



Throw Away the Key

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Emma Sparrow is in a period of transition. She is dropping the men from her dating roster, much to the surprise of her friends who are hopeful that the change means she is ready for something more serious. For years, she has said that she won't date a woman again until she is ready to fall in love. Is she now? Maybe.

But Emma doesn't have time to focus on the DC dating pool, because she is moving into her own place for the very first time, having gone from living with her parents to becoming her best friend's roommate since their college dorm years. Now that best friend Zora is getting serious and moving in with her boyfriend, Emma feels ready to try something new and create her own space. When she finds the perfect building, the place seems just right for Emma, but she'll have to deal with the no nonsense landlady.

Sadeqa "Sadie" Evans seems to have it out for Emma, but it's not like Emma means to lock herself out of her apartment or break her key. Even underneath all of Sadie's grouchy exterior, Zora and her granny sense sizzling chemistry, and when they implore Emma to take a closer look, she begins to notice the sexy woman behind the smoldering glares and snarky remarks.

When they find themselves in close quarters, Emma opens herself to the possibilities, but after, Sadie is just as closed off as before. When the pair are drawn together like magnets once more—unlocking sparks and a fiery connection—Sadie bolts mid-date, leaving Emma questioning whether she's romantacized everything that happened. Was Emma ready too soon? Will Sadie ever be open to more?

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CHAPTER ONE

“Em! Where you at?”?

“In here!” Emma sat on the beige carpeted floor in her bedroom taping boxes together as she hummed along to the Cowboy Carter album playing from the Bluetooth speaker on her nightstand next to her scent diffuser, which was currently filled with green tea and lemongrass essential oils. More than once, she’d lost the edge of the packaging tape and had to go picking at the roll with her fingernails. Over here fuckin’ up my gel manicure.

“What you doin’ in here?” Zora asked, leaning against the doorway in a pair of joggers and one of her boyfriend’s sweatshirts. Her curls were unkempt, as expected, given the level of sextasy Emma heard going on the night before. “Are you really packing?”

“Yeah, it's time for me to go. I've reached out to a few different buildings to schedule tours and have decided that I am actively looking for a place. I want to get out of your hair.” She finally got enough of a corner of the tape released to pull some across the folded seam of a freshly assembled box, snipping the excess and folding a corner of the packing tape before setting the roll down. “Your girl is all grown up now!” Emma flipped her boho braids behind her shoulder and started to assemble another box.

“But you're not a bother to us! Just because Reid is moving in here doesn't mean that you have to go anywhere. It's not like he's going to use your room.” Zora stepped further into the room and ran her fingers over some clothes folded on Emma’s unmade bed, a lacy pink bra flung over the corner of her teal upholstered headboard.

The floor was the only neutral color in the room—the space was filled with bright colors, gold accents, and cherry blossom string lights. “Don’t get me wrong—my man, my man, my man,” she gushed, “but no one replaces you.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “As if anyone could ever!” she tsked. “But you gotta remember, you are just one door away from me. I know you love your man. I just want to be able to give you your privacy because, uh—and I don't want to embarrass you—but you're not exactly the quietest when you two are having your loving moments ,” Emma grinned at Zora with a wink. Quiet they were not—Emma was pretty sure one of the neighbors stood out on the porch for the grand finale of that second round.

Zora's face colored. “I mean, I could be quieter,” she stammered, breaking eye contact.

“Yeah, but who wants to worry about volume when you're in the middle of clappin’ cheeks? I want you to be able to enjoy yourself—I want you to shout when you need to! Seriously, sis, if he's not making you scream like that, he's not doing it right. So trust me when I say it's perfectly fine. Hell, get some for me too,” Emma smiled to herself as she stood and handed an empty box to Zora. She placed flat boxes against the foot of the bed. “You might as well make yourself useful, if you’re gonna be in here.”

“But is this how you're going to spend your Saturday night? You're not going out tonight?” Zora scratched her scalp, smoothing her hands over her hair as she felt its dissheveled state. “You coulda told me I looked like a damn cockatoo.”

Emma smirked. “I needed to imprint this vision on my brain first. And, no, I don't have anything lined up.”

“What happened to that one who you usually went out with on Saturdays for movies

and whatever else? Mr. Film Buff...”

“Yeah, I kind of got rid of everybody. I got tired of them. Sort of a social entanglements cleanse.” She stepped into her closet and brought out an armful of clothes still on their hangers, making a pile in front of Zora before she moved over to her lime green bookcase to fill another box. She set another empty box on top of her matching green desk, which she’d carefully painted herself in Zora’s backyard. The wall was covered in Black girl magic—colorful paintings and prints of Black women adorned with flowers, dancing, traveling, and glowing.

“Wait, all of them?” Zora blinked in awe, holding a half-folded shirt in midair.

“Hey, it's not like there was an entire football league, you know,” Emma grimaced, clutching her pearls as Zora cackled. It was true that Emma preferred to date around. She’d found too frequently that the men she dated in DC had diagnosed themselves as allergic to commitment, so she reached out to different people to satisfy different needs. Most recently, there had been the film guy, the foodie, and the deejay. Each served their specific purpose, and compartmentalizing helped her avoid emotional complications.

“No, but you do carry a basketball team with a couple of possible alternates from the bench once in a while,” Zora quipped, removing the clothes from hangers and folding each article to place neatly in the box.

Emma rolled her eyes. “It was just three guys and the rotation was getting a little stale. A couple of them were getting kinda clingy and one of them literally asked me if I knew where we were going. Nevermind that film guy is forty-five and lives with his momma and the foodie and I have nothing else in common. Neither of them are people I’d consider for anything long-term. I just felt like I needed some fresh air.”

“So, are you looking to build a new roster then?” Zora motioned for Emma to come

over to her with the tape as she flattened the cardboard, folding it and holding it closed as Emma taped it together.

“No, I feel like I'm done with that.” The finality of Emma's tone felt a lot like freedom. Something was missing from her romantic life—namely, the romance.

“Wow,” Zora's mouth gaped open. Her wide stare was riddled with disbelief.

Emma threw her hands up in the air. “What?” She was perfectly capable of flying solo. It's not like anyone needed to maintain a rotation at all times, did they?

“You've had dating rotations as long as we've lived in this house together. I just wasn't sure I would see the day when you would make the choice to stop.” She regarded her best friend with wonder as her eyes narrowed. “So does this mean what I think it means?”

“What's that?” Emma bit her lip as she turned and pulled more clothes from the closet. Why does this chick always read me like a book?

“You always said that when you stopped your rotation, it meant that you were ready to date another woman and fall in love.”

It had been a long time since Emma's last relationship—her only love. Things didn't end on good terms and she didn't like to talk about it even though her therapist seemed to bring it up with far more frequency than Emma felt was warranted.

Emma shrugged. “I'm more open to it, but I don't think dating was the reason I decided to end things... I just know I'm tired of trying to keep up with these guys, so I decided to give it up for a while.” Maybe I'm ready...

“Okay,” Zora nodded, accepting the next pile of clothes.

“Y'all up here?” Granny Marion called as she neared the top of the stairs. “How are my babies?” She stepped into the bedroom, a smile on her ruby lips as she smoothed the front of her slacks. Her bronzed brown skin was moisturized with Vaseline and shea butter, her dark eyes bright with mischief and framed by laugh lines.

“Granny, we could have come downstairs!” Zora chided her grandmother.

Ms. Marion stood just as elegantly as ever, her silver hair pulled back into her signature chignon, her dancer's feet poised in fourth position. “Nonsense. I came here to help my girl pack. “That's why I have my casual attire on today.”

“I see you, friend.” She was always a sight to behold—the matte red lipstick on her lips brought her entire look together. The clean white collar of her blouse was flipped upward. “You're so stylish, Granny Marion,” Emma gushed, holding a hand out to her as they sat on the bench at the foot of Emma's bed.

“So, what is it that we're going to tackle today?” The elder clasped her hands in her lap as her ankles crossed, as if on queue, looking around the room at the state of disorganization—assembled boxes and flat ones, random beauty products in piles, clothes scattered everywhere, and half of Emma's books missing from their shelves.

“We're gonna put some boxes together, and I think I need to make a pile of things to purge. I've got clothes and shoes that I need to get together to donate, though I think I could probably do away with half of the stuff in this closet.”

“Well, just make sure you're not donating my clothes,” Zora warned. More often than not, Emma found her way into Zora's closet to discreetly borrow some of the more colorful pieces of her friend's wardrobe. In most instances, the articles of clothing were never seen again.

Granny looked between the two. “What were y'all talking about when I came up

here?”

“Get this—Emma said she's gotten rid of the roster.”

“Have you?” Granny perked up. “Got bored with the gentlemen?”

Emma’s shoulders bounced in response. “Yeah, it was time—the connections just stayed on the surface, so there wasn’t any potential.”

“Well, I might know some people that I could connect you with depending on what it is you're looking for at the moment,” Granny winked. “I met a couple of young men the other day when I was visiting the fitness center, and they were being trained by this lovely young lady with the cutest little posterior.”

Zora’s eyes widened.

“I really need to go to the gym with you sometime,” Emma grinned at Granny.

Granny giggled and raised her index finger, she and Emma pressing the pads of their fingers together in their own mini high five.

“Here you two go,” Zora muttered, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Listen, this is just how we roll,” Granny said, pointing a finger at her granddaughter. “You know she's leaving because of you.”

“Granny!” Zora wailed, her face bright crimson. “Because of me?”

“Well, you do holler, baby. You gotta know that if your window's open, I'mma hear you—I'd be surprised if the neighbors didn't hear that encore performance this morning,” Marion nodded, a matter of fact expression on her face.

“Lord,” Zora groaned, covering her eyes with her hands. “I think I need to soundproof my room.”

“If she did that, would you stay?” Granny gently rested a hand on Emma's knee.

She shook her head. “Honestly, I think I need to do this, and I'm excited. This is the first time that I've ever lived alone—I lived in the dorms and then I moved in here and lived with you and Zora. And I just want to have this experience before whatever comes next. I think it'll be good for me!” She smiled brightly. “A new adventure.”

Emma had been lucky, because she always had a strong support system. Whether she was on the West Coast with her family or on the East Coast with Zora's, she had people she could depend on. None of that would change if she got her own place, and though Zora never saw her as a burden, it wasn't lost on Emma how much her best friend did for her without even thinking about it. Zora had mentioned the possibility of expanding and opening a second bookstore in the future, and Emma wanted to be the obvious frontrunner to manage that new location when it happened. Why not start with my own household?

“And besides, I've saved so much money living here with you all, eating all your food and doing all the things... it's time for me to be a grownup.”

“That's fair, and we will absolutely come over and raid your fridge,” Zora chuckled. “But, seriously, just know you can always come back.” She reached for Emma's hand to give it a squeeze.

“Thank you. I appreciate that, sis.”

“Well, I'm excited. Just make sure that you're not too far away because I want to come visit. I gotta keep up with my bestie,” Granny smiled sweetly.

“Of course! You’ll both have keys and an open invitation. Now, let’s get started,” Emma scrambled to her feet as Granny leaned forward and held a box before her on the floor.

“Let’s put some of those items from your desk in here.”

Zora began rifling through Emma’s closet. “See, half of these things in here are mine!”

Emma turned and grimaced at Granny who winked conspiratorially.

“Hi, I saw an ad about the apartment available in your building, and I was curious whether you had time for someone to come by and visit?”

“Yes. When are you thinking of coming by?” The shortness of tone made Emma sit up straighter.

“Would today be okay?” Emma bit her lip, her leg bouncing nervously as she and Granny sat at the dining table. Her phone sat on the hard surface with the speakerphone enabled.

“What time?”

The woman on the phone’s voice was curt, but Emma was so excited to see the apartment in person that she paid her no mind. She never took another person’s attitude to heart—she was focused on the goal and always assumed that bad energy had far more to do with what that person was going through and less about her.

The pictures online made the space appear bright and airy, the rooms seemed spacious and the price was exactly what she was looking for. The apartment building was a few blocks south of Union Market, and just north of the H Street corridor,

which Emma thought was perfect, given the shopping and restaurants all around there.

“How about three o'clock?”

“Fine. Don't be late.” The phone clicked and then beeped to indicate that the property manager hung up the phone.

“Sheesh. What a sourpuss!” Emma's eyes widened as she typed the address into her phone to make sure that she knew how to get there. “As long as I've lived here, you would think I wouldn't need GPS, but I can't help but get lost!”

“Honey, you would lose your head if it wasn't attached,” Granny teased.

“Yeah...” Emma dipped her head slightly. Granny wasn't wrong—in the past week, Emma had misplaced her phone, her work keys, her sunglasses, and her work tablet (twice). And actually, those were Zora's sunglasses and they're still missing. We're definitely not going to tell her though—maybe she won't notice.

“Tell me about this place.”

Emma squeezed her eyes shut, recalling all of the details and ticking them off with her fingers. “So, it's in a ten-unit building. It's all brick on the outside. Um, there are four basement-level apartments, and then two with two bedrooms each on the first floor, and four one-bedrooms on the second floor. They have a one-bedroom open right now. The building is across from a bunch of row houses, and there's a fence around the property and there's some patio space out front with some tables. So we could feasibly sit outside and enjoy some lemonade once it gets warm.”

They'd had a mild winter, but the weather still threatened chilly temperatures in late February. Emma's favorite time of year was quickly approaching—she absolutely

loved to be out when the cherry blossoms hit peak bloom. Being surrounded by incredible views and a sea of pale pink petals brought a calming energy to Emma that she relished each year. And it wasn't like she was a plant lady with an amazing green thumb—hell, she killed the last two succulents she bought from Trader Joe's.

“It's been nice weather, so I'm gonna go over there and check out the neighborhood a bit today. If it ends up being something that seems worthwhile, would you want to come see it?” She stared hopefully.

“Of course I would,” Granny nodded, setting down her mug of tea. “We can't let you leave us to go any old place, you know.”

“Okay, well, I'll keep you posted.” Emma plopped a kiss on Granny's cheek before she waved goodbye.

“See you later, sweetpea.”

As Emma walked out to her royal blue Mini Cooper, the breeze ruffled the hem of her pleated maxi skirt, its pink and blue paisley design billowing softly against her ankles. Emma breathed in the fresh air and rolled up the sleeves of her chambray blouse that she'd tied at her waist. “This is gonna be the one,” she whispered. She reached into her purse and cursed to herself before running back into the house. “Forgot my keys!”

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CHAPTER TWO

“You're late,” the manager bristled as Emma huffed out of breath, rushing to the building's front door. The little hint of expression on the woman's face read wary and perhaps slightly annoyed, her lips puckered. If she hadn't looked so put out, Emma would have complimented her beautiful brown skin. Her hair was cut to a short, tapered fade and mini hoops pierced her ears. Her dark eyes swirled with intensity as she leaned against the wall with her arms crossed over her chest. She's giving both relaxed and irritated.

“I'm sorry, I forgot my keys and then parking was really difficult, but I've made it and I'm just so excited to see this place! I can be quick—I didn't mean to keep you waiting,” Emma panted enthusiastically as she reached out her hand in greeting. “I'm Emma.”

“Well, come on,” the woman droned, turning away from her.

Emma's eyes widened as she followed the woman through the building lobby and up the stairs. Yikes. Is she gonna be a pill every time we have to speak?

“Okay, well, this is Unit 5.” The woman unlocked the door and stepped inside to hold it open, Emma walking past her into the bright apartment.

The large living room led to a decent sized kitchen. There was enough space for a small dining table, but Emma pictured a couple of stools at the kitchen counter being sufficient for her. She opened different doors and craned her neck to assess the storage. “Oh, wow, there's so many closets!”

“Yep, there's a coat closet. And then this door here is actually for the in-unit washer and dryer—they're stackables. And then you've got an additional closet here before you get to the bedroom. Only the studios don't have laundry, so there are card-operated washers and dryers in the basement.”

“Nice.” The wooden floors gleamed in the light, looking as if they'd been recently polished. “Do you have a rug requirement?” Emma asked. She wasn't a huge planner, but there was a good amount of furniture she'd have to get for a space like this to look lived in.

“It's preferable that you have some sort of a rug if you're going to live here, considering this happens to be directly above my apartment,” she deadpanned. She'd leaned her shoulder against the door jam, her legs crossed as she stared lazily.

“Right,” Emma smiled quickly, her heart pounding nervously as she stepped towards the bedroom. Note to self: buy padded rugs. “Wow, what a great space.”

The bedroom had its own door into the bathroom, which was also accessible through the hall. There was a small walk-in closet, but there was plenty of space within the room itself for a dresser and Emma's desk. “This is great. I love this place! Would you mind terribly if I came back and brought my best friend to see it?” She wrung her hands. “I feel really good about it, but I can be indecisive at times, and I just want to make sure that I'm not getting ahead of myself.”

“If you feel like it's necessary, yes. But I can tell you that there are other people interested in this place.”

Emma's eyes widened. No!! “Oh, I would be happy to pay an initial deposit to hold the place, just so that we can come back and see it. I could bring her by tomorrow at the very latest—possibly today!”

“Yeah, fine, whatever.” She looked at her watch testily.

Emma bit her lip. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name before.”

“It’s Sadie,” the woman said quickly.

“Right, it’s nice to meet you,” Emma ventured cautiously. “Well, I completed the application online already and paid the application fee. Um, I have my checkbook if you want a deposit. Or would you prefer that I go get a certified check?”

Sadie shook her head, her tiny hoops swaying. “You can pay the deposit online. I’ll send you an invoice so that you can do that today, preferably as soon as possible, otherwise I won’t hold the space for you. If you delay, then by the time you come tomorrow, this place could be rented.”

Her mouth was drawn into a tight line, but something in her eyes made Emma curious to know more. She wasn’t about to ask though. “No, I will definitely pay it immediately—I’ll be watching my email for the invoice. I just want to bring her by and get her opinion. We can be quick.”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” Sadie showed Emma other features of the building—the mail boxes, the package room, a small garden in the back of the building with one parking spot for each tenant and a couple of first-come, first-serve guest spots.

“Oh, I didn’t realize I could have parked back here,” Emma observed, fighting not to give Sadie a side-eye.

“I guess you’ll know for when you come back.” Sadie walked Emma back to the front of the building before silently retreating into an apartment without a goodbye or any closing communications. The door clicked with finality.

Emma looked around the lobby to see if anyone else witnessed what just happened, but no one was there. She shrugged and ambled back to her car, assuring herself that whatever was affecting Sadie's vibe was surely temporary.

Hours later, she brought Zora back with Granny.

Sadie stood in the lobby, confused when she opened the front door to see Emma. "I didn't really expect you to come back until tomorrow."

"I'm sorry, but I was just so eager to get back to you. I paid the deposit like you asked and I brought my friends today because, barring any major issue, I really would love to go ahead and rent the place.

Sadie pointed at Zora, her lips a straight line. "So are you going to be living here with her?" She asked, her tone almost hostile.

"No, I'm her best friend. She just likes to run some things by me," Zora looked from Emma to Granny, her face frozen in that smile as if to ask "What's this chick's problem?"

"I'm her other best friend," Granny Marion piped up as she stepped forward, her eyes twinkling. "And how are you, young lady?"

"I'm well, ma'am." Sadie softened slightly as she greeted the elder.

Emma watched quietly, unmoving, as if she was seeing a fawn come into a clearing and any sudden change might scare it away. So is it me? Her mind ran through all of the possibilities of ways she could have offended Sadie—from her tardiness to wondering if she'd forgotten deodorant or needed a breath mint.

"You may call me Marion, dear."

“It's nice to meet you, Miss Marion.” Sadie reached out a hand, which Granny shook and then cradled with both of hers.

“Well, let's go on and see this place. I'm sure you have other things that you need to do.”

“Yes, ma'am, I do.”

“Thank you so much for taking the time,” Emma said warmly. “I really appreciate it.”

Sadie nodded once before directing them up the stairs. Granny held the banister and looped her arm in Emma's as she climbed the stairs, Zora stepping behind them, and Sadie following. They all stood aside as Sadie opened the door and held it for everyone to enter.

Emma stood with Sadie once inside, though she found herself holding her breath to avoid disturbing her future landlady. Zora and Granny admired the place.

“This is beautiful,” Zora murmured. “I love all of the light. And having a washer and dryer in your unit—that's perfect!”

“Yeah, and the kitchen's a good size. You know I don't know how to cook, but there are plenty of drawers for takeout menus,” Emma laughed. “Maybe I'll take a cooking class at some point.”

She caught Sadie rolling her eyes before she made eye contact with Zora, who mouthed, “The fuck is her problem?” She was clearly irked by Sadie's demeanor, and the last thing anyone needed was for Zora to go all mama bear in protecting her bestie. Emma shrugged, toying with the handles on the cabinets.

“I really like your style.” Granny turned to Sadie, gesturing toward her outfit.

She stood in a simple white tank top and distressed jeans ripped at the thighs and the knees, her richly moisturized skin peeking through. “Thanks, uh, I don't really put a whole lot of thought into it,” Sadie responded awkwardly, adjusting a black bra strap.

“Well, it works for you. You're a very lovely young lady. I wish I could pull off such a short haircut like that.” Granny gestured toward Sadie’s hair.

Emma observed their conversation. It was true, Sadie’s fade had a hard part, her high cheekbones on display. Her face was bare of makeup, but her dark brown skin had a dewy glow in the light, making Emma wonder what skincare routine Sadie had put together. It was completely impossible to decipher her age—she could be anywhere between her late twenties and mid-forties. I wonder if she uses those viral TikTok masks.

“Don't you think she has a nice style?” Granny pointed at Sadie, whose dark eyes darted to Emma questioningly.

Emma nodded, smiling. “Yeah, it's very casual chic but with an edge. Your skin is amazing!”

Sadie snorted. “Thanks.” She crooked a brow and gestured around the room as her head tilted. “So, what do you say?”

Emma glanced silently at her best friend, who nodded, before turning back to respond. “If my paperwork goes through, I’d love to rent this place.”

“Well, I'll call to let you know. I have all your information at this point,” Sadie pulled open the door and moved to leave.

Emma held up a hand. “Thank you so much for your time. We really appreciate it.” Sadie nodded. “I'll lock up when y'all are done.” And she left.

“That's an attractive young lady,” Granny observed thoughtfully.

“I don't know, she seems a little irritated today,” Zora eyed her best friend cautiously.

Emma grimaced and tried to wave it off. “Maybe she's got something going on. Or maybe she just has to warm up to people.”

“Everybody's got something, baby. Let's see what time says,” Granny smiled brightly.

“Come on, my darlings. I'm hungry.”

Emma's eyes lit up, ready to release her nerves and anxiety. As much as she wanted the apartment, she and her therapist had been working lately on releasing stress. She wasn't always great at it, but she tried. What is meant to be will be. “You know what? Me too. Let's go.”

CHAPTER THREE

The next day at the bookstore, Emma was making her way through the inventory, snacking on a chocolate croissant from the coffee kiosk.

“You're getting flakes of pastry everywhere,” Zora observed from behind her.

“I know, I know, I'm always making a mess,” Emma droned cheerfully. “I promise I'll clean it up. I even brought the portable vacuum out from the office, because I knew I was going to make a mess with this pastry,” she smiled.

“I love that you can find a silver lining in just about anything,” Zora replied, shaking her head in amusement. “So, any word yet on that apartment?”

“No, not yet, but I don't know, the more that I think about it, I wonder if the property manager really wasn't feeling me as a potential tenant.” Sadie's scowl and deep amber eyes were imprinted on Emma's mind.

“Oh, I don't know about all that, like you said yesterday, maybe she had something going on—you just never know with people what causes their mannerisms to be the way that they are, but I'm sure she would warm up to you if you moved in there.

“Do you feel like you're really serious about it though? Because again, remember, you don't have to go anywhere. I would be happy for you to stay. We could even switch around the third bedroom so that you're further away and maybe you won't be subjected to certain... activities,” Zora paused to search for the right word, blushing as she said it.

“‘Activities’ is an understatement, bookie. Sometimes it sounds like you two are having a true WWE Smackdown up in there.” Emma’s lips twitched as she bit back a laugh.

“Oh my god, shut up,” Zora groaned. “That’s not the case.”

“Yeah, okay, whatever. You act like I can’t recite some of the dirty shit you were saying to your man.”

Zora’s cheeks grew bright red, and she averted her eyes. “I—”

“What are you two over here gabbing about?” Granny strolled in from outside, the sunny weather was the perfect welcome to an early spring. “I wonder if peak bloom is going to be early this year.”

“You think so, Granny?” Emma’s face brightened. Visiting the cherry blossoms had become one of their favorite shared traditions—they preferred to go first thing in the morning to beat the tourists. As much as she wanted to be more attuned to nature year round, Emma was terrified of critters and had been traumatized while picking apples one fall. Admiring from arm’s length was much more her speed.

“Maybe, assuming we don’t get one last cold front. We didn’t have a very cold winter and we’ve had lots of sunshine and nice temperatures, so I think we might see some blossoms starting to open up in the next couple of weeks.” Granny Marion was a litmus test for so many things, but she’d been in DC long enough to have a feel for the weather and some of the big happenings around town.

“I am so ready for springtime to officially be here! We’ll have to make sure that we plan to go down there once we figure out what day peak bloom is supposed to be.”

“Definitely, we have to uphold our tradition, although I may have some plans.”

“Plans? You gonna go on another trip with your friends?” Zora asked. Granny Marion had a squad of vintage singles that she liked to travel with. Most recently they came back from Fort Lauderdale. They had stayed at a hotel on the beach and enjoyed each other's company for an extended long weekend in the sunshine.

“We're trying to think of something. I don't know if it would happen that quickly, but you know I like to be a woman about town,” she said slyly.

“Okay Granny, I see you.” Emma pressed her index finger to Miss Marion's, who giggled.

“You know, I just like to use this energy while I got it, because a certain someone still hasn't given me any great grandbabies.”

Zora's shoulders fell as she heaved out a breath, the hints of a smile playing at the corners of her lips. “Now Granny, we have been all up and through this.”

“I know, I know, and you found your person, and all I'm saying is that we already know that he's gettin' them cheeks.” Marion shrugged. “Maybe you two should vary your positions more.”

“Granny,” Emma whispered, her eyes bugging as she dragged out the second syllable.

Zora's face turned a deep scarlet. “Not the cheeks.... Not the cheeks, Granny,” she started, her expression gagged as she tried to hold it together. “I don't even know what to say to that.”

“Well, if you're going to subject us to the sounds of your amorous behavior, then I suggest you narrate every once in a while. Paint the picture.” Granny gestured as if she were brandishing a paintbrush across a massive canvas.

How does she say some of this shit with a straight face? A fucking legend. Emma hid her face in her hands, cackling hysterically, a tear running down her cheek. “You never cease to amaze me, Ms. Marion. You are truly the elixir of life in human form. You give me life every single day, Granny.” She swiped at the corner of her eye with her knuckle.

“Well, we have to keep it interesting, my darling.”

“Anyway,” Zora's embarrassment was still apparent on her cheeks. “I was just wanting to ask you if you were really serious about giving up your rotation, or have you thought more about that?”

“Nuh-uh... don’t think we don’t see you changing the subject,” Emma teased, wagging her finger. “But yeah, it feels like the right time to switch things up. I feel like I'm too old to keep dealing with these dudes. You know, at my big age...”

“You’re not even nearing forty yet, so what big age?” Zora shook her head in confusion.

“I'm not forty, but I feel like I’ve matured. I mean, in part, I was keeping my rotation because I didn't want to catch feelings for somebody who wasn't actually ready. But if we’re being honest, I wasn’t ready either. The rotation was just a distraction. I was still healing, that’s all.”

“Bad breakups will do that to you,” Zora nodded. “I’m glad you are finally in a place to admit that.”

More than five years had passed since Emma’s last relationship. She’d fallen hard only to be ghosted and then ultimately dumped via text. Dani, Emma’s first love, had been scared away by her own feelings, believing that their mere presence meant that she had to commit to something that she wasn’t ready for. But Emma had no

intention of rushing the process. Dani never gave Emma the chance to show that she was willing to wait.

After the breakup, Emma kept the shards of her heart compartmentalized for a long time, refusing to offer more than a delicate corner of her heart to any one person. Her rotation was built as a form of self-preservation, but she veered from dating women to avoid doing to one of them what Dani had done to her. Thank god for therapy.

Emma fiddled with her inventory tablet. “Timing is everything. In DC, it feels like it works against single women—we’re trying to date people who want to stay single until they’re, you know, silver and sexy. The last woman I even attempted to talk to was in her forties talkin’ bout ‘let’s be friends with benefits,’” she sighed. “I don’t have the energy for that anymore. I want to be all in. I’m not opposed to a silver and sexy person, but at the same time, like, I’m a pretty young thang. Surely somebody wants to wife me up.”

“Undoubtedly, my dear,” Granny responded, her ruby lips curving in approval. “Someone will snatch you up when it’s right. There’s no need to force it.”

“Exactly. But I also don’t need to waste my time with things that aren’t serving me anymore. And so that’s why the guys are gone. They were decent guys, but I didn’t feel strongly enough to consider anything beyond casual dating.”

“Okay, I hear you,” Zora squeezed her shoulder. “Well, maybe at some point you will tell us what it is that you’re looking for. We might know some people to introduce you to.”

Emma pressed her lips out to the side. The last few months—perhaps as Zora’s relationship grew stronger—Emma had become aware of a longing that lingered even when she was in the company of one of her dates. The dates were perfectly fine—they simply weren’t remarkable. Emma wanted extraordinary.

“Yeah, but no rush. For now, I'm going to nest a little bit once I have my new place and enjoy the fact that I'm living on my own and experiencing the luxury of not having to share the remote control or people accusing me of snoring,” she glared at Zora.

Zora smirked, “Listen, I'm only telling you the truth. We gotta get you a special pillow or something.”

“Come on, I only snore when I'm really, really tired and it's never that bad!”

Zora bit her lip and turned to look at her grandmother, who held up her hands and took a step back. “I didn't say nary a word. Grown folks' business is grown folks' business and I'mma mind mine. I'll be over there with my favorite young man, getting some coffee, if you need me.” Granny sashayed towards the coffee kiosk to greet Brian.

“I'm telling you, your snoring is not just an occasional thing. Reid and I have heard you through the walls...”

“Well, if you can hear snoring through the walls, imagine all the things that I hear and consider minding your business?” Emma quirked an eyebrow at her best friend. The silence was loud.

“Oop!” Zora raised a church finger and saw herself back over to her office, while Emma continued to finish with the inventory.

“I do not snore all the time,” she muttered to herself.

CHAPTER FOUR

Later that evening, Emma remained at the store after Zora and Granny had headed home. She decided to finish up the week's inventory so that she would have less on her plate over the weekend. She made it over to the cookbook section, which always made her hungry, so she'd run out quickly for a burger and an order of duck fat fries from a nearby eatery. As she sat on the floor licking her fingers, her phone rang, and she imagined Zora watching her from one of their newly installed cameras. She's probably about to bitch me out for making a mess.

Emma hastily rubbed her fingers against a napkin, trying to remove some of the grease from the duck fat before swiping at her phone and streaking the screen with oil. "Hello," she answered on speaker, fries still filling her cheek as she chewed rapidly to swallow them down.

"Emma? Is this a bad time?" Sadie's husky voice filled the space and Emma pictured her scowling at hearing Emma speaking with her mouth full.

"No, no, this is a good time." Emma wiped her mouth. "How are you?"

"Fine. I just called to let you know that all of your paperwork went through and you've been approved for the apartment." There was a slight raspiness to her tone.

I wonder what she'd sound like on a podcast. She'd make a killing by reading people to sleep. "Oh my god, that's amazing! Thank you so much for your call."

"Yes, well, somebody had to notify you, so that's why I called," Sadie deadpanned.

Emma's smile stopped halfway. "Right, well, thank you for that. I really do appreciate it. In terms of next steps, what timeline will we be working with? Should I plan to stop by to pick up the keys?" She grabbed her peanut butter Oreo shake and took a sip, a little shimmy activated as she savored the combination.

"Why don't you give us the week? I want to just make sure we do one more walk through and a thorough cleaning before you come. But I would say a week from tomorrow."

"That would be perfect. Are there any rules when it comes to moving trucks or anything like that? I'll likely have my friends helping me."

"No strict policies. Just be careful and mind the walls as you're coming up the stairs. A lot of times people will just double park their moving truck out front so that they don't block off the driveway to the parking in the back—that would be a sure way to piss off your neighbors. But out front, you can imagine that you still need to be relatively quick because people might need to access cars parked on the street. And I don't want to have to deal with the fallout."

"No, no, I wouldn't ask that of you. I'll definitely make sure that we're considerate of the neighbors," Emma assured her hastily. "Um, and, and I'd be happy to drop treats off to people in the building. Sort of a greeting my neighbors gesture."

"That's really not necessary. And plus you have no idea what allergies people have these days," Sadie said, matter of factly.

Emma thought about that for a minute. "I understand. And thank you so much. Do I need to come at a certain time to pick up the keys?"

"Ideally, you'll come at nine in the morning because I would prefer to have the rest of my day to do what I need to do." Emma pictured Sadie's face fixed into what seemed

to be her signature scowl, though that glimpse of softness when she spoke with Granny came to mind.

“Of course, I want to be respectful of your time. Um, and is this your cell phone? Should I save it just in case?”

“Yes, this is my cell phone and as you move in, um, I will have additional numbers and some move-in guidelines in terms of when it's appropriate to contact me and when it's not, preferred service providers in terms of cable and internet, and all the things.”

“Okay, great. I'm really looking forward to next week, and I will be the best neighbor! I really will.” Emma hopped to her feet, her excitement shooting her full of adrenaline. She raised a fist above her head, bouncing from one foot to the other Rocky-style.

“Well, the best neighbors are the quiet ones. I'll see you next Saturday.”

Sheesh. “Got it. Thank you,” Emma hung up the phone before falling to a squealing heap on the floor. “This calls for something special. Ooh, maybe I should pick up a cake to take home and celebrate.”

She noted where she left off with inventory, picked up the rest of her food, and ambled for the front door, the street lights twinkling through the front windows.

“Oop, let me not forget my keys!” She turned back around and snatched them off of the counter. She locked up and headed for her favorite treats, the cool breeze whispering through her braids. “One week to go. Time for a new chapter.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The following week, Emma made sure to be right on time to pick up her keys from Sadie, who was fresh faced and dressed in yoga shorts and a hoodie. Her toned legs made her look even taller, the muscles in her quads and hamstrings looked shapely and strong. Sadie cleared her throat, shaking Emma's stare loose with a raised brow, her dark eyes penetrating Emma's soul.

"Sorry about that," she stammered hurriedly. "Uh, do you practice yoga? Are you about to head somewhere to work out? I'd love to know where you go if you have a recommendation for a studio," Emma inquired as Sadie placed a key ring in her open palm.

"I prefer to have my privacy, but there are tons of spots in the area," Sadie replied simply before turning to leave the building. "When I come back, if you have questions, I can answer them via text. I don't plan to be home all day."

"Sure, no problem. I'll let you know if anything comes up. I did bring some flyers for anyone here who might want to come to a community event at the bookstore."

Sadie pumped her brakes and turned around, holding a palm up toward Emma. "Hold on a second. You should not be bothering your neighbors. There's no soliciting in this building."

"Oh, no, I wasn't going to solicit," Emma assured her. Shit. I'm gonna be on her bad side already. "It was just an invitation. People can take it or leave it."

Sadie held up a finger. “Don't drop these off at people's doors. You can leave a few by the mailboxes, and if somebody wants one, they'll take it, but leave people alone.”

“Well, good morning there, Sadie.” Granny greeted the landlady with a smile as she stepped through the open front door.

“Miss Marion, it's so good to see you again.” Sadie's face softened immediately, her husky tone exponentially friendlier, earning a side-eye from Emma. “How are you doing? I didn't expect to see you here on moving day.”

The elder waved her hand. “Oh, well, you know, everybody needs someone to help them get situated and decide where to put things. I'm that kind of mover. I don't really lift anything these days.”

“Well, I'm sure that Emma is lucky to have you.” Sadie nodded in Emma's direction.

Emma stared at the woman, stunned by the kindness that was coming out of Sadie's mouth given the constant gruffness directed toward her. It's like she's an entirely different person . Maybe it's me. She hates me. If Emma could elicit even an ounce of the energy Granny received, she'd bask in it. This woman was raising Emma's blood pressure, and Emma wanted nothing more than to experience Sadie's softer side—there was something alluring about it. Emma just couldn't put her finger on what it was.

“Well, I hope that you will take a look at that flyer yourself. You know, our community events at the bookstore are extremely important to the neighborhoods and demographics that we serve. And certainly I can imagine that you would want your friends to come as well. We make sure that students of color are supported and encouraged to write and be creative. I just know that you would want to join us at some point.” Granny clasped her hands in front of her body and looked at Sadie expectantly.

“I will definitely keep that in mind and I was just telling Emma that she can set these in the mail room so that people can pick them up if they'd like. But, you know, we can't have anybody going door to door.”

It was like watching the two negotiate on Emma's behalf—like she wasn't even there, or worse—like Sadie would rather talk to Granny than her. Emma preferred Granny to most people herself, but in this instance, she wanted to understand how Sadie ticked.

“No, that's perfectly fine. I'm sure that your tenants will want them because so many locals are familiar with Opus Northeast.” Granny retrieved a flyer from Emma and handed it to Sadie, who accepted it willingly.

Am I invisible? Is Emma in the room with y'all or nah?

“Oh, is that your granddaughter's bookstore?” Sadie glanced at the flyer with interest. “Looks like there are some good events coming up.”

“Yeah, that's mine,” Zora huffed, heaving a cardboard box in her arms as she made her way up the stairs. Sweat dampened her forehead as she shot a glare in Emma's direction.

“Oh, let me come up and open that for you.” Emma rushed up beside her so that she could unlock the door and prop it open.

Reid advanced behind them with a dolly carrying banker's boxes full of books.

“We'll be careful with the stairs.” He nodded at Sadie as he adjusted his glasses, his tall frame towering as he passed Granny.

Emma watched Sadie nod from her vantage point at the top of the staircase.

Granny continued her chatter sweetly. “You headed to yoga?”

“Pilates actually.”

“Oh, do you use one of those reformer machines? I've always found those so fascinating.”

Sadie smiled—a broad, genuine smile that crinkled at the corners of her eyes.

Emma stared in amazement. It’s like watching the tin man find out he has a heart.

“I do, yes.”

Granny’s expression brightened. “I wonder, how did you get into that?”

Sadie pressed her lips together and shrugged. “It looked really challenging and I like to work out and push myself. And so I really gravitated towards this.”

Granny Marion glanced up the stairs. “You know, our Emma loves yoga and barre classes. I bet she'd love to go to a Pilates class sometime.”

Sadie hid a smile, never tearing her eyes from Granny. “I'll keep that in mind.”

“Alright, well, best be on your way. You don't want to be late for your class.”

“Yes, ma'am. I hope I see you again soon.”

“Count on it.”

Sadie turned to leave as Emma made her way back down to Granny to offer her arm and help her to the second floor.

Granny's eyes lit up as she grinned at Emma. "She's a fiery one!"

Emma smiled ruefully. "Fiery is one word for it. She seems to like you though."

"She likes you too." She patted Emma's arm.

Emma chuckled. "I am not seeing what you're seeing at all. I think I'm already on her bad side, and I really love this building. She seems to like her space. Maybe I should just leave her alone and she'll warm up to me?"

Granny eyed her strangely. "Let's see how that works out."

CHAPTER SIX

“Hi, would you like to sample our cheese?”

The Saturday morning farmer’s market on H Street was bustling well before 9am. It was Emma’s first weekend since moving into her apartment, and she’d been acquainting herself with the different shops and restaurants near her in Union Market and along H Street.

Emma wandered around, hoping to grab some fresh items before heading to work to open the store. Tented table booths carried everything from dairy products and produce to fresh fish and handmade pasta. She’d noticed a long line forming at the artisanal cheese booth and joined before the crowds grew even thicker.

“Ooh, what kind do you have today?” Emma asked brightly, surveying the table filled with miniature signs and samples.

The woman behind the table gestured to one end of it. Her dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail and she wore a black and white striped apron over her clothes. “We have our special chevre goat cheese and a sharp cheddar left—some of the others went quickly about an hour ago. Later today, we’ll have a triple cream brought over from our store—we’re located on 14th Street. All of our cheeses are made with fresh products from local, sustainable farms.”

“I’d love to try the cheddar!”

The woman nodded and removed a clear plastic cloche to let Emma select a piece

with a toothpick. “This one is smoked with applewood and it has a little bit of jalapeno added to it.”

Emma popped a cube of cheese into her mouth, the sharp and creamy cheese had a slight hint of smoke and a tang from the pepper. “Oh, this is so good,” she nodded as she chewed. “Could I have maybe that size right there?” She pointed to a small block of the cheddar.

“You sure you don't need more?”

“Oh, I'm sure. It's just me at home. I'm trying to make sure that I don't have a lot of food waste.”

The woman nodded. “I can appreciate that goal! We try the same in our house,” she gestured to her daughter who sat in a foldable chair, her knees to her chest with her cell phone inches away from her nose. The girl gave a little wave without looking up.

“Well, thank you. I'm still getting it all figured out—I've just gotten a new apartment, and it's my first time living alone.” Emma smiled bashfully.

The woman's expression brightened. “Oh, well, I'm gonna drop a little sample in here of our chevre as well as a housewarming gift. I hope you enjoy it and maybe we'll see you back here next week!”

“I'm sure you will, thank you so much.” Emma paid for her cheddar and turned toward the produce tents, bumping into someone as she moved. “Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry!”

As the person turned around, Emma saw that it was Sadie in a monochromatic jogger set. Iced coffee dribbled down the front of her hoodie. Emma immediately reached to dab at the damp material with a napkin, but Sadie grabbed her wrist to stop her. “It's

okay, I got it.” She accepted the napkin from Emma and pressed it into the material.

“My fault, Sadie. I should have been watching where I was going. I didn't know you came here—we could have walked over here together!” She tried to make light of what had just happened, though nothing about Sadie’s expression hinted that she was looking for someone to walk with her.

“Yeah, I was here to meet friends, so that probably wouldn't have worked out.”

“Right,” Emma frowned slightly, feeling like the shadow of a rain cloud had rolled in. I wonder if her friends have the same temperament. She had never cared much for confrontation, so she held back, though everything in her body screamed for her to ask Sadie to identify the chip on her shoulder. “I hope you find them. It seems really busy here today. Any particular booths that you recommend?”

“Uh, well, I see you've already found the cheese table,” Sadie looked behind Emma.

“There's a great place that has local honey, if you go further down that way,” she pointed in the opposite direction of the produce booths. “But if you go back that way, they just got in some white nectarines, if you like those.” She fidgeted as if she were itching to leave.

“Ooh, those would be perfect. Thank you. And I feel like all of those things go together, right?” Emma rambled nervously. “Nectarines, honey, and cheese makes for a great party. You know, kind of a girl-dinner vibe.” Ugh, shut up, Emma! This chick does not care.

“Sure. Well, anyway, I see my friends so I should go.” Sadie was in motion before she’d finished her sentence.

“Okay, bye.” Emma’s voice trailed off as she turned around and headed toward the

produce. Maybe next time I run into her, I should just walk the other way. She picked up nectarines, red potatoes and a bunch of young carrots.

“Do you have a recipe in mind that you're gonna be cooking?” An older woman asked, her white hair pulled into a long braid she'd slung over her shoulder.

“I really don't. I'm actually not a very good cook. Honestly, looking at these now, I don't even know what I would do with them—I just know I like these ingredients. Your produce looks so fresh, it's hard to resist,” she admitted. “I'm Emma, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Emma—I'm Tonya. Hmm. Well, with potatoes and carrots, I can give you a good recipe for roasted chicken, which you could put the potatoes and carrots with. I'd say you probably just want to also get it, maybe an onion and a couple of lemons? Perhaps some fresh thyme or rosemary. I usually carry some recipe cards with me for folks looking to attempt something new.” She flipped through a container with receipts and other papers until she found a bundle of cards rubberbanded together. “Yes! Here you go.”

“Okay, I could try that,” Emma nodded tentatively as she read the instructions. “I'm having some friends over for dinner after work, and I bet this could really impress them. At worst, I'll have takeout on standby!”

“Great. It's one of those easy dishes where you just put it all in the same pan with some seasonings and—”

“Wait, is there a booth that has seasonings? I don't think I have those at home yet,” Emma winced, wondering if she should just order a pizza instead. This whole cooking thing requires so much more preparation than making an order from DoorDash.

“Yes, it's actually right next to the honey booth.”

“Oh, perfect. I was headed there anyway!” Emma thanked Tonya after paying and carried her parcels toward the honey booth. As she walked up, she found Sadie with two of her friends. “We meet again!” she smiled brightly, nodding at the others.

“Uh,” Sadie sputtered.

“Hi, I'm Joy.” A tall woman with boho braids and gold earrings in the shape of Africa reached out a hand. Her peach-colored sweater hung off one shoulder, exposing her glowing brown skin. She wore wide-legged jeans and combat boots.

“Hi, I'm Emma. I just moved into Sadie's building.” Sadie had yet to move or form a coherent sentence. She appeared frozen. I wonder if she's embarrassed. Maybe she was talking trash... I don't want them to get the wrong idea about me. “She told me to check out this booth along with some others,” Emma smiled easily. “I love your braids!”

Joy flipped them over her shoulder and toyed with the curling ends. “I love yours! You'll have to tell me who your technician is, because mine doesn't do color like yours. I love the ombre effect.”

Emma beamed and immediately began to rummage in her purse. “Of course! I carry around a few of her cards—she's so talented and sweet too. As the weather gets warmer, I try to go lighter with my color—sort of a 1B/30/27 vibe.”

“Wait, yes! So you're the new neighbor,” Joy glanced at Sadie as she accepted the card from Emma. “Thanks for this—I bet your tech loves you for promoting her business. This is my partner, Sheena.”

“So nice to meet you both. Do y'all come here all the time too? Um, I understand that

Sadie's been here before,” Emma kept her eyes on Joy. She could feel a look from Sadie burning into the side of her face and didn’t want to trip over her words.

“Yeah, pretty much every weekend. Are you new to the area?”

“Yes, but just to this neighborhood. I used to live with my friend over in Mount Rainier, and so there's a closer farmer's market, but I was really excited to come and see this one since it's so much bigger. I’m trying to make a new routine.”

Joy leaned in like she had a secret. “Well, let me tell you, you definitely gotta get some of this honey. It’s locally sourced and great for anyone with allergies. She even sells bee pollen if you don’t mind the potency of it.”

“Sadie mentioned this booth specifically, so I had to come check it out. And Tonya over in the produce section told me to stop at this place for spices,” Emma pointed to the next booth.

“Oh, do you cook?” Sheena asked, her thick hair framed her face in chunky twists. “I’d like to think I’m the chef in our household.” Joy nodded proudly at Sheena and rested an arm on her shoulder. The chemistry between them was so undeniable that it made Emma’s heart flutter.

“I really don't know how, to be honest, but Tonya gave me a recipe for roasted chicken that I want to try out. My best friend and her grandmother are the cooks—I’m usually just along for the ride,” Emma laughed. “But now that I'm living on my own, I'm going to be learning the ropes.”

The first few days in her new apartment had been quiet—almost too quiet, but she’d busied herself getting the place furnished. Her new sofa had been delivered, and she had put together some stools to sit at the kitchen counter. She planned to buy more bookcases and a few more pieces once she figured out exactly what she wanted, but

she felt no rush.

“This is your first time living alone?” Sadie asked, puzzled, as Joy and Sheena’s gazes swept from Sadie to Emma.

“Yeah, I went from the dorms straight into my best friend's house. She inherited this big ole house from her parents, but she didn't want to be there alone and it made life easy for me too since I work at her bookstore. Sadie was kind enough to approve my application and let me move in.”

Joy and Sheena exchanged a glance before eyeing their friend.

I wonder what that means...

“Oh, Zora,” Sadie nodded, staring off at something on the ground.

“Yep, but now that Zora and Reid are getting more serious, I just wanted to give them a little bit more space. So, I decided to move out and try solo living.”

Sadie’s eyes had glazed over as if she was lost in her own world. Joy placed a hand on her shoulder. “I think everyone should have that solo living experience at least once. You learn so much about yourself! And it's dope that you had the ability to live with your best friend—I lived with this one way back when.” She gave Sadie a squeeze.

“Yeah, it made life easy. My family’s on the other side of the country, so Z and her granny are my family here.” Emma picked up a jar of raw honey. “Anyway, I’m sure y’all have stuff to do. I, um, better get this honey and some seasonings, because I still need to go and buy a chicken for this dinner. But it was great to meet you both and, Sadie, I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

Joy and Sheena nodded and waved.

“Yep, uh huh,” Sadie winced as Joy elbowed her. “See ya.”

Emma stopped by a local market before heading home for the last of her ingredients. As she reached the building, she felt around in her pockets. “Shit, I don't have my keys.”

She knocked and tried buzzing Sadie, but nobody answered. “Crap.” She set her bags down on one of the patio tables, plopping down on a chair in a huff, almost falling out of it when she heard a noise behind her.

“You good?” Sadie asked, carrying a reusable grocery bag on her arm, her expression unreadable.

“I sorta locked myself out... I must have forgotten my keys in my apartment.”

Sadie sighed and waved for Emma to follow her inside. “Is this a normal occurrence for you?”

“I never mean to, but sometimes I’m a little scatterbrained. I’m working on it,” Emma assured her.

“I guess that’s really all anyone can ask of you.”

That may be the nicest thing she’s ever said to me...

They walked up the stairs in silence, Sadie moving keys on her ring around until she had the right one for Emma’s door. “Do you always carry all of our keys on you?”

“Honestly, I do it for reasons like this. It just makes things easier for me.”

Emma nodded.

Sadie twisted the door knob and pushed the door open before stepping aside.

“Thanks, I really appreciate it.”

Sadie threw up a peace sign and made her way down the stairs. “Later!”

Emma watched her descend before closing the door, her mind running over the events of the day and meeting Sadie’s friends. The warmth Joy and Sheena both exuded had been a vibe, and she hoped to run into them again. Now how did those two become friends with Sadie?

CHAPTER SEVEN

“I’m really impressed.” Zora held a hand over her mouth as she chewed. “You really made this yourself? This isn’t one of those situations like I dealt with where this is delivered food dressed up as homemade.”

“No, I’m not Lawrence,” Emma teased. “I actually made this. I went to the farmer’s market today and a woman selling produce had this recipe for veggies and potatoes and chicken all on the same tray in the oven. And she just made it sound really simple. So, this is my attempt to follow her instructions.”

A ceramic baking dish sat on the counter, half of the chicken laid flat in the center surrounded by vegetables. Emma had watched a YouTube video to learn how to properly clean and spatchcock a chicken—that was the one instruction the recipe card didn’t include, but it had been far easier than the name suggested. Once the whole chicken laid flat, she’d seasoned butter and rubbed the skin with the mixture, stuffing some underneath for added flavor.

Surprisingly, so long as she followed the directions, everything made sense. She’d always watched Zora and Granny in the kitchen, so she understood the mechanics—she’d just never had a need to try before now. Emma watched them eat more food, her smile growing as sounds of satisfaction filled the room.

“It’s not an attempt,” Granny corrected. “This is a success! It’s delicious.” She and Zora sat on the stools facing the kitchen island, while Emma stood on the other side facing them.

“Really?” Emma knew Granny wasn’t one to gas her up, but it still felt damn good to see them enjoy something she made.

“Yes. You did a great job—the chicken isn’t overcooked and frankly, I’m more relieved that it’s cooked all the way through,” Zora admitted. “Even if you only ever have one strong dish—this is the one, sis.”

Emma high-fived her best friend across the table.

“Today was so busy at the bookstore, we didn’t really get a chance to chat. How was your morning of exploration?” Granny poked at a roasted potato.

“It was good. The farmer’s market was really nice. I ran into Sadie and a couple of her friends there.”

“Did you?” Granny perked up.

“Yeah, she’s still Sadie,” Emma smiled, rolling her eyes. “But she made some recommendations at the market, so I can’t even be mad.”

“What kind of recommendations?” Zora speared a carrot.

“She gave me advice about some of the different booths to hit up, and then I locked myself out of my apartment earlier...”

Zora stared at Emma the way a big sister would stare at her little sister. “Already?” she asked, her fork hanging in mid air.

“It wasn’t my fault! I was moving too fast because I was so excited to go to the farmer’s market, and I guess I just forgot them,” she shrugged. “And thankfully Sadie was back in time to let me in. I barely waited a few minutes.”

“Was Sadie upset?”

“No more than usual,” Emma lifted her hands in question. “I honestly can't tell with her. Probably just a personality difference, because she seems nicer to literally everyone else I've seen her interact with.”

“I don't think she's annoyed with you, if that's what you're thinking,” Granny offered. “You know, sometimes it takes people a bit to warm up, and besides, I feel like there's something there.”

Zora nodded her agreement. “There's definitely some sexual tension between the two of you.”

“What are you even talking about?” Emma asked incredulously, her cheeks warming. She practically hates me . “I am not seeing what you're seeing.” She shifted from one foot to the other as she remembered Sadie's heated glare when she spoke to Joy and Sheena.

“Have you not looked at that woman? First of all, she's gorgeous—her skin is flawless . She is stunning,” Zora sliced into her chicken thigh. “I'm surprised that you haven't already asked her about her day-to-night skincare regime.”

Granny agreed. “Honestly, if I hadn't found some options through online dating, I would be after her in a minute. She seems to have a good head on her shoulders, she's easy on the eyes, and I didn't see a ring on her finger. Someone oughta snap her up.”

Zora's bite of chicken stopped just before her mouth as she stared at her grandmother. She shot a wide-eyed glance at Emma.

“You know what, Ms. Marion, we learn something new about you every day,” Emma grinned. “Let me find out that you and I have the same type when it comes to

women.”

Granny’s lips pursed in amusement. “I don’t believe in saying never to something I’ve not yet tried, dear. But she’s so clearly your type, Emma. I’m surprised that you don’t see it.”

Emma frowned. “I hadn’t really thought about it. I don’t even know if she’s queer? Either way, she’s got a ‘don’t fuck with me’ sign on her forehead—maybe that’s why I can’t see past this surly vibe she’s got goin’ on. I get the sense that she really can’t stand me.”

“I don’t think it’s that she doesn’t like you,” Zora shook her head. “You warm to people faster. Some might see that as being a bit extra,” she said after a pause, as if she were considering her words.

“I’m not really hearing that as a compliment in this moment.” Emma narrowed her eyes.

“Well, I don’t think that’s necessarily a bad thing. You always keep things interesting, you make it funny, you keep things light. Not everybody likes perky people.” Zora shrugged. “You don’t need coffee to be completely energized.”

One word stuck to the forefront of Emma’s mind. “That’s how y’all see me? Perky?” She frowned, hoping that she wasn’t seen as some annoying joke—not only to Sadie but to the people she loved most.

“I wouldn’t say perky,” Granny chimed in. “I would say, exuberant. You’re full of life. And there’s nothing wrong with centering joy rather than wallowing in negativity. Anybody that has a problem with that has a problem with me.”

“Thank you,” Emma leaned across the counter and tapped her index finger with

Granny's. "You really are the best."

Marion winked at her before setting down her silverware. "Delicious meal, my love. And there's nothing extra about loving the life you live. Some people are miserable and they can't stand to see others being happy."

"I just worry that being 'extra' means that no one takes me seriously," Emma rested her hands on the counter. Maybe that's why Sadie seems so annoyed with me. She thinks I'm extra.

"Anyway," Zora redirected, jutting her chin toward Emma. "Question for you: Are you attracted to Sadie?"

Sadie's dark eyes appeared in Emma's mind, but so did her look of disdain. "Honestly, I might have to look at her again, because I haven't really been paying attention." Her legs, the forearm sleeve... those eyes.

Zora glared at her best friend. "I don't buy that for a second."

Emma kissed her teeth. "Okay, fine. I will admit..."

Zora rested her chin in her hands, her elbows propped on the counter. Her smug expression made Emma scoff. "We're listening."

"I will admit that she's attractive. And Granny was right—she does have a really cool style. It's very simple, but it's kind of edgy and sexy. I don't know..."

"So, you said all of that and really you could have just said yes. Interesting,"

Zora teased taking a sip of the wine Emma paired with dinner.

Ugh, this heffa. “Well, whatever. I don't think she's interested in me, so none of this really matters. And besides, she lives directly below me. It's probably not a good idea. If something did happen and things didn't work out...”

“Time will tell, baby. It always does,” Granny's eyes sparkled. She wiggled her shoulders. “Now, what do you have for dessert?”

Emma chuckled. “I hope you don't hate it, because it's not fancy, but I have a cheese plate with some sliced nectarines drizzled with local honey.”

“Well that sounds delightful,” Zora quirked a brow. “Who are you and what have you done with my best friend?”

“You know, it was something that came up at the farmer's market,” Emma shrugged.

“This is all new territory for you, but I'm into it. I'm liking this whole, ‘Emma on her own’ situation.”

“I think I am too.” Emma rose to pull a platter out of the fridge, removing the plastic covering. “I didn't really get why people cared so much to have their own space, but I do now. It's nice having a space that I get to change as I see fit, and no one can veto me on my choices.” She winked at Zora playfully.

“Yum.” Granny reached for a slice of nectarine. “I don't think I've ever drizzled honey on fruit like this before—maybe when I'm having fruit with yogurt—but it seems like an interesting combination.”

“I thought so, too. I wasn't sure if it would work or not, I just thought we'd try it. I ended up buying a couple of different kinds of honey. This one is a hot honey, because I thought it would be good with this smoked cheddar, which has a little bit of jalapeno. I don't know if I should have gotten this or something more like a creamy

cheese, but you know, the other cheese that they gave me a sample of was goat cheese, and I want to throw that in a salad or something later.”

“You're a regular Martha Stewart over here,” Zora placed a slice of cheese on top of a slice of nectarine with honey and took a bite. She nodded as she chewed. “This works.”

Emma beamed as she and Granny followed suit, layering cheese onto the honeyed wedges and took their respective bites. The crisp white nectarines had a subtle sweetness, the hot honey building a sweet tingle on her tongue as the smoky creaminess of the cheese cooled everything down. “Mmm, this is good!” I wonder if Sadie would like this. She shimmied in celebration of her triumph. “And you know what? When it comes to Martha, the one thing I will say is she ain't no snitch.”

Granny giggled. “Period.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Fuck, I knew I was moving too fast. Oh God.... Shit, shit, shit!” She whispered to herself, as she sat at the top of the stairs of the apartment building. She pulled out her phone and looked up Sadie's contact information to send her a text.

Hey Sadie, this is Emma... I am so, so sorry. Are you home or near home? I locked myself out again. I swear I didn't mean to do it!! I was moving too quickly to get to work and I just... I'm so sorry. I apologize in advance, but if you happen to be around, I could really use your help. I'm already late for work.

After she sent the message, she bit her lip and stood to her feet, throwing her hands in the air. She began pacing back and forth, gesturing wildly as she spoke. “This is crazy. How do I keep doing this to myself? I literally looked at them and then what did I do? I must have gotten distracted....”

“Do you always talk to yourself? I could come back if you need a minute.” Sadie stood at the bottom of the stairs, the door to her apartment wide open. Her arms were crossed over her chest as she watched with amusement.

Emma's mouth dropped open as she pushed her braids behind her shoulder. “Oh, hi. Sorry, I didn't hear you come out. I was just trying to recount my steps and see where I went wrong.”

Sadie's head tilted to the side as she continued to regard Emma's frazzled state. “Listen, this can't happen all the time. I really do have other things that I could be doing.”

“No, I completely understand. It won’t happen again.” I hope. Please don’t let it happen again.

Emma watched Sadie as she walked up the stairs. She wore a form fitting black V-neck t-shirt with faded blue jeans ripped at the knees. The shirt clung to the slight curve of her breasts, tiny orbs poking through the thin fabric, catching Emma's eye.

She swallowed as her lips parted slightly.

Sadie wore small hoops in her ears—the only jewelry Emma could see. Her hair appeared to be freshly cut. Her bare face had a dewy glow, and Emma noticed more detail of Sadie’s ink this time around—a thorny vine of flowers intricately wrapped around her forearm.

“I really like your hairstyle,” Emma thought out loud. We really could have done better than that, Em.

“Thanks.”

She pressed on, the clipped tone feeding her anxiety. “I just don't feel like everybody can pull that off, but it really suits you.” She glanced sideways again. “You have really striking cheekbones.”

Sadie slowed and reared her head back slightly. “Uh, thanks?”

So random. Emma choked out a laugh. “Sorry, I talk a lot when I get nervous.”

Sadie reached the top of the stairs, brushing past Emma. Her musky scent was lightly floral with hints of vanilla. “Why are you nervous?” Sadie asked as she slid a key in the door.

“I just, you know, I want to make a good impression, and I feel like I haven't been.”

Sadie shrugged. “You're fine. I don't mind helping you out, but maybe this won't become a weekly thing?”

“Of course,” Emma rushed inside the apartment, grabbing her keys and running back out the door. Sadie remained there. “Thank you so much. I won't bother you with this again, I promise, but I really appreciate it and I'll make it up to you.”

“There's no need for all of that,” Sadie replied with a wave of her hand. “It was just a locked door. It's not like you lost the keys or anything. This was an easy fix.”

Emma nodded, Sadie's scent tempting her to draw closer. She swallowed as her eyes met Sadie's dark brown gaze, thick, curly lashes framing her eyes. She had a tiny beauty mark at the peak of her left cheekbone, just below the corner of her eye. The intensity of her stare sent swirls through Emma's chest as she wet her lips with the tip of her tongue.

“Well, I've gotta get back to deal with some paperwork, but I hope that you make it to work safely and have a good day,” Sadie blinked, finally breaking eye contact. She pressed her fingers together and lifted her elbows, cracking her knuckles as she moved to jog down the steps.

“Thanks, you too. Um, don't work too hard!” Emma called after her as she rattled the door knob to make sure it was locked. Of course it's locked, it locks automatically—that was the problem in the first place. She sighed and rested her forehead against the door. Damn, she looked good.

At work, she relayed what happened to Zora and Granny, who listened with amusement. “I know historically I lose things all the time, but now I'm not even losing things—I'm just forgetting them.”

“Technically, you forgot all the things that you lost—you didn’t remember you’d brought them or where you put them. It’s all in the same wheelhouse, but at least make copies of your key and give them to us so you can stop bothering her.”

“Oh my god, I’m the annoying neighbor!” Emma exclaimed. She pulled a pile of paperbacks off of a cart for the counter display. A coffee shop instrumental playlist sounded through the bookstore speakers.

“Well, she probably wouldn’t have a reason to have any issue with you if you would stop creating more work for her,” Zora suggested. “It’s not major work, but I doubt any of the other tenants have this issue.

The bell on the front door jingled as a couple walked in to browse. The two were regulars—they waved in Zora’s direction before heading over to the display of new releases and staff picks. A couple of families with small children searched the colorful array of illustrated covers in the kid’s section while they waited for Granny’s storytime.

Emma sighed. “Damn, that’s a good point. I really am the worst.”

“You’re not the worst,” Zora assured her. “You were just in a rush. When you’re running late, you’re kind of all over the place. It happens!”

“Yeah,” Emma imagined Sadie rolling her eyes at the text that morning. From there, her mind roamed to the fit of Sadie’s shirt and the headiness of her scent. “I complimented her today. Maybe she will take it easy on me.”

“Oh, so you did take another look,” Zora tilted her head, waiting for more. Her mane of curls tipped to the side.

“I did, and you’re right—she’s very attractive. She probably would be someone that I

would go after. She's got that edge with a hint of softness..." Emma gave a chef's kiss. "If she's into women, which I don't actually know yet..." I can't tell if she sees me, but I definitely see her.

"I mean, it might be worth finding out," Zora, winked at her. "She's definitely sexy."

"She is, but I don't know."

"Whatchu mean?"

"Nothing about her mannerisms indicates that she's feelin' me." It's the exact opposite. Sadie's scowl and standoffish body language came to mind.

"Well, as Granny said, time will tell. But I think she just needs a chance to see you in a different light—one where she's not constantly having to unlock doors for you."

Emma rolled her eyes. "Anyway, I'm sure there are plenty of people out there that I could match with, so I'm not really concerned with my landlady. That being said, I should probably get her a little gift to thank her because it's, what, two days in a row where I've locked myself out? I'm sure she thinks that it's going to be an all the time thing and she's regretting her decision to let me move in."

"As long as you pay the rent, I don't think she's gonna regret it. Unless you become a complete nuisance." Zora placed a pile of hardcover books on the counter and began applying sale stickers.

"True. I should go to the hardware store this weekend for copies."

"The gift idea is cute though," Zora nodded. "Well, what are you gonna get her?"

"I figured..." she pointed to Brian over at the coffee kiosk. "Kerri's Bakery really is

that girl.” A salted caramel latte is calling my name right now...

Zora laughed. “True. A woman after my own heart. Hell, that would work for me. Or is that what you were hoping—to woo her with sweets?”

“She doesn’t strike me as the easily wooed type. Wanna come with me and help me pick out the things that might be best?” Emma hooked a finger toward the spot where Granny stood sipping an iced chai with oat milk—she had it one time and was completely hooked.

“Okay!” Zora's face lit up as they strolled to the kiosk.

“Brian,” Emma called across the room in a flirty tone. “I hope y'all are stocked up because I need some goodies.”

Brian smiled bashfully. “Well, if we don't have it, Kerri's planning to drop off some more pastries later, so just tell me what you want and we can get it.

“Even better.” Zora rubbed her hands together. “This is gonna be fun.”

Emma pushed her playfully and cackled. “These ain’t for you, heffa!”

Zora pouted. “You right.”

“I mean, you can have something too. But help me build a box of goodies that says something like ‘thanks for helping me out.’”

“Nah, you need one that says ‘help me help you... outta them clothes.’” Zora burst out laughing and Granny tittered bashfully. Brian looked like he wanted to fade into the background.

Emma pursed her lips as she rolled her eyes. “I really hate you sometimes.”

“Same, bookie.”

CHAPTER NINE

Kerri wasn't able to come by the bookstore after all, so Emma and Granny went to the bakery after the bookstore closed. Zora had to get home for a special date night with Reid, but she rattled off a list of her favorites just in case the bakery hadn't sold out.

The evening air cooled and Emma tugged at her cardigan. Granny looped her arm in Emma's as they strolled down the street.

"Do you know what she likes?" Granny asked.

"I really don't, actually," Emma poked her lips out as she thought. "Well, I know she likes cheese and honey..."

Granny raised an eyebrow. "That's not a whole lot to go on, my love. We don't know if she has any allergies or—"

"Oh my god, she might have allergies! What if I kill her?" Emma exclaimed. In her mind's eye, she pictured Sadie being carted away in an ambulance after feeding her baked goods. "Should I text her and ask her if she has any food restrictions?"

"If you asked her, would she discourage you from doing this?"

Emma's mind raced. "Probably... but—"

Granny could always sense when Emma was about to teeter into panic. She placed a gentle hand on Emma's arm. "Okay, let's calm down first... you can get a sampling

of things and if she can't eat something, she'll tell you, right?"

Emma took a beat. "Yeah, true. Well, what should we get?"

Once they stepped inside, they eyed the cases of confections and baked goods, scents of butter and chocolate wafting in the air and mixing with dark roast coffee. Stacy, one of the baristas greeted them as they walked in, a smudge of flour dusting her cheek. "Hey, Emma, Ms. Marion. What brings you by?"

"Hey, Stace, I want to get a box of goodies for someone as a thank you gift. I'm not sure what she likes though, so let's do a small assortment."

"Okay. What size box are we looking to fill?" Stacy pointed to different sized boxes arranged on top of one of the glass cases and grabbed a pair of tongs.

"Maybe this medium one?" Emma pointed to a square pink box.

"Any thoughts on what you might want to include?"

"Definitely a handful of the madeleines." Kerri's madeleine cookies were otherworldly—Emma and Zora feasted on the lemon butter ones every afternoon. "The lemon ones. And let's do the matcha too. Do one of the guava and cream cheese tarts. And maybe do the ham and gruyere croissant for something savory."

Stacy began opening different cases to gather treats, carefully placing the madeleines around the tart and setting the croissant on its side. "Okay, you've got space for one more thing."

Emma tapped her chin thoughtfully and turned to Ms. Marion. "I feel like we should do one thing that has chocolate."

Granny nodded. “Good call.”

Stacy directed them to a different pastry case. “So we have English toffee covered in chocolate and then sprinkled with crushed pistachios, our special walnut and fudge brownies. We have chocolate croissants and a flourless chocolate cake with a little bit of a raspberry drizzle on it. If she likes coconut, Kerri is currently frosting a German chocolate cake in the back...”

“Oh, well that sounds good. Why don't we do the flourless one? I think that makes sense just in case she's got a gluten allergy.”

Stacy nodded. “I'll finish packaging that up for you, and since it's a gift, I'll add a little special razzle dazzle. Either one of you want a coffee?”

“I'll take a decaf cappuccino made with oat milk and a dash of cinnamon please,” Granny spoke up.

Emma smiled. “You know what? I'll have the same. I don't really need any caffeine this late.”

“Perfect. I'll meet you at the register.”

“Do you think those were good choices?” Emma wrinkled her nose as she turned to Granny Marion.

“I think they're great. Most of those things are some of your favorites, so hopefully you have something in common.”

“True.”

After they paid, Emma dropped Granny off at home before heading to her apartment.

“Oh my god, I shouldn't have had that cappuccino,” she whispered to herself as she parked her car, her thighs squeezing together. I have to pee so bad. She locked up her car and quickly made her way to the front door, unlocking it before running up the stairs, pastry box in hand. Ugh, this wasn't how I wanted this to happen, I just wanted to drop this off. She hurried to put the key in the deadbolt lock, and as she turned it, there was a loud snap of metal between her fingers. “Oh, no,” Emma whined. “This is not happening.” I should have bought a bigger box.

She lifted her hand and the rounded bow of the key was cut off at the shoulder. Staring into the keyhole, the entire blade was lodged inside. She tried shoving the jagged piece in her hand into the lock to see if she could still get it to turn, but she had no such luck.

“This woman is gonna to kill me,” she muttered. Trudging down the stairs with urgency, Emma knocked twice on Sadie's door, standing with a wary smile as the deadbolt unlocked.

“Yes.” Sadie had a wry smile on her lips as she leaned against the edge of the door. Per usual, she was fresh-faced, her dark eyes giving Emma a once-over as she casually hooked a thumb into the pocket of her jeans. The slowness of her gaze gave Emma butterflies. If she'd been sitting, the look was squirm-inducing.

Emma reminded herself to breathe and held out a hand. “Listen, I'm so sorry to bother you...”

“Don't tell me you forgot your keys again!” Sadie groaned.

“No, no, I didn't. I swear!” She held up the round part of her key. “It broke in the lock, so I can't get in, and I really have to go to the bathroom. I'm so sorry, but do you mind if I use yours? There isn't a secret one for residents in the lobby right?”

Sadie's eyebrows shot up. "Uh." She looked into her apartment really quickly, as if guarding her safe haven. "No, there isn't a restroom in the lobby."

"I promise I won't touch anything. I just... two minutes." Emma swore as she wiggled from side to side.

"Yeah. All right. Give me your key so I can take a look."

"Okay, thank you. Um, is this the same configuration as my apartment-bathroom's in the same place?"

"Slightly different, but there's one right down the hall there," Sadie nodded in the right direction.

"Okay." Emma rushed in the door too quickly to notice much of the apartment decor. She set the baker's box on the kitchen counter before running to the bathroom. "Oh, it's so cute in here," she observed as she shut the door and did her business, blowing out a huge breath of relief. After flushing, she washed her hands and stared at herself in the mirror, her nerves making her heart beat faster. Not exactly what we'd planned, but here we are. "You have got to pull yourself together," she whispered.

Inspecting her reflection, she pressed her lips together to redistribute her lip gloss and smoothed a hand over her braids. She cleared her throat and shook away the nerves as she moved to the door.

CHAPTER TEN

Emma exited the bathroom to find Sadie standing at the kitchen counter on her cell phone. She began pacing back and forth, rubbing the back of her neck as she waited for a response.

“Hey Sal, I’m gonna need you to send someone over here. We have a broken key jammed into a tenant’s lock. “Yeah, I know, this never happened here before, but we’re probably going to need new keys for that particular unit. Maybe make a few extra copies while you’re at it,” Sadie mused.

She was lifting the lid to the baker’s box when she spotted Emma drawing near. “Sorry,” she mouthed.

Emma waved to her that it was fine.

“About how long?” Sadie sighed. “Okay. Yeah. Well, we’ll be here. In my apartment for the time being. Okay. Thanks, man.” Her mouth curved to one side as she disconnected the call. “So the guy is already on another job, and he said that they’d be here in about two hours.”

“I’m so sorry. It feels like I just keep making things worse for you.”

Sadie smiled slightly. “Well, unless you have superhuman strength, this one actually wasn’t your fault. Were you headed to a party or something? Some bookstore event?”

Emma’s brow furrowed. “No, why?”

“Oh, I was just curious what the treats were for.”

Emma’s head bobbed with understanding. Here goes... “Actually, they’re for you.”

“For me?” Sadie stared at the box as if it would start moving any second.

Emma shrugged. “Yeah, I felt like I wasn't leaving a good impression on you, and I just wanted to make it up to you since you've had to bail me out so frequently already. I figured I'd get you a few things from my favorite bakery and hopefully smooth things over a little bit.”

Sadie bit her lip as she frowned, turning her attention to Emma. Her dark eyes locked onto Emma’s searching for something, Emma squirming under her gaze. “Were you under the impression that I was mad at you?”

Emma cocked her head to the side thoughtfully. “No, but I also wasn't thinking that I was becoming your favorite tenant. I don’t want to be the annoying one that you regret approving.”

Sadie’s shoulders relaxed. “Well, I don't know if there is anybody that actually holds the title of favorite, but anybody that brings baked goods is alright with me.” She peered at the top of the box, the energy around her becoming lighter.

“I wasn't sure what you liked or whether you have any allergies, so I just picked at random and hoped you weren’t avoiding carbs.”

“Is it okay if I open it?” Sadie gestured, hovering over the lid with curiosity.

“Of course, it's yours!” Emma pointed out the different items in the box. “I’ve got some sweet, some savory, some chocolate, and some gluten-free.”

Sadie opened the package and reached in, sampling one of the matcha madeleines, her eyes lighting up. “Wow. These are really good.” She said, her cheek full. She captured a crumb with the tip of her tongue, catching Emma off guard.

Emma’s stare zeroed in on the wet mark on Sadie’s lower lip, her cheeks warming as she gulped and found her words. “Yeah... I am telling you this place is amazing and I strongly recommend that you check out Kerri's if you've never been there before.”

Sadie polished off her madeleine. “I'm going to have to do that for sure. Thank you again. Please, I'm not going to be able to eat all of this myself,” she pointed to the box. “Besides, we’ve got a couple of hours to kill. If you’re hungry, this is basically what I’ve got in the house.”

“Okay, well, thank you.” Emma nodded, reaching for a madeleine. She took in more of the apartment. The walls had been painted a slate blue and were covered in colorful paintings depicting Black women joyfully gathering and dancing. The dining table was bare except for a decorative bowl full of decks of playing cards from different places. She must travel a lot. Emma imagined Sadie jet setting with nothing more than a pair of sunglasses, a hi-res camera and a shoulder bag. “Wow, this is a really nice setup. How long have you lived here?” She glanced back.

“About five years.” Sadie leaned her hip against the kitchen counter, her elbow resting on the surface.

“Have you always done property management?”

“No, but I actually own the building.”

Emma stilled, the other half of her madeleine dangling before her open mouth. “Oh, I did not realize that. Wow, good for you!”

“Well, I don't exactly advertise it,” Sadie shrugged. “My grandparents used to own this place and it was one of the few things we were able to keep in the family with my parents passing so early,” her voice trailed off. She blew out a breath and rubbed the side of her neck.

“I'm so sorry to hear that,” Emma shifted her eyes, her thoughts going to Zora when she lost her parents. “But that's quite a legacy for them to leave behind. Such a beautiful gift, and you obviously take good care of this place.”

Sadie nodded. She had a faraway look on her face, as if she was thinking about a distant memory. “Yeah, I've had time to upgrade some things and my grandparents showed me the ropes. We have a couple of tenants from back when they managed the building...”

“Is this them?” Emma walked toward a set of bookcases covered in vinyl records and photographs. An enlarged portrait of Sadie in a graduation gown standing between two elders stood out from the rest—an array of pressed flowers in an acrylic frame at its side. Her hair was longer and hung around her face in two-strand twists. She smiled widely, her arms around the waists of her grandparents.

“Yeah, that's them.” Sadie's face softened, her eyes glistening as she looked away.

Emma studied the photo. “Your genes are strong! You look just like your grandmother.” Sadie's elder had the exact same complexion, her high cheekbones and the smallest shock of gray hair running through her shoulder length sisterlocks. She was a few inches shorter than Sadie, with a proud smile as she reached to get her arm around Sadie's shoulders.

Sadie laughed, “Yeah. Down to our baby pictures. She was my heart.”

“How long ago did you lose them?” Emma's tone was pensive—she didn't want to

overstep, but Sadie smiled sadly.

“They passed away, within about a year of each other—my grandfather first. It was maybe six months after this photo was taken—my college graduation.” Her grandfather stood tall and strong, his eyes shielded with wire-rimmed glasses. He cupped one side of Sadie’s face and was turned slightly, kissing her temple. “He was strong as an ox until he started to have heart problems, but he was well into his seventies by that time. Too set in his ways to change.” She leaned forward, resting her hands along the back of the couch, her shoulders drooping slightly.

Emma started to reach out to her and thought better of it. Maybe she doesn’t like to be touched. She turned away from the photo. “I’m really sorry. Do you have siblings?”

Sadie shook her head, “Nah, but I’ve got a good group of friends who pour into me and vice-versa. Most of them I’ve known since high school.”

“Solid friends are a blessing.” Emma thumbed through the covers of some of the albums. There were all kinds of musical genres, and Emma wondered whether they were arranged in any sort of system. “You have quite a collection here.”

“Yeah, I keep telling myself I need to stop buying more, but it’s a habit,” Sadie moved closer and ran her fingertips over the edges of several worn covers fondly.

“That’s how Zora is with books. She literally owns a bookstore and still can’t help but buy new books. She has this ever growing collection—her ‘to be read’ pile,” Emma laughed lightly.

“Yeah, I get that. I think I buy according to my mood.”

“What were you listening to most recently?” Emma’s chin jutted toward the record

player.

“Uh, Billie Holiday.”

“Ooh, do you mind if we play that?”

“Sure.” Sadie moved to turn on the player and start the record from the beginning.

“Which one is this?” Emma asked.

“An Evening With Billie Holiday,” Sadie replied.

As Stormy Weather began to play, Emma smiled wide. “Oh, this is one of my favorites.” She continued searching the albums, admiring the collection and humming along with Billie as she crooned.

“You have a nice voice,” Sadie watched her quietly, her amber eyes trained on Emma who immediately stopped.

The rasp in Sadie’s voice sent heat climbing to Emma’s cheeks. “Thanks. Um, is it okay if I sit down?”

“Sure, of course. You’re gonna be here a while, so you might as well get comfortable.”

Emma sat on the couch. “I should have asked you when I came in if you prefer for people to take their shoes off. I picked up the habit when I lived with Z.”

Sadie pointed to her bare feet. “I usually do.” She grabbed the baker’s box and a couple of paper towels and set them on the coffee table. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Sure.” Emma slipped off her shoes and moved them off to the side as she pointed and flexed her feet, a happy sigh escaping her lips.

“I have water, tea... some wine,” she glanced at Emma curiously, the air in the room becoming electrically charged more and more with each look.

Emma’s mouth watered. How would she react if I said wine? “What kind of tea do you have?”

Sadie broke eye contact to peer into her cupboard. “Chamomile, green, Earl Grey, and chai.”

“Earl Grey would be perfect if you have a little bit of milk or cream.”

Sadie gave her a sideways glance. “Is oat milk okay?”

“Yes, thank you.”

She put on the kettle and returned to sit with Emma on the couch.

Emma wanted to know everything. “So are you from DC?”

Sadie nodded. “Born and raised. I’ve never lived anywhere else.”

“Do you travel a lot?”

“Some. I’ve been on a couple of trips with my friends. I don’t particularly like planes, but I will go if it means I can enjoy a beach somewhere. I just take something to help me sleep.”

Emma giggled. “I hear that—I’m such a baby with any bit of turbulence. What’s your

favorite place that you've been so far?"

Sadie tilted her head and pushed her lips to one side as she thought. "Portugal."

"Ooh. That's on my bucket list! I haven't been, but I hear so many good things."

"I would highly recommend it." Sadie sat back and rested her arm along the back of the couch, close enough to touch Emma's shoulder if she extended her fingers. "I could move to Lisbon tomorrow and be perfectly content."

"Yeah?" Emma pictured Sadie in a string bikini, sunlight glowing on her dark brown skin, mirrored sunglasses on her face as she stretched out on the sand with her hands folded behind her head. Lucky beach...

"Yeah. What's your favorite place that you've traveled to thus far?" Sadie pulled her arm back to rest her head on her hand, Emma immediately clocking the absence.

"I mean, I'm from the West Coast, so my favorite place is always going to be Hawaii," she smiled. "But I will say, I spent some time in Belize, and it was really beautiful there. I'd go back in a heartbeat."

"Oh wow. I haven't been there, but I follow a content creator who was there recently. I've got to get there sometime soon."

"You do," Emma agreed. "I just love that feeling of landing somewhere tropical and feeling the stress roll off of my shoulders. I feel like there's so many places that I want to see and I haven't had the chance, but there's still time. I just need to start planning."

"I feel you. The ultimate stress reliever."

Emma sighed dreamily. “Yes... I could use a trip sometime soon.” She stared off in the distance, imagining the warm sunshine and a balmy breeze kissing her skin. She blushed as she opened her eyes to find Sadie watching her, having apparently witnessed her mental transportation. Her cheeks warmed and she bit her lip.

Sadie cleared her throat and looked away. “So you're from California?”

“Yup.”

“What part?”

“Bay Area. My parents are still there—they are thinking about downsizing so that they can travel more. I try to go home for the holidays,” she sighed. “I don't always make it, but they know my heart. Sometimes I can't make the trip, so I'll spend them with Zora and her granny.”

“Does your family know Zora well?”

“Oh yeah. She's practically been adopted by my parents—she's from the Bay too, but her mom and grandmother are from here. You two have some things in common—she lost her parents and her grandmother has been, you know, that constant in her life since then. Honestly, she's been the constant in mine for a long time at this point too. We're really close.” Understatement. Emma's lips twitched at the thought of her vintage bestie.

Sadie nodded gently. “It really helps to have people around you when you experience loss like that.”

“I can only imagine.”

A comfortable quiet grew between them, and Sadie reached into the box and broke

the guava and cheese tart into pieces. “This looks really good.”

“It's honestly my favorite thing.” Guava jelly was artfully pooled and ribboned over the cream cheese filling, the buttery pastry a golden brown that wrapped around the filling at the edges forming crispy bits of perfection.

“Well, please have some with me.”

“I will,” Emma nodded, leaning back against a pillow. “But you've got to try it first.”

“Okay.” Sadie eyed her dubiously before she took a bite, the flaky crust crunching as her lips closed around the filling. “Oh my god.” Her eyes shut and she hummed as she chewed. “This is heavenly,” she whispered, her shoulders swaying slightly.

Emma watched Sadie as if she moved in slow motion, the heady scent of Sadie's perfume wrapped around Emma, arresting her full attention. Her eyes traveled to Sadie's lips as she licked them, trying to catch pieces of the pastry that had stuck to her lip gloss. Emma blinked, her mouth watering more in response to the woman than the delicacy.

“This is otherworldly,” Sadie hummed.

“Yeah,” Emma swallowed. “Here you have a piece of pastry.” Emma leaned forward. “Actually, you have a little bit of the guava jelly too,” she laughed.

“Oh,” Sadie's eyes flew open as her finger went to the corner of her mouth.

“No, I got it.” Emma wrapped a paper towel around her finger and dabbed at Sadie's lower lip, unable to tear her eyes away as the tip of Sadie's tongue traced the seam of her lips. “You've got a little bit more. Just...”

The tea kettle began to shriek, and they both froze before realizing where the sound was coming from. Sadie jumped up to turn off the stove, setting the kettle aside as she turned back to the living room empty-handed. “Are you still thirsty?” She sat facing Emma, her dark eyes hooded as she flexed her jaw.

“Not for tea,” Emma murmured, staring at Sadie’s lips. Now devoid of gloss, her full lips let Emma’s intrusive thoughts win as an image of her nibbling and savoring Sadie’s mouth flashed in her mind. Damn, she’s so beautiful.

Sadie sat perfectly still, the rise and fall of her chest drawing Emma’s vision downward as she drank in the tattooed arm attached to a hand only inches from her thigh. Emma lifted her gaze to find Sadie studying her face, her curling lashes perfectly framing those dark orbs that Emma could lose herself in if she wasn’t careful. Should I? Emma tugged her bottom lip between her teeth, unsure what reaction would come, but she was more afraid of not trying. She ran her fingertips over the back of Sadie’s hand, tracing the petals of flowers within her tattoo sleeve.

Sadie hummed gently and leaned closer, Emma moving forward as if magnets drew them together. Emma's hand traveled upward and cupped Sadie's cheek as she kissed her, her lips soft and supple.

“Just one last bit,” Emma whispered, running her tongue over Sadie's lips, taking away the last bit of jelly.

Sadie kissed her back, softly, the intensity growing as their kiss deepened.

She leaned forward to deposit the rest of her tart on the coffee table before turning to face Emma, her hands running over Emma's braids before settling on her shoulder, her thumbs caressing Emma’s collarbone. Emma moaned against Sadie’s mouth as she trailed her lips down the side of Sadie's face, her throat.

“You smell amazing,” Emma whispered against Sadie’s skin.

Sadie shivered at her touch—Emma's fingers looping under Sadie's t-shirt as she tugged it upward, pulling it up over her head, revealing a black bralette with a deep V.

Her nipples puckered through the fabric, a small tattoo in the space between her breasts. Sadie stopped Emma from reaching for her. “Wait.”

Emma’s mouth moved to speak, confusion in her eyes, but Sadie stood silently. She grabbed Emma by the hand and tugged her up, leading her back to the bedroom. Oh. They were greeted by a king-sized low-profile bed with an intricate wooden headboard and stark white bedding. Sadie turned back as they reached the side of the bed, Emma kicking off her shoes as Sadie reached out to unbutton Emma's blouse. She

admired the swell of Emma’s breasts, grazing her palms against Emma's supple skin.

“Your skin is the most beautiful shade of brown,” Sadie murmured.

“I could say the same thing about you. Yours always looks so soft.” Emma pulled her close for another taste of her lips, her mouth still sweetened by guava as their tongues intertwined.

“I tried to fight it, but I’ve been craving you. Craving this,” Sadie breathed against Emma’s lips as she unbuttoned Emma's jeans, tugging them down and helping her step out of them before running her fingertips up Emma's thighs. Her hands reached Emma's rounded hips and pulled her closer as she gripped her ass. “You're so soft in all the right places.” Sadie traced upward along Emma's back, unhooking her bright pink bra. “Everything about you is a pop of color. You’re radiant.”

Emma's breath hitched as she absorbed Sadie's words, heat emanating from her core as she melted into Sadie's touch. The world around them fell away as she let Sadie's praise wash over her.

Sadie held one hand to Emma's throat as she ran her lips over the curve of Emma's breasts, running her tongue up the line between them before taking one of her tight nipples into her mouth. Emma moaned at the contact as Sadie's hands roamed her skin, thumbs hooking the sides of her panties and looking to Emma, waiting for her to nod before pulling them down.

Emma reached for Sadie, running her palms over her breasts before pulling at Sadie's belt buckle.

"Lay back on the bed," Sadie whispered gently, the rasp in her voice reverberating throughout Emma's body.

Emma sat on the edge of the mattress, scooting herself back to the center of the bed, her heart pounding in her chest as she stared at the woman crawling toward her. She propped herself up on her elbows to watch as Sadie explored. She sees me.

Sadie slid her fingertips up the length of Emma's body, admiring her curves, kneading her thighs. She leaned forward to kiss Emma's knee and down the inside of her thigh, nipping at the soft flesh. Gently, her index finger traced Emma's seam and split her apart.

Emma sucked in a breath, closing her eyes, reveling in the contact. She shuddered, her toes beginning to curl instinctively in anticipation.

"I wondered what you would taste like," Sadie whispered as she applied her tongue to Emma's clit, the warmth of her breath sending delicious tremors through her core.

Emma whined, her hips circling in response. “You did?” She asked, her mouth agape as Sadie's tongue wound circles and lapped at her, Emma's mind short-circuiting as she moaned at the contact.

“I did.” She breathed. Sadie ran her tongue along the inside of Emma's thighs before hooking her arms under them and closing her lips around the sensitive peak as her hands held Emma open.

“Oh my...” Emma gasped, unable to finish her sentence as Sadie's lips and tongue

intensified the contact, sucking and humming against Emma as she writhed at the sensation, her breath coming quicker as her back arched and her own hands grazed her breasts. Her thighs began to shake as she cried out.

Sadie inserted a finger slowly, Emma's body convulsing in reaction. “You're so wet,” Sadie whispered, her tongue continuing to apply pressure to Emma's clit. She added a second finger, angling her hand so that she teased Emma's spot.

Emma convulsed, panting. “I'm... I'm—” she moaned. “Yes. Fuck, yes.” Sadie picked up the pace, the delicious pressure building until lights flashed behind Emma's eyelids. “Oh my god.”

Her body shook as she came, Sadie continuing until every wave of orgasm left her body.

“I... oh my god,” Emma smiled. “That was um, wow.”

Sadie nodded, resting her chin on her arms splayed across Emma's abdomen. “That was something I had been thinking about, I just didn't think it would actually happen.”

Emma ran a hand over her hair as she tried to catch her breath. "I didn't think it would either. I honestly didn't think that you liked me very much."

"What?" Sadie pulled back to hover over her, studying her face.

"You just seemed so annoyed with me. Do I remind you of an ex or something?"

Sadie buried her face in Emma's neck, nuzzling her bare skin. "Looks can be deceiving," she mumbled as she moved to Emma's side, pulling her close. "I was drawn to you that very first day, but I was trying to keep things professional. Maybe I overdid it."

"You looked at me like you hated me," Emma chuckled.

"Looks can be deceiving," Sadie repeated as she scooted closer still, kissing Emma. "I'm sorry it made you feel like that though. I didn't handle that well, and I try to mask what you do to me."

"Oh yeah?" Emma breathed, gently raking her nails against the nape of Sadie's neck and earning a faint gasp. "What do I do to you?" Emma unbuckled Sadie's belt as she tasted herself on Sadie's tongue. When she drew down the zipper, the front door buzzed.

"You've got to be kidding me," Sadie murmured against Emma's lips.

"What? Who's that?"

"Probably the locksmith," Sadie ran her tongue down Emma's jaw before planting a kiss below her ear. She rolled away from Emma, kicking her feet over the side of the bed to search for her clothes.

“Oh, fuck,” Emma whispered. “I thought they were gonna take longer.”

“He must have finished early.” Sadie pulled on her shirt. “You can wait here if you want.” A question hung in her voice, but Emma couldn’t discern whether the question was asking her to stay.

As much as she wanted to stay and continue to explore, her anxiety rose to the surface. “No, it's okay. I'll get dressed.”

Sadie eyed her curiously and nodded, closing the bedroom door behind her as she went to let the locksmith in. By the time Emma had dressed and returned to the living room, Sadie was seated on the couch, finishing her slice of guava and cheese tart. The front door of her apartment was wide open. “He's almost done,” she said between chews. “God, this is so fucking good.”

Emma watched Sadie lick a flake of pastry from her lips, her eyes zeroing in on the wet patch of skin. “Wow, that's fast.” She could care less about getting into that damn apartment.

Sadie licked her fingers, seemingly unaware of Emma’s inner turmoil. “Yeah, they're really good at what they do. That's why I always keep them on speed dial.”

Emma nodded, sitting next to Sadie on the couch and planting a kiss on her lips. “Did you have plans today that I totally ruined?”

Sadie shrugged, a lopsided smile on her face. “It wasn't your fault.”

“So that's a yes.”

Sadie’s head bobbed. “It's okay. I can still make it for the better part of the event.”

Emma nodded, running her hand up Sadie's thigh. "Well, I'd like to finish what we started if you wouldn't mind being a bit later." She stared into Sadie's deep brown eyes with her curling lashes.

"Yeah," Sadie cleared her throat. "That sounds entirely doable." She leaned forward to kiss Emma again as they heard heavy footsteps coming down the stairs. Emma bit her lip, giggling as Sadie sighed, "Foiled again."

They smiled at each other, rising from the couch.

"Hi there," the locksmith called into the apartment as he poked his head in the door and Sadie beckoned him inside. "I believe these are for you." He handed a key to Sadie and two keys on a keychain to Emma. "I'm Eddie. I understand that you have a hard time locating your keys."

"Nice to meet you. So I'm infamous already," Emma grinned, turning a playful side-eye to Sadie, who looked up, as if she'd seen something up on the ceiling.

He shrugged, laugh lines crinkling. "We get to hear little bits and pieces here every now and again. But, Sadie thought this might help you out." He handed her a bright orange carabiner for her keys. "You can keep them connected to your purse or backpack or whatever it is you use. So at least if you are good at remembering your purse but bad about remembering your phone or your keys, this might help."

"Wow, thank you! This is very thoughtful." She hooked her keys into the carabiner and connected it to a belt loop on her jeans, beaming at Sadie.

She nodded. "Just don't forget they're attached to your jeans when you take them off."

Emma blushed. That is absolutely something I would do.

Eddie turned to Sadie. “I’ll send you—”

“Yep, send me your invoice and I’m sure I’ll see you this weekend.”

He nodded, taking his leave and closing his door on the way out.

Emma’s face warmed as she met Sadie’s gaze, “So…”

Sadie held up a finger. “Wait, I forgot that I got you something else too. I meant to drop it off the other day. Thought it might help you out.”

“Oh?” What could she have gotten me? She frowned as Sadie placed a small brown paper gift bag into her hand. “You didn’t have to do this!”

“It’s not a big deal, I promise. Personally, I just think everyone should have one.”

Puzzled, Emma reached for the contents and threw her head back the moment she realized what she was holding. She laughed so hard her stomach hurt.

“It’s an Airtag so you can always find your keys.”

Emma wheezed, tears threatening to fall from her eyes. “This will definitely help, so long as I don’t also lose my phone.”

Sadie’s mouth dropped open. “I guess I never thought of that.”

“I’d lose my head if it was detachable,” she chuckled and stepped closer to Sadie, reaching for her hand. “Thank you. This is really thoughtful.”

Sadie’s heated gaze trained on Emma’s lips before her expression changed. She blew out a breath, her eyes darting to the clock on her soundbar. “Listen, I do some

bookkeeping for a friend of mine who owns an art gallery, and we have some numbers to crunch. We just did taxes a couple weeks ago, so now we've got some planning to do."

"Damn, duty calls, huh?" Emma pouted. "Are you sure you don't have time for..."

"I really hate to say this, but I don't. Raincheck?" Sadie reached for Emma's hips, stroking them gently.

Emma nodded, pressing her lips against Sadie's once more. She wrapped her arms around Sadie's neck, pulling her into a hug.

Sadie stiffened and awkwardly patted her on the back.

Shit, maybe she's not into hugs! "Maybe we can find some time this week," Emma released Sadie, slipped on her shoes and inched near the door. She snuck a peek over her shoulder seeking a hint of assurance.

"Sure," Sadie bit her bottom lip, her gaze dragging up Emma's body as it darkened. Her voice was thick with want as she shoved her hands in her pockets. "Thanks again for the treats. All of them."

Emma winked before letting herself out. "Anytime." Call me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“?Sadie,” Emma called.

The farmer's market was lively, the weather having warmed up a bit as they neared the vernal equinox. The breezy, mild weather meant a colorfully printed scarf and ankle boots with Emma's favorite emerald green peacoat. She'd pulled her braids back into a half-up 'do to keep her hair out of her face.

“Oh, hey.” Sadie's casual chic continued with her heather blue jogger suit covered by a black motorcycle jacket—its collar covered by the hood from her sweatshirt. It had been almost a week since they last saw each other, and Emma didn't have proof, but she was under the impression that Sadie had been avoiding her. Her responses to texts had been short, and she never seemed to be home when Emma returned from work. “I didn't expect to see you here,” she said, rubbing the back of her neck and scanning her gaze over the market stalls. “Getting anything special?”

Or maybe she just doesn't want to see me at all. Emma called Sadie the day after the key debacle, which she followed with a text in case Sadie was anything like Zora and didn't listen to voicemails. No returned call. “I just wanted to come and pick up a few things and see if Tonya has another recipe for me to try.”

“So you've been trying your hand at cooking?” Sadie studied Emma's face, her expression undecipherable.

Emma searched for hints and nodded, finding none. “Yeah. Are you meeting up with your friends?”

“Yes. She's supposed to be, but we've been trying to find her for the last half hour,” Joy retorted from behind Emma.

“Oh, hi, Joy. Sheena. How are y'all doing?” Emma giggled as Joy scowled at Sadie.

Sheena fingerwaved, the corners of her mouth curving in amusement as her gaze pingponged between Emma and Sadie. “We're good. How've you been?”

“Uh, you know, day by day.” Emma fidgeted with her bags. She tried to hide the disappointment from her face, her mind going into overdrive about what it is that she could have possibly done to upset Sadie. If she made eye contact with Sadie for too long, she feared all of her thoughts being written all over her face in neon print.

Joy regarded Emma thoughtfully. “Listen, I'm having an art show at a gallery later. Would you be interested in coming?”

Emma's lips parted in surprise. “I would love to! I'm a big fan of art, and I feel like—given how colorful you are,” she gestured to Joy's choices of bright orange and yellow against her brown skin, “I can imagine really gravitating towards your medium.”

Joy beamed at her as her golden bangles caught the sunlight and tinkled together like tiny wind chimes as she dug her hand into the tote hanging from her shoulder. “Yes, I noticed the same light about you.”

Emma grinned, a bounce in her shoulders. “Kindred spirits.”

“Exactly! Well here, I have a little event card.” Joy handed her a small glossy flyer on cardstock.

“Nice! Is it okay if I bring a close friend? Just a friend—not a date,” she mentally

cursed herself for blurting out that last bit. It wasn't like Sadie was showing interest in dating anyway.

"Sure, of course," Joy glanced quickly at Sadie, a question mark on her face, but her friend was studying a piece of lint on her shoulder. "Well, we're headed towards the honey booth. I hope you and your friend can make it," she squeezed Emma's shoulder and Sheena winked as the couple joined hands.

"Right, I'm headed to produce. It was good to see you again, and Sadie, I'm sure I'll see you around." Emma's voice quieted as she turned away.

Sadie's silence ate at Emma, but she convinced herself that Sadie probably had a lot going on. A new tenant was moving into the building and they likely kept Sadie busy. Surely she'd call when she was ready.

Emma picked up a creamy blue cheese and some freshly made mozzarella from the cheese stand before moving on. She picked up red leaf lettuce, Persian cucumbers, cherry tomatoes, radishes, and mangoes once she reached Tonya's stand.

"Actually, let me get a pint of strawberries also, please."

"You got it," Tonya replied cheerfully.

"I'm wondering if you have a recipe that might go well with a salad with some of these components. The chicken turned out so well that I'm inspired to try something else!"

Tonya swiped her mouth to the side. "Hmm. Have you ever cooked salmon?"

"No, is it difficult? I need, like, beginner level stuff."

“Yeah. Don't worry, this is really easy, I promise,” Tonya waved away the concern as she searched for a recipe card for blackened salmon fillets. “You may need to pick up some more spices, but I’m sure you’ve got everything else you need. And here, add these to your bag—I’ve got a lemon cilantro vinaigrette recipe that will make your toes curl!”

She dropped citrus fruit, a bunch of herbs, and an avocado into Emma’s bag and totaled her up, Emma hovering her phone over the terminal to pay. “Ooo, that sounds delicious. I’ll try it and let you know how it all turns out. Thanks, Tonya!”

The woman nodded and waved to her. “See you next week!”

Emma turned to peruse a few more booths, stopping and buying some fresh walnuts, and sampling the candied pecans. A new booth caught her eye and she strolled over to take a look at scarves with different patterns and colors. “These are beautiful,” Emma murmured as she admired the colors and prints. These would make great gifts for Zora and Granny. She sifted through the soft textiles, wondering if they were handwoven.

“Thank you. Are you looking for anything in particular?” The stall owner was an older woman sitting in an adirondack chair, rocking as she crocheted what looked to be a baby blanket—pastel pink and blue curled with soft white yarn into a delicate shell pattern. The woman’s hands were so practiced that they moved swiftly with precision without her paying their movements any mind. She eyed the multicolored paisley pashmina-like scarf beneath Emma’s palm, its deep blues and purples overlapping with hints of an embossed pearlescence here and there. “That’s a popular design—I’ve got that in greens and browns as well. The last of the pink sold out this morning.”

Emma shook her head. “I’m just browsing, but these are beautiful.” She ran her fingers over the gauzy material, admiring one with a geometric pattern of pink and

orange and coral. “I’ll have to come back. Will you be here next weekend?”

“I will. And here’s our card just in case you think of something that you’d like in the meantime—everything that’s here is also on our website. All of our materials are handwoven, and designs are handpainted or embroidered. We can also do custom orders if there are colors that you want that we don’t have posted.”

Emma nodded. “Great, thank you.” She eyed the coffee stand next door, thinking that she might need to get a caffeine fix before heading home. “Is that a special order that you’re working on?” Emma jutted her chin toward the afghan in the woman’s hands.

“What this?” Her eyes softened as she looked at the blanket as if realizing that she’d been crafting their entire exchange. “No, my daughter is expecting—my first grandchild.”

“Aww, how sweet. That’s such a beautiful blanket—your grandbaby will be so lucky!”

“Thank you, my dear,” the warm glow in her face displayed her anticipation. “You have children?”

“Not yet,” Emma shook her head wistfully. “Maybe someday.” She thanked the woman again and started toward the next stall for a latte. She stepped in line behind two others, perusing the drink specials in honor of St. Patrick’s Day. Unless it’s mint or matcha, it shouldn’t be green.

“Hey,” Sadie’s voice sounded behind Emma, startling her.

“Oh, hey. I didn’t see you there.” More honestly, I’m surprised that you’re acknowledging that you see me...

“You getting coffee? I mean, of course you’re getting coffee... this is a coffee stand

,” Sadie squeezed her eyes shut as if she was wishing for a do-over.

She’d taken off her leather jacket and held it in her arms, Emma’s eyes falling to the delicate expanse of skin over Sadie’s collarbone that was exposed. “But they serve tea and lemonade, so it was a valid question.” Emma swallowed hard, tilting her head. “Listen, uh, I don’t have to come to that art thing if it makes you uncomfortable.”

Sadie’s brows rose in surprise. “Oh, I’m not uncomfortable.”

Right. “Are you sure?” Snark was typically more reserved for Zora, but small talk just felt... wrong. Everything in Emma nudged at her to close the distance between her and Sadie except for a voice in her head, which warned her off.

“Yeah, I... it’s just that I have a lot going on. But I think it’s great that you want to come and support Joy.”

“I like Joy. I recognize that I don’t know her well, but she’s got a cool vibe. I’m happy to support her.” Emma turned and ordered an iced matcha latte with oat milk and strawberries and stood off to the side waiting for her drink.

Sadie placed her order and followed Emma, poking her finger at Emma’s purse. “I see you’ve got your keys clipped to your bag.” The carabiner was hooked around one of its straps. It had come in handy whenever Emma needed to find her keys in a hurry.

Now we’re reaching... she’d know how useful the thing was if she’d bothered to answer the phone. “Yep, I’ve got my keys, so as long as one doesn’t break in the lock again, I’ll stay out of your hair,” she quipped. Thanks to the silent treatment, Emma made it a point to run through the checklist of items she needed for fear that she’d have to interrupt Sadie’s work so that she could retrieve her keys or phone. She’d

started planning out her outfits in advance and clipping her keys to whatever purse matched best so that everything was where it should be.

In truth this new practice wasn't a bad thing—it saved her a lot of time. She just didn't want to admit that planning was actually beneficial. Zora'd never let her hear the end of it.

“You're not a bother, Emma,” Sadie blew out a breath. “Listen, I know I haven't called you back. I just...”

Emma's face grew hot at the threat of rejection. “It's cool,” she smiled tightly. “No need to explain.”

One of the baristas called out Sadie's name and she stepped forward, though her lips parted as if she had something more to say. Her eyes darted back and forth between Emma's and the ground before she grabbed her cup of regular drip coffee and raised it wordlessly, turning back to go join her friends.

Emma's mind ran a mile a minute as her drink was delivered to the counter. She smiled as she thanked the barista and swirled the drink in her hand. “I do not get this girl,” she muttered to herself, as she pivoted on her heel to walk home.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Zora had a date that night with Reid, but Granny was free and agreed to go with Emma to the art show. As they approached the front door of the gallery, Granny turned and looked at Emma with a thoughtful expression. “You good, baby?”

Granny had put on a dressy pair of slacks with a beaded sweater and a winter capelet. She’d said the event warranted a red lip, her hair pulled back into her signature chignon. She’d been keeping a watchful eye over Emma since they got into the car.

“I’m good,” Emma nodded, a brave smile curving the corners of her mouth slightly. “No worries.” Nevermind that her stomach was tied into knots. She shivered as the evening breeze ruffled the collar of her lightweight trench coat.

“You ain’t never gotta lie to me, baby,” Granny’s sage voice was gentle, her warm eyes framed by wisdom.

Emma’s shoulders dropped as she looked into the face of her elder. “I’m fine. I’m just disappointed. I did want to see things progress with Sadie, and I’m disappointed that it seems like she felt the need to distance herself from me. I just really wanted to, honestly I don’t know...” She looked upward toward the night sky, the warmth of the streelights blurring out the stars

“You wanted to be ready for your person. And it’s completely understandable why you would feel a sense of hope and disappointment if it feels like your feelings aren’t being matched.”

Emma nodded. “I got my hopes up, Granny. And it's probably too soon to tell if Sadie is the right one or the wrong one or whatever, but I wanted to feel like she'd at least give it a chance.”

Ms. Marion reached for Emma's hand and gave it a squeeze. “First of all, never be ashamed of hope—it's a good thing to want things for yourself, for your heart. You deserve good things, and wanting them for yourself is not something that you should regret. You are a sweet and sensitive spirit that can see the good in everyone else. You want good for everyone else. I want you to give yourself that same acceptance and care.”

Emma clutched the elder's hand between her own. “I needed that.”

Marion nodded. “For right now, just be present in the moment. Enjoy the show, and who knows? Maybe in seeing you tonight, Sadie will share more about where her head's at. And if she doesn't, maybe she isn't quite ready for what you might be ready for.”

“Yeah, you're right.” Emma smiled gratefully. “Granny, thank you. You always know where my head is and I really appreciate the way that you bring your perspective without judging. Sometimes I wonder whether people take me seriously.”

“Why on earth wouldn't they take you seriously? You're smart. You're beautiful. You're funny. You see the best in everybody.”

“Yeah, but maybe they think I'm just being naive. When I got home from the farmer's market, I couldn't help thinking about this stuff—like, why am I so all over the place? How come I am constantly losing things? Does everyone think I'm flighty? I just wonder sometimes. I don't mean to be... Like I know most things are said in jest, like me being extra,” she emphasized with finger quotes. “But is there truth to the jokes, or am I doing the most by overthinking this stuff?”

Granny pressed her lips together. “Anybody that thinks that you are flighty or doing too much doesn't know you well enough, and really it's their loss, because you're worth the investment. There's nothing wrong with being the light in a room full of darkness. People gravitate toward you because they need your light. Now come on, gimme some sugar,” Granny opened her arms to Emma, giving her a big hug.

Emma dropped a kiss on her cheek. “I love and appreciate you so much, Ms. Marion. You ready to go in?”

“Yeah, let's do it.”

“Emma, you made it!” Joy greeted them immediately at the door as they walked inside. She pulled Emma into a big hug and then turned to Granny. “Here, let me take your coat.”

“Thank you! Joy, this is Ms. Marion, my best friend Zora's grandmother.” Emma pulled her trench off, smoothing her hands over the front of her black cable knit sweater dress, her knee-high leather boots skimming its midi hem. She'd matched Granny's energy with a strong red lip.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Marion. Do you accept hugs?”

“I surely do,” Granny gave Joy a squeeze. “Congratulations! You've got quite a crowd here tonight.” She gestured around the gallery as laughter and talking voices bounced off of the walls.

Joy beamed radiantly, her brown skin glowing almost golden in the light. Around the room, canvas paintings lined the walls, bright and bold and colorful. Throngs of people were clustered at each one, pointing to different features as SoCa music played from a small DJ booth in a back corner.

“These are incredible, Joy,” Emma craned her neck to take in the vibrance of Joy’s work. Silhouettes of Black women in motion—each brush stroke creating texture and nuance. The first piece inside the gallery entrance was of a woman twirling before a mirror, the skirt of her dress and her mass of curls a vision topped only by the expression of joy on her face. “I’ve always wanted to take up art—I took a few classes in college, but I never got to really see it through. This is iconic,” she breathed.

“Oh, thank you. I’m so glad that y’all came to this installation today. We are really focusing—and when I say we, I mean me and my creative side. We were really focusing on showing strength and resilience and joy in a visually dynamic format,” Joy beamed, gesturing proudly at her work. “If you ever want to join me at the studio, I’d love to have you. I think everyone finds something new about themselves on the canvas.”

“Really? That would be amazing! Now, hear me when I say that I don’t expect that my art would be anything like this—I’m more on a paint and sip level, but I think this would scratch a creative itch that I haven’t satisfied in quite a while, and I’d much rather make some art for my place than buy some random prints.”

“The colors are very powerful,” Granny nodded at the closest piece. “I’d love to join y’all in the studio when the time comes.”

“Of course! I’d love to have you. Emma, if you want to continue down that way, um, Sadie’s over there.” Joy pointed toward a corridor at the end of the room.

A flutter bloomed in Emma’s chest. “Oh, okay,” she replied nervously. She hesitated, looking at Granny Marion like a deer caught in the headlights.

“You go on ahead, baby. I’m gonna sit here and talk to Joy and learn more about her inspiration,” she winked at Emma as if to say “you’ve got this.”

Emma swallowed down the urge to protest. “Okay, I’ll catch up with you in a bit.”

“Take your time,” Joy smiled conspiratorially at Granny who was grinning like a Cheshire cat. She leaned close to Emma. “She just needs some time to open up. You’ll see.”

Their eyes connected and Joy reached out to give Emma an encouraging pat. They inhaled together, and Joy nudged her toward the back.

“You’ve got this, girl,” Joy whispered.

Granny leaned toward the woman whispering something which was met with raucous laughter. She giggled sweetly, giving Emma a finger wave before pointing toward the mirror painting to ask questions.

Emma shook her head and turned toward the next art installment, admiring different pieces along the wall as she found Sadie looking at the last one. In it, a woman appeared to be sprinting, reaching for the word “Freedom,” which was just out of grasp. Her expression was one marked with pain and hope, that one word felt like a loaded statement surrounded by gradients of color.

“Hey, you made it,” Sadie’s eyes widened as her eyes traveled down Emma’s body before returning to meet her gaze.

Emma’s cheeks warmed and she silently thanked the low lighting in the room. She appreciated the added height her boots gave her, knowing that her dress hugged her generous curves. “Yeah, I said I wanted to come and support, so I’m here,” she shrugged.

“Well, I’m glad you did.” Sadie wore a denim jumpsuit that cinched her waist and accentuated her backside. Its unbuttoned collar revealed a generous amount of skin.

“You look beautiful,” Emma said slowly, trying not to stare, but she couldn’t tear her eyes away.

“I could say the same about you. Can I give you a hug?”

Emma froze. “Uh, sure.” Her body tensed as Sadie drew closer to her, pressing her lips against the side of Emma's jaw before standing back to admire her. “This dress is everything.”

Sadie’s scent invaded Emma’s senses as she short-circuited from the contact of hands skimming her back. “What was that for?”

“It was something I should have done earlier at the farmer's market.”

“So why didn't you?”

Sadie shrugged sheepishly. “Uh, I don't know honestly. In retrospect, I could have handled that whole exchange better. Listen, do you want to go and talk?”

Emma's eyebrows raised as Sadie pointed back toward what looked like an office door. “Is that okay?”

“Yeah, I'm here all the time. Joy knows I use her office sometimes to take calls or to hide when I don't want to deal with crowds.”

“I know that feeling well.” As much as Emma enjoyed people, she was often overwhelmed and would need time to recharge after being exposed to large groups.

“Really? I didn’t think you were such an introvert.”

“I would say that I'm right on the line,” Emma shrugged. “Maybe I'm an ambivert, I

don't know, but there are definitely times when I enjoy my solitude and other times when I like to connect. But I would say I'm more of an introvert because the people that I connect with are people that I know and want to connect with, not just random strangers.”

Sadie nodded. “I feel the same way. Well, come on, let’s go talk. It’ll be nice and quiet there.” She reached out before pulling her hand back, as if she was having an internal argument with herself. “I’ve got to chill,” she muttered and grasped Emma's wrist, her hand sliding into Emma’s as their fingers interlocked. Sadie tugged her toward the office.

Once inside, Sadie shut the door. “I’ve been trying to work up the nerve to talk to you, get you alone.”

The office had colorful prints framed and neatly arranged on one wall across from a large wooden desk with a leather desk chair and large black filing cabinets. A small sofa off to the side was covered in cartons and art shipping boxes.

“Okay, well, I'm all ears. What do you want to say?” Emma leaned against the desk, facing her. Her heart pounded in her chest as she waited for Sadie to let her down easy, knowing that any attempt to be kind would just shatter her even more.

“I... I just,” Sadie stammered, pacing as she searched for the words. “Oh, fuck it.” She pressed herself against Emma, cupping her face in her hands as she kissed her, catching her by surprise.

The kiss was soft and warm. Emma melted into it, angling her head for more as she opened her mouth, allowing Sadie's tongue entrance. As the kiss deepened, their embrace tightened, Emma's hand roaming Sadie's back, pulling her closer. Sadie nibbled at Emma's bottom lip.

“Sometimes I express myself better by showing,” she murmured.

Emma’s lips brushed against Sadie’s gently. “Yeah, I get it. Good talk,” she nodded. “Though you know I’m going to need you to use your words too, right?”

Her shoulders slumped in response. “I know. And I owe you an explanation, believe me I know. I’ve been practicing in the mirror the things that I’ve wanted to say to you, starting with an apology.”

Emma’s lips quirked at the corners. “You practiced apologizing? To me?”

“Well yeah, I can’t imagine how you must have felt when I didn’t get back in touch with you after... you know.” Her hand cupped the side of Emma’s face. “It was shitty of me to leave you in the dark like that.”

Emma pulled back to stare into those deep brown eyes. “What happened?”

“I just froze up. It’s been a long time since I’ve gotten close to anyone, and I wasn’t sure exactly what I was ready for. I should have communicated with you rather than shutting you out. I really am sorry.”

Emma watched Sadie’s face, wondering if she could trust what Sadie had shared when Joy’s words replayed in her mind. She just needs time to open up... “I suppose I could forgive you.”

“I would be grateful for your forgiveness.” Sadie’s mouth found Emma’s jawline, her throat, the lobe of her ear. The sultry rasps of her whispers made Emma squeeze her eyes shut and shiver. “There are things that I want to do to you that we shouldn’t do here. Joy wouldn’t be mad about it, but at the same time, I just don’t want to mess up her event.”

“Well, I'm sure we could do some live depictions of strength and resilience, but I don't think that's what she was going for,” Emma joked.

Sadie laughed, her face in Emma's hair, breathing in her nutty vanilla scent mixed with amber. “You smell so damn good. Let's go back to the apartment.” She grabbed Emma's hand again, kissing her fingertips and knuckles, the palm of her hand and the inside of her wrist. “I wanna be able to take my time.”

Shockwaves reverberated through Emma's body, heat pooling at her core. “So are we going to your place or mine?”

“Yours. You always have food.” Sadie's eyes were hooded with lust, but they crinkled at the corners as her lips curved.

Emma grinned and cackled. “Okay, good point, but we need to really have you work on that.”

“Deal.” Sadie sealed her promise with one more scorching kiss that left Emma breathless and dripping wet, squeezing her thighs together to prevent herself from laying back and spreading it wide on Joy's perfectly organized desk. Sadie squeezed her hand, a knowing look in her molten gaze as she tugged her through the door.

Back in the gallery, they rounded the corner and found Joy and Granny together, chatting like old friends, Granny giving her observations about the colors and the meaning behind different stances of the characters depicted in Joy's art. Marion's arm was looped in Joy's, and Sheena bounced around the room to different friend groups, clearly the proud partner of the famous artist, her eyes full of love as they trained on the pair as they made their rounds.

Sadie still had a hold of Emma's hand as they approached the two. “Hey Granny, I think we're going to leave.”

Ms. Marion nodded. “No problem, I’ll walk out with y’all.” Joy nodded and led the way toward the front to retrieve their coats.

“Are you sure you’re ready to leave, Granny?” Emma asked worriedly.

“Yeah, this is good timing—I’ve got a ride coming,” she smiled knowingly, smoothing her hair and grabbing her lipstick to reapply.

“Excuse me? Who?!” Thoughts raced of Zora tearing Emma a new one for Ms. Marion climbing into a rideshare car, left to her own devices to fend off some sketchy predator.

Granny ignored her. “Joy, the installation was beautiful. I’d definitely love to come back and see more of your art. And you have to let us know when you’re having the next show.”

Joy nodded, embracing her. “I really appreciate your support. Definitely let your friends know that they can come by. My art is going to be featured here for the next couple of weeks.”

“I sure will, I’ll tell them and I’m definitely going to come back myself. I’m bringing Gerald next time.”

Joy followed them out the door. “Gerald, is that your husband?”

Granny shook her head. “No dear, my husband passed long ago. Gerald is my boyfriend.” She winked at her audience as a sleek black car pulled up. “And right on time.”

Joy turned to look at Emma and Sadie, a look of shock on her face. Emma hid a smile behind her hand. Sadie stared at Granny in awe.

Gerald exited the car to open the door for Ms. Marion clad in a v-neck sweater over a dress shirt and jeans so freshly pressed that the creases were still crisp. His clean-shaven face brightened as he stepped closer. “Hello, dear,” he beamed at her, kissing her on the cheek with deliberate slowness.

“Oh, not you gettin’ fresh in public,” Granny blushed, swatting his arm.

“I can’t help myself. Look at you,” his baritone voice held amusement as he waved to their audience before helping her into the car.

Granny winked at Emma. “I expect a call in the morning!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Emma’s cheeks grew hot.

Joy turned to them, gesturing to Sadie as she eyed them both. “I expect the same.”

Sadie’s warm hand found Emma’s back as she glowered at her friend. “Let’s go.”

“Joy, your art is incredible. Thank you so much—I’m going to come back and I intend to take you up on the studio invite.”

“Please do.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

By the time they both made it up the stairs and in the front door, shoes and articles of clothing were flying every which way. Emma unbuttoned the front of Sadie's jumpsuit as she guided her toward the bedroom, their mouths connecting, indulging in each other. By the time they reached the edge of the bed, Sadie's body was completely bare, and Emma hands freely roamed her expanse of dark brown skin. "You are breathtaking, Sadie." She kissed her passionately, her tongue gaining entrance beyond that perfect pout, the back of her fingertips grazing the soft strip of curls just above Sadie's core.

"Finally, a night where there are no locksmiths or other plans..." Sadie nibbled on Emma's lips before turning Emma away from her, dragging the hem of her dress up and over her head. As she pulled the fabric away from Emma's body, she placed her lips between Emma's shoulder blades, running her hands from her waist to her hips. "Do you have a toy box?" her breath a whisper against Emma's skin.

"Ooo," Emma shivered and guided her panties down past her hips, stepping out of the lacy fabric as it slid to her ankles and moving to open the bottom drawer of her night stand. Sadie grabbed her hip, expertly kneading her lower back with her thumb. "Since we get to take our time..." The anticipation was overwhelming as her mind raced through the possibilities, her imagination running through innumerable sequences of pleasure they could pursue.

"Do you have a preference?" Sadie watched Emma, the rise and fall of her breasts, her hand traveling up Emma's side to massage her shoulder. She peered inside the drawer and her eyes widened. "Jesus... that's quite the arsenal you've got there."

Emma blushed. “So we have some friends who own a romance-only bookstore. Everytime I visit their shop, I buy a book and a new toy.”

“Damn... I’ve always been one to take matters into my own hands,” Sadie ran her fingers down Emma’s shoulder to her chest, rolling her palm over a hardened nipple.

Emma sucked in a breath, hoping she hadn’t overwhelmed her. All she wanted with Sadie was this closeness—she’d take it any way she could get it. Her scent, her voice, her touch, her presence was like a drug and Emma was already hooked. “It’s not like we need any of these...”

“No, I want to see what you like.” The drawer housed wands of different sizes, a rose, dildos and vibrators, among other things. Lube and smaller finger vibrators lined one side. “This is very organized, I’m impressed,” her throaty laugh made Emma bite her lip.

Sadie reached into the drawer and picked up a double-ended toy, its blue silicone standing out from the other pink and purple ones. One side was shaped like a standard dildo, while the other end curved upward with an angled knob. “This is a new one for me, but I’m curious...” She turned to stare into Emma’s eyes, her gaze hooded.

Emma licked her lips, trying to concentrate. “The strapless? I just got that one recently—the girls at the store were pretty adamant about it.” Her hand hovered over different areas. “G- spot stimulator on this side, with this curved part here for their clit, and then the wearer uses this side to penetrate their partner. It’s got a few different settings... I don’t know, it makes me both nervous and excited.”

“What’s there to be nervous about? So you haven’t tried it before?”

She shook her head. “Nope. Why, what do you think?”

Sadie ran her finger over the smooth silicone surface before wrapping her hand around it, her heated gaze melting Emma's insides. "I'm intrigued... can I drive?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll be your passenger princess anytime, " she whispered, running her nails down the side of Sadie's torso. She reached into her drawer for a bottle of lubricant before sitting on the edge of the bed next to Sadie. Emma allowed the silky liquid to gather on the stimulator as she turned it to its lowest setting, teasing it between Sadie's legs. "Let me help you get started."

She ran her hands over Sadie's breasts as the device slowly slipped into Sadie's core. As it reached its hilt, the curved part connecting with her clit, Sadie's body trembled and Emma increased the intensity.

"Fuck," Sadie gasped, standing to her feet. She gripped the shaft of the toy and faced Emma, who leaned forward, taking the tip into her mouth, running her tongue along it before climbing further onto the bed, her legs opening to make space for Sadie.

Her knees pointed to the ceiling, her feet flat on the mattress, Emma touched herself, her thighs slick with want. She moved her hand away as Sadie rubbed the tip of the toy up and down the slit of her folds, her arousal growing by the second until she was ready to beg. Emma moaned as Sadie entered slowly, the vibrations of the device making her walls clench as Sadie pushed deeper. Emma's body arched as one of her legs wound around Sadie's waist.

Sadie bit her lip as she eased all the way in, her mouth dropping open as the pressure caused the curve to press harder against her clit. "I definitely need one of these," she whispered as she buried her face between Emma's breasts, massaging their peaks with both of her hands as she moved, guiding the length in and out slowly, Emma's back arching as Sadie hit the right spot. Sadie pulled one of Emma's knees over her shoulder, jutting her hips forward to grind the curve of the device against both of their cores.

Emma cried out as the sensation overwhelmed her, delicious pressure building as Sadie thrust gently, continuing to grind against her clit. “Please don’t stop,” Emma begged.

“Trust me, I’m not finished with you yet,” Sadie murmured as her tongue circled one of Emma’s puckered nipples before taking it into her mouth. She thrust slowly, both of them lost to the frequency vibrating between them. Sadie’s eyes squeezed shut, a line pinching between her brows as she bit her lip, throaty moans emanating from within her as Emma reached her pinnacle.

Emma shouted, her body convulsing as Sadie continued to ease in and out—so slowly that Emma wanted to cry. “Oh my g—” she saw stars before she could finish, Sadie leaning forward to nuzzle her neck as she began to move faster, moaning just below Emma’s ear.

“Fuuuck, Em.” Sadie brought her arms under both of Emma’s knees, drawing them upward to go deeper.

Hearing Sadie use a nickname had her ready to fold. Emma’s eyes rolled back, her chin extending upward as Sadie kissed the column of her throat. Her mouth fell open as she gasped, her breath ragged.

Sadie rotated her hips, inching herself closer to Emma as she continued to pummel her.

“Sadie,” Emma whined. “Please...”

Sadie stared into Emma’s eyes, lust and heat radiating from her as she focused her gaze. She moved faster. “Please what?”

“Please... I need...” she moaned as her mouth dropped open, the edge of orgasm

overwhelming her senses.

Sadie pulled her lip between her teeth and drove into her, pushing Emma's knees closer to her chest. "Fuck," she groaned.

Emma's hands gripped the duvet cover, her hips rising to meet Sadie's as Sadie pressed her pelvis to Emma's, the device between them providing added pressure. Emma panted, "Yes, yes... I'm—"

Sadie moaned, her body jerked as she came hard, the movements bringing Emma over the edge. Sadie kept grinding, wringing every last spasm out of them both before she reached for Emma's face, kissing her lips, her jaw, her collarbone. "Oh yeah, I'm a fan."

"Me too," Emma grinned widely, her mind still reeling at this new level of intimacy. What does this mean for us? A litany of questions threatened to creep up, but she threw a mental wall up to block the intrusive thoughts from ruining their afterglow. Especially when she could instead think about the other goodies from the toy box they could experience together. "I can pick one up for you so that you have one at your place too... what's your favorite color?"

"Black."

"Now why doesn't that surprise me?" she teased, yawning as Sadie pulled out, turning off the device before moving it to the side of the bed. She laid next to Emma, facing her with her head propped on her hand, her other one drawing slow swirls on Emma's hip.

"Should I leave you to get some sleep?"

"No," Emma nuzzled Sadie's neck, kissing the angle of her jaw. "Stay. I'm not done

with you yet.”

“Well, when you put it like that...”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Emma woke to the scent of bacon frying. She turned to see the other side of the bed made up slightly, a dip still in the pillow. As she rubbed her eyes and took a deep breath, she relished in the fact that she had slept so peacefully. She stretched her arms above her head, pointing her toes before sitting up and throwing her legs over the side. She reached for a robe on an accent chair and threw it around herself before padding into the living room.

“Good morning, sleepyhead.” Sadie greeted her in a sultry tone.

“Good morning, yourself. I didn't know you cook,” Emma smiled. “You never have food at your place, so I thought...”

Sadie laughed. “It's because I always cook all of it. So I tend to buy groceries a couple times a week. I used to do a lot of meal prep and stuff like that, but I would get bored having the same things over and over again. So I'd rather cook something, have it a couple days at most, and then have something else. But it does mean I go to the store more often—I try not to keep a bunch of stuff in my freezer.”

Emma nodded. “I feel like we used to have a completely full freezer and pantry at my house. When I was younger, our family struggled a bit before my parents found their footing and got settled in their careers. But that initial struggle with food insecurity caused us to always have more food than we needed. Pantry and freezer were always packed—if the zombie apocalypse were to happen, we wouldn't be without supplies for a long time.”

Sadie tilted her head. “That makes perfect sense. That's how my grandmother used to do things, too. I think I just have grown more concerned with food waste and I feel like I used to waste so much that it bothered me. Especially cooking for one.” Sadie poured fresh coffee into two mugs, moving around Emma’s kitchen as if she were already intimately aware of where everything belonged. She grabbed oat milk from the fridge and dropped a pump of hazelnut syrup from the counter into both cups before mixing.

“I get that.” Emma accepted a mug of coffee from across the island and took a sip, sighing contentedly. Sadie perked up at the sound and rounded the counter to cup Emma’s face, planting a soft kiss on her lips. “Mmm, good morning indeed,” Emma murmured. “Thank you, this is exactly how I like it.”

“The coffee, or...” Sadie teased.

Emma sputtered. “I can’t say that with reference to last night. That was... beyond anything I’ve experienced before. I think I even dreamed about it.”

Sadie hummed, brushing her lips against Emma’s once more before returning to her cooking. “I think you did too. You may have moaned in your sleep once or twice.”

Emma groaned. “Are you serious?”

Sadie nodded, a sly smile spreading across her face. “It was cute though. Not to mention an excellent boost to my ego.”

Emma shook her head and sipped her coffee. “I guess,” she laughed. “So what's on the menu?” She asked as Sadie began to beat some eggs.

“Well, bacon, obviously,” she gestured to the frying pan. “And I'm gonna make cheese omelets next. I've already sliced up some fruit.”

“Wow, it's like a whole gourmet meal. This is amazing,” Emma sat on a stool facing the counter. “I feel like I could get used to this.” Her eyes widened as she said it. Shit. “I didn't mean that in a way where I'd pressure you. I'm so sorry.”

Sadie smiled. “It's okay. You're fine.” She poured half of the egg mixture into the pan, swirling it around, pushing at the edges with a spatula. She allowed for it to set more before she sprinkled in some grated cheese. “I could see this not being a single occurrence. Obviously last night was amazing for me too—I don't do this for just anybody, Em.”

Emma's face warmed. She's thinking about it too. Maybe we have a real chance? “I feel like I'm watching a cooking demonstration. This is so cool. I've never tried—or, really, I've never attempted—omelets. I feel like my scrambled eggs don't even turn out the way I want them to,” Emma laughed. “Less fluffy and more flat. But this is incredible. Who taught you to make these?”

Sadie shrugged. “I picked up a lot from my grandmother and then in college I dated a girl in culinary school.”

“That must have been fun.”

“The food was good, but it was never going to last,” Sadie chuckled and shook her head thoughtfully. She waved around the silicone spatula.

“I want to take a cooking class or something.” Emma rested her elbows on the island counter, watching with interest while Sadie moved the eggs around in the pan.

“Well, from what I hear, you make a mean roasted chicken.”

She set down her mug. “Who told you that?”

“Ms. Marion may have mentioned it in passing.”

Emma shook her head ruefully. “She is so stealth,” she laughed.

“So, what are you up to today?”

“Uh, I have to get to the bookstore in about an hour or so, but I'm off tomorrow and haven't made any plans yet.”

Sadie plated the omelet and started another one. She set a finished plate in front of Emma with a fork, the fruit and eggs arranged perfectly for a social media-worthy post.

“Okay, presentation!” Emma admired Sadie's work down to the fresh herbs she'd sprinkled for garnish. “This is stunning.”

“Eat. I'll be joining you in a second.”

“No, no, I'll wait. It's totally fine.”

“But I don't want your food to get cold!” she insisted.

Emma's shoulders slumped. “Okay, well, I'll take a bite.”

Sadie waited, watching Emma as she sliced a piece of the omelet with her fork, gently placing it on her tongue.

Emma's eyes closed and she hummed. “This is perfect,” she sang as she chewed. “So good, really.”

Sadie nodded. “Good, I'm glad. So, tell me something about yourself that I wouldn't

know,” Sadie requested as she finished making her omelet.

“I think I want to get a dog,” Emma shared. “But I don't really know where to start with all of that and I'm not necessarily sure that I'm up for all the responsibilities. So I thought maybe I would foster first to get a feel for it.”

Sadie's eyebrows raised, but she kept her eyes on the stove. “That seems reasonable.”

“Pets are allowed here, right?”

Sadie nodded. “Yeah, there's a pet deposit you would have to put down and there's a monthly pet rent, but it's reasonable.”

“Okay, yeah, I've been researching pet insurance and all the things and I know I could handle that, but I've never had a pet before. I just know I love animals.”

Sadie watched her, a hint of a smile on her face. “I'm sure you would have a great time with it. You should try it.”

“Hmm... maybe I'll put in the application to foster today and see what happens! Should I just pay the pet deposit now?” She pictured fuzzy paws scampering around the apartment and wondered whether Zora would allow a bookstore mascot.

“No, just wait until you actually have a dog for sure coming and then we'll take care of it. It's no big deal.”

Emma smiled and sipped her coffee. They ate their omelets, enjoying the silence of the morning. After a particularly big bite, Emma noticed Sadie watching her as she shimmied in her seat. “What?” she covered her mouth as she chewed.

“When you taste something you like, you smile and do your little dance and it's really

cute,” Sadie's eyes sparkled.

A laugh caught in Emma's throat as her cheeks warmed. “Well, thank you. I'm really impressed with your cooking,” she speared strawberry slices as she swayed in her seat. “This is a treat!”

“Thanks. Maybe we should try to cook something together sometime.”

“I'd really like that.” Sadie stood placing their empty plates in the sink, running some water over them before returning to Emma's side of the counter. “I should probably head downstairs. I need to check and see if I've got any tenant messages and I have some errands I need to run.”

“Okay. Thank you for breakfast, among other things,” Emma smiled up at her.

Sadie dipped her head to plant another kiss on Emma's lips before turning to leave.

“Hey wait,” Emma called after her. “Do you think that maybe we can spend some time together, just you and me?”

Sadie froze, her eyes registering somewhere between surprised and alarmed. “Uh... yeah, sure. What do you think you want to do?” She stepped awkwardly toward the door as if she would bolt through it at any moment.

Emma shrugged, the flutter in her chest curling into a ball in the pit of her stomach. Maybe I shouldn't have asked... “We don't have to do anything big. What if you come to the bookstore? There's an open mic night poetry slam event happening in a couple nights. You could invite Joy if she's into stuff like that too.

“I just thought, you know, it might be nice to intentionally meet each other somewhere or go somewhere together and know that we're there to hang out with

each other.”

Sadie nodded, she leaned against the door, rubbing the side of her neck. “So, a date?”

Emma smiled wide, willing her nerves not to show. “I hope so.” Please tell me I’m not just a fling...

“Yeah, text me the information and I’ll check my schedule. I’m sure we’ll find a time that works. Anyway, gotta run.” Sadie bobbed her head and gave a little wave before she left.

“Bye,” she replied to a closed door. Emma rested her elbows on the counter, her head in her hands as a thought crossed her mind and she groaned. Just because she’d chosen to give up her rotation didn’t mean that everyone was on the same page. Shit. Does Sadie have a roster?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“She's gonna be here any minute.” Emma paced back and forth in the bookstore sitting area. “What if she doesn't show up? What if... what if she's not really into the event? What if she doesn't like what I wore tonight?”

“Okay, I really need you to chill out,” Zora warned her from her seat next to Granny Marion. “Pump your brakes. She's gonna show up. And I'm sure she'll appreciate what you wore, but in the grand scheme of things, she isn't coming for your outfit just like she's not coming for the event.”

“And she'll enjoy herself—everyone loves open mic night,” Granny added. “Probably in the same way that you two admired the art at the exhibit—this is another form of creative expression that lets everyone put their guard down. I'm sure she'll have a good time.” Granny patted Emma's arm. “You're doing too much, as the young people say.”

“I feel like they say other things now,” Zora informed her grandmother. “What the current phrase is, I couldn't tell you because I'm not in that generation. I barely know what anyone is talking about on social media anymore.”

Granny's shoulders bounced. “Every generation is younger than me at this point, so I'm just gonna go with the ones I can remember.”

“Do you really think this outfit is okay? I could go change,” Emma gestured to her pleated floral skirt and her bright plum blouse that was tied at the waist.

“No, I like it. I love the little hint of skin at your midriff. The colors are so you,” Zora twirled her finger in a circle, directing Emma to spin around. “Yeah, this is great. It’s giving sexy artist bawdy in the springtime.”

Emma pulled her braids into a bun with some of the curls at the ends hanging as tendrils on the sides of her face and struck a pose. “Hmm?”

“Perfect,” Granny observed, patting Emma’s hand. “You look beautiful. Don’t worry.”

Her nerves couldn’t be calmed. I probably shouldn’t have had that extra latte. “But what if I say the wrong thing? And what if she gives up on me for good?”

“I’m not going to say it’s impossible that you could put your foot in your mouth. But the more that you assume you will, the likelier that chance becomes. Just give yourself a couple of deep breaths and let things happen. You’re gonna be fine,” Zora soothed.

“Okay, should I change my shoes?” Emma pointed her foot for Z to take a look.

“I think the gold sandals are cute, and they look comfortable—you’re always trying to get me to wear heels,” Zora rolled her eyes. “But, I like these. They match your jewelry. You look great—you know we’d tell you if we thought differently.”

Emma nodded. “Okay, okay. Fine.” She blew out a breath, trying to ward off all of the swirling what-ifs and overthinking. Easier said than done.

“Why don’t you go with Brian over to Kerri’s to pick up the catering for the event. It’ll give you something to do so that you’re not thinking about this so much. And we’ll take care of the rest over here. We’re almost completely set up anyway, but we’ll manage the chairs and stuff,” Zora offered. Giving Emma something to do was her

way of helping her adjust focus to something within her control.

Granny waved Emma away. “We got this, baby. Don't worry about it.”

“If you're sure...”

Brian approached, a warm smile on his face. Clearly, he's been briefed. “You're comin', Em?”

Zora's hand pressed gently against Emma's back between her shoulder blades. She was two seconds from getting a two-handed shove. “Yep, let's go.”

For the rest of the afternoon, Emma's energy was channeled into busy work—decorations, food set-up, directing foot traffic in the store, ringing customers, and greeting evening guests. Granny and Brian kept her loaded with madeleines and lattes, though she assumed at some point that Brian switched her over to decaf, because she wasn't bouncing off of the walls. She'd strung up tea lights leading toward their small stage, the food tables adorned with bright cardstock prints from Joy's gallery and colorful bouquets from the farmer's market.

“Hey, you made it!” Relief melted some of Emma's remaining anxiety as she took in Sadie's look for the evening. Sadie wore a halter that exposed a great deal of her back with one thin strip of material dividing her shoulder blades, her full tattoo sleeve on display. She'd selected black ripped jeans and heeled boots that put her several inches above Emma's eye level. “How are you?”

“I'm good. How are you? You look beautiful,” Sadie admired her slowly, her gaze traveling up Emma's body with such intensity that Emma could almost feel it moving along the surface of her skin.

“Thank you,” Emma smiled bashfully. “I love this look on you. It's really sexy,”

Emma tried not to stare. “Really, really sexy,” she murmured as she stepped closer, wrapping her arms around Sadie's neck as she kissed her on the cheek. She was tempted to give Sadie a real kiss—she looked so good—but not everyone was into PDA, and she didn't want to chance that Sadie would feel a way. Emma could care less who was around—the woman before her made her mouth water.

“Thank you. I could say the same, you know.” Sadie gave her a squeeze, her hand running the length of Emma's arm sending tingles up her spine. Emma's lips curved at the sensation. “Wow, it looks like it's completely full in here,” Sadie craned her neck to look around.

A large space had been cleared in the center of the store and many of the mobile bookcases and displays had been moved to make more room. Almost every seat was taken, and some of the younger attendees sat cross-legged on cushions on the floor. Granny sat in her usual chair surrounded by regular patrons of the bookstore.

“Yeah, we have a lot of community support. When Zora took over the bookstore, she made efforts to connect with the local charter schools and with the writing community. She's been really, really committed to advocating for child literacy and supporting kids interested in writing, connecting them with resources to learn ways they can seek publication. So the community shows up for her.” Emma gazed proudly at her best friend, who directed some people over to the snacks before checking in with the emcee for the evening.

“This is impressive,” Sadie said as they snaked through the crowd. “It's standing room only in here!”

Emma nodded. “Yeah, but we saved you a seat.” She gestured for Sadie to follow her over to the seating area.

“You did?”

“Mm-hmm. You're next to the person who's everybody's favorite.” A vacant chair beside Granny had a handwritten sign that read “RESERVED” in red block letters.

“Ms. Marion, it's so good to see you,” Sadie beamed, kissing her cheek as she stood and grasped Sadie’s hands.

“Well, hello there, dear. How are you? I love this top that you're wearing. I might have to steal it from you,” Granny winked.

Sadie chuckled. “It's yours if you'd like it. I think it would look better on you.”

“Well, come on over here. I saved you a seat right next to me.” Sadie hesitated, looking to see if there was an additional seat for Emma, which made her smile.

“Oh, I'm working, but I'll come and join y'all in a bit.” Sadie nodded as she sat, Granny leaning on the armrest of her chair to chat with her as Emma went to the cashier's counter to manage purchases.

Several local authors were doing readings from recent releases and one of their local poets planned to perform a piece from one of their collections. Different creatives got up one-by-one and shared their projects with prearranged mood music to enhance the vibes—Zora's boyfriend, Reid, included.

Emma smiled. The last time he had gotten up on stage, he was attempting to win Zora's heart. Zora stood off to the side. As store owner, she always liked to be at a vantage point where she could see if anybody had needs that she could assist with.

Her hands were clasped in front of her as she watched her man, his eyes never leaving hers, as he spoke about love and recognizing it for the first time.

Emma drew her attention away for a moment to ring up a customer purchase and

when she turned back, Reid pulled a box from his pocket, promising the rest of his life to the woman that he loved, if only she would have him. Zora's jaw dropped, her hands flying to her mouth. As he kneeled, gesturing for her to come forward, Zora's teary eyes darted to Emma and to Granny before returning to Reid, her glowing face full of love and joy. Emma felt her heart ready to burst, she was so happy.

“I wonder if Granny knew?” Emma whispered to herself. She knew that they were serious. Obviously, they just moved in together. But, he hadn't made any mention to her that he was going to propose. He probably assumed I wouldn't be able to keep a secret. Z's taught him well. The two of them fit together so well, Emma chided herself for not seeing this coming.

Zora stepped closer, standing just before the stage as she watched Reid set down the microphone and open the box, a ring sparkling within. Zora's arms wrapped around herself as Reid said words that only the two of them could hear, her body shaking as she laughed and cried. Emma held her breath as she and everyone in the crowd watched in anticipation.

The moment that Zora's head nodded and Reid stepped down from the stage, Emma whooped and cheered. “That's my girl!! Go best friend, that's my best friend!” She yelled as she threw her arms in the air and shimmied with glee. Everyone in the crowd gushed and clapped, many stepping closer to the couple to get eyes on the new hardware on Zora's left hand.

Emma turned to look at Granny who patted the corners of her eyes with a napkin.

She's probably thinking that she's much closer to getting her grandbabies now. I moved out at the perfect time. Emma sighed contentedly as her eyes traveled to Sadie, who looked panicked. She looked up and saw Emma looking at her.

Emma's heart stopped. “Are you okay?” She mouthed.

Sadie lips turned slightly and she nodded as she rose to her feet. She whispered something to Granny Marion whose face turned from happy tears to stricken. Sadie kissed Granny's cheek and headed towards the counter where Emma stood. "Hey, I'm so sorry, but I have to leave."

"Are you sure? Is everything okay?" Emma pressed, her brows furrowed with concern.

"Yeah, I just... I can't be here right now," Sadie averted her eyes and glanced toward the door.

"Uh, okay," Emma said slowly, her heart thumping with nervousness. What is happening? "Wanna talk later?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll call you," Sadie offered as she made a beeline for the door without looking back. No congratulatory words for Zora and Reid. No explanation.

Emma watched her leave, her heart dropping with every step. We can't deal with this right now. She took a few deep breaths and shook her hands before turning to and making a beeline for Zora and Reid, who were surrounded by patrons. Granny held Zora's hand, but she tracked Emma's movements with worry and questions etched into her face.

Emma shook her head, indicating that she was fine, pushing down her emotions, wanting to focus on the fact that Zora now had a whole fiancé. As she reached her best friend and her fiancé, she put on her brightest smile and threw her arms around the two of them. "Y'all know we have to go somewhere to toast to your engagement, right?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“?Wait, she just left?” Zora stepped away from all of the excitement when she saw Granny pulling Emma away to console her in Zora’s office. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. One minute, Reid was proposing to you and everybody was excited, and I looked over and Granny was so happy– all of us were just cheering. And then I looked at Sadie and there was something in her face, it was like her whole vibe changed immediately.” She’s spooked. Maybe for good this time.

“She did say bye to me,” Granny cut in. “She apologized and said she had to leave.”

“Yeah, she said the same to me, but no reason for why things were so abrupt,” Emma realized she was wringing her hands and clasped them behind her back.

“Maybe she got an emergency text message from a tenant or something... Maybe, it’s something completely unrelated to what was happening here,” Zora said hopefully.

Emma tried to smile, but she wasn’t feeling it. “Or maybe it was directly related to what was happening here.”

Reid strolled over, pride apparent in his face as he joined his bride-to-be.

Emma walked from behind the desk to give him another hug. “Congratulations again, bruh, that was so beautiful.”

“Yeah, man, I wanted to tell you–I just wasn’t sure that you would be able to keep it

to yourself,” Reid squeezed Emma before standing behind Zora, kissing the crown of her head.

“Who was it that told you that I can't hold water? I keep secrets all the time.” Zora and Granny looked at each other and looked away, Zora staring at the ceiling as Granny peered over her shoulder, plucking at imaginary lint. “I can keep a secret,” Emma emphasized, even as the different secrets she blurted out came to mind—like that time she lost Zora’s favorite sweater. “Don't play me like that... maybe I could keep a secret.”

Zora snorted. “That’s a strong maybe, sis.” Granny bit back a laugh.

“So what’s going on? Didn't you come here with someone?” Reid wrapped an arm around Zora’s waist, and she leaned into his body, her hand caressing his.

“Yeah, she cut out after you... after Zora said yes.” Was it because she said yes? Is she a commitment-phobe?

“Damn, well I hope she's okay.”

“Yeah, I'll check on her when I go home. It definitely threw me off,” Emma shook her head and waved off the thought to regroup. “But this time right now is about y'all. We need to celebrate!”

Zora glowed. Her thick curls were pulled up into a fluffy pineapple, her fresh-faced look accentuated by a golden highlight. “I like to see you take charge like this, especially since you're gonna be my maid of honor.”

Emma blinked in shock. “Me?” Warmth emanated from her chest as the weight of responsibility fell on her shoulders like a cement block. “For real?”

“Well, who else would be my maid of honor, really? How many best friends do you think I have?” Zora giggled.

“Well, Granny is one,” Emma counted on her fingers. “And Reid is one at this point...” She tried to think of other close friends, but Zora kept her immediate circle small. “Maybe a cousin?”

“Girl, what? Granny is gonna walk me down the aisle and obviously Reid is the groom, so that only leaves one person available for the job. I love the rest of my family, but you are the only other person I would want to stand with me. There is one thing though—something that I really, really need for you to promise me.” Zora leaned her head closer as Reid grinned behind her.

Emma held her breath. “What's that?” On one hand, her chest swelled with love for her chosen sister. On the other, the coordination of different moments ignited her anxiety. She'd never been maid of honor before, and planning events was not her strong suit.

Zora stepped out of Reid's arms and reached for Emma's hands, squeezing them tightly. “I need you to promise me that you understand,” she spoke slowly, deliberately, her gaze so intense it made Emma's eyes widen, “that if you lose the wedding bands before the wedding, I will kill you.”

“Um,” Emma's eyes darted from Zora to Reid to Granny, none of them smiling or laughing. “Uh, are you sure you want me in this role? You and I both know my strengths and weaknesses, and I prefer to stay amongst the living.”

“Do your job correctly, and you will.” Zora stared her down ominously.

Emma laughed awkwardly. “Ah, okay, I, I hear you. Maybe don't give them to me until the very last minute?” Reid nodded behind Zora, assuaging Emma's fears. Do

they make wedding carabiners?

“But you’re saying yes, right?”

Emma nodded, willing herself not to fuck up. “Of course. I’m probably going to ugly cry while y’all say your vows, but that would be true no matter where I was in the room.”

Zora’s face softened as she pulled her best friend into a tight embrace. “I mean it, Em. I wouldn’t want anyone else to stand up there with me. But come on, let’s go back—we’ve still got some more creatives doing readings. Intermission’s almost done.”

The crowd of people had descended on the dessert table and were milling about, chatting and laughing while lo-fi beats played in the background.

“Okay, sounds good,” her voice hollowed. All she could think about was getting home.

Zora examined her best friend. “Listen, are you okay? Do you want to get out of here? I’d totally understand if you wanted to leave and go check on her.”

“No, no, I’m fine. I want to be here and celebrate with y’all after.”

Zora nodded. “Okay, sis.”

The emcee called the audience back to their seats and introduced the next performers. Each went up with a different flavor and style—the spoken word was sexy and daring—a variety of artistic demonstrations of emotion and strength and grit. Zora and Reid went back toward the side of the stage while Granny returned to her seat.

Emma leaned her head in her hands, her elbows on the counter. She tried to remain present, to hear the art being shared, but she had a hard time not allowing her mind to drift to thoughts of Sadie. What the hell was her problem? Why's she so shifty?

"Hey," Joy walked up to the counter, her voice jolting Emma, from her thoughts.

"Hey, Joy. Are you having a good time?" Emma tried to sound cheerful but her tone fell flat.

"I am! I wish we'd known about these a while ago—I will definitely be coming here with more frequency," she gushed before her expression morphed into something more serious. "Listen, I saw Sadie leave. Did something come up?"

Emma pressed her lips together, pulling them into a tight smile as she shrugged. "She didn't really say."

Joy nodded, knowingly.

"Um, should I be worried?" Emma asked. "The timing of her departure makes me wonder if maybe the proposal was triggering for her."

It was Joy's turn to vaguely tug at the corners of her mouth, genuine care in her face. "It's not my business to share, but I want to encourage you not to give up. There's something between you two, and I can tell that Sadie likes you a lot."

Emma blew out a frustrated breath. "Should I be worried?"

"I don't think so. Just talk to her."

Emma nodded. "Thanks, Joy. You know, Granny and I were talking about your art installation and we want to bring Zora and Reid to come and see it."

“Yes, I'd love that! Shoot me a text and let me know when—I'd love to be there when y'all come through.”

“Will do, I still have your card.”

“Perfect. Well,” she reached over the counter to pull Emma into a hug. “Take care, and I'm sure I'll see you soon.”

“Sounds good. Probably at the farmer's market,” Emma smiled.

“Right,” Joy grinned.

Emma waved as Joy exited the store, her shoulders drooping as time passed.

Later that night, as she arrived back home from having drinks with Zora and Reid and Granny, she knocked at Sadie's door, but there was no sound and no answer. She could hear the faint sounds of Billie Holiday and assumed that Sadie had either fallen asleep or simply wasn't ready to talk, so she climbed her steps to her apartment,

wondering whether she and Sadie had made a mistake.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Em. Earth to Emma,” Zora waved her hand in front of Emma's face.

“Huh? Oh, sorry,” Emma had been staring out the window at nothing in particular, her mind wandering, rolling through mental footage of the night before and what could have happened.

“Are you okay?” Zora leaned back against the counter to regard her friend, who had been stationary for the past hour.

“Yeah,” Emma sighed. “I'm fine.”

“You didn't get to talk to her last night?”

Emma shook her head. “No, if she was home, she didn't answer the door when I knocked. I can't help but think that it had to do with us.”

“It's not unreasonable to have thoughts like that. I mean, this was supposed to be your first date, right? Time will tell. It's possible that she wasn't home and that's why she didn't answer.”

Emma opened her mouth, but Zora continued.

“And yes, before you say anything, she could have called you. She could have given you an explanation, and you deserve one. But, she's human. She may be going through something that you know nothing about.”

Now why did she have to go and be all logical? “No, I know you're right,” Emma tried not to whine, though she was tempted to throw a full-on tantrum. “I keep running everything over in my head, thinking maybe I pressed and shouldn't have, that I didn't recognize a boundary.”

“You're not really one to overstep though,” Zora said softly. “Like, you, are you extra in some ways? Yeah. Are you a bundle of energy and light? Yeah. But no, you're not someone who sees a boundary and decides to play at its edges. You give people their space.”

Granny sidled up next to Emma, nudging her with her hip as she patted her on the back, her warmth radiating from her tiny frame. “It's not a bad thing to wear your heart on your sleeve, you know.”

Emma huffed. “Yeah, but I feel like I did the thing we all know you're not supposed to do—I put all my eggs in one basket. I choose to give up dating around and literally the first woman I see, I throw myself at her.”

“Now, come on, you've got to give yourself some credit. You didn't throw yourself at her. You didn't even think she liked you in the beginning.”

Emma cracked a smile. “I'm still not completely sold that she likes me at this point. But it does seem like something is there—was there.”

“I think we would all say that, to be honest,” Granny nodded. “Don't fight your emotions. They're valid. But also, don't run through that long list of what-ifs, because there is no honest explanation until she tells you what's on her mind. So just give her that opportunity when she's ready. She's gonna have to see you either way—she can't avoid you forever when you live at the top of the stairs.”

I'm tempted to just sit outside her door and wait until she gives me an explanation.

Might be extra, but I bet it would be effective. “You're right.”

“Excuse me, is there an Emma Sparrow here?” A man stood just inside the door of the bookstore in a black polo and slacks.

“Hi, that's me.” Emma eyed him nervously. Did I forget to pay a credit card or something?

“Yeah, I'm Mike. I'm here to drop off your foster dog?”

“Oh my god, I forgot that was today!” Emma exclaimed, clapping her hands. She peered around the man, recognizing that a small strip of leash was wrapped around his leg, a blur of movement behind him.

“Who is this little ball of energy?” Emma drew closer, gingerly taking steps forward in case the dog was skittish.

“This is Coco.”

“Coco! Hi, Coco,” Emma rested her hands on her knees as Coco peeked around the man's leg carefully, her curly brown fur framing her little face.

“What breed is she?”

“She's a toy poodle mix. We think she's mixed with some sort of terrier, but I'm not completely sure, since she's a rescue.”

Coco's floppy ears and bright brown eyes watched Emma as she knelt down to the floor. “Hi, Coco,” she whispered as she held out her hands, palms facing upward. Coco inched closer to sniff her fingertips. “I'm Emma. She's so tiny!”

“Yeah. We don't think she's going to get much bigger. She's about two years old, so she's technically still a puppy but her last foster placement had her long enough to train her to go outside for the bathroom, so she's used to going for walks in the morning and evening. She was crate trained, so I brought one for you.”

“Oh, I don't want her to have to be in a crate,” Emma whined as Coco licked her fingers.

“You might change your mind on that,” Mike laughed. “But, you know, do what feels comfortable.”

“I didn't know you were fostering a dog,” Zora came up, running her hands along Coco's back. “She's a cutie.”

“Yeah she is,” Emma scratched behind Coco's ears as she rested her chin in one of Emma's palms.

“She seems to like you too,” Mike observed as he stood up straight. “I'll be right back, I just need to go to the car and get the rest of her stuff.”

Emma didn't look up, completely focused on Coco, who was wiggling closer, her wagging tail moving her entire backside. Emma laughed, Coco matched her energy to a tee. “Okay, sounds good.”

“How long are you fostering for?” Zora asked.

“Uh, they asked me to foster for a month. I had wanted a dog for a while. I didn't want to bring one into your house because if I'd gotten a puppy, I worried that we'd ruin all of your carpets upstairs.”

“Yeah, that would have been interesting,” Zora wasn't anti pets, but she did like her

house to be a certain way. Sadie had given Emma the encouragement she needed to submit her application. I wish she was here right now.

“But yeah, I figured fostering will give me a better idea if I can handle a dog of my own or not. Plus it helps out the shelter for a while.”

“Smart. Great idea. Think you need to adjust your schedule for her?”

“Um, I don't think so, but let me see how she fares with my current schedule. If she needs an extra walk at midday, I could probably just run home at lunch.”

“We can circle back on that whenever, just say the word.”

“Thanks,” Emma scooped Coco up and brought her close to Granny. Coco sniffed and juttied her nose out, kissing her hands. Granny lit up at the contact.

“My, she is darling! Zora, have you thought about having a bookstore mascot? Because I think Coco could be the perfect one.”

Emma’s eyes brightened. “Oh my god, that would be amazing if we could have her here in the store!”

“Well, how about you see how she fares at your apartment first, before we go and make any commitments? We need to make sure that she's not going to pee all over the merchandise and that she doesn’t have some secret love of chewing books,” Zora mused.

“Okay, you have a point. We probably also want to make sure that we're not going to bother anyone's allergies.”

“You know, poodles are said to be hypoallergenic,” Granny pointed out, clearly

advocating for Coco's presence.

"Yeah, but whatever she's mixed with may not be. We'll have to see." Emma hugged Coco to her chest as Coco littered her neck and chin with kisses and nuzzled her chest. "This is gonna be an adventure for us."

Coco looked at her curiously, her little head tilting, as if she understood and was considering the possibilities.

"Z, do you need me to stay?"

"No, go ahead. I've got this today. I was planning to stay 'til close anyway. I'll see you in the morning?"

"Yeah, I'm gonna take Coco and go get some supplies."

Mike returned and handed Emma a crate stuffed with some pee pads, a blanket, and a chew toy. He pulled folded papers out of his back pocket and handed Emma sign. "This is your copy, and my card is stapled up top if you have any questions. The back pages are information on the fostering to adoption process, in case you decide you are interested in pursuing something more permanent."

Coco rested her head against Emma's chest, and Emma cooed. "That's a definite possibility. Thanks, Mike!"

He waved as he left.

"Okay, Coco, let's go get some stuff for the house and take a walk in the neighborhood."

"That's a good idea—let her adjust to some of the scents," Ms. Marion nodded her

head in agreement. “And about that other thing,” she looked at Emma, affectionately. “There's nothing to worry about. I’m sure she'll talk to you soon.”

Emma nodded, giving Granny's cheek a quick peck. “Thank you.”

Granny patted Coco's head, “And I will see you tomorrow.”

“Granny,” Zora warned.

She shrugged in response. “The heart wants what it wants, baby.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Okay, Coco. This is home,” Emma whispered to Coco, who looked up at her, her bright green harness attached to a retractable leash. Emma’s other arm was wrapped around the crate with the handles of shopping bags from the pet store hanging from her hand. “Okay, so we’re gonna go up these stairs... I wish you could help me with some of these bags.” Emma unlocked the door and they stepped inside. She looked up the staircase to find Sadie sitting on the landing at the top.

“Hey.” Sadie called softly.

Emma and Coco advanced up the stairs as she watched. “Hi,” Emma replied cautiously. “This is Coco.”

“Oh my gosh, you are so cute. Do you know how cute you are?” Sadie cooed, her eyes twinkling as they drew closer.

Coco immediately took to her, wriggling out of Emma’s arms to lick Sadie’s hands, jumping into her lap. Sadie laughed. “What a ball of energy.”

“Yeah.” Emma stood frozen, unsure what to do.

“Listen,” Sadie stood to her feet, still holding Coco. “I wanted to apologize for leaving the way that I did yesterday.”

“Are you okay?” Emma stared at her, searching her face for clues as to what happened.

“I'm fine. It's just... seeing Zora get engaged like that triggered some feelings that I've been working through.” Sadie moved to the side so they could both sit down together. “As you know, I was raised by my grandmother and my grandfather. I lost both of my parents at a young age—they were in a really bad accident. And you know that my grandparents passed right after college graduation.

Emma nodded, listening, reaching in to pet Coco, but she pulled her hand away when she made contact with Sadie's.

“I'm not going to break or run away if you touch me.” Sadie smiled slightly.

“I think that remains to be seen,” Emma tilted her head, her lips quirking to the side.

“Fair, that's fair. So... I was married once.”

“Oh. Okay...” Emma's eyebrows shot up. That was not on my bingo card. Of all the scenarios she'd considered, Sadie being married previously was not one she'd played out.

“Yeah... It wasn't for long—about six months. And then she left. No reason given, no conversation. She just decided to disappear and applied for an annulment. I only found out when I got served papers.”

Ouch. “Did she ever explain?”

“No. She didn't realize that we didn't actually qualify for an annulment, so we ended up having to get a divorce. All of the communication was done through attorneys, so I never actually saw her again,” she hung her head, her shoulders drooping until Coco littered her with kisses before snuggling close.

“Wow, I'm sorry.”

“Yeah. So, one might say that I have some abandonment issues,” Sadie smiled sadly.

“I mean, given the context, I could see that. You know that's nothing to be ashamed of. I wish I'd known.”

“Yeah, it's just... watching your friend get engaged, it just made me think of the past, and I saw your face light up and how happy you were, and I got scared. I'm in therapy, and I'm working through it. Getting tools and all the things, right? But it's hard and I fight anxiety all the time, worried that I'm gonna fall for someone who's gonna leave again. And I worry that I'm the problem.”

Coco leaned her head against Sadie's chest, one of her paws by her nose, as if she were listening to her heartbeat and wanting to ease Sadie's nerves. Sadie cradled Coco like a baby, in one arm, her other hand gently rubbing Coco's tummy.

So it's not just me. “I mean, you're not the only one that deals with anxiety, and I have a therapist too. I think therapy's a good thing for everybody,” Emma admitted. “So I'm never gonna judge you for that. And no matter where things go with us, I'm not the kind of person that just disappears on someone. If, for whatever reason, things don't work out, I will tell you my reasons. I can promise you a conversation. But I will also respect it if you say that you're not ready for anything right now.”

“But that's just it—I don't want you to think that I'm not ready for anything, because I am. I can feel myself gravitating toward you. I know that there's something here.” She stared into Emma's eyes with sincerity. “I really appreciate you for hearing me out.”

“Of course! I was so worried that I had done something wrong.”

“No, no, no,” Sadie murmured, placing her hand against Emma's cheek, stroking her cheekbone with her thumb. “You didn't do anything wrong.”

“Sometimes I just think I'm too much for people. Not everybody can handle it.”

“I'm not going to lie to you,” Sadie laughed. “I thought that in the beginning—that you were a lot because you were so amped on that first call—but after seeing that this was the real you and not some mask or facade, it became really refreshing to me. Someone who moves through the world with so much joy. I think you're a rare breed.”

“Yeah, I've been told I take after my grandmother who passed before I was born. I was actually named after her,” Emma smiled gently as Sadie leaned back against the banister. “I just want everybody around me to feel good.”

Sadie nodded. “That comes across. Joy loves your energy. You actually inspired her to work on a new collection called ‘Exuberance.’”

Emma beamed, her eyes saucers. “Really?”

Sadie nodded.

“Wow, that's incredible!”

“You're incredible.” Sadie squeezed Emma's thigh before reaching for her hand to give it a squeeze.

“Thank you for sharing your past with me,” Emma spoke gently.

Sadie nodded. “Thanks for not running away.”

Emma grinned. “Don't worry, I don't scare easily. Unless we're talking movies, and then I will be the first to admit that I'm a complete punk.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Emma stood to her feet. “Do you want to come in for a cup of coffee? There's no expectations for anything at all tonight. We could just keep talking?”

Sadie nodded. “Yeah, that sounds nice.” She was still holding Coco in her arms as she stood. She stooped back down to reach for one of Emma's shopping bags. “What all did you buy this dog? She's barely ten pounds.”

“Oh, I think she's like 8 pounds. She’s just a baby!”

“Okay, that's not exactly a big distinction.”

Emma chuckled. “Yeah, okay, you might be right there. I just felt like Coco is a fancy girl, so she needs all the things. She’s gonna be here for at least a month, if not more.” She unlocked the door and let them in, kicking off her shoes before dropping the dog crate and some of her bags on the kitchen counter. “Here, I'll take that bag from you.”

Sadie closed the front door and unhooked Coco's leash from her harness, setting her on the floor. Coco's tail wagged as she sniffed the area rugs and the furniture.

“Is coffee okay or do you want tea?”

“Um, I'll have whatever you're having.”

Emma turned into the kitchen and washed her hands. “I’m feeling like having a

matcha latte. Are you good with oat milk?"

"Yeah, that's perfect."

Emma set to work. As she waited for her kettle to come to a boil, she began to unpack the supplies from their shopping bags. She set a fuzzy dog bed on the floor in front of a bookshelf. Coco ran up to it, sniffing around its sides before climbing into it, circling twice and laying down. "She likes it!" Emma squealed. "Oh, that makes me so happy. I was looking at this blue one and then there was a bright pink one, but something just told me to pick this brown and cream one. It felt like it just went with the furniture better."

"You know she probably wouldn't have seen some of the color anyway, right?" Sadie asked, her lips twitching in amusement.

"She could have special abilities," Emma shrugged, pouting slightly.

Sadie shook her head and burst out laughing, wiping the corners of her eyes. "What else did you get?"

Emma showed her bags of treats and different toys. Pet shampoo and special dog food that she purchased.

As the kettle came to a boil, Emma set it aside and pulled a container of matcha powder out of the fridge. She scooped the bright green powder into a tea bowl and poured hot water over the top, whisking carefully before distributing the tea into two mugs. She poured oat milk into a frother. "These things are so convenient. Makes me feel like a barista."

"It really is the little things, isn't it?" Sadie laughed.

“Yeah.” As she poured the milk and picked up the mugs, she gestured towards the couch and Sadie followed. She grew pensive. “You know, you're not the only person that deals with feelings of abandonment. I haven't been in a serious relationship in a long time, and it's because my last real relationship was my first one with a woman. I was head over heels, and I don't know if it was a timing thing or what, but she decided to end things pretty abruptly. I was heartbroken, and for a long time, I've been afraid to open myself up or to even consider the possibility of getting serious with anyone.

“And so, for the last several years, I've had kind of a dating rotation. I've been dating a handful of guys—each one basically filling a different space. I don't know, it feels like most of the guys that I've met in DC are so unserious when it comes to monogamy, so I didn't want to put myself in a position where I could catch feelings.”

Sadie nodded. “Yeah. Some of my friends say similar things.”

“To be honest, I didn't want to get involved with a woman again until I was ready to fall in love,” Emma shrugged, taking a sip of her latte.

“So are you saying that means that you're now at a point where you're ready?” Sadie searched Emma's face, her expression unreadable.

Emma nodded slowly. “I think so. I may already be there. I know that I'm ready to work at something—to build with someone. But that doesn't mean that I want you to feel pressured or anything like that—you don't have to change anything about how you move. We can take things slow.”

Sadie suppressed a chuckle. “You know,” she put her arm around Emma's shoulder, “slow really hasn't been our style so far.”

Emma giggled. “It really hasn't.” They sat in comfortable silence, relief washing over

Emma as she melted into the couch next to Sadie. “I’d really like it if you slept here tonight.”

Sadie intertwined her fingers with Emma’s, lifting their hands to press her lips against Emma’s knuckles. “I’d like that too.”

Emma’s heart swelled as she leaned in to kiss Sadie softly. “No more walking away without an explanation. Okay?”

Sadie sighed contentedly, pressing her forehead against Emma’s. “Promise.”

After they finished their lattes, they checked on Coco, who was still curled up in her bed and fast asleep. Sadie followed Emma into the bedroom. “It’s like Coco knew it’s been a long day,” she laughed.

“Do you want some pajamas?” Emma asked.

“What do you wear for pajamas?”

Emma shrugged. “Could be anything from sweats to a negligee to nothing, honestly. It just depends on the mood I’m in.”

Sadie nodded. “How about a pair of sweats and a tank top? I get cold at night.”

“That’s not likely to happen if you’re in bed with me. I’ve been told I radiate heat.” Emma dug into her closet, producing clothes for Sadie and changing into an oversized t-shirt. They climbed into bed, and Emma turned to spoon Sadie, wrapping her arm over Sadie’s chest and pulling her close as she kissed her shoulder. Sadie shivered at the contact. “Get some sleep, babe,” Emma whispered, pressing her lips against Sadie’s nape.

Sadie sighed as Emma held her, her breathing evened as she fell asleep. Emma smiled, nuzzling Sadie's neck as she drifted off.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Weight shifted on the mattress as Emma turned onto her side and opened her eyes. Dark brown eyes stared back at her. “Hey, good morning.”

“Good morning, beautiful.”

“Sleep well?”

Emma nodded, stretching as she smacked her lips. “Mmmhmm. How about you?”

“Do you know that you snore?” Sadie’s lips curved into a half smile as Emma’s eyes widened.

“Slander!” She was about to toss a pillow at Sadie when something scratched at the bedroom door. Emma sat up in a panic. “What the—”

High-pitched whining sounded on the other side of the door, and Sadie rested a hand on her arm. “It’s Coco. Your foster dog?”

Emma swung her legs off of the bed and rushed to throw on pants. Shit, shit, shit! “Oh my god, Coco! We didn’t even take her for a walk last night. That poor baby!” She ripped open the door and Coco zoomed into the room, running around both sides of the bed, slowing to sniff different pieces of furniture before sprinting out the door only to return and repeat her actions. “Look at all this energy,” Emma squealed. “Hi, Coco!”

Coco peered up at Emma, her tail in the air as she hunched playfully, looking ready to bolt as her wagging shook her entire backside. Sadie dressed and sat on her knees, allowing Coco to climb on her, scratching behind her ears and laughing as Coco stared up at her in awe.

“I have a feeling this dog likes you more than she likes me,” Emma muttered, running her hand along Coco’s back. She headed toward the living room calling behind her. “Coco, wanna go for a wa—” Her words were cut short as her bare foot landed in something squishy. “Oh nooooo,” she cried. “I just stepped in...”

“Oh shit,” Sadie came up behind her followed by Coco.

Emma turned, standing on one leg to avoid tracking any. “Exactly.”

“Just stay there a sec,” Sadie stepped around her and padded to the kitchen. “She peed, but at least she did it in the kitchen on the tile. Where are your cleaning products?”

“Now I’m understanding the pet rent more,” Emma deadpanned as Sadie doubled over with laughter. “There are sprays and wipes under the sink. I think there are some cleaning gloves if you want to use those.”

Sadie wiped tears from her eyes. “Nah, I’ve seen far worse. One tenant has a dog who likes to chew on doors, another has a couple of cats that use every available surface as their personal scratching posts. Your neighbor across the way had a sick puppy who ate something he shouldn’t have and retched all the way down the stairs,” Sadie laughed. “This is easily containable, and she wouldn’t have done it if we’d taken her out last night.”

“In our defense, she was sleeping. I didn’t want to disturb her,” Emma pouted. “Lesson learned.”

Sadie had wiped down the kitchen floor with a pet-safe cleaning solution and returned with wet and dry paper towels. She wiped everything down, dried Emma's foot, and picked up Coco's poop, tossing everything in one of the shopping bags from the pet store and tying it closed. "We can drop this off as we take her outside."

"Do you think she still needs to go?" Emma knelt to scoop up Coco.

Sadie raised a brow. "Do you really want to take that chance?"

"You're right, let's go."

They made their way outside, tossing the trash along the way, Coco excitedly bounding from plant to plant before circling a patch of dirt to do her business. Sadie and Emma leaned against one of the patio tables, giving Coco the full length of leash to explore. Sadie set down her phone and Emma's keys as she peered up at the crisp blue sky, thin clouds slowly traversing far above.

"You didn't tell me how you slept, by the way," Emma bumped Sadie with her shoulder.

"I slept well. I woke up to you snoring," Sadie teased, wrapping her arm around Emma's waist.

"I don't snore." Sadie stared at her with a deadpan expression until she pursed her lips. "Well, Zora said I snored before, but it's only when I'm really tired. And plus the pollen count has gotten higher..."

"Right," Sadie shook her head slightly, her lips twitching with amusement.

Emma swept her braids up into a ponytail and tied them with a band around her wrist.

"Listen, I just want to make sure we're good."

“What do you mean?” Sadie dropped her arm onto the table and turned to look at Emma.

A twinge of nervousness ran through her. “I don’t know... maybe the intrusive thoughts are winning, but am I putting a burden on you to try to be ‘the one?’ Just because I’m ready, I don’t want you to think—”

“The intrusive thoughts are definitely winning, babe.”

Babe. Emma’s heart pounded until she couldn’t hear her thoughts anymore. “You don’t feel any pressure or think I’m too extra?”

Sadie squeezed Emma’s shoulder. “Em, I knew that first day when you arrived all bubbly and bright that you were going to turn my world upside down. I tried to fight it, but you have a way of getting past all of my defenses, which scared me at first.

“I think I had been closed off for so long that I had a really hard time letting my guard down. But I want to try. I don’t want to chance losing you when everything in me tells me I’d regret that if it happened.” Sadie grabbed Emma’s waist and pulled her closer, pressing her lips against Emma’s softly. “Okay?”

Emma hummed, relief washing over her. “Okay,” she nodded. “Thank you.” Coco climbed up into a patio chair, standing on her hind legs and reaching with her front paws for access to the table.

“Of course. You promised to communicate, and I promise to do the same.”

Emma hooked an arm over Sadie’s shoulder, running her fingertips over the back of Sadie’s neck until she shivered. There was a tenderness in her eyes that stirred butterflies in Emma’s stomach. “Did you have any plans for today?”

“Well, after we take care of this situation, let’s go see the cherry blossoms,” Sadie nuzzled Emma’s neck. “While you were asleep, I checked and today is supposed to be peak bloom. We can bring Coco with us and make a day of it.”

“You really do know how to sweet talk me,” Emma grinned. “But I think we’re going to have to take a detour on our way over to the Tidal Basin.”

“Why’s that?”

“I need to call the vet. I think Coco just swallowed my keys.”

Sadie groaned, scooping up Coco and searching above and below the table. “Always the keys. You know what? It’s time to invest in smart locks for the building.”

“Good call, babe.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Six months later.

“I’m home!”

“Hey, we’re in here,” Sadie called from the bedroom.

They’d consolidated into Sadie’s downstairs apartment since it was bigger, and Coco had officially become theirs after her first two months with Emma—there was no way they could part with her, and they had a special adoption party in Zora’s backyard. Since Sadie worked from home, there’d been no need to bring Coco to the bookstore everyday, but she was a frequent visitor, especially on performance nights.

Emma kicked off her shoes and locked the front door before making her way past colorful paintings she’d invested in prior to Joy releasing her Exuberance exhibition. Further down the hall were Emma’s first wall-worthy attempts at paintings containing technicolor depictions of nature. She followed the sound of explosions coming from the television mounted across from Sadie’s king-sized bed. “What are y’all in here watching?”

Coco stood to her feet and wagged away, her eyes brightening at the sight of Emma as her body swayed from left to right.

“Hi sweet girl,” Emma booped Coco’s nose before pulling off her work clothes to change into something more comfy. “How was your day, love?” She picked up her clothes from the floor and dropped them into the hamper.

Sadie laid against the pillows on her side, her head propped up in her hand. “Pretty chill. I talked to Joy a little earlier. She’s scheduling her next show at the gallery.”

Emma opened the closet door wearing her bright green lacy bra and thong set from Savage Fenty. “Well that’s exciting! I can’t wait to see it in all of its exuberant glory,” she grinned at Sadie before accessing a chest of drawers inside the large walk-in. “I don’t think I’ve ever inspired someone’s art before.”

“No?” Sadie watched Emma thoughtfully, her expression riveted at Emma’s movements.

Emma grabbed a super soft loungewear set in olive green and dropped it on the bed and paused at the eye contact. “Nope. Why, what are you thinking right now?”

Sadie picked up Coco and helped her to the floor. “Coco, go relax!” Coco picked up a braided chew toy from the floor and headed to her cozy bed in the living room. Sadie looked back to her partner. “I’m no artist, but I’m feeling inspired.” She sat on her knees at the edge of the bed, reaching for Emma, her hands wandering down Emma’s back.

“Is that so?” Emma murmured, her lips brushing against Sadie’s as flutters cascaded from her chest. “Tell me about your inspiration.”

“It involves you getting naked right now. You’re my muse.” Sadie pulled Emma closer, nibbling at her bottom lip. “Here, let me help you.” Her hands at Emma’s back, Sadie unclasped the lacy bra, relieving her breasts from their underwire cage. Emma sighed contentedly as she reached for Sadie’s t-shirt with the faded image of Whitney Houston on the front. “My turn,” she whispered.

Sadie’s hands roamed Emma’s body as her last article of clothing was removed, exposing her rich ebony skin. She tensed as Emma’s lips pressed against her throat and trailed their way to her collarbone. Goosebumps raised on the path that Emma’s

tongue traced down her body, and Sadie shuddered as Emma nipped at her breasts.

Emma nudged Sadie onto her back with the pillows and headboard to one side of her body. Sadie scooted back to allow more space, and Emma dug quickly into their pleasure drawer, which had some new additions after Ms. Marion surprised them with a trip to an adult toy store. Zora was still scarred by the visit, having learned more than she bargained for about her grandmother, but Sadie and Emma had a ball.

Emma wrapped her fingers around a new wand massager and slid her hand up Sadie's thigh, Sadie's eyes falling shut as she sucked in a breath at the contact. As Emma's tongue ran the same route, Sadie's dark skin glistened in the warm light as her knees fell apart, a throaty moan escaped her lips. "Keep making that sound for me," Emma kissed Sadie's inner thighs, admiring the definition of her long legs, her toes curling with every light touch.

Emma hooked an arm under one of Sadie's thighs and split her apart with her thumb and forefinger. Emma dipped her head to circle Sadie's core, lapping at her, reveling in her sweetness. Sadie's head rolled back as her mouth fell open, her gasps motivated Emma to delve her tongue deeper.

"Yes," Sadie hissed, her back beginning to arch as she brought one of Emma's hands to her chest.

Emma palmed her breast as she suckled her clit, humming as she worked. Sadie's hips ground against Emma's mouth as she cried out, her body convulsing as she rode out her orgasm. Emma kissed her sensitive peak, drawing one last spasm from Sadie's body before straddling and kissing her love.

Sadie's arms wrapped around Emma's body as they savored each other. Emma lifted her upper half, arching her back as Sadie cupped her full breasts, rubbing her thumbs over the tightened buds. Emma moved one of her thighs between Sadie's and grabbed for the wand she'd brought to the bed. As she turned it on, Sadie watched her with

hooded eyes.

Emma dipped the wand between them, grazing its tip first against Sadie's apex before doing the same to herself. She bit her lip as she angled one side of the wand's tip at the seam of Sadie's pretty pussy, dipping her hips to allow the other side to split her folds. As she held the toy in place, the two ground against each other, hips rolling in a unified tango with a vibrating center. Emma turned up the intensity and they both gasped. "Fuck," she whined.

Sadie grasped Emma's hips, dictating the pace, both of them nearing climax. Sadie moaned, her chin rising toward the ceiling as her back arched. "I'm?—"

Her body erupted, her release causing her hips to buck against Emma's. The movement pressed the device further against her, Emma's mouth falling open as her eyes rolled back. She came hard, catapulting into the atmosphere as wave after wave crashed between them. They chased the ebbs and flows until they were both too sensitive to take any more, the toy finally removed and set aside.

Emma collapsed onto the bed next to Sadie. "That was an excellent purchase."

Sadie nodded.

After they caught their breath, Sadie peeled herself up from the bed. "Water?"

"Yes please," Emma crawled toward the head of the bed, burying her face in a pillow.

Sadie padded toward the kitchen, calling out to Emma after she opened the fridge. "Hey, Em, did Zora give you the ring box with their wedding bands already?"

Emma opened one eye. "Yeah, why?"

"Is it black?"

“Yeah...” She sat up slowly. “What’s going on?”

Sadie appeared in the doorway holding an empty ring box. Coco trailed in behind her, her butt wagging enthusiastically. “Did you leave it on the table?”

Emma stared at the box. Did I? “Oh no... Do you think—” She pointed at Coco.

Sadie nodded grimly. “She may have.”

“Fuck. Call the vet!”

THE END