



Unstoppable You

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Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Delaney: I'm over men. Officially. I gave Connor St. Clair EVERYTHING (you know what I mean) and he ended up "accidentally" in bed with a girl he picked up at the local bar. Now I'm single and ready to burn the world down, starting with his beloved truck. That's when James St. Clair (Connor's sister and my former middle school nemesis that I haven't seen in years) appears in my Pilates class. Because my life isn't bad enough already.

James: Getting away from my divorced parents and my good-for-nothing brother was supposed to bring me happiness, but reality was a harsh mistress. I'm not too thrilled to be back in town, but things start looking up when I run into Delaney Budreau. She's fresh off her breakup with my cheating brother and she's even more beautiful than I remember. Too bad I was so awful to her when we were kids—and then there's the whole Connor thing. I'd love nothing more than to mend things between us. I'll never forgive myself if I don't at least try.

Delaney: Whatever. James isn't on my radar, no matter how hard she tries to ingratiate herself into my life. I've got bigger plans. Better plans. You've heard of the Bucket List, get ready for the F*ckit List. All my life I've been a good girl, a rule follower. That ends now. I'm going to live my life for me, and that includes doing things like getting a body piercing, dancing on a bar, and kissing a girl for the first time. I'm absolutely definitely straight, but I'm tired of being boring old reliable Delaney. I want to get wild. I want to be free.

James: I never expected to see Delaney at Sapph of all places, but I know a woman on a mission when I see one. Over more than a few drinks, she tells me about her list, and I decide that the best way to make up for the way I treated her in the past is to help her complete it. Starting with a kiss.

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Chapter One

Delaney

“Fuck you, Connor. Fuck you, and the truck you rode in on!” I spoke through sobs as I added more items to the burn pile.

“Is that it?” my boss at Between the Sheets Bookshop and friend, Larison, asked.

“Yeah,” I said, wiping my dripping nose. I know I looked like shit, but I didn’t care. Appearance was the last thing on my mind.

Larison gave Stace, the friend who offered to let me add my ex-boyfriend’s shit to the yard waste from her parent’s house, a thumbs up. Stace was the one setting and supervising the fire since she worked as a firefighter.

It took a little while, but soon Connor’s favorite shirts, his hats, shoes, and a bunch of other shit were reduced to nothing but smoke and ashes. Too bad I couldn’t have gotten my hands on his precious gaming systems. That would have really made him hurt.

Larison put her arm around me.

“Thanks for suggesting this,” I said. I’d wanted to get rid of Connor’s stuff in a dramatic way. Like throwing it out the window of my second story apartment along with a banner that said WELCOME HOME, CHEATER so everyone in the city would know what he did to me. Instead, he’d snuck in while I was at work and

grabbed the essentials before he moved in with one of his friends.

“You’re welcome,” Larison said. “Stace was actually the one who came up with it.”

Stace saluted us and then went back to supervising the fire, her arms crossed, showing off her muscles. The first time I’d met her, I’d been in awe of her fitness level, but then I heard about her job and it made sense. Still. She looked like she could lift a car and not break a sweat.

“Thank you,” I told Stace.

She turned her head and smiled. “It’s the least I could do.”

The fire was still going, but all of Connor’s crap was nothing but ash and I’d lost interest. My relationship was finally dead and cremated. I wiped my eyes, which were still wet but this time because of the smoke. It was totally the smoke.

I’d been crying nearly every second since I came home to my apartment one Saturday night and found Connor in bed with someone else. I’d screamed and she’d screamed and we’d both turned on Connor, who had told her that we had broken up and me that he was going out with his friends. I’d been over at Larison’s, but her daughter had started feeling sick, so I’d canceled my planned evening with her and her girlfriend, Jo. Ever the dutiful girlfriend, I’d sent Connor a message about it, but he’d left his phone in his pants on the floor while he’d been fucking someone else.

If I was truly honest with myself, things hadn’t always been good with Connor, even from the beginning, but I’d just...I’d told myself that things were great. That was what I’d always done. Imagined that things were wonderful even if they weren’t. Always looked on the bright side. Found the silver lining. That was me, Delaney Budreau, the good girl, the sweetheart, the amazing girlfriend, the perfect employee, the ideal daughter.

And Connor St. Clair had fucked me over anyway. It didn't matter that the night before I'd cooked his favorite meal. It didn't matter that I'd bought ugly dark sheets because he thought that anything else was too "feminine." It didn't matter that I did his laundry and cleaned the kitchen and didn't complain when he left his wet towels on the bathroom floor.

I had almost never complained. Had always smiled and rolled my eyes and swallowed my anger. Told myself that I was being dramatic, that I was being demanding, that I was asking for too much. That he worked hard (he didn't), he was stressed (from staying up all night gaming), that I loved him (did I?).

Of course I had loved him. I wouldn't have done everything for him if I hadn't.

"You okay?" Larison asked me, squeezing my shoulder.

"Yeah," I said, but the word was an empty syllable. I told people I was fine all the time. If I shared how I really felt, I might open my mouth and never stop screaming.

There was sadness, yes, but there was another emotion under the sadness, wearing the sadness on top of itself like a cape.

Pure, distilled rage.

If you'd asked me before this happened if I was an angry person, I would have scoffed and told you that I believed anger was an emotion people used as an excuse. That anger was too accepted these days as the only valid emotion while so many others were shamed and hidden away.

That had been a different Delaney.

"Come on," Larison said, pulling me back from the fire. "I think I know something

that will cheer you up.”

* * *

“Well?” she asked a little while later as we sat at the sports bar with a pitcher of beer and a basket of wings in front of us. Normally coming here would have cured what ailed me, but tonight it wasn’t doing the trick.

What was wrong couldn’t be cured by honey barbecue wings and the best cheap beer in the city. The only cure I would even consider was something like murder, but I’d never be able to lie, and orange was not my color.

“Yeah, definitely better,” I told Larison, plastering a smile on my face that made my cheeks feel like they were stiff and cracking.

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“Fuck Connor,” Jo said, passing me a glass of beer.

“I’d rather not, actually,” I said, taking the sweating glass and stopping myself from immediately chugging it. Larison had driven me here and I was taking a car home so my plan was to get absolutely smashed, something I’d never done actually done before.

There were so many things I’d never done before.

Jo and Larison gave me similar sympathetic looks as I swallowed a huge gulp of beer and tore the meat off a wing with my teeth, discarding the bones in the empty bucket that had been provided.

I’d never felt so feral in my life. The idea of tearing off all my clothes, running into the woods, and screaming until my lungs bled definitely had its appeal.

I wanted to scratch and bite and claw and wreck and ruin and destroy.

The fire today hadn’t done much to slake my rage. If I could have set Connor’s truck on fire and watched it burn, that might have satisfied me. Maybe not even then.

Larison and Jo tried to talk with me, but I was only half-listening. The rest of my brain was busy these days. Occupied with other matters.

Rage and vengeance required a lot of energy, apparently. I was exhausted.

“You sure you’re good to work next week?” Larison asked me. She might be my

friend, but she was also my boss, so things could get a little tricky sometimes.

“Absolutely. I’m happy for the distraction. I just want to get back to normal.”

There was no getting back to normal for me. Normal was the exact thing I wanted to avoid. Where had normal gotten me? It had gotten me a man who fucking cheated on me. It hadn’t made me rich, or famous, or even happy.

Doing what I was supposed to do, what was expected of me, had never done me a goddamn thing.

It was time for something new.

My parents used to watch this older sitcom and one episode the guy decided to do the opposite of all his instincts, and everything started working out for him. That was the energy I wanted to bring to my life.

Fuck-it vibes.

Part of me thought about telling Larison and Jo about my new plan, but I was still keeping it to myself. I didn’t just want to dive into something recklessly. I needed to think this through.

What did I always do? Make a list. This would be a Fuckit List. All the things I’d stopped myself from doing up until now that I was going to let myself do.

It was going to be a long-ass list.

“Delaney?” Larison asked, and I realized I’d been staring off into space and thinking about my list.

“Yeah, sorry. I’m back.”

Reaching for a wing, I ate it rapidly and tuned back into the conversation between Larison and Jo. They were discussing a new book, of course. Normally I’d have been completely involved in the discussion and you wouldn’t have been able to stop me from talking, but my constant-burning rage was making that difficult.

It should have been a fun night out with my friends, but my heart wasn’t in it. I didn’t know why this breakup was hitting me so hard. I’d always been able to put things aside and keep a smile on my face and a song in my heart.

Fucking Connor. The night I’d discovered him was a complete blur. I know I’d done a lot of screaming and crying, but other than that? No idea what I’d said. It was a shame, because I still had plenty of things I wanted to say to him.

“Delaney?” Larison had obviously been trying to get my attention.

“Hm?” I asked.

“Do you want to just go home?” she asked, both her and Jo giving me concerned frowns.

I didn’t like that. Usually I was the one with the concerned frown looking at them. The one who was taking care of someone else. The one who was making sure that everyone was having a good time, and if they weren’t, I did my best to change it. This role reversal was as uncomfortable as an old scratchy sweater.

I didn’t like it at all.

There was no way to salvage tonight. I was fully in my head and not even wings and beer and my friends were going to bring me out of it.

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“Yeah, if that’s okay?” I said.

“Of course,” Larison said, squeezing my hand.

They refused to let me pay and I caught Jo whispering in Larison’s ear. I bet they’d dropped their daughter Juniper off with Larison’s moms for the night, so they were free to get frisky. Good for them. At least someone was getting laid.

If I was honest with myself, I couldn’t remember the last time Connor and I had had sex. It had been a while.

Fuck, I didn’t want to think any more about Connor. He’d wasted too many of my years already.

I sighed in the backseat as Larison drove me to my apartment and dropped me off. Dragging myself upstairs, I paused for a second after I unlocked the door. Every time I came home, I’d get hit with a wave of nausea that made it hard to stay standing.

We’d moved into this apartment together. Well, I’d directed the movers to bring things in and Connor had immediately sat on the couch and started gaming on his device. But I’d done my best to make it our place and now all I could see when I walked through the door were the holes. The empty places.

Connor’s butt print that had permanently altered the shape of the couch.

“I need a new couch,” I said once I’d managed to stop myself from throwing up. No one answered me because I lived alone now.

I hated it. Absolutely hated it.

“Fuck,” I said, wiping away tears and leaning back against the door.

It had been two weeks. Two weeks since my entire world changed.

“I hate this,” I said to no one.

There was no one here to listen.

* * *

Somehow I got my ass out of bed the next day instead of rotting for an entire Sunday. I should be doing work for my screen-printing business, or cleaning, or meal prepping for the coming week, or a million other things. Instead I made triple chocolate chip pancakes and ate them in bed in my pajamas, licking the plate when I was done.

I puttered around, trying to get things cleaned up, but I gave up and decided to leave the house and go to Pilates. Maybe some endorphins would help. It was worth a shot.

The gym wasn't far from my place, so I walked with my mat slung over my shoulder. The air had just the slightest chill to it, broadcasting that fall was on the way. My favorite season, normally. Something told me that not even stepping on crunchy leaves and giving out candy on Halloween was going to cheer me up this year.

Keeping a smile on my face, I checked in at the desk and went to the locker room before bringing my mat, water, and towel to the Pilates room.

The class was absolutely packed for a Sunday afternoon, which was normally fine with me, but I would have enjoyed some more space around my mat.

There were a few familiar faces, but I avoided them so I didn't have to make small talk or endure their knowing glances and questions. While I did live in a city, it was a small one, and a lot of people knew me from Between the Sheets or high school. In fact, I'd known about this class because of one of our book club members, Devyn, our fearless leader. She always managed to put together a class that gave you the best bang for your buck and left you wanting to curse her name.

Shaking and sweating and cursing was exactly what I needed today, I hoped.

There was an empty space in front of me and I hoped it would stay that way so I could have a good view out the window, but of course right before class started, someone laid their mat down.

My luck had been absolutely shitty lately.

Determined to make the most of the class anyway, I gave Devyn all my attention as she started us with a warm-up.

By the time we were even halfway through the class, I was ready to cry. All of my muscles shook and sweat poured down my chest as I tried to remember how to function.

Why did I do this to myself? I wasn't having fun. I wasn't enjoying myself. The music was good, and that was about it.

"And hold it for five, four, threeeeeee, twooooo...and one!" Devyn always drew out that countdown from five and I gave her a dirty look that she ignored. I didn't think I was the only one.

I made it through the class, ending it slumped on my mat like a wrung-out dishrag. How the hell was I supposed to get home? My legs weren't in working order

anymore.

“Fuck me,” I said softly to myself.

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“Okay,” a voice said, and I sat up, wincing only to meet the eyes of the woman who’d parked her mat in front of me.

She had two-colored hair that was half brown, the other half dyed platinum blonde. It wasn’t a look that many people could pull off, but she made it work. Her face was also decorated with a silver septum piercing. That worked for her too. Something about her made me stare for a second.

She looked...familiar? Yeah, I’d definitely seen her before.

“Delaney?” she asked, and everything fell into place with a snap.

James. James St. Clair. Connor’s sister, who was my age.

My mouth had never just hung open in shock before, but it was happening now.

“What a small world,” she said with a smile, as if she was happy to see me.

After a second, my shock turned to a very familiar emotion: distilled rage.

Moving quicker than I thought was possible after that workout, I stood up and grabbed my stuff, not even bothering to clean off my mat or roll it up.

I had to get out of here. Get away from her. Get away from all the St. Clairs. No good ever came from me talking to a St. Clair. That was true now more than ever.

This month was the absolute worst. Stumbling through the gym, I made it to the

locker room to change, got all my stuff together, and bolted, keeping my head down as much as I could.

I managed to make it outside the gym before I heard someone calling my name.

“Hey, Delaney, wait!”

No thank you, I wasn’t going to be doing that. Speeding up, I moved as fast as I could without actually running, my lungs and legs burning.

Cardio. I needed to do more cardio.

No way, fuck that. All I needed to do right now was to get away from James.

Huffing and puffing, I booked it, but it seemed like she kept gaining on me. Okay, I should have done more cardio, but I hadn’t known I would have needed it to escape James St. Clair.

She’d been voted “most likely to be famous” in the yearbook and had given the city the middle finger on her way off to do that.

Guess it hadn’t worked out and now she was back to ruin my life.

Connor hadn’t said a word about her moving back, but we’d never really talked about his sister. Him, because the world revolved around him, and me because I had wanted to forget she existed.

“Delaney, wait.” A hand grabbed my arm and made me stop, but I’d been about to collapse from a stitch in my side anyway. Gasping, I braced my hands on my shaking legs. Never run after Pilates.

“Running away from me? Really?” I turned my head and peered up at her. Of course she wasn’t breathing hard and looked like a fitness model in her matching black bra and leggings set. Had she even broken a sweat during class?

“Fuck. You,” I gasped out. Was I ever going to be able to breathe again? Unlikely.

“Deep breaths,” she told me, and I glared at her and gave her my middle finger.

“Are you running away from me because of school or my brother or both?” she asked.

“Fuck off,” I said, finally starting to get my lungs under control. For things that were supposed to keep you alive, they were surprisingly finicky.

Wincing, I stood to my full height, which was only a few inches shorter than James’s. That was more annoying than I could put into words at the moment. She shouldn’t get to be taller than me.

Her septum piercing glinted in the sun as she gazed at me, taking me in.

I didn’t want to be taken in, least of all by her.

“Leave me alone,” I said, and started walking again.

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“Where are you going? I can at least give you a ride.”

I would rather get run over by her car than sit in it.

“Just leave me alone, James,” I called out. “Leave. Me. Alone.”

Her footsteps didn’t follow me and a few streets later I glanced over my shoulder to see that she wasn’t behind me anymore. Good.

Unfortunately, in my rush to avoid her, I’d gone in the opposite direction of my apartment, so I had to backtrack on my sore legs.

What a day. Pilates was supposed to be an escape, but it had done the opposite.

James St. Clair was here, and I was going to do whatever I could to avoid her for the rest of my life.

Chapter Two

James

I hadn’t noticed her at all when I’d walked in. I’d been concerned with finding a spot and not being late. Pilates had been my favorite workout lately and I’d been pleased that there were classes at the gym. At least one thing had gone right lately.

The class had absolutely kicked my ass, so I’d been completely focused until the end when I started packing up and heard someone curse nearby.

There she was. Delaney Budreau. What were the chances? I'd be lying if I said I hadn't considered that I might run into her now that I was back, but I hadn't expected that it would be so soon. I'd only moved into my new apartment two days ago and had decided to take a break from work and unpacking for a workout class.

The universe decided to throw Delaney in my path today.

It had taken me a second to recognize her. At first, I'd just seen a gorgeous woman, but then I'd gotten a look at her face and it was like the past and the present folded onto themselves. I was both here in this moment and in the past with a pretty girl from my seventh-grade class.

The second she realized it was me, however, she bolted. Just absolutely ran from me like her hair was on fire.

Could I blame her? Not really. But I was still going to chase after her and at least see if we could have a cup of coffee or a few minutes of civil conversation so I could explain myself. Apologize.

Over the years I'd thought so often about her. About the things I'd said when we were kids that made me nauseated to remember. About how she deserved better than Connor—I would know. I'd had to live with him for most of my life.

She wasn't ready to hear from me yet. I let her go after I caught up, because I didn't want to end up with a restraining order. Sighing at the absurdity of life, I went back to the gym where I'd abandoned all my stuff.

I drove back to my new apartment and shut the door, leaning against it and dropping my gym bag and mat on the floor. This place was nearly twice the size of my old place in Boston and only about two-thirds of the price. It was wild how much you could get in a smaller city.

The building was older, but the apartment itself was updated with shiny new everything and included a washer and dryer in my linen closet. I'd almost cried at how beautiful it was when I'd had my first tour. No more hauling my laundry down to the basement. No more quarters and dryers burning up my clothes.

I'd even had to buy more furniture to fill the space. I was still getting used to it. Maybe I'd get some plants or a pet or something. Not a dog or a cat, but some kind of creature to talk to.

I hoped Delaney had made it home okay. What was her place like? I pictured her having a big window with a chair in front of it. She'd loved reading when we'd been kids. She'd always have a book or two in her bag that wasn't just for school. I'd probably made fun of her for that. So much of my youth was a blur, but I could remember a few things, and a lot of them involved Delaney. As if my brain had decided she was worth remembering.

Sighing, I headed to the shower, stripping off my Pilates outfit. The class had been intense, and my muscles were going to be sore for a while.

After my shower, I was ravenous, so I made a quick turkey sandwich with some avocado, Havarti, bacon, and arugula and ate it in the kitchen before gulping down some water and peeling an orange to eat while I wandered around and thought about Delaney.

She'd grown up really well. Really well. She still had that stunning blonde hair and eyes that were mostly brown but with those greenish flecks toward her pupil. I'd spent an awful lot of time trying to figure out the exact color of Delaney's eyes in art class instead of drawing a still life or whatever we were supposed to be doing. No one had ever known.

I finished my orange and washed my hands, at a loss for what to do. I'd had a whole

plan for today to be productive, but Delaney had derailed all of that. I couldn't focus on much of anything.

Checking the time, I realized that the library was closed, so my hopes of visiting were dashed for today. Damn. I logged onto the app and browsed the ebook collection instead, which left much to be desired, so I switched to my old Boston card since it was still active. Jackpot.

Figuring the day was a bust, I decided reading was the best way to spend my time, so I opened the windows, put on some music, and grabbed one of the books I'd bought before I left Boston but hadn't had a chance to read yet.

I'd just finally sunk into the story when my phone went off, shattering my concentration.

Hey, do you think I could stay with you? It was Connor. Shocking that now I was close enough to do things for him was the exact time he'd decided to be my brother again.

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When I'd been in Boston I'd barely heard from him once a month. In the two days since I'd been back, he'd messaged me at least five times. As if I had some sort of responsibility to help him claw his way out of his bad choices. Connor had a lifetime of them piled up by now.

I ended up just calling him rather than go back and forth with messages for an hour.

"Hey, Connor, no, you cannot stay with me. You'd have a place to live if you hadn't cheated on your girlfriend, who was too good for you, by the way," I said as a greeting.

"Aw, come onnnnn, Jimmy. It wasn't my fault." He knew how much I fucking hated it when he called me "Jimmy."

"How? How wasn't this your fault, Connor? She walked in on you fucking someone else. Did your dick just happen to slip into her body?"

"That's not what happened," he said and then rambled out a long story of how he wasn't to blame for anything. I'd heard it all before. He needed to get a new script.

Finally, he took a breath and I cut him off before he could keep going. "Connor. You are twenty-seven years old. It is time for you to grow the fuck up, get your shit together, and be a damn man. Do the work and maybe then we can talk. Until then. Bye."

I hung up on him, shaking with anger.

My parents would be his next call. Dad first, and then Mom. One of them would help him after he talked them into it. That was what Connor had always done and it had always worked.

No wonder he thought he could cheat on his girlfriend and talk his way out of it. He'd talked his way out of anything from speeding tickets to vandalism to cheating. Delaney wasn't the first girlfriend he'd fucked over.

One of these days I wasn't going to answer his messages at all. That day hadn't come yet, but it would, eventually. I simply didn't want someone in my life who didn't give a shit about anyone but himself. Yes, he was my brother, but that didn't entitle him to a place in my life.

Frustrated and annoyed at having to deal with my manchild brother, I tried to go back to reading, but my mind wouldn't settle. Instead, I threw on some shoes, turned on a podcast about a religious cult, and went outside. I was still all shaky and sore from Pilates, but I needed to move. Outwalk my family drama.

This shit was why I'd moved away in the first place. I had no doubt I was going to get messages from both of my parents about being a terrible sister for not letting Connor crash on my couch, eat my food, do zero chores, and pay for nothing. The rule was that I had responsibilities to him, but he didn't have any to me. Ever.

"Fuck them, fuck them, fuck them," I chanted as I stomped my way down the sidewalk. I was relatively close to the park, so I veered that way and tried to take in the trees and the fresh air and the ducks floating on the pond to give me some kind of peace, but it wasn't working. I wanted to throw rocks in the water and scream and maybe break some shit.

I did a quick search but there were no rage rooms nearby. Of course. I'd never been to one before but now that I needed one, there wasn't one to be had.

I paced around the park until I was hungry again and stopped to buy a brick oven pizza slice the size of my head at a nearby restaurant. That helped my mood somewhat and by the time I returned to my apartment, I was a lot calmer. Maybe I should start meditating or something. This stress probably wasn't good for my blood pressure.

Raging about Connor inevitably made me think about Delaney. The two of them had been together for four years. I'd been floored when I'd found out from my parents that they were a couple. He hadn't looked twice at her when we'd been in school and had even said some shitty things about her looks, but since I'd done the same thing, I didn't feel like it was my place to give my two cents about her dating him.

And would she have listened to me anyway? Not likely.

Delaney, Delaney, Delaney.

When I'd kicked the dust of this state off my shoes and had started fresh in Boston, I'd put everything about my old life behind. My family, people I'd known in high school, everyone. Including Delaney.

Not that she'd wanted to see or talk to me anyway. The wounds I'd left from the slings and arrows of middle school were deep and they weren't healing anytime soon. The guilt I carried had eaten away at me over the years, waking me up in the darkest hours of the night, sitting on my shoulder, whispering on my ear. I'd thought about reaching out to her so many times. Hundreds of times. Had written dozens of messages and even letters. I still had some of them somewhere, folded away and living in journals.

Now I had my chance to do this in person, so maybe there was a reason I'd never sent those letters or typed those messages. Maybe it was supposed to be like this all along.

Chapter Three

Delaney

To say I was furious at James for ruining my post-Pilates endorphin high was an understatement. I was LIVID. It was a struggle when I got home not to trash my entire apartment or scream until my neighbors called the cops.

Instead, I rage-shopped online, finally buying the skirt I'd had my eye on for ages, as well as a special edition hardcover with sprayed edges from an author that I was obsessed with. You'd think being a bookseller that I would get sick of books, but it had had the opposite effect on me. I couldn't get enough of them.

Someday, if I ever managed to get my hands on a bunch of money, I was going to buy a house and devote the entire place to books. There wouldn't be a single wall that wasn't covered in books. Obviously there wouldn't be any in the bathroom, but I'd already picked out the perfect bookish wallpaper.

Someday.

Thinking about my book house was much more fun than thinking about James. Fucking James. Why did she have to choose now to show back up in my life? Was this some kind of cosmic punishment? Hadn't one member of her family already ruined my month enough?

At least Connor hadn't contacted me today. He'd still been randomly sending me messages, which was funny because he'd barely sent any when we'd been together unless he was asking me to do something for him.

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Figuring I might as well channel my rage into being productive, I opened my laptop and pulled up my current orders. Printing labels and packing orders took up some time, and then I decided to do another print run to replenish my stock. Using the screen-printing press definitely helped get out my aggression a little bit. The machine took up a bunch of space in my living room, but I'd just bought a smaller couch. It was fine. I made it work.

Time got away from me as I lost myself in the repetitive tasks. There was an old-fashioned soothing quality to printing shirts and bags. Of lifting the plate and seeing the design that I had created and stamped myself. Once I was satisfied with my productivity for the day, I devoted the rest of my night to reading and eating the soup dumplings I'd been saving in my freezer.

Reflexively I kept glancing at my phone, as if I was waiting for a message to come in from one or both of the St. Clair siblings. I wouldn't put it past James to get my number from her brother and use it to harass me.

I did get a message from Larison asking how my weekend went, though. Much more welcome.

I'll tell you tomorrow. It's too much to type or put in a voice message.

This James situation had to be discussed in person. Mondays were generally terrible, but I honestly loved my job about ninety percent of the time and Larison would not believe my weekend encounter.

Oh goodness, now my curiosity is piqued and I need to know just a little bit. Don't

keep me in suspense!

I laughed.

I'll just say that I had a blast from the past. That's all I can say without getting into it.

Well, I'm completely intrigued and on the edge of my seat. Jo would like to tell you that she wants to know too, so we might have to put her on video.

That happened a lot. Jo was still finishing her degree to become a reading and literacy teacher, but sometimes she'd call in between her classes to check in. It was so sweet. I'd always been envious of their relationship and how they supported each other. I couldn't even get Connor to respond to a simple message let alone get him on video during the day. He was always too busy doing something else.

I'd told myself that was true. Hewastoo busy. It wasn't fair of me to have such high expectations.

Now I didn't know what to think anymore.

* * *

Larison didn't disappoint when I told her about James appearing in my Pilates class. I'd never really mentioned James much, because she wasn't a part of Connor's life. She'd been so adamant that she was never fucking coming back when she got accepted to college in Boston. Yet here she was.

A small part of me, the smallest part, wondered what had happened to bring her back. Was it a breakup? Had she gotten fired? Was she running from the law?

The curiosity was small and quiet, but it still sat in a corner of my brain and yapped

too loudly for my liking.

As if Larison had heard my thoughts, she asked, “I wonder why she came back, if she felt that strongly about leaving and cutting everyone off?”

I shrugged. “Don’t know, don’t care.”

Larison nodded as we both worked side-by-side to check the shelves and make sure the shop was ready to open for the day. She asked me if I should tell my parents about James being back and I shook my head immediately. They’d want to know everything and try and get us to reconcile, and that was not happening. Hell to the no.

James, Connor, and I had grown up in the suburbs only minutes from the city, so it was still like a small town where you saw familiar faces at the gas station. My mom worked at the town office and my dad was a retired math teacher who now did small engine repairs, so neither of them was good at holding in any good gossip. I loved them, but neither of them could shut up if their lives depended on it.

“Well, hopefully you won’t have to run into her again. Maybe she won’t come back to that class and will leave you alone?” Larison said, flipping the sign from CLOSED to OPEN and unlocking the door.

“One can only hope,” I said. My hopes had never been lower.

* * *

For a Monday, it wasn’t a bad one. I’d had a long discussion about romance books that had tentacles with one woman, and then had helped a very shy teen (who I hoped wasn’t skipping school) find some queer romances. Larison’s daughter stopped by with her nanny and brought treats for all of us, and Jo came by in the afternoon when her classes were finished so I had to recount the whole James situation again for her.

“What a small world,” she said, shaking her head and pushing her clear-framed glasses further up her nose.

“Not that small, apparently.”

It wasn’t like me to be so grumbly and grumpy and I didn’t like the person that the breakup had turned me into.

For sure I was still my normal self with the customers, but it was an additional strain in a way that it hadn’t been before. I’d always liked people, had always enjoyed being around them. My mom used to joke that if you looked up “extrovert” in the dictionary, you’d see a picture of my face.

I’d almost been like an addict when I was younger. So desperate to never, ever be alone. Since I didn’t have any siblings, I would sneak into my parents’ room, and when I was too big for them not to notice me in their bed, I’d sleep on the small couch that they usually put laundry on. Sleepovers had been my absolute favorite and I’d done whatever I could to get myself invited to as many as possible. Some kids at school made note of my desperation (I wasn’t as good at hiding it) and school got rough for a while as the girls I’d been friends with turned on me for being “weird” and “obsessed” with them.

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James had been one of the first ones to notice and I heard her loudly talking to some other girls in the locker room when I was changing for gym. Swallowing down nausea, I'd stayed in the stall until they'd left and had been punished for being late to gym, but it didn't matter.

It wasn't until high school that I found more loyal friends and people who didn't think I was a freak. Most of them had gone off to different colleges or moved to other states, but we still kept in touch every now and then online and through messages.

"You're frowning a lot for a Monday," Larison said, interrupting my ruminating in the late afternoon.

"Sorry. Just thinking about too many things."

Larison made a face. "I know what you mean. My brain never seems to slow down. Are you feeling any better about...everything?" She didn't need to clarify what she meant by "everything."

I shook my head. "I don't want to talk about it."

She winced. "Sorry for bringing it up."

Larison was an incredible friend, as well as a boss. We had clicked in the first interview, but I never could have known how important she would become to me.

"Thanks."

“Why don’t you go and check on the online orders? I’m sure some came in over the weekend.”

Doing work in the back office was my least favorite thing, but I was tired, and it was almost the end of the day anyway.

I got totally wrapped up in my task of filling the orders. I’d have to make a trip to the post office tomorrow to ship everything out. If I did that, I could stop by the bubble tea place and get a treat.

“Hey,” Larison said, making me jump. Why was I so out of it lately? “Sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you. But we’re ready to close down.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Her face crinkled with worry that I didn’t want to see, so I went back to stacking the orders in the “ready to ship” box.

* * *

I did my best to focus on my routine of going to the grocery store and bringing everything home to have a nice dinner that night, but instead I bought a party tray with veggies, cheese, and crackers and ate it on the couch with a really bad reality show on in the background. Cooking could wait until tomorrow.

My phone lit up with a notification just as I was eating the last grape. I had a new message on one of my social pages from an account I didn’t recognize.

Hey Delaney, this is James. I wasn’t sure how else to reach out to you. Didn’t want to ask my brother for your number. He and I are not on the same page about a lot of things so I’m ignoring him at the moment. Anyway, I just wanted to reach out and see

if maybe you'd let me buy you a cup of coffee? There are some things I'd like to say to you that I think should be said in person. Just let me know.

I almost gasped aloud at her audacity. I mean, at least she'd waited almost one whole day before reaching out to me, and she hadn't begged her brother for my number. Still, it wasn't cute, and I wanted to answer her right away telling her to go fuck herself, but something made me hold back and resist the impulse to burn this bridge completely.

Maybe I felt the teeniest, smallest sliver of compassion because while Connor was now my ex, he was still her brother. There was no getting out of that relationship, even if they never spoke a single word to each other again. She'd always be connected to him.

And he was one of the biggest assholes on the planet.

The freedom I had now that I no longer had to defend him was a little shot of euphoria in amongst the rage and hurt and disappointment.

I read the message several times over, wondering what to say. I didn't want to have coffee with her. Didn't want to hear what she had to say, but...

If I didn't sit down with her and let her get whatever off her chest, then I knew I'd always wonder what it might have been. I wasn't sure if I believed in regrets, but in my soul, I knew that I would be upset at myself for telling her to fuck off again.

It had been years since we'd had any contact. I was a different person now, and it was a little arrogant to believe that she hadn't changed as well. If I didn't hear her out, just this once, then I'd never know what she might have said.

Fine. We can meet somewhere for coffee. You are buying. I have the freedom to

leave the second I want to. You're also getting a fifteen-minute time limit. That is more than enough time to say what you need to say. Understood?

I sent the message and waited for her response.

That's all fine. Let me know when a good time for you would be.

Chapter Four

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James

It was a long shot, but I was absolutely shocked when she agreed to meet with me.

Delaney responded Monday night that we could meet on Friday at 3 p.m. and gave me the name of a new coffee shop. It looked cute and trendy and had creative pastries, so I told her that was fine and went to bed with unsettled thoughts.

Now I just had the rest of the week to decide on what I wanted to say. As if I hadn't had years already.

Sometimes there weren't enough words, or you didn't have the right words. As long as I led with sincerity and honesty and truly being sorry for what I'd said and done to her, the rest was in her hands. I couldn't make Delaney forgive me.

Shit. I had a new client in ten minutes, and I hadn't prepped nearly enough.

When I told people what I did for a living, they didn't believe me.

"What the hell is a baby name consultant?" they always asked, and then "people pay money for that?!" It made meeting new people awkward sometimes.

I hadn't gone to college for it, but I did have an English degree and a love for words. Their shapes and sounds and origins and meanings. It wasn't as much of a logical leap as you'd think.

I'd worked for a few years as a literary and editorial assistant, an administrator at a

small printing press, and as a fact checker for a few authors. The book world was an amazing place to work, but the job stability had been lacking, the pay wasn't consistent, and I just didn't want to be at the whims of someone else. My love for the industry wouldn't pay the bills.

One day I'd been scrolling online and had gotten served a video from someone who was talking about unusual careers, and it had been like being hit by lightning. It was perfect.

I'd started my business before I quit any of my other jobs, and somehow found the right keywords and was immediately flooded with clients. Not only was it interesting work, I was good at it. I also donated my services to anyone trans or nonbinary to help them pick a new name that suited them best.

I logged on to the video chat and checked my appearance one more time before calling my new client. She was having twins and searching for names that would be complementary, but not too matchy. Such a fun challenge.

This was our first consultation call, so I needed to take her through my questionnaire and figure out what direction she wanted to go in.

The mom, Bella, was so sweet, and introduced me to her partner. Since I got so many inquiries, I had to be selective and queer families were always my top priority.

We talked and laughed, and I lost myself in the meeting and taking notes.

“So next I'm going to make up a list of ten options, and we'll go through them at our next meeting. My biggest piece of advice once I give you the list is to write the names down for yourself, hang them up, try them out. A name that you might not immediately like might grow on you. I'll also be sending you the report with my list and more details than you could ever possibly want. Whatever you do, do not ask

your family or friends. Trust me on this.”

Bella laughed and I could see how utterly excited she was for this whole process. That energy rubbed off on me and sometimes it was better than caffeine.

“Thank you so much, we’ve just been totally lost with all of this.”

I grinned. “Don’t worry. That’s what I’m here for. I’ll have your report by the end of the week, and we can schedule our session. It was lovely to meet both of you and congratulations again.”

We said goodbye and I put in my notes from the meeting into the document I made for each consultation.

It was easy to lose myself in work for the next few hours, until my eyes were dry and my stomach was screaming. The best part of working from home was my ability to head to the fridge and pull things out to make a meal. Tonight a chicken Caesar pasta salad was calling my name, along with some oven baked potato wedges slathered in duck fat. Wanting to feel fancy, I made myself a little mocktail with fresh blood oranges, ginger ale and mint.

While I was still exhausted from moving, it felt nice to make myself a beautiful and delicious meal, even if I ate it on the couch in the sweats that I’d changed into after I’d finished my workday.

One hard and fast rule I had for myself was that I always dressed in professional clothing, even when working from home. I also filmed and created a lot of content during my day to help bring in clients and expand my business, so I couldn’t look like I’d just rolled out of bed and expect people to pay me money for my services.

After I ate, I set a timer to allow myself a little social media scrolling on my alternate

accounts. Very early in my career, I'd made sure to keep my personal and work accounts separate so I could have a place where I wasn't James, Baby Name Consultant.

Of course, the first thing I checked was Delaney's social media. I'd followed her on my alt account and she must not have noticed, or else I wouldn't have been able to message her.

I liked getting these little looks into her life. Seeing her showcasing her printed T-shirts, making silly faces with her friends, funny posts from the bookshop she worked at. I wanted to visit it so much, but I wanted to see if I could make things right first. It would be an invasion otherwise.

Instead I went online and placed a few orders for books, a tote bag, and a T-shirt that I knew were from Delaney's collection. There. That wasn't too invasive. I was allowed to buy her products.

Satisfied, and with my social media scroll time over, I made myself another mocktail and grabbed my ereader. Not a bad start to the week. Not bad at all.

* * *

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The rest of the week was a blur of work and social media posts and consultations and sending invoices and website maintenance. Being self-employed wasn't for the faint of heart. I also managed to make it to the library and came home with a stack of books, and I hit another Pilates class, but didn't see Delaney.

Friday morning, I woke up with a pit of dread in my stomach. I'd written out a list of all the things I wanted to say, but I knew Delaney enough to know that she wouldn't be impressed by me reading from a list on my phone like a shitty influencer doing an apology video. It was helpful for gathering my thoughts, but in the moment, I was going to speak from the heart. Seeing her in front of me was going to give me the right words. Hopefully.

I changed out of my work clothes and shut down for the day over an hour before I needed to meet Delaney. Taking that much time to get ready was probably excessive, but I wanted to show up looking my most confident and feeling my best.

We had both changed from the girls we were in school. I'd done a lot of hiding who I was under makeup and clothes that I'd hated but were considered in-style. I'd also dyed my hair and shaved and gotten spray tans and bought skirts at the mall.

When I'd finally gotten away for college in a new place, I'd realized that I'd been in a tiny bubble of conformity and I didn't have to swim in it anymore. No one was going to care if I wore the right jeans. The right shoes. If my hair was the right shade.

I'd gone a little wild my freshman year, trying a ton of different hair colors and styles (including an all-black era) until I started building a style that felt like me.

Other changes had followed. I stopped pretending I didn't like to read, I stopped pretending that I liked movies with shirtless men. The evolution from who I was in high school to the true version of myself was rough, but I'd gotten through it and now I was on the other side, a lesbian with a septum piercing who had two-tone hair and sometimes wore a sports bra that flattened my chest because it felt good.

I laid out three options and finally selected a green romper with a leaf pattern on it that had ruffled straps and added a baggy white cardigan that I'd crocheted during a particularly bad month about a year ago. I pulled my hair back in a loose bun, pulling a few strands out to frame my face. Makeup was simple and light, and I adjusted my septum piercing. Sometimes it got wonky and went sideways and I hated that.

One last look in the mirror and I grabbed my bag before taking a shaky breath and locking my door. The café was close enough to walk, so I strolled down the street, checking the time to make sure I wasn't going to be late, my heart pounding double time in my chest, like an overhyped marching band.

The closer I got, the more anxiety fizzed in my veins. For a half a second, I considered canceling. I checked my phone to see if she'd sent me a "sorry, never mind" message, but there was nothing.

A man exiting the café held the door for me, and I gave him a tight smile before walking inside. The sound of soft, generic music greeted me, as well as the clinking of plates and the hiss of the espresso machines.

The place was packed with people having an afternoon snack, and plenty of gig workers on their laptops. Some days I would bring my work to a café, but I tried not to make it a habit. My home office setup was much cozier, and there was no way I was doing consultations in a loud coffee shop.

When I didn't see Delaney right away, I found a table near the door in front and sat

down. I was too nervous to order anything yet, my stomach twisting and turning and tying itself into complicated knots.

She arrived only a minute after I sat down, wearing baggy jeans and one of her T-shirts that had a stack of books on it and said BOOKISH VIBES ONLY. When she got closer, I saw that there was a little frog sitting on top of one of the stacks of books. Cute.

As I took her in, I watched her look around and find me. Her eyes instantly narrowed. Not a great sign, but at least she was here. She hadn't ghosted me. Her full lips pressed together as she crossed the short distance to stop in front of my table.

Her blonde hair was carelessly pulled back from her face in a messy ponytail and for a moment, she took my breath away. She was stunning.

I inhaled a shaky breath and stood up.

"I'm going to order the most expensive thing they have," she said by way of a greeting as she crossed her arms.

"Go ahead. Get whatever you want." She could buy the whole damn pastry case if she wanted. Now that I was saving so much money on rent, I could afford it, even with the expense of my move.

Delaney's eyes narrowed and she pivoted toward the counter. Since I was paying, I followed her, but not too closely. Didn't want to invade her space.

"Yes, I'll have one of each flavor of croissant, as well as the muffins. Oh, and an iced red velvet latte. The biggest size you make."

She turned and looked at me over her shoulder, raising one eyebrow as if to say, "are

you going to argue?”

The barista didn't seem phased by the order and read it back to Delaney to make sure it was right.

“Is this together?” the barista asked, glancing at me.

“Yes,” I said, feeling my cheeks get hot. “I'll have a small iced red velvet latte as well.” It sounded delicious.

Delaney huffed out a little noise when she heard my order but didn't say anything as I paid with my card and added a nice tip for the barista. We moved over to the pickup counter where we were going to be waiting for a while.

“You didn't want to order any of the cake pops?” I asked her, trying to get some kind of conversation going.

Delaney made a disgusted face. “Cake pops are just a scam to make you pay a lot of money for stale cake that should have been thrown away. They're an atrocity and they should be banned as a dessert.”

Well. I hadn't expected a treatise on cake pops, but I hadn't really known what to expect from her these days.

“Good to know,” I responded, and she pressed her lips together, as if she hadn't meant to say that much to me. She crossed her arms again and didn't say anything as the staff packed up her order into a box and made our lattes.

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Once we had everything, I helped her carry it all back to the table.

She threw the top on the box open and wiggled her fingers before selecting one of the pistachio cream croissants. It did look incredible, and a little bit of the bright green cream escaped when she bit into it, dripping onto her chin. Without thinking, I reached out to wipe it away and had to pull my hand back at the last second. I didn't have the right to touch her. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Delaney glared and grabbed a napkin. She wiped her chin and swallowed.

“Well? I'm here. Let's hear it.”

Okay. It was time.

“I've thought about what I was going to say to you for a long time. Years. I can't count how many times I wrote you a letter or thought about sending you a message. That's not important.” I had to take a breath as my entire body shook in my seat. Any moment now I was going to throw up or pass out or both. Delaney took another bite of croissant.

“I'm sorry. That's the first thing I wanted to say. I'm sorry for all the shit I said to you when we were kids. There's no excuse for being a mean little bitch, because I was a mean little bitch. There was a lot going on with my parents and my brother and that's not an excuse, but I feel like I was just so angry all the time and lashing out, and you were just...” I trailed off. It had taken me years to recognize the intense feelings I'd had at the time about Delaney were jealousy mixed with an absolutely massive crush. I wasn't going to tell her about that part, though. That was my own

shit to deal with.

“You were there, and you had two parents who loved you and you were sweet and kind of nerdy and I don’t know, Delaney. What I do know is that I’m so fucking sorry for all of it and I wish I could go back and yell at myself for treating you so badly when I should have treated you like a friend. I’m just so sorry. You didn’t deserve any of it. I know me saying this years later doesn’t do anything to mend the past. I know you don’t owe me anything and that is absolutely fine. I just wanted you to know that I didn’t forget about it and I didn’t stop thinking about it and I haven’t stopped thinking about it. Not for a day. It’s haunted me and I know that you’re angry and you have a right to be. I’m just so sorry, Delaney. I’m sorry for all the awful things I said and did.”

I managed to shut off the flow of words and unclench my hands from each other where I’d been hiding them under the table.

Delaney had watched my face with concentrated intensity that I couldn’t look away from if I wanted to. Everything around her blurred out of focus until she was the only thing I could see.

Silence fell thick and heavy between us. The shaking that had taken over my whole body evaporated and now a prickling heat took its place. Neither was comfortable, but the heat was somehow worse as I waited for her reaction.

After what seemed like a thousand years, but was probably only moments, she exhaled and nodded.

“Okay. I guess, uh, thank you for saying that. It took you long enough.” She had me there.

I winced. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“I get it. You’ve said it already. I’m not really sure what you want from me.”

I shook my head. “Nothing. I want absolutely nothing from you. Only to listen to me and that’s it. Everything from here on out is up to you.”

Her eyes narrowed as if she didn’t believe me and she picked up the croissant again, shoving another huge bite in her mouth. The cream exploded out one end, falling onto the table and barely missing her shirt.

“How’s that croissant treating you?” I asked.

“Good,” she said, her mouth full. I snorted and then reached for my latte, my hands steadier than they had been a few moments ago.

The caffeine was from the latte going to kick me in the teeth, but that was fine. It would help me get through the rest of the afternoon.

Delaney finished the croissant and then selected a banana nut muffin.

“Is my punishment that I have to sit here while you eat that entire box?” I asked.

She tilted her head to the side as she took a bite. “Maybe. It wouldn’t be enough, but it would be a start.”

“What other kinds of punishments did you have in mind?” I asked, and then realized how flirty that sounded. That wasn’t my intention at all, but it had slipped out.

Delaney’s eyes narrowed and then she smiled. “Punishments shouldn’t be enjoyable, James. And something tells me that you’d like certain kinds of things.”

One of my hands dug into the wood of the table, clawing at it for something to hold

onto. Did she actually just say that? Was this real?

“I will neither confirm or deny,” I said, trying to keep my tone neutral and get us back on more casual footing.

Her comment took me back, though. I was going to be analyzing it for hours later.

“Hmmm,” she said, eating the rest of the muffin. Once she was done, she rolled her eyes. “Okay, fine, take whatever you want. It feels weird to be eating when you aren’t.”

Tentatively, as if she was going to lunge out and bite me, I reached for the cinnamon chip muffin. They were always my favorite, even if other people thought they were boring.

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Delaney watched me peel away the parchment paper wrapper and bite into it. I would have preferred to have a plate, but I could make do.

Delaney sipped at her latte and glanced out the window. I did my best not to stare too much at her, but it was a challenge. She was just so gorgeous. Delaney could never know about my past crush or my current attraction. She was straight, firstly. Second, she'd just gotten her heart shattered by my asshole brother, and third, even if she was into girls, she wasn't going to be into me, a person who had made her middle school years miserable. No fucking way. You didn't fall for your former bully unless you were in some sort of romcom.

Any feelings I had were going to stay unrequited. Maybe that was my punishment for the bullying.

"God, I feel so shitty about it, Delaney," I said, even though I'd already done the whole apology thing. There was no rule that said I couldn't do it multiple times.

Delaney was quiet for a moment, looking into the box of pastries as if it would tell her how to respond.

"Okay," she said when she looked up. "I get it. You're sorry."

Shit. I had pushed too far. I sat there and watched as she retreated behind an emotionless mask.

"Well, you said what you were going to say, and I've got my croissants and my muffins and my latte so I'm going."

I wished there was something I could say to make her come back, to regain the soft, somewhat flirty energy we'd clasped only moments before, but it had already slipped through my fingers. She was gone and I wasn't going to be able to get that back.

"Of course. Have a good rest of your day, Delaney," I said, not moving from my seat. She snatched up the box and had a little trouble balancing it with the enormous iced latte, but she managed and then walked away without another word.

Guess that was that.

Chapter Five

Delaney

It was mostly what I'd expected, but I hadn't anticipated how much pain I'd hear in her voice while she spoke. She hadn't cried, but there had been tears in her voice.

Well, that made two of us. I'd spent many nights crying into my pillow and hoping my parents didn't hear me. They'd done the best they could and had gone to the school about the bullying, but it hadn't solved the problem.

I had to wait it out until I got to high school and for my main bully to move away. That had been James's friend, Eva. I wonder whatever happened to her. I could look her up online, of course, but if she was doing well, that was going to be a knife to the chest. Hopefully she was single and had a bad job and lived in a tiny roach-filled apartment. She deserved it. The absolute sadism she'd exhibited as a tween was still wild to me. It had been strange, that James had been one of my main tormentors in middle school and she practically disappeared from my life when we moved to a bigger school.

I almost lost track of her, but every now and then she'd pop up in one of my classes,

but she made sure never to talk to or make eye contact with me, and it wasn't like we were sitting with each other at lunch. She'd left my social sphere, but the damage remained.

It hadn't ruined my life, obviously, but it had really fucked me up for a few years.

I still didn't know what to think about Delaney. I managed to get the box of pastries home safely even though I was vibrating from the caffeine in the latte that I basically gulped down because it was so good.

Met with James today and she apologized. Drinks tonight?

Larison's response was quick. Yes, absolutely! Jo can watch Juni. She owes me because she's going hiking with Reid on Saturday.

Perfect. We agreed to meet at the bar with the good wings in a few hours. Until then, I buzzed around my apartment in a frenzy, cleaning and doing laundry and dishes and clearing out half my closet before my energy crashed. Oops.

I also had another one of the croissants, this one filled with Nutella.

What was James doing tonight? Probably going out or doing something fabulous, but I really didn't know. We might have spent a lot of time together in our younger years, but she was basically a stranger to me now. I didn't know what she did or if she was seeing anyone or had weekend plans. I wanted to go to Pilates this weekend, but I wasn't going to pick the same class for fear that she'd be in it, so I selected the Saturday late morning class instead. I'd get brunch after as a reward. Perfect way to start the day.

Did James like brunch?

Ugh, this caffeine was really messing me up. I shouldn't be thinking about her. When I left the café, the only things I should have brought with me were the croissants and the relief that I had finally gotten an apology from a bully. I never had to think about her again, but here I was, still thinking about her.

She'd looked good, I had to admit. The new look with the piercing and the hair suited her so much better than the generic pretty-girl thing she'd had in school. She also seemed more comfortable. There was a brittleness about her that I'd noticed when we were kids. Like she was so close to completely snapping. Always on the edge.

She'd mentioned something about her family and taking it out on me, and knowing her family, I could understand that part, at least a little.

James and Connor's parents were two people who were so mired in their own resentment and hatred of each other, they'd made it their entire personalities. You couldn't talk to his mom without hearing what a disgusting jerk his dad was, and you couldn't talk to his dad without hearing a list of grievances about his ex-wife.

There was a reason why I had rarely joined Connor for family dinners or holidays. The tension and resentment were painted onto the walls, soaked into the floorboards of his mom's house and his dad's penthouse apartment. You left feeling like you wanted to have a drink or sleep for a week or both. They were bitter, vicious people and all of that had done a number on their son. Why wouldn't it have affected their daughter?

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Not that I blamed Connor's parents for the way he turned out, but they certainly hadn't helped. I'd watched him get away with everything in high school with a smile and charm and his lazy "I'm just a local boy" veneer. It didn't hurt that his dad owned a car dealership and had a lot of local power and clout.

Great, now I was thinking about James and Connor. A recipe for a bad night. The worst night.

I threw myself into the shower and then put on a cute dress before making a little extra effort on my makeup and curling my hair before I pulled half of it up and away from my face.

Checking myself in the mirror hung on the back of my bedroom door, I grinned. Damn, I looked hot. The dress I had on hit me at just the right spot, making my legs look longer. Since I didn't have to walk too far, I slipped into my cute shoes that weren't that comfortable.

Hell yeah, I looked great. I'd say that looking this good was revenge on Connor, but he'd never really noticed my outfits or commented on them except to say that he didn't like me showing too much skin because he thought it would make other guys look at me. Or that I was trying to attract other male attention and make him jealous. It was all ridiculous. I had been completely and totally faithful to him.

One terrible thought that sat in my stomach and woke me up some nights was what if that wasn't the first time that Connor cheated on me? Most guys didn't wake up one morning a few years into a relationship and think "oh, I'm going to meet a woman at a bar, tell her I'm single, and bring her back for sex while my girlfriend is out for the

evening.”

There had been several other times that I had questioned, but he’d explained it away and turned the tables on me until I was the one apologizing. He’d bought flowers and had started being sweet and I’d just...let it go.

I’d let it go and now look where I was.

Fuck, I was still thinking about Connor! Angrily, I shoved my phone and my lip gloss in my bag for the night and shrugged into my jean jacket.

Tonight I was having drinks and wings with Larison and I was going to promise myself not to think or speak about Connor. Couldn’t make that rule about his sister, though.

Larison and I had far too much to discuss about James.

* * *

“You did not!”she gasped when I told her how many croissants and muffins I’d ordered.

“She’d said I could order whatever I wanted and I thought about it, but that would have been rude and the employees would have had to pack everything up, so I just settled for like, most of it.”

Larison laughed and shook her head, taking a sip of beer. I reached for another wing, my fingers already sticky and covered in sauce.

“And you didn’t bring any of them for me? Rude,” Larison said.

“Sorry. A few croissants and muffins are the least she could do after years of psychological torture.”

She winced. “Shit, I’m sorry. You’re right.”

I shrugged. “It’s water under the bridge.”

Larison gave me a long look that I didn’t like. I squirmed under her scrutiny and tried to cover it by drinking and then shoving another wing into my face.

“Is it, though?”

“Yes,” I said, after licking some sauce from my thumb. “It is.”

She seemed like she wanted to say something else, but she didn’t, and that was one of the reasons that Larison was my friend. When I asked her to drop something, she did. I didn’t have to ask her to do it very often. Most of the time, things could be brushed off with a smile and the knowledge that things would be better tomorrow. They always had been, in my experience.

My silver linings philosophy hadn’t failed me until now. It wasn’t working so well on my cheating boyfriend. Right now, the biggest upside was not having to do his laundry for him. I guess that was something.

“What is it?” Larison asked, and I realized I’d drifted off again. I hated how often that happened to me now. It was seriously frustrating.

“Nothing,” I said, shaking my head and giving her a smile. “Just thinking. How’s miss Juniper doing in her ballet class?”

One sure way to get Larison to speak about something else was to bring up her

daughter. I absolutely adored that child and I needed a Laney and Juni day soon.

“Oh, she’s loving it. Reid is strict, but she’s getting into it. At this rate, we’re going to have to get a bigger place just so she can have a dance room. I’m already budgeting for shoes, so we’re going to have to keep planning more book events.” She rolled her eyes, but she was beaming.

We both laughed and settled into familiar territory. It was good to be out with my friend, to be doing something normal. The only bad part was that I had to go home to an empty and quiet apartment. Larison started yawning and I wanted to beg her to have another drink, to maybe go nearby and get some ice cream, but she needed to get home to her family.

“You can always come have a sleepover with us as long as you don’t mind Juni waking you up at the crack of dawn. I’ll cook you breakfast to make up for it.” While that was a wonderful idea, I wasn’t in the mood for it.

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“Soon,” I told her. “How about we plan one for the end of this month?”

She squeezed me in a hug and then let me go. “Absolutely. I’ll talk to Jo and see what works for our schedule and school. Juni will be ecstatic.”

Larison stayed with me while I waited for the car to get here and then she sent me off and I went home alone.

At least I had a ton of croissants and muffins to keep me company.

Chapter Six

James

Connor attempted to contact me again that weekend, but I sent him straight to voicemail. I didn’t want to hear anything he had to say right now.

The meeting with Delaney affected me more than I thought it would. For the rest of Friday and Saturday morning and afternoon I just kind of wandered around, unable to commit to or complete anything. I unloaded half the dishwasher, forgot the laundry in the washer, stalled out on my website updates, and set down every book I picked up.

Nothing grabbed my attention, so I gave up, put on some sad music, and curled up under a blanket in my favorite cozy chair by the window and watched the world go by. I’d anticipated feeling better after I’d talked to Delaney, but this feeling was way worse. Like I’d ripped open a bunch of old wounds that were now bleeding everywhere.

I wanted to fix it so badly. I wanted to make it right, but there was no way to make it right, short of time travel.

That was the worst part.

I honestly wasn't in the mood to go anywhere on Saturday night, but I couldn't turn down the Sexy Saturday drink specials and general merriment at the only bar for queer women in the state. I missed my old haunt in Boston, but Sapph looked like it could work.

Dressing in a pair of my favorite jeans and a lace top, I made sure I had my ID before checking my nose ring in the mirror and then hopping in the car I'd ordered.

A few minutes later I was dropped off outside the bar with its purple neon sign that made me instantly feel at home.

For the first time in several days, I smiled as I paid my cover and walked in. Noise and packed-together bodies greeted me, and I headed directly for the bar to order my first drink.

The bartenders worked like a well-oiled machine, so it didn't take long until I had an icy purple drink in my hand that I'd ordered from the specialty menu. Didn't really matter what was in it. I was just here to get a little buzzed and be around my people.

When I'd come out as a lesbian in college, it had made so many things clear for me. Like finding the answer to a math problem you'd been working your entire life to solve.

I managed to stake out a seat at the very end of the bar and let the music and conversation wash around me. Coming out tonight had absolutely been the right decision.

As I glanced around, I caught the eye of several women and considered taking things to another level tonight. Flirting was always on the menu for me, but sex wasn't as casual for me as it was for other people. Sure, I'd done the bathroom hookup when I'd first come out and had discovered oh hey, I don't hate sex, I actually LOVE sex with women, but I'd gotten that out of my system. I wouldn't turn it down if the vibes were right, but that wasn't what I was going for tonight. Dancing and flirting though? Yes, please.

By the time I had my second drink in my hand, I'd danced, I'd laughed, I'd flirted, and I'd forgotten about all the bullshit from this week. Well, almost.

Taking a break from dancing, I headed outside for a breather to let some of the sweat on my skin dry. Looking up at the sky, I squinted to try and see the stars. No luck. That was one of the only downsides of city living. Couldn't see the details in the sky.

I moved away from the smokers to pull crisp air into my lungs before diving back into the maelstrom that was Sapph on a Saturday night.

* * *

I managed to drag myself to Pilates on Sunday, but Delaney wasn't there. I hadn't expected her to be, though. I'd probably driven her away from this particular class, which added insult on top of injury.

She hadn't blocked me on social media, which was interesting. Every time I opened my feed, I saw that she'd posted something new. The algorithm seemed intent on putting her front and center for me.

It didn't escape my notice that she'd deleted any of her posts with Connor. That made sense, and it was a little bit of a relief not to see his dumbass face refusing to smile as she beamed next to him. He couldn't even fucking smile for her.

If she was mine I would have...

No. Throw on the brakes, red light, do not pass go, stop that immediately.

That line of thinking would only torment me further.

* * *

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Over the next few days, I thought about Delaney way too much. It was like a mental compulsion. Anytime my thoughts drifted away from what I was trying to do, they veered right back in her direction. Delaney with pistachio cream on her chin. Delaney listening to me as I fumbled through my apology.

She'd grown into herself and even though there was a visible sadness that wrapped around her like a blanket, there was also a new confidence to her and the way she carried herself, the set of her shoulders that she hadn't had when she was a kid.

What did she see when she looked at me? I'd gone through changes as well, and not just with my piercing and my hair and my clothes. Did she see me now? Or did she only see the person I'd tried to be years ago?

The girl she'd known who had said so many hurtful things was playing a part. A role she hated but didn't know how to give up. I wouldn't say that our suffering was the same by any means, but I'd been a miserable wreck then.

I wasn't as miserable anymore (most of the time) and I liked to think I'd gotten my act together. At least my career was something I could point to that I'd created and built on my own.

My parents thought my job was a joke, but I'd long stopped caring about their opinions, if I ever had. My family wasn't where I'd gotten any of my validation, and I'd learned that very early in my life.

Turning away from my bleak thoughts, I turned on my TV to distract my brain with something else. Anything else.

Now that I'd adjusted to life here again, I really wanted to make some friends. Not an easy task when you worked from home.

I'd rather lay down in the street and let every car run over me than try to reconnect with anyone I'd been friends with from school. So many of them had moved away anyway, including Eva, the ringleader of the bullying group. Every now and then I looked her up and saw that she'd become a nurse and moved to Arizona. God help her patients.

I looked online for various activities that I could join as a first step. Run club was an option, but I was never going to train for a marathon or anything like that. Runners seemed really intense. Was there a strolling club? That would be more my speed. A link caught my eye and I clicked on it to find that Between the Sheets had a book club once a month, as well as several other crafting nights and book signings. That was something. Book lovers were definitely my kind of people.

There was just one small problem with the book club: Delaney would be there. I'd be invading her space and I wasn't sure that was a good idea. Still. I found myself putting in an order for the book and signing up for the emails about the club. The next one wasn't for a few weeks, so I had time to smooth things over with her beforehand. And even if I didn't go, I'd at least get to read a good book.

* * *

Over the next week I fully adjusted into my new life in the city. Work was steady and kept me busy, and I was loving my office space now that it wasn't a desk crammed in my tiny bedroom. Having lots to look at out the window was essential for me. There was also a fantastic coffee shop within walking distance that I went to almost every day and their French toast latte was my new favorite thing.

Delaney was still on my mind constantly. Anytime I saw someone with long blonde

hair, I'd do a double take and make sure it wasn't her. Unfortunately for me, there were a hell of a lot of blonde beauties in the area, so I made a lot of embarrassing mistakes.

"Sorry, I thought you were someone else," was something I'd said more than a few times by the time the weekend rolled around. Even though I didn't have a typical nine-to-five job, I forced myself to keep nine-to-five hours.

I'd burned out right when I started my consulting business and it had been hell and I'd do anything to prevent that from happening again. Only after resting, speaking with a therapist, and reprioritizing my life had I come out of it.

I visited Sapph again on Friday night and danced my ass off, ending the night with a hangover and sore feet. Saturday called for sleeping in, taking it easy at a late Pilates class, and a huge brunch after.

I did my usual check when I walked into Pilates and put my mat down and sure enough, there was a blonde ponytail that I recognized across the room. Pretending I wasn't staring at her and waiting for her to turn around, I arranged my mat and water and went to get my weights.

She finally turned so I could see her face and it was like I hit a wall and couldn't move. So many times this week I'd thought I'd seen her and now she was here.

Delaney looked up and met my eyes, her face immediately forming a scowl as she recognized me.

I shrugged and pointed at my spot across the room. She wouldn't even notice me.

She huffed and rolled her eyes, sipping at her water.

Not knowing what else I could do, I sat on my mat and faced the front of the room.

Chapter Seven

Delaney

I took one or two Pilates classes a week and she just had to end up in one of them.

At least she was on the other side of the room, so I didn't have to look up and see her. If she hadn't literally stared at me so hard that I felt it, I probably wouldn't have seen her at all.

Fuming, I kept my focus on the instructor, refusing to give James even a fraction of my attention or energy. All of that was reserved for getting through this class alive. It was a higher difficulty level than I was accustomed to, and about ten minutes in I was regretting all my life choices.

The minutes crawled by as I flopped on my mat and lifted weights that were so small but made my arms hurt so much. By the end I was pouring sweat, shaking, and desperate for Belgian waffles covered in chocolate and bananas, bacon, and a frothy latte.

I dilly dallied until I was the last one in the room so I could hopefully avoid James in the locker room. Walking as slowly as I could without tripping over my own feet, I headed to the locker room, eyes darting left and right for any glimpse of James.

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The gym was busy, the locker room buzzing with people talking about the rest of their weekend plans and complaining about their workouts and spouses and kids. All the usual gym stuff.

I found the locker where I'd put my stuff and pulled my bag out of it. As I was checking to make sure I had everything before hitting the showers, I heard a voice on the other side of the lockers.

"Connor, the answer is no. If you keep this shit up, I'm blocking your number. I don't give a fuck if you're my brother. Bye."

There were plenty of women who could be talking to guys named Connor like that in here. But none of them had James's exact voice. I froze where I was and heard her muttering to herself before slamming her locker and walking toward the main door, which led her right past me.

"James," I said, my mouth forming her name before I had even decided to speak. She turned, her face pale and pinched with unhappiness.

Shit. I'd called her name and now I didn't know what to say. She waited anyway.

"He's an asshole to you too?" I managed to say.

She opened her mouth to say something and then closed it, nodding.

"I'm sorry," I said. Why the hell was I apologizing? Her brother wasn't a moldy bag of radioactive dildos because of me. We'd both suffered for knowing him.

I'd only had to deal with him for four years. She'd had to deal with him her whole life. And at least I got to kick him out of my house.

She shrugged. "He is who he is. I should have blocked him a long time ago. Gone no-contact. But family is complicated."

No matter how bad the bullying at school had gotten, I'd been able to go home to two parents who loved me unconditionally. My childhood outside of school had been almost ideal and I had nothing but good memories from those times.

James probably couldn't say the same. Not only had she gotten stuck with the brother she had, her parents were the actual worst. I cringed at the memory of her dad storming into the school and trying to throw his weight around. Then there was her mom, the most passive aggressive woman to ever walk the earth. She'd join a volunteer group and within hours had caused complete mayhem and turned half the moms against the other half leading to tears, accusations, and the spilling of too many secrets.

In short, James had drawn the short straw in the family department.

My stomach rumbled, reminding me that I needed to feed it ASAP.

"I was just about to go to brunch. Do you want to join me?" What the hell was I saying?

James raised her eyebrows so high they almost kissed her hairline.

"Really?" she asked. "Is that a genuine offer?"

Her tone was snappish, but I didn't take it personally. Talking with Connor would have put me in the same frame of mind.

It was now or never.

My original plan of pretending she was a stranger and never acknowledging her existence wasn't working, so I guessed this was the new plan. Or at least it was the plan for today. I wouldn't have done it if she hadn't sounded and looked so wrecked. Fuck.

"Yeah, it's a sincere offer. As long as you don't spend the whole time giving me an apology speech again."

That comment made her lips twitch at the corners. Almost a smile.

"I won't. I promise." We stood there staring at each other as if neither of us knew what to do or say next. This was uncharted territory.

"I need to shower and change first," I announced, and then blushed because did she really need to know that? No.

"Oh, of course. I'll just wait out front. Take your time." She'd thrown a purple fleece on over her light pink matching bra and leggings. The whole look was effortlessly cool. Like she was off to model for an activewear brand. Even her shoes had purple-and-pink accents on them.

I wish I was that coordinated today. My tank was an old one that had a few holes and a design so faded you couldn't even figure out what it was, and my pants had also seen better days.

You'd think for someone who worked with clothing, I'd put in more effort, but I'd just shoved whatever my fingers touched first into my bag this morning on my way out the door.

At least the clothes I had to change into were a cute pastel mint cropped sweatshirt and pants. James left me to my shower and I gathered up my things in a bewildered daze.

Less than a half hour later I found myself sitting across from James at another table while we tried to make small talk but failed spectacularly. Usually, to carry on a conversation, you had to have some curiosity about the other person, and I didn't really want to know any more about James than I already did, so we were at a conversational impasse.

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“Supposed to rain tomorrow,” I said. Great. I was talking about the flipping weather.

“Mmm,” she responded. Guess she wasn’t going to make much of an effort either.

I was just about to escape to the bathroom when our server came to take our orders. I put in my usual order and James selected the classic breakfast plate with eggs, bacon, sausage, two pancakes, and cranberry juice.

She crossed her legs under the table and winced. I was familiar with the feeling.

“My legs always hurt so bad after class,” I said. There, that was something.

“I know. You go in so confident and then get your ass handed to you.”

I managed to find a little laugh in the back of my throat and her shoulders relaxed a little.

“I’m still not sure if moving back was the right idea,” she said, as if she was thinking aloud.

Shit. I didn’t want to talk about this.

“Why did you?” I blurted out. As if I wanted to know!

Well. Maybe a teeny tiny part of me wanted the gossip.

James lifted her eyes to the ceiling and sighed. “Combination of factors. The city was

getting more and more expensive and I just wasn't feeling...connected, I guess is the right word. So many of the people I tried to make friends with would be there one minute and the next they'd get a job somewhere else, or move back home, or decide the city was too expensive and vanish into the woods. Western Mass. Same thing."

She waved a hand and I suppressed a snort. Did she just make a joke? I didn't recall James ever saying anything particularly funny.

Our server returned with our drinks and she grabbed at her cranberry juice as if she was desperately thirsty. Or trying to stave off a UTI.

I pulled my latte closer and took a cautious sip. Delicious. I couldn't wait for the caffeine to hit my veins.

"Anyway," James said once she'd drained her glass in a few gulps. "I didn't know where else to go so I just came back here. Seemed as good a place as any."

Huh. Interesting. She was so nonchalant about it for someone who'd been like "bye bitches!" the minute she had her diploma and a college acceptance.

"Plus, it's so much cheaper. I can't believe how much bigger my apartment here is." I wouldn't call my place cheap at all, so Boston prices had to be through the roof.

"And you didn't have a job or anything keeping you there?" I finally asked. Okay, okay, my curiosity had officially taken over and I was going with it. We were already here, and she was talking so I might as well find out.

"I work from home," she said, not meeting my eyes.

"Me too. I mean, part time."

She nodded. "I know."

Right. She followed my social account. That was how she'd messaged me in the first place.

Was her job a secret? Was it embarrassing? Now I was really interested.

James inhaled through her nose and leaned back in her chair, as if she was bracing herself. "I'm a baby name consultant."

"What the hell is that?" I blurted out. "Sorry."

She waved that elegant hand again. "I usually get that reaction. I meet with parents and help them choose names based on the meanings or cultural significance or find ones from history. Names can be important." She would know. I'd never heard of a girl named James before.

Intrigued, I asked the question that I had wondered for many, many years. "Why did your parents name you James?"

She shrugged. "The ultrasound tech must have messed up, plus my mom was absolutely convinced she was having another boy. So when I came out and obviously wasn't, they named me James anyway. It came from my grandfather."

Oh. That wasn't as good a story as I had always assumed.

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“Huh,” I said out loud.

“Were you expecting something else?” she asked.

“No. I guess not. It’s just unusual.”

“I own it. It was one of the only things my parents did right for me.” Ouch.

Our food arrived and she went quiet again. We’d been doing so well for a little while there.

Guess it was my turn. “My parents just picked my name out of one of those books. They went over so many options. I was almost Darcy, which might have been fun.”

James put her fork down and studied me for so long I felt myself blushing. Being under that kind of scrutiny was unnerving.

“You don’t look like a Darcy,” she announced.

“Why not?” Darcy was such a cute name. Plus, it made me think of *Pride and Prejudice*.

“It’s not right for you. Means ‘descendant of the dark-haired one.’ Clearly not for you.” She nodded at my hair.

Wow. The fact that she was able to tell me that without even looking it up was bizarre.

“And what does Delaney mean?” I asked, almost terrified to know the answer. What if it was something bad or gross?

James smiled slowly. “It means ‘dark challenger’ or ‘angel from heaven.’ Much more suited to you.”

My entire face heated up. Wow. I had no idea. Who knew hearing your name’s meaning was so intimate.

“How do you know that?”

James picked up a piece of bacon and crunched it. “I looked it up a while ago and remembered it. And I recently had a client who picked the name Darcy. I don’t just have an encyclopedia of name meanings in my brain all the time. It would make things easier if I did.”

Still, it was impressive she’d managed to pull those two out.

“How did you even get a job like that?” Hopefully my blush had faded.

James methodically cut her eggs into small pieces. “I got an English degree and worked in publishing for a few years, but it wasn’t stable enough or consistent enough. I was tired of relying on other people and wanted to build something on my own. That way, if I failed, it was on me and not because of the whim of someone else. And I guess I wanted to see if I could. I got served a random video online with another woman talking about doing it and I knew it was the perfect thing to do with my English degree and research skills. I had to basically make things up as I went along, but I’ve been doing it for almost two years now and I am constantly turning potential clients away.”

That was truly wild. A job I had never heard of and she was drowning in clients.

“Damn, I am in the wrong line of work,” I said.

There was that almost smile again. “It’s a lot of work and there are really hard days too. But it’s rewarding. I also offer to help trans and nonbinary people pick names as well, but that’s just for fun.”

Wow. Now that she was talking about her job, she seemed much more relaxed and open, her eyes clear and bright. Loving your job was something I was very familiar with.

“I know what you mean. I love being a bookseller. On the good days, I’d do it for free if I could. On the hard days, I tell myself that I don’t get paid enough.”

Then something happened that I never expected. We both started laughing at the same time.

If you’d told me a week ago I would be sitting across from James St. Clair having brunch and swapping work stories, I would have said you must be thinking about a different Delaney with a different James because it definitely wasn’t me with this woman.

Eventually we lapsed into silence while we each demolished our plates of food. I kept having to tell myself to slow down so I didn’t choke because damn, those were good waffles.

Our server came to ask if we wanted anything else and James asked for the check.

“I’ve got this one,” she said.

“You already bought the croissants,” I pointed out. It wasn’t that I wanted to pay, but it rankled that this was the second time I’d gotten food with her and she was paying

again.

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“It’s not that big a deal. I’m not going to fight you, Delaney.” I wasn’t going to fight her either. It didn’t matter that much to me.

“It’s the least I can do. You’ve helped me more than you know,” she said when the server brought the check and she took it. Huh? Oh, right. The whole reason we were sitting here was because I had pity on her for having to deal with Connor. That would be my good deed for the day. It should really count as my good deed for the week.

“Yeah, sure,” I said, not wanting to get into it. I didn’t want to think about having sympathy for James.

Our meal had concluded, but neither of us knew how to end this bizarre interaction. James finally got up, and I followed her example, wanting to roll my eyes as she held the door open for me and I muttered my thanks under my breath.

“Sooo...” I said, drawing out the word as we stood outside facing each other.

“So.” Short and to the point.

I opened my mouth to say “bye” when she beat me to it. “I wanted to ask you something.”

Oh god, what now.

“Okay?” This could be anything from “can I borrow a pen?” to “can I borrow a kidney?”

She glanced up the street. “I was hoping to join the book club at Between the Sheets, but I didn’t know if that would be weird for you. Since you work there.”

Oh. That was less than a kidney but a little more than a pen.

“Yeah, that’s fine. Whatever.” In my effort to appear like I didn’t care, I sounded like I cared. Crap.

“You can do what you want,” I added, only making things worse.

James studied my face and I hated the way her eyes felt like they were peeling off my outermost layers and seeing all the ugly squishy embarrassing things underneath that I did my best to hide from everyone, even my own family.

James saw me in a way that was so uncomfortable that it made my skin itch.

“Okayyyy,” she said, drawing the word out. “I didn’t want to show up and surprise you.”

“I probably won’t even be there,” I blurted out, knowing full well that I never missed book club. It was one of the best parts of my job and I would have shown up for free even if I wasn’t getting paid.

“Oh.” James moved her lips into a smile that was there and gone in a blink. “I’m sure you have other things to do today.”

That was sort of true. My plans today included soaking in a tub with a bath bomb, reading, maybe some laundry, working on a new shirt design, and eating leftover chili with nacho cheese chips instead of a spoon, followed by a sleeve of Girl Scout cookies that had been hanging out in my freezer. You know, important shit.

“I do,” I said.

“Right.”

“I’m gonna go now,” I blurted out, since one of us needed to leave and I guessed it was going to be me.

“Bye, Delaney. Thank you.”

“Yeah, uh huh,” I said, backing away from her and then turning around. I was heading in the wrong direction, but she didn’t need to know that. I just kept walking and swung a right so I could make a loop to get back to my apartment.

It wasn’t until I made the turn that I stopped feeling James’s eyes on me.

Chapter Eight

James

I was never going to thank Connor for calling me and begging for money and a place to stay and whatever, but I hadn’t expected Delaney to overhear me and invite me to brunch. Awkward at first, but both of us thawed a little bit once the food arrived and got to talking about work. I didn’t mean to infodump all over her, but she seemed interested and pleased to know about her name origins. She’d blushed and had looked so pretty that I’d had to close my eyes so I didn’t do anything foolish, like tell her exactly how pretty I thought she was.

Once she finally walked away from me, I peeled my feet off the sidewalk and went back toward the gym to get my car and go home.

* * *

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I hadn't meant to bring up the book club, but she'd been right there and I'd wanted to make sure it was okay with her. She'd said that it didn't bother her, but I wasn't so sure. No doubt if she really didn't want me there she would have told me to fuck off.

I had Delaney on the brain for the rest of the weekend of course. As if having her appear in my life again had opened up some forgotten corner of my brain that had built a shrine to her.

Another work week passed as I did my best to keep my mind on my work and my clients and giving them my very best as always, but I was absolutely more distracted than usual due to the Delaney issue.

On Friday I finally decided to visit Between the Sheets. With any luck, Delaney wouldn't be working and no one else would know who I was. Just another random book lover.

The shop was cozy and bright, with light streaming in through the windows and painting patterns on the haphazard rugs and cushy chairs. It was almost like walking into someone's home and I couldn't help but smile as I looked around.

My smile fell the second I saw who was at the register on the right side of the store. Delaney.

She was talking to a customer, putting several books into a tote bag, and I might have been able to turn around and sneak out if several people hadn't piled in behind me and blocked the door and my escape route. Delaney looked up, her smile falling the moment she spotted me.

Great. Now I'd ruined her workday. Well, I was here now, and she'd seen me so the least I could do was buy a few things.

The group of women who'd come in behind me were loud and giggly. Delaney stepped out to help them and I made sure to give them space and browse on my own.

Between the Sheets had an excellent selection, including a display of Delaney's shirts and tote bags, book sleeves, bookmarks, stickers, and all kinds of other bookish merch. There was a little curtained off area that I was curious about and quickly learned that was where they kept the more adult items. That was unexpected. I ducked in and looked at the various items. They were all in fun colors and shapes and I seriously wanted to grab a few but I would rather ram one of these monster dildos into my ear than buy one or more in front of Delaney. I took a picture of the business name and decided to look them up later. I needed some of those fun toys in my personal collection.

I emerged from the little toy area to find Delaney standing on the other side with a smirk on her face.

"See anything you like?" she asked.

"Maybe," I said, trying to keep my face neutral.

She looked like she wanted to laugh or say something else, but then one of the giggly women asked her something and she had to go tend to them and I was off the hook.

Phew.

I moved to the shelves and took my time going through them, looking at the employee recommendations (Delaney's especially), pulling anything that was of interest.

They had a nice variety of the more popular titles and some more underground books that I'd never heard of, and I considered myself pretty well versed in what was out there for romance, but there were just so many books and so many authors that you could only scratch the surface before you were crushed under a pile of unread books. Not a bad way to go, though.

Before I knew what had happened, my arms were trembling from holding a stack of books. Something had come over me. I'd been possessed by the spirit of the bookshop and she wasn't letting me get out of here without buying more than a few. Plus, my new apartment was bigger, so I had more room for books. Ergo, I needed the books to fill the space.

It just made sense.

Sometime later I ended up at the register with Delaney as she added up my purchases and I tried not to wince at the total. I'd also gotten some bookmarks and stickers and an ebook sleeve that I just had to have that was black with pink-and-purple ombre flowers.

"If you're trying to buy your way into my good graces, it isn't going to work. This money doesn't go directly in my pocket," she said as she filled two canvas bags with my items.

"I know that, Delaney," I said. "Can't I just love books?"

She glared at me, but she wasn't going to find a lie. I did really love books.

"I don't trust you," she said, pushing the bags across the counter at me and snatching the receipt from the printer with a bit more force than was necessary. She held it out to me, and I took it from her carefully, sliding it into one of the bags.

“You don’t have to trust me. I can live with that.” I’d promised myself that I wasn’t going to lie to Delaney anymore, but I’d just broken that promise.

“Good,” she snapped and then gave me a dead-eyed smile. “Thank you for shopping at Between the Sheets. Have a wonderful day.”

Well. She definitely wasn’t happy with me for coming into her work, but she hadn’t thrown me out, so I think that was a win? Progress, at least. It was something. Got her used to the idea of me coming to the bookshop in time for book club next week.

Seeing her in person made me feel giddy. I loved getting to see her face and drink in her expressions. Being around her was addicting after going cold turkey for so many years. How had I been able to function around her in high school? It was a blur. And she hadn’t been this back then. The years had only intensified her innate beauty. By the time she was forty, she was going to be so glorious that you wouldn’t be able to look at her without major injury. Helen of Troy territory. As it was, her face could definitely start a small war. A skirmish at the very least.

Hunched over due to the weight of the books, I struggled to get back to my car, but I made it without doing too much shoulder or back damage. Lifting weights. I needed to start lifting more weights.

I went home with my books and dove right into one of them until my stomach screamed at me to tend to it. I made myself a dinner of chicken enchiladas with rice and beans and devoured it, putting the leftovers in the fridge.

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I could spend the rest of the night with my books, but instead I threw on a cute fit and called a car to take me to Sapph. I needed to kiss someone pretty, even if it could never be Delaney. There were plenty of blondes at Sapph and my eyes would be closed anyway. Yeah, that was what I wanted to do tonight.

So I did.

Chapter Nine

Delaney

“What was that?” Larison asked me after Delaney left, weighed down with enough books to crush a small car.

There was a lull in customer traffic, so we had a moment to take a breather before the last rush of the evening. I wondered if James had come in to see me on purpose or if she had just come in on a whim. I didn’t like to consider that she knew my schedule, but she might have. James was detail-oriented like that. She’d always been that way, even when we were kids. If you ever got assigned to do a group project with her, she’d automatically grab a pen and start delegating. I was actually surprised she wasn’t in a field where she could be in control. Where she could have dozens of underlings doing her bidding at her beck and call.

“That was nothing,” I said to Larison, giving her a look that made her smirk.

“Didn’t look like nothing,” she said, replacing the tape in the receipt printer.

“Well, it was,” I told her, moving from behind the register to rearrange one of the new release displays that had gotten jumbled up.

“Hmmm,” Larison said, loud enough for me to hear. I couldn’t give her anything or else she was going to think it was a thing. And it wasn’t. Just my former bully who had recently apologized to me buying some books at the shop that I worked at. No big. Sure, I’d wanted to throw the books in her face when I’d first seen her, but we got through it with minimal animosity on my side.

She probably thought I’d softened to her after the impromptu brunch, but that had only been pity on my part. Just being nice to her in that moment. One brunch didn’t change everything. I wasn’t letting her off that easy.

No doubt my parents would say I was being petty, but they were always too nice, and that had gotten them into trouble before. There were lots of awful people out there who would take advantage of kindness, and I’d seen it firsthand. There was a time and a place to be kind, and there was a time and a place to be smart and protect yourself.

Fine, let James come into the bookshop and buy a few things, let her come to book club, but I wasn’t inviting her to my birthday party.

Larison kept acting like she wanted to bring up the James situation again while we finished out the day and closed down.

“Thanks for covering for Holiday. I know we both appreciate it.” The other part-time employee, Holiday, was on a little trip with her girlfriend Danny this weekend.

Everywhere I looked, I was surrounded by happy couples and it was hard not to let it get to me. Even when I’d been with Connor, though, I’d still felt like things were different for me. Not once in four years of being together had he ever brought me

flowers or showed up at my work to say hello, or anything like that. He'd never once planned anything for our anniversary, and I'd had to constantly remind him when it was so he wouldn't forget.

And even then, he still forgot. But it "shouldn't matter" and "anniversaries are bullshit made up by card companies."

"You okay?" Larison asked.

"Yeah, great. Ready to start my weekend." I gave her my sunniest smile.

"Doing anything fun?"

"Oh, yeah, definitely. I'm going to be a wreck on Monday," I lied. I didn't have any plans. Well, any plans that didn't involve myself in my comfiest clothes and my couch and eating my weight in delivery tacos and reading a lot of books. But that sounded sad when you said it out loud.

"It's nothing but work for me and Jo this weekend." Since Jo had her classes during the week, she usually filled in and helped on weekends when she could.

"Juniper is going to an animal sanctuary with her grandparents and I'm so jealous," she said with a sigh.

"Me too." I wanted to go to the animal sanctuary. That sounded more fun than whatever I was going to come up with to do this weekend.

Why couldn't I do something other than books and tacos? There was nothing stopping me. Sure, I'd be out by myself, but that was fine. Other people did things on their own all the time. Did I need a partner or friend to do something fun? Hell no.

Feeling empowered, I was walking home when I got a message from Connor. Fucking Connor.

Instead of ignoring and blocking, I did the wrong thing and opened the message.

Dick. Right there on my phone. Blurry Connor dick.

I screamed and dropped my phone, watching in slow motion as it slammed to the sidewalk in front of my apartment with a terrifying crack.

Fucking mother fucking HELL. I surveyed the damage and made sure it still functioned. Sort of. The pic was followed up by two more messages.

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my bad

that wasn't u

I managed to hold in a scream. BARELY.

This fucking fucker busted my heart and then he busted my phone with his mediocre limp dick.

His dick that had never satisfied me, by the way. Not once. Shaking with rage, I managed to type out a response and send it, even with my messed-up screen.

I faked all my orgasms

I could have sent more than that, but that sent a pretty clear message. I stormed up the stairs to my apartment, still trembling with anger at this man who had stolen so much of my time.

My phone chimed with further responses from Connor, but I just turned off my notifications and tore off my clothes, stomping my way to the shower.

I was going out tonight and I was going to look hot as fuck and I was going to get smashed.

Fuck Connor and his fucking dick.

* * *

Two hours later, I didn't care so much about my broken phone and had made several new friends at the bar I'd just kind of wandered into. It was a grungier place than I'd normally patronize, but tonight I was all about doing shit that I wouldn't normally do. Like going to a bar alone.

So far, several dudes who looked like they might be in a motorcycle gang had listened to me tell them all about my cheating boyfriend, had done shots with me, and were now giving me their best life advice. Not that I was going to remember it tomorrow. I'd also become besties with the elder lady bartender who had a smoker's voice and so many blurry tattoos that I couldn't even begin to tell what they were.

"You doing okay, hon?" she came over and asked as I swayed on my stool. God, I hadn't felt this good in a long time. Warm and floaty and like I had no fucks left to give. I couldn't really feel my face, but feeling your face was overrated.

This was fun. I wanted to have more fun. Not that staying up all night reading a really good romance wasn't a good time, or having wings with Larison and Jo wasn't a blast. I wanted different fun. New fun. The kind of fun I'd always held myself back from participating in because I didn't want to get into imaginary trouble.

Whenever other people told stories of goofy things they'd done when they were kids, I always had to hope they weren't going to ask me for any of mine. Because I didn't have any. I had never stolen a piece of candy, never cheated on a test, never skipped school, never stepped one tiny toe out of line. Ever. Not once.

People always called me a "good girl" in a derisive way, and that had hurt, but I had been. I'd been a quintessential good girl. My parents had zero complaints. I cleaned my room and did my homework and never gave them any trouble. Never snuck out, never drank underage, never lied to them.

They'd bragged about me to anyone who would listen, how they wished they'd had

another child, but they were worried they wouldn't get one as perfect as me.

Perfect.

Look at where perfect had gotten me! I'd been the perfect girlfriend too, and Connor had screwed me over. Being good hadn't made him love me. Hadn't made him treat me well. Hadn't given me anything but a broken heart.

"Fuck being good!" I yelled, though all of my words sort of mushed together, but everyone cheered me anyway.

"Fuck being good," I yelled again, more clearly.

The bartender laughed.

"Hon, I think you're done for the night. Let's get you home."

Somehow, a very nice bouncer at the bar who was built like a teddy bear on steroids got me into a car that took me to my apartment. Digging into my reserves of sobriety, I managed to crawl my way up the stairs and get my door unlocked. Couldn't make it to my bedroom, but I flopped my way to the couch and managed to get most of my body onto it.

Close enough.

* * *

I wasn't feeling so good the next morning, though. There was a price for my night of recklessness, and I moaned myself awake as the sun streamed in through the curtains as if it had a vendetta against me.

“Nooo,” I moaned, throwing my arm over my eyes to try and block out the light. A moment later my stomach heaved, and I had to bolt to the bathroom where my body tried to turn itself inside out. Violently.

Once I had everything out, I slumped on the bathroom floor and rested my cheek on the bathtub. Ohhhh. That was nice.

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My stomach was empty, but still unsettled. I definitely had to wait a while before I could attempt to move. Gingerly, I made my way back into the living room and found my phone on the floor. Yup, screen was still cracked. I'd need to get that fixed as soon as possible. Great.

I managed to get myself onto the couch again and flipped through the pictures I'd taken at the dive bar. They'd gotten worse as the night wore on, and the last few were just shots of the floor. At least I had some evidence of my reckless evening.

I ordered a breakfast sandwich, hash browns, and a giant iced latte that would hopefully restore me. Until it got here, I tossed back a few painkillers and a glass of water that almost made me gag, but I got it down.

I sort of drifted until the food arrived, throwing on a sweatshirt before I went downstairs to retrieve my sustenance.

"This could be really good or really bad," I muttered to myself as I opened the still-steaming sandwich.

It ended up being good, and I managed to keep all of it down. By noon I had perked up and was feeling less like I'd been peeled off the sidewalk after being run over by a garbage truck.

I had a million notifications, many of them from Connor. I ignored those and then realized that I'd sent a few messages to Larison and Jo last night.

Seems like someone's having a good timeLarison had said after I'd sent her a ton of

terrible pictures. I typed out a belated response.

I'm paying for it today. Connor "accidentally" sent me a dick pic and I kind of lost my mind.

Her answer was quick. Oh shit. You really need to block his number. Don't let him take any more of your time or energy.

She was right, and I couldn't keep thinking about nightmare scenarios where he was in a car accident or something and was only able to call or message me. Or if he was arrested or something.

It wasn't like he didn't have parents who babied him and a sister who, in spite of how he treated her, answered his calls.

He also had plenty of extended family that would drop anything to help him. And friends, somehow. He had plenty of guy friends who put up with his shit until they got tired of him again.

I pulled up his contact and sat there with my thumb hovering over the block option until I actually did it. There. I blocked him. Now he couldn't use my number to contact me. He could still find me on social media, but that took a little more effort and Connor didn't like making much of an effort.

I hadn't read his messages. No doubt he was pissed at what I'd said. As if I was the one who had wrecked our relationship. As if I was the one who had flushed four years down the toilet.

He was never going to take responsibility for anything he did. Ever.

But blocking him was the next step in breaking his hold on my life. I'd gotten him out

of my apartment, but now I needed to completely evict him from my life.

I wanted to be a different kind of woman than I'd been when I dated Connor.

The rest of my Saturday was spent looking up other people's youthful rebellious stories online and trying to decide what I wanted to do for myself. Obviously now that I was older, some things were out the window. Underage drinking, sneaking out of the house, etc.

But there were plenty of other things that I'd wanted to do, or thought about doing, or wished I could do. I pulled up a blank note on my phone and started adding things to my list.

My Fuckit List. No more Bucket List. It was time for the Fuckit List.

Throughout the night I kept adding things as I thought of them.

Among the things like "dance on a bar" and "go skinny-dipping" and "crash a wedding." I also added "kiss a girl." Because why not? Most of my friends had gotten drunk and kissed a friend or played Spin the Bottle and gave another girl a peck at a party.

I needed to rack up my rebellious points and that seemed exactly like the kind of thing that would help. Maybe I could accomplish the dancing on the bar and the girl kiss on the same night. I'd definitely have to have a few drinks in me for the girl kiss. It wasn't like I wanted to kiss a girl or anything. Anytime I'd ever seen something like that, I'd always thought I should look away and my stomach had twisted in an uncomfortable way. I wasn't homophobic or anything, but it just made me feel...strange.

As long as I had enough shots beforehand, I might not even remember the girl kiss. It

would be quick, and then I could check it off my list.

Now I had a mission.

One thing I hadn't thought of was how much time I now had to myself. Being Connor's girlfriend had sucked up a lot of my day. Doing all of my chores on top of his had been utterly exhausting.

Now I had to figure out some better ways to fill my time. Mine. It was all mine now.

Chapter Ten

James

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The interaction with Delaney bothered me for the rest of the weekend. After the brunch thing, I'd thought that she might have revised her feelings on me. Guess not.

Judging from her social media posts on Friday, she'd had a good night. I was almost jealous. I'd taken my ass to Sapph for drinks and dancing, but I couldn't find anyone I wanted to kiss. Not that there weren't offers, but none of them made me have that breathless, fluttery feeling in my stomach.

None of them were Delaney. I'd been kissing planning to stranger and hope they would magically transform into her, but it wouldn't happen. That kind of magic existed only in the kinds of books I liked to read.

Frustrated, I went home from Sapph and was irritated for the rest of the day on Saturday, and that feeling carried over into Sunday. My parents and my brother weren't helping either. Connor was mad about something and he'd recruited my parents to his cause of harassing me. The messages and voicemails were constant.

When I'd moved away, I'd gotten so used to not hearing from any of them, and now it was like they couldn't go a day without reminding me of the reasons I'd left in the first place. At least they didn't know where I lived, or else they might show up.

I went to Pilates on Sunday and was surprised to see a new instructor who introduced herself as Lea. She was beautiful, with willowy limbs and dark hair, but she took us through an absolutely brutal class. She had us doing moves I had never seen before, and it was one of the most innovative and difficult classes I'd done in a while. I had to go up to her after to tell her how great it was. My abs were going to be wrecked for the next two days.

“Thank you so much,” she said. “I just started teaching so I’m still nervous every single time. It’s nice to hear when someone appreciates what you work so hard on.”

How sweet.

I asked her if she was new to the city and she shook her head. “No, I grew up nearby, but I recently moved back.” It sounded almost exactly like my story.

Taking a risk, I asked her if she wanted to go grab a coffee or something and crossed my fingers that she didn’t think I was hitting on her.

“That sounds great. I could use a boost. Just let me clean up and I’ll meet you out front.”

Delaney hadn’t been in the class, but I still kept a lookout for her while I waited for Lea.

She came around the corner wearing an outfit from an expensive and well-known activewear brand, her hair pulled back into an absolutely perfect ponytail. There was a way that Lea carried herself that broadcast that she’d come from money. An indefinable quality and posture that you couldn’t quite put your finger on, but you knew it when you saw it. Her bag was one that I’d coveted for myself but had never been able to justify the expense of.

I asked her about school, wondering why we didn’t know each other since we seemed to be about the same age.

“I went to private school,” she told me, meeting my eyes as if I was going to give her shit for it. When she said the name of the school, I knew that yes, she had come from money because no one who went there didn’t have prestigious parents. Very prestigious parents. Even more prestigious than mine. They’d wanted to get both me

and Connor in, but hadn't had enough clout.

Moving on from that fraught topic, I asked her about post high school.

"Mmmm, let's just say college didn't agree with me," she said through a little laugh as we walked together down the street to the closest coffee shop. It was one of those cool independent places with themed drinks and lots of vegan and vegetarian options.

Okay, college was a no go. I told her about my own experience going away and moving back. We were in line to order when my job came up.

"That's so interesting. How do you get into something like that?" I gave her my little abridged bio and she told me how she'd bounced around to a bunch of different jobs and now did a combination of things including digital art, Pilates, yoga, and making fitness content. It sounded like she did a lot of things, and I understood that kind of lifestyle.

We commiserated about being self-employed and how much work you had to do that wasn't your actual job.

"Teaching classes at least is a little bit of stability. My parents are livid that I resisted their indoctrination to come and work for the family business." Now that was something I knew a little bit about.

It was shocking how many things Lea and I had in common, and we talked until our pastries were just crumbs and our latte cups were empty.

It was so nice to meet someone that I immediately clicked with.

"This has been really great, thank you," she said. "I feel like we're almost living the same life." I laughed because it was true.

“If you ever want to hang out or go for a walk or something, just let me know,” I said and gave her my number. She gave me hers and we waved to each other outside of the shop.

Things were starting to look up.

* * *

I’d finished reading wellbefore the book club meeting but went back through my copy and made a few notes in the margins. I always thought people who got enraged about writing in books were a little too uptight. I also didn’t really care about dogearing the pages of my own books. Library books were another story. I didn’t touch those, but my own? They had broken spines, notes in them, receipts used as bookmarks. I was a little bit of a chaotic reader when it came to my physical books.

I threw my book in my bag along with a few pens, a notebook to take notes in, and my phone. I didn’t really know what to expect, but I was nervously excited about tonight, and not just because of Delaney.

The energy was buzzing when I walked into the bookshop and I instantly spotted Delaney speaking with another woman I recognized from my first visit to the bookshop as the owner, Larison. I tried to figure out where I should sit, since the chairs were arranged all in a circle, which made sense. It was a little unnerving.

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“You look like you’re a little scared,” Delaney said, sneaking up on me.

“I’m not,” I said, unclenching my fingers from the strap of my bag.

Delaney rolled her eyes. “There’s food and drinks, and you can sit where you want. Or you could leave, whatever. I don’t care.”

“You sure?” I fired back at her.

“No, I don’t care,” she said, her cheeks shading just a little pink. Interesting.

“You know, when someone repeatedly says that they don’t care, it kind of seems like they might care.”

Delaney fumed silently for a second before turning away from me and going back to the refreshment table to fiddle with something.

I followed her.

“Pass me a plate?”

She huffed out an annoyed breath but handed me a paper plate anyway.

There were all kinds of food options, so I was glad that I hadn’t had dinner already. A few other book clubbers came over to fill their plates and Delaney stepped away to take care of other things. Once I had my snacks, I filled a cup with some strawberry lemonade and decided it was time to find a seat. There were about twenty-five chairs

and nearly half of them were full. This was a livelier club than I'd been expecting. I saw a few familiar faces that I might have remembered from high school, but I'd blocked so much of that experience out of my mind. Even looking through my yearbook just gave me page after page of people I had almost no memory of.

I noticed several existing groups of friends and I didn't really want to sit in between people who already knew each other, so my options were limited. I selected a chair that faced the windows that looked out on the street.

"That's my seat," Delaney said. I glanced at her over my shoulder.

"Sorry," I said, getting up and moving one seat over. She glared at me for a half second and then I watched her face morph into her bookseller smile.

"Okay everyone, we're going to get started here shortly, if you want to grab any last snacks and find your seats and get your books out."

It hadn't been my intention to sit next to Delaney, but I wasn't going to move now. Being next to her made my skin buzz in a pleasant way and if I inhaled deeply enough, I could smell her scent just a little. It was sweet and a little floral. Light, but I knew it was hers. I'd gotten a whiff of it a few times before. I wish I could ask her what it was.

Delaney began the evening and I got to focus on her. Beside me, she was confident and I could tell that she was enjoying herself. It wouldn't surprise me if she had volunteered to host these events. The participants were bright and talkative and there was rarely a lull in the conversation.

Our book was a fun one, a sapphic romcom that was kind of out of the realm of the books I usually read, but I'd had so much fun with it and the feeling seemed mutual. Delaney had a typed list of questions, but she didn't really need to use it as the talk

flowed from one thing to the next, going over the stronger parts of the book and some of the weaker ones, or the parts we wished had been done a little differently.

Throughout it all, Delaney kept everything moving smoothly and fostered a light and jovial environment that made everyone relax.

She was really good at this.

I'd forgotten how good she was with people. Whereas I had been the one who had tried to control the group projects or always wanted to be the captain of any team, Delaney had sat back and watched the social dynamics before speaking up and then getting everyone on the same page.

There was more than one way to lead people and her way was definitely superior to mine.

I was left a little in awe of her by the end of the night.

What a huge mistake I'd made by coming here. Being in her presence was only making the crush I had on her stronger. Instead of being a mild presence in my brain, a tingling of my skin, a swoop in my stomach, now this crush was a hand around my throat. Fingers squeezing at my heart. It had transformed into a violent thing that wouldn't let me breathe.

Fuck. I only had myself to blame as I watched her start to clean up and laugh with a few people as they worked to fold up the chairs and stack them in the back of the room.

She was so gorgeous it made my eyes burn to look at her.

I'd barely touched my food once Delaney had started talking, so I shoved a few

things in my mouth so they wouldn't go to waste. She came over to get another chair and saw me standing there and shoving food into my face.

Busted with my squirrel cheeks.

She made a choking noise and started coughing, as if she was trying to eject a laugh from her body.

I did my best to chew and swallows quickly without compromising my breathing. It was close, but I managed.

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“Can you just forget that you saw me do that?” I asked.

She tried to hide a smile. “Absolutely not.”

“Damn.” Well, it was worth a try.

“You don’t have to rush out, you know. I still have to clean up and it’s going to be a little while.” While we’d been talking, the last of the other book clubbers had left and it was just the two of us now. The bookshop was quiet, and I became conscious of my own breathing. Why was it so loud?

“Um, yeah I’m just... Do you need help with anything?” It seemed only fair that I’d give her a hand.

“If you wanna carry all those chairs to the storage room in the back, I’ll wrap up a plate of desserts for you.” Well that was generous.

“Deal,” I said.

Most of the chairs were already stacked against the wall, so all it took was me hooking a few under my arms and carrying them to a back room that had the door cracked open. Most of space was taken up by boxes and boxes of books, as well as several tables covered in shipping supplies.

I set my first round of chairs in an empty space against one wall and went back for the others. I almost jumped when soft music piped through the hidden speakers. Delaney must not have liked the silence either.

On my third round of chairs, I paused for a second, watching her as she swept the floor and swayed to the music. I recognized the song, a soft bluesy cover of an older song that I often played myself. Delaney did a little twirl with the broom, oblivious to me watching her.

Fuck. Tonight had really done me some damage. If I'd thought I had a crush on her before, things were now so, so much worse. She was beautiful and she was sassy, and she was competent, and she was a leader. There was nothing about her that I didn't like.

Before she noticed me being a total creep, I got back to carrying the chairs and finished at the same time as she was carrying some of the leftover food to the fridge in the storage room.

Without asking, I went out to the main part of the shop and grabbed more of the containers she'd already packed up.

"Oh," she said when she almost crashed into me in the doorway of the storage room. "You don't... I mean, you can leave. I'm getting paid to do this."

I shrugged. "It's fine. I don't have anything to rush home for. I don't mind, Delaney." Saying her name was like a little treat I allowed myself.

She huffed out a breath. "Fine. Suit yourself."

I followed her lead and helped her with the rest of her closing duties. The music continued to play, and I wondered if this was a Delaney-specific playlist, or if it was a generic one for the shop.

"Okay, I need to get my shit and set the alarm, so you can definitely leave now," she said, turning off the lights. The shop was spick and span and ready to open tomorrow

for eager readers.

I settled my bag over my shoulder. “I’ll just wait outside and walk you to your car.”

“That’s entirely unnecessary.” Maybe it was. I was still doing it.

Things were pretty quiet in this part of the city at this time of night. The tourist season was almost at an end and soon the residents would start preparing for winter.

Delaney appeared surprised when she found me leaning against the building as she exited the front door and locked it with her key.

“Jesus, did you have to lurk like that? I thought you were going to attack me.” She put her hand on her chest and breathed hard.

“I’m sorry. I just didn’t think you should walk alone.”

Delaney looked up and down the sidewalk, which was mostly deserted. “Yeah, this is a real high crime area.”

“You never know,” I said in an ominous voice. “Come on, just let me do this.”

“Fine. Whatever. I can’t stop you from following me. Just don’t be weird.” I could do that. Probably.

“Right, got it. Don’t be weird.”

I fell into step beside her and matched my walking pace to hers.

“Did you enjoy it? Book club?” she asked after a few moments of silence.

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“Oh yeah. I’d never really been to one before and I didn’t know what to expect. You put everyone at ease.” Shit. Was that too much of a compliment? I couldn’t let my crush on her bleed through into how I talked to her. Any whiff of me liking her was going to make her run for the hills.

“Thanks. That’s my goal,” she said, ducking her head as if she was hiding a blush, but it was too dark to tell.

“You’re really good at it.” Too much. I was doing too much.

“You don’t have to kiss my ass, I get it.”

“I’m not just saying that, Delaney. I don’t give compliments if they’re not sincere.”

She huffed. “Were your insults sincere?”

Well. Guess we were back to that.

“It’s okay to still be mad at me, you know. There’s no time limit on it.” If she wanted to hate me forever, that was her prerogative. It would probably destroy me, but I couldn’t make her forgive me no matter what I did. That was the thing with people: you couldn’t control anyone else’s actions but your own.

The ball was in her court and she could smash that ball with a hammer and set the court on fire if she wanted.

“God, I don’t hate you, James. You act like I think about you all the time and I

don't."

"Okayyyy." I drew the word out, not really sure what she was getting at. Had she just said she didn't hate me? That was definitely progress.

Delaney turned and pointed at me. "I'm not saying that I forgive you, because having to forgive everyone for everything is bullshit. But I don't hate you. I don't think I ever really hated you. Not even then."

Oh.

She was so hot when she was putting me in my place. Focus, James. This woman is trying to tell you something.

"I'm not asking you to forgive me."

She crossed her arms and both of us jumped as a nearby car honked. "Aren't you?"

"No," I said honestly. "I'm not."

"Then what are you doing?"

I had to think about that for a minute. "Going to book club?"

"Fine, whatever. This is my car. You can go now." She gestured to the candy-red sedan and hit her keychain to make her lights flash.

Shit. This was over.

"Mine's back that way," I said, gesturing with my thumb over my shoulder.

“Okay.” She stood beside the passenger door and then straightened her spine as if she was bracing herself. “Thank you for coming to book club. I hope you had a good time. Don’t forget to check your email to see what the next book club pick will be. Drive safe!” The whole speech was delivered with a false cheerfulness and the fakest smile I’d ever seen.

Vicious.

I bit back a smile and nodded. “You have a good night, Delaney.”

Stepping away from her, I walked backwards, keeping my eyes on her. It was dark, but she was standing right in the beam of a streetlight so I saw her fight a smile and lose before she threw her bag into the passenger seat and then got behind the wheel.

I watched her for as long as I could without tripping and cracking my head open on the pavement.

I could still feel her gaze on my back, though.

Chapter Eleven

Delaney

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Book club ended up being...odd. Of course, James had sat right beside me so she could make me maximum uncomfortable. I was used to leading these things and having people look at me, but having James look at me was different. I could feel it against my skin like a caress.

Normally I had no problem leading and focusing, but I kept having to redirect my attention whenever she breathed, which was all the time. Even a little twitch snagged my focus and I swear I lost my train of thought at least fifteen times. Somehow, I made it through and didn't stumble too much, but I'd been so close to turning to her and demanding that she leave.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I made it to the end but then she hung around. Because she couldn't torture me enough, apparently. At least she was helpful. I got home a half hour earlier than I would have, which was very nice. Bonus, I didn't have to work at the shop tomorrow so I could sleep in before I had to get up and pack my shop orders from the week and get them shipped out.

For now, though, I wanted to drink some tea with honey and read the really good book that I'd started yesterday until I passed out in bed. A good ending to the night.

If only James hadn't been there. The night would have been completely perfect.

Freaking James. She was so obviously trying to get back into my good graces. Why, I didn't know. Guilt leftover from childhood? Was she one of those people who hated it when someone didn't like them? I wasn't sure, but it was getting to me. She was getting to me.

The night was over, though, and book club wasn't for another month. I'd switched my Pilates classes so I wouldn't see her, and I didn't work every day at the bookshop. The odds of me just bumping into her were small-ish. It was much easier to avoid her when we weren't walking the same school hallways.

It didn't matter. James wasn't going to be a part of my life going forward. I had other things on my mind.

Several times a day, I looked at my Fuckit List and tried to plan out when I was going to accomplish each goal. It was all well and good to put "skinny-dipping" on a list and imagine doing it, but the logistics were another story.

It wasn't like I could go to the pool at the gym and just hop in sans suit. My most likely place to take the plunge was somewhere isolated at night. Would I be safe from men and/or bears? Would I be safe from partying teenagers who wouldn't hesitate to film me and share my pale ass all over the internet? And what about the water temperature? So many things to consider.

Some items, like playing blackjack at a casino would require travel and definitely someone to come with me. Going to a casino to gamble alone was just too pathetic to consider. I'd have to rope in Larison and maybe let her in on some of my list items. I didn't think she'd make fun of me for it. Maybe I should have added things like "run a marathon" or "donate to charity" or other more worthy items on my list. Maybe I'd put them on later after I'd gotten the rebellion out of my system.

* * *

"So I made a list," I announced to Larison while I was over at her place for brunch. Juniper was flitting around, bopping us on the head with her new sparkly wand and trying to cast spells on us. Right now, she was highly entertained by yelling "freeze!" and we would stop moving until she "unfroze" us with a garbled incantation that kept

changing. It made holding a conversation difficult, but she was having the time of her life, so I wasn't going to be a bad sport. She was an adorable and precocious girl, and it was going to be fun to see the person she became when she got older.

“What kind of list?” Larison asked, one eye on me and one on Juniper as she ate her pancakes. I'd showed up with a bacon, egg, and hashbrown casserole since they were providing the pancakes and the table and chairs and so forth.

I loved being with their little family because it made me think of my own and growing up as the only child.

“Ummm, well, it's a Bucket List. But instead of beginning with a b, it begins with an f.” I waited for them to figure it out.

“Oh, interesting,” Jo said, pushing her glasses up her nose. “And what made you decide to do that?”

“What do you think? Connor.”

“Yuck!” Juniper said and I turned to look at her. She grinned and swung her feet under the table.

Larison and Jo shared a look. “So we might have said ‘gross’ a few times when talking about you and him and she might have picked up on it and we didn't discourage her,” Larison said, looking a little pleased and sheepish at the same time.

I burst out laughing. “You can yuck him all you want.” It was kinder than what I would have said.

“Anyway, it inspired me to do the things that I always held back or told myself not to do. I feel like I don't have any good stories, you know? I've never done anything

interesting. I feel like all I do is work and read books and talk to my parents and hang out with you.” It wasn’t the worst life, but it wasn’t the most exciting one either. Not the life I had envisioned.

“I want to make some bad decisions. I never make bad decisions. I always have to consider things from every angle, and I’m tired of it. I’m tired of being responsible and conscientious.”

“Con-sci-en-tious,” Juniper repeated as she stabbed her fork into her pancakes. “Jo Jo, what does that mean?”

It was beyond precious the way Juni talked to Jo.

“It means you think about the consequences of something before you do it. Like before we splash in the bath, we think about if it’s going to make a big mess for someone to clean up.”

Juniper watched Jo speak with rapt attention. “Ohhhh. I understand. Why doesn’t Laney want to be ’scientious?”

All the attention turned to me. Great. How was I going to explain this?

I looked at Larison and Jo for a lifeline. Larison tossed me one.

“Sometimes, Juni, people think about too many consequences that might not happen and they scare themselves out of taking risks. Does that make sense?”

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Juniper thought about it and then nodded.

“It’s okay, Laney. Do you want a hug?” She was too sweet.

“I’d love a hug, thank you,” I said, putting my arms out. It was impossible to have a bad day when you were around Juniper.

She jumped up from her chair and came over to give me a sticky and syrup-scented hug.

“I would love to hear about these bad decisions, but maybe that’s a conversation for another time,” Jo said. We all knew that my Fuckit List wasn’t something that could be discussed with young and sensitive ears nearby.

“Oh I’ll get into it. I might actually need some help with a few of them.”

Larison propped her chin on her hands, elbows on the table. “I’m intrigued even more.”

“I think I can speak for both of us when I say that we’ll do anything to help you complete this list,” Jo said.

Larison nodded. “One hundred percent. You look good, Delaney. Better than you have in a while.”

I didn’t want to know how bad I’d looked before today. It wasn’t that I’d let myself go, but I had definitely seen my frowning face and tired eyes and lifeless smile in the

mirror more than a few times since everything that had gone down with Connor.

That damn man had sucked the life out of me and I was getting it back.

* * *

I spent the rest of the day with the three of them and didn't get a chance to tell Larison and Jo about my list, but I ended up sending them a few of the items in our group chat later that night. No one besides me was ever going to see the full list, because no one but me needed to know what else was on it.

I especially didn't tell them about the "kissing a girl" part. Not that I thought they would judge me, but it still made me feel strange. Like I was trying to be some kind of...lesbian tourist. Like one of those girls who kissed another girl when she was wasted to make all the boys drool. Disgusting. That wasn't what I wanted to do it for. And trying to explain it would get weird and complicated, so it was easier to just not talk about it.

They were on board for the skinny-dipping.

You should do it in the ocean. Really live it up. Cold plunging is supposed to be really good for you, I think Larison sent.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd actually swum in the ocean. There was always one excuse or another. I didn't want to get my hair wet, or I couldn't find a cute suit, or the water was too cold. That last one was legitimate because even in the height of summer, ocean water never got all that toasty in Maine.

So would you come with me so I don't have any mishaps? I feel like I've seen too many shows and movies where skinny-dipping goes wrong.

They said they were on board and we started planning.

How about we make a whole sleepover of it? Rent a cottage for the night? Jo suggested, and that was a fabulous idea. Every single one of these items on my list should be checked off with ceremony. With celebration.

How about next weekend? We'll have to go after the shop closes on Saturday and be there before open on Sunday unless I can get Holiday to cover Larison sent.

We figured out the rest of the logistics and Holiday was all too happy to cover now that she was back from her weekend getaway with her girlfriend.

Jo did some searching online and somehow found a cute little cabin in a coastal town that also boasted a lighthouse, a bookshop (very important), and an award-winning bakery. The cottage was too cute for words and somehow had availability for us, so I went ahead and booked it.

Booking a place to stay without doing a ton of research and agonizing over it for days also wasn't something I was used to. I was rebelling already. It felt good. In the grand scheme of things, it wasn't a massive change, but for me, it was a step in the right direction. No, I'd never be the kind of person who could just pick a random dentist to go to or who could grocery shop without an itemized and very strict list, but I could be a little more spontaneous.

My skinny-dipping adventure was ON.

Chapter Twelve

James

My clients the following week were incredible. Not only did I have a polyamorous

triad who was welcoming twins, I had a single mom who had decided to have a child on her own. I always put my utmost care into my work, but I made sure that I did everything possible for them. It helped to scour away the negative comments that I received constantly on social media. About my job being fake, and a scam, and criticizing everything about me from my eyebrows to the tone of my voice. I did my best not to read too much of it, but I did have to do moderation on my pages to make sure that nothing truly bad was going on.

I wish I could have hired someone to manage all of that, but then I'd be paying someone to potentially expose themselves to internet hatred and I just couldn't go through with it.

You had to take the good with the bad. That was life.

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In my spare moments, I found myself pulling up Delaney's account and scrolling embarrassingly far down. I'd actually reached the bottom of her socials a few times and I didn't want to think about what that said about me and my obsession.

Since book club, my crush hadn't abated or decreased in intensity. It had set up a sweet little home in my chest and had started decorating. Any moment now it was going to start expanding and taking over more real estate.

The shy little crush of my youth had grown to a raging inferno that threatened to consume me. I'd let it, of course.

I considered going to the bookstore again, but that would be too desperate, even for me. Stalking her online was much safer.

I didn't count on bumping into her completely by accident, but it happened the following Saturday afternoon when I'd gone to the grocery store to grab a few things.

One minute I was comparing avocados for ripeness and the next I was looking into a pair of golden-brown eyes that made my heart completely stop for a second in shock.

"Delaney." Her name slipped out of my mouth without me making the decision to speak.

My name was an annoyed sigh from her. "James."

"What are you doing here?"

She raised her eyebrows and selected a few limes, putting them into a crocheted produce bag. Right. Groceries. She was getting groceries. Same as me.

My face flamed with a blush that I knew she caught.

“I’m having a girl’s night,” she announced and then I was the one raising my eyebrows.

“With Larison. And her girlfriend Jo. We rented a cottage by the beach.”

“Sounds nice,” I said, unsure of where the hell this conversation was going. I kept picking up avocados and squeezing them lightly.

“I’m—” she started to say and then pressed her lips together. “Never mind.” Delaney glanced down at her phone. “I need to get going. Larison and Jo are waiting.” So why was she still standing here with me?

“Have a good time?” I said, and it definitely sounded like a question.

“You too,” she said and then winced. “I mean, have a good time doing whatever you’re doing too.”

“I knew what you meant.” Now who was flustered? Fuck, she was cute.

Delaney grabbed another lime and then tossed the produce bag into her cart.

“Have a margarita for me,” I said, nodding at the bottle of mix and tequila.

“Maybe I will,” she said, smirking just a little and if I didn’t know better, I would have said she was almost flirting with me. Almost.

But I was just looking at the world through lesbian lenses and she was absolutely not flirting with me.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” I found myself saying, incapable of not throwing a flirt right in her face.

I had to get myself together. I couldn’t behave when I was around her.

She opened her mouth, probably to make a pointed comment about something I had done to her, but then she closed it again.

A beat of silence passed between us before she seemed to shake herself a little and then gripped the handle of the cart.

“Bye, James,” she mumbled, practically running me over in her hurry to get away.

“Bye Delaney,” I said, but she was already out of there.

Huh.

* * *

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My weekend probably wasn't as exciting as hers. I would have loved to have a girl's weekend. When the hell had I last done anything like that?

Deciding to take a chance, I reached out to Lea and asked her what she was up to on Saturday evening. PMS was absolutely kicking my ass, so I wasn't up to heading to Sapph tonight, which pissed me off. Instead I was camped out on the couch in my oldest and coziest pajamas with a heating pad on my junk, painkillers and chocolate within reach, and one of my favorite romcoms on my TV. I'd been alternating watching movies and reading a super filthy romance. Both were helping me feel better.

Not much. I'm pretty boring, lol. I taught two classes today so I came home and hopped into a bath before doing my best slug imitation on the couch.

Perfect. We were kindred lounging spirits. That's what I'm doing, minus the exercising. Is it as exhausting teaching as it is taking the class?

It can be. It's more mental than physical, since most of the time I'm not doing all the exercises myself.

We quickly fell into a lively back and forth, going from talking work to our favorite dishes at local restaurants to movies and back to our favorite work drama.

I don't care how much you pay me, I'm not doing nude Pilates. I draw the line!

I read her message after the story about almost signing up to teach a nude Pilates class at a random resort and had tears running down my face.

I don't even know how you'd be able to focus enough to teach. And what about the equipment?! I sent.

I try not to think too hard about it. Sometimes I wonder if they ever found someone. Wasn't going to be me!

It was nice to talk to a friend again, even if we had just met each other. There was something about Lea that just made me smile and want to keep talking to her. The two of us went back and forth until she told me she was falling asleep and needed to go to bed.

In spite of my uterus trying to ruin my life, it hadn't been a terrible day. I'd even had one Delaney sighting where she hadn't yelled or brought up the past. That had to be progress.

Getting her to tolerate my presence was the goal and we were getting there. Slowly.

* * *

On Sunday I slept in and had to force myself to get up and do what I needed to get done before the start of the week. Laundry, vacuuming, emptying the dishwasher, dusting my books, changing the sheets. I put on an audiobook and got down to business after I had a random breakfast of frozen waffles slathered in Nutella, with bacon, tater tots, and Greek yogurt with honey. And then I ate two cheese sticks straight from the fridge. My hormones were making me ravenous.

I checked Delaney's socials to see what she was up to and was treated to several videos and pictures of her with her friends looking like they were having the time of their lives. Drinks and laughter and cuddling together, and there was a still picture of what looked like a blurry beach at night with the caption "when you've never been skinny-dipping, your besties go with you as emotional support towel holders."

Oh.Oh.

Delaney had gone skinny-dipping in the ocean, I assumed from the picture and the caption. That was...that was quite the image to put in my mind. A fantasy, if you will. When I'd been growing up, I'd been so confused and scared of my feelings around other girls that I'd done everything I could to not look. To keep my eyes to myself. To wait and change when no one was looking and to make sure my eyes weren't wandering. Locker rooms were absolute hell for me, and I'd done my best to get through it by distracting myself. Sometimes those distractions involved being unkind. It was like my own awful feelings spewed out of my mouth and splashed on everyone else. There was no excuse for it, but I understood it better now. Why I'd done something that was so out of line with what I truly felt.

I was proud of Delaney for reclaiming herself. A person like Connor had a way of consuming all your time and energy and sucking you dry. Taking up all the air in the room so he could hoard it while you were gasping. And then he'd be all shocked when you got angry you couldn't breathe. And that was somehow your problem to solve.

My fucking brother. He hadn't been in touch for the last few days, which was nice. I had no doubt that the next time he pissed one of his friends off or "forgot" to pay his rent, or crashed another car, or got into more debt, that he would be blowing up my phone to help him. It was coming. Sooner rather than later probably.

God, she was amazing. Taking her breakup and channeling it into doing what she wanted.

Images of her submerging herself in the moonlit ocean like a mermaid swam through my thoughts and it was hard not to spend my entire day replaying that particular fantasy on a loop.

How cold had the water been? Pretty chilly, I was guessing. Had she screamed when she'd gone in? Had she dived under the water?

So many questions with no answers that I was ever going to get.

Before I could stop myself, I was liking one of her posts. I managed to not leave a comment, which would have been way too much. But a few minutes after I'd liked her post, I had a new message. From Delaney.

Chapter Thirteen

Delaney

Larison and Johad cheered me on while I stripped in the dark and ran into the ocean, crossing my fingers that I didn't step on a crab or jellyfish. The water was cold as balls and I gasped and shivered as I forced myself to dunk my head underwater.

The cold was sharp, like microscopic knives stabbing me in every single pore. It almost stole my breath, so I breached the surface again, dragging in a gasping breath.

"Holy fuck, it's fucking cold!" I yelled.

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“We’ve got your towel ready!” Larison called.

“How long do I have to be in for it to qualify as skinny-dipping?” I asked, clutching my arms to my chest as I tried to conserve any body heat. My teeth clacked against each other loudly. How did people do this on a regular basis? It was awful. All I wanted was to be warm again.

“The dictionary defines it as ‘swim in the nude’ so I think you gotta swim,” Jo called out, her face lit up by the glow of her phone.

Fuck, I had to swim too? Fine. I unclamped my arms from my chest and sloshed forward, doing a few jerky doggy paddles. I could swim, like a lot of kids raised on the coast, but I wasn’t winning any Olympic medals.

“Okay, I swam!”

“We saw. It’s been documented,” Larison said, giving me a thumbs up.

Great, now I could be done. My body had stopped shaking and had gone mostly numb with a mild burning sensation. Just awful.

With stiff legs, I sloshed out of the water, the sand sticking to my feet. The minute the wind hit my wet skin, I started shaking again. Jo was there to fold a massive bath sheet around me.

“That was terrible,” I said as my teeth started to chatter again.

“But you did it!” Larison said, giving me a hug. I leaned into her warmth.

“We should have brought some tea or something with us,” Jo said as they guided me back toward my clothes. I’d brought a spare set of sweats to put on post-dip and pulled them out of the bag. Getting the clothes on over my damp skin wasn’t easy, but I managed and then slid some sandals on my feet.

Larison absolutely blasted the heat when we got into the car and Jo let me have the passenger side with the seat warmer. My friends were the best.

Shoving my hands in front of the air vents, I started giggling.

“I don’t know why I’m laughing,” I said, still laughing. Larison and Jo joined me, as if it was contagious and before I knew it, we were driving around on random roads blasting a playlist and singing at the top of our lungs.

This. This was what I’d missed out on. What I’d been wanting. I looked through the window and up at the stars and just...soaked in this moment. I wanted to save it forever.

While I couldn’t bottle this feeling, I could take pictures and video, so I did. That was something to document my first item checked off the Fuckit List.

We all threw ourselves into the hot tub when we got back and drank too many margaritas until we had to crawl our way to bed.

The next morning, I woke up with a hangover, but it was totally worth it. I dragged my ass into the kitchen and made a nice greasy breakfast for the three of us and we all perked up after eating and downing some coffee.

Before we went back to the city, we hit the downtown area and played tourists for the

morning and afternoon. We took silly pictures in front of the lighthouse, ate massive sugar-drenched cookies from Sweet's Sweets Bakery, and checked out the bookstore. Larison got deep in shop talk with the pretty blonde bookseller who said she owned the shop and we had to practically drag her away, but not before she exchanged info with the owner and promises of meeting up again.

Before we got on the road, we hit the bakery again, grabbing a box of assorted croissants and it made me think of James and the day she'd given me her apology.

"That's a serious face," Jo said, glancing at me in the rearview mirror. "What are you thinking about?"

I'd go naked into the ocean again in front of the entire world before I admitted that I was thinking about James.

"Monday," I said, because that was a reasonable thing to be thinking about.

"Don't remind me," Jo said. "I have a presentation next week and I'm not looking forward to it."

Mission: distracted.

I didn't think about James (much) until later when I was scrolling through social media and had a notification pop up.

James had liked one of my pictures.

Stalker.

I opened up the messages and typed out a message before I could question myself.

Guess your weekend was pretty boring if you're liking mine.

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I couldn't stop myself from being snarky at her. It was payback for surprising me at the grocery store. Seeing her had been...weird. Just weird. Out of context and it had made my stomach get all twisty. She was trying to weasel her way back into my life and I wasn't going to allow it.

Yet here I was, messaging her.

My weekend wasn't as good as yours, that's definitely true. Congrats on the skinny-dipping.

Fucking hell. I shouldn't have posted anything alluding to that. I didn't want James to think about me skinny-dipping.

My first instinct was to tell her to go fuck herself, but then she'd know that she was bothering me.

Before I could think of what to respond, she sent another message.

How cold was it?

I guess I could answer that. Cold as HELL.

I bet. You're braver than I am.

Huh. That was interesting. I couldn't tell if she was serious or if she was just blowing smoke up my ass. The latter was most likely. James's goal to get into my good graces was so transparent.

I'm not that brave. And did you know that it's not skinny-dipping unless you're actually swimming? Why the hell was I talking to her? I couldn't seem to stop. My fingers kept tapping out responses.

Didn't know that, but now I do. I did it once back in college to impress someone.

Interesting.

Did it work?

She typed and then stopped and then typed again. No. She ended up hooking up with my roommate instead.

Wait, what? She?

This was new information. Back in school James had been part of a group of girls who seemed to be totally into guys. They spent inordinate amounts of time talking about which guys in our class were cute, how they were going to ask them to dance, and who was "dating." We were so young that no one was actually doing much, but holding hands in the hallway and being social media official was a big deal.

James had been totally part of that group and I still remembered her "dating" a boy or two.

High school had been murkier because I'd done whatever I could to avoid knowing anything about her, but I was pretty sure she'd gone with some guy to prom at least.

How did I respond to this? Was I supposed to draw attention to the pronoun?

That sucks, I'm sorry. There. That was supportive-ish.

Thanks. I was kind of a mess then. I mean, more than I am now.

I found myself responding again. Why couldn't I stop?

We're both different people than we used to be.

I mean, I didn't have a different sexuality now, but I had changed a lot from that shy and bullied girl I'd been.

I wanted to ask her about the "she" and get more information. When had she figured that out? How had she figured it out? Had she always been attracted to girls? Did she still like guys? How did any of it work?

The questions kept going off in my brain like reloading fireworks. It was hard to think about anything else.

Why was this revelation fucking me up like this? It didn't matter to me if James was a lesbian. Didn't affect my life in the slightest. So why was my stomach churning and my palms sweating?

I had to set down my phone and do a lap around my apartment for a minute. I needed to stop talking to James right now. Shoving a window open, I gulped in fresh air.

My phone went off with another notification, but I ignored it. Instead, I went to my desk, shoved my headphones on, and opened my inbox. The rule was no work on weekends, but I needed to distract myself with something right now. Emails were the easiest option.

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* * *

I avoided my phone for most of the night, getting ahead on my social media schedule, clearing out my inbox, and making lasagna to avoid it.

I'd calmed down from the strangeness of earlier, but I still didn't want to go back and forth with James again so soon.

My parents had sent me a few messages, asking when I was coming to visit. I didn't get over to see them as much as I should, considering they only lived ten minutes away. It had been a few weeks since I saw them, and I was more than overdue for a visit. I said I'd come by next Sunday, stopping at their favorite Italian place to bring dinner.

You really are the best daughter Mom sent. It was nice to hear, but it also made my chest tight with anxiety.

I always envied anyone who had a sibling, but now that I'd been through the ringer with Connor, I wasn't so sure. James had drawn a shitty hand in the sibling department, that was for sure.

James. She had responded again, and the notification was going to bother me like an itch I couldn't scratch.

I didn't open it until I had gotten into bed with a book.

Thanks for listening to me, Delaney. I really appreciate it.

It was still hard to tell if she was actually nice or if she was saying what she thought I wanted to hear. The only way to tell would be to spend more time with her, and I sure as hell wasn't going to do that.

Right?

* * *

What's the weirdest suggestion that you've given someone for a name?

It was Monday and I was on my morning break at the bookstore and I was currently bored in line at the coffee shop while the people in front of me acted like they were new to the planet and had never ordered coffee before.

Ohhh so many. I really have to keep my personal judgment out of it. I've had a few clients that were insistent that they wanted all creative spellings for more common names. That's always an adventure.

Her career absolutely fascinated me. It made sense with her getting an English degree. Names were words, after all. And she had the cachet of going through life with an unusual name, so she could talk down parents who were determined to name their kid Tayble or something.

What's your favorite name? I asked her when the line still hadn't moved. Everyone around me was starting to get pissed off as the person at the front stood there squinting at the menu as if no one else was in a rush.

I have way too many. Some are more special than others. Right now any name that one of my trans clients pick is my favorite. Because sometimes I'm the first person who they get to hear use it. Those moments get really emotional.

That was really beautiful. The line finally moved, and I had to remember what I was supposed to be doing. Right, coffee.

I started to give my order, but the cute barista finished it for me.

“Am I here that much?” I asked.

She grinned. “I just have a memory for certain orders.” We made eye contact for a little bit longer than was standard between barista and customer. I found myself fumbling for both my words and my card.

I managed to get my act together and move to the pickup line without making too much of a fool of myself. It wasn’t like she was flirting with me or anything. Right? She was just being nice and hoping I’d tip her better for remembering my order. She probably turned that charm on for people of all genders. Connor used to assume every female-appearing service worker was flirting with him when it was nothing of the kind.

I had to be better than Connor.

Read anything good lately? James asked me while I waited for my drink and the one I was taking back to Larison. Nearly every day we worked together one of us went out and got treats or coffee or something for the other.

James had no idea the door she’d opened with that seemingly simple question.

How much time and/or money do you have? I asked, half-joking and half-serious. I was capable of just recommending three books and then if given enough leeway, I could probably go for hours if not days. I had lists on lists on lists on spreadsheets of books. Yes, it was my job, but it was also my passion to find a book for every reader, from a bibliophile to the most reluctant reader. It was a calling, a joy, a mission.

Oh, did I start something with that question? She asked, and I couldn't help but smile as I sipped my vanilla and toasted marshmallow ice coffee.

Don't worry. I'll go easy on you. What kind of book are you looking for? What books have you read that you want to read something similar? Or, if you don't know, what are the tropes or vibes you want?

That wasn't too intense. I could keep it to a couple of recs. Possibly.

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I had to go back to work, so I couldn't really dig into James's answers until after we closed the shop for the day, and I was home making a quick dinner of teriyaki beef, broccoli, and rice.

That's a lot of questions. Okay. So I think I want a few different things. I'm looking for a super cozy sweet romance. Maybe with some fantasy elements? Something that I can escape with. And then on the other hand I want to read something super messed up. Envelope-pushing. That doesn't have to be a romance, but I wouldn't be mad about it. How about we start there?

That was a ton of information and I could absolutely work with that. Some people would ask me if I could recommend a book and they'd tell me they just wanted something happy with kissing in it. I'd press and sometimes get a few more details, but it wasn't until I started handing them books and they read the blurbs on the back where I could figure out what they really wanted. It was an art as well as a science.

With that information from James, I grabbed my rice from the rice cooker and topped it with the broccoli, beef, lots of sauce, and a sprinkle of sesame seeds. The plate of food steamed invitingly, and I was starving.

But as I grabbed my chopsticks, I also pulled up my master spreadsheet of books and started scrolling through, looking for a book for her first request of something light and escapist and maybe fantasy. I had a standard choice, but James impressed me as someone who had probably already read that one. It was an entry-level book. I needed to look a little deeper. Find a hidden gem. Something unexpected.

My food started getting cold as I threw myself into the hunt for the right book. I

scanned the spreadsheet and my own shelves before selecting a title that I really thought would be perfect. I'd gotten totally swept up in it. Oops. Doing my job off the clock.

I shoveled the rest of my now-lukewarm dinner into my mouth so I could look for a selection for her second request.

Chapter Fourteen

James

It wasn't until later that night, after I'd shut down from work and had eaten shrimp tacos for dinner and made myself a bowl of popcorn with lime juice and Tajin on it that she got back to me about the recommendations.

Okay I limited myself to two books. I could have given you more, but we're starting easy.

She also sent me links for the two books. I read through both of the blurbs and she had absolutely nailed it. The fantasy book was sapphic, and the other one wasn't. Interesting. I bought both ebooks immediately, as well as the paperbacks from Between the Sheets. Gotta support your local bookseller. Maybe I'd order a book a week just to bother her. Book order flirting.

No, not flirting. I wasn't flirting with her. You didn't flirt with people who were so obviously not into you. I'd gotten all the "crush on a straight girl" stuff out of my system already. At this point in my life, I was only interested in people who were equally interested in me.

Delaney was off limits.

Thank you. I sincerely appreciate it. I wish there was something I could do for you. Have anything that needs a good name?

I didn't think she needed any research done, or author contracts read or emails sent to cover designers, so that was what I could offer her as far as my professional expertise.

Okay, how about my air fryer?

She attached a picture of a standard black air fryer with her message and I burst out laughing. I hadn't expected her to take me up on her offer.

Oh, this could be fun.

Does your air fryer have a gender? I asked.

I asked them and they said genderqueer.

This time I nearly choked on a laugh. Delaney was funny. I guess I'd known that already but seeing it in real time was a pleasant surprise.

Genderqueer air fryer. Got it. Let me work on a list and I'll get back to you with some options.

I threw my professional hat on and got to work.

Well. It wasn't really work, but I was enjoying myself. I searched for names of animated appliance characters which also led me down a rabbit hole of children's books. I managed to emerge eventually, but my eyes were burning, and I realized I'd been at this for too long. There went my Monday evening. Guess this was going to be a multi-day project.

I shouldn't have agreed to this. I'd gotten too excited that she was giving me attention and now my feelings were going to get absolutely crushed.

I was in a mess of my own making.

* * *

Over the next few days, I did my best not to devote too much time to this air fryer name project. I couldn't seem to stop myself from adding names to an already voluminous list. I was overdoing this silly little request, but it was for Delaney.

You're really taking this seriously, huh? Delaney responded when I told her I was still working on the list on Wednesday.

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It's just a fun project to do when I have a spare minute I lied.

By the way, your books should be heading to you tomorrow. I packed them up today so they're ready to go. You really think you're so sneaky.

Maybe I wanted you to know I sent.

What do you want from me, James? Even seeing my name typed by her gave me a thrill. Almost as good as hearing her say it.

Nothing. I told you. I don't want anything from you. Anything you give me is a gift.

I realized how it sounded the second I read it back to myself in the context of our conversation.

Fuck. I'd revealed too much again. This was what came with talking to her too much. With dropping my guard.

Well now you're definitely blowing smoke up my ass, James. Come on. Did you really think I was going to buy that?

Phew. She thought I was being sarcastic. That was so much better than her knowing that I was sincere. You couldn't read tone in a message and that had worked to my advantage this time.

It was worth a try, wasn't it? I responded, playing along.

She and I had been furiously messaging back and forth since Monday and I still couldn't believe we were talking like two regular people.

I'd also heard from Lea, who had been sending me funny stories from teaching Pilates and fitness memes that cracked me up. I needed to get to her classes more often and maybe see if we could hang out again. Lea was a solid potential friend.

Connor hadn't reached out and I was starting to get suspicious, but I was also grateful that he wasn't pestering me and neither were my parents. They wouldn't start the full-scale attack until the holiday season started and then it would be relentless. Every year it was a nightmare and I wanted to disassociate about it as long as I could.

It's MillieDelaney said after I'd pared down my name list to my standard ten options. Millie meant "gentle strength" or "strong in work" and it was really cute as well. I'd gotten very creative and silly with my suggestions.

Millie was one of my favorites too. I was hoping you'd pick that one.

Delaney had named her air fryer because of me. I had named an object in her home. It wasn't her declaring that she was actually queer and in love with me, but it was something. Probably the best I'd ever get.

Millie says hello was accompanied by a picture of the air fryer with a sticky note with HELLO written on it in swooping letters.

I needed to see her again. I wanted to ask her what she was doing this weekend and suggest maybe we go out for drinks or something. Or a walk. Or to get an obscene amount of croissants again. Something, anything. I was setting myself up for an epic crash and I'd only have myself to blame.

Are you going to Pilates this weekend? she asked, as if she'd been listening to my

thoughts.

Maybe, why?

It took her a few minutes to answer. I was planning to go on Saturday afternoon. You know, if you were going to go. What did that mean?

Are you saying you want me to go on Saturday afternoon or you want me to avoid that class? I responded. Better to spell it out than dance around things.

Ugh fine, I meant if you were going to go on Saturday afternoon I would also be there. And I guess that would be okay with me.

Wow, she was putting in a lot of effort to invite me to go to Pilates with her. If that was what she was doing.

Delaney. Are you saying that you want me to meet you at Pilates? You can just say that.

She sent me several angry emojis. I'm not INVITING you. I'm saying that if you came to that class that I would also be there.

Semantics. Very adorable semantics.

Ohhhhh, got it. So if I were to show up to the afternoon class, would there be a space next to you to put my mat? Or would I be forced to be on the other side of the room so you can pretend we don't know each other?

I really wished I could see her face.

Why do you have to make this into a big thing? I don't care where you put your mat,

James. Forget I even said anything.

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I took a risk and video called her. It took a few seconds before she picked up.

Her face filled the screen and I stopped breathing for a second.

“Really?” she asked, looking annoyed. Her hair was on top of her head in a messy bun and she wore a loose T-shirt as she leaned against her couch.

“What? I wanted to get clarity on this whole Pilates situation.”

She scrunched her face up and glared at me. “There is no situation. I was just... Whatever. I don’t even know why I’m talking to you.”

“Because I helped you name your air fryer, Delaney,” I said, my tone serious. “Do you know how much time and effort I put into that?”

She rolled her eyes, but her cheeks were just the tiniest bit pink. “You didn’t have to,” she mumbled.

“No, but I had fun. I can name some other stuff in your apartment if you want. Maybe this is a whole new revenue stream for me. I bet I could get super rich people to pay me to name their stuff.” There was an idea if I ever needed some quick cash. Appliance namer to the stars?

“You’re such a weirdo,” Delaney said, but she was smiling.

“You’re the one who asked me to name your air fryer,” I sang.

“Oh my god, I’m not talking to you anymore,” she said, covering her face, but she was laughing. This was definitely better than just sharing messages back and forth.

“Hey, Delaney,” I said, purely for the pleasure of using her name. “I’ll see you at Pilates on Saturday.”

She huffed. “Fine.”

“Did you want to coordinate outfits? Just send me some options.”

“Bye, James,” she said and ended the call.

I couldn’t keep the smile off my face for the rest of the night.

Chapter Fifteen

Delaney

I had no idea why I kept talking to James, but every time I told myself I was going to stop responding so she didn’t get the wrong idea, I kept writing back to her. And then I picked up on Friday night when she called me. There was absolutely no excuse for that behavior.

Her hair had been down and tucked behind her ears and her septum piercing was a little crooked. Not that I noticed. Her shoulders were visible as they peeked out from under her dark gray tank, and I didn’t notice those either.

I’d had to stop myself from staring at those shoulders and ended the call after she’d made me laugh a little too much in a way that had my stomach squirming.

The Pilates thing was...well, I guess I was trying to be nice. Or something. James had

gotten to me this week and worn me down. As much as I tried to hold onto that grudge I had lovingly tended since before I hit puberty, she had chipped away at it with every new message and every joke and every glimpse of who she was now.

It was a challenge to reach down and search for that grudge. To remember the shape and size of it. By Friday night, I'd kind of given up. Guess I just wasn't meant to be one of those lifelong grudge-havers. The kind of people who could rant for hours about someone who had done them wrong thirty or forty years before and still have just as much passion as the day the grudge was born.

Besides. There was someone else in my life who had done me more recent harm, and he just happened to be James's brother. Maybe he'd used up all my grudge energy. Transferred it from one sibling to the other.

James sent me a picture on Saturday morning of a black sports bra and a dark blue pair of yoga pants laid out on a bed.

Cute? Or not cute?

Oh was she serious about the matching thing? I'd planned on wearing my new flowered bra and shorts set that I'd splurged on to make me feel better about the Connor situation.

It's hard to tell when it's not on a person I responded.

A few minutes later, I got a picture of her wearing the set and posing in front of a mirror, her head tilted to the side and her other hand holding up two fingers.

Isn't this how the fitness girly poses? Am I doing it right?

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I snorted and tried my best not to stare too much at the exposed band of her stomach between her bra and the pants.

You've got the head tilt right.

She sent me three more pictures with different poses, and I couldn't help smiling. She was goofier than I thought she would be.

Definitely the last one I told her. The picture had her making a ridiculous face and sticking her ass way out.

Cool, thanks. What are you wearing?

Coming from someone else, that would almost sound like a creepy pickup line or something.

I wasn't going to put my outfit on and pose for her, so I sent her a picture of a model wearing the set.

That's not you James responded. I want to see you wearing it.

Ugh, why did that comment make me feel all nervous?

You'll see me wearing it in like an hour.

I thought it was a good idea to get my Pilates in since I'd be going out and getting a little bit drunk tonight and trying to check off another item on my Fuckit List.

Okay fine. But if you get there before me, save me a mat space.

I set my phone down and went to pack my bag before I chomped on a protein bar. There wasn't much else to do in my apartment, so I left for Pilates way early and got to the gym with so much time that I thought about hopping on the stair master for a little while and then changed my mind.

After waiting around and messing on my phone for a while, I was one of the first people to walk into the Pilates room. I scoped out my favorite spot on the left side of the room near the front and laid my mat out perfectly.

I checked my phone and saw the last message that James had sent me. Heading to the side of the room where the equipment was stacked, I grabbed some weights, two balls, and two circles. Using the tools, I laid out a second space beside me for James's mat. I didn't have to. But I did it.

A few minutes later I heard someone coming up behind me.

"You did save me a spot." I glanced up and my stomach did a little flip when I saw her smile. Her hair was pulled back in a braid and I didn't see her septum piercing.

"You took out your nose ring," I blurted out.

James moved the equipment and laid her mat out. "Nope. Just tucked it away." As I watched, she pulled the ring from where she'd pushed it inside her nose.

James laughed at my horrified look. "It doesn't hurt or anything. I just hide it sometimes."

She tilted her head to one shoulder, stretching her neck.

“I like your outfit,” she said, rolling her shoulders, drawing my attention to them.

“Oh, thanks.” I looked down at my white flowered bra and shorts, wishing that I’d worn something with more coverage. I’d worn similar outfits to class before, but there was something different about James drawing attention to it.

“Electrolytes?” James asked, tilting her bottle toward me.

“No, I’m good.” I had my own water.

“You okay?” she asked, adjusting her braid.

“Yup. Just thinking about seeing my parents tomorrow.”

James nodded and then studied my face for a few moments. “I remember your parents. They were always so nice.”

I winced, as if it was my fault that James had been stuck with shitty parents.

“They’re pretty great.”

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She let out a long breath. “Sometimes I wonder what my life would have been like with different parents. You know, since I’ve had a few disagreements with mine.”

“No, do you have some family issues?” I asked, pretending I was in the dark and trying to lighten the mood.

James laughed. “I feel like you probably know a lot more about my family than you ever wanted to.” That was the truth, and not just because Connor walked all over them. His mom was a spiteful bitch and his dad would always hug me for too long.

I shuddered at the memory.

“You could say that.”

She smiled sadly. “Yeah, it’s...they’re the reason I moved away, you know?”

“But then you came back.”

She nodded, picking at the edge of her mat as more people filed into the room and set up their mats around us.

“I did. And...I don’t regret that I did, I guess. But it’s a change after being away for so long. I got used to just being on my own. And now they can call me and I don’t have geography as an excuse anymore.” Her smile was razor sharp.

“Mmmm, I know what you mean.” My parents loved to call me to come over for silly things. Most of the time I didn’t mind.

“If you ever want to take your mind off things though, I’m available,” she said, her face going a little red as she pulled off a tiny bit of her mat and rolled it between her fingers. If she wasn’t careful, she was going to shred a hole right into it.

“Available for what?” I asked and she looked up at me.

“I mean, if you wanted to go out or do something. I’m not doing anything. I’m free. Tonight.” I’d never seen James this fumblingly awkward and it made me smile. Seeing my former bully stumble over her words with a red face was healing.

I almost wanted to take her up on that, but I had my own plans tonight and I didn’t want to explain my Fuckit List to James. Hell no. Absolutely not.

“I’ve got plans already, but thanks. Maybe next weekend?” There. That was something.

“Deal,” she said, and our instructor Lea started class.

* * *

“Am I dead?” James asked while we both lay on our mats an hour later.

“If you can talk, you’re not dead,” I said, sitting up slowly so I could have some water. Lea had not taken it easy on us and I knew my abs were going to be screaming for the rest of the day, but in a good way.

I looked down at James and she gave me a tired smile and a weak thumbs up. “Okay. I’m going to move. In a few minutes.”

James had thrown herself completely into the class and I hadn’t been able to stop seeing her perfectly pointed feet and flexibility. Pilates usually made me feel like I

didn't have a handle on correctly moving my body, but James had looked like a professional Pilates doer. It just wasn't fair.

"Dammit, now I'm starving," she said, putting her hand on her stomach. Her yoga pants had ridden down a little bit and her belly was peaking out. Another piercing winked at me from her belly button.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm starving. Do you want to go get something with me? I'm thinking a burger. With bacon. And fries." That did sound amazing. The protein bar I'd had before class wasn't cutting it for me. I could definitely use a burger and fries.

"Sure," I found myself saying. "Uh, I'm going to take a quick shower and then meet you in the front?"

"Yup. I'm on my way. Look at me go." She hadn't moved.

I cleaned off my mat and put everything away and James hadn't moved.

"They're going to kick you out," I called as I left the room. I didn't hang around to hear if she responded.

* * *

The locker room was busy, and I kept my eyes down as I had a quick shower, changed, and twisted my hair back in a clip so I didn't have wet hair hanging on my shoulders.

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James tapped me on the shoulder as I waited for her in the lobby.

“Ready?” she asked, her face pink from her own shower. She wore a matching black sweat set that had a logo I didn’t recognize on the front.

“Yup.”

We both paused outside the gym, looking up and down the street.

“Did you want to just walk somewhere?” James asked me.

“Uh, sure. There’s a good place right down the street actually.” It was one of those kinds of places that had burgers with funny names that came loaded with so many toppings that you could barely fit them in your mouth. Their double-fried fries were also legendary and had been featured on a traveling food show.

“Sounds good to me. I trust you.” James fell into step beside me as I adjusted the straps of my bag. We’d been talking with each other all week, but it was different now that we were in person.

“How’s Millie?” James asked, bumping my shoulder with hers. It still annoyed the hell out of me that she was taller.

“Millie is booked and busy keeping me alive,” I said. The air fryer naming was too ridiculous, but I couldn’t stop saying “hey, Millie” and “thank you, Millie” every time I used my air fryer now.

“Good for her. She looks like a hard worker,” James said, grinning at me and I tripped on the sidewalk. The only thing that saved me from breaking my face was James grabbing my arm.

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

She didn’t let go for a second, her fingers clenching my arm.

“James?” I asked, nodding to the death grip she still had me in.

“Oh, sorry. Just trying to make sure you’re good.” She let go and stepped away from me, almost bumping into another man walking down the street.

“I’m fine,” I said.

* * *

The burger place wasn’t busy, since it was a little too early for dinner and a little too late for lunch. We got a booth right in the front with the window facing the street. It reminded me of the first time we’d eaten together at the café.

James ordered an Arnold Palmer and I asked for the same.

I watched her over the edge of my menu as I pretended to peruse it. She chewed on her lip as she read through the options.

James was still gorgeous, but in a different way. Less polished and more...comfortable. Like she just rolled out of bed looking incredible. For someone who’d just been through a workout class and had taken a quick gym shower, she was

glowing, and I didn't think she had a single ounce of makeup on.

"Did you ever have acne?" I asked, my tongue voicing my inside thought.

James looked up, puzzled by the question. "Uh, not really? I get a few breakouts sometimes before my period, but for the most part no."

What a bitch.

"Ouch," she said through a laugh, and I realized I'd said that last part out loud. Oh well.

"You made fun of my skin," I reminded her.

Her face fell and she gripped her menu in both hands, making it bend. "I know. I...I really am sorry about all that."

"I know you are." I didn't want to keep bringing up the past, but it kept coming up anyway.

"I went on birth control in college. That helped," I said.

"You have lovely skin, Delaney." Well, I wouldn't go that far, but the compliment did make me feel a little soft and fluttery.

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A server brought our drinks and asked if we were ready to order. James asked for more time before I could open my mouth.

“What’s good here? I’m kind of up for anything.”

Going back to the menu, I listed off some of my favorites.

“I think I’ll get the Bee Sting Burger,” James said, which happened to be my favorite burger with onion rings, bacon, honey barbecue sauce, and cheese. Eating it was always a mess, but after your first bite you didn’t even care.

I decided to get something different and did a custom burger with bacon, avocado, fried pickles, and spicy mayo.

James’s phone went off and she read a notification and then smiled.

“One of my clients had her baby. Her name is Poppy Scarlett.” She typed a quick response and then put her phone down.

“Pretty,” I said.

“They went with a color theme. That was fun. Her parents want to have more kids, so I’m hoping I get to work with them again.”

Her job absolutely fascinated me. It sounded like a joke when you first heard about it, but then she explained, and it was really special.

I wondered what her parents thought about her career. They hadn't really given a shit about Connor having any kind of employment, and he'd lied to them about what he was doing anyway. Had they given their daughter the same leeway? Didn't think so.

Fully aware I might be opening a can of worms, I said, "What do your parents think about your job?"

She laughed. "They hate it. I'm pretty sure they think I'm actually selling drugs."

"And I'm guessing you've explained to them that you are not, in fact, a drug dealer." Of the two St. Clair offspring who would sell drugs, Connor was a much more likely candidate. I'd had my suspicions when we'd been dating that I'd done my best to ignore.

"Many times. They think my job is bullshit, my degree is bullshit, my life is bullshit. I don't know why I still answer the phone when they call me." She sucked down most of her drink through the straw and I wondered if she wished it was something stronger.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to bring that up." I couldn't seem to stop dredging up unpleasant things.

"It's fine," she waved her hand, dismissing the topic. "Tell me about the last book you read."

Now that was a conversation I couldn't resist.

"Okay, have you heard about something called sentient object romances?"

Her eyes went wide and she leaned in. "No, tell me more."

Chapter Sixteen

James

Our plates were empty, but we hadn't stopped talking. Once Delaney had gotten started telling me about some of her favorite very strange romances, I was riveted. Not just on what she said, but the way her mouth moved and her eyes and the sound of her laugh. I drank her in, barely letting my eyes leave her face even to blink. I had to keep reminding myself that any time she could decide to tell me to fuck off and I might never see her again. I had to make the most of every moment.

Our server came and asked about dessert and I wasn't necessarily in the mood for something sweet, but if it would keep Delaney here with me, I'd eat an entire cake by myself. One bite at a time.

"Yeah, I think I need something sweet. If that's okay with you?" she asked me.

"As long as we split it."

I let Delaney select the s'mores cookie skillet which arrived piled high with ice cream, drenched in chocolate and marshmallow sauce, and with sprinkles and crushed graham crackers.

It was a masterpiece and it made my teeth hurt just to look at it.

"Oh my god, it's huge," Delaney said, her eyes going adorably wide as she picked up her spoon. "This is going to be a challenge."

She gazed at me with determination burning in her eyes.

“Are you up for it?”

I picked up my spoon and held it in the air like a sword. “Bring it.”

We didn’t manage to finish the whole thing, so Delaney asked for a box and I said she could have the leftovers.

When the bill arrived, Delaney snatched it.

“We could have split it,” I said as she shoved her card in the book and set it back on the table for our server.

“Next time,” she said. I couldn’t stop my eyebrows from going up.

“Next time?” I asked.

“Next time,” she nodded.

Oh.

* * *

Delaney and I walked back toward the gym together. “Where are you parked?”

“I walked,” she said.

“Do you want a ride? My car is right there.” I pointed a few spaces away where I’d

somehow managed to snag an on-street spot.

She shrugged. “Sure.”

For the few steps it took to reach my car, I panicked that there was something embarrassing inside.

I unlocked the doors and blurted out “sorry, it’s a mess,” before Delaney shoved herself into the passenger seat with her bag and her rolled up yoga mat.

Chuckling my stuff in the backseat, I winced at the amount of random crap scattered around. A bag of old clothes I intended to donate to the thrift store, a box with something I was supposed to return but had forgotten about, more than a few receipts and spare napkins. My car wasn’t dirty, but it was messy. There was a difference.

Delaney didn’t seem to mind, and she hummed softly to herself as I pulled out of the space and onto the street.

“So, um, where do you live?” I asked, realizing I hadn’t asked her.

“Oh, sorry.” She gave me the address and I put it into my phone that I set in the holder attached to the dash. A detached British voice told me to turn left at the next intersection.

I was going to see where Delaney lived, and I was trying not to read too much into that. She wasn’t going to be inviting me up for coffee or anything, so it wasn’t that big a deal. Still. It was another peek into her life. Another layer of her that I was getting a peek at.

Less than three minutes later, we had arrived. She really did live close to the gym.

Her building was brick and rectangular and pretty nondescript, but it looked homier and nicer than so many of the newer construction gray boxes that had popped up around the city.

“It’s not the best, but it’s not the worst,” Delaney said, her hand on the door. “Um, thanks for the ride. I guess... I’ll see you later?”

I gripped the steering wheel with both hands and told my heart to calm the fuck down. It had gotten confused and had decided this was the end of a date and there was the possibility of a kiss.

There was absolutely not going to be a kiss. Not in a million years.

“Yeah, you’re welcome. And thanks for the burger. It was just what I needed.”

“Okay, bye.” She pushed the door open and I watched her walk into her building. I stayed in my spot until I was sure she was safe inside.

My phone lit up with a message.

Going to eat this in bed later
Delaney sent with a picture of the box with the leftover cookie in it.

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I'm jealous I responded before I put on my blinker and drove back to my own apartment.

* * *

I found myself at Sapph a few hours later moping about Delaney. And the only reason I knew I was moping about Delaney was because the bartender asked me why I looked so down.

"Do you have a drink for when you've developed a devastating crush on a straight girl?" I yelled over the music. She gave me a sad smile and said she'd take care of me.

"It's called the Heartbreaker," she told me when she pushed the deep red drink in front of me.

"Perfect," I told her and opened a tab.

Usually, I'd be scoping out a cutie to dance with at this point in my night, but Delaney had ruined me for everyone else. No matter who I looked at, I couldn't help but compare everyone with Delaney and she always came out as the better choice.

Except she wasn't a choice because she was straight.

I caught the eye of a pretty woman with curly hair who looked like she was going to come over to me, but I broke eye contact and sipped at my drink. It was rich and a little smoky. Different than what I would have ordered, but I liked it. And it was

appropriate, given the circumstances.

She'd find someone else who wasn't falling for a straight girl like me.

Maybe I shouldn't have come out tonight. My time might have been better spent at home on the couch with one of the bizarre romance books Delaney had told me about. I'd downloaded a bunch of them and was truly skeptical, but I could have live-reacted to them in her messages.

Sighing, I finished my drink and decided I might as well make it an early night when I turned around and saw a flash of blonde hair. Just another Delaney Doppelgänger. She had many, but no one was as stunning as she was.

Except...this person was definitely a similar height to Delaney. I pushed my way through the crowd without seeing anyone else but the person who was paying her cover and looking around the bar with a little bit of fear and apprehension under the neon lights of the Sapph sign at the front.

Holy fucking shit.

ItwasDelaney Budreau.

Chapter Seventeen

Delaney

I'd spentthe rest of the afternoon and evening in a burger and cookie coma, searching through my Fuckit List to find what items I wanted to check off tonight. I was going to try to go for dancing on the bar. That was one I probably should have waited for Larison to go with me to accomplish, but I was feeling strangely antsy and like I wanted to just...do something.

I searched for the bars in the area, deciding I should hit one that wasn't one of my regulars, just in case I got kicked out. Searching online for "bars near me that let you dance on them" left me with no ideas, so I just searched articles recommending bars. I might have to try a few places to get this task done.

I dressed in a low-cut top that made my tits look great, and jeans that hugged my ass. Figuring boots would be good for dancing on a bar, I slid into a pair of black heeled ankle boots that weren't that comfortable but made me feel like a badass. A little pinching was nothing if I could knock off another item on my list.

I was nervous as I got out of the car and said goodnight to the driver. I'd had him drop me off near several bars that I could try.

All I had to do was walk in.

* * *

Turned out dancing on a bar was a lot easier said than done. The first two bars I tried gave me bad vibes and had more of a sportsbro vibe than what I was looking for. I needed someplace different.

I really should have brought Larison and Jo with me. What was that place they were always going to? The lesbian place?

Sapph. Wouldn't that be the kind of place that would let a woman dance on a bar? I hoped so, setting off in the right direction, wincing a little as my boots pinched my toes.

I stood outside of Sapph for a few minutes before I got up the courage to walk in. This wasn't the kind of place that I belonged, but I also couldn't dismiss the idea of being in a room full of mostly women. Plus, they were playing some really good

music.

Rolling my shoulders back and marching forward, I presented my ID to the jacked woman on the stool at the door and paid my cover.

Holy crap, this place was jammed with people. There was barely any room to move. My stomach did a little swoop and I almost turned around and went home. I'd never really been in a place like this. Larison had invited me to come out with her before, but I'd never felt comfortable enough.

I looked around, waiting for someone to yell that I was a straight girl who had infiltrated a sacred space and needed to be thrown out onto the sidewalk on my ass.

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No one did. But someone did say my name.

“Delaney?”

I turned around to find a very shocked James standing there and staring at me as if she’d never seen me before.

“James? What are you doing here?”

She raised both eyebrows so high they almost disappeared. “What are you doing here? You know this is a lesbian bar, right?” She pointed up at the sign that said Sapph in neon purple.

“Uh, yeah? I know.”

She blinked at me. “Oh, I’m not. Yeah, I’m straight. I just...” I trailed off, pushed from behind by more people trying to get in and make their way to the bar. James had an empty glass in her hand and I really wished it had been full so I could have taken it from her.

Bumping into James was definitely not part of the plan for tonight.

“Can we—” I motioned to moving away from the main crowd.

James nodded, taking my arm and dragging me after her toward the back of the bar where there was a sort of safer corner near the bathrooms. The music wasn’t as loud, and you could hear yourself think.

“Seriously, what are you doing here?” James asked, setting her empty glass down on a high-top table.

“I...um...” How the hell did I explain my Fuckit List to her?

She studied my face for a minute and then leaned forward. “How about I get you a drink and you can tell me?”

That sounded like a fine idea.

“Yeah, sure.”

Delaney patted my arm as if to tell me to stay where I was and veered through the crowd to the bar, getting the attention of one of the bartenders immediately.

I tried to keep her in my sights, but it wasn’t possible. I lost her and then she seemed to appear out of the low light of the bar, carrying two drinks with her lower lip clamped between her teeth in concentration.

She reached my corner without incident and handed me a drink.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s called a Heartbreaker,” she said, tapping her glass to mine.

“How appropriate,” I said, my tone dry as I took a sip. It was rich and heady and had a hint of pomegranate that was really nice.

“It’s good,” I told her. She nodded and tossed back half of the drink in one gulp.

“So,” she said, once I’d consumed about a third of the drink. “What the hell are you

doing here, Delaney?”

I drank more. I was probably going to need at least two or more of these.

“Do you think they’d let me dance on the bar?” I asked.

“What?”

I repeated what I’d said.

“Dance on the bar? Why?”

Dammit. I wasn’t going to be able to get out of this without explaining the Fuckit List.

“It’s something I’ve always wanted to do. You know? Like that movie.”

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She looked at me as if I was speaking another language. “What movie?”

This was going to require more explaining. I pulled up my phone and showed her a clip of the movie I’d watched when I was a kid with my teenage babysitter that had a scene where the women danced on the bar and even set it on fire.

“They’re definitely not going to let you do that here. There are regulations and so forth,” James said. “Plus, there isn’t room.”

The bar here was pretty narrow and lined with people sitting or leaning over to shout their orders. This wasn’t a dancing kind of bar.

“You could sing karaoke. That’s next Thursday,” she said. I shuddered. That wasn’t something on my list.

“No, that’s okay. I was just...never mind.”

James tilted her head, as if waiting for me to go on.

Instead I finished my drink and slammed the glass down, the ice rattling around. “How about another one?”

Once I was midway through my second drink, I felt good enough to try and explain the Fuckit List.

“So, you know how I was a good girlfriend?” I asked her.

“I mean, I’ll take your word for it,” she said, toying with her drink more than consuming it.

“Well I was. I was a fucking amazing girlfriend. And I’m an amazing daughter. And a model student. A good citizen. All that shit. I’ve always been good. Always done what was right. And what did it get me? A guy who fucking cheated on me.”

James winced. I kept forgetting that the guy who cheated on me was literally her brother.

“No offense.”

“I could spend a lot of time talking shit about my brother, but I’d rather not.” Fair enough.

“Anyway. I always did what was expected, never rebelled. And it didn’t pay off now, did it?” The alcohol was starting to make me feel warm and floaty. It was nice. I couldn’t stop staring at James. She’d worn a cropped T-shirt that showed her belly ring, and low-rise cargo pants that should have looked ridiculous but just looked slouchy and cool on her. She’d left her hair down in messy waves, as if she’d just been running her fingers through it. The combat boots on her feet only added to her look.

She really was different than she was in high school. I don’t know if I would have recognized her if you put her graduation picture next to one taken tonight.

“I’m guessing no is the answer you’re looking for?”

Right. We’d been talking. I’d gotten distracted by staring at her. Back on track. Fuckit List.

“I made a list of all the shit I wanted to do and didn’t do and now I wanna do all of it.” Recklessly, I pulled up the list and slapped my phone into her hand.

Her eyes scanned back and forth, getting wider the longer she read down the list.

“Oh, uhhhh, interesting,” she said once she’d finished looking, immediately grabbing her drink and taking another huge swallow.

“Did you mean to put ‘kiss a girl’ on there?” she asked, her voice suddenly loud as she leaned toward me.

My shoulder bumped into hers, as if I’d been leaning too without being aware of it.

“Oh, yeah. I mean, doesn’t everyone go through that phase when they’re young? I never did any of that. I wish I could drink underage and sneak out of my house, but that doesn’t really work because I’m grown. But I could still kiss a girl for fun, you know? Just to say I’ve done it.”

I was babbling and later I’d blame it on the alcohol.

James gazed at me as if I was a puzzle she could not solve.

“What?” I asked, grabbing my drink and finishing it. Would having a third be a bad idea? Maybe. I was still going to have another one. If I couldn’t dance on the bar, I could at least have a good time while I was here.

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her head.

“Another!” I said, raising my empty glass. “It’s the least you can do because I can’t dance on the bar.”

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James gave me another searching look and then shrugged before going to the bar again. This wasn't working out too badly after all.

* * *

"Whoa, slow down, baby," James said when she handed me my third drink and I tried to take it all down at once.

"Baby?" I asked after I choked on the first sip.

"Sorry. It slipped out." She'd gotten herself a glass of clear liquid with ice that might have been water.

One of my favorite songs came on and I couldn't stand still.

"Oh my god, you have to dance with me," I said, yanking her hand toward where a group of people were dancing and having a great time. I wanted to join them.

James's eyes were wide, and she was like a deer in the headlights as I stood in front of her, putting my hands on her shoulders to show her where to stand.

When the hell was the last time I'd danced like this? Not just alone in my room or something?

I couldn't remember when. And I'd never danced with this much alcohol in my veins. It was fucking awesome.

Tonight was amazing.

I let out a cheer and a few of the women around me joined in. Throwing my hands in the air, I spun in a wobbly circle and didn't fall, but only because James caught me, pulling me close.

"Be careful. You've already had a few."

"I have! I want another one. Can you get me another one?"

She studied my face. "Maybe in a little bit. And you should have some water too."

Pft. Water. That sounded responsible. I didn't want to be responsible. I was always responsible.

"Fuck responsibility!" I yelled.

"Oh Jesus, you're well on your way to being wasted," James said, smiling a little.

"I really like your hair," I yelled over the music. "I've been meaning to tell you, but I didn't want to give you a compliment."

She burst out laughing. "God, I wish I could save this night. Thank you, Delaney. That's very nice to hear."

Another song came on and I started moving with the beat, not caring how I looked. Not caring how anyone saw me. Just moving any way I wanted to.

"Fuck." Somehow, I heard James's little exhalation over the cacophony of other sounds.

“What?” I asked, doing another twirl and managing to stay on my feet. It was a near thing.

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her head and weakly bopping to the beat.

“You gotta put your hips into it, James.” I reached out and grabbed her hips, doing my best to make her sway to the beat.

She completely froze, doing the opposite of what I’d intended.

“Move,” I told her, pushing as hard as I could. Finally, she did what I asked. I looked up to find her closer than I’d realized.

Oh.

Her eyes were pools of darkness and I liked the way they flashed at me. I liked the way her hair fell and the way she was breathing hard, even though she was still barely moving.

“Is this what you wanted?” she asked, her voice dipping low in a way that made goosebumps pop up on my skin. The dance floor was a cramped, sweaty place, but I was struck with a strange chill.

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“Yes?” It sounded like a question.

My hands were still on her hips. Why were my hands still on her hips? I needed to let go of her.

Why wasn't I letting go of her?

James moved closer to me, until there was only a whisper between us. Now I was breathing with difficulty.

What was happening?

“Delaney?” she said, her voice buzzing in that low tone that gave me a second round of goosebumps.

“Yeah?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

She seemed like she was going to say something, but then she changed her mind, stepping back from me and taking hold of my wrists to remove my hands from her hips. Her skin was warm and made me tingle where she touched me.

James was touching me.

“I think I should get you some water,” she said, her voice rough.

“Uh huh.” Brilliant. I was doing a bad job at speaking. Blame the alcohol.

“Go back to the corner and wait for me,” she said, and normally I didn’t like people telling me what to do and would have told her to fuck off in any other circumstance, but I found myself nodding and doing what she asked.

I was also going to blame that on the alcohol.

Chapter Eighteen

James

I’d also had three drinks in a pretty short period of time, but I was much steadier than she was. Something told me Delaney didn’t drink all that often and it was hitting her like a ton of bricks.

It would have been utterly adorable if I wasn’t also worried about her doing herself a serious injury. Even leaving her to get water was risky, but I came back and found her leaning up against the wall with a zoned-out look on her face.

Fuck, she was cute as hell.

“You’re back,” she said, grinning at me. Delaney was smiling. At me.

“Here you go, baby,” I said without thinking as I pressed the water into her hand, making sure she didn’t immediately drop it. Shit. I couldn’t stop calling her “baby” and it was a good thing she was a little too tipsy to notice. She wasn’t drunk enough to forget about tonight, but hopefully those little endearments would be forgotten.

I’d almost died right there on the dance floor when she’d touched my hips. Delaney had never touched me before. And she’d done it to try and get me to dance with her.

This was one of the strangest nights of my life and it wasn’t even over yet.

I made her down most of the water and then she hauled me out to the dance floor again, throwing herself into the music and dancing her ass off. She couldn't stop laughing and it was contagious. The people around her cheered for her and even though some of her moves were utterly ridiculous, she was giving it her all and that was something to admire. I sure did.

Delaney had tried to pull me in, but I wasn't going to dance with her like I would have usually danced with a woman at Sapph. She was just a visitor tonight. Having a good time in a place where men weren't centered. It was probably a heady feeling after being fucked over by Connor. How could he have had this incredible woman for four years and just...banged someone else? If I had Delaney in my bed, I'd never let her leave. I'd bring her all her meals and make sure she had everything she could possibly need. I would have pampered her every moment of every day. Because she deserved it.

It was beautiful to see that she hadn't let the breakup get her down. She was here and she was smiling and dancing and having the time of her life. I was just lucky I got to witness it.

"This is fun," she said through a happy sigh after she'd finished the water. We'd been standing together against the wall and watching the crowd for a little while. A few people had given Delaney a once-over, but I'd put my arm around her to ward anyone off. She hadn't noticed yet. Those drinks had really hit her hard.

Delaney snuggled into me, letting out another sweet little sigh. Oh hell. She was leaning almost completely on me and I could smell her, and I'd had a few drinks myself and this was all happening too fast.

"Do, um, do you want..." I trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

"I would take another drinky drink." Damn, she was adorable. And she smelled

incredible and I wanted to grab her chin and tilt her head up just enough to kiss her. But kissing her tonight was out of the question. If I kissed her (which would be never), I wanted her to remember it was me.

My head had started spinning the second I read “kiss a girl” on her list. She’d brushed it off as something “everyone did” and that it was a standard rite of passage, but was it? Sure, a kiss didn’t determine your sexuality, but what if?

What if?

Those two words pounded in my head like the beat of a song. I couldn't stop thinking about it.

Delaney was straight. Wasn't she?

* * *

It turned out that alcohol also made Delaney sleepy, and her eyes kept fluttering closed. Time to get her home.

"Hey. Let's go home, okay?" I called a car to take both of us to her place. Thanks to dropping her off, I had her address in my phone already.

A very drowsy and warm Delaney let me take her out of the bar and get her into a car. I was going to make sure she was in bed before I left and went home myself.

"Have a good night?" the older woman driving us asked.

"You could say that." She smiled and offered us both mints and water. I declined, but it was sweet of her to offer.

Delaney was a little more lucid when we got to her place.

"Why did we leave?" she asked.

“Because it was time to go,” I told her, helping her up the stairs. “Where are your keys, baby?” There it was again. That word I couldn’t stop saying.

“Here they areeeee,” she sang, dangling them in front of me. “I can do it.”

I watched as she fumbled a few times, but did manage to get the door open, giggling as she walked in and dropped her bag on the floor.

“I wanna dance,” she said, pouting and swinging her hips. Jesus Christ. She was too sexy for her own good. It was a serious problem for me, especially tonight.

“You can dance if you want, but how about we get some more water and aspirin into you?”

She pouted even further. “I gotta pee.”

“Well, I’m not going to help you with that.” She stuck her tongue out at me and stomped to the bathroom. I moved closer to the door, just in case she needed some help.

“Everything okay in there?” I asked when she’d been quiet for a few minutes.

“Shhhh, you’re distracting me,” she said, and I choked back a laugh.

I shut up and looked around. Delaney’s apartment wasn’t what I thought it would be. I’d assumed it would be warm and full of books and little knickknacks and cute things and maybe some plants.

This place was...bland. And dark. The couch was faded navy blue and there was one tan rug and barely anything on the walls. There were books, yes, but not as many as I would have thought.

Connor. This had to be Connor. He would have told her not to buy anything that he thought was too “girly” or not “masculine” enough. His fingerprints were all over this place.

She needed to get some new fucking furniture.

Delaney emerged from the bathroom with a goofy smile on her face.

“All done.”

“Good.” I gave her another glass of water and made her sit on the couch while she drank it and had some aspirin.

She started nodding off again, so I got her up and pushed her toward the bedroom.

“Come with meeeee,” she said. “I’m so tired of being alone.”

Her bedroom was a little more her speed. The bed had a pretty flowered comforter and there were stacks of books everywhere.

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Delaney grabbed my arm at the same time she flopped on the bed, almost yanking me off my feet.

“Stay with me,” she pleaded, her eyes sparkling with tears. “I hate being alone.”

How could I say no to her? I couldn’t.

Between the two of us, we got her shoes and mine off and I tucked her under the covers.

“I’ll stay with you until you fall asleep,” I told her. It wasn’t going to take long.

She yawned so hard her jaw cracked as she nuzzled into her pillow.

“Stay with me,” she muttered again, reaching out to me. I took her hand, cradling it gently with mine. We’d done more touching tonight than we ever had before, and it was messing with my head.

Here I was, laying in Delaney’s bed and holding her hand. This was beyond my wildest dreams. Sure, I was wearing jeans and I was on top of the blankets while she was under them, but I was still in her bed, surrounded by her scent and feeling her warmth beside me.

Glancing over, I saw that she was out. Her fingers loosened from mine. I turned on my side so I could make sure she was okay. Also so I could stare at her a little bit, obviously. Not in a creepy way. In a concerned way.

She had plenty of pillows, so I made myself comfortable. Just for a few minutes. Just a few more...

Chapter Nineteen

Delaney

My head was pounding when I woke up. That was the first thing I realized. The second was that I wasn't alone in my bed.

Carefully, I cracked one eye open to figure out what the hell had happened. The lights were still on, but the sky was still dark-ish outside my window.

Oh, and James St. Clair was sleeping next to me, her head cradled on one of her arms.

The night rushed back at me and I remembered going to Sapph. Drinking (that explained the headache) and dancing. James was there. I'd tried to get her to dance with me. What happened after that was kind of fuzzy, but I could put the pieces together.

Huh. I should be a lot more upset that James was in my bed than I was. It was kind of sweet that she had come in and stayed with me. She must have been tired herself.

Her face was smooth in sleep, some of her hair falling in her face. So carefully, I reached out with a few fingers and moved the strands out of her face. She scrunched up her nose in an adorable way but didn't wake up.

One small issue: I really had to pee. Like, in a "if I don't go soon, I'm risking kidney damage" way. And I had to get past James to get to the bathroom.

There was nothing else to do but wake her.

“James,” I said, touching her shoulder. “James?”

Her eyes fluttered open and she looked surprised before she smiled sleepily at me and my heart did a lazy little somersault. Huh.

“I’m sorry. I have to pee so bad.”

“Yeah,” she said, her voice rough.

I climbed out of bed and went to relieve myself. I took a while washing my hands before going back into my bedroom. James was still in my bed, but she was sitting up and reading the back cover of one of my books.

“Is this any good?” she asked, showing me the cover.

I leaned against the door, taking in this very strange sight. “Yeah, it is. Wanna borrow it?” I was only half-kidding. James didn’t need to know that I never, ever lent my books out. I didn’t trust anyone to take care of them. Books were precious and I didn’t want anything to happen to mine.

“Are you sure?” she asked, turning the book around in her hands.

Now was my time to retract my offer. But she’d brought me home safe and tucked me into bed. “I’m sure.”

James smiled and got to her feet. “Sorry about falling asleep and everything. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Uh huh.”

My head was pounding even worse right now. I needed to take something and lay in bed for a while until it passed. I had to pace myself with drinking from now on. I was not a fan of hangovers.

“You okay?” she asked, approaching me.

“Headache.”

“Let me get you something.” She moved past me to the kitchen to get a glass of water and shake out two pills from the bottle on the counter. Guess she’d gotten acquainted with my kitchen last night.

James came back and gave me the glass of water. I took the pills from her, swallowing them along with a few gulps of water.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

James St. Clair was in my apartment. Had been in my bed.

“I should probably...go.” She pointed toward the door.

“It’s the middle of the night.” There was no need for her to run off now.

“Or the early morning. Depending on your perspective.” She yawned and that made me yawn back.

“You don’t have to go. Just stay until the sun comes up at least.” She’d have to take a car back to her apartment if she went now. “I can drive you. Just wait until the morning and I’ll take you.” That was a nice thing to do. I was good at doing nice things for people. That was my comfort zone.

James seemed like she wanted to argue, but she nodded. “Okay.”

“Glad we got that settled. I’m going back to bed.” I jerked my thumb in the direction of my bedroom.

“I’ll just...” she pointed at the couch.

I shrugged. “We were already sleeping together. I’m not going to kick you out of my bed. I mean, unless you want to sleep on the couch.” I didn’t want to presume. Maybe I wasn’t a fun person to sleep with. Connor hadn’t liked it. He’d done a lot of passing out in the living room, but that was mostly due to his constant gaming.

Her face went violently red. “I’ll just take the couch.”

“Whatever.” I needed to pass out again ASAP.

I should have changed into pajamas, but I was too lazy, so I flopped into bed again and pulled the blankets over me, closing my eyes and shutting out the world.

Well, I tried to shut out the world.

James was in my house. James had been in my bed. The second St. Clair to do so, but not in the same way, obviously. James wasn’t into me like that. She’d just brought me

home and had fallen asleep by accident.

And now she was on my couch. It was a shitty couch. Connor had been angry at the price of furniture, so I'd ended up getting one he was happy with at a steep discount. It wasn't really comfortable, and I'd had to get extra padding so I didn't have back pain when I sat on it for too long.

My apartment was small and quiet enough that I could hear her trying to get comfortable as the couch creaked with every movement.

That was it. I was looking for a new couch starting tomorrow.

"James?" I called out, not wanting to get up again.

There was a long pause.

"Yeah?"

"My bed is much more comfortable than the couch," I called.

"Okay?"

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Come on, did I have to spell it out? “Get your ass in here.”

More creaking until I heard feet padding across the floor and she appeared in my doorway. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, come on. I’m tired.”

She approached the bed cautiously, as if I was going to change my mind.

“Just get in.” I glared at her and then turned onto my side, my back facing her.

James got onto the bed and for a moment she paused before she slid under the blankets with me. My bed wasn’t that big, and she was pretty close. I could smell her scent, which was dark and almost masculine? More like cologne than perfume and it was really nice. Connor had always worn that awful body spray stuff that had made me gag when I’d accidentally walk through a cloud of it.

James settled in beside me and I let out a sigh, doing my best to relax and fall into sleep again.

It took a long time.

* * *

The sun was up the next time my eyes opened and James was still in bed with me. But this time my back was pressed right up against her and she’d thrown an arm over me. We were cuddling.

Oh. Maybe I should be more shocked, but she was warm, and she smelled good, and I hadn't been held by someone like this for a long fucking time and it was nice. Really, really nice.

James exhaled and her breath puffed against the back of my neck, but she slept on quietly. No snoring. That was nice too.

My god, I was touch deprived. All I wanted to do was wiggle backwards a little bit and press my body even closer to hers. Her arm on top of me was just the right pressure.

The only reason Connor ever cuddled with me was to press his dick into my back as a prelude to sex. James and I were cuddling for entirely different reasons and I was loving this.

Before I could stop myself, I let out a little contented sound and felt James slide into wakefulness beside me.

She inhaled sharply, freezing with her arm still around me.

"Sorry." James retracted the limb and moved away from me and all I wanted to do was grab her and tell her to come back. To resume holding me for the rest of the day. We could stop for food breaks. Maybe she could throw in some hair touching.

Ugh. I was a mess. Begging James to hold me was a new low.

"It's okay," I said, rolling onto my back and looking up at the ceiling.

"It's morning. Late morning," she said, and I could feel her gaze on my face.

"Yeah. Give me a few minutes and I'll drive you home."

She sat up. “You don’t have to. I can call for a ride.”

I finally looked at her. Hair all haphazard, a crease on her cheek. She looked beautiful for someone who had passed out in my bed twice.

“I’ll drive you. Maybe... I can make you breakfast first? To thank you for bringing me home. It’s the least I can do.” That seemed like a fair trade. A meal and a ride.

Her mouth popped open as if she wanted to argue, but I rolled my eyes.

“Don’t make a big thing out of it.” I got out of bed and cringed at my outfit. I needed a shower and to brush my teeth, but I needed to get James home first.

“Can I use your bathroom?” she asked.

“Of course. You don’t have to ask.” I ran my hand through my hair and winced. Definitely needed to do a deep condition soon.

James hit the bathroom while I puttered around the kitchen, assembling some breakfast items. I could go really easy and just toss some frozen waffles on a plate, but I wanted to do something more, so I pulled out eggs, sausage, sourdough, an avocado, and started making some coffee. My headache was gone, but I was absolutely starving.

“I’m going to throw some eggs on avocado toast with some sausage. Is that okay?” I asked when she came out of the bathroom.

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“Yeah, that’s fine. I’m good with whatever.” She stood there with her shoulders up near her ears as if she didn’t know what to do with herself.

“You can grab some cups out of the cabinet.” I pointed to where my coffee cups lived.

She took two out, laughing at the funny pictures and sayings on them.

Once the coffee had brewed, she poured two cups and then grabbed creamer from the fridge, adding it to her cup.

“Me too, please.” She dumped just enough in and handed me the cup as I babysat the eggs and sausage.

I had her cut the avocado and mash it with a little bit of lemon juice, olive oil, and salt and pepper before toasting the bread.

It was nice to cook with someone. Connor never had. I’d had to be responsible for nearly all of his meals if I wanted to eat real food. He would have lived on pizza rolls and beer and microwaved chicken nuggets if I’d let him.

James added a dash of hot sauce to her toast and I did the same.

Since I didn’t have a dining table, we both sat on the couch. James winced.

“You would have wrecked your back. That’s the side that Connor sat on.” She shifted in her seat, making a face.

“It’s...very worn in.”

“Yeah. I’m gonna get a new couch.” We were mostly silent as we ate. The food revived me, and I was feeling pretty great even after my wild night. I hadn’t gotten to cross anything off my list though, which was a bummer.

“What’s that face?” James asked and I must have been frowning.

“Nothing. I was just determined to cross off one of the things from my list last night and I didn’t. It’s fine.”

You win some, you lose some.

“Sorry about the bar. We can probably find you a place to dance on it.” That made me think of the grungy bar that I’d gotten wasted at the night that Connor had sent me the dick pic. They’d probably let me. Should have gone there last night, but then I wouldn’t have ended up at Sapph with James.

“It was a cool place. Sapph. Do you go there a lot?” I asked.

“Not a lot, but it’s one of my favorite places in the city. It’s nice to have somewhere to go where I feel comfortable.” That made sense.

I was silent for a moment while I tried to decide how to ask my next question, and if it was a question I was even allowed to ask.

“When did you...” I trailed off, hoping that she got the gist.

“When did I become a lesbian?” She raised one eyebrow and set her empty plate on the coffee table, taking her coffee with both hands.

“I wasn’t going to ask it like that!”

She grinned at me to show she was teasing.

“I’m messing with you. Um, it was in college. Remember how I told you the girl I had a crush on that picked my roommate? It was her. She was my lesbian awakening.” James wiggled her fingers.

“Is that how it works?”

She snorted. “I don’t know how it works for other people. I feel like...there was always this voice in the back of my head, but it was so quiet. It was speaking, but I couldn’t translate. Does that make sense? And then I was finally away from my shitty family, saw this girl at orientation and my entire world changed. I’ve never been hit by lightning, but that’s what it felt like. One minute I was absolutely straight and the next minute I wondered what the hell I’d been thinking all those years. It was like something shattered.”

I guess I’d been through something similar, with the whole Connor thing. The life I had planned for myself had vanished the second I caught him fucking someone else. All the dreams of a wedding and kids someday and buying a house and holidays. Just like that.

But would I even have had those things with Connor? Whenever I’d asked him about marriage, he told me that it was “just a piece of paper” and we could just be together without “all that.”

“Wow,” I said to James. “That sounds like a lot. Did you have anyone to talk to about it?”

She shook her head. “Not really. I ended up panicking and searching online until I

found the campus queer organization and showed up at their door the next morning. I guess I wasn't the first person to freak out and end up there." She told me how nice and welcoming they'd been, and how she'd broke down crying because suddenly her entire life made sense.

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“I understood myself for what felt like the first time. There had been this...this terrible feeling in my chest for so long and it was just gone. And I knew what it was like to be free.”

Her words were so beautiful I almost wanted to cry.

She laughed. “And then I had to make up for lost time, so I was a giant slut for a while. It was awesome.”

A startled laugh burst out of me.

“And then I calmed down a little bit and had a girlfriend for about a year.”

I didn’t know why she was telling me everything, but I found that I wanted to know. Wanted to hear about this James that I hadn’t met. So different from the girl I’d gone to school with.

“What happened?”

James blew out a breath. “She got into grad school and I couldn’t do the long-distance thing and I wasn’t going to go with her. We just weren’t right for each other. It was a very mutual breakup, if you can believe that. And then I graduated and did the slutty thing again, but I got sick of it pretty fast. And then I moved back here.”

She’d lived a lot of life since I’d seen her last. I’d had no idea.

“Does your family know?” Connor had never said anything, but he was shockingly

self-centered so that wasn't a surprise.

"I mean, they know in the sense that I came out to them, but it didn't really take. Like they didn't want it to be true, so they just pretend that it isn't." Ugh. That was horrible. I had no doubt if I ever came out to my parents (not that I would), they would probably throw me a party with a rainbow cake.

James really deserved better parents. And definitely a better sibling.

"I'm sorry."

She finished her coffee and stood up. "Not your fault." James picked up all the dishes and set them next to the sink.

"I should probably get out of your hair. You're visiting your parents today, right?" Shit, I was. I'd completely forgotten. They were expecting me in a few hours for lunch, and I still needed to pick up the food and some flowers.

For some reason I didn't want to drive her home. It was nice having her here. Having another human in my apartment again. She'd done her duty by getting me home and she probably had other things to do today that didn't involve saving me from my loneliness, so I couldn't keep her here.

"Yeah, just let me change and we can go." I still had my bar outfit on from last night.

"Sure."

I threw on a pair of joggers and one of the T-shirts I'd designed before shoving my feet into my sneakers and grabbing my keys.

"I like your shirt," James said, pointing at it.

“Oh, thanks.”

“I have the same one.” She grinned at me as we left my apartment and I locked the door behind me.

“Wait, you do?”

The stairs were wide enough that we could walk down side-by-side.

“I ordered a bunch of things from Between the Sheets.”

She had? “When?”

She told me it was a few weeks ago.

“Larison must have packed the order and didn’t even notice.”

James nodded. “I was kind of hoping you might have gotten it and seen my name. That was when I was still trying to apologize to you.”

I made a face. “Please don’t start that again. I’d like to move past it if we can.”

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She smiled and my chest did this little disconcerting fluttering thing that confused me.

We were quiet as we reached my car and I unlocked the passenger side for her. Good thing my car was clean and there wasn't a pile of books sitting in the passenger seat like there usually was. There were some in the trunk, but she couldn't see those. I also had a few boxes of shirts in the backseat.

James slid into the passenger seat and her scent overwhelmed me. How did she still smell so good? I really wanted to know what it was.

"Now I get to see where you live," I told her.

She exhaled shakily and then gave me her address. It was on the edge of the city in one of the more historical areas. Just knowing that part of the city I was already jealous. Sure, she wasn't as close to the downtown, but she had lots of cool places and art galleries and other interesting places nearby.

James was quiet for the ride, so I turned on the radio, searching until I found a good station. The ride wasn't going to be that far, but with normal traffic it was going to take longer.

The GPS directed me to park in front of a lovely Victorian. No fair.

"What a gorgeous building," I couldn't stop myself from saying.

"Would you, I mean, do you want to see it?" Hell yeah I did. I loved getting a chance

to look in other people's homes. It gave me ideas for my own and I definitely needed ideas. Connor had always held me back from doing any major decorating. He'd even tried to force me to get rid of some of my books. His idea of decorating was...nothing. Literally nothing. Blank walls, no rugs on the floor. Frat house chic.

"Yeah, I'd like to see it." Maybe I could also sneak into her bathroom and find out what her perfume or cologne was.

"Okay," James said, getting out of the car and waiting for me to join her.

We looked silly, with her still in her outfit from last night and me in my joggers and T-shirt. Her building had a shiny elevator that we rode up to the second floor. James let me into an apartment toward the front of the building and I almost gasped at all the natural light that spilled in through the massive windows.

I was officially jealous.

Everything inside was a mix of old and new. Stone counters, stainless appliances, but the floors looked like they might be restored originals.

"Damn," I couldn't stop myself from saying.

James had decorated with lots of neutrals and soft colors. It was much more feminine than I expected.

"I'm just going to, um, change. You can look around if you want." She edged toward a door which I assumed held her bedroom.

Of course I made a beeline for her bookshelves that took up space on either side of the windows.

She also had a gorgeous white desk facing the window with her laptop, printer, and a number of files on it. James's workstation was more organized than I would have expected too.

Her bookshelves were arranged by color in a rainbow and I couldn't get over the visual. I wondered how she found anything.

I was so lost in the books that I didn't hear her come out of the bedroom.

"See anything you like?" she asked, and I jumped about a mile into the air.

"Fuck, you scared me. How do you walk so silently?" I asked, turning around to face her, my heart still trying to recover.

James nodded down at the fuzzy socks on her feet. She'd changed into a pair of baggy flannel shorts and a faded T-shirt. She looked slouchy and cozy and I remembered that only a few hours ago, she'd been wrapped around me.

"How do you find anything with them organized by color?" I asked.

"These are all the books that I've read. My TBR is in my bedroom and organized in order of how I'm going to read them, but I'm also a mood reader too." Interesting. I was pretty strict about how I did my reading, but sometimes there was a new release that you just had to put everything else aside for.

"Do you want anything?" she asked.

"Um, water maybe?" We'd just had breakfast, but I was feeling a little dehydrated for some reason.

James brought me a glass of water and it reminded me of her bringing me one early

this morning.

“Thanks for taking care of me last night. Again.”

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“Oh, you’re welcome. It seemed like the right thing to do. Maybe next time you go out, you should go with someone. Just to be safe.”

I hadn’t felt like I was in danger or anything at Sapph, but I guess she did kind of have a point about not going out alone.

“Ugh, fine,” I said, rolling my eyes. It was a mistake to come up here. Why was I here? I didn’t need to see her apartment that bad.

“Delaney?” James asked as I tried to come up with an excuse to leave.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“There was...there was something on your list that I think I can help with.” Oh shit. I’d shown her my list last night. I’d told myself I wasn’t going to show it to anyone, and I’d had a few drinks and handed my phone over to James.

“Yeah, what was that?” I quickly ran through the options. Gambling? Dancing on the bar? Sneaking into the movies?

James paused and gazed at my face so intensely that I almost wanted to take a step back from her, but instead I stepped closer. She took the empty glass and set it on her desk.

What was happening?

“This,” she said, stroking my cheek and leaning down so slowly that I had a lot of

time to understand where this was going. Had a lot of time to stop her.

Why wasn't I stopping her? My list didn't say "kiss James"! It said "kiss a girl." Any girl. Anyone other than her. I could go outside and find one right now. I could. I was going to.

Right now.

But I wasn't moving. Well, I was. I was pressing up on my toes just the tiniest bit to move closer to her mouth. To her. It wasn't a conscious thought, a decision that I'd made. Hey, I'm going to kiss James St. Clair right now. What?!

I hadn't thought it, but I sure did it. One minute I was flipping out and the next I was kissing James.

I hadn't kissed a whole lot of people, but I would have told you before this moment that kissing was fine. Pleasant, even. It was nice in the way that ice cream on a hot day was nice. In a way that sliding into fresh sheets was nice. Very normal, average nice.

Kissing James wasn't nice at all.

It was terrible and wonderful and awful and incredible. It was so many things at once that my brain overloaded and shut down until all I could do was feel.

The heat of her skin. Her touch, gentle but insistent on my cheek. The way she smelled, intensified by our close contact. The shape of her plush, warm lips on mine. The pressure of them against mine. Firm, but not too firm.

Just right. The Goldilocks of kisses, you could say.

And then it was over before I could even realize it was happening and James was pushing away from me. My back hit the bookshelves.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry.” Her hand flew to her mouth, as if to hide it from me.

“Uhhhhh,” I let out. Words. Form some words. Any words. “What the fuck was that?”

Not the best words. Find better ones.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated, her face draining of color. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Why?” I swallowed, my throat unbearably dry. “Why did you do that?”

She shook her head, still looking as horrified as if she’d killed someone.

“You wanted to cross it off your list and I took advantage. I’m sorry.” She kept saying it and I was starting to get annoyed. I’d had enough apologies from this woman for a lifetime already.

“Stop,” I said, putting my hand up. “Just...give me a second.”

I touched my lips, which were the same. Huh. I guess kissing someone the same gender as you didn’t result in any immediate physiological changes.

Still. My skin was hot and tight and tingling with energy.

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“Can you—” I started to say and then stopped. No. That was a bad idea.

“I’m sorry,” I said. Guess the apologizing was contagious.

“What are you sorry for?” she asked, finally uncovering her mouth. Hers looked the same as well. No changes for either of us.

“I don’t know.”

The two of us just stood there in her apartment in bewildered silence until I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Can I ask you something?” The words came out before I was ready.

“What is it?” Her tone was soft, and I had to close my eyes for a minute. I opened them again and said the words that could change everything.

“The list said ‘kiss a girl’ so I have to be the one doing the kiss. And you just kissed me, so it doesn’t count. Because of the rules.”

Her eyebrows rose. “There are rules? I didn’t see those.”

I nodded like a bobble head. “Yeah, there are rules. Like with the skinny-dipping. I had to actually swim for it to count.”

“Oh. Okay.” She licked her lips and I watched the path of her tongue.

Was I really doing this? I mean, I'd already done it once. What was one more kiss? I could delete it from my list since I hadn't gotten a chance to dance on a bar last night.

"Sooooo, can I kiss you?" I asked. Words that I never thought I would say, least of all to James St. Clair.

My world had turned upside down in the past few weeks. Why not go with it?

"Yes," she said, taking a shaking step toward me again. This time I was the one who reached for her. Tilting her face down. I'd never put so much time and concentration into a kiss before. Not even my first one, which had happened in sixth grade at a birthday party and was over so fast it was like it hadn't even happened.

I was putting so much care into it because of the Fuckit List. It had to be documented. Like you have to get verified for the World Records book.

"Okay, this is for the list," I said, only a whisper away from her mouth.

She was shaking just a little bit. Tremors went through her and I almost asked if she was okay, but I wanted to get this kiss over with so I could be done with it.

I gave her a second to say no, but she didn't, so I gently pressed my lips to hers. My plan had been to count to five and stop.

Instead, I kissed her. And kept kissing her. I couldn't help it! Her lips were really fucking soft and she tasted so damn good and I could smell her so much better and I think I might have lost my mind. It wasn't until she made a little whimpering sound at the same time as I'd run my tongue along her lower lip that a tiny bit of sanity returned to me and I yanked myself away from her.

"Oh my god, I'm sorry!" More apologies. Endless apologies between us.

“What the hell was that?”

Chapter Twenty

James

Had I created today in my imagination? Only a few hours ago I'd thought there was absolutely no way in hell that I would be kissing Delaney and now we'd kissed. Twice.

And she'd been the one who asked! Because of some sort of weird bucket list thing, but still.

I couldn't get ahead of myself. This kiss was just a thing on her list to check off. It didn't mean anything. Right?

Now Delaney looked a little horrified, stumbling away from me and turning her back to me. I heard a sniffing sound and said her name.

“Delaney?”

She faced me and I saw that she was crying. Oh shit.

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“What’s wrong?” I asked, reaching out to her and then yanking my arms back. She was upset and definitely didn’t want me to touch her right now.

“I don’t know why I’m crying?” she said, raising her hands in the air in bewilderment. “What is happening to me?”

Gently, like I was approaching a baby deer, I walked toward her and then ushered her to the couch, getting her to sit down. I grabbed a box of tissues and passed them to her.

She sniffled and wiped her face and I tried not to throw up. A kiss could change a hell of a lot, but this seemed like an extreme reaction.

“I’m fine,” she said through gulps of air. “I really am.”

She didn’t seem fine, but I waited until her tears had slowed.

“Can I get you anything?” I asked. Whatever she wanted right now she could have it.

Delaney shook her head. “No, I’m okay.”

She wiped her face and blew her nose. “Oh my god, I don’t even know what that was. Give me a second.” Getting up, she went to my bathroom and shut the door.

Okayyyyy, what the hell was happening?

I waited for Delaney to come out, trying to understand the events of the last few

minutes. And it had only been a few minutes.

Delaney came back out with her face a little damp, as if she'd washed it. Her face was still red, and her eyes were puffy.

"I'm sorry," she repeated.

"What are you sorry for?" I asked, wanting to go to her so badly that I clamped my hands on the edge of the couch to stop myself.

She shrugged, letting out a little humorless laugh. "I don't even know."

Things were awkward after that. Neither of us could figure out what to say.

Finally, I asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

She pressed her lips together and shook her head.

Okay, that was a no.

She didn't seem to want to leave, though, and I thought about what she'd said last night. That she was lonely. I knew she spent a lot of time with her best friend and boss, but she'd been living with Connor, and him moving out had been abrupt after the cheating. It made sense that she would miss having someone around, even if the last someone had been my asshole brother.

It was fine with me if she wanted to hang out.

"Are you supposed to go see your parents?" I asked her, and her eyes went wide.

"Oh shit. I am. But I don't know if I can. Fuck."

She grabbed her phone to check the time.

“You could tell them that something came up and you needed to help a friend.”

Her eyes met mine and she seemed to relax just a little. “I can’t lie to them.”

“It’s not really a lie. You did help me by giving me a ride.”

I was excellent at coming up for excuses not to see your family. I had so many I could probably write a book of them.

Delaney bit her lip.

“Your parents will understand. Just say you’ll go later, or that you’ll make it up to them.”

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I remembered her parents from when we'd been in school. Her mom worked for the town, so she literally knew everyone, and her dad was a teacher, so he knew everyone that she didn't know. They'd come to every single parents' night and concert and event for Delaney and they were always so proud of her.

My parents had never shown up unless it was a meeting where they could get up and talk or yell or fight with each other. Or my mom would want to join a group and be in charge and make everyone else miserable. She'd practically demolished the Boosters in less than a month. They wanted to ban her, but then my dad threw a fit even though he hated her. My parents were endlessly embarrassing.

Delaney typed out a message and then waited. A few responses came in.

"They're concerned but I told them that I'd come for dinner next week, as well as on the weekend. It really has been too long since I've seen them." I could hear the guilt in her voice.

"I thought you weren't going to be good anymore?" I asked her.

She rolled her eyes. "That wasn't what I meant."

I couldn't help but lean closer to her. "What did you mean?"

She looked away from me. "I can't believe I showed you my Fuckit List."

I almost choked. "Yourwhat?"

“My Fuckit List. You saw it last night.” Was that what she was calling it? I had to hold back a laugh.

“It was quite a list.” One item in particular had completely disrupted our day.

Delaney scrolled through her list and then set her phone down.

“Do you need anything?” I asked.

“No. I mean... No.”

What was that hesitation?

“It’s okay. You can ask for things, Delaney.” She clenched her hands on her knees.

“It’s nothing.”

She wasn’t going to open up to me anymore right now. I really needed a moment away from her to think, but I wasn’t going to get it right now.

“It’s a nice day out. What do you think about taking a walk?” Sitting here in the apartment was too much for me. Made me think about the kisses we had shared and how the second time she had been about to shove her tongue in my mouth and I’d almost blacked out in shock.

“Yeah.” Delaney nodded. “Let’s do that.”

* * *

It was one of those unusually hot early fall days that still felt like summer, so we headed toward the pier.

“Did you want to get anything?” I asked her as we strolled past the stalls that would soon be closed down for the season.

“I wouldn’t say no to some ice cream.”

We got in line to order ice cream and I kept glancing at her. I had kissed Delaney Budreau. She had kissed me. It made me want to climb on one of the picnic tables and announce it to everyone.

I mean, it was never going to happen again, so I was going to have to live the rest of my life on those two short kisses. Not enough. Not nearly enough.

I swore I could still taste her if I licked my lips.

Delaney ordered a chocolate peanut butter cone, and I got cherry vanilla. We walked together toward the end of the pier as we ate our ice cream together.

“Feeling better?” I asked.

“Ice cream always seems to help,” she responded. “I still feel shitty about not going to see my parents, but I couldn’t talk to them right now. They’d ask me all kinds of questions that I don’t think I have the answers to.”

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We paused, leaning against the railing and looking out at the bay and the wind-whipped waves. Various sea birds floated on top of the waves, bobbing like toys in a bathtub.

“You know, you can talk to me,” I said, bumping my shoulder against Delaney’s as she stared off into the distance.

“Can I?” she asked, turning and facing me.

“Of course.”

She studied me for what felt like hours. As if she was looking for something. I wanted her to find it more than anything else.

“Your ice cream is melting,” I said as it dripped down her arm. She didn’t seem to have noticed.

I watched as she lifted her arm and licked it clean. I had to close my eyes and do my best not to think lewd thoughts about her tongue. The same tongue that had almost been in my mouth.

She had almost put her tongue in my mouth.

Was I allowed to read into that? Because I really, desperately wanted to read into it.

Delaney and I finished our ice cream and kept walking around, walking into random shops and strolling around. She appeared completely lost in thought, even when I

tried to draw her into conversation. Eventually I gave up.

We decided to have lunch at a local tapas place that was expensive but delicious.

Things were off between us, but nothing I did seemed to make a difference. I guess I'd just have to wait it out.

Delaney asked our server to split the check and I didn't know what that meant either.

Between last night and today, I was just a giant ball of confusion, but so was Delaney. So many things sat unsaid between us. Guess we were going to ignore them and hope they went away.

Once we finished lunch, I expected Delaney to tell me that she was going home, but she walked back to my apartment and up the stairs behind me. I shut the door and faced her.

"Can we have a conversation?" I asked. Had I given her enough time?

Delaney let out a loud breath and flopped on the couch. "I guess." She didn't sound happy.

I sat down beside her, making sure there was a little distance between us.

"What happened earlier? With the kiss?" Oh no, I was saying the "k" word.

Delaney flinched at the mention of the kiss.

"I don't know," she mumbled, picking at her nails.

"Delaney," I said, my voice firm. "What was that?"

“I don’t know!” She surged to her feet and paced to the window, staring out for a second and then whirling to face me.

“I don’t fucking know, James! All I know is... I think I want to try it again.” Her face was so red, she could have been confused for a stop sign.

Hold on. I needed to hear her say that again so I could confirm I wasn’t imagining things.

“Repeat that last part,” I said, my hands shaking as I braced them on the couch. If she gave me the word, I was going to her. If she wanted me to kiss her, then I was going to fucking kiss her.

She bit her lip. “I want to try kissing you again.”

Our eyes met and then I was off the couch and striding toward her as fast as my legs would carry me.

“Right now?” I asked, stopping right in front of her. I needed to make sure. I had to be sure this was what she wanted. She had to take the lead.

“Yes,” she said, and I swore I could feel her trembling.

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“Are you scared?” I asked, leaning closer. Delaney didn’t pull away. I kept my eyes on hers, searching those deep golden-brown pools for the answers I was seeking.

“Yes.”

“Of me?”

She nodded. “But not scared enough that I don’t want to do it.”

There had never been a kiss in history this consequential or monumental. Or maybe I was being too self-centered, but it certainly felt that way in this moment.

“You can kiss me, Delaney.”

She nodded once. And then her lips were on mine again. Soft as the brush of a butterfly wing at first. So gentle, as if she was worried I’d shatter. I held back, forcing myself not to attack her the way I desperately ached to.

This was all new to her and I had to be so careful. I wanted this to be a safe place for her to explore.

Delaney took what appeared to be a bracing inhale before her eyes closed and she met my lips again.

Oh hell. It was just as electric as the last two times. Kissing Delaney obliterated any other kiss I’d had before. I couldn’t even remember them. Had I ever kissed anyone before? Not likethis.

She took her time, as if she wanted to experience every moment and evaluate it before moving on. I'd kiss her until my lips fell off.

It took monumental effort not to answer her back when she started moving her mouth against mine, but then I heard her make a little frustrated sound and she pulled back.

My eyes snapped open to find a disgruntled Delaney looking at me.

"You don't have to kiss me if you don't want to."

"I want to," I blurted out. "I absolutely want to."

She huffed out a breath. "Then kiss me back. It's weird when you don't."

Had to give the lady what she wanted.

This time when Delaney pressed her lips to mine, I immediately responded, matching her pace and pushing just a little. She answered back and we fell into a wordless conversation between the two of us, discovering our kiss together.

It was heady and beautiful and delicious and deep. I didn't know if I'd ever kissed someone this thoroughly. Not even in college when one of my favorite hobbies had been making out.

I reached for her and pulled her so she was pressed up against me and I could relish the feel of her body. Fuck, I loved the way she felt. She was perfect to hold.

Delaney's hands were hesitant. One started out on my face and then sunk into my hair and the other gripped my shoulder as if she was holding on for dear life, her nails digging into my skin. I hoped she left marks.

We kissed and kissed, and I learned the taste of her mouth and I could have counted her teeth and she could have done the same. Our tongues became best friends and danced together like they'd always known each other.

My lips started to grow numb before I was willing to put any kind of space between us.

Delaney's eyes fluttered open and she had a dazed look on her face which I bet was mirrored by the one on mine.

"Wow," I breathed.

"Yeah," she said, licking her lips as if chasing the taste of me. Fuck.

"I know I only put kissing a girl on my list, but..." she trailed off, her face flushing even more.

"What is it, baby?" I asked. There it was again. That word I couldn't hold back around her.

I stroked some of her hair back from her face.

"I, um..."

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“What do you want? You can have it.” If she was going to ask me for more, I’d give it. I’d give her anything.

“I’m not... I mean, I don’t...”

She couldn’t get the words out so maybe I was going to need to say them for her.

“Do you want to go to my bedroom and try some things?”

Her nod was almost instantaneous.

Okay. We were doing this. I was letting Delaney experiment with me.

“Before we do anything,” I told her, “we’re going to talk about everything we do. And if either of us wants to stop at any time, we can stop. No questions asked. Understood?” She had to know that this only worked if we were both into it.

“Yeah, got it,” she said, her pupils blown, and her cheeks flushed. I’d been turned on since last night, but my desire had reached heights that I’d never known before. I could barely walk as we both crossed the short distance to my bedroom. I was grateful that I made my bed every day so it wasn’t a mess when we walked in. Sure, there were a few clothes on the floor and other things out of place, but I kicked them into a corner and turned to face her.

Delaney hovered in the doorway.

“Everything good?” I asked, stepping closer to the bed.

She had her eyes on it and she looked up at me. “Yeah. I’m a little nervous.”

I didn’t want to bring up the fact that the last person she’d probably had sex with was my brother. He didn’t get to have any part of this. I banished him from my mind.

“Do you want to take off your clothes? Or keep them on?”

She opened her mouth to respond and then pulled her shirt off. She only had a bra on underneath. It was almost the color of her skin.

“Me?” I asked, fiddling with the hem of my shirt. She nodded. I’d never undressed so slowly before. Usually it was a race to get as naked as possible.

Delaney pushed her joggers off and then she was standing in front of me in just her underwear. I followed, peeling my shorts off.

“Can you—” she pointed at the bed. I hoped she would get more comfortable.

“Do you want me to lay on the bed?” I asked.

She nodded, her eyes racing up and down my body as if she didn’t know what part of me to look at.

I rested on my back and held my hand out to her. “Come here.”

She stepped toward me and took my hand but stayed standing beside the bed.

Her eyes were locked on my belly ring. I flicked it with my fingers. “Do you like that?”

She nodded. “I thought of getting one, but I never did.” I wondered if it was part of

her “good girl” thing. So many people had teased her about being a rule follower and a suck up and all kinds of nasty words. I couldn’t take those words back, but I could give her a positive experience here in this room. With me.

“You can touch me, Delaney. I’d love it if you touched me.” I was going to die if she didn’t touch me in the next ten seconds.

I moved over on the bed and Delaney sat next to me, her legs folded under her.

I’d seen her body in the Pilates outfit she’d worn, but I’d done my best not to stare at her. Now I got to look all I wanted to. She was softly rounded, and I loved that I got to see all those little silvery stretch marks and the softness of her belly. She was incredible.

Tentatively she reached out and stroked a finger across my stomach and I did my best to hold still. Her touch felt like a burn, searing me with fire.

“You’re beautiful,” she said softly.

“You are,” I told her. “You’re gorgeous, Delaney. Sometimes I can barely look at you.” Her eyes met mine as if she didn’t believe me.

“It’s true. I’m not lying to you.” There would only be truth in this room between the two of us for as long as we were here together.

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“Thank you,” she said and then she touched me more boldly. She traced my bra.

“I wish my boobs were like yours,” she said, almost wistful. Mine were definitely smaller, and that was a blessing. If they were more prominent, I would have hated them.

“Yours are perfect. Just the right amount.” I’d kept my hands to myself so far, but I reached out and brushed my finger on the underside of one of her breasts over her bra.

“Ohhhh,” she said, closing her eyes. “I think...I think I want you to touch me too.”

I told her to lay on her side next to me and I turned to face her.

“I’ll take mine off first,” I said, undoing the clasp of my bra in the back and then pulling it off.

Delaney stared at my naked breasts and then closed her eyes as she took off her own bra.

Her breasts were full and all I wanted to do was fill my hands with them. To stroke and tease and taste her nipples until they were hard and stiff.

She traced one finger across my upper chest, but her eyes were zeroed in on my nipples, which were hard enough to cut glass. Like they were reaching for her and desperate for her touch.

“Can I touch you?” she asked.

“Of course you can. I want you to.” Reaching for her hand, I folded her fingers around my breast and we both gasped at the contact.

“Yessss,” hissed through my teeth. Then her thumb strummed my nipple and I let out a whimper. I wasn’t normally this incredibly sensitive, but I wanted her so much.

Delaney squeezed my nipple and I watched as she did the same to herself.

“What are you doing?” I asked, almost laughing.

“Just feeling the difference. I’ve only ever felt my own.” That did make me laugh.

“You’re so fucking cute, baby.”

Her eyes went wide at the endearment, but she didn’t draw attention to it.

“Yours are pretty. And really soft.” Now she had me in both hands and I could barely control the sounds coming out of my mouth. God, she felt so good. Her caress became more confident the longer she touched me and soon she was pinching and pulling at my nipples and I was so close to coming already.

“Let me—” I gasped. “Let me make you feel good.”

I didn’t reach for her until she met my eyes and nodded, her hands dropping from my breasts.

“Mmmm,” she said as I did the same to her, giving her the softest touches and then increasing the intensity.

“Can you lay on your back?” I asked. She blinked at me and then did so.

“I’d like to taste you, Delaney. I’ve been thinking about tasting you for so long.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Her eyes were bright, and she’d started panting. I made sure I kept watching for cues that she wanted to stop or that she didn’t like something as I leaned down and flicked my tongue against her nipple. A moan fell from her lips and I took that as a good sign to pull the entire thing into my mouth and give it a nice long pull. Delaney’s fingers flew into my hair just the way I’d hoped they would and her legs curled up.

“Oh fuck, that feels so good. Oh god, oh fuck.”

I would have smiled if my mouth wasn’t busy doing something else. Eager to please her, I kept going, learning what she liked. Adding my teeth had her almost losing her mind. I had to stop myself from shoving my fingers into her bottoms to find out how wet she was. I allowed myself a brief look and there was a definite wet spot. Fuck yes. I’d made that.

If she let me, I was going to taste her there too.

I slowed my movements and looked into her face.

She had the dreamiest smile, as if she’d never experienced something like this before. Maybe she hadn’t.

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“Do you want to stop?” I asked, even though I knew the answer to the question.

“No! Don’t stop!”

“Okay, I won’t stop,” I said, smirking at her. She glared at me and I laughed.

“You want to take your bottoms off? Or I can take mine off and you can check me out. Do a little comparison.”

She snorted and rolled her eyes, but she agreed.

I yanked mine off and tossed them across the bed.

“Here I am,” I said, feeling a little silly.

Delaney surprised me by sitting up and then moving so she was perched between my legs, with me on my back. Okay then. She really did want to get a look.

“I’m a fan of the bush,” I said, gesturing to mine. I kept things trimmed and neat, but I had never been into the full wax look on myself.

She looked from my pussy to my face and back as if she didn’t know what to focus on. Her cheeks were pink, and she worried her bottom lip with her teeth.

Taking a risk, I widened my legs, giving her the full show.

I knew I was wet, and that she could see it. I wanted her to.

“God, having you look at me is so hot, baby,” I said. Could you come from a look? If she kept staring, then I just might.

Delaney seemed perplexed with what to do next. She was the cutest. Almost naked and flummoxed by pussy.

“Come here,” I told her gently, reaching for her. Maybe we needed to slow things down a little bit and let her catch up. We’d done a lot already for her first time with a woman.

My first sexual experience had involved no nudity and just a lot of clumsy fingering in a literal closet. Ah, good times.

Carefully, Delaney lay on top of me and I moaned at the contact of her skin with mine. Oh yeah, that was perfect.

“Look at you, gorgeous,” I said, pushing her hair away. I should have had us both put our hair up before we started doing anything, but I hadn’t been thinking.

“Kiss me,” I told her, and then her mouth was on mine again, kissing me deeply as she started to rub her body against mine, and the friction was going to drive me out of my mind.

“That’s it,” I told her as she undulated and started to move faster.

“I want to touch you,” she said into my mouth.

“You can touch me anywhere you want. Literally anywhere. I’ve got lube if we need it.” I literally carried travel bottles of lube in my bag. I’d learned so much in my slut era.

“Uh huh,” she said.

Delaney fumbled the kiss as she stroked her hand down my belly, stopping to play with my belly piercing before she brushed the top of my pussy. She pet my bush briefly and I almost came just from that.

I moaned into her mouth as she touched her fingers against me, as if she was discovering something for the first time.

“You’re so soft,” she said, her voice a little wrecked as she found my lips and traced the shape of my clit. I knew I was wet and coating her fingers and I had to stop myself from begging her to put her fingers in her mouth and suck them off while I watched. This was her exploration and I didn’t want to push too far too fast.

My legs jumped when she made direct contact with my clit.

“Sorry,” she said, pulling back.

“It’s okay. I like soft touches, but I also like it if you rub in a circle, and if you wanna slap it, then I’m not going to stop you.” She could hook my clit up to a car battery if she wanted to see what would happen. I didn’t even care.

“Oh,” she said and then went back to kissing me but let out a frustrated sound a moment later. “I can’t see what I’m doing.”

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Before I could say another word, she pushed herself up, then scooted between my legs, shoving them further apart.

My eyes flew wide as she hovered with her face incredibly close to my pussy. She nodded in satisfaction.

“That’s better.”

Whowasthis woman?

“Do you need me to do anything?” I asked, feeling a little left out so I stroked my hand in her hair, gathering some of it in my hands to hold it out of the way.

I’d never had someone study me so intently before. It was arousing and a little unnerving.

“No, I’ve got this,” she said, and gone was the trembling and unsure woman who’d barely been able to ask for anything.

She was determined, that concentration at home on her face.

Delaney tilted her head to the side, as if trying to get a good angle.

She suddenly grinned at me. “It’s pretty. You’re pretty.”

I couldn’t stop the somewhat hysterical laugh that bubbled out from inside me. “Thank you, Delaney. That’s one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me.”

No one had ever complimented my pussy in quite that way before.

“I expected it to be... I don’t know.” She propped herself up on her elbows and frowned before turning on her side, resting her head on the inside of one of my thighs. “There. That’s better.”

This was not how I thought this was going to go, but I wouldn’t change a thing.

“I like the way you feel,” she said, stroking me with one finger, just barely dipping inside me.

“Mmmm, I like the way you feel when you do that.”

Those were the last coherent words I said for a while as she slowly and methodically tried out every kind of touch on me. Soft and slow and then with more pressure and then she started to enter me with one finger.

“You’re so warm.”

I couldn’t answer.

I kept trying to chase her hand, to pull her deeper, but she wasn’t letting me. This woman was going to torture me to death.

“Let’s see if we can find...is that it?”

“Holy fuck!” She’d hooked her finger inside me and pressed on my G-spot. The pressure eased and then she stroked it and I thought I was going to lose my mind.

“More fingers,” I gasped. I needed more of her hand inside me. And then ideally some clit action and I was ready to blow.

“Got it,” Delaney said, adding a second finger and experimenting with touch and pressure and thrust.

“Fuck yes, fuck yes,” I chanted.

Delaney was saying something softly to herself, but I couldn’t hear her. I was too busy trying not to beg her and turn into a total mess. I was quickly losing that battle.

“Clit, clit, clit,” I gasped.

She shifted and then her thumb rubbed my clit in clumsy circles until she got the hang of it and then it was like she’d been born to do this. As if her hand had been formed and created to fit and pleasure my body.

“I’m gonna come,” I warned her. I was going to climax and I was probably going to get the bed wet. It didn’t happen every time, but it did happen when I was very, very horny. Like tonight. I’d been wanting and wanting her and now I had her inside me and with me and—

“I’m coming, ohhhh fuck!”

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Delaney pummeled my G-spot and caressed my clit and I was launched into an orgasm that felt like it was going to kill me. It was too much, far too much and I couldn't handle it. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't feel anything but this.

It grew and grew until finally fading and bringing me back down into reality and my bed. Which was definitely wet.

Every limb trembled with the aftermath as I did my best to recall how to breathe.

Delaney popped her head up and I saw that her face had moisture on it.

"Sorry," I gasped. Oh god. She'd been in the splash zone.

She smiled and wiped her face with her hand. "It's okay. I thought that was a myth."

Okay, she wasn't upset. She wasn't running away or glaring at me in disgust.

"It's not," I said, trying to collect my scrambled thoughts.

She lifted her fingers, studying them. As if she was looking for something.

"How do you feel?" I asked her.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

I smiled and pushed my sweaty hair back. "I think you got a good idea of how I feel. I was pretty clear about it."

Her eyebrows furrowed. “I don’t think... I mean, I’m not gay. A lesbian. Whatever.”

I couldn’t stop myself from snorting. “Delaney, you literally just had your fingers inside me.”

She huffed and looked at the ceiling. “I know that. I’m just... I don’t know what any of this means, James. What does this mean?”

I reached for her and she let me pull her until she laid on my chest, her head resting right on one of my breasts. I liked having her there. Felt like she fit.

“This doesn’t have to mean anything. I was just teasing you. Tomorrow you could decide that this was fun but not for you. There’s no pressure to do anything. This is a decision-free zone tonight.” I gestured to indicate my bed. “This is a safe place.”

She looked up at me and nodded, but she still had too many thoughts swirling in her eyes.

“Okay?” I asked.

“Okay.”

Now that we got that out of the way...

“Would you like to see if I can make you come?” I asked.

Her eyes lit up and she smiled. “Yes. Please.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Delaney

What the fuck was this night? I didn't know, but now I was on my back and James had removed my bottoms (which were embarrassingly wet, I might add). Far too many thoughts and questions trampled through my brain and I needed them to shut the fuck up so I could enjoy this.

Having an orgasm had always been a monumental challenge for me. It was rare when it happened when I was by myself, and even rarer to happen with a partner. I kind of gave up on having them when I decided I was going to marry Connor. I mean, the orgasm gap was real, and I wasn't the only woman who wasn't coming. I told myself I didn't need it. Sex wasn't just about getting off.

Any time I'd tried to give Connor any kind of direction, it hadn't gone well. So I'd accepted the rare masturbatory orgasm as my fate and I'd been fine with it.

Now here I was in bed with James and I wanted to beg her to get me off. Beg her to fuck me hard with her fingers and stroke my clit at the same time. Too bad I didn't have my trusty vibe with me. It might have been fun to add, but I was curious to see if James could make it happen with just her hands.

"I want to kiss you," James whined and climbed up toward me, smiling with so much joy that I swear my heart stopped beating. She was sweaty and messy and glorious. I'd never seen anyone look this beautiful.

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James kissed me at the same time as she played with one of my nipples and I gasped in surprise, but she just let out a throaty laugh, dancing her fingers down my body and stroking the insides of my thighs to make me open them. It was almost impossible to focus on kissing her when I knew where her hand was going.

It was already too much sensation. I had never, ever felt like this and there wasn't time to analyze that now. I didn't have the brain capacity.

James's tongue stroked into my mouth and I was completely lost. She was so damn good at this. Her fingers were sure and skilled as she stroked the sides of my clit, thrust inside me, and did a whole bunch of other things that had me gasping and whimpering and moaning.

It wasn't a conscious decision to thrust my hips against her hand, but it was happening and the heel of her hand was hammering at my clit and she had discovered my G-spot and was doing all kinds of things to it as if in retaliation for what I'd done to hers. I was going to need her to give me a rundown of all her tricks after this was over. Everything I had done was based on what I liked for myself, but she knew so much more than I did. Had so much more pussy-pleasing experience.

There was only so much you could learn from porn, which Connor had loved to watch. It had always been very specific, and I'd always watched it to please him. The kind he liked was so fake to me.

"You're thinking too much, baby," James said, and I loved the way that word sounded when she said it. I loved the way it was directed at me.

She pressed hard against my clit, making me whimper before she thrust her fingers hard and fast in and out of me and I knew that I was going to come. I was absolutely going to come.

“I’m close, I’m close,” I told her, and I could feel her smiling into my mouth. She was pleased.

“Come on. Be a good girl and let me see you come.” The combination of the words and the efforts of her hand detonated an orgasm that stole my breath and had stars exploding in my eyelids like fireworks. The climax grabbed me by the throat and didn’t let go as I surrendered to it. Nothing had ever felt like this before.

Nothing.

When my eyes opened at last and I saw James smiling down at me, I had to kiss her again with tingling lips. My skin was ultra-sensitive as James traced gentle patterns on my hips and belly.

“Well?” she asked.

“Well what?” Thinking was still somewhat of a challenge right now.

“What did you think?” she asked, raising her eyebrows.

“I don’t know what to say.” That was as honest an answer as I could give her.

She laughed softly and then leaned down to kiss my forehead. “You’re still totally out of it, baby.”

“I like it when you call me that,” I managed to say.

She seemed surprised. “You want me to call you baby?”

“Just for tonight,” I clarified. “Just for now.”

James nodded. “Right. For tonight.”

She lay beside me on her side, and I could feel her gazing at me.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked her.

“I’m thinking that you’re so fucking beautiful, Delaney. And that I feel honored you let me see you like this.”

I turned my head and my heart did that thing again where it stopped for a second.

“Thank you,” I said, because that seemed like the right response.

She grinned even wider. “You’re more than welcome, baby.”

* * *

Her bed was still wet, so we got up and I helped her change the blankets.

“I guess I should...go?” I asked.

“You don’t have to. I mean, I was going to take a shower. You could come with me. If you want?” If you’d told me this caring, gentle woman was the same girl who had made me cry in the locker room all those years before, I would have said you had the wrong woman. Yet here I was, hopping into James’s shower and fighting over who got to stand under the water.

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“You’ve been there forever, I’m cold!” I said, shivering next to her.

“I have not!” she argued.

We wrestled for a second, both of us laughing until James shoved me under the spray and grabbed her body wash and a washcloth.

“I’ll do your back.”

She pushed my hair over my shoulder and started gently scrubbing my skin with the soap and the cloth. I closed my eyes and luxuriated in her touch.

“Mmmmm,” I said.

Warm lips caressed my ear. “I like hearing you make that sound.”

What we’d done together had been wonderful. A revelation. But this? This was amazing too.

“Just keep touching me, James,” I said. “Please keep touching me.” I heard the desperate note in my voice, but did it matter at this point? The woman had literally finger-fucked me until I came. Most of my shame had kind of gone out the window. I was enjoying myself too much.

There would be time later to analyze this experience and obsess over the implications, but right now, all I was going to do was let myself have this pleasure. The point of my Fuckit List was not to do shit just to do it, but to let myself be free. Of

expectations, of the rules I set for myself, of rules I didn't want to follow anymore.

I turned to face James and took the washcloth from her. "My turn." I wanted to do some touching too.

* * *

It was early evening when we left the bathroom, me still wrapped in a towel.

"You can borrow something. I don't think I'd mind seeing you in my clothes," James said, pulling a few things from her dresser. On the top were various bottles and containers, and I drifted over, searching for her signature scent. I tested a few bottles until I found it, inhaling deeply. It wasn't as nice from the bottle as it was when it mingled with her natural smell.

James presented me with a T-shirt, shorts, and a soft pair of bottoms. Why was thinking about wearing her underwear arousing?

Since she'd already seen me naked for a while, I dropped the towel and slid into her clothes. They were so soft and smelled like her. While I was getting dressed, she had too, in a very similar outfit and held a brush.

"Want me to work on your hair?"

I opened my mouth to tell her that I could brush my own hair, thank you very much, but then I shut it.

"That would be nice, thank you." James had me sit on the bed as she perched on her knees behind me. She moved the brush through my damp hair with so much care.

"Your hair is gorgeous, but it always has been." I'd been blonder in my youth, so as

my hair had gotten darker, I'd needed chemical help to lighten it to the shade I preferred.

"When did you dye yours like that?" I asked.

James snorted. "I'll show you my hair journey in a minute. Let's just say I went through a spectrum before doing this."

She'd done so much with her college experience and I'd done a whole lot of nothing. Had barely even dated. My main focus had been on my studies and getting the best grades I could and majoring in business with the intention of someday getting an MBA or perhaps going to law school. Not because I wanted to, but because I knew my parents would have been so proud.

My grades had always been stellar, and I'd made the dean's list and graduated with honors.

Most of it had been a miserable experience, honestly. I could admit that now. Would it have killed me to dye my hair or spend a few nights doing something silly with my friends?

I couldn't help but think of all the time I'd wasted.

"All done," James said, still running her fingers through my hair.

I glanced at her over my shoulder. "Do you want me to do yours?"

Her grin was soft and sweet. "Yes please."

We swapped places and I brushed out her hair, enjoying the task more than I should. I took longer than I needed to because I wanted to keep touching her.

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“Beautiful,” I told her, and she turned around with a smile on her face and her phone in her hand.

“I’m going to show you these, but you’re not allowed to make fun of me.”

How bad had her hair really been? I was dying to know now.

“I don’t think I can make that promise,” I told her. If it was really bad, I was going to mock her.

James huffed and turned the phone so I could see it as I wiggled closer. “Fine, but don’t be too mean.”

“We’ll see,” I told her, and she smacked me on the arm.

* * *

She’d dyed her hair some truly appalling colors it turned out. We went through them all and I gave my critique until we both were laughing so hard we couldn’t breathe.

“Are you telling me you didn’t dye your hair the color of neon vomit?” she asked me, and I gagged.

“No, I did not.” That led to me finding my pictures from college and showing her. I hadn’t had much of a social media presence back then because I thought it was a waste of time.

I didn't think about going home. I was fully in the moment because in this moment I didn't have to think about anything else. Not what all of this meant, not how I'd never come that hard in my life, not about the changing feelings I had for James.

Nope. Not touching any of that. Set down the can opener, do not touch that container of worms. Walk away.

"Hey," James said, touching my arm. I'd mentally drifted off again.

"Yeah?" I asked, staring at her. She was pretty even with her face bare and her hair half-damp and hanging on her shoulders.

"I'm really glad you stayed today."

The way she looked at me made all sorts of big, scary, squishy things move in the vicinity of my rib cage and I wasn't going to wonder about that either. Instead I smiled and nodded. "Me too."

* * *

I had no intention of leaving until I absolutely had to, and James appeared happy to have me stay. A few hours after the shower, I found myself sitting on her counter while she cooked for me.

I'd offered to help, but she told me that she could handle it, so I watched as she chopped peppers and onions, seared chicken, warmed tortillas, and made a fajita seasoning with items from her spice rack. Add a few shakes of hot sauce and a squeeze of lime and we had a platter of gorgeous fajitas.

We ate on her couch, which was much more comfortable than mine.

“Where did you get your couch?” I asked her.

She grabbed her phone and mine vibrated momentarily with a notification. “Sent you the link. I had to get a new one because my old apartment was so small, I couldn’t fit a full-size one and only had this little dinky loveseat. I sold it to a college student who’d been very happy to get it for a decent price.”

“Nice. I really need to change my apartment. It’s...I need a change.” We were veering very close to topics I absolutely didn’t want to discuss. Her brother being the main one.

Fuck. James was Connor’s sister.

I shoved a fajita in my mouth and pushed all of that aside. I’d have time to flip out about it later.

Chapter Twenty-Two

James

Delaney kept zoning out and I knew she was probably panicking about today. Things had changed for her, there was no way of getting around that.

“Hey,” I asked her after we loaded the dishwasher, “did you want to talk about anything?”

She washed her hands for a long time and shook her head as she dried them.

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“You can. If you want. I just wanted you to know that I’m here. And if you want to go back to being friends and never talk about today again, that’s okay.” I wouldn’t forget about it, but I wouldn’t bring it up unless she wanted to. Above all else, I didn’t want her to have any regrets about today.

She studied my face and nodded again. “Thanks. I’m not ready to...anyway.” She threw the paper towel she’d used to dry her hands in my trash can. “I should probably get home.”

Fuck, I didn’t want her to leave. A brief image of handcuffing her to my bed danced through my mind. I’d only do that if she asked.

Delaney had never given me any indication that she might be a little kinky, and I wasn’t going to ask. Not unless she brought it up. But if she wanted to discuss it, I’d be more than happy to.

“I’m not kicking you out. Hell, you can stay as long as you want.” It was a serious offer.

Delaney rolled her eyes. “No, I need to go home. I skipped out on going to my parents and I also had a million things to do when I got home from seeing them.” I needed to do a bunch of cleaning that I’d put off so I could get naked with her. No regrets. I could do chores anytime.

“Got it. Well.” She gathered up her clothes and I gave her one of my reusable grocery bags to take them home with her.

“I’ll wash this and give it back to you,” she said, plucking at the hem of the shirt she wore.

“Keep it,” I told her. She could have it. I loved the idea of her wearing my clothes. Why was that such a turn-on?

“I’ll bring it back,” she said, stepping closer to me. Was our time over now? Would I ever get to kiss her again? Was today the only time like this I’d have with her?

I was doing my best not to panic about that. I’d gotten the tiniest taste of her and all I wanted was more.

“One more kiss,” she whispered, as if to herself. She popped up on her toes and joined her mouth with mine, immediately kissing me deeply. She wasn’t shy about it at all. As if she wanted to make this last one a good one. The best one. My tongue twisted with hers in a bittersweet way and I knew that something between us had ended when she finally pulled away.

I couldn’t cry. I wasn’t going to let her see me cry. Not until after she left.

“Let me know when you get home safe,” I told her. “And...just don’t ghost me. Please. Even if it’s just to reach out and tell me that you need time.”

I couldn’t bear it if she stopped talking to me altogether. Not when I’d finally gotten her back in my life.

Delaney gazed into my eyes and I thought she might kiss me again.

“I’ll see you...when I see you?” she said and walked to the door.

Fuck. Letting her go was awful. I hated it.

“See you, baby.” I had to get it in one more time.

Her smile was soft as she opened my door and left. The sound of it shutting behind her was a sound of finality.

Shit.

* * *

She sent me a message only a few minutes later that she'd gotten home.

I'm ordering my new couch right now. Do you think you could come over and help me put it together when it gets here?

I shouldn't have been as excited as I was to get that message. Hell yes I could help her with her couch.

Sure. I put mine together so I know all the tricks.

She was still talking to me.

Thanks.

I tried not to stay glued to my phone the rest of the night, so I cleaned up the house and did laundry and dishes. Part of me didn't want to wash the blankets that we'd messed up together, but it would have been gross not to.

I got a message and I ran for my phone, hoping it was from Delaney.

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It was from Connor.

Can u come get me?

For half a second, I wondered if he was in jail, but then remembered that he wouldn't have been able to send a text message if he was. And he would have called our dad first because he could only remember one or two phone numbers.

Where are you? I typed out the response with my teeth clenched. It didn't matter, but I wanted to make sure he wasn't in danger. I might not like him very much, but he was my brother and I didn't want anything terrible to happen to him.

New Hamshire

How the hell had he managed to graduate from high school? I knew my dad must have pulled some strings and put pressure on the teachers to pass him.

What the hell are you doing in New Hampshire?

He called me.

"Can you just come get me?" he whined. "I'm hungry."

"You told me you're in New Hampshire, but where? Are you sitting on the side of the highway? Are you safe somewhere?" He was so bad at details.

"I'm, uh, sitting in front of a Walmart." Okay, that was good.

“And how did you get there?”

“Ugh, can you stop it with the third degree and just come here?”

I had no idea what had resulted in him ending up at a New Hampshire Walmart, but I wasn't going to be bailing him out. He could call someone else.

“Call Mom or Dad. I'm busy.” I hung up.

Immediately he blew up my phone until I turned off the notifications. He'd stop eventually, and then I'd get the calls from my parents for being a shitty sister and the cycle would begin again.

Letting out a disgusted sound, I started folding my laundry and thinking about today with Delaney. A complete surprise, but I wouldn't have changed a single moment of it. She'd been shy, and then eager and adorable and open. We could do so much more together. Just in case, I wanted to check if she'd been recently tested in case she decided she wanted to explore more.

At some point, we'd have to discuss the fact that she had very recently been dating my brother. It was going to be weird, that was for sure.

I checked my phone about an hour later and saw that I had a bunch of angry voicemails that I deleted and a lot of pissy texts. Well fuck him. He could figure his shit out himself.

And I had another message from Delaney.

I can't stop thinking about you. Is that bad?

No, there was absolutely nothing bad about that. Instead of typing out a message, I

video called her.

She answered right away. As if she'd been waiting for me.

"Hey," I said as her face lit up the screen. She was in bed, her hair draped on her pillow.

I got comfortable on the couch.

"Hey," she responded. "I thought you might want some space or something, but...I guess I didn't want to give you space."

"Me neither. I almost asked you if you wanted to stay another night. You could, you know. Or I could come there." I'd walk if I had to. It wasn't that far.

She sighed. "No, I need to have some space to think. But I can think and still talk to you about other things." Good. I needed to keep talking to her.

"Did you tell Millie that I said hello?" I asked her.

She snorted. "Yeah, I talk to my air fryer now. I guess I'm that person."

“Nothing wrong with that.”

Silence fell between us.

“I don’t know what to think,” she whispered.

“About what?” I asked, even though I knew. She’d said she didn’t want to talk about this, but it seemed almost impossible to avoid.

“About me. About what we did together. About how it made me feel. About what that means for who I am and what I know about myself.” Her words were so quiet I could barely hear her.

“I was really scared. When I first came out. Because I knew my parents wouldn’t be supportive, but also because I wasn’t sure that was who I wanted to be. Why did I have to be defined by my sexuality? So many other people get to just live their lives and not even think about it once. Why did I have to have this struggle and stress? It isn’t always an easy thing, Delaney. To question what you’ve believed about yourself for your entire life. To see a different future for yourself.”

She fiddled with her blanket. “I almost want to ask my parents, but I don’t know what to say and I don’t want to say the wrong thing. What if I change my mind? What if I’m wrong?”

Her eyes were big and bright when she looked up at me. I wished I was there with her to hold her in my arms, but this was the best I could do.

“There’s no wrong way to be. If you change your label or change your mind, then so what? It’s not anyone’s business but yours. And if you don’t want to wake up tomorrow and hop on the lesbian float in the Pride parade, you don’t have to. You get to decide who you are. No one else. Because this is your life and you’re the one who gets to live it.”

I gave her the words I wish I’d heard for myself back when it had been two a.m. and I’d been freaking out in the glow of my laptop as I searched online to figure out if I was a lesbian or not.

Delaney started to cry and, fuck, I wanted to be there with her.

“Do you need me to come over?” I asked. “I can be there in like ten minutes or less.”

She sniffed. “No. I’m okay. I really am. Thank you for talking to me. And for today. I wouldn’t have trusted or wanted that with anyone else.”

“Oh, baby,” I said.

She gave me a little smile and that was good to see. “I shouldn’t like the way you call me baby so much. Connor...he never called me that. He called me ‘babe’ and I always hated it.” Good thing I hadn’t used that.

“What’s the difference?” I asked.

She thought about that. “I’m not sure. It just is different.”

“He called me earlier. He was stuck at a Walmart in New Hampshire.” Delaney burst out laughing just as I hoped she would.

“What the hell was he doing there?”

I shook my head slowly. “I have no idea, but I sure as fuck wasn’t going to get him. He blew up my phone for a while and now I’m just waiting for the two-pronged assault of my parents telling me what an awful sister I am.”

“I’m sorry. You really shouldn’t have to deal with that. If you ever want to borrow my parents, I know they’d love to see you.” I had no doubt about that. Delaney’s parents were just good people, through and through.

“Maybe. Wouldn’t they assume that something was happening between us?”

Delaney shrugged one shoulder. “They might.”

“Would you be okay with that?”

She let out a long breath. “I don’t know yet. I have the feeling I’m going to be up really late tonight.” She rubbed her forehead with frustration.

“Do you want me to stay on the phone with you?”

“No, you don’t have to do that. But maybe we can just keep the call going for a little while.”

“Sure.”

We talked for a little longer and then I started getting ready for bed, setting the phone nearby so she’d know I hadn’t gone anywhere.

“Can I tell you a secret?” she asked as I got into bed.

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“Please. I love secrets.” I wiggled my eyebrows and pulled my blankets up, propping my phone on them.

“I sprayed on some of your cologne before I left because I really like the way it smells.” I hadn’t even noticed, but holy shit, that was cute.

“So you like the way I smell?” I asked, smirking. Her cheeks went red.

“Don’t make it weird, James.”

“You’re the one who admitted to stealing my smell.”

She made an offended sound. “If you were here, I’d throw a pillow at you.”

“I wish you were here,” I admitted.

She sighed. “Yeah, I kinda wish that too. So you could distract me and I wouldn’t have to do this whole fucking identity crisis.”

She let out a little laugh that was mostly without humor.

“Can you reschedule the identity crisis for another time?” It wasn’t a great joke.

Her lips formed a sad smile. “Not really. And the fact that I am having a crisis means that there’s a crisis to have. Right?”

I didn’t follow. “What?”

She huffed. “The fact that I’m even questioning my sexuality means that it probably isn’t what I always assumed it was. Like, people who are straight don’t sit around thinking about kissing people of the same gender all the time.”

I wanted to be careful with this. “Some do, I’m sure.”

“Right, but they would probably like ‘no, definitely not’ and that would be that. You don’t continue to question if you’re already settled in who you are.” She had a point there.

Delaney let out a frustrated noise. “Why is this happening now? Why couldn’t I have figured this shit out years ago? Like, what the fuck?” I knew exactly how she was feeling.

“I don’t have an answer for you, but I get it. I get all of this.”

She was quiet for a while and then she started to cry.

“I think... I don’t think I’m straight.”

I nodded and waited.

“Being with you just...it made sense. For the first time. I wasn’t forcing myself. It felt right instead of wrong.” Holy shit. I couldn’t believe I was getting to see her have this revelation in real time.

“I understand. The feeling right instead of wrong.” Fuck, did I understand.

“Does this mean I can go to Sapph now and they won’t kick me out?” She laughed.

“They would never kick you out, but now you can feel comfortable there. It’s your

space. It's a place for people like us."

"People like us," she repeated. "I don't think I'm ready for the word yet. To say it or to even think it. I know a word shouldn't be that scary, but I need some time to adjust."

I nodded. "That's fine. Your label should fit you, and not for you to fit the label, if that makes sense." For a brief period of time, I'd assumed that I was bisexual because I was still so attached with the idea that while I might have feelings for women, I could still date and be with men. That lasted for as long as it took for me to realize that I had exactly zero romantic and sexual attraction to men. Ever. Delaney might go through a similar journey, especially since she'd been in a relationship with a man for four years. Letting that go was a lot.

"God, can we talk about something else. Anything else."

I thought for a moment. "I read that romance with the cucumber and the tomato."

She gasped in shock. "You did not!"

"I did."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Delaney

James stayed up talking to me for a long time, but eventually I had to let her go. We both had work tomorrow and both of us didn't need to stay up all night.

Speaking with James had helped, but there was still too much. This was all too much. It had happened so fast, but I guess that's what it had been like for her too. One minute and everything had changed.

If I was truly honest with myself, signs had been there. A hell of a lot of signs had involved James, actually. The strange feelings around her, the way I was kind of obsessed with everything she did. In high school I'd told myself I was ignoring her, but then every time I saw her, my stomach did flips.

And then there were all the things I hadn't felt with the guys I'd been with. There had only been three. One in high school (brief), another in college (even briefer), and then there was Connor, who I bumped into the summer I came home from college and he'd given me attention for the first time and...that was it. I hitched my wagon to his star and decided that we were going to be together forever.

Connor had never made my heart race. I'd never felt the kind of desire for him the way I did when I looked at James. No matter what I did, sex with him had always been a chore. Never natural. Never something I had truly wanted.

I'd convinced myself I was in love with Connor. That was clear to me now and it

made my stomach churn. I ran to the bathroom but managed to stop myself from emptying my stomach into the toilet. I popped an anti-nausea pill and went back to bed. The sun would be up in a few hours and it was going to be a miserable day at work. I'd thought about calling out. Larison would be fine with it. I almost never took sick days as it was. She'd had to send me home more than a few times when I'd stubbornly showed up.

No, I could get through this. I could put on a happy face and pretend everything was fine and I hadn't had a complete and total sexuality crisis this weekend.

In fact, Larison would be a good person to talk about it with. She wouldn't judge and she was queer herself. She'd also been with men. Yeah, going to work was the best idea. If I stayed home, I was only going to spiral and get myself all worked up.

I needed to talk to my best friend.

* * *

"Oh my god, are you okay?" Larison asked when I showed up the next morning and took off the sunglasses I'd been using to cover my dark circles.

I sipped at my second cup of coffee and gave her a smile. "I'm fine."

She took my arm and dragged me to sit in a chair in her tiny office.

"Are you okay? Do you need to go home?"

I shook my head and hid a yawn behind my hand. "No, I want to be here. I just didn't get a lot of sleep last night."

Her face was filled with nothing but concern and I wondered if we had enough time

for me to tell her what I needed to tell her before we opened.

“I’m... Well... I don’t... I might not be straight.” There, the words were out.

Larison sat there, totally frozen for what felt like a lifetime. Did I break her?

Then she sat up abruptly. “You know, now that you say that, it makes sense.”

It did?

“What are you talking about?”

She glanced at the clock. “We do not have enough time to get into this right now. But I need to do this.” Her arms pulled me into a hug.

“We’ll talk today, I promise. And thank you for trusting me.”

I hugged her back. “Thanks. It’s kind of a long story.”

Her eyes were sparkling when she pulled back. “I need to hear all about it.”

* * *

Safe to say that Larison was floored when I told her about my little experimentation with James. I didn’t give her all the gory details of course, but she got the idea.

“And it felt so natural. I didn’t have to talk myself into it. I didn’t have to keep focusing or stop myself from thinking about other things. It was...easy? I don’t know. It felt like the way sex should be.”

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The shop was quiet, and we were pretending to work on one of the table displays.

“I know what you mean. When it’s right, it’s right, and when it’s wrong, it feels really wrong.” That was it.

“And I kept going through my past and remembering all these times that I knew something was off or that I should feel something and didn’t. All the times I literally convinced myself that I was happy or in love or turned on. No wonder I used to be so tired.” So much was clear now. As if I’d emerged from a fog that had obscured everything up until now.

“Don’t feel like you need to commit to a label. Give yourself some more time. And you might want to have another night with James. Just to double check.” She winked at me and I smacked her lightly with one of the books.

“Do you mind if I tell Jo? She might also have some advice.” One of the upsides with being friends with so many queer women was that if you decided you were queer yourself, they were there to help.

“No, go ahead. But I still have a lot to figure out. Telling my parents and if I want to post online and... I don’t know. There’s a lot to think about.” Right now, it was all so overwhelming. Part of me had some guilt about not going to my parents first, but I really wanted to be sure I had something to tell them at all. And in my mind, in the scenario where I told them, James was with me. It would be so much easier to have her by my side.

She’d go with me, I knew that for sure.

“James has truly been amazing. I couldn’t have felt better with anyone else.”

“I love that for you, my friend. That’s exactly what I’ve wanted for you. I caught the way she looked at you when she came for book club.” She wiggled her eyebrows.

“Shut up.” I tried to hit her with another book, and she darted away. The bell above the door rang and we gave each other a look and put on our professional smiles.

“Welcome to Between the Sheets. Let us know if you need help finding anything,” Larison said.

“Oh, thank you,” the woman said, clutching the handle of her bag on her shoulder and looking around as if the books were going to bite her.

“We’ve got ourselves a newbie,” Larison said in my ear. Sometimes we would get a customer who had never been into a bookstore like ours, but their curiosity had made them walk through the door. I’d helped more than one woman who had escaped from a strict upbringing give herself permission to read books that she’d been taught were dangerous, pornographic, and evil. Those were the best days.

“Um, actually? My friend told me about this book, and it’s got dragons in it, I think?” We knew exactly which title she wanted, and Larison directed her to the fantasy shelf and gave her the book, along with a few more suggestions. She ended up with three books and a smile on her face before she left.

“That’s why I do this,” Larison said after she left.

I hugged her. “Agreed.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

James

It was nearly impossible not to message Delaney all day to check on her. She gave me an update during her morning break that she'd spoken with Larison and it had gone well.

I kept stopping myself from asking if I was going to see her anytime soon. Like tonight. I'd literally seen her naked yesterday and needed to see her again, but I didn't know if it was too much to ask.

Soooo I was wondering. What do you think about coming over to my place tonight? I feel like I can't make a true decision about my sexuality without another try. Don't you think?

I agreed. I really, really did.

I'm happy to be your experimental buddy. As long as you want, as much as you want. I had a physical about six months ago and everything was negative.

There, now we could talk about that part of things.

I actually went right after Connor because I wouldn't put it past him to give me something and not tell me. You know, since he was fine with fucking other people. I'm set too.

God, my brother really was the worst. I hated that I shared even an ounce of DNA with him. It wasn't fair that you couldn't choose your family. I never would have picked him or my parents if I'd had any other options.

He's the worst.

I know.

I didn't want to keep talking about my brother.

Do you want me to pick something up for dinner? Then we don't have to cook. More time to do...other things.

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If I had my way, we would do nothing but “other things” all the time.

Sounds perfect to me. I’m fine with whatever you want to pick.

We negotiated for a little while and settled on pizza from one of the best local places.

I was going to see Delaney tonight. And there would be food and nudity involved. Did life get better than that?

I almost wished I could go back in time and tell my awkward teenage self that one day she would get to see that girl she had all those confusing thoughts about naked. That someday things wouldn’t always be so awful.

I finished my last few tasks of the day right around the time when Delaney would be closing the bookshop. I put in the pizza order to be delivered in a half hour to Delaney’s house and changed out of my work clothes. It took too long to pick what to wear as I tore through my closet and drawers before selecting a pair of ripped black jeans and a purple shirt that was cropped just enough to allow my belly ring to peek out. Delaney had been riveted by my piercing and I wanted to show it off for her.

This time I put my hair up and took off most of the makeup I’d put on for my workday.

Too excited to wait any longer to see her, I got in my car and drove to Delaney’s apartment, parking a little ways down the street. Just as I was about to ask her if she was back yet, I got a message.

I'm home if you want to come over whenever.

Not wanting to appear too eager, I waited five endless minutes before I answered that I was outside.

She met me at the front door to let me in with a smile on her face and still wearing her work clothes.

"Hi," she said, holding the door open.

I kissed her hello.

She laughed as I showed her with my mouth how much I'd missed her since I had seen her.

Once I had kissed her until my knees were weak, I leaned back. "Hi."

Her eyes blinked open. "That was a hell of a greeting."

"Should I apologize?"

She grinned and grabbed my shirt to drag me inside. "Hell no."

"The pizza will be here in a few minutes," I said in between kisses as she pushed me up against her door and pulled at my clothes.

"Shit, I'm hungry," she said, but didn't stop devouring me.

"We can't eat and kiss at the same time," I pointed out and she made a frustrated sound and pushed away from me, putting her hands up between us.

I laughed, still a little unsteady on my feet. “Food first.”

She nodded. “Right. Food first. Um, how was your day?”

We sat on her awful couch and discussed how our Mondays had gone while we waited for the food to arrive.

“I’m going to change really quick,” she told me.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask if I could watch, but that would lead to us completely forgetting about the pizza and she needed to eat. Sometimes food had to take precedence over sex.

I sat on my hands on the couch until Delaney emerged from her bedroom in one of her T-shirts and a pair of soft green shorts, her hair up in a messy bun.

“You’re beautiful,” I breathed, and she snorted.

“You didn’t always think that.”

Fuck. My past misdeeds always came to bite me in the ass.

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She flopped on the couch next to me, drawing her feet up.

“No, I did. I know it’s hard to believe that, but I did. I always had these really conflicting feelings about you. I’m not using that as an excuse, but it’s the truth. I always got these stomach flutters when I looked at you.”

Delaney adjusted her bun. “I think those are called butterflies, James.”

“I didn’t know that at the time. Didn’t know what they meant because weren’t you just supposed to feel those for boys?” I didn’t know then what I knew now.

A notification went off on my phone and I saw the pizza had arrived.

“I’ll go get it,” I told her, getting up and slipping my shoes back on.

We ate together on the couch, and I couldn’t wait until her new one arrived so I could help her put it together and have a better place to make out.

“Can you show me how your machine works?” I asked, nodding at her T-shirt press that took up a huge corner of the room.

“Sure. Not tonight, but sometime. I’ll even let you make one.”

That would be cool. “I’m excited.”

She rolled her eyes. “Dork.”

Once we finished eating, I put the leftovers in the fridge and turned around to find Delaney gazing at me with hunger in her eyes.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about you today. And about things we could be doing together. Things I want to try.” My back pressed up against the fridge, making a few of her magnets fall on the floor. Whatever. They weren’t important.

I had to close my eyes for a minute to gather my composure.

When I opened them, I found her stalking closer to me.

“And what kind of things did you have in mind for tonight?” I asked her.

She tapped her chin with one finger, thinking. “Well. I want you to sit on my face. But I also want to sit on your face. And I want to give scissoring a go. And edge you with my vibrator and vice versa. That’s just a few things.”

I raised my eyebrows, almost at a loss for words. “Another list?”

Her smile was bright and mischievous. “A Fuckme List.”

A startled laugh burst out of me. “Oh my god.”

Delaney crossed the rest of the space between us.

“What do you want, baby? You can have it.” She could have everything. I’d get it for her.

“As much as I want to do all that, what about you? What do you want, James?”

Hearing her say my name that way was still so incredible.

“I want...” I trailed off. Too many things. Far too many things. But we had to start somewhere.

“I want to go down on you and have you come all over my face. I want to see if I can make you squirt.”

She closed her eyes and moaned. “Fuck yeah, let’s do that.”

Her hand clamped mine in a tight grip as she dragged me to her bedroom.

* * *

A while later I looked up at her with my face covered in her desire and watched as she drifted down from her climax. I’d gone down on her until my jaw was sore and she had been cursing my name to let her come. I licked my lips, desperate for more of her.

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“I didn’t squirt,” she said, pouting.

“That just means we’ll have to try again,” I said, placing a kiss just above her clit. She trembled and reached down to cradle my head.

“You look amazing right now.”

I smiled, having never been happier in my life. “If I’d know this was where I’d end up, I would have moved back sooner.”

Her fingers tangled in a few strands of hair that had escaped my braid. “But I would have still been with Connor.” She pulled a disgusted face.

“Yeah, but I would have just stolen you from him.” I had full confidence in my skills to seduce her away from him.

Her eyebrows went up. “Scandalous.”

I gazed deep into her eyes. “He didn’t deserve you.”

“And you do?”

I thought about that for a moment. “Yes.”

“You’re awfully confident.”

I kissed the inside of her thigh, licking the line of one of her stretch marks. “You like

it.”

She let out a sigh. “Yeah, I do.”

* * *

A little while later we lay together, sweaty and completely exhausted, Delaney’s head resting on my shoulder.

“I didn’t know sex could be like this,” she said.

“Me neither.”

She lifted her head to look at me. “Really?”

“Yeah. I’ve never felt anything like this before. It’s different with you.”

Her smile was dazzling. “So it’s not like this with everyone you’ve been with?”

Not even close.

“No. You’re special.”

Her kiss was sweet. “Are we dating now?”

The question shocked me. “I...don’t know? Do you want to date? Are you open to moving that fast?” Only a day ago she’d barely been able to say she wasn’t straight. I wasn’t opposed to dating her at all, but I didn’t want to go too fast.

“Is that the cliché? Lesbians bring a U-Haul to the second date?” she asked.

Now I was even more surprised. “What do you know about U-Haul lesbians?”

She snorted. “I work with Larison. I pay attention.”

Oh, right.

“Are you saying that word out loud now?” I’d never heard her use it before.

Her nod was slow. “I’ve been thinking it over and over. Trying not to be scared of it. That’s...that’s the first time I’ve said it out loud today.”

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I wrapped my arms around her, bringing her close and kissing her hair.

“How does it feel?”

“I’m not sure yet. I’m still deciding. But it doesn’t feel bad?” That was something. She could try on any labels she wanted until she found one that fit her.

“That’s awesome, baby.”

She let out a happy sound and burrowed closer to me.

“I think I’d be okay with being a lesbian.”

I let out a snort. “I think I’d be okay with you being a lesbian too. It’s a pretty great thing to be, in my experience.”

No complaints from me.

“My parents are probably going to throw me a party.” She sounded a little grumpy about that and then winced.

“Now I sound ungrateful. I don’t mean to be. My parents are amazing, and I love them. But they’re going to make a big deal about it, and I don’t know if I’m ready for them to buy matching ‘I love my lesbian daughter’ shirts.”

That image made me laugh. They really were the sweetest people.

“You could make shirts for them.”

She fiddled with my belly ring. “I could. Maybe I will.”

A comfortable silence fell between us.

“I’m still nervous to tell them. Even though I know they’ll be fine. There’s a tiny part of me that wonders.”

It was only natural that she’d have that tiny bit of uncertainty.

“I’ll go with you. If you want.” If she needed me to have her back, she had me.

“Would you?”

I clasped her tight for a moment. “Of course.”

“I think I might like that. I’m having dinner with them on Thursday. And then spending all day Sunday with them. You don’t have to come on Sunday, but maybe on Thursday?”

The idea scared me a little, but I wasn’t going to tell her that. I’d suck it up and be there to support her no matter what.

“I’d love to.”

“Thanks, James.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Delaney

It was all too easy to fall back into relationship mode with someone, but at the same time, being with James was so different from anything I'd done with Connor.

Firstly, I enjoyed being with her. Any minute I wasn't in her presence it felt like something was missing. Even my hours at work weren't the best part of my day anymore. Every day I laughed at least once until tears streamed down my face and my stomach ached because of something silly she'd said.

Having someone in my space again was such a relief. James could be a little bit of a mess, but I didn't mind. She wasn't a careless slob like some people.

James respected my opinions and wanted to know what I thought about things. When I talked, she heard and remembered what I said. So many little things that I had never had in a relationship before. It was an adjustment.

Plus, there was the sex. Oh my god. The sex. The sex to end all sex. I was pretty much open for anything and we were blowing through my new Fuckme List with rapid speed. Not everything worked out, but we gave it a shot anyway.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm

On Thursday she showed up with a pair of black slacks and a button-up shirt and her hair in a low bun and she looked so damn good that I almost canceled on my parents again.

Mom had made lasagna and gave James just as big a hug as she gave to me when I introduced her again. Dad poured her a drink and they both waited for me to give them an explanation as to why I'd brought James with me. She bumped my shoulder with hers in support. I could do this. Taking a breath, I looked at my parents.

“So. Um. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking and exploring since my breakup, and I’ve come to the conclusion that I don’t think I’m straight and James and I are seeing each other.” Mom gasped and yanked both of us into hugs so fast that I couldn’t even finish what I was supposed to say.

Dad poured more drinks and made us do a toast, the biggest grin on his face.

They needed to slow their roll a little bit. “I’m not ready to officially say I’m one way or the other, but I’m testing out the lesbian label and it might be for me. I’m not sure yet. So don’t go out and like, buy a giant lesbian flag to hang in front of the house.”

Mom had been sneakily messing on her phone for the past few moments.

“I got one of the rainbow ones,” she said, turning her screen and showing it to me.

“Jesus Christ,” I said under my breath.

Dad piped up. “You know, one of my buddies online is a member of this group for

parents of queer kids. Now what is it called?” Now he was on his phone asking his friend.

I met James’s eyes and she winked at me. “It’s PFLAG.”

Dad snapped his fingers. “That’s it! Let me see if they have a local chapter. We should get informed and involved.”

They were ridiculous.

James and my dad seemed to get along like two peas in a pod and he dragged her off to show her all his projects, including all the vintage sewing machines he was restoring.

Mom sat down with me on the couch with cups of tea with lots of local honey in it.

“Did you know?” I asked her. It was a question I’d been wondering since this whole process started.

Mom shrugged. “I suspected that maybe you had a thing for girls. You would get really intense about some of your friends. But I figured it was best to give you space to figure things out on your own. And then you were with Connor and you told us you were happy, so I didn’t say anything.”

Right. I’d said I was happy. I’d done my utmost to make everyone believe that I had been. For four years I’d lived that lie.

“I didn’t really believe you. A mother knows. But if I’d said anything truly negative about your relationship, you might have pulled away. So I chose to keep it to myself and wait.”

Her smile was sad. There was nothing either of us could do about it now.

“I kind of wish you’d said something.”

She sipped her tea, watching me over the rim of her cup. “Would you have listened?”

No, I wouldn’t have. We both knew that I wouldn’t have.

“You got my stubborn side and your father’s. I know when to pick my battles,” she said.

I sighed.

“I always felt terrible for James. I’d wanted you to invite her over to see if maybe you could work things out. But I’m glad you got here eventually. She’s lovely.”

She was.

“I’m happy,” I said through sudden tears. “I’m really happy, Mom.”

“Oh, my girl.” She pulled me into her arms for a warm hug that smelled like basil and comfort.

“I’m happy for you. And I love you. More than you could possibly know.”

* * *

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm

Hey. Want to go to Sapph tonight? James sent me the message on Friday afternoon.

Yes please! Do you mind if I invite Larison and Jo?

Now that she'd met my parents, it was time for James to officially meet my friends too.

Sounds good!

"Hey, do you think your moms can watch Juniper tonight?" I asked Larison when there was a quiet a moment. We'd been slammed all day. I was filling in for Holiday again because she'd caught a nasty stomach bug. Poor thing was miserable, and I was happy to fill in for her.

"Possibly. Why?"

I told her the plan to go to Sapph.

"That sounds amazing. Hold on."

After a little back and forth, it was decided that the four of us would go to Sapph and I couldn't wait.

* * *

"What do you think?" James had come over to my place to help me pick out an outfit to go to Sapph in.

“No,” she said, making a face.

“What’s wrong with it?” I asked. The dress was dark and form-fitting and made me feel sexy.

“Take it off,” she said, snapping her fingers. I’d pulled the dress over my head before realizing what she’d been doing. My last two outfits had also been rejected for no obvious reason.

I glared at her. “You’re just saying no because you want me to take my clothes off.”

She grinned. “Yup.”

“You’re shameless,” I said, throwing a pair of pants at her that she ducked from her position on my bed.

“Yes I am when it comes to getting you naked.”

I pointed at her. “Shameless.”

Deciding to ignore her advice, I put the dress back on and checked myself in the mirror.

“Hair up or down?” I asked, gathering it in my hand.

“Up, so it’s not all sweaty on your gorgeous neck.” James got up from the bed and started kissing my neck, making me completely forget what I was supposed to be doing.

“Mmmm, that’s nice.”

Why were we going out again? Why would I want to go out when I could spend the night in bed with her?

“Want me to put it up for you?” she asked, resting her chin on my shoulder and meeting my eyes in the mirror. Her fingers danced up and down my spine and I wanted to take my dress off again and let her have her way with me.

“Yes please.”

James did my hair for me and I kissed her as a thank you.

“Ready to go?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

* * *

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm

We met Larison and Jo right outside Sapph.

“I feel like I should officially introduce you. This is James.” I gestured to her, feeling a little formal and foolish.

“It’s nice to meet you finally,” Larison said, nodding to James. “I’m Larison.”

James leaned closer to me. “Larison. Nice to meet you too.”

“I’m Jo.” They nodded at each other and we walked into the bar, paying our cover. There. Now they’d met.

“Want me to get drinks?” Jo asked. It made sense to send one of us, so we didn’t have to wait as long. She took our orders and we looked around to find a place to park ourselves. There was a high-top table in one corner that Larison was able to nab.

“You gonna dance with me, baby?” James asked in my ear.

Nothing could stop me. “Absolutely.”

I gazed at her and couldn’t stop myself from kissing her immediately.

“Cheers to that,” I heard Larison say and then there was a clinking noise.

James pulled back and we found Larison and Jo giving us both smug smiles.

“It’s good to see you happy, Delaney,” my best friend said.

Jo raised her glass. “To Delaney!”

I lifted mine. “And to James!”

“Delaney and James!”

We drank and then I pulled her onto the dance floor and we finally got to dance together the way I wanted. It was the perfect night.

Epilogue

James

“Are you ready?” I asked Delaney. She refused to show me her outfit.

“Yeah, just a second!” I leaned against the couch and crossed my arms. If she took too much longer, we were going to be late meeting everyone.

“Tada!” She burst through the door and posed for me.

I nearly slid off the couch and right onto the floor. “Oh my god. You look fucking incredible.”

She wore what I could only describe as a fluffy fairy dress in varying shades of orange, pink, and white. Her hair was curled, and she’d also brought the same colors to her eye makeup.

The colors of the lesbian flag.

“Well now I just look like a slob.”

I glanced down at my cargo shorts, and T-shirt that had two pairs of scissors on it. I did have a lesbian flag to wave, though.

“You look hot, shut up,” she said, coming over to me and kissing me until I didn’t want to take her anywhere.

“Are you nervous?” I asked. This was her first Pride as an out lesbian.

“Nah, I’m good. I mean, we already U-Hauled so I feel like Pride is a moot point.”

Less than a month after we started dating, we decided that living in two separate apartments was nonsense and we got a new place together in my same building, but the apartment had a second bedroom that I used as my office, while Delaney had her T-shirt press and the rest of her work in part of the living room.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:57 pm

The extra space was nice, and it was good for me to have a door I could shut so she could listen to her music while I did client meetings in the office.

I'd also finally cut off contact with my family after the Connor in New Hampshire incident. The guilt they'd tried to pile on me for not going to get him was the final straw, but without Delaney's support I wouldn't have been able to block their numbers at last. Now I would get the occasional email, but I had a filter on my email, and I deleted them without reading. Delaney's parents had swept me right into their family and I'd grown incredibly close with her dad.

"Okay, we have to hurry," I told her. We were not only meeting with Larison and Jo, but with a whole group of other sapphics that we'd become friends with. I'd invited Lea, but she had some event this weekend that she couldn't miss. She and I had become besties, and I was so glad that I'd met her.

Delaney took my hand as we walked toward the park where the parade was supposed to start.

"You seriously look amazing, baby," I told her as she floated and twirled beside me. "Everyone is going to be jealous of me."

I saw our friends and we both waved, but Delaney stopped me.

"What is it?" I asked, turning to face her.

"Just wanted to tell you that I couldn't have gotten here without you. I didn't know it was possible to be this happy, James. I love you so much."

She had heels on that made her almost as tall as I was, which made it much easier to kiss her. I was a big fan of the shoes. Hopefully I could convince her to keep them on later when we went to bed.

“I’ve always loved you, Delaney. Always.” I gathered her into my arms, and she squealed as I carried her the rest of the way to meet all of our friends.

* * *