

USA TODAY bestselling author
JULIE JOHNSON



NOT YOU IT'S ME

A BOSTON LOVE STORY

JULIE JOHNSON

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***This one's for every girl out there who's still waiting for her Prince
Charming to show up.***

(Maybe he just got lost and is too stubborn to ask for directions)

“You call yourself a free spirit, a *wild thing* , and you’re terrified somebody’s gonna stick you in a cage. Well baby, you’re already in that cage. You built it yourself.”

BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY’S

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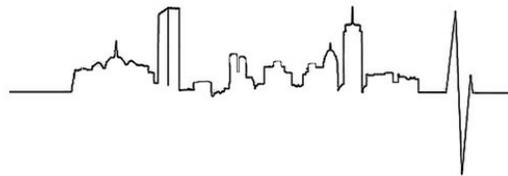
Also by Julie Johnson

Next up...

CROSS THE LINE

CHAPTER 1

CALLER 100



THE DIAL TONE buzzes in my ear, mocking me — just as it’s done the last two times I called the studio.

Damn .

I don’t even know why I bother. I never win this kind of thing. Whether it’s scratch tickets, lottery numbers, or radio call-in prizes, I’ve got worse luck than a black cat breaking a mirror on Friday the 13th , because I’ve yet to win a damn thing.

What’s that quote about doing the same thing over and over, but expecting a different result?

Oh, right. That’s the definition of *insanity* .

And yet, I keep calling.

Sighing, I pause with my finger poised over the power button of my cellphone. I know the sane, logical thing to do is throw it onto the passenger seat, shut off my car — which has begun to rattle ominously as I’ve been idling at the curb — and go inside... but I can’t seem to stop myself.

I hold my breath, close my eyes, and punch the screen to redial.

Just one more time.

Sitting there, listening so hard it almost hurts, with my eyelids squeezed shut and all my energy honed on a single, impossible thought, I forget to breathe.

Ring, dammit.

Please, just freaking ring.

For a moment, nothing happens.

And then...

It *rings* .

My eyes fly open as a voice cracks over the line.

“Congratulations, you’re our lucky 100th caller! Give us your name!”

My mouth gapes like a Miss America contestant asked her opinion on the state of the crumbling global economy. I’m so stunned I can’t form words.

“Hello? You’ve reached *KXL - BOSTON* , can you hear me?” The host clears his throat and laughs. “Well, if no one’s on this line, we’ll have to move on to another caller—”

Shit!

“I’m here!” I yell into the receiver. “Sorry, sorry, I’m here!”

“Give us your name, sweetheart!”

“Gemma,” I breathe, my mind spinning. “Gemma Summers.”

“From?”

“Cambridge.”

“Well, Gemma Summers from Cambridge, you’ve just scored two courtside seats to tonight’s playoff game!”

“Ohmigod,” I squeak.

He laughs again. “Yep, the game of the season, tonight at seven at The Garden. We win tonight, we’re going all the way, baby!”

“Thank you,” I finally manage to get out. “Thank you so much.”

“It’s my pleasure, Gemma! We at *KXL* always take care of our listeners.”

“Yeah,” I agree dumbly, still a little shell-shocked.

I can hear him smiling through the phone when he speaks again. “Tell us — how are you feeling right now, Gemma? Are you a Celtics fan?”

Yikes . I should’ve known this was going to come up.

Truthfully, I hate basketball — almost as much as I hate lying. But, can I admit that on live radio without the entire male population of the greater Boston area wanting to kill me for scoring the much-coveted tickets most of them would sell their souls for?

Probably not.

So, I do what any self-respecting girl does in this situation.

“Oh, huge, huge fan,” I lie through my teeth. “But not as big as my boyfriend.”

“Well, then, he’s probably the luckiest guy in the world right now, assuming he’s your plus-one!” The host chuckles. “You’ll make him a happy

man, tonight.”

“I hope so,” I mumble, shaking my head. “If this doesn’t work, nothing will.”

“What was that, Gemma? I couldn’t hear you.”

Shit! Did I say that *out loud* ?

“Oh, nothing!” My cheeks flame. “Just, thank you so much, he’s going to be so excited!”

I think.

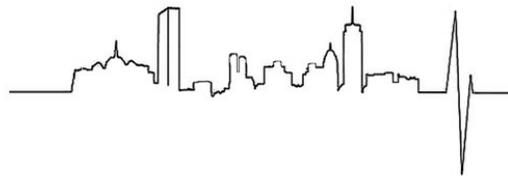
I hope.

I pray.

Because, *seriously* — if this doesn’t make him happy, I’m pretty sure nothing I ever do will.

CHAPTER 2

GEMMA-LOGIC



RALPH IS HAPPY.

It's almost weird to witness. I'm so used to seeing him look at me with that expression of half-indifference, half-frustration on his face, I'm having trouble processing the fact that he's actually smiling at me. With *teeth*. For the first time in...

Weeks?

Or, is it months?

Needless to say, he was thrilled about the tickets when I told him. Hell, he picked me up off the floor and spun me around in a circle, which is the most action I've had in...

Weeks?

Or, is it months?

Jeeze, my life is pathetic.

I wasn't always this girl — you know, the one who settled for consistent sex at the sake of both that elusive *spark* and her self-respect. I guess I just got tired of waiting. When I moved to the city eight years ago, I was an idealistic eighteen-year-old full of energy and hope and passion. Being single was exciting, rather than *exhausting*. I spent years going to bar after bar, club after club, dancing the night away with anonymous strangers. Doing what my generation does best — total physical intimacy with none of the emotional baggage.

Then I hit twenty-four, and slowly began to watch my friends, who'd

once matched my every tequila-shooter and shimmied until the wee hours by my side, pair off into *couples* .

And then *married pairs* .

And then *parents*.

I can barely keep my plants alive, let alone a tiny human.

By the time I hit twenty-six and realized what was happening, it was too late. I'd already become Single Gemma — the one who throws off the even-numbered dinner party, the one my friends look at as a pet-project rather than a person. They're well meaning, of course, but I can't say it's always appreciated.

First there's Shelby: "My dentist is single, Gemma! Recently divorced, full head of hair... I really think you two might hit it off! I'll set something up when I go in for my cleaning tomorrow. He's stable — you would do so well with a guy like him! And he almost never makes my gums bleed."

Breathe, Gem. She's not trying to be patronizing, she's just trying to help.

Then there's Chrissy: "Oh, my Cross-Fit trainer is mega-hot — seriously, you should see his abs. I wish Mark still had abs like that, but he keeps talking about gaining 'daddy-weight' — like he's the one who carried the goddamn baby around in his goddamn womb for nine goddamn months. Sorry, what was I saying? Oh, right, Steve. I'll slip him your number after my next class."

See, marriage isn't the Crock-Pot 'o gold everyone makes it out to be, Gemma. If you were married, you'd probably know what the hell daddy-weight is and be required to accept the fact that your husband let himself go less than a year after the wedding. The world of Budweiser-tumors and marital resentment is not for you.

But, no matter what I tell myself, I can't shake the feeling that something is simply wrong with me. I'm a twenty-six year old woman living in a modern metropolis and I've never been in a serious relationship in my life. There are literally thousands of men at my fingertips with the help of Tinder and OkCupid and CoffeeMeetsBagel and Hinge and a million other online-matching services whose mission statements guarantee they'll help me find my perfect match.

So... where the hell is he?

And, if date after date after date after date leads to absolutely nothing more than coffee or a one-night stand... if none of the hundreds of men I've met since I moved to Boston are right...

It has to be *me* .

That's the only logical conclusion.

Which brings us back to Ralph.

With his cheap haircut, pudgy physique, and a wardrobe most sixteen year-old boys would kill for — seeing as it consists almost entirely of Boston sports team logo tees and track pants — Ralph Goldstein isn't exactly a stunning specimen of man. But he is one crucial thing my friends seem to think outweighs all the questionable fashion choices and lack of sexual magnetism: *single* .

I met him six months ago, when he moved into the apartment across the hall from mine. He isn't my type — in fact, I'm not sure he's *anyone's* type — but I felt like I had to at least try this relationship-thing everyone else is always raving about.

So I tried.

I've *been* trying for about four months now.

But no matter what I say, do, or pretend to feel, I just can't seem to make it work.

In a shocking turn of events, Gemma Summers fails once again to find her true love.

At least at first, I could console myself with the fact that, if not a *sou*lmate, Ralph was a decent enough *sex* mate. But then, time passed and even that wasn't enough to keep what minimal heat existed between us burning. Now, it seems like we fight more than we talk, and I can't really remember why I was so determined to be coupled-up in the first place. Sometimes, I think I was happier as Single Gemma than I've ever been as Relationship Gemma, even if it *is* nice to have someone to go to the movies with and to drag along to the wedding showers that seem to be getting more and more frequent as the years slip by.

But maybe my luck is about to change. Winning these tickets — maybe it's a sign that things can get better between Ralph and me. Maybe two people who aren't perfect for one another can still be happy. Or, if not happy, then maybe... content?

I don't know.

But I'm glad when he laces his fingers through mine and guides me across the street into the TD Garden stadium — better known to every Bostonian as The *Gah* den. It's the most loving gesture he's showed me in... well, maybe *ever* ... and I smile as we jostle through the crowd with our

hands entwined. There are people everywhere, a sea of green jerseys and foam fingers and face paint crowding in from every direction as nearly 20,000 fans cram inside and fight to find their seats.

Boston takes its sporting events *very* seriously.

We find the box office and collect our tickets, and I pretend it's not annoying when Ralph speaks over me to the window attendant. He doesn't even let me hold the tickets *I won* as we make our way through the arena, but he *is* still grasping my hand as we walk down a billion steps, and I figure that has to count for something.

Right?

Down, down, down — light-years closer than I've been at any kind of event before. The only tickets I've ever been able to afford on my artist salary were nosebleeds at Fenway three summers ago, and, if I'm being honest, it was to see Bruno Mars, not the Red Sox. Sports aren't exactly my thing.

Still, when we hit the court it's so surreal, I nearly stumble, my Chucks squeaking against the high-polished wood. Instead of steadying me, Ralph drops his hand so I don't take him down too if I fall on my face, which is kind of a dick move. Thankfully, it doesn't matter — I manage to right myself at the last minute and prevent a potentially mortifying moment in front of thousands of people.

A dowdy-looking usher looks me up and down skeptically — *rude* — before scanning our tickets and pointing us toward a stretch of empty seats on the mid-court sideline.

Jeeze, I already know I look ridiculous, lady, you don't need to rub it in.

Frankly, I'm considering writing a sternly-worded letter to *KXL* the moment I get home, suggesting that next time they give out free tickets, they also provide a pamphlet with "what to wear" guidelines. That'd be really helpful and would probably prevent people like me from wearing *bridesmaid dresses to basketball games*.

What you have to understand is, I've never been to a basketball game in my life — and certainly not a playoff game. Courtside. With cameras and celebrities and giant, gorgeous NBA players so close I'll be able to see individual beads of sweat on their brows. (Side note: *Yum.*) So, naturally, I called Chrissy this afternoon, hoping she might have a little fashion insight to help me blend in at an event like this.

I can see from the usher's expression that I'm definitely *not* blending. In fact, I think Chrissy's advice ("Wear something fancy, you're going to be on

television if you're sitting courtside! Hell, Ben Affleck might be there!") has led me very, very astray.

See, I'm an artist. A freaking oil painter. Which means there are maybe four items in my closet free of paint-speckles and grime-smudges. Of those four, only two could possibly be considered *fancy* — and they just so happen to be my old bridesmaid dresses from Chrissy and Shelby's weddings.

So, here I am — crammed into a two-year old, blue-black cocktail dress that's at least a size too small in the boob region and makes my ribs ache if I breathe too hard. And, because I'm *me*, an idiot, I listened to not only Chrissy, but also to the sincerely-flawed Gemma-Logic that thought it might be a good idea to “dress down” my ridiculous getup — not with a casual-but-still-appropriate pair of heels or flats, but with my beat-up, black Chuck Taylors.

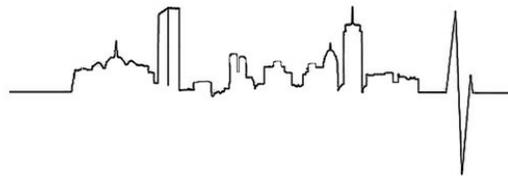
In other words, I'm a walking disaster.

Ralph is so self-absorbed, I don't think he's noticed. That's possibly due to the fact that he's been on his cellphone since I told him I scored us tickets, calling every guy he's known since fourth grade to brag about the “seats he won.” Whatever. Hopefully he'll put the phone down when the game starts.

The sad thing is, even if he doesn't, this is still the best date we've ever had.

CHAPTER 3

DICKWAD



“Wooo!” I yell, my fists thrown to the sky. “Nice block, 33! Look left, he’s open — Number 14 is open! Ohmigod, he’s *open* are you *blind*?”

Ralph glares at me out of the corner of his eye, but otherwise doesn’t acknowledge my screams. Apparently, I’m making it hard to hear whoever he’s chatting with.

Oh, did I mention he’s still on the phone?

But that’s okay. I’m not letting him get me down. I’m having a hell of a good time all by myself, thank you very much.

The four beers I’ve consumed are helping.

In fact, I’ve discovered I kind of like basketball. It’s exciting — especially when you’re so freaking close to the action. Since it’s a playoff game, every seat in the arena is full, and with each basket Boston makes, everyone in the stands behind me roars so loud the floor vibrates. Despite the snarky side-eye Ralph keeps throwing my way, I roar right along with them.

I’m going to have *fun* tonight, dammit. I have to. Because if I don’t keep smiling, I’ll surely cry about the fact that as soon as that final buzzer rings, my one, pathetic attempt at a relationship is officially, 100% over. Four whole months wasted on a mediocre guy who won’t even make eye contact with me half the time — frankly, it makes me want to weep. And Gemma Summers being reduced to tears by a man-child named *Ralph* is just too pathetic to contemplate.

“Nice play, 14! Shoot! Shoot!” I’m on the edge of my seat, hands curled

into fists. “YES!” I scream, leaping to my feet when the player sinks the basket.

Because I’m fully absorbed in the game (the rules of which I still don’t fully understand — I mean, come *on* , the ref blows that damn whistle every ten seconds) I don’t realize that Ralph isn’t the only one taking notice of my enthusiastic cheering. In fact, I’m so wrapped up, I haven’t given more than a fleeting thought to the tall-drink-of-water who took the seat on my other side just after the game got underway — besides to mentally note that I’d never seen a simple jeans-and-tee combo look so good on anyone who wasn’t an Abercrombie poster boy. But that was over an hour ago, at the start of the game.

Now, it’s nearly over.

I sit back down, smoothing the satin of my dress over my thighs and crossing one Converse-clad foot over the other. The last thing I want is to flash my hoo-hah on national television. My mother would be mortified — not that she’d ever, in a million years, watch a basketball game... but it’s about the principle of the thing.

My ass has settled on the seat for less than a second when I hear a deep, masculine voice from my left.

“Miss, you dropped this.”

Startled, I practically jump out of my skin when a big, calloused hand reaches toward me, my ancient cellphone — with its cracked screen and ridiculous, sparkly-blue case — clutched between two fingers. My wide eyes fly up to meet his steady green ones, and I’m suddenly having a difficult time breathing.

Short crop of dark-blond hair.

Thick, black lashes any girl would kill for.

Chiseled *everything* — jaw, nose, cheekbones, forehead.

I didn’t even know a forehead *could* be chiseled, until I saw this guy.

I’m staring — I *know* I’m staring — but I can’t seem to stop, even after my fingers reach out and retrieve my cellphone from his grasp. He’s model-worthy gorgeous. Seriously drool-inducing. I have to fight the urge to reach up and check that I haven’t started salivating like a Saint Bernard, especially when his eyes scan my face, then drop to my neckline in a sharp, shameless sweep.

“Hi,” I blurt, like the total moron I am.

“Hi,” he echoes, his lips twisting in an amused grin.

“You come here often?” I jerk my thumb in the general direction of the court, my eyes still glued to his face. “‘Cause, you know, I don’t. It’s my first time here, in case you were wondering. Not that you looked like you were – wondering, that is.” I gulp, hoping it might stop my rambles. “But this is kind of awesome. Way better than I was expecting. Not that I really knew what to expect, but...yeah. I’m going to stop talking, now.”

He looks at me a little quizzically, like he’s not quite sure what to make of me, but then a laugh slips from his lips — a full-bodied belly laugh, the kind that makes his eyes close and his shoulders shake. Just hearing it makes me want to laugh too, but I’m so transfixed watching him, I can’t do anything remotely normal.

When his laughter tapers off into quiet chuckles, his eyes reopen and suddenly he’s looking at me again, kind of like he’s waiting for something, so I just say, “You’ve got a great laugh,” and watch his smile twitch wider.

“Thanks,” he replies, his voice rockier than the Grand Freaking Canyon and twice as deep.

We’re staring at each other, neither of us saying anything, when the crowd goes crazy. My attention snaps back to the game, just in time to see a Celtics player sink a three-pointer from what seems like an impossible distance. Forgetting the fact that I’m wearing an altogether too-skimpy dress, I’m instantly back on my feet, jumping up and down like a little kid and screaming at the top of my lungs. I think I hear Green Eyes laughing again but I can’t be sure over the din of the arena. I’m about to turn and check when a hand clamps over my right elbow and jerks me roughly back down into my seat.

I whimper a little when my tailbone slams against the chair, knocking the breath from my lungs and the wind from my sails faster than a pincushion popping a balloon.

“What the hell?” I squeak, my outraged eyes flying in Ralph’s direction. His hand is still clamped on my arm like a vise — it’s starting to ache.

“Have a little class, Gemma,” he growls, his expression disdainful as he looks me up and down. “You’re practically popping out of your dress.”

I try to shake off his grip, but it’s too tight. “Let go of me, asshole! You’re hurting my arm.”

He releases me with a disgusted shake of his head, then returns to his phone call. I watch as he wipes his palm against his pant leg, as though he has to rub off all traces of where my skin touched his, and I bite my lip so I

won't cry.

How the hell did I end up here, with this jerk?

I don't need to look far for an answer. I know exactly how this happened.

Because I thought it was *me* . I thought *I* was the reason I was still single. That the flighty, kooky, quirky mess that is Gemma Summers was the reason no men in my life ever stuck around, or were worth sticking around *for* .

Now, I see I was wrong.

It's not me — it's *them* .

The truth is, all men are rat bastards. My father, the boys in third grade who blew spitballs into my hair, my ex-boyfriends — if you can even call them that — and now Ralph, who I've officially christened Rat Bastard Numero Uno.

The Rat Bastard to End All Rat Bastards.

And most certainly the last rat bastard I'll be wasting my time on. After the final buzzer, I'm officially giving up men, buying several vibrators, and joining a convent.

Actually, I'm pretty sure those last two things are mutually exclusive, so...

Just the vibrators, then.

I want to get up and leave, but the game is almost over and I know I'll never have seats like this again for the rest of my life. So, I cross my arms over my chest, the fingers of my left hand gently massaging feeling back into the flesh of my right arm where Ralph grabbed me, and angle my body away from him as much as possible.

Unfortunately, this means I'm seriously encroaching on Green Eyes' space — my knees are practically bumping his thigh. Five minutes ago, this would've been fine — more than fine — but now, there's the small fact that I've just given up men for the rest of eternity and, besides, after what Ralph just did, I'm so angry and embarrassed, I can't meet anyone's gaze, especially not when they look like they might be part of the Hemsworth brothers' gene pool. My skittish eyes flit over his gorgeous, narrowed ones for less than a second before I turn my face straight ahead and resolve not to look at either of the men on my sides for the rest of the game.

It's a good plan.

A great plan.

It totally would've worked, too — if not for something I'd never even factored in as a possibility. Because at the start of fourth period, during a

quick break in the action, the massive jumbotron at center-court starts to flash with images of couples in the crowd. And those couples, cheered on by thousands of people inside the stadium, begin to *kiss* .

It's so cute I actually forget about my dickwad boyfriend — soon to be *ex-boyfriend* — and start smiling again.

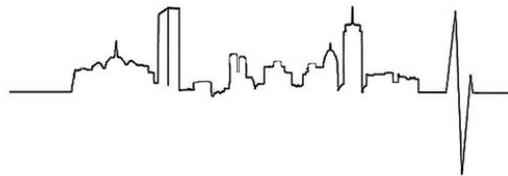
Well, until the camera swings down to the courtside section and lands on me.

Me and my dickwad soon-to-be-ex-boyfriend.

Dammit . I totally should've left when I had the chance.

CHAPTER 4

ENOUGH



THE CAMERA'S locked on me, and it's not moving. I catch a glimpse of myself on the huge, pixilated screen — a pale, dark-haired girl in a fancy black dress and ratty black sneakers. Too many curves, too many curls, and no one to kiss. I know there's panic flashing in my eyes — hell, I can *see* it, blown up to jumbo proportions on every screen in the arena. And so can everyone else.

I'm a freaking ant beneath a microscope.

The crowd starts to titter — *oh, honey, look at that poor girl* — and I'm getting a little desperate, so I swallow hard, throw back my shoulders, and sneak a glance at Ralph. He's still on his phone, the bastard, totally unaware that we've become the central act at the kiss-cam circus. Forcing a smile to cover my deep mortification, I elbow him sharply in the side, but he just bats me away with a hand and a glare before returning to his phone call.

I groan.

The crowd explodes with laughter.

I try to smile too, like I'm in on the joke, but it's wobbly — I can feel it trembling on my lips — and I begin to wonder if the man behind the camera is some kind of sociopath, because frankly, the fact that he's still filming right now — while surely entertaining for everyone who, you know, isn't *me* — is pure evil.

I look up at the camera and shrug my shoulders, hoping the *yes-my-boyfriend-is-in-fact-a-total-asshole* expression translates to the crowd. I think

I succeed, since the laughter gets even louder, but suddenly I'm distracted by the wall of man blocking my view of the jumbotron.

Green Eyes is out of his seat.

His eyes are on mine, and he's reaching for my hand.

The crowd is going wild and my brain is short-circuiting, but apparently my hand doesn't need executive functions to tell it what to do, because it's lifting from my lap and slipping into his.

Before I can form a single thought, he's pulling me out of my chair.

Sliding one arm around my waist.

Slipping one hand behind my neck.

His eyes never leave mine as he leans in, bending me backward over his arm in a full-on, movie-star dip, and the only thought in my head is *ohmigod, there's no way he's going to kiss me right now*, but then even that disappears when his lips move closer and my mind blanks entirely.

Because he's kissing me.

And it's *good*.

No, actually, it's *great*.

It's not the soft, sympathetic, pity-kiss you'd expect in a situation like this.

It's a full on, invade-your-senses, shatter-your-world, boil-your-blood *kiss*. With *tongue*.

For a moment, I'm so stunned, I just hang there limply... but then my brain catches up to my body and I realize that the hottest freaking man I've ever seen is *kissing me* like I've never, ever been kissed before, and that I might never be kissed like this *again* for the rest of my whole pathetic life, so I damn well better enjoy it while it lasts.

Without another thought, my arms twine around his neck, my mouth opens under his, and I'm returning his kiss without hesitation, with abandon. He feels my response and a low growl vibrates from his throat — for a second, I think he's angry, but I quickly realize it's a *good* growl when he pulls me tighter to him, so I'm fully plastered against the hard plane of his body. Thoughts long-chased from my mind, I don't even try to think of reasons this is a bad idea. I melt into him like my limbs are made of water.

It's easily the best kiss of my life, which doesn't make any sense at all, because I don't even know the man whose lips are devouring mine — hard, hot, with just the right amount of teeth and tongue to make things interesting.

I can hear the crowd going crazy, twenty thousand people screaming at

the top of their lungs, but somehow the sound of my own heartbeat is drowning them out. The kiss goes on for way, way longer than it should, but I don't worry about that, or anything else for that matter, because there's no room in my head for worries about my dickwad soon-to-be-ex-boyfriend or the crowd or the cameras.

Not when every mental faculty is consumed by Green Eyes and his perfect freaking kiss.

WHEN OUR MOUTHS finally break apart, I feel like I'm floating.

It takes me a minute to realize that's because I *am* . His muscular arms are still wrapped around my back like steel bands, holding me near parallel to the ground. He's lunged so deeply, I can feel the weight of my hair pooled against the court.

My lashes open and he's right there, his face less than an inch away from mine. My eyes blink a little too rapidly as I stare into his — pure icy green, without any flecks of hazel or brown to dilute the color, and currently half-lidded with something that looks a lot like desire... and maybe just a hint of surprise.

I swallow hard, trying to catch my breath, and stare at him for a moment, waiting for him to stand upright and put me back on my feet.

He doesn't.

Another few seconds tick by, and I can't contain myself anymore.

"You must do a lot of lunges," I blurt.

His eyes fill with amusement and his mouth twitches. "Excuse me?"

"At the gym." I feel my cheeks flush with color. "You must lunge a lot because, I mean, *jeeze* , you've been holding me here for, like, two minutes and you aren't even winded. Are your thighs burning? They must be burning right now."

He stares at me, an unreadable expression on his face.

Great job, Gemma. Scare off the hot stranger mere seconds after he's finished kissing you .

I fight the urge to groan at my own stupidity. "Sorry, it's probably not proper etiquette to be talking about your thighs, since, you know, I've just met you and all. But, we also made out... so I don't know where we're located on the bodily-function-sharing-scale."

"There's a scale?" His voice is thick with mirth.

I widen my eyes. “Of course there’s a scale. I mean, you wouldn’t jump into a first date talking about how often you pee or how many times a week you have s—”

His eyebrows lift.

“You know, I’m just going to stop myself right there.”

His lips twitch again.

“So, do you?”

“Do I what?” he asks.

“Do a lot of lunges.”

A full smile breaks out on his face. “You’ll have to come to the gym with me sometime, find out for yourself.”

“Oh, no. Working out isn’t exactly my thing. Seriously, the last time I did a lunge I think I sprained my vagi—” My lips slam closed. “My leg. A muscle in my leg.”

He laughs.

“Really, though, I tapped out at about ten seconds, and that was just supporting my own body weight.” I shake my head, grimacing. “Any kind of strenuous physical activity...Not my specialty.”

His eyes glitter with dark humor, and I have a feeling he’s envisioning an entirely different kind of strenuous physical activity. *Shit* .

“Sports! I mean sports.” I swallow nervously. “I hate sports.”

“And yet, you’re courtside at a playoff game.”

I open my mouth to retort, but before I can get out so much as a word, I’m interrupted by Ralph, who sounds decidedly pissed off.

“What the hell is this, Gemma?”

An instant later, I’m back on my own two feet. Blood rushes to my head, but Green Eyes steadies me with a light grip on my arm. When my brain stops spinning, I manage to focus on Ralph, who’s finally hung up his cellphone. There’s a glare pinching his face, and his head is swinging from me to Green Eyes and back again.

“Hi, Ralph.” I lift my arm and do a little finger-wave in his direction.

The crowd bursts into a thunderous chorus of laughter and cheers.

When he hears them, Ralph’s hands fist at his sides and his face begins to redden. “Don’t give me that cutesy little ‘*Hi, Ralph.*’” He takes a step closer to me, and I feel Green Eyes tense at my side. I notice his hand hasn’t let my arm. “Want to explain who the hell this guy is and why the hell you were kissing him like a little slut in front of the whole fucking world?”

My spine snaps straight and, though I can't see him, I actually feel the anger pouring off Green Eyes. I hear the overhead announcer giving a play-by-play of what has, by this point, become a huge spectacle.

Well, folks, there's always plenty of drama on the court during a playoff game, but tonight it seems there's just as much happening on the sidelines!

I try to ignore him and focus on defusing the situation before it becomes national news and ends up — if it hasn't already — on YouTube for the rest of eternity.

"You were on the phone, and the kiss-cam—" I start.

Ralph cuts me off. "Oh, I was on the phone for two seconds—"

"Try two hours," I mutter.

"—and god *forbid* no one's paying attention to Gemma for a single minute of the day!" Ralph sneers. "I swear, you need more validation than a preteen girl on her period."

I flinch.

Ralph steps closer and his voice drops to the condescending whisper I'm all too familiar with. "I'd always heard artists were self-absorbed, but *you* ..." He shakes his head and a smirk twists his lips. "Then again, can you really even call yourself an artist if you've never sold a single one of your stupid paintings?"

That's low, even for him.

I try — and fail — to bite my tongue. "I don't know, Ralph, can you really even call yourself a man if your sexual stamina hasn't improved since your wet-dream years?"

"Good one, Gemma." He smiles, but it's laced with a cruel edge. "You know, Susie from 3B doesn't seem to mind. And Emily from the building next door? She's never complained. Especially not last night, when I nailed her in your apartment."

I feel my face pale. The hand on my arm tightens reflexively, but I barely notice.

"Twice." Ralph grins, beyond pleased with himself. "You know, Gem, you really shouldn't leave your key under the mat."

"You—" I swallow. "You were—"

"Cheating on you?" He takes another step forward, so only a foot or so separates us. "Oh, Jesus, Gemma. Did you really think we were exclusive? Hell, I would've ended things after our first date but..." He shrugs and his eyes drop lasciviously to my chest. "You're hot. And you live ten feet from

me. Doesn't get much *easier* than you."

The double meaning in his words is not lost on me. I feel myself beginning to fall apart, and bite my lower lip so the tears gathering in my eyes don't escape.

Ralph laughs and leans closer. "These tickets were just the icing on the cake. The fact that I've been screwing you for the past four months—"

I never get to hear the rest of his insult because, in a motion so fast my eyes can barely track it, Green Eyes' hand flies out and locks around Ralph's windpipe in a bruising grip that cuts off all sound from escaping and all air from entering.

My mouth falls open.

Holy shit. I'd completely forgotten he was still standing by my side.

For a few seconds, Ralph tries futilely to escape, but when Green Eyes takes another step forward and drags his body up so he's balanced on the tips of his sneakers, Ralph goes limp as a rag doll and his eyes flash with panic and fear. He looks like a terrified mouse caught in the paws of a massive lion.

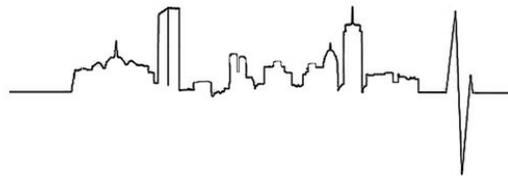
Green Eyes is so tall, he has to lean down a half-foot to bring his face level with Ralph's. His body radiates controlled power, but I can see his face is composed in a blank mask. Only his eyes, somehow simultaneously cold as ice and burning bright with fury, reveal the depths of his anger.

His face is centimeters from Ralph's when he opens his mouth and growls one word that sends chills racing down my spine.

"Enough."

CHAPTER 5

SOMETHING



I'M RUNNING.

Which isn't the easiest feat in a skintight satin dress, let me tell you.

For the billionth time, I curse Boston's cobbled, winding streets and crummy weather, which are making an already miserable moment even more painful. The sky is doing that half-rain, half-snow, not-quite-sleet-not-quite-hail thing, leaving me drenched and shivering in less than a minute.

I don't care.

I'd rather be out here — I'd rather be in the seventh circle of hell — than spend another freaking moment in the stadium with every set of eyes locked on me and my dickwad, now-*officially* -ex-boyfriend. And Green Eyes. And the three security guards who swooped in as soon as Ralph went airborne.

I didn't stick around to see the aftermath. I grabbed my jacket, turned on one heel, and *bolted* — out of the arena, into the cold April night — without so much as a thank you to the man who saved me from public humiliation.

Belatedly, I realize I should've just hopped on the subway — aka “The T” to everyone but tourists — at the Garden and headed back to my apartment, but I must've left my brain behind along with my shredded self-confidence, because now I'm out in the cold with a too-thin spring jacket and I'm not sure whether the moisture on my face is leaking from the sky or my eyes.

Plus, even if I go back across the river to my tiny, fifth-floor, one-bedroom in East Cambridge — the small neighborhood crammed between

the MIT campus and Charlestown — I'll never be able to relax. Not when a single glance across the hall will make me think of Ralph, and the questionable things — *girls* — he did somewhere in my apartment.

Before I deal with that, I need several more beers and at least two bottles of Lysol to scrub every surface where his bare ass potentially rested as he boinked Susie from 3B. I just hope they did it somewhere unoriginal. Like the kitchen floor, which can withstand a thorough dousing of bleach.

And if not...

Come to think of it, I've wanted to move for a while now. And redecorate. And maybe burn every possession I own in a large sacrificial fire.

But that's a problem for another day.

Right now, I need to get inside, preferably somewhere with a change of clothing and a lot of alcohol. And there's only one place close by where I might find both of those things.

Chrissy's.

I duck under an awning and peek into my wallet but, to my disappointment, no cash has magically appeared in the hours since I left my apartment. I know the funds in my bank account are dangerously low — too low to splurge on a cab, even if it means getting there faster and not having to take the subway in my current sodden state.

Alas... I'm broke.

Head tilted forward against the rain, I hug my arms around my torso and trudge onward to the closest T-stop. My Chucks are soon soaked through, the grimy puddle-water seeping through the soles so they make a sickening *sluewp!* noise with every step I take.

At this point, my night really can't get much better.

Five minutes later, I finally spot the Haymarket station across the street. With a quick glance in either direction, I bolt across an empty intersection and beeline for the entrance. I'm nearly there, so close to making it out of the driving rain I can almost taste it, when a black town car slows to a stop on the curb by my side. My eyes swing involuntarily in its direction just as the darkly tinted back window slides down with an audible buzz.

I open my mouth, fully prepared to tell whoever's inside that I am not, in fact, a prostitute working her corner, and that he can go straight to hell for assuming the worst in someone simply because she may or may not be wearing a tiny, tight dress, now fully plastered to her every curve thanks to the rainstorm.

Not a single word makes it past my stunned-silent lips.

Because sitting in the backseat of what appears to be a very expensive black sedan, his gaze locked firmly on mine, is Green Eyes.

“Hi,” I blurt dumbly.

“Hi,” he echoes, the hint of a grin on his lips. “Need a ride?”

Mind reeling, I glance from his car to the station entrance, considering my options for less than a second. A twenty-minute ride on a cold, plastic seat in a train-car full of judgmental stares and a lot of uncomfortable commuters? Or... a short trip in a toasty town-car with a stranger who, for all I know, is a serial killer but kisses like he’s part Greek-god?

It’s barely a question.

He sees the answer on my face before I’ve voiced it, throwing open the back door and sliding over on the leather seat to make room for me. I don’t even hesitate as I slip inside the warm space and settle back against the soft cushions with a relieved sigh.

EYES FIRMLY CLOSED, I pull a series of deep breaths through my nose in a futile attempt to collect myself. Now that I’ve stopped moving, my emotions have finally caught up with me and I’m so full of anger, self-pity, embarrassment, and every other sensation under the sun, I’m not sure what I’m feeling besides *overloaded* .

I’m all too aware, however, that I’m a hairsbreadth away from losing grip on my last scrap of composure — it’s all I can do not to break into a fit of semi-hysterical laughter as soon as I’m out of the rain and settled inside the car.

The gentle sound of a throat clearing startles my eyes open.

Green Eyes.

“Here.” He’s shrugged out of his jacket without my noticing, and before I can object, he’s draped it around my shoulders like a giant blanket. He pauses for a minute before pulling away, tugging it close around my neck so his hands brush the bare skin there. His eyes, steady but guarded, never waver from mine as he settles his coat around me. For some reason, that gesture is more intimate than the two-minute make out session we shared not so long ago.

“Thanks,” I whisper when his hands finally drop away, hugging the jacket a little tighter around myself. It’s massive and masculine and still warm from

his body. I'm grateful as some of his heat starts to sink into my bones.

There's a silent moment, where we just stare at each other without speaking, and all I can think is that somehow, though this must be the worst night of my entire life, for just this moment nothing seems broken or messed up or wrong. Somehow, shut away from the world in this town car, all my problems feel fixable. It's a crazy thought, but I can't get it out of my head as I look at him.

He's watching me, eyes still intense. "You okay?"

I nod.

"That asshole back there... was he your boyfriend?"

I nod again.

A scary look flashes in his eyes.

"Well, it's safe to say, now he's definitely my ex," I correct softly, a small smile on my lips.

The scary look subsides a bit. "Good."

I pause, summoning my courage. "You're going to miss the rest of the game."

"I own those seats for the season." He shrugs. "There'll be other games."

"Oh," I whisper.

And suddenly, we're silent again.

Thankfully, a voice from the front seat shatters the quiet. My eyes fly toward the sound, and I see a black partition sliding down to reveal a handsome, salt-and-pepper-haired man in his late-forties sitting in the driver's seat. His warm brown eyes meet mine in the rearview and I smile when he winks playfully in my direction.

"Sir?" His eyes move to the man sitting beside me. "Where to?"

Green Eyes nudges my knee with his, and I look back at him.

"Gemma?"

A warm sensation slides down my spine when he says my name in a lazy voice, like he's savoring the sound of it on his tongue. I'm momentarily stunned by the fact that he even *knows* my name, before remembering that Ralph used it at the arena.

"Ye-yeah?" I stutter, feeling a little too caught up in his gaze.

"Where are we going?"

"Oh! Right. Back Bay, please." I blush furiously as I rattle off Chrissy's address from memory.

Green Eyes' brows lift on his forehead, more than likely curious how a

girl like me can afford to live in Boston's most expensive neighborhood. He's too polite to ask, so I take pity on him.

"My friend Chrissy's place." I haul in a deep breath. "I don't really want to go home, right now. Ralph... well, he's my neighbor."

His expression flattens and his eyes, if possible, turn even more serious. "He won't bother you again."

His tone is so determined, so *sure*, I can only imagine what transpired between him and Ralph after I left. I decide some things are better left unknown.

"Oh," I say stupidly, at a total loss for words. "Well... thanks for that."

He's looking at me again, his eyes hyper-alert and full of questions, and it's more than a little unnerving. I can't speak with his eyes trapping mine, so I drop my gaze to my lap and clear my throat roughly.

"And thanks for, you know, kissing me and everything." I start to play with the sun-shaped pendant hanging on a chain around my neck – a nervous habit. "You really saved me, back there."

I can feel him looking at me, but I keep my eyes on my hands.

"Gemma?"

"Yeah?"

He waits until my gaze skitters up to meet his. The ice in his eyes has melted and I see they've gone warm, turning to green pools, though his tone is deadly serious when he speaks again.

"Don't ever thank a man for kissing you."

I don't know what to say, so I just nod as my mind cartwheels madly, searching for some way — *any* way — to lighten what has suddenly become an all-too-heavy atmosphere.

"So, you don't regret turning yourself into a public spectacle just to help some random girl with a dickwad boyfriend?" I ask lightly, half-joking.

He leans closer, just the fraction of an inch, but that tiny, insignificant shift seems to suck all the air out of the car. "I can't imagine there's any man on earth who would regret kissing you."

I feel heat flaming my cheeks even redder. There's no comeback in the world to appropriately counter that statement, so I just look out the window and pretend not to hear the quiet, amused chuckle he fails to muffle.

The car glides through the wet night, the tires kicking up water as we turn onto Comm Ave. The only sound besides the gentle patter of rain on the roof is the persistent buzzing of Green Eyes' cellphone, which he pointedly

ignores after one short glance at the screen. Whoever's calling seems to piss him off — a dark scowl contorts his face as he shoves the cell roughly back inside his pocket without bothering to answer.

I shoot a furtive glance at him, fighting off a blush. He's the embodiment of composure; I'm the epitome of chaos. My hair is dripping steadily, soaking the fabric of his jacket. There's a legitimate puddle forming beneath me on the leather seats. I don't even want to know what my makeup looks like, at this point — if there's any left on my face, that is.

"God, I'm a mess," I mutter under my breath. "I'm really sorry, I'm probably ruining your seats..."

"Gemma." His voice is steady. "Don't worry about it."

"Chrissy and Mark are going to kill me when I show up like this, still pissed off and embarrassed. It's going to stress them out... which is just about the last thing they need, right now. Chrissy's pregnant and it's sort of high risk, I guess — bed rest, the whole shebang. Let's just say, they've got enough to worry about, without adding my drama to the list." I sigh, guilt stirring in my gut. "Am I the worst friend ever for imposing on them?"

He pauses for a beat, staring at me like I've just asked him to run naked through the streets of Boston.

"Never mind," I mutter. "You don't have to answer that. I'm an idiot."

His brow creases in confusion. "What?"

"The way you're staring at me..." I shake my head and trail off. "Sorry, just ignore me."

Comprehension flares in his eyes. "I'm not staring because you're an idiot; I'm staring because in the last hour, you've been pushed around and insulted by that asshole—" His jaw clenches. "—you're soaked to the bone, shivering with cold, and stuck in a car with someone you barely know.... Most people would be happy to impose on their friends, after the night you've had. But you're more concerned with stressing them out than making yourself comfortable." His eyes are fixed on my face in such an intent study, I fight the urge to squirm in my seat, and when he speaks again, his voice is quiet. "I'm staring because you surprised me, and people don't often do that."

I don't say anything; I just stare back at him, at a loss for words.

"And, for the record," he adds, his voice dropping lower, "I don't think I'm capable of ignoring someone like you. Anyone who does... well, they're either blind or stupid."

"Oh," I whisper, shocked and embarrassed by his words.

Without looking away, he calls to the driver. “Evan?”

“Sir?”

“Change of plans. Take us in a loop, along the river. We’re going to give Gemma a little time to dry out, before dropping her off.”

“Yes, sir,” Evan says, steering the car into the exit lane. Seconds later, he pushes a button that triggers the partition between the front and back seats, to give us some privacy.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I whisper, once we’re alone. “I’m sure you have better things to do with your night.”

“Not really,” he says, shrugging.

“Well... thanks.”

“It’s no problem.”

“I don’t even know your name,” I say, as my eyes move over his features. His lips twitch, as though he finds that news vastly entertaining. “I know.”

“And, from your expression, I’m guessing I *should* know your name?”

He shrugs, not giving anything away.

“You’ve got courtside season tickets and a chauffeur. Only important people have chauffeurs – there’s a rule about it, somewhere.”

“Uh huh.” He grins.

I narrow my eyes on him. “So, who are you?”

“Who do you think I am?”

“I don’t know, that’s why I’m asking.” I sigh. “Give me a hint.”

He shakes his head, amused.

“Oh, fine!” I grumble, staring at him. “I’ll guess. Even though I’m terrible at this stuff.”

He chuckles softly again, and the sound makes me smile despite myself. Lifting one hand to stroke my chin, I adopt an expression of deep contemplation and pin him with a narrow-eyed stare. My eyes scan his jeans and t-shirt — which, at first glance appeared casual but after another look are clearly well made, likely designer — then move to the watch at his wrist, an expensive-looking silver Rolex that gleams even in the car’s low lighting.

Hmmm .

“Well, you’re attractive in a clean-cut, rich-dude kind of way,” I say, which makes his lips twitch again. “Not rough enough around the edges to be a rock star. Arrogant, but not in that loves-his-own-reflection way that models and actors have.”

He laughs outright, when I say that. “I thought you were an artist, not a shrink.”

“People watching is kind of my thing,” I say, grinning. “Well, that and cannoli from *Maria*’s in the North End. Those are also my thing.”

His eyes join in the smile, crinkling at the corners. “I think *Maria*’s cannoli are everyone’s thing.”

“Ah, so he likes Italian... is that a clue? *Oh!* I’ve got it – you’re a mob boss.”

“No.” His grin gets wider. “Though I probably wouldn’t admit to it, if I was.”

“Okay.... You’re a news anchor!”

“Try again.”

“You’re the mayor!”

“You don’t know what the mayor of Boston looks like?”

“Shut up.” My cheeks heat. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No, I’m enjoying your guesses.”

“Okay.” Fighting off a laugh, I force my face back into a serious expression. “You don’t have a scruffy beard, so you can’t be a Red Sox player, and while you’ve got some nice muscle action going on there—” I gesture vaguely at his chest and abdominal area. “—you don’t look like a Patriots linebacker, that’s for damn sure.”

“Are you insulting my manhood?”

“Only a little, tiny bit.” I laugh. “So, I’m guessing....”

“The anticipation is killing me,” he says drolly.

I shoot him a look. “You’re either a Kennedy, one of the Wahlberg boys, or Tom Brady’s secret younger brother.”

“Wow,” he says, his eyes wide.

I feel my heartbeat pick up speed. Am I actually *right* ?

That *never* happens!

“What?” I ask breathily.

He snorts. “You’re an absolutely terrible guesser.”

“Hey!” I protest, offended. “It’s not like I didn’t warn you.”

“It’s all right, I won’t hold it against you.”

“How benevolent of you,” I mutter sarcastically. “I bet you can’t do better.”

His eyes gleam. “You’re an artist.”

“That’s cheating!” I protest. “You overheard Ralph trashing my paintings

at the game.”

A dark look moves over his face when I mention this. “True enough, but I would’ve known you were an artist anyway.”

“How?”

“You’ve got paint splatters on your shoes and there’s a smear of green by your left elbow.”

Oh, great. That’s not embarrassing, or anything.

“Damn.”

He laughs. “Do you do that around everyone, or just me?”

“Do what?”

“Blush like that.”

My cheeks get even redder. “Oh, around everyone,” I lie shamelessly.

His grin gets bigger, like he knows I’m full of shit. “Uh huh.”

“You know, I think I’m feeling better,” I say decidedly, folding my arms across my chest. “You can take me to Chrissy’s, now.”

“Don’t be embarrassed. It’s cute as hell.” He leans closer and my stomach clenches in response. “Most women I meet are so busy being sophisticated, they forget to be real.”

I stare at him. “Maybe you’ve been hanging around with the wrong women.”

“Maybe,” he agrees softly, reaching out to brush a wet strand of hair off my cheek. As soon as his fingers make contact with my skin, my mouth parts as a breath of air slips out. I’m nearly in a daze when he adds, “But I’d be no good for you, Gemma.”

Pulling back, I stare at him. I’m so startled by his words, I forget to be embarrassed. “And why is that?”

“You’re much too sweet for me.”

“I’m not sweet. I’m tough.”

“Said the girl who doesn’t like contact sports and, last time she went to the gym, sprained her va—”

“Ah!” I yell, cutting him off. “Okay. No need to go into details.”

He grins again and my stomach squirms at the sight.

“You’re cocky. And gloating. Some might even say *annoying*,” I tell him, my eyes narrowed on his smiling face. “I’ve decided I don’t like you.”

He leans even closer, and my heart starts to pound in my chest. “Oh, you like me,” he whispers. “That’s exactly the problem.”

“You only date women who don’t like you?”

His eyes glitter. “I don’t date at all, Gemma.”

“Oh,” I whisper, my mind reeling at all that his words imply.

Everything about this man, from the way he kisses to the way he looks at me to the sexual energy practically pouring off him, screams he’s not one to go without female company for long. So, he may not date, but he certainly....

Makes love?

No, that’s not the right term.

He...

Fucks .

This is a man who *fucks* .

The thought alone is enough to give me heart palpitations.

“Stop looking at me like that, Gemma,” he says, his voice so low, it sounds like a threat. Probably because it *is* one.

“Like what?” I ask defensively, my eyes locking with his.

“Like you’d like to see what *not dating* me entails.”

My cheeks heat. “That’s not what I was thinking.”

He doesn’t bother calling me out on my lie.

“Tell me who you are,” I whisper, meeting his eyes through the darkness.

“No, I don’t think so.” His eyes go soft around the edges and his voice drops so low I can barely make out his next words. “You’ll find out soon enough, anyway.”

“What does that mean?”

He shakes his head.

“Whatever.” I roll my eyes. “You won’t tell me and I clearly suck at guessing. That leaves us only one option.”

His brows lift in amusement. “Does it, now?”

I nod gravely. “Two Truths and a Lie — have you ever played?”

“No, but the title gives away the rules of the game.”

“Right.” I fight a blush. “First one to guess four correctly wins.”

“Wins what, exactly?” he asks suspiciously.

“Um...” The blush I was fighting takes over. “Uh...”

“First rule of negotiations.” He leans closer, his eyes on mine. “Always know your endgame. Otherwise, there’s no point in fighting at all.”

“Oh, god.”

“What?”

“You’re one of those weirdos who plays chess against himself, and lays awake at night thinking through strategy, and has a first edition of *The Art of*

War on his bookshelf, aren't you?" I shake my head in faux-exasperation. "I have a strict rule against dating men like that. I don't want to be the Luke to anyone's Yoda, you know what I'm saying?"

He grins wider. "Was that a *Star Wars* reference?"

"Absolutely not," I lie.

"Uh huh." He totally knows I'm full of shit. "And, anyway, you don't have to worry."

"Because you don't have a first edition Sun Tzu?"

"Because I don't date. I already told you that." A funny look flashes in his eyes — I'd say it's almost *embarrassed*, but men like him surely don't get embarrassed. When he continues, his voice has lost a bit of its polished composure. "I'll have you know, *The Art of War* is one of the best works ever written."

"HA!" I snort. "You totally have a copy! You're so predictable."

His eyes narrow on mine, but there's a smile still tugging at his lips. "I've never been accused of that before."

"Oh! I just thought of what I want."

His eyes drop to my mouth. "Really?"

"From the *game*."

"Oh," he murmurs, eyes still on my lips.

I ignore the squirming feeling in my stomach and press on. "If I win, you go on a date with me."

His eyes flash up to mine, suddenly serious. "And if I win?"

"You won't."

He stares at me skeptically, his gaze unrelenting, until I give in.

"Oh, fine." I heave a martyred sigh, as though he's done something utterly unreasonable, like ask me to stop watching HBO on Sunday nights when *Game of Thrones* is on. "If you win... *I'll* go on a date with *you*."

I expect him to laugh at my smooth negotiation tactics, but he doesn't. When I look up at him, the gloating smile falls off my lips faster than Ned Stark's head hit the ground — sorry, *spoiler alert* — because there's a look on his face I can't quite describe.

Actually, I *can* describe it; I'm choosing not to.

Because, if I described it, I'd have to say it looks a lot like pure, unadulterated lust. And that would be bad.

"Um," I breathe, my eyes locking with his. They're liquid with heat, burning into mine across the space between us.

“If I win,” he says gruffly, leaning closer. “We go back to my place.”

“Like... for coffee?” I ask hopefully. “Or snacks? I could totally go for a midnight slice of pizza or three.”

He shakes his head. “No, Gemma.”

I gulp.

“One night. No strings.” His words match the intensity of his stare. “That’s all I can offer. That’s all I need.”

“N-need?”

Great. I’m so nervous, I’m stuttering.

He nods slowly, his eyes on my lips. “I don’t do long term. Not ever. But there’s something about you...” His eyes lift to mine. “Just one night. No expectations. No morning afters. No wanting *more* .”

“Who says I’d even want more?” I struggle to make my voice offended, but my fast-beating heart and sweaty palms are evidence of some very different emotions coursing through my veins at the moment. Like fear. And lust. And maybe a little bit of excitement.

He just looks at me, a seriously confident, seriously *hot* expression on his face. It’s not even cocky, it’s just a fact — *he’s so good, I’d want more*.

“You’re awfully full of yourself.” I fold my arms across my chest, staring him down. “And, for your information, I don’t do long-term either, so even if I *did* agree to your crazy terms, I wouldn’t, like, stalk you or write you long-winded love letters or hold a freaking boom-box over my head outside your bedroom window. This isn’t the tenth grade, and even if it was, I’m not that kind of girl — *woman!*” I correct swiftly. “Whatever.”

His lips twitch, but his eyes are deadly serious. “So, you’re agreeing? I win, you spend the night with me.”

I nod hesitantly. “But it doesn’t matter, ‘cause you’re not gonna win.”

He leans closer, his eyes flashing darkly, and I suck in a breath. “Don’t count on it, Gemma. When I’m invested in something, I fight for it. Hard.”

I gulp again.

His stare flickers from my eyes, to my lips, to the small, ornate necklace lying against my skin, in the valley between my breasts. The tiny gold pendant, shaped like the sun, glimmers even in the low light. It’s the prettiest piece of jewelry I own — a gift from my mother, when I graduated high school. She said it was a lucky talisman, to drive away the shadows of misfortune and keep my life cast in light.

I’ve hardly taken it off, in the near-decade since, but I’ve never called

upon its lucky powers more than this moment.

I have to win this bet. *I have to* — or I'll be screwed, in more ways than one.

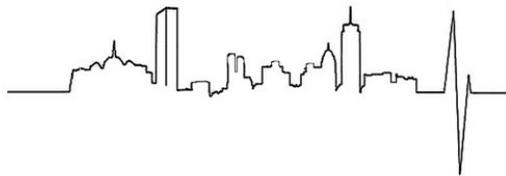
“Sunshine...” he whispers, his eyes still fixated on the necklace, which I have a distinct feeling has just become a namesake. “You just gave me something worth fighting for.”

Holy. Shit.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

CHAPTER 6

LIES



“I’LL GO FIRST.”

“Why do you get to go first?”

I ignore his question, clearing my throat and making my voice serious. “Okay, here goes.” I tick off my truths on my fingers as I speak. “My middle name is so embarrassing I never tell anyone — even my closest friends. When I was sixteen, I was arrested for climbing the town water tower on a dare, but the police chief decided not to press charges because he thought my mom was hot. And, when I go out on dates or am invited over to someone’s place for dinner, sometimes I pretend I’m allergic to broccoli just to get out of eating it.”

By the time I’m done, he’s shaking his head in amusement. “You’re not going to make this easy on me.”

“Nope.” I narrow my eyes. “I play to win, too.”

He inclines his head in acknowledgement. “Good to know.”

“You’ll never guess it right.”

“I don’t have to guess.” A slow grin spreads across his face. “I already know.”

“Big words, Yoda.” Total nerd that I am, I contort my voice to resemble the small green Jedi’s, not above making myself look like a fool if it means distracting him. “Like to see the follow through, would I.”

He grins wider. “Did you just do Yoda-speak?”

“Absolutely not.”

“The water tower story — that’s your lie.”

My mouth falls open. “How did you know?”

He doesn’t answer, not about to reveal his secrets and give me an edge.

“I really was arrested for climbing that damn thing.” I sigh. “But the police chief didn’t think my mom was hot, he was just a nice guy, so he let me go.”

“Point one goes to the cocky bastard,” he says softly. “My turn?”

I nod.

“I’ve been to thirty-six countries. I’m fluent in Spanish and Italian, though my French is passable, as well. And I like pancakes, but hate waffles.”

“The first one,” I say immediately. “No one’s been to thirty-six countries.”

“You’re right. I’ve been to thirty-seven.”

I stare at him for a beat, not knowing what to make of that statement, so instead I just say, “Wait, you hate waffles?”

He chuckles. “Is that a problem?”

“Um, yes.” I make my eyes bug out. “Only Satan hates waffles.”

“Maybe I’m the devil.”

He says it like a joke, but his eyes are so serious it makes me nervous.

“Okay, the score’s tied, one-one. My turn.” I swallow hard, racking my brain for a good lie. “My favorite flower is the hyacinth. I think the word *moist* is the grossest in the English language, if you’re using it in any context except to describe cupcakes. And I believe there’s a special ring in hell for people who don’t use their directionals while switching lanes.”

His eyes work with thoughts for a few seconds as he weighs my words.

“Hyacinths,” he says finally.

“Ugh!” I screech. “You really are Satan, you know that?”

He grins. “What are your actual favorites?”

“Peonies. The great, big, puffy ones that fall apart after about a nanosecond.”

His eyes go soft around the edges and he looks like he’s storing that fact away in the steel vault that is his mind. “My turn again. And, Gemma, just in case you forgot...” His voice drops low. “I’m winning.”

I cross my arms over my chest and glare at him. “For now.”

He chuckles again, the sound rich and warm coming from his throat. “All right, here goes. I hate text messages — they’re more annoying than

mosquitos. I surf, ski, and rock climb whenever I get the chance, which isn't often. And I have a golden retriever named Charlie."

"You so don't have a golden retriever." I snort. "And, if you did, his name would definitely not be Charlie."

"How do you know?"

I look him up and down. "People who've traveled to thirty-six — sorry, thirty-seven — countries don't have pets. And besides, you just don't seem like a dog person, what with that ginormous stick up your butt, and all."

He narrows his eyes, at that.

"I bet you've never even had a pet goldfish." I grin when he doesn't contradict me. "I'm right, aren't I?"

A grudging nod confirms it.

"Sweet!" I pump one fist into the air, victorious. "Two-two. My turn, again." I pause. "Okay, I've got one."

He lifts an eyebrow, waiting.

"All my friends are married, with varying degrees of success. I can't cook anything, and I do mean *anything* — even, like, scrambled eggs or toast. And once, in college, I dressed up as Princess Leia for Halloween, with the gold bikini, the hair-buns, and everything."

He takes a moment to think, his eyes dark with curiosity and amusement. "Do you still have the costume?"

"Are you trying to cheat?"

"Gemma, everyone can make scrambled eggs. It's biologically programmed into you from birth." He grins when I make a face. "So, back to the costume..."

I cross my arms over my chest. "It's your turn, again."

"Fine, fine." He chuckles. "I hate vanilla — the smell, the taste, everything about it. I drink my coffee black. And the first time I went kite-boarding, I broke two fingers in my right hand."

"No one hates vanilla. It's like, the most basic of all flavors."

"I do," he says, his smile widening. "Which means, you *lose*."

"No way! What's the lie, then?" My eyes widen. "Don't tell me — you secretly like loads of hazelnut creamer in your coffee."

He shakes his head. "Kite-boarding. I broke three fingers, not two."

"Oh, whatever." I swallow, nervous for the first time since we started playing. "I'll catch up. You'll see."

"Don't get too cocky." His fingers flex against the supple leather of his

seat. “I only need one more to win. Unless you’re ready to concede now, and head back to my apartment.”

“No,” I whisper roughly, all triumph stripped from my tone.

“Then you better think of a good lie,” he says, eyes glittering with promise. “Because I have no intention of letting you off easy.”

I begin to rub slow circles into my temple, hoping it might ease some of my sudden stress.

“Okay, um...”

“I’m waiting, Gemma.”

Shit!

Shit, shit, shit.

Why did I ever think this was a good idea?

Probably because I’m unreasonably stubborn when I think I’m right... and, okay, I’m the first to admit that *yes*, I’m the kind of girl who likes to play with fire — waiting till the last minute to pay my bills, befriending random strangers on the train, driving cross-country in a car with 170,000 miles on the odometer and a failing exhaust system. Most of the time, I *like* flying through life by the seat of my pants. Going with the flow. Taking things as they come, and all that jazz.

No commitments. No responsibilities. No answering to anyone but *me*.

It’s more fun, that way.

The only problem is, sometimes I land myself in situations like this, agreeing to crazy bets with sexy strangers who simultaneously tempt and terrify me. Twenty minutes ago, when this was all entirely hypothetical, it was fun. But now, with him looking at me like I’m one of *Maria’s* fresh-baked cannoli — the kind so good, you devour it in two ravenous bites — it feels a little too real for my liking.

So real, in fact, that I’m starting to worry he’s *serious* about taking me back to his apartment and having a wild night of emotionless, meaningless sex.

It shouldn’t bother me. It’s been so long since I had a decent orgasm, I should be begging him to have his wicked way with me. But, I can’t. Because, well...

I like him.

Not in a doodle-your-name-in-my-notebook, listen-to-love-songs-that-remind-me-of-you, smile-to-myself-for-no-reason kind of way. I’ve never felt that way about anyone, and I’m not going to start now.

But, I do *like* him, in a normal, you're-a-cool-human kind of way.

And that means going on a date with him is pretty much out of the question.

As for sleeping with him... well, that's either the worst idea I've ever had... or the best.

"Gemma."

My eyes fly up to meet his, and I realize I've spaced out for several moments.

"Sorry." I clear my throat. "I'm ready now. I think. Almost."

He looks at me, recognizing the sudden shift in my mood from playful to pensive.

"Okay, here goes." My voice is wavering; I make a conscious effort to steady it. "I broke my leg when I was seventeen, when I fell off the back of a motorcycle, and it still aches whenever it rains. I'm left-handed. And the only thing in my refrigerator at the moment is wine, some expired orange juice, and a really old onion."

He's quiet for a long time, just looking at me, and the silence grows between us until it's so heavy, I can barely breathe. There's indecision in his eyes, but I can't decide whether it's there because he doesn't know the answer... or because he *does*, and he can't figure out whether he wants to use it.

"Gemma..."

My eyebrows lift at the medley of emotions in his voice — longing, reluctance, lust, restraint — and though all he's said is my name, I intuitively know what's coming.

Rejection.

For some ludicrous reason, I feel tears threatening to prick at my eyes. Which, honestly, is the most absurd thing in the history of things, because I don't cry. Ever.

Not at the end of *The Notebook*. Not at funerals. Not at weddings or baby showers or any other sob-inducing events.

I dismiss the unfamiliar sensation, chalking it up to temporary insanity, which has pretty much been the theme of my night.

I don't *like-like* boys. (*Men*. Whatever.)

I don't get butterflies.

I don't cry for no reason. (Heck, I don't even cry for *good* reasons.)

And yet...

I know it's crazy, stupid... but sitting here, waiting for him to speak, I almost feel like he can see straight through me, down to my soul. As though, somehow, amidst this game of lies, he's pushed through and found the heart of me, beating too-fast inside my chest — a wild, frothing animal trapped in a cage of ribs, made of flesh and blood and vulnerabilities I've never shared with anyone.

Like any good predator, he has an innate ability to root out weaknesses. He senses my wild, wounded heart with the ease of a shark smelling blood in the water from miles away, or a spider feeling the vibrations of its victim in a web long before it ever sets eyes on it.

It's an uneasy feeling. Edgy, uncomfortable, inexplicable. Like my skin's gone see-through, and he somehow knows all my secrets before I've ever voiced them.

His mouth opens, then snaps shut again, as though he's searching for the right words to let me down easy. As though I don't already know what he's going to say.

"Just say it," I whisper, unable to wait anymore. "The suspense is killing me."

"I can't do this."

"You can't guess the answer?"

"You're right handed, Gemma." He sighs. "But that's not what I mean."

"I don't understand."

"I can't do this with you."

My brow wrinkles in confusion as I wait for him to clarify.

"One night. No strings." He casts his eyes to the ceiling. "God help me, but I can't do it. Not with you."

"You're the one who set the terms." My voice is affronted, angry. "You're the one who put that idea on the table."

"I know. Christ, Gemma, I know that."

"So, what? You changed your mind? Decided I'm not hot enough for you?"

His eyes return to mine, narrowed with emotion. "You're gorgeous."

"Then what's it about?"

"I thought I could... But with you... It's just... I underestimated..."

He's tongue-tied.

This smooth-talking, Sun-Tzu-reading, control freak is actually at a loss for words, because of me. It should be endearing, but I'm too pissed to be

endeared.

“Thanks,” I drawl. “That really clears it up.”

His eyes flash. “Gemma, this isn’t about you — don’t make it. It’s all on me.”

I snort. “Wow.”

“Excuse me?”

“I didn’t think you were the kind of guy who’d use the *it’s-not-you-it’s-me* line.”

“It’s not a line,” he counters.

“Don’t tell me — you’re also *working on yourself*. Oh, and you’d like to *still be friends*.”

“Gemma.”

“What?” I snap. “It’s not polite to get a girl all hot and bothered with the promise of a night of endless orgasms, and then back out. In fact, it’s downright rude.”

His gaze drops to my mouth as it fires angry words at him, and I see his eyes are dilated with desire and anger and a million other emotions I can’t name.

“Whatever. I never would’ve gone through with it, anyway,” I say, not sure whether my words are true or false. My eyes are smarting again, as inexplicable rejection courses through my system.

It’s not lost on me that I’m more upset about the sexy green-eyed stranger turning me down than I was about breaking up with the only guy I’ve ever attempted to date.

God, what the hell is the matter with me?

(Don’t answer that.)

His eyes are still on my mouth as he reaches blindly to his right and presses a button to activate the intercom. When he speaks, it isn’t to me. “Evan?”

“Sir?”

“It’s time to drop Gemma off, now.”

“Yes, sir.”

Seconds later, I feel the car turn, though I don’t take my eyes off the man mere inches from me.

“If you’re so eager to be rid of me, let me out here,” I snap childishly. “I’ll walk.”

“No.” A flat denial.

“You’re annoying.”

“You already told me that.”

“Well, I meant it.”

“Good,” he says, his tone serious. “It’ll make it easier for me to stay away from you.”

I stare at him for a while, not knowing how to respond to that, until I finally summon courage I didn’t even know I had, and whisper the question haunting my thoughts.

“What if I don’t want you to stay away?”

His eyes flash dangerously. “You don’t have a choice about it.”

“I’m not some innocent, little girl you need to shield from the world,” I tell him, my voice hushed. “And I’m not looking for love or romance or whatever bullshit you apparently think girls like *me* need.” I lean closer to him. “You might think you’ve got me pegged, but you don’t know anything about me. I’m not a relationship kind of girl. Ralph was the closest thing I’ve come to commitment and, well, you saw how *that* turned out.”

His eyes flash again.

I lean closer. “Maybe I don’t want to date you. Maybe I *am* interested in learning what *not dating* you looks like.”

A threatening sound, almost like a growl, erupts from the back of his throat. “I already told you — I can’t.”

“You can. *We* can.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking for.”

One brazen word — a taunt — pops from my mouth before I can stop it.

“So?”

“You’re playing with fire,” he grits out. “Do you know what happens when sugar hits flame?”

I shake my head, barely listening as my eyes move over his chiseled face, its planes and angles stunning even in the dim light of the car. I can’t stop myself from questioning what it would be like to kiss him again, from wondering what he’d do if I closed the gap between us and pressed my lips to his.

“It turns to ash.” He growls again. “Gemma.”

My dazed eyes drift up to his. “What?”

“Stop.”

Registering the sheer steel in his tone, I sigh in resignation. He’s not going to change his mind. He doesn’t want me.

The realization should embarrass me, but for some reason, all I feel is crushing disappointment.

“Fine,” I mutter, turning to look out the window.

Less than a minute later, we’re pulling up outside Chrissy’s building — an ancient, classic brownstone with flower boxes and picture windows.

“Thanks for the ride, Green Eyes,” I say, shrugging out of his coat and casting one fleeting glance in his direction as my hand closes around the door handle.

Those very eyes widen slightly as they move over my face, as though they’re memorizing my features. “Green Eyes?” he asks, amused.

“Well, I suppose I could’ve gone with *knight-in-shining-town-car* or *destroyer-of-self-esteem*, but neither of those quite roll off the tongue.”

He shakes his head, his mouth twitching with amusement again, though his eyes are serious.

“Do something for me?”

My eyebrows lift.

“Don’t keep the key to your apartment under the doormat, anymore. The thought of that asshole getting back into your place...” He trails off, his expression suddenly dark.

Before I can stop myself, I’m reaching out and laying a hand on his arm. His eyes jerk up to meet mine as soon as my cold fingers make contact with his skin, and I know he must feel it too — the static current that jolted through me as soon as I touched him.

It’s eerie. Electric. I pretend not to notice it, though the charge seems to grow stronger the longer my hand rests on his arm.

“I won’t,” I promise gently, a little bit touched that this stranger cares more about my well being than the man I dated for the past four months ever did. “I promise.”

He nods, a look I can’t quite decipher in his eyes as he stares at me.

Before he can say another word or I can do something stupid, like throw myself at him again, I turn and slide out of the car, into the rain. Dashing for the brownstone entrance, I slam to a halt on the stairs when his voice reaches my ears.

“Gemma!”

I spin and see he’s followed me out and is standing on the sidewalk, getting totally drenched in the downpour. His t-shirt is plastered to every contour of his muscular chest. I think I see the outline of a serious six-pack

beneath the fabric, but it's hard to tell from this distance. And his eyes — they're burning into mine again. I feel that electricity charging the air around us once more, and he's not even touching me this time.

Uh oh.

"Gemma," he repeats, a little quieter this time. My eyes lift to his.

"Yeah?"

I'm frozen in place on the first step as he crosses the sidewalk and stops directly in front of me. With a full stair's height advantage, we're eye-to-eye for the first time. His gaze, from this distance, is so intense, it nearly swallows me whole. I don't feel the cold rain on my skin or the chilly breeze off the river — in fact, with his eyes on mine, I'm suddenly so warm I think I might combust.

It doesn't make any sense. I don't even know this person.

But I can't stop remembering how his lips felt against mine back at the stadium. I can't stop my eyes from dropping to linger on his mouth. And I can't stop the words that slip out in a thready whisper as I stare at his stunning, rain-covered face.

"Did you want something?"

My question is tremulous. When he doesn't answer, my gaze flies back to his. I somehow manage to keep it steady, unwavering, as he leans forward until our lips are mere centimeters apart.

"Yeah," he says gruffly, one of his hands reaching up to push a soaked strand of hair behind my ear. "Yeah, I did."

Before I can ask *what*, his lips slam down on mine once more.

CHAPTER 7

DETAILS



“HOLY CRAP!” Chrissy squeals as soon as the door swings open, scanning me from head to toe. “You ruined my bridesmaid dress!”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes as I take a step over the threshold. “It’s not like I meant to—”

“Wait!” She throws out her hands to stop my movement. “Stay there! You’ll ruin the hardwood.”

I freeze on the welcome mat, and a puddle immediately begins to pool by my drenched sneakers as water streams off my limbs. My eyes scan the apartment. It’s a stunning open-floor plan — full kitchen and a granite-topped breakfast bar on the left, spacious living room with a fireplace and a white sectional set on the right, and three doors leading to the main bedroom, nursery, and bathroom on the far wall. With crown moldings, high-ceilings, and hardwood, the whole space screams understated wealth. The sofa alone costs more than my rent.

Chrissy shakes her head at me in disbelief, her short blonde bob flying in all directions, then turns to face her half-closed bedroom door. “Mark! MARK!”

“What?” a male voice calls from the next room.

“Get a towel!”

For such a petite woman, she’s got a pretty commanding yell.

“Why? Did your water break?” His voice is teasing.

“You’re not funny!” she yells back.

A minute later, Chrissy's husband — cute, early-thirties, average build, with dark brown hair and soulful brown eyes — appears in the doorway with a fluffy white towel in hand. He rolls his eyes at his wife before passing it to me. Burying my face in the fabric, I manage to both dry myself off and hide my grin from Chrissy. At eight months pregnant, she's a little more hormonal than usual and tends to be extra sensitive when she thinks she's being teased — especially by the man who knocked her up.

When I'm semi-dry, Chrissy takes the towel from my hand, waddles to the sofa, and drapes it over one cushion. She gestures for me to sit before collapsing on the other side of the couch and propping her swollen ankles up on the coffee table.

I stare wordlessly from my friend to the towel.

She rolls her eyes. "What? It's Pottery Barn. Do you know how much it'll cost to reupholster this thing? And, no offense, Gem — you look like you fell off a duck boat and landed in the Charles."

With a sigh, I lower my still-damp limbs onto the towel and turn to look at her. "Nice to know your priorities are in order, Chrissy."

I hear the sound of the refrigerator opening in the kitchen area behind us.

"Hey, Gemma, you want a beer?" Mark calls.

Chrissy answers before I can.

"Mark!" she hisses in a whisper-yell. "I just got Winston to sleep! Stop yelling!"

I half-turn to catch Mark's eyes before he does something stupid, like argue with his very pregnant wife about their one-year old son who, evidently, is asleep in the nursery, but he unwisely launches in before I can stop him.

"But, hon, you were just screaming at me to get a tow—"

"Oh, yes, blame me!" Chrissy's eyes begin to well with tears as twin spots of red appear on her cheeks. "It's my fault! Always my fault!"

I glance from my friend to her husband, who I fully expect to have recoiled in total fear of his hormonal spouse. To my surprise, he looks totally composed — even a little bored. He meets my eyes as he presses a cold bottle of beer into my hand.

"This happens a lot. It's best to just ignore the crying. It passes. She'll be okay again in about..." He glances at his watch. "...thirty seconds, give or take."

I try my best to hold in my laughter as Mark settles in on the far side of

the sectional. Looking at me across the coffee table, he lifts his beer in a wordless toast, before taking a long pull from his bottle. I quickly follow suit.

Like magic, thirty seconds later Chrissy's tears have evaporated and she's smiling again.

"Anyway, Gemma, care to share why you're soaked to the bone?"

"It's a long story," I hedge, shrugging.

"Does it have anything to do with Chase Croft?" Mark asks casually.

Both Chrissy and my eyes fly in his direction.

"What?" we exclaim in unison.

"Chase Croft," Mark says slowly, looking at us like we're both insane. "The billionaire."

I feel my face pale and my grip on the beer bottle grows dangerously tight.

Chrissy snorts. "Honestly, Mark, have you been sneaking pot into your brownies? What on earth would Chase Croft have to do with Gemma?"

"Um," I whisper, my eyes blinking rapidly as thoughts whiz through my mind.

"Mark?" Chrissy prompts.

I take another sip from my bottle.

Mark looks from me to his wife. "Well," he says, scratching his stubble with his free hand. "I mean, I just figured since she was making out with him an hour ago, and all..."

I choke on my beer.

FOAM SPRAYS from my mouth in all directions.

Chrissy's so stunned, she doesn't even notice when a few drops land on her pristine white sofa. She's looking from me to her husband with an expression of acute disbelief.

"What?" she hisses. "Mark, how the hell would you even know that?"

"I was watching the game." He shrugs. "Apparently, when the guy whose family owns the team starts kissing the girl sitting next to him, it's important enough to show on national television."

"He owns the team?!" I squeak.

"He really kissed you?!" Chrissy squeals.

"Personally, I would've preferred a little more footage of that sweet three-pointer Bradley sunk — but that's just me." Mark looks at me. "No offense,

Gem.”

“None taken,” I whisper in a detached voice, my mind occupied by alarming thoughts.

I threw myself at a billionaire.

God, he must think I’m a total idiot.

God, I *am* a total idiot.

“Gemma!” Chrissy grabs my arm in a tight grip, her manicured fingernails digging into my flesh.

I look at her and see her eyes are glassy again, the telltale sign of impending tears. Hoping for a little guidance, my gaze swings in Mark’s direction.

“Beats me.” He shrugs. “Any emotion — excitement, happiness, sadness, fear, joy, whatever — seems to manifest as crying these days. I have a hard enough time knowing when I’ve done right or screwed up under normal circumstances. The weeping just adds a whole new level of mystery.”

Chrissy hurls a decorative pillow at her husband, which he dodges in a well-practiced move, then turns to face me again.

“Details,” she says adamantly. “I want — I *need* — details.”

I sigh and launch into the story, describing everything from Ralph’s refusal to hang up his cellphone to the kiss-cam landing on me. I skim over my humiliation and focus on the rescue: Green Eyes — sorry, *Chase* — pulling me from my seat, dipping me back, and kissing me like he meant it.

“Holy wow,” Chrissy breathes, grabbing a magazine off the coffee table and fanning herself. Even Mark, who’s typically bored to sleep by our girl-talk sessions, is staring at me with interest.

...and they haven’t even heard the rest of the story yet .

“Well, I’m sure it’s not that weird.” I try to sound indifferent. “Billionaires don’t live by the same rules we do. I’m sure he goes around kissing people on national television all the time.”

Chrissy and Mark glance at one another.

“What?” I ask, knowing Chrissy — whose obsession with gossip, pop-culture, and all things scandalous remains unparalleled — undoubtedly has the scoop on him. “Come on, lay it on me.”

She clears her throat delicately. “I hate to break it to you, honey, but no one really knows that much about him. He was a bit of a playboy when he was younger, but what heir to a multi-billion dollar fortune wouldn’t be? Lots of girls, lots of parties, from what I remember. He was always getting into

scuffles with the paparazzi, arrested for DUIs, stuff like that.” She’s staring at me, eyes wide. “But he’s been MIA for the past five years. No one really knows where he went or why he left. There was some kind of scandal with his family, but I don’t think the details were ever made public.”

Hmm.

“He’s been out of the country, as far as anyone knows. Tonight at the game was one of his first public appearances since he left when he was twenty-five.”

“He’s only thirty?” I ask, surprised.

“I think so.”

“Yep,” Mark concurs, staring intently at his smartphone screen. “At least, according to Wikipedia.”

“Oh, honey, let me see!” Chrissy demands, holding out her hand for his phone. Instead of simply passing it to her, he stands up, rounds the coffee table, and squeezes in directly beside her, so they’re sharing a single cushion. Within seconds, he’s settled her back against his chest and wrapped his arms around her so she can see the screen. Her hands rest gently on her rounded stomach as she snuggles back against him.

I snort. “God, you two are disgustingly cute.”

They grin in unison and it’s so adorable I want to vomit on the spot.

“You never told us how you ended up soaking wet on our doorstep,” Chrissy says pointedly. “Or what happened after he kissed you.”

I grimace. “Ralph happened.”

A dark look replaces Mark’s typically unruffled expression. “I bet that toolbag was—”

“Mark!” Chrissy gasps.

“What?” he retorts. “He *is* a toolbag. No offense, Gemma.”

“None taken,” I repeat for the second time tonight.

“So?” Chrissy prompts, gesturing for me to continue.

I launch back in, telling them about the intense moment between Green Eyes — *Chase* — and Ralph, followed by my Cinderella-esque escape out into the rainy night. When I get to the part about the town car pulling up beside me at the curb, Chrissy’s eyes go wide as saucers and she leans back into her husband’s chest.

“He drove you here?” she asks.

I nod.

“You got in the car with a stranger?” Mark’s expression darkens further.

“Did he kiss you again?” Chrissy demands, before I can answer.

Looking from husband to wife, I give another hesitant nod.

Mark mutters, “Not smart,” at the same instant a loud, “OHMIGOD!” explodes from Chrissy’s mouth.

It takes her a few minutes to calm down, but when she does, I tell them the rest.

How he called my name.

How I stopped on the stairs.

How he walked over to me.

How he brushed the hair from my face.

How he kissed me until I couldn’t even feel the rain anymore. Until all I felt was *him* , his lips on mine, his hands in my hair. Drenched with water, filled with fire, we were soaking wet and burning up all at once.

“Ohmigod. Ohmigodohmigodohmigod,” Chrissy repeats in a dazed mantra, her eyes unfocused.

If she’s this unhinged by just a kiss, I’m glad I didn’t tell her about the bet I made... and the way my night almost ended – wearing nothing but my birthday suit in Chase Croft’s apartment.

“I think what my wife means to say is, ‘*Then what happened, Gemma?* ’” Mark offers, rolling his eyes.

I laugh lightly. “Then he left.”

“What!” Chrissy yells, her eyes flying back to mine. “What do you mean he *left* ?”

“I mean he *left* . He stared into my eyes for a moment, walked away, and climbed back into his town car.”

“He didn’t say anything?”

“No,” I lie. “But it doesn’t matter, anyway, because I’m giving up men. All men. Billionaires included.”

Mark’s eyebrows go up.

“What?” Chrissy squeals.

“No more men. These lady parts are officially closed for business,” I say decidedly, crossing one leg over the other to punctuate my words.

“Oh,” Chrissy says, relieved. “I thought you were serious!”

“I *am* serious.” My eyes narrow. “Men are rat bastards. Love doesn’t exist — not for me, anyway. And I’m done trying. I’m going to get a dozen or so cats, several high-quality vibrators, enough batteries to last the next decade, and then call it a day.”

Chrissy and Mark glance at each other, lock eyes, and, after a few seconds, burst into loud, cackling, simultaneous laughter.

“I’m serious,” I grumble.

It doesn’t matter. Neither of them is listening.

IT’S ONLY LATER, long after Chrissy and Mark have tucked me in on their couch with a pile of blankets and retreated to their bedroom, that I allow myself to drop my man-hating facade and replay the final moments I shared with Chase in the rain — lingering over all the details I’d neglected to share with my friends when they asked about it, for reasons I wasn’t sure I could explain.

His lips are on mine — consuming me — and I feel wanton, reckless, standing here kissing a total stranger. It doesn’t make a damn bit of difference, though. I couldn’t stop kissing him at this moment even if someone put a gun to my head and ordered me to walk away.

My hands find his shoulders, sliding against the wet fabric of his t-shirt, and as soon as he feels the light touch of my fingers against him, his careful control seems to slip. A sound rattles in his chest, as though his restraint is being sorely tested, and his hands tighten around me, so I’m plastered against him. His grip is so fierce, it’s almost painful, but in the best way possible.

For a few moments, we’re lost.

In the moment, in the rain, in each other.

I vaguely register the sound of a door opening nearby, but I for one have so little interest in the world outside his lips, Boston could sink into the damn ocean and I’d barely bat an eye.

Apparently, he doesn’t feel the same, because suddenly he tears his mouth from mine and steps backward, creating a careful distance between us.

“Gemma,” he says again in that intense way that makes my name alone hold more weight than a thousand pointless words from careless lips.

I just stare at him, breathless. Waiting for him to speak.

For a long moment, there’s silence. When he finally shatters it, his voice is halting.

“I’m sorry.”

My eyebrows lift in confusion. “What are you sorry for?”

“Kissing you.”

I ignore the flash of hurt that jolts through me. “Don’t ever apologize to a girl for kissing her,” I say in a light voice, echoing his earlier words in the car, hoping to make him laugh.

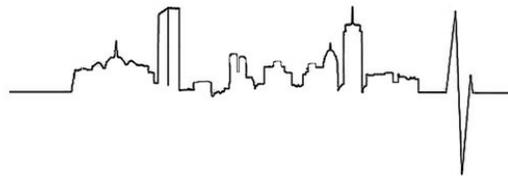
His lips twitch a little, but his eyes are serious as he stares searchingly at my face. Before I can say another word, he leans forward and presses a fleeting kiss to the tip of my nose. Then, he turns and walks away.

I watch as he climbs back into the car and the door slams closed behind him.

And for a long time after his taillights have disappeared down the street, I stand frozen on the steps in the rain, wondering what the hell just happened.

CHAPTER 8

MISS MYSTERY



THE SOUND of insistent buzzing wakes me from a deep sleep. I groan as I roll over and fumble blindly for my phone, my fingers skidding along the coffee table in the dark apartment. My eyes are still fused shut when I finally pull it beneath the blanket and lift the speaker to my ear.

“Hello?” I mumble groggily.

“Gemma! What the hell is going on?!” Shelby’s voice blasts through the receiver.

“What time is it?” I groan.

“5:30.”

A moan of displeasure rumbles from my mouth.

“Never mind that!” she continues. “I was about to head out on my run when I saw it. Gemma, how could you not tell me?”

“Shelbs, my brain isn’t awake yet. I have no freaking clue what you’re talking about.”

“The *kiss!* The Chase-Freaking-Croft *kiss!*”

My eyes snap open and all the moisture evaporates from my mouth in an instant. “What did you just say?”

“Gemma, it’s all over the internet. There are, like, a million YouTube videos and the local news channels are eating it up! I’d bet my left tit that by noon, it’ll hit the national circuit, if it hasn’t already.”

I sit up so fast, my blankets go flying in a blur of fabric.

“They’re calling you Chase’s Cinderella!” Shelby squeals happily.

“You’re famous!”

Dread sinks into my stomach like a stone. “Do they know who I am?”

“Well, I don’t think they have your name yet, but they definitely have your picture.”

“No, this isn’t happening,” I say, shaking my head in denial. “No, this *can’t* happen.”

“Sorry, doll, but it already happened. Everyone wants to know the story. *Myself* included, you bitch.” She huffs in exasperation. “I can’t believe I had to hear about this on freaking Facebook instead of from my best friend.”

“But...but...” I swallow. “But, it was just a kiss!”

“No.” I can practically *hear* Shelby shaking her head. “It was *the* kiss, with *the* most elusive, uncatchable bachelor in the country, at one of *the* most widely broadcasted sporting events of the year.”

I feel myself starting to panic.

“This isn’t going to change anything though, right?” I ask naively. “I mean, in a few days, it’ll all blow over.”

I try not to take offense when Shelby bursts into loud, unapologetic cackles that mock me through the line. “Oh, doll,” she gasps, when she’s finally regained some control over herself. “I’m sorry to break it to you but this is going to change *everything*.”

AS SOON AS I hang up with Shelby, I head for the coffee machine and start a fresh pot — there’s no way I can handle a crisis like this without caffeine. While it’s brewing, I snatch Chrissy’s laptop off the breakfast bar, hop onto a barstool, and log onto the internet. With hesitant, horrified keystrokes, I type CHASE CROFT, CELTICS into the search bar and, before I can talk myself out of it, push the ENTER key with my face screwed up in a grimace of foreboding.

Half a second later, the screen is full of video clips, news stories, and stills of the man whose star power my best friends clearly did *not* exaggerate in their descriptions. I hit the image-filter and begin to scroll down the page. Picture after picture assaults my eyes, each depicting various views of the same thing: an insanely attractive man holding a girl in his arms on a basketball court, their mouths fused together.

Holy. Shit.

I click on one image, and immediately see it’s attached to a news article

from the *USA TODAY* website. Another is credited to *PEOPLE* . Then there's *ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY* . And *THE BOSTON GLOBE* . Oh, and who could miss the absurdly large headline stamped across the *TMZ* photo of my semi-terrified face, caught unawares as I fled the stadium?

MISS MYSTERY! Who is Chase Croft's Secret Lover?

I soon see it isn't even the worst of the headlines. In fact, they're all pretty terrible. The more I read, the more I want to slam the laptop closed, give up the lease on my apartment, and move to a secluded cabin by a pond in the wilderness, without internet or cellphone cameras or gossip magazines or billionaires with really freaking awesome kissing skills.

Thoreau did it. Why not me?

KISS-CAM! Billionaire CHASE CROFT Returns to Boston with a Bang!

ALL ABOUT THE CHASE: Playboy at the Playoffs!

CHASE-ING SOME TAIL! CROFT's New Girl!

CELTICS Score! (and so does CROFT): See the Exclusive Photos!

They go on and on and on.

For the most part, they have minimal details about me, which makes me breathe a little easier. Nearly all of them are focused on Chase's abrupt return to the States after his five-year absence, and offer no more than speculation about who the "mystery woman" he kissed last night might be. A few of them are outright fabrications.

For instance, according to Perez Hilton, I'm an exotic dancer named Bethany Sinclair, who frequently attends NBA games in the hopes of landing a rich player as my husband. On the other hand, Mario Lopez thinks I'm an ex-Celtics cheerleader named Shareena Troiani, who was injured two seasons ago but still gets team benefits from time to time. And the Fashion Police, god bless them, just want to know why on earth I'd wear a cocktail dress and Chuck Taylors to a basketball game.

I admit, that last one makes me smile.

I've just started to relax a little, when one particular headline jumps out at me.

CROFT'S Courtside Cinderella: Who She is and Why She Ran — We Have the Scoop!

I click on it, a flutter of unease ribboning through my stomach.

When I see the story source is the *KXL - BOSTON* website, I nearly fall off my barstool.

This can't be good .

And it isn't. Because *KXL*, the bastards, have capitalized on the fact that the tickets *they* provided are what led to such a sensational new story. And they've all too eagerly given up the name of the woman who won those courtside seats on the radio yesterday.

My name.

In big, bold letters, scrawled across the top of the page.

*FROM CALLER 100 TO KISSING CROFT, GEMMA SUMMERS
MAKES THE MOST OF HER KXL WIN!*

Holy. Freaking. Shit.

WHEN *CHRISSEY* and Mark find me ten minutes later, I've started to hyperventilate. Mark hands me a paper bag and tells me to "breathe" which earns him a glare from both me and his wife, while *Chrissy* passes me a giant mug of coffee with not enough sugar and too much milk. I'm too distracted to be picky, at the moment, so I drink it anyway, barely tasting the hot liquid as it slides down my throat. As for the bag, I wad it into a ball and throw it at Mark's head as soon as his back is turned.

He just grins at me and heads to the nursery to get the baby, who's begun making adorable gurgle-whimper noises to let the world know that he is, in fact, awake now and ready for some breakfast, thank you very much.

"Look, it's not so bad," *Chrissy* says, reading over my shoulder. "Most of them haven't put it together that it's *you* yet."

"Mmm," I hum cynically. "And how long is that going to last, exactly?"

"At least another hour or so," Mark says, walking back into the room with *Winston* in his arms.

My eyes lock on the towheaded, tousle-haired one-year-old, who just so happens to be my godson, and I hold out my arms for him. "Gimme that baby."

"He has to eat first," *Chrissy* objects.

"It's 6 a.m. and I'm already having the worst day of my life," I point out. "I need a little baby therapy."

Mark laughs as he passes his still-sleepy son into my arms, and I immediately inhale that indescribably amazing baby smell as I hold him close.

"Hi *Winnie*," I coo, bouncing him up and down on my lap. His high-pitched giggle of joy instantly makes me feel better. "Who's the best boy?"

You are! Yes, you are!”

Mark and Chrissy roll their eyes, but allow me five full minutes of ignoring the world while I make funny faces at Winston and delight in every nonsensical noise that comes out of his tiny pink-bowed mouth — probably because they’ve found a link to the YouTube video, and are watching my Kiss Seen Round the World with rapt attention and pithy commentary.

“Look, Mark! There she is!”

“I see her, hon.”

“Look, my bridesmaid dress! I picked great dresses. I was an awesome bride.”

“I know, hon.”

“I told her to wear that, you know.”

“I was here, hon.”

“Ohmigod! Look at *that* ! He’s kissing her! With tongue!”

“I could’ve lived without seeing that, hon.”

“Oh, and look at that little weasel, Ralph! He’s so pissed. But he totally deserves it. He’s a weasel — don’t you agree, Mark?”

“I agree, hon.”

And on and on it goes.

When Mark finally reclaims his son, I turn back to the screen with a dejected huff.

“Oh, look!” Chrissy says. “They’ve also linked the recording from your radio call! We *have* to listen.”

I groan and drop my forehead into my hands. “I don’t have to listen, I was *there* , remember?”

“Well, we weren’t!” She clicks a button to queue the audio before I can stop her, and suddenly the *KXL* host’s voice is booming through the speakers.

“Congratulations, you’re our lucky 100th caller! Give us your name!”

I wince when my own voice, tinny and far too nasally, fills the room.

“Gemma. Gemma Summers.”

“From?”

“Cambridge.”

“Well, Gemma Summers from Cambridge, you’ve just scored two courtside seats to tonight’s playoff game!”

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

Why, oh, *why* had I given them my last name? And why couldn’t I have

lied and told them I was from some ridiculous Massachusetts town, where they'd never be able to find me? Like Marblehead. Or Swampscott. Or Sandwich.

They'd never track down Gemma from Sandwich.

Mark's voice cuts into my mental ramblings. "So, remember how I said you had at least an hour or so before they put it together that you're the mystery girl?" he asks, looking at me with a regretful expression from across the room.

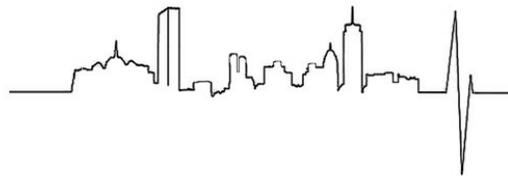
I gulp. "Yeah?"

"Well, I'm guessing you have more like ten minutes, now."

"Damn." My forehead drops to rest against the cool granite countertop as all hope flees my system. "I was afraid you were gonna say that."

CHAPTER 9

CANARY



A HALF HOUR LATER, life as I knew it is over.

Dressed in a borrowed pair of Chrissy’s too-long jeans, which I had to cuff three times at the bottom, and a boxy, oversized sweater that makes me look like a spokesperson for The Gap, I manage to fly under the radar for the entirety of my twenty-minute subway ride across the river to Cambridge. No one looks at me twice, even as I walk the three blocks from the station to my building.

I start to think maybe Chrissy and Mark were overreacting.

Then, I get to my street.

My feet slam to a standstill when I see there are at least three news vans parked in front of my walkup. Reporters are readying themselves, cameramen are circling, and men with large booms are positioning their equipment, as they undoubtedly prepare for a morning newscast.

About me.

Unless, of course, Mrs. Hendrickson in 1C finally got them to do a story on her cat Bigelow, who she swears can predict local weather patterns. Somehow, I doubt that’s the case.

“Dammit,” I whisper under my breath, deliberating for a moment before realizing there’s absolutely no way I can go through the front doors without throwing gasoline on an already hot story. With a sigh, I cut down a side street and circle the block, praying none of the reporters were smart enough to camp out by the back-alley entrance.

I do a little impromptu happy dance in the street when I round a corner and see my path into the building is clear from this side. Bolting to the rear entryway, I punch in the code and slip into the back hall. The door clicks shut behind me, closing out all the maddening pomp and paparazzi that seem to go hand in hand with Chase Croft — who, fabulous kissing skills aside, I'm beginning to think is a pretty big jerk for saddling me with all of this without so much as a warning. I guess now I have my answer to why he apologized for kissing me, last night.

I heave a deep, incredulous sigh as I lean against the door.

I've just had to sneak into my own freaking apartment like I'm sixteen again and my mom is asleep upstairs. True, this time I didn't have to climb the trellis, but it's still pretty damn annoying. I can't help but think that if this — dodging cameramen and ducking through alleyways just to get home — is the new normal... I'm going to have to move to that pond in the wilderness, after all.

Or maybe Tahiti.

I've always wanted to go to Tahiti, though if someone gave me a million dollars to point it out on a map, I'd be not a single cent richer.

Whatever.

Point is, the kiss last night was freaking awesome.

But the aftermath pretty much sucks.

I NEVER WANTED to be famous.

I never wanted to be anything but boring, isolated, introverted Gemma — alone with her oil paintings, a few close friends, and a near-deadly caffeine habit.

I'm happy with my life, for the most part.

Okay, I admit, the last few months of dating Ralph haven't exactly been a highlight, but up until then I've been pretty damn content. Great friends, solid job, rent-controlled apartment...

I'm (mostly) living the dream.

Since my own art doesn't pay the bills, I work full-time at a gallery downtown called *Point de Fuite*, which sells extremely expensive, modern French art to edgy entrepreneurs, patronizing — yes, in both senses of the word — socialites, and rich businessmen who are always on the lookout for the next Monet or Renoir.

Sure, I'd rather live entirely off profits from my own paintings but until that happens — until I actually get up the nerve to show my art to people who aren't Chrissy, Shelby, or my mother — I'm content to broker other artists' work five days a week. Estelle, the gallery owner, is bossy and a little too obsessive about paperwork, but she's not the worst boss I've ever had (I'm looking at you, supervisor Talia from that coffee shop on Newbury) and she's pretty understanding about most things.

Except personal days.

See, she doesn't really believe in them, unless they're on the schedule two months in advance. So, when I called the gallery this morning, hoping she might take pity on me and give me the day — or the week — off to hide beneath my comforter until either *A*. The media get bored and go home or *B*. I run out of food in my pantry, she said no.

Well, actually, she said, "Pas question! Absolument pas."

In any case, that's why I'm here, at *Point de Fuite*, praying none of the reporters camped outside my apartment noticed me sneak out the back door and followed me here. Though, I guess it's only a matter of time before they figure out where I work, too. I can only hope this whole thing blows over before they start digging too deep into my past.

Estelle is decidedly unsympathetic.

"The world doesn't stop for anyone, ma chérie, even billionaires." Her face, faintly lined from years of laughter and sunshine, crinkles in a grin.

"Oh, jeeze, Estelle, not you too." I groan. "You saw the video?"

"Everyone on the planet saw the video, darling," she says, clucking in amusement. She smooths one hand over her graying hair, which is swept back in the elegant twist she's worn every day since I met her two years ago, then claps her hands three times in quick succession. "Now, we've had a special request from a new, high-profile client. Apparently, the family business has changed hands, and they're redecorating their offices with an entire new spread of artwork, furniture, paint, and god knows what else."

I lift my brows, wondering how this possibly concerns me.

"You'll bring a portfolio to the office later this afternoon, and show the interior designer some images that might complement their updated space." Estelle walks behind the glass-topped counter, her floor-length blue skirt flowing behind her with each graceful step. She pulls out one of our portfolio books, which contains full-color images of all our artists' works. Usually, we only use them for reference when we're ordering a new series to display in

the gallery, but now, Estelle passes me the binder with a meaningful look. “Hopefully, they’ll like what they see, Gemma.”

I know very well she actually means, *If they don’t like what they see, you’re in deep shit, Gemma.*

I take a breath. “But, Estelle, we never make house-calls. I thought the whole *Point de Fuite* philosophy was to bring the clients to the art, not the other way around. Haven’t you told me a million times that someone who buys art without seeing it in person is...” I stop and think for a moment, trying to recall her words, and force my voice into a terrible impersonation of her own. “...*bête comme ses pieds.*”

She shakes her head at my poor pronunciation, but her expression turns wistful as she glances from the portfolio to my face.

“Ma chérie...” She laughs heartily, her eyes warm. “If someone wants to spend nearly a million dollars purchasing an entire series of our paintings... philosophy be damned. I’d be the stupid one, if I stood in the way of that.”

I stare resignedly at the portfolio. “Fine. I’ll go. But if I’m hounded by a million reporters on the way there, dart into traffic to evade them, and end up dead...” I heave a heavy sigh. “You’ll be sorry.”

“And, somehow, the *French* are accused of being more melodramatic than you Americans.” She makes a *tsk* sound. “But you’re correct, I will be sorry.”

I start to smile. “Really?”

“Of course. Do you know how long it took to train you?” She quirks one eyebrow at me, her lips twitching in amusement. “And I’ve just spent all that money on your new uniform. A new girl might have entirely different measurements...”

“Hah! Hysterical,” I grumble, tugging at the hem of my dress, grabbing the binder off the counter, and stomping away to find my matching blazer. Estelle’s tinkling laughter chases me into the back room.

AS I MAKE my way across town, praying no one recognizes me, I do my best to put all thoughts of Chase out of my head. The fact that I can’t seem to shake him off is more than a little annoying because, well, as conceited as it sounds, it’s never happened to me before. I’ve never felt this tingly-all-over, stomach-churning, heart-in-my-throat, electricity-in-my-skin feeling — and certainly not over someone who’s made it clear he doesn’t want to be with

me, even in the naked, biblical sense of the word.

I'd like nothing more than to chalk the nervous butterflies in my stomach up to the media frenzy and the stress of last night's breakup, but I can't. The truth of the matter is, Chase's brush-off bothered me. *Bothers* me.

More than I'd like to admit.

I know it doesn't make sense. Just as I know four rounds of Two Truths and a Lie, two lingering kisses, and several sexually charged stares does not a relationship make. Not that I even want to be in a relationship at all, with anyone, especially not if his name rhymes with *debase* .

Unfortunately, saying this to myself over and over as I ride the Orange Line is *not* the same as believing it. After twenty minutes, when I've nearly reached my destination and I still can't get him out of my head, I'm ready to bash my face against the glass train window, if it means putting an end to the torture of my own thoughts.

I'm not this girl — the one who obsesses over a guy she barely knows, who can't stop fantasizing about the potential of a stranger. I don't even *recognize* this girl.

I've never been a believer in the perfect happily-ever-after. Never listened to the scores of people who've been shoving fairy tales down my throat since I was a little girl, one Disney movie at a time.

Someday your prince will come, and you'll ride off into the sunset...

Yada, yada, yada.

The way I see it, everyone's been telling the story wrong. I mean, take Cinderella, for example. She never asked for a Prince, let alone waited around for one. Hell, all *she* ever wanted was a night off from work and a fancy dress to twirl in for a few hours. It's never made sense to me that I'm supposed to sit around pining for some mythical Prince Charming to get off his ass and rescue me. If that's the grand game plan, I could end up waiting forever. Because, I mean, if he's anything like the rest of the male population, the prince is probably stuck in traffic somewhere, or got lost along the way and is too damn stubborn to ask for directions.

Point is, I've always known there was no fairy godmother in my future. No princes or perfect fairytale endings, either. Which just makes it infinitely more frustrating when, to my great dismay, images of myself in an empire-waisted dress, combing my seventy-foot-long locks of perfect hair while singing to my bird friends, start to play in my mind. Because, in these hallucinations, the score swells to a crescendo and suddenly, there's a man on

a horse charging toward my tower, wearing those weirdly hot leggings, and he looks suspiciously familiar, with a head of blondish hair and green eyes so deep, you could swim in them.

God dammit.

I'm so totally screwed.

“RIGHT THIS WAY.”

Anita, the severe-looking secretary in a pencil skirt and pumps, gestures sharply at me before turning from the lobby and heading down a wide hallway to the left. My eyes scan the space as I follow after her, glad I didn't have to wait more than a minute or so in the reception area, which, at the moment, contains not a single piece of furniture. Until this point, I've been hovering uncertainly on the threshold of the 29th floor elevator banks, feeling awkward as a Girl Scout selling cookies to a crotchety neighbor.

It's clear the offices are in the middle of a huge renovation — outdated colors, fabrics, and furnishings have been ousted in favor of clean lines, modern touches, and a tasteful, rather than tacky, color scheme.

The walls are bare, but half-painted with a fresh coat of warm ivory-toned paint. As we walk down the hallway, passing empty rooms on either side, I can see the painters have yet to finish replacing the deep, depressing green that previously covered every inch of the office. I wince as I spot the clashing emerald carpeting stretched wall-to-wall across the floors.

I suppose it's true — *money really can't buy class* — because whoever designed the original office had terrible taste, despite the fact that they could afford to rent the second-highest floor in this towering, Financial District skyscraper overlooking Boston Harbor and the Atlantic. A space like this, with a view like *that*, doesn't need bold colors or heavy furnishings — it should be light, airy, floating among the clouds.

I feel an instant appreciation for the new designer, who clearly recognizes this fact, if the warm, white colors replacing the previously Oz-themed walls are any indication. This sensation only grows as I step lightly over scraps of ripped up green rug scattered around the hallway, and catch glimpses of the beautiful, if unfinished, hardwood floor the renovators have unearthed beneath.

It's already an improvement.

Anita leads me to the end of the hall, stopping before a set of huge,

French-style doors crafted from beautiful opaque glass. I look at her expectantly, but she says nothing.

“Is the designer in there?” I ask eventually, clutching the portfolio a little tighter against my chest.

Without a word, Anita nods, turns on her heel, and disappears back down the hallway, the expression of aloof-distaste on her face never wavering.

“Thanks!” I call after her, rolling my eyes.

Way to throw me to the wolves without an introduction, Anita.

I take a deep breath and try to compose myself, unsure why I’m suddenly so nervous. I’m fully capable of talking about art with a stranger for a few minutes. Hell, I do it every day. And, given the number of paintings I’ve sold in the past two years, I’m actually pretty freaking good at it.

Smoothing my hands over the form-fitting black dress and sharp, matching blazer Estelle makes all her female brokers wear, I set my shoulders back, curl my right hand into a fist, and rap three times on the door.

I don’t panic when a deep, male voice calls, “Come in.”

I don’t panic when my hand closes around the handle.

I don’t even panic when the door swings open and I take two shuffling steps into the office, allowing my eyes to scan the magnificent space in a probing, appreciative sweep.

But then, my gaze lands on the gleaming glass-and-chrome desk — along with the man sitting behind it, whose green-eyed stare is evaluating me with the same critical eye I’ve used to measure his office — and all that composure flies right out the window, falls down 29 stories, and lands on the sidewalk with a sickening splat.

And I *panic* .

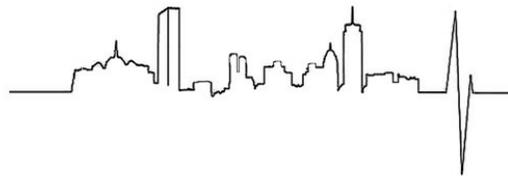
Because Chase Croft is sitting behind that desk, staring at me like the freaking proverbial cat about to swallow a helpless canary.

In case that was too metaphorical for you...

Yep. I’m the damn bird.

CHAPTER 10

BLUE



“Hi,” I blurt, as has become my unattractive yet involuntary reaction whenever I see this man. I hear the distant click of the door closing at my back but, frozen just inside the threshold, all my concentration is focused on the man staring at me from across the room.

He smiles — a lazy, confident grin — and his voice is soft, a verbal caress, when he speaks. His gaze though, is alert as ever — intense, unwavering, active, as he watches me enter.

“Hi.”

His voice rumbles across the open space, deep and magnetizing, and suddenly, I’m fighting the urge to squirm as I stand there, gripping the binder so hard my knuckles have gone white. There’s quiet for a moment as we stare at one another, the air heavy with unspoken questions — the loudest one being, *what the hell am I doing here?*

Finally, I realize that he’s not going to shatter the silence, which is a little infuriating considering he’s clearly orchestrated this entire encounter.

“You figured out where I work,” I manage to say.

His eyes are still serious, working with thoughts, but his lips stretch in a *baby-I’m-a-billionaire-what-did-you-expect* grin. I get the sense it’s an act, to make himself appear less threatening than he is, like a lethal cobra throwing up his hood to mesmerize and distract its prey before a kill strike.

It makes me feel vulnerable, manipulated, intimidated — even angry. And I’m not typically an angry person.

My hip juts out with what little sass I can muster.

“You brought me here,” I say in a voice that’s aiming for snarky but falling pathetically short.

He nods.

“Why?” I say, practically squeaking.

God, I sound like I’ve ingested a balloon-full of helium.

He rises from his leather chair, rounds to the front of his desk, and leans casually against it with his arms crossed over his chest. He looks even better dressed up than he did in jeans and a tee, which I wouldn’t have thought possible. His muscular torso fills out his white dress shirt like it was custom made for him — then again, he’s a billionaire, so it probably *was*. He doesn’t have the normal, businesslike CEO look — no tie, shirt unbuttoned at the collar, sleeves rolled casually to his elbows — but anyone who steps inside this office would be a fool to doubt he commands the space with absolute authority. He saturates the room with power, just leaning there looking at me. My heart’s tempo kicks up a notch as my eyes lock on the tanned slice of skin peeking out at his collar.

“You sell art,” he says casually.

My throat convulses and I actually *see* him make note of its movement in his mind. Ignoring that, I force myself to form words.

“Yep.”

Okay, not words, plural. Word, singular. Because that’s all I can get out, at the moment.

He looks like he’s burying a grin. “Well, it just so happens, I’m in need of some art.”

I stare at him blankly, feeling like my brain has entirely disconnected from my body.

“You might’ve noticed, I’m redecorating.” He gestures vaguely in the direction of his office.

“Yep,” I say again, nodding as my eyes follow the sweep of his hands. I’m not really interested in looking around his office, but I can’t spend another second staring at *him*, or I’m going to spontaneously combust from what I tell myself is sheer mortification.

Not *attraction*.

Definitely not.

I’m just embarrassed I threw myself at him last night, when he was a stranger, when we were two ships, passing in the night. Now, in the harsh

light of day, I'm understandably uncomfortable.

This fluttery feeling in my stomach has absolutely nothing to do with how good he looks in that shirt, or how my skin actually tingles whenever he looks at me.

Nothing at all .

My eyes narrow, moving from the windows to the walls to the gleaming hardwood, taking it in with the practiced, professional gaze I've used countless times to assess artwork.

It's clearly a man's office — the furniture is all black, chrome, and glass. There's a masculine feel to everything — sharp edges and angles — and there are no knickknacks laying around, nor are there fresh-cut flowers or any personal decorations. Sure, this could be because he's still in the middle of a transition, but I don't think so. I get the sense that if I come back in six months, when the construction workers and painters and renovators are gone, it will still look exactly the same as it does now.

Utilitarian. Pragmatic. Cold.

"Well, you've got a good space," I say, swallowing. If he isn't going to talk about our cumulative seven minutes in heaven last night, or that we almost ended up in bed together, or the fact that he's brought me here under false pretenses, I'm sure as hell not about to bring it up. "And the white is definitely an improvement over the garish green the previous tenant used. *Bleh* . Just awful," I murmur lightly. "Whoever picked that palette needs his eyes examined."

"I'll be sure to tell my uncle to make an appointment," he says dryly, his voice thick with amusement.

My eyes fly to his and I feel a blush creeping up my cheeks.

There's my damn Foot-in-Mouth Syndrome, acting up again.

"Oh, god, Mr. Croft, I'm so sorry."

His eyebrows go up at my use of *Mr. Croft* but I keep speaking before he can get a word out.

My eyes are wide on his. "I swear, I didn't mean anything by it."

He opens his mouth to speak, but I plow onward.

"Your uncle's taste is lovely—"

"No, it's not," he cuts me off, his lips twitching. "Why do you think I'm redesigning the space?"

"But—"

"Gemma." He says my name in that deep voice and my mouth snaps shut

instantly.

Shit.

“Do something for me,” he says, and it’s not a request.

I nod.

“My name is Chase — use it. Don’t call me Mr. Croft.” His voice is deadly serious — I can tell this is important to him, for some reason he doesn’t care to share.

I’m not even tempted to dive into his issues, right now, considering I’m drowning in my own, so I simply nod again and turn my gaze back to the walls. It’s far, far safer to examine the office instead of the man who occupies it — I know this like I know the street vendors outside Fenway Park will rob you blind for a freaking hot dog and a lukewarm beer on a summer day.

I clear my throat. “You’ve got a lot of white, in here. Negative space isn’t necessarily a bad thing — you don’t want to diminish the scope of the room or detract from the view — but with a few key art pieces, you can really complement the room’s overall tone.”

He doesn’t respond.

I walk to the window and look out at the ocean. In the summer, the harbor is packed with boats — we’re so high up, they’d probably look like seagulls bobbing on the water from this distance — but it’s still far too early in the year for sailing. Now, the water’s cold, sea green, and rough with whitecaps. If I squint, I can almost make out the lighthouse at the mouth of the harbor. I focus on it, pointedly ignoring the man at my back, whose very presence I can feel threaded through each particle of air between us.

“What’s your favorite color?” I ask abruptly, still not looking at him.

There’s a beat of silence. “Until yesterday, I’m not sure I had one,” he says cryptically.

I’m so curious, I forget to ignore him. I turn, eyebrows raised.

He hasn’t moved from the desk. His eyes lock on mine, scanning my irises intently. “Today, I’d have to say it’s cornflower blue.”

Wait, *what* ?

My knees actually wobble, going weak like I’m some kind of 16th century maiden, swooning at the words of a rascalion. I quickly lock them back in place, simultaneously trying, and failing, to keep my eyes — which are, coincidentally, or maybe *not* so coincidentally, the same hue he’s just mentioned — from widening too much at his words.

“Oh,” I say flatly, feeling my pulse thudding out of control. It’s pounding

so hard, he can probably see it moving my jugular vein.

His eyes drop to the column of my throat, flashing with some unreadable emotion — *yep, he totally sees it* — and then flicker back up to mine. “So, what do you have for me?”

“What?” I squeak, my voice helium-infused once more.

His smile goes lazy, but it doesn’t touch his eyes. They’re still a little too intense for my liking. “Art, Gemma. What kind of art do you have for me?”

“Oh,” I say again. *Duh, you idiot.* “Right. The art.”

His lips twitch.

I pull the portfolio away from my chest for the first time since I walked into his office, belatedly realizing I’ve been using it like a shield. I tilt my head down so he doesn’t see the blush heating my cheeks, and start flipping through the pages like my life depends on it.

“Maybe something abstract, to juxtapose with the clean lines of the space and the furnishings. Nothing *too* abstract, though, not *crazy* abstract, just abstract enough to offer a little balance.” I’m muttering to myself, flipping through more pages, looking for a particular piece I saw in the binder a few weeks ago. “It has to be masculine, obviously. Bold brushstrokes, strong palette. Maybe a Morellet, but something by Soulages would probably work better—”

“Gemma.”

His voice is low and close. I feel the hair rise on the back of my neck, as I realize he is no longer safely across the room, leaning against his desk. He’s somehow moved without my realizing it. I swear I can almost feel the solid wall of heat his body’s throwing through the sliver of remaining space between us. My mouth goes dry, words evaporating in an instant, and I keep my eyes on the pages in my hands, which are suddenly trembling.

“Yep,” I say breathily, not even managing to convince *myself* I’m unaffected by his nearness.

“Gemma,” he repeats, his voice even lower.

He waits until my reluctant eyes skitter up to meet his. It takes all my self-control not to step back when I see how near his face is — his eyes are millimeters away from mine, two pools of icy, unreadable emotion. I can’t look into them — it’s just too much — so my gaze drops to his mouth instead, thinking it might be easier to focus on.

I’m wrong.

He’s too damn beautiful.

It's breaking all my rules.

See, I have this theory that humans are just living, breathing, talking forms of art, each crafted with a different technique and carved out of different materials. Each beautiful in their own way. And sure, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and totally subjective, and changes depending on your circumstance, *yada-yada-yada* ... but most of the time, it's pretty easy to classify people.

Like, okay, you know those women who are gorgeous and never know it? Or the men who pass quietly through life, handsome and unnoticed, never begging for attention or crying out for recognition?

Those are your watercolors.

And the loud, vivacious, gorgeous-and-they-know-it creatures, with bright lipstick and closets full of bold colors and outfits they never wear twice?

Acrylics.

The graceful, elegant, aging beauties you pick out in the crowd, or across the cafe, the lines on their faces telling a story you just *know* you'd want to hear, with so many layers and smudges, twists and turns, you're not even sure where they begin?

Charcoals.

Then, you've got the big-picture-beautiful people, with the collection of interesting features that together make a beautiful face. They're your oil paintings — best from ten feet away and, at the end of the day, kind of funny looking if you lean closer and analyze all their elements separately.

But I'm quickly learning that Chase Croft doesn't fit any of my categories. He isn't a brushstroke on canvas, or bumpy layers of paint on a palette, or imperfect lines scratched inside a sketchbook. His features aren't just gorgeous as a collective — he's one of those annoyingly attractive people whose every feature is equally stunning.

He's a *sculpture* .

Painstakingly chiseled into perfection over the course of *years* , until arias could be written about his eyebrows, his cheekbones, the freaking shape of his nostrils.

And *me* ?

Well, I'm probably a finger-painting.

Done by a three-year-old.

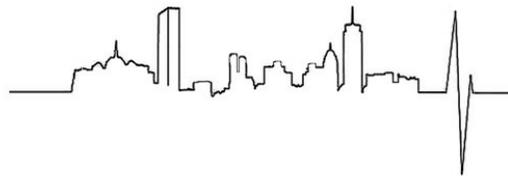
Without supervision.

Anyway, my point is, when my eyes drop to his mouth, I'm annoyed — in a kind of squirmy, breathless way — to find it's even more attractive than those eyes. And, well, since it's so close to mine, and since I'm a deeply-flawed human with no control over her libido, I can't help myself — my eyelids droop a little and my tongue darts out to wet my dry lips, my self-restraint and sense of propriety both fleeing in such close proximity to him.

He notices.

CHAPTER 11

DISTRACTION



AN OMINOUS NOISE rumbles from his throat, and my eyes fly back to his, which seem to darken as I watch. He glances briefly down at my mouth and for one, crazy moment I think he's going to kiss me again.

“Fuck,” he mutters suddenly, stepping back from me with purposeful strides and returning to his desk with one hand clenched into a tight fist by his side and the other massaging tension from the back of his neck.

I feel his retreat like a blow to the stomach — a flat-out rejection, hitting me hard and sucking the air from my lungs.

Gemma, you idiot. He's already told you he doesn't date. He's warned you away, more than once. Last night was a fluke. Men like that don't kiss girls like you. He probably only brought you here to make sure you don't talk to the press about him, or stir the story into an even bigger media frenzy.

Suddenly, I'm pissed — mostly at myself, for being so affected by this man I don't even know, just because he's attractive.

Am I really that weak?

I don't search too hard for an answer to my own question.

Instead, I take deep breath, staring at him with narrowed eyes, and tell myself to snap out of it.

“Why am I here?”

His eyes narrow too, sensing the abrupt change in my mood. “I already told you. I need some art — a service which, if I'm not mistaken, you provide.”

I flinch at the coolness of his tone, and a scoff escapes my mouth before I can stop it. “Bullshit.”

His expression flattens and his eyes start to glitter with repressed anger. I instantly get the feeling that he doesn’t have much experience with people challenging him.

“Excuse me?” he growls.

“You heard me,” I snap, feeling — foolishly — brave. “We both know you didn’t bring me here to broker pieces of modern French art. So, why don’t you just cut to the chase, *Mr. Croft*?”

I admit, I tack on the last part just to piss him off.

Eyes on my lips, he lurches toward me involuntarily, taking two steps away from his desk before he can stop himself, ready to cross the room and either kill me or kiss me silent — I’m not sure which. I watch, nerves swirling in my gut, as he freezes, realizing what he’s done.

Neither of us moves as he pulls a deep breath through his nose, his fists clenching so tightly at his sides, the veins pop out in his tanned forearms. A few short seconds pass, and he settles back against his desk, in control once more.

He clears his throat. “I preferred last night’s nickname.”

I stare into those namesake green eyes and jerk my chin a bit higher, not bothering to respond.

He reads the anger on my face for a long, still moment, until my skin is tingling beneath the weight of his stare and the air starts pressing in around me. Until I can’t take it anymore.

“I’m not going to talk to the press,” I say finally, my voice infused with strength I don’t feel.

His eyebrows lift and his voice has lost a bit of its lethal edge when he speaks again. “What?”

I swallow. “If you brought me here to pay me off or talk me out of spreading the story to the media, don’t bother.” My spine straightens and I snap the portfolio closed. “I wouldn’t talk to them even if they paid me.”

“Gemma, that’s not—”

“And frankly,” I barrel on, glaring at him full-out now. “It’s rude and insulting to assume I’d sell my story just to make a quick buck. I may not be a billionaire like *some people*, but I don’t want to be. I don’t want the attention. I can’t wait until all this blows over, and I can get my life back.”

“Gemma—”

“There were, like, a *million* reporters outside my apartment this morning. Did you know that?” I ask, my tone a little hysterical. His mouth opens, but I’m too riled to stop myself. “Of course you know that — you know my name, you know where I work. Hell, you probably know what I ate for breakfast this morning.”

His lips are twitching.

“I mean, *seriously*, it was just a freaking Pop-Tart! And not even a good one — it was a Trader Joes knock-off Pop-Tart with the healthy alternative frosting and the skimpy sugar-free filling inside. *Totally* not the same. And, honestly, I could’ve used the freaking sugar rush, because I had to sneak out of my building like my last two rat-bastard dates did before I woke up—” His eyes get a little scary, when I say this, but I’m so worked up, I don’t notice. “—And it is *not* as easy as it looks to navigate that back alley in these damn heels Estelle makes me wear for work. I know Boston is historical and all, but can we quit it with the freaking cobblestones, already? It is not the 1800s, anymore, people!”

I finally run out of breath — and words — and realize I’ve been pretty much yelling about sub-par breakfast foods and city infrastructure for the past five minutes to a man who is a virtual stranger, despite the fact that he’s had his tongue in my mouth. *Twice*.

The blush hits me, hard, and I pull a deep, mortified, gulp of air through my nose.

“Are you finished?” he asks, after a minute of silence, looking at me intently. I can’t help but notice, his mouth is twisted like he’s fighting another smile.

I nod.

He pushes off his desk and strides across the room, coming to a stop just inches away. His body language is aggressive, claiming the very air, as though my personal space belongs to *him*, not me. He stares down into my face, leaning forward so I can’t possibly miss his words.

“I didn’t bring you here to pay you off,” he says, and his voice is soft — not normal soft, though, soft in the way that thunder seems soft when a big storm is moving offshore, echoing out over the ocean. Safe, but only from a distance.

I stare at his chin, unable to meet his eyes. “So, why did you bring me?” I ask, my voice reedy with nerves.

He waits until my eyes flicker back to his, and then he does something

that makes the breath catch in my throat. With one hand, he reaches out and pushes a tendril of hair that's escaped my Estelle-inspired bun behind my ear, his fingers lingering in the space beside my face but never touching my skin. I'm statue-still, staring at him, waiting for him to break the silence because *I* certainly can't — my throat is lodged with emotions I don't want to analyze.

Breathe, Gemma.

"Chase," I whisper, my stare never moving from his. "Why am I here?"

As soon as his name leaves my mouth, all the ice melts right out of his gaze, and he's suddenly looking at me with something a lot like longing.

"I wanted to see if you were okay," he says finally, his hand coming to rest against the side of my face. I feel the callouses of his palm and fingertips tracing my skin, the touch lighter than you'd ever think such a big man capable of. I fight the urge to close my eyes and lean in, to rest my face in his hand and absorb his warmth, like he's got the sun inside his skin.

His voice gets husky. "I'm sorry for creating chaos in your life. It wasn't my intention."

"It's okay," I breathe, frozen as I watch him lean a fraction closer.

He's staring at my lips, I'm staring at his eyes, and we're barely touching but somehow I feel him everywhere, on every inch of my skin, like this stranger who I don't know from Adam is somehow more attuned to the strange Gemma-wavelength I operate on than anyone else has ever been.

And then he opens his mouth and says, "It's a damn shame I can't see you anymore."

Hold on.

What?

What the *what* ?

"I'm sorry?" I ask, breathless.

He's still looking at my mouth, but at my words, his eyes drift back to mine. He reads the confusion on my face, and his hand drops away. "I can't see you again," he says, and I think there's regret in his tone, but I'm a little too angry to process it.

Actually, I'm a *lot* too angry to process it.

"So, you dragged me here.... *Why* ?" My voice is incredulous. "To make me feel like an idiot — sorry — like even *more* of an idiot?"

His face closes down instantly, his eyes freezing over into emotionless disks.

I spin away from him so fast, it makes me dizzy. My eyes lock on the

door, and I race in its direction, fueled with anger and more embarrassment than I'd like to admit.

Rejected. Again.

Again!

It would be funny if it weren't so humiliating.

"Gemma, wait—" His voice carries across the room, irritatingly composed.

"I'm out of here." I spit the words from my mouth like venom. "Please, whatever this was, let's *not* do it again."

I'm reaching for the door handle, when a hand closes around my arm, the grip strong enough to halt my progress completely. I jerk to a standstill, glancing over my shoulder at him with narrowed eyes.

"Let me go," I hiss, hitting him with my coldest glare.

His hand tightens reflexively. "Not until you let me explain."

My eyebrows go up as my face contorts into an impatient, uppity expression that says *hurry up, jerk, I don't have time for this*.

His eyes scan my face and his lips twitch again — he thinks I'm *amusing*.

Amusing!

I begin to tug at my arm, trying to escape his grip, but it only tightens at my efforts.

"Gemma."

I still at the sound of my name. Not on purpose, of course — it's just an involuntary reaction to watching those lips form the syllables when they're so close to mine.

"I'm sorry." His voice is gravelly again.

I jerk my chin, rejecting his insufficient apology without words.

His eyes flash and my belly contracts as he stares at me. "I thought if I made this about business, it would be easier." He exhales sharply. "It's not."

Still silent, I wait for him to explain. I, for one, am *done* talking.

"I just got back to town. I have..." His gaze cuts sharply away from mine, but I can see thoughts working behind his eyes. "...certain *obligations*, if you will, that I have to focus on right now. I can't afford to be distracted."

My eyes widen and my voice drops to a snarl of indignation. "And I'm a distraction?"

He hesitates a beat, then nods.

I can't help myself. I lean in closer. "You are so damn *full of yourself*."

His eyes fly back to mine, narrowing as I watch.

My voice drops to a furious whisper. “You think because we kissed, like, *twice*, that I’m interested in you? That you can snap your fingers and have me in your life, *distracting you* all damn day?” I snort. “*Ha!* Maybe you billionaires just assume you can have whatever you want, whenever you want it, but I’m sorry to inform you...”

His eyes start to glint with anger.

“...*I’m not for sale.*”

With that, I yank my arm free in a vicious tug I know is going to bruise, grab the door handle, and disappear into the hallway before he can catch me again. I don’t look back as I cut through the lobby, ignoring Anita as I jam my finger into the elevator call button a million times, shifting nervously from one high-heel to the other, waiting for a hand to close around my bicep once more.

I breathe a huge sigh of relief when the doors slide open, and I step inside.

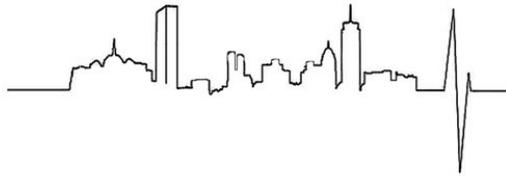
The tension uncoils from my shoulders as I turn, eyes on the panel of illuminated buttons, and find the one that will whisk me back to ground level. The doors are sliding shut again when I look up and realize my relief was premature. Every muscle in my body locks into place, frozen with fear and anticipation and, if I’m being honest, *excitement*, as I catch sight of him standing in his unfinished office lobby. It’s like seeing Michelangelo’s *David* amidst a disheveled world of paint cans, drop cloths, and drywall dust. He doesn’t move to stop me — he just stands there, arms crossed over his chest, gaze burning into mine so intensely, I worry I’ll actually catch fire.

I somehow manage to hold myself together until the doors finally close, cutting off my view of him, but as soon as I’m alone, I collapse back against the elevator wall. My heart is pounding so hard, I worry it might simply give out, and I press my eyes closed in a vain search for composure.

Somehow, after the last half hour, I don’t think I’ll ever be composed again.

CHAPTER 12

HOT-SHIT



I KNOCK three times and wait, listening to footsteps crossing the apartment, until the door swings open.

“Babe.” Mark stares at me across the threshold, doorknob still in his hand. “Not gonna lie, you’ve looked better.”

“Mark!” Chrissy yells from the sectional. “That is *not* what you say to a girl after she’s had a tough day. You either say, ‘would you like me to pour you a glass of wine and massage your feet?’ or you say nothing at all!”

“Hon, I don’t think Gemma wants me to massage her feet,” he yells over his shoulder, before glancing back at me warily. “Do you?”

I grimace and shake my head.

“Mark! It’s not about actually *doing it*. It’s about the *offer to do it*.” She snorts. “God, it’s like he’s learned *nothing* after nearly three years of marriage.”

Mark rolls his eyes. “Do you want to come in? Join the party? Do a little husband bashing?”

I step into the apartment, ruffle his hair, and grin — the first time I’ve actually smiled all day. “As long as you have an empty wine glass I can borrow,” I say, pulling a jumbo-sized bottle of Pinot Noir from my bag. “Or a really long straw. Either one.”

Laughing, Mark closes the door behind me, grabs the bottle from my hands, and heads for the kitchen.

I cross the apartment to Chrissy, who’s sprawled out on one half of the

sectional like a queen on a litter, her ankles propped up on a pillow and a bowl of popcorn balanced precariously on her swollen belly.

“Look, Ma! No hands!” She grins and steadies the bowl as I throw myself onto the couch beside her. “I’m not too proud to admit, I’ll miss the built-in-belly-table function when this baby decides to pop out.”

I reach over and grab a handful of popcorn, shoving it in my mouth just as Mark returns with a brimming glass of wine and passes it to me.

“Thanks,” I mumble, my words muffled by a mouthful of kernels.

He smiles and settles in on a chair across the room.

“So, what is it this time?” Chrissy asks. “Did you dance with an Arabian Prince at a rock concert? Seduce a handsome heir at a football game? Ensnare a wealthy benefactor in line for coffee?”

“You’re hysterical,” I mutter darkly.

A tinkling laugh escapes her lips. “Sorry. You know I’m cooped up all day. The mind tends to wander.” Her eyes swivel to her husband. “If *someone* would just let me out of the apartment every once in a while...”

“You heard what the doctor said.” Mark is unmoved. “*Bed rest*. Minimal movement, except for trips to the bathroom.” He looks at me. “Which is pretty much every ten minutes, so it’s not like she could even go anywhere, anyway, unless she feels like wearing an adult diaper.”

“Ugh!” Chrissy huffs, her eyes narrowing. “You are so annoying.”

Mark grins at her, his eyes soft. “I love you too, babe.”

She giggles.

I roll my eyes. “You two are disgusting.”

They both turn their smiles in my direction. “We know,” they say in unison, further affirming their gross levels of cute.

I groan.

“So, tell us about the day,” Chrissy says, her eyes gleaming with excitement. “I want all the juicy details. I’ve been tracking the story on social media, but besides some pictures of the outside of your apartment building, they don’t have anything new.”

I nearly choke on my wine. “I’m sorry... did you just say you’ve been *tracking* me?”

Chrissy nods. “I set up a Google Alert. Every time a new story goes up about you, my phone *dings* ! Isn’t that great?” she exclaims. “Mark showed me how.”

My eyes fly to Mark, who’s suddenly looking guilty.

“Sorry,” he mumbles, avoiding my eyes.

I sigh. “Well, I guess it’s a good thing they don’t have anything new.” My voice is audibly relieved, and I take a big sip of wine. “The last thing I need is them hounding me at work, after the day I’ve had.”

“Ohmigod!” Chrissy squeals. “For a second there, you looked *worried* ! Does that mean there’s something you thought they might find out about? Did something happen today? Did you see him again?” With each question, Chrissy’s voice gets louder, until her tone is piercing.

I stare at the crazy woman who used to be my best friend, genuinely concerned for her sanity.

“Hon, calm down—” Mark starts.

“Shhh, Mark!” Her eyes never waver from my face. “GEMMA, TELL ME!”

“She’s a little scary,” I say instead, looking at Mark.

He nods. “Preaching to the choir, babe.”

“Gemma Summers, if you don’t spit out your story right this minute I’ll —”

We never get to hear what form of deadly punishment she intends to inflict on me, because at that exact moment, someone starts knocking on the door. It’s not the polite knock of a stranger or a deliveryman — it’s the insistent, constant pounding of an angry fist against wood.

I freeze for a minute, my eyes flying from Chrissy to Mark to the door and back again.

“I’ll get it,” Mark says casually, rising to his feet and crossing the room. I find my heart is in my throat as I watch his hand move through the air, turn the knob, and tug open the door.

“Well, it’s about damn time!” a sassy female voice snaps.

Oh, thank god.

I relax back against the couch cushions.

“Hiya, Shelbs,” Chrissy calls to the tall, toned brunette who’s just stepped over the threshold. Her usually pretty face is contorted in a glare.

“Don’t *Hiya, Shelbs* me, you bitches!”

“Hey!” Chrissy huffs in protest.

“What did we do?” I ask, my eyes widening.

“Oh, um, I don’t know,” Shelby says, coming to a stop next to the coffee table with her hands planted on her hips. “Maybe *made out with a billionaire on national television and then dodged my calls for the next twenty-four*

hours ?”

“Oh.” I gulp. “Right, that.”

Her eyes narrow. “Yes, *that* . I’ve been calling you all day. You never answer your home line or your cell. I even went to your damn apartment, and you weren’t there, either!”

“Well—”

“And let me tell you, the twenty-five reporters outside your building practically stampeded when they spotted me. Apparently all brunettes are created equal, because it took me a good ten minutes to convince them I wasn’t you.”

“Damn, they’re still there? I was hoping they’d given up by now,” I mumble. “And I’m sorry, Shelbs, really. I wasn’t ignoring you — I ducked out of work early and went to *Crumble*, that new cupcake-slash-coffee shop on Beacon, to stuff my face and clear my head for a few hours. My phone died and I didn’t want to risk going home to charge it.”

Some of the anger fades from her expression and she flops down on the sectional beside me. “Well, whatever, you still could’ve called from Chrissy’s phone. I’m so out of the loop.”

“She only got here like five minutes ago,” Mark says, coming to my defense.

“And she hasn’t even told us anything,” Chrissy adds, glaring at me again. “Not yet , anyway.”

“Christ,” I mutter, taking another large swig of wine.

“He won’t save you now.” Shelby’s eyes are gleaming. “Spill, bitch.”

I sigh.

Then, I *spill* .

FORTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER, it’s totally silent in the apartment. Chrissy and Shelby are staring at me with identical expressions of stunned disbelief. Even Mark, who’s usually unruffled, looks a little shocked.

I can’t blame them. I’ve laid it all out there, every single mortifying detail of the trip to what I’ve only just learned is Croft Tower. (That particular tidbit would’ve been helpful to know *before* I arrived on the 29th floor.)

“Well?” I ask, swallowing hard. “What do you think?”

For once, Chrissy and Shelby are at a loss for words. Surprisingly, it’s Mark, who jumps in first.

“I think he’s a Grade-A asshole, and he better hope we don’t cross paths in a dark alley. Billionaire or no, I’d be more than happy to introduce my fist to his face.” His expression is dark.

“Mark!” Chrissy exclaims, turning to her husband. “Honey, don’t you think you’re overreacting a bit?”

“No,” he mutters decidedly.

“But you’re a pacifist! You marched in the Peace Parade last spring,” Chrissy reminds him.

“And didn’t you write an Op-Ed in the *Herald* around Christmas, campaigning for a reduction in televised violence during primetime?” Shelby offers.

Mark shrugs off their words. “Did you not hear what he said to Gemma?”

“Well—”

“But honey—”

“I know men like him.” Mark cuts them off. “The type of men who think they own whatever woman they’re with, because they have X amount of money or power or influence.” He shakes his head swiftly, his eyes on mine. “He’s not the kind of man for you, Gem.”

“I know that,” I say, my voice wavering a little. “But you don’t have to worry. Men like that don’t go for girls like me, anyway.”

In unison, three sets of eyes narrow on me.

“What?” I ask, startled.

“Do you own a mirror?” Shelby is staring at me like I’m a nutcase. “Seriously, do you?”

Chrissy sighs. “Gemma, honey, how many times do we have to tell you? You’re *mega* hot. *Off-the-charts* hot. *Intimidating-to-most-guys* hot.”

“Oh, please—” I protest.

“Mark!” Chrissy turns to her husband. “What, did you give that little macho speech and use up your daily quota of words?” She snorts in exasperation. “For god’s sake, tell Gemma she’s hot.”

He turns to his wife. “I don’t think Gemma needs me to tell her she’s hot.”

I shake my head to confirm this.

“MARK!” Chrissy’s face is turning red and her voice is getting loud. “A year ago, I pushed your watermelon-sized baby out of my vagina. In another month, I’m going to do it all over again. So, goddammit, just *TELL GEMMA SHE’S HOT!*”

Mark chuckles, totally undisturbed by his wife's outburst. When his eyes move to mine, they're full of good humor. "Gemma, babe.... you're hot-shit."

I grin. "Thanks."

"And I'm not just saying that because I was coerced by my formerly hot-shit, now totally bat-shit wife."

My grin gets wider.

Chrissy glares at Mark.

Shelby turns to me. "Well, I for one think it's too soon to judge."

"What?" I ask.

"*What ?*" Mark growls.

Shelby shrugs. "Well, everyone knows the Crofts are, like, the Kennedys, the Vanderbilts, and the Wests *combined* ."

I tense at her mention of some of New England's most prominent families.

"They're American royalty. They've got it all — wealth, notoriety, and a stake in every viable economic pool, whether it's acquiring tech companies or funding startups or owning sports teams. They built their family dynasty from the ground up, essentially achieved world domination with Croft Industries, and somehow stayed on top of the international business world for over fifty years... until five years ago, when there was some big rift in the family. No one really knows what happened for sure, but after that, Chase disappeared. Now, suddenly he's back, and it's rumored he's taking over Croft Industries as CEO. Gemma basically just confirmed that when she told us he's completely redesigning the office space in his taste."

"So?" Chrissy asks, impatient as ever. "Why does this matter?"

"Well, maybe it doesn't." Shelby sighs. "But you know how Paul works in finance?"

We all nod — Shelby's husband Paul is almost *always* working, and hardly a day goes by without her moaning about the demands of the financial world and his long hours away from her.

"Apparently the guys at his office were talking about Croft coming back to town, and everyone was really surprised that the company is passing to Chase, who's apparently something like the family black sheep, instead of his cousin, Brett. See, Jameson Croft — Brett's father, Chase's uncle — was the previous CEO, and I guess it was always expected he'd hand over the reins to his son when he was ready to retire... but nobody thought that would be

anytime soon. Jameson himself only took control of the company about ten years ago.”

“Weird,” Chrissy whispers.

“Anyway, around the time Chase left, everything changed,” Shelby continues. “Company stock plummeted. Rumors circulated about mergers, bankruptcy, you name it. The family never confirmed or denied any of it, though. They never even made a statement about it.”

“Yeah.” Mark is nodding. “Now that you mention it, I remember hearing something about all this.”

“Paul told me there’s a lot of bad blood between Chase and his cousin.” Shelby shrugs. “So, all I’m saying is, maybe he wasn’t pushing Gemma away to be an asshole. Maybe he’s just dealing with a lot of shit right now, and doesn’t want to drag her into the middle of it, considering how crazy everyone already is over him coming back to town, then the big playoff game kiss incident...”

Chrissy’s face is contemplative. “Plus, I’m sure the Crofts have some pretty serious skeletons in their closets — the last thing that family needs is to be under a media microscope. Think about it, Gem... if your relatives make the Borgias look friendly, would you want to bring someone else into that?”

I’m silent for a moment, thinking back to this afternoon. Green eyes flash in my mind, and I hear his voice, rumbling in my direction like a train barreling down the tracks.

I thought if I made this about business, it would be easier.

It’s not.

I just got back to town.

I have certain... obligations.

I can’t afford to be distracted.

He’d told me — granted in his cryptic, close-mouthed, controlling way — that he had things in his life he needed to sort out. I just hadn’t been in the mood to listen, too insulted at being called a distraction to hear him out or give him the benefit of the doubt. And, if I’m honest with myself, too hurt and insecure at the idea that he’d never look at me the way I looked at him to stand there for another minute.

My cheeks heat with embarrassment. “Am I an idiot?” I ask quietly, causing all three of them to look sharply in my direction.

Chrissy lays a comforting hand on my arm. “Of course not, honey. You

had every right to storm out of there, after what he said. But...”

I look at her expectantly. “But what?”

“Well, I don’t think he’d make the effort of bringing you all the way across town to his office if he just wanted to check in on you. A man like that doesn’t do *anything* without a purpose — and, honey, I’d assume the purpose in this scenario was to get a better look at what he sampled last night at the game.”

“You’re crazy,” I say, dismissing her immediately and glancing at Shelby. “She’s crazy, right? Back me up here, Shelbs.”

Shelby shakes her head. “Sorry, I have to agree with the preggo-nutcase on this one. No way would Chase Fucking Croft care about some random girl enough to follow up. If he’s really the CEO now, he’s got, like, a billion assistants working for him who very easily could’ve tracked you down on his behalf. Instead, he arranged to see you in person — in his private office, no less — to explain himself. I don’t care how many times you deny it — he’s interested in you, Gemma. Even if he pushed you away and gave some spiel about *obligations* and *distractions* ... it still sounds to me like he’s torn.”

“Torn?” I ask, almost afraid to hear her answer.

“Between wanting you and wanting to keep his life as simple as possible, now that he’s back in the States and smack-dab in the middle of sorting out his family drama.”

“Right,” Chrissy jumps in. “He knows he wants you, but he also knows he can’t have what he wants. *Eeek!* This is even better than the daytime TV soaps I’ve been watching. *Passion! Intrigue! Family secrets! Forbidden love!*”

Mark snorts. “No matter how many times I hear you ladies dissect and overanalyze a man’s motives, it never gets even marginally less insane.”

Chrissy’s smile fades as her gaze moves to her husband. “You want crazy?” Her eyes narrow. “I’ve still got three more weeks of bed rest. I’ll *show* you crazy.”

Mark just grins at her affectionately and heads to the kitchen to retrieve the bottle and refill our glasses. And sitting there, sipping wine with my best friends, for the first time in two days — or maybe longer, if I really let myself think about it — I feel a weight lifted off my shoulders, because I know, whether it’s Rat Bastard Ralph or Chase Freaking Croft or nobody at all, I don’t need a man in my life to be happy.

Not when I’ve got them.

IN CASE YOU'RE WONDERING, I know it's rare — the three of us staying friends, despite being in totally different phases of life. I've seen many BFF-bonds fall by the wayside when one girl got married, leaving her former bestie alone to struggle through the mires of single-hood without a wing-woman. And I get it — it can be tough, sometimes, to relate to Chrissy's discussions of diaper cream and Shelby's complaints about Paul never making it home for her all-vegan dinners, just as I'm sure it's hard for them to hear about my previously pathetic love life which, until this week, consisted of a string of men just like Ralph.

Maybe it's because, even when they were both single, they never really understood my choices when it came to love — probably because they couldn't grasp the fact that I wasn't looking for it.

See, people always make the mistake of assuming that sex and intimacy go hand in hand, that you can't have one without the other, but they're wrong. My friends talk about sex like it's this perfect, intimate act, with fireworks exploding behind eyelids and worlds shifting and mountains moving. They're always *making love*, never *fucking*. As if a girl can't simply enjoy the mechanical processes that lead to a good orgasm without wanting a rock the size of Texas on her left ring finger and a Pinterest board full of organza dress ideas.

They don't talk about the satisfaction of sex without strings because, even though men do it all the time, for some reason it's still somewhat of a scandal if a modern woman's number of sexual partners exceeds single digits.

Here's your meaningless, mind-blowing orgasm, served up with a side of slut-shaming and unfair societal expectations. Enjoy!

Maybe they choose to forget. Maybe they've watched too many movies, read too many romance novels, believed too many COSMO articles promising that sex is always this beautiful, soul-baring act. And, hey, maybe it *is* like that for some people, every single time.

Somehow, I doubt it.

The bottom line is, sex is sex.

No intimacy required.

And, I, for one, have always been perfectly okay with that. This brave new world of sexual satisfaction without emotional investment has suited me just fine, even if Shelby and Chrissy think I'm defying the laws of nature because I'm not actively searching for *The One*.

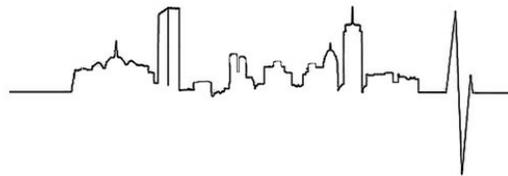
I've always thought, a little cockily, that I know something they don't.
That there is no *One* . That he doesn't exist on any level other than
fantasy.

But as I sip down my wine and look at Mark's hand on Chrissy's
pregnant stomach, as I hear the softness in Shelby's voice when she calls
Paul to let him know she'll be home late...

It makes me wonder if I really know anything at all.

CHAPTER 13

NOTHING



I PUSH against the door to my apartment and meet resistance — it sticks in the frame, like something’s blocking it from swinging open. A forceful bump of my hip jars it wide enough for me to squeeze through, and I step over the threshold onto the mountain of papers that have been jamming my entryway. My eyes bug out as I see literally hundreds of business cards, media release forms, and contact sheets mixed in with a pile of mail several times its normal size, and at least six newspapers.

What the hell?

I’ve gotten more mail in the past two days of dodging my apartment than I have in the two full years I’ve lived in this building. Slamming the door closed behind me, I drop into a crouch and begin digging through the mess. Evidently, the reporters found a way inside the complex — or they bribed my neighbors to do their dirty work for them — because my apartment is starting to look like something out of an episode of *Hoarders: The Early Years*. There’s so much paperwork, I can’t even see my entry mat. A cursory glance tells me most of it contains contact information and interview requests for different talk shows, radio spots, and primetime sit-downs, all requesting an exclusive. All wanting a piece of the Gemma Summers story.

Don’t hold your breath, leeches.

The newspapers, all of which seem to feature front-page stories about me or Chase, or me *and* Chase, are a bit tattered, likely from being shoved roughly through the thin mail slot in my door, but I catch sight of a bright

blue sticky-note fused to the front of *The Boston Globe* and peel it off. I have to squint to read the shaky, sloping cursive scrawled across the tiny turquoise square.

GEMMA DEAR,

I'VE BEEN COLLECTING these since this whole shenanigan started! Got *The Times* , *The Globe* , *The Herald* , and *The Wall Street Journal* . Thought you'd want them. Don't worry, I kept a bunch of copies for myself — well, only the sections about you, I used the rest to line the litter boxes. Oh, and feel free to bring your new man by to meet Bigelow anytime! He looks like a cat person.

MRS. HENDRICKSON, 1C

I LET the note flutter to the floor as a hysterical giggle bubbles up from my stomach and bursts from my throat. This whole thing — the reporters, the attention, the hiding out from my own apartment — hasn't really fazed me until this point. But there's something about the image of Chase Croft, in his billion-dollar clothes, crouched down on Mrs. Hendrickson's musty carpeting, playing with her giant tabby cat, that sends me careening right over the edge.

I collapse back against my door, sitting amidst a pile of papers I'll never read and strangers' phone numbers I'll never use, and laugh until tears are glossing over my eyes and I can barely pull a breath into my lungs.

IT'S strange to be back in my apartment after essentially living at Chrissy and Mark's for the past two days. Everything at their place is white, glossy, and pristine — the polar opposite of my space, which is dripping in different colors, patterns, and textures.

The apartment is cramped, but it has high ceilings, which lends the illusion of more space than I actually have, and there's only one window, but it's big and west-facing, so it lets all the mid-afternoon sunshine pour in. My floors are a hodgepodge of wood — oak and maple, dark and light — with one section blending straight into another with little rhyme or reason. I've got a red couch, a blue refrigerator, and not a single cup that matches in all my cabinets. There's a funky, asymmetrical coffee table I found at a flea market plunked in front of the sofa, and instead of a television, I have one full wall covered in floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, every nook and cranny jammed with my favorite, well-worn paperbacks. The rest of my wall space is covered in oil canvases — some complete, some half-finished, all my own handiwork.

It's a mess.

I love every square inch of it.

After I've gathered up the papers by the door and tossed them in the recycling bin in my pathetically small kitchen, I head straight for my bedroom. Really, it's less a room than a closet, separated from the rest of the apartment by glass-paned French doors. My queen-sized bed takes up almost the entire space, with a peacock green duvet and decorative blue and red feathered throw pillows. There's no room for a dresser, so I got creative when I first moved in and suspended a horizontal ladder from my ceiling along the far wall. My colorful wardrobe hangs from the rungs like some kind of strange piece of modern art you'd find at a hipster gallery in the Theater District.

Artsy but functional.

I collapse face-first on my bed and fall into a restless sleep, in such a stupor after the emotional day — and the two glasses of wine I chugged — I almost forget to set my alarm. If I'm late for work tomorrow, especially after I ducked out early this afternoon, Estelle will either fire me or kill me — which would just be the cherry on top of an already fantastic week.

At the very least, I suppose I can be thankful that the reporters seem to have given up their quest. When Shelby dropped me off on her way home from Mark and Chrissy's, I fully expected I'd have to sneak through the back alley, as I had this morning. It was a welcome surprise to find the camped-out news vans had gone home for the night, and the front stairs of my walkup clear for the first time since the story broke.

See, Gemma? It's already blowing over — soon, that kiss with Chase Croft will be a distant memory. You'll probably never see him again.

For some reason, the words I meant to be reassuring only seem to upset me more as I drift off to sleep.

THE SOUND of my phone buzzing pulls me back into consciousness.

This is becoming an unfortunate habit.

Without opening my eyes, I throw out a hand and grope for my cell on the nightstand. As soon as my fingers close around the glittery, plastic shell of my three-generations-old iPhone, I yank it beneath the covers and click it on, peering at the too-bright, spiderweb-cracked glass through slivered eyes.

It's not even seven, and there's already a text message lighting up my screen.

Chrissy: You should see this.

Evidently, her Google Alert is still working, because there's a link pasted beneath her words, and when I click on it, I see the story has only been up on the web for about ten minutes. I squint at the tiny caption at the top of the page, feeling my heart begin to pound inside my chest.

CROFT'S CONFESSION — CAUGHT ON CAMERA!

There's a video clip below the headline, and after a moment of hesitation, I jab my finger viciously against the screen to queue the footage. The clip is choppy, but I recognize the Charles River running paths in the background, which doesn't make much sense at all until Chase rounds a bend in the trail and jogs into view — whoever's filming clearly knows his morning exercise route.

He looks *great*. There's a dark stain of sweat on his gray t-shirt, his calf muscles stand out in sharp definition each time his sneakers hit the pavement, and his hair is damply disheveled in a way I've never seen before. I have to hand it to him — he never breaks stride when the reporters step onto the path and ambush him, their cameras already rolling; he just blows past, as if they aren't even there, as if he's done this so many times in the past, it doesn't even faze him anymore.

The video stream gets bumpier as the cameraman picks up speed, running after Chase while his partner hurls questions rapid-fire.

Are you dating Gemma Summers?

Have you spoken to her since the kiss?

Are the rumors true? Have you two really moved in together?

I try not to freak out when they mention my name or the blatant lies

associated with me, telling myself they'll say *anything* to get a response from him. My grip goes so tight on my iPhone, I worry I'll create even more fissures in the ruined screen, but I can't stop watching. I'm relieved when Chase doesn't turn, doesn't react at all to their invasive questions. He knows better than to give them what they want.

Well, I *thought* he did.

But then, he hears the next questions.

Should we expect an engagement?

Will there be a new Mrs. Croft anytime soon?

I'm pretty sure the reporter was trying to be funny, but Chase doesn't seem to get the joke. As soon as those words leave the reporter's mouth, Chase slams to a halt and despite the grainy quality, I see every muscle in his body go tense. He turns slowly to face the camera, and his face is set in stone — his expression harder, harsher than I've ever seen it. For a moment, he almost looks like he wants to kill the reporter who asked the question. Apparently, I'm not the only one who thinks so — the video bobs as the cameraman takes a hasty step backwards, away from Chase.

Something about those questions clearly struck a raw nerve.

But then, quicker than lightning, Chase's lips twist up into the ghost of a smile — totally at odds with his eyes, which are still flat with anger. His voice is charming and more than a little condescending, when he speaks.

"Listen, boys, I'm gonna say this once, and then I'm never gonna address it again — mostly because there's nothing to address. She seemed like a nice enough girl and she was in a tough spot at the game..." He shrugs, like he's barely given it a thought. "I figured I'd help her out. But as for anything serious..." His smile turns wolfish. "Well, you boys know better than anyone, I'm not a one woman kind of man. Certainly not for an entire lifetime. Hell, sometimes not even for a single night, if you know what I mean."

I feel my stomach clench and hug my blankets a little closer.

Everyone in America knows *exactly* what he means — according to Chrissy, he was photographed on more than one occasion going home for the night with multiple women hanging on his arm, back in his party-boy years.

"So, no relationship?" The reporter asks again. "Nothing's going on with you two?"

"Less than nothing." Chase grins full out — that heart-stopping, panty-dropping grin — and starts jogging backwards away from the camera. "And,

for argument's sake, let's just say, if I ever *am* going to settle down... I doubt it will be with a girl like Gemma Summers."

His words hit me like a bucket of ice water.

Done with the interview, he winks, turns, and jogs away down the path without another word. Seconds later, the video feed clicks off, and I'm left staring at the blank screen of my phone, feeling like an idiot of the highest order when tears start to prick at the back of my eyes.

Chase Croft is an asshole, jerk, buttfaced idiot.

But I'm an even bigger idiot for letting him get to me.

THE ANSWERING MACHINE beeps in my ear and I take a deep breath.

"Hi, Ms. Scarpozzi, it's Gemma Summers from *Point de Fuite*. I'm just calling to let you know that I've finished drafting your paperwork. You'll receive an invoice sometime within the next two business days. Once the wire transfer is complete, we'll notify you, and then you can come pick up your new Lalanne. If you're unable to pick it up, we offer delivery services for an additional fee. It was a pleasure working with you and your husband! Feel free to give me a call back if you have any questions, and thanks again for your business. Bye, now."

I place the handset back in its cradle and file the Scarpozzi's paperwork away in my desk drawer. The wealthy newlyweds uprooted to Boston a few months ago from suburban New Jersey, and came to the gallery with money to burn, determined to trade their cheetah-print for Chagall. I like them a lot, regardless of the fact that they've just earned me a commission big enough to pay my rent for the next month and put some much-needed cash flow back in my bank account. I also admire their attempt to reinvent themselves, even if I can't fathom why anyone would want to join New England's über-wealthy, old-money, elite circles. I doubt they'll be successful, no matter how many expensive pieces of art line the walls of their penthouse. It's a poorly kept secret that if you aren't Boston bred, with ice blue Yankee blood in your veins, you'll never ascend beyond the bottom rungs of the city's high-society ladder.

My eyes lift to scan the gallery space, moving from the high ceilings to the whitewashed walls to the giant skylights overhead, where light filters in like translucent honey. I've always loved it here — a good thing, considering it's been my mandatory home away from home for the past few years. The

constant changeover as art pieces move in and out, along with the influx of new clients, assures that every day is fresh, like the first brushstrokes on a blank canvas. It keeps things busy — and keeps me from going out of my gourd with boredom.

Never a dull moment at Point de Fuite.

Not that you'd know it, looking around right now.

The place is practically deserted. One woman came in while I was on the phone — I can see her wandering around, glancing fleetingly at paintings with about as much interest as I'd show a sheet of basketball stats, but other than that, the gallery is completely empty. I give her another look-over and feel dread creep up my spine. I can't explain why — it's like some deeply ingrained instinct is telling me, from just one look, that this woman is a snake in the grass. Something I'm biologically programmed to avoid at all costs.

I shake my shoulders, hoping to rid myself of the inexplicable feeling.

Maybe she's a reporter, trying to ferret out a story before we throw her back onto the sidewalk with the rest of the press, who've finally figured out where I work. She certainly doesn't look like she's here to buy anything — everything from her confident stride to the exaggerated sway of her hips as she glides around the room, like she's on a freaking catwalk, tells me she's more interested in her own appearance than the art on the walls.

Oh well. Not my job to judge.

It is, however, my job to sell art, so I square my shoulders, take a deep breath, and skirt around the desk. My heels click softly against the marble floor as I cross to her. She hears me approach and when she looks up, the naked anger etched on her features makes me freeze in place.

Um...whoa.

I swallow, hoping it will dislodge some of the discomfort clogging my throat, and fall back on my years of customer service to guide me through this. My voice is bright and unwavering as I address her.

“Can I help you with something, ma'am?”

She's around my age — immaculately dressed, with sky-high heels I could never walk in, her hair and makeup perfectly styled to highlight her already-beautiful features. Even glaring at me like I've just suggested she looks fat in those designer pants, she's absolutely stunning.

“If you're looking for something in particular, I can direct you there,” I try again. “Or, if you're just browsing, I can give you some background information on our pieces.”

Her eyes narrow further and she takes a step closer to me. When she speaks, I'm unprepared for the vitriol in her tone.

"*Stay away from him, bitch .*"

My eyes widen. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," she spits. "He's mine. And I'm not about to let some little two-dollar tramp change that."

"Are you talking about Chase Croft?" I ask dumbly, genuinely confused why this woman I've never met before in my freaking *life* is attacking me at my workplace. Clearly, if she thinks I'm a threat to her, she's never looked in the mirror. Or watched the morning news, for that matter, because Chase made his feelings pretty clear in that video clip.

She doesn't answer my question. With a hair flip and a scowl, she turns on her — very, very high — heel and beelines for the exit. Her strides never even *bobble* as she walks away, and I'm so stunned by that fact, I don't even realize she's leaving until she's slipped out the front doors and disappeared.

What the *hell* ?

I wander back to the front desk in a daze, mired in worries that my life is never going to get back to anything resembling *normal* . As I finish filing away the Scarpozzi's paperwork, I simultaneously file away the strange incident with the blonde in the back of my mind, adding it to the stack of all the other strange things that have happened since Chase kissed me and my life imploded.

The sound of heels clicking against the gallery floor makes me look up.

"Closed another one?" Estelle asks, coming to a stop by my desk.

I nod. "The Scarpozzi's."

"Good." Her tone is brusque — she's never been one to fuss with congratulations or accolades, even when one of her brokers has sold an ostentatiously expensive piece. "But we're still behind on overall sales, this month. If we want to keep our head's above water, we really need to make a few more big commissions in the next few weeks. What's your schedule look like for the rest of the afternoon?"

"Oh, um, I'm just going to be here, manning the desk and waiting for walk-ins." I see the look on her face and plow on, hastily. "But I could make some calls to previous clients, I suppose, try to drum up some new business —"

"Never mind all that," she says decidedly. "You're free. Which means you'll do another house-call for me."

My face blanches of color. “What?”

“We’ve got a VIP client. He requested you, especially.”

Did she say *he* ?

“But, Estelle—”

“But *what* ?” Her eyebrows lift sardonically. “The gallery needs the money. Unless of course, you’re willing to give up your bonus this year. And frankly, Gemma, you have no place protesting, after you failed to sell a single piece of art to our other VIP yesterday afternoon. That was a real missed opportunity.”

Damn . She has a point, there.

But... did she say *other* VIP?

I swallow, trying to regain composure. “So, this isn’t the same client as yesterday?”

“No. This is a new one.” Her lips purse with impatience.

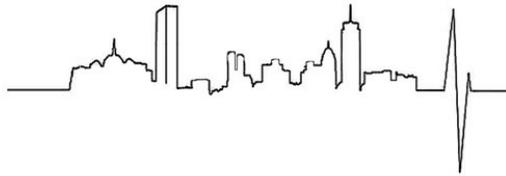
All the breath escapes my lips in a single relieved *whoosh* . “Oh, thank god.”

As long as it isn’t Chase Croft waiting for me at my destination, I don’t give a rat’s ass who the new client is. Before this morning, I would’ve been secretly thrilled at the idea that he’d changed his mind, that he wanted to see me again, that he couldn’t stay away...

Now, I’d sooner sell my own art for dimes on the subway platform than see him again.

CHAPTER 14

YIKES



STUPID, stupid, stupid.

I was wrong, before.

See, I thought it wouldn't matter who the new client was, so long as it wasn't Chase.

I should've known better, honestly. If there's one thing I've learned in life, it's that things can always get worse when you least expect it.

I suppose this is one of those times.

Because I'm currently standing in the nicest apartment I've ever stepped foot inside in my entire life, staring from what I'm pretty sure is a Monet on the wall to a man so good looking, he gives Chase a serious run for his money, and trying not to salivate — over both the man and his artwork, but mostly the man, as he steps into the room and crosses toward me. He's got thick, lush black hair with just the right amount of wave, skin so smooth most models would sell their souls for it, and the most stunning blue eyes I've ever seen — ice-blue at the center, with a ring of navy around the edge of the iris.

Everything about him screams wealth, power, refinement — from his stunning twentieth-floor views to the designer suit he's wearing to the uniformed French maid who let me in, five minutes ago. He's dark ink, gliding liquidly across the canvas of this white, light room, and I'm just standing there like a dork, totally tongue-tied, with my portfolio crushed against my chest, wishing I'd run a brush through my hair before leaving the gallery...

And then he *smiles* .

It's a good smile — mega-white, with dimples in both cheeks, offsetting the sharp line of his jaw. Though, I can't help but notice, it doesn't quite reach his eyes, and there's an edge to it, no matter how hard he tries to make it appear charming.

"Ah, Miss Summers, I presume," he says, crossing the apartment toward me.

I don't know what to say, so I just nod.

"Excellent." His smile widens. "I'm delighted you could make it. I'm Brett Croft."

Wait.

Wait, just a second.

Did he say...

Croft ?

As in... Chase's *cousin* ?

The one with the bad blood and the hostile takeovers and the competition for a place as CEO at Croft Industries?

That cousin?

Holy shit. I'm going to *kill* Estelle for sending me here without so much as a warning.

"You're even prettier in person, Miss Summers," he murmurs, his eyes on mine.

Abruptly, it's very clear why I'm here — and I have a feeling it has nothing to do with art. No wonder Estelle said *he requested you especially*. I'm nothing more than a pawn in the pissing contest between two billionaires.

How in the *hell* did this become my life in the span of two short days?

I don't have time to answer my own question, because he's nearly reached my side. He moves with a slick, sinuous grace — like oil sliding through water, barely disturbing the atmosphere around him. I'm rooted in place, watching him get closer and closer until he's only a few feet away. When he comes to a stop, he offers his hand in greeting, and for a moment it just hangs there in the space between us, as I try to wrap my head around what's happening, here.

After an uncomfortably long slice of time, my manners finally kick in, and I lift a deadened arm to slide my palm against his. As we shake, I note his skin is cool to the touch, and almost freakishly soft — like he's never done a hard day's work in all his life, and has manicures more frequently than I do.

Granted, I only get them about twice a year when Chrissy and Shelby drag me along on a “girl’s day” or for pre-birthday preparations, but you get the idea.

His grip tightens on mine but I barely feel it — at that moment, my mind is on an entirely different set of hands, the opposite of *these* hands, the ones I felt cupping the sides of my face as their owner kissed me in the rain, warm with heat and rough with calluses. Hands I’ve actively imagined exploring other parts of me in moments of weakness over the past few days, when—

Stop it, Gemma! We hate him, remember?

“Did you have trouble finding the place?” Brett asks, snapping me out of my unhealthy thoughts.

“No,” I blurt, shaking my head again. “It was fine.”

“Great.”

He’s still holding my hand.

I want to pull away, but I don’t want to insult him. I can’t afford to screw up with another VIP, or Estelle will have my head.

“So.” The cheer in my tone is as forced as my smile. “You’re looking to add to your collection?”

His eyes sweep my face, then move down my body, lingering too long on certain aspects of my anatomy in a stare that sets my teeth on edge.

“Yes,” he murmurs, his eyes still lasered-in on my legs. “Definitely looking to acquire something new.”

At that, my polite manners evaporate and I pull my hand roughly out of his.

“Great,” I snap, stepping purposefully out of his space. My tone is bordering on rude, but I don’t care. “Any spot in particular you were thinking about putting the new piece? Something over there, by the fireplace, might work beautifully, though it depends what you’re looking for, of course.”

I turn to face the mantle, focusing on the floor-to-ceiling, white brick fireplace that dominates the far wall. After a moment, he moves to stand beside me, maintaining the careful distance I’ve placed between us.

“Of course.” Just like that, his voice has flipped from seductive back to businesslike. “Most of my pieces are oils, impressionist, late 1800s. But I’m looking for something a little more modern, perhaps for my personal office.”

I relax a little.

Maybe he got the hint.

“Or my bedroom,” he adds, and my spine stiffens again as my eyes fly in

his direction.

Maybe not.

He looks at me, one side of his mouth tugging up in a smile. “Follow me.”

I watch him walk away, disappearing down a hallway to the left of the fireplace, and try not to freak out.

Oh, who am I kidding?

I *totally* freak out.

But only for a few seconds, because even pissed off and slightly mortified, I remember that I’m not the kind of girl who allows herself to be intimidated by someone just because they have money and an annoyingly possessive gaze. Pulling a deep breath through my nose, I set my shoulders, tighten my grip on the art binder, and march after him before I lose my nerve.

“MONET REALLY GETS ALL the credit and attention — rightfully so — but when it comes to composition of light, personally, I prefer Degas. I mean, the evolution of his work over the years is amazi—”

Tap, tap, tap.

A series of sharp knocks on the study door cuts off my defense of Degas over Monet as the premier impressionist painter — which is probably a good thing. I have a tendency to get carried away, when talking art, often getting lost in the conversation and forgetting myself... and my conversation partner.

My gaze lifts to Brett and I find his eyes are already on my face, studying me from the couch across the coffee table. His stare is intense — it seems to fill every molecule of space in his private study, where we’ve been sitting for the past forty minutes discussing art and totally neglecting the binder of pieces I’m supposed to be convincing him to spend a godforsaken amount of money to purchase.

“Come in,” Brett calls, not looking away from me. I watch the muscles of his throat work and feel my cheeks heat with embarrassment. God, I’m a nerd. I can’t believe I’ve been sitting here with the (second) hottest guy I’ve ever met, talking his ear off about art. What I can’t figure out is why he *let* me.

Before I can wonder too much, the door to the study swings open, and a man is standing there, filling the frame. *Literally*. He’s so big, I can barely see space around his body, but it’s not his size that makes him scary.

One look at his face, and the breath catches in my throat.

He looks like The Incredible Hulk except his skin isn't green and he's got a long, thin, white scar running across his jugular, as though someone tried — and failed — to choke the life from him with a piano wire. His beefy limbs have been stuffed into a suit that must've been custom made because I'm pretty sure even those Big & Tall stores don't make clothes *that* gargantuan. It's his eyes, though, that really terrify me — they're empty, totally. Just black, vacuous circles in his head, staring through me for a brief moment before locking on Brett's face.

"Five minutes out," The Hulk says without preamble. "Ten at the most."

Brett nods. "Good. Let me know when it's time."

"Yes, sir." The Hulk nods at Brett, in confirmation of something he doesn't bother to explain, then lumbers back through the frame and closes the door behind him.

My eyes move to Brett, and I see he's smiling to himself, a real shit-eating grin, which is weird. But not as weird as the fact that Bruce Banner is apparently a member of his staff. And *definitely* not as weird as the fact that he doesn't even address The Hulk's interruption — he just turns to me and launches back into conversation.

"So, tell me about yourself," he says, his attention totally riveted once more.

My mouth gapes. "What?"

I'd much rather talk about Monet than myself.

His eyes narrow on me. "Who is Gemma Summers?"

"Oh, um..." I cross my legs, shifting uncomfortably under the weight of Brett's stare. My eyes skitter away from his, coming to rest on the coffee table between us. It's a stunning piece — gleaming oak, definitely an antique, definitely an *expensive* antique, from the looks of it. The kind of furniture you admire as artwork, and would never think of putting your drink or a pile of magazines or, *god forbid*, your feet on. "I'm not really anything special."

"Somehow, I doubt that."

My eyes lift back to his. "Really, I'm nobody."

His gaze sharpens, reminding me of a hawk or some other predatory bird narrowing in on its prey from so high above, the poor, fluffy, soon-to-be-meal doesn't even stand a chance. "My cousin doesn't think so. In fact, it seems he's taken quite an interest in you."

And there it is: the real reason I'm here. He thinks my presence is a dig at

his cousin.

Does no one watch the goddamn news, anymore?!

My mouth tightens as memories of Chase's cruel words replay in my mind.

Let's just say, if I ever am going to settle down... I doubt it will be with a girl like Gemma Summers.

After meeting the blonde this morning, I can see why.

Anger thrums through my veins as I refocus on Brett, my eyes narrowed. "I don't think you should confuse pity with interest."

"I've known my cousin all my life – I can read him better than most. We even lived together, for part of our childhood."

I raise my eyebrows, communicating *yeah, so what?* without words.

"When we were fifteen, sixteen, we used to ride our grandfather's thoroughbreds when we were home from school for the summer. We'd go to the stables and pick out our horses and, after a while, Chase grew particularly fond of one of the young stallions, a great, black, monster of a horse. I could see it in his eyes, in the way he touched its mane and brushed its coat down after our rides, that it was his favorite, though he never said as much."

"Is there a point to this trip down memory lane?" I mutter impatiently, not wanting to talk about Chase or his devotion to his horse.

It's hard to hate someone who loves animals.

Brett's lips twist in the mockery of a smile. "My point, Miss Summers, is that when he realized I'd learned the stallion was his favorite, he did everything in his power to hide his affection for it. He'd only ride it at night, or when he thought I was away from the house. And if I was around, he made a point to choose another horse for the day."

"But why?" I blurt, before I can stop myself.

"He wasn't good at sharing — still isn't, in fact. Always worried I'm going to steal his favorite toys, I suppose." His smile gets bigger, a little more malicious. "Which brings us back to you, Miss Summers."

I stare at him, waiting.

"His indifference toward you is just another act, to keep me away." He shifts in his seat, a hawk adjusting his wings before descent. "Trust me."

"Why would I trust you? I don't even *know* you," I snap.

Something flashes in his eyes — something I don't like, as in, at *all*.

"You've got spirit." He smiles at me, but it's oily. "Then again, so did his stallion."

I blanch.

His smile widens. “This is going to be fun.”

“What are you talking about?”

He continues as though I haven’t spoken, his gaze appraising. “You see, Chase is very controlled, in all realms of his life, but he has a temper. It’s his biggest tell.” He leans forward, just a fraction of an inch, but it’s enough to make me shy backwards in my seat. “He knows I’m watching. It’s only a matter of time. And even if I’m wrong, even if he truly isn’t interested...” His eyes scan down the length of my body. “I’m sure my efforts won’t be wasted.”

Ew.

Mega ew.

I rise to my feet, keeping my eyes locked on the coffee table. “Well, you’ve got my number, Mr. Croft, if you want to talk about a new piece for your collection. Otherwise I have to be going—”

“Sit.”

Suddenly, there’s steel running through his soft, honeyed tones.

My heart jumps in my chest and my eyes fly to him. He hasn’t moved so much as a muscle but he looks pissed, sitting there with one hand extended into the space between us. It takes me a few seconds to realize he’s waiting for the binder I’m still clutching against my chest.

I swallow forcefully and make myself hand it to him, feeling like I’ve lost a vital part of my defenses when I do, and sink reluctantly back onto the leather couch.

For a few minutes, the only sound in the room is the flipping of pages as Brett works his way through the binder, sometimes lingering over a particular piece but never seeming to dwell on any of them for long.

Damn. Estelle is going to be so pissed at me. This is twice in a row, now, that I’ve screwed up with a VIP. It won’t matter to her that none of this is my fault. The end result — Gemma spectacularly failing to broker any paintings — is the same.

The sound of the binder snapping closed makes me flinch.

“I’ll take both of the abstracts by Favre, and the still by Sartre — the blue one, on page 18.”

My mouth drops open. “What?”

“Did you not hear me?” he asks, his tone mirthful. “I said I want the Favre—”

“I heard you,” I say, my cheeks reddening. “It’s just... No. You can’t.”
His brow crinkles with amusement. “I can’t buy the paintings you came here to sell me?”

I swallow. “You’ve only seen their pictures.”

“And?”

“Don’t you want to see them in person?”

He shakes his head, amused.

I try again. “Don’t you want to hear about the artists’ backgrounds?”

Another head shake.

“But, Mr. Croft—”

“Miss Summers.” His voice is firm. “Did you come here to sell me art?”

After a beat of hesitation, I nod.

“Then why are you trying to talk me out the sale?”

“I...well...” I trail off.

“Good,” he says decidedly. “It’s settled, then.”

I sigh. “You didn’t even get to hear my sales pitch. It was good. Really.”

A smile tugs up the left side of his mouth. “I’d love to hear it. Unfortunately, we don’t have time today.”

“What do you mean?”

He opens his mouth to answer but before he can, there’s another knock at the door, seconds before it swings wide.

The Hulk is back.

“He’s here.”

“Right on time.” Brett laughs boyishly, but there’s a dark edge to it that makes me nervous.

The Hulk’s expression never changes; his voice never wavers above a low rumble. “Should I let him in, sir?”

Brett nods, his face still split by a grin. “Yes, immediately.”

The Hulk nods and disappears, the door clicking shut at his back.

My head swivels from Brett to the door and back again. “What’s going on?”

“We’ll meet again, in a few days, to finalize the sale, if that’s all right with you.” He phrases it like a request, though we both know I don’t have a choice about it. Rising to his feet, he buttons his blazer and circles the coffee table until he’s right beside me. “It was lovely to meet you, Miss Summers.”

“You too,” I say automatically, staring up at him and feeling like my brain is ten steps behind whatever’s going on here.

He offers me a hand. “Come.”

Not wanting to be rude — after all, the man has just agreed to purchase not one but *three* pieces of art, which will make Estelle so happy she probably won’t fire me any time in the foreseeable future — I slide my hand into his and allow him to pull me to my feet. His cool skin sends a strange, squeamish chill up my spine.

“Thanks,” I murmur, as soon as I’m upright. I begin to pull my hand from his, when his grip tightens and he steps closer.

My heartbeat picks up speed.

“The pleasure was all mine, Miss Summers, I assure you.”

“It’s Gemma,” I blurt stupidly, at a loss for words and rational thought with those too-blue, too-intense eyes locked on mine, less than a foot away. “Just Gemma.”

Brett’s lips twist in a smile and he opens his mouth to say something, but before he gets a word out, the door to the study is thrown open with so much force, it rattles on its hinges. Startled, I nearly jump out of my skin as my eyes fly toward the entrance, fully expecting to see The Hulk standing there, green and raging, suit in tatters, ready to rip us to pieces.

Except it’s not him.

There’s another man standing there, seething, with flashing green eyes and a vein jumping in his jugular as he takes in the scene before him.

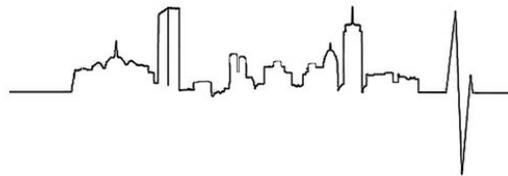
Chase.

And his narrowed, burning gaze is locked on my hand, still wrapped tightly in Brett’s grip.

Yikes .

CHAPTER 15

WILD



FOR ALMOST A FULL MINUTE, there's total silence in the study.

Chase and Brett have locked eyes in a stare-down of epic proportions and, though I'm still standing here with my hand stuck in Brett's grip, I think they've entirely forgotten my existence. The hatred is so thick in the air, it's getting hard to breathe and I'm beginning to think things can't get much worse — until Brett starts speaking. At which point, I realize clogged, tense silence is vastly preferable to the two of them actually communicating.

“Well, if it isn't my favorite cousin!” Brett says, grinning happily. “I'd ask what made you drop by, but I've got a pretty good idea.”

Chase's jaw clenches tighter and he doesn't bother to respond.

“Ah, so stoic, as usual.” Brett glances at me briefly, his eyes hooded. “Miss Summers and I were just getting...” He pauses. “...*acquainted*.”

I don't look at him, but I can actually *feel* Chase's anger. It's palpable — pouring off him in waves, saturating the room around us. Brett doesn't seem to notice — or, if he does, he simply doesn't care. He carries on speaking, his tone cheerfully cruel.

“We were just making plans to meet again, to finalize our...” Once again, his beat of silence is artfully timed. “...transaction.”

Chase's eyes cut to me — just for a fraction of a second, but the expression I see in their depths is scary enough to make my shoulders curl in on themselves. Hastily, I swing my eyes in Brett's direction.

“Thank you so much for your business, Mr. Croft. I'll be in touch soon to

discuss details of the sale,” I say, hoping — stupidly — that once Chase realizes this meeting is only about art, he’ll cool down.

He doesn’t.

If anything, the room gets even tenser. So tense, I’m afraid to look at Chase. And, because I’m *me*, certifiable idiot of the century, I don’t keep quiet, as I clearly should in this situation. Instead, I keep talking and shove my foot even further down my throat.

“Feel free to call me at the gallery with any questions,” I prattle nervously, keeping my eyes locked on Brett’s chin because his too-pleased smile is creeping me out a bit, if I’m being honest. “My personal extension is on the business card in your binder. Which, you know, you can just keep here, in case you want to look at your paintings. And ‘cause, well, we’ve got like twenty of them at the gallery and I’m sure Estelle — that’s my boss — would want you to have access to all our artists’ collections without having to drive across town.”

Brett’s grin steadily widens as I’m speaking. By the time I fall silent, it’s so big, I can see practically all of his teeth.

Like I said — *creepy*.

“How considerate of you, Miss Summers.” He leans closer and his grip tightens on mine. “Though I wouldn’t mind the drive. In fact, I’d love to visit your gallery sometime.”

My mouth falls open a little when I hear something that sounds suspiciously like a growl from the other side of the room. It’s the first sound Chase has made since he arrived, and it is *not* a good one. In fact, it’s a downright *scary* one.

“Well, I really have to be going now,” I say, my voice going up in a nervous squeak as I attempt to pull my hand out of Brett’s. My tug is no match for his grip, which only tightens around mine — not quite painful, but almost. His hold feels like a threat, and yet, despite the fact that it’s *my* fingers getting crushed, somehow I don’t think the threat is for me.

My gaze darts in Chase’s direction and I see his eyes have gone scary. They’re locked on my hand —which is starting to ache, by the way — and there’s a lethal edge to their intensity.

I gulp down a breath, trying to stay calm, though I must admit, most of my energy is concentrated in an effort not to pee my pants where I stand — which, in case you weren’t paying attention, is between two terrifying men whose anger management problems are only outweighed by their family

issues.

“Um,” I say — *squeak* — in an attempt to get myself far, far away from ground zero of the Croft Civil War. “I have another appointment in an hour and it seems like you two have lots to catch up on, so if you’ll just let go of my hand, I’ll be out of your hair and—”

“Let her go,” Chase says, finally speaking. His voice is emotionless, cold, totally contained, and his eyes are locked on his cousin. “*Now* .”

Brett chuckles. “Well, since you asked so nicely...”

His hand loosens and I instantly pull mine away, feeling a rush of pins and needles shoot into my fingers as blood flow returns. My relief is short-lived. I don’t even have time to step back, to turn for the door, to freaking *move* , when my hand is snatched up again. My eyes drop and catch a glimpse of large, calloused fingers wrapping around mine, but I don’t have time to process the fact that they’re Chase’s, or that somehow, he crossed the room so quickly I missed it, because suddenly, I’m moving.

Fast.

My coherent thoughts and protests are left behind as he drags me from the room without a word, his hold so tight the bones in my fingers grind painfully together. Distantly, I hear Brett’s laughter chasing us out of the study, down the hall, into the living room, and before I know it, we’ve reached the front door and I’m being yanked into the hallway. I don’t have the wherewithal to fight, at the moment, so I follow — my feet moving automatically, forced to jog if I want to match Chase’s long-legged strides. And even though it’s a pain in the ass to run in heels, *not* matching his pace isn’t an option. I’m pretty sure he’s so mad, even if I tripped and fell to the marble floor, he’d just keep going, dragging me behind him like a child drags a toy doll through the mud.

Only when we’re alone in the elevator, descending rapidly down twenty floors to ground level, do I finally realize how flipping *angry* I am — at Brett, at Chase, at the whole goddamn situation.

He’s still holding my hand. I tug at it, trying to free myself, but his grip never loosens.

“Let go,” I hiss, turning to look at him.

His jaw is clenched tight, the vein in his neck is pounding, and there’s a muscle jumping in his cheek.

Whoa . He’s pissed.

“Chase,” I say, tugging again. “Let go of my hand.”

“No,” he growls flatly between tight-locked teeth.

My mouth drops open. “This is ridiculous! You can’t just burst into people’s apartments and interrupt their business meetings and drag them out like some kind of caveman! I’m a grown woman! It’s the twenty-first century! And frankly, I’ve reached my lifetime limit for dealing with overbearing billionaires, so *let me go!*”

I punctuate my words by pulling harder against his grip, this time putting my whole body weight behind it.

It makes not a bit of difference.

“Chase!”

“Quiet.”

“I will not be quiet! This is ridiculous!”

“Gemma, I said *quiet.*”

“I don’t know who you think you are, but I don’t like it at all! This is absolutely outrageo—”

The words evaporate on my tongue when Chase steps forward, his vicious tug sending me stumbling after him, and pushes the Emergency Stop button. The elevator jolts to a halt, and suddenly, without the mechanical buzz of the car moving on its cables, it’s altogether too quiet, too close inside this tiny floating box. He stands there, staring at the illuminated buttons, the muscle still working in his jaw as he fights for control, and the space seems to shrink around us.

Feeling claustrophobic, I gulp for air as Chase turns slowly to face me, his expression thunderous with barely-leashed anger.

“We aren’t talking about this here.” The finality in his tone is unmistakable, and my own anger, momentarily forgotten, swiftly returns.

“We’re not talking about this at all!” My eyes are narrowed. “As far as I’m concerned, once we’re out of this damn elevator and you let me go, we’re never talking again!”

“Yes, we are,” he counters flatly, his voice booking no room for argument.

“You can’t tell me what to do!”

“I can. I just did.”

I shriek in frustration. “There’s something wrong with you! You say you don’t want me, then you bring me to your office. You tell the world I’m nothing but a charity case, and then you show up here like some kind of crazy person.” I throw my free hand up, exasperated. “Normal people don’t behave

like this! Normal people don't stomp around, all broody and mysterious, thinking they can do whatever they want and say whatever they want, and go wherever they want, whenever they freaking feel like it!"

He doesn't respond; he just stares at me, waiting for me to finish. Which might take awhile — I've got a lot of shored up emotions, ready to explode.

"I'm getting pretty sick and tired of being manhandled! Guess what? It's not fun at all! I was just doing my job, trying to sell some art, and now I'm pissed off and embarrassed and my freaking *hand* hurts, because apparently you and your cousin are in some kind of contest to see who can give me arthritis of the fingers first!"

His grip loosens instantly at my words, but he doesn't drop my hand.

"I want to go home, Chase. I want this to be over. Whatever game you and Brett are playing — I don't want to play. I don't even want to know the rules, or who the winner is when you finally run out of ammunition in this pissing contest. Just leave me out of it."

"I can't."

"Excuse me?"

His jaw clenches again and his words are low, stripped of emotion, when he speaks. "It's too late. You're already involved."

My eyebrows go up on my forehead. "You're kidding," I say flatly, unable to muster even an ounce of incredulity.

His eyes scan my face. "I tried to keep you out of this. I swear, I did. But it's too late now."

A hysterical noise — half chuckle, half scream — escapes my mouth. "You're totally nuts. Bonkers. Gonzo."

"Gemma."

"Seriously, what are you even talking about?"

He sighs. "My cousin and I — we don't get along."

"Yeah, I got that, thanks," I snap.

His nostrils flare with anger, but he reins it in and his voice is composed when he continues. "He thinks I'm interested in you."

I notice he doesn't clarify whether Brett's beliefs are accurate, but I'm certainly not going to ask, so instead I just bite out a terse, "And?"

"And that makes you a target."

I stare at him, waiting for him to break into a grin and say, *Gotcha! Just kidding, Gemma.*

He doesn't.

“What does that mean?” I ask. “That I’m a *target*?”

“It means, he’ll do everything he can to use you against me. To hurt me.”

“Oh,” I say, instantly relieved. “Well, then there’s nothing to worry about.”

His eyes narrow. “Care to explain that statement?”

My cheeks heat with the beginnings of a blush. “Well, I just mean, there’s nothing going on between us, so it’s not like he could use me against you even if he wanted to. We’ve only met, like, twice. We’re basically strangers. So, there’s really nothing to worry about. You can let me go, I’ll tell your cousin there’s nothing between us, and we can all get on with our lives.”

That strange, scary look creeps into his eyes again. “You will not be speaking to my cousin again.”

“Excuse me?” I huff. “I’ll do whatever I damn well please, thank you very much.”

“Gemma—”

“No!” I interject. “He’s a client, now. I’ll have to talk to him, one way or another.”

“Find a new client.”

“Oh, right.” I snort. “Because I can just snap my fingers and find a new gazillionaire art connoisseur.” My eyes go wide and I infuse my voice with sarcasm. “Or, *hey!* Maybe I can just go out into the forest and pick up a few new ones, because apparently they’re growing on trees, now!”

“Good.” Chase totally ignores my sarcastic comments, his voice flat. “Because you’re not dealing with Brett ever again.”

I fight a scream “Are you even listening to me?”

“I’ll buy however many goddamn paintings you want!” he barks, his expression dark. “I’ll buy the whole fucking collection! But *Brett is not your client, anymore*. Do you understand me?”

I make a concerted effort to get my breathing under control and decide to try a new tactic. “How did you even know I was here?”

“I keep an eye on everything my cousin does.”

“That’s insane,” I breathe.

“It’s necessary.” His voice is unapologetic. “And it’s a mutual arrangement.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, Brett and I both subscribe to the *friends close, enemies closer, family closest* mentality.”

“You’re a loon,” I say matter-of-factly. “A caveman. All that testosterone has done something to chemically alter your brain.”

“Gemma, this isn’t a game.” He takes a step closer, and I immediately shuffle back, trying to maintain a safe distance between us. “He’s dangerous. He’s hurt people in the past, people I cared about, people I loved, just to prove a point. Just to prove that he *could* .”

I’m so startled by this admission, I take another step away from him.

He closes the gap instantly, still speaking. “This is his favorite kind of game to play — cat and mouse, the ultimate challenge, even better that it might make my life hell. It doesn’t matter what either of us say — he’ll come after you, in any way he can. Before today, he was just curious, like everyone else, because of the kiss at the game. But now that he’s met you...” His eyes lock on mine. “He won’t stop.”

For the first time, I feel the markings of true anxiety stirring to life in my gut.

“Until what?” I breathe.

Chase shakes his head. “I don’t know. I wish I knew, but I don’t.”

Mind reeling, I take another step away from him. “This is your fault,” I whisper finally, when I’ve composed myself enough to formulate words.

His spine snaps straight, as though I’ve struck him.

My eyes lift to his perfect mouth. “You never should’ve kissed me at that game.”

“I know,” he mutters darkly. “I already apologized for that, Gemma.”

“And that makes it okay?” I laugh bitterly. “How could you have done that, knowing it would lead to this?” I gesture vaguely upwards, in the direction of Brett’s apartment. “Knowing he’d come after me?”

Chase takes another step toward me. “Gemma.”

“Don’t *Gemma* me!” My eyes fly to his. “This is a goddamned mess! I don’t want this! I didn’t ask for any of this!”

“I know that!” he roars suddenly, his careful control finally snapping. “Don’t you think I know that? Why do you think I pushed you away after you came to my office? Why do you think I brushed you off with the press? I tried to keep you out of my life, away from this shit. I *tried* .”

“Not hard enough, apparently!” I yell angrily. “Because here we are!”

He’s breathing hard, his eyes burning into mine. “What do you want me to say? That I fucked up? I already know that. I wasn’t thinking, when I kissed you at the game. I looked at you, and I just... couldn’t stop myself.”

A sharp, stunned exhale escapes my lips. I don't want to look too deeply at the feelings his words have stirred within me, so I wrap myself in anger instead, using it like a shield. "And after that? Why the hell would you drag me to your office? Why even attempt to see me again?"

"I had to warn you this wasn't going anywhere. I thought I owed you that much."

"You didn't need to warn me away — I wouldn't have pursued you like some teenage girl with a crush. But I suppose that possibility never entered your egotistical brain?"

His jaw ticks.

I step closer, so angry I forget to be afraid of him, until only a half-foot of space separates us. "And I suppose you couldn't stop yourself from showing up here today and throwing fuel on the freaking fire, so that whatever slim possibility still existed that Brett might just move on and let me walk away was utterly and completely extinguished?"

"Gemma." His voice holds a warning I don't heed.

I laugh again, a brittle peal. "Because if he wasn't going to come after me before, he sure as shit will now. Your caveman antics ensured that, Chase, so thank you *very* much for—"

I never get to finish my sentence, because his free arm shoots out and slips behind my back, hauling me forward before I can even think of protesting. I slam against him so hard, the breath is knocked from my lungs. His other hand, still holding mine, squeezes tighter and bends up behind his back, so my arm is forced to wrap around him.

"What are you doi—"

My words are swallowed up as his lips crash down on mine. It isn't a soft kiss — it's intense, *furious*, in a way I never knew a kiss could be, his lips hard and unforgiving against mine. It's a *shut-up-I-hate-you* kiss. A *you-drive-me-crazy* kiss. An *if-I-don't-kiss-you-I'll-kill-you* kiss.

It's a battle — our mouths are opposite fronts, fighting for ground, warring for control.

I shove his chest.

He bites my lip.

I nip his tongue.

He tugs my hair.

The kiss goes wild as my other arm winds around him, clutching the back of his shirt, my nails raking against the fabric. His hands release me, but only

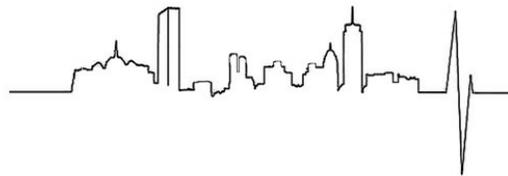
for a second, as they drop and haul me roughly up against him. Two strides and he's got me pinned against the elevator wall.

I don't even think about it — my legs go around him, my dress bunches up around my thighs, and my arms circle his neck. I forget that I'm angry, that I'm pretty sure he's irreparably messed up my life, that five seconds ago, I hated him...

And I kiss him back with everything I have.

CHAPTER 16

TITAN



A VOICE — scratchy with static and filled with concern — bursts from the intercom box on the button panel, startling us apart.

“This is Jim, from Maintenance. Is anyone in there? Everything okay?”

My lips pull away from Chase’s and I stare into his face, my breaths coming too fast and my heart pounding so hard against my ribs, I’m worried the bones might break under the pressure. He’s looking back at me, his face a study in halves — a lazy half-smile tugging at his lips; half-lidded eyes, filled with desire.

“Is anyone in there?” Jim from Maintenance asks again, his voice tinny and distant. “Folks, if you can hear me, use the intercom button.”

“Fuck,” Chase curses quietly, his amused smile widening. “I haven’t been caught making out since I was sixteen.”

“Um,” I breathe, blinking rapidly, not knowing how to respond to that. “Can you put me down, now?”

He doesn’t.

In fact, at my words, he just chuckles and leans closer, so I’m pressed even more firmly against the elevator wall.

“Tell me again how there’s nothing between us,” he whispers, his mouth dropping to my neck, his lips pressing a soft kiss against the sensitive skin there.

“Chase,” I say, my voice weakly protesting even as my body betrays me, arching to get closer to him.

He ignores me, as usual.

“Seriously.” I try to pull back, but there’s nowhere to go. “I have to get back to work and then go home, take a shower, and forget this ever happened.”

At *that*, he stiffens and his head lifts slowly from my neck until his narrowed eyes trap mine. He leans even closer — which I didn’t think was possible, but somehow he manages — and I watch as the smile falls right off his face, his features contorting into a scowl in mere seconds.

An angry sound rattles at the back of his throat.

I swallow hard, suddenly regretting my thoughtless words. Sure, I meant them — but I didn’t have to *say* them and get myself in trouble. Again.

He leans in, his voice low. “Sorry, for a second there, it sounded like you said you were gonna go home and forget this ever happened,” he grumbles, his eyes flashing.

I jerk my chin higher. “Your hearing is just fine. It’s your *listening* that seems to be the problem.”

Shit.

I did it again. Apparently, I missed the lesson on thinking-before-speaking in kindergarten.

“Gemma,” he says menacingly.

“*Chase*,” I mock. “Put me down.”

“Not until you admit there’s something here.”

“Why would I admit to something that isn’t true?”

His throat does the angry rattle thing again.

Yikes.

“Gemma, I’m not playing this game with you.”

“You’re the one playing games!” I say, my voice incredulous. “You and your gonzo cousin up there.”

“We’ve been through this.” His jaw clenches tighter. “He’s dangerous. It isn’t a game.”

I snort. “Maybe you’re overreacting.”

Before Chase can respond, Jim from Maintenance interrupts.

“I’m going to try to do a remote factory reset to get the elevator jumpstarted. Should take five to ten minutes, at the most. If that doesn’t work, I’ll have to call the firefighters. Just hang tight, in there, okay? We’ll get you sorted out in no time.”

Firefighters? Shit!

Chase doesn't move or acknowledge Jim's interruption.

"Chase!" I smack my palms against his shoulders. "Did you not hear Jim? Put me down! We have to get out of here."

He's silent and the muscle is jumping in his cheek again. Instead of addressing the fact that we need to leave, like, *pronto*, he mutters, "I'm not overreacting."

"Jesus," I groan. Apparently, we aren't leaving until this conversation is finished. "Really, *this* again?"

He stares at me with a stony expression.

"Fine, have it your way. But *you* can talk to the firefighters, when they get here." I try to shrug but I'm pressed too tight against the wall to move. "All I know is, Brett seemed perfectly nice to me. Sure, maybe he's a little intense, but isn't it possible you're projecting your own anger and hatred onto him?" I ask. "I mean, yeah, he probably brought me up there just to mess with you, but maybe that's where it ends. I don't think he's actually going to *do* anything to me."

"You don't know anything about it," Chase snaps, fury like I've never heard before lacing his tone.

"I know that before *you* got there, we were having a totally normal conversation about art. Yeah, your cousin needs to cool it with the lingering stares — I don't care how much money you have, that's just not polite — and yes, there was a weird, brief tangent about thoroughbreds, but otherwise it was a totally normal business meeting."

I'm so busy talking, I don't notice he's gone completely still at my words, every muscle in his body locking into place with tension.

"Really, Chase, you're overreacting to all of this."

I trail off into silence. After a moment, he breaks it and his voice is so intense, so guttural, I barely recognize it.

"*What did you say?*"

On a scale of 1 to *angry*, he's shot straight past *seeing red* and landed on *blood boiling*.

"Um." Damn, I'm squeaking again. "That maybe you're overreacting?"

His eyes, unblinking, cut to mine in an unrelenting stare that sends shivers down my spine.

"Thoroughbreds," he says, and I can tell by the pure fury in his voice, he's still a tad bit vexed.

"Um.."

“Gemma.” I worry steam is going to start leaking from his ears. “I’m not going to ask again.”

Okay, maybe he’s more than *a tad bit* vexed.

I gulp again. “I don’t know! He just starting talking about how he knows you better than anyone, and how he can *read* you, and then he was telling me about your grandfather’s horses.” I’m breathing hard, trying to hold his stare but, frankly, it’s scaring the shit out of me.

“And?” he prompts, shaking me lightly. “What else did he say?”

“Chase, you’re scaring me.”

“Good,” he says unapologetically. “*What else did he say?* ”

My brow creases as I shuffle through memories of my conversation with Brett, which somehow seems like a lifetime ago after everything that’s happened in this damn elevator. “Um, he said you had a favorite horse. A stallion. Except you didn’t want him to know it was your favorite, so you only rode it when he was out of the house.” I take a deep breath.

“Anything else?”

“Just that you aren’t good at sharing.” I wince as I recall his exact words. “And that you’re always worried he’s going to *steal your favorite toys* .”

Chase is totally silent, his eyes working with thoughts I can’t begin to decipher, his jaw locked down so tight, he’s probably going to crack his teeth. Not that he’d notice — he’s trapped so deep inside his head, the elevator could probably come loose from its cables and plummet back to earth without him realizing.

I give him a full minute before I speak again and when I do, my voice is soft.

“Chase.”

He looks at me with haunted eyes.

“What is it?” I whisper, my words barely audible.

He hesitates a beat, then unclenches his jaw with visible effort. “You think this is a game. You think I’m overreacting.” He pulls a deep breath in through his nose, his eyes never wavering from mine. “I thought those same things, once. When I was sixteen, I didn’t want to see what was right in front of me, didn’t want to see him for what he was. For what he *is* .”

I wait, knowing he’s not finished.

“My horse, Titan — he was a thoroughbred stallion. Dark black, solid muscle, more than sixteen hands. A gift from my grandfather, on my seventeenth birthday. He said I’d become a man, and a man needed his own

horse, so long as I agreed to care for it myself, to do all the feeding, brushing, exercising. I didn't mind. Titan was first thing that was ever just *mine* — solely my responsibility." Chase's eyes are distant, clouded with memories. "Brett's younger than me by about eight months. He would've gotten his horse, if he'd waited. Grandfather was always fair, never favored one of us over the other. But Brett didn't want to wait. He was jealous — so jealous, it consumed him. I could see it in the way he watched me brushing Titan out after our rides, in the way he lurked in the shadows of the stable, waiting for an opportunity."

Chase lifts his gaze to meet mine, and I see stark anger there, in the depths of his irises, along with hurt — a deep-rooted, long-aching pain that still plagues him, even after all these years. I barely know this man, I'm not even sure I *like* this man, but I can't help feeling compassion for him. Heart turning in my chest, my fingers involuntarily begin to stroke the bare skin at the back of his neck, just above his shirt collar.

"One day, I had to go away, I don't even remember why. I asked one of the stable hands to keep an eye on Titan. But when I came home and went out to the stables, planning to take him for a ride, he wasn't in his stall. No one had seen him. The stable hand didn't know where he'd gone." His nostrils flare on a sharp inhale. "But *I* knew. Even before Brett ran into the stable without my horse, his face a mask of fake shock and horror, I *knew*."

The breath catches in my throat.

"He said it was an accident. That he'd taken Titan for a short ride, to give him some exercise because he knew I was busy that day. He said Titan's hoof caught on a rock, that he stumbled, fell, landed wrong. It was a terrible *accident*, a tragedy — my thoroughbred with a broken leg."

The very air around us has stilled, as though the world itself has stopped spinning, and I don't dare breathe, unwilling to shatter the moment until he's purged this long-unspoken memory from his system.

"He was in pain. There was nothing to be done." Chase's voice is eerily empty, detached of all emotion. "Grandfather got out his pistol and we walked to the field, where Brett left him, writhing in agony, foaming at the mouth. I'd never seen an animal suffer like that. And I'd never held a gun until that day, when Grandfather pressed its cool butt into my hand and told me being a man wasn't always pretty. Titan was my horse — it was my responsibility to take care of it."

My fingers stop moving and instead simply press into the skin of his

neck, a wordless offer of comfort.

“I stroked his mane, one last time. Told him I was sorry. And then I shot him in the head.”

His voice doesn't break, when he says it, but my heart does — I feel it fissure inside my chest, picturing the young boy and the horse he loved, lying dead in a field.

“Chase,” I whisper, grief sluicing through me.

“Brett did that,” Chase says flatly. “He broke him. Killed him. The first of many things of mine he's broken.”

I'm wordless, stunned, as I stare at him, searching for the right words. But there *are* no right words, not for this. Nothing I say can fix this.

Chase's eyes return to mine. “I'm not overreacting. I'm not projecting my anger onto him,” he says resolutely. “He's charming. He always was. And he's smart enough to cover his tracks. Maybe he seems harmless to you, maybe you still think none of this shit applies to you, but I need you to believe me when I say that you're *wrong*, Gemma.”

I somehow manage to nod as horror washes over me for an entirely different reason.

I was so lost in his story, I forgot, for a moment, that the same, fledgling monster who killed a horse at sixteen years old is now fully grown and, apparently, has set his eyes on me.

Holy shit .

My breaths start coming faster as my panicked eyes shoot up to the ceiling, as though Brett can somehow see through the many floors of plaster and steel currently separating us. I feel exposed, utterly alone, as naked terror pumps through my system.

“Gemma,” Chase says, shaking me lightly.

My eyes fly back to his — I know they're wide and full of fear.

“You'll be fine.” His voice is steady, strong. “I promise I won't let him touch you. I won't even let him get near you.”

“I... But...” I try to speak, but find I can't articulate even one of the many hysterical thoughts clanging inside my head.

Chase opens his mouth to speak again, but it's not his voice I hear.

“Folks, just hang tight. Looks like the factory reset isn't working. I'm going to call the firefighters, now.”

“Fuck,” Chase curses.

He stares into my eyes for a long moment, then finally sets me back on

my feet, turns, and pushes the button to restart the elevator. I can hear him speaking rapidly into the intercom, telling Jim something, but for the life of me I can't make out his words. The steady, static buzz of panic quickly overwhelms all my senses and drags me under.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I'm having a serious case of *déjà vu*.

It's raining, the sky is getting dark, and I'm sitting in the back of a town car as it winds through the streets of Boston, being carted around by Evan, the same salt-and-pepper-haired chauffeur I met the other night. Oh, and there's a gorgeous, totally mysterious man sitting next to me, who I still know almost nothing about.

We don't speak as Brett's neighborhood is left behind.

We're both lost — me in worry, Chase in fury. I can tell he's barely holding on to his control; it's there in the tight clench of his jaw, in the way the tips of his fingers press against his pant legs so tight, the skin around his fingernails goes white with lack of circulation. My mind churns with nerves as I replay my conversation with Brett over and over. In retrospect, everything he said seems like a thinly-veiled threat, a dark innuendo I missed at the time.

You've got spirit... Then again, so did his stallion.

A shiver moves through my body.

"Cold, miss?" Evan asks, his eyes finding mine in the rearview mirror.

I shake my head. "No, I'm okay. Thanks."

Swallowing hard, I turn back to the window and let my gaze go unfocused as the buildings whiz past. Chase doesn't say a word, but after a moment, a big hand lands on my thigh and squeezes lightly, a silent offer of comfort. And right now, that's enough. His warm touch seems to drive away some of the demons running rampant through my mind, and I feel a little of my panic ebb. Leaning back against the soft leather, my eyes slip closed — and stay that way, until I feel the car slow to a stop.

When my lashes flutter open and I catch sight of the building outside my window, my eyes swivel to Chase, wide with confusion.

"This isn't my building."

His lips twitch. "Observant."

"I'll rephrase," I say, my eyes narrowing. "Why aren't we at my building?"

Chase shrugs. “Why would we be?”

“You said you’d take me home!”

“No,” he corrects softly. “I said I’d take you away from Brett. I never said I was taking you home, nor did you insist on going there.”

A squeal of frustration escapes my lips. “It was implied.”

“Implication and instruction are vastly different creatures, sunshine,” he drawls, sounding every inch the successful businessman.

“So help me god, if you start quoting Sun Tzu right now...”

His lips twitch as he reaches out and laces his fingers through mine. “Come on.”

“Where are we?” My eyes swing back to the window, and I see we’re below ground, in a parking garage of some kind, but I don’t recognize it.

“You’ll see.” His hand tightens on mine as he swings open his door and steps out of the car. I follow because, well, I don’t really have any other choice. My feet have barely cleared the car when Chase starts walking, towing me behind him at a quick clip toward a bank of elevators on the far side of the garage.

“I don’t think I like you,” I mutter darkly to his shoulder blades.

He glances back at me, a full-on grin on his face, and as soon as I catch sight of that straight row of pearly whites — so often concealed behind his stony mask of composure — I feel a little of my indignation slide away.

What can I say? He gives good grin, even when he’s dragging me around like a caveman.

We’ve almost reached the elevators when I look back over my shoulder at the town car, my only chance of escape dwindling faster than my will to fight for it. Evan hasn’t moved, leaning against the hood like he’s never been more relaxed in his life. He winks at me and grins reassuringly when he catches my eyes.

I’m glad *one* of us is at ease with all of this, because I’m certainly not.

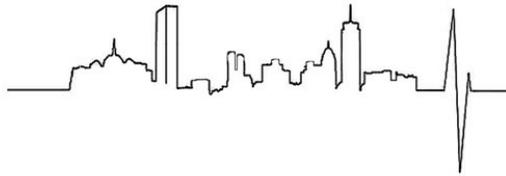
I don’t even have time to smile back, because the elevator’s sliding open with a low chime and suddenly, I’m out of the parking lot and inside yet another floating metal box with a bossy billionaire I’d like to kick swiftly in the shins, at the moment, fed up with his brutish tendencies.

Chase pulls a keychain from his pocket, slides a small access key into the button marked 30 — the penthouse — and up we go, neither of us saying a word as we ascend. We glide to a stop, the doors peel open, and I feel my eyes widen as they sweep the low-lit space.

Chase's apartment.

CHAPTER 17

BUTTERFLIES



IT'S HUGE, probably almost 10,000 square feet, taking up the entire 30th floor of the skyscraper.

Floor length windows cover every out-facing wall of the loft, which stretches from where we're standing more than fifty feet across in every direction. There's more behind us, I'm sure of it, but I can barely process what's in front of me, so I purposefully don't turn around as we step from the elevator.

To my surprise, it has none of the coldness of Brett's whitewashed, modern apartment. Instead, Chase's space is full of color — the shining hardwood floors are deep mahogany, almost auburn in the dim light, offsetting the warm, cream-toned slivers of wall that peek out between the dominating glass window panels. His furniture isn't sharp or angular; it's *sumptuous*. One look at his sofa and I know it'll feel like I'm sitting on a cloud.

The loft is sparsely furnished — unsurprising; you'd need a helluva lot of stuff to make this much room seem cluttered — but that's part of its appeal. I step further inside, my hand dropping away from Chase's, and let my eyes sweep as I pivot in a slow circle on my heels, finally taking in the 360-degree view.

Behind us, in the space beside the elevator, is a wide, open archway leading into what looks like a ginormous bedroom. Even from here, in the semi-dark, I can make out the shadow of a huge headboard, illuminated by

the rainy afternoon light which pours in from Chase's adjacent private rooftop balcony. I want to focus on the ocean views, on the fact that he's got a freaking patio 30 floors above the earth, but my rounded eyes seem to be stuck on the bed, sliding from black sheets to black pillows...

Gemma!

Time to move on.

Fighting a blush, my gaze skitters quickly back to the main room before I can dwell too much on the activities that happen inside Chase's bedroom. On the left, set into the floor, there's a sunken set of couches that could seat a ridiculous number of people, surrounding a stunning, square coffee table that, if I'm not mistaken, actually has a low-burning gas fireplace embedded in the center.

I roll my eyes, and when they return from their trip up inside my sockets, they land on a dark, custom-colored pool table tucked into one corner, then skirt over an imposing oak dining table that makes the one in Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* look like plastic kiddie seating. I totally ignore the sheer number of bookshelves lining the far wall, even though I'm itching to explore them, because, well, as everyone knows, if the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, the way to a girl's is through a good book. Or, in this case, a bazillion good books. And, as much as I'd like to confirm that he really does have that copy of *The Art of War* on his shelves... I'm just not willing to risk it.

A massive kitchen dominates the space to the right. Gleaming copper pots and pans hang from a ceiling rack, an impressive collection of knives are displayed on a metallic wall-strip above the stainless sink, and a giant refrigerator which probably holds more food than one man could ever eat in a lifetime sits unobtrusively in the corner. It's a stunning set-up, as is — but the real shocker, the part that makes me lose my breath, is that it looks like someone actually *cooks* here.

It's not just some model kitchen, used as a prop for those whose dinners consist of Chinese takeout and dry martinis (I'm looking at you, Chrissy). There are dishes in the sink, garlic peels on the counter, a half-eaten baguette still sitting on a thick wooden cutting board.

"You cook?" I ask, without turning around. My words are soft, but he hears me.

"It's a hobby." His voice is low, close, barely two feet away.

"Of course it is," I say snottily, to cover my discomfort at his nearness.

Ugh. He's probably a *great* chef. I'm not sure why I find that so annoying. Probably because he's already pretty perfect in every other regard. There should be some kind of rule that says supremely attractive people aren't allowed to have any other skills. It's not fair to the rest of us.

He chuckles. "You're cute when you're mean, you know."

I pointedly ignore his words, walking away from him until I reach the vast spread of windows. To my surprise, I recognize the view instantly.

"We're at Croft Industries." Surprise colors my tone. "Aren't we?"

"Yes."

"You *live* here? Above the offices?" I turn to face him, startled when I see he's followed me across the apartment, his steps so silent I didn't hear him approach. Our eyes lock and my stomach clenches, its movement unfortunately doing nothing to kill the flurry of butterflies who've apparently taken up residence there.

Chase nods. "Just moved in a few weeks ago, when the renovations finished. In fact, you're one of my first houseguests."

"Oh," I say softly, staring at him. For some reason, I find that infinitely sad — all this space, and no one to share it with. "Does that mean you're officially the new CEO?"

He nods. "There's a black-tie gala on Friday night — Jameson is planning to make the announcement after dinner. Otherwise, I wouldn't be attending."

"Don't want to wear a tux?"

"Don't want to see my family," he corrects. "Usually, I avoid these things at all costs, but it seems I can't get out of this one."

"That's the trouble with being the guest of honor, I suppose."

He nods. "The whole Croft family has to make an appearance, along with a hundred or so business associates and friends of the family. Plenty of press, too."

"You don't sound excited."

"I've got a lot of emotions when it comes to events involving my family members," he says, his gaze steady on mine. "None of them are excitement."

I find it infinitely strange that a man with such clear disdain for his family could simultaneously show such loyalty to them.

"Why come back at all?" I ask softly. "If you were happier during those years away..."

"It's complicated."

I don't doubt that — every bone in Chase's body is complicated, right

down to his littlest finger.

“Chase...”

His eyes go liquid as soon as I say his name.

The butterflies in my gut go crazy.

“What is it, Gemma?” he asks, his voice husky.

It’s there, on the tip of my tongue — the desire to ask him if he’s lonely, if he needs someone to talk to, if he needs a friend... but I worry it’ll be too much, too fast. Crossing lines I’m not even sure I’m allowed to cross.

“I’m sorry about Titan,” I whisper instead, wanting to reach out and grab his hand but resisting the urge. “I didn’t get to say that, before.”

His eyes get warm — warmer than I’ve ever seen them, so warm I worry I’m going to melt into a puddle at his feet if he stares at me like that for much longer.

“Still mad at me?” he asks, his eyes dropping to focus my lips. I know he’s thinking about the elevator — hell, *I’m* thinking about the elevator — and just the memory of that searing kiss, of his hard lips against mine, of my legs wrapped tight around his waist, is enough to set my pulse thundering in my veins.

I almost ask *for what?* — my brain is literally *that* scrambled by his presence — but thankfully, before the words leave my lips, I remember I’m supposed to be pissed about his alpha-male antics.

“Furious,” I say, but there’s no heat to my anger.

A slow, wolfish grin spreads across his face, like he knows I’m full of shit, and it makes my stomach feel all squirmy and warm. The feeling magnifies tenfold when he takes a step closer. Then another. And another, until he’s practically pressed up against me again.

Danger!

I blink hard, trying to refocus, and make my voice casual. “Why did you bring me here, Chase? Why can’t I go home?”

My words are a stark reminder of reality. His eyes shutter almost instantly, and I mourn the loss of the heat in his gaze. When he speaks, his voice is utterly composed.

“We need to talk.”

“About?”

In lieu of an answer, he reaches out, grabs my hand, and drags me over to the couches. This time, I don’t fight him. As soon as I settle in on the cushion beside his, my earlier predictions are confirmed — it’s cloud-soft and mega

comfortable.

“Brett.” Chase says flatly.

“Do we have to talk about him?” I protest, having only just forgotten about his slime-ball of a cousin.

“Yes.”

I huff but don’t object.

Chase leans back, one arm draped casually over the top of the couch. If he reaches out just the tiniest bit, the tips of his fingers will be touching my hair. Which isn’t distracting, or anything. At *all* .

Cue butterfly storm.

“And us,” he adds casually, like those two little words haven’t brought my world to a screeching halt.

“U-us?” I stammer, looking at him with wide eyes. “What do you mean, *us* ?”

He holds my stare in a searching gaze. “Us. This.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You can try to deny it’s there, sunshine, but I’m sorry to break it to you — you’re a terrible liar.” He grins like he’s not even a little bit sorry.

“I am not!”

“You are.”

“And there’s nothing between us!”

His eyebrows lift, calling my bluff.

“Fine,” I mutter. “Maybe there’s a little, tiny spark. But that’s *it* !”

He just looks at me. Looks and *looks* , until my lie disintegrates into thin air and floats away. And then he says, in a simple voice that makes my heart stutter, “It’s more than that and you know it, Gemma.”

More?!

“But... you don’t even like me,” I protest.

“Not true.”

“Well, I don’t even like you.”

“Gemma.” His mouth twitches in amusement. “Remember how I mentioned you’re a terrible liar?”

Shit .

“But...” I’m really grasping at straws, now. “You don’t date,” I remind him, desperate to believe my own words. “You don’t do *more* .”

“That’s true.”

Despite myself, I feel my heart deflate like a week-old balloon.

“Maybe that’s because I wasn’t doing it with you.”

My mouth falls open as equal amounts of hope and fear rush back into my chest, filling that damn balloon until it’s threatening to burst. Pulse pounding in my veins, I meet his eyes as panicked thoughts race through my head — about us, about the press, about his slime-ball cousin...

“But...” I struggle to find the right words. “We can’t...”

“Gemma.” His voice is steady and, when I look up at him, so are his eyes. “Breathe.”

I nod, trying to breathe, but I’m kind of freaking out about the fact that Chase has just said he wants *more* — whatever that means — because it’s probably the worst idea ever, considering neither of us has ever had a functioning relationship, so far as I know.

Chase senses that I need time to process and doesn’t push me. Instead, he smoothly changes the subject, so I can breathe again.

“Time to talk about Brett.”

It’s probably a bad sign that I’d rather discuss a sociopath than our relationship status, right?

Oh well.

Pushing the thoughts of *more* to the back of my mind, I take a deep breath and manage to calm myself down.

“Okay. Lay it on me.”

“I told you about Titan.” His voice is controlled, though I can still sense undercurrents of intense anger. Anger and *pain*, though he’d never admit to feeling any.

Again, I have to fight the urge to reach out to him.

“That was the first time Brett took something from me. Something that mattered, anyway.” The hand by my head flexes with tension. “Before Titan, there was always competition between us, but it was small stuff, mostly, nothing out of the ordinary — going out for my spot on the rowing team, running against me for class president, spreading rumors about me to sabotage my friendships. Nothing extreme, just standard familial rivalry.”

“Uh huh,” I say, thinking *nothing about that sounds standard to me. At all.*

“But after that summer, it was like something had been unleashed inside him — he stopped trying to hide his manipulation, his efforts to hurt me, and became almost... blatant about it.” He sighs. “We both attended the same all-boys boarding school in Rhode Island. I’d snuck a girl into my room, one

night, against the rules. Everyone at the Academy did it — we all looked the other way, had each other's backs when it came to covering with the hall monitors." His voice thrums with anger. "Except Brett. He reported it — along with all my other indiscretions — to the headmaster. And, when that wasn't enough to blacken my academic record, he got inventive. Stirred up cheating claims with my teachers, accused me of stealing his essays, of forcing him to do my homework with threats and coercion. Total bullshit, of course — I made better grades than he ever did, so if I was going to cheat, it wouldn't have been off him — but it sewed the seeds of doubt in the school board's minds enough that they believed him when, one day, he showed up in the medical wing with a black eye and bruised ribs, spouting lies that I'd beaten the shit out of him. I hadn't, no matter how often I'd considered it, but that didn't matter. I was expelled for bullying, halfway through our senior year. Grandfather nearly disowned me." Chase shakes his head. "There's more, but it's not worth getting into — I think you get the idea."

I nod in confirmation and, this time, I can't stop myself — I reach out a hand and lay it against his knee. He tenses at the contact, but, after a few seconds, I feel his muscles relax under my fingers.

He's unused to being comforted, I think to myself. Unused to the idea that someone might reach out to give rather than take, requiring nothing in return.

It's a terribly sad realization.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, my heart a little bit broken for him.

"For what?" Chase asks, his eyes steady on mine. "It's not your fault, Gemma."

"I know, it's just..." My eyes drop to my hand, looking fragile and fine-boned where it lays against his knee. "I know how it feels to be disappointed by family — by the people who are supposed to love you unconditionally. It's a betrayal of everything that makes us human. Frankly... it freaking *sucks* . I'm sorry you had to go through it, that's all."

My eyes find his and I see they're curious, active with thoughts — whether about my past or his own, I don't know. His mouth is set in a stern line and the muscles beneath my fingers are rock hard once more. After a long while, the silence between us lengthens into a heavy thing, and I begin to worry he's angry with me for intruding on his memories. My eyes drop as I wait for him to tell me to butt out, to go home, to get lost.

He never does.

A small eternity later, I feel the stirring of fingers in the hair by my temple. It's not much — just one, simple stroke of the strands — but I know it's his way of saying *thank you* even if he's not ready to say it out loud.

He clears his throat. “Even the expulsion Brett orchestrated wasn't enough to hurt my chances at Harvard — which made him even angrier. He hadn't counted on the cachet of the Croft name. Truth is, I could've been a felon, had a terrible GPA, called my college interviewer a jerkoff — it wouldn't have mattered. My family legacy alone was enough to convince even the toughest admissions officers.”

“Must've been nice,” I murmur thoughtlessly.

His eyes harden, icing over as I watch. “It wasn't.”

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you. It's just...” I trail off, searching for the right words. “I didn't go to college right away. My mom couldn't pay for it, and I wasn't even sure what I wanted to study. So, I moved to the city, worked my ass off at crappy coffee shops that barely paid the rent, and set aside every penny I could scrape together until I had enough for a few semesters of art school.”

“But you had a choice.” His voice has gone surprisingly soft and I see his eyes have thawed a bit. “The only choice for me, for anyone in my family, is an undergraduate career at an Ivy League school, followed by one of three paths — an MBA, a law degree, or a medical degree, also from an Ivy League school. That may sound like a charmed existence but, believe me, when I hit eighteen and realized my whole life had already been scripted, that everything I'd ever wanted to do was out of reach because it didn't fit the mold of what my family felt was *acceptable* ... Well, let's just say, the Croft name stopped being a gift and became a burden.”

“Is that why you left five years ago?” I ask quietly.

His eyes lock on mine and his lips twitch. “Been researching me, huh?”

“No!” I flush. “My friends, Chrissy and Mark... they're kind of...um...” I trail off, trying to think of the best way to describe my wackadoodle friends.

Chase's eyebrows lift with amusement, and his fingers begin absently toying with a strand of my hair, as though it's the most natural thing in the world. The look on his face is one I can't easily describe — his features are torn between surprise and disbelief and maybe even tenderness as he stares at his fingers, siding through the dark silky locks.

Fighting the urge to squirm, I try to pretend he hasn't just forced my heart into overdrive and scrambled my brain to mush as I search for the right

words. Or really *any* words, because if I go much longer without saying anything, he's going to think I'm having a stroke.

I clear my throat a little desperately as he leans closer, closing some of the space between our cushions, his eyes dropping to my mouth.

Danger!

"Um... Chrissy and Mark... They're nosy. And protective. And maybe a little overbearing," I finish, forcing the words out with a wince. "But it's mostly out of love, I swear."

"They care about you," he says simply, but there's an edge of sadness to his words. His eyes flicker to mine, holding intently as he adds, "They love you."

I nod, feeling my heart skip a beat inside my chest. His mouth opens, and I think he's going to say something else about it, but then I see his eyes flash as he changes his mind.

"To answer your question," he says instead. "No – the burden of being a Croft is not why I left."

"Oh." My voice is soft, and I don't push when he doesn't offer more.

"But that is why I came back," he adds lowly.

I open my mouth to ask what he means, but he cuts me off with a personal question that throws me.

"Did you go to art school here in Boston?"

"Mhm," I confirm. "But only for a few semesters."

"Why didn't you finish?"

I shrug, embarrassed by the answer.

I ran out of money.

Instead I say, "Real life happened."

He nods. "Do you ever think about going back?"

"Not really." My eyes find his again. "My mother always taught me, you end up at the destination you fix your eyes on: look to the future and you'll get there, keep looking at the past, and you'll find yourself back where you started."

"A philosophy you live by?" he asks softly.

"I don't know about that. But, in my experience..." I play absently with the sun pendant at my neck, a nervous habit. His eyes watch my fingers move along the gold chain. "The past holds pain; the future holds promise."

Something flashes in his eyes, when I say that, but I can't quite decipher it. Before I can analyze it too deeply, my purse starts beeping, my

embarrassing text-alert tone — the first eight notes of the Harry Potter theme song — ridiculously loud in the silent loft.

Do-dooo-do-do-dooo-do-dooo-dooooo.

Chase's eyebrows lift.

Blushing furiously, I reach into my bag and pull out my phone, its cracked screen flashing Shelby's name.

"It's just Shelby," I say, pressing a button to toggle it into silent-mode. "I'll call her back later."

My eyes lift to Chase and I see he's staring at my phone, his intent eyes examining the cracks in my screen, the sparkly blue case I bought when I was twenty and still use because it's such an old model, they don't even sell replacement cases anymore.

"Anyway..." I say, tucking the phone out of sight.

Chase's eyes return to my face. "Are you happy at the gallery?"

I nod.

"Have you ever thought of putting your own paintings on display somewhere?"

My eyes cut to his. "What is this, an interrogation? Or perhaps a business inquisition, Mr. CEO?"

One side of his mouth pulls up in a grin. "Sorry. Bad habit."

"Shrewd businessman pitted against unwitting artist," I murmur. "The odds are not in my favor."

He laughs, full out. "Fine. How about a fair trade — you answer one, I answer one."

"Okay, but since I've already answered, like, five of yours, I get to ask you four in a row."

"One."

"Three!" I counter.

"One."

"Two and a half!" I haggle, my voice rising.

"What exactly would *half* a question entail?"

I narrow my eyes and drop my voice low. "Two, final offer."

"One." He shakes his head, amused.

"Ugh!" I grunt. "You are so annoying."

He chuckles again, the big jerk.

"Fine," I grumble. "One."

His grin widens.

“But I get to go first!” I demand loudly.

“I was always planning to let you go first, sunshine.”

“I don’t like you,” I inform him, cheerful despite the fact that I’ve just lost miserably at negotiations. You know what they say about bartering with a CEO...

Actually, come to think of it, I *don’t* know.

Is that even a thing people say?

It’s probably not a thing.

Moving on.

I make a big show of lacing my fingers together and stretching them, like I’m preparing to do battle. “Okay, let me think...” I stare at him, trying to keep my expression badass, but he’s grinning at me again and it’s doing a funny thing to my insides. “Oh! I’ve got one! What’s your favorite—”

The sound of a phone ringing cuts me off before I can finish my question.

Chase sighs, pulls his cell from his pocket, and glances at the screen.

“Fuck. It’s my CFO, calling about a new project. I have to take this.” His eyes lift to mine. “Will you wait here?”

I nod.

The phone chimes shrilly again. Standing, he starts to lift it to his ear, but pauses before answering, arm suspended midair. In a flash, his eyes return to mine and in a single, sharp move, he bends at the waist, plants his free hand against the couch next to my face, and, before I can blink, brushes his lips across mine in a soft kiss that leaves me breathless.

“Don’t go anywhere,” he whispers against my mouth, and I see his eyes have gone melty again. “We still have shit to discuss, sunshine.”

I gulp, knowing he means *us* and *more*.

“And, after that, I’d be happy to tell you all about my *favorites* .” His voice drops lower. “Maybe I’ll even show you a few of them, if you’re lucky.”

My heart flips in my chest, thumping wildly at the implication in his words. I just wanted to know his favorite city — the man has been to thirty-seven countries, after all — but I’m pretty sure Chase has something else in mind.

Something that involves me shedding more than just my self-control.

I start to lean forward, not wanting the kiss to end... and freeze when his phone rings again, loud and insistent.

With a final lip brush and a muttered curse, he’s gone, striding toward the

archway across the apartment, rounding a corner, and disappearing from sight without a backward glance. He must have a private office in the space off his bedroom, because a minute later, I hear the sound of a door closing.

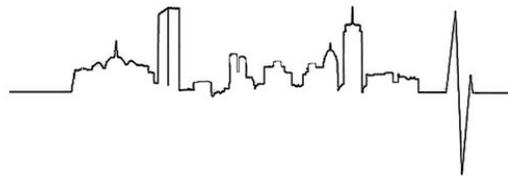
And then, I'm alone in Chase Croft's penthouse — somewhere I never in my wildest dreams imagined I'd wind up — and thoughts, *dangerous* thoughts, about how this bossy, annoying, elusive billionaire might just disprove my theory that all men (Mark excluded, of course) are rat bastards, begin to flutter through my mind.

I press a hand to my stomach in an attempt to steady myself.

Damn . The freaking butterflies have multiplied again.

CHAPTER 18

BABY



HE'S GONE for a long time.

So long, in fact, I forget to be polite, and start to wander.

I play with the fireplace remote, delighted to find you can not only adjust the temperature and size of the flames, but also the speed at which they dance on the grate and even their color. I flip from blue to red to orange to green, feeling like a four year old who's learned to make the automatic car window go up and down.

Cool .

Well, actually it's *hot* , but... you know what I mean.

Leaving behind my merrily-dancing magenta flames, I trace the felt-topped billiard table and lift a few of the heavy, striped pool balls from their pockets, each of which is engraved with the word CROFT in gold filigree letters. A bit excessive, in my opinion, but considering I've never played pool in my life, I'm not one to judge.

I skim my fingertips along the glossy oak table, wondering with vague curiosity if Chase has ever had a dinner party with enough guests to fill all sixteen seats. Probably not a Croft family gathering, that's for damn sure.

Finally, I reach the bookshelves — which, if I'm being honest, were really my destination from the beginning — and start to work my way through his collection. It's vast — everything from classics to modern literature, poetry to nonfiction. Books on business practices sit next to tomes on medieval archery; slim travel guides are shoved in next to glossy-paged

photography books. There's no rhyme or reason to their placement, which sends a happy thrill shooting through me; they look like my own messy, disorganized, well-loved shelves back in my apartment — though I'm nearly positive he paid more than the twenty bucks I spent at a flea market for mine last year.

My fingers move gently, stroking the spines with a reverence I reserve only for the true loves of my life — words and works of art. For a good long while, I'm totally entranced — plucking out volumes, skimming their covers, inhaling their scent. Is there anything on earth that smells as good as the pages of a book — new or old?

I swear, they should bottle this stuff and sell it as perfume.

After a few minutes, I finally find what I'm looking for — a thin, off-white volume with a cracked spine and bright red lettering.

Sun Tzu.

Grinning, I pull it out, flip to the first page, and make my way toward a comfy-looking armchair by the windows. I'm so engrossed I barely register the sound of a phone ringing on the small table to my left. I jump about a foot in the air when the landline answering machine picks up and a sultry, unmistakably feminine — and unmistakably *familiar* — voice starts blaring from the speaker.

“Chase, baby, it's Vanessa.”

I still completely at the sound. That voice — it's the same one I heard just this morning at the gallery, hissing at me from the blonde's perfect mouth. In all the drama with Brett, I'd completely forgotten about her — and what her presence in Chase's life might mean.

A quick glance behind me confirms he's still locked away in his study, in the throes of a business call.

“Why haven't you called me?” the blonde continues, sounding clingier than plastic wrap. “You've been back in the city for weeks. I expected a call *ages ago.*”

Apparently she doesn't reserve that bitchy tone for accosting perfect strangers — she's just as uppity, talking to answering machines.

“You know I don't like waiting.”

I don't know Chase all that well, but it's really hard to imagine he'd date a woman *this* whiney. Plus, she did just say he hasn't called her... so, maybe they're just friends, or he dumped her and she can't let go.

Honestly, it shouldn't matter to me *who* this woman is, because it's not

like Chase and I are together, or anything.

It *shouldn't* matter.

But it does.

Her voice drops lower, getting even more seductive. "I *miss* you, baby."

Okay, maybe she doesn't sound whiney at all.

Maybe she sounds exactly like she looks — tall and thin, with lots of hair and perfect skin.

Damn.

"I shouldn't have to chase you, Chase," she murmurs across the line.

Clever.

"I mean, baby, I'm your *fiancée* ." She huffs. "Don't I deserve better?"

Every muscle in my body goes completely still.

"Think about it, baby," she says, then clicks off with a wet, lip-smacking *muah!* noise.

The book in my hands falls to the floor as I listen to the sound of static over the line, trying not to throw up as all my fears that Chase Croft is just like every, single other rat bastard man in my life come true, hitting me with one swift kick to the gut.

All those stupid, hopeful butterflies swarming in my stomach die on impact.

I DON'T THINK about it.

I just grab my purse from where I left it on the coffee table and *bolt* , choosing not to analyze the feelings of extreme disappointment and regret coursing through my veins. Leaning back against the elevator wall, I keep my eyes closed for the duration of my ride down to the first floor, trying not to remember another elevator ride, just an hour ago, which ended with my legs around Chase's waist and his tongue in my mouth.

He's the worst of them all.

Worse than my dad.

Worse than third-grade spitballers.

Worse than Rat-Bastard-Ralph.

He's the Rat-Bastard-King.

The thought makes me want to cry.

As soon as the penthouse-access elevator doors slide open, I'm running. It doesn't take me long to find my way through the marble-floored labyrinth of

hallways, back to the main lobby. I spot the bank of public elevators I took the last time I was here and know escape is close.

Thirty seconds later, I fly past the front security desk, weave through the crush of commuters exiting the building on their way home for the night, and burst from the revolving glass door onto the sidewalk. I pull a gulp of damp, evening air into my lungs, the first real breath I've taken in minutes, and tell myself everything is going to be okay.

For a tiny sliver of time, I feel nothing but sweet, undisturbed relief. And then the camera flashes start.

“HOW BAD IS IT?”

“It's—”

“Wait!” I interject, hands pressed firmly over my eyes so I can't see Shelby's face. Or her computer screen. “Lie to me.”

“It's not that bad, Gem.”

“Really?” I ask, hope lacing my voice.

“No, not really. You asked me to lie to you, remember? It's *bad*. Like, *really* bad.”

I fall back against Shelby's couch — a musty, springless, uncomfortable piece she swears is an antique — and groan, loudly. Thank god she was home, when I got here. As a freelance graphic designer, she makes her own hours and, more often than not, she spends her days out of the midsize, recently-renovated house Paul purchased for her in the suburbs four years ago, doing Pilates or Cross Fit or hot yoga or god only knows what other kind of torture.

The one time she'd dragged me to the gym with her, I spent forty minutes flirting with a personal trainer named Drake and bouncing on the exercise balls like a five-year-old while she did a zillion crunches with such determination, you'd think a drill sergeant was standing over her. She never even got winded. As for me, I didn't get Drake's number — despite some of my best moves, including (but not limited to) hair-flips and flirty smiles — and I didn't get another shot, since Shelby never invited me to the gym with her again.

Shocking, I know.

“This is a disaster,” I mutter.

“Yep.” She sounds practically giddy. “There are lots of pictures of you —

thank god you were having a good hair day — and they’ve all got delicious headlines like *AFTERNOON DELIGHT — GEMMA SUMMERS SPOTTED LEAVING CROFT INDUSTRIES* . It’s awesome.”

“Shelby!”

“What?”

“Nothing about this is *awesome* . I almost went blind from the camera flashes outside Croft Tower, I stubbed my toe on a fire hydrant while I was running away from the swarm of reporters, and the taxi driver I finally managed to hail charged me double because I made him take the long way here, so I wouldn’t be followed.” I sigh. “The story had finally died down, the paparazzi were *just* starting to leave me alone. And now...”

“Now, they totally know about your tawdry affair with the billionaire!”

My eyes crack open to glare at her. “It’s *not* an affair. We barely know one another.”

“You’ve kissed,” Shelby points out. “Twice.”

I blush. “Actually...”

“Ohmigod! *Not* twice?” she squeaks. “As in, *more than twice* ?”

I groan again and throw my arm back over my eyes.

“You’ve been holding out on me, bitch!” Shelby latches onto my arm and pulls it away from my face. “Spill it like a glass of milk.”

I glance at her. “That’s not a thing people say.”

“I say it.”

“Well, it’s not an expression.”

“Ask me how much I care,” she demands. “No? Then *spill!* ”

With a sigh, I tell her about the trip to Brett’s office, Chase dragging me out, and the elevator ride, without going into any details about the fact that, apparently, Brett is a certifiable lunatic. When I describe the elevator kiss, she sighs dreamily and starts to melt. By the time I get to the part about the gentle lip brush in Chase’s apartment, she’s practically dissolved into a puddle of estrogen on the couch beside me.

“Ohmigod,” she breathes, her eyes locked on mine. “YOU ARE TOTALLY HAVING A TAWDRY AFFAIR WITH A BILLIONAIRE!”

“Shelbs! Stop it.”

“What?” she asks. “How is any of this bad? A mega-hot, filthy rich, possessive-in-all-the-right-ways man is interested in you! Not a *boy* , like the string of losers you’ve hooked up with in the past...a *man* .”

“Thanks,” I mutter sarcastically. “You’re making me feel *much* better

after my crap day.”

Shelby makes an impatient *tsk* noise. “I have absolutely no idea why you aren’t currently ripping off every article of his clothing. With your *teeth* . Hell, if I weren’t married... *Whew!* The things I would do to that man.”

“You have a husband.”

“I also have an imagination. An *active* one.” Her eyes gleam.

“Gross,” I mutter. “And for your information, I have plenty of good reasons for staying away from Chase Croft — starting with the fact that all men are rat bastards and ending with the fact that a woman stopped by the gallery this morning and *threatened me* to stay away from him.”

“Bitches be crazy.” Shelby shrugs. “He’s been at the top of *People* magazine’s ‘Richest 50 Under 50’ list for the past few years — it doesn’t surprise me that women are trying to stake a claim, even if it’s not theirs to stake.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought, too... until she called his answering machine while I was in his apartment. He was in the other room, but I heard the voicemail pick up.”

Her eyebrows lift.

“She called him *baby* .”

Her eyebrows go even higher.

“And she called *herself* his fiancée.”

“What!?” Shelby explodes.

“See! He’s a rat bastard.”

“More like High Chancellor of the Rat Bastards.”

“Exactly,” I mutter, glad she’s finally on the same page.

She’s totally silent for a minute — uncharacteristically so — until she murmurs, in a soft voice totally unlike her usual deafening tones, “Sorry, Gem.”

“For what?”

“I could tell how much you liked him.”

I sigh, but don’t deny it.

I can’t.

Because she’s right.

MY DAY quickly goes from bad to worse.

Around six, I grab the Red Line from Shelby’s place in Somerville back

to my apartment, only to find approximately ten million reporters (okay, maybe I'm exaggerating a little) in front of my building.

I detour three blocks out of my way, circle around to the back, and begin to pick a path through the trash-littered alley toward the rear entrance... only to find another five million (possibly exaggerating again) reporters have finally caught on to my sneaky ways and are there, cameras at the ready, waiting for me.

A cry goes up when they spot me, photo flashes snapping so bright, my corneas will never be the same. The mob rushes forward, all screaming at the same time, their voices blending together into a cacophony that hits me in a solid wave of sound. Washing over me. Dragging me under. Drowning me.

And it's annoying. *Really* annoying.

Because, the thing is, I'm an adult.

I do my own (headache-inducing) taxes, I pay (most of) my bills on time, I can tell the difference between Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon (a skill that eluded early-20s Gemma, who only ever drank wine if it came in a box) and I even watched Bigelow, Mrs. Hendrickson's cat, for a week when she went to visit her grandchildren in Phoenix (and he didn't die).

Point is, I'm an *adult* .

I'm equipped to handle a lot.

But I can't handle *this* .

The battery of questions. The onslaught of camera flashes, *click click click* , immortalizing every one of my panicked expressions on a digital memory chip for the rest of eternity.

Gemma!

Look over here!

Gemma!

Give us a smile, love!

"I have no comment!" I say, over and over, in the vain hopes that they'll believe me.

Gemma!

Is Chase your boyfriend?

Are you sleeping together?

"Leave me alone! I have nothing to say to you!" I scream, my voice breaking, my hands tearing and clawing like a wild thing as I try to push forward, try to reach my door. If I can just get *inside* , just get *away* ...

A camera is shoved into my face, its shutter snapping down in a burst of

clicks before I can throw my arms up to cover my face.

“Please.” My voice is scratchy with panic. With desperation. “I just want to go home.”

I try to push through again, but it’s no use.

The swarm is too dense. There are so many of them, crowding in from every direction, I can’t move, can’t breathe, can’t do anything but cradle my arms over my head and close my eyes, as though that might make them disappear.

It doesn’t.

Gemma! Over here! Gemma!

Tell us about Chase!

Do you have a comment about the kiss?

Are you dating?

Look over here, Gemma!

Gemma! Gemma! Gemma!

GemmaGemmaGemmaGemmaGemma.

Their voices go static between my ears, suddenly distant, as if I actually *have* been dragged underwater. There’s a buffer between us — one made of fear and defeat — and I feel the breaths getting ragged in my throat as I struggle for air. I’m choking on my own desperation to escape, on my inability to get away, and everything fades out of focus as I slowly crumple into a protective crouch against the dirty pavement.

Gemma Summers, brought to her knees by the bloodsuckers.

Defeated.

How pathetic is that?

Suddenly, I register a break in the crushing wall of noise — a new voice, strong and steady, breaking through the din of questions.

I don’t look up, even when a hand clamps onto my bicep in a warm, reassuring grip. Only when I hear the familiar voice at my ear, do my eyes blink open and focus on the man staring down at me.

Steady brown gaze. Salt-and-pepper hair.

Evan.

“It’s okay, Miss Summers. I’ve got you,” he says, and there’s so much conviction in his voice, I believe him.

Without protest, I allow him to pull me to my feet.

“Stick close behind me.”

I don’t question him — I just tuck my forehead between his shoulder

blades and follow as he cuts through the crowd. As we start to move, another man closes in behind me, dressed in solid black from his leather jacket to his badass motorcycle boots, and I somehow instinctually know he's here, like Evan, to protect me.

The reporters fall back as we push forward and in less than a minute, I've been ushered up the three stone steps and am standing outside the doors, still flanked on either side by the towering men.

"The passcode, miss," Evan prompts, his voice kind.

With a trembling hand, I reach forward and punch in the building code. There's a short, mechanical buzz — the best sound I've ever heard in my life — and then the entry swings wide and I'm inside, the screams of the reporters cut off as soon as the metal door rejoins its frame.

The breath I've been holding for far too long escapes my lungs in a single, relieved *whoosh* as I turn and lean back against the wall, my eyes closed, just enjoying the silence for a long moment as the panic in my system slowly subsides.

"Are you okay, Miss Summers?"

My eyes open slowly, bringing the two men who've just saved me into focus.

"It's just Gemma," I say, my voice still shaken up. "And yes, I'm fine. Thanks to you."

The two men nod in unison, but it's Evan who speaks.

"Chase had us on standby here, in case you had trouble getting back into your building."

Even his men call him Chase, rather than Mr. Croft.

I tuck that nugget of information away, ignoring the pang shooting through my chest as I process Evan's words. I find myself torn between happiness and outrage at the fact that Chase had his men tail me.

See, he cares about us! the naive, optimistic half of my brain says.

...Just apparently not enough to tell us he's engaged, the snarky, bitter half adds.

I ignore them both, focusing on the man in front of me.

"I don't know how to thank you."

He smiles, his eyes flickering with warmth. "No need, Miss Summers."

"Just Gemma, please," I say, smiling back at him. My eyes slide to the other man who, now that I'm not in the throes of a panic attack, I see is younger, maybe early thirties, with a severe buzz-cut and eyes so dark, they

remind me of staring down a well — eyes that, if you looked too long, you might just fall into, lost forever in their depths. “And you are?”

He stares at me, his face expressionless, those dark eyes measuring, and clears his throat. “Knox.”

“Is that a first name or a last name?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer.

O-kay . Moving on.

“Well, thanks for getting me inside.” I swallow. “I really appreciate it.”

Evan and Knox nod in unison again, which is kind of creepy, but considering they’ve just saved me and everything, I’m not about to call them out on it.

“Do you want us to walk you up to your door?” Evan asks.

“Oh, no, that’s not necessary.”

He nods in acceptance and reaches into his pocket, pulling out a slim, brand-new cellphone. It’s the latest-generation iPhone, the one I’ve been salivating over for months but unable to afford. Holding it out for me to take, he says, “This is yours.”

My eyes fly to his. “Excuse me?”

“Chase wanted you to have it. His numbers are already programmed in, so you can reach him anytime.”

I stare at the phone like it’s a poisonous snake, about to leap from Evan’s hand and bite me. “I don’t want it.”

“Miss Summers, we have orders—” Evan begins.

“I don’t care,” I say flatly, my eyes returning to his face. “I don’t want it. You can tell your boss to stick it where the sun don’t shine, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Miss—” Evan tries again.

“*Take the phone.*”

The voice — a low, rumbling growl — is so cold, I instantly break out in goose flesh. It takes me a minute to realize it’s Knox, who’s spoken, and when my gaze travels to his face, I see there’s something hard in his eyes. Something that doesn’t take *no* for an answer.

Ever.

“But—”

I barely get the word out before he’s stepping forward, snatching the phone from Evan’s grip, and pressing it into my hand. He’s so tall, my neck snaps back to keep his face in sight, and it’s all I can do not to cower at his

nearness. Everything about him is lethal, dangerous, but it's those eyes — bottomless, black, and far older than his thirty years — that really shake me, down to my very core.

“Take. The. Phone.”

“Okay,” I breathe, my fingers closing around the cool metal in my hand, not wanting to be the subject of that gaze for another stinking second.

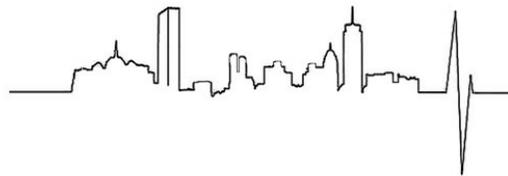
He nods, turns for the door, and disappears outside without another word.

“Don't mind him,” Evan says, the easy smile still on his lips. “His bark is worse than his bite. Most of the time, anyway.”

With that, he winks, turns, and follows Knox out the door, leaving me alone with a new phone and a thousand questions I know I'll probably never get the answers to.

CHAPTER 19

VENOM



I’VE BARELY MADE it through my front door when my cellphone — my old one, not the new, shiny one I have no intention of ever using — starts ringing. Closing the door behind me with a sigh, I reach into my bag, fully expecting to see Chrissy’s name on my screen. No doubt she’s just gotten pinged with a considerable number of Google Alerts.

But, to my horror, it’s not Chrissy.

It’s *Estelle* .

Damn it all to hell, I’m probably going to be fired for cutting out of work early, two days in a row. Which is *perfect* considering everything else in my life is falling apart — why not my career, as well?

“Estelle, I’m so sorry,” I say, as soon as the call connects. “I swear, I had a good reason for not coming back to work after the VIP meeting. It won’t ever happen again. Please, just don’t fire me.”

“Fire you?” she asks, sounding genuinely surprised. “Why on earth would I fire you?”

“Um...”

Is my brain short-circuiting?

“Ma chérie, I’m calling to *congratulate* you.”

Wait... *what?*

“I don’t know how you did it, but the VIP from yesterday called an hour ago and purchased an entire spread of abstracts!” Estelle laughs delightedly. “He says they’re redoing the entire executive suite at Croft Industries, and

he'd love nothing more than to adorn the walls with our artists' work."

My stomach sinks as I realize Chase's angry words in the elevator had been no idle threat.

I'll buy however many goddamn paintings you want! I'll buy the whole fucking collection! But Brett is not your client, anymore. Do you understand me?

"There's been a misunderstanding, Estelle—"

"And then, almost as soon as I hung up the phone, a very large man with a very interesting scar came to the gallery with a huge bouquet of flowers for you! Red roses — just *lovely*, the whole gallery smells divine. Apparently Brett Croft, the VIP from this afternoon, was so pleased, he thought you needed an extra thank-you for your services!"

I'll bet he did.

"I don't know what you said, but you certainly must've made an impression."

"Estelle—"

"And you didn't even tell me about the three abstracts you sold *him*!"

"Well, Estelle, like I was trying to explain—"

"Excellent work! Truly," she interrupts me. "Gemma, *ma chouchoute*, I'm so pleased, I'm giving you a few days of paid time-away. You've been working hard, and it's clearly paying off."

"But, Estelle if you'd just let me—"

"No objections!" Her tone is final. "You've been begging me for some personal days for ages. What is the expression you Americans use? Don't look at a horse's teeth?"

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," I correct, my voice resigned. "But, Estelle, we really should talk about the reason Croft Industries—"

"Au revoir, Gemma! See you on Monday."

The line goes dead in my ear and I slowly pull the phone away, staring at it like it might provide some answers. And then it hits me.

It's only Wednesday night.

Which means I have a four, full days off — something that hasn't happened in all the years I've been working for Estelle. And *that* is cause for some serious celebration.

So, despite the fact that my life has (for the most part) gone to shit, seeing as there are dozens of reporters camped outside my apartment and the guy I'm falling for is engaged to another woman, I flip on some music, grinning

as I recognize the familiar strains of Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers' *American Girl*, and start to spin around the apartment in crazy, happy circles, until the world turns to blurry smears of color around me.

BAG SLUNG OVER ONE SHOULDER, I back out of my apartment and shut the door behind me, wiggling the knob once to ensure it's locked. The duffel is heavy enough to test my balance as I walk down the five flights of stairs — I've packed only enough clothes for a few days away, but the two large bottles of wine I stashed inside are weighing things down a bit.

When I hit ground level, I pause in the hallway for a moment and pull my hair around the sides of my face so it cascades down in a dark curtain, covering everything except my eyes. Reaching into the duffel, I grab the ratty Red Sox cap one of my ex-boyfriends (a term I use loosely) left at my apartment after a drunken overnighter a few years back, tug its brim low over my forehead, and slip a pair of mirrored aviator sunglasses over my eyes.

Totally incognito.

Okay, so I know it's not exactly a perfect disguise, but it's the best I could come up with on such short notice. And, anyway, now that it's dark out, most of the reporters have gone home for the night, so I should be able to make the dash to my car without any problems.

I haul a deep breath into my lungs, telling myself there's no reason to freak out. I'll just throw open the door and make a run for it, before the few remaining hold-outs have a chance to stop me or get any good pictures.

Easy as pie.

Actually, come to think of it, not easy as *pie*.

Easy as something else. Like ramen noodles. Or microwave popcorn.

Because, what exactly about *pie* is easy?

The one and only time I tried to bake one, it bubbled over and I ended up with a sticky, noxious layer of blueberry goop charred onto the bottom of my oven that no amount of scraping will ever remove, and set off every smoke detector in the building. The fire department actually came and evacuated everyone, it was so bad.

But I digress.

I'm nearly to the back hallway when a voice echoes through the empty passage, stopping me in my tracks.

"Going to stay at your new boyfriend's place?"

I freeze as the sheer venom in those words hits my back and washes over me.

Ralph .

Damn.

I knew it was inevitable that we'd bump into one another — we're neighbors, after all — but somehow, I've managed to avoid seeing him since the moment I ran out of the stadium the other night. I should've known my good luck couldn't hold forever. Though I can't help but think, if given the choice, I'd pick a stampede of relentless reporters over a conversation with Ralph any day of the week.

“Or did he dump you already?” he spits, his voice coming closer.

I tense, every muscle in my body poised for action as I turn to look at him. The scowl on his face intensifies as soon as our eyes catch, and I see anger flash like lightning across his features when I don't give him the satisfaction of a response.

“What, too good to talk to me now, Gemma?” He laughs bitterly. “Think you're better than me, because you're letting Croft bone you?”

My hands curl into fists around the straps of my duffle. Through clenched teeth, I bite out a few angry words. “Let's be honest, Ralph. I was always better than you. Who I'm *boning* has very little to do with it.”

“Bitch,” he snarls, stepping closer. “You'll pay for what you did to me.”

An incredulous laugh pops from my mouth. “For what *I* did to *you* ? Are you delusional? You're the one who cheated on me, ignored me, pushed me around, and subjected me to quite possibly the most *boring* sex in the history of sex.” My voice gets louder as my words run away with me. “Quick tip for whatever girl you decide to subject to your considerable lack of charms next: there *are* positions other than missionary, Ralph! *Many of them* . And here's another pointer, free of charge: treating sex like it's a race to see who can orgasm fastest isn't fun for *anyone but you!* ”

His scowl darkens to a look of pure hatred and I take a step back, belatedly realizing that maybe it's not the best idea to pick a fight with a man in a deserted hallway at nearly 10 p.m. when most of my elderly neighbors are long asleep, even if it *is* only Ralph — pudgy, short, lazy Ralph. I've never seen him as remotely threatening before, but as he advances on me now, his face contorted with so much rage he's nearly unrecognizable, I think maybe that was a mistake.

A big one.

“You’ve got a big mouth, Gemma. Never liked that about you, except under very *specific* circumstances.” His eyes glint vindictively as his thinly veiled sexual innuendo hits me like a slap in the face.

Never one for subtlety, Ralph.

He takes another step forward as I retreat from him, the amount of space between us dwindling almost as rapidly as the distance between my back and the shadowy corner of the hallway — somewhere I don’t ever want to be with Ralph, but especially not now, when he looks like his hands are itching to wrap around my windpipe and squeeze until there’s no breath left in my lungs.

“That fucking video is everywhere,” he sneers. “Everyone’s seen it. My friends. The guys at work. My fucking *mother* .”

I fight the urge to snap *so what?* at him, figuring now isn’t the best time for another taunt.

“You humiliated me on national television, Gemma. The YouTube video has millions of hits. I’m a laughing stock. They’re calling me *Cellphone Guy* on the radio, on TV. The internet shit is even worse. I’m a fucking *meme* . And it’ll never end. It’s out there forever.” His breaths are ragged and there’s a look in his eyes I don’t like — an off-the-rails, out-of-control, downright *scary* look. “You’re gonna fucking pay, Gemma. *You have to fucking pay* .”

He’s threatening me — I register that plain as day. But there’s a small part of my brain still insisting that Ralph wouldn’t actually *hurt* me. Not with anything more than words, that is.

The other, more rational portion of my mind thinks otherwise, and my hand starts slowly unzipping my duffel as I pray my cellphone is somewhere near the top.

“Get away from me, Ralph, right now. Otherwise I’ll—”

“You’ll *what?* Call the police?” He laughs, stepping closer. “It’ll take them a while to get here, Gemma. Too long.”

My heartbeat picks up speed as I backpedal further away from him, my hand now hurriedly rooting around my bag for the phone. “You so much as touch me, I’ll press charges. You’ll go to prison, Ralph. Your life will be over, I’ll make sure of it.”

“You already did that, Gemma, when you kissed Croft and made me a fucking fool.”

My back hits the wall and I see victory flash in his eyes, now that he’s got me cornered. Ralph’s body blocks the path in front of me, there’s a wall to

my back, a closed apartment door on my right, and the exit is twenty feet down the passage to my left. I could make a run for it, but I don't much like the idea of putting my back to him, not when he's looking at me like that. Plus, with the duffle weighing me down, he's probably faster than me.

The small part of my brain that insists Ralph isn't a threat has fallen noticeably silent — especially when he takes another step forward, revenge in his eyes and dark promise in his reaching hands.

I open my mouth to scream even as my feet prepare to move, but it's not my own voice I hear ringing out in the silent hallway.

"Gemma, dear, is that you?"

The voice, surprisingly strong despite the frailness of its owner, is accompanied by the welcome sound of the door on my right swinging wide open. Ralph freezes, his hands suspended limply in the air between us, and my eyes leap to Mrs. Hendrickson, who's just appeared in the doorway. Her feet are stuffed into bedroom slippers, her gray hair is in pink rollers, and every inch of her skin covered with a paisley-patterned nightgown that drapes her from her neck to her toes. There's a large, orange tabby cat cradled in her arms, purring so loudly I can hear him from five feet away.

I've never been so happy to see anyone in my life.

"Mrs. Hendrickson," I breathe, my voice audibly relieved as my eyes move back to Ralph. He's still glaring at me, but he's taken a few steps back, widening the space between us. I don't look away from him as I speak to the old woman. "I'm so sorry, did we wake you?"

In truth, I'm not even a little bit sorry.

"Oh, no, me and Bigelow were just sitting at the window, doing a little peeping," she informs me shamelessly, clearly not registering the tense atmosphere in the hallway. "Did you know, the man and his wife in the building next door are thinking about getting a cat? Bigelow would like that. He likes to sit at the window when the sun's out, it would give him something to look at during the day."

I nod, my eyes still locked on Ralph's. "That would be very nice, Mrs. Hendrickson." I swallow. "I have to be going, now, but will you do me a favor?"

"Of course, Gemma dear. What is it?"

"This hallway is a bit spooky at night. Would you mind watching to make sure I get to the door all right?"

The old woman is silent for a long moment, and when I glance back in

her direction, I see she's finally registered the friction humming in the air. Her gaze moves from me to Ralph in a measuring study and, after a few seconds, awareness seeps into her soft blue eyes. They narrow on Ralph in a menacing stare that's pretty impressive, for an octogenarian. For anyone, really.

He takes another step back.

"Do you want to come in for a cup of tea, dear?" she asks me, her eyes locked on Ralph. "We'd be happy for the company, wouldn't we, Bigelow?" Her hand strokes the cat's fur, and he emits a purr so loud, I think the air around his body actually vibrates.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Hendrickson, I can't tonight." I make sure to look at Ralph when I say the next part. "I have people expecting me. They'll worry if I don't show up."

Sure, it's a lie, but he doesn't know that.

"Okay, but you'll come see me soon, right, Gemma dear?" Mrs. Hendrickson smiles at me. "If you don't, well, I'll just have to track you down myself. Have you ever met my grandson, Bobby?"

I shake my head at her seemingly random question.

"He's a fine young man. A police officer." Her smile widens, and her tone is lighter than air as she looks back at Ralph. "Isn't that great? I'm sure he could track you down if I can't, Gemma dear. In fact, I'm sure he can track down just about *anyone*."

For the first time, I smile. The old lady has bigger *cojones* than Ralph, and better threats.

"He sounds great, Mrs. Hendrickson," I say, reaching out to scratch Bigelow behind the ear. "Thanks."

"Don't forget to visit," she reminds me, as I start to back down the hallway, toward the exit.

"I won't."

I glance back at Ralph and see the scowl hasn't shifted off his face but his eyes are now resigned, rather than furious, and I know he's given up. For now, at least.

I keep my eyes on him as I move away, forcing my face into a composed mask. I don't let it slip, even when I reach the door and Ralph mouths something at me that makes every fine hair on my body stand on end.

This isn't over .

With a final glare, he rounds the corner and disappears.

My eyes move to Mrs. Hendrickson, still standing guard in her doorway. She winks at me and, ignoring the shivers Ralph's threat prompted, I manage a smile before pushing through the exit, my feet poised to run for the car.

Out of the frying pan, into the freaking fire.

"WHAT DO you mean you're not in the city?" Chrissy screeches into the phone. "Where the hell are you?"

I wince, leaning forward to adjust the speakerphone volume without taking my eyes off the road. "I'm heading up to Rocky Neck, to visit my mom for a few days."

"Why on god's green earth would you do that?"

"I just... have to get away for a while. Get a fresh perspective."

"You can get a fresh perspective here!"

"Chrissy, we live in the same city."

"Boston and Cambridge are technically two separate cities," she points out. "I mean, there's a whole river between us!"

I snort.

"Please, don't go away. This bed rest thing — it's boring me to tears. Without your visits, I'll go insane. I don't have anyone else to keep me company."

Way to lay on the guilt, Chrissy.

"It's only for a few days," I assure her. "And you aren't alone — you have Mark and Winnie."

"Mark is at work all day and Winston is eleven months old. Not exactly a stimulating conversation partner." She sighs deeply. "And as much as I love them, *they* aren't being kissed in elevators by handsome, extremely eligible bachelors."

"I see you've been talking to Shelby."

Her tinkling laugh drifts over the line. "She may've filled me in on certain details. But it's not the same, secondhand! What am I going to do without you around to keep things interesting?"

"Rest. Read a book. Keep growing that baby."

"You sound just like Mark." She huffs. "Traitor."

I roll my eyes. "I'll see you when I get back."

"But—"

Before she can launch into a fresh string of protests, I reach out and

power down my cell, cutting off the call and ensuring that Chrissy — predictably persistent — can't call me ad nauseam until I change my mind about getting out of town. I wasn't lying about needing a fresh perspective. I'd just failed to mention the fact that I was running away.

From the paparazzi camped outside my apartment.

From my rage-aholic ex-boyfriend intent on revenge.

From the crazy, Croft cousin who wants to use me as a pawn in his games.

But, mostly, from Chase.

And from the unexpected pain that splintered through my heart this afternoon when I heard the blonde's voice on his answering machine.

As soon as Evan and Knox left earlier, the new cellphone they'd forced into my hands began to ring, the screen lighting up with a message that made my stomach flip.

CHASE CALLING

I'd pushed the ignore button, pretending not to hear the terrifying alert of a new voicemail that beeped from the speakers twenty seconds later. I hadn't listened to his message...

Or any of the others he'd left me, on two-hour intervals for the rest of the day.

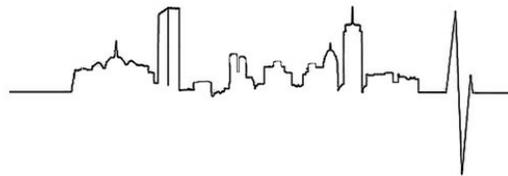
But, when I zipped my duffle closed and crossed the apartment, ready to leave for the weekend, I'd stopped at the last minute, walked back to the coffee table, and grabbed the phone before I could talk myself out of it.

I wasn't going to analyze why I'd brought it with me.

Because the idea that I was holding on to the only piece of Chase I'd ever be able to call my own... well, that was just too sad to even think about.

CHAPTER 20

COLOR



THE SCREEN DOOR swings open on screechy hinges and a woman in her late fifties steps onto the porch, her dress clay-streaked and rumpled under the dim patio light.

“Gemma! It’s so late. What are you doing here?”

“Happy to see you too, Mom.” I snort.

A soft hand bats my shoulder playfully. “Oh, hush, you know I’m happy to see you. It just would’ve been nice to have a little more warning before Hurricane Gemma made landfall. A little time to tidy up, board up the windows, batten down the hatches...”

I roll my eyes — she’s called me Hurricane Gemma for as long as I can remember. Not my favorite nickname, even if it is well deserved. I spent most of my teen years stirring up a storm of drama in the quiet, coastal community where I grew up. The tiny, harbor-side art colony of Rocky Neck an hour north of Boston didn’t have much room for trouble, but what little I could find, I whipped into a tempest.

“Very funny, mother.”

She smiles joyously and it transforms her face — still stunning, despite its many laugh lines — from merely beautiful to truly gorgeous. All my life, I’ve wanted to look like my mother, envying her fall of thick blonde hair — now more ash than honey, with streaks of gray running through it here and there — and her tall, willowy frame. I got my father’s genes, instead — which was pretty much his only contribution to my life.

“It’s been too long, baby girl.” Wrapping her arms around me, Mom squeezes tight for nearly a minute. I breathe her in — lemon and lavender and fresh-drying clay — and I’m five years old again, all skinned knees and crocodile tears, and there isn’t a problem that can’t be fixed with a hug and a kiss.

When she finally pulls away, she keeps her hands at my shoulders and examines my face with a mother’s shrewd eye. “Man trouble?”

“What?” I exclaim, my heart racing. Mom doesn’t own a TV or a computer — there’s no way she could’ve seen the news footage about Chase and me. “Why would you think that?”

God, is my pain so apparent, even my mother can read it on my face?

“You look pale. You’re much too thin. And there are bags under your eyes.” Her gaze sweeps my features. “In my experience, that *can’t-eat-can’t-sleep* feeling is usually caused by a man.”

My mouth nearly drops open.

In her younger years, Petra Annabella Summers had a face that launched a thousand proposals — none of which she accepted, even after I was born. When I was a kid, her sculptures sold well enough to support us, so there was no need for a man around, and even after I moved to the city at eighteen, she never expressed any desire to marry. As far as I know, she hasn’t been on so much as a date in at least twenty-six years.

And here she is, trying to fix *my* man troubles.

“Maybe I just wanted to see you,” I say defensively, unhappy at being so transparent.

“Maybe,” she agrees softly. “But I don’t think so.”

I fall silent.

“Gemma, love, what’s wrong?” she asks. “You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t need to work something out.”

I sigh. “It’s a long story, Mom.”

She wraps one arm around my shoulder, opens the screen door, and leads me inside. “How about I make you a cup of tea and you tell me all about it?”

I drop the duffle to the floor, unzip it, and pull out a bottle of pinot noir. “If by tea you mean wine, I’m totally in.”

She laughs. “Even better.”

I smile.

It’s good to be home.

BY THE TIME I finish telling her the whole story, it's hours past midnight, the candles have burned low, and the wine bottle is nearly empty on the table between us. My mother is staring at me with wisdom in her eyes, but I have a feeling I might not like what she's about to say.

"You need to hear him out," she announces, confirming my predictions.

I sigh.

"Why can't you take my side, for once, mother?" I ask, exasperated. "Didn't you hear the part about the hidden fiancée?"

"Things aren't always what they seem."

"Well, it sure *seems* like he's been lying to me since the minute we met."

"Oh, Gemma, for goodness' sake, you've only known the man a few days — doesn't he get longer than that to reveal his deep dark secrets? Doesn't he deserve a chance?" Her eyes narrow on mine when I don't answer her question, but her voice is gentle when she continues. "You only heard one side of the story, and you bolted without waiting around to hear the whole thing. I taught you better than that, baby girl."

The words snap out before I can stop them. "No, if anything, you taught me that men are liars and cheaters, who either leave on their own or aren't worth keeping around to begin with."

Her eyes get sad and it makes my stomach clench.

Shit .

"Mom..." I whisper, instantly filled with remorse. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

She waves my words away with her hands. "Gemma, I know I haven't always been the best role model when it comes to relationships. After your father...." She trails off, her eyes distant. "Well, I guess I just never really moved on. And afterwards, I always thought it was better for you to see me as a strong, independent woman, who didn't need a man to make her happy. That's who I am, who I've raised *you* to be." Her eyes return to mine. "But that doesn't mean I want you to give up on your shot at love, baby girl. It doesn't mean I want you to distrust a good man when he comes into your life."

"You don't know he's a good man," I protest. "You don't know anything about him."

"I know you like him." Her lips twist in the hint of a smile. "Enough to drive all the way out here and talk to your mother about it. That right there tells me everything I need to know."

I sigh deeply. “You’re impossible. And even if I did like him, it doesn’t matter. It would never work out between us. We’re from totally different worlds. And then there’s the press... if they dig too deep.... I don’t want you to get hurt...”

“Gemma.” Mom reaches out a hand and places it on top of mine. “This isn’t about me — it’s about you.”

“I know that. But it really doesn’t matter, Mom. It just... isn’t going to work out.”

“Do you really think that? Or are you just looking for an excuse to push him away, because you know he’s not like the other men you’ve dated? Because you know you won’t be able to brush him off or forget him with nothing more than a pint of Ben & Jerry’s?”

“Mom—”

“Is it because you know, deep down, if you let yourself fall in love with this man... he might really hurt you?”

I lean back in my chair, pressing my eyes closed to shut out her words.

“I don’t know, Mom. I don’t know what I’m feeling, anymore.”

Her fingers squeeze mine. “You don’t have to, Gemma. You just have to give yourself permission to hope.”

“For what?” I ask miserably.

“For the possibility of something truly wonderful. Because a life without hope, without love... that’s really no life at all.”

I SPEND the entire next day in the sunroom with a borrowed canvas and mom’s collection of oils, painting until my mind goes blank. Music drifts quietly from the speakers, but the only other sound is of my brushstrokes as they glide and smudge and layer over one another as the hours slip by. Mom knows better than to disturb me, not that she would — she’s sequestered in her sculpting room, working on a newly commissioned piece for a client. When inspiration strikes, she’s been known to lock herself away for full days at a time, appearing only for the occasional snack or bathroom break.

It’s been a long time since I last spilled my soul onto canvas — too long. I’ve got so many pent up emotions, my fingers practically shake with need to release them. I paint for hours and barely notice. If not for the gradual lengthening of shadows as the afternoon sun wanes into twilight, I’d never know any time has passed at all.

When I finally break for the day, it's nearly dinnertime and my canvas looks as schizophrenic as I'm feeling, covered in bold colors that are seemingly at odds with each other. Sad blues meld into passionate reds, then blur into jealous greens that fade to cowardly yellows — like my mind has been scooped out and poured onto paper, every emotion a paint-splotch.

Not exactly a Picasso, but it's *mine*, and though drained both physically and emotionally, I feel more myself than I have in days. Longer, even.

I barely touched my paints the whole time I was “dating” Ralph. And even in the weeks and months before then, I felt utterly uninspired every time I sat down at the easel. I was blocked, and I didn't know why. Worse, there was nothing I could do about it.

You can't force art.

But today, sitting here, with thoughts of Chase swimming thick as gesso in my mind, I've felt expressive, in-touch with my own emotions in a way I haven't been since... maybe ever.

It's wonderful and terrifying, happy and heartbreaking all at the same time.

I can't think about it — about him — so I slip off my stool and turn my back on the colorful canvas.

Lifting my arms above my head, I crane my neck and bow my back, sending instant relief to my cramped muscles. Whenever I spend hours painting, I feel like a frail, ninety-year-old with arthritic joints, as though expending so much artistic energy has aged me decades, rather than hours.

Stomach rumbling, I wander from the enclosed porch into the kitchen, hoping there's some food in the fridge... and feel my jaw drop open.

Because my mother isn't locked away sculpting in the back room.

She's sitting right there at the kitchen table, sipping a cup of tea, casual as can be.

And Chase Bossy-Is-My-Middle-Name Croft is in the seat across from her.

“HEY,” he says casually.

My mouth gapes. “You did not just say *hey* to me.”

His eyebrows go up.

“You did not just say *hey* to me like it's no big deal that you're here, in my childhood home, sitting at the table across from my mother, having a

freaking tea party.”

His lips quirk up in a shameless grin. “Sorry, sunshine, but I did.”

A sound escapes my mouth — a scream, a squeal, it’s not easy to classify — and my eyes slide to my mother, who’s looking all too pleased with herself.

“Mom, tell me you had nothing to do with this.”

“Gemma, you know I don’t like to lie.”

Betrayed by my own flesh and blood!

“Bu...wha...” The sound squeaks from my throat again, louder this time.

“This isn’t...”

They both stare at me, expressions amused.

“Why?” I finally manage to ask.

Chase stands. “You weren’t answering your phone.”

“It’s not my phone,” I say immediately.

“Fine,” he agrees, stepping closer. “You weren’t answering the phone I gave you.”

I shuffle back a step, keeping a safe amount of distance between us.

“When a girl ignores your calls, it usually means she doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“You want to talk to me.”

“I do not!”

He grins — the good grin, the panty-dropping one — and I feel a few of the butterflies I thought were long-dead flutter back to life in the pit of my stomach.

Perfect . Just perfect .

Chase tracks me down and now there are *zombie freaking butterflies* swarming inside me.

“Yes you do.” He takes another step closer. “You just don’t know you do, yet.”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” I snap, but my anger sounds thin, even to my own ears. “Nor does the fact that you’re *here* .”

His grin gets bigger.

“Gemma,” my mother scolds. “That’s not how I raised you to treat your guests.”

“I didn’t invite him. He’s not *my* guest.”

She laughs and looks at Chase. “Don’t mind her. She hates surprises. You should’ve seen her at her tenth birthday party. I invited some of my friends

from Ringling Brothers over — really nice people I met after one of their shows in Boston, though the acrobats were a bit snooty, if I’m being honest — and when Gemma walked in and saw the clowns, she just about wet her pan—”

“Mother!” I interject.

She continues, as though I haven’t spoken. “Let’s just say, my little Hurricane Gemma can cause quite the stir when she’s caught off guard. Another time, at her high school graduation, I showed up with a bullhorn and a big—”

“*MOTHER!*”

“Anyway, Gemma hates surprises.” Mom smiles placidly into her tea. “And clowns,” she adds with a wink in Chase’s direction.

He chuckles softly. “I’ll keep that under advisement.”

“Gemma, why don’t you take Chase for a walk around the colony? Show him the galleries, the harbor. The boats aren’t in the water, yet, but it’s still pretty, and the sun’s shining.”

“I…” The words dry on my tongue as I look from my mother to the man I’m 99% sure is stalking me, realizing I’ve been thoroughly outnumbered and outmaneuvered. A resigned sigh slips from my lips before I’ve even consciously accepted defeat.

Chase chuckles again, sensing victory.

“Oh, and put on something nice, Gem. You’re a mess.”

“Mother!”

“Gemma!” she echoes.

I glance down at myself, feeling my eyes widen as I take in the sight of paint-splattered jeans and a wrinkled tank top. A blush steals across my cheeks when I see I’m not even wearing a bra. There’s paint beneath my fingernails, turpentine on my hands. My hair is piled in a messy bun on top of my head, and I can’t remember whether I bothered to brush it this morning.

I sigh again, and turn for the door.

“I’ll go get changed.”

Chase’s laughter follows me into the next room.

ON A CLOUDY, crisp spring evening, the rocky beach just steps from my house is unsurprisingly abandoned. We walk by the water’s edge, only the sounds of small waves crashing in rhythmic kisses against the shore and the

occasional sea gull crying out overhead breaking the silence between us.

Smooth rocks in a million different shapes and sizes crack together beneath our feet as we walk along the empty stretch of shoreline, not touching or saying much of anything. As if a silent dare has been thrown down, and whoever shatters the wall of space between us loses.

Well, I'm not about to be the loser.

Nope. No way. Not happening.

Another few moments pass in silence, and I can't take it anymore.

"You're breaking all my rules, you know."

The words fly from my mouth before I can stop them.

BREAKING NEWS! Gemma Summers loses, yet again.

Whatever.

It's been pretty clear since Day 1 of this — my heart fails in my chest at the word *relationship* so let's call it a *flirtation*, that's much more benign — that there's only one power player here when it comes to negotiations, and his name is not Gemma. Which is probably why he doesn't bother following any of my rules.

If you hold all the cards, you can play the game however you want.

Chase glances over at me, skeptical. "Gonna need a translation on that one, sunshine."

"The *rules*." I keep my eyes glued to the beach and force the words out. "You're not supposed to meet the parents until later. Way later. Like, two weeks before the wedding, over an awkward dinner at a restaurant with giant booths so no one's elbows accidentally touch or anything."

He looks at me a little strangely, a grin quirking his lips up at the corners. "And you know this *how* exactly? From your vast experience bringing men home to meet the parents?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "I don't like you."

He chuckles.

"And yeah, so you're the first guy that's ever met my mother — clearly, I'm not the queen of relationships. But even *I* know there are rules about how this stuff is supposed to happen."

"How do you know the rules if you've never done this before?" He grins. "Is there a book I should be reading, with a list of these rules? A manual, maybe? Some kind of guide I could reference?"

"No, smartass." My eyes narrow further. "It's an unspoken rule."

"If it's unspoken, how is it a rule?"

I toss my hands up, exasperated. “It’s just not allowed, okay? It’s frowned upon.”

“By who?”

“Me!”

He shakes his head, grinning.

I sigh. “It’s like... writing shouty emails in ALL CAPITAL LETTERS, or feeling *every single apple* in the pile while forty other people are waiting to approach the freaking produce, or not picking up the massive pile of doo-doo your Doberman has left steaming on the sidewalk. *You just don’t do it.*”

“Did you just compare me, meeting your mother, to literal dog shit?”

I ignore his bemused question entirely.

“Oh! And I firmly believe there should be laws against people who talk on speakerphone in public. Like, *hello* random dude with the old-school flip phone, I so do not need to hear about your plans to ‘get turned’ this weekend and ‘work the ladies’ at the club with your ‘boys’ — I’m just trying to ride the subway in peace.”

“Has anyone ever told you you’ve got a lot of rules?”

“Don’t even get me started on people who don’t recycle.” I huff in outrage. “Just throw your old car batteries in the ocean while you’re at it, earth-haters!”

“Gemma.”

Nostrils flaring, hands planted on my hips, I begin to pace in small circles.

“There’s no book, no guide, but there *are* rules. Basic, life rules that all humans should follow. And I’m pretty sure, right at the top of the freaking list, next to *no socks with sandals* and *brush your teeth before the dentist* is the rule about not meeting the parents until absolutely necessary. Definitely until you’ve known the person longer than a week.”

“Gemma.”

“In fact, I’m not entirely sure it’s *ever* necessary. In-laws are one of the main causes of marital discord and divorce. I read that online somewhere! Though, come to think of it, it might’ve been on Wikipedia, and I’m not sure how factual or scientific their statistics are, but—”

“*Gemma!*”

“What?” I snap, freezing in place as my gaze flies back to him.

When our eyes meet and I realize I’ve been shouting nonsense for the past several minutes, I instantly feel my cheeks blaze with heat.

God, I'm a dork.

Chase doesn't look like he minds, though. In fact, he's grinning wider than I've ever seen.

"Your mom was right."

"Huh?" I ask, brilliant as ever.

"You really do hate surprises."

He's not at all apologetic, when he says this. In fact, he sounds downright pleased with himself as he closes the distance between us, so he's fully invading my space, his front plastered against mine.

"Because they never end well," I whisper, craning my neck to keep eye contact and trying not to melt at his proximity.

His eyes flicker down to my lips. "This one could."

Danger!

I force myself to step away and keep walking down the beach in resolute silence, determined to hold out until I've gotten some answers from him. Specifically about the smoking hot blonde who may or may not be his fiancée.

And this time, I'm absolutely *not* going to be the one who caves first.

(Seriously, this time.)

We walk for a few more minutes, long enough for my blood to cool and my embarrassment to fade away. We're nearly at the end of the beach, when he finally speaks.

"It's beautiful, here."

Chase stops, hands shoved deep in the pockets of his jacket, and looks out over the inlet.

"Yeah," I agree, bending to pick up a small, flat stone. I test its weight in my hand before flinging it toward the water, and watch with satisfaction as it skips across the surface, *one-two-three-four-five-six*, before plunking through the waves and plunging to the bottom of the harbor.

"You look like you've done that before."

"More times than I can count." I shrug. "There's not a heck of a lot to do in Rocky Neck, especially for a kid."

"Did you like growing up, here?"

I don't look at him when I answer. "It was quiet. Beautiful. The kind of place where no one ever really *leaves*. Kids grow up, get married, buy a house down the street from the one they grew up in, and the cycle restarts."

"You left."

I nod. “That life... it wasn’t for me. I knew that before I was old enough to put it into words.”

“None of the boys in town caught your eye?” he asks, his tone playful. “No high school sweethearts tempted you to stay?”

I know he’s trying to keep things light, but I can’t. Looking at him just reminds me of the fact that no one’s *ever* tempted me... not like he has, at least.

“No,” I whisper to the waves. “I’ve never been in love.”

He’s silent, absorbing my heavy words like the sea did my stone, and I continue before he can speak.

“I mean, sure, I’ve known love. I’ve *loved* — my mom, my friends, my work. And they’ve loved me in return. But I’ve never been *in* love.” My voice drops so low, I doubt he can hear my next words. “I’m not even sure I believe in it.”

Chase is silent for so long, I don’t think he’s going to speak at all. When he finally responds, he says something I’m not expecting.

“I have.” He clears his throat. “Been in love, that is.”

I try — and fail — to ignore the irrational pang of hurt and jealousy his words send shooting through my chest.

“At least, I thought it was love, at the time,” he continues. “I was young. Twenty-three, fresh out of college. Grandfather had retired, by then, given control of the company to Jameson.”

“Your uncle?” I ask, recalling Shelby’s Croft-family-tree lesson a few days ago.

Chase hesitates a beat. “Yes.”

I don’t see him move, but I feel him take a step closer.

“Jameson placed me in charge of one of our New York subsidiaries. It was my first real shot at proving myself and, in all honesty, I was terrified I’d fuck it up. That’s when I met Vanessa.”

I sneak a glance at him out of the corner of my eye and see his jaw is clenched tight.

“There was so much pressure at work — it was nice to have someone there, someone who was fun, someone who just wanted to party and blow off all the responsibilities piling up around me.” His hands fist by his sides. “It wasn’t long before she had me blowing off business meetings and coming in late, still hungover from the night before. The drinking was just for fun, at first, but then... it spiraled into something more. Something darker. And

before I knew it, I'd been arrested for a DUI, brought to court facing assault charges for punching out a paparazzo while I was loaded one night, and out of the job I'd worked so hard for. Jameson gave Brett my position at the company."

His voice gets so low, so *pained*, I forget to be angry or jealous, and without thinking, I reach my hand out for his. At first, when our bare skin brushes, his fist stays tightly clenched, not accepting my touch. Still, I don't pull back, and after a few seconds, I feel his grip relax as he lets my fingers twine with his.

"I should've known, then, that Brett had orchestrated it, but I was too lost — in the booze, in the rebellion, in *her*." He swallows hard, and I move my thumb across the back of his hand in soothing strokes. "I'd lost everything — my pride, my job, my self-respect — which only made me hold on tighter to the one thing I had left."

I squeeze his fingers. "Vanessa."

He nods, still not looking at me. "She suggested we get married. By that point, I was drunk more often than not and I would've agreed to just about anything, if I thought it might give my life some meaning again. So, I put a ring on her finger." He takes a deep breath. "Two weeks later, I was out for a run one afternoon, in the park. It started snowing, so I headed home early."

I squeeze his hand in mine, sensing his unease.

"I remember walking in, seeing the clothes scattered everywhere — her bra on the stairs, her underwear lying there in the hallway, the man's jacket dropped on the threshold to my bedroom." His fingers flex against mine. "She was in bed with Brett."

I gasp.

"He'd been fucking her the whole time." His voice is utterly flat, empty of emotion. "She was just part of his plan, to derail my life. And it worked."

Scattered puzzle pieces in my mind start to snap into place, creating sense where before there was only confusion. Casting a bit of clarity into the mystery that is Chase Croft.

Chase, tensing when the reporters asked about a potential engagement.

His face, when he walked into his cousin's study and found my hand clasped tight in Brett's.

The uncontrollable anger in his stride, in his eyes, in his voice at just the thought of Brett touching me, talking to me.

God, no wonder he flipped out.

“Chase...” My voice is gentle. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m not.” His eyes move to mine. “The truth is always better than a lie, even if it hurts. I worked hard to get my life back, after that. I went to Europe, to Asia, to every forgotten corner of this world I could find, trying to be someone else. Trying to leave Chase Croft behind and become someone better.” He swallows. “I don’t know if I succeeded in that. But I do know I changed. And I learned to be careful about who I place my trust in. There’s a very short list of people I tell about my past... let’s just say, I don’t add anyone lightly. ”

He squeezes my hand, that one small gesture communicating more than a thousand pretty words, and the breath stills in my throat.

Because he trusts *me* .

He doesn’t say it, but it’s there in the way he’s laid out his past for me without shying away from the ugliness, from the pain. And what have I given him, in return?

Very little except distrust.

I suddenly wish, more than anything, I could go back to the start of all this and do things again — better, this time.

“I’m sorry, Chase,” I whisper to the water, feeling like the worst human being of all time.

His hand tightens on mine and my eyes refocus on his face. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

I take a quick breath. “What happened after you found out? About Vanessa, I mean.”

“As soon as I learned the truth, Brett tossed her aside like a piece of garbage. In his eyes, she’d fulfilled her purpose. She wasn’t happy about it, despite the big payoff he gave her to keep her mouth shut with the press. So, she came back to me, showed up at my doorstep. Told me she loved me, that he’d tricked her. Begged me to take her back.”

I hold my breath, afraid of what he’ll say next.

“No matter how many doors I slam in her face, she keeps trying. Keeps calling.” I feel myself relax as he shakes his head in disbelief. “Brett’s probably paying her to do it, hoping it’ll fuck with me, even after all these years.” He pauses. “And considering the fact that her call made you run from me, yesterday, I guess it’s working.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper again, for an entirely different reason. “I shouldn’t have bolted without talking to you, first.”

His hand squeezes mine and though he doesn't say anything, I know he's accepted my apology.

"Why are you here, Chase?" I force myself to ask. "Why are you telling me all this?"

He glances at me, and those green eyes are so intense, I'm pinned to the spot.

"The second I saw you, jumping up and down on the sidelines of a sport you didn't understand, cheering for the wrong team and still somehow having more fun than everyone else in that stadium, I *knew*. Knew I wanted you in my arms, in my bed, in my life." His eyes are liquid heat — molten lava, burning into mine. "I'm used to getting what I want, Gemma."

I stop breathing.

"Still, I was going to stay away from you, keep you out of all this shit, even if it killed me."

"Why?"

"Because you aren't built for deceit or lies or darkness. I'm shadow and you're *sunshine*. You're not like me. You're just... different."

"Bad different?"

"Different in the best way possible. My world — it's monochrome. Black and white. But you..." His voice gets lower, huskier. "You're painted in every shade on the palette. You're screaming color. A fucking rainbow."

I pause for a moment, trying to process that. "Past tense?" I ask finally.

"What?"

"You said you were going to stay away from me. *Were*, not *are*." I swallow hard. "Past tense."

He looks at me, his eyes searing into mine, and the expression on his face makes my heart clench with hope.

"I was trying to keep you out of this shit with Brett. Now that he knows... you're in it, whether I like it or not." He steps closer and I tilt my head back to hold his gaze. "I'm not staying away anymore, Gemma. I can't. I *won't*. And I could give a fuck who knows it."

"You barely know me," I whisper.

"I know enough." His words are so adamant, I don't question him.

For a moment, we're quiet.

"You're wrong, you know," I say after a while, looking back at the water.

A pause. "About?"

"You're not all shadow and darkness. Maybe Brett is, maybe your family

is, but not you.” I scrape together the courage to say the next part. “You’re kind and caring, even if you hide it beneath that dominant, bossy, pain-in-the-ass arrogance. And when you laugh...” I inhale sharply. “You make the world light up.”

His hand squeezes mine and I force myself to look at him. His eyes are burning so bright, it almost hurts to meet his gaze.

Almost.

“People who laugh like you do aren’t dark, Chase,” I whisper. “Not where it counts.”

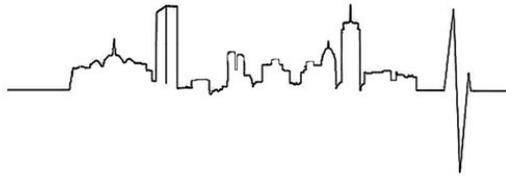
His expression is serious as he echoes my words. “You barely know me.”

I pause. “I guess I know enough.”

And then, before I have time to prepare, his arms go around my back, his head dips to mine, and he’s kissing me like the rest of the world can go to hell, because all that matters is this — *us* — lips pressed close and hands entwined in a hold I couldn’t break even if I wanted to.

CHAPTER 21

WRECKAGE



JUST WHEN THINGS are starting to get good — hands slipping under hemlines, tongues joining in on the action — Chase breaks the kiss, pulling back so his forehead rests against mine and our hurried breaths mingle in the space between our faces. A whimper of protest escapes my lips, and he bumps his nose against mine.

“We’re going back to the city now. Specifically, to my apartment. More specifically, to my bed,” he says, his voice rough. “We aren’t leaving until we’ve worked out whatever this is between us — so, you might want to clear your schedule, sunshine. I have a feeling that’s gonna take a while.”

There’s an unmistakable promise in his words that makes me shiver.

“So bossy,” I whisper playfully, staring up into his eyes. “It makes me wonder...”

His eyes are intent, watching my mouth form words.

I lean closer. “Are you this bossy in *every* aspect of your life, Mr. CEO?”

He doesn’t answer.

Instead, he laces his hand with mine, turns, and starts tugging me back toward the house, his long strides eating up the stretch of beach so quickly, I’m practically jogging to keep up.

“Chase!”

His pace doesn’t slow.

“*Chase!*”

He slams to a halt so fast, I nearly run straight into his back. I open my

mouth to ask him what the *hell* he thinks he's doing, but before I can get a single sound out, his eyes cut to mine and the words evaporate on my tongue.

Holy shit .

His eyes aren't just warm — they're boiling over with passion, with sheer *need* , and I realize he's hanging onto his control by a thread. I know intuitively if I push him any further, at this moment, I'll find myself naked on the rocks at my feet faster than you can say *beach sex* .

I'm not too proud to admit I consider testing that theory.

My eyes watch his mouth as he takes a step closer.

Danger!

"Never mind," I whisper, considering the ramifications of a public indecency charge and, more pressingly, the not-so-fun side effects of getting sand in places sand is *not* meant to end up.

He nods, pulls a deep breath in through his nose to regain some control, and starts pulling me toward the house again.

This time, I don't protest.

"CALL AND CHECK IN, when you get back. I want to make sure you're home safe."

"I will, Mom." I lean in and press a kiss to her cheek, my arms squeezing her willowy frame in a tight embrace. "Thanks for letting me stay here, last night. And for, well... you know."

I don't have to say it — she knows what I mean.

For bringing Chase to me .

She pulls back to look into my eyes, her hands on either side of my face. "He's a good one, baby girl. A keeper. Give him a chance."

"I'll try."

Staring at me, her voice drops to a whisper. "Not every man is your father."

"I know that, Mom."

"Knowing something and believing it are two different things, baby." She shakes her head. "Your dad — well, that was just plain bad luck. And me... well, I know I wasn't the best mother—"

"Mom! Don't say that."

"I'm too much of an artist — too scatterbrained to make sure your lunches were packed and your permission slips were signed, too flighty and

eccentric to be friends with the other mothers. You were more organized than I was when you were just seven years old. Most days, there was only one adult in this house and, baby, it wasn't me."

"Mom..." I whisper, my voice soft.

I don't correct her, though. It's the truth.

"Gemma, what I'm trying to say is, you've never let yourself be a kid. Your whole life, you've listened to your head over your heart — talked yourself out of finishing art school because it wasn't practical to have debt, told yourself to put off opening your own gallery because you didn't want to give up your job benefits, decided to sell other peoples' art because it was a safer bet than trying to sell your own. And it's no secret you've only ever picked emotionally unavailable men, because there's no chance of ever getting your heart broken."

I stare at her. "Is there a point to all of this?"

She sighs. "You pick practicality over passion — you always have. And maybe that's my fault, for leaving too many responsibilities on your shoulders when you were too young to deal with them." Her eyes are glossy with unshed tears. "I'm sorry for that, baby girl. I truly am. If I could go back and do things differently, I would."

She takes a deep breath, her hands squeezing the sides of my face.

"Life is a big, fat mess. There's no order or reason to most of what'll happen to you before you turn to dust and fade from memory, and there's nothing you can do about that. All you *can* do is find someone who turns that abstract chaos into a work of art... and never let them go."

"Mom..." I say, my voice breaking.

She's holding back tears. "I don't know if that man waiting in our driveway is the one for you — only time can tell you that. But I do know that you deserve love, more than anyone on this earth, and it'll find you eventually, even if you keep trying to avoid it." She stares into my eyes, her expression more serious than I've ever seen it. "My only advice is, when you start to fall, don't talk yourself out of it — the right man will be there at the bottom, to catch you. Take a risk on messy. Live fearlessly. Love recklessly. Most of all, just *love*."

"YOU'RE QUIET."

Chase's words startle me back into the present. I glance over at him,

taking in the sight of his profile as he steers the Porsche with practiced ease. No town car, today — Chase gave Evan the day off, when he decided to drive up to Rocky Neck. Apparently, he doesn't like to use the chauffeur unless he has to — which, unfortunately for him, is most of the time, now that he lives in the city. He's assured me Knox will pick up my car later tonight and deliver it back to my apartment before I even notice it's missing.

I'm unconcerned — I barely use it, anyway — and besides, I'm too wrapped up replaying my mother's parting words over and over in my mind to worry much about my crappy car. So wrapped up, in fact, that forty-five silent minutes pass without my noticing. We're nearly back to the city when Chase looks over at me, his eyebrows raised in concern.

I can't blame him — I don't think I've *ever* been quiet this long, in the history of my existence.

"Everything okay?"

"Sorry." I sigh. "I was just thinking about my Mom."

"Do you see her often?"

"Not as often as I should, considering she only lives an hour away."

"She's not what I expected." He shakes his head, a smile playing out on his lips. "When my secretary came into my office this morning, saying she had a *Miss Summers* on the line, I thought it was you."

I laugh, at that. "Full of surprises, my mother."

"And full of life." His smile widens. "You two act more like sisters than mother and daughter."

"She's been my built-in best friend since I was born." My voice is wistful. "She was always the *cool* mom — my high school friends would come over to hang with her, even when I wasn't home. There were always people filtering in and out — musicians, artists, other eccentrics she brought home like strays." I grin. "They say it takes a village to raise a child. Mom took that expression pretty literally."

"You miss her," he says softly.

I nod in confirmation.

He pauses. "And... your father? He's not in the picture?"

I still completely, hands curling into fists on my lap. "No."

Chase nods.

After a few moments of silence, the tension slips out of me as I realize he's not going to demand answers I'm not yet ready to give. I kind of adore him for that.

“You never talk about your parents,” I say softly, looking over at him. “Just your grandfather, your uncle, your cousin...”

He’s quiet for a long, suspended moment.

“They died when I was five,” he says finally. “A car accident.”

“Oh, Chase...” I reach out a hand and lay it on his knee. “I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago,” he says, as though any amount of time could make suddenly losing both your parents any less heartbreaking. His voice gets distant, as he filters through memories. “They were driving home one night, to our summer house in Manchester. They’d spent the night at some kind of company charity event. It was raining out, really miserable. The roads were slick.” He takes a breath, and I see his fingers tighten around the wheel. “They were almost home. I was waiting up for them — I remember wanting to say goodnight, to have my mother tuck me in, instead of the babysitter.”

“Chase...” I squeeze my fingers tighter against his leg. “You don’t have to...”

“I know. I want to.” He swallows hard before continuing. “There’s this old, narrow bridge, barely wide enough for two cars, that leads over an inlet — you have to cross it, to get to the house.” He takes a deep breath. “My grandfather told me, years later, they were fighting when they left the charity ball. So, maybe they were still fighting on the ride home. Distracted. Angry. I don’t know — I’ll never know, for sure. But somehow, my dad lost control of the car.”

I can’t breathe, can’t move, can’t speak.

“They hit the water. Sank to the bottom. I waited up all night, but they never came home.” His words are resigned, but he can’t hide the pain beneath. “The next week, I moved in with my grandfather. I haven’t been back to that house, since.”

“Chase...” My voice cracks on his name.

He looks over at me, and the grief in his eyes makes my breath catch.

“Like I said... it was a long time ago.”

“Maybe...” I pause, not wanting to push him too far.

His eyes soften. “Maybe what, Gemma?”

“Maybe you should go back,” I say gently. “Maybe... you should say goodbye.”

His jaw starts to tick, a sure sign he’s trying to compose himself.

“If you want...” I trail off, feeling foolish. Clearing my throat, I try again. “If you want, I’ll go with you, Chase. Any time you want.”

He nods sharply, his fingers clench tighter, and, if I didn't know any better, I'd swear his eyes are just the tiniest bit glassy. In that instant, I want to wrap my arms around him, to offer him comfort, more than I've ever wanted anything in my life.

"Maybe someday," he says eventually, his voice soft.

"Okay," I whisper back, not saying anything more. I'm not about to force the issue — not when he's already trusted me with so much more than I ever expected.

BEFORE I KNOW IT, we're gliding back into the city limits and pulling up outside my apartment building, the front stoop illuminated by dim street lamps. When he parks and turns off the engine, I glance over at him, surprised.

"Why are we here? I thought we were..." I blush. "Going to your place."

"You need some clothes."

"What?"

"Clothes, Gemma." His mouth twitches in amusement though his eyes are deadly serious. "Enough to last the weekend. Maybe longer."

I stare at him, dumbfounded. "Why?"

"I told you before, we've got shit to work out."

"And?"

His eyes gleam darkly. "You're staying at my place for the foreseeable future, until it's worked out."

"No, I'm not!" I scoff.

"Gemma." He shakes his head. "This is happening between us."

"You can't just unilaterally make these decisions and boss me around."

"Actually, I can." Grinning shamelessly, he reaches over me, leaning in so his lips are practically on mine, and grabs my door handle. When he speaks, I feel each word form against my mouth before the sound reaches my ears. "Get your ass out of the car, sunshine. We're going upstairs to your apartment, grabbing some clothes, and then going to my place and getting in my bed."

My mouth falls open at his brazen words, and he's not even done.

"Or, if you want to fight me on it, we can go upstairs to your apartment, take *off* some clothes, stay at *your* place, and get in *your* bed." His nose bumps mine. "Either way, this is happening."

Before I can explode at him for obliterating all previous records of overbearing alpha-maleness, he shoves open my door, pulls back from my body, and slides out the driver's side into the street. I've barely had time to blink, when he's rounded the front of the Porsche, yanked my door fully open, and pulled me onto the sidewalk with him.

I vaguely register that he's got my duffle strap slung over one shoulder, but most of my attention is commanded by the news van slamming to a halt in front of my building.

Not again.

"Fuck," Chase curses. "Let's go."

And then, we're running for the door, laughing and swearing as we bound up the front steps, the reporter yelling at our backs.

Chase! Gemma!

Look this way!

There's a blinding camera flash in my peripherals but I ignore it, keeping my eyes on the keypad as I punch in the building code and push my way inside, Chase close on my heels. When the door slams shut, I fall back against it, laughing breathlessly as I try to wrap my mind around the utter ridiculousness of my life since I met Chase. The more I think about it, the louder my unladylike snorts get, until tears are forming in the corners of my eyes.

"Gemma." Chase steps closer, his expression wary. I'm practically hysterical, by this point, so I can't really blame him for looking at me like I'm two clicks away from flying over the cuckoo's nest. "Take a deep breath."

My eyes meet his. "Paparazzi are camped outside my building again."

He nods.

"Fourth day in a row."

He nods again.

"They just spotted us together." I'm laughing so hard by this point, I can barely catch my breath. "Which means they're only going to get crazier."

"Gemma."

"They might as well move in!" I wheeze out between chuckles. "I think there's a vacant apartment on the first floor, maybe they can turn it into some kind of snack-nap room, like on movie sets, where the reporters can all go to refuel between broadcasts. I mean, they're here so often, now, it's just practical—"

My words are cut off because suddenly, Chase's mouth comes down on mine in a firm, no-nonsense kiss that steals the breath from my lungs. By the time he's done, we're both panting hard and I can barely remember why I was so worked up only moments before. It's hard to remember my own name, with his hands cupping the sides of my face and his lips a hairsbreadth from mine. His thumb is gentle as he strokes the fragile skin beneath my eye, but his gaze is dark with passion.

"Better?" he asks gruffly.

I sigh. "This is never going to get more normal, is it?"

He leans a fraction closer, so his lips brush mine in the ghost of a kiss. "I hate to break it to you, but no. Nothing about my life is normal, and so long as you're with me, yours won't be either."

"Am I?" I can't help asking.

His eyebrows lift.

"With you?" I add.

"That's up to you, sunshine."

My eyes practically bug out. "Wait..."

His eyebrows go higher.

"You're actually letting *me* decide something?" I ask, my voice teasing. "Someone get a calendar! Mark the date! On this day in history, Chase Croft actually conceded something to Gemma Summers!"

He grins, slips one arm around my shoulders, and pulls me away from the door. "Don't get used to it," he grumbles, but I can tell beneath the gruffness of his tone, he's laughing.

When we get to the top of the stairs, I cross the landing to my apartment door.

"This is me," I tell him, feeling a rush of belated worry as I realize I'm about to show Chase my apartment — my messy, minuscule, mismatched apartment, which, in its entirety, is smaller than the master bedroom in his loft. I don't care much about that — but I feel sheer panic at the idea of him seeing my artwork.

It's everywhere — canvas after canvas, tacked up on the walls, leaning against furniture.

All the paintings I've been too afraid to put on public display are suddenly going to be a prominent part of the Gemma Summers' Apartment Tour. I might as well pull my still-beating heart from my chest and hand it to him — that would probably feel less personal.

Hesitating with my hand on the knob, I turn to face him.

“What are the odds you’re willing to wait out here?”

He grins, like he thinks I’m adorable, and I know the odds are absolute zero.

“Open the door, Gemma.”

I sigh, because he’s got to be the bossiest, most annoying person in the history of mankind.

And then I open the door.

“I KNOW it’s not the Taj Mahal, but—” The breath disappears from my lungs as the door swings wide and I catch sight of my apartment. “Holy shit.”

I feel Chase take a step closer to me, so his front is pressed against my back, and I know he’s lending me his strength as well as shielding me from any unseen threats. I barely notice — my eyes are fixed on the disaster before me.

It’s a mess — completely trashed, like a freaking tornado moved through the city while I was gone, the damage somehow isolated to my apartment. My well-loved red couch is flipped on its side, the stuffing bursting from cushions that look like they’ve been split open with a jagged blade. My funky, flea market coffee table has gone from intentionally asymmetrical to totally nonfunctional — two of its legs are snapped off, and there are deep gouges in the glossy wood which no amount of varnish can ever fix. My bookshelves are overturned, hundreds of paperbacks lying in ruined piles on the floor, their covers ripped off and their pages dented.

My heart is beating so loud, it drowns out the sound of Chase, speaking rapidly into his cellphone behind me.

Even from here, I can see my turquoise refrigerator has been given similar treatment, and what little food I had inside has spilled across the floor in a soupy mess. My artsy-yet-functional wardrobe ladder no longer hangs from my bedroom ceiling — it’s been ripped down in a cloud of plaster and hurled through the thin glass of my French doors. Ceiling dust and glass shards join thousands of floating feathers on the floor — either Wolverine was playing with my peacock throw pillows, or someone slit them open with the same determination as my couch cushions.

None of the furniture is salvageable.

My clothes are in shreds.

I'm definitely not getting my security deposit back.

I accept these things with a kind of detached horror. It's awful but, for the most part, I'm okay.

Possessions can be replaced.

Doors can be rebuilt.

My heartbeat starts to slow back to normal, and I'm actually pretty proud of myself for holding it together...

Until my eyes move to the walls.

I've been so wrapped up in the damage littering the floor around me, I haven't spared a glance at my paintings. So, I didn't even notice the wreckage extends to the colorful canvases I spent the past half-decade pouring every bit of my heart and soul into.

A sound bursts from my throat as I fly into motion, rushing past the threshold into the disaster site that used to be my home.

"Gemma, wait!" Chase calls, but I don't stop.

Glass crunches beneath my feet, and my hands tear at cushion foam and shredded wood as I cut a path through the wreckage. When I reach the far wall, where most of my paintings were, I fall to my knees, barely flinching as shards tear through my jeans and slice deeply into my flesh. That pain is nothing, compared to the ache inside my chest as my fingers trace the thick layers of oil on the ruined canvases before me.

The knife would've been enough to destroy them but whoever did this really went above and beyond, because in addition to the deep cuts rending the canvases in tatters, streaks of black spray paint cover many of the works. Words jump out at me, creating hate where art used to be.

BITCH

SLUT

WHORE

The blocky letters scream at me, their angry message unmistakable. It's abruptly very clear this was no random robbery, no casual break-in. This was personal. Intentional.

Someone out there hates me this much.

I feel like I've been punched in the stomach, the realization hitting me like a physical blow. I want to cry — I feel like I *should* be crying — but I'm too shocked, too angry to feel any real sadness. Hands resting on my bleeding kneecaps, I don't look away from my ruined works of art, even when I feel Chase's heat at my back. I don't protest when his arms slip around me, one

hooking beneath my knees, the other going behind my shoulders, and he lifts me from the floor into his arms, cradling me against his chest like I'm something to be held close, something precious, something *priceless*. I'm so numb at this moment, I don't question it. I just turn my head into his neck and let his strong arms absorb my body's relentless shakes.

TIME PASSES.

I'm not sure how much — in fact, I only really notice because suddenly, we're on the landing outside my apartment and Knox is there, his face set in a severe frown as he strides toward us and surveys the apartment with intent, angry eyes.

"No forced entry," he says flatly.

Chase's arms tighten around me. "Police are on their way."

"I'll talk to them. You get out of here, take care of her. I'll check in later with an update."

"Thanks."

The men exchange nods, and then we're moving again. My whole body bounces with Chase's steps as he carries me down the flight of stairs, never breaking stride, as though my weight is barely worthy of consideration.

"I can walk," I tell him, sounding shaky despite my best efforts.

He ignores me.

"Chase, put me down."

"No."

He sounds so pissed off, I decide not to fight him.

We push through the front doors just as two police cruisers pull to a stop outside my building. The officers nod to Chase as they climb from their vehicles, and before I know it, they've flanked us on all sides. It takes me a few seconds to realize they're clearing a path from the doors to the curb, where the Porsche is parked, so the paparazzi can't get close to us.

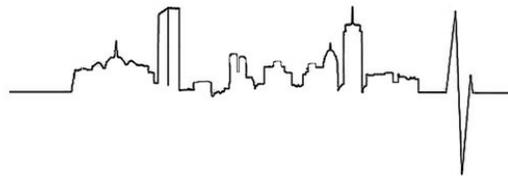
Evidently, Chase wasn't exaggerating the cachet of the Croft name.

I'm back on my feet for the blink of an eye while he yanks open the passenger door, but before I can get my bearings, he's scooped me up once more, settled my body on the seat, and closed me inside the car. I hear him thanking the officers, watch him stride around the front and slide into the driver's seat. His door has barely slammed closed when the engine turns over and we peel away from the curb, leaving behind the wreckage of my old life.

I don't look back.

CHAPTER 22

CHERISHED



“DRINK.”

Chase presses a short tumbler of amber liquid into my hand, then settles in on the sectional across from me. The loft is dark — only firelight from soft flames in the gas mantle illuminates the space. Dark shadows dance on Chase’s chiseled features, lending him a haunted look. Not that he needs it — he looks haunted enough, after the events of tonight.

Fingers curling around the glass, I lift it to my lips and take a hesitant sip. The warm burn of scotch slides down my throat and spreads through my empty stomach, soothing me instantly.

“None for you?” I ask, staring across the fire at him.

He shakes his head. “I don’t drink very often.”

I nod, remembering his story about Vanessa.

The drinking was just for fun, at first, but then... it spiraled into something more. Something darker.

I glance down at the glass in my hands. “Does it bother you if I do?”

“No.”

I take another sip, feeling less shaky than I have in hours as the alcohol spreads through my system.

“Gemma.”

I look up when he says my name.

“We’re going to take care of this.” His words are a promise. “Knox is dealing with the police, and he’s the best in the business. Whoever did this,

he'll find out."

"I don't think we need to look very far," I mutter darkly.

Silence descends and, after a moment, Chase clears his throat roughly. "Do you know who did this?"

I drop my eyes from his, not liking the scary-intense look in them. "I don't *know* anything other than the fact that suddenly, my quiet little life has imploded and I've got enemies coming out of the woodwork." I take another sip of scotch. "Between your crazy cousin and your crazy ex..."

"This isn't Brett's style." His words are definite — he's speaking from experience. "And, sunshine, if anyone's crazy ex is responsible for this... it's not mine. The lock wasn't broken. Someone had a key."

"Um..." I wince, staring at my hands. "There's a teensy, tiny chance I forgot to take the key out from under my mat."

"Dammit, Gemma," Chase growls. "I told you to take care of that days ago."

"Well, I forgot!" My voice is defensive. "Things have been a little crazy this week, if you haven't noticed!"

Likely hearing the hysteria creeping back into my voice, he gives me a pass and doesn't push further. "Nothing was taken. Your laptop was sitting right there on the floor, smashed to bits. That, coupled with the spray paint and the sheer destruction..." His voice gets softer. "This was personal."

"You don't have to tiptoe around the truth." I rub my forehead and sigh tiredly. "We both know it was Ralph."

His jaw clenches but he doesn't look surprised. "You're positive?"

I nod. "We kind of... got into it last night, when I was leaving for my Mom's."

A weighty pause. "Got into it?"

I swallow nervously and rush to get the words out. "He thinks I ruined his life. So, he kind of... threatened me."

Another long, stony silence.

"Ralph's always had a flare for the dramatic," I whisper quickly. "He said I had to *pay* for making him an internet meme. And, frankly, I don't know how he can possibly blame *me*. I mean, it's not like *I* control the internet. Tumblr has a life of its own! All it takes it one weird facial expression caught on camera and BOOM! Instant meme. Just ask that girl on the Olympic Figure Skating team—"

"He threatened you." His words clip out like bullets from a gun — sharp,

staccato, shiver-inducing. “And you didn’t think it was important enough to mention.”

“I didn’t exactly have a chance.” I start to squirm in my seat, uncomfortable beneath the weight of his glaring eyes. “There wasn’t a good moment.”

“Bullshit.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said *bullshit*, Gemma. You could’ve told me at any point — hell, it didn’t even have to be in person. You could’ve called me on the fucking phone I gave you.”

“It’s not my phone.”

An unhappy sound rumbles from his throat.

I roll my eyes.

“Are you ever gonna do it?” he asks abruptly.

I stare at him, confused. “Do what?”

“Let me in.” His eyes narrow. “Because this running away, pushing me away, keeping me at arm’s length shit is getting old. Especially now, when you’ve been threatened and your apartment’s a shambles. This is serious, Gemma.”

I know that.

Deep down, I know exactly how serious it is.

But, right now, with Chase glaring at me like I *asked* for Wreck-It-Ralph to destroy my apartment, it’s easier to be angry right back at him.

Angry is always better than scared. Even if that anger is directed at the wrong person.

“Well, I’m so sorry not everyone uses your wrecking-ball approach to barging into other people’s lives!” My words are practically dripping with sarcasm. “Not everyone moves at hyper-speed, Chase. I’ve known you about a minute! I wasn’t aware I had to inform you of every little thing that happens in my life!”

“I’m not asking for total transparency, Gemma. I’m asking you to be smart. I’m responsible for you, and—”

“Why?”

His eyes flash. “Excuse me?”

“Why are you *responsible* for me?” I snap. “You’re the one who said he didn’t do relationships, who said he didn’t date. And here you are, trying to control me, like some overprotective, overbearing boyfriend!” I’m

practically vibrating with anger. “News flash: you’re *not* my boyfriend — you made it pretty clear where you stand on that front the first night we met — so why don’t you stop acting like this is anything more than you wanting to get in my pants and trying to make up for your sociopathic cousin!”

I don’t mean it – not a single, stupid bit of it. I want to snatch the words back as soon as they leave my mouth.

But it’s too late. They’re already out there, floating in the air between us. I watch their impact — the way Chase’s eyes go flat, how his mouth sets in a firm line, and a wave of remorse crashes over me. My lips open, ready to apologize, to take it back, to fix it.

“Chase—”

“There are t-shirts in the top drawer. Should be an extra tooth brush beneath the sink.”

“What?”

He doesn’t acknowledge my question as he rises to his feet. “Don’t leave. There are reporters stationed outside. Your apartment isn’t safe. And, if you go, I’ll just have Knox track you down and drag you straight back here.” His words are so controlled, you’d think he was talking to a total stranger as he walks to the elevator without another glance in my direction. “Goodnight, Gemma.”

The doors slide open, he pushes a button, and he’s gone before I have time to muster outrage at his orders. Yet, even as the minutes tick by, alone in the dark apartment, the anger still doesn’t come.

All I feel is regret.

I TRY TO STAY AWAKE, to wait for him to get back from wherever he’s gone to escape my bitchy words — something I really can’t blame him for doing — but I’ve had a crap day, not to mention a full glass of scotch, and every muscle in my body is aching with pure emotional exhaustion. He’s been gone mere minutes when my eyes start to droop. It’s not long before I find myself wandering out of the main room, so tired I barely process the fact that I’m in Chase Freaking Croft’s humongous, gorgeously decorated bedroom.

I don’t bother turning on the lights as I move through the space, my eyes picking out the massive dresser even in the dark. I cross to it, slide open the top drawer, and grab a plain black t-shirt off the top stack. Even though he’s not here, there’s something intimate about undressing in Chase’s bedroom —

I can almost feel his eyes on me as I slide the jeans over my hips, wincing as the dried blood from my glass-sliced kneecaps sticks to the fabric. I hurriedly pull off my shirt, unclasp my bra, and drop them to the floor in a pile, feeling exposed and vulnerable, standing nearly naked two feet from Chase's massive bed.

His shirt is huge on my frame, draping to mid-thigh, and as soon as I slip it over my head, I'm hit with a wave of *Chase* — his clean, masculine scent invading all my senses.

For a moment I just stand there, breathing him in with my arms wrapped around myself, hugging the fabric to my chest and pretending he's the one pulling me close in a comforting embrace.

It's a poor substitute for the real thing.

With a regretful sigh, I slip into his private bathroom, barely able to meet my own eyes in the mirror as I brush my teeth with a spare toothbrush and wash my face. I pee, gulp down a glass of water from the tap, and douse the lights as I wander back into his bedroom, coming face to face with the massive bed frame which dominates the space. Black sheets, black headboard, black pillows — it's a man's bed, with no trace of frills or femininity. The sight of it makes me shiver so hard, I can't imagine what climbing *into* it will do to me.

And I'm not about to find out.

Not tonight, at least.

Skirting around the bed, I grab the soft gray blanket folded across the end, cross to the glass balcony doors, and step out into the cool night. It's freezing, this high up, but my breath doesn't catch just because of the cold or the magnificent view.

Standing at the tallest point in the entire city, with all of Boston's lights sprawled out below like a blanket of stars, and nothing above but clouds and open air... I'm untouchable. The very world is out of reach — reduced to smudges of color and motion so far below I can't make out their shapes. Even the stars overhead seem dim and distant, obscured by the steady burn of Boston's lights.

Nothing can reach me here — not Brett, not Ralph, not even my own fears or insecurities.

I'm safe .

Protected in a way I've never been, even back when I was a kid.

Thanks to Chase.

The thought makes my heart ache, so I push it away. Ignoring the cold, I turn from the railing and scan the deck, my eyes moving from the built-in pool and hot tub on the far side to the set of cushioned chaise lounges, sun umbrellas, and tall patio heat lamps. On the opposite side of the deck, there's a semi-enclosed kitchen setup, with stainless countertops, a giant grill, and a mini-fridge. The whole spot is perfect for summer barbecues and lazy afternoons.

I could happily spend the rest of my days right here, on this deck in the sunshine with Chase, and never leave.

The thought is so alarming, I banish it to the darkest recesses of my mind.

I want to explore a bit more — hell, I want to strip to my skin and slide into the heated pool — but I'm too tired.

With a last, longing glance at the in-deck hot tub, I flip on the closest heat lamp, stretch out on the chaise to my left, and tuck the blanket close around my limbs, so I'm cocooned against the chilly spring air. I make a half-assed attempt to pick out some of my favorite constellations in the sky overhead, but soon find I lack the energy. Even the many, many worries in my head aren't enough to keep me conscious.

My eyes slip closed and I'm asleep in less than two minutes.

I STIR awake to the sensation of arms carrying me through the air. The sound of the balcony door clicking shut pulls me back into full consciousness.

"Chase?" I mumble, my voice laced with sleep.

"Shh."

His hold shifts as he sets me down on the bed and, seconds later, the mattress depresses as he stretches out beside me. I feel the hard expanse of his bare chest pressed against my side, the gentle touch of his fingers in my hair, brushing loose strands off my face. My eyes flicker open and he's right there, his face inches away, and his gaze is soft and warm when it meets mine. My heart starts to thud too fast in my chest as I take in the sight of him — the tan column of his throat, the chiseled slope of his shoulders. His abs are so defined they look air-brushed, complete with a trail of hair that leads straight down to the waistband of his black boxers.

Oh. My. God.

I'm not sure whether I'm more relieved or disappointed to find he's not completely naked.

Relieved. Definitely relieved , I chant over and over in my mind, not above lying to myself. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

“Hey,” I whisper, the word cracking in my throat.

His lips tug up in a half-smile. “Hey.”

“Thought you were mad at me?”

“I am.”

“Oh,” I whisper, thinking he doesn’t *seem* mad with his hands in my hair and his body this close.

He leans in and brushes his lips against mine. They’re somehow hard and soft all at once, and they feel absolutely perfect pressed against my own. I kiss him back with enthusiasm, and he doesn’t stop me... until I try to deepen the kiss. With a gentle push, he moves us apart, so a few inches separate our faces. He’s breathing hard, and his eyes are hazy and dark when they meet mine. His fingers trace the chilled skin of my arms in a lazy caress.

“You’re cold.”

“I’m fine,” I insist.

“It was fucking freezing out there.”

I shrug.

“You’ve got enough problems right now without adding pneumonia to the list.” He curses under his breath. “There’s a perfectly good bed right here. What were you thinking?”

I’m grateful for the darkness — maybe it’ll conceal my blush.

“Gemma.”

He wants an answer. His tone practically demands it.

Damn .

Maybe if I say it really fast, he won’t fully process my words and thus it won’t be so embarrassing?

“Ididn’twanttoclimbintoyourbedwithoutyouokay?”

It comes out as one long slurred word, and as soon as it’s out of my mouth, I want to pull the covers up over my head and disappear. Or maybe suffocate myself with a pillow.

I feel my cheeks getting redder the longer the words are out there, hanging in the silence between us. After nearly a minute of total quiet, I probably look like Chrissy after her honeymoon in Cancun a few years ago, when she had so many margaritas, she forgot all about sunscreen and turned into a lobster.

I freeze when I feel Chase shift, closing most of the space between our

faces until I'm forced to meet his eyes. I'm surprised to find they aren't mocking or mean — they've gone soft again, and there's a look swimming in their depths I can't quite decipher.

"You'd be a real pain in the ass if you weren't so damn cute."

My lips twist in a half smile, half pout. "I'm sure there's a compliment mixed in there, somewhere."

His voice gets gruff. "You planning on being a bitch again?"

I think about it for a minute. "No. Not tonight, anyway."

There's a short pause as he processes that, before his mouth stretches into a grin.

"Good."

Then he's kissing me again, and this time, there's nothing soft or restrained about it. His arms slide around to the small of my back, and in one tug, he's pulled me on top of him, so I'm sprawled against his chest. I press closer, wishing I could sink into him and let Gemma Summers disappear, at least for a little while.

Maybe forever, if it means feeling like this for the rest of my life.

The thought startles me so much, I plant my hands on his shoulders and try to push myself up to look at him. He doesn't let me — his abs flex as he curls up, keeping his mouth fused to mine. If I'm going to get my protests out at all, I have no choice but to mumble them against his relentless lips.

"Chase," I whisper, but with his lips on mine it sounds more like *chzz* .

He ignores me.

"Maybe—"

His kisses cut off my words.

"Maybe we should—" I try again, before my words are swallowed up.

He only kisses me harder.

"—talk—"

He sucks lightly on my lower lip, until I feel the scrape of teeth against sensitive skin, and my mind gets a little foggy.

"—about this," I breathe, my fingers digging into his biceps when he gently bites down, tugging on my bottom lip with his teeth. It feels so good, my mind literally frazzles into static.

Why do I want to stop this, again?

"Chase..."

I gasp out his name, my voice filled with want, and at the sound, he breaks the kiss. I should be happy, considering I'm the one insisting we talk,

but as soon as he pulls back, all I can think is *Really? The man who ignores almost every protest out of my mouth chooses this moment to start listening?*

I want to slap myself across the face for ever suggesting we talk. My body doesn't want to talk. And, from the look in Chase's eyes, neither does he. They're dark with passion — darker than I've ever seen, the green in his irises almost black in the dim light of the bedroom.

We're both panting hard, our faces so close, I can feel his breath against my lips. I open my mouth to speak, but for the life of me, I can't remember what I wanted to say to him, what I felt was so important we discuss at this exact moment in time. In fact, all I can think is that right now, I want his lips back on mine and his body pressed as close as possible, kissing me until I forget to worry about my life and just *live* it.

He stares at me for a long moment, reading the expression on my face, and whatever he sees there makes his eyes get lazy with heat. My stomach flips at the sight, trepidation and anticipation stirring in my veins. Closing the space I've created between us, he strokes our noses together and aligns our lips, so I can feel each word as they rumble through his chest and out his mouth.

"Gemma..." His voice is rough, stripped of patience. "We've done enough talking."

His mouth closes over mine again, and this time, I don't fight it. I let him kiss me, devour me, until there's nothing left in the world except him and me, here in this dark room — two people utterly and completely wrong for each other... and yet, somehow, so totally right.

His hands slip beneath the t-shirt, callused fingers exploring my back, caressing the bare skin there. It feels so good, my whole body arches against his, and I can't stop the satisfied sigh that slides up my throat, past my lips, into his mouth. Lips never breaking contact, he swallows the sound and, before I can recover, his tongue slides inside to stroke mine. That single brush is all it takes to shatter what little restraint I'd been clinging to.

It's a shot of pure oxygen into the embers of slow-burning passion that have been smoldering between us for the past week. In seconds, we're set ablaze — fiery, fierce, burning up with it. My hands trace his torso, greedily exploring every stretch of bare skin within reach as his grip tightens on my back. I scrape my nails against his chest, reveling in the feeling of his muscles contracting, and Chase groans low in his throat in response.

Enjoying the way my touch affects him, I grin against his mouth, though

my time with the upper hand is short lived — he flips over so fast I barely see him move, rolling me onto my back and settling above me before I can protest.

Not that I'd want to.

His weight presses me into the bed, a solid wall of heat, stealing the breath from my lungs without crushing me. I don't know how it happens, but suddenly my t-shirt is gone — whipped over my head and tossed across the room before I've even seen Chase move. My thoughts blink out like a light bulb with a faulty fuse as soon as my bare chest brushes his. Every sense except touch goes dull — eyes unfocused, ears buzzing — as though my body is so overloaded by the sensation of his skin against mine, I can't process any other sensory input. His lips drop to my neck, planting kisses along my throat, and the buzzing between my ears grows so loud, it drowns out my heartbeat.

In fact, it's getting pretty hard to ignore. Which is annoying because...

NEARLY NAKED CHASE CROFT IS ON TOP OF ME.

The buzzing stops for a second, then starts up again on short, insistent intervals. Though he's still kissing me, Chase grumbles out a sound of frustration, and I feel my cheeks flame as awareness creeps into my brain.

My mind isn't buzzing — it's his phone, on the bedside table.

Oops .

It vibrates again, and I freeze.

"Ignore it," he mutters against my neck, planting kisses in the hollow beneath my ear.

I happily oblige, my hands knotting in his hair to pull him closer.

The landline phone starts to sound in the other room, its piercing ring shattering the moment.

"Fuck." Chase groans and lifts his head so his forehead rests against mine. We're both breathing too fast, and I'm almost positive my eyes are a mirror of his own — dilated with pure desire.

"Go," I whisper, craning my neck to brush my lips against his. "It might be important."

"I don't care," he murmurs. "This is more important."

"It could be Knox."

He sighs and I feel his warm exhale across my lips. Without moving his body, he throws out one arm and snatches his cellphone off the bedside table. I hear him curse quietly as he reads the screen.

“Fuck.”

Which translates to: *Yes, it's important* .

“Chase,” I prompt, hearing the landline ring again.

“I’m going.” He pushes up on his forearms and pins me with a glare. “Don’t you dare fucking move.”

I grin. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

He snorts in amusement.

“What?” I protest, my voice teasing. “When have I ever not followed your orders, Mr. CEO?”

“How about every fucking day since we met,” he mutters, but his tone is playful, rather than pissed.

I’m still laughing when he lowers his mouth to mine and kisses me one last time, his lips hard and unrelenting. By the time he’s done, my amusement is long gone and my body is thrumming with desire again. I stare up at him, filled with longing and regret, as he sits back on his knees. He’s about to move off the bed when he catches sight of my face.

He freezes completely, every muscle in his body going tight. I’m sprawled in his bed and he’s gazing down at me in a way he’s never done before — in a way no man has ever done before. I know my hair is a mess of waves, fanning across his pillow, my cheeks are probably flushed redder than a tomato, and I’m pretty much naked except for a flimsy pair of panties, but somehow it doesn’t matter. I should be embarrassed. Hell, if it were anyone else, seeing me in this exposed state, I *would* be embarrassed.

But it’s Chase.

And he’s looking at me with such warmth, such sheer tenderness, as his eyes move over my hair and my body, I can’t feel anything except cherished.

The phone rings again.

“Go, before I pull you back down here,” I whisper.

His eyes flash darkly and his jaw clenches tight. “Don’t tempt me, sunshine. You’re too goddamned beautiful. I’m having a hard enough time walking away, right now, and you can bet your ass I won’t be able to focus on a single thing Knox needs to tell me, knowing you’re naked in my bed.”

The breath catches in my throat as his fingers stroke lightly across my cheekbone one last time. I don’t even have time to pull in a proper breath before he’s gone — sliding off the bed and crossing out of the bedroom as though he hasn’t just set my world atilt on its axis with a few little words and a tiny caress of his fingers against my face.

CHAPTER 23

STAY



I HEAR the muffled sound of Chase on the phone in the other room. There’s urgency in his tone, and a resigned kind of anger, so I know it’s not good news. When I hear him say, “Fuck. Come up, we’ll talk here,” I know it’s more than *not good* .

It’s bad.

With a sigh, I force myself to scramble out of bed. It takes me a while, but eventually I locate the t-shirt Chase threw across the room and pull it over my head. I run my fingers through my hair before padding into the main room — just in time to see the elevator doors slide open as Knox swaggers into the apartment.

He freezes when he catches sight of me, half-clothed in Chase’s giant shirt, and I *think* his lips quirk up in the hint of a smile, but it’s hard to tell, what with his constant *I’m-so-badass-Chuck-Norris-fears-me* expression.

“Hiya, Knox.” I do a little finger-wave in his direction, grinning wide.

At that, he definitely smiles — just the tiniest bit of crinkling around his eyes, but still, it counts. In my book, at least.

“Sunshine, I told you to stay in bed.”

When I hear his voice, my eyes move to Chase. He’s leaning against the kitchen island, arms crossed over his broad chest, somehow commanding the space even in his bare feet and boxers. I grin at the sight and cross toward him. As soon as I’m within reach, his arm shoots out and tags me around the waist, hauling me close, so I’m plastered against his side.

I don't object — in fact, I nestle closer, enjoying his warmth, the way my head fits perfectly in the hollow of his throat, and how good his arm feels, wrapped tight around my shoulders.

"You don't need to be here for this," he rumbles softly against my hair.

"It's about me, right? My apartment and Ralph?"

My question is met with stony silence — which tells me I'm 100% correct.

"That's what I thought. I'm staying."

Chase sighs, but doesn't argue.

"Stubborn," he mutters.

"Overprotective," I counter.

He chuckles, but I feel his body go tense as he turns his attention back to Knox.

"What did you find out?"

Knox's dark eyes flicker from me to Chase. "Goldstein is in the wind. I checked his apartment, went to his office, even paid a visit to a few of his friends. None of them have seen him."

"You're sure?" Chase asks. "They aren't lying, covering for him?"

Knox doesn't bother to respond, but his eyes glitter with something dark — like onyx exposed to light — and his head bows in the slightest of nods.

He's sure.

I don't want to know *how* he's so sure. Ever. Because I have a feeling it involves a lot of broken bones and scary threats.

"There's more," Knox says, voice low. His dark eyes move to me. "Maybe you should go back to bed, Gemma."

Chase's muscles go even tenser and I feel my heartbeat kick into high gear.

"I'm staying." My voice is resolute, even if there's fear running through it. "I want to know."

Knox nods, looking back at Chase. "The apartment was ransacked — you saw that. Nothing valuable was taken. But, after picking through the wreckage, I think he did find something." His eyes move to mine. "You had a wooden box, beneath your bed."

Dread drops into my stomach like a stone.

"Looked like you kept lots of old papers in it — high school report cards, old invoices, photographs, that kind of shit. They were scattered all over the floor of your bedroom." Knox's gaze narrows on my face. "You know what

I'm talking about?"

I nod.

"He put the empty box back on your bed, when he was done. There was a note in it."

I suck in a nervous breath, and Chase's arm tightens around me.

"What did it say?" I force myself to ask, dreading the answer.

Knox's eyes are intent. "*Tomorrow I won't be the one they're laughing at, bitch.*"

"Shit," I whisper. "Shit, shit, shit."

Chase turns me in his arms, cups my face between his hands, and bends to look into my eyes. "Gemma. What's wrong?"

My gaze, wide with panic, flickers up to his. "This is a mess. Oh god, I have to leave. I have to get out of here, leave the city, maybe go back to my Mom's..."

"Gemma." His grip on my face tightens, not enough to hurt me but enough to ground me in the present. "Tell me what's going on. We'll fix it."

"You can't fix this, Chase!" A hysterical sound bubbles up from my throat. "The press — they're going to love this. They'll eat it up. And the fallout... God, I knew this would happen. I knew they'd find out. Dammit, I'm such an idiot."

"Sunshine."

"You should cut ties with me, Chase, before the shit hits the fan. This is going to be a freaking circus. They'll never leave me alone, after this."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"You don't understand—"

"Gemma!" His eyes flash with frustration. "Listen to me. I don't give a shit about your past or the press. It doesn't fucking matter to me. All that matters is this, right here, you and me." His voice is unshakable. "Whatever it is, I'll fix it. But you have to let me in. You have to trust me enough to make it better."

I freeze, staring at him. Weighing the truth in his words.

My mother's voice whispers from the back of my mind.

When you start to fall, don't talk yourself out of it — the right man will be there at the bottom, to catch you.

"He knows," I whisper, staring so deep into Chase's eyes, I can almost see his soul.

"Knows what, sunshine?"

I take a deep breath.

“He knows about my father.”

KNOX AND CHASE are both staring at me, expressions of surprise on their typically stoic faces. I can't exactly blame them; hearing that the man responsible for approximately half my chromosomes is Milo West — the same Milo West who owns seventy percent of New England's tech industry — is a bombshell big enough to rattle even the most composed person.

“How is that possible?” Knox asks bluntly, shattering the silence.

“My mother never really gave me the down-and-dirty details.” I shrug. “All I know is they met twenty-seven years ago, shared a few weeks of passion, and, like magic, nine months later... *abracadabra baby!* ”

Knox stares at me blankly, clearly not appreciating my attempt at levity.

“Gemma.” My eyes move to Chase when he says my name. “Does he know about you?”

I rub my temple, hoping it might sooth the headache pounding there. “He knows.”

“And?”

I sigh. “And he never had any interest in me, okay? He already had a family by the time I came along. Millionaire tech tycoons don't exactly make a habit of going to their illegitimate, adulterous love child's soccer games or invite them to spend the holidays together.”

“He didn't provide for you at all?”

“He sent money.” A sharp exhale of disgust slips out. “Mom sent it right back. We didn't need his charity.”

“It's not charity if he's your father,” Chase says softly.

“Chase.” I roll my eyes. “Come on. He isn't my father. He's nothing more than a sperm donor.”

“Gemma—”

“No!” I run my fingers through my hair, exasperated. “I don't want to talk about this. And frankly, if it weren't for Ralph, we *wouldn't* be talking about this. Ever.”

Chase's eyes narrow on my face. Mr. CEO does *not* like the idea of me keeping secrets from him, that much is apparent.

“What was in the box?” Knox's voice is low, intent.

I glance at him. “My birth certificate. The *FATHER* section is blank, so

that wouldn't have been much help to him. But... there were letters.”

He lifts one eyebrow in question.

“He wrote to my mother, during their — I'm not sure you can call it a relationship. During their affair, I suppose. Love letters, full of pretty words and promises. Or, they were... until he found out she was pregnant.”

Knox's eyes narrow and Chase's jaw clenches as they wait for me to finish.

“He sent her \$800 and told her to get rid of it. Of me.” I swallow, trying to keep my cool. “He said he couldn't jeopardize his family with...”

“With what?” Chase's voice vibrates with barely-leashed fury.

I swallow again. “With a mistake.”

“*Fucking asshole* .” Chase curses so loud I flinch at the sound of it. “If I ever cross paths with him...”

“Chase.” I lay a hand on his arm and wait until his livid gaze lifts to mine. When it does, I make my voice as calm as possible. “He's not worth it.”

The muscle ticks in his cheek on steady intervals as he fights to control his temper. I have a distinct feeling if he ever runs into Milo West in a dark alley... only one of them will come out alive.

“Ralph has them,” Knox says, calling my attention back to him. “The letters.”

I nod. “And I'm sure he's already delivered them to every news outlet he can think of. I'm actually surprised he had the patience to wait until tomorrow's broadcast to ruin my life.”

“This isn't going to ruin your life.” Chase's voice is resolute.

“Maybe not,” I agree softly. “But it will destroy my mother's.”

His eyes cut to Knox. “See if you can find him before he gets to the networks. I'll call my lawyers, see if they can work up an injunction before whatever they have airs. It may not stop them forever, but it might give us a few hours. I've got some favors I can call in, if I need to.”

Knox nods to Chase, glances briefly at me, then turns and heads for the elevator.

“Bye!” I call to his retreating back.

He doesn't answer as he enters the elevator and pushes a button, but just before the doors slide shut, I notice the skin around his eyes is doing the crinkly thing again and I know, despite his badass-exterior, he's smiling on the inside.

“Go back to bed, sunshine.” Chase's voice is gentle. “I'll call the lawyers.

See what they can do.”

“How can they possibly do anything this quickly? And at this time of night?” I ask, incredulous. “It’s past one.”

I see amusement flash in his eyes. “Gemma, my family has had their fair share of indiscretions and interactions with the press. Things like this are the exact reason I pay my lawyers such a shitload of money. You could buy a private island with the amount the Crofts have spent on retainer fees over the past decade to cover up scandals and keep things out of the public eye.”

I wouldn’t touch that statement with a ten-foot pole.

“But they won’t be able to stop the story forever, right?” I ask instead.

“We’ll stop it.”

I wish I felt as sure as he sounds.

I sigh. “All my life, I’ve been hiding from this. And now... the press is going to have a field day. They’ll be like dogs with a juicy bone, sucking every drop of marrow they can get from this story. And if it were just me, that’d be one thing. But it’s going to affect my mother, too. They’ll drag her into it, upend the life she’s built without him...”

“I’ll have a man from my security team watch her. If the story breaks, the press won’t even get close enough for photos.”

“Thanks,” I whisper, meaning it. “But it’s not just that. Milo West...” My tongue feels awkward even saying his name, after a lifetime of resolutely refusing to acknowledge his existence. “He broke her heart. She fell in love with him, had a child for him... and he picked his perfect family over her. She never moved on, afterward. So, having all this ancient history dredged up and thrown in her face... I’m worried it’ll break her heart all over again.”

“And yours?” Chase asks, his tone soft as he takes a step closer to me. “What about your heart, Gemma?”

“You can’t get hurt if you don’t care,” I say automatically, the line well rehearsed after years of telling it to myself. “And I don’t give a shit about Milo West.”

I feel Chase’s fingers lace through mine and squeeze lightly. With a gentle tug, he pulls me close. His free arm wraps around my back and his cheek comes down to rest on the crown of my head, so I’m pressed hard against his bare chest, the steady thumping of his heartbeat strong beneath my ear.

“Sunshine,” he whispers against my hair.

“I’m okay. Really.”

And in that moment, despite everything happening in my life, it's not a lie.

I really *am* okay.

Actually, I'm better than just okay.

I'm *safe* .

DESPITE MY BEST INTENTIONS, I fall asleep curled up on the couch, watching the flames dance on the grate and listening to the murmur of Chase's voice as he orders his lawyers to work their magic and stop the presses before they can further derail my life.

I don't know how long I'm asleep, but it feels like hours later when I stir awake in Chase's arms as he carries me through the dark apartment and settles us back in his bed, beneath his zillion-thread-count black sheets. I'm so exhausted I can't even crack open my eyes or lift my head from where it rests against the warm skin of his chest.

"What did the lawyers say?" I murmur, my voice barely audible over the thundering of his heartbeat, directly beneath my ear.

"Shh, sunshine. Go back to sleep. We'll talk about it in the morning."

He breathes the words into my hair, his arms banding tighter around my back so I'm snug and warm against him. I feel one hand slip up under my t-shirt, and seconds later, his fingers begin to trace soothing circles against the small of my back. The other hand slides up to caress the sensitive skin at the nape of my neck and his fingers stroke through the hair there, offering comfort in the simplest of ways. His touch is absentminded, totally natural, with none of the forced intimacy of my past conquests – like it's something he's done a million times before without even having to think about it.

He touches me like a habit.

I'm startled by how much I like the idea of making habits with Chase.

It should scare me — how easy, how *perfect* it feels, being with him. All of this should have me running for the hills. In the past, this exact thing — a guy pushing past the physical connection to real emotion — *has* sent me running for the hills.

But here, in Chase's bed, drinking him in with every one of my senses, I can't pretend not to feel it — the intimacy of the moment. The sweet, beautiful, heart-aching simplicity of a hand in my hair, of arms wrapped tight around me. There's nothing sexual about his touch — only comfort,

compassion between two people who care for one another. And still, with just the trace of his fingertips on my skin, he reaches deeper into my soul than any man has ever done before, even in the throes of the best orgasm of my life.

Seriously — it should freak me out.

It freaks me out that it *doesn't* freak me out.

I sigh as all the tension slips out of me and I relax against him, my limbs like water. I've never done this before — just slept with a man, in the most basic form of the word. My one-night stands either fled in the cover of darkness or hung around just long enough to make things awkward in the morning. And Ralph... well, after he finished — regardless of whether I'd even come *close* in the two minutes he spent pumping away with the impatience of a boy inflating his bicycle tires — he'd roll to the other side of the bed, as far from me as he could get, and start snoring loud enough to make my headboard shake.

So romantic.

Hesitantly, I wrap my arms around Chase's body and snuggle closer.

"You're good at this," I whisper sleepily.

I feel his body still beneath mine. "What, sunshine?"

"This." I squeeze my arms tighter. "Us . You're good at it."

He's quiet but, after a few seconds, I feel his lips press against my hair.

"Only because it's you," he murmurs, making my heart turn in my chest.

"I've never done this before." My words are practically inaudible, but somehow, he hears me.

"I know, sunshine."

"I might be bad at it."

He chuckles. "Yeah, I'm starting to get that."

My eyes crack open and I shift against him so I can meet his eyes. Even in the dark, I see they're soft and warm.

"I'm sorry about earlier."

His arms tighten around me. "I know."

"This stuff — letting you in — it doesn't come naturally to me." I take a deep breath, trying desperately to keep my voice from shaking. "He's got another family, you know. That's why he didn't stay with my mom."

Chase stills completely, his eyes on mine. "I know."

"I have an older brother I've never met. A little sister, too." I swallow. "I always wanted siblings. Even more than I wanted a father, growing up, I

wanted brothers and sisters to play with.”

Chase’s fingers stroke through my hair.

“It was just me and Mom. She didn’t ever tell me about him — she just said he left us, before I was born. She didn’t want me to know I was half West.” I sigh. “I get why she kept it from me, now. She didn’t want me to see the life we almost had. It would’ve been like telling a little street urchin her father was the king — that she should’ve been a princess, not a pauper.”

“How did you find out?”

“I found the letters, when I was fifteen. She kept them in her jewelry box. I was trying on her necklaces, one day, when she wasn’t home. And there they were, at the bottom of the drawer. Letters from my father.” I take another steadying breath. “I was so mad, it sent me into a tailspin. Drinking, drugs, boys — any trouble I could get my hands on. The rest of my teenage years passed in a blur. I was mad for a long time.” My hands curl involuntarily. “I’m still mad, if I’m being honest. Not with Mom — with him. Milo. For doing that to her.”

“And to you,” Chase adds softly.

I’m silent for a moment, trying to work up a denial but unable to do it. I can’t lie about this — not to Chase — so I lay my head against his chest and listen to his heartbeat, willing myself not to cry. He doesn’t push me; he just pets my hair in long, soothing strokes, reassuring me without words that I’ll be all right. I press my eyes closed and hug him so tight it’s probably hard to breathe, but he never complains.

“He didn’t stay,” I whisper finally, my words hollow.

Chase’s lips brush my forehead and his arms tighten to hold me closer.

My voice is little more than a whisper.

“No one ever stays.”

A single tear escapes my eyelid and drips onto his bare chest. He flinches when he feels it, as though a bullet’s hit his chest instead of a single drop of moisture. As though that tiny tear causes him physical pain.

I don’t let any more escape, and he doesn’t say anything.

He just holds me in the darkness, his arms so tight they’re almost painful, and lends me his strength.

It’s only later, much later, when my breaths have slowed and I’ve nearly nodded off to sleep that I feel lips brush against the shell of my ear and hear the echo of soft-rasped words, so distant I can’t tell whether they’re real or the fragment of a dream.

“I’ll stay, sunshine. For you, I’ll stay.”

CHAPTER 24

BURN



WHEN I WAKE in the morning, Chase is gone. I register the absence of him — of his heat, of his scent, of the reassuring thud of his heartbeat — before I’m even fully conscious. Disappointment pumps through my veins as my eyes blink open, locking instantly on the empty space where he used to be. When I catch sight of the sheet of paper lying on his pillow, covered in neat lines of elegant, masculine script, I vault upright and greedily pull it close to make out his words.

GEMMA,

You looked too peaceful to wake, no matter how much I wanted a kiss goodbye.

I’ll settle for hoping you’re dreaming of me, instead.

I have a business meeting across the city this morning, so I’ll be gone for a few hours. Make yourself at home. Evan is downstairs in the lobby — if you need anything and you can’t reach me, he’ll take care of you.

I called in a few favors and the press has agreed to table the story, for now. Pissing off the Crofts isn’t good for business — and when I told them just how pissed I’d be if they upset my girlfriend, they backed off. Very quickly.

I know yesterday was tough. But today will be a better day, sunshine. I’m sure of it. After all — no day that begins with you wrapped in my arms can

possibly turn out to be anything but beautiful. I'll see you soon.

Yours,

Chase

PS: If you get bored, check my study.

MY HEART POUNDS WILDLY in my chest as a grin spreads across my face, so big it makes my cheeks ache. Like a little kid with a note from the tooth fairy, I pull the paper close and hug it to my chest, feeling stupidly happy as his words melt through me, warming me from the inside out.

I'm not sure what's better — the fact that he worked a miracle and stopped the story, or the fact that he called me his girlfriend for the first time in a freaking note, like he thought if he casually slipped it in, it might not give me heart palpitations.

God, he's annoying.

Sort of. Kind of.

Okay, *fine*, he's not annoying at all.

I throw off the covers, jump out of bed, and race toward the door on the far wall, which I know leads into his study. I've barely gotten the door open, barely even scanned the space, when tears spring to my eyes.

It's an elegant room, with loads of windows, an imposing oak desk, and a gorgeous view of downtown, but I hardly spare it a glance. My glassy eyes are locked on the far corner, where, in a sunny nook by the windows, a stunning, antique wooden easel has been set up. There's a blank canvas propped on it, waiting to be turned into art. A brand new set of oils sits at the ready, next to a big bottle of turpentine, a container of gesso, several brushes, and a new wooden palette. All the supplies I could ever need — including the ones I've never been able to afford at the expensive art stores — are there, crying out for me to use them.

He's thought of everything.

It's the best gift I've ever had, from anyone. Ever. There's no way to repay him — I know from many years of scrimping and saving just how much all this costs. Not that he'd let me, even if I tried.

I'm shocked to feel water leaking down my face, a steady torrent of tears. The sensation is so foreign, it takes me a moment to realize I'm crying.

Me. Gemma Summers.

Crying like a wimpy little girl, for the first time in as long as I can

remember.

I wipe moisture off my cheeks as I walk forward, my hands shaking as they sift through the materials he left me. My gentle-flowing tears turn to full-out hiccupping sobs as I get close enough to see, stacked neatly against the wall, more than a dozen blank canvases in various sizes. It'll take me months to fill them all. Which can only mean...

He wants me around, in his life, for a long while.

My tears flow faster at the thought, until I'm practically weeping. I didn't cry when I had to drop out of art school because I ran out of money. I didn't cry when I fell off that damn motorcycle as a teenager and broke my leg. I didn't even cry when Mom told me the true story of my parentage.

But this, what Chase has done for me, is enough to turn me into a leaky mess.

The easel has been set up in the sunniest spot in the office, with the prettiest vantage, directly across from Chase's desk. In fact, it completely blocks his own view of the windows. Sitting at his desk, looking out, he won't see the cityscape. All he'll see is me, painting.

Oh .

I'm having trouble pulling in a full breath as my eyes move from his desk to my easel. It should be strange — messy art and practical business sharing the same space — but somehow they go together. The easel is finished in warm mahogany, a perfect match for the rest of the office, as though it was designed to match. Designed to *stay* .

My breath halts entirely at that thought, and I decide it's a good idea to gulp down some coffee before I pass out from lack of oxygen. And perhaps locate some tissues before I turn into a living, breathing puddle of emotion.

Turning my back on the office, I find my way to the kitchen in a daze and flip on the coffee machine, doing everything in my power not to think about the beautiful easel or its spot in that beautiful office and *especially* not the beautiful man who put it there.

LIFTING the coffee cup to my mouth with one hand, the other roots around the bottom of my purse, wincing as my fingers brush past several weeks worth of gum wrappers and half dried-out pens. I've just taken a sip when I finally feel the smooth plastic of my phone case. Pulling it from the depths, I press a button to power it on and nearly spit my mouthful of coffee all over the

breakfast bar.

I have seventeen missed calls and voicemails.

Seventeen!

Fourteen of them are from Chrissy. Two are from Shelby. The last one is from my landlord.

I don't bother listening to them. I just scroll to Chrissy's name and punch the redial button. It barely even rings before the call connects and her voice crackles over the line.

"You are in so much trouble, Gemma Summers!"

"What did I do this time?"

"If you'd bothered to listen to the zillion voicemails I left you—"

"Which would've taken several years," I point out.

"—you'd know that I saw the photos of you and Chase outside your apartment last night. You're back in the city!"

"Yeah." I sigh. "My mother, the traitor, called him from Rocky Neck. He came and brought me back early."

She huffs, outraged. "And you didn't even bother to tell me?"

"It was late. I didn't want to wake you," I hedge, avoiding a fight with her at all costs. There are so many hormones running through her veins at the moment, she makes most meth-heads look sedate — I am so not about to enter a battle I know I'll lose. "And let's just say, things didn't work out so well when I got to my apartment."

"Um, yeah, I saw the photos! Why the heck were the police there?"

"Rat Bastard Ralph got his revenge."

"What?"

I sigh, take another large sip of my coffee, and tell her about my wrecked apartment.

"What a dick!" she screeches into the phone when I finish. "If I wasn't seventeen years pregnant, I would totally find him and kick his ass! Actually, I could probably still kick that little weasel's ass, even in this state. I may be the size of the Hood blimp and confined to bed rest, but he's kind of a weakling. I can take him."

I laugh, picturing Chrissy waddling down Comm Ave, her swollen ankles shoved into motorcycle boots, a leather jacket not quite closing over her protruding belly, on the hunt for my asshole ex-boyfriend.

"Thanks, but that won't be necessary. Chase has it covered."

She screeches into the receiver again, this time out of excitement rather

than outrage, and I pull the phone away from my ear to prevent permanent hearing damage.

“Please warn me next time you’re gonna do that,” I mutter.

She totally ignores my grumbles. “So, does this mean you’re dating him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, how long are you staying there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you going to the Croft gala thing tonight?”

Chase had mentioned it in the car yesterday, but he hadn’t invited me.

“Chrissy, I don’t know.”

“Is there anything you *do* know?”

I think about it for a minute. “Not really, no.”

“Ugh.” She groans. “I can’t properly interrogate you over the phone. Can you come over? My glare is much more effective in person.”

“The paparazzi are apparently camped outside, stalking me.”

“How intense is their presence? Say... on a scale of one to Britney Spears?”

I tilt my head in thought. “Are we talking teenage-dream Britney or bald, off-her-rocker Britney?”

“Either.”

I sigh. “Probably somewhere in between — think *Crossroads* press-tour Britney.”

“Ahh,” Chrissy murmurs in complete comprehension. “Gotcha.”

“I’d invite you to come here but...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Preterm labor *bad*, bed rest *good*. I know the drill.” She huffs. “I really don’t think I can manage two and a half more weeks of this. My love for daytime TV is vast, but even it has its limits. Ellen is great, but at this point even her daily dance parties aren’t enough to cheer me up. And I’ve watched so many telenovelas, I’m practically fluent in Spanish, now.”

“Maybe the baby will pop out bilingual. That’d be cool.”

“Truth.” She pauses. “Damn, now, I’m craving Mexican. Maybe Mark will get me a burrito or four from *Anna’s* on his way home from work...”

I snort. “Goodbye, Chrissy.”

“Wait!” she snaps. “You’re not getting off that easy. You still owe me details, woman!”

I should've known she wouldn't be easy to shake.

Sighing, I rack my brain for something I can tell her. I don't want to get into the saga of my father — it's way too early in the day to unpack that much familial dysfunction — so instead, I take a deep breath, make my voice as casual as possible, and say, "Chase bought me an easel and replaced all my supplies. It was nice."

Total silence from the other end of the line.

"Chrissy?" I ask. "You still there?"

"Ohmigod," she breathes.

"What?" I ask, my heart pounding a little too fast.

"You love him."

"*What?!*" I screech. "Where did you possibly get that from? All I said is *it was nice!*"

"I know!" she screams. "You totally love him!"

"Chrissy! Did you fall and hit your head? Because if you don't have some kind of cerebral hemorrhage, you've definitely gone insane."

"Gemma, honey, don't bother denying it..." She makes a *tsk* sound. "I can hear it in your voice. You're totally falling for him. No — you've totally *fallen* for him."

"That's not possible. I've known the man a week! I can't possibly—" I shake my head in denial. "No. No way."

She giggles. "It's cute — you trying to talk yourself out of this."

"Chrissy!"

"Gemma!"

"People don't fall in love in a week."

"I fell in love with Mark in five seconds," she reminds me, her voice a little dreamy. "All he said was '*I'm Mark, I'll be your TA for the semester*' and BAM! I knew, right then, that I was in love with him."

"How could you possibly know that?"

"He made me look forward to biology." I can almost hear her shrug through the line. "True love is being so excited about seeing someone, you don't even care if you have to dissect a frog to do it."

I laugh. "Well, it's not like that for me."

"Do you have butterflies?"

"No," I lie immediately, pressing a hand to my stomach where the fluttering creatures have practically taken up residence since I met Chase.

"O-kay, whatever you say, Pinocchio."

I narrow my eyes even though she can't see me. "I don't like you."

"Oh, you're just full of lies today." She giggles. "Have you slept with him yet?"

I hesitate.

"Ohmigod, you haven't!" she exclaims. "That just *proves* it!"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"If you weren't falling for him, you would've slept with him ages ago. Given him the Gemma Special and sent him packing."

My eyebrows go up. "The Gemma Special?"

"One night. No cuddling. No personal details. Gone by sunrise. I hate to break it to you, honey, but it's your *modus operandi*."

I roll my eyes. "So not true."

Even though it kind of was.

"Whatever you say," she singsongs. "But I have one last question."

Dread churns in my stomach. "What?"

"Are your pants on fire right now? Because you are *lyyyyyying*."

"I'm hanging up, now."

"Oh, fine." She laughs. "But I'm only letting you go because I really have to pee and the last time I brought my cell into the bathroom, it ended up at the bottom of the toilet. And since I can't really bend over... Let's just say, Mark wasn't a happy camper when he got home."

I roll my eyes.

"Anywho, call me tonight!" she demands, clicking off mere seconds later.

Shaking my head in exasperation, I take another large swig of coffee and do my best to forget everything Chrissy just said. Because as outrageous and off-the-mark as she is, I can't help but wonder if she's also kind of...

Right.

FIVE HOURS LATER, I'm starting to understand why Chrissy is such a loon, these days. Half a day of house arrest, and I'm going out of my mind with boredom.

After hanging up with her, I called back my landlord, who didn't answer, followed by Shelby, who *did* answer and, after a little arm-twisting, agreed to run a much-needed errand for me: shopping for some replacement clothes and dropping them off here ASAP. Which, in Shelby-time, means anywhere from ten to twelve hours from now.

In my short day of incarceration, I've showered, dressed in a pair of Chase's boxer briefs and one of the too-big, ultra-white button-down dress shirts I found hanging in his massive walk-in closet, drank three cups of coffee, watched four reruns of FRIENDS on TV, and cursed everyone from Estelle for giving me time off, to Ralph for wrecking my apartment, to Chase for putting me under house arrest. I tried to paint, but my mind is too crowded with worries about too many different things to create anything worthwhile.

Eventually, I settle in on the couch and start reading *The Art of War*, mostly as a joke, a first, but after a few pages, I have to admit Chase was right — it's kind of engrossing.

Not that I'll ever admit that to *him*.

When the elevator chimes open around two, I jump to my feet so fast, the book in my lap tumbles to the ground. I'm barreling in Chase's direction before he's made it two steps inside the apartment.

"You're back!" I yell, seconds before impact. I don't slow when I reach him. At full speed, I hurdle my body against his — arms going around his shoulders, legs wrapping around his waist — and hold tight. He grunts as my body-slam knocks the breath from his lungs, but his arms slide around my frame as he accepts my weight and pulls me close. Face tucked into the crook of his neck, I breathe him in and feel the low chuckle vibrate through his body.

"Missed me, huh, sunshine?"

I squeeze tighter in confirmation, pulling back to look into his eyes.

"No, I do this to everyone." I grin teasingly. "I greeted Evan this exact same way when he came up to check on me at lunchtime. You should've seen his face."

His eyes narrow on mine. "Very funny."

I drop my forehead against his and let my eyes droop half-closed, my gaze locked on his mouth. It's so close to mine, if I move just the tiniest bit forward, our lips will brush.

"Thanks for the easel," I whisper.

"You're welcome sunshi—"

I don't even let him get the word out, because I can't wait anymore. Suddenly, my mouth is pressed against his, my hands are twining into his hair, and I'm pressing closer, as close as I can get, until our bodies are flush together. He responds instantly, growling low in his throat as his grip tightens

and his mouth claims mine in a passionate kiss.

With his arms beneath my thighs and his lips fused to mine, Chase crosses the apartment in quick, determined strides, carrying me into the bedroom and setting me down on his bed before I've even realized we're moving. His hands are hungry, his kisses are lingering, as he stretches out over me.

"My clothes look good on you," he mutters against the pulse point in my throat, where my heart beats a little too fast.

I crane my neck to give him better access, my nails digging into the crisp fabric of his shirt.

"Really?" I breathe, struggling to form coherent words with his hands on my body. "I think they'd look better on your bedroom floor."

He doesn't laugh, like I expected him to. Instead, his hands move, finding the hem of my shirt, and he tugs. *Hard*. Buttons fly in all directions as the fabric tears open, and I gasp at both the sound and the sudden feeling of his rough palms on the sensitive skin of my stomach.

"You're so damn beautiful," he whispers, staring greedily down at me, drinking in the sight of his hands on me. I arch beneath him, bringing my mouth back to his as my hands find his waist and cling tightly.

"You ruined your shirt," I whisper against his lips.

"I have more shirts." His eyes are molten with pure, unadulterated passion. "But I'm fresh out of patience."

My breath catches and I hold his stare, feeling a little reckless.

"*Good*."

He moves so fast I barely process it, closing the space between us and lowering his mouth over mine once more. His lips are possessive, demanding everything I thought I could give and then *more*. He doesn't let me look away as he kisses me. Our gazes hold as our hands explore unfamiliar territory, the moment filled with such intensity, I can't tell whether my heart is pounding so fast out of fear or desire. I want to look away from him, to break his stare, but I can't — I owe it to Chase, to myself, to see what this is between us, even if it scares the hell out of me.

Looking at me with fire in his eyes, he grabs my hand and leads me to a place I've never been before, where the brush of a fingertip against fragile skin, the hot exhale of a breath against an earlobe, is enough to set my very soul aflame.

And with Chase touching me, I finally understand. I finally get it — why

little girls hold out hope for their Prince Charming, and still believe in fairy tales even when they're seventy years old and he hasn't arrived. I finally get why songwriters and poets spend their whole lives trying to put this feeling, right here — this stripped-bare, can't-catch-my-breath, world-has-stopped-turning *feeling* — into words.

He pulls off my clothes, layer by layer, his mouth trailing kisses in the wake of his fingertips, and with each tangible barrier he removes, I feel another emotional wall crumble as well. The pure intimacy in his touch, the reverence in the way he looks at me — like I really am the only sunshine in his gloomy world — has me fighting back tears.

No matter what I try to tell myself, this isn't just physical. It isn't about the mechanical processes leading to a really earth-shattering orgasm, or a means to an end, or something I could feel with any good-looking Tom, Dick, or Harry I met at a bar. With Chase, I'm not filling a void, scratching an itch with someone I'll walk — or, better yet, *run* — away from as soon as the sheets have cooled back to room temperature.

Because I want morning-afters with him. I want to know what his voice sounds like at dawn, groggy with sleep. I want to wake up in his arms, want his face to be the first thing I see when my eyes sliver open. I want to run my fingers through his messy bed-hair, and cook pancakes in our underwear, and spend lazy hours under his dark sheets, pretending the world outside doesn't even exist.

I want to go to bed with him, and wake up with him, and do every inconsequential thing in between with him.

And even though that scares me out of my mind... the thought of letting someone like Chase slip through my fingers without ever experiencing those things is even scarier.

So, I kiss him back.

I push away the walls, those careful barriers I always keep in place to ensure things stay strictly sexual. I stop worrying about the fact that this — that *he* — might really mean something.

And I go all in.

Hard lips and greedy kisses, eager hands and tangled limbs.

His fingers trace my sides, hook on my underwear, and slide them down my legs, casting them away without ever moving his eyes from mine. My shaky fingers undo the buttons of his shirt, clumsy and careful, like I'm sixteen again and I've never removed a man's clothes before. When I finally

push it off his shoulders, freeing his chest from the confines of fabric, I inhale sharply at the sight of him in the mellow afternoon light — his skin glowing, bronze and sleek, the muscles so defined I ache to trace their curves.

“Gemma.”

Chase lowers his forehead to mine, breathing hard. His eyes are dark emerald ink, so intent I can actually feel them sliding over me, like water across my skin.

“Gemma,” he breathes again, and there’s desperation in his tone. Longing. And a question I thought he already had the answer to.

“Chase.” I brush my lips against his. “Yes . God, yes.”

We lose ourselves in the expanse of his bed, the world falling away until all I can see, feel, hear, smell, taste, touch is him. *Chase* . On my tongue, in my hands. His lips at my ear, whispering things I never thought I needed to hear until it was him, saying them. And when he finally slides inside me, his eyes locked on mine, I feel him everywhere, in every particle of my being, like an electric current moving through my body, affecting me down to an atomic level. We connect, and there are no flashing lights or explosions of color behind my eyelids. It’s not a fireworks display, or a moving of mountains, or any of the other ridiculous things COSMO promised.

It’s *better* .

“Look at me,” he demands, his voice rougher than broken glass. “*Look* at me, Gemma. Do you see it?”

Our eyes hold and when I look, really look, I see it.

I see *him*.

Right there, on the surface of his irises, offering me the world, if I only want to reach out and take it.

I see *us* .

An eternity of possibility, swimming in his eyes.

“I see it Chase.” He shifts and I gasp at the sensation. “I see us.”

I’ve barely gotten the words out when his lips are back on mine, even fiercer than before, matching the pace of his body as he lays claim to my soul. He moves in me, his pace unrelenting, uncompromising, and my chest clenches, tight with pressure and pleasure, as though he’s wrapped his hands around my heart and squeezed, until all the fissures and cracks made from years of insecurity and abandonment are sealed together.

There, in his arms, for the first time in my life... I’m whole. And when I shatter to pieces, rocked by an orgasm so intense it takes my breath away, it’s

with a full heart inside my chest — one filled with hope and bottomless possibility — and it's a million times better than anything I've ever felt in the past.

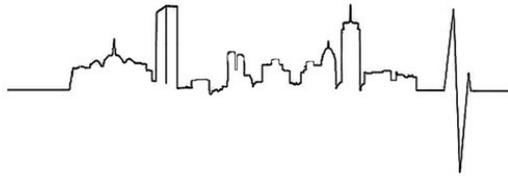
Because it's *more* .

Because it *matters* .

Because it's Chase.

CHAPTER 25

REBEL



THE SUDDEN LIGHT of Chase's phone screen beneath the black duvet makes me squint.

"Damn. It's almost five." He whispers the words against my neck, the hand not holding his phone tightening around me. Pressing a kiss to my nape, his voice drops lower. "I have to go, soon."

I turn in his arms, so we're face to face. "I'm sorry, there's no leaving permitted. You have to stay right here for the next several weeks until we either die of dehydration or get tired of one another."

He chuckles, leaning in to bump his nose against mine. "Then I'd better stock up on water bottles, 'cause I don't see that second thing happening anytime soon." A slow, satisfied grin spreads across his lips.

"Good," I whisper, leaning in to press a soft kiss to his mouth.

"Believe me, sunshine, if I didn't have to move, I wouldn't." He sighs. "But I've got the gala tonight. I can't miss it."

"Damn. I forgot," I mutter, snuggling closer. "How bad would it be if you blew it off?"

"How bad would it be if the new CEO didn't show up to the ceremony announcing his tenure as CEO?" Chase's voice is playful. "Probably pretty bad."

I sigh. "Figured you'd say that."

He stares into my eyes for a long moment, his expression conflicted.

"What is it?" I ask.

“Nothing.”

“Chase.”

He cups the side of my face. “Come with me.”

“That’s not the smartest idea you’ve ever had.”

“Probably not,” he agrees. “But I’m still asking.”

“The press will be there. Brett will be there. You uncle, your business partners...” I shake my head. “It’s a bad idea.”

“Maybe.” He kisses me, soft and sweet. “But you’re the only person I want to spend tonight with — even if it’s at a stuffy business dinner.”

My heart flips as I stare back at him, totally indecisive. I know in my gut it’s a bad idea, but when he’s looking at me like that, asking me to be there for him... it’s not so easy to hold to my convictions.

“Do I have to wear a dress?”

He grins, sensing victory. “Yeah.”

“I’ll have to borrow something from Shelby.”

His eyebrows lift. “Does that mean you’ll come?”

I nod hesitantly.

“Sunshine,” he whispers, his eyes getting ultra-warm and melty.

“You owe me.”

His grin widens. “What do you want?”

“Oh. Um.” I tilt my head, trying to think of something. “Uh...”

He stares at me, waiting, and my cheeks start to redden.

“Well, I don’t have anything prepared right this second! But I’ll think of something. Eventually.”

“Sunshine.” He starts to laugh, his whole frame shaking with mirth. “We really need to work on your negotiation skills.”

“It’s not my fault! I can’t concentrate with you looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“All gorgeous and chiseled and dreamy.”

“Dreamy?”

“Yes!” I glare at him. “It makes my head foggy and then I get tongue tied and my cheeks get red and...and...”

The words dry up on my tongue as my eyes move over his handsome features.

“You forgot what you were gonna say again, didn’t you?” He grins, cocky at his effect on me.

I smack him on the arm. “I don’t like you.”

“I beg to differ.” He leans in, burying his head in the crook of my neck. “In fact, in the last hour, you told me several different times just how much you liked me. *Very* loudly, I might add.”

My blush intensifies. “Oh, go to your stupid gala alone, you big brute.”

He pulls back to look at me, the humor fading from his eyes. “You don’t have to come, if you don’t want to. I know it’s asking a lot.”

I reach up and run my hands through the hair by his temple, enjoying the sensation of the silky strands against my palm almost as much as the fact that touching him is starting to feel as natural as breathing.

“If it means spending time with you, I’ll go. Even if I have to deal with the paparazzi and make small talk with your family.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m tougher than I look.” I flex my bicep playfully.

“Oh, really?”

“Yep.” I grin, lowering my voice to a whisper. “I’m so badass, sometimes I don’t even safely eject my USB drives — I just whip them out of the computer and shove them back in my desk.”

“Wow,” Chase breathes, his eyes wide. “Living life on the edge.”

“That’s nothing.” I struggle to maintain my faux-serious tone. “Sometimes, I completely ignore the **TEAR HERE** label, and I open the chip bag *upside-down* .”

“Say it isn’t so!”

“Oh, yeah.” It’s getting harder and harder to keep a straight face. “And occasionally, at the grocery store when they have those little sample tables out, I pretend not to see the **TAKE ONE** sign... and I take *two* .”

“My little rebel,” he says, grinning as he pulls me close. I bury my face in his neck and let him hold me, for a while, until the humor has faded from my bloodstream and my heart has slowed to match Chase’s steady, metronomic beats. I’m so relaxed, I’ve almost fallen asleep, when the rumble of his voice snaps my eyes open.

“You have to be sure.”

I pause, considering his words, and he rolls me gently onto my back so he can see my face.

“If we do this,” he whispers. “If you go with me...”

I wait breathlessly for him to finish, my eyes trapped by his steady gaze.

“It’ll be making a statement that we’re together,” he says bluntly. “That this — you and me — is really happening.”

I inhale sharply.

“Are you ready for that?” His words are an intent whisper. “Are you ready for the world to know you’re mine?”

I open my mouth automatically, fully prepared to deny his words.

I’m not yours. I’m not anybody’s.

The words are there, on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t voice them. Because I know, staring at this beautiful man in front of me, that I’d do anything he asked, just as he’d do anything I asked of him. And that means I’m his, as surely as he’s mine.

So, instead of throwing the words in his face, as I would’ve only days ago, I take a deep breath and say a sentence that surprises even myself.

“I’m ready, Chase.”

He kisses me, then, all tenderness lost as his hands slide up my back and across my naked skin. And even though we’re short on time and my heart’s beating like hell inside my chest, we waste another hour beneath the covers together, laughing and loving and proving just how sweet it feels to belong to each other.

“JESUS CHRIST, Gemma, the security in this place is ridiculous. It’s like Fort Fucking Knox in here!” Shelby grins at me, then winks at Knox, who’s hovering behind her with his typical stony expression in place. “Puns intended, of course.”

I snort. “Not your best material, Shelbs.”

“Oh, whatever. You try shopping for three hours — not even for yourself, I might add — then lugging the entire contents of your closet across town, *then* being practically frisked by a leather-clad dude you’re pretty sure they based those Jason Bourne movies on, and still come up with A-grade jokes. It’s not easy.”

“Thanks for coming.”

“Don’t mention it.” With a grunt, she drops a huge pile of zippered dress carriers and paper shopping bags on the couch beside me, slaps her hands together, and pivots to take in the space. “Holy cow! This place is huge. You could film a porno in here.”

“Shelby!”

“What? One of the classy ones, obviously. With real talent and a plot. Not a corny, cheesy one with too much body hair and weird 70’s music playing in

the background.”

“Ew.”

“That was a compliment!”

I glance at Knox and see the skin around his eyes has crinkled up, though his mouth is still set in a firm line. “Oh, *this* you find amusing?”

He shrugs, the eye-crinkle intensifying.

“Men,” I mutter, turning back to Shelby. “So, what did you bring me?”

“Three new pairs of jeans, some basic tops, and a few pretty blouses you’ll never wear. Just to get you through the next few days.” She grins shamelessly. “Plus, every dress I’ve worn in the past decade, with the exception of my wedding dress, of course. Nobody touches my Pnina Tornai. But we’ll find something for you.”

“So long as it’s not skintight or covered in sparkles, I’m okay with anything.”

Shelby makes a face and glances down at the pile of dresses. “Well, that rules out about half of these...”

I heave a heavy sigh.

This isn’t going to be pretty.

“Wow.”

“I know, right?”

“Really... wow .”

“I know!”

“Shelby....” My hands skim over the fabric, which drapes from my shoulders to the floor, the train just long enough to cover my toes in the front and trail along behind me as I walk. The dress is constructed of the softest, silkiest satin I’ve ever felt, lending it an elegance none of the clothes in my closet have ever had. The squared-off boat-neck cut and whisper-thin straps, coupled with a low back and a classic, fitted silhouette, make it look expensive. Elegant. Traditional.

It would be totally anti-Gemma, if not for the colors.

Because instead of using a plain black swathe of silk, or a sedate navy shade, whoever designed the dress did the unexpected and went with a bold, multicolored pattern. There are so many different hues coloring the dress, they blend together like brushstrokes on a palette. With each step I take, the colors shift and dance as the light plays across my silhouette.

I look like a walking piece of art.

A living, breathing kaleidoscope.

I know I should feel ridiculous — girls like *me* can't wear dresses like *this*. Girls like me don't even know how to *walk* in dresses with this much fabric, or heels this high. I don't have Shelby's toned Cross-Fit body, or Chrissy's naturally perfect proportions. I don't look remotely like a supermodel.

But, staring at myself in the mirror, taking in everything from my paint-palette dress to the pretty way Shelby's pinned my hair at one side of my head, so it drapes over my left shoulder in a gathering of loose waves, I feel surprisingly confident.

Actually, I feel better than confident.

I feel pretty freaking gorgeous.

"I've never even worn it," Shelby murmurs regretfully. "I bought it for a gala at the MFA last year, but Paul had to go away on business at the last minute so we gave up our tickets."

I turn to face her. "Oh, Shelby... are you sure you want to let me borrow it?" My guilty eyes meet hers as my hands stroke the fabric covetously. "Maybe you should save it for yourself."

"Nonsense." She waves my words away. "It's just sitting in my closet, collecting dust. And, girl, a Simon Gilbert dress should *not* be collecting dust. Ever. That dress deserves a night out on the town."

"Well, if you're sure..." I grin, unabashedly pleased that I don't have to wear one of the other dresses she's brought along. As soon as she zipped me into this one, I knew it was perfect.

Shelby snorts in amusement. "Do you want jewelry, too? I brought some nice pieces..."

"No." I reach beneath my neckline and pull out the gold sun pendant, so it hangs over the front of the dress. "I'll wear this. I have a feeling I'll need whatever lucky juju I can get, tonight."

Shelby stares at the necklace for a minute, then nods. "It looks perfect, actually. Whimsical."

"Cool." I grin. "But Shelbs, I think you're forgetting something."

"Impossible. I'm like a rhino. I never forget."

"An elephant."

"Did you just call me an elephant?"

I roll my eyes. "No, idiot. The expression — it's *an elephant never*

forgets , not a rhino never forgets .”

“I’m pretty sure it’s a rhino.”

“It’s not.”

“Well, I like my version better.” She shrugs. “Animals aside, I didn’t forget anything.”

“Beg to differ.” I narrow my eyes at her. “I need underwear, genius.”

“Oh, that.” She makes a *pffft* noise with her lips. “You aren’t wearing any.”

“I know, that’s the problem.”

“No, I mean you aren’t wearing any *tonight* . Not with this dress, anyway.”

“Excuse me?”

“Gemma.” Her hands land on my shoulders and she looks deeply into my eyes. “You are not wearing granny panties with a Simon Gilbert design. Underwear lines in this dress would be a crime against humanity.”

After five years of being Shelby’s best friend, I’ve learned to recognize the battles I’m never going to win.

This is one of them.

“Fine,” I mutter darkly. “But I’ll have you know, I like my granny panties just fine, thank you very much.”

Ignoring me, she reaches into her purse, pulls out her phone, and gestures for me to turn in a circle. “Do a spin for me, I want to see the dress move.”

Eyes on her phone, I raise one brow in question.

“Oh, fine.” She sighs. “Chrissy threatened to kill me if I didn’t send her a video of the 360 degree finished product. She’s mad enough she can’t be here in person — if I don’t do this, she’ll probably murder us.”

“Mad as in *angry* or mad as in *crazy* ?”

“A little of both.” She shrugs. “Now *spin* !”

“Fine, fine.”

I do as she says, pivoting in slow circles, catching my own eyes in the mirror each time I come back around. Even after she’s finished filming, I keep spinning, until I’m dizzy and breathless with laughter, twirling around the room like a little kid. I can hear Shelby screeching about wrinkles and torn hemlines, but right then, in that instant, I’m too happy to listen.

When two warm, callused hands close over my bare arms, I jolt to a sudden stop. For a few seconds, the world continues to spin around me — if not for the steadying grip at my biceps, I’d fall on my ass in a swirl of silk.

I'm still laughing when the dizziness fades and I finally meet Chase's eyes.

"Hey," he whispers, leaning in to brush his lips against mine.

"Hey yourself," I whisper back, my eyes dropping to take in the sight of him. He looks incredible in a tailored black tuxedo.

"You look beautiful." His eyes are warm as they sweep appreciatively down my frame. "That dress was made for you."

"Actually, it's Shelby's," I blurt stupidly. "And you look beautiful, too."

He grins.

"Handsome!" A blush heats my cheeks. "I mean you look *handsome*."

"Thanks, sunshine."

I hear a forced cough from behind me. "*Introduce me.*" Shelby coughs again, louder this time. "*Anytime, now.*"

"Oh! Sorry." My blush gets redder as I turn to face my friend. "Chase, this is Shelby. Shelby, Chase."

They shake hands politely, and I notice Shelby's eyes have practically glazed over as she stares at the man beside me.

"Nice to meet you," he says, his voice deep.

"You too," Shelby breathes. "I've heard all about you."

Chase glances at me, eyebrows raised. "Oh, really?"

Shelby nods. "Gemma tells me everything."

"Not everything," I mutter.

Chase chuckles, turning to face me. "We have to leave, sunshine, or we'll be late."

Shelby meets my eyes when his back is turned.

He is so hot! she mouths, fanning herself with her hands.

As soon as Chase looks back in her direction, her arms drop to her sides and her face morphs into a polite mask.

"Nice to meet you, Shelby. I'm sure I'll see you again, soon."

"Count on it." She smiles wide.

He winks at her, then turns back to me, plants a soft kiss on my forehead, and stares into my eyes.

"Five minutes, okay?"

I nod, fighting the urge to melt into him. "Okay."

He grins, like he knows exactly how many female hormones he's just sent into overdrive, and walks out of the ginormous master bathroom where we've been getting ready.

"Oh. My. God." Shelby squeals as soon as the door closes at his back.

“He’s so hot. Like, hotter than hot. *Sahara freaking desert* hot.”

“I know,” I say miserably.

“You are so totally screwed.”

“I know,” I repeat.

“Seriously.” She starts fanning herself again. “If you don’t jump his bones tonight, I will.”

“Shelby! You’re married!”

“Have you *seen* the man? Paul will understand.”

I sigh.

She meets my eyes. “Gemma...”

“What?”

“You’re falling for him.”

“No,” I lie instantly.

She stares at me for a moment. “That bad, huh?”

“Ugh!” A groan slides from my throat. “He’s just so...”

“Hot?”

“Perfect,” I whisper miserably. “Kind and generous and thoughtful...” I don’t even mention how good he is in bed because, knowing my friend, that conversation will take at least three hours to get through, which will definitely make me late for the gala. “He’s freaking perfect. And I’m a disaster on wheels. What if I embarrass him in front of all these people, tonight? What if I look like a fool, standing next to someone like him?”

“Gemma.” Shelby rolls her eyes. “You’ve never seen yourself very clearly. I mean, sure, you’ve got your share of problems, what with the obvious daddy issues and clear avoidance of attachment when it comes to men—”

“Gee, thanks, Shelbs.”

“What I’m trying to say is... no, you’re not perfect. Nobody is. Not even Chase Freaking Croft – though, admittedly, with an ass like that, he comes pretty close.” She walks over to me, slides her arms around my frame, and hugs me gently. “Don’t sell yourself short, Gem. *He’s* lucky to have *you* on his arm tonight, not the other way around. Trust me — I wouldn’t waste this dress on anyone who didn’t deserve it.”

I blink away tears as I hug her back, trying not to ruin the makeup she’s spent the last hour applying with meticulous precision.

“You really think so?”

“I do.” She pulls back to look at me. “And, if it’s really bad, call me. I’ll

stage an emergency extraction. Chrissy's preggo, but she can probably still drive a getaway car, if necessary."

I laugh. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

CHASE IS tense the entire ride across the city. Besides a few short words to Evan, he hasn't said a thing in almost twenty minutes. The privacy partition is up, closing us together in the back seat, and as time creeps by and we near our destination, the silence only seems to get heavier.

"You okay?" I ask finally, when it's too much to bear any longer.

He startles at the sound of my voice, as though I've brought him back from somewhere far away. His gaze slides to mine and even in the darkness of the car, I can see demons still lurking in the depths of his eyes. He doesn't answer my question. Instead, he reaches out, tags me around the waist, and tugs me closer, so I'm sprawled across his lap. One large hand wraps around the nape of my neck, pulling my face in so our foreheads rest against each other and our breaths mingle. His other hand traces absent circles on the bare skin of my back.

He's wrinkling my dress, mussing my hair, but I don't fight him — not now, when he so clearly needs the comfort of physical touch. Laying my hands on his chest, I stare into his eyes, so close to mine, and search my mind for the right words to say.

Before I can come up with anything, he closes the distance between us and kisses me — hard, rough, like my kiss might erase all the anxious, angry thoughts swimming around his head. He doesn't give me an inch of space to pull away, to protest, to question his sudden desperation. He just keeps kissing me, moving his mouth over mine until my lipstick is long gone and the air is stolen from my lungs. Until I'm forced to pull away just to catch my breath.

"Chase..." I can barely summon enough restraint to keep from pressing my lips back against his. But, no matter how much I'd like to continue getting lost in him, a small, unfamiliar voice in the back of my mind is crying out that there's something more important than a physical need, right now. Something deeper than these drugging kisses, than the numbing effect of passion on exposed nerves.

With another guy, I wouldn't care. I'd let him bury his problems beneath a mountain of lust and enjoy the avalanche that followed. But this isn't some

random guy.

It's Chase.

So I make myself take a breath and say, "Tell me what's wrong."

He sighs and I feel the gust of his breath across my still-tingling lips. There's a weighty pause before he finally speaks.

"I should've prepared you." His tone is closed-off, tight with self-restraint. "My family... They aren't good people."

"Chase, after meeting Brett — who, I might add, makes Donald Trump look like a good guy — I wasn't exactly expecting the Brady Bunch."

His lips twitch.

"It's going to be fine." I kiss his clean-shaven cheek and feel his arms tighten around me in response. "You'll see."

I don't say anything else and neither does he, as we ride slowly toward what will undoubtedly be a trying night. I just nestle closer, my head fitting perfectly in the crook of his neck, and absorb the heat of his skin, the clean smell of his aftershave.

And there in his arms, I find I'm not even a little upset that I've talked us out of a prime opportunity for backseat-of-a-limo sex — a bucket-list item if there *ever* was one. There, wrapped up in him, I'm totally, completely, 100% content.

I WAS WRONG.

About the night being *fine*, that is.

Not that that's anything new.

As soon as the limo pulls up to the curb — where, I kid you not, a legitimate red carpet has been rolled out — and Chase helps me out of the car, there's an explosion of light and sound. Reporters are screaming, cameras are flashing, and I thank my lucky stars I'm not epileptic because, otherwise, I'd be on the ground seizing.

Chase!

Gemma!

Look this way!

Give us a smile!

Are you two officially together?

How about a kiss?

Chase squeezes my hand and heads for the entrance, his eyes on the doors

and his stride never wavering. I do my best to adopt his *I-couldn't-give-fewer-fucks* attitude, but it's hard to be aloof when you're trying your damndest not to trip in high heels and keep your eyes from squinting against the bombardment of camera flashes.

When we reach the entrance, the doors open immediately, two uniformed attendants nodding in welcome. Chase's grip tightens as we step over the threshold into a gorgeous atrium with a grand crystal chandelier, gleaming gold-veined floors, and about two hundred people, chatting and sipping cocktails, dressed in dark suits and formal black dresses.

Seriously, I've seen funerals with more color.

Waiters move through the room with lofted trays, conveying all manner of drinks and finger foods to the many guests in attendance. At the back of the atrium, there's a large bar — thank god — and a huge set of double doors, leading into the main ballroom where dinner will take place.

“All right, sunshine.” Chase's voice is low. “Let's get this over with.”

“I didn't think there'd be so many people,” I breathe, trying to calm my racing heartbeat as the collective weight of several hundred eyes turn to take in our arrival.

“Typical Jameson — never one to pass up a good opportunity for a party.” He tucks my hand into the crook of his arm as his eyes scan the room. He's clearly looking for someone — someone I'd guess, by the tension in his frame, he doesn't want to see.

Probably Brett. Or Vanessa. Or his uncle. Or some unknown enemy I have yet to hear about.

Great .

“So, what do we do now?”

“Mingle.” Chase says it like a curse word. “Otherwise known as kissing shareholders' asses, schmoozing with potential new clients, and trying not to piss off any current ones.”

“And I suppose I'm just your silent arm candy for the evening while you swim with the sharks?”

My voice is teasing, but when his eyes cut to mine, they're anything but.

“No.” He stares at me for a beat, totally serious. “You're my fresh air when they try to drag me under. The only thing keeping me from drowning in this bullshit.”

Oh .

My heart clenches and my hand tightens on his arm. “Chase.”

His eyes go soft when I say his name, but only for a second. By the time he's turned back to face the room, his body tensing like a soldier heading into battle, they've morphed back into shards of ice. I keep my hand on his arm as we walk into the room, pretending not to feel the eyes on us from all sides. Pretending it's not weird that conversations hush as we drift into the fray. Pretending it doesn't set my teeth on edge when the women examine me like a unfortunate wad of gum stuck to the bottom of their Manolos, while their men gaze at me like a piece of meat at the butcher shop, to be sized meticulously, consumed vigorously, and replaced easily.

I wasn't built for this life. Never wanted it. The pretension, the posturing, the sheer ostentation — it holds no appeal for me. In fact, it makes me a little sick to my stomach.

But for Chase, I'll grin politely, make small talk when necessary, and do my best to bear it. Because, at the end of this miserable night, I'm going home with him. And for that, I'd suffer through anything — even dinner with his family and two hundred other snakes in human suits.

CHAPTER 26

PHOEBE



I THOUGHT I'd be bored, people-watching and eavesdropping as I shadow Chase through the crowd, but it's actually kind of fascinating to see him like this — polite, personable, playing the part of a well-mannered socialite rather than the brooding caveman I know him to be. To most eyes, he looks like the perfect golden boy, towering over the crowd like Thor, greeting acquaintances with varying amounts of sincerity. Only someone who knows him, as I'm beginning to, would see the wry twist of his mouth as he suffers through small talk, the slight clenching of his fists as someone slips an underhanded barb about his playboy past into the conversation, the infinitesimal narrowing of his eyes as he stares down a person he doesn't particularly like.

As my gaze moves around the room, I see Chase isn't the only one employing the *smile-on-your-lips, daggers-in-your-eyes* method — which isn't exactly surprising, given the fact that this room contains more WASPs than the nest in the old tree behind my Mom's house. Everywhere I look, people are glaring over the rims of their cocktails, raising eyebrows at frenemies' backs, and laughing coyly at their own jokes.

Between the thinly veiled insults being tossed back and forth, and the subtle manipulation of resources and power happening in each and every conversation around us, it's basically like watching a live episode of *Game of Thrones*.

Just, like, without the dragons and stuff.

After a solid hour of small talk, I've almost reached my limit. My cheeks are starting to ache from smiling so much, my feet have begun to cramp in the heels Shelby forced me to wear, and I'm going to explode if one more person looks at Chase like he's some kind of freaky black-sheep interloper, out to steal the family business. Or worse, like he's some vacuous party-boy who spent the last five years on a beach somewhere.

First, it was the snotty woman by the entrance.

Oh, Chase, it's just wonderful to have you back. We all wondered if you'd ever return from your little...trip. Where was it you went, again? Cabo?

Then, the balding man by the coat check.

We'll talk, my boy, we'll talk. I've got a great new venture Croft Industries would be lucky to get their hands on. A young stallion like you needs something splashy, right out of the gate, to prove he's willing to put his money where his mouth is.

Then, the pinch-faced couple by the grand staircase.

Good to see you, Chase! I'm sure the family is thrilled to have you back. Brett most of all. Though, I'm sure he was as surprised as the rest of us to hear you'd be taking the reins in his place!

Everyone we've chatted with has been pretty terrible, though my personal favorite has to be the woman we're talking to now. Mrs. Pauline Breeland is one of those wives who speaks enough for two — probably because her husband never says anything at all. She's been prattling on for the last ten minutes about their daughter, Cherie, who apparently Chase once met at a mixer during his boarding school days and, thus, is destined to marry.

"She's a lawyer now. So ambitious, my Cherie. Always was — I'm sure you remember! And she's grown into quite the looker... though I may be biased!" Mrs. Breeland laughs so hard, you'd think she was front row at a Jim Gaffigan show listening to his Hot Pockets segment. "She lives right across town in Beacon Hill. I'm sure she'd love to get a drink with you and catch up. You two would hit it off, I'm just sure of it!"

Seriously, lady? I'm standing *right here* .

"Now that you're grown, you need to start thinking about settling down! You're no spring chicken!" She giggles again. "Though, I must say, my Cherie hasn't aged a day! Looks the same as she did at seventeen. I wish she'd tell me her secret!"

I'm so sure.

"You two would look just wonderful together!" she continues, her eyes

never wavering from Chase, who hasn't said more than two words since this woman started speaking. "Two young people from *good* families... Perfectly suited! Oh, you *must* give her a call. I'd love to see you both settled."

I can't help the blush that starts to creep across my cheeks — for once, not one of embarrassment but of the sheer *outrage* I'm struggling to bury beneath a politely disinterested smile.

Chase stares at her for several long moments with a strange look on his face, before speaking. "You know, Mrs. Breeland, I think you're right."

What?

What?!

If he just said what I think he said, I'll be heading for the exits faster than you can say *enjoy-your-life-with-Cherie* .

"Oh, good!" Mrs. Breeland smiles, beyond pleased with her efforts to proposition her daughter. "I'll tell Cherie to expect your call."

My jaw clenches. I'm about ready to blow my top and unload two hours worth of pent-up anger on Chase when I feel his arm slide around my midsection, his fingers curling tight against my stomach, so I'm forced to step closer. I startle at the sudden movement — besides my fingers on his arm, or the light brush of our hands, we've barely touched since we stepped through the front doors — but when his head turns and he looks down at me, I see his eyes are simmering with equal parts anger and amusement.

"Oh, no, I meant about settling down," Chase tells the woman, still looking at me. "Sunshine, what do you think? One kid? Two? I've always thought three might be too many, but if we had four, so they each had a playmate, maybe it wouldn't be half bad."

My jaw falls open.

I hear Mrs. Breeland gasp.

Chase grins. "Once you hit five, it's basically a litter. But there's a certain elegance in a clean half-dozen, don't you think?"

He's joking.

I know he's joking, just to piss off this lady for disrespecting me.

But I'm having a little trouble processing the humor in his words, what with the images of our half-dozen green-eyed, towheaded, paint-splattered babies running around the yard.

"Um..." I squeak.

Chase looks back at Mrs. Breeland. "Tell Cherie hello, for me. I'm sure she'll find someone soon, with a mother like you extolling her many graces at

every opportunity.” His grin widens when she clucks in shock. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, we need to find a broom closet somewhere and get started making those babies. Or, at the very least, practicing.”

With that, he nods to Mr. Breeland, pivots with me still tight against his side, and starts walking toward the bar.

“Nasty old bird,” he mutters. “And I remember her daughter — just as snotty, even as kids.”

“Um,” I squeak again.

“Gemma, relax. It was a joke.”

“Uh huh,” I agree, trying to calm my racing heartbeat.

“I’m not going to impregnate you with a half-dozen babies.”

“Oh, good.” I breathe out a huge sigh of relief.

“Not yet, anyway.”

“What?!”

He chuckles. “Come on, let’s get you a drink.”

A drink would be good.

Actually, seven drinks would be good.

But I’ll stick to a single glass of pinot noir and hope it’s enough to take the edge off... and make me forget about Chase’s seriously not-amusing jokes.

“IS YOUR UNCLE HERE, YET?”

Chase looks at me. “Jameson?”

I nod.

We’re in a small alcove by the bar, surveying the room as I sip my wine. Chase is pointing out the different couples, telling me some of their scandalous family backstories, which range from alcoholism to accidental pregnancies to the occasional fetish — it’s all *very* entertaining — but I can’t help but notice he’s been tiptoeing around actually introducing me to any of his family members. Which is weird... considering we’re at a Croft event, and all.

“No, he’s not here.”

My eyes widen. “But didn’t he plan this whole thing? One last hurrah as CEO and all that? It’s kind of weird he wouldn’t come to his own party.”

“He’s not well.” Chase’s words are flat. “He probably won’t come until dinner, to make his speech.”

“Oh, Chase...” I trail off, looking at his stone-set face. “I didn’t know he was sick. Is he... is it...”

“Cirrhosis of the liver. He’s got a few months, at best.”

“Chase.” My voice breaks on his name.

“It’s fine, Gemma.” There’s so much suppressed anger in his words, I can tell he’s anything *but* fine.

“I’m so sorry, Chase. He’s been — well, sort of like a father to you, right?”

His jaw ticks, a sure sign he’s searching for control. “Something like that.”

My eyes search his face as confusion stirs in my veins. Chase isn’t ever one for big shows of emotion — I don’t expect him to weep openly about his uncle’s illness or even act too upset. But this... this is just strange. Because, if I’m reading him right, I think he’s almost... *angry* with his uncle.

I open my mouth to ask him about it, but his abrupt curse cuts me off.

“Fuck.”

“What is it?”

“Brett’s here.”

“Where?”

“By the doors.” Chase’s whole body goes tense. “And he’s not alone.”

“Let me guess... He brought Vanessa as his date.”

He glances down at me, concern filling his eyes. “Afraid it’s worse than that, sunshine.”

“Worse than Vanessa?” I ask, doubting that’s even possible. “Have you *met* the woman?”

His mouth tugs up at one side but his eyes don’t change. “Unfortunately, yes. But this is still worse.”

“Who could possibly be worse than Vanessa?”

He hesitates a beat.

“Chase.”

His arm squeezes tighter around my waist, as if to steady me for the impact of his words. As if he knows whatever he’s about to say will rock me.

“It’s Phoebe.”

I stare at him blankly.

“Phoebe West,” he clarifies.

It takes me a minute to put it together. When I do, my heart sinks into my stomach like a ball of lead. “Phoebe West as in...”

“Your sister.”
Shit.

“SHE’S HERE. My half-sister who I’ve never met, who doesn’t even know I exist, is here.”

Chase stares at me as I pace in small circles around the coat-check room, where he dragged me as soon as he realized I was falling apart in the middle of the gala.

“Not only is she here, she’s here with Brett. Psychotic, creep-tastic Brett. As his date.”

Chase doesn’t speak, doesn’t move, doesn’t even try to touch me. He just watches me from his spot by the door with careful eyes, waiting for me to work through this.

“Which means Brett knows. I don’t know how he knows, but he *knows*. Ralph got to him. Or he got to Ralph. Somebody got to someone. A meeting of the mentally-unstable minds, if you will. Either way, he *knows*.”

Chase’s expression doesn’t waver as my voice goes up an octave, getting even more hysterical.

“We know that *he* knows. And as soon as we go out there and face him, he’ll *know* that we know.” I try to breathe deeply, but can’t manage it. “What we don’t know is if *she* knows. You know?”

“Gemma.”

“She probably doesn’t know — not about me, not that her date is crazier than that *put-the-lotion-on-its-skin* dude in *The Silence of the Lambs*. She’s probably just a pawn, right? A threat. That’s Brett’s style. Find out about my hidden half sister and dangle her in front of me at a major, publicized event, so I’m constantly waiting for the shoe to drop. It’s psychological warfare.”

“Gemma, breathe.”

“I can’t breathe!” I stop circling, coming to face him with my hands on my hips and tears pricking at my eyes. “My sister is out there. My *sister*.”

“Gemma.”

“What?”

He reaches out, grabs me by the hand, and tugs me to him. The sudden move sends me stumbling into his chest, the hard landing almost enough to knock the wind from my lungs, but I don’t care. Because suddenly Chase is kissing me and, when he does, the rest of the world fades away, until

thoughts of crazy relatives intent on destroying us, and nasty socialites who think we're wrong for each other, and even the small parts in my own mind that question what on earth we're doing here fade away.

He kisses me until I start to disappear. Not all of me — just the part that's never had a safe place to land, never trusted anyone, not fully, because I learned early that everyone disappoints you eventually. The part that thought relationships like this were nothing more than Hallmark propaganda, that never thought I'd find someone who could wrap his arms around me and, with just one touch, make everything in my world seem right. The part that doubted a man like this — a *feeling* like this — even existed.

His hands slide into the hair at my temples, pulling me closer, deepening the kiss. Giving me what I need — not empty words, not paltry reassurances that everything will be okay, not promises of something he can't guarantee.

He knows that, given the chance, I'll rant and rave without stopping for breath, working myself up to new heights of anxiety. And, because he knows this, he doesn't try to talk me off the cliff. He just grabs me and pulls me from the edge, with open-mouthed kisses and lingering touches and whispered words I barely hear. Because he knows it's what I need.

He knows me.

It's a sudden thought, and a surprising one, that this man, who I've known such a short time, could understand my inner workings better than anyone I've ever met. It seems ridiculous, at first. Yet, as the thought settles in a corner in the back of my mind... I see the indisputable truth in it.

And as his hands slip under the hem of my dress, as my arms wind around his shoulders, as he lifts me against the coat-room wall and brings us together, we don't say anything as we make good on the promise he made to Mrs. Breeland. We just touch and cling, our mouths never breaking apart, and lend each other strength with the comfort of our hands.

A SECRET SMILE plays on my lips as we walk, hand in hand, back to the party. My hair is a little wild and I've had to completely reapply my lipstick, thanks to Chase's kisses, but I can't say I'm even a little bit sorry about that.

The cocktail hour has wound down in our absence and the atrium is rapidly emptying as people wander into the main ballroom to find their tables. Even the thought of sitting at Chase's side through a three-course meal in front of hundreds of people isn't enough to diffuse the happy glow that's

settled around me. Still, as we round the bar and head for the ballroom, the smile falls abruptly off my face... because standing there, in our direct path, are Brett and Phoebe.

Unavoidable.

I feel Chase's hand tighten on mine as he stops, his narrowed eyes locking instantly with Brett's gloating ones.

"Cousin!" Brett grins. "There you are. I was wondering if you'd even bothered to come."

"I'm here," Chase says flatly.

"Well, good. If you hadn't shown up, Jameson might've had to give the position to someone else." His words are playful — a harmless joke between cousins, to anyone else's ears — but from this distance, I see Brett's eyes gleam with repressed vitriol, which doesn't wane as his gaze slides to me.

"And Gemma! Looking lovely, as ever."

He leans in to kiss my cheek, and Chase goes so tense, I think he's going to snap and punch Brett out in the middle of the atrium. I'm utterly still as Brett's lips skim my cheek in a cool kiss. A deep rattle of anger rumbles from Chase's throat as soon as his cousin's mouth makes contact, and I quickly step back to his side.

"Always a pleasure," I say, my words as stiff as my expression.

"We still need to meet, to discuss that artwork you sold me," Brett reminds me cheerily. "Perhaps you can swing by my apartment tomorrow."

Chase stiffens.

I force a smile. "I'm on vacation."

"Monday, then." Brett's grin widens as he glances at his date. "I think you'll agree, we have plenty to discuss."

I still at the clear threat in his words.

Brett chuckles and slides his arm around Phoebe's waist. "I'm sorry, I've completely forgotten my manners. Have you met my date? This is Miss Phoebe Evangeline West." He looks back at me, glee in his eyes. "Wasn't it lucky that she was free tonight?"

"Luck is one word for it," I murmur.

Chase's grip tightens on mine — a warning. "A date you didn't have to pay to spend the night with you? Good for you, Brett."

His tone is so light, no one would ever suspect the hatred running deep beneath his teasing words.

Brett chuckles, like it's all in good fun, and the woman at his side — who

I've been steadfastly ignoring right up until this moment — lets out a peal of innocent laughter. The sound is so pure, so joyous, I can't help my eyes from sliding to hers.

She looks like me, five years ago.

The realization slams into me, harder than a punch to the gut. We're almost the same height, both petite with compact, curvy frames — hers, at the moment, is zipped into a stunning ivory gown that floats down to mid-calf, and strappy, skyscraper-high heels I'd never be able to walk in. Our hair is the same shade, though hers is straight as a pin and cut into a sleek, angular bob — shorter in the back, with longer ends that just brush her shoulders in the front. She's got awesome bangs across her forehead — the fringed, too-long-on-purpose kind that hang into her eyes — and she radiates confidence, just standing there looking at me.

When her eyes lift to mine — almond-shaped, hazel, sparkling with life — I'm so dazzled by the beauty of them, I don't even feel relief that they aren't blue, marking at least one difference between our looks.

“Brett don't be so stuffy.” She sticks her hand out with a roll of her eyes and a grin on her lips. “It's just Phoebe.”

For a minute, I struggle for composure, staring at a girl who clearly has no idea who I am, wondering how on earth I should possibly act around her. Thankfully, Chase's hand tightens on mine in a quick squeeze, and I snap out of my stupor.

“Gemma,” I murmur, reaching out with tentative fingers to take her hand. “Gemma Summers.”

“Nice to meet you, Gemma Summers.”

I attempt to smile back at her. “You too.”

“Killer dress.”

“Oh, thanks.” I glance down at myself, still in disbelief that such a gorgeous design is on *my* body. “I borrowed it from a friend.”

“Well, it's fabulous. I've been staring at it all night — and not just because it's the only spot of color amidst all this navy and black.” She makes a gagging face. “My great aunt Tessie is more daring with her fashion choices than some of these women, and she's ninety-six. Then again, she's also been known to strip down to her birthday suit and run through the halls at the nursing home, so she's not always the best judge of proper attire.”

I laugh, despite myself. “Well, if the people here had as much life as your aunt, it would probably be a much better party.”

“Undoubtedly.”

I grimace. “Though I could do without seeing some of these people in the nude.”

She laughs with such infectious, uninhibited joy, I can’t help but smile at the sound of it.

“Phoebe, why don’t you and Gemma get a drink?” Brett’s voice cuts through the moment like a knife strike. “My cousin and I have some things to catch up on.”

My eyes move to Chase, a question in their depths, and he gives a terse nod.

“But—” I start to protest.

“Just for a minute, sunshine.” Chase squeezes my hand tight before dropping it and turning back to Brett, anger radiating from his every pore. I open my mouth, fully prepared to insist on staying by his side, but the feeling of an arm looping through mine distracts me.

“Another glass of wine sounds perfect,” Phoebe says, leading me toward the bar with such familiarity, you’d think she’d known me years, not minutes. “They probably have to discuss something terribly boring, like a merger. An acquisition. Profit margins.” She makes another gagging sound. “It’s enough to drive a girl to drink.”

“Hence the open bar.”

“Thank god for that.” She shakes her head as we reach the bar. “Now, for the most important question of all...”

I raise my brows.

“Red or white?”

I laugh. “Red.”

“Me too,” she says, grinning as she gives a waiting bartender our order. Mere seconds later, he slides two heavy crystal goblets across the marble countertop. Phoebe passes one to me, clicks her glass against mine, and takes a hearty sip.

As my fingers curl around the glass, I dart a glance at Chase. He’s still talking to Brett and whatever they’re discussing is *not* making him happy. In fact, his expression has grown so dark, I worry his head is about to explode.

I take a sip of my wine and turn back to Phoebe. I’m mid-swallow when she makes a startling announcement.

“I’ve decided we’re going to be friends.” Her eyes twinkle with humor. “Because I’ve been to enough of these functions to know, you can’t get

through them alone.”

Friends?

I can't speak — mostly because I'm struggling not to spit my mouthful of wine all over her as her words rattle around my skull.

It doesn't seem to bother her that I don't respond; she just grins wider and leans closer, her voice dropping low. “I never would've come, if Brett hadn't invited me. I didn't think he knew I *existed*, until he called earlier. I mean, our mothers ran in the same society circles, and we've crossed paths a few times at functions like this, but he's never even looked my way — until today. I don't know what changed, but I wasn't about to say no — these Croft boys are hot. Mega hot. Burn your freaking *tongue* hot.”

God, she even sounds like me when she talks.

I swallow hard. “Tell me about it.”

“So, you and Chase are—”

I never get to hear the rest of her question because suddenly, the boys are back. There's a careful distance between them, when they appear at our sides, and neither of them looks particularly happy. But considering no one is on the floor bleeding, I'm thinking that's pretty much par for the course, with them.

Chase squeezes my hand and I turn to look at him, instantly troubled by the darkness in his eyes.

“Dinner's about to start. Let's go find our table, sunshine.”

I tighten my fingers, squeezing to let him know I've heard him.

“Great! I'm starved.” Brett smiles that oily smile of his. Unfortunately, it does very little to diminish his attractiveness. “It seems there was a mix up with the tables – Phoebe and I were originally seated in the back, instead of with the rest of the family.”

“How odd,” Chase says flatly.

Brett's grin never wavers. “As luck would have it, I spoke to the wait-staff and they were able to move around some seats, so we could all sit together on the stage. One big, happy family, right, 'cuz?”

Chase's jaw clenches tight. “Perfect.”

Brett's eyes move to mine and I tense at the look in them.

“Gemma, did I mention? I had the pleasure of meeting a close friend of yours today. *Ralph*. Great guy — and he told me the most interesting stories about you! I'm sure my date would be fascinated to hear them, don't you agree?”

“If we’re trading stories, I’m sure there are plenty Chase could tell the table about you.” Fake smile fixed to my lips, I turn to the man by my side, who’s barely keeping his anger in check. “Let’s go find our table, love.”

Chase nods, slips his arm around my waist, and starts to lead me away. I glance back at Phoebe, who’s still smiling happily, having totally missed the strained words I’ve just traded with her date, and wave goodbye. She seems so young, standing there next to Brett, and far too sweet for him. But as much as I’d like to grab her by the arm and scream *run for the hills, while you still can!* I don’t. I can’t. Not without revealing *why* .

And, as nice as she is, that is seriously not an option.

I push thoughts of her away and turn my attention to Chase.

“You okay?”

He nods. “You?”

I nod, too.

We’re both lying, but neither of us calls the other out on it.

He glances at me. “She’s nice.”

I nod again, this time in earnest. “Yeah.”

“Seemed like you two hit it off.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“She liked you, Gemma.”

“Yeah, well, it doesn’t matter, does it? I have a distinct feeling, if she ever finds out I’m the glaring product of her father’s infidelity... she won’t like me very much at all. In fact, she’ll probably hate me, for ruining her life.”

“You don’t know that.”

I snort.

“Maybe she’ll never find out.”

“You’re kidding, right?” I roll my eyes. “This is Brett, we’re talking about. *Brett* . You seriously think, if he has a weapon he knows will hurt me — and you, by proxy — he won’t use it? That he’ll just shrug and say ‘*bygones, cuz*’ and let it slide? Come on, Chase.”

“I’m sorry, sunshine. I thought I’d be able to protect you from this. I thought I’d stopped the story.”

“You did stop it.” My hand tightens on his. “Neither of us could’ve predicted that Rat-Bastard Ralph would team up with Bat-Shit Brett.”

“I’m just sorry you’re in the middle of it.”

“Don’t be,” I say, my voice soft. “Because if I wasn’t in the middle of this, I wouldn’t be next to you. And right now, that’s the only place I want to

be.”

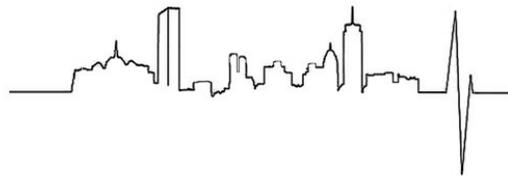
His eyes thaw, going soft as I watch, and he bends to press a kiss against my forehead.

“Sunshine,” he whispers.

And just that one word, in his deep, rumbling voice, warms me straight to my soul.

CHAPTER 27

ALWAYS



IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG to find our table.

At the far side of the massive ballroom, where several dozen large, round tables have been set up with white linen clothes, towering floral centerpieces, and a full china dinner-service, there's a long, rectangular table, slightly elevated on a platform, where the Croft family is seated.

Several people are already there — Brett's mother, a dark-haired woman with ice-blue eyes; a set of cousins nobody talks to except at family shareholder meetings, and several members of the executive board. Chase leads me to the empty seats at the middle of the table, so we're literally center-stage for all to see, and pulls out my chair.

"Just breathe," he whispers against my hair as he settles into the seat next to mine. "Three courses. One hour. Then we're out of here."

It'll be fine. I made it through five courses of canapés at Chrissy's baby shower last month, surrounded by seventeen married women who repeatedly tried to set me up with every eligible bachelor in their phone books.

This is child's play.

Except, that's not really true. Because as soon as Brett and Phoebe arrive at the table, taking the two seats directly across from me and Chase... well, I'd take three hours of fending off set-ups any day of the week. My half-sister keeps smiling at me, her sociopathic date keeps letting his eyes roam from my face to my chest — *come on, dude, I don't even have cleavage in this dress* — and Chase is getting tenser by the minute.

I'm starting to think it can't get any worse, when a man walks through the ballroom doors and begins making his way toward the stage, stopping briefly to speak with several attendees along the way. His expensive suit and distinguished appearance do nothing to distract from the fact that he's a very sick man — his skin has an unnatural pallor, there are deep circles beneath his eyes, and he's much too thin.

I know instantly that this is Jameson Croft, even before he arrives at our table and takes the seat next to Chase. But, as he gets closer and I spot the fading blond in his gray hair, as I catch sight of his eyes, hard and green, I'm even more started by another thought. A thought so surprising, it catches me off guard.

He looks nothing like his son, Brett, who's a spitting image of his mother. In fact... he looks an awful lot like his nephew.

THE AIR at our table is tense, to say the least.

Phoebe keeps catching my eye, looking more confused by the minute, and I can't exactly blame her. I'm pretty confused, myself.

Chase's jaw is clenched so tight, I'm worried his teeth are going to break. He hasn't taken a single bite of his dinner, and he's sipping his glass of soda water like he wishes it were something a helluva lot stronger.

Brett, for once, doesn't look gloating or gleeful — he looks pissed. He's gulping down glasses of scotch like he's actively trying to end up under the table, a dark expression on his face as he looks from me to Chase to the man next to him.

Jameson.

Who, I might add, is the reason for all the tension.

He arrived at the table, gave a stiff nod to Chase, another to Brett, and settled into his seat without bothering to introduce himself to me or Phoebe. Even his wife got little more than a murmured hello. Mere seconds after he sat, a waiter appeared at his elbow with a short-stacked tumbler of clear liquid on ice — which he's been sipping steadily for the past ten minutes.

If the fact that the family patriarch, who just so happens to be dying of liver cirrhosis, is gulping down vodka shocks anyone at the table, they certainly don't say as much. They don't even look surprised — their expressions range from resigned (Brett's mother) to enraged (Chase) to regretful (the cousins at the far ends, who no one seems to be speaking to).

We eat in total silence, picking at arugula salads with sweet-roasted pecans and pretending it's not odd that our dinner table is quieter than a monastery. For all I know, it's not odd, for the Crofts. Maybe every dinner they eat is shrouded in silence and strained conversation. Somehow, I doubt they're the kind of family who share stories about their days or bicker over the last bread roll in the basket.

Phoebe's eyes meet mine across the table and she widens them to the extreme in an unmistakable *what-the-hell-is-happening-here* expression. I shrug my shoulders up in a slight *hell-if-I-know* movement. She grins and returns her eyes to her plate.

I start to smile myself, until I feel the weight of eyes on my face. My gaze slides to the left, and I find Brett is watching me, a calculated gleam in his ice-blue irises. Instead of flinching and looking away, I meet his stare head-on, raising one eyebrow at him in a cool, composed, *what-the-hell-do-you-think-you're-looking-at* gesture. The smug twist of his lips is the only answer I get in return, so I just stuff more arugula into my mouth and pray that the second course is almost ready. Anything, to get me away from this world of silent conversations and strained relationships.

DINNER FINALLY ENDS, but the night's not nearly over. I'm pushing the remnants of my chocolate cake around my plate, half-listening to the first of many speeches we'll be forced to endure before we can finally go home.

One of the cousins is at the podium, giving a long-winded summary of the company's many accomplishments from the previous year.

"Chase."

He looks at me with eyes that have glazed over, raising his brows in question.

"I have to pee," I whisper.

He grins. "Gemma, this isn't kindergarten. You don't need my permission to leave."

My cheeks flame in the beginnings of a blush.

"Go," he says softly, eyes warm on mine. "Just hurry back. I don't know how long I'll last without you, here."

I smile at his words, slide back my chair, and beeline for the doors. My grin falters when I catch sight of a familiar hulking frame at the back of the ballroom — it's Brett's personal Bruce Banner henchman, standing in the

shadows in his ill-fitting suit, looking intimidating as ever with that wicked-looking scar on his neck. Our gazes meet for a fraction of a second as I walk past, and the darkness in his eyes sends such a chill through me, I'm still shivering as I cross into the empty atrium and enter the women's room.

As soon as I close the stall door behind me, a huge sigh of relief escapes — in part because I really, *really* had to go, but mostly because I needed a break from Brett's sidelong glances, Chase's too-tense muscles, Jameson's rapidly-emptying tumbler, and even Phoebe and her funny facial expressions. Every time she catches my eye and grins, like we're both in on the same joke — like she's already a close friend — my heart clenches.

How long until Brett tells her?

How long until she hates me?

After I've taken care of business — not an easy feat in a floor-length dress, by the way — I head out to the bank of sinks. With a full lounge, a towel attendant, and several baskets of complimentary toiletry supplies laid out on the countertops, the bathroom clearly caters to an elite crowd. I'm moisturizing my hands with one of the mini-bottles of almond-scented lotion, when the door swings open.

As soon as I lock eyes with the blonde in the mirror, who's scowling at me with more vehemence than the guy I once spilled a two-hundred degree cappuccino on at my old job, I go still as a deer in headlights.

Vanessa.

“Looting the supplies, huh?” Her eyes narrow on the bottle in my hands. “Not surprising. You probably can't afford your own. And trashy, gold-digging home-wreckers have to seize every opportunity, I suppose.”

“Why don't you tell me?” I snap sweetly. “I mean, after all — you're the one who worked Chase over for a big payoff.”

She sneers and steps closer, her black, strapless sheathe gown glittering in the low light. “You're going to pay, bitch.”

“Would it surprise you to hear you're not the first person to tell me that, this week?” I roll my eyes. “And, frankly, it's not nearly as scary the second time around. Maybe I'm getting immune to threats. *Oh!* Or, maybe your threats just suck.”

Her eyes narrow. “Did you really think you could just take him from me? That I wouldn't put up a fight?”

“I hate to break it to you, but he wasn't yours to take. Chase has been trying to ditch you for years.”

“He’s going to forgive me, eventually, and then you’ll be the one out on your ass.” Her eyes gleam as she steps even closer, causing me to press back against the bank of sinks. “We belong together — I know it and he knows it.”

“Sorry, but by *together* do you mean *sleeping with someone else behind his back* ? Or *getting him fired from his job* ? Or, my personal favorite, *hurting him so bad, he fled the freaking country for five years?* ” I shake my head. “Somehow, I think Chase will have different ideas about a reunion tour with you.”

“You don’t know anything! *Anything* . You’re just some little slut he’s interested in this week. A flavor of the month. A shiny new toy he’ll use until it’s thoroughly broken in. Until something newer and shinier comes along to replace you.”

Her words hit me like a slap across the face. It takes effort to keep from showing any reaction.

“You’re kidding yourself if you think this is going anywhere. He’s never going to settle down with a nobody like you — he said so himself, only days ago. On *camera* .” She laughs, a malicious sound designed to inflict pain. “We both know how this ends, Gemma. And it’s not with some happily-ever-after ride into the sunset.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself from snapping back at her.

“Chase is a Croft. He’ll fuck you and use you and when he’s done, he’ll toss you away.” She smiles, pleased with herself. “And when he does decide to settle down, it’ll be with someone good enough for him. Someone his family can be proud to be connected to. Someone like *me* .”

My heart’s racing inside my chest, a mad tattoo of panicked beats I worry she’ll be able to hear across the five feet between us. I try to fight the truth in her words, try to tell myself she’s wrong. I know she’s exploiting my vulnerabilities, voicing my deepest fears of inadequacy and inferiority... but that doesn’t make it easier to dismiss her words.

She steps closer, her voice dropping lower. “So, have your fun. Let him use you up, until you’re half in love with him. Let him take everything you have before he throws you away.” She grins. “Maybe you’ll even last the week. But six months from now, six *years* from now... do you really think you’ll be the one standing by his side?”

I open my mouth, prepared to refute her words even if I worry they might be true, but I never get the chance. The sound of a stall door being thrown open, hard enough to rattle the hinges, makes me jump half-out of my skin.

Vanessa and I turn at the same time to look at the brunette gliding from the stall, who's clearly been eavesdropping on our conversation and, from the looks of it, isn't at all sorry about it.

"Vanessa." Phoebe grins, but it's got an edge I haven't seen from her before. "Nice to see you again. I'm Phoebe West — remember me?"

Vanessa's face pinches with discomfort and goes suddenly pale.

"No?" Phoebe's grin widens. "I'll refresh your memory, then. I was the one at the Children's Hospital Benefit last summer, who caught you and a certain married gentleman with his pants around his ankles in that back hallway. Very daring of you, considering his wife was in the next room, and all."

"I—I don't know what you're talking about," Vanessa snaps, though her voice lacks any real conviction.

"Oh, I think you do. Flagrant infidelity in a public place isn't the kind of thing a girl forgets!" Phoebe steps closer. "Then again, I suppose a classy, well-bred lady like yourself thought she was just doing her civic duties, since he was a city official, and all. Tell us, are your services factored into the state budget?"

Vanessa huffs in outrage, turns to glare at me one last time, then stomps to the exit and disappears. My wide eyes move from the door to Phoebe, more than a little impressed that she managed to annihilate Vanessa with a few casual words.

"That was way too much fun," she says, stepping up to the sink beside mine, her eyes dancing with mirth. "I hate that girl. Always have. She bounces from one eligible bachelor to the next, trying to sink her claws in. The month she chose my older brother, Parker, as her target was one of the worst times of my entire life."

My world stills at the mention of her brother.

My brother.

She makes a disgusted sound. "She was like a leech. Following him everywhere. Showing up at the house. Swimming in our pool in a barely-there bikini, hanging all over him in front of me, calling him sweetheart and baby and boo-boo — *blech!* What self-respecting girl calls a man boo-boo?"

"What self-respecting man lets her?"

Phoebe grins. "Not Parker. He ditched her."

I hesitate a beat. "Is he... Is he dating anyone, now?"

"Why?" Her eyebrows lift. "You interested? I thought you were with

Chase.”

“No!” I practically yell, uncomfortable at the suggestion that I’m incestuously interested in my half-brother. “I’m definitely with Chase. Just... wondering.”

Phoebe stares at me for a beat. “Sorry, I’m a little protective when it comes to Parker. And no, he’s not seeing anyone. Not anyone serious, anyway. I mean, I really don’t think you can call the parade of bimbos that march through his life *dating*, since none of them last longer than a few nights. I love my brother, but... his taste in women needs some serious work.”

“You two sound close.”

She nods. “Yeah — mom’s dead, dad’s a big businessman. Parker basically raised me.”

“I’m sorry... I didn’t know.”

“How could you?” She shrugs. “It isn’t so bad, really. It’d be damn-near perfect, if he wasn’t so overprotective. He scares away most of my dates long before they’ve made it past night one.”

“But he let you come with *Brett*?” I ask, my nose scrunching.

“No, he’s out of the country, so I took advantage.” She stares at me for a minute. “You don’t like Brett.”

I stay silent, not wanting to get into it with her.

“Gemma?”

Standing there looking at me with those bright eyes, she looks so young. So innocent. And I know I’m not responsible for her, that I’m certainly not her big sister... but I can’t help myself from trying to protect her, even if it’s not my place.

“He just... gives me a vibe,” I hedge.

“Come on, girl. You have to do better than that.”

I sigh. “Let’s just say, Chase has told me some stories. And he doesn’t seem like the nicest guy out there.”

She nods. “Well, it’s a good thing I’m not really interested in him, then.”

“You’re not?”

“Nope.” A slow grin spreads across her face. “But I *am* hoping word that I was his date gets around to a certain someone.”

I laugh out loud. “Let me guess — someone your brother disapproves of?”

“His best friend,” she says, a little miserably. “I’ve loved him for, like,

ever. But he refuses to see me as anything but a little sister.”

“So, you’re trying to make him jealous?”

“Yep.” She sighs deeply. “According to my friends, it’s a great motivator, as well as one of the only ways to get a man to see how pigheaded he’s being.”

“I wouldn’t know. I’m new at this whole dating thing, myself.”

Her eyes catch mine in the mirror. “You’re doing fine. Better than fine. Have you *seen* the way Chase looks at you?”

I blush.

“Vanessa is off her head. And, quite possibly, her meds. Because that man looks at like you like he’s never letting you out of his sight.”

I snort. “Which is probably why we should be getting back.”

“You go, I’m going to touch up my makeup.”

“See you back at the table.”

“Hey, Gemma?” Her voice halts me just before I reach the doors, and I turn back to face her.

“Yeah?”

“I’m really glad I met you.”

My heart lurches in my chest and I begin to fiddle with my necklace, pressing my fingers into the sharp-edged gold to calm myself.

“You too.”

“Maybe we can grab lunch, sometime?”

Maybe...if you don't hate me after tonight.

“I’d like that.”

“Good.” Her eyes crinkle at the corners, catching on the pendant in my hands. “You know, it’s funny... I have that exact same necklace at home.”

I stop breathing.

“I’ve had it forever.” She shrugs. “I guess it’s kind of my lucky charm.”

What are the odds of that?

“Really?” I ask, my voice cracking.

She nods. “My dad gave it to me when I was little. He said when you keep the sun by your heart, the shadows can’t ever get close.”

My hand drops away from the necklace, as though the metal has scalded me.

No.

No way.

This necklace was a gift from my mother.

Not from him.

Not from the father who never wanted me.

Not the father who called me a mistake.

No.

Nothing makes sense as I stand there looking at her, failing to form a single word as my mind spins out of control. I don't even try to respond; I just force one last smile, turn on my heel, and slip out the doors without another word. The necklace I've worn for nearly a decade hangs heavy around my neck, weighted down by secrets. My mother's, my father's... I can barely keep track, anymore.

My fingers itch to rip it off and toss it away, as it swings gently against my chest with each step — rhythmic little taps from a pendulum of lies. I contemplate calling my mother, demanding answers I'm not even sure I want to hear... but I can't. This conversation isn't one I can now, in the middle of a gala.

My heart races nearly as fast as the thoughts in my mind as I wander dazedly across the atrium. I'm almost back to the ballroom when I spot the front doors, leading out onto the street.

I freeze, staring at them, confronted with the ultimate choice.

I can flee.

I can pick up my dress and run out into the night, away from Vanessa's words, from the half-sister I'll never get a chance to love, from the necklace that now symbolizes a lifetime of lies.

I can do it.

But, I'll also be running away from Chase.

And, I'm not sure when it happened, I'm not sure how it happened... but leaving him behind has become something I absolutely *can't* live with.

So, I package up all the pretty little lies I've lived my life by in a box at the back of my mind. I take a deep breath, steady my shoulders... and I head into the ballroom. Because even if my world has morphed into a place I barely recognize anymore, even if nothing at all makes sense, even if I'm falling rapidly into chaos...

Chase is my safe place to land.

WHEN JAMESON LURCHES to his feet, tumbler still in hand, and stumbles toward the podium at the far side of the stage, I know things are about to go

from bad to worse. A lot worse.

Chase tenses at my side, Brett's expression gets darker, and even Phoebe seems to be picking up on the strange vibe running among the Crofts.

I lay a hand on Chase's thigh beneath the table, squeezing lightly. It's a small comfort but it's all I can offer, and as he looks over and catches my eyes, I see, beneath the sharp green ice, a hint of that softness he seems to reserve just for me.

"It'll be fine," I whisper, though, for all I know, my words are an outright fabrication.

"Sunshine." His voice calls my bluff.

Moving closer, so my mouth is pressed almost to his ear, I lower my voice into something that sounds like my Yoda impression mixed with the sage-like tones of a samurai warrior.

"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles."

His eyebrows lift. "Someone's been reading Sun Tzu."

"Maybe."

He grins. "After all the shit you gave me..."

"Whatever." I shrug. "It's good, I guess, but if given the choice, I'd still pick, like, a Kristen Ashley book any day of the week."

His grin widens and seconds later, I feel his hand lace with mine beneath the table.

"Thanks, sunshine."

"For what?"

"Making me smile when it's the last thing I wanted to do."

"Well, I was getting pretty tired of your brooding. And starting to worry you'd give yourself TMJ with all that clenching. It's just not good for your teeth—"

My words are cut off by the sharp squeal of the microphone as it's pulled from its stand. My eyes fly in that direction, landing on Jameson, who's looking more than a little tipsy. I wonder how he's possibly going to give a coherent speech, seeing as he's three sheets to the wind.

"Good evening," he slurs into the mic, swaying a little on his feet.

Oh. He's not going to give a coherent speech. Not at all.

"Great," Chase mutters.

"Thank you all for coming here tonight, to celebrate a new chapter in the Croft family legacy." His words are running together a bit at the ends, but at

least he's managed a full sentence. "As most of you know, as of this week, I'm retiring. I never thought this day would come so soon — though, if you ask my son, it's taken forever! Right, Brett?"

He guffaws into the microphone, his whole body shaking with laughter. The room watches in silence as vodka splashes over the side of his glass and lands on his shiny black dress shoes.

Chase's hand tightens on mine and I see Brett's hand clench around his glass so hard, the tips of his fingers turn white. Brett's mother is totally detached, her eyes unfocused, as though she's not even here.

"Most men want sons," Jameson drunkenly informs the crowd. "Carry on the family name. Create a legacy." He takes another sip of his drink and the sound of his lips smacking together echoes out through the speakers. "Not *me*. I wanted daughters. Girls. Someone to love me, not someone to replace me. Not *boys*, to fight over the scraps of my life until there was nothing left. Like wolves with a deer carcass."

The air at the table is so thick, I'm having trouble catching my breath.

"But we don't always get what we want!" With sloppy steps, he shuffles closer to the microphone. His voice booms so loud, the mic emits a squeal of feedback. "I don't want to die at sixty. My wife doesn't want to be a widow — *do you Marlina?*"

Brett's mother flinches, but otherwise has no reaction.

"And my son," Jameson smiles. "Well, he doesn't want me to choose another man to run my company, that's for damn sure!"

He's teetering on unsteady feet, laughing so hard I fear one more good chuckle might send him careening face-first off the stage.

"Chase," I whisper. "You have to stop him."

His hand tightens on mine, but he doesn't stand.

"Which is really the reason we're all here tonight, isn't it?" Jameson continues. "To welcome our new CEO. My *nephew*. And a better man than I ever was — a fact he's reminded me of many times!"

The mockery in his voice is unmistakable. Chase's grip grows so tight, my finger bones start to ache.

"Chase, my boy, where are you?" Jameson calls, turning to face the table. "Come up here!"

For a second, no one at the table moves. I don't think anyone *breathes*.

"Chase," I whisper, squeezing his hand.

He looks at me, the pure dread in his eyes making my heart still.

“You don’t have to do this,” I tell him, my voice low. “If you want to run...just say the word and we’re gone.”

I see indecision flicker in his eyes for less than a second, before they flatten into hard, emotionless disks. He’s utterly silent as he leans forward and plants a soft kiss on my cheek, then rises to his feet and crosses the stage with unhurried steps. Looking at him, you’d never know how much hurt hides beneath that mask of indifference.

Polite applause ushers him toward his uncle. I watch him go, my stomach tied in nervous knots.

“Here he is!” Jameson cheers, grabbing Chase in a stiff-looking handshake. “My boy! The *un* prodigal son! The heir-*un* apparent. The man taking over for me, when they send me home to die.” He chortles loudly at his own joke, perhaps to compensate for the fact that no one else is laughing. “With him at the helm, it’s hard to say who’ll be in the ground first — me or my company!”

I wince at the crass joke — if you can even call it that.

There are murmurs of concern spreading through the audience, rippling out from the tables nearest the stage to the back reaches of the ballroom. Jameson has surpassed good-naturedly drunk and gone straight to mean — and I’m not the only one who’s noticed.

“Now, Chase, here, he’s been more than a nephew to me,” Jameson slurs, a lopsided grin on his lips. “He’s really more like a so—”

In a quick move, Chase reaches out and grabs the microphone from its stand, cutting Jameson off mid-sentence. With a sharp nod to the nearest waiter, Chase signals for his uncle to be led back to his seat. It’s a small mercy that Jameson is so drunk, he doesn’t even put up a fight as they steer him away.

“Let’s give my uncle a hand,” Chase says into the microphone, his voice revealing none of the anger I’m sure is thrumming through his system at the moment. Personally, I’d rather gouge my eyes out than applaud his uncle’s words, but with the silence dragging on and Chase standing there at the microphone with the whole room watching, like he’s some kind of exotic zoo animal, there’s really no other choice. I lift my hands and start to clap, the sound of my palms slapping together shattering the quiet of the ballroom. Chase’s eyes find mine for a fraction of a second, and I see a message in his gaze.

Thank you.

My heart clenches and I clap harder. After a second, another set of hands joins mine. My eyes follow the sound across the table to Phoebe, who's applauding for all she's worth. I smile, she winks, and a small eternity later, the rest of the reluctant audience joins in as well, until the whole room is vibrating with thunderous, wholly-undeserved applause.

"Thank you." Chase's deep voice carries out across the room, instantly silencing our claps. "I'm not one for speeches on the best of nights, and this one has been particularly long. So I'll keep this brief." His voice is steady, unflinching, as he looks out over the crowd. "I'm a Croft. Even in the years I most wanted to, I could never change that fact."

I watch a muscle jump in his cheek, and I lace my hands together beneath the table to keep from fidgeting.

"You don't always like your family, you sure as hell don't get to pick them, but that doesn't change a damn thing." He swallows hard. "This name I carry, this company my grandfather built from nothing — it's not something I can walk away from. It's a commitment. It's a blood oath — one I intend to honor."

There's total silence — everyone's watching Chase command the room with rapt attention. Even Brett, though his expression is less awed than angry.

"You don't know me. Some of you might think you do, but I'm not the person you knew when I left five years ago. I'll readily admit, the boy I used to be failed to measure up in many ways. But I hope you won't judge the man I've become on the same yardstick. I hope you'll give me a chance to prove I've changed."

I feel my heart turn in my chest as I watch this man — this amazing, heartbreaking man — stare down the people who've been judging him mercilessly all night.

"I may not be your choice. I may not even be the best man for this job. But it's mine." His eyes find mine again, and my breath catches at the intensity of his gaze. "And I protect the things that belong to me. Always."

Always .

His final word is still reverberating from the speakers when Chase turns his back on the crowd, crosses to the table, and tugs me to my feet. I don't even have time to ask what's going on because, before I know it, he's pulled me off the stage and is leading me through the ballroom so fast, the people at the tables around us are nothing more than smears of color in my peripherals.

"Chase," I hiss.

He doesn't stop.

If anything, his pace increases.

Just before we hit the atrium, I look back over my shoulder at the Croft table. Brett's eyes, still and watchful, lock with mine, and the look in them makes all the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. His gaze holds a promise.

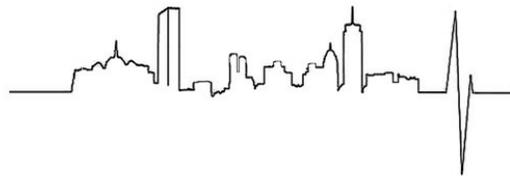
Chase may've won this battle, but don't believe the war is over. It's just beginning.

I force myself to look away from him and catch Phoebe's eyes one final time. Still in her seat, she's laughing and shaking her head at Chase's caveman-esque exit. The last thing I see, before the ballroom fades from sight, is her amused grin.

As we step out of the building, race down the red carpet, and slide into the back of the limo Evan's just pulled to the curb, I can't help but wonder if I'll ever see her again.

CHAPTER 28

LOON



THE ELEVATOR DOORS slide shut behind us as we step into the dark loft. The ride back to Croft Industries was silent — neither Chase nor I spoke a word as the limo glided through the streets, each entirely consumed by our own thoughts. Turning the sun necklace over and over in my palm, I spent the ride trying to sort out whose family is more messed up — mine or his. For the life of me, I couldn't decide on an answer.

On the left, we've got infidelity, an accidental love child, inescapable half-siblings, and an impending media crises.

On the right, we've got sociopathic tendencies, fatal alcoholism, scheming socialites, and a case of murky parentage.

It's a toss up, honestly.

Chase shrugs out of his suit jacket, walks to the kitchen island, and lays it over the back of a barstool. I'm silent as I sidle up beside him and set my clutch purse on the counter, my elbow bumping lightly against his. He doesn't say anything — he just leans toward me so his heat presses into my side, the length of our bodies resting together like two playing cards in a pyramid, each holding the other upright. My eyes slide shut as I absorb his strength.

I'm not sure how long we stand there in the dark, leaning on each other. But eventually, I feel his body start to shake — slowly, at first, then faster and faster, until my teeth are rattling with the force of it. My eyes fly open, heart pounding in my chest as I'm consumed by real, genuine fear. Because if

Chase is falling apart — if this strong, composed man has been brought to tears — I don't know if I can keep from breaking down right along with him. I don't know if I can be strong enough for us both.

His shoulders shake harder, silent sobs wracking his entire frame. Fearing the worst, I burrow into his side, slide my arms around his body, and force myself to look up into his face....

“Wait... You're... you're *laughing!* ” I yell, my voice filled with disbelief as I see he isn't crying at all. Quite the opposite. “*Laughing?*”

He only laughs harder at my outrage, until he's turning red in the face from lack of oxygen. Until he's doubled over, clutching his stomach; gasping for air with tears forming at the corners of his eyes.

“Chase!” I smack him on the arm, fighting off my own round of incredulous giggles. “How is anything about this funny?”

He looks at me, shoulders still shaking with mirth, and grins so wide it splits his face in two. “It just is,” he manages to gasp between chuckles.

“How?” I demand, trying not to laugh myself. I can't help it — watching him like this, near giddy, is enough to trigger my own hilarity.

“Sunshine, he was drunk off his ass. Totally wasted.” He snorts. “The man is dying from a lifetime of heavy drinking — does that stop him? *No!* He's got one last public appearance as company CEO — does he at least feign normalcy? Sober up for the occasion? *Of course not!* ” Chase wipes at his eyes as another round of chuckles overtakes him. “My first act as Croft Industries CEO was to have the highly-inebriated former CEO escorted off stage. Sunshine... that's not just funny. It's fucking hilarious.”

I plant my hands on my hips and stare him down. “You're a loon.”

He grins and stands upright. “You've told me that before.”

“Well, you probably deserved it.”

“I didn't.”

I roll my eyes. “Well, what were you doing at the time?”

“We were in an elevator,” he murmurs, the laughter fading from his eyes as he thinks back. “I'd just dragged you out of Brett's apartment.”

“Oh,” I say, trying not to melt when he's looking at me like that. “So, you were being a caveman. You totally deserved it.”

He takes a step toward me, his eyes on my mouth. “You don't seem to mind when I act like a caveman.”

I move back a step. “I do, actually.”

“Really?” He takes another step. I retreat until my back hits the hard edge

of the kitchen island.

Danger!

“Yes, really,” I tell him, ignoring the butterflies flying in a vortex around my stomach. “It’s very annoying.”

“I seem to remember that elevator ride ending with your legs around my waist.” His voice is low as he closes the last sliver of distance between us, his body pressing me back against the counter so I couldn’t move even if I wanted to.

“I don’t remember that at all,” I breathe, my eyes on his bottom lip.

“I guess I’ll have to remind you.”

Without warning, his hands hitch beneath my thighs and he lifts me onto the counter. I’m barely settled when I feel the rough pads of his fingertips on my bare calves, hiking the length of my dress up past my knees, until it’s pooled against the marble in a swathe of color. Stepping closer, his hands trail against my skin as his eyes find mine in the dark.

“Is any of this coming back to you?” he murmurs, his lips dropping to my neck.

“Not really,” I breathe as my legs lift to wrap around his waist. My feet, still strapped into heels, lock behind his back so he’s flush against me.

I feel his grin against my skin. “I guess I’ll have to work harder.”

“Definitely.”

His hands trace higher, up over my bare hipbones, searching for fabric that simply isn’t there. I enjoy the flash of surprise in his eyes when he pulls back to look at me.

“Oh,” I murmur, my voice playful, my eyes wide and innocent. “Did I forget to mention I’m not wearing any—”

I never get to finish my taunt because Chase moves forward, his mouth slanting down over mine and swallowing the rest of my words. It’s an open-mouthed, no-holds-barred kiss, consuming me with what can only be described as desperation. He kisses me like the purity of our mouths moving together might be enough to erase the scars our families carved into our souls tonight. His hands slip beneath the hem of my dress, stroking across my skin like a hard brush against canvas, like a chisel against stone, as though his touch can turn my limbs into art.

My hands wind around his back as I press closer, losing myself in every beat of his heart, every trace of his touch. I hear the distant rustle of a belt sliding from its loops, of clothes falling to the ground, but I’m far too lost to

pay much attention. There are more important things commanding my senses.

The pleasure-pain of stubble scraping against soft skin.

The sensation of hot breath on the hollow behind an ear.

The taste of pure desire on the pad of my tongue.

All teasing and laughter is long gone from the moment. We're totally silent as we explore each other in the dark, each motivated by an unspoken need to erase the horrors of tonight with the purity of *us*. To scrub away the darkness with the glow we create together.

I'm half-gone with passion by the time Chase pushes inside me, filling me in a way I've never before experienced. It's more than a physical joining — it's as though he's reached inside my chest and taken my heart between his palms.

He's holding my life in his hands — one wrong move might kill me.

But, instead of breaking it... he just lets it beat.

Thump, thump, thump.

Gemma, Gemma, Gemma.

Chase, Chase, Chase.

His hands are planted on the countertop beside me, my fingers are in his hair, our mouths are pressed together. We're not even kissing — we're just breathing each other in, our lips skimming and parting, skimming and parting, like the million stones I've skipped across the waves in Rocky Neck. I stare into his eyes as he pushes me over the edge, and with each stroke of his body, each touch of his hands, each lingering look, he takes my fragile heart and breaks it a little more.

Not by pulling it to pieces; by filing it with so much emotion, it's nearly bursting. Until it's so full of *us*, there's simply no room left for all the years of pain and sadness and unworthiness that defined me before.

He loves me, and it breaks my heart...in the exact way it needs to be broken.

When I was little, Mom and I drove past a burning field, the plants scorched down to the earth, the blaze so bright, no life could possibly survive it. I asked her why the farmers would do such a thing to their own crops, and she said, *Slash and burn, baby girl. Slash and burn*.

Sometimes, you have to raze things to the ground before you can start over. Sear away the past, to pave the way for a bright future.

At age five, this concept made no sense to me.

But with Chase slowly breaking me apart and building me back together

with sheer force of will, with his hands and his touch and his words fitting my fractured pieces together better than they've ever done before, I finally see.

You have to rebuild a broken heart before it can love again.

So, I don't fight it. I let him slash me open, burn me down to my most basic levels, beneath the barriers, beneath the scar tissue and damage built up by years of disappointment. Down to the very heart of me.

Then, I let him piece me back together, thrust by thrust, our gazes locked, until there are tears streaming from my eyes at the sheer beauty of the moment.

And as my heart, whole and healed, beats strong inside my chest, in perfect sync with Chase's pulse, I know I'll never be the same after this. After us .

Thump, thump, thump.

Us, us, us.

LATER, we're sprawled in Chase's bed, skin bare and limbs tangled, our eyes long-adjusted to the darkness of his room. I'm tracing circles on his naked chest with my fingertip, while he plays with the ends of my hair.

On the surface, it sounds like a simple moment: the casual aftermath of two lovers on crinkled sheets, doing nothing at all exceptional or exciting. But there's nothing simple about the way I feel when he touches me — thoughtlessly tender, with absent affection. And, really, it *is* kind of exceptional that we're here — Gemma Summers and Chase Croft. Two people who don't make sense on paper, whose broken, blunted pieces shouldn't fit together.

And yet, here we are.

Fitting .

A week ago he was a stranger. Now, I'm beginning to wonder how I ever made it through the day without him.

I suppose I didn't know what I was missing.

"Tonight kind of sucked," I murmur eventually.

"Ah, just what a man likes to hear when it comes to his sexual prowess."

I lift my head to look at him. "Not *you* , dummy. I meant tonight, the gala. You know, *before* the staggering show of sexual prowess."

He snorts. "Glad to hear it."

“I just mean...” I sigh again. “Between Rat Bastard Ralph conniving with Bat-Shit Brett, meeting my half-sister, nearly coming to blows with Vanessa in the bathroom, and then Jameson’s Grey Goose sponsored speech—”

“Back up.” Chase’s eyes narrow on mine. “You bumped into Vanessa? You never mentioned that.”

Shit . I hadn’t meant to tell him about her.

“Didn’t I?” I ask, my voice innocent.

“No.”

“Huh, that’s odd. I could’ve sworn—”

“Gemma.” His voice is stern. “Cut the shit. What did she say?”

I feel my cheeks start to heat with color. “Nothing.”

“Gemma.”

“It isn’t a big deal.”

“Then why are you blushing?”

Damn .

“She was very predictable, really — nothing I hadn’t heard before. It didn’t bother me at all.”

“Then tell me.”

“It was just a little something about me not being good enough for you.”

“That sounds far too magnanimous for Vanessa,” he says bluntly.

“Gemma, tell me what she said.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

I cross my arms over my chest. “*Because* !”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Well, it’s the only one you’re getting.”

He groans. “Christ, you’re a pain in the ass.”

“Oh, like *that’s* going to help your case.” I roll my eyes. “Insult the person you want answers from. Real smart.”

“You’re deflecting,” he points out.

“Am not,” I snap, my voice defensive.

He catches my eyes and I see his have gone soft. “Come on, sunshine.”

His voice is warm, cajoling.

“It’s embarrassing, okay?” I mutter, the words rushing from my mouth too quickly to stop. “She maybe, possibly, equated me to a shiny new toy you’ll use up and throw away as soon as you get bored with me. She basically called me a sex doll. Just not as succinctly.”

An angry sound rattles from Chase's throat.

"But it doesn't matter," I continue, before he's sent into a rage blackout. "Because Phoebe was there and she *totally* handled Vanessa. Seriously, it was kind of awesome to witness. Apparently, she caught her in a compromising position at some charity event last ye—"

"Gemma." His voice is so low, I instantly fall silent.

"Y-yeah?" I stammer, trying to keep my cool as he shifts suddenly, so he's leaning over me, his eyes trapping mine in an intent stare.

"You believed her."

"No, I didn't," I insist, even though it's a half-lie.

"You did." His voice is pissed-off. "You still think this is just about sex for me. Just about the chase. Something to scratch an itch, or keep me amused for a few weeks."

"I...um...well..." I struggle for words, not knowing what to say to him.

"Fuck, Gemma!" he growls. "You really think that's all this is for me?"

"Um...No?" I wince at the hesitation in my own voice.

"Christ," he mutters, falling back against his pillow beside me, his eyes on the ceiling. "If you think that, what the hell are you doing with me?"

"I guess, I just thought..." I press my eyes closed and force myself to say it. "I've never felt this way before. I've never had anyone look at me the way you do, touch me the way you do, take care of me the way you do. I've never felt like anyone truly understood me, until you. And I figured, everyone deserves to feel this way, at least once in their life, right? Even if it's not meant to last. Even if the other person doesn't feel the same."

"Sunshine—"

"Look, I know better than anyone that love isn't always perfectly balanced — it doesn't break even, doesn't weigh the scales equally on both sides. Someone always cares more. So, I figure it's okay if I'm that person, with us. It's okay, Chase. Just because it's not perfect, doesn't mean it's not real."

He stares at me.

I try out a smile, but it's a little shaky. "Don't worry, I'm not going to freak out or anything, and start stalking you."

He keeps on staring.

"I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't have said anything. It's just, well, you asked. And I'm not a very good liar. One time, Chrissy asked me to cover for her with Mark because they were on this couples-diet thing and she was, like,

dying , so she snuck off to get some Pink Berry, and when he asked me where she was I told him she was learning to play the ukulele with a—”

“Gemma.”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up.”

I huff. “Don’t tell me to shut up, mister— *hey!* ”

My squeal of protest escapes just as Chase grabs me by the shoulders, pins me flat to the bed, and rolls so his entire body is sprawled on top of mine. I try to push him off, but he’s too heavy to budge even an inch.

“Get off!” I complain, squirming futilely. “You’re heavy!”

“You’re the loon.”

“Excuse me?”

“You. You’re the loon, in this relationship. Not me.”

“Am not!”

“Gemma, the amount of nonsensical bullshit you’ve talked yourself into believing in the space of just a few days could set a world record.”

Rude!

“Well, I’m so sure,” I say snottily, glaring up at him.

His eyes narrow. “You’ve got yourself convinced that I don’t care as much as you do, that I’m not as invested in this as you are, and that I don’t feel the same way about you. And all that would be bad enough — but on top of that, you’ve *also* convinced yourself that it’s somehow *okay* to feel like that. That it’s not totally fucked up for you to be in a relationship where you’re the only one invested, where the guy doesn’t give a shit about you.”

“Well—”

“I’m talking now.” His voice leaves no room for argument, and my mouth snaps shut. “I know you’ve never done this before, I know you think we’ve got different definitions for what this thing is between us, so I’ll lay it out for you, plain as day. *My* definition.”

Oh, boy.

He leans so close, his lips are practically pressed against mine. “We’re together. You’re mine. Which means, *I give a shit* . I’m always going to give a shit. We’re going to fight, we’re going to make mistakes, we’re probably going to drive each other fucking crazy because, like I said earlier, you’re a loon.”

I open my mouth to protest, but he keeps on talking.

“Don’t tell me I don’t care about you, because it’s bullshit. Don’t tell me

I'm not in this with you, because I am. *I'm in it*, sunshine. And I care — a hell of a lot more than I ever thought I would." He drops his forehead to rest against mine, and his voice loses a tiny bit of its edge. "This relationship — it's happening. You and me — we're partners. Equal partners, with equal feelings, and equal fucking chances of getting hurt. You got me?"

I'm silent for a long time, processing his words. He just stares at me, his eyes burning into mine, his body pressing me into the bed, and waits for me to say something. Anything.

"Are you done?" I ask finally.

One side of his mouth tugs up in a smile. "Yeah."

"Can I say something, now?"

"Yeah."

Tilting my head up, I bring my mouth to his and kiss him with every ounce of passion I can muster. And with my hands and my lips, I tell him exactly what I think of his definition of *us*.

WHEN WE FINALLY BREAK APART, we're both breathless, lying on our backs with matching grins on our lips. I roll to lay my head on his chest, just over his heart — which is quickly becoming my favorite place in the world — and listen to the comforting thump as my own heartbeat returns to normal.

"Who knew, when we met, that your family would be just as screwed up as mine?" I ask, after a while, my voice quiet.

A soft kiss lands on my temple. "Yours may be screwed up, but they're not half as bad as the Crofts."

"I don't know, does *your* family saga include an illegitimate love child that will destroy the family if the media ever catches wind?" My voice is teasing. "Because *mine* does. And, speaking as said illegitimate love child... it's not as fun as it sounds."

His mouth opens, like he wants to say something, then promptly snaps closed again. I see the muscle jumping in his cheek as his eyes swim with indecision.

"Chase?"

He lifts his gaze to meet mine, and the stark pain in it makes my heart stutter in my chest.

"Yes."

"What?"

“You asked whether the Crofts have an illegitimate love child in the mix, that’ll destroy the family if the media ever finds out.” His jaw tightens. “Yes. We do.”

“Chase...” I whisper, my mind racing through possibilities so fast I can barely keep up.

“Me.” His voice is flat, revealing none of the emotions swimming in his eyes. “I’m the bastard.”

My heart aches as he forces out words that are nearly enough to break him.

“Jameson isn’t my uncle. He’s my father.”

IT ALL MAKES SENSE, NOW.

Why Brett resents him so much.

Why he hates being called Mr. Croft – hates being a Croft.

Why he left, five years ago, when he learned the truth.

Why Jameson would leave the company to a nephew, instead of a son.

“So...” My voice is gentle, hesitant — as though one wrong word might make him shut down... and shut me out. “Your mother... she...”

“Cheated on her husband with his brother.” Chase nods. “I barely remember the woman, but she sounds like a wonderful person. Honest. Faithful. Exactly what a wife and mother *should* be.”

His words are so sarcastic, so scathing, I want to flinch away. Instead, I do the opposite — I move closer, flattening my palm against his chest, directly above his heart. I feel it racing beneath my hand, an undeniable window into the anguish he’s feeling, no matter how composed he looks on the surface.

“I’m sorry, Chase,” I whisper. “I’m so sorry, love.”

He doesn’t speak; I don’t know if he *can*, right now.

“I know how it feels, to learn your life is a lie. I remember...” I shake my head, consumed with memories of my teenage self, crying on a bedroom floor with letters in my hands. Totally destroyed by the truth. “It’s like losing your identity. And it’s almost enough to kill you.”

“It *did* kill them.” His hand presses tighter against my back — the only show of emotion he’ll allow himself. “My parents... the night their car went over that bridge, into the water. That was the night my father finally learned the truth – that his wife was a cheater. And... that I wasn’t his son.”

“Oh, Chase...”

“I don’t know if it was an accident or if he was just so mad, he couldn’t take it anymore... if he chose to... if...”

He can’t get the words out.

I choke back tears when I see his eyes, still locked on the ceiling, are glassy. Moving closer, I force myself to speak, trying to keep my voice from cracking.

“I wish I could make this better for you. All I can say is, the people who created you don’t define the person you become. You can read a thousand studies about nature over nurture, about genes determining destiny... but I’ll tell you one thing: they’re bullshit.” I lift my hand to cup his cheek, my thumb stroking slow circles against the faint stubble there. “You could have Charles Manson as a father and end up a saint; you could have Mother Theresa as a mother and end up a serial killer. At the end of the day, *you* define the person you become. Not a strand of DNA. Not the parents you didn’t get to choose. *You* .” I pull in a deep breath. “And, Chase Croft... the person you’ve chosen to be... he’s pretty freaking amazing. So amazing... it takes my breath away, just being near you.”

He looks at me then, his eyes dark with the demons of his past and something else, something deeper, something I can’t quite define.

“Of all the people in the world who could’ve won the seat next to mine at that playoff game... it was you, Gemma.” His voice cracks on the last word. “*You* . The one person on the planet who might just understand me.”

My breath catches as he pulls me closer, his arm a steel band across my back. His mouth presses hard against my hair, so his words are slightly muffled.

“I don’t put much stock in luck. I don’t really believe what goes around comes around, or that everything balances out in the end. But if I’ve earned any karma at all — it’s *you* ,” he says simply. “You’re my karma, sunshine. And I’m pretty sure you were made for me.”

SATURDAY PASSES in a blur of laughter and love-making. Chase and I turn off our phones and spend the whole day naked in his bed — not to mention in his hot tub, in his shower, on the kitchen floor, and even once on the pool table. By the time night falls, we’re both so exhausted from a marathon day of sex, we can barely lift our heads from the pillow.

“Hungry?” Chase asks, his voice softer than the beams of the setting sun, filtering through his windows.

“Starving.”

“Me too.”

Neither of us moves. Sprawled in his bed, the sheets tangled around our limbs, my head rests on his stomach and his arm is thrown across my torso, just beneath my breasts, anchoring me against him.

“I’ll get up,” he says. “Get us some food.”

“Mhm,” I murmur, my eyes drifting shut.

“Really, I’m getting up now,” he says, still not moving. “Any second.”

“Mmm.”

“If I wasn’t so goddamned worn out...”

“Chase.”

“Yeah, sunshine?”

Using the final reserves of my strength, I drag my body parallel to his and collapse against his chest, so I’m lying half on top of him. “Shhhh.”

“I thought you were hungry,” he says, his voice amused.

“Nap now. Food later.”

The sound of his chuckle reaches my ears, though I’m already nearly asleep. “Whatever you say, sunshine.”

The last thing I feel, before I slip out of consciousness, are his arms tightening around me in a warm embrace.

CHAPTER 29

DIABOLICAL



MY EYES SNAP open in the middle of the night.

I'm wide awake — the unfortunate side effect of falling asleep at 6 p.m., I suppose — but Chase is still asleep next to me, his breaths deep and regular. Knowing I won't be able to fall back asleep any time soon, I do my best not to jostle him as I slide out of his hold and off the bed. In the dark, I find one of his t-shirts on the floor, tug it over my head, and pad barefoot into the kitchen.

God, I'm hungry.

I flip on the row of pendant lights hanging above the counter, dimming them as low as possible, and beeline for the pantry. Rooting through his cabinets, it doesn't take me long to find what I'm looking for. I grab the box off the shelf, cross to the refrigerator, and pull out everything I need.

Twenty minutes later, waiting for the pancakes to brown on the griddle, I retrieve my cellphone from my clutch purse and power it on. It doesn't even faze me to see I've got another half-dozen voicemails and texts from Chrissy, but I wince when I realize I've missed another call from my landlord. I'll have to call him back, as soon as it's a reasonable hour.

There's a text from my mother — *Everything okay, honey?* — probably because I've been ignoring her texts since the gala. Frankly, I don't know what to say to her. Or, maybe, I'm afraid of what she'll say to *me*, when I ask the questions Phoebe's necklace-revelation prompted.

Maybe a little of both.

Chrissy's messages range from forwarded Google alerts — *Chase Croft Makes His Societal Debut with New Girlfriend!* — to text messages threatening my life, if I don't call her back with details sometime soon. Nothing unusual.

Which, I take it, means Brett hasn't leaked the story to Phoebe and the media, yet.

A relieved breath escapes, just as two arms wrap around me from behind and a warm body presses against my back.

"Those are going to burn," Chase whispers against the nape of my neck, his voice scratchy with sleep.

I turn in his arms, to face him. "Did I wake you?"

His forehead drops to rest against mine. "Felt you gone."

"Sorry."

"Don't be, sunshine." His arms tighten in a quick hug, then drop away as he turns, picks up the spatula, and starts flipping the pancakes. For a few minutes, I watch him moving around the stove with ease, his muscular forearms flexing as he wields kitchen utensils, pulls a platter from the cabinet on his left, and starts loading it up with perfect, golden-brown pancakes. There's something sexy about watching a man cook — especially when he's wearing nothing but black boxer briefs — and I swear, if I hadn't already had all the sex my vagina could handle in the past eighteen hours, I'd be jumping his bones on the kitchen floor.

Again.

Chase grins as he slides a plate across the counter toward me, his eyes still a little drowsy, his hair still a little mussed. "Eat up, sunshine."

"Thanks."

He pushes the butter and a bottle of maple syrup toward me. "Here."

"Yuck." I wince, eyeing the brown bottle. "I hate syrup."

"How is that even possible? Everyone likes syrup. It's the best part."

"Said the man who doesn't like *waffles*."

"Touché." He grins. "You know, you still haven't told me your middle name."

"Not gonna happen."

"Come on."

"Nope."

"It can't be that bad, sunshine."

"Trust me, it *can*."

“You’ll tell me someday.”

“Don’t hold your breath.”

He sighs and lets it go.

For *now* .

I slather my pancakes in butter as he shuts off the stove and settles in on the stool beside me. Cutting off a giant slice, I shove it in my mouth. I moan with satisfaction when the first bite hits my tongue, so hungry I barely bother to chew as I devour the stack on my plate.

Chase chuckles, but doesn’t tease me — he’s too busy shoving his own pancakes in his mouth.

“That was the best *ever* ,” I breathe after I’ve cleared my plate, my hands resting on my stomach.

Chase snorts as he pushes his empty plate away. “Oh, really? Better than sex?”

“Definitely,” I tease, elbowing him in the side.

His eyes narrow, the look in them making my stomach flip. “Is that so?”

“What can I say? They were really good panca— *hey!*”

My squeal of protest is lost as Chase jumps off his barstool, so fast I barely see him move, plants his shoulder against my stomach, and throws me over his shoulder. I don’t even have time to form words, because before I know what’s happening, he’s marched us back into his room and tossed me down on the bed.

“Chase—”

He’s silent as he reaches for me, and the look on his face makes all the thoughts in my head flee. The t-shirt goes up over my head and disappears, Chase’s underwear vanishes like magic, and then, faster than I can blink, he’s on me, *in* me, grinding his body against mine in a slow, torturous pace that makes me forget about breakfast foods.

“BETTER THAN PANCAKES?” he asks, after we’ve both cooled down.

“I was just teasing, you know.” I press a kiss to his chest. “You didn’t have to go all caveman.”

“I didn’t hear you complaining.”

I grin against his skin. “True enough.”

His hands slide through the hair at the nape of my neck, massaging with rough fingers. We’re quiet, for a while.

“You’re not wearing your necklace.” His words, spoken in a soft voice, still send a jolt through me. “I’ve never seen you take it off, before.”

I don’t say a word, but I can feel my body radiating tension.

“Gemma?”

I swallow. “It’s... something Phoebe said.”

He waits.

“She said she has one just like it,” I whisper. “A gift from her father.”

“Sunshine...”

“Which means... There’s a pretty good chance my mother has been lying to me about him for years.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Actually, I do.” I push up to look at him. “She said he never tried to contact me. Never sent a card, never sent a letter. Nothing. Only a check, in the beginning, before he realized she wasn’t going to take his money and get rid of me.” I clear my throat, hoping it’ll dislodge the emotion forming a lump there. “But if that’s true, why would he give me a necklace? The same one he gave his own daughter, years ago? Why would he do that, unless...”

The lump expands, blocking my airway and cutting off my words.

“Unless he wanted to be a part of your life.” Chase finishes for me, when he sees I’m too choked up to form words. I drop my head back to his chest and let him stroke my hair, let him murmur quiet assurances that it’ll be okay, that we’ll figure it out, against the crown of my head. And, for a little while, I let myself believe him.

“Have you considered getting in contact with him?” he asks, some time later.

My body goes tight at just the thought.

“I could get in touch easily,” Chase continues. “We’ve done business with West Tech in the past. It wouldn’t take more than a phone call, if you’re open to—”

“No.” My voice is flat. “I don’t want to see him. I don’t want to talk to him. Not now... not ever.”

Chase pauses, processing the chill in my words, the rigidity of my frame.

“Okay, sunshine,” he whispers, kissing the top of my head. “Okay.”

It takes a while, but eventually I fall asleep in the circle of his arms.

THE SOUND OF LOUD, booted footsteps clomping against hardwood stirs me

awake. My eyes blink open and I see it's midmorning, maybe near noon, if the bright sunlight pouring through the balcony windows is any indication. I'm alone in bed and this time there's no note on Chase's empty pillow.

Hearing hushed, unfamiliar voices drifting from the main room, I reach over the edge of the bed and grab his rumpled t-shirt off the floor. I glance around for the shopping bags Shelby delivered before the gala, but they aren't on the armchair, where I left them. A squirmy feeling stirs in my stomach as I follow my instincts across the room, into the walk-in closet where Chase keeps his clothes.

Sure enough, folded neatly on the shelves to my left, are four pairs of jeans. My gala dress is hanging neatly in a garment bag, next to a colorful array of blouses and tops that Shelby purchased. Grumbling under my breath about bossy, presumptuous billionaires, who charge ahead into new territory without even *thinking* about asking for permission, I snatch a pair of jeans off the top of the stack and stuff my legs into them. As I pull on a bra and do up the buttons of what I must admit is a very pretty top, I think of the many, many things I'm going to say to Chase when I find him. Big things. Possibly *loud* things, at the top of my lungs.

At which point, he'd better explain it was all an accident, that his housekeeper put my things in his closet without checking with him.

Because, seriously, if he moved me into his apartment without so much as a conversation...

I'll have to kill him.

When I'm dressed, I pop into the bathroom to take care of business, shriek at the scary state of my waves — *hello, sex hair* — and brush my teeth as fast as possible. Rubbing at my bleary eyes, I head into the kitchen, fully expecting to find Chase talking to Evan or Knox — or even Shelby, if she's in a particularly persistent mood.

I do *not* expect to find three hulking men in GALIZIA MOVING CO. shirts lugging boxes out of the elevator and depositing them along the wall on the far side of the loft.

My wide eyes meet the steady brown gaze of a tall, muscular, bald man who looks a little like Bruce Willis.

"We'll be out of your hair in a few minutes, ma'am." He nods courteously and continues stacking boxes. "Just a couple more of these to unload."

"Okay?" My eyes drift around the apartment, searching for Chase, but

he's nowhere to be found. Instead, they catch on one of the boxes. Because peeking out the top, I see something I recognize. Something I thought I'd never see again.

A square throw pillow, with a red and blue peacock-feather design.

The same one that used to sit on top of my bed.

But that's impossible.

Unless...

I force myself to stay calm as I take slow steps across the room, my eyes locked on the boxes like they contain something hazardous, that'll kill me if I get too close. Like nuclear waste. Or a biochemical weapon.

Unfortunately, it's much, much worse than that.

Because, when I get close enough, I see it *is* my peacock pillow. And it's sitting on a stack of books I recognize from my destroyed shelves, their covers tattered but still in place. I barely breathe as my hands tear through box after box, unearthing more of my belongings — a set of knives, my blender, a paint-splattered pair of jeans, some underwear, my makeup bag, a jewelry box, some candles, a vase.

The only scraps that escaped Ralph's ransacking.

I whirl to face the mover-men, hands planted on my hips. The bald man catches my eyes, startling at the scary expression on my face. The other two get one look at me and wisely board the elevator to escape my wrath.

"What are you doing?" I snap at the bald man, as the elevator slides closed.

"Just..." He looks nervous. "Just my job, ma'am."

I sigh and try to make my voice less shrill. "Sorry, I didn't mean to snap. I just need to know who told you to bring these boxes here?"

"Well... Mr. Croft." He swallows. "His instructions were real clear — package up whatever was salvageable at a crappy little apartment over in Cambridge, trash the rest. Then, he said to bring the boxes here, wait for a scary looking fella named Knox to let us in through the service entrance, and unload 'em here, in the penthouse."

"Yes, that was *my* crappy apartment, you were at."

He has the grace to blush. "Sorry."

"It's all right." I sigh. "But this is *my* stuff! Why on earth would he have you bring it here?"

"Don't know anything 'bout that." He scratches his beard. "People pay me to move things, I move 'em. Not my job to ask a lot of questions."

I sigh again. “Well, there’s been a mix-up. Can you please bring all this back to my apartment? I’ll make sure you’re paid for your time.”

He starts to shift from foot to foot, looking uncomfortable. “Don’t think that’ll be possible.”

“Why not?” My eyes narrow. “I assure you, this is my stuff.”

“I’m sure it is, ma’am.” He eyes the elevator, as though he’d like nothing better than to make a quick exit. “It’s just...”

“What?”

“Well, the landlord was there, when we were clearing out your place, and he was real insistent we had to be finished by the end of the day. Said the lease was ending, and he had to get the renovators in ASAP, seeing as he has a new tenant moving in, and all.”

“He said *what* ?!”

“Look, I have to be going.” He starts to edge toward the elevator. “I’m real sorry for any inconvenience, but I hope you’ll find everything in order. And next time you’re moving, please think of us.”

“Wait!” I call, as he crosses to the elevator and pushes the call button. “Don’t I have to sign anything?”

The doors slide open and he steps inside. “That Knox fella signed on delivery, ma’am. Have a nice day, now!”

And then, he’s gone, leaving me in the middle of Chase’s apartment, surrounded by six cardboard boxes that contain the sum total of my earthly belongings.

What.

The.

Hell.

“I’M GOING TO KILL HIM.”

“Babe.”

“Seriously.” I pull a candlestick out of the box closest to me and sneer at it. “He’s dead.”

“Babe.”

“Don’t *babe* me, Knox.”

“You’re freaking out.”

I whirl to face him, candlestick still in hand, and point it at him like a sword. “Yes, I’m freaking out. My boyfriend — who, frankly, only became

my boyfriend about thirty seconds ago — *gave up the lease to my apartment* . Oh, and then he moved me into *his apartment* without even asking me! If anyone has cause to freak out, it's *me* , Knox! The girl with the domineering, devious, downright *diabolical* boyfriend!"

"That's a lot of *d* 's, babe." Knox's eyes do that crinkle-smile thing, and the sight makes me forget my anger. Only for a second, though.

He arrived about twenty minutes ago and found me freshly showered, with my hair and makeup done, wearing one of my new Shelby-purchased outfits. After the movers left, I spent ten minutes staring from box to box in disbelief before deciding I needed coffee, followed by a long, hot shower. I ticked both of those off my list, before I began searching the boxes — one of which, fortuitously, contained my hair dryer.

Post-blow-out, I grabbed all my clothing from Chase's closet, carried it out into the main room, and dumped it on top of the stack of boxes. I was in the process of calling my landlord — who blithely informed me there was nothing he could do to fix this mess — when Knox walked in. He made the mistake of thinking, since I *looked* put together, that I wasn't coming apart at the emotional seams.

Wrong .

I step closer to him, the candlestick held aloft and my eyes narrowed on his.

"Where is he? Tell me, so I can go *kill him* ."

"He's busy."

"Doing what?"

"He's in a business meeting."

"It's Sunday."

He shrugs. "Babe, just let it be."

"No, I will not *let it be!* Come on, Knox, are you seriously not going to tell me where he is?"

"Depends."

"On?"

"On whether you're gonna attack anyone with that candle." He reaches out and plucks it from my grasp. "And whether you're gonna make a big scene."

"I won't make a scene," I say automatically.

His eyebrow arches dubiously.

"I won't!" I insist, crossing my fingers behind my back. "Promise."

He continues staring at me.

“Want me to pinky swear?” I offer.

“Christ,” he mutters to the ceiling. “She crosses her fingers behind her back and offers to pinky swear, like a kindergartener. Chase is fucked.”

“I’m right here, you know.” I cross my arms over my chest. “I can hear you.”

His eyes crinkle again as they return to mine. “Know that, babe.”

“Please tell me,” I beg, my voice cajoling.

He pauses, staring at me.

“Please,” I repeat softly.

“Christ.” He blows out a huff of air. “He’s in his office. Down one floor, take a left. Can’t miss it.”

“Thanks.” I grin at him, grab my purse off the counter, and beeline for the elevator doors.

The whole ride down, I practice what I’m going to say to Chase.

Starting with *you’re a crazy person* and ending with *I’m not moving in with you, ever*.

Okay, maybe not *ever* .

But, not for a long, *loooooong* time.

When the doors chime open, I step into a hallway I recognize. Sure, last time I was here it was in the throes of a renovation and I was being led around by an aloof blonde named Anita... but it’s definitely the executive suite at Croft Industries.

There are still signs of work being done — unfinished wall sections marked with blue painter’s tape, small piles of plaster dust in the hallway corners, clear plastic drapes protecting the hardwood floors from paint droplets — but for the most part, it looks great. Gone are the garish green tones, the horrid carpeting, the heavy furnishings. It’s been tastefully decorated in what I’m coming to recognize as Chase’s signature taste: practical, pretty-looking furniture, that’s upscale without being uncomfortable.

I wander down the hall and find myself once again at that imposing set of double doors which, this time, I know lead into Chase’s office. It seems like a million years ago that I stood before them in my work uniform, a binder full of artwork pressed to my chest, worrying about meeting whoever I’d find inside.

Little did I know...

I take a deep breath, steady my shoulders, and reach for the handle. As my fingers curl around the knob, I tell myself to stay strong, even if he tries to pull that caveman nonsense that steals all rational thought from my head with a single glance, a single touch, a single word.

We're going to have a normal, adult conversation about this.

I'll state my mind clearly, and he'll listen respectfully.

It'll all be fine.

And maybe, after we've dealt with this like normal people, we'll make some more pancakes. Naked.

I fight a smile at that last thought, thinking it probably does not bode well for the strength of my argument, if I've already forgiven him in my thoughts. But I can't help it — this is Chase, we're talking about, after all.

So, with one more deep breath, I push open the door and step inside to face him.

And all those silly, shortsighted thoughts go right out of my head.

Because he's not alone.

There's a man, sitting in the seat across from him.

A man I recognize instantly — probably because I look just like him.

Milo West.

“GEMMA,” the man says, as soon as he sees me, surprise on his face and sadness in his tone.

“Gemma,” Chase says, rising to his feet, concern in his voice and apology in his eyes.

Me, well, I don't say anything.

I just turn on one heel and race for the elevator at the end of the hall.

“Gemma! Gemma, wait!”

I hear Chase calling me, but I don't stop until I hit the elevator banks, flying past a startled Anita at the front desk without so much as a word. I jam my finger into the call button over and over, cursing its slowness.

“Gemma.”

Chase's voice, winded from running, is close. I know he's standing right behind me. My body tenses like a sprinter on the blocks, waiting for the gunshot. I don't turn to face him. I don't move a single muscle except for my finger, which repeatedly jabs at the call button.

“Sunshine—”

“Don’t.”

“If you’d just listen—”

“*I said don’t .*” My voice is scathing, shredded with anger and disbelief. “I don’t want to hear what you have to say, right now. I don’t want to be anywhere near you.”

“You shouldn’t be alone—”

“*Stop .*”

He sighs.

I feel him take a step closer, so there’s only a tiny bit of space remaining between my back and his front. I can feel the heat radiating off him, through that tiny sliver of separation. His breath stirs the hair at my nape with each exhale.

It takes every bit of strength I possess not to turn around and look at him, to close the distance between us. I know, with his arms around me, I’ll feel better — there’s no comfort in the world like the circle of Chase’s arms.

But I don’t. I can’t.

Not when, every time I close my eyes, I see the image of the man I’ve fallen in love with sitting across from the man who never loved me. The man who resented my existence from the moment I was conceived. The man I never wanted to see, meet, or even hear from.

Chase knew all that; he reached out to him anyway.

So, it doesn’t matter that he was trying to fix things — fix *me* . It’s still a betrayal. It still hurts.

The elevator doors finally slide open, and I step inside. I half expect him to follow me in, but when I turn to face the doors, I see he’s frozen just outside the threshold, his face a mask of sadness and frustration.

“Sunshine...” he whispers, pain flashing on his features. “I didn’t mean... I thought if you just...” He shakes his head. “I want you to be happy. I was trying to make things better for you. To protect you.”

I hit the button to take me down to the lobby, staring at him with eyes full of distrust. “Then why did you do the one thing you knew would hurt me beyond belief?”

His mouth opens, shuts, opens again. No words escape, because there’s nothing to say.

Our gazes hold until the doors shut, leaving me alone.

I don’t even try to fight the tears, as they drip down my cheeks onto the elevator floor.

I RACE out of the building, dodge through a crowd of pedestrians with my head ducked, in case there are any paparazzi lurking nearby, and dart across the street to the closest subway station. I'm sure Knox is hot on my heels — Chase may've let me leave, but there's no way he'd do it without knowing I have protection — so I hop on the first train I see and ride aimlessly for nearly an hour, changing lines at random. People look at me a little strangely — in their defense, I *am* still weeping like a leaky faucet — but no one says or does a thing.

This is New England, after all. We aren't that friendly.

I hop off the T at the public garden and start to wander the paths, thinking a walk by the pond might clear my head. The park is dreary this time of year — gray, damp, with only tiny traces of spring peaking up from the flower beds — and it does little to distract me.

At the water's edge, I catch sight of two swans, a mother and her baby, gliding across the surface in perfect tandem.

Across the way, on the opposite bank, a young mother and her toddler throw bits of bread to the ducks, laughing each time a bird snaps one up.

To my left, a teenage girl on a bench groans into her cellphone — *but, Mom, all the other kids' curfew is eleven. Why do I have to come home at ten?*

Mothers are everywhere I look.

It's like the universe is actively trying to smack some sense into me with as many signs as possible.

You're mad at the wrong person, genius.

I sigh as I reach into my purse and pull out my cellphone. A growl of frustration erupts when I see I've grabbed the new, Chase-approved one from the depths of my bag by accident. With a rough shove, I return it to a deep pocket and locate my real cell — complete with sparkly blue case and cracked screen.

My finger trembles a little as I dial a series of buttons I know by heart.

“Hello?”

I press my eyes closed at the sound of her voice.

“Gemma, are you there?”

My free hand curls into a fist by my side and the other tightens around the plastic.

“Gemma?”

“I’m here.”

“Oh, good, I thought you’d pocket-dialed me.” She laughs. “What’s up, baby girl? You finally ready to tell me about your night at the ball with Prince Charming?”

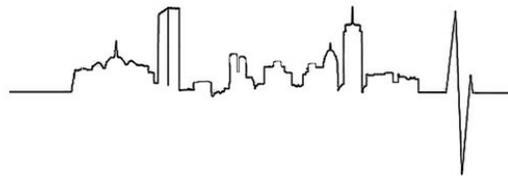
“No.” I clear my throat. “I actually need you to tell *me* something.”

“Name it.”

“Why have you spent twenty-six years lying to me about my father?”

CHAPTER 30

FINE



I STEP inside the doors of the brightly lit shop, its plexiglass countertops revealing a vast array of delicious-looking sweets.

Crumble — the best cupcake place in all the land. Or, at the very least, in the Greater Boston area.

The woman at the cash register recognizes me immediately.

“Hey, Gemma!” She smiles wide. “You want the usual?”

God, I have a usual. That’s a little sad.

“Hi Katy. No — today, I’m gonna need a whole half-dozen.”

“To go?”

“Nope.” I swallow. “For here. Just for me.”

Her eyebrows go up as she looks from my tear-stained face to the platter of chocolate-on-chocolate cupcakes she’s just pulled out. “You sure?”

I nod.

“Alrighty, then.” She smirks a little as she loads up a hot pink plate with six giant cupcakes. “But, if your arteries clog in one of my booths, I’m not responsible.”

“Hardy har har.”

She smiles as she passes me the plate. “Gemma... if you want to talk about it...”

“No,” I say immediately. “But, thanks.”

“Whoever he is, he’s not worth the calories.”

“So true,” I mutter, Milo’s face flashing in my mind as I grab my

cupcakes and head for a back table, where I can eat my feelings in peace.

“THIS BETTER BE GOOD, I was right in the middle of my CrossFit session—” Shelby breaks off abruptly when she catches sight of my face — which may or may not be covered in chocolate frosting. “Oh, Jesus. What’s wrong?”

“Nuffing,” I slur around a giant bite.

“I’ve known you six years. Never once have I seen you resort to a sugar coma to fix your problems.”

I shrug. “First time for everything.”

“You’ve got chocolate, like...” She grabs a napkin from the dispenser and passes it to me with a grimace. “...*everywhere* .”

I glare as I snatch the paper from her outstretched hand and begin wiping my mouth. She waits until I’m done chewing before she sighs, pulls out the seat across from me, and settles in.

“Gemma.” She steepled her hands on the table in front of her. “Look at yourself.”

I push the plate of cupcakes toward her. “Cupcake?”

She stares at me like I’ve just offered her methamphetamine. “Are you kidding? Do you know how many carbohydrates are in a cupcake? How much sugar is in that frosting?”

“Whatever. More for me,” I say, grabbing another one and taking a colossal bite.

“You want to tell me what happened?”

“Not really,” I mutter around a mouthful.

“So you just called me here to bear witness to your moping?” She snorts. “Sounds productive.”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’m already here — missing my workout, I might add. Paul’s traveling for work. All I’ve got waiting for me at home is a Paleo meal and a rerun of TopChef.” She stares at me, eyebrows raised. “Lay it on me.”

So, I do.

I tell her everything — about my father, about Phoebe, about Chase. I even tell her about Brett and his threats to spill the story to the press. It takes over an hour — in part because Shelby interrupts me with questions every two seconds — but when I finally finish, she doesn’t say a word. She just reaches out, grabs the final cupcake off the plate, and takes a bite.

Wow. *I've made Shelby break her five-year sugar hiatus.*

That's when I know it's bad.

"You know how, in the past, I've teased you about having run-of-the-mill daddy issues?" Shelby says eventually, after she's devoured her entire cupcake.

"Yeah?"

"Well, I take it back. I take it all back. Because, holy *crap* that is a helluva lot more screwed up than I ever imagined."

"Tell me about it."

"So, your mom..." Shelby's voice is hesitant. "She admitted it? That Milo tried to be a part of your life?"

"Yep." I take a deep breath, trying to stay calm — I've done enough yelling, today, where my mother's concerned. "Apparently, he's been reaching out since I was born, trying to be at least a small part of my life. He wanted to take me on vacations, introduce me to his kids, pay for college... And she never even told me about him. She let me believe he was this villain, this horrible rat bastard who abandoned me."

"Gem..."

"The closest he ever got was this necklace." I reach for my neck automatically, searching for the sun pendant, but my fingers brush bare skin and I remember I threw it off, after the gala. My voice drops lower. "I just can't believe she kept all this from me. Kept *him* from me."

"At least you know, now," Shelby says. "Maybe someday, you and Milo can move forward."

"After all this time... I don't know."

She shrugs. "Well, you don't have to decide right now. You don't have to forgive him right away — him or your mom, for that matter."

"She says she was trying to protect me, but... I can't help the small part of me that wonders if she was really just trying to protect herself."

"Did she apologize?"

"She cried." I swallow. "I've never heard her cry. Ever."

"Jeeze, that's rough." Shelby winces in sympathy.

"I love my mother — she's my best friend. But right now, I need some space from her, to sort my head out."

"You also need to call your boyfriend."

I groan. "I can't."

"Too bad, you have to."

“Why?”

“Because he’s your boyfriend and you stormed out of his office crying your eyes out. He’s probably worried about you. Actually, if what I’ve heard about Chase is true, he’s *definitely* worried about you.”

“But...”

“What?”

“He’s going to think I’m an idiot,” I murmur. “I blamed him for all this, when he was really just trying to help. I took my anger out on him because...”

“Because you knew he could take it.” Shelby shrugs. “It’s not rocket science, doll. He knows you weren’t really mad at him.”

“He’s going to think I’m crazy.”

“Gemma, I hate to break this to you, but you *are* crazy.” She grins. “That’s half the fun of being around you.”

“Thanks, that’s really helpful.” I groan.

“If he didn’t like crazy, he wouldn’t be with you.” She reaches out and lays her hand on top of mine. “Now call him! Or, at the very least, send him a text to let him know you’re still breathing. Though, in all honesty, I’m not sure how you’re alive after eating five of those cupcakes. I can feel my organs shutting down after just one.”

I roll my eyes, grab my phone off the table, and text Chase.

So, I freaked out at you. Turns out, I should’ve been freaking out at my mother, instead. Forgive me?

The phone rings in my hand.

“Sunshine.”

“Hey.”

“You’re okay?” His voice is thick with concern. “Knox couldn’t find you. You aren’t at your apartment, you’re not at the loft, and your car’s gone from its spot. I called the phone I gave you, but it went straight to voicemail—”

“I’m okay. I rode the T for a while, walked through the park, then eventually picked up my car and went in search of cupcakes.”

“I was worried.”

“I know.” My voice gets small. “I’m really, really sorry, Chase. I shouldn’t have freaked out on you, I know that—”

“No.” He cuts me off. “*You feel like freaking out?* I can deal with that. *You need to yell at me?* Go for it — scream at the top of your lungs, sunshine. *You need some space?* That’s fine, I’ll give it to you when you need it. But

bolting without explanation? Running away without talking to me? Without letting anyone know you're safe — especially now, when we know for a fact there are people who'd like to hurt you? ” His voice gets more strained with each sentence, until he's growling into the phone. “Sunshine, that's not okay. That's *never* okay.”

“I'm sorry,” I whisper.

I listen to him breathing over the line, imagining his face — jaw ticking, eyes dark, brow creased.

“No more running,” he says finally, his voice soft. “We have a problem, we talk about it. That's the only way this is going to work.”

“Okay.”

“Now, will you please come home?”

“Yeah, about that. *Home* .” My eyes narrow. “We have to talk about my apartment. Specifically, about the fact that you moved me out of it without talking to me, and now all of my earthly belongings are sitting in boxes in your living room. *More* specifically, about your utter insanity if you think I'm going to live with you.”

Shelby squeals, when she hears this — in all the drama, I completely forgot to tell her about Chase's executive moving decisions.

“I figured that might come up, at some point,” he says wryly.

“Chase!”

“Sunshine.” His voice is warm — I can hear him grinning.

“Don't *sunshine* me, mister!”

“You freaking out?”

“Yes, I am most definitely freaking out!”

“You gonna run again?”

I pause for a beat, then sigh in resignation. “No.”

“See you at home,” he says, clicking off seconds later.

I listen to dead air buzzing at my ear, and lift my eyes to Shelby.

“He moved me in, without even asking!”

She nods. “Sounds like it.”

“He is the most annoying, bossy, incorrigible, pushy, arrogant man I've ever met.”

Her eyebrows lift. “Anything else?”

I sigh. “And I'm totally in love with him.”

I'M DRIVING BACK to Croft Industries when my cellphone starts to ring. Cursing, I press a button to toggle the speakerphone and slide my finger to answer the call.

"Hello?"

"Gemma!"

"Chrissy, I can't really talk right now, but I promise to give you updates on the gala later tonight."

"I need you to come over."

"It's not really a good time, Chrissy. I have to sort some things out with Chase and my father and my apartment—"

"Gemma!"

I blink, startled by the shrillness of her tone. "Yeah?"

"I need you to come over."

"Is everything okay?"

"Mark's out of town on a business trip, my parents are on a cruise in the Mediterranean, and Winston refuses to eat his Cheerios. Oh, and my water just broke all over my Pottery Barn sofa. But, other than that, everything's just peachy!"

"Your water broke?" I shriek.

"Yep."

"Are you sure?"

"Gemma, there's a puddle of amniotic fluid on my living room floor. I'm sure."

"But you're not due for another two weeks!"

"Tell that to the fetus."

"Okay, um, crap," I mutter, my mind racing. "It's going to be okay. We're just, um... crap."

"Gemma, I'm the one in labor. Calm yourself."

"Sorry, sorry!" I wince. "Have you called an ambulance?"

"No, I called you."

"But... shouldn't you call an ambulance? I mean, I can drive you, but what if you go into heavy labor while we're caught in traffic in the tunnel or there's some kind of natural disaster on the way to the hospital, and I have to deliver the baby in the backseat, on the side of the highway? What then, Chrissy?"

Silence blasts over the line. "Let me get this straight. You want your pregnant best friend to ride alone in an grimy ambulance to the hospital,

holding a squirming one year old, when she hasn't even started having full contractions, yet?" she asks finally. "You're kidding, right? You better be kidding."

"Totally kidding," I agree, grimacing at my own stupidity. "I'm on my way."

"Great."

I blare my horn as I swerve into the exit lane, toward Chrissy's neighborhood. "I'll be there in five minutes. Shelby isn't far, either — we were just at *Crumble*, so—"

"You bitches got cupcakes without me?" Chrissy's voice is outraged. "And you weren't even going to bring me a one? I'm *pregnant!* Not just pregnant, either. I'm in *labor!*"

"Technically, we didn't know you were in labor—"

"But you *do* know their Red Velvet is my favorite!"

"Chrissy, there's a baby currently coming out of your womb. Please focus."

"Whatever," she grumbles. "Just call Shelby. One of you will have to keep an eye on Winston, while I do this thing."

Only Chrissy would refer to giving birth as *this thing*.

"How far out is Mark?"

"He's in San Diego, for a conference. He's hopping on the first flight back, but he won't land for at least six hours."

"Damn." I swallow. "Just breathe, Chrissy. I'll be there before you know it."

"I'm breathing just fine."

"Good, well... keep doing that."

She snorts. "You know what would've made this day a helluva lot better?"

"What?"

"A red velvet cupcake."

I roll my eyes and hang up, immediately hitting a button to dial Shelby. It rings once, twice, and then her voice is snapping over the line.

"Miss me already?"

I cut right to the chase. "Chrissy's in labor."

"Crap."

"That's what I said." I merge lanes erratically, cutting off a taxicab in the process. He lays on the horn and flips me off, shouting a loud, Bostonian

faaahhk you for added emphasis.

Oops.

“Anyway, I’m almost to her place, now. Long story short, the baby’s early, Mark’s across the country, and she needs us to watch Winnie, plus hold her hand and do those weird Lamaze breathing exercises while she pushes. Oh, and she really wants a cupcake.”

“I don’t think you’re supposed to eat before labor. Something about all the pushing, combined with a full digestive track leads to unwanted bowel movem—”

“Ew! TMI, Shelby. *TMI* .”

She sighs. “I’m on my way.”

“I’m pulling up outside, now. See you soon.”

I toss my cell back into my purse as my eyes scan the street for a spot in front of Chrissy’s building. There’s not a single free space to be seen and I don’t have time to circle the block, so I swerve into a restricted tow-away zone in front of a fire hydrant, flip on my hazard lights, and race into Chrissy’s building without bothering to shut off my engine.

A car thief’s dream, I know.

But I’ll be back in a second. And it’s Back Bay — no one here is going to steal my shit-box of a car, sitting amidst all these Audis and BMWs, even if they keys are still in the ignition.

I fly up the stairs and throw open the apartment door, expecting to find Chrissy in tears, freaking out, mid-breakdown. Instead, I find her sitting placidly on the couch, her overnight birth-bag by her feet, strapping the velcro of Winnie’s tiny blue sneakers.

“I’m here!” I yell breathlessly, rushing into the room. “I’m here.”

Chrissy looks up at me. “Great. We’re ready.”

“Why aren’t you freaking out?” I ask, narrowing my eyes on her. “You should be freaking out.”

“Pretty sure you’re freaking out enough for the both of us, Gem.”

“Valid point,” I agree, crossing toward the couch and ruffling Winston’s silk-soft hair. “Hi, Winnie.”

He gives me a toothy grin, squeals, and reaches for me. I happily haul him into my arms, and he nestles into the crook of my neck with a gurgling laugh.

“Can you walk?” I ask Chrissy. “Or are you, like…”

She rolls her eyes and rises to her feet. “God, you’re dramatic, today. Just

hold Winnie and grab my bag. His car seat is by the door.”

She begins waddling toward the exit, faster than I would’ve thought possible, and there’s no choice but to throw the strap of her bag over my shoulder and follow her out. For the entire elevator ride down, I try — and fail — to adopt Chrissy’s composure. I can’t help it — the last time she did this, I showed up at the hospital after it was all over, bearing balloons and a cuddly teddy bear. I didn’t prepare for this possibility. None of us did.

We bump into Shelby on the front steps.

“Yo,” she says, nodding to Chrissy.

“Yo,” Chrissy volleys back.

I stare from one to the other in disbelief. “And you both think *I’m* the crazy one.”

“You are,” they say in unison.

“Whatever, can we please go to the hospital, now?” I look pointedly at Chrissy. “In case you’ve forgotten, you’re in labor.”

She just rolls her eyes at me.

“Shotgun!” Shelby calls.

“Did you just call shotgun for the ride to the hospital?”

“Oh, don’t look at me like that.” She scoffs. “Chrissy has to sit in the back, anyway. There’s more room.”

“This is true,” Chrissy adds.

I sigh and look at Shelby. “I guess you’re leaving your car here, then?”

“You can’t,” Chrissy says. “They’ll tow you, unless you’ve got a resident sticker.”

“Crap,” Shelby mutters.

“We’ll both drive, then,” I decide, shifting Winnie in my arms, so I have a better grip. “I’ll bring Winnie in my car, you can drive Chrissy.”

Shelby looks guilty, glancing from her shiny, low-slung, two-seater Mercedes convertible to Chrissy. “The thing is, I actually just had the interior redone, and—”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, I’ll ride with Gemma,” Chrissy says, heading for my car which is, thankfully, still idling by the curb. “And anyway, Shelbs, your convertible is so low to the ground, I’d need a fork-lift to get me out again.”

“Mine may not be any better,” I mutter. “Let’s just hope it doesn’t break down on the way there.”

“What?” Chrissy says, her voice suddenly shrill.

Shelby widens her eyes at me and shakes her head in warning.

“Nothing! Nothing.” I swallow. “I’ll get you there.”

While I strap Winston into his baby booster, Shelby helps Chrissy get settled in the backseat next to him. My car is rattling a little ominously, but I pretend not to hear it. Getting worked up might snap Chrissy out of the zen-like calm she’s adopted — which, I have a feeling, would be very, very bad for my health. And my ears.

Once they’re both shut in the back, I turn to Shelby.

“See you there?”

“Yep. Take Storrow Drive, it’ll be fastest, this time of day.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t worry, Gem.” She grins as she heads for her car — which she somehow managed to park in a perfect spot, in front of a neighboring brownstone. “The hospital’s ten minutes away. What can possibly go wrong in ten minutes?”

A feeling of dread creeps over me as soon as she says those words. I want to scream *Shelby, you idiot! How could you tempt the universe like that?*

But, since I’m not five anymore, I keep my superstitions to myself, ignore the bad feeling stirring in my gut, and watch her drive off.

She’s right, I tell myself, sliding into the driver’s seat. *It’ll all be fine.*

Forcing a grin, I glance back at Chrissy and Winston.

“How you doing, back there?”

“We’re fine, Gemma. Just drive.”

See?

Everything’s fine.

I’m reaching for the shifter when the passenger door of my car is roughly yanked open. A man jumps into the seat — a pudgy, disheveled-looking man, with dirty clothes and a dark scowl. A man whose face I might recognize, if not for the fact that my attention is fully consumed by his hands.

Or, more specifically, what’s *in* his hands.

Because he’s holding a gun, and it’s pointed at me.

“Drive, bitch,” Ralph sneers, shaking it in my direction. “Right fucking now.”

Okay.

This right here?

So totally not fine.

“WHERE DID YOU GET A GUN?”

My mind is racing as I look from Ralph to Chrissy to Winston, considering our options. I contemplate bolting from the car, but Chrissy’s in labor — she can’t run, let alone get Winnie out by herself. Hell, I’m not even sure how fast she can walk, at this point. And then there’s the small matter of the gun in my face.

“I said *drive* .” He jostles the gun at me again.

“Or what?” I ask, my eyes wide. “You’ll *shoot* me?”

His scowl deepens. “Gemma, I’m not fucking around.”

“Okay, I know you’re intent on your revenge, and I ruined your life, and you hate me. *Yada, yada, yada*. Whatever. It’s going to have to wait, because we’re literally on our way to the hospital right now. This is a real emergency, Ralph, and you’re kind of messing things up for us.”

“*This* is Ralph?” Chrissy shrieks. “No wonder you never wanted to introduce him.”

Ralph turns incredulous eyes to the backseat. “What did you say to me, bitch?”

Chrissy doesn’t bat an eye at the gun suddenly pointing in her direction. She looks at me, cool as a cucumber, and says, “You never told me he doesn’t shower.”

I wrinkle my nose, taking in the unwashed stench coming off Ralph. He looks dirty and his clothes are rumpled, like he’s been living on the streets for the past few days. “Actually, this is a new development. He had standard man-child hygiene habits, while we were dating.”

“Ah, yes. The *pants-never-need-to-be-washed* , *shaving-is-a-weekly-activity* , *manscaping-is-a-myth* type.” She nods sagely. “I know them well.”

“Exactly.”

“SHUT UP!” Ralph yells, causing both our heads to snap in his direction. His eyes narrow on me. “Drive the fucking car, Gemma, or I swear to god...”

“Ralph, come on. We both know you’re not going to hurt me.”

“You don’t know anything, bitch.”

“Can we watch the language?” Chrissy asks. “I’ve got a one-year-old back here. Very impressionable age. I don’t want his first word to be cocksucker.”

Ralph’s eyes darken, and his arm swivels sharply, so the gun is pointing straight at Winnie.

“Ralph...” I whisper.

“Shut up!”

The gun shakes.

Winnie’s eyes are wide, watching the mouth of the gun like it’s a spinning toy on his mobile.

Chrissy and I both go dead silent.

“You don’t think I’ll hurt you, but what about him, huh? Still sure I won’t hurt anyone? *No?*” Ralph’s voice is low with anger. “Then *drive the fucking car*, before I decide to stop being so nice.”

I meet Chrissy’s eyes and, for the first time, I see a flash of fear in their depths. So, I grab the shifter, pull out into traffic, and I drive the fucking car.

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?” I ask, my voice quiet.

Ralph doesn’t say anything. His knees are jumping up and down to a beat only he can hear. With each nervous jitter, the gun in his hand bounces a little more.

“Ralph. Please.” I try again. “Where are we going?”

“Shut up.”

“Can we at least drop Chrissy off at the hospital? This isn’t about her. It’s about me. The hospital isn’t far from here. And, if you let me drop her off, I’ll go with you, wherever you want to go. Just let me—”

“Do you think I’m some kind of idiot?” he sneers, glaring at me.

Kind of, yeah.

“You really think I’m stupid enough to let you stop at a fucking hospital?” he continues.

I mean ... a girl can dream .

“Just drive.”

My hands tighten around the steering wheel as I meet Chrissy’s eyes in the rearview mirror. Her face is flushed and she’s breathing heavy — telltale signs she’s in pain. My eyes ask a question; she mouths the answer back at me.

I’m okay .

Even if she’s not lying, she can’t hold up for long. I’m not sure how fast her labor’s progressing, but I’m relatively certain we should get to a hospital, pronto.

At Ralph’s direction, I drive a while longer, until we’re well out of Chrissy’s neighborhood. I’m going as slow as possible, looking for

opportunities — a police station, a security guard on the street, anyone who might be able to help — hoping Ralph doesn't notice my crawling pace. I start to get nervous when we pass through the city limits and he tells me to keep driving — away from Boston proper, away from the hospital.

Chrissy's breaths have intensified to full-on pants of pain, and even Winnie is looking distressed, the longer we drive in utter silence.

I'm about to try reasoning with Ralph again, when the sound of buzzing shatters the quiet.

“What the fuck is that?”

I don't answer him.

The buzzing continues, loud and insistent, until Ralph leans forward and grabs my purse off the passenger-side floor. Reaching inside, he pulls out my sparkly blue phone and sneers at the screen.

“Chase Fucking Croft. That bastard has half the BPD on my ass, not to mention that private contractor fucker who's been tailing me. Haven't been able to go home in days, thanks to Croft.”

“Your new partner hasn't been taking care of you?”

The words fly from my mouth before I can stop them.

His gaze, cold with fury, slides to mine. I think he's going to ignore me, but he doesn't.

“Brett?” Ralph laughs bitterly. “He took my information. Said he had some grand plan, to bring down his cousin. But he cut me out. Used me. Should've known — he's a fucking Croft, too.”

If he's working alone, we might just have a shot. Ralph isn't the smartest kidnapper on the block. In fact, Ralph isn't the smartest — period.

“It doesn't matter, though.” Ralph's trying to sound tough, but I can hear undercurrents of anxiety in his tone. His eyes never waver from my phone as he tosses my purse into the backseat, watching as the screen flashes *CHASE CALLING* over and over. “I've got a new partner now. She's smarter than both of them, combined. Not to mention a fuck of a lot better to look at. Together, we're gonna make that whole fucking family pay. Literally.”

She?

There's only one *she* I can think of, who'd want to hurt me and Chase, but it's almost too ludicrous to consider she'd stoop low enough to work with Ralph.

It can't be her.

Ralph grins to himself. “Guess we'll find out how much you're worth,

Gemma. Me, I wouldn't pay a goddamn cent to get you back." His grin widens. "For your sake, I hope your new boyfriend doesn't feel the same."

"Chase will be looking for me," I say, attempting to reason with him. "He'll suspect something's wrong, if—"

My words are cut off when Ralph's hand flies out, clipping me across the cheekbone with the butt of his gun. Stars of pain burst behind my eyes and, for a minute, the road in front of me disappears entirely. I feel the car lurch, swerving out of its lane as my hands momentarily lose control of the wheel. A sharp horn blares from the car driving beside us. Chrissy's shrieks echo from the backseat. Jolted roughly in his booster, Winnie starts to cry, little hiccupping sobs of distress.

I register it happening, but it all feels distant as my head swims with pain.

"Stupid bitch!" Ralph yells, grabbing the wheel and yanking us back on course.

When my head stops spinning, I blink away the stinging ache and steady my hands on the wheel, trying to stay in control.

Your godson is in the backseat.

Your best friend is back there, too, with an unborn child in her belly.

Don't fuck this up, Gemma, any more than you already have.

Eyes watering from the pain radiating through my rapidly swelling cheekbone, I see Ralph roll down his window and toss my phone onto the road. My gaze swivels to the rearview, just in time to see a car behind us run it over.

"Take a left, up here." Ralph's legs are jittering again, and every few minutes he glances in the side mirror like he thinks someone might be following us.

I turn the car down a road I don't recognize. We've reached the outer fringes of the city, where the buildings are a little worse for wear and the people a little less polished. Graffiti streaks the sides of crumbling concrete overpasses, trash litters the streets, and few businesses are actually open, though it's only late afternoon. We pass row after row of triple-decker public housing projects before entering a stretch of seemingly abandoned warehouses. Both pedestrian and car traffic grow thinner as we weave through this forgotten southeastern suburb.

The sound of a phone beeping makes my entire body tense. For a minute, I worry it's the second cell in my purse — the new one Chase got for me, which now symbolizes my last shot at escape — but it's Ralph's, buzzing in

his pocket.

“What is it?” he snaps into the receiver.

I hear the faint sounds of a female voice, on the other end.

“We’re almost there,” Ralph confirms. “Yes, I got her.”

He pauses, listening.

“No, not exactly.”

Another pause.

“Well, she’s not exactly alone. Her friend was with her.”

I hear a loud shriek reverberate from the other side.

“Fuck you, Vanessa!” Ralph sneers. “She’s never fucking alone — Croft trails her around like a puppy. This was the only shot I had, so I took it.”

Vanessa!

A rapid stream of words screech in response.

“Don’t call me an idiot, you bitch! You don’t know who the fuck you’re talking to.”

My eyes drift to the rearview mirror and meet Chrissy’s. Her breaths are shallow, she’s got one hand pressed to her abdomen, and she’s starting to look panicked.

I raise my eyebrows.

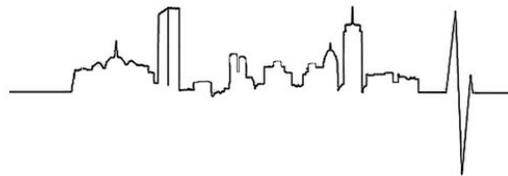
She holds up seven fingers and mouths something at me.

Seven minutes apart. Getting stronger.

Shit.

CHAPTER 31

PEACHY



“YOU’VE GOT to be fucking kidding me.”

Vanessa is pissed. *Super* pissed. Probably because, when she envisioned kidnapping me for some kind of idiotic extortion-ransom plot to strike at Chase’s weak spot, she didn’t anticipate her partner bringing along a heavily pregnant woman having regular contractions, as well as a squirming toddler.

Serves her right for teaming up with someone as idiotic as Ralph.

“What is this, *daycare* ?” she snaps, striding toward Ralph. “I told you to bring her alone! Not only did you ignore that instruction, you’ve created two witnesses to a *crime* , you amateur!”

“I’m getting pretty sick of the name-calling, Vanessa,” Ralph snarls back.

“Oh, I’m sorry, did I hurt your feelings?” She rolls her eyes. “Too damn bad!”

Winnie shivers in my arms and I hug him a little closer. It’s freezing down here.

Ralph’s brought us to some kind of abandoned, underground parking garage, with ripped-up concrete floors, a handful of dim lights, and low, rust-stained ceilings that drip water on our heads as we stand against the wall, waiting for the two worst kidnapers of all time to sort out their shit. The age-yellowed headlights of my car do little to illuminate the space, but the bright LEDs of Vanessa’s Mercedes cast a huge halo around the cavernous garage.

Chrissy’s got one hand pressed to her abdomen, as if she might stave off

the pain with firm pressure, and her other is wrapped tight in mine, clenching hard enough to bruise the bones of my fingers each time a contraction moves through her. Right now, between waves of pain, her eyes are squeezed tightly shut as she focuses on her breathing and tries to tune out Ralph and Vanessa.

“You’re such a bitch! I don’t even know why I teamed up with you.”

“Because you needed me, asshole! It was my idea to grab her and force Chase to pay up.”

“Well, I don’t need you anymore! I can do it without you.”

“You’ve got half the Boston police force out looking for you!” Vanessa scoffs. “As soon as you make contact and Chase finds out you’ve got his girlfriend stuffed in a trunk somewhere, you’ll be dead fucking meat. You need me to negotiate. And, since you’ve been such a royal fuck up, I’m upping my price. I want seventy percent, now.”

What’s all this about a trunk!?

“We said fifty-fifty!”

“That was before you brought a pregnant woman and her spawn into the mix!”

They go on like this for a while. I rub my hand over Winnie’s back in soothing strokes, hoping it might calm him down.

“Spawn?” Chrissy whispers, so only I can hear. “Really?”

I glance at her and drop my voice so low, it’s nearly inaudible. “Tell them your contractions are getting worse. Tell them you have to sit.”

“Wouldn’t exactly be lying, if I told them that, Gem.” She winces in pain, holding her abdomen like it’s being torn apart from the inside. Probably because it is .

“My purse, in the backseat. There’s another phone inside.” My words are hushed but intent. “Get it. Call for help.”

Her eyes widen in comprehension as she nods, pushing off the wall, where we’ve been standing since Ralph forced us out of the car at gunpoint into this drippy, damp place.

Vanessa is shrieking again. “Seventy-thirty, or I walk. You’re lucky I’m not asking for more— *hey!*” She breaks off abruptly when she catches sight of Chrissy, waddling toward the car with measured steps. “Where the hell do you think *you’re* going, preppers?!”

“Oh, so you *did* notice I’m pregnant!” I have to hand it to Chrissy — she never even breaks stride as she tosses the words over her shoulder. “Could’ve fooled me. But really, don’t let me interrupt your little tiff. I’m just going to

sit because, well, there's a fetus pressing against my cervix like a train barreling down the tracks. And gravity is *really* not my friend, right now, if you know what I mean."

Ralph steps forward. "Listen, bitch, I don't care—"

"What's the going rate for infanticide, these days?" I ask, interrupting him. "Anyone know?"

Vanessa rolls her eyes.

"I think it's 25 to life." Chrissy shrugs. "Does Massachusetts have the death penalty? I can never remember."

"Oh, I'm not sure. But I don't think juries look too kindly on baby-killers. Not to mention the inmates, in prison. I can only imagine what they'd do to a guy responsible for the death of a pregnant woman and her unborn—"

"Okay! Okay." Ralph's looking a little rattled. "Get in the fucking car and don't fucking move. And leave the door open!"

"Christ, this is a fuck-up," Vanessa mumbles.

"Gladly," Chrissy says, her voice more fake-sweet than a packet of Splenda as she waddles the final few steps to the car. I catch her eyes just before she slides into the backseat, and hope she reads the message in my gaze.

Please, be fast. And please, be careful.

She nods slightly in comprehension. I hug Winnie tighter, praying this will all be over soon.

"This is taking too long." Vanessa huffs, still glaring at Ralph. "Sixty-four. That's my final offer. You don't like it, leave!"

"I'm the one with the gun!"

"Do you even know how to use that thing?" She taunts, leaning forward with her hands on her hips. I watch as Ralph processes her words, his face turning mottled red with anger.

Oh, no .

I know from experience, if there's one thing he can't stand, it's having his ego questioned. Especially by a woman.

"I don't know, *do I*?" he yells, swinging out his gun-hand and firing off two rounds. As soon as I see his finger on the trigger, I turn to face the wall, shielding Winnie with my body. The loud bang of the gun echoes through the entire space, ringing in my eardrums long after the bullets are embedded in cement ten feet to our left.

When I finally peel my eyes open, all I see is the gray wall in front of me,

and all I can hear are Winnie's wails, each one louder and more heart-wrenching than the last.

"Shhh, honey," I breathe against his hair. "It's okay. It'll all be over soon I promise."

"You're crazy!" Vanessa's shouting, behind me. "What the hell is wrong with you, firing a gun in here? Do you *want* to get caught?"

Glancing over my shoulder, I see her charging toward Ralph, a murderous look on her face. Despite the fact that he's got a gun, Ralph does the smart thing for once — and backs the hell off. He retreats until he's nearly at the Mercedes and she follows, screaming at him the whole time. I couldn't care less, about their idiocy — not *now*, when there's a clear shot between my position on the wall and the front door of my car.

I swallow, hard.

"Back off!" Ralph demands, his voice whiney. "Let's just call Croft already, tell him we have her, and see what he says."

"You're an idiot if you want to be anywhere near here, when that call is made." She scoffs.

"Then let's shove her in the trunk, and be done with it!"

I try to tune them out as I hug Winnie closer and begin to edge along the wall. Thankfully, his cries have died down to a low, steady whimper that calls little attention to us. My steps are small, hesitant, as I move ever closer to the car.

"And what are we going to do with her friend and the fucking baby, huh?"

"More to bargain with!" Ralph is getting defensive — his face is red with rage and his hands are shaking by his sides. "We can get an even bigger trade, for the three of them."

A phone starts to ring. I hear rustling, as someone pulls it from their pocket, and a second later, Ralph's angry voice shatters the silence.

"Why the fuck is Brett calling you?!" he barks. "You told me you weren't working with him, anymore, Vanessa!"

"I'm not!"

"Then why is he calling you?" Ralph's voice gets louder, crazier, with each passing second. His very, very small brain is only now putting it together that Vanessa has most likely double-crossed him — and he's not happy about it.

"Just calm down," Vanessa says, but even she sounds shaken at Ralph's

sudden turn toward crazy-town. “We’ll sort this out, Ralph, you just have to trust me—”

“Trust you?” His words are a little hysterical, now.

I edge closer to the car.

“What was the plan?” he continues. “Pin the kidnapping on me, while you collect all the money and get off scot-free?”

“No, of course not!”

I angle my body, so my back is to them and my front is facing the car. If anyone’s getting shot when I make a run for it, it’s not going to be the little boy in my arms. My eyes catch on Chrissy’s, through the back window, and I see hers are full of pain and fear. Heart pounding in my chest, I dart a glance back at the kidnap-twins and see Ralph advancing on Vanessa, until she’s pinned against the wall.

By my guess, there’s about twenty feet of space between us.

How long does it take a bullet to travel twenty feet?

Not long, that’s for damn sure.

Still, when I see him turn fully away, so all his attention is focused on the cowering blonde before him, I know it’s now or never.

Pressing one last kiss to the top of Winnie’s head, I push off from the wall like a shot and race for the car as fast as my legs will carry us.

WE’RE HALFWAY there when I hear Vanessa cry out.

“Ralph! Stop her!”

Shit!

I hear a muttered curse, the sound of pounding footsteps, and the unmistakable rapport of a gun firing in my direction.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

Searing pain grazes my shoulder, causing me to stumble. I’m nearly blind with agony, but I force my feet to keep moving, one after another. The welcome clicking sound of the gun running out of rounds reaches my ears.

Thank god.

We’re almost there.

A final burst of hope shoots into my bloodstream, like a needle of

adrenaline straight to the heart, as I fly across the pavement faster than I've ever run in my life.

"Gemma, you fucking bitch!" Ralph screams. "*Stop!*"

I don't.

We're nearly at the car when the front door flies open. I see Chrissy, legs still in the backseat, half-lying on the center console, and I practically toss Winnie into her waiting arms. My ass isn't even settled on the front cushion when my hand hits the shifter and my foot slams down on the gas pedal.

"Gemma, you bitch!"

Ralph sprints for the car, head on, and I swerve around him at the last second.

"Hold on!" I yell, just before my hands tighten on the wheel and whip it all the way left. The U-turn is so sharp I think we might flip — but eventually the car rights with a squeal of tires and the smell of burning rubber. I press the pedal flat to the floor and blast past my rat bastard ex, who's still screaming like a crazy person.

Probably because he *is* a crazy person.

"You okay?" I yell to Chrissy, as we race up the ramp toward daylight.

"Just peachy!" she yells back, doing the final buckle on Winston's car seat.

"Winnie okay?"

"He'll be fine."

"Fetus okay?"

"Let's just say, it'll have a great story to tell about its day of birth."

"Damn straight."

I look back in the rearview and see the Mercedes slam to a halt next to Ralph. Vanessa's at the wheel, steaming mad, from the looks of it, and as soon as Ralph jumps in, she peels out after us. Her engine is faster, newer, stronger — even with my foot pressing the pedal to the floor, she's eating up ground twice as fast as my car.

"Gemma, they're gaining on us," Chrissy says, looking over her shoulder through the rear window.

"I can see that, Chrissy."

She swallows nervously, but falls silent as we barrel through the exit and swerve onto the empty access road. Squinting at the sudden brightness, mere seconds later I watch in my rearview as the Mercedes flies out of the garage.

"Can't you go faster?" Chrissy asks, sounding nervous.

“Going as fast as I can.” I clench my jaw.

“Well, can’t you do any evasive maneuvers, like in the movies?”

“Chrissy, do I look like James Bond, to you?”

She sighs.

“If we can make it to the end of this stretch, we’ll be back in semi-civilization,” I say, not sure whether I’m reassuring her or myself. “They won’t be able to follow us, with other cars and people around.”

My car starts to rattle, a sure sign the engine is straining as we fly down the seemingly endless straightaway. Chrissy moans in the backseat, her back arching as another contraction hits her, hard.

They’re getting closer together.

“How you doing back there, Chrissy?”

“Just.” Deep breath. “Peachy.” Deep breath.

“Uh huh.”

“The other moms.” Deep breath. “At my birthing class.” Small moan. “Can shove it.” Deep breath. “With their water births.” Bigger moan. “And private midwives.” Deep breath. “*I’m in a freaking car chase!*”

“Glad you can see the silver lining,” I mutter, watching as the entire steering column of my car starts to shake beneath my hands. A strange, burning smell has begun to drift back from the engine and fill the interior — definitely not a good sign.

I dart a glance ahead and see we’re nearly halfway back to the main road; my eyes snap up to the rearview, and I see the Mercedes has crept closer, the front mere feet from our back fender, so near I can make out Vanessa and Ralph’s faces through the windshield. She beeps, *loudly*, and it sounds like a threat.

Shit.

“Where’s the closest hospital, Chrissy?”

“Don’t know.” She’s breathing through clenched teeth, her face pinched in pain, but I think the contraction is starting to pass. “Not even sure... where we are.”

“Maybe Roxbury? Mattapan?” I swallow. “I don’t know.”

“Not exactly... our kind... of neighborhood,” she pants.

“Did you find the phone? Are the police coming?”

“Called Chase. Then police.” She shudders with pain. “But the phone ran out of battery before I could describe where we are.”

“Shit!”

Could they track the call? Triangulate our signal? Or is that just something that happens in the movies?

“Seriously.” She takes another deep breath, her hands pressed against her swollen stomach. “Don’t you ever charge that thing?”

Um... no?

“It’s not even my phone!” I say, my voice defensive.

“You have to charge it every night, when you go to sleep,” Chrissy informs me, sounding a bit more like her old self. “Put a charger next to your nightstand.”

“Really not the time to lecture me on proper iPhone maintenance.” I sigh. “And I don’t have a bed, remember? Homeless, for the time being.”

“What?”

“It’s a long story. Chase gave up my lease and now I have to either move in with him or find a new place—”

“*What?!*” Her voice goes up an octave. “You don’t tell me anything!”

“Chrissy, it’s really not the time—”

My words cut off abruptly when something rams into us from behind, sending a jolt through the entire car.

“Shit!” I glance back just in time to see the Mercedes — its shiny silver front crunched in from the impact — preparing to charge us again.

“Hold on!” I yell, my hands curling tighter around the wheel as I brace for another hit.

I’m so worried about the danger coming from behind, I don’t even think about what might be coming at us in the front. My eyes go wide as I see a large black SUV fly onto the access road, its turn so sharp it nearly goes up on two wheels. It’s maybe the length of a football field away — a distance rapidly shrinking, at this speed — and it’s heading straight for us.

I can’t brake; going this fast, there’s no time. Plus, there’s the small matter of Vanessa.

As soon as I think her name, the Mercedes slams into us again, its impact hard enough to give me whiplash, not to mention make my already-struggling car start to wheeze in a not-so-good way. Distantly, I hear Chrissy trying to soothe Winnie in the backseat, but I can’t spare much thought to them. Not with the SUV bearing down on us, coming closer and closer with each second, like some deadly game of chicken sure to end with all of us in the hospital. Or worse — the morgue.

“Who is that?” Chrissy shrieks.

“Not sure, but I don’t think they’re on our side!”

“Of course not!” Her voice is laced with pain — the sign of another contraction rolling through her. “That would be too.” Deep breath. “Damn.” Small moan. “Easy.”

Her contractions are coming closer — five minutes apart, maybe less.

“Shit, shit, shit,” I curse under my breath, watching the road rapidly disappear between me and the SUV. When the space shrinks to fifty yards, I start to lay on my horn.

“Get out of my way,” I chant, over and over. “*Get out of my way!*”

“Move, asshole!” Chrissy shouts, feeling a bit less magnanimous. “This... is... so not... the time... to fuck... with me.”

Each of her words is punctuated by a scream of pain.

I blast the horn again — one long, suspended *beeeeeeeeeeeep* — but the SUV doesn’t move to the side of the narrow road. If anything, it starts coming faster.

The Mercedes rams us again from the back, so hard I almost lose control of the car.

Shit .

“Chrissy, hold on.” I swallow. “And hold Winnie.”

“Run the fucker off the road!” Chrissy yells back at me. “And then let me out.” Deep breath. “So I can *kill* .” Small scream. “That...blonde...*bitch* !”

Really helpful, Chrissy.

I tug once on my seatbelt, making sure it’s clipped tight, and watch the road dwindle.

Thirty yards.

Twenty-five.

Twenty.

I take a deep breath.

Fifteen yards.

Ten.

Five.

At the last possible second, I swerve the wheel sharply right. I register the SUV flying past us on the left, a familiar Hulk-sized man behind the wheel, but most of my attention is locked on the road in front of me.

Or, lack thereof.

Dirt flies up in a cloud as we spin out, the tires skidding onto the slope of patchy grass beside the road. The wheel is wrenched from my hands as I lose

control of the vehicle. The world goes mute; time seems to slide into slow motion as I wait for the inevitable crash.

Somehow, my hands find the wheel again, clamping down in a last ditch effort to bring the car back under control. It's locked hard over — no matter how hard I try to turn, it doesn't budge.

I see the fence — a towering, ten-foot wall of graffiti and concrete, lining the roadway. Coming ever closer to my windshield.

I think I scream, but I'm not sure. All I know, in that instant, is that I'm probably going to die.

And, if I die, it'll be without telling the one man who's ever scaled the walls of my heart and made himself at home that I'm pretty sure I'm in love with him.

Actually, I'm not pretty sure.

I'm sure.

Certifiably, 100%, no-going-back, *in love with him* .

My last thought, before we slam front-first into the wall with a piercing screech of metal and a shower of sparks, is that I hope, somehow, he knows that.

I MUST'VE PASSED out for a second, because when I come-to, the dust has settled, somewhat.

My head aches worse than anything I've ever felt before. Judging by the pain in my lungs, I figure at least one of my ribs has to be broken — either that, or the airbag hit me hard enough to rearrange my internal organs. My shoulder burns where Ralph's bullet grazed me, and his earlier blow to my cheekbone pales in comparison to the sharp spike of pain that shoots through my temple as soon as my eyes blink open.

I rub at my chest, hoping it might soothe the ache there. The airbag is already deflating and over the top of it, I see the front of my car is crumpled in like an aluminum soda can. The engine shakes violently — *once, twice* — and then, with a final wheeze, falls silent. I see smoke drifting up from beneath the hood and pray to god fire isn't about to follow.

In the sudden quiet, I hear a mewling whimper of pain.

Chrissy .

“Chrissy!” I scream, turning around to face her as my hands search for the release button of my seatbelt. “Chrissy, are you okay?”

My heart pounds madly in my chest as my eyes fly over the backseat. She's there — eyes slivered open, her hand on Winnie's tiny, flailing arm.

He's alive.

She's alive.

"Chrissy, talk to me." My voice cracks. "Tell me you're all right."

"Just." She wheezes. "Peachy."

I try to chuckle, but it hurts too much. "Glad to hear it. Is Winnie okay?"

"I think he's just shaken up," she says, stroking her fingers through his hair. "We'll be okay."

"Good. Mark would've killed me."

"Totally." Her grin is lopsided, but it's there. "Listen."

"What?"

"Listen." She sits up a little straighter. "Sirens."

I strain my ears, listening, and when I do, I hear them — the undeniable sound of police cars, racing toward us.

"Thank god." I take a deep breath and pain streaks through my chest. "Now, you can get to the hospital and have that damn baby."

"Let's hope I make it that far." Her smile fades a bit. "I really don't want some state trooper looking at my hoo-hah."

"Seriously, Chrissy, we need to discuss your priorities."

I hear her laugh, but the sound is swallowed up as my car door is yanked open with a jarring squeal of metal. I turn, fully expecting to find a police officer, firefighter, paramedic — really, any kind of first responder would do, at this point.

Instead, I find The Hulk.

I'M SO stunned by his appearance, I don't even fight him as he reaches in, wraps his hands around my biceps, and yanks me from the car without a word.

"Hey!" I scream, when he throws me up over his shoulder. "Put me down!"

"Bring her back here!" I hear Chrissy shrieking. "Or I swear to god, I will kill you!"

"Chrissy!"

"Gemma!"

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” I scream as my fists pound his back, flooded with disbelief that I’m being kidnapped *again* .

Kidnapped from my kidnappers!

It would almost be funny, if it didn’t totally *suck* .

I can’t see much, considering I’m hanging upside down, and all, but I can tell the Mercedes is long gone. That’s not much of a surprise — Vanessa and Ralph may’ve been the worst abductors in the world, but evidently even *they* were smart enough to cut and run when they saw my car spin out of control.

Kidnapping is one thing. Murder is another.

The Hulk doesn’t break stride or bother to respond to any of my curses. He just walks up the dirt incline toward his SUV — which, I’ll have you know, didn’t suffer so much as a scratch — pulls open the passenger door, and tosses me inside. To my surprise, he doesn’t close the door after me — he keeps coming, wedging his massive frame into the seat, until I’m forced to scramble to the driver’s side, to get away from him.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I screech.

He doesn’t answer as he settles into the passenger seat, pulls the door closed, and flips the locks.

“Drive,” he says flatly.

“I’m not driving anywhere!” I stare at him like he’s a total crazy person. “And I’m not leaving my friend! She’s pregnant! She needs medical attention!”

“Cops will be here any minute.”

“Exactly! And I fully intend to wait for them!”

His jaw clenches as he stares me down with those eerie, empty eyes for a long moment, before reaching into his jacket pocket and whipping a sleek black gun from his holster. He’s not like Ralph — he definitely knows how to use that thing.

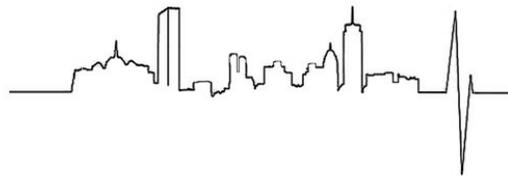
“*Drive* .”

I swallow hard, glance one last time at my car, still smoking faintly by the wall, and pray to every god up there that Chrissy, Winnie, and the yet-unnamed fetus will be okay.

And then, I drive.

CHAPTER 32

LET GO



WE'RE silent for almost an hour.

I listen each time he tells me to make a turn, change lanes, merge onto a different road. Every bone in my body aches to the point of distraction. My mind searches for possible escape plans, but everything I come up with ends with me meeting a very gruesome end, either staring down the barrel of The Hulk's gun or bleeding out in a flipped SUV.

Neither of which sounds very appealing, at the moment.

I can only hope Chrissy is with the police, by now — that she's safe at the hospital.

Eventually, we leave the highway and merge onto a winding back road, the trees growing denser as we move ever eastward. The coast can't be far off, now, and I feel dread stir to life in my stomach as thoughts tickle at the back of my mind. Thoughts of another car ride, not so long ago, when Chase told me a story about the house he grew up in.

When we pass an ornate wooden sign that reads *MANCHESTER-BY-THE-SEA WELCOMES YOU*, I feel the pit in my stomach morph into a bottomless cavern of anxiety.

I know exactly where we're going.

I hear Chase's voice echoing through my mind...

They were driving home one night, to our summer house in Manchester... It was raining out, really miserable. The roads were slick...

My hands clench tighter around the wheel.

“Why are we here?”

The Hulk looks over at me, surprised I’ve broken my resolute silence, and readjusts his gun where it lays against his knee.

“Brett wanted you to bring me here, right?” I try to keep my voice calm, but it starts to fray as hysteria creeps in. “He did, didn’t he?”

He looks out the window, as though thoroughly bored by my questions.

“Why?” I ask. “Why *here* ?”

He doesn’t say a word.

But I worry, deep in my bones, that I already know the answer.

WHEN WE ROUND a bend and the bridge comes into sight, I pump the breaks. Hard.

It’s smaller than I thought it would be — maybe forty feet across, fifteen feet wide, constructed of wood planks and a stone foundation. Thin, plywood railings on either side are all that separate cars from plummeting into the inlet below, where water rushes in with the evening tide.

A small, overgrown sign peeks out from the foliage at the side of the road.

CROFT ESTATE

Shit.

The Hulk looks over at me. “Keep going.”

“No, I don’t think so.” My hands tighten around the wheel until my fingertips turn white.

His gun hand twitches slightly, but he doesn’t lift it. Instead, he reaches out, punches a few keystrokes into the built-in navigation system, and leans back in his seat, waiting.

The sound of ringing fills the car.

“Is it done?”

Chills break out all over my body as Brett’s oily voice oozes from the speakers.

“You psychopath!” I snap, vibrating with anger and fear. “What the hell is wrong with you? What am I doing here?”

A dry chuckle sounds over the line. “Ah, Miss Summers. Still with us, then.”

My heart starts to pound. “Why am I here? You have your revenge. You found out about Phoebe, about my father – you’ve got all the ammunition

you need to derail my life.”

“And there’s the fundamental flaw in your thinking,” he tells me cheerily. “Because this isn’t about you, Gemma. It’s never been about you, or the West family.”

“It’s about Chase,” I whisper.

“Brava!” He sounds amused. “The greatest illusionists — and businessmen, for that matter — know that distraction is one of the best tools in the box, my dear. Slight of hand, shift of focus — you distract the audience with a trick in your right hand, while your left works the real magic.”

“Listen, Brett, I don’t know what you’re planning, but whatever it is, I’d suggest you rethink it.”

“Oh, really?” He sounds amused. “And why would I do that?”

“You really think you won’t get caught, if you hurt me?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Gemma.” He chuckles again. “You drove up to your boyfriend’s summer house, perhaps to confront him after a rather unpleasant interaction with his ex-girlfriend — in a car rented under his company name, I might add. On your way, you met with a terrible accident, on the same bridge where others — your boyfriend’s parents, in fact — lost their lives in the past. Such a tragically beautiful coincidence. And such a dangerous bridge! Maybe we’ll have it torn down, in memory of all the people it’s taken from Chase. That would be quite poetic.”

“You’re sick.” I swallow against the lump in my throat. “You really think Chrissy won’t tell the police it was *your* thug who grabbed me? That Chase won’t know it was you, if you hurt me here?”

“Oh, Miss Summers. It’s a good thing you’re pretty, because you aren’t exceptionally clever.” I can hear the grin in his voice. “The police will never be able to link me to this with anything more than circumstantial evidence — and everyone knows, that’s not the kind that sticks. Plus, there’s the problem of a motive. Why would *I* possibly want to hurt *you* ?” He makes an amused *tsk* noise. “Even if Chase goes to the police with everything he’s been collecting against me for the past decade, it’ll be his word against mine. And I’m not the one with a criminal record. Who do you think they’ll believe, Gemma?”

My stomach clenches so hard I think I might throw up.

“Poor Chase.” He laughs. “Of course, *he’ll* know the truth. That’s half the fun. In fact, I tipped him off. He’s on his way there, as we speak.”

My heartbeat picks up speed, thinking of Chase. Of how terrified he must

be, driving back to the place where his parents died, knowing what's waiting for him when he gets here.

No.

I'm not about to let that happen.

I'm not about to let him watch another person he cares about die.

Not now. And definitely not *here* .

"It won't work." My voice shakes, despite my best efforts. "There's a flaw in your perfect plan, Brett."

"Oh? And what might that be?"

"I'm not going to drive off the fucking bridge."

"Of course not." He laughs again. "That would be ridiculous."

A little bit of tension slips out of me.

Maybe, I can reason with him.

Maybe, I can delay until Chase gets here.

Maybe, I can still make it out of this alive.

"That's why my associate is there," Brett adds. "To help you along."

My heart clenches in my chest. I hear the sound of the line going dead as Brett disconnects the call, but I can't focus on that. Because The Hulk suddenly has my seatbelt in his massive hand, and he's squeezing with all his might, until the veins are popping in his forearms. I flinch back from his proximity, watching beads of sweat break out on his forehead in utter confusion.

What the hell?

By the time realization hits, it's too late. He's bent the metal tongue of my seatbelt out of shape, jamming the buckles so they can't be undone. I watch in horror as he presses the release button and tugs, smirking when the warped latch doesn't release.

I'm trapped.

I tug on the belt, but it's so tight around my chest I can barely breathe, let alone move.

"You don't have to do this," I plead with him, watching as he cracks his window slightly, shrugs out of his suit jacket, and calmly tucks his gun back into his holster.

"Please," I beg. "I'll pay you. I'll give you whatever you want."

He looks over at me for a single moment, and what I see in his eyes makes my heart fail.

Because it's *nothing* .

Nothing.

Not an ounce of sympathy, not a fragment of humanity, not a shred of understanding.

He's empty, inside.

His eyes don't leave mine as he reaches over, grabs my right knee with one beefy fist, and jams it down onto the gas pedal with so much force, I've got no chance in hell at resisting him.

The car lurches forward, toward the bridge, and I try to swerve, but his other hand has latched onto the wheel, keeping us on a steady course for disaster. I hear the moment we cross onto the bridge — the sound of the tires, spinning over uneven boards — and I feel my stomach fly into my throat when the Hulk pulls sharply on the wheel, sending us careening toward the barrier.

Toward the water.

I don't have time to think how insane it is that this is my *second* car crash of the day, because suddenly, we've hit. The wood railing snaps like a toothpick when our car crashes against it, *through* it, and then we're flying.

No.

We're *falling* .

I don't scream, when we hit the water. I can't — all the breath is stolen from my lungs on impact. We land so hard, my teeth clack together in my skull and my head whips forward with such force, I'm surprised my neck doesn't break. There are sounds — rushing water, the sputtering engine — but I barely hear them. My eyes are wide, watching the water creep up over the hood as we slowly slip beneath the surface.

The Hulk has already undone his seatbelt and rolled down his window the rest of the way. Water is spilling over, filling the passenger side so rapidly, the entire car will be full in a matter of seconds. He doesn't say anything, doesn't even look at me, as he maneuvers his huge frame against the stream of water, out through the open window. I hear the sound of his feet, pushing against the metal door as he swims off.

And then I'm alone.

“Wait!” I gasp, feeling water ascending up past my knees, my stomach, my chest. “Please!”

But he's gone.

I barely manage to pull in a last breath before the weight of water wins out in one great, final torrent that fills the car to the ceiling. The world goes

dark as I sink slowly toward the bottom, the weak evening sunlight barely filtering through the murky depths. I wonder vaguely how deep it is, here — if I'll still be alive, when I hit the bottom.

I want to scream, but I know I can't waste my air, so I thrash against my seatbelt, instead.

I claw at the buckle until my fingernails tear.

I curse Brett and The Hulk and Vanessa and Ralph.

And then, as the strength in my arms starts to wane, as my will to fight slowly ebbs, as my vision starts to fade out around the edges and my lungs start to burn...

I curse myself.

I curse every stupid, stubborn, self-preserving bone in my body for ever pushing Chase away. I curse all those horrible, harmful voices in my head that told me it would never work, that a girl like me would never make a man like him happy. I curse the marrow in my bones, the strands of my DNA, that truly believed I wasn't worthy of a love like his.

With the last of my strength, I tilt my head toward the sky. The faintest beams of sunlight shine down through the windshield — I wish I could feel their warmth, but I can't feel anything, anymore.

Except *cold* .

Dark.

Alone.

As I slip away, I pretend he's here with me — his hands on my arms, his lips warm on mine, the rough calluses of his fingers tracing my skin.

Chase .

The last thing I see, before the darkness takes over and I fade into nothing, is an image of his face — those green eyes, that wolfish grin. And with him burned forever onto the backs of my eyelids, I smile as I let go.

It's not a bad way to die.

CHAPTER 33

AFTER



BREAKING UP IS NEVER EASY, I suppose — which is probably why so many people suck at it. We're so scared to hurt feelings, to place blame, to be anything but polite, that we retreat to the safety of clichés.

It's not you, it's me.

We can still be friends.

I need to focus on myself.

Our friendship means too much to me.

I've been on the receiving end of my fair share of these lines. And I'm not ashamed to admit I've even used some of them. Because, when it comes down to it, it's a lot easier to feed someone a line than simply say what you feel.

We're not it. You're not the one. I'm sorry if I hurt you.

At some point, we all decided that honesty was no longer the best policy. We chose, collectively, to embrace the cliché. To generalize, to standardize, until all those pesky, personal feelings are sucked right out of the dreaded encounter. Until our breakups more closely resemble a business severance than the ending of a relationship. Hell, it's practically become a competition — who's more aloof, who handles the mess with the least perceivable distress, who's "winning" the break up.

And hey, maybe that would be okay.

Except, those harmless little clichés aren't really so harmless. Because when you hear those same lines, over and over... when someone can't be

bothered to end things with a good reason, with some emotion and honesty — or, hey even an original *line* — scary thoughts start to take root. Those little voices in your head say you aren't even worth the effort it takes someone to *dump you* with a little personalization. They say you aren't worth the time, the energy, the emotional drainage.

You aren't worth anything, at all.

I spent a long time listening to those voices.

Believing them. Hearing them. Fearing them.

And, when I met a man who made me question everything, it took me a long time to shake them off. So long, I almost missed my chance to tell him the only thing that matters.

We're it. You're the one. I'm sorry it took me so long to figure it out.

I almost let those little voices steal my happy ending.

Almost.

Thankfully, I get another shot. And this time... I'm not going to screw it up.

MY EYES SLIVER OPEN.

The first things I see are the peonies. They're everywhere – in vases, on tables, on windowsills. Every shade, every shape, every color imaginable. My favorite kind.

He remembered.

There are tubes in my arm, pumping god only knows what into my bloodstream. A gazillion machines are next to my bed, beeping regularly as they monitor my vitals. I'm wearing a horrid, light blue hospital gown, my mouth is drier than the Sahara, and every muscle in my damn body aches like I've been flattened by a steam roller.

But I'm *alive* .

And there's a gorgeous blond man in the chair next to my bed, slumped forward so his head and arms rest on the mattress, beside my thighs. I move my right hand — and wince, because *ouch* , I wasn't kidding when I said *everything* hurts — until my fingers stroke through his hair.

I feel him stir, feel him slowly come awake beneath my touch. All at once, he seems to realize what's happening — his eyes spring open as he snaps back into full consciousness.

His head turns, his eyes find mine, and I feel my heart flip at the relief in

his gaze.

“Hey,” I whisper.

“Sunshine,” he breathes, sitting up. In the space between two heartbeats, he’s gathered me in his arms and crushed me against his chest. “You’re okay. You’re alive. You’re breathing. You’re speaking.”

“I’m fine, Chase.” My words are muffled against his shirt. “But you’re kind of crushing me.”

“Sorry.” His hold loosens, but he doesn’t let me go. I get the feeling, in that moment, he *can’t* let me go. “I thought...” He trails off, looking into my eyes. “I thought you were dead. And then they said, even if you woke up... You were without oxygen, and...” His forehead drops against mine, and he breathes me in. “I thought you were dead.”

“That makes two of us,” I say, my voice wry. “What happened? I don’t remember anything, after the car sank... I ran out of air, and... well, it’s just darkness, after that.”

His jaw clenches and he pulls back to look at me. “I got there just in time to see the SUV go over the railing. Brett’s man, Hawkins, came up. You didn’t.”

“The Hulk.”

“What?”

“Brett’s thug. I call him The Hulk. Sometimes, Bruce Banner, too.”

He looks at me like maybe my brain was damaged, after all. “Sunshine...”

“I was kidnapped, shot, punched, and drowned. I almost died! You aren’t allowed to tease me right now.” My cheeks heat. “Just tell me what happened.”

He watches the blush spread across my face like he’s witnessing a miracle firsthand. “Never thought I’d see that again,” he murmurs, rubbing one thumb across my bruised cheekbone, his touch gentle.

I lean into his hand, so he’s cupping my face.

“I jumped in after you, but the car was already submersed, sinking fast. It took me a long time to get to you, to cut the seatbelt, to pull you to the surface...”

“But you did.” My eyes fill. “You saved me.”

“If anything had happened to you...”

“It didn’t.” I reach up and place my hand over his. “I’m fine.”

I sit up straight as a thought suddenly occurs to me, panic rushing through

my veins. “Chrissy!”

“Shh, sunshine, she’s all right. Actually, she’s right upstairs,” he assures me. “The police got her to the hospital in time. She gave birth to a healthy baby girl late last night. Mark’s with her now.”

“And Winnie?”

“He’s okay. Just a few bumps and bruises. Shelby’s watching him — she’s been going back and forth, between your room and Chrissy’s room.”

“Thank god they’re okay,” I breathe, settling back against my pillows. “What time is it?”

“Around six — the nurses will be in soon, to take your morning vitals and yell at me.”

My eyebrows lift. “Why would they yell?”

“This is the ICU — visitors aren’t supposed to spend the night. Or bring flowers.” He grins. “I was persuasive.”

“Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me.”

He has the grace to look a little embarrassed. “The large contribution my family makes every year at the MGH fundraiser may’ve helped matters.”

“I’ll bet.” My voice is dry. “Wait, I’m at Mass General?”

“Yeah. You were in rough shape. They air-lifted you here.” His face goes dark. “Scariest thirty minutes of my life.”

“Well, that just *sucks!*”

His eyebrows go up. “Excuse me?”

“The first time I ever ride in a helicopter, and I’m unconscious the whole freaking time.” I huff. “Just my luck.”

He grins and shakes his head at me.

“I’m serious!” I protest.

“As soon as you’re better, I’ll take you on the company helicopter.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

He kisses me then — just a light brush of his lips over mine, and the tenderness of it steals my breath.

“You should sleep,” he says, pulling back slightly, his eyes moving over my features like he’s trying to memorize them. “You need to heal.”

“I’m fine,” I murmur, but I can hear the drowsiness in my own voice.

“Shh.”

My eyelids slip closed, despite my best efforts. “Chase?”

“Yeah, sunshine?”

“Are you staying?”

He pauses a beat. “Always.”

I let the beauty of that single word sink into my bones.

“Then, why are you still on the chair?”

I hear him chuckle seconds before his arms slide around my frame as he climbs into bed with me.

“This is definitely going to get me in trouble with the nurses,” he whispers against my hair.

“Tell them I coerced you. That you’re powerless to resist me.”

I feel his lips twitch against my temple. “That, Gemma Iphigenia Summers, is the truth.”

My eyes snap open and a horrified gasp erupts from my mouth at the sound of my middle name.

“How do you know?!”

He grins shamelessly. “I read your chart.”

I groan in mortification. “Nooo. Please tell me I’m still unconscious.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” he bumps my nose with his. “And, for the record, I think it’s cute.”

“For the record, you’re a loon.”

“Don’t worry, sunshine. Your secret is safe with me.”

I don’t challenge that statement. I just sigh, snuggle into his arms, and let my eyes slip closed once more. Because I know Chase’s arms really are the safest place on earth.

“SHE’S *STILL* SLEEPING? Are you sure there isn’t permanent brain damage? It can’t be healthy for her to be sleeping this much.”

“Shhh, Shelby! You’ll wake her. And wheel me closer — the baby brigade won’t let me out of this damn chair, but I don’t have to be shoved into the corner like some distant cousin.”

“Chrissy, we aren’t even related to Gemma. A distant cousin has more rights to be in here than we do.”

“It was a figure of speech. Now, wheel me closer!”

A sigh. “Fine. But seriously, do you think Chase was lying when he said she woke up this morning? Maybe the grief did something to his head. Maybe, he’s delusional and she’s really a vegetable.”

“Shelby. Don’t call Gemma a vegetable.”

My eyes peel open and pin the two of them with a glare. “Honestly, the coma was preferable to this.”

“You’re awake!” Shelby squeals, racing forward and grabbing one of my hands. Over her shoulder, I see Winston is fast asleep in his baby backpack, sleeping soundly against her body with his thumb in his mouth. “See, Chrissy, I *told* you she wasn’t a vegetable.”

“Yeah, that’s *exactly* what you said, Shelbs.” Chrissy rolls her eyes. “How are you feeling, Gem?”

“I’m fine. Sore as all hell. And thirstier than that time you guys made me eat that pot-laced brownie, before Chrissy’s bachelorette party.”

“Here.” Shelby passes me a cup of water from the nightstand beside my bed. “Drink.”

I down the entire glass in one gulp, feeling instantly better.

“Are you okay?” I ask Chrissy, once I’ve swallowed. “You, and Winnie, and—”

“And Summer.” Chrissy finishes for me, tears in her eyes and a grin on her lips. “Our new baby girl. She’s fine — she’s perfect. We’re all perfect.”

I pause, my eyes wide. “Summer?”

Chrissy nods. “After her godmother — the best friend-slash-getaway-driver a girl could ever ask for.”

“Chris...” I trail off, my eyes filling with tears. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.” She wheels her chair forward, next to Shelby, and grabs my other hand. “Do you want to meet her?”

“Hell yes, I want to meet her.” My tears overflow.

“Well, the next one you have is definitely going to be named Shelby.” Shelby glares at Chrissy. “Right?”

Chrissy glances at her, grinning. “What if it’s a boy?”

“Shelby could be unisex.”

I snort.

Chrissy scoffs. “Do you want my son to get the shit beat out of him on the playground?”

“Oh, whatever,” Shelby mutters. “You better pray it’s a girl, then.”

Chrissy rolls her eyes again and turns her head toward the door. “You can come in now, boys!”

My tears drip faster as Chase steps inside, his eyes locking on mine immediately, followed by Mark — who’s got a tiny, pink bundle cradled in

his arms.

“Babe,” he says, his eyes finding mine. “Glad you’re not dead.”

“Mark!” Chrissy huffs. “That is *not* what you say to a girl after she’s nearly drowned as the target of a sociopathic billionaire intent on revenge.” Her eyes slide to Chase. “No offense.”

“None taken,” he says, grinning.

Mark sighs. “Sorry, Gem. How are you feeling?”

“I’ll be better when I’m holding that baby.” I pull my hands from Shelby and Chrissy’s grasps and reach for her. “Gimme.”

Mark laughs as he passes her into my arms. I hold her delicately, like one wrong move might break her, staring down at her tiny pink-bowed mouth and fluttering, whisper-thin eyelashes in awe.

“She’s amazing,” I breathe, fighting tears again. I look up at my friends, my eyes moving from Shelby to Chrissy to Mark. They’re all practically glowing with happiness – love shining from their eyes as they smile at me – and I can’t fathom how I got so lucky. These three people are more than just friends – they’re *family*.

My heart is so full at this moment, I think it might burst. I look automatically for Chase, wanting to share this with him... and realize he’s still standing by the door. He’s set himself apart, leaving me to this moment of bliss with my friends.

My gaze searches for his and, when I find it, I see his eyes are edged with a sadness that makes my breath catch. Belatedly, I realize my beautiful, heartbreaking man has never had this – the kind of friendship that can withstand anything. (Even car chases and near death experiences.) He’s never been part of a family like this – never been a part of *any* family, really. He’s never felt the kind of unconditional love that I share with these crazy people I call best friends.

My brows lift as our gazes hold. I hope he can read the message in my eyes.

Come join us, Chase.

He shakes his head and I know it’s because he doesn’t want to interfere.

You’re part of this, now, I tell him, our stares still locked intensely. *Part of my life, part of my friends, part of my family. Come on. Join us, love.*

His eyes flash dark with emotion and I know if we were alone, he’d be kissing the breath out of me, right now. In steady strides, he crosses the room to my side, laying his hand on my shoulder and squeezing gently. I know it’s

his way of saying thank you.

It's a good way.

Shelby, Chrissy, and Mark all smile warmly at him as he takes his place in our small circle.

In our family.

I'm so overwrought, all I can do is look down at the baby in my arms, barely able to make out her features through the tears swimming in my eyes.

"She's beautiful," I choke out. "So beautiful."

"Just like her godmother," Chase says quietly, his voice warm. I tilt my head to look up at him, grinning through my tears.

He gazes at me with the baby in my arms and something a lot like longing flashes in the depths of his eyes. Before I can freak out too much, he leans down and presses a kiss to my forehead.

"Mark! Why don't you ever say romantic things like that to me anymore, huh?" Chrissy is teasing — I can hear the laughter in her voice.

"Because we're married," Mark says, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. His eyes are twinkling as he stares at his wife. "Isn't that the whole point of getting married? So you never have to compliment anyone ever again? If not, I'm going to have to reconsider some things..."

"You're going to get it, mister!" Chrissy yells, wheeling toward him with a murderous look on her face. "Come back here!"

Mark laughs as he backs out of the room and down the hall, away from his wheelchair-bound wife, who seems intent on revenge. Their laughter carries back to us long after they've faded out of sight.

"Those two." Shelby rolls her eyes, then looks at me. "And now *you two*. For god's sake, can we tone down the lovey-dovey crap? It's enough to make me toss my cookies."

"You don't eat cookies," I point out.

"It's a figure of speech!" she grumbles. "You know what, I'm going to go make sure those two don't kill each other." Leaning down, she presses a kiss to Summer's forehead, followed by mine. "Feel better, Gem. I'll be back to check on you in a bit."

"Bye, Shelbs. Thanks for coming."

With a final wink in Chase's direction, she slips through the door and disappears.

I look up at him, then down at the baby in my arms. "I have a namesake. How cool is that?"

“Pretty cool, sunshine.” He settles in beside me on the bed and wraps an arm around my shoulders. “Though, if she turns out to be half as much trouble as you, I pity the man who falls for her.”

I still, at those words, my heart racing in my chest. I almost say it, then.

I love you .

But something holds me back.

“Speaking of trouble...” I swallow. “Have you heard anything about Ralph and Vanessa?”

“Funny thing happened.” He chuckles lowly. “Turns out, before Chrissy ran out of phone battery, she managed to film a good portion of their conversation in that parking garage. It’s essentially a taped confession. The police caught them less than a mile away from the spot your car crashed — as soon as they got them in custody, they turned on each other faster than a flipped coin.”

“Wow,” I breathe.

“Yeah. And that’s not all.” He looks at me, his eyes suddenly serious. “When I went into the water after you, Knox chased down Hawkins — or, The Hulk, as you like to call him. He’s in police custody, facing charges for kidnapping, assault, reckless endangerment, and attempted murder.”

“Holy cow.”

Chase nods. “Word is, he’s cutting a deal. If he gives the DA everything he has on Brett, they’ll shave some years off his sentence. If not, with that many charges... he’s looking at some serious time behind bars.”

“So, after all these years, after everything he’s done... Brett might go to jail?”

Chase nods. “Assuming his lawyers can’t get him off.”

“Finally,” I breathe, relieved.

“Finally,” Chase echoes, his mouth tugging up at the corners. “There’s something else.”

My eyebrows go up.

“Your mother is here,” he says gently. “And... so is your father.”

“Oh.”

I’m truly too stunned to say anything.

“I told them to wait in the lobby, for now. I wasn’t sure you’d want to see them.” His eyes ask a question I’m not sure I have the answer to.

I swallow hard. “I guess... I guess they can come in.”

“Are you sure, sunshine?”

I nod. "I'm sure."

"Then I'll go get them."

I'M PRACTICALLY LEVITATING off the bed with nerves, waiting for Chase to return with my parents in tow.

A kind nurse came by and took Summer back to the nursery while he was gone, and without her in my arms I'm not sure where to focus my restless energy. Fighting the urge to fidget, I clasp my hands together and wait for them to arrive.

Mom's crying before she even sees me.

"Gemma!" she exclaims, crossing the room in a blur of motion, until her hands are wrapped tight around mine. "Baby girl, I was so worried."

"I'm fine, Mom. Really."

She doesn't say anything — she's crying too hard — but as she pulls me close, I know no matter what happens, no matter how many fights we have or how many angry words we exchange... she'll always be my mom. And I'll always love her, flaws and all.

I hear the sound of a throat clearing, and my eyes move toward the door. There's a tall, dark-haired man standing there with a bouquet of beautiful red and black flowers in his arms.

"Gemma." He takes a few tentative steps into the room, his posture stiff. "I'm Milo West. I'm... I'm your father."

My eyes dart to Chase and he nods slightly, reassuring me with that tiny motion.

You can do this, sunshine.

I force my eyes back to Milo's and see, in the depths of his gaze, that he's nervous despite his frigid manner.

"It's nice to meet you," I say quietly. "Thanks... for coming."

He nods, looking more than a little overwhelmed. I take pity on him.

"Are those for me?" I ask, my eyes dropping to the flowers in his arms.

"Oh... Yes, of course." He looks around at the million peonies, then down at the single bouquet in his arms, clearly feeling flustered. "I didn't think you'd have so many already..."

"Are they poppies?" I ask, extending my arms for them. "They're beautiful."

He nods, taking the final steps forward and gently laying the bouquet in

my arms.

“Your sister... they’ve always been her favorite.” His voice is halting, awkward, forced — but he’s trying. Even I can see that. And right now, in just this moment, fresh off a near-death experience... I’m willing to give him a free pass.

I tilt my head forward to inhale their fragrance. “Thank you, Milo.”

He tries out an uneasy smile.

“Mom, will you put them in some water for me?” I ask, passing the flowers to her.

“Sure, baby girl.” She pulls them to her chest. I see more tears gathering in her eyes when she leans in to press a kiss to my forehead, then turns for the door. “Chase, why don’t you help me track down a vase?” she asks, her voice clogged with emotion.

Chase meets my eyes and I nod.

I’m okay.

“Of course, Petra.” He lets Mom tug him out the door without protest.

“I can go, too. I’m sure you need to rest.” Milo shifts from foot to foot, looking anywhere but at me as he prepares to head out after them.

“Why don’t you stay?” I ask, halting him with my words.

His eyes find mine, full of uncertainty... and hope.

“Are you sure?”

I nod. “Tell me about Phoebe. And Parker. I’d love to know more about them both.”

He looks a little shell-shocked as he settles into the chair beside my bed, but once he starts talking, he seems to relax a bit.

And here I thought this day couldn’t get any stranger .

Of all the things I didn’t expect about the last twenty-four hours — car chases, kidnappings, surprise births, near drownings — me, sitting with my father, having a civilized conversation was the last one I’d have predicted. And yet... it’s really not so terrible. In fact, listening to him talk about the siblings I’ll hopefully get to know one day...

It’s actually kind of nice.

BY THE TIME everyone goes home, it’s well into the evening and I’m so exhausted, my eyes are drooping shut. Chrissy’s been officially discharged — she and Mark were eager to get the newest addition to their family home

as soon as possible — and Shelby has gone to make dinner for Paul, who's expected back from a business trip any hour now.

They both assured me they'd visit first thing in the morning.

My parents left a few hours before my friends — Mom, with a crushing hug that made my sore ribs ache, and Milo, with a stiff nod and an awkward hand-squeeze — with promises to check in on me soon.

Considering the fact that yesterday I wasn't speaking to either of them, I'm going to say there's at least one silver lining to almost dying.

My phone has been ringing off the hook all day as everyone from Estelle (who cursed rapidly in French for several long minutes) to Katy (the *Crumble* bakery owner) to Phoebe (who I didn't even know had my number) calls to check in on me. I want to talk to them but Chase won't let me, insisting I need my rest — which he may or may not be right about. Sitting by my bedside, he takes message after message and never complains, his free hand wrapped tight around mine.

At the end of visiting hours, I find myself looking forward to some much-needed rest... Until another knock sounds at the door.

"Who is it now?" Chase mutters, his voice low.

My bleary eyes lift to the entryway and, to my great surprise, land on a frail old woman in a floor-length blue pea coat, toting a massive black bag over one shoulder.

"Gemma, dear!"

"Mrs. Hendrickson?" My voice is laced with surprise as I sit up straighter in bed. "Is that you?"

"No, it's Sophia Loren — *of course* it's me, dear." She clucks as she walks further inside the room. She stops when she catches sight of Chase, who's still hovering at my bedside. "And *you* must be the billionaire everyone's been going on about. I'm Gemma's neighbor, downstairs in 1C. I'm sure she's told you about me."

"I'm Chase." A slow grin stretches across his lips as he extends a hand in greeting. "It's nice to meet you, ma'am."

She stares at his hand for a moment without shaking it, her eyes narrowing. "You know, those reporters trampled all over the flower beds outside our building because of you."

Chase makes an effort to bury his grin, but it's not very successful. His voice is thick with mirth and his lips are twitching when he responds. "I'll be sure to have them replaced, ma'am."

“Well, then.” She nods in satisfaction, slides her hand into his, and shakes firmly before her eyes swivel to meet mine. “You picked a good one, Gemma dear.”

I look at Chase. “I know.”

“But I must say, you look positively a *fright* .” Mrs. Hendrickson shakes her head in disapproval as her eyes move over my battered features. “We heard what happened from the landlord – everyone in the building is simply *buzzing* about it – and we just had to pop by and make sure you were okay!”

“We?” I ask, somewhat alarmed by her use of the plural. “What do you mean, *we* ?”

“Me and Bigelow – who else?” Her soft blue eyes crinkle up in a smile as she lowers her large purse onto the end of my bed. I nearly jump out of my skin when a furry orange head pops out the top of the bag, triangular ears pointed sharply toward the ceiling and slanted feline eyes narrowed on me.

“I don’t think cats are allowed in the ICU,” I murmur, my eyes wide as they move from Bigelow to Chase – who’s looking extremely amused, by the way.

Mrs. Hendrickson clucks. “Well, of course not, dear. Why do you think he stowed away inside my purse?”

“I...well...”

I trail off, at a loss for words.

A muffled chuckle erupts from Chase’s direction. A second later, I feel one of his hands lace through mine and squeeze tightly. His other reaches out to stroke Bigelow’s fur, eliciting a loud purr as soon as his fingers make contact.

“I just knew he’d be a cat person,” Mrs. Hendrickson murmurs happily, staring up at Chase in adoration.

I feel a smile twitching at my lips as I reach out to scratch the cat behind one ear.

“Thanks for bringing him, Mrs. Hendrickson.”

“Don’t thank me, dear. Just get better.” She smiles. “After all, I’ll need you to look after Bigelow again in a few weeks, when I go back to Phoenix to watch my youngest grandson graduate high school. And you know he’s quite an active cat – he can’t be with someone who’s confined to a hospital bed all day.”

“Of course not,” I agree, my voice choked with laughter.

Chase chuckles full-out as his hand tightens on mine, and the sound is so

packed with joy, it warms me down to the core of my bones.

LATER, it's dark and quiet in my room, the only sound that of the machines gently whirring and our slow breaths, mingling in the space between our faces as we share a too-thin pillow on my cramped hospital bed.

"You look exhausted," Chase whispers in the darkness, his lips finding mine in a soft kiss. "Go to sleep, sunshine."

"Will you still be here, when I wake up?" I ask sleepily.

"Stupid question."

I smile. "Good."

He chuckles against my hair. "I think the nurses have given up on trying to kick me out."

"I told them to leave you alone." I shrug. "I figure if I slip into a coma again, I'd like it to happen in the arms of the man I love."

He goes completely still and when he speaks, his voice is low, intent.

"Care to repeat that, sunshine?"

I turn to look into his eyes, smiling and crying at the same time. "I know it's crazy and way too fast and I probably should wait to say it until we've figured things out – important things, like whether you snore and where all my books are going to go, because your shelves are already full, and obviously your stance on real, sugary Pop-Tarts versus the gross, healthy-alternative filling ones." I pull in a breath. "But the thing is, I almost died yesterday, and I guess none of those little details seem super important anymore. I don't know when my expiration date will come around – it might not be for fifty years, or ten years, or two months. It might be tomorrow, or five minutes from now. I don't know when I'm going to leave this earth. But, whenever that is... I want to go knowing that I came clean. That I told you everything. And the truth is... I love you, Chase Croft. I really, *really* love you."

His eyes go soft as they move over my features and when he speaks, his voice is more emotional than I've ever heard it – tender and hopeful and happy.

"For the record... I like the sugary Pop-Tarts."

I blink in surprise before his words catch up with me and a grin overtakes my face. "Really?"

He nods, staring at me for a beat with something a lot like awe in his

eyes. “You love me?”

My voice cracks. “I love you.”

“Does this mean you’re officially moving in?”

I sigh. “God, you’re incorrigible.”

He grins. “You’re moving in.”

“This doesn’t mean you get to boss me around.”

“Uh huh.”

“There will be absolutely *no* macho-man, bossy-pants shenanigans allowed.”

“Whatever you say, sunshine.”

“You’re doing that thing, where you pretend I’m getting my way just so I’ll let you off the hook, aren’t you?”

His grin widens. “See? You know me so well, already.”

I groan. “This is going to be a disaster.”

“Maybe.” He brushes his lips against mine. “But I love you, too, sunshine. I really, *really* love you. And even if it’s too fast, even if it’s a mess, even if it’s crazy... it’ll be *our* mess. *Our* crazy. And that’s really all I need.”

“Well, then...” My eyes are watering, which kind of takes the heat out of my argument. “I’ll have you know, I’ve got conditions.”

“Conditions?”

“If I’m going to move in.” I stare into his eyes, deadly serious. “For starters, I’m going to need a waffle maker. I don’t care if you don’t like them — a girl needs a waffle maker, Chase. It’s a rule.”

His lips twitch. “I think we can manage that.”

“*And!*” I point a finger at him, in case he thought he was getting off easy. “How do you feel about chocolate cupcakes?”

“They’re pretty good.” He shrugs. “Especially from that place *Crumble* on Beacon Street.”

My eyes fill with tears again, and this time they spill over.

Chase looks at me like I’m crazy. “Sunshine, if you don’t like the cupcakes there, we can go somewhere else. I don’t think *Maria’s* makes cupcakes, but we both agree, their cannoli are top notch—”

“I love you, you big idiot.” I cut him off, pressing my lips to his in a kiss that’s wet from my tears. “Now shut up and kiss me.”

He does.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I hate writing this part, because it means it's over.

Another book finished, another chapter ended, another cast of characters I have to part with. I've had so much fun writing Chase and Gemma's story, I'm not ready to say goodbye. Not ready for it to end.

I hope you enjoyed reading **NOT YOU IT'S ME** as much as I enjoyed putting it down on paper. Without readers like you, none of this would be possible – so *thank you* for supporting me. Whether this is your first Julie Johnson book or your fourth, thank you for spending a few hours trapped between my pages. Thank you for reaching out with words of kindness, for leaving reviews on *Amazon*, *Barnes & Noble*, and *Goodreads*, for recommending my books to your fellow bookworms. I'll never be able to express how much your support means to me.

To my wonderful parents – thank you for embracing my dreams and for (miraculously) not freaking out when I told you I wasn't applying for a regular 9 to 5 after college. You've taught me to make the most of every ounce of life you're given while you still have time, to live fearlessly, to dream without limits.... I love you both.

To my older brother, Zack – thank you for teaching me that nerds are the coolest humans, for instilling a great love of *Star Wars*, dinosaurs, and LEGOs within me from an early age, and for putting food coloring in my cereal that one time and turning my teeth bright green. (Good times.) Love you much.

To my friends – thank you for championing my books to everyone who will listen. You are amazingly supportive, not to mention incredibly understanding of my hermit-like tendencies when I have to hibernate in my

writing cave for weeks at a time. I love you guys to pieces.

To my street team – you ladies rock my socks off! Seriously, the amount of time and effort you put into your reviews, your book videos, your graphics and teasers.... It awes me. I love you guys!

And, lastly, to every reader, blogger, and fellow author who's a part (small or large) of this epic book community we share – thank you for making it fun, for keeping it interesting, and most of all, for inspiring me to keep writing. I couldn't do any of this without all of you!

PLAYLIST

1. *You Should Know Where I'm Coming From* by Banks
2. *Treacherous* by Taylor Swift
3. *Beneath Your Beautiful* (feat. Emeli Sandé) by Labrinth
4. *American Girl* by Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers
5. *Stay With Me* by Sam Smith
6. *Gotta Have You* by The Weepies
7. *The Way I Am* by Ingrid Michaelson
8. *Lay Me Down* by Sam Smith
9. *Love Me Like You Do* by Ellie Goulding
10. *If You Leave* by Nada Surf
11. *The Writer* by Ellie Goulding
12. *You Are In Love* by Taylor Swift
13. *Thinking Out Loud* by Ed Sheeran

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JULIE JOHNSON is a twenty-something Boston native suffering from an extreme case of Peter Pan Syndrome. When she's not writing, Julie can most often be found adding stamps to her passport, drinking too much coffee, striving to conquer her Netflix queue, and Instagramming pictures of her dog. (Follow her: [@author_julie](#))

She published her debut novel *LIKE GRAVITY* in August 2013, just before her senior year of college, and she's never looked back. Since, she has published more than a dozen other novels, including the bestselling *BOSTON LOVE STORY* series, *THE GIRL DUET*, and *THE FADED DUET*. Her books have appeared on Kindle and iTunes Bestseller lists around the world, as well as in *AdWeek*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *USA Today*.

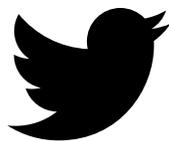
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NEXT UP...

Read the first chapter of **CROSS THE LINE** , book #2 in the BOSTON
LOVE STORIES.

*Phoebe West has been head-over-heels in love with her brother's best friend
for as long as she can remember.*

Not that he's bothered to notice...

CROSS THE LINE

CHAPTER ONE

SOME PEOPLE BRAG ABOUT ONE NIGHT STANDS.
WHATEVER. I'VE GOT TWO NIGHT STANDS.
EITHER SIDE OF MY BED.

Phoebe West, upon hearing her best friend lost her v-card after prom.

My name is Phoebe West and I've been kidnapped.

I think. Maybe.

It's kind of a long story.

See, it wasn't supposed to happen this way.

For the record, it *never* would've happened this way if my life were a movie. (Preferably a rom-com of some sort with a kickass soundtrack and a happy ending, starring a fabulously-styled version of myself opposite Michiel Huisman. Or Liam Hemsworth. Or Henry Cavill. I could go on, but I won't.)

Point is, I had a plan. A pretty good one — or so I thought until yesterday, before it all went to hell faster than you can say *Phoebe-you're-a-nutcase* in Pig-Latin.

Sigh.

This calamity began, as they usually do, because of a boy.

No, not a boy.

A *man*.

A smoking hot, sexy as sin, *older* man who just so happens to be my big

brother Parker's best friend — and has been since they were, like, ten and still thought girls were weird and covered in cooties.

Oh, how I wish *that* phase had lasted.

It would've saved me the torture of watching my undying preteen crush work his way through half the girls at the private prep school he and my brother attended. He would've worked his way through the other half, too, but he and Parker had a strict rule against going after each other's girls. (Part of their man-code or whatever.) For that, at least, I could be grateful.

Or, so I thought.

Because a few years later — by which point my binder-doodling, call-and-hang-up, harmless little crush had blossomed into full-on love (or *lust* depending on the day) — I realized that same man-code which forbade boys from ever stealing each other's girlfriends also extended to other things.

Specifically, to little sisters.

More specifically, to *me*.

There I was — *BAM!* — smack dab in the fine print of their bro bible:

RULE #1:

No dating ex-girlfriends, current girlfriends, or potential future girlfriends.

RULE #2:

Absolutely no touching, fucking, or corrupting little sisters.

RULE #3:

Pizza without meat on it doesn't count as a meal.

I probably should've been flattered that I ranked above pizza when it came to male priorities, but all I could feel was heartbreak that I, Phoebe West, would never be able to call Nathaniel "Nate" Knox my own.

Never feel the weight of his eyes moving over my face with heart-stopping heat.

Never know the touch of his hands, big and rough, gliding across my skin, as I'd envisioned since I was barely old enough to understand my desire for such things.

The closest I'd ever get was a brotherly pat on the back and that same cool, narrow-eyed stare he used on everyone. The cocky, condescending,

infuriatingly attractive one that made a tiny crease appear in the space between his eyes and clearly said, *Yes, I'm measuring your worth* and *No, you don't live up*.

Even his blatant indifference wasn't enough to deter me. Because, well, here's the thing.

I love him.

I always have.

Falling for Nate wasn't something I was ever really conscious of doing. It was just something I *knew*, in the pit of my stomach, in the marrow of my bones, in every dark, secret corner at the back of my mind. Ingrained so deep I wouldn't know how to begin to overcome it — like my hatred of chocolate in breakfast foods and my love of Old-Fashioneds with top-shelf bourbon.

It's set in stone.

Unchangeable, no matter how hard I wish I could let him go.

I can't help it. From that very first day I met him, it was like my body had been programmed to fall head over heels... and my mind had absolutely no say in the matter.

So, you can imagine how frustrating it was when, after years of patiently waiting — for my boobs to come in, for my wardrobe to sort itself out after that weird retro-Punk phase I went through, and, most especially, for Nate to come home from his first semester of college and notice that I'd grown up — he didn't even blink an eye at my high school freshman field hockey skirt and newly minted set of knockers.

In fact, if anything, he pulled away more, until I'd been demoted from *honorary little sister* to *invisible girl who lives with Parker*. That first winter break, he barely spoke to me at all unless it was to say something banal like “excuse me” as his body brushed past mine with new carefulness on the way to the fridge, or “is Parker home” when I'd hear the doorbell chime and race downstairs as fast as my legs could carry me, determined to be the one to greet him.

At first, I hated how much those tiny, bland niceties meant to me — how one thoughtless word from him could make or break my entire day. Each “hey Phoebe” and “tell Parker I called” was a bone thrown to a desperate dog, who'd live on any scrap of attention that came her way so long as it came from *his* hand. It made me feel weak. Pathetic. Invisible.

But afterwards, when Nate dropped out of Harvard — and, for all intents and purposes, out of my life — I missed his strained small talk, his tossed

scraps. Oh, how I wished he'd come back from wherever he'd gone and look through me while saying "pass the pepper" at dinner. Because, as sad as it was to admit, having Asshole Nate around was better than no Nate at all.

His father, an influential Boston defense attorney with big plans for his only son, was pissed beyond belief when his sole heir joined the special forces and disappeared without so much as a discussion.

Parker, his best friend since elementary school, wasn't thrilled to lose his partner in crime, but he vowed to be supportive if it meant making Nate happy.

And me? Well, there've been several stages of my post-Knox life.... starting with pure, undiluted misery.

The slightly melodramatic *wherefore-hast-thou-forsaken-me-o-beloved-one* phase was essentially an eighteen-month period during which I consumed a lot of chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream and listened to Damien Rice songs on repeat until my eye sockets physically refused to produce any more tears.

Then, when I turned sixteen and was finally done feeling sorry for myself, the numbing sorrow of missing him wore off and I realized how freaking pissed I was at him for abandoning me.

This may've been because my pride was a bit wounded that Nate hadn't even bothered to come back and *notice* my months of moping, which was pretty inconsiderate, since it was all over him. Even later, when I learned he was halfway around the world training for a tactical team so lethal they didn't even have a name, the firestorm of rage-fueled, unrequited love continued to scorch my insides.

My angry phase lasted longer.

Approximately six years, to be exact, until both high school and college were fading in my rearview and I was a twenty-two year old woman with a pitiful amount of experience with the male sex, all because my stupid, stubborn heart refused to relinquish hope that someday, my soulmate would wake up and smell the freaking pheromones.

But eventually, as I moved to the city and settled into new patterns in my Back Bay brownstone, as my "real life" started and — alarmingly — began to slip by without anyone to share it with.... I was forced to accept the fact that my reckless, hopeless (and occasionally dirty) dreams of Nate would never be fulfilled.

With that realization, I transitioned from anger into the indifferent phase,

where I've been dwelling unhappily for nearly a year, now.

The main rules of indifference are:

Don't think about Nate.

Don't talk about Nate.

And never, ever, talk to Nate at the few family gatherings where our paths cross.

It's kind of like my own personal Fight Club, except less violent and way more pathetic since I'm the only member.

Before you judge me for giving up on the man I've loved for almost my entire lifetime, you have to understand something — a girl can only handle so much rejection. And, over the years, I've had more than my fair share of it.

First, there was the time in fourth grade when I stole Nate's cellphone and spent an entire afternoon — practically an eternity, at age nine — locked in my walk-in closet, scrolling through his text inbox and sending eloquent "Dnt txt me! I h8 U!" messages to every girl in his contact list. (I know, I know. Not my proudest — or smartest — moment. But, in my defense, no one told me he'd be able to see them in his SENT folder as soon as he miraculously found his missing phone on the kitchen counter later that night. *Oops*.)

And I can't forget the incident in sixth grade — well before my boobs came in, mind you — when Parker threw a huge pool party for his sweet sixteen and, jealous of the *totally* mature tenth-grade girls wandering around with what, at the time, seemed like Victoria's Secret model bodies in comparison to my mosquito bites, I went into the bathroom and stuffed the cups of my bikini with enough tissues to keep Kleenex in business for at least the next decade.

A mistake — the repercussions of which I didn't even fully realize until one of Parker's bitchy girlfriends pushed me into the pool, the impact dislodging my stuffing like confetti from a canon. The two minutes I spent floating in the water, makeshift boobies drifting around me like white, translucent jellyfish as I listened to the older girls giggle, were bad enough; the fact that it was *Nate* who reached in, pulled me out, and wrapped a towel around my shaking shoulders was worse. Mainly because, as soon as my feet hit dry land, the tissue began fusing to my limbs, clumping on my skin like some grade-school paper maché project gone terribly awry.

Somehow, when I'd imagined Nate seeing my boobs for the first time, I hadn't reeked of chlorine and they hadn't been made of paper.

Oh well. You win some, you lose some.

(I seem to lose most, actually.)

And yet, even the pool party wasn't as abominable as the time in eighth grade, when I asked him to be my date to the Sadie Hawkins dance. He didn't even bother letting me down easy. He just grinned, ruffled my hair like I was an adorable-but-idiotic golden retriever, and walked away, laughing as though the suggestion was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. His rejection stung, don't get me wrong, but it was the aftermath that really kicked me in the shins. Without Nate as a date, I had no option other than to ask my friend Lila's older brother, Duncan, to go with me. He was cute in a clean-cut, average kind of way — not dark or dangerous-looking, like other boys-who-shall-not-be-named, but handsome enough to get my fourteen-year-old heart pumping.

Duncan was a charmer when he picked me up in his father's Porsche, smiling as he slipped a corsage on my wrist, driving with one arm thrown across the back of my seat. Just when I was beginning to think things might not turn out so bad... he downed six shots of whiskey in the school parking lot, which left him so incapacitated he couldn't even slow-dance with me *once* during the hour I spent leaning against the wall of the Starry-Night-themed reception hall, watching him gyrate questionably against several unsuspecting girls in taffeta.

When I called Parker to come get me, he — somewhat grudgingly — showed up... with Nate in tow, because apparently the universe thought I hadn't suffered enough humiliation for one night. Crammed in the backseat next to a moaning Duncan, I listened to Parker and Nate talk about the "hot chicks" they'd had to bail on to pick me up, and prayed to disappear. When Duncan puked in my purse halfway home, I knew my perfect night at the middle-school dance was finally complete.

Ah, memories.

I could go on, but I'm sure you get the picture. When it comes to Nate, my life has been one long string of humiliation and horrifyingly bad luck. Before he disappeared, taking my heart with him, I tried *everything* to get his attention.

Okay, not *everything*. I stopped short of stripping to my skin and climbing into his bed naked because *hello*, I still have some pride left. (Not much, but enough to know that ambushing him in my birthday suit and demanding that he finally remove my pesky virginity — only to be rejected and dismissed with the same detachment he'd use to send an overcooked

steak back to the kitchen — is a blow from which my self-esteem would never recover.)

But I've tried everything *else* .

Heated glances. Cold shoulders.

Sidelong-looks. Full-frontal stares.

Ignoring him. Adoring him.

And you know what?

Not a damn bit of it worked.

It doesn't matter what I do — Nate still treats me with the same aloof disinterest he always has, since the day I hit puberty.

In a few days, I'll be twenty-four, which means I've been in love with Nate for more than a decade. And not once in all that time has he shown me so much as a flicker of reciprocal interest. Hell, he doesn't even check out my boobs — which are now very real, thank you very much — if I walk around in a bikini when he comes to visit Parker in Nantucket. And it's not like there's nothing to look at — I'm a generous C-cup, for god's sake. (Frankly, I think the universe realized it owed me, after the pool-stuffing incident, and bequeathed me with a really stellar set of ta-tas to even the score.)

But, it was with a heavy heart and some seriously neglected lady parts that, two months ago, I decided to toss in the towel for good. I'm not usually a quitter, but it seemed there was no choice other than to lock my heart away in an impenetrable steel box inside my chest and move on — to new men, who actually noticed I was alive and worthy of love. Or, at the very least, a little below-the-belt action. After all, a girl can only wait so long.

So, I did something seemingly harmless.

I accepted a date to a stuffy dinner gala with a wealthy, eligible bachelor named Brett from one of Boston's most prominent families. With dark hair and ice blue eyes, he looked a tad like Ian Somerhalder, which was about his only redeeming quality because most of the time, he gave off seriously creepy vibes. Not that it mattered — I wasn't interested in him. I just thought, after years listening to Lila barrage me with advice about *The Top 10 Successful Ways to Make a Man Jealous* and *12 Irrefutable Strategies to Forget That Rat Bastard* , I should finally give it a go. One last-ditch attempt to catch Nate's attention, before my ovaries dried up from lack of use. I figured it couldn't hurt, right?

I just never in my wildest dreams imagined it would actually *work* ...