







# Winnie Takes Paris (Love and Travels #2)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** The fabulous stylist, the absentminded professor, and a Parisian adventure...

Winnie

Someone once said, when life gets you down and you're feeling blue, brush yourself off and go to Paris!

Okay, maybe that was me.

Hey, I don't regret taking an oddball assignment to assist a British professor abroad. I could use a break from my life as an aspiring hair and style guru in LA. The only worrisome snag is that the professor is determined to do everything on his own.

Not acceptable. I'm here to help the impossibly smart geek with mismatched socks who just happens to be my best friend's boss.

No, I don't know nothing about history, but I'm nothing if not resourceful. What could go wrong?

Alistair

I've been called an absent-minded professor more than once. I don't mind at all. My work is important and living on a diet of biscuits and tea while delving into ancient civilizations doesn't seem so terrible. But Paris calls. And somehow, I have a new temporary assistant.

Winnie is a technicolor, whirlwind American with a wicked laugh and the subtlety of a steamroller. He's brash and ridiculous and...funny, warm, lovely, and—

Oh no. This can't be happening. I swore I'd never fall for anyone again.

Winnie can take Paris, but he can't take my heart.

Or can he?

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WINNIE

“P aris n’a pas été bati en un jour.” Translation: Paris wasn’t built in a day. —French proverb

A colorful avalanche of clothing spilled from the suitcase atop the fluffy fuchsia-and-tangerine duvet. Sweaters, caftans, berets, and whimsical scarves in rainbow hues jockeyed for space with velvet slippers, black-and-white wingtips, and gold glitter-bomb high-tops. There was little to no chance of the industrial-sized accessory kit fitting inside the oversized luggage, and the regal Himalayan eyeing the mess from her perch on the nearby desk knew it.

“Liza is judging you.”

The cat purred in agreement, languidly swooshing her tail.

I propped my hands on my hips and glanced at my friend lounging on the chaise in the corner. “I don’t think she’s the only one.”

Max sat up with a gasp, clutching at a strand of phantom pearls. His sun-streaked brown hair flopped strategically across his face, falling neatly along his high cheekbones. “Me? Judge? Never.”

I chuckled fondly.

If possible, Max was a bigger diva than me. And that was saying something. In his watermelon midriff tee, pink micro shorts, and a wrist full of beaded bracelets, he was quite fabulous. And probably a tad chilly, too. The weather had been glorious in LA lately, but it was cool tonight. There was a hint of autumn in the air.

Max claimed not to notice. He was a Minnesota transplant and an unapologetic sun worshiper. Less was more in his book...when it came to clothes, anyway. His dress shirts were a size too small, his pants were all capri length, and if he could get away with wearing his Jimmy Choo slides, he was a happy camper.

In his defense, the poor guy wore scrubs and OMG, Crocs for his day job as a dental hygienist. It only seemed right and fair that he celebrate the real Max under those baggy blue cotton garments and plastic white slip-ons.

God, I was going to miss him...and my spoiled feline friend, Liza. And my human friends, Deacon and Andre and Jace and Bjorn, and my sister, Jazz, and my niece and nephew. I'd definitely miss my salon sisters, Jax and Serena, too. Okay, fine...I was going to miss almost everyone, but I'd be home in six weeks and just thinking about the Halloween-themed welcome home parties I had to look forward to would be enough to keep my spirits up if I ever got homesick.

I sincerely doubted that would happen, though. I was Paris bound, baby! The city of lights, love, croissants, wine, the Eiffel Tower, and ding dang berets...

Winnie is coming for you, gay Par-ee!

Truthfully, fucking off to Paris was probably a terrible idea for a guy hoping to get ahead at work. And tapping into my savings account to pay for my plane ticket...also a bad idea. But screw it. I'd tried being sensible and responsible. It wasn't fun, and I hadn't reaped any rewards at the salon.

Nothing, nada, zilch.

I'd pasted a phony smile on when that beach-blond idiot who called everyone sugar got the promotion and the chair that was supposed to be mine. I'd worked my booty off and yes, I'd been disappointed. However, I'd sucked it up, dusted off my go-to happy grin and gotten back to it, razzle-dazzling the clientele at The Lounge.

I'd shampooed my heart out, swept the floors, mixed the formulas, handled basic cuts, poured the tea, and dished the dirt. Same as I'd done day in, day out...year after year. Guess what? I didn't get the next promotion either. I wasn't as bummed, because Marcus really was an exceptional stylist.

However, last month's diss had been a gut punch of epic proportion.

Get this...the new receptionist who'd been moonlighting at another salon was asked to join the team as a color expert, a.k.a. stylist. That was supposed to be my spot. My chair. I liked Kylie and I wanted to be happy for her, but I was oh, so sad for me. And let's get one thing straight—sad was not in my repertoire.

I didn't do sad.

Ever.

Sad was drab colors, gray skies, and tacky polyester shirts. It was unfortunate breath, bad sex, and running out of coffee on a Monday morning. Things I would never ever intentionally do or be part of if I could help it.

I was so unaccustomed to the emotion that I wasn't sure what was wrong with me until my best friend, Raine, FaceTimed me from England and said three dreaded, horrible words :

“Winnie, you’re blue.”

Ugh!

I’d sobbed like a baby, spilling my guts out with mascara streaking my cheeks while my bestie had comforted me from afar. Poor guy. I wouldn’t have wanted to deal with me in that state. I’d been a wreck.

In my mind, I’d been disrespected. The more I thought about my predicament, the more I realized it was never going to get better. Management didn’t want me to be anything other than a glorified shampoo person. I was the comedic relief, the fun-time gal, the bad boy with a broom who had the latest gossip and was quick with a compliment.

“Oh, stop! Boy, you look a-maze-ing!” Clap, clap, clap. “Where’s the red carpet? I’m having a moment.”

Dramatic? Maybe, but effusive praise was much appreciated by Hollywood’s who’s who clientele. Semi-famous actors, directors, and models asked for me by name. I was well liked, damn it.

But it wasn’t enough. It was the adult version of being the last kid picked in gym class. Been there, done that...no thanks. Thirty-five-year-old me owed it to the painfully skinny, awkward gay boy who’d eaten lunch alone far too many times in the fifth grade. I needed to regroup and reevaluate my goals.

I’d wanted to be a stylist to the stars, but perhaps the cosmos was suggesting there was something else out there for me. Another path, another purpose.

Like...what, though?

I'd vented to my friends over mango margaritas and more chips and salsa than anyone should indulge in. Max told me to hang in there, Deacon told me to switch salons, and my brother-in-law, Milo, who was one shady motherfucker, said he knew a guy who could shake up the owner. Wow .

Of course, I ignored Milo. Jail wasn't on my bucket list and sure, everyone claimed orange wasn't their color, but oh, honey...every shade of orange did me dirty, and I wasn't taking any chances. Besides, I liked the owner at The Lounge. If Lawrence didn't feel the same about me or my future at his salon, I had to accept it and make do, or...move on.

Raine had suggested that a visit to England might do me good. I'd regretfully informed him that an impromptu getaway wasn't in my budget. He'd sighed and dropped the topic.

But a week later, he'd had another idea. "Be me for a month in Paris."

"Excuse-ay moi ?"

"There's a series of lectures in Paris about ancient Egypt, and Professor Creighton is scheduled to speak. He wanted to go early to do some research. I planned to fly back and forth, but Graham just surprised me with a trip to Bali. I can find someone else at the museum to take my place or... you could do it!"

"Love it...except, I don't know anything about ancient Egypt," I'd reminded him.

Raine hadn't been bothered by the reality check. "Normally, that would be a concern, but your main job on this trip would be to make sure the professor gets to his train on time and that his socks match. You'd be a glorified companion. That's all."

"Paid escort to an old man? How did I get here so soon?" I'd lamented theatrically.



“Not that kind of escort, perv. And Professor C is only forty-four.”

“Oh.”

“The professor doesn’t like change, but I talk about you all the time and you met at our party, so he practically knows you already.”

“I don’t remember meeting a professor.”

“Oh, I thought I introduced you. Well, it doesn’t matter. He’s going to love you, and you’re going to love an all-expenses-paid trip to Paris!”

There was a generous stipend attached to the temporary position, too. Sweet deal.

But I’d still thought about the proposal long and hard. It wasn’t a matter of packing and catching the next flight. I had Liza to think of, and rent, and...a job. But Max’s cousin had agreed to sublet my apartment for a month, and feed my cat. And Lawrence had patted me on the back, congratulated me on seizing a fabulous opportunity, and said he looked forward to hearing about my adventures when I returned.

So...guess who was going to Paris? C’est moi !

Yep, I’d been memorizing useful phrases from Google Translate, and I was determined to be the best travel companion possible.

Deux cafés, si’il vous plait. Two coffees, please.

Où est la gare? Where is the train station?

Aide! Help!

Good start. However, I had no illusions that this would be a walk in the park. I'd never been to France, didn't know the language, knew nothing about ancient Egypt, and my people never had issues with mismatched socks. This would be a challenge. But if anyone needed a reset, it was me.

I petted Liza as I scanned my overflowing suitcase. "I suppose I could do a teensy bit of editing."

Max nodded his approval. "You can always buy something in Paris. And I do expect a trip treat. I'm hoping for a rhinestone-bejeweled Eiffel Tower shirt, please."

"You shall have it." I smiled affectionately. "I'm going to miss you, Maxy."

"I'll miss you too, honey. You're going to text us, aren't you? Liza will want updates. We want to hear all about the professor. I hope he's a hunk," Max said in a rush .

I snort-laughed. "I'm pretty sure he's a smarty-pants geek, but even if he was a dreamboat, I would never flirt with Raine's boss."

"Then you'll have to find a sexy Frenchman."

This was my cue to give a saucy reply of the "Oh, hell yes" variety, but I didn't have it in me. Raine was right. I was blue, and it wasn't a good look. However, I had high hopes that a change of scenery and a solid month of eating my weight in croissants would clear away the cloud hanging over my head.

I needed to reclaim my zhuzh, and something told me Paris was the best place to start.

London first.

I said my good-byes to sunny LA, hopped a late-night flight to Heathrow, and landed in a rainstorm in London the following day.

Gray was just as bad as blue, and I had a moment of regret, wondering what I was doing. But then Raine picked me up and whisked me to the posh Grosvenor Square house he shared with his handsome husband and their black Lab, Linus, and I remembered just how lucky I was to have friends who felt like family.

Raine Edwards-Horsham was my brother from another mother. A vertically challenged, lighter-skinned version of me with a mop of brown hair and questionable fashion sense. I said that with love, of course.

We'd met at San Francisco State when he'd friend-stalked me in Anthro 101 seventeen years ago. I hadn't thought I'd have anything in common with an eager twink from a teeny town in New Mexico, but Raine's sunny disposition and relentless energy won me over. Like me, he was an optimist who wanted to believe the best in people.

I used to think I had street smarts and Raine had common sense, but we'd gotten into a few binds that would suggest otherwise.

Like the time I'd gotten us lost on a sketchy street in East LA, and Raine had interrupted a drug deal to ask for directions. Or the time I'd volunteered to bring a dish to a work party and had misread the ingredients for a stuffed-pepper recipe. I'd used a super-spicy habanero with a kick that had given the runs to everyone who'd partaken. As in there'd been a hefty line around the corner with some pale, miserable-looking stylists. Bad, I know...but Raine had put condensed milk in an eggnog recipe, so it was probably most accurate to say we were both mini disasters.

Past tense. Unlike me, my best friend had his act together now.

Raine had married a great guy with a dreamy accent who worshiped the ground he walked upon. They had a town house in London, a fancy estate in Cornwall, and traveled all over the world. I loved hearing about Raine's life in the UK. This was home for him now, and I was simultaneously ecstatic for him and brokenhearted for myself. Our clubbing days in the Castro were long gone. Our margarita drag brunches in WeHo were reserved for his occasional trips to LA. Life had changed.

For Raine, anyway.

I needed a taste of whatever magic elixir he'd stumbled upon. Minus a geographic move that would require learning how to drive on the wrong side of the road, navigate public transportation on the daily, and memorize new money. But damn, this was nice.

I curled my long legs onto the fluffy sofa and sipped sauvignon blanc. My cheeks were warm from the alcohol and the roaring fire in the huge stone fireplace. And I had my best friend all to myself. Graham was away on business, and though I absolutely adored him, I was selfishly happy to catch up with Raine without having to explain who we were talking about or translate what Graham jokingly referred to as our colorful interpretation of the English language.

We covered important topics, like Max's crush on the married dentist in his office, Deacon's nipple piercing mishap, and which version of Love Island was truly the best. We discussed the new play Graham and he had seen last week, an exhibit they'd loved at the Tate, and their garden at Deverley.

In a perfect world, I could have stayed there, soaking up all the yummy juju without moving a muscle. But...I was here on assignment.

"Tell me all about Dr. Clayton, honey."

“Professor Creighton,” Raine corrected. “He’s a brilliant, lovely man.”

I raised a brow at my American friend’s very British description of his boss. “Does that mean he’s hot?”

Raine snorted. “No, it means he’s a super smart, nice guy.”

“But...”

“No buts.” He took a sip of wine, then set his glass next to a stack of fancy books about English architecture on the coffee table. “You’ll like him. He’s sweet and—okay, there is one thing.”

“Go on.”

“He’s very...forgetful, like a real absentminded professor. It’s not a problem or anything.” Raine frowned. “At least, I don’t think it’s a problem. I haven’t been to a conference with him in a while. The last one was in Amsterdam. We got separated by a group of cyclists for a hot second. I spotted him on a bridge and poof ...he was gone. He’s terrible about texting or answering his cell, so I was in full panic mode. Twenty minutes later, I found him in the red-light district checking out sex toys as if nothing had happened.”

I hooted with laughter. “Yeah, I bet he staged a getaway so he could do some private shopping. Was he looking for a plug for his male lover or edible undies for a lady friend?”

Raine rolled his eyes. “He’s very private. But I’m pretty sure he’s single and married to his work. I’ve thought about setting him up, but I have no idea about his sexual orientation. Besides, his perfect match would be an Egyptologist or an expert on Greco-Roman studies. Unfortunately, I don’t know anyone who’d fit the bill, and he

doesn't really talk about anything else."

I wrinkled my nose. "What am I supposed to talk about with him?"

"Oh, please. You can talk to anyone."

True. But a little insight would go a long way.

"You've worked for him for a couple of years now. You must know something personal about the professor."

"Sure. He takes his tea with a dollop of milk and a teaspoon of sugar, and he loves biscuits...uh, cookies," he translated with a chuckle, no doubt catching my confused expression. "Especially Jammie Dodgers. He's a bit reserved, but it's not as if you have to become best friends. Your job is to make sure Professor C gets to the conference center on time and?—"

"To make sure his socks match," I supplied.

Raine hit me with a no-BS stare. "I cannot stress how important that is. Wardrobe choices might not matter in a library or museum, but there will be photographers and videographers at these events."

I perked up. "So what I'm hearing is...the professor needs a stylist."

"Not a professional stylist, Win. More of a helpful nudge with his color palette."

"Got it. Don't you worry about a thing! I've got you covered. "

He smiled. "I know. I'll introduce you properly at the museum tomorrow, and you'll meet up the following day to catch the train to Paris. Eeps ! Oh, Win, you're going to

love Paris! Did I tell you about the time...”

I tuned my friend out. The wine had gone to my head, and my brain was swimming with new ideas.

See, it occurred to me that I hadn’t been thinking about this venture the right way. I could be the professor’s unofficial stylist and sharpen my skills in the most fashionable city in the world.

Maybe this was fate. Maybe being overlooked at the salon time after time was a blessing in disguise. Maybe the universe was waiting for me to lose my ever-loving mind, throw in my broom, and step away from the shampoo station.

I could learn a lot in Paris. I’d take a million photos, gather fabric samples, study hair styles, and go home with a whole new edge to my portfolio. When I got back to LA, I could take private clients...Hollywood notables, rock stars, techies with lots of money and no fashion sense. I could reinvent myself. Yes, this could be very good indeed.

I melted into the marshmallow cushions, sipping wine and humming along to Raine’s travel plans as a wave of gratitude washed over me. This wasn’t a hiatus from real life. This was an opportunity to become a better me, and I intended to seize it.

The following day, I wasn’t so sure.

My head hurt from one too many glasses of wine, the sky was pissing rain, and the Tube was a crowded maze of humanity with blank faces and dripping umbrellas. By the time we exited the station at Russell Square and walked to the British Museum, I looked like a drowned rat.

Confession: I was a faux museum gay. I mean, guy. You could count on my best

behavior for one hour before I lost interest and made my way to the gift shop or better yet, the cafeteria for a pastry and bottle of screw-top Chardonnay.

The funny thing was that I loved art and I had mad respect for painters, sculptors, and visionaries. I just didn't enjoy aimlessly wandering through hallowed halls, whispering and pointing as if I understood the significance of a Greek statue of a muscular man with a gorgeous derriere and a tiny willy.

But I had to admit, the British Museum had that wow factor. Behind the stately stone exterior with its formal columns and grand entry was a modern glass dome that flooded the lobby with natural light...even on a gray day.

I gaped in awe at the crisscross glass ceiling above us. "This is gorgeous."

"It's called The Great Court. It was built in 2001, and that alcove in the middle is called The Reading Room. It's an archive now and a study space." Raine tugged my raincoat meaningfully. "This way."

He pulled a badge from his pocket and handed it over to a serious-looking man standing sentry at a private entrance. The guard smiled warmly at Raine, treated me to a brief once-over, and stepped aside.

We took an elevator to a lower level and emerged in a dimly lit beige-and-white corridor. Everything was dull and monotone, from the chipped tiled flooring to the drab paint on the walls. Glum city.

Raine picked up the pace, the way some weirdos do when they're excited to be at work. I lengthened my stride to match Raine's until he stopped at the end of the hall in front of a door with a discreet sign labeled, "Antiquities Department, Creighton."

Setting a finger to his lips, he unlocked the door and motioned for me to enter a



cavernous room with high ceilings and a tile floor lit by a small library-style lamp that cast a wide yellow-y circle on the table but did nothing to illuminate the space. Neither did the large windows covered with blackout shades.

I had two minutes, tops, before I suffocated.

“Hello, Raine. Was I expecting you today?” The deep timbre of a masculine voice rumbled through me, rooting me in place.

A second later, I nearly jumped out of my skin. A large man with wild dark hair and thick glasses cleared his throat and meandered to the table littered with...stuff. I couldn't make out his features or tell what had his attention in the dim lighting, but damn, I was suddenly very curious.

“Yes, Professor C. I wanted to introduce you to my very best friend, Winnie Rodriguez. He's going to be traveling with you to Paris tomorrow. I thought it would be better to meet here than at the train station for the first time.” Raine tapped my arm. “Winnie, this is Professor Alistair Creighton. Professor C, this is Win.”

I put on my friendliest smile and stepped forward with my hand outstretched. “Enchanté, monsieur .”

The professor moved out of the shadows, blinking at me like an owl, and geez Louise...Alistair Creighton was hot.

He was a bear of a man, approximately my height but thicker all over with a lightly stubbled jaw, full lips, a straight nose, and bushy eyebrows. I would have done a double take on the street, and that wasn't just a commentary on his beefcake appeal. The guy buzzed with the kind of energy associated with passionate people driven by an internal fire.

In his case, I supposed it was all things Ancient Egypt.

I studied the professor's floppy brown hair, broad shoulders, and sexy forearms visible where he'd pushed up the sleeves of his oversized, nondescript sweater. His khakis were a size too big, and the tips of his shoes were hopelessly scuffed as if he'd dragged them on the floor. But those minor fashion faux pas suited the academic vibe and did nothing to detract from his obvious good looks.

His rapid-fire speech in French pulled me back to reality.

“ Bonjour. C'est un plaisir de vous rencontrer . Je n'ai pas ?—”

“Ohh, no, no. I don't speak French. Not really. I've been practicing a few phrases and ‘ enchanté ’ is one of them,” I admitted with a laugh. “I can also order us croissants, beignets, coffee, and wine. We're all set, honey.”

The professor's deep frown and blank stare gave me the distinct impression that he hadn't understood a word I'd said. In English.

“Very well. Good to meet you,” Professor Creighton replied absently before addressing my friend. “Raine, you must see this. I'm fairly certain it's Ammit. Not a great rendering, mind, but if you look closely, you can see the crocodile head. There's evidence of hieroglyphics at the base. Rather badly faded. See here.”

Raine leaned in to examine the rock—yes, it was a fucking rock—and oohed in appreciation. “Incredible.”

I approached the table, watching their interaction with amused fascination. I'd always known Raine was a geek, but I rarely got to see it in action. It was cute. However, I had absolutely nothing to add to the conversation.

While they spoke animatedly about their rock, I strolled the perimeter of the dark room, pausing to read titles of the leather-bound books on the shelves. Gods and Pharaohs, The Rise and Fall of the Empire, Ramses II, Rituals and Beliefs. I wondered if the professor had read all of them, and my eyes widened a moment later.

Holy shit. He'd written some of these books.

Okay, it was official. I hadn't felt this out of place since I'd shown up to class in leg warmers and neon-green sunglasses in my single-handed attempt to bring back the eighties at Oakwood Elementary. I'd failed miserably, and had even gotten uninvited to Misty Martinez's co-ed birthday party.

Side rant: That tiny episode had marked the first time I'd been actively cognizant of being shunned for being...me. See, Misty had regretfully informed me that her parents weren't comfortable with my kind, and I'd had no idea what that meant. What was my kind? How was I different? I liked bright colors and fun prints. Why was that bad?

No doubt it had happened a gazillion times in little ways before that day, and I'd just been blissfully unaware. Now I knew, and I'd immediately realized there was nothing I could do to change their views without becoming one of them, and that wasn't going to happen.

I was a nonconformist to my very marrow. I didn't know how to fit in. If the dress code was black, you bet I added some sparkle. If the occasion called for a song or a dance, I wanted a diva anthem and I wanted to choreograph that bit of genius myself.

Was I talented? No. Was I gifted? Not particularly. But I'd learned a long time ago that being "different" was my superpower.

And I'd learned to recognize that difference in others. Like the professor.

On paper, we had nothing in common but Raine. But I suspected that Professor Creighton lacked the conformity gene too.

The clues were all over the room. Not only was it packed with books, artifacts, drawings, and maps of old-time civilizations, it was littered with the remnants of days' worth of to-go meals, empty coffee cups on the file cabinets, jackets, sweaters, and umbrellas. And get this—there was a cot in the corner with a blanket and pillow. This dude loved his job so much that he fucking lived here !

Christ, this was bad.

Alistair Creighton was not makeover material. He was a dedicated geek. A.k.a, the nerd version of my proud rainbow gladiator. We were two sides of the same coin...with currency that was only valid in specific circles. I couldn't Eliza Doolittle him. I couldn't do anything...except what I was being paid to do—escort a British brainiac who favored UPS shades of brown to Paris. Oh, joy.

Note to self: read the fine print, honey.

### ALISTAIR

What a peculiar creature.

I spotted Winnie on the pavement outside of St. Pancras Station, jostling the blue bag on his shoulder as he raced toward me, pulling two large suitcases behind him. A lock of raven hair fell over his forehead, partially covering his hazel eyes, which appeared to have been painted a cobalt hue that complemented his long emerald coat. I dare say, he resembled a beautiful peacock. Truly lovely to behold. And very colorful.

Truth be told, I was rather in awe of Winnie Rodriguez. I'd never met anyone quite like him. Of course, I rarely strayed far from work. If I was in London, I was at the museum. If I was in Oxford, I was at the university. A trip to Paris was quite extraordinary. Brilliant city and all, but I didn't travel outside the UK unless it was important.

And this conference was important. There was much to discuss between the recent archeological dig in Saqqara, new developments in digitized aerial photography, and a ton of artifacts found in the necropolis on the Nile.

I wouldn't miss it for the world. As a leading expert in Egyptology, I'd been asked to speak at the weeklong event. I knew myself well, though. Shorter trips cost valuable research time...more so than longer ones. It was a matter of efficiency. I concentrated better if I stayed in one location for a month.

And Paris was always a good idea. Or so I'd heard.

I'd taken a six-month sabbatical from the university to finish the book I'd promised my agent for the Oxford Press, but I rarely took time away from the British Museum. It was my main office, and there were far too many exciting things happening. Like the fresh new batch of religious artifacts I'd received from my colleague in Egypt on Tuesday.

My team could handle preliminary studies, and Raine would take over in the lab when he returned from his trip, and— Oh, dear. That's ri g ht . Raine wasn't coming with me to Paris.

Winnie Rodriguez was taking his place.

Now I'd admit that I wasn't the most socially aware individual on the planet, but based on our one formal meeting, I had a few doubts about my new assistant.

You see, Winnie was very...distracting.

"I don't think it will work, Raine," I'd lamented via a last-ditch phone call after yesterday's meeting.

Raine had sounded genuinely confused. "Why not?"

Fair question. I'd erroneously assumed Winnie would be a carbon copy of Raine, and he most definitely was not. Unfortunately, that wasn't a good reason.

Winnie had been charming and friendly, he'd asked about my research and had claimed to be excited to assist me in France. I had no reason to complain, other than...my pulse had accelerated at an alarming rate the moment he'd stepped into the room.

I'd thought it was a mild reaction to his cologne until I'd gotten my first close-up look at the most beautiful man I'd ever laid eyes on. Technically, I'd seen Winnie from afar at Raine's soiree a couple of years ago, but I hadn't formally met him. He'd been surrounded by friends—a social butterfly to my reluctant hermit. I hadn't been brave enough to introduce myself. And there'd been no point since we'd never cross paths again.

Now here he was.

Winnie was truly...stunning—tall and willowy, colorful and confident. He exuded that unintentionally intimidating air of someone who was supremely self-aware. And my God, he wore eyeliner with the panache of an ancient Egyptian aristocrat.

“He's not academically minded,” I'd stated after a long pause.

“That shouldn't matter on this trip. Think of Winnie as a companion who can organize your calendar for you.”

“I don't know...”

“Give him a chance, Professor,” Raine had cajoled. “Winnie will take good care of you. I promise.”

There wasn't much else I could say without sounding mental.

I had no one to blame but myself. Because I hadn't paid attention to Raine's plans, I was stuck with a technicolor whirling dervish who gave me a mild case of tachycardia.

“He-lloo! There you are! I'm so sorry. I went to the wrong train station.” Winnie gestured wildly between King's Cross on the other side of the road to St. Pancras

behind us. “I’ve been standing in front of the platform departure sign, waiting and waiting. Raine dropped me off and said, ‘Go that way,’ but I chose the wrong way, and oh sweet baby Jesus, if stress burned calories, I’d be a supermodel. Not to worry, I’m here and ready to get this party started. Shall we?”

I adjusted my spectacles, attempting a calming smile as Winnie fanned his face, panting like a fish out of water. “There’s no reason to panic. Our train leaves at half three. ”

Winnie frowned, thrusting his rainbow-bejeweled phone toward me. “This says fifteen thirty. That’s two thirty.”

“No, it’s half three. Or three thirty p.m., if you’d like.” I checked my watch. “We have plenty of time to check in and have a spot of tea. Follow me.”

“Wait up. I’m supposed to be in charge of travel stuff. I have our tickets and?—”

“I have an e-ticket on my mobile. You can be in charge of the tea.”

“I can do that,” Winnie grinned, turning his two suitcases back-to-back and securing his long fingers around both handles before reaching for mine.

“What are you doing?”

“Taking your suitcase. An assistant must assist,” he singsonged, turning to the entrance.

Two steps in, Winnie jolted to an abrupt stop, nearly impaling himself on the spires of luggage handles.

“Let me?—”



“No, no. I’ve got this.” He waved me off, but I certainly wasn’t going to let him wheel three large suitcases and a carry-on alone. That was madness.

“I insist.” I grabbed the nearest handle, gave a sharp tug, and accidentally dislodged the bag from Winnie’s shoulder.

It slipped down his arm and toppled to the ground, spilling half the contents. A water bottle rolled toward the curb along with hand sanitizer, an eye mask, and a first-aid kit.

Winnie gasped in horror and hurried off to rescue the runaway water while I dealt with the items at my feet. Including a travel-sized container of hand cream and lube and...a massive pink silicone phallus.

“Maybe we should carry our own—oh! Roger escaped. Naughty, naughty.” Winnie plucked the dildo out of my hand and made a production of dusting it off, winking at a curious businessman passing by. “I think that’s everything. Let’s get the show on the road, honey.”

And with that, he was gone, breezing away as if it were perfectly normal to drop a sex toy at an international train station in broad daylight. I stared after him for a beat with my mouth wide open, then licked my dry lips, straightened my jacket, and headed inside, where Winnie was casually waiting for me at the end of the general ticketing queue.

I motioned at the first-class signage. He did that single-raised-brow trick again and wordlessly wheeled his hefty suitcases to join me. The queue was much shorter here, but the usual security hassles applied, with slow-moving passengers and brusque agents.

I was painfully aware of Winnie as I shuffled ahead of him, passport in hand.

“You are traveling alone?” the border agent asked.

“No, I?—”

“We’re together!” Winnie popped up at my side, fussing with the collar on his peacock ensemble. “Do me a favor and make the ink mark super dark for me, please. I want everyone to know I’ve been to France.”

The older man’s lips twisted in amusement as he stamped our passports. “Like this?”

“Yes, perfect. I mean... oui, oui !” Winnie grinned. “ Bon-gher, miss-ure .”

“Safe travels.”

I stepped aside to give Winnie room to maneuver around me. The agent caught my eye and inclined his chin in what seemed like...admiration by association. Or a nonverbal, “Your boyfriend is lovely.”

“He’s not my—we’re not—” Oh, bloody hell.

I cleared my throat and speed-walked to catch up with Winnie .

I pushed the button for the lift to the second-floor first-class lounge. It was usually quieter upstairs with ample seating. I gratefully commandeered two comfortable leather chairs and sank into the one closest to the window.

Winnie insisted on getting drinks and returned a few minutes later with tea for me and a glass of champagne for himself.

“I feel like I just ran a marathon.” He scooted to the edge of his seat and leaned toward me, raising his glass in a toast. “To Paris!”

I tapped my cup to his flute awkwardly. “To Paris.”

Winnie watched me cautiously. “Did I get your tea right? Raine said you like a smidge of milk and sugar.”

“Uh, yes...brilliant. Thank you.”

He grinned. “You’re welcome. What should we do now?”

“Wait for the train,” I replied evenly.

Winnie threw his head back and laughed, drawing a few curious glances our way. The lounge wasn’t exactly a library, but there was an unspoken acknowledgment that this was a quiet zone.

“Got that. I meant, what about work? I’m your assistant. If you need me to do anything, just say the word and I’m there.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your diligence, but there’s no need. Enjoy your champagne,” I said in a tone that clearly marked the end of the conversation.

Winnie didn’t take the hint. “Do you like champagne?”

“No, I don’t.”

He flattened his hand over his heart. “Why not? Champagne is the elixir of the gods, sunshine in a flute, bubbles for the soul.”

I shrugged. “I’m afraid I don’t care for bubbles at all. I don’t want to drink them, anyway.”

“ Mm , you’re missing out. I would bathe in champagne bubbles if I could.” He hummed indulgently.

“That sounds...sticky.”

Winnie’s lips twitched. “You’re right. It also sounds like a waste of a good thing, and I wouldn’t sacrifice a single sip of this stuff.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond or if I was supposed to, but this was probably a good time to remind Winnie that I didn’t need him to entertain me or vice versa. Or perhaps this was an opportunity to ask him a few questions and be done with prerequisite niceties.

What sort of questions, though? I had no clue. This was the sort of thing Raine usually handled for me.

I set my cup on the side table, pulled my phone from my pocket, and typed, Questions for a new acquaintance.

Google suggested the following: Number one, ask personal information—likes, dislikes, favorite color, hobbies. Not a chance. In my admittedly limited experience, that line of inquiry invited reciprocity, and there was no point in pretending we shared any common interests.

Number two, comment on something pleasant, such as the weather. I glanced out the rain-streaked window and quickly abandoned that suggestion. Too dire.

Number three, pay a compliment. That seemed like a safe option. Winnie was very...winsome. He had beautiful olive skin, perfectly coiffed hair, a flair for fashion, and?—

“You have lovely eyes,” I blurted.

Winnie froze midsip, quirking his head as he slowly lowered his glass. “Are you flirting with me, Professor?”

“I—no! No, I...no,” I sputtered, wrinkling my nose, licking my lips, and blinking in rapid succession. “That was a statement, not a flirtation. I don’t do flirtations, so you’re quite safe there.”

“Am I? ”

He was teasing. The spark in his eyes held pure mischief, but I didn’t know the rules of engagement at all. Was I supposed to say something clever in return? Possibly, probably. Witty banter wasn’t my strong suit, so I went with the truth instead.

“I couldn’t help noticing that you’re wearing makeup and...you look quite smart.”

His megawatt grin hit me like a bolt of lightning. “I do? How so? I’ve never been told my application of Chanel Stylo Yeux in espresso gave collegiate vibes.”

“Uh, no. I didn’t mean smart in that sense. That is to say, I’m sure you’re very intelligent, but I meant that you look...nice.”

His smile didn’t waver. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Well done, old chap. Now, leave it alone. Unfortunately, I couldn’t shut my gob. This was bad...very bad. “Ancient Egyptian men wore cosmetics, and depending on their rank and social class, they wore a lot of it. The kohl liner they used had practical purposes, too. It shielded one from the sun’s rays and repelled insects. They used animal fats and oils to create moisturizers, shampoos, and even to prevent baldness. Interesting, isn’t it? They’d rub fat from a snake or

a?—”

“Okay.” Winnie held his hand up. “That’s a lot of information.”

“That’s hardly the tip of the iceberg,” I assured him.

“I bet.” He gestured to the corner of his eye. “I made a last-minute trip to Sephora for this stuff. Much easier than wrangling a snake.”

“Sephora, derived from the Greek sephos, or beauty.”

Oh, bloody blooming bollocks. What is wrong with me?

Winnie eyed me warily. “Are you all right? You seem...nervous.”

I’d been afraid of this. I hadn’t actually thought it would be this bad, but in my gut I’d known I couldn’t function normally around someone like Winnie. I hadn’t realized I’d turn into a human encyclopedia, though.

“I am,” I admitted. “I’m very nervous. I’m—it’s not...I’m?—”

“You don’t like trains?” he guessed.

Incorrect. Trains were by far my favorite mode of transportation.

“I hate them,” I lied. “I get fidgety, spout nonsense, and my palms go clammy. Never mind me. I’ll be fine.”

“Of course you’ll be fine. You’re with me, and you know what? I’m a master at deflection. The trick is to change the subject inside your brain.”

I furrowed my brow. “What does that mean?”

“Under every heavy thought is a light and fluffy bloop. You need to access the bloop and hang on to it till the heavy stuff moves on.”

“The bloop?” I repeated.

“Yes, something whimsical. Here’s an example.” Winnie shifted to face me. “This morning, I almost lost my ever-lovin’ mind when I couldn’t find my French adapter. I’ve had a month from H-E-double-hockey-sticks, and it was kind of the last straw. I’d ordered the adapter last week, put it directly in my suitcase so I wouldn’t lose it and poof ! Just like that, it was gone. It was a minor calamity, and I was in danger of spiraling. But I closed my eyes, cleared my thoughts, and dusted the drama aside. And do you know the first thing that popped into my mind?”

“Uh...I really have no idea.”

“Brie cheese.” He smiled, bright and bold.

I gave him the blank stare he deserved. “Brie cheese.”

“Yep! My subconscious reminded me about all the amazing things I want to see and do and eat in Paris. I’m going to positively gorge on French cheese, French baguettes, and French wine, honey. I see myself wearing a black-and-white striped shirt and a beret on a blanket near the Eiffel Tower, chowing down in style. Just thinking about it calmed me. And guess who found his adapter a minute later?”

“You?”

Winnie slapped my knee. “That’s right! So...close your eyes. Go on and find your bloop.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I don’t think that will work for me.”

“Just try it. One time,” he insisted. “Close your eyes for me. Are they closed?”

I sighed heavily.

Playing along seemed easier than arguing. “Yes.”

“Good. Now clear the slate like you’re wiping a chalkboard at the end of the day, and say the first thing that pops in your head.”

“Penis.”

My eyes shot open, my face ablaze as I stuttered and stammered an awkward apology. I was too caught up in my state of mortification to register that my assistant had keeled forward, his shoulders shaking.

Winnie whooped with glee. “Oh, Professor. I like you!”

“I—that’s not what I—” I sucked in a breath of air as I reached for my tea. If nothing else, I could hide my face in my cup.

“Oh, please don’t tell me you were kidding. Dick is always on my mind too.” He gave a mischievous wink and continued. “But I promised Raine I’d be on my best behavior. I don’t want to shock you with the unedited version of yours truly before we leave Scotland.”

“England,” I corrected.

“Oh, that’s what I meant.” Winnie pursed his cherry-tinted lips and whispered, “Now tell me where your penis came from. ”



“My—I—” I looked down at my crotch on cue.

Winnie was now positively overcome with hilarity, howling with laughter like a demented hyena.

Much to my horror, curious glances drifted our way.

This was not going to work. Not at all. I liked Winnie, but he was more than I could handle. Too loud, too enthusiastic, too charming, too pretty, too...everything.

“You’re funny.” Winnie deserted his seat, pushing aside his luggage to slide into the leather chair next to mine. “However, I have a feeling you weren’t talking about your own johnson.”

I opened my mouth and shut it immediately. “If you must know, I was referring to the pink...toy you dropped earlier. Not that I was actively thinking about it, but it isn’t something one sees popping out of bags every day.”

“That was embarrassing,” he said, sounding the very opposite of embarrassed. “I didn’t repack very well after my adapter fiasco this morning, and the cock got out of the bag, as they say. I apologize. I promise you won’t see Roger again.”

“It’s no bother. It was just a surprise...that’s all.”

Winnie snickered. “For me too.”

A blessed quiet fell between us, and I was more than happy to let it linger for as long as possible. Which wasn’t long enough. Inexplicably, my mouth opened and?—

“Roger?”

“Roger.”

“Is Roger named for your boyfriend?” I asked, immediately cringing. “Sorry, don’t answer. That was too personal.”

“Oh, hush, you. Get personal. I don’t mind,” he chided, crossing his legs as he settled into the leather upholstery. “Roger the dynamic dildo is a gift from a former beau who looked like Roger Moore’s James Bond. Hunk-y! Human Roger ended up being a total prick, but nice eye candy while he lasted. Honestly, if I hadn’t named my toy after him, I wouldn’t have remembered Roger at all. He was one of those obnoxiously fit gym rats who couldn’t pass a mirror without checking his muscles.”

I squelched the impulse to share the ancient Greek mythology about the beautiful man who fell in love with his reflection and mourned being kept apart from his “love.” It was a fascinating tale, but not everyone was interested in folklore and past civilizations. Their loss.

“Narcissus,” I mumbled...because I couldn’t say nothing at all.

Winnie brightened. “Exactly. I love that story.”

“You know it?”

“Sure, I took a class on mythology at San Francisco State as an elective. It ended up being one of my faves. Zeus and Hera and all those egotistical gods and goddesses sitting on their mountain interfering with the masses below. So rude. Of course, I’d have given my left nut to be one of them. How fun would it be to smite your foes?”

“Yes, I can see the appeal.”

“Right? But I’m stuck in a mortal body, so one must make do, trading scathing

memes with your coworkers or better yet, commiserating with your besties over margaritas.”

I wrinkled my nose in confusion and pushed at my glasses. “Right.”

“Thankfully, I know self-care and self-absorption are two different things. Roger the ex didn’t get it, but where I come from, he’s not unique.”

“Where are you from?” I inquired, curious in spite of myself.

“Oakland originally, but I’ve lived in LA—West Hollywood specifically—for oh...thirteen years now, give or take. Have you ever been to LA?”

“I have not. ”

Winnie gave an exaggerated gasp. “Really? I would have thought you’d been all over the world.”

“Yes, but for work primarily—to attend conferences or to occasionally give speeches,” I replied.

“About ancient Egyptians.”

“As well as ancient Greek and Roman civilizations.”

“Raine told me you’re an expert in your field.”

“I—well, yes, I suppose I am,” I agreed with a slight shrug.

“Don’t be shy, Professor.”

“Very well...I’m an expert in ancient studies,” I conceded. “It’s been my focus for over twenty-five years.”

Winnie gaped in awe. “That’s incredible, but I gotta ask...why? Why Egypt? Why Greece? What makes cultures that have been gone for thousands of years interesting? That’s a sincere question because I’m low-key jelly.”

“Jelly?”

“Jealous,” he translated.

I furrowed my brow in confusion. “Do you harbor a secret proclivity for history or?—”

“Ew! No.” He covered my hand and squeezed it, igniting a flurry of butterflies in my stomach. “Don’t be offended. I love old myths, but I’m more of an expert in modern studies. I can tell you anything you want to know about modern music, fashion, entertainment, and who’s who and what’s what on social media. My high school algebra teacher told me I was pop culturally precocious after he failed my ass in algebra. I don’t like numbers, but I like people. Well...most people.”

“I see.”

I didn’t. I didn’t see anything at all, but I was enchanted nonetheless.

Winnie was enigmatically captivating. Every word he spoke should have erected an impenetrable barrier between us, yet somehow, I was more interested in him than ever. Simply put, I was a proverbial moth drawn to a brilliant, rather eccentric flame.

I was a product of modern times by birth only. I used technology to advance my knowledge of the past...not for the sake of entertainment. That made Winnie my

reverse doppelganger. A person with whom I didn't have a single thing in common. My extreme opposite, my paradoxical counter.

Now, that wasn't a surprise. I was reserved, Winnie was not. I was quiet, Winnie was not. I was committed to my studies, while Winnie was seemingly "figuring himself out." Neither of us would have ever chosen to share a cup of tea, let alone spend a month traveling together, and yet...here we were.

"So what's with old Egypt? Why is it special?" Winnie prodded, pulling me from my reverie. "What made you curious about it?"

I furrowed my brow. "Well, if you must know..."

"I must," he gushed in a campy tone, propping a hand under his opposite elbow and tracing his jawline with a delicate brush of his forefinger.

"My nan gave me an illustrated book about Antony and Cleopatra when I was nine years old, and I've been hooked ever since."

Winnie smacked my shoulder. "You closet romantic, you! Same here. Nothing in the closet about me, though. Hell-o!"

"No, I'm not a romantic." I snorted derisively. "But their story is fascinating because it straddles Rome at its most powerful and Egypt at its decline. I found myself wanting to know more about both. I haunted libraries and the Internet for information, compiled data of my own, and eventually made a career of it."

"See? That's why I'm jealous. You have a passion, and you're living for it." He clapped his hands and leaned forward. "I want that. I'm a stylist and the passion is there, but something must be missing because I've been passed over for three promotions in a row."

“Have you spoken to your supervisor?” I asked.

“Not since the first time. Lawrence has told me to be patient more than once, and I’ve had the patience of a damn saint, but now...I think I might need to move on. I just hate the idea of making a change and—” Winnie raised both hands and shook his head. “Let’s not talk about that. I’m not taking bad vibes with me to Paris. Only happiness. So...back to you and the Egyptians.”

“There’s nothing more to add. I enjoy history, and there are over three thousand years’ worth of successive dynasties to explore. Enough to keep me busy for a lifetime.”

“ Hmm .” He straightened his long legs in front of him. “Well, I obviously can’t help with the work part of this trip, but I can run errands and make reservations for you. Just say the word, and it’s done.”

“Thank you. I don’t anticipate needing much help, to be honest. You’re free to sightsee and do whatever you want in the city.”

“Not without you, Professor. We’re peanut butter and jelly this month.”

“That’s not necessary,” I assured him. “You’ve never been to Paris and?—”

“We’ll see it together. It’ll be tray mag-nif-eek .”

That wasn’t going to happen, but I had a feeling it was best to keep mum. Once we arrived in Paris, my work would dictate my schedule and Winnie could entertain himself.

I glanced down at my empty cup and set it on the coffee table. “I drank that rather quickly.”

“More tea?”

“No, that’s—” I protested. But Winnie was already gone, trailing a cloud of sweet-scented cologne in his wake. “...quite all right.”

I frowned, unsure what to think of my companion. Peanut butter and jelly? That sounded...disgusting. I reached into my pocket for my mobile, pondering Paris as one does. I’d been there dozens of times and knew the city fairly well. I could send Winnie on errands that doubled as sightseeing opportunities and?—

Where was my phone?

I tried my other pocket.

Not there.

I stood abruptly and felt my khakis.

Nothing.

Oh, no.

I rummaged through the carry-on strapped on top of my luggage, unzipping the side compartments and the main section. I pulled my computer out, my charger, my adapter, my emergency packet of biscuits and a roll of fruit pastilles that had probably been there for a year.

Nothing.

This wasn’t the first time I’d lost my phone. It happened often enough that I had a standard protocol in place, starting with retracing my steps.

So I pushed my glasses to the bridge of my nose, scanning the carpet like a hound on a mission as I headed for the lift.

“Where’re you going, honey?” Winnie hollered from across the room, carrying a cup of tea in one hand and two bags of crisps in the other.

Heads swiveled in our direction. The quiet businessman huddled over a computer at a small table, the family of five spread out near the window, the couple holding hands near the beverage bar. I blinked at the sudden attention, anxiety welling in my chest...the way it did for anyone who’d misplaced their cellular device moments before boarding a train to another country. But my anxiety came with a side of panic.

Do not have a panic attack. Do not have a panic attack.

I licked my dry lips and strode toward Winnie, whispering, “I can’t find my phone. It’s gone missing.”

“You put it in your carry-on,” he said smoothly, handing me the to-go cup. “Left inside pocket, next to your passport.”

“I checked.”

“Check again.”

I hurried back to the mess I’d left, fumbled through my bag and... voilà , there it was. Thank Christ.

“I—that’s so strange. How did you know?”

Winnie winked. “I pay attention.”



The overhead speaker crackled just then, alerting passengers that the train bound for Paris was ready for boarding at Platform 4.

Winnie bent to help gather the items I'd strewn about, clucking over the state of my computer case: "Archaic, darling. You need an update." My adapter: "I have the same one!" And of course, the sweets: "What's a fruit pastille? Are they British Starbursts? Color me intrigued. Thankfully, I know you'll share. It's a travel rule."

His commentary didn't end there, but Winnie didn't require my input. And though I was rattled from a near disaster, his whirlwind manner of speech was oddly calming.

I triple-checked that my glasses were on my head, slid my phone and passport into my coat pocket, and glanced up at a fellow traveler bestowing the same indulgent smile the boarding agent had given earlier.

My first thought was that it was flattering that random bystanders would think someone like Winnie would bother with someone like me. He was a peacock to my hedgehog—brilliant and beautiful .

My next thought was more closely rooted in reality.

Get serious, Alistair. No one in their right mind would have mistaken us for lovers. They'd undoubtedly guessed that Winnie was my keeper, my paid companion, my escort...minus the sexy bits. It was obvious. Just as it would have been whenever I'd traveled with other assistants and associates in the past.

I'd never noticed before, but I noticed now. And the truth of it was a tad mortifying.

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3

WINNIE

The professor was a weird one. Hey, I embraced my weirdness, but I didn't understand the academic variety.

Alistair had opened his laptop the moment we got settled on the train, ordered a cup of tea from the attendant, flexed his fingers, and started typing a mile a minute. He occasionally lifted his head to take a sip, and not that I was counting, but this newest cup had to be number six. Did Brits really drink that much tea?

Whatever. He seemed happy enough, and I wasn't going to miss out on this whole first-class experience.

It was glorious. A flirty Frenchman introduced himself as our humble servant, offered wine or more champagne, and served it with a dish of fresh strawberries. And that was just a warm-up.

“Bon appetit. I am Guillaume. If you need anything, let me know,” he purred in a dreamy accent.

“Mare-see . Did I say that right?”

Guillaume chuckled. “Close enough. The R can be softer and more in your throat, yes?”

“Mah-see .”

“You’ll keep trying. By the time you arrive in Paris, you’ll speak like a native,” he promised.

I thanked him, nudging Alistair’s elbow. “Did you hear that? I’m getting a free French lesson. This is so...ooh-la-la, right? That’s real china, too. Not a plastic cup or paper napkin in sight. I could get used to the high life. We all judged our friend, Donovan, when he got himself a sugar daddy. I judge no more.”

“A sugar daddy,” he drawled, pausing with his hands over his keyboard to eye me curiously.

“Yep, Donovan met Stan, a sixty-six-year-old movie exec, newly divorced from his wife of thirty years, father of three adult children, grandpa of two, at a go-go club. The ew factor was strong with that one, but five years later, they’re still together and happy as clams. They live in a fab house in the Hollywood Hills with an infinity pool that makes you feel like you’re tiptoeing in the clouds. They travel the world, hobnob with movers and shakers, and according to Donovan...the sex is amazing.”

The professor’s fingers froze on his keyboard. “Uh, I...should concentrate.”

“Of course you should. Oh, wait! Look at this view! The sun is finally out, the sky is blue, and those fields are a patchwork of gorgeous green. Your country is so pretty. Especially when it stops raining for a fucking second.”

Alistair nodded his agreement before diving into his work, head down, eyes on his screen, one thousand percent focused.

I snuggled into the corner of my leatherette seat and watched the world whiz by in a champagne fizzy, pinch-me-now state of contentment. The moment I spotted my first

French flag, I turned on the travel playlist Max curated for my trip to set the mood—édith Piaf, Carla Bruni, and a few other French artists I didn't know—and let myself bask in the joy of impending discovery.

Paris, I'm coming for you.

We arrived at Gare du Nord early in the evening, took a taxi to our hotel facing the Jardin des Tuileries, and checked into our suite on the fifth floor. I wheeled my suitcases into my adjoining room, opened the French doors, and squealed loud enough to catch the attention of a pedestrian strolling on the opposite side of the street.

"Are you all right?" Alistair asked, fussing with his glasses as he hurried into my room.

"I will never be all right again. Look!" I pointed at the Eiffel Tower glowing like a firecracker against the indigo sky. "Can you believe it? It's real!"

The professor cocked his head curiously. "Of course. Did you think the Eiffel Tower was part of an elaborate scheme designed to entice tourists to visit?"

"No, but also...maybe." I folded my arms over my chest to ward off the autumn chill and smiled dreamily. "It's more than I ever imagined. I can't wait to explore tomorrow. I've done my research and put together an itinerary. We can go to the Louvre in the morning, walk along the Seine toward Notre-Dame, have lunch in the Latin Quarter, go to Montmartre and see Moulin Rouge. That's a must! It gives Burlesque vibes. Did you see that movie? Diva heaven. Cher, Christina, Stanley Tucci... Then we'll go to?—"

"Thank you for the invitation, Winnie. I'm afraid I won't be joining you. I have quite a bit of work to catch up on."

“Hold up. Aren’t you hungry? Let’s get dinner. We can discuss your schedule and?—”

“Sorry, I can’t. I’m terribly behind. I’m going to require a day or two to devote to my current project,” he replied awkwardly. “I hope you’re comfortable here. Good night.”

I followed him through the elegant hotel room decorated with gilt-framed Impressionist artwork, cornflower blue satin drapery, and a gold and azure duvet on the king-sized bed. It was très sophisticated and almost as big as my entire apartment. I’d assumed Alistair would have a similar setup, but wow...they gave the professor the chichi suite.

“Oh, my! You have a living room too? This is sweet, Professor.” I gave a low whistle, perusing the ample sitting area and dining table.

He frowned, blinking as if he’d been totally unaware of his lush surroundings until I’d pointed them out.

“I-I don’t make the reservations. The heritage fund consults with the museum and?—”

“Lucky you,” I intercepted. “C’mon, I’m hungry and I’m sure you are too. Let’s find a café and order pommes frites and boo-ju-lay. I don’t even know what boo-ju-lay is, but it’s fun to say and it sounds good.”

“Beaujolais is a region in Burgundy. They harvest grapes with thin skin and low tannins, rather like a Pinot Noir. Light and fruity.” He coughed and his cheeks pinkened adorably. “That’s more than you wanted to know, I’m sure.”

“Not even close. Tell me all about boo-ju-lay at dinner,” I prodded.

Alistair lowered his gaze, then moved to the door meaningfully, waiting for me to join him under the threshold. “Not tonight. I’ll eat alone. Don’t worry about meals. You’re welcome to place any food or beverage charges on your room. Enjoy yourself, Winnie.”

The door closed in my face before I had a chance to respond.

I raked my teeth over my bottom lip and mulled my choices. But there really wasn’t another option. I couldn’t coerce a grown-ass man into doing anything he didn’t want to do.

I was on my own.

My first three days in the city passed in a blur of endless sightseeing. I walked for miles, using my cell as a map to check off a few landmarks I wanted to be sure to see—the Louvre, the Arc de Triomphe, Notre-Dame. I strolled through the Tuileries, sipped coffee in cafés, and peeked into the windows of Chanel, Hermès, Dior, and Gaultier. And yes, I took copious photos and videos to document my touristy moments.

It was a blast, and trust me, I hadn’t even scratched the surface. I had big plans to go back and spend some quality time at every point of interest—including the museums. The line at the Louvre was ridiculously long, and I didn’t have the patience for that. Besides, I sort of hoped to coax the professor to come with me...if only to drag him from his room.

So far, I’d been unsuccessful. Or as sporty folks say—I struck out.

Day one: I’d knocked on Alistair’s door and invited him to breakfast. He’d politely declined my offer and reiterated that I should have fun. On my own. I’d reminded the professor that I was there to help him, but he’d waved me off. He had work to

do...alone. I'd tried again at dinnertime, but he hadn't answered at all, nor had he responded to my text message.

Day two: repeat.

Day three: Repeat with a twist. Alistair had looked like he'd slept in his clothes when he'd inched the door open at nine a.m. His hair had stood on end, his glasses had been smudged with fingerprints, and his clothes wrinkled. He'd insisted that he'd just woken up, but truthfully, the professor looked like he'd pulled an all-nighter. I'd voiced concern, but he'd assured me he was fine. Just busy.

Was I worried? Yes. I figured I'd give him one more day to acclimate before I butted in with gusto. As you might recall, I was primarily on matching socks and punctuality duty. I also assumed he'd want me to run errands or...something. However, his eating and working habits were none of my business.

Day four: I met Gerard.

Let me backtrack a moment.

The morning began the same as every other day in Paris.

I knocked on our adjoining door, no response.

“Yoo-hoo! Are you there, Professor?”

Nothing.

I texted him, no answer. I caught my reflection in the mirror in between knocks and texts and blanched at my pasty complexion thanks to an olive toned sweater that tipped more toward evergreen. I'd changed my outfit because....yikes, grabbed my

Oui, Paris tote and moved into the hallway.

That was when I noticed the “ Ne pas déranger ” sign. I hit Google for the translation: Do not disturb.

I couldn't remember if it had been there yesterday.

And why did that bother me? I didn't know what to do. I chewed on my nail, worrying way too hard about a geeky bear of a man I hardly knew.

I considered texting Raine for guidance, but I didn't want to intrude on his romantic getaway with his husband. And I didn't want to be an alarmist. On the other hand, leaving the professor to work all day again didn't feel right either.

My mental pickle made it difficult to enjoy my daily croissant and coffee.

“ Monsieur , your bag has fallen.”

The deep voice and sexy accent pulled me from my reverie like a shot out of a cannon. I glanced at the man bending to retrieve my tote and did a double take. How did one say “sexy silver fox” in French?

I thanked him as I stood. “Oh, that's nice of you, but I'm on my way out. Did you want this table? It's one of the only window seats left.”

“ Merci , but no. I've had my breakfast.” He pointed to a nearby table. “I was sitting there and couldn't help noticing that you seemed...preoccupied?”

That last word sounded like a question, and yes, it also sounded a tad flirtatious.

I fussed with my sweater, tugging the longish sleeves till they fell over my hands with



a macabre cool effect while surreptitiously studying the stranger. He was a couple of inches taller than me with salt-and-pepper hair, crystal-blue eyes, and a ready smile on his full lips. His designer jeans and checkered sport coat combo was understated chic. Add his gorgeous accent, and he was anyone's idea of a perfect ten.

"Oh, I was just...worried about my travel companion." I held up my key card as we walked out of the hotel restaurant.

"Bon chance ."

"What does that mean?" I asked, hoping I didn't flutter my lashes too. The French language was too damn pretty for me.

"Good luck."

"Oh, right. Mare-see ."

He chuckled lightly. "You're welcome. Are you enjoying Paris?"

"Yes, I am! I've seen so much, but I'm here to work and I'm starting to feel guilty. Do you live here?"

"At zee hotel?" he joked.

I rolled my eyes, charmed by his boyish humor. Quite honestly, I was starved for human contact. Other than a few pleasantries with random fellow tourists and waitstaff, I'd been on my own for days. It was no wonder I turned into a simpering coquette the first time a handsome man glanced my way.

"In Paris," I clarified.

“Non, I live in Dijon. It’s an easy express train ride away, but I have business in the city and a conference to prepare for.”

“Conferences seem to be all the rage. What’s yours about?” I asked for no particular reason. I was just trying to be friendly and it was an innocent enough question.

“Ancient Egypt.”

I came to an abrupt stop in the middle of the bustling hotel lobby, mouth open. “Do you know Alistair Creighton?”

Monsieur Silver Fox’s eyebrows shot to his hairline. “Yes, of course. Dr. Creighton is a preeminent Egyptologist.”

“So he’s an expert?”

“Of course. He is one of the most dedicated scholars in the field...a tireless researcher. And a friend. Are you acquainted?”

“Uh...yes. We just met recently.”

Okay, yes, I was hedging...for a good reason. See, the professor had been on my mind for the past three days. As we’d established, I’d been given a job and wasn’t working at all, and Raine wasn’t an easy text away at the moment. But an unbiased opinion might offer better clues about the elusive professor anyway.

He cocked his head curiously. “You met him here...in Paris?”

“We actually met in London, but yes, in Paris too. He’s here...staying at the hotel.”

“Really?”

“I’m Winnie Rodriguez, by the way,” I said, offering my hand.

“Gerard Poitier.”

Okay, I was officially a puddle of lusty goo. That accent, that firm grip... mmm .

“Nice to meet you,” I choked out.

“Are you interested in ancient Egyptian studies?” he asked .

“God, no!” was the honest answer, but in this case, a little white lie wouldn’t hurt.

“Yes, specifically Professor Creighton’s work.”

Gerard nodded as if that made perfect sense. “I understand. He’s a brilliant man. His insights into the daily life of ordinary civilians in the ancient world have opened a fascinating new line of research. Many archeologists directly deposit their newest findings onto the professor’s desk for review. Myself among them.”

“You’re an archeologist?”

“ Oui .”

I grinned. “Wow, I’ve never met a real live archeologist.”

“ Voilà !” He opened his arms wide. “Here I am.”

“So you’re the guy who digs up mummies and buried treasure?”

“If I’m lucky...yes. There are many—how do you say...factions?—involved. Governments, land owners, museums. It’s a relief to collaborate with researchers like

Creighton. I've never met anyone who works as hard as him. The professor has been known to sequester himself for days on end in his office when he's not teaching." Gerard narrowed his eyes. "I was sure he would not be in Paris until later this month. Are you certain Alistair Creighton is here?"

"Yes, I'm his assistant."

He blinked in barely disguised surprise. "That is interesting news."

If I wasn't suddenly anxious as hell, I might have given more details, but I was legit worried now.

Sequestered for days on end ...

Oh, no.

I swallowed hard as I reached into my pocket for the key card to my room. "Yes, yes, definitely. I should get going. "

"Bon ." Gerard bowed gallantly. " Au revoir, Winnie. It was nice to meet you."

I stared after him for a beat, then raced for the elevators and stabbed the button for the fifth floor.

Yes, I was occasionally guilty of overreacting. Shocker! Perhaps this was one of those times, but something wasn't quite right about being holed up in a hotel room for days on end with a "Do Not Disturb" sign barring even the housekeeping service.

The mental snapshot of a bedraggled professor with Einstein-esque hair yesterday freaked me the hell out. I had to make sure he was okay, and I wasn't taking no for an answer.

I decided to stage my attack from the inside, knocking gently before pounding on the door. “Professor? It’s Winnie. Good morning, are you there? Professor, are you?—”

The door flung open and there stood a half-naked, wet man, clinging to the corners of the tiny white towel wrapped around his waist.

“Is something wrong, Winnie?”

Uh...good question.

But I needed a second before I attempted words, ’cause holy crap, the professor was a dream.

Sidebar: I know what you’re thinking. I’d just had a starry-eyed moment over a random stranger, and now this. Yes, I was a horny, sex-deprived beast, but seriously...I was unprepared for this level of professorial bear hotness.

Alistair was a hunk of thick masculinity. Water dripped from his messy damp hair onto his broad shoulders and down his thick, hairy torso. My gaze caught on the rivulet cascading over his left nipple. I tried to look away, but the tattoo across his pecs and along his side had my full attention. I could claim to be suddenly curious about hieroglyphic translations, but I was way more interested in the ripple of muscles in his forearms and the trail of hair under his navel pointing south .

So the professor was a little soft in the middle—not overly fit, no six-pack, no bulging muscles, or veiny biceps. So what? There was something incredibly attractive about a naturally sexy man who didn’t seem to have a clue that he was legit...hot.

Hold up.

Earth to Win! There would be no perving on the sexy professor. Alistair was off

bounds. And let's remember, I'd been worried sick about him for days. If I found any gray hair on my head, it was his fault and I was going to be pissed.

"Nothing's wrong, but?—"

"Good. Enjoy your day." His lips curled into a weak approximation of a smile as he closed the door.

I raised my hand like a shield and stepped around him to avoid having my fingers smashed, and accidentally— I swear I have no idea how it happened —dislodged his towel.

Imagine my surprise when I whirled to face him with my best "don't mess with me" expression locked and loaded only to find myself ogling a naked man.

Excuse me, a naked professor.

Personally, I had no words. I gaped for far longer than was polite as Alistair bent to pick up the towel, and somehow managed not to fan myself, which was a damn miracle 'cause the view was...wow.

His ass was thick and yummy, and his cock was absolute perfection, hanging between a neatly-trimmed thatch of hair. The towel was back in a flash. He refastened it, muttering something about changing into clothes before disappearing into the bedroom.

Gulp.

I set my hands on my hips, then crossed them over my chest, licking my lips nervously. I wasn't sure what the proper etiquette was, but my guess was that it would be best to pretend it never happened. Good plan .

I paced to the window and opened the drapes, blinking against the flood of sunlight as I surveyed the room. Geez, it looked like a war zone.

No kidding. Books, scattered papers, and three laptops shared space on the dining table with a medley of used mugs, a teapot, and an assortment of cookie wrappers, while the floor was covered with towels and empty water bottles.

First of all, I was impressed that he'd managed to fit this much shit into the one suitcase he'd brought. And second, I had a feeling he hadn't eaten anything other than cookies for few days. This was bad.

I was raised in a loving Mexican American home where food was life. You're sad, eat. You're mad, eat. You broke up with your bum boyfriend who ghosted you for a month and wants to see you now...don't do that, and eat. All serious conversations happened over a meal. So did joyful ones. If you asked my abuela , food cured everything but stupid, and I believed her.

Alistair Creighton was a brilliant man who did some deep thinking about shit I couldn't begin to comprehend, but no one's brain was at its best if all you ate was?—

“What the hell is a Jammie Dodger?” I mumbled, fingering the empty red package on the table.

“It's a delicious biscuit,” the professor replied, tugging at the sleeves of a beige sweater that did nothing to complement his baggy khakis.

Clothes certainly didn't make a man, but now that I'd seen what was underneath all that cotton and polyester-wool blended nonsense, I was a little confused. Did he not understand how much sexiness he was hiding?

Whatever. The man needed a real breakfast. And to vacate the room so housekeeping

could do their thing.

I dropped the empty packet into the trash and pasted a smile on my face. “I’m sure they’re fabulous, but one can’t live on jelly- filled cookies alone. C’mon, I’m taking you to breakfast, Professor, and I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to. I’m in the middle of an important project, but thank you for the invitation.” Alistair moved to the door and opened it to give me the old heave-ho.

“Nope. I’m not going anywhere without you,” I insisted. “I know you’re very important and that you do very important work, but I can’t stand by while you eat processed crap while I’m feasting on the best bread and cheese and wine I’ve ever had in my life. It’s not right.”

“I appreciate your concern, but—” He furrowed his brow as I flattened my back to the doorjamb and slid down the wall. “What are you doing?”

“Protesting. You come with me, or I stay here with you...just like this.”

“Winnie...”

“Alistair...”

The professor scrubbed his hand over his stubbled jaw and sighed. “All right. One meal.”

I jumped to my feet and clapped. “Excellent. I’ll grab my chapeau , and off we’ll go!”

I led Alistair downstairs to the dining room, monologuing about everything from the hotel’s plethora of crystal chandeliers to the glorious September weather outside. He



didn't say a word until a waiter informed us that the restaurant was closed but would reopen at lunchtime. An hour and a half from now. Shit .

“Oh, that's dreadful,” Alistair said. “Thank you for inviting me. We'll try again another time.”

“No, no. I have a better idea. Let's walk through the park and get a little something at a café.”

I took his hesitation as a yes and didn't give him a chance to shake me off. I hooked my arm through Alistair's, bypassing the elevators and heading straight for the exit .

Did I mention that it was a beautiful day? The sky was an impossible shade of blue with fluffy cotton ball clouds. I inhaled deeply as I glanced up at the French flag billowing in the breeze and the Eiffel Tower in the distance. Perfect.

We walked across the street to the Jardin des Tuileries through the grand iron gates and into the park. This was easily my fifth or sixth jaunt through the gardens. I'd strolled along the tree-lined wide dirt paths, bumping elbows with tourists and Parisians taking detours on their way to work. It was a nice place to sit with a cup of coffee near the fountain, drinking in the scenery before deciding if I wanted to visit the Louvre to my left or stroll the Champs élysées on my right.

Today, I steered us to a café hidden in the canopy of trees and chose a table for two. I wasn't hungry at all, but I took the liberty of ordering Alistair a bowl of soup and a jambon et fromage on a baguette and tea for both of us.

“You ordered for me?” he inquired, cocking his brow curiously.

“Sorry, but you were making a meal out of that menu, and sipping tea on an empty stomach can't be good for you.”

He frowned. “On the contrary, tea is beneficial to the digestive system.”

“So is food. And I don’t think you’ve eaten anything decent in days, so have a damn sandwich. My treat. I haven’t been to this café yet, but if it’s anything like the one I ate at yesterday, the bread alone is haute cuisine.”

“If you say so.”

“I do. And this will be better for you than eating cookies for breakfast,” I retorted, quickly adding, “Never mind. I’d rather eat cookies too, but it’s not a healthy choice for a guy who uses his brain so much.”

He pursed his lips in amusement as he fiddled with his glasses. “Thank you for thinking of me. Unnecessary, but...very kind of you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Our eyes met and held for a beat. Two seconds later, my face felt flush as a swarm of butterflies fluttered against my rib cage.

Odd reaction. I mean, sure...the professor was hot as fuck. Under his sad beige and brown exterior was a masculine specimen of pure beefy hotness. But that was a simple observation. Nothing more.

Alistair glanced up as the waiter deposited two individual teapots and cups, soup, and the sandwich on the table. He thanked him in French, reaching for his teapot like a junkie desperate for his next hit. He added milk and sugar, stirred the liquid—three times in each direction, clinking the spoon in a perfect triangle. Then he set the spoon on the saucer and sipped.

I observed his careful ritual while I poured my own tea.

“You’re staring,” he commented, picking up the ham-and-cheese baguette.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to. How’s your work coming along?” I asked politely.

“Well enough,” Alistair replied, biting into his baguette with a moan. “This is very good.”

Okay, the flash of heat returned in full force. I cradled my teacup, tearing my gaze from the hungry man eliciting sexy noises with every other bite. This was what blue balls did to a guy. It wasn’t possible to get turned-on watching someone eat a fucking sandwich, was it?

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No, but thank you.”

“I could organize your paperwork or do some basic data entry or—oh, my God, if you don’t quit having sex with that damn jambon baguette, someone’s gonna call the creep police on us,” I whisper-hissed.

He quirked a brow, dabbing his chin with the thin white napkin. “The creep police? Has anyone told you that you’re a very unusual person, Winnie?”

“Often. So how’s this gonna go? If you’re going to continue being a workaholic, I’m going to have to stage an intercourse to make sure you eat. Don’t think I won’t do it,” I warned.

Alistair’s eyes crinkled at the corners as he dug into the soup. “I believe you mean intervention...not intercourse.”

“Oops. Anyway, give me something. What can I do?”

“Unfortunately, you don’t have the training to help with my research, but I appreciate the offer.”

“ Hmm . Can you at least tell me what you’re working on?”

He eyed me over his soup spoon for a moment as if weighing the wisdom of sharing Egyptian secrets. His intensity was jarring for someone who seemed determined to blend in with his surroundings. It was in the set of his jaw and his shoulders and his razorlike stare. This man was fierce.

“All right. I’m in the midst of contributing to a rather extensive exhibit detailing the everyday life of ancient citizens of Egypt, throughout a number of dynasties. A recent archeological dig in Saqqara turned into a treasure trove with thousands of new artifacts. As you can imagine, it’s a daunting task.”

“Oh. How does that work? Did you bring artifacts with you to Paris or?—”

“Good Lord, no!” Alistair glanced around as if to be sure no one within hearing distance would think for a second that he would do anything so ridiculous and possibly illegal. “These treasures belong to Egypt. We work with the country and their team, studying artifacts that have been buried for centuries.”

I squinted behind my Prada knockoffs. “What can you find in a chunk of rock or an old piece of pottery? ”

“A portal through time.”

I wanted to laugh at his dramatic tone, but Alistair was dead serious. In fact, his eyes had taken on a rapturous glossy hue I associated with major events, like scoring front-row tickets to a Beyoncé concert, including backstage passes and complimentary parking.

“Professor, please tell me you’re not attempting to build a time machine to transport yourself to ancient Egypt. If I’m about to have a Back to the Future moment, I’m sure as hell not going to waste it hauling rocks up the side of a pyramid. No, thank you,” I huffed in my sassiest tone.

“I’m not building an actual time machine.” He chuckled, his eyes bright with humor. “But something like it.”

“How do you mean?”

“Every artifact holds clues to the past. A single piece of tile provides a gold mine of insight. We use infrared imaging to ascertain age and composition. Analyzing the paint tells us about the materials used and where they originate from. The rarer the substance, the more likely it belonged to a person of means. We can slowly puzzle together its use based on the thickness of the shard, the break point, and the other objects discovered with it.”

“Really? All from a piece of tile?”

“Yes, and the Egyptians effectively left us time capsules all over the desert. It’s not just a matter of excavating the tombs of pharaohs, either. Archeologists have found well-preserved mudbrick houses that tell us about the people who worked for the aristocracy too. Everyday people weren’t usually mummified, so we don’t know as much about their diets or the diseases they dealt with, but there are clues...everywhere.”

“That sounds interesting.”

Alistair agreed. “Very. It’s an excess of information, to be honest. I’m concentrating on religious artifacts found at a site we think was a village chapel or place of worship. A perfectly preserved mummy of a man was found nearby, and that is highly

unusual.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “You’ll never run out of things to do, will you?”

“Never,” he said gleefully. “I should get back. Now you know that I have a lot to do before the conference and?—”

“Hang on. You haven’t finished eating, and it’s”—I glanced at my watch. Eleven-fifteen a.m.—“brunch time. Eat and enjoy the sunshine. Vitamin D is good for the soul...and so is putting your work on hold for a couple of hours to nourish your body.”

He patted his belly and scoffed. “I don’t think anyone would suggest I’m in danger of starving.”

“You’re hot, Professor,” I replied, unthinking. “Don’t go changing.”

Alistair blushed. An honest-to-God pink-cheeked blush.

“I—that’s...thank you,” he sputtered. “That’s enough about me. Have you enjoyed Paris so far?”

“Oh, yeah! It’s a gorgeous city. I might go to a museum or two today. How about you?” I raised a hand. “No, let me guess...Egypt is calling.”

“Yes.”

“If you must, you must.” I sighed theatrically. “You don’t get a reputation for being an expert without busting your booty for it. Raine warned me that you’re a hard worker. So did Gerard, the sexy French archeologist. I believe his exact words were, ‘dedicated expert, tireless researcher.’ Your reputation has followed you to France

and?—”

“Gerard?” he intercepted, dropping his spoon onto the table with a clang .

“Gerard...who?”

“I don’t remember his last name.”

“Poitier?”

I snapped my fingers. “That’s it! I met him in the dining room earlier. We chatted on the way to the lobby and realized we both knew you. Small world, huh?”

“Gerard Poitier is at our hotel?” Alistair leaned forward, his brow creased in consternation. “Right this very moment?”

“Uh...well, I didn’t ask about his plans. I just met the guy.”

“In the lobby?”

“Yes, he said he was spending one night in Paris.” I narrowed my eyes. “Are you okay? You look pale.”

“And you told him I was here...in the city?”

I frowned. “Did I do something wrong?”

Alistair released a jagged breath. “No, of course not. But I can’t go back to the hotel now.”

“Why not? Is he dangerous? He didn’t seem dangerous. He seemed...nice,” I reported in a rush. “Though I guess the most dangerous people are master

manipulators who can fool anyone. But I didn't get bad vibes from him, and I'm damn good at reading vibes. And he only had complimentary things to say about you. Nothing murder-y or?—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake," the professor interrupted. "We're not enemies, and Gerard is not a murderer, Winnie. Don't get yourself worked up."

"Okay, I won't, but...why are you avoiding him?"

"Because if Gerard knows I'm here, he'll want to see me, and I'm not prepared to prematurely divulge any details regarding my research. We agreed to meet at the end of the month prior to the conference, and we shall. But not a moment sooner."

I nodded as if that made complete sense. It didn't explain his sudden agitation or...his pink-tinged cheeks. Wild speculation here, but I got the impression there was something personal between the silver fox and the professor. And for reasons I couldn't begin to dissect, I felt a twinge of something that felt vaguely like...jealousy.

Ew .

"I'm too curious and gauche to bite my tongue like a good assistant. I gotta ask...is Gerard your ex?"

"My—what? N-no," he sputtered. "Absolutely not!"

I held my hands up in surrender. "Sorry. It's just that you seem as upset as I was the time my summer fling showed up at my salon to pick up his new boy toy, who spilled the beans about his amazing sexy older man while I'd shampooed his hair and prepared his platinum color treatment. Imagine my shock when the cheap-ass scrub I'd kicked to the curb waltzed in the door like a damn white knight. I'd never told



him where I worked 'cause that relationship wasn't going anywhere good, but I could have done without the confrontation and the yucky feeling that someone else inspired the kind of gallantry I'd wanted. Why was he a better man for the faux-blond twink than he ever tried to be for me?"

Alistair opened and closed his mouth. "Uh...I don't know, Winnie."

I snorted. "That was a hypochondriac question. No answer required."

"You mean hypothetical...or more accurately, rhetorical."

"Yes! That's the one." I sipped my now-cold tea, wrinkling my nose as I pushed the cup to the middle of the table. "I didn't mean to veer so far off topic. No one needs to hear another version of the 'always a bridesmaid' blues. So boring. I don't need a man to complete me, and neither do you. Or...a woman. I shouldn't assume you're gay or straight or?—"

"I'm gay," he intercepted.

And now we were cooking with fire. I felt oddly proud of myself for sussing out information Raine hadn't been able to after years of working for the professor.

"Me too." I beamed. "Surprise!"

Alistair's lips twisted in reluctant humor. "Thank you for sharing, but it's neither here nor there. I need access to my room without running into Gerard Poitier. There must be an alternate entrance to the hotel or?—"

"There's not, but that shouldn't matter. What are the chances of bumping into him again?"

“Famous last words. I’m not risking it. Not now, anyhow. I need to plan a speech in the event of an accidental encounter, but I’m certainly not ready now.” He furrowed his brow and stared at something over my shoulder. “I can discuss the amulets with him. Those are of interest, and I can?—”

“Whoa. You’re all up in your head, Professor. Leave the speech planning for later. If you must stay away from the hotel, do something fun like...see Paris.”

“I’ve seen Paris.”

“Not with me, you haven’t.” I squeezed his hand and stood. “Come on, we’ll take a walk. It’ll be great!”

Alistair didn’t respond. His glassy-eyed gaze indicated that he was deep in thought, so I honestly wasn’t sure he’d heard me at all. Or maybe he was trying to think of a nice way to get rid of me. I hoped not. I was conversation starved and desperate for company other than my own. We didn’t have to do much. A stroll along the Seine, maybe pop into the shops on the Avenue Montaigne, or?—

“Have you been to the Louvre?”

“I tried, but the line was insane. Too bad, ’cause I’d love to meet Mona Lisa in person. She’ll have to wait. Shuffling along like cattle to look at art is not my idea of a good time.”

He stood abruptly. “We’ll go now.”

“Trust me on this one. It’s too—Professor, where are you going? Professor?”

He strode away, hands in his pockets, head held high...a man on a mission.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I grumbled, waving over the waiter so I could pay for our meal .

I caught up to Alistair at the crosswalk and tugged on his sleeve. He flashed a smile my way and absently tucked my hand in the crook of his elbow, as if walking arm in arm was something we did. I hated to admit it, but I liked that a little too much.

We arrived at the twin grand glass pyramids of the Louvre and as I’d warned, it was a sea of humanity. People taking photos, children hopping off pedestals, and the general hullabaloo associated with lines that snaked on and on.

I had my “I told you so” locked and loaded, but Alistair continued past the pyramids to an archway and pushed a series of buttons on a pad affixed to the stone wall. The door clicked and was opened by a fierce-looking bald man in a suit I assumed was a museum guard.

“Monsieur?”

“Dr. Creighton.” He released my arm to rummage through his pockets. “Now where did I put my—oh, here we are.”

The professor pulled an ID from his pocket and spoke in French to the guard who examined the card, conferred something on his computer, then ushered us inside.

And just like that, I was in the fucking Louvre...via a secret entrance, no less.

I followed Alistair and the man through a narrow stone corridor. The guard bowed, gesturing for us to move ahead of him into a cavernous space filled with statues.

I whirled with my hands on my hips. “We’re in the museum.”

“We are. Antiquities wing, to be precise.”

“How did you do that?”

He shrugged. “I have credentials to come and go whenever I choose. Come along. I’ll show you the crypt.”

Did he know how to show a guy a good time or what?

I followed the professor through room after room, occasionally stopping for him to point out a few pieces, like the statues of Karomama and the goddess of Sekhmet, a reconstructed chapel with hieroglyphic inscriptions he said offered insight into planting and harvesting in the daily lives of rural ancients, and the Great Sphinx of Tanis.

We passed mummies and sarcophagi that looked interesting, but they were popular exhibits, surrounded by tourists snapping photos I’d bet my next paycheck they’d forget about the second they walked out the door.

We moved down a long staircase to the tomb of Ramses III, where he pointed out the red stone crypt with violent hieroglyphics. Alistair explained that the tomb had been placed on the lower level because of its size and weight before turning to a colorful statue in a loincloth and elaborate Egyptian cat eyes with marble-like pupils.

“Who’s he?” I asked, casting my gaze around the dimly lit room.

“This is the ‘Seated Scribe.’ The quality of this piece, from the materials used in the ink work, attention to detail, and the composition itself are extraordinary.” Alistair tapped the glass barrier. “He’s well fed and in good health, which means he was a person of great power—an influential officer or perhaps a relative of the pharaoh. He certainly didn’t do any physical labor.”

“Why isn’t he wearing clothes?”

“It was bloody hot in Egypt that day,” he deadpanned.

I spun on my heels and swatted his elbow. “That was a joke. Look at you showing your silly side in front of Egypt’s social media guru.”

Alistair’s lips twitched in amusement. “The scribe would have been more concerned with numbers and figures than entertainment. They were one of the few who were skilled at reading and writing. A pharaoh would want to be sure to take his scribe along with him to the next life to handle his affairs. This isn’t the only such statue. Many have been excavated over the past two centuries, but the detail on this one truly sets it apart.”

I clandestinely studied my companion. The professor suddenly seemed taller, more confident and imposing. This was his domain, and he was a true master. Obviously.

I mean, c’mon...he had a secret code and credentials to get into the freaking Louvre, for fuck’s sake. Color me impressed.

“Did you work on any of these artifacts?”

Alistair tilted his chin. “Yes and no. I gather information that helps archeologists and curators catalog their findings and collections. So yes, I’ve personally examined some of these artifacts, but I’m the middle man, if you will.”

“No, you’re the brains,” I corrected, stepping aside to give a tourist room to snap a pic. “Let me see if I’ve got this right. The archeologist finds the special rock, gives it to the museum, who gives it to you to do the intellectual legwork. You tell them why it’s significant, connect it with other pieces, and hand it over to the curator...who takes all the credit.”

“That last part is incorrect. I work with archeologists and curators, but I don’t take the place of either.”

“ Hmm .” I gave him a thorough once-over. “You’re really, really smart, aren’t you?”

“Well, I...” Alistair blushed, an honest-to-God, sexy-as-fuck blush.

“That was a statement. Nothing rectoral about it.”

“Rhetorical,” he supplied.

I pointed at him. “Yes! There’s that word again.”

We shared a smile and don’t quote me, but I think I was the one blushing now.

“Um, I’m happy to show you the antiquities rooms, but perhaps you’d like to see the more famous works, like the Mona Lisa and the Nike of Samothrace.”

I slipped my arm through his. “Show me everything, Professor. I’m all yours.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:14 pm*

4

### ALISTAIR

If anyone had told me I'd spend a random weekday afternoon escorting a colorful American around the Louvre, I'd have thought they were mad. Mainly because I wasn't in the habit of strolling through the museum for fun...or of leaving my desk while knee-deep in an important project.

This was Gerard's fault.

All right, no, it was mine for letting his presence get to me. What the hell was he doing in Paris? Moreover, why hadn't he contacted me now that he knew I was here? I'd checked my phone, expecting a message of some kind. Bonjour, I'm in town and heard you were too. Shall we have coffee? The silence was strange.

I pushed Gerard out of my mind and lost myself in the Louvre. Figuratively, not literally. I knew this museum almost as well as I knew the British Museum. The Winged Victory of Samothrace on her pedestal in the Daru staircase, Venus de Milo in the Greek, Etruscan, and Roman antiquities section, Jacques-Louis David's The Coronation of Napoleon in the Denon Wing, and of course, the Mona Lisa .

I peppered Winnie with more information than he'd ever remember, poor chap. Did he know the contents of the Louvre were worth over thirty-five-billion pound sterling and that it would take a hundred days to see every piece of art owned by the museum? Did he know that the Louvre was more than eight hundred years old and according to some, was haunted?

“They say a mummy wanders the halls, and a woman in red roams the garden. I haven’t seen either, but I believe it. These old buildings have seen centuries worth of brutal history. We might be surrounded by ghosts at this very moment,” I commented, casting a sideways glance at Winnie.

Bloody hell, he was lovely. His cheekbones were razor sharp, his eyes glinted with greens and golds, and his lips were lush and full, painted in a pale shade of pink that offset his beautiful olive skin. I’d never spent any significant amount of time with a man who wore cosmetics. Not that he wore much. A bit of color on his lips, cheeks, and liner that made his eyes look impossibly big.

Winnie had the long limbs, graceful stride, and stylish clothing of a runway model. I didn’t know men who dressed, walked, talked, or sparkled like him. It might have been intimidating, but he had a wide-eyed aura of wonder that made him seem approachable. Someone you’d trust with secrets.

Strange sentiment, but perhaps it explained why I’d told him I was gay. That wasn’t something I shared with acquaintances. Actually, it wasn’t something I shared at all.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” he asked, sinking onto a bench in the red room.

“Yes.”

He grinned. “Just like that? No need to think about it?”

I blushed at his teasing tone for no reason in particular. “We all have a spirit. It’s tangible—even though you can’t see it, you can feel it. It’s illogical to think we fade or disappear into nothingness. Of course, that’s not a hypothesis I can readily defend, so let’s keep that between us, shall we?”

Winnie made a zipped-lips motion. “If you could be haunted by a famous ghost, who



would it be? I'll go first...Celine Dion."

"She's alive and well," I reported.

"I know. This is a preemptive haunting request."

"Can you do that?"

"Of course," he declared. "My game, my rules. Who's haunting you?"

"No one, I hope."

"Play the game, Professor," he chided with an eye roll. "Who's it gonna be? An Egyptian pharaoh, a sexy Roman gladiator, or?—"

"Charles Darwin," I replied automatically.

"Why?"

"He was a naturalist, a biologist, a geologist, a?—"

"No. Stop. He would bore you to tears, telling you things you already know. He'd probably be better for me. I'll take Darwin, you can have Celine." Winnie tilted his chin toward the skylights and sighed dramatically. "The things I do for my friends."

I chuckled. I couldn't help it. He was daft, but he was thoroughly entertaining.

"You're a gentleman through and through," I agreed, pursing my lips. "Now let's continue on to the?—"

"No, no. I'm parched and my dogs are barking. I need an art break and an infusion of

French bread or a macaron, stat.”

I glanced at the time and did a double take. Blimey! It wasn’t like me to take hours away from my work. For a moment, I couldn’t recall what I was doing at the Louvre at all, but before I could insist on returning to the hotel, Winnie flagged down a guard and asked for directions to the nearest café in the museum.

Twenty minutes later, we sat at a table for two on the balcony next to the balustrade overlooking the gardens with a proper lunch of croque monsieur and quiche lorraine . Don’t ask me what we talked about. The weather; his cat, Liza; his aversion to the color gray; and a detailed account of the sights he wanted to see around Paris, like Versailles.

He’d already done quite a bit of exploring on his own, but he had questions that supposedly only I could answer about Notre-Dame and “that fancy bridge with the pretty lampposts.”

And somehow, an hour later, I found myself strolling along the Seine, pointing out architectural wonders as if I were a native.

Winnie stopped in the middle of Pont Neuf and pointed at the sun dipping low on the horizon, painting the sky pink and orange.

“This is absolutely gorgeous,” he enthused, flashing a winning smile my way. “Thank you.”

“I—you’re welcome. I didn’t do anything, though.”

“Sure, you did. You took a whole day off to show me the city. That’s definitely something.”

Those hazel eyes and the charming lilt in his voice stirred butterflies in my stomach and made me dizzy. What was wrong with me?

“I can’t believe I’ve been gone all day.” I rubbed the heel of my hand on my temple and finally braved a peek at my mobile.

And there it was...a message from G. Poitier:

I heard a rumor you’re in Paris, my friend. Are you free for dinner or a drink?

I didn’t respond. I slipped my phone into my pocket and fixated on a riverboat slicing through the current, squinting against the sun’s glare.

I’d forgotten about Gerard for hours. And I’d forgotten the panicky feeling that always accompanied unwanted surprises.

“Who’s texting you in French and messing with your zhuzh?” Winnie asked, poking my ribs playfully before bugging his eyes out. “It’s Gerard. Shit! I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have told him you were here. He made it sound like you were friends.”

“He’s a colleague...not a friend.”

“Mmm . He must be more than that. You’re green around the gills.”

I frowned. “I am not.”

Winnie shrugged, unbothered by my withering glare. “A teense. Trust me, there’re a few coworkers I’d rather not bump into—out of town, out of sight, out of mind. But you really hate that guy.”

“I don’t hate him.”

“But you want to avoid him.”

“No, I want to...minimize contact,” I replied, proud of my matter-of-fact tone.

“Because...”

“Because I have nothing new to share with him, and I don’t like to divvy my work in bite-sized portions for leisurely consumption. We keep schedules and diaries for a reason.” I felt around the bench in a sudden panic. “Where did I put my mobile?”

“In your pocket,” Winnie said matter-of-factly. “The coast is probably clear now if you want to head back to the hotel.”

I chuckled ruefully. “I’m not hiding from Gerard. It was more a matter of needing space to think. I come up with my best lines after unexpected confrontations.”

“Confrontation?” he repeated. “Are you sure he’s not an ex?”

“Positive. Gerard is the perfectly nice gentleman who...wooed my ex. It’s complicated,” I blabbed.

See what I mean?

I couldn’t shut up in Winnie’s presence.

He widened his eyes comically. “That cad! What, when, and how? I want all the deets. Unless, you’d rather not talk about it. That’s absolutely okay, too. But I will say this...I’m an excellent listener. In fact, in my capacity as hairdresser, I’m practically a therapist. I assure you, I have heard it all.”

“It’s not an exciting tale, Winnie. Boy wins boy, boy loses boy to a handsome,

wealthy, successful, charming man...with a French accent. I bet you've heard better stories at your Hollywood salon."

He studied me for a moment, then reached out to thread his fingers with mine. The unexpectedly forward gesture caught me unawares. By the time it registered that I should have pulled away, we'd been holding hands for over a minute, and damn it, this was nice.

"Let's see...one of my customers broke up with his boyfriend in rush hour traffic on the 405 and demanded to be left on the side of the road where he was picked up by the police. He spent an hour sobbing in the back seat with a German shepherd howling at him. Another customer told me his lover was so thrilled with his Brazilian wax job that he showed it off...everywhere. And yes, he caught his man bent over, pants down, cheeks spread for his eighty-year-old neighbor. Somehow, they're still together."

I barked a laugh. "No!"

"Yes. I also had a client who walked in on his boyfriend and his 'straight' best friend doing the dirty, and another whose ex blew a stranger on a dance floor while my client was in the bathroom."

"Really?"

"Really," Winnie huffed. "Not all of those stories are true. Some guys just make shit up for entertainment purposes. I can usually tell the difference between grossly embellished and true horror stories. Tea is the currency at my salon. I've heard the 'boy leaves boy for another boy' tale from both sides, and it always makes me sad. Sometimes mad. Like now. Just know that you're equally as successful, handsome, and desirable as Gerard. And your accent is hotter."

“Well, now I know you’re lying,” I teased. “He’s French.”

“British accents, though...yum.”

I snorted. “Definitely off your rocker. Thank you for the compliment and your concern, however misplaced. I’m not heartbroken. All parties have moved on. Including me.”

He cocked his head curiously. “Okay, then give it up. What happened with the ex? How long ago did you break up?”

“Five years ago.”

“Tell me more. Where did you meet?”

“At the museum.”

Winnie crooked his finger. “Keep going.”

“Colin was an assistant to one of the curators while he was finishing his degree in antiquities. We hit it off, and everything was lovely for four years...or so I thought. We didn’t live together, but we talked about our future as if it was a given that we’d eventually do heteronormative things, like get married. But Gerard came along, and that was the end of us,” I finished in a rush, fighting the urge to slap a hand over my mouth. I’d never shared any of this information...with anyone.

“Gerard sucks,” Winnie deadpanned.

“It takes two to tango, doesn’t it? Colin was unhappy, and I didn’t know it. According to him, the writing was on the wall, and it should have been evident to me that we weren’t a good match anymore. His list was extraordinarily detailed. I worked too

much, I never remembered birthdays or anniversaries, and the sex was...uninspired and infrequent.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Ouch.”

“Maybe it was true, but it hardly mattered. He had feelings for my handsome business associate.” I fixed my gaze on the glint of fading sunlight on the Seine. “They’re married now and have a lovely home in Dijon...or I’ve heard. We’re not friends, but we’re friendly out of necessity. I see Gerard at conferences, and occasionally he’ll turn up in London to discuss various projects. And it’s all very normal.”

“Except for the part where he stole your man.”

“He didn’t steal Colin.” I quirked a brow, adding, “He lured him away and absconded with him. That’s quite different.”

Winnie elbowed me playfully. “Ahh, see? You have a good sense of humor.”

“I try. As I mentioned, it’s been years. I know evidence suggests I’m not over it, but I am. I have to be. Gerard has worked on countless excavations, and we collaborate quite often. Always have. Unfortunately, I’m not good with people. Even ones I’ve known for years, so...it’s awkward.”

“Yeah, but you get a hall pass for the absconding part.”

“It’s not as though I want Colin back,” I said. “However, it would be nice if I could meet Gerard by chance at a hotel lobby and know for certain that I wouldn’t panic, forget how to speak, or say something that makes it sound as if I still care when I don’t.”

“I can help with that.”

“Thanks, Winnie. But I don’t need help.”

“You do,” he insisted. “The good news is...it’s easy. You’ve already self-diagnosed. You work too much, and your feng wee is off.”

“Feng shui?”

“That’s it.” Winnie twisted on the bench and pointed at my chest. “I’m gonna be real with you, Professor. You’ve forgotten how to have fun. I understand that old civilizations are your jam, but you live in the twenty-first century and you need to relearn how to socialize with people in this era.”

“I’m perfectly capable of socializing, thank you very much,” I huffed haughtily .

“When was the last time you let loose and had a drink or three, went dancing, or flirted with a sexy man?”

I felt around on the bench for my phone. “It’s been a while. I just had my mobile, didn’t I?”

“It’s still in your pocket.”

“Oh, yes. Thank you.”

“You flirted with me earlier today. I’m a sexy man...if I do say so myself.” He certainly was. “We didn’t go dancing, but we’ve been hanging out all day, and I ordered wine with lunch, so the answer is today. Well done, Alistair.”

I chuckled lightly. “Thanks, but I didn’t flirt with you. You’re an assistant, and circumstances are...”



“Ambidextrous?” he offered.

“Ambiguous.”

“That’s the word.”

I furrowed my brow. “No, I don’t think that word applies either. Our roles aren’t ambiguous. I’m your employer.”

“Only temporarily. Formalities don’t apply. I mean, c’mon...I would never spend the day hanging out with my boss back home. In spite of the fact that he’s overlooked me too often for my sanity, he’s a nice guy, but...it would have been weird. This doesn’t feel weird.” Winnie gestured between us meaningfully.

He was right. It didn’t feel weird in the slightest.

“No, I suppose you’re right.”

“I am, and that’s what makes me the perfect person to get you out of your social funk,” he continued. “Circumstances couldn’t be better ’cause I’ve got the blahs too. A different variation from yours. Mine is more of a ‘What am I doing with my life?’ funk, but it’s still a funk and I don’t like it. Solution: we’re both going to take Paris!”

Winnie threw his arms open wide and tilted his head to the sky, a moonbeam smile lighting his beautiful face.

“Take Paris...where? ”

“It’s an expression, silly. I propose we paint the town and do something fun every day. We can take turns expanding our horizons. I should see things and get cultured, and since you’re an expert, you can be my guide. In return, I’ll help you explore clubs

and bars so you can practice honing your dormant sexy skills.”

I balked. “No, thank you. I have no desire to go to bars, and my sexy skills aren’t dormant, they’re nonexistent.”

“No way. I don’t believe it.”

“Well, you should. I haven’t so much as kissed a man in five years,” I admitted, pushing my glasses to the bridge of my nose.

Winnie lifted one brow in what might have been surprise. “Kiss me.”

“I-I...wh-what?” I sputtered.

“Kiss me,” he repeated.

“I-I can’t kiss you.”

“Of course you can...for all the reasons we already discussed. It’s just a facet in our quest to take Paris. Is facet the right word?”

“Uh...no,” I replied distractedly. “Listen, Winnie, while I appreciate your inventive thinking, intimate exchanges are?”

“Kissing is the French equivalent of a handshake,” he intercepted. “I read it in Vogue , and it totally makes sense. If you ask me, kissing gets way too much credit. It isn’t a marriage proposal, you know. But it is a skill you want to hone, to be sure. You let those skizzles go flat, and poo f! There goes your confidence. So, pucker up, buttercup. Let’s do this.”

Winnie scooted into my space, closed his eyes and presented his gorgeous mouth to

me like a gift. There was only one logical, appropriate response here and it involved a simple “No, thank you” and a gentle reminder that kissing an employee, regardless of the length of their tenure or whatever country you happened to be in at the moment, was never a good idea.

But my God, his eyelashes were impossibly long, his cheeks were flush from the cool breeze off the river, and his mouth was a thing of beauty. His lips looked plump and pillowy and so inviting. If I didn’t know any better, I’d have sworn there was a magnet, drawing me toward him.

I leaned in, inch by inch, until our noses brushed. I should have pulled away then, but gravity had me in a chokehold. I couldn’t stop my momentum.

The next thing I knew, my lips were pressed to Winnie’s and the sky erupted with fireworks as a choir of angels sang from the heavens.

Dramatic? Yes, perhaps, but accurate.

When he molded his mouth against mine, angling his chin and parting his lips, I had to wrap a hand around his shoulder to stay vertical. He tasted like cherries and mint and felt like lava in my arms. He was the sun, and I was in danger of combusting. But I couldn’t let go. Not yet.

I licked the seam of his lips, and oh so tentatively pushed inside. Winnie gasped, his low moan of approval vibrating deep in my chest as he took over, threading his fingers in my hair as he glided his tongue alongside mine.

We carried on like teenagers in a never-ending lip-lock till oxygen deprivation became a cause for concern.

Winnie nipped my jaw and straightened, his drowsy gaze fixed on my mouth for a

beat before finally meeting my eyes.

I waited for him to break the silence. Nothing.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

Winnie blinked as if coming out of a fog. “Yes. Wow, yes, yes. I’m...very good. Fuck me, Professor. You are a man of many talents. Including kissing. Why didn’t you tell me you’re an expert?”

“Uh...because I’m not. I told you I’m?—”

“Out of practice. I remember.” He raked his teeth over his bottom lip and exhaled theatrically. “Well, like I said, I think it’s a good idea to keep your skills up, so if you want to do that again...I’m cool with it.”

Yes, I was also very, very cool with it.

I pushed my hands into my pockets. “It’s getting cold. We should go.”

We wordlessly headed north along the cobblestone path, making way for faster moving pedestrians. Somewhere in the melee of lackadaisical tourists and Parisians hurrying home for the day, Winnie hooked his arm through mine. Along the Quai de la Mégisserie, past Pont des Arts, across the street to the Louvre...he stayed glued to my side.

We said our good-byes in the hallway outside of my suite.

There was no talk of future plans or of work that had been left undone. And there was definitely no mention of the kiss. Good thing, as I didn’t trust myself to speak while my lips were still tingling and my heart was hammering in my chest.

I was sure I'd feel more like myself as soon as I sat at my desk and fell into a rabbit hole in the Middle Kingdom, circa 1938 BC.

I turned on the light and cast my gaze around my room, noting that the reams of paperwork and the laptop I'd left open were untouched, but the wreckage of biscuit wrappers and tea cups had been cleared away by housekeeping. It looked nice, I mused, shrugging off my jacket.

At the last second, I remembered my phone and rescued it from my pocket.

A new text from Gerard popped up on my screen.

Sorry I missed you today. Quel dommage. I could meet early for breakfast if that is possible.

I waited for the usual wave of panic to hit in the form of a choking sensation followed by palpitations or a case of the sweats. Perhaps that was a gross overreaction, but I didn't do well with personal strife.

Deleting Gerard's number, ignoring his texts, and canceling him from my life would have been professional suicide. As I'd told Winnie, I needed Gerard's field expertise, and he needed my historical insight.

It was too bad he'd seduced my boyfriend and apologized as if he'd accidentally run over my post box. It was too bad he was ridiculously attractive and interesting and French, and it had been a shame Colin thought so too. *C'est la vie*. That was ancient history and as my therapist had said, their choices weren't a reflection of my worth—my work was. Well, she didn't say that last part, but work cleared the cobwebs.

So had a day running around Paris with my temporary assistant.

I reread Gerard's text and replied, Yes, of course.

He responded immediately with a lengthy message regarding his train and Colin's plan to meet him at the station in Dijon. That alone should have raised an internal alarm, but it didn't.

No, not a smidge of panic. Nothing at all. That had to be Winnie's doing.

I touched my lips and smiled.

Later, when I finally crawled into bed and turned out the light, I was still smiling.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:14 pm*

5

WINNIE

I kissed the professor.

That was bad. Naughty, naughty, bad. In my defense?—

Okay, I had no defense. I'd been drunk on Paris, pleased to share it with someone for the day, and I'd gotten carried away.

Ugh . This was so me.

I'd been jumping without a parachute since puberty. Shiny coins were my passion. If it glittered and seemed the slightest bit dangerous, I wanted in.

Alistair was the ultimate shiny coin. He was my best friend's boss, he was a makeover moment waiting to happen, and he was so far out of my league it was almost comical. Check, check, super check.

Okay, I wasn't a complete jerk. I'd coerced him from his room out of genuine concern for his well-being. Staring at a damn computer screen all day, not eating well, or sleeping was no bueno . I was being paid to look after him in Paris, and it had been my duty to save him from death by Jammie Dodgers.

I'd just gone too far .

Truth time: I was attracted to the professor, and I'd shamelessly manufactured a kiss that should never have happened. But...I hadn't thought he'd do it. And I one thousand and ten percent hadn't known he could kiss like that. I mean...geesh.

That possessive hand on my shoulder, the rough scrape of his end-of-day scruff on my face, the slide of his lips. I twisted the sheets, turning from one side to the other, obsessing over that kiss and wishing there'd been fewer layers between us. Who knew the professor was a roguish, dominant hunk under a Clark Kent-esque disguise?

Christ, I'd seen him naked too. I knew the man was hung like a horse and that his body was sturdy and strong. There was no way I could keep my thoughts pure and G-rated now.

Later that night, I'd gripped my cock, imagining the professor peeling off his clothes and covering me like a warm blanket. I was an expert at conjuring porn-worthy fantasies, but I'd never been so hard or desperate for a happy ending.

I'd flung my duvet off, stroking myself in languid pulls and squeezing my base to keep from shooting prematurely when my brain spun a kaleidoscope of raunchy scenes, each more erotic than the last. The professor between my knees, his cock drooling precum on my inner thigh as he pushed his glasses on his nose, demanding that I show him my hole. The professor's fingers stretching me open, his cock inside me. That was it.

I'd come like a rocket, white light and stars clouding my vision.

One cold shower and a stern talking-to later, I'd concluded that encouraging Alistair to step away from his desk and have fun was all well and good, but I could not under any circumstance offer myself as Exhibit A, B, or C for a good time.

I tapped on his door at eight a.m. on the dot the following morning, prepared for the



inevitable post-kiss awkwardness. A housekeeper answered on the second knock with a polite, “ Bonjour !”

“Oh, bonjour . He’s gone?”

“ Oui .”

Shit . His computer was missing, but the stack of paperwork littered the table, and his jacket was draped neatly over one of the chairs.

I waved as I backed out of the room and headed for the elevators. I had a list of things to do and see, but I’d been hoping for a companion today.

I strode across the lobby and gave my room number to the friendly bald ma?tre d, Henri, manning the desk at the restaurant.

“Ah, my favorite American! Where would you like to sit this morning? I have zee window table, zee buffet table, and zee popular corner next to zee coffee.”

I smiled. “The window, sill vu play . How was that?”

Henri winced. “ Meh . Getting better, I think.”

I followed him through the maze of tables and slid into the booth. A server swooped in with coffee and a menu. I gave it a cursory glance, then scrolled through missed text messages and emails. I even checked my bank balance. Depressing.

I tossed my cell aside and cradled my cup as I scanned the dining room. The couple next to me had honeymoon-glazed goggles on, the family of four on my left were speaking German, and the businessmen opposite them were—the professor and Gerard, intently studying the laptop between them.

Whoa.

I watched them for a moment, gauging the mood. I'd expected the professor to be on edge and discombobulated, but he seemed perfectly cool and calm. If anything, Gerard was the one who looked out of sorts. Don't get me wrong, he was still hot as fuck—like an updated French version of Indiana Jones. He had the aura of someone who was comfortable anywhere. I could picture him in the deserts of Egypt or in a library, knee-deep in thick leatherbound books.

But I wouldn't have pictured him in a hotel restaurant, hanging on Alistair's every word.

This was interesting.

Seeing them together made me think their relationship was more convoluted than Alistair had indicated, because it was obvious that Gerard was in awe of the professor. He fixed a razor-sharp gaze on Alistair and leaned into his space, engrossed in whatever he was saying. I had no doubt that if there were a way to funnel the contents of the professor's brain directly to his, Gerard would have been all over it.

I abandoned my coffee and strode confidently toward their table, my eager-assistant smile locked firmly in place.

“Good morning, gentlemen. I mean, bonjour ! I see you're already hard at work unveiling the secrets of the ancient world and the—” I stopped mid-sentence and pointed at the screen. “Is that gay porn?”

Alistair snorted. “No, and good morning, Winnie. This is a closeup of a recent finding of a Ramesside period ostrakon.”

“I have no idea what that means, but my eyes do not deceive me. That’s...old-timey hanky-panky.” I squinted to get a better look at the crude drawing of a man in a loincloth bent at the waist as his lover entered him from behind, hands on hips.

Yeah, that was sex.

“You are correct, and that’s what makes this piece unusual,” Gerard commented with a friendly nod. “Allo , we met yesterday. I’m Gerard.”

“Winnie,” I said coolly. Gerard was less dreamy now that I knew the shady side of his personal connection to the professor. “I remember. ”

“I must thank you for letting me know Dr. Creighton was in town. We’ve accomplished a great deal this morning.”

“Oh. Right. I don’t want to interrupt,” I lied.

“No, no, I have a train to catch, and I am running late.” Gerard scooted his chair away from the table, aiming an indulgent half smile at me as he unhooked his computer bag from his chair and gathered his belongings. He spoke to Alistair in French in a low tone, then switched to English again as he stood. “Au revoir , Winnie. I shall be in touch, Al-ee.”

“Al-ee?” I arched a brow and flopped unceremoniously onto the seat Gerard vacated.

“Never call me that,” Alistair huffed imperiously.

“Why not? It’s a nice nickname.” I chuckled at his sharp glare. “My real name is Winston, but the only people who’ve ever called me that were teachers on the first day of school. I’ve always been Winnie. My sister is Jasmine...everyone calls her Jazz. What’s yours? And don’t tell me you didn’t have one growing up. Everyone

does.”

“Lee. Don’t call me that either.”

“Yes, sir.” I saluted him and pointed at the computer. “So...ancient porn is your secret research. You saucy minx, you.”

Alistair barked a laugh. “You’re a cheeky bugger. No, it’s not a secret, but it is sensitive.”

“Because they’re gay?”

“Not only that. It’s timing. Gerard would like to discuss his findings at the conference later in the month.”

“And he wants you to do the work.”

Alistair shrugged nonchalantly. “Research is what I do.”

“It’s gotta be weird to look at ancient porn with your ex’s husband.”

“That was...different,” he agreed wryly.

“I don’t like it. So tacky. There must be someone else he could ask. ”

“Well, he could ask Colin. He’s a trained linguist and a historian too, but Gerard claims Colin is too busy at the moment and there’s no one else. Sticky subject or no, I am the expert.”

“Sticky subject? More like crusty object,” I snarked. “I bet that rock inspired a few nasty fantasies. Can you x-ray it for ancient jizz?”

“Don’t be crude. This drawing is roughly three thousand years old. The hieroglyphics have partially worn off, but Gerard’s team thinks they’ve found a missing shard related to this artwork, and there’s a bit of excitement about it.”

“Show me again.”

“Sorry, I can’t. You’re not part of the archeological society,” Alistair teased, signing his name on the bill.

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll enroll as soon as I get to my room. C’mon, one more time.”

He tapped the lid on his laptop and slowly opened it. “A quick peek.”

I rested my elbows on the table, staring at the screen. “His arms and torso are too long, and the schlong is too small. Also, I don’t think it’s possible or wise to turn your head to that degree. But he’s smiling.” I pointed at the figure’s smudged face, then at the symbols to the left. “What does that say?”

“Unknown for now.”

“Any ideas?” I asked, pausing to thank the server who’d tracked me to Alistair’s table and delivered a fresh cup of coffee.

“A name, a place, a year. Something that ties the men together.”

“Do you think one of them is the artist?”

Alistair gazed at the laptop thoughtfully. “No. The artist is less important than the subject matter, though. As you can imagine, we don’t come across many homoerotic artifacts. We’ll see the occasional painting of two men or two women kissing, but in the past, historians have claimed the subjects were merely close friends or possibly

siblings. Not lovers. This is what you might call hard evidence.”

“Very punny, Professor.” I sipped my coffee, admiring his slightly hooked nose and strong chin as he closed his laptop. “Twelve hours ago you wanted to avoid that man like the plague. Now you’re in porny cahoots. Where did the change of heart come from?”

“You.” He smiled. “I’m going to my room to shower and change. I’ll?—”

I grabbed his wrist. “What do you mean...me?”

“I don’t know how to explain it, but when I saw Gerard’s text last night, it seemed foolish to ignore him. In a roundabout way, you pointed that out...and you were correct. I suppose I also have to thank you for adding to my workload.” Alistair released a faux put-upon sigh and wriggled out of my hold. “See you later.”

“Wait. I’ll help. I insist. We had a deal, remember? We’re still taking Paris together.”

I sounded desperate, and I knew it. I’d had a feeling Alistair would happily give me the brush-off after yesterday’s renegade kiss, and I’d been right. I didn’t want to chase him down and beg him to see the city with me. I wanted him to want me...or at least need my help. I was damn tired of feeling useless. I needed a purpose.

“Winnie...”

“And if I’m responsible for giving you more work, I need to do my share. I’m not a professional, but I can do something. You need someone to research modern porn for the sake of comparison, I’m your guy. I’m gay, and I know how to do gay sex. Who’s qualified? This guy.” I pointed at my chest enthusiastically.

“We’ll talk about it later,” he said kindly. “Have a good day, Winnie.”

I sat alone, nursing my lukewarm coffee while thinking about how to weasel my way into the professor's world. I could Wikipedia the hell out of ancient gay sexcapades and maybe learn how to decipher hieroglyphics. That couldn't be hard to do.

I opened the browser on my cell, glancing up briefly to thank the server for topping off my beverage just as my previous viewing history popped up— How to influence your boss's opinion, How to be a better listener, How to ask for a promotion, How to deserve a promotion, How not to take things personally, How to make a million dollars.

Huh.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek and frowned at what was either a plea for help or the index to any iteration of "Fill-in-the-Blank For Dummies." This was my crisis of confidence on full display, and it wasn't a good look for me.

At thirty-fucking-five, I'd hoped to have a thriving career, a fabulous house in the hills, an adoring husband, and a cute man-bag-sized pup that Liza wouldn't hate. I was failing on all counts. Okay, yes, my pity party for one was currently happening in Paris, France, so I had that going for me but not much else.

Out of the blue, a sense of renewed purpose surged through my veins. I had to make my time here count. I refused to walk away from this trip with nothing to show besides a social media feed filled with gratuitous selfies and a bag of bejeweled treats for my friends. I didn't want to be the guy who took a break to find himself. I wanted to make a difference.

How? Well...like it or not, I was going to help Alistair.

I cleared my browser history and typed: Ancient Egypt.

Fuck . This was a lot.

The timeline began in 3000 BC and continued into the Roman era. I skimmed through entries as I picked at cold eggs and a croissant .

Egyptians were inventors, educators, architects. They wore makeup, loved animals—especially cats—and women had equal rights. Ooh, I liked these people.

Doctors practiced specialized medicine, and yes, they saved organs for reasons I wasn't clear about. I assumed it had something to do with the afterlife. There seemed to be a strong emphasis on preparing for your next act. I made a mental note to ask Alistair about it.

Later. I was curious about modern conundrums too.

I opened a new tab and googled Gerard Poitier and Colin...last name unknown.

Interesting. Gerard Poitier was forty-eight, born in Nantes, educated in Paris, Egypt, and London, and had a list of credentials longer than my arm. He'd been on site during some exciting excavations and was widely considered one of the most important Egyptologists of his time...alongside Alistair Creighton of the UK.

They were peers, and from the photos online, it appeared as though once upon a time, they'd been good friends. Until Colin fucked that up.

Okay, that wasn't fair, but there was a story here and I was curious. I ordered a latte I didn't need and kept scrolling.

Colin Farrington, age forty-two, born in Buckinghamshire, educated in Oxford, and blah, blah, blah. I moved to his photo and frowned.



Damn it, he was really handsome. Blond, blue-eyed, trim, and well-dressed. He looked smart and sophisticated, and yep, I hated him.

I set my cell facedown on the table and picked up my latte, processing this new information like a detective mulling over clues for a job no one had hired me to do.

Fact: these were three smart, highly respected men...who'd been involved in a love triangle. That should have spelled scandal, all caps. Or at least, it should have made a headline or two. However, there was nothing tying Alistair to Colin romantically. Nothing at all.

That was...odd but telling. I had a strong feeling he hadn't lost Colin because he'd forgotten birthdays and didn't care about sex. He'd lost him because he'd put his career first.

That was sad.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:14 pm*

6

WINNIE

I spent the rest of the day on my own, strolling through the city and trying not to think about love triangles or basically anything that didn't spark joy. Paris was a feast for the eyes and the soul. I felt rejuvenated and carefree the following morning...ready to conquer the city and if he'd let me, assist the professor.

I tapped on his door, unabashedly ogling his damp torso as he fiddled with the corner of a towel.

"Alistair, you're naked," I deadpanned. "Again. Are you irascible to clothes?"

He fastened the towel and offered an apologetic half smile. "I think you mean averse not irascible. And no, I quite like being dressed and I'll fix that immediately. Good morning."

"Good morning." I sidled around him, stepping into his room. "Don't bother dressing on my account. Hey, it looks like you cleaned up the place."

"A bit. I shouldn't have opened the door, but I didn't want to miss the cleaning service today." He clutched his towel with one hand and raked his fingers through his hair with the other. "I'll finish up in the bathroom and get dressed. Was there something you needed?"

"Yes! I've been doing some research, and I have questions." I shooed him into his

bedroom suite. “Do your thing. We can talk through the door.”

“I’m going to shave, Winnie, and?—”

“That’s cool.”

Alistair wrinkled his brow as if pondering whether it was “cool” before giving up and heading for the bathroom. He didn’t close the door all the way, but I kept a respectful distance perched on the bench at the end of his king-sized bed.

The thick damask curtains were drawn on one side of the window, letting a ribbon of light in. I quelled the urge to tidy the mess of discarded clothing on the floor. I was no neat freak, but this dude was a slob.

“What was your question?” he asked, removing his glasses to slather lotion onto his cheeks.

I gazed at his reflection in the mirror and damn it, my mind went blank. There was something incredibly sexy about a bear of a man shaving. Or was that me?

I cleared my throat and decided to put the overdue “I shouldn’t have stuck my tongue down your throat” speech on hold. It was better to concentrate on my new mission of becoming a proper assistant.

“Did ancient Egyptians really invent toothpaste, clocks, and paper? What was the purpose of the mummy thing? I read that everyone did it, irregardless of class.”

Alistair pivoted with a razor in hand, his face white with shaving cream, his hair askew. “Irregardless is not a word, and not everyone was mummified. It was an expensive process. Poorer people were buried in simple graves with a few belongings.”

“I knew that. I was just testing you.” I jumped to my feet to lean against the bathroom doorjamb, unthinking. Emphasis on unthinking. I shouldn’t have been in his suite at all, but he was magnetic. “These are things an assistant should know, and I’m doing my homework.”

“That’s not necessary,” he stated, dragging his razor along his jaw.

I ignored him. “I read that the oldest known mummy was found in Chile, not Egypt. I also read something disgusting about the organs and brains and—you’re going to cut yourself. Let me help.”

He held the razor out of my reach and shook his head. “No, Winnie.”

I rested my hip on the counter, crossing my arms and blurting, “I’m sorry about the kissing thing. It was hot as fuck, so I don’t really regret it, but it probably shouldn’t have happened. I’m glad that you spoke to Gerard and took control of that situation. Good move. Except you took on another project. And since it’s sort of my fault, I’m going to assist you...like I suggested.”

Alistair’s eyes shifted to mine in the mirror as he continued to shave. I watched the glide of his sure fingers in a trance. I didn’t notice the gathering silence until he turned on the water and bent to rinse his face. He reached for the hand towel on the counter and dried off, then slipped out of the room.

And me? My mouth was dry and my heart was beating out of control. Oh, yeah...and my dick was pulsing against my zipper. I was sex starved, to be sure, but this was an extreme reaction to watching a man shave.

Ugh . You know what this meant? I was attracted to the professor.

Snap out of it, Winnie.

I swiped my clammy palms on a towel and grabbed the glasses he'd left on the counter, wordlessly handing them over to him .

Alistair thanked me with a nod and wandered to his suitcase, clutching his towel with his right hand and sifting through his belongings with his left. Apparently, this was a silent good-bye.

I could take a hint. I tortured myself with one last peek at his broad chest and noticed that his glasses had slipped on his nose as he unearthed a pair of boxer briefs. He froze...hands full and most likely unable to see.

Anyone else would have dropped the briefs, fixed the glasses situation, and moved on without a thought. Not Alistair. The guy had more degrees than a thermometer, yet motor skill prioritization stumped him. I cocked my head, fascinated by his apparent indecision.

When seconds ticked into a minute, I couldn't take the suspense. I marched to the professor's side and pushed his glasses to the bridge of his nose.

"Oh, ha. Thank you."

Alistair flashed a self-deprecating grin that made him look ten years younger. The twinkle in his eyes and the lopsided curl of his lips invited me to laugh at his clumsy display. But I couldn't stop staring at his mouth...and his smooth jaw. He smelled fresh and minty—like toothpaste, shampoo, and something uniquely him. It was the beginning of my undoing.

His damp hair was finger-combed and wild and I liked it. I itched to push the stray lock from his forehead. Of course, I wouldn't dare. No way. I knew myself. One touch and I'd be a goner. I'd plaster my naughty self all up in his grill, feasting on his lips while I explored every inch of his beefy, sexy torso. Bad idea.

So I stepped aside and gestured to the adjoining bedroom. “I should...”

“Yes, of course. We’ll talk later.” Alistair nodded. Vigorously.

All that vigorous nodding dislodged his glasses again .

This time he dropped the towel and the briefs to rescue his spectacles, and boom—he was starkers.

Just like the other day. Only worse because now I knew what it felt like to have his mouth on mine. I was so fucking hot and horny for him, it wasn’t funny.

And what the hell was with the rampant nudity?

If I didn’t know better, I’d think Alistair was an exhibitionist. Hell, maybe he was, but I had bigger problems to contend with now. Like my dick. It swelled in appreciation, and my little gasp of surprise was drenched with a generous helping of unmistakable desire. I couldn’t fake my way out of this gracefully.

I was fully clothed in my fabulous blue plaid trousers and a tapered oxford shirt. I oozed all things sharp and professional, but there was no hiding my burgeoning boner.

I picked up the towel in a last-ditch effort to pull myself together. Sadly, my balance was out of whack. I tripped and fell onto my knees, looked up and?—

Oh, Lord, give me strength.

Yeah, you know the philosophy I shared with the professor at the train station about finding a light and fluffy bloop to distract you from your problems? Total bullshit. Or maybe it didn’t apply in times like these. I mean...c’mon. I was face-to-face with a

big, beautiful cock that seemed to grow before my very eyes.

I'd been in some tricky situations in the past. For example, the back-seat make-out session with a stranger I'd shared a cab with in New York City who I spotted on *Dancing with the Stars* the following week, and the memorable occasion when a go-go dancer pulled me on stage and proceeded to peel his clothes off à la Magic Mike. All of his clothes.

There were dozens of other instances of me temporarily losing my sense of propriety, but they paled in comparison to this .

Sure, I knew what I was supposed to do—jump to my feet and tell Alistair to knock on my door as soon as he was dressed, but I was not a damn saint. I was on fire for him. He was quietly commanding, sexy without trying.

And naked Alistair was a fucking god.

This man had been on my mind nonstop for days, starring in this exact sort of scenario. So excuse me for making all the wrong decisions, but since I was probably already on my way to hell in a Louis Vuitton knockoff handbag, I had nothing to lose.

Okay, possibly a job. That didn't register as particularly important at the moment, though.

I glanced up at the professor and lifted my hand, brushing my fingertips along his shaft in a featherlight touch.

"Can I?" I whispered. "It's too much, I know it is, but I just..."

"Yes." Alistair's voice was low and rumble as he gripped his cock at the base, offering it to me with a no-nonsense confidence that was sexy as fuck. "Do it."

I licked my parched lips as I curled my fingers around his shaft, stroking him slowly. My knees dug into the commercial-grade hotel carpet, but I was too strung out to suggest moving somewhere more comfortable. The head of his cock disappearing behind his foreskin was mesmerizing.

I squeezed him on the up-stroke experimentally, watching a bead of precum gather on his slit. I swiped it with my thumb, meeting his gaze as I sucked the digit like a lollipop. Alistair hissed somewhere above me and let out a guttural, greedy sound I felt deep in my chest. It spurred me into action.

Real action.

I jacked him a couple of times and leaned forward to lick the underside of his cock, just once. I fondled his balls and did it again, opening my mouth to circle his crown with the tip of my tongue. And then...I swallowed him whole.

Alistair groaned aloud, grabbing a fistful of my hair as if to keep me in place. He didn't have to worry about me going anywhere. I was in heaven. I sucked with gusto, hollowing out my cheeks and drawing away with a pop before opening wider and taking even more of his thick dick.

I gagged more than once—a testament to his size and my lack of recent practice. I squeezed his ass and raked my nails along his thighs, loving his endless stream of British swear words. Bloody fuck, bloody fucking hell, so bloody good...

My eyes watered as I pulled off his dick. I chuckled softly, gliding my hand up and down his pole. "I love the way you talk. You sound so sexy and so?—"

"Christ, I'm going to come," he warned.

And he did. On my chin, my right cheek, and the corner of my mouth. Holy fuck, that



was hot.

Heavy breathing filled the otherwise silent room as I sat on my heels, blinking wildly in a state of blissed-out horny shock.

“Wow,” I purred, licking my bottom lip.

“You’ve got...on your... Stay. I’ll be back in a jiff.” Alistair returned with a wet cloth, wearing a pair of black boxer briefs and a hesitant smile. “Are you all right?”

I stood, tidying up and straightening my clothes. “My cock hurts from zipper strangulation but otherwise, yes.”

“Open your trousers,” he commanded.

“I...”

“Do it.”

His authoritative tone sent a new wave of shivers along my spine. I obeyed with trembling fingers, too far gone to second-guess my decision-making skills.

I leaned against the nearest wall, shoving my trousers and boxer briefs over my ass. My cock sprang free and yes, I might have whimpered in relief as I gripped myself. I was so close. My whole body was taut and tingly with impending release. I squeezed my eyes shut and jacked my aching dick .

Alistair moved into my space, licked his palm, then curled his fingers around mine, and stroked—once, twice...

“ Ungh !”

“That’s it. I’ve got you,” he murmured softly. “Come for me.”

I shot off like a cannon, roaring as I dug my nails into his arm. I went limp and instead of collapsing against the wall to put a little space between us and the bad idea I’d unleashed, I threw myself at the professor, fusing our mouths hungrily.

And somehow, it was better than our first kiss. It was a needy, grabby, tongue twist fueled by adrenaline and post-orgasmic bliss.

Hey, no one had ever accused me of being subtle.

Alistair broke for air and stepped aside, bracing himself on the wall next to me, panting. I wished I could think of something clever to say, but there was a big empty cartoon bubble hanging over my head.

I met his eyes and shit, I think I blushed.

“How did that happen?” I choked out.

He bent to pick up the towel he’d dropped earlier, wiped his hands, and then tossed it to me. “You followed me into the bathroom to ask about...mummies. It’s hazy for me after that.”

I did a minor cleanup job and loosely put myself together. I needed a shower and a change of clothes, stat. “Mummies. History really gets your motor running, huh?”

“You could say that,” Alistair agreed with a self-deprecating half laugh, setting his hands on his hips as he stared at me. “How do we do this now?”

“You mean...” I gestured between us manically, panic rising like a tidal wave.

“Winnie? Are you going to faint?”

“Yes. No. Um...gimme a second. I’ll be right back.” I made a beeline for the bathroom, turning on the faucet as I gaped at my reflection .

Jiminy freaking Christmas, what did I do?

I’d blown my best friend’s boss. No, I hadn’t just blown Alistair—I’d gotten down on my knees and worshiped his cock with everything I’d had in me. No thought about consequences or the fact that we were only a few days into a month-long trip. Disaster!

Or was it? Ugh. There was only one way to find out.

I splashed water on my face, searched my pocket for my pink-tinted gloss and reapplied, examining my bee-stung lips as I gave myself one last stern talking-to in the mirror. “Get your act together, Win, and be-fucking-have.”

Lecture complete, I straightened my shirt and opened the door.

“Are you all right?” Alistair asked, a concerned expression knitting his brow.

“Honest? I’m a little freaked out and the potential for big regret should be there, but I don’t feel it. You might, though, and I understand. I guess that makes me nervous. Sexy shenanigans was definitely on my Parisian wish list, but I’m sure it wasn’t on yours and certainly not with me. So when you ask, how do we do this—the answer is, I don’t fucking know. You have to make the call here. You have to tell me what you want. If you want me to leave, I’ll go. If you want me to stay?—”

“Of course I want you to stay, you daft man. I thought it was obvious.”

I lifted my chin and smiled hesitantly. “Okay...good.”

“We’re here for a month, Winnie, and while I suppose we could pretend nothing occurred, that might prove impossible in the long run. For me, anyway.”

“Me too. Totally impossible,” I agreed. “Okay, let’s stick to my idea—Paris for me, King Tut and mummies and naughty Egyptian art for you. And I think you should let me help you. It’s only a month, right? I don’t want to go to any more museums alone, and I don’t think you should be cooped up in your room all day. The rest—the sexy stuff...I say we go with the flow. No plans necessary.”

Alistair nodded slowly. “All right.”

“Yeah?” I flashed a wide grin. “You’ll let me help?”

“We can try.”

I didn’t miss the hesitant drawl, but I wasn’t deterred. “I’ll shower and change, and then we can coagulate our calendars.”

“Coordinate?”

“Yes! That’s it.” I pointed a finger at his chest and at the last second, kissed his cheek. “Thanks. You won’t be sorry.”

7

ALISTAIR

I had a feeling I was going to be very sorry.

Yes, I liked Winnie...a lot.

He was a breath of fresh air albeit with the subtlety of a hurricane—loud and brash. Yet I sensed a fragility to him that brought out my protective side. I hadn't known I'd had one. His plea to assist had a manic edge I associated with someone who had something to prove to himself. I knew a thing or two about personal battles.

Perhaps my mini meltdown— the one that had led to our unplanned initial Parisian excursion—had leveled the playing field a bit. Winnie had met my close-associate-slash-one-time-nemesis and in a roundabout way had encouraged me to face Gerard. Of course, that had led to yet another project, so I wasn't convinced I'd come out ahead on that one.

But let's talk about that blowjob, shall we?

My God, Winnie on his knees with his lips wrapped around my dick had officially jumped the queue to the top of my favorite memories. It was sensual and sexy and a little confusing.

How was it possible that this beautiful hothouse flower of a human wanted me ?

But he did. And it was more than want. He'd looked at me as if he'd thought I might have the answers he needed. With his swollen lips, dreamy eyes, and my cum on his cheek, I'd had a very real desire to be whatever version of a knight in shining armor he'd dreamed up.

And that wasn't wise. I was no savior, but if he was hoping for a Parisian diversion with meaningless sex and didn't mind that it came with a small history lesson, I was on board.

I vowed to be open to new ideas and suggestions and step outside of my comfort zone. I might even let him "assist" me. Just a little.

He could begin by acquainting himself with a general timeline of Ancient Egyptian.

"How? Wikipedia?" he asked.

"That's fine."

"Great. Be sure to check the schedule I left on your desk. We're splitting time evenly between work and field trips...starting today."

"Winnie..."

"No complaints," he warned. "We have a deal, a plan, a schedule. It's going to be fab, darling. You'll see."

That was how it began.

Winnie's Proposed Schedule:

Breakfast

Excursion 1

Lunch

Work

Excursion 2

Dinner

Excursion 3

“This is an excursion-heavy proposal,” I commented warily.

“We can switch things around. Maybe double work one day and double fun the next.”

I fixed him with a dubious once-over. “I agree to a three-day trial.”

“You’re on. Prepare to have the best three days ever.”

Day one: I gave Winnie a list of broad subjects to review online—the Nile, gods and religion, hieroglyphs, art and architecture—while I studied notes and digital archives of archeological fragments. Every once in a while, I’d ask him to stop and look up something specific, like Amun, Ogdoad, and the temple at Karnak...for fun.

I sat at the table I’d repurposed as a desk, squinting at two different screens, deciphering hieratic documents on one, a map of Saqqara on the other, images of artifacts on an iPad, and...a view of Winnie in my periphery with a laptop on his knee, oohing and aahing over whatever he’d stumbled across in the latest rabbit hole he’d fallen into.

I'd expected to be annoyed by the distraction, but Winnie was pleasant company. For once, he wasn't overly chatty and if his occasional interruptions caught me off guard, I blamed my newly activated libido. I was intensely aware of Winnie.

Well, since we'd agreed that sex was on the table, there was no point in pretending to be a prude, right?

Contrary to what my ex thought, I loved sex. I loved everything about it. I loved the fluttery sensation of mutual attraction and the tentative dance that turned into rabid desire. I loved the intimacy of holding a man—touching, kissing, fucking.

And God, I wanted to fuck Winnie.

But I'd take whatever he offered and do my best not to scare him away.

I found myself machinating ways to get close to him. Yes, the man who could sit for hours in front of a computer suddenly needed to stretch his legs and step onto the balcony for a bit of fresh air.

Winnie would join me, standing close with a dreamy look on his face as he soaked in the city. I'd brace for manic conversation à la Mr. Toad in *The Wind in the Willows*. Again, he'd surprise me...leaning on me like a cat until I opened my arms and let him in.

Soulful kisses turned hungry in an instant. We'd stumble into my suite, pull the duvet aside and undress as if we were on a timer, chasing lips in the dimly lit bedroom. I was usually self-conscious about nudity. I wasn't overly fit or trim, but I was too engrossed in Winnie to worry about my shortcomings.

He was beautiful.



I couldn't believe he was naked in my bed, arms open, legs spread wide. I climbed atop him, licking every inch of his body from the crease under his knees to the sensitive skin under his sac. I sucked his balls, teased the tip of his cock, devouring him in greedy pulls, then tweaking his nipples.

Sometimes I urged him to feed me every drop he had while I stroked myself to the finish line. Other times, I covered his body, thrusting against his erection as I feasted on his mouth. I liked the feel of him beneath me, and I loved holding him tightly as cum spurted between us.

There'd been a couple of shower hand jobs, a sofa frothing session, and countless blowjobs. No complaints here...except I'd been extremely unproductive at work.

And Winnie hadn't gone sightseeing.

Till today.

"Where are we going?"

My gaze traveled to Winnie as he adjusted his fedora at a jaunty angle in front of the mirror next to the elevators. This morning he wore a smart herringbone suit coat with designer jeans he'd rolled at the cuffs and a pair of shiny loafers that looked decidedly uncomfortable for traversing city streets.

In contrast, I was sensibly dressed in khakis, a tan jumper, and trainers. I would be comfortable; he would be fabulous.

"It's a suggested schedule. I know you're busy, and I respect that. So maybe a stroll through the gardens or the shops on the Champ Elise would be nice before we dive into the books?"

“Champs élysées,” I corrected. “Lunch, one stroll, then back to work.”

“Yes, sir!” He beamed, dancing to the elevator as soon as the doors slid open. “I mean... oui , mon-sur .”

“ Monsieur . We have one hour, Winnie. Nothing more.”

Winnie winked and threaded his arm through mine. “One hour.”

Three hours later, we’d popped into a dozen shops on Champs élysées, had a bite to eat at a crowded café on the Avenue de Wagram, and bought tickets to traverse the two hundred and eighty-four steps of the spiral staircase to the top of the Arc de Triomphe.

It was cramped and hot, and not my idea of fun, but Winnie was happy and that was worth the price of admission. His smile blinded me. No joke. He stood on the precipice overlooking Paris, emanating the kind of joy I hadn’t felt since I was a child. I couldn’t stand there, staring at him forever, so I prepared my short speech about Napoleon commissioning the structure in 1806 to honor his troops’ victory over Austria. You know...for fun.

Winnie beat me to it.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“A village outside of Canterbury, two hours southeast of London. ”

“Family?”

“I have one, yes,” I confirmed sarcastically.

Winnie snickered, nudging my elbow playfully. “Answer the question, Professor.”

“My parents are alive and well, happily married and happily retired. My sister, Annabelle, lives two streets away from Mum and Dad with her husband, two children, and three dogs. My father taught history at primary school, Mum was a librarian, and Annabelle and Richard are both historians. They have a successful podcast and have written a few books that have been well received.”

“Wow! Genius runs in the Creighton genes, huh?”

I gave a half laugh. “I don’t know about genius, but we’re all academics. I spent quite a bit of my youth surrounded by books.”

“Not me. I’m the first one in my family to go to college.”

“San Francisco? Is that right?”

He twisted to face me and beamed. “You were listening! Geez, it’s almost like you’re flirting with me again, Professor.”

“I don’t flirt,” I huffed.

“That’s right. I remember.” Winnie inched closer to me to give a fellow tourist room to take a selfie.

He smelled good. I fought the urge to bury my nose in the crook of his neck and breathe him in. I cleared my throat instead and tried to remember what we’d been discussing. Family, university...safe topics.

“Did you enjoy college?”

“Oh, God, yes! I met amazing friends and learned a lot about how to adult as a queer man in the big scary world. San Francisco felt like the ultimate safe space. I was out in high school, or maybe even junior high—I forget—but I didn’t really let my guard down and stretch my wings until college. I faked it well in high school. I wore wacky clothes, did my hair and makeup, and walked into every room like I had it going on.” He snapped his fingers and popped his hip out. “Long story short...I didn’t.”

“Sounds like any typical teenager.”

Winnie gasped. “Typical? Bite your tongue. I was never typical. I never wanted to blend in, but I definitely needed those college years to learn...grace, you know? I’m not graceful, so that’s probably the wrong word. What’s the word when you’re transforming into the you that you’re supposed to be and it finally feels right? Like a butterfly.”

“A chrysalis?”

“No, but you know what I mean—you go to college to get all the angst and in-your-face BS out of your system. You go to all the parties, do the drugs, drink way too much, have too much sex, and when the dust settles, if you’re lucky, something magical happens—you find your people. And if you’re extra lucky, you’ve sworn off vices that don’t serve you and men with big egos and small dicks. You figure out your worth and you stand by it. You own it. College gave me that extra boost I needed.”

“I see.”

“My mom didn’t understand, though. ‘ Mijo , you waste your money!’” He modulated his voice a few octaves with a Mexican accent before continuing. “Sure, I’m still paying off student loans, but I have no regrets. None. Think about it...if I hadn’t gone to SFSU, I wouldn’t have met Raine and I wouldn’t be here with you

now. And wow, this is amazing, Alistair. Truly amazing.”

His voice was laced with profound wonder.

Once again, Winnie confounded me. One simple “Did you enjoy college?” and he’d given me a dissertation on growth and self-affirmation. I couldn’t relate to his tale in any way, shape, or form, but I was spellbound. How could I not be?

Snap out of it, man .

“Amazing,” I repeated for lack of anything better to say.

“So...yay, college.”

I chuckled. “Yay, college. I don’t think I uttered that phrase once while I was at uni.”

“Really?” He pivoted toward me, resting his elbow on the rail. “I thought you loved learning. You’re a professor, for fuck’s sake.”

“Yes, but I was there to learn, not to—how did you put it—get all the angst out of my system. I don’t have angst.” I fiddled with my glasses and slipped my free hand into my pocket to rummage for my phone as I idly watched a gaggle of tourists point out the Eiffel Tower in the distance.

Winnie arched his brow imperiously. “Everyone has angst, honey. And your cell is still in your right pocket.”

I gave a weak half laugh and pulled my phone out. “I’m forever misplacing things. That’s my angst.”

“Wrong. That’s a quirk. Angst is different. That’s the stuff inside that makes your

stomach hurt at three a.m. out of the blue. Does that ever happen to you?"

"No, I'm usually working at three a.m.," I admitted.

Winnie wrinkled his nose in distaste. "What do you do for fun?"

"I suppose I...read."

"And?" he prodded.

I shrugged. "I watch films every now and again."

"What's the last film you watched in a movie theater?"

I shot him an exasperated look. "I don't remember exactly...maybe Titanic ?"

Winnie's jaw dropped like a cartoon character. "That's a moldy movie. That cannot be your answer."

I snickered at his put-upon expression. "It is my answer, and what is a moldy movie, exactly?"

"Old!" He sighed and waved a diva-esque hand between us. " I loved that movie to pieces, though, so I'm only judging you for not going to the theater."

"Why would I want to go to the cinema? People don't behave there. They talk, put their feet on your seat, stare at their cellular devices."

"How do you know? Cell phones didn't exist in Titanic days."

"They did," I reported. "They were just heftier and texting was a bother."

Winnie smiled. "Sounds positively prehistoric."

We were quiet for a long moment, admiring the view. I pointed out the Place de la Concorde, the opera house, and the H?tel des Invalides where Napoleon's tomb was on display. It was all very neutral, so I wasn't sure why I veered off course and made things personal. Again.

"Do you still have angst?"

"Yeah." Winnie kept his gaze forward, his expression hidden behind his dark glasses. "I think it's tied to my Peter Pan syndrome."

"You don't want to grow up?"

"No, it's more that I don't know how to do it. I haven't used my degree for anything newsworthy, and I'm not exactly killing it as a stylist. I can't decide if it's time to move on or try harder." He opened his palms and inhaled deeply. "You're lucky to be passionate about your work. I've never had a job I wanted to do all night long. Ever."

I stuffed my hands into my pockets and squinted at the traffic below. "My work is a nice escape."

"From what?"

"Twenty-first century problems," I replied. "I'm paid well to travel back in time to piece together aspects of an ancient civilization that thrived for thousands of years. I can dive into my favorite era and reconstruct the temples and palaces of Ramesseum, imagining what life would have been like at a time of incredible prosperity in the reign of Ramses the Great. I can get lost in fragments of lives long gone with bits of pottery, shards of jewelry, and mummified pets. It amazes me to think someone like us wore that necklace or bracelet on their skin, held that cat in their arms, fed it water

or milk from a bowl...just as we would. All that separates us is time.”

“Huh, I’d never thought of it like that. No offense, but musty old stuff in museums doesn’t do much for me. If you hadn’t taken me to the Louvre, I would have gone on my own and skipped out as soon as I got my selfie in front of the Mona Lisa . Hashtag ‘why so glum?’”

I barked a laugh. “There’s no need to apologize for not sharing my interests. I’d be more surprised if you did. You’re a thoroughly modern man, Winnie—vibrant and curious, and very much in tune with what’s cool and trendy. I’m not.”

“You’re cool.”

“Am I really?” I snorted in dismay.

“In your own way...yes.”

“Well, I’m definitely not trendy.”

Winnie stepped aside, cocking his hat as if to get a better look. “No, you’re not.”

“You don’t like my jumper?” I asked, plucking at the fabric.

He slid his sunglasses down his nose and pushed them into place. “Beige is making a comeback, but you’re riding that wave too hard. Blue is your color. Trust me, it’ll make your eyes pop.”

I twisted my lips in amusement. “If you say so.”

He playfully bumped my elbow on the railing and sighed. “Sounds like we’re both in the market for a little escape. Paris is mine and work is yours.”



“I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“It’s not totally accurate. Your escape has meaning and purpose. Mine is an opportunistic getaway that I hope ends with a flash of chalance.”

I laughed. “You have an interesting habit of repurposing the English language.”

“Do I?”

“Chalance isn’t a word, Winnie. Perhaps you mean clarity?”

“No, chalance sounds better. The opposite of nonchalance,” he insisted, bumping my elbow again.

I returned the favor as if we were old friends, then turned to study the surrounding landscape—the fluffy white clouds, the trees turning orange and yellow, and the French flags dotting the avenue.

I’d been here many times, but I couldn’t remember the last time I’d wanted to linger and soak in the atmosphere. There was always work to do, important research that was crucial to furthering our collective understanding of the past, yet for the first time in ages, I was very comfortable right where I was...in the present.

Of course, I couldn’t stay here for long.

“Do you see the obelisk straight ahead in the Place de la Concorde?” I pointed at the huge phallic-shaped slab of vertical red granite in the middle of the roundabout down the avenue from the Arc de Triomphe. “It’s over three thousand years old and is one of a pair—the other is still in Luxor.”

He gaped. “That thing is three thousand years old? For real?”

“Yes. It was gifted to Paris in 1833. Interesting, since Napoleon went out of his way to conquer Egypt just over three decades earlier. They claim he wanted to damage British trade routes to India, and yes, I’m sure that’s true, but Napoleon had quite an ego,” I rambled on. “Some say he wanted to walk in Alexander the Great’s footsteps and—sorry, I’m lecturing.”

“I don’t mind at all.”

“Really? I would think that—what’s wrong?” I cocked my head as if it would help me decipher his expression .

“Kiss me,” Winnie blurted, tugging my sleeve as he grinned at me.

My glasses slipped on my nose as I furrowed my brow, pivoting to face him. “What—here? Now?”

His smile had an enigmatic quality I couldn’t interpret, but the desire was easier to read. It had been a long time since anyone had looked at me like that. It was hypnotic.

“Yes...here. Now.”

I traced Winnie’s jaw with the tip of my forefinger, relishing his sharp intake of breath as I stepped closer. He put a hand on the top of his head to keep his hat in place as he tilted his chin, lips parted in invitation.

So I kissed him.

It was brief but potent—a quick brush of tongues, a sigh, and the slide of lips. I released him, my cheeks on fire when I accidentally stumbled into an older man with a professional camera around his neck. What were we thinking? We were in public, for God’s sake. Standing atop of a famous monument, snogging like teenagers was

reckless and immature and?—

Oh, fuck it.

I pulled Winnie into my arms again and crashed my mouth over his. His hat slipped off his head, his sunglasses went cockeyed, and we definitely had an audience now. I should have been mortified by my lack of self-control and decorum, but I wasn't. He felt too good.

A wolf whistle and applause snapped me out of my trance. I bent to pick up Winnie's hat, fixed his sunglasses, then linked my fingers with his and pulled him to the staircase.

We speed-walked along the Champs élysées—no window-shopping this time, no pausing for carefully curated Instagram-worthy selfies. I noticed him studying the obelisk as we waited for the light at the crosswalk to turn, but he didn't ask questions and I didn't volunteer information .

We had more pressing things in mind.

I knew I did, anyway. I wanted Winnie. I wanted him badly.

I wanted him naked in my bed, arms above his head, legs open. I wanted to touch him, taste him, tease him, please him. And I wanted to take my time.

We nodded to the doorman and made our way to the lifts, where we shared a ride with a chatty couple from Texas. Winnie charmed them and I ignored them, staring straight ahead like a statue. The second the doors parted, I sprang into action, key card in hand as I strode down the hall toward my suite with Winnie at my heels.

We didn't enter the room; we crashed into it, careening against the nearest wall as we

came together in a manic embrace with dirty kisses and feverish humping. Winnie broke away with a gasp and tossed his hat onto the desk, then shrugged his suit coat off and motioned for me to follow his lead.

I tugged my jumper and T-shirt over my head, dropping them on the floor. I had a brief thought that I should have started with my trousers. My cock was far more impressive than my no-gym body.

He was obviously open to the concept of a short tryst with a flabby professor who avoided sunshine like a vampire, but I wouldn't kid myself that he found me...attractive. Not Hollywood attractive, that was for certain. After all, Winnie came from the land of oiled-up, muscular hotties with six-packs, golden tanned skin, perfect teeth, and impeccable wardrobes.

That wasn't me. Not that he seemed to mind as he was currently attempting to suck on my tonsils as he kicked off his shoes and unbuckled my belt.

I returned the favor, unzipping and lowering his trousers to?—

“Bloody hell, Winnie. What are you wearing?”

He licked his pink-stained lips and glanced down. “Lace. Do you like it?”

My mouth went dry in an instant. I swallowed hard and stepped aside to get a better look at the flimsy black fabric covering his rigid cock. He wriggled out of his shirt and trousers till he stood wearing nothing but a bit of lace.

And Christ, I'd never seen anything sexier in my life.

“I—yes. I like it...very much. You're—God, you're fucking beautiful,” I whispered reverently.

He beamed and, without warning, launched himself at me.

I caught him with an oomph , sucking his tongue as he wrapped his legs around my waist. It would have been wisest to undress completely before attempting to waddle with my knees trapped in my khakis, but there was no way I was letting him go.

I held his bare arse, squeezing his flesh as I shuffled into the adjoining bedroom.

Good news, housekeeping had been in, so it didn't look as if a hurricane had blown through. Bad news, my computer bag was where I'd left it, protruding from behind the bin next to the nightstand. Needless to say, I tripped over the bag and we both went flying toward the bed.

Winnie squawked and gasped for air when I landed on him like a wrestler taking an opponent out on the mat.

"I'm sorry. I?—"

He cut me off, smashing his lips to mine as he snaked his arms around my neck and pulled me in like an octopus. We rolled on the freshly made bed, batting pillows aside and losing excess clothing in between searing kisses. Except for the lace.

"I know this wasn't supposed to be part of the plan, but you feel so good," he hummed. "We don't have to do everything. We can stop whenever you want. I just want to?—"

I covered his mouth with my hand and immediately let go to better pin him to the mattress. "More doing, less talking. "

Winnie purred like a kitten. "Yes, sir. You can take them off now."

“The lace stays. Don’t move a muscle.” I bit his jaw and hopped out of bed, naked.

I avoided the bathroom mirror as I rummaged through my toiletries. My reflection would only ruin the moment, and I didn’t want to take a chance that reality would interfere with this incredible dream. Things like this didn’t happen to men like me.

I grabbed the lube and a towel and at the last second, a condom too...just in case.

“ Mmm .” Winnie propped himself on one elbow, fingers sliding over the lace-covered bulge.

I set the supplies aside and climbed atop Winnie, scooting between his open legs. Then I stared in a mix of awe and appreciation. I know, I know...I was ridiculous and time was ticking, but damn it, he was gorgeous—sinewy and lithe with flawless, smooth skin. His raven hair fell like a curtain, partially shading his luminous eyes. And his lips...God, those lips might be my undoing.

Or maybe it would be the lace.

I massaged his inner thigh, brushing my thumb along the crease where lace met skin. “You look lovely.”

“So do you. Come closer. Let me touch your cock,” he cajoled like a siren.

“Not yet. Lie back and open up for me.” I was impressed with the note of authority in my voice. Lord knew it was an act. I was jittery and nervous but determined. I wanted this to be good for him. No regrets.

Winnie obeyed, spreading himself wide, a finger ghosting over his perfect pucker. “Like this?”

“Have I told you that you’re lovely? Possibly the most lovely man I’ve ever seen.”

“Oh, go on,” he preened, chuckling lightly .

I glided a single digit alongside his, loving the sound of his low moan as I pushed the tip inside. Just a tease. “I want to lick you, taste you, make you come. Will you let me?”

“Y-yes. You can fuck me. You can?—”

“Shh. We’ll get there. For now, relax.” And with that, I bent to drag my tongue from his balls to the tip of his cock peeking out of his thong.

I sucked precum from his slit, then mouthed his thick shaft through the lacy barrier while gently probing his arse. I pushed my finger farther and continued my exploration, licking a trail from his V-line to his belly button. I traced the contours of his ribs with the tip of my tongue and laved his nipples, adding a second finger.

“Oh, fuck, oh, fuck, oh, fuck...yes, so good, Alistair. Please,” he groaned.

I folded his knees to his chest and parted his cheeks. My nostrils flared in appreciation...and hunger. That was what this felt like—hunger, need, and unchecked desire. I trailed my tongue along the scrap of lace cutting him in half, then I pushed the string aside and kissed his entrance...with my lips and my tongue.

Tentative tastes gave way to something urgent and primal. I speared his opening and feasted like a savage, pausing occasionally to tease his ball sac as I finger-fucked him.

Winnie whimpered, slipping his hand under the lace to grip himself. I didn’t stop him. My concentration was focused on his hole...and on not coming too soon. I’d

never been harder in my life. I tried not to rub against the mattress or his thigh, knowing I was an errant pump away from blowing my load.

He shoved at the lace and gave his pole a proper squeeze. And yes, I got greedy. I pulled the lace off altogether and tossed it aside. My fingers were in his arse again, my mouth on his cock. I sucked him to the root, bobbing up and down .

I released him, panting as I drank in the sight of him writhing beneath me, humming my name, begging me over and over, “Fuck me, Alistair. Fuck me.”

I rolled a condom on, lubed up, pressed my cock at his entrance, and slowly entered my lover.

Winnie was so tight, so hot, so...bloody perfect. I buried myself balls deep, my arms trembling in the effort to move with care.

“Tell me when you’re ready.”

Winnie released a ragged breath and inclined his chin. “Now.”

He lifted to meet each thrust, demanding more as I rocked my hips steadily. Languid strokes gave way to frenetic fucking. The bedsprings creaked and the walls practically rattled with Winnie’s enthusiastic moans. His teeth in my shoulder, his fingernails clutching my arse, his legs wrapped around my waist.

Winnie was voracious and he wanted more, more, more. I delivered.

I kissed the inside of his calf, gripped his cock, and jerked him until he stiffened and trembled, crying out as his orgasm hit and cum jetted across his stomach.

I didn’t stop moving...I couldn’t. I held his ankles wide, pistoning faster and faster,



chasing my release. When it hit, I was gone, floating somewhere on a cloud above us like a kite on a strong breeze. I didn't ever want to come down from the high or let go.

Until Winnie grabbed my face and fused his mouth to mine. It was an exclamation mark of a kiss—an “I can't believe we did that” and a “Wasn't that the best thing ever?” sort of kiss.

Eventually, I collapsed beside him, gasping for air. My vision blurred and my limbs felt like spaghetti. I was pretty sure I wouldn't be able to move for twenty-four hours...or more. I rolled to face Winnie, rescuing the towel I'd brought in earlier. I unfolded it and laid it across the mess on his belly.

“You bit me, you bloody vampire,” I chided without heat, pointing at my shoulder.

Winnie grinned and bared his teeth. “You didn't know?”

“No, I?—”

He dove on top of me, smothering me with a hundred kisses. He stopped to fix my hopelessly smudged and crooked glasses, flashing a radiant grin that lit the room like a firecracker. “I'm a vampire, a werewolf, and a zombie all in one. A chupacabra.”

I laughed. “You know that means ‘goat sucker’ in Spanish, right?”

“Yo hablo espa?ol,” he huffed with attitude. “Okay, I don't speak it well, but I understand it...mostly. And that's not the point.”

“What is the point?” I smiled fondly, brushing a strand of hair from his eyes.

“I'm fierce. Very fierce.”

“I know you are. I knew it the moment we met.”

Winnie beamed, sidling closer to lay his head on my chest and push his foot between my legs. “Thank you.”

I wrapped a tentative arm around him and kissed his temple. “Is this...cuddling?”

“It is.”

“ Hmm . I like it.”

“Me too, Professor. Me too.”

### WINNIE

Confession: I'd never been with anyone who made me feel truly special.

Okay, so yes, Alistair was a nice guy and under his never-ending supply of beige sweaters—excuse me, jumpers—he had a big heart. He was kind, generous, attentive, extraordinarily smart, and good in bed.

Hold up...he was amazing in bed—the perfect combination of rough, tender, and passionate. He fucked me into the mattress, pounding my ass so hard I saw stars. But he also made love like an artist, worshiping my body with a reverence that made me want to cry.

It wasn't "making love" in an ooey-gooey boyfriend way. We weren't those guys, and we never would be. Though I had to admit, I was beginning to feel jealous of the men who'd come before me who'd had the right to ask about his day, hold his hand at dinner, and snuggle up with Alistair at night.

Colin was a fool. He was probably happy as could be—so, good for him. But had he really thought Alistair's prowess in the bedroom was uninspired? What a fucking idiot.

I slipped into the role of short-term boyfriend without any fanfare. Cuddling, talking about hopes and dreams, arguing over stolen blankets...that was my jam. I was good at companionship and sex. I hadn't had much practice with long-term relationship-

style intimacy, but there was no need to worry about that with Alistair. We could delve into personal territory without feeling exposed.

I told him about my wacky, selectively-traditional Mexican family—the cousin we were sure was involved with a cartel even though he claimed he'd bought his Rolls Royce selling produce at the farmer's market. And my Italian brother-in-law, Milo, who quoted *Goodfellas* with alarming accuracy and always seemed to know a guy who could "help speed things along."

"Jazz met him at the restaurant she worked at. He'd ask to sit in her section with his buddies to talk business with his 'associates.'" I rolled my eyes, swirling my sauvignon blanc. "And he must have had some kind of understanding with the owner, because her appointed section changed whenever Milo walked in the door. I judged hard. I love my sister and I watched *The Sopranos*, damn it. But guess what?"

"She loves him and she's happy?" Alistair offered, slathering butter on a piece of warm, crusty bread.

"Yep. They have two kids, a gorgeous house in Bel Air, and by choice, Jazz hasn't worked in a decade. By all accounts, Milo is a doting husband and father, but what Jazz really loves is that he's good to our parents and grandparents. And me. My family knows how to put on the super macho facade, but in reality, we're very accepting. If Milo had been a jerk to me, he wouldn't have lasted a day with Jazz. He was always cool, though."

"That's nice."

I pointed my wineglass at him and took a sip. "It is. I'm gay, no one cares. My sister's married to the mob, which is way more concerning, but hey, we love her. It makes for interesting holidays and family vacays. Blended Italian and Mexican chaos with the best food ever."

“Sounds like you’re very close,” he commented with a smile.

I nodded. “Are you close with your family?”

Alistair shrugged as he handed me a slice of buttered bread. “Reasonably so.”

“What does that mean?”

“We get along well enough, but I’m the odd one out, you might say.”

I bit into the carb heaven and moaned. “Because of the Egypt stuff?”

He chuckled. “Because of the single and homosexual stuff.”

I went still. “They’re bigots?”

“No, no. Not at all. They’re lovely people. It’s more an emphasis on the single aspect. They adored Colin and it’s not that they’re heartbroken over an old breakup, but I think they’re impatient that I haven’t gotten on with it and found someone new.” He paused and widened his eyes comically. “They’ve decided to do it for me.”

“They set you up...with suitors?” I asked incredulously.

Alistair sighed. “Afraid so. My mother introduced me to a nice gentleman from church on my last visit home. He was a sixty-year-old widower who, according to Mum, had recently gone gay. She thought we’d get along smashingly.”

I pulled a funny face. “Not so much?”

“Not at all. He enjoyed crossword puzzles, the symphony, and he had a cat. I can’t recall anything else about him because he was so...”

“Boring?”

“Dead boring,” Alistair grouched. “Frankly, I was insulted they’d thought that uninspired, uninteresting man was perfect for me. It’s not flattering to think that’s how they see me.”

I bristled on his behalf. “That’s perifitous! ”

“That’s not a word, Win,” he corrected fondly. “Preposterous?”

“That’s it. You’re smart, passionate, sexy as fuck, and interesting. You work with archeologists and museums. You have a fast-pass ticket to the Louvre because they freaking know you. Gah! I wish I had that kind of rizz,” I lamented with a dramatic sigh. “And rizz is definitely a word.”

“Rizz? What is that?”

“Charisma.”

Alistair grinned. “Thank you, but you’re the interesting one here. I’ve never met anyone quite like you.”

“Ha. Lots of people say that about me, but they don’t always mean it as a compliment.”

“Well, I do. You’re charming, full of life and joy, and...you’re drop-dead sexy. Your inventive use of the English language and your impressive capacity for carbs should be alarming, but they only add to your overall mystique.”

I sat up tall, blushing from head to toe. “Mystique? I have one of those?”

“You do.”

I smiled shyly and sipped my wine.

I wanted to tag this memory in my mental inbox, relishing the light-headed buzzy feeling of good wine and an enchanting atmosphere when I was home again mopping up peroxide-tinted locks.

But most of all, I wanted to remember Alistair.

My cell vibrated on my nightstand at way-too-early o’clock. No, this was Alistair’s room, but I was alone. I noted the stream of light from under the door as I reached for my phone. 6:04 a.m. Text from Raine .

Bonjour! Just wanted to check in with you. How’s gay Paris?

I rubbed sleep from my eyes. Magnifique! Why are you texting so early? It must be 4 a.m. in the Maldives.

Bali. Heart emoji. Are you having the best time ever?

We exchanged a few selfies from our trips. Raine shared one of him and Graham on the beach, sporting sunburns and matching sappy grins. I scrolled through dozens of photos I’d taken over the past week of Alistair and me—in front of the huge clock at the Musée d’Orsay, on a bench at the Luxembourg Gardens, at a café overlooking the Seine.

In the first few pics, Alistair looked resigned and maybe a teensy shell-shocked, but his smile was a thousand percent genuine in the photo from yesterday of us on Pont Neuf at sunset.

And me? I looked...happy. Like stupid happy.

It was a better pic than the one of me with the glass triangles of the Louvre in the background, but I sent that one instead to avoid questions like...are you screwing around with my boss?

Yay! I'm so glad you're loving it , Raine typed. The conference is coming up soon. You may have to interact with Prof C more at that point. He's a rock star with that crowd, but the socks will be an issue.

Got it. I frowned at the screen before adding, I met one of his colleagues at the hotel already. Gerard Poitier. Do you know him?

What?! In Paris? Omg, can you talk?

One thumbs-up emoji later, my cell buzzed.

"You met Gerard? Spill."

"That's all I have," I replied in a low voice. "He was cordial and suave, and he had a homotastic artifact he wanted Alistair to look at."

"Alistair? You're like old chums," Raine teased.

"Calm yourself."

" Hmm . I know Gerard respects the professor, but if you ask me, he takes advantage. He's a savage name-dropper who just happened to marry the only other Egyptian linguist expert with ties to the museum."

"Marrying for a museum pass? That's a new one," I snarked.



“Not if that pass gives you access to experts from the most prestigious antiquities departments in the world. Not that—” Raine paused abruptly. “Graham’s calling me. Gotta run.”

“Okay. Don’t worry. I’ll keep an eye out for him. The professor, I mean.”

“I know you will. If you have any questions, I’m a text away. Also, I hid an emergency box of Jammie Dodgers at the bottom of your suitcase for the professor. He’s an eat your feelings kind of guy, and he’ll want those during the conference for sure. Love you.”

I left my cell on the nightstand and pulled on the hotel’s complimentary fluffy white robe before padding barefoot into the living area, where Alistair was hunched over the table.

I smiled at the sight of him.

His hair was wild, his oversized T-shirt was hopelessly wrinkled, and his glasses were crooked...and probably smudged. The way my heart lurched and somersaulted in my chest, you’d have figured this dude was the incarnation of a younger even sexier George Clooney, not an overworked man who lived part-time in a world that had been gone for almost two thousand years.

“Good morning.” I kissed the top of his head. “How long have you been awake?”

Alistair pushed away from the table and swiveled the chair, scooping me into his arms in a flash. “Since four. Did I disturb you?”

I draped my arms around his neck and shook my head. “No, I was up.”

Okay, not true, but I decided there was no need to share my conversation with Raine .

He loosened the tie at my waist and slipped his hand under the robe, splaying his fingers across my stomach, then brushing them along my length. Just a whisper of a touch...featherlight and intoxicating. I arched instinctively, leaning into him and nipping his bottom lip.

He pressed soft kisses on my throat and skimmed fingernails along my sides. The robe slid off my shoulder and damn, I felt like a movie star—one of those old-timey divas who wore silk and slept on satin sheets. He nuzzled my neck, humming in appreciation.

Appreciation you say? Well, yes. This was adoration. I recognized it in his reverent gaze and tender caress. If I was the professor's newest distraction, I wanted to be the best distraction ever. He could study me, decipher me, set me on a shelf and admire me. He could fuck me, use me, consume me—that worked too. As long as he kept looking at me...just like...this.

Alistair shoved the robe open and held me firmly at the base, stroking me the way I liked it. I returned the favor, flattening my palm over his erection currently straining to poke a hole through his briefs. He gripped my wrist and shook his head, gently pushed me off his lap.

Next thing I knew, I was in his arms being carried like precious cargo. Yes, all six feet of my skinny ass. I laughed, clinging to Alistair's neck like a koala as he strode toward the bedroom and dumped me onto the middle of the mattress.

We snickered, rolling from side to side in a halfhearted fight for dominance. Somewhere in the mix, I lost the robe and Alistair shimmied his tee and briefs off, and finally, we were skin to skin. We groaned in unison as if it had been years and not hours since we'd been naked and writhing.

"I win. Let me suck your cock," I panted.

Alistair chuckled. “Be my guest. ”

I used every trick in the book to please him—licking his shaft like a lollipop, twirling my tongue, and doing my best impression of a shop vac. When he was incoherent and reduced to British swear words, I fumbled for the lube and stretched my opening while he suited up. I didn’t do a great job, but that was okay. I wanted the burn. I wanted to feel him all day, all night.

I lowered myself onto Alistair’s gorgeous dick, watching a myriad of expressions cross his handsome face. Wonder, desire, wonder, lust, wonder. I held his hands, undulating my hips to a rhythm we set together. He moved faster, fucking me harder and nailing my prostate with every thrust. I couldn’t hang on and he knew it.

Alistair let go of my hand and stroked me till I was surfing a wave of pleasure so much bigger than either of us. Any second now, it would bury me and?—

“Oh, fuck, I’m coming,” I roared, spilling my seed over his belly.

He held me against his chest and switched our positions, fucking me in a frenzy to the finish line.

I ran my fingers through the professor’s hair, breathing heavily in the afterglow. I was wrung out and a little sore, but I didn’t want him to get up yet.

A medley of thoughts jostled my brain at once— He fits me, he smells good, his skin is soft, I want his cum inside me, I wonder if he’d want that too.

“I’m squishing you.” He kissed my nose as he pulled out before I could protest.

I watched Alistair disappear into the bathroom and listened to his movements. I knew he’d return with a warm cloth. I knew he’d wash away the mess, offer me water, and

make room for me to cuddle up next to him. Those were things attentive lovers did, right? I'd had that before.

Maybe he just did it better .

Maybe he did everything better.

So why did this feel extraordinary, as if he were filling empty spaces, adding color, adding a spark of something new? I didn't have answers, but I was smart enough to know not to question a good thing. And Alistair was my good thing.

WINNIE

A listair was chattier than normal on our walk to the Marais. He pointed out interesting architecture and explained that each arrondissement had its own character, much like any other city.

“They’re distinct neighborhoods, some more commercial than others. The Latin Quarter is the bohemian, artsy section of town,” he reported, pointing across the Seine. “Just over there, beyond Notre-Dame. Did you know the bell in the cathedral is named Emmanuel and weighs over thirteen tons? Did you know there are at least a dozen replicas of the Statue of Liberty in Paris? Did you know the city was originally called Lutetia in Roman times?”

No, of course I didn’t know any of that. I hummed along, stopping to snap pics every so often.

“Why Lutetia?”

“I’m glad you asked. Lutetia Parisiorum. Lutèce is Latin for mud or swamp and the Parisii were the Celtic people who lived here before the Romans. Caesar described the area as a great marsh along the riverbanks, or...Marais, which means swamp. The marsh was drained over the years to make way for proper housing. As far back as the Bronze and Iron ages, the locals would have wanted to be close to the river.”

“Why? Swamps are notoriously smooshy and smelly.” I paused in front of a

fashionable boutique, tilting my hat to get a better look at the impressive array of leather goods.

“The Seine has always been an important trading route to other parts of Europe,” he said, motioning me to follow him down one narrow cobblestone street to the next as if he knew exactly where we were heading. “It’s no wonder the Romans wanted it. As with every city they conquered, they made Paris their own. There are countless Roman ruins in the area...baths, a forum, aqueducts, statues, coins. It’s quite amazing.”

The truly amazing thing was that Alistair had all these facts on standby in some corner of his brain where I stored shit like the name of my favorite barista at the Java Joint on Third and the code for the men’s room at the Cantina. I was in awe.

And while I nodded and hummed along, I took a few notes of my own. One, there was nothing swampy about the Marais now. It was peaceful and pretty with high-end shops and cute cafés.

Two, the professor walked with a confident air of someone comfortable in his surroundings. He never once fussed with his glasses, and he hadn’t double or triple-checked for the cell he usually kept in his right-hand pocket.

He was quieter in the Picasso Museum. We wandered through the converted maison with sweeping staircases and ornate ironwork, studying paintings and sculptures, sharing wide-eyed glances.

“What the fuck did he do to her face?” I whispered.

Alistair scrunched his nose and squinted like an owl. “Nothing particularly nice.”

I barked a laugh that echoed off the high stone ceilings and cast an apologetic smile at

a fellow tourist .

I leaned against Alistair, linking our pinkies for a beat. “What do you know about Picasso?”

“Nothing much.”

I gasped. “Really? And here I was expecting a report on the great master, Professor.”

“Sorry, but I don’t know modern art.” He tilted his head left and right, then shrugged. “The colors are nice, though.”

“Yes, they’re happy hues. What’s your favorite color?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Of course you do,” I scoffed. “Everyone does.”

“What’s yours?”

“I love bubbly blues, bright pinks, and pernicious purples.”

“Pernicious?” he repeated, eyes alight with amusement.

“Yeah.” I narrowed my gaze as Alistair’s indulgent grin morphed into a belly laugh that boomed off the walls. “What’s so funny?”

“Pernicious means highly destructive, subtly harmful and possibly deadly. You can have pernicious ideas, effects, and thoughts, but a pernicious purple”—he chuckled merrily—“that’s a new one.”

I swatted his arm in mock censure as we strolled past a painting of a woman with two faces staring into a mirror. “How about precipitous purple?”

“That means dangerous.”

“How about...”

“Powerful, passionate, perfect, profound, picturesque, perky...I could go on,” he singsonged.

“Show-off.”

We snickered like idiots and continued through rooms filled with whimsical sculptures and priceless paintings. We made up a game along the way to say the first thing that popped into mind in front of each piece of art.

Alistair took the literal approach. The painting of sunbathers reminded him of summers at Lake Windermere; the woman holding a child looked vaguely like his sister and her son. I went rogue. A blob on canvas was a dead ringer for my abuela’s Chihuahua, Trixie, who my fabulous cat, Liza, loved to terrorize. An early self portrait of Picasso vaguely resembled my landlord’s gym bunny boy toy, Dash.

“A gym bunny boy toy named Dash?”

“ Mmhmm . He’s sexy and he knows it. But he’s put together in a Botox, trainer on speed dial, and epic coke habit sort of way. Not so healthy. I steer clear of that nonsense. Or anything that renders me likely to dance on tabletops while incapacitated. I’m thirty-five, honey. On my last go-go boy escapade, I tripped on the gossamer sheath I was wearing over my crop top and Daisy Duke shorts and fell on my ass in the middle of a Donna Summer classic. Mortified isn’t a strong enough word,” I added with a sassy head bob.



Alistair laughed, and I suddenly wanted to share another ten of my most embarrassing moments. I liked the way his eyes crinkled and lit up. I liked the way he stood closer than necessary, always touching me...the brush of his shoulder or pinky finger. I wished every room in this museum were longer.

We ordered tea and sat on the terrace outside of the rooftop café, nibbling pastries and commenting on clouds shaped like toy balloons in the blue sky, the fat tabby sleeping on the sill of a nearby mansard roof, and the delicious autumn chill in the air.

Okay, that was me. Still yapping.

“I love fall. It’s my favorite season by far. We don’t get these amazing oranges and reds everywhere in LA. Not that I’m complaining. Our weather is better and?—”

“Do you miss home?” he interrupted.

“No, not at all. I miss Liza, though. I’ve been checking in with Max and his cousin for updates. Apparently, she hasn’t been pining for me. The nerve. ”

Alistair smiled. “Your world is very different from mine. More colorful. I have a hard time picturing gossamer sheaths and muscular men called Dash. I suppose you order lattes with a list of special instructions at a coffee shop where you might bump into a movie star or a rock god on a random Wednesday.”

“Well...yes. I’ve had the occasional star sighting, and that’s fun. I play up the whole ‘OMG, can you believe who I saw’ routine at the salon, but between you and me, they’re just people with issues of their own. Maybe I’m not as easy to impress as I used to be. So you brushed elbows with Selena Gomez at The Grove, so what? I’m having cha-mom-olee tea on a rooftop in Paris with a guy who knows how to read hyperglyphics.” I held up my hand like a pastor at Sunday morning mass. “I win, honey. I win.”

His eyes crinkled and his cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink. “I believe you mean chamomile tea and hieroglyphics.”

I winked. “I do indeed.”

The professor shook his head in faux exasperation. “You’re bonkers, you know that?”

“Only a pinch.” I rested my elbow on the table and smiled. “You never told me your favorite color.”

“Soft greens...and blues. The colors of the trees and sky in London after a rainstorm.”

“Isn’t London mostly gray?”

“We have our share of rain, but we have lovely days too. I live in Marylebone near The Regent’s Park. It’s a pretty spot. In springtime, there are trees with pink petals and lawns dotted with tiny white flowers. It’s like candy floss and marshmallows...the sort of thing illustrators draw in children’s books. I have a flat in Oxford as well, a block away from the river. Weeping willows drag their tendrils through the murky Cherwell, and on a clear day the water looks green and you can see the clouds’ reflection from the sky above. It’s like walking into a painting. ”

“But not a Picasso.”

“Certainly not.” Alistair snorted. “I may be biased, but the English countryside is quite beautiful.”

“I know. I haven’t spent enough time in the UK to give big opinions, but I’ve been to Cornwall to visit Raine and Graham, and my view from the train window on our way here was a feast for the eyes. California is beautiful too. Just different.”

“Do you go to the beach at home?”

I waved my arms. “Oh, no. I don’t like sunscreen, sand, and I look like a stick figure in beachwear. I’m too skinny, and there’s no hiding my lack of muscles in a suit.”

“That’s ridiculous,” he scoffed. “You’re very good-looking, Win. Don’t tell me you don’t know that.”

“Thanks, but I know what I’m dealing with. If I have the notion to worship the sun, I invite my friends over for a margarita brunch and we sit under umbrellas by the pool in my apartment complex. I wear a caftan, a huge hat, and movie-star sunglasses. No one cares what I look like there...except pervy old Mr. Macklin. But he’s ninety and his currency is old Hollywood. He has the best stories about Rock Hudson and Marlon Brando. He might be bullshitting, but he sounds convincing, and isn’t that half the battle?”

Alistair sipped his tea. “You’ve used that expression before. What do you mean by currency?”

“The thing you bring to the table. Your cash, your cred, your talent. Mine is entertainment.”

“How so?”

“With my family, I’m the fun guncle, the adoring son and grandson they love but can’t relate to. At the salon, I ask questions, tell tales, and play therapist...with humor. My closest friends know the real me. I don’t have to behave around them. They don’t judge me harshly or expect me to be on my game all the time. My currency can be a bag of chips and a seat on my chaise with them.” I stirred my tea. “What about you?”

“My currency is...knowledge. Boring answer, isn’t it? No wonder my family set me up with a country widower.”

“Oh, stop,” I chided. “And don’t downplay your achievements. You’re a researcher, a professor, an explorer, a scientist. You do important shit.”

His lips quirked. “Very important shit.”

“Indeed,” I replied in an exaggerated British accent.

“Thank you. That’s a nice compliment.” Alistair paused for a moment, adding, “I think you misspoke. Your currency is joy. That’s a rarer quality than you’d think.”

My cheeks were warm, and I didn’t know where to look all of a sudden. He made me feel exposed, vulnerable. And yet...somehow...safe. “I—thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Also...you’re not a stick figure, and you’re not too skinny. You’re just as you’re supposed to be.”

Before I could sputter an awkward acknowledgment, Alistair tapped the table and launched into tour-guide mode. Did I know that the nearby Place des Vosges was the oldest planned square in Paris and that Victor Hugo lived there for sixteen years? Did I know that the Hôtel de Ville was the city hall and that it was the headquarters of the French Revolution?

No, I hadn’t known any of that and until this very second, that had been okay by me. But my God, the professor sounded like a poet, using words like an artist with a paintbrush on smooth canvas, his deep voice conjuring images of historic figures who’d walked these streets hundreds of years ago.

My tea went cold as the sun crested the sky, lengthening shadows. And when a gust

of cool wind whistled across the terrace, we left the museum and crossed the Seine.

We stopped at a couple of book vendors along the riverside and gift shops on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. I took endless photos of buildings and flower stalls and selfies with Alistair. In front of the Pantheon, the Sorbonne, the bridge with the locks, and more in the park.

And all the while, we talked...and talked, covering major topics like French desserts, popular songs, and the headaches of traveling. Nothing important in the slightest.

I walked on air, my hand tucked into Alistair's coat sleeve, my heart happy and for once, blessedly content.

It was the best day ever.

### ALISTAIR

“The pyramids of Dahshur, the Fifth Dynasty...the priestess and royal burial site.” I reread my findings regarding religious artifacts found and cross-checked the latest information, noting political shifts to nonroyal leadership due to drought and financial hardship during that time.

Fascinating stuff, I mused, plucking my glasses off my nose and staring into space as I pictured men with kohl-lined eyes decked in gold and priceless gems, jockeying for clout and influence in changing times. Like ancient versions of ruthless tycoons. Nothing ever really changed. Fashions and ideologies rode waves of popularity, but the fundamentals were the same. Humans organized systems of cooperation to advance their causes...the price varied.

If I closed my eyes I could travel through time. I could be there. I could feel the blistering hot sun on my skin, hear the hum of conversation in a language long dead, and I could see the great pyramids on the horizon.

When I was a younger man, I'd imagine a constant companion with hazy features and no name who traveled with me up and down the Nile. I'd discuss the finer points of what I'd learned that day, and he'd listen. Silly, I know. We all had ways of coping with loneliness.

It wasn't that I was a shut-in. I'd had my share of lovers over the years, but the only one I'd ever confided in was Colin, and that relationship had exploded in my face

quite spectacularly. If anyone had asked me a month ago, I'd have sworn I was content to be alone.

Hell, I preferred solitude to anxious dating games. I didn't want to "get to know" a new man. I didn't care about anyone else's favorite song, the name of their first pet, or their worst experience with alcohol. I'd heard all the stories, done the phony laugh bit, and had clandestinely checked my watch, wondering if the possibility of sex was worth another hour with someone I'd never see again.

News flash: it wasn't fun. I'd rather be in ancient Egypt...if only in my head.

But now I wanted Winnie.

All the bloody time.

I wanted his constant chatter, his curious mind, and his beautiful smile.

And yes, I wanted his body. I couldn't get enough of him.

Three weeks of traipsing around Paris and playing tourist with Winnie had opened a portal that had always been there but somehow seemed so...new. I loved Paris. I'd just gotten into the habit of thinking of it as work.

I only went to museums with archives that were useful to my research. I stayed at a hotel near the Louvre for the sake of convenience. I liked French food, but I could get by with room service.

Winnie wouldn't hear of any of that. He'd bulldozed his way into my quiet world and turned it upside down.

Look at me. I'd gone for daily walks in the park, eaten croissants by the dozen, and

had visited fancy boutiques on the Rue Saint-Honoré with a wide-eyed lover who'd sighed with pleasure as he'd snapped photographs of designer storefronts. I'd taken him on a tour of the opera, stood in a bloody long queue to see Napoleon's tomb, and had walked along the river so often that the vendors greeted us now with a friendly "Bonjour."

Who was I?

I couldn't answer that one, but I knew this was a dream. Better than my imaginary travels with the faceless man by far. Still, I knew I'd wake up one day and it would be over. Winnie would be gone, back to his fabulous life in Los Angeles. I had no doubt he'd return with a renewed sense of purpose, ready to tackle his goals, even if that meant a change of employment. Whatever had to be done, he'd do it. Winnie was fearless.

And I was...lucky to know him.

I swiveled my chair toward the figure lounging on the sofa, my heart thumping wildly in my chest. Winnie was terribly distracting.

The hem of the deep purple ensemble he called "jajas" rode high on his leg. It was actually a caftan, the type of garment I associated with retirees who played bridge whilst smoking cigarettes and swigging martinis poolside. It shouldn't have been sexy in the slightest, but the silky fabric draped enticingly over his sharper edges and lithe curves. Winnie looked more like a model posing on a chaise than a fledgling student of Egyptology.

I brushed off the twinge of guilt that he wasn't out exploring the city, but I was selfishly pleased he wanted to be with me. Besides, it was bloody wicked out there.

Rain slashed the sky diagonally and blew orange and red leaves along the street at the



Jardin des Tuileries as afternoon gave way to evening. All that was missing was a roaring fire and a dog at the hearth.

Winnie seemed cozy enough, a computer balanced on his knee, his eyes glued to his screen. He occasionally hummed and made a production of stretching his long limbs across the cushions like a femme fatale in a Hitchcock film, but otherwise, he was engrossed.

I opened my mouth to ask what he was reading just as a message flashed on my computer.

Gerard: Have you discovered anything new? I have a theory I'd like to discuss with you. Are you free to talk?

Yes, but Gerard was the last person I wanted to talk to at the moment. I'd text him later and let him know that his project would have to wait until after the conference. I simply didn't have the time.

I closed my laptop, stretching my arms above my head as I wandered to the sofa. "Did you find anything interesting?"

Winnie glanced up with a jolt. "You scared me."

"Sorry." I sat on the opposite end and pulled his feet across my lap, arranging the silky fabric to cover his ankles. "Are you cold?"

"No. In fact, I'm hot and bothered." He fanned his face theatrically and scooted closer to me, his legs hooked over my knee. "Look at this. I found the gay couple in Gerard's naughty pottery piece. They were buried together in a loving embrace with their noses touching. According to my research, that was usually reserved for husbands and wives. And get this...their epilogue says, 'Joined in life, joined in

death.””

“It’s not an epilogue, it’s an epitaph.”

“Yeah, yeah. This article says homosexuality wasn’t uncommon in the ancient world, and their relationship must have been approved by the pharaoh. I even got their names for you, so ta-da ...research complete!” He smacked his hand on my knee and grinned. “Tell Gerard to suck it!”

“Well done. Unfortunately, that’s not the same couple.”

He frowned. “How do you know? ”

“Different timeline.” I gestured at the screen. “Khnumhotep and Niankhkhnum are thought to be the first recorded homosexual couple in history. They shared the title of overseer of the manicurists. The hieroglyphs and painting in the tomb tell their story. They were each married to women, had many children, and worked for the king as trusted servants. Some historians have said they’re brothers, perhaps even twins, but the art and text suggest something undeniably more intimate. And yes, they must have had royal support and lived in a time where sexual fluidity was accepted. The writing on the one Gerard showed us is more like a receipt.”

“A receipt? For sex?”

“Yes, an ostrakon is a notepad. A postcard of sorts for making lists, tallying grievances. Ancient Greeks and Romans used them to vote on individuals to be exiled. It’s where we get the word ostracize.”

Winnie gasped. “You mean...their gayness might have been used against these men?”

“There’s no way of knowing for sure, but yes, it’s a possibility.”

“That’s...depressing.” He set his laptop on the coffee table with a sigh. “So the love story in the gay tomb is an anomaly.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“I was hoping there were others like them.” Winnie slumped theatrically. “It sucks being on the outs throughout all of fucking history. I know it, I’ve lived it. I wish there was more.”

“More...what?”

“Love. I love love stories. I love romance.” He threw his hands in the air. “There, I admit it. I love candlelit dinners, long walks, sexy music, and rom-coms where the underdog gets the guy or the girl. I mean, c’mon, is it too much to ask for a damn happily ever after? ”

I widened my eyes and nudged his arm playfully. “Are we still talking about ancient Egyptians?”

“Yes, ’cause those manicurists have a damn cool story and they shared it with the world in pictures and words and...” Winnie sighed. “It’s amazing. I was hoping there were more stories like theirs. It’s nice to think that love like this has existed for thousands of years, and that it was celebrated. We all want a taste of that...or at least, we’d like to feel less alone.”

I nodded. “I suppose that’s true.”

“Does Gerard know what it says?”

“I’m sure he has an idea. He wants to link the newer ostrakon to the one at the British Museum and present it at the conference next week. He texted me earlier to discuss it.”

“Have you done any research for Gerard’s project?”

“No, I have my own work to do,” I replied.

He raised a brow and snapped his fingers. “Just like that?”

“I don’t work for Gerard. I translated the passage for him as promised, and whilst I admit there’s some interesting crossover, I don’t have the time or resources to delve deeper. He’ll have to wait.”

“Wow. You’re kind of a badass.”

I snorted. “That’s right, and I have better things to do than have a natter with my ex’s husband.”

Winnie’s eyes sparked with renewed humor. “Oh? Like what?”

“You.”

He barked a laugh and beamed at me. “My naughty professor.”

I kissed his forehead, nose, and lips. “Come. I want to show you something.”

I pulled the curtain open wider, motioning to the light display out the window.

Winnie pressed a hand to his heart in delight as he gazed at the Eiffel Tower sparkling and glittering in the indigo sky. “It’s so beautiful.”

“It’s very pretty,” I agreed.

“Pretty? It’s incondolent!”

I pursed my lips in amusement. “I believe you mean incandescent.”

“Yes! Incandescent.” He hummed reverently. “I’ve seen it every night, but never in a storm.”

I unlatched the door to the balcony and stepped outside, lifting a palm to the sky. “It’s wet, but it’s stopped raining. Come join me.”

Winnie leaned his back against my chest, tilting his chin as I set my hands on his hips and breathed in his scent.

“It’s bejeweled to the nines...like every inch of it is covered in diamonds. This is magic. When I’m sweeping up hair and mixing dyes, I’m going to remember this moment.”

So would I.

Neither of us spoke for a minute or two. This was usually where I’d share a few interesting facts about the Eiffel Tower. It was the tallest structure in Paris, it was built in two years, it was once painted yellow. I had twenty more tidbits, but I kept them to myself and nuzzled his ear.

“You’ll find your happily ever after someday, Win—the right job, the right person. You’re too extraordinary to accept anything less. And thousands of years from now, perhaps some intrepid archeologist will unearth your story and be inspired.”

He turned in my arms, his eyes shiny and bright. “That’s the nicest thing anyone’s

ever said to me.”

I wanted to assure him that I meant every word, but my tongue felt too heavy and I didn’t trust my ability to form coherent sentences. So I captured his mouth in a searing kiss, the glow from the Eiffel Tower shimmering like a halo around him .

Winnie was far from angelic, but he was pure in his own way...solid and real. When he was home again, thinking of Paris, I’d be thinking of him.

But he was here now, and I wasn’t going to waste a precious second on work.

We headed inside, shedding clothing as we moved into the bedroom. Sensual kisses accompanied low moans and wanton writhing. Winnie bent between my legs and sucked me to near oblivion. I kneeled behind him, entering him with care—my hands on his hips, my lips hovering near his ear.

We were good at this already. The heady give-and-take, the slide of skin. I’d learned to read his body. I knew he liked it hard and dirty. I knew that he loved praise...any kind—his eyes, his arse, his cock. And I knew which whimpering sound meant he was close.

I flattened him against the mattress and rolled sideways, lifting his left leg as I pumped my hips double time. Winnie stroked himself and my God, with his sex-drunk half-hooded gaze and dark hair strewn across the white pillow, he was a devil and an angel. Dark and light, sin and heaven all at once.

And I fell. So far, so deep.

I came, gasping for air, holding him as if I’d never let go.

In the morning, I awoke with Winnie sprawled over me with one arm flung across his

face, looking somehow even more beautiful than ever. My heart swelled till it felt too big for my chest. Bloody hell, this couldn't be good for me.

I had to snap out of it. I needed coffee and there were things to be done, damn it—calls to return, emails to write, and important research regarding four-thousand-year-old relics. I needed a little separation, a little time to myself. I was usually so good at being alone, but now...all I wanted was Winnie, and this had to stop.

Winnie's eyes fluttered open, a smile ghosted the corner of his mouth. "G'morning."

"Good morning." I swept hair from his forehead, a speech about my busy day on the tip of my tongue. Instead, a voice that sounded remarkably like mine said, "Let's get out of town, shall we?"

### WINNIE

A listair navigated Parisian traffic like a pro while I gazed out the passenger side window of our rental car, taking in the blur of suburban sprawl and freeways that reminded me of every other big city I'd ever visited. The same...yet different. Special. Like the beginning of a new adventure.

Maybe it was the melodic French music on the radio and the steady, calming presence of the man behind the wheel. Either way, it was pure magic. And when Alistair veered off the main highway, it got even better. The French countryside was a tapestry of green and gold with fluffy clouds in a pretty blue sky. Church steeples, castle ruins, sheep, and cows dotted the hillside.

He followed the signs to Fontainebleau, a charming small village with narrow streets and quaint buildings—not a tacky strip mall in sight.

We parked the car and walked a few blocks down cobblestone streets to the iron gates guarding a chateau with a grand horseshoe staircase that looked like something straight out of Cinderella .

I blinked in wonder. “I think I’ve seen pictures of this place. It’s pretty famous, huh?”

“Lesser known today than Versailles, but yes, Fontainebleau was once the royal hunting lodge for Henry II, Louis VII, and even Napoleon,” Alistair explained. “The forest and gardens go on for ages beyond the palace itself.”



“That ginormous palace was a hunting lodge?” I let out a low whistle. “Must have been nice.”

“Royalty lived very well. I’ll take you to Versailles and Vaux-le-Vicomte too, so you can see just how well.” The professor held his arm out and inclined his head. “Shall we go inside?”

We walked through room after room decorated with lush fabrics, gilt-framed mirrors, priceless portraits of important-looking royals, and crystal chandeliers as big as small cars. We opted to do a self-guided tour with headphones, but Alistair kept interrupting the recording to point out details and give his spiel, so I turned off the sound fifteen minutes in and listened to my lover’s rendition of historical events instead.

He painted pictures with words, conjuring kings and queens living large in fifteen-hundred-plus rooms. They hosted lavish hunting soirees and partied like OG rock stars. Alistair talked about Napoleon’s abdication in the main courtyard on that fabulous staircase and a pope who’d been imprisoned there two hundred years ago.

I took over the storytelling as we strolled the circumference of the huge lawn arm in arm under darkening skies.

“Rewind, honey. The year is 1800, and we’re the royalest guests at the ball.” I glanced at the clouds gathering on the horizon and continued. “The king has been dying to get us to attend, and we finally gave in and agreed. I’m setting the fashion standard in a gorgeous purple silk jacket and those adorable pants with the high socks, and there are definitely gold buckles on my shoes. Pure gold. You’re looking dapper in deep-blue velvet, carrying a walking stick and?—”

“Why do I need a walking stick?”

I squeezed Alistair's arm. "You don't need it, but it's the fancy kind that makes people go, 'Oh, check him out. He must be somebody.' C'mon, everybody wants to be somebody."

"Do they? I'm perfectly happy to remain in obscurity myself, and though I'd hate to pop your bubble, there are a few things wrong with your story. There was no ruling king in 1800. The last one had his head lopped off, and?—"

I put a hand over his mouth and shook my head. "Don't ruin the fantasy. No pesky facts allowed."

"Oh, in that case, we might as well be joint kings of this tiny estate."

I beamed at him. "Yes, yes, yes! It's dreadfully small, darling. I need an upgrade, stat."

"And you shall have one five times the size and—oh, dear." Alistair held his palm up and frowned. "Is this celestial precipitation? I don't believe I permitted rain today. Did you, darling?"

"Definitely not, darling. How rude." My cheeks hurt from grinning as the first drops of rain fell on my face. "What do we do now?"

He put his hands on his hips and watched a group of fellow tourists without umbrellas racing toward the chateau. "Run!"

I laughed like a loon as we darted across dirt paths and slippery cobblestones to the exit.

And when Alistair slipped his hand in mine at the gate, leading me to the rental car, I barely noticed the rain.

We had lunch at a tiny pub in town with dark-paneled walls, low ceilings, and oodles of historical charm in its creaky floorboards and faded black-and-white prints of French landmarks. Our waitress had bobbed raven hair, red lipstick, spoke no English, and had a serious “Don’t fuck with me” look .

If I hadn’t been with Alistair, I would have pointed at the first thing on the menu and crossed my fingers in the hopes that I hadn’t ordered duck liver. But Alistair wasn’t intimidated in the slightest. He spoke with confidence, asking questions, gesturing at the menu, and slowly cracking the young woman’s haughty exterior. Her eyes twinkled as she replied in rapid-fire French, and I think she actually blushed.

Hold up. Was she flirting with my man, my date, my lover, my...Alistair?

Okay, no, he wasn’t mine for real, but he was mine for now and I didn’t share.

I set my hand over his on the table, staking my claim. Alistair turned his palm and laced our fingers, still conversing with the waitress about fuck knew what. That feeling of being protected, cherished, and cared for was back with a vengeance. Add a cozy table for two near a fireplace at a five-hundred-year-old pub in the French countryside, and damn, I could get drunk on this stuff.

I was torn between reminding myself this wasn’t real and reveling in something that felt like magic.

We toured a chateau with a moat and pristine gardens, then continued on to a teensy-tiny town built around a church that dated to the twelfth century and a castle with a turret that gave strong Rapunzel vibes. Alistair parked in front of a narrow house with bright flowers spilling from window boxes and a black-and-white smallish fluffy mutt standing guard on the porch.

“This...wow...gorgeous,” I whispered.

Alistair met me on the passenger's side, carrying both of our bags. "Don't set your expectations too high. It's rather simple, but it's clean and charming, and the owner is...colorful. You'll see. "

The door flung open on cue and a small middle-aged woman with wild red hair bounced onto the pathway to greet us.

" Bonsoir! Bonsoir! Comment vas-tu, Al-ee ?"

" Bien. Et toi ?"

"I am," she began in careful English. "...very nice to see you. Oui ?"

" 'Happy to see you' works better," Alistair corrected affectionately.

The woman swatted his arm playfully and launched into a speech in French, complete with hand gestures and eye rolls as her dog ambled over to investigate. I bent to pet its ears while they chatted. I didn't need to speak the language to know they were friends. Once again, I was curious. What did an Egyptologist from the UK and an innkeeper from a small village outside of Paris have in common?

"My manners are terrible. I am Francoise." She thrust her hand at me and squeezed my fingers in a viselike grip as I stood.

"I'm Winnie. I'm Alistair's...friend."

In a move I was pretty sure I'd never seen outside a cartoon, Francoise arched an eyebrow to her hairline.

"Friend. Ohh! Z'is is good. Very good. Okay, I am Al-ee's... c'est quoi ca ...friends through zee ex-boyfriend? Old news and not good news. No worries for you,

naturellement .” She gestured from the sky to the house behind her. “Come, come. It is raining now.”

She disappeared in a flash, leaving a vapor trail of Chanel number five in her wake.

Alistair led the way inside, pausing to set our bags on the bottom step of the narrow staircase off the foyer. The ceiling was low and the wide-plank wood floorboards were obviously uneven, but like the pub, Francoise’s house oozed charm with crystal sconces, colorful throw rugs, and pastoral prints hung willy-nilly on red toile wallpaper. It was the sort of French chic look LA designers copied yet never quite nailed.

I hummed my approval. “This place is so freaking cute. I love it!”

Francoise reappeared with a thin, gray-haired man she introduced as her husband, Jacques. He spoke less English than his wife, so I was pretty much relegated to nodding with a stupid-ass smile on my face while Alistair translated. Apparently, our hosts were leaving for the night and Beau, the dog, was staying with us. Francoise had made Al-ee’s favorite stew; there was wine, cheese, and chocolate. Our only chore was to feed Beau breakfast and keep the treats to a minimum.

“Beau is...fat and lazy, but very handsome, oui ?”

“Very,” Alistair agreed. “Don’t worry. He’s in good hands.”

After a series of kisses on both cheeks, they were gone.

I scratched Beau’s ears, then leaned against the kitchen doorway, French music drifting from a radio on the counter.

“What’s this song? The one on the radio. I know it’s Édith Piaf, but is it special?”

“La Vie en Rose,” he replied. “Her famous ballad...a love song. It means to see life in?—”

“No, don’t tell me. I like the mystery. I feel so French when I hum along, you know?”

Alistair smiled affectionately. “If you say so. Wine?”

“Yes, please. So...where are we, and what just happened?”

“Francoise and Jacques are old friends and the owners of this fine establishment,” Alistair explained. “They live next door and rent rooms here. I called to let them know I’d be in the area, and they said we could have the place to ourselves for the price of keeping Beau company while they’re out for the evening.”

“Sweet deal,” I commented, following him into a quaint kitchen with open shelving chock full of colorful plates and bowls. “She said you met through the ex? Are they archeologists or something?”

He helped himself to a bottle of wine and motioned for me to take a seat at the long farmhouse table in the middle of the room. “No, Colin went to university with Francoise’s brother, who’s a colleague of mine at the museum. I told you academia is a small world.”

“It’s the same in my world too, honey. Practically every stylist in WeHo either previously worked for a Hollywood studio and left the grind with a few big-name clients or they’re newbies trying to make their way up the food chain. Like me.” I thanked him for the wine, smiling when Beau lumbered over and settled at my feet. “This is fun. I feel like I’m playing house in another country.”

“You are. Cheers.” He clinked our glasses as he slid onto the chair next to mine.

“Cheers.” I sipped my wine, relishing the buzz of alcohol and happy vibes from my unexpected day. I didn’t want to ruin this, but I seemingly couldn’t help myself. “What’s Colin like?”

Alistair tilted his chin, narrowing his eyes. “Why do you ask?”

“Just curious. Is he stuffy and boring? Please say yes.”

He barked a laugh. “I can’t believe you didn’t guess that I was the stuffy, boring one in that story.”

“Oh, stop fishing for compliments. Other than a peculiar allegiance to neutral shades, you’re the most interesting man I’ve ever met,” I gushed.

That was the absolute truth. I mean, today alone had been one adventure after another, and Alistair was the khaki-clad wizard who’d made it happen.

“Really? I’m chuffed, but?—”

“Chuffed? Like...scuffed, fluffed, stuffed? What does that mean? ”

He snickered merrily. “It means pleased. I think you knew that, you cheeky monkey.”

My smile was in danger of splitting my face in half. I sipped my wine in an attempt to regain control of my facial features. And though the topic no longer interested me, I needed a diversion.

“What were you saying about Colin?”

“Nothing at all,” he countered. “But since you’re curious, he’s a nice bloke—intelligent and ambitious. He’s the professor every student hoped to be

assigned to and the dinner guest you strategically place at the table to keep conversation going. In other words, my opposite.”

“Oh. I’m assuming it’s not weird that we’re at his friend’s sister’s house in another country.”

“Not weird at all. As I mentioned, my social and professional circle are one and the same. Our relationship has been over for years now. We have a lot of crossover and it can be invasive, but I don’t care for drama—especially if it’s about me.”

“Are academics drama queens?”

“Some are. I don’t pay attention, and I don’t listen to gossip. It was a good thing that only a few friends knew about Colin and me. Like Francoise’s brother, Phillippe. Francoise and Phillippe are probably one of the few who chose sides and stuck with me. The rest, like my parents, thought I was probably to blame. Doesn’t matter. I’d rather be known for my academic contributions than for being the fool who let Colin Farrington get away.”

I dragged my teeth over my bottom lip. “Oh, no. You’ve still got feelings for him.”

Alistair scoffed. “Absolutely not.”

I wondered if that was totally true. I’d witnessed his angst a few weeks ago after I’d run into Gerard. That had to have been more than a desire to maintain professional distance while working overseas. But I didn’t want to know. I was sorry I’d brought up the ex. Colin didn’t belong here.

“Good.”

“And I have to warn you that Francoise has probably already told Phillippe about you.



She'll make it sound like wedding bells are imminent, too."

I chuckled, relieved to change the subject. "Oh! How exciting! Our wedding is going to be huge."

"Oh, dear. I was hoping for something small." He pushed the sleeve of his sweater to his elbow and picked up the wine bottle. "More?"

"Yes, please." My gaze locked on his strong hands and...geez, since when were forearms sexy? I cleared my throat and immediately started talking a mile a minute. "No small wedding. I'm gonna want all the bells and whistles."

"Thank you for the warning."

"You're welcome. I'll have you know I've been planning my wedding since I was nine years old and my cousin, Letitia brought over a stack of Bride magazines taller than I was. You could have wrapped me in a bolt of tulle, thrown me a bouquet, and I swear I'd have been the happiest boy in town."

Alistair's lips quirked in amusement. "I think my father would have swallowed his tongue."

"I'm sure my parents probably had a few uncomfortable chats about their precocious son constantly trying on his mama's high heels, but ultimately, they must have decided foisting conformity on me wasn't worth the effort. I have a vague memory of being signed up for preschool T-ball. I was probably five years old and had no idea what it was, but I think my mom and dad lured me in with promises of treats and a trophy. One glance at the costume on game day and all hell broke loose. It was so...ugly that I refused to wear it. No way, no how was I putting that polyester mess on my skinny little body. According to Jazz, that was the day I came out." I snickered.

He grinned, casually petting Beau's head as he reached for his wineglass. "I can see it clearly. I bet you were ridiculously adorable."

"Totally ridiculous. When did you come out?"

"I'm not out. Not all the way out, anyway. My family knows and a few friends. That's it. It just doesn't seem like anyone else's business."

"Fair enough. When did you come out to your parents?" I amended.

"Well, I'd started seeing someone I really liked. My mum recognized all the signs of my mad crush and she was delighted at the prospect that I had a prospect, so she harangued me for hints about the identity of the lucky lady. I finally lost my cool and blurted, 'Liam!'"

I snickered gleefully and did my best RuPaul diva snap. "Oh, no you didn't."

Alistair nodded. "I did, and after she'd clutched her pearls and moved beyond the shock, she told me to bring him round for Sunday dinner."

"That's nice. And did you?"

"No, we didn't last long enough to get the family involved. I was so awkward around poor Liam." He pulled a face and continued. "I tripped over my shoelaces, stumbled over my words, and generally came across as a bona fide mess whenever he walked into a room. Like the day I first saw you."

"At your office?"

He gave a lopsided half smile. "No, the first time I set eyes on you was at Raine's party in Cornwall. You floated into the room like a phantom, dressed in gold. Your

hair was perfect, your lips were pink, and you'd done your eyes up like an Egyptian prince. I'd never seen anyone more beautiful in my life. ”

“Me?” I set my hand on my heart.

“Yes, you. I never quite worked up the courage to say hello that night. There were so many people and in the general chaos, I could almost believe I'd imagined you. A couple of years later, I was too engrossed in my work to put two and two together until you showed up, ready to take Paris by storm. I told Raine I didn't need the help, but he insisted.” Alistair lowered his gaze and leaned forward. “I'm glad he did.”

I opened and closed my mouth...twice. “I...me too.”

He reached for my hand and pressed a kiss on my palm. “Are you hungry? Francoise is a wonderful cook and?—”

“Wait. You're not awkward. You're lovely. Inside and out.”

He snorted. “Thank you, but I think most people would tell you that I'm an odd duck.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, odd is my middle name.”

“What a coincidence. It's mine too.”

We shared a sappy smile. I'm talkin' super sappy. I had stars in my eyes, a goofy grin on my face, and my heart was beating a mile a minute. It was disarming to feel so rattled yet so safe at the same time. With a dog snoring at our feet and French music playing softly in the background, I could have stumbled onto a Hollywood movie set. This couldn't be real.

Buzz buzz.

I slipped my phone out, squealing at the new pic of Liza flashing on my screen.

Meow bitch, when are you coming home? Max gives me extra kibble and I think I love him now. Also, news flash. Cally McNally is opening a salon on Melrose. She wants you. My lack of opposable thumbs is tiresome. Can Max send your résumé?

Job opportunity.

That was...interesting. Not something I wanted to think about now .

I closed the text thread, but showed Alistair the photo of Liza, grateful for the diversion.

“She looks like you, in feline form,” he observed, snaking his hand under my shirt. “Pretty...and fierce.”

I moaned at the feel of Alistair’s stubbled jaw on my ear.

“Thank you, I— mmm .” I lowered my hand, cupped his cock through his khakis, and blurted, “How do you say Roger in French?”

He blinked at the wild non sequitur. “Rogz-air. Why do you ask?”

“I brought Rogz-air with me.”

“The pink thing?”

“Dildo,” I clarified.

“This is the same Roger you dropped at St. Pancras Station.”

“I only have one Rogz-air with me, honey. I have a much more extensive collection of sexy toys at home, but I figured he’d would do the job in Paris. I wasn’t counting on you, and well...obviously, he’s been thoroughly scrubbed and...”

His eyes took on a heated look I knew all too well. “Show me.”

We got to our feet, startling the sleeping dog. Beau gave us a bored once-over and resumed snoring as we hurried out of the kitchen, grabbing our things on our way upstairs.

Alistair ducked under a narrow doorframe at the top of the stairs, dropped his bag, and pulled me to his chest. Our mouths collided hungrily. And just like that, the rest of the world melted away.

I clung to him, my arms wrapped around his neck as he ravaged me. Yes, ravaged. I felt like a damsel with a ripped bodice on a retro romance cover. No complaints here. The plunging tongues, roving hands, and the seductive sway of hips was pure poetry.

Alistair unbuckled my belt and unzipped my jeans, slipping his fingers under the elastic of my boxer briefs to knead my ass cheeks while I was still reeling from his kiss. He ghosted a digit along my crack and licked my earlobe, thrusting his erection against mine.

I nipped his lip, reaching between us to rub him good and dirty. “No teasing. Get naked and show me the goods, Professor.”

Alistair shook his head. “No, love. I’m calling the shots tonight. Listen closely. Are you listening?”

Professor fantasy unlocked. He had my full attention like nothing and no one ever had.

“Y-yes.”

“Take off your clothes, retrieve your toy, and get on the bed...on your knees. I want to see that pretty hole of yours. Do you understand?”

I gulped and possibly nodded, but don't quote me. I was in another zone.

I shed clothing in record time and rummaged through my bag for Roger, tossing socks, briefs, and the umbrella we could have used earlier in the day. I found my toy in the sealed compartment I'd packed it in, all cleaned up and ready to play. Then I hustled to the bed, stopping in my tracks.

“Oh, honey, we're gonna break this thing.”

“It's sturdy.”

“Are you sure? Maybe we should—” I glanced his way and nearly swallowed my tongue. “Fuck me, you're hot.”

It was true. Alistair was tall and thick in all the right places—his chest, his thighs, his gorgeous cock. Nothing about him was overly sculpted or perfect, but his realness was alluring. I licked my lips, shamelessly admiring his hairy pecs.

Alistair set a bottle of lube and a packet of condoms on the nightstand and pointed meaningfully. “Bed. Now. Don't touch yourself. Your cock and arse are mine.”

“Holy shit. Yes, yes, yes. ”

I obeyed, positioning myself on my hands and knees, presenting my ass like a gift. The bedsprings creaked as he climbed behind me onto the mattress, splaying his palms on my back. He drizzled lube over my crack and glided his cock along my crease.

I think I whimpered. Oh, my God...mortifying. But I couldn't help it.

Anticipation ate me alive, which was kinda strange 'cause I was a damn good bottom. Like...the best, VIP, top shelf. The key was to relax every fiber of every muscle in the body. Once his beast of a cock was inside me, I could take over, guiding the action with the tilt of my hips and a well-timed, "Fuck me harder."

That was how it had worked with previous lovers, anyway. Not so much with the professor.

I forgot myself with him. I was too strung out to relax. Desire tripped me up, making me dizzy and shaky. Precum dripped from my aching dick onto the sheet below. If I'd trusted my balance, I'd have jerked it for a little relief, but he'd warned me not to touch myself and I wanted to be good for him. So good.

Finally, Alistair eased a finger inside me and reached around to grip my cock. I could have wept with relief. To be clear, I had no chill now. I fucked into his fist, riding that single digit like a ho.

He pulled out, tsking. "Slow down, boy."

"Ungh ." I hung my head and sucked in a breath. "Please."

"Don't worry. You'll get what you want, Win. What you need," he purred, slipping two fingers in.

I gripped the pillow with a grunt, arching into his touch and moaning aloud when he found my sweet spot. It was so good, but still not enough. “More.”

Wrong thing to say. Alistair pulled away again, leaving me feeling empty and horny to the point of madness. He returned seconds later...with Roger. I’d thought we were going to skip the dildo foreplay and get to the real deal, but okay. I knew this particular toy well, and the stretch and burn was familiar. Or so I’d thought.

Nothing was the same with Alistair in control. He massaged my hole with Roger’s tip, then slowly breached me, going no more than an inch...in and out, in and out. It was torture and I loved it. Or maybe I loved his steady hand stroking me like a maestro or the trail of kisses he planted on my neck as he whispered dirty sweet nothings.

“I’m going to fuck you, Win. I’m going to be so deep inside you. You’re going to beg for it. You’re going to want to feel me tomorrow and the next day. You’re going to wish you could feel my cum in your hole and?—”

“Oh, fuck yes! Fuck me,” I growled.

I gasped as the dildo filled me. He didn’t shove it in haphazardly, but it was a lot. I breathed in, slowly releasing a stream of air till pleasure chased any lingering pain away. And suddenly, he was coming at me from every direction. His mouth, his fingers, and yes, that goddamn Roger.

“Is this what you wanted, love? Is this the cock you wanted?”

“No, no, no. I want you. Please,” I sputtered, licking his lips.

“Ask me nicely.”



Torture. Pure fucking torture. “Ugh! You...you, fucker.”

Alistair gently removed Roger and tossed it aside, smacking my ass hard enough to leave a handprint. “Lie down. I want to see you, naughty boy.”

Christ, he’d spanked me, called me boy, and I was so here for it, I could have cried.

I’d never moved so fast in my life. Legs up and spread wide, precum leaking on my lower abs. I was a hot mess, ready to be ridden hard. I gazed up at Alistair, who had the decency to look as close to the edge of sanity as I was. His longish hair was damp with sweat, and his hand trembled as he reached for a condom.

“No condom...just you. Please,” I blurted. “I was tested before I flew here. Your call, but whatever you do, just...fuck me. Yes, I’m begging. I need you, I want you. I?—”

Alistair dropped the wrapper, lined his bare cock at my hole, and entered me with a fluid thrust that made my toes curl and my eyes roll in their sockets. He stilled for a moment as if to be sure I was okay. Then we were off to the races, fucking like animals in a carnal dance we’d become experts at in a matter of weeks.

He knew I loved it when he dragged his thumbs over my nipples, and I knew he loved it when I lifted my hips and clutched his ass cheeks in a greedy grab for more. I loved the spontaneous position changes too. One second I was staring up at the ceiling, and the next I was bouncing on his cock like a pogo stick, trying not to snicker at the squeaky bedsprings.

Alistair cracked up first, and that should have ended the sexiness. No one laughed during sex, right? You moaned, grunted, mumbled perverted praise and promises to do things that would make a hardened criminal blush, but you didn’t laugh. In a twist, I’d been missing out.

His crinkling eyes and wide grin freed something deeply joyful in me, welling to the surface on a wave that had me diving into his arms. Alistair held me close and rolled on top of me, brushing hair from my eyes as he moved.

He whispered in a language I didn't understand—maybe French or maybe an ancient Egyptian dialect no one had spoken for centuries. It was impossibly romantic and sweet and gorgeous, and I felt myself begin to fall.

True, my orgasm was coming for me like a runaway freight train, but something else was happening too. My defenses were slipping away, leaving me vulnerable and exposed. It was scary as fuck, and yet somehow...I knew I'd be okay.

I squeezed my eyes shut and held on as he came, shooting his load inside me—another thing I'd never let another man do. I was giving pieces to him that I'd sworn I'd save for someone special. I should have been alarmed, but it felt too fucking good.

And all I could think was, Thank you, Paris .

12

ALISTAIR

“These few streets surrounding the church and the castle ruins are all there is to the town. I think less than a thousand people live here.”

Winnie leaned on the handlebars of the red bicycle he'd pulled from Francoise's shed. “Cool. So it'll be a short ride around the block.”

I wrinkled my nose, glancing skyward in the hopes this outing might be sidetracked by a sudden torrential rainstorm. Sadly, the weather was not going to save me. The sun glittered through autumnal leaves while a flock of birds chirped merrily.

“Right. But wouldn't you rather go on to Versailles? It dwarfs every chateau you've seen so far. The grounds are incredible and?—”

“You don't know how to ride a bike,” he intercepted dryly.

“Of course, I know how to ride one. It's just...been a while.”

Winnie's grin was unfettered and mischievous. “How long?”

I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. “Thirty-five years, give or take.”

“Thirty-five—no way.”

“Way. ”

He put the kickstand up and marched to my side. “I’ll teach you. Trust me, I’m good at this. You’ll be riding hands-free within an hour.”

“Thanks, but I don’t require a lesson. And neither of us is riding a bicycle hands-free,” I added grumpily.

“If you say so, papi,” he singsonged with a wink, hiking a thumb toward the shed. “I’ll take the bike with the basket for Beau, and you can have the red one.”

I glanced at the tiny, stout mutt napping on the stoop nearby. “Why is Beau coming? Francoise and Jacques will be home any moment now, and?—”

“Don’t be mean. We bonded over cheese and bread crust last night. I can’t abandon him now. Can I, Beau-low baby boy?” Winnie cooed.

Oh, dear.

It was true, though. Beau had sat at Winnie’s feet while we’d warmed up the stew Francoise had left for us, and had curled into a ball on his lap in front of the fireplace later. We’d opened a second bottle of Cabernet Franc and sat with our legs entwined, chatting about French food, thick socks, and places we’d visited that started with the letter P.

By the way, the only P places he’d been that he remembered were Pasadena, Palm Springs, Petaluma, and of course, Paris.

Don’t ask. This was Winnie, after all. There was no rhyme or reason to his methods. He was a free spirit to the nth degree. He shared his thoughts on every topic that popped into his head—crusty, warm bread was the best, Martians definitely existed

millions of years ago—and told hilarious stories about Sunday drag brunches with his friends.

He painted a picture with words of sunshine, ocean breezes, bottomless pitchers of margaritas, and big-bosomed drag queens with beehive wigs and gorgeous sequined gowns who sang Judy Garland songs like the diva herself, then pumped up her breasts and asked random patrons to check her jiggle. I laughed till my cheeks hurt, idly caressing his feet as I filed nuances of Winnie into the ever-growing compartment he'd claimed in my brain.

That sounded barmy, I knew. Nonetheless, it was true. He'd broken through every barrier and carved his initials in walls I'd thought were untouchable.

Winnie was bright and beautiful, funny and silly, and utterly charming. He was the king of hyperbole, over-the-top expressions, and outlandish euphemisms. I'd never met anyone like him. Ever. We belonged to very different worlds.

Yet Winnie seemed equally fascinated by me.

He peppered me with questions about the castle ruins down the street and didn't run for cover when I explained that the site was previously a Merovingian necropolis.

"What the fuck is that?" he'd asked, petting the snoring dog in his lap.

"The ancient burial ground of the ruling family of the Franks."

"How ancient?"

"Two thousand years old," I'd replied.

Winnie's mouth had dropped open. "Shut the front door. That's creepy as fuck and

also...super interesting.”

And that was it in a nutshell. Winnie made me feel...interesting.

Me.

Go figure.

Look, I knew who I was, and I'd long ago accepted that the subjects that captivated me had a very small audience. Winnie didn't fit the description of a budding Egyptologist, and I wasn't the date he'd choose to bring to a West Hollywood pool party. We were polar opposites, but for reasons that made absolutely no sense whatsoever, we fit .

For now, not for always.

Not to worry...I understood. And that was why I trudged to the shed to unearth the second bicycle, mumbling under my breath, “ Do not fall. Do not bloody well fall .”

After a shaky start with precarious wobbling and a minor drop into a shallow ditch, we were on our way.

We rode to the castle and made a loop around the keep. I pointed out the towers and the moat, and because I was me, I gave a brief history lesson about medieval architecture.

“The moat was the first line of defense, but you also had high towers, battlements, a drawbridge, arrow slits, and more.”

“Amazing. I call the round tower, top floors for the views, please. How about you?”

“I’ll take the next one over.”

Winnie beamed. “We can knock the wall down in between and put up a huge flat-screen.”

Rather than point out the difficulties involved in removing a castle wall, not to mention that this one was a UNESCO World Heritage site, or that I rarely watched television, I nodded solemnly. “Brilliant idea. I’m going to want a life-sized chess set.”

“Only if I can have a bowling alley.”

I pretended to consider his request. “Deal.”

I rode ahead of him, snickering as he whooped with glee behind me.

We continued along a single-lane road, passing fields with grazing cows and horses and modest homes partially hidden by enormous trees. The next village over was sorely lacking in medieval castles, but it had a boulangerie, a pizzeria, a post office, a market, and a few boutiques. It was also very dog friendly.

We left the bikes at the rack in front of the post office, put Beau on a leash, and set off to explore. I’d figured Winnie would lose interest quickly. There was nothing flashy or exciting here. This was a quiet provincial dot on a map where only a handful of residents spoke English. Winnie loved it.

“ Enchanté, enchanté, enchanté !” He pivoted on the sidewalk, one hand on his hip. “I could live here.”

“And what would you do for a living?”

“Cut hair. There’s no barber shop. They need me, and I’m easy, honey. They can pay me in cheese, bread, and wine. C’mon, you can tell me all about chalets while we check it out.”

“ Chateaus ,” I corrected, smiling the same silly smile I’d been sporting for days as he sashayed down the street like a runway model.

Winnie waited for me at the corner with his hand outstretched and a beguiling come-hither look on his face. For me. And yes, I was the one who was enchanted now. Utterly enchanted.

We strolled hand in hand through stores stocked with Eiffel Tower tees, felt berets, and kitschy Impressionist prints. Nothing high-end or fashionable, but better quality than at some of the tourist traps in the city. And the last boutique on the street sold colorful clothing that Winnie declared was magnifique.

“Alistair, they have your color. I swear this is it. This is you,” he commented, flattening a jumper against my chest.

“It’s blue.”

“No, no. It’s not plain ol’ blue. It’s sky blue and cornflower blue and...Egyptian blue.” Winnie arched a brow in challenge. “See, I listen. Try it on for me. Please.”

The salesperson descended on cue, and she understood enough English to insist that my friend was right. I figured it was easiest to go along with them. I pulled the wool-blend fabric over my head, chuckling at Winnie’s theatrical gasp.

“ C’est parfait !” the woman gushed.

“ Oui !” Winnie agreed. “It’s par-fay ! It’s the perfect hopper. ”



“Jumper?” I snickered as I pulled it off. “Thanks, but it’s not my taste. It’s too...colorful.”

He wagged his brows. “Trust me on this one. This color is your friend, honey.”

I glanced from the salesperson to Winnie to Beau, who was busy licking his balls, then shrugged. Why not?

“Fine, I’ll take it.”

Win flashed a radiant grin that made me feel like I was ten feet tall with a mega penis and a winning lottery ticket. Who was I?

Honestly, I didn’t recognize this version of myself. I’d ridden a bicycle, held hands with a man in public, and parted with cash for a jumper that would clash wildly with everything in my wardrobe. And I had zero regrets. In fact, my smile was too broad and my shoulders were set with a confidence I didn’t usually feel whilst dealing with everyday people in the real world.

This was the Winnie effect. My whirling technicolor dervish of a lover cast a spell everywhere he went, charming shopkeepers, waiters, seasoned archeologists, and anyone lucky enough to fall into his orbit.

Like me.

We returned to pack up our belongings and deliver Beau to his owners. I’d expected Francoise to be home now, but we’d missed her. She’d left a note on the kitchen table with instructions to leave Beau in the house as Jacques would be back within the hour.

The note was in French of course, and filled with nosy questions about my new friend

along with the usual “It was nice to see you, don’t be a stranger” sentiments. She’d signed her name with a flourishing F, a heart on the I, and “ Bonne chance .”

I scribbled a quick thank you on the flip side of her note, no hearts, assuring her I’d hoped to visit again soon. I...not we. I certainly didn’t respond to her queries regarding Winnie. For obvious reasons. I couldn’t explain what I didn’t understand.

I glanced at the man showering a stranger’s dog with nonsensical gibberish till Beau rolled belly up, tongue out, begging for more. Winnie delivered, slowly straightening and peering over my shoulder.

“ Bonne chance . Why is she wishing you good luck?”

“She knows I’m giving a speech or two at the conference. Small world, remember?”

Winnie pushed a strand of hair from my eyes and fussed with my shirt collar. “You don’t need luck. You’re going to be amazing.”

I could have scoffed and assured him that words like luck and amazing didn’t apply. I knew the material too well to falter. A few speeches in front of a crowd of likeminded scientists and historians was a walk in the park. It was the socializing I didn’t enjoy.

But Winnie was here now, and I couldn’t help thinking everything was going to be okay.

13

WINNIE

B ack in Paris and it was showtime, baby.

This was what I was here for. This was my time to shine. This was where I was supposed to watch out for mismatched socks, mind the clock, and make sure my best friend's boss remembered to eat. Easy stuff. So easy that I hadn't really given the conference portion of this trip much thought. To say I was a tad unprepared for my assignment was an understatement.

Okay, the socks, time management, and food weren't an issue. But conference rooms filled to the gills with a hoard of serious-looking Egyptologists was another story. I'd never been around so many smarty-pants people in my life. It was kind of intimidating.

And a text from Raine with a list of reminders didn't help.

Day one is a meet and greet. Mission wardrobe is on. Check the socks and be ready with a water bottle and a packet of almonds. The professor forgets to eat at those things.

Day two is his speech on Saqqara.

Day three is the recent discovery of the Nile Delta Necropolis. Professor Poitier will speak afterward. They have friendly tension. Jammie Dodgers help. Suggest a cup of

tea and sneak a few on his plate. Perfect stress reliever.

Day four is...

I turned my cell upside down and frowned. Fuck, I should have been doing my own research. I didn't know jack shit about Saqqara and the Nile Delta. I was supposed to be a true asset, not just a pretty face handing out jam cookies.

Okay, no freaking out. I could cram a few weeks' worth of ancient Egypt into a couple of all-nighters with Wikipedia, and in the morning, I'd blow the professor in the shower.

Yeah, I had this. No worries.

Study, sex, serve.

Day one began with a BJ and a leisurely lie-in. Then Alistair shuffled to his makeshift desk in the hotel room to work. That was my cue to hit up Google for some Egyptology for Dummies notes. I spent an hour memorizing basic facts like there are many pyramids in Egypt, one female pharaoh wore a fake beard, and mummification required a fuckton of bandages.

That was as far as I got. Sorry, but it was a smidge boring and I needed to save my enthusiasm for later. Besides, he'd agreed to let me trim his hair, so I had a mini project before the festivities.

"I probably shouldn't be asking, but...are you nervous?"

Alistair met my gaze in the mirror propped next to the dining table in his suite. "No. Not at all. I know most everyone who'll be there. It's fine."

“Oh.”

“I’m more nervous about how much hair you’re cutting,” he griped playfully.

“Don’t be. I’m a professional.”

“I know.” He smiled. “Are you nervous?”

“Me? Ha! Of course not. My job is socks. ”

“No...you’re my date.” Alistair waited till my hands went still to glance up at me.

“You didn’t think I was leaving you in the hotel room, did you?”

“Well, no. I thought I was following you and staying close in case you needed something.”

“I’m not a pampered celebrity, Winnie...or a toddler.”

“I know, I know.” I raked my teeth over my lower lip. “But date? That’s—are you sure you want that?”

“Yes. I’m positive.” He wrinkled his nose and scratched his nape nervously. “To be clear, I’m not coming out at an event with three hundred work associates. It’s not that I’m not proud, but?—”

“Shh. I get it. If you want me, you can have me.”

“I want you,” he whispered. “More than you know.”

The way he looked at me just then sent the butterflies in my stomach into a frenzy. I’d waited my whole life for that look. It was possessive and hungry and vaguely

dirty with the right amount of indulgent reverence.

And it made me nervous. Not good, 'cause nervous me was a loose cannon.

But don't worry...I had this.

The meet and greet was held at a banquet room at the Ritz. Snazzy Central. I wore a clingy tuxedo shirt under a short dinner coat with big gold buttons and a purple plaid kilt, in case you're curious. Other than the kilt, it was a safe ensemble. Alistair wore a suit. An actual well-tailored gorgeous navy suit, a white oxford shirt, and a silk tie.

Wow...just wow. The professor cleaned up nicely.

"You look amazing," I gushed. "So handsome and?—"

"Dr. Creighton, it's a pleasure to see you. Do you remember my wife, Penelope?" An old gentleman with a huge white mustache stepped up, grasping the professor's hand as he pulled a slight woman with glasses forward. They were Americans from Spokane who'd specifically made the journey to hear Alistair speak.

Another couple joined them. And another. We were surrounded on both sides by eager-looking, well-dressed folks vying for Alistair's attention. Someone quoted a passage from his last novel; someone else wanted his thoughts regarding the latest dig in a city I couldn't pronounce to save my life.

"Dr. Creighton, I can't tell you how happy we are to be here. We booked our flights months ago. I feel like a teenager at a rock concert," Penelope twittered.

"I assure you, I will not be shaking my hips onstage," Alistair deadpanned.

His audience howled as if they'd just heard the funniest joke ever. I chuckled along

with them, plucking a champagne flute from a passing waiter's tray.

"Honey, you should," I piped in. They all turned to me expectantly. "Oh, hello. I'm Winnie Rodriguez."

A British woman with short curly hair gave me an appraising once-over. "Lovely to meet you. Are you with the Louvre?"

"Louvre? Me? Work there?" I snort-laughed. "I think they'd put me on the 'only hire if desperate' list. And let me tell you, they'd have to pay me big bucks. I'd rather watch paint dry. But...it's a nice place to visit," I added in a rush, noting the six-way blank stare.

"Winnie is from Los Angeles," Alistair said in an unmistakably affectionate tone. "That would be a rather long commute."

They snickered politely but seemed more curious than ever now.

"I'm the professor's assistant while Raine is on vacation," I explained .

"Ah!" Apparently, that made sense. They nodded and resumed interrogating the professor.

They weren't rude, but they were single-minded in their love of ancient history and had correctly guessed that I wasn't going to quench their thirst or broaden their horizon on their favorite subject. I totally understood. If I'd had a hard-on for hieroglyphs, I wouldn't bother with me either.

But this wasn't my rodeo. I had nothing to prove to anyone here. My only job now was to look pretty and keep the champagne and canapés coming. Done.

I stuck to the professor's side with a smile pasted on my mug while I witnessed a remarkable transformation. Alistair didn't suddenly loosen his tie and demand the deejay play his favorite Gaga tune, then challenge his work bros to a drinking game, but the shell around his carefully guarded facade had cracked. He was open, friendly, and talkative.

It was nice to see him so comfortable in his skin. He knew these people, knew his role here, and he shone. I had no idea what the fuck he was talking about half the time, but he did it with such passion and excitement that I found myself wracking my brain for those darn Wikipedia trivia tidbits to add to the conversation.

But I was a good boy. I didn't do anything embarrassing. I didn't even ask if anyone knew how to walk like an Egyptian. Seriously. The force was strong with me all night...until Gerard made his entrance with a stunning blond man on his arm.

Colin.

I was curious about this guy. I'd read about his work in antiquities and his marriage to a prominent archeologist, but nothing online revealed his personality...if you know what I mean. No one said Colin was the best dude ever, and no one said he was a dick. It was all unsatisfyingly neutral .

First impression: he looked like an angel with golden hair, aristocratic features, and a sophisticated air.

Second impression: Colin and Gerard made a formidable team. They were supermodel gorgeous and ridiculously smart. That didn't seem fair.

Third impression: I didn't like him.

Yeah, yeah, not surprising. No doubt that was me being a judgy asshole, but I never



claimed to be perfect, as the white-hot flare of jealousy racing through my veins indicated. It was totally irrational. Colin didn't have anything I wanted. His romance with my professor was over eons ago, so what did I care?

Well, here's the thing—it didn't take a rocket scientist to guess we were nothing alike and had zero in common. Fine by me. I took pride in my “uniqueness.” Usually, anyway.

At that very moment, not so much.

“Oh, we must say hello to Dr. Poitier and Dr. Farrington,” a woman in a shimmery pink sequined gown chirped.

“Is everyone here a doctor? It's sort of like Grey's Anatomy for ancient civilizations,” I quipped, mostly to myself. Alistair was speaking to a heavysset gentleman with a bushy mustache that curled at the corners.

Penelope heard me, though. She chuckled good-naturedly. “That's clever.”

I bowed. “Thank you.”

“However, doctorate degrees outnumber medical degrees by the dozens here.”

“I figured. Are you a doctor?” I asked conversationally.

“Yes. And so is my husband.”

“ Hmm . And what about him?” I pointed at a random person.

“Yes. Dr. Shaw is a historian from Yale.”

“And her?”

“Yes,” Penelope confirmed. “Dr. Katzan is an archeologist and antiquities expert.”

I inclined my head toward Colin. “Him?”

Was it my imagination or did Penelope actually blush? “Oh, Dr. Farrington is a linguist and Demotic expert, second only to Dr. Creighton, his former mentor. They worked together for years until Dr. Farrington met Dr. Poitier. That was a shocker. No one knew Dr. Farrington was...”

“Gay?” I supplied.

“Yes. Not that it matters, of course, but he always had a girl on his arm at these soirees. One day, out of the blue, he left a prestigious post at the British Museum and moved to France. For love. Sweet, isn’t it? I’m sure poor Professor Creighton was gutted to lose him. They’re very close friends. Or they were,” she singsonged in a tone that implied there might be drama between the two men. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to say hello to them.”

She hurried off before I could ask any probing questions.

I plucked another canapé from a passing tray and let my eyes wander over the room, homing in on Gerard and Colin, deep in conversation with Penelope. Alistair was nearby, chatting with a sophisticated gentleman in a tuxedo. I watched the three men while sipping champagne, looking for clues to their past, like a paparazzi dropout arriving at the scene of a crime a few years too late.

Pathetic. And very un-me.

Later, at the hotel that night, I changed my clothes in my room, and opened one of the

emergency packages of Jammie Dodgers Raine had packed. I nibbled on the corners, lifted the top cookie, and licked jam from the center as I pondered the state of affairs.

Dr. Creighton was a big fucking deal.

I'd known he was brilliant and sought-after, but it was something else to see him in action, surrounded by fellow scholars who hung on his every word. To me he was Alistair, the professor, the geeky hunk who told stories about people who'd lived thousands of years ago and knew the history of practically every major city around the globe. He was the guy who lost his phone on the regular and had no concept of popular culture.

And he was from a world I would never in a million years be part of.

Damn it, I wished I'd taken French in high school. I wished I'd liked school more and had more than a passing interest in history.

I wished I had more time with Alistair...away from his adoring fans and anything that might remind him that I really didn't belong here.

I choked down another Jammie Dodger and told myself to snap out of it. I had to keep my head in the game and my heart out of the equation.

The conference officially began the next day.

Alistair dressed, as per usual, in khakis and a matching sweater. He also wore one black sock, one navy sock, forgot to shave, and couldn't find his phone.

"Here's your phone," I said, slipping it into his back pocket. "Shave first. And just a suggestion...lose the brown sweater, wear your new blue one instead, and let's go with navy socks."

“Right. Good thinking.” Alistair smiled hesitantly. “You don’t have to stick around for this part. You’ll be bored to tears. Go explore, have fun.”

“Are you kidding? Who’s gonna make sure you remember that King Tut was the most famous pharaoh in ancient times?”

“That’s historically inaccurate. King Tut had a rather insignificant reign, and his death brought an end to his bloodline. His successors did their best to tarnish Tutankhamun’s name. Little did they know that King Tut’s burial site would make him a household name centuries later and—” Alistair dragged his razor along his jaw as his gaze flitted to me. “You knew that didn’t you?”

“I’m smarter than I look,” I bluffed.

Yep, I was a new man this morning. I’d had my internal pity party for one last night and officially moved on. This conference was not about moi . I was here to support Alistair, and damn it, I was going to do my job.

He chuckled lightly. “You’re brilliant.”

“So are you, and you’re going to be awesome.”

And he was.

I’d been a DragCon regular every year for almost a decade, but that was the extent of my foray into conferences. Thousands of queers and allies celebrating drag culture and self-expression with a chance to see your favorite queens was too juicy a ticket to pass up—club music, rainbow-infused everything, and discussion panels highlighting topics like fashion, makeup, wigs, and queer activism. Loved it.

This...was nothing like that.

The atmosphere in the conference room was serious with a capital S. The speakers' names, the topics they were covering, and the times were listed on a teleprompter and on an embossed program in the lobby.

The air of excitement was palpable.

But geez, it was...b-o-ring. I wasn't sure how anyone could make the topic of museum funding exciting, but the new dig in Egypt sounded promising. Unfortunately, the speakers lacked pizzazz. No snappy one-liners and no jokes to lighten the mood.

I sat through three speeches, fell asleep in my chair before lunch and pressed repeat in the afternoon.

Until Alistair took the stage at the end of the day.

In a twist, my man was the Mick Jagger of Egyptology. The room went bonkers. They stood for the professor as he made his way to the podium, applauding with gusto.

I overheard whispers of the time he'd given the Prince of Wales a tour of some important king's tomb at the British Museum and the award the duke of fuck-knows-where had presented him at Oxford. Alistair was the best of the best. He was the guy every archeologist wanted on speed dial. He was well-connected, brilliant, ebullient, and had an uncanny ability to retain thousands of years' worth of obscure history in his brain.

No, those were not my adjectives. And as you probably guessed, I had no idea what the fuck ebullient meant till I googled it. Enthusiastic...in case you were curious.

The whole room went dead quiet—pun intended—while Alistair decoded a section of

text from a sarcophagus in French and English. It was a hymn or a prayer and instructions on how to navigate the afterlife with funerary amulets for someone with a five-syllable name. It was interesting, but my attention wavered to Gerard, who gave a friendly wave from his seat two rows in front of me.

His husband wasn't with him. I didn't know if that was weird or not, but I went with weird anyway.

Where was Colin? Was he avoiding Alistair on purpose? Was there bad blood or just more to the story than I knew? Was he angry that Alistair hadn't translated the sexy rock his husband had asked him to a few weeks ago? Why hadn't he done it himself? He was a linguist. Shouldn't he know how to decipher hieroglyphics too?

Okay, I'd officially gone bananas. Creating some wacky espionage-like scenario with a grand setup Matrix-style was over-the-top...even for me.

I supposed I could have asked Alistair about Colin, but I hadn't wanted to waste what little time I had left by potentially bringing up bad memories.

So I played the part of valet and cheerleader during the day and sex god at night, setting the ambience, dimming the lights and keeping the curtain open just enough to see the Eiffel Tower from the bed.

I wore my lace thong and brought my A game, sucking him to the point of madness and offering myself like a gift. I wanted Alistair to remember me fondly...and not as a jealous weirdo who'd done the unthinkable by falling for a man who was out of his league.

Yes...I'd fallen for Alistair. Hook, line, and sinker. Head over heels, bewitched, infatuated to the point of madness.

As a result, I was off-kilter that whole week.

I found myself staring at him with a mixture of pride, awe, and intense affection—over breakfast, at his lecture, in bed. I was transfixed by the sound of his voice in a crowded conference room, the rise and fall of his chest as he entered me. I wanted to be wherever he was. London, Paris, a random town on the Nile River...hopefully with high-Internet access.

The accompanying niggles of self-doubt were a new one for me. Did he want me? I wasn't like Colin. I wasn't the kind of boyfriend he could hide. He'd have to want me just the way I was. And let's not forget that I lived on the other side of the freaking globe.

Ugh! Yeah, I faked it well enough, but I was kind of a mess.

### WINNIE

O n the last day of the conference, I paired my favorite deep-purple button-down with my houndstooth trousers, rolled up the cuffs to show off the adorable boots I'd crammed into my suitcase, and topped off the look with the hat I'd insisted was a Parisian must. Clothes didn't make a man, but I felt more like myself and that was a positive.

The professor took the stage in the afternoon to discuss the religious artifacts he'd been researching for months. He had the audience in the palm of his hand. They didn't seem to care that his blue sweater had made its third appearance or that he was wearing a white sock on one foot and a beige one on the other because I'd forgotten to do a double check. They were entranced by him. And damn it, so was I.

I stood off to the side, my back against the conference wall, cheering him on, my heart full to capacity yet hollow somehow—as if I had everything and nothing all at once.

A burst of applause broke my reverie. I shoved my cell into my pocket as Alistair bowed graciously, waving to the conference goers and stepping aside. The moderator motioned for him to stay onstage, then introduced Gerard Poitier .

You'd have thought she'd announced Beyoncé as the surprise guest. Everyone was on their feet again, clapping loudly.



I fumbled through the program in confusion, mumbling to myself. “Gerard’s not on the schedule.”

“Dr. Poitier headed the team responsible for finding the tomb.”

I glanced over at the golden-haired man standing closer than expected on my left. “Oh. Right. I?—”

“Hello, I’m Colin Farrington. I believe you’ve met my husband, but I haven’t had the honor,” he said in a smooth British accent that was sexier than it should have been.

“Winnie Rodriguez. I’m Professor Creighton’s...assistant. Enchanté .”

Colin inclined his chin, cool and detached. Of course, he was even more appealing up close in his designer suit, tastefully tousled curls, and the lightest sheen of gloss on his lips.

The epitome of casual elegance with a side order of snooty.

He wasn’t rude—more like friendly but unfriendly, if you know what I mean. Pretty much what I’d expect from a prominent professor of antiquities, a scholar, and a scientist. Geez, he probably played electric guitar in a band on the side too.

“I heard Raine is on holiday.”

“Yes, I’m filling in for him. I’m actually a stylist,” I blurted for no reason whatsoever. “Mostly hair, but I dabble in couture.”

“You must be responsible for the jumper.”

“Alistair’s azure sweater? I am. Chic, isn’t it?” I tipped my hat and gave a friendly

nod, but he kept his gaze forward, a slight sneer on his lips.

Unless I was mistaken, I'd been judged and found lacking.

To be fair, I'd been thinking the same thing for a few days, so I sort of agreed with him, but also...fuck Colin Farrington. I inched away from the posh turd to avoid stomping on his Prada loafers and tuned into Gerard, who was pointing at a projected image of a shard of pottery with writing on it.

"...demotic ostrakon recording tax payments for grand monuments are of interest." Gerard clicked a button and the image changed to the sexy queer-themed rock he'd showed Alistair at the hotel a few weeks ago. "But 'grievances' for other favors were also recorded. The image is reminiscent of a better-known ostrakon currently at the British Museum, however, this one is unmistakably homosexual. Dr. Creighton wanted a chance to translate the demotic script, so perhaps he can shed light on the subject."

All eyes zoned in on Alistair.

For the first time in days, he looked unsure.

Alistair cleared his throat and faked a smile. "I haven't had the opportunity to delve into this particular one, but?—"

"Oh, my mistake," Gerard said. "I assumed you'd done the research, but that's okay. Perhaps you can speculate on the subject?"

"Speculation isn't research," the professor replied, launching into a speech about the better-known naughty artwork at the British Museum.

As he warmed up to the topic, he seemed to regain his footing. Phew .

“I have a strong feeling A-lee didn’t do his research,” Colin tsked.

His comment was addressed to the person on his right, but I bristled ’cause if I’d overheard him, so had everyone in our little section, and that was not okay.

“Not like Dr. Creighton at all,” the faceless man hummed in disapproval. “He’s compulsively organized.”

I pushed away from the wall and glowered. “That wasn’t his research. It was a favor.”

Colin and the man next to him regarded me with the mild surprise reserved for spiders that show up out of nowhere.

“A favor? I don’t think so. It’s an important piece of LGBTQ art that should have been prioritized,” Colin huffed under his breath.

“He didn’t have time,” I argued.

For the first time since he’d joined me on the wall, Colin turned to face me. “I wonder why. Too busy with extracurricular pursuits? That’s not like A-lee at all.”

His gaze burned a hole through my forehead before raking a slow trail down my body. I gasped in dismay. This fucker was throwing shade and he was doing it so well, it almost sounded like a compliment. It wasn’t.

I pushed off the wall, fists clenched and jaw set in a straight line. “Extracurricular my ass, honey.”

Three hundred people turned on cue.

Oh, shoot. That wasn't my inside voice.

"What are you doing?" Colin hissed.

"Nothing." I waved sheepishly and tried again in a softer tone. "I was there. I know what happened. The omnipositron is brand-new and there wasn't time for?—"

"Lower your voice," Colin snapped.

"What is he talking about? What's an omnipositron?" the other man asked as a twitter of curiosity buzzed throughout the room.

Heads were craning to see what was going on. Nothing good.

"Sir, please." The moderator took the microphone and pointed menacingly at me. "You must find a seat at once."

"But I?—"

"Sit down." Colin grabbed my elbow.

I shook him off and collided with someone behind me.

"Sorry," I muttered, overcorrecting as I stepped forward and landed on Colin's foot .

He lost his balance and toppled backward on his ass, taking me with him.

Yep, I lay sprawled on top of my lover's ex in the middle of an international conference attended by intellects from every galaxy in the universe.

No, this wasn't a brawl, but my uncoordinated attempt to untangle myself was

compounded with a helping of misplaced animosity...on my end, anyway.

I took my time standing up, and when Colin's knee almost connected with my nuts, I pushed him down again...harder than necessary. Unfortunately, I had an audience and yes, I looked guilty as fuck.

Half the auditorium gasped in dismay. I supposed it was only natural that all hell would break loose too.

"Sir, you must leave at once," the moderator demanded. "Gardes !"

A serious-looking guard pulled me off Colin and unceremoniously escorted my ass out of the room, deposited me on the steps outside the conference center, and yelled at me in French.

I fixed my hat, straightened my collar, and held my hands up. "I'm going, I'm going."

Mortified, check.

Humiliated, check.

Ashamed, check.

I was too stunned to think straight.

What had I done?

I walked a block or two in a daze, shaken and confused.

Geez, Raine was going to kill me, and Alistair...oh, my fucking God, I'd let him down. I'd embarrassed him. I'd asserted myself in all the wrong ways and had let

petty jealousy take over. This wasn't a tacky reality show where exes and new lovers duked it out for ratings. This was top-tier, mega-academic, internationally important stuff, and I'd just gone Jerry Springer on their collective asses.

I wanted to disappear, pack my bag, and hop the first flight home.

I wanted to stay and find out what the hell Colin was trying to pull. How dare he take shots at Alistair and at me...and?—

Oh, fuck.

Of course, this was the perfect time for the heavens to open up.

Not just a drizzle or a few drops, either. This was real rain. I glanced around quickly and realized I had no idea where I was. I stood on a corner and mapped out my location on my cell, head bent, eyes watering, rain ferociously slashing the sky. My phone was getting wet, and my nose was running. I was so done, it wasn't funny.

So when the light turned, I absently stepped from the curb into a puddle with pond-like aspirations...and immediately burst into tears.

Yep, this was me falling apart in the most beautiful city in the world. This was me making mistakes, overstepping boundaries, and revealing faults and insecurities like badges of honor. This was me coming to terms with endings.

Guess what? This was a big city, folks. No one noticed, no one cared. I was just one more starry-eyed idiot who'd hoped a month in Paris would change my life. It had. My world had opened up, but sadly, I was still me.

And I knew how this would play out. Alistair would wave off my apologies as if becoming unhinged at an important conference was sort of normal. Or as if he figured

he deserved to be sabotaged by an inappropriate lover. He'd rally and retreat to his books and rocks and relics, and life would go back to usual...and he'd forget about me .

Maybe not tomorrow or next week, but eventually, I'd be nothing more than a blip in time.

That was unbearably sad.

By some act of God, I was able to hail a taxi. I typed my address on my cell and showed it to the driver to avoid any language barrier confusions. Then I took my hat off and finger-combed my hair as I watched rivulets of rain water make patterns on the window. My throat felt so tight. I couldn't keep all this negative juju inside, or I'd combust.

So I did what I probably should have done weeks ago...I called Raine to confess my sins.

He answered on the third ring, sounding groggy and half-asleep. Shit.

“Win?”

“Yeah, it's me. Sorry. I thought you were home now.”

“I am. We just got in a few hours ago. I'm jet-lagged for sure, but Graham is at the office, catching up on?—”

“I fucked up,” I interrupted.

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, you name it, I did it. His socks didn’t match, he’s worn the same sweater for days, I ate his cookies, and then I got into a tussle with a prick who I think I’m jealous of, and to top it off, I got kicked out of the conference. Yes, me....kicked out. It’s just...all bad, and I’m sorry.”

The silence on the line was deafening. Just when I thought Raine had hung up on me, I heard a snort of laughter.

“You got kicked out?” He snickered.

“This isn’t funny. It’s serious. Alistair is dealing with this on his own, and I should be with him, maturely, not throwing punches or making trouble. I’m embarrassed, and I’m sorry.” Again...quiet. “Raine? Are you there?”

“Yeah, I’m...you called him Alistair. That’s not the first time, either. ”

I didn’t bother fighting my tears now. They cascaded down my cheeks faster than I could swipe them away. I sniffed loudly, avoiding the taxi driver’s curious glance in the rearview mirror. “Y-yes, I know.”

“Oh, Win...tell me everything, honey.”

“No, I can’t.”

“Did something happen?” he asked gently.

“Yes. He’s a good man, and I really...I really wish I could be a good man for him.”

“You and...the professor, huh? That’s...I didn’t see that coming.”

I stared out the window, unseeing, and sighed. “Me either.”



“What will you do?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I don’t know.”

What could I do? I’d already fucked everything up by falling in love.

15

WINNIE

“Winnie?” A door opened and closed, footsteps padded toward the bedroom.

“I’m not here.”

Alistair knocked on the bathroom door once and turned the knob, cocking his head curiously. “What are you doing?”

“Shame-eating Jammie Dodgers. I’m sorry,” I choked out. “I’m so sorry.”

Commence Operation Apology.

Alistair crouched next to me on the floor. “Don’t be. Are you all right?”

“Well, I stepped in a puddle and ruined my shoes, then left my hat in my Uber and had to chase after it for a block. It was cold, so I took a shower and got distracted by cookies. It happens. I understand why you like these things now.” I held up a cookie. “They’re pretty good.”

He brushed my damp hair aside and kissed my forehead before joining me on the floor with his knees bent. “I’ll have one, please.”

I passed him the package, sighing heavily. “I’m sorry, Alistair. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Stop. I know you are.”

See? I knew he’d let me off too easily.

“I’m...wrecked about it. Totally repellent.”

He wrinkled his brow. “Repentant?”

“Yeah, I didn’t mean to start a brouhaha in the middle of your speech. I swear, I didn’t punch him. I wanted to ’cause he’s a smug shithead and he has a very punchable face, but violence isn’t my style. That doesn’t explain how I ended up on the floor. I get that. I pushed him...it was an accident, but maybe I was rougher than I needed to be. I don’t know what came over me. I’m just...sorry.”

“You think Colin has a punchable face?” he asked, biting into his cookie.

“Very punchable. I don’t like him, and I don’t like that Gerard basically told hundreds of your fans that you didn’t do your research. How dare he?”

“That was rather annoying.”

“Annoying?” I huffed. “No, it was sucky. He tried to make you sound like a slacker, as if you owed him that research. And why that art piece? It’s erotic, and it wasn’t on your agenda. Was he outing you? Would he do that? Or am I paranoid and looking for a reason to hate your ex? Please...don’t listen to me. This is a breakdown in progress. I’d steer clear if I were you and—how is this funny?”

Alistair chuckled softly. “You stood up for me.”

I nudged his knee and grumbled, “Hysterical, huh?”

“I’m not laughing at that. I’m touched. I am.” He put an arm around me and squeezed. “It was unnecessary, but I appreciate the sentiment. You’re more fierce than I thought. You’re also not wrong. Academia can be a cutthroat environment, and people have a habit of posturing to make sure the light shines at the most flattering angle on them. Human nature, I’m afraid.”

I was quiet for a moment. “Did I leave a mess for you? What does a professor do when his assistant gets kicked out for disorderly conduct?”

“That was a first for me,” he said with a laugh. “I have no idea.”

“I’m glad you’re amused, ’cause I’m devastated. And I’m not proud of this, but...I was jealous too.”

“Jealous? Of Colin?”

“Everyone, I think. I feel really dumb here, and it’s hell on my complexion.” I pinched my cheeks and made a face, hoping to add a little levity.

“You’re not dumb,” he snapped, adding, “Someone else’s doctorate degree doesn’t lessen your intelligence.”

“Good. I don’t want the extra degrees, and honestly, I don’t think I’d survive a day of digging for treasures in the desert. Let’s be real. I’m so me, it’s a situation.”

Alistair tilted my chin and traced my jaw, smiling sweetly. “I have no idea what that means, but as I’ve told you many times...you’re perfect just the way you are. Please never change.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. I’m not good at change.”

“Winnie, you?—”

“I have a job interview...in LA,” I blurted, lowering my eyes.

He cocked his head curiously as if confused by the segue. Who could blame him? I was talking nonsense, floundering like a sad fish on dry land.

“That’s fantastic. Congratulations.”

“It’s just an interview, but it could be good for me.”

Alistair went still for a beat. “Tell me about it tomorrow. For now, just...come here, love.”

I leaned in, practically melting in his arms as he lowered his mouth to mine. So gently, so tenderly. He was comforting me and buoying me, giving me so much more than I deserved...and I took it.

I climbed onto Alistair’s lap and wrapped myself around him, gliding my tongue alongside his and deepening the connection till we were both panting for air.

He eased me off his knee and pulled me into the bedroom. He undressed me and claimed me, licking and kissing every inch of my body before pushing his thick cock in my hole. He was demanding yet patient—pinning my arms above my head as he thrust hard and rough. We’d done this so often, but it was never the same.

Sometimes it was just a hot and horny release. Sometimes it was playful or even a little savage. And always consuming. We moved with purpose and meaning, communicating with our bodies. We gave pieces of ourselves I instinctively knew no one else had ever seen.

Or maybe that was just me. I opened myself wider, arching to match his rhythm, my heart beating wildly while a voice in my head chanted, “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

And I did.

I was in love with the professor.

Hopelessly in love.

When he came inside me, filling me as he shuddered in my arms, I almost blurted my truth. Almost. I held on to him like a lifeline, tears blurring my vision, and swallowed the words.

I was a fucking coward.

And a realist. This wasn't my world and like it or not, it never would be. I was a Parisian distraction, the side entertainment before Alistair returned to his books and artifacts. I wished I fit in. I wished I could be the man he needed and deserved.

But I wasn't.

And it was time to let go.

### ALISTAIR

My month in Paris had gone better than expected...by a long shot. But I was anxious to be done and go home. I had bigger things on my mind. Like Winnie.

He was coming with me to London for a few days, and I was hoping to convince him to stay longer. Either way, I wanted a plan for us. I wanted?—

“What the hell happened yesterday?” Colin demanded as we filed out of yet another conference room for brunch with the Egyptian board of antiquities from Cairo.

Representatives from major museums and universities were here. Including Gerard with his husband at his side, playing the part of supportive spouse.

“Relax, mon cher ,” Gerard advised. “I’m sure it was a misunderstanding. Your assistant was worked up about the ostrakon, oui ?”

“No, that wasn’t it. Winnie didn’t appreciate that you put me on the spot. He had a theory that you wanted to set me up, which of course is preposterous.” I shoved my hands into my pockets and smiled ruefully. “Unless you were hoping the homosexual content would throw me off guard in a public forum so you’d have witnesses to corroborate when you petitioned for Colin to take over the translations.”

Gerard opened his mouth and closed it. “Preposterous.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I suspect there’s international interest in that piece. It belongs to Egypt, but perhaps you want it for France.” I held up my hands. “I don’t know. But don’t ask for casual favors again, Gerard. I don’t have the time, and I will not be used as a pawn. I’ve spoken with our Egyptian contact and asked that the ostracon be sent to London for further study...by an expert. That’s me...I’m the expert. Now if you’ll excuse me, I must thank my assistant.”

Colin and Gerard shared a look as others milled behind them into the hallway. Those bloody wankers.

Politics and posturing weren’t my strength. Everyone wanted to be the number one leader in their field. Some would go to extreme measures, creating new alliances and discrediting peers.

I hadn’t forgotten that I’d been played for a fool five years ago. I’d never done well with personal distractions. Colin knew it. Was it odd that my boyfriend of four years, who’d insisted on our relationship being secret, was suddenly and quite publicly in love with one of my most important colleagues? Francoise thought so. Phillipe thought so. And while I’d alternately floundered and buried myself in work, Colin had established himself in France, translating his husband’s archeological discoveries.

Colin was good. But that was because he’d learned from the best.

Me.

Colin followed me and grabbed my elbow, pulling me aside, his face blotchy with anger. “Assistant? I think not. Who is that ghastly man?”

“My boyfriend,” I replied loudly .



“Boyfriend? Are you mad?”

“No, I’m gay,” I quipped.

Heads swiveled in our direction.

Colin ignored the scrutinous looks and whisper-hissed, “He’s not appropriate, Alistair. Don’t be a bloody fool. He’s too young, too na?ve, and completely beneath you.”

“He’s perfect.”

“He’s ridiculous,” Colin spat.

I furrowed my brow. “Is that so? Who would be better...you? No, no, that ship sailed on a while ago, didn’t it? And I’m glad it did. I wasn’t at the time, but now...I know you did me a favor. I see you as you are, blind ambition and all. You and Gerard make a fine pair. Have him contact my assistant next week to discuss his project. In the meantime—and please do take this the right way...piss off.”

I flashed an ear-to-ear grin, whistling as I strolled toward the exit.

Oh, what do you know? I just came out, told off my pompous ex, and bloody hell, that felt good.

I couldn’t wait to tell Winnie about it.

I couldn’t wait to see Winnie, period.

On the taxi ride to the hotel, I’d googled “how to make long-distance relationships work.” Keep conversation current, plan regular video chats, set in-person meetups in

advance ...

This was going to be fine. More than fine. It was exciting because it was real life.

My life...and Winnie's.

“Winnie? You wouldn't believe my day. I'll tell you about it at lunch. Are you hungry? I skipped the brunch. I don't think anyone will notice and if they do, well...too bad.” I shrugged off my jacket, checking my phone for new messages. “We could try th at restaurant by the Trocadero or the café with the waiter who always flirts with you.”

I paused, waiting for Winnie to sail into the room in his flowy ja-jas and tell me he couldn't help it...everyone flirted with him.

The room was quiet, though. So quiet, it echoed.

“Winnie? Winnie, are you here?” I took a good look around the living area, then headed to my bedroom, the first flash of panic rising in my throat.

I moved to the adjoining room he'd been using as a personal closet for the past few weeks, my heart in my stomach. It was...empty.

He was gone.

Gone.

His closet was pristine—no shoes, no hats, no colorful coats or scarves. The bathroom had been cleared out—no toothbrush, no luxury moisturizer he claimed made him look five years younger, no fancy shampoos and conditioners, no makeup strewn across the counter.

I was well aware of Winnie's capacity to fill a room. His presence was tangible and magnetic. I could feel when he was near...the scent of him, the aura of him.

But I was unprepared for the complete...absence of him.

I ransacked the space, hoping to find clues. I tossed pillows around, pushed aside the curtains, looked under the beds.

Nothing.

Just nothing.

I spotted the tiny Eiffel Tower ornament he'd bought weeks ago next to a note scribbled on a sheet of hotel paper on my desk.

We took Paris...together. Think of me when the Eiffel Tower shimmers at night and know that I'm thinking of you.

Yours, Win x o

I read the note over and over. He hadn't said good-bye, per se, but this was obviously a "thanks for the good time, glad we met, have a great life" letter.

I replayed our conversation that morning. No, we hadn't talked much. We'd made love, and it was wonderful. Perhaps a little desperate or maybe that was me. Last night, he'd said a job interview had come up, and his old life was calling. I'd told him we'd make it work, but he hadn't replied. He'd already made his decision.

And it wasn't me.

I fumbled for my phone and called him.

No answer.

I texted.

Nothing.

My heart clenched. It was as if someone had ripped open my ribs, reached into my chest, and crushed it in a vise grip. I wasn't new to heartache, and I wasn't new to being left behind. I'd been someone's second choice and quite frankly, it was bollocks. But Winnie was nothing like Colin.

This wasn't a repeat.

This was just...something wonderful that ended too soon.

One week later, I was a pathetic mess. I couldn't eat or sleep and...I was worried. My mind was so firmly stuck on a man who lived a continent away that my concentration on ancient history had gone tits up.

And I couldn't let go. I left Winnie countless voice messages and texts.

"You must be home now. Please call me."

Text me if you'd prefer. I just want to know that you're okay .

"Professor? Professor?" Raine jostled my arm, his brow knit with concern. "Are you all right? You were zoning out."

Again.

I pushed away from my desk, nodding like a puppet with a broken string. "Fine. I'm

fine. Did you need something?”

“No, do you?” he countered, leaning on the corner of my desk.

“No, I’m—I’m not so fine.”

“I know. You’ve been so quiet this week. What’s wrong?”

“No, I’m—I don’t know what I am.” Heartbroken, mentally ravaged, chronically sad...take your pick.

“Are you ill?”

“No, I’m—” I raked my fingers through my hair and blew out an exasperated breath.

“Why did you send Winnie to Paris with me, Raine?”

A slow smile lit Raine’s face. “Because he’s fun. And I figured if anyone could get you to leave your post for an hour or two a day, it would be Win.”

“Oh.”

“You told me it went well. I saw the write-up about the event on the World Archeology page and they said?—”

“Everything went well,” I intercepted. “Yes, Winnie was...helpful.”

“Good. I’m glad. I talked to him yesterday. He interviewed for a new job and he starts next week. I thought he’d be ecstatic ’cause the timing couldn’t have been better, but he sounded blue. Like...really sad. That’s so not Win. I think he misses Paris.”

“Oh, right.”

Paris.

“I think he misses you too,” Raine added.

My gaze snapped to his, my heart beating faster than a hummingbird’s wings .

He knew? I had questions, but nothing I said would make any sense at the moment. We were thousands of miles apart, and there was a good chance we were both bloody miserable.

Either way, there was something I needed to say. Something Winnie needed to know. It wasn’t too late. There was still a chance. I just had to do something crazy like—

“I’m going to LA, Raine.”

Los Angeles was beautiful in October with blue skies, endless sunshine, and a lovely breeze off the Pacific Ocean. The traffic, on the other hand, was hideous. My driver played a medley of songs with a frenzied electric drumbeat as we crawled at a snail’s pace on the freeway and east on Santa Monica Boulevard toward West Hollywood.

Palm trees warred with billboards for scenery on the congested roads. It looked nothing like London.

I stared out the window, painfully aware that I had no plan whatsoever. I should have done this in Paris. Flying to California on a whim reeked of desperation. Accurate description but perhaps not something I was keen to advertise.

“Here you are, sir. It should be the upstairs unit. Do you need help with your luggage?” the driver inquired.

I had one carry-on, so no...I didn't need help. I needed a dose of courage.

I typed a quick text to Win. If he didn't read it, I'd resort to plan B, which involved sitting on the stairs until he showed up. Not my brightest work, however, I was fresh off an eleven-hour flight and it was currently midnight in the UK, so...give me a break.

There's something on your porch. If you're home, will you check for it now ?

"Could you hold on a moment? And if possible, will you queue up this song on your phone?" I asked, pointing at my mobile.

The driver glanced at my phone and snort-laughed. "Are you kidding?"

"No. I'll pay you for your time and the embarrassing soundtrack, but I need you to hurry. Just in case."

I darted a frantic look at the stairwell leading to the second floor of the gray stucco house, the pathway lined with cheery red geraniums. The door wasn't visible from this angle so I wasn't sure how this was going to work. Bloody hell...new text.

Better yet, check the pavement.

Another text... Translation: Pavement is the sidewalk.

I stepped out of the car and waited.

The street was quiet. A few cars passed, a jogger weaved around two mums pushing prams, and a delivery truck stopped in front of the complex decorated with Pride flags on a few balconies across the street.

I hiked my carry-on over my shoulder and checked the address Raine had given me just as a figure glided down the steps.

My heart caught in my chest at the sight of him. He was...extraordinary. And he was mine. Mine.

This was it. I tapped the driver's window and a moment later, Édith Piaf's "La Vie en Rose" blasted from the car.

I dropped my bag on the grass, holding my breath when Winnie stopped on the bottom step, his mouth open in a perfect O.

I slipped the driver a few bills and waved him off. He pulled away, stalling at the stop sign on the corner to crank the volume to ear-splitting decibels.

Winnie crossed his chest, pushing the sleeves of his tee to his elbows and rubbing his arms. His form-fitted jeans were thread-worn at his crotch and rolled at the cuffs, and his toes were painted a purple that matched his flip-flops. Christ, he looked like a model for California living, the queer edition. So damn beautiful.

"Alistair. What are you doing here?"

The music was so loud, I could hardly hear myself think. I pointed at the idling car and went into professor mode...of course.

"That's a love song," I said, ignoring the question. "A beautiful French love song. She's telling her man that he's entered her heart and changed everything. And that when he speaks, she sees life in pink. And that's pretty much exactly what I came here to tell you, but it sounds loads better in French."

"Did you come all this way to speak French to me?" he whispered.



“I came to tell you that I love you.” I slipped my hands into my pockets and patted my mobile for good luck.

Winnie gasped and covered his heart with both hands. “Oh, my...”

“I love you, Win,” I repeated, my voice cracking ominously. “You’re everything to me...moonlight sonatas, chaos and peace, music and light, and color. So much color. I didn’t know that the world was brimming with magic until you came along. And God, I want that magic in my life.”

Tears welled in his eyes. “With me.”

“You.” I stepped closer and set a hand on his hip. “You’ve brought me to life again, reminded me to open my eyes...and not take the small things for granted. No matter how you feel about me, that alone is a debt I can’t repay. But I’m hoping that you love me too, and?—”

Winnie leaped into my arms. “I love you. Yes, I love you so much.”

“Be mine, Win. Let me be yours. ”

“I want that so bad.” He stroked my face and gave a self-deprecating shrug. “We both know I don’t fit. I’ve got the wrong kind of smarts, the wrong kind of friends. I live here, you live there. I know I’m good, but am I right for you?”

“God, yes. You’re perfect for me.” I kissed his temple, resting my hands on his shoulders. “If you want me, I’m yours.”

Winnie wiped a tear away. “I want you...forever.”

“Good. I don’t want to live vicariously through someone else’s two-thousand-year-

old story anymore. I want my own. With you.”

He beamed, raking his teeth over his bottom lip. “How do you say I love you in French?”

“ Je t’aime .”

“ Je t’aime ,” he repeated.

I swayed slightly, holding him tight. My pulse raced and my eyes were watery. I fused my lips to his, kissing him thoroughly. I was aware of the music fading, a horn blasting, and someone whistling, but it was background noise.

Nothing could pull me from this moment. From this man and our beginning.

## Page 17

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“ You are part of my existence, part of myself. You have been in every line I have ever read.”—Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

Three years later

Winnie

Platform 5 at Gare du Nord was a sea of humanity. As usual. Serious-looking business folks traveling lightly dodged tourists with mega-sized luggage on their way to the exit. The announcement from the overhead speaker was drowned out by conversations in many languages, the incoming train two platforms over, and the traffic outside.

I tucked my rainbow-hued scarf into the collar of my emerald-green wool coat for warmth, craning my neck expectantly for a glimpse of my professor. Three days apart wasn't a big deal in the scheme of things, but sometimes it felt like an eternity .

A woman with a giant suitcase bumped into me as she herded two small children. “ Pardonne-moi. Sorry.”

“ Pas de soucis ,” I replied like a freaking native. Translation: No worries.

Uh, yeah, that was me...speaking French. Did you catch that? Don't quote me, but I think I'd even used the correct context. I'd been taking French lessons for three years now and let me tell you, it was a challenge. There were so many ways to say, “It's okay.”

For instance, I could go with okay, and everyone would know what I meant, but that was boring. Pas grave or “Never mind” was a solid choice, too. I’d fucked that up a couple of times ’cause grave in English also took you to a spooky place with tombs and my mind had a wonky way of mixing words that absolutely didn’t work in French. I’d thrown around the phrase “ Pas de tombe ” a few times before my husband set me straight.

“You realize you’re saying, ‘no tomb’?” Alistair had gently corrected with a snort of laughter.

“Oh. Too literal, huh?”

“ Un peu .”

I’d snapped my fingers. “A little! I know that one.”

Alistair had just smiled that gorgeous “You’re the best thing that ever happened to me” smile that turned me inside out, and everything in my world had felt one thousand percent right and good...and so much more than I ever dreamed of.

Maybe that was why these occasional weekdays apart drove me batty. Yes, we both had important business to attend to, but damn it, I’d missed him like crazy.

And there he was.

The professor emerged from the first-class train with a carry-on bag slung on his shoulder. My pulse skittered and my heart flipped the way it always did for my tall, handsome hunk of a man. He tightened the belt on his khaki coat as he scanned the area, tilting his chin and flashing a megawatt grin.

I waved both arms above my head and hurried toward him. No chill whatsoever.

“ Bonjour, mon amour. Je t’aime, je t’aime, je t’aime !” I shouted for the entire station to hear. So what? Let them hear. We were out, proud, and madly in love. And horny too. Did I mention it had been three long-ass days?

Alistair dropped his bag on the ground between us and pulled me against his chest. Then he tilted my chin and crashed his mouth over mine. I think I whimpered, and I definitely swooned.

“Hello, my love,” he said, sweetly kissing my nose. “I missed you terribly.”

I sighed as he bent to pick up his bag. “Me too, but I did all the things. You’re going to be so proud of me.”

“I’m always proud of you.”

That was true. He was. Alistair was my biggest champion and most enthusiastic fan. He truly believed I was capable of greatness and get this...I was beginning to think he might be right. The past twelve months alone were a sign that good things were on the horizon for both of us.

We’d started a business in London, bought a house in the French countryside, and gotten married last spring in LA. How’s that for a banner year?

I won’t lie and claim it was all sunshine and roses from day one. Doing the long-distance relationship thing could be stressful no matter how much effort you put into making it work. We did it, though.

I’d had a life in LA and like it or not, I’d needed a job. I’d thought about chucking it all and relocating to London to be with my man, but that was a daunting move, and I’d wanted to be sure our version of forever was the same .

We’d racked up frequent-flyer miles jetting between Los Angeles and London for a

year. I'd introduced Alistair to my friends and family, taken him to drag brunches, shopping at The Grove, hikes in Runyan Canyon, and of course, to the LA County Museum of Art.

I'd tried not to overwhelm him, but that was bound to happen to a degree. My friends were outrageous, my family was loud, and the emphasis was always on food or fun. But Alistair loved it all. He bonded with my parents and grandparents, brought gifts from the UK for Jazz and my niece and nephew, and was polite though slightly distant with Milo...wise man.

Every visit to LA had been jam-packed. I'd usually take the week off from my job at Cally McNally's salon as a stylist to play tour guide and still allot time for us to be alone. London was calmer somehow. I could explore the city or hang out with Raine if Alistair had to work. And when he was free, we'd travel the English countryside...by train.

Yeah, that sneaky man of mine admitted he'd fibbed about having high-speed railway nerves on our initial Parisian adventure. In truth, Alistair was the type of travel aficionado who had multiple apps on his cell to track the times and routes for trains running throughout the UK. Geeky, yes...but also kind of freaking adorable.

We took frequent trips to Europe, too. Germany, Italy, Spain, Austria, the Netherlands...and always France.

Year two, I moved to London. It was a no-brainer and honestly, I thought everyone saw it coming. Maybe not Liza, though. But she settled in with us nicely at the new flat we'd bought in Marylebone—Alistair's old one had been too small to accommodate my shoe collection, let alone me and my cat. It was bright and airy and had a fabulous bay window overlooking The Regent's Park. Liza approved.

The only issue: my lack of employment. There were plenty of salons in the area and I actually had worked at one for a few months, but I didn't love it. One day, Alistair

had said, “Why don’t you do something you really love? Something with color and design? Something that makes you happy.”

So simple, right? And it had been there all along. In that tiny village we stumbled upon when we’d stayed at Francoise and Jacques’ house. The store with the gorgeous sweaters and quality trinkets from France. I’d figured there had to be interest at some kitschy boutique for some of their goodies, and I’d been right. I became a sort of middleman, buying clothing and accessories for a cute shop in Soho. It was so successful that I’d asked the owner, an adorable feisty old woman with blazing red hair named Martha, if she’d consider taking me on as a partner. To my utter shock and joy, she’d said yes.

Now I had my dream job. I occasionally traveled to LA, France, or anywhere Alistair needed to be for a conference to hunt for artsy, fun accessories and whatnots to sell at La Mode. I didn’t miss cutting hair at all. It was interacting with people that I loved, and I had that in spades now...plus time to be with my husband.

Can I just say...wedding of the freaking year! Gah! We were married on a cliff overlooking the ocean in Malibu on a beautiful Saturday in early May. There were flowers galore, amazing food, a champagne fountain, and a drag queen for entertainment. The grooms wore white, and our guests wore black.

Was it a lot? Yes. But Alistair had insisted. “No regrets, Win. You wanted a big wedding, and we’ll have one.” Friends flew in from all over the world to attend, including Raine and his husband, Graham. It was one of the best days of my life. Right up there with the proposal.

Alistair had asked me to marry him in Paris on the balcony of our hotel overlooking the Eiffel Tower, dazzling and sparkling away. It was romantic for sure and totally fitting. This was where we’d fallen in love.

This magical city with its amazing vistas, charming streets, and rich history would

always be special to us. So was the tiny village outside of the city where we'd bought a three-hundred-year-old farmhouse with a stone facade and fields of lavender. The house was located a short bicycle ride from the shop I purchased goods from, and while it was a great-investment-slash-write-off for us, it needed a fuckton of repairs and a serious fung shwee makeover.

Renovations had begun this week, so I'd combined a business trip with contractor meetings. After a night in Paris, the plan was to head to the house so Alistair could weigh in on some of the remodeling choices I'd made so far.

"I know you don't care, but this is our house and I want you to be happy," I'd told him.

"As long as you're there, I'm always happy."

The feeling was mutual. Alistair had changed my life and opened my world, and he claimed I'd done the same for him.

We'd found a rhythm and a balance that made it possible for us to complement each other. Alistair still worked long hours at the museum and commuted to teach at Oxford one semester per year. He was highly in demand, and he loved his job. I was so proud of him and sometimes, I still couldn't believe I was the one he'd chosen to share his life and build a future with.

Speaking of which...

"I'm going to rip your clothes off the second we get to the hotel, and in the morning, I have something to show you," I purred, linking our hands.

"You're being very secretive," he chided lightly.

"I know, but trust me...it's something you need to see, not hear. "



The following day, we drove to our new farmhouse. Frost glistened on the rooftop and on the muddy trench in front of the driveway.

Alistair wrinkled his nose as he shut the door, shaking his head in dismay. “It’s like a bloody moat. You should have warned me to bring my wellies.”

I dug my diva sunglasses from my bag and chuckled. “Tiptoe through the puddles. Come this way.”

He trudged behind me, grumbling without heat about the warm bed we’d left in the city to skulk around a cobweb-ridden farm in winter. I couldn’t blame him. The house was in dire need of a facelift, but it had good bones. I opened the door, put my sunglasses away, and led my husband inside, past the dark kitchen to a narrow doorway.

I knocked on the wainscot-covered wall—once, twice...

“What are you doing? Is there a secret compartment or?—”

“Bingo!” The wall gave way to an inner chamber and a steep stairwell.

Alistair gaped. “A wine cellar? This is a nice surprise.”

“It gets better.” I used the flashlight on my phone and slowly navigated the steps. “Be careful. It’s safe but very old.”

I stopped at the bottom of the stairs and felt for the string to the lone lightbulb the contractor had rigged down here at my request. The small cave-like area was illuminated, revealing what had once indeed been used as a wine cellar.

“Cool, huh? But look at this.” I fumbled along the wall until I located a niche built into the stone. It was half covered with a piece of wood hanging by one hinge. “This

was a vault at one time. A place to store jewelry or precious belongings.”

Alistair opened the makeshift door and studied the collection of old bottles. He picked up what might have been a perfume bottle, turning it slowly in his hands. “These are initials. A and W...like us. ”

“Yes, and a heart.” I pointed at the date. “It’s a hundred years old. It’s a treasure. Kind of like the ones you examine from ancient Egypt, right?”

He grinned. “I suppose that’s true.”

“I wonder who this belonged to. Maybe a nice married couple, or maybe two lovers who had to hide their identity. Maybe two men or two women.” I paused for a beat before rummaging in my bag. “It made me think that we should leave our own mark.”

“You’re not proposing to make this into a tomb for us, are you?” he snarked.

“Ha. Ha. Nope. I made this.” I pushed some newer bottles aside to reveal the crude stick figures I’d painted on the stone. Me in a purple coat and a hat and the professor with glasses and a blue sweater.

Alistair threw his head back and laughed. “It’s perfect.”

“A hieroglyph of us. And someday, many thousands of years from now, someone will find it and know we were here. Two guys who met and fell in love and stayed in love forever. Do you think it will last a thousand years?”

“Ten thousand or more. Have I told you I love you today?”

“Yes, but say it again.”

“I love you, Win.”

“I love you too.” I held his face in my hands and kissed him with everything I had. We stared at each other, breathless and starry-eyed. I couldn’t speak for Alistair, but I was a little overcome.

He saw me. He knew me. He loved me for who I was, flaws and all. He showed me his scars, his fears, and invited me into his world...to stay.

He even gave me Paris. In return, I’d give him forever.

Thank you for reading Winnie and Alistair’s story!