



Love or Leave (Mapleton #4)

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Category: Romance

Description: Two fake dates. One big secret. Zero chance of keeping it casual.

Cara Keller can navigate constellations better than her love life—but she's ready to shake things up. Her plan? Take up golf (badly), dive back into dating (awkwardly), and accidentally run into her crush at a concert. All she needs is a plus-one to make it all go smoothly.

Enter her brother's infuriatingly hot best friend—aka the human version of a red flag.

Antonio Santori thought he had time to fix his broken marriage—until his ex announces she's bringing a date to his parents' anniversary party. Desperate to save face, he makes a deal with Cara: two fake dates, no strings attached, and absolutely no telling her brother.

But secrets this hot don't stay hidden for long. Stolen glances turn into late-night confessions, and fake dates start feeling dangerously real. Keeping it a secret was easy. Letting each other go? That's where it gets complicated.

Love or Leave by Diana Deehan is a flirty, forbidden brother's best friend romance brimming with secret hookups, sizzling chemistry, and all the slow-burn tension your heart can handle. It's also the final installment in the Mapleton Series, complete with a heartwarming series epilogue featuring scenes from each of your favorite characters' points of view.

Say goodbye to Mapleton with one last romance that's impossible to resist.

Total Pages (Source): 43

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

one

Thirty-six hours had passed since Cara Keller officially dumped the only boyfriend she'd ever had.

She had severely underestimated the time needed to recover. In fact, she'd only set twenty-four hours aside to move through the stages of grief and get back to her normal life.

But she hadn't accounted for the verbal abuse Cooper had slung at her.

He hadn't wanted to continue their relationship. It had basically been dead on arrival, anyway. But the words he'd used had been... harsh.

He'd said she was annoying. And too dorky for him.

And unlovable.

Then he asked her to email him the concert tickets she'd bought him for his birthday.

She'd given herself an additional twenty-four hours after that last insult triggered some deep-seated trauma from her formative years.

The worst part was that she agreed with him, even if his delivery had been unnecessarily mean. Not about her being unlovable—though the insult stung—but dorky? Oh yes. And annoying? Most likely.

Which was why she'd spent the final twenty-four hours of her post-breakup wallowing period reassessing her life.

She'd always been unapologetically herself.

And it had got her exactly where one would expect—thriving career-wise but failing miserably in her personal life.

She'd tried to shed her previous nerdy self by getting a glow up with a new hairstyle and wardrobe, and she'd thought it worked when Cooper had asked her out.

But it turned out she'd just slapped some lipstick on a pig.

If she was ever going to really connect with others, she'd have to leave the comfort zone she'd built around herself, and that was going to take some real outside-the-box thinking. Which, unfortunately, happened at four-thirty in the morning, and Cara was not a morning person.

Now, almost a full twelve hours later, at four o'clock in the afternoon, Cara found herself squinting her eyes at the bright glare coming off the three computer screens on her desk.

The screens had fried her overtired eyes and brain.

Normally, she'd push through the fatigue with a double macchiato and go home well after dinner, but not tonight.

Tonight, she had plans.

She glanced over her shoulder at her professor, whose desk ran along the opposite wall in their cramped, windowless office, and saw that Dr. Tanaka was still working

away on her own three screens.

Cara had put off telling her about needing to leave early, not because Dr. Tanaka wouldn't let her go, but because she would pry into Cara's decision, and then spew every unsolicited thought from her brain without thinking.

Cara powered down her computer and stood from her ancient desk chair. It let out a loud mechanical creak. "I have to leave early today," she said.

Dr. Tanaka stopped typing and popped her head up from her own computer screens, then twisted, causing her own chair to let out a matching mechanical creak. She pushed her glasses higher on the bridge of her nose with her middle finger. "You don't leave early."

"Normally, no."

Dr. Tanaka narrowed her eyes. "Why is today an anomaly?"

"Actually," Cara said, packing her laptop into her bag. "Every Monday is going to be an anomaly for the next six weeks."

"You need to check your definition of anomaly," Dr. Tanaka said in her sarcastic tone. "Which you can do after you tell me where you're going."

Cara tucked in her chair as she said under her breath, "Golf."

Dr. Tanaka leaned forward, her mouth slackening, before she scoffed and shook her head. "I thought you said golf," she said with a laugh.

Cara took a deep breath, then exhaled. "I did. I'm a golfer now."

Dr. Tanaka's eyes bulged out of their sockets. "That's a sport."

Cara shrugged. "More of a hobby."

"But why?"

Cara really didn't want to go into what brought her to the conclusion that golf was the answer to her problems. It had all made perfect sense at four in the morning.

Taking up a sport would accomplish her two primary objectives.

One, she'd be trying something new, which would be a good first step to reinventing herself. And, two, she would meet men.

Real life men.

Not the catalogue of creeps she'd found on the dating apps since her breakup.

She'd googled "how to meet men" and read a suggestion that she join some kind of sport. Seeing as the only two local sports that were still open for registration were volleyball and golf, she decided it would be safer to choose the sport where the ball wasn't being spiked at her face.

"Because it has to be easier to hit a ball that's not in motion."

Dr. Tanaka pulled her glasses off and squeezed the bridge of her nose. "This is because of that degenerate you broke up with, isn't it?"

Cara winced, but didn't deny it.

"Golf won't fix your life, Cara."

Cara stuck her chin in the air, as if the insult didn't bother her, even though she was fooling no one.

"Maybe not," she said. "But I've gathered endless data that says what I'm currently doing isn't working, either."

Dr. Tanaka searched Cara's eyes for a moment before shaking her head. "Golf is dreadfully boring. The outcome is always the same. The ball goes into the hole, sometimes with slightly more efficiency."

Cara nodded as she slung her computer bag over her shoulder. "Still better than volleyball. And who knows, maybe my husband is there waiting for me."

"But he'd be a golfer," Dr. Tanaka said, her nose turning up.

Cara rolled her eyes. "I have to go where the men are to find a man. It's a matter of matching trajectories, like..." She paused a moment to develop a metaphor that Dr. Tanaka would understand, and a second later a lightbulb went off.

"Like traveling to Mars," Cara finished. "You can't just hop on a shuttle and take off. You need to wait for the planets to align and aim for where Mars will be when you get there."

"And the men you want are on Mars?"

Cara lifted a shoulder. "Mars is overflowing with men. I'm bound to be compatible with one of them."

Hopefully.

She didn't need perfect compatibility. Just someone who wanted the same things as

her, and who she liked to hang out with. But she had to admit it would be helpful if she knew what she was looking for. How do you find something if you don't even know what it looks like?

Most people her age at least knew who they were and what they wanted out of a partner. All Cara knew was that she was lonely and wanted her person. Someone to hang out with and talk to and laugh with and have fun. Someone to have kids with, to have the family she always wanted.

But first, she needed to gather more data. Test more waters. Find out what she could tolerate, and what she couldn't. And golf lessons were the perfect start.

"I always thought terraforming Mars was a fool's errand," Dr. Tanaka said, picking up her Dr. Who Tardis mug and warming her hands around it. "If you have the technology to turn Mars into Earth, why not just fix Earth?"

Cara narrowed her eyes and tossed her professor's opinion around her brain, wondering how that fit into her analogy. "Are we still talking about golf?"

"No, my brain stopped making sense of what you said a while ago."

Cara nodded. "Well, then, I better get going. My shuttle lands in thirty minutes and I don't want to walk in late and have all the Martians stare at me."

Dr. Tanaka gave a dismissive wave and turned back to her computer. "Try not to injure yourself."

"You can't injure yourself at golf."

"That's the consensus, but then again, golf hasn't met the likes of you."

Welp, her worst fears came true.

Cara walked into the golf center three minutes late. The instructor in the center of the tiny room stopped whatever speech he'd been giving and looked at her, causing the mass of heavily cologned Martians, all wearing slightly different versions of the same polo shirt, to turn and stare at her.

She swallowed the dread and awkwardly lifted the corner of her mouth as she shuffled toward the group, pressing between two guys and trying to blend in.

"Are you here for golf lessons?" the instructor asked, with a look of disbelief in his eye.

She'd worn black yoga pants and a hoodie since it was a chilly night and she knew they'd be outside for almost an hour.

Apparently, that wasn't the correct choice.

"Yes," Cara said.

He narrowed his eyes and made a show of looking around her. "Where are your clubs?"

Cara's heart stopped.

Shit. She didn't want to admit she didn't own clubs.

"Sorry, I forgot them," she said, getting ready to turn around and book it out of the place.

The instructor stopped, rolled his eyes, and dropped the clipboard by his hip. "This is

an advanced lesson. Are you sure you belong here?"

Advanced? Sweet fucking hell.

Panic sweat trickled down her neck and she wondered if she should admit she'd never played golf before. She couldn't remember seeing anything about the lesson being advanced. Why had she signed up in the middle of the night?

"I-

"She can borrow mine."

Cara twisted toward the deep voice beside her and found a handsome man who was radiating the sort of confidence that only comes from being comfortable with your surroundings. He threw a bright smile at her, then a wink.

"Thanks," she said, trying to hold back her smile from taking over her face.

"Just stick with me," he said.

She took in his built frame and his dark, warm complexion.

Don't mind if I do.

"Fine," the instructor barked, interrupting her salacious thoughts. "Don't forget them again."

Cara nodded, and once the instructor went back to his speech, she turned and gave a mock wince to her savior. His smile doubled, then he turned and focused all his attention on the instructor. She started feeling pretty damn good about this whole golf thing.

After several torturous minutes of listening to golf jargon she didn't understand, the instructor beckoned everyone to follow him out the back door to the driving range.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Cara followed her saviour with the golf clubs and stepped through the door after he held it open for her. "I'm Jalen, by the way."

"Cara."

He smiled again. "Great to meet you."

She fell into pace beside him as they walked down the turfed path toward the driving stalls, passing the occasional space heater that blasted her with warmth. "Thanks again for saving me back there."

"No problem."

She glanced around, and when she was sure no one would overhear, she leaned toward Jalen to confess that this was her first time playing. Unfortunately, he spoke before she could.

"You should keep your clubs in your trunk. That way you won't forget them," he said, looking at her with a soft grin. "That's what I do."

Cara forced herself to keep a straight face, even though she wanted to laugh. "Right. Good tip. Thanks."

He stopped at two empty tees, placed his clubs between them, and pulled out a pair of gloves and a club with a bulky end.

"Which driver do you want?" he asked as he pulled the gloves over his hands.

She eyed the four remaining drivers, then reached for one, hoping it was the right choice. When Jalen bent forward without a word to place a ball on his tee, she figured she'd selected appropriately.

Luckily, she'd had the foresight to look up a few golf basics after registering, so she at least knew the difference between a driver and an iron. But that's where her knowledge ended. She hadn't got far enough in her research to determine the difference between different drivers.

With a shrug, she took a ball and placed it on the tee in front of her, then threw up a prayer and swung.

And missed the ball entirely.

She braced herself and glanced over her shoulder at Jalen. Unfortunately, he'd seen the whole thing.

"You didn't see that," she said, trying for a joke.

Jalen laughed. "It's all good. It takes time to get used to new clubs."

Cara's brows shot up. "Yeah, that's definitely the problem." She discretely shook her head, hoping for this to come to an end without embarrassing herself further. Jalen was cute and nice, but there couldn't be much kicking around in his brain if he really thought she'd done this before.

Or maybe he was too focused on himself to notice.

Behind her, Cara heard the whooshing sound of a club breaking the sound barrier followed by the high-pitched smack of the ball. She turned to see Jalen's ball sailing through the air in a perfect arc toward the 300 yard sign in the field.

"Wow," she said.

Jalen wagged his eyebrows. "Thanks."

She suppressed an eye roll at his cockiness. "Have you been playing long?"

Jalen nodded. "All my life. My grandpa gave me my first lesson when I was three. We still play every Easter morning. He's a member at Glenn Abbey."

Jalen's expectant stare made her suspect she should know what Glenn Abbey was and be impressed—what with being a golfer and all.

"Oh, wow," Cara replied with unnaturally raised brows and a bob of her head.

Jalen beamed. "Yeah, it's pretty great."

He turned back to load up another ball. Cara made a mental note to look up Glenn Abbey. This whole situation was hilariously beyond her capabilities, but she'd come too far to quit now.

She lined up her next shot, but before she could take another swing, her phone rang.

"Thank God," she murmured. She reached into her pocket, happy for the distraction until she looked at the caller.

Cooper.

"Ugh."

"Something wrong?"

She shook her head at Jalen and ignored the call.

"I can give you some pointers, if you'd like. You look a little rusty."

Cara's cheeks flushed. "Sure, that would be great."

Jalen put his driver back in his bag, then came to stand beside her. "Widen your stance a little and keep your knees loose."

"Loose knees," she said with a nod. "That makes perfect sense."

Jalen chuckled. "Keep your grip strong and your front arm as straight as possible." He took her wrist in his hand and extended it down so her elbow wasn't bent.

"Thanks." As she turned she caught a whiff of his cologne—then her phone rang again.

"Maybe you should take that," Jalen said, backing away.

Cara shook her head. "No, it's just a..."

Delusional ex boyfriend who's begun stalking me.

"A friend," she said with finality. "He's just calling about a concert this weekend."

"Which concert?"

Uh oh.

"The Cherry Chasers."

"No kidding," Jalen said with a huff of a laugh and a wide, handsome grin. "I'm going to that concert this weekend."

Shit.

"Really?"

Jalen nodded. "Those tickets were impossible to get."

"Yeah." She was still annoyed at how hard she had worked to get tickets for a crappy band she didn't even like because she knew how much Cooper liked them. Cara had planned to either give in and send them to Cooper or sell them online to the highest bidder. It felt kind of petty, considering she'd bought them as a gift—back when she'd thought they'd be going together.

Embarrassed by the sudden shame that filled her whenever she thought of Cooper, she hit the decline button on her phone and placed it back into her pocket.

"We seem to have a lot in common, eh? Golf, music. I wonder what else," Jalen said.

Cara's lip twitched. She hated both things. But few men shared her interests. Especially attractive athletic guys with wide smiles who smelled like heaven.

"So, will I see you there?" he asked.

Cara looked up at Jalen's dark eyes. "Yes," she replied without thinking.

Suddenly, the instructor was right next to her. He scribbled at his clipboard for a moment before finally looking up at her with an assessing glare. "Alright, let's see your swing."

Fuck.

Following Jalen's advice, she aimed and then swung. Mercifully, the club somehow made contact with the ball, which skidded along the grass for fewer than fifty yards before dying. But it was something.

"Hmmm," her instructor said with a disappointed look and an unsurprised shake of his head. "Needs work."

Jalen smiled and gave her a thumbs up before turning his attention to the instructor. She probably shouldn't be considering going to that crappy concert, but if it meant she'd see Jalen again, outside of golf, it would probably be worth it.

Besides, there had to be more to him than just sports and questionable taste in music. It was way too soon to write him off.

She gave herself a decisive nod. She'd keep the tickets and go to the concert, and definitely without Cooper. But the only thing worse than going with him would be going alone.

Which meant that she'd have to rope someone into going with her.

But who?

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

two

Antonio Santori pulled into the dimly lit parking lot of his apartment building. He killed the engine and dashed out of his car, making a beeline for the door.

His sister Maria was going to kill him for being so late, but there was no way he could show up to his niece's unicorn birthday party as is—in dirty scrubs with no gift.

He jogged to the front door, scanned his key and entered. He pulled up short when he came face to face with his neighbour, Sara. Her surprise at his sudden appearance vanished in a flash, instantly replaced by a sad scowl.

He lifted an awkward hand in a wave. "Hi—"

Sara snapped away from him and marched off down the hall, refusing to let him finish.

Honestly, he deserved worse. She would have been completely justified in chewing him out—or even slapping him, for that matter. He would have preferred it to the silent treatment.

He let remorse flow over him as he pulled the mail from his box and made his way down the narrow hall toward his door, doing his best to ignore the rancid stench wafting from one neighbour's unit and the blast of screaming metal coming from the other.

Sara was a beautiful girl. She was also smart and sweet, with a good head on her

shoulders. Antonio couldn't help but be attracted to her when he first moved into the building. Especially when she'd started flirting with him at the lowest point in his life.

Then Fran showed up.

Shaking off the memory, he thumbed through the mail as he unlocked his door. He pushed into his depressingly cramped studio apartment when he saw it.

A letter from his wife's lawyer.

He stopped halfway through the door's threshold and swallowed the nausea bubbling in his throat. She was actually going through with it.

His marriage was over.

He was on the verge of being the divorced guy.

He dropped his bag and stepped the rest of the way inside, letting the heavy metal door slam shut behind him. He took the three steps to the giant pull-out sofa that took up most of the three-hundred square foot living space and collapsed on its edge.

What a fucking disaster.

He couldn't bring himself to ripping the envelope open and reading it. Instead, he tossed it onto the coffee table currently doubling as a nightstand and dining table, and buried it under the rest of the mail, as if pretending it didn't exist would make it so.

He glanced around the room, painfully aware of the fact that if he hadn't let his marriage fall apart, he'd still be in the home he bought with Fran, and he'd only be a few doors down from his sister and his parents.

Instead, he had failed, and now his wife—well, soon-to-be ex-wife—whom he'd never wanted to divorce, lived in the house his grandparents had gifted the down payment for, and he was alone in what could only be described as a hellhole.

The only upside to the situation was that he wasn't still living at his parents' house.

That was where he'd first gone after moving out the house, and he'd never been so miserable. But he couldn't really blame his parents for being disappointed in him. He'd made a complete fucking mess of his life.

The only person he could blame was himself. Especially since Fran had come to him crying and begging to get back together, and he'd let his hurt ego stop him from giving them another shot.

It was the biggest mistake he'd made in his life.

He shook off the intrusive thoughts and stood, pulling his dirty clothes off and tossing them into the hamper next to the fridge, then took another three steps to the tiny bathroom.

He had to get out of that place, but every time he thought about moving, he just wished he could go back to his home and make things work with Fran.

He'd poured countless hours and money into fixing up that house to make it theirs—new floors, new kitchen. His father helped him re-tile the bathroom and build the deck in the back. It was his home.

So was Fran.

They'd been together so long that his family didn't even know how to react when he attended family events alone. He'd always wanted to marry Fran, have kids with her,

grow old in that house together with her.

And he'd let a stupid little dip in their relationship ruin it all.

If he could travel back in time, he'd have gone to therapy with her when she first mentioned not being happy.

He'd have told her they had something worth fighting for when she'd told him she wanted a divorce.

And he never would have been so stubborn after the Sara situation when she'd had second thoughts.

He turned on the shower and stepped into the cold, weak spray of water. He had to fix this.

If he couldn't make it work with Fran, he couldn't make it work with anyone.

After showering and dressing quickly, he grabbed Sophie's gift and rushed out the door. He knew what needed to be done. He just hoped his mom and sister wouldn't lose their shit when he asked for their help.

Antonio arrived at his sister's house an hour late. He fought the urge to rush in and rang the doorbell instead. Maria's house was as much of a second home to him as his parents' house, but the last time he spoke with her, Maria mentioned how much Sophie loved answering the door.

It didn't take long to hear Sophie's little feet pattering on the hardwood floor, getting louder and louder as she got closer to the door. When she opened the door, her sparkly brown eyes lit up.

"Zio!"

Antonio's heart melted and he bent and picked her up, balancing her in one arm and her giant present in the other.

"Happy Birthday, Soph," he said. "Sorry I'm late."

She wiggled in his arms, reaching for the present, completely ignoring his apology. It seemed that showing up with a present was enough of an apology.

"What's in it?"

"A dinosaur robot with guns instead of feet." Antonio squatted down and placed her on the floor before passing the giant pink box over to her.

She turned her nose up.

He laughed and shook his head. "Go open it and see."

She took off running with the gift. Antonio closed the door and took off his shoes and coat. Before he could take a step, his sister appeared from the kitchen, holding two gigantic glasses of red wine.

"You're going to need this," she said, passing him one of the glasses and then giving him a hug.

"Why?"

She glanced at him like he was a fool. "Mom, obviously."

Antonio took a drink of the wine. "That bad?"

"Tonio! Is that finally you?"

Maria cringed at their mother's voice reverberating down the hall, then lunged toward the door. Antonio grabbed her by the elbow.

"You can't bail on your own party," he said with a snort.

"Watch me," she said.

He laughed and forced her down the hallway toward the kitchen, where he knew his mother was presiding over the party from the dining table.

"Is it because of the anniversary party?" he asked in a whisper.

Maria nodded, then plastered on a fake smile and turned into the kitchen. Antonio suppressed a laugh and followed.

"Sorry I'm late," he said as he entered. He moved toward his mother and gave her a kiss on the cheek, then sat beside her.

"You missed all the planning," she said in her disapproving tone.

"Sorry. Where's Dad?"

His mom impatiently waved at the door. "He got tired again and had to leave."

Antonio glanced at Maria, who smirked behind her glass of wine before taking another drink.

Their dad was always "tired" these days.

When his mother had insisted his father get checked out for being so tired all the time, he had asked Antonio if doctor–patient confidentiality worked between family members.

When Antonio assured him it did, he confessed the only thing he was tired of was his wife.

Antonio told his dad to come up with better excuses other than being tired, if he wanted to duck out for some peace every once in a while, but he apparently didn't follow doctor's orders.

"Actually, I'd love to help plan the party," Antonio said.

Maria set down a platter of antipasti on the table before sinking into the seat opposite him. "It's all done. Right down to the same colour-candied almonds they had at their wedding that took me a million phone calls to find..." she trailed off, annoyed, earning herself a scowl from their mom.

Maria had told Antonio how much she hated the fuss their mother was making over being married so long, especially since their parents had been down-right miserable most of that time.

"You know, Maria," their mom said, staring daggers across the table. "Marriage is a holy sacrament. And some people respect that sacrament."

Maria threw her hands in the air. "I'm married, Mom," she said in an exasperated tone.

" You are..." she said, trailing off with a pointed look toward Antonio.

And there it was.

All of his mother's disappointment wrapped up in two words and one look.

The annoying thing was that he felt the same way as his mom. When he'd said "I do" to Fran, he'd meant it. He'd fully expected them to grow old and die together. What he hadn't expected was for her to fall out of love with him.

But then again, he'd been working eighty hours a week and barely saw her for all the years he was in med school and residency. Still, she knew he'd be going through all that when they'd gotten married.

Maybe they had just been too young.

That was the best explanation he had. Fran had blindsided him when she'd said she wanted a divorce.

He'd finally felt as if the difficult times were behind them.

They'd talked about taking a trip to Europe and starting a family and renovating their home, and next thing he knew, he was packing up his half his shit and moving out.

"Enough," Maria said, slapping her hand on the table and pulling him from his inner turmoil. "This is a birthday party, not judgment day."

His mother rolled her eyes as Antonio reached for his wine and took a deep drink.

He cleared his throat. "Actually, I was hoping to see Fran this weekend."

His mother sat up and so did her dark eyebrows. She glanced at him with cautious optimism on her face. "What?"

He braced himself and squared his shoulders. "I want you to send her an invitation to

the party."

The second the words were out, his mother and sister both shot out of their seats.

"Thank God!" his mother said at the same time Maria yelled, "Hell no!"

Antonio pulled back from the table at the very loud response. He expected their reactions.

"I'll send it now," his mom said, pushing her chair out and backing away from the table.

She'd taken a single step before Maria nearly tackled her. "Not a chance, Mom," she said before turning to him. "Why, Tone?"

He took a deep breath and scrubbed a hand over his face. His stomach was in knots. "I want my life back."

"I know but—"

"I got the papers today," he said, the words heavy.

Maria went quiet.

"Fran wanted to get back together a few months ago, and I said no. But I've changed my mind. I'm not signing the papers."

Maria shook her head in disbelief. "You've been so miserable. How can you forgive her for this?"

Antonio expected Maria's disapproval, so her reaction didn't surprise him. In fact, he

was pretty certain what she was thinking was a lot worse than what she was saying. But he'd already thought this through, and he knew the people in his family would think he was Fran's doormat.

He didn't care. He desperately wanted to put this whole mess behind him and move on.

When Maria realized he'd already made up his mind, she turned her piercing gaze at their mom. "You're actually okay with this?"

"She's my daughter-in-law, and her parents will be there, of course." She shrugged her shoulders. "Why shouldn't she come?"

Maria let out a silent scream. "Because she broke Tonio's heart, for starters."

"My heart is fine," Antonio said. "I want her back."

His mom pulled Maria's hand from hers and started toward the door. "Good," she said, smiling widely. "I'll go get an invitation now and deliver it to her myself," she said.

She'd made it almost to the door when she stopped and turned. "Maria, change the seating plan so Tonio is sitting with his wife for dinner."

Maria's jaw hit the floor as she watched their mother walk out the front door, but Antonio was feeling lighter than air.

His house was only a few doors down from Maria's and their parents'. Hopefully Fran was home and would be excited to get the invitation—hopefully she would understand this was a way for them to get together and reconcile.

Hopefully she'd accept.

"This is going to be a fucking nightmare."

Antonio rolled his eyes at Maria's warning as the tightness in his chest eased. This wasn't going to be a nightmare. This was going to be a new beginning.

Now he'd just have to hope and pray that Fran would give them another chance. They could go to therapy and start being honest with each other about where they went wrong, so he could fix it, and they could move on.

"This is a good thing," he said, standing from the table and squeezing his sister's shoulder. "Be happy for me."

Maria closed her eyes and sighed, then gave him a fake smile.

"That the spirit," Antonio said with a grin, then made his way to the living room to focus on his niece and her birthday party.

But after saying hi to his two younger sisters, their boyfriends, and his brother-in-law, who was on the floor playing a game with Sophie, he fell into introspection again. It was hard not to feel hopeful that Fran would come to the event.

He wanted so badly for this to be the beginning of the end.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

three

Cara pulled her knitted sweater tight around her chest as she dashed from her car into Keller's pub. The temperature had dropped that morning, dipping below zero for the first time in the season, and she hadn't yet pulled her winter parka out from the back of her closet.

It nearly killed her to leave her warm bedroom, but she was on a mission now, and it couldn't wait any longer.

She stepped out of the cold, dark wind and into the warmth of Willow's brewery. The moment she entered, Jer looked up and smiled.

Perfect.

He waved her toward him with one hand as he filled a glass with another.

She made her way over and hopped onto one of the tall stools that lined the bar in front of him. "Is Max here?"

He narrowed his eyes and tilted his head to the side. "Not yet, why?"

Cara shoulders relaxed. She was happy she would have time to talk to Jer alone without having to hear her brother's opinion on the matter. "I need a favour."

"Name it," he said, leaning an elbow on the bar toward her.

"I need you to come to a concert with me this Sunday."

Jer waited, then his forehead unwrinkled and he stood up straight. "That's it?"

"Yeah."

"Why don't you want Max to know?" he asked with narrowed eyes.

She rubbed her hands over the tops of her thighs. "It's because of—"

"Cooper."

Cara nodded. "I bought the tickets for his birthday, and after I broke up with him he asked for the tickets, but because I'm being a spiteful bitch I said no.

I was going to sell them, but I met this new guy—Jalen—at golf, and he's going to be there so I want to go to see him, but obviously I can't go with Cooper, and I'd rather die than go to a concert alone, so will you come? "

She gasped for breath as Jer's mouth dropped open.

He blinked. Paused. Then blinked again.

"Golf?"

She threw up her hands. " That's what you latched on to?"

Jer snorted. "Everything tracks but the golf."

"Ugh," she said with an eye roll. "Will you come with me? Please?"

"I would, but I can't," he said, moving the filled beer glasses onto a tray and placing a paper ticket on the tray with them. "Willow's still trying to hire someone, and I'm all she's got right now."

Cara slumped over onto the bar. Her temples throbbed.

"Just ask Max."

"Cooper is a trigger word for him," she said, her voice muffled by her folded arms.

"What about Willow?"

"I need a boy. I told Jalen my friend is a him."

Jer snorted as the door opened and Max and Antonio walked in. He leaned in close to Cara and whispered, "You could always ask Dr. McDreamSteam."

She picked her head up and fought the urge to look over her shoulder at the door. "He's outta my league."

Jer launched himself backwards in mock offence. "And I'm not?"

Cara rolled her eyes. "Of course you are. But it's different. He and I are... awkward," she said, dropping her head. "I shouldn't have asked him out."

"You asked him out?!"

She took in Jer's shocked face. "Only sort of. I said we should play poker, and he told me he's staying married. It was weird."

Jer looked like he wanted to say something, but he plastered on a bright face instead

and looked over her head. She swiveled on the stool and found Max and his annoyingly attractive, perfectly bone-structured friend standing right behind her.

"I wasn't expecting you," Max said as he gave her a half hug. "It's cold."

Cara rolled her eyes. "I occasionally do the unexpected."

"No, you don't," Max said.

She huffed an annoyed breath. "I actually needed to see you," she said, leaning past him, trying for a casual wave. "Hi, Antonio."

Antonio smiled and waved back, then casually settled his tall frame onto the stool next to her, but not before discreetly sliding it away from her a little.

Why did he do that? Did she smell? Did he hate her? Did she make him so horribly uncomfortable when she suggested the poker date, and now he can't stand being close to her? Did she even intend for it to be a date? Was she the only one being weird about this?

She settled the panicky thoughts with a deep exhale.

Here she was spiralling while he probably hadn't given their interaction a second thought.

She'd dissected every syllable of their conversation.

She'd talked herself into being proud that she'd made a bold move, even though she'd initially wanted to crawl in a hole somewhere. But maybe it hadn't been that bold.

It was hard to tell.

Things between her and Antonio differed from her and Max's other friends. Adam and Ethan would have both given her a hug or a smack on the back, or something. But she'd known them all her life. They were practically older brothers to her. Whereas she'd only met Antonio a few weeks ago.

While shit-faced.

In a bush.

Not to mention the fact that every time she saw him, she wondered what he looked like naked.

She forced away the thought and straightened her spine. It occurred to her that she wasn't really sure how he and Max knew each other, or why she'd never met him before. She'd have to ask Max without sounding too curious.

Not that she was curious about Antonio.

The corner of her mouth pulled at the lie and she shook the thought from her mind.

"Is Ethan coming?" Jer asked, breaking the silence.

Max nodded. "He and Adam had to stop at Ethan's on their way. They should be here soon."

"Good," he said. "We tapped the new ale today. He asked when it would be ready."

"I'll take one," Antonio said, his deep, smooth voice floating over her ear.

"Same," Max said, sitting on the other side of Cara.

"Cara?" Jer asked.

"Sure," she said, then cleared her clogged up throat. "Thanks."

Jer put a little metal bucket of peanuts on the bar before turning to fill three glasses.

Max grabbed a peanut from the bucket and crushed it in his fingers. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Right. She braced herself for the flurry of questions she knew would come, then let it out. "Can I borrow your golf clubs?"

Max's eyebrows hit the ceiling. "Why?"

She rolled her eyes. "To go stargazing. Why do you think?"

Antonio and Jer snickered, and she took a deep breath, trying to stop herself from coming off too aggressively.

"You're going golfing?" Max asked incredulously. "Seriously?"

Cara tipped her chin up. "I've signed up for lessons. I already started Monday, but I need clubs."

"You started already? Did anyone get hurt?"

"Only my pride," she muttered, her neck going hot at the memory of swinging and missing.

Max narrowed his eyes. "Why are you doing this?"

"Ugh," she said just as her drink arrived. She took a gulp of the amber liquid before continuing. "I want to meet new people, step out of my comfort zone, try new things."

Max stared at her for a moment, opened his mouth to say something, then thought better of it and opted to just nod instead. "Sure, you can borrow them, but they're probably too big for you."

"Oh," she said, not realizing there were sizes.

"You can borrow mine," Antonio said from the other side of her. "They're human size."

She twisted toward him, and was greeted by his warm, picture-perfect smile.

"Really?"

He nodded. "I'll get them to you," he said, casually taking a drink.

It annoyed her how smooth and comfortable he was. She was anything but those things. But that was probably because she was harbouring many unspoken fantasies about him, and he wasn't harbouring any for her.

She forced her expression to be neutral.

"Thanks," she said.

"Willow's in the office," Jer said to Max. "She doesn't want to be bothered, but she said she needs to see you when you get here."

"Thanks," Max said, standing. "I'll go see what she needs."

A second later, a waitress pulled Jer aside, leaving Cara and Antonio alone. An awkward silence settled over them as Cara's mind went back to her problem with the concert.

Jer had been her only plan. She needed to find an alternative, or else she just wasn't going to show up.

"So, I take it you're not a golfer?"

Cara turned toward Antonio's smooth voice and took in his inquisitive light brown eyes. "I could be. I never really tried."

He absorbed her response. "Why now?"

"I'm in a rut," she said with a small shrug.

Antonio made a little "hmm" noise, as if he knew exactly what it felt like to be in a rut. "What's your rut like?"

She thought for a moment, wondering how much to tell him about her stalled existence. "I go to school, I go to work, and I rinse and repeat until I want to pull my hair out, then I play games."

Antonio leaned slightly forward with interest. "What games?"

Cara cringed. "I'm not saying."

He gave a low chuckle that buzzed between them. "Yes, you are."

She scrunched her eyes together. "Magic the Gathering, Blood on the Clocktower, D and D."

When she opened her eyes, he was staring at her with a heart-melting smile.

"You're a nerd."

She snickered. "You have no idea."

If he knew about her collection of Star Wars Funko Pop's or how many times she'd read Lord of the Rings , he probably wouldn't be smiling. He'd be scooching his chair even further away.

Antonio looked around the pub, then back at her. "I played D and D in high school."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

He nodded. "I was never that into it, though. Now I play way too much online Scrabble."

She laughed at him and took a drink before they fell into silence again. But this time it was far less awkward than before. Still, it didn't stop her from fidgeting with the corner of her sweater and remembering her unresolved problem with the concert.

Cara glanced across the room at Jer, who was still in deep conversation with the waitress. It was too bad he wasn't able to go. Jer would be perfect company.

Antonio would probably be fun to hang out with all night, too, but definitely a less perfect option than Jer. Antonio was too... smouldering.

Cara looked over at Antonio. Her options were extremely limited at the moment.

What the hell? He already shot me down once. What would it matter if he did it again?

"Antonio?"

He turned toward her and one of his dark, angled eyebrows cocked.

She ignored the heat taking over her face and pressed on. "I have tickets to this concert on Sunday and I'm meeting this guy there, but I don't want to go alone."

His head pulled back, and she realized how out of the blue her question had been.

He broke eye contact with her and uneasily glanced at the door Max had left through, then back to her. "Okay..."

"Will you go with me? I already asked Jer, but he can't."

Antonio stared into her eyes for a moment before blinking away. "I don't think we should go to things together," he said.

She raised an eyebrow at him.

"You and I... We're more... group friends."

"Group friends?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, as he tapped his beer glass and shifted in his seat.

Gone were his relaxed shoulders and calm smile.

"Were friends only in a group. We probably shouldn't hang out alone."

"Oh," Cara said, surprised—and a little offended—by his response. Not only did he not want to go to the concert with her, he never wanted to hang out with her. Ever?

She wanted to ask why but decided it would be better to shake off the insult so she gave him a single jerky nod.

Antonio seemed to notice her offence. "I just don't think Max would approve."

Cara fought off a fresh wave of annoyance, but it clearly showed on her face.

"I didn't mean it like you need his approval, or anything," Antonio said, backtracking. He reached his hand behind his head and rubbed the back of his neck.

"He doesn't trust me," he said, then added, "And he shouldn't," under his breath before lifting his glass and taking a drink.

Cara stared at him for a moment. It was both relieving and concerning that she wasn't the reason he was saying no. Max was.

But why?

She was about to ask why when Max and Willow stepped through the door, forcing all her questions to dry up in her throat.

Antonio quickly recovered, steering the conversation toward Willow's new ale. Cara nodded along with a smile, adding appropriate interjections as needed, but her thoughts were light years away.

The concert had slipped from the forefront of her worries, eclipsed by her growing curiosity around Antonio.

Why did Max think he was so untrustworthy?

And was he right?

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

four

Antonio finished up his rounds and headed out of the emergency unit toward the elevators. His morning had been hellish; a lunch break was exactly what he needed. He stepped into the elevator and pressed the button for the third-floor cafeteria.

It took no time for his thoughts to run away from him. Before he knew it, he was in a zombie-like state, ruminating over what he'd dealt with all morning.

The elevator stopped on the next floor. He pulled his phone from his pocket and opened the browser. He typed in a few letters and Google knew exactly what he wanted—to play online Scrabble. Nothing took his mind off other people's troubles like kicking a computer's ass in Scrabble.

He waited for the game to load as the elevator continued its climb up. When it reached the third floor, Antonio stepped off and entered the cafeteria when he heard his name.

"Tonio!" Maria waved from her window table, catching his eye.

He turned toward her, racking his brain, wondering why she was there, but he came up empty. "Did we have plans?"

"No," she said, waving him off. "I just hoped I'd catch you for lunch. I grabbed your favourites." She made a jerky gesture to a sandwich, a salad, and a fruit cup as her eyes darted around the room.

Antonio put away his phone and took a seat. "Maria?"

When she gazed up at him, her eyes shed their nerves and took on the pitiful look he'd grown accustomed to seeing in the last six months.

"Something's wrong," he said, speaking his internal thoughts out loud.

Maria shoulders fell forward and she looked away from him, gazing out the window toward the forested area beyond.

Antonio's stomach rolled. "Tell me."

She took in his eyes and her head tilted slightly to the side. "Let me hold your hand when I tell you this," she said, reaching across the table.

He rolled his eyes and shook her off. "Is it about Fran?"

"She came over this morning," Maria said, her tone shifting. "I hate that we're neighbours."

Antonio's back stiffened. "You can't say stuff like that."

"I can say how I feel," she said, stabbing him with a glare.

Sensing a scene-making lecture coming, Antonio swiftly moved on. "What did she want?"

"To RSVP."

"Oh," he said, relief flooding his body. "So she's coming?"

"Oh yeah, she's coming," Maria said, her voice all high pitched and loud. "But she's not coming alone."

Antonio's entire body froze. "She's bringing someone?"

"Can you fucking believe that?" Maria said, sitting back in her chair and shaking her head. "I can't believe mom agreed to invite her."

"Well... I... I..." Antonio stammered, trying to gather his thoughts before they all dried up. Was Fran really seeing someone else?

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "Did she say if it's serious?"

Maria shook her head. "No, but she told me who it was, and I don't think you're going to like it."

Antonio's heart stopped. "I know him?"

"Sort of..." Maria mumbled, her gaze flicking around the room. She was clearly stalling.

"For fuck's sakes, Maria," he said, then remembered where he was and leaned in. "Who is it?"

"Blake Hunter."

Blake Hunter. He knew that name.

"How do I know that name?" he asked, racking his brain.

Maria huffed a breath. "He's that irritating guy on the news. Does all that survivor

stuff."

It all clicked. Then nothing made sense again.

"Fran is dating Blake Hunter?"

"Yeah," Maria said, shaking her head. "Princess Fran, who won't even make pasta with Nonna because it hurts to stand in her heels too long, is dating a guy who voluntarily lives in a tent."

Antonio flinched.

"You know why she's doing this, don't you?"

"Maria..."

"Don't, Tonio," she said, her voice rising. "You always defend her."

"And you've always hated her for no reason."

Maria narrowed her eyes at him. "I have reasons. And this is another one. She's coming to our parents' anniversary party with a famous date before the ink is even dry on your divorce papers."

Antonio ignored the boulder in his throat. "Technically, there isn't ink on the papers yet, and can we really call Blake Hunter famous?"

Maria threw her hands up again before taking some calming breaths. "So you don't care that she's doing this?"

Antonio sighed. He hated the idea of seeing her with someone else—especially

someone so obviously unsuitable for her. And the idea that she'd moved on made it difficult to breathe. Especially since he hadn't.

Well, that wasn't one hundred percent true.

He'd somewhat moved on with Sara before Fran briefly came back into the picture. But Fran wasn't to blame for that. He never should have dated Sara when his wounds were still bleeding. It had been too soon.

He forced some deep breaths and looked out the window, trying not to ruminate about everything falling apart.

Again.

"Tonio," Maria said in a softer tone.

He glanced up at her clenched half-smile.

"You can't go to this party alone."

Her words sunk in and he dropped his head into his hands. "I don't know how I fucked this all up so bad."

Maria shook her head. "It's not you. You guys just aren't meant to be."

He reared back. "Not meant to be? We've known each other all our lives. If I can't make it work with her, how will I ever..." He trailed off and let the ending of the sentence hang over them like a wet rag.

How would he ever make it work with anyone?

"Maybe you can talk to her after this weekend, but I really don't think you should show up alone. She's going to be there with that guy and it's all anyone's going to talk about all night."

"I don't want to bring someone."

"Maybe a friend? Or what about that neighbour I met?"

Antonio winced. "My neighbour hates me," he said, his mind snagging on the word friend .

"Why?"

He squeezed his eyes shut. There was no way he was going to tell his sister what he'd done. "I'd rather not say."

Maria stared at him, then shook it off. "Ask a friend, find a girl on one of the apps, I don't know, but you can't walk in there alone."

Ask a friend.

Cara needed a friend to go to a concert. Maybe they could make a deal?

He laughed at himself and shook his head. No way could he do that. Max would skin him alive.

But if they never told Max...

He shook his head at the intrusive thought.

"You thought of something," Maria said, a smile tugging at her mouth. "You have

your smart face on."

"There's a girl I know, but it's complicated."

"A girlfriend?"

Antonio shook his head. "No no. She's just a friend. Barely that, actually, but she might come."

Maria flopped back in her chair. "Thank God," she said. "Bring her. Bribe her if you need to."

Antonio rubbed at his face. How had it come to this? He'd honestly expected that Fran would want to work at their marriage. Bringing Blake to his parents' anniversary party? That hadn't even crossed his mind. He was still trying to wrap his head around why they'd broken up at all.

One minute they were talking about starting a family and the next she was saying they'd be happier apart, asking him to give her space.

He tried to talk to her about why, but she always evaded the question.

He'd suspected it was because he wanted a family, and she'd never exactly been the motherly type.

But she'd always said she wanted to have kids one day. Maybe she changed her mind.

Or maybe she never wanted kids and just expected she would one day?

Or maybe she wanted a family, just not with him?

He was going deep down the hole he kept finding himself in since their separation. There were no answers in the hole. Only loneliness, self-loathing, and the crushing feeling of failure.

Maria took his hand, pulling him back into reality. "You look so torn up."

Antonio straightened himself.

"What she did was unforgivable," Maria said.

"I'd forgive it," he said, shaking his head and staring off into the distance. "In a heartbeat. I expected to be where you are at this point in my life."

He'd already had the house, and his career was finally under way. He figured he'd be announcing Fran's pregnancy to his family that Christmas. Instead, he was living in a shitty apartment all alone, sleeping on a pullout couch, and plotting to bring a fake date to his parents' anniversary party.

Maria squeezed his hand. "Sorry, Tone."

He gave a shrug and forced himself out of his self-made pity-party hole and back into reality.

Maria was right. He obviously couldn't go alone. Everyone they knew—his whole family, his cousins, grandparents, everyone—would see that Fran had moved on and that he hadn't. He already knew how the night would go—everyone giving him the same pained look Maria had just offered.

If he showed up with Cara, no one would feel bad for him. She was stunning.

But would she keep it from her brother?

Max was Antonio's best friend these days, and he'd specifically asked Antonio to stay away from Cara. And for good reason.

But he had no intention of making a move on her. He wanted to fix his marriage.

He blew out a breath and took a leap. "Put me down with a plus one."

When Maria didn't reply, he looked up at her.

"Are you sure—"

"I'm sure," he said, cutting her off. "I'll find another time to talk to Fran, if she'll let me."

Maybe things would fall into place the way they should, anyway. Fran might see how much better off she'd be with him and remember the good times they'd had together.

He knew Blake Hunter wasn't the right guy for her. He was the right guy for her. And he could explain to Fran later that Cara was just a friend doing him a favour. Everything would work out in the end.

The only thing he wasn't sure of was whether his and Max's friendship would survive if he ever found out Antonio used Cara as a date.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

five

C ara gazed at the dark night sky through the telescope she'd positioned out her bedroom window. That night, the sunlight from the other side of the earth illuminated a full moon, and despite its low position in the sky from her viewpoint, it sat perfectly centered in her window.

Thinking about the vastness of space always helped her put her problems into perspective. Well, not always. Maybe more like ninety-eight-point-three percent of the time.

Unfortunately, this situation fell into that rare one-point-seven percent.

She'd typed and deleted a dozen messages to Cooper, all of varying degrees of anger, but none of which made her feel better about the situation.

She knew what she should do—forward the tickets to Cooper so she could finally wash her hands of the mess, and just see Jalen next week at golf. But it all felt icky somehow.

She couldn't let Cooper get away with bullying her out of the tickets. Not after everything he'd said to her. Still, it was probably best for her mental health to cut her losses and never see him again.

She stepped away from the telescope, grabbed her phone from the nightstand, and belly-flopped onto her bed.

"Just do it," she said to herself, suppressing her agitation.

She opened the text thread to Cooper and started typing a simple, to the point message.

You win. Fuck off forever.

Her finger hovered over the “send” arrow for a split second before her phone started ringing.

Unknown caller.

With a shrug, she answered the call, assuming it was just some scammy scammer that would ask her for her social insurance number and mother's maiden name. Her brain lit up, suddenly energized. Maybe scamming a scammer would bring her mood up.

She forced a silly accent that made her sound like a sweet old lady ripe for the taking. "Hello there."

A pause met her.

"Is this Cara?" a smooth, deep voice asked.

Holy shit.

Was this the world's sexiest voiced scammer? If so, her bank account was in trouble.

"Um, yes. Who's this?"

"Antonio."

Ohhh...

Wait, what? How did Antonio get her number?

And why?

And how?

Unless...

She gasped, then darted up onto her knees as the tension she'd been holding released. "Have you changed your mind?"

A moment of silence passed. "How did you guess?"

"It was that or phone sex, but the latter seemed unlikely. Are you really going to come to the concert with me?"

Another long pause, then Antonio's cultured tone eased over the line once more.

"First, don't say sex to me ever again. If your brother finds out I've called you, let alone talked about sex with you, he'd drug me and sell me to organ harvesters on the black market."

Cara snorted as a grin took over her face. "He doesn't know how to sell things on the black market."

"He's resourceful."

She rolled her eyes but smiled at his quickness. "I'm surprised you think so little of your friend."

"Actually, I think very highly of him, which is why I feel like a dirt bag for calling you behind his back."

Cara flopped down on her bed, resting her head on her pillow and staring up at the ceiling. Something about laying back while listening to his voice was incredibly appealing. "So why did you?"

A heavy sigh came through the line. "Something came up and I'm hoping we can make a deal."

"What kind of deal?"

"I need a date—a pretend date—for a family party."

Cara thought back to their first conversation. Well, second. She couldn't actually remember the first conversation she'd had with him on account of the drunkenness.

"Aren't you trying to get back together with your wife? Why don't you ask her?"

"She's already going to be there," he said, his voice heavy. "She's bringing a date."

His defeated tone had her chest squeezing. He was going through a really shitty time and she wanted to help him. But she couldn't see how her tagging along would make things better.

"Sorry," she said. "But if I show up with you, won't that kinda set you back on the whole reconcile-with-your-wife plan?"

Her words barely left her lips before her hand flew to her face.

What the fuck was she doing? Trying to talk him out of this deal that landed so neatly

in her lap in her hour of need?

"I just need a band-aid solution for now. My family is very... involved."

Very involved, meaning prying and gossipy. Got it.

She actually didn't mind that. In fact, she got a tinge of envy toward him. Having a big family that cared about him enough to pry was a good thing.

Max was always there for her, and that was enough. She just hoped one day she could make her own big prying family.

She shook off the run-away thoughts and smiled. Everything was coming together.

"I'm in," she said with a definitive nod. "When's the party?"

"I have one condition," Antonio said, his tone much more serious than what Cara thought the situation warranted.

Cara smiled to herself. "Do I have to go through a series of agility tests? Kill someone? Solve several riddles? Sleep with you?"

A moment of silence passed, and she imagined Antonio with his chin dropped to his chest and his head shaking back and forth in exasperation.

The image made her smile wider.

"Make that two conditions," he said, his tone grave. "One, you don't joke about anything to do with you and I having sex. In any way. Ever."

She rolled her eyes but in truth, she was happy with the ease of the conversation. "I'll

give it my best effort," she said. "And two?"

"We don't tell Max."

She shot up in her bed like a vampire waking up. "You don't want to tell Max?"

"Absolutely not."

"Why?"

Antonio paused, seemingly weighing his response. Eventually he replied but completely ignored her question. "Do we have a deal?"

"Ugh," she said, annoyed that he wouldn't just tell her. She hated not knowing things. "Just a sec."

She put him on hold and tried to think. She couldn't go to the concert alone, but what would Jalen think of Antonio?

She brought up the image of Antonio in her mind, all smooth and steamy and well dressed, then laughed off her worry. One look at him, and Jalen would know they were just friends. He was so obviously way out of Cara's league. No one with hair that perfect and a jaw that chiselled was in her league.

She definitely wanted Antonio to come with her, but lying to Max wasn't something she did lightly.

Or at all.

And then there was the commitment to go to a family party with him. She didn't know what to expect from that.

She took him off hold. "What's this family party going to be like?"

"It's my parents' fortieth anniversary party. About a hundred people at La Tavola Club."

"So... fancy?"

"Yes."

Fuck.

"Just a sec."

"You don't have to put me on—"

She put him on hold again, then stewed over what would be the formal dress code, unfamiliar faces, and crowded ballroom. The whole scenario was puke-inducing.

Cara took him off hold. "Antonio?"

"I've never been put on hold in a normal conversation before."

Cara rolled her eyes. "I really want to say yes, but I'm not great at small talk in large, intimidating groups of strangers. You might want to find someone better."

He paused for a moment, as if thinking up his own move. Why did it feel like a game?

"Didn't you say you wanted to get out of your comfort zone?"

"Yes," she conceded. "But this feels like nuking my comfort zone."

"I just need to make an appearance. If it's too much, we'll bail. Do we have a deal?"

Cara squeezed her eyes shut as he threw the final blow. Yes or no. In or out.

She held her breath and took the proverbial leap. "Fine."

"Perfect," he said with a smile in his voice. She half expected him to say “check mate.”

"The party starts at six. Could you meet me at my place around five-thirty? I don't want anyone seeing me pick you up."

Cara rolled her eyes and told herself not to be offended. This wasn't a date. It was a deal between... whatever the hell they were. Group friends.

"Fine. Text me your address," Cara said.

"Will do. Thanks."

Cara let her shoulders sag into her chest. "Yeah," she said. "Bye."

Cara hung up the phone and stared at it, feeling just as icky and weird as she had before, except for different reasons.

She hated sneaking around, and hated formal situations with people she didn't know, but Antonio had a point—she'd said she wanted to step out of her comfort zone, and she intended to do just that.

Plus, once this horrible party was over, she'd get to go to the concert and see Jalen outside of golf. Not to mention telling Cooper “no” to the tickets would be very satisfying.

And maybe things with Jalen would work out so well that he'd invite her to one of his family parties, and she'd have to impress them. She could use this experience with Antonio as practice.

And she'd be helping a friend—a group friend—out. Maybe she and Antonio could shake off some of their awkwardness and become real friends. Then one day when the dust settled, they'd tell Max, and he'd laugh and ask why they hadn't just told him.

With a decisive nod she opened her conversation with Cooper, deleted you win and sent him the text fuck off forever.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

six

At the sound of muffled voices in the hallway growing louder, Antonio looked up from the impossible Scrabble game he was playing on his phone.

Cara.

He breathed a sigh of both relief and anxiety as he stood from the edge of his bed and went to answer the door. He'd been having mixed feelings about dragging her into his personal nightmare, but he couldn't stand the alternative.

Before she knocked, he swung the door open and was surprised to find her a few feet away, her back to him. Maybe she realized how foolish this was and was ready to pull the plug. It was probably for the best.

Suddenly, she spun around to face him, and his brain melted.

She was wearing a short, fitted black dress, with black high heels and a dark wool coat that came to her knees. She'd curled her dark short hair and put on sparkly earrings. But what stood out the most was her full, bright red lips.

He stared at her for a moment, his heart beating a drum, then opened his mouth, but forced it closed, stopping himself from speaking the first thought that came to his mind. Max wouldn't have approved.

He blinked up from her lips to the rest of her face, then stopped again.

She looked terrified.

Her big brown eyes had doubled, and her gaze was flitting around, unsure where to land.

"You okay?"

She shook her head and walked toward him without slowing down. He held open the door and let her barge past, then followed her into his apartment as she collapsed onto his couch/bed.

"I'm feeling overwhelmed," she said. "And a girl in the hall just told me not to trust you."

Antonio glanced back at the door before his shoulders caved. "Sara."

"What's that all about?" Cara asked, pulling her coat away from her neck as if she couldn't breathe.

"She doesn't really like me."

"No shit. Why?"

He winced. "I met her when I moved in here about six months ago, and we dated, but..."

An enormous amount of shame blocked the words from coming out.

Lucky for him, Cara was tipping toward a panic attack and hadn't noticed that he stopped speaking.

She fidgeted with a charm dangling from her bracelet as her eyes darted around the room. "Is your family going to ask me things?"

His gaze scanned her body, from her gorgeous red lips down her tight dress and endless pale legs. There wasn't a chance he was going to walk in and not draw everyone's curiosity. Not only because Cara was gorgeous but also because his family had only ever seen him with Fran.

And they were the nosiest bunch of people on earth. Plus, he was sure his mother was going to have a coronary.

But that didn't seem like helpful information to share at the moment.

"Here," he said, handing her his phone.

She took it in her shaking hand and looked down. "Scrabble?"

"It'll calm your anxiety."

She stared at the Scrabble board, and her gaze flicked around the screen.

He sat down on the edge of the bed next to her and immediately regretted how close he'd positioned himself to her. From his vantage point he could see her chest heaving with laboured breaths. "Maybe we shouldn't do this—"

"No," she said. "I'm always nervous before things like this. I'll be better after we walk in."

Antonio inspected her, but she didn't notice. Her eyes seemed to be less wide, her shoulders less strained. "I'll say I'm on call so we can bail if it's too much," he said.

Maria was the only one who would know that's not true, but she wouldn't say anything.

Cara nodded as she clicked a few buttons on the screen and stood. She handed him back his phone as the winning jingle played.

"Did you win?"

She gave a half smile and a cocky brow. "Of course."

"Already?"

No way.

He took the phone from her and stared at the game board in disbelief. He had the worst luck in that game, all z's and f's and g's and q's with no u's.

"How did you do it?"

"Well, you had a great hand," she said. "I saw you were saving the highest scoring letters to win at the end."

His thoughts scrambled and a laugh escaped him. "Uh... yeah," he said, shaking his head. "That's exactly what I was doing."

She laughed. "So you do suck. I was trying to give you the benefit of the doubt."

"I didn't think I was that bad," he said, slipping his phone in his pocket. He held her gaze, searching her brilliant eyes for a moment longer than he should have before turning and heading for the door. "What word did you play?"

She followed him and stepped through the doorway into the hall. "Freezing. Three hundred and twenty-four points."

"Holy shit," he said, locking the door behind him and starting down the hall with her. His face split into a grin he couldn't control. "I didn't even know the points went that high."

"I'm not surprised," she said with a snicker. "What with all the cat's and cow's you played."

He burst into a laugh. "I guess what you lack in golf you make up for in Scrabble?"

She shrugged as he pulled open the door to the parking lot. "Scrabble's never been a favourite, but I've always loved games. Can we talk about tonight?"

He glanced at her with a smile, loving how quick her mind was. "I'd rather talk about—"

You.

He immediately killed the thought and gave his head a shake, reminding himself that the night was not a get-to-know-you type of situation. She was only there to stop him from looking so pathetic in front of everyone he knew. He wasn't supposed to want to know about her.

He forced himself to focus on the goal of the evening—Fran.

"Sure," he said as they crossed the parking lot toward his car. "What do you want to know?"

"What's your ex-wife's name?"

"Francesca," he said, unlocking the car and opening the door for her. "Goes by Fran."

"How long ago did you break up?"

"I left in February. Valentines Day, actually."

Cara's eyes went wide as she sat in the car. "You ended your marriage on Valentine's Day?"

"She ended our marriage on Valentine's Day," he said, then closed the door and walked around to the driver's side.

"Why?" Cara asked once he was sitting down.

Antonio looked over at Cara before putting the car in drive and exiting the parking lot. "You ask a lot of questions."

"And you are very selective about which ones you answer."

He frowned as he drove down the street, but he didn't respond.

"Is anyone going to hate me or yell at me or call me a home-wrecking whore?" she asked.

He chuckled. "That's what you're worried about?"

Cara nodded.

"No," he said. "I'm sure it's going to be awkward, and my mother won't be happy about any of it, but no one will hate you and they certainly won't yell."

Cara took her bracelet in her hand and began fidgeting again. "Maybe we should have a code word, in case things get to be too much."

Antonio smiled. "Okay," he said. "How about freezing?"

"Perfect," Cara said, sagging a little in relief. "Easy enough to use in a sentence but doesn't come up too often to be confused with regular conversation and has multiple synonyms to avoid using it if you have to."

Antonio nodded, happy that she seemed more relaxed. He was pretty sure her anxiety was more about the unknown and not having a plan rather than just your basic fear of crowds.

"Good," he said. His guilt about taking her along receded. "You say freezing, and I'll pretend like I have a call from the hospital."

Cara gave him a smile as her shoulders relaxed. He was glad she was feeling better about this, but as they got closer to the club, all the anxiety that had drained from her began filling him.

The familiar warmth and scents greeted Antonio as he walked through the doors with Cara and into the large centre atrium of La Tavola Club. His grandparents had been members of the club ever since they'd immigrated to Canada, and he'd been going there since he was born.

So had Fran.

In fact, they'd first met there when they were five years old at a Christmas party, while standing in line to meet Santa. They'd had their first kiss in the coat check after graduation when they were thirteen.

And their extravagant wedding reception was held in the enormous ballroom down the hall ten years ago.

He forced his brain to stop dwelling on the past and walked in step with Cara across the polished marble floor toward the coat check at the smaller reception room, thankful that at least the party wasn't in the same space as his wedding.

"It's just through there," he said, nodding toward the open doors, where he could already see his aunts gathered at a table. "I'll take your coat."

He stepped behind her and took the collar of her coat and slid it down her back, then forced his gaze off her long, soft neck as images of him bending and kissing her along her necklace burst into his mind.

What the hell is happening?

A million conflicting thoughts raced through his mind. He fought the urge to slap himself.

"Thank you," she said with a pretty, reluctant smile.

He handed their coats to the attendant, took a deep breath, and walked them through the doors.

His eyes immediately found Fran.

She was standing by the bar with a tall, rugged looking guy in a brown suit with a navy plaid tie. His heart sank. He looked away before she noticed him noticing her and put all his attention on his "date."

"You okay?" he asked, leaning in toward Cara.

She turned and smiled up at him. Well, slightly up at him. Wearing heels, she was only a couple of inches shorter than him.

She leaned in close, her cheek close to his, and whispered into his ear, "I feel like my heart is going to fall out of my butthole."

A laugh escaped, taking with it some of the tension, and finally he got a bit of relief. "Medically impossible," he said as he took her hand to give her some support. She was warm and soft and he had to work hard to get his wayward thoughts in line. "Just remember our code word."

They took a few more steps into the room and pulled up short when Antonio's favourite person came bounding toward him with a shriek. He bent down and opened his arms.

"Zio!"

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

He lifted Sophie up, and she kissed his cheek. "Hello, little miss," he said before shifting his attention to Cara, who smiled back at him, finally resembling her usual self. "Cara, this is my niece, Sophie. Sophie, this is Cara."

"Hello," Cara said. "I love your dress."

Sophie smiled, then dropped her cheek onto Antonio's shoulder. Maria finally caught up with her daughter and stopped in front of him with a sigh.

"Sophie," she said, taking her from Antonio's arms. "Go find the other kids so I can talk to Zio, okay?"

"I don't know where they are," she said, the corners of her mouth pulling down with a little whine.

Maria gave her a patient smile. "That's the point of hide and seek. Off you go."

She set Sophie down on her little white dress shoes and they all watched as she meandered away until she saw a little boy run out from under a table and chased after him.

"I'm glad you came," Maria said to Antonio as she gave him a hug before turning to Cara.

"Hi."

Cara smiled at Maria. "Hi."

Antonio's shoulders relaxed slightly. "This is Cara," he said to Maria. "Cara, this is my sister, Maria."

Maria pulled Cara into a tight hug and, when she pulled back, gave him a look of concern. "Fran's already here with Blake Hunter."

Antonio sucked in an annoyed breath. "I think we can just call him Blake."

"I know that name..." Cara said. A little crease formed between her pretty dark eyebrows as she scanned the room.

Antonio could see the second she found him and put two and two together. She gave a bit of a nod, and her gaze dropped to the woman beside him.

"Is that Fran standing next to him?"

Maria rolled her eyes. "That's her, Princess Fran."

"Be nice," Antonio said.

"She makes it impossible," Maria said, shaking it off and turning to Cara. "So, how did you two meet?"

Cara made eye contact with Antonio and gave him a smirk. "In a garden."

Antonio huffed an unexpected laugh. He loved how subtly funny she was. "A rose garden at midnight. It was beautiful," he added.

Cara's face lit up and she held his eyes.

"Why does that sound like a lie?" Maria asked, a smile playing on her face as she

looked between him and Cara.

Antonio shrugged. "It's all true."

"I don't know how beautiful it was," Cara said.

Antonio stared at her for a moment and loosened up the control he had over his mind, allowing his suppressed thoughts to run rampant for the first time since he'd met her that night.

Cara was quite possibly the most strikingly beautiful woman he'd ever seen in real life.

The fact that she even questioned her beauty was beyond him.

She was tall and curvy, with the softest, rosiest skin and the glossiest dark hair.

She looked stunning now, all put together and glowing, but even when she was drunk in the bushes and he was untangling her hair from a thorn, she looked beautiful.

And he hadn't even mentioned how brilliant and funny she was.

"It's all true," he said, unable to peel his eyes off her. He wanted to touch her again. Hold her in his arms.

He reached for her hand.

"Hi, Tonio."

That voice, so familiar, stopped him in his tracks. He blinked away from Cara and turned to find Fran standing right next to him. His eyes met hers for a moment before

darting up to her date.

He stared in silence, searching for words before Maria saved him.

"Introduce us," Maria said to Fran, with a nod to Blake.

Fran collapsed a little, as she always did under Maria's scrutiny, and Antonio was reminded of all the times she'd been upset throughout their relationship because she felt like Maria hated her.

He'd always taken Fran's side, always told Maria to back off. But he couldn't really blame Maria for being annoyed in this situation.

He was annoyed.

"This is Blake Hunter," Fran said, stepping aside as her date reached his hand toward Antonio.

"Great to meet you, man," Blake said, grabbing hold of Antonio's hand and shaking it. "Fran told me all about you two."

Antonio fought off the urge to bare his teeth, and schooled his face to a neutral position. "Great," he said, unsure how to respond to that.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your date?" Fran asked, barely even looking at him. Her eyes were focused on Cara.

"Yes," he said. "This is Cara." He placed a hand on the small of her back and pulled her a little closer to his side.

Cara smiled and gave a little wave. "Hi."

Silence fell over the group for a moment. He realized he was staring at Fran, who was staring at Cara. He looked at his date, hoping she wasn't feeling anxious again, but instead of fear, he found worry... directed at him. Maybe even a little pity.

Was she worried about him?

He looked at Maria. Same look.

Jesus.

"So," he said, trying to break the million-year-long silence even though he didn't have a follow-up.

He let out a breath and glanced around the room. Every pair of eyes was staring at him. He rolled his eyes, hoping they would all fuck off and stop staring.

No one did.

Just when he couldn't imagine it could get any worse, his mother broke away from the group she was with and started toward them.

"Incoming," Maria said under her breath.

Fran turned and saw his mother, then turned back toward them and dropped her head.

"Tonio," his mom said. "You made it."

She came in close, and he bent to kiss her cheeks.

"And you brought someone with you?"

"This is Cara. Cara, this is my mom."

Cara smiled. "It's nice to meet you. Happy anniversary."

His mother tipped her chin up and gave a cold, "Thank you," as she turned her gaze away from Cara and on his soon-to-be ex-wife. "Fran," she said. "I'm surprised you came."

Fran's eyes widened. "Well, you sent an invitation."

"Yes, but," she said, looking over at Antonio before continuing. "I didn't think you'd bring someone."

Maria glared at their mother while Fran dipped her head and Blake's eyebrows shot up.

Jesus Christ. It was too fucking much.

Antonio wanted to pick up a chair and throw it through a fucking window.

He knew that seeing Fran with someone new for the first time would be difficult, not just for him, but for his entire family. What he hadn't imagined was how confused and angry he'd feel. He honestly couldn't even pinpoint his feelings in that moment. He was just overwhelmed.

He looked around the room at all the familiar faces, the same faces that had watched them dance their first dance together, and he just couldn't take it anymore. Sending that invitation had been a big mistake.

He had to get the fuck out of there.

He opened his mouth, closed it, then dropped his gaze and shook his head.
"Freezing."

The dead silence that suffocated them stretched for a few more seconds while everyone tried to figure out what he'd said.

"What?" Maria asked.

Before he could respond, Cara clutched her stomach and moaned.

Thank fuck.

"Ooh... I don't feel very good," she said.

He turned toward her, happy to have a set of eyes to focus on that weren't judgmental.
"You don't?"

She dropped her delicate chin and shook her pretty head, making her earrings dance.
"No, it's my... head," she said, moving her hands from her stomach to her temples. "I think I'm getting a migraine."

Antonio put a fake worried look on his face and placed his hands over hers, dipping his knees to look squarely in her eyes, as if evaluating her.

"Doesn't look good," he said, brushing his thumb over her temple. "I better get you home."

Without another word, he turned away, took Cara's hand in his, and headed for the door. Luckily, it only took a few seconds for the attendant to get their coats, and they were back in his car within minutes.

They sat in silence for a long while as he drove back. He was at a complete loss for what to say. What an embarrassing mess.

"So," Cara said, treading lightly. "You're just as bad at code words as you are at Scrabble."

It took him a second to process her little quip, but when he finally did, a laugh bubbled up from nowhere and escaped his lips.

Then another.

He shook his head and laughed as he drove under the streetlights, the rest of the stress draining from his body. "And you're an even worse actor. Why did you hold your stomach and say you had a migraine?"

Cara smiled and shrugged. "I wasn't expecting you to say freezing. I thought it would be me."

"Yeah," he said with a headshake. "Sorry, I don't know what happened there."

Cara shook her head. "Don't apologize," she said. "That was rough. You handled it better than I would have."

He glanced over at her. "What would you have done?"

"I would have cried and ran out of the room. Or kicked that guy in the shin. Your mom seems very... passionate."

"Passionate?"

"Yes. Passionate about your relationships."

He nodded. "She's not happy about me and Fran separating. She thinks I've brought shame to the family and I'm going to hell."

Cara blew out a whistle.

He looked over, and she was back to fidgeting with the charm on her bracelet.

He pulled into his apartment's parking lot and parked. They both stepped out his car, and he walked her over to her car.

"Thanks for coming," he said. "It was better with you there."

She gave him a smile. "What are you going to do about Fran?"

He shook his head, not even knowing where to start. "I don't know. I can't imagine she actually wants to be with a guy like Blake."

"Yeah, they don't seem that compatible," Cara said, digging out her keys from her purse. She pressed the button to unlock her car and pulled open the door, then hesitated and turned to him.

"Just so you know, if I were Fran, I'd choose you," she said. "And I wouldn't even think twice about it."

She said it while looking at her feet, as if she knew better than to say it, but couldn't help herself.

It was comforting to hear, especially following his extremely embarrassing night and returning alone to his awful apartment.

Actually, everything about having her with him that night had been good, like a salve

over a burn.

"Thanks, Cara," he said, fighting the urge to pull her into a hug. "I'll see you tomorrow."

She gave a nod and smiled, then got in her car and drove off. He watched her go, feeling way too alone now that she was gone.

seven

C ara took a deep, cleansing breath as she walked up the cracked sidewalk toward The Hideaway Room, a small music venue tucked between a vintage clothing store and a tattoo parlour.

The venue's giant neon sign flickered intermittently, casting purple shadows across the crowd gathered outside building as the throbbing of loud music permeated through the brick.

She had left early, expecting to arrive first, so she was surprised to see Antonio waiting for her near the venue's metal entrance doors, leaning against the dark wall and looking down at his phone.

Damn. He looked good. A little too good, actually.

Even in the dim glow of the streetlight, she could see how attractive he was. He'd worn dark jeans that fit him perfectly, a charcoal button down and a black jacket that looked both casual and expensive. His dark wavy hair caught the light as he tilted his head, examining his phone screen.

She wondered how Jalen would react to her having a "friend" that looked like Antonio. And well dressed. With expressive eyes and a perfect smile. That was also brilliant and smelled like a million bucks.

She shook it all off as she approached him, her heels clicking against the uneven pavement. No matter how attractive he was, he was taken—sort of—and had made it

very clear, on several occasions, that he wasn't interested in anyone but his wife. And especially not his friend's little sister.

He didn't even want her uttering the word “sex” in his presence.

"Hey!" she said, trying for the most “I like you only as a friend” tone she could muster.

Antonio looked up, their eyes met, and he smiled. "Hey," he said, pressing a button on his phone and slipping it into his pocket.

"Scrabble?" she asked as she came to a stop in front of him. She had to raise her voice slightly to be heard over the music coming from inside.

He gave her a smile and pushed his hands into his pockets. "I'm getting better."

"You've overcome your fear of q's?"

"Not entirely, but I'm making progress."

They smiled at each other for a moment before falling back into silence. Why did she feel so awkward around him? It was probably because she was trying to act like he was just a friend when she knew she didn't think of him that way.

At all.

She needed to fix her brain so she could look at him and see a friend, not a funny, smart, caring, hot guy who she wanted to make out with.

She banished the thoughts from her mind, focusing instead on thoughts that would place him alongside Ethan and Adam in her mind.

"So how do you and Max know each other?" she asked.

His forehead creased a fraction. "We played hockey together when we were teens."

She scanned his face again. "I should have met you before."

He shrugged. "It was a triple A team when we were eighteen. I only played for half a year before I broke my leg and had to stop. But we stayed in touch."

Cara nodded. "And you reconnected after your separation?"

"Yeah," he said. "I reached out to see if he was still in Mapleton when I moved to my apartment here. I lived with my parents for a while, but I couldn't stay there."

Cara scoffed. She couldn't imagine living with his extremely disapproving mother would have been easy. "I wondered whether—"

The thought exploded in her mind as she caught sight of the last person she expected to see on that sidewalk.

Cooper.

He was striding toward her with a grin, and when the crowd cleared, she saw he wasn't alone.

"Lily?" she asked, even though they weren't close enough to hear her.

Lily seemed to read her lips and faltered her steps, but Cooper kept marching toward her.

Oh no.

Her rage bubbled at seeing her ex and her old friend together at a concert that she paid for. She forced herself to calm down so as not to make a scene.

"Who's Lily?" Antonio asked, turning around and scanning the crowd.

"My best friend," she said, seeing nothing but red. "Former my best friend."

"Cara," Cooper said with a smile as he strolled toward her. "I was hoping you'd be here to sort this all out."

His audacity shocked her into silence.

Did he actually think she was there to help him get into the concert? And were they... together?

Lily had told Cara she was wrong for breaking up with Cooper, but she hadn't expected her to swoop in later.

Cara swallowed down the hurt. "Are you two together?"

Cooper nodded as he slung a casual arm around Lily's shoulders.

Her anger and shock and sadness faded, leaving her with only pity for Lily and irritation at his ongoing harassment. She couldn't believe she actually cried over this guy.

"Cooper," she said, trying to stay calm, "I know your brain struggles to connect simple dots, so allow me to explain things clearly."

He stared at her with his mouth open slightly, as if not realizing she was being incredibly rude and sarcastic.

"There is no universe in which I would come here to help you and your new girlfriend get into a concert that I paid for."

Her voice had started low, but by the last word, she was yelling.

She couldn't stop.

"I stayed awake until midnight," she continued. "I refreshed three screens a billion times, and I paid an absurd amount of money to get these tickets, and then you broke my heart."

Cooper continued his slack-jawed stare while Lily made herself small behind him.

"What makes you think I would then go out of my way for you?"

When she looked away from him, she realized she'd drawn the attention from the crowd waiting in line, including the people scanning the tickets.

Then she remembered Jalen was there, somewhere.

Shit.

Scanning the crowd, she didn't see him— thank God —but it would probably be best to stop berating Cooper on the sidewalk before Jalen caught her acting like a raving lunatic.

She turned away from Cooper and took Antonio's hand.

"Come on," Cara said, marching them to the front of the line.

The two guys at the front of the line looked a little scared as she approached. "Can I

cut?" she asked. They nodded and stepped aside.

"Thank you," she said as politely as possible. She showed her QR code to the attendant and stepped inside.

As soon as she was through the doors, she wanted to leave. The music pounded so loudly it triggered an instant headache. The room was tiny and packed and she hated it, but she'd come this far. She could stick around a little longer, to at least see if she could run into Jalen.

Luckily, the opening act finished the song and announced they were done, and that the headline act would be out shortly.

Cara's shoulders dropped in relief.

Antonio leaned in close. "You okay?"

She shook her head. "I'm mad at myself for getting so angry. Thank God Jalen wasn't around."

"That guy deserved to be yelled at," Antonio said. "No wonder Max hates him."

Cara nodded. "Still, I'd rather Jalen find out later rather than sooner that I'm a spiteful bitch who'll yell at someone on the sidewalk."

Antonio laughed. "I'm sure he'll love your temper." As a crowd walked past and bumped into him, he moved closer to her, and she tried not to react to his closeness, but it was impossible. He smelled good, and he was being so nice to her. She wanted to fall against his chest and never leave.

"Thank you for coming with me."

He slid that gorgeous smile her way. "I owed you. Besides, this beats stewing at home, wondering what Fran and Blake are up to."

She lifted the corner of her mouth. "I'm sure I'll think way too much about Cooper and Lily now that I know they're together."

Antonio nodded. "But you won't get back together with him?"

Cara puffed out a laugh. "Absolutely not. Been there, done that. I've cut him out like a gangrenous toe, and I have no intention of re-infecting myself."

Antonio laughed. He looked like he wanted to say something else, but a tap on her shoulder had her spinning around.

"Cara?"

Her eyes popped open, and she turned to find Jalen. "Oh, hi," she said.

Jalen leaned in and gave her a hug. It felt easy. Comfortable. That was how she'd wanted to greet Antonio.

She pushed away the thought and forced herself to focus.

"I'm glad we ran into each other," she said.

Jalen pulled back and flashed a brilliant smile. "Me too. This is my friend Paul."

"Hi, Paul. This is Antonio," she said, and waited for them to all shake hands while internally yelling at herself for not saying "my friend Antonio."

Jalen placed his hand on her upper arm and leaned in. "Can I talk to you, just for a

second?"

She nodded and let him lead her away from Antonio and Paul.

"I was wondering if you want to go out with me sometime this week? Maybe Thursday?"

She nodded way too emphatically and had to tell herself to be cool.

"I'd love that."

"Great," he said, pulling out his phone. "I'll take your number and call you to arrange it."

She smiled and gave him her number just as the band came on stage.

"We better get to our seats," he said. "Paul will kill me if I make him miss anything."

She smiled as he came in for another quick hug.

"See you later," he said as he pulled back. He walked off with Paul.

Antonio came back into her vision. "All good?" he asked.

She broke into a nerdy smile and did a little dance, letting the excitement out. "He asked me on a date!"

Antonio laughed and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "So, mission accomplished then?"

"Yes," she said as a deafening wave of feedback hit her in the ear and everyone in the

room winced.

She glanced from the stage to Antonio. "Freezing?" she asked.

His head jerked back slightly. "You want to go already?"

She nodded before remembering what he'd said about sitting in his apartment alone, thinking about his problems.

Maybe they should stay so he wouldn't have to be depressed all night. She really didn't want to be there but abandoning him so soon after she just used him to get a date with Jalen seemed wrong. He'd got dressed and came out with her. Plus, he was clearly going through a really shitty time.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

She also really enjoyed hanging out with him, and she was determined to fix her impression of him and make her brain see him as a friend.

"Do you play euchre?"

Antonio lips curved. "I've played before. Why?"

"There's a tournament tonight at a gaming cafe close to here. They run card tournaments every Sunday night. Do you wanna play with me?"

He smirked before a range of emotions played across his face. "I'm not sure—"

Cara cut him off. "It's just cards, Antonio," she said. "Don't you think we should try to be friends?"

He narrowed his eyes, struggling with the invitation. He reached a hand to the back of his neck before shrugging and giving her a smile. "Okay," he said. "Why not?"

Cara walked into the gaming cafe and took off her coat. She hadn't been there in a while, but nothing had changed.

The Dungeons and Dragons tables were still in the corner, the artist who painted Warhammer miniatures was still at a table by the washrooms, and the endless shelves of board games still filled the far wall.

She walked between the tables toward the counter in the back and smiled at the bartender.

"We'd like to join the euchre tournament," she said.

The guy behind the counter nodded.

She turned to Antonio to ask him if he wanted a beer, but the look on his face stopped her. "What?"

"Are you a regular here?" he asked.

She glanced around the room and realized she'd revealed a lot about herself in the last ninety seconds.

He knew she was a nerd, but maybe he hadn't realized just how nerdy she was?

That room had probably been the largest gathering of nerds he'd ever been a part of—what with his triple A hockey and general hotness.

He'd probably been popular in high school.

And had friends. And went to parties where he hooked up with slutty girls.

She'd been so painfully shy it was as if she hadn't existed. It wasn't until she'd put in a great deal of effort, and countless hours of YouTube makeup and hair tutorials, before she garnered any attention from a classically attractive man, and that turned out to be a nightmare.

Cooper taught her a few things, though. Most notably that men like him didn't like nerdy gaming cafes.

"Are you really that surprised?" she asked.

His brows rose and his jaw dropped open as his gaze raked down her body and back up. "You're kidding, right?"

She looked down, trying desperately not to read into what he was possibly implying. Despite her efforts, her cheeks flamed and didn't know where to look.

Antonio shook his head, a move she was realizing he did often when talking to her and turned toward the guy behind the bar.

"Two cream ales," Antonio said to the guy as he pulled his wallet from his pocket.

"I'll get it," she said, but he waved her off and handed over his card.

While the guy was getting their beers and snacks, she decided to ignore Antonio's flattery and check out the tournament situation. She leaned over to look through the door into the back room, where all the tables were set up for the tournament.

"It's been a while since I played. How mad are you going to be if I suck?" Antonio asked.

She turned to him and smiled. "It won't matter. I'll win."

He laughed. "Are you always this confident?"

"With card games? Yes. Other things, not so much."

Antonio narrowed his eyes at her as if she was a puzzle to solve. "What other things?"

She stared at him for a moment, wondering how much she wanted to reveal, then realized that it didn't matter what he thought of her. He'd already seen her yell at her

ex in the street while acting shamelessly spiteful, then brought him to the nerdiest place on earth.

She had nothing to lose by being fully honest with him.

"Relationships," she said in a near whisper. "Guys in general, sex... I don't really have a clue."

Antonio's eyes bulged, and he reared back.

She immediately regretted saying anything and shook her head, looking down at her feet. "I'm never telling you anything ever again."

He huffed a laugh. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting you to be so... forthright."

"Forthright?" she asked with a smile.

He nodded. "I'll use that one next time I play Scrabble."

Their eyes connected when she looked up, but he quickly looked away.

"I'm surprised by you," he said. "Your insides don't match your outsides."

"Huh?"

He stared back at her, his gaze flicking between her eyes then dropped to her lips. "You're beautiful," he said.

She stopped breathing and her eyes widened so much they felt dry.

"And obviously brilliant," he continued. "You have every reason to be confident, but

then you say things like that, and it surprises me."

She stared at him in shock for a moment before the bartender broke the silence.

"Here's your beer," he said, placing two frosty glasses on the bar.

"Thank you," she said, picking up a glass and taking a sip, hoping the cold drink would calm her hot face.

"I shouldn't have said that," Antonio said, shaking his head. "I can just imagine what Max would do to me if he knew I was here with you, let alone telling you how beautiful you are."

She forced herself to take a breath but couldn't meet his eyes. "I'm glad you said it."

He huffed out a long breath and grabbed his beer, then tilted his head toward the doors. "Should we go in?"

She nodded and walked to the door, but stopped before going and whispered to him, "If I blink twice, go alone."

A slow smile spread across his face. "Okay."

They walked in and sat across from each other at a table with another team already set up, and one of their opponents dealt.

It only took a few rounds for her to read the cards and their opponents.

Once she figured them out, they handily won round after round until they'd eliminated their first team.

After the easy defeat, their opponents stood and left, and Antonio leaned across the table.

"You can count cards?"

She nodded. "It's only half a deck."

He sat back with a smile as the next team arrived. On the second-to-last round she knew his hand was absolute shit, but he was forced to make trump clubs. Still, it was better than hers and the other teams, so she blinked twice at him.

"I'll go alone," he said with zero hesitation.

She smiled and set her cards down, then sat back and watched as he took each hand to win the game. The other team stood immediately, angry over him winning with such a shitty hand. Once they were gone, they both burst into laughter.

"That was amazing," she said.

He shook his head with a laugh. "I thought you'd lost your mind when you blinked twice. I had the left bauer, a nine, a ten, and a queen off suit."

She laughed and stood. "I know."

He stood and shook his head. "You gotta teach me."

"I will," she said. "But we have one more round before—"

A loud double ping went off, stopping her train of thought. What the hell?

"Was that both of our phones? At the same time?"

What were the odds?

She pulled her phone from her purse as Antonio took his from his pocket, and they realized what had happened.

"Adam started a group chat," Antonio said, looking up at her with wide eyes.

She winced and accepted the invitation, then read the message.

Adam: Where is everyone? Can you come to Chelsea's? We've got news. Also, how do we not have a group chat yet?

Shit.

She glanced at Antonio, who'd paled to a shade whiter than the cards.

"It's okay," she said. "We can play cards together, can't we?"

Antonio shook his head. "I promised your brother I wouldn't go anywhere near you."

She narrowed her eyes. "I want to know why he doesn't trust you."

He ignored her demand and started walking toward the doors. But she stayed firm.

When he realized he'd been walking alone, he turned and came back with his shoulders drawn. He looked around, then leaned closer.

"He thinks I'm a douchebag for cheating on Sara."

She pulled back from him as her eyes doubled. "Sara? Your neighbour?"

Antonio nodded, regret marring all of his features. "For the record, I also think I'm a douchebag."

Cara folded in on herself a little. "You cheated on her?"

Antonio gave another solemn nod.

"Why did you do it?"

He winced and gave a hard, obvious swallow. "Fran showed up at my place one night and told me she was having second thoughts, and I..."

He trailed off, but she got the gist.

She stared at him for a long moment and put herself in his shoes. She didn't think he was a bad guy, but obviously she agreed with the consensus. It was a douchebag move.

It now made more sense why Sara warned her away from Antonio in the hallway. But she didn't need a warning. She and Antonio were only friends.

Barely even that.

"You think I'm awful now, don't you?"

Cara shrugged. "Why didn't you just break up with her?"

"I did after, and I told her the truth. But to be honest..."

Cara grew impatient. "What?"

He let out a sigh. "It was the other way around, to me. Being with Sara made me feel like I was cheating on my wife."

Okay... That was...

Super fucked up.

But she couldn't really judge. She'd never been told on Valentine's Day by her husband that he wanted a divorce only to have him show back up later and want to be with her.

It was kinda hard to wrap her mind around it.

"I never wanted any of this," he said. "The divorce, the cheating. I'm just... fucked."

Before she could respond, their phones pinged again with a response from Max in the group chat, saying he was on his way to Chelsea's.

Antonio's eyelids dropped and he squeezed his eyes shut.

"We'll lie," she said, already planning an excuse as she stepped toward the door.

She appreciated his honesty—with her, at least. And no one was perfect. He told her the truth and was clearly remorseful, so she decided not to hate him forever. But she could see why Max didn't trust him.

It would be nearly impossible to trust him after something like that.

Antonio finally looked up and followed her. "I'm sorry I'm asking you to do this, but Max is—"

"It's fine," she said, cutting him off as she typed in the group chat. "I'm going to hold up my end of the bargain."

eight

Antonio climbed the stone steps to Monroe Manor and walked in. He felt odd walking into Chelsea's house, but she'd asked him to in the group chat when he'd said he was on his way, so he did.

His mind was still reeling from the last few hours with Cara.

He and Cara had messaged the group saying they were on their way and tried to time it right, so they'd arrive ten minutes apart.

She hadn't seemed all too happy about lying, but there was no way he was going to explain to Max that he'd used his little sister as a fake date because his wife had a new boyfriend.

And that he liked it.

And had the best night in forever, playing in a card tournament with her at a nerdy gaming cafe.

And that he wished he could see her again.

God, his life was so fucked up.

The only thing that was going well was his new group of friends. Who he was now lying to.

He shook his head as he took off his shoes and started into the house, promising himself that he would do better. No more lies. No more schemes.

He kept walking through the huge old house but didn't see anyone. "Hello?"

"Back here!" Adam called from somewhere in the depths of the gigantic manor.

He started toward the light and sound, past a fancy little sitting room and an enormous wood staircase. He'd expected the huge old house to feel cold, but he'd been wrong.

Ben's toys and the smell of vanilla filled the rooms, and the vintage movie posters on the walls were a cool touch.

It made him even more homesick. And somehow it got worse when he came around the corner to the gigantic kitchen-slash-dining-slash-living area, where a Christmas tree was set up by the fireplace and totes of ornaments and decorations were stacked in the center of the room, waiting to be used.

"Hi, Antonio," Chelsea said as she stepped toward him and gave him a hug. "Sorry about the mess. I wasn't expecting to have everyone over."

Antonio shook his head with a smile. "Doesn't bother me at all."

He moved through the group, greeting all his friends, then took a seat on a stool next to Max and thanked Adam as he passed him a beer.

A second later, the front door opened, and Cara walked in. He could hear her steps getting closer until she stepped into the room and said hi to everyone.

She was clearly far more at home here than he was. She moved around the room,

saying hi and giving hugs to everyone, but when she came to him, she awkwardly paused, unsure what to do.

"Hey," he said, just as awkwardly, trying to remember how they were supposed to act with each other.

"Good to see you again, Antonio," she said, then turned and dropped onto a dining chair.

He told himself not to smirk.

"Where were you tonight?" Max asked.

Antonio panicked for a moment before realizing Max was asking Cara.

"On a date," she said.

Antonio forced his poker face. Stay calm, stay neutral.

"Ooh, tell us everything!" Willow said.

Cara looked around at all the faces. When her gaze connected with his, he tilted his head quizzically and leaned in. Her beautiful eyes danced with amusement.

"I met this guy at golf and he asked me out."

"Is he dreamy?" Adam asked, getting a laugh from everyone.

"In fact, he is," she said. "His name is Jalen, and he seems cool and he's easy to talk to, and I really like him."

The smile that had been playing on Antonio's lips from Adam's teasing faltered, as a surge of jealousy moved through his chest, squeezing. Was she really that into Jalen?

He mentally shoved the question aside. Of course she was. Why shouldn't she be? The kid seemed nice enough. And she'd been thrilled when he'd asked her on a date. Just because his life was in the shitter didn't mean she shouldn't be happy.

He took a deep swig from his beer and looked up. Cara was staring at him, her eyes intense, as if trying to read his mind, but he quickly looked away.

"Did you have a good time?" Willow asked.

Cara cleared her throat. "Yes, I did."

"So you're going to see him again?" Max asked.

Cara nodded.

"Hmmm..." Natalie said, drawing the attention of the room. "I always thought we should set Cara up with Jake from your hockey team."

Jake?

Antonio's shoulders tensed. Why would they set her up with Jake?

Max scowled. "Why do we have to set her up with anyone?"

Natalie rolled her eyes. "I just think he's cute, and they're around the same age."

Same age.

He took another drink, remembering that there was a sizable age gap between him and Cara. Not that it mattered, since she was one hundred percent off limits. And he was married. But it was easy to forget she was over ten years younger than him.

Actually, it was easy to forget about everything when he was with her.

He had to stop thinking like that.

"Doesn't matter," Adam said. "Jake's dating Brin."

"He is?" Ethan asked. "I didn't know that."

"Who's Brin?" Antonio asked.

"Brin of Brin's Café," Adam said.

"Oh," Antonio nodded. He'd stopped in there before, but he wasn't a regular. "How do you know literally everything?" he asked with a laugh.

Adam smiled. "I talk to people," he said before turning back to Natalie. "You'll have to find someone else."

"No, you won't," Cara said, jumping in to put an end to the conversation. "Why are we here?"

Chelsea cleared her throat as Adam moved to her side and put his arm around her shoulders. "We set a date for our wedding."

Natalie gasped.

"When?" Cara yelled.

"New Year's Eve." Adam said.

A chorus of excitement rang out as everyone hugged and voiced how happy they were.

"It doesn't give us much time to plan," Chelsea said. "And my schedule is so busy with the movie, but it's just going to be small, here in town, at the golf course."

"It's going to be amazing," Natalie said. "You haven't been dress shopping yet, have you?"

Chelsea shook her head and put on a blinding smile. "I was hoping to go with my bridesmaids."

"Does that mean we're bridesmaids?" Cara asked, her pretty eyes hopeful and her hands clasped together at her heart.

Antonio's face stretched into a smile and let himself stare at her for longer than he should have. But everyone was too excited to tell.

"Of course!"

The girls all jumped up, screaming and dancing together in a big group hug.

Antonio moved away from the piercing noise toward the guys.

"Does that mean we're groomsmen?" Max asked, his hands clasped together as Cara's had been.

They all laughed.

"Obviously," Adam said, and as much as they made fun of the girls, they all joined in a group hug around Adam, too.

"I already have plans for a bachelorette party!" Natalie called over to the fray.

"Dear God," Adam said to them under his breath with a shake of his head. "Can you imagine all of them out at a bachelorette party?"

Antonio looked over at the group of beautiful women and smiled. They were all stunning in their own way, but something about Cara made her stand out, as if she was under a spotlight that followed her everywhere she went.

"They're going to get a lot of attention."

"And cause a lot of trouble," Max added.

Ethan laughed and shook his head. "We were thinking it would be fun to do a joint bachelor and bachelorette party bus tour. But there's not a lot of time."

"I can take off whenever," Max said.

"Same," said Adam. "What's your schedule like?"

Antonio shrugged. "Chaotic, but I'm owed a lot of favours."

Adam smiled and gave his shoulder a squeeze. "Thanks, man. I'm glad you're here."

Antonio smiled and nodded. "Me, too."

They dove into discussing the details—the venue, flowers, food, and everything else—but Antonio fell silent. He wasn't much of a talker, anyway. But he was

incredibly grateful to be there with friends and to have things to look forward.

He'd meant it when he'd told Cara that his new group of friends in Mapleton was the only thing going right in his life.

And it was going very right, and he was very thankful.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

nine

Cara sat across from Jalen and resisted the urge to fidget with her bracelet as her mind flitted, trying to remember the topics she'd read to bring up on a first date.

She'd felt good at the start of the date, excited even.

But now that they were there, sitting across from each other in silence, she was panicking.

She made a mental note to look up how to cope with silence when she got home, then cleared her throat. "So, what do you do for work?"

Jalen looked up from his menu and put on an arrogant smile. "I'm a lead software engineer for a tech startup."

Cara nodded, searched for a follow-up question while he went back to reading the menu.

"What are you engineering?"

Jalen looked up again, then glanced around as if it was a stupid question.

Was it?

"I just work on code all day."

She wanted to say “coding what?” but didn't want to face his arrogance again, so she kept her mouth shut.

To say it wasn't going great would be an understatement.

Well, maybe that wasn't fair. He hadn't done or said anything problematic to her. He just didn't seem that interested in speaking, which made her incredibly uncomfortable.

She pretended to peruse her own menu, even though she could recite it like the quadratic equation.

When he'd suggested “this great new place called Keller's,” she'd agreed, expecting him to see the connection, but then realized he didn't even know her last name.

Then she was sure he'd figure it out when both the hostess and waiter greeted her by name, but he just smiled obliviously and sat.

It was clear he wasn't that curious about her. In fact, he hadn't asked her a single question in the ten minutes they'd already spent sitting across from each other.

Cara glanced at her watch. Nope, it had only been four minutes.

Why was time moving so slowly?

She hoped their conversation would become more organic as they settled in and became comfortable, but it wasn't looking good, and she was getting more and more fidgety.

"I'm gonna try the cabbage roll sandwich," he announced, placing the menu down and taking a drink of Willow's new ale.

"Solid choice," she said with a smile. "It's delicious. My grandmother's recipe."

Jalen's eyes slowly lifted and met hers, and he stared at her for a moment. "Your grandmother's recipe?" he asked with a wince, as if he'd just realized he was sitting across from a completely unhinged person.

"Yeah," she said with a laugh. "This is actually my brother's and his girlfriend's place. Keller is my last name."

His face relaxed—albeit slightly—as he sat back. "I didn't know."

"Are we all set to order?"

Jalen looked up at the waiter who'd appeared beside their table. "Cabbage roll sandwich, please."

"And for you, Cara?"

"I'll have the maple bacon burger but be sure to tell Luis it's for me. He'll know what to do."

"You got it," the waiter said with a wink, then turned and disappeared.

Jalen relaxed fractionally but stayed quiet as the awkward silence returned. This time it swept over them like an avalanche, cutting off air.

Cara searched for something to ask him to fill the void as she fidgeted with the bottom of her shirt. She'd sworn off the fidgeting but could not put an end to it.

Should she tell him what she was working on at school? Mention the once-in-a-lifetime meteor shower that was coming next week? Start blathering on about how

cold it had been?

Ugh.

Finally, her mind landed on golf.

"Have you been out on the links lately?"

On the links?

What on earth was she saying? And why was she bringing up a topic she knew nothing of?

His eyes met hers, as if he'd been waging his own silent battle for conversation and she'd just cast him a lifeline.

He smiled, opened his mouth, and started blathering on about handicaps and eagles.

She followed along, trying to gauge an appropriate time to laugh or nod, trying to keep up the ruse.

If she was going to go on another date with him, she'd need to broaden her golf research beyond little throwaway terms she didn't fully understand, like "links."

Suddenly, the door opened, and an icy breeze blew in, followed by Max.

His eyes met hers briefly before zeroing in on the guy sitting across from her. A millisecond later, he changed his trajectory and turned toward her, gobbling up the distance between them while staring daggers into the back of Jalen's head.

She rolled her eyes at him, then realized he was wearing gym clothes.

And the ends of his hair were wet.

And it was Thursday.

Shit.

Hockey night.

That meant that not far behind would be—

The door opened and in blew Adam, Ethan, and Antonio. Adam followed Max and when he saw her and Jalen, his ridiculous face broke into a smile.

Here we go.

She braced herself, all the while Jalen droned on and on about some golf course she was supposed to care about, oblivious to the storm brewing behind him—her brother, and his two friends who were practically also brothers, and their newest friend, who definitely wasn't like a brother at all.

Jalen trailed off as Max moved to the side of their booth and stopped, effectively cutting off the view of the restaurant behind him.

"Cara," Max said in a fake intimidating voice.

She rolled her eyes.

Jalen twisted to look up at Max, then glanced back at her with an expectant look.

"Jalen, this is my brother, Max. Max, Jalen."

"Hey, man," Jalen said in a shaky voice as he extended his hand toward Max.

Max looked at her first and she widened her eyes, so he took his hand and played nice.

"Well, well, well! What have we here?" Adam asked with a big gotcha smile as he pushed aside Max. "Cara, are you on a date?"

Ethan laughed and shook his head.

Cara sighed. "This is Adam and Ethan and—"

Fuck.

She finally realized what she should have realized the second she'd realized it was hockey night.

Jalen had already met Antonio. But Antonio definitely shouldn't have already met Jalen.

She searched for an explanation, but Jalen had already spotted Antonio and spoke before she could.

"Hey, Antonio, right?"

Shit, shit, shit.

Antonio nodded but stayed silent. He spared her one glance, but his face was completely neutral.

"You two know each other?" Max asked, staring at Antonio.

Before either could answer, Cara interrupted.

"Anyway!" she shouted, way too loud than the situation called for. "You guys want to go, so you should. Go, that is. Now."

Max frowned as Adam laughed, and Ethan pushed the two of them along. But when she looked at Antonio, she caught him staring at Jalen.

Actually, staring wasn't the right word for what he was doing. It was more like... glaring?

"You two have fun!" Adam said.

Antonio snapped out of it and followed the group through the restaurant to a table in the back near the brewery doors.

It wasn't as good as them leaving entirely, but at least they were out of sight. Besides, she and Jalen would have to get used to them all if they were going to figure out some common ground and date each other.

"That's your brother?" Jalen asked as he turned back toward her, his brows sky-high.

"He only looks mean."

Jalen gave her an unconvinced nod. "And Antonio? He's..."

She waited for him to finish.

"A friend of your brother's?"

Cara nodded. "Yeah, they've known each other since they were young."

"So, is he... like a brother to you?"

Cara snorted and immediately regretted it.

"Uh, I haven't known him as long," she said, trying to recover.

But it was futile. Antonio was as much as a brother to her as Mars was a moon of Earth. But given that Jalen looked nervous and seemed to grasp that there was something else between them, on her side at least, she shook her head and tried again.

"We're just friends," she said.

Jalen nodded but stayed silent.

Cara started fidgeting again.

"Okay!" the waiter said as he came to a stop next to their booth. "I have the cabbage roll sandwich for you," he said, placing a loaded plate down in front of Jalen. "And a maple bacon burger, just how you like it, from Luis, for you," he said, placing the plate in front of Cara. "Enjoy."

They both said thanks, and the waiter turned and walked off. Cara almost wanted to ask him to pull up a chair and stay.

Silence fell upon them again, but at least this time there was food to distract her and give her a buffer to think of better directions to steer the conversation toward.

"So, what did you think of the concert?"

He launched into a funny story about his friend Paul buying fake tickets from three different scammers before getting legit ones, and she forced herself to forget about

Antonio sitting just across the room.

She relaxed into the comfy booth, and picked up her burger, and gave all her attention to Jalen.

ten

" I don't like him."

Antonio internally screamed in agreement but remained completely silent as Max glared across the room, picking apart Jalen. A waiter came by and dropped some menus in the center of the table, but no one reached for them. They already knew the menu front and back.

"You don't even know him," Ethan said, gesturing across the way to Jer behind the bar. He held up four fingers and Jer got to work with a nod.

"I don't need to know him," Max said. "I'm an excellent judge of character."

Adam burst out into laughter. "You thought Willow was a criminal."

"So I was wrong once," he said, finally breaking his glare and turning his attention to Antonio. "How do you know him?"

He'd known the questioning would come as soon as Jalen recognized him, so he'd already prepared a plausible explanation and rehearsed it in his head several times.

It had helped distract him from how pretty Cara looked and how annoyed he'd been at the surge of jealousy that flooded his system as soon as he saw them together.

"He was a patient."

Ethan was the first to turn to him, brows bunched as if staring at a puzzle that wasn't fitting together. "Shouldn't he know you as Dr. Santori?"

"Normally, yes, but these were special circumstances I can't discuss under doctor-patient confidentiality."

Ethan winced, and Adam threw up his hands.

"Don't tell him that," Adam said with a dramatic flick of his wrist toward Max. "His imagination will take over and Cara will never be allowed to date the kid."

Even better, Antonio thought to himself.

He forced a neutral expression on this face, even though he wanted to smile, as Jer delivered their beers and left.

Just then, they all heard Cara's funny little laugh across the room and turned. Antonio's foot started tapping under the table. What the hell was this Jalen kid saying that was so fucking funny?

"She looks like she's having fun," Ethan said.

They all looked over and saw her beautiful eyes all crinkled and happy as she bent slightly forward, laughing.

Had she smiled and laughed that much when they'd gone out? Definitely not at his parents' anniversary party. But maybe she did at the euchre tournament?

"And if she heard you say 'allowed to,'" Ethan added, with a pointed look at Adam, "she'd marry him out of spite."

Max's already deep scowl deepened further.

"Don't you want her to be in a happy relationship?" Ethan asked. "That's what she wants."

Max slowly calmed down and sat back, piercing Antonio with his gaze. "Just tell me it wasn't something criminal."

Antonio hesitated, then wanted to punch himself for almost lying. "No," he said. "Nothing criminal."

Max assessed his eyes for a long moment before finally breaking eye contact and reaching for his beer. He knew how much Max loved his sister. Honestly, she was more like a daughter to him.

The fact that Antonio was lying to him, and sewing seeds of doubt about Cara's date, made him hate himself even more.

What the hell was he doing? How did he become this kind of person? He always thought of himself as a good friend. He wanted to be someone you could count on.

Instead, he'd become someone you wouldn't want to leave alone with your sister.

"She'll figure it out," Ethan said. "She's definitely smart enough."

"She lacks experience to see red flags. Look how long it took her to figure out Cooper," Max said. "I still worry she'll start that bullshit back up again."

Antonio took a drink and stayed quiet.

After that concert, there was no way. Max didn't have to worry about Cooper ever

again.

But he obviously couldn't put his friend's mind at ease without admitting he'd been sort of seeing his sister. He glanced across the room at Cara and wondered if they should just come clean.

"How did your parents' anniversary party go?"

Antonio blinked over at Adam, who was watching him curiously. Could Adam tell that he'd been watching Cara?

Shit.

Hopefully not.

"It went bad." Antonio twisted in his seat, forcing his attention elsewhere and fighting the urge to glance across the room. "Fran brought someone. And Mom called her out. It was a disaster. I left ten minutes after I got there."

His friends winced in unison.

"Is it serious between them?" Ethan asked.

Antonio shrugged. "I don't think so." He remembered how sick he felt standing across from Fran at that party. "They don't seem compatible. She's always been very high maintenance, and the guy she brought is fucking Blake Hunter."

All three of them made matching "oh" faces when they recognized the same. "That survivalist guy, right? With the news segment?" Adam asked.

Antonio nodded.

"I saw a clip of him killing a wolverine with a rock and skinning it with a pocketknife," Ethan said, a look of absolute disgust on his face. "It was gruesome."

"Has she changed a lot?" Max asked. "Become outdoorsy?"

Antonio shook his head. "I can't imagine that. She's a real princess-y type, you know? But I haven't seen her since..."

"Since you cheated on your neighbour with her?" Adam asked.

He squeezed his eyes closed. "Yeah," he said, dropping his chin and shaking his head with regret. When he realized his friends had all gone silent, he looked up at their uncomfortable faces.

"Sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to depress everyone."

"You didn't," Ethan said, shaking his head. "It's just that..."

Antonio stared at him for a moment. "What?"

The three of them exchanged glances before Adam took a deep breath and leaned in. "Do you think there's still life left in this seemingly dead horse you're beating?"

Antonio's instinct was to defend his choices, but in truth, he'd asked himself the same question a million times after the anniversary party.

And again since hanging out with Cara. Maybe he and Fran weren't as perfect for each other as he always thought.

"I was sure we could work it out," he said. "But if she's moved on, then..." Antonio trailed off and threw a brief glance across the room at Cara before finishing. "Maybe

I should, too."

"Well, I guess one good thing that came from it is you moved here," Max said with a smile and a clap on his back.

Ethan and Adam nodded, and Antonio felt better than he had all week.

Other than the night spent with Cara.

Fuck, he wished there was some prescription he could write to wipe his memory of that.

The waiter came and took their orders, and then Ethan filled them in on the plan for the bachelor party next weekend, followed by Adam telling them how stressed Chelsea was trying to make her and Ben's first Christmas in their house perfect.

Antonio suppressed his disappointment that he wouldn't be in his home with a wife and kid this Christmas and tried to enjoy the rest of his beer and meal with his friends.

He needed to decide whether to finally begin the painful process of untangling his life from Fran's.

eleven

Cara breezed into her lab Monday morning at eight a.m., right on time, and pulled up short. The familiar hum of servers and cooling systems filled the silence, but she was the only one there.

It was unusual for her to be the only one in the lab. “On time” meant late to Dr. Tanaka. Unless it was the end of the day.

Then on time meant early.

Cara dropped her lunch bag on the cold metal desk with a hollow thunk and pulled out her phone. When she didn't see a missed text or email, she thought her professor might have been in some horrible accident, so she called her phone.

After a few rings, a deep voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Uh, hi, is Dr. Tanaka there?"

"Yes, but she can't come to the phone. She's—"

A yell in the background cut him off. "Just a moment, please," the man said. A second later, her professor was on the line.

"Cara?" she said in a gross, raspy voice that sounded like she'd been gargling gravel.

Oh no.

"Yes..."

"Flu."

"Oh, thank God," Cara said with a laugh as she plopped onto her chair. The familiar give of worn padding felt reassuring after her momentary panic. "I thought you died, and I'd have to delay my dissertation."

Her professor let out a gargle sound, but didn't quip back with a snarky one-liner like she normally did.

She must've been very badly off.

"Just rest," Cara said, spinning in a little circle in her chair toward her screens. "I'll take care of everything here."

It was actually going to be nice to have the lab to herself. She could take her lunch whenever she wanted and listen to her music instead of the classical music her professor insisted on. Plus, she could leave early and get to golf on time.

"The meteor event is tonight. I need you to lead it."

Oh no.

"I have golf tonight," she said, thinking about how she'd left the date with Jalen last week. It had started disastrously, but Jalen actually ended up being funny and nice. She wanted to give it a chance, and she was excited to see him again.

"There's no one else—" Dr. Tanaka's voice broke on a guttural puking sound. "I have

to go," she said.

Cara reared back in disgust. "Ew, okay, I'll do it," she said.

A noise came through that might have been "thanks." Then the line went dead.

Cara tossed her phone onto her desk and sat back with a sigh.

Well, that sucked.

She was finally coming around to Jalen. They'd texted back and forth a bit that weekend and seemed to be less awkward around each other. She'd even been studying up on golf.

She knew who Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson and Rory McIlroy were, and she knew the difference between a birdie and an eagle, and what a handicap meant. She'd even picked up Antonio's clubs from Max. She was ready.

But there was no way she could do both. The members of the Royal Astrological Society would start showing up at the observatory at sundown, which was the same time as her lesson.

With a sigh, she picked up her phone and started typing a message to Jalen. Halfway through, she stopped.

Maybe she should ask him to come to the observatory. It would give her a chance to show him what she did for work and school. Besides, everyone loved meteor showers, right?

She erased what she'd already typed out and started over.

Cara: I can't make it to golf, I have to go to the observatory to run a special event. There's a meteor shower tonight. Would you like to come with me?

She hit send and waited. A few moments later, a reply.

Jalen: Sorry, I don't want to miss golf. We're working on our short game tonight.

She rolled her eyes, telling herself she shouldn't be annoyed, but she was definitely annoyed. Maybe it was because he seemed completely disinterested in anything to do with her, or maybe it was because he could work on his short game literally any other night for the rest of his life.

It was just fucking mini putt.

He took golf way too seriously. But then she met him at a golf lesson, so what did she expect? And she knew he already had plans. It had been a long shot at best.

Antonio would've said yes.

She dropped her head onto her desk, then banged it a couple times against the metal for good measure. Why were the recesses of her brain filled with Antonio?

Antonio was married.

Antonio was in love with Fran. Perfect, tiny, giant-chested Fran.

And Antonio was going to be back with Fran as soon as she pulled her beautiful little head out of her stupid, sculpted ass and dropped Blake Hunter.

Antonio was not—and never would be—someone she could go to on a date with.

Still, her brain brought images to the forefront of them on a twilight date in a field of wildflowers, snuggled up in a warm blanket, stargazing under the pale moon.

She wished she knew what it felt like to be touched by him, wished she could remember the first night they met. Wished he was single and into her and wanted all the things she wanted but refused to acknowledge.

Why did he have to be so damn hot?

God, just his lips alone could—

No!

She banged her head on the cold, hard desk a few more times, forcing herself to remember the heartache etched on his face when he'd hung his head at the party and code worded “freezing.”

Fran's rejection devastated him—he was still one hundred percent in love with her.

Whatever Cara felt for him was moot.

She picked herself up and grabbed her phone, forcing out a crappy reply.

Cara: Okay.

She wondered if her disappointment came through, but a second later, she got another message from Jalen.

Jalen: I got some tickets to the Orca's game next Friday. Want to go?

She stared at the words.

A minor league hockey game?

Why would he ask her to a minor league hockey game?

She already knew the answer. Because he didn't care about putting in any effort to find out what she liked and take her on a date. He didn't seem to want to know her at all.

She was feeling like an accessory to him, like a fancy watch he put on and took with him to places he wanted to go.

She already knew that she would have a terrible time at a hockey game with him, fidgeting around and wondering what to ask him just so he would talk and fill the void. And hockey games lasted over two hours.

Ugh.

It wasn't ideal, but he was a nice guy and she wanted to see where things between them would go.

Cara: Okay

She sat back. It was too bad she didn't feel as attracted to him as she did to Antonio, but maybe that would change.

She'd have to give Jalen more thought that weekend while she was away, ask her friends what they thought, and see what they said.

If she decided she didn't want to go, she'd just change her mind later.

And besides, she needed the dating practice. The last thing she wanted was to be

awkward and fidgety on her future first date with her soul mate.

Actually, what she really needed to practice was sex.

An image of Antonio in her bed flashed through her mind and she reached up and literally slapped herself across the face.

This was going to be a rough weekend.

twelve

"Rough morning, eh?"

He'd finally gotten a new place—a small victory in what had been an endless shift.

He glanced up at his colleague, Ramit, smiling as he walked behind the nurses station in crisp scrubs with a tray of coffee in one hand. He pulled out a cup and handed it to Antonio.

"One of my worst nights," Antonio said, his voice hoarse from hours of barking orders.

He accepted a cup of coffee gratefully, the warmth seeping through his tired fingers as he tried to push away the image of the teenager they'd rushed in after the deadly crash.

Collapsed lung, five broken ribs, significant blood loss—the kid would probably make it, which was more than he could say for the drunk driver who'd hit him.

"I heard about the pile up last night," Ramit said, settling against the nurses' station counter. "I kept expecting to get called in."

Antonio nodded, flagging the apartment email to reply to later, then rolled his aching neck. "We managed. Thanks for the coffee."

"No problem," Ramit said.

"And thanks for covering for me this weekend."

Another nod. "Where are you off to?"

"Montreal for a bachelor party." The words felt strange in his mouth—when was the last time he'd done something that wasn't related to work?

Ramit's eyebrows jumped. "Wow. What's it like having a life?"

Antonio laughed. "Unusual. What's it like having a newborn?"

Ramit paused, considering. "Remember the sleep deprivation during residency?"

"Yeah."

"Like that, but worse. But also the best thing ever, somehow... It's complicated." He straightened up as a nurse approached with a clipboard. "You ready to brief me?"

Antonio smiled, pocketing his phone. "Almost. I just have one more patient to see first." He grabbed a file the nurse handed him, the familiar weight of responsibility settling back on his shoulders.

"Sounds good."

Antonio gulped more coffee before taking the file and turning toward the patient's curtained off area. He glanced through the triage notes. Seemed like this guy had a gnarly rash on his butt.

Great.

He pulled back the curtain as he looked at the file. Thirty-six-year-old male, allergic

to penicillin—that might be a problem—believes he'd been in contact with poison ivy. Weird for tail end of November.

"Hi, there—"

Every thought died in his brain as he looked up and saw Fran.

And Blake.

He blinked a couple times, convinced the fatigue was creating apparitions.

"Hey!" Blake said from the bed with a big smile. "We know you."

"Hi, Tonio," Fran said, a sheepish look on her face. "I didn't know you were in."

"Hi," he said as a sudden coldness seeped into his gut.

He tried to make his overtired brain process everything. How had he not noticed Blake's name?

He inspected the file, then looked up. "Elliot Beebe?"

Fran frowned, then whipped her head toward Blake, who'd lounged back on the bed and laughed.

"Yeah, that's me."

"What?" Fran asked.

Blake nodded. "Well, it's actually Elliot Beebe the third, which is why I never officially changed it to Blake Hunter when I started in show business."

Show business.

Antonio held in a laugh as Fran stared in wide-eyed horror at her... boyfriend?

He shook off the sick feeling that the word “boyfriend” brought and tried to act like a professional.

"So, Elliot," Antonio started. "What brings you in?"

"Well, I was in the woods for a segment on winter survival for preppers, and I had to take a shit. So I popped a squat off the trail and ever since, my ass has been on fire."

Antonio nodded as he set the file down on the table and took a pair of gloves off the wall. "When was this?"

"Three days ago. It's brutal."

"Has it been getting worse?"

"Oh, yeah," he said with a wince as he shifted his weight from one hip to the other.

"Let's take a look."

Fran turned up her nose as she twisted in her seat and rested her elbows on her knees. Then she dropped her head in her hands. Maybe she'd just realized she wasn't cut out to be a survivalist's girlfriend.

Blake unzipped his pants as he rolled over, then pulled his pants and underwear down in one shot, revealing the worst poison ivy rash Antonio had ever seen.

It was all over his butt, between his cheeks, and spreading toward his scrotum.

Luckily, it didn't look infected.

At least not yet.

"This is embarrassing," Blake muttered, his voice muffled by the paper-covered pillow.

"I've seen worse," Antonio lied, feeling a little bad for the guy. He was in an incredibly vulnerable position. And in a lot of pain.

"I heard you killed a wolverine. What was that like?" Antonio tried to distract Blake as he spread his butt cheeks apart to see if the rash was blistering where there was friction.

"It was such a fucking thrill. And it tasted incredible."

Antonio shuddered. "I can't imagine that's true."

Blake laughed. "Yeah, well, I hadn't eaten for three days. Bear shit would have tasted incredible at that point."

Antonio laughed. The guy actually seemed kind of cool—as much as it pained him to admit.

"Okay, we're done." Antonio removed the gloves and tossed them in the wastebasket by the sink. "It's definitely poison ivy. And it looks pretty bad where it's rubbing."

"I didn't know you could get poison ivy in the winter."

Antonio nodded. "All parts of the plant, even the roots, will cause a reaction."

"It hurts like a bitch."

"I'm not surprised. I'll write you a prescription for cream. Apply it twice a day and try not to wear any clothing."

Blake snorted. "Guess I'll be lounging around the house naked," he said. "Sorry, Fran."

Around the house?

Antonio stopped dead in his tracks before slowly turning toward Fran. Her features were all contorted and pinched.

Our house?

He wanted to ask it, but he already knew the answer.

"Sorry," Blake said, his smile gone as he glanced between the two of them. "I thought... Fran said you were okay with it. Sorry, man..."

Antonio broke his cold stare and silently shook his head as he ripped the prescription paper from the pad. He didn't know how to even start processing that Fran had moved a guy into their house.

His house.

Antonio's whole body stayed rigid as he backed up, trying to put as much space between them as possible.

"I don't live there permanently," Blake said, his tone more serious than Antonio would have expected. "I don't want to be the asshole here. We just—"

"It's fine," Antonio said, cutting him off. He worked to unclench his jaw. "If the rash gets worse, come back. It won't take much for it to become infected, especially in that area."

He turned and walked away without another word, heading for the front desk—until he remembered Blake and Fran would have to pass by on their way out. Instead, he veered off to the small office in the back. Unfortunately, Fran knew about the hidden room from all the times she'd visited him at work.

Seconds later, she appeared in the doorway.

"Tonio?" she asked in the sweet voice he used to love. There was a time he would have happily listened to that voice until he took his dying breath.

Now it set his teeth on edge.

"I'm busy," he said over the ringing in his ears.

"He only stays over sometimes. He doesn't live there."

Antonio squeezed his eyes shut, unsure how to process the situation. On the one hand, he was devastated that he'd been replaced. On the other hand, he felt as if the final straw hit his back and finally broke it.

His mouth opened and words poured out, unfiltered.

"My nonno gave me the down payment for that house as a wedding present."

Fran dropped her head. "You said you didn't want to sell it," she began.

Yeah, because I wanted to move back into it.

"And you said you didn't want to buy out my half, either," she continued.

Right, because I didn't want to live there without you.

"I have no clue how to move on," she admitted.

I didn't want you to.

"It's like you engineered this divorce so I couldn't move on."

Antonio's shoulders slumped and forced himself to turn in his seat to face her. "I never wanted any of this."

"No," she bit back. "You were happy being completely miserable."

"Completely miserable isn't fair," he said. "We could have solved all our problems."

She looked away from him, down at the floor, then back up. "Is that what you want?"

He stared at her for a moment, at a loss. Did he want that?

He finally seemed to wrap his mind around moving on after his parents' party. He'd made plans to move out of that studio and into a more permanent apartment, and he was even ready to admit to everyone in his life that his marriage had indeed failed, and he was officially getting a divorce.

He needed to move forward with his life, not backwards.

Right?

Or did he just come to that decision because he believed Fran had totally moved on?

Or maybe he never would have been able to move on until she did, and now that she had, he could finally see a way out for himself.

"Is that why your mom invited me to the anniversary party?" Fran asked, pulling his attention back to her.

It had only been a couple weeks since that party, but it felt like years ago. So much had changed since then.

"That was why," he said.

He had changed his mind since, though. Right?

He was better off letting go of Fran and moving on. Right?

Fran searched his eyes. "What about the girl you brought?"

Antonio shook his head, trying to push Cara from his thoughts. He'd promised himself that he wouldn't let Cara enter his mind, for her sake and Max's, and he intended to keep that promise—no matter how impossible it seemed.

"She's... nobody. Just a girl I know. I only brought her after I found out you were bringing Elliot."

Fran's long eyelashes fluttered closed. "Please don't call him that," she said as she turned away. "I have to go."

Antonio smirked at her cringing embarrassment and wanted to feel bad about it but couldn't. The only thing he was certain of in that moment was his spiteful happiness that Fran was about to be miserable.

"Make sure you cover the whole rash. In and around his anus, too."

A shudder worked over her as she spun and left, her heeled boots clicking along the linoleum floor to meet up with Blake.

Antonio smiled to himself as she went. It was childish, but he couldn't help it. He could picture her gagging as she rubbed prescription cream all over Elliot's butt hole.

He stood from the desk and gathered his things. The dense fog covering his life seemed to lift, albeit fractionally, and a touch of dim light shone through.

He took a swig of coffee and set off in search of Ramit, feeling lighter on his feet than he had in a long time. The sooner he briefed him, the sooner he could get out of there and pack for his weekend away with his friends.

thirteen

Cara stood on the sidewalk in front of Brin's Café and balanced a load of coffee on one hand as she pulled her scarf up around her neck to shield herself from the icy wind.

She'd offered to grab coffee for everyone that morning so they could get on the road to Montreal, but if she'd known how cold it was going to be, she wouldn't have been so nice.

Because the sun hadn't risen, the streetlights were still on, and a thick frost coated everything. She was the only person in sight, which wasn't a surprise since the only place open was Brin's.

She peered through the window back into the café and checked the time on the wall. The limo bus had likely left Monroe Manor already, so hopefully she wouldn't be waiting for long.

She'd been bouncing on her toes in the foyer, waiting for Antonio to arrive at Monroe Manor when she realized how desperate she'd been to see him and bolted out of there. The last thing she needed was someone noticing how eager she was to see Antonio again.

She hadn't slept a wink all night. She'd never been to Montreal before, or out for a bachelorette party, or even away with friends for a weekend.

But mostly she'd fixated on Antonio.

As she had for the past week.

No matter how many times she slapped herself to rid her mind of saucy images of him, they always came back. Quicker and hotter.

It was as if a parasite had entered her brain and took over, rewiring synapses so she could no longer think of Antonio as her brother's friend. In her mind, he'd morphed into a super hot dude she wanted to bang, and she had no clue how to exorcise the demon.

Or worse, if she even wanted to.

Just then, the limo bus appeared down the street, breaking her thoughts as it came closer and rolled to a stop in front of her.

Warm air blasted from it as the back door opened. Cara bent down and passed the tray of coffees to the first person she saw. Max.

"Thanks, Cara," Willow said as she pulled cups from the tray and distributed them.

"No problem," she said.

Cara ducked inside and settled on an empty section of the seat next to the door. Antonio sat opposite her, all the way on the other side of the bus, next to Ethan.

She smiled at him. "Morning," she said.

He smiled back and opened his mouth like he was going to reply but glanced at Max and thought better of it.

It was almost amusing how uncomfortable he was at interacting with her when

everyone else was around. She wanted to make things less weird, but the moment she looked at him, all she could think about was getting closer.

She took him in, her eyes landing on the sliver of his neck showing from under his dark hoodie. She wondered what his stubble would feel like against her cheek.

Or what his hands would feel like sliding up the back of her shirt.

Or what his face would look like when he—

No! She shook her head and looked away. But her resolve only lasted a second before she glanced back up at him. He was scrolling through his phone, his head bent in concentration, when she got an idea.

An awful idea—a wonderful, awful idea.

Cara tipped her chin down with a grinchy smile as she glanced around the bus, finding everyone half asleep and leaning on each other, except for Antonio. He was wide awake, lounging on the seat with an ankle crossed over his knee.

She hesitated for a split second before giving a “why the hell not” shrug and pulled out her phone. After a few clicks, she hit send, then watched Antonio and waited.

A second later, his head snapped up to hers and he smiled, then he looked back down and started typing.

Her smile was now taking over her face as she waited to see what he would say to her invitation to play Scrabble with her. She looked around—no one was paying any attention to her—so she didn't bother to hide her elation.

What was it about sneaking around right in front of their friends that was so... fun?

She suppressed an excited squeal as she felt her phone buzz with a new message and opened it.

Antonio: It's too early to be taken to task by you.

She hid a laugh.

Cara: You don't look that tired.

In fact, he looked delicious. Downright cuddleable. She wanted her face on his chest. She wanted to kiss along his jaw and down his neck.

Antonio: I'm used to functioning with little sleep.

She lifted one eyebrow at him when his eyes found hers, then started typing again.

Cara: Then you have no excuse.

He huffed a small laugh, then hit a button. Cara got a notification on the game screen that he'd accepted the challenge.

She couldn't contain her glee. And it only multiplied when her first set of letters popped up on her screen and she knew exactly what word to play.

She played her word and hit enter, then waited. Antonio's reaction didn't disappoint. He dropped the phone away from his face and stared at her across the bus as she tried not to laugh.

Antonio: Nipple?

She smiled at his message and nodded.

Cara: On a double word score. Beat that.

"Is that Jalen?"

Cara's head shot up at Adam's voice so fast that her phone fumbled in her hands and almost crashed to the ground. "Uh, no..."

Chelsea opened her eyes at the sound but kept her head down against Adam's shoulder. "Then who's making you smile like that?"

Cara schooled her face into what she hoped was a nonchalant expression. "Just some guy I met."

She really hoped that sounded believable.

"Won't Jalen be upset?" Adam asked.

Cara shrugged and searched for words, but any response she might have planned died when a notification dinged on the Scrabble game. She looked down and almost snorted.

He played the word SEX.

She wasn't sure what she was more gleeful about—that he seemed comfortable being inappropriate with her or the egregious misuse of the letter X.

She chanced a glance at Antonio, but he was staring out the window, perfectly composed, not giving a single shred of evidence that he was the one on the other end of her conversation.

He wasn't as good as her at Scrabble, but he was much better at sneaking around.

Was that a red flag?

She shook off the thought. "I'm not sure about Jalen right now," she replied to Adam, and noticed a slight flicker from Antonio's direction.

"Oh," Chelsea said, sitting up. "Adam said you looked like you were having fun on your date."

She nodded. "It was okay, but I don't know if he's the one ," she said as she assessed the game board and thought about her next move.

"What does your heart tell you?" Chelsea asked.

Max opened one eye. "What does your head tell you?"

Before Cara could roll her eyes at him, Natalie snorted. "What does your vagina tell you?"

Max winced and closed his eyes as the rest of them snickered.

Cara smiled and shrugged. These were good questions. What was her heart and head and vagina telling her?

She knew her heart wasn't in it at all. That one was easy. Her head was still on the fence. But her vagina? It knew exactly what it wanted. And he was sitting across from her on that bus, pretending not to care about the conversation.

She smiled as her brain connected the dots between the letters and game board and played U, A, and L on the end of his SEX to score off him.

"Maybe the guy you're talking to is a better fit," Adam said. "You won't stop

smiling."

She tried to wipe the smile off her face, but it became impossible when Antonio had added I, T, and Y to their word.

"Yeah," she said, feeling bold, but still not bold enough to look at Antonio. "He probably is."

She gave it a second before looking around the bus to see if anyone was looking at her. When the coast was clear, she glanced in Antonio's direction. And found him staring at her.

She wished she knew what he thought of the conversation.

She had much more in common with Antonio than with Jalen. Possibly more than any other guy she'd ever met.

He was more introverted, like her, and seemed to have similar likes and dislikes. Plus, their sense of humor was practically the same.

But he wanted Fran.

And she couldn't blame him. Fran was his first love. She thought of how impossible it had been to get over Cooper, and she hadn't been married to him for ten years.

Still, it was becoming more and more difficult to ignore her feelings. She wished she could jump into a wormhole that led five years into the future and see what kind of person she'd settled down with. Would it be someone like her, like Antonio, or her opposite, like Jalen?

Unfortunately, time travel wasn't yet a thing, so she'd have to figure it out on her own.

It just sucked that finding the love of your life involved so many variables. How was she supposed to find the one if she didn't even know what the one was like?

She needed to conduct more research. Collect more data.

Antonio was obviously off the table as a partner, but someone like him might fit the bill. Someone quieter, more reserved. She always thought she needed some balance to help her out of her shell, but she never felt a hundred percent comfortable around super outgoing guys.

Even with Cooper, she'd been so deep in her head and worried about what he thought that she'd never been able to enjoy him.

And maybe sex would be better with someone who was more similar to her, who understood all of her and liked her anyway—not just her more loveable side.

She glanced at Antonio again, making a mental note of his dark brown wavy hair, dark eyes, dark stubble, soft lips...

He was more attractive than Cooper or Jalen, for sure. A little too attractive, if she was being honest. But somehow, she still felt comfortable at the idea of being with him. She didn't think she'd be nervous with him as she had been with Cooper.

It was too bad she couldn't test him out—just a little—to see if her hypothesis was correct.

How great would it be if he were down for that?

She spared a glance at her brother, knowing that Max would be the main reason Antonio would say no. But they wouldn't have to tell Max, would they? They'd already kept their fake dates from him. And, if she was being honest, this whole

sneaking around thing was pretty damn... exciting.

Plus, she could use the practice with someone who knew what he was doing, and Antonio fit that bill perfectly.

It would be like a research project.

She peered at Antonio from across the bus and pictured herself sinking between his knees. This time, she didn't chase the thought away—she let it fester. And the more it festered, the more she accepted that this was the best idea she'd ever had.

She let the image sit in the back of her mind as she planned. She could wait until later that night, after she'd had a few drinks, then she'd pluck up her courage and tell Antonio she wanted to use him for sexual practice.

A thrill and a lot of nerves shot through her veins all at once and she suppressed the urge to laugh at herself. He'd most likely shoot her down. But what if he said yes?

Just the possibility of him agreeing cemented the plan in her mind.

She forced her concentration back to the Scrabble board while listening to Chelsea tell Jae about the things she'd booked for her wedding that week.

Cara just hoped that if Antonio turned her down, his rejection wouldn't sting too badly.

fourteen

Antonio was fucked.

Thoroughly and completely fucked.

He sat in an overstuffed, luxurious leather booth at the fanciest steak house he'd ever set foot in, next to Max and across from Cara, and carried on the impossible task of keeping his eyes off his best friend's little sister.

If the only thing working against him was how gorgeous she looked in the low-cut dress she'd changed into, or how her big doe eyes sparkled under the candlelight, he might have been able to resist.

What he couldn't resist was how much he liked her. Like, really liked her. She was so... perfect.

He glanced up and found her smirking at him, with half-lidded eyes that made him wonder what was going on in that beautiful mind of hers.

It was probably wishful thinking on his part, but she seemed into him. In fact, with the way she'd been looking at him all day, he was convinced her mind was so deep in the gutter she'd need a shot of penicillin.

Just then, Cara smiled at him before dropping her gaze to his mouth and licking her lips.

Fucking hell.

His body responded instinctively. His heart pounded as a flush of warmth radiated from his stomach. He wanted to touch her. Wanted to kiss her lips. Wanted to drop his face into her cleavage while she straddled his lap.

But more than that—arguably worse than that—he also wanted to just be with her. Alone, hanging out, talking, laughing, playing games.

He shook his head.

He had to stop this!

He screamed it in his head, but the message didn't seem to absorb.

He'd swore up and down that he would keep his distance that weekend, or at the very least not spend any time alone with her. But the second she'd stepped into the back of the limo that morning, with her beautiful pale pink skin that had been licked by the cold, he knew he was in trouble.

He'd wanted her sitting next to him, her head on his shoulder, her hand in his.

He'd tried to stop himself from thinking about her. He really did. But then she'd smiled at him and sent that Scrabble invitation and he was toast.

He shouldn't have accepted the invitation.

He shouldn't have played the word sex.

And he definitely shouldn't have felt relief when she'd said things weren't great with Jalen.

He blinked hard at the menu, forcing his attention on the first line—though he'd already read it thirty times—instead of on Max's hulking presence beside him or Cara's stunning eyes smirking at him from across the dimly lit table.

"This place is so cool," Cara said.

Antonio looked up at the sound of her voice as if being summoned, and before he could stop himself, his eyes connected with hers.

Her eyes sparkled brighter than the jeweled earrings that framed her face.

He broke eye contact and glanced around the room with a casual nod, hoping it wasn't obvious how much was going on in his mind.

"Yeah, I didn't expect all this from the outside," Chelsea said.

In fact, none of them had.

Natalie had heard of a secret steak house in an old, renovated factory that was incredibly exclusive, and booked reservations.

When they'd arrived and saw a butcher shop, they'd thought they'd been scammed, until a host in white gloves opened a nondescript black door and invited them in.

The opulence hidden inside shocked them.

The restaurant was small and intimate, decorated in black and gold. The host led them into a private cellar room with chandeliers and sconces on the walls. Antonio had loved it—until Cara sat across from him and he realized all that lighting was illuminating her .

She was wearing a deep burgundy dress that brought out the natural flush in her cheeks, and she'd painted her full lips the same red as the first night they'd met. All of that was bad enough the first time he'd seen it. But this time she glowed from the inside out, like a fucking beacon.

Resistance was futile for a brainless bug like him.

"You okay?"

He twisted his head toward Max, who was staring at him with a puzzled expression.

Shit.

Had Max just caught him ogling his beloved sister?

"Yeah." Antonio's voice was garbled and thick with fear that he had just spoken his last words.

When Max didn't immediately stand and break his neck, Antonio cleared his throat. "Why?"

"I just said you're being even more quiet than usual, but you didn't hear me."

He forced his shoulders to relax and looked down at the menu. "I'm just trying to decide what to order."

Max narrowed his eyes at him, looked around the table, then back. "It's a prix fix menu."

Antonio looked back down at the menu and saw that it was, in fact, not a menu, but a card explaining the different courses. No choices involved.

"Oh," he said, placing the card down and taking a drink from his glass of water.

This was going to be a long night.

"Are you feeling okay?" Cara's voice skated over his nerves, somehow both thrilling and calming.

He looked up and met her eyes. "Yes, fine," he said.

"Really?" she asked with a smirk that made her eyes sparkle even more. "You look like you might be a little cold. Maybe even free—"

"Nope," he cut her off, reaching for the wine and trying not to jerk his gaze away guiltily. "I feel great."

Just then, several waiters entered the cellar with the first course and, mercifully, the wine pairings.

They all raised a glass to their first drink of the night before Ethan struck up a conversation about what lay ahead of them.

Chelsea spoke a little about the bridal shower and Adam filled them in on the rehearsal dinner that his Uncle David was planning.

Antonio paid attention, but as was his usual habit, he mostly fell quiet to the extroverts of the group.

He liked it best that way. The food was delicious, and the wine was the best he'd ever had, as were his friends.

But nothing compared to the beautiful woman making eyes at him from across the

table, and as drink after drink arrived, he struggled to remember why he was keeping her at arm's length, especially since she seemed very interested in getting closer.

Why was he still lying to himself about how happy he was to be near her?

And why the hell did he stop her from saying their code word?

He chanced one more glance at her, and when their eyes connected, he stopped questioning himself. Everything in that moment seemed crystal clear.

He wanted Cara. And not just for the night.

And he was sick of feeling guilty about it.

"The cab's here!"

Antonio spun on the sidewalk outside of the club they'd just left and found a small van stopped on the street waiting. He looked back at all his friends and then back at the van. No way were they all going to fit in that thing.

"Is there only one coming?" he asked.

Natalie blinked up at him. She and Ethan were standing with Jae, holding her from both sides.

"Uh..." she said.

Antonio smiled.

The night had taken a wild turn after the steakhouse.

They'd gone to three clubs and the shots never stopped flowing.

After a while, Antonio realized that someone was going to have to stay sober enough to keep Adam alive, so he started pretending to take the shots and dumped them instead.

Cara had caught onto him and quietly called him out for it, but he carried on doing it, and she seemed to do the same.

Besides the two of them, Natalie seemed to be the most coherent.

"We should get Adam in," Natalie said.

Antonio looked over at Adam, who was splayed out on a bench next to Cara and shook his head. "I'll get another cab and take Adam with me," he said.

Adam was fine where he was, relatively speaking, but the rest of them were not. Max was swaying on his feet, carrying Willow on his back and Chelsea in his arms. Ethan and Natalie were struggling with Jae.

"You guys go," Antonio said, walking to the van and opening the door. He made sure they all got in before closing the door behind them, but when he spun to look back, Cara was still on the bench, sitting with Adam.

"Do you want to go with them?" he asked.

She smiled and shook her head. "You need my help with this guy."

Antonio didn't, but maybe she was using it as an excuse to hang out with him. He hoped she was.

"I can get..."

Antonio broke eye contact from Cara and looked at Adam, waiting for him to finish his sentence, but he blacked out mid-thought.

Antonio turned to the van and waved them on. Natalie nodded, said something to the driver, and off they went, leaving Antonio and Cara alone for the first time that night.

Well, besides Adam.

Cara pulled her coat tighter and gave a small shiver against the frosty night air. Antonio started feeling guilty about wanting her to stay with him.

"Are you cold?" he asked. "You should have gone with them."

Cara smiled and shook her head. "I think Adam's going to be harder to handle than I was."

Antonio's memory flashed back to when he'd pulled her from the bushes, and he laughed. "I bet he won't scream like I'm trying to take advantage of him the second I touch him."

Cara laughed and stood from the bench, then moved in close. "I promise I won't scream if you do it again."

He couldn't keep the smile off his face at the suggestiveness of her comment. He also couldn't stop the flood of lascivious thoughts from short circuiting his brain, or stop the tingling in his palms as they ached to touch her. "You want me to touch you again?"

Cara pressed in closer, then smiled with a nod.

"What are you two..."

Both their heads snapped toward Adam, who'd come to for a split second before re-passing out.

Cara winced and took a cautionary step back. "Do you think he can actually understand us?"

Antonio shrugged. "Maybe, but his short-term memory will never retain it," he said, then glanced back at her.

Cara side eyed Adam before moving back in close to him. She zipped her coat up so that it was fully closed around her neck, then gave him a devilish little smile. "It's kinda fun, isn't it? Sneaking around like this?"

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Antonio smiled and nodded. That was impossible to disagree with. The Scrabble game on the bus had been the most fun he had since... well, since the euchre tournament. He knew it wasn't just fun because they were sneaking around. It was fun because she was her.

He'd never felt this sort of thrill with Fran. Not even at the beginning of their relationship.

He could feel himself tipping too far over the edge. His feelings for her were stronger than he was comfortable with. In a last-ditch effort to maintain a platonic relationship, or maybe to give her an easy out if she wanted to take it, he broke eye contact and looked up at the cold, clear sky.

"Hey, look, Orion."

Her eyes burned into the side of his head for a second before she twisted up and snorted. "That's not Orion."

He let out a laugh.

"Do you know anything about astronomy?"

"I know I'm a Virgo."

"Oh my God," she said. Her smile dropped. "That's not..." she took a deep breath before shaking her head and continuing.

"You're probably looking at Cassiopeia," she said, turning her back to Antonio and pointing up. "You can tell because it's shaped like a W and it's close to Polaris, above Perseus and Andromeda."

Antonio looked down at the back of her head, wanting so badly to pull her into his chest. He didn't really know which constellations she was talking about, but he knew he wanted her to keep talking. "I've never heard of it."

She continued looking up. "The story goes that Cassiopeia insulted Poseidon by declaring she was more beautiful than his sea nymphs, so he sent a monster after her to steal her daughter. See that bright cluster to the right?"

He followed her finger up. "Yeah."

"That's Cassiopeia A. It was the only supernova visible from earth with the naked eye, but it exploded in the sixteen hundreds. It looks pretty amazing through a telescope, though."

"How can you see it if it exploded?"

"You don't see it how it is now. It's too far away. What you see through a telescope is how it looked in the past. In Cassiopeia A's case, approximately four hundred years ago."

"Huh?"

"It's too far away to know what it looks like now, because the light hasn't reached us."

He nodded, trying to wrap his mind around that. Why hadn't he learned more about space? It was cool as fuck.

Cara turned back toward him and reached for his shoulders. He thought— hoped—she was going to kiss him, but she just smiled and said, "I'll show you sometime," before twisting his body around.

He let her spin him until his back was to her, then she reached over his shoulder and pointed up.

"That's Orion, the hunter," she said. "It looks like an hourglass. See?"

He nodded.

"The brightest star at his shoulder is Betelgeuse. Across is Bellatrix, where his weapon starts, and the three little dots in the middle are his belt."

Antonio committed the details to memory as he reached for her outstretched hand, worried that her fingers would freeze without gloves. Sure enough, she was ice cold.

He turned toward her and took both her hands in his to warm them before realizing what he'd done, but when his brain told him to drop her hands, he refused and held them tighter. He looked up at her eyes that he loved so much and found her staring into his soul.

It was almost too much, as if she was viewing him under a microscope. He drooped his gaze to her lips, but that really didn't help matters.

She moved in close until her body pressed against his with their intertwined hands between them at their chest. The heat of their bodies radiated together, swirling around them and keeping them warm.

When she rose slightly on her tip toes toward him and moved in close, it didn't even occur to him to stop her. He wanted her close. And now that she was, it felt right. As

natural as breathing. It was as if something tethered him to her.

There was probably a scientific reason, maybe there was some astrophysical concept that could explain why he couldn't break away from her, like the same reason stars don't break from their constellations.

He didn't know. All he knew was that some cosmic force had made it physically impossible for him to step back at that moment. In fact, it felt as though he was being sucked in closer.

Antonio moved in, leaned forward, and gently touched her lips with his. In an instant, he ignited—as if he'd touched a star. His skin fluttered as heat shot through his veins, lighting every atom in his body on fire.

Cara's lips parted, opening for him, soft and warm, and he deepened the kiss, finally moving his hands to touch her face. Her hands reached up, coming around to the back of his head, and a little sigh escaped from her as his fingers touched her ear.

Everything in his heart and head and body fell exactly into place. It was as if he'd been putting together a million-piece puzzle for the last thirty years and he'd finally found the last missing piece to complete it.

His heart drummed hard, almost painfully, inside his chest as her soft, wet lips slid against his, causing a light headedness he'd never experienced before. An overwhelming need to touch her—explore her—overcame him. He wanted desperately to erase everything between them.

He reached his hands around her waist and pulled her up, pressing her against him. Why was she wearing such a thick coat? He wanted to feel her warmth, touch her skin, kiss her neck.

"Cab."

It took half a second before Adam's voice registered and Antonio remembered he was standing on a sidewalk outside of a bar in Montreal.

Shit.

He jumped back as if someone had electrically shocked him, and he snapped his eyes to the bench, where he found Adam sitting up, holding the armrest, and trying to stand.

Cara's hand landed on Antonio's shoulder, and she pushed him toward Adam. "We better go."

Antonio nodded in a daze. He hauled Adam to his feet and he happily took the help, flopping his arm across Antonio's shoulder as they made their way across the sidewalk to the car.

Antonio placed Adam, who was mumbling something incoherently, in the front seat of the cab, then closed the door and got into the back seat.

Cara was already in the warm car, waiting for him. She moved in close to Antonio and he reached his arm out toward her without thinking, pulling her into his side until her head rested on his shoulder.

Perfect.

"Ambassador Hotel, right?" the cab driver said, not bothering with a hello.

"Yeah," Antonio said.

The driver pulled away from the curb, and Antonio felt Cara shiver next to him.

"I don't mean to say it, but I'm freezing as in the true sense of the word."

Antonio laughed and rubbed his hand up and down her arm. "Same."

He held her for the whole ten-minute drive, surprised, but also not surprised at all, by how holding her felt like the most natural thing he'd ever done.

Having her in his arms was everything. He literally believed they connected somehow, on some cosmic level, and the universe was pushing them closer.

Either way, he allowed himself to enjoy the quiet stolen moment. Some time between the Scrabble game that morning and the drunken stargazing, he'd accepted that fact that she was someone he wanted in his life.

Telling Max about the situation was going to be fucked up. But he had to do it.

Cara snuggled in closer, melting into his side, and he dropped a kiss to her forehead. He held her for the rest of the drive, slightly afraid at the depths his feelings had already gone, until they arrived at the hotel and the cab came to a stop in front of the lobby.

Cara pulled away first and Antonio's body actually bristled at the loss.

They thanked the driver and took hold of Adam, then made their way into the hotel, down the hall, and up the elevator to their block of rooms on the top floor.

But when they got to the respective rooms, they realized they were in trouble.

Their friends seemed to have drunkenly mixed up all the rooms.

Antonio used Adam's key to put him in his rightful bed, but Chelsea was nowhere to be found.

When Cara opened the room she was sharing with Jae, she found all the girls in there.

Willow and Natalie had passed out in Cara's bed.

Chelsea was in the second bed with Jae. Antonio and Cara hunted around for a minute but couldn't find keys to Ethan's or Max's room.

Cara tipped her head toward the door and they both stepped out into the hallway.

"I don't have a bed," Cara whispered after the door had swung closed.

Adrenaline shot through Antonio's veins as she looked up at him. He wanted her in his bed more than anything, but he really wanted to do this the right way. Not the “sneaking behind her brother's back” way.

The solution to their problem was so clear. She should stay in his room with him.

He wanted it. She seemed to want it.

But would they actually be able to stay together without anything happening? As much as he agreed with her that the sneaking around was fun, he didn't want to start a relationship with her like that.

God, he wanted her to stay with him but prayed she wouldn't.

"Antonio?" she asked in a whisper.

He took in her eyes. "Mmm?"

Please don't say it. I won't be able to say no.

"Can I stay with you?"

Fuck.

She said it.

He looked back at the door to his room, picturing the one king-sized bed that was in there. "Just to sleep?" he asked.

She held his gaze, then gently shook her head. He was pretty sure he was going to need a fucking defibrillator.

His head had already started nodding, but his brain forced some logic out of his mouth.

"What about Max?"

She stared into his eyes for a moment and desperately wished he could read her mind. "We don't have to tell him."

He gave one more utterly useless hesitation before he took her hand in his and unlocked his door.

fifteen

Cara walked into Antonio's hotel room, feeling more nervous than she would have expected, considering how badly she wanted to be there.

She'd been so relieved he hadn't said no that she hadn't fully processed what she was in store for.

In fact, she was still reeling from their steamy kiss under the stars.

She took a few deep breaths and moved through the room, noting how neatly he'd placed his suitcase on the rack inside the closet, peering into the bathroom to see how he'd carefully unpacked his toiletries onto the counter.

She compared it to what her bathroom sink had looked like when they'd left for dinner that night and laughed. "I think I've found another thing we don't have in common."

"Really?" he asked, coming up close behind her and placing his hands on her upper arms. "What's that?"

His hands drifted up and down, warming her through her jacket. On instinct, she moved until her back pressed up against the front of his body. He reached around to the buttons of her jacket and slowly undid the top one.

His fingers unhooked the next three buttons, and her coat fell away. The cool air reached Cara's too-hot skin and anticipation shot through her body.

"What's that, Cara?"

"What's what?"

A low chuckle came from his chest as he took the lapels of her coat and pulled, dragging the scratchy wool fabric down her shoulders. Shivers zinged across her skin.

He dropped the coat on the floor and reached his hand to her neck, pulling her hair back and leaning in close. His lips grazed her ear. "What don't we have in common?"

A gasp escaped and her head flopped to the side as he trailed kisses her from her ear to her neck and across her shoulder.

"You're tidy," she breathed out.

He let out a hum as he kissed his way back to her ear. "Are you messy?"

"Yes," she said with a sigh, but it came out as encouragement. She never wanted his mouth to leave her neck.

"What else don't we have in common?"

She focused her thoughts. "You like sports."

"Mmm."

His mouth was still on her neck, but his hands were moving down to her back and to the top of her zipper. "I'm not that into sports," he countered. "I just needed something to do besides work and sitting alone in my apartment."

"You played when you were younger, though, and if you played with Max, then you

must have been pretty good."

He took the zipper and slowly inched it down.

"I was a fast skater and a decent puck handler, but I only kept playing because my dad wanted me to. When I broke my leg, my mom made me stop and I don't remember being too torn up about it."

Her back cooled as he exposed more and more of her skin. She was lost in the deep vibration of his voice.

She wanted more.

"What made you want to be a doctor?"

"I like gross things."

Cara laughed, but it caught in her throat as her dress gave way from being too loose and slid down her shoulders, exposing her torso.

"Do we have that in common?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I don't mind checking out the occasional festering wound."

Antonio gave a warm, rich laugh. He backed away slightly and the space he created made her dress drop and pool at her feet. He took her by the waist and turned her to face him.

She was exposed and chilled, yet the gentle way his hands circled her skin, as if she was something precious, warmed her. He reached his hand to her temple and pushed aside her bangs, as if trying to get a better look.

"I like beautiful things, too," he said, scanning her face and landing on her eyes. "Like big brown eyes that shimmer like stars." His gaze dropped to her mouth, and he traced her bottom lip with his thumb. "And soft red lips that taste like dessert."

She was speechless.

Literally speechless.

She parted her lips, knowing she should speak at that moment, but had no words. She moved in closer and pressed her lips to his, soft at first, until she felt a low sound rise from his chest—as if he'd found great relief—and he deepened the kiss.

She almost couldn't believe it was happening. She was in Antonio's hotel room, and he wanted her—a lot, it would seem.

Her hands moved up and into his soft, thick hair, and she pulled him closer, wanting more—needing more. His hands moved, gliding up her back, over the clasp of her bra, down to the waistband of her panties, then sweeping back up.

She wanted to rip the rest of her clothing off. Wanted to see him and feel him with nothing in between them.

She broke the kiss and moved her hands to his belt to unbuckle it. When she glanced up at him, his eyelids were low, and his breathing was shallow and fast. She tugged the buckle loose, letting it clatter open, then reached for the button of his pants.

"Cara?"

She looked back up, seeing that his face was strained. "Yeah?"

"You're sure about this, right?"

"As sure as I am that the earth is round."

He tilted his head to the side. "Well, you can't know that for certain."

She snapped away from him as her jaw dropped. "Oh my God," she said, her head shaking. "Please tell me you're joking. I can't sleep with a Flat Earther."

He smiled and let out his rich laugh. "Of course I'm joking," he said. His hand reached up to her face, and he ran his thumbs gently across the tops of her cheeks. His smile faded into a serious expression.

"I just want to make sure we're going to be okay after this."

Her eyebrows raised at the seriousness of his tone. He was obviously worried about what would happen after this, but he didn't need to worry. She knew what this was. And she'd become pretty good at keeping secrets from Max.

"We'll be fine, Antonio," she said, wondering how to reassure him she wouldn't get attached and expect a marriage proposal as if they were living in eighteenth-century Britain and he'd defiled her.

"I know this isn't going anywhere," she said.

His movements suddenly stopped and he gave her a blank look. "That's not..."

He paused, staring for a while, then reached a hand up and rubbed the back of his neck. "You do?"

Cara nodded and a hot tingle of embarrassment crept up her neck as she realized she would have to tell him the truth.

"I don't have a ton of experience in this department, and I was hoping I could, you know..."

He stared at her and gave a slight shake of his head, clearly not quite understanding what she was trying to say.

God, this was humiliating.

"You know... Get practice."

Cara saw his body freeze and his jaw drop, then his head bend slightly forward, as if he was trying hard to process how pathetic she was.

"Practice?" he asked.

She nodded but refused to elaborate. He was smart enough to get what she was saying. And standing in front of him in her underwear had already made her feel way too vulnerable.

"Uh," he stumbled around slightly, with a general sort of awkwardness.

Fuck. This was going south. Fast.

"I know you want Fran." Cara hoped to do some damage control and salvage this. "And I want to see where things go with Jalen. I was just hoping, since you're technically single, that we could... Well, that I might learn how to be better..."

She wanted to crawl into a hole and die. Why had she said all that? She should have just said "don't worry, all is good" and taken off his pants.

She chanced a look at his face, expecting him to be wincing in second-hand

embarrassment for her, but he had drawn his eyebrows together and fixed his gaze on the floor.

He was deep, deep in thought.

"Ugh," she said. "I made everything awkward. We can just forget about this and go to sleep."

He stared at her for a long moment before finally speaking. "You want to see where things go with Jalen?"

Her eyebrows shot up. He was hesitating because of Jalen?

"We've only been on one date. It's not official or serious or anything."

He gave a solemn nod. Maybe he didn't want her there at all anymore. She'd clearly misread something. She didn't expect him to be offended.

She felt pain in her palms and realized she'd been clutching her fists so tightly in anxiety that her nails had dug into her palms.

"Do you want me to go?"

"No."

He said it so fast, Cara got a surge of renewed hope that he wasn't going to kick her out of the room. But then he fell silent again.

Ugh .

"I just feel comfortable around you," she went on, in another attempt at damage

control. "And I want this, and I thought you wanted this too and we're both technically single... Can you please say something?"

Antonio looked at her and smirked but stayed silent.

She rolled her eyes and suppressed a laugh. "Seriously, I'm feeling very... exposed right now."

He moved closer to her and wrapped his big, warm arms around her protectively. She dropped her cheek to his chest.

"I want to be with you," he said. "More than anything. But my head is everywhere right now."

"Same," she said, her voice muffled in his deliciously scented shirt.

"Okay," he said, his hands moving up her back and into her hair. His fingertips grazed her scalp and she groaned.

She waited for him to say more, but nothing came. Finally, she lifted her face off his chest and looked into his eyes. "Elaborate, please."

He bent to kiss her lips, and when his tongue touched hers, her body grew feverish. He bent lower, his hands going under her thighs, then picked her up without breaking the kiss.

All the air left her lungs as her feet lifted off the floor. He turned and placed her on the edge of the mattress.

"I want to do this," he said. "As long as you do."

She smiled. "I do."

"Good," he said, reaching for the button of his pants, which were now eye-level with her. He traced his thumb across her lower lip. "Let's start here."

Her whole body zinged, and her jaw dropped.

"Perfect," he said with a smirk, then unzipped his pants.

A moment passed before the rush of need surged through her, and then she reached up and took over his zipper, loosening and pulling down his pants and boxers until he was free.

She bent forward, but he stopped her with his hands on her shoulders.

"Take your time," he breathed out.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

She looked up at him and when her eyes met his, he let out a sigh and a heavy blink. He was clearly deeply aroused, which made her feel great. But she really didn't know what to do.

She fumbled around for a second before he reached for her chin, tipping her eyes up to his. "Do whatever you want—touch, lick—but don't put my dick in your mouth just yet."

She nodded, trying to remember what she'd done for past blow jobs, and trying to forget that he'd probably had a million of them from perfect Fran that were probably significantly better than what she was going to do.

She placed her hands tentatively on his thighs, sliding them up, then ran her thumbs along the base of him. He smiled and groaned and brought his hands to her jaw.

"You're beautiful," he said, staring into her eyes.

Her heart galloped, and her body flooded with warmth. She ached to touch and be touched by him.

She leaned forward and lifted his shirt up, kissing his hard stomach, trailing her tongue along his skin, exploring him with her mouth. He became more and more aroused—and so did she. When he put his hands in her hair and bunched it in his fist, she thought she might die.

Her hips started moving on the bed, desperate for some friction as her hands moved along his length, teasing him and playing with him. He became harder. Finally, she

put her lips on him and slowly took him into her mouth.

His head fell back, and he let out a deep groan. "Cara," he said with a broken voice, but nothing else.

Her mouth swept over him, slowly at first, then again and again, each time a little faster, a little harder. She couldn't help it. Her own body was growing more and more sensitive—more and more desperate to feel him on her.

In her.

His hands slipped from her hair, trailing down her neck to her shoulders, and after a few more slow passes, he winced slightly and gently held her back, stopping her from taking him again.

She looked at him, hard and wet, and all she wanted was more. But when she glanced up at his face, his eyes were screwed tightly together and his chest heaved.

He stayed like that for a moment, trying to collect himself, before he took her by the elbows and guided her to her feet, kissing her mouth and breathing as if he'd just run a marathon.

"I just need a second," he said.

She nodded, but a second seemed like an eternity at that point. And keeping her hands and mouth off him was no longer possible.

She stood up and kissed his neck, moving across his jaw to his ear as she pressed her body against him, needing more. She took the bottom of his shirt and pulled it up over his head and tossed it aside.

He gave her a slow smile and kissed her mouth while unclasping her bra and dragging it down her arms. She sighed at the rush of sensations drifting over her skin.

Finally, she could breathe. But she didn't want anything left between them—not even a scrap of clothing.

Antonio seemed to feel the same way, because he stepped out of the pants and boxers that were around his ankles, then reached for her panties.

He bent his head down, tipped it to the side, and slowly slid them off. She shuddered with pleasure. Finally, they were completely bare to one another.

He guided her back to the bed and laid her down, his hands curling around the backs of her knees as he lifted and parted her legs, then sank to the floor in front of her.

Her jaw dropped. "Antonio," she said, not sure what to follow that up with. No one had ever gone down on her before. "I'm not sure—"

"Mmm..."

The deep sound of pleasure coming from his throat stopped her brain. He trailed soft zig-zagging kisses and licks up her thighs as she gasped and arched off the bed.

"Hold still, beautiful," he said, then pressed his tongue against her.

She went completely still while his lips swept over her, kissing and teasing, but it wasn't easy. Her body wanted to float off the bed.

She tried to understand what she was feeling, tried to pay attention to what he was doing to her, but her brain refused to focus. Her thoughts drifted away, leaving her with an increasingly overwhelming desire to join her body with his.

She put her fingers in his hair, trying to get more of him when he changed his angle and sucked. Her pleasure built until it shattered through her, and she cried out—torn between pulling him close and pushing him away.

He kept a slight pressure on her as she came back down from her high, then he crawled over her and kissed her lips before lowering himself on top of her. His weight and the softness of his chest on her skin reignited her desire.

She held him to her, running her hands along his back as she sucked on his ear. "That was incredible," she whispered, thrusting her hips toward him.

His skin burned beneath her touch, but the trail of goosebumps along his shoulders and arms told her he'd been shivering from the light scratches she'd left down his back.

Cara gently thrust her hips toward him, ready for more, but he moved back slightly.

"Antonio?"

"Mmm..." he said, his mouth between her breasts.

"Can I be on top of you?"

He paused, then pulled back with a smirk on his face. "Fuck yeah," he said, backing away from her. "But go slow."

He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her up and around until he was on his back and she was straddled on top of him.

She placed her hands on his chest and smiled. She knew she was going to like being on top of him like that. She slid back until she could feel him, then pressed down, but

he took her hips in his hands and stopped her.

"Slower," he said.

She rolled her eyes, and he lightly slapped her ass cheek. Why did he want everything done at a glacial pace? Maybe he liked the torture?

He took hold of her hips and adjusted her until they were aligned, then pressed her down ever so slightly until he was just barely grazing her opening.

She held in a gasp and realized that the only way to get him to move faster was to make him want it more. She moved to his ear, kissing and licking him as she barely swayed her hips just slightly along him.

His body tensed and he let out a groan, and his hands loosened slightly on her hips.

Perfect. What she was doing seemed to be working.

With a bit more wiggle room, she swayed a little more and trailed kisses from his ear down his neck and along his collarbone, then back up to his other ear. She could feel the slick heat between them, the way he glided effortlessly along her.

She was getting more and more desperate to feel relief.

"Cara," he said, her name nothing more than a rasp of breath.

She lifted her head until their eyes connected, and she found him searching her eyes. One of his hands left her hip and grazed her cheek as he brushed her hair back from her face.

"Now?" she asked.

He swallowed and gave a nod, his eyes intently on hers.

She held his gaze and lowered herself down, taking him into her. His eyelids dropped slightly but stayed open, watching her as she went down, down, down and her whole body tightened.

God that feels good. Too good.

She squeezed her hips inward, flexing her legs to try to get closer to him. Finally, his eyelids closed, and he let out a low groan.

"Up," he said.

She loosened her body and glided her hips up.

"Fuck," he said. His face was screwed together. "Again."

She repeated the motion again, this time slightly faster, then again, and again, until she could no longer keep the pace and sped up.

He held her hips, moving her in a different pattern—back and forth, then in circles—showing her different ways to move all the while looking as if he was about to break. Finally, he let go of her hips and looked into her eyes.

"Find what feels good for you."

"What about you?"

He smiled. "It all feels good."

"Okay," she said, moving back and forth and then around until she found the exact

right spot where the friction made her explode with pleasure. She settled into it, moving faster and faster.

He moved his hands to her lower back and held her tightly as he rose up into a half sit-up and she gasped.

"Keep going," he said, as if there was some way for her to possibly stop.

She moved faster and faster, their collective pleasure rising meteorically. Higher and higher she went, the pleasure building and building until it finally became too much and she exploded.

Her body squeezed onto him and his arms came around her until they were twisted tightly together. He pressed into her a few times before his body went rigid and he came hard, emptying himself into her with a grunt.

It took a few moments for her mind to finally wake up to what had just happened. She'd never felt anything like that before.

"Holy shit," she breathed out as her body collapsed onto his, her face in the crook of his neck and his warm arms wrapped around her back.

He held her wordlessly for a long time before he finally rolled her onto her side and wrapped himself around her back. She was reeling, grasping for something to make sense before forcing her brain off and relaxing into the warmth of his body. She'd never been spooned before.

And she'd never been so happy.

That had been unlike any sex she'd had before.

She waited for the self-consciousness to come, for the awkwardness, but it was nowhere to be found. She told herself it was because he was a doctor, and he obviously knew his way around erogenous zones, even now as he kissed the back of her neck, but she knew that wasn't it.

It had felt that good because she felt free around him.

He made her feel comfortable.

He made her feel loved .

Panic settled into her chest.

She made a move to sit up, worried about where her thoughts were going, but he held her tight and brought his lips to her ear.

"Stay with me, at least for a little while," he whispered.

She stayed still, not sure what to do. A second later he lifted the side of the blanket and pulled it over them, enclosing them in a warm cocoon, and she'd never felt more cared for, more loved, more adored in her entire life.

She almost wished there was some awkwardness, or that she hadn't felt so good, just so she could separate her heart from her body at that moment. But none came.

Just an overriding, all-consuming need to maintain contact with him.

Shit.

She might've fucked up, thinking she could sleep with him and not feel anything for him. Especially when she'd already liked him. But what was done was done.

At this point, she might as well just bask in the bliss for the night. She'd have to face the reality that was waiting for her in the morning and carry on with her life.

sixteen

Antonio's heavy feet moved aimlessly along an uneven path. There was such resistance to his movement that he thought he must be walking through water. But when he looked down, he saw a colourful field full of wildflowers that spanned as far as the eye could see.

A flicker caught his eye, and he looked up. In the clear, dark sky sat gigantic stars, shining bright and beautiful. They were close enough to touch.

He reached out his hand for the top point on the brightest star, cautious at first, expecting it to burn him. But it didn't. It was warm, not hot, and buzzed lightly under his fingertips.

He bet that she'd love it if he picked a star for her.

He grasped it in his fist and pulled, dragging it slowly from the sky. It left a streak of warm white stardust in its wake.

He reached out and broke it loose from the strands of light, then turned, scanning the field. Where had she gone? She'd been right beside him a minute ago.

Hadn't she?

Finally, he spotted her in the distance.

Her soft dark hair stood out against the flowers and starlight.

He called for her, but she couldn't hear him, so he stepped closer, wading through the thick flowers.

The closer he got, the louder she sounded.

Like church bells in the air, floating toward him.

He couldn't wait to see the light in her big brown eyes when she saw the star he'd picked for her. He finally reached her and called her name, but she didn't respond, so he tapped her shoulder.

Knock knock knock.

The sharp sound echoed unnaturally.

Was she... made of wood?

Antonio stared at her shoulder, trying to make it make sense, when another knock rang out.

Cara slowly turned to face him.

And she was—

Max?

Antonio opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out. Knocking—faster and more urgent now—filled the void.

"Antonio!"

His eyes flew open, and he glanced around disoriented for several seconds. He looked down at the beautiful girl next to him.

Fuck.

He shook his head, trying to separate the incredibly vivid dream from reality.

Another knock reverberated through the room, shaking the walls, and clearing the last bits of fantasy from his mind.

"Ant!?"

Shit.

Antonio reached over, gently shaking Cara's shoulder until she grunted and opened her eyes. Her face seemed to go through the same disorientation and shock he'd just experienced before she shot upright, clutching the bedsheet to her chest.

"Oh my God," she whispered, staring at the door. "Is that Max?"

Antonio nodded, trying to shake the image of her in his bed from his mind long enough to process the last eight hours. It had been a goddamn roller coaster.

"Antonio!" Max shouted again. "You in there?"

Fuuuuck.

"Yeah, one sec." He stared wide-eyed at Cara with a shake of his head, unsure what to say or do.

He'd followed her lead the night before—after she'd told him she wanted to see where

things went with Jalen and was only interested in a night of practice sex from him.

He'd gone along with it instead of telling her the truth about how he felt, mostly because he'd realized he had no right to ask more from her.

He'd told her repeatedly that he wanted Fran back.

"Antonio! Open up!"

Now he'd have to deal with the fallout. The very large, furious fallout. He hoped to, once again, follow her lead.

He looked at Cara and waited, but she just stared back. How the hell did she want to play this? Did she even have a plan?

"I'm not dressed," he said, panicked.

Cara dropped her head into her hands, and he realized he was on his own here. He jumped out of bed and her phone fell out of the sheets with a loud crash to the floor.

That had probably been the buzzing star he'd felt.

Antonio rolled his eyes and grabbed it, gently tossing it to her, then he took off around the bed in search of clothes.

"We can't find Cara," Max said through the door. "She came back with you and Adam, right?"

Antonio froze.

Shit.

How was he going to get out of this one?

He looked at Cara. She swiped open her phone and her eyes went wide.

"Ten missed calls," she whispered, then glanced between him and the door, a look of guilt marring her beautiful eyes.

"I think we should just tell him," he whispered back.

Her eyes doubled, and she shook her head in huge, jerking movements.

"Uh, just a second," he called out to Max, then moved in close to Cara.

"I don't see a way out of this," he said. He knew for sure that Max would freak. But he'd get over it, eventually. Right?

Cara stared at him for a moment, her eyes pained, her brows bunched. "I don't want him to know I did this."

The room spun. His stomach rolled, and he thought he might puke.

She appeared full of regret. Why did they do this? Why hadn't he just said no?

He knew why. Because he lov—

No.

He dropped his head to the mattress. Had he ever done something this stupid before?

"We agreed to keep it between us," Cara said.

"I know," he said, trying to process how adamantly she was protesting telling Max and what that meant for them.

Not that there was a them . She'd made that clear.

"Okay," she whispered, breaking him out of his despondency, at least for now. "I agree. We should probably tell him one day. But later. Much later. Now is literally the worst possible time."

Cara gestured down at her naked body covered in a thin white sheet. Antonio fought off the fresh wave of desire that hit him.

"Fine," he said, shaking off the image of her straddling him. "What are we going to do?"

She narrowed her eyes for a moment at him before opening her phone again. Antonio stared at her, hoping she'd fill him in on whatever plan she'd cooked up, but she just silently clicked away.

"Uh," Antonio said, realizing a million years had passed since Max had spoken. "Sorry, I haven't seen her since last night. She definitely came."

Cara smirked.

"Back!" Antonio smacked his face. "She definitely came back ."

He pulled himself together and straightened his face, trying hard to ignore her. If they were going to move on, he'd have to look at her less.

Or never.

He searched the floor for his underwear until he realized he was in his own room, and he had a suitcase full of clean clothes. With a shake of his head, he grabbed clean underwear, a t-shirt, and shorts from his suitcase, and dressed faster than he ever had in his life.

When he heard a loud bang come from the hall, he spun toward Cara.

"Take him away," she whispered with a wave toward the hall, before getting out of the bed and gathering her clothes.

After she made a beeline for the bathroom and was securely hid away, Antonio opened the door.

Max stood in the hall, blocking him. He was staring down at his phone, clicking away. "What took you so long?" he asked.

"Uh, I was taking a shit," Antonio said. That excuse always worked. No one ever followed up with questions after that. "Did you find Cara?"

Max nodded. "She just texted. Apparently, she woke up early and was feeling sick, so she went for a walk. She didn't want to puke in the hotel room."

Antonio nodded. Perfect. "Oh, good."

"Yeah," Max said, pushing a hand through his hair with relief. "I panicked for a minute. Thanks for getting her back safe."

Antonio nodded. "No problem," he said, ignoring the surge of guilt. "There's a café in the lobby, right? Let's go get some coffee."

Antonio stepped fully into the hall, forcing Max to move back, and let his room door

close behind him. They walked down the hall toward the elevators together, leaving Cara enough space to dash over to her room and clean up.

Antonio just hoped she left sneakily enough so no one caught her creeping out of his room. Until that point, they'd only lied by omission. They had a chance that morning to come clean. But since they didn't do that, he'd now actually outright lied. Right to Max's face.

He wasn't sure Max would ever forgive him. Or if he even should.

seventeen

Cara was at her lab, bleary-eyed from the hours she'd spent that morning in front of her computer. But she'd be lying if she said the only thing giving her a headache was the blue light. She knew the headache was actually from the nightmarish situation she'd created for herself.

She pushed away from her desk and spun in her chair. It was only eleven thirty, but she was ready for her lunch break.

"I'm breaking," she called over her shoulder at Dr. Tanaka.

Dr. Tanaka spun in her chair. "Like, mentally?"

Cara managed a weak laugh. "Yes," she said, taking out her lunch bag and reaching for the pill bottle she kept inside for emergencies.

"I know it's brutal right now," Dr. Tanaka said, "but we're getting there."

Cara snorted and shook her head before popping a pain relief tablet in her mouth and chasing it with a swig of cold coffee from her mug.

They'd been collecting thousands of pages of data for the last few months and this week, they finally took on analyzing it.

The mountain of work was a welcome relief after the events of the weekend.

She hadn't even hesitated to work through her golf lessons.

On Tuesday, she'd already had enough of searching through spreadsheets.

Wednesday had been torture. It was now Thursday, and she was done.

At least the endless lines of data had thoroughly distracted her from the deep emotions Antonio had brought about.

"We are," Dr. Tanaka said, more enthusiastically this time. "I can feel it."

Cara couldn't feel it. She was pretty sure they were no further along than they had been on Monday. She pulled a sandwich from her lunch bag and spun away from her computer. Dr. Tanaka did the same, grabbing her lunch as she went.

"We should get a table here," Dr. Tanaka said with a smile.

Cara nodded and took a bite, noting the time on the wall so she'd know when to expect the pain medicine to move its way through her system and numb her pulsating head.

"You okay?"

Cara shrugged. "Headache. I'll be fine in twenty minutes."

Dr. Tanaka nodded and took a bite of her leftovers, but didn't seem to buy it. "Thanks for covering for me last week," she said. "I'm sorry I made you miss golf."

"That's okay."

Dr. Tanaka took another bite. "How was the meteor shower?"

"Good."

"And Margaret? How was she?"

Cara finally let out a little laugh. Margaret was the president of the Royal Astrological Society, and to call her intense would be an understatement. She was in her seventies, retired, and took her position seriously.

"She was... Margaret," she said.

Dr. Tanaka laughed for a second, then settled into a smile, and finally got back to her assessing look as she ate.

"And Golf Guy?" she asked. "What's going on with him?"

Cara huffed a sigh and shrugged. "I asked him to come with me to the observatory, but he wanted to work on his short game instead."

"Mmm," she said, showing no surprise.

Cara probably shouldn't have been surprised, either.

"He asked me out to a hockey game."

Dr. Tanaka turned up her nose.

"I know," Cara said. "I told him I'd let him know, but I've been so busy that I didn't know if I had it in me to sit through a whole three-hour hockey game."

Dr. Tanaka's eyes double in size. "Three hours? That's how long they play?"

Cara nodded.

"Barf. When's the game?"

"Tonight," she said, pulling her phone from her bag. "I actually haven't checked my messages in a while..."

Cara opened her messages and paused. She had a text from Antonio.

She hadn't heard from him since the weekend when they waved goodbye to each other and parted ways. As much as she wanted to talk to him and see him, she refused to initiate the communication. She knew that any interaction at all with him would just make things worse.

Why did she think she could have sex with him and sleep in his big spoon and not fall in love?

Why?!

"Everything okay?"

She looked up at Dr. Tanaka and winced. She'd told no one what happened, obviously, because they were lying to all their friends. The only person she could talk to about it was Antonio, and that wasn't going to happen.

Cara dropped her chin. "You know how I went to a bachelorette party last weekend?"

Dr. Tanaka slowly lowered her fork to her dish as her eyes widened. "Yes."

Cara sucked in a breath and braced herself. "While I was there, I slept with my brother's friend."

Dr. Tanaka fell back into her chair. "Oh my God," she said. "I thought you were going to tell me something bad happened."

"That's not bad?" Cara asked, her voice coming out all squeaky. "I'm pretty sure I fell in love with him."

Dr. Tanaka's eyes darted around. "What did your brother say?"

"He doesn't know."

"Oh," she said, looking down for a moment to collect her thoughts. "Are you going to... date him?"

Cara shook her head. "No. He's still in love with his wife."

Dr. Tanaka's eyes bulged.

"They're separated," she said. "It wasn't a cheating thing."

Dr. Tanaka settled back in her chair slightly, then let out a long whistle. "You should really lead with these updates on Monday mornings. Holding it in isn't good for your skin."

Cara bit into her sandwich. "I've been trying to forget it happened."

"But you can't?"

Cara shook her head and glanced back down at the screen in her hand. "He texted me, but I haven't read it," she said, staring at her phone. "I'm afraid to look."

"Maybe he likes you as much as you like him?"

Cara shrugged. "Would it matter? He's a walking red flag."

"How so?"

"He's still technically married. And he cheated on a girl before. He's very good at lying. He's ten years older than me. And Max doesn't trust him."

Dr. Tanaka nodded in agreement.

"If Max doesn't even trust his own friend, how could I?"

"Maybe you should read the text."

Cara scrunched her face, released it with a sigh, and unlocked her phone. She read the text out loud.

Antonio: Hey, just reaching out to see if we're okay.

A moment of silence passed between Cara and Dr. Tanaka.

"Reaching out?" Dr. Tanaka asked. "He said reaching out?"

Cara looked down, then back up. "Yup. Sounds like a work email."

"To see if we're okay?"

Cara nodded.

"What are you going to do?"

Cara shrugged. She literally had no clue.

Ignoring her feelings was impossible, but she knew she couldn't date Antonio.

Just then, her phone pinged with another text.

She looked down, expecting another message from Antonio. Maybe one that didn't sound so stiff and impersonal. But when she opened her phone, she saw it was from Jalen.

"Now golf guy just messaged."

Dr. Tanaka let out a low whistle. "When did your life get so exciting?"

Cara rolled her eyes. "He wants to know if I'm going to the game with him tonight."

Dr. Tanaka loaded her fork with pad thai and stuffed it into her mouth. "Are you?"

Cara flopped back in her chair. "What would you do?"

"Forget him," she said around a mouthful of food. "Forget both of them."

Cara raised an eyebrow. "But golf guy isn't bad. Right?"

Dr. Tanaka placed her lunch on her lap and gave Cara her full attention.

"You want to find your person, right?"

"Yeah..." she said trepidatiously, a little afraid of the intensity coming off Dr. Tanaka.

"And you know you're never going to be happy spending your life going to hockey games, or golfing, or everything else this guy is dragging you to, right?"

"Yeah, I guess," she said.

"So why waste your time?"

"Well, most guys like sports. You don't have to have everything in common with someone to make a relationship work, do you?"

If she had to find someone who was just like her, she'd be alone forever.

"No, but there are fewer things to fight about later."

Cara shrugged and opened the conversation with Jalen. At least his text sounded like a human wrote it to another human he cared about.

"I'm saying yes to the hockey game," Cara said with a shrug. "I have nothing better to do and I could use a night out. And this will give me one more chance to see if there's anything there before cutting things off."

She typed out a falsely enthusiastic response to Jalen.

Cara: I'm free and I'd love to go to the game with you tonight.

With a decisive nod, Cara hit send. There. Done.

"What are you going to do about brother's friend guy?"

Hmm... that was trickier.

Cara knew what she had to do. She had to forget about her feelings for Antonio and move on. Maturely. That way, they could still hang out as a group.

She was certain that eventually, as time went on, she'd realize that her feelings for him were nothing more than postcoital hormones. And when he reconciled with Fran, she would be happy for him.

She gathered her thoughts, then started typing.

eighteen

Antonio stared at his phone's screen, waiting. Ten minutes had passed since he'd texted Cara asking if she was okay with everything that had happened between them.

He'd been writing and deleting texts since Sunday night. Must have started at least a hundred, ranging from asking if she was okay to asking her if they should go out sometime, but he couldn't bring himself to send any of them.

He knew he should forget about it all and let Cara move on with her life, as she wanted. But that was much easier said than done.

When he'd agreed to spend the night with her, he expected he'd be able to separate sex from his feelings. But the feelings crept in through the cracks, and now he was trying to figure out whether to exterminate them or let them take over.

He'd finally broken down during his lunch break and wrote the most generic, surface-level text he could, hoping it would at least open communication so he could get a better idea of where her head was at.

They needed to get together and talk about it. There had been no chance for him to speak to her after he'd left his room with Max.

She might have hated him. Or maybe she felt indifferent about the entire experience. But what if she had feelings for him, too?

What if they were as deep as his?

He had to know.

Finally, a notification pinged on his phone, and he checked it, but it wasn't a text from her, it was an email from the property manager at his new apartment.

He rolled his eyes and set his phone down.

It wasn't urgent. He'd already completed the lease and gave notice to his current landlord that he was leaving. The new property manager said he was going to email details about when he could start moving his stuff in.

Antonio couldn't wait to get out of the place he was in, but it was hard to be excited about his new apartment when his mind was so occupied with the mess he'd made with Cara.

Why hadn't he just admitted his feelings to her that night, and told he thought they should give things a go?

Because two weeks ago you shot down her advances and told her you wanted Fran.

He dropped his head down on the table.

It had been fifteen minutes now, and he was getting worried. He tried to tell himself that she was probably busy, at her lab, doing whatever a person at a space lab does—that she wasn't staring at his text wondering how to tell him the truth, that he'd hurt her, and that she'd never forgive him.

Exactly what Sara had told him.

He'd thought that was the lowest he'd ever sink, but no. He went and slept with his best friend's little sister, whom he secretly loved—and who now refused to speak to

him—and lied to his friend's face about it.

God, sometimes he just fucking hated himself.

He was about to give up and get back to work when his phone rang.

He shot up and grabbed it off the table, ready to answer it way, way, way too eagerly. But it wasn't Cara.

It was Maria.

He wanted to curse the universe for sending so much communication from all the wrong people. Why couldn't he get a response from Cara? She was the only person he cared to hear from at that moment.

"Hello," he said, begrudgingly.

"Heyyyy..." she said, drawing it out.

Antonio raised an eyebrow. That was an odd response. He'd never heard his sister draw out a single vowel for so long.

"Uh, hi. Everything okay?"

Maria's heavy sigh barreled through the call. "No," she said. "I have bad news."

Antonio braced himself.

"I don't know how to tell you this... I actually hate what I'm about to tell you..."

Another pause.

"Just say it," he said, forcing himself to breathe in and out. What the hell was going on?

"Blake is living with Fran," she said.

Oh.

Antonio relaxed back into his chair.

"I'm so sorry, Tonio. I wasn't sure if I should tell you, but Mom saw them leaving your house and she's freaking out and saying she's going to march down there and kick 'that man out of her son's house.'"

"Wow, okay." Antonio tried to take it all in and shift gears from his Cara problem. Fran sleeping with Blake was the least of his worries. "She said he just spends the night sometimes."

"Wait," Maria said, followed by a way-too-long pause. "You knew about this?"

"Yeah."

"And you still want her back?!" Maria screamed at him.

Antonio pulled the phone away from his ear to protect his ear drum from her shrillness. "You're yelling."

Maria ignored him and went off on a rant, but he barely heard any of what she said because his phone pinged with a new text.

He turned the volume down on his sister and let her continue to go off while he opened the text from Cara.

Cara: We're fine.

His heart stopped.

That's it? Those two little words?

And what the hell did “fine” mean?

Fine as in I hate you? Or fine as in let's be friends? Or fine as in come over later and spoon me all night?

He needed way more information than that.

Maria hadn't yet come up for air, so he typed out a reply before he talked himself out of it.

Antonio: Do you want to get together and talk? I'm free tonight after ten.

He only had to wait fifteen seconds for a reply this time.

Cara: Can't. Going out with Jalen tonight.

His stomach sank.

Jalen?

What was this, their third date? Was this going to continue? She'd seemed unsure about him on the bus.

And why the hell wouldn't she be home by ten o'clock?

Then he remembered why she'd wanted to have sex with him that night. To get more experience.

God fucking dammit.

"Tonio!"

His sister's voice broke through. "Yeah, sorry, what?"

"You don't seem to care at all that the whole family is angry about Fran moving a guy into your house."

He shook his head. "It's not news to me."

"Well, it is news to the whole family, who basically want to put a hit on your wife, who you claim to still be in love with."

He tried to absorb her words, but another text came from Cara, and he couldn't think about Fran or Maria or his mother or Blake.

Cara: Maybe we can meet up in the morning. Not too early.

His eyes doubled.

What had she said on the bus? That Jalen had asked her to an Orca's game? Those games usually started at seven, finished by nine thirty. Hopefully, they would go back to her place, not his. That would mean they'd get there around ten.

And he was off at ten. If he just went over to her house after work, then he could—

His brain forced him to stop the super fucking stalker-y direction his heart had taken

him in.

"What are you going to do?"

He sighed. "I don't know, Maria," remembering Maria was talking about Fran.

Ugh.

The last thing he wanted was to keep talking about Fran, Blake, and that old house. He'd finally crawled out from under that weight and started to see a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel.

But now the tunnel was bleak as fuck.

As was his future with Cara. Although he couldn't really grieve that, considering they never even had a present.

Exhaustion hit him like a train. He wished he could just snap his fingers and make it all disappear. Even just for a little while.

"Maria, I gotta get back to work," he said, rubbing at the tightness in his chest.

"Okay," Maria said in a sad voice. "I'm sorry you're going through all this, Tone. I can't imagine how I'd feel if Pete asked for a divorce and moved a new girlfriend into our home."

Antonio shook his head. Too many things were all happening at once. He just wanted it all to stop.

"I'll let you go," she continued. "And I'll try to keep Mom from killing Fran."

"Okay, bye."

He hung up the phone and, with it, hung up all the noise about Fran. But as soon as he did, his mind fell on Cara, as it had every day since their night together.

He hit reply to her text, started typing, then deleted it. He did it again. And again. Until, eventually, it really was time to get back to work.

It wouldn't be at all fair to her to tell her what was truly on his mind, but his stomach rolled with the possibility of her spending the night with Jalen.

He'd fallen way harder and faster than he'd expected. And fighting it was becoming impossible.

He closed the conversation without sending any reply and stood from the table. He hoped that by ten o'clock, when his workday ended, his mind would be free of these thoughts and he wouldn't do something stupid.

nineteen

The front seat of Jalen's car was closing in on Cara and she couldn't breathe.

She covertly pulled out her phone and checked it for the fifteenth time since they'd left the arena. Four minutes? She fought off the overwhelming urge to roll the window down and gasp for air.

That would make her look a little unhinged. Especially considering the temperature was unseasonably low. At least they were halfway to her house, and this date would finally be over.

The next time she was on the fence about a guy, she'd drive herself.

The night had started out okay. The drive from Monroe Manor to the arena was fine. Almost natural, even. She had high hopes.

But before they even sat down, Jalen started talking about the players' stats and ranking in the league and which players had already been scouted by the NHL. She'd spent the entire night feigning interest and trying to change the subject.

After the game, she suggested going somewhere to play pool, but he shrugged off her suggestion, gave her a smirk and said, "Let's get outta here."

She wasn't sure what he thought was going to happen, but considering she'd been wanting the date to end, she'd just smiled and nodded and let him lead her out to his car.

The drop off was going to be pretty fucking awkward.

She glanced in his direction, and he turned toward her with a smile and an eyebrow wag.

Fuck.

She really wished she liked him more. He was very attractive. And he wasn't an asshole. But something was just... off.

He's not Antonio.

How messed up was that?

She was on a date with a nice, sexy guy who was clearly very into her, and all she could think about was Antonio.

Her brother's friend, who cheats on girls, was still married, and told her he wanted his wife.

The click-clack of the car's turn signal pulled her mind from her troubles, and when she looked up, she realized they were home.

She started spinning her bracelet around her wrist, her mind whirring. She should have spent the drive figuring out what to say to Jalen to end whatever this was. Now she'd have to wing it.

She hated winging it.

He pulled the car down the long gravel driveway and eased to a stop right in front of the porch. What the hell was she going to say? Could she just make a quick escape

and dash into the house? She could send him a text later and tell him it wasn't working.

That was a terrible plan, but the only one she had, so she unbuckled her seatbelt.

"This was fun—"

"I'll walk you to your door."

He said it as he moved. Before she could protest, he was already out of the car.

Goddammit.

She let out a sigh now that he was out of earshot and exited his car, cursing herself for ever agreeing to this date.

He came around the corner and she let him take her hand as they walked up the stairs, but she pulled away when they came to the door and reached into her purse for her key.

"I had a great time tonight," Jalen said.

She nodded and opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, he took her hand again, slowing her movements and forcing her to look up at him.

He moved in closer, put one hand on her cheek.

"Cara?"

She took in his dark eyes. "Yeah?"

"Can I kiss you?"

Her heart softened, and she questioned whether she was giving this enough of a try. Had she let her feelings for Antonio cloud her judgment about Jalen?

Oh, probably.

Maybe she needed to test the waters a bit with Jalen. Maybe it would help her lose her feelings for Antonio.

She nodded, and he leaned in close.

He smelled good. He looked good. He sounded good.

She hoped he'd kiss good, too.

But the moment his lips touched hers, she felt exactly nothing. It wasn't a bad kiss, but her heart wasn't in it. Nor was her brain.

Or her vagina, for that matter.

Any doubt about him being "the one" vanished instantly, like a fart in the wind.

Everything about him, to her at least, was just... meh. She really hoped that sleeping with Antonio hadn't ruined every other guy in comparison.

She pulled away from Jalen, feeling pretty down about everything, but when their eyes connected, she realized the feeling wasn't mutual.

"Wow," he said, rubbing his hands up and down her arms.

She gave him a half smile and glanced around the front yard, searching for words.

"Can I come in?"

Her eyes flew up to his and she could feel how wide they were. She forced them to relax and her brain to think.

"Uh... that's a little too fast for me," she said.

Okay, that was probably a weird thing to say. They'd been on several dates and had been talking for a couple of weeks by then. If she had no interest in being at home alone with him, wouldn't she know by now?

She was sending mixed signals for sure. Jalen seemed to think so, too. He gave a nod and looked around.

"We don't have to... I mean, we can just hang out for a while."

Cara shook her head before she realized how that might come across. There was just no way she wanted to be inside with him. Maybe if everyone else was home. But it was hockey night, so everyone was out.

Jalen seemed to get the point and gave a nod, then glanced back at his car.

"Okay," he said, taking a step away down the porch. "Maybe next time."

Next time?

She fought off a wave of nausea.

"See ya later," he said, then turned and walked to his car.

Cara stood on the porch and watched him drive away, and when his car turned out of the driveway, she sank down on the cold wood steps.

What the hell was wrong with her?

She didn't have long to ponder before a set of headlights turned down the driveway and blinded her. She checked the time. It was too early for anyone to be home.

Was Jalen coming back? Had he forgotten something?

Maybe it was Chelsea and Jae and she'd have someone to talk to about her problems. Not that she could tell them about Antonio, but maybe she could change some names and get some advice while still keeping it secret.

But when the car was close enough for her to recognize who it was, she froze.

"Antonio?" She'd said it out loud and shook her head as her heart raced. She hadn't expected to see him. He'd said he'd be free after ten, but they didn't make any actual plans.

She shook her head and rolled her eyes at herself.

He probably wasn't there to see her at all. Maybe the guys had a hockey group chat she wasn't a part of, and they decided to go to Chelsea's after their game instead of the pub for beers.

He pulled to a stop in front of her and she realized she was still sitting on the porch, in the freezing night air, like a weirdo.

She stood as he stepped out of his car and walked over to her.

"Hi," he said.

Her heart, head, and vagina all stood at attention at the sound of his voice. There was more chemistry in one syllable from Antonio than three hours of conversation with Jalen.

"Hi," she said back, wishing she could find the resolve to break eye contact with him.
"No one's here."

Antonio's brows knitted. "I came to see you."

Her body ignited. Literally ignited.

Suddenly, she was no longer cold. She couldn't even feel the air.

He climbed onto the porch, stopped in front of her and let out a deep exhale. Was he nervous?

"Why are you sitting alone in the cold?"

"Jalen just dropped me off."

His face went blank, like he was trying hard to cover his emotions. "How was your date?"

Cara shrugged, looking down at her feet.

Antonio came in close and lifted her chin with the knuckle of his index finger, forcing her to look at him. Their eyes locked for a long moment before he lifted his hand to her cheek. She tilted her head into his touch, wanting more of the warmth from his palm.

God, he felt so good. She loved his hands. Lust radiated through her body, from her stomach outward. Her brain began melting with memories of the last time they touched.

But somehow logic forced its way in, and she remembered she was supposed to be keeping her distance from him—not letting him stroke her cheek.

She took a step back and narrowed her eyes.

"Why are you here, Antonio?"

He ran a hand through his hair, opened his mouth, closed it, and looked around.

She just stood there, waiting.

Eventually, he found words.

"I can't stop thinking about you," he said.

Her whole body tightened. Why was he doing this? And why hadn't he done it sooner?

"Why?"

She didn't know why she asked the question. Or even what it meant. She just threw the question out into the ether.

Why, universe? Why?

"Because I like you," he said. "I want to talk about us."

Her forehead creased, and he stepped in close and opened his arms.

She shamelessly sunk against his chest, and his arms wrapped around her back. Her lungs loosened and her breath started to flow with more ease.

"What is this?" she asked.

A moment passed, with each of them clinging to the other, before he spoke.

"I think you already know the answer to that," he said, his voice soft and deep. "How was your date?"

She pulled back from him, not enough to stop the hug, just so that she could see his eyes. "My date?"

He kept a firm hold on her eyes, searching, as if bracing himself for what he was going to say.

"If you're with Jalen, or if you don't want me here, just say so," he said. "Tell me to go, and I'll leave you alone."

She tried to focus on unpacking everything he'd just said.

She honestly hadn't expected him to tell her he liked her—or to imply that he knew she liked him, too.

Maybe he had been feeling the way she felt since that night in the hotel.

It seemed like it. He'd showed up at her house on a night she was going out with someone else and hadn't let her out of his arms since they said hello.

It honestly seemed a little stalker-y, but she was thrilled—in a good way, not in an “I’m afraid for my life” kinda way.

She wasn't really sure what to think about him showing up. But there was one question that bubbled up and burned a hole in her brain.

"What about Fran?" she asked.

Antonio gave his head a slight shake. "I don't care what Fran does. She's with Blake," he said, reaching one hand up to her face and tucking her hair behind her ear.

Her eyelids closed at his touch, and a hum escaped her lips. Those words were music to her ears.

"I don't want this to stop," Antonio said.

His words were slightly vague and confusing, but she couldn't stop herself from falling ever so slightly more under his spell. What part of this didn't he want to stop? Sleeping together? Sneaking around?

She didn't fully understand what he meant, but she whole-heartedly agreed. She didn't want Antonio to stop. In fact, she desperately wanted him to start.

He slid his fingers through her hair, down the back of her neck, and she melted into his touch. "I want you, Cara. I want to be with you."

The admission sent waves of need through her. She blinked down at his lips, remembering the feel of him on her—in her.

A heavy sigh escaped from her chest.

Antonio reached for her chin, tipped it up and kissed her. Everything in her screamed yes!

His lips moved gently at first, then deeper and with more urgency until her entire body was alight. His hands gently pulled her hips toward him.

Was she really going to do this again?

Yes.

She wanted to scream. Wanted to cry. Wanted to rip all her clothes off and rub herself on him like a cat in heat. Clearly, once with him hadn't been nearly enough. Would twice do the trick?

No.

She briefly wondered where this was all going. What did he mean by “be with you”? Be with her one more time? Forever?

They probably should've stopped and talked about it, but right when Cara was going to suggest that, his tongue slid across hers in the most decadent way and she thought, fuck it .

She broke off the kiss and shoved her key in the door handle as she pushed against it.

"Come inside," she said, taking his hands and backing into the house.

He smiled and followed her.

twenty

Heat radiated through Antonio's chest as the fluttering in his stomach came to a stop. He hadn't known which way this was going to go, given that Cara had been keeping her distance from him since their night together—and went on a date with Jalen.

But when she sunk against his chest, almost relieved at being in his arms, a sense of calm washed over him. Everything was going to be alright. They were exactly where they were supposed to be.

Cara pulled him into the house and pressed herself against his body, causing a euphoric ache to flood through him. His hands were desperate to touch her. He reached around her, pushing up the back of her jacket to feel her skin as she leaned in and pressed her lips against his.

His brain screamed at him to stop and talk to her before it went too far, but when she licked his tongue and playfully sucked his lower lip, his body took over. His heart pounded as shudders of pleasure raced along every nerve ending.

They could talk after.

He held her against his chest and took a few steps forward, pressing her up against the wall. She reached her fingers under his belt and pulled his hips closer, moaning when she felt how aroused he was.

"Upstairs," she said between kisses.

He kept her pressed against the wall as he reached behind, put a hand on the front door, and slammed it shut with a loud bang.

He deepened their kiss, reluctant to pull apart to climb the stairs. He could lift her and carry her up so he wouldn't have to leave the heat radiating from between her legs—

"What!?"

A loud voice broke through the lust, followed by a blaring metallic clank.

Antonio broke from Cara with a jump and spun around.

Adam was standing there with a wrench on the floor in front of him, his eyes bulging out of his skull.

Seconds of silence ticked by, but they felt like hours. No one moved. No one even blinked.

"Were you two... Are you guys...?"

Adam stumbled back, glancing over his shoulder as if wishing he could rewind to a time when he hadn't seen Antonio dry humping Cara against the wall in the foyer.

Suddenly, Ethan appeared from around the corner. His gaze darted between the three of them. "What's going on?"

Antonio squeezed his eyes shut, praying they were the only ones there, and that Max wasn't about to come from the hall and break all his bones.

In a way, it would be nice if Max knew. They could get this over with and he and Cara could move on. But at the same time, he needed his bones.

Finally, Cara stepped forward and moved her hands to her hips. "What are you two doing here? And why isn't your car parked out front?"

The three of them turned to Cara in unison. Her voice had come out accusatory. Antonio suppressed a smile.

"The faucet wasn't— We needed a wrench from Ethan's—"

Adam stopped his explanation with a huff, as if he realized how ridiculous it was that he was answering her questions. Clearly, he believed he should do the interrogating here.

"Are you two fu—"

"Don't say it," Ethan said, cutting him off. "This isn't our business."

Adam spun on him. "What?"

"I agree with Ethan," Cara said.

Adam turned and pointed a finger at her. "I'll get to you in a minute," he said, then spun back to Ethan. An entire silent conversation seemed to pass between the two friends over a three-second period, which gave Antonio a second to gather his thoughts.

Cara agreed with Ethan? That it wasn't their business? Did that mean she didn't want to tell everyone about them?

He wanted to be out in the open with Cara, not telling their friends to mind their own business. God, he hoped she wanted the same.

"Is Max coming?" Antonio asked, trying to figure out if he and Cara had enough time to talk things through. He'd prefer to know what he was going to tell Max before telling him about their secret. And for that, he had to know where Cara stood.

Adam and Ethan both turned toward him. Ethan winced, and Adam freaked out.

"Are you serious right now?" Adam asked, his eyes wild. "You better not think that whatever the hell this is," he waved between Antonio and Cara for dramatic effect, "will continue."

Ethan leaned toward him. "Max is at the pub."

Antonio exhaled in relief. That would give him some breathing room.

"We are going to decide if this will continue," Cara said, her voice laced with rage. "You two will stay out of it."

"Agreed," Ethan said, turning. He grabbed Adam's arm, but Adam shook him off.

"There is no way you can keep this from Max," Adam said, before turning to Ethan. "When he finds out we knew and didn't tell him, he'll kill us, too."

Ethan considered this for a moment, then winced.

"Yeah," Adam said, nodding with wild eyes. "They're going to take us down with them."

"You're being ridiculous," Cara said.

"Am I?" Adam yelled. "Am I?" he repeated, louder and with wider eyes. "You think Max is going to be okay with his friend using his little sister?"

Antonio blanched at the word “using,” and was about to shut that down, but when he glanced at Cara, she'd dropped her shoulders.

Antonio turned toward her, ignoring his friends. "That's not what's going on here," he said.

She looked up at him, searching his eyes.

"I'm not using you, Cara."

God, he hoped she believed him.

"Oh, really?" Adam interrupted.

Antonio's eyes closed, and he sucked in a breath to calm himself down. But before he could speak, Adam continued.

"If you aren't using her, then why haven't you told Max?"

Antonio's thoughts swirled so quickly it was hard to keep up. "We were only keeping it from him at first because—"

"Because you're married," Adam continued.

Antonio shook his head at the interrogation. "Separated."

"And Max doesn't trust you."

"He—"

"Because you cheated on your last girlfriend," Adam said.

"That—"

"And because he loves Cara like a daughter."

Antonio went numb as the knot in his stomach grew. What a fucking dumpster fire. He'd never felt like a bigger piece of shit in his whole life.

"Enough," Cara said with a shake of her head. Her warm hand took his, and she tugged him toward the stairs.

He wanted to go with her, but his limbs felt like a million pounds.

"This isn't your business, Adam," she said, pulling on Antonio's arm.

Adam stopped and crossed his arms around his chest. "I agree," he said. "I wish I didn't know about any of this. But now that I do, I'm not keeping it from Max."

Using all her strength, Cara pulled, and finally, Antonio's legs loosened enough to follow her. They turned away from Adam and Ethan and climbed up the stairs.

They were at the top of the stairs when Adam shouted up, "If you don't tell him, I will."

Fuck.

What the hell was he thinking?

There were a thousand other ways he could have handled his feelings for Cara. And he'd chosen the absolute worst one. He'd gone to her house and ravaged her, and they got caught.

Now they were in this messy situation where he'd have to backtrack and convince his friends and her brother that he wasn't using her. He'd made the worst fucking mess of his life.

Now he had to scramble to pick up the pieces.

twenty-one

C ara took the stairs two at a time, dragging Antonio behind her. When she got to her room, she yanked open the door and placed a hand on Antonio's back, shoving him into her bedroom and slamming the door behind them.

Her blood had been boiling with indignation. She couldn't believe the nerve of Adam and Ethan interrogating Antonio. They'd acted as if she wasn't even there.

She was an entire adult. She could—and would—make her own decisions about whom to sleep with. It was no one else's damn business.

She had nothing but respect and love for Max, but his—and his friends'—opinion of her and Antonio's relationship was not relevant.

Okay, maybe not relationship . But whatever the hell the thing between her and Antonio was did not need Max's stamp of approval.

She'd admit that she lost some bravado at Adam's suggestion that Antonio was using her. The thought had caused a stabbing pain in her chest, and she prayed it wasn't true.

If she was honest, though, she'd been using him, too. In fact, she'd literally told him she wanted to use him for sex. But the problem was that she'd fallen for him. Hard. And now the thought of him using her for sex made her stomach roll.

She honestly didn't know what to feel or think anymore.

She pushed past Antonio, who stood frozen in place just inside the door, and sat on the edge of her bed. She immediately stood back up and paced the room. Then she sat back down.

Finally, she looked up at Antonio and saw him exactly where he she left him—head hung low—as if he'd just been tried for murder and sentenced to life.

She rolled her eyes.

"Antonio," she said, waiting for him to look up at her.

He didn't. Just stared down and shuffled his weight between his feet.

"It's going to be fine."

Antonio shook his head. "I fucked up."

His response made her pause.

"Does that mean you regret this?" she asked in a tiny voice.

He met her eyes, his brows drawn together. "No," he said. "I just wish we'd done things differently."

Antonio finally moved. He crossed the room and sat on her bed, so close that their thighs touched, then he turned until he was facing her. Before he spoke, he reached up and tucked her hair behind her ear.

The last bits of anger and frustration slipped away with his touch. She leaned into him again.

"Cara?"

She tipped her eyes to his and waited.

"I hate how we started," he said, pausing for a moment, as if he was collecting his thoughts. "I wish I hadn't asked you to my parents' anniversary party."

She winced. It felt as though he was breaking up with her. Was that what was going on? She had already started convincing herself that her heart would be better off in the long run.

She nodded, forcing herself into a mature response. "We agreed to help each other out. We'll tell Max, he'll get over it, and we'll all move on."

Antonio froze. His face scrunched, and he stared at her for a long, intense moment. "You want to move on?"

Cara opened her mouth to speak, but when she saw the look in his eyes, her heart squeezed. "Isn't that what you want?"

Antonio immediately shook his head. "No."

Her mouth fell open even wider. Was he serious?

He searched her eyes for a moment longer before shaking his head. "You can't tell how much I like you?"

She shook her head while she tried to process what was happening. "You said you love Fran," she said. "You're married."

Antonio stood, ran his hand through his hair, and began pacing.

"That was before," he said. "I guess part of me will always love her. But ever since our date—well, our non-date, or whatever it was—at the euchre tournament, I haven't been able to think about anyone but you."

Cara forced her jaw up off the floor and clamped her mouth shut. Obviously, she felt the same, so it shouldn't have been that big of a shock to her. But how could he have done a complete one-eighty in only a few weeks?

"Am I alone in this?" he asked.

She waited a few seconds, then shook her head.

"I wanted to come here to talk about us, but then we kissed and you're so..." he ran a hand through his hair. "And then Adam and Ethan..."

Silence hung in the air between them as she considered his words. She didn't think he was being dishonest about his feelings. She could tell that he wanted her and liked her. What she couldn't understand was how he could already be over his wife, just like that.

Also, the whole "cheating on Sara" thing was burning a hole in her brain.

"Cara," he said, waiting for her to look up, "do you want to be with Jalen?"

Her eyebrows shot up. She'd forgotten all about him. "No."

He gave a nod. "Do you think we can start over? The right way this time," he said. "Without the lies and sneaking around."

She stared at him for a moment before she stood from the bed and crossed her arms protectively across her chest. That's what she wanted more than anything. Being with

Antonio felt exactly right.

But her head wasn't convinced.

Antonio drew near and placed his hands on her shoulders. She deflated in relief at his touch. Her head might have reservations, but her heart and body were all in.

She brought up an image in her mind of them together, holding hands, kissing, and touching whenever they wanted. Would it be so bad to see where things could lead?

"So you want to... date?"

Antonio nodded. "Yes."

She stared at him for a moment, wondering whether he wanted this because he genuinely liked her, or because he didn't want to ruin his friendship with her brother. "Not just because of Max?" she asked.

He pulled back slightly, shocked. "Of course not."

She narrowed her eyes, wondering if she could trust his words. He didn't have a great track record for trustworthiness.

His shoulders dropped. "You don't believe me, do you?"

She didn't know what to say. She didn't know if she believed him or not, so she gave a little shrug.

He lifted a hand and squeezed the back of his neck. "I think we have something really great together," he said.

"If...?" Cara prompted. If Max approves ? If Fran doesn't change her mind ?

"There is no if," he said.

She wanted to believe him so badly. They would be great together. But she wasn't sure if it was foolish to trust him.

She went back and forth, and back and forth in her mind before she finally held her breath, listened to her heart, and dove in headfirst. "Okay."

Antonio wasted no time. He pulled her in close, put a hand on the back of her head, and cradled her against him, kissing her temple.

She loved his touch—probably a little too much. But that wasn't enough to date someone, was it? She just hoped she hadn't made the worst mistake of her life.

"So we're going to tell Max?" she asked, her voice muffled in his shirt.

Antonio placed a sweet kiss on her lips and nodded. "Yes."

"What are we going to tell him?"

Antonio smiled. "That we're together. That you're my..." he hesitated. "Girlfriend."

Cara's heart filled with so much love and hope it overflowed. Maybe if she loved him enough with her heart and body, her brain would get on board, too.

"Girlfriend?"

Antonio smiled and nodded. "Is that too soon? Should we—"

"No," she said, her face betraying her true feelings. Her entire body was lighter. "I want to be your girlfriend."

Antonio reached out and hugged her, pressing his heart against hers. "I want to be your boyfriend."

They held each other for a long time before pulling away just enough to kiss. When he finally let her go, she thought she might float away.

She had a boyfriend, and he was perfect for her. Maybe the circumstances they'd come together under weren't ideal, but they would make it work.

They sat on the bed and made a quick plan for how to tell Max. Antonio said he'd call him tomorrow and arrange a time to get together to discuss.

Then they kissed goodbye, and he left. Now all she had to do was officially break things off with Jalen—and hope that Max would take their news well.

twenty-two

Antonio grabbed a steaming cup of coffee and sat at the desk in the back of the emergency room.

He had about a million things to get done.

Normally, everything would have overwhelmed him, but a calm wash of peace settled over him after Cara agreed to be his girlfriend the night before, and he doubted anything could disturb it.

Every problem in his life was finally falling into place.

His future was brighter than ever with Cara. Sure, they'd got off to a rocky start, and she hadn't seemed one hundred percent convinced of his motivations, but he was certain that once Max was in the loop and everyone got over the shock of it all, they would move on and be better than ever.

All he had to do was come clean to Max and assure him he wouldn't ever hurt Cara. Which would be easy enough, since that was the very last thing he'd ever do.

He took a drink of his coffee and pulled out his phone. There was a never-ending list of things he needed to get done, and he only had about twenty minutes before rounds, so he started on it.

He emailed his new landlord to confirm the time he'd arrive to move in that weekend. He ordered more moving boxes, and he replied to the group chat message that

Chelsea had sent, officially inviting him to their rehearsal dinner.

He couldn't wait to go to the rehearsal with Cara as his date. Actually, there were a lot of things he couldn't wait to do with Cara. He'd already started brainstorming date ideas he could take her on, since they hadn't had a proper first date yet.

They could go stargazing. And out for dinner where he could look at her without being secretive about it. He could find out if there was a board game night coming up somewhere.

It was nice to think about it all. But before he could actually start his relationship with her properly, he had to jump the last hurdle with Max.

But how?

He wanted to do it face to face, not over the phone. He checked the time. After work would be okay, he could go to the pub. A public place with witnesses would probably be prudent.

He took a few deep breaths, then hit the call button on his cell.

Max answered after the first ring. "Hey."

"Hey, how's it going?" So far, so good.

"Good," Max said. "What's up?"

Okay, here we go. "Just wondering if you want to grab a beer later."

"Can't. I have sound therapy with Willow and Jer tonight," he said.

Antonio laughed.

"You wanna come?"

Shit. He really wanted to be alone to talk to Max about it, but not with Willow and Jer around. It was bad enough Adam and Ethan knew already. But he couldn't really do anything about that.

"No, that's okay," Antonio said. "I've got a lot of packing to do. Maybe I could stop by tomorrow?"

"I have meetings all day tomorrow. How 'bout Sunday?"

"I'm moving to my new apartment Sunday morning, but I can—"

"I'll help you move," Max said.

Help him move?

No.

Nothing would make him feel like a bigger piece of shit than having his friend hoisting an eight million pound pullout couch while he told him he dated his sister behind his back, lied to him about it, but now she's his girlfriend.

"Nah," Antonio said, shaking his head back and forth. "I've got it under control—"

"Just take the help, Ant."

Antonio glanced around, searching for any excuse he could use. "I don't have much stuff," he said. "We can meet up for a beer after. Around four?"

"No," Max said. "I'll be at your place Sunday morning. Eight."

"You really don't—"

"Not taking no," Max said. "See you then."

Before Antonio could shut the conversation down, Max hung up.

Antonio ran a hand through his hair and slouched back in his chair. Why did he do this? And why did Max have to be such a good friend?

He shook it off and sat up. He'd just have to tell Max before he lifted a single finger. That way, he could still punch him and walk away, and Antonio wouldn't feel like an even worse friend than he already was.

"Hey, I need you."

Antonio turned in his chair and saw his Ramit standing in the doorway. He was supposed to be doing rounds. "What's up?"

"There's a patient asking for you," he said, looking at the file. "Maybe family?"

Antonio stood, his stomach dropping. Hopefully not his dad. Or mom. "Who is it?"

"Elliot Beebe."

"Ugh." His lip curled in annoyance.

Ramit smirked. "So not family?"

"Far from it," Antonio said.

"He says his rash is getting worse. He asked for you. Bed three."

Antonio took the file with a sigh and started toward the bed, telling himself to keep it professional. But when he arrived and pulled back the curtain, he saw Elliott there all alone.

Good.

"Hello," Antonio greeted him.

Elliott turned and smiled. "Hey, thanks for seeing me."

Antonio gave a nod. "So, the rash isn't clearing up?"

He shook his head. "Fran refused to help," he said. "I did my best, but I think it's getting worse."

He nodded again, ignoring the mention of his ex-wife and flipped through the file. The prescription he'd wrote was pretty potent and should have gotten the job done, but if he wasn't applying it properly, it obviously wouldn't work.

There was a stronger antihistamine he could prescribe. A course of antibiotics would get on top of any potential infection.

"You need something stronger," Antonio said, pulling a pair of blue latex gloves from the box on the wall.

Elliott nodded and pulled down his zipper. "I need someone stronger, too. Fran's too delicate, you know?"

Antonio kept his face neutral and told himself to say nothing. Elliott and Fran were in

his past, and all he cared about was his future. With Cara.

He inspected the rash on Elliott's ass. It hadn't got worse, but it certainly wasn't getting any better. The stronger cream would definitely help.

"Okay," Antonio said, signalling that they were done and removing the gloves. "We'll try a different cream and a course of antibiotics. That should clear it up."

Elliott zipped his pants up and smiled. "Thanks," he said. "How long do you think it will take?"

Antonio shrugged. "A few days to a week."

Elliott sighed. "I was hoping it would be quicker. I don't think I can last another week under Fran."

Antonio's brows pulled together. He tried to ignore Elliott's words but couldn't any longer.

"Are you and Fran... over?"

Elliott nodded emphatically. "Oh yeah," he said. "She's horrible. I've never met someone so... Well, you know how she is."

Antonio knew he should shrug it off, walk away, ignore everything. But he didn't.

"Why are you staying with her, then?"

Elliott gave him a slimy smile. "I'm not going to break up with her yet. I'll do it after my rash clears."

"You said she's not helping you."

"Well, she does my laundry and cooks," he said. "She's not a good cook, but my ass is burning like a bitch. I can't do it on my own."

Antonio stared at him for a moment, wondering why he was acting like they were friends. And wondering why he even cared. "So you're just using her?"

Elliott shrugged again. "What choice do I have?"

Antonio opened his mouth, then closed it.

None of this was his business. He didn't want to be with Fran. What she did and who she did it with weren't even on his radar anymore.

But Elliott's face and general attitude sickened him. Why would he take advantage of her like that?

He wordlessly scribbled the prescription on his pad, ripped off the paper, and tossed it on the bed.

"You're a piece of shit," Antonio said. "Don't ask for me again."

Elliott's eyes widened in shock, but Antonio didn't stick around long enough for a response. He turned, pushed through the curtain, and walked away.

What a douche bag.

He was happy to move on from Fran. Being with Cara made him realize they'd never been a good match for each other. It was so obvious how much better suited he and Cara were.

But Fran had been his best friend growing up, and his wife for ten years. He didn't want her to be taken advantage of.

He thought back and forth for a moment, then finally decided he would at least relay the information Elliott shared. So he sent a text to Maria telling her what had happened. Maria replied, asking if he wanted her to tell Fran, and he said yes.

There. Done.

His good deed for the day.

Now he could move on, focus on his new apartment and his new girlfriend, and figure out what he was going to say to Max. It was all uphill from there.

twenty-three

C ara sat on a high stool at Willow's bar and fiddled with her bracelet. She'd only been there for about thirty seconds, but the idea of seeing Jalen already made her sweaty.

She wanted to end things over text, but before she could find the words, he'd messaged her and asked if she wanted to go to a golf simulator with him and his friends that weekend.

It was incredibly tempting to just ghost him, quit golf lessons, and pray she never ran into him at the grocery store, but she really didn't want to be that person. So she asked him to meet her at the brewery for a quick drink that night and he replied, Looking forward to it!

Ugh, the exclamation mark made her panic. Maybe if she hadn't done everything he wanted, he would have known they weren't compatible. But she'd played this sporty golf girl role with him and now he seemed to be way deeper into this than she was.

She couldn't wait to get this breakup over with so she could move on to bigger and better things.

Like Antonio.

"Care-bear," Jer said, finally seeing her at the bar.

He came over with a smile.

"Jer-bear," she said, trying to sound casual.

Jer's smile dropped. "What's wrong?"

"I'm meeting someone."

He wagged his eyebrows. "A sexy someone?"

"Yes, but I'm breaking up with him."

Jer's brows shot up, and he seemed to think for a second. "Is this the Jalen I've heard so much about?"

Cara nodded.

"It's over?"

"Oh yeah," she said. She considered telling him why but didn't want to jump the gun and tell anyone before Max knew.

She was still waiting to hear from Antonio. He'd told her he wanted to talk to Max alone about it first, which she thought was kind of silly, but she went along with it.

"Is this gonna be messy?" Jer asked.

Cara shook her head. "I don't think so. I'm just nervous."

She figured it would be fine. They'd only been on a few dates. But it was nice to have Jer on the other side of the bar for moral support.

Jer nodded. "Break up with him before he orders. That way, he won't stay here to

drink his beer all awkwardly."

Cara smiled. "Good call."

"I'll take some time before I come over, and I won't pour it for a while to give you a chance to say what you need to say."

Her shoulders loosened, and she let go of her bracelet. "Thanks."

The door opened behind her and Cara turned toward it just as Jalen walked in. He spotted her and smiled, closing the distance between them in a few long strides.

Here we go.

"You got this," Jer whispered, then took a few steps away to the end of the bar.

She hopped off the stool as Jalen approached, then panicked. How the hell was she supposed to greet him? Give him a hug? Shake his hand?

She'd only broken up with one other person, Cooper, and she'd been so angry with him at that point that she hadn't considered these things.

The memory of that breakup triggered her slightly, but she remembered where she was—with Jer on the other side of the bar. If Jalen turned mean like Cooper had, she could escape easily. Not that he would. Jalen was great.

He just wasn't her person.

"Hey," Jalen said, then pulled her into a tight hug.

She went with it, not sure what to do. He was acting as he always had, without a

single inkling he was about to get dumped.

He pulled away and placed a kiss on her cheek. Before she could gather her thoughts, he was already nodding at Jer.

"Excuse me," he said, his hand in the air.

Jer turned and nodded.

"I'll take a pint of the IPA," he said before turning back to Cara. "You like the IPA here, right?"

Cara's jaw went slack. She didn't know what to say.

Jalen turned back to Jer. "Make that two, please."

Luckily, Jer seemed to sense her panic and stepped in. "You got it," he said, staying at the end of the bar without moving.

That would buy her a bit of time but she'd need to pull the trigger. Quick.

"Jalen," Cara started, pausing for him to look at her.

He twisted on his stool and smiled. "Yeah?"

"I think you're really great," she said, easing into it, trying to remember what she'd read on how to break up with someone honestly and respectfully.

Jalen gave her a smile. "You, too."

"And I've been thinking a lot lately about what I want and need."

He leaned in closer, and his grin widened. "Me, too," he said. "I think I know what you're going to ask me."

Wait. What?

"What I'm going to ask you?"

Jalen nodded. "I wondered if you weren't down to move forward, physically, because you want to be official first."

Cara's eyes became dry, and she realized it was because they were open unnaturally wide. Did he think she was going to ask to be his girlfriend?

Shit.

"No, that's not..." she paused, trying desperately to gather her thoughts instead of saying the first thing that came to mind.

"Wait," Jalen said, finally cluing into her general demeanor and awkwardness. "Are you breaking this off?"

Cara sighed and nodded with a wince.

Jalen's face was a mask of shock. "But we... We're so alike."

She fought off the urge to slap her palm to her face.

The article said she should be honest and respectful, so telling him the truth would probably be the best course of action. She'd just blame herself and say she wasn't being honest about her hobbies, rather than emphasize how little he even seemed to care about who she actually was.

"This is because of Antonio, isn't it?"

A glass dropped behind the bar and shattered as the crowd in the room gasped.

She looked up to find Jer staring at her, his empty hand outstretched where the glass had been, and a look of unbridled shock marring his face.

Jalen spared a glance toward the commotion but quickly turned back to her.

"It's because of him, isn't it?"

She winced, knowing full well Jer was listening to the whole thing. But she wasn't going to lie. Again.

She nodded.

Jalen guffawed and turned away from her, shaking his head. "I knew the whole 'he's just my brother's friend' bit was bull."

She didn't have to look at Jer to know he was still staring at her, dumbfounded.

"I'm sorry, Jalen," she said, not knowing what else to say. "You're really great."

He shook his head and stood, then turned to Jer. "I don't need that beer," he said.

Jer mumbled, "Oh, yeah, okay."

Jalen turned to her. He opened his mouth like he was going to say something more, but he just shook his head and, without another word, walked away.

She had three seconds to breathe a sigh of relief before Jer turned on her.

"Antonio?!" he shouted. "Our Antonio?"

She squeezed her eyes shut and nodded.

"What about his wife?"

She shook her head. "He's not..." she said, stumbling for words as she worked through the emotions of the last three minutes. "That was before."

Jer looked at her with pity-filled eyes. His head tilted slightly to the side. "Cara, baby, no," he said.

Her muscles tensed at the look on his face. She wanted to say his pity was misdirected, that Antonio had changed his mind. That he no longer loved Fran and that he'd moved on.

With her.

In secret.

Suddenly, she couldn't breathe.

That sounded completely foolish.

But he'd said...

She pulled at the collar of her shirt. "We've been hanging out together for a while. He's not... I mean we..."

Jer looked around the room, then back at her. "Max doesn't know, does he."

He said it as a statement, not a question, and it got her back up. She felt the need to defend herself. And Antonio.

"No," she said. "But he's my boyfriend. Things are good between us."

Jer stared at her for a moment. "Is he officially divorced then?" he asked, his eyes full of concern. "The last thing I heard was that he refused to sign the papers. And that was only like two weeks ago."

She stared at Jer, her jaw going slack. Had he officially ended things with Fran?

"I don't know," she said, pulling out her phone.

She sent a text, asking Antonio how things were going with the Max situation, then sat back and tried to remember why trusting Antonio was a good idea.

Antonio's reply came right away.

Antonio: He's helping me move Sunday at 8 am. I'm going to tell him as soon as he gets here.

Cara sighed a breath of relief. At least he was following through with what he'd said he'd do. She needed to give him the benefit of the doubt.

She wondered how their conversation would go. Max had a tendency to get a little protective. And if Ethan's and Adam's reaction to her and Antonio together was any sign of how this was going to go, it might be better if they did it together.

She decided it couldn't hurt if she came too. Help her new boyfriend out.

She opened the conversation with Max and asked if she could see him on Sunday.

She just needed to engineer the situation so she could tag along covertly and act as a buffer.

Max would be fine once he saw how happy they were together. And everyone else would get on board once Max knew.

Everything was going to be a-OK.

twenty-four

Antonio sat on the edge of his pullout couch, surrounded by packed boxes, and tried to rein in his foot's involuntary bouncing. He'd tried his best to keep order in the tiny apartment, but the lack of floor space made organizing the moving boxes impossible.

The physical mess would be enough to set him on edge, but that, combined with the inner turmoil over his secretive relationship with Cara, had thrown him off the deep end.

He glanced at the clock and stood, pacing.

The time was seven fifty-five. Five more minutes before Max would arrive and he would finally get some relief from all the uncertainty and anxiety.

He would open the door, invite him in, and before Max could lift a single box, he'd say I'm in love with Cara and we're together and I'm sorry we kept it from you.

Then he'd brace for impact.

After the inevitable physical assault, he and Cara would hopefully move on. He should have taken her out on dates by now, brought her flowers, built on their relationship.

He shook his head, trying to rid himself of the memories of all the times he'd talked to her about Fran and how he wanted to get back together with her. He wished he could just erase it all.

But he couldn't. All he could do now was apologize and move on.

He glanced at the clock. Two minutes to eight.

He paced the floor, two whole steps toward the window and two steps back, before finally breaking and picking up a box. He had to direct his nervous energy somewhere—and quick.

He turned and headed for the door. He almost made it there when he heard a faint knocking on it.

It was a soft knock that Max would never have made. Maybe Cara had come along?

His shoulders instantly relaxed as he set down the box on the floor and grabbed the door handle, but when he pulled it open, he didn't find Max or Cara.

He found Fran.

He stared at his ex-wife as she smiled up at him with a sad look. "Hi, Tonio."

"Uh, hi," he said, wondering why the hell she was there. She'd only ever come to his place once before, when he was with Sara.

He shook his head. "I'm busy." He hoped she'd just turn around and go away.

She looked past him into his crappy little space, then smiled up at his face. "Maria told me you were moving."

He nodded. So why are you here, then?

He looked at her expectantly, as the unspoken question hung in the air between them.

Fran hesitated for a moment before asking, "Can I come in?"

Antonio narrowed his eyes at her, but a flash caught the corner of his eye and when he looked down the hall, he saw Max.

Shit.

Max smiled and gave a nod, but his step faltered when he saw Fran.

Okay, it wasn't too bad. He could ask Max to give him a minute, tell Fran she needed to go, and get this back on track.

"Hey," he called over to Max. "Could you just give me a minute?"

"Yeah," he said, stopping abruptly.

"Ow, what are you..."

Cara's annoyed voice sounded, and it took a moment before Antonio realized she was behind Max.

Double shit.

Cara leaned over with a beautiful smile toward him, but when she fully sidestepped Max and finally saw Fran, her stride stopped, and her smile dropped.

"Sorry, Cara," Max said, completely oblivious to the shit hurling toward the fan in front of him. "We'll come back in a bit."

Max turned to walk away, but Cara stood, blocking his way, immovable.

Antonio shook his head and searched for words as Fran twisted and took in Max.

"Cara," Max said again. "Let's go."

Cara shook her head.

Antonio stared at the situation unfolding in the narrow, dark hallway as if he was watching a movie—a very, very bad movie.

He needed to do something—quick.

After a moment of awkward silence, Fran turned and glanced down the hall, then spun back toward Antonio with wide eyes and leaned in.

"Why is the girl from the party here?"

She'd said it in a whisper, but her voice carried the few feet down the cramped hallway and hit Max.

Max stopped trying to leave and turned toward Antonio, his head cocked to the side.

"Girl from the party?" Max asked.

Okay, the movie wasn't just very, very bad, it was a psychological horror flick where he was holding a detonator and had to decide whether to blow up an orphanage or a children's hospital.

Max's eyes darted between Cara and Antonio as he waited for an answer. Cara was silently staring at Fran, probably wondering why Fran was there and whether she was coming or going.

Panic bubbled up from Antonio's chest and into his throat.

"Why are you here Fran?" Antonio asked assertively, hoping to divert from her party comment and make it clear to Cara that he hadn't invited her—that she'd just arrived on her own.

Antonio thought he could still get things on track. He just needed to get rid of Fran, make it clear to Cara that she wasn't there with him—in any way whatsoever—then fill in Max.

Fran hesitated and glanced back at Cara before she spoke. "Maria called and told me you spoke to Blake yesterday, and I just wanted to thank you for thinking about me."

Antonio winced slightly and looked at Cara.

"Yesterday?" Cara asked. Her normally brilliant eyes had dulled, and she'd caved in on herself, as if to minimize the hurt by becoming smaller.

Antonio shook his head, overwhelmed, searching for what to say to make the situation better. He'd only prepared himself for Max.

He hadn't expected Fran and Cara and Max.

Fran's eyes darted between him and Cara. "Are you two..." she paused, stumbling over her words. "Maria said it was just... You told me she was just some girl."

It was as if she'd detonated a bomb.

"Some girl?" Max asked, in a chilling tone. "What the hell is going on here?"

"She's not some girl," Antonio said to Fran, shaking his head. She had been some girl

at the start. But she wasn't anymore. Not by a long shot.

"Yesterday?" Cara asked again, this time her voice full of hurt.

"No," Antonio said, pushing past Fran and Max.

He reached for Cara's hand, but she pulled it away.

"I didn't say that yesterday," he said, hoping he could stop the bleeding. "I spoke to Blake yesterday at the hospital and I told Maria about it. But I never said you were just some girl yesterday."

Cara softened at the pleading in his tone.

Max only became harder and colder. "But my sister was 'some girl' to you before that?"

Antonio turned to him and saw nothing but murder in his eyes. He'd expected Max to take it badly, even under the best of circumstances. But this—this was the worst possible timing, and he hadn't braced himself for the sheer hatred staring back at him.

"Yes," Antonio said with a nod.

Max's neck corded, and his jaw clenched. "You've got to be kidding me," he said with an intense, fevered stare. "I told you to stay away from her because I know how fucked up you are."

Antonio bristled, but there was nothing he could really say. He was fucked up before he met Cara. But everything had since changed.

"Why would you do this?" Max asked.

He spared a glance at Cara, and his heart sank. She looked totally checked out. She'd lowered her face toward the floor, unable to meet anyone's eyes.

He had to fix this.

"I'm sorry, Max," he said. "It just sort of happened and I—"

"Stop." Max's nostrils flared. "I knew this would happen. I knew it. You're a fucking sociopath—"

"Enough, Max," Cara said, finally looking up from her feet.

Somehow, Max did what she said.

"I want to talk to Antonio," she said. "Alone."

Max shook his head, holding Cara's eyes with a glare. "You know he does this," he said, waving his hand between Antonio, Fran, and Cara. "He cheated on his neighbour with his wife."

Antonio bristled again. "Ex-wife," he said, but he honestly shouldn't have bothered. Max was too enraged to notice.

Cara looked Max squarely in his eyes. Finally, a look other than shock and dismay covered her face. Unfortunately, it was anger.

"I knew that." Her tone of annoyance stopped Max in his tracks. "Max, please wait for me in the car."

Max stared at her, shaking his head in disbelief. After a long pause, he blinked—still as stone—as his gaze shifted toward Antonio. Slowly, deliberately, he turned the rest

of the way to face him. "I don't want to see you again," he said with a coldness Antonio hadn't thought was possible.

Antonio's gut sank. He'd been prepared to take a punch, not to be cut off from his friend. He would rather have taken a hit.

Max turned and walked down the hallway. When he got to the door, he tore it open and left without another word.

Antonio's whole life was crumbling—again. But unlike before, when Fran had told him she wanted a divorce, he didn't feel angry or frustrated or confused.

He felt... dread. Stomach-dropping, weighed-down, achy-chested dread.

What if this was it for him and Cara?

What if they were over before they even got started?

twenty-five

Cara waited for Max to leave before turning toward Antonio. He was standing in front of his apartment door with his head hung, and she wasn't sure if it was from guilt or defeat.

Fran stood in front of him, unmoving, as if paralyzed by the situation that had just unfolded.

Had she really just arrived? It seemed like it, but Cara honestly didn't know what to believe anymore. She'd given Antonio the benefit of the doubt, but maybe that had been a stupid thing to do.

This nightmare hadn't been on her bingo card for the day.

"Cara, you're not just some girl anymore—"

"Fran," Cara said, cutting Antonio off. She really didn't want her boyfriend's wife to hear anymore of the conversation. "Can you give us a minute?"

Fran snapped out of it and nodded. "I'll just go—"

"No." Cara shook her head. She wasn't planning on sticking around, so there was no reason for Fran to leave. She just had one question she wanted an answer to before she pulled the plug on her and Antonio's relationship.

Fran awkwardly scurried down the hallway in the opposite direction of the door and

stood in the corner.

Cara would have laughed if her heart wasn't breaking. She turned to Antonio, who'd become completely despondent. She couldn't really blame him. The situation was beyond fucked. And Max hadn't helped. He'd could be incredibly cruel when he felt cornered.

"Antonio?" she said, waiting. When he looked up at her, she wanted to cry. "Did you sign your divorce papers?"

His eyebrows bunched, as if that hadn't even crossed his radar.

"Not yet," he said, glancing back at his apartment. "I don't know where they are, but I—"

Cara turned on her heels, effectively cutting him off, and started walking toward the door Max had left by. Every step made her heart crack a little more.

"Cara," Antonio called

A second later, Cara felt his hand take hold of hers. She stopped, but only because her heart wished things hadn't turned the way they had. She wanted so badly for things to go well.

"I'm going to sign them," he said, pleading with his eyes. "I'll find them right now."

Cara forced herself to look at the reality and not the supposed love in his eyes. Max didn't trust him. Jer didn't trust him. Sara had warned her about him. Now she was faced with the same thing. She recognized the pattern, and her eyes absorbed the tears.

"You should have signed them after you asked me to be your girlfriend."

Antonio bent his head. "You're right, I should have."

Dammit. She'd expected him to defend himself, not agree. Maybe she wasn't giving him enough credit.

Her tears broke through, and she scrubbed them from her cheeks. "Why is Fran here?"

"I don't know. She got here literally right before you—"

"Why didn't you tell her to leave?"

"I—" He turned back to look at Fran. "I'll tell her right now."

Cara shook her head. "Did you tell her there was nothing left between you two?"

"No, I didn't think about her. I just wanted to move on—" He stopped his explanation and held her eyes, searching. "You don't trust me."

A heavy sigh came from her chest, and she shook her head. "I don't trust you."

He dropped her hand. His arms hung down his sides, pulling his shoulders and head down with them. "What can I do?"

Get a fucking time machine.

"I think if you were serious about me, Fran would know by now that things are completely over between you two."

"I only told Maria—"

"If you were serious about me, Maria would know by now that things are completely over between you and Fran."

"I..." Antonio trailed off, shaking his head.

"You talked to Maria about Fran yesterday," Cara said, her voice betraying her sadness.

Antonio took a deep breath to steady himself. "Blake came in and said he was going to break up with her. I only told Maria because Blake was being a dick, not because I wanted something to happen between me and Fran."

Cara nodded and pulled in an unsteady breath, desperate now to stop the tears.

"So you were worried about how Fran would feel about Blake mistreating her, but you didn't think about how I would feel being mistreated by you ?"

Antonio's jaw dropped. Cara was pretty sure he'd have been less shocked if she punched him and broke his nose.

"That's not..." he drifted off, as if finally seeing things from her point of view, and not liking it. He sagged slightly and shook his head. His face showed his grief.

"I hate that I mistreated you," he said, his voice catching.

"Yeah, me, too."

He dropped his eyelids and shook his head. "I want to fix this."

The tears Cara was holding back ran freely down once again, and she turned away from him, forcing her feet forward. She pulled open the door and took a step out but couldn't resist glancing back for a split second.

When she saw him standing there, shellshocked and broken in the hallway, her heart cracked the rest of the way.

She should have known better than to get involved with him. She should have listened to everyone around her when they told her not to trust him.

She shook her head and left. Never again.

twenty-six

Antonio looked at his feet as Cara walked away. He couldn't bear to watch it happen. Of all the worst-case scenarios he'd imagined would happen that day, he never considered that Cara would break things off with him and walk away.

How could she think he was more worried about Fran than about her? Cara was all he thought about. For weeks, she occupied his mind.

He hadn't even spoken to Fran until she'd showed up out of the blue. He thought he'd done the right thing by giving her a heads up about Blake. Hadn't he?

He finally snapped out of it and marched toward the door. Maybe he could stop Cara and somehow convince her that he was being honest.

He pulled the door open and searched the parking lot, but she was nowhere to be found. He didn't even know what car her and Max had arrived in or where they'd parked.

He shivered in the cold and kept walking, searching to see if he could find them, when a raindrop hit his face. He looked up at the grey sky as the freezing cold drops started coming down more quickly, hitting him in the face.

"Are you okay?"

Antonio lifted his head and turned to find Fran standing next to him, concern marring her face. He shook his head, and her hand came down on his forearm.

He pulled away from her. "Why are you here, Fran?"

Her head pulled back. "I thought you'd be happy to see me," she said.

He shook his head again. He had purposely not called her because he hadn't wanted to see or talk to her. Maria must have misinterpreted. But that was on him. He should have told Maria about Cara.

Why hadn't he?

Fran's eyebrows bunched together. "You gave me that impression at the hospital. You told me you wanted to work things out."

He squeezed his eyes shut and ran a hand through his hair.

"Tonio," Fran said, her face soft now. "Maria said you were moving into a new apartment this weekend and... and, well, I just broke up with Blake, so I was thinking..." She trailed off, looking down at her high-heeled leather boots.

Antonio's jaw tightened as his teeth clenched together. "Thinking what?"

She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "I wanted to see if you'd rather come home."

He stared for a moment, almost unable to believe she was saying what she was saying. But once he processed her words, a deep anger roiled inside of him.

He was so pissed. At her. And at himself.

This was everything he'd wanted since he'd first packed his bags and left. Until about three weeks ago.

He'd hated being away from her. Hated his apartment. Hated being a divorced guy. Hated being alone. Hated the looks of pity his family would give him. Hated being a disappointment to his mother.

Now his soon-to-be ex-wife was changing her mind, and he felt nothing but boiling hot, blinding rage, and he didn't know what to do about it.

"Tonio," Fran said, peeking up at the sky.

He didn't even feel the icy rain pelting down—it was as if his body had gone numb to everything but the moment.

"We have to get out of this rain," she said. "Come home. We'll talk about it."

Home.

He stared at her and could feel his lip curl in anger. "Yeah," he said, "we definitely need to talk."

She turned toward her car, and he followed.

twenty-seven

Cara reefed open the car door before Max brought the car to a full stop in front of Monroe Manor. Shockingly, he'd respected her wishes to drive in silence, but she knew she wouldn't be able to put him off forever.

But she wasn't ready to talk about it yet. All she wanted was to be alone in her room, under her covers, where she could release all the pent-up sadness and tension and just cry. She wondered how long it would take to get over Antonio. Would twenty-four hours do it?

Unlikely.

She might as well admit defeat now and jump straight to the thirty-six-hour protocol.

She exited the car, slammed the door behind her, and made a beeline for the front door through the freezing rain. If she could at least rid herself of the image of Antonio in that hallway with his head hung low, regret etched in his features, she might have a chance at getting over it.

She just wished things had gone differently. She wished he were more trustworthy.

She wished he didn't have a wife.

Fucking Fran.

She was like a giant, puss-filled zit on Antonio's face that refused to break open,

drain, and go away. It was stupid to think he'd somehow got over her in the few weeks they'd known each other, but Cara had wanted him so badly she let herself get carried away in the fantasy.

Did he not really mean what he'd said about being her boyfriend? Did she only believe it because she wanted it to be true so desperately?

But even if he had meant it, and wanted to be her boyfriend, it didn't matter.

He still had way too many issues with Fran that he hadn't resolved.

Was it just neglect, as he claimed, that he hadn't signed the divorce papers?

Or was he strategically leaving the door open to so he could one day walk through it again?

The unsigned papers were a deal breaker for her. They'd been officially together, boyfriend and girlfriend, for three days. She'd broken up with Jalen. But he hadn't thought it prudent to finalize his divorce?

She hung her head as she toed off her shoes and took off toward the enormous staircase.

"Wait!"

Max's voice broke through her runaway thoughts, and she stopped and turned to him from the second step.

"I can't talk about this right now."

Cara had woken up that morning believing she'd finally be putting all the unease in

her heart to rest. Instead, it had detonated like an atomic bomb inside her body.

"Cara? Are you okay?"

She turned to find Willow staring at her with big saucer eyes. Chelsea and Natalie were standing behind her in the hall. She hadn't even heard them come in, but then she remembered they were all getting together that morning to discuss bridesmaid dresses.

She shook her head as her eyes filled with tears. She blinked and blinked, swallowed too, but the weight of the tears became too much and one broke free, gliding down her cheek and hitting the carpeted stair below her feet.

"I'm going to fucking kill him," Max muttered.

Willow snapped toward him. "Who?"

Before he could answer, Ethan and Adam came down the hall and stopped short. Ethan looked at her, then at Adam, then sighed.

"You know?" he asked Max.

Max's head swerved, lightening fast toward Ethan. "Did you know about this?"

"Know about what?" Willow screamed.

Cara swiped at the tears in her eyes as she came back down the stairs. "Antonio and I were sort of seeing each other," she said.

Everyone took a few moments to react. But their reactions set her teeth on edge.

Willow's shoulders relaxed, Natalie smiled, and Chelsea clapped.

"We knew it," Chelsea said, glancing toward Natalie and Willow. "We were just talking about this the other night. You two are literally perfect for each other."

Max snapped his neck toward them. "Have you lost your minds? He's older than me."

Natalie rolled her eyes. "That doesn't matter."

Max seethed. "He's still married."

"Only technically," Willow said.

Max shook his head and stumbled backward. "I can't believe this."

Cara's heart sank. They could see what she'd seen from the beginning, and it nearly killed her.

"Don't let Max spoil it," Chelsea said.

Max narrowed his eyes at Chelsea. "Me spoil it?"

Cara held up a hand. "There is no it to spoil. We just... He's never..." her voice clogged up in her throat and she had to swallow before finishing her sentence. "He's still... He never stopped with Fran."

Her three friends' faces all broke at the same time, and their shoulders all dropped in unison.

"I'm sorry, Cara," Adam said. "He's not in the right place yet. He never should

have—"

"Don't say it," Cara said, holding her hand up. "I want to be alone for a while."

"Of course," Natalie said. "We'll check on you later."

Cara hung her head and turned, taking the stairs up to her room. What a horrible disaster. Why had she believed he'd got over Fran? Why had she kept that secret for so long? Maybe her friends could have talked her out of it.

She'd finally saw the light, but not until she was standing there in the cramped hallway of his apartment building, with his beautiful wife, who he was one hundred percent never divorcing, talking about how he was thinking about her the day before.

Maybe she shouldn't have broken up with Jalen.

Maybe she should find someone else.

She shook the wild thoughts from her head and turned. "Here," she said, holding up her phone.

Ethan was the first to clue in and hold his hands out.

She tossed the phone to him, then turned and climbed the rest of the stairs. The last thing she needed was to doom-scroll through the dating apps in her depressed state.

As soon as she'd closed the door, she heard voices from below all talk at once, so she flopped onto her bed and stuffed a pillow over her ears.

twenty-eight

Antonio climbed the steps to his old house and waited on the covered porch as Fran punched a code into the pad above the door handle. The keypad hadn't been there when it was his home. He wondered how long she waited after he left to change the locks.

He remembered receiving the house keys for the first time, and the feel of Fran in his arms as he carried her across the threshold. There was so much happiness then. And hope. He never imagined his future would be like this.

Fran pushed open the door and stepped inside, holding it open for him with a smile.

He'd only taken a single step inside before the nausea hit.

The house was fully decorated for Christmas and smelled like the cranberry candles she loved. The first thing that caught his eye was the angel on top of the tree.

He'd given it to her for their first Christmas together. It had been so expensive he had to split it between two credit cards.

He glanced around the house—at the furniture, fireplace, photos—and waited for the nostalgia and comfort to come rushing back. But none of it did. It was as if a dark, evil curse had marred everything he once loved, like his own personal Chernobyl.

Antonio sucked in a deep breath, but his airway was closing.

"I'll make you an espresso," Fran said, trying to sidestep behind him to close the door against the cold wind.

He backed up, shaking his head. There was no way he was going to get trapped in there.

"I don't want one."

The mental anguish left him too exhausted to be polite.

Fran glanced around. "Do you want to sit on the porch—"

Antonio nodded and turned, walking back out the front door and dropping onto a varnished Adirondack chair. The chair wanted to force him to relax, but he couldn't. He sat awkwardly at its edge with his back uncomfortably bent forward and his elbows on his knees.

Rain fell in cold, icy sheets, and the broken corner of the eavestrough he'd never gotten around to fixing sent a steady gush of water pouring off the porch roof into the soaked grass below.

Fran followed his lead and sat down opposite him. "I guess I can take it you don't want to move back, considering you can't even stand inside for five minutes."

Antonio shook his head.

"Is it because of Blake? Because he was here?"

"No," he said, scrubbing both hands up and down his face. "I forgot all about that, actually. Is that why you want to get back together?"

Fran's eyes welled up, and she looked away from him, toward the street. She'd always tried to hide her tears from him.

"I don't know, maybe," she said, her voice distant and broken. "Maybe I made a mistake breaking us up, like you said."

Antonio huffed an exhausted breath, but as it escaped, it became a laugh. He was completely flabbergasted. How was this actually happening?

Fran screwed her eyes shut. "How can you laugh right now?"

"Because this is so fucked," he said, trying to pull his emotions in, "it's hard not to see the humor in it."

Fran sniffed and pulled her sweater around her neck. "I don't find anything funny about this."

"I'm not surprised," he said, assessing her. "We never saw eye to eye, did we?"

Fran looked down at her toes. "That's not true. We have a lot in common. Our families are best friends, same traditions, same cultures. We're attracted to each other."

Antonio stared at her, waiting. "Right. And that's where it ends."

Fran sat back in her seat and crossed her hands in her lap.

"How could we have expected to be happy for sixty years based on that?" Antonio asked. Everything finally made sense. "Staying together means too many sacrifices... for both of us."

"I think I'm ready for the things you want," she said in a small voice. "To start a family."

The words were like a net falling over him, trapping him inside. They were the exact words he'd been longing to hear from the moment he finished his residency.

But the last few weeks had really highlighted all the problems beyond just that. Having a child together would only make things worse. He honestly believed they'd both dodged a huge, ugly, destructive bullet.

"We should never have a baby together."

"Why?" Fran asked.

Antonio's mind immediately landed on Cara, and just the thought of her made his shoulders relax. Being around her felt right, everything clicked into place. He knew that they were right for each other. They would see eye to eye on things that he and Fran would never.

"I'm a square peg and you're a round hole. We just don't work," he said, looking back at her. "Do you really think you made a mistake, Fran?"

"I thought I was doing the right thing, but now I'm not sure."

Antonio nodded. "I had myself convinced that we were perfect for each other, but I don't think that anymore. On the surface, it seems good. But in real life, it's exhausting."

Fran sniffed. "This would be a lot easier if you were a drunk like my sister's ex."

Antonio nodded. "That's probably why it's been so hard. There was never one big

issue that made divorce feel justified. But you were right to end it. Neither of us wants to spend the rest of our lives unhappy."

Fran looked out across the front lawn and shook her head.

"I'm sorry I wouldn't let go," he said.

"I'm sorry, too, Tonio."

He nodded and glanced behind him at the front door. It was time to really let go of everything. This was over.

"You should sell the house."

Fran's eyes shot up. "Sell it?"

Antonio nodded.

"Do you want to buy it?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I need closure for this part of my life, to move on."

"Move on with Cara?"

His throat closed. "I hope so."

What if she was really done? What if Max never spoke to him again?

Fran raised one eyebrow. "Did you really start dating her without signing your divorce papers?"

Antonio cringed. "Yes. And that was only one of many missteps," he said, standing from the hard chair.

Fran stood, too. "She seems to really love you. I'm sure you'll work it out."

"I hope so."

Fran turned toward the steps. "Come on. I'll drive you back to your apartment."

"No," he said, looking down the street toward Maria's house, then beyond to his parents' house.

"I'm going to walk over to Maria's and talk to her. And Mom."

Fran recoiled. "That's going to be fun."

Antonio snorted. "Just think, you'll never have to see them again."

She looked up at the sky and mouthed a thank you. "Sign the papers, Tone."

Antonio nodded and stepped off the porch into the icy rain.

twenty-nine

Cara woke in a pool of hot afternoon sunlight that drenched her bed.

When she'd run to her room to hide, the winter storm had still been raging outside.

She'd distracted herself with Netflix on her laptop, but it hadn't taken long for her to nod off, and eventually the sleep took her away from her problems.

She'd welcomed it—however brief it had been.

She checked the clock, wondering how long she'd been unconscious. She was shocked to see it was already late afternoon. She climbed out of bed and peered out the window.

The storm had passed but left a path of destruction in its wake. She spotted Ethan and Natalie near the woods behind their house with Ben, picking up fallen branches and breaking them over their knees.

She rubbed her eyes as the memories of the morning came rushing back, then fell into her chair and slid down to its edge.

Another break-up. She should be a pro at getting over failed relationships by now. But Antonio had broken her heart way worse than Cooper had. She hadn't even realized that what she'd felt for Cooper wasn't love until she'd fallen for Antonio.

She rubbed at the ache in her chest. They'd only officially been together for three and

a half days, but in that time, she'd fallen hard. And, worse, she'd let herself be hopeful.

She forced herself to stand up and threw on some fresh clothes and brushed her hair. The crying had made her throat raw. She needed a tea and something to eat to build up her energy.

For more crying.

She opened her door and listened but heard nothing. Hopefully everyone was too busy with their own lives to be hanging around, thinking about her. She climbed down the stairs and went to the kitchen. But as soon as she turned the corner, she found Willow at the island, working on her laptop.

"Hey!" Willow said, immediately closing her computer. "I was about to come check on you."

A headache formed behind Cara's eyes. She loved her friends, but she really just wanted to be alone. "I don't need to be checked on."

Willow deflated.

"Be nice."

Cara whipped around to find Max on the chair in the living room, working on his own laptop.

"Why are you here?"

Max set aside his computer on the coffee table and walked over, taking the seat next to Willow. "Willow was feeling sick, so we're working from here. And we're worried

about you."

"I'm fine."

Willow narrowed her eyes. "You just slept five hours in the middle of the day. You're obviously not fine."

Cara turned and grabbed the kettle, filled it with water, and plugged it in.

"Please tell me what happened," Willow said.

Cara sighed and sat on the stool next to her. She knew she wouldn't get away with ignoring the whole thing. "Fine. What do you want to know?"

"When did it start?"

She turned to her brother with a wince. "A few weeks ago."

"Weeks?" Willow asked, her eyebrows creeping up.

Cara sucked in a deep breath. How much should she reveal? Probably all of it. Maybe it would be somehow therapeutic to get it all out.

"I actually sort of..." God, this was embarrassing. "Asked him out at the grand opening."

Willow whipped her head toward Max, eyes sharp. "I told you."

Cara raised a brow. "Told him what?"

"He assumed Antonio was trying to get with you."

Cara slowly shook her head before dropping her chin. "It was me."

"Adam said he was using you," Max said.

Another heavy shake. She thought back to the night in Montreal when she'd thrown herself at him, hoping he'd catch her.

"If anything, I used him," she said.

Max's nose wrinkled. "Tell me what happened. Without the details."

"Well, I asked him out at the grand opening, but he said no, that he was getting back together with..." She trailed off, not even wanting to say her name.

"Right," Willow said.

"Anyway, I had tickets to this concert, but no one else could go, so I asked if he'd come—just as a friend—and he said no."

She rubbed at the tightness in her chest.

"Why didn't you ask me?" Max asked.

She turned to her brother with a sigh. "Cooper was there. And Jalen. It was complicated."

He let out a sharp breath and opened his mouth to speak, but Willow cut him off before he could get a word out.

"Then what?" Willow asked.

"Out of nowhere, Antonio called. He didn't want to go to his parents' anniversary party alone, and he said he'd go to the concert if I went to the party, and obviously I agreed."

"But why didn't you just tell us?" Max asked.

Cara thought back to the conversation and wondered. "I wanted to, but he didn't want to. He probably already knew that I liked him." She squeezed her eyes shut at the memory of them playing cards together.

"So, in Montreal you two were..." Willow drifted off. "It progressed?"

Cara nodded.

"And the next morning, when we couldn't find you?"

Her belly knotted as she turned to her brother. "I was in his room."

Max stood with a shake of his head and paced the room. "He lied right to my face."

Cara winced. "Actually, he wanted to tell you right then. I made up the story about going out for a walk, and I asked him to lie and take you away, and then I snuck out of his room—"

"Yeah, got it," Max said, his eyes closed, waving at her to stop.

"Anyway, he came over on Thursday and wanted to talk and we kissed and that's when Adam and Ethan caught us. He asked me to be his girlfriend, and we planned to tell you, but then this morning..." She trailed off. She'd given enough information for both of them to work with.

Willow looked like she wanted to cry. "I feel so bad for him."

Max spun toward her, eyes wide. "Him?"

"He's been through a lot, and he finally seemed to turn things around, and then—boom." Willow made an explosion with her hands.

Cara's stomach lurched. She agreed. Probably because she loved Antonio.

She didn't want him to suffer. The worst part about it was that she could really be herself with him.

He'd seen her at her worst and at her best and everything in between.

And he'd still said he loved her and wanted to be her boyfriend.

She never would have done some of those things in front of Cooper or Jalen. She thought back to the sidewalk in front of the concert when Antonio saw her yelling at Cooper.

"He probably wasn't expecting to fall in love with you," Willow said. "And it happened so quickly he probably didn't know what to do about it."

Cara shrugged. It didn't really matter. It was over.

"What are you going to do?" Max asked.

Cara rolled her neck and stood, making her way to the kettle to pour her tea. "Find someone who isn't married. It just sucks because..."

"What?" Max asked.

Tears pricked her eyes, but she held them off. "I thought he was perfect for me."

"We all think he is," Willow said.

Max scowled.

"Almost all of us," she said, glaring at Max. "Do you think you can forgive him?"

Cara nodded. "I'll forgive him and put it all behind us, but I won't date him."

There was no way she could go back down that path—she liked him too much. He was perfect for her in some ways, but not in others.

Suddenly a lightbulb went off and Cara realized what the problem was. Finding a partner was like making a Venn diagram. She needed to find someone that fell into the intersection of compatibility, chemistry, and availability.

Antonio ticked the first two off the list. Big time. But he wasn't available. It was too messy, and she didn't need to settle for someone who wouldn't make her a priority.

"Are you going to get back out there? Maybe try the dating apps again?"

"Eventually," Cara said. "But for now, I'm going to go cry."

She pulled the tea bag from the cup and tossed it into the compost, then she grabbed a banana and a tin of cashews from the cupboard and headed for the hall.

"Care," Max said.

She stopped.

"The racetrack's having a poker tournament next weekend. We can go, if you want."

She considered for a moment. "Yes, to the poker, no to you."

"Rude."

Cara smiled for the first time since the disastrous morning at Antonio's. "I want to get comfortable doing things alone."

If she'd gone to that concert alone, none of this would have happened.

Max narrowed his eyes. "Fine. I'll text you the link. What do you want me to do about Antonio?"

Cara shrugged. "Don't care."

She walked away and climbed the stairs up to her room. Before she even made it to her door, she had the text from Max for the poker tournament.

Maybe the love of her life was a poker player.

That made way more sense than golf.

thirty

Antonio paused and sucked in a deep breath before reaching for the door handle to Keller's and pulling it open. It had been five days since he last saw Max.

Five days since Max said he didn't want to see him again. He hoped that was enough time for his temper to cool.

He'd been too busy to come around before then, anyway. He'd moved all his shit out of the studio apartment, buttoned up the last details of his divorce, sent off the signed papers, removed Fran as an emergency contact from everywhere and everything, and dealt with his family.

The only thing left to do was put his social life back together.

He wanted to tell Cara he was through with Fran for good, but he knew he had to start with Max.

Cara didn't trust him because Max didn't trust him. That was the root of the problem. Also, he'd been such a shitty friend. He needed to apologize and let Max know it was never his intention to use Cara or just sleep with her.

He walked through the door, and the hostess gave him a big, welcoming smile.

Phew.

"Hi, Antonio," she said. "Do you want a table, or are you just here for a visit?"

Thank God.

He'd fully expected Max to have hung his photo on the wall with a "do not serve" notice on it.

"Just a visit," he said.

She smiled. "Max is in his office. You can go back there."

"Okay," he said, throwing up a prayer as he walked. What were the odds Max would grab him by the collar and drag him out of the doors he just walked in?

Max left his door slightly ajar. He probably hadn't expected Antonio to show up.

He hesitated at the door. A week ago, he would have tapped a knock as he pushed open the door and walked right in, but things were much different now, so he lifted his fist and knocked.

"Come in," Max said.

Antonio pushed the door open and stepped inside, but as soon as Max looked up from his computer screen, his face soured and he looked back down at the computer screen.

"No," he said.

Antonio winced and walked the rest of the way in, closing the door behind him.

"I'm just gonna..." he trailed off. Max wasn't even looking at him. Undeterred, Antonio pulled out the chair across from Max and sat down, paranoia creeping in as his eyes swept the room.

Did he keep weapons in here?

Antonio shook off the thought and cleared his throat. "I'm sorry."

Max didn't look up from his screen. "Hasn't anyone ever told you not to do things you need to apologize for?"

Antonio nodded. "I shouldn't have—"

"Shouldn't have what?" Max said, finally looking up. He stabbed him with a glare.

"Lied, snuck around, not signed the papers sooner—all of it."

Max narrowed his eyes. "She was in your room with you."

Antonio cringed, then deflated with a nod.

"We went for coffee together," Max said, sounding more hurt than angry. "We talked for an hour. And you just sat there, shooting the shit while my sister was in your room?"

"Yeah." Antonio remembered the frantic morning, how happy he'd been with her. He'd fallen so hard and so fast, he didn't know what to do with it.

"It was a terrible choice," he said, not sure what to say. "I'm sorry."

Max shook his head. "I asked you to stay away from her because I knew you would do this. You're in love with Fran—you always have been."

Antonio shook his head. "I was," he said, not sure whether to try to sugarcoat things. "I thought my marriage was worth saving, but I was wrong. Things change. Things

have changed."

"What things?"

"Well, for one, I signed the papers and sent them off. I'm as good as divorced," he said, still feeling lighter than air about it. It had been such a huge weight off his shoulders.

"And you're happy about that?" Max asked.

Antonio nodded. "I'm in a good place now. It was over a long time ago. I just didn't know how to move on. Now I do."

"With my sister?" he said, voice laced with anger.

Antonio stared at Max for a moment. "I love her."

Max shook his head. His deep scowl deepened even further. "She deserves—"

"I know."

"And you're too old for her."

Antonio nodded. "Still... I love her."

Max stared him down long enough for Antonio's mind to wander. What had she told him? Was she willing to give them another shot?

He hoped so.

"Does she hate me?" he asked, his heart lodge in his throat.

Max shrugged. "She was upset for a few hours, but then she talked about it and kinda seemed over it. Nothing like when she broke up with Cooper."

Antonio's stomach dropped.

"No crying. No ice cream. No belting out bad power ballads," Max continued.

Antonio looked away, forcing his emotions down before Max started giving him that pitiful look he despised.

"She's even getting out this week. Tomorrow, I think," he said.

"What, like on a date?" Antonio asked, his heart cracking.

Max shook his head. "No, she's going to a poker tournament. At the racetrack. Tomorrow night. Eight o'clock."

"Poker?" Antonio's eyebrows shot up.

"Mmm hmm... Right up your alley."

Antonio smirked, remembering all the hands he'd beat Max at in the past. He had a feeling Cara would be a more formidable opponent.

"That's very detailed information. It's almost as if you want me to see her."

Max rolled his eyes, then fixed him with a glare sharp enough to burn. He looked like Zeus with a lightning bolt, itching to strike. "Fuck this up again and I'll kill you."

Antonio smiled. "Deal."

thirty-one

C ara walked into the poker room at the racetrack casino fifteen minutes early and glanced around. She wanted to get there early so she could snag a late position seat to the right of the dealer.

She'd been in big poker tournaments before and had it on her bucket list to qualify for the world series of poker one day. For now, it was just a fun distraction. She didn't know why she hadn't entered a tournament in so long.

Probably because she didn't really have any friends that played, and she couldn't stomach going alone.

She tipped her chin toward the ceiling and marched to an empty table, setting her beer precisely to her right before taking a seat.

Seconds later, a middle-aged guy in a leather jacket claimed the chair beside her.

Another minute passed, and a man in a hoodie and sunglasses slid into the seat across from her.

She smiled to herself but kept a neutral face. They were already sizing each other up.

Neither of those two were going to be the love of her life, but she'd happily take all their money. Also, the ratio of men to women was promising. Possibly even better than golf.

Why hadn't she started scouting dating prospects here instead?

She shook off the thought, took out her phone and opened a Scrabble game to distract herself until the table was ready to start. One good thing that came from Antonio was Scrabble to eliminate anxiety. She'd just started playing when she got a text. From Antonio.

Her face soured. It was his first attempt at communication since last weekend—she was expecting it to come eventually. What she didn't know was how it would go. Would he try to get back together? Would he try to smooth things over?

She'd already decided she would do her best to be civil and move on. Reconciliation wasn't on the horizon, of that she was certain. But they were part of the same friend group. She really didn't want to make it awkward for everyone.

She braced herself with a deep breath and opened the text.

Antonio: Don't tell me you're playing Scrabble to distract yourself before Poker.

She pulled back from shock, then glanced up on instinct. He wasn't there, was he?

She scanned the room, and it only took a second before their eyes connected. He was standing at the bar, waiting for a beer. He gave her a smile and a wave before looking down at his phone.

How the hell did he know she was going to be there?

Antonio: Your poker face isn't as good as you think.

She rolled her eyes.

Antonio: Eye roll = You're annoyed with me. Save me a seat.

She glared at him before responding.

Absolutely not, she wrote, but before she could hit send, he was already on his way over to her.

He took the seat to the left of the dealer, directly across from her. He set down his beer and pulled out his phone.

Antonio: Act like we don't know each other.

She wanted to throw her drink at him.

Cara: I'm here to play poker. Not your mind games.

Antonio: Poker is a mind game, beautiful.

Cara: Don't call me that.

Antonio: This reminds me of the bus. Best weekend of my life.

Okay, that was it. That was the straw that broke her camel's back.

As she was about to stand and walk out, a grizzled old man took the last seat, put down his cane, and told the dealer to hurry and deal, as if everyone hadn't been waiting on him.

Cara put her phone on mute, shoved it into her pocket, then forced herself to think of the physics equations she'd been using that day in her lab to keep a neutral expression.

Maybe sticking around and taking all of Antonio's money would be cathartic.

She glanced up at him while the dealer ran through the rules and found him smiling like a dope around the table.

"Is it deuces wild?" Antonio asked the dealer.

Interesting. He was taking the noob approach.

"This is Texas Hold'em," the dealer said. "Nothing is wild. Are you sure you're in the right place?"

If his plan was to appear incompetent, it was working. He widened his eyes and looked around, then shrugged and pushed his gigantic pile of chips to the side to draw attention to it.

"I'm just gonna build the plane as I fly it, so to speak. I've always wanted to play poker."

Cara kept quiet as Antonio sold a lie to the table that he was a dummy with deep pockets. And they all gobbled it up.

The dealer dealt the hand. She peeked at her cards. A king and a jack. Both hearts. Not bad.

Antonio looked at his cards and let the corner of his mouth lift. He picked up a chip and tossed it into the center of the table. But before the kid wearing the hoodie could call or raise, Antonio reached back into the center to pick the chip back up.

"Bro, you can't do that?" Hoodie guy said.

"A chip laid is a chip played," Grisled guy said.

"Oh, sorry, friends," Antonio said.

When she finally looked up, he was staring right at her.

"Can we start over?" Antonio asked her.

Cara pursed her lips when a smile threatened to show. She had no intention of starting anything over with him, but she had to admit—it was a clever approach, disguising it as part of the game.

A game within a game. Dammit. Why did he have to be so... likeable?

Cara sharpened her voice. "No."

He deflated as the rest of the table erupted into various accusations and name calling.

The dealer got everyone back under control before explaining to Antonio, as if he were a small child, that he couldn't renege a bet.

"Fine," Antonio said, staring at Cara as he tossed his chip back into the center of the table. "But I'm still in this."

Cara ignored him while the dealer rolled his eyes.

"You have no choice but to be in it," he said.

"Exactly," Antonio said with a snap of his fingers. "It's like fate or something."

"Or bad decision making," Biker guy said.

Cara snorted but covered it just as quickly.

The bet went around the table and everyone called, then the dealer flipped over the flop. A two, another king, and a three. Cara had a pair of kings. A great hand. But the two and three were concerning. Someone could've been sitting on the makings of a straight.

"Ooo..." Antonio said, as he picked up five chips and threw them in the pot.

The other guys narrowed their eyes at him, but she knew he had to be bluffing.

Hoodie and Biker folded, but Grisled stayed in.

She grabbed five chips and tossed them on the pile, avoiding eye contact with Antonio. The dealer flipped the next card.

Six of diamonds.

Shit.

Antonio smiled and grabbed a big handful of chips. He tossed them into the center, but Grisled hesitated. Obviously, Antonio had a straight. Or at least that's what he wanted everyone to believe. It was a perfect hand to bluff on.

After a few seconds of staring Antonio down, Grisled called.

Now it was her turn to call, raise, or fold.

Grisled probably had a pocket pair, but unless they were aces, he couldn't beat her, and the likelihood of getting pocket aces was low.

Antonio was the real threat.

Was he bluffing?

She stared at him until he met her eyes, and his fake smile dropped. He blinked and gave her a sincere look, and she promptly blinked away.

She would likely win the hand if she stayed in—and she'd love to beat him—but she hated that she was allowing herself to get sucked back in by him.

It had to stop.

"Fold," she said, tossing aside her hand. "I'm not still in this."

Antonio's face dropped at the phrase she threw back at him.

"You win," the dealer said, looking at Antonio, added "somehow" under his breath.

Cara gathered her chips and stood.

"Cara," Antonio said, his voice laced with urgency. "I don't want you to go—"

She gave a slight shake of her head, avoiding his eyes, but she was spared from answering. Before he could finish what he was saying, the table erupted.

Hoodie and Grisled leapt out of their chairs, hurling accusations of cheating. Biker sat still, fists on the table, threatening to kill everyone.

She decided she was better off walking away entirely—much like she'd emotionally done with Antonio. He was a bad hand that required more risk than she could afford to take.

Hopefully, he got the message.

thirty-two

Antonio arrived at the observatory, parked, and hopped out of his car. He zipped up his coat as he walked toward the front doors.

It was a cold, clear night, and the sky was brilliantly dotted with countless twinkling stars. He pulled open the door to the round room and spotted Cara immediately.

She was standing in the middle of the room beside a gigantic telescope. In front of her were rows of folding chairs, filled with people waiting for her lecture to start.

She looked beautiful, rosy. He hoped she wouldn't tell him to fuck off and go away. It was a risk, showing up, given her reaction to him at their poker game.

He knew the exact moment she saw him—she paused mid-sentence with the older woman in the front row, locked eyes with him for a split second, then let the pleasant expression slip from her face and rolled her big brown eyes at him.

He fought off the wave of sadness that came with knowing the woman he loved now hated him. All he could do was hope he could find a way to get them back to where they once were, and the only way to do that was to remind her how good they were together and hope she'd give him another chance.

He stood back at the edge of the crowd and waited, unsure what to expect. Would she march over and tell him to get lost? Call the police?

Nope.

She tossed her hair away from him and continued her conversation, ignoring him entirely.

He fucking hated the silent treatment.

He sat down in the third row and waited. The minutes ticked by slowly before she finally turned and addressed the crowd.

"We're ready to begin," she said. "Tonight, we're going to talk about the event horizon of black holes and look at the closest one to Earth, Gaia BH1."

Before she could say anything else, the older woman in the front row shot her hand up in the air. She didn't wait to be called on to speak.

"You forgot to introduce our new members," she said. "We always begin by introducing our new members."

Antonio unleashed a wide smile and suppressed a laugh.

There was no way she forgot. She just didn't want to address him.

"We have a lot to get to tonight, so I—"

"It'll only take a moment," the woman said. She stood and faced the crowd, putting Cara behind her.

"I'm Margaret, leader of the Niagara Chapter. We have three new members to welcome tonight. Please give a warm welcome to Maury, Kathleen, and Antonio!"

Antonio smiled and waved as his fellow members turned to him to say hi.

Becoming a full-fledged member of the Royal Astrological Society was probably a step too far, but now that he was there, he really wanted to check out that black hole.

And if Cara refused to give him another chance, at least he had some potential new friends.

Maury was probably cool.

"This is Cara," Margaret continued, gesturing toward the love of his life. "She's a PhD student of astrological physics at the university. She and Dr. Tanaka alternate leading our sessions."

Cara sighed out an obviously annoyed breath but seemed to shake it off. She waited for Margaret to sit, then carried on.

"Okay, black holes," Cara said, getting back on track.

"The event horizon of a black hole is the boundary where the gravitational pull is so strong that objects would have to exceed the speed of light to avoid getting sucked in. It's basically a point of no return."

She turned to a giant paper flip chart on a wooden easel and pulled out a thick marker. As she drew, she spoke about the physics equations that break down past the event horizon, and how it has evaded physicists so far because of how difficult it is to study something you can't see.

Maury raised his hand and asked what would happen if a person were to fall in.

She explained they would die immediately because of a process called "spaghettification," then drew a diagram of a stick figure being pulled apart cell by cell in a long string.

It was gruesome and intriguing.

At the end of her talk she took questions, answered them, and then had everyone come to the front to look through the telescope.

Antonio stood at the back so he could be the last in line and waited. Cara took her time with each person, making sure they knew what they were looking at and answered their questions. She kept a polite smile on her face until the very last person in front of him left, then her smile dropped.

"Why are you here?"

Yeesh... Not a great start.

"I wanted to see you," Antonio said, then turned toward the gigantic telescope and peered in. "I also have a new fascination with black holes."

Cara huffed an annoyed breath. "Unwanted and repeated contact is an offense. Criminal harassment. Do I have to file a police report, or should I just call Max?"

He stopped and turned to her. "Cara," he said, and felt some hope when her angry face faded slightly. "I'm sorry about how things went."

Cara stared for a moment before the rest of her angry look melted away. She looked around the room, then back at him.

"Me too," she said. "Maybe we could just give this some time to settle and then we can go back to being friends."

"Friends?"

His heart split and he immediately shook his head.

Cara sucked in a breath and looked down at her toes. "Let's not make it awkward for our friend group. We have Adam and Chelsea's wedding coming up, and Willow was talking about having a friends Christmas party at the brewery. Let's just move on."

He looked at her for a long moment and wondered if he should take her lead and back off, but when he opened his mouth, he couldn't bring himself to agree.

"I can't be just friends with you, Cara. I love you."

She softly shook her head. "No, you don't."

"Yes, I do," he said, lifting a hand to the back of his neck. "You're like my black hole. I've moved past the event horizon." He dropped his hands by his sides. "I'm spaghetti."

There was a long pause before she spoke.

"I'm not in your black hole, though," she said. "I escaped just in the nick of time."

Antonio forced his head to stay up, instead of letting it fall in disappointment. This wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

"I signed the divorce papers. Everything with Fran is completely over. We can start fresh, take it slow and—"

She shook her head, cutting him off. "It's too late."

She turned and walked away, heading for the group before he could say another word.

He'd lost the battle, but the war was still raging. She didn't feel like she could trust him, so he'd have to make her understand he was in it with her for the long haul. But how was he going to do that without becoming a stalker?

Back to the drawing board.

thirty-three

Cara walked into Monroe Manor and dropped her bag.

She'd blasted her music on the way home from the observatory, but not even the belting vocals of Adele could drown out Antonio's voice in her head, telling her he loved her.

Or that he was spaghetti.

Why was that the oddest, grossest, and most romantic thing she'd ever heard? She wished he'd hated the observatory and thought it was boring. But she knew he'd love it. She could see them together there—talking, touching, kissing.

Was it a mistake to tell him they should just be friends? Every part of her ached to go to him, fall back into his arms, and believe everything he said.

She shook her head and sighed as she took off her shoes. Even if he'd signed the divorce papers, and even was being honest with her and loved her, how could she tell it would last? How long would it be before Fran came knocking again?

"Cara?"

She turned away from the stairs at the sound of Willow's voice calling from the back of the house, but before she could reach her, all of her friends came rushing down the hall toward her.

Cara pulled up short, as if she was being ambushed. "What's this?"

They all searched around her, looking over her shoulder at the closed door.

"Are you alone?" Adam asked, his eyes wide.

"Obviously." What were they expecting?

"Where's Antonio?" Natalie asked.

Cara's eyebrows shot up. She took in the matching looks of confusion.

"Didn't he come see you tonight?" Chelsea asked.

Cara froze in her tracks and blinked. "How did you know?"

They all looked at one another, then back at her.

Cara zeroed in on Willow, knowing she seemed to be interested in her and Antonio getting together. "Willow, did you tell him where I'd be?"

Willow shook her head. "Not me."

"Then who—"

"I did," Max said.

She looked up over everyone's heads at Max. " You? "

Max nodded.

Cara stared at him, dumbfounded. "You?" she emphasized.

Max rolled his eyes. "Yes—me."

Cara narrowed her eyes at him, her mind running a mile a minute. "Did you tell him about the poker tournament, too?"

Another nod.

What in the? Now Max was playing matchmaker? For her and Antonio?

"Oh my God," Cara said, rubbing at the knot in her chest. She never thought Max would help Antonio date her.

How did Antonio pull that off?

"Please," Chelsea said, her face scrunched up. "Tell us what happened."

"He came to the observatory, and I called him a stalker," Cara said.

Natalie snorted a laugh. "Then what?"

"He said he missed me, and loved me, and was sorry, and I said we can be friends."

Her friends all winced in unison, discomfort passing through them like a wave.

"He said he loves you?" Willow asked.

Cara shrugged. "Yeah, but I don't know if I believe him."

Willow's jaw dropped.

"What? You all believe him?" Cara asked.

Everyone immediately nodded, but she tuned them out. The only person she looked at was Max. He stood still, holding her gaze.

"I thought this was what you wanted," Max said.

"You're actually okay with this?"

Max huffed out a sigh. "I'm still pissed that you both lied and snuck around, but yes—if it's what you want."

Did she want to be with Antonio? Yes. But it was more complicated than that.

"I do," Cara finally said.

"Then what's the problem?" Max asked.

Cara dropped her chin. "He's too good of a liar. I don't even know what to believe anymore."

Max nodded. "You need a spreadsheet."

"Oh my—no," Adam said.

Max glared at him before turning back to Cara. "Fine, no spreadsheet. Let's just verbally go through the facts. One, he signed the papers."

"People remarry their exes all the time," Cara countered. "He's cheated before. Remember?"

Max shook his head. "You're not being fair. That was before, and he was in special fucked-up circumstances."

"He loves you and he's trying," Willow said. "Add that to the pros column."

"Con. He told me he rented that studio apartment so he could go home as soon as Fran agreed. Is he still there? Did he actually move into a new place?"

"No, he didn't," Adam said.

"See?" Cara said, tipping her chin up.

"He's living with his parents."

Cara stopped, and her face fell. "He is?"

"He gave up both apartments and moved in with them," Adam said. "Temporarily."

"Why?"

Adam nodded. "He's buying a place, asked if I could inspect it for him."

Cara's heart stopped. "What about his old house?"

"It's up for sale. There's a sign already on the front yard. And he's not in the same place he was when you met him," Adam said. "Mentally, I mean. Or physically, too, I guess."

"Oh," Cara said, her mind whirling.

"So we'll move that to the pros side," Willow noted, continuing, "and another

pro—you love him."

Cara sighed, remembering his touch and how calm and happy he made her feel. "I miss him."

All that came from Chelsea was an endearing, "Awww..."

The pros were definitely stacking up. Maybe Cara was being too hard on him.

If Max could forgive him and move on, why couldn't she?

Probably because she was scared. Breakups were hard, and she didn't want another broken heart, especially from someone she loved as much as Antonio. But she also wanted to be with him.

It was probably worth the risk. She knew she wanted to be with him—just the thought of it made her feel lighter than air.

"I think I can move past the event horizon," Cara said.

She was met with silence, and when she looked at her friends, they all had confused looks on their faces.

It didn't matter. She missed Antonio. She loved him. And if he'd gotten closure and moved on, leaving his old life behind, why shouldn't they give things another shot?

Even Max thought she should—and that was telling.

She turned around and pulled on her boots.

"Where do his parents live?" she asked.

thirty-four

Antonio walked into the front door of his parents' house and gently closed the door behind him. It was late, and he knew his dad would already be asleep down the hall.

He should probably go to bed and get some rest, too. But the sting of rejection was keeping him awake and alert. The night hadn't gone as he'd hoped, but it had gone as he'd expected.

As much as he would've loved Cara to run into his arms and reciprocate his love, he knew it was a long shot. He'd fucked up badly, and it was going to take a lot to prove he'd left all his baggage in the past. He needed to figure out his next move.

He walked into the kitchen and found his mom sitting at the table in the corner, working on a puzzle. She startled when he walked in, then rolled her eyes at herself.

"You're home? How did it go?"

He shook his head and turned to the fridge for something cold to drink.

When he'd come home after speaking to Fran, he unloaded everything on his mother, including his relationship with Cara.

He also told her that "the girl from the party" was the love of his life, and he was ending everything with Fran to be with her.

His mother had been skeptical, to say the least, and slightly disappointed Cara wasn't

Italian. But he made her promise she'd treat Cara better than she'd treated Fran, and his mom nodded and apologized.

His mom stood from the table. "I'll make something."

He shook his head. It was embarrassing enough moving back in with his parents. There was no way he was going to revert to being waited on, even if he knew she was offering more out of her need than his. Cooking calmed her.

"I'm just going to grab a drink."

She nodded and sat back down. "How did the house inspection go?"

Antonio took a can from the fridge and sat at the table across from her. "Good," he said. "I love the place and it's in good shape, close to the beach."

"When do you close?"

"In two months."

He took a drink and wondered what to do next.

At the poker tournament, he'd tried to remind Cara how great they could be together, but that had ended disastrously.

And he'd basically poured his heart out at the observatory, which also didn't work.

Maybe he needed to start slower. He could send her flowers. Did she like flowers?

She liked games.

He could send her board games for them to play together. "The Game of Life" would be perfect.

He felt his mother's hand touch his and when he looked up, she gave him a pitiful look. "She'll come around, Tonio."

Antonio smiled and nodded. He hoped she was right.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door.

His eyes squinted as he looked at the clock on the microwave. It was too late for visitors.

His mom stood, but he stopped her. "Are you expecting someone?"

"No."

He got up. "I'll get it."

He went to the door, worried about what he'd find when he opened it, but when he swung it back and saw who was standing on the other side, his jaw dropped.

"Cara?"

She exhaled in relief. "Thank God. I was going to give up if this house wasn't yours."

His brain finally caught up to the fact that she was standing on his porch, and his body began to slowly let go of its tension. That had to be a good sign... right?

"If this house wasn't mine?"

"Max only knew your street, not the house number, so I had to go by cars, but there are three cars just like yours on this street," she said with an eye roll.

Antonio's face broke into a grin. He was so happy she was there. "You've been knocking on random doors?"

"Not random. Doors with cars like yours. Keep up."

He laughed, and the rest of the tension in his body eased.

"Who is it?" his mom asked, coming into the entryway behind him.

Antonio stepped aside and opened the door the rest of the way. "Mom, you remember Cara?"

His mom smiled. "Of course," she said. "Come in."

Antonio smiled at his mom, thankful that his lecture to her about being polite and keeping boundaries had sunk in.

Cara stepped in reluctantly, but Antonio took her hand and tugged her in, closing the door behind her.

"Can you just give us a minute?" Antonio said to his mom.

She nodded, then turned and walked away, leaving them both behind.

"Sorry," Cara said, shaking her head. "I was so preoccupied with seeing you I hadn't realized how late it is. I probably shouldn't have—"

"We were up," he said, putting an end to her nonsense about the time. His heart had

soared at the thought of her wanting to see him. He'd have answered the door at three a.m.

Cara smiled and glanced around the house. He hated that he was thirty-two and living with his parents. It felt like high school, and there were way too many photos around of him as a child.

"You grew up here?" she asked, looking around the room.

He nodded.

Her smile grew. "I like it."

The tension that he had released started to build up again. The conversation was moving too slow. It was a good sign that she was there, but what did this mean?

"Adam said you're thinking about buying a house."

"Yeah, the owner just accepted my offer. Cara, can we stop with the small talk?" he asked, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, his hands restless at his sides.

She smiled. "You want big talk?"

He nodded.

Her smile slowly faded as she searched his eyes. He wished he could crack her brain open and see what was going on in there. The silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken words.

"I didn't really believe that you'd moved on," Cara said, her voice barely above a whisper.

He nodded, his jaw setting with determination. "I have. Entirely."

She searched his eyes again, and he caught the way her breath hitched slightly before she gave a slow nod. "I miss you."

Hope bubbled up in Antonio, warming his chest. "I miss you, too."

Her hands found each other in front of her, fingers twisting together in nervous circles. Without thinking, he opened his arms and she stepped inside his embrace, her body melting into his.

Antonio wrapped his arms around her back, pulling her close—and in that moment, nothing had ever felt so right.

"Why are you here, Cara?"

"I love you, Antonio."

He squeezed her tighter. "I love you, too."

"I really liked being your girlfriend. I want to fall into your black hole, if you're really ready for me." She pulled back just enough to look up at him, hope and vulnerability in her beautiful eyes.

He nodded without hesitation. "I'm one hundred percent ready."

"I'm glad you didn't say something like a thousand percent. That would have really flattened my pop, if you know what I mean."

He laughed and kissed her lips, sighing when she melted into him. He loved everything about her—the way her mind worked, the feel of her skin, the sound of

her laugh.

He wanted her forever.

"I don't want you to go, but I think its kind of awkward to ask you to stay." His thumb traced small circles on her lower back. He couldn't stop touching her.

She smiled and leaned forward, kissing his neck.

"I really fucking hate that I live here right now."

She pulled back and smiled at him, her eyes bright. "I feel the exact opposite," she said.

He knew where she was coming from, but still, he hated that he couldn't hold her, cuddle her, make her breakfast.

The closing date for his new house couldn't come soon enough.

"You can come to my place," she said running her hands along his back.

"Is anyone there?" he asked.

"Everyone is there."

Antonio smiled, picturing them among their friends, out in the open and at ease.

He couldn't wait.

"Let's go."

thirty-five

Epilogue

Cara smoothed the skirt of her red dress, adjusted her earring, and tried not to check the clock. Again.

Antonio was picking her up.

Not meeting her there. Not asking her to come to his place first so no one would see them together. He was picking her up from her place like an actual boyfriend. Because that's what he was—her actual boyfriend.

The doorbell rang, and her heart twirled in her chest. She pulled the heavy wood door open and found Antonio standing on the porch. He was wearing a crisp button-up shirt under a navy suit, with a thick black overcoat.

His mouth curved into a grin, and her heart flooded with warmth. He stepped forward and kissed her cheek, then he held out a neatly wrapped box toward her.

"I was going to get you flowers, but I think you'll like this more," he said.

Cara's jaw dropped before her face split into an enormous grin. "You brought me a present?"

Antonio nodded. "Open it."

She ripped into the paper, revealing a yellow and blue box with two characters on the front standing back-to-back. "Seven Wonders Duel."

"It's a board game," he said. "For us to play together."

Aww, he really got her.

She nodded as tears pricked the back of her eyes. She moved into his arms and hugged him. What a one-eighty from being asked out to a minor league hockey game.

"I love it. I love you," she said, she said, pulling back to look into his eyes.

He leaned in close, slowly, and pressed his lips to hers, right there on the front porch for everyone to see.

No one was home, but still, it felt good to be out in the open with him.

"I love you, too," he said. "The internet said it's a good game for highly competitive couples. I thought that would work for us."

She chuckled and set the game down, then took his hand and closed the door. "We should really get going."

Before they even made it to Antonio's car, both of their phones buzzed. At the same time.

They grinned at each other and said in unison, "Group chat."

"You answer, I'll drive," Antonio said, opening the door for her.

Cara slipped into the front seat and pulled out her phone.

Max: Where the hell are you two?

She rolled her eyes and replied, letting him know they were on their way, and relaxed into the seat.

Antonio eased out of the driveway and took her hand in his between them. It was easy, comfortable. Natural.

She smiled down at their intertwined fingers, basking in the warmth of his hand. "It's nice to touch you," she said.

Antonio chuckled softly. "I was just thinking the exact same thing."

They drove in peaceful silence, but inside Cara was filled with excited energy.

They'd been on a couple of dates, and their friends obviously knew they were together, but this was the first time they would walk into an event, hand in hand, and introduce each other to strangers as each other's significant other.

They pulled into the parking lot of the Mapleton Country Club, and Antonio glanced her way. "Ready?" he asked.

"Oh, yes."

They walked into the Fireplace Lounge and immediately spotted their people, clustered together in the center of the empty room in front of the gigantic fireplace.

It was still two days before the wedding, and the decorators hadn't yet arrived. But she could already tell by the room that their "grounded glam" theme was going to be incredible.

Their friends turned and came toward them at once, like a bunch of planets finding a new center to orbit. They all greeted each other and hugged.

"Why were you late?" Natalie asked with an eyebrow wag that made Max wince.

"My fault," Antonio said. "I had to go home for a gift."

"He got me a board game," Cara said, turning to Antonio, beaming.

He kissed her temple. "Once I'm settled into my new place, I was thinking of having a game night. Everyone's invited."

Willow smiled. "I'm in! I'll bring the beer, but just know I have zero strategy."

Antonio smirked her way. "Even better," he said with a laugh.

The wedding planner and Adam's uncle David came into the room and started directing everyone. Cara felt Antonio's fingers lace with hers again, and she squeezed, never wanting to let go.

She looked around at her friends and knew this was the start of an amazing future together. The next time they were all together, they'd be celebrating something even bigger. But for now, they were here. Together. Out in the open.

Exactly where they were all meant to be.

Adam & Chelsea's Wedding

Willow jolted awake from a queasy wave splashing up her throat. She rolled out of bed and sprinted down the hallway with her hand over her mouth, just barely making it to the toilet in time.

She wished she could chalk it up to nerves—Chelsea was getting married that afternoon and there were a million things to do. Or maybe blame a sudden illness. A twenty-four-hour flu or something.

But this was the third morning in a row. Was there such thing as a seventy-two-hour flu that only made you nauseous in the morning?

She dropped her chin to her chest. She was drowning in denial.

Suddenly she heard movement down the hall, then a frantic knock on the bathroom door.

"Willow?" Chelsea asked, her voice laced with concern.

Willow sunk to the floor in front of the toilet and wiped her mouth with toilet paper.

Chelsea pushed the half-open door the rest of the way and paused, her eyes going wide as she assessed the scene in front of her. Cara and Natalie pressed in behind her.

"I'm okay," Willow said with a pathetic little wave.

She flushed the toilet and tried to stand, but the swirling in her stomach kept her on the floor.

"How long have you been like this?" Chelsea asked.

"A few days."

Chelsea covered a wince, then glanced over her shoulder at Natalie. Natalie's eyes softened as she offered a faint smile and a small shrug.

"I'm sorry," Willow said, wishing she could feel normal that morning—of all mornings—to support Chelsea. "I don't—I didn't—"

"Wait," Cara said, placing one hand on each of their friends' shoulders and leaning forward, as if to brace herself. "Do you think you might be pregnant, Willow?"

Chelsea immediately turned and pushed by Cara and Natalie, leaving the bathroom, and Willow wanted to cry. This was the worst timing ever. She was ruining Chelsea's wedding day, and she had no idea what Max's reaction would be.

He didn't really do surprises.

She needed to get up, brush this aside, and pretend it wasn't happening. She'd deal with it tomorrow.

She pushed off the toilet and stood just as Chelsea came back into the bathroom.

"I'm sorry, Chelsea. I'm just going to shake it off for now and—"

"Here."

Chelsea held out a pregnancy test to Willow. Natalie and Cara slowly turned toward her, their eyes wide.

"You just have those lying around?" Cara asked.

Chelsea nodded. "Me and Adam started trying. No luck yet," she said, sliding another glance toward Natalie, who went uncharacteristically silent.

Willow clutched her stomach as another wave of nausea raced through her. She took the outstretched box and turned toward the toilet.

"We'll give you some privacy," Cara said.

Her friends left the room, and Willow pulled out the test with a resigned sigh.

It was probably better to know.

Antonio pulled to a stop outside the clubhouse and grabbed his bag from the backseat. An overnight winter storm had blanketed all of Mapleton in snow, but the roads were clear, and the country club was warm. It was going to be a great night.

He walked in and spotted Max right away. He was sitting in a brown leather chair, looking relaxed, with his ankle over his knee and a tray of coffees on the low table in front of him.

Perfect.

He'd hoped that arriving early might give him a chance to talk to Max alone. Max was always early. And Antonio needed a quick word, preferably with no one else around.

Max looked up as he approached and tipped his chin in the air. "Coffee?"

Antonio nodded and joined him, sitting in the matching chair opposite him. He set his bag down and grabbed a cup.

"You're early," Max said.

Antonio nodded, taking a sip of the hot coffee before speaking. "Actually, I was hoping to talk to you."

Max sipped his coffee, his eyes narrowing slightly over his cup. "What about?"

"Cara."

His friend's shoulders stiffened, but he nodded for him to continue. Antonio braced himself and went for it.

"I'm getting my new house next month, and I'm going to ask her to move in with me."

Max stared back at him, silent and unreadable.

It was intimidating as hell, but there was no way he was holding anything back from Max again.

He'd learned his lesson.

"I love her."

Slowly, the corner of Max's mouth lifted, but his eyes stayed cold. "It's a little fast, isn't it?"

Antonio shrugged. The speed of it all didn't bother him. What was the point in delaying the inevitable? Besides, he wanted her to feel at home with him, and to think of his place as hers.

Max let go of the restraint in his expression and allowed the smile he'd been holding back to take over completely. "It's up to her, obviously," he said.

Antonio nodded. "I know, but given how we started..." He trailed off, stopping his mind from going backwards. He only wanted to look ahead. "I just wanted to let you know my intentions."

Max nodded and stared in silence. Finally, he stood from his seat and picked up the tray.

"I'm rooting for you, man," he said with a clap on Antonio's back.

"Thanks," he said, relaxing fractionally.

Just then, the doors opened and in walked Ethan and Adam. They all greeted each other, then headed back to the suite to hang out and get ready.

Antonio fell to the back of the pack as he pulled out his phone and opened his conversation with Cara.

Antonio: I can't wait to see you. I love you.

A second later, his phone lit up with her response.

Cara: Love you too. Big day.

It was a big day. For them, too. He was going to ask her to move in with him.

Hopefully, she'd say yes. And maybe one day soon they'd all be gathering together, getting ready to celebrate him and Cara getting married.

One thing at a time.

Chelsea stood in front of the full-length mirror in the bridal suite and fought back tears as Jae stood behind her, fastening the long row of satin buttons.

The soft white gown draped artfully off her shoulders and down her curves, sparkling just enough to catch the cool winter sunlight streaming through the windows.

The outside world looked like a picture-perfect winter wonderland with thick snow coating the pine trees around the golf course. If she'd hired an Oscar Award-winning set designer to style the scene, they couldn't have made it more perfect.

"There," Jae said, stepping away. "Done."

Chelsea swallowed down her emotions and turned toward her friends, who'd gathered in the room, already dressed in their stunning silk gowns. They'd went with a grounded glam theme—"Blue Collar Met Gala," as Adam pitched it.

She loved it almost as much as she loved him.

She'd spent the last couple of months in awe of his enthusiasm with the wedding planning. He'd spoken of nothing but the food and music and flowers. She was pretty certain she was the luckiest person on earth.

Just then, the door to the bridal suite opened, and in came her son, fully dressed in a tiny black tuxedo and shiny shoes.

Her heart backed up in her throat and she blinked again and again, but she couldn't

stop a few tears from falling.

The bridesmaids immediately engulfed him, all cooing over how handsome he was, and he lapped up the attention, making sure everyone saw his fancy pocket square and the boutonniere his Uncle Ethan had pinned to his lapel.

"Adam gave me this, Mama," he said, holding out a thick white envelope. She hadn't even noticed he was holding something. "He said to give it to you."

She took it from him with a smile. "How did you like hanging out with the boys?"

Ben smiled. "It was fun. Max gave me cookies and orange juice."

She laughed and opened the envelope, then fought off a fresh wave of tears as she read the first line.

Dear Chelsea,

I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you. I planned a honeymoon for us—for the three of us. We leave tomorrow morning. Don't worry about a thing. Our bags are being packed right now, and the jet's at the airport waiting for us. We can leave whenever you want.

Can't wait to kiss you,

Love A.

P.S. Ben will tell you where we're going.

"Holy crap," Chelsea said, looking up with tears in her eyes. "Adam booked us a honeymoon."

"Where to?" Natalie asked.

She looked at Ben. "Where are we going, buddy?"

Ben's expression broke into a broad smile. She'd never seen her boy so happy.

"Disney World!"

Chelsea laugh-cried as she sank down and pulled him into a tight hug. How had she found someone she loved so much, who also loved her son?

Willow came in close and peeked at the card. "Oh, my God. He's amazing."

Jae nodded. "He really is."

Chelsea stood and wiped her eyes.

"Ready to go make this official?" Natalie asked.

Chelsea flushed with happiness. "Absolutely."

Cara handed them each their bouquets, and they headed for the door.

Adam stood at the front of the Fireplace Room and tried to figure out what to do with his hands. He wasn't sure he'd ever been so awkward before.

Well, maybe when he proposed.

The air buzzed with excitement and warmth, and the crackling of the birch wood in the hearth behind him filled the room with a woodsy smell.

It mixed with the scent of roses and dandelions—yes, dandelions—in the floral arrangements that lined the aisle and mantle behind him. He'd never forget the florist's face when he insisted on dandelion boutonnieres.

He smiled and relaxed slightly at the memory of her losing her shit as he happily signed the order to pay an obscene amount of money to have “a common weed,” as she called it, specially grown and brought in for a winter wedding.

She'd tried to talk him out of it, saying they'd wilt after an hour, which was a good point. But that just made him buy enough boutonnieres to have fresh ones on his lapel all day.

He looked out at the sea of familiar faces—his uncle cracking a joke in the front row, his dad ignoring his uncle and beaming proudly, Denise dabbing under her eyes with a tissue even though nothing had happened yet.

Everyone was there. Everyone who could be. And those who couldn't were with him in spirit.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

Suddenly, the pianist in the corner of the room shifted the music, cuing the start of the procession and a lump rose in his throat.

This was it.

Ethan and Natalie came down the aisle first, grinning as they linked arms. Ethan gave him a wide smile and a playful shrug on the way down. He was pretty sure his best friend never thought he'd see this day.

Next were Max and Willow. She looked pretty and happy. He looked... stoic. Adam wouldn't have expected anything else.

Then came Cara and Antonio, walking in perfect sync, happy and light. He was thankful they'd worked out their problems. It was good to see them happy. Cara gave him a little thumbs-up and Antonio flashed him a grin.

Finally, Jae came down on her own. When she got to the end, he knew this was it. Chelsea was on her way.

He inhaled deeply as the music changed again, and the doors opened. And there she was.

His wife.

All he could see were her stunning aqua eyes, misty and beautiful, shining at him from down the aisle. He fought off the urge to speed things up, get this done so he could start the rest of his life.

Beside her, holding her hand with a serious expression, was Ben. He tugged her hand forward, and Adam's heart cracked open wide. He watched as his little family walked toward him.

He felt the sting of tears and forced himself to keep it together. But the lump in his throat swelled as they got closer and closer. He glanced toward the crowd for a split second, and everyone was dabbing their eyes.

When they reached him, Ben passed Chelsea's hand over to him with a nod, as they'd practiced. Adam whispered, "Thanks, buddy," before standing to face the love of his life.

The officiant began, but Adam barely heard a word until it was time for the vows.

Chelsea went first. She talked about how he was her biggest supporter, her love, her best friend, her safe place.

He had to blink back emotion as he read his vows to her and Ben, and when he told her she made life worth living, his voice choked and a tear came free.

Finally, the officiant got to the easy part—saying "I do." An overwhelming feeling came over him that his life—the life he was always meant to live—was finally beginning.

"You may now kiss your bride."

He leaned in, took Chelsea in his arms and kissed her, and the room erupted into cheers.

Adam smiled against her lips, and when he pulled back, he got her beautiful dimples.

"I'm never going to stop loving you," he said.

Chelsea smiled that smile he loved so much and kissed him again. "Same."

The snow began falling again in soft, drifting flakes, settling on the stone path behind the golf course. The photos were taking longer than expected—too many people, too many candid moments—but Cara didn't mind.

Everyone was glowing with love and the glass of champagne she'd been sipping warmed her from the inside. She stood just off to the side under a canopy the photographer had set up, her fingers intertwined with Antonio's.

Across the way, Chelsea and Adam laughed, faces lit with happiness as the photographer snapped shot after shot. Ben was up high on Adam's shoulders and covered his eyes with both hands as Chelsea leaned in to kiss Adam.

Cara smiled, her heart was warm despite the chill. She leaned into Antonio's shoulder and sighed.

"They look so happy," she said.

"They are," he said, voice low. He bent toward her and kissed her temple.

So was she. And everyone else.

She glanced across the path at Willow, who had her hand on her stomach, and wondered if she was waiting until tomorrow to tell Max.

The thought of being an aunt had filled her heart all day, but it had also brought up many questions she had about her own future.

She gave a side-long glance to Antonio and wished she could read his mind. They hadn't really talked about them since they officially became a couple. It had only been a few weeks, but she wanted to make sure they were on the track she wanted to be on.

Her fingers tightened around his. "I want this to be us someday," she said in a near whisper, as if she was confessing.

Antonio didn't flinch. He didn't even blink. He just turned toward her and smiled his heart-stopping smile.

"I talked to Max this morning about us," he said.

She blinked, surprised. "You did?"

Antonio nodded.

What the hell? Why wouldn't he just talk to her?

Antonio turned toward her, took both her hands. He probably sensed her annoyance. "I just wanted him to know my intentions. Full transparency."

Cara wanted to roll her eyes, but more than that, she wanted to know what they talked about. "Your intentions?"

He stared at her for a moment, carefully choosing his words. "I want a future with you, and I want..."

"What?" she asked, impatient with his trailing off. She silently hoped he was ready to take the next step.

She knew she was ready.

"I want you to consider moving in with me."

His words removed all the tension her body was holding. She sank in relief.

Thank God he was on the same page as her.

She hadn't wanted to invite herself to move in with him, but she was definitely considering it.

Her shoulders relaxed and she moved in closer, leaning against his chest. "I thought I was going to have to gradually leave my stuff at your place until you got the hint."

He gave a soft laugh and brushed a thumb over her cheek. "Why don't you just think of it as your place, and move everything in all at once?"

Cara stood on her tiptoes and kissed him as his arms came around her back and lifted her into the air.

Antonio set her down and smiled into her eyes. "We'll make it our home together."

She beamed and kissed him again. It seemed like they were heading toward their own wedding someday.

And someday didn't feel too far away at all.

Ethan sat at the head table, quietly nursing a beer as laughter and music swirled around the reception. He'd carefully planned out his speech weeks before and printed it on a single index card. Short and sweet, as Adam requested.

He'd even rehearsed it out loud to Natalie as they cuddled on the couch in their home the night before. So he was ready when Adam's uncle, who'd been emceeing for the

evening, appeared at his side with a grin and a microphone.

"Best man means you're the speech guy," he said.

Ethan smiled and took the mic, then stood and gently tapped a dessert spoon on a crystal water glass. The sound echoed across the warm, candlelit room as everyone turned to look at him. He pulled his index card from his breast pocket and began.

"Adam and I met when we were seven years old playing on the same little league team," Ethan said. "He showed up to the first game wearing two left cleats because, and I quote, 'the right one didn't feel right.'"

Laughter rumbled through the room and Adam shrugged, as if that made perfect sense.

"When we were in grade eight, he asked me why a skeleton wouldn't want to go to a dance."

"Because he had no body to go with," Adam piped up from his seat.

Ethan laughed along with the room and shook his head. "See what I've been dealing with?"

Everyone laughed again.

"This is how I know he's going to be the best dad a kid could ask for. He's been telling dad jokes since he was seven."

The vibe shifted in the room and the laughter melted into emotional aww's. Ethan looked at his parents and sister at the table across the room. His mom dabbed her eyes with her napkin.

"Growing up with Adam meant never being bored. He was always the loudest one in the room, the first to try something ridiculous. You honestly couldn't predict what he'd do next."

"But underneath the endless jokes, the wild energy, and the slightly unhinged karaoke performances, Adam is a great guy. He has the biggest heart of anyone I know. And watching him love Chelsea and Ben the way he does... it's something special."

He caught Natalie's eyes across the head table. She was sitting next to Chelsea with a soft smile and shining eyes.

Ethan knew how low she'd been feeling lately, given the struggles they'd had trying to conceive. He felt down, too.

He held her eyes and went off script.

"I've learned that love doesn't always show up the way you expect. Sometimes it starts in chaos. In uncertainty. With hard days and big decisions and terrifying hope."

Natalie pushed away tears, and he had to swallow the emotion that bubbled up.

"But if you're lucky—and I think all of us in this room are—you find someone to go through it all with. Someone who holds your hand on the good days and holds you up on the bad ones. Someone who says 'We've got this!' even when they're not totally sure. That's love. That's family."

He broke eye contact with Natalie and looked at Adam.

"I'm really glad I get to stand here beside you while you build your own family," he said and raised his glass. "To Adam and Chelsea. To family, to laughter, and to a lifetime of truly terrible dad jokes."

The crowd laughed and tapped their glasses.

Ethan switched the mic off, and before he could turn, Adam side tackled him with a hug.

"Thanks for keeping it PG," he said with a grin.

Ethan laughed and shook his head. "I didn't have much material to work with."

The reception was in full swing. Upbeat music filled the air, and the fairy lights the decorators had strung on the ceiling glowed over the crowd of people on the dance floor. But Max's eyes were only on one person.

Willow.

She was dancing in a loose circle with Chelsea, Natalie, and Cara in the middle of the polished wood floor under a disco ball. Her cheeks were flushed, her hair was shining, and the silky dress she wore hugged her body all the way down to the floor.

She was stunning.

He fucking loved her.

He took a drink of his beer and let himself watch her, laughing and moving. He couldn't wait to get her home later.

The music shifted and Adam's uncle David came over the speakers announcing the bouquet toss. Suddenly, the dance floor cleared of men and filled with women.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:30 am

A moment later, Chelsea stood at the front with flowers in her hand. She smiled, pointed to someone in the crowd, and mouthed, "You're next."

From where he was standing, it looked like she'd pointed at Willow, but it was hard to tell. He took a step closer to get a better view as Chelsea turned around and flung the bouquet over her head.

It soared through the air and landed directly in Willow's hands.

She blinked, looked down at the flowers, then immediately turned to him with wide, playful eyes.

Max's heart thudded in his chest so hard he thought for sure someone would hear it over the music. He smiled back at her. She looked happy about the idea of marrying him, which took an enormous weight off his shoulders.

Willow bounced her way over to him and came in close for a hug. When she pulled back, she was staring down at the bouquet.

"What do you think of this?" she asked, her pretty features slightly guarded.

Max blinked. "I'm happy you caught it. I love you more than anything." Then he frowned slightly. "You know I want to be with you forever, right?"

She gave a nod and a little smile. "Just making sure."

He studied her for a second. "You look like you're feeling better," he said, reaching

up and touching her flushed cheek. "You have your colour back."

"I'm not."

Max's brow furrowed. "You're not?"

She shook her head and took his hand. "Max... I took a test."

"A test?" he asked, shaking his head. What did that—

The words finally connected, and the entire room tilted.

"You—what—." He forced himself to stop for a beat and collect his thoughts. "A pregnancy test?"

Her eyes welled with tears, but she still managed a small, trembling smile.

"Was it positive?"

She gave a nod. "You're going to be a dad."

All the air left his lungs. It felt as though a giant vacuum sucked all the oxygen from the room. He stood frozen, processing, before he finally snapped out of it and pulled her into his arms.

"Holy shit," he said into her hair.

He'd lifted her off the floor and hadn't even realized.

Was that okay? Was he allowed to pick her up?

He had no idea what to do with a pregnant woman.

He set her down gently and touched her belly through the silky fabric. His kid was in there.

Their kid.

A smile spread over his face.

"I know this wasn't part of your five-year plan—" Willow started.

"Fuck that plan," he said, leaning back to cup her face. He stared into the eyes he fell in love with. "This plan's way better. We'll figure it all out."

He kissed her, deep and slow, and she melted into his arms.

"I'm buying you a ring," he said against her lips. "You're marrying me."

She laughed through her tears and nodded. "Yeah, I am."

Natalie stood near the dessert table with Gale and Amy and watched as Max hoisted Willow into the air, then gently set her down as if she was an antique teacup he didn't want to break.

Emotion clutched at her chest.

She was happy for them. She really was. Their group was growing.

She just wished so badly that it had been that easy for her.

Gale's hand landed gently on her back, and she shook off the feeling and forced a smile. "I'm okay," she said, before her mother-in-law could ask.

Gale and Amy nodded.

It was nice having them to talk to. Gale had opened up about her struggle to get pregnant with Ethan. And now that they'd seen the doctor, understood the problem and made a plan, she felt much better about the whole thing. Her doctor was confident that she could conceive with the right treatment.

Still, it ate away at her.

Ethan came up behind her and slipped a sparkly confetti popper into her hand. "It's almost time," he said before dropping a kiss to her head.

She smiled and let him tug her toward the dance floor where their friends had gathered.

"I've been thinking," Ethan said gently, drawing circles with his big hand along her upper back, "maybe we should tell them tonight. It's a lot to carry alone."

Natalie hesitated. It was likely old habits dying hard—bottling up her feelings and suffering alone and never showing vulnerability and running when things got too tough.

In some ways it was easier to keep things to herself, but easier wasn't necessarily better, and she didn't need to do that anymore.

She had family, friends, and, most importantly, Ethan. A whole group of people surrounding her, loving her.

She squeezed his hand and nodded. "Okay. Let's do it."

They reached the group just as Adam was handing out plastic hats and tiaras and tiny noisemakers.

Cara gave Natalie a long look, tilting her head. "Hey, you good?"

Natalie took a deep breath. "Yeah, I mean... not really."

Her eyes scanned their little group—her sister the bride, glowing next to her groom, Willow clinging to Max's arm, Cara nestled against Antonio, all of them looking back with concern.

And love.

Her eyes filled and Ethan's arm came around her shoulders, strong, sure.

"We saw a fertility doctor last week," she said. "We've been trying since our wedding and... we're starting treatment after the holidays."

Her friends didn't skip a beat. They all moved in unison toward her and pulled her and Ethan into a group hug in the middle of the dance floor. Arms wrapped around them as they all whispered their love and support.

The weight she'd been carrying left her shoulders and her eyes overflowed, but they were good tears. Hopeful tears.

The lights overhead dimmed, and Adam's uncle David began the countdown to the new year.

"Ten... nine... eight..."

The group separated, but Ethan stayed close. "Whatever happens, we've got this. You and me."

Natalie swallowed the lump in her throat and leaned into him. "I love you."

"Seven..."

"I love you, too."

She smiled at him and glanced around. Chelsea laughed as Adam put a tiara on both their heads.

"Six... Five..."

Cara giggled as Antonio covered her face with kisses.

"Four... Three..."

Willow whispered something to Max that made him pull her protectively into his arms.

"Two... One..."

Ethan's blue eyes smiled at her like she was his universe.

"Happy New Year!"

Natalie leaned in and kissed her husband.

The new year had begun. And with Ethan by her side, and surrounded by her friends and family, she knew she could take on whatever lay ahead.

Authors Note: You gotta know by now that I can't resist a bonus scene! Here's one from Brin's POV. She's getting her own story in a spin-off series. Enjoy!

Brin had spotted David Hartley the second she walked into the country club—he was impossible to miss. All incredibly wealthy men were. And she was no stranger to incredibly wealthy men.

She'd seen enough bespoke tuxedos that cost more than her yearly net profit at the café and smelled enough custom colognes designed by the best noses in Paris to spot the billionaire—trillionaire?—in the crowd.

There was a time when a high net worth and a three-thousand-dollar haircut impressed her.

Not anymore.

She'd spent the entire evening avoiding him, staying close to her boyfriend and pretending there wasn't a Hartley among them. Perhaps she was being a bit paranoid, but she never knew who to trust.

As the hours passed, and after the ceremony, dinner, dancing, and midnight countdown were done, she'd settled her anxious thoughts and let her guard down.

That had been a big mistake.

"Brinley."

She jerked away from the dessert table and toward the smooth, cultured voice beside her. A normal person would probably welcome his presence. But she wasn't normal.

She popped a mini gold-flecked chocolate chip cookie into her mouth and chewed with a fake smile. "That's me," she said with a smile.

Hartley raised an eyebrow, but only for a second. It was enough to worry her, though. Did he know?

"I was looking forward to stealing a moment of your time."

Okay. He definitely knew.

"Stealing?" she said with a humourless laugh, her entire body shifting to defense. "Interesting choice of words."

He had the decency to pale. "I didn't mean anything by it."

She rolled her eyes and blinked away from him, slowly turning her eyes over her shoulder to check the room. The last thing she needed was to raise suspicion.

"No one's watching us," he said. "No one who would connect the dots, at least."

She relaxed, but only marginally. Instead of saying anything, she popped another cookie and looked at him expectantly.

Get on with it.

"Do you speak with your sisters often?"

She huffed out a breath as the last bit of hope she had faded away. He knew she wasn't "Brin."

"I'll take your silence as a yes," he said, glancing around the room.

He knew who she was, so he should know better than to try to speak with her. She wasn't supposed to discuss her past with anyone. Court orders.

"And Westley? Do you speak to him?"

Her head pulled back, stunned. It had been a very long time since she'd heard that name. Did he know about Wes?

He couldn't have. No one knew.

Except her and Wes.

She huffed out a breath and looked away, wondering if she'd have to tell David Hartley to fuck off right there under the fairy lights.

Hartley seemed to take the hint. He looked across the room and backed into the shadows of the dessert table. "Are things with Jake serious?"

She stared at him, back pressed into the corner, looking uncomfortable. Wealthy, powerful men never slunk back into shadows. What the hell was this?

She should have walked away, but this was too intriguing. And concerning.

"Why would you care about the seriousness of my relationship with Jake?"

She suspected he was in contact with Wes. She wouldn't have been surprised. Was that what this was about?

Hartley's shoulders rounded slightly. "I'm trying to help you. It might be difficult to move forward with Jake."

What the?

She stared at him, wondering why the hell he would try to help her. Then she remembered what her middle sister had said once, about her suspicion that someone "untouchable" must have been helping them behind the scenes. Had it been David Hartley the whole time?

She looked at him, backed into the corner, glancing around like he was some common street dealer.

"You stepped in back then, didn't you? You bought the café?"

He waited a beat, then nodded.

"Why?"

"Your mother asked me to," he said, his eyes going soft. "I've never told her no, and I'd never let her down."

She didn't even try to hide her surprise.

Her eyebrows shot up so fast and stayed up for so long that her eyes went dry.

She'd long suspected the “untouchable” that was helping was Wes.

It was actually a relief that Wes wasn't involved.

She wanted to believe it, but there was a giant, gaping hole in Hartley's story.

"My mom passed before any of this came to light."

He nodded. "She had suspicions about your dad for a while, though. When she got sick, she asked me to look out for you three."

"Why you?"

He held her gaze. "She knew how much I always loved her," he said.

His eyes dropped to his shoes briefly. She couldn't believe what she was hearing—or seeing.

"It killed me when she married your dad."

She had to tell herself to pick her jaw up off the floor. All these years and she had no

idea. Her mom never once gave any sign that she'd been involved with David Hartley.

"This is so far beyond..." she trailed off as the speechlessness sank in.

What in the world?

He gave a wince. "I know you don't know me," he said. "And what I'm about to say might sound kind of... odd... but I always hoped your mom would leave your dad and that she and you and your sisters would be with me. But after she got sick..." He trailed off, his eyes showing heartbreak.

"Sorry," she said, not knowing what the hell to say. Never in a million years would she think she'd be giving words of condolence to David Hartley over her mother's untimely death twelve years ago.

Hartley gave a nod, then stood up straighter and squared his shoulders as if he just remembered who he was.

"If you or your sisters need anything—ever—I'd like you to reach out to me. And I know that Westley—"

"Stop," she said, cutting him off. "I'm not sure how much you know, but I will not talk about Wes—him."

She caught sight of Jake across the room. Her sweet, caring, honest, and incredibly normal boyfriend. He was her future, and she was solely focused on him.

She turned back to Hartley and gave him a genuine smile. "Thank you for helping us," she said. "And for telling me about your involvement. You've eased my mind about things."

Hartley gave her a confused look, but she refused to elaborate. He didn't need to know how relieved she was to know, after all these years, that she didn't owe Wes anything.

She turned and walked toward Jake, leaving David Hartley, and memory lane, permanently closed behind her. When she got to him, Jake wrapped her in a big, burly hug. He smelled like Old Spice and felt like two-hundred-dollar commercially produced wool.

And she loved it.

"Were you talking to Adam's uncle?" he asked.

She shook her head. Lying came way too easily from years and years of practice. "Nope, just eating some cookies."

She kissed him and reveled in his rough, warm hands against the soft skin on her back. This was exactly what she needed.

She just hoped that if she and Jake ever took the next step, she wouldn't have to go too far back into her past in order to move forward.

To be continued...