



Love's a Script (Hearts Collide #1)

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Category: Romance

Description: Love has a way of revising the best-laid plans.

As a professional matchmaker and a chronic people pleaser, Mary Neilson knows all about harmony.

So she never meant to clash with public radio news show host Ruben Byers during an on-air interview.

Their tense exchange on the state of modern dating generates unprecedented buzz for the show and prompts Ruben's boss to assign him a feature exploring the subject further.

Worse still, he must join Hearts Collide Matchmaking as one of Mary's clients for research.

Mary reluctantly accepts the challenge of finding the vexing but handsome radio host a match, hoping her success will improve her chances at a coveted promotion.

And despite Ruben's reservations and unexpected attraction to Mary, he is committed to seeing the process through.

However, the chemistry between them is obvious and hard to resist.

When it threatens to upset their objectives, will they cling to their defined roles or accept that matters of the heart can't be scripted?

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Chapter One

Valentine's Day is to matchmaking agencies as the first of January is to gyms. In other words, the fear of solitary futures (usually imagined, for some reason, in hilltop monasteries or cat-filled apartments) was heightened in the weeks leading up to the day of love.

Mary Neilson, a matchmaker at Hearts Collide Matchmaking, embraced the influx of motivated clients and held their concerns as tenderly as possible, regardless of how commonplace they were.

"I just want someone to split a giant éclair with. You know, like the ones from the Dutch Oven," said Adrienne, a twenty-eight-year-old wedding photographer, and Mary's first client of the day.

It would take work on Mary's end to untangle what Adrienne truly wanted because she was what they at the agency called a "hodgepodge." This type was unfocused, having spent years absorbing inconsistent ideas of The One through media, family, peers, and a one-off visit to a psychic.

A "hodgepodge" was not to be confused with a "unicorn seeker": a client hoping for a partner with a statistically unlikely combo of characteristics.

A poetry-loving chemist who's also a ballroom dancing champion, for instance.

And a "unicorn seeker" differed still from a "Pygmalion" in that the latter felt entitled to a mate who met all their specifications because they'd paid for a matchmaking

service.

That said, not everyone fell neatly into an archetype.

Take Mary's last client before lunch, Gavin.

A thirty-nine-year-old in tech sales who exercised a medical-journal-recommended number of times per week and played soccer in a community league.

He seemed like a lot of the straight men who walked through the agency's doors until he said, "I'm a sperm donor influencer."

Mary didn't allow her smile to slip as Gavin detailed his side gig and showed off the glitchy website where he sold "Share Your Spunk" T-shirts and water bottles.

At the end of their meeting, while walking him through the lobby to the exit, Mary told him what she told every person who came in seeking her help: "I can't wait to find you your match."

On the way back to her office, the receptionist at the front desk waved Mary over. "Cassidy wants to see you," she said.

"Cruise lead?" Mary asked, her posture straightening.

"Hard to say."

Mary quickly set off down the hallway toward her boss's office, fussing with the volume of her hair.

She knocked on the frosted glass door, and a responding voice told her to enter.

Inside, Cassidy was talking on the phone with earbuds while on a treadmill.

She pumped her arms back and forth, holding on to pink dumbbells.

Mary stepped off to the side to wait, nearly tripping over Cassidy's assistant who was on the floor bearing her weight on an overflowing suitcase. The assistant's smooth ponytail and turtleneck sweater had conspired to make her flushed face look like a pulsing zit.

"Do you need a hand?" Mary whispered.

The assistant hopped up to her feet. "No, I've got it," she said, throwing her body on top of the piece of luggage again.

After a minute or two, Cassidy ended her call shouting, "Kiss my ass, Scott," and pitching her earbuds across the room. "Don't ever get married. If you do, skip the divorce proceedings and acquire some arsenic. What can I do for you, Mary?"

"I was told you wanted to see me."

"Yes!" Cassidy said, now punching her dumbbells overhead. "I agreed to a quick radio interview about the mayor's engagement this evening, but I forgot I'd be on a flight to Halifax. I'll need you to fill in for me."

"Of course. I'd be happy to."

"Perfect, I knew I could count on you. Shay will send you the details and our talking points."

The assistant, still struggling on the floor, affirmed with a feeble nod.

“Is that all?” Mary willed there to be more.

“It is,” Cassidy said. “Oh, could you fetch my earphones before you go?”

Disappointed, Mary did her boss’s bidding and left for the staff lounge to begin her lunch break.

She’d hardly stepped inside the break room when two of her colleagues cornered her against a counter.

Kaitlyn and Catelin—dubbed the Twins, on account of their names and the J.Crew sales they both shopped—stood on either side of Mary.

“We saw you go into Cassidy’s office,” Catelin said.

“Yes, she wanted to talk to me.”

“And,” said the other Kaitlyn, pressing forward, “what did she want?”

Mary looked between the two women, now understanding. “It wasn’t about cruise lead,” she told them. “I’m stepping in for her on a radio interview tonight.”

The Twins recoiled. An unpaid task outside of working hours was not an enviable position. They left the room quickly, tossing “Good luck” over their shoulders.

“Might need to start carrying a switchblade,” said Eden, a fellow matchmaker who’d watched the ambush from the lunch table. Her downturned eyes were always smudged with black liner, intensifying her doleful appearance.

“We’re not in a prison yard.”

“All’s missing are the jumpsuits and DIY tattoos,” Eden said dryly. “Everyone’s lost their damn mind around here.”

The cruise lead position—an inaugural opportunity to plan and execute the agency’s biggest matchmaking event on a cruise voyage—was coveted by all save for Eden.

Cruise lead promised obvious perks like a stipend and event-planning experience, and Mary had built the role up in her head further to where it would also temper what a therapist she’d seen virtually for two and a half sessions concluded was her “general concern of dispensability.”

Mary had taken a seat beside Eden with her meal when Sienna, another matchmaker, barreled into the break room, her always present water tumbler dangling from her hand like a loose thread on a garment. Her eyes wildly landed on Mary. “Did you get it? Cruise lead?”

Mary strained to swallow the food in her mouth before answering, “No, I was asked to step in for a radio interview.”

“Really? That’s a pretty big responsibility. It means Cassidy trusts you to represent the agency. Which probably makes you her front-runner.” Sienna had lived most of her life in a small town up north and had never left the country, so she was hungry for this sort of summer adventure.

“I don’t think you should read into it,” Mary said. “We’ve all been assigned extracurricular tasks before.”

This reasoning put Sienna at ease, and she made her exit with a lighter step. Mary tried returning to her lunch, but the break room had a revolving door and shortly ushered in Francine, a veteran amongst the matchmakers.

“Hello, beautiful ladies,” Francine said with an affected drawl found in old Hollywood movies. She surveyed the contents of the refrigerator as she rambled about the details of her morning until abruptly turning to Mary. “I heard you had a meeting with Cass?—”

“My god,” Eden said, slamming her fork onto the table. “She didn’t get cruise lead.”

Francine looked to Mary.

“I wasn’t offered the role,” Mary confirmed.

“Oh, that’s a relief,” Francine said. “Not that you don’t deserve it, but you know...”

After a stretch of uncomfortable silence, Francine quit pretending she’d come for anything more and excused herself.

“Madness,” Eden said when they were alone, and Mary couldn’t object.

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Chapter Two

The interview-based public radio program, according to their bio, provided audiences with expert perspectives and commentary on the day's important stories.

It was highbrow fare compared to what Mary listened to on her commutes, which as recently as yesterday saw DJ Spice updating listeners on his vape-quitting journey before he introduced a techno remix of a Hozier ballad.

There was a click on the line at last, and Mary could now hear one of the hosts of All Intents and Purposes , Chesa Salvador, speaking in the measured cadence of a broadcast journalist. "Late last week," Chesa began, "Mayor Kevin Laurie announced his engagement to Jennifer Acres, a chartered accountant he met through a local matchmaking service, Everlasting Connection. Out of respect and privacy for the couple, Everlasting Connection has declined to comment on the union."

Chesa welcomed Mary to the show and posed a set of simple questions that allowed Mary to introduce herself and settle into the rhythm of the interview.

"I want to start off this discussion with your read of the public's response to the mayor's engagement," Chesa said. "A lot has been made of him seeking out a matchmaker since he's been one of the city's most eligible bachelors and presumably didn't need such a service."

"Matchmaking doesn't have to be someone's last-ditch effort," Mary said. "And it's not only for people who have a hard time dating for whatever reason. It's a great option for anyone who values their time and wants to quickly cut through the noise."

The other host, Ruben Byers, entered the conversation, and he spoke with a warm, relaxed lilt as if they sat in a living room with dim yellow lighting.

“Speaking of dating options,” he said, “I’m sure you’re aware of reports concerning the declining popularity of dating apps among young people as well as what many economists theorize are diminishing physical spaces to meet new people.

Do you believe professional matchmaking could be the solution for this problem? ”

“For sure,” Mary said. “We’ve seen more and more people in their twenties come through our doors in the last few years.

And I’d like to add that matchmaking isn’t new.

Cassidy Fowler, the CEO of my agency, is a third-generation matchmaker.

It’s an old practice that many cultures around the world still use.

In the past it might’ve been the village elder, and today it’s someone like me in a downtown high-rise. ”

“Except, in the past, Granny wasn’t charging someone upward of a half a year’s rent to match them with the town cobbler,” Ruben said pointedly, and Mary’s hand stilled where it had been doodling shapes on her note’s margins.

“Yes, it is a premium service,” she said, taking care to add extra brightness to her voice. “Clients pay for the convenience and curation.”

He laughed, but there was no humor in it.

“Curation. What an interesting word to use when referring to people.” He moved on

to the next question while Mary was floundering for a response.

“There’s also a certain sentiment that Mayor Laurie’s engagement comes at a convenient time, that it’s a distraction from the scandal that has plagued his city council’s office for nearly a month now. Do you agree?”

“I-I can’t speak to that.”

“All right, can you speak to the artifice inherent to matchmaking?”

Mary frowned. “I don’t think I understand what you mean.”

“I mean your agency constructs these romantic scenarios, these dates, and even provides outlines on how to optimize the chances of falling in love. I know you’re in the mix, but you must see there’s an artificiality baked into the entire process.”

“No, I don’t see that,” she said, irritation spilling into her tone. “We give guidance and support because dating can be hard, and it takes energy to decide what to do and how to impress. We take care of that so the best version of you gets to shine.”

“Huh. Then do you think the orchestrated dates work in a similar way that music in ads or movies do?” he asked. “Research has long suggested film scores, for instance, can manipulate a viewer into feeling certain emotions, when without that input, they might not have.”

Mary shifted to the edge of her seat, casting her notes aside.

“This isn’t a lifetime subscription, okay?”

” she said sharply. “When the hot air balloon lands and the string quartet leaves, all that’s left is the couple.

They have to make it work. We have a 92 percent success rate, which shows the love people find through our service is real.

” She could hear herself getting louder.

“I suspect you’ve been unlucky in the relationship department, Mr. Byers.

If you have, I’m sorry about that, but your cynicism is misplaced.

I would encourage you to seek out a matchmaker and see for yourself. One within your budget, of course.”

Mary’s face was hot against the receiver and a slight tremor burdened her hand, but soon her heartbeat began to settle. It was then she realized the silence on the other line. She waited. “Hello?” Listened. A dial tone was the eventual and only response.

* * *

Mary knew the apologetic message she sent her boss immediately following the interview would remain in purgatory until the next day, but it didn’t stop her from checking for a response all evening or waking up in the middle of the night because she thought her phone had chimed.

Cassidy’s reply came instead in the morning while Mary was making breakfast. We’ll chat when I get back , her boss wrote in her email.

Tone couldn’t be accurately discerned from those six static words, but left to her psychological tendencies, Mary spun a scenario where not only was she out of the running for cruise lead but also at risk of termination once her boss returned from her trip.

The interview was hardly a topic of discussion at work, and no one was as concerned as Mary was about the potential fallout. She clung to their nonchalance, trying her best to make it her own, until partway through the day, she learned of two comments that had appeared on the agency's review page.

"They're bogus. Clearly trolls," Eden said. She'd come to Mary's office to bear the news dressed, appropriately enough, in all black.

"What did they write exactly?" Mary asked.

Eden's steady eye contact strayed, and Mary changed her mind, saying, "Actually, don't read them. Just give me an idea."

"Okay. One's calling you shrill, and the other is calling you bitchy."

The air seemed to congeal in Mary's lungs, turning her breathing shallow.

Those reviews—which Cassidy and future clients would inevitably read—made her sound like someone who caused scenes in public and stiffed on tips.

Mary didn't ruffle feathers. Ever. She was nice, friendly, sweet.

"A pleasure to have in class" had been a staple comment on her grade school report cards.

"You okay?" Eden asked.

"Yes!" Mary replied and even managed to smile. "As you said, trolls. But thanks for letting me know."

Eden nodded and moved to exit. At the door, she paused. "If you ask me," she said,

“you did nothing wrong. He’s the one who went off script.”

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Chapter Three

Each weekday morning, the small team of All Intentions and Purposes gathered in a conference room with a standing double-sided whiteboard to plan that evening's eighty-minute radio broadcast. It was a vital meeting that would shape the many hours they'd spend writing scripts, lining up guests, and preparing for interviews.

But on this day, Ruben Byers struggled to focus on the news story a staff writer was pitching because the show's production director had chosen that time to clip his nails.

As director, Hugh stood inside the rack room with the audio technician, managing the progress of the show Ruben cohosted.

The almost sixty-year-old was good at his job, which allowed him to push the limits of social propriety, but when one of Hugh's clippings landed too close to the open box of blueberry muffins, Ruben finally said, "Hey, could you hold off on that until we're done here?"

Hugh blinked like he found the request confusing but ceased all personal grooming thereafter.

At the end of the meeting, Ruben set a time for the group to reconvene in the afternoon.

And as the writers, editor, and line producer got up to leave, Hugh asked Ruben and his cohost, Chesa, to stay behind.

Ruben shared a look with his partner, and in the silent shorthand they'd developed over the five years working together, they agreed this couldn't be anything good.

Once the room had cleared, Hugh began, "About last night's broadcast and that interview with the matchmaker?—"

"I know. I was too confrontational," Ruben said, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"You were being thorough," Chesa said, and Ruben appreciated the defense, especially since she'd been frustrated with how the interview had escalated.

There was a balance they aimed for with each episode, and he'd complicated one of the few easy stories they sprinkled in between the serious interviews and discussions.

But for better or for worse, he was beholden to truth and authenticity, so he hadn't been able to go along with the breezy interview when it helped trivialize the scandal unfolding in the mayor's office.

"Actually, it's good the interview went in the direction it did," Hugh said. "We got more calls and emails about that segment than anything before. The listeners loved the banter between you and the matchmaker."

Ruben wouldn't call the exchange banter.

There had been nothing friendly or good-natured about it.

He remained convinced matchmaking relied on manipulation, but he had nothing against the matchmaker...

Mary, was it? In fact, he'd been impressed with how well she'd held her own.

He was no stranger to debates, to parleys.

But rarely did someone locate him in their arguments so accurately or as smoothly as she had.

It was thrilling, like the first hit of air on a cold day.

“Happy ending then. Right?” Ruben said, still wary.

“Yes, and it’s why we’re going to give the people more of what they want and make the next feature about modern dating.” Hugh held his hands up like he was framing a lit marquee. “Sex robots, speed dating, and matchmaking, oh my!”

There was a stunned pause before Chesa said, “But we’re already doing it on labor and employment. We’re halfway through interviews, and we’re meeting with Novak next week.”

“Don’t kill it. Put it on ice for now,” Hugh said as if it didn’t take them a number of weeks to produce their quarterly features. Restarting that process with a new topic and with less time would require supreme organization.

“Oh, and I was also thinking,” Hugh continued, “that it would be cool if Ruben did an on-the-field component and hired that matchmaker from the interview.”

“Hire the matchmaker?” Ruben said.

“Yeah, some immersion reporting. Get the real scoop on matchmaking. A first-hand experience.”

“No,” Ruben replied. “Absolutely not.” It was gimmicky, and he would not subject himself to a contrived affair. And he didn’t think the matchmaker he’d offended

would be happy to work with him anyway.

“Guys, you’re not flagship,” Hugh said with vibrato in his voice that might’ve been humorous in a different instance, but this was a reminder to the cohosts to ration their obstinance.

“We’ll start brainstorming,” Chesa said.

Satisfied, Hugh left, and the cohosts took time to come to terms with their situation.

Ruben had never been naïve enough to hope this job would last forever, believing budget cuts, robots, or the nation’s fried attention span would eventually make his role obsolete.

But two years ago, when their show had a brush with cancellation, he’d learned how ill-prepared he was for the end.

It was only coincidence that had saved their show when around that same time the host of another, more popular show from their network had old message board posts resurface.

They were described in an official statement as “racially insensitive and not representative of the station’s values.

” The powers that be couldn’t very well have followed up the debacle by pulling the show with the Black and Filipina hosts, so instead, Hugh was brought in to improve operations and analytics.

“All I know is I’m not hiring a damn matchmaker,” Ruben said, but when Chesa didn’t immediately agree and kept clicking her retractable pen, he turned to her. “You can’t be serious.”

“I think it would make things interesting.”

“Jesus Chr?—”

“Hear me out. We use your experience as a framing device.” She walked to the front of the room and wrote on the whiteboard as she spoke. “We playback your take on matchmaking from the interview at the start, and at the end, we see if going through the process changed your opinion.”

“Okay. What about the middle?” he asked.

“We explore what makes people choose one method of finding love over another. Add historical context. Some academic perspectives.”

Ruben nodded, thinking. “So maybe our central question could be”—he took his own marker to the board—“is there an ideal, scientifically backed way to find authentic love?”

Chesa agreed, and they spent minutes creating an outline. When complete, they stood back to appreciate the map of weaving lines, jutting arrows, and circled words.

“You see the vision now?” Chesa asked.

He sighed. “I see it.”

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Chapter Four

Mary was steps from leaving her apartment for the day when she caught a whiff of something offensive. It was a cross between sour milk and whatever went on in the backroom of pet stores. With her keys, coat, and purse still in hand, she searched through her home for the elusive stink.

She lifted the frilly throw pillows on her sofa. Went low to look under the coffee table. She found nothing to blame inside the carts of the dishwasher or on the shelves in the refrigerator, and there was nothing more sinister in the garbage bin than a poorly flattened pizza box.

The source of the smell, it turned out, was inside the closet that held her laundry appliances. A load of clothing clung to the sides of the washing machine barrel. They'd been forgotten, left to fester for probably days.

"Unbelievable," she muttered, dropping her things. If she hadn't been self-flagellating since the interview earlier in the week, she might've noticed the retching conditions sooner. With one hand, she poured liquid detergent over the smelly clothes, and with the other, she made a call.

"Hey, Willa!" Mary said brightly to the voicemail system. "Hope you're doing good. It seems you forgot to remove your clothes from the washer. I'm restarting the cycle so if you could come pick them up when you can, that would be great. I'll be home by six."

What had started as a temporary arrangement between Mary and her neighbor had

warped into a big inconvenience.

An uncomfortable chat was obviously necessary, but she kept putting it off to endless tomorrows.

After hanging up the phone, Mary noted the time and rushed out of the door.

Despite her best efforts, she hit red lights throughout her drive and got to work minutes late.

Her first appointment of the day was already seated in her office.

“Hello!” she said to the back of the person’s head. “I’m so sorry for the wait.”

Mary quickly moved around the room, talking about this and that as she unspooled her scarf and traded her soggy boots for heels.

When she made it to her desk, she got her first good look at her potential client.

He sat in the chair with his long legs crossed, somehow making the highly contemporary seat look comfortable.

His coily hair was cropped, and a generous collection of freckles peppered his brown face and neck.

He was dressed more casually than others typically did for first meetings in a gray sweatshirt with a faded print of the World Wildlife Fund panda on the front.

Handsome, she decided.

“As we wait for technology to cooperate,” she said, tapping the buffering screen of

her tablet, “why don’t you tell me a little about yourself?”

An impish half smile lit his face. “Well, I’m Ruben Byers. I’m thirty-four years old, and I’m a radio show host.”

* * *

Hearts Collide Matchmaking was located on the seventh floor of a downtown commercial building across from an orthodontics clinic.

Ruben had taken in the white surfaces, angular furniture, and severe lighting, and it was as though he stood in a biomedical megacorp’s headquarters where they harvested organs for the elite.

The receptionist who led him to the office rattled off options on an extensive beverage menu and returned with Ruben’s chosen glass of water set on a decorative tray.

He’d been inspecting the drink when Mary entered the room with a perky greeting.

She moved around in a hurry, her short, straight hair—the color of butterscotch—swishing in tandem.

She spoke with a forced effervescence one might encounter in a biomedical megacorp’s employee training video, but when she realized who he was, her grin waned.

Her displeasure was the first thing that had felt real since he’d walked in.

“What are you doing here, Mr. Byers?”

“Ruben. And it’s nice to meet you in person.”

She was beautiful with a round face, dark eyes, and perfect brown skin. Naturally, a wisp of attraction took hold, but Ruben stamped it out, reminding himself of the purpose of the visit.

“I’m here,” he said, “because we received a large response from our listeners following your appearance and?—”

“Glad I could help.”

Ruben was oddly delighted by the sarcasm. “Yes, well, on top of our weeknight broadcasts, we release a feature, a sort of radio documentary, every quarter, and we’ve decided our next one will be on modern dating.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“One research component would include me going through the matchmaking process with you.”

She was shaking her head before he finished his sentence.

“Hold on,” he said. “It won’t technically be a promotion, but Hearts Collide and your services will be highlighted. And if you want, we could do another interview.”

“So I can get hung up on again? I’ll pass,” she said.

“That was out of my control. It’s live radio, and I went over.”

“You also went off topic.”

“I’d say I went on reasonable, related tangents.”

“I didn’t go on air for reasonable, related tangents.”

He considered telling her she’d done a great job nonetheless, and that if it hadn’t been for the time constraint on their interview, he’d have stayed volleying with her for much longer.

“I’m sorry,” he said instead. “I was concerned with the larger context we were having the conversation in. It wasn’t personal. ”

“All right, but I still don’t think you’re the right fit for our agency.”

“Why not?”

There was a pause. “We have an in-depth admission process,” she said.

“That’s fine. I’ll do whatever is required of me.”

“We’re also an expensive service, as you know.”

He smiled. “The invoice will be paid in full.”

“None of my clients signed up to be part of a documentary.”

“My reporting will be on my experience, not on any specific person, and I’d disclose my work and assignment to each match.”

After a bout of silence and some hope on his end, Mary crossed her arms and told him no. “I’m here to help people who’re actually looking for love,” she said. “I can’t in good conscience bring on someone who doesn’t believe in this method.”

Any persuasive argument Ruben might've offered would've required him to lie about his perspective on matchmaking.

"I understand," he said and thanked her for her time.

If he'd learned anything from his years in radio, it was to be adaptable.

Things changed on a dime. News broke, equipment failed, and interviews fell through.

An aggrieved matchmaker would not derail progress.

* * *

There was a certain kind of character native to sitcoms that Mary always admired. They were the ones who weren't afraid to say what needed to be said in a deadpan aside, to call out the hypocrisy, the irony, or the absurdity of characters and situations.

Mary had sent Ruben packing without placation or apology, and she swore it was worthy of the cheers from a studio audience. She felt boundless, and at the first opportunity, she recounted the interaction to another matchmaker.

"You'll never believe who I had a meeting with first thing this morning," Mary said to Francine as they fell into step with each other on the way to the break room.

"Who?" Francine asked, her brows raised as high as the Reloxin in her forehead would permit.

"That radio show host who interviewed me on Monday. He wanted to join the agency for a documentary."

“What did you tell him?”

“No. Obviously.” Mary laughed, expecting her colleague to join in.

“Why did you say that?” Francine asked.

“Because he insulted me and the agency as a whole.”

Ruben was so sure of himself, so sure of his perspective, and she blamed the combination of his wit and handsomeness for that.

“All right, but, hun,” Francine said, “that could’ve been good publicity.”

“I don’t think he’s all that interested in finding love, though,” Mary said as they arrived at the break room. “He wants to do this solely for his documentary.”

His enrolment would’ve meant betraying the purity of the process and that wasn’t worth it. Mary assumed their boss would feel the same way.

“What documentary?” asked Sienna from the kitchenette where she was refilling her outsize tumbler with water. Eden, already seated with her lunch, looked up, curious as well.

“The radio host Mary had a little spat with,” Francine explained, “wants to join the agency as part of a documentary.”

“And she’s not taking him on—you’re not taking him on?” Sienna asked.

Mary shook her head.

“But that’s free advertisement,” Sienna said.

“That’s what I was telling her!”

Feeling desperate to make them understand, Mary said, “He thinks our operation works through mind control. Like we’re puppeteers or witches.”

The Twins entered the room at that moment, asking, “Who’s a witch?” And Francine, once again, explained. Meanwhile, Mary joined Eden at the table with her lunch, hopeful her sharp, no-nonsense colleague would validate her choice. “You get where I’m coming from, right?” Mary asked.

“Yeah, and I agree with you,” Eden said. “But I also get what they’re saying. Cassidy is a businessperson first before she’s a matchmaker.”

Mary fell quiet as the fizz she’d been coasting on all morning flattened. Deep in thought, she picked at her food and tried to hold on to her convictions, so she didn’t immediately notice when the Twins, Sienna, and Francine assembled before her.

“We don’t want you to think of this as a poaching situation,” one of them said, “but we were wondering if you would be okay with one of us taking on the radio host as a client?”

Mary realized then that because she’d misjudged what her boss’s position on Ruben’s enrolment would be, she hadn’t appreciated how the situation could be personally beneficial. In bringing this opportunity to Cassidy, Mary might begin to repair the damage she’d caused with the radio interview.

“I’ve changed my mind,” Mary told the other matchmakers. “He’s mine. He’s my client.”

Chapter Five

However, on this particular morning, he'd abandoned his routine for a dense questionnaire from Hearts Collide Matchmaking. Yesterday, two days after Mary had refused to take him on as a client, he received a call from her boss.

"We'd love to extend an offer to you to join our agency," she'd said.

Ruben wanted to say he was no longer interested.

He'd already been rethinking alternative framing devices for the feature.

But one thing he and Chesa had agreed on from the show's inception was that they'd produce the best shows they could regardless of topic, and he knew the feature would be better with the matchmaking element.

"Which matchmaker will I be working with?" he'd asked.

"Mary Neilson. Unless you'd prefer someone else."

"No, I'm happy to work with Mary." It was unclear if she would feel the same about him, but if he was going to have to bear this process, he'd prefer to do it with someone who knew his opinion on matchmaking and he didn't have to humor.

Slouched against his headboard, he worked through the questions, struggling to understand how the agency knowing his favorite candy (Swedish Fish), favorite color (green), and the side of the bed he slept on (middle) would lead to meaningful

matching.

He ditched the documents to get ready for the day, and after leaving his apartment, he stopped at the coffee shop where he and his cousin met up on some mornings.

In that bubble of chatty early risers, hissing espresso machines, and blaring blenders, Ruben easily spotted Junie with her heavily pierced face and long twists she'd fashioned high on her head.

"Your tea's cold," she said when Ruben dropped into the seat across from hers.

"Sorry." He took a drink from the mug anyway. "I got caught up with some work."

"Anything interesting?"

"Actually, yes. You're looking at the latest client of Hearts Collide Matchmaking."

"Man, what're you talking about?"

"I've joined a matchmaking service for research purposes."

"You're lying," Junie said, so he pulled out his laptop from his weathered messenger bag and showed her the evidence.

"There's a lifetime's worth of password security answers in here," she said, horrified.

"You've never downloaded a dating app in your life, but here you are doing all this."

"It's for work," he said.

"Don't lead with that on dates," Junie said. "It's no way to get a woman to marry you."

“Marry me? Lots of intermediary steps missing there.”

“But that’s the goal of a service like this, no? Marriage is in the realm of possibilities.”

“Same could be said about winning the lottery,” he replied flippantly.

“It won’t kill you to express some optimism, you know.”

“You’re right. I have hope in my heart that—” Ruben suddenly clutched his neck, making a show of gasping for air before dropping his head sideways.

Junie threw a crumpled napkin at him. “All I’m trying to say is you don’t disclose information about your bank account balance when you’re just looking for a hookup.”

Nothing his cousin said was untrue, but Ruben didn’t have inherent faith in much, and matchmaking was, at this point, an unproven method. So he was going to take everything one step at a time, and currently, he had about twenty different forms to complete.

* * *

A new sculpture of Jesus on the cross had been erected at the front of the church auditorium, and to Mary, he appeared unusually—and perhaps sacrilegiously—ripped.

She was crammed on a velour-covered pew between her sister and her dozing father, scrutinizing the marbleized son of God and wondering if she was the only one who was. Mary believed Jesus, at least this version of him, ought to be lanky, tortured, stoic. Not rendered in the image of Calvin Klein.

Her thoughts were interrupted by her sister's knobby elbow jabbing her side.

"What?" Mary asked, and Hattie, with her eyes still fixed on the pastor, smacked the purse Mary held in her lap.

Only then did she register the muffled chirp of her ringtone.

Quickly, she dug for her phone and silenced it but not before receiving some glances and waking her father.

She used the interior of her purse as cover to text the client who'd called, promising to respond in an hour.

The pastor eventually dismissed the congregation with hopes of a blessed week, and while they filed out of the sanctuary, Hattie said to Mary, "You should remember to put your phone on silent."

"I thought I had," Mary said.

"It's rude and a distraction," Hattie continued as they stopped shy of the building exit for the brief conversation their family always had before parting ways each Sunday.

"I know that."

"If you were a neurosurgeon on call, I'd understand, but?—"

"Nice sermon, wasn't it?" their father said with put-on pep.

The sisters, though impartial, nodded. They weren't really a religious family, but when Mary was twelve, their dad, a recent divorcé and single father to two girls, had believed church was the best way to combat the threat of teenage pregnancy.

Fortunately, the sisters had attended public school with competent sex education.

Nowadays, habit and the reality they'd only ever see each other during the holidays kept them regularly attending.

"How was your week?" their dad asked.

"It's still diapers and spit up all day and all night," Hattie said.

"Work's been good," Mary offered. "I don't remember if I mentioned it before, but I'm up for an exciting project."

"Is that right?" her dad said. "I'm sure you've put in the work to earn it."

His words were sincere, but he was also a math professor at the community college and didn't quite get Mary's career, and Hattie, who was not only an engineer but married to the guy she'd loved since high school, even less so.

For that reason, Mary avoided going into much detail about her job, but after a difficult week, things were looking up and she'd had the urge to relay that optimism.

She'd presented Ruben's proposal to Cassidy over the phone, and her boss had been all in.

"Excellent work securing this, Mary." Even their discussion about the botched interview had gone well.

"I've never heard you so riled up," Cassidy had said with a laugh.

"Didn't know you had it in you. But you did good defending the agency. "

The fake reviews were being taken down, and just like that, the fretting Mary had done was obsolete, her guilt unnecessary.

It left her free to imagine grander things like increasing her chances at cruise lead by successfully matching Ruben.

All she had to do was put aside her misgivings about his motivations and treat him like any other client.

When the routine family chat ended, Mary's father bid her and Hattie goodbye with a kiss to the back of their gloved hands and began a careful shuffle to his vehicle.

Mary made a move to also leave, but Hattie stopped her.

"We need to talk," her sister said, pulling her back into the church foyer. "Dad's seeing someone."

"As in he's dating? How do you know?"

"He came over to see the boys, and he was checking his phone constantly. He doesn't remember to charge the thing half the time, so it was weird. I asked him what was up, and he told me."

Mary couldn't say she was surprised. It had been a while.

Their father had mostly stayed single after the divorce, but when they were still teens, he'd dated a busty woman who always left her lipstick on their glassware.

Mary hadn't known the woman was her father's girlfriend until Hattie started talking about weddings, but any subsequent worrying Mary had done over the reputations of stepmothers hadn't mattered because Lorraine had stopped coming around soon after.

“Her name’s Aurora, and she lives five hours away,” Hattie said.

“Pretty name.”

“Sure, but who do you know over the age of thirty-five named Aurora?”

“Wait a minute,” Mary said. “Are you thinking he’s being catfished?”

“Well, yeah. He’s in the targeted age range for it. Also, the details he was giving me about her were vague as hell.”

“He’s smart, Hattie. Maybe he wants to keep things private for now.”

Her sister rolled her eyes. “Don’t do that.”

“What?” Mary asked.

“That let’s-all-get-along positivity crap you do. I’m not the bad guy for being concerned.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Say you’ll do some investigating. Doesn’t your job have software for background checks?”

“No, we require independently done background checks for clients in certain tiers, but it’s not?—”

“Fine, okay. Whatever. Then do some internet and social media sleuthing. Because I swear if he gets fleeced of all his earthly possessions, he’s not moving in with me.”

Chapter Six

Ruben and some of his coworkers had paused in their work to gather in front of the mounted television and watch Mayor Laurie—who'd shown up to the annual ice sculpture exhibit with his fiancée—talk to the press on location.

Though Ruben believed the mayor's sudden engagement suspiciously timed, studying him now with his wife-to-be, he couldn't deny they appeared as real as any lovebirds.

His arm was about her waist and she looked at him adoringly as he spoke into various microphones that crowded them.

"Mr. Mayor, is there a date set for the nuptials?" an unseen reporter asked.

"We're hoping for an autumn wedding. Something very intimate and private."

"Oh, the restraint!" said Chesa. "A shame it wasn't applied to the budget for his swearing-in ceremony."

"Mayor Laurie," another reporter piped up, "do you have any updates on how you'll proceed with the auditor's findings?"

The mayor stiffened, his friendly expression fading.

"We are obviously taking it very, very, extremely seriously, and of course, obviously, we understand that the constituents would like this addressed sooner rather than later, obviously. But we are using the allotted time we've been given to prepare a robust

response... ”

“He’d sound more convincing recommending gas station sushi,” Ruben said.

After, the team dispersed to different areas while Chesa approached Ruben. The orange hockey jersey she wore was almost too fluorescent to look at directly. “Excited?” she asked.

“Yeah, excited to get it over with,” he replied. Mary was due at the station at any moment for his first meeting as an official client of Hearts Collide.

“Not a very romantic way to talk about your dating life,” Chesa said.

“Well, this isn’t a very romantic undertaking.

” That was nowhere more evident for Ruben than when he was completing a particular section of the intake forms that asked him to define his dream partner, to choose characteristics from a drop-down list like he was selecting toppings for a pizza.

The coarseness of it nearly moved him to abandon everything, but he reminded himself that buttressing the feature was his priority.

“I think she’s here.” Chesa nodded in the direction of the entrance.

Ruben turned to see Mary, a sight of sophistication in a spotless cream coat, being directed his way by the sound engineer.

“I expect a full debrief afterward,” Chesa whispered as she left his side.

Ruben met Mary in the middle of the floor where she said hello with a terse smile.

He thanked her for accommodating him by meeting at the studio and offered her something to drink from the station's newly acquired Keurig machine, but she declined.

Inside the conference room, he watched Mary silently unload the contents of her bag onto the table one by one.

He'd expected some tension, but the antiseptic air between them was unbearable.

"I was looking at the add-on services on your website," he began lightly. "Do people actually pay extra for a style consultant?"

"Yes," she said. "Some want to look and feel their best when they're about to meet a lot of romantic prospects. A style assessment is one way to do that."

"You think I need one?" he asked in jest but pushed his chair away from the table to give her a full view.

Mary took a serious look from the coils on his head to his old Converse high-tops then said, "I'm not a style expert."

"But you have an opinion."

"I do."

Ruben laughed when she didn't elaborate. "That bad?"

"No, I'm just not able to give you useful feedback because, again, I'm not an expert."

"How diplomatic," he said, then worried the comment came off glib.

If Mary thought so, she didn't address it, starting the meeting without further preamble.

She spoke quickly with what seemed like practiced inflections and gestures, and the hair framing her pretty face billowed whenever she spoke a word beginning with a plosive consonant.

"We will only have two check-in meetings," she said while explaining his truncated matchmaking plan. "After your first date and before your last date. But you'll provide written feedback on each date on the Hearts Collide app. It will help me refine your compatibility data."

Compatibility data. It was easy to forget they were talking about human connection.

"Problem?" Mary asked.

"Nope. Taking it all in," he said. "But tell me, how exactly do you calculate compatibility?"

"We have about ten guiding principles that we use to assess matches, but each matchmaker also uses their experience and their—for a lack of a better word—gut to pair people."

Ruben nodded, pulling out the pen and notepad he'd brought along to jot down this revelation. The agency's website and press coverage gave the impression that centrifuges and difficult computations were involved.

"I thought I wouldn't be directly quoted in your feature," Mary said.

He looked up and found her frowning. "And you won't be," he said. "These are my personal notes that I'll use to talk more accurately about the agency."

She still appeared untrusting, and he realized he had her ire but none of her confidence. It would affect his experience, and ultimately, the quality of his insights.

“Okay, can we be real?” he said, putting his pen down.

“I know you think I’m a cynical smartass.

I won’t deny the smartass part, but if we’re being technical, I’m a skeptic, not a cynic.

I question almost everything, but not for the sake of being a contrarian.

I’m okay with being proven wrong, and I have no problem changing my opinions after learning something new.

It’s what makes me good at my job. So I give you my word that I’ll be open and committed to this experience. ”

Mary searched his face, and whatever she saw there softened the furrow that had lightly creased her forehead. “All right,” she said. “And I promise to do my best to find you your perfect match.”

They shook hands at that point, and after a quick tour of the app he’d be using to see his matches’ profiles and complete post-date assessments, the meeting was over.

“Lookout for an email later today with all the information we’ve gone through,” she said as he walked her to the elevators. “I’ll have your first match before the end of the week.”

“That’s fast,” he said.

“We only have six weeks,” she replied, stepping into the empty elevator cab as he

remained on the office floor. She pressed the close button once then a few more times when nothing happened.

“Old building,” he said. “It takes a moment.”

They waited, not making direct eye contact. Ruben didn’t try to fill the silence in case his mouth undid their undeveloped goodwill. He swore it was the longest the doors had ever taken.

“Your outfit’s fine, by the way,” Mary said after a bit.

“Yeah?”

She nodded. Smiled. “It’s clean and it fits. It does skew a little too university RA or man with a hot sauce review blog for my taste, but that’s only something I’d say if I was being undiplomatic.”

A spirited laugh left Ruben just as the elevator door finally appeared and slid shut.

* * *

Mary studied the collection of glossy headshots spread out across her desk.

The smiling women in the photos were all—to varying degrees—compatible with Ruben.

In her search, she’d prioritized outspoken women.

Women who lived their lives on their own terms. And those who valued authenticity as much as Ruben.

Only a novice matchmaker would expect to hit a home run with a first match. It happened occasionally, but matchmaking with that sort of intent was limiting and didn't leave room for pairings that were a little offbeat.

There was a knock at the door, and Mary called out for the visitor to enter.

"Your caffè mocha and pastry," Eden said, stepping into the room with long strides that could've appeared on runways if Eden had been the sort.

"Thank you," Mary said, moving for her purse. "How much do I owe you?"

"Don't worry about it."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure," Eden said, joining her behind the desk. "New client?"

"Yeah, the radio show host. I did his onboarding yesterday."

"How was that?"

"It went surprisingly well."

The dynamic Mary had with Ruben was unfamiliar, a bit tense, and far too direct.

Typically, with other clients, she went to great lengths to present herself as ceaselessly positive and benevolent.

But donning her Energizer-Bunny-on-caffeine persona for Ruben after how their first interaction had gone would be such obvious pretense.

“This is an eclectic group,” Eden said, sifting through the photos. “Have you narrowed it down?”

Mary considered the photos and pointed to one.

“Imani was my first choice,” she said, “but I don’t know if the timing will work because I have a short window with Ruben and she’s out of the country for a month.

” Mary tapped another photo. “I like Trisha, and I think she and Ruben could get along. My only concern is Ruben’s a vegetarian and she grew up hunting.

Neither has a preference for a partner with a specific diet, but again, because there’s so little time, I don’t know if I want to risk it. ”

“So nowhere close,” Eden said.

“No, but I’ll get there. I just want to make sure I’m making the best choices.”

“It’s a lot of effort for a reluctant client.”

“He told me he was open, so I’ve decided to take him at his word and also look at this experience as a personal challenge to make a believer out of a nonbeliever.”

“If you’re successful in changing his perspective,” Eden said, “you’ll have earned a medal.”

“Cruise lead would do,” Mary replied offhandedly.

“It’ll be the most dignified bid for the role then,” Eden said. “I literally saw Sienna almost trip headfirst into the reception desk because she was rushing to hold the door open for Cassidy when she got in this morning.”

“Oh, wow,” said Mary.

“It’s embarrassing,” Eden continued. “Especially since we all know she sees cruise lead as a vacationing opportunity.”

Mary nodded but knew more than likely Eden would find her own motivation for the role gauche as well.

Desperation laced Mary’s desire for professional acknowledgment.

Oh, she wished for indifference. She assumed it simpler, less exhausting to not regularly need assurance on where she ranked in others’ esteem. But such was not her reality.

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Chapter Seven

RUBEN BYERS: Tell me about the major histocompatibility complex.

AMANDA PRESLEY: Simply, the major histocompatibility complex is a gene.

And in the context of our conversation, it's a gene we suspect informs at least some of our sexual-romantic attraction to particular people.

More specifically, have you ever wanted to bury yourself in your lover's neck?

Bathe in their natural scent? That impulse we believe comes from the MHC.

RB: Can you screen for it?

AP: I suppose you could, but that's, one, a lot of money, and two, puts a lot of pressure on a gene which is but one element that could influence attraction. It's probably more fun, anyway, to let your body do the talking.

* * *

Ruben met Gemma—a thirty-year-old ceramic artist—at a poetry club that would serve as the backdrop for their first date.

Seated across from her at a small round table with a single tea light candle, Ruben was unsure how much of their circumstance he could acknowledge.

He was concerned that bringing up their matchmaking would dampen potential romance, but after exchanging some pleasantries and commenting on their surroundings, Gemma asked, “How long have you been with the agency?”

“Not long at all. You’re my first match.”

“Lucky you,” she said with a wink, and he chuckled, relaxing in his seat.

The room soon reached capacity, and the lights were turned down as the host welcomed the audience and told them to prepare for an evening of “really beautiful, enriching vibes.” But as the first poet stepped to center stage, Ruben began to worry the opposite would be true.

Gemma’s syrupy perfume, which he’d noted earlier as strong but ignorable, had become potent in the absence of airflow from the once-open door.

Every breath Ruben took was saturated with that fragrance, and within minutes, he felt like barbed wire was twisting into his skull.

He tried tilting his head away from his date, but it didn’t do much beyond giving him a crick in his neck.

While a man with a goatee was reciting a sad poem with an extended bird metaphor, a cough began inching up Ruben’s throat.

He tried to pacify the cough with throat clearings, but somehow that made things worse.

By the time the audience was snapping their fingers at the end of the goatee man’s performance, Ruben feared anything deeper than a gasp would trigger a spectacle to rival an erupting volcano.

He turned to his date and mimed something he hoped she'd roughly translate as "I'll be right back," then left his seat.

In the relative quiet and privacy of the washroom, he hacked and coughed and sneezed until he could freely inhale the special mixture of piss and disinfectant that existed in public bathrooms. His reflection confirmed how he felt as his eyes had turned a milky red.

A middle-aged man in a slanted fedora entered the washroom and, upon meeting Ruben's bloodshot eyes in the mirror, sagely said, "It's okay to feel. No shame, my guy. No shame."

With the abrasive paper towel and water from the sink, Ruben did his best to return to his regular form and mentally prepared to finish out the remainder of the evening.

* * *

Mary paused in the hallway in front of her office door to run a smoothing hand down her hair before entering the room for her first check-in meeting with Ruben.

Her smile faltered when she didn't find him seated but rather standing in the corner of her office, inspecting the contents of her floating shelves.

"Do you like working here?" he asked in lieu of a greeting, turning to face her. He'd cut his hair. It was more tapered on the sides, drawing the eye to the shape of his square face, broad nose, and jaw.

"Do I like working at Hearts Collide?" she repeated slowly, trying to discern if there was a question behind the question. "Yeah, of course."

"No, I mean, do you like working in here . In this office." He followed her lead as she

walked over to her desk and took her seat. “All this glass and chrome doesn’t make you feel like you’re in a laboratory?”

She didn’t have to look around to understand what he saw. “My boss has always said she wants people to feel like they’ve landed in the sky.”

“Hold on, is that why I’m sitting on a lumpy round chair? It’s supposed to be a cloud?”

“That’s the idea.”

“It feels like I’m sitting on a pile of Lego.”

Careful not to validate the disparaging remark, Mary offered to fetch him a different chair, but he declined on the grounds that it wouldn’t kill him. When she tried continuing with their meeting, he interrupted, saying, “You still haven’t said if you like working in here.”

“I do,” she replied.

Ruben leaned forward, and in a hushed voice, said, “This will remain between us, so no need to be diplomatic.”

That word again. It felt euphemistic. He might as well have called her spineless. She didn’t know why it bothered her. She could’ve moved on, but his one raised brow taunted her. “Fine. When I first started, I thought it was sterile looking.”

“There we go!”

“But I now think it’s beautiful and modern,” she added. “In fact, if it didn’t look this way, I might’ve never become a matchmaker.”

“What do you mean?”

“I applied for this job accidentally, thinking I was leaving my resume for the receptionist position at the orthodontics clinic down the hall. I realized my mistake when I got a message asking me to come in for an interview at Hearts Collide.”

She was a recent grad looking for a job, any job, as she tried to figure out what came next.

It was the first interview request she’d received after sending out dozens of applications.

She’d been determined to land the role, reading sex and relationship columns on Cosmopolitan.com until she could parrot the jargon.

“I started as my boss’s assistant and later transitioned into matchmaking,” she told him.

“So you’re sitting here today is a coincidence.”

“Technically,” Mary said. “But if I didn’t like the work, I wouldn’t be here nearly eight years later.”

Ruben cocked his head slightly. “What do you enjoy about it?”

The question surprised Mary, and she took a moment before answering. “This type of work suits me, I think. I like working with people, and I like when things are in harmony,” she said. “And that’s what matchmaking is all about.”

Ruben didn’t say anything. He regarded her with a soft but uninterpretable expression, and heat spread across Mary’s face as the seconds passed.

“Enough of that,” she said, averting her eyes to the tablet in front of her and pulling up Ruben’s profile. “We should get started. Tell me about your date.”

“We went to the Windmill Poetry Club. Have you been?”

Mary shook her head. “I’ve heard good things, though.”

“Yeah, it’s cool. Nice ambiance and a fully stocked bar,” he said before talking about some of the poetry he’d heard and going on a tangent about the success of the city’s efforts to revitalize the art scene. But there was one notable element missing from his review of the night.

“And Gemma? What did you think of her?” Mary asked.

She had set the two of them up thinking Gemma’s artistic whimsy would pair well with the cultured Ruben.

When Ruben didn’t respond right away, Mary grew concerned. “Did something happen?” she asked.

“No. Gemma was great—is great, but I think I might be allergic to her. Well, allergic to the perfume she wears.”

“Like she applied too much of it?”

“Maybe. All I know for sure is that at the end of the night, I felt like I’d snorted lines of potpourri.”

With all the care Mary took to filter out incompatibilities, it was incredible how it was still possible for some unconsidered factor to push a match off course.

“I’m so sorry that was your experience,” she said.

“If you’re open to it, I can set up a do-over date.

I’ll explain the situation to Gemma, and she can wear a different fragrance or, to be safe, nothing at all. ”

“My only hesitation with that plan,” he said, “is I don’t feel great telling a woman to quit wearing a perfume she likes because I get the sniffles.”

Mary wondered if he was inspired by genuine gallantry or if he needed an excuse to label the match a failure. “Gemma’s not under court-ordered community service. If she doesn’t think you’re worth switching out her perfume for, she’s free to reject you.”

She had never uttered such harsh words in that office, but Ruben’s immediate laugh erased any regret she might’ve felt.

“All right, then,” he said. “Set it up.”

Chapter Eight

A worthwhile evening was guaranteed when Ruben found himself at the Bull Trout Pub on trivia night. The space, dimly lit by wall sconces and multicolored Christmas lights, was compact but possessed an aged charm.

People milled about waiting for the next round to begin. They refreshed their drinks or ducked outside for a smoke. Ruben had remained at his team's table to safeguard belongings.

"As a reminder," said the night's host over the sound system, "the use of electronics is prohibited. Any violation will result in a place on the wall of shame and a permanent ban from future games."

Ruben spotted his cousin on her way back from the bar with a grin on her face. He was confused until he saw the basket of French fries she was carrying.

"How the hell did you manage this?" Ruben asked, reaching for some fries and finding them still gloriously hot. It was a whole ordeal trying to request anything besides drinks on trivia night.

"I flirted with the new bartender. Got her number too," Junie said, waving the cocktail napkin with the information before tucking it away into her tote.

"Bring that luck with you to the next round," he said. Their team had blanked on the answer to the final question before the break that asked for the name of the singer-songwriter with credits on Aretha Franklin, the Ronettes, and a theme song for a

2000s TV comedy-drama.

“Oh, before I forget, how’s matchmaking going?” Junie asked as she created a mixture of ketchup and mayonnaise. “You told me you were going on a date, and I’ve heard nothing since.”

“Because I’ve only been on the one.”

“Seriously?” she asked, unimpressed.

“Hold on now. It’s only been a week. And I have other responsibilities and hobbies.” He gestured to the bar surrounding them.

“All right, was that singular date a success?”

“No, not really.” Ruben’s date with Gemma didn’t just fall apart, his do-over date with her would not be happening because she’d decided to pursue someone else.

Please know it has nothing to do with you , read the email from Mary with the update. I apologize for any disappointment. I’ll be in contact soon with info on your next match.

Ruben wouldn’t admit this out loud, but he was relieved at this conclusion. He’d not felt any irresistible pull to pursue things with Gemma but had been willing to try again because of his commitment to the process as well as the possibility that his aversion to her perfume had biased his feelings.

“Tell me more,” his cousin said. “I want to know the nitty-gritty of matchmaking.”

“Well, there’s a post-date assessment that I do. Which is basically a questionnaire about different aspects of the match and date.”

“Homework,” Junie said, shuddering.

“It’s not so bad.” Ruben had expected to hate it more, to find it unnatural.

But it felt in line with the reflecting he was doing for the feature anyway.

“I actually think it might be a good way to remain grounded and objective,” he said.

“It would be easy to get wrapped up in the romanticism of meeting your supposed perfect match and mistaking that for a real connection.”

“Sounds like you’re an advocate now.”

“Nah, I still have doubts and questions. Like how does a formalized evaluation affect how I behave going forward? Am I subconsciously and retroactively performing the part of a good date knowing what my match will be asked during her post-date assessment? Is that authentic? Am I being myself when I’m that aware?

And say I want to remove this checklist from my head, how?—”

“Whoa, okay, okay,” Junie said loudly.

“What?” he said. “You asked for the nitty-gritty.”

“Next time just the CliffsNotes.”

* * *

After a long day at work, Mary enjoyed cocooning on her couch with dinner and an action movie that had questionable acting and ambitious, but not wholly successful, practical effects.

On that night, she happened upon one such film on cable.

The muscular hero had just run inside a steel manufacturing plant with a group of henchmen on his tail when a knock sounded at Mary's apartment door.

She got up to answer it and found her neighbor in a robe with a face of glittery makeup, holding a damp blouse. "I need a super-fast dry on this top," Willa said.

"Yeah, for sure," said Mary, hating how automatically the response sprang, how she moved aside to let her neighbor saunter in, and how she took a seat on the arm of her sofa and politely listened to Willa talk about the birthday dinner she was running late for.

Willa had sprained her ankle just before the holidays last year, and Mary, sympathetic to the plight, had offered her in-unit washer and dryer so Willa didn't have to make the trek to the laundromat. But months and a totally healed foot later, Mary's neighbor was still doing laundry in her home.

Watching Willa now, you'd think she lived there.

She maneuvered the knobs and buttons on the machine, feasibly modeled after a spaceship control panel, with ease.

With the rumbling start of the dryer, Mary grew irritated with herself and was suddenly emboldened.

She waited for a lull in her neighbor's prattle then said, "I've been thinking about this laundry arrangement. "

"Oh," said Willa, curiosity tilting her head.

Mary opened her mouth to continue, but a ringing phone cut her words short.

“I’m sorry,” Willa said before answering the call in a breathy voice pitched octaves higher than necessary. “I know, I know. I’m leaving soon,” she said to the person on the other line. “Wait! When did she say that?”

The unfolding conversation should’ve stoked Mary’s annoyance but instead drew up memories of a time when she too had a vibrant social life.

When was the last time she’d gone out? Attended a non-work-related event?

Maybe she could throw a dinner party, break up the last months of winter, and try a few bookmarked recipes.

She quickly thought of people she could invite but stopped upon closer reflection of that mental list.

Being generally amiable, Mary had accumulated a great number of friends.

But it was perhaps more accurate to call many of them acquaintances.

Some of her deeper friendships were over a decade old, forged during a time when an impromptu weekend trip to Lake Louise was possible.

However, in recent years, those same friendships were now maintained through hearting selfies and the occasional coffee meet-up.

And of all of the people from work, Mary would invite Eden, maybe Francine, to a theoretical dinner party, but she wasn’t sure either would jump at the opportunity to socialize outside of office hours.

The express cycle ended with a twinkling jingle, pulling Mary from her thoughts and Willa from her call.

“That’s better,” her neighbor said, inspecting the transformed garment. She thanked Mary, and they walked to the front door together. Before Willa crossed the threshold, she paused and said, “Oh, you were saying something before.”

Mary, now too wistful for any tense conversation, waved her off. “It’s all right,” she said. “We’ll talk another time. Enjoy the party.”

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Chapter Nine

RUBEN BYERS: How true is the adage about opposites attracting?

CLANCY WASHINGTON: It sounds true and is reinforced by fairy tales about beauties and beasts and our insistence on visualizing human attraction with magnets.

But when it comes to forming lasting romantic relationships, the research does not support that.

In actuality, it shows that we like people we recognize, people who are similar to ourselves.

RB: So how similar? Is it enough for the big-level stuff—ethics, politics, religion—to align, or is it better to go more granular? Like if someone enjoys bingeing prestige TV shows and cracking crude jokes, do they need to find someone who enjoys the same?

CW: [Laughter] You don't have to go out there and find a clone. But how you view the world and how you show up in it has to align. If not, it's unlikely to work out.

* * *

In the corner of a popular sports bar, Ruben's first date with Aliya—an industrial project manager and dog foster mom—unfolded amid the cheers and chants of patrons watching the rugby championship on flat screens affixed high on walls.

The conversation had come in waves with Ruben and Aliya.

He prided himself in being able to talk with anybody, but things were not flowing.

When they simultaneously reached for their drinks, they made eye contact.

Aliya raised a brow—a challenge—then brought her stein to her lips and sharply tipped her head back, chugging the amber liquid.

Having learned his lesson earlier, Ruben didn't attempt to join in and let his date compete against herself.

Before arriving at the bar, Ruben and Aliya had played indoor miniature golf on a course designed to look like the grounds of a circus.

Undeterred by this, Aliya approached the activity with a seriousness reserved for the PGA final, asking for complete silence during and between swings.

When they'd left the site to head over to the sports bar, she'd stopped bragging about her victory long enough to challenge him to a footrace.

"Bet I can make it to the end of the parking lot before you!" she'd said, breaking into a sprint before Ruben could process the call to action. His acceleration had been clumsy, and his foot landed on a patch of ice that took him to the ground, flailing for purchase.

A group of teens hanging around nearby had seen him go down. They burst out into laughter, and one of them shouted, "You good, mister? Don't walk into the light!" It bruised him more than any fall could have.

"I win!" Aliya declared presently, slamming her drained glass onto the table.

"Impressive," he said, hoping he didn't sound sarcastic.

The waiter delivered their food, and for a couple of minutes they silently ate, and Ruben used the intermission to remind himself there was a reason they were matched.

They were 54 percent compatible—or was it 53?

Nevertheless, he shouldn't be too quick to dismiss their chances over a small personality incongruence.

“You mentioned something about wood-burning art earlier,” Aliya said after a while.

“Yeah, I picked it up in the last few years,” he said, pulling out his phone to show her pictures of his creations, images of space, marine animals, plants, and birds captured in pieces of wood.

“These are awesome. What do you do with them afterward?”

“Lots of gifts to friends and family. The rest hang out in different areas of my apartment.”

“You know what you should do? Sell them.”

“It's just something I do to relax, and the logistics involved in selling seem like a nightmare to deal with.”

“It wouldn't be that hard to set up an Etsy store or—oh, I see people selling crafty stuff at the farmer's market all the time.”

“I don't have any interest in doing all that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s a hobby.”

She frowned. “But you’re leaving money on the table. You should take the revenue and put it into a high-yield savings account.” She proceeded to go on about her investments and how much she’d already saved for retirement, while Ruben continued to eat, trying to care.

At the end of her spiel, he told her, “Like I’ve said, I’m not interested in making income from my hobby.” His tone was firm and brought the topic to a close but also shifted the mood of the date, and he suspected they both knew it would be the first and last meal they’d share.

* * *

For weeks, whenever all the matchmakers were in the same room with their boss, as they were today for a staff meeting, there was hope that cruise lead would be announced.

Mary had thought about everyone’s odds: Francine had the best chance of getting the role because she’d been a matchmaker at Hearts Collide since the much-mythologized “rose gold stationery years.” Francine herself played into her assumed victory, regularly talking about how she planned to use the cruise lead stipend to buy a purse she supposedly had on hold at Hermès.

In contrast, Sienna was the agency’s most junior matchmaker, and she’d been compensating for that through brownnosing.

Mary, meanwhile, saw her own chances interchangeable with Catelin and Kaitlyn’s.

And Eden was uninterested in the role, so of no challenge.

“Last thing before I let you go,” Cassidy said from the head of the long table as Mary held her breath. “We need to do better at sorting out the regular garbage from the recyclables. It’s getting ridiculous, ladies.”

Shoulders in the room sagged like days-old party balloons as Cassidy, unaware of the shift, continued with her final remarks, but before she could officially dismiss them for the day, Eden interrupted. “Do you have an update on who will be cruise lead?” she asked.

The other matchmakers’ heads swiveled from Eden to their boss.

“No, I’m still deciding,” Cassidy replied.

“Then is there a date you can give us when to expect an announcement?” Eden asked shamelessly.

Cassidy looked around at all of them. “I see,” she said, removing her thick-framed glasses. “I’ll tell you what, during next month’s meeting, I’ll have an answer for you.”

A round of excited chatter swept the conference room, and Mary leaned over to Eden and said, “Thank you.”

“It had to be done,” her colleague replied. “I can’t work under a perpetual drumroll anymore.”

The matchmakers got up to leave the room and start their workday, but Cassidy called Mary to hang back.

“How’s it going with Ruben Byers?” Cassidy asked, her attention split between Mary and the phone in her hand. “What’s the status of the radio documentary?”

“Oh, we don’t discuss his work,” Mary said.

Cassidy looked up with a frown. “Do you have any sense of whether he’s appreciating the process?”

“I think so. He had a first date with his second match over the weekend. It wasn’t a success, but he still seems optimistic.”

Mary had paired Ruben and Aliya together because of their outlooks on life.

They were go-getters, principled, the types of people who would rewrite an instruction manual they thought inadequate.

However, according to them both, a second date was not in the cards.

Despite their similarities, they’d rubbed each other the wrong way.

Aliya called him low energy in her post-date evaluation, and in Ruben’s verbose write-up that inexplicably included a review of the sports bar they’d patroned and the history of the first miniature golf course in the country, he said Aliya was overly competitive.

“Have you set him up with his next match?” Cassidy asked.

“I’ll be working on that this week.”

“Okay, great work. Keep it up,” Cassidy said.

“Thank you!” Mary held her smile in place until her boss turned to leave.

She’d sounded confident, but truthfully she wasn’t sure how she’d proceed.

The time constraint, the effect of each failed date on Ruben's attitude toward matchmaking, and her boss's investment in the outcome were weighing on Mary, making her second-guess the instincts that she'd used to match couples long before she'd ever known the name Ruben Byers.

Chapter Ten

It was a Saturday morning with agreeable weather, but Ruben was tucked away on the top floor of the downtown library.

He sat in front of a microfilm machine scrolling through photographic reproductions of century-old newspapers, looking for the personal advertisements sections in each issue.

There, with a simple turn of a dial, he read about people—some his age, many much younger, and most of them white—seeking companionship, a spouse.

Even though time and circumstance separated them, Ruben wanted to know, for instance, if the malting plant worker from Biggar, Saskatchewan, ever did get a response from a woman of mild nature and good morals.

Ruben was loading yet another microfilm reel when a Black boy in a noisy snow jacket appeared at his side and studied the computer monitor.

“Hello,” Ruben said, looking around for an accompanying adult. “You here with someone?” It was a large library with three levels, and the children’s section was on the ground floor.

“Luther!” came a woman’s sharp whispered call.

“You Luther?” Ruben asked the boy, who showed off his gummy smile then bolted down one of the aisles.

Moments later, the woman who'd called for the boy came into view with her back to him. She had a grip on a toddler's wrist and a diaper bag slipping from her shoulder. "Come on, Luther. You've gotta listen to Auntie. Story time is going to start soon and we won't?—"

"He's between the third and fourth filing cabinets," Ruben told her.

The woman turned, presumably to thank him, but she froze as did he when he recognized Mary. Even on her day off, she looked polished, wearing a neutral-colored outfit with a sleek hairdo. A peal of giggles from Luther as he darted down a different aisle knocked them out of their mutual surprise.

"Could you..." Mary placed the diaper bag at Ruben's feet and handed him the toddler's arm before taking off in the direction of the hiding nephew.

"How's it going?" Ruben awkwardly asked the child he was now in charge of, but the boy didn't respond, more interested in the floppy curly-haired doll he held in the crease of his elbow.

Ruben watched Mary track Luther through the aisles, begging compliance with promises of treats and gifts that grew more elaborate with each offer.

At one point she vowed to find him a real firetruck to drive.

Finally, she got a hold of the kid, and she returned to collect the other boy and the diaper bag. It was then Ruben noticed she also had a third child, a baby, strapped to her chest.

"Let me carry this for you," he said.

"Not necessary."

He insisted, and she took a moment before relenting.

“I’m still getting used to there being three of them,” she told him as they moved toward the elevators as a group.

“You’re doing fine,” he said.

On the ride down, Mary reminded the boys that they’d be using their inside voices for the rest of their library visit.

When they exited on the ground floor, they passed stout shelves filled with colorful slim books on their way to the reading corner where children and their guardians had gathered.

A woman in an owl-print dress had already begun reading from a picture book, so they tiptoed to a spot in the back.

Ruben had planned to leave after handing off the diaper bag to Mary, but the path he’d taken there had somehow closed up. So he sunk onto the green carpet with Mary and her nephews.

“Thank you, but you don’t have to stay,” Mary whispered as she removed the baby from the contraption on her chest and plopped him on the carpet with a wood stacking toy he immediately took to.

“Can’t,” he said, matching her volume. “I don’t want to step on tiny fingers trying to fee-fi-fo-fum my way out.”

The older boys, like most of the children in the room, were engrossed in the vibrant illustrations and progressing story of a bird in the Serengeti learning self-esteem.

“I’m sorry for taking you from your work,” Mary said after some minutes.

“Don’t worry about it, I’m enjoying story time,” he said, and debated before adding, “even if the lady reading sounds like she was just shotgunning NyQuil.”

It was satisfying to watch Mary shake her head but fail to squash her smile. And what a pretty smile, he thought, noticing the way her eyes crinkled. Mary’s gaze suddenly met his, and he realized he was gawking. In an attempt to deflect, he asked, “Have you ever seen old matrimonial ads?”

“I don’t think so,” she said, so he produced his phone and showed her what he’d been researching all morning.

“This is for your documentary?” she asked.

He nodded.

“They look like job postings,” she said. “It’s a little depressing.”

“How so?”

“You don’t think it’s sad that people were pitching themselves like a used futon on Facebook Marketplace?”

“How different is it from dating app bios or even what you do?”

“For one, I want you to actually fall in love.”

“Okay, but love wasn’t their focus or the priority,” he said.

“Then my point still stands. Depressing.”

“To you as a person living in the present day. But I’ve been reading this anthropologist’s research on marriages across times, and different peoples from communities in northern Cameroon to Roman philosophers to French peasants viewed love as a threat to rationality, or just a bonus, or an entirely illegitimate emotion.

So while the matrimonial ads weren’t romantic, they were honest.”

“I don’t know about honest,” Mary said. “I think marrying solely for practical or economic reasons would’ve incentivized exaggeration and scams. Jebedia says his wagon is bigger than it is to get a wife with great cooking skills.

Meanwhile, Edna lies about being the best canner on this side of Hudson Bay.

One fails to mention their hoarding habit, and the other doesn’t reveal their debt. ”

Ruben chuckled, somewhat compelled by her reasoning. “Are you single?” he asked, realizing late that the question might be invasive.

She looked at him, her eyes wide. “Why?”

“I guess I’m wondering how your work influences your romantic life. Are you too enlightened to slum it with the rest of the mortals on dating apps?”

“I wouldn’t call myself enlightened,” she said. “But my job has altered what I expect from a future partner.”

“And what do you expect?” he asked, not sure why he was curious about the specifics or why he watched her closely as she pondered.

When she emerged from her thoughts, she said, “Someone who sees me for exactly

who I am and what I am, and doesn't just accept it but relishes it."

It was a nice sentiment, one he could echo. More questions piled up in his head that he didn't get to pose because the room erupted with the jubilant squeals and applause of children, marking the end of story time.

"You won't put anything I mentioned in your documentary, will you?" Mary asked as he helped her get the boys into their toques and mittens.

"No. Not at all. That was a genuine conversation."

"Okay, good," she said. "Then it was nice talking with you."

"Yes, it was," he replied. It wasn't until he was back with his microfilms on the quiet library floor that he knew he meant it.

* * *

When Mary returned her nephews home, they were tuckered out from their day and didn't put up a fight when their mother, after greeting them with kisses, declared it time for a nap.

Mary waited for Hattie in the kitchen, and when her sister arrived it was with a plastic-wrapped parcel in hand.

"Catch," Hattie said, tossing the bag.

"What is this?" Mary asked after pulling out the contents of the bag to find a felt mermaid costume and purple wig.

"I thought we could dress up for this year's plunge," Hattie said.

The sisters had participated in an annual polar plunge fundraising event every year since Hattie had experienced a bout of postpartum depression with her second child.

“Thanks for taking the boys out today, by the way. How was it?”

“We managed,” Mary said as she removed her coat to try on the costume over her clothes. “I took them to see the ice sculptures, then we got hot chocolate. And ended up at the library for story time.”

“Which library did you go to?” Hattie asked.

“The downtown one.”

“Oh, I haven’t been since they finished the renovation.”

“It’s nice. They have this pretty mural as you walk in now. And they put in new carpeting in the kids’ library.”

“I’ll have to visit soon,” Hattie said, eyeing the bottom of Mary’s costume. “It’s a bit long, no?”

“A little,” Mary said, attempting to walk but nearly falling with the effort it took to move her legs.

Hattie grabbed her kitchen shears from a drawer and sat on the tiled floor at Mary’s feet. “Don’t move,” she said.

As her sister went to work taking off inches, Mary’s thoughts drifted to Ruben.

She rarely ran into clients out in public.

When she did, she'd wave or stop for a quick chat.

She certainly never sat shoulder-to-shoulder with them on a carpet in a kids' library.

They'd been so close that she'd noted a cluster of freckles below his right eye that looked like an upside-down anchor.

He always set or reset the tone of their interactions with his off-kilter questions and dissecting gaze. She couldn't rely on rote politesse. The unfiltered truth always came out, and as a result, today, she'd revealed too much about herself.

"There!" her sister said, hopping to her feet to look at her alterations from a distance.

"Feels good," Mary said, easily crossing the kitchen with the room the hem shortening had given her.

"Okay, now on to more serious issues," Hattie said, folding her arms. "What have you learned about Dad's girlfriend?"

Mary removed her costume and stuffed it into the bag. "I did my best, but I couldn't find anything on her."

"See!" Hattie said. "That's suspicious. How's her only online presence the subreddit she and Dad met on?"

"She could be other places, but there's a popular author with her exact name and it skewed every search I tried."

"Mitch thinks we should hire a PI," Hattie said.

"A private investigator? That's a little dramatic."

Hattie laughed, the sound almost unbridled. “Baby, is this not a dramatic situation?”

“Why don’t we talk to Dad first?” Mary said. “Tell him our concerns and give him a chance to clear things up?”

“I already asked him all the questions. It was like pulling teeth getting that Reddit information. This will save us time and stress.”

“I hear you, but can we at least try talking to him together? Please?”

Mary didn’t want to go behind her father’s back to investigate him like he was incapable of running his own life. He’d raised them mostly on his own after the divorce, and he built a respectable academic career as a mathematician. Surely he could account for his girlfriend’s existence.

“Fine, okay,” Hattie said. “But if things still sound sketchy, we’re going with the PI.”

Chapter Eleven

MONICA REED: There's a belief that many of my clients have before working with me that finding love should be effortless and spontaneous. That it should find them wherever they are even if that's locked up in a princess tower. But that's hogwash, okay?

CHESA SALVADOR: How so?

MR: Intentionally and repeatedly putting yourself out there will yield better results than simply thinking about the love you want in your life. I'm not saying love can't be whimsical and surprise you, but it's more true that the squeaky wheel gets the grease.

* * *

"The nature of this process doesn't allow me to dwell on a failed date for too long," Ruben said into his recording device.

It was early in the morning at the radio station, long before any of the staff were set to show up, and Ruben was at his cubicle dictating a reflection he'd use when it was time to draft the script for the feature.

"Matchmaking encourages optimism," he continued.

"A hope that The One is around the corner as long as you keep going. It almost sounds like the mindset of a gambler, but where slot machines are all luck,

matchmaking feels dynamic, responsive. Winnable.” He leaned back onto the hind legs of his chair, pausing to think.

“I’ll need to see if there’s data to support this impression.

Maybe the hope is an illusion but required if you’re going to engage in a Sisyphean sport like dating. ”

Some movement to Ruben’s left yanked him from his focused musings. Chesa had quietly arrived and was watching him over the partition that separated their workspaces. He startled, jerking forward to avoid falling backward in his chair, but in the process, he tipped over his mason jar of water.

“Sorry! I didn’t want to interrupt you,” Chesa said as they both rushed to clean up the spill with tissue and scrap paper.

“I’d have preferred the interruption over the nefarious ghost approach.”

“I didn’t think you’d be here this early,” she said once the desk was dry. “Didn’t you have a date last night?”

Ruben sighed, retaking his seat. “Yeah.”

“Bad?” she asked, finding a spot against the wall of his cubicle to prop her shoulder against. The workday hadn’t officially begun, but a pencil had managed to find its way behind her ear already.

“No, the date was fine. She was nice. But we mostly talked work.”

“Fun, a networking event.”

The observation wasn't far off. Minutes after Ruben had met his date, Felicia, at an indoor ice-skating rink, she'd said, "You don't remember me, do you?"

It was the worst thing someone like Ruben could hear.

He met new people at an unimaginable rate, but he had all sorts of tricks to remember them.

He'd tried running through the possible contexts he could've known Felicia from, and it turned out that they'd taken several English courses together as undergraduates.

"It's okay," she'd said. "It's been, like, over a decade. I didn't really expect you to remember me. I only do because you were always one of the smartest ones in class, and I thought you were cute."

For the rest of their time together, they put their mediocre skating skills to work and detailed their academic and professional pursuits.

"So what is this?" Chesa asked. "Zero for three?"

"Yeah, I suppose it is." He pushed against the impulse that wanted to take her words as an indictment. "What about your end?" he asked. "Any updates?"

"I scheduled an interview with that queer speed dating organizer I told you about, so I'm looking forward to that. Also, Hugh is asking about the sex robots again."

"He's obsessed, and it's getting uncomfortable," Ruben said.

"Do you want me to relay that verbatim?"

"Sure, if you think it would stop the badgering."

* * *

In a nice downtown restaurant with table-side service and dressed-up patrons, Mary and Hattie dined with their father.

Anticipation and nerves had turned what should've been a delicious dinner into one Mary wanted to end.

As her dad perused the dessert menu with the flashlight on his phone, Mary looked at her sister pointedly.

"Not yet," Hattie mouthed, but once their server had topped off the water glasses and taken their orders, Hattie took a deep breath and told their father that they needed to talk. "Mary and I are concerned," she said.

"Concerned? What about?" he asked.

"Aurora. She's a stranger, and we want to make sure you're being careful," Mary said. The sisters laid out their suspicions and doubts, trying not to insinuate he was especially vulnerable.

Their father listened, then sat back in his seat, smiling. "I appreciate you, my girls, but it's all right."

"No, it's not all right, Dad," Hattie said. "That's why we're here. Have you seen a picture of her taken in the last five years? Have you video called?"

"No, we want the first time we see each other to be in person."

"So you're meeting soon?" Mary asked, hopeful.

“In the spring. We’re attending the Copenhagen Jazz Festival.”

Hattie stilled. “Copenhagen. As in Denmark.”

“I understand it’s a bit of a mad adventure, but I’m old. What’s there to lose?” He shrugged. “I’ve already sent her the money for the tickets, and?—”

“You didn’t buy the tickets yourself?” Mary asked carefully.

“No,” he said and explained the reward points Aurora supposedly had and an early bird discount only she could access.

Mary didn’t need to look at her sister to know they felt the same sudden dread.

This wild and impulsive man was not the father Mary had known all her life.

That man was sensible and normal. He lived according to the schedule set in his Day-Timer.

“Never let the gas tank go below the halfway mark,” he used to tell them as teenagers.

“Why don’t we set up a call where we can all talk to her and get to know her?” Mary said, panic rising and thickening her throat.

Their dad shook his head. “That’s an ambush. She’ll assume I don’t trust her.”

“You don’t know her to trust her!” Hattie said too loudly at the moment their server reappeared.

“Two molten lava cakes and the poached pear,” the waiter said, his expression neutral

as he placed each person's chosen dessert in front of them.

No words were spoken, and Mary didn't taste a thing. When only shallow pools of melted ice cream remained, their father said, "I've been alone a long time, so my choices don't come from desperation. I'm clearheaded. You mustn't worry."

It was obvious their father was in love with this Aurora woman and would not be moved to doubt, so after they assured him they'd cover his tab, he rose to leave and bid them goodnight with kisses to the back of their hands.

"He won't have two pennies to rub together," Hattie said flatly, waving over a server for a glass of wine.

Mary also feared that. How many stories had she read of reasonable people getting caught up in emotions and financially ruining themselves in the process? Her father was too close to retirement to ever recover.

"You still want to go the private investigator route?" Mary asked.

"It's our only option," her sister said. "He's a man of evidence, so if something's off, we'll present him with proof. And if all is well, then we'll shout bon voyage as he leaves for Europe."

Mary nodded, her frayed nerves soothed by the plan despite her qualms about prying into her dad's private life.

"Mitch is taking the boys next weekend to visit his parents. Come over and we'll iron out the details."

"I can't. I have an out-of-town wedding next weekend."

“The week after, then.”

Mary agreed.

Later, close to midnight, the sisters left the restaurant.

“I’m so happy to not be breastfeeding anymore,” Hattie announced as they stepped out onto the sidewalk crowded with the usual Saturday nightlife crowd and hordes of concertgoers wearing identical branded merchandise. The road was filled with bumper-to-bumper traffic.

“It’s going take forever getting out of here,” Mary said mostly to herself as Hattie had closed her eyes and started shimmying to the music pouring out of the bar next door.

Mary used her ridesharing app and booked the cheapest car, which happened to be one where they’d be commuting with other customers.

She linked her arm with her sister’s and approached the curb, craning for a view of the incoming vehicles.

Within minutes, their hired dark Hyundai Elantra pulled up ahead.

“She drunk?” the driver asked Mary when she opened the backseat door.

“No, she’s fine. A little tipsy.” Mary still took the middle spot to act as a potential vomit buffer between Hattie and the stranger in the right window seat.

Once Mary made sure her sister was buckled in, she turned to acknowledge the other passengers, but froze when she found Ruben, of all people, beside her.

He smiled and greeted her like they’d planned to meet in such warm, close quarters.

Meanwhile, she was unnerved and negotiating her leg's position to maximize the space between them.

"This is Mary," Ruben told the woman in the front passenger seat who he introduced as his cousin.

"The matchmaker?" Junie said, whipping her head around and revealing a striking appearance of bleached brows and facial piercings. "What a cool job you have."

"Thank you. I do enjoy it," Mary said.

"Were you at the concert?" Ruben asked.

She looked at him but quickly turned away. With traffic at a standstill, the brake lights from the vehicles ahead tinged the interior of the cab red, making it almost feel like she was in the corner of a pulsing nightclub with a sexy stranger.

"No, dinner with family," Mary replied, patting her dozing sister whose head had lolled against the window with a soft thud moments earlier. "You?"

"Trivia night at the Bull Trout Pub."

She vaguely recalled something about the hobby on his admission forms. "Did you win?" she asked.

Junie groaned while Ruben explained, "We had a good average score, but a whole round on Romeo and Juliet adaptations did us in."

"I have a question," Junie said, turning again to address Mary. "You're an expert on relationships. What're your thoughts on love at first sight? Do you believe in it?"

“Sure, I believe in it.”

Ruben scoffed.

“What?” his cousin asked. “You disagree with your matchmaker?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Mary said, surprising herself.

“Okay,” he said with a laugh, “but I just think the concept of falling at first sight is something that sounds nice in stories or wedding vows so people insist it’s real.”

“Around 15 percent of our successful clients say they fell in love immediately with the person we matched them with.”

“I’m sure that’s in retrospect,” Ruben said, angling his body slightly toward Mary. “It’s easy to assign depth and significance to that initial spark once someone is actually in love when in reality it was all carnal.”

“It might not be the deep love felt by an aging couple, but it’s still a version of it.”

“There’re better words to use in that case, like ‘smitten,’ ‘infatuated,’ or ‘besotted.’ Maybe the Germans have a term we could borrow. But let’s reserve the word ‘love’ for the real thing.”

“A purist,” Mary said dryly. Their knees bumped with each groove in the road, and it added a vitalizing current to their exchange. “How do you define real love, then? What waiting period is needed to reach it? A month? Six months? A year?”

He shrugged. “It’s not about the length of time specifically?—”

“You’re rejecting the legitimacy of love at first sight, so obviously time is relevant to

you,” she countered.

“If in an instant,” Ruben said, “someone can know the good, the bad, and the morning breath of someone else, then fine, I believe in love at first sight.”

“But you wouldn’t say a novice pianist isn’t making music because they’re not as good as someone performing with an orchestra, would you?”

There was silence. Ruben opened his mouth, but no words came.

“Well,” Junie said, laughing, “I think Mary won that round.”

Chapter Twelve

The congestion on the road had let up, and Ruben's back-and-forth with Mary had inspired the driver, Patrick, to ask for help in planning his fifteenth wedding anniversary.

"How can I make it nice for my wife?" Patrick had asked, and instead of lobbing generic suggestions, Mary leaned forward as far as her seatbelt would allow and launched into a series of questions.

God, Ruben liked her. She possessed a wit that wasn't immediately obvious but was completely enrapturing when revealed.

He liked that she never ceded to his perspective on subjects.

That she pushed him to reassess his ideas.

And listening to her now, he liked the effort she was putting into creating a bespoke itinerary for Patrick and his wife.

She suggested a visit to a botanical garden, afternoon tea, and a flip through of their wedding photo album.

"And if you end up choosing Filomena for dinner," Mary said, "call to book a reservation and tell them Mary Neilson sent you. They'll give you priority seating and comp apps and dessert."

“Oh, very generous. Very generous!” Patrick replied.

As Mary relaxed back into her seat, Ruben got another waft of the fragrance he’d first caught when she entered the car. Sweet but subtle, like the air in a bakery. It suited the woman who wore it: one had to draw near to experience its full impact, but even then it never overwhelmed.

Ruben inwardly winced, suddenly aware of the odd direction of his thoughts.

He turned his attention outside his window where he anchored his mind to the task of counting the streetlights they passed.

Thirty-seven streetlights later, they reached the sisters’ destination.

Ruben got out of the car so they could exit onto the sidewalk instead of the snow-packed road.

“Careful, there’s some ice here,” he said, offering his hand to Mary for support.

After finding her footing, Mary squeezed his hand and thanked him. “You’re welcome,” he replied as an odd sensation pressed his stomach. A late-night hunger pang, he reasoned and moved to help Mary’s sister, but Hattie was already out of the car and staring at him.

“You look familiar,” she said, leaning close, squinting. “Did you go to Eastglen?”

“No, Old Scona.”

“Huh, I swear I know you from somewhere, though.”

“I host a radio show, so maybe?—”

“That’s it! Intensive Purposes , right?”

He smiled despite the error.

“My husband listens to your show sometimes.”

“Thank him for me.”

“I will, and?—”

“Hattie, you’re holding them up,” Mary said, tugging at her sister’s arm. They all said goodbye for the last time, and the women walked off into the still neighborhood while Ruben reentered the car.

“Honestly, I have more faith in matchmaking having met Mary,” Junie said. “She seems great.”

Ruben nodded. “She is.”

* * *

The downtown sidewalks were bustling with office workers heading to lunch, Mary and Eden among them. With the newly fallen snow squeaking under their boots, the women spoke of their mornings until Mary, without warning, stopped in her tracks.

“What’s wrong?” Eden asked, halting as well. Mary didn’t respond and cut through the stream of pedestrians to a random store’s display window.

“What the hell are you doing?” Eden asked, following Mary on the detour.

“Just looking,” Mary said.

“At orthopedic loafers?”

Mary hadn't noticed the shoes set up on pedestals and mannequins behind the glass, too focused on watching the foot traffic behind her in the window's reflection.

She was waiting for the tall man she'd spotted to pass, and when he finally did, she realized it wasn't Ruben like she'd believed when she saw the stranger's frame and dense, coily hair in the distance.

Her panic and actions now seemed illogical, and she turned to look at Eden and found her colleague staring back, bewildered.

“Sorry, I thought I saw a client,” Mary said.

“You owe them money or something?” Eden asked as they rejoined the flow of pedestrians.

“Nothing like that. I just keep bumping into him everywhere.”

Their library run-in and the accidental carpool that past weekend would've been enough for Mary to make that statement, but she'd also been served up several internet banner ads for Ruben's radio show where he was smiling beside his cohost. His seemingly constant presence had made it difficult for Mary to ignore a certain truth.

“Have you ever been attracted to a client?” Mary asked, immediately regretting her choice to pose the question, but with a casual air and hardly a glance, Eden said, “Yeah.”

Mary felt it necessary to add, “Not in a trivial way, but in a ‘you would if you could’ way.”

“Once.”

They arrived at the small restaurant, a favorite for soups and sandwiches, and the warmth inside promptly chased the chill that had gripped them on their walk.

It was a relief to know that someone as measured as Eden had also experienced what was considered among matchmakers to be the most pathetic pitfall.

“What happened? What did you do?” Mary asked as they joined the line to order.

“I matched him with a physiotherapist with a black belt in tae kwon do.”

Mary had found previous clients attractive or thought them a good catch, but it was as informational as their enneagram type or star sign.

Having so much insight into a person’s inner world, neuroses, hopes, and dreams clinicalized the interactions.

Made it difficult to feel allured by the good or put off by the not-so-good.

But that was where Mary believed her complications with Ruben stemmed: she had never really seen him as a client.

How they met, his documentary, and how she was set to professionally gain from the arrangement had made sure of that.

Not to mention how unencumbered she was around him.

He coaxed her to say the things she’d never say, to share her brash and irreverent opinions.

That sort of freedom was intoxicating for someone like her.

“So who’s the client?” Eden asked, her eyes fixed on the menu board on the back wall.

Mary couldn’t detect a ravenous hunger for gossip in her colleague’s tone, only mild curiosity, but perhaps she was telling herself this to rationalize opening up and would live to regret it when she was the subject of office whispers in a few days.

“The radio show host, Ruben.”

“Hm, okay.” It was unclear if it was an appraisal of Mary’s taste or not. “You don’t have feelings for him, do you?”

“Oh, no. No, not at all. No.”

“Then there’s no problem,” Eden declared.

“Except I’d be so embarrassed if he ever suspected anything at all.” Mary could see a situation where Ruben believed his unsuccessful matches were by design, a sabotage set by a besotted matchmaker.

“You have, what, a month left with him?” Eden said. “Keep interactions short. And if communication can be done over email, opt for that. You’ll be fine.”

Mary nodded, drawing confidence from Eden’s certainty.

She would be fine.

Chapter Thirteen

CHESA SALVADOR: Last year, you declared Lauren Birdie's Grammy-nominated and JUNO-Award-winning single "Away We Go" the wedding first dance song to beat them all?—

PAULA NASRI: [Laughs] Yeah, and it was controversial! You'd have thought I'd deleted Etta James's discography the way people in my email inbox reacted. But in the end, no one can say it's not a great song.

CS: What do you think the song captures about love that makes it so affective?

PN: It showcases the journey of falling in love with not just the lyrics but also with the actual music production.

The first verse has a light, stripped-down production that echoes those first weeks after meeting someone new, when you might be tentative but hopeful.

The chorus is heavy with percussion, and the kick drum sounds like a rapid heartbeat.

It makes the listener feel like the stakes are ratcheting up and hearts are on the line.

Then the music swells after the bridge, and the song ends with Lauren belting this big triumphant note.

And we know she's gotten her happily ever after.

* * *

Mary traveled by shuttle two hours outside of the city to the Sun Valley Hotel and Conference Center for her former clients' wedding. She arrived at the hotel the evening before the big day and spent time writing an effusive card of congratulations to the couple.

In the morning, hours before the ceremony was scheduled to begin, Mary left her room with the card and a gift in hand and rode the elevator up several floors to a suite at the end of the hallway.

Loud talk and music slipped past the suite door held ajar by the deadbolt.

Mary knocked as a formality and entered the room veiled in clouds of hairspray.

Six women in varying states of dress flittered around, paying her no mind as she passed them and the abandoned plastic tiaras and hot pink "Team Bride" sashes.

"Can someone look up if snowfall on your wedding day is good or bad luck?" said Mary's former client, and now bride, Vanessa.

She sat by the window with three artists transforming her face and hair with different tools, and Mary inched closer until Vanessa spotted her and jumped to her feet, squealing.

"I love this woman," Vanessa said, introducing Mary to the room. "She's the whole reason Ian and I are here today."

Mary smiled, lowering her head in gratitude.

It never ceased to amaze her that she played a role in people's happiness.

“I wanted to give you a small gift on behalf of everyone at Hearts Collide,” Mary said, presenting the card and box covered in pretty paper.

The bride and her bridesmaids gushed over the luxurious candle set and accessories.

“Have you eaten?” Vanessa asked as the stylists corralled her back to her seat. “We’re getting food delivered soon if you want to stay.”

“No, that’s all right. Enjoy this moment, and I’ll see you later.

” Mary left the suite and headed straight to the main level for the breakfast buffet.

She found the hotel’s restaurant packed mostly with guests excited to kick off a day of skiing and snowboarding.

Once the hostess led Mary through the carpeted dining room to a table near some windows, she joined the buffet line and selected foods from the silver domes that would tide her over until cocktail hour.

While taking in the spread at the fruit station, Mary happened to look across the pass and was shocked to see Ruben—handsome as ever in a tan cable-knit sweater—adding pineapple to his crowded plate.

She’d just committed to limiting her interactions with him that week, but here he was. It was lighting-striking-thrice type of odds.

What was he doing here? For a dreadful moment, she feared he was also a guest at the wedding, but the name tag attached to the branded lanyard about his neck suggested he was attending the business conference she’d seen signage for in the hotel lobby.

The man behind Mary cleared his throat in a way that signaled to her that she'd been standing in place too long.

She quickly ladled chunks of melon she didn't even want onto her plate and moved along, keeping her head down to avoid accidentally making eye contact with Ruben.

He remained in her peripheral sight, however, so she knew when he left the buffet area.

When it was time for her to return to her table, she stopped shy of the exiting steps, realizing Ruben was seated somewhere in the dining room. He could very well be at the table next to hers, and she wasn't prepared for an interaction with him right now.

"Can I help you with something, ma'am?" asked a uniformed staff member.

"Yes," Mary said. "Is it possible for me to take this plate to go?"

* * *

"You've got something on your shirt," Ruben said to Chesa when she plopped down on the seat across from him in the hotel restaurant.

"Hollandaise," she said, sighing. "Where did you get the croissants?"

"At the very front, but you can have mine." He pushed his plate toward her, and he watched her take the pastry and pull it apart before tentatively asking, "How're you doing?"

They were on day two of a weekend-long media and communications conference—a gathering of the most extroverted chatterboxes—and Chesa had been having a rough go of things.

It started with the organizers misprinting her name on her badge as “Cheese”; next, she discovered that her hotel room had poor Wi-Fi connection; then yesterday she’d accidentally missed the only panel she’d been looking forward to.

“The weekend is cursed,” she said, looking out of the windows where heavy winds were creating grooves and waves in the fallen snow. “I might head home after the talk at eleven. Sorry to abandon you.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll let you know if I learn something earth-shattering in the afternoon sessions.”

After breakfast, the cohosts left the restaurant for a conference hall marked on their schedules.

When they found the event photographer already in the room, Chesa said, “I can’t with him today,” and used her notebook to shield her face.

The photographer had stalked the halls all weekend, zipping down the aisles like a spinning top, taking pictures at angles that could not possibly be flattering.

Ruben was sure he’d been caught mid-yawn.

During a break between sessions, Ruben parted from his cohost’s side to refill his bottle at a water fountain.

He moved with the slow line while his attention wandered the open area on his left.

People dressed in formal attire mingled near closed double doors decorated with a flower arch.

Must be a wedding, Ruben thought. His eyes then landed on a woman partially turned

away from him.

Her rich skin tone and hair—a familiar hue of darkened honey, made him lean forward to get a better look at her profile.

Mary.

He smiled, amused by the coincidence. If it weren't for the conversation she was engaged in, he'd have called out to her and shared in the absurdity.

She looked incredible as always, but unlike the sensible work-appropriate outfits he'd always seen her in, this dress exposed her round shoulders and closely followed the shape of her wide hips and perfectly drawn-in waist. Her legs?—

“Dude, you're up,” said the man behind Ruben in the line.

He could've sworn there were people ahead of him moments ago.

He quickly filled his water bottle and left the queue intending to approach Mary, but she was no longer where he'd last seen her.

Disappointed, Ruben headed to his next meeting, and for the rest of the day, he would scan every room he entered for sign of her.

* * *

The wedding ceremony had gone over without a hitch, and now that the bouquet had been tossed, speeches made, and the tiered cake cut, the families and friends of the newlyweds were on the dance floor. Mary, however, was having no such fun.

The moment news spread among attendees that she was the matchmaker who'd

brought Vanessa and Ian together, she'd been flocked by those who wanted to know details about the union and singles who were keen on repeating the success of their hosts.

She spent close to an hour speaking over the bass of the DJ's set list, so the moment she had a chance, she snuck away for a break.

The break was only meant to last a few minutes, but in the quieter halls not tainted by the smoke machine and the sourness of booze, Mary decided to covertly call it a night.

People were flailing more than dancing at that point, anyway, and she needed to be up early to catch the first shuttle back into the city.

While waiting for the elevator, she momentarily tensed when the doors opened on a man with Ruben's complexion and build. The coincidences were making her paranoid, and the end of her working relationship with Ruben couldn't come soon enough.

Once in bed, Mary fell asleep easily even with the thrashing wind outside her window.

But where in reality she'd been able to evade Ruben, in sleep she dreamt she stood in a hallway of doors where on the other side of each one stood Ruben.

Ruben in a mullet wig; Ruben with a fake moustache; Ruben dressed as a clown; Ruben, completely naked, but hiding his dick behind a bouquet. It was more confusing than erotic.

By 6 a.m., Mary was awake, back in a realm where she could control her thoughts.

She prepared for the journey home and then left her room for the main level.

The lobby was barren, except for the two front desk staff and a small group of seated travelers waiting for the outgoing shuttle.

They all stared at the cloudy scene on the other side of the tall windows where the rough winds from the night persisted and threw the snow around, creating small funnels of white.

The roads would be a mess, Mary realized.

“Do you know if the seven o’clock shuttle is still scheduled to leave on time?” she asked the front desk clerk checking her out of her room.

“Do you have the RoadRunner app?” he asked dutifully.

“I don’t know what that is.”

“It’s the app the shuttle service uses. Any updates or delays will be communicated through the app.”

“Is there a way for me to just get an email or a text?”

“You’ll have to download the app, sign in, then select an option for email or SMS.”

“Oh, okay. Thank you,” she said, but once she stepped away from the desk, she approached the other bleary-eyed travelers.

One of them must have downloaded the app.

But she never made it across the floor to introduce herself and ask because her cell

phone, along with everyone else's, began to ping, chime, and blare.

On the screens, an automated message appeared: This is an Emergency Alert. Snowfall and Blizzard Warning—Heavy snow and strong winds with gusts near 80 km/h have produced near-zero visibility. Postpone nonessential travel until conditions improve.

Chapter Fourteen

The doors and windows in the lobby had been sealed to keep out the wind and snow, but they rattled as if they might fly open at any moment.

And as hard as Ruben tried, he couldn't make out anything in the gray outside.

It left him wishing he'd done as Chesa had and journeyed home last night, but he'd thought one extra sleep in a bed more comfortable than his own wouldn't hurt.

When Ruben had first arrived, he'd thought the lobby grand with its high ceilings, exposed wood beams, and central fireplace, but that was all lost with so many people packed in there.

"Folks, it's bad out there," the hotel manager told the assembled guests.

He stood on top of the front desk and spoke into a megaphone.

His stiff oversized blazer made him look like a child playing dress up.

"We're watching weather reports closely, and for now, it's been advised we all shelter in place."

The people whined and objected. "You can't keep us here!" someone shouted.

"You're right," the manager replied evenly, "but access to the main road is completely blocked with snow. If you do venture out, there's no guarantee someone

can come get you.”

“But where do the people without rooms stay?” asked one guest who’d arrived on the full shuttle ahead of the blizzard.

The manager said, “We will be offering blankets and sleeping mats for people to use here in the lobby.”

“What about food?”

“We will serve two buffet meals. One in the morning and another at dinnertime. A snack table will be available during lunch hours.”

“Will the ski lift be open?”

The polite professional facade that had governed the manager’s face to this point cracked a little.

“Well, no. There’s a blizzard,” he said.

A ceaseless wave of questions and complaints followed that the hotel manager did his best to address, but at last called for order, saying, “Join a line at the front desk, and one of our staff will help you with your individual concerns.”

As bodies shuffled to form queues, Ruben ended up near the front of one and waited fifteen minutes to be helped. He booked additional days in his room at the regular rate because, as the clerk explained, it was standard hotel policy to charge the same, come rain, shine, or raging blizzard.

“But I do see here you have two single beds,” the clerk said to him. “We can offer a discount if you are willing to share your room with a stranded traveler.”

“I’ll consider it,” he told her and moved aside for the next person in line. He wasn’t eager to room with a stranger, but it felt especially selfish to leave a perfectly serviceable bed unused during an emergency.

“Hey, Ruben!” someone called across the way. A small group of people Ruben had met at the conference waved at him from the middle of the lobby, and he temporarily abandoned his quest to join them.

“This is nuts,” said one TV news anchor with teeth so white they made Ruben think his own looked like pennies in comparison.

“I’m thinking two or three days before we can leave,” Ruben said.

“Well, it depends,” replied a meteorologist from an east coast station. “The snow and wind might subside, but the roads will still need clearing. And we’re not getting prioritized up here. I’d say prepare for four to five days.”

As his colleagues continued to talk, Ruben’s gaze wandered the lobby in search of possible solo travelers, and instead saw tired families, bored friends, bickering couples, scolding parents, and most surprisingly of all, Mary.

She sat on the hearth of the raised fireplace in a beige matching set.

For some reason, he hadn’t expected her to still be here.

Ruben’s feet were moving him toward her before he could properly excuse himself from the group. She was typing on her phone and didn’t notice him until he was standing in front of her. “Bad weather we’re having,” he said past a sudden wave of nerves.

She looked up, dragging her reading glasses onto her head. “Oh, hey! What’re you

doing here?”

“Work conference,” he said. “You?”

“I was attending a wedding. Would you like to take a seat?” She scooted over on the concrete, and he nearly declined before noting how she craned her neck to look at him.

Once he was more level with her, they asked after the safety of each other’s loved ones and for a few minutes watched the storm beyond the windows. The noise in the lobby had significantly reduced by this time, but occasional protests at the front desk would bring the volume up again.

“I feel sorry for the people stuck sleeping out here,” Ruben said.

Mary laughed and gestured to a series of bags at her feet. “I’m one of them. I checked out of my room just before the alert went out.”

The thought of Mary curled up in front of the fireplace like a barn mouse, disturbed Ruben. It was completely unnecessary. “You can stay in my room if you want,” he said.

Mary stammered for seconds before Ruben’s face heated in realization. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I should’ve clarified. There’re two beds.”

“Oh! Duh! I don’t know why I thought...” She shook her head and smiled. “Thank you. I accept.”

* * *

“Make yourself comfortable,” Ruben said as Mary looked around his hotel room. The

room was standard in size—certainly enough to share—but currently felt like a coffin.

She was rooming with a client, an awkward predicament even without the attraction.

She walked past his roughly made bed to place her bags beside the bed closest to the window.

While she unpacked her few belongings for what she hoped was a short stay, Ruben turned on the television to the news, lessening the pressure to speak.

When she took her toiletries to set out in the bathroom, she closed the door behind her. To her reflection in the three-way mirror, Mary whispered hollow things like “You got this” and “Don’t make it weird.”

She returned to the bedroom and found Mayor Laurie on the TV.

Mary stood beside her bed and watched the mayor speak from a podium in a city-branded tracksuit and cap, repeating facts and advisories she’d heard all morning.

However, things turned strange when he ended his address crooning a verse of “Baby, It’s Cold Outside. ”

“There goes your guy,” Ruben said from where he sat at the foot of his bed.

Mary turned, aghast. “My guy? My guy ? Why is Mayor Laurie my guy?”

“You passionately defended him during the radio interview. I assumed you were a fan.”

“I was defending my industry, not him specifically,” she said. “I don’t like him and

definitely didn't vote for him. He literally doesn't believe dinosaurs ever existed."

"Damn, I forgot about that rumor."

"I can never forget," she said. "He is forever linked in my brain with dinosaurs. Like peanut butter and jelly. Or Bonnie and Clyde."

With the record settled, hunger led Ruben and Mary out of their room in search of breakfast. They arrived at the hotel restaurant to find it past capacity with people having loud, unmodulated conversations around reconfigured tables. It looked and sounded like a mall food court.

"We'll have to get here earlier next time," Ruben said. They waited their turn at the buffet and made do with the small desert plates that remained. Once food was procured, they searched the dining room for a place to sit.

"Over there at the far end near the window," she said, and they approached the two occupants of the table—a middle-aged couple from Arizona named Jillian and Allen—and asked if they could sit with them.

"Of course!" said the husband and wife who sported matching tie-dye T-shirts and sunburnt noses.

They talked over each other, completing or correcting the other's sentences.

Quickly, Mary learned how long they'd been married, the names of their adult children, and the places they'd traveled to.

"Did Kilimanjaro in 2018, Sydney in 2015, and we absolutely adored our '09 visit to the Galápagos Islands," said Allen.

“We try to do these outdoorsy trips every couple of years together,” Jillian explained.

“An enviable hobby,” Ruben said. “Hopefully there’s still a natural world to see by the time I retire.”

“Matamata,” Mary said before thinking.

Ruben looked at her, surprised. “Yeah, how did you—” He smiled. “Right, I forgot.”

“And how long have you two been together?” Jillian asked after studying them.

“Oh, it’s not like that,” Mary said.

“I’m too much of a skeptical smartass for her,” Ruben said, garnering amused snorts from the actual couple, and Mary found herself smiling as well.

“And have you two started preparing?” Allen asked.

“Preparing?” Ruben said.

“Yeah, for when things get worse.” Allen conspiratorially dropped his voice.

“There’s no one coming in or going out for who knows how long.

That means the food we’ve got is all we have.

Supply will decrease, and people will begin to fight for resources.

It’s day one, and you can already feel the tightening of the belt.

We’ve been here all week, and the breadbaskets have never been that sparse. ”

“I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about,” Mary said.

“Maybe. But our advice? Start stashing,” Jillian said as she and her husband pulled from the inner pockets of their winter jackets, Ziplock bags filled with scrambled eggs whose heat was clouding the plastics.

“Oh, wow,” Mary said, forcing her expression neutral. “That’s...resourceful.”

“The goal is to put off cannibalism for as long as possible,” Allen said.

“Cannibalism? That’s a day-forty resort,” Ruben said, looking similarly put off by the couple’s bags of mush. “We’ll be off this mountain long before we’d have to even think about eating each other.”

Allen shrugged. “I guess we’ll see.”

A woman in a toque who’d been making the rounds to the tables in the dining room appeared at theirs.

Her wide stance and the clipboard she carried gave her an air of authority.

She introduced herself to them as Elizabeth and explained she’d been authorized by hotel management to coordinate entertainment for the guests during this snowed-in period.

“We’re stuck here for a couple of days, but that doesn’t mean we can’t have fun,” Elizabeth said with unfaltering enthusiasm.

“There’s a table in the lobby with different sign-up sheets for activities and classes being offered by fellow guests.

I'm personally looking forward to the Zumba class tomorrow morning.

If you have an activity you would like to spearhead, let me know and?—”

A commotion at the buffet station drew everyone's attention. A tall man held a slice of pumpernickel in the air out of reach of a much shorter man.

“I got to it first,” shouted the shorter of the two.

“Then why am I holding it?”

“‘Cause you're a thief and your arms are freakishly long!”

The tall man responded to the insults by dragging his tongue across the debated bread, sending the shorter one into a rage. There was shoving and a string of expletives before capable bystanders were driven to finally step in.

“And there we go,” the Arizona husband said, self-satisfied. “The infighting for resources has begun.”

Chapter Fifteen

CHESA SALVADOR: Can you explain the meaning behind the name of your premarital workshop, “Pentimento”?

BLAIRE HATFIELD: Yeah, so a pentimento is an Italian word meaning “to repent.” I know that sounds grim, but it also describes a phenomenon that can occur with old oil paintings where the artist’s sketches, previous drafts, or mistakes that were painted over begin to peek through the completed work.

CS: How does this concept inform your approach to premarital counseling?

BH: I ask my clients to let go of the idealized version of their soon-to-be spouses because holding on to it can sometimes mean forgoing a more beautiful, interesting version of their partner.

I want couples to acknowledge the whole, not just the nice veneer, to foster a deeper connection that can help them in the future when conflict inevitably arises.

* * *

At the activity sign-up desk, situated against a vacant wall on the main floor, Ruben was surprised to see the forms were filling up with names.

There were calls to play classic board games, participate in scavenger hunts, and join a guitar jam session.

One could practice yoga in the lobby, screen movies in the lobby, and do karaoke in the lobby.

Even the hotel's laundry services had a sign-up sheet.

Under normal circumstances, Ruben wouldn't have bothered browsing the activity desk, but with no place to go and no schedule to adhere to, he'd joined Mary after breakfast in search of entertainment.

"See anything interesting?" Mary asked when they converged at the middle of the long table after starting on opposite ends.

"Nah," he said. "What about you?"

"Polka dancing," she said.

"Really?"

"Yeah, you know, to release the stress of the day."

Ruben smiled picturing Mary getting down and folksy while wearing an outfit more suitable for lounging. "I'm sure you'll have fun," he said.

"Oh, I'm not actually going to do it."

"Why not?"

"The class requires a partner."

The instinct that had Ruben offering Mary his spare bed moved him to now say, "Tell me when and where."

Mary laughed.

“I’m serious,” he said. There was far worse company to keep than his lovely matchmaker’s. “Let’s do the polka.”

“No, that’s okay. You don’t have to.”

“What will I do instead? Ski?”

After consideration, Mary said, “All right, but promise me you’ll tell me if you’re not enjoying yourself so we can bail.”

He agreed, and an hour later, he was standing in a bare conference hall with Mary and eight other couples for Gisela’s Polka Dance 101.

It had been easy to commit to the class when it had just been a concept, but now he was uncertain if the year of tap lessons in elementary school would carry him through.

“Today you will learn the polka,” Gisela said. “And by the end, you should be able to hold your own on any dance floor.”

They began the class out of hold, practicing the basic steps. Half jumps up and down, half jumps side to side. Over and over again, working up to the tempo of the zippy, brass-instrument filled music playing from a small portable speaker.

“We’re kinda killing this,” he whispered to Mary who, like him, had picked up the choreography relatively quickly.

When it was time for them to get into hold, Gisela said, “The polka requires you and your partner leave enough space between your bodies to pass a melon.”

“What type of melon?” one man asked.

“A sensible golden honeydew,” Giselle replied automatically.

As Ruben turned to get into position, he was met with Mary in a tank top. When the hell had she removed her sweater? The tops of her breasts were visible with the new neckline, and he stalled as if it were the first time seeing cleavage.

“Do you wanna try?” Mary asked, dragging him out of his stupor.

“Yeah, let’s do it.” He closed the distance between them, placing one hand high on her back while she rested hers on his shoulder.

They completed the setup by loosely joining their free outstretched hands.

Gisela went around the room, adjusting people’s forms, and when she made it to them, she pressed Ruben’s hand more firmly between Mary’s shoulder blades.

“Support her. And no slouching, both of you.”

As Mary fixed her posture, her breasts pushed into the space between them, and Ruben pretended not to notice as he kept his eyes on the center of Mary’s forehead.

He was so focused on not looking down, in fact, that he missed the violins that cued the first step of the dance and was out of sync with Mary for the remainder of the routine.

The second attempt didn’t go much better.

All the moves he’d nailed on his own had become clumsy with a partner.

“I think I might’ve spoken too soon,” he said, frustrated.

“No, we’ve got this,” Mary said, her hands tightening where they held him. “I think the problem is you’re leaping like a gazelle, but my legs are much shorter than yours.”

So on their next trial, while their instructor shouted reminders about posture, foot articulation, and leaving space for the honeydew, Ruben focused on shortening his steps.

And for the first time, he didn’t completely mess up their flow.

They continued to improve, prancing, albeit stiffly, across the floor.

“You having fun?” Mary asked him during a brief water break. “It’s okay if you’re not.”

“No, yeah, I am,” he said. That wasn’t entirely true, but he was committed to finishing. During one run-through, Ruben, so intent on perfectly executing an element, tripped over his own feet and nearly toppled onto Mary.

“I’m so sorry,” he said when they’d straightened, but she was laughing, hard.

The bright sound and her delightful eye crinkles sent goosebumps along his arms. Beautiful.

Beautiful. Beautiful , was the sudden chant in his head that replaced all concern for choreography.

His footsteps were lighter as they bounced and leaped and spun past other couples.

By the time Gisela shouted, “From the top for the last time!” the space between Ruben and Mary could fit a citrus at best, and the routine included a whole lot more intermediary steps not associated with the polka, and he imagined they looked far from refined reeling around the room.

He wanted to remain suspended in the moment, force his lungs to accommodate, his legs to carry on, and the lively tune to play indefinitely.

But the final note did come, and they collapsed to the floor, breathless. Grinning.

* * *

Mary felt she’d lived several days by bedtime. She was freshly bathed and sitting against her headboard in a tightly cinched robe, half watching a wedding-planning reality show while Ruben was in the shower, whistling the polka tune they’d danced to earlier in the day.

She’d enjoyed the lesson with Ruben more than she’d wanted to, but through it, she’d realized she’d given her emotions too much power.

She didn’t combust feeling the muscles in his shoulder, nor had she melted into a puddle while watching his full lips mouth the count of the dance.

He was just a man she happened to find exceedingly handsome, and she’d survive however many days they were stuck in this hotel room together.

“Your calves feel like they’ve been run across a washboard, right?” Ruben said when he entered the room, along with the scent of the hotel-provided soap.

“A little,” she replied, averting her eyes after noticing how low his sweatpants rode on his hips.

“What are we watching?” he asked as he followed her by sitting up in his bed.

“Nothing really.” She slid the remote across the nightstand to him. “You can change it.”

But Ruben didn’t move for the remote, and for a few minutes, they watched a couple and a wedding planner—the star of the show—tour a venue and complain about it every step of the way.

“What are they even talking about? Not chic enough?” Ruben said, gesturing at the TV. “It’s a damn castle.”

“I think they’re looking for something understated. An art gallery or an upscale restaurant, maybe.” As she suggested this, the scene cut to the pair inside a museum, gushing over it. Mary was also able to accurately predict the kinds of florals and food service style the couple ultimately chose.

“I’m impressed,” Ruben said. “I don’t know how you made sense of their confused visions.”

She shrugged. “I get a lot of practice interpreting what people say they want.”

“I’ve been wondering,” he said, “how hard is it keeping all your clients’ information straight in your head?”

“I always have access to everyone’s profiles, so I don’t have to rely on my memory. But some details stick more than others. Like, I remember your top travel destination because it diverged from the typical answers I see. I also find it easy to remember client archetypes and?—”

“Client archetypes?” Ruben asked.

“It’s how we sometimes categorize clients unofficially.”

“And what are these categories?”

“Oh, uh, they just help us understand a client and their worldview,” she said vaguely.

“Are they pejorative?”

“No,” Mary replied, regretting mentioning it at all. “They’re blunt, yes. And they can sometimes sound a bit like a psychological evaluation, but that’s why we don’t share them with clients.”

He nodded. “So what archetype do I fall under?”

“Did you not hear what I just said?”

“I did, but we both know I’m not like other clients.” He smiled mischievously, spurring warmth across Mary’s body.

“I won’t be the reason you cry yourself to sleep tonight.”

“You don’t think I can handle it?” he asked, amused.

Mary thought about it for a moment. “No, I believe you’re one of the few who could.” Ruben valued candor. It was a quality she personally and professionally admired in him. “All right, is this conversation off the record?” she asked.

“Completely,” he said. “I don’t conduct interviews while lying in bed in my pajamas.”

The reminder of the unusual situation they were in further assured Mary of her

otherwise questionable choice to tell Ruben, “You’re what we call a duck.”

“A duck?” he said as he sat taller in bed, his face lighting up. “Like the bird?”

“Yeah, you’re someone who, on the surface, appears chill, even-keeled like a duck gliding across the water, but underneath, you’re always thinking and assessing like the fast-moving duck feet underwater.

For matchmaking, it’s relevant because you’re the sort who could start to over-intellectualize your feelings. ”

“Jesus,” Ruben said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Okay, and how did you come to that diagnosis?”

“You’re a self-identified smartass, generally confident, but you also write the longest post-date assessments out of any of my clients past or present.”

He laughed. “Really? They’re that long?”

“Absolutely.”

Ruben’s laughter swelled, and Mary joined in.

“My bad,” he said. “I’ll be more aware of the word count going forward.”

“No, don’t worry about it. As I said, you’re the only one who does it, so I have time to read your op-eds.”

Mary returned her focus to the show, thinking they’d come to a natural conclusion on the topic, but then Ruben asked, “And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“If you came to you for matchmaking, what category would you fall under?”

She shifted in place, uncomfortable with the sudden focus. “Honestly, I don’t know. It’s hard to self-assess accurately. I need distance.”

“Okay, how about you from a decade ago?”

She paused. It was an intriguing exercise, and scrutinizing the old her came easy.

“I’d definitely categorize nineteen- or twenty-year-old Mary as a chameleon.

She was someone who tweaked her interests, her personality, and even her sleep schedule to better suit whoever she was with.

In matchmaking, that type of client can be difficult because they don’t quite know what they want but also seem content with anything.

It’s hard to narrow down and filter out candidates for them. ”

Becoming a matchmaker had been an eye-opener.

It had changed how Mary viewed romance because she had the honor of witnessing great loves and true loves.

Suddenly a boyfriend who, for instance, didn’t know her last name was Neilson and not Nelson after a year of dating wasn’t going to cut it anymore.

Ruben’s persistent gaze brought Mary to the present. He was studying her like he was seeing her for the first time. She’d said too much. Gotten a little too real.

“I hope you don’t think my past personal shortcomings affect my competency as a matchmaker,” she said.

“No, not at all,” he replied. “It makes you more human and less like some omniscient deity flinging heart-shaped arrows at people.”

She laughed stiltedly. “Okay, good. Just making sure.”

They turned their attention back to the TV program, but Mary continued to feel the raw sting of exposure even after the room went dark for the night.

Chapter Sixteen

On the second morning under the shelter-in-place advisory, Ruben was awakened by the sunlight slipping past a gap in the curtains. It softly defined everything in the hotel room, including Mary.

He smiled upon seeing her. The invariably elegant and put together Mary was not a graceful sleeper. Her limbs were sprawled out like branches. The thin top sheet was tangled around her waist, and the scarf that had been covering her head had vanished.

Before last night, he thought he understood Mary, but learning she didn't always show up as the bold, incisive force she was with him piqued his natural curiosity.

It made him want to lean in and discover more fascinating complexities.

As he continued to consider her, a stray desire rose to reach across the cavern that separated their beds and sweep the mussed hair from her pretty face.

It was a jarring thought that drove Ruben out of bed and quickly into the bathroom with his toiletries.

The last thing he needed while rooming with Mary was to entertain any ideas that could alter his general regard for her into something specific and potent.

He stepped into the shower before the running water had a chance to warm up and doused the yearning from his body.

Mary couldn't ever suspect this attraction.

It would mess with their congenial relationship, turn it awkward, and more importantly, it could affect how she did her job as his matchmaker moving forward.

After dressing and double-checking that he'd not left even a speck of toothpaste in the sink, he emerged from the washroom with his thoughts fairly sorted out.

Mary was awake by then, sitting in bed watching the news.

The anchor was numerating the damages from the last twenty-four hours and forecasting another harsh day.

"Morning," he said, avoiding direct eye contact.

"Morning," she replied, her voice husky from sleep.

The sultry sound set off a gentle quake across his chest as if it had been murmured directly against him.

"I'll give you some space," he said, quickly straightening the duvet on his bed. He needed to get out of there. "Do you want me to save you anything from the buffet?"

"No, it's all right. I won't be coming down for breakfast."

Ruben paused and looked at her. "You okay?" he asked. She was propped up against her headboard with the top sheet tucked under her arms. Besides the faint lines marking her face from where she'd lain on her pillow, she appeared herself.

"The bride from the wedding I attended this weekend misplaced her engagement ring, so I'm going to help look for it."

“Do they need extra hands?” he asked.

“No, it should be fine. It’s me, plus her entire wedding party.”

“All right,” he said. “Find me if things change.”

He left the room then and headed down for breakfast. The confusion in the lobby and restaurant from the previous day had greatly improved, and folks seemed to have accepted this would be their circumstances for a while.

A few old men casually chatted with each other as they watched the snowfall at the biggest window in the restaurant, someone was walking around in their robe, and a group of kids were playing a game of tag in a corner of the lobby.

The spread at the breakfast buffet was less varied than the day before, with the offerings including two types of cereals, whole wheat bread, and a fruit salad.

“What you see is what there is,” the staff member nearby would periodically announce.

Ruben ate his breakfast with the Arizona couple who spent the meal outlining more of their endgame preparations. Today they’d be stockpiling lithium batteries they could find around the hotel. At first, Ruben humored them with questions, but grew fascinated by their intensive plans.

Once Ruben was finished with breakfast, he visited the activity desk.

Anything he might have tolerated was already full for the morning, so he returned to his empty hotel room.

He spent a portion of time reading, another completing a lower body stretch routine

for his aching calves, then he worked on his laptop before abandoning it for television when the internet connection began to lag.

He became restless and was seriously considering the 11:30 a.m. bracelet-making session when his cousin called.

“They’re predicting it’ll be at most another day,” Junie said.

“And thank god because I don’t know how many more rounds of Yahtzee I have in me.

” She’d been hunkering down through the blizzard at her parents’ home, and Ruben had been getting a play-by-play of the trying experience through text: All I’ve watched today is Sanford and Son episodes and the news...

Time has no meaning here... I keep forgetting not to swear.

“It’ll probably be longer for us up here,” Ruben said. “The roads to the highway haven’t been cleared at all.”

“An extended vacation in a nice hotel doesn’t sound bad.”

“It’s not exactly a restful alpine getaway right now,” he replied, telling her about the guest overcapacity, middling food, and haphazard summer camp entertainment. “I’m also rooming with Mary.”

“Who’s—wait, you mean your matchmaker, Mary?”

“Yeah, it was a coincidence. We were attending different events at the hotel. She didn’t have a room, I had two beds in mine, so I offered one to her.”

“Okay, so you’re definitely having a better time than me. Getting snowed in with a beautiful woman is actually my dream scenario.”

“Well, my situation is not that,” Ruben said with a dismissive laugh that sounded forced to his own ears, but he quickly changed the subject. This situation could never be that.

* * *

Inside the bridal suite of Mary’s former client, things were already in disarray. The bed had been stripped of its sheets, the mattress thrust off its base, and suitcases had been opened and emptied.

Vanessa sat on a chair in the corner of the room, eyes red and swollen as her bridesmaids looked on helplessly.

“Hey,” Mary said softly as she advanced toward the group.

Vanessa leaped from her seat and raced to hug Mary. “It’s not here! I’ve looked everywhere!” Vanessa wailed, her arms like a vice around Mary’s neck. “It was Ian’s great-grandmother’s ring, and I’ve lost it!”

“It’s going to be okay,” Mary said, pulling back to look straight into her former client’s eyes.

“Listen to me. We know you wore the ring on the wedding day, so it’s in this hotel somewhere.

We’ll go through this room again. Then we’ll search all the spots you took photos.

Ian and the groomsman can tackle the ceremony and reception halls. ”

“Ian doesn’t know yet,” Vanessa said, on the verge of tears again. “I don’t want to tell him.”

“It’ll be faster if we divide and conquer, so we should tell him what’s going on. Does that work for you?”

Vanessa nodded, and once Mary gave the bridesmaids instructions on how to systematically go through the space, she found the groom in the hallway, baffled as to why his wife had refused to talk to him all morning.

After Mary explained the situation, Ian asked, “Is she okay?”

“No, not really, but it would help if you went in there and told her you don’t hate her for possibly losing a family heirloom twenty-four hours after your wedding.”

With the slight tension in the new marriage on its way to repair, Mary joined the search efforts in the suite.

She scrutinized the carpet, several times mistaking glitter remnants from the bachelorette party for the ring. She went through every drawer in the room twice over. Nothing. And when Mary and the bridal party broke for lunch, the ring was still missing.

The women sat around on different available surfaces, waiting for the groomsmen—whose search of the halls had also produced nothing—to deliver lunch from the restaurant.

“I was so scared this whole wedding would fly by and I wouldn’t remember a thing,” Vanessa said dejectedly, “but I can say these have been the longest days of my life.”

The bridesmaids, realizing their friend needed distraction, overwhelmed the moment

with good memories, gossip, and inside jokes. There was hardly a gap of silence, and Mary looked on with admiration at the display of friendship.

“Mary,” said the maid of honor, a tall woman with shiny auburn hair, “who is that man you sit with at mealtimes? The one with the freckles.”

Not only had Mary not expected the question, but she was surprised to see the entire bridal party had leaned in to listen to her reply.

Mary fumbled for an answer that wouldn’t breach Ruben’s privacy as a current client. “He’s my—I suppose we’re...acquaintances,” she finally said.

“Do you know if he’s single?” the maid of honor asked. “Because Bethany is single.”

“Oh, my god, stop, you guys,” Bethany said with mock modesty. “But is he?”

The friends laughed, and Mary, uncomfortable, replied, “Ah, yeah. Yeah, he is.”

“Could you introduce us?”

“I’m off duty,” Mary said with a laugh she couldn’t help including even though she knew its undermining effects.

“All you have to do is make an introduction,” said Vanessa, appearing spirited in a way she’d not been all morning.

Mary hesitated, but under the other women’s fixed gazes, she buckled. “All right, but I’ll first make sure he’s interested in meeting someone.”

There was a knock at the hotel door that turned out to be the groom and two of his groomsmen with sandwiches and juice boxes for lunch.

And as the meals were divided up, Mary retreated to the suite's bathroom for a moment alone.

She needed to rein in her annoyance, but she took her job seriously and this was not how she worked.

As a matchmaker she didn't just throw people together.

There was a method. Things to consider, and Mary knew nothing about Bethany except that the cool-toned bridesmaid dress had suited her complexion the best.

Mary sat on the edge of the giant bathtub and flipped her head over her knees.

The rush of blood gave her the impression that all her worries were draining out of her, and when she turned back upright, she was slightly dizzy but thinking clearer.

A simple introduction did not have to bear the weight of her entire matchmaking practice.

Plus, if Ruben and Bethany made a genuine connection, Mary would've unofficially but technically succeeded in matching him, and he would no longer be a client.

No more contact, no more contention about thinking he was good-looking. She'd be free.

Mary moved to stand from the tub, but a flicker of light caught her eye. She cocked her head for a second look, and there, just behind the basin sink, lay Vanessa's emerald-and-diamond-cluster engagement ring.

Chapter Seventeen

Ruben had been on his laptop at the desk next to the TV credenza when Mary returned to the hotel room, announcing, “I’ve got wedding cake!”

“I’m guessing things went well with the search party,” he said as she showcased the stout cylinder covered in pale blue icing.

“Yes, they did,” she said. “You want some?”

He definitely did. It was the first appetizing food in a couple of days. They cleared the table and found an extra chair. They had forks but no plates, so they ate the lemon raspberry cake directly from the serving stand.

“It was complete luck,” she told him, relaying the story of her victory. Ruben listened, enjoying the relaxed talk until Mary paused to recall a detail and held her fork in her mouth. The tines left an impression on her plush bottom lip that Ruben watched slowly clear.

“What?” Mary asked, freezing. She swiped her hand across her mouth. “Do I have icing all over my face?”

“No, you’re good. You got it.” He cleared his throat. “So how do you know the bride and groom again?”

“They’re former clients.”

“Really?” He didn’t mean to sound so shocked, but it was one thing to conceptualize being matched and another to know real people were committing to each other based on a process he was currently going through.

“Yeah, I matched them eighteen months ago.”

“Wow,” he said. “Do you ever set people up in your personal life?”

“I’ve introduced friends who ended up seeing each other for a bit. But my sister is with her high school sweetheart, and my dad is...well, he’s dating.”

The slight edge in Mary’s tone made Ruben ask, “That a bad thing?”

“It’s not, it’s just...” She put her fork down. “My sister and I think he’s being catfished.”

“Why do you suspect that?”

“There are a few red flags and some inconsistencies, but we’re planning to hire a private investigator to make sure.”

Ruben nodded sympathetically, remembering a segment they’d almost included on the show months ago about the increasing sophistication of love scams in the era of artificial intelligence. “If you need a PI recommendation, I know a guy.”

“Thanks, but my sister is putting a list together. We should be all right.” They resumed with the cake in comfortable silence until Mary said, “Oh, before I forget, one of the bridesmaids is interested in you. She’s seen you around the hotel and finds you good-looking.”

Ruben laughed. “All right, um...”

“I can introduce you if you want. I know it’s not an ideal situation, but this wouldn’t be an official match. I don’t have any idea of compatibility, but she seems sweet. She could also turn out to be a complete nightmare.”

Ruben found the idea of a date during a weather emergency unappealing, but if he was going to be trapped in this hotel for more days, it would serve him not to spend so many of them with Mary.

“Okay, I’m down,” he said. “I’ll meet her.”

“Yeah?” Mary asked. “Because there’s no pressure. If you don’t want to?—”

“No, I’ll do it.”

* * *

Mary had expected some resistance from Ruben when it came to introducing him to the bridesmaid.

Hell, part of her was certain he’d say no outright.

The sliver of disappointment his decision roused scared her more than the lust before it.

It was a precursor for territorialism and jealousy, and she refused to go down that path.

She’d introduce Bethany and Ruben tomorrow morning after breakfast and then pray that they’d hit it off.

In the meantime, Mary needed to create space, so after she and Ruben had had their

fill of cake, Mary made some excuse to leave the room.

She wandered through the hotel, finding entertainment in watching a several-person guitar jam session she came across in one corridor and then in a chess tournament underway in the lobby.

When she reunited with Ruben at the restaurant for a tasteless dinner of minestrone and crackers, Mary didn't have to directly address him as the Arizona couple dominated the conversation with their appraisal of the different batteries they'd collected that day.

When the meal was over and Ruben said to Mary, "I'll give you some privacy to get ready for bed," she didn't take the allotted time for granted.

She completed her routine in record time, burying herself under the covers and pretending to be asleep when she heard Ruben enter their room.

There wouldn't be any chitchat between them tonight.

And after a morning spent pulling a bridal suite apart, it didn't take long for Mary to drift off.

She slept peacefully, dreamlessly until a few hours after midnight when she was wrenched awake by a blaring alarm.

Another weather alert, she initially believed; however, it was all-consuming, filling the room evenly, and the noise was louder than anything her phone could emit.

"Mary," Ruben called from his side of the room. He was standing, pulling a sweater over his head. "We've got to go."

She jumped out of her bed, finding her boots to shove her bare feet into and grabbing her winter coat slung over the settee in the room.

The metronomic siren urged them to abandon everything else and heed its cry.

In the hallway, the source of the emergency wasn't any clearer.

Guests stood in their pajamas, searching for answers from their neighbors who looked back, at a loss.

Mary and Ruben hustled toward the elevators, but Mary stopped them halfway.

"No, we should take the stairs," she said, pulling on his arm so he'd follow her in the other direction.

They found the stairwell noisy, brimming with people making an exodus.

Seeing a few of them with their luggage made Mary wish she'd at least grabbed her phone and wallet.

She and Ruben merged onto the steps with everyone else.

In that cavernous gray shaft, voices clashed with the alarm, and it was chilly despite the bodies.

Their descent was slow-moving, and Mary tried not to think about anything but putting one foot in front of the other.

Since there was no way to know exactly what was going on, speculations spread through the queue. Gas leak was the popular theory.

Movement stalled for minutes at a time, and people would yell, “Move! Hurry up!”

Someone would then screech, “We’re all going to die!”

“Shut up!” was always the response.

Occasionally, Mary would look to her right at Ruben, who, she assumed, sensed her gaze and would look back. They’d say nothing, but it was fortifying in some way for her.

During one stagnancy, Mary and Ruben were waiting on a landing when protests from above made her turn in time to see a man barreling down, unconcerned for the order or safety of the other guests.

The man rushed in between her and Ruben, shoulder-checking Mary hard enough that if she hadn’t been holding the railing, she’d have fallen.

It must’ve been palpable panic and the pain in her side that drove her to grab on to the man’s arm and shout, “What the fuck is wrong with you? We’re all scared and trying to get out of here. Don’t be an asshole.”

The man turned to face Mary, only the man was actually a teen boy with full cheeks and acne spotting his forehead. He looked at her with bugged-out eyes, and her anger dissipated. “I’m so sorry,” she said, but the teen had already taken off farther down the staircase.

She slowly recognized the presence of others around her, who only spared her a glance, but she was mortified by her outsized reaction.

“You all right?” Ruben asked her. He had a tender hold on her elbow.

She nodded. "I shouldn't have gone off like that."

"Nah, you're fine. It was a good life lesson for the kid," he said. "The wording and tone might need to be reworked for a Sesame Street script, though."

A tension eased in Mary's chest as she met Ruben's facetiousness with a reluctant smile.

At this point, the alarm had become ordinary, and the journey felt like it might never end.

Sure, the numbers on the walls marking the floors were decreasing, but still there were countless stairs and landings and growing uncertainty.

So when the alarm just stopped, it was realized in a wave.

Everyone stilled, looked around, then at once began asking the same questions.

Is it over? Can we go back to our rooms?

For some guests, the answer was yes, and they exited the stairwell using the door on the closest landing, but for others, like Mary and Ruben, they continued toward the lobby because the alarm had gone on for too long for their anxiety to be so easily allayed.

The lobby was almost as full as it had been on the first day of the blizzard, with the hotel manager on top of the front desk and megaphone in hand.

"We are deeply sorry for the confusion and panic," the manager said. "There is no danger. An alarm was falsely tripped. Please return to your rooms. I repeat, you are safe. Return to your rooms."

The gathered crowd loudly grumbled, but it was the best way things could've ended.

As they stood waiting for their turn on the elevator, Mary and Ruben spotted the Arizona couple as they marched to the stairwell door on the ground level.

Unlike everyone else, they wore weather-appropriate clothing and were equipped with headlamps and matching tactical backpacks.

Mary and Ruben simultaneously looked at each other and burst into laughter.

"They're a fun, quirky duo," she said.

"Oh, a perfect match," he replied.

With the fog of fear and chaos now completely lifted, Mary realized she and Ruben were holding hands.

When it happened, she didn't know. But their palms were flush, and their fingers intertwined.

Ruben must've realized it, then, too, because his firm grip grew lax.

And Mary slowly, without comment, withdrew her hand from his.

Chapter Eighteen

After the night's big interruption, morning came too soon for Ruben. He'd opened an eye to read the clock on the bedside table and was about to pull the covers over his head for a few more hours but saw Mary staring at the ceiling.

"How long you been up?" he asked her.

"Not long," she replied, turning on her side to face him. "I kept waking up thinking I heard another alarm."

"I dreamt that the side of the hotel room got ripped away by the wind," he said. "And I was just circling in the sky with a cow in a sort of blizzard tornado."

"Wait," Mary said, laughing. "Where did the cow come from?"

"I can't even begin to explain or guess."

"Where was I?"

"You're asking too many questions about what amounts to a stress-induced bad dream," he replied, but the truth was that Mary had featured in his dream.

He didn't mention it because it would feel like an admission of something more, but she'd been right beside him in the snowy cyclone, and their hands had been joined as they were in reality during the faux evacuation.

In the stairwell, Mary had reached for his hand when the alarm cut out. It had been an honest bid for comfort that he'd eagerly met, but like so much that weekend, it had also been a breach of the neat parameters that once governed their interactions.

Once they'd both gotten ready for the day, they left the room together for breakfast and found that all anyone could talk about was what caused last night's false alarm.

"The wind," came one suggestion from a lady on the elevator.

"I think a rat chewed through the wires that set off the alarm," said another in the line at the buffet.

Ruben overheard someone bet it was a drill to test the response time if there was ever a real need to evacuate. And, of course, the Arizona couple had an elaborate conspiracy they readily shared.

"Someone broke into the kitchen trying to cook something and accidentally caused a fire that tripped the alarms," Jillian said.

"I wouldn't blame them," Ruben replied as he pushed around the gummy oatmeal slop now passing for breakfast.

"You want some raisins?" Allen asked, sliding over a mini-snack box of raisins. The couple had collected a few dozen boxes so far. "Gives the food a hint of sweetness," the older man said.

"I'm okay, thanks. Only thing that would hit the spot right now is a bowl of cereal that has enough added sugar to power a small motorized vehicle."

Mary commiserated with a nod, saying, "Or a slightly heated cinnamon bun with extra glaze."

Jillian perked up in her seat. “We’ve got this Mexican place back home that sells these incredible churros.”

“Ah, the caramel sauce!” Allen said.

The four of them continued sharing the perfect dishes and meals they’d eaten in the past until, toward the end of breakfast, the manager of the hotel showed up in the restaurant.

The dining room fell to a hush when he called attention to himself with the megaphone, and Ruben braced himself for more unpleasantness.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your breakfasts,” the manager said, appearing the same as he had the first day of the storm, save the shabby stubble along his jaw, in a dress shirt and oversized blazer.

“I’ve just received some good news. The main road that leads to the highway will be cleared as early as tomorrow morning. ”

There was a hum as people turned to their neighbors to confirm what they’d heard.

“You mean we’re going home?” someone shouted.

“Yes, and to celebrate?—”

Applause and cheers thundered, and it took the manager a full minute to regain control.

“To celebrate,” the manager said loudly, “tonight we will have a special dinner. Bring your appetite and wear your best.”

Ruben turned to Mary and nearly said, “Toasts will be made with glasses of pickle juice,” but the dismissive words evaporated in the face of the blissful smile Mary wore.

“We’re going home!” she said, and something in Ruben’s chest lurched.

* * *

With the end of the hotel quarantine imminent, Mary let herself think about the moment she’d feel wind on her skin again, when she could plod through the snowdrifts and crack the thin frozen top layer.

She spent most of the afternoon seated on the lounge chair in the corner, preparing to return to work, her apartment, and routine.

She made a grocery list, reconnected to her team’s communication platform, drafted emails, and booked the first shuttle out the next morning.

On the other side of the room, Ruben also worked intently.

His hands flew across the keys of his laptop as he talked on the phone tucked between his ear and shoulder.

She got distracted watching his movements.

From the way he mindlessly twirled his pen across his fingers to how he balanced on the back legs of his chair, stretching his arms overhead and revealing a sliver of his taunt abdomen under his T-shirt.

“Am I being too loud?” he asked when he caught her looking at him.

“You’re not. It’s fine,” she said, smiling through the embarrassment. She turned back to the work on her lap and vowed not to raise her head again. The strategy worked, except she also dozed off right there in the chair.

When she woke up, daylight had gone, her neck was stiff, and Ruben was standing before her, handsome in a button-down shirt, jeans, and Converse.

“Sorry to wake you,” he said softly.

She lifted a self-conscious hand to her face. “What time is it?”

“We have an hour before dinner.”

She reeled to straighten and checked her phone, confirming she’d slept all afternoon.

“I’ll be quick,” she said and retreated to the bathroom where she freshened up, ran a heating tool through her hair, and struggled into the sequined long-sleeve mini dress she’d brought as an option for the wedding.

She emerged from the bathroom to find Ruben standing in front of the TV, listening to the latest storm reports.

“Any major updates?” she asked as she slipped past him to store her belongings.

“Same old hedging. But it doesn’t seem the damages in the city are...”

“Are what?” Mary asked when he didn’t finish his thought. She turned to face him and found him staring at her.

“The damages are not as bad as they’d predicted,” he said. “You look nice.”

A feather-light trill fell along Mary's back. "Thank you."

He gave a short nod, then turned away to switch off the television. "You ready to head down?" he asked.

"I am."

When they arrived at the restaurant, they discovered order had been restored to the dining room. Chairs and tables were no longer positioned randomly, and gentle orchestral music from unseen speakers played guests to their seats.

Ruben and Mary were waved down by the Arizona couple, and they approached the pair who had traded their sporty outfits for a dress and trousers.

"You look spectacular," Jillian said to Mary as the women hugged.

"You as well!"

As guests continued to arrive, waitstaff circulated around the restaurant with sparkling cider.

Allen raised his glass. "To making it out here alive."

"And without devolving into cannibalism," Ruben added, and they all clinked their glasses together.

Soon, the aromas from the buffet filled the room, and section by section, guests were permitted to go up and serve themselves.

The main meal consisted of a meat or vegetable lasagna, salad, and garlic bread that had everyone going back for seconds.

It was all simple, certainly nothing to Yelp about, but it felt like luxury.

Toward the end of dinner, Mary got up to scan the dessert spread, a medley of brownies, Nanaimo bars, and Rice Krispie treats, when Bethany sidled up to her. With all the excitement of the last day, she'd forgotten about the bridesmaid.

"Would you mind introducing me to Ruben right now?" whispered Bethany. "We're all leaving tomorrow, and I don't want to miss my chance."

"For sure!" Mary said, and gestured for Bethany to follow her. As they approached the table, Mary readied herself, putting on a big, great smile.

"Ruben," she said brightly, "I'd like you to meet Bethany. She's the bridesmaid I was telling you about."

Surprise crossed Ruben's face before he smiled and greeted Bethany, who quickly took Mary's seat.

Their conversation was immediate, and Mary retreated to the other side of the round table next to the Arizona couple.

She took sips of her tea and nibbled at the dessert squares, listening to the older couple share their plan to make wine with all the raisin boxes they'd collected when they got home.

Periodically, Mary would permit herself to glance over at Ruben and Bethany.

While she couldn't hear what they were talking about, Mary doubted it warranted all the laughing Bethany was doing.

She could admit it was an ungenerous thought.

She'd watched countless singles interact and was accustomed to the excessive preening, the awkward flirting, and the nervous ticks.

When a couple got up to sway to the slow music, they shifted the expectations of the evening, and gradually pop hits replaced the classical music and more people abandoned their seats to dance.

It gave Mary something to fix her attention to other than the date happening across from her.

That is, until Bethany and Ruben also made their way to the makeshift dance floor.

Mary watched them for half a song—her shoulders growing tense with each syncopating beat—before she realized she didn't have to be there.

Chapter Nineteen

“Having fun?” the Arizona couple asked Ruben when he returned to the table after a stiff round of dancing with Bethany. They’d exchanged contact information, but Ruben wasn’t sure there was much there.

“It’s certainly an evening,” he replied, retaking his seat.

He nibbled at the remaining dessert on his plate, scanning the room for Mary. He was sure she would have questions about the unofficial date. But ten minutes lapsed, and her seat was still vacant, so he asked the chatty couple, “Did you see where Mary went?”

“Oh, she called it a night,” Jillian said. “Poor thing seemed tired.”

“It’s been a long weekend,” he replied, already strategizing his exit. There was nothing else keeping him in the dining room, and he had a long drive tomorrow. He drained the last of the water from his glass and said goodbye to Jillian and Allen.

“It was nice meeting you,” Jillian said. “Let us know if you’re ever down in Arizona!”

Ruben rode the elevator up to his floor, and a mild case of melancholy came over him when he realized he and Mary had would soon revert to their roles as client and matchmaker. Then again, it was probably for the best, considering his attraction to her.

When Ruben arrived at the hotel room, he eased the door open, treading lightly in case Mary was asleep. But Mary was very much awake, and Ruben halted upon seeing her. She was still in her dress, reaching for something on her back as she craned for a look in the full-length mirror.

Mary froze when she finally noticed him. “My zipper is stuck,” she explained, slightly out of breath.

“Oh,” he said, stepping forward. “Can I help?”

“Please,” she said, presenting her back to him.

Ruben settled behind her, and making sure not to touch her unnecessarily, he reached for the tab and pulled. It didn’t budge. He tried again, applying a bit more force, but the results were the same.

“It’s really stuck, isn’t it?” he said.

“Yeah, I almost broke a nail.”

He fell quiet, trying to get a better grip and didn’t anticipate Mary asking, “So what did you think of Bethany?”

“Um, she was nice,” he said, briefly meeting her gaze in the mirror they faced.

“That’s good! And did you like her?”

“I did,” he said distractedly.

“Incredible! So, does that mean?—”

“One second,” Ruben said as he felt the zipper give a little. He pulled at the tab with all the might in his thumb and forefinger, ignoring how the small shiny discs covering Mary’s dress scratched his hand, but his effort was met with no success.

“You got it?” she asked, twisting to look over her shoulder.

“No,” he said, stepping away to consider the dress from a distance. “Did you try taking it off over your head?”

“Yeah, and I can’t pull my arms out.”

“All right,” he said, thinking. “We need to increase the leverage. If you brace yourself, and I hold you, it might help.”

Mary planted her hands on the wall as he put one of his at her waist. He went in for another attempt, and the result was the tab completely breaking off the zipper.

“Dammit,” Ruben said, frustrated at being bested by a sparkly dress.

“It’s all right,” she said. “Thanks for trying.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll just sleep in it and figure it out in the morning.”

He shook his head. “Not the way you sleep.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, turning to face him.

“You sleep like you’re engaged in hand-to-hand combat.” He imitated her erratic arms.

“Oh, that. Trust me, I know. I was a pariah at sleepovers.” She sighed dramatically. “You karate chop someone’s neck one time...”

He laughed, thrilled by the deadpan delivery. “Okay, let me try one more time,” he said, “so you can avoid Freddy Krueger-ing that beautiful face.”

Mary’s eyes widened, and Ruben registered what he’d said. Earlier in the evening, he’d told her she looked nice. He’d chosen the word intentionally because it was forceless, less revealing. But here he was that same night, straight up calling her beautiful.

Mary didn’t say anything as she resumed her position, and Ruben, with his cheeks on fire, inspected the zipper again.

He now noticed how the teeth of the zipper had snagged on the fabric, so using a pen from the desk, he worked to disrupt the interlocking mechanism at a different point.

It took a lot of wriggling, but he was able to create a tiny gap, and from there, with one solid tug, the two sides of the dress came apart.

“There you go,” he said, taking a healthy step away from her and averting his eyes from her exposed body.

“You did it!” she said and thanked him, smiling. She was a sight to behold with her tousled hair and loosened dress she held up with a hand.

“No problem,” he said, swallowing hard. He should’ve stepped aside to clear her way back to the restroom then, but it was as if he were fixed in place by concrete.

And it appeared she was similarly afflicted.

Lifetimes passed with them standing there but equally no time at all before they joined.

Her arms swung around his neck while his hands splayed across her naked back, pulling her flush to him.

Their lips met in a rush, pressing, skimming, stoking warmth.

A desperate hum crossed her lips to his, settling somewhere in his center, and with the first caress of her tongue, he made a sound of his own. Her leg hooked around his waist, and it was so simple for him to pull the other one along and drag her up to him.

She grabbed the sides of his face, slowing their kiss until it was molten, heavy.

His heart drummed. His hands roamed, trying to absorb the moment, the woman he held.

Her bare skin was soft, her undulating hips a gift.

He forever wanted to feel the heat of her thighs wrapped around him.

She caught his lip between her teeth before soothing the bite with a sweep of her tongue.

“Mary,” he breathed as she dragged her mouth along his jaw, down his neck. He needed to get her on a surface, against a wall, and show her the hard proof of his desire. But a brief commotion outside their hotel room broke the delicate spell they were under.

Mary sharply pulled away from him, out of his arms. “I shouldn’t have—I’m sorry. I?—”

“Mary, it’s all right.” He thought he might’ve shouted that, but he couldn’t know for certain because of the sound of the blood rushing in his ears. Mary backed into the bathroom, and a knot, obstinate and tough, formed in the pit of Ruben’s stomach the moment she shut the door.

He moved to his bed and lay on his back, staring at the ceiling.

The kiss had been too brief, but she’d left traces of herself on him.

Her subtly sweet fragrance lingered, as did the inkling of her bite on his lip.

She’d saved them from a big mistake, but still his body clamored and his heart raced.

Ruben didn’t know how much time had lapsed when Mary entered the room again. His heartbeat staggered at the quick eye contact she gave him. “All yours,” she said impassively.

He thanked her and withdrew to the washroom to prepare for bed, emerging only after he’d managed to steady himself.

Mary was completely hidden under her duvet, but he doubted that she was sleeping.

He wanted to say something to make everything less of what it currently was, but words failed him.

So he turned off the lights and got into bed.

He lay in the dark listening to the churning heater until, despite everything, he fell asleep.

In the morning, upon opening his eyes, he reflexively looked over to the other side of

the room.

He expected to see her there, but her bed was empty and roughly made.

On top of the stacked pillows was a note written on the hotel room's stationery:
Thank you for sharing your room with me. Safe travels.

Chapter Twenty

Excerpt from the official Hearts Collide Matchmaking training manual

IV. The matchmaker/client relationship

The best relationships are built on trust. That's the same for the matchmaker/client relationship. The following should be considered to keep the dynamics as strong as possible:

Your client list is not your dating pool.

Remain courteous and warm, but remember, your clients are not your friends.

Avoid romantic involvements with clients.

If a romance cannot be avoided and a relationship is pursued, the client's membership at the agency will be terminated. Membership will not be reinstated if parties break up.

* * *

Nearly a week had passed since the blizzard that had cloaked part of the province for days, and in that time, Mary had tried to convince herself that what had happened in the hotel room with Ruben didn't have to change anything.

She could do her job, and they could carry on as they had before that wonderful kiss,

which existed in the same lawless plane that made it possible to day-drink at the airport and not have a problem.

However, every time she tried to open up Ruben's file to do said job, she was struck with such profound embarrassment that left her wanting to lobotomize herself.

But with no surgical experience, she only had one real solution.

"Are you able to take over a client's account for me?

" Mary asked Eden. They sat in Eden's office, Mary in the seat clients always occupied, feeling truly humbled.

Transferring matchmaking duties was not an unusual practice in the agency, but it was typically done for logistical reasons or a matchmaker's familiarity with a demographic.

"Maybe," Eden said. "Who's the client?"

Mary took a breath. "Ruben Byers."

One of Eden's thin eyebrows rose on her face. "The radio show host?"

"Yes," Mary said as she readied herself for follow-up questions. Eden was perceptive enough to probably deduce that Mary's previously expressed attraction had since complicated.

"Are you in love with him?" Eden asked as rotely as you would for the time.

"No."

“Did you sleep with him?”

“No,” Mary said, but couldn’t quite get herself to admit what did happen. The conversation was mortifying as it was.

Eden reached for her tablet and spent close to a minute tapping and swiping, undoubtedly checking her schedule, before looking up and saying, “All right. Send me his files and relevant information.”

“Thank you,” Mary said, feeling the heaviness that had hounded her chest for the last week ease, “and I’m sorry for the extra work.”

Mary wondered if her colleague judged her, but she tried hard not to care because either way she was getting help.

“Would you like to be kept in the loop about his progress?” Eden asked.

“It’s okay. You can handle it like you would any of your other clients.” She needed to close the chapter on Ruben.

“Have you told Cassidy?”

“Not yet, but I will. You don’t have to worry about that.” Mary was dreading that talk, though.

“If you want,” Eden said, “we can tell her you wanted him to experience different matchmakers and get a feel for the agency as a whole.”

Mary’s surprise must’ve telegraphed onto her face because Eden added, “I thought it would be unnecessary to make the transfer a thing. Especially, you know, with the cruise lead announcement around the corner.”

It was an incredibly kind offer. One Mary would never have requested, but it saved her from the experience of telling her boss that her efforts to do good by the agency had been thwarted by an instance of unprofessionalism. If they'd been closer friends, Mary might've hugged Eden then.

* * *

Ruben wasn't expecting anyone when his apartment doorbell sounded on a weekend afternoon.

"Open up!" squawked his cousin over the intercom.

He buzzed Junie in, and she arrived at his door carrying a snow sled.

"Special delivery," she greeted, hauling the sled into his arms before slipping past him into the apartment and shucking off her boots and bohemian-style wrap jacket.

"I thought I was picking it up from your place," he said, propping the sled against a wall as Junie made herself comfortable on his couch.

"Yeah, so did I. That's why I got it from storage and put it out at the front. But it's been three days, and it's becoming an eyesore."

"Sorry." He sighed. "Work's been busy."

The Blizzard Long Weekend, as it was referred to, had damaged a power line near the station, so while repairs were made, the displaced All Intents and Purposes team had relied on different studios for their broadcasts all week, creating more work and unique stresses.

"You want a drink?" he asked, stepping into his kitchen.

“Yeah, whatever you got is fine.”

He returned to the living room minutes later with a large bowl of microwaved popcorn and soft drinks, and Junie stopped skimming the selection of streaming shows on his television to partake. “I’m guessing the sledding date was Matchmaker Mary’s idea,” Junie said.

“No, why?”

“Because I haven’t seen you play in the snow since we were kids.”

“I do have the capacity for fun and adventure,” he said. “Also, Mary’s not my matchmaker anymore.”

“Wait, you’re done already?”

“No, I’m still at the agency. I’m just working with someone new.”

It would be an adjustment going from Mary to Eden, who, while an attentive and adept matchmaker, couldn’t be accused of being warm or overly friendly. She might’ve half smiled once during their first meeting.

“Why? What happened?” Junie asked, looking concerned.

“It was something to do with her schedule,” he said calmly. The email Ruben had received informing him he’d no longer be working with Mary had cited a vague logistical conflict that might’ve made sense if he’d read it slower, but he knew it was simply a cover for the real reason.

He’d tried to banish the details of that kiss with Mary—the heat and pull of her hands around his neck, her petal-soft lips, the ease with which her body had pressed against

his—but still, they plagued him.

If she hadn't created distance between them, he would have in order to regain some professional detachment and preserve the integrity of his reporting.

The feature and the radio show at large were his most important pursuits, and he'd been reminded of that when he'd walked into the studio at the start of the week and found it void of buzzing lights and whirring equipment.

It reminded him of the recurring nightmares he'd suffered during the months his show was being threatened with cancellation, where he'd find himself standing in a lifeless studio.

"That seems kinda unprofessional to drop a client like that," his cousin said. "Didn't she know her schedule before taking you on?"

"It's not a big deal. Things come up."

"Okay, but what if you were attached?"

He shrugged. "I wasn't."

Junie didn't say anything after that for a while, resuming her search for a program for them to watch. He'd thought she'd dropped the subject until she suddenly turned to him, smiling. "Oh, I know what happened with your matchmaker!"

Ruben tensed but, as casually as he could, asked, "What?"

"All those days in a hotel room together," Junie said. "I bet you got on her nerves so bad. You probably said something to offend her, and she couldn't do her job without wanting to smack you upside the head."

“Hm,” Ruben said, relaxing. “You might be right.”

“Not might. Definitely. You can be a real pain in the ass sometimes.”

Junie was a sounding board for Ruben on many things, including relationships. So, as easy as it would've been to be honest about Mary, he knew it would precipitate a long, interrogating conversation that he didn't feel like having. Especially now that Mary and that kiss were all in the past.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Neilson sisters, intent on choosing the best private investigator to look into their father's girlfriend, decided to conduct a series of interviews with potential hires on a weekend morning.

They sat on the same side of a worn booth at the back of a diner where the smell of bacon grease and coffee were most potent.

"We can go back and forth asking the questions," Hattie said, pointing to the set of bullet points on one of the papers she'd printed out for both of them.

Mary nodded and murmured, "All men," as she scanned the page with the candidates' profiles.

"Sorry," Hattie said indignantly, "I didn't meet your girl power quota. Maybe next time."

"Hey, I wasn't criticizing you. It was just an observation," Mary said. "Thanks for doing all the research." Her sister seemed snippier than usual, but Mary chalked it up to the pressure of the moment.

The first candidate showed up on time. He was a bald man with deep-set wrinkles in his face and twenty years in the industry. He answered their questions smoothly and seemed confident about their case, projecting a month or so of work.

"And you're up-to-date with your private investigator license?" Mary asked toward

the end of their meeting.

“More or less,” he said.

“How more and how less?” Hattie asked.

“Well, the way I see it,” he said, pausing to take a slug of coffee, “the whole licensing thing is a sham. You fork over money to get a flimsy paper you gotta renew every two years. But with or without it, I can do the job.”

“So to be clear, you don’t have it,” Hattie said.

“No.”

The sisters waited for the man to leave the diner before they pressed their heads together to debrief.

“I don’t like that he lied on his profile,” Mary said.

“Me neither.”

When the second PI arrived with an energy drink, a laptop, and a baby face, Hattie asked, “How old are you?”

“I turn twenty this year.”

“So you’re nineteen right now?”

“Only till August.”

“You’re like the PI version of Doogie Howser,” Hattie said, laughing.

“I don’t know who that is,” the young man replied, and the sisters looked at each other.

He seemed to understand that their apprehension was with his youth, so he straightened in his seat and steeped his hands for the rest of the interview. He didn’t have much experience, only having been an official investigator for a few months, but he was licensed and eager to prove himself.

“I’ve got fifty hours of baton training,” he proudly told them, but the visual of him taking out kneecaps on their behalf made Mary uncomfortable.

“We’ll keep that in mind,” Hattie told him.

Once the young man left with an order of pancakes in a Styrofoam container, Mary turned to her sister for her thoughts. “It’s an immediate no,” Hattie said. “I would wring the neck of anyone who had my teenager running around solving grown folk’s mysteries.”

The third candidate walked in wearing a leather jacket and chewing gum like a lead in a plunky police procedural.

He sat with his arms draped over the back of the booth bassinet and would wink after each answer.

It was off-putting, but Mary tried to keep an open mind.

After all, he was registered and not fresh out of high school.

He also had experience doing the sort of investigation they needed him for.

“I love the hunt,” he said. “And I don’t give up.

I do whatever's necessary to get the information my clients need. ”

“Within the law, right?” Mary said, trying to cut the intensity of his proclamation with a bit of humor, but there was a long, ripe silence before the PI answered, “Of course.” His intonation and the proceeding wink did a remarkable job of undercutting the assurance.

It set off warning bells within Mary, and she imagined if they went with him, there was a chance they'd have Mounties kicking in their doors in one to eight months. Mary was relieved to learn her sister felt similarly.

“I say we take our chances with the first guy,” Hattie said once they were alone again. “He's not licensed, but he seems competent.”

“But how do we know that? If he could lie about his licensing, he could be lying about his investigating abilities,” Mary said. “I think we should keep looking.”

Hattie shook her head. “We don't have time to sift through more postings.”

“I'll do it this round. Give me a week.”

“We don't have time,” she repeated, her voice clipped.

“Hattie?”

Her sister sighed. “Dad sent Aurora more money. Apparently she had damages from the blizzard that needed to be fixed urgently.”

An invisible vice took hold around Mary's lungs, and she couldn't bring herself to ask for the dollar amount.

Hattie jumped back into advocating for the first candidate, downplaying his shortcomings and calling his hire a necessary risk, but Mary realized they had another option. “I know someone who could help us.”

“Who?” Hattie asked.

“An acquaintance with a contact.”

“That sounds even more sketchy than my suggestion.”

“No, the person I know has good judgment and high standards. I trust him.”

Mary had been sure she’d never talk to Ruben again, but now she needed him.

* * *

When Ruben had suggested sledding to Soledad, a thirty-five-year-old dermatologist and self-professed winter sport fanatic, for their first date, he’d not anticipated how much he’d wipe out.

“Good thing we didn’t go skiing,” he said, shaking the snow from his shoulders.

“You would’ve needed full body armor to survive,” Soledad teased.

They stripped out of their snowsuits when they reached their cars and then drove to a nearby café with kitschy, mismatched furniture.

After placing their orders at the front counter, Soledad excused herself to the washroom while Ruben looked for a place for them to sit.

He’d just claimed a spot near a window when his phone chimed with a text.

Hey, it's Mary Neilson, it began, and for moments that was as far as Ruben could read. I'm sorry to bother you and understand if you choose to ignore this. But is it possible to get the information for the private investigator you mentioned?

Ruben knew this message was the last thing she'd wanted to send, so her father's situation must've escalated.

Absolutely, he replied. My PI contact is a careful person, so he'll need to vet you first before he'll work with you.

How long does the vetting process usually take? she wrote back.

Ruben sensed her urgency, but unfortunately, his PI contact wasn't one to be put on a deadline. He told Mary as much, but also added, Let me see what I can do.

Soledad arrived at the table shortly after, and he put his phone away.

Their hot chocolates with bobbing marshmallows were delivered, and they continued with their conversation where Ruben nodded, smiled, and asked questions but never fully re-engaged.

The date ended with a vague assertion that a nice time was had, and he entered his car and immediately messaged his PI contact, who went by the initial E, on an encrypted messaging app.

He got home and forced himself to go on about his afternoon and not wait by his phone, but yet he didn't turn on music or the TV lest he miss the PI's reply.

He also nearly fell trying to get to his phone when it buzzed, only to find a notification prompting him to write an assessment on the date he'd been on.

It was close to dinnertime when Ruben finally received a call from a blocked number.

“I don’t do rush jobs,” E said to him, his voice rough like those were the first words he’d spoken all day.

“I know,” Ruben said simply.

There was a pause. “You cashing in that favor I owe you?”

“I am.” Of all the tasks Ruben could’ve solicited help with, sussing out a possible catfish was pedestrian work for E, leagues beneath his skill.

“I’ll send you the location and meet time,” E said. “Don’t be late.”

The line went dead, and a calm settled over Ruben, knowing whatever Mary needed to know would be found.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The instructions for the PI meeting had been plain.

Mary was to drive to Basin Reservoir—a location reserved for ice fishing this time of year—leave her car in the parking lot of the provincial recreation area, and walk across the frozen lake to the third ice fishing shack where she'd meet the investigator who called himself E.

It was a weekday morning, and the sun had barely risen when Mary arrived at her desolate destination.

She sat in her vehicle for several minutes, building up the courage to exit into the cold.

Finally, she took a galvanizing breath, grabbed her purse, where a manilla envelope filled with her father's details safely sat, and left her car.

She trudged through the snow, against the biting wind, past the naked trees, until she reached the edge of the lake.

She could just see the ice fishing shacks—old, small, four-seater airplanes that had been hollowed out—fifty meters in the distance.

As she gingerly crossed the lake, her thoughts turned to morbid things like falling through the ice and a bobcat attack from behind.

Mary debated calling her sister to keep her company and allay her worry, but the entire reason for Hattie's absence was she couldn't leave her kids while her husband was away on a work trip. What kept Mary moving instead was the possibility of her father's future despondence.

When she arrived at the small aircraft, she entered from the opening at the side of the plane, grateful to have at least escaped the brute wind.

It had been gutted of anything that made it suitable for aviation.

There were three sealed ice fishing holes down the middle and a bench along each side of the plane for people to sit.

She didn't spend too much time marveling at the novelty of the space and took a frosty seat and tried to attune her senses to someone's approach.

When she at last heard the soft crunch of footsteps, Mary tensed, tightening the grip on her car keys between her knuckles.

The stranger she expected to appear in the opening of the plane was actually Ruben in a winter jacket and jeans roughly stuffed into snow boots. The relief made her momentarily dizzy.

"What're you doing here?" she asked.

"Sorry, I thought that was clear in my texts," he said. "E doesn't know you and couldn't do his usual background check, so I'm here to vouch for you."

"Right. Yes, you probably did mention that. I've just been spaced out recently. Come in."

She scooted over on the bench, and he lowered himself beside her, blocking the draft from the opening even more.

“It gets cold in here after a while,” he said, shaking out the blanket he’d brought with him and offering her a section.

She thanked him and draped the material over her legs.

“How are you?” he asked.

“I’m fine. Nervous about all this.”

He nodded and didn’t attempt to make her feel differently. “You’re going to work directly after this?” he asked.

“Yes, I’ll probably stop at a coffee shop before and get a drink. I didn’t eat a big breakfast, so I might also pick up a pastry. I’ll see...”

She was talking nonsense, but Ruben listened like she wasn’t.

Eventually, she fell quiet, and the gentle cracks and pops of nature took her place.

She had an urge to ask him about his matchmaking progress, but before she could succumb, a tall, broad, hooded figure appeared in the opening of the plane.

From the way Ruben casually stood up and greeted the person, Mary knew the PI had arrived.

As if it were routine, Ruben lifted his arms from his side, and E traced a block device around his body.

Mary followed, but during her inspection, the block beeped when it reached her left coat pocket.

“You have a phone on you?” E asked.

“I do.”

“That’s on me,” Ruben said. “I forgot to tell her not to bring it.”

“I can run it back to my car,” Mary said quickly.

“Just leave it out beside you,” E said, settling onto the bench across from them. He pushed the hood from his head to reveal a handsome angular face, a stern expression, and locs pulled into a low ponytail. “So you’re trying to find out if someone is who they say they are.”

“Yes, my father’s girlfriend.” Mary produced the envelope from her purse. “They met on a music subreddit.”

E shook the envelope before pulling out the papers it held. There wasn’t much, only basic information she and her sister had gathered from conversations with their father and one grainy picture of who they thought might be “Aurora.”

“I’d like whatever investigation you do to be as noninvasive as possible,” Mary said.

E didn’t respond but continued to go through the documents. She looked to Ruben, who assured her with a nod that her parameters would be respected.

Some time had lapsed when E stood up without warning.

“Is it enough?” Mary asked, rising as well.

“Yes,” E said. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Wait,” she said. “How would you like to be paid? I’m assuming cash, but I can also do e-transfer.”

“Payment’s been taken care of,” E replied as he and Ruben exchanged a look. The bulky man left the plane before Mary could ask him further questions.

She looked at Ruben. “You paid him?”

“No, not technically,” Ruben said, standing to fold his blanket. “He owed me a favor.”

“What did you do for him to owe you a favor?”

“It’s a long story.”

Her eyes narrowed, but she didn’t push the point. “I could’ve paid.”

He shrugged. “You needed it, and it was going to waste.”

“Okay, but?—”

“Just say thank you, Mary.”

“All right, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied before gesturing for her to exit the plane first. The air had lost its bite as the sun continued to crest, and the once eerie barren surroundings now sparkled like the inside of a snow globe.

They didn't speak as they shuffled over the ice toward land, but as they crossed the snow-filled shore into the parking lot occupied by only their cars, Mary surrendered to curiosity and asked, "How's matchmaking going? "

Ruben gave her a sidelong glance and smiled. "You mean after my matchmaker abandoned me? Great."

"I didn't abandon?—"

"Hey, I don't blame you. I get it, I would've been too big of a distraction."

With his flippancy and charm, Ruben did what Mary had failed to do in the past weeks. All at once, the kiss was one silly joke. Nothing to hand-wring over and definitely nothing to feel embarrassed about.

"Oh, please," she said, adopting his casual tone. "In that case, I did you a favor as well."

"Yeah?" he asked.

"Yes, you were right there with me. You enjoyed that kiss."

"So by sacking me as a client, you were sparing me..."

She hesitated with a brazen reply on the tip of her tongue, and it might've stayed there if it weren't for the growing smile on Ruben's face. "I spared you hours upon hours lost to lustful thought," she said.

The sound of Ruben's laughter diffused in the open air. "Shall I build an altar and thank you for every productive day since?" he asked.

“Yes. I take offerings of gold and flowers.”

They’d drawn closer at some point, and in the sunlight, she could see the various browns that made up his beautiful eyes. She thought they’d kiss. She hoped they’d kiss. All the reasons not to were irrelevant. And just as she thought she’d get her wish, Ruben took a step away from her.

“I’ll talk to you later, Mary.”

He was already walking toward his car when she processed his words and called out, “There’s no reason for us to see each other later.”

“Then I guess this is goodbye forever,” he said, turning back briefly to smile at her.

Despite the cold, Mary’s face felt hot.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:22 am

Chapter Twenty-Three

[Hearty, growing laughter]

ELLEN CALHOUN: Don't you feel better?

RUBEN BYERS: I suppose I do [laughs]. Is this what your students are chasing?

EC: Definitely. Laughter is the best medicine.

RB: Have you had a therapist direct clients to your classes?

EC: I don't know. But I know we see a lot of couples coming because they were looking for some levity in their relationships. Child-rearing, money, work, and family drama can put stress on a relationship. It makes sense that you search for a sort of release.

RB: So a spoonful of sugar makes life's medicines go down.

EC: Precisely.

* * *

It was the middle of the week—the first back in the studio since the blizzard—and Ruben and Chesa were pulled away from their work for a quick meeting in the conference room with their production director.

“Where are you guys with the feature?” Hugh asked. He sat with his legs propped up on top of the conference table, tossing a glass paperweight between his hands.

“Interviews are ongoing,” Chesa said. “The narration script is starting to take shape, and we’re meeting with Novak next week to go through the sound DX collection.”

“Okay, perfect,” Hugh said, then turned to Ruben. “How about matchmaking? Catch me up.”

“It’s been good,” Ruben said, searching for something substantive to say, but landing on, “Really good. I’m gaining a lot of insight... And I went on my third date over the weekend.”

“Third! There’s a real connection, then,” Hugh said.

“Oh, I mean it was a first date with the third woman I’ve been matched with.”

“Okay,” Hugh said slowly. “So no ringing endorsement yet.”

“It’s a process,” Ruben replied. His date with the dermatologist was the best he’d had with a match yet.

She was interesting, smart, and beautiful.

They had fun. So why hadn’t he set up a second date with her?

A part of him worried it was because of the meeting with Mary at the start of the week.

It had been a brief interaction, but the brilliance of it had yet to dim.

He'd not planned on bringing up the kiss or for their words to turn flirty.

He'd told himself that the awkwardness was all right, that only politeness needed to exist between them, but it had suddenly become imperative he see one of her genuine smiles with the eye crinkles.

Mesmerized by her beauty, by the decadent shade of her skin in the daylight, he'd longed to caress her wind-chilled cheek, to tilt her head back so that their parted lips would easily meld.

Hours of lustful thoughts indeed. But that was all it was, thoughts.

Nothing more would come from them because Mary was right, there was no reason for them to see each other again.

As Hugh continued to dole out feedback and encouragement about the developing feature, a commotion in the office carried into the conference room.

"Holy shit!" someone shouted, and it was a herding call for anyone within hearing shot. News had broken.

Ruben's phone was out before he even turned to vacate the conference room with Hugh and Chesa right along with him. He searched the push notifications and alerts filling his screen for the one that had caused the reaction.

"Goddamn," he said when he found it.

"Mayor's Fiancée Already Steppin' Out?" read the headline with an accompanying candid photo, taken from a distance, of Jennifer Acres kissing a man much taller than the mayor in the back alley of a Chinatown restaurant.

On the open office floor, some of the All Intent and Purposes team huddled around laptops, while others were glued to their phones. “When was the picture taken?” one staff writer asked. “This could’ve been at any point.”

“Recently,” answered another. “You can see her engagement ring.”

Hugh chuckled, rubbing his hands together. “What is politics without the occasional cheating scandal?”

“Maybe they have an arrangement. Like an open relationship,” Chesa said.

“Or,” Ruben said, “it’s like I’ve been saying from the beginning, the timing of their engagement was oddly convenient, and the relationship was always just a ploy to distract from the auditor’s report.”

More theories were offered up for the group to consider, and when the show’s editor interrupted, saying, “Guys, Jennifer Acres just posted on social media,” it sent the office into another frenzy, searching for her account then dissecting the messaging:

“Is she quoting the Bible?”

“I think it’s Rascal Flatts lyrics.”

Meanwhile, Ruben’s phone buzzed with the arrival of a text, and a wide, immediate smile appeared on his face seeing Mary’s name.

* * *

The Hearts Collide office was abuzz over the news of the mayor’s personal drama. Not so much because of the political implications, but because, as matchmakers, they didn’t like seeing another agency embroiled in drama.

“It makes us all look bad,” said Francine. All the matchmakers were gathered in the break room, their half-eaten salads and wraps forgotten. “If they couldn’t properly vet candidates for a high-profile client, why should regular clients trust them?”

“That agency needs to make a statement,” said one of the Twins.

Eden laughed. “And say what? ‘We condemn cheats, knaves, and crooks’?”

Mary hadn’t contributed much to the conversation—mostly noncommittal nods—preoccupied instead with the text she’d sent Ruben thirty minutes ago.

It was an impulsive, regretful move. But when she read the headline breaking the news about the mayor, her first thought was of Ruben.

Had he heard? What did he think? He must feel vindicated for doubting the relationship’s stability from the start.

She’d taken a screenshot of the article and sent it to Ruben with a series of surprised-face emojis.

Seconds after pressing the send button, she wished for a redo.

And every minute that passed without a response was a practice in humility.

Of course he’d heard the news. It was what he did for a living.

She shoved her phone into her purse for the rest of the afternoon.

Work was the perfect distraction, and so was grocery shopping in the evening and cooking a one-pot meal while the TV played in her living room.

She'd almost forgotten about the text until her cell phone rang.

At first, she thought the sound was coming from the playing commercial, but it persisted.

She nearly dropped the phone when she saw it was Ruben calling.

Why the hell would he do that? She wasn't going to pick up. Who called when a text would suffice? She continued to watch her phone ring before suddenly answering it.

"Have you heard of Sprout, the vegetarian restaurant?" Ruben asked without a greeting, like they were mid-conversation. His familiar, blasé tone dashed away any of her misgivings about taking the call.

"No, I don't think so," she said, turning down the heat on the stove before leaning against her kitchen counter. "Why?"

"I'm waiting for their pot pie to be delivered. It has carrots, peas, potatoes, onions, mushrooms. Life-changing meal."

"You had me before mushrooms," she said.

"Not a fan?"

"Something about the texture, the taste, the smell are just nasty to me," she said. "Like those little stringy fibers you see when you slice one open? Gross. Also, I don't think food should be gray."

He laughed. "I respect it," he said before smoothly changing subjects. "It's all a performance with Laurie, by the way. 'Look at me, the poor jilted mayor. Don't think about my office's audit investigation that showed evidence of misappropriated

funds.’”

“Wait,” Mary said. “You don’t just think the relationship was fake, you also believe that this cheating incident was part of the plan to garner public sympathy?”

“It’s convoluted but not impossible.”

“I saw footage of him leaving city hall this afternoon, and he looked genuinely crushed.”

“Surprise! The professional liar is good at faking sincerity.”

“Okay, but that sort of arrangement would need unbelievable coordination not just from the couple but also the matchmaking agency, and the agency wouldn’t knowingly get involved in the kind of scheme you’re suggesting.”

“Why not? They get to say the mayor was a client of theirs. It gives them credibility. Some prestige. Name recognition. Which potentially means more clients.”

“In the short-term, maybe,” Mary said. “But clients love an agency with a high success rate, and an agency wouldn’t risk that for a high-profile engagement they know from the start will end.”

Ruben made a contemplative sound.

“Also,” she continued, “I can’t imagine why they would knowingly risk having that arrangement going public. It would destroy trust with their main clientele.”

“Fair points,” he said.

Remembering her pasta, Mary moved to attend to it and found the bottom had

slightly burned.

“I should get going,” she said to Ruben after confirming with the clock that she’d been on the phone far too long. “Enjoy your fungi-filled dinner.”

Ruben laughed and told her to have a good night as they hung up. A residual buzz clung to her for the rest of the evening, but she didn’t actively dwell on the conversation or how she felt. It was a one-off chat. Nothing untoward.

The following day, just before noon, the receptionist stopped Mary in the hallway. “Your lunch delivery is on the counter in the lounge,” she said.

“I didn’t order anything,” Mary replied. “Are you sure?”

The receptionist shrugged. “Your name is on it.”

Mary headed to the break room and straight to the lone takeout bag.

She felt a curious stirring in her chest reading the order sticker: Vegetable pot pie.

NO MUSHROOMS. There was a grin on her face the entire time as she opened the box to the cartoonishly perfect pie emanating herby savory heat.

On the first bite, she agreed it was life-changing.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The decision to send Mary a pot pie came to Ruben when they were on the phone the night before. He'd thought it would be a fun gesture, something that would make her laugh.

According to the delivery app, the pie had successfully arrived at Mary's workplace over forty minutes ago, and he worried that someone had gotten to it before her.

He also wished he could verify that the restaurant substituted the mushrooms out for another vegetable.

Had he overstepped in some way by sending her the pie altogether?

Maybe he should've given her a heads-up.

Too brain-clogged to focus on the work in front of him, Ruben got up from his desk to make himself a cup of tea, and when he returned, a text from Mary was waiting for him. Incredible. Thank you, it read with an attached picture of the half-eaten pie.

The tension that had gripped Ruben's neck all morning slowly loosened as he read her message again. He wrote back, Glad you're liking it!

"What did you say?" Chesa asked, her head suddenly popping over the partition between their cubicles.

Ruben stashed his phone underneath a stack of papers. "What?"

“I thought you were saying something to me.”

“No, I was talking to myself,” he said easily.

The good mood the text had induced carried Ruben to the end of his workday, and an hour after he got home, that good mood reached an apex when Mary called.

“I wanted to thank you again for lunch,” she said.

“Yeah, it’s no problem,” he replied, abandoning the dishes he was washing. “It’s my duty to evangelize about good vegetarian food.”

A pause followed that might’ve precipitated the end of their call, but Ruben quickly asked, “What are you watching?” He was picking up the faint drone of the television in the background.

“Oh, some action movie on cable,” she said.

“What channel?” he asked, moving into his living room.

“It’s not very good.”

“Then why watch it?”

“Because I like it.”

He laughed. “Okay, then, what channel?”

She finally told him, and he turned his TV to Jungle Run IV , a B-movie from the late 80s. The main actor was no one famous, simply a nondescript brown-haired white guy with heaping muscles.

“Have you watched installments one through three?” Ruben asked, baffled by the way the camera swung and turned, absolutely refusing to follow the action unfolding in the multi-person fight. He’d seen more of the mahogany trees in the background than anything else.

“I have,” Mary said.

“For real?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, I ask sincerely, what exactly are you enjoying here?”

“It’s over-the-top but fun in a low-budget way. Also, I like the hero.”

“The grunting meathead does it for you, huh?”

“No, not in that way. Not my type, but I enjoy what he represents. At his core, he’s a rebel who defies authority and the laws of physics.”

She was so sincere in her defense that Ruben almost accepted the point of view, but the camera deigned the audience to witness the hero getting stabbed in the stomach. It took him down for only three counts before he rose and continued to fight as if it were but a paper cut he’d received.

“I can feel you thinking,” Mary said. “You’re supposed to experience the mayhem, not question or judge it.”

So Ruben tried ridding himself of all thoughts, sinking into his sofa like a skewered marshmallow over a fire.

It didn't work, but when the grunting meathead jumped from one ledge to another impossibly distanced ledge with a shout that sounded like an actual lion's roar had been added in post-production, Ruben laughed until he was doubled over and wiping tears from his eyes.

"See!" Mary said, her voice full of mirth. "You're enjoying it."

As the high-octane scene transitioned to a quieter one set in a sparsely furnished cabin, a random woman with oddly clean hair but dirty clothing appeared and tended to his wound with random bits of scrap fabric and murky liquor.

The hero kept calling her "doll," and Ruben asked, "Does she have a name?"

"They might've mentioned it. I can't remember. But she's not the same lady from the other movies."

When a slow saxophone instrumental started playing, Ruben knew what was coming. The action hero and the unnamed woman inched closer to one another before rushing to lock lips and tear at each other's clothes. The same erratic camera movement used in the fight scene was again employed.

As the couple began lowering themselves onto crates with exposed nails, Mary said, "She's going to get impaled in more ways than one if she's not careful."

"I'm guessing the risk of tetanus is part of the thrill," he replied.

They watched more of the movie, laughing at the special effects and dialogue and sharing ample commentary on the illogical plot, until Mary suddenly said to him, "I should let you go. Release you from this torture."

Ruben wanted to protest. He didn't want the call to end. It beat anything he might've

otherwise been doing, but his goodnight would've been less reluctant if he'd known that for the remainder of the week, he and Mary would spend each evening on the phone together.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Mary assumed it was momentum that kept her and Ruben calling each other night after night.

He'd initiate some of the calls, and she the others.

Their conversations were never longer than two hours, and they spanned a variety of topics.

One evening, after briefly talking about their respective workdays, Mary was curious about the minutiae of his job, which led Ruben to guide her through the vocal warm-ups he did before live broadcasts.

Yawns, meows, lip trills, and hums. "Your mouth should feel buzzy after. Almost itchy," he said.

On another night, they wandered onto the subject of bubble baths. "I don't see the appeal," he told her.

"Have you ever had one?" she asked.

"Yeah, and it was whack. The water was cold within minutes."

"That's an easy fix," she said. "You make the water hot enough to where it's uncomfortable to enter, but not so hot that you get first-degree burns."

That same evening, with the phone on speaker, Mary applied serums and creams to her face in the bathroom while they swapped childhood memories.

“I set out to break the Guinness World Record for longest time spent reading when I was ten,” he said.

“I came nowhere close, but in my heart, I was a champion and told everyone around me as much.”

“That’s actually very adorable,” she said.

He asked her about the electives she’d chosen in school, and she told him she was in band. “I played the French horn.”

“Really? I’d have guessed student council. The planning and organizational side seems more your wave.”

“You know what, I would’ve loved to be on student council, but I always saw it as a popularity contest I’d regret trying to win.”

“I was on the debate team,” he said.

She laughed. “Of course you were.”

“Mary, are you trying to suggest I’m argumentative and quarrelsome?”

She loved how he said her name. She couldn’t explain it, but it never sounded as dull as she’d always considered it. “Oh, I’m not suggesting,” she replied.

Later in the week, when the mayor finally released a statement addressing his relationship, Mary could hardly wait to get off work to speak to Ruben.

When the time came, she sat wrapped up in a blanket on her couch with her laptop, and they spent close to an hour dissecting the vague language and the confounding decision by the mayor and his team to use an emoji in an official statement that gave no clear explanation but asked for privacy.

It became normal for Mary to arrive home, prepare dinner, shower, and then eat as she waited for Ruben to finish his broadcast. She'd come to anticipate his reflective murmurs, his rich laughter, his quips.

She obviously knew that there would come a point when that would end, but she hadn't expected it to come so soon or for it to be as sobering.

Ruben called her on the last day of the week at an hour they'd usually chat and said, "Sorry, Mary. I can't talk tonight. I have a prior engagement...a date."

"Oh, that's fine," she said brightly. "You enjoy yourself!"

After hanging up, she sat on her couch in stillness, replaying the week, questioning her intentions, and feeling foolish.

She'd reasoned that their calls were harmless.

Quaint, even, because who talked on the phone anymore?

But she was bounding toward dangerous territory.

There'd been a suggestive undercurrent to their conversations, one that would ignite a thrum of heat she'd stifle with crossed legs.

Truthfully, she'd enjoyed doing something that felt illicit.

Breaking free, even just for two hours a day, from concerns about perception and likability while talking to someone she had no worry of offending, who she didn't have to be "on" around. It had felt good.

Clear-eyed now, Mary reached for her phone and found Ruben's number in her contact list. She hesitated for a moment, then deleted the information.

* * *

Ruben's second date with the dermatologist Soledad was going objectively well. They went out for dinner at a bistro where they talked with very little interruption from their waiter.

After dessert and coffee, they left the restaurant into the winter evening where the wind tunneled through the gaps in their clothing. Soledad said, "Remind me what the research question for your radio documentary is."

"We're asking if there's a scientifically backed way to optimize chances of finding true love."

"Big question. You expect to come to a definitive conclusion?"

"I don't know. But so far, the answer is shaping up to be that there are many roads to Rome."

When they reached her car, they stopped and faced each other.

"That was a nice evening," she said.

"Yes, very nice," he replied and a long pause followed with only the sizzle from a nearby parking security lamp to fill it.

Ruben quickly understood what the moment was building to even before Soledad took a step toward him.

Naturally, he closed the space between them.

They kissed, and he felt nothing. Pure mechanics and the simple, literal sensation of lips touching.

He wondered if it was the cold's numbing effect and tried to deepen the kiss by gently cupping her face, but to no stirring avail.

Ruben wanted to tell her that he didn't see a future for them, but he waffled on whether it was insensitive to do so right after sharing a kiss.

He debated too long, and Soledad said goodnight with a sweet smile and entered her car.

Inside his own vehicle, Ruben took a moment before driving off to check his phone, lying to himself that he wasn't hoping to see a message from Mary until he only found notifications for news and emails.

His attention had waned throughout the date.

The conversation with Soledad had been paint-by-numbers.

Which was normal since they didn't know each other, but it was difficult not to compare it to the talks he'd had with Mary that past week.

Those ones always felt like being on a road without a map.

They moved aimlessly, discovering delightful troves along the way.

One moment they were sharing their perspectives on self-driving cars (with corresponding links to articles to bolster their arguments), the next, making a definitive ranking of Miss Vickie's potato chip flavors.

He would've preferred to be in his heated apartment on the phone with her tonight, and it was a terrifying realization.

One person couldn't take that much space in his brain.

It would snowball into something more complicated, and he couldn't afford complicated right now.

The radio feature was his priority, so things had to change. No more night chats with Mary.

As Ruben pulled out of the parking lot toward home, he drowned out thoughts of that very woman with Top 40 tunes.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“So you have no idea what it says?” Mary’s sister asked as they both stared at the manila envelope in front of them on the kitchen counter.

Mary shook her head. “I thought we should open it together.”

“I wish you’d just read it,” Hattie said, rocking her youngest son in her arms after his tearful morning.

Mary hadn’t expected the investigator to have such a quick turnaround.

It had barely been a week, but that morning when she’d gone to her car to head to work, she’d spotted the envelope under her windshield wipers, “For Mary Neilson” scrawled on top.

She’d texted her sister immediately and told her she was on her way.

“You open it,” Hattie said as she shut her eyes, so Mary tore open the envelope and spilled the documents onto the counter, sifting through them once, twice, and a final time to make sure.

“She’s real,” Mary said.

Hattie pried one eye open. “Really?”

Mary nodded, and her sister let out a long exhale and began going through the papers

herself.

Aurora Pryor was in fact her real name. She was a retired ICU nurse. A divorced mother of four children ranging from twenty-nine to forty years old. She'd lived in the same home for two decades.

"She's gorgeous," Hattie said, studying a picture of Aurora in front of a fleet of vintage cars.

Her skin was bronzed, and her white hair coiffed.

A red lipstick highlighted her brilliant smile.

The longer Mary looked at the photo, the more she could imagine her dad, perhaps sometime in the near future, standing beside her in one of his plaid shirts he always buttoned to the very top.

"She's real," Hattie sang softly to her baby, who smiled with all his gums. "She's real. She's real. Aurora is real."

Not only did Aurora exist, but she appeared honest. Their father had sent her money for music festival tickets and supposed home repairs after the blizzard, and included in the PI's pile of evidence was a ticket purchase receipt for the festival and a picture of a debris removal truck parked in front of Aurora's house which had a great leafless tree impressed into its roof.

"The PI was thorough," Hattie said.

Mary didn't want to think of the powerful telephoto lens he must have used to capture the photos.

“Might hire him to find the shoes Luther keeps hiding around the house,” she said.
“How much did he charge?”

“Nothing.”

“He did all of this for free?” Hattie was incredulous.

“He did it as a favor to the person who connected us.”

“Aren’t we lucky,” Hattie said. “Make sure to thank both of them.”

Mary nodded, though she would not be doing that.

Her evening talks with Ruben had come to an unceremonious end when they both just stopped reaching out.

Despite her resolve, for the last few days since, Mary would check for his missed call and wonder if the date he’d gone on was why he hadn’t so much as texted her.

Shame prevented her from asking Eden for intel.

“You want to stay for breakfast?”

“No, I have to get going,” she said, kissing her nephew’s temple. “It’s kind of a big day at work.”

Over the weekend, Mary was included in an agency-wide email from her boss, scheduling a staff meeting for that day.

So, within the next hour, she’d know if she got cruise lead or not.

She'd taken extra care with her outfit and hair that morning, and she'd planned to get to work early, but the PI's delivery had detoured her.

She still arrived at the agency with time to spare but found that the other matchmakers, also wearing their best, had taken the good seats around the conference table.

"Finally, right?" Mary said when Eden showed up and slipped into the chair beside her.

"Eons in the making," she replied.

Cassidy appeared shortly and commenced the meeting, filling the first half with meandering updates. Mary made sure to remain attentive, nodding and smiling. Soon, they reached the last item on the meeting's docket.

"As promised," Cassidy began, "I have made a decision on who will lead our inaugural matchmaking cruise event. I understand it's been a nerve-racking wait. I thank you all for your patience." Cassidy smiled. "Eden, I've chosen you for lead."

Mary thought she'd misheard her boss, but the room turned to look at Eden, and her usually stoic colleague's eyebrows were sitting high on her face.

"Thank you, Cassidy," Eden said, surprise making her sound breathy. "I'm grateful for the opportunity and excited to start planning."

Excited? Grateful? What happened to the disinterest Eden had expressed for weeks? The others clapped, and Mary dutifully joined in but wanted to shout, "Objection!"

The meeting was adjourned, and the matchmakers circled Eden to congratulate her. Mary's stomach was in knots listening to all the cooing. When it was her turn to offer

Eden some kind words, Mary pushed past her scattered thoughts to say, “Wow, congrats!”

“Thank you,” Eden simply replied, and Mary waited, hoping for an explanation for her coworker’s change of heart. It didn’t come, so on stiff legs, Mary got up and retreated to her office.

There, she paced the floor a few turns, her heart pounding, refusing to ease. She pulled out her phone, intending to text Ruben, only to remember she’d deleted his information and their messages. She fought the urge to search the recent call log for his number.

There was no one else she could reach out to, so she chucked her phone into her desk drawer.

The ugly emotions bearing down on her chest would’ve been too much for the friends on her contact list who mostly knew her as an upbeat person, and she didn’t want to freak out her sister or her dad by sending a distressed message.

Mary took a seat and flipped her head over her knees, willing the rush of blood to bring some relief. She stayed that way until there was a knock at her door.

“Sorry,” the receptionist said, peeking inside. “Your door was closed, so I wanted to make sure I could send in your first client.”

“Yes, I’m ready,” Mary responded, pasting on a big smile. “Show them in.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Too quickly, Ruben had subsumed Mary into his routine, placing their conversations among daily tasks like meal preparation and chores.

But he was confident that by the end of the week, things would be back to normal; all he had to do was remove all opportunity for his brain to lament the break in pattern, to note Mary's absence.

So, for the last two nights, Ruben would get home from work and fill his evenings with absorbing activities.

He'd drag out his stationery bike and ride for an hour, focusing on keeping pace and breathing.

A loud playlist accompanied his showers, and he'd eat dinner while perusing social media.

Dishes were completed with the TV on in the background, and he'd read or watch a few episodes of an old sitcom until he was tired enough to fall asleep quickly.

On the third night of this temporary routine, he'd just finished brushing his teeth and had returned to the living room to collect his phone and found he'd missed a call from Mary six minutes ago.

He didn't hesitate as he called her back, and it was only while the phone was ringing that he considered she might've pocket dialed him. He didn't care, though, and all his

intentions of keeping his distance were lost to his quickened pulse and the possibility of even a brief interaction.

When Mary finally answered the phone, her voice was a salve that soothed. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have called,” she said.

“It’s all right. You good?” He posted himself against his kitchen counter so as not to get too comfortable. This would be short, he told himself. But Mary’s response was choppy, unintelligible garble.

“I can’t hear you,” he said. “You’re cutting out.”

The static crescendoed before clearing. “Better?” she asked.

“Yeah, kinda. Where are you?”

“Parking lot of a convenience store. I wanted a root beer float.”

“A root beer float,” he said with a laugh, his eyes panning to the stove’s clock. “It’s ten.”

“Yeah, well,” she said, “it was a long, shitty day, so I decided to go wild.”

His chest heaved. “What happened?”

She didn’t answer right away.

“Did you at least get the root beer float?” he asked.

“No, the store had the root beer but not the vanilla ice cream.”

“I have vanilla ice cream,” he said.

“Does it have dairy?”

“No, but I promise it’s good.”

“I don’t believe you.”

He laughed. “Only one way to find out.”

There was a pause. “You inviting me over?” she asked.

He should’ve backpedaled. It would’ve been the wise thing to do, but the idea that he could do something so simple as providing an ingredient for a float and improve her low spirits was too irresistible.

“I am,” he said before giving her his address and hanging up.

While Ruben waited for her to show, he straightened his entrance area and double-checked that the ice cream was still nestled in his freezer amongst the frozen vegetables and microwavable meals.

The buzzer to his apartment rang sooner than he’d expected, and a minute later, Mary was at his door.

“Come in,” he said, taking the pop bottle she’d brought.

“You’ll have to let it rest for a second,” she said, keeping her puffer coat on but removing her boots. “I dropped it on the way up.”

Ruben retreated behind his kitchen counter as Mary settled against the back of his

sofa and looked around his place.

“Is it weird that I’m here?” she asked.

“No. Do you feel weird being here?”

She shook her head. “But I did only call because I wanted to vent to someone.”

“About your dad’s situation?”

“No, actually,” she said, her voice momentarily brightening. “It turns out his girlfriend is who she says she is.”

“That’s great. I’m glad E came through for you.”

“Me too, and thank you again for connecting us.”

He nodded then forced himself not to fill the preceding hush, and eventually, Mary said, “I didn’t get a role at work that I really, really wanted.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, hoping it didn’t sound hollow. He knew all about professional disappointments and how much they hurt.

“I knew there was a chance I wouldn’t get it,” she continued, “and I was ready for that. But I feel almost betrayed by the person who did get it.”

“Why is that?” he asked gently.

“Betrayed is probably not the right word, but I heard she went to our boss and directly pitched herself for the job. Around me, though, she acted almost like she was too good for the role. And I get it, we’re just coworkers, not real friends.

She doesn't have to disclose anything to me, but I guess I feel embarrassed for not knowing that until now. ”

Ruben struggled for what to say, not knowing what Mary needed in her moments of sadness, but she suddenly took a long exhale and said, “Glad I was able to admit that out loud.”

“You feel better?” he asked, searching her face.

She smiled. It was so good to see. “I do. Thanks for listening.”

“It's no problem,” he said, looking away as something in his chest caught. “So how about that root beer float?”

He pulled two tall glasses from a cupboard, the ice cream from the freezer, then searched his drawers for an ice cream scoop.

When he turned back, Mary had removed her coat and was standing by the counter.

His nerves rattled, and he gripped the ice cream pint, letting the icy burn take his focus from her and the tight, long-sleeve T-shirt she wore.

As he struggled to put a dent in the hard surface of the ice cream, he mumbled his frustrations.

“Ruben—”

“I should've gotten this out to soften a little.”

“Ruben, I?—”

“I know, I’ll run the outside of the container under warm water and?—”

“Ruben.”

“Yup?” he said, reluctantly meeting her gaze.

“I’ve missed our night calls,” she said, her voice soft.

He nodded and replied just as softly, “Me too.”

Time changed rhythm then, slowed down. Tension accumulated, building and filling the gap between them. It might’ve dissipated if either of them had had the sense to look away, but they soon reached a point where they were too far gone. They rushed into each other’s arms, their lips finally meeting.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Clothing was removed between passionate kisses, tossed over shoulders and kicked to the side until they stood only in their underwear. Ruben's hands wandered over Mary, brushing the soft flesh of her arms, stomach, hips.

"Mary," he rasped against her mouth to assure himself this was all real, that she was here.

Her touch roused a fire that urged him to get her to his room.

When they arrived at the foot of his bed, he pushed the straps of her bra from her shoulders and bent to kiss her throat, her breastbone.

There, he felt her heart fiercely beat against his lips.

He unfastened her bra and let it fall to marvel at how she fit in his hands.

He thumbed her perfect nipples—shades darker than her sepia skin—into stiff, wanting points.

Again, he breathed her name. Her fingers found purchase in his short curls when he drew her nipple into his mouth and fondled her thighs. Her moans cascaded over his head. He wasn't sure how long he spent adoring her before she pushed at his shoulders.

At first, he thought she was pulling away, that she'd had a change of heart, but her

molten gaze said differently.

She fell backward onto his bed but stayed him with a hand.

While looking up at him, she shifted until she was lying on her forearms in the middle of the mattress with her legs bent and her knees slightly open.

“Stroke yourself,” she said, her voice breathy, husky.

Ruben didn’t think he’d heard her correctly until uncertainty clouded her eyes.

He quickly released his erection from his boxer briefs, and her eyes flared as he licked his palm and gave himself a languid pull.

He couldn’t have known how affecting it was to watch someone watch him, but his dick grew harder under her study.

“Slowly,” she whispered, her focus still on him as one of her hands disappeared down the front of her underwear. Her honey hair was tousled around her face, her lips parted on shaky breaths.

All intelligible thoughts scattered into a useless pile, and he propped one of his legs onto the edge of the bed to better twist and draw his hand up and down his shaft.

“Take those off,” he said of her panties.

“Ask nicely.”

Something jostled in his chest with the gentle command. “Let me see you, love.”

She shook her head slowly.

“You teasing me?” he asked.

She gave him a lazy smile, and her lids fell to half-mast as the small circles she made over her sensitive bud increased in speed. He wanted to do that for her. He wanted to get her off. “Can’t wait to feel you,” he told her, tightening his grip around his dick, imagining it was her.

“Maybe this is all I want to do,” she said.

He smiled, slowing his stroke. “You sure? I’ll do a better job than your fingers.”

“Yeah?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper now.

“I’ll start with my mouth, get you all nice and?—”

“Okay, do it,” she said desperately, and it was as if a starting pistol went off. Ruben dropped to his knees and pulled Mary by her hips to the edge of the bed where, with hurried hands, he removed her underwear.

She was already so wet, so supple, and when he buried his face against her, he had to force himself to take his time. He breathed her in, tasted her, dragging his lips all over her.

“Ruben,” she moaned, pressing up toward him.

He drew back to view the perfection her arousal and his mouth had created. “Stunning.”

He lightly brushed his fingers across her clit, and a tremor passed through her body.

He continued with this caress and carefully watched her face to find the right pressure

and her favorite spot.

She grew louder, her brows knitted together, and just as her body began to tense, he withdrew all contact.

Mary gasped, reeling up to look at him. She stammered, confused, but before she could protest, he was touching her again. Massaging, circling, tapping her responsive clit. He got her back to the edge where her head fell to the mattress, and she was pinching her nipples.

“Right there, don’t stop,” she said, but like before, he didn’t let pleasure engulf her.

“You’re doing this on purpose!” she said, outraged, her eyes wild and her breathing heavy. “You can’t.”

He smiled. “Okay,” he said as he kissed the thickest part of her inner thigh and gave his dick a placating stroke. Her building frustration would make the end more blissful.

“Ruben, I’m serious. I want...”

Her words died as he returned his attention to her pussy, sliding his middle finger inside of her and using his thumb to care for her clit.

She watched him where he stoked her arousal, and sweet sounds spilled from her lips.

Seeing her this uninhibited and enraptured in desire was breathtaking.

But again, as soon as she was close, he denied her a climax.

“Ruben,” she cried. “Please, please, just...”

“What, love? What do you want? Tell me.”

“Let me come. Make me come.”

Part of him wanted them to remain suspended in this lust purgatory.

It felt safe, predictable, and unburdened by the emotions that surely would follow a release.

But he also needed to see and feel Mary reach her peak.

He needed her satiated. With driving fingers and a tongue that now craved her, Ruben let pleasure grow.

He didn't let up. She writhed under him, and her hands dug into his forearm.

“There you go, beautiful,” he whispered. “That's it.”

Mary's moans escalated until she came completely undone with his name on her lips.

* * *

When Ruben told Mary he needed to get a condom from his medicine cabinet, she expected him to leave and quickly return.

Instead, without breaking their kiss, he hauled her into his arms as he got up from the bed and took her along.

Her legs automatically wrapped around his waist as he carried her, and she pressed kisses to his face and neck, making a game of trying to find every freckle.

She breathed the scent of his crisp shower gel still detectable on his skin.

“I’m ready to feel you around me,” Ruben said when they’d reached the bathroom and procured the sought item.

Even with her recent orgasm, Mary was delirious with anticipation too.

The weight of his erection pushed up against her, and she wound her hips in a circle to temper her desire until they could reach the bed.

But they never made it that far. Ruben stopped in the hallway and pinned her to a wall, and she didn’t realize he intended to fuck her right there until he was fumbling to open the foil-packaged condom with his teeth.

She helped him put it on, then he took a beat, pushing her mussed hair out of the way to look at her intensely as if cataloguing the moment, her face.

“Fuck me,” she whispered more as an interjection than a command, but Ruben kissed her then brought his forehead to hers as he eased himself into her pussy. Their mouths dropped open when his dick fully settled inside of her. They were motionless for a time, clinging to each other.

“You good?” he asked, his voice strained.

She managed to nod, and he began guiding her along his length.

They started slow, not to any particular rhythm.

It was like they were exploring the contours of the position.

His tongue swept the hollow of her throat, she gently caught his earlobe between her

teeth, and their lips brushed any skin they met.

Friction built and sparks flew, urging them to quicken their pace to where the sound of their flesh slapping on the downward stroke echoed in the hallway.

“Talk to me, Mary,” he said earnestly. “You like this?”

She would have laughed at a question with such an obvious answer if she weren’t in the throes of the experience, unable to do anything but feel and whimper, “You fit so good.”

He groaned while his strokes became more fervent. The cool wall against her back was of little reprieve from the heat and sweat being created between their bodies.

“Just like that,” she told him as there was an upshift toward orgasm. “Fuck me just like that.”

His dark eyes held hers as he remained steadfast with his speed and arrangement.

She wanted to look away; her heart felt like it was thrashing against her ribcage, but she was too close.

She held on for dear life as she turned hot and incoherent.

Any sort of control she had was lost as she rode the wave to euphoria.

She shut her eyes and found a kaleidoscopic display that brightened until all she saw was white.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Mary was coaxed from sleep by the brush of Ruben's lips along her fingers, palm, wrist, arm, and shoulder. Against her neck, he whispered, "Keep sleeping. It's still early," before quietly leaving the bed.

She buried herself in the folds of the sheets and rolled over onto the vacated spot on the mattress, still warm from Ruben's body, and fell back asleep. The next time she awakened, it was to the smell of breakfast and faint television noise.

The night lived on in memory and body, and she stretched her arms over her head, sighing as her stiff muscles eased. She felt wonderful. Ruben had seen her, understood her, and for that, she'd had one of the best experiences of her life last night.

But as Mary stared at the textured ceiling, her glow faded.

A nebulous dread replaced it, and she kicked at the duvet to relieve herself from even its pressure.

It had been an unquestionably bad idea to sleep with Ruben.

She wished she could teleport out of the apartment and avoid interacting with him, avoid filtering what she was feeling through nonchalance.

But if she was quick, she could be out of there in minutes.

She sat up in the bed and saw that Ruben had folded her clothes neatly on his dresser, but when she got up, she realized only her sweatpants and underwear were present.

Her shirt was missing, probably hiding in plain sight somewhere in the living room where she'd thrown it.

Mary refused to exit the room topless, so she opened a dresser drawer and pulled out the first garment she saw, a dark hoodie with "National Broadcasting Association" printed in white on the front.

The hoodie overwhelmed her short frame, and she cringed at how trite and cutesy it felt to wear.

She poked her head out of the bedroom into the hallway. The front door beckoned her, but she stopped in the bathroom to rake her hands through her hair and gargle mouthwash. She wanted to be somewhat presentable even if she was leaving right away.

The TV concealed Mary's entrance into the living area.

Ruben stood at the stove, his back to her, and she froze like a gargoyle as multiple thoughts crossed at once.

Where was her shirt? Could she grab her belongings and bolt before Ruben noticed?

His triceps looked particularly pronounced in the T-shirt he was wearing.

Was he making pancakes? Yes, there was already an impressive stack beside him. He'd made breakfast for them.

"Something smells good," she said, her exit plan forgotten.

Ruben turned. “All for you,” he declared with a smile. “Have a seat. I’m almost done.”

She couldn’t just dip after he’d spent time preparing food for her, so with butterflies in her stomach, she sat at the kitchen island in front of one of two placemats. He asked her what she wanted to drink, and she told him whatever he was having was fine.

“The ice cream was on the counter all night. I had to throw it out,” he said when he joined her at the table with hibiscus tea, pancakes, fake bacon, and condiments.

“Wow, so no root beer float, then?”

“No, sorry. But I think I made up for it, right?” he replied with an impish smile that warmed Mary’s cheeks.

She didn’t appreciate how hungry she was until she began to eat.

She complimented him on the softness of the pancakes, and he told her the baking powder was the source.

They didn’t talk much during the meal, only occasionally commenting on a news headline from the TV.

It was comfortable. Easy. But she soon became overwhelmed by the normalcy of it all.

The dread she’d felt while lying in his bed earlier crept up again, stifling all enjoyment.

She got up from her seat and said, “I’ve got to go.

I need to get home and shower and prepare for work. ”

“Okay,” Ruben said casually, looking at her plate of unfinished pancakes. “I can pack that up for you.”

“Sure, yes! Thank you,” she said as she quickly found her coat and boots. Once she had the Tupperware of half-eaten pancakes, she left, but as she was waiting for the elevator and beginning to relax, Ruben exited his apartment and called out, “Mary!”

She turned and watched him jog to her, ruffled by the unexpected encore. “Your shirt,” he said when he arrived before her. “It was in front of the sofa.”

“Oh, thank you.” She looked down at the hoodie she still wore. “I can?—”

“It’s fine. Give it back whenever,” he said as the elevator door opened. He tipped her chin upward and kissed her sweetly. “Have a good day.”

Mary didn’t know if she replied before stepping into the elevator in a daze. As she descended to the ground level, it felt like everything inside her was too.

* * *

“What’s got you in a jolly little mood today?

” Chesa asked as she and Ruben exited the conference room after the staff morning meeting where they’d chosen topics to discuss on that evening’s show, including a story about a series of olive oil heists perturbing authorities in Ontario that Ruben was most entertained by.

“Jolly little mood?”

“Yeah, you were whistling when you came in this morning.”

Had he? Ruben shrugged. “Restful night, I guess.”

However, that made no sense, seeing as he’d only gotten a handful of hours of sleep on a bed he’d been shoved to the edge of by Mary’s erratic sleeping positions.

He squashed the sudden smile that wanted to emerge as he recalled waking up with her knee nestled against his ribs and her hand splayed across his face.

Despite this, his morning had been as enlivening as any well-executed routine of health tonics, aerobics, and journaling.

It was perhaps why he was in no rush to contemplate the impact their actions would have on the future.

“Hey, Ruben,” called one of the station’s bookers from his cubicle. “Your 10:30 interview is waiting in studio B.”

“Thanks, Corey,” Ruben said, grabbing his notes from his desk. The biologist was early, but it was better than the alternative. As the deadline for the feature approached, Ruben and Chesa were hoping to complete the remaining expert interviews and start drafting the narration script soon.

When Ruben entered the studio, he nodded to Novak, who was already in the rack room. The biologist, Lincoln Goddard, sat at the broadcasting desk, inspecting his surroundings. The older man had gray, receding hair and rectangular glasses balancing on the tip of his nose.

“Doctor Goddard, nice to meet you,” Ruben said, shaking the professor’s hand. “Thanks for doing this in studio.”

“I’m always happy to talk about my research.”

Ruben instructed Goddard to put on his headphones while he adjusted the microphone to sit above the older man’s eyeline. “Talk like you regularly talk,” Ruben told him. “I’ll ask you questions, and you answer however you see fit.”

“Oh, like an interview. I’ve done those before,” the man quipped, and Ruben smiled.

Humor boded well for their conversation.

Guests often became uptight in the studio, fearing that any sudden movement or a too-heavy sigh might wreck the expensive equipment.

But that sort of insecurity produced stiff interviews.

As Novak finished setting up the recording levels, Ruben found his seat on his side of the desk and asked the professor, “What drew you to the field?”

Goddard leaned back into his chair. “Many people think it was an undying love for animals, but that’s not the case.

I’m actually quite terrified of them. A German shepherd bit me as a boy, so I’ve never even owned a pet.

But I’m fascinated by beings we can’t truly communicate with.

Ironically, I find it simpler studying nonhuman animal behavior. ”

“Why’s that?” Ruben asked.

“It’s less frustrating. I can assume that eight times out of ten, the female peacock will

go with the male with the biggest, flashiest train.

Meanwhile, humans have access to higher-order thinking.

We are prone to inconsistencies, subjectivity, and to act against our own species' survival.

We fall in love, and love is—" The professor laughed.

"Well, love is a wily fucker—can I swear?"

"We're not recording yet, but feel free even once we begin."

"Have you ever been in love?" the professor then asked.

The question caught Ruben off guard, but he answered, "Yeah, I have."

"How many times?"

"Two. Four times if we're counting teenage infatuations," Ruben said, trying to bring some levity as he was uncomfortable with the attention.

"And I'm guessing how you met those people and the timeframe between meeting and falling in love and ultimately out of love were all different?"

"Yes, I suppose."

Dr. Goddard nodded. "See, inconsistent. There's no rubric. And are you in love now?"

"No..."

“You say that like you’re unsure.”

“I’m sure.”

“But there’s a contender.”

Ruben hesitated. He didn’t know why he hesitated. “No.”

A smile grew on the scientist’s face. “This is why I stick with base animals.”

Ruben was relieved when Novak gave him the signal that sound check was complete, and he put aside what should’ve been idle chitchat and an establishment of rapport with his guest to begin the official interview.

He pushed himself to remain present and conversational, and fortunately, the talkative professor didn’t need much encouragement to expound.

At the end, Ruben thanked the man and escorted him to the exit, then headed to his cubicle to prepare for that evening’s broadcast.

Chesa spotted him from her neighboring desk. “Ah-oh. Did the interview go badly?”

“No, why?”

“It’s just that you look so glum,” she said.

Did he? Ruben shrugged. “It was a great conversation. A very much needed perspective. A good reminder.”

Chapter Thirty

Mary showed up at her father's home on a Saturday afternoon, and when he opened the door to let her in, he asked, "Was I expecting you?"

"No, I just thought I'd swing by."

"That's nice," he said as they walked to the kitchen area where several piles of students' assignments were stacked on the table. The home was too big for one man, but he seemed not to mind the gnawing space and the dust accumulating in spaces less frequented.

"I have some carrot cake from the grocery store," he said. "If you want some."

"Sure." She watched him retrieve the cake from the refrigerator and cut thick slices.

"How's work?" he asked while he put on the kettle.

"Good."

"And how about that role you were set to get?"

She waved her hand dismissively. "I didn't get it."

"I'm sorry," her dad said, pausing to look at her sincerely. "Next time."

She smiled at her dad's long-used motivation that might've sounded shallow coming

from someone else, but as a mathematician, Conrad Neilson really did see failure as an opportunity to try again.

And with a week separating Mary and the cruise lead announcement, the only residual disappointment she harbored was the one associated with Eden.

She'd been prepared to act as though all was well between them, but within a day or two, they'd stopped taking their lunch breaks together.

They also no longer escaped to the other's office between client meetings.

It was unclear who'd initiated the shift, and she'd not gotten used to it yet, but she supposed it felt better than pretending all workday.

Mary and her father took their seats at the cluttered breakfast nook with their cake and tea, and after a few bites, she said, "Dad, I need to tell you something."

"Okay," he replied, putting his cup down.

"Hattie and I hired a private investigator to look into Aurora."

"Oh" is all he said.

"The PI didn't find anything concerning," she added. "Aurora is who you said she was."

"Why are you telling me this?" he asked.

"Because I'm sorry that we felt the need to do it."

She'd also wanted to confess because, with the week she'd had, she hoped it would

relieve some of her emotional fatigue.

“It felt like the smart thing,” Mary said. “You’ve always been careful, and suddenly you weren’t. It was so out of character, and honestly, it scared us.”

Her father laughed, his round belly shaking with the effort.

“You know, I had my forty-fifth high school reunion last year, and it was the first time in decades that I revisited my grade twelve yearbook quote. ‘Screw your courage to the sticking place.’” His eyes drifted to stare into the middle distance for a moment.

“It’s from Macbeth , I believe. It reminded me to demand more from life and occasionally take the path with some resistance.

So, when I met Aurora on the Reddit, I decided to go for it. ”

“I’m happy you did and that you didn’t listen to us,” she told him. They returned to their plates, but the conversation bounced around in Mary’s head. Even after she’d left her dad’s place, his words lingered. They slowly took hold, germinating a realization.

* * *

“When’s the food getting here?” Ruben’s cousin asked from her place lounging on his sofa.

“Check. My phone’s on the coffee table,” he replied, distracted. He sat at the kitchen counter, trying to complete some time-sensitive work on his laptop before they left for trivia night.

“Eight minutes!” Junie said. “And you also have a notification to confirm a date with Larissa P.”

“Ah, shit.” Ruben got up from the stool for his phone. He’d been forgetting to do that all week, preoccupied with work and Mary. Five days had passed since Ruben had seen or spoken to her, but it had given him space to think, to reassess, to reason.

Being around Mary, being with Mary, quietened his otherwise racing mind.

Consequently, he’d lost sight of the big picture, but his talk with the biologist had fixed that.

Human romantic connection was unpredictable, and Ruben was risking a lot for vague affection and hot chemistry that would prove fleeting.

“I’m excited to learn if you’ve fallen in love or not with everyone else during your feature,” Junie said as Ruben pocketed his phone after confirming his date.

He had been light on the matchmaking details recently, but it was hard to give updates where there were none. “I’ll give you an exclusive spoiler,” he said. “I have not.”

The buzzer to the apartment went off. “That must be the food,” he said. “Can you answer it as I go change?”

He headed to his bedroom and swapped his hoodie and sweats for jeans and a long-sleeve, pub-trivia-themed shirt.

He emerged from his room as Junie was speaking to the delivery person at the front door.

But his cousin said, “Yeah, he’s right here,” and moved from the doorway to reveal Mary on the other side.

The impact of her presence halted Ruben. She looked so beautiful, like a snow angel, in her long white coat. The flickering lights from the hallway cast a halo all over her.

“Is it a bad time?” Mary asked. “I can come back.”

“No, no,” he said, quickly moving toward her. “It’s a perfect time. Come in.”

Mary’s eyes flitted to Junie, who was watching the interaction intently. “Could we...” Mary gestured to the corridor outside his apartment.

He nodded, following her out and closing his front door behind him.

“How’ve you been?” he asked, suddenly feeling like trash for not sending even a cursory text after she’d spent the night. “I should’ve called or?—”

“No, please. It’s okay. I didn’t expect that,” she said, not quite meeting his eye.

“Everything between us from the start has been a little tricky, and...” She took deep breath and gave her head a tiny shake.

It was a fortifying gesture, Ruben realized, and he knew then what she was trying to do.

She’d come to the same conclusion he had.

“Mary, you don’t have to be so diplomatic,” he told her, wanting to spare her the discomfort of placating him. “I know what you’re going to say, and I’m right there with you.”

Her face softened. “You are?”

“Yeah. You’re as devoted to your job as I am to fulfilling my commitment to the matchmaking process. Our night together was amazing, but there’s no need to complicate things.”

There was dead air as Mary blinked, and just as Ruben began to fear he’d misread the situation, she smiled. “Yes, I-I’m glad you understand,” she said.

“Of course! I was?—”

“Order for Ruben Byers?” said the delivery person who’d suddenly appeared.

“Yeah, right here.” Ruben reached for a cash tip in his pocket only to realize he’d forgotten his wallet inside the apartment.

“Give me a second,” he told the delivery person and Mary.

As he entered his home, his cousin barely scrambled out of the door’s path, making it obvious she’d been eavesdropping.

He ignored her and retrieved his wallet from the bedroom nightstand, quickly returning to the corridor where only the delivery man remained.

“She said she had to go,” the man said as they made their exchange. Ruben thanked him and peered down the carpeted hallway for sign of Mary before stepping back into his apartment with an odd feeling.

Junie was waiting for him in the kitchen, and as he put the takeout bags down, she asked, “Why did you not tell me?”

“Tell you what?” He feigned obliviousness in sheer hope that she was referencing something else.

“About you and your matchmaker.”

“Never came up,” he said, lining the deli containers along the counter.

Junie huffed, exasperated. “I should’ve known when you told me you guys shared a hotel room for days during the blizzard, then stopped working together.”

He didn’t comment as he pulled plates from the cabinets and utensils from a drawer.

“So, what now?” Junie asked.

“I have a date next week with Larissa P., and?—”

“You mean you and Mary aren’t...”

Ruben forced himself to laugh passed the dryness in his throat. “No.”

His cousin looked confused.

“We have professional obligations,” he said.

“But you like her, no?”

“Sure, but I’m not risking the radio feature for something that in all likelihood would fizzle out in four months.”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

He shrugged. “You’re right. But what I do know is that the feature is important to me and that love is a wily fucker.”

Junie frowned. “A what?”

“A wily fucker.”

His cousin studied him, and Ruben looked back defiantly. He was prepared for her to press the matter, tell him to be brave or bet on love or something equally patronizing, but Junie’s expression relaxed, and she gently said, “All right, pass the guacamole.”

* * *

Stepping out of Ruben’s apartment building, Mary found that it was now snowing. Nothing major, just flurries. But she stopped in the small parking area to tilt her head upward, letting the soft flakes disappear on her hot skin.

She’d drawn from feeble wares of courage to come there that evening to tell Ruben she was falling for him. It was an epiphany that followed her visit with her father. Her dad had scribed his own destiny, unconcerned with others’ opinions.

That was admirable to Mary because she often felt like she contorted herself to please people in hopes they’d like her, love her, praise her. It usually resulted in an insecurity that left her needing more confirmation, more affirmation that the false image she’d presented was landing correctly.

But it wasn’t like that with Ruben. He had seen her from the very beginning. He didn’t need her nice and saccharine. She felt bold in his presence, secure that he’d not recoil from her true visage. He was the type of person she wanted to love and be loved by.

She laughed then, the sound hitting her ears harshly. Her current state was unfortunate, but it could've been worse. She could've told Ruben her feelings and subjected herself to an excruciating rejection. This private humiliation was preferable.

Mary didn't remember her drive home, consumed with planning the meal she would construct from pantry snacks and the action movie that would help her temporarily escape from reality.

She'd just entered her apartment and was shedding her outerwear when a knock on her door sounded.

Willa was on the other side with her laundry hamper in her hands.

"Great, you're home," Willa said. "I wanted to do a load."

A reflexive smile appeared on Mary's face.

"Yeah, sure. Come in." But as her neighbor crossed the threshold into her home, something within Mary sharply protested.

"Actually, Willa, wait. I don't think I can let you do your laundry here anymore.

You use way too much detergent, you always forget to remove your lint from the dryer, and you've also never returned the handheld steamer I lent you. I'd like it back...please."

Mary didn't move a muscle as she prepared for a big reaction, but all Willa did was flatly reply "Okay," and retrace her steps out of the apartment.

"Thank you for understanding!" Mary said, to which Willa mumbled something that Mary didn't catch, but she quickly shut her door before she could reverse her decision

or apologize.

She pressed her back against the hard surface, and as her nerves began to settle and what she'd done came into focus, a smile sprouted.

Chapter Thirty-One

Ruben arrived at work after a restless sleep the night prior.

He hadn't been able to slow down his thoughts long enough to relax, but as a result, he'd come to a revelation that might've otherwise taken him weeks.

On the ride up to the station's floor, he placed his head against the back wall of the elevator and closed his eyes, steeling himself.

Not many people were in the office yet, but Ruben was only looking for one in particular.

"Can we have a quick chat?" he asked Chesa when he found her refilling the water in the Keurig. His cohost followed him to the conference room where a box of muffins had already been positioned on the table for the upcoming morning meeting.

"What's up?" Chesa asked, taking a seat as Ruben remained standing, his hands in his pockets.

"I'm ending the matchmaking."

Calmly, Chesa said, "Okay." She let the quietness hang, and he almost smiled at her using an interviewing tactic they often employed with guests. People were typically uncomfortable with silence and rushed to fill it, and in the process, they revealed more than they'd intended.

“My head’s just not in it anymore,” he said.

Chesa nodded. More silence.

“And it wouldn’t be fair to the women I’m matched with if I continue.”

A couple of evenings ago, Ruben spent three hours in front of a twelve-by-sixteen-inch canvas with his date Larissa, a hairstylist, in a beginner acrylic painting class where they worked on rendering a bouquet with pale petals and wide leaves.

The repetitive brush strokes and the ammonia from the paint had lulled Ruben into an almost meditative state.

And for long periods, he’d forgotten he was on a date.

The conversation that did arise was uninspired, and at one point, after posing a question to Larissa about her morning commute, she responded, “You know you already asked me that, right?”

Chesa leaned forward in her seat. “What happened?”

“I’ve lost perspective,” Ruben said, sighing. “I got too close to my matchmaker.”

His cohost did her best not to look shocked, but he saw her brain turning. “Are you dating her?”

Ruben knew the question was coming, but still, it sent a jolt through him. “No, it’s not a relationship I’ll be pursuing.”

He was frustrated that he wasn’t able to complete the matchmaking process. And while he didn’t blame anyone but himself for that, he was committed to maintaining

his distance from Mary, if only on principle.

“She wasn’t an official source,” Chesa said. “And this was immersive reporting about your subjective experience, so no expectation of impartiality. We’re good.”

“Except we have commentary about Hearts Collide as an agency. But I’m ready to disclose conflict of interest.”

“I say we scrap the matchmaking angle from the feature altogether,” Chesa said, definitively.

Ruben shook his head. “No, absolutely not. We liked it as a framing device, and we’d have to rework the script.”

“So get out your red pen. It was a fun framing device that was never integral to the feature. And if I can be honest, your anecdotes about matchmaking were kind of a snooze.”

It was the first time he’d really laughed in days, and he was grateful to have Chesa as a friend and colleague.

“Plus,” she continued, “Hugh will be excited to hear that now we have space to talk about sex robots. I’ll give you the honor of informing him.”

* * *

Love was in the air at Hearts Collide. All morning, an unusual number of Mary’s clients arrived for their meetings with glowing updates.

“I think this is it, Mary,” said Summer, an esthetician and relationship late bloomer. “I think Henry might be The One.”

Her ten o'clock client, Aja, couldn't stop giggling as she recounted her second date with a pilot with whom she had 78 percent compatibility. "I never would've gone for him in my regular life, but he's incredible," Aja said.

Even Felix, a prickly, corporate lawyer Mary had been working with for half a year, had something positive to report. He usually began his assessments of his recent matches with a critique, but today he simply said, "I like him."

Never in all her years of matchmaking had Mary envied her clients' successes, but each of her honest, heartfelt congratulations that morning was stained with self-pity.

She could've been among those gleaming, charmed faces.

She was glad when her break at noon arrived.

She abandoned her packed lunch to head to a nearby eatery, hoping the fresh air and sunshine on the walk over would shed her funk.

While she waited for her ordered sandwich and soup at the end of the counter, Eden entered the restaurant. She was hard to miss with her height and striking dark skin, but Mary pretended not to see her, even when Eden joined the crammed waiting corner.

A fleeting tightness gripped Mary's chest as she thought of how, not too long ago, they would've been waiting for their lunches together.

They had maintained the utmost professionalism for the past weeks, but they hadn't talked beyond the "good mornings" and "have a good evenings." So it was puzzling when Eden edged toward Mary until they were standing side by side and said, "It's taking longer than usual. "

Mary replied politely, “I think one of their sandwich presses is down.”

They didn’t swap more words for a minute or two, then Eden suddenly turned to face Mary fully and asked, “Can we talk?”

Mary couldn’t think to do anything but nod and move to the side wall for privacy.

“I know you really wanted cruise lead,” Eden began, cutting through the noise of chatter and sizzling food. “I wasn’t sure if you wanted space or if I should say sorry, so instead I’ve been awkward about it all.”

The admission threw Mary since she’d believed it had been her who’d been awkward.

“I didn’t know you wanted the position,” Mary said. “Whenever it came up, it sounded like the last thing you’d ever do, so I was confused when you accepted it and when I heard that you’d directly asked Cassidy for it.”

“I wasn’t trying to be sneaky or duplicitous,” Eden said adamantly. “I hated the chaos and competition in the office and didn’t want to contribute to it, especially between us, because, you know, I’m the closest to you out of everyone.”

Mary absorbed Eden’s words, laughing lightly. “See, I thought I’d maybe overestimated our camaraderie because I thought you would’ve at least told me you wanted the role.”

“I didn’t think it was worth mentioning because I didn’t think I was going to get it,” Eden said. “To me, it was either you or Francine.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really. You’re personable. Your clients adore you. They invite you to their

weddings. Half of the reviews on our site specifically name you and sing your praises. Like, a main reason I wanted cruise lead was to get better at interacting with clients. Be more like you.”

It was the first time Mary heard anything close to self-deprecation from Eden, and it moved her to admit, “I try really, really hard, and it’s exhausting. I feel like a wind-up toy sometimes. I’ve actually admired and tried to emulate your chill aura.”

“Grass is always greener, right?”

Mary’s order was called out, and she retrieved it before returning to Eden and asking, “Have you started planning?”

Eden let out a long exhale. “Yeah, Cassidy sent over this giant dossier that I need to show you. There’s a bunch of travel vaccines I need to get and CPR training that starts next weekend.

Funnily enough, the thing I’m most stressed about is what I’m going to pack.

I think I might have to buy a new wardrobe. ”

Mary nodded. The all-black outfits Eden preferred wouldn’t be suitable for a sunny cruise deck. “I have hats you could borrow.”

They both cracked up at the thought of Eden in wide-brim straw hats, and from there, they slipped into talking, as they once did, about work, office gossip, and the notable clients they’d seen in the past weeks. Which inevitably led Mary to confess. “I fell for the radio host.”

“Shit,” Eden said, grimacing. “I’m sorry.”

“I tried to follow your advice and keep contact to a minimum,” Mary said, “but at every turn, there was an opportunity to sabotage myself.”

“You know he’s no longer part of the agency.”

Mary’s shoulders tensed. “He met someone?”

“No. At least no one in our database. He terminated his contract early in the week and came in to talk to Cassidy.”

“Did he give a reason?”

“Not anything specific. But he did assure us that the agency would still be cited in the feature.”

Mary had entertained a notion that if Ruben hadn’t been committed to matchmaking for the feature, things between them could’ve unfolded favorably. But it had been days since he’d left the agency, and he hadn’t reached out.

Eden’s order was called, and they started the trek back to the office together.

“Next time, shake me if I start to fall for a client, okay?”

“Deal,” Eden said. “And if you still have raw emotions about it, I know a place with cheap drinks where we can sing karaoke at the top of our lungs.”

Mary didn’t know what surprised her more, the invite or that Eden did karaoke. Regardless, she was heartened and replied, “Yeah, I’d love that.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

It was an early morning on a Saturday, but Ruben was at work recording narration for the feature. Novak—the only other person at the station—was already in the rack room running a sound check with a pack of sour candy by his side when Ruben entered the studio.

At his desk, Ruben massaged his jaw and began his sequence of vocal warm-ups.

It was a mindless routine he usually did while scrolling on his phone, but today, he kept losing his flow, remembering the time he led Mary through those very exercises over the phone.

Of late, many previously unremarkable things conjured thoughts of her.

Like days ago, he'd stopped at the library to pick up books on hold, only for sentimentalism to strike as he recalled sitting with Mary on the carpet with her nephews during story time. She was even tethered to his favorite vegetable pot pie order.

The antidote for this rumination was time, and Ruben would've been okay with that if not for the longing.

It was so strong on occasions that it took his breath away.

He'd not anticipated that, and several times he'd been close to sending Mary some random text message just to reopen the lines of communication.

But he'd held strong. He'd committed to this conclusion.

She was off living her life, and eventually, he would too.

"You ready?" Novak asked into the microphone that connected to Ruben's headphones.

"Yes, sir," Ruben replied, straightening the script in front of him. "Let's do this all in one take and get outta here."

That must've jinxed him because everything that could've gone wrong recording the tracks did.

The opening of his script took several takes as he kept stumbling over his words.

His speech had more sibilance than usual, which would mean extra work for Novak.

And when Ruben randomly got a case of dry mouth, he rectified it by guzzling water but then needed a bathroom break fifteen minutes later.

At the end of the session, Ruben apologized to Novak for the inefficiency and left the station exhausted.

On his way home, he stopped to put gas in his car and grab snacks from the convenience store that would tide him over a weekend on the couch.

Moments after he joined the queue to pay, the customer at the counter let out a loud whoop.

"I won!" the man shouted, waving a lottery ticket. "I won! Three thousand dollars! I won!"

The other patrons, including Ruben, cheered and offered the man their congratulations as he left the store doing a jig.

After that display of luck, everyone ahead of Ruben purchased some sort of lottery ticket.

When it was Ruben's turn at the till, the attendant asked if he was interested in any lottery or instant games, and he declined, barely holding back a remark about the rising rates of gambling addiction.

But as his collection of junk food was being rung up, Ruben looked out of the store's window to see the winner from minutes earlier still in the parking lot. He leaned against his car while he spoke on the phone with animated gestures and a goofy smile.

Ruben turned back to the clerk. "Why not?"

"Sir?"

"I'll get a couple of scratch tickets. Why not?"

Once Ruben had the glossy tickets in hand, it felt urgent that he find out if he'd won anything.

As he walked back to his car, plastic bag of snacks looped around his wrist, he used the broad end of his keys to scrape off the foil coating on the lottery tickets.

For several seconds, his world became limitless.

Perhaps he'd win. Turn this day around. Get a goofy smile of his own. Even a couple hundred dollars would do.

Sorry, try again.

He tossed the useless tickets into a nearby bin, feeling silly for indulging in a statistical improbability. He knew better. As they said, death and taxes were the only certainties.

And your feelings for Mary.

The ardent thought stopped him in his tracks. So plain and as real as the sharp smell of gasoline around him and the humming engines of cars coming and going.

He was in love with Mary.

It was the first time he'd let himself think it, but the truth had been simmering below the surface.

He'd been terrified to surrender to the vast, intangible feeling.

Instead, he cleaved to skepticism—a bottomless well of doubt—because it was easier and risked him nothing.

But wasn't Mary—lovely, beautiful, incredible Mary—worth taking a leap of faith?

With a racing heart, Ruben got into his car and pulled out his phone. He found Mary's contact and dialed the number. With each plodding ring, he became less sure that she'd pick up, and he readied himself to leave a voice message, but she answered, "Ruben?"

"Mary—"

"Ruben, where are you right now? Are you busy?"

Thrown by the questions, his intended words left him, and his focus narrowed to the overlapping chatter coming from her end and the slight strain in her voice. “You okay?” he asked.

“I could use your help.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

“Our ride will be here in five,” Mary called into her apartment.

She stood in her entryway ready to go, waiting on her sister.

It was the morning of the polar plunge, and Mary already couldn’t wait for the day to end.

It was colder than forecasted, the painkillers for her headache hadn’t kicked in yet, and her sister was getting on her last nerve.

“You need to oil the hinges on your door,” Hattie said as she exited Mary’s bedroom where she’d been changing.

“Noted,” Mary tensely said. It must’ve been her sister’s dozenth complaint about some element in her apartment since she’d arrived. Mary might’ve been equipped to engage with Hattie if not for her own testy mood.

“Hope you don’t mind, I’m borrowing a hoodie,” Hattie said.

“Yeah, it’s fine—wait, no, not that one,” Mary said, approaching to take Ruben’s National Broadcasting Association hoodie from her sister.

She’d yet to return it, but it was on her to-do list. Mary refolded the hoodie and walked it back to the drawer it had been hiding in, returning with one of her own for her sister.

“I liked the other one. It’s baggy,” Hattie said as she reluctantly slipped into the sweatshirt.

“Well, it’s not mine.”

Her sister looked at her. “Whose is it?”

“I borrowed it.”

“Yeah, okay. That doesn’t answer the question,” her sister said. “Are you seeing someone?”

“What? No.” Mary stepped into her boots and gestured for her sister to follow suit.

“Come on, tell me the truth,” Hattie said. “Don’t make me hire a PI.”

“That is the truth. I borrowed it from a friend, okay? We need to get going now. The car is almost here.”

Hattie dropped the subject, for which Mary was grateful.

She was trying to do less talking and thinking about Ruben.

She’d gone entire days, sometimes two in a row, without considering him, her feelings for him, or his lack of feelings for her.

It had made her believe she’d surmounted the emotions, and she’d tuned into his radio show one evening to test herself.

Immediately, she’d failed as her heart quickened, simply listening to his conversational lilt while he interviewed some economist. Minutes later, she was on

the verge of tears and rubbing an ache on her sternum.

The sisters left the apartment to find their ride waiting and greeted their driver as they settled into the back seats that smelt faintly of cigarettes.

Not long into their journey, while Mary was watching the scenery change from closely packed buildings to stretches of undeveloped land, Hattie asked, “Can I get my registration bib?”

“I don’t have it,” Mary said, frowning. “Why would I have it?”

“I told you to grab it from the counter.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Then I didn’t hear you.”

“Clearly.”

Mary took a breath, gaining control of her emotions before asking the driver to turn around. The retrieval was quick, and they were again on track to get to the plunge site on time. But before they could leave the city limits, they took another diversion from the predetermined route on the GPS.

Mary pressed forward to ask the driver, “Everything okay?”

“Yes, yes,” he replied. “Need to check something.” He tapped the dashboard where a series of lights were blinking. They pulled into the empty parking lot of a high school—twenty minutes away from their destination.

When the driver exited the vehicle to open the front hood, Hattie mumbled, “We’re going to be so late now. I hope he knows what he’s doing.”

“Can you just fucking stop complaining?” Mary said.

Hattie carefully asked, “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. But you’ve been annoying all morning, and I didn’t appreciate you blaming me earlier for something that isn’t my fault. You forgot your bib, not me.”

“Okay, yes, you’re right,” Hattie said, her hands up. “I apologize.”

The sisters sat silently and listened to their driver tinker with the complexities under the front hood.

However, it was soon clear that the problem didn’t have a quick fix when he abandoned mechanics to make a call.

When he returned to the driver’s seat, he told them, “Another car will be here to pick you up, don’t worry. ”

“How long will that take?” Mary asked.

“Fifteen minutes.”

It was the first year the sisters weren’t using their own vehicles as they’d grown tired of the parking mayhem at the plunge site, but now they were at risk of missing the whole event.

“Mitch can be here in five,” Hattie said, but that was a severe underestimation. Getting all three boys in the car alone would take double that time.

Mary pulled out her phone to see if there were faster options on the rideshare app, but an incoming call interrupted her progress. The number was unattached to a contact in her phone, but she recognized it. She didn't debate before picking up. "Ruben?"

A calm settled over her once she heard his smooth voice on the other line, and despite everything, she said to him, "I could use your help."

* * *

Ruben's hands were jittery, as if electricity mingled with the blood in his veins, and he tightened his grip around the steering wheel to steady them as he pulled into the bare parking lot of the Catholic high school where Mary and her sister waited for him.

On his drive over, as he'd thought of what he needed to tell Mary, he'd considered the possibility that she wouldn't reciprocate his feelings.

It didn't lessen his resolve, however. He knew that even if she didn't feel the way he did, she couldn't deny their connection, and he was pinning hope on her seeing that it was worth exploring.

"Talk about right place, right time," Hattie said to Ruben when he exited the car to greet them and open the trunk for their bags.

"Yes, thank you for coming," Mary said.

"Always. Whenever," he replied, realizing the response too intense when the sisters looked at him in unison. But he didn't attempt to backtrack. She'd soon understand.

"So, polar plunging," he said, once they were on the main road. "How does it work?"

Ruben looked at Mary in the back seat through his rearview mirror, but she was staring out of the window with a neutral expression as Hattie, in the passenger seat, replied, “Basically, you strip down to your underwear or bathing suit and sit in an ice-cold lake for two minutes.”

“And you both do this every year for fun?”

Hattie answered on the sisters’ behalf again. “For fun and charity.”

“Cool, cool,” Ruben said before trying a few more topics to draw Mary into conversation. None of them did the trick.

“The last time we met,” Hattie said, “I don’t think I caught how you and Mary know each other.”

“Through work,” he replied. “I joined her agency for a story.”

“Oh!” Hattie perked up. “You were one of Mary’s clients. Did you find someone?”

He hesitated. “Not exactly.”

“Hmm. It’s not for everyone.”

Ruben detected a slight condescension in Hattie’s tone, perhaps subconscious and dulled from years of repetition.

“Few things are for everyone,” he said, “but the agency has a 92 percent success rating, so don’t put too much stock in my experience.

Your sister is great at what she does. People get married because of her.

She's passionate and thoughtful and rigorous with her approach.

I just happened to be a client who was too much of a duck for the process to work. ”

“A duck?” Hattie asked.

“A skeptical smartass,” he said as Mary's eyes finally met his in the rearview mirror.

She quickly looked away, and he wanted to express all his feelings right then, get her to understand that what he felt for her went beyond his admiration for her work ethic.

But she deserved more from a declaration of love where his attention wasn't split between her face and traffic.

For the rest of the journey, he was siloed in his thoughts and emerged again only while looking for parking at the event grounds.

The plunge site was a lakefront populated with people, cars, one media truck, and erected white tents with signs denoting change rooms, a registration booth, food concession stands, a heating zone, and a first aid station.

As Ruben reversed into a parking spot on a mound of slush, Mary said to her sister, “I'll sign us in and meet you outside the changing tents.”

Ruben got out of the car with the sisters and opened his trunk so they could retrieve their bags.

“Thank you again,” Mary said. “I appreciate you coming to the rescue.”

“Of course. And if you want,” he said, “I could wait. Give you a ride back.”

“No, that’s okay. We’ll be fine.” She gestured to the fleet of cabs waiting for participants.

Ruben wanted to insist, but Mary walked away toward a long queue ahead. He watched after her until she disappeared in the crowd.

He turned to close the trunk, startling when he discovered Hattie still standing there, studying him.

“By chance, are you a member of the National Broadcasting Association?” she asked.

“Uh, yes, I am.”

Hattie smiled. Nodded. “Thought so. And does my sister know you’re in love with her?”

Something lurched in Ruben’s chest. He didn’t ask Hattie how she knew and simply said, “No, not yet.”

“So you plan to let her know?”

He nodded.

“Would you like to do it now?” she asked, holding out her registration bib.

Chapter Thirty-Four

CHESA SALVADOR: What's the appeal of speed dating?

KENT CAMDEN: It happens so fast. You're able to get out of your head in a way that might be difficult on a longer date.

The people who are the most successful in speed dating, and I'd argue dating in general, are those who throw out the script they've always used and let the person sitting right in front of them influence the interaction.

* * *

"Plungers, the event will begin in fifteen minutes. Please start making your way to the beachfront," announced an omnipresent voice as Mary stepped out of the change tent into the cold in a sports bra, underwear, rubber boots, and her felt mermaid costume.

She headed toward the spot she and Hattie had planned to meet, expecting to see her sister ready to go in an identical ensemble.

"What's going on?" Mary asked. "Why aren't you changed?"

Her sister was still in the warm clothing she'd arrived in and didn't seem in any rush to change that.

"I'm feeling a little sick all of a sudden."

“Oh,” Mary said, touching her sister’s forehead with the back of her hand. “Let’s leave. I’ll quickly get my?—”

“No, stay. Ruben’s going to take my place in the plunge.”

“I-I don’t understand,” Mary said. She assumed Ruben had already left, and she didn’t want to see him again. The ride in the car with him had been torturous. She’d played as if his casual talk and laughter hadn’t pained her, but it was clear life had moved on for him.

“Here he comes,” her sister said, nodding to where Ruben was exiting the changing tents wearing, as many around them did, a rented robe and tall rubber boots, but with his height, more of his bare legs were visible.

“I’ll watch you guys from the beach. Have fun,” Hattie said, darting off before Mary could ask any of the several questions she had.

So instead, she turned to meet Ruben with a smile she hoped didn’t reveal her anxiety.

“I’m not prepared for this at all,” he said, laughing.

“You know, you don’t have to do this.”

“It’s for charity.”

“The fundraising has already happened. The plunging is more symbolic.”

He shrugged. “For fun, then.”

His robe fell open at the top, exposing a portion of his chest that Mary studied,

remembering how it had felt to rest her cheek there. To feel his steady heart, the rumble of his voice as they lay in his bed, temporarily free of impending reality.

“I’m going to find a spot on the shoreline,” she said abruptly, spinning around toward the beach where fellow plungers were already gathering.

Mary thought she’d successfully left Ruben behind while bobbing and weaving through the crowd, but when she settled on a vacant patch a distance from the icy waters, Ruben was standing beside her.

“Damn,” he said, blowing into his hands and jumping in place a few times.

“Not too late to back out,” she said.

But Ruben, looking directly into her eyes, replied, “Not a chance.”

Shortly after, robes and blankets were dropped as the event’s announcer stationed on a platform nearby with a microphone declared it was showtime.

A bell rang out, and the plungers cheered as they raced to enter the lake.

No matter how many years Mary had participated in the plunge, she was always shocked at the temperature of the water.

She waded in until it reached her chest. Ruben had to crouch a bit to get on her level.

His eyes widened, and his mouth fell open as he rigidly said, “Cold.”

The rowdy cheers from many of the participants faded into scattered hoots as people buckled in for the two minutes.

This was when Mary and her sister would typically cling to each other to make it through, but with Ruben in Hattie's stead, Mary kept a respectable distance between them.

The lake was packed, and Mary had a low vantage point, so it was impossible to look anywhere but at Ruben.

Time moved under a different currency there, and together, they shivered and cussed under their breaths.

As the first minute neared, she could feel nothing and everything, and it got harder not to swim back to shore. All her best intentions evaporated, and she reached for Ruben's hands under the water. His fingers immediately interlocked with hers, bringing forth some endurance.

She stared into Ruben's dark eyes, at the constellation of his freckles, his wide mouth, the coils that made up his hair, and a pang traveled through her chest and expelled from her as a gasp.

Ruben squeezed her hands as if to say they were in this together. But it all became too much for Mary. She had to leave, get away from him.

"I can't," she said suddenly.

"Just a little while longer," he replied.

So she stayed and bore the freeze. When the other plungers started loudly counting down from fifteen, Ruben said something over the din.

She shook her head. "What?"

He laughed, drew close, and repeated, “I. Love. You.”

Stunned, Mary stared at him as a bell began to toll and people shouted, “Get out, get out, get out.”

She arrived on shore with her teeth chattering and Ruben by her side. He pulled her into his body, and her arms locked around his middle. She couldn’t feel her fingers, her toes, or her face. Oh, but could she feel his heartbeat, his touch, his breath, and the weight of his arms.

They, along with the other freezing plungers, were hastily guided by event volunteers into the warming zone, and soon after, Mary lost track of Ruben as she entered a change tent to get out of her soaked clothes.

Her limbs moved slowly and independently of her buzzing mind to dress her.

And by the time she exited her tent, she believed she might’ve hallucinated Ruben’s declaration.

She searched for him in the warming zone and then around the hot beverage station, eventually finding him fully dressed, tying the laces on his Converse shoes near the backside of a tent facing the lake.

She could hear her pulse in her ears as she approached.

She didn’t give him a chance to unfurl from his lowered position before asking, “Did I hear you correctly out there?”

He rose to stand with that impish half smile of his. “Yes. If what you heard was that I love?—”

“Why now?” she asked desperately, having to make sure before hope bloomed. “Why here? Why not weeks ago or yesterday or tomorrow?”

“Because today was the first day I gave up trying to reason myself out of loving you,” he said, taking a step toward her.

“This wasn’t how things were supposed to go for us.

I’ve been fixated on how I shouldn’t know that you purse your lips when you’re angry and trying to hide it, or that you have a rasp in your voice first thing in the morning, or even that you hate mushrooms and love to dance the polka.

Yet I do. And I want more. I want to learn everything that gets you excited, makes you angry, and makes you sad.

I want to fall asleep to the sound of your voice.

I want to wake up at the edge of the mattress with your elbow in my solar plexus.

And dammit, I want to watch every godawful action movie with you. ”

Mary looked down to the dirt-snow mix beneath her feet, trying to hold herself together as his beautiful words seeped into her pores.

Ruben loved her, and her mirrored feelings that she’d downplayed for weeks, that she’d eclipsed with work and routine and positive mantras, threatened to erupt in an unpredictable display.

“Mary...”

She lifted her gaze to find Ruben’s brows furrowed and the confidence that usually

raised the corners of his mouth gone. He was uncertain. Uncertain of what? Surely not her feelings? Mary couldn't imagine that her love for him was not plainly written across her face.

“Mary, if you need time?—”

She cut him off, reaching for his face and planting a kiss. Ruben's surprise quickly turned to reception, and he kissed her back, long and tenderly, chasing the chill from her lips. And the contents of her soul chimed in songful harmony.

“I love you too,” she told him between their fervent kisses.

His arms tightened around her, and they stayed in their embrace, oblivious as crowds thinned, the tents dismantled, and snowflakes fell around them.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:22 am

MARY NEILSON: Oh, sorry, didn't know you were working.

RUBEN BYERS: You good, baby. Just dictating some notes. What's up?

MN: Nothing, just went to the mailbox, and you've got some letters. Is this the new recorder?

RB: Yeah, but be careful with the microphone end. The muff keeps popping off.

MN: Oooh. Nice. [Clears throat] Ruben Byers, please describe to listeners your exact feelings for one Mary Neilson.

RB: Well, you could say I'm enamored, head over heels, lovestruck.

MN: Hmm. Very good. I believe she has described her feelings similarly.

RB: Has she now?

MN: Yes, I think she's even said you're a good lay.

RB: [Laughs] That's nice to hear. If she's happy, I'm happy.

[Interference]

MN: I don't think Mary Neilson would be too impressed with me sitting on your lap...or where your hand is moving.

RB: The interview is over, love. Put the recorder down.

MN: No, I think I have a few more... [Distortion] No, you're right, it's over.

[Clattering]