



The Violet Hill Series

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: Second Kiss

Daisy Grace Webber's life hasn't exactly turned out how she thought. She didn't think she'd drop out of college and come back to the small town she grew up in. To be fair, she didn't think her love of baking would turn into a job at the Violet Hill Cafe either, but it did.

Something else she didn't expect was for Molly Madison to walk back into her life, eight years after she moved away. They'd been best friends forever, or so she'd thought. But Molly is back in town and she's looking... really good, actually. And that reminds Daisy of that one time at a sleepover when they'd kissed during a game of Spin the Bottle. That one kiss has been on her mind since then, but it's irrelevant. Molly isn't into girls.

But as Daisy and Molly spend more time together, feelings start to grow, and Daisy is wondering just how "straight" Molly really is...

Double Exposure

Anna Corcoran's life is hectic, but that's how she likes it. Between her jobs at the Violet Hill Cafe, the local library, and doing publicity work for authors, she doesn't have much time for anything else. Until Lacey Cole walks into the cafe and she feels like she's been knocked off her axis.

Lacey's a photographer and writer and wants to do a profile on the cafe, including an interview with Anna. She's game, but after spending a few days with Lacey, Anna is falling. Hard. The only problem is that Lacey isn't going to be sticking around. She floats from town to town, never staying in one place.

But as they get closer and closer, Anna wonders if maybe this would be the one time when Lacey would decide to stay put. With her.

Second Chance

Serena Nolan's summer isn't going how she planned. Fortunately, her cousin, Anna, is there to rescue her from spending her time off from college with parents who don't understand (or want to understand) her. Serena's thrilled to be living with Anna and her girlfriend, Lacey in Lacey's studio, and working in the Violet Hill Cafe. She's even adores Lacey's cat, Murder.

What she definitely didn't plan was running into her ex, Fiona Davis. They'd been best friends that had turned into something else, but everything had crashed and burned before the end of high school several years ago.

Serena is still smarting from the heartbreak, but she can't say no to spending some time with Fi. Against her better judgement, old

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One

“Hello, Daisy Grace,” she said. Normally, my name doesn’t make me into a clumsy fool, but that voice did. The measuring cup full of milk slipped from my fingers and splattered all over the floor of the bakery.

“Shit,” I said under my breath, grabbing a towel to clean it up. I couldn’t turn. Not yet.

“Oh, sorry about that,” she said, and I still couldn’t look at her. How long had it been? She’d moved away just before high school started, so that was . . . more years than I felt like doing the math on as I tried not to cry over spilled milk.

“It’s fine,” I said to the floor as I mopped up the rest of the milk. It was on my shoes too. Great. Now I’m going to have to wash them. Not like they don’t get covered in flour on a daily basis, but having shoes that smell of old milk wasn’t something I wanted.

I finally stood and turned. There she was. Molly Madison. My childhood BFF who was now a twenty-two-year-old woman standing in front of me.

“Hey,” she said when my eyes made it from her sandal-clad feet—toes painted a cute mint green—to her black maxi dress and up to her face. A face I had stared at during summers at the beach and winters during sleepovers, watching the moonlight move across it. She was the same. Almost exactly the same.

“Hey,” I said, feeling like all the oxygen I’d been saving in my lungs had deserted

me. Her eyes were still blue, her hair was still dark with subtle highlights of red. Her cheeks were still round and high, even more so when she smiled. Like she was doing now. But it was a trembling smile. A smile I hadn't seen in so long.

"Daisy!" Jen, one of my bosses called. Her wife, Sal was the other half of the duo. Jen was always the more stern of the two, so when she said my name like that, I knew she meant business.

"Yeah?" I asked, turning back toward the kitchen where she was putting together sandwiches for an order.

"You okay in there?" I locked eyes with her. She must have seen my milkstrophe and she knew me well enough to know when I was rattled. Like right now.

"Sure, fine," I said, but I wasn't convincing anyone.

"Okay. Just remember that we have to get those orders started tonight so we have them for this weekend." Right. I totally forgot. In addition to being Violet Hill Café, we also sometimes hosted events, including a birthday party this weekend for one of our favorite customers.

I nodded at her and then she finished the sandwich and shoved it on the counter for one of the servers to pick up and take to a customer.

"Why don't you take your fifteen now?" she called back to me, her eyes flicking between me and Molly.

"Oh," I said. I looked over at Molly and she was still staring at me. I could only imagine how much flour and other baking supplies I had on my face, and my hair was definitely falling from its clip. I'd recently gotten it cut and it wasn't quite long enough to stay up all the time. I was also still getting used to the undercut on one

side. Molly's eyes had raked across it and I wondered what she thought. I wondered a lot of things actually. Namely, what the fuck was she doing here?

"Sure," I said. "Uh, give me a sec?" I held up my milk and flour covered hands to Molly and she nodded.

"No problem." I quickly scrubbed off the worst and hoped my hair was arranged. She was still within my sightline, so I couldn't exactly fix myself without her seeing. And I didn't want her seeing me doing that.

"Um, why don't you come around the back?" I asked, pointing to the door. Violet Hill was a wide-open space, punctuated with shabby tables, chairs, and couches. A comfortable place that looked like it had been decorated with only yard sale finds. Which it had been. The bakery was only separated from everything else by a half-wall that had my sinks and supplies, with the ovens and shelves on the wall behind me. At first, it was a bit unnerving knowing that the customers could see me while I was working all day, but I got used to it.

I ushered Molly out the back door and into the little courtyard that most of the other employees used as a gossip-slash-smoking area. A few rusty café tables and lawn chairs were strewn about. I took a chair and Molly sat on one as well.

"What the fuck are you doing here? I thought you moved to Chicago." Well. That wasn't exactly what I wanted my opening line to be, but whatever.

She shrugged one shoulder.

"Moved back. Wanted a change. So. Here I am." She folded her hands and looked down at them. I was still having problems processing this.

"Oh," I said. I sounded like I didn't know another word.

“I know it’s been a long time, but I heard that you worked here so . . .” She spread her hands and shrugged again. “I thought it would be nice to see you and catch up.” Catch up. Yeah, I’m sure we can catch up the almost nine years that we haven’t seen each other.

“You said you were going to write. Or call. Or email.” She’d promised. And then she didn’t. I’d tried again and again and figured my best friend had just found a new best friend. Or maybe it had to do with that party at Elizabeth Walker’s house. What happened that night shoved itself to the forefront of my brain.

“I know. I’m so sorry. Things were just . . .” she trailed off and then shook her head. “There’s no excuse for it, really. I’m sorry. I bailed on you. Completely.” I crossed my arms.

“Yeah, you did. So what do you want from me? Forgiveness? From so many years ago?” She opened her mouth to respond and then shut it.

“You look really good, by the way.” Well, that was out of left field. She looked good, too. Clearly, she had filled out more since I’d seen her last because she was working that maxi dress. I had to tell myself not to stare at her chest. She wasn’t into girls.

“So do you,” I said reluctantly, wiping some sweat from my upper lip. It was cooler out here than in the bakery, so I was going to enjoy the breeze and the palpable tension.

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“I . . . I don’t know what I want. I just wanted to see you. And to see how you were doing. What you’d done with your life. I thought about you. So many times. I almost contacted you, but then I couldn’t.” Why not? I was sure she had some excellent explanation. Maybe she’d been abducted. Or she joined a cult.

“I thought about you a lot,” she said again, and I couldn’t help but feel a twang of pain as I saw the regret written plainly on her face. Maybe she should have done something about it sooner? Like, an email? A Facebook message? Fucking social media had made communication easier than ever. So why now?

She sighed.

“I know you’re probably pissed at me. And I don’t blame you. I just . . . Do you think we could maybe have some coffee and talk?” I snort. I work in a fucking coffee shop.

“Oh, right,” she said when she saw my look. “Or maybe a drink? Or some pizza? I don’t know. I would really just like to catch up. Do you think we could do that?” I wanted to say no. I wanted to tell her that I’d been living without her for years and I’d been doing just fine. But that’s not what happened.

“Sure,” I said in a choked voice. I’m not sure how it happened, but it did. And then I realized that my break was over and I needed to get back to work. There were croissants that needed to be rolled and bread to be baked and cookies to decorate.

“Great,” she said, standing up and wiping her hands on her dress. As if her palms were sweaty. I hoped she was just as nervous as I was.

“So, um, here’s my number,” she said, handing me a business card from her bag. Huh. A business card. How adult. I didn’t read it as I took it from her and tucked it into my apron pocket.

“Okay. I’ll call you,” I said, my voice sounding like not my own. She gave me a little smile that seemed hopeful.

“Good. I look forward to hearing from you. And catching up.” I walked her back through the café and she lifted her hand in a little wave before she was out the door. Didn’t buy anything. Huh. Whatever.

I went back to work and Jen came over to talk to me.

“So. What was that?” she asked me, leaning against the counter and crossing her arms. She was rocking some seriously gorgeous cat eyeliner and red lipstick today and had her brown hair up in the perfect messy bun.

“What was what?” I said, covering my hands with flour so I could knead some dough for sandwich bread.

“That girl that came in here. That was some major sexual tension if I do say so myself.” I stared at her.

“Are you kidding?” I shoved my fingers in the dough. I wasn’t focusing on my work. I was too stunned at what Jen had said.

“Um, no. I would never kid about something like that. Seriously, I thought you were going to jump over the counter and start making out with her.” What the fuck is she talking about?

“What?” I said, blinking a few times. Jen laughed.

“Oh, my sweet baby.” She patted my cheek and started whistling as she went back to the kitchen.

Seriously, though. What the fuck?

Two

I pulled Molly’s card out of my apron before I left work and slid it into my jeans pocket.

When I got back to my apartment, which was walking distance of the café, I fed my cat—I know I am a lesbian cliché—Pumpkin, and stripped off my clothes before heading to the shower. I had to shower immediately when I got home so I didn’t track flour everywhere. I also smelled like baked goods all the time and it could be kind of irritating when you were trying to cut down on carbs.

After my shower, I wrapped myself in my fluffiest robe and sat down on the couch with a cup of tea. The card was black with white glossy font.

Molly Madison, Social Media Marketer. And PR professional. Interesting. I turned the card over and saw a phone number as well as several social media accounts. That wasn’t what I saw her going into, but it fit. She’d always been good with people and computers, so I guess that worked. Didn’t explain what she was doing back here, though. I didn’t think there were a whole lot of job opportunities in this small town in Maine, but maybe she worked remotely?

Why was I thinking about this? It didn’t matter. We were going to meet up, catch up, and then I’d go back to never hearing from her again.

What Jen said was still bothering me. Sexual tension between me and Molly? I had no idea what she meant. I wasn’t into Molly and she wasn’t into me. We hadn’t even

seen each other in years, and when we'd been friends it hadn't been . . .

I was completely ignoring what happened at that one party. It didn't count. "Spin the Bottle" doesn't count.

It. Didn't. Count.

Still, I grabbed my phone and decided to do the cowardly thing and send her a text message.

Hey, this is Daisy. I'm free tomorrow night if you want to go out.

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That sounded suspiciously like an invitation for a date, but I wasn't sure how else to phrase it, so I sent the damn thing anyway. She responded immediately.

Sounds great! How about Zukos?

I couldn't help but smile. Zukos was the pizza place that we always used to go to when we were kids. More than one pizza party had taken place under that roof. What a throwback.

Sure. Is seven okay?

My hands trembled a little as I sent the message. Why was I flipping out? I was still angry, but it had cooled somewhat. Now I was nervous and curious. Curious enough to actually go through with it.

Sounds good. Meet you there. I'm really looking forward to it. She added a cute little winking emoji that was at odds with the tone of our conversation earlier. Huh. Seemed like she was trying to mend fences or bridges or however the saying went.

Now I just had to fret about everything until tomorrow night. I even got out the photo album my mom had made. Molly was in a lot of those pictures. Birthdays and sleepovers and trips to the beach. We both smiled with missing teeth, arms around each other.

Best friends forever. We'd even had those heart necklaces.

I sighed. Funny how things could change. Lives changed. People changed.

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I had to rush home after work the next night so I'd have enough time to shower and get myself presentable before seeing Molly. I didn't want to look like I was trying too hard, but I didn't want to look like a slob either. Was there something between fancy and not fancy at all? I wasn't sure. Usually I just wore clothes I didn't care about getting covered in chocolate and jam and baking powder. Not that I didn't dress up every now and then, but as I looked through my closet, nothing really jumped out at me as something I wanted to wear.

Finally, I settled on a pair of jeans, my most comfortable sandals, a cute tank top, and a few silver rings. Simple. I kept the makeup light and brushed out my hair and dried it until it was straight. I wasn't a bombshell, with my brown eyes and brown hair and average everything else, but I could clean up okay.

Why was I thinking about that? This wasn't a date. I mentally smacked myself.

Of course I arrived five minutes early, but when I walked in, Molly was already sitting down in one of the booths, tapping her fingers on the table.

She rose when she saw me, rocking another beautiful dress. She'd always loved wearing dresses when we were kids. Guess that hadn't changed.

Her cheeks flushed and I tried not to think about how pretty she was.

"Hey," she said, reaching her arms out. Probably for a hug. I ended up just sort of walking into them and she wrapped them around me. She's only about three inches shorter than me. Growing up, we'd been evenly matched in terms of height.

She let me go and let out a tiny little sigh and then sat back down.

“I thought you were going to bail on me,” she said, putting her fingers on the table and softly drumming them again. I wanted to reach out and make her stop, but I didn’t want to touch her any more than was necessary.

“I wanted to. I thought about it.” I figured honesty was the best policy, right?

“I thought that you might. I know . . . we have a lot to talk about.” The waitress came and asked what we wanted to drink. I figured why the hell not have booze, and ordered a mojito. Molly does too. As soon as the waitress left, I busied myself with the giant menu so I didn’t have to look at her and trace the sweep of her eyeliner with my eyes, or look at her lips as they moved as she talked.

The words on the menu swam in front of my eyes and she coughed. I looked at her over the top of the menu.

“So, um, what are you gonna get? I thought maybe we could share a pizza? Or something?” She was really giving this a lot of effort, I had to give her that.

“Sure. Tomatoes and olives?” I said and she smiled.

“Tomatoes and olives.” Guess that hadn’t changed either. We still liked the same kind of pizza.

“So, you’re in PR and marketing?” I asked after we shared a moment of super intense eye contact that made me blush a little.

“Uh, yeah. I ended up going to the University of New Hampshire and majoring in communications, and then got more into advertising and social media when that started taking off as a marketing tool. I guess I’m pretty good at it.” She shrugged one shoulder. Modest. Always modest Molly.

“That’s great. And you like doing it?” I asked. She nodded.

“I do. I know some people see it as superficial, but it’s a lot of hard work. It’s a lot of figuring out why people click on the things they click on and how to get them to click on something.” That made sense. She asked me how long I’d been working at the café.

“Well, I went to college and tried out a few majors, when I started working in a grocery store bakery doing the graveyard shift and I found that I liked it better than I liked going to school. So I dropped out and I’ve been bouncing around ever since.”

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She stirred her drink with her straw.

“Your mom must be happy to have you around.” I laughed a little.

“That’s an understatement. I have never seen a parent so thrilled that her daughter was dropping out of college.” I was an only child, so all the burden of succeeding was on my shoulders. Fortunately, my mother set the bar pretty damn low. Basically all I had to do was have a regular job and stay out of jail and she thought I was the greatest kid ever.

“And yours?” I asked. Molly had never really been close with her parents. They’d been so wrapped up in her brother, who was four years older and a super high achiever. Not that she wasn’t. She got good grades and did a lot of activities, but since she wasn’t a National Merit Scholar, she couldn’t compete with him.

“They’re fine,” she said, sipping her drink. Oh. There was definitely a story there. I’d seen her parents a few times over the years when they’d moved back. They’d never liked me, so we didn’t even exchange a hello, despite me having been under their roof almost as much as I’d been under my own.

“And Jason?” I said, asking about her brother.

She smiled, but her lips twitched just a tiny bit.

“He’s good. Married. Has two little boys. He lives in Minnesota now.” Oh, wow. I didn’t keep track of him, but I knew he’d moved away.

She pressed her lips together and I could tell that this was part of the catching up that she definitely wanted to get past. Okay, then.

“So, are you working a lot here or . . .” I trailed off. I was pretty terrible at this whole situation. Hopefully that meant we could end it sooner. I was starting to regret coming. And I needed another drink. I sucked down my first one and rattled the ice a little to see if the waitress would hear and bring me another one. She did. I’d have to take it slow on the second one because I was a bit of a lightweight.

“I’m trying. Things are a little up in the air right now,” she said. She hadn’t even finished half her drink yet. Always the more moderate of the two of us.

“Yeah?” I said.

She nodded. Our pizza finally arrived and we busied ourselves with chewing and trying not to burn our tongues on the melted cheese. This was going so well.

“Do you remember that sleepover when we ate one pizza each?” she asked as I worked on my second slice. I couldn’t hold back a smile.

“My mom was convinced we’d hidden it somewhere or threw it in the trash.” We could both put away our share of pizza, even when we’d been kids.

“And then we polished off the garlic bread in the middle of the night,” she said and I laughed. “So much garlic breath.”

That made me think of another night and I could feel my face getting red.

“Are you seeing anybody?” I blurted out. Why. Why was I like this?

“Not anymore,” she said, her face falling even more than it already had. She put

down her slice of pizza and looked off into the distance.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I was really fucking this up.

“It’s okay. It happens. What about you?” Her eyes landed back on me and I felt myself blush again.

“Oh, um, no. Not for a while.” I’d dated here and there but couldn’t seem to keep a girlfriend. I’d get into something and then I’d find something wrong with her and then sabotage things. My last relationship had only lasted two months. I’d sort of given up on dating, to be honest. At least for right now. There were plenty of queer girls that came into the café, but since it was a small town, I’d either dated them, or dated girls who had dated them. New, shiny girls didn’t come around that often. Except now, but Molly wasn’t into girls.

“Here’s to being single and ready to mingle? Or however that goes,” she said, holding up her drink. I clinked my glass with hers and it finally seemed like we were going to be able to converse without it getting too awkward. She asked me about where I’d gone to college and that was a pretty safe topic, so we talked about that for a while until we finished most of the pizza.

“Guess I can’t put it away like I used to,” she said, looking forlornly at the last two small pieces that neither of us could cram in our mouths. I was pleasantly buzzed by this time, so I was feeling a little less on edge about the whole thing.

“Shame,” I said. The waitress came to ask us if we wanted dessert and we both declined. This night was going to end soon and I still didn’t have answers.

“Do you . . . do you want to get coffee or something?” I asked, and I sounded just like her the day before.

“Oh, okay?” She didn’t seem sure, but the waitress split the bill and then Molly ended up telling me that I should take the rest of the pizza, so I reluctantly did.

“I can drive,” I said, nodding to my car.

“Sure,” she said, getting in the passenger seat. I was glad I’d recently cleaned. Not that it would matter. She had to remember I was kind of a slob.

I ended up taking her back to the café. Sometimes I came in extra early to start on the bread and rolls and so forth, so it wasn’t unusual for me to be in the bakery at all hours.

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“Is this okay?” she asked as I punched in the alarm code and turned the light on.

“Of course,” I said, walking through the back and turning on lights here and there. I went out to the front and turned on the lamp next to one of the couches.

“I’ll make some coffee,” I said, motioning for her to sit down. She did, heaving a little sigh.

“Is there anything else you want? There’s a few pieces of cheesecake back here from today,” I said, going back to the bakery section.

“I wouldn’t object to cheesecake,” she said, and I couldn’t help but smile at that too. She looked so pretty in the low lamplight.

Don’t fall for a straight girl, Daisy. That was literally the first rule of being a lesbian.

I filled the coffee pot and pulled out the cheesecake, adding two slices to one plate and then dolloped some whipped cream on top with shaved chocolate pieces. I couldn’t half-ass anything that I’d made myself.

“This is a really cool place,” she said and I realized she’d gotten up from the couch and was checking out some of the vintage posters and pictures. It was pretty damn obvious from the walls that this place was gay as fuck. I wonder what she thought about that, but she hadn’t asked any questions yet.

“Yeah, I like it,” I said, wondering if I should just break down and tell her that I was also gay as fuck. I hadn’t really figured it out until college, so there was no way she

could have known when we were kids. Unless I'd been broadcasting lesbian-ness, but I was pretty sure I hadn't been.

The coffee spit into the pot and I filled two mugs, set them on a tray, and added forks and the plate of cheesecake.

We sat on the couch together, sipping coffee and eating the cheesecake. I couldn't deal with the silence, so I got up and put on some music, shuffling through the station that the café subscribed to. It had a lot of Tegan and Sara on it. I skipped to something a little less gay.

"I missed you," Molly said when I sat back down. She wasn't much for blurting things out, so I was taken aback.

"You did? I must have missed all those phone calls and messages," I said. I sounded like a bitch, but I thought I had a right to be.

"I know," she said, putting down her fork. "I tried. So many times, and I know that's not an excuse, but I did miss you. I did. I begged my parents to let me come back and see you, but . . ." She trailed off. Oh. I got it.

"They didn't want you staying friends with me," I said and her face got red as she nodded.

"I know that's not an excuse, but ugh!" She put her head in her hands.

"We were kids," I said. Why was I comforting her?

"I know, I know. I tried. I tried and my parents messed with my head and then I thought that you hated me because I'd moved and I got all wrapped up with all these thoughts and then I felt like it was too late."

It pretty much was. I stabbed a bite of cheesecake and shoved it in my mouth. Not my best, but she didn't need to know that.

She reached out and grabbed my hand.

"Is it too late?" My fork clattered to the floor in surprise and I looked down at our hands, clasped together.

"Is what too late?" I said. I'd completely blanked out and lost all sense of what was happening because her touch was making my skin buzz. As quick as she'd made the contact, she whipped her hand back and folded her fingers together in her lap.

"Is it too late to fix things with us?" Her voice was so quiet I almost couldn't hear it.

I opened my mouth to answer. But what was the answer? Could we fix things? I had no fucking idea.

"I don't know," I said, because it was the truth. I couldn't give her an answer. This was all too much. My brain was scrambled and I couldn't get rid of the feel of her touch. I reached down and picked up my fork. I'd have to get another one. Molly hadn't touched her cheesecake yet.

"Well, can we try at least?" Her eyes were big as she looked up at me and I saw echoes of the girl I'd known, grown now into one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen. And she just kept getting prettier the longer I sat with her. This was going to be a problem.

"I guess so? I don't really know. Can I think about it?" I asked. I could see the hurt in her unbelievably blue eyes. Had they always been that astonishing color? Yes. They had. I remembered trying to mix paints and capture the color in art class, but I'd never gotten close.

“Sure,” she said, putting on a shaky smile as she picked up her fork. I got up and grabbed another one as I tossed the floor fork in the dishwasher.

“This is really good,” she said when I sat back down. I was glad I’d put music on, because if it was silent it would have been even worse. We finished our cheesecake without talking anymore, as if neither of us was sure what to say or how to move on from everything. So many years of silence.

“Thank you,” she said as she set her fork on the empty plate. She’d always been graceful as a kid, probably due to her ballet classes, and that hadn’t changed. God, she was so beautiful. We stood and she leaned forward, as if she wanted to give me a hug. I guess I leaned too because then her arms were around me and my arms went around her as if they’d been waiting to do that for hours. Maybe they had. I breathed in the scent of spicy perfume. Not quite cinnamon, but similar. Shit.

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I pulled back as fast as I could because I just didn't want to let myself melt into a hug with her. Too much. Too soon. I couldn't handle it.

"Thank you for tonight," she said as I tidied everything up and then set the alarm before we left so I could drive her back to the pizza place to get her car.

"You're welcome," I said and she gave me another little smile that made my heart flip over in my chest. We stood together in the parking lot and stared at one another. I wasn't sure what to do, so I just waited and then she leaned in and hugged me again. It was just as powerful. My arms wanted to hold her and didn't want to let go. But I forced myself to unclamp from around her and let her go to her car.

"See you later?" she asked as she unlocked her door.

"See you later," I said.

Three

"You're awfully distracted today," Anna, one of the waitresses, said as she leaned over the counter while I was elbow deep in bread dough. It was two days after my date and I was trying to lose myself in the morning rush.

"Am I?" I said, looking up into her deep brown eyes which somehow worked with her currently light lavender hair. Said brown eyes narrowed.

"You know you are. Tell Auntie Anna what's wrong." Haha. She was about a year younger than I and worked part time at the little library in town and did publicity for

authors on the side. Her dream was to move to New York, but internships didn't pay the bills.

I bit my lip and unstuck my hands from the dough. To tell her or not to tell her . . .

Anna was good with secrets and she was pansexual, so she'd completely understand my feelings about Molly since she'd dated girls before. And guys. And people who weren't girls or guys. The gender (or lack thereof) of the other person didn't matter for her. "Equal opportunity," she said.

"Come on. Take five and talk to me sweets." I wondered if Jen had put her up to this. She'd asked me about the "date" (that wasn't a date) and I'd given her vague details. Maybe she thought Anna could pry them out of me.

I sighed. It would really have to be five minutes because I had to get this bread into pans and into the oven before the yeast went nuts.

I scraped the excess dough off my hands and scrubbed in the sink before Anna and I snuck out back. Jen was out for the morning and Sal liked to come in late, so we could pretty much get away with anything. Not that we would. Sal and Jen were the best bosses I'd ever had.

"So, tell me about the girl," she said, slouching into one of the lawn chairs. This was one of those times when I wished I smoked so I could have something to do other than cross my arms and tap my foot to avoid conversation.

"There's nothing to tell. She was a friend, she left, she came back, we ate pizza, I made a fool of myself, we ate cheesecake, she went home." There was a little more to it than that. Molly had texted me a few times, and I hadn't texted her back yet. Wasn't there some sort of rule that you had to wait three days after? Oh, that was for a date. Still. It was a thing.

“Uh huhhhh,” Anna said, crossing her arms and raising one eyebrow.

“Shut up. It wasn’t like that. Just because I’m a lesbian, doesn’t mean I’m attracted to every girl.” She snorted.

“Yeah, just because I’m pansexual doesn’t mean I’m attracted to everyone alive,” she countered. I rolled my eyes. “And I’m not saying that because she’s just another girl. She’s the girl. The one that got away.” Now this was getting ridiculous.

“She’s not the girl. She’s a straight girl who I was friends with when we were kids. And then she left and didn’t keep in contact and now I guess she wants to atone for it, or something. I don’t know. I think she’s got some guilt. Whatever. It’s not my problem. I doubt I’m ever going to see her again.” Anna put her hands up.

“Okay, okay. If you say so. But I think you’re going to be eating your words.” She got up and patted my shoulder.

“Just let me know if you need some Auntie Anna advice.” Yeah, that was hilarious. Anna had just had a disastrous breakup with her boyfriend. In the café. In front of everyone. But she was such a good waitress and everyone loved her, so she could pretty much get away with murder.

“Thanks,” I said, waving at her and then holding up one particular finger. She blew me a kiss.

^^*

I didn’t eat my words, if that was even possible, but Molly did show up later that day. As if she’d heard us talking about her and had decided to come and ruin my day.

This time Anna was the one who came and got me and said that, quote “a hot girl is

asking for you.” I dusted myself off because I knew it would be Molly. Who else would it be? I emerged from the bakery and found her sitting at one of the little corner tables nursing a cup of tea out of one of our huge mugs. Seriously, they were the size of bowls. You needed two hands.

She blushed when I took the seat across from her.

“Hey,” she said. “I hadn’t heard from you so I figured I’d stop in because I knew you’d be here.” Curse my inevitable predictability. When I wasn’t at Violet Hill, I was pretty much at home. Sleeping. Because I spent most of my life here. Pathetic, but at least it was my life and I was in charge of it and I didn’t have to answer to anyone. Well, except my mom, but she didn’t count. I would always have to answer to her. I could be fifty years old and still answering to my mom. Because I would “always be her baby.”

“Yeah, coming here was a pretty safe bet,” I said as Anna came over with one of our vegan sandwiches and a fruit salad.

“Thanks,” Molly said to Anna, who gave her a wink.

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“You’re welcome, sweetheart.” Anna flirted with literally everyone. She couldn’t help it. Sometimes we joked about the fact that we’d never hooked up for some reason. I just wasn’t into casual hookups. I had a hard time separating sex and relationships. But if that worked for her, then go for it.

Molly blushed, which surprised me, but it was probably just from embarrassment. I gave Anna a look and she just smiled her sweet smile. Freaking Anna.

“So, what are you doing here?” I asked as she picked up her fork to get started on the fruit salad.

“I wanted to see you. I . . . um, hadn’t heard from you so I figured I should take a chance. Because you said you’d think about being friends and I hadn’t heard anything.” Oh, right. That. I was kind of hoping that she would just never contact me again and then I wouldn’t have to deal with it. Ever.

Honestly, I didn’t know if I could handle being friends with her. Between the tingles I got when she hugged me, to the distance and the awkwardness, I just didn’t think my life needed this complication. Sure, it was a loose end, but I just . . . I didn’t think I could do it. I liked my life the way it was. I didn’t feel like shaking it up, thank you very much.

But then I looked up at her and I could just see that she wasn’t going to let this go. Like that time she decided that the two of us were going to put up a hammock in her room instead of her bed. It didn’t go well. There was a lot of plaster damage. I told her before we even started that it wasn’t going to work. And then it didn’t work. Molly hadn’t given up until we tried, though.

“I’m guessing by the look on your face that you’ve thought it over and you don’t want to. That’s . . . that’s fine. I just wanted an answer. That’s all I wanted.” Her voice broke just a little bit, and damn that hurt. She was hurting and now I was hurting. I didn’t want her hurting. Even though I was still smarting from the fact that she hadn’t bothered to contact me for eight years.

“That’s not . . .” I started to say. “I mean . . . I don’t know, Molly. I mean, I guess we can try it? I mean, we were friends then, so who’s to say that we can’t be again?” I guess we at least owed it to our past and to each other to give it a shot. And I knew she wasn’t going to let it go. Even though part of me thought it was going to be a disaster, I was going to say yes. I guess.

I was a big girl and I could put on my big girl panties and be friends with her. Just friends. I could do it. I hoped.

“Really?” she said and the joy that bloomed on her face made me ache. She really did want this. You couldn’t fake an emotion like that and I knew she wouldn’t. She wasn’t some stranger trying to get something out of me. Hopefully next week she wouldn’t ask me for money. I didn’t think she would. This was Molly. The girl that I’d spent so many nights with, cuddled up in the same bed. Who I’d whispered all my childish secrets to. Who I’d shared everything with. Once. Could it work again?

I guess I was going to find out.

I found myself smiling back at her and trying to ignore the way my blood warmed at the look on her face. She wasn’t smiling at me in that way. She was a friend smiling at another friend. Nothing more.

“I should probably get back to work,” I said, glancing back at the bakery. I had cupcakes to frost and pizza dough to roll out.

“Oh, right, of course. You’re working.” She blushed a little and ducked her head. If she got any cuter, I wouldn’t be able to stand it.

“I’ll talk to you later? I’ll be sure to text you back, promise.” She bit her bottom lip and I thought I was going to die. I was seriously catching feels and this was going to be a huge problem.

“Okay,” she said. “We’ll talk later.” Now I was the one blushing as I stumbled back to the bakery and tried to screw my head on straight. I mean, at least try not to think about Molly in a non-gay way.

Good luck with that, Daisy.

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She waved goodbye again when she was leaving and a few minutes after that there was another text from her asking if I wanted to hang out after I got off work. Since I didn’t have anything better to do (besides watching old episodes of The Great British Bake-Off), I said that I’d meet her at my apartment about an hour after I finished work. So I could shower and make sure I didn’t have a ton of flour under my fingernails.

I rushed home as quickly as I could, not only to shower, but to clean my apartment as fast as I could. “Clean” was probably the wrong word. It was more like cleverly hiding how much of a slob I was. Not that Molly didn’t know that already, but I wanted to give the impression that I’d improved over the years. Or something.

As soon as I had gotten out of the shower, I flew through the apartment and tried to do as much damage control as I could, but there was only so much I could do. After braiding my hair back and throwing on some jeans and a nice shirt, I figured things were good enough.

Of course she was on time, I thought as I went to answer the door. She'd knocked instead of ringing the doorbell, which I was glad about. The doorbell always made me jump. If I knew how to disable the thing, I would.

I took a deep breath before I opened the door, but it didn't help any. She still knocked me out. Had she gotten prettier by the hour? Because it was seriously ridiculous. She had on skinny black pants and a loose purple top that fell off one shoulder. Like she just came from a fabulous dance party and decided to bless me with her presence.

"Wow, I mean, hey," I said, wanting to die. I was doing great at this friendship thing.

"Wow yourself," she said, looking me up and down in a way that made me blush even more. I was totally reading too much into all of our interactions and I had to stop.

"Well, this is it. Come on in," I said, stepping back. She didn't reach forward to hug me, and I was grateful. That would have just driven me over the edge and I would have done something awful, like smell her hair.

"Nice," she said, taking in the small space. I wasn't much of a decorator, but I'd done my best with stuff my mom had found at yard sales and foisted on me and a lot of crap from the Target discount aisle. It was cute and comfortable, which was all I could really ask for. I didn't want to live in a place that looked like a Pottery Barn catalog. Plus, it would be a lot more cleaning, which, ew.

"Thanks," I said, edging toward the kitchen.

"Do you want something to drink?" We hadn't really made an actual plan for what we'd do tonight so I was kicking myself for not having an itinerary.

"Yeah, sure," she said, sitting down on the couch. Okay then. Did that mean she

wanted water or alcohol? Water was probably a better bet. I didn't need to get drunk with her. When I got drunk, I got handsy. That definitely wouldn't be appreciated right now. By her.

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I filled two glasses with water and ice and brought them over.

“Oh, thanks,” she said, taking a glass from me as I set out the coasters. I should have had food. I guess I wasn’t a very good hostess.

I sat down on the couch with enough space between us so it wasn’t weird and we sipped our water. My apartment was so quiet that I was going to start tearing my hair out any minute. Normally I always had the TV or music on. I was so used to the café, that quiet really bothered me.

“So . . .” I said, drawing the word out and turning to face her.

“So,” she said, setting down her water. “I guess we’re gonna be friends now, huh?” I nodded.

“It’s a little bit harder when you’re adults, isn’t it? I can’t just ask you to join my blanket fort with your Barbies.” She laughed.

“Well, you could. Blanket forts are awesome.” She had a point. “Plus, now we can have wine in the blanket fort, which is so much better.” Now that was something I could get behind.

“Okay. Let’s do it.” I set my water down and got up, heading to the closet where I stored my extra blankets. I was a HUGE fan of piling as many blankets on top of me as I could without suffocating in the winter, so I had a lot of them. My mom also seemed to give me a blanket for every single holiday because I loved them so much.

I started yanking them down from the shelves and throwing them on the floor.

“Are we seriously doing this?” Molly asked, her eyes sparkling.

“Hell yes, we are seriously doing this.” She made the cutest little sound of delight and went back to the living room to figure out how this fort was going to happen.

In the end, we used four chairs and had to pin a few of the blankets together to make it work, but soon we had a genuine blanket fort and I busted out a bottle of cheap red. Since it was dark under there, I pulled a few lamps under to make it cozy.

“You know what this needs?” Molly asked.

“What?” I sipped my wine, pacing myself.

“Popcorn.” She ducked out and started rummaging through my cupboards. I left the sanctuary of the fort to go give her a hand. We almost bumped into one another and I apologized as she blushed. Fuck, she was pretty. So fucking pretty. She’d always been pretty, but it was a completely different thing to see her now as a woman. I got out the popcorn and put it in the microwave as she got out a big bowl and then a few other snacks.

“This is perfect,” she said as I watched the popcorn bag rotate in the microwave.

“Yeah,” I said without thinking. I looked up to find her staring at me. She quickly looked down to the plate that she was arranging cookies and chocolates on.

Huh?

I went back to staring at the popcorn and it finished popping. We gathered up the snacks and went back to the fort, but I brought my phone and pulled up some music.

Something mellow. And not super gay. I settled on Adele. On a low volume.

Molly and I shared the popcorn and our hands kept bumping in the bowl and it was almost a cliché romantic scene in a movie. Without the romance and sexual tension. At least on her side. On mine? Fuck, I wanted to grab her and kiss her so hard that both of us stopped breathing. I wanted to pull her hair and slip that shirt off and taste her collarbone.

Yeah, I needed to slow down on the wine.

I set my glass down.

“What else have you been doing with yourself now that you’re back?” I asked.

“Uh, not a whole lot. Feels like all the decent people left and now only the losers are left. With yourself as the exception.” She tipped her glass in my direction.

“Yeah, yeah. I see how it is. I don’t even care. What people think about me doesn’t really matter. So what, I’m a lesbian that dropped out of college and moved back home. So sue me.” I took a swing from my glass and then realized what I’d just said. Oh. Oops.

To her credit, Molly didn’t gasp or make any other signs that she was shocked by the information.

“Well, I guess the lesbian is out of the bag.” What the hell, it didn’t matter. She was going to figure it out anyway. I worked at a fucking queer café. It couldn’t be that much of a surprise.

“How long have you known?” she said, not meeting my eyes.

“Not sure. I mean, I think I alwaysknewbut I didn’t want it to be true? Are you asking if I knew when we were kids? On some level, probably, but I never would have figured it out, I don’t think. Took me graduating high school. That’s when I found my first girlfriend.” Ah, what wonderful and confusing times those had been. I wouldn’t go back to them for all the wine in the world.

“Oh,” she said and I couldn’t figure out what the fuck that word was supposed to me.

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“Do you not want to be friends with me anymore?” I said, even though I knew that couldn’t be the case.

“Fuck, no. That doesn’t have anything to do with us being friends. I guess I’m just a little surprised. And not, at the same time.” Huh, that’s what a bunch of people had said to me when I came out to them. That they were shocked, but not. Whatever.

“Does it make you see me differently?” Were we really having this conversation?

She looked deep into her wine glass.

“Do you remember when we played Spin the Bottle?” Uh, okay. Weird thing to think about, but sure. I hadn’t stopped thinking about it since she showed up again. My first girl kiss. The kiss I would compare all the other ones to. The kiss that made my blood zing and my toes curl.

“Yeah,” I said, not sure where she was going with this. She finally looked up at me and she had a strange little smile on her face.

“That was the first time I kissed a girl.” Yeah, I knew. I was there.

“And?” I said.

“And . . . I knew.”

“You knew what?” She could not be getting at what I thought she was getting at. I had to set my wine down so I didn’t drop the glass and ruin the rug.

“Knew that I liked girls.” Well. Shit. I felt like all the air had been sucked out of the blanket fort.

“You like girls,” I said. She nodded.

“Yup.”

“You like girls in a gay way.”

“Yes.”

“You like girls as in you want to kiss them and be with them and date them and marry them.” She started to laugh.

“Yes. I don’t know how many other ways I can say it.”

“Do you like boys too? Or people who are non-binary?” She thought about that for a minute.

“Not boys, for sure. And I could date someone who wasn’t a guy. I think. It would depend on the person? I’m not really sure what that makes me. I usually just go with queer as my label.” You could have knocked me over with a feather. I was stunned.

“You’re queer.”

“Daisy May.” She gave me a look.

“I’m sorry! It’s just . . . what? You’re queer. You like girls and you’ve dated girls?” She nodded.

“Yeah. My last relationship was with a girl. We were living together and we broke

up. That's why I'm back." Wow. "It . . . it didn't end well." She sniffed and I realized she had started to cry.

I leaned forward, but she put her hand up to stop me.

"It's fine. I'm fine. Just still get a little emotional about it every now and then. I thought she was the one and it turned out she wasn't. Anyway." She wiped her eyes and drained the rest of her wine glass.

"Holy shit," I said. "So that kiss was . . . for both of us." What did that mean?

She sniffed again and the way she looked at me . . . I licked my lips, took the wine bottle and poured the rest of it into my glass and then hers until the bottle was empty. Then I took it and spun it around. As if the wine gods were with us, it landed right on Molly. Somehow. I had hoped for that to happen on the first try, but I would have spun that damn bottle as many times as it took for things to work out.

I looked up at her and a slow smile started to bloom on her face. I leaned forward on my hands and brought our faces close together. I wanted to give her enough time to back out, if this wasn't what she wanted.

Forget about the past. Forget about everything. We were just a girl and another girl who wanted to kiss each other. Nothing more complicated than that. It was just a kiss.

I exhaled and her lips trembled just a little before I pressed myself fully forward and met her lips with mine. She was soft and hesitant, but within a few breaths, she kissed me back. I tasted the wine on her tongue and under that was just . . . her. We hadn't used tongues back in the day, but were making plenty of use of them now. I stroked the inside of her mouth and pulled myself closer. My hands dove into her hair and her fingers dug into my sides. I took a shuddering breath and opened my eyes.

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She was right there with me, those crystal blue eyes.

“Wow,” she breathed, licking her lips.

“Yeah,” I said, equally unable to come up with any other words. My entire body tingled from my fingertips to my toes and in-between. Now that was a kiss.

I moved my thumb over her cheek.

“You’ve had some kissing practice, I think,” she said, her voice low. Like she didn’t want to break the spell.

“So have you,” I said. Our first kiss was what a first kiss should be. Clumsy. Nervous. Quick. But it had still made my heart race and kept me up half the night with the memory of Molly’s lips. And a whole lot of confusion about what kissing a girl and liking it meant. But that took me years to untangle.

“What does this mean?” she asked, moving away from me a little more. Her face came back into focus and I dropped my hand from her face.

“I don’t know,” I said, which was the honest truth. “Can we kiss instead of talking about it?” She laughed just a little.

“Okay.”

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We completely lost track of time, and before I knew what was happening, it was late, late, late and we were horizontal in the blanket fort, and neither of us had taken a single item of clothing off.

“I feel like we’re sixteen or something,” she said, tugging a wisp of my hair. My braid had come undone at some point and now my hair was dry and all wavy.

“I know. I didn’t know I could feel like this. All fluttery and shit.” She laughed and then I started and then we ended up rolling around on the floor and laughing together.

“I wasn’t sure about everything, but when I saw the café you worked at, I had hope,” she said, propping herself up on her elbows.

“Yeah? I guess I wasn’t very stealth, was I?” She shook her head.

“I mean, you weren’t broadcasting, but I had hope. I kept fishing for clues.” Huh. I hadn’t noticed.

“Well, I had no idea about you. Holy shit, I’m still wondering if you’re pulling some elaborate and sick joke on me.” Her response was to lean over and stick her tongue in my mouth and kiss me until I was dizzy.

“Does that feel like a joke?” she said, pulling back. We were both breathing hard again.

“No,” I said.

“Good.” She booped my nose with hers and then resumed her previous position.

“So how long have you been out?” I asked. She sighed.

“Well, I was out to myself for years before I came out to my parents. It, um, didn’t go well.” Oh. Shit.

“I’m sorry,” I said. She picked at some fuzz on her shirt.

“Whatever, it’s fine. It’s not my problem, it’s theirs. I’ve made my peace with it. Besides, even before that, they weren’t the best of parents anyway.” I didn’t want to say it, but she was right. Her parents were physically there, but never really emotionally there. I had always felt just a little uncomfortable at their house. Like I was disrupting their lives by existing in the same space. I knew Molly felt that even more acutely.

“And what about you?” She looked up at me.

“Um, I figured things out in college. Kissed a few girls, the usual. My mom was totally fine with it because she’s just like that.” I remember when I came out to her, I’d been flipping out, and all she did was hug me and ask if I wanted her to make me some cookies. I’d cried and then wiped my eyes and asked for snickerdoodles. With frosting.

“She would be,” Molly said with a sigh.

“I’m sorry about yours. I really am.” She shook her head and I thought she was going to cry.

“I’m fine. I swear. I’m still a little raw from the breakup.” She sniffed.

“What happened?” I asked, even though I kinda didn’t want to know.

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“The usual. We met, dated, moved in together, and then she decided that she didn’t want to be committed anymore. I don’t know. We just weren’t a good fit, I guess.” I brushed a tear from her cheek.

“I’m glad you came back. Even though it was for a shitty reason.” She nibbled at her bottom lip.

“Thanks. I guess I just felt like I needed to come back to where it felt like things had started. I always felt at home here, even when I wasn’t with my parents, you know? It just felt right here.” I knew what she meant. I loved this tiny little weird town. There were so many queers here somehow, and it was amazing. I never wanted to leave. Plus my mom was here, so I didn’t feel the need to go anywhere else.

“That makes sense.” She nodded.

“What time is it?” she asked and then looked at her phone. “Shit, it’s really late.” Pushing herself up, she ducked out of the blanket fort and groaned as she stood up. I followed her and blinked at the brightness of the rest of my apartment.

Wow, it was late. Nearly one in the morning. I was starving now, and suddenly exhausted.

“You could stay,” I blurted out without thinking about it.

She looked up from her phone.

“What?”

“You could stay. Not, like, in a sexy way. Just as in, you could stay. Sleep on the couch. So you don’t have to drive tonight.” The thought of her leaving and then me being alone in the apartment sounded like a terrible idea.

“Oh, wow, that would be . . .” She closed her eyes for a second. “That would be really nice.” I breathed a sigh of relief. Molly and I had had sleepovers hundreds of times, but none like this. This was . . . something else.

“Do you want to shower?” I asked. I knew she took her showers at night. It was strange, knowing so many things about her past but not a whole lot about her present. Other than she was an unbelievable kisser. And she was cute and hot as hell at the same time.

“Yes, thank you,” she said, running her fingers through her hair. It was a little tangled now from my fingers. Almost sex hair. Almost.

Nope, I wasn’t going to think about that. Neither of us was ready for that. Maybe she was. I wasn’t, that was for sure. Wouldn’t stop the fantasies though.

I got her set up in the bathroom with towels and shampoo and everything, and then went to find her something to wear. Being roughly the same size was fantastic. I found some pajama pants, some shorts, and a T-shirt so she could choose. I left them in the bathroom and told her to use whatever she wanted.

“Thanks, Daisy,” she said and I couldn’t help but lean forward and give her a little kiss. I pulled back before it turned into anything else.

“You’re welcome.”

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Figuring out the sleeping arrangement was stressing me out the whole time she was in the shower. I made my bed as nicely as I could and then made up the couch so there was no pressure. Not that there would be. Why did kissing have to make everything so complicated? Not that I was upset about the kissing. Fuck, the kissing was incredible. I never knew it could be like that. Sweep through your whole body and make you forget your own name.

“Hey,” she said when she came out of the shower, towel wrapped around her head and wearing the t-shirt and shorts; score one for me!

“Hey!” I squeaked, jumping. I’d been messing with the pillows on the couch because I was an idiot and not a grown-ass woman.

“So . . .” she said, drawing out the word. We’d been saying that a lot tonight.

“So you can sleep here or . . . I mean, I don’t want to put any pressure on you. We’re both adults.” I sure wasn’t behaving like one.

She looked at me, looked at the couch and then back toward my bedroom.

“I mean, we’ve slept in the same bed before. Hundreds of times. I don’t know why this would be any different.” Right. Okay. We were doing this. I didn’t say anything as we walked back to my bedroom. I couldn’t stop watching her as I pulled down the blankets. I knew what side she slept on, so I let her take it. I didn’t care where I slept. My bed was a queen, so there was a possibility of us sharing it and not having any physical contact.

She got in and then I did. We were both on our backs and staring up at the ceiling.

“This is kind of awkward,” she said after a few moments and I busted out laughing.

“Yeahhhhh.” I turned onto my side and she mirrored me so we faced each other.

“I feel like your mom should be telling us to settle down and go to sleep,” she whispered. The lights were still on, but a hush had settled over us.

“I know. It’s . . . strange.” Molly was staring at my mouth.

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“Stop that,” I said, nudging her shoulder.

“What?”

“Staring at my mouth. It makes me think about kissing and then kissing makes me think about other things.” Our eyes locked.

“Would that be so bad?” she whispered.

No. It wouldn’t be bad in the slightest. But I definitely didn’t think that was something we needed to be doing right now. I didn’t want to fuck this up by fucking her.

“What are we doing?” I asked. I hated shattering whatever we had going on, but I didn’t do well with uncertainty when it came to relationships. I liked to know what was happening and what we were. I liked definitions.

“I’m not really sure. I’m still in awe that you wanted to kiss me back, so I’m kind of just going with it. I haven’t analyzed it in my head like you’re doing right now.” I rolled my eyes and she stuck her tongue out at me.

“Don’t get sassy with me. I know a lot of secrets.” It was true that most of the secrets I knew were things from childhood, but those had the potential to make you the most mortified when revealed.

“Shit, that’s right, you do. But I know a lot of yours, so there.” I bopped her on the nose and she squealed.

“Hey!” A moment later she grabbed a pillow and smacked me with it. Not to be outdone, I did the same and then it was an all-out war until I was on top of her and she had her hands up and was begging me to stop through tears of laughter.

“Oh my God, we are such a cliché right now,” I said, looking down at her. She wiped her eyes and the mood changed to something else entirely. Molly pushed herself upward and took the pillow out of my hands.

“Come here,” she said, reaching for my face. After a second of hesitation, I leaned down and met her mouth and then it was back to kissing and I didn’t ever want to do anything else. Who needed food? Who needed air? All I needed was her mouth and her tongue and the feel of her under me.

Before I knew what was happening, she’d grabbed my hips and was thrusting upward into me and I was meeting her and the kissing became a little harder. These sweet little moans escaped from her mouth and I thought I was going to come just from her noises. I wasn’t too quiet myself.

“Fuck,” she said. Even though we both had shorts and panties on, it was mind-blowing. I shifted so one of my legs was on the inside of hers, and one was on the outside, so we could line everything up.

“More,” I said, moving just a little bit so she was hitting the right spot with her thrusts. She complied and I almost wanted to cry because she felt so good and I hadn’t been with anyone like this in so long. Maybe ever. I opened my eyes at the exact moment she came and shuddered under me and that drove me over the edge. I tried not to collapse on her and rolled to the side. Both of us were sweaty and panting.

“Holy fucking shit,” she said, and turned to grin at me.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Oops?” she said and we started laughing again. “I think I need another shower.” I nodded because I did too.

“You can go first this time,” she said. “I still need a minute.” I propped myself on my side and looked at her.

“You’re really beautiful, you know.” Her already-flushed cheeks got redder.

“So are you. I couldn’t believe it when I first saw you.” She brushed some of my hair behind my ear.

“Shower,” I said, because things had gotten intense and I needed some time to unpack it. Before I went to the bathroom, I grabbed her a second set of shorts and a t-shirt.

“Shit,” I said as the hot water of the shower tumbled down on my head. I hadn’t meant for that to happen and now things were going to get even more complicated. There was definitely not a good chance of us continuing with just a friendship now. We’d sort of burned that bridge. So now what? Were we going to start dating? So much had happened so fast and I was just reeling. I stayed in the shower longer than I should have, and only got out when I realized I needed to save her some hot water. I got out, got dressed again, and went back into the bedroom. She was on her phone, scrolling through an article.

“Hey,” she said with a smile.

“All yours.”

“Thanks,” she said, pausing to give me a kiss as she walked by. I tried not to check out her ass, but completely failed on that front. While she was gone, I continued to fret.

“That’s not a good face,” she said when she came back. “Tell me what you’re thinking.” She flopped down on the bed.

“This is a lot happening really fast. I mean, a few hours ago I didn’t even know you liked girls, and here we are and it’s just a lot.” She nodded and reached out.

“It’s okay. This doesn’t have to mean anything.” I shook my head.

“It already does. In the absence of a time machine, I just kissed the shit out of you and we both came. I can’t undo that.” Her fingers stroked my arm, raising goosebumps.

“I don’t want to,” she said.

“Me neither. I just don’t know what to do about it. We’re clearly something more than friends at this point. Seeing as how most friends don’t want to take their other friend’s clothes off.” She snorted.

“Yeah, I definitely want something more than that. But why do we have to stick a label on it right this minute? We can see how things go. There’s no shame in that.” It wasn’t the shame factor, I just couldn’t explain it. The only thing worse than being in relationship limbo would be cutting this off altogether, so I just reached out and squeezed her hand.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” I pressed my lips to hers.

“Okay.”

Five

I woke the next morning with Molly’s arms wrapped around me. I was actually a little hot and the minute I moved away from her, she opened her eyes and looked at me.

“Hey.” She smiled sleepily at me and I couldn’t resist the urge to kiss her, so I didn’t.

“Hey.” I grabbed my phone as she blinked and stretched. It was still early; we hadn’t

slept that long, but I wasn't worn out. I had a scheduled day off, so I'd planned on sleeping in and watching movies all day, but now that Molly was here, I had other plans.

"Do you need to go?" I asked, and hated how whiny I sounded.

"Um, I need a change of clothes, but other than that, I can take a day." I felt my face light up.

"Really?"

"Yup."

I hopped out of bed.

"Don't move," I told her.

"Sure thing," she said, rolling onto my side of the bed and closing her eyes again.

Rushing out to the kitchen, I set up a tray with tea, some ricotta-filled croissants, a few lemon poppy-seed scones, and a cinnamon swirl muffin. One of the upsides of being a baker was that I always had fresh baked goods in my house that were leftover from the café. I also brewed some strong coffee.

"That is the sexiest thing I've ever seen," she said when I walked back into the bedroom with the tray.

"I'll take that as a compliment." She went for the coffee and moaned as she smelled it.

"I definitely meant it that way." I went for the tea, pouring in some honey and stirring

it up.

We both sat cross-legged on my bed and demolished the tray. Neither of us had eaten much last night so we were both starving.

“I always knew you were going to be a baker,” Molly said through a mouthful of scone.

“Really? I didn’t.” I’d played with all kinds of career goals. I just never thought being a baker was a thing I could succeed at. I didn’t think it was a “real” job. Or something.

“Yeah. Don’t you remember when you were making those intense cakes in the Easy Bake Oven? You like, made your own recipes and everything.” Oh, yeah. I’d almost forgotten about that. My mom had gotten me one for Christmas on a whim, and I’d used it until it literally stopped working. By that time I’d graduated to a real oven.

“Huh.” I guess I’d never thought of it that way. Baking was such a natural part of my life, I didn’t consider it all that often.

“Yeah, I always knew that’s what you would do.” I couldn’t stop from kissing her again. Sweet Molly with rumpled hair and puffy eyes and she was still the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen.

“What made you get into PR?” I asked and she started telling me about the parts of her life I’d missed. How she went to college not knowing what she wanted to do, got a degree in Communications and sort of fell into it.

“I guess I’m really good at getting people to click on things. And it’s creative. I get to design campaigns and track numbers and all that little weird stuff that for some reason I love.” I laughed. She’d always been more into math when we were kids.

She'd always done that homework first and I'd often talked her into doing mine for me.

"That's amazing," I said, and I meant it. I was also wondering if maybe she'd give Sal some ideas how the café could up their online presence. It wasn't great, but no one really wanted to deal with it.

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“And I get to stay home and work in my pajamas, so who’s the winner here?” she said with a laugh.

“You. Definitely you.” I let her have the last bite of the muffin and then we lay back in bed and talked. About our in-between lives. About funny college stories and mishaps and relationships. It was going to take us a long time to catch up on those eight years.

“I missed you,” she said, smoothing out a crease in the blankets. “So much. But it had been so long and it was almost like I’d built up this story in my head that you had moved on and didn’t want to talk to me anymore. How dumb is that?” Not that dumb, because I’d basically done the same thing.

“I missed you. A lot.” I reached out and took her hand and kissed the back of it. Like we were in a movie. She sighed.

“But now I’m back and I don’t have any plans to go anywhere.”

“Good. Because I don’t want you to.” I’d just gotten her back. She leaned toward me and I gathered her up in my arms in a hug.

“What do you want to do today?” I asked and she looked up at me.

“You?”

I laughed. “Other than that. And I think we should cool it on the sex for a little while. Until we figure out what the fuck we’re actually doing.” Her lips formed the cutest

pout that probably would have helped her get out of a murder charge.

“Fine,” she said. “But that means I get to tease you a lot.” What the fuck had I gotten myself into? I remembered all her exact ticklish spots, so I stuck my fingers under her arm and she squealed and tried to get away.

“No fair!” she yelled.

“Totally fair,” I said.

She rolled over onto her back and I wanted so much to straddle her and then lick her neck and kiss my way down her body until I set up camp between her legs. Seriously, going down on a girl was one of my most-favorite things in the world. I would devote a significant portion of my day to it if I could.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she groaned and flipped over onto her stomach. Well, I could go down on her like this too . . .

I needed to stop thinking about that.

“Like what,” I said, getting on my stomach and sliding up so I was next to her.

“Looking at me like you’re picturing me naked. It makes the whole ‘hands-off’ thing a lot harder.”

“That’s what she said.” She shoved me away.

“You’re terrible.”

“Yes, I am,” I said, nodding. “So. Do you want to go to your house so you can change and then maybe come back here?” She sat up and nodded.

“Sounds good.” After that, I didn’t know, but we definitely needed to get out of bed. It was just too easy to think about pulling her underwear off with my teeth and then fucking her all day.

^^*

In the end, I rode in Molly’s car back to her place.

“Swanky,” I said. She lived in a brand-new building on the nicer side of town that was almost within walking distance from the café.

“It’s temporary,” she said as we got out of the car. “I actually hate it. So sterile. But I needed a place in a hurry and this was available.” She squinted at the modern façade with its concrete and rows of windows. It looked almost like a weird office building.

“Anyway.” She got out her keys and I followed her up the stairs to her unit.

“This is it. I left most everything behind, so it’s a little bare.” That was putting it mildly. She didn’t even have a couch. There were a few chairs, some boxes and a small table in the main room. The kitchen was spotless and stainless steel. Gross. I hated the modern look. So cold.

“It’s a place to crash.” She said it like an apology as she walked back to the bedroom. The place was smaller than mine. The rooms were so small that it would almost have been better as a studio.

“I’ll just be a second!” she called from the bedroom as she shut the door. “Make yourself comfortable. If you can.”

Okay then. I sat down on one of the chairs and looked around. There were stacks of boxes and I did a little snooping. A lot of them had books, others had clothes and

other miscellaneous items. I found a few framed pictures of Molly and her brother. I had always liked him. I wondered if he'd come visit her here. I'd love to see him and I was sure she missed him too.

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“Back!” Molly emerged in another maxi dress, blue this time. It made her eyes pop.

“Damn,” I said, standing up. She grinned and slowly twirled for me.

“You look really good.” I walked over to her and gave her a kiss. As easy as that.

“Thanks. You don’t look so bad yourself.” I’d worn something a little nicer than my everyday baking clothes. I mean, I wanted to look good for her.

“You look really sexy,” I said and she blushed. “I almost don’t want to take you anywhere.” Well, anywhere besides the bedroom.

She rolled her eyes and took my hand.

“Come on. If we stay here much longer, I’m not going to be able to handle it.” We headed out the door and she kept her hand in mine. Our fingers linked perfectly, just as they had when we were younger.

“We fit,” I said, looking down.

“We do.” Molly swung our joined hands, another thing we used to do when we were kids.

Before I got into the passenger seat, I pushed her up against the car and kissed her.

“I thought we were cooling things down,” she said when our lips parted.

“Kissing isn’t sex,” I said, grinning.

“Kissing can lead to sex. And kissing can be just as intimate as sex.” Molly brushed her thumb across my bottom lip and sparks lit me up from the inside.

“Mmmm, yes it can.” She made a sound of frustration. I laughed and finally let her get in the car. I was a little wobbly on my own feet and grateful to sit down.

“Where to?” Molly said, turning to me.

“I don’t know. Normally when I have a day off, I’m alone and I just watch a bunch of TV and don’t get out of my pajamas. So I’m already ahead of the game.” She snorted.

“Okay, I have some ideas.” Good, because I didn’t. All I wanted was to spend the day with her and see what would happen. It had been less than a few days since she had walked back into my life, and it was almost as if no time had passed. Granted, we were older, but we fell into our old patterns and it was like sliding into the most comfortable pair of shoes, but that were also the prettiest shoes you’d ever seen. The best of both worlds. Both comfortable and exciting.

Molly and I arrived at someplace I didn’t think she would bring me. Our elementary school.

“And we’re here because . . .” I said, trailing off.

“Because why not? Come on.” She got out of the car and dashed for the playground and I followed along behind. It was summer vacation, so we didn’t have to worry about anyone calling the cops on us for being the weirdos lurking around the playground. Molly went for the swings first, which made me grin because it was just like when we were kids.

“Push me,” she said, getting herself going. I stood behind her and pushed her and she begged me to go higher and higher. My arms got tired and I took the swing next to her and she slowed herself down until we were gently swinging together.

“I can’t believe I’m here with you right now,” I said, shaking my head.

“Why not?”

“Because I never thought I was going to see you again. I actually found some pictures of us a few weeks ago when I was going through stuff at Mom’s. I got pissed and shoved them back in the box. But now I’m thinking I should get them out again.” My mom had stockpiled photos of my childhood because that was just the way she was. Molly was in at least a third of them.

“I’m sorry. I’m still sorry. I’m going to be sorry for a long time,” she said, slowing her swing and kicking her feet in the dirt.

“It wasn’t just you. I could have tried harder for contact. I mean, it’s not like we didn’t have the internet and phones and everything. You just moved, you didn’t fall off the face of the planet.” I had to take some responsibility for losing touch with her. We’d both been at fault.

“But it’s okay now,” she said, reaching out and taking my hand. “Because you’re here and I’m here. Together.” Together. I squeezed her hand and then jumped off the swing, tapping her shoulder.

“You’re it!”

Tag was another one of our favorite games and we chased each other all over the playground and down the slides and all the way down to the soccer field, where we both collapsed onto our backs.

Puffy clouds drifted across the sky and I turned to look at her as the sun lit up her hair.

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“I always thought you were so beautiful, you know. I felt so plain next to you.” Molly had always been “the hot one,” or she would have been the hot one if she’d stayed and we’d gone to high school together.

“Do you ever wonder what would have happened if we’d stayed friends? If I’d stayed here? Or if we might have drifted apart anyway?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, plucking a blade of grass. “There really is no way to know, but we’re here now.”

“True. I guess dwelling on the past doesn’t do anyone much good.” She sighed and closed her eyes. I took my moment to roll on top of her and kiss her.

“Hey,” she said into my mouth, her eyes popping open.

“It’s just kissing.” I brushed my nose against hers and then took her bottom lip between my teeth.

“Nothing with you is ‘just’,” she said. Ditto.

I was freaking out last night about how fast things were moving, but it seemed less scary today. Maybe it was the sunshine. Maybe it was sleeping with her arms around me. I wasn’t sure what it was, but I knew, without a doubt, that I wanted whatever this was with her.

I’d been staring down at her.

“What are you thinking about in that brain of yours?” she said, brushing some of my hair out of our faces. I should have put it up so it would stop getting in the way.

“You,” I said. “Just being with you.” Her smile was brilliant.

“You’re sweet. And sexy. And funny. And lovely. And . . .” I stopped her with a kiss. It was just too much.

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After our playground adventures, we decided that we were hungry, so we headed back to my house for lunch.

“You have better bread there,” Molly said when I asked her if she wanted to go out to eat. I couldn’t argue with her there, so we went back to my house.

“This place is so cozy,” she said as I walked to the kitchen and started messing around in the fridge.

“Thanks. I mean, it’s definitely cozier than yours. No offense.”

“None taken.” She flopped on the couch and sighed. The chairs were still out from making the blanket fort. Had that really been just last night? We’d covered so much ground in such a short time. But sometimes life was like that, I guess. Sometimes things happened so fast you just had to hold on and enjoy the moment.

I wasn’t really good at doing that, historically. But the way Molly looked at me was something special. Something to treasure.

“Do you need any help?” she asked, but I waved her off. I liked feeding people. It was kind of my thing. My main contribution to the world. So I made up a tray with

turkey, avocado, tomato, and basil-mayo sandwiches on my favorite sourdough bread, as well as some potato chips and a few clementines. And because no meal was complete without dessert, I added two slices of Italian cream cake.

“You want some iced tea?” I asked. She nodded and I made up two glasses, topping them off with lemon slices and fresh mint.

“You’re so good to me,” she said.

“I feed people. It’s my thing. I’d probably be smaller if I ate less, but who wants to do that?” I said.

“I’ll cheers to that.” She raised her glass and clinked it with mine.

My phone buzzed and I looked down. Mom. If I didn’t pick up, she’d leave a long ass message and just call me incessantly until I picked up. She was fun like that.

“Hey, Mom,” I said.

“Hey, Daisy Grace!” My mom was one of those people who was disgustingly cheerful for no apparent reason. “How are you doing?” she asked and I could hear her fluttering around the house. She could never sit still either. Sometimes she even talked to me on speakerphone when she was doing the dishes.

“I’m good. How are you?” We had to go through the little routine before she would tell me why she was calling. There was always a reason, but sometimes it took longer to figure it out than others.

Molly just sat and ate her sandwich. If Mom knew she was here, she’d die. My mom loved Molly to pieces. Probably more than she loved me.

“Oh, I’m fine. What are you up to today?” It wouldn’t matter if I was at work. I’d still be having this exact conversation.

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“Not much, how about you?” We went back and forth like that and then finally she asked if I knew that Molly Madison was back in town. AHA. I knew it.

“I did. As a matter of fact, she came to the café the other day,” I said. Molly perked up. She’s asking about you, I mouthed to her.

“You can tell her I’m here,” she whispered. “I miss her too.”

“Who are you talking to?” Mom said, her voice getting all excited. She knew. Of course she knew. Someone probably saw us and told her. Because this town was too small and people couldn’t mind their own damn business.

“Molly,” I said with a sigh. Mom made squealing noises and bombarded me with questions for Molly. Which I relayed to her and then gave Molly’s answers back. It was seriously annoying, but they were both so cute about it.

“You tell her that she’s coming over for dinner. Anytime she wants. You can come or not.” Thanks, Mom. Nice to know how much you care.

“You wanna go tonight?” Molly asked. Trying to listen to both of them was starting to give me a headache.

“Yes, fine! We’ll come tonight. Okay, see you later. Bye!” I had to hang up. I buried my face in one of the pillows and groaned.

“Aw, you’re so cute.” I looked up to find Molly grinning at me.

“She’s going to figure it out. She’s my mom. She figures everything out. And then she’s going to get all involved.” My mom loved to meddle in my love life. So much. It was her main hobby.

“So?” she said. “Would that be so bad? You know she likes me and she likes you and she loved it when we were friends. So why would she be upset that we’re . . . doing what we’re doing?” I hated that logic, but she was right. If I told my mom that we were together (or whatever we were), she would probably start planning a wedding.

“I wouldn’t mind having her as a mother-in-law,” she said, smirking.

“Slow your roll, M&M,” I said, falling back on the nickname I’d used for her when we were kids.

“Whatever you say, DG,” she countered. I growled and pushed her back, straddling her.

“I will tickle you, don’t think that I won’t,” I said, wiggling my fingers. She put her hands up to stop me.

“Don’t you dare. Remember what happened last time.” Oh, I did. I was remembering it right now and it was making my skin heat up and my brain start to forget why I’d told her that we should cool things down.

“Ugh, fine,” I said, pushing myself off her. She made a little sound of protest.

“Wanna watch a movie?” I asked and she nodded. I flipped on the TV and handed her the remote. We would end up watching what she wanted, so it was easier just to give it to her and save myself a fight. It was strange, the things I still remembered about her.

She flipped through my Netflix and found something old that we'd watched a hundred times together. I scooted next to her and she grabbed my arm and slung it around herself before putting her head on my chest. Oh. Okay then. I wrapped my legs around hers and we held each other as we watched the movie. Her fingers made lazy designs on my side, just barely slipping under my t-shirt. I ran mine through her hair.

Just holding her was incredible. Molly was warm and she smelled good and the feel of her head on my chest made my heart feel like it was going to grow and then explode.

"This is nice," I said softly. Her fingers stilled for a moment.

"It is," she said, snuggling closer. "I could do this forever." The word hung in the air after she said it. "Would that be awful?" Her voice was timid.

I kissed the top of her head.

"No. It wouldn't."

Six

"Why are you so stressed?" Molly said a while later as she drove us to my mom's house. I'd been picking at a thread on my jeans. "It's not like I haven't met your mom before. Tons of times." It was true. But I knew the second Mom looked at me and looked at Molly, she would know. And then she would say things and I'd have to explain what the hell was going on when I didn't even know what was going on.

"I just am, okay?" I said and cringed. I didn't mean to snap at her. "Sorry. I'm fine." She reached out and took my hand, kissing the back of it.

“We got this.” I thought she was going to drop my hand, but she held it the rest of the way to the house.

Mom was waiting on the porch for us.

“Molly Madison. It’s been a while,” she said, holding her arms out to Molly.

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“Hey, Miss Deb,” she said. Molly had always called her “Miss Deb” and Mom had found that delightful.

“Oh, baby, it’s been so long.” Mom held Molly for a long time and then leaned back to examine her.

“Look at you. A grown woman, and a beautiful one at that.” She sighed and gave Molly another hug.

“Hi, Mom,” I said and she had a hug for me as well.

“Come on in, come on in. It’s been so long since I had such good company.” Mom ushered us into the house.

“I’m making seafood pasta, is that okay? You’re not a vegan or something now, are you?” Mom asked Molly.

“No, that sounds wonderful.” It also happened to be Molly’s favorite thing that my mom made. Subtle, Mom.

“So tell me how you’re doing?” Mom said, forcing Molly to sit in the living room as she brought us all tall glasses of super sweet iced tea. Molly glanced at me and gave the update that she’d given me, leaving out the fact that she’d come back because of a breakup.

“So now, are you seeing anyone?” Mom said, getting right to the good stuff. Molly blushed.

“I’m not really sure, but I think I’m starting something with someone really special. I’d like it to turn into something, but I’m not sure yet.” I couldn’t look at her because I knew she was talking about me.

“Oh, sounds like it could be serious,” Mom said.

“It could be,” Molly replied. I really wanted to leave the room. This was getting a little too weird for me.

“Mom, do you need any help in the kitchen?” I said, standing up.

“Sure, if you want to put the bread under the broiler to crisp that would be great,” she said and turned back to Molly to ask more about her love life. I sighed inwardly and escaped to the kitchen. I didn’t want to hear anything more.

I got the bread crisping and checked on the pasta and the seafood with Mom’s special alfredo sauce. She didn’t like it when I meddled in her cooking, but right now I needed something to do.

I was so immersed in stirring the sauce that I didn’t notice when someone came up behind me.

“Hey,” Molly said in my ear. I jumped and dropped the spoon I’d been using into the sauce.

“Shit.” I fished the spoon out and turned around.

“Are you okay?” she asked, brushing some of my hair back.

“Don’t do that. She could walk in and see.” I glanced around, but I could hear Mom singing in the dining room as she got the “good plates” out of the china cabinet.

Molly's mouth made a thin line.

"And what if she did?" I wanted to groan and melt into the floor.

"Because then we'd have to explain and I'm still trying to process this. It's a lot, okay? I can't be like you and just jump into this with both feet. Hell, it hasn't even been two days. I need time. I just need time." She sighed.

"I know. I know you're right. I guess I just get carried away with everything. You've always been the one to ground me. To keep me from floating away on wings made of silly ideas." I laughed, remembering some of her schemes from when we were kids.

"Or maybe I could float away with you," I said, touching her cheek.

Of course, someone cleared their throat and we both froze and slowly turned to find Mom leaning against the wall with a satisfied smirk on her face.

"Hey, Mom," I said, shooting a glance at Molly. Her face started to heat up.

"Well. All I'm going to say is that it's about damn time." She walked over and gave both of us hugs.

"You finally got there," she said in my ear, planting a kiss on my cheek.

"Huh?" I said.

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She just laughed and hugged us both again.

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“A mother knows,” she said over generous servings of seafood pasta, garlic bread, and salad.

“But . . .” I was still playing catch up.

Mom rolled her eyes and went for another piece of garlic bread.

“I always knew you’d be together, I was just waiting for you to figure that out.” Molly and I shared a bewildered look.

“But you didn’t know that we both liked girls.” Mom snorted.

“Of course I did. But I didn’t want to push and I didn’t want to interfere. I wanted everything to blossom in its own time.” This was wild. I’d never thought of my mother as the diabolical type, but damn. She had kept that quiet.

I shook my head and looked at Molly. She just smiled and shrugged.

“This is just . . .” I kept shaking my head.

“Go with it,” Mom said.

“What she said,” Molly agreed.

“That’s my girl.”

Was this some sort of conspiracy? Molly started to laugh and Mom just patted my shoulder.

“I still have no idea what’s going on, but I think I’m outnumbered so I’m going to sit here and eat my food and pretend that everything is normal.” Molly picked up my hand and kissed it. Mom sighed dreamily.

“That’s what I wanted to see.” Unbelievable. It was so unbelievable that I started to laugh and then I couldn’t stop.

“Now I’m not going to be pushy or anything, but winter weddings are really lovely. You could do a Christmas theme with a carriage and beautiful lights. Oh, it would be so beautiful.” Mom was off her rocker. I looked over at her, but she was off in her own world.

“So I guess you’re okay with this?” I asked, meaning me being with Molly.

“It’s all I ever wanted for you. Someone who lights up when you walk into a room and loves you unconditionally. Who will take care of you.” I was still dumbfounded.

“That’s quite an endorsement,” Molly said, blushing a little.

“I meant every word. You’re my other daughter. Always have been. Always will be. I couldn’t have picked anyone better.”

“I think I need a minute,” I said, getting up from the table and walking outside. I sat on the porch and looked out at the yard. The sound of the screen door alerted me that Molly had followed me. She took a few moments before she sat down next to me on the glider.

“You okay?” she asked, putting her hand on my knee.

“I honestly don’t know. It’s all happening so fast and I can’t seem to catch my breath. You’re here and you like me and we’ve kissed and it was amazing and you’re amazing and my mom is like, shipping us together and she wants us to get married? What the fuck is even happening, Molly?” She leaned over and kissed my cheek.

“Love,” she said. I turned and met her eyes.

“What did you say?”

“Love. That’s what’s happening.” I waited for her to tell me that she was joking.

“You love me?” She laughed.

“Are you kidding? I’ve loved you my entire life. I might not have known, but I’ve never felt this way about anyone. It’s the most obvious thing in the world. Of course I love you. How could I not?” I opened my mouth and closed it a few times.

She loved me? Did I love her? The answer to that question hit me over the head and it was like my brain exploded.

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“I love you, too,” I said. It was just that easy. Did it make sense? Probably not. Was it a little rushed? Yup. Did I care? Nope.

“I love you, Daisy Grace. I’ve always loved you.” She reached for me and our lips met and that was the period at the end of the sentence. I loved her. She loved me. The end.

I knew her. I knew her arms and her hair and her laugh and the way she smiled. I knew how she liked her eggs and that she hated pickles and that she wanted to have kids someday. I knew all the important things. The rest? We could figure it out.

I waited for some instinct inside me to scream that I’d made a mistake. That I was rushing too far, too soon.

All I felt was love. And certainty. And calm.

No panic. No feeling of wrongness.

Just right. She was right. We were right.

I pulled back from her and rested my forehead against hers.

“I love you,” I whispered.

“I love you.”

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Mom came out to find us snuggled up a while later.

“Look at you two. Pretty as a picture.” She sighed in that dreamy way again.

“I can’t believe you wanted this all along,” I said to her. “You could have said something.”

Mom raised an eyebrow.

“Would you have listened?” Yeah, she had a point.

“Probably not.”

“Exactly.” She leaned against the porch railing and Molly updated her more on what had happened in her life and what her parents were doing and so forth.

“Well, you can come and stay anytime you want if you’d like to get out of that apartment. I have a spare room and this house is awful big and lonesome.” She had tried to get me to move in with her, but I’d put a stop to that right away. I couldn’t imagine trying to have someone over with my mom in the bedroom across the hall. No way. But Molly staying here would be something else. She could always stay at my place when we wanted to do sexy things.

“Are you sure?” Molly said. “Would you be okay with that?” She turned to me.

“It would be better than that terrible apartment, no offense. But that place is awful.” It really was.

“Really?” Molly said, squeezing my hand.

“Of course.”

“Oh, goody,” Mom said, clapping her hands. “Now I’ll get to see Daisy Grace because she’ll come over to see you.” I rolled my eyes. I saw my mom at least twice a week, if not more. And if I didn’t see her enough (or enough by her standards), she would just come to the café.

Once again, my mom was getting exactly what she wanted. I guess I was too.

“Oh, this is going to be such fun. Both my girls!” Mom hugged us both again, hard enough to almost crack one of my ribs.

“What have I gotten myself into?” I said when she let me go.

“A whole lot of trouble,” Molly said, kissing my nose.

Seven

Molly and I went back to her place, grabbed a bunch of her things—which left her apartment even more empty—and went back to my apartment.

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“I can’t believe my mother has found yet another way to guilt me into coming over all the time. She’s an evil genius.” I flopped onto the couch and Molly sat next to me, drawing her feet up under herself.

“You have to admit, it’s kind of perfect. Cheap rent and I don’t have to live in a cinderblock nightmare anymore.” True. It really was an idea situation.

“Hey, I told you I loved you,” I said, suddenly remembering.

“Yeah, you did.” Molly grinned. “That was fast.” Was it, really?

“I mean, I’m pretty sure that I’ve been in love with you and I just told myself that was what best friends did when we were kids. I’m pretty sure that friends don’t want to kiss their friends all the time.” Molly nodded.

“True. I used to check out your boobs a lot. I told myself I was just measuring them against mine. It’s funny the little lies we tell ourselves to fit in.” It was. I was still unpacking all the things I’d done to try and seem heterosexual for all those years. Made me feel like shit when I thought about it.

“So we’re doing this. All in?” I asked. Molly leaned in. I was captured by her eyes and her smile and just how gorgeous she was. How was it possible to be that pretty?

“All in,” she said and then she kissed me. This time, she was the one to push things further by licking my bottom lip and then when I admitted her to my mouth, she climbed into my lap.

“I want you so much,” she said, pulling back and raking my hair out of my face.

“I want you too,” I said, squeezing her ass.

“Mmmm,” she said, grinding her hips against me. “What happened to waiting?”

“Fuck that,” I said and she laughed.

“Fair enough.” My mouth went back to hers and this time I wasn’t going to hesitate. Like I had flipped a switch. Love on.

I got my fingers under the straps of her dress and pushed them down her shoulders. She hiked up the dress, pulling it over her head and tossed it and it landed on the TV. Molly sat up so I could remove my shirt.

“I’ve seen you without a shirt on so many times, but it still takes my breath away,” she said, brushing her fingers along my collarbone and pushing my bra straps down my shoulders so she could kiss them. Need roared in my skull and I shifted so that she was on her back on the couch and I was above her again.

“You gonna top me?” she said, smiling and biting her lip.

“Maybe a little. We can switch.” I looked down at her in just her underwear, asking her with my eyes if it was okay. She nodded.

“If you want to stop, just tell me,” I said. Her fingers tangled in my hair as I kissed my way down her stomach and paused at the band of her underwear. I kissed the little bow on them and she moaned.

“What do you want?” I said, resting my chin on her stomach.

“I want you.”

“You want me where?” Her response was to thrust her hips upward. Okay, message received.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful, Molly,” I said, brushing my fingers over her underwear. She made a little noise and pushed against me, so I stroked her again.

“More,” she said, her eyes shuttered closed, one hand still in my hair. I hadn’t even touched her with my mouth yet, but this was turning me on so much I could barely stand it.

I moved my hand a little lower and pushed her panties aside so I could really see her. Fuck. Fucking hell. She was beautiful and wet and I just wanted to put my mouth on her.

But first, I wanted to tease her a little more. I stroked her with one finger and she gasped. I did that for so long that she made a frustrated sound, so I slowly dipped one finger inside and her hand clenched so hard on my hair, I was sure she’d pulled out a few strands. They’d grow back.

I flicked my tongue out once and her hips jacked off the couch, reaching for me again.

“Patience,” I said, looking up at her. She was so stunning like this, her skin all flushed and her eyes glowing.

“Fuck that,” she said and yanked at my hair a little. Whatever she wanted. I’d do whatever she wanted.

So I did. I licked her and sucked on her clit and fucked her with my fingers until she

was a complete mess, moaning my name and coming hard.

Twice.

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I lifted my face and smiled at her as she came down from her second orgasm.

“Fuck. I wish we’d been doing that when we were younger.” I wiped my face and crawled up her body so I could kiss her.

“But I probably wouldn’t have been as good. I’ve had years of tongue practice.”

She gave me a smile and a tired laugh.

“I love you so much,” she said.

“I love you. And I loved that. I plan on devoting a lot of time to getting you off, just so you know.” Molly kissed me.

“Now it’s your turn.” She flipped so she was on top of me. Her hands went immediately to my pants and she yanked them off with so much enthusiasm I couldn’t help but burst out laughing.

Molly just gave me a wicked smile that promised I wouldn’t be laughing shortly.

^^*

Somehow we made it back to my bed and lay curled up together, still catching up on the years we’d missed. I heard more about her ex, which should have bothered me more than it did. Mostly what bothered me was that her ex had gotten to have those years with her and I hadn’t.

“Did you ever think it could be like this?” I asked her in the wee hours of the morning. I had to work the next day, but I’d drink a Red Bull and deal.

“Honestly, no. I hoped though. I thought about you so many times. I thought about that kiss over and over. And then I told myself that I was making more out of it than it was. Brains are fun that way.” I nodded. I knew exactly what she meant.

“So, does this mean you’re my girlfriend?” she asked with the cutest little grin.

I sighed and rolled my eyes.

“I guess.” She smacked me on the arm.

“Don’t act so excited about it,” she said. I kissed her.

“Yes, I will be your girlfriend, Molly Madison. I would like nothing more.” I waited to be terrified again, but nope. All I could feel was happiness.

“Good, because I don’t plan on letting you go again. I plan on attaching myself to you. You’re not gonna shake me, Daisy Grace.” She kissed my shoulder and then lightly bit it.

“Like a sexy barnacle,” I said. “The sexiest barnacle.” She scrunched her face up and I did the same until we started kissing again and then all bets were off and sleep just wasn’t going to happen.

We could sleep some other time.

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“You look like shit,” Anna said the next day when I stumbled into work.

“Thanks, I feel awesome.” My voice was raw from talking with Molly all night, and I was a little sore from all our other activities too. I knew I probably looked like death warmed up, but it didn’t matter. It was totally worth it and I planned on doing the same thing the next night and every night for the foreseeable future. Except on those nights when I stayed at Mom’s. Molly had a few weeks left in her month-to-month lease, so as soon as she could, she’d be taking up residence in the guest room there.

“Please tell me it’s because you got laid and you weren’t up all night watching baking shows,” she said as she set fresh flowers on the tables. I just gave her a mischievous grin that made her run over to me, grab my arm, forced me to sit down, and tell her everything. For someone who wasn’t really into romance for herself, Anna sure loved to hear about it when other people were involved.

“I knew it,” she said when I told her what had happened with Molly. “I totally called it. I win.” I just rolled my eyes at her.

“One of these days, someone is going to nab your heart and then we’re all going to laugh.” She snorted.

“Yeah, like that’s going to happen. I like my freedom. I like being able to do what I want. I love love, but it’s just not for me. C’est la vie,” she said, getting to her feet and doing a little twirl.

“Yeah, we’ll see,” I said. I had pretty much thought the same thing less than a week ago. And now here I was with an official girlfriend. Life could change in the blink of an eye. You just had to be ready to grab on and go with it.

My phone buzzed and I wondered who was texting me this early. I looked down to find a picture of Molly making a pouty face. Her message said that she missed me.

“Ugh, you’re disgusting and I love it,” Anna said from over my shoulder.

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“Just you wait,” I said. “Just you wait.” I got up and went back to the bakery. I had bread to bake and muffins to make and a girlfriend to dream about while I did all of that.

What had I been so scared of?

Epilogue

Six months later, I couldn’t believe how much everything had changed. I was at my mother’s, wearing the ugliest Christmas sweater I’d ever seen, and I was peering under the tree and trying to figure out what was in all of the wrapped boxes. There was one thing in particular I was hoping to get.

“What do you think you’re doing?” a voice said behind me. I paused in the act of shaking a box and set it down slowly.

“Nothing,” I said, turning around and finding my girlfriend with her arms crossed and her eyes narrowed.

“You’re trying to figure out what’s in them and it’s not going to work. You have to wait until tomorrow. That’s how this whole thing works.” She gave me her hand and pulled me to my feet. Mom was belting out carols in the kitchen and Molly twirled me around the living room.

“I know what you’re looking for in those boxes and you’re only going to get it if you’re very, very nice.” I spun us toward the arch where my mom had hung some mistletoe. Just for us.

“And what if I’m very, very naughty?” I asked, pulling her closer.

“Then I’ll love you anyway,” she said before kissing me.

Molly Madison. My best friend. My love. My everything.

She was totally going to be my wife.

The ring was waiting in her stocking. Waiting for tomorrow. She had no idea and I couldn’t wait to see her face when she figured it out. And I couldn’t wait to hear her say that she would be mine forever.

“Best love forever,” she said.

“Best love forever,” I agreed and we went to the kitchen where mom handed us glasses of spiked egg nog.

“To love,” she said.

“To love,” Molly and echoed.

“And to grandchildren,” Mom added.

“One step at a time, Mom,” I said. She sighed.

“I can dream.”

One

It was one of those days when she walked into the café. One of those days that I would need a drink after. One of those days when I wanted to tear off my apron, toss it in

the corner, and tell Sal and Jen that it had been real, but I had other shit to do.

And then she walked in. It was one of those things where I happened to turn at the right moment and bam. There she was. Like fate had placed her in the doorway of the Violet Hill Café. The sun lit her up from behind so it was like her dark hair glowed. The door shut behind her and she took off her sunglasses and looked around. I instantly appraised her blue button up and slim black pants. Hmm, she might be lost and not know that this was a totally queer café. Or she could know exactly what she was doing, and in that case I wanted to wait on her.

I walked over. Damn, she was sexy as hell. I should probably not be ogling her like that, seeing as how I was on work time. But when had that stopped me before?

“Can I help you?” I asked in my nicest voice. I tried not to make it too sugary sweet because then it just sounded sarcastic.

“Yes, I was hoping to speak to one of the owners?” Huh. That was an odd request. I looked her up and down again, but she didn’t seem the type to “ask for a manager” so I was a little caught off-guard.

“Can I ask what this is regarding?” I was so professional right now.

“Sure, my name is Lacey Cole and I’m a freelance photographer. I’m working on a project right now and I was wondering if I could take some pictures here and write a piece on the café. Kind of a ‘People of New York’ thing, but for LGBTQ spaces.” Oh, well. That was something completely different. I sputtered for a minute, trying to think of what to say. I had other tables and other customers. But this girl with her dark hair and captivating hazel eyes was going to make me ignore them all.

“Sure, Jen is in the back. I’ll just go get her. If you want to find a seat?” I gestured around the café, currently full of people on laptops, the working lunch crowd, a few

families with young children, and some teens that had clearly skipped school to come here.

“Thanks so much,” she said, taking a seat in a corner at a table for two.

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“Oh,” I said before I forgot, “can I get you anything?”

“Uh, sure. Dirty chai?” I tried not to smile when she said “dirty” and failed. What was wrong with me? I was a flirt for sure, but this was throwing me off my game. Pretty girls tended to do that to me though. So did pretty boys. And pretty non-binary people. Pretty people just got to me. The perils of being pansexual.

“Can do,” I said, nearly tripping over my feet as I went back to the kitchen to put in her order and get Jen.

“Thanks . . .” she said, trailing off and trying to read my nametag.

“Anna,” I said.

“Thank you, Anna,” she said in a husky voice that made my knees weak. I needed to get my shit together ASAP. I wobbled back to the kitchen and called out an order for a dirty chai and nabbed Jen who was right in the middle of assembling sandwiches.

“There’s a photographer here who wants to do a story or something on the café. Figured it could be good publicity.” Jen nodded to me and finished the sandwiches before taking off her apron and washing her hands.

“Pst,” Daisy, who was up to her elbows in dough, said over the half-wall that separated the kitchen from the bakery.

“You talking to me?” I asked, leaning back.

“Yeah. Who’s that hottie you were talking to?” I rolled my eyes. Guess I’d had an audience when I’d been talking to Lacey. You couldn’t do anything in this town without someone catching wind of it.

“No one,” I replied and then went to pick up Lacey’s drink. My hand shook just the tiniest bit when I brought it to her. Fuck. I was really having some serious issues. I wish I still smoked. I could use a cigarette right about now. Calm me down. Or maybe a shot of something.

“Here you go,” I said to Lacey, who was deep in conversation with Jen.

“Thanks,” she said, glancing up and shooting me a smile that made me flutter in several places. Damn. I needed to get away from her so I could keep my wits about me.

I went back to work and dealt with my other tables, but my attention kept drifting back over to the corner where Lacey was. Fortunately, I had a woman asking me for every single ingredient in every single menu item (she wasn’t eating “that bad stuff that’s in bread,” aka, gluten), and by the time I sold her on a salad, Lacey was gone. I almost breathed a sigh of relief. Of course, then I scurried back to the kitchen with the pretense of picking up an order and asked Jen what Lacey had wanted.

Jen had a shiny business card in her hand.

“She wants to take some pictures and write a story about the café. I’m sure Sal is totally going to go for it.” She rolled her eyes. Sal wasn’t a fan of having her picture taken.

“But it could be good publicity, right? I mean, it would get us out there. Maybe it would bring in more business.” Not that we seriously needed it. We seemed to do just fine, even in the winter when all the tourists left and it was just the locals. There were

the regulars who came every morning for their coffee, or during lunch, and there were always kids using our Wi-Fi after school.

“Sure, it could be. Or maybe it will bring a bunch of fucking homophobes to protest outside. You know how those nuts troll the internet for queers to harass.” Well yes, there was that, but we were just a tiny café in Maine. It was a liberal state. And the town loved us.

“Or maybe it will bring in a bunch of new business and will end up being a great idea.” I didn’t know why I was so on board with this thing. It wasn’t like I really cared that much. But there was something about Lacey. Something I couldn’t put my finger on.

Jen sighed.

“Ugh, I don’t have time for this. Since you seem to be so excited about it, how about you negotiate with Lacey? Sit down and figure out what she wants and so forth. And maybe think of a good way to pitch this to Sal so she won’t flip out. Can you do that?” Sure, I could do that. I only had three jobs, but I could add this on top of them. Besides, Sal and Jen had given me a job and had been so good about the hours I could work. They were like family. Hell, they were a lot better to me than my actual family.

“Uh, yeah, I think I can handle that,” I said, feeling my face go a little red. There was something seriously wrong with me right now. Jen handed me the business card.

“You are the best. Oh, I posted the new schedule. Just let me know when you can’t be here and we’ll work around it.” She patted me on the shoulder and got back to the kitchen. I was supposed to leave in a few so I could get to my other job at the library down the street. I shook myself, slipped the card into my pocket, and went to finish my last few tables so I wouldn’t be late.

Two

I got back to my place at a reasonable time, but I had a ton of publicity work that had piled up during the week. I tried to set myself a schedule and stick to it, but I'd been slacking lately. I had several blog tours to organize and a ton of graphics for a new release, but the second I opened Photoshop I swear my eyes crossed. Maybe a shower first.

I was taking off my clothes and checking the pockets when I found the business card. I hadn't forgotten about it. Well, I'd forgotten about the card, but not about Lacey. I sighed and set the card on the edge of the sink as I put my hair up. Since I liked to keep my color as long as possible, I only washed it every third day. It was still fading too much for my liking. I was going to have to do another color job sooner rather than later.

Lacey. I had volunteered to talk to her about taking pictures and doing a story of the café. Why had I agreed to that?

Because I would do anything if a hot person was involved. I really was shameless. Shaking my head at myself, I got in the shower and did my thing, but I couldn't stop picturing Lacey's beautiful face and feeling the tingles she gave me when she'd walked into the café.

Fuck. When I fell, I fell hard and fast. And I was already feeling something for Lacey. If I let myself, I could definitely fall for her. But falling also scared the shit out of me, which was why I stopped dating anyone when it got too real. It was so much less messy to just fuck and have that be it. I hadn't been in a relationship in so long that I'd pretty much forgotten what it was like to be in one. Flirting and fucking was so much easier. So much less complicated.

Why was I thinking about this? I needed to get a grip. Shaking my head at myself, I

got out a brush to detangle my hair. It was early, but I was exhausted. And I still had work to do. Maybe work would take my mind off of Lacey. That was probably a smart idea. Work was good. Money was good.

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Thinking about a pretty girl and how she made you feel wasn't the wisest choice for me, I had too much else going on. And I didn't need complications. Nope. I was going to be a professional and contact Lacey in a professional manner because I was a professional.

Maybe if I said it enough times to myself, I'd actually do it.

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I stressed the whole next day at the library for my morning shift. I was so out of it, that I had trouble shelving the books, even though I could normally do that in my sleep. I knew I had to contact Lacey ASAP and that Jen was going to ask me about it when I got to work later. So, I sucked it up and got out my phone when I had my lunch break before heading to the café.

Please let me leave a message, please let me leave a message, I thought as the phone rang. Of course, she picked up.

“Hello?”

“Hi, may I please speak with Lacey Cole?” I probably sounded like someone who was trying to sound professional, without actually sounding professional. Why was I such a dork sometimes?

“This is she,” she said and I could hear a lot of background noise.

“Yes, hi, hello, this is Anna, from the Violet Hill Café? Jen asked me to call you and

work things out with what you had in mind for the photos and the story.” I had practiced what I wanted to say and I still sounded awful. Why was I like this? Why couldn’t I be confident? Oh, right, because she was gorgeous. I had such a weakness for pretty people.

“Oh, hello, Anna,” she said, and I swore she was smiling when she said it. I could just hear it in her voice.

“Hi,” I said again, like a dope. Wow, I needed to get this situation over with so I didn’t embarrass myself further.

“I’m actually doing some work in a friend’s studio. That’s how I found out about the café. Do you want to meet me there and we can discuss?” Oh, well. I guess?

“Um, sure. I have to work until seven tonight, though. Could I come after?” I hoped she would say yes so I could just get this done.

“Yeah, that works. It’s the Shelly Jones photography studio. Do you know it?” Oh. Yeah. I did. She specialized in taking sexy boudoir photos. Mostly of women to give to their men on Christmas and Valentine’s Day. Not exactly the kind of person I could see hanging out with Lacey, but then again I didn’t know much about her. I’d been tempted to stalk her online, but had refrained out of self-preservation.

“Does eight work for you?” she asked. Shit, her voice was so sexy.

“Yeah,” I said. “Um, see you then?”

“See you then, Anna.” I tried not to imagine her saying my name in the throes of passion. I did not need that in my brain, thank you.

“Okay, bye,” I said before hanging up.

Please let me be more suave tonight. Please.

^^*

I told Jen that I was meeting with Lacey after work and she seemed satisfied with that.

“You told Sal anything?” Jen rolled her eyes. Today she was rocking several shades of glittery shadow that made her eyelids look like a galaxy. I would never be able to pull off that look, but she could.

“I’ll only tell her when it’s a definite. You know how she feels about ‘social media clickbait’,” she said, using her fingers to make air quotes.

“Yup, I do.” For someone who was still quite young, Sal was a hardcore Luddite. She didn’t even like people paying with cards, and Jen had had to talk her into upgrading their equipment all the time. But she was a lovable grump and I adored them both.

“So, maybe get something in writing? Like a proposal or something? I don’t know. Just some parameters so we know what’s what.” That sounded like a good idea, and something that hadn’t even crossed my mind.

“I will. I’ll work up something with Lacey.” Why did that sound totally dirty? I could feel myself blushing, but Jen didn’t seem to notice.

“Sounds good.” I got through the rest of my shift and hurried home to shower and get myself presentable before driving over to the photography studio. The lights were off on the first floor of the building, but there was a glow on the second floor. I texted Lacey to let her know I was out front and she told me to come around the back and head up the stairs.

I knocked on the door at the top of the dark stairs.

“It’s open,” Lacey called and I cautiously stuck my head in. She was working, crouched behind a camera and taking photographs . . . of a cat.

“Hey,” I said, not wanting to disturb whatever was going on. The all-black cat sat placidly on an elaborate velvet chaise, not even disturbed by the clicking of the lens or the lights trained on it.

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Lacey looked up from the camera.

“Hey, sorry, I was just working with this new lens I got.” She grinned and set the camera on a desk in the corner.

“Come here, Murder,” she said and wiggled her fingers toward the cat. Said cat gave her one look, closed its eyes and fell asleep.

“Bastard,” she said, sticking her tongue out at him.

Lacey swiveled around and turned her attention to me, and suddenly I felt like I was the one under the spotlights.

“So, come on in and have a seat,” she said, motioning to a little sitting area with two chairs and a table in between them.

“Coffee?” she asked. There was a little cart nearby with a coffeemaker on it and several mugs.

“Do you have tea?” I didn’t need excess caffeine right now. She nodded.

“Sure, can do.” She set the machine to dispense hot water and I looked over at the cat.

“You named your cat Murder?” I asked. She laughed.

“It’s the name for a group of crows. Seemed appropriate for a black cat, no?” I nodded and crossed my legs. I was feeling like an interloper. And I also couldn’t stop

watching the way Lacey moved. She was just so sexy in that effortless way. I was always drawn to beautiful people and she was one of the most beautiful I'd seen in a while. I was in trouble. I jumped when she walked over and pressed the cup of tea into my hands.

"Thanks," I said, looking up into her eyes. They weren't quite brown and they weren't quite hazel either, but some sort of gorgeous mix. I needed to stop staring at her. Like, right now.

"So," she said, sitting down across from me. "What did you need from me?" I blushed, even though she hadn't said anything overtly dirty. I was seriously going to have a breakdown. I needed to get this done as quickly as possible.

"Um, well, Jen asked if you could draw up something in writing? Like a proposal or something. Then she can take it to Sal and they can talk it over. Oh, and I was wondering if you had examples of other stuff you'd done?" She got up and grabbed a laptop off the desk.

"Sure thing. This is my site." I set my tea down and she handed me the laptop, but then came to stand behind me to scroll through it. She smelled like jasmine. Some of her dark hair brushed my shoulder as she leaned forward.

I had to force myself to focus my eyes on the screen.

"Wow," I said. She had a gorgeous site with tons of unbelievable photos on it. Including boudoir sessions with people of all shapes and sizes and genders and orientations.

"That's one of my main goals. To make boudoir accessible to everyone," she said in my ear. I shivered. I needed to get this over with.

“Nice,” I said, my voice hitching a little. I turned my head and our eyes met. She smiled slowly.

“So. Let me show you some of my project. I haven’t launched it yet. I’m working on getting it off the ground. And if there’s enough support I might even do a book.” That was a lot. Damn. She was really serious about this.

I coughed and moved a little further away from her. I couldn’t think. She made me feel drunk. Everything got a little blurry at the edges, but her face sharpened in focus.

The chair had wheels on it, so I slid away from her. She made a little sound that I didn’t know how to interpret. Was it one of disappointment?

“That’s amazing,” I said, spinning in the chair to face her. “Really amazing.” She smiled and a dimple popped in one cheek. Made her even more irresistible. I had a thing for dimples.

“Thanks so much. So, basically, what I want to do is a profile on the café. How it started, what it’s doing for the queer community, that kind of thing. And I’m going to want to interview Jen and Sal and probably some of the employees, and take pictures to go with the stories. If I could talk to some of the customers and get their stories. That’s kind of my thing. Everybody has a story and all that.” I still didn’t know if she was actually queer, and I felt like I needed to know.

“So, what inspired you to do this project?” I asked.

She crossed her arms and leaned against the desk. I tried to keep my eyes on her face.

“Well, I’m a member of the community myself, being both trans and bi. So, who better to tell the stories of queer people than a queer person?” She did a little shrug and I bit my bottom lip.

“Yeah, I agree. As a pansexual person.” There. Everything was out. She showed me hers and I showed her mine. Bisexual. So, she was probably into girls. I hoped.

She took a deep breath.

“So, I can get something typed up and I have boilerplate release forms as well. I’d like to have another meeting with Jen and Sal too. Jen said that Sal was going to be a harder sell on the project, but I’m ready to make a presentation. I’ve been told I can pretty persuasive.” Why did that sound super dirty and totally turn me on? I needed to go home.

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“Sounds good.” I stood up on wobbly legs and nearly screamed when something brushed against them, but it was just Murder. I looked down at him and he blinked at me with yellow eyes and just kept purring.

“He likes you. And he pretty much hates everyone,” Lacey said, leaning down to pet him.

“Yeah, well I think we have that in common,” I said, trying to joke. It wasn’t really true. I liked most people.

Lacey laughed and the sound was warm and rich like spiced rum. I needed to stop thinking of her in sexual terms. This was a business thing. Nothing more.

“Would you be interested?” she asked, and I couldn’t figure out what she was asking me.

“Interested?” I said, like a dumbass.

“Interested in being interviewed.” She straightened up and we were nearly at eye level. She would only have to bend a tiny bit to kiss me. Which I needed to stop thinking about. Lacey wasn’t going to be kissing me. I didn’t even know if she was single.

“Oh, that. Um, sure. Yeah, that would be fine,” I babbled and then laughed nervously.

“Great,” she said. I wanted to stare into those eyes and pick out every single color in them and then paint my walls those colors.

I needed to get a grip. She finally blinked and stepped away from me, but her cheeks were a little red.

“So, um, it’s late and I should be getting back,” she said, raking a hand through her hair.

“Where are you staying?” I asked and then wanted to kick myself. That was absolutely none of my business.

“Oh, I’m renting this little run-down cottage. It’s cute and right on the water, so I get up in the middle of the night sometimes and take pictures, or watch the sun rise. Maine is such a beautiful place.” Huh. I’d lived here for so long that I forgot about all its natural wonders. I was usually too busy going from one job to another, or hermiting in my apartment and doing work. I needed to get out more apparently.

“Where are you from?” I needed to stop asking questions, but my brain kept firing them out through my mouth.

“Tennessee, originally, but I’ve lived all over. I’m a bit rootless. Can’t seem to find a place that feels like home.” I’d always lived here. I couldn’t imagine moving from place to place like that. I’d feel so lost.

I nodded and it seemed as if our interaction had come to a natural end.

“Well, it was nice to see you again,” I said, heading toward the door. “And I look forward to talking more with you.”

“Thanks for coming, Anna. I really appreciate it. And you’ll be seeing so much of me that you’ll definitely get sick of me.” She laughed.

“Don’t count on it,” I said over my shoulder as I headed out the back door of the

studio and down the stairs.

Three

The next week, I saw Lacey a lot. But it wasn't enough. The more she was around, the more I wanted her around. Somehow she'd impressed Jen and Sal with her presentation, and had commenced work on her profile. She'd taken action shots of Jen assembling sandwiches, interviewed them both, and had also done an interview with Daisy, since Violet Hill was what helped her reconnect with Molly. It was all very sappy and cute. I teased Daisy about it mercilessly, but she just had a dreamy look in her eyes ninety percent of the time, so I was pretty sure my teasing went in one ear and out the other.

"You're so in love with her, it's gross," I said to Daisy as she squealed and launched herself at Molly when she came to pick her up from work. It was like they hadn't seen each other for years instead of just a few hours. I didn't know what that was like. And then Lacey walked in and my heart jumped and started beating super-fast.

"Hey," I said walking over to her. "Dirty chai?" I'd gotten to know what she liked and didn't like. It made me feel like a creeper, but also exciting that I knew things about her.

"Yeah, sure. And maybe a BLTA?" she asked. It was basically a BLT with avocado instead of mayo. We also had a version with veggie bacon for all the vegetarians/vegans that we served. What was it with queers and being vegetarians/vegans? It was such a cliché, but it was so true.

"You got it," I said, stumbling a little bit on my way to put in her order.

"You totally love her," Daisy said in sing-song as I passed the half-wall that separated the bakery from the rest of the kitchen.

“Huh?” I said, looking back at Lacey, who was busy with her phone.

“You’ve got the biggest fucking heart-eyes right now,” Daisy said as she took off her apron. Molly nodded in agreement.

“I do not,” I said, and actually rubbed my eyes.

“Do too,” Molly said with a little giggle. I rolled my eyes.

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“Whatever,” I said under my breath and turned toward the kitchen. I could still feel them watching me.

“Stop it,” I said before I went back to taking care of my tables.

“Never,” Daisy called after me as she headed out the door.

“So,” Lacey said on her way out. “I’d love to do an interview with you, if you have the time? I’m only here for another week, and then I’m off to my next project.” My heart actually sank down to my feet. I mean, I should have known that she was going to be on her merry way, but to hear the words from her lips made them real. This sucked. I had just met her, but imagining her leaving felt like a horrible wound opening in my chest. What was wrong with me?

She was still waiting for an answer from me. Oops.

“Oh, yeah, sure. When did you want to do it?” I cringed at how that sounded. I couldn't keep my mind off dirty things when she was around.

“Whenever you have time. I’m pretty much open.” Yeah, I definitely needed to get my mind out of the gutter, but I wasn’t sure if that was ever going to happen. At least not around Lacey. She made my mind go to dirty places with just her presence.

“Oh, yeah. I have some work to do tonight, but maybe I could bring my laptop and I could multitask?” It would help me be more professional if I could get myself into

work mode when I was with her. That would be much better.

“Sounds good. I have some editing to do in the studio, so that would be great. How about around eight?” I nodded and she gave me another one of her smiles. I still hadn’t gotten used to my reaction when she smiled. Like the sun was coming out from behind the clouds and I was completely drunk at the same time. It was a strange feeling.

“Great!” I said, squeaking a little. I couldn’t seem to keep my cool around her. It was a real problem. Maybe it was good she was leaving in a week. Then I could get my feet back under me.

^^*

I showed up at the studio with my laptop and my professional face on. And then Lacey opened the door with Murder (the cat) in her arms and everything fell away.

“Hey,” I said, feeling the awful urge to giggle.

“Hey, come on in. I was just getting a few cuddles with this monster,” she said, setting the cat down. He immediately wound his way round my legs and purred so hard I thought he was going to hurt himself.

“Little monster,” Lacey said fondly.

“How does he do with all the traveling?” I asked as we headed over to the little office area to sit down. She already had some photos up on the huge desktop and was in the middle of editing.

“He loves it. I swear, he’s like a dog. He sits in the front seat and just purrs away. As long as I don’t take him on a plane, he’s fine. So my car has a lot of miles on it.”

Huh, I hadn't thought of that. A mobile lifestyle. Still couldn't imagine it.

"That's good," I said, sitting down and pulling my laptop out of my bag. "What are you working on?"

She clicked a few things and brought up a seriously sexy picture of a woman wearing black lacy lingerie and laying on a bed, with light streaming through the window. In fact, that very bed was in the room over in a corner. I recognized other areas of the studio too.

"Amazing," I said. The woman was totally gorgeous. All smoky eyes and red lips and a smile on her face as if she'd just gotten herself off.

"I think so," she said, and clicked through a few more of the pictures. There were people of all shapes and sizes, femme and butch and everything in between. Lacey had the knack of bringing out the beauty in everyone and each shoot was completely unique and worked for that person.

"You're really good at this," I said, looking from the picture to her.

"I really appreciate that. It's my life's work to help people feel good about themselves." Well, I'd say she was succeeding.

"I've always wanted to do something like that, but I didn't have a reason. You know, most people get them taken for someone." Like a husband or girlfriend or someone for Valentine's Day. I didn't have anyone like that in my life and hadn't for a long time. I missed things like that.

"Why not do it for you?" she asked and I didn't have a good answer.

"I guess I'm only going to be this young once." Someday, I'd look back on this body

and wish for it when I was old and saggy and sad.

“I mean, if you wanted to. I could take some for you.” I blushed so red that I had to look away from her. I couldn’t imagine being that vulnerable in front of Lacey, since I’d been developing a serious crush on her. She was going to be gone so soon, so letting that crush further crush me wasn’t the best idea.

“That’s okay,” I said, wishing my cheeks weren’t blazing. I looked down and coughed and Lacey closed the window on the computer.

“So, should we get to work?” she asked. I nodded and put my attention back on my laptop. Work. Right. The thing I was supposed to be doing right now.

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I blinked a few times and pulled up Photoshop. I was working on a Facebook banner for a client for her upcoming release.

Lacey went back to her computer and we got down to business for a few minutes, with the only sounds being the clicking of laptop keys.

It was awkward. For me, at least. I couldn't focus on what I was doing. I was too busy watching her. This was a ridiculous idea. There was no way I could concentrate on pixels when she was sitting so near me, her light brown brows furrowed in concentration. She rested her chin on one hand and I admired the graceful arch of her spine. Everything she did was so careful. So elegant. I felt like a total klutz in comparison. Bumbling and awkward.

"You're staring at me," she said, and I almost died right there.

"Sorry," I said. She swiveled in her chair and stared right back.

"It's okay," she said.

"Is it?" I asked, licking my lips. They were extremely dry for some reason.

"Yeah. You can look at me all you want."

"Do you want me to look at you?" I needed some clarity, but I was terrified of getting it. So far, things seemed to be going in a good direction. But I'd been wrong before. Many times. I had a habit of misreading situations and getting myself into trouble.

Lacey started laughing.

“I feel like I’m too old to be coy. I like you. And I am getting the feeling that you like me?” she asked. I nodded.

“You’re into me?” I asked, my voice squeaking. I was really failing at this. She was probably going to second-guess everything now that I’d started talking.

“Yeah, little bit. Is that okay?” Was she serious?

“You’re asking me if it’s okay that a ridiculously sexy woman is somehow into me? Uh, yeah. It’s pretty much okay.” I laughed a little hysterically. I really was blowing it.

“Ridiculously sexy? Oh, I like that,” she said, getting up from her chair and coming toward me.

“You are. Ridiculously sexy.” She leaned down and took my laptop off my knees and set it on the floor.

“Well, I think you’re ridiculously sexy,” she said, leaning forward and then pausing with her face a breath away from mine. “Do you think I could kiss you?” My answer was to push forward and meet her lips with mine.

Oh. Wow. It was a sweet kiss. A brief kiss. But it was perfect. Her mouth curved into a smile.

“I’ve been wanting to do that since the moment I met you,” she said. We were so close I could count her eyelashes.

“Really?” I asked, breathless. I’d forgotten that I needed to keep breathing. The kiss

had knocked me completely off my axis. Just one little kiss.

“Yeah. But I wasn’t sure if you were into me, or available or . . . anyway.” I almost burst out laughing because this was somehow happening.

“I am. Into you and available.” She licked her bottom lip.

“Good.” She leaned in for another kiss. My fingers curled against the back of her neck and pulled her closer. We were at an awkward angle, but it didn’t matter. Lacey was a damn good kisser.

Damn good.

Something brushed against my leg and I jumped, but it was just Murder. I laughed and Lacey picked him up.

“Little brat. You always get mad when the attention is not on you.” She nuzzled him and he purred like a tank. Way to clam-jam, Murder.

Lacey growled at Murder and set him down.

“Sorry about that,” she said, her cheeks just a little pink.

“It’s okay,” I said, wondering when we’d be going back to kissing. Or something more. There was a bed in here and a lock on the door.

“There’s just one little thing I think we should talk about before we go further,” she said. Dammit. Of course there was a catch. There was always a catch.

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“And what’s that?” I asked, not really wanting to know the answer.

“The fact that I’m leaving in a few days.” Oh, that. I’d completely forgotten about that because of the kissing.

“Right,” I said. “I mean, that sucks, but can’t we still have fun for a few days?” I wasn’t really looking for anything long-term anyway. My feelings for Lacey were strong, but I’d had strong feelings before. I guess I was fickle. I fell hard and fast, but then I somehow moved on to the next shiny person. It would be nice to have something for a little while.

“You’re okay with something quick?” she asked.

“I mean, if you are. I am. You’re hot and I’m into you and you’re a great kisser and you’re smart and interesting and I would like to spend some time with you. Whatever that means.” It wasn’t exactly the best sales pitch, but it was the best I could do.

Lacey laughed a little.

“You’re so cute. So fucking cute.”

“Thank you,” I said, blushing a little.

“And you’re okay with the whole trans thing? I haven’t asked, because I wasn’t sure,” she said. I’d dated a trans guy before. I’d been totally in love with him and then he’d shattered my heart. But that didn’t have anything to do with him being trans. We just weren’t a good fit. Different places in our lives and all that.

“Of course. One of my boyfriends was a trans dude. And I’ve dated people without genders and with genders that changed while we were together and every kind of person in between. I like who I like.” She seemed to visibly relax. Shit. I probably should have said something sooner.

“You know that I don’t care, right? That it’s not a problem, at all?”

She let out a shaky breath. “I mean, I figured, but you really never know with people. I’ve only been out for a few years, so I’m still working on the whole coming out part. I’ve known I was bi since I was eleven, so that hasn’t really been an issue. But the trans part is . . .” she trailed off.

“Yeah, I know. And thank you for telling me and trusting me.” I stood and rose up a few inches to kiss her.

“You’re so sexy, Lacey,” I said. “So fucking sexy.” I put my arms around her neck and pressed closer to her.

“Mmm, so are you. I’m a sucker for a girl with purple hair.”

I giggled. “Is that so?”

“It is.”

We kissed again and it set my blood on fire. I got closer and closer until I was pushing her back and then we crashed into her chair.

“Oops,” I said and she smiled.

“No worries.”

I stuck my tongue back in her mouth and she made a little moaning sound. It turned me on so fucking much I thought I was going to die. Now that I had her, I just wanted more, more, more. I wanted her naked and spread out for me to enjoy. But I knew that she might not be as comfortable with that. So I was going to take her lead and see where she wanted us to go.

Her fingers started to move up my shirt and I was hoping we were on the way to getting naked, but then she stopped.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her face going red. It was the first time I’d seen her less-than confident.

“It’s okay,” I said, taking her hands and kissing the backs of them.

“Is it?” she asked. “I just . . . I’m a little self-conscious when I’m with someone new.” I kissed her softly.

“It’s okay. We can go at whatever speed you want to. Would you . . .” I trailed off, trying to think of what we could do in a small town at this late hour. Everything was closed.

“How about we just sit and talk?” she suggested. That was good enough for me.

“Sure,” I said. I looked around the studio and there were chairs and the bed, but no couch or anything.

“I’m staying down the street at the Violet Hill Inn, if you maybe wanted to go there? I have a couch in my room. No pressure, or anything.” That actually sounded nice. The Violet Hill Inn was an adorable little place, perfect for tourists. It was the off-season now, so I bet she was getting one of the best rooms at a low rate. I’d worked there a few summers in high school as a housekeeper and I still remembered the layout and

which rugs were the hardest to clean.

“Sure, sounds good.” It was within walking distance, as were most things around here. Didn’t look like we were going to get much done tonight.

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“We could also do the interview there, if you want. Or maybe not. I don’t want to push you about doing it if you feel weird about it.” I shook my head.

“I don’t feel weird. I think we should still do it.” Plus, it might keep my mind off thinking about kissing her.

“Only if you’re sure,” she said, saving her work and then shutting down her computer.

“I am.”

Four

I was right about Lacey getting the best room at the Violet Hill Inn. She’d even managed to get herself the suite that had its own entrance. They didn’t accept cats, so she’d left Murder at the studio.

“Pretty nice,” I said, as she let me in.

“Yeah, it’s not too bad. Much nicer than the last place I stayed. I kind of hate hotels, so I was glad there wasn’t one here.” Yeah, there wasn’t much around here. The closest chain hotel was probably forty minutes away.

The place was cozy and had new furniture since I’d been here last.

“Sorry about the mess.” It was a little cluttered with photography equipment, a couple suitcases and some clothes thrown here and there on chairs. No underwear though. I

wasn't sure who would be more embarrassed by that, her or me.

"It's nice," I said as she cleared off a little loveseat.

"Do you want anything? I have a microwave, a minifridge, and a coffeemaker. It's a pretty nice setup."

"Some tea would be great," I said.

"I have that too." She walked over and got out a mug to heat up some water for tea and I looked around the rest of the room. There were things everywhere and it felt intimate. Like I was seeing a side of her that I shouldn't be seeing yet.

"Here you go," she said, handing me my tea. "So, do you want to do the interview first or maybe do something else? And I don't mean kissing." I laughed a little.

"I'm trying not to kiss you right now, and talking about kissing just makes me think even more about it. So." She sipped from her steaming mug.

"Yeah, I'm having some issues too. We probably should have done the interview before the kissing." Yeah, probably. Oops.

"I've never been good at doing things in the right order." Lacey smiled and I set my tea down.

"Sorry," I said as I leaned over and kissed her again.

"Don't be," she said into my mouth. We kissed and kissed until I didn't know why I hadn't spent most my time kissing Lacey Cole. There were goosebumps all over my skin and I didn't have any blood running to my brain anymore. I was so fucking turned on that I was nearly shaking.

“Are you okay?” she asked, pulling back and putting her hand on my cheek. God, her eyes were so beautiful.

“Yeah. I just . . . I want you. A lot.” I wasn’t going to lie. She was so damn sexy. Just . . . everything about her got to me.

“Mmm, I want you too,” she said, closing her eyes briefly and making a little sound of desire. Why did she have to do that? It just made things worse.

“Well,” I said. “What are you going to do about it?” I bit my bottom lip and she groaned and rested her forehead on my shoulder.

“Why are you doing this to me? It’s like you were thrown in my path to destroy all my focus and turn my brain into a lust monster.” I giggled a little bit at the use of “lust monster.” I’d never thought of it that way, but it was an apt description.

“I’m sorry?” I said, and she just raised her face and grinned at me.

“You’re not sorry. Not even a little bit.”

I giggled. “Not really. Because you’re doing the same thing to me.” Lacey put some space between us and leaned back.

“Yeah, I think we should do the interview. Maybe if I get myself in professional mode, I’ll stop thinking about taking your clothes off.” She was trying to kill me. Seriously.

But I nodded and moved to other end of the couch.

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“Sure.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath and then another.

“Okay. Back to professional mode.”

I waited while she got out another laptop and came back over, folding her legs up on the couch and then setting the computer on them.

“So. If there’re any questions you feel uncomfortable with, just let me know and I’ll move on. You only tell me what you want to tell me, okay?” I nodded. I was pretty open about most of my shit, so I wasn’t particularly bothered about what she might ask. Sure, I did have people who, when I explained I was pansexual, asked me if I loved cookware.

“How about we start with how long you’ve been working at the café.” Oh, right.

“Um, about two years, I think? Yeah, that seems about right.” Wow, it didn’t seem like it had been that long.

“And how did you get the job?” I went into the story of meeting Jen randomly at a rally for Planned Parenthood and realized that she was one of the owners of the café in town. We’d struck up a conversation about witty protest signs and she’d essentially given me a job on the spot. It had been perfect timing because I’d needed one desperately.

“What does it mean to you, as a part of the LGBTQ community to work at a place that celebrates you?” Lacey asked. I had to think about that one for a minute.

“It means that I can be myself. That I can talk about my life and not worry about hiding. That I can be a girl who dates girls, or a girl who dates someone of any or no gender, and it’s embraced and celebrated. It’s the most freeing, comfortable thing in the world. It’s my family.” I wiped at my cheeks and found tears. Wow.

“It felt like a safe place for you. Is your family supportive of you?” I snorted and wiped my eyes on my sleeve.

“That’s a no. I’m pretty sure my mom is just praying I’ll settle down and marry a nice boy and have babies and go to PTA meetings like a ‘regular’ person.” I put “regular” in air quotes.

“Hm, sounds familiar,” Lacey said as she typed. I knew so little about her and I wanted to know everything. Yet here I was, spilling my guts.

“She’s also horrified about my hair,” I said, pulling a strand in front of my eyes and studying it. “The first time I dyed it she grounded me for a week.” Ah, memories. I was a rebellious teenager and I didn’t give a fuck about my parent’s rules. Sure, I understood why they had some of them. But others were just made so that we could appear to be a nice, normal family. When we very much weren’t.

“I don’t like to think about my family,” I said. We might live in the same town, but I avoided them as much as I could. I was an expert at dodging my parents in the grocery store if I saw them.

“I’m sorry,” Lacey said, her fingers typing. I knew she was taking down my words, but she was also going to add other things.

“Would you . . . would you mind if I took your picture right now?” she asked, slowly setting down her laptop.

“I guess not,” I said. I wasn’t sure that I looked all that great, but she was a photographer and there was something about the way she asked me that made me say yes.

“Hold still,” she said, putting her hands out as if I was going to lunge away or do something.

“I will,” I said, trying not to move my lips and watching her as she scurried around the room, getting different things that she apparently needed.

At last, she came back over with a camera. It was definitely one of the fancy ones that she used for work. For some reason, having her take my picture here and not at the café was making me feel on display. Vulnerable. Or maybe it was because I was telling her all kinds of personal things about my past and my relationship with my family.

I expected her to tell me to look or feel a certain way, or maybe to even fix my hair, but she didn’t do that. She just snapped a few pictures. Silently. It was eerie, hearing the click of the lens. Lacey paused, as if she was waiting for something.

“Should I do anything?” I asked after a few moments of silence.

“No. I’m sorry. You’re just so beautiful.” I felt myself blushing.

“Thank you.” She was beautiful. I was so ordinary. I mean, my hair was unusual, but other than that I was pretty plain.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked me.

“How gorgeous you are,” I said and then shut my mouth. She clicked a few more times and then sat back on the couch.

“Look at you,” she said, showing me some of the digital images. I didn’t see anything remarkable, but I guess she did.

“You’re stunning,” she said, looking at them. “Just so beautiful.” I coughed and she shook her head a little, as if she was trying to clear it.

“Sorry. Got a little carried away. I get like that sometimes.” Setting the camera down, she picked up her laptop again and typed out a few words.

“Okay, so, moving on. Why do you think places like Violet Hill are important for people?” I turned that one over in my brain again.

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“Because they’re a safe place for people to be. For queer teens. For adults who don’t feel that they can come out. For people who are so far in the closet they hate themselves. For people to see that, contrary to popular culture, you can be gay or trans or pansexual and happy. That there is a life for you, and a place for you. People who are like you. You’re not alone.” I felt like I was going to get emotional again, so I looked at the ceiling and tried to get it together.

“It’s okay. We can stop if you want,” she said softly. I definitely needed a breather. I picked up my tea with shaky hands and took a sip. It was barely warm, so I made a face.

“I can warm that up for you,” Lacey said, taking the cup from me.

“Thanks.” Now that I’d told her so much about myself, I wanted to know a little about her.

“Can I interview you?” I asked. She looked over at me from the microwave.

“You want to turn the tables, huh?”

“Yeah, just a little.”

“Okay, I’m game.” Cool. Now I got to pretend to be a journalist.

“So. You told me that you knew you were bi when you were young. Can you tell me a little about that?” Her eyes narrowed and I could tell she wasn’t super happy with me turning the microscope around.

“Sure. Basically I thought it would be really nice to kiss a girl. Which, since I was assigned male at birth, was expected. But then, I also thought it would be nice to kiss a boy. When we played Spin The Bottle, I never minded kissing anyone. I just liked people. I had so many crushes it was ridiculous.” I knew exactly what she meant.

“So, I just thought I was bi. A bi dude. And that was fine, but it never felt right. I didn’t want to be someone’s boyfriend.” She shrugged and the microwave dinged. Lacey brought my tea back and talked more about how she’d come to understand she was a trans woman and how that transition had gone with her family.

“I’m so much happier now. And it’s right. Everything feels right now.” She smiled and I finished my tea.

“And then I’ve just been bouncing around for a few years, trying to figure my shit out and find a place that feels like home. Haven’t found it yet.”

“Do you think that you will?” I said.

“I’m not sure. Sometimes I think I’m bound to just wander the earth aimlessly for the rest of my life. Rootless. It’s not the best way to live, but it’s what I know how to do. I guess that means I’m not good at commitment.” I snorted.

“Yeah, me neither. I mean, when it comes to relationships. It all kind of scares the shit out of me. How do you know that you can be with someone for your whole life? That’s a huge choice to make and I don’t know if I’m ready to make it.” I didn’t know if I would ever be able to make it, honestly. Some might think that was sad, but I was okay with it. As long as it worked and I wasn’t miserable I figured it was the way to go.

“Agreed. I don’t know. I could see myself being with someone, but maybe not marriage? Some days I think I want that and then others I want to float around with

nothing tying me down.” Neither of us could make up our minds it seemed.

“Looks like we’re in the same boat,” I said.

“Seems so.” Silence fell over us like a thick blanket. I wasn’t sure where we were supposed to go from here.

“Now that we’re not doing the interview, do you think I could kiss you again?” she asked, and it was so sweet. It was probably a bad idea, but I didn’t care.

“Yeah, you can.”

Five

Somehow, we were both able to put on the brakes before things went too far. I realized it was very, very late and that I had to work the next morning. I said goodnight to Lacey with a soft brush of our lips and she promised to come by the café for lunch so I could see her.

I went to bed giddy. I couldn’t remember the last time I was this excited about seeing someone the next day. Hell, I was excited about work. Not that any of my jobs were awful, but being this stoked was a rarity.

She was just so sexy and cool and smart and interesting. I loved knowing what she thought about everything. Even if I didn’t want to kiss her face off, I wanted to know her. To talk to her. To spend time with her.

And that time was running out. She was going to leave and not come back. She’d said so herself. A boat without an anchor. Adrift.

I didn’t want to be the one to hold her back. I didn’t even know if I could. I liked her.

A lot. But I'd liked a lot of people a lot. Sure, I couldn't remember liking someone so quickly to this degree, but what did that mean? Not a whole lot.

Still, it kept me up most of the night, thinking about Lacey and kissing her and even drifting toward a future. Coming home from work and seeing her on the couch.

That last part was when I was almost asleep and when I woke up, the dream was hazy and I was turned on. Oh.

I lay there for a moment, trying to get my brain to start functioning normally again. I didn't dream about shit like that. Ever. I needed to cool things down so I didn't find myself too far in with no way to get out except with a slightly broken heart.

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I was pretty sure that was going to happen anyway, but maybe I could somehow minimize the damage. I'd nursed heartbreak before. I should probably stock up on ice cream and make a list of comfort movies that were available on Netflix. To get out ahead of things.

My alarm didn't give a shit about potential heartbreak and started screaming, so I got up and turned it off. Time for another day at the Violet Hill Café.

^^*

"Did you sleep last night?" Daisy asked when I showed up with barely a minute to spare to clock in.

"Thanks for the compliment," I said, putting on my apron and checking my hair in the mirror.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it in a bad way. I know you work so many jobs. I wonder how you do it." I gave her a smile.

"So do I." She laughed and headed back to the bakery. She'd already been here for several hours. Getting the bread baking, making cinnamon rolls the size of a human skull, and putting glaze on the breakfast muffins (they were basically cupcakes). My mouth started watering. I had definitely gained a few pounds since I'd started working here and I didn't regret a single one of them. I'd never eaten so well. I was kind of a horrible cook, so about ninety percent of the food that I ate came from here.

I got started with setting up my tables and chatting with the other waitress, Ruthie.

She was fresh out of high school and was heading off to college in a few months. I thought of her as a little sister and I knew she was going to set the world on fire. So incredibly smart.

“How are you doing?” She’d recently gone through a breakup with her long-distance girlfriend and was pretty blue about it. I’d shared lots of cheesecake and advice during our breaks.

“Fine. I think I’ve moved from acceptance back to rage. I figure as long as I’m not stagnant in one emotion, I’m making progress.” I laughed as she flipped her braid over her shoulder. She had the longest hair of anyone I’d ever known. All the way down her back, it brushed the back of her legs even when it was up. I always joked that she should give up the college dream and just be a princess.

“Well, rage is good. Burns calories,” I said and she nodded.

“Sounds legit.”

We opened the door and our first customers flooded in, eager for caffeine and Daisy’s cinnamon rolls. I greeted most of them by name. Even though it was a small town, Violet Hill was even smaller and I liked seeing the same faces every day. Consistency was so comforting.

I thought about what I’d told Lacey last night, about this being my family and it was so true. When I looked around, I saw people who would gladly give me the shirt off their backs if I needed it. Who would come and bail me out of jail if I had to call. Wasn’t that what a family was for?

I moved through my day so lost in thought that I didn’t notice when someone came up behind me.

“Whoa!” she said when I nearly dropped the plate I was carrying. I turned to find Lacey standing there and my heart did a little flip and wiggled with happiness. I smiled, despite the fact that she’d scared the crap out of me.

“Sorry,” she said.

“It’s okay.” I took the plate back to the dishwasher and wiped my hands off before I came back out to see her.

“Dirty chai? And a BLTA?” She ducked her head as if she was ashamed that she was predictable.

“Yup. I’ve got a ton of work that I was supposed to do last night that I’m going to catch up on, if that’s okay.” How sweet. She was asking permission to work here. Some people acted like this was their living room, kicking off their shoes and playing funny videos at full volume. Without headphones. I’d gotten used to giving them glares to make them stop.

She took a seat in one of the corners in a fluffy chair that had a little table next to it for the food. She’d brought her laptop in a messenger bag and I couldn’t stop thinking about how graceful and beautiful all of her movements were. I wondered if she’d ever danced. She’d be good at it.

I looked at the clock and realized with all my thinking, I’d missed one of my breaks. Perfect timing. I sidled over to where Lacey sat and pulled over another chair.

“Mind if I join you for a few?” I asked. She opened her computer on her lap and beamed.

“I would like nothing more. Well, I’d like to have you for more than just a break, but I’ll take what I can get.” Now it was my turn to be shy. She made me feel like I was a

young teenager with a mountain-sized crush that was going to swallow me whole.

“Okay, then,” I said. She typed something into her laptop and then looked up at me.

“I’ve been working on some of the pictures I took of you, if you’d like to see them.” I wasn’t sure if I did, but I said yes.

Lacey turned the laptop around and I was astonished.

“Wow. I look . . . pretty?” It almost sounded like a question. My hair was a mess, and my cheeks were red and my eyes were a little wet from crying. But I had an intensity in my eyes that she’d captured. It was raw and it was real. She’d taken a picture of me. Not airbrushed. Not fancy. Just me.

“You look gorgeous. But then, you always do. I just had to get that emotion on your face because it was so gorgeous.”

“You sure you didn’t Photoshop me?” I asked, looking up at her again.

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“Just a little changing of the light and shadows and fixing some of the tint. But other than that, it’s just you.” I wasn’t so sure about that. But I liked the picture. I hoped that I could get a copy of it when she left.

“Would you like to see the others?” she asked and showed me some of the other raw images she had yet to work on. There was Daisy and Molly, gazing lovingly at each other, Daisy’s face covered in flour. A picture of Jen making sandwiches. Sal in the office, doing the books. A few of our customers, including Todd, the trans man who practically lived here when he wasn’t at work, and who we’d had a fundraiser for his top surgery. Ellie, who was genderqueer and disabled and had the best laugh of anyone I’d ever met. They were all there and they were all beautiful. My patchwork family.

“You really love them,” Lacey said.

“Yeah. I do.” I had tears on my face again.

“Why do you keep making me cry?” I asked, using a napkin to blot my cheeks.

“It’s unintentional, I assure you,” Lacey said. I balled up the napkin and she reached for my face.

I flinched. “What?”

She froze. “You have an eyelash on your cheek.” Oh, how cliché. I leaned forward and let her gather the eyelash with her elegant fingers.

“Make a wish,” she said, holding it up. I couldn’t see it because I was too busy staring into her eyes. Today they looked like black tea with too much honey. Perfect.

“Okay,” I said, blowing at the supposed eyelash. I didn’t make a wish. I was too distracted to think of one.

“I really want to kiss you right now. I wonder if that’s what you wished for,” Lacey said. She’d come closer and our faces were only inches apart. I could kiss her so easily. But I was at work. Not that I thought that Jen or Sal would demote me for kissing in the café (seeing as how Daisy and Molly sucked face, and did lots of things when Daisy was in the bakery), but still. I was still a little rattled from those strange dreams I had last night and trying to figure out my feelings.

“I probably shouldn’t,” I whispered and she nodded, pulling back.

“You’re right. We probably shouldn’t. Here.” I nodded and she looked back down at her laptop. There was a breath of awkward silence and I wasn’t sure what to say.

“I’ll, um, go get your chai and your BLTA,” I said, getting up. I went back to the kitchen to get her order and brought it out.

Lacey was quiet as I set down the plate and handed her the chai cup. I hated to think it was something I’d done.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out. “I’m sorry about the kissing. It’s just . . . you’re here and I want to kiss you, but you’re leaving. I know I said I was up for whatever, but I’m not sure if I am. I know that’s a bit like flip-flopping. Ugh, I don’t know what I’m trying to say.” I put my head in my hands.

A hand brushed my shoulder.

“It’s okay. Really. I didn’t think that this was going to be anything. There’s just . . . there’s no time. For anything substantial and I don’t know if I can do anything with you that isn’t . . . substantial.” That was how I felt, but it was kind of too late to be making this decision. I was already wading into a pool of feelings for her.

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” I said, sighing. Lacey sipped her chai and I let the music of the café distract me for a minute.

“Why does everything have to be so complicated?” she said, laughing a little.

“I don’t know. I think things get more complicated the older you get.” It was true, in my experience.

“I think you’re right.” She sighed and shook her head. “I wish my life wasn’t complicated. I think I’d like to try simple for a while. Instead of blowing around like a tumbleweed. I don’t even know if I could. But it would be interesting to try.” She turned her eyes on me and my stomach twisted with what she might be saying.

“Do you . . . do you think you might want to stick around here? For a little while?” I didn’t have the right to ask her to be here since I wasn’t offering her anything. I couldn’t offer her anything. I still barely knew her. What I did know, I liked. A lot.

“I’m not sure. But I can at least stay for another week? Just . . . take a break. I can’t remember the last time that I just sat around and did nothing. I’ve been working so hard for the past few years and I want to see if I can actually slow down and take a breath. This seems like as good a place as any. And it’s got a bonus. You’re here.” I felt myself blushing.

“Another week?”

“Another week.”

A lot could happen in a week.

Six

I had to go back to work before we really hashed things out, but I could barely contain my glee that she was staying for an extra week. Maybe I could even take a day or two off and we could hang out. I couldn't remember the last time I'd slowed down either. I was always moving, always doing something else so I didn't have to stop and think. I'd done it in my relationships, too. I'd moved from one person to the next, never slowing down long enough to see if something could work in the long-term.

Maybe we both needed to put on the brakes and breathe. Together.

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I found someone waiting by my car for me when I walked out of the library after locking up.

“Fancy seeing you here,” I said. She grinned and adjusted the adorable baseball cap she had on. She looked damn adorable.

“I know. I can’t imagine what I would be doing at a library.” I snorted.

“So, what can I do for you? You want to break in and read all the dirty books?” She leaned close and whispered conspiratorially to me.

“Do you have any gay books? Those are my favorites. With girls kissing other girls.” I pretended to gasp.

“So scandalous,” I whispered back.

“I know.” She wiggled her eyebrows and I couldn’t resist any longer. I reached for her face and she came forward to meet me.

It was like the first time. All fire and sweetness and her lush lips on mine. I’d never had someone kiss me who just completely swept me up in it. I couldn’t remember what else I was supposed to be doing, other than kissing Lacey Cole. Why would I ever want to do anything else?

She rested her forehead on mine.

“You’re incredible. I don’t even know your middle name, but you’ve just totally

ruined all my plans. And I like my plans, Anna.” I shivered at the way she said my name.

“I’m sorry I fucked with your plans.” I licked my lips, tasting her.

“No you’re not.” She pushed away from me and sighed.

“You want to do something?” she asked.

“What?” Everything was closed or closing soon. Ridiculous small town hours. At least in the summer we would have been able to get a drink until ten.

“I . . . don’t know. You’re the one who lives here. Show me your town.” Okay. I guess I could do that. It was a relatively warm night and we only needed light jackets to wander around without getting cold.

“Sure,” I said, motioning to the street. “Let’s go.”

^^*

We headed up and down the main street and then went down to the water. There was a dock that people often used in the summer as a place to get drunk, but tonight it was abandoned. Sometimes I would come down and stick my feet in the water, but you couldn’t pay me to do that now. Way too cold.

Still, Lacey and I sat on the dock and watched the moonlight drift over the waves.

“It’s nice here. It feels like this town moves at a different speed than the rest of the world. It’s calm. Slow. But in a good way. I like it.” I’d been other places, but not for a long time. I’d flirted briefly with the idea of moving to New York or Seattle, but that had always seemed impossible. Unreachable. So I’d just stayed here. And I was

happy. I was. I think?

“Does it make you happy? Traveling?” Lacey pulled her legs up and put her chin on her knees, looking out at the water. The wind tossed her hair around under the ballcap.

“It used to. I think it still does. But, like I said, I feel the need to stay still for a while. To breathe. To do nothing but sit and read a book, or watch movies all day. To be idle.” I liked the idea of it, but wasn’t sure if I could really do it.

“I could try being idle with you. I could take some days off, maybe.” She turned and smiled at me, hopeful.

“Really? I think I’d like that. A lot. Being idle with you.” I didn’t mean to make it sound sexy, but there was an undercurrent that I didn’t think I was the only one feeling. She brushed some of my hair behind my ear.

The ocean air was cold, but cleared my head. I’d always loved living near the salty air. It helped me get clarity sometimes.

“Then let’s be idle.”

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It got too cold to sit by the water, so we ended up being idle in the comfort of Lacey’s room with a few rum and Cokes, and some cheese and crackers.

“If you had a million dollars, what would you do with it?” I asked. We were getting to know each other by asking ridiculous questions. It was fun and silly and I was warm from the alcohol and I couldn’t remember being this relaxed in ages.

“Hmm,” she said, her face screwing up as she thought. So adorable. “Probably buy some boobs.” She looked down at her chest and pouted a little.

“How big would you go?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. I’m still waiting for mine to grow a little more.” They looked perfect to me, but I wanted her to be happy with them.

“I think I’d buy a villa in Tuscany,” I said. “Fix it up. Like that movie.” Lacey looked up from her chest.

“That sounds nice. I’ve never been to Italy.” I could tell she was still thinking about her body.

“Hey,” I said, reaching out and touching her arm. “I think you’re beautiful. Just the way you are. Okay? You don’t need to change anything. But if you want to, need to, that’s okay too. Do what you need to do for you. You deserve it. You deserve everything.” She bit her bottom lip and nodded.

“Thanks. I’m still figuring out what I want. It changes. Anyway, let’s talk about something else.” She went back to asking about what I’d put in my villa.

“Well, I think I’d love to have a huge garden. I mean, I can’t grow a damn thing, but maybe I could hire a gardener or something. I mean, if I had all that money, I don’t see why I couldn’t pay someone to grow stuff. And then I’d put my library with windows overlooking the garden so I could have a window seat to read in.” Of course I’d have a huge library. That was essential.

“And who would live with you in this villa, or would it just be you?” I knew what she was asking.

“I’m not sure. It might be awful lonely to be in a villa by myself. I might want to have a cat, at least. A black one.” She smiled slowly.

“Oh, really?”

“Uh huh.”

Lacey sipped at her drink and thought about that.

“I think Murder would like living in a villa. There’d probably be lots of birds in the garden for him to watch and plenty of places to hide and then jump out and scare us.”

“Us?” I said.

“Yeah, us.” That word was both terrifying and reassuring at the same time. I couldn’t figure out if I liked the sound of it or not. So many conflicting feelings.

“I could put in a photography studio. I think someone could take a lot of wonderful photographs in Italy,” I said. Her smile got wider.

“I think I could.” I changed the subject again, asking about her most-embarrassing moment. I then shared mine, and we went back and forth like that for hours. Well into the night.

“Do you want to just stay here?” she asked. I thought about it. Not a good idea. Too many temptations.

“It’s okay. I don’t live that far.” And I had my car. This was when living in a small town worked out in my favor.

“Okay,” she said, but I could tell she was a little hurt.

“It’s not that I don’t want to. I just . . . I think we should keep things . . .” I couldn’t find the right words.

“Uncomplicated?” she asked and I laughed.

“Yeah. That.” Lacey sighed and nodded.

“Yeah, you’re right. We should keep things as simple as possible. At least for now.”
For now.

“Sounds good. So . . . I’ll see you tomorrow?” I hoped I would.

“Yeah. You’ll see me tomorrow. We’ll do some more idling.” I couldn’t resist giving her one last kiss before I left.

“Goodnight, Lacey Cole.”

“Goodnight, Anna Corcoran,” she said.

Seven

The next few days were a blur of work, seeing Lacey, talking with Lacey, laughing with Lacey, and work. I wasn’t getting a whole lot of sleep, but I couldn’t remember being happier. I’d put in for five days off at the library and Violet Hill and I’d somehow gotten them. Mostly based on the fact that I almost never took vacation days and rarely called in sick. It paid to be a good employee apparently. I also got ahead on my design work, so I wouldn’t have to do that either. I was going to have five days of complete idleness with Lacey and I couldn’t wait.

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“So, are you like, together?” Ruthie asked as we took one of our breaks at work. Lacey was finishing up her interviews and taking some boudoir shots today so she wasn’t here, but she’d pretty much been camping out at the café for the past few days. I was going to miss the sight of her in the corner, concentrating and working hard.

“No. We’re just . . . I don’t even know what we are. She’s leaving soon. It’s not even a fling because we haven’t had sex.”

“Do you have to have sex to consider it a fling?” I thought about that.

“I don’t even know anything anymore. I’m just going with the flow I guess.” The flow was good. I loved the flow.

“So what happens when she leaves?” I gave her a look.

“Oh, sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. But it’s nice to think about someone else’s relationship for a few minutes.” I could understand her need for distraction.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Yeah, it’s okay. I’m moving on. I think. Maybe if I say I’m moving on enough times, it will actually happen.” Ouch. She was in a tough spot.

I wanted to say something comforting, but I couldn’t think of what.

“Shit,” she said, looking down at her phone.

“Break’s over.” So it was.

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A few days later was the eve of my five days of idleness.

“So. I have an idea. But I’m not sure if you’re up for it, but hear me out,” Lacey said, putting her hands up to stop any protestations I might have. But I didn’t know what she was going to suggest, so how could I protest?

“Hit me with it,” I said. We were back at the photography studio, hanging out with Murder and talking about our worst school pictures.

“I know I’ve already taken some pictures of you, but I was wondering if maybe . . . maybe you’d want to do a boudoir session? Before I go? Free of charge. No pressure.” I opened my mouth to say “hell no,” but then I thought about it. Why not? Who else would I be comfortable enough with to do something like this? If I put it off, then I was going to be eighty and wondering why I’d never done it. And how bad could it be? Really?

“I think I’ll do it.” Her eyes lit up.

“Really? I mean, not just because I’m excited about the prospect of seeing you in lingerie. I like photographing pretty people.” I bet she did. I laughed.

“You’re hilarious. So, do I have to do anything special?” I didn’t have much in the way of lingerie in my drawers.

“Just bring what you feel comfortable and sexy in. And maybe I’ll have a few little things for you to try on.” Oh, that was interesting. The idea of wearing something Lacey picked out for me turned me on. A lot.

“You’re trying to seduce me,” I said. She giggled.

“Am I that obvious?”

“Uh, yes?” Lacey hid her face.

“I’m not trying to seduce you,” she said, her voice muffled.

“You’re always trying to seduce me. Everything you do seduces me.” She lifted her head.

“Really?”

“Uh, yeah. I honestly don’t know how I keep my hands off you most of the time.” It was a serious challenge. But I wanted to keep things toned down. I was still totally confused about what to do with my feelings for her.

“Well, that’s a bit like the pot calling the kettle black,” she said. I stuck my tongue out at her.

“Real mature.” I shrugged.

“Never said I was.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Okay, so I’ll take your picture and I’ll keep my hands to myself and my seducing to a minimum. How’s that? I can be a professional.” I wanted to laugh, but I didn’t.

“I feel like I should make a bet with you about this,” I said.

“No way. I am really trying here.” She pretended to be serious, but failed. So cute.

“Stop being cute, you’re making it worse.”

“You’re seduced by cute?” Lacey raised one eyebrow.

“Always.”

“Oh, then I’ll try not to be cute.” She batted her eyelashes and pouted her lips and I groaned and threw a pillow at her.

“Stop it!”

“I can’t! I’m just too cute! It’s a disease!” I lunged at her and shoved her against the couch.

“If you don’t stop, I’m going to kiss you.” She gasped.

“Oh, no that would be terrible. The absolute worst thing to ever happen to me. Being kissed by Anna Corcoran. Please, no.” We both giggled and I shoved the pillow out

of the way so I could get to her.

But at the last second, I pulled back.

“No, I don’t think I’ll kiss you. Because that’s what you want.” She sat up.

“Are you serious?” Now who was frustrated?

“Yup. I’m not going to kiss you.” I moved away from her and pressed my lips together.

“Meanie,” she said, pouting. Damn, now she was back to being adorable again.

“Takes one to know one.” We were both being totally childish, but I didn’t care at all. I loved being silly with Lacey. It was so nice to be silly with someone.

“Fine, fine,” she said. “I don’t want to kiss you either.”

“Liar.”

She sighed.

“Whatever.”

^^*

The morning of my first day of idleness, I woke at my usual time. Of course. But I had a full day with Lacey planned and I was eager to get to it. First up: breakfast.

“I thought you said you were terrible at cooking?” Lacey said when I showed up with a waffle iron and ingredients for waffles.

“I am, but waffles are the one thing I make really well. It’s a gift.” I set the waffle iron on the table next to her coffeemaker and got to work mixing the ingredients. I’d also brought whipped cream and blueberries that I’d pilfered from Violet Hill. What they didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them. Plus, Daisy had been watching the whole time I’d been stealing them from the walk-in and hadn’t said a word.

“A gift, huh?” she said, coming up beside me and sliding her hand down my back. I leaned into her and she kissed me on the cheek.

“A gift,” I said, turning so I could meet her lips. She still took my breath away when she kissed me. Every single time. I didn’t know when or if I’d ever find someone who kissed me like that ever again.

“You’re such a good kisser,” she said when she pulled back.

“Am I?” I wasn’t aware that I had any particular talent at it. I mean, I’d never had any complaints, but I’d never won any awards for it either.

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“Mmmm, yes. You make me forget about everything.” She made a little groan of frustration and stepped away from me.

“So, I got you some stuff for your shoot. And I can do your hair and makeup if you want. Or if you want to go natural, we can do that too.” I wasn’t sure. I kind of liked the idea of getting all dolled up, but I wasn’t really like that normally. Not that I didn’t wear makeup, but I tended to keep it on the light side. My hair was dramatic enough already.

“Can we do maybe a little bit?” I asked.

“Of course. This is all you. This is all for you. Whatever you want to do that’s what we’ll do.” I liked the sound of that.

“Can I see what you bought?” I wasn’t sure if I wanted to. This photo shoot was already going to be tough.

Lacey went and got a bag from under the bed.

“So I got a little bit of everything.” She dumped it out on the bed. Oh. She really had gotten everything. There were plain cotton tanks with briefs, lacy bralettes, a sport’s bra, a pair of lacy boxer shorts, a barely-there thong and one other thing. A corset.

“I estimated on the sizes,” she said sheepishly. She’d estimated perfectly.

“They all look good,” I said, running my hands along the pink lace bralette. It had matching panties and was so pretty and delicate. I’d never owned anything like that.

I'd always worried the lace would just get torn in the wash.

"You like?" she asked, coming to stand beside me.

"I do. Very much. You didn't have to do this." I turned and found her face so close. Her eyes were more gold today. Almost like topaz.

"I wanted to. I wanted to buy something pretty for you to wear."

I brushed my hand against her cheek.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." I paused with our lips just a whisper away from each other.

"Do you think I could maybe see you in something like this," I asked, brushing my fingers along the lace set again. Lacey blushed like a sunset.

"I don't know. I'm so self-conscious about my body." I kissed her nose.

"It's okay. Just an idea. But no pressure. You don't have to do anything you don't want to, gorgeous." I put my arms around her and squeezed.

"You're the best," Lacey said.

"No, I'm not. I'm terrible." We both laughed.

"So, anyway," she said, breaking the hug. "I thought you could pick what you wanted and discard the rest." I picked up the lace bralette and matching panties and one of the cotton tanks.

“I don’t really think I’m a corset girl. I don’t fancy my ribs being smushed.” I shuddered.

“Yeah, I don’t blame you there. Okay, I’ll take the rest of these back if you don’t want them.” Lacey gathered up the rest of the items and put them back under the bed.

“So, I can get the studio tomorrow for a few hours, if you’re ready to do it.” Oh, wow. That was quick. I was kind of hoping I’d have a few more days to mentally prepare, but whatever. I could do this. I wasn’t going to be naked, for fuck’s sake.

“Sure, sounds good. Do I need to do anything special?” Lacey ran her hand through my hair.

“Just bring your gorgeous self and anything you’d like to wear. I have some jewelry in the studio already if you want to wear some. And some hair accessories, although, I think a simple shoot would be best for you. Is there any music you’d like?” Oh, I hadn’t thought of that. There was a lot to this thing.

“Um, whatever. I’m not picky.” Now I had a full day to stress and hope that she didn’t notice the cellulite on my ass, or the stretch marks on my thighs or that weird little scar I had on my belly from when I fell off my bike.

I mean, I wasn’t obsessed with my flaws, but photo shoots tended to kind of bring that stuff out in the open. I hoped that I looked okay.

“You’re going to be gorgeous,” she said, wrapping some of my hair around her fingers and tugging gently.

“I hope so.”

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There was one thing I needed to do before the shoot. Re-dye my hair. Lacey offered to help and I didn't think she knew what she was in for.

"Gloves," I said. "Gloves, gloves, gloves. Unless you want purple hands." She laughed and said maybe she did. We did the dyeing job in her bathroom and it was hilarious and we had a few mishaps and my mind drifted into "what if we did this all the time?" What if Lacey was my hair-dye helper for more than this one time? I really wished my brain would stop running with this stuff. It made it harder to think about her saying goodbye in a week. Not that I was counting the hours I had left or anything . . .

"And now we wait," I said as she set the timer and hid the white towels that were now splotched with purple. The inn was totally going to find those and bill her.

"I'll reimburse you," I said.

"Don't worry about it." She kissed my cheek and put on some music and started doing a goofy dance to keep me entertained. I started laughing so hard that I couldn't stop and tears streamed down my face.

"Stop it, I'm going to die," I wheezed as she moon-walked around the bathroom with a goofy smile on her face. My lungs were dying.

"Stop what? This?" She turned and did a dorky little butt wiggle.

“Yes, that! Stop. I can’t breathe.” Lacey started to laugh as I wiped my eyes. The timer went off and she took me over to the sink to wash out the color.

“If this was blue, it would look like Smurf blood.” I snorted and nearly banged my head on the sink.

“You have to stop being so funny or I’m going to injure myself.” She rinsed the color out and then wrapped my head in a towel.

“This is the most fun I’ve had in a bathroom in a long time,” she said and I started giggling again. She’d hit my funny bone and now I couldn’t seem to stop.

“Ugh, I didn’t mean that the way it sounded!” she wailed, but all was lost. We both had a laughing fit until we were rolling around on the floor and gasping.

“I can’t remember the last time I had this much fun with anyone,” she said, reaching out and taking my hand.

“Same,” I said, turning my head to meet her eyes. We were laying on a bathroom floor, but it didn’t matter. My hair was wrapped in a towel, but it didn’t matter. I was right where I wanted to be. With Lacey Cole.

“I really like you, Anna,” she said in a hushed voice.

“I really like you, Lacey.” She took a deep breath.

“That’s kind of a problem.”

Yes, it was.

“You’re leaving in a week,” I said. It was actually six days, not that I was counting.

“I know. But I’ve already pushed leaving by a week. What’s another?” But what would two more weeks do? She’d still be leaving, she’d just be prolonging it and making it worse. Perhaps it was better to end things now. Then my heart would only be a little broken.

I’d recover. Probably.

“I don’t know what to do here,” she said.

“I know. It’s a rock and a hard place.” She groaned and looked at the ceiling.

“If I go, I could come back. I could always come back.” She could, that was true. But what was I supposed to do? Just sit and wait for her? That wasn’t fair to either of us.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Me either.”

All we could do was enjoy the next few days and see what happened. Six days could change everything.

Eight

Our second day of idleness started with me getting my hair and makeup done by Lacey. Apparently she was good at that as well. She was just good at everything.

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Murder twisted himself around my feet, meowing for attention. I fed him treats when Lacey wasn't looking. I wanted him to love me. By the way he was trying desperately to burrow his way into my lap, I'd succeeded.

Lacey rolled my hair up and pinned it and applied what felt like a ton of makeup to my face, but when she showed me the final product, I just looked like a more polished version of myself. She did an amazing job. My shiny violet hair fell in soft waves over my shoulders. All I needed to do now was put on the bralette and panties and pose. She'd set up a few different scenes and I wasn't going to admit that I'd practiced in my mirror at home.

Spoiler alert: I was not good at making sexy faces. I hoped that I would discover some hidden skill when Lacey turned her camera on. I didn't have a whole lot of faith that would happen.

"Okay, beautiful, all you need to do is get changed and then we're ready to roll." She'd turned on some music and it turned out to be Adele. Interesting choice.

I scurried toward the bathroom and was pleased to see a robe in there for me. She'd also turned up the heat so I wouldn't get cold. I slipped into the lingerie and looked at myself in the mirror. I looked like me, but better. Sexy. Or at least as close to being sexy as I was going to get.

"You can do this," I said to myself and then realized I was talking to myself. Yikes. I shook my head and put the robe on, cinching the tie. Lacey Cole was going to see me in my underwear. I'd spent at least an hour in the shower last night getting rid of every offending hair that I could find. Now I was worried that I'd missed one or two.

Not that it mattered, she could airbrush them out. But still.

“You ready?” Lacey called to me and I turned and opened the door.

“Yeah,” I said, not sounding very confident. I came out to find her fiddling with the lights.

“Hey,” I said, my hands still on the ties of the robe. It just skimmed the top of my thighs, so this was the most unclothed I’d been with her.

The song switched to “Make You Feel My Love” which was a little disconcerting. I wondered if she’d planned that.

“Wow,” she said, staring at me. “You look amazing.” I looked down to make sure I wasn’t falling out anywhere.

“Um, thanks.” I fiddled some more with the robe and then she shook her head as if to clear it.

“Oh, yeah. Right. Pictures.” She was blushing. “So, what I thought we could do is have you start out sitting, to get you comfortable, and then move to standing and then the bed. But only if you’re comfortable. I’m only doing this if you want to, okay? You don’t have to take a single shot if you don’t want to. Or, I could take them all and then you decide that you want to delete them. This is all for you. You’re in charge, Anna.” I held the robe a little closer and nodded.

“Okay,” she said and motioned me over to a red velvet tufted chair that looked like something from a professor’s library.

“If you want to keep the robe on for the first few, that’s more than okay. I’m mostly going to take a few test shots to make sure the lighting is right.” I looked into her

eyes and instantly calmed down. Her voice soothed me.

“Uh huh,” I said, sitting down. She arranged me with my hands in my lap and fixed my hair.

“Gorgeous,” she said, winking and stepping back to pick up the camera.

“Here we go,” she said.

“Do you want me to look at you?” I asked, trying not to move too much.

“Just stay right like that,” she said from behind the camera. She crouched down and clicked a few times.

“One, two, three,” she’d say and then there would be the click. I tried not to blink. Sure, I’d had my picture taken before, but not under these circumstances.

“Good, good,” she would interject. I wasn’t sure what, exactly, I was doing that was good, but I guess it was working?

She stopped and moved back.

“Now I want you to think about something warm. Something that makes you happy.” I looked at her.

“Now look away,” she said, but I shook my head.

“I just want to look at you.” She froze.

“I’m sorry,” I said, ducking my head and blushing. I hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

“No, it’s . . . it’s okay. I’m just a little taken aback.” I peeked up at her. She had a stunned look on her face.

“Sorry,” I said again.

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“Don’t be. I feel the same way. I was just hoping you weren’t going to find out my ulterior motives for wanting you to do this.” I couldn’t hold back a laugh.

“You aren’t as stealthy as you think you are, Lacey Cole.”

“I know. But I was hoping you’d let me get away with it.” I took a breath, stood up and dropped the robe.

“Maybe I will.”

I sat back down and tried not to think about all my flaws that were now on full display.

“Holy shit,” she said in hushed tones. “Holy fucking shit.” I’d never really gotten that reaction before. Lacey sort of tipped over and sat on her ass, holding her camera up so it didn’t hit the floor.

“Are you okay?” I asked, trying not to fidget.

“Yeah, I think so. I’m not really sure.” Her voice had a dreamy quality to it and her eyes were wide.

“Seriously, are you okay?” I was starting to get worried.

Lacey nodded slowly.

“Yup. Just fine. I’m just staring at the most beautiful human I’ve ever seen and I can’t

believe you're real, but sure, totally fine." I looked down at myself. Just a regular body. A little chunkier than I'd been a few years ago. A few scars. Stretch marks. Uneven boobs. Chunky legs. Nothing special. I wasn't a radiant beauty. But she was looking at me as if I was a priceless work of art.

"You're stunning. Absolutely stunning." She finally got up and aimed her camera again.

"If you say so," I said.

"I do." She started clicking again and I followed her instructions, looking in a few different directions, playing with my hair, moving my hands. I got more comfortable as the time ticked on and she actually got me to laugh a few times by making funny faces at me. Things got less serious and I started to have fun and loosen up.

She had me do some standing poses and I felt kind of silly trying to be alluring, but she assured me that I was doing a good job.

And then, we moved to the bed. She had me start off sitting and then resting against a pile of soft white pillows.

The more I'd watched her work, the more turned on I'd become and I seriously wanted her. Everything she did was erotic and she was in her element. I couldn't stop myself from reaching out and taking the camera from her hands.

"What are you doing?" she asked, but she let go of it.

"Turning the tables," I said, figuring out which button to push to take the picture. She seemed hesitant at first, but I got a few shots of her and then I stood up.

"Come here." I patted the bed and she sat down on it. Today she wore a faded t-shirt

and jeans and the shirt clung to her body so perfectly. She was a stunner.

“Relax,” I said, brushing my hand through her hair.

“I’m not good at this,” she said nervously.

“You’re doing fine.” I took a few shots and then made a face at her to get her to laugh. I had no idea if I was doing this right, but that didn’t matter.

“Okay, okay,” she finally said, taking the camera back, but it was to set it on the floor.

“I need to kiss you,” she said, reaching for me.

“If you must,” I said, leaning down. She pulled me onto the bed and I squealed a little. Lacey rolled me until she was on top and I was pressed against the bed. Oh.

“Hello,” I said, a little breathless.

“Hello,” she said, her voice low. She braced herself on her arms, but there wasn’t much between us. The scraps of lace I was wearing seemed insubstantial at the moment.

“Fuck, I want you so much,” she said, just barely pressing her hips against mine. Just enough to make me moan.

“I want you, Lacey. So much.” So much I was losing my mind. This was torture. Pure, irritating torture.

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“Can I touch you?” she asked, and I nodded. She started at the top of my head, running her fingers through the loopy curls she’d created earlier. Her fingers traced my ears and skipped down my neck to my chest and roamed across my breasts and then down to my navel. Her touch became hesitant.

“It’s okay,” I said and she moved lower, just barely caressing the apex of my thighs. I arched against her hand and I couldn’t stop the moan that came from my mouth.

“You feel incredible,” she said, moving against me again. If she kept this up, I was going to combust.

Combust from lust.

She lowered her head and kissed me, but I pushed against her and deepened the kiss. Her hand continued its slow torture even though I started rhythmically arching against her. She didn’t take it further than that, and I wanted her to. I also wanted to touch her.

I pushed my hand against her shoulder and she reared back.

“I’m sorry.” She thought she’d done something wrong.

“It’s okay! You didn’t do anything. I just want to touch you. Is that okay?” She thought about it a minute.

“You can stop me anytime. For any reason.”

“Sure.” Knowing that she was still shy, I went slow, starting with her face like she’d started with mine. When I got to her chest, I waited, to make sure it was okay with her. I brushed against the soft curves there and I wanted to fill my hands with her. I knew she would look so amazing naked, but that would come with time. I hoped. It would come with trust.

My hand ventured lower, dipped into the curve of her belly button and then rested at the top of her jeans.

I waited again, but she urged me on and I covered her. I hadn’t asked about any surgeries because it hadn’t been the time. I hadn’t had the right to know.

“I haven’t . . . I mean, I’m still,” she said, her face going red. I knew what she meant.

“It’s okay, Lacey. I’ll work with whatever you’re working with.” I smiled and cupped her through her jeans. She moaned and I was pleased when she pushed herself against me. I stroked her again and she let me. I moved so I could use more of my hand and squeezed her gently.

“Fuck,” she said.

“More?” I asked, doing it again.

“Yes.” I wanted more of her, so I unbuttoned her jeans and slid my hand in, palming the outside of her underwear.

“Holy fuck,” she said, her eyelids fluttering.

“You feel so good,” I said, stroking her.

“You feel so good,” she said, her hands gripping the comforter.

She looked incredible like this, all wild and undone. Like a goddess. I started a rhythm, trying to find what she liked. At one point, she asked me to stop.

“Are you okay?” I asked, pulling my hand back.

“Yeah. I just want to touch you, too.” She wiggled her fingers and I laughed.

“Okay, we can do tandem.” We moved so that we could both have full use of our hands and still look at each other. It was hard to maintain composure and keep up a steady rhythm when she was touching me, but I did my best. When she went faster, I went faster and we started building towards the peak together. Sweat broke out on her face and both our breathing took on another pitch. At one point, Murder jumped on the bed and stared at us, but wandered off to lick himself.

“Little pervert,” she panted and then moaned. “I’m close.”

“Me too,” I said and I wondered if we would come at the same time. The combination of touching her and the way she touched me had me building and building until I crested and my hips jerked against her hand. I felt her coming just after I started and that just made it even better. Stars exploded behind my eyes and the storm seemed to go on and on.

When things finally started to calm, I didn’t want to move. My entire body was electric. I hadn’t come that hard in . . . ever, maybe.

“Fuck,” she said, looking at the ceiling. I took my hand back to find it was sticky and wet.

“Sorry about that,” she said, still trying to catch her breath.

“No worries,” I said, getting up and washing off in the bathroom. When I came back,

she was a little red.

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“Do you need to clean up?” I asked and she nodded. “No worries.” She shuffled off to the bathroom and came back a little while later.

“Well, I wasn’t expecting that to happen,” she said, sitting back down on the bed.

“Me neither. But I liked it. Even though it was unexpected. Sometimes the unexpected things in life are the best.” I got up and kissed her softly.

“It was amazing. You felt amazing.”

“So did you.” She caressed the back of my neck. “Can I take a picture of you like this? You’re glowing.” I didn’t see why not. I got back on the bed and she arranged me again and snapped a few shots.

“You really are astonishingly gorgeous.”

“So are you.”

Nine

Once we both came down from orgasm high, we realized we were starving. I put my regular clothes back on and we headed to Zukos for pizza. We both consumed way too much melted cheese and practically had to waddle back to her room at the inn.

“So, I have a question for you,” she said as I lay on the couch and moaned about eating too much.

“Fire away,” I said, putting my hand on my stomach.

“What would you think . . . about me not leaving in a week?” I sat up and stared at her.

“Are you serious?” She bit her lip and nodded.

“I know that we’re not even technically doing anything and I wouldn’t be staying just for you. I like it here. I’ve found a peace that I haven’t witnessed anywhere else. I want to see what it would be like to stay in one place and I’d like this to be the place. Or at least give it a try.” My mouth dropped open.

“Are you serious?” I said again, getting up from the couch and walking toward her.

“Yes.”

I tackled her onto the bed and kissed the shit out of her.

“Yes, I totally want you to say, are you kidding? I was going to try and get up the courage to ask you, but I thought that was totally selfish, but I wanted to give it a shot and I’m rambling and I don’t even care. Yes. I want you to stay, Lacey Cole. I want to find out what we could be. And I want you to be where you feel happy. And if it’s here, then that would be amazing. But I don’t want you to feel obligated.” She put her finger against my lips.

“I’m not obligated. Honored. Stunned that you’d want me to stick around.” I shook my head.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Only sometimes.” We kissed again, but she pulled back.

“Oh, I have a question. Can Murder stay with you until I find another place?” I laughed.

“Of course. Your cat is my cat.” Her eyes narrowed.

“Don’t you dare steal him. He’s mine.”

I pretended to be offended by the notion.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Liar.”

I stopped her protestations with another kiss.

Epilogue

“He loves me more,” I said, as Murder perched on top of a stack of boxes that we had yet to unpack. Lacey had sent for the last of her things from storage and we were moving her into her new apartment. Our new apartment.

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We'd only been together for a few months, but my lease had been up and she'd wanted me out of that crappy studio. So when she'd asked me if I would rent a place with her, I had no objections.

"It's only because you sneak him treats," she said, fiddling around in one of the boxes for the wine glasses she thought she had in there. We'd gotten everything inside the apartment. Now we just had to unpack it, but first we needed a drink.

"I can only find a mug with the word 'fuck' on it and a cereal bowl with a unicorn on it," she said, holding them up.

"Good enough," I said and popped the bottle of wine, filling the unconventional glasses.

Lacey Cole was my girlfriend and we were living together. I didn't know much beyond that, but I didn't need to. I was happy. She was happy. I was still working my three jobs, but I'd cut back a little on my hours so I could have more time with Lacey. More time to be idle. To be still. She was still working on her project and was looking at launching it soon. Instead of staying in a new place, she would go for a weekend, or a few days. She also had been taking photos at her friend's studio and was building up quite a list of clients and had several weddings booked this summer.

I took the offensive mug, leaving her with the bowl.

"To love," I said, holding the mug up.

"That's a cliché," she said, making a face.

“So?”

“So, we should toast to something original.”

“Like what?”

“To . . . boxes!” She raised her bowl. We were surrounded by them.

“Okay, fine. To boxes. And love,” I added.

Lacey smiled.

“To boxes and love.” We both raised our “glasses” and clinked them together.

Murder yowled in protest.

“No, you can’t have any wine,” Lacey said. “Wine is for humans only.” We sipped and set our makeshift wine glasses down.

“Come here,” Lacey said, holding her arms out.

“What are we doing?”

“Dancing.” We started to sway to nonexistent music.

“This is my favorite song,” I said.

“What song is that?” Lacey said, dipping me. I arched back and then looked up at her.

“Ours.”

“Mine too,” she said.

One

“I swear, if I don’t get out of here I’m going to lose it,” I said to my cousin Anna, holding my phone against my shoulder as worked on packing up my dorm room. Staying with her this summer was my absolute last resort. I could not live at home with my parents suffocating me. Plans to crash with friends had fallen through, so she was my only hope. She’d moved in with her girlfriend, Lacey, who traveled a lot doing photography, so I didn’t think it would be too much of an imposition. I’d sleep on the couch; I didn’t even care. I would sleep on the damn floor.

“Hey, it’s okay, Serena. Of course you can stay with us. You’re family.” Not only were we family, but she was also one of the only other queer people I knew. My parents didn’t understand my demisexuality or my demiromanticism or my bisexuality and I was tired of trying to explain myself to them so they’d believe I didn’t just make words up from reading too many Tumblr posts.

“Thank you,” I said, those two words not enough to express how I felt. I sat down on one of the boxes that contained part of the crap from my dorm room. Honestly, I would have loved to go straight to Anna’s from here, but I didn’t want to shove all of this junk in her small apartment, so I had to go home first.

Home. It was a strange word, and it didn’t feel the way it was supposed to feel. Home was supposed to be warm and safe and the people in it were supposed to accept you unconditionally.

Or maybe that was just for Hallmark cards.

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Time was ticking away, and I needed to get from school to home and then to Anna's. It was going to be a long day.

^^*

"Thank fuck," I said, nine hours later when I finally collapsed on Anna's couch and she handed me a glass of wine. Lacey's cat, Murder, had commandeered my lap and was purring loudly.

"You doing okay?" she asked and I stuck my hand out and waved it side to side before going back to petting Murder.

"Things go okay with your parents?" I rolled my eyes.

"What do you think?" I seriously needed a shower, both to wash off the sweat of moving everything and to get the feel of being with my parents off my skin.

"I'm sorry," she said, rubbing my arm. "It seems to run in the family." Our mothers were sisters and seemed cut from the same problematic cloth. Her parents still lived in town, but she never saw them. I'd grown up just a few towns over, and the chances of seeing mine were also slim. Thankfully.

"Where's Lacey?" Anna's eyes took on a dreamy cast when she thought about her girlfriend. They'd met by chance and had been serious right from the beginning. I was expecting a ring sometime soon.

"She's off in Vermont this week. She's got to take work when she can get it, but

having her gone a lot is hard.” She sipped her wine and sighed.

I hadn’t dated anyone in a while. Actually, the last person I dated was Fiona, my BFF from high school. I’d fallen hard for her and . . . things hadn’t worked out. I still stalked her on social media every now and then. She was off at school in New York. I tried not to think about her too much; I was still raw.

“Are you sure she’s okay with me being here?” I asked. The apartment wasn’t huge, but it had a second bedroom that Lacey used as her in-home photography studio, and that was where I’d be sleeping. I was a little nervous about messing anything up or tripping on some of the equipment when I went to the bathroom in the middle of the night, but Anna had assured me that I could make myself at home on the spare bed that Lacey sometimes used for her boudoir photos.

“Of course. It’ll be fun to have a roommate for a little while. Plus, you can keep me company when she’s gone. What else do you have planned over the summer?” I was hoping to avoid this part, but I needed another favor from Anna.

“Do you think maybe they might need help washing dishes at the café? I will literally work for anything. I just need something to do during the day and make a little money so I can pay you rent.” She shook her head, setting her wine glass down on a coaster on the coffee table.

“No, you’re not paying rent. We already agreed to that. You can help with groceries or utilities, but that’s it. You’re family.” Anna and I had hung out a lot growing up and I’d always felt such a kinship with her, more than some of my other cousins. I wondered if it was the queer in me recognizing the queer in her before we knew.

“And I’m sure we can find something for you at the café.” I breathed a sigh of relief. That was two things out of my way. Now I just had to actually get through the summer.

“Plus, if you wanted to give me a hand with some of my publicity work, I could pay you for some of that. Just like, sending out emails and stuff like that.” Anna was currently working three jobs: waitress at the café, part-time librarian, and she also did freelance publicity for authors. It made my head hurt.

“Oh, wow, that would be great. I could even add that to my resume when I start looking for internships.” I was an English major in college, with the goal of being involved in publishing somehow. Either as an author, editor, or literary agent. I wasn’t sure yet. That was yet another reason I wanted to stay with Anna—we had so much in common. I was definitely going to be raiding her bookshelves. Most of my books had to go back to my parent’s house, but thank goodness for e-readers.

“Sure! Anything to help out.” She put her arm around me and gave me a squeeze.

“I know it hasn’t been easy for you and I want to help. I really do. I wish I’d had someone when I was your age, and I want to be there for you.” I tried to duck my head and wipe away the few tears that escaped my eyes.

“Thanks. That means more to me than you can ever know. I just . . . Thank you, Anna. Seriously, thank you so much.” She grinned and hugged me again.

Things were going to be okay. I was going to be okay.

Two

A few days later I started work at the Violet Hill Café as a hostess-slash-dishwasher-slash-whatever. Basically, I would go in and do the stuff that no one else wanted to, or had time to do. Like taking down the old ads on the corkboard, making sure the tables weren’t wobbling, and helping Daisy in the bakery. I loved that part the most.

“So now everyone wants stuff like from The Great British Bake-Off and I want to be

like I'm not Mary Berry! I haven't been baking from infancy. But I'll give it a shot," she said with a laugh as she rolled up perfectly-filled chocolate croissants. I thought all of her pastries were beautiful, and I could definitely not do anything that looked that good. Still, she was letting me try, which was cool too. Today, I was learning about croissants.

Her face was covered in flour, as usual, but I liked Daisy. She knew what she was good at. Her undercut was also totally badass and I envied her bravery in rocking it. I had wanted to do something adventurous with my hair for a long time, but didn't know what. Today I had it twisted back in a boring blonde ponytail. Blah. I hated feeling blah. I didn't want to feel blah anymore. I need a change. I need to shake things up.

"Hey," Anna said, drawing my attention as she shoved armfuls of dirty plates back on the counter toward the dishwasher. "Can you do those and then come help me out front? I just need someone to take a few orders and do some seating. I'm desperate." Sometimes in the afternoons the café filled up and there was a line out the door of people waiting. It stressed me the fuck out, but I needed this job and working at a queer-friendly (and queer owned) café was more than I could ask for.

After Lacey did a profile on Jen and Sal and the café (including Anna and some of the more colorful customers), people had been traveling to come here, if only because they knew it was a safe place to be.

"Sure, give me a few minutes and I'll be out," I said, going to work on the dishes. I got them in the industrial washer, wiped my hands, and put on an apron.

Whoa, Anna was right. People were cramming themselves into nooks and corners, some even standing while sipping their coffee. It was going to be A Day.

I took a breath and thanked my lucky stars that I had worked weekends waitressing

up at school to make extra money and could pretty much go into that headspace without a lot of effort.

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I slicked on a smile and seated the first couple, who were about my age and painfully cute. They kept looking around in wonder, including studying my nametag that said “Serena, she/her” on it. I gave them menus and poured water and said I’d be back to take their orders.

“Serena?” a voice said behind me. I nearly crashed into one of the tables in all the chaos.

I whirled around because I knew that voice.

“Fi,” I said before I could stop myself. The café faded away as I stood there, locked in on her brown eyes. I hadn’t seen her in person in years, but here she was, in the café, waiting for a table.

I opened and closed my mouth a few times and she gave me a shy smile.

“Long time no see,” she said and I looked from her to the girl she was with. Tattoos, choppy brown hair, and a septum piercing. I looked back at Fiona.

My brain couldn’t figure out what I was supposed to be saying or doing. All I could do was drink in her familiar face with the freckles all across her nose and cheeks. Her skin was tanned and her hair was cut in a cute long bob that framed her face.

Oh, shit. I was staring. I was staring and I needed to stop. I ripped my eyes away from hers and blinked a few times. Right. I was in a café. I was a waitress. I needed to get them to a table.

“Um, follow me,” I said, spinning around and leading them to a table that had just emptied and been wiped down. I robotically showed them to it and then handed out menus and tried to pour water without spilling too much. I couldn’t look at her.

“Hey,” a soft voice said and a freckled hand touched my arm. I looked at her just as I was about to scurry away.

I looked from Fiona to the girl she was with and realized that they were probably together. Well, shit. She’d moved on, and why shouldn’t she? We’d dated in high school when neither of us knew what the fuck we were doing. I still didn’t know what I was doing, but at least I had a few years of experience under my belt.

“I’ll be back to take your order in a few,” I said quickly, because there were people still waiting to be seated and I didn’t want to get fired my first week. I had no backup if I lost this job.

I scampered away, but I couldn’t stop thinking about seeing her. About what happened the last time I saw her. About what had happened in her life since. Clearly, a lot.

As I went through the motions, I kept part of my attention on her table. At last, I was able to go ask them what they wanted. Maybe I could figure out what the relationship was.

“Okay, so what can I get you?” I asked, poised and staring at my order pad.

“I’ll have a why-are-you-acting-like-we-don’t-know-each-other and a side salad,” Fiona said, which made my head snap up.

“What?” I said.

“I . . . think I’m going to find the bathroom,” her companion said, easing out of her chair and basically running away. Great.

“Okay, that was mean, but at least it got your attention,” she said, and I was locked into her eyes again. Such lovely eyes. I remembered the look in them when we’d . . .

Yeah, I didn’t need to think aboutthatright now.

“I’m working,” I said, gesturing around. “And you’ve moved on, so . . . I don’t know what there is to say.” I started to sweat. I mean, sweat more than I was already sweating. With all the bodies in here, it’s heats up quick.

She looked confused and then her eyes went wide.

“Oh! You thought I was with . . . no, no, no! Trick is just a friend. She has a girlfriendanda partner and I don’t think she’s looking for anyone right now. Not that that would make a difference. Anyway, we’re not together.” She spoke in a rush and I almost didn’t catch everything.

“Look, this is going to have to wait. I just, I can’t do this right now.” I pleaded with my eyes and she nodded.

“Of course. Of course. When do you get off?” I glanced over at the clock.

“In about an hour.”

“Okay, cool. I’ll just wait for you. If that’s okay?” Did I really have a choice? I mean, I was glad to know she wasn’t with the sexy girl she’d come in with. Wait, no I wasn’t!

Fiona Davis had scrambled my brain.

^^*

One extremely painful hour later, I took off my apron and told Anna I would see her later. She had a later shift, so I would be at the apartment alone. Lacey wasn't coming back until tomorrow.

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Fiona was out front at one of the café tables, fiddling with her phone. Trick? or whatever the girl's name was that she'd been with, had left.

"Hey," I said, taking the empty seat next to her.

"Hey," she said, setting her phone down. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" I asked, crossing my arms. I was on my guard because my heart was still pretty bruised from how things had ended.

"For acting like that. I shouldn't have said that stuff while you were working. I guess I just got ahead of myself when I saw you. It's been so long." She gave me a tentative smile, but I was still on my guard.

"It has. What are you doing here?" I asked, even though she'd grown up two towns over. The area was so small that the high school we'd attended had served seven small towns.

"Home for the summer from school. I wouldn't be here if I had found any other way. What about you?" I remembered how her parents reacted when we'd started dating. To my face they'd been cordial and nice, but I could tell under the surface they weren't okay with it. They just weren't as blatant as mine.

"I'm staying with my cousin, Anna, and her girlfriend. She got me the job here." She nodded and picked at a little rust spot on the table.

"I'm not with Trick. I know I said that, but the look on your face said that you

thought we were together. She's just the only friend I know around here who knows what it's like to be queer. She was a few years ahead of us in school. Do you remember her?" Oh, shit. Yeah. She went by a different name then, which I couldn't recall off the top of my head, and she hadn't had any of the tattoos, but now she was ringing a distant bell in my memory.

"Yeah, now I remember." She breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm not seeing anyone. Not that you asked or wanted to know. But I'm not." I didn't ask and I didn't need to know. But still. A knot in my stomach started to loosen.

"Now that we've gotten that out of the way, tell me what you've been up to. I mean, I stalk you on Facebook, and I thought about sending you messages so many times." I'd thought the same thing. But I'd never had the courage to actually send her a message. What would I have said? Hey, remember how we broke up and you shattered my heart, so, how's it going? Not so much.

I was still on edge, but being with her was making me relax against my will. She had always been like that. When I had been in chaos and confusion, Fiona had been like gravity. She'd centered me and helped me focus and brought calm. It was something I couldn't quantify or explain, and it was one of the reasons I'd become friends with her. That was before either of us knew we were queer. At the time, we'd just thought we were really good friends. Good friends who made out sometimes. A lot. Looking back, we'd both been adorably clueless.

"I'm so sorry. For what happened between us. I think . . . I think I just got scared and confused and I bailed. I bailed on us." Oh, we were really doing this now. I looked around, but no one else was paying attention.

"You broke my fucking heart," I said and she flinched. Good.

“I know. I broke mine in the process.” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“I loved you. And that wasn’t easy for me, you know. I don’t love just anyone like that.” Being demi, I usually only went for people that I had a deep connection, like friendship, with before I could even begin to consider them boyfriend or girlfriend material. I had to know someone, really know them, before the other feelings came into play. I honestly didn’t know how other people could just pick someone to date and be like “sure, yeah, that one.” How the hell did that work? Things with Fiona had just sort of happened, but I hadn’t had anything like that with someone since, and not for lack of trying.

“I know, I know.” Her face crumpled and she started to cry. Oh shit. Instinctively, I reached out to her and somehow she sort of fell over and into my lap.

This was an interesting turn of events.

“I’m so sorry, Cricket.” I nearly flinched at the sound of the nickname she’d given me. It was a long ridiculous story that I didn’t really entirely remember, but the nickname had stuck. I’d called her Ladybug. I hadn’t thought about those names in a long time.

She wiped her eyes with her hands and looked up at me. Her face was blotchy, but she was still so fucking beautiful that it made me ache.

“Hi,” she said in a quiet voice.

“Hi, Ladybug,” I said, pushing her hair back from her face. She smiled and sat up, as if realizing what she’d done.

“Oh, shit, I am sorry about that too.” She dove out of my lap and got back into her seat, wiping her eyes with a napkin.

“I’m just a hot mess, aren’t I?” she said, laughing. A beautiful hot mess.

That same feeling was creeping back and I wasn’t sure what to do about it.

“Do you want to go somewhere to talk?” I blurted out. Now that we’d started, there were more things to say. Stuff we needed to get out. When we’d broken up, it had felt like we’d stopped everything in the middle of a sentence. I needed to finish it and put a period on it so I could move on. And I was pretty sure I wasn’t the only one who still needed closure of some kind.

She nodded.

“Okay, sure.”

Three

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We ended up at our old high school, which wasn't far from the café. I sat down on a bench near the track and she sat next to me. The night was steamy and warm. No doubt in a few hours the temperature would drop and I'd be shivering on the couch at Anna's apartment. Maine weather was fun like that.

I looked over at Fiona and I could tell she wasn't thinking about the weather. Her eyes were far away, maybe lost in memories. Shit, now I was too. I turned and looked at the bleachers. The same bleachers we'd made out under years ago.

"We were young, weren't we?" she said quietly.

"Yeah, we were." We still were. I honestly didn't feel like an adult yet. I was still waiting for confidence and certainty.

"I loved you, you know that, right? I really, really did." I knew. I'd loved her too. A part of me still did.

"Then why did you end it?" I asked. This was what we were here for. To dredge up the old so we could get it all out in the open and move on.

She sighed and then I saw silent tears rolling down her cheeks. She didn't brush them away.

"So many reasons that don't seem nearly as important as they did back then. I was scared and worried and questioning everything and I knew we were going away to college and I just didn't see how we could make it work. It wasn't that I didn't love you enough. It was that I let other things get in the way. And I wrecked the best thing

that ever happened to me.” Fiona sniffed and looked down at her folded hands.

“I’m sorry, too. I made mistakes. This isn’t all on you.” And it wasn’t. We’d fought about petty things and I’d made careless comments. We’d both been young and it was the first relationship for us both. I didn’t know how to have a girlfriend and she hadn’t either. But there had been good moments too. Really good moments.

“If I could go back in time, I would have fought for you. For us. I wouldn’t have let all that other bullshit make me afraid.” She finally turned to me and leaned closer.

“I miss you so much, Cricket. I think about you every day. Sometimes it feels like you’re just waiting in the next room. I expect you to walk in and smile at me and tell me everything’s going to be okay.” I swallowed around a lump in my throat. Tears were threatening to fall and I didn’t want to let them. I shut off a lot of things after the breakup because I didn’t want to leave myself that vulnerable again.

“I miss you, too,” I said, nearly choking on the words. She leaned over and put her head on my shoulder. Just that touch and I’m thrown back into high school when we used to drive around and sing to the radio. When we used to get soft serve cones; chocolate for her and vanilla for me. When we used to kiss in the backseat of her car and get our legs all tangled up.

“I had this weird feeling I was going to see you today,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I had a dream about you last night. That usually means I’m going to see someone. When I dream about them.” Fiona was a big believer in dreams and astrology and that kind of thing. I wasn’t so sure. I was more practical, I guess. I wasn’t as much of a dreamer as she was.

“What kind of dream was it?” I asked, scooting a tiny bit closer to her so our legs were touching.

“You were just . . . there. Standing beside me. Wearing this beautiful white dress that floated around.” I snorted. I couldn’t imagine myself wearing a gauzy white dress. Currently I had on ripped jeans, an old tank, and Chucks that were so dirty they should be thrown out, but I didn’t have another pair.

“And I looked over at you and you smiled and kissed me.”

“Anything else?” I was wondering if the dream had taken a dirty turn.

“No. You were just . . . there. And I felt safe again.” She turned her head and our faces were so close that her breath stirred the little wisps that had escaped my ponytail.

“And then there you were in the café, and I wondered if it was a sign.” If I hadn’t been so captivated by her, I would have rolled my eyes. Fiona and her signs.

“A sign of what? Doom?” I had thought she would laugh, but she didn’t. Instead she raised her hand and stroked her fingertips on my cheek.

“No. A sign that we weren’t done. Not yet.” I moved my face away.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. You don’t think that your dream and then running into me is a sign that we’re getting back together, do you? Because no.” I crossed my arms and moved away from her. My skin buzzed with the way I used to feel when we’d kiss. Like I couldn’t breathe, but that I didn’t care.

She was scrambling my brain again and I needed to think and focus. I couldn’t fall back into her arms again. No way.

“Serena,” she said, touching my arm. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way. I just meant that it felt like we needed to talk. Just talk.” I looked back over at her and I only saw sincerity in her brown eyes. I let out a breath.

“Okay. Talking is fine. So let’s talk.” She opened her mouth, but then changed her mind.

“You first.”

Now I rolled my eyes.

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An hour later we were both starving. It had taken a little bit longer for us to fall into our old habits, but they were there. She'd had me laughing my ass off about her roommate, who had a pet snake that was constantly escaping and winding up in odd places.

"I mean, I don't have a problem with the snake, but it's a little unnerving when you reach for a pen and pick up a snake instead." I shuddered.

"Yeah, no thanks. I would drop that snake off at the first animal shelter I could find and never say a word to the roommate. Snakes don't belong in dorm rooms." She flicked her tongue out and made a hissing noise.

"Oh my god, stop it, stop it right now!" I said, putting my hands up to defend myself. She just kept hissing and then I got off the picnic table and she chased me around the track field until we both fell on the grass and rolled over onto our backs, laughing until we couldn't breathe. I couldn't remember the last time I'd laughed with someone like that.

"So, have you dated anyone at school?" she asked. I sat up and pulled up a few blades of grass, tying them together.

"Not really. You?" I didn't want to talk about dating with her.

"I've gone on dates, but no one stuck." She shrugged her shoulders like it didn't bother her.

"Yeah, I've gone out with people, but I haven't felt that spark." And I hadn't fallen

for any of my friends, either. It was fine. I was still young and in college and I didn't think I needed someone right now. I had enough to deal with.

"Me neither," she said with a sigh. I continued to pull up blades of grass and tie them together.

"Do you want to get something to eat?" My stomach was going to start growling any minute.

"Uh, sure. Did you want to go somewhere?" Not really. But the only other option was going to Anna's. I sent her a quick text asking if it was okay that I brought Fiona over. She knew Fiona and they got along.

You're hanging out with your ex? Are you sure that's a good idea?

Probably not.

We're just sorting things out from years ago. No big deal.

It wasn't. I didn't think. I just wouldn't make it a big deal.

Yeah, sure. There's a frozen pizza in the freezer if you want to put it in the oven, I should be back by the time it's done.

"You can come back to Anna's. Her girlfriend is out of town, so it will be just the three of us. Is pizza okay?" She nodded and I stood up. I held my hand out to help her up and she took it. Fiona was taller than me by a few inches and I'd always liked being the shorter one. My hand lingered in hers for a few seconds and then I took it back and dusted it off on my jeans.

"Let's go."

Four

“Wow, this is really nice,” Fiona said when I showed her the apartment.

“Yeah, I’m really fortunate that Anna had room for me. But I would have slept on the floor rather than go back to my parent’s house this summer. Wine?” She nodded and I filled a glass with a sweet red that Anna had several bottles of.

She drifted around the apartment, paying attention to Lacey’s photographs and the framed articles that Anna had put up everywhere.

“So, Lacey is a journalist?” I handed her the glass of wine and she clinked it against mine before taking a sip.

“More of a photographer turned journalist. She travels all around writing articles and taking pictures of people. She also does boudoir photography specifically for queer people as well.” I motioned to the studio-slash-my-bedroom.

“That’s really cool,” she said, looking around at the lighting equipment and various props that were stacked in corners and shoved away. Every day I made sure to keep the studio as clean as possible so Lacey wouldn’t come back to a disaster in her work space. I wanted to be a good guest, even if they wouldn’t let me pay rent. I could unload the dishwasher and vacuum and keep my shit looking nice. It was the least I could do.

“Yeah, I haven’t met Lacey yet, but Anna loves her, so I’m sure she’s great.” Murder chose that moment to make his appearance and jumped up on the couch.

“Hey, little monster,” I said, leaning down to scratch his ears the way he liked.

“Oh, isn’t he pretty,” Fiona said, holding her hand out to Murder so he could butt it

with his head.

“This is Murder and he’s a good boy,” I said. Murder was going nuts with all the pets and attention and rolled over for belly rubs.

We both nearly jumped when the door opened and Anna called out.

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“We’re just petting Murder,” I said.

“I swear that cat is the most spoiled cat on the face of the planet.” She looked burned out and tired, but she had a glass of wine in her hand when she walked into the studio.

“Hey, Fiona. Nice to see you again.” She gave Fiona a hug and me a look that told me she was keeping her eyes on us. She didn’t need to worry. We were good now. Or we were on our way to being good.

“Pizza is in the oven,” I said, and like it was meant to be, the timer dinged.

“Good, I’m starved,” Anna said. “I’m going to take the quickest shower possible if you don’t mind.” I shook my head as she walked to the bathroom.

“She’s the same,” Fiona said. “Well, except for the hair.” That was true. Anna hadn’t always had purple hair, but looking at her now, it suited her so well that it looked like it was meant to be.

“Some things don’t change,” I said. Fiona nodded and we went to get the pizza out of the oven.

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“I had forgotten about that!” Anna said when we were talking about adolescent hijinks. Since she was my older cousin she had helped with a lot of our worse misdeeds. Fiona had been around for a lot of that.

“Yeah, I thought my parents were going to ground me for the rest of my natural life,” I said, remembering the time when we’d had a party in a back field and it had gotten way out of hand and somehow one of my friends had ended up passed out naked on the principal’s lawn the next morning. I hadn’t been responsible for that, but the party had been my idea. Still, I hadn’t forced anyone to get drunk and naked.

“I swear, I thought I was going to jail,” Fiona said. Her parents hadn’t been any more lenient than mine and had grounded her from seeing me (except for school) for a month, but it didn’t really work that well. Especially since they both went to bed early and were heavy sleepers and her bedroom was on the first floor. Seriously, did they think that was going to work?

“You and me both,” I said. The wine had gone to my blood and I was feeling safe and warm. Fiona had always had that effect on me. No matter who else I was with, as long as she was there, I felt grounded.

The pizza was gone and so was the bottle of wine and Anna was practically falling asleep at the table.

“Ugh, I have some work to do, so I’m going to go in the bedroom and see how much I can get done before I pass out. Sorry for bailing on you, but it’s been a long day.” Her speech was punctuated with a yawn.

“No, it’s fine. I should probably get going anyway,” Fiona said. It wasn’t that late, and I realized that I didn’t want her to go. I didn’t have to work the next day and planned on hanging out at the house, at least until Lacey got back. Anna had to work, so it was probably going to be a little awkward at first and I’d wanted to avoid that as much as possible.

Anna bid us goodnight and shuffled off to the bedroom.

“You don’t have to go. I mean, not right now. If you don’t want to,” I said in a rush.

“Okay,” she said, picking up the plates and heading to the sink to rinse them off. I followed her with the rest and we got the dishes in the dishwasher and then drifted over to the couch.

“This is really nice,” she said. “That you don’t have to stay with your parents.” I nodded.

“I don’t know if I could have lasted with them for an entire summer. I’m going to have to figure something out for next year, but for right now, I’m good.” If I could afford to, I would have gotten my own apartment, but there was no way I could afford that right now. School was too expensive, even though I’d gotten a ton of loans to pay for it.

“I know what you mean,” she said, slipping her shoes off and pulling her feet up on the couch.

Murder appeared again and jumped up between us for more affection.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry that you have to stay with them.” She nodded.

“It’s okay. I’m tough and I can take it. And someday I’ll have my own place and I’ll only have to see them on holidays.” I was also looking forward to that time.

“Is it really bad?” I asked. Fiona didn’t like to talk about her parents a whole lot, even when we were younger. She’d just shut down and clam up when I asked.

“No, it’s not. It’s really not.” She busied herself with scratching under Murder’s chin.

“Is there somewhere else you could go?” She shook her head and looked up.

“It’s fine. It’s temporary. And they’re paying for me to go to school.” I was in a similar boat. If my parents decided they didn’t want to help me with school, I’d be fucked.

“We can talk about something else if you want,” I said, petting the spot on Murder’s back that he loved. “Or we could watch a movie? Quietly, because Anna’s sleeping.”

“No, I should go. This has been . . . a day.” It had been. I was going to be up pretty late thinking about everything that had happened. Everything that had been said, on both sides.

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“It has,” I agreed and we both got up as I walked her to the door.

“Thank you,” she said, gripping my shoulder. For a second I thought she was going to pull me close and kiss me. As if it was nothing. As if it was just something she wanted to do. If she kissed me right now, I wouldn’t know what to do. Or how I would react. Part of me would want to push her away and another part of me, a part I would have liked to ignore, would want to pull her closer.

But she didn’t kiss me, and I was definitely going to ponder what would have happened if she had.

“Text me,” I blurted out.

“Okay,” she said, giving me a lopsided smile that made my heart flip over and remember all the other times she’d given me that smile.

Shit.

“Bye,” I said, the word a little strangled. She gave me a little wave and I closed the door, resting my back on it.

What a day.

Five

A few hours later, I was in bed thinking about how my life had just completely been thrown off track. I hadn’t planned on seeing Fiona again. Maybe ever. And I would

have thought that if I did see her again, I would have had some prep beforehand. That I'd get some time to think about what I'd say.

That didn't happen and now I was reeling.

I couldn't stop thinking about how incredibly beautiful she was. Had she always been that pretty? I remember the days in high school that I used to stare at her face and wonder how she was real. How she was mine.

She wasn't mine anymore. Before my thoughts could traipse off in a fantasy-like destination, I had to remind myself that we had broken up. Our relationship was over. Done. All we could hope for now was to have a civil relationship, and, maybe someday, a friendship.

Maybe not. Friendships were tricky for me. I had a hard time drawing the line with what was friendship and what was something more. I didn't want to fall right back into being more than friends with Fiona.

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"Wow, rough night?" Anna said the next morning when I stumbled out of the studio to get some coffee. I'd given up on sleep, and she had to get ready for work. Lacey would be here soon, and I was stressing. But I needed caffeine to actually function today. I wanted to clean everything up and make sure I was being as unobtrusive as possible when she got back.

"Not in the way you think. She left not long after you went to bed. Things are just . . ." I trailed off, holding my hands out.

"Yup, sounds about right. Seeing your ex again when you're not prepared can be the worst." She made a face and shuddered.

Exactly.

I was about to say something else, but she swore and chugged what was in her coffee cup.

“If I don’t go right now, I’m going to be late for the library.” Anna and her jobs. I waved goodbye and then I was alone. After I slumped on the kitchen table for a while, I made myself a lazy breakfast of leftover croissants from the bakery and two cups of strong coffee. That made me feel marginally better.

Realizing I hadn’t showered in a while, I got up and went to the bathroom, pulling my shower things out from where I’d hidden them under the sink.

I belted out a few showtunes and then realized I’d forgotten to bring a change of clothes with me. Whatever. I bundled my other clothes under my arm and walked out of the bathroom in just a towel.

There was someone at the kitchen table and I screamed.

“Holy shit, you gave me a heart attack,” I said, clutching the towel and glad I hadn’t dropped it.

“You must be Serena,” she said, getting up. I’d seen enough pictures to know this was Lacey. What a way to meet your cousin’s girlfriend (and the person whose house you’re living in) for the first time.

“Uh, yeah. You must be Lacey.” She was just as I’d expected her to be. Tall, rocking a loose tank, and with her dark hair in the most perfect messy ponytail, with aviators perched on top of her head. She was just . . . cool. Way cooler than I’d ever be, or could ever hope to be.

She smiled and I could objectively see why Anna had fallen for her.

“Um,” I said, feeling slightly underdressed.

Lacey blinked.

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“Right, why don’t you change and I’ll, um, stop being weird.” I laughed a little and went into the studio, making sure the door was shut. Not that I thought Lacey would want to see me naked, but I didn’t want to take any chances. As quick as I could, I slipped on a pair of jean shorts, a tank, and put my hair up in a messy bun that dripped down the back of my neck. I didn’t mind, since it was a hot day.

“Hi,” I said, poking my head out and finding Lacey still sitting at the table, but this time she had a glass of iced tea in front of her.

“Want one?” she asked, holding up the pitcher. There was another glass.

“Yeah, sure,” I said. Why the hell not.

“Thank you so much for letting me stay here. I’ll never be able to tell you how much it means to me,” I said, but she waved that off after pouring me a glass of iced tea. A few lemon slices landed in my glass, but I didn’t care.

“Don’t even worry about it. Anna adores you and you’re part of her family so that makes you part of my family by extension.” I hoped she didn’t see my face getting red, because it definitely was. I didn’t really like the fact that someone I’d just met had agreed to let me live with her when my own parents couldn’t respect my queerness. It was fucked up and Lacey being so nice to me reminded me how fucked up it was.

“Still. Thanks,” I said, sipping my iced tea, not even flinching about how cold the ice was against my teeth.

“Don’t even worry about it. I’m sure once Anna and I get an actual house, it will become some sort of queer inn.” I laughed a little at that.

“That would be awesome.”

Lacey grinned. “I know, right?” Murder slinked out of the studio and gave Lacey a glare.

“Oh, I see how it is. You’re mad that I left you.” I swore he nodded and then came over to jump on her lap. “You little bastard,” she said fondly, giving him a kiss on the top of his head.

“So, what do you have planned today?” I asked her.

“Basically, I’m going to unpack some of my shit and crash, if that’s okay with you. I might wake up around dinnertime, though.” She yawned and shook her head. “Fuck, all this traveling is getting old.” I knew Anna didn’t like it, but I understood why she had to do it for work.

“Do you enjoy it?”

She yawned again and I realized I should probably let her get some sleep.

“Yeah, I really do. But it’s so nice now to have a home base. And a beautiful girl to come home to.” Murder looked up at her and rubbed his head against her chin.

“Yes, and you too,” she said. I put the iced tea back in the fridge and she shuffled off to the bedroom.

Huh. A whole day to myself. I hadn’t had one of those in a long time. What ever was I going to do with all this time?

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I was bad at having free time. I'd scanned through Anna's bookshelves and started and discarded about ten books that hadn't been able to capture my interest. To be fair to the books, my mind wouldn't stop wandering to a certain girl named Fiona. What was she doing today?

After running through a dozen TV shows and movies, I finally grabbed my phone and sent a text as Murder nuzzled at my feet on the couch.

What's up?

It was innocuous enough. I could get away with saying that, couldn't I?

She answered only two minutes later.

Not a whole lot. Stuck at the house. You?

Sounded like she didn't have anything going on. Could I hang out with her again? Could I handle that?

Day off. Bored. Want to hang out?

I also wanted to give Lacey some space to decompress and have her home back since she'd been away. It felt like the right thing to do.

Yeah! I can pick you up in 10?

Sounded good to me. I sent back that I'd be ready and then dashed around to make myself more presentable. I even looked in the mirror to see if I wanted to put on mascara, but decided against it.

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What was I doing? I didn't need to impress Fiona. She had literally seen me at my absolute worst before. This wasn't a date and I wasn't trying to woo her.

I had to get a grip.

There was a knock at the door and I flung it open before the sound could wake Lacey. I heard soft music coming from her room though, so maybe it wasn't a big deal.

"Hey," I said, drinking her in. She had on a long sundress and large sunglasses that would have looked downright ridiculous on anyone else, but they looked gorgeous on her.

"Hey," she said, putting the sunglasses on her head. "What do you want to do?"

"Well, Lacey just got back and I thought we could go out and give her some space. I still feel awkward about being here." She nodded and leaned down to pet Murder as I grabbed my bag and put it over my shoulder.

"We could take a walk or something. Someplace shady. Or get some lunch?" It was about that time and my breakfast hadn't been very substantial.

"Sure," I said, shoving Murder back inside and locking the door.

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We ended up on a little nature trail just outside of the town limits. It was the kind of trail people walked their dogs on and had picnics at the end in a little clearing, set up

with picnic tables and a swing set.

“What’s your major?” I asked, which was such a bad question. I cringed to myself, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“Uh, right now? I’m not sure. I’m declared as a business major, but that’s not what I want to do. My parents made that decision for me.” Ouch. At least I didn’t have to deal with that.

“What do you want to be doing instead?”

“Psychology,” she said immediately. “I want to be a therapist and work with queer kids. I want to help them. I want to be someone they can trust.” Well if that didn’t break my fucking heart I didn’t know what would.

“Be the person that I didn’t have growing up,” she said more quietly.

“That’s amazing,” I said, totally meaning it.

“Really?”

“Yeah, it is.” A warm feeling had settled in my chest and I was trying to ignore it and failing. I was thinking too much about how things had been when we were together. I’d just seen her for the first time in years yesterday and now I was completely caving and picturing having a full-blown relationship with her again. As if that was even possible. We were both off at different schools and had different lives and there was no way it could work, even if it was a good idea. Which it wasn’t. Not even close to a good idea.

I realized I was staring at her and forced myself to look back at the trail so I didn’t trip.

“What do you want to do?”

I told her my vague plans of working in publishing. “I don’t really know. And my parents are still up my butt for being an English major. But at least they didn’t set limits on what I could study.” I gave her a sympathetic look and she smiled sadly.

“Things have changed a lot, but then they haven’t at the same time,” she said and damn, wasn’t that the truth?

“Some things don’t change,” I said and our eyes snagged. Of course, I tripped over a root in the path and she grabbed my arm so I didn’t fall.

“Sorry,” I said, even though I wasn’t sure what I was apologizing for.

“It’s fine,” she said, a little breathless. I was leaning on her and I needed to get my legs to work on their own again, but all I could see were her gorgeous eyes and the way her hair framed her face.

I coughed and then moved away from her. It took me a minute to figure out how to put one foot in front of the other. Walking, yeah. I could walk. I apparently wasn’t the only one having trouble. Fiona reached up and tucked her hair behind her ears. She’d always complained about her ears and thought they were too big. I thought they were adorable. Still were.

We walked in silence until we made it to the little clearing and sat down on one of the picnic tables. We’d timed it right and were the only ones here. I was relieved, I didn’t like people watching us. It felt invasive, even if it was well-intentioned.

“What are you going to do with yourself this summer?” I asked, leaning back into a cool patch of shade.

“I’m not sure yet. Probably get a temporary job. I can pick apples or something. I’ve done that before.” We were both lucky because the towns we lived in were dominated by summer-only industries so jobs for us were easy to come by.

“That would be cool. You’d be outside all the time.” She nodded and then laid out on the top of the picnic table.

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“You’re probably laying in bird poop,” I pointed out. She cringed and sat up, trying to crane around and see if there was any on her back.

“Ewww,” she said, and I burst out laughing.

“You’re fine. I was just saying ‘probably.’” Fiona glared at me and I just laughed harder.

It was so easy to laugh with her. So easy to fall back into patterns of behavior that we’d had for years. Like no time had passed. Like just yesterday she was telling me that she loved me. I said it back, for the first time. For the first and only time I’ve said it to someone other than family. And it felt like the first time I’d meant it. I’d meant it so hard that I’d felt like crying.

“What are you thinking about?” she said, and I realized I’d zoned out and stopped laughing.

“The past,” I said without thinking.

“Our past?” What else?

I nodded.

She pressed her lips together and looked away. As if it hurt to look at me.

“I really fucked up a good thing, didn’t I?” she said quietly, looking at her hands and then dusting them off on her dress.

“We were young,” I said. We had been. We still were. I definitely didn’t think I knew what the fuck I was doing.

“Do you have any regrets?” she asked. I had to think about that one.

“Yeah, I really regret those awful highlights I had sophomore year,” I said.

“You know what I mean,” she said, pushing my shoulder. I knew what she meant. I just didn’t know if I could talk about it right now.

“I do. But I’m still trying to catch up with the fact that you’re here. Can we just . . . not talk about the past for a little while?” She looked as if I’d slapped her.

“Oh, shit, I’m so sorry. Of course, of course.” I wasn’t that upset, but I also didn’t want to revisit everything again today.

“We could . . . start over? Sort of?” she suggested. I raised one eyebrow.

“And how would that work?” You couldn’t start over when you knew exactly how someone else brushed their teeth and what kind of eggs they ate in the morning and how they liked their coffee. You couldn’t ignore or deny those things. It was like muscle memory. Relationship memory.

She grinned and my heart rolled over a bit. Not quite a flip, but definitely a little roll. I was going to have to be careful. So careful.

“Hi, I’m Fiona Davis, nice to meet you.” Oh, really? This was what we were doing?

“Uh, I’m Serena Nolan?” She stuck her hand out and we shook, and I pulled away quickly. I didn’t want to touch her too much. It made me want to touch her more.

I shook my head and smiled a little.

“So, Fiona, what brings you out here to this park that I am also in?” She smacked my shoulder again.

“I’m serious. We’ve lived a few years apart from each other. We’re new people, in a way.” And we were the same people, too, but I wanted to humor her. Also a problem.

I asked her what her major was, again. I asked her what brought her to town. I asked her what she liked about college, which opened her up to telling me more about her roommate and her classes and how jarring going from your parent’s house to a college dorm could be.

“And my mom still expects me to tell her where I’m going to be? Like, I’m hours away and I have to text her and say that I’m going to the store. It’s ridiculous.” Wow, I knew her parents were controlling, but apparently they’d gotten worse since Fi had gone to school.

“Did she put a tracker on you?” I asked and she rolled her eyes.

“Honestly, I wouldn’t put it past her. I, um, haven’t told her that we’re hanging out.” Well, crap. That was just great.

“Did you lie to them, or did you just not tell them where you were going to be?” She shrugged one shoulder.

“I told them I was going out for a walk and just didn’t say that I was going for a walk with someone else. Okay, now I’m regretting bringing this up.” She pulled her knees up and rested her chin on them.

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“Sometimes I think about just putting everything in my car and driving somewhere new. Just cutting all ties and becoming someone else. Like Witness Protection, but without running from people who were trying to kill me and all.”

“Yeah, that part wouldn’t be so fun. But I get that. Wanting to go somewhere new. Being here with Anna kind of feels new, but it feels safe at the same time. It’s nice being here. Being able to do my own thing. And being at the café.” The café was a safe haven for more people than Jen and Sal would ever know about. They’d created something that was going to help so many people. It made me want to cry sometimes, thinking about it.

“We can talk about something else,” I said, and started talking about my own college experience, shying away from anything related to parents. She laughed at my stories and very soon I realized that I was hungry. Her stomach gave a loud growl and we both laughed.

“Want to go get something to eat? I bet I can get a couple of chocolate croissants at the café.” I knew how much she loved chocolate.

“Oh my god, that sounds amazing,” she said, rubbing her belly and hopping off the picnic table.

I almost held my hand out to her to link our fingers together, but stopped myself before I could. Shit. I was falling into patterns and I had to be on my guard or else I was just going to lean over and kiss her like it was nothing.

I had to be more vigilant.

Six

“Really? On your day off?” Anna said when we walked in. She’d come right from the library to do her afternoon shift at the café.

“What? I’m hooked on Daisy’s croissants.” Anna nodded.

“You raise a good point.” She seated us in a little nook and I couldn’t stop feeling like everyone was watching us. In fact, I looked around and saw Lacey on her laptop with a pair of noise-cancelling headphones and a plate filled with crumbs on the table. I’d thought she was going to spend the rest of the day sleeping, but apparently not. Anna skipped over and gave her a quick kiss before taking the plate. Lacey looked dazed and heart-eyed for a moment before she looked back at her computer.

“That’s Lacey,” I said to Fiona, pointing her out. “She’s really cool.” She was. Effortlessly cool.

“It’s awesome that she let you stay there. I wish I had something like that.” She looked down at her hands and she was sad again.

“Wait right there,” I said, pointing to her so she wouldn’t move. I weaved my way through the tables and walked right into the back where Daisy was up to her neck in flour.

“Hey, you’re here on your day off?” she asked.

“Couldn’t stay away. Listen, can I get two chocolate croissants? I have a girl who needs them. And maybe if you could put a few aside in a bag for her to take home?” Daisy looked at me and then peered over the counter of the bakery at Fiona.

“Ohhhhh,” she said, as if she had caught on to something.

“It’s not . . .” I said, unsure of how exactly to explain everything with Fi.

Daisy put up flour-coated hands.

“Say no more. You’ve got it.” She scraped the flour off her arms and hands into the sink and then plopped two croissants onto a plate.

“I’ve got maybe five left. Is that enough?”

“Probably for a few hours,” I said. She gave me a look and then made a shoo-ing motion.

“Go, she looks hungry.” That was what Daisy did. She fed people. It was her thing. I set the plate on the table and Fiona looked up at me, a smile breaking out like sun from behind the clouds.

“Thanks,” she said, picking one up.

“Do you want anything else? I’m going to get some iced tea.” She said she also wanted some, so I rushed to the back and scooted by Jen, who also asked me what I was doing here, and filled two glasses with iced tea, and plopped two lemon slices on the rims.

I brought them back to Lacey and she looked up with wide eyes and a smear of chocolate on the side of her mouth. That was the only evidence that croissants had even existed. The plate was empty.

“I was hungry,” she said, sheepish.

“Damn, you should have told me you werethathungry,” I said, setting down the iced tea. “I would have brought more.”

The urge to reach out and wipe the chocolate from her face was almost unbearable. Finally, I did. I just let my hand reach out and my thumb scraped the chocolate from her skin. Before I could even consider the consequences, I popped my thumb in my mouth and licked off the little bit of chocolate.

Time stopped. She looked at me and everything in the café went away. Just like it had when I'd first seen her again. Only . .

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I blinked and shook my head.

“Sorry,” I said.

“No problem,” she said, her voice dazed. I knew I should be doing something, but I wasn’t sure what it was supposed to be.

A throat cleared and we both looked up like startled deer in car headlights.

“Your croissants,” Daisy said, holding out the bag to me. Her eyes flicked between me and Fiona and back again and she gave us both a smile.

“Enjoy.” She wasn’t just talking about the croissants. Oh, I was going to get an earful at work tomorrow.

I unrolled the top of the bag and pulled one of them out. Might as well, since Fi had eaten two.

She sipped her iced tea, but the tension between us had ratcheted up about five thousand notches. I could barely think with her sitting right across from me. I moved my legs and accidentally bumped her feet under the small table. I felt like all eyes were on us. I wished I could put up a wall that we could hide behind. But then I’d be alone with her and that wasn’t good either.

I couldn’t win.

We were crossing territory we’d already crossed, only this time we were older and a

little bruised from the last encounter.

“I miss you. I miss you so much sometimes that it hurts,” she said quietly, staring at the plate of crumbs.

I opened my mouth to answer, but I couldn't. I had missed her. I thought about all the times that I had wanted to tell her something I knew would make her laugh, or something that only she would understand. I'd lost count of how many times it had happened. I'd tried to ignore it, but that wasn't possible. I'd filed those moments away in the backroom of my brain and had covered them with the hurt from our breakup. But now . . .

Now that cover was slowly sliding off and I was remembering how good things had been.

We sat again in silence and I felt like I was being ripped apart at the seams. Something had to give. Something had to happen. We teetered on a precipice and something had to give.

“I miss you, too,” I said, and she reached out to clutch my hand.

“I know I fucked up, Cricket. I know I did. But I just want to know if maybe . . . if maybe you would consider being my friend again?”

“I'll have to think about it, Ladybug,” I said and she stroked her fingers along mine. I had to close my eyes because I couldn't look at her. She was just too beautiful. Too much. She consumed me.

“Okay,” she said, taking her hand back. I shivered at the loss of contact. “That's okay. I don't want to pressure you. It just feels like we were meant to run back into each other for a reason.” Of course she would say that.

“Unfinished business?” I said, trying to lighten things up.

“Like ghosts?”

I shrugged one shoulder.

“But we’re not ghosts,” she said.

“Notyet.”

She smacked my shoulder.

“Don’t be morbid.”

Phew. Things had gotten a little too serious there.

Seven

In the end, we both finished all the croissants and I didn’t want to admit that to Daisy, so we ended up slinking out of the café. Well, not really slinking. We were both too full to slink.

“What now?” I asked. I’d gotten the feeling that she really didn’t want to go home and that was fine with me. “The house is available, apparently, since Lacey is here so you can come over and enjoy free air-conditioning and we can watch a movie while we digest,” I suggested. She nodded and said that would be fine.

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Fiona stayed with me until Lacey and Anna came back with bags of takeout seafood, including lobster rolls.

Fi seemed uncomfortable, but we all assured her that it was fine to stay for dinner. Lacey plunked a lobster roll and some fried zucchini on her plate and gave her a smile.

“You’re always welcome here,” Lacey said. I reached under the table and squeezed Fi’s hand. She squeezed my hand back and then picked up her lobster roll. There was also fried shrimp, fried clams, fries, and bottles of cheap local beer.

“I always say we should have a lobster bake, but why do that when you can just buy it?” Anna said. “It’s not like we really have the space for that in the yard.”

“You can hire someone to do them now,” Lacey said.

“I know you’re all set on writing about queer stuff, but could you moonlight as a food writer?” Anna said, leaning against her and pouting.

“I mean, I can specifically search for queer chefs and business owners,” Lacey said. “I could do a whole food series.” Anna’s eyes lit up.

“Yes, do this thing,” she said. “You must.” Lacey laughed and kissed Anna on the nose. I had to look away. Seeing them together and so cute was making me feel weird. I turned to look at Fiona, but she just looked . . . wistful. Like any minute she was going to put her chin on her hands and her eyes were going to turn into pulsing cartoon hearts.

I had to look away from her too, so I focused on my food. I was also trying to tell myself that this wasn't a double date, because it was starting to feel like one. Lacey and Anna's cuteness was affecting my brain. I was getting relationship feels by osmosis.

"Whatever you want, sweetheart," Lacey said. Anna grinned and rubbed her face against Lacey's shoulder like a cat. I shouldn't have invited Fiona over.

^^*

Later, we all crammed on the couch to watch *Imagine Me & You* for the millionth time.

"I love this movie," Fiona said in my ear. Since the couch was so small, I was practically in her lap. I'd thought about sitting on the floor, but being this close to her was . . .

It was nice. I could smell her hair and feel the warmth radiating from her skin and if I shifted just a little, I could rest my head against her shoulder.

So I did. I felt her shock, but then she relaxed. I looked down and found her hand creeping over toward my leg. Oh. Lacey and Anna were wrapped around each other like they were trying to melt into one being with two souls, so they weren't paying attention. My heart rate kicked up and Fi started softly stroking up and down my leg. Like we used to.

I wasn't paying attention to the movie anymore. No matter; I'd seen it dozens of times. I shifted so I was closer to her and put my hand on my thigh, right near where her fingers were making patterns on my jeans.

Our pinkies crashed into each other and I sucked in a breath. Why was my hand

touching hers such a big deal? I'd touched her hands hundreds of times before. When we were kids we held hands as little girls did. I had loved her then, but in a friendship way. I had loved her for years as a friend before it turned into something else.

She pulled back a little, but my hand chased hers. Trying not to think what a bad idea it was, I slid my hand over hers and twined our fingers together. There.

I couldn't look at her, but she was staring at me.

I thought I was going to die. Part of me wished I could melt into the floor and other (a majority) parts of me couldn't stop thinking about the fact that we were holding hands.

And I'd told her I would have to think about being friends with her again. This wasn't exactly friendly behavior. It was something else.

We kept our hands entwined until the movie ended and Lacey got up with a yawn. Most of the lights were off, but I took my hand back and Fiona put hers in her lap. As if nothing had happened.

"Fuck, I'm tired. I think I need to go to bed," Lacey said, stretching her arms over her head, shoulders popping. Anna was giving her a look and I remembered that they hadn't seen each other in a little while and probably wanted some alone time.

Good thing the studio wasn't right next to their bedroom. I could feel my face getting red.

"Yeah, I'm tired too. Do you, um, want to just chill in the studio with me?" I asked Fiona. I didn't think she wanted to leave yet and I didn't want her to, but I also wanted to give Anna and Lacey some privacy.

“Sure,” Fiona said, figuring out what was going on by the looks Lacey and Anna exchanged.

“Goodnight,” I said, waving and dashing toward the studio. Lacey and Anna barely noticed.

I shut the door to the studio and quickly booted up my laptop to play some music to cover any and all sounds that we might hear. I shuddered at the thought and turned up theHalsey.

“Are you sure you’re okay with me being here? It seems like we might be . . . intruding,” Fiona said, inching toward the door.

“We can go out somewhere if you’re uncomfortable. I’m not sure where because, even in the summer, nothing is open past ten.” Nothing except one small bar, which we couldn’t get into. Or maybe we could, but I didn’t want to try and fail at that.

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“No, it’s fine,” Fiona said, chewing her bottom lip. Her cheeks were a little red and I didn’t know exactly why.

“Should we talk?” I asked, sitting down on the bed and patting the space next to me.

“Um, yeah, probably.” She came over and sat down next to me.

“I don’t . . . I don’t really know what I’m doing and why it’s happening, but I just . . . I miss you so much,” she said, leaning into me, her eyes bright. I thought she was going to cry.

“I missed you so much. I missed this,” I said, taking her hand and entwining her fingers with mine. “This.”

I thought she was going to smile, but then she leaned her face closer to mine and I knew what was going to happen. She was going to kiss me. I was going to kiss her back.

I leaned. She leaned. We both leaned. There was a lot of leaning. Her mouth was a whisper away and all I had to do was lean just a little bit more. She held back, letting me make the decision. I wanted. I wanted to so much.

Fiona was the dreamer in our relationship. The one who took risks. I was the one who thought about everything too much. Who considered every single angle before making a choice. I didn’t want to think anymore. Thinking so much was exhausting. All I wanted to do was feel.

So I raised my other hand and cradled her cheek, bringing her face to meet mine. There.

The kiss was so soft and so tender that it wasn't even a kiss at first. We were both holding back. And then the feel of her mouth on mine and the fact that we'd kissed so many times before flooded my brain with memories and then we werereallykissing. It was so familiar and so new at the same time. I remembered how she felt, how our mouths fit together. The mechanics were the same.

But had my blood always been on fire like this? Had she always stolen my breath? Past and present coalesced together into the current moment and all I could see, taste, and smell was Fiona. Thoughts collided and died in my head, as if they had to make room for her.

She pulled back and I made a little sound of protest. She rested her forehead against mine.

"Stop thinking." My only answer was to pull her back and kiss her again. And again. And again.

Eight

So much for trying to be friends. I couldn't exactly be platonic friends with Fiona, and to think that I could have was ridiculous. There was a pull between us that neither of us could deny. A need. A chemistry. I wanted her and she wanted me. In all ways.

We kissed for what felt like hours. In fact, she'd been the last person I'd kissed. I hadn't been able to kiss anyone since her. I liked kissing, very much, but I liked it especially with Fiona Davis. I more than liked it.

Somehow, we ended up horizontal on the bed and my fingers started to make their

way under her shirt. I craved her skin. I couldn't get close enough. Our kissing had quickly turned intense, with tongues being liberally used, and both of us gasping for breath.

This time, I pulled back.

She smiled at me as we lay wrapped together like Lacey and Anna had been on the couch.

"Did you know that was going to happen?" she asked me.

"No, of course not. I still hadn't decided if we could be friends," I said. Well, that was fucking out the window now.

"And now?" she asked, brushing some of my hair out of the way. It had gotten all tangled during our kissing session.

"And now I don't know what the fuck I'm doing." I rolled onto my back and looked at the ceiling. I was still trembling a little from the intensity of kissing Fiona.

"That's good because I don't either," she said, mirroring my position.

"Do you ever feel like you know what you're doing?" I asked her.

I felt her shake her head, and turned back onto my side, propping my head up. "Not really. Fake until you make it, right?"

"Nothing about that kiss was fake, Fi," I said and she turned her head to look at me. Her lips were bright from the friction of kissing.

"I know, and that's the problem."

That was our problem.

“I’m not ready to be together, together,” I said. She nodded.

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“I understand. It would be . . . it wouldn’t be easy. With both of us at different colleges in different states.” I nodded. Exactly. I had never bargained on long distance. Fiona had broken up with me before we could even talk about what we would do if we’d stayed together after high school.

“Doesn’t mean I’m not thinking about it,” she said.

“Whoa, that’s a little fast for me, Fi.” She’d always been the one who barreled ahead. Who went all-in. Who didn’t have to think about every little potential problem or roadblock. That was me. That had always been me. I’d thought it worked for us.

“I know. I know it is, because I know you. I didn’t mean to come back into your life and make things more complicated. That’s not what I wanted.” This was . . . complicated.

“You weren’t the only one kissing,” I said. “Fuck.”

“Exactly,” she said.

^^*

We just sort of lay there with our separate thoughts for a while.

“I don’t want to go home,” she finally said. I’d figured, but she hadn’t said it out loud yet.

“You can stay, if you want. There’s a couch, or we could share the bed.” The upside

of Lacey having her studio was that there were numerous places to crash if you needed to. And I didn't think she would mind Fiona staying for one night. Just one. I had heard a few sounds coming from the bedroom and they were definitely going to be occupied for a while and not thinking about what Fiona and I were doing.

"Really?" she asked.

"Yeah, absolutely. I have to work tomorrow, but you could come and hang out in the back with me, or maybe bring a book and read or something." I was struck by this want and need to take care of her. To wrap her up in my arms and protect her from the world. To show her the world that I had found that accepted and embraced me. The world that made me feel safe.

I wanted that for her.

"Okay," she said. I smiled at her and went to go find some pajamas that might fit her.

^^*

She decided, wisely, that sleeping in the same bed was probably a bad idea.

"What, afraid you can't keep your hands off me?" I joked just so I could see her blush.

"No," she said, arranging the pillows on the couch.

I knew I might not be able to keep my hands off her, and pushing things further than they had already gone tonight wasn't a thing I wanted to do. My head was still so scrambled and I knew I wasn't going to get much sleep. Not with Fiona in the room. Not with her breathing distracting me.

Every time she moved, I wondered if she was going to get off the couch and ask to join me in the bed. I wondered if I would get up and join her on the couch. Or ask her to join me.

So many paths to take. I didn't know which was the right one. Which was the logical one. Feelings screwed everything up.

Was I still hurt from our breakup? Yes. Did kissing her erase that? No. But . . . what if? What if we could start over? Not really starting over. I didn't know what to call it. Maybe starting again? I had no idea how it was going to work. I had no idea if it was a good idea. But I did know that I wanted to kiss Fiona a lot more. And spend time with her. And just . . . be with her again. I wanted to be with her again.

^^*

The next morning, I woke up before Fiona. Which was a lie because I hadn't really slept. I'd been in and out, but it had been more like napping.

I tried not to be a total creeper, but I did lay there and watch her chest rise and fall. She'd always slept on her back, something that I always found odd and endearing. To be honest, I found nearly everything about Fi odd and endearing. I didn't know what she'd told her parents, but when I asked her what they would say about her not coming home, she'd just shrugged. Okay.

I listened, but didn't hear anything from the kitchen, so I opened the door and tiptoed out. My plan was to make a quick breakfast for me and Fi and then sneak back into the studio to give Anna and Lacey some space.

But as soon as I put some bread in the toaster oven, the bedroom door opened and Anna came out, her hair all over the place and a sleepy smile on her face.

“Good morning,” she said, shuffling to the coffeemaker. She was moving a little stiffly and I wasn't going to ask.

“Um, Fiona stayed over last night. She got tired and didn't want to go home. She slept on the couch.” I felt the need to add the last thing so she wouldn't get any ideas. Anna slowly turned to me.

“Oh did she now?” she said, leaning her hip against the counter. Ugh. I knew this was going to happen.

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“We’re not sex-crazed likesomepeople,” I said and she batted at my shoulder with her hand.

“Look, you try being in a semi-long distance relationship with a smoking hot girlfriend and then tell me how that goes for you.” If,ifFi and I decided to do this thing, we’d be long distance for another two years for us to both finish school. Two years was a long fucking time. I didn’t know if I could get through that.

But I was getting too far ahead of myself. I always did that.

“Whatever,” I said, and turned to watch the toast so it didn’t burn. The last thing I needed today was burned toast. Anna hummed to herself as she grabbed some pastries, put them on a plate and then put the plate on a tray, along with two cups of coffee and some orange juice.

“Stop trying to make the rest of us look bad,” I said as she marched back toward the bedroom with her and Lacey’s breakfast.

“No one’s stopping you,” she said as she knocked on the door and then Lacey sleepily admitted her.

Just as I was buttering my own toast, Fiona tiptoed out of the studio.

“Hey,” she said quietly.

“You don’t have to pretend you’re not here. This isn’t a walk of shame. I told Anna you’d stayed over and made it clear that you’d slept on the couch,” I said, but Fi still

seemed worried.

“It’s fine. You’re welcome here,” I said, going over and rubbing her arm. She gave me a shy smile and I really wanted to kiss her. I really wanted to pull her into my arms and smile into her mouth and kiss her until the coffee brewed again. Then I wanted to sit on the couch, our legs entwined, and feed each other breakfast and maybe watch an old movie.

Unfortunately, I had to work, and she had to go home. Still, we could at least eat breakfast together in the studio on the couch. Almost as good.

“What are you going to do today?” I asked. I didn’t want to seem like I was nagging her. I just really wanted to know what she was going to do when she wasn’t with me.

“I don’t know. I might, um, stop at the café for a bit? If that’s okay?”

“Of course it’s okay! I’d love to see you. I’ll bring you free food.” Jen and Sal wouldn’t care. Her eyes lit up.

“Would there be croissants?”

“Ladybug, there will always be croissants.”

Nine

She did go home for a little bit, and then showed up at the café a few hours into my shift. I’d been looking up and waiting to see her.

“She’s not here yet,” Daisy said the fortieth time I’d done it. Since it was currently slow, I’d joined her in the bakery for a little while, helping to mix frosting and glaze for cupcakes, pastries, and other confections. She wouldn’t give me the pastry bag

and let me decorate any of them yet, but I had hope by the end of the summer she might. Daisy could be a little bit of a control freak in her bakery. Which was fair, I guessed.

“I know,” I said, going back to sifting confectioner’s sugar into the mixing bowl.

“You are completely head over ass, aren’t you?” she said and I wanted to protest, but she was pretty much right.

“I mean . . . it’s complicated.” Daisy wiped her cheek, which only smeared more frosting on it.

“Isn’t it always? What are you going to do?” I’d given her the basic story of what had happened last night. I didn’t feel bad telling Daisy, considering she’d sort of been through a similar thing with her current girlfriend, Molly. They too had been best friends growing up, but they had only kissed once and hadn’t really gotten together until years later. Still, she could offer me some valuable advice. And things had worked out for her, which was ideal.

“I don’t know. I haven’t had a time to process it. Not even staying up all night and thinking about all the possibilities. And I want to do the right thing, but I don’t know what the right thing is.” Daisy thought about that as I turned the mixer on and watched the glaze come together. She tapped my arm to tell me when it was at the right consistency. I turned off the machine.

“What if you thought about what you wanted, instead of what was right? I mean, if you only made decisions about what to do based on what was right, you’d never do anything reckless or risky.” That was true. And I hadn’t done much that was reckless or risky in my life. That just wasn’t my style. Maybe that needed to change.

“Just think about what you want. What you want your life to look like. Is Fiona in it?

Picture your ideal life and then act accordingly.” That gave me a lot to think about and I just happened to look up and see Fiona walk through the door. The sun lit her up and it was like I’d been punched in the heart.

“I wish you could see your face right now,” Daisy said, but her voice sounded like it was coming from far away. I found myself walking out from behind the bakery half-wall and moving toward her. I was covered in sugar and butter and vanilla, but I didn’t care.

“Hi,” I said, as if we were the only two people in the café.

“Hey,” she said, the cutest smile on her face. She had another dress on, a short yellow one with a full skirt that looked like it would be great for dancing and twirling.

I pictured us dancing together, me swirling her under my arm even though she was the taller of the two of us. We’d danced that way before. Prom. My brain was ripping me into the past, reminding me of how beautiful she’d been in that silky green dress.

It had been perfect. Absolutely perfect.

We blinked at each other and then both started laughing.

“I missed you,” I blurted out. It had literally been a few hours, but I had missed her. Ridiculous.

“I missed you,” she said and I realized I should probably show her to a table and let her sit down.

“Oh, sorry.” I looked around and found that one of the smallest little iron tables was free. The café was a conglomeration of things that didn’t seem to go together but did. I loved the shabby chic and comfy vibe.

I seated her and she picked up a menu.

“I didn’t get a chance to look last time,” she said about the menu.

“Okay, cool. Take your time. As much as you need. No rush.” I was losing it. I could feel my cheeks getting red.

“Okay,” she said, also blushing a little. Secondhand blushing. I dashed back to the bakery without asking if she wanted something to drink.

“You are the absolute cutest, I could die,” Daisy said, resting her chin on her hands.

“Shut up,” I said, willing my cheeks to stop burning. “It’s not like that.”

“It’s likesomething, my dear,” she said with a wink.

It certainly was.

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She was still there at the end of my shift. She’d pulled a book out of her purse, a giant non-fiction tome that she seemed to be halfway through. I couldn’t stop sneaking peeks at her while she was reading. I also wanted to borrow the book when she was done.

I finished my side work and made sure that everything was done before I washed my hands, took my apron off, and grabbed my bag. She was still engrossed in her book, so I had to tap her on the shoulder to get her attention.

“Were you waiting for me?” I asked, since to assume would be a little presumptuous.

“Yeah. I just decided to take a day off from . . . everything and read. I don’t do that enough.” I wasn’t sure what she did with her time when she was home. Her parents worked during the day, so I assumed it was very lonely, and her sister was ten years older, so she was off living her own life. Trista had gone as far away from home as she could and married a man from Belize, which her parents weren’t thrilled about. I was thrilledforher.

“You should relax, especially when it’s summer. I think I should help you with your relaxing,” I said. “We can make a list! Or a spreadsheet!” I loved both lists and spreadsheets and electronic documents. I loved tracking everything from my homework to my life goals. It made me feel like I had a handle on things when mostly I didn’t. My goals might be more abstract, like “get an internship” and “buy a house”, but they did have deadlines that I planned on sticking to.

Fi rolled her eyes.

“Okay, okay. I’ll let you make me a list. But no scheduling. That gives me anxiety.” I sat down with her and she pulled out a notebook from her bag, turning to a fresh page.

“I want to read twenty books this summer,” she said, patting the enormous tome. I raised my eyebrows.

“Books that thick?” I asked.

“Well, not all this thick. I’ve got some shorter ones in ebook.” That sounded more doable. I motioned with my hand for her to write it down.

“You have a much better chance of doing it if you write it down.” She thought and then a slow smile took over her face. She wrote deliberately slowly and then crossed the item out before turning the notebook so I could read it.

Kiss a cute girl.

Well. That was adorable and made my heart flutter.

“You dork,” I said.

“Hey, it’s something I did.” I laughed and then told her to get on with it. She added going to the beach and swimming at least ten times, eating as much ice cream as she could, spending an entire day in bed, going on a road trip, catching up on all the shows she was behind on, and going out in public without underwear.

The last thing was more of a joke, but she wrote it down when I said it, so it was on the list. And I was blushing my face off.

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“See? That’s plenty. You’re already working on the reading, so let’s tick another one off the list. How about we get some ice cream?” She closed the notebook and nodded.

Ten

“I think I’m going to die. I’m pretty sure we ate one entire cow’s worth of ice cream.”
I made a face.

“I don’t really want to think about what ice cream is made of right now,” I said, leaning back on the picnic table. She leaned over and swiped the corner of my mouth where I bet there was some fudge or sprinkles lingering. I froze and she stuck her finger in her mouth to lick off whatever it was. I was having déjà vu. I was full to the brim of ice cream and I wanted to kiss her.

She smiled at me and my heart fluttered and we were definitely having a moment at this tiny ice cream stand that was only open in the summers because not many people wanted to eat ice cream in December in Maine.

And then she turned away from me and pulled something out of her bag. Okay, moment over.

Quickly, she scribbled something down and then turned the notebook so I could read it. I was so captivated by her that it took a second for me to figure out how to read again.

Kiss Serena.

Oh. Well now. She raised one eyebrow as if to ask me if it was okay.

“I mean, it’s on the list. We have to do it,” I said, pretending like I was having trouble with that. “Oh nooooooooo.”

She grinned at me.

“Shut up,” she said and pulled my chin toward hers.

Her lips were still cool from the ice cream and I could taste the caramel swirl on her tongue. We still hadn’t made any decisions about us, but here we were, kissing again.

Every single thought and hesitation melted out of my head and all I could think about was the feel of her mouth on mine and the sparks firing in my body. Fuck, kissing Fiona was one of the greatest experiences I was probably ever going to have.

Her tongue flirted with mine and we sunk deeper into the kiss. My heart pounded in my ears and I knew my hands were doing things on the border of being indecent in public. Fi laughed and pulled away.

“Your hands are cold,” she said, and I realized my fingers had been messing with the straps on her dress. Oops?

“Maybe we should . . . go somewhere else,” I said, looking around to see if we’d scandalized any of the other people at the ice cream stand. So far, no one was paying attention to us since there was a kid throwing a tantrum about sprinkles that had captured everyone’s attention by the unbelievable volume of noise he produced from such a tiny body.

“Yeah,” she said, and as I stood up, she grabbed my hand and laced our fingers together. Okay, we were doing this. She looked at me and I squeezed her hand back.

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“So what are you and Fiona doing, exactly?” Anna asked me one evening when Fi had to have dinner with her parents. I had no idea what she was telling them she was doing when she wasn’t at home, but they seemed to be okay with her explanations. Or, at least they weren’t calling in missing person’s reports on her.

“That . . . is a good question that I don’t know the answer to, and I don’t know when I’ll know the answer. I keep waiting for one. I keep telling myself that we need to figure our shit out, but I’m having a nice time with her. It’s a relief to just . . . be. To hang out and kiss a little and not have the pressure. We’re having fun. Why does it have to have a definition slapped on it?” Anna raised her eyebrows. It was kind of a speech.

“I’m not pressuring you. I just wanted to know what’s going on and if you wanted to talk to me. Because you seem happy. And I’m happy for you. And I love you.” She held out her arms and I fell into them.

“Thanks, Anna,” I said, my words muffled in her shirt.

“Anytime, babe. And you don’t have to define anything. Not to me. Not to anyone. Not unless you want to.” I nodded. Why was I feeling like I wanted to cry?

“Part of me is screaming that I should want to define this and make a statement and make a decision, but the rest of me is just having a good time. It’s . . . interesting. And sometimes annoying.” Anna nodded.

“I know what you mean. Take your time. Take all the time you need.” I didn’t have that much time, though. The summer didn’t last forever and sooner or later, I was going to have to say goodbye to Fi and figure out what the hell we were going to do moving forward.

I wanted her. I wanted us. I wanted to be with her. But I didn't know how that would work in practice. Or if I was even capable of it. Or if she wanted it. We'd been skating around the issue so obviously, and something was going to have to give. One of us was going to have to cave and start the conversation. Just . . . not yet.

We'd checked off a number of things on her list, but one was missing and one I had actually been planning for.

A road trip. In spite of us both being from Maine, we'd never really explored that much of the state and I had started plotting out a hypothetical road trip. One that would take a few days and make a number of stops. Including a night or two at an inn or hotel. I hadn't made reservations anywhere, but I'd picked places. I didn't want to make the plans if she couldn't do it, or she didn't want to. Then I'd be out of luck and money. I had some squirreled away from my job and I couldn't think of a better use for it. Living with Anna and Lacey was saving me a lot of cash, which was great. Paying for school was going to be a tiny bit less sucky in the fall.

"So, I have a proposition for you," I said one night when we were hanging out in the studio together and just doing nothing. I liked making plans with her and setting out a schedule, but more often than not, we just did whatever we felt like. Sometimes that was laying on the couch and talking about all the plot holes in Disney movies and fighting over a can of Pringles.

“Okay?” she said. She looked wary.

“It’s not something bad. Why are you going negative? I haven’t even told you what it is.” She stuck her tongue out at me.

“Fine, what is it?”

I had totally planned this part, and pulled out the printed spreadsheet and list I’d made for the trip.

“I want to check something else off your list.” Her eyes scanned down the list and then she smiled.

“A road trip, huh? A multiple-day road trip? And we’re going to be staying overnight?” One of her eyebrows went higher.

“I’m not trying to seduce you,” I said in a completely unconvincing tone. I mean, I wasn’t. I definitely wasn’t.

“Are you sure about that?” she asked, setting the list aside and using her arms to crawl up to where I was. We’d been laying pretty much head to foot. Suddenly, her mouth was very close to my mouth.

“Do you want me to seduce you?” I asked. The air had changed in the blink of an eye and things were . . . different. Again.

“Do I look like I want to be seduced?” she asked, and I was about ready to explode.

This was different than just kissing. She was asking for something beyond that.

I didn't know what to say.

I opened my mouth and she answered for me. She kissed me.

I gasped into her mouth and she softened her approach. Still, the second her lips touched mine, I couldn't help but reach for her. Reach for more.

I pulled her face closer and let my tongue answer her. My other hand stroked up and down her side, making her shirt ride up a bit.

I was in so much trouble.

And I didn't give a single fuck.

Fi started making these desperate little sounds as we kissed and I felt like I was going to completely lose it. I needed her. I wanted her. This was different than when we'd been together before. The fire burned hotter; brighter.

Desire thrashed inside me and my entire body shook with it. I'd never experienced it like this. Not even before.

"I want you so much," I said and she moaned. I was about ready to lose all sense and reason, but she put a hand on my chest and pushed herself back.

"Are you sure?" she asked. Her eyes were bright and she was so beautiful it hurt to look at her.

"Yes," I said. "I want you. And I want . . . I want to try this." The words that I'd been holding back for days spilled out of my mouth. I couldn't stop them.

“I want to see what we could be. Together.” I stroked her cheek and she smiled.

“I want that too. And you. I want you.” I couldn’t stop the smile that probably took up my entire face.

“So we’re doing this?” she asked.

“We’re doing this,” I said. She rolled over onto her back and looked up at the ceiling and started to laugh.

“Life is strange sometimes, isn’t it?” she said. I turned on my side and looked at her profile.

“Yeah, it is.”

Eleven

“This car is halfway filled with snacks,” Fi said the next weekend when we were packing up my little hatchback for our road trip. I’d gotten the time off work, she’d told her parents whatever she’d told them, and we were booked at a few inns and bed and breakfasts along the Maine coast. I was both nervous and more excited than I’d ever been before.

We hadn’t told everyone about our change in relationship status. For now, it felt a little private. Like I wanted to stay just in our bubble and not share anything yet. Of course, Anna gave me a knowing look before she left for work and told us to be careful. And then gave me a wink and I knew exactly what she was thinking. But I’d deal with that when I got back. We had four days ahead of us together. Just us.

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“You can never have too many snacks,” I said. I also had a first aid kit, enough sunscreen and bug spray for ten people, an emergency blanket and flares, and several jugs of water. Just in case. I liked being prepared.

“You ready to go?” she asked as she slammed the trunk.

“Ready if you are,” I said, putting on my sunglasses.

“Yup,” she said, coming over to give me a kiss. I couldn’t believe we were doing this. I never thought that we’d get to this place.

“Let’s go, Cricket,” she said and went to open the passenger door for her.

“After you, Ladybug.”

A few hours later, Fi was grateful for my snacks. So far, we’d stopped at two strange antique stores, taken pictures near a lighthouse, and had been nearly run off the road by exactly two vehicles. Typical.

We had taken about five dozen selfies, but I hadn’t been happy with any of them.

“I hate my hair,” I said. “It’s just so boring.” Fi thought about that.

“Turn left up here,” she said and I did it without asking why we were turning into a Walmart parking lot. I figured she had to pee.

“Come on,” she said, getting out of the car and reaching for me. I took her hand and

followed her into the store. She dragged me toward the beauty department and stood me in front of the hair dye.

“Pick one.” I turned and slowly looked at her.

“You’re not serious.”

“Why not? I could cut yours if you want, too. I got pretty good at doing my own.” I didn’t know she’d cut her own hair. It looked amazing.

“I don’t know . . .” I said, my eyes blurring at all the choices.

“Close your eyes,” she said, taking my hands. “What kind of hair do you want to have, but were scared to?”

“Blue fading into purple with an undercut on one side,” I said and opened my eyes. It was the look I’d been aching for since I saw it on someone else’s Instagram.

“Okay, we’re going to need dye and bleach and clippers. And scissors so I can give you a little trim.” She stroked her fingers through my ponytail and then gave it a tiny yank.

“Ow,” I said and she kissed my cheek.

Just a mere two hours later, we were in the bathroom of the cute as hell inn we’d chosen for the night and the smell of bleach was making me feel dizzy.

“Now if it starts itching like crazy, let me know,” she said. I was nervous about this. I was skeptical. I was kind of freaking out. But I was doing it because I wanted to do something. I wanted to be the kind of girl who just dyed her hair. If I could pretend to be that girl, then maybe I could fake it until I became her.

To distract me from the smell of the bleach and my scalp itching, Fi danced and sang in front of me, making me laugh until I had tears streaming down my face. And I didn't think they were a result of the bleach.

"You're amazing," I said and she blushed a little.

"Thanks." We shared one of those moments when our eyes just sort of locked and everything else faded away and all I could see was her.

"Things are going to be different this time, aren't they?" I asked.

"Yes. They are. I'm not going to let anything, least of all my own insecurities, get in the way again. We're going to be adults and talk about things instead of making rash decisions." I nodded.

"We're very mature now," I said.

"I promise you, Cricket. I promise I won't make decisions about our relationship without talking to you first. Okay?" I reached for her hand and kissed her palm.

"I promise you the same thing, Ladybug. We're in this together. You and me, against the world." And our parents, probably. And distance. We hadn't talked about that part yet, but I figured we could cross that bridge when we got back from this trip. This was a new beginning.

The timer on her phone went off and we rushed to rinse out the bleach in the huge tub before she dried my hair and put the dye on, painting the blue at my roots and mixing it with the purple that dominated the ends. I almost didn't care what it looked like. I just wanted a change.

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While the color marinated on my head, Fi called for room service. I was nervous that they would reprimand us for doing hair dye in the bathroom, but the guy who came up didn't even give me a second look.

"We had so many snacks today," I said, looking at the little rolling table that was piled with food. French fries and lobster rolls and chocolate mousse and a huge plate of heirloom tomatoes with salt, pepper, and olive oil.

A Maine feast.

We sat along the edge of the tub and stuffed our faces as my color cooked. I ate so much that I was barely able to move afterwards, but I had no regrets. Fi had a tiny speck of chocolate mousse in the corner of her mouth and it was like one of our things. I leaned over and instead of using my finger, I used my tongue to wipe it away, which led to us both ignoring the timer on her phone in favor of kissing. I didn't think it would matter. My hair wasn't going to fall off, and if it did, totally worth it.

Kissing Fiona Davis was the best thing of all things.

At last, we washed out the dye and then Fi gave me a trim and parted my hair for the undercut. I'd almost forgotten about this part of the deal because I was so dazzled by the color. I looked like a mermaid. A kind of badass mermaid.

"You ready?" she asked, firing up the clippers. They buzzed loudly in the large bathroom.

“Yeah, sure,” I said, not sounding sure at all. She turned them off.

“You don’t have to. It looks amazing just like this.”

I turned my head from side to side in the mirror. It looked great, but I wanted something more.

“Do it,” I said, meeting her eyes in the mirror. She turned the clippers back on.

“Here we go.”

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“It feels prickly,” she said as we lay on one of the queen beds. I loved hotel sheets. They were just so nice. I wondered if there was a place you could buy hotel sheets for your own bed. I’d put them on my dorm mattress in a heartbeat.

“Are you happy with it?” she asked, still stroking the undercut side of my head.

“I am. I think it’s going to take a few days before I’ll recognize myself in the mirror. I’ve never dyed my hair before.” It felt like an extremely radical thing to do, but it wasn’t, really. It was my head and I could decide what the hair on it looked like. Still, I had the feeling my parents were going to freak when they saw it. I’d deal with that later.

Right now I’m nineteen years old and I’m on a road trip with the girl that I’m . . . dating. That was still weird for me to think of, but it was true.

“Are you my girlfriend?” We hadn’t actually said the word yet.

“I should hope so. If you want me to be,” she said, twirling some of my hair around

her fingers.

“I want you to be. And I want to be yours.” She snuggled closer into my chest.

“I like thinking of being yours. And you being mine.” I did, too. It felt like we had always kind of been that way. That even when we were apart, we were still connected in some way. That we only had to find our way back to each other.

“My Cricket,” she said.

“Chirp chirp,” I said, rubbing my legs together.

“You dork.” I crossed my eyes at her.

“My beautiful dork with the amazing hair.” I did have amazing hair now. I was pretty excited about it.

She yawned and I realized how late it was. I wished we were of age to get champagne from room service, but I’d snuck a few small bottles of wine in with the snacks that I’d pilfered from Anna’s cabinet.

I pulled one of them out and poured it in some of the plastic cups the inn provided.

“Cheers,” I said, and we clinked our glasses. We hadn’t discussed sleeping arrangements, but there were two beds, so all our bases were covered.

I looked at Fi and she went to her suitcase and pulled out her pajamas. I turned around and rustled in my own suitcase. We hadn’t talked about this part either.

“You can look,” she said, her voice quiet. I pulled out a pair of shorts and a tank and turned. She had a baggy T-shirt on that skimmed the tops of her thighs, and a pair of

panties. That was it.

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“Wow,” I said. Seriously, wow. She tugged a little on the hem of the T-shirt to pull it to cover more.

“I wasn’t sure what I should wear, so . . .” she trailed off.

“You look amazing.” The T-shirt was faded, so I couldn’t even see what the image on the front had originally been.

“Thanks,” she said, looking down. Her bare feet curled around each other.

“Do you, um, want to sleep separately?” I asked, my voice squeaking. She bit her lip and shook her head.

“I want to sleep with you.” I wasn’t sure what that entailed, but I was all for it.

“I want to sleep with you, too.” We had done this before, but it was like we had never been naked in front of each other. Still, this felt different and new. All of it did.

“We don’t have to . . . you know. We can just sleep,” she said.

“I know.” But I wanted to. I wanted to kiss her and pull that T-shirt over her head and taste the skin of her collarbone and see if that spot by her hip still drove her wild when I licked it with my tongue. I wanted to see if she was as incredible as I remembered.

“I feel like I don’t know how to do this,” she said, so I took the lead.

“We can do whatever we want.” I walked over to her and captured her mouth. She gasped at the force of my kiss, but her hands wound instantly into my hair, pulling it just a little bit. She knew I liked that. And I knew that she loved it when I stroked the sides of her neck as we kissed.

“Wait, I have to say something,” she said, breaking our kiss. She rested her forehead against mine.

“I love you. I never stopped.” I nearly fell over. I wasn’t expecting that. I’d felt the same way, but I’d thought it was too soon. I was rushing. I was being headstrong, which wasn’t my thing at all.

And here she was, this incredible girl, telling me that she loved me.

“I love you, too. Always have. Even when I was hurt and angry at you. I never stopped. I just tried to ignore it.” But it would not be ignored. We had both made mistakes and it was time to move past them. It was time to build something new. Just the two of us.

“I’m so sorry for everything from before,” she started to say, but I put my finger to her lips.

“It doesn’t matter right now. All that matters is this.” And I kissed her again.

We went slow, as if we had centuries of time. It was both new and the same. She blushed a little when I pulled her T-shirt over her head and ran my hands up and down her sides. I nearly lost my mind when she flicked her tongue against my neck and just barely scraped my skin with her teeth.

We undressed each other slowly, savoring. I wanted to touch every inch of her skin again. Reintroduce myself.

She trembled as I lay her on the bed and danced my fingers up and down.

“You’re so beautiful,” I said before I flicked one of her nipples with my tongue. She moaned and arched her back. I smiled in satisfaction. I loved this. I’d missed this. I’d miss this more than I would ever admit.

In bed, I’d always been more of the aggressor and we fell into old patterns, but just as I was sweeping my tongue into her bellybutton, she yanked on my hair and dragged me back up to her mouth for a searing kiss. I was so turned on, I thought I was going to die from it.

“What do you want?” I asked when she released my mouth.

“Why don’t you try a few things and find out?” she asked with a quirk of one eyebrow.

This girl was going to be my undoing.

I resumed what I was doing, kissing and licking my whole way down her body. She still had the panties on, so I hooked them over her hips and she helped me get them off.

“Fuck, you’re incredible,” I said, just sitting back and looking at her.

She raked my hair back from my face and smiled.

“I’m so happy we found each other again.”

I leaned down and kissed halfway between her bellybutton and the apex of her thighs. She arched her lower half up toward my mouth and I kissed lower. I was going to take my fucking time with her.

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I wanted to remember her taste. I wanted to sear this into my memory. I wanted everything.

I put my hands on the insides of her thighs and pushed them apart. She smiled wickedly down at me.

“I know what you want,” I said. I knew exactly what she wanted. Just before my mouth met her core, she moved her hips to meet my lips. My girl.

I licked her one time, long and slow and deep. All the way up and all the way down. Her hands gripped the sheets and she let out a moan. That was what I wanted. And I was going to do whatever I could to get her to make that sound over and over.

I fluttered my fingers over her clit and she started to thrash. Perfect. She was so beautiful like this. Wild and untamed. My dreamer, undone by pleasure.

I flicked her clit with my tongue and stroked her opening with my fingers before dipping them in and out, in and out. Just enough to make her beg for me to go deeper. Harder. Fiona Davis wasn't a delicate flower.

She always wanted more.

I gave her what she wanted. I fucked her with my fingers and my mouth until she was a mess of begging and trembling. I added one more finger inside her and used the other hand to stroke her lower, just the way she liked it. That was all it took. I held on as she climaxed and savored every pulse of her body and every single sound she made. When it was over, she panted and then looked down at me.

“You’re really good at that,” she said. I laughed a little and kissed the inside of her thigh.

“You’re worth being good at it for,” I said. Now she was dragging me back up to her mouth, attacking my tongue with hers and shoving me onto my stomach. I put a pillow under my hips and she set to work reciprocating.

“Mmm, I could just eat you up,” she said, stroking my thighs. I trembled at her touch. Getting her off had turned me on so much that it wasn’t going to take much on her part.

“Please do,” I said, looking over my shoulder.

She gave me a grin before she licked the inside of my thigh, right to my center.

“Fuck,” I said. She laughed, sexy and low.

“Your turn.”

Twelve

Later, we lay in each other’s arms.

“You know, I brought something else with me. I didn’t want to show it to you in case something happened and we decided that we weren’t ready to have sex yet,” she said as she fiddled with my hair.

“Yeah? What’s that?” She gave me a cute grin and then went to pull something out of the bottom of her bag. Two somethings.

“Oh,” I said as she held up the dildo and a strap-on harness. We’d used toys before

when we were younger, but this was something else entirely.

“We don’t have to. I just brought it. Just in case. I’ve never tried it, so I’m not even sure how it’s supposed to work.” Suddenly, I was very un-tired.

“Put it on and see,” I said and what ensued was Fi getting all tangled up in the harness and me trying to help her get it on correctly.

“I feel like such a dork right now,” she said as I helped her attach the dildo. It was sparkly and purple. I still wasn’t sure how I felt about it, but I was definitely willing to try.

“What do you think?” I asked her as she skipped over to the mirror. She wiggled her hips.

“I think it looks kind of awesome.”

“Me too,” I said, standing behind her and putting my arms around her.

“But you’re probably too tired to do anything else,” she said, meeting my eyes in the mirror.

“I’m not tired anymore,” I said, reaching down and stroked the dildo. “Let’s figure out how it works.”

^^*

Sufficient to say, we weren’t ready in time for checkout the next morning. When the housekeeper knocked on our door to kick us out, Fi hurriedly kicked the dildo and harness under the bed as I said we’d be gone within fifteen minutes. She gave both of us a look, but let me shut the door behind her.

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“Don’t forget that’s under there, or she’s in for a surprise,” I said, pointing to the bed.

“Maybe that should be a thing. There are always Bibles in hotel rooms, why not have strap-ons too?” I snorted and helped her throw all of our crap in our bags (including the dildo and harness) so we could leave.

“Hey,” she said as we joined hands and dragged our stuff out of the room.

“What?” I asked.

“I love you,” she said. I kissed her cheek.

“I love you, too.”

The rest of the day we spent stopping at goofy tourist traps, eating more lobster rolls, and pulling over to make out and fool around in the backseat whenever we felt like it.

It was perfect. It was perfect and even though I knew it wasn’t going to last, I was holding onto every single second.

We would face our future together. Remember our past, and not make the same mistakes again. We were stronger together than we were apart.

And I loved her. I loved her more than I ever had before.

^^*

“Thank you for this, Cricket,” she said as we stood on top of Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park the next morning to watch the sunrise.

“You’re welcome, Ladybug,” I said, tucking my arm around her and resting my head on her shoulder.

“This is everything,” she said as the sun peeked over the horizon and set the sky on fire.

“You’re everything,” I said. I was only looking at her. At her wonder as another day began.

She smiled.

“I knew somehow that we would get here in the end.”

“Fate?” I asked.

“Maybe. Maybe something else. It doesn’t really matter, does it?”

I turned and looked at the sky. It didn’t look real.

“No, it doesn’t.”

Epilogue

I finally found out when we got back that Fi had told her parents that she was going to do what she was going to do and they could either accept that and be in her life, or she would leave, just like her sister. That scared them, so they loosened the reins and she was finally able to breathe and live her life. My parents, not so much. But I had Anna.

“I could transfer, you know,” she said as we packed up my car to move me back into the dorms. The two of us had spent the rest of the summer in a blissful haze and I couldn’t admit how much it was hurting me to leave her.

“But then I’d know that I was the only reason you did and I’d feel guilty,” I said. I didn’t want to be the reason she transferred. Even if she asked me to transfer, I would do it in a damn heartbeat. It wasn’t the same, but I couldn’t explain why.

“Maybe I’ll just do it and show up at your dorm,” she said. I gave her a look. That was exactly the kind of thing she would do.

“I would not encourage you to do that, but if you did, I wouldn’t shut the door in your face.” She grinned at me and shoved the last box in my trunk before shutting it.

“Drive safe,” Anna said, giving me a huge hug. Lacey was there too. They both had become more to me than family this summer. I could never tell them how much it meant to me that they let me stay.

“You’re welcome anytime. Christmas, next summer, spring break. We’re here for you,” Lacey said.

“Thank you.” Anna and Lacey went back into the apartment to give me and Fi a moment.

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“Don’t think I’m not serious about this transfer thing,” she said, putting her arms around me.

“I take everything you say completely seriously,” I said, holding her tight. My hair was freshly dyed again, and my parents hadn’t reacted as much to it as I’d thought they would. Progress?

“I love you,” she said in my ear. “More than I can express in words.”

“I love you,” I said, wishing I could just live in this moment forever.

We kissed so many times that we started to laugh and she slapped me on the ass.

“Go. Drive safe and call me when you get there.”

I nodded and got into the car with a lump in my throat.

The drive to school was long and lonely and I was completely miserable by the time I showed up to move into my dorm room.

I got out and wished that I could wave a magic wand and have everything in my new room without doing any of the work. Since I was so late, no one was really around to help. Until a voice spoke behind me.

“Do you need any help?”

It wasn’t possible.

I turned slowly and there she was, her own car fully packed with all her stuff.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I’m going to school. I’m also moving into this building. What a coincidence.” She was trying to be nonchalant, but she couldn’t hide her grin of satisfaction.

“You are ridiculous,” I said, rushing over and pulling her into my arms.

“Ridiculously in love with you, Cricket,” she said.