



Sunny Goes Cold Turkey

(Stars in the Desert #2)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: My celebrity crush is shooting a movie at my family's resort. Unfortunately, he brought his irritatingly flirtatious co-star with him. The guy needs a nanny for his precocious daughter, and I need to keep it together—impossible tasks with so much temptation around.

Sunny Pratt likes things orderly, and apparently Sunny Pratt speaks in third person when she's freaking out. The film crew arrived today. I had everything organized and ready. Vowing to be professional, I gave up my addiction to a certain celebrity. I'm going cold turkey! I've got this!

Except now I'm nannying for his devilishly handsome co-star, Anders Beck, who breaks every rule I make. He's dangerous and annoying—and charming, dang it. He can't seem to stay in line and he's going to pull me out of line with him.

Anders Beck I'm gunning to be the next Indiana Jones. My manager says I have to keep things professional with Sunny—she's the nanny, there's a lot riding on this movie, it's not just your career on the line, Anders... blah, blah, blah. I can't stay away from her. I'm not going to. She needs some excitement in her life and I need some Sunny in mine.

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I picked the wrong day to quit doing Coke. The fizzy, caffeinated drink has been my crutch for far too long. I run a health-centered destination spa, for goodness sake. I'm an otherwise health-conscious person. The habit is embarrassing, really.

This morning, my brilliant mind decided that since I have an entire film crew coming to the resort that I run with my brother, I should cut myself off from the one thing that keeps me functional. For my long-term health it's a smart move, but right now my brain feels like a wadded up dishrag.

Soda isn't the only bad habit I'm trying to break today. I'm also not thinking about the fact that my lifelong celebrity crush, Micah Watson, is starring in the movie that's being filmed here. Meaning, he's staying in one of our suites. And it's time for me to give him up, because this isn't the regular kind of celebrity crush that you can laugh about with friends. My family and friends don't know just how unhealthy my obsession has become. It's adult-woman-writing-our-names-together-in-my-journal bad. I am mature enough to admit that my infatuation has reached an unhealthy level, just not mature enough to take down the poster of him hidden behind the dresses in my closet.

In the ten years since Micah Watson and Anders Beck starred in their first paranormal love triangle blockbuster, the majority of the female world has been divided into two camps—Team Micah or Team Anders.

I've been staunchly Team Micah from day one. I secretly own the merchandise. To my everlasting shame, I've argued my stance with strangers online. Micah Watson is devastatingly tall, dark and handsome, but also trustworthy, stable, respectful to women, smart—everything Anders Beck is not. I will die a humiliating death on the

Team Micah hill.

Like a bad habit, I've kept it a secret, a fact which will serve me well in the coming months of having to act normal. I've had years of experience hiding the extent of my obsession.

I've also signed about two hundred legal documents promising I'll be nothing but discreet and professional for the duration of filming, so I can kick the Micah Watson habit for a few months. Legally, I'm required to. I read the contracts. If I interpreted the jargon correctly, if this shoot goes south, all that will be left of our family-owned resort will be a few broken down golf carts and abandoned buildings while we duke things out in court. My job for the next few months is to cater to the needs of the film crew, lie low, and not fall deeper in love with Micah Watson. Easy peasy.

So, I'm not thinking about him at all. I'm not picturing his big, sculpted arms pulling open the front door any minute now, or his wavy, dark brown hair resting on one of our pillows tonight. I'm not thinking about it so hard that I'm sweating from every pore. I pull my blouse away from my chest to fan myself. Is it hot in here?

The crew is coming in waves, with Micah Watson— Eeek! —Anders Beck, the writer/director, the supporting cast, and all of their entourages supposedly arriving at 1:00, which was twenty-three minutes ago. I just need to get this first round of hoity-toity guests checked in and settled. After that my brain won't need to function at a high capacity for at least a few hours, when the production crew is scheduled to arrive.

Everything is ready for this non-event that I'm barely thinking about. I have soft music playing, essential oils diffusing in the air, and the fountains trickling. The rooms are immaculately appointed, and our staff is polished and lining the foyer like English house servants awaiting the king. I'm wearing a layer of makeup and my most professional-yet-perky pencil skirt and heels. I spent extra time straightening my

long, dark hair. I don't normally dress like this for work, but today isn't a normal day.

I have meticulously planned every detail to make things perfect for The Micah Watson—and the rest of the cast and crew, of course. My knee is bouncing under my desk like a jackhammer.

On my drive to work I noticed that even Mother Nature is trying to impress our celebrity guests: The sky outside is a perfect robin's egg blue, contrasting with the coral sandstone cliffs that provide the backdrop of our destination resort. We had a rare rainstorm overnight, so the air smells fresh and the desert flowers are blooming. Everything is perfect. We just need our guests to arrive.

I drum my fingers on the white marble reception desk. This is a terrible time for a splitting headache and brain fog. My mind wanders to the vending machine in the employee break room. It's stocked with cold bottles of Coke. If I had one now, it would have condensation dripping down the side. It would hiss when I twist off the lid. All I need is one sip. Fizz. Sugar. Caffeine. Happiness. Is my right eye twitching?

Maybe I have time to run down there and grab a drink? I look at the clock. I look at our employees, ready and waiting. What are the odds that our important guests will arrive in the three minutes it will take me to run to the breakroom and shotgun a Coke? I totally have time. I'm already kicking my Micah Watson habit cold turkey. That's enough self-improvement for one day .

"Be right back."

I stride away from the front desk to the sound of Mercer's gasp behind me. My best friend leads guided hikes and gives welcome tours at the resort, and today is the most important day of her employed life. She looks even more stressed out than I feel, which is abnormal for her. Nothing fazes Mercer.

"Dude, where are you going?" her frazzled holler echoes down the wide, tiled corridor.

I can feel the eyes of our other employees on me. I'm their boss. They won't say anything. Mercer, on the other hand—

"If you leave me here alone and they walk through that door, you are dead to me."

"I won't be long!" I call down the hall.

Less than two minutes later, I'm back at my post behind the front desk and my belly is full of cold, sparkling, heavenly cola. I can already feel the happy chemicals buzzing around my body. Instant improvement.

"See, I told you it would be fine," I reassure Mercer with a glance at the clock. 1:29. They're a half an hour late. This isn't a big deal. Our guests arrive late all of the time. I'm not going to let it get to me.

It's totally getting to me.

I don't love this about myself—the obsessive need for everything to run on a precise schedule—but I can't help it. I prefer predictability. Stability. All of the -ilities. I love organizing things to perfection, that way everything in my life functions smoothly and there are no surprises. I straighten my magnetic name tag, then drum my fingers on the marble counter again.

"Sunny Pratt!" Mercer hisses my full name like curse words, reaching across my desk and slapping a hand over mine to hold it in place. "Stop that! Your stress is contagious, man." Her eyes are darting around more than usual.

"I'm not stressed, I just—" URP!

Did I just stress burp? Oh no . No, no, no .

I guzzled that Coke way too fast. I realize I am feeling a little queasy. Maybe I shouldn't have had that soda on an empty stomach. In all of my hustle to prepare for our guests I had skipped lunch. I just need to eat a little something to settle my stomach.

Mercer and a few of my employees are tittering as I dig through the front desk drawers in search of a quick snack. Tic Tacs? Blech. I rummage deeper, past some mystery cords and the rubber band ball. Dusty granola bar? Pass.

I need to organize these drawers. This is ridiculous. I lean down to open the bottom drawer and find Mercer's stash of Red Vines, and just in time. My belly is like an agitating washing machine preparing for the spin cycle. I stuff a piece of licorice in my mouth, intending to chew and swallow the entire thing before I sit up and resume my post like the professional I am. While I chew, I arrange the contents of the drawer so that it's less chaotic.

As I sort paperclips according to size, I stuff another rope of licorice in my mouth sideways. Geez, this is delicious. Why don't I eat candy more often? It's doing something for my stress level, but this drawer is utterly absurd. Why is there a single black sock in here? A throat clears and I realize there's a person standing in front of my desk. I startle, slam the drawer shut, and straighten.

And Anders Beck is standing in front of me.

Holy crap, Anders Beck is smiling at me.

Unfortunately, I still have a Red Vine hanging out the corners of my mouth like the tusks of a walrus.

I yank at the licorice and throw it under the desk where it lands on the tile with a thunk.

Why? Why, why, why am I the way that I am? I silently berate myself. I rarely eat candy, and the one time I'm stuffing it into my face like a raccoon in a trash can, a major Hollywood heartthrob catches me. I guess I should be grateful. At least it wasn't Micah Watson who caught me in walrus mode .

It's just Anders Beck, and he is grinning straight at me. The force of his megawatt smile almost knocks me on my behind. I've always conceded that he's a handsome man, but in person he's surprisingly, painfully perfect. His dark blonde hair is longer than I've ever seen it, the waves brushing his collar. I'm learning just now that even the most detestable of celebrities is beautiful in real life.

Strong, square, perfectly stubbled jaw? Check.

Ice-blue eyes? Obviously.

Single dimple on his right cheek? Swoon.

Drool-worthy muscles? Hot dang.

Then, in the corner of my eye I spot a profile I'd recognize anywhere.

Micah Watson.

Micah Watson is in the building. I might faint.

"I'm going to faint," I mumble, making the man in front of me chuckle.

Micah Watson's big arms—his best feature, according to the brackets I made when I

was sixteen—are folded across his chest as he strides past my desk without even a glance my way. I can't stop the smile that overtakes my face because the man I've been daydreaming about since I was fourteen years old is standing three feet away from me. Some part of my brain registers surprise that he came into the building for this part of the process. I figured I'd be dealing with his people, or his people's people. Not that I'm complaining, because look at him .

To protect my sanity, I was counting on seeing less of Micah. We would deal with his assistant, his manager, or whoever, and he would stay far away from me, closed off safely in his suite. And yet he's right there, scratching the back of his head and flexing his indecently exposed bicep in front of God and everyone. I fan my face. Is our air conditioner broken?

Someone's throat clears and my eyes dart to Anders, whose amused smile never seems to leave his mouth. That's when I realize I'm ogling, and more than one pair of eyes is fixed on me. Because Anders isn't alone. There's a man to his right with black hair and black, thick-framed glasses hiding a pair of dark eyes. He's got strong Darth Vader vibes, and his expression says he is not amused.

"Checking in," are his only words. I swear I can hear heavy, modulating breathing through some kind of mechanical apparatus.

I better take care of him before he Force-chokes me.

"Oliver Jones," he adds, like it should have been obvious and I am a moron.

Ah. Anders' manager. We've spoken on the phone multiple times and we've been on a first-name email basis. I didn't picture him being so stuffy. And Sith-like. Well, two can play at that game. I've been training for this my whole life.

I stuff my infatuation with Micah deep, deep in my heart. I smash it into a box, lock

the box, and incinerate the key. He's just another guest. I can hyperventilate about all of this in a few months, when filming wraps and they leave. I've got this.

Then I hear Micah's deep voice echoing through the foyer. I can't make out what he's saying through the chatter around me. Annoying. But oh, the sound of it.

I haven't got this.

Yes you do, Sunny. Pull yourself together.

I smooth my skirt, nod, and smile. "Yes, of course. Welcome to Nizhóní, Mr. Jones." I use the same tone I use with all of the difficult-to-please guests who have come and gone over the years. I can do this. See how blasé and professional I am?

"That's how you say that word? Nizhóní?" Anders' gruff voice is so deep and low I feel it in my bones.

"Yes, An—Mr. Beck." I shake off the trance I'm in from the sound of Micah's husky voice that, frustratingly, I still can't make out. This is going to be a deliciously long and difficult couple of months. "My mother chose the name. Her mother was Navajo and it's a tribute to her. It means beautiful. "

I've repeated this detail to many guests over the years, and the old habit has a calming effect on my heart. It also serves as the reminder I need to do my job well and keep things professional. I love this resort. It is my home and our family legacy. I've been running these halls since I was old enough to run. I stole snacks from the kitchen and swam in the pool until I was old enough to get my first job here folding laundry. Hundreds of people have come here and found rest and rejuvenation, and I take pride in that. I love this place.

"Fitting," he says with a wink that temporarily fries my brain.

So much for my calm heart. Fetch my smelling salts, I feel a swoon coming on.

Wait, what? No, no, no. This is Anders Beck—the buffoon, the womanizer, the rascalion. He isn't supposed to have this effect on me. He doesn't. Geesh, the man has a powerful wink.

Mercer is standing behind the men, watching the interaction with wide eyes. She mouths, “Oh. My. Gosh!” and pantomimes what I think is a large, sexy man with burly muscles, winking. Her little game of charades is vaguely crude and definitely not appropriate for work.

I feel myself blush and shake my head at her. You're going off of all celebrity crushes cold turkey, Sunny, I remind myself. In fact, that should be my nickname: Cold Turkey Sunny. I can't let the lethal charisma that radiates from this man affect me. It won't, because I'm Cold Turkey Sunny. She is a serious businesswoman. Nothing affects her.

More groups arrive and my other employees greet them and start the check-in process. Chatter fills the lobby and I silently monitor Micah Watson and his small entourage bowing to his every need. Crowds part around him and all eyes are fixed on him. The man is modern American royalty. It's just the reminder I need of who I am and what my role is today.

Miraculously, I navigate the check-in process with the men in front of me efficiently. It's streamlined, since most things were taken care of by the production company weeks ago. Except ...

“It looks like we're missing some of your party? Anders, will your daughter and nanny be joining you?” We have a woman named Nan and Anders' five-year-old daughter listed on our paperwork.

Oliver answers for Anders, his tone robotic, “Imogen and Nanny Nan are on their way, just later than we thought. They're accompanied by Mr. Beck's personal protection, as you'll recall from my email.”

I refuse to smile at the fact that the nanny's name is Nan. I am a statue. I am the picture of poise and maturity. Poise and maturity, dang it.

Nanny Nan , my brain betrays me. NANNY NAN .

I feel a smile creeping onto my lips and I employ every muscle in the bottom half of my face to stop it. Nanny Nan , my brain taunts a third time. It's not even funny, but because I'm not allowed to laugh—and I've just downed a Coke and a bunch of sugar—I laugh.

I wish I could say it was a charming, demure giggle. Nope. Because I fought so hard to contain it, the laugh bursts out of my nose in the form of a snort that echoes through the corridor like a gunshot. Several heads whip my direction, including the well-coiffed head of Micah Watson. He barely turns my way with a perturbed glare, and I die a little inside. I bet he's so tired from traveling all day.

Even Mercer, the queen of the snort laugh, is wide-eyed. Not once in our eighteen year friendship, or in my twenty-six years of life, have I made a sound like that.

Here lies Sunny Pratt, who died of humiliation after snort-laughing in front of People's Sexiest Man Alive.

But then Anders' face brightens with a smile that makes my heart stop. His crystal blue eyes look straight into mine, like I'm his partner in crime. “Right? I laugh every time he calls her Nanny Nan. I told you it's funny.” He shoves Oliver's shoulder, “Just call her Nan.”

Oliver releases a heavy breath. “She is the nanny. Just maintaining a professional boundary.” Then he mutters under his breath, “One of us should. ”

Suddenly I’m very interested in this Nan person and her relationship with Anders Beck. I imagine him coming home to her after a long day of filming and settling onto the couch to watch a movie with her and Imogen. Imogen falls asleep and Anders makes an excuse to put his arm around Nan. They cuddle. She plays with his hair.

Ugh. Oliver is right. Anders needs to learn boundaries. And Nan needs to keep her grubby paws out of Anders’ hair.

Wait. Why do I care if this woman throws herself at this guy? If she’s willing to be taken advantage of by an obvious womanizer, that’s on her. And you’re in love with Micah, so none of that matters. Except you’re not even in love with him for the next few months. You are abstaining. Cold Turkey Sunny, remember?

My horrible daydream-turned-lecture is interrupted by Oliver, “Nanny Nan will arrive in a few hours with Imogen. I’ll give her instructions on how to find their room.”

I can’t help but match Oliver’s task-oriented energy, because honestly, when my senses aren’t being assaulted by the presence of multiple A-list celebrities, I am a task-oriented person. The real me is in here somewhere, hiding behind the bumbling teenager I’m impersonating. This is me pulling it together.

“Perfect.” I smooth my skirt—mostly because my palms have gotten sweaty—and my mind is blown when I catch Anders’ clocking the movement. My hands freeze on my legs, “Mercer will give you a short tour of the property and show you to your rooms. Meanwhile, Eric will handle your luggage.” Is Anders still looking at my hands on my legs? Did I get something on my skirt? “I hope you enjoy your time here.”

“I think we will,” Anders says with another one of his killer winks.

I realize a few things at this moment: One, Anders Beck knows exactly what he’s doing. He’s a terrible flirt, and it means absolutely nothing. He’s a natural born charmer, which I should’ve seen coming. A guy doesn’t become the king of the red carpet with the personality of a wet sock. And two: If having Micah Watson on the premises doesn’t kill me, this man will.

I paste on a phony smile, pretending to be unaffected by this tidal wave of charisma. “Have a nice afternoon, Mr. Jones.” And with barely a nod toward Anders Beck I tack on, “Mr. Beck,” like an afterthought.

Oliver appraises me with kind eyes after this interaction, and I notice that the Sith Lord isn’t bad looking when he isn’t scowling. I think I’ve won his approval. “Thank you, Sunny.” He spins around, “Which one of you is Mercer?”

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Oliver and I are in the now-empty lobby of the resort, waiting for Nan and Imogen to arrive. Most of the time Oliver handles this stuff because he says I draw too much attention to Immy, but this resort is locked down tight for filming. Usually we're constantly looking over our shoulders for paparazzi, but the production is so buttoned-down that half of the crew doesn't even know why they're here. And no one except those closest to us know that Micah and I are here. The freedom is pretty sweet.

I'm kind of hoping to run into that cute brunette we met earlier—Sunny? My eyes drift to the front desk every few minutes, just in case she makes an appearance. I wouldn't hate seeing that sexy skirt of hers again. And her smile, of course. That was like pure sunshine. She has a pretty fitting name.

I'm sprawled out on one of the plush couches that line the spacious main entry of the resort, but Oliver is pacing in front of me. He's calling Nan, who isn't picking up. It's late—well past dinner time—and they're not here. They left our place in Brentwood after lunch, so they shouldn't be this far behind us. Nan's last text said they were stopping for chicken nuggets in Las Vegas because that's all Imogen wants to eat these days. That was three hours ago, but I know how traffic gets in Vegas. I also know they have my private protection, James, with them so I'm not worried. The guy is well trained to handle paparazzi and overeager fans, not to mention the dude is jacked. He can take care of Immy and Nanny Nan. I roll my eyes at the ridiculous name.

The rest of the crew arrived, dumped their stuff in their rooms, and left for dinner a while ago. Oliver and I haven't eaten and we're both getting a tad edgy. He's annoying the crap out of me, if I'm being honest. Oliver and I are friends, but we

don't do well in close quarters. Everything that makes him an excellent personal manager—perfectionism, attention to detail, organization—bugs the bejeezus out of me in large doses. Like right now, with the pacing.

“Ollie, calm down and have a seat. I'm sure they're fine. Stop pacing.” He hates being called Ollie, and I'm trying to irritate him because he's irritating me. Looks like it's working.

“You like that your life runs like an atomic clock, right? Who do you think makes that happen?” He smashes his thumbs on the screen of his phone again. “Me, so I'll pace if I want to pace.”

In the corner of my eye I spot Sunny taking a seat behind the big front desk. Man, she's pretty.

Look, don't touch, I remind myself of the first words out of Oliver's mouth when we left the front desk earlier. Of course he tracked my attraction to Sunny and immediately warned me off of her. I'm here to work, and he knows what happens—well, what used to happen—when I get distracted. At the time I appreciated the reminder, but now, with my empty stomach and her sunshine smile only twenty feet away, I think Oliver's advice is kind of stupid.

But I'm looking, not touching, because deep down I know he's right.

So, I look.

Sunny has her long, shiny brown hair pulled up into some kind of twisted thing on top of her head that wasn't there earlier. There's a pencil sticking out of it, which is... adorable. Strands of hair have escaped the pencil and are trailing down her delicate neck. She's also wearing tortoise shell glasses that weren't there this afternoon. And before this moment I didn't know that the sexy librarian look is my thing. Tortoise

shell glasses are the new string bikini. This is me keeping my hands to myself.

Her full lips purse to one side like she's thinking. I zero in on those soft, pink lips for longer than I intend to. They probably taste like that red licorice I caught her eating earlier. Just an objective observation from a man who is looking and not touching.

I don't know what she's doing, but she's pretending to be busy. I know acting when I see it. She's clicking on her computer and shuffling papers around, but it's her drifting gaze that gives her away. Her smokey librarian eyes land on Oliver, and dart toward me periodically like she's trying not to look. Her gaze catches on Oliver a little longer than I like and I scowl. Then her eyes land on me in surprise.

Did I just growl? No way did that sound just come out of my throat. I flick a wave at her and chuckle, like my laughter always starts with a growl. I'm just a normal, growl-chuckling guy hanging out in a lobby with his manager, wondering where his daughter and nanny are.

"Sup?" I lift my chin in the universal greeting of frat boys everywhere. That did not up my cool factor. Ugh. I better go over there before I shoot finger guns at her or something. I stand and saunter over to her desk.

"How can I help you, Mr. Beck?" she asks, before I have a chance to speak.

Her formality is jarring. After five minutes of spying on her, I had concocted an entire personality for Sunny that was warm, inviting, and well, sunny. Maybe she's not a naughty librarian. Maybe she's boring. Dang.

"You can call me Anders," I smile .

She does a double take and her eyes go wide. The movement knocks another strand of hair out of her pencil bun.

“Long day, huh?”

“Yes.”

She’s giving me nothing to work with. “Do you like working here?” I prod.

She nods rigorously, and this time her hairdo unravels. The pencil clatters onto her desk and she swipes it up, twisting her hair back into a knot before I even get a chance to enjoy her messy hair. She blows the remaining strands up and out of her eyes with those distracting licorice lips. “You’re sure there’s nothing I can do for you?”

That question in her soft voice is begging for an innuendo-laden response. She’s killing me. I wish she wouldn’t tee it up like that when I’m working so hard to be a good guy. “Just getting to know you. We’ll be seeing a lot of each other.”

Out of nowhere, our blonde tour guide plops onto the spare chair next to Sunny. “Hey, Anders. Aren’t you supposed to be at some swanky dinner with the other VIPs?”

While Sunny elbows her I peek nonchalantly at her name tag. “Hi, Mercer. Yeah. My daughter and her nanny haven’t arrived yet. Just waiting on them.”

Just then, like my words summoned them, the front door bangs open and James walks in carrying a sleeping Imogen on his shoulder.

Oliver’s loud voice reaches them before I do. “Where have you been?”

James shoots a look at Oliver, then at Mercer and Sunny, making it clear that he doesn’t want to have this conversation with an audience.

“They’re good,” I say, knowing all about the huge pile of NDAs they’ve signed. I reach for Immy and she settles into the crook of my neck like she always does, with her crazy blonde frizz tickling my nose. “What happened?”

James’ only response is a sigh and, “I lost her in Vegas. ”

Oliver’s angry questions come out rapid-fire. “You lost Imogen? How could you do that? Is she okay?”

“Not Imogen. I lost Nan.” James’ voice is like an idling motorcycle that’s ready to gun it. “We stopped for dinner. Nan said she needed to use the bathroom and didn’t come back. She took off. She didn’t answer her phone. It took us a while to track her down.”

“And by ‘us’ you mean you and a five-year-old child were walking the streets of Las Vegas trying to track down Nanny Nan?” Oliver has a way of phrasing things that can blanket an entire room in shame. And he just can’t stop with the Nanny Nan thing. “Where is she now?”

“Sleeping in the car. She wouldn’t wake up.”

Speak of the devil. The woman herself appears, mincing toward us in a pair of high heels and skin-tight pink dress that are both decidedly un-nanny-like. She paws at James’ shoulder with a manicured hand. “You could’ve left her in the car with me, Sugar.”

I feel some petty satisfaction when he shrugs her hand away. “Imogen shouldn’t be left unsupervised in public, even if she’s asleep. It’s not safe.” His rumbling motorcycle voice revs. He’s right, and I’m glad he’s saying it so I don’t have to. I’m angry enough that I’d lose it.

But apparently, Nan doesn't know when to stop. She spins on her heel and drapes a hand on my shoulder, droning on in her southern drawl which lands halfway between sexy and grating. "It wasn't that big a deal, Andy." Gross. Not loving that nickname. "She woulda kept sleeping."

Oliver corrects her. "James parked, unloaded her from the car, and walked into the building before you realized she was gone—"

"Get her, Vader!" a female voice whisper-shouts behind us.

Oliver's head swings toward the voice, wearing a very Darth Vader-esque death glare. It's the perfect nickname. I'll be borrowing that one .

Mercer dodges Sunny's swinging elbow and hisses, "What? Geez, quit with the elbow!"

Alabama Fran Drescher scowls at Mercer. "Shouldn't you be getting our bags?"

Sunny arches one perfect eyebrow at Nan and quietly asks Mercer to take care of the bags.

"Y'all are both going to need to get out there. There's a lot. Get along, now." Her twang is syrupy, but it's false sweetness that has me holding back a gag.

The pair of women stand like they're really going to fetch Nan's luggage. I can't let that happen after the way she just spoke to them.

"I've got it. Where're the carts?" I offer, looking for a place to lay Imogen. I mean, of course I'm hoping they have some secret hired muscle to do this job because I've seen how Nan packs, but better me than them. And Nanny Nan certainly isn't jumping in to help.

“Not a chance, big guy. You’re not leaving us with her. You handle that” — Mercer motions to Nan — “and we’ll get the bags.”

When I turn my attention back to my group Oliver is finishing a lecture. “Bottom line, when we have an issue with the care you give Imogen, we need compliance instead of argument and complaints. You work for us.”

“Okay. I promise I won’t leave her alone, even if she’s asleep. Happy?” She holds her clawed hands out, like I’m supposed to hand Immy over.

“No.” Oliver’s answer is like the bang of a gavel. “What’s this about you disappearing in Vegas?”

Nan turns on James, “You told them?” she whines. Poor, put upon Nanny Nan. “I was just playing a few hands while Imogen ate her nuggies. She was with James. It wasn’t a big deal.”

“You were gambling?” I’m going to let Oliver handle this mess, but I can’t stop the question. I’m an easy going guy. I let a lot of stuff slide, because people usually have to be pretty patient with me. Plus, sometimes it’s better to let someone else be the go-between in these interactions. But Nan left Immy with James so she could gamble? Nope. I am way too grumpy for this bull crap.

“It was fine. I told you, James had her—”

Then Immy whines, “Hairy!” half asleep, reaching around me like her dog is going to bound around the corner and into her arms. Immy loves that dopey dog and it’s always a nightmare when they’re separated. Unfortunately, she’s staying at a kennel for the next two months because traveling with a 120-pound Great Dane labrador mix mutt is a major pain in the behind.

“Hairy is at home, Immy,” I smooth her wild curls and rest a hand on her head, holding her against my shoulder. “We’ll see her when we get home.” Please don’t ask when we’re going home. “I want to go home!” is Immy’s favorite thing to say exactly when we can’t go home.

She arches her back, doing a perfect impersonation of a flopping fish to escape my arms. “I want Hairy!” her tiny holler echoes through the corridor.

And suddenly, something big knocks into the back of my knees and they buckle. I land hard on my butt and my body breaks Imogen’s fall. And there’s Hairy, right in my face—snout to human nose—her warm dog breath puffing directly into my gaping mouth. Her big, brown eyes are guilt tripping me for even suggesting we would leave her in a kennel for two months. The tennis ball that is a permanent fixture in her slobbery mouth drops in my lap and she pants, waiting for me to throw it.

“I’m so sorry!” Sunny bursts in behind Hairy, gasping and out of breath. “He was running around the parking lot and came through the door before I could stop him! I’ll get him out” — she drags in a lungful of air — “and call animal control.”

“Hairy is a girl,” Imogen tells Sunny, in that tiny, solemn voice of hers. “See her pink collar? She’s my dog. I named her Hairy Styles because she’s my best friend and I love her.” She flings her twiggy arms around her dog’s furry, gray neck and I swear I see Hairy roll her eyes because none of this makes sense. How did she end up in this situation, and with such a name? Hairy is a good, long-suffering girl.

While Sunny catches her breath, Oliver lays into Nan. “The dog? You brought the dog. I left simple instructions to leave the dog at the kennel on Westwood Ave. Why is she here? More importantly, why was she running loose around the parking lot?” Ever since the day we brought her home from the shelter, Oliver has refused to use the name Immy chose. I don’t think a female dog named Hairy Styles computes in his

cyborg brain.

Nan is whining worse than Immy now. “Imogen wouldn’t let me! She wouldn’t stop crying.” She pleads to me, “Y’all don’t understand how dependent she is on that dumb mutt.”

I swear Hairy’s whiskery eyebrows raise at the insult. She can’t be too dumb; she’s disliked Nan from day one—which was exactly eight days ago. Finding a trustworthy nanny is no easy task when you’re Anders Beck.

I grab her slobbery tennis ball and launch it down the hall. Hairy bounds after it, with Immy giggling at her heels. With my daughter distracted I can say what needs to be said.

“You’re fired,” I tell Nan, too hungry and tired to elaborate. This shouldn’t require an explanation. When she protests, I cut her off, “That’s enough. You’re done. James will get you home safely.” He’s going to hate that.

But Oliver tries to stop me. “Think this through. We have a full day tomorrow. I won’t be able to replace Nanny Nan like that” — he snaps his fingers — “or I would have already.”

He’s not wrong. This is going to be a major pain in my a—

“Y’all can’t fire me! I just started. You’ve barely given me a fair chance,” Nan’s grating voice cuts into my thoughts. She stabs her pointed nail into my chest, “On second thought, you know what? I quit. Good luck to you. Good luck figuring out how to take care of that little brat by yourself. You have no idea what that girl needs, and you have no idea how to be a father.”

She spins on her bedazzled heel and leaves.

Her words might have hit differently if she hadn't spent the afternoon blowing off her one job. She isn't exactly a credible source. I'm an okay dad. I think.

Oliver runs a hand down his face, releasing a long breath. He curses. Immy and Hairy are back at my side, playing a combination of fetch and keep away with the nasty tennis ball. Hairy runs away with the ball and Immy follows her.

"We'll figure this out," I assure Oliver. "It'll be fine."

"It'll be fine for you. I'm the one who has to find a replacement nanny in the twelve hours before you start filming a new project." His thumbs are already burning a trail on his phone screen.

"Let me find someone. I can find someone." I don't know why Oliver doesn't think I can do this stuff. Just because he usually does it doesn't mean I can't. Everything always works out.

"Okay, Hot Shot. We're hours from civilization, at an empty resort in Utah. Where are you going to look?" How does the man glare straight into my eyes and yell at me while he types on his phone? See? Cyborg.

I look around the lobby like a nanny vending machine is going to appear. Worth a shot. Then I spot Immy at the end of the hall. She's curled up on a couch next to Sunny. Hairy is on her other side, sitting back against the couch cushions like she's one of the girls. Sunny runs her fingers through Immy's curly hair, twisting it into one of her pencil bun things. Hairy lolls her head to the side, leaning her full weight onto Immy, who tips into Sunny. The domino effect makes the three girls laugh. I think Hairy is laughing, anyway. She started it. Something about the sight pinches inside my chest. Now I want to look at her and touch her, but for entirely wholesome reasons. Sunny is different .

Immy spots me watching her. “Daddy, look how my hair is! It’s got a pencil just like her!” she announces with a giggle, wriggling out from under Hairy. The pencil falls out of her hair with the movement and she whines, “Hairy! You knocked out my pencil!”

Sunny shushes her and whispers, “I’ll fix it.” She drags her fingers through the curls again, twisting them into the pencil on top of Immy’s head. My daughter’s eyes are glazed—she loves having her hair played with. And I don’t blame her. I think I’d enjoy having Sunny’s fingers in my hair, too. In no time, Immy’s hair is up in the pencil and all is right with the world.

I raise an eyebrow at Oliver.

Oliver raises an eyebrow at me.

Sometimes it’s convenient having my best friend as a manager, because we can communicate telepathically. I want to hire Sunny to be Immy’s nanny. Oliver doesn’t think it’s a great idea, but we don’t have a lot of options.

He shrugs.

I nod at him. He needs to be the one to hire her. I can’t do it—It’ll come out sounding like a proposition. Want to hang out in our suite and play house with me for pay?

He nods emphatically back at me.

I nod his way, lobbing the task back at him. This is what I pay you for, man.

He shakes his head at me, and nods rigorously in the direction of the girls.

I turn to face them and Sunny is watching us.

“What?” she asks.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

I am in love with Imogen Beck. Well, I guess her real name is Imogen Beck Abrahamson. She has Anders' true surname, which is a mouthful. Either way, I wish she were mine. The place in my heart that has felt painfully hollow since high school feels practically cavernous with this sweet girl sitting beside me. I can throw her hair into a pencil bun like mine and laugh with her about her slobbery dog, but I can't let Immy's pure light fill me with longing. This is one instance where I won't allow myself to daydream. It hurts too much.

I slip my glasses on her face to complete the Boring Businesswoman look. She makes a cross-eyed face at me and giggles when the glasses slide down her nose.

I look away from her to scan the lobby for something—anything—to distract me from this train of thought. I've checked the rear entrance periodically for any sign of Micah Watson, but no such luck. The guy disappeared after check-in and hasn't been seen since. It's a little deflating, but probably for the best. Dang it.

I check the back door one more time, just to be sure. That's when I catch Anders and Oliver having a silent argument while they shoot tense nods at each other and in my direction. The exchange goes on for an awkward while until they see me staring .

“What?” Am I not supposed to interact with Imogen? My mind races back to all of the legal documents I signed to prepare for our celebrity guests and their offspring, but I don't remember anything about not fraternizing with the children. I thought I was helping out, in my inept way.

Anders shoots one last nod at Oliver and the man purses his lips in response. I swear I hear him call Anders a chicken under his breath as he marches my direction. Geez,

the guy even walks like a sci-fi supervillain. I remind myself that I have done nothing wrong and have nothing to be nervous about.

Luckily, I'm saved by my best friend. Mercer plops on the couch next to me, probably bored to death and ready to go home since her job was done hours ago. But last night I made her promise to be my wingwoman today to keep me from doing anything embarrassing or tabloid-worthy. She's the only person in the world who knows about my obsession with Micah, and she enjoys letting me know when I'm acting a fool.

She gives knuckles to Imogen and kicks her feet up on the coffee table, all of her nervousness from earlier long gone. She has no idea how much her don't-give-a-crap attitude calms me down when it isn't driving me bananas.

"Thank you," I breathe at Mercer, hopefully quiet enough that Darth Oliver can't hear.

"We have an emergency," he says, like I wasn't diligently eavesdropping during the whole soap opera scene with Nanny Nan.

"Do you need a nanny?" I'm already combing my mind for an employee we can afford to spare for a few months who would also be a trustworthy caregiver. It's a short list. I hope he has a backup plan.

Anders arrives, slinging his big arm around Oliver, "We have a proposition for you—" he stops mid-sentence when he spots Imogen. "No. Absolutely not. No. Take off those glasses, young lady. And take that pencil out of your hair, while you're at it." His icy eyes are stern, like I gave his daughter meth or Fun Dip or something equally egregious.

Wow. Someone's testy. Even Oliver looks at Anders in shock.

Anders sighs and rubs the back of his neck, as if I require all of the patience in the world. His ridiculously large bicep mocks me in my embarrassment. His face is red. “Oliver has a request.” He holds a hand out to his daughter, “Come on, kiddo. Let’s let the grownups talk.”

“You’re a grownup, Dad.”

“Nah. Let’s go find some Skittles.”

The two wander away, tiny hand in giant hand, with Hairy trotting at their heels. I feel myself sigh and Mercer stabs me with her pointy elbow—our weapon of choice today, apparently. I know I’m staring. Just one...more...peek. And there’s Mercer’s elbow again, and this time she clears her throat in an obnoxious way. Ugh. Why am I staring at Anders Beck? Gross.

“We have a request. We need a nanny, and Anders wants you.” Oliver’s tone says Anders Beck gets what he wants.

“He wants me ?” I sound mildly disgusted, but deep, deep inside my ego is enjoying this.

Mercer clarifies under her breath, “He wants you to be his nanny.”

“I know, but I have to... do my job. You know. Run the resort.” I have no other answer or solution to this problem because my brain is short-circuiting.

Of course I want to say yes to Oliver, and I should—if there was ever a time to give our guests what they want, this is it. But who will do my job? And besides—I’m ashamed to admit the thought crossed my mind—if I’m shut away in Anders’ suite nannying, the odds of “accidental” run-ins with Micah Watson go way down. It would be ideal, and yet horrible. I don’t want to do it.

“Joe can handle your stuff.” Mercer scoffs under her breath, “Like it’s hard. ”

“Excuse you? We literally have an entire film crew staying here that I need to keep track of.” I shoot down Mercer’s crazy idea by default, but even as I say it I realize she’s right.

My older brother Joe can absolutely handle my job, because up until a few months ago it was his job. He was running this place long before I even started folding towels for housekeeping. He’s had me take on more and more responsibilities as he’s been distracted for months planning a wedding and building a house. It won’t kill him to take a break from all of that to help out with the family business again. Plus, there’s no way he’ll let me say no to our most important guests ever.

But what about my heart? I’ve babysat before and it wasn’t bad, but playing house with a little girl—especially one I already feel so drawn to—might destroy me. Spending months nurturing and teaching a child, only to have her ripped away at the end of it will hurt.

But then another picture pops into mind—one where Anders comes back to the suite after an exhausting day of filming. I make a nice dinner for him. We chat and laugh about our days. We tuck Immy into bed. Our fingers brush when we turn out the light. He wraps his big warm fingers around mine, pulls me to him, and—

“Dude,” Mercer whisper-shouts at me and I barely dodge her pointy elbow.

Where on earth did that come from?

“I’d love to help,” I feel myself saying. It’s fine. It’s not like I’ll be in Micah Watson’s suite all day—just his arrogant, skirt-chasing co-star’s. The random, PG-13 daydreams I’m suddenly having of Anders are a fluke. It’ll be fine.

Is this really happening?

Fireworks launch in my stomach as the reality of what I've agreed to settles in my mind. I feel a confusing combination of excitement, nervousness, joy, and worry at the prospect of nannying Imogen Beck.

This is going to be so much fun.

This is going to hurt.

I can't believe I'm doing this.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

Day one of filming. It's a little before eight in the morning. I take a swig from my huge, insulated water bottle—this dry desert air is no joke—and I'm ready to go to make-up. Oliver and the new nanny should be here any minute. I only ever beat Oliver out the door on the first day of shooting, because I'm always so antsy on day one. The rest of the time, he'll be pounding on my door and driving me crazy while I'm still in the bathroom. But I'm pacing in front of the couch in my suite, humming the words to my usual Mariah Carey song.

This is my calming routine when I have the first day jitters. I get my Mariah on. My mom raised me on her songs, so they ground me. I can sing most of them by heart, and this one is her particular favorite. It's an intense, vocally-challenging pop number (is her music anything but vocally-challenging?) about the sweet, sweet fantasy Mariah has about a boyfriend. It shouldn't be calming—in fact, it should be deeply embarrassing—but whatever. It's my process. I don't question the process that has led to Academy Award nominations. I give in to the urge to sing, belting out the final chorus.

There's a soft knock at the door and I jump.

“One second!” I holler, swiping my water bottle, ready to get a move on .

When I open the door, the breath gets sucked right out of my lungs. The suites at this resort have exterior doors facing the open desert, so there's a stone walkway, orange sand, and mint green sagebrush trailing up to sheer, sandstone cliffs for a backdrop. The sun is coming up over the distant mountains and beams of yellow light shine around the figure who knocked on the door.

It's Sunny. Of course she would arrive in an actual halo of sunlight. And she's wearing those dang glasses again. She's also wearing a pair of jeans that make her hips look extra squeezable, and a little white t-shirt. The corners of her full lips are turned up, like she knows something I don't. I can't breathe right.

"Come in," I say on a shaky exhale. The last functioning part of my brain instructs me to open the door for her, so I do—about ten inches. She'll only just be able to squeeze past me. The little devil on my shoulder gives me a high five.

Her eyebrows furrow behind her glasses and she scoots past me into the suite. I feel her warmth and try to catch a whiff of her hair.

Oh no.

I expected her to smell like coconut or pink lemonade or something sunny—anything but whatever this funk is.

"Ugh. What is that?" The words fly out of my mouth before I can stop them. The odor is that jarring. I try breathing only through my mouth, but I don't want to taste it. I pull my shirt up over my nose.

She darts away from me. "I'm sorry!" She stands against the opposite wall, as far from me as she can get. Her face is flushed red. "I got skunked on my run this morning! It wasn't a direct hit, but I think I ran right through it. I washed my hair four times !" She lifts a strand of her long, chestnut hair and makes a confused face. "I thought it was gone! How bad is it?" The panic in her voice is adorable.

I cough into my shirt. My mom raised a gentleman, but not a liar. "It smells like you boiled a few pounds of ground beef in a pot of bleach. "

"Geez, okay!" she complains.

“And left it out in the sun for a week—”

“All right!” she snaps.

“Then used the bleachy beef juice like perfume.” I can’t stop smiling. She’s as fun to mess with as Oliver. This was just the distraction I needed from my Day One nerves.

“You—” she starts, but she’s interrupted by the man himself walking through the open door.

Oliver’s face screws up. “What on earth is that smell?”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. I smell like a hot pile of garbage,” she snaps. Her glasses slide down her nose and she shoves them back into place.

Oliver gives her his version of side-eye, which is probably terrifying for someone who doesn’t know him.

Immy chooses this moment to stumble out of her room, with Hairy hot on her heels as always. She stops so fast it’s like she walked into a glass door.

“Ew! Why’s it so stinky in here?” She’s not a morning person. “Daaaad!” she grouches at me, “You smell so bad!”

Even Hairy whines.

“It’s not me! It’s Sunny,” I don’t feel bad about blaming her for the smell. Mother Teresa wouldn’t take the fall for that stench. “Your new nanny got sprayed by a skunk,” I say through my shirt, gesturing to Sunny, who is plastered against the furthest wall away from everyone. Look, don’t touch? Not going to be a problem today.

“I can fix it! I saw it on YouTube!” Immy runs into the other room, probably to get her tablet.

“Ready?” I ask Oliver.

“Wait, don’t you have instructions for me?” Sunny steps away from the wall, looking panicky.

I hold a hand toward her, “That’s close enough.” I smirk, “Your only job is to keep Imogen alive and figure out how to get rid of that smell.”

She casts a withering glance behind those cute librarian glasses. “Right. But is she allergic to anything? What’s her routine? Do you have any rules I should know about?”

Oliver barks out a laugh. It’s a rare sound, so it startles me. I glare at him. He’s such a butthead.

“Immy will tell you her routine,” I explain. “Just keep her alive. And I’m serious about the smell. Do whatever you have to do.” I turn toward the door.

“But—” she looks really worried.

“You’ll be fine. My number is in Immy’s phone if you have an emergency. Or you can always call Darth Oliver here.” I smack my friend on the shoulder. “We gotta get going. Day one.”

“I’ll shoot you an email,” Oliver says to Sunny. He lets the "Darth Oliver" thing slide. He knows how I get on the first day of shooting.

“Bye, Im! Love you!” I call toward the back of the suite.

“Wait!” She darts back into the room with her huge tablet pressed to her chest. She drops it on the floor and wraps her arms around my legs. “I love you, Dad!”

“Love you, too, Immy. See you later, okay?”

Her scrawny arms squeeze tighter. “Just five more minutes.”

Five more minutes is Immy’s thing. It’s how she gets what she wants. “I can’t, kiddo. I have to go to work. You need to stay here and take care of Sunny. Make sure she doesn’t make Hairy sick with that stink, okay?” I peel her off of my legs and hoist her up to eye level, blow a raspberry on her cheek, and put her down.

I turn to Sunny, who is rosy-cheeked and flustered. "Don't forget to grab my number out of Immy’s phone. Good luck today." I wink. I can't help it. It's like my eyelid is hardwired to do that when a tempting female appears. I'm programmed to ruffle calm, pretty feathers.

Oliver clicks the door shut behind us and we're not even three steps down the walk when he says, "No."

"What?" I think I know and it better not be what I think .

"You know what." He claps a hand on my shoulder with a little more force than necessary. "I get it. She's hot. But we talked about this. Look, don't touch. You pay me to keep your life on track and I'm telling you right now, keep things above board with Nanny Sunny."

I shrug him off. "You know what? That sounds even stupider than Nanny Nan." I chuckle and take a swig of water. I joke because I'm not in the mood to have my nose rubbed in my old weakness, which is doing stupid stuff with beautiful women and losing my mind. But I haven’t done that stuff in a long time. And I haven’t done

anything with Sunny. Yet.

"Anders. Just let her be the nanny. You can screw around with whoever you want after the premier. Until then, stay focused and keep your nose clean. Day one."

I kick a pebble into the shrubs by the pathway. This will end quicker if I tell him what he wants to hear. "Yeah. Day one."

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

“Wait!” I call toward the door when I realize Anders has left me on dog duty with no instructions and no idea what I’m supposed to do with these two all day. I’m less concerned about caring for a human child and more concerned about keeping this humongous beast from biting my face off.

The door is already closed, the men are gone, and Hairy drops her slobbery tennis ball on my sandaled foot. Cold slime oozes between my bare toes and Hairy whines.

“Um, no thanks.” I nudge the drool-covered ball toward the giant dog. “Sorry, Hairy. I’m not a dog person. It’s nothing personal. I was bitten by my friend’s mini schnauzer when I was twelve and ever since then I’m nervous around animals with teeth that are designed to shred flesh,” I explain with a shrug.

Hairy sighs deeply like she’s weary of being discriminated against.

Imogen looks up from her tablet. “Just so you know, she doesn’t know that many words. She just knows ‘sit’ and ‘outside’ and ‘walk’.”

Hairy sits, and tilts her head to the side with every new word.

“And Hairy is nice. She doesn’t bite.” Imogen goes back to her tablet, clicking away on YouTube. Her compact, bare feet barely reach past the edge of the couch cushion. Is it normal for a five-year-old to have open access to YouTube like that?

Hairy’s bowling ball-sized brown eyes blink at me.

What now? I silently plead with the canine. I expected a list of instructions. Maybe a

schedule. But the dog just looks at me like, How am I supposed to know? I'm a dog.

Looks like I'll be improvising—my favorite.

“How about some breakfast?” I ask Imogen. I'm done talking to the unhelpful dog.

“Okay. What do you want? There's cereal.” Imogen hops off the couch and grabs my hand with her sweaty little fingers, pulling me toward the suite's kitchen. “You should eat fast. We need to fix your smell.” I can tell she's trying to breathe through her mouth. Poor thing.

“No, not for me. For you. Have you had breakfast?”

The little girl wanders ahead of me. “Not yet. I can make something, too. Want some eggie toast? That's what Nan likes, ‘specially when her head hurts in the morning.”

I have so many questions, but my stomach makes me start with food, since I skipped breakfast while I washed and re-washed my hair. “What's eggie toast?” I slide onto a metal barstool at the white marble counter.

“You'll see. I learned how to make it from YouTube. First, I need a pan.” She opens and closes a few of the cupboards until she finds the pristine, unused frying pan that every suite is equipped with. Her small, nightgown-covered behind pokes out from the fridge and she emerges with eggs and a bag of shredded cheese.

I move to help her—not keen on mopping eighteen eggs off of this tile—and watch with wide eyes as the tiny girl drags a chair over to the stove. She stands on it and sprays cooking spray into the pan, lighting the gas burner before I realize what she's doing. “Uh, wait. Are you allowed to do this? ”

“Yep. My dad says I make the best eggie toast ever.” She uses a drinking glass to

carve a circle out of the center of two pieces of whole wheat bread. She butters them on both sides and they sizzle when she drops them into the pan. It's clear that she's done this more than once. She tosses the bread circles to Hairy, who swallows them in one gulp without chewing. These two have a system. This must be how she keeps Hairy from biting off her face—bribery.

“This is the funnest part.” She messily cracks an egg into the hole of each slice of bread and sprinkles cheese over the whole thing. “I made up the putting cheese on it. The eggie toast on YouTube doesn't have cheese. At home I put some onion powder on it, too. That's real yummy, but I don't have any. When you do the next food order, can you get some?”

Food orders are the kind of thing that would be explained on a list of instructions. That's why instructions are so important, I grumble to myself. I'll be figuring that out, I guess. “Sure.”

When she flips the toast to cook the other side, the cheese sizzles and the aroma of cheese, toast, and eggs fills the room. My mouth is watering and I realize I'm hungrier than I thought. And once again, I think I love this child.

You're doing a job, I remind myself. Short term.

A white plate appears in front of me on the counter and a spatula slides the egg creation onto it. Imogen drops her toast onto another plate and drags her chair right next to mine. I lift the toast to my mouth, taking a huge, cheesy, delicious bite. Heaven. I am nannyng a chef.

“Wait,” she grabs my hand, “We need to say the blessing. Open your mouth.”

“Open my mouth?”

“To bless the food in your tummy.”

She watches me. A beat passes. Her blue eyes are a mirror image of her father's. She's serious, waiting for me to open my mouth so she can bless the food. Our eggie toast is getting cold .

My eyebrows furrow and I open my mouth.

She nods, pinches her eyes closed, and blesses the food. But she doesn't stop there. “And please help Dad to not get hurt at work. Please help Hairy be a good girl. Thank you for Hairy. Thank you for this eggie toast I made. Thank you for my new nanny, Sunny. Please help us get the smell off of her because it is really stinky. The end.”

The end? I wait for more. She drops my hand and I realize that's it. “Uh, amen.”

“The smell is in here, too,” Imogen informs me from her booster seat in the back of my car. She helped me find it in the suite and showed me how to put it in the backseat. She really is sharp for a little kid.

She's buckled in and we're making our way back to the resort from the grocery store. We picked up hydrogen peroxide and baking soda, along with some powerful shampoo. I'm crossing my fingers that it works. We'll see. The home remedy video Imogen found was convincing, but it might singe the hair off my scalp. It will be worth it as long as it gets rid of the skunk funk.

How mortifying. To think I actually felt confident knocking on Anders Beck's door this morning. I had my post-run endorphins pumping me up and my cutest jeans giving me false hope. But I will never forget the look on his face when I squeezed past him into the suite. That's not a look a girl wants to see on anyone, least of all an unearthly handsome man. I feel my face getting hot as the moment replays in my mind on a loop. I'm going to find and destroy that A-hole skunk.

“I like it here.” Imogen says dreamily, gazing out the windows at the tiny desert town I’ve always called home. “It’s easy.”

“Easy?”

“Yep. It's not so crazy. There’s not so many people everywhere. ”

Huh. “Is it crazy at your house?”

Her sweet voice is wistful. “Yep. We have to be careful every time I go anywhere because lots of people try to talk to me and my dad.”

“That’s because your dad is famous, and because your dad is famous, people want to meet you.” And I realize at this exact moment the huge risk I took, taking Imogen into a public place. Weirdly, no one seemed to notice her at my side. She looks like a normal kid today. She dressed herself in a pair of overalls with a yellow t-shirt and let me brush her hair into a ponytail. We managed to walk in and out of a grocery store with barely a glance our way.

I also wonder what Micah Watson thinks of my hometown. I hope he loves it as much as I do. Maybe he’ll love it for the same reason Imogen does. Maybe he’ll want to move here...

“I don’t like it.” Imogen sighs, still watching the boring streets of my little hometown with fascination like it’s one of her YouTube videos.

It takes me a second to catch up. “You don’t like when people want to meet you?”

“Sometimes not. Sometimes people are nice, except I don’t like when they act like they know me. And sometimes my dad gets mad when people talk to us too much.” She gasps, “What’s that place?” she asks with the energy of a golden retriever that

spotted a squirrel.

I can't see what she's talking about. I'm driving, so my hands are on the wheel at ten and two and my eyes are forward. "What place?"

"With the skating guy! Stop there!"

Oh. She means Hansen's Rollerburger. The drive-in hamburger joint has a huge neon sign of a guy wearing roller skates, holding a giant hamburger. I guess I can see why it would catch a kid's eye. It's been a landmark in this town since the 1950s, so I don't really notice the glaring, story-high neon sign anymore. My youngest sister actually works there to pay her way through college and has a shift today, I remember. I bet she'd love to meet Imogen Beck "by coincidence."

"Want to check out Rollerburger? "

"Yeah!"

She doesn't have to tell me twice. In my hurry to get out the door this morning I had forgotten to grab a Coke. I find a place to safely u-turn and we pull into a spot in the shade of the awning.

While we wait for our rollerskating server, I read the menu to Imogen. "They have hamburgers, shakes, and fries. Do you like that kind of stuff?"

"Yes!" She unbuckles herself, grunting as she climbs over the center console and into my front passenger seat. "Let's try everything!"

"Everything?" I laugh. "I'm still sort of full from your awesome eggie toast. What if we both get a snack and we can share?"

“Okay. But just so you know, me and my dad like to try everything. Then you know what’s good.”

“That sounds smart.” And wasteful and expensive. Oliver dropped by while Imogen was dressing and armed me with Anders’ credit card, which feels surreal, but I’m not going to be irresponsible with it. “Maybe next time.”

My sister skates up to my window, “Hey, Sis! I thought you were working—” her fairy-like face screws up and she fans her nose. “Oof. Is that skunk?”

“Yep! And we got stuff to fix it!” Imogen is maybe a little too excited to experiment on my hair. “You’re so lucky you get to skate at your job!” The child of an actual movie star has stars in her eyes over my rollerskating waitress sister.

When my sister spots my passenger her mouth hangs open. “Hey, you’re—”

“Goldie, this is Imogen. I’m nannying her while her dad is in town.” Please be cool, I try to communicate with wide eyes. She is not known for her decorum in exciting situations. “Imogen, this is my sister, Goldie.”

“Hi, Imogen. What can I get you?”

Praise the skies, she’s acting normal .

We order a few simple things from the menu, including a large Coke for me and a small lemonade for Imogen because I don’t know if she’s allowed to drink soda. She insists her dad lets her have Coke, but caffeinating a tiny person sounds risky. We make our way back to the resort, eating our chicken nuggets and fried pickles while I drive because I’m anxious to de-funk my hair.

A few hours later I wake with a jolt. It takes a minute for me to process my

surroundings. I'm lying on the couch in Anders' suite, with Imogen curled into a ball at my side, and Hairy curled into a giant ball at our feet. This afternoon we had applied a mixture of hydrogen peroxide, baking soda, and dish soap to my hair and wrapped it up in a heavy white towel to do its thing. We decided to watch a movie while the solution worked on my hair, and we must have slipped into a fried food coma. I feel like I've been asleep for hours. What time is it? What year is it?

My eyes are still a little blurry, but I finally notice a pair of legs standing in front of me. I gasp and bolt upright when I realize it's Anders. The big towel falls to my lap and my damp hair falls into my face. Imogen mumbles in her sleep.

"Sorry," his hoarse voice whispers. "I didn't mean to wake you from your nap."

That was no nap. That was the beginning of hibernation. I realize with shame that it's dark through the windows. Anders must have turned on one lamp, and that's the only light in the room. "What time is it?"

"A little after nine."

"Seriously?" We slept for five hours?! I would say I can't believe I slept so long, but I can believe it. I haven't had a decent night of sleep in weeks, anticipating the arrival of the film crew. So really, it's his fault. "I'm sorry. We turned on a movie and I guess that's all it took."

"No worries. Immy's internal clock is off because we've been in Europe for a few weeks. We only had a few days at home before we came here." He leans down to scoop her up, and she snuggles into his neck. "Help me get her to bed?"

"Sure."

I follow him to Immy's room, pinching the sensitive skin on my arm to keep me in

the present before my imagination takes me somewhere I don't belong. I pull down the comforter and adjust the pillow. Anders places her gently on the bed and pulls the covers over her, tucking them around her tiny form.

"G'night, love," he whispers, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

I sigh. I can't help it, okay? Any red-blooded woman would sigh at that sight.

Anders follows me from her room, and I'm feeling self-conscious with my mangy mess of hopefully de-skunk-ified hair. Luckily, the suite is mostly dark. Maybe I can slip out before he turns on any more lights—

Click .

Too late.

The spacious living area is flooded with light and reality. I attempt to finger comb my hair into some semblance of order, but my fingers catch in the concoction that Imogen applied to my hair so many hours ago. It's fine. I'm just the nanny. No one cares if the nanny has cute hair.

"How did it go today?" he asks, and I can tell he's smiling even though I'm not looking.

I'm fully focused on finding my sandals. I kicked them off near the couch before our marathon nap. "It was great. Your daughter is very well behaved, and so intelligent." Where are my shoes ?

"Thank you." He clears his throat, "I guess you two figured out how to get rid of the smell?" He is really smiling. I wonder if he always smiles so much, or if I'm just lucky.

Or maybe he's flirting with me. I dig my nails into my palms to stop that train of thought. He's a celebrity heartthrob adored by millions who can crook his finger and any woman would come running. Anders is a player, you're the nanny, and you're in love with Micah. Act like it.

"You can't smell it anymore?"

He shakes his head, and his grin makes his blue eyes crinkle at the corners.

I sigh with relief. "Oh, thank goodness." Maybe Imogen's YouTube goo actually worked. Some of my usual confidence returns. "Imogen helped me find a mix of stuff to put on my hair that was supposed to get rid of the smell. I guess it did the trick. She's a little genius. Honestly. She's incredibly bright for her age."

"She is, and she knows it. She tries to boss me around every day." His voice is full of love for the little girl. It's silent for a beat and he says, "Well, thanks for your help."

Oh, right. I'm supposed to be leaving right now. "You're welcome. Same time tomorrow?" I ask as he leads me toward the door.

How does Anders smell so good after a long day of work? He has this clean ocean scent that makes me feel like I'm standing on the bow of a boat with the wind in my face. Everything about him sends a thrill through me, even his scent. I need to get away from him so I can get my head on straight.

"Yep." He opens the door for me, swinging it wide so I can pass through. "Thanks again."

"You're welcome. I'll see you tomorrow." I nod.

See? I can be professional. This is a business transaction. I am nailing this nanny

thing. I'll feel like my usual self in no time.

He closes the door behind me. I take one step on the walkway and realize I've forgotten my shoes .

No way am I knocking on that door to get my sandals. It's okay. I can get them tomorrow. I'd rather walk to my car and drive home barefoot than admit that I'm so flustered by Anders and his dumb, sexy ocean scent that I forgot to put on shoes. This is fine. I just need one good night of sleep and tomorrow I'll be back in control.

For now, I'm stepping lightly on the sandstone path toward my car, trying not to think about scorpions or lizards or any other nocturnal creatures my bare feet might encounter in the dark. The thought has me high stepping on my tiptoes like a cartoon burglar.

"Sunny," Anders' voice behind me makes me jump. He jogs toward me. "You forgot your shoes."

Sinkholes always open up and swallow cars and houses at inconvenient times, but never when you need them. Like right now. I would appreciate it if a sinkhole would save me from this moment. Where's a natural disaster when a gal wants one?

I blush from my face all the way down to my conspicuously bare toes when Anders hands me my shoes. "Oh, those. Right." It's strange to me that Anders Beck was just holding my favorite worn-in sandals. I drop them on the ground and slide my feet into them one at a time. "Thanks. Not sure how I forgot these," I say with an awkward chuckle.

"Immy's mother calls it Mom Brain. You'll get used to it."

My heart sinks. "Is Nanny Brain a thing?" I try to joke. If so, I think I've had Nanny

Brain since he got here yesterday.

"I don't know, but if so it suits you. See you tomorrow, Ginger," he says in his warm voice that makes my heart trip.

"It's Sunny. Now look who has Nanny Brain." I laugh and give him a little wave. I'm a little stung, but not exactly surprised that he can't remember my name. "See you tomorrow."

I walk into my condo fifteen minutes later to find Mercer draped across our couch in the dark, with the original Micah Watson/Anders Beck movie playing at full volume. The windows are rattling.

"Why is it so loud?" I shout above the sound of roaring, fire-breathing creatures duking it out.

"Exposure therapy," she shouts back, eyes glued to the screen.

I can't live like this. I swipe up the remote and turn down the volume. "Exposure therapy for who?"

"For you, so you can act normal around Micah." There's an unspoken "duh" in her tone.

"I think it might work better if I watch it with you." I shoot her a knowing look, "Keep pretending you aren't Team Micah. You almost pull it off. Speaking of, did you see him today?"

I flip on the lights, grateful to be back in familiar, comfortable territory. I'm also ready to put a dent in the bag of Rainier cherries I put in the fridge a few days ago. I'm hungry for fruit. I turn toward our olive green refrigerator, which is original to

our condo's 1970s construction. Those old appliances are just built different. That fridge will probably outlive me. It's the only thing in the condo that hasn't been updated, so it makes a funny contrast with our subway tile backsplash and wide plank hickory floors.

"Girl, what did you do?" Mercer's shocked voice follows me into the kitchen.

"What?" I pull my cherries out of the fridge to find that the bag is almost empty. "Did you eat my cherries? And stop dodging my question. Did you see Micah Watson today or not?"

"Yeah, I saw him for like a second before his golf cart almost ran me into the bushes, thanks for your concern. And yeah I ate your cherries. They were delish." She boosts herself to sit on the kitchen counter. "What did you do to your hair?"

"You turd! I was looking forward to those cherries all day." I should've hidden them somewhere Mercer would never find them, like inside a box of baby spinach or with the cleaning supplies. I nibble into one of the last juicy cherries. "Imogen and I put some stuff in my hair that's supposed to get the smell out." I remember I haven't seen her all day and add, "I ran through a cloud of skunk this morning and I still need to rinse it out. Anyway, what did Micah look like today?" I pluck the stem off another cherry and sigh dreamily. "Ugh. I still can't believe you're having Micah Watson sightings at Nizhóní. So unreal."

She ignores my question and commentary. "First of all, that's why I don't run. Second of all, I think whatever you put on your hair did something to it." She's biting back a grin that makes my stomach drop.

I dart to the mirror by our front door. I'm so confused by what I see that I run to my bathroom where the light is better. Maybe it's just the lighting in the living room. And the kitchen.

I flip the light switch and gasp. There are two women in the mirror. My blonde-haired best friend whose mouth is turned down in a worried frown, but the twinkle in her eyes tells a different story. The other woman in the mirror looks like my horrified twin, except her hair is orange. Dayglow orange. A little bit of chestnut brown hair shows through where Imogen didn't apply the anti-skunk paste thoroughly.

"I'm... I'm a Cheeto."

"Dude, it's not that bad."

"Well, it's not good!" I shriek.

"We'll fix it before anyone sees it."

Oh, no .

I think back on the past hour and every interaction I had with Anders. I remember his constant, endearing grin that I figured was just well-practiced, meaningless flirtation.

It was not flirtation.

Oh, nooooo .

At least I never ran into Micah Watson, despite the fact that I took the long way to my car and walked extra slowly past his suite tonight. I look at Mercer. I have no words. My eyes well with tears. "That's why he called me Ginger."

"Who called you that? Anders?" She rolls her eyes. Mercer has zero tolerance for baloney from men, even famous, rich, hunky ones. "How original."

I nod miserably.

“How about this? I’ll run to the store and get a box of dark brown hair dye. While I’m gone, you wash that junk out of your hair and remember that he’s just a guy and in ten years none of this will matter.” She squeezes me in a side hug, “Okay, Ed?”

“Ed?”

“Ed Sheeran,” she cackles at me. “Go wash your hair.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

I 'm counting down the days until I get to punch my co-star in the face.

The character I'm playing is morally gray bordering on charcoal, and I get to, I mean have to , punch Micah Watson when we shoot our fight scene. I wonder what day that's happening, but I don't have our filming schedule memorized—that's Oliver's job. My jaw clenches.

"It's fine. I don't mind. Let's go again," he says. There's no mistaking the complaint in his tone, like we aren't all exhausted after a long day of shooting. Not to point fingers, but he's the one who isn't getting it done today. He's ignoring Christopher's input half the time, and the other half, he's giving me direction.

Micah is a gifted actor, but he's arrogant. He's been in the business long enough to know things, but he's cocky enough to think his opinions and thoughts outweigh the rest of the crew's. This is the sixth movie we've co-starred in together. The media and our PR teams paint the picture that we're old friends, but the reality is, we're co-workers. We've accumulated weeks and months filming together. We attend premieres. But when we go home, that's the end of our interaction. We're just too different to be close friends .

And there's no mistaking the irritation on the face of our director, Christopher Marchant. Chris decides when we shoot again and when we're good. You'd think with his reputation and backlist of films grossing an average of a billion dollars—no big deal—Micah would trust his judgment. Secondhand embarrassment washes over me on his behalf.

He stands on his mark with a long exhale. "Get it right this time, Beck," he says

under his breath. Then before I can hit him, his black eyebrows furrow and suddenly he's his character, Kota. His personality may be like nails on a chalkboard, but I'm impressed by the transformation on his face. He just went from diva actor to misunderstood adult orphan in two seconds flat.

I bite my tongue and stand on my mark. The cameras roll, we say our lines, and I know when the scene lands. I can feel it. Chris says we're good. The muscles in my shoulders relax. Finally. I can go back to my suite and eat my Snack.

I've been thinking about my Snack all evening. My nutritionist prepares my food with every macro tracked and accounted for, and serves it all in labeled plastic tubs: Breakfast. Snack. Lunch. Snack. Dinner. Snack. Not a calorie over or under what my body needs to maintain the physique this role requires. When I accept jobs like this I am basically hungry for months. All I want is a slice of stuffed-crust pizza, but I probably have a chia protein shake waiting for me.

When I tell you I earn every penny of the millions I make on these projects, believe it. Maybe that's dramatic, but hello —actor.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Watson."

He doesn't respond, just nods, gathers his things, and gives whiny orders to his assistant. He's been cold like that since our first table read for this project, but I don't have time to care. I have my Snack waiting for me.

"Are you ready to go, Mr. Beck?"

I startle and whip around to see a guy in a golf cart bearing the name of the resort. Where did he come from ?

"Are you my ride today? Where's Oliver?" I ask, climbing aboard the cart. He'll miss

the daily meeting-slash-lecture he runs on the golf cart ride back to my suite. What a pity.

“I don’t know, but he asked me to drive you. I’m Eric. I work for the resort, in case the nametag and golf cart didn’t make it obvious. I’m usually a hiking guide, but for the next few months I’m a little bit of everything,” he says with a laugh.

“Cool.” I’m so mentally done. I just want this guy to drive me to my suite so I can enjoy my pre-packaged health food in peace. This guy’s a talker, though.

“I’d be happy to take you on a hike when you have time. We have some of the best scenery in the country. Let me know when you want to go.” He pauses barely long enough to take a breath. “I hear our Sunny is babysitting for you. I’ve missed seeing her around the last few days.”

Something in his tone gives the impression that he’s marking his territory like a dog. I don’t like it at all. “I get that. I’m enjoying her... having her around my place, I mean.” Yeah, it’s a butthead thing to say. I don’t care. I’m grouchy. “You know her well?” I want him to say no, but I also want to grill him for information. It’s a conundrum.

“Yeah, I’ve known her since high school, and I’ve worked for her family since then. We go way back. I like Sunny a lot.” If we were in the animal kingdom, he’d be aggressively strutting in my face with his feathers plumed around him. In the human kingdom, he seems to settle for taking corners a touch too fast for this top-heavy golf cart.

I eyeball the twerp. He doesn’t scare me. “Me too.”

Eric is silent. He peels around the last turn to my suite and the tires actually squeal. I didn’t know that was possible in a golf cart. I lean back in my seat, like I find his

maniacal driving relaxing. He jams on the brakes and I slide forward, almost off the seat.

“Thanks for the ride.” You psychopath .

I climb down from the cart without a backwards glance and double time it across the sandstone path to the suite.

It's late. The sun is long gone and the lights inside are out, so I assume Immy is asleep. The silent darkness in the entry makes me think Sunny might have crashed, too. I toe off my shoes and step quietly toward the back of the suite and the refrigerator. Snack time .

I round the corner into the mostly dark kitchen and catch Sunny with her rear end poking out of the refrigerator, the light from the open appliance spilling around her. I don't know how she hasn't heard me, but then I realize she's wearing wireless earbuds and she's totally focused on the task at hand. She's rooting through the contents of the fridge on a mission. Unfortunately, she's not going to find anything but my lame pre-portioned food and Immy's eggs and chicken nuggets. I make a mental note to have Oliver get some better food delivered for her.

Leaning against the door jamb, I fold my arms across my chest to watch her, feeling my lips tilt into a half smile. I don't hate coming home to this view. My foul mood slips away at the sight of her.

“Dinner? Snack? Lunch? What kind of control freak eats like this?” she wonders aloud. Judging by her volume and tone, she doesn't know how loud she's talking, and she's probably hangry. She's also angrily organizing my food into Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner, and Snack stacks.

I feel kind of creepy watching her from behind, hearing her thoughts out loud. It's

entertaining, but still. I should probably let her know I'm here, spying on her.

I step toward her, then three things happen at once: Sunny whips around, screams—really screams—and throws the container she's holding straight at my face. Overhand.

Bullseye .

The container of whatever that was hits me squarely in the forehead and clatters to the floor. She has a good arm, I'll give her that. That rang my bell a little .

“What are you doing?!” she hollers at me.

“What am I doing? Why did you chuck a thing of food at my face?!”

“You scared me half to death! Why are you sneaking around in the dark like that?” Oh, she's definitely cranky.

“I don't know! I thought you were asleep!” I don't know why we're yelling at each other. There's a lot of adrenaline flying around this room and I really hope we haven't woken up Immy. “Why haven't you turned on any lights?”

“I don't know, okay!” She takes a deep breath and lowers her voice, “I'm sorry I threw that at you. It was a knee-jerk reaction. I thought you were a serial killer.”

“It's okay.” I lean down to scoop up the container of food. It's a Snack. I feel a twinge of sadness when I see that the cucumber egg wraps have unrolled and disassembled inside the container. Aw, man. My Snack. I sigh. “Makes sense. You're in a locked room, in a resort covered in security cameras, in the absolute middle of nowhere.”

It's still pretty dim in this kitchen, but I swear I see her face turn deep red. Her eyes shift around like she's looking for an exit. "Well..." she lets out a breathy laugh, "I was listening to a true crime podcast when you came in. Ever since I started listening to that stupid thing everyone is a potential serial killer. I'm always on the verge of being murdered."

"Maybe you shouldn't listen to serial killer podcasts alone in the dark? Just a thought."

"You think?" she snaps, and immediately backtracks, biting her lip in a way that makes me forgive her instantly. "Sorry. I think I'm hungry."

I crack open the container of food, and quickly reassemble a wrap. I hold one out to her. A peace offering. "Want some?"

"Yes, please. "

We sit on the stools that line the counter, shoulder to shoulder in the dim kitchen, and share my snack. There are six wraps. I do the gentlemanly thing and offer three to Sunny, but this means I'll be in an even bigger calorie deficit than usual. Maybe I can splurge and have a bowl of Immy's cereal. I can't live like this; getting worked up and excited over the prospect of a bowl of Captain Crunch Berries. Whatever role I play next, there will be zero shirtless scenes.

We're both munching contentedly in silence when I say, "Let's listen to your podcast," because I can't stand the quiet, and Sunny is kind of reserved when she's not yelling at me for turning up in my own suite.

"Sure." She hands me both earbuds.

I pass one right back. "Let's listen together, now that I'm here to protect you from

serial killers,” I say with a wink. Oliver wouldn’t approve of any of this, but Oliver doesn’t need to know.

Her cheeks flush again and I stifle the urge to touch them. She looks so soft. She smiles and presses the button on her earbud to restart the podcast, taking a dainty bite of a wrap.

Then there’s a man’s voice in my ear: “When Laura Miller returned home on the night of September 8, 1983, she didn’t know she was walking into a crime scene. The door was unlocked. She entered her living room and found her roommate, Veronica, facedown on the carpet in a pool of her own blood and vomit, a broken fireplace poker at her side...”

I can’t push the pause button fast enough. When I can’t find the button, I give up and yank the earbud out of my ear.

“ Why ?” It’s the only word that comes to mind. I have so many questions. I eye the innocent looking woman at my side, who is eating her cucumber wrap like it’s just a normal night of snacks and gory murder scenes.

“It’s fascinating,” she says with a shrug.

This woman is caring for my child .

“You big chicken,” she says, and a teasing light flashes in her dark eyes. “Besides, I’ve seen all your movies. You’ve been in stuff way scarier than this.”

“Those aren’t true stories, though,” I start to explain, but then my mind catches up with her words. “Wait, you’ve seen all of my movies?” Obviously, most people have seen at least one of my movies. Why do I care that Sunny has seen them? Specifically, why do I care that Sunny has seen all of them? My ego is enjoying this.

"Did I say that?" She fidgets with her glasses, pushing them up on her nose. The action should be kind of nerdy, but it makes my pulse jump. "I've seen one or two, I guess."

"Sunny?"

"Yeah?"

"You're a bad actress." I bump her shoulder with mine, "Be honest. How many have you seen? Which one is your favorite?"

"Um..." She screws her lips to the side as if her response to this question requires deep concentration and analysis.

She's totally stalling. She twists her hair up on top of her head like she's going to hold it in place with a pencil, then she lets it fall back around her shoulders. It's an adorable nervous habit. She sighs, blowing a lock of hair out of her face. That's when I remember that it was orange last night and tonight it looks normal.

"Your hair is brown again."

Now her face is twenty shades of red, but she latches on to the change of subject. "Ugh. Don't remind me. I can't believe you didn't say anything." She holds up a strand of hair to examine it. "The stuff Immy and I used to get out the skunk smell did that. I should've known that would happen when we used straight peroxide. My hair feels like twine." She dangles a lock in front of me to demonstrate, dropping it with a defeated sigh.

This might be the only invitation I'm ever going to get. I'm taking it. I reach over and lift the strand of hair off her shoulder and let it slide through my fingers. I examine it like I know anything about hair.

Sunny's sharp intake of breath and frozen posture tell me I might be overstepping. Maybe. Or does she like this? I slide my thumb down the lock of hair and I can hear her short breaths beside me. I think she likes it. My focus shifts from her chestnut hair to her dark eyes and what I see there tells me she's enjoying my fingers in her hair. I turn my fingers in the strands, letting them wrap around and tangle in her hair.

"Let's Do This," she whispers.

I choke on nothing and my hand grips her hair in a loose fist. "I'm sorry?"

"That's my favorite Anders Beck movie."

Oof. Now I'm the one blushing. Our sexy hair-playing moment is over. "Out of all of my work, that absolute rubbish is your favorite?"

It was the first movie in the first series Micah and I starred in together. I was nineteen years old when it was filmed. I was elated to even get an audition, let alone get the part, so I didn't care that the script was trash. It's one film in a sea of paranormal young adult love triangle movies that flooded the market at the time. Micah Watson was my co-star, of course. You could plug any generically handsome actor into our parts and the movie would be no different. It was a critical failure, but now it's considered a cult classic by, well, women in Sunny's demographic. I've heard of movie theaters showing it on throwback nights where groups of women show up dressed as the characters. I cringe thinking about it. I wonder if Sunny has participated in that nonsense.

Again: This woman is caring for my child.

I probably sound ungrateful. Maybe I am ungrateful. My partnership with Micah Watson has gotten me where I am today—I've been nominated for awards in these dipstick roles, and even won teen choice awards—but I'm ready to end it. I'll never

get the roles I want as long as we keep making movies together. I need to make movies where I'm not typecast as the scoundrel who steals the girl from all-American good guy Micah. The irony, I think, shaking my head.

Sunny breaks into my thoughts, "How dare you. That movie is iconic and I'll fight anyone who says otherwise."

Her violent defense of my earliest garbage work is charming, but I can't let this slide. "Sunny." My tone is scolding, and her doe eyes go wide, "I've worked on so many films, and every one of them is superior to that pile of dung. Please choose a better favorite."

"No way." She folds her arms, looking every inch the stern librarian. Her glasses slide down her nose and she pushes them back into place. I want to groan at the sight.

She's the nanny, you moron, I remind myself.

"What about Atlas?" It's my one successful movie, independent of Micah. There have been one or two others, but they've all flopped. I got an Oscar nomination for that part, though. Let's see her defend a paranormal love triangle movie against that.

"Oh, that was good. Definitely my number two choice. The plot twist with the compass at the end was awesome, and the cave scene during the storm was" — she mimics a chef's kiss — "You killed that scene. But it's not Devin professing his love to Jolie on the edge of a cliff right before he morphs into a firebird and saves her." She recites my lines with the same inflection I had used—something even I can't do after thirteen years. "Sorry, but that is your best work."

This woman knows nothing about cinema. "Let's call a spade a spade: You have questionable taste in movies." I turn on my barstool to face her, and my knee pushes against her thigh. I leave it there. It would be awkward to stand and move my barstool

so that my knees don't touch her when I'm facing her. This is weird, but less weird. She doesn't move away. Victory. "Let's get to the bottom of it. Why do you love that movie so much?"

"That's personal, and we just met."

I laugh. She can't be serious. "Come on. It's just a movie preference. I'm trusting you with my child." And why do I even care?

Her brown eyes scan my face, so I school my features into my most trustworthy expression. "Come on. I'm a vault."

"Okay."

That was way too easy. It's a good thing this woman lives in Podunk, USA and not Los Angeles. The sharks would circle. "Whenever you're ready."

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

I stare at Anders' chin while I talk because it's at my eye level, and because looking into his eyes makes my knees buckle. This conversation requires strength. No one but Mercer knows about my Micah Watson obsession and she doesn't even know the "why" behind it. Maybe letting it out will be therapeutic. In a few months, Anders Beck won't remember my name let alone what I'm about to tell him, but maybe this will help me get over Micah Watson once and for all.

"I was in a bad car accident when I was fourteen. I lost my dad." I blink hard to stop the familiar moisture that comes whenever I talk about him, even after twelve years. So much was taken from me that day. Not only my father, but my ability to have children. That one patch of black ice changed my whole future.

Anders' big hand covers mine and I freeze. He pulls it away just as quickly and I plow ahead. "I was in the hospital for a few weeks. It was a hard time. I missed the funeral. I cried that whole day—" I snap my mouth shut. I'm sharing way too much; more than I've ever told anyone. I don't know why I'm so comfortable telling Anders this stuff—maybe it's his easy going nature that loosens my lips. He also feels surreal. Sitting in this dim lighting with him feels dreamlike, like I'll wake up in my bed at any moment.

His eyes catch mine and there's that weak feeling. Will I ever get used to this guy and his blinding star power? It's insane. I know enough about this guy that I shouldn't be reacting this way to him.

"I'm sorry." His blue eyes are intense.

"It's okay. It was a rough time, but I'm good now. Anyway, my family was at the

funeral, and I was alone in the hospital, having the pity party of a lifetime. A nurse came in. She talked me through it and turned on that movie. It was light and fun.”

I smile as I recall the comfort of a simple love story during an excruciating time. It was like anesthetic for my heartbroken fourteen-year-old soul. For years, Micah filled the cracks in my heart. I could’ve turned to drugs or alcohol or even comfort eating in my grief. Instead, I turned to Micah Watson, his dashing, dark looks, and a continuous stream of unhealthy daydreams. Micah Watson is my coping mechanism, and his worst movie of all time (I can acknowledge this to myself, at least) is my drug of choice. But all I tell Anders is: “It was just what I needed that day.” He doesn’t need to know that I’m infatuated with his co-star.

“Well,” he crosses his arms, “I feel like a major jerk.”

“You shouldn’t. I get it. Technically speaking, it is the worst of your movies.” I guess I can acknowledge it to him. Look at that.

He scoffs. “You can’t know that. You haven’t really seen all of them.”

Except I have. If a movie contains a hint of Micah Watson, I’ve seen it. Anders has been in a handful of movies that don’t co-star Micah, and I’ve watched them just in case. He is Micah-adjacent, and a girl can never be too thorough. “That’s true.”

My pants? Officially on fire.

He makes a “hmm” noise next to me and rubs his five o’clock shadow. “What’s one you haven’t seen?”

I pretend to think for a minute because I’m stalling. I could recreate this man’s iMDB page from scratch with no notes. I choose one of his lesser-known historical dramas that came out when I was seventeen years old, right after the first installment of the

Let's Do This series. It was a box office bomb. He'll buy that I haven't seen it. Of course, I saw it the night it opened. "Contagion 1918."

"We're watching it." He stands and makes his way to the couch like I'm going to follow him.

I do, obviously. "Watching it right now? That movie is like seven hours long. Is your ego really that delicate?" I tease him while looking at my watch.

It's 9:30. According to the schedule Oliver emailed yesterday afternoon while Imogen and I were taking our long nap, I'm supposed to be here at seven tomorrow morning. He also emailed a link to Immy's remote tutor and a list of dos and don'ts for this gig. My law-abiding personality appreciated every last bullet point. I read the thing at least three times while my brown hair dye processed and I can almost recite it on command. Rule number one: "NO FLIRTING WITH ANDERS OR YOU WILL RUIN THIS VERY IMPORTANT MOVIE AND POTENTIALLY HIS CAREER," was typed in all-caps. Of course, it was written in legalese, but that was the gist. Point taken, Darth Oliver.

Anders' eyes crinkle at the corners. "It's three hours long, Grandma. But it's fine if you don't want to watch. I'll just turn it on and we'll see what happens." He swipes the remote and drops onto the plush white couch, crossing his long legs on the coffee table. Even his tan, bare feet are cute, which I didn't think was possible. It's annoying.

He presses a bunch of buttons on the remote and I'm frozen, standing next to the couch while I deliberate. On one hand, this feels risky for about a hundred reasons. The main reason being that Oliver was very clear that any blurring of the nanny/boss line will not end well for me legally, and I'm scared of Oliver. On the other hand, we're not technically flirting or doing anything inappropriate, plus I'd get to live out the fantasy of millions of teenage girls. I'm also capable of self-control. The fact that

so many acquaintances have teasingly called me Grandma attests to that.

I'm no dummy. I lower myself onto the couch a friendly distance from Anders and keep my feet firmly planted on the rug. If I relax too much I might forget I'm the small-town, fill-in nanny and he's an international superstar whose ex-wife is a European supermodel. It's laughable that Oliver is worried about me flirting with Anders. We couldn't be more mismatched. He's champagne and he's used to dating caviar. I'm fried pickles and Coke.

"Don't most actors hate watching their own movies?"

"Which actors told you that?" he chuckles while the movie opens.

"I must've read it somewhere." Like in an interview you did with Micah nine years ago.

"I don't mind it. In the early days I hated it. I don't have any control over the end product—editing, sound, stuff like that. I thought I could make better creative choices and that was irritating. But with experience I've learned that these projects aren't just mine. I'm one part of a whole machine that makes these movies happen." He slings a heavy arm across the back of the couch behind me, no big deal. "I'm lucky to be able to be more selective about who I work with, and I trust the team."

I don't hear a word he says. Every square inch of my shoulders feels the warmth and weight of his arm and it's all I can focus on. I didn't sit too close to him, but somehow it feels like his arm is curled around me. Am I inching toward him or is he inching toward me? Is he trying out one of his overused moves on me? Do I care? I'm not sure.

"Huh." I pretend to be engrossed in the movie, which isn't difficult when one of my favorite actors is the lead. I might not be in love with the guy, but I've developed a

healthy appreciation for his body of work over the past decade or so. I begrudgingly admit that his actual body isn't bad, either.

We spend the next three hours watching the movie from a friendly distance. He comments on the actors he worked with and shares the little bits of trivia he can remember. His movie commentary is pure gold, and I eat it up. It turns out to be one of the best nights of this film junkie's life.

Eventually, the credits roll and Anders moves his arm off the back of the couch. I'm guessing his hand is completely numb by now. He flexes his fingers and hides a yawn against his elbow as we stand from the couch. "See? That was arguably better than your favorite, right?"

"Wrong," I say through a yawn, because his yawn was contagious. I'm too tired and braindead to form an argument. This is why I never stay up this late. I hate feeling like this. "Let's Do This is your finest work. I stand by that." I grab my purse while sliding my feet into my sandals at the door. It takes a few tries, but at least I'm leaving with my shoes tonight.

"Clearly, we're going to have to watch the rest so you can form a legitimate objective opinion. For science." He opens the door for me, "Are you okay to drive?"

He's not allowed to be so sweet. "You're not allowed to be so sweet." Dang it. I've reached that stage of sleepiness—the brain-to-mouth diarrhea stage. "Sorry. Um, yeah. I'm okay to drive. Thanks for the movie." I giggle a little, as if that won't destroy all evidence that I'm of sound mind. Get out of here before you do something even more goofy, Sunny.

He leans against the door jamb in that alluring way I've seen him do on the screen, with his arms folded across his chest. Does he know how that looks? Is he being sexy on purpose? "It was fun," he says in that gravelly voice. There's no way he's doing

this by accident.

There's barely enough room for me to scootch past him. I swear he does this on purpose, too. I squeeze through the door, getting one last whiff of his beachy scent. "Yeah. Fun. G'night!" I holler as I speed walk into the night, to the sound of Anders chuckling behind me.

It's one in the morning when I park in front of my condo. My phone buzzes in my cup holder almost immediately. It's my brother, Joe. Who died? That's the only plausible reason my brother would call in the middle of the night. My heart is galloping.

I slide to accept the call and whisper, "Hello?"

"Sunny!" he exhales into my ear. "She's fine," he says to whoever is in the background. It's most likely his fiancée, Indie. "Where've you been? Everyone has been looking for you." The relief in his voice rings loud and clear.

"I'm nannying, remember? Why didn't you just call me?" That's when I notice I have multiple missed calls and texts from him, Mercer, and my mom. Oops. That's what I get for walking out to my car with hearts in my eyes like a cartoon character. I've completely ignored my phone. In my defense, I didn't think anyone would be panicking about my whereabouts.

"You're nannying until one in the morning?" He's switching into big brother mode, which is as endearing as it is irksome.

"Yeah, it was a long night." I yawn loudly to drive the point home, praying that he'll drop it so I can go inside and sleep. Right now, all I can think about are my feather pillow and cool sheets.

“I thought filming wrapped around nine? A bunch of the crew had dinner at the resort tonight. I saw Anders Beck skip dinner and walk back toward the suites.”

Who is he, the KGB? “It’s late, Joe. I’m tired. Thanks for covering things for me, but can we talk tomorrow?” Can we reschedule this interrogation ?

“I just want to make sure nothing inappropriate is happening. That wouldn’t be good for anyone. I know you’d never do anything, but listen, that guy better keep his hands—”

There’s a shuffling sound on his end of the phone, then, “Sunny?” It’s Indie, bless her. “Your brother was just worried. We’re glad you’re okay,” she says emphatically, like her words are intended for Joe. I can hear the big dork in the background making threats. “Why don’t we see each other more often? We need to catch up. Let’s get lunch one of these days. I want to hear all about your cool nanny gig, but I’m going to let you go. Good night! Say good night, you big oaf,” she sasses Joe.

Suddenly, Indie is fighting back a laugh, and the phone makes a scuffling sound. I can hear Joe’s deep voice teasing her. Now she’s giggling. Gag.

“You guys are gross,” I say, ending the call before I hear anything worse.

Not enough hours later that morning, I park near the front reception area so I can check on my baby before nanny duty begins. I’m never “away” from Nizhóní for this long, ever, and I don’t like it. Between Joe, my mother, and Mercer, the resort should be under control without me. In fact, Joe has helpfully reminded me that I’m still the Padawan to his Jedi in terms of managing this place, the big nerd. So I’m sure everything is running smoothly.

It’s fine.

I'm positive that it's fine.

I'd better just pop in, though. And if I happen to bump into a certain movie star in the process, so be it.

I check my hair in the glass door on my way inside, relieved to see that the straw-like strands are still glossy from the treatment I did this morning. It will be months before my hair fully recovers from the skunk treatment. But the only thing that will help the dark circles around my eyes will be getting more than four consecutive hours of sleep. That needs to happen soon. I yawn as I swing open the door.

"Hey, Merce." I smile at my friend, who hurriedly removes her boots from her desk.

"Hey. You're here early. I never heard you come in last night." She pumps her eyebrows up and down like a cartoon character. "I tried to call you. Joe was freaking out. Wild night?"

I blush at the memory of my movie night with Anders, even though I didn't do anything wrong. I don't like how freely my mouth runs when I get that tired. That can't happen again. And Mercer doesn't need to know the details of my late night with Anders. She'll read way too much into it and say something incriminating at exactly the wrong time. Best to keep that information to myself for now.

"Something like that. How are things here?" I look around, relieved yet disappointed to see that the place is still standing, despite my absence. "This place is a ghost town."

"Yeah, it's these movie people. They don't come inside so much. The ones who actually eat have the kitchen deliver everything to their rooms." She leans across the desk and leans toward me conspiratorially. "We get phone calls with the most oddball requests, and always at the worst times. Like last night I had to run to the store to

grab this very specific brand of coconut oil for Frankie, Micah Watson's assistant, because someone could not live without it at ten o'clock at night." She rolls her eyes.

My ears are fully perked. What does Micah Watson need coconut oil for? Is he conditioning his hair with it? Making a smoothie? I love learning these details about his preferences in real life, and not from diving way too deep in an online forum at two in the morning—not that I would ever do that. I am so invested in this coconut oil mystery, that I forget to maintain my standard calm, cool facial expression. I realize I'm grinning like an idiot when Mercer's cackle echoes down the long, tiled foyer.

"Team Micah means you're on Team Dr. Bronner's Coconut Oil now. Better stock up, you weirdo."

"Shh!" I hiss.

I've never been comfortable with my friends and family knowing I'm on Team Micah. The last thing I want in this world is for Micah Watson to know I'm on Team Micah. He needs to think I'm a mature, fascinating, intellectually-rounded woman. He doesn't need to know the truth.

"Oh, relax. Frankie is probably waking him up to the sound of gentle rain and the smell of freshly brewed espresso as we speak. There's no way he heard me."

What a life Frankie has. Maybe I could talk her into trading jobs for a day or two? My shoulders tense at the thought of entrusting Imogen to anyone else, though. The tiny voice in the back of my head reminds me that Imogen has made it this far without me, and that after this film shoot she's not my responsibility. Now my whole upper body is tense. I am worried about too many things that are outside of my control at the moment—Nizhóní, Imogen, and whether Mercer has been kicking her boots onto the desk around our guests all week.

“You need a massage. You should book one.” Mercer leans back in her chair. “You look like you’re losing it.”

“I’m just tired,” I say through a yawn.

“You know we’ve got this. You have to trust us. Pretend you’re on vacation.”

When have I ever taken a vacation? I work at an actual resort, which I love. I don’t need a vacation. Until my obnoxious best friend distracted me with thoughts of Micah Watson, there were a few things that I legitimately needed to check on, though.

“Did you put in the order for the—”

“Yes. Yesterday.” Mercer quirks an eyebrow like a challenge .

“What about the—”

“Joe took care of the issues with the grounds crew. Yes.”

“I wasn’t going to say that.”

“Yes, you were.”

I hang my head.

“I promise we’ve got this. You gotta let yourself have fun, for once. Let your hair down.”

I frown at her. I have fun all the time. When I tell Mercer as much she laughs right in my face.

“I say this with all of the love of someone who has known you since elementary school: No, you don’t. You’re always worried about everyone and everything, which is a great quality until you take it too far and try to control everything. Let go. Be selfish for five minutes. The world won’t explode.” Her grin is suspicious. “You might even get to first base with a handsome movie star.”

Anders’ face flashes through my mind—specifically his angular, stubbled jawline—and I swear I can still feel the weight of his arm that was slung behind me on the couch last night. “Oh my gosh, keep your voice down!” My face is burning, and I’m grateful for the unusually empty reception area. I whisper in a rush, “Besides, the odds of that happening are nonexistent since Oliver threatened me with financial ruin if I come within five feet of Anders.”

“I was talking about Micah.” Mercer’s knowing smile makes me want to whack her over the head with a pool noodle. When she props her feet on the desk again I smack them back to the floor.

“You know what I meant! There will be no canoodling with Micah or Anders or any number of the handsome men staying on the property right now, capiche?” I practically shriek.

“Glad to hear it,” Oliver’s robotic voice echoes from the end of the long corridor. He marches down the hall, somehow typing on his phone and not running into any furniture. Meanwhile, I’d like to dive under a sofa. A woman I don’t recognize is walking with him. She’s kind of gorgeous in that white blonde, fluorescent teeth, Hollywood way.

“Ugh, what does he need now?” my friend gripes under her breath, smoothing her shirt. She straightens some already-straight papers on the desk.

“Who’s that with him?” I whisper. My curiosity is holding me in place.

“Oh, that’s Frankie. Micah’s assistant,” Mercer says, tightening her high, blonde ponytail like she’s preparing for battle.

When they’re a few feet away, Frankie swipes the screen on her buzzing phone. “Good morning, Mr. Wats—” whoever cuts her off on the other end has plenty to say. “I-I know, Mr. Watson. I’m getting it for you as quickly as I can, but we’re fairly remote here, and—” Now the voice on the other end of the line is loud enough I can also make him out. It’s definitely Micah. He’s not happy. His tone is off-putting, but I bet he’s so tired from these long days of filming, and they have such an early start today. I can hardly believe I’m hearing his voice in real-time. “I’ll get it as soon as I can,” Frankie says, pulling the phone away from her ear to stare at it, then tossing it into her huge bag. Did he hang up on her?

Oliver rolls his robot eyes and makes his way toward us.

This is my cue to leave. I put a hand on Mercer’s shoulder and whisper, “You got this. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Don’t leavemewithhim!” Mercer grinds out rapidfire, without moving her lips.

I cuff her shoulder with my loose fist. “Let your hair down. Have fun for once.” I enjoy rubbing her own words in her face. What are best friends for? “Good luck!”

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I rush away from set, antsy to get back to my suite for the night. We finished ahead of schedule and it feels like cheating to go home so early. But I don't care. This way Sunny and I can watch our movie and I won't be as dead tired as I was this morning. I have another one of my movies picked out and I think I can work my charm to steal another inch or two of Sunny's personal space. And let's not forget I have a Snack waiting for me. These thoughts put a spring in my step.

I walk into the suite to find Sunny obsessively vacuuming the same three square feet of area rug like she's caught in a loop. I can't tell if she's cursing at the vacuum or the carpet, but clearly she doesn't know I'm here. She has her back to me, and the commercial vacuum that she must've borrowed from housekeeping sounds like a mini jet engine. I don't want to repeat the mistake I made yesterday and end up with a carpet sweeper thrown at my face, so I wave my hand like a white flag.

"Sunny?" I try to call over the sound of the vacuum and her ranting, but she aggressively vacuums a few more passes and I know she hasn't heard me .

She stomps a switch on the machine to turn it off with her foot. "...like someone launched a confetti cannon full of dog hair in here," she grouches as she winds up the cord. She has a lot of rage today.

"Sunny?" I say as gently as possible from my position behind the couch I'm using as a buffer.

She startles and gasps. "Anders!" she complains, like I'm solely responsible for her lack of trust in humankind. Luckily, she doesn't have anything to throw. "You scared me to death! Again!"

Hairy immediately gallops into the room with a nightgown-clad Immy running behind her. “Dad!” she squeals, wrapping her skinny arms around my legs.

“Get up here, kid,” I growl playfully, launching her over my shoulder and spinning her in a circle that makes her screech. “How was your day?”

“Good. I did school and Sunny took me to a park made all of rocks,” she says into my back. “And we read books and had Rollerburger again.”

I swing her back to my eye level. “Rollerburger again? What’s a Rollerburger? Sounds awesome.” My gaze moves from Immy to Sunny, who is aggressively shoving the vacuum into the tiny coat closet.

She wipes her forehead with the back of her hand to brush her hair out of her eyes. “It’s this hamburger place—”

Her explanation is cut off by Immy, who can’t seem to contain herself. “She’s on roller skates.” Her blue eyes are wide and blinking. This is serious business.

“Who’s on roller skates?”

“Goldie. At Rollerburger. She’s on roller skates and they have the very best nuggets I’ve ever had.” This is the most critically important information she has ever shared in her five years of life.

I look at Sunny, who is sheepish. “Goldie is my sister. She’s a carhop at this hamburger place in town. I hope it’s okay, we stopped today after we went to the park. I promise I’m being safe with her...” She trails off, like she’s waiting for me to jump in and save her with my approval.

I don’t approve. “You had hamburgers?” I look Immy squarely in the eyes. “Without

me?”

“Yeah, except I got nuggets and they were so good.” My daughter can’t wait to rub it in when she has fun without me.

It sounds like these two have started a whole, wholesome life together where they have fun outings and I want to be a part of it. I hate missing out. “Sounds like I need to try out Rollerburger, and I’m starving. Want to go?” Snack forgotten. Diet forgotten. My dad bod is tomorrow’s problem.

Before Sunny can protest, Immy shouts, “Yay!” and wiggles out of my arms to run for her shoes.

As soon as she’s gone, Sunny’s hands are on her hips. “She was in bed.”

“We have to get her off of the European schedule at some point, right?” I inch toward her.

“I guess so,” she steps back. “I suppose I’ll go then. See you tomorrow?”

“What? You have to come!” Immy races back into the room wearing her nightgown and the sparkly jelly sandals she’s so attached to. They kind of make her feet stink, but she chooses them every time. “My dad doesn’t know how to get to Rollerburger.”

Sunny makes a face at me that says I need to let her off the hook. She doesn’t want to be the bad guy. She has no idea who she’s dealing with.

“Yeah, you have to come,” I say. “We’ll get lost.” I give her my patented puppy dog eyes. She shoots me a look that says she knows I’m full of it, but her cheeks are also a little pink.

A minute later we're in the parking area and I'm looking for whatever SUV Oliver rented for Sunny to drive Immy around in. The girls stop at the most nondescript sedan ever manufactured. It's a white, base model Toyota Camry, obviously a few years old, with zero bells and whistles except for the slightly tinted windows. They're the most eye-catching feature on this granny-mobile.

"Oh yeah. Oliver made a good call with this rental. We'll blend right in with this thing." I nod my approval while Sunny unlocks the doors. "This car is so boring no one will suspect Imogen and I are in here."

"This is my car," Sunny deadpans.

Immy giggles, "Dad."

"I'll have you know that this is one of the safest cars on the road, and you're right," Sunny says as she drops into the driver's seat, "No one has spotted Imogen yet. So, you're welcome."

I pull my baseball cap lower onto my head and throw on my sunglasses. "That has to be some kind of record. And thanks for taking good care of my kid."

My knees are almost around my ears in this tin can. How does Sunny drive this thing? She's pretty tall herself. I'm six-foot-three and she's only five or six inches shorter than me. I eye her in the driver's seat, purely for research purposes. Her long, tan legs are tucked under the steering wheel, and the short, flowery dress she's wearing is draped across her seat. My gaze moves up to her bare arms, then at her big, brown eyes which are looking at me. She arches an eyebrow.

"What?" I scan her figure again. More research. "Just making sure you're buckled up. Safety first."

“Are you buckled up?” she asks with a withering glance. She is batting my attempts at flirtation away like flies at a picnic.

“You should put your seatbelt on, Dad,” Immy instructs from her booster seat.

I buckle up with an eyeroll that I hope Immy can’t see. What am I doing? Like I need another woman in my life telling me to put on my seatbelt. I already have a tiny one.

“Nice.” I nod toward the figurine behind Sunny’s steering wheel. The only hint at personality in this car is a tiny toy version of Micah Watson’s character from our first movie that’s perched in front of her tachometer.

“Oh... yeah.” She throws the car in reverse. “Would you believe me if I said that came with the car?”

“Sure, if you borrowed this car from a fourteen-year-old girl.”

She rolls her eyes. “You’re just jealous you’re not on my dashboard.”

“Ha!” Probably.

And one thousand hours later, because Sunny drives like a senior citizen, we park under a giant neon sign of a guy wearing roller skates and carrying a hamburger. There’s a huge plastic letter board menu in front of the car listing enigmatic food items like “heeburgr” and “rench frie” and “oon ring,” since half the letters are missing. There’s a faded sign underneath the menu that reads “Honk for service.”

While Sunny decodes the menu I reach past her and honk the horn. She jumps like she’s been tasered and smacks my arm away.

“Why did you do that?!” she hollers.

I gesture to the sign. “Honk for service?”

“Yeah, but no one actually does it. They saw us pull in.” She’s shaking her head and muttering at me when a blonde on roller skates glides up to her window. She cranks it down with a huff. “Hey, Goldie. Sorry about that.”

Ah. The sister.

“‘S’okay.” The blonde pulls a tiny notepad out of her black apron. “Geez, three times in one week? Are you officially off the health nut wagon, Sis?”

“It’s been an off week, okay?” Her gaze darts my way.

“I’ll say. You’ve been hanging out with Sir Sexy Dimple Sparkle Pants all week. Hubba hubba!” she sexy-growls. At least, I think it was supposed to be sexy. I can’t see her face from my position in the passenger seat, but based on what her hands are doing there are also some suggestive gestures happening .

Sir Sexy Dimple Sparkle Pants? I’ve been called worse. I’ll take it.

Sunny laughs uncomfortably, “Goldie!” Her eyes snap my direction.

“What?” I can’t see her face from this angle, but she flips a page in her notepad and positions her pen to take our order.

A wicked little grin forms on Sunny’s pink lips. “Nothing. I’ll have my usual,” she says too innocently.

“Bo-ring!” Her sister sing-songs while scribbling on her notepad. “Is that it?”

Sunny turns to me, then Imogen. “What do you guys want?” she asks loudly with a

devious smile.

“Oh,” Goldie says, finally leaning down to glance at the passenger seat.

Her notebook and pen drop to the concrete. She bends over to pick them up and her hands shoot to the car door, latching on like her skates must’ve gotten away from her. Her head drops below the window and all we see are two hands, clinging for dear life, and the sound of clunky roller skates banging against the concrete and the side of the car as she fights to regain her footing.

“You okay down there, Sis?” Sunny asks, her tone equal parts honey and evil.

Goldie rights herself and flips open her notepad like it’s just another day on the job. “What will you have, Sir Sparkle Pants? Or can I call you Sexy Dimple?”

“Sir Sparkle Pants is my dad. Call me Sexy Dimple.” I flick a little wave and a huge smile in her direction, to emphasize said dimple. I can tell I’m going to like this sister. She looks like what I imagine Immy will look like in twelve or thirteen years. Something inside me wants to make sure she has lunch money and that the boys at school are being nice.

“Just so you know, my dad’s name is Anders Abrahamson,” Imogen says from the back seat. “And my grandpa’s name is Johan. ”

“Oh hey, Immy! I didn’t see you back there!” Goldie smiles, “The usual?”

“My daughter has a usual?” I tease Sunny.

“Nuggets. Duh, Dad.” Immy reminds me.

“Duh, Dad,” Goldie parrots, writing Immy’s choice on her notepad. “So, a chicken

nugget meal for Immy. Protein burger and diet Coke for Sunny. And what would you like, Sexy Dimple?"

I end up copying Sunny's order and when our food arrives I find out that her usual is basically a paper wrapper full of disappointment: A bun-less, cheese-less hamburger patty wrapped in lettuce. She ups the wow-factor by adding a mystery condiment called Fry Sauce.

"Why do you eat this? What's the point of eating out if you're ordering this way?" I ask between bites. I'm already eyeballing the dilapidated menu board in search of something else to scratch my junk food itch. If I'm falling off the diet wagon, I'm going to dive headfirst into a cookie dough milkshake with something fried on the side.

"First of all, no one made you copy my order, Sexy Dimple," she snarks, her cheeks full of lettuce. That nickname coming out of her mouth has an entirely different effect than it did when her sister said it. It's a good thing Immy is here. "Second of all, aren't you on some bonkers diet anyway?"

"Yeah, I am. Just until we get a few scenes shot. But this is no biggie."

"What kind of scenes?" she asks, munching on her Blah Burger. "Wait, I'm not supposed to ask that. Nevermind."

"No, it's fine. Just the usual shirtless stuff. I'm supposed to look a certain way." I puff up my chest and curl my arm into an obnoxious flex, sneaking a peek at Sunny. "Look at you blushing."

"I am not! It's warm in here." She pushes the button for the air conditioner until her hair flutters away from her face. "You're so full of yourself," she says with a pink-cheeked smirk .

“Don’t think I don’t see you looking.” I flex again.

“If I’m looking it’s because you have fry sauce on your lip, Charlie Granger.”

Charlie Granger was a character I played whose main personality trait was being a womanizer, because like I’ve said, I’ve been pigeonholed by Hollywood. But the fact that Sunny remembers a character from a movie that came out six years ago and was an embarrassing box office flop? Noteworthy.

Immy’s phone vibrates in the back row and Sunny is saved by the buzz. My daughter ignores her phone, cramming another nugget into her mouth. She’s a child on a mission. Her phone continues buzzing against the fabric seat.

“Im, that’s yours.”

Only three people have Immy’s phone number: Myself, Oliver, and her mother, Cassidy. I recognize that it is ridiculous for a five-year-old to have a phone, but it’s a safety thing. Our lives are too crazy for me to not be able to reach her. Plus, Cassidy goes ballistic if she can’t talk to Immy the one time a year when the mood strikes. I send up a prayer that it’s Oliver calling because every time her mother calls, Immy’s world turns upside down. No one has time for that on the first week of filming. Immy wipes her fingers on her nightgown and swipes the phone open.

“Hi, Ollie,” she says around a mouthful of chicken nugget. She’s the only person who gets away with calling him that.

I can’t hear the other end of the conversation, but I know what’s coming. Immy passes her phone to me and goes back to her dinner.

“Hey, man.” My mind is racing for an explanation that won’t get Sunny in trouble with Oliver. Maybe it’s time for his daily reminder that he’s my manager and not my

mother. “What’s up?”

“I hate when I have to track you down on Imogen’s phone. Where are you?” Right down to business. That’s been Oliver’s modus operandi since we were in high school and he was voted Most Likely to Be the Resident Stick in the Mud for the Rest of Anders Beck’s Life. Not really, but now I’m thinking about having a plaque made for him.

Sunny shifts in the seat next to me. Something about the movement lets me know that she’s as uncomfortable as I am.

“Just grabbing a hamburger with Immy.”

“Just Immy?”

“Sunny came, too. Hey, listen, did you get the thing I asked you about?”

“Thing?” he snarls. Now he’s annoyed and distracted. Two birds, one stone.

“You know, the thing .” I draw out the word like that will help. I can’t say what the thing is because it’s a surprise for Immy. Harry Styles is on tour and he has a show in Minneapolis on her actual birthday, which conveniently lands two weeks after we’re scheduled to wrap shooting. We can visit my parents and knock out a concert all in one trip and I’ll be father and son of the year. I asked Oliver to track down passes, but it’s a huge request, given the show has been sold out since the day tickets went on sale.

“Be a little less cryptic, man.” When his voice gets distant I know he’s swiping through the calendar and notes on his phone looking for clues. “Oh, the tickets. Working on it. I’ll let you know when I get them. The reason I’m calling is because there’s been a minor schedule change for tomorrow.”

While he fills me in on information that definitely could've been a text message—which only confirms the fact that he actually called to check in on me—Goldie rolls up to Sunny's window.

“Do you two lovebirds need anything else?” she asks with the volume and subtlety of a Piccolo Pete firework.

I panic and smash the “end” button, throwing the phone into the back seat. I'll be hearing about this tomorrow.

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I smoosh a blob of yellow paint onto my rock and swirl it until it's a circle that I can turn into a big sun. I peek at Immy's rock. There are gobs of yellow, blue, and pink, with smears of every color in between where the paints have combined. It almost looks like the watercolor sunset happening outside the window. We got back to the suite with our supplies with just enough time to paint before Immy will beg for bedtime. Despite all of Anders' efforts she is still on Copenhagen Standard Time.

We got an oversized button-down shirt at the thrift store to use as a smock and a plastic tablecloth to keep the mess contained. Painting and the associated messes aren't my thing, but there's an easy out-and-back hike close to town that I think Immy will like. Hikers paint rocks with inspirational phrases or pictures and leave them all over the path. It's called Aspiration Trail. It's cute, and annoyingly Instagrammable. My social media feed is overrun with friends from high school and their kids on the hike, posing with their rocks. We'll let our rocks dry overnight and tomorrow it will be our turn. This weekend will be emotionally tricky for me—turning another year older isn't always fun—so I'm grateful for the distraction, even if the distraction is tricky in her own way .

“What are you working on, kiddo?” From the looks of it, it could be the sunset, an octopus, or Jupiter. I'm not about to guess wrong and hurt her feelings.

She bites her tongue while she works and her little eyebrows scrunch together. “It's me at a Harry Styles concert. See? That's lights.” She points at a yellow blob, then a pink blob. “And that's me. I'm pretty much all done.”

“I love it. That looks just like you. You're a big Harry Styles fan, huh?”

At my mention of her name, Hairy Styles the dog bumps my wrist from underneath with her wet snout. I prop my paintbrush on the paper plate I'm using as a palette, wipe my wrist on my jeans, and scratch the dog behind her warm, floppy ear. We've reached an unspoken agreement in the days I've been in her domain. I scratch her behind the ears and in exchange she doesn't rip out my jugular with her enormous teeth. She leans all of her warm body weight into me whenever I give her attention.

"Harry Styles is pretty much the best ever, of all time." She swirls her brush in the pink paint. "That's what me and my dad sing. Did you know that my dad is a really good dancer, too? He sings and dances with me all the time. Harry Styles is our favorite to do."

Oh, the amount of money I could make selling this information to tabloids if I were an immoral person. "I didn't know your dad could dance and sing. I'd love to see that." And so would the entire female population of the United States.

"He doesn't sing that good, just so you know." She bites her tongue and pauses. She adds a few details to her rock that require full concentration, then holds up her masterpiece. "All done! I put my dad on it, and you. But there wasn't room left for Hairy. Besides, she can't go to the concert."

"Aww, why not?"

Her half-lidded, exasperated expression is a mirror image of Oliver's. It's almost a jump-scare. Anders may be her father, but the influence of the second man in her life is evident. "Because Hairy is a dog." Her unspoken "duh" is implied.

After a few more minutes of perfecting our painted rocks my curiosity gets the better of me. "What's your favorite Harry Styles song to sing with your dad?" I nudge Hairy away with my foot before she demands ear scratches again. The sun on my rock is almost finished.

“I’ll show you! And I can show you our dance, too.” She drops her rock onto her paper plate and skips away. Less than a minute later a fast-paced, full-volume pop song blasts from her tablet, filling the airy kitchen. She’s working up a sweat, whirling and pumping her arms to the beat. She’s a decent little dancer. I wonder offhandedly if someone taught her to dance like this, or if it’s second nature when you’re the daughter of an entertainer.

“You’re a good dancer, Imogen. Do you take classes?”

Her face glows under my praise and she talks through her intricate, adorable dance moves. “I wish I could take classes, but my dad says I can’t ‘cause we’re gone too much. So we just dance together. That’s how I got this good.” She does an adorably awkward leap that doesn’t exactly confirm her words.

Oh, to have the confidence of the five-year-old daughter of a celebrity. “You are so good. I love this song.”

“Get up! I’ll teach you the dance.” She’s breathing a little heavier as she restarts the music. “Come on!” Her tiny, soft hand pulls me off my chair.

I’m not much of a dancer, unless you count country line dancing. Mercer and I have done that a few times at a place in town. I can dance when I’m repeating the same ten moves in a group of people who are also repeating the same ten moves in orderly lines. There’s minimal improvisation, and a generous margin for error. Line dancing fits inside my comfort zone.

What Immy is doing is so far outside my comfort zone it’s in Russia, but I mimic her anyway. She won’t judge me, and I’m ninety percent sure Hairy won’t. I catch my reflection in the huge glass windows that line the back wall of the suite. Yikes . I’m judging myself right now. But I’m still counting this as my cardio for the day, since my run didn’t happen this morning.

Immy shows me all of the moves in her dance, and I feel like I'm finally getting them down when a booming baritone voice shouts over the music.

"You got it, Sunflower!" He dances up next to me and it is immediately clear that Immy's skills are genetic. Oh wow, he can dance.

I drop my arms at my side and still my awkwardly gyrating hips. The embarrassment that I've been caught dancing poorly is entirely forgotten. "Who told you?"

He's saved from my question when Immy throws her arms around his legs in her typical response to his return home. "Dad!" she squeals up at him like she didn't see him eleven hours ago. Hairy barks. He grins down at her and turns his grin on me.

"Who told me what?" He asks with a phony one-dimpled smile. He is full of baloney. This is the first time I've ever wanted to accuse him of being a bad actor.

I arch an eyebrow at him. "Who told you my name?" Very few people know that Sunny is short for Sunflower. My mother, bless her heart, is an earth-lover and her children didn't escape her love of flora unscathed. My sisters are Marigold, Willow, and Sage. Then there's my brother, the poor guy. He got the worst of it. I can't even say his middle name without blushing. In my mother's defense, when my brother was born the word didn't have the connotation it has now. It's become a top secret family joke.

"I met Joe today."

"Reeeeeeally?" I draw the word out. That two-timing, traitorous brother of mine! All familial loyalty has left my being. "That's brave of him, given his middle name is—" and I repeat my brother's name, enunciating all three syllables to drive home the sheer awfulness of it. No surprise, I blush.

Anders' mouth drops open and his startled laugh rings through the suite. "Oh, that's awful. I can't wait to run into him again."

"Aub-ur... Ugh. What's that word?" Even Immy can't spit it out.

Luckily, her dad jumps in to change the subject. "What else are you girls up to tonight? What's all this?" He gestures to the rocks and our paint mess on the table.

"Sorry, we'll get that cleaned up. Just a little art project." I drop our brushes into our cup of water while Immy crumples up our paper towels. I hate making a mess and I would've had this taken care of long before he got home, but he's home early. Again. I hate that I can't predict when he'll walk in the door. I seem to have a knack for incriminating myself when he comes home unexpectedly. "Will you put the paper towels in the trash, kiddo?"

While I rinse brushes, Immy clears the trash and explains the hike we're doing in the morning. While her chatter fills the room, Anders pulls one of his containers of food from the fridge and starts eating like he's never going to see food again. He peels the "Snack" sticker off the container and tosses it on the counter before putting the used dish in the sink. I quietly clean up our mess and pop his container in the dishwasher, wiping my hands on the kitchen towel when I'm done.

Immy and her dad have a natural back-and-forth that I'm hesitant to interrupt, but it's time for me to leave. I slide my feet into my sandals and sling my purse over my shoulder. "I'm going to head out." I give him a smile, but the exhaustion is real. I need my bed and it's barely seven p.m. Taking care of a child is a full-body workout. I turn to Immy, "I'll be here bright and early for our hike, okay? Get lots of sleep!"

She races over and throws her arms around my knees, "Five more minutes! I have to finish showing you the dance."

“Aw, I have to go, hon.” I shoot a “save me” look to her dad, but so far he’s zero-for-seventy-two at doing what I expect. When he blinks his impossibly blue eyes at me I know I’m not going to see my pillow any time soon.

“You can’t go. I picked another absolute classic Anders Beck film for you to dissect. We were supposed to watch it last night, but you made us go out for burgers.” He shrugs like his hands are tied. “Unless you’re too tired?”

“You’re the one who made us go out for burgers, for the record.” I kick off my sandals and pad into the living area. “And I’ve never met a movie star so obsessed with watching his own movies.”

He mimics a stab to the chest while he follows me. “I’m doing this for you. You need to develop your cinematic palate. Your favorite Anders Beck movie is a blight on the catalog.” He drops onto the couch, remote in hand.

I have a decision to make. I can sit next to him on the overstuffed white couch within sniffing distance of his cologne, or I can sit in the sturdy armchair and crank my neck for two hours to see the screen. It seems like an obvious choice. Unfortunately, Immy makes the decision for me when she takes the seat next to her dad. Hairy takes the cushion on her other side, drooping her huge head across the armrest. I curl into the armchair, tucking my feet under me with a sigh. This is for the best. I don’t need Oliver running me through with his lightsaber tonight.

“You won’t be comfortable watching from there. Hairy, get down.” Anders’ stern voice makes tiny bumps pop up all over my arms. Hairy groans as she lowers her massive body onto the ground, giving Anders—and me—the dog version of side-eye the whole way.

Great, now I’m on the beast’s poop list.

“Get over here, Sunny,” Anders commands, and something about the way he says my nickname makes those bumps pop up all over again. “Second best seat in the house.”

I lower myself onto the cushion next to Imogen and cross my legs under me. “What’s the best seat? ”

“The one next to me.” His cocky grin makes his dang dimple pop. I would roll my eyes if I wasn’t so flustered.

Imogen snuggles into his side, proving his point. He curls his big arm around her, leaving my shoulder four inches from his right hand. If my calculations are correct, if I shift to the left by half an inch every fifteen minutes, his hand will touch my shoulder by the time the credits roll. It’s going to require all of my concentration to stop myself from allowing that to happen.

Because I’m only interested in Micah , I remind myself.

No, because you’re Cold Turkey Sunny , the logical side of my brain interjects.

Party pooper , a voice that sounds eerily like Anders whispers in the back of my mind.

I am officially going crazy.

Luckily, Anders has chosen a movie I’ve seen multiple times so I won’t have to pay close attention. I could recite the dialog from memory. It’s a sci-fi story about a guy who receives a signal from deep space and follows it, ultimately saving humanity. It’s layered with metaphors and has a sweet love story, obviously. One does not cast Anders Beck in a film without a love story unless one wants to deal with hordes of disappointed female viewers.

Five minutes into the movie, Imogen is snoring, her lanky body dangling across Anders and more than her portion of the couch. Her head is twisted at an angle on Anders' arm and her mouth is wide open. She still hasn't adjusted to this time zone. If I didn't know that, I'd be checking for a carbon monoxide leak. I've never seen a person go out so fast. Her white-blond curls have flopped over Anders' arm and onto mine. I want to reach over and comb her hair out of her face. I want to straighten her out so she doesn't get a kink in her neck. I remind myself for the two hundredth time today that she isn't mine. She isn't yours, I think dejectedly. Her dad is here. I'm off duty.

You don't even want kids, remember? I scold myself. I've been talking myself into this lie for years now, but the part of me that aches to nurture and raise a child hasn't gotten the message that I'm infertile. And the connection I feel to Imogen is deepening in a dangerous way. It's going to hurt when she leaves. How am I supposed to spend my days with her without getting attached? It feels impossible.

Speaking of. I want to sneak a look at Anders, but at this angle it is difficult to check him out subtly. He's blurry in my periphery—all tan arms and dark stubble—and I can't see his face. He's sort of like a dream man. I pretend to get more comfortable, angling myself against the couch so I can get a better look at him. When my eyes dart his way, his blue eyes are already on me and he's grinning.

"Comfortable?" Why does every word out of his mouth sound like a tease? When I nod he adds, "I'm gonna to put Immy to bed."

"Want me to do it?" I offer.

"No, I enjoy taking care of her." I sigh inwardly at his sweet words—he loves that girl so much—then he adds, "Will you pause it for me, though?" He hands me the remote and our fingers brush and linger just long enough to make me silly.

“Haven’t you already seen this? Aren’t you in this?” I laugh, buzzing from the contact high of Anders’ touch. This man has a way of grounding me in the present and making me put off thinking about the future. This isn’t good.

He stands and hoists his daughter into his capable arms, a move that he’s obviously done more than once. “Yeah, but I haven’t watched it with you, and that’s kinda the point.”

“Okay.” I pause the movie, and the screen freezes on an unflattering shot of Anders—mouth hanging open, eyes wide, with his long hair standing upright in the wind. I shoot out a laugh that makes his gaze swing to the television.

“Why you gotta do me like that, Sunflower?” he calls over his shoulder.

My face burns at the name, but while Anders puts Imogen to bed, I scan the man on the screen. What I thought about Anders—the pictures the tabloids paint—doesn’t match what I’m seeing. I hear him whisper to his daughter and I know that this is who he really is. No one can fake being a loving father that well. If he’s a party animal, he’s doing a great job of hiding it.

The version of Anders on the TV screen is softer around the edges and boyish. Immature. I can admit that he has always been handsome, but he’s getting better with age. The man walking back into the room is all angular lines and muscles. Creases form around his eyes when he smiles at me. Is this really happening? Am I having another movie night with Anders Beck? I will never get used to this. And I don’t think I’ll ever recover when this gig ends. Reality will be such a letdown.

He plops onto the center couch cushion, well within my personal space bubble, and way closer than a guy watching a movie with his daughter’s nanny should. He takes up a lot of room, because everything about Anders is big. His personality fills a room when he enters it, his deep voice booms like a jet doing a flyby, but he’s also just

physically large. He's well above six feet tall, with thick arms, and legs like tree trunks.

I'm a tall girl. I can reach high shelves and wear big shoes. I don't often feel petite, but sitting next to Anders I feel practically dainty.

He snatches the controller from me. "That's enough of that," he says to the carnival mirror version of himself on screen, restarting the movie.

I'm thoroughly distracted when his hand rests on his thigh, clutching the remote. Why watch him on screen when I can ogle live-action Anders right here? Because even his hand is entertaining. It's strong and tan, with these strangely attractive veins popping out that I want to trace with my fingers. He's tapping his thumb against his leg like he's antsy. After a few minutes of that, he drops the remote and flexes his hand and I am breathless. I am without breath. This is an outstanding performance. Five stars. Bravo !

But Anders is still fidgeting. His hand flops between us and he drums his fingers on the cushion. When his knee starts bouncing, I cover it with my hand to hold him still. He sucks in a breath.

"What is up with you?" I ask.

"What?"

"You. You're like one of those wind-up toys with the spring coiled tight. Do I need to put you on the floor so you can spin in circles until you bang into a wall or something?" I scold, smiling at the mental image.

He laughs. "Yeah. I'd love to see you try." He settles deeper into the couch, slinging his arm behind me. It's an unspoken physical challenge.

He's a big, solid guy who can undoubtedly hold his own. What he doesn't know is I have a big, solid older brother, so I had to learn to fight dirty. Tickling is the old standby, but if Anders isn't ticklish it won't work and he'll be prepared for my next offensive. I'll lose the element of surprise, which is critical when going up against a big, solid guy. I hesitate to do what needs to be done, but I must. I've never been someone who can ignore a challenge from an arrogant man.

While Anders' eyes are trained on the screen—watching himself, for the record—I slide my hand up to my mouth and lick my fingertip, leaving it nice and sloppy. Facing forward, I monitor Anders in the corner of my eye. I move my hand slowly, cautiously toward his ear like I'm docking a spacecraft on the International Space Station. I'm getting away with it. This is happening. Three... two...

Right as my juicy finger is about to make contact with Anders' ear, his hand shoots to my wrist, holding it in place. He wraps my hand inside his big fist, drying the offending finger on the leg of his jeans. "A valiant effort." He holds my palm in place against his thigh. "But were you really about to give me a wet willy? How old are you? "

"Twenty—" I start with a gusty exhale. I can't think. My hand is pressed against Anders' leg, with his warm fingers on top of mine. What was I saying? Oh yeah. "Six. I'm twenty-six. My birthday is this weekend. I'll be twenty-seven." Yes. Good math, Sunny , I compliment myself. "But you're a big guy. A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do." My words are way too breathy.

The vein that runs across his tan wrist is calling to me: Just one tiny touch. What would it hurt? And before I realize what I'm doing, I drag the pad of my index finger down the length of the vein. Anders sucks in a breath and uses his free hand to hold mine in place. Now both of my hands are layered between his and I'm trapped—the world's most willing prisoner.

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Sunny is right. I can't stop fidgeting. Every molecule inside me is fighting to pull her close and my body is humming with unspent energy. But Oliver's obnoxious voice is in my head, holding me back. Look, don't touch. Easy for you to say, Oliver. Everything is easier for an android.

But he's correct, as androids tend to be. I can't afford to lose my mind right now. Making this film count is important, because of what comes after it. A huge movie project has been promised to me, contingent on the success of this film. It's independent of Micah Watson, the story is fresh, the role I've been offered has depth, and I am perfect for it. Imagine it's 1981, and I've been offered the role of Indiana Jones. That is my life right now. At least, that's what my agent, the director, the producers, and Oliver say. This job has the potential to change the trajectory of my career. Iconic role. Oscar buzz. Movie history being made. Blah, blah, blah. How are Sunny's hands so soft? That's all I care about at the moment. And what would she do if I kissed her?

When she ran her finger down the length of my hand, it weakened whatever remained of my self control. Now I have to touch her. That's all. I settle for covering her hands in mine and taking deep breaths to relax. It's not helping things that her huge, brown eyes are blinking at me. I'm looking, with only a little touching. I need to calm down. What I wouldn't give to belt out some Mariah Carey right now.

"Y-your birthday is this weekend?" I clear my throat. "Doing anything fun?"

Her sigh is shaky, and her small hands don't move. "My mom is throwing a party for me. She always does. I figured I would take Imogen. It's low key—just family and a few friends. Is that okay?"

“Is it okay to take my daughter to a party where I haven’t been invited? Nope.” When her face falls I add, “But only because I want to go. When’s the party?”

“Sunday afternoon. My mom usually makes a big dinner every weekend. This one will just have cake at the end. No big deal. You’re not missing anything. Besides, you have to work.” Her insufferable doe eyes blink, blink, blink at me.

Why is she trying to talk me out of a party? “Yeah, but that’s not the point. You could have invited me.” I blink at her the way she’s blinking at me. Let’s see how she likes it.

“You think I should have invited The Anders Beck to my boring family birthday dinner, knowing full well you’d have to shoot me down anyway?” She arches an eyebrow, but her hands haven’t budged. She’s not that annoyed.

“Yeah.”

“You know what would happen if you showed up at our family dinner?” She pulls her hands away and mimics a bomb exploding. At least, I think that’s what she’s doing. Maybe it’s fireworks.

“That” — I imitate her fireworks, including the sound effect — “sounds fun to me. You’re right, though. I gotta work.” At the moment, I don’t remember why I work so much.

Indiana Jones , Oliver’s voice reminds me in my head.

“Gotta make those blockbuster movies that keep Imogen knee deep in chicken nuggets.” She nudges me with her elbow .

I nudge her back.

She nudges me back. Hard.

I can't respond in kind, so I pull her in, wrapping my arms around her. I squeeze, "Let's play nice. Your elbows are like little swords." She melts against my chest, and my breath catches. She wasn't supposed to give in so easily.

"You're the one that's not playing nice." Her voice is weak, and I wonder if I'm squeezing too tight.

I don't want to loosen my grip, but I force myself. What is she talking about? I've been nothing but a gentleman with her, despite the things I want to do. The irony is, I've finally found a woman I want to touch because of reasons other than how she looks, and I'm not allowing myself to do it. I don't know myself anymore—and maybe that's a good thing.

"I'm being nice." I tighten my arms again. Maybe I'm a lost cause. "I just don't trust your elbows."

She squirms like she's trying to get away, but if anything she's only moving closer. I'm not stopping her. I doubt Indiana Jones himself could summon the will to stop her. I can smell her hair, and it's far more enjoyable than the skunk situation she had going on a few days ago. She smells sweet, like fruity candy—sort of like Skittles, which happen to be my favorite.

I take a deep breath in through my nose. "You smell like yellow Skittles," I mumble with a sigh.

Her laughter vibrates against my chest. "Yellow Skittles, specifically? Is that a good thing?"

I sniff her shiny, dark hair like I'm on a fact-finding mission. "It's... torment."

I feel the warmth of her exhale. “That doesn’t—”

My phone buzzes in my pocket, effectively dousing whatever was starting between us. Sunny retreats to her side of the couch, her eyes fixed on the movie like there will be a quiz later .

“Sorry.” I pull the phone from my pocket, checking the screen. Oliver. I swear the guy has a radar for fun, and he must find and destroy all signs of it. I swipe to accept the call. “Hey, Ollie.”

“Hey, man.” He sounds more peeved than usual. “We have some changes tomorrow.” Then he goes on for a solid five minutes about a location issue, which started a domino effect of chaos. Shooting changes. Costume and makeup issues. Rearranged schedule. It’s a pain in the butt, but not unusual. It means we’re starting way too early tomorrow, and I feel a tinge of guilt for keeping Sunny out so late. It also means I’ll be free early on Sunday, which opens up my schedule for things like a birthday party and a home cooked meal. Don’t mind if I do .

Oliver’s voice is buzzing in my ear like a mosquito, “...which means that you have less than zero time for your usual bull—”

“Ollie, I get it. I’m focused. Lay off.” I say this even as Sunny’s feet tuck almost under my leg on the cushion. She’s using the arm rest as a pillow, her brown hair cascading over the side of the couch in a way that can only be described as extremely distracting. With all of that hair out of the way, her slender neck is ready and waiting. I think I can see her soft pulse under the velvety skin below her jaw.

He snorts in my ear, making me jump. “I’ve seen Nanny Sunny. And I know you. You can’t help yourself around beautiful women, and now you have one under your roof. Easy access. You’re going to need hourly reminders from me.” I scramble to lower the volume on my phone, pressing the tiny button no less than forty times. I

hope she didn't hear that.

"Ollie, it's been years. Lay off." I need to redirect him, because the best way to get Oliver off my back is to talk about work. It comforts him. The guy loves work. He should marry it. "I have a question about tomorrow."

I regret the decision when ten more minutes pass and Oliver is droning about our schedule, then ideas to make our day more efficient, all peppered with unsolicited input on my performance. They're good thoughts. But I still want to cuddle with the nanny. I fake a yawn in Oliver's ear.

He groans. "How were you nominated for an Academy Award?"

"Because I have a great manager."

"That's right. Now get some sleep, dingus." He hangs up on me.

I drop back against the cushions, tossing my phone to the side with a huff. I remember too late that Sunny had stretched out beside me while Oliver was yapping. My phone lands screen down, squarely on her chest—and not on the bony, ribcage part of her torso. It's the soft, curvy part that I am absolutely not thinking about. When she doesn't yell at me, bat the phone away, or even twitch, I realize she is out like a light. Her full lips are parted and I think I spot a little drool starting.

This woman is going to kill me.

What a conundrum. I should wake her up so she can go home, but she looks so peaceful. Her hands are tucked under her cheek in the praying position. She's too innocent for a guy like me. The little devil on my shoulder tells me to let her sleep because she's too tired to drive, and she'll have to be back here in seven hours anyway. Really, the kind thing to do is let her get the rest she needs. It's decided,

then.

I snag a blanket off the uncomfortable arm chair and tuck it around her, starting at her feet, and begging the universe to keep her asleep. She doesn't budge. This girl is a deep sleeper. When I get to her shoulders and see my phone on her chest, I freeze. There's a chance I can hook the black case with my pinky finger and pull it off of her like I'm fishing. There's also a solid chance that if I try that, she'll wake up with my hand grazing her boob.

I guess my phone is hers now.

Turning off the lights and the TV, I force myself into my bedroom. I want to stay with Sunny. She is exactly what her name implies—straight sunshine—and I'm like a wilted houseplant that's been living in a dark room. Everything inside me wants to pivot toward her and drink her in. Instead, I faceplant on my bed and groan into the pillow. Get your crap together, Indiana Jones.

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My phone vibrates against my chest and my groggy brain makes me slap it away. It buzzes and buzzes, but I need a few more minutes to sleep. That's it. Just five minutes. The phone's muffled humming resumes from the carpet next to my bed. Someone is calling me now. What kind of sadistic person makes a phone call in this day and age? And before sunrise? That's what texting is for. It must be Joe. He's the only person I know who's awake at this hour.

Wait—a detail registers in my foggy brain—there's no carpet next to my bed.

My eyes blink open and last night rushes back to my mind like I'm remembering the best kind of dream. Anders and I “watched a movie” together. We sort of held hands. He took a long phone call. Then I must have fallen asleep. I feel like I swallowed a whole packet of Pop Rocks. My stomach is in my throat. I slept on Anders Beck's couch.

BANG! BANG! BANG! Now someone is pounding on the door, and I scramble to my feet, snatching my phone from the floor as I go.

I swipe to answer the call. “I'm fine, I'm fine...” I reassure Joe as I swing open the door .

Oliver is on the other side of the door, his phone pressed to his ear. “Glad to hear it,” his clipped words echo through the phone in my hand. “What are you doing with Anders' phone?”

My face burns as I pull the device away to inspect. It is definitely not mine. Somehow I have Anders' phone and answered it. I slept with it. Why do I feel the need to

confess? “I thought it was m-mine.”

His eyes scan my frame—from yesterday’s rumpled white blouse, to my sleep-worn jeans, to my bare feet. I drag my fingers through my bedhead and Oliver tracks the movement.

He quirks an eyebrow.

“I must've fallen asleep on the couch.”

Both eyebrows shoot to his hairline.

“I’ll get Anders.” I step past him toward the bedroom.

“Please. Allow me.”

He marches ahead and I scurry after him, feeling like a teenager caught in her boyfriend’s bedroom. It isn’t until we’re at the door that I realize I’ve made a horrible, horrible mistake. Or the best decision of my life. Time will tell.

Oliver yanks the covers off of Anders, revealing a man wearing absolutely nothing except the jeans he had on last night. He’s just miles of sculpted muscles, and I can’t pull my eyes away. His bare torso is perfection—like he was carved from solid marble by a sculptor who was asked to recreate the perfect male specimen. Every muscle from his chest, down his arms, to those swoon-worthy veins in his wrists and hands, is exquisite. He’s a work of art. He’s a Renaissance sculpture, if Renaissance sculptures had a tan and smirked when you ogled them while mentally waxing poetic.

Oops.

“You were due in make-up twenty minutes ago,” Oliver snaps. “Get up.”

I stare at my bare feet, but I'm tracking Anders' every move in my periphery. He pulls a gray t-shirt over his head—pity—and stuffs his feet into his shoes. “Let's go,” he claps his manager on the shoulder, “You can lecture me on the way there.”

He stops in front of me, standing between Oliver and me like a shield. He pulls a baseball hat over his messy hair while his sleepy eyes scan my face. His voice is low, “I'm sorry I didn't wake you. You were so out, I didn't have the heart.”

I shrink, hiding behind the solid wall that is Anders. “I think I'm in trouble,” my shaky voice whispers.

My heart is thumping. In school, I was the kid who turned in my work early and followed every rule. I stop at stop signs at one o'clock in the morning. I get nervous walking through the security screening at the airport because what if I accidentally have a bomb in my carry-on? I hate being in trouble. This isn't me.

His bright blue eyes stare straight into mine. “I think I'm in trouble, too,” he says, and that crooked grin of his makes an appearance. “Different kind of trouble, but still... trouble.”

Then he and Oliver close the door behind them, leaving me to wonder what he meant. That man .

“You can do it, Immy.” I squeeze her sticky little hand in mine. “It's not much farther.”

We're hiking Aspiration Trail. Imogen left her painted rock alongside the path ten steps in and declared she had had enough nature, but I still need to leave my sunny-painted rock at the top of the hill. I'm determined to keep this kid off of screens today, and I keep missing my morning run because of Anders' chaotic schedule. I miss those endorphins and the vitamin D. A little outside time will be good for both

of us.

“I’m tired of walking,” she announces. Her jelly shoes aren’t helping the situation. They’re covered in dust, which is turning into sludge between her sweaty toes. But she insisted on them. She also insisted on bringing Hairy, who is enthusiastic about every lizard and bird that darts in her line of sight. Her leash is wrapped five times around my left hand because she keeps lunging toward the bushes.

We’re surrounded by rocky cliffs and desert blossoms. The spring sun rose behind a thick layer of clouds, but it’s finally starting to warm the air, and birds are chirping. “I know you’re tired, but isn’t this a pretty morning, Immy? Let’s look for flowers while we walk. I bet we can find one in every color.”

She tugs her hand out of mine. “No. That’s boring.” She sits on a rock and folds her arms. Hairy mimics the stubborn pose, lying in the dirt with her paws crossed in front of her.

Dang Julie Andrews.

Her character made this look so easy in *The Sound of Music*. How did she get seven children to run through the Austrian countryside, laughing and singing with her? I can’t even inspire one child to take a short walk up a singular hill. I’m sorry, Julie. It’s not your fault.

I sigh, pulling my rock out of my back pocket with my free hand. My sloppily painted rays of happy yellow sunshine do not match the sky or the general mood of my hiking companion. I place the rock in a grouping of other painted rocks in various stages of fading. One of the rocks reads, “Live Laugh Love” in purple cursive. I imagine myself picking it up and launching it into the desert with an echoing cackle. Instead, I take it and sit on the rock next to Imogen.

“Can you read this?” I show her the rock.

She sighs and I’m surprised when she sounds out the words live, laugh, and love—despite the fact that her tone conveys death, sadness, and infinite despair.

“It’s annoying, right?”

“Yep.” She scuffs her jelly shoe in the dirt and Hairy leans into her leg.

“I think so, too. It feels like being told to be happy. Like, if I’m not enjoying life, let me figure out why. Don’t just tell me to be happy so you don’t have to live with a sad person. Honestly, it seems a little selfish to me—commanding someone to live, laugh, love.” I grin to myself. “And don’t tell someone to laugh. If they’re not laughing, the jokes need to improve.”

Silence from the boulder next to me.

“Are you sad today, Immy?”

She shakes her head.

“Are you mad?”

“No.”

“Tired?”

She huffs.

“Dumb question,” I chuckle, crossing my ankles in front of me. “You seem unhappy. Can you tell me what’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to walk anymore.”

That’s not all, though. She was grouchy from the moment she stumbled out of her bedroom this morning a few minutes after her dad left. “Okay. I found a spot for my rock. We can be done, we just have to walk back to my car.” I brush my hands on my legs. “Let’s go.”

“I’m tired of going places,” she mumbles to her dusty shoes.

“What do you mean?” I let the question hang. If I don’t move or say anything, I won’t startle her out of answering.

She sighs deeply, like the weight of life is bearing down on her fragile, five-year-old shoulders. “We go lots of places, but sometimes I want to go home.”

“Okay, I’ll take you back to the suite as soon as we get back to the car. I promise.” She must not have slept well last night. If I didn’t have to drag Hairy down this hill, I would have offered to carry her.

Her red, watery eyes blink up at me. They’re her dad’s eyes, and seeing them anything but bright makes my chest hurt. “No! I want to go home!” she screeches, and bolts up the path the wrong direction. Hairy bounds after her. Unfortunately, the dog is still securely tethered to my wrist .

I’ve been water skiing before. I’ve been pulled around a lake by a boat. Being pulled around the desert by the largest dog on planet earth is similar, but there are differences—face planting on water versus face planting on gravel, for starters. It hurts.

I scream, “Hairy! Stop!” while being dragged face down across the ground. I yank the leash with all my strength to pull myself more upright, but I’m still stumbling

forward on my knees and elbows. I use the tension Hairy is creating to regain my footing, tripping ahead.

This dog isn't stopping. And neither is Imogen. Pain vaguely registers in various parts of my body, but my only concern is catching up to Immy before she's lost in the desert.

I tug on the leash, jogging to match Hairy's pace. She can't drag me if I outrun her. "Hairy! No! Bad girl!" I scold, heading in what I hope is the direction Immy ran. Hairy gallops at my side, seemingly content that we're on the same mission. It turns out that when I'm not being dragged horizontally by her, Hairy makes a good running partner. Our pace is similar.

"Immy!" I holler. I spot her bright blonde ponytail bobbing ahead on the trail and my tense shoulders relax. There's no way a kid in jelly shoes is outrunning me. I did our town marathon last fall and took third place in my age bracket. This is asinine.

I pick up the pace, relieved that Imogen is visible and safe. It doesn't take long before we catch up to her. She has slowed considerably, marching uphill toward the end of the hike where there's a stone monument and a view of the valley and small town below.

When we're close enough, Hairy whines and pushes her wet snout into Immy's hand.

"You can't run away like that, Immy. It's dangerous."

She swings around to face me, wiping her upturned nose on the sleeve of her shirt. "I don't wanna be here! "

I take a deep breath. I don't know a lot about kids, but in the short time I've had with her, I've learned that this one will match my energy. "I know. We're going to leave,

but you went the wrong way. The car is back there.” I say calmly, hitching a thumb behind us with a soft smile.

“No! I want to go to my house. I don’t want to sleep at a hotel and go in other people’s cars. I want to go in my dad’s car, and have my bed in my room!” she sobs.

Oh.

Suddenly, I’m feeling desperately under-qualified for this job. I don’t know what to tell her. Does she know she won’t be going home for a few months yet? I’m not going to break it to her.

“Have you told your dad you want to go home?” Yes. This feels right. Let her dad give her the news.

“Yeah. He says we will. But I want to go home today, though.” She sniffles.

Now I have a conflict of interest. I don’t want any of them to go home, except maybe the dog. Don’t let the door hit you in the tail on the way out, Hairy . I think I finally get what Immy is saying, though, and my heart squeezes.

“I’m sorry, Im. I bet it’s hard to feel so homesick.”

She nods and sniffles, drawing in a shaky breath.

“You should talk to your dad about this. He can help you.”

She nods, but I know I need to do more.

The thing is, I can’t relate. I sigh. This is embarrassing. “I guess I don’t know what that feels like. I’ve never really been anywhere but home.” I shrug, hoping the five-

year-old doesn't judge me for barely leaving the county I was born in.

She wipes her nose on her sleeve again and I make a mental note to keep some tissues in my pocket. "You're lucky."

"I don't know about that. Did you know that I've never been on a plane? I've only ever driven to a few places. I don't have a passport. My family has lived in the same house my whole life, doing the same things, with the same people. I am so. boring." Whoa. Where did that come from? This child isn't your therapist, Sunny. Maybe cool it with the info-dumping?

"You never went on a plane?" Her horrified expression tells me that her worries are forgotten—temporarily, at least. "Why?!"

I shake my head. "I don't know." But I know exactly why: I'm so consumed with having my life in precise control that I can't leave my job. And maybe I am a little boring. That's a long answer for a five-year-old, so I say, "Can you believe that?" I can't, either. I lead her back onto the path and I'm relieved when she follows without complaint.

Her eyes go wide. "You have to go on a plane. It's so fun." She's practically bouncing down the trail now, pointing at flowers in between chattering about all of the plane trips she's been on. And I'm left feeling whiplashed by the mood swings of this tiny person.

I look at Hairy and whisper, "Is this normal?"

Hairy's big, brown eyes blink like she's seen some things, but Oliver had her sign a pile of NDAs.

"Okay, then."

I tug the leash, and Hairy and I follow Immy back down the trail. Tears forgotten. Homesickness—what’s that? I unlock my car and Immy is climbing into the back seat before she speaks again.

“You have blood on your face.”

My right cheek started to throb once the adrenaline of our adventure wore off, but I know better than to touch an open wound with unclean fingers, so the severity of the injury was a mystery until now. I peek in the rearview mirror. Gross. There’s a long drag mark across my cheek with a line of blood dripping to my jaw. I also have some impressive road rash on my knees and elbows, thanks to Ms. Hairy’s Wild Ride. Luckily, I have a first aid kit in my glovebox and plenty of experience using it.

While I’m swiping my cheek with an alcohol wipe, I scowl at Hairy, who is panting from her fur-coated seat. I swear she’s smiling, completely oblivious that she made a mess of my face. She’s just happy to be here, stinking up the interior of my car.

“Maybe warn me next time you want to go racing across the desert, Hairy.” I roll my eyes at the dog. These dumb wipes are stinging and making my eyes water.

“Just so you know, she can’t understand you,” Immy reminds me.

“I know.”

I need a Coke. A big one.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

“H oney, I’m home!” I call into the suite.

There’s no sugar coating it—today sucked. All of the changes that were made to the shooting schedule set off a chain reaction of chaos that bled into every aspect of the project. The entire crew was on edge. Sometimes this happens when we get in the thick of filming. There are a lot of opinions and expectations. It’s a huge machine with a lot of moving parts, so when the machine gets jostled unexpectedly it can lead to... feelings. That’s a kind way to say it. At one point today, Christopher’s face turned dark red and I swear I saw veins in the shape of devil horns pop out on his forehead.

So, rough day. All I want is to collapse on the couch next to Sunny and watch a mindless movie. I check the time on my phone. 10:47 p.m. I hope she’s up for it. It’s late, tomorrow is another early day, and it’s her birthday.

“Girls?” I call into the darkness. I know Sunny is a woman, but what am I supposed to do here? I imagine calling out, “Woman and girl?” or “Sunny and Immy?” but they’re both a mouthful.

When there’s no answer I try again. “Ladies?” There we go. That feels right .

I pause at Immy’s temporary room. It’s quiet, but there’s dim light coming under the door. Twisting the knob slowly, I open it just enough to peek inside. The bedside lamp is the only light in the room, casting a warm glow around a scene that makes my ribcage feel way too small for whatever my heart and lungs are doing.

Sunny is propped against the headboard, with a huge picture book flopped on her tan

legs as though she fell asleep mid-story. Immy is tucked under her arm, her mouth drooping open, and Sunny's glasses sliding down her nose. My daughter's wild, white-blond curls are damp and tamed into two neat braids on either side of her pink cheeks. She looks peaceful and childlike, not like the mini-adult she so often tries to be. Hairy is curled in a huge ball on the carpet next to the bed, dead to the world.

Pulling my phone from my back pocket, I tiptoe closer to get a picture. I don't want to forget this. I frame the shot and capture the image, immediately sending the photo to my mother because nothing makes her happier than seeing her granddaughter content. Selfishly, I also know this will earn me some much-needed goodwill.

I stare at the photo on my phone screen. This one's a keeper—everything about it. I zoom in, since it's a cheap way to get a better look at Sunny without gawking at her in real life. Objectively speaking, Sunny is beautiful. Her face is perfectly proportioned and symmetrical. Her lips are full and pink, and her dark eyelashes are long. Technically speaking, she's a knockout. Perfection. Whatever.

It's her hair that gets my attention tonight, though. It's twisted into two braids that match Imogen's. Sunny has been so good for her. It's strange to think about, but if I could've chosen the traits I want in a mother for Imogen, Sunny has all of them. She is incredible. And those braids make me think other distracting thoughts. Let's just say, if Oliver could read my mind right now, he'd burst through the wall like the Kool-Aid man. But when I zoom in, I notice something on her face. My eyes flick to the woman on the bed and I step closer to inspect in real life.

A few long scratches run down her cheek, surrounded by swollen red skin. I scan the rest of her and see that her knees are also marred with angry crimson gashes that look fresh. I don't like this. I want to erase it all with my fingertips. I don't like seeing her hurt. Everything inside of me is screaming, "Who did this to you?!" like some dumb romance movie cliché.

But it's true.

I need to know who or what did this to Sunny so I can destroy it.

"Are you mad?" Immy's soft voice breaks the silence, startling me.

"Hey, Im," I smile at her. "I'm not mad. Why would I be?"

"Your face looks pretty mad," she whispers. It's obvious she's trying not to wake Sunny, which is sweet. She pulls the glasses off the end of her nose and hands them to me the way kids do when they're done with something. I look at the frames in my hand. How can an innocuous object turn sexy so fast when it's on Sunny's face?

"I'm kinda wondering what happened to her cheek and her knees. How'd she get all scratched up?"

"I guess Hairy pulled her down."

"Hairy did this?" I don't mean to, but I raise my voice and it wakes the mutt. Her ears try to perk under their droopy weight. "Hairy," I scold her. Her tail thumps on the carpet.

"Yep. We went hiking today and Hairy was following me and pulled Sunny down by the leash," she whispers through a long yawn. "Hairy was chasing me. That's when Sunny fell down. But guess what?" Her eyes go wide and she draws out the pause for maximum drama. She is definitely my child. "I found out that Sunny has never went on a plane," she murmurs with the gravity of a CIA informant.

I have about a billion questions, as I often do when I interpret Immy's stories. First off, I am unreasonably angry with the dog. What do I do with her? Second, how is it possible for someone to reach their twenty-seventh birthday without ever riding in an

airplane? That can't be right .

“She told you she's never been on a plane?” I circle the bed to sit on the opposite corner from Sunny's feet.

“Yep. She said she never goes anywhere and her life is super boring.” Another yawn.

“She said that?” I need to know if this is Imogen's commentary on Sunny's life, or did Sunny say her life is boring? And why do I care? I guess I hate the thought of Sunny being down about her life. A pure sunshine person deserves to enjoy her life. She shouldn't be bored.

“Yep. But I told her she needs to go on a plane. Remember when we went to that place where we rode our bikes all over, and they had really good ice cream? We should take Sunny there. Then she could go on a plane. And we could see Mormie, and Sunny could meet her!”

Mackinac Island with my mom—that's what she's talking about. I've taken her there a few times with my parents and she loves it because it means undivided attention, which is Immy's favorite thing. My mother, Tillie—or Mormie, as Imogen calls her—is one of those grandparents who makes everything magical. Immy worships her. A familiar twinge of guilt unsettles my stomach. I need to take Immy home more often.

“That would be fun. There are a lot of reasons people don't go on planes, though. Maybe Sunny wouldn't be able to go.” Let's manage those expectations before Immy ends up arranging our marriage. She already wants her to meet my parents and join us on the family vacation, for heaven's sake.

“I hope she goes. I'm going to call Mormie tomorrow to tell her about it.” Another big yawn, followed by fluttering eyelids. She's almost out.

“Let me talk to her, okay? Get some sleep, love.” I lean in to kiss her forehead and her eyes stay closed.

I sit on the end of the bed thinking. There are two possibilities: Either this conversation will be forgotten by tomorrow, or Imogen’s newest fixation will be a trip to Mackinac Island with Sunny, and it will be all anyone hears about. Realistically, that would be easier to pull off than tickets to a Harry Styles concert. I don’t know what to hope for. I like Sunny. I want her. I’m self-aware enough to acknowledge that. But setting aside the fact that she’s the nanny and off-limits, I don’t have room in my life for anything—especially anything serious. I’m Indiana Jones-ing, here. But then I look at their matching braids and I want to do something stupid, like get on a plane and take a family vacation.

Ugh . People snap their wrists with rubber bands when they’re breaking bad habits. Maybe every time I have unrealistic, inappropriate thoughts about Sunny I need to crack a whip à la Indiana Jones. That’s probably what it would take to sever this connection I feel to her—a whip crack. Or a bolt of lightning.

I groan. This is insane. She’s just a woman. I meet new, beautiful women literally every day. I am acting like a moronic, hormone-addled teenager.

But she is unlike any woman I’ve ever met. Sunny is... Sunny. She’s pure sunshine.

“Anders?” Sunny’s sleep-roughened voice whispers from her place against the headboard. Her dark eyelashes flutter open as she clears her throat. “Are those my glasses?”

For the love of all that is holy, someone please crack me with a whip.

Instead, the Indiana Jones theme music is playing somewhere in the back of my mind, guiltling me out. I pass her glasses to her like they’re a hot potato. She puts them on

and I look away in the name of self-preservation. I'm just a man, standing in front of a woman, trying not to have inappropriate glasses-related dreams all night.

"Sorry to wake you, and for getting home so late." I frown, remembering the day. What a mess. "It was a long one."

"I'm sorry you had a hard day," she murmurs as she extricates herself from the bed. She tucks the blankets around Immy. "Did you get your snack? "

My phone buzzes in my pocket. "Not yet. I'm starving." I pull out my phone because the notifications won't stop. There are multiple texts from my mother, still incoming.

MORMIE

brING ME MY GRANDBABY.

MORMIE

Now.

MORMIE

And who is that gorgeous woman???

MORMIE

I'm guessing she's the new nanny? Nan didn't last long, huh?

MORMIE

Please don't be your usual self with that one. Love you, Sockergris.

My mother always sends texts one after another, machine gun-style. Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat. It's how she talks in real life, too.

But I can't respond now—not when there's a warm, sleepy-eyed woman smiling at me. Sunny tracks the buzzing of my phone and I shove it in the back pocket of my jeans, where it continues to buzz. My mother is on one tonight.

“Ollie texted. You have an early day tomorrow?” She tries to hide a yawn behind her hand.

I love that she's calling him Ollie now. It's like we're a team, united in our goal to annoy the bejeezus out of him. “Yeah. Sorry about that. You know you're welcome to sleep here if it's more convenient.” Yes. For convenience. Where's that whip? I need it.

“I don't think so,” she says with a laugh. “Oliver had fire shooting out of his eyes when he caught me here this morning. I bet you got an earful.” I follow her to the living area, where she slides her feet into her sandals. I need to start hiding those things when I walk in the door.

“He tried to give me an earful, but I reminded him that he works for me, and that you and I have a friendly working relationship. I'll talk to him about laying off you.” I'm hungry, bordering on hangry, thinking about the conversation I had with Oliver this morning. I don't want Sunny to leave, so I wander over to the fridge mid-sentence to grab my snack. She can't leave if I keep talking. She's my conversation prisoner. “Big day for you tomorrow. Or are you one of those women who hates her birthday? Should I not say anything about it?” I peel the Snack sticker off the container and toss it on the counter.

“Not at all. I love being showered with gifts and attention. And you're rich, so expectations are high.”

That startles a laugh out of me. Her tone makes it obvious that she's joking. She doesn't strike me as the kind of person who seeks out elaborate gifts, or even attention, but this feels like a challenge. I can't wait to knock her off her feet with... something. Tomorrow. I need to get on it. "Oh, I'm all over this. Anders Beck does not mess around when it comes to gifts."

She covers her reddening face with her hands, "Please tell Anders Beck I was kidding. I'll feel guilty if you get a gift for me. I'll be here in the morning and we'll just have a normal day, okay?"

"Not a chance," I say around a mouthful of this chickpea tofu snack that is decidedly inedible. I would commit murder for a bag of Skittles. I drop the plastic container on the counter and make my way to Sunny, who is standing at the door with her bag slung over her shoulder and her hand on the knob. I'm not missing out on Sunny time for that garbage snack. I don't care how hungry I am.

"Please don't go crazy. I'm a simple gal."

"You are anything but simple, Sunny Pratt." I'm standing way too close to her. She's not moving away. Before I realize what I'm doing my fingers brush the scratch on her cheek. She sucks in a breath, and I pull away. "Did that hurt?"

"No. "

"Immy said Hairy did this. What happened?" This is good. Make her tell a story. Keep her here as long as possible.

Once again her cheeks flush pink and I'm consumed by the urge to touch them. So I do. She shudders, but leans into my palm. Her skin is so warm and velvety, it's impossible to pull my fingers away. She recounts the events of her morning with Imogen, and her soft breath against the inside of my wrist makes my heart jump.

What are we doing? Can she feel this?

She sighs and the warmth of it teases my skin. “Anyway, I caught up to Im and we had a good talk. She’s pretty homesick, but she’s easy to redirect.”

I can tell she’s leaving out details, and there’s a tornado of urgent thoughts twisting in my mind—a beautiful woman who is standing so close that her candy scent is driving me crazy, a homesick daughter, and one stupid, stupid dog. I respond to the easiest of the three, fully distracted by the woman in front of me. “I’m sorry Hairy did this to you. I’ll find a kennel for her,” I say offhandedly.

“Aw, you can’t do that. Hairy was only worried about Imogen. That’s why she took off after her, I think. She was doing her dog job.” Sunny tilts her head to the side, leaning into my hand. “And Imogen relies on her a lot. I’ve been watching them. She’s like an emotional support animal for your daughter. She’s tuned in to her moods and calms her down.”

Huh. I haven’t noticed that. I always just thought of her as the big, dopey family dog. I had one of those growing up—an Irish setter named Fisher who was even dopier than Hairy, if that’s possible. His favorite pastime was to dig my boxer shorts out of the laundry and eat them. I’ve held Hairy to a Fisher expectation level. I guess I need to pay closer attention to her. It’s something to think about at another time. Like, when Sunny isn’t standing twelve inches away from me wearing those risqué glasses.

“All right. The dog can stay, but she’ll be receiving a harsh lecture from me in the morning,” I grumble .

Her voice lulls like she’s falling asleep where she stands, held up by my hand. “Every time I lecture Hairy, your daughter reminds me that she can’t understand me.” Her dark lashes flutter, and the breath from her soft laughter tickles my wrist.

Did she just fall asleep upright? I'm a human male. This is too much. I squeeze my eyes closed and release a slow breath. I count backwards from ten. Nothing helps. She needs to go home. Now.

"You have goosebumps," she murmurs, tracing a line down my forearm with her fingertip.

Her voice almost shatters my weak effort at self-control. I wrap my free hand around her wrist, holding it in place. If she keeps doing that, whatever remains of my logic and restraint will evaporate. I search her big, brown eyes with mine. She's blinking. Nervous. Questioning. And way too pure for a guy like me.

I can't do this. I'm going to be strong this time. You're Indiana Jones, you absolute turnip-for-brains.

"Have a good night, Sunny."

I pull my hand away from her face and turn the doorknob.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

I started crying in my car, somewhere in between Anders' suite and home. I don't know why—probably a combination of exhaustion and pent-up frustration. There are a hundred things flying through my brain, all making the tears unstoppable. Micah Watson has been in the same county as me this week and I have had exactly one sighting.

On top of that, I can't have what I've been pretending for my entire life that I don't want. Since I was a teenager I've known that I can't have kids. I think I've made peace with it. But not only is Imogen a daily reminder of everything that I've been talking myself out of for thirteen years, she's exactly the kind of kid I would want—if I could have one.

Then, the cherry on top of this pathetic sundae is Anders. The man is nothing like I expected. I know he wanted to touch me tonight. He's pretty easy to read. And in a reassuring, but unwelcome, display of self-control he didn't make a single move. He was a perfect gentleman. He's another thing I thought I didn't want, which—SURPRISE—I do want. Very much. And I can't have him, either.

Pity party for one?

In this mental state, all I'm certain of is that life is categorically unfair and I need every minute of sleep I can get before my alarm goes off in—I check the time on my phone—six hours. Now I'm really bawling. I push through the door and stumble into the entryway, kicking off my sandals and dumping my bag on the floor.

“Sunny? Are you okay?” My mom is tucked under a quilt on the couch with a thick book in her hand.

“Mom?” I ask, just as my brain registers my mom’s cinnamon clove air freshener and the fact that I’m standing in her foyer.

Oh, lovely. I drove to my mom’s house. Again. I made the short commute from the resort to our family home so many times as a teenager, especially after working the late shift in the dining room, that I’m ashamed to say this isn’t the first time I’ve ended up here on autopilot.

“Ugh.” I shove my feet back into my shoes, and the tears ratchet up about ten notches. My face is going to be a swollen mess tomorrow if I don’t get this under control. I’m grumbling about all that is wrong with the world when I swipe my bag from the floor.

Probably for the best, my mother stops me before I can drive home in this state. She wraps me in one of her all-encompassing hugs and my entire being sighs with relief. Her familiar lavender scent reminds me that my world is not ending. There is hope. Mom is here.

She pulls away to look at me. “You’re exhausted. Sleep here. I’ll find out what happened to your face in the morning over birthday waffles.”

“Dog.” It’s the only explanation I have the energy for. I drop into my favorite armchair. My eyes are already closed. I didn’t quite make it to my old bedroom. “And I can’t do birthday waffles because they’re shooting early tomorrow and I have to wake up in like forty-five minutes.” I’m exaggerating, I know. I tend to bring the drama when I’m sleep deprived. This is why I’m usually such a stickler about my schedule. I prefer to be of sound mind.

“We can make it work. What time do you really have to be there in the morning for Imogen?” That’s my mom, always coming at me with logic and reasonable questions.

“Six.”

“Tell you what. Get some rest. In the morning you can pick up Imogen and bring her here for birthday waffles. I’ll even keep an eye on her so you can take a nap. Sound good?” She pulls me to my feet. “You can’t miss birthday waffles. That’s a crime.”

The tears won’t stop. I will never be as good at life as my mother. She opened a successful resort that has brought rejuvenation and happiness to hundreds upon hundreds of our guests, all while raising five children. The bar is so high, I’ll need an Olympic-sized trampoline to reach it. I’ll never have a family to take care of anyway, so maybe it doesn’t matter. When I tell her as much, she frowns and chuckles at the same time.

“You really are tired. You’ve been pushing too hard for too many weeks. I’m dragging you to your room now.”

And she does. I don’t even remember my head hitting the pillow.

Sniff, sniff, sniff, sniff, sniff...

The sound pulls me from sleep, and before I register what is making the noise a wet dog nose stamps my cheek.

“Argh!” I swat it away and my hand is met with a slobber-soaked tennis ball and steamy dog breath. “Hairy?! What are you doing in my old room?” What am I doing in my old room?

The dreamlike events of the previous evening flood into my mind and I pull the flowery sheets over my head in embarrassment. I got awkwardly close to Anders to the point that he sent me home. Then I had a crying jag worthy of a Disney princess and accidentally drove to my mom’s house. Basically, I am killing it at life.

At least the sun is shining .

Which means I am late.

A few swear words fly through my mind as I track down my cell phone and scramble out of bed and into the hall. Hairy barks, thumping down the stairs behind me.

“Mom! I slept in! I’m going to grab Immy and we’ll be back in a few!” I holler across the house. I don’t even know if she’s around to hear me, but I don’t have time for a polite goodbye. I hope I didn’t totally screw up Anders’ day.

“We’re in here!” a familiar voice calls from the direction of the kitchen. Immy?

I look down at the dog. Hairy is here. Why is Hairy here? My groggy brain is buffering. No important details are registering.

I wander into the kitchen, where I find Immy standing on a dining chair next to the counter. Over her nightgown she’s wearing my mother’s apron that reads “Hands off my buns” with a few strategically placed cartoon dinner rolls. Her hair is still pulled away from her face in the two braids I gave her last night. I have so many questions.

“Happy birthday, my Sunflower!” My mother circles the counter and wraps her arms around me.

“Yeah, happy birthday, Sunny!” Imogen smiles over a huge metal bowl of waffle batter. It looks like my mom has her folding in the whipped egg whites. That was always the job I got as a kid.

“Thanks, you guys.” I check the clock over the stove and find that I slept for over nine hours. Nine hours? “Um... I have so many questions. How did you get here, Im?” I rub my eyes. Maybe I’m still asleep and this is a bizarre dream? It’s possible.

“Miss Sarah came and got me and Hairy this morning.”

My mom must have clocked my worry, because she cuts in, “You needed sleep. That was obvious. Anders and I agreed that you’ve been pushing yourself much too hard and that you deserve to sleep in on your birthday. ”

“You talked to Anders about me? How? Why?” There’s embarrassing, and there’s my-mom-talked-to-my-celebrity-boss-about-me humiliating. Happy birthday to me. “I was extra tired last night, but I’m fine now. I’ve got this. I can’t believe I slept in so late.”

My mom sighs. “I can. You’ve run yourself ragged for weeks. Anders says you’ve had nothing but late nights and early mornings. He got my number from his manager and called me after you went to sleep last night. He was worried about you, especially after I told him you were crying when you got here. We decided that you should sleep in for your birthday and I would take care of Imogen this morning.”

“Mom!” I can’t believe this. But the fire of my mortification burns down to the steady, warm glow of feeling cared for. That was unbelievably thoughtful for a man who supposedly doesn’t respect women. I can’t afford to see this side of Anders. He’s easier to resist when I think of him as a womanizer.

“Happy birthday and you’re welcome,” she says with a mom look that silences me. The waffle iron beeps and she opens the lid. “This is ready. Should we cook up some birthday waffles, Imogen?”

“Yeah!”

I slump onto a barstool and watch while my mom guides Imogen. She shows her how to scoop a cupful of the lumpy batter and spread it onto the hot iron, where it sizzles and steams and fills the kitchen with the smell of happiness. Imogen giggles when

she closes the lid and flips the waffle upside down.

“I made a waffle, Sunny!” She beams at me and my chest aches with pride over this little girl who isn’t mine. The joy she finds in her new skill makes my heart swell.

I can’t help my smile. “You did a great job, Im!” Confused feelings aside, I am giddy about this breakfast. Our family celebrates a lot of birthdays and these Belgian waffles have made me a lover of birthdays .

The crusty-eyed sleep fog is dissipating and I’m looking forward to the day. The ever-present tiredness that has clouded my mind for weeks is gone. I’m well rested and there are waffles on my horizon. I get to have dinner with my family and Immy tonight. Maybe my life isn’t tragic. Maybe I really was just overtired last night.

“I’m sorry about last night, Mom.”

She cracks open a can of diet Coke. “Don’t apologize for being tired to the point of tears, especially not on your birthday,” she says as she pours the drink over ice and pops a bendy straw into the glass. A tiny, pink paper umbrella materializes, and she props it on the rim. “We’re celebrating you today. Drink this.” She slides the glass to me across the counter.

I laugh, “The umbrella is a nice touch.” I take a long sip. Bubbles. Caffeine. Happiness. Diet Coke for breakfast. It’s good to be alive. I might have a problem. “I can’t believe Anders let you take her,” I whisper with a nod to Immy, who is busy over-stirring the big bowl of batter with her noodle arms.

“He was almost too okay with it, actually. It wasn’t the first time we’ve talked, though. I’ve met Oliver and Christopher. Signed all the stuff. He said he knew I was your mother by the matching braids.”

That makes me smile. It's true. My mother and I—and even Immy—are wearing the same hairstyle today. My mother's gray hair is pulled into her usual long, double Dutch braids. I did mine and Imogen's last night before we fell asleep reading, so ours are looking less smooth and put together, but not terrible. Nothing about me is put together at the moment, though. I'm wearing yesterday's clothes and I'm overdue for an appointment with my shower and toothbrush. It's okay. I have a glass of Diet Coke and a waffle coming up.

It's quiet for a moment when my mother says, "I have to say, he's even better in real life."

My gaze shoots to Immy, who, luckily for me, is completely engrossed in stirring the batter. I nod at my mom. "Yep. "

"He's also thoughtful. Generous. An attentive father. And he smells pretty good, too."

Like I need to be reminded of his positive qualities. "I know." I sigh.

"He wouldn't be the worst option, is all I'm saying."

"Mom, he isn't an option." She knows the position I'm in as his daughter's nanny. "Can we just focus on the waffles?" I shoot a meaningful look in Immy's direction to let my mother know that she's listening and smarter than she gets credit for. She's also a parrot. I don't need to have this entire conversation repeated to her father—or worse, Oliver. No, thank you.

"I am focusing on the waffles ," she drags out the word. "I think you could use some waffles in your life." She wags her eyebrows.

I can't believe my mother, whose intuition is usually spot on, is encouraging this.

Hope sparks in my chest, but I smother it.

“ Waffles aren’t safe. They’re too rich. Too fancy. Way out of my league. I’m not opposed to waffles , in general. I’m just more of a Captain Crunch Berries type of girl.” I want her to disagree with me. I want to be wrong.

“How do you know waffles aren’t safe? Because I’m seeing otherwise. And waffles are not out of your league. You are smart, beautiful, witty, sensitive— waffles should be so lucky.”

My face burns under her praise. “You’re my mom. You are supposed to think that. But the sad reality is, waffles and Captain Crunch Berries don’t go together. Besides, even if I did deserve waffles, I’m not allowed anywhere near them. They are strictly off limits. I’m on a no waffles diet indefinitely, thanks to all the paperwork I signed.”

My mother smiles at me. “You’re right. You always were my little rule follower.”

“My dad loves Captain Crunch Berries the most,” Immy interjects, slopping the batter-coated spoon onto the counter.

There is no way she understood that conversation, right? Please, Universe. Do me this one favor .

I’m saved when the back door opens and Joe and his fiancée, Indigo, come inside. She’s looking bright-eyed and adorable, as always, with her dark red hair piled on top of her head and my brother’s arm slung around her shoulders. These two are almost unbearable in their syrupy happiness with each other.

“What are you two up to?” my mom asks, while demonstrating for Immy how to safely remove the waffle from the hot iron, sliding it onto a white plate with a long fork.

“We’re here for breakfast,” my brother says, jostling past me to take the plate.

Indigo yanks his arm. “No, you don’t. You know the rules. First one’s for the birthday girl. Hand it over, sir.” She arches an eyebrow at Joe, who winks and kisses her cheek in response. Gag me.

But at least he passes me my waffle and wishes me a happy birthday.

“Thanks, Indigo,” I say, taking a dramatic bite of my waffle while making eye contact with my brother.

While Immy spreads a cup of batter on the iron, Joe, Indigo and I sit in a row at the counter.

“This is fun,” Indigo whispers to me as she shoots a look at Immy. “Is this your first time making waffles?”

“Yep. Miss Sarah teached me, but it’s pretty easy.”

I take another monstrous bite. “I think this is the best birthday waffle I’ve ever had, Im. Thanks for working so hard to make it.”

“I was just telling Sunny that she needs more waffles in her life,” my mother announces to the group, unhelpfully. “ Waffles ,” she repeats, flexing her loose bicep and nodding at Immy to drive the point home.

“Muscles?” Joe asks.

“No, waffles ,” Indigo repeats in her deepest voice, mimicking a burly man the best she can with her petite frame.

“Waffles?” Joe parrots, deepening his voice even further. “I’m not following. ”

Immy sighs, like her patience with my brother has already worn thin after this two-minute interaction. “Waffles means my dad, but Sunny thinks she is just Captain Crunch. But I told her my dad likes Captain Crunch the very best.”

That silences the room. The eyes of every adult woman are wide with panic. My mother’s face goes red. The sound of the grandfather clock ticking echoes through the house. The waffle iron steams.

I am in so much trouble.

“So, waffles must be working today, huh?” Joe asks Immy, looking thoroughly entertained by our discomfort.

Thankfully, his attempt to distract her and cut the tension works. “Yep. He works every day, that’s why Sunny comes over. She’s my favorite of all of my nannies. She takes me to Rollerburger and we go for walks with Hairy, except Hairy isn’t allowed on our walks anymore because she dragged Sunny down and she got all scratched up.”

It’s like someone put a quarter in Immy. She goes on and on, describing our hike, my fall, and even when we fixed my skunked hair. This kid doesn’t forget a thing. She’s also saving me from catching my family up on the last week of radio silence from me. The other adults in the room encourage her stories, egging her on and getting far more incriminating details than I ever would have shared. Immy is an entertainer, like her dad. She eats up the attention, getting more and more animated as her stories go on.

Around a mouthful of waffle she announces, “And Goldie is my second favorite ‘cause she called my dad Mr. Sparkle Dimple.” She shoves another bite of waffle into

her mouth before she's even swallowed the last one. "She's so cool. She skates at her job ." Her near-hero worship of Goldie is evident in her tone.

That makes Joe laugh out loud.

My mother makes eye contact across the counter and mouths, "I. Love. Her."

I mouth back, "Me too." Probably a little too much. How am I supposed to say goodbye to this girl in a few months ?

Today was such a good day, I can't let it end. After waffles—actual waffles, not the metaphorical kind—we hung out at my mom's house. Imogen and I wandered through the small peach orchard, which is just starting to bud. We walked Hairy. I had a long, hot shower while my mother and Immy took naps. All of my sisters, plus Joe, Indigo, and Mercer, came over for dinner. We ate my favorite pork barbacoa salad with Brazilian lemonade, and I'm so full I won't be able to eat for three days. It was loud and chaotic, with a little too much good-natured teasing about my need for waffles .

After dinner we moved to the back patio table for some fudgy birthday cake and a few rounds of our go-to card game. Now we're surrounded by plates of half-eaten cake and cards. My sisters are teaching Imogen the rules of the game, and I'm blown away again at what a quick study she is.

The sky is a hazy lavender from some patchy storm clouds and the recent sunset, and the lights strung around the patio are helping us see our cards. A chorus of crickets starts up somewhere in the bushes, and in the distance a car engine is rumbling through the desert.

My mother's house is remotely located at the base of a line of rocky, red cliffs. She has a million-dollar view of the parched landscape, but with time and attention, her

yard and garden have become an oasis. Sitting on her back patio at dusk, listening to the crickets and the sound of my siblings and Mercer bickering and laughing over cards, is all I wanted for my birthday. This is my happy place.

Then Anders walks up the back steps, casually dressed in worn jeans and a white t-shirt that pulls across his broad shoulders and chest. He's letting his beard grow in for the movie, and he's looking tan from long days shooting outdoors. My heart thumps in my ears at the sight of him—Anders Beck—in my mom's backyard .

I take it all back. A handsome movie star for my birthday? This is my happy place.

“Looks like I found the party,” he announces.

“Dad!” Immy cheers, jumping up to wrap her arms around his legs. Hairy barks.

My sisters, Willow and Sage, gasp in unison. Goldie drops her cards and they scatter across the table in the breeze. Joe does one of those chin lift salute things that guys do.

My mother chimes in, “Oh good, you made it! Did you have any trouble with my directions?”

“Not at all.” He's looking right at me. Or am I imagining it?

“What are you doing here? I thought you were working late?” I have to ask, because if I had known he was coming to my birthday dinner I would've put some effort in. My hair is slopped into a haphazard bun on top of my head and my nerd glasses are in place. I spent the day goofing around with Immy, so I wore my softest yoga pants and a baggy t-shirt that I know for a fact has a hole in the left armpit.

“All done. We started early today. And your mom invited me.” His eyes crease at the

corners when he smiles at me. “Happy birthday.”

I think I’m experiencing a full body blush. I’m warm from head to toe and my heart is tripping. How does that man make a birthday wish sound seductive? Somehow I need to communicate to him to tone down the charisma around my family. They’ll track it, latch onto it, and read way too much into it. And I’ll be teased about this until I’m seventy-five years old. My best shot is to treat Anders like he’s any other friend showing up at a family get-together. Act natural.

“Thanks! I’m delighted that you’re here!” I shout, springing from my chair like one of those inflatable car dealership guys. “Have a seat! We’ll get you some cake!” I shoot crazy eyes to each of my siblings that I hope communicates, “EVERYBODY STAY CALM AND ACT NATURAL!”

My mom follows me around the table to the back door. Meanwhile, my sisters are smirking and nudging each other, thoroughly amused and enjoying our celebrity visitor.

“Sit here!” Goldie moves down one chair, opening a seat next to the one I just vacated. “Glad you made it, Mr. Sexy Dimple Sparkle Pants.”

“Me too. Nice to see you again, Goldie,” he says as Imogen climbs onto his knee. Hairy curls up at his feet. The three of them look right at home sitting at our patio table. He scans the group. “Wow. Mama and Papa Pratt hit copy-paste when they made you girls, huh?”

Everyone laughs louder than the familiar joke warrants, and I cringe.

I push through the back door and make a beeline to the remainder of my birthday cake. I can feel my mother’s eyes on me. I grab a plate and start to chop a giant slice with a long knife. She places her wrinkled hand over my shaky, knife-wielding one.

“Sunny.”

I hack into the cake with more force than necessary. “Yeah?”

“Take a deep breath.”

“Why?” I slap the cake onto a paper plate, where it lands with a heavy thump. “Fork. I need a fork, and probably a napkin. Where are the napkins?”

“You need to calm down. He’s just a normal guy who happens to have an unusual job.” Her serene voice has an instant effect on me. I’m like one of Pavlov’s dogs, only instead of salivating at the sound of a bell, my heart rate drops at the sound of my mother’s voice. I’m so lucky I have her.

I take a deep breath. She’s right. He’s just a normal guy. Why am I acting like this?

You know why.

“I think I like him, Mom.” There is nothing filtering my thoughts before they leave my mouth tonight, which is going to be problematic.

“I’m sure you do.” She tosses her braids over her shoulders and pulls a glass down from the cupboard, filling it with milk. “One phone call with the man and I’m half in love with him myself,” she adds with a laugh.

“But it’s more than that. I mean, yeah he’s charming. He’s rich. Handsome” — my mother’s eyes widen and she makes a sound like a deflating balloon; even she isn’t immune to his appeal — “But I’m drawn to who he is as a person. He’s fun. Spontaneous. Thoughtful. He’s not what I thought he’d be.” I swipe a big fingerful of fudge frosting from the edge of the cake platter and lick it off. Chocolate will help.

“And you’re his daughter’s nanny.”

“Thanks, Mom.” She has never been one to mince words, which has its pros and cons. I usually appreciate her frankness, and I needed that reminder tonight, as much as I don’t want it. “I know nothing can happen, or will happen. I think that’s why I’m so nervous. I have all of these thoughts and feelings that have nowhere to go.”

She drags her finger through the chocolate frosting on the cake plate, joining me. “Then you need to talk about them, because if you don’t they’ll come out eventually. You’re like a shaken can of soda. It’s got to go somewhere. You just need to prepare for it. Choose the where and when.”

“Over the sink?” That’s where I would open a shaken can of soda.

“Yeah. Who’s your ‘over the sink’ person you can share these feelings with so they don’t explode all over Anders Beck?”

“I think we’re pushing this metaphor now.” I say, feeling squirmy.

“You know what I mean.”

I think for a second. “It’s you. Mercer. Indie. Joe. ”

She smiles. “See? You have plenty of people you can share with. Be smart with Anders. As much as I love to tease you about breaking the rules—and your need for waffles —no one can afford for this situation to go sideways.” She’s right. A lot of things hinge on this shoot going well. She smacks my bottom. “Now take that handsome man some birthday cake.” She hands me the glass of milk with a plastic fork. This is all so simple compared to the treatment he must be accustomed to, but I’ve never heard anyone complain about Sarah Pratt’s fudge birthday cake.

I stab the fork into the cake like it's a flag on the moon and hold my head high. I've got this.

When we step back onto the patio, there's a new face at the table. Eric has taken my seat next to Anders and he's telling a story about a hike he did with Lauren Holly when she was a guest at our resort a few years ago. I guess he thinks since Lauren Holly and Anders are in the same line of work, they'd know each other?

I slide the plate onto the table in front of Anders, placing the glass of milk off to the side. He pops his dimple at the sight of the chocolate cake. It's a far cry from mung beans and tofu. Pulling a spare chair up the table, I wedge myself next to Indie, who gives me a knowing smirk. She's been on the receiving end of Eric's stories more than once.

"Sunny!" Eric rounds the table and throws his toned arms around me. He's always been a huggy guy. "Happy birthday, gorgeous! I got something for you."

He pulls an envelope out of his back pocket and passes it to me. It's bent and warm from being sat on.

"Thanks, Eric! You didn't have to get me anything." He really didn't. We're friends, but we're not birthday gift friends. We're certainly not butt-warmed-envelope friends. My face burns under the gaze of the people around the table—well, one person in particular. When I peek at him over the envelope, he's not smiling like I expect. His brow is furrowed in a way I've only seen in movies .

I question him with my eyes and he pastes a phony half smile onto his mouth, taking a large bite of chocolate cake. Sliding my finger under the flap to open the envelope, I unfold a sheet of paper. It's a printed screenshot for the purchase of two concert tickets. "Fleetwood Mac tribute band?"

“At Tuacahn!” Eric is smiling so big, I swear his tongue is going to loll out the side of his mouth like a golden retriever’s. “It’s going to be so sick!”

“Thank you?” That sounded bad. It’s an incredible gift. I heard about this concert and wanted to go—I’m a Fleetwood Mac girl, thanks to my mom’s influence—but I never got tickets because... life. And I love going to concerts at this amphitheater, nestled deep in a sheer sandstone canyon. I backpedal. “Thank you so much, Eric. This is really thoughtful.” But this feels like too much, and it’s two tickets. Is he coming with me? Is this a date? Can I give the second ticket to Mercer? Why did Eric put me in this position? I need more information.

Eric answers my nervous internal questioning when he says, “We can leave early and grab dinner. It’s Saturday night. I checked the filming schedule—you should be off the hook with babysitting early that day, right?”

My eyes dart to Imogen and Anders. His frown is back and aimed directly at Eric. I don’t want Anders or his daughter to feel like a burden. I’ve become fond of my days with Immy, and the side perk of hanging out in Anders’ suite, within sniffing distance of his cologne? That’s not bad either. Being bamboozled into a date under the guise of it being a birthday gift? Definitely not my thing.

“I’ll have to check with my boss.” I turn to face Imogen. “Hey boss, are you okay hanging out with your dad so I can go on a date with Eric on Saturday?”

She lifts her head off of Anders’ shoulder, and despite my joking tone, her mini scowl matches her dad’s. “I guess so. ”

Anders’ brow furrows at her response, but he’s silent. Maybe he isn’t okay with me being unavailable when he needs me? Well, he needs to learn to be okay with it. I had a whole life before he got here. No way am I allowing him to dictate how I spend my off hours. I don’t care if he’s used to having everything his way, or how sexy that

dimple is. He can put that thing away. And now I'm scowling.

Then, Anders' face relaxes and his frown disappears. He pastes on a smile, but there's something different about it. It looks off. And it occurs to me—he's acting. I would have never known it before this week, but this watered down smile isn't close to the real deal. I appreciate the effort, but it's too late. I'm still irked at him for being irked. We're caught in an irk pickle.

"Sounds like a fun time, Eric," Mercer says from her end of the table, sporting her standard conniving grin. I appreciate her attempt to lighten the mood that had started to turn sour. She reads me well.

"Yeah, it's going to be sweet. I've always wanted to take Sunny out."

He winks at me across the table, and I feel an inexplicable urge to dodge his flying wink. I don't want this kind of attention from him. Eric has dated just about everyone who works at the resort who is single and has two X chromosomes. I'm feeling like I'm at the bottom of the dating barrel, which isn't great. But he gave me a gift, so it's awkward.

"I'm looking forward to it. Thanks, Eric—"

I'm cut off by a crack of thunder so loud it makes me gasp. Then, several things happen in slow motion: Hairy dives under the table, tipping it sideways over her enormous, furry body. Playing cards scatter and plates slide across the table. Worst of all, Anders' cake and tall glass of milk spill all over his lap and Imogen. He bolts upright in the uproar, practically dumping Immy off his lap. Dishes clatter to the patio.

"Hairy!" Immy and Anders moan in unison.

The dog is curled into a giant, quivering donut under the table. Clearly she is not a fan of our spur-of-the-moment desert thunderstorms. Another crash of thunder echoes through the distant canyon and she whines like she can read my angry thoughts.

“Here. I have something you can change into, Immy.” My mother reaches out a hand to Imogen, who is drenched in whole milk. “Follow us. I’ll show you where you can get cleaned up,” she says with an apologetic look to Anders.

My mother takes them through the back door and I’m left with Clifford the Big Red Doofus shaking at my feet. What a mess.

“Hairy is freaking out. Let me put her inside, then we can clean up,” I tell my sisters. It’s hard not to slip into eldest sister mode in times of chaos. “Come on, Hairy.” I call her with a click of my tongue.

She ignores me. She’s a trembling ball of fur and anxiety, cowering under the table. “Hairy, come on. Let’s go.” Fat rain drops plop on the table and my hair. “Hairy,” I whine, tugging her pink collar. She won’t budge. I am Sisyphus and this mongrel is my boulder.

Rain is pelting all of us now. My sisters, plus Joe and Eric, scramble to gather the soggy cake dishes and ruined cards. The storm can wash away the milk. I have to get this dog—who is completely dry, thanks to the table—into the house before I’m drenched.

The downpour feels like someone opened a big, heavenly spigot to full blast. It’s pooling on the table top and in between my sandaled toes. “Hairy. Now,” I snap over the roar of the storm, in a tone usually reserved for exorcizing demons.

Finally, the dog bolts from under the table and into the back door, smacking the glass so hard I’m surprised it doesn’t crack the pane. I twist the knob and she barges past

me into the house.

“Geez, Hairy!” I holler after her. She shoves under my mom’s long, rectangular dining table and curls back into her shaky donut. Poor scared, dumb dog. I shudder, turning back to the mess .

“It’s your birthday. We’ve got this,” Indie says, gesturing towards the house with her hands full of drooping paper plates. “Go dry off.”

I don’t need to be told twice. Shaking my head at Hairy, I march up the stairs, leaving a soggy trail on the carpet behind me. I’m eager for my gray sweatpants that have the name of my old college running down one leg in block letters. I know those holey things are here somewhere.

I barge into my room and jolt when I spot Anders standing in my closet. What in tarnation is he doing here?! His big arms are crossed and he’s grinning like he’s watching an old episode of The Office with my dresses and blouses.

“Anders?”

He pivots toward me, smirking like I didn’t just catch him snooping in my childhood bedroom. “Well, well, well,” he says in his slow baritone that makes my breath hitch. A strobe of lightning and a simultaneous thunderclap make his words menacing.

“What?” I inch into the room. The man is like a black hole—constantly pulling me in, and the mystery of what will happen to me when I get inside is as terrifying as it is exciting. But I have to know what’s in there. I’m allowing myself to be drawn in, fully aware that this can only end in disaster.

He doesn’t respond, but when I finally reach him, he nods toward a gap in my hanging clothing. There, hanging on the wall between two dresses that I bought in

high school, is my worst nightmare.

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I love the blush that blooms on her cheeks when Sunny joins me in the closet. I know technically I'm the guilty party here. Sunny caught me skulking around in her closet, after all. But I can't help it. Teasing her is as close to flirting as I'm legally allowed, and this discovery is a gold mine.

I just found a poster of Micah Watson plastered on the wall in Sunny's closet.

It's not a wholesome poster, either. It's from the early days of our first series—one of those sweaty, bare-chested shots that we were compelled to pose for before either of us knew we had the power to say no. It's all oiled-up muscles, low-slung jeans, and bedroom eyes that would make my brothers gang up on me. And they have ganged up on me for stuff like this.

The poster itself makes me uncomfortable. Coming face-to-pectorals with Micah in Sunny's closet was a jump-scare, for sure. But it also brought back the feelings that surfaced out on the patio a few minutes ago when that goofball Eric showed up: Possessiveness, jealousy, and a dash of irritation. I know I'm not entitled to any of those feelings, so I'm stuffing them deep and covering them up with a heavy layer of flirtatious teasing. My reasons for coming into Sunny's room were innocent, at least.

Geez, you can't even think that with a straight face, Anders.

Okay, I wanted to snoop. There, I owned it.

Sunny steps next to me and her gaze follows mine. I can't stop watching her. Tendrils of her dark hair have escaped her messy bun and are resting on her pink cheeks. I can smell her lemon Skittles smell. We're way too close to each other in this tiny closet.

When she finally tracks the thing that grabbed my attention—the scandalous, sweaty artistic masterpiece featuring my co-worker—she laughs so loud that the sound of it fills the small space. Not the reaction I expected. I’m relieved, but sort of confused.

She’s out of breath when she says, “Oh, that? I forgot that was there. Mercer put it up as a joke during our senior year. Don’t read too much into it, buddy.” She tucks her loose hair back into her bun, like brushing off men is a daily affair for her. Maybe it is.

But then she gasps and mutters an old-timey curse that startles a laugh out of me. She pulls the door shut behind us so fast it makes her clothes flutter in the wind it creates.

“What—”

“Shh!”

“Okay, I haven’t been shushed in about twenty years,” I say at full volume.

“Then you’re overdue,” she sasses under her breath. Her wide, brown eyes blink up at me behind her glasses. We are really close now that the door is closed.

“Why did you shut us in here?” I can feel myself smirking down at her. I wish I could stop it, but I want to do a lot more than smile at her. Look at me, exerting self-control.

“My mom. I heard her coming. I’m not allowed to have boys up here,” she hisses in a rush .

Now I’m really chuckling. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to get you in trouble. Let me just jump on my bike and head back to the middle school. I’ll see you in P.E.”

“My mom has rules, wisenheimer. Strict rules.” She shoves my chest playfully.

“She’s old fashioned.”

I snatch her hand and hold it in place. She isn’t going anywhere with that sassy mouth. “Then she must hate your taste in wall art.”

Her breaths are short and shallow, and her pink lips part when she gazes up at me. “I wouldn’t blame her. Micah and his oiled-up, salacious body and those come-hither eyes,” she whispers, like anyone will hear us buried in this closet.

Something boils up inside of me at her words. I don’t like this one bit, but I just shake my head. “The words you use, Sunflower,” I say through a sigh.

“You make me nervous. That’s when the nerd words come out.” Her small fingers curl around mine, making my heart jump.

“Why do I make you nervous?” I squeeze her fingers.

She squeezes back. “You don’t need to ask. You know.”

“You make me nervous, too.”

Her dark brown eyes widen. She licks her bottom lip, and it juts into a pout. She is trying to kill me. “Malarkey,” she whispers.

Deceased . I am deceased.

I inch toward her until my chest presses against her, our clasped hands the only thing between us. “You and your scandalous glasses, geriatric vocabulary, and... kissable lips.”

She sucks in a breath and her dark eyes bore into mine. “ Anders .” The word is

barely audible.

Blink once if you want me to kiss you.

She blinks.

I don't have to be told twice.

I cover her lips with mine and she squeaks—just a tiny squeak, like I surprised her—then she melts against me. I grab her hip with my free hand and pull her even closer. Her clothes are kind of soaked, and I'm warming her up. Doing my duty. She whimpers against my mouth and the sound undoes me. She is way too innocent, way too good, for someone like me.

What are you doing, Anders?

We can't do this. I'm going to ruin everything. It kills me, but I draw back.

My movement does something to Sunny. One of her hands winds into my hair and the other makes a fist in my t-shirt and she pulls me to her like I'm in trouble. And I am. Her kisses are wild and urgent now, and I'm having a hard time remembering why I started to back away. Her lips are so soft. She feels right. How can something this good ruin anything?

I'm giving in.

She must sense my surrender, because cautious, demure Sunny is gone. This new, crazed version of her yanks me deeper into the closet until we tumble into the wall, surrounded by her dresses and the smell of her perfume. I find the soft spot under her jaw and kiss a line down her throat. She shudders, pulling me closer with the hand that is tangled in my hair.

“I haven’t given you your birthday gift,” I mumble against her skin between kisses—my weak effort at distraction.

I feel her laugh under my lips more than hear it. “Is that not what this is?” Her fingers stroke through the hair at the base of my neck, sending chills down my arms.

Focus, Anders. “Nope. I have something fun for you. Two things, actually.”

Her lips find my earlobe. “This is fun.” Her sigh tickles my hair.

Okay, this has to stop. I can handle uptight, librarian Sunny. Holding her off was painful, but possible. Manageable. But kiss-crazed, wild Sunny? I am powerless against her. I’m losing control of myself, and that’s more dangerous than anything. I have to do something.

“Can I give it to you? ”

“You didn’t need to do anything.” She sighs against my neck.

I pull away, holding her at arm’s length for safety. Her innocent eyes are killing me, half-lidded and staring up behind her glasses. She’s still breathing heavily, and it makes me want to steal her breath some more.

I shake my head to clear it. “One of the things is outside, but I have one right here.”

“Ooo, outside gift and inside gift,” her velvety voice murmurs. She is absolutely not the same woman who blushed over this bare-chested poster five minutes ago. “Inside gift first.”

I wrangle my phone out of my back pocket and my stomach lurches when I see that the screen is bright. Apparently, I’m four minutes and seventeen seconds into a phone

call—with Oliver. Dang .

I jam my finger onto the little red phone icon to end the call. The phone buzzes in my hand immediately. It's Oliver calling, of course. That'll be a fun conversation we can have later. I swipe to reject the call and open my browser to find her gift.

Meanwhile, she drags her fingers down my forearms, tracing invisible lines and making me lose my mind. Wild Sunny is dangerous.

“You can't do that.” I shake my head. My fingers stumble over my phone screen, making a mess of what I'm trying to do.

“Why not?” She isn't stopping.

“Because I'll do something stupid and get us both in trouble. And you'll never get your birthday gifts.” I hold her hand in place over my wrist.

“You're right. We better do the outside gift first, then. I can't make any guarantees about my behavior. I need some fresh air.” She sighs. “And a slap in the face,” she adds, under her breath.

I chuckle. Her hair is messy, and her lips are swollen. I'm loving this unhinged version of her. I straighten her glasses. “Who could blame you” — I gesture toward my body — “when you're faced with all of this? ”

She shoves my shoulder. “All right, that does it. Get out of my closet, Anders Beck.”

She reaches for the knob, but the door doesn't budge. She rattles the handle, but still nothing.

“Oh crap. Crappity, crap, crap,” she grinds out, twisting the knob. It turns, but the

door won't open. She rattles and shakes the thing. No dice. "Crap on a cracker."

I'm not the smartest man, but I sense that this is the wrong moment to laugh. "Locked?"

"Yep. The stupid thing always sticks from this side. I can't believe I forgot." Her head drops in defeat. "We need to call someone to come let us out. Ugh."

"I think I'd rather take off the doorknob than do that. You have a screwdriver or something?"

"Do I look like someone who keeps a screwdriver on her person?"

This time I do laugh, but I try to soften the blow by kissing the back of her hand. She's kind of irresistible. "Okay. Who's the least embarrassing person we can call?"

She taps her index finger on her chin and her eyes flit to the ceiling. "My mom, I guess."

"Nope. Next." Like I need her no-boys-allowed mom grilling me. Sarah seems nice, but I'd like to start out on her good side.

"I'm serious." She holds a hand out for my phone. "The others will tease me without mercy. They're also rats, so they'll wait to do it when you're not around." She types the number and presses the phone to her ear.

We wait in silence while the phone rings, but the call goes to voicemail. "She's not answering. Maybe... Mercer? Or Indie? Indie would probably pick up."

I shrug. "Whatever it takes to get us out of this closet."

Indie picks up, and after some solid teasing and laughter, promises to come open the door. She's definitely letting us sweat it out in here, because no less than eight minutes later we hear footsteps on the stairs—a lot of footsteps. It sounds like Indie invited a herd of cows into Sunny's bedroom. Awesome. There are a lot of whispering and hushed giggles coming through the door. The knob rattles and the door swings open.

On the other side of the door, Sunny's room is crowded with her entire family—Indie, Joe, Sarah, Willow, Sage, Goldie, Mercer, with Imogen holding Sarah's hand. Her face says she is excited to catch her dad doing something silly. It's a lot of bodies in a tiny bedroom, and every one of them is grinning at us.

“Well, well, well,” Mercer crows, in a tone that sounds eerily similar to mine. If I didn't know my parents so well, I'd swear we share DNA.

The rest of the family is chuckling and dishing out pot shots over the top of each other. My face is on fire. I can't even look at Sarah. I can't handle another disappointed mother in my life. I would pose for a horde of paparazzi in my boxer shorts over this. Why do I feel so exposed?

A quiet, forgotten voice in the back of my mind answers, You're being your old self again .

Nuh-uh , I tell the voice. We were just fooling around in here. It's no big deal. Nothing serious. Never serious.

Exactly , the voice taunts.

No. This is different. She's not just a pretty face—a distractingly pretty face. She's more.

But are you really taking her to meet your family, Indiana Jones? the voice goads, sounding an awful lot like Oliver. Great, now he's worming into my subconscious.

"Mind your beeswax!" I spit out. Audibly. Using my idiot vocal chords.

Every face swings my direction and I laugh, like I wasn't just having a conversation with myself that ended in an argument. Mind your beeswax?! Sunny's old lady-isms are rubbing off on me .

I push out a dramatic sigh. "Not you. Me. Being locked in a closet messes with a guy's head." I chuckle. "Anyway, who wants to see what I brought for Sunny's birthday?"

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

I am freaking out. No one would know, because I'm laughing and following my family down the stairs like it's any other day.

But it's not any other day.

I just spent ten luscious, toe-curling minutes making out with Anders Beck in my closet. What is this dreamy parallel universe I've slipped into? For the record, the man kisses like it's a competitive sport and he's the world champion. It was just... heaven. Until my family caught us. I will be teased about this until the end of time. Mercer definitely clocked my beard-burned cheeks and pointed it out in her less-than-subtle way. I'm trying to be cool and it's not going well. What's new?

Anders leads us through the front door, toward my mother's circular driveway. I'm bringing up the rear with Imogen, whose tiny hand found mine on our way down the stairs. I just speed-changed into my favorite old sweatpants, so I'm glad the downpour has stopped for now—though it left the air sweet with the smell of wet earth and creosote. Storms in the desert can be unpredictable, but this one felt like the universe's way of pushing me into a closet with Anders, like a little birthday gift from above. I can't stop smiling about it .

At the end of the driveway, behind my siblings' line of cars, a bubble gum pink Jeep catches my eye. Anders leads us in that direction.

"Jeeping Beauty!" Imogen squeals, dragging me toward the Jeep. "Dad! How did it get here?"

"I had James bring it from home for you and Sunny to drive." Anders grins at me.

“This gift is just a loaner, but I thought it would be a lot more fun for you and Immy than the barbiturate-with-wheels you've been riding around in.”

Imogen is bubbling with excitement. “Yeah, our Jeep is so fun. We take her in the mountains by our house when my dad doesn’t have to work. She’s mine. My dad named her Jeeping Beauty ‘cause he tells me I’m Sleeping Beauty. Get it?” — she drags in a huge breath — “And ‘cause it’s pink.”

“That’s a good name.” I smile down at her.

Now that I’m standing closer, I spot the words “Jeeping Beauty” painted on the fender in scrolling cursive, barely visible in the dark. I don’t know anything about these vehicles, but I can tell this one is older and has been well restored. The paint is custom and shiny, the tires are big and knobby, and it doesn’t have a cover. Top? Whatever you call the part that keeps the wind from destroying your hair—this Jeep doesn’t have it.

Anders says under his breath, “It was either this, or a purple Jeep named Rapunzel. I prefer the pink.”

It’s hard to tell in the dim light, but I think he’s blushing. While my family circles the vehicle, peeking inside and gushing about this over-the-top gift, Anders stands close to me—probably too close—and murmurs, “So... I gotta be honest. Immy told me you said your life is boring.” He holds his hands up in surrender at my glare. “Her word. This isn’t a big deal, I just wanted to give you some fun.” He scuffs his shoes across the gravel at our feet. Is he nervous? “So, what do you think? Fun? ”

This Jeep is a lot of things—impractical, loud, conspicuous, and likely gas-guzzling. It doesn’t look like me. My environmentally-friendly, top safety rated sedan looks like me, but maybe I don’t want it to. I want to have fun. Maybe I should drive a vehicle that looks like it belongs to someone who has played Seven Minutes in

Heaven with a celebrity. My heart skips at the thought.

“I. Love. It. Can we take it out now?” I’m bobbing in my flip flops when I ask. I don’t recognize myself.

Anders chuckles. “Hop in.” He turns to my mom, “We’re going to go out for a little birthday ride. Would you mind keeping an eye on Hairy for us?”

“Sure thing. Have fun, you two. Don’t stay out too late.”

I can tell from her tone that we’ll be having a long conversation later. I cringe, thinking about how I’ll explain the closet incident. Oh well. That’s tomorrow’s problem. It’s still my birthday, and tonight is for Jeeping. I’m not sure that’s a word, but I’m making it one. Anders helps Imogen climb into the back, where a special seat is already strapped in place for her. While he buckles her in, I make crazy eyes at my family and wave goodbye.

I taunt in mock-whisper, “See ya, suckers! I’m going Jeeping with Anders Beck!”

Mercer groans. “You’re a scumbag. Details. I’m getting all of the details tonight when you get home.”

“Ugh! What is your life right now?” Goldie whines.

My other sisters are silent behind their Chesire grins.

“Be safe,” Joe says, with a look to Anders. “Be careful with her—” He is cut off by Indie, who hooks an arm around his neck and leans up to his ear. He looks none too pleased with whatever she says, but it silences him. Man, am I grateful to have her on my side.

My family wanders back toward the house as I make my way to the passenger door—well, there is no door, it's more like a passenger opening. Or portal. I'm about to climb through the passenger portal when Anders slides in front of me, hoisting himself into the seat before I can.

“You're driving,” he orders.

I climb through the driver's side portal, buckle in, and turn the key in the ignition. My foot is on the brake and my shaky hand is on the gearshift when I realize I've overlooked something critical.

“This thing is a manual?”

“Of course.”

“I—” I fiddle with the thing. “I don't know how to drive one of these.”

“Oh.” His mouth twists to the side in thought. “I'll teach you real quick. No biggie.”

I appreciate that almost everything is “no biggie” to this man—no problem is too impossible and no mountain unclimbable. It makes me feel like I can do the things that scare me. I also wonder something: Am I standing in my own way sometimes? If I tried Anders' method of assuming everything will work out and life will be easy, maybe it will? Maybe instead of assuming worst case scenarios, I can consider what's the best that can happen? But... if I don't catastrophize, I'll be unprepared for those eventualities. Catastrophizing is a tough job, but someone has to do it. I shove these thoughts in a mental box to examine later.

Anders clears his throat, dragging me back to the present.

I smile, nervous but willing to try his way of living—at least in this small way.

“Okay. What do I do?”

He gives me a quick rundown of how to drive a stick shift and I try my hardest to concentrate. I’m sitting in the driver’s seat of Anders Beck’s Jeep, after all. It’s asking a lot.

But he helps me through the tricky parts, Immy giggles every time I stall the engine, and twenty minutes later we’re roaring through the open desert with the rain-scented wind whipping through our hair. Anders’ deep voice gently reminds me when to let off the gas, push the clutch, and shift gears until I mostly have the hang of it. Immy zonks out quickly in the back seat, so I don’t feel too bad keeping her out late.

We’re at a four-way stop in the middle of nowhere, with sagebrush on every side, and I’m feeling proud of the fact that I downshifted and stopped without incident. I send up a silent prayer of gratitude for a compassionate transmission, braided hair, and my charmed life in general.

“What are you doing?” Anders asks through a laugh.

“Stopping?”

“Why?”

“Because it’s a four-way stop?”

“We’ll be abducted by aliens before we see another car out here.”

“It’s the law,” I scoff. I’m feeling like a mega-nerd at the moment, but I hate losing a debate more than I hate being a nerd. In fact, I’m leaning into it. I push my glasses up my nose to complete the effect. I take my foot off the brake and slowly release the clutch. We’re rolling, but then I press the gas pedal a hair too fast and the Jeep

shudders.

“Criminy, Jeeping Beauty,” I mutter. “You big, pink drama queen.” Eventually, we lurch through the intersection, barely avoiding a stalled engine. Poor Jeeping Beauty. She doesn’t deserve this abuse.

Anders just smiles and drapes his big arm around the back of my seat. Then I feel his fingers sliding through the loose hair at the nape of my neck. “I kinda like you, Sunflower,” he murmurs so quietly, I’m not sure whether I heard him right. His warm hand rests around the back of my neck, and the weight of it is the perfect mixture of comforting and exciting. His strong fingers softly knead the tense muscles there and I realize, this is the best birthday I will ever have. Nothing can ever top this.

We drive aimlessly for miles, down back roads, past the reservoir where the air turns chilly, and around the red sandstone cliffs that overlook my tiny town. Anders and I talk about everything— movies and TV shows, our high school years, our families, past boyfriends and girlfriends. This part of the conversation is an eye-opener. I laugh out loud when Anders tells me he rarely dates and hasn’t had a girlfriend since his divorce.

He shakes his head. “As far as the general public knows, Anders Beck has a different woman on his arm every week. I’m still typecast as a womanizer because in the early days of my career, that’s exactly what I was. But Cassidy motivated me to get clean. Healing from my brief, but toxic, relationship with her has led to me dating the way you drive—safe, slow, and within very specific parameters.” I can hear his grin in his voice.

“That makes sense.” I don’t care that he’s insulted my driving because he’s not wrong. It only takes one terrible accident to make a gal hypervigilant on the road. It sounds like the same principle holds true in Anders’ relationships.

He continues, “Ollie has taken it upon himself to make sure I stay sober, but he arranges one-off dates for publicity. We let the public think what they need to think about me to sell the roles I play, but hopefully all of that will end soon. That’s a big reason I need this current project to go well. But yeah, I rarely date anymore—it’s too dangerous.” He drags his thumb across the back of my neck, sending a shiver down to my toes.

I have to agree. The man is dangerous.

He goes on. “I’ve made too many mistakes with too many women, so I’ve been in recovery... Until...”

Oh, he is finishing that sentence. “Until what?” I prod.

“Until you. I can’t help myself with you.”

“I was in that closet, too. It takes two.” I won’t let him take all of the blame for this.

He groans, running a hand down his face. “Okay, tell me about your favorite music now.”

Our conversation moves to lighter topics, and I’m surprised by how much we have in common. We agree that cereal is the superior snack, although we bicker about the best brand. Anders really is a Captain Crunch Berries guy, but the correct answer is Quaker Oatmeal Squares. Midway through the cereal discussion, his hand moves from massaging my neck to my knee and I almost squeal with joy.

Now we’re losing our breath, laughing and imitating Oliver as Darth Vader, when I check Immy in the rear-view mirror. She’s slumped against the side of her seat, deeply asleep. I love the way her mouth hangs open when she’s really out like this.

“She’s still asleep,” I say with a gesture to the back seat. “We should probably take her home.”

He sighs. “I guess we should.”

“Okay.” I drag out the word and ease my foot off the gas pedal. I’m in no rush.

I catch Anders’ smirk in my periphery. He squeezes my knee and something about the gesture feels like reassurance. The night is over, but this isn’t over. We drive back to the resort in silence, except for the sounds of the Jeep shifting gears and Anders calling my mother to ask her to dog-sit Hairy for the night.

We park next to the pathway that leads to the suite and I turn off the Jeep. “This was...” I bite my lip. I can’t say everything I’m thinking; any sane man would run for the hills. But I have to say something. “You’ve made this the best birthday I’ve ever had. Thank you.”

His eyes are dark in the moonlight, but I feel them on me. His voice is low. “It isn’t over.” His hand moves to mine and he laces our fingers together. “I still have another gift for you, remember?”

I gasp. “Oooo! The inside gift! I forgot!” I unbuckle my seatbelt.

“Not so fast,” he whispers. “Let’s do it here. I don’t think we should go inside.”

“Why not? Isn’t it an inside gift?”

He chuckles. “The Jeep was the outside gift. This other thing can be an anywhere gift, really. ”

I reach over and unbuckle his seat belt. “Okay, then. I choose inside.”

He squeezes my fingers. “I think you and I should probably stay outside where it’s safe...” He trails off, his eyes searching mine.

“Safe?” I’m not following.

“Safe.” His eyes are intense. There’s some hidden meaning here that I’m not picking up on. He sighs at my lost expression. “Sunny,” he groans in that husky voice of his.

“What?” Why is it safer out here? What am I missing? If anything, we’re ten times safer inside than we are in this conspicuous Jeep. As fun as it is, it’s a terrible option for someone trying to protect his daughter’s privacy. Hopefully the locals don’t put two and two together.

He throws his hands up, obviously exasperated. He lets out a long breath and searches my eyes for something. Then, he cups my cheek with his large hand. He’s still searching my face. He’s asking a question with no words.

“Sunny.” His thumb strokes a long, slow line across cheek and back. “I need to get my head on straight.”

Oh?

Oh .

Wow, I’m slow tonight.

Blood rushes to my cheeks as his meaning finally registers. I’m embarrassed that it took me so long to catch up, but it’s just so unbelievable that Anders would need to get his head on straight around me. This can’t be real.

I slide my glasses back into place, “Okay. Let’s do it right here, then.” I hate how

breathy my voice sounds.

Anders growls and gently covers my mouth with his hand. “Just... please. Don’t say anything else. Give me a second.” He wrestles his phone out of his pocket and types a bunch of things. “Okay. Look at this. ”

He passes his phone to me and the screen is open to a website for a huge... hotel? “What am I looking at?”

“This is your other birthday gift. There’s a short—super short—break in filming the weekend after next and I thought it would be fun for you to try out this place. It’s supposed to be good. I booked a two-night stay for you and a friend.” He scrubs his hand through his hair. “You deserve it after everything you’ve done for Immy and me.”

“Um... this is way too much, Anders.” I scan the screen. “Wait. It’s in Minnesota? I have work to do here, and a resort to run. I can’t go to Minnesota.”

He chuckles. “Of course you can. I’ll have Immy. You have the weekend off. And the best part? I’m flying you there. I have a plane,” he announces with a waggle of his eyebrows, like he’s a little boy bragging about his bike.

A plane ride, a weekend away when we have a resort full of influential people, traveling with Anders Beck. My mind is a whirlwind of worries and happy possibilities. I’m trying not to think of the worst-case-scenario reasons why I shouldn’t galavant to Minnesota with this man.

Ultimately, his pride and excitement over this gift is contagious. The reality that I get to fly for the first time in my life, and with Anders, sinks in. I practically dive into the passenger seat and throw my arms around his neck before I think about what I’m doing.

“Oof,” he says into my hair. “Is this a yes?”

“Uh-huh,” I say into the fabric of his shirt, with a long, greedy inhale of his cologne.

“Thank you, Anders. You kind of overdid it.”

His warm arms tighten around my back. “It’s not close to enough for the woman taking care of my children.”

“Child.”

“Don’t forget Hairy.” His hand rubs a line from my shoulders to my waist, where his fingers stop and press into my t-shirt .

“For Hairy, you owe me a month in Bora Bora.” I shift closer. I’m dying to feel his beard scratch the soft skin on my neck again. I should probably get out of this Jeep.

“Done,” he murmurs, his hands still pressing tight on my back. “Now, I’m taking Imogen inside. We’re all going to get some good sleep and stay out of trouble.” His stern tone would be laughable if it wasn’t so sexy.

I sigh, disentangling myself from our hug. “Probably a good idea.”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

“Go,” Christopher says nonchalantly. He isn’t an “Action!” guy. When it’s time to shoot we get a simple “go” that we won’t hear if we aren’t listening. It forces everyone to pay attention, I guess. Smart man.

At Christopher’s quiet word, I pull on my metaphorical Paul Jamison mask and run. And run, and run, and run. This character is constantly running. It’s a risk you take as an actor, choosing a role in an action movie. There will be cardio. This is the four thousandth take of this shot and I’m near death. How many angles does Christopher need of us barrelling through the desert? By my count, about four thousand.

My co-star is barely breaking a sweat. I swear the guy’s a machine. We reach our marks and skid to a halt. Micah yanks my arm to drag me to a halt.

“Here!” he yells, his breath heavy in my ear.

I pause.

“Cut.” Christopher says from his place on the truck.

I’m heaving for breath, but my shoulders relax. That was it. I can feel it. It’s been a grueling day, but I think we finally have it and I can go back to my suite. I grin without thinking .

It’s Sunny time.

“That’ll do. Good work, everyone.” Everyone starts to gather their things and wrap up the day, but Christopher straightens the weathered baseball cap on his head. Uh

oh. That's a move I recognize.

"Anders, let's talk." He doesn't sound pleased.

Micah's assistant passes him a white towel and he uses it to mop his dry forehead. "Anders Beck to the principal's office," he whines, mimicking an old-timey school secretary. He passes the towel back to Frankie without a thank you. "I heard about Sunday night."

"Thanks, Frankie," I say to his assistant. Someone should acknowledge her. She's been graceful in response to Micah's thankless dismissal since day one.

Frankie walks off in the direction of Micah's waiting golf cart and I turn to my co-star. "Please don't comment on my personal life. Let's focus on work."

One side of his mouth hitches up in a sardonic smile. "Are you capable of that?"

I count backwards from ten. The audacity of this guy. I've been here. I'm giving one hundred percent without complaint, which is more than I can say for him. And besides being seriously dehydrated and coated in a thick layer of sand and sweat, I probably developed stress fractures in my legs from what we did today.

"Care to clarify?" I ask. My calm tone does not match the irritation I'm feeling.

Before he can answer, Christopher shouts from the bed of the truck he's been working from. "Anders. Let's go."

"Have fun in detention," Micah sing-songs as I walk away.

How many days left in this shoot? I've had difficult co-workers who come and go—active addicts, lazy bums, perfectionists, the full range—but Micah is like a

permanent rock inside my shoe. I try to shake off the annoyance as I reach Christopher and hop onto the flatbed truck.

“What’s up? ”

Christopher pulls off his ratty cap and curls the bill in his hands before tugging it back onto his head. “Something is off with you today.”

“How so?” I don’t mean to sound like a snarky, punk kid, but I am beat. I’ve literally been running all day. I don’t know what more I could have given.

“I don’t know. You’re here, I get it. You’re putting in the time.” He blows out a long sigh and props his fists on his hips. “But you’re not here here. The magic whatever that makes you Anders Beck is missing. You’ve been counting down the minutes all day long.”

I think back on the work I’ve done with Micah and can’t disagree. I’m not going to throw him under the bus, though, no matter how much I want to. He’s nailing his part. It shouldn’t matter that I’m daydreaming about punching his throat.

Then there’s the matter of Sunny Pratt. I haven’t texted her, even though I want to. I haven’t called her, even though I can think of at least ten valid reasons to dial her number. I have compartmentalized the nanny into a mental box all day like the professional that I am. I’ve only opened that box... a few dozen times. Okay, maybe I’ve been kind of distracted. Sunny has been on my mind constantly. It’s just that I only have so much time with her...

“I’m sorry, Chris.” And I really am. I want to do my best work. This isn’t me. Well, it is, but I’m determined to do better. “I’ll get my head in the game.”

“Yeah, about that. I talked to Oliver.”

“Oliver called you?” That guy better not have taken his issues to Christopher. He’s a pain in the behind, but he’s always kept this stuff between us. Yeah, I butt-dialed him in the middle of making out with Sunny. And yeah, he overheard stuff that’s probably giving him a brain aneurysm. But once I stop dodging him we can talk about this like adults. There’s no need to drag the director and producer into it.

“I called him. I’m concerned about your focus, and so is he.”

I want to be angry. I want to swear. I want to fire Oliver. But I know they’re both right, so I stay silent.

“I hear you’re starting something up with the nanny.”

I run a hand down my sweaty face. I need a shower, and a rewind button for life. “Yeah.” No point in hiding it.

“I can’t comment on your personal life. I will comment on the fact that we’re paying you enough that you should be capable of holding off on any distractions for a few months.” One of his assistants puts a tablet in front of him and he scribbles his signature. “That’s all I’m asking.”

“Yeah. Hearing you loud and clear, Christopher.”

“Good man.” He claps my shoulder. “No more clock-watching. See ya tomorrow.”

My eyes scan the desert for my ride—my rat manager-slash-best-friend should be here in a golf cart somewhere. I can’t get back to my suite fast enough.

“Yeah, I never want to get a call like that again, man,” Oliver gripes as we roll to a stop in front of my suite. It’s been a solid ten-minute lecture from him, and I’ve already heard it from Christopher. “I can’t unhear what I heard on Sunday night.” He

shudders. “And I could’ve done without the dressing down from Christopher.”

“I get it,” I snap.

“I don’t think you do,” he snarls. “It’s not only your job you’re messing up. Quit screwing around with the nanny.”

“That’s enough, Oliver,” I bark. “I’m doing my job. You do yours. And remember I’m paying you really well to do it.”

Instant regret. I hate that I just said that. Oliver is my friend and he means well, and reminding him that I provide his paycheck makes me feel like a grade A rump roast. I march into my suite cursing myself and my manager under my breath. I’ll have to call him later to apologize, after I’ve eaten something. I can tell I’m not myself.

When I push through the door, I’m greeted by a soft, slow Harry Styles song filtering from somewhere in the back of the suite. I stand in the dark entry taking deep breaths and willing my annoyance away before I slip off my shoes and wander toward the kitchen. The music is helping.

“Ladies?” I call out gently—I’ve learned Sunny doesn’t appreciate it when I sneak up on her—but no one responds except a crooning Harry Styles.

I turn the corner to the kitchen and find Sunny, her back turned to me, rocking Imogen, whose head is slumped on her shoulder. All forty-three pounds of her look like dead weight in Sunny’s arms. Her mouth is drooping open, with her twiggy legs loosely wrapped around Sunny’s waist. Sunny steps softly from side to side, humming the song close to Immy’s ear, her voice a half note off-key

Screw Oliver. Screw Christopher Marchant. And screw Indiana Jones.

I would stand in front of a train for these two.

I lean against the door jamb, cross my arms, and observe in silence. Sunny's hair is down today—straight, shiny, and longer than I thought. She's wearing a simple white t-shirt and a pair of jeans I've seen before. They're the ones that make her hips look extra squeezable. I bite the inside of my cheek. There's something stuck to Sunny's butt.

I'm trying—mostly trying—not to let my eyes linger on her back side. In my defense, I have to figure out what's stuck there. Anyone would. It's the friendly thing to do. The light is dim in here, but I squint and see that it's an oblong, white sticker printed with the word "Snack." It's adhered perfectly to the right side of her bottom like a label.

Well, that's appropriate .

I bite my cheek to hold in my laugh as my Snack rocks side to side, humming along with the slow song, while my daughter's feet dangle around her sides.

Not moving toward her is testing every last shred of my willpower. Then Sunny's humming turns to whisper-soft singing, and she leans her head on Immy's. How can I be expected to just stand here? I can't. I step toward the girls, wrapping my arms around both of them.

Sunny gasps lightly. "You're home," she whispers. Her smile is like an unfiltered ray of sunlight in this dark room.

My daughter's tiny body curls between us as we sway in time with Sunny. If Oliver asks, this isn't dancing. We're rocking Immy to sleep. Totally innocent. I run my thumb over her waist and nod. I can't say anything. Who knows what will come out of my mouth? Her lashes flutter closed and she sighs.

“We did a few fast songs. We slowed things down a little and she crashed,” she whispers with her eyes closed, swaying to the music. She won’t look up at me. “We should put her to bed.” She pulls away.

“Yeah.” I follow her into Imogen’s bedroom, folding the blankets and sheets down so Sunny can lay Immy in her bed.

We tuck the blankets into Immy’s sides, standing way too close to each other for this one-person job. Something is off in Sunny’s eyes—maybe longing or sadness—when she smooths the blankets around my daughter.

I follow Sunny out of the room and close the door softly behind us. She walks straight to the foyer and slides her feet into her sandals. My heart sinks.

“Where are you going?” Yes, desperation. That’s what women love, Anders.

“Home?” she says the word like a question.

Instead of an angel and a devil on my shoulder, there are a dozen voices in my head—Oliver, Christopher, Imogen, and even my mother. Everyone wants something different. Everyone is telling me what to do. I shake my head to clear it.

“Don’t go,” I say on an exhale. I’m begging her and I don’t care.

She sighs. “Oliver came over today.” Her tone is resigned.

She doesn’t need to tell me what he said, I only need to know how he said it. “Was he civil?” He better have been good to her, or I’ll be inventing a hundred ways to skewer him.

“Of course he was. Polite. Straightforward.” She frowns. “He reminded me what’s on

the line for you, and for me.”

“He wasn’t rude or threatening?”

She cocks her head to the side, like she’s remembering the conversation. “No. Just blunt. He reminded me to have boundaries with you. And he’s right—”

“I can’t.” I cut her off.

“Can’t what?” There’s hope in her brown eyes.

“Have boundaries with you.”

Now her eyes are tearing up. Not the response I wanted. “Anders...”

“You can’t say my name like that if you expect me to have boundaries with you.”

“Okay, then.” She sighs gustily, swiping at her wet eyes, then digs through her purse on the credenza. She produces a small spiral notebook and a pink pen with a big pom pom on top. “I want to be here. I love taking care of Immy. You need a nanny, no distractions, and for this film to do well. We both need this to work. We need rules.” She opens the notebook and positions the pen to write, like we’re going to do this right here in the foyer.

“Not sure how a rule is different from a boundary, but” — I chuckle — “fine. Let’s sit. We can talk this out and you can make as many rules as you want, Sunflower.”

“No, sir. I’ll stay right here. You are dangerous. In fact, I’ll go first.” She scribbles on the paper. “You aren’t allowed to call me Sunflower.”

When I look over her shoulder I see that she’s numbering this list of absurd rules.

“But your name is Sunflower—”

“Number two.” She’s writing like her pen has a lit fuse. “No more cologne or whatever it is that makes you smell like that.”

Oh yeah? Two can play at this game. “Gimme that.” I snatch the pen and notebook from her hands and scrawl out a rule of my own. She tries to peek before I’m done writing and I have to spin away from her. She’s fast, though. She swipes the book from my hands and turns away from me before I can stop her.

“No glasses? You expect me to be half blind until I’m done nannying Immy?”

I scoff. “Don’t you have contacts? Wear those.”

“Sometimes I can’t! My eyes get dry!” She yanks the pen away from me by the dumb pom pom. “Why do you have to wear cologne? Are you trying to get Micah’s attention?”

That’s a low blow, and she knows it. She knows I spend my day around men and she’s heard me muttering about Micah more than once. She knows the cologne has to be for her. I steal the pen back and jot down another rule that I don’t necessarily want to enforce. “That’s it! No more pencils in your hair! I’m disallowing hair pencils of any kind!”

She gasps in outrage, elbowing my arm and taking the pen. “Fine! Then you have to wear long sleeves. And gloves! Your arms and hands shall not be visible around me.” She’s gaining steam now, scribbling in the notebook with a scowl that I want to kiss off of her face. “And you’re not allowed to sing to Immy in my presence!”

“Pffft! When have I ever done that?”

“You haven’t, but she says you do that sometimes, and I will have none of it.” I swear I see smoke coming from the pen while she writes. Her handwriting is less legible with every rule.

I put my fists on my hips. “This is a list of nos. Gimme some yesses, Sun...ny.” Now that her given name is off limits, it’s all I want to call her. “What am I allowed to do around you? ”

Her lips twist to the side while she thinks. “Be as disgusting as possible.” She grins. “Really stink the place up. Also, you can call me Nanny Sunny. Be inconsiderate and self-absorbed. Forget to text me when you’re going to work late. Stuff like that.”

“No.” I’m not doing that. I give her my most stern look, and I see her melt—not the effect I intended. “But I have an idea.”

“O...kay?”

“We can text each other.” I’m looking forward to this. I’m excited, actually. “I promise, this will be good. It’ll force me to behave myself. Christopher will be happy. And I’ll still get...” I trail off. I can’t say what I’m thinking.

“You’ll still get...?” Her eyebrow quirks.

“I’ll still get time with you.” I take a step backwards. I can’t admit this when I’m standing too close to her. I lower my voice, in case Ollie has the place bugged. “The longer I know you, the more I feel like I need to be around you. You’re sort of addictive.”

Her cheeks turn rosy. “Addictive, huh? That doesn’t sound good.”

“It’s terrible.”

She pulls her phone out of her purse and swipes it open. “Okay. I’ll start.” She taps out a quick message. I’m not surprised that she has my number. Oliver gave it to her on day one. She’s just never used it until now, much to my dismay.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket. I fish it out and scramble to unlock it. Her updated contact name on my phone makes me grin.

SUNFLOWER

I better go home. Have a good night, Mr. Beck.

I shoot a quick, knee-jerk reaction text in return.

ANDERS

Stay

ANDERS

Please

ANDERS

We can watch a movie

ANDERS

or something

Great. I’m machine gun texting like my mom now. My pride has left the building. Sunny sighs and types her response. A second later my phone dings. She taps her toe

on the tile while I read her message.

SUNFLOWER

You are pushing these rules, sir.

I can't be upright for a minute longer. My body is completely drained. I sit on the tile and prop myself against the cool wall to type my response. I'm surprised when Sunny sits beside me, crossing her legs.

ANDERS

Mr. Beck. Sir. Why so fancy?

I catch her smirking in my periphery.

SUNFLOWER

Because you're fancy. And you're my boss, so...

ANDERS

Then I get to call you Sunflower.

While she reads the text I add another rule to our list—no calling me “Sir” or “Mr. Beck.”

She drops her phone on her lap. “You know, the point of these rules is to establish professional boundaries. ‘Sir’ and ‘Mr. Beck’ are both appropriate things to call you.”

“Then so is your legal name, Sunflower. ”

“It doesn’t even sound like a name,” she complains while I scratch her first rule off of the list. “Ugh. Sunny is good. When you call me Sunflower it sounds like a nickname. It sounds way too friendly for the nanny.”

I bump her leg with mine. “I hate that you think of yourself as the nanny.”

She laughs. “I am the nanny.”

My eyes dip to hers. “You’re so good to Imogen—so much better than just a nanny. And last night...” I shake my head. I can’t finish that sentence. Sunny left nanny territory last night, for sure. She is so much more. I wish I could say it. I type out a text instead.

ANDERS

You are so much more.

Oof. That’s a huge thing to admit. I might scare her away, but it’s honest. You get what you get with me—heart on the sleeve, guns blazing, zero-to-sixty. At least I forced myself to omit the heart-eyed, kissy face emoji. I watch her face as she reads my message. She doesn’t hate it. Her lips curl at the corners as she responds.

SUNFLOWER

You are bad news, Anders Beck. I need to leave before I do something un-nannyish.

Well, my curiosity is piqued. I can’t type fast enough.

ANDERS

LIKE WHAT SUNFL9WER???

I smash the send button, leaving my desperate message as-is, in its all-caps, misspelled glory .

Her phone buzzes and she scans the text. “Ugh!” She groans, pushing herself to stand. “You are so much trouble. I’m leaving before you get me fired or we ruin your career or both.”

She holds out a hand like she’s going to pull me to my feet. I take it, jump to a stand, and pull her to me in one swift motion. Wrapping my arms around her, I steal one more long, selfish hug. Oliver can deal.

“Good night, Anders,” she says into my neck. Her warm breath on my skin is torture. She pulls away, her eyebrows are furrowed and her mouth is drawn into a line. “That... we can’t be doing any more of that.”

I hold my fingers up in the Boy Scout salute. “Last one, I promise.”

Nothing can stop me from texting her two minutes after she walks out that door, though.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

“H oney, I’m home,” I grumble to Mercer as I walk in our front door. Anders just gave me one last hug. We said goodbye and I listened to sad Celine Dion love songs the whole drive home. Next, I’m having a pity party catered by my friends Ben and Jerry. I dump my bag on the floor and stomp into the kitchen.

“Geesh. Rough day?” she grunts, from what looks like an intense yoga pose in the middle of our living room. She’s wearing her holey, velvet track pants that read “Juicy” across the bottom and are at least fifteen years old. She found them in a thrift shop when we were in high school and has worn them consistently since. Her predictability is comforting.

“Something like that,” I call from the kitchen, digging through the freezer. There’s a half-eaten pint of chocolate fudge brownie ice cream in here somewhere. “I got busted for making out with Anders last night. Oliver gave me a talking to.”

I give up on my ice cream. It’s probably freezer burned by now, anyway. Defeated, I flop on the couch.

Mercer faceplants. “What?” she screeches, muffled by her yoga mat. She scrambles into a sitting position with her legs folded under her. “I mean, I figured you guys weren’t making friendship bracelets in your closet, but what ? And how in the heck did Oliver find out? I haven’t told anyone!” She holds up two fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

Geez, she looks like the female version of Anders right now. Not the reminder I needed. I scowl thinking of his Scout’s promise to stop hugging me.

“I think it’s like this,” I mumble, holding up three straight fingers. “Anyway, I guess Anders butt-dialed Oliver when we were...you know... and he heard it. A lot of it.” My face heats at the thought. I’ve been blushing about it off and on all afternoon, ever since Ollie came over at lunch and laid down the law.

Mercer cackles, standing. “No way! Talk about crummy luck.” She drops onto the cushion beside me. “Well? So?”

“So, what?” I hug one of our yellow throw pillows against my stomach.

“Ugh! What else? How was it? Making out with Anders Beck? How am I even asking this question? I’m offended you didn’t tell me about it the minute you got home last night.”

“Merce, you were dead asleep by the time I got home.” I wanted to talk to her, but anyone who prefers to keep their face attached to their skull lets Mercer sleep. “And to answer your question, it was... surreal. But it’s over. Oliver made sure I understood that nothing can happen between us, or it will essentially ruin Anders’ career.”

“Pffft.” She rolls her eyes. “Oliver is a tool. He better have given that same lecture to his boss.”

I nod. “Anders and I decided on some professional boundaries. Rules.”

She makes a fart noise in response. “That is lame.”

I have to agree. “Yeah, but we all need this movie to go well, right?” I’m talking myself into this, but I shouldn’t have to. This is huge for our resort. I honestly don’t know if we’re prepared to handle the publicity that will come from being used as a location for this movie. We’ve been busy enough since Indigo’s crazy social media

following discovered us. My brother's fiancée used our resort to hide out when she needed a break from the spotlight and it worked out very well for all involved. She found my brother and it put our resort on the map. That's how the location scouts found us. Now here we are, making out with movie stars in closets.

Mercer shrugs. "So, what are the rules? Did you run them past Oliver for approval?" She mimics his robotic tone with disdain I've never seen in her before. Mercer doesn't sugar coat anything and she'll tell you right away if you're being a doofus, but she doesn't just dislike people. My spidey senses are tingling.

"Um... what's your beef with Oliver?"

She jumps from the couch. "No beef." She's rolling up her yoga mat awfully fast.

"Mercer. What?" I know there's something.

She groans. "Nothing. He's just annoying. I've been helping Joe this week—"

"Thanks for that, by the way." She's taken over a lot of my work since I've been nannying Immy. We're playing musical chairs at the resort right now. There's too much to do and not enough of us to go around.

"It's fine. Anyway, Oliver is like a freaking mosquito in my ear. He's always looking for something or needs something and I'm like, dude , let me work." She tosses her yoga mat into our coat closet, it knocks something down and she slams the door before whatever it was can fall out. "Ya know?"

I grin. "Hmm."

"Shut up."

“The lady doth protest too much—” A throw pillow smashes into my face. I jump up to retaliate when my phone buzzes in my purse.

I hold up one hand to fend off my friend. “Oliver and Mercer Jones,” I sing-song, grabbing my bag from the floor. I dig for my phone, “Sounds good. Like your names belong together.” I swipe open my phone and see a text from Anders. A pillow ricochets off my head from Mercer’s direction, flopping onto the ashy fireplace grate

.

ANDERS

Did you make it home okay, Sunflower?

I squeal in my throat, holding the phone to my chest. “It’s him,” I whisper with wide eyes.

“Oliver?” Mercer makes a face like I tracked dog doo in the house. “No way.”

“Gross. No.” I can’t stop smiling. “It’s Anders.”

I spin away from her to type out my response, as if I have anything to hide.

SUNNY

I made it. Thanks for checking in, boss. [winking emoji]

It’s not a flirtatious wink, for the record. It’s a business wink. I sigh. I’ll be reading and re-reading his texts for the next year. I think I’ll lie in my bed and do that right now, as a matter of fact.

“I’m headed to bed,” I mumble, staring at my phone. I’m floating toward my

bedroom on a cloud of hormones and delusion when Mercer calls from the living room.

“Hey, Sunny.”

“Yeah?” My eyes are glued to my screen, distracted.

“You have a big ol’ Snack sticker on your butt.”

My week flies by in a blur of dance parties with Imogen, endless vacuuming of Hairy’s fur, and a constant stream of vaguely unprofessional text messages from the incorrigible Anders. He may have mentioned something about what he called my “squeezable jeans” at one point. And I may have an album on my phone dedicated solely to screenshots of our conversations .

On the surface, he is Immy’s dad and my boss, and I am just the nanny. He comes in the door at the end of the day and I give him an update on his daughter. We say goodbye. I get in my car. By the time I’ve buckled my seatbelt I have a message waiting. The first night, the message was two words: “Your eyes.” I hounded him for the rest of the night to explain himself. We texted until after midnight that first night. The next night, Anders needed to catch up on sleep and so did I. We only texted for a few hours.

The system is working well. According to Anders, there haven’t been any more distractions, lectures, or location hiccups. If the rest of the shoot goes like this, it will all be over before I’ve had time to really appreciate it. I’m making a conscious effort to slow down and enjoy my time with Immy and my text messages with Anders. Who knows what will happen when this shoot ends. This daydream has an expiration date and I am dreading that day.

That’s what is on my mind as I’m doing my hair for my date with Eric. I shoot a

quick text to Anders while I wait for my curls to cool before I brush through them.

SUNNY

How is it already Saturday?

ANDERS

Right? Seems like I just got caught kissing you in your closet last night.

SUNNY

You can't see it, but I'm blushing. That was so embarrassing.

ANDERS

You should be embarrassed, Sunflower. I've seen the decorations in your closet. Shameful.

SUNNY

Excuse me? That poster is fine art. It will be worth a fortune someday.

ANDERS

Maybe if it wasn't covered in lipstick kisses .

SUNNY

The only thing getting lipstick kisses in that closet is you.

I laugh. Maybe that was too much. It's my new favorite hobby to flirt and torture Anders, knowing full well there's nothing we can do about it. I run my fingers through my long curls, separating them and freezing them into place with a shot of hairspray. My phone buzzes on my bathroom counter and I snatch it up, antsy to hear from Anders. It's been a full forty-five seconds without contact, after all. His first message is a GIF of one of Snow White's seven dwarves blushing, then:

ANDERS

What are you up to tonight?

SUNNY

I'm going to a Fleetwood Mac cover band concert. Should be good.

I'm focusing on my excitement to see the band. Eric is harmless, but I've known him way too long. He's already dated everyone around me. If he was really interested, he would have asked me out long ago. Once again, I'm feeling like I'm at the bottom of the dating barrel, and it's not a great feeling.

ANDERS

That's right.

ANDERS

The birthday gift date.

ANDERS

Have fun

ANDERS

Don't let him get handsy

Here we go. Anders is rapid fire texting again. Sometimes when he messages me I have to pause to be sure he's gotten it all out before I respond. I stare at my phone while I wait it out and notice the clock in the corner of my screen. Eric is supposed to be here in seven minutes and I still need to grab all of my stuff for this outdoor concert. I'll probably take a blanket and my little travel rain poncho just in case. I need to hustle. But first, I give Anders a little taste of his own medicine.

SUNNY

I will

SUNNY

And I won't

SUNNY

Have fun with Immy and Hairy tonight!

SUNNY

Don't miss me too much

He responds with a GIF of a pathetic looking dog waiting at a closed door and I sigh. He has a way of sneaking right into my heart, even when we're having an innocent conversation. I need to hide my phone from myself or I will be the worst date ever, rereading old messages from Anders while drool runs down my chin. I silence my

phone, stuffing it in the bottom of my purse where I can't sneak peeks at the screen.

There.

Now I only have to work on staying mentally present, because this man is totally ruining my concentration.

"Are you warm enough?" Eric leans in to shout into my ear, maybe for the tenth time. It's hard to be heard over the music and noisy crowd around us, so he keeps ducking in and talking right into my ear. He's been doing this all night. If the concert doesn't make my ears ring, Eric is determined to finish the job.

"Yep," I shout, pulling my blanket tighter in front of me and focusing on the band. They're doing a decent cover of my favorite Fleetwood Mac song and I'm into it. They're good. My date, though? He's like a golden retriever and it's like I have a forgotten hot dog in my pocket or something.

I don't have any hot dogs for you, Eric.

He throws an arm around the back of my seat. "Are you thirsty? I can get drinks," he says, way too close. His tan, hairy leg brushes against mine. It's not a warm night. I don't know how he isn't shivering in those cargo shorts. This amphitheater is at the base of a canyon and once the sun goes down behind the red cliffs it's downright chilly. Most concert goers are wrapped in blankets or are dressed in hoodies and hats, even on this spring day. Eric's shorts and t-shirt make me question his sanity. And I wish he'd stay out of my bubble for a minute so I can enjoy the music in peace. This gives me an idea.

"A drink would be great," I call over the band, inching away nonchalantly.

"What do you want? Pepsi?"

He shouts the hard P in Pepsi and I swear it blows the hair back from my face. His breath smells like he hit Taco Bell on his way to my house. And who drinks Pepsi?

“A Coke would be great.”

“Do you want diet?”

I want to listen to this song, man. “Diet is great! Thank you!” I call over the band with a smile. He is a nice guy, just oblivious.

To my great relief, Eric makes his way down our row, apologizing with a loud, “Pardon!” in the face every person he passes. One guy winces. Those poor souls .

But now the seat next to mine is vacant and luxuriously silent. I’m loving the feel of the cool night air on my face and the music echoing off the canyon walls around me. I lean back and snuggle deeper into my crocheted blanket. I love this afghan. Its zigzagging multi-colored rows always make me happy. My mom made it for me after my idiot boyfriend broke up with me in high school. She said the crazy colors are supposed to remind me of Joseph from the Old Testament whose brothers betrayed him and sold him into slavery. His life got really difficult before it turned out amazing. So will mine. My mother is good at gifts with meaning and this one brings me pure joy.

I’m so focused on the colorful pattern of the blanket that I barely register when Eric returns to his seat. That was way too fast. Since when are concession stand lines short? Maybe if I keep my attention on the stage he’ll sense that I want to enjoy the concert in peace

“Having fun?” a deep voice mutters from Eric’s seat, though it’s certainly not Eric.

I spin to face the man beside me. His poor disguise is laughable. A baseball hat barely

hides his wavy hair and the thick-framed glasses he must've stolen from Oliver do nothing to distract from his stormy ocean eyes.

“What the heck are you doing here, grumpy butt?” I nudge Anders’ shoulder with mine.

“Listening to some Fleetwood Mac classics,” he almost snarls, slinging his arm around the back of my chair.

I grab his hand and drag his heavy arm over my head and back to his arm rest. “Eric will be back any minute, boss .” I emphasize the word. “And speaking of. Where is Imogen?”

He has the nerve to shush me. “I’m trying to listen.”

“I know you didn’t leave her with Oliver.” Suddenly I’m less interested in the band and more worried about Imogen and the man beside me.

“She’s fine. I found a babysitter.” He slouches into Eric’s seat .

“Who?”

He completely ignores my question. “Having fun on your date?”

“You don’t have to make that face.”

“What face did I make?” He’s trying way too hard to sound innocent.

I’m not buying it. “The face that says you know I’m not having fun and you only came over here to rub it in.” I imitate his smirk the best I can, making it extra dopey because he’s being a pain and he needs to be brought down a peg. “Like that.”

He chuckles. “Well, are you having fun?”

A sigh gusts out of me before I can stop it. “The band is good.”

“What about this Eric guy? Are you having fun with him?”

There’s no way I’m detecting jealousy in his tone.... Right? I bask in the idea that I’m more than a fling to him and this evidence that he might honestly care about me. “Sure. He’s a nice guy.”

He raises his eyebrows behind those heinous costume glasses. He’s so arrogant with his perfect face, stupid expensive cologne, and women caving to his every whim. Well, not this woman. Not tonight.

“Listen, I’m not going to sit here and bash on my date while he’s off getting a drink for me. He might be clueless and pushy, and okay, yeah, his breath smells like a beefy five-layer burrito, but he’s a nice guy.” I shove his arm off the armrest between us. “Go back to your seat.”

He’s grinning like he won. “I knew it.” He doesn’t move.

“He’s coming back, you know. You can’t hijack my date.”

He just grins and hogs the entire arm rest, completely invading my space.

“Who has Imogen? You can at least put my mind at ease if you’re going to steal my date’s seat.” I know my mom can’t have her. She’s at dinner with her sister about an hour’s drive north of town. And there’s no way he asked Oliver to take her.

His warm smile in response to my question makes my heart trip. “You’re really worried about her? ”

I roll my eyes at his non-response. “Obviously, I’m worried about her. I can’t just turn off caring about her because I’m off the clock.” And I’ve gotten too attached, just like I feared I would.

The music crescendos and he’s hard to hear, but it sounds like he says, “You’d be surprised...” At my confused look, he shouts over the pounding music, “You’re good with her.”

Anders is quiet for a minute, seemingly listening to the band instead of teasing or distracting me. I can’t help but picture Eric coming back to an occupied seat, and I’m annoyed that I don’t know who’s taking care of Imogen. I am fully distracted by Anders, and not in the fun way. I check the aisle behind us periodically, but Eric doesn’t return. After the fourth or fifth time I turn around, my phone buzzes on my lap. Maybe that’s him? He has been gone a suspiciously long time.

Instead, I find a bizarre message from Mercer. It’s one of her classic, voice-text-gone-wrong, stream-of-consciousness messages with zero punctuation and lots of decoding required.

MERCER

Hypothetical question period if someone is babysitting and the kid they are babysitting falls off a skateboard and lands on her arm weird and it’s probs just a sprain but you want to be sure it’s not broken but you also don’t want to freak out the parent or alert the general public which doctor would you go to for that? Hypothetically speaking period

I gasp and grab Anders’ arm, clinging to him like a lifeline. I reread the message to make sure I understood it correctly.

“What?” he yells over the music. “What’s wrong?”

I spin on him. “You left Imogen with Mercer ?” I shout. It’s not a question. “Talk about the blind leading the blind!” I wad up my blanket and snatch my bag. “We have to go! ”

I drag Anders to his feet and down our row, pushing through the crowd in a way that’s probably drawing too much attention.

“What’s wrong?” His grip tightens around my hand.

I don’t want to attract any more looks, so I pass my phone to him and let him read while we stomp up the steps to the back of the amphitheater. After reading my message, Anders marches ahead of me, sliding my phone into his back pocket and pulling me behind him. On our way to the exit, I spot Eric chatting it up with two blonde women. I catch his eye. He shoots an apologetic look my way and all I can do is shake my head at him. I can’t even think about that mess right now. One disaster at a time.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

I don't get scared. Not many things in this world make me nervous. I'm a big guy, and I can hold my own in a dark alley at night. But apparently a cryptic message from my babysitter where I learn that my daughter might be broken has me running.

When I arrived during the opening act of the concert I parked my blacked-out SUV in a dark, hidden corner of the amphitheater parking lot, hoping to remain anonymous. Now I wish I had left it front and center so I could get out of here faster. I'm dragging Sunny behind me to the car, but she seems to be keeping up just fine.

Yanking the key fob out of my pocket, I unlock the doors and reach for the passenger door handle to let Sunny in.

She brushes me away. "I got it. Let's just go."

She doesn't have to tell me twice. While I drive, Sunny calls Mercer and directs her to take Immy to the clinic closest to the resort. Those two have a shorthand that works well in emergencies, but I barely understand a word of it. The whole time they're on the phone, Sunny gives driving directions to me with her hands. When I almost turn the wrong way in a roundabout she smacks my arm and gestures in the right direction .

"We might beat you there. See you in a sec." She throws her phone onto her lap.

"What happened?"

"All she said was Immy fell off her skateboard and landed wrong on her arm." She leans forward in her seat. "Can't you drive any faster?"

“Immy doesn’t have a skateboard.”

“Mercer’s skateboard. Turn left here.”

A white minivan honks when I turn in front of it. “How far away are they?”

“Right behind us. The clinic is on your right. Right here. That’s the driveway.” She unbuckles her seatbelt and the metal buckle clanks against her window.

I nod. “It’s okay, Sunny. I’m sure she’s fine.” If it had been a near-death experience for Immy, we would have received a very different phone call. Of course I’m worried, but now that I’ve heard Mercer on the other end of the line I’m thinking more clearly.

I park next to the curb outside the entrance just as a little green junker car sputters up behind us.

“That’s them,” Sunny says, slamming her door after her.

By the time I lock my car, Sunny has a weepy Imogen in a reverse-backpack bear hug and they’re walking into the clinic with Immy’s arm resting on a pillow I recognize from the suite. I jog to catch up, feeling like yesterday’s leftovers. Since when does Immy run to someone else when she’s upset?

“Hello? Did you forget someone?” I tease, rubbing Immy’s back.

Her face is buried in Sunny’s shoulder, but I hear her whimper.

“Anders.” It’s all Sunny says, but her tone conveys an entire lecture. This isn’t the time. “We’ll get you all fixed up, kiddo. I promise.”

“Okay.” Imogen sniffs. “My arm hurts really bad.”

Her little voice muffled by Sunny’s t-shirt makes my heart squeeze and I take in the sight of them out of the corner of my eye. Sunny rubs a circle on Immy’s back. Something in my brain rewires as I watch her comfort my daughter. I can’t name it, but I know my future is not the same one I had planned a month ago. I am stunned speechless.

Sunny’s soothing voice cuts into my thoughts. “I know, honey. They’ll give you some medicine to make it feel better.”

My mind is whirling as she calms my daughter. How am I already having white-picket-fence thoughts about her? How has this woman become such a critical part of my life—our lives—in such a short time? This is dangerous territory. I don’t trust myself here, but it feels right.

I rush to the door to hold it open for the women. Mercer walks past and whispers, “Seriously sorry about your kid. I thought she’d be fine, I promise. She seemed like she knew what she was doing.”

“It’s fine. She probably thinks she knows how to ride a skateboard because she saw it on YouTube.” And she can be convincing when it comes to getting what she wants. I have no idea who she inherited that trait from.

Twenty minutes later, Imogen is seated on Sunny’s lap on the exam table, explaining to the doctor that she saw Tony Hawk do a kickflip on YouTube, so she thought she could do one. He nods his bald head, like he’s including this information in his analysis of her x-rays.

Sunny and I exchange a look at the mention of YouTube. If I’m reading her right, her face is telling me that Immy needs less time watching videos online and more time

with her feet in the grass. I agree. If more of my nannies engaged with Immy the way Sunny does instead of parking her on a tablet, my daughter might not have a potentially broken arm. But I also wouldn't know the joy of a Fruit Roll-Up ice cream sandwich, so it's a catch twenty-two.

The geriatric doctor turns to Sunny. "I don't see a fracture on the x-ray. Your daughter is very lucky. I've seen quite a few fractures from skateboarding in my years."

Sunny's cheeks turn rosy. "Oh, uh—"

"She's my daughter."

The doctor shrugs. "In any case, it's only a sprain. We'll wrap it up, and with some rest, that should take care of it. She can alternate ibuprofen and acetaminophen for the pain." He wraps her wrist in an elastic bandage, explains how to ice it to reduce swelling, hands me a stack of papers, and closes the door behind him. In the end it feels like healthcare we might have received in a drive-through. I guess now we pull up to the second window to pay?

"Can we go home now?" Immy whines against Sunny's shirt.

Her voice is delicate in my daughter's ear. "Sure, kiddo. Your dad's car is parked right outside." She moves to put Immy on her feet, but she protests. That sprained wrist is affecting her entire body. She's in limp noodle mode and Sunny is stuck on the table under her.

"Can I take you, Im?"

She shakes her head and tightens her one-armed hold on Sunny.

“Here...” I grab Sunny’s hand and wrap my other arm around her back, pulling her to her feet. She stumbles forward, and for a painfully brief moment we’re in each other’s personal space. I’m close enough to smell her hair. Neither of us is moving. Her brown eyes blink up at me and I can’t stop myself. I lean down and press a kiss against her forehead. Sunny sucks in a breath and I linger, because this isn’t enough. I can’t back away.

“I’m smushed,” Imogen whines between us.

“Later,” Sunny whispers, sending a pleasant shot of dopamine through my brain. “You can text me later.”

And I will. I have plenty to say.

The next afternoon, I’m sitting in my trailer waiting for my call time when I see the girls outside my window. Even though they’re a few buildings away, it’s easy to spot Immy’s blonde hair and Sunny’s... Sunny-ness, walking hand in hand down the sandstone pa th. This morning I caught them rumbling away in my Jeep, their ponytails blowing in the wind. I hated to see them driving off without me, probably on their way to Rollerburger or some other fun activity without me. Did I mention that they are having fun without me?

Well, not again. I rush out of my trailer before they’re too far away.

“Sunny!” I call, jogging toward them. “Im!”

Their heads whip around and Immy darts in my direction. “Dad!”

When she reaches me, I hoist her into my arms. “What are you doing, kid?”

“We’re going to the pool. Sunny said since it’s so warm we can go swimming. And

look!” She waves her arm in my face, showing off the special waterproof splint Oliver tracked down.

“Cool, kiddo.”

Sunny catches up to us and I try really hard not to notice she’s dressed in a flowy white thing that allows the tiniest glimpse of a black swimsuit. I quickly redirect my eyes. “I wish I could join you.”

“Why not?” my daughter pouts.

“I’m working.” — I gesture to my torn, bloody costume and the artificial bruising and scratches on my face — “But we’re working here today, so maybe I’ll see you do your tricks from where we’re shooting.”

Sunny pulls back her sunglasses, propping them on her hair. “Where are you filming?”

“Just outside the spa building. The back exit.”

Her eyes widen. “That’s right by the pool. I wonder if it’s closed?” Her eyebrows pull together.

I shrug. Since it’s just us on the property I haven’t seen anyone using the pool, but I don’t know whether it’s officially closed down. “I’m sure if it’s locked you know someone who will let you in,” I say with a wink .

She nods her head to the side in agreement, pulling her white dress thing closer together in the front and hitching her huge bag higher up on her shoulder. “We better let you get back to work, right Im?”

“I guess. Okay. Bye, Dad. We have to go.” And just like that she’s wiggling out of my arms, more than ready to ditch me for more exciting prospects. That’s life with a five-year-old.

“Well...” Sunny hesitates while Immy latches onto her hand, pulling her in the direction of the pool. “See you later?”

“Yep. Have fun. Don’t miss me too much, Sunflower.”

I was joking, but apparently the girls don’t miss me at all because I catch glimpses of both of them throughout the afternoon. Imogen’s past nannies would sit in one of the lounge chairs surrounding the pool while begrudgingly watching my daughter do her tricks. I’ve heard plenty of loud complaints about that from her, but I get it—sometimes I want to relax poolside without having to rate dives or play Marco Polo. But Sunny is in the water, tossing Immy into the deep end, doing cannonballs, and making a general commotion with Imogen. My eyes wander in the direction of their splashing and laughing between every take, until the last time.

We’re mid-take. My character is being interrogated by Micah’s character about something shady he did in the previous scene. My eyes dart to the pool area, then widen when I spot Sunny standing on the diving board. Obviously, she’s only wearing her swimsuit, and somehow it’s exactly what I pictured for her—black, practical, and full coverage. But it does nothing to hide her generous curves. The mental image of Sunny standing there showing Immy how to dive, all long, tan legs and soft lines, is going to destroy me.

“Cut.” Christopher’s annoyed voice slices through my not-safe-for-work thoughts. Thank goodness. Except I think I’m about to get my butt handed to me by our director.

“Someone shut that down.” He motions to the sounds coming from the pool. “The

noise is ruining the shot. ”

Three guys jump up at once and trip over each other to get to Sunny first.

“I’ll do it,” one of the director’s assistants says.

“No, it’s fine, I’ll go.”

“Be right back,” comes from some random guy at the craft table.

Looks like I’m not the only one who’s been distracted by the nanny all afternoon. Well, I don’t like this at all.

“Sorry, everyone. I’ve got this. She’s my kid.”

“And your kid’s nanny,” Christopher reminds me none-too-subtly.

I nod to him so he knows the message has been received, then make my way over to the pool. Sunny is correcting Imogen’s dive form on the pool deck when I reach them.

“Hi, girls.”

“Dad! Sunny is teaching me how to dive like her! Did you see me? Watch!” She bends her knees and puts her arms in a little V-shape in front of her. The plastic splint on her injured wrist looks like it’s hanging on for dear life.

“Just a sec, kiddo,” I put a hand on her shoulder. “So…” Man, I hate being the bad guy . I know this about myself. Why did I volunteer for this, again? I should’ve sent the random dude from craft services to be the killjoy. I look at Sunny. “The noise is messing up the shots,” I say with a cringe, hoping she’ll fill in the blanks.

I can't tell if her face is red from all the sun, or if I made her blush, but she stammers, "I-I'm so sorry! We'll go! Come on, Im."

"I was just getting the hang of it," she whines, tugging her little swimsuit back in place on her backside. This kid has a constant wedgie at the pool. Strangely enough, this makes me wish I was swimming with my kid today instead of arguing with Micah Watson in front of a camera. And behind a camera.

"Tell you what. Let me finish working and maybe we can sneak into the pool tonight." Immy's eyes brighten at my words. "As long as no one tells the owner of the resort what we're doing," I say in a mock-whisper for Sunny's benefit.

Sunny does a zipper motion with her fingers over her lips and makes her way to the chaise where they stashed their towels. I can't help but follow her.

"I'm sorry we messed you guys up. I had no idea—"

"No worries. Most of the afternoon was action shots and stuff. Sound wasn't an issue. But right now it's all dialogue. I'm arguing with Micah's character."

"Sounds like a party." She wraps a towel around her torso and tucks the corner into the top to hold it in place. How does she make something so innocent look so provocative?

It's a towel, you animal.

Meanwhile, Imogen is doing her best to imitate Sunny's towel trick, but it keeps falling apart. Sunny leans down to tighten my daughter's towel and tuck the end.

Once she's all put together, Immy's watery blue eyes find mine. "Can we come watch you, Dad?"

Sunny shakes her head. “We should go home. We’re not dressed for it, and it’s about time for dinner, anyway.” She takes my daughter’s hand and my eyes are fixed on her.

I can’t let them leave, and I love the idea of having them on set, as distracting as they are. “It’s no biggie. Come watch for just a minute.” I crouch down so I’m eye level with my daughter. “You remember the rules on set?”

Immy grins and bobs her head up and down. “No talking, no touching, and make faces at Micah when he isn’t looking,” she repeats from memory with a sober expression.

“Good—”

“BECK!” Christopher’s voice booms through the air, from a megaphone that I have never seen before. He must have bought it especially for me. I’m flattered. The entire cast and crew is watching us, including Oliver, whose stern eyes are shooting Death Star-like lasers at us.

I take Immy’s hand and we stroll back to set, despite Sunny’s protests. I’m annoyed with Christopher and his megaphone, so I take my time.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

This isn't happening. I have to wake up from this nightmare. But I'm starting to think I'm awake and this is really happening. I am having my first real in-person interaction with Micah Watson and my hair is dripping down my back. I also likely have mascara under my eyes, and I'm wearing a soggy, somewhat saggy swimsuit left over from last summer. My only hope is to blend into the background like a sagebrush.

I lead Immy to a low rock wall to sit, as still as shrubbery, far away from Christopher Marchant, who is glaring at me, and Micah Watson, whose gaze hasn't left his phone since we got here. Some guy shoves a tablet in my face and has me sign away half of my First Amendment rights under threat of execution if I reveal any footage or even descriptions of what I witness on set. Or something like that. I read no part of the legal document—I am too busy wondering if Micah sees me, while also not caring if he does, while also observing how scrumptious Anders looks in his costume. Those costume designers know exactly what they're doing with that slightly torn, fitted t-shirt.

The set has a lot more going on than I imagined. There's just a lot of stuff—contraptions I can't name, lights, cameras, and some small tracks on the ground for moving the cameras. And there are so many people standing around. There are costumers, make-up artists, people with walkie-talkies, some moving the unnamed apparatuses around, some standing at a table covered with food.

A guy touches up Anders' make-up. The men take their places. The director says, "Go." And Micah and Anders start going at it. An asteroid could rip through the sky and land in my lap, and it wouldn't pull my attention away from this scene. On screen, these men capture attention. In person, they are riveting.

They spar for a few minutes before a voice interrupts them. “Cut.” The director’s voice is firm, and I don’t know the guy, but he sounds kind of peeved.

They reset, return to their marks, and start again. I wish I had some popcorn and a Coke Icee. I could watch this for hours. They’re a few lines of dialog past the first take when Christopher barks, “Cut!” He waves Micah and Anders over and they exchange words. The expression on Micah’s face is... haughty. It’s not a look I’ve seen on him before. It’s not an attractive look, which I didn’t think was possible. He has plenty of angry words for Anders. I can’t hear much from here, but as the conversation gets more heated, I hear Micah snark, “... that girl needs to go.”

Is Micah talking about me? Or Imogen?

One thing I am certain of—no matter who he’s talking about—is I don’t like the way he’s talking to anyone. It’s like he’s the sun at the center of this movie set and everyone else is orbiting him. His needs trump everyone else’s. Between takes, Frankie holds a small fan up to his face and he rolls his eyes, batting it away.

Ick.

Then, he snarls something about getting rid of the distractions on set so he can work.

I want to get out of here, but I don’t want to draw even more attention. I wish I could blend into the background like a chameleon and crawl away. From where I’m sitting, the scene was going well. Or so I thought. I didn’t think Immy and I could have possibly been distracting. But then the three of the men swing around and look me right in the water-logged, mascara-dripping face. I hold my breath.

Anders says something low and sharp to Micah. Micah says something to the director, who nods. Anders looks like he’s ready to flip a table when he marches toward us. Uh-oh.

“You’re doing really good, Dad!” Immy cheers him on, oblivious.

“Thanks, kiddo.” His fire-and-ice eyes find mine. “This is uncomfortable…” he trails off.

“You need us to leave?” It’s a guess, but I hope I’m wrong.

Relief washes over his face when he nods. “I’m sorry. It’s not you. It’s—”

“No, it’s totally fine. I’m sorry we messed things up again. I need to get dinner for Immy, anyway. Plus, I need to shower. We don’t want to be in the way. Let’s go, Im. How about some nuggets for dinner? Get your stuff.” She doesn’t have any stuff. I silence my motormouth with a breathy laugh that only amplifies the awkwardness of the moment.

“For the record, I like having you here.” He squeezes Immy’s shoulder and adds, “Both of you.”

“I wish we could stay and watch,” Immy pouts, whinier than usual.

I crouch down to talk her through it. “I know. I’m sad about it, too. But we need to let Hairy out, then I think we should drown our sadness in the biggest order of nuggets Goldie can make. Sound good?”

“No!” she shouts. “I want to watch my dad!” She screeches in a way that is so outside of normal for her that I just stare at her, dumbfounded. In a swift motion, Anders scoops her up, takes my place on the rock wall, and whispers in her ear.

It finally occurs to me—just at this moment—that not only are we past due for dinner, but it’s almost time for bed, and her ibuprofen has probably worn off. We played hard in the pool, and it’s taking a toll on her little five-year-old body. How did I not think

of this? I have to be the most careless nanny of all time.

You're not meant to be taking care of children , a desperate voice whispers in the back of my mind. The thought feels like an ocean of salt being rubbed in a wound that never seems to heal.

That's when it registers that the entire production crew is fixated on this scene, waiting for Anders to scoot us away so they can finish their jobs and go home. Everyone—Micah Watson, Christopher Marchant, Darth Oliver—saw Imogen scream at me, and how I froze like a deer waiting to get run over by a truck. And now they're all watching, their faces a mixture of annoyance and anger. I wonder how hard it is to get into the Witness Protection Program?

I need to get out of here. My gaze swings through the smorgasbord of people judging me, to Imogen. Anders is still whispering in her ear, but now she's smiling and whispering back, even with remnants of tears clinging to her long eyelashes. She grins at me and I know right away that something is up.

"What?" I check my clothing for anything unfastened, unzipped, or dangling.

"Nothing," she chirps, hopping down from Anders' knee. "Ready to go?" She grabs my hand.

I'm not sure I'll ever get used to the rollercoaster of Imogen's emotions, but I squeeze her tiny fingers and smile at her. "Sure." I turn to her handsome dad. "See you in a few?"

"Can't wait." Then he slides his big hand behind my neck, ducks down, and presses a soft, leisurely kiss to my lips. His thumb drags down my cheek and he smirks as he pulls away.

“What are you doing?” I hiss. My eyes dart to Imogen, who is in no way mentally prepared for this development, then to the film crew. Micah’s face is dark red. Christopher is having words with Oliver. “You’re going to get us in trouble!”

Imogen’s giggle bounces off the buildings around us. “I told him to do that!” She is proud of herself, but she has no idea the ripple- effect of problems she just started. I’m already dreading the dressing down I’m surely going to get from Oliver.

“A five-year-old put you up to that and you listened?” I quirk an eyebrow at him.

“Not that exactly, but... yeah.” He drops a whisper of a kiss to my cheek, chaste enough for church. Then he plants a loud, smacking kiss on his daughter’s cheek. “See you ladies in a little bit.”

“Ugh.” I faceplant on the couch in my condo, dangling my feet off the edge of the cushion. What a day. I passed the childcare baton to Anders the second he came in the door tonight, eager for rest and a minute away from him. I’m in desperate need of perspective.

Oliver didn’t contact me (read: rip me a new one) the way I expected him to after Imogen and I left the set. That ax has been dangling over my head all evening and it's taking a toll. I don't know what Anders was thinking with that very public kiss. Don't get me wrong, I thoroughly appreciated it. I can still feel it on my lips and I swear I can smell him on my clothes. But why did he choose that moment to hurdle over every rule we've made—in front of every person who has an interest in our relationship remaining professional? His director, Oliver, Micah, Imogen...

“Ugh!” I groan into the velvety couch again, pounding it with my fist.

“You’re home early.”

I startle and lift my face off the cushion. Mercer is lying sideways on our loveseat with her legs draped over the arm. Her blonde hair is in its standard sloppy ponytail, and her tall athletic socks are sagging off of her toes.

“I didn't see you there.” I re-bury my face in the couch. Why couldn't I have been born an ostrich?

“Rough day? ”

“Anders kissed me again. On set this time, in front of Immy and everyone. Everyone.”

I sense Mercer sitting up. “No way.”

I blink one eye open to gauge her reaction. “I assure you, he did. I would know. The man can kiss.”

“So... what's the big deal? He's a fox. I say go for it.”

My voice is muffled by the couch when I tell her, “First of all, Oliver threatened me with financial ruin if I mess with Anders. My job, your job, Anders' job, everyone's job is on the line here.” He's like the Anti-Oprah, handing out threats. There's one for everyone. I can't imagine the end of Nizhóní, our family legacy and the last thing left of my father, all boiling down to the fact that I can't get my crap together around a handsome man.

“Pfft. Oliver talks a big game, but what can he really do?”

I sit up and kick my feet onto our coffee table. “According to the documents I signed, a lot. Besides, I really don't want to mess with Anders' career. This role is a big deal for him, and I'm a distraction. They'll finish shooting, he'll go on to his next thing,

and I'll be left here feeling like one of your dirty socks." Used, discarded, forgotten under the coffee table. Womp womp.

"No," Mercer snaps. "My strong, kind, gorgeous friend is not a dirty sock and never will be. Stop that talk right now. Anders doesn't even deserve you."

That comment gives me pause. I think about the guy I've been spending my nights and trading texts with. I see a dad who doesn't know how to enforce a bedtime, and a man who likes to goof around and bend rules. If he's a womanizer, that means I'm the one being womanized. Does it feel like he's doing that? I'll have to think about this. Kissing me like that in front of Immy before we even know what we are is incriminating evidence.

But I also see a guy who is so thoughtful, he paid someone to drive his Jeep hundreds of miles just so I could have fun. And speaking of fun, he makes me laugh. I've never laughed so hard and so often. Throw in the fact that he's ridiculously handsome and talented, and I don't know how I'm going to survive a weekend away with him. At least we'll be staying in separate locations.

"Geez, you are so far gone." Mercer taunts, breaking my runaway train of thought.

"I'm just thinking about the trip. How am I supposed to keep it together when we are in such close proximity? And on a plane—I can't handle this. This isn't me. I just want to get some cats from the animal shelter, watch some knitting tutorials on YouTube, and retire."

Mercer groans. "Do you hear yourself? You're not ninety years old. You're young. Give yourself the chance to live. Make mistakes. Do something crazy."

"And ruin my life, Imogen's life, and Anders' career in the process? No thanks."

“Taking a trip with a hot guy isn’t going to ruin anything. You’re not doing anything wrong, and you won’t. You’re too smart for that.”

I’m not sure about that. My face goes warm, thinking about the few illegal kisses I’ve shared with Anders, plus all of the boneheaded things I’ve done since I met the man. The combination of his lethal charm, his single dimple, and his quick wit make all logical thoughts leave my brain.

“You think I’m wrong,” Mercer says with a sideways grin.

“I don’t know what to think. Anders is... He’s not what I expected.” I remember his habit of dumping his dirty meal containers on the counter, and how the first thing he does when he gets home is find Immy and hoist her up for a hug. “He’s a real guy. Normal. Not perfect, but good.” I shake my head, trying to clear it. “It doesn’t matter whether he deserves me or not, or whether I deserve to have some fun. It can’t happen.”

“There’s a song about this.” Mercer nods sagely, like she’s about to impart some hard-earned relationship wisdom. Then she belts out, “Every party has a pooper, that’s why we invited you— ”

“Oh, shut up.” I laugh, despite myself. I refuse to tell her she makes even that song sound good. Mercer can sing, but if you point it out, she basically curls into a ball like a pill bug and rolls away.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket while Mercer goes on singing her party pooper song, only now her voice has morphed into a French accent. I pull out my phone to find that I’ve missed multiple texts, and now I have a call coming in from the man himself. My heart thumps against my ribcage, but I need my brain to be in charge for a minute. Cool your jets, Heart. It’s just Anders.

It's just Anders. The thought does nothing to calm my eager heart.

I swipe to answer the call, and stand to sneak away to my bedroom.

"Hello?" I keep my voice low, using my hand to muffle my friend's singing, which is an insult to French people everywhere.

"Everay partay has a poopah!" Mercer only gets louder as I move further away.

"Sunny?" his deep voice hums in my ear. "Everything okay over there?"

I close my bedroom door behind me. "Yeah. Mercer is just being... Mercer. What's going on?"

There's shuffling on his end. "You ran off tonight."

"I know." I sigh and slump against the bars of my wrought-iron headboard. "Why did you do that, Anders?"

"Do what?" The smile in his voice makes me want to push him into a lake—or drive over there and kiss him. One of those things.

"You kissed me in front of Immy, and everyone. What were you thinking?" My cheeks warm at the memory of the way he felt, and all of the eyes on us.

"Immy gave me permission."

"Great, so you only kissed me because a kid said you could." I grab a pillow and wedge it behind my back. I need to invest in a comfy headboard. "I can't believe she told you to kiss me. What a little meddler."

“She didn’t tell me to kiss you, exactly. Just” — he clears his throat — “When that kid gets an idea in her head, there’s no talking her out of it. And my kid has ideas about you.”

My heart is really thumping now, whether out of excitement or a fight-or-flight response, it’s hard to tell. I am scared of how attached I am to Imogen. Pain is imminent. “What ideas, Anders?”

“Yesterday she told me... she wants you to be her permanent nanny.”

He’s lying. I don’t know how I know, I just know. His tone is different. Actor-y. Those were not Imogen’s words, I am sure of that. Strangely, a little cloud of sadness hovers over me at the thought. Those words spark unfair hope in my lonely, childless heart. “You’re lying.”

“That was the nuts and bolts of it, okay? She wants you around long term.”

I gasp. “So you decided to reinforce your impressionable child’s delusions?” I shout. What a disaster. At least he’s rich enough to afford a good therapist for her.

He chuckles, “Not at all. I just kissed you. I asked her what I could do to make her happy, and she gave me some ideas. I improvised. Are you saying you didn’t enjoy it?” He pretends to be hurt, but he’s full of it. He knows exactly how well he kisses and how I responded.

“Obviously not, but I’ve been waiting for a threatening call from Oliver all night. He and Christopher looked so... done.”

“I just got off a call with them, actually. I took care of it.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

Impossible. I let the line fall silent. There’s no way it was that simple. I feel like I got pushed into a lion’s den, but the lion yawned and fell asleep. At any moment the lion is going to wake up and sic his team of lawyers on me .

“You still there, beautiful?” The smile is back in his voice. He’s needling me with every little word he uses. He knows exactly what he’s doing, and it’s working. But I’m not about to let him know that.

“Yeah. I just can’t believe it was that easy.”

“I wouldn’t say it was easy. I just told them I’m off the project if they won’t let me have a personal life.” There’s more shuffling on his end of the line, almost like he’s smothering his phone with a pillow.

“And they just said ‘okay’ and backed off?” I don’t buy that.

“Sure.” More muffled sounds come through the receiver.

“What on earth are you doing over there? And I don’t believe that they just said ‘okay’. There’s no way.”

He’s quiet for way too long.

“Anders?”

“Yeah.”

“What did they say?”

His answering sigh is gusty. “Chris said they will replace me if they have to. They won’t, though. He’s just trying to get my head back in the game, but he doesn’t need to. I’ve got this. It’s fine.”

“Anders.” His name comes out softer than I intend.

“We’re good, Sunflower.” His voice caresses my name in a way that violates every rule we’ve made—as if his kiss hadn’t done that already. The man is a lost cause.

“Anders.” This time my tone is stern. “You need to take this seriously. This will end badly for both of us.”

“Who says it’s going to end?”

He can’t see my glare, but it’s there. “Come on. Be serious.”

“I am not known for that.”

I know. “ANDERS.” This time I use the voice I’ve been using to get Hairy down from the couch.

“I promise everything is going to be good. Trust me. Now, on to a fun topic.” There are more scuffing sounds on his end, then he says, “We have a trip this weekend.”

I haven’t forgotten. We’re supposed to leave in just a couple of days. And because I’m Sunny Pratt I’ve already researched the weather, packed a bag and a backup bag in case the weather changes. I was supposed to invite a friend, but I haven’t. Maybe I chickened out. I don’t know. I do know that I’m relishing the idea of a few days alone in a quiet place where someone else makes my bed for me. The place where I’ll be staying is absurdly opulent. I have absolutely nothing to wear there, which means I’m doubling down on my plan to hole up in my room like a yeti, eating room service and

reading. Dream vacation.

“Yep. I’m ready. And excited. Have I thanked you enough for this?”

“No thanks necessary” — he grunts — “from the woman taking care of my child.”

“Okay, I have to know what you’re doing over there. Moving furniture?”

He laughs through a grunt. “Working out in my living room. Tabata.” There’s another groan followed by a long exhale. “I took off my shirt. You’re missing a show.”

“You’ve been working out this whole time?” My laugh is incredulous, but a little too breathy. I can’t get the image of Anders doing whatever he’s doing, all shirtless and sweaty, out of my mind. I run my hand down my face. This has to stop. I try to joke to keep things light. “Celebrities. They are not just like us.”

His laugh is strained, probably from being mid-plank or something. “You think this body happened by accident?”

Absolutely not. “Okay, that’s my cue. Goodnight, Anders. Have fun working out while I get eight luxurious hours of sleep.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

“It’s so far,” my daughter whines, literally dragging her jelly-clad feet. Imogen is not a fan of long walks and my plane is parked on the farthest end of the tarmac. It’s not that far, but she’s tired from staying up too late last night and an early morning ride to this small, regional airport. She must’ve finally adjusted to Mountain Standard Time right as we’re about to spend the weekend in a different time zone.

“Hop up, kiddo.” I crouch down so she can climb on my back.

This isn’t the day for a parental lecture on positivity or getting enough sleep. I just want to get in the air and get out of here. I stack Immy’s carry-on on top of mine. Sunny helps me buckle them together and the three of us continue toward my plane.

The days since the incident on set with sexy, wet swimsuit Sunny have been taxing. The work itself has been fine. My head is in the game. I’m feeling the part. The team is working well—all except for Micah. He’s about one snide comment away from a Will Smith-esque face slap from me. He can’t keep Sunny’s name out of his mouth, figuratively speaking. He can’t remember her name. The butthead just calls her Hot Nanny. And he has had plenty to say since her appearance on set, none of which bears repeating. The man has a filthy mouth when there are no cameras around.

A caveman-like protective instinct has me reach over to take Sunny’s hand at the memory. Her soft fingers lace through mine and everything feels okay.

“When you said you had a plane...” she starts.

“What?” I’m making her say it, because teasing Sunny is my new favorite hobby.

“I thought it would be...”

I smile and let some crickets chirp.

“Like, a big plane. I thought it would be some big ol’ pretentious jet, okay? Not...”
She gestures toward our ride.

I act offended on behalf of my old Cessna. “She can hear you.”

She scoffs. “How did this thing get here, anyway?”

“I flew here in it with Ollie. It shaves off a few hours when we travel. It gives him more time to oil his hinges.” I shrug.

She looks even more confused. “And it’s just been sitting up here this whole time?”

“She’s a good plane. She stays where I put her.” I grin. “I promise, you’re going to love this.”

Imogen encourages Sunny from her place on my back. “It’s so fun when my dad flies. You’re gonna like going on a plane, don’t worry.”

The fact that I’m the pilot finally registers with Sunny. The look of terror on her face would be comical if it wasn’t so hurtful.

“I learned to fly a few years back. I got the plane to make traveling less...”

“Safe?” she fills in.

“Oh, you’ll be safe. I’m an excellent pilot. I’ve only crashed a few times. Right, Im?”

“Dad!” She giggles against my neck. “Just so you know, my dad doesn’t crash. He is super good at flying.”

I hitch Immy higher onto my back, feeling the need to sell Sunny on an Anders Airline experience. “Yeah. Super good. Flying is a rush. You’ll see. Besides, this makes traveling less public. It gets us places without dealing with crowds. I can go through smaller airports. This thing is big enough for me, Immy, Hairy, and Oliver—”

“The whole family,” she interrupts with a laugh. There’s some shakiness in her voice that makes me wonder if she’s more nervous about having me as a pilot, or flying in general.

I squeeze her hand. “You nervous?”

“Yeah.”

We reach the plane and I swing Immy down from my back. She skips around the plane, energy restored. “What are you nervous about?” I ask Sunny, unlatching the door. Maybe I can talk her through this so it will be fun for her.

“Burning alive in a plane crash. Mercer and Hairy lighting my condo on fire. Nizhóní going down in flames while I’m gone. The usual.”

Geez. I’m glad Immy was out of earshot during that laundry list of horrors. There’s a lot of fire in this woman’s worst-case scenarios, but one look in her glassy, brown eyes tells me she isn’t joking. My heart squeezes for her. “I’ll have Oliver double-check the fire extinguishers and smoke detectors. I promise I won’t crash the plane. Hairy can teach Mercer how to stop, drop, and roll. We’ve got this, Sunflower. You’re going on an adventure.”

She exhales, long and deep, and something in her big, brown eyes changes. She flashes one of her blinding, knockout smiles and this time my heart pounds against my ribs. “Okay.”

“That easy, huh?”

“I still can’t believe you left Hairy with Mercer.” Her shaky laugh gives her away, but I’m proud of her for facing this fear head-on.

I shrug, organizing our bags into the cargo area. “It was Oliver’s idea. He says they’re a perfect pair. It worked out since you didn’t invite her along like you were supposed to.”

“I know... things are just too crazy at the resort right now.” She sighs. “And I love alone time. ”

Sunny watches quietly through my flight pre-check, which isn’t abnormal for her. She’s not a huge talker. In unfamiliar situations, like on set the other day, she seems to prefer standing back to observe. When we take off, I hear her little gasp through my headset and she latches onto my forearm until we finish our ascent. Besides that, she’s silent, her brown eyes wide and taking everything in. I’m busy keeping my promise not to crash, so I’m preoccupied, but Imogen makes enough conversation for all of us.

She points out rust-colored cliffs below, and one fat, white Hairy-shaped cloud in the cornflower blue sky. She giggles, then laments the fact that we couldn’t bring Hairy this time. Then she moves on to comments about how the ground looks like a big blanket and the trees and shrubs look like yarn tied through a quilt. Then she wonders aloud if my mom is going to make chocolate balls for us this time. Eventually she peters out, her head lolls against her seat, and she falls asleep.

Not long later we're winging our way northward to Minnesota when Sunny's voice comes through my headset, breaking through the constant drone of the twin-engine airplane and occasional radio chatter.

"This is unbelievable, Anders."

Something in her tone has changed and I realize she's blinking back tears. Her watery eyes are wide, taking in the expanse of blue sky and clouds, and the corners of her mouth turn up in a gentle smile. The late morning sun shines through the window behind her, catching gold highlights in her dark hair—or maybe that's remnants of my daughter's accidental dye job. Either way, she is radiant. Everything about her glows and I want to draw closer and closer to her warmth. Her authentic, unashamed delight in this short flight on a thirty-year-old, no-bells-and-whistles airplane makes me want to wrap her in bubble wrap and stand between her and the world. She is too good for this planet. Earth, you do not deserve this woman .

For once in my life, I don't know what to say. How do I gather all of my thoughts into a response that won't scare her away? Instead, I pull her hand to my mouth and press a kiss to the inside of her palm. She doesn't need to know what's happening in my head. Yet.

I'm sure my thoughts are plastered all over my face and showing through everything I do, anyway. Yesterday Christopher said that if he doesn't end up firing me, I should send him a wedding invitation. I can fly a plane and bungee jump off of tall bridges. I do my own stunts, hanging off cliff faces hundreds of feet above the desert. But that? That offhanded, half-joking comment from a guy who knows me well drained the blood from my face.

Thankfully, Sunny breaks through my thoughts with a comment that catches me completely off guard.

“You’re better at this than I expected.” She nods in the general area of the control panel and yoke. “You’re a decent pilot.”

That startles a laugh out of me. “What did you expect?” I ask, incredulous.

“That came out all wrong.” She laughs, too, which I don’t love. “I mean, you don’t fly the way I thought you would. I was sure you’d be doing barrel rolls up here just to get a rise out of me.”

“You think I want to scare you?”

“It’s just... usually you’re so...” she trails off.

I know how I am. But not with flying. At least, not with my kid in the back seat. And now with this woman as a passenger? No way. I shake my head. “Not with you and Immy in the plane. Besides, this old gal’s not built for barrel-rolls. She’s more of a point A to point B aircraft. Like if your car was a plane, this would be it.”

Sunny smiles, patting the dash of the plane like a dog. “I like her.”

I like her, too .

My dad picks us up from Crystal Airport in the same Subaru he’s been driving since I bought it for him. It was a gift after I got my first big paycheck—a “thank you for not killing me as a teenager” offering. He loves the thing.

When he pulls up to the curb, I offer Sunny the front seat because it seems like the gentlemanly thing to do, but her panicked head shaking tells me she’ll be more comfortable in the back seat with Immy. She waits with me, shivering in her little blue dress and tennis shoes, while my dad walks around the car to greet us. Minneapolis is chilly compared to the warm, dry desert we just left. I tug a sweatshirt

out of my carry-on and pass it to her. She thanks me and pulls it over her head, wrapping the long sleeves over her knuckles and folding her arms around herself. Her glasses are askew from the process, and she pushes them back into place.

The sight of her swimming in my oversized sweatshirt, her brown eyes blinking behind her glasses, makes the words tumble out of my mouth. “You... you get used to it. True Minnesotans consider this spring.”

My dad pops the trunk to help me load our bags, then gives me a quick hug with a pat on the back and a short, “Glad you’re home, Son.” He nods at Sunny. But when Imogen wraps her arms around his legs he comes alive. He scoops her up and squeezes her in a bear hug.

“Morfie!” Immy’s squeal is muffled by the shoulder of her grandpa’s worn, navy corduroy jacket.

Sunny looks at me with a question in her eyes.

While my daughter and her grandpa catch up I explain, “Grandpa is Morfar in Swedish. Immy turned it into Morfie. She morphed it, if you will.” I cringe at my lame joke.

Sunny’s eyes are warm. “You are such a gigantic dork. I love it.”

I smile into the trunk where Sunny can’t see, arranging the last of the bags and slamming it closed. “Grandma is Mormor . She calls her Mormie. You can call her Tillie, and my dad is Johan.” I hope my tone conveys that she shouldn’t be nervous. “I’m surprised my mom didn’t come along. I know she wants to meet you.”

“It’s a shame. I have so many questions about all of this.” She waves a hand in my general direction.

“Well, too bad. You’ll have to believe the lies you read on TMZ like everyone else.”

I open Sunny’s door and hold it until she settles in her seat. My dad buckles Immy into the booster seat that never leaves the back of the car. After I’m buckled in I tug my hat over my head. My aviator sunglasses have been in place since the flight because obviously I can’t aviate without them. Oh, geez. Are dad jokes contagious? Because I’ve been with my father for under five minutes and they’re popping up like an allergic rash.

“Did Mom give you the address of the place where Sunny’s staying?”

“Yeah, I got it.” He turns to Sunny in the back seat. “You sure you don’t want to come to dinner first? My wife would love to meet you. She made me promise to invite you and offer a ride to your hotel after.” It’s clear that my dad is uncomfortable. He never knows how to act around the people in my life, so he ends up acting overly formal bordering on standoffish. He doesn’t know Sunny, though.

“I’d really like that. I have a lot of questions about this guy.” She pats my shoulder over the seat. “I haven’t been able to nail down a diagnosis.”

That gets a loud laugh from my dad. “Oh, Tillie needs to meet you. She can tell you everything you need to know, plus some things you don’t want to know.” He pulls into traffic. “So, what do you say? Dinner?”

“Yeah, Sunny! You have to meet my Mormie.” Imogen chimes in.

“I’d love to. Thank you.”

And that’s how, a few hours later, I find myself wedged between my mother and Sunny on our family couch, flipping through a photo album while the two women laugh at me. Sunny gets a kick out of the matching footed Christmas pajamas my

mother sewed for us every year until way too recently.

“Please tell me these still exist,” she says, breathless with laughter.

She turns the page, and it’s a picture of the whole family after my parents’ citizenship ceremony. I was probably five or six years old that day. I don’t remember much about Sweden, since I was only a few years old when my parents emigrated, first to New York, then eventually finding jobs as school teachers in Minneapolis. They’ve been here ever since.

“What brought you to the United States?”

My mother looks at my dad in the kitchen. He’s up to his elbows in dishwater. Immy is standing on a chair beside him, drying plates and putting them away. “?ventyrskall,” she answers in her native tongue with a dreamy sigh. “The call of adventure. Johan and I love to travel. We wanted to see the world. We fell in love with this country. Something called us here, so here we are.”

She flips the page to a photo from one of our many trips to the motherland. My brothers and I lined up in slickers and galoshes on some rain-soaked street in Stockholm. “We didn’t make it home often enough. But we do now, thanks to this guy.” My mom kisses my cheek. That makes forty-seven for this visit. I’m keeping a tally.

“Aw, what a good son,” Sunny squeezes my knee. She hides a yawn behind her hand.

They’ve been mocking old photos of me for so long, I didn’t realize how late it has gotten. “We should probably get you to your hotel, huh?”

When she nods, my mother stands. “We didn’t even get to dessert. I’ll pack some chokladbollar for you.” She leaves to fill a repurposed cottage cheese tub with a few

of the nostalgic, chocolatey treats. It's a gesture I've seen my mother make many times, though it's sometimes a margarine or Cool Whip container.

"I think I'll call the hotel and tell them I need a late check-in. How far is it from here?"

I don't want her to leave. "Forty-five minutes or so." How can I ask her to stay when this is supposed to be her vacation? She deserves a break from me and Immy, but I haven't been away from her except to sleep and work this week. I don't like it. Don't go.

She pulls her phone from her bag and walks my parents tiny foyer to make the call. I follow my mother into the kitchen to track down some comfort chokladbollar . I'm lucky. She still has them out when I catch up to her. I pop one in my mouth whole.

"Slow down, Sockergris . You'll get sick." My mom tsks and swats my hand away before I can take another one. Then she whispers, "I like this one," with a nod toward the living room.

"She's cool, right? I thought you'd like her."

"I do." Her blue eyes crinkle at the corners. "You're you with her. I like that."

I chuckle to hide my bruised pride. "Who else would I be?"

She purses her lips to the side, thinking. "With Cassidy you were—"

"I know." During my brief mistake of a marriage to Cassidy, I bore no resemblance to the son she raised. I'd regret it fully except it resulted in the best part of my life—Imogen. My mother has never held back her opinion on the subject of the women I date and she likes to make sure I stay in line. I wonder if she and Oliver

have been trading texts again.

“Um, Anders?” Sunny peeks around the corner into the kitchen and curls a finger at me to follow her.

My heart thumps at the invitation. She is killing me, and she has no idea. I would follow her anywhere. For now, I follow her into my parents’ living room.

“What’s up?”

She looks worried and uncomfortable. “The hotel can’t find my reservation. ”

“I’ll call them. They have to—”

She sighs. “Anders, trust me. I know this business. I checked every possible name and scenario.” She bites her lip, like she doesn’t want to say what she needs to say next. “There isn’t a reservation for me, and they have no openings for this weekend.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

“O liver made the reservation. You know Ollie—there’s no way...” Anders shakes his head, pulling his phone from his back pocket. “Why don’t you go in there and try a chocolate ball while I sort this out? I’ll just be a minute.” He presses a kiss to my forehead and leaves through the front door.

I ponder our list of carefully selected rules for keeping professional boundaries in place. This man has blown through all of them. It’s a dream. And a nightmare. I can’t shake the nagging feeling that everything is going to fall to pieces because Anders and I galavanted to Minnesota like a couple of teenagers.

I wander into the kitchen, nervous without a plan for the night. It’s getting late, and I don’t have a hotel reservation. Are Anders’ parents early-to-bed kind of people and I’m wearing out my welcome? Maybe I can call a rideshare and find a hotel nearby. These thoughts are spinning in my mind when I find a chocolate-coated Immy sitting at the counter with her grandpa. I squeeze her in a side hug.

“Mind if I join you?” I perch on a barstool. “Anders is making a phone call. ”

Johan slides a little container of chocolate balls toward me. “You should have some before we eat them all.”

“Dad had some, too, Morfie,” Immy defends herself, her mouth full of slobbery chocolate.

I gingerly pick up one of the treats with a whisper to Imogen, “Don’t talk with your mouth full of food, kiddo.” I take a delicate bite of the chocolate ball. “Thith ith good,” I pop the rest of the mind-blowing dessert into my mouth with a dramatic eye

roll. “Oh man, that’s delithious,” I moan.

Imogen giggles. “You said not to talk with food in my mouth!”

“I know.” I wink at her. Anders’ dorkiness is rubbing off on me. “Your Mormie’s treats are too good, I guess.”

Johan observes me quietly. His pleased smile is weathered and one-dimpled—the aged version of his son’s grin. I bet poor, young Tillie didn’t stand a chance. “They’re Anders and Immy’s favorite,” he says in his faint Swedish accent. “Have another.”

I nod, happily snatching just one more. “Thanks.”

The three of us work our way through a few more chocolate balls—I couldn’t stop at one more—in companionable silence.

Immy swallows her chocolate and wipes her mouth on the back of her hand with a long, satisfied sigh. “Do you really hafta go to a hotel?”

“Well, that’s what your dad is working on.” I peek over Immy’s head to Johan. “The hotel couldn’t find the reservation Oliver booked. Anders is figuring it out.”

Johan’s wrinkled forehead gathers into a frown. “Uh-oh.”

I’m learning that Anders gets his chattiness from his mother. The sound of the clock ticking makes me wonder if Tillie will reappear because even Immy is uncharacteristically quiet this evening.

“Hi, hi!” Tillie flutters into the room like I summoned her, wearing a floral mumu over a thick pair of sweatpants. It also looks like she’s doing heatless curls tonight. There’s a long, foam rod woven into her gray-blond locks. “Oh, I’m glad you’re still

here, Sunny! I was worried I'd miss you!"

"Woman, what are you wearing?" Johan mutters.

"Pajamas." She nibbles on a chocolate ball. When her husband shakes his head she adds, "It's supposed to get down into the teens again tonight. Where is my boy?"

"He's outside making a call. They lost my reservation, I guess," I say with a cringe.

"Oh no! Well, you can just stay with us. We have plenty of room. Here, I'll show you where you can put your things."

"Sleepover!" Immy cheers.

The two co-conspirators start toward the hallway before I can stop them, only pausing when Anders walks in. He's looking red-faced, either from anger or the cold. It's hard to tell.

"Ollie never made the reservation. I've tried a few places, and there's nothing comparable open for tonight. I called everywhere." He runs a hand down his face, scratching his scruffy jaw. "I'm sorry, Sunny. I can't believe—"

"We worked it all out," Tillie cuts in. "She's staying here."

Anders eyebrows raise and he looks at me with a question in his eyes. We've crossed a few lines in the last few weeks, but spending the weekend with his family would be a monumental one. Is he uncomfortable with this?

I shrug at him. It's your call, I try to communicate telepathically. I don't have much of a choice. It's either this or the nearest Motel 6.

His blue eyes search mine. I'm down if you are , he seems to say.

I nod. "Only if you're all okay with it. I don't want to be in the way."

"Impossible. We have more than enough room. Anders' brothers won't be here until tomorrow."

Anders coughs to hide a curse. "Josh and Liam are coming?"

"Language!" Tillie swats the back of his head. "Of course they're coming. I told them you were finally coming home and we planned it. I texted you about it. I'm sure I did." She fiddles with the foam rod in her hair. I just met her, and I know this story is fishy. She loops her soft arm through mine. "Here, I'll show you to Anders' room—"

"No!" Anders' startled voice stops her. "We can't put her in there, Mom."

"Oh, no no no. I couldn't. Where will he sleep?" I agree, though Tillie ignores both of us. We're already halfway up the creaky wood staircase, with Anders and Immy following closely behind. "I can sleep on the couch. Really."

Tillie ignores me and her son's many protests, swinging open the door to his room ceremoniously. If I had pictured the childhood bedroom of Anders Beck—and I haven't—this would not be it. I fight unsuccessfully to stifle my laughter as I take in my surroundings.

A bunk bed lines one wall, and covering every square inch of wall space there are dozens and dozens of posters.

Of Mariah Carey.

It's not a single poster, tastefully hidden in the back of his closet behind his clothing

like a sane person. No. There are many, many posters, from every Mariah era. It's so many posters that it detracts from the fact that there is an actual twin bunk bed in this grown man's bedroom. Maybe I've been listening to too much true crime, but it reminds me of one of those stories where they find a serial killer's lair covered in photos of the victims. I would be nervous except it's so freaking hilarious.

Obviously, I know what I have to do.

I take a quick selfie, making sure to include as many posters as possible. I type a text Mercer right away with the caption: "Well well well..."

"Gimme that." He grabs my phone before I can push send, holding it just out of my reach. "Let me remind you that you have a poster—"

"No! Anders!" He wouldn't bring that up in front of his mom. I just met her. I need her to like me. He knows that. I jump for my phone, like that will stop him.

"...of Micah Watson hidden in your closet!" he exclaims with triumph.

"No." Tillie gasps and her hand covers her mouth. Her smile tells me she's hamming up her response for her son's benefit.

Anders' grin is devious. "Yes."

"It isn't what it sounds like!" I defend myself, even though I know the truth: There is no defense. "Besides, you have to admit this is next-level crazy." I gesture to the walls. He even has a Mariah Carey Merry Christmas poster. "What in the Ted Bundy is happening here?"

Tillie laughs, even though I'm only half joking. "Will you be able to sleep in the presence of all this?"

“I can’t take Anders’ room. Let me take the couch.”

She shakes her head. “Not a chance, honey.” She fluffs the pillow and turns down the blanket.

It’s settled, then. I’m learning that there’s no point in arguing with any member of this family when they want something.

A few hours later, the house is quiet and I’m staring at the underside of the top bunk, completely wired. How on earth did I end up here—in Anders Beck’s family home, sleeping in his bed, staring into the many faces of Mariah Carey?

This family is not at all what I pictured. I like Anders’ parents. They talk, love, tease, and bicker like a normal, healthy family. I curl my toes in the cold sheets, finding strange pleasure in the fact that they are slightly pilled, kind of scratchy, and smell like Tide. There is no pretense here, despite their son’s megastar status .

Now I’m thinking about Anders and Imogen, sharing the bunk bed in the room next door. I wonder if he took the top or the bottom, and smile at the mental image of either option. Imogen had begged to take the top bunk with me, but I was relieved when Anders told her he wanted to have a sleepover with her. My efforts at remaining detached from either of them have been obliterated by both parties. They’ve stormed through my weak defenses and I’ve barely put up a fight. They’re just too hard to say no to.

For example: I rode in a tin can airplane across the country to a destination I didn’t plan. I have no idea what tomorrow will bring because I have no schedule. This weekend is not what I had envisioned and I am loving everything about that. Is this what adventure feels like? Because I need more of whatever this is.

“Goodnight, Mariah,” I whisper through a contented sigh as I force my eyes closed.

Of course, my phone immediately buzzes on the carpet where it's plugged in next to the bed. I'd ignore it, but what if Nizhóní is on fire? I swat around, find the charger cord, and reel in my phone like a trout.

ANDERS

Comfy?

SUNNY

Yep

ANDERS

Because I can come in there and tuck you in

ANDERS

I know all the tricks to that bed

SUNNY

Anders Beck Abrahamson. What would your mother say?

ANDERS

It was her idea

That makes me laugh out loud before I can stop myself. I slap my hand over my mouth.

ANDERS

I heard that. Coming over

“Stay where you are!” I whisper-shout through the wall, praying it’s not loud enough for Tillie or Johan to hear. I hope they’re heavy sleepers.

ANDERS

Nope. On my way. Get decent

ANDERS

Or not

There’s a soft knock at the door before the knob turns.

I pull the covers up to my chin out of instinct. Anders doesn’t need to know that I’m sleeping in his sweatshirt—the same one I didn’t really need earlier this evening when he offered it to me. I packed layers. I’m no dummy. But did I accept the ruggedly handsome man’s sweatshirt even though I had one in my bag? Yes. Again: I am no dummy. Say au revoir to your sweatshirt, buddy.

“Are you seriously knocking right now?” I tighten the blanket around me, just in case.

Instead of answering, he drops onto the bed beside me, lying back and crossing his ankles like he hasn’t just crossed a major boundary.

“Um, hello.” I laugh, scooting over to make room on the narrow mattress. “Welcome to your bed.”

“Hi.” He fluffs his side of the pillow under his head. “This thing is terrible.”

“I don’t care. I’m just happy I’m not at Super 8 tonight.” I whisper, hoping he’ll follow my lead. I don’t want to get caught like this .

“Me too.” His voice is low, thank goodness. He pulls my hand away from the vice grip I have on the blanket under my chin and kisses my palm. He tries to keep my hand in his, but I slip it away.

“Anders, you can’t be like this with me.”

“Why not?”

I groan. “You know what? I understand Oliver more and more the longer I know you.”

He pretends to shudder. “Don’t say that, Sunflower.”

“You know why we can’t do this. You’re making it so hard for me to keep it together.”

“So let things fall apart,” he says through a yawn. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

I hold up my fingers, ticking items off by the dim glow of the plug-in nightlight across the room. “One, we ruin the shoot. Two, you ruin your career. Three, Christopher’s lawyers destroy my family’s resort. Generations of hard work, gone. Poof. Four, we are all destitute. I wind up selling pictures of my feet on the internet to survive. You get by charging middle-aged women for photos at conventions.”

“I could make a decent living doing that.”

“ANDERS.”

He sighs. “I know.”

I can hear a clock ticking in the silence that follows. I peek at him when I feel his eyes on me. His hair is messy and his scruff is longer than I’ve ever seen on him. He really is ridiculously handsome. And good. I’m feeling a little like Elizabeth when she visits Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*. If I wasn’t half gone over Anders before we left Utah, I am now after seeing his childhood home and watching him interact with his parents. I can’t believe I ever bought into the trash that gets printed about him online.

“You’re not what I thought.” The words are out before I can stop them.

“How so? ”

“Well, there’s the Mariah thing.” I tease to deflect from the truth, because he can’t know what I’m really thinking. He’s already impossible to hold off. “The amount of grief you gave me for one, single Micah Watson poster—”

“One atrocious poster.”

“Um, have you seen these walls?”

“Yep. But that’s not what you meant. I’m not what you thought because?”

He lets the quiet fall around us. I squirm under his plaid comforter.

“I don’t know, I just thought you were like the stuff that goes around online. Different girl every week. Ostentatious. Mega bachelor yacht parties. Dragging Imogen around the world like a toy.”

“Hmm.”

I realize far too late how that sounded. “I mean, I know stuff online is only half true. But...”

He doesn’t respond. In the heavy silence that follows, it occurs to me that I am the Mr. Darcy of this situation. I’m the one who thought he was beneath me. I have made judgment after judgment about this man based on what? I don’t know him. I didn’t know him, anyway. But I think I know him now.

“The thing is—” he starts to say.

“I’m sorry,” I say at the same time.

“Go ahead,” I murmur.

He pulls in a deep breath and releases it slowly. “That was me. I can’t deny it. But it’s not me now.” He takes my hand, squeezing like he’s reassuring both of us. “Imogen’s mom...” he scratches his jaw.

He doesn’t want to talk about this, I can tell. I run my thumb across the back of his hand to encourage him.

“When Cassidy left us, Imogen was a wreck. We’ve both healed a lot, but you’ve probably noticed some of it still. She’s clingy. Worries too much. She tries to fill in like a mom would...”

I don’t know how I haven’t connected the dots before now, but he’s exactly right. My heart breaks for the little girl who doesn’t understand why her mom is gone and the anxiety and fear that go along with that.

“Cassidy just... left us. Left her—her own daughter. Yeah, I partied and I wasn’t the greatest guy. But seeing how much Cassidy hurt Imogen? That’s all it took. I realized I don’t want to be that person.” His voice rumbles like thunder and the tension in the air has gathered around us like static electricity. Lightning is going to strike soon. “I’m not that person anymore.” He recites the words like a mantra.

“You’re not. I can see that.” My voice is soft.

He’s gone quiet, and I can’t make out his face in the darkness. I need him to know that I see the real him, but he interrupts my thoughts, repeating my words under his breath like he’s inspecting them for truth. “I drag my daughter around the world like a toy.” Next it sounds like a question—an angry, lashing question. “I drag her around like a toy?”

“Anders, that’s not...”

“Hmm.” He kicks his feet over the side of the bed.

“Anders. I didn’t mean—”

“I know. I just need to think. It’s fine.” He squeezes my knee through the thick blankets, but his voice is robotic. “Just wanted to make sure you’re comfortable in here.”

He’s across the room before I can think of anything that will make this right. He twists the knob and without turning around, whispers, “G’night, Sunny,” into the dark.

“D ad.”

I groan into my wafer-like pillow. “Five more minutes, Ollie...” My mind goes black.

“Ugh! Dad! You gotta get up.” Imogen’s mouth is close to my ear now, tickling me into consciousness. “I made a surprise breakfast in bed for you and Sunny.”

I run my hands down my face, trying to wake up. It’s still dark. Why can’t I get this kid on a normal, human schedule? The frustrating thought takes me back to last night, and the talk I had with Sunny. Her words drag through my mind, barbed and scratching at my perception of my parenting.

Because I know she’s right.

It doesn’t feel great to recognize that I’ve done so many things wrong at the cost of my daughter’s wellbeing. But this is my career and my life, and she’s my daughter. I’m not about to leave her on other continents or across the country while I do my job like Cassidy did. I don’t know where to start to fix this. It’s a problem with no easy solution, but I’m determined to make it right.

I can’t worry about this right now. I already spent half the night tossing around and thinking about it, which is why I feel like —

“Ugh! Dad!”

“Okay.” That came out sharper than I intended, and I instantly wish I could suck the word back into my mouth. “I’m sorry, kiddo. I didn’t sleep very well.”

“It’s okay.” She pats my shoulder. “Come on. Your breakfast is gonna be cold.” She wraps her hands around my arm that is dangling over the side of the bed, pulling with all of her bird-like strength.

“Hey, isn’t breakfast in bed supposed to be in bed?”

“Ugh!” She tugs harder. “I can’t carry it. It’s too big. You have to help me.”

Eventually all of Immy’s tugging leads me to a breakfast tray for two on my parents’ kitchen island. There are two plates of her egg toast, two bananas freckled with brown spots, and two glasses of chocolate milk that slopped a little over the sides. I grab Immy under the arms and pull her up in a hug.

“Did you know that you’re the best girl in the whole world?” I peck a kiss on her cheek. “The very best.”

“Dad!” She giggles. “It’s going to get cold before Sunny can have it!”

“Okay, okay.” I take the tray and let Imogen lead me up the stairs. I hope Sunny slept better than I did last night because she’s about to have the earliest breakfast of her life.

I balance the tray on my side and move to knock on my old bedroom door, but Immy barges in before my knuckle hits the door, flicking on a dim yellow lamp.

“Immy, no—” I’m juggling a lot of food and can’t stop her.

“Sunny, get up! I made eggie toast for you and my dad!” She throws herself onto the edge of the bottom bunk, next to a sleeping Sunny.

The sight of her, sprawled across my bed, hair tangled around her face, with one foot

flopping off the side, makes me regret my cold treatment of her the night before when my ego was bruised. She deserves so much better than me and my mess. I scan her frame in a respectful, gentlemanly way and when I see that she slept in my sweatshirt I realize something. This woman owns me. She deserves better, it's true. But she owns me.

“What?” Sunny's voice is rough from sleep, and she tugs the comforter up to her neck at the sight of us, squinting into the lamp light.

“Breakfast in bed!” Sunny cheers, then whispers to me. “Sit by her, Dad. Get in the bed.” She nudges my leg. “Sunny, you hafta sit up and make room for my dad.”

Sunny's eyes are wide when she scrambles to prop herself against the headboard, leaving not quite enough room for me on the narrow bed. I can tell she's half-asleep and numbly following my daughter's bossy orders the best she can.

I love that my kid is giving me an excuse to get close to Sunny after things went south with us last night. I settle the tray on Sunny's lap while I climb in beside her. I barely fit under the top bunk—we're both half-hunched under here, following the orders of a five-year-old—but I'm enjoying the way Sunny is pressed against my side. I can feel her warmth through my sweatshirt she's wearing and it's a very good thing that my daughter is here to keep me in line.

“Thanks for being cool about this,” I murmur, taking the weight of the tray off of Sunny's lap.

She clears the sleep out of her voice. “This is really nice, Im. I've never had breakfast in bed.”

“You're going to love it. Normally my Morfie makes it, but he's still asleep.”

I track Sunny's gaze as it flits to the window and the darkness outside.

"Sorry," I say under my breath. "It's early."

"It's okay. This looks so good, kiddo," she says to Immy before taking a sip of her chocolate milk. "Mmm. This is the best."

"I know." My daughter and her confidence. But she glows under the praise, watching as we both dig in. "Okay, I'm going to eat my breakfast. I'll come get the tray in... thirteen minutes."

I hear Sunny's tiny snicker as Immy closes the door behind her, leaving us alone in the quiet room. I swallow. I want to make things right with us, but I don't know how to start. She needs to know that I'm not blowing her off and that I want to talk, I just needed time to process. I can't get the words to come out, though. I'm too distracted by Sunny and the fact that every point of contact from our shoulders to our hips feels magnetic.

"Thirteen minutes. We better get cracking." She holds her chocolate milk aloft like she's waiting to clink glasses for a toast.

I grab my glass and tap it to hers. "To breakfast in bed with a beautiful woman, even if it is at six a.m." I regret the words immediately. I'm sure they won't do much to convince her I'm anything but a philanderer.

She sighs. "To breakfast in bed with an incorrigible movie star."

Joking. That's a good sign. I take a bite of my egg toast, grateful to eat anything that isn't served in a labeled, plastic container. I think about what to say while I chew.

"You're right about me dragging Immy around, but I don't know how to fix it."

She coughs around her toast. “I wasn’t saying that. I—”

“I know it wasn’t you saying it, but it’s true, nevertheless.” I find her dark brown eyes. Man, she’s pretty. “I’m thinking about it. I’m going to figure it out. I want you to know I love Imogen more than anything. There has to be a way for me to be a dad and... this.” I gesture to my body—to Anders Beck, the celebrity persona.

Her full lips turn up at the corners. “Millions of hot dads do it every day. You’ll find a way,” she teases.

I scoff. “Impossible. There aren’t millions of hot dads.”

She smiles at my stupid joke, nibbling on her toast. “You are a rare specimen, Anders. That much is true. ”

Her small smile stays in place while we finish our breakfast, which feels like a victory. I’m finishing the last bites of my overripe banana when Sunny stacks our dishes on the tray, because of course she’s the person who stacks her dishes after being served.

“Oh...” She uncovers a scrap of paper under her plate and unfolds it.

This has Imogen written all over it. I find a lot of notes in my luggage when I travel—surprise, joking threats, requests for souvenirs, and I-love-yous, in her misspelled, childish scrawl. I lean over to read the note, but to my surprise Sunny folds it before I can. Even in the dim light I can tell her face is pink.

“What does it say?” I ask with a laugh. What would she want to hide from me? I swipe for the note, but before I get close she shoves it down the front of her shirt for safekeeping. That makes me laugh even harder.

“So! What’s the plan today?” Her voice is loud, obviously trying to deflect. I let her. I can just ask Immy what the note says.

“I guess my brothers are coming. And one thing you should know about my family is we can’t get together without my mom giving us a project to finish. We’re doing tile today.” I think back on the texts I traded with my mom and her excitement to have her bathroom redone. My back already hurts thinking about it. I guess I’m glad my brothers are coming, after all. I’m kind of dreading any interactions they’ll have with Sunny, but at least there will be more hands to carry tile and buckets. A horror movie soundtrack plays in my mind at the thought of the grout water buckets. “It’s not too late. We can find a day spa for you. This is supposed to be your vacation.”

“Are you serious? Not a chance. I love doing tile. All of that planning and laying things out in order, with a finished product to look at immediately? Ultimate satisfaction.”

I should’ve known, but I shake my head at her. “There’s no way I’m letting my girlfriend retile my parents’ bathroom on her so-called vacation.”

She arches an eyebrow at the word, which was my precise intention. She doesn’t look thrilled with me. What else would I call a girl who I like to kiss and who I brought home to meet my parents? There isn’t a more accurate word for it. We can ignore the fact that Anders Beck, Inc. is paying her to take care of my daughter. That makes it sketchy.

I bump her shoulder with mine. “Besides, my mom’ll want you and Immy all to herself, far away from the back-breaking labor.

“We’ll see,” she says with a knowing look. “All right, I think our thirteen minutes are up. Shoo. I need to get dressed.” Then she actually shoos me out of my own bed with a playful shove.

I lean back under the bunk to grab our breakfast tray and tug playfully on the shoulder of her sweatshirt. “This looks good on you.”

Four hours later, I’m on my hands and knees spreading thinset onto my parents’ bathroom floor with a trowel. I’m also trying not to stare at Sunny’s backside as she does the same. She’s obviously done this before. She’s been bossing my brothers and me around all day. Or more accurately, she’s prevented us from making multiple near-disastrous home improvement decisions all morning. Tomato, tomahto.

Liam and Josh came in on the same flight from Chicago, where they work at a tech startup they founded. They crashed through the door early this morning with their backpacks and running critical commentary.

Sunny has taken to them like a butterfly to flowers and I could not be less pleased with the situation. I’ve been the butt-end of a lot of jokes today. I was worried about my brothers ganging up on Sunny and scaring her away. They’ve never liked any of the women I’ve dated, least of all Imogen’s mother. But it turns out I should’ve been worried about the three of them ganging up on me .

“Explain it to me again,” Liam says, because as the eldest son he feels entitled to justifications for my every decision. “How did you end up hiring your girlfriend to be your nanny?”

“I’m not his girlfriend.” Sunny corrects him for the tenth time, scraping a neat swirl of thinset off the concrete. “My family owns the resort where Anders is filming. He hired me to take care of Immy after he had to fire the old nanny at the last second.”

Josh coughs from where he’s perched on the closed toilet—which is sitting in my parent’s bathtub until the tile is finished—scrolling on his phone. “You fired another one?”

“Yep,” I snap at my baby brother. “You want to get off your butt and help, Yankee? Or are you going to sit there all day?”

“Why do they call you that?” Sunny asks Josh. She’s been like a boxing referee with us, trying to keep things light and above the belt. She doesn’t know that this is normal for us. It’s how we show love.

“He was born after we moved to the States,” Liam answers for him. “He’s the one true Yank of the family.”

“Ah,” Sunny says. “And you guys were born in Sweden?”

“Ja ,” he answers, letting his voice get low and growly in a way that gets my hackles up. “?kta svenskar .”

Is he trying to act sexy for her right now, whipping out the Swedish? And I swear he just puffed up his chest when he said that. Freaking Liam.

I slop a pile of thinset on the floor, spreading it out and scraping up the excess before Liam hands me a sheet of antiqued penny tile. We fit it into place next to the previous sheet, using a grout float to level it all out. Sunny taught us this trick. She’s working alone in her corner—precise, efficient, and gaining on us. Who knows what Josh is doing? Probably ordering a crate of protein powder or more mirrors. I get all the guff for being arrogant about my looks, but Josh is the real peacock of the family. It doesn’t help anything that he has the face and physique to back it up. Freaking Josh . I slap another mound of thinset onto the concrete .

“Easy, pal. Let’s take our time and do this right,” Liam chides.

Instead of shoving his head into the toilet and flushing, I pass him my trowel and let him take a turn. And just in time. Sunny’s phone buzzes on the counter and she hands

her trowel to me.

“I’ll just be a second.” She takes her phone into the hall and closes the door behind her.

My brothers and I work in silence for a minute—except Josh, who is still scrolling on the toilet—before Liam chimes in like he can’t contain himself.

“She’s different.”

“How so?” I’ve almost caught up to where Sunny left off. Liam is slow.

“I don’t know. You brought her home, for starters.”

That’s true. I don’t bring anyone home. Cassidy was the only one, because things actually got serious. After her first visit she avoided my parents’ house like it was a construction site porta potty.

Liam continues, “She’s normal. Super cool, actually,” he says with a grunt. His voice echoes through the bathroom and I wish he was capable of a lower volume. He’s not. “And she’s an absolute smokeshow, but like in an authentic way.”

“She can move her face,” Josh adds, distracted by whatever is on his screen.

“Facial movement. I didn’t know the bar was so low.” I’m vigorously scraping the thinset off the concrete now.

“You know what I mean. And you act differently around her. It’s obvious that you respect her. You listen to her. Watch out for her. You’re not so dang self-absorbed. You’re like... pre-Hollywood Anders.” He’s really huffing and puffing over there.

“Hmm.” I place a sheet of penny tile that connects with the area where Liam has been working, lightly pressing it into the mortar. This will need to dry overnight before we can grout tomorrow. We’ll probably finish just in time to hop on the plane for Utah. The process has gone smoothly with Sunny’s help. We avoided the slowdowns caused by our usual mistakes in these projects our mother saves for us.

Speak of the devil. My mom walks in, looking every inch the retired elementary school teacher she is. I remember her embroidered denim jumper from before I moved out. It’s kind of comforting, actually. This place is like a time capsule. “How’s it going in—oh, it looks so good. I think I’m going to cry!”

“No. Don’t cry, Mom,” Liam begs. “There are men working here.”

“You cry if you want.” I shoot Liam a pointed look. I don’t blame her. This tile is a big step up from the 90s-era linoleum that my dad pulled off the floor in preparation for our visit.

“Thank you, boys.” Her eyes are red-rimmed and blinking. She gets weepy every time we come home. Then she makes a 90-degree turn in the conversation. “That Sunny is a real gem, huh?”

Here we go. I know she’s been biding her time, waiting for the opportunity to catch me alone for the interrogation. Not that I mind. She loves me and means well. I’ll take this over Oliver’s interrogations any day. At least with my mother I know she’ll encourage me to go after what I want—Sunny—instead of pushing her away.

Wait .

The realization that I want Sunny finally registers in my neanderthal brain like I just discovered fire. Not “want” like I need to devour her with kisses, although I do want that. I’m human. But the kind of “want” I’m feeling means roots. I want our roots and

lives and everything to tangle together until it's impossible to separate. I want to belong to her and I want her to be mine. This is the feeling that started at the emergency clinic after Immy's skateboard accident. The rightness of it courses through me like the lifesaving heat from my neanderthal fire.

Immy called it.

Last week when she was freaking out on set, I'd been desperate to calm her down. In what I'll own was not my finest parenting moment, I bribed her .

"I'll give you whatever you want if you stop yelling and go back to the suite with Sunny." I whispered in her ear. I knew it was terrible parenting. Desperation will do that.

"I want you to marry Sunny so she can live with us all the time," she whispered back.

I almost fell on my butt, but I played along because it wasn't my first hostage negotiation. "What if Sunny doesn't want to marry me? She just met me." I felt the dagger-like stares of the entire crew pressuring me to speed this along.

"Just so you know, Sunny loves you. I can tell. Just ask her, okay?"

So, I did the only thing I could do. I told my daughter I'd try my best, then I kissed Sunny in front of everyone. I had no choice. I didn't want any other choice, and it was an excellent kiss.

"Oh, my." My mother's fading Swedish accent drags me out of my memory of Sunny's lips. "Boy, you are in so deep."

I know. I can't go on denying what I feel for Sunny. I can't act like it's a meaningless crush and I'm only messing around, because it isn't and I'm not. This is different

from anything I've ever felt. My brain is rewiring, with Sunny and Immy at the center of it, and I want matching pajamas and rings in our future. "I'm—"

"You're not being your usual self. I can see it. You're being real."

"Yeah, and... I think I love her." I feel naked admitting this in front of my brothers, but I also realize I've got myself in a predicament. I need my mom's help more than I care about my brothers' judgment. "I love Sunny." The more I say the words, the more that warm feeling moves through me.

"You can't fall in love with the freaking nanny, you moron." Liam grunts from his corner of the bathroom. "You realize the situation you put her in. You provide a paycheck. You're in a power position. It's totally screwed up, man."

I glare at my brother. "Thanks, Dr. Phil. I know. I didn't plan on this. "

"What did you think would happen? Come to think of it, that's the problem. You don't think. We've all seen how you go after women," he barks in his stupid, booming voice. "At least this time you seem for real. You actually love Sunny?"

I want to punch him, but his concession at the end stops me short. I can take my anger out on him later tonight over a round of Super Smash Bros. For now, I need to figure out some things. I drag my hands through my hair, remembering too late that my hands are covered in mortar. "Yeah. Settling down, two-point-five kids, arguing over how to load the dishwasher kinda love." I groan, running my hands down my face. "What am I going to do?"

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I can't believe what I just overheard. I didn't mean to eavesdrop. I finished my phone call with Mercer, relieved to know my life back home is intact, minus the arm of one couch which was eaten by an unattended Hairy. But nothing has caught fire. Whew. I paused outside the bathroom door when I heard three words that will echo in my mind for the rest of my life: I love Sunny. I froze in place, stunned by the words spoken in Anders' unmistakable baritone.

Now Liam is ripping him a new one and I am a statue. I can't move.

Anders loves me?

ANDERS LOVES ME.

I've watched a lot of medical dramas. I know what comes next. Someone will come in here with a defibrillator and fix whatever is going on with my heart. Either it's beating so hard and fast that it's a steady, loud hum, or it has stopped altogether. I need a crash cart. I need some attractive actor-doctor to inject me with a dose of epinephrine. I need to plunge face-first into a heart-shaped box of chocolates. I need a white dress. I need to think this through .

Unfortunately, a critical conversation is still happening on the other side of that door and Anders says four more words that stop me cold: Two-point-five kids.

And there it is.

I'm flatlining.

While I'm caught up deciding how to do my hair for our wedding, Anders says some of the only words he could say that make me realize the wedding won't happen. He wants a family. Of course he wants a family. I'm surrounded by evidence of that fact. Who wouldn't want a family when they come from such a happy one? I know I do. It just can't happen for me.

This isn't news. I've been coping with this life-altering truth since the accident that took my dad also took away my ability to have children. I've grieved this. It's just a sad fact of my life. But it has seriously narrowed down my potential husband pool. Not many men are family-oriented and yet don't want children.

My only serious boyfriend, Blake, who I dated for three years, broke up with me exactly forty-eight hours after we learned that my body isn't capable of bearing children. Besides adding injury to almost unbearable grief, it sent a clear message that really messed with my seventeen-year-old head.

It still does, apparently. Because I'm staring at the backside of a bathroom door wondering how I can break this to Anders gently, and angry all over again about my injured body.

Usually I let the information out early in the dating process before either party gets too attached. It weeds out men quickly. In fact, it seems to have weeded out every man up to this point. I've had a lot of three week relationships. The problem with Anders is that we haven't technically dated. I didn't see this coming, so I didn't see a need to clue him into my infertility. Like an idiot, I let myself get attached. I got way too close. We're in too deep, but we can't keep doing this. I accidentally hoodwinked us both .

What am I going to do?

I walk downstairs, straight out the front door, and plop onto the porch swing. That's

what I do. I park myself on the dusty yellow cushion and stare past the barely budding trees to Lake Harriet. Anders told me the name of the lake when we drove up to the house yesterday. Anders . The muscles of my face draw into a scowl that's giving me the beginning of a headache. I swipe my phone open and start a text with my mom on autopilot.

SUNNY

I done messed up, A-A-ron

It's a joke from a silly video that has become part of the family vernacular. My mom sends a laughing emoji in response, then:

MOM

What did you do?

SUNNY

I just overheard Anders telling his family that he loves me

SUNNY

Like, two-point-five kids loves me

SUNNY

He doesn't know that I know

SUNNY

And I haven't told him about... you know

I see the three little dots indicating that my mom is typing. They disappear and reappear a few times before this message comes through:

MOM

Do you love Anders ?

SUNNY

I just met him

MOM

So?

SUNNY

How I feel doesn't matter. He actually said the words. He wants kids.

MOM

You know what I'm going to say

She has been a vocal proponent of adoption since I received the news of my infertility. I get it. If I ever happen to find someone who loves me enough to accept me as-is, that would be the only way I could have children. But I also know how costly and arduous that process can be—despite what my mom always says. It seems easier to make peace with a child-free life than to start down that path—to say nothing of the near-impossibility of finding a family man who is content with

adoption. This is a circular conversation we've had many, many times.

SUNNY

You don't need to say it. I know.

MOM

You need to tell him and let him choose

SUNNY

I know what he's going to choose

MOM

I'm going to tell you something that might shatter your reality: You don't know everything, you can't control everything, and yet everything will be okay.

I agreed with her up until the end there. Over the past few weeks, Anders has shown me that I don't know everything. He's made it his mission in life to help me see that I can't control everything. But I don't know that everything will be okay— not with Anders and me, anyway. While I'm pondering the hopelessness of the situation, three messages come in at once.

ANDERS

You disappeared

MOM

Just tell him. Put it out there. If Anders is the man for you, it will work out. But remember to have fun. You're on vacation. You can save the hard talk for later if you need to. This one will keep. Love you, kiddo.

ANDERS

We're getting a late lunch. Come find us when you're ready

I know I need to fess up to Anders that I overheard and find a way to let him down gently. I do. But maybe my mother is right and it can wait until after our weekend getaway. No need to sully the fun of tiling floors and sleeping on Anders' bunk bed with talk of my infertility. I'll tell him on the plane ride home or maybe Monday.

These justifications are running through my mind when I square my shoulders and walk inside, ready to party with the Abrahamsons. I hardly recognize myself. Who is this woman who is putting off until tomorrow what should be done today? It's like Mercer has taken over my body.

I tuck my phone into the pocket of Anders' oversized hoodie as I step into the nearly empty kitchen, feeling Imogen's note that I had stashed there earlier this morning. The memory brings heat to my cheeks. She had written the words "Wil you mary my dad?" in her sweet, childish scrawl. My chest aches at the thought of her eager heart, so willing to love me.

"Hi. Sorry, Mercer was just checking in," I say to no one except Anders, who is at the sink washing his hands. There's no sign of anyone else. It's just me and Anders Beck, the celebrity heartthrob adored by millions who just admitted that he loves me. But he doesn't know that I know and he is standing right there.

"Everything okay back home?" he asks, with a flash of his dimple. He washes up and down his forearms, scrubbing away the drying thinset. The movement makes the

veins in his arms and hands distractingly prominent.

“Yeah,” I mumble. I’m staring at his arms. I know I am, but I also can’t look at him anywhere else and keep my wits about me. His dimple is unsafe. He even has a clump of thinset stuck in his messy hair that’s making me want to run my fingers through it. “Where is... where’s...” My brain is frozen, ogling his hands while he dries them on a red dish towel. Spit it out, Sunny .

He’s smirking in a way that says he knows exactly why I can’t look at him. Or like he knows I have an incriminating communiqué hidden in my pocket. His blue eyes dance like he’s holding in a laugh.

“Where is everyone?” He finishes my question for me, letting me off the hook. “We talked my mom into getting take-out from this pizza place we grew up on. They all left a few minutes ago. I’m surprised you didn’t see them pull out.”

I’m not surprised. My nose was glued to my phone in panic mode. “That’s...” Anders walks around the counter closer to me, and whatever I was going to say leaves my brain. He loves me.

He leans against the counter next to me. “Good?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“You okay?” He bumps me with his elbow. “Sorry you’ve been working through your whole weekend off. I owe you another vacation.”

That snaps me out of it. “No, you do not. I’m having fun, trust me.” The last thing I need is for this man to make any more effort on my behalf. He’s already too hard to resist. “I love projects like this. It’s relaxing to me.”

His phone buzzes on the counter and he ignores it. “I hope so. You’re getting the full Abrahamson treatment. Heavy labor and comfort food.”

“Two of my favorite things.” It’s the truth. Very few combinations of activities are more satisfying.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I can tell he’s distracted by his ringing phone.

“You should get that.”

“Nah. It’s Ollie. I’ll call him back.”

“What if it’s an emergency?”

“It’s never an emergency with Oliver. Hey, what did Immy’s note say this morning?”

I can tell he’s trying to deflect and distract me. Little does he know, I invented that tactic. “Want me to talk to him?”

His face makes me think he’s considering it and I’m worried he’ll call my bluff. I’m not talking to Oliver. He’s frightening. Luckily, the buzzing stops and we’re both saved.

“So...” he trails off.

“So?” I’m so awkward around him now that I know he’s in love with me. It was all fun and games when the stakes were lower. Now, there’s pressure I can’t ignore. And it’s not helping anything that Anders looks like he just finished some construction-themed photo shoot. He’s all messy hair, muscles, and sweat from hard labor.

“My brothers are staying the night.” He clears his throat, visibly uncomfortable.

“Good. You guys probably don’t get to see each other often, right?” And I like them. They’re easy to talk to. Liam is smart. I can tell he makes Anders toe the line. And Josh is hilarious. It’s fun to see how the brothers interact.

“I guess.” He seems less than thrilled.

I understand why when our sleeping arrangements are sorted out later that night. After a day of hard labor and heavy food, we’re all ready for sleep. We found Imogen dead asleep on the bottom bunk in Anders’ bedroom-slash-Mariah shrine hours ago. Because Anders slept in Josh and Liam’s room last night, the only place left for him is with me and Imogen. He makes a sad little bed on the carpet, even though I’ve told him repeatedly that I can take the couch, the floor, the bathtub, or anything. I feel so guilty about this arrangement.

“Ready?” He holds a hand to the light switch, waiting for me to make the ascent to the top bunk.

I’ve brushed my teeth and washed all traces of mortar out of my hair, leaving it dripping on my shoulders. The climb up the rickety wooden ladder is the final obstacle of this crazy day. I make my way up the steps and crawl under the comforter and sheets as quickly as I can. “Yep.” I tug the comforter around me as darkness falls over the little room.

My eyes are starting to adjust to the dim nightlight when the bed wobbles precariously. Is Anders climbing the ladder?

“What are you doing?” I hiss, fully aware that his brothers next door will be privy to our full conversation. And I have no interest in Imogen discovering us like this; I don’t care what her note said.

“Coming to hang out with my girl,” his deep voice warms the dark room. There’s an

unspoken “obviously” in his tone that makes my toes curl. “I promise I’m not sleeping up here. My mom would kill me. She’s like your mom.”

I suspect the only reason Anders got away with the sleeping arrangement at all is because Tillie and Johan ducked out early to go to bed. “It’s not the sleep part I’m worried about, Anders,” I murmur.

“What do you take me for? I’m not that kinda guy.”

I see the hint of a smile as he falls on top of the comforter beside me, making the bed frame creak and crack, and pinning my left arm under the blankets. There isn’t room up here for both of us. If anything amorous was going to happen tonight, this ramshackle bunk bed would throw a bucket of ice water on that fire fast, to say nothing of Mariah Carey watching over us.

Good.

I can’t handle having him so close when I know rejection is looming on my horizon. I can smell his cologne and feel his heat, and the rise and fall of his chest. He’s also being a perfect gentleman, unless you count climbing into my bed and pinning me to the mattress accidentally.

I can’t take this.

“I’m infertile.” The words pop out of me like machine gun fire, surprising both of us. Oh, how I hate those words. I’d much rather say “I can’t have kids,” but when I’ve used that wording in the past it only prompted more questions about my infertility. I’m so tired of answering those questions. The phrase “I’m infertile” tends to shut that down.

A beat passes. Then another.

I knew he wouldn't take this news well. I can't believe those words flew out of my mouth like that. I'm just so overwhelmed by this man. He's been full steam ahead with me this weekend—this month—and I am... scared. I have to stop whatever is going on here. I can't be his girl, his girlfriend, the girl he loves, or anything, when he doesn't have the full truth.

“Anders? Are you awake?” I whisper.

“I'm sorry, Sunny.” He pauses, and his hand finds mine underneath him. He pulls my hand free, pressing it beneath his. This man is like a warm blanket. The weight of his hand feels reassuring, and very friendly. “That's... probably difficult?”

Is it difficult for me to know that I'll never be able to have children of my own? That there have been exactly zero men who have stayed interested in me after learning this information? It's old news for me, but he should've known this long before we ended up in the same bunk bed.

“It is—or it was, anyway. I've known for a long time, so I'm fine.” This isn't entirely accurate, but it will shut down further unwanted questioning. “I just thought—I guess I thought you should know.”

He rolls onto his side to face me in the dark, shaking the bed and making a racket. I can't see his eyes, but I feel them on me and he's uncharacteristically quiet. He pulls my hand to his mouth and kisses my palm in a move that is becoming a terrible habit.

“Why did you think I should know?” His deep voice hums against my palm.

Now I'm feeling extra silly because obviously he doesn't know that I know he loves me. He doesn't know that I heard him tell his brothers that he two-point-five-kids loves me. I'm just the nanny sharing her highly sensitive medical history at a sleepover. Wonderful. But there is no trace of teasing in his tone, which I appreciate.

Too many men have turned to jokes to lighten the mood during this difficult conversation. No matter how much time passes, I've never been able to joke about this part of my life. The grief is always there. I've made peace with it and live around it.

He's waiting almost patiently for my answer. He squeezes my hand when I take too long.

"Uh... I overheard a conversation today." Might as well throw it all out there at once. "I heard you tell your brothers you love me."

"Oh yeah? You heard all that, huh?" He doesn't sound embarrassed. He's as nonchalant about our impending doom as ever. "I figured I'd say it before my mom called me out. She could tell."

"Hold up. Your mom was in the bathroom at the time?" Aaack . Tillie knows Anders loves me, which means Johan probably knows by now. I am going to disappoint the entire family instead of just Anders and his brothers. I should've tried harder to stop this from the beginning.

"Yeah. She asked, so I admitted it. She could tell there's something different about how I feel about you. "

I groan, pulling away from him. "Anders, we can't do this."

"Why not?" he asks with a smile in his voice, tugging me even closer. My head is tucked under his chin now, and he's rubbing a line up and down my back.

"Did you hear what I just told you?" I let out an exasperated sigh.

"That you're... infertile?"

“Yes. That. I know that you love me. I think I love you, too, but you’re not thinking about—”

“You love me?”

The surprise in his voice does something to my heart. It squeezes and aches behind my ribs. I picture the father of a little girl who was abandoned by her mother, navigating life alone and yet always surrounded by prying eyes. Always second-guessing the intentions of the people around him, to the point that he is surprised when someone genuinely loves him—even when he is so entirely loveable.

“Of course I love you, Anders.” I pretend to scoff. “It’s not that hard to do.”

Instead of the response I expect, he wraps an arm around me, pulling me impossibly close. He holds me so tight, it eases the ache in my chest. It’s like our hearts want to be physically close to each other. He weaves his fingers into the hair at the nape of my neck, and I feel his long sigh when his warm, solid chest relaxes against mine. I knew Anders was an excellent kisser, but it turns out that his true gift is hugging. Anders Beck is a world-class, Olympic-caliber hugger. I could stay like this forever. I curl into him.

“I love you.” He says the words on a relieved exhale, making his chest hum against me.

“I knew it!” a tiny voice cheers from the bunk underneath us.

We startle apart. Well, I pull away. Anders is as immovable as a brick wall, draping his heavy arm over my waist and chuckling.

“Yeah, yeah. Go back to sleep, Im.” He uses his Dad Voice on her, which never seems to work .

“I tried to, but you guys are talking so much and I have to hear it.” She yawns.

“You don’t have to hear it. This is a Sunny and Dad talk. Imogen needs to sleep.”

“I can’t. I need Hairy,” she whines.

I squeeze Anders tight waist, silently asking for permission. He nods.

“Hey Im?” My voice seems loud in this small room.

“Yeah?”

“What if your dad sleeps with you instead of Hairy tonight? He’s also big and stinky.”

Imogen giggles. “Yeah, he is.”

“Thanks a lot, girls,” he gripes, even as he moves toward the ladder. He pauses, turning back toward me. He leans down to kiss my forehead, lingering. “I’m thinking about what you said. I promise,” he murmurs against my temple.

“Yeah?” I whisper.

“Yeah. Just didn’t want to leave you hanging.”

“Okay.” I feel the ax dangling over me, even as he says those words that are meant to be reassuring. He wouldn’t be the first guy who had to “think it through” only to reject me in the end. This time is different, though. I’ve never had this conversation with someone when I’m in this deep. Even with Blake in high school, the feelings weren’t this intense. I don’t think I’m going to sleep tonight.

I wonder if there are any more of those chocolate balls downstairs?

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

Sunny's voice grumbles from somewhere above me, pulling me out of a deep sleep. "Joe?" Her sleep-roughened voice cuts through the darkness. "It's so late...er, early."

It finally registers that I'm in my childhood bunk bed and last night Sunny told me she loves me. Or maybe it was tonight. It's hard to gauge the time in the dark. Either way, the memory of Sunny's words and the way it felt having her pressed against me kickstarts my heart.

I'm sweating in this tiny bed. Imogen is a heater and her warm, pudgy toes are smooshed into my cheek. She does tumbling routines in her sleep. I push her foot away with a groan. Between thoughts of Sunny and the sporadic kicks to the face, I didn't sleep well. I swipe my phone to check the time. It's five in the morning. I've missed some calls from Oliver, Christopher, and some unknown Utah numbers.

"What?" Sunny shrieks. "No!" She clambers down the wobbly ladder. "Anders. Anders, wake up! "

I bolt upright, whacking my head on the unforgiving bottom side of the top bunk. Sunny drags me up from the bed with strength I didn't know she had.

"What?" I'm fighting to stay calm, but her tone is making my fight or flight response engage. I've never seen her lose it like this. She's stuffing everything into her bag—dirty clothes, shoes, her charger, and a familiar cottage cheese container. Chokladbollar ?

She hisses into the phone, "Yes, I'm with Anders. Lecture me later! How bad is it?" Her rushed question shoots through the quiet bedroom. Immy rolls over and curls into

a ball. “Did they get it out? Is it even out yet?”

I can almost make out Joe’s sharp response, but what I think I heard can’t be right. Fire? There’s no way. Sunny joked about the resort burning down a few times before we left. Joe has to be messing with her.

“Sunny.” I put a comforting hand on her arm to slow her down. I’m sure whatever it is isn’t as bad as it sounds. “What’s going on?”

Her dark eyes flash to mine, panicked and wide. “A fire...” she trails off, blinking. She still has her phone pressed to her ear and I can hear her brother barking her name to get her attention. She’s zoning out. She looks like she’s going into shock. I pull her phone away from her and she lets me.

“Joe?” I lower Sunny to sit on the bed and she stares blankly at the wall. “Sunny is kinda freaking out. What’s going on?”

“Anders?” He spits out my name like he’s sure I personally hired an arsonist or something. “We had a fire at Nizhóní. It’s almost out now. There’s...” He curses and shouts something to someone on his end. “She needs to get home. Can you get her here?”

“Yeah. As fast as I can.”

We should’ve brought the jet .

Naturally, we pass through the worst turbulence I’ve ever experienced on our flight back to Utah. Between Immy’s tearful whining, Sunny’s dazed stare out the window, and the bumpy ride, it’s a long and nightmarish trip. In my rush to file a flight plan, pack up Immy, and scramble to the airport, I haven’t returned a single one of the many calls I missed this morning. You’d think I really did hire an arsonist, given the

number of calls I've missed. I kind of don't want to land the plane. I know things are only going to get worse before they get better. I have enough gas to circle for an extra hour or so. It's tempting.

But later that afternoon, I do land the plane. I load a silent Sunny and sleeping Immy into my SUV. We make the short drive from the small airport surrounded by an eerie peace that I can barely stand. It's exactly like that moment in every horror film when the girl walks alone into the dark, quiet house and you know there's a monster waiting for her. Don't go in there, you idiot .

Only we're the idiots this time.

When we finally reach the entrance of the resort I expect to see smoldering remains, smoke, ashes, and fire trucks. Instead, there are policemen holding off a small line of cars, all with California and Nevada plates. The entrance is blocked by squad cars with their lights flashing. There are barricades closing the walking entrance and holding back a small crowd of photographers. Paparazzi.

A word flies out of my mouth that I never allow myself to say, especially around my daughter. Sunny straightens in the passenger seat, anger and stress etched in the lines between her eyebrows. Her gaze darts to Imogen. I know, I know. She doesn't need to say anything.

I pull into the drive and we're stopped briefly by one of the officers guarding the entrance. He sees my face, nods, and lets us through before we're stopped for too long. But still, a group of photographers rushes my SUV, clamoring and hollering at us and each other. A few of them smack their meaty hands on the windows. Thankfully, the police handle them efficiently. A short, kind of pudgy officer even pulls out a nightstick. Geez. These small town cops don't mess around.

My eyes flash to Imogen in her booster seat, praying that she's still asleep. She's not.

She's dragging in short, hiccupping breaths and blinking hard. Trying not to cry. My heart rips open. How can I keep doing this to her? I can't.

Before I can say anything, Sunny reaches around her seat and takes Imogen's hand. "Shhh. Hey. Look at me, Im." She pauses and I hear my daughter's breathing slow. "We're okay. See? Your dad is here. I'm here. We're about to see Hairy. Keep looking at me, kiddo."

She calms Immy with chatter while I navigate the parking area in the direction of my suite, confused. Where was the fire? Everything looks normal if you don't count the crowd at the entrance. It isn't until I turn the last corner that I see it.

Black soot stains white stucco above the broken windows and door to my suite, as well as a few suites on either side. The landscaping is smashed and muddy, and trash is scattered here and there. The whole area is closed off with yellow tape.

That's it?

I'm glad that the fire was contained in this small area, and that Sunny, Imogen, and I were not around when it started. The point of origin is definitely my suite, the door of which is ominously open wide.

"What in the world?" Sunny asks no one, whipping out her phone and punching a few buttons. We stare through the windshield in disbelief while her call connects. "I'm here. Where are you?" she asks whoever is on the other end of the line. "Yeah, we're right outside. Coming in."

I throw the SUV into park and Sunny moves to help me unload Imogen. "I've got this. Go ahead." I wave her away .

When Imogen and I finally make it inside, the first words out of her mouth are,

“Where’s Hairy?”

I’m less concerned about the dog, and more perplexed by the scene in front of us. Sunny, Sarah, and Joe are lined up on one side of the soggy, ashy mess, faced off against Mercer and Oliver, who are standing oddly close to one another. The entire room is coated in a layer of some kind of foam.

“She’s with Goldie,” Mercer finally answers my daughter. “She’s okay. Want me to go get her for you? I can go.”

Joe snaps. “No, you don’t. And bring her where? You burned their suite to the ground, Mercer.”

Sarah puts a hand on his arm with a barely perceptible shake of her head. She gestures subtly toward Imogen with red-rimmed eyes, a gentle reminder from an experienced mother.

Meanwhile, Oliver takes Mercer’s hand. She yanks it away. “Read the room, dude.”

Sarah holds out a hand to Imogen. She looks to me for approval and I nod. “Why don’t we go see Hairy and get some dinner? I bet you’re hungry after your long trip, huh?” I haven’t thought about dinner and I’m relieved by Sarah’s thoughtfulness.

There’s a moment of tense silence while my daughter and Sarah leave, but Sunny’s voice slices through it the moment the door clicks. “How did this happen?” Her voice breaks, and it undoes me.

“You get to tell them, pal. I’m done talking,” Joe barks at Oliver. I’ve never seen anyone speak to him like that and live to tell the tale.

Oliver faces Sunny, clearly avoiding eye contact with me. “We had a fire.”

“How?” She sounds so tired.

I stand beside her, lacing our fingers together. She has to know that this is fixable and everything will be okay. I squeeze her hand to reassure her. But she slides her fingers out of mine, stepping closer to her brother. Something about her movement feels off. A knot forms in my stomach.

“How did the fire start?” Her monotone question doesn’t sound like the radiant ray of sunshine I’ve come to love and I feel a protective anger growing inside my chest.

Mercer sighs. “Oliver and I came here to get some stuff for the dog.”

“You guys were together?” I ask Oliver. “Why?”

Oliver’s chagrined look to Mercer tells me everything I need to know, but don’t want to know. “We’ve been hanging out.” There’s a phrase I’ve never heard Oliver use. “We came here to grab some things. Things escalated. We got—”

“Busy,” Mercer cuts in.

“I was going to say distracted,” Oliver corrects her with an awkward smile.

Disgusting .

Sunny is cringing. “Mercer!” she moans the name in the same tone a person would use if they found a toenail clipping in their pasta.

Oliver finishes the story almost in one breath. “We were making out” — Sunny and I wince in unison, which would be comical in any other circumstance — “and I don’t know for sure, but the fire department seemed to think it started with the curtains. I’m guessing the dog knocked the candles into them.”

I'm not thinking about why there were lit candles.

But making out with a woman during a critical film shoot? Unattended candles? Major property damage? After the years of nagging, reminders, and unending check-ins from Oliver, this happens? I know this is no time for gloating, but I can't stop myself.

“Well, well, well...” I goad my best friend, dragging out the words while I smirk at the odd pairing.

Mercer looks like she's going to shank me in my sleep .

Meanwhile, Sunny has covered her face with her hands, like that will undo the fire, or erase the mental image of her best friend getting frisky with a cyborg. She pulls her hands away, crossing her arms with a look to me that I don't recognize. She turns to Joe. “How bad is it? How far did it spread?”

Joe pauses before he answers, taking her in. “Why don't we get you home so you can rest? There's nothing else to do today. The insurance company is sending someone over in the morning. I'll need you for that.” He turns to Oliver. “I'll talk to Christopher when I know more. For now, we're moving Anders and his daughter to a room on the opposite end of the property. Problem is, that area is less isolated and harder to secure. You'll have to be a lot more careful coming and going.” His gusty sigh says more than his words. “We had so many people on the property today—first responders, the local news. I'm not sure who tipped them off...”

Them . The paparazzi. It doesn't matter who alerted the vultures and how they found us. It doesn't change anything. Our lives and this film shoot just got infinitely more difficult. I feel the weight of my phone in my back pocket, knowing now that the calls I haven't returned are likely bad news.

All of that can wait. Sunny and Imogen are my priority. Now she's pacing the room, peppering her brother with questions about the extent of the damage. Oliver and Mercer fill in with their first-hand accounts that make me wonder if there's some kind of memory-erasing hypnosis treatment available anywhere. Other than that, I'm relieved to hear that no one was injured. Nothing we left behind in the suite was irreplaceable. Everything will be fine.

When I say as much to the room—just thinking out loud—all eyes whip my direction.

“What?” I ask.

“What?” Sunny whispers, her eyes squinting like she must have misheard me .

“I think I said everything will be fine?” I honestly don't remember. “I expected worse, but this isn't so bad. Everything is replaceable, right?”

“No, you're right. You're absolutely right.” Sunny gives me a defeated look, then turns to her brother. “Can you take me home?”

He nods and he follows her out the door.

“Everything okay?” I say to their backs, turning back to Oliver and Mercer. “Did I say something wrong?” I ask the fire-starting perverts still standing in front of me.

Mercer makes a face at me. “Really?”

I'm tired and this snarky blonde person just ruined the day of the woman I love. As far as I can tell, we're both on Sunny's crap list. I don't deserve her ire. “Yeah. What?”

Mercer shakes her head. “Her parents opened this place before she was born. She was

raised here. It's as much a part of her family as she is. On top of that, this resort is her pride and joy. She lives to make it perfect." Now Mercer looks tired, or maybe a little guilty. "I know everything works out for you. You think nothing is a big deal. You have all of the money you need and a team of people who take care of you." She has been hanging out with Oliver. "But this is a huge deal to her—to all of us. This isn't just our livelihood. It's our home. And yeah, maybe everything will be fine. This stuff is replaceable, and even if it's not, it's just stuff. But would it kill you to console her for five seconds before you brush it off?" She sucks in a breath. "Sorry," she says half-heartedly at the end of her rant.

The truth of her words slices through me like a knife. I absolutely did do that. I mean, yeah—things do usually work out. I'm a big believer in manifesting, the power of positive thinking, optimism, whatever you want to call it. I still am. But seeing those attitudes from another angle—from the perspective of someone who needs compassion, someone to mourn with her—makes me realize optimism isn't so simple and I've unwittingly hurt the woman I love. "You're—"

"Right." Oliver butts in. "She's right. I know it's hard to say the word."

"Shut up." I push back like I'm his twelve-year-old brother. "I can admit when I've screwed up." I let the room fall silent while I think about how to make this right. I hate that I've hurt Sunny. I settle my gaze on Mercer. "How do I fix this?"

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

Joe's white Bronco is waiting for us in the parking lot and the familiarity of it is comforting. It's an older model that's been in my family since it was new. My dad spent hours working on the thing with Joe when he was a teenager. I would bring jugs of ice water to the garage for them and find their legs sticking out from under the engine while they worked. This thing has a lot of my dad in it. If I close my eyes after I've buckled my seatbelt it almost feels like a hug. The engine roars to life and Joe turns in the direction of my condo.

"Can you take me to Mom's, actually?" I need the feeling of home and some space from Mercer. I love her. She'll always be my closest friend. I just need to sort through my feelings before we sleep under the same roof.

My brother doesn't answer, just makes a quick u-turn. His warm voice breaks through the noise of the rumbling engine a few minutes later. "How are you coping, Sis?"

"I'm..." How am I? I've felt hollow and robotic all day. It's like the emotional side of my brain closed for business and only the essential employees came in to work—heart pumping, lungs breathing, eyes seeing .

But now that I've taken in the damage from the fire, my feelings are slamming around inside me like debris in a tornado. I feel guilty that I wasn't there to stop it. Angry at Mercer for letting it happen. Annoyed at Anders for being flippant about it. Equally frustrated and terrified that the only thing in my life that I have any control over—our home and our family legacy—is a sooty, soggy mess because I left for one weekend. Still somehow pining for Anders. Disappointed in myself for pining for Anders when my life is embers.

“I’m okay.”

Joe doesn’t respond, but I sense his scowl coming from the driver's seat. He makes a turn or two in the wrong direction despite my protests, before pulling into a familiar driveway. He parks under a story-high neon sign of a guy carrying a hamburger and wearing roller skates.

“You need to eat.” He cranks down his window and the breeze coming into the cab is chilly. “And I’m going to take a little treat to Indie. She’s been alone all day.”

A familiar ache pinches in my chest. Joe and Indie are so perfect for each other. They support and encourage each other. They make each other better. They think about each other’s needs. Is it unreasonable to want what they have? I don’t think I’m asking for much, Universe.

“Geez. You doing okay?” Joe asks with a sidelong look.

“What?”

“That sigh. That’s the sigh of someone who needs a punching bag, or like I’m going to be your punching bag,” he jokes with his usual crooked grin.

I didn’t even realize I had sighed. “Sorry. Just thinking.”

“About?”

Joe has always been a fantastic listener, sometimes against his will. It’s one of the many perks of having a bunch of sisters. That’s lucky for me, because the words start spewing out of me like he dropped a Mentos in a bottle of Coke.

“My life. It is such a wreck. I accidentally fell in love with Anders, even though

we're completely wrong for each other. We're opposites. He wants kids, and—well, you know. Plus, his life is too chaotic for someone like me. We just don't make sense." I unbuckle my seatbelt to make room for the fried food I'm about to annihilate. "That's mess number one. On top of that, the only thing in my life that I have going for me, Nizhóní, literally caught on fire when I left it alone for one weekend. I feel like a failure for that, even though logically I know that's ridiculous. And you know what?" I'm picking up steam now. "I finally did something fun for myself for the first time in my life, and I liked it. I had fun. Sunny Pratt did something crazy, and out of the ordinary, and fun . And look how it turned out."

"Mom said you tiled a bathroom."

"I took a plane to tile a bathroom in Minnesota." My loud voice echoes under the neon hamburger man.

He laughs. "Minnesota? Wow. In that case..."

While he's laughing at me, a skinny teenage boy skates up to the window to take our order. We get a lot of food—I think we're both comfort eating tonight—and when it arrives, I munch my hamburger in silence while Joe drives me home. He won't eat without Indie, which is both sweet and irritating. I'm working through the last of my fries when he pulls in front of my mother's house.

"All right, I've been thinking." He wrangles the gear shift into park. "Do you want my input?"

I swallow and take a long swig of my Coke. "Of course." I appreciate that he asks and doesn't just dump his opinions all over me this time. His fiancée has been good for him.

"I won't weigh in on Anders because I hardly know the guy, except for what I've

heard. You're smart. Trust your instincts on that." I can tell the words are a challenge for him to say. He slings his hand over the steering wheel and turns to face me. "But as far as the stuff with Nizhóní goes—"

Here we go. I brace for the lecture. All of the mental flogging I've done today runs through my mind: I've been irresponsible, I'm ruining the family business, I should be delivering hamburgers on roller skates, and repeat.

"The fire was not your fault. It had nothing to do with you leaving and everything to do with Mercer being a bonehead. You're allowed to take a weekend off. We'll fix it and be up and running in no time. It's not as bad as it seems."

"You sound like Anders," I say with an immature eye roll.

"Well, he's right. It's repairable. No one was hurt."

"Yeah, it's repairable. That doesn't mean it doesn't hurt." My voice cracks and I can't say anything else. I don't want to cry, but my eyes are hot and my throat feels tight.

"Why does it hurt?" Now he sounds like the bossy older brother I remember from my childhood.

The frank question rattles me so much, I spit out an answer before I think about it. "Because it's all that's left of him!" I don't remind him that since I won't have a family of my own, this is it for me. "It's all I have. And I'm failing."

"Sunny." His hand lands on my shoulder, and his voice is firm. "The place isn't Dad, and you are not a failure. Do you think Mom and Dad never made mistakes or had setbacks? They did. Do you think they never took time off? They did. And do you think Dad would want you to beat yourself up like this?"

He's right , a quiet voice in my head says, so much like my dad that the lump returns to my throat. Of course he's right, though I'm not ready to admit it. My big brother doesn't need to know that he's actually helping me right now. I have to protect what remains of my stupid pride. He interrupts my thoughts while I'm crafting the perfect zinger in response .

“Anyway, I gotta get this food to Indie before it gets cold. We'll talk tomorrow. You good, Sis?”

He means well. I know he does. “I guess so.” I gather up my trash with a sigh, slamming the door behind me. “See ya tomorrow,” I shout through the closed door. He doesn't care. He has a hot fiancée to make out with.

I'm stomping up the walkway to my mother's front door when my phone dings with a text from Oliver of all people.

DARTH OLIVER

We've found a replacement nanny to take over care of Imogen for the duration of filming.

“Why?” The word shrieks through the cool night air just as another text comes in.

DARTH OLIVER

You've done an excellent job with Imogen. We assume that your focus needs to be on the resort now and are attempting to plan ahead. Your assistance has been much appreciated and as previously discussed, your paycheck will be electronically deposited.

Assistance . That word is wholly inadequate to describe the attachment I've formed

with that little girl. This hurts, just like I knew it would. I crash through the front door and shove my trash into the bin in the kitchen. I stomp up the stairs to my bedroom, frustrated at the world.

This day started way too early, and the weight of it pulls me onto my old bed face first. I smash my fingers onto the screen of my phone looking for the thumbs up emoji. That's all Oliver is getting from me. After all, he lit my family legacy on fire and had the nerve to fire me as Imogen's nanny. I push send and open my text chain with Anders. Nothing. Our text chain has gone dead since we were together all weekend. I'm a little sick about how I walked away from him tonight, so I type out a short apology.

ME:

I'm sorry I was short with you when I left tonight.

Maybe it's good that I'm not taking Imogen tomorrow. I'm not in the right place mentally to be around Anders. The effects of the fire are as consuming as the fire itself and I need to tap into the wisdom of pre-Anders Sunny. I need to behave like my normal, old self until I fix everything at the resort. Comfortable, reliable, somewhat depressing normal—that will get me through this. Back to the status quo, for now at least. We have a dozen decisions to make to get the place repaired and I need my mind running at full capacity to handle it—which means no deliciously distracting men. Hopefully Anders will understand.

I read and reread old texts from him and nod off sometime in the middle of the night.

Normal.

This is good. I'm running from my mom's house to the resort, something I used to do all the time to burn off steam. It's a quick four mile route through the desert that I've

taken at least a hundred times. When I get to work, I'll shower in the spa and change into the clothes I've stashed in my compact backpack, along with a sensible, high-protein lunch. Then, Joe and I will meet with the insurance guy about the fire. That part is not-so-normal .

I pick up my pace, grateful for the tailwind and an activity to channel my stress into. My running has been inconsistent recently, and even though it hurts more than usual, my mind needed this. Joe's reminders from the night before are echoing in my head, and I realize with more than a little relief that he—and Anders—are right. The fire is awful, but the damage is fixable. I can't take responsibility for it. It's a setback. I'm not a failure.

The more I repeat those thoughts, the lighter I feel.

Dolly Parton is singing about working nine to five through my earbuds as I jog around the last bend before I reach the resort. I sing along as I run because Dolly gets me. I am going to kick today in the butt. I've got this. I won't have a handsome movie star around, throwing me off balance. I groan, thinking about Anders.

He texted me after I fell asleep last night and again this morning. When I missed a phone call from him on my way out the door for my run, I texted back a quick, "Things are hectic. Glad you found someone to take care of Im. We'll talk soon!"

I've missed a few more texts from him, but I can't talk to him yet. I still have too many things to think through. I need a clear mind and a solid plan for this mess before I'm around the man. He's all-consuming and I don't trust myself to be smart in his presence. I still wish I could see him and Immy today, though. Just for a minute. I push harder, making my lungs burn and my legs ache. Maybe I can run off the heartsickness.

The wind gusts into my face like a slap, blowing around a cluster of tumbleweeds in

the distance. I squint to keep the sand out of my eyes, but it stings my bare legs and arms. This is getting gnarly. It's a good thing I'm almost done with my run. I spot a medium-sized tumbleweed on the path ahead, rolling right toward me. I leap over it in time with Dolly Parton and laugh at how insane I must look. I'm glad it's barely dawn so I'm alone out here .

I push through the wind until I'm almost at the resort entrance. Then I spot the final boss: A tumbleweed roughly the size of Jabba the Hutt, rolling toward me on the path. I've lived in the desert my whole life. I'm familiar with tumbleweeds. Honestly, I don't usually think about them much. This one is different, though. I swear I hear a deep, villainous laugh as it rolls my direction.

“ Huhhh huhhh huhhh ,” the tumbleweed throat-laughs as it crashes toward me on the path, seemingly in slow motion.

My senses are on high alert. I push down the volume on my music. “Hang on, Dolly,” I whisper, keeping a sharp eye on the tumbleweed as I slow to a jog. I track its direction given the wind, calculating where to run to avoid it rolling into or over me. Finally, it tumbles past and I'm safe.

I crank up the volume and resume my pace, but the wind changes direction sharply. Something large and extremely scratchy crashes into my bare legs from behind. Between the powerful wind and Jabba the Tumbleweed, I lose my balance and land in a gangling heap in the spindly sagebrush. “Aaaaack!” I holler to no one, while Dolly Parton continues to trill in my ear.

I scramble to my feet, brushing bits of shrubbery off my legs and red running shorts. I make a quick examination and find a few scratches on my thighs, but nothing terrible. I'm fine, just humiliated. Situation normal.

“Are you okay?” a melodic male voice calls from behind.

I know that voice.

This cannot be happening.

I whip around and discover that this is, indeed, happening. Micah Watson jogs up behind me on the path in all of his tall, dark, and handsome perfection. He's shirtless, breathing heavily, and wearing a very small pair of olive green running shorts. How long has he been back there?

"Are you okay?" He repeats, louder and slower this time .

I pull out an earbud. "Uh..." I blink. Am I okay? Why is he asking me that? I can't get over the shorts.

"That looked like a bad fall."

Ah, yes. That.

He pauses to inspect my legs, then my arms. Now he's looking at my waist, and his eyes move up, up, up until they land on mine. They're dark and unblinking like shark eyes.

I don't want shark eyes on me. I want icy blue ocean eyes. I fold my arms over my chest and take half a step back. "I'm fine. Just a little embarrassed. I didn't know anyone else was out here," I say over the wind with a dumb little wave at the surrounding desert.

"I've been running out here almost every morning." His breathing is already normal.

"I move my body every day. Consistency is key."

I bite my lip. Of course he does. "That's true." Why are his shorts so small, though?

They're essentially two flimsy flaps of fabric per leg, both blowing precariously in the wind. I need to look away, but it's like I'm at the circus and those shorts are the bearded lady. I can't stop staring. When I finally drag my eyes to his face, he's smirking like he caught me.

"I could go with you, if you'd like. I've been meaning to talk to you, and there are some minor changes you could make to your form that will make a huge difference." He checks his smart watch with a frown.

There are some minor changes I could make to your shorts that will make them cover up your biscuits, I snark internally. It's a knee-jerk reaction, but he's right. I should be more consistent. And what does Micah Watson have to talk to me about? My curiosity wins.

"Sure." It's just a run, right? Harmless. But wait. "How do you get past the paparazzi, though?" It's strange to me that he's just out here on his own without a crowd of photographers chasing him. "Or did you outrun them?" I laugh at my joke.

I don't think he heard me. "I'll be out here tomorrow morning at six if you want to join." he says, tapping something on his watch. "Glad you're okay."

"Thanks?" I call to his retreating form as he sprints away. Huh. Weird. I guess I'm going for a run with Micah Watson. Should I try to be excited about this? A few weeks ago there would've been fireworks, squealing, and texts to everyone I know. Not anymore. All I can focus on are Micah Watson's little shorts, barely concealing his family heirlooms, as he lopes away.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

“Y ou know Dave, the grip?” Oliver asks as he starts up the golf cart.

He knocked on my door earlier than necessary this morning, introduced me to the replacement nanny he hired without my consent, and dragged me out of my new suite. Imogen was still asleep. Yesterday was hard on her. “Sure. Dave the grip. What about him?”

“Dave is Melanie’s boyfriend. He helped me find her.”

The sun is really bright today. “Who’s Melanie?”

“The woman we just left with Imogen. The replacement,” he reminds me patiently.

I grunt in response. On any other day, I’d hear it from Oliver over this, but he’s on his best behavior. Something about lighting my suite on fire is keeping him in line, but I can’t even enjoy it. I’m unsettled after this weekend. Sunny is so busy that we’ve barely connected. We’ve texted and spoken over the phone, but she has a lot on her hands with the fire. I’m desperate to relieve her load. Mercer gave me some ideas of what to do. I want to carry this burden with her and I have a plan. Unfortunately, I have my own fires to deal with first .

We have a busy shooting schedule today, made even more chaotic by all of the property damage and paparazzi. The weekend away was good for my mind, but now I can’t get my mind to focus on work. I’m jittery like it’s day one all over again, only this time it’s because I can’t stop thinking about Sunny.

A few hours later, we're a dozen takes into a scene that isn't working. I don't like to

point fingers, but if I did, all ten of mine would be pointed at Micah. That's a lie. Seven fingers would be pointed at him, three at me. Or three pointed at Micah, seven at me. I'm in a surly mood and it's bleeding into my work. We're in a stuffy walkway between stucco buildings at the resort, and heat is bouncing off the walls. I'm sweating through my character's clothes.

Micah is sitting in his chair, scrolling on his phone while his assistant points a handheld fan to his face. I'm shooting a monologue where my character is bragging about his wealth, and I lean into the arrogance. It's what I've been typecast for, after all. Sunny is going to hate this guy when this movie comes out. I wonder again how she's coping.

Lines, Anders . I'm reciting my lines. Cameras are rolling. "Please. One snap of my fingers and my Sikorsky S-92 will pick us up. I have access to jets, a train—I have a sheet of flips at my disposal."

Son of a gun.

Fleet of ships, Anders. Fleet of ships, fleet of ships...

Christopher lets me correct the line without cutting. It's an easy fix in post.

I repeat the line. "I have access to jets, a train—I have a sheet of flips at my disposal." This time I curse.

"Cut." Christopher barks.

I realize at that moment that I'm working on auto-pilot, kind of like when you drive a familiar route and don't remember it when you get home. I have no memory of the lines I just recited, up until that disastrous ending. Chris's face is unreadable. The lighting guys, grips, and camera people avert their gazes, acting busy.

“Sorry,” I tell Chris and the crew, stretching my neck and pushing Sunny out of my mind yet again. “I’ve got this.”

Chris hesitates and I see his jaw flex even from where I’m standing. He nods silently. We reset and wait.

“Go,” he says.

I wish Micah would wipe the impatient sneer off his face. That’s not helping anyone.

I block out my co-star and focus, repeating the lines I reviewed over and over this morning. The tension in the air abates as I become my character, the script flowing naturally out of my mouth like they’re my own. This is it. This is the magic—when my words and body dovetail seamlessly with the character I’m playing. I sense Christopher’s shoulders relaxing in my periphery.

“I have a fleet of ships at my disposal.” Hallelujah . I fist pump internally.

“Dad!” a little girl’s voice shrieks through the narrow walkway.

Immy?

“Cut,” Christopher snaps.

Imogen races past the crew in her jelly shoes and nightgown. Her cheeks are pink and streaked with tears and her hair is still in yesterday’s ponytail. I look around for Sunny, then remember that she’s not with my daughter today. What was the name of the new temporary nanny? Melissa? Melanie. Where is Melanie? Why is my daughter here alone?

“I can’t get Hairy!” Immy tugs my hand with all of her body weight. My eyes shoot

to Oliver. He's on his phone, nodding tensely at me, and hopefully tracking down the nanny.

"What are you doing here, Im?" I whisper in a rush. "I'm working. Where's Melanie?"

"A lady was sleeping on the couch and I was by myself." She sniffles. "But she ran away!"

"The nanny ran away?" Unbelievable .

"No! Dad! Hairy ran away when I took her out to go potty!"

Oh geez. "Ollie. I need you to help Im find Hairy."

"No, Dad! You have to help!" She hiccups through her tears. She's trembling. "I think Hairy—"

"Someone get the kid out of here," Micah snarls from his folding chair, barely looking up from his phone.

Christopher's stern gaze locks on my face. Dozens of eyes are on me, waiting for me to make a decision so they can get on with their jobs. Immy tugs on my hand with a whimper that undoes me.

There are times when you know a seemingly minor decision is going to change the rest of your life. This is one of those moments. It's my two roads diverging in a yellow wood. In one direction is this version of my career. All-consuming, butt on fire, nonstop—with all of the money, status, accolades, and satisfaction that go along with that. Indiana Jones is on that path. On the other road is my daughter. Simplicity, peace, and balance. Weekends at my parent's house. Lazy Sunday mornings. Sunny's

face flashes through my mind. I hope she's on that road. When I look down at Immy, one fat tear falls from her eyelash and plops onto her dusty jelly shoe. And that's all it takes—that one teardrop.

There's no question.

I hoist Imogen up and she wraps her scrawny legs around my waist. "Let's go find Hairy," I whisper in her ear. "I'll be right back, Chris."

And I will. I'm making my daughter my first priority, but I'm also fully aware of my obligations and how unprofessional I'm being. This just means every one of my co-workers is going to hate me. I'll let them. My daughter is all that matters at the moment .

I jog in the direction of our new suite carrying Immy. "Where was the last place you saw Hairy?"

"She ran away by the cars." She snuffles in my ear. "I hope Hairy isn't lost. She's my only friend. We have to find her."

The words are a punch to my gut. A mutt dog can't be all this girl has. Sure, her mom is terrible. She's like Bizarro Santa Claus. She visits annually bearing gifts, disappearing just as quickly as she appears, and leaving a giant mess in her wake. And of course, I love Imogen, but I'm sick when I consider where she has fallen on my list of priorities. She deserves more. She deserves a parent who provides stability, consistency, and opportunities to form friends who aren't canines. I'm going to be that person for her.

We reach the parking area and there's no sign of Hairy. I listen for her howly bark and heavy paws, but only hear birds chirping sweetly, like they have no idea this week has been total chaos. I spot the back door of the main resort building. It's

propped open.

Oh no .

Hairy is in there. I know it. I run through the door as fast I can with Immy in tow, and find that my instincts are correct. Hairy is galloping in circles around the main corridor, oblivious to the destruction her case of the zoomies is causing. A large vase is toppled and cracked. Couch cushions and pillows litter the floor.

“Hairy!” I bark at her. “Get over here!”

She barks back, enjoying our new game. Imogen scrambles down from my arms, racing to her dumb dog. By the time I reach them, Hairy is panting. Her jowls are hanging open in a wide smile. She’s proud of her work here.

“Bad girl!” I snap.

“Dad! She was just having fun!” Imogen throws her arms around Hairy’s neck.

“Anders. ”

I whip around. Oliver is standing in the back entrance, looking winded like he chased us here.

“We need to sit down and talk. Is that okay, Immy?” He smiles at my daughter.

“Sure. I’m gonna sit down and talk to Hairy, too.” She tugs on the dog’s collar until Hairy relents and they wander to the other end of the long hall.

Oliver lowers onto the edge of the couch, waiting for me. I replace the cushions in the seat opposite him and sit.

“I messed up.” He spits out the words so fast I’m not sure I heard him right.

“What?”

“Don’t make me say it again, dorkwad.” He runs his hands down his face. “I dropped all the balls. I’ve been distracted. I’m forgetting stuff I never forget, doing stuff I never do. I shouldn’t have been with Mercer that night.” He sighs. “If there was no fire, Sunny would have had Imogen today. This wouldn’t have happened.” He’s picking up steam. “Did you know I forgot to make Sunny’s reservation in Minneapolis because I was up all night with Mercer—”

“No. Stop. Please” I hold up a hand like the action will remove the mental image. “I don’t want to know anything else.”

“I have to get this off my chest.” His penitent eyes plead with me. I’ve never seen him like this. “I screwed up. This is all my fault. I let Mercer get to me. She’s just so... so...”

He drags his hands through his hair with a frustrated smile. I think back on our long friendship and realize this might be the first time he’s experienced real romantic attraction. I’ve wondered when it would finally happen. I need to let him off the hook. Those feelings are nothing to mess with.

“Ollie, it’s okay.” I sink back into the cushions. “Remember in high school when I almost failed Trig because of Sadie Mortensen? Same deal. You studied with me. I passed. This’ll be fine. Trust me. ”

“Yeah, except you were only screwing up your own grades back then. I’m slowing down production on a major film shoot.” He scowls. This guy hates being human.

“So what? We all screw up sometimes. Being human is okay. In fact, I kinda prefer

human Oliver.” I sling my arm over the back of the couch. “It’ll work out, man. See who’s benefiting from my don’t-give-a-crap attitude now?”

“You are so annoying.” He glares at me, then his eyes soften. “But thank you.”

I just nod. This is as touchy feely as our friendship has ever been.

“What are you going to do?” he asks.

Sunny’s smile pops into my mind, as has been the case all morning. I know what I want to do. “I’m going to do everything in my power to keep her. We’re paying to get these repairs done. This place is going to be better than before. I’m hiring all of the best interior designers, contractors...” I trail off with a sigh. “Sunny is everything to me now.”

“I meant with the shoot, but that’s a smart move. Sunny is different in the best possible way. You’re a better man with her. You don’t deserve her, but you need her. Imogen needs her. If you can talk her into letting you stick around, you need to make it happen.” He stands. I guess we’re done here. “And normally I wouldn’t advocate throwing your fame and money at problems, but this time I won’t stop you. She deserves it.”

He’s right. Luckily, I already have a plan.

“Hey, Im? Want to help me with something?”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:06 am

I 'm warming up in my favorite blue running shorts, grateful that it isn't windy this morning like it was yesterday. Micah said to meet him out here at six, so here I am—not because I'm after anything from him. I love Anders and Micah is barely a blip on my radar. It's incredible what one tiny pair of olive green running shorts is capable of. In less than thirty seconds, they undid thirteen years of physical attraction. I'm not in delusional love with Micah Watson anymore. And if love can be defeated by a pair of flimsy running shorts, was it even love to begin with?

I laugh at myself. I've been such an idiot this last decade or so. I'm still waiting for the man because it would be crazy to ignore his offer, right? I'm dying to know what Micah Watson has to talk to me about. I can't wait to tell Anders about whatever happens today, and about the shorts. He's going to love to hear about those.

I pull one sneakered foot behind me to stretch my quads, surveying the entrance to the resort. Either the paparazzi are giving up or they are late sleepers. It's empty out here and I'm happy about that.

I didn't tell Mercer where I was going when we crossed paths this morning. I haven't talked to Anders. He sent a text late last night—a quick check-in. I sent a quick reply. Yesterday was insanely busy for both of us. The meeting with the representative from our insurance company was positive. The fire is covered, we just have a few months of repair work ahead of us. Joe and I made a game plan for that. Everything will be okay, just like he and Anders said.

I just wish I could shake this restlessness. Maybe exercise will help. I finish my warm-up with one last peek at the resort entrance. I feel silly waiting for Micah out here, so I turn to start my run. I'm barely a quarter mile down the path when I spot a

pair of scandalously small running shorts headed toward me. From the looks of it, Micah is just finishing his workout. He must have forgotten his offer.

He smiles when he sees me. “Hi. You made it.”

“Yeah, but it looks like you’re almost done?” I hope that didn’t sound as pathetic as I feel.

“Just wanted to make sure I got my miles in. I didn’t know if you could handle my distance.” He pushes something on his watch screen. “Ready?”

Nice .

“Don’t worry about it. You can get started on your day. Thanks for the offer, though.” Fourteen-year-old Sunny would slap my face, but the words come out of my mouth nevertheless. I even offer a goofy little salute to drive home that I am mentally unwell.

“No, it’s fine. I’ve wanted a chance to talk to you, anyway.” He turns like he’s really going to run with me immediately after finishing his run. Whatever. If the handsome, wealthy, megastar wants to give me pointers and have a chat, who am I to say no? It’ll make a good story to tell at parties, if nothing else.

We run in silence for a few minutes and I can’t help but notice that Micah isn’t winded. His lack of heavy breathing is distracting to the point that I can’t seem to get my own breathing under control. I’m tired today. My lungs are tight and my legs are heavy. I’m trudging down the trail, feeling self-conscious about my pace and labored breathing—even more so when Micah drops back to watch me run.

“You should be wearing better shoes for your gait. You pronate, and it looks like you have a wide foot.” Trot, trot, trot . “Wearing the wrong shoes can lead to injury.”

Well, at least my shorts are visible without a microscope.

I know he's right, though. I continue to run in silence. Micah offers occasional input on my form and breathing. I try the minor changes he suggests and don't notice any huge improvement right away, but that's no surprise.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about Anders," he says with plenty of air in his lungs. So annoying.

"What about?" I eke out between breaths.

"I would appreciate it if you'd give him some space for the duration of the shoot."

That stops me in my tracks. "Excuse me?"

"We can't afford for Anders to chase you like a dog in heat. The man has no self-control around females ."

Says the man who's had his eyes on various parts of my body for the stationary portion of this conversation. And the way he says the word "females" makes my nostrils flare. I look at Micah Watson—really look at him. He is nothing like I thought. I'm so relieved I never got what my little fourteen-year-old heart prayed for.

A familiar pink Jeep passes us. I spot Anders' tan profile. Immy is in the back seat, her unrestrained blonde curls blowing around her. That's going to be a nightmare to brush out later. I should be grateful that the new nanny gets that job. Instead, I'm just bummed out. My feet feel even heavier in my shoes.

Suddenly the Jeep makes a u-turn and stops a dozen feet in front of us on the road. My heart is pumping hard now. Those are my people in that Jeep .

“Sunny!” Imogen calls. “Come here!”

“Ugh,” Micah groans beside me. He mutters something that I can’t make out, but his tone isn’t kind.

“Micah?” I make the word sweet even though I want to stomp on his running shoe and leave.

“What?”

“I’ve seen all of your movies.” I hate to give him this information. He doesn’t deserve the satisfaction.

His face says he’s expecting me to ask him for an autograph and he’s put out by the possibility. “Thank you, and?”

“Anders is a much better actor than you. I think he’ll be just fine.”

I don’t elaborate or wait for a response. I jog over to the rumble pink Jeep and the man and child I’ve missed so much these past—how long has it been? Two nights? It has felt so much longer. I think I might be addicted to them.

“Hi, guys!” I smile at Imogen first, then my eyes find Anders.

His expression is grim and he’s staring hard at Micah. His gaze flits my direction, tripping at my bare legs, before finally landing on my face. I arch an eyebrow at him, even though I like having this man’s eyes on me.

“What are you doing with him?” he asks. It’s a fair question.

“He offered to give me some running pointers.” I make a face that I hope conveys

how little I'm enjoying Micah's advice or his company. I probably look like I ate something rotten.

There's relief in Anders' eyes when he answers. "I bet he did." He shakes his head with a look of disgust.

Micah jogs up to us, jamming his finger on his smart watch with a huff. "I need to get back."

I bristle at his impatient words. "Go ahead." Why is he still here, anyway ?

There's a beat of silence before Micah says, "Fine," and sprints away. We watch him leave without an ounce of regret on my part. The man is a tool.

"His shorts look like kid shorts," Imogen announces from the back seat.

"Immy, that's not nice," Anders says, but his wide eyes and dramatic nod tell me that he agrees.

I bite my lip to hold back a smile. I love these two. "What are you guys up to?"

"We're looking for you!" Imogen chimes in. "My dad got a big—"

"I wanted to invite you over for movie night." Anders talks over his daughter loudly. "If you're not too busy? I know you have a lot going on."

"I'm not too busy." I have so much to tell him. The last two days have been a whirlwind of problems and difficult emotions, but I know that it will all be okay. I can't control everything and I want to stop trying. I'm ready to let go. And I am still out of my mind in love with Anders Beck. I hope he still loves me, because I got hooked fast and this 48-hour involuntary detox has been miserable. It's like I'm

running the last fifty feet of a marathon and Anders is standing on the other side of the finish line.

I hold all of these thoughts inside when I ask, “What time?” I know I’m smiling desperately.

“Can we pick you up at seven?”

“Sure.”

“Okay. See you tonight.”

He waves and I mimic the gesture with a big, dumb grin, entirely stupefied by this man.

I cannot wait for tonight .

Late that afternoon I’m sitting down with my mom and Joe, running through post-conflagration logistics. We’re in Joe’s office and my feet are kicked up on the corner of his desk. We have a solid plan to handle the fire damage going forward, so I’m partially distracted by what I’m going to wear to movie night. I want to be comfortable, but I also want to look nice. And I don’t want to look like I’m trying too hard, even though I definitely am. I know which jeans I’m going to wear. That part is easy. Maybe my blue blouse?

“...the grounds crew can wear stilts and clown suits, and once we set up the cotton candy machine and corn dog fryers it’ll be a pretty nice carnival,” Joe’s voice barges into my happy thoughts.

“What?” Corn dogs? Has Joe lost his mind?

“Just trying to get your attention,” he teases with a crooked grin, pushing my heels off his desk. “Space cadet.”

“Be nice to her, son,” my mother chides. “Do I need to remind you of how twitterpated you were when you met Indie?”

“Absolutely untrue,” he scoffs.

My mom doesn’t respond except for raising her eyebrows. We all know the truth. She looks at me. “Have you seen him?”

I shake my head. “Not really. I need to deal with this stuff and I didn’t think I’d be able to keep my head on straight with him around.”

“How’s that working out for you?” Joe asks, like the older brother that he is.

My mom frowns at him. “Can I be honest with you?” When I shrug, her love-filled eyes find mine. “There’s nothing wrong with having your head on a little crooked. That man is perfect for you. You balance each other. You need him to pull you out of the perfectionism bubble you make for yourself. He might even keep you from going crazy trying to make everything just so all the time. You need him. When are you going to see him?”

“He invited me over for a movie with Immy tonight.” I know I’m grinning again. It’s impossible to keep my cool.

“No wonder you’re so useless today.” Joe doesn’t mince words. “When can we expect you to get your head back in the game? Ballpark it.”

I kick my feet back onto his desk. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“In body only.”

That’s... true. I can’t blame him for calling me out on it.

My mom saves me with a stern look to my brother. “Joe and I can pick up your slack just like you picked up his slack when he got engaged and started building his house. That’s what family does. We love you, kid. You’ve handled the changes of the last few months like a professional.” She grins. “For the most part. Now you can let us take over for a few.”

“Mom’s right,” Joe says with a put-upon sigh. “If you want to run off into the sunset with Mr. Blinding Veneers, you have my blessing.”

I can’t help but hug my brother, as annoying as he is. “I don’t think they’re veneers.”

“There’s no way those teeth are original.” He cuffs my shoulder. “But go get him, Sis.”

“You’re wearing a hole in the floor, dude,” Mercer says from her usual spot in the armchair. She looks like she’s ready for a night in—her antique Juicy sweats are on and she’s up to her elbow in a pint of ice cream. It’s a relief that things are back to normal with us. We talked it out last night, and it helps that she schemed with Anders to arrange this movie night. In all of her contrition over the fire she’s also started cleaning up after herself. My best friend is still a mess, but she’s the best kind of mess .

I need a distraction. “So are you going to keep carrying on with Oliver, or what?” I bite my lip trying not to listen for an approaching car.

“Carrying on? Okay, Grandma.” Mercer rolls her eyes. “Yeah, no . I think that was a one-and-done for me.”

“Really?” She doesn’t seem at all bothered by ending her fiery fling.

She nods. “He’s too robotic. And I’m gonna focus on getting my act together.”

“If you say so.” I fall onto the couch, determined not to stare out the window looking for a pink Jeep. I’m wearing Anders’ favorite jeans, a flowing white blouse, and my comfy sandals. Nice, but not over-the-top, I think. “Is my hair too much? I curled it. Is it obvious that I’m trying to look nice?”

“Yeah,” she says around a mouthful of rocky road.

“Gee, thanks, Merce.” I swipe open my phone to find that two minutes have passed. It’s 7:03. I bounce my knee a dozen times.

“You gotta calm down.” She puts her ice cream on the coffee table. “Take a deep breath in through your nose and count to four. Hold it and count to seven, then let it out through your mouth and count to eight. Like this.”

She demonstrates the calming breathing technique and I try it, even though I want to throw a pillow at her face. I breathe in. One...two...three...four... I hold my breath. One...two...three...

BANG BANG BANG! Someone pounds on the door.

I startle, then jump up, grab my purse, and swing open the door before I remember to release the breath I’m holding.

“Hi!” I say on a heavy exhale.

Oh, Anders. Am I a little woozy, or is he wearing a tuxedo? I was not mentally prepared for this man in a tuxedo with that tan, scruffy jawline. It takes me way too

long to notice he's carrying a dress bag. Immy is beside him in a cupcake-like tulle dress and glittery gold ballet flats. She's carrying a shoe box. I am slightly underdressed for movie night. They hand me the bag and the box as I let them into my condo.

"Change into those. We'll wait." Anders says with a smirk.

Immy plops on the couch next to Mercer with a dramatic poof. "But just so you know, you should go fast because we have—"

"A surprise." He gives his daughter a look. "Remember, it's a surprise," he emphasizes.

Ten minutes later I've changed into the sapphire blue sequined gown and strappy heels they provided. I've never dressed like this in my life. Anders guides me into the passenger seat of his black SUV and we're driving toward nowhere with Immy chattering in the back seat. It's desert on all sides of the road and I'm dying of curiosity.

"You changed your mind about movie night?"

He squeezes my hand over the console. "No. You'll see. No more questions."

"Are we going to be around a lot of people?" We're dressed for an event, and my stomach is in knots at the idea of facing a crowd unprepared. Anders and I haven't even talked about what we are. I need to do Mercer's breathing thing again.

"Absolutely not. I know you better than that." He kisses the inside of my palm and all is right with my world.

We're on a two lane road, deep in a sandstone canyon when Anders finally parks.

The sun is just starting to drop behind the cliffs, covering everything with golden light and making the scene in front of me look like a dream. I'm not sure my eyes are working right. Out here in the middle of nowhere, among the cliffs and sagebrush, is a long red carpet. I try to see where it leads, but the path is obscured by the landscape.

I gasp. "What is this, Anders?"

"It's a—" Imogen starts .

"Nope!" He cuts her off. "Geez, you two don't get the concept of a surprise, do you?"

I twist around in my chair, whispering conspiratorially to Immy. "You can tell me."

"You better not. I'm warning you."

His stern voice sends a happy little flutter through my stomach. He circles the SUV to open our doors, leading us both to the red carpet. He laces his fingers through mine and Immy skips ahead of us, obviously excited about whatever is at the end of this thing.

I squeeze his strong hand, holding tight because I'm in heels, and even though we're walking on carpet, the rocky ground beneath it is unpredictable.

He squeezes back, "Can I be serious with you for a minute?"

"Maybe if you try hard enough." I bump him with my hip.

He growls and pulls me into his side, holding me tight. "I can't think straight with you in that dress, Sunny. I should've brought a baggy, brown trench coat for you to wear." He clears his throat and we take a few more steps before he continues. "Okay, you know how I love candy?"

Well, that took an unexpected turn. I think about it. I guess he does tend to keep a bag of Skittles at the ready. “I think so?”

“I mean, when I’m not getting ready for a shirtless scene, I like candy. Anyway, when I was a kid I used to sneak it in my lunchbox. I figured out quickly that if I filled my lunchbox with Skittles and M&Ms there wasn’t room left for real food. By the end of the day I was sick. Eventually, I learned to pack real food and fit the candy around it.”

Where is he going with this? And where is Immy? She is wasting us on this red carpet. Anders is unfazed. He must not be too worried about whatever is ahead of us. Very him .

“My life has been like a lunchbox full of candy. I haven’t left room for the best things. The most important things. So I’m rearranging, and the thing is...”

My heel catches on a bump in the carpet and I stumble. Without missing a beat, I’m in Anders’ capable arms and my feet are off the ground. The man has literally swept me off my feet. If I wasn’t so breathless I would laugh at the ridiculousness.

“Sorry,” his deep voice rumbles close to my ear. “I didn’t think the shoes through when I planned this.”

“This is good, though.” I stretch up to kiss his neck. “You were saying?”

His Adam’s apple bobs. “I-I was saying that I’m rearranging my life to make room for the best things.” He hitches me higher and closer in his arms. “But the thing is, I’m not making room for you in my life.”

I laugh. “Excuse me?”

“That came out wrong.” He chuckles and I love the hum of his laughter while he holds me. “I’ve been doing it all wrong. I’ve filled my life with work and travel and myself.” We make our way around a bend in the trail. He has to be dying carrying me, but if he is, he’s hiding it well. “But I’m flipping that inside out. I’m not making room for you in my life. You are my life. You’re everything to me, Sunflower. Will you make room for me? For us?”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. My eyes are blurry with tears. I want to kiss him before I answer because it’s been way too long, but I don’t allow it because I also need to think. I want to say yes—of course I do—but I don’t know how it can work.

He must sense my reservations because he plows ahead. “I want all of you, Sunny. I want to hike through the desert and play cards with your sisters. I want to bring you on the real red carpet and show you off. I want to find kids to raise with you. I want to fill a house with at least fifteen kids. Two from each continent, plus Immy. ”

Aaaaand... now I’m bawling. I hope he’s serious. I’d raise fifteen kids with him. He skipped a step, though.

Anders goes on. “I want you. But mostly I want to be yours. I’m begging you to let me be yours.”

He lowers my feet to the ground, but I’m not ready to let him go. I don’t know what to say, but I can’t be separated from him any more.

He fills in the silence. “I know I’m going way too fast. That’s always been me—zero to sixty. But in my gut I know this is right.” His voice is thick with emotion. “Can’t you feel it?”

I stare into his icy blue eyes. He’s so right. Everything inside me knows this is right—we’re right.

“Yes,” I whisper, blinking up at him. “Anders, I needed you so much. I thought I was okay. I thought I could make life perfect on my own, but I was so wrong. I didn’t know how much I was missing until I found you.”

His hands squeeze my waist. “ I found you . That first day, watching you with Immy in those glasses... I found you. And I want to keep you.”

“Well, I’m yours,” I push the words past the knot in my throat.

He whoops, pulling me into his arms and spinning us in a circle. His fingers thread through the curls at the back of my neck and his lips crash onto mine. I tug on his lapels, bringing him closer and memorizing the feel of his mouth on mine. When my teeth find his bottom lip he pulls away.

His husky voice is breathless. “There are children present, Sunflower,” he murmurs. He shakes his head, taking my hand and leading me farther down the carpet. “It’s a good thing you said that, otherwise the rest of this night would’ve been incredibly awkward,” he adds with a chuckle.

We turn one last corner and finally catch up to Imogen. She’s sitting on a couch. Is that a couch? There’s a huge screen and a projector. There’s even a popcorn machine. All of it is positioned at the end of a red carpet in a clearing in the middle of this desert canyon like it belongs here.

“Hurry up, you guys!” she calls, kicking her feet on the end of the couch cushion. “You’re going so slow!”

We make our way toward her, hand in hand. No movie night will ever top this.

“How did you do this? This is crazy. There’s half a movie theater out here, Anders.”

“I know people who are good at making movies in crazy locations,” he says with a shrug. “This isn’t that different. And I’m not the best with unscripted words. I thought maybe I could show you how it might look if we do this together—my life and your life. Red carpet. Red rocks. What do you think?”

I take a long look at what’s ahead of us: Imogen, the red carpet, movie nights, and peaceful time in the quiet desert, just us. “I want all of it.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he murmurs. He pulls his free hand out of his pocket, taking my other hand with it. I feel something in his palm. There is no way.

“Anders, is that a—” I’m certainly not going to say it.

“It’s a ring. But I’m not crazy enough to ask you yet.” He pulls the hand with the ring away. “I just want to warn you that it’s coming. Brace yourself, because it’s going to blow your mind.” He laughs. “Your mom said I should just do it. I told her she’s nuts. It’s a little fast,” he says, completely nonchalant, like he’s not already blowing my mind at this moment.

“Just let me look at it!” I reach for his hand, but he holds it over his head. I jump for it. “Come on, Anders. Just a peek.”

This man is crazy. Who buys a ring for someone so soon?

Maybe I’m crazy, too, because I would say yes.

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Sunny, three years later

“Get out of my closet, Anders,” I say half-heartedly as I walk into my childhood bedroom.

I know he’s in there, and whatever he’s doing can’t be good. I hear him rustling around while I dig through my dresser in search of a pair of comfy sweats. We’re back in Utah and every pair of stretchy pants I own is either in a box or at our place in California. Major packing oversight.

Jackpot! There’s a pair of paint-splattered gray sweatpants in the bottom drawer. Why is paint-splattered clothing always the comfiest kind? Come to Mama .

I lock the bedroom door, then slide the sweats up under my skirt and pull the skirt off over the sweats. Tada! Instant mood improvement.

Our flight from the little airport in California to the even smaller one in Utah was a bumpy ride. I shudder as I dig around my drawers looking for an equally comfortable t-shirt, preferably with holes and even more paint.

What a day. We’ve made the trip dozens of times as I’ve worked remotely, but today’s flight was the first one where I had to use the airsick bag. Joe had to ease me into the idea of working from my home with Anders in Brentwood, and it was hard to be away at first. But I love being in California with Anders and Immy—and sometimes even Hairy—while still being involved at Nizhóní. It’s been the perfect amount of adventure for me.

But after a flight like the one today I'm ready to be a permanent Utah resident. Luckily, that's precisely why we're here. The movers arrived at our new house yesterday and Imogen has been talking about it constantly. We're spending tonight at my mom's house and officially moving in tomorrow.

After Anders finished the "Indiana Jones Project," as he calls it, he scaled way back at work. The ironic thing was, that film made him an instant hot commodity. America discovered his range and fell in love with him all over again. He accepted fewer, more meaningful roles, which only created demand by lowering supply. He's being offered bigger paychecks and working less. We're all winners here, especially Imogen who is thriving with two parents and loves having her dad around more. She's even taking dance classes.

I find an extra scuzzy t-shirt and change out of my button down shirt. There's more rattling around in my closet and now that my mission is accomplished I'm nervous to see what my husband is up to in there.

When I tiptoe in, he shoves some hangers together and hurries to wad up a huge sheet of paper with those sexy, veiny hands of his. Wait. That's not paper. It's my poster of Micah Watson.

"Excuse me, sir. You are destroying private property." I try to yank the wrinkled remains of my embarrassing childhood crush out of his hands.

"Don't you think it's a little uncouth for a married woman to have a poster of Micah Watson in her closet, Mrs. Abrahamson?" He tugs the drawstring of my sweats. I think his intention is to pull me closer, but all it does is cut my abdomen in half, making me squeak .

"Oh... sorry," he grins and slides his big arm around my waist, drawing me to him.

I fall into him, more than willing. Nothing beats a hug from Anders. "Let me guess.

You found an old poster on eBay. Something from the early days of your career before you started losing your hair.”

My husband is not losing his hair, but he’s paranoid about it and I love to rub it in. I have no doubt there’s an early-twenties, shirtless Anders poster hanging in my closet where Micah Watson used to be. I would not complain. I gave up Micah cold turkey and never looked back. I’m addicted to his co-star, though.

“Don’t start, woman.” Anders tickles and pinches my sides, making me squeal. His fingers are strong and perfectly adept at making me crazy. After a few years of this he knows exactly where I’m sensitive and he’s relentless in the best way.

I dart away, shoving apart my dresses to get a peek at the wall where my poster used to be. As suspected, there’s a new poster in its place—a huge one—but it’s not of my husband. I glare in disgust at the bare midriff that replaced Micah Watson. It’s Mariah Carey, at the pinnacle of her oiled up, late-90s Butterfly era. I try to reach around him in an effort to rip the thing down.

“Aw, you don’t like it?” Anders murmurs against my earlobe.

“Nope! No way. It’s bad enough I have to live like this when we visit your parents. I won’t be able to sleep with this in here.”

“Luckily you’ll be sleeping in our brand new, custom home twelve miles away, surrounded by a tall wall and locked gates. You’ll be far, far away from Mimi.”

I fake a gag. “I hate when you call her that.”

“I hate that I found you with Micah the day I was going to beg you to spend your life with me, but here we are. ”

I smack his shoulder. “Oh my gosh, are you ever going to let that go?” I hear about

this at least weekly. When he's busy he has Oliver email a reminder.

"No." He leans in and presses a warm kiss to my forehead. "Now let's go put Immy to bed so I can put you to bed."

The next morning, we drive the Jeep to our new house. The Jeep never did make it back to California. She's a Utah girl. Same here, Jeeping Beauty .

The wind is whipping around us and I'm glad Immy and I both braided our hair today. I breathe in the spring desert scents and smile, dragging my fingers through the rush of dry air. It's so good to be here. A few years ago Immy told me that she liked it here because it's easy. I couldn't agree more. We have a lot of privacy in this small town. It's like being in a beautiful bubble with all of my favorite people.

When we pull up to our gates, a crowd is gathered. At first my stomach drops, thinking we've already been found, until I see a familiar green van, front and center. Indigo's newly refurbished Volkswagen is partially obscured by Mercer's car and a huge bouquet of helium balloons. I get a better look at the crowd and realize with a shock that my in-laws are chatting with my mom and Joe. Liam and Josh are talking to Sage and Willow, and Goldie is sitting on the hood of her car, buried in a thick book. Everyone is here.

"What's going on, Anders?"

He doesn't answer. We pull up to the gate and Anders presses the button on the remote. "Who invited you clowns?" he mocks, passing everyone onto the property. The line of cars follows us and when they unload I see that they've brought a party—trays of food, drinks, and Hairy running circles around all of it. She was supposed to stay with my mom today. Dang it.

"Anders? What's going on?"

“Nothing.” He smirks.

“I call B.S. There are too many balloons for this to be nothing.”

My husband just shrugs and kisses my cheek.

Immy and I make our way to the entrance of our new home while Anders carries one end of a six foot sandwich. Yum . I love a big sandwich. Then I spot the balloons—two specific balloons, shaped like a three and a zero. Oh geez. He promised me he wouldn't do this.

When we finally make it inside, the members of my family who beat us here shout, “Surprise!” and begin a discordant version of “Happy Birthday!” so loud that Hairy whines and dives under the table.

Unfortunately, it's the same table holding a cake that's meant for me. Every person in the room hollers, “Hairy, no!” The table tips and the cake slides, crashing partially on the dog, partially on the floor, and all in slow motion. Hairy's tail wags, wiping frosting in a seashell pattern on our new wood floors. She's just happy the singing stopped.

Anders' eyes are wide, darting from the mess on my hand-selected hardwood to me, and back to the dog. “I love you, Sunflower?” He says it like a question because he knows those words usually get him out of a mountain of trouble.

I throw my arms around Anders' neck, standing on tiptoes to whisper in his ear. “I love you, too.” I kiss his cheek. “But she's your dog, Mr. Beck.”

While my family scrambles to deal with the mess that Hairy created—they're old hands at this by now—my phone buzzes in my back pocket. I check the notification on autopilot, fully expecting an automated “Happy birthday!” message from my dentist .

My heart pounds in my ears. I don't believe the email I'm seeing. I reread it three times to be sure. We've been waiting for this message for months—for so long that I started to lose hope. Anders and I have had so many late night, teary-eyed conversations about this that I've lost count.

I hold the phone out for my husband to see and he snatches it from my hand in disbelief. When he looks up from the phone his eyes are watery and crinkled at the corners.

I can't believe this, his icy blue eyes say.

Me neither, I grin back.

He pulls me into a hug that lifts my feet off the ground. I squeal when he spins me in a circle. I thought the birthday when I played Seven Minutes in Heaven with Anders was my best birthday. I was wrong. This is it, always and forever.

“What's going on?” my mom asks when I'm back on my feet.

My family is distracted, serving up segments of the giant sandwich that survived Hairy. I can't wait to tell them. Once they're all settled I'll have Anders make the announcement—he enjoys a big, dramatic reveal.

For now, I lean closer to my mom and whisper, “I finally got an email from the adoption agency. You're going to be a grandma again.”

THE END