?

A week after the last shoot ended, I was sitting at

my table, trying to budget out how to make my final paycheck from the studio last through the month, when my phone rang. I stiffened. Could it be Jessica calling? Would I answer if it was? I looked at the caller ID. A number I didn't recognize.

“Hello?”

“Am I speaking to Amelia Earhart?”

“Yes,” I said hesitantly.

“This is Alex Bainbridge from Western Talent.”

“Okay?”

“I'm contacting you because our connections in the business could really help someone with your talent and I'd like to invite you to sign on with us.”

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“Wait, are you an agent?”

“Yes Miss Earhart, I thought that was clear.”

“I just... umm, wow. I’m surprised you’re contacting me.”

“Why don’t you come into our office this week and we can discuss a potential contract?”

I felt like I was dreaming as I set up the meeting with the talent agent. Four years of struggling and I’d never booked an agent. Now they were calling me. Was this the start of a whole new life?

I burned with excitement when I got off the phone, but then a pang of sadness hit me, because my first urge had been to call Jessica to tell her about it. Why couldn’t I stop thinking about her? She was a jerk. She’d used me, treated me like I was disposable. Made me feel like I was nothing to her.

I couldn’t ever let that happen again.

Instead of calling Jessica, I called my mom, who was so excited she could hardly breathe.

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to come to the screening premiere of Real Love,” she gushed. “I might actually die of joy!”

I laughed. “Well, I’d love if you could make it.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Sorry, I’m getting another call,” I said, looking at the unknown number on my phone.

“Better take it! It’s probably another agent trying to snatch you up before you become a big star.”

I grinned as I said goodbye before taking the call, sure it was just a debt collector. Except it wasn’t; it was another agent. I could barely make sense of what was happening.

From my conversation with the second agent, I found out that the latest trailer for Real Love had been released and was apparently stirring up a storm online.

I chewed my lip as I debated with myself, finally deciding to watch the trailer. It wasn’t like I wanted to recreate my memories with Jessica. In fact, I was over Jessica, living my new life of apparent stardom. But still, watching the trailer couldn’t hurt, right?

I pulled the video up on my laptop, a strange feeling stirring in my stomach. Seeing myself acting was so weird, but I couldn’t help feeling proud of the way I carried the character off. The screen flashed to an image of Jessica’s hand on my thigh and cut away quickly. My heartbeat quickened.

Our lips together.

Her hands in my hair.

I slammed the laptop shut.

I was over Jessica. So over her. Over the second guessing and the hurt she caused me with her lies and acting. I was over her.

How many times did I have to say that to myself before it became true?

22.

Jessica

“It’s been two months since that little jerk broke your heart.” Oliver skewered a breakfast sausage on his fork. “You should’ve at least had a hookup by now.”

I winced. I didn’t want random sex with someone I barely knew. I wanted a connection. I wanted Amelia. But I’d screwed all that up and maybe she was better off without me.

“I guess I don’t move on as fast as you do.” I gave him my best smile to hide how much I was still hurting. In Oliver’s world, the best way to get over a breakup was to get into a new relationship—which he’d done, almost immediately after Mel smashed his heart into pieces. He and his new girlfriend were happy and I was happy for them, but I didn’t work quite the same way. My relationship with Amelia had felt like the first real connection I’d had in a long time.

Part of me was dismayed to see that Amelia’s career was really taking off. I’d seen online that she’d scored a big role in a historical film that was destined for the Oscars. I was happy for her, happy that her dreams were coming true after she’d worked so hard to achieve them. I just hoped she’d never stop being herself. How long had I been in the business before I stopped being me?

“You guys ordered without me?” Sara walked up to our table at the cafe, looking indignant.



“Sorry.” I smiled at her. “But if it makes you feel any better, I’ve barely eaten.”

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“She’s still nursing her broken heart,” Oliver explained as he slid his chair over to make room for Sara at the table.

“Sorry, I know it’s rough getting over someone,” Sara said as she sat down.

“It’s not that.” I sighed. “I think Amelia might have been right about me.”

“Jess, you’re amazing, and you deserve to be happy. None of what she said about you was true,” Sara said.

“Except it was true,” I pressed. “I am a phony. I never do anything without considering how it will affect my image.”

“That’s just part of the job. We all do it.” Oliver shrugged and popped a bite of scrambled eggs into his mouth. I got the feeling he didn’t understand. Sometimes people in the business lost sight of what normal life was.

“I get what you’re saying,” Sara broke in. “You want to be your authentic self, and you don’t know how to balance that with your work life.”

“Yes!” I practically leapt up. “How are you always better at describing my thoughts than I am?”

Sara laughed. “I’ve known you too long. Trust me, knowing what’s on your mind is a curse more than a blessing.”

Oliver snorted a laugh into his orange juice, nearly choking on it.

“Actually, I wanted to ask you something. I was wondering if you’d like to be my date for the first screening of Real Love at IndieFest this weekend.” I picked at my napkin. “I mean, I made the movie for you. Only seems right that I invite you to the premiere.”

“Are you asking me on a date?” Sara stifled a giggle. “Sorry, but how many times do I have to tell you you’re not my type?”

“Fuck off.” I reached over the table to punch her in the arm, knocking over a jar of table syrup, which Oliver caught just in time before it spilled all over the table.

“Jesus, you two.” He shook his head.

The moment of chaos was suddenly interrupted by my ringing phone. I checked the caller ID. My mom. Anxiety rolled through my gut.

I hadn’t spoken to her since Amelia had cussed her out. In all honesty, it’d been a huge relief to have a few months free from her guilt and criticism. She’d even stopped bothering me for money, though I still covered her household bills. I looked at the number on my phone again. Even if my parents were shitty sometimes, they were the only parents I’d ever have.

“Sorry, I have to take this,” I said, standing from the table.

Outside the cafe, I answered the phone, bracing myself for the conversation to go in a direction I wouldn’t like. There was a long silence after my initial hello and then my mom finally spoke.

“I’ve been doing some thinking.” Another long silence. “About what you said the last time I was at your house.”

“Yeah?” I rubbed the back of my neck, still unsure of where this conversation would go.

“I want to apologize.” Her voice softened, but it sounded like she was struggling with each word. “I understand I’ve gotten a bit... ambitious with your career in the past, and perhaps I haven’t respected your boundaries as much as I should have. You’re an adult now and I should treat you that way.”

That’s only what I’ve been saying for the past five years, I thought, but instead said, “I appreciate that you finally realize that.”

A small part of me wondered if she was just saying what I wanted to hear, but I knew what a struggle it was for my mom to apologize. There was no way she’d bring herself to do it unless she truly believed she was in the wrong.

As if she hadn’t shocked me enough, she went on, “I would be deeply honored if you’d allow me to attend the premiere of Real Love. I know this is important to you and I want to be there to support you.”

“I—wow, umm, yes. I’d love if you could make it.”

“Jessica?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.” She said it so quickly it caught me off guard. “Even when I’m not being the mother you wish I was, I still love you.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

I said goodbye, feeling more content than I had in months. I’d been working through

years of counseling to try to get to that conversation from my mom. To think, all it actually took was Amelia calling her a bitch.

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I paused with my hand on the cafe door.

I missed Amelia's hotheadedness. I missed how bold she was, how openly she wore her feelings. I missed everything about her. Just when I'd thought I was starting to get over her, a wall of longing hit me.

I still loved her.

And in that moment, I didn't know if I could stop loving her. But it was way too late to say I was sorry for giving her mixed messages about our relationship. And even if I did, what was an apology worth? She'd been right, I was an actor right down to my core. How was Amelia ever supposed to trust me again?

I walked back into the cafe, plastering a smile on my face to hide what I was feeling, but as I sat down, I realized I shouldn't be hiding what I was feeling. Wasn't that the whole issue? I needed to change. I needed to be authentic.

I looked up at Oliver and Sara and said something that came to me so suddenly that even I was surprised by my words. "I'm going to quit acting."

"What?" Oliver nearly spit his coffee all over the table.

"Honestly, acting has brought me nothing but grief my whole life."

First the business had ruined my relationship with my parents,

then it ruined my relationship with Amelia. I didn't know how to stay in this business

while still remaining myself, so getting out of it was the only solution.

Sara examined me seriously before saying, “But you were so excited to be making movies that could make a difference in people’s lives.”

“Maybe I needed to be looking at my own life.” I stared down at my plate of barely touched breakfast. “Some of the stuff I’ve been doing, the lying, the pretending, it’s not good for anyone—me or the people in my life.”

“Is this about Amelia again?” Sara asked.

“Yes—and no.” I shook my head. “She made me realize I don’t want to be the person I’ve been pretending to be. I’m not sure I even like the person I’ve been pretending to be.”

“What you’re talking about is pretty drastic.” Oliver’s brow furrowed with concern.

“I know,” I said. “But I think it’s what I need to do to be happy.”

And maybe, maybe, maybe, I was entertaining a small delusion that if Amelia realized that I’d quit acting, she’d know I’d changed. I knew getting my hopes up was setting myself up for heartbreak, but the truth was, I would’ve given up everything just for a chance to have Amelia back in my life.

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Cameras flashed as Sara and I stepped out of the hotel and into the waiting limousine. Rosebridge was a small town and the riverside streets seemed to be exploding with the extra guests the film festival had drawn. I shut the limo door on the mob and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Wow, I didn’t know the star treatment was so sweet.” Sara leaned back on the leather seat and poured herself a glass of chilled champagne. “How is this the first time you’ve asked me to be your date?”

“You’re not my date, you’re my entourage.” I swiped the bottle of champagne from her and took a long drink.

“Easy,” Sara cautioned. “You nervous?”

“About what? Seeing Amelia again or announcing to the world that Real Love will be the last movie I ever make?”

I wasn’t even concerned about the film doing well. I knew that Amelia and I had created something spectacular. The audience would love it and there would be a theater full of marketers from huge studios who would bid on the distribution rights for Real Love. I’d never been so sure of a movie’s success and yet so afraid to attend a premiere.

“Hey, you’ve got me here.” Sara bumped her shoulder against mine. “There’s nothing to be nervous about.”

“Thanks.” I exhaled a small amount of tension.

The chaos of cameras returned as we pulled up to the film festival. I peered into the crowd, wondering if Amelia had arrived yet. I knew I’d see her at the interviews after the screening tonight, but I had no clue if she’d even look at me, let alone speak to me.

My heart raced as I thought of the announcement I planned to make at the interviews in a few hours. I hadn’t told my mom yet, and I had no clue what her reaction would be. Giving up the career she’d worked so hard to build for me could destroy all the



recent gains we'd made in our relationship.

I had to do it anyway.

And not just because of a desperate hope that it might win Amelia back. I had to start being myself.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:10 pm*

I opened the limousine door and stepped out into the crowd of paparazzi and reporters. Sara stood by my side as we walked towards the theater set up to screen Real Love. Her calm demeanor helped to keep me grounded as people swarmed me for photos and autographs. I just tried to stay in the moment and not let my thoughts drift towards Amelia or my announcement.

But then, just as I was entering the tent, a second limo pulled up and Amelia stepped out. Her hair was neatly gelled, suit hugging her slender frame, green eyes even more gorgeous than I remembered.

23.

Amelia

My breath left me when I saw Jessica standing outside the theatre. Why did I still have to feel my heart racing when I saw her? Why did I have to fight the desire to throw myself into her arms? Why did I still have to love her?

Our eye contact broke when a woman beside her put her hand to Jessica's shoulder and drew her inside the doors. Jessica leaned in and whispered something in the woman's ear and the hair on the back of my neck prickled. Was she Jessica's date? They certainly seemed close.

Did seeing Jessica with another woman make me jealous? No—it fucking killed me.

I strode through the crowd and into the theatre, hoping I could find a seat at the back, but as soon as I sat down, a lady with a clipboard tapped my shoulder.

“Miss Earhart, the four seats at the front are reserved for you, Miss Black and your dates.”

“I don’t have a date,” I said in a much more surly tone than the woman deserved.

“We have a camera crew here to film your reactions during the screening.” She smiled tensely, trying to be polite even though I was making her job a lot harder than it had to be.

I sighed and stood, legs heavy as I walked to the front of the theatre where Jessica sat with her date. I took the seat further from her, leaving an empty space between us. Somehow I felt too close and too far from her at the same time. I tried to sneak a quick look at her date again, but ended up making eye contact with Jessica instead. I froze, heart pounding.

“Hey,” she said, smiling nervously.

“Hi.” I looked away.

“This is Sara by the way.”

I clenched my fists as jealousy tore through me again. I kept my jaw tight as I said back, “So I guess you were more into women than you were letting on.”

“What?” Jessica shook her head. “Oh, Sara and I aren’t dating.”

“Right.” I looked away again because I was so done with this. “I know the drill. Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone your pretty girl is just a prop.”

“Hey, thanks, you’re quite pretty yourself.” Sara leaned forward to speak around Jessica.

“You’re not helping.” Jessica pushed Sara back into her chair.

“There’s nothing to help,” I hissed as the lights dimmed. “You and I don’t have to talk.”

A spotlight pooled in the front of the room and the director walked out to say a few words about Real Love before the screening started.

“I just want to tell you that I’ve changed,” Jessica whispered, leaning over the empty seat to reach my ear. It was the closest we’d been in months and I just wanted to turn and kiss her. And I hated myself for being so pathetic.

“Good for you. I hope you're happy with yourself,” I said without looking at her.

Jessica whispered one last thing in my ear before pulling away, “I haven’t been happy since you left me.”

I squeezed my eyes shut as the title music for Real Love began to fill the theatre. Why did she have to say that? Why did she have to make wanting her hurt so bad?

My chest became tighter with each minute the film played. From beside me, I kept hearing little hissing whispers as Jessica and Sara murmured back and forth. How fucking rude. You’d think an actress would know you’re not supposed to talk during a movie.

By the time my first kiss scene with Jessica came up, I was staring down at the floor, trying to keep from hyperventilating. I heard a small giggle from Sara and my fists clenched again. I wondered if Sara really was just a prop. It seemed like there could be a lot more between the two of them. Maybe Jessica had just said they weren’t dating so she wouldn’t embarrass me since I’d shown up alone. But since when did Jessica care about how I felt? I thought back to all the moments of tenderness, how

caring and thoughtful she'd always been towards me.

Jesus, don't think about that!

I kept my gaze on the floor, refusing to watch the romance playing out, but then I heard it: "I love you."

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I jerked my head up to see Jessica's eyes looking down at me from the screen, so full of tenderness and love. Or at least, what I'd wanted to believe was love.

The shot cut to me and I whispered back to her, "I love you too."

All the ox

ygen was sucked from the room. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't watch this. I couldn't sit here. I couldn't be this close to her.

I stood, bolting down the aisle like I was going to be sick. I didn't care if I drew anyone's attention, I couldn't fucking do this anymore. I swore I heard Jessica call my name as I fled the theatre, and it only made me move faster.

Reporters mobbed me as I entered the twilight, and the flash of cameras made it hard to tell where I was going—where was I going? I just needed to escape.

"Amelia!" Jessica called again. I looked back to see her a few feet away, struggling to get through the crowd. Fuck, I couldn't talk to Jessica. Not now, not ever again.

Across the street, a limousine sat idling. I couldn't tell if it was the car I'd arrived in, but I didn't care. I ran across the street, banging on the driver's window. He looked annoyed as he rolled it down.

"I need you to take me back to my hotel," I said.

"Do I know you?" The driver looked at me like I was crazy. Shit, it wasn't my driver.

I looked back to see Jessica bolting towards me.

“Uh, there’s a traffic cop over there who said she wants to write you a ticket.” I blurted without thinking. “Rosebridge has a law against idling.”

“What the fuck?” The driver leapt from the limo to look around for the woman I’d described. I ducked into the driver’s seat and slammed the door.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I heard him yell as I hit the gas.

Jesus Christ, what the fuck was I doing? Had Jessica driven me so crazy that I was stealing limousines to get away from her?

Apparently.

I looked in the rear view mirror to see both her and the limo driver chasing after me, Jessica taking the lead as the driver pulled out his phone—probably to call the cops.

Holy fuck. Holy fuck. Holy fuck.

And then I realized, as I came to traffic circle, I had no clue how to drive a limousine. I jerked to a stop in front of the circle and tried to ease the car in, feeling a bump as I went over the curb. I took out a decorative shrub as I tried to handle the turn.

I was so focused on not fucking up the limo that I didn’t notice Jessica had caught up with me until she was right beside the car. I floored it, driving right over the curb and into the posh little garden lining the traffic circle, but it was too late. Jessica tore open the door and leapt into the back seat.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I shouted at her.

“What the fuck are you doing, Amelia?”

“Not talking to you, that’s for damned sure.” I started pressing buttons, searching for one that would close the divider between the driver and the passenger, finally finding it, but before it had closed, Jessica jammed her arm in the way, stopping the divider halfway.

“Amelia, I know you hate me right now, but you’re acting crazy.”

“I don’t hate you.” I pushed my foot down on the gas, but the wheels only spun in the mud. The urge to escape had never been stronger as I felt my feelings forcing their way out of me. I couldn’t run anymore. There was nowhere to go. I let my head slump against the steering wheel and said again, “I don’t hate you... I’m in love with you.”

“What?”

“I said I’m in love with you.” I jerked my head up to glare at her in the rear view mirror. “I’m in love with you. I’m in love with you. I’m in love with you, Jessica Black. How many times do I have to say it?”

24.

Jessica

“I... I’m in love with you too,” I said in disbelief. “I can hardly even think of anything other than you.”

Amelia didn’t turn, just kept staring at me in the rearview mirror as she said, “I wish that meant something.”



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“Doesn’t it, though? Doesn’t it mean everything?”

“No, it doesn’t, Jessica.” She turned suddenly. “Loving someone doesn’t mean anything if you lie to the person you love—lie to the whole world about how you feel about them.”

“Believe me, I couldn’t hate myself more for what I did when we were together... and that’s one of the reasons I love you so much. You make me a better person, Amelia.”

She looked down, some of the anger dropping from her voice. “Well, you’re welcome, I guess.”

Outside the limo, a crowd was gathering, but thankfully they couldn’t see us through the tinted windows.

“I understand if you’ll never forgive me, but I want to prove to you that I’ve changed. I’m going to announce that I’m quitting acting tonight.”

“What?” She looked up suddenly, eyes going wide.

“I want you to know that I’m done with pretending. All of it. Forever.”

“Holy shit.” She barely breathed the words.

Photographers were setting up cameras, snapping shots of the stolen limo. The crowd pressed tight around the car. Suddenly, all my hesitation left me and I knew what I

had to do.

“Hey!” I shouted as I rolled the window down. “I just want to announce that I am officially retiring from acting. Real Love will be the last film I ever make.

“What are you doing?” Amelia gaped at me before squirming over the divider, into the back seat to tackle me to the floor of the limo.

The mob outside went wild, people shouting questions over one another, cameras sticking into the window to photograph us. Amelia reached up and hit the button to shut the window. I guess we were both acting a little crazy.

“I need you to know that if you give me a second chance, it’s going to be for real.” I squeezed my arms around her. It felt so good to have her this close again.

“Jessica... I...” Amelia’s expression was so conflicted. She moved her mouth wordlessly a few more times before finally uttering, “I’m so in love with you and I have no idea what to do about it.”

“Just give me one more chance,” I begged. “I promise I’ll treat you the way you deserve.”

She couldn’t seem to form any more words, so she just kissed me. Hard.

“Oh God, I love you so much.” I grabbed her by the neck and pressed her lips to mine. Months of desire poured out into my kiss, and I felt the longing returned by Amelia’s lips. I ran my hands down her body, up her shirt, feeling her soft skin and toned muscle.

Amelia moaned into my mouth. Our breath steamed, fogging the windows. I didn’t care who was outside. I needed her. I’d needed her for months.

She pulled my dress above my waist and I heard the seams tear from the sudden motion. I would be a mess when we finally emerged from the limo, but I wasn't thinking about that. My mind was completely focused on Amelia's confession as I kissed down her neck, leaving lipstick stains all over her white shirt collar. Everything about her body was perfect and I couldn't believe this was really happening.

I slid her pants down her thighs, finding her wet heat and stroking her until she was moaning my name. Jesus, that sounded good on her lips. Her nails raked down my back as I slid a finger inside her, groaning out with all the aching need I'd kept pent up for months.

She grabbed me tight, pressing her lips to mine as she gasped out, "Fuck, Jessica." She was panting, cheeks red, lips raw. "I missed you so much."

Everything around us disappeared as we touched one another's bodies with unquenchable urgency in a blur of gasped moans, flushed lips, heaving chests. My lips on her peaked nipples. Her hands in my hair. Our bodies pressed together like we could never be close enough.

The moment was perfect.

Until the police sirens filled the air.

"What the hell?" Amelia shot up, the moment broken.

I let out a groan of annoyance, but couldn't help laughing. "Well, you did steal a car. I'm not sure what you expected."

"Fuck." She lay back down covering her face with her hands. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. What was I thinking?"

“Hey, don’t worry about it.” I pulled her pants back up quickly. “You were just acting the part of a crazy celebrity.”

“I thought we were done with acting.” She let a small smile spread across her face.

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“I know I am.”

Police lights flashed in the window and officers began clearing the crowd. A gloved hand thumped against the window.

“You’ll be fine.” I swallowed nervously.

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I sat in the police station, hair still a mess, Amelia’s lipstick stains all over my neck. This whole mess was the worst publicity of my career, but I couldn’t be happier when the officer brought Amelia out to the front of the station where I was waiting for her.

Her shirt hung sloppily with half the buttons torn off, and she looked more stressed than I’d seen her in my life, but she grinned when she saw me. I stifled a giggle. Did they really have to handcuff her?

Actually, I wouldn’t mind handcuffing her myself.

I shut that idea down quickly because I was still horny as hell and had been for the entire three hours I’d waited for Amelia to be released. Fortunately, I’d been able to convince the limo driver not to press charges against Amelia. He hadn’t been very moved by my explanation that Amelia had just been driven crazy by love and wasn’t thinking, but somehow the twenty-thousand dollars I offered him ended up being a more compelling argument.

“Thank you so much,” Amelia said, throwing her arms around me as soon as they’d

removed the handcuffs. “I don’t know what you did, but I know you saved my ass.”

“Hey, I had to save your ass.” I pinched her cheek. “That butt is way too cute to be locked away.”

Amelia looked out the front doors of the police station to where reporters were swarming like flies. “Holy shit.”

“Yeah...” I scratched the back of my head. “Guess we attracted a bit of attention to ourselves.”

“You weren’t serious, were you? When you said you would quit acting.”

“Yeah, I was.”

“But—”

I held my hand up to cut her off. “That’s not the life I want anymore. I just want to be with you.”

“You didn’t have to quit just for me...” She looked at the ground like she fel

t guilty over my decision.

“Trust me, I’m doing it for me too. I’m doing it for us.” I opened the station doors, exposing us to the army of reporters and paparazzi. As we stepped out, Amelia grabbed me, pulling me in for a deep kiss that sent an explosion of excitement through the crowd. But for the first time in my life, I didn’t care what the headlines were going to say tomorrow. Everything I wanted was right there in my arms.

Amelia

Jessica's eyes looked into mine adoringly, and I swore I saw tears in them as she finished her vows.

"... and I never want to be apart from you again," she said as she slid the ring on my finger.

My hands trembled as I looked down at the symbol of commitment. I'd known I'd wanted to marry her, but I hadn't realized how long I'd wanted it. In the year since Jessica and I had confessed our love, hardly a day went by when I didn't think about my future with her. I wanted it to last forever.

I grabbed her by the neck and pulled her lips to mine, not even waiting for the cue from the officiant. From the front row of seats, I could hear Oliver clapping excitedly, but I didn't care. I was so lost in that moment.

Until a loud shout snapped me out of it.

"Cut!" The director strode onto the set. "Oliver, can we do the scene with less noise from you? Honestly, you're worse than the extras."

"Sorry." Oliver held his hands up defensively. "I just got really excited."

The director turned to me and Jessica. "You guys were perfect as always. Can we do it just like that again, but quieter?" Her eyes darted back towards Oliver who nodded and gave a very silent thumbs-up.

As Jessica and I redid the scene, all the emotions I'd felt only became more powerful and this time, I knew I was tearing up too. I could redo this scene as many times as they wanted me to. I could do this forever.

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 2:10 pm*

Since the success of *Real Love*, major studios had been begging Jessica to be in more lesbian romance movies. She'd been resistant to come out of her retirement, but she'd finally agreed on one condition—she only wanted to make movies with me.

I could agree to that.

I was living my dream with the person I loved more than anything. I didn't know how my life could get any better.

"Hey, I have a present for you," Jessica said as we headed back to our dressing rooms.

"Oh shit, I didn't forget our anniversary, did I?"

Jessica laughed. "No, it's something I've wanted to give you for a while."

She put her arm around my waist and led me toward the prop room. I blushed as I remembered last week's filming when I'd gone to wake Jessica up from a nap and it'd led to.... well, I'll let you imagine. I never could understand why Jessica preferred to nap on the floor instead of on the couch in her dressing room. It was just one of her adorable quirks.

She led me towards her favorite spot in the back of the room, behind a rack of long wool coats that had been used for a WWII drama. As she parted the coats, I saw a large red box with a bow on it.

"It's huge!" I kneeled down next to the box.



“Don’t get excited. It’s not as big as it looks.” She grinned, taking a seat next to me.  
“Open it.”

There was something in her tone that told me that this gift was more than it seemed and I couldn’t help feeling nervously excited as I pulled on the bow. My mind raced with possibilities as I took off the lid and peered inside.

“Jessica...” My brows furrowed. “... this is your dog.”

Cleo looked up at me from inside the box, seemingly as confused as I was.

Jessica’s excited smile forced her dimples to press deep into her cheeks. “You said you always wanted a dog!”

“So you’re giving me Cleo?” I gaped.

“No!” she said hurriedly. “We’re going to share her... I want to share everything with you, Amelia.” She scooted closer to me, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a small ring box.

I stared in disbelief as she opened it. “Did you take that from the set?”

“No.” She smiled softly. “I actually bought this months ago. I was just waiting to work up the courage to ask you: Will you marry me?”

“Holy shit, yes.” I threw myself at her, tackling her to the floor as I kissed her.

She laughed, pulling away just long enough to slide the ring onto my finger before she submitted to my ruthless kisses again. I couldn’t believe that moment was real. I’d been dreaming of it for so long, but I never could have imagined how happy I would be to commit my life to Jessica. To think, after all the romances we’d be making together, we would be getting our own happily-ever-after.

End.