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Never *Sweeter*

A Dark Obsession Novel

CHARLOTTE STEIN

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Prologue

Letty's heart sank when the headlights illuminated the trail she was walking along. The vehicle behind her was never going to be her dad come to pick her up, after all. She hadn't told him about her broken-down car—mainly because she was a senior on the verge of graduating, not a child who still needed his help at every turn. And it wasn't Becky here to rescue her. She doubted Becky had even gotten her message, or would care if she had. No, it had to be them. They were always hanging around up here, drinking their longneck beers and fooling around.

Not so long ago she'd passed the bluff on the way home, safe inside her rusted-over Camaro, and seen Tate throwing something at Jason's head. Or at least it had looked that way in the split-second glimpse she'd gotten.

Lucky her—now she was going to get more than a brief glimpse. They were going to pull some stunt, and she knew it. It made her walk faster, arms tight around her middle as though she could somehow make herself smaller.

She knew it was impossible, however. She was too big in almost every way: her generous hips and breasts and butt were forever on their radar. Even her nose and hair took up way too much space—the former was far too long and strong for her dimpled face, and the latter refused to stay in almost every clip and tie she owned.

The dark curls sprawled down her back and over her shoulders, in a way that should have been beautiful. Instead it was forever a mess.

They probably could have seen her from a mile away.

And now they were honking the horn. Hollering out of the window.

Letty heard *fatty* and *thunder thighs* and *flabby*, and tried to speed up. The trouble was—speeding up only made things worse. It made things jiggle. It emphasized how awkward she was. Pretty soon she would have to break into a run, and then the real trouble would start.

In fact, it already had.

She heard something clatter against the dirt path behind her, and knew it was something one of them had thrown. Probably Tate, because he was always the one who took things too far. The other day he had put his book bag behind her chair, so that when she got up she stumbled over it. He

followed her places and seemed to lie in wait, each time getting steadily weirder until she was sure he was building to something terrible.

This had to be it. *They're going to run you over*, the terrified part of her brain told her. But they wouldn't take it that far, would they? She glanced back and saw that Jason was behind the wheel, which gave her some hope.

Jason was the more reasonable one of the three. He usually hung back, tiny dark eyes only assessing the action, and never really contributing. He would probably keep things under control, she told herself, even as the truck edged closer and the laughter got wilder. Plus there was Tate, furiously jabbering in Jason's ear.

Go on and ram into her, she imagined him saying, and for one insane second she just wanted to ram them first. A hot vein of anger split the stone she usually kept around it and surged to the surface. It burned through her body, taking out almost everything in its path—her reason and sense of self-preservation and restraint.

And then suddenly she was stopping.

No more shrinking down.

No more running away.

She came to a dead halt and just stared through the windshield at them: these three guys who had made her years in high school hell. They looked strangely small and almost far away—as though just the act of facing them reduced everything they were down to an insignificant speck.

And it seemed that they knew it, too.

The laughing and hollering stopped. All she could hear was the wind keening up from the bluff that was now almost behind her, and the rattle of the leafless trees and brambles that lined that sheer drop.

It was bliss—for about a minute.

And then Jason revved the engine once, twice. Like someone firing a warning shot, she thought, though she wanted to laugh once she had. They weren't ever going to actually do it for real. Bullies like them never really did anything. It was all just safe things that made their target feel like shit.

Ramming someone off the bluff with a truck wasn't safe.

It was dangerous, it was deadly, it could kill.

They would never kill her.

No matter how stone faced Jason looked, or how fiercely Tate was urging him, or how queasy Patrick seemed, they wouldn't—a fact that she

was so sure of she was almost grinning when the truck lurched forward. At the very least she felt as if she had won something, about a second before the metal grille hit the middle of her body hard.

Then there was just air underneath her feet.

Followed by jagged rocks.

And finally, bloody silence.

Chapter 1

TWO YEARS LATER

It had to be some kind of hallucination. A trick of the light or not enough to eat. That was the only explanation Letty could accept, because Tate Sullivan was a million miles away. Last she heard he had bagged some wrestling scholarship at somewhere fancy like Stanford, so him being here at tiny Breckenridge College seemed completely impossible. Doubly so, when she factored in the time that had passed—it had been two years since high school, and he hadn't needed to fill those years with rehab. He should have been deep into his college career, not just starting out like her.

Yet when she snuck a second look she had to accept it. Barely anyone was as enormous as Tate. He stood six feet five in bare feet, and had shoulders so broad they strained the seams of every shirt he wore. They were straining the seams of his shirt now, which was pretty much confirmation enough.

But then there was his face, fresh from a million of her nightmares. Nobody else looked the way he did, so ugly and handsome at the same time. His jaw was too big and brutal for that butter-soft mouth; those sultry, soft-focus blue eyes did not belong above his busted nose.

And the ears...

She used to dream up insults about his ridiculous jug ears. In fact, that was the first thing she thought of when she snuck another glance from her seat at the back. All the things she wanted to say to him, in return for every *fat ass* and *thunder thighs*. Every bit of her rage distilled into one perfect, beautiful rant, aimed right at his stupid, smug face.

Like a preemptive strike, before he got his digs in.

Because surely he was here to harass Letty. It couldn't possibly be a coincidence or genuine interest on his part. He didn't even like movies, yet here he was in her film theory class. What was he going to do? Tell Professor Harrison that science fiction was for fatties and weirdos?

No, he had to be here for some nefarious reason. Maybe he thought she was the one who had called the cops on him after the truck incident, and was here for some kind of payback. He'd gone to similar lengths before to get her, after all. Hanging around outside the library until seven at night, just waiting in the dark and freezing cold for her to come out. Missing

practice so he could give her hell as she walked down the hallway of doom that went down the middle of school.

Driving up to the bluff, when he somehow knew she would be there.

Was this really that different?

It didn't feel different. Her heart was already beating her insides bloody. She tried to concentrate on the lecture—her first college lecture about cool things she really loved—and found herself focusing on all the things that were wrong with her instead. She had allowed her dark, curly hair to roam free of pins and clips, and her dark eyes were ringed with mascara. Just a touch, but a touch would be too much for Tate. So would the jeans that clung to her still curvy hips and ass, and the sweater that almost showed off her impressive chest.

He would have something to say about all of it. He was probably already dreaming it up now. He only *looked* like he was paying attention to the lecture. Really, he was pretending to write things down—though he made it look good. He wrote in that weird crabbed way he had, hand curled almost into his body. Fingers pressing down too hard on the pen, the pen pressing down too hard on the paper. By the time he was done his notebooks always looked like murder victims, full of inky wounds and ugly punctures.

Letty would be damned if she was going back to that.

So she took the stairs two at a time. She pushed past people without apology, dodging satchels and outstretched arms, picking up speed as she went. The double doors of the lecture hall barely knew what hit them by the time she barreled through.

And she kept going that way, too. She all but sprinted to the nearest stairwell, always looking behind herself as she did. Mind constantly counting down the steps until she was free and clear. Only five more until she was at the north-side exit. Another fifty or so to clear the Bradley Building. Then a straight shot across the grounds to her dorm, where the sanctuary of a locked door awaited.

Easy, she told herself.

But that was her downfall, thinking of everything but the most important factor in all of this: Tate was and always had been as cunning as a trapped animal. You could see it when he wrestled—that kind of feral intelligence guiding his every move. Each time the crowd thought him beat,

he would blindside his opponent before they ever saw it coming. His greatest strength was looking like someone too stupid to bring a knife to a knife fight. Then snapping a concealed blade right into his opponent's gut.

And by god, he did it to her hard here. He didn't just use a blade. He used a goddamn machete. She rounded the last corner before the exit, absolutely sure she had escaped him. He was still nowhere to be seen in the hallway behind her. Even if he flew on winged feet he had no chance of catching her now.

Or so she thought.

But then she turned back to the doors that should have been in front of her and saw only him. An enormous, impossible wall of him, so sudden and terrifying she could barely process it.

Somehow he had gotten ahead of her. He must have gone around the other way or darted past when she was busy looking in the other direction, and now he was here. All six feet five inches of him stood with his arms crossed and his expression sullen as though *he* was the one who should be mad.

And Letty couldn't even tell him otherwise. As soon as she saw him everything just seemed to go in slow motion—like she was suddenly Sarah Connor watching in horror as the Terminator emerged from an elevator. She even made a similar sound, and came fairly close to losing her footing in the exact same way. One leg tried to keep going and the other snapped to a halt and she stumbled. She almost slipped.

She would have gone down if it were not for his hand.

The one he closed around her arm. Firm, but bizarrely gentle.

Though his grip was still shocking, all the same. It made her realize something in a great rolling wave: he had never touched her before. Not even at his most despicable; not even when it would have helped him to do it. He had always somehow kept his hands to himself, and after a second of contact she understood why.

It burned when he did it.

It burned *him*.

He snapped his hand back in an almost fearful way—she saw him do it. Though later she would tell herself it was something else. She would imagine he had done it on purpose, to hurt her. That he had known she was already pulling back hard, and all he had to do to destroy her was let go.

Because it *did* destroy her. She went back so fast and so violently her teeth came together around her tongue. All the breath whammed out of her body when she hit the floor, like an echo of their last encounter on that dark road. Back then, she had thought she was dying because of the sudden constriction in her chest. The brief inability to take a single breath, as though maybe the truck had crushed her lungs.

Followed by the blinding pain as her head connected with something hard. Back then it had been jagged rocks on the way down. This time it was a gleaming parquet floor—not quite as vicious, true, but the effect was almost the same. The world was already narrowing down to a tiny dot, despite her best efforts at holding on. She clawed at the sides of unconsciousness, desperate not to go out like this again.

What if she didn't wake up this time?

He would be the last thing she saw before darkness claimed her. Those soft-focus eyes and that twisted smile; his voice like a reminder of everything she hated. "Letty," he said as he leaned down, the note of triumph in it so unmistakable she tried to scream. She tried to kick and spit and rage against the injustice of it, but it was already too late. The dot became a pinprick, then finally dissolved altogether.

Chapter 2

Letty's first thought was that she had died and gone to hell. How else to explain the smell of disinfectant and the feel of what seemed to be hospital bedsheets? Only Satan would force her to endure all of that again. The pain and the endless procession of unsympathetic nurses. Discovering each of her injuries in a slow and debilitating procession, culminating in the scar around her ear and the stripe they had shaved to get to the fracture.

Though when she put one shaking hand up, she could still feel all of her curly hair. She ran her fingers through it, frantically checking and checking for bare patches.

There was nothing.

Toward the back of her head she could make out a truly magnificent lump, and it ached under the slightest touch. But that was all. She wasn't even sure if she had a concussion, considering how easy it was to sit up. The world did not spin; she had no urge to vomit.

And this wasn't a hospital. It was the campus med room they'd shown everyone at orientation, with the posters advertising help lines dotting the walls. One of them to her left was the friendliest warning she'd ever seen about contracting VD. Another suggested she come along for hugs and cookies. It was actually quite warm and inviting.

Until she turned and saw him.

He just sat in the sagging plastic chair by her bed, like a kindly relative or a really good friend. Even more astonishing, he had apparently been there so long he had fallen asleep. His eyes were closed and his chin was almost touching his chest, so unself-conscious about it she could almost believe it was true.

If it were not for the years of pure torment.

And the letting go on purpose.

He had definitely let go on purpose, which meant only one thing. He was here to do something equally terrible, like take a picture of her bare ass. After all, her ass *was* almost bare. Someone had taken off her jeans and sweater at some point, and she could feel air against a lot of skin. She pushed the sheets down—slowly and silently—and saw that even her socks were missing.

Though finding them in the cupboard by the bed barely helped her at all. In order to put them on she would have to take things off. In front of Tate. Who was probably watching her through slitted eyelids. Hell, even if he wasn't, the whole thing was a huge pain in the ass. She was going to have to be silent and super fast to avoid waking him up. But at the best of times she was neither.

And these were *not* the best of times. The ancient mattress creaked when she inched toward the edge. Every attempt at sliding her legs off the bed made the cheap sheets rustle and crackle like a brown paper bag. Even her feet against the tile seemed loud.

Anything more and he was bound to wake up—it seemed like a miracle that he hadn't already. She was breathing too hard. She must have whimpered, at least, yet when she checked he looked exactly as he had a minute ago. Chin on his chest, eyes closed, oblivious.

And he stayed that way as she tugged on the rest of her clothes.

First the jeans, then her socks, and finally her sweater.

Good as new.

Apart from the sense that all of this was a mistake. She had been knocked unconscious. It was entirely possible a doctor was supposed to see her. Staying seemed like the wisest course of action—or at least it did whenever she couldn't see Tate. When she glanced back at him she didn't feel troubled about fleeing.

She only felt a rising balloon of relief inside her.

This time, she had escaped him for sure. He was actually snoring as she slipped through the door and out into the hallway. There was no chance in hell that he would stop her.

No chance at all.

No way.

Impossible.

“Hey, Letty!”

Her hand was actually on the handle of the nearest fire exit when she heard Tate's voice. The door was open a crack, and she could see daylight beyond. A little more and she would have been through. She could have pretended him hollering at her was some guys playing Frisbee just beyond them. Just could have kept going until she was free and clear.

She almost did anyway. The temptation to was so all consuming it seemed to burn as it went through her. It made her eyes sting—though that might have been something else. Four years of frustrated, bitter rage pushing against them, maybe. Certainly it was something she had to contain before she could turn around and take him in.

But years of practice had made her good at it. She gritted her teeth and looked up at the ceiling for a good thirty seconds, and the sensation passed. By the time she faced him her eyes were as dry as they had ever been. Her face was that carefully constructed blank slate, as though he bored her to death.

And she held it, despite the things he had to say.

“That nurse said you were supposed to stay overnight,” Tate told her. “She said you needed to rest—you can’t just run out on serious medical business.”

She thought at first that she had misheard. There was barely an insult in there. He didn’t smirk while he spoke. Plus, what was that whole medical business remark about? He sounded like somebody’s dad.

If somebody’s dad knew absolutely nothing about science.

“So this is what you’re going with,” she said. “Faking weird concern to lure me in.”

“No. No not at all. Who would even do that?”

To his credit, Tate managed to laugh.

The problem was, the laugh had no substance. It puffed out of him like a dying breath.

“You would. You actually *did* do that.”

“Name one time I did that.”

“How about the time I was carrying textbooks for Merriman and you asked if I was sure I could manage? Then you threw them in the fountain outside the science block.”

“Oh, okay, yeah, my bad. But apart from that one tiny incident of book destruction—of books I might add that were not even yours.”

“Then there was the time the books *were* mine,” Letty continued. “Only you thought a fitting place for them was a toilet in the boys’ bathroom. Then when they wouldn’t flush you doused them in lighter fluid and set them alight.”

“I...damn it, all right. But that was years ago; you can’t hold something against me I did as a kid. But this is different—you could go back to your dorm and start bleeding out of your eyeballs. I have, like, a civic responsibility to make sure you don’t.”

“Are you serious with this shit? Who do you think I am, exactly—some kid fresh off the school bus? I know you, Tate. I know you better than your own mother probably does. I had to know you to survive high school. Do you get that?” She shook her head, surprised to find something like weary amusement in her voice. “Civic responsibility? Jesus, if you had even an ounce of anything like that in your whole meaty body you would have checked on me in the hospital last time.”

He started to answer, but something seemed to pull him up short. More than that, in fact. It robbed his features of all animation. It took his half smile and the pretend concern, and replaced it with an odd kind of closedness. Like his face was a book and someone had just slammed it shut.

“I really didn’t think you’d want me around last time.”

“But you think I want you around *now*? After you drop me on my ass?”

“Wait, *what*?” he said. “Now hold on a second, that is not what happened at *all*.”

“Please tell me you’re not going to try gaslighting me over a fucking head injury. You grabbed me and then let go right when you knew I would slam into the ground.”

“Jesus Christ, Letty I don’t even know what gaslight *means*. I’ve never known what it means. You say these things and I’ve no fucking clue what you’re talking about.”

Tate stopped there and took a breath in a way that seemed oddly familiar. Then she realized: it was like her glancing up at the ceiling to stop the tears, even though he didn’t appear tearful at all. She wasn’t sure Tate *could* cry, if she was being honest. So what was this? What exactly did he need to contain?

Anger, she thought—and it was true, his voice was softer when he started talking again.

But there was something else there, too. A kind of desperation that made her feel odd.

“And that is fine. That is really cool that you’re super smart and know about this shit,” Tate said. “Shit that I probably *did* do once without, like,

being aware of it. But I swear to god I'm not doing it here. I swear to you that I just wanted to stop you falling, and then you looked scared as fuck and like you wanted to kill me and so I just backed off. I just backed off, that's all."

He drew a line under his words with his hands, firm and sure, and when he did that odd feeling tripled. It made her want to slide down the double doors and onto the floor, for reasons she couldn't grasp. It had to be her not-that-serious-injury, but it didn't feel like it. It felt like something else. Like she believed him.

And she couldn't allow that.

"Then keep doing it. Back all the way off until we can barely see each other. You understand me, Tate? If you really are concerned, just leave me alone."

Chapter 3

It took a full three days to accept that Tate had listened. Three days of peering around corners before going in that direction. Three days of anxious messages from her dad, asking her ridiculous things like did she want him to call the police? Three days of wondering if she *should* call the police, even though there was nothing to tell them. He wasn't doing any of the old bullshit he used to do—or at least none that warranted her dad getting as upset as he had the last time. She could almost see the four worry lines across his forehead in every text; the way he'd seemed to age overnight.

She didn't want him to get any older.

So she messaged back that everything was fine, and only afterward realized that it was. Tate was just never anywhere, not even in places he was supposed to be. She braced herself for Harrison's next class, but had no need to. When she dared to look in that direction, someone else sat in his seat. And a cursory glance around told her that he had not simply chosen another one. There were no six-foot-five-inch guys in the lecture hall, busy being too massive for their chairs.

If anything, everyone else was more of a problem. Halfway through a PowerPoint presentation on gender bias in modern cinema, she got that creeping, self-conscious feeling. The one that used to come over her whenever she studied too hard in front of Tate in some class he didn't care for. Usually it meant that he was watching her with that bright spark of amusement in the corners of his eyes, just waiting to make trouble.

But when she scanned the lecture hall—with her head still down to appear as inconspicuous as possible—there were no signs of him. He hadn't slipped in as her attention waned.

It was other people. A girl seven rows down was looking directly at her with the oddest expression on her face. It seemed like curiosity, but it was lacking something. Some vital component that made it make sense—and after a second she realized what it was. The girl looked happy, not angry or cruel or annoyed. Her eyes were bright, but not with evil intent. And then just to cap it off, she smiled.

She smiled and waved.

What the hell was a complete stranger doing smiling and waving? She checked behind herself to see if the girl was communicating to someone

else, but the only thing back there was a wall and a window, several feet above her head. It was such a certain thing she simply had to wave back, in case she was just knee-jerk rejecting a potential friend. A good friend, the kind she'd hoped to find here.

And then there was the other girl. The even more popular and pretty one, who was bizarrely being about a hundred times less subtle than the first. This girl had turned all the way around in her chair, and was actually whispering, "Hey," over and over at her. It was so bad that her friend—who had quite possibly the most amazing haircut Letty had ever seen, like a stripe of animal fur down the center of her head—was tugging at her arm and kind of telling her to knock it off.

"Sam, leave the poor girl alone," Hair Stripe hissed.

Yet even that seemed without cruelty. It still made her skin prickle all over, and she had the strongest urge to scratch the scar around her ear. But she couldn't just ignore them. She even found herself leaning forward after a moment, to better hear what the girl was saying.

But Professor Harrison got in the way.

"Ladies, I am aware of how poorly I compete with the topic du jour. But if we could just leave that aside until the end? Especially in light of the fact that you two are not supposed to be here at all."

The two in question immediately slid back into their seats and paid attention. But though Letty tried to do the same, she found herself struggling.

Once they were out in the hall, they kept on looking at her. Blondie's face was so wildly animated it was scary.

"So you're dating the hunk, right? You have *got* to be dating him."

"The...what? Dating...who?"

"The hunk! You know, the *hunk*."

Blondie made circles in the air with her hands, but it didn't help.

Nor did her friend's expression—more reasonable but no less convinced that she should understand.

"I have literally no idea what you're talking about. I can, however, assure you that I've never dated anyone that could even remotely deserve the label *hunk*."

"Soooo...he just carried you because he's like...a super awesome Disney prince?"

“Someone *carried* me? Carried me where?”

She was laughing as she said it, though the laugh soon died.

Now the more reasonable one was frowning, and when she whispered, Letty caught some of the words.

They sounded a lot like *she doesn't know*.

“He carried you down this hall that we are standing in right now. Everyone practically applauded. Several girls fainted, probably in the hopes that they would be carried, too.” She paused, suddenly as concerned as her friend seemed. “Do you seriously not remember any of this?”

“Sam, I think it’s hard to remember things when you’re unconscious,” the reasonable one said, but Blondie paid no attention. She was intent now on getting to the bottom of this mystery.

“Yeah, but he must have told you. Didn’t he tell you that he swept you into his manly, macho arms and whisked you away to the campus med room?”

“No. Nobody told me that.”

Her own voice was flat, when it came out.

Flat and cold and strange.

But Blondie didn’t seem to notice.

“Oh my god. Searing hot *and* modest. I think I have my dream man.” She paused again, but this time it was purely down to the elbow her friend gave her. It was hard and insistent, and it seemed to bring Blondie back to something like sense. “Unless you guys *are* a thing?”

“I don’t even know who you mean.”

She shook her head, to make it stick.

But a sick feeling was starting to thread through her stomach.

“You know, he’s the wrestling champ Coach Parker is completely in love with. Can’t miss him—he’s like seven feet tall and super beefy. Just really, really beefy.”

“Sam, I think we should just leave this nice girl alone, okay?”

“No, no, hold up—his name is something like...Trent.”

“You don’t even know his name? Sam, seriously let’s just go.”

“A guy like that doesn’t *need* a name. He has to learn to respond to desperate grunts.”

“It’s Tate,” Letty said, but they didn’t hear her.

Probably because she sounded like she was dying when she spoke.

“I think it might have been Taylor. He looks like a Taylor.”

“I don’t think it’s Taylor. Maybe Topher?”

“Topher is not a name, Bea. Come on, where is your head?”

“It is a name I—”

“His name is Tate; you mean Tate. Tate Sullivan.”

They both turned and looked at her, half surprised.

Half so gleeful it sort of made her sick.

“Yeah that’s the guy! So you *do* know him.”

“No, I don’t. I really don’t at all.”

She was glad that she sounded so sure when she said it.

Only they didn’t seem to think she sounded sure at all. Blondie leaned and put a hand on her arm, her face a picture of completely sincere concern.

“Hey, are you okay?” she asked, so kindly Letty couldn’t speak for a moment. Her throat was apparently full of very emotional bees. Her head was spinning and her stomach had clenched into a knot, so it seemed like the best thing was to just get out of there.

She needed to get out of there, *now*.

“Yeah, I’m fine, I just have to go. I left the curling iron on while needing to wash my hair just as my favorite show is starting. See you around, okay?”

Chapter 4

Letty decided the best course of action was just to pretend none of this was happening. But it was hard to, with ten girls a day coming up to her to ask if she was dating her mortal enemy. Most of them were lovely about it, but lovely was not the point. She came to this school to get away from Tate, and now he was everywhere.

He was in their starry eyes and behind almost every whisper she heard. She had to endure a million iPhones being thrust at her so she could see herself being carried in his massive arms and hear comments like *it looks as if it hardly took him any effort*. And she couldn't disagree, either.

It was true. His biceps were barely tensed. She looked tiny and featherlight cradled between them, like some kind of doll of herself.

Though that wasn't what stuck with her.

What stuck was the video she saw on her dorm neighbor's phone.

Her name was Lydia, and she had gloriously thick bangs and eyes that seemed to house seventeen souls. She had been the only one on her floor who offered to help when Letty moved in, and the only one who had struck up a conversation. As the girl approached her, Letty even remembered the substance of their conversation. "*Man, you really have to be good at trusting complete strangers to get by at college, huh,*" she had said, as if she'd known exactly what made Letty jerk back when she'd grabbed for the box full of knickknacks in Letty's hands. She'd somehow seen the sharp spines that covered Letty's skin and understood that a sudden move from a new acquaintance made them stand up.

It clearly was the reason she didn't just thrust her phone at Letty.

And probably explained why the video she'd shot was different.

This one didn't focus on his arms, or her feet, or anything to do with the physical act of carrying. It instead focused on Tate's right hand—the one that was carefully curled over her head, as though it were possibly made of glass on the verge of breaking.

And on his face.

She couldn't look away from his face, tiny and blurry but still noticeably not right.

"I just thought maybe you'd want to see this version. If you know what I mean?"

“It...it just looks like all the others.”

“You sure?”

Lydia raised an eyebrow.

Letty did her best to ignore it.

“Yeah. Positive. He was just...being a good Samaritan. That’s all there is to it, I swear to god. We aren’t dating—he would never have wanted to date me. So if you’re interested you should totally go for it. I mean, you’re super hot so I can’t see any problem and even if there was I—”

“Are you aware you’re talking really, really fast?”

Not just fast, she thought. Calling it just fast was generous.

Her breath had gotten all high and tight, and every word was hurting her as it escaped. She had to take several breaths before she could answer, and even then it wasn’t right.

“I just heard it then, yes. But even that’s not what you’re thinking. I’m not trying to cover for anything he...he...” She gulped another breath in vain. Lydia was still looking at her with curiosity—of the kind sort, but curiosity all the same. And it was definitely making her jump and stutter and breathe in a completely clumsy way. “He’s just an acquaintance. I knew him in high school.”

“Well, I guess that’s the mystery solved, then.”

“Yeah. Definitely. Nothing more to it.”

“Right.”

She nodded, relieved that she could now safely escape. In fact, she was halfway down the hall to her own room when she heard Lydia speak again. Almost at her door, and through to safety.

Though she was actually glad she hadn’t quite made it, after the words.

“But you know, if you ever wanted to talk about how little there is to it, I’m right next door to you. Tap it in Morse code, if you feel more comfortable doing that. Send me smoke signals from a burned cheesy pita.”

“I will. Thanks.”

“Anytime. College is hard.”

“God yeah, sooooo hard.”

“Guys are even harder. In more ways than one.”

She laughed in response, sudden enough that it startled her. She couldn’t remember the last time she did that while talking to another person. Not so loudly at least, and certainly not as carelessly. It just popped out of her, new

and alien enough that she tried to cut it off. She clamped her teeth around it as she disappeared into her dorm, but the laugh would not be denied.

It filled her tiny room, briefly.

And stayed with her all through the night.

She didn't think about his expression again after the conversation with Lydia. Mainly because Lydia was very good at taking her mind off it. She did things like suggesting they walk to class together, without a single bit of hinting. And when they got there, Lydia sat with her. She pulled the armrest desk up for her and admired her array of pens and laughed about the last lecture when Harrison had said *shit* instead of *sits*.

As though friendship was supposed to be this effortless.

Watching out for the insults hidden in every word was the aberration.

Life could be normal, she thought.

And then she went through the double doors that led to the south-side stairwell, and there he was. Just sitting on the steps that led up to the library, as if lying in wait like he used to. What other reason could he have for being here? Though even as she thought it, she was taking in all the little details that told a different story. He wasn't just sitting on the stairs, primed to leap as soon as the doors opened. He was hunched over something, oblivious to anyone who might come through.

And that something was a notepad. He was writing with all the care and attention of someone who definitely did not think trying hard was for losers. She could see from here how much he had written—his tiny, blockish handwriting smothered page after page, each word so firmly rendered it created a kind of jagged Braille on the other side. In places he had even torn the paper.

But he appeared as oblivious to that as he did to her.

He didn't look up—not even when she started backing away. Usually he seemed to sense when she tried to escape, yet somehow that didn't happen here. He was too intent on his task, to the point where she was able to figure out that they were class notes. He was copying class notes from the page he had clenched in his left hand, occasionally squinting at the even shittier handwriting of the owner before painstakingly transferring it to his own notepad.

Even more astonishing: he sometimes referred to a book Harrison had put on their reading list. That was open on his broad knee, too, just beneath the pad. And when he got to a certain point, he ran a finger underneath a particular line. Like the line was vital.

Like all of this was vital.

It made her wonder seriously terrifying things, like what if he'd always been this creature underneath? Certainly he reacted differently from the Tate she knew when he noticed her presence. He almost jumped up, spilling everything off his lap in the process. Then, when he realized how this looked, he tried to hide it. He snapped the book shut—*The Monstrous-Feminine*, she saw, and tried not to goggle—and flicked the cover of the notepad back over.

But he did it all very poorly. He lost pages; he screwed others up. His bag refused to take everything all at once, and more things spilled all over the ground.

As they had once for her, about a thousand years ago.

Now she was supposed to laugh and say *look at the nerd studying*—only she couldn't bring herself to do it. The words cleaved to the roof of her mouth. Even simpler ones were a struggle, in this brand-new and baffling territory. But she eventually got them out.

"Are you trying to take Harrison's class in this stairwell?"

He took a while to answer her.

So long, in fact, that she could see the lie before he said it.

"I have no idea what would give you that impression."

"The...fact...that you...are clearly trying to take his class in this stairwell. Those are the hipster kid's notes, right? I see his name there—Bartleby Winnamaker."

He immediately tried to cover the ornate writing at the top of the page with his thumb, but the damage was done. And he knew it. He even rolled his eyes in that way she remembered from various classes, when he mispronounced a word or answered a question wrong.

Come on Tate, it seemed to say. *Get it together.*

And then he tried to do just that.

"Maybe he was just helping me out. Maybe my eyesight is super bad and I need someone to see the shit Harrison scribbles on the board in his crazy small handwriting."

“I think your problem might be that you’re trying to read his crazy small handwriting from outside the lecture hall. Maybe even farther than that—you’re never there when I come out.”

“You said you wanted me to *not* be there when you come out.”

“That isn’t how I remember our conversation at all.”

“Oh holy fucking fuck, am I lamplighting you again? How do I keep doing this?” He threw up his hands, while she did her best not to roll her eyes and correct him. *Gaslighting*, she wanted to say. *The term was gaslighting*. “Look, okay I know you did not exactly say that—you said stay away. So I have stayed away. I have stayed as far away as I can humanly get without slipping into another dimension.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to say something snarky back. Something like *I wish you would slip into another dimension*. It was what she would have told him back then, after all. Yet when she went to, something happened. The words caught in her throat. They got all tangled up in that eye roll he just did and his expression now: like someone trying to scale the sides of a glass building after a sudden rainfall.

And his expression then, in the video when he had carried her. The one that she had refused to believe was concern, but had to now. Everything he was doing just kept bludgeoning that realization in harder, until her insides ached with it. Her mind spun with it. Much longer and she was going to vomit.

“When I said that I wanted you to stay away, I definitely didn’t mean that you should miss lectures to accomplish that. At the very least I didn’t mean that you should try to take down information from those lectures in a stairwell.”

“There’s nowhere else I can go. Bartleby won’t let me take his notes back to my dorm building because they come back smelling like pot.”

“Well, there is this thing called a library. And last time I checked that place was drug free.”

“Ha fucking ha. I can’t do this in the library.”

“Because that’s where nerds go?”

“No because that’s where *you* go. Like all-the-time-constantly-twenty-four-seven in the library. If I go there I might as well turn up for class.”

“Oh my god, you *should* turn up for class. You *have* to turn up for class. I cannot be the reason that you, Tate Sullivan, are barred from studying that

you actually want to do. That would be even weirder and more gross than if you tried to take a picture of my naked butt when I was in the med room.”

“Jesus, do you honestly think I would do that?” He paused, long and hard enough that she knew he was figuring it out. His expression shifted from amusement to confusion to something that came very close to horror, in under thirty seconds. “Wait. Did you think that was the reason I was there?”

“It did cross my mind once or twice.”

Or a few thousand times.

“Letty, I was there because—”

“I know why, okay.” She closed her eyes for just a second, remembering that look on his face as he carried her. The concern all over his features, which she still couldn’t quite accept. “But maybe we could just...not go into that. Ever. Just never talk about it.”

“Hey, if you’re willing to talk to me at all we can do it about anything you want.”

She fell silent then, though not through choice. All the oxygen seemed to have left the stairwell, and it took her words with it. The only thing she could do was stand there, staring at him, but even that was a problem. It gave her too much time to take in a million new things about him—like how soft his gaze suddenly was and how serious he seemed. That smirking humor she had come to know so well was gone, replaced by some other weird thing she didn’t recognize.

She would have called it sincerity on anyone else.

But she couldn’t with him. Not now, not ever.

“I think this might be pretty much my limit.”

“Okay, well...that’s fine, too, I guess.”

“All right. So...goodbye then.”

“Yeah. Goodbye,” he said.

But he didn’t stand up.

He just kept on making way too much eye contact.

Heavy, hypnotic eye contact that she had to get away from right now.

“You don’t seem to be going anywhere.”

“Neither are you.”

“Because I need to go up.”

She pointed, and in response he shuffled to the left.

Not that it helped particularly.

“Do you really expect me to squeeze through that tiny amount of space you just opened up? I doubt I could get a toe in there, and am pretty sure you know that.”

“Don’t know anything of the kind. I’m betting you could slip through, no problem.”

“Careful, Tate. That kind of sounded like a compliment.”

“If it’s a compliment, then how come you’re backing away?”

She honestly hadn’t realized she was. It just seemed to be a reflex when it came to him. He started talking, and suddenly she was doing her best to escape. In fact, she was sort of surprised she hadn’t already. The fire escape was barely three feet behind her. He was still sitting on the step, and didn’t seem inclined to move.

Running would have been easy, yet still she stayed.

And talked. God, they were doing a lot of talking. More than they’d ever done, and most of it so lighthearted she couldn’t wrap her head around the words.

They made her want to laugh and puke at the same time.

“I’m not backing away. I’m just naturally leaving in an ordinary manner.”

“Call me crazy, but I’m pretty sure you usually leave facing forward.”

“I was just about to turn. You didn’t give me a chance.”

“So...do you need like total silence or...?”

“That would be a start.”

“And maybe I should close my eyes.”

“Sure, why not?” she said.

Though she didn’t expect him to really do it.

Or to stay that way for what seemed like forever.

She almost took a step toward him before she remembered who he was and what he was capable of.

“Like I’m going to fall for that old trick.”

“Closing your eyes is a trick now?”

“You’ll open them just as I think I’m out. And then...grab my legs.”

“I’m not some creature hiding under your bed. At least let me grab your shoulder.”

“And then what? Let me guess: you decapitate me.”

“I was thinking more like...patting you reassuringly. Though I guess I could pat too hard with my giant meat hooks and accidentally dislodge your head. How well is it attached to your neck?”

“Hard to tell. Getting hit by a truck probably loosened it a little.”

Silence fell after that, though it wasn't the sort she was used to. There was no sense of waiting for some terrible punch line, no hint of mischief in his eyes. If anything, his eyes had gotten softer—as though those words had hit him there and left a bruise.

“Letty, I—” he started.

But she cut him off before he could finish.

“I know you carried me.”

“I wasn't keeping that a secret from you, if that's what you mean.”

“No, that wasn't what I meant. I meant...you know. Gratitude.”

“You don't have to be grateful. In fact, maybe don't ever be grateful because I don't know how to deal with it. Let's just say I'm really in the red, and it's going to take me like twenty good deeds before I get anywhere close to the black. Then you can say thank you.”

“I think by the time you got to deed twenty I would be long dead. This all on its own is making my palms sweat so much I think I might be getting dehydrated.”

His laugh was an electric shock to her already jangled nerves—too loud and brash and scary.

She reacted to it before she'd even let it sink in.

“Why are you laughing? No, stop, okay, I take that back. I take it back I'm not nervous at all.”

“Letty, no no—”

“I was just trying to see what you would do if I showed you some weakness, and now you've revealed your true intentions I can safely murder you.”

“Honey, no, you've got the wrong idea. I was laughing because it was *funny*.”

“Funny as in what? Like funny looking?”

“Come on. You know you're witty as fuck. I know you know that. No matter what happened you could never hold that part of yourself back.”

“Yeah. Guess I should have kept quiet and spared myself, huh?”

“That’s not what I meant. I meant that you were always at your very best when I was at my worst.”

She heard something crack and splinter the second he got to that last word. But it took her a second to realize the cracking and splintering came from somewhere inside herself. That thick layer of granite she had carved around her heart had just developed a fissure, and things were starting to leak through.

Bad things, like hopes and dreams.

And in a second he was going to notice. Her eyes were already starting to sting. Every breath she took seemed too fast and too shaky. But even more horrendous: there were words pushing against her lips. Stunned, disbelieving, desperately thankful words.

Words she could never, ever trust him with.

“I have to...I just remembered I promised a friend I would eat a grilled cheese sandwich with her. It’s a whole thing. That I need to do. Right now.”

“Sure, okay. I guess I’ll see you later.”

“Later I will be busy. I will always be busy.”

“Cool, I get it. Busy.”

“Goodbye, Tate.”

“Goodbye, Letty,” he said.

Though she wished to god he hadn’t.

It left her thinking about how wistful he had sounded for the rest of the day.

Chapter 5

They sat cross-legged on the mostly unmade bed in Lydia's dorm room—the same shoebox shape as her own, only three times messier and twice as cool—when she first confessed. It just jolted out of her in the middle of easy conversation about some trashy TV show, like a gunshot in the middle of a party.

She expected blood and screaming and traumatized silences to follow.

Instead, Lydia barely finished chewing her mouthful of grilled cheese before she replied.

“He bullied you. He was your bully. That guy who carried you. Was your bully.”

And man, the relieved breath she let out when Lydia was done. It felt as though she was doing it for the first time. Like she had never really breathed before, and now finally, at almost twenty-one, she was allowed.

“I know, it feels kind of like I hallucinated it all, too. But I swear to god, I didn't.”

“Oh I believe you. I just wanted to super emphasize how shocking it is.”

“I know right? Like really, really shocking.”

“They could make a Lifetime movie out of you.”

“*My Deadly Bully.*”

“*A Bully Among Us.*”

“*Fatal Bullying.*”

They were laughing as they went through the titles, but it was the silence that followed that Letty appreciated most. It was the equivalent of settling into an overstuffed leather seat after three hundred miles of hiking. Everything about it was comfortable—even the way Lydia watched her steadily as she took another bite of her sandwich.

It was a patiently waiting kind of look, she knew.

Not a *stop eating, you fatty* kind of look.

“So what did he do to you? Like insults and things?”

“He sat in the passenger seat while his friend rammed me off a cliff with his truck.”

This time, the silence was a little less comfortable. For a start, Lydia's mouth was open through it. And then there were her eyes: suddenly pitch-black and as wide as moons.

“Okay, just so you know, never let your new buddy make stupid Lifetime movie jokes when all the while that is a thing that happened to you. Holy shit, Letty, I’m so sorry.”

“No, to be honest it’s better if you keep them coming. That way I don’t have to think about it too much.”

“How about we call your movie *Attempted Murder*.”

“It wasn’t attempted murder,” she said, though she had no idea why she did. To make it seem more palatable to her friend? Or to make her conversations with Tate more palatable, in light of it? Neither seemed acceptable. “Or at least, that’s what the cops said, after Jason told them it was an accident.”

“Jesus. They just bought it? He says my foot slipped and they believe him?”

“He was a high school wrestling champ. So was Tate.”

That darkness in Lydia’s eyes shifted then. Became something sharper somehow, yet no less comforting. Clearly, Lydia would never tell her that she had to stop doing whatever she was doing that goaded Tate. There would be no calls to the college’s office to talk about the transfer she should get, instead of the one he should. Just like that, someone who was not her family was on her side.

“That is fucked up. That fuck is so upped it might never get down again.”

The laugh startled Lydia when it came out. But it startled Letty more. It wasn’t even brittle or bitter—it was full-bodied and thrumming with life. Like the sort of laugh she heard other people sharing all the time.

And when Lydia tentatively joined in it was just...

It was like slipping into a suit of normality.

“Man, you are really easy to talk to—I feel about a thousand pounds lighter. Mentally, that is. Physically I just finished off half a pound of premium cheddar.”

“I think a half pound of premium cheddar is warranted, to be honest.”

“I don’t know. I just don’t feel so bad about it lately.”

“Maybe it’s just that you have some distance now.”

She shook her head and came very close to doing something normal friends did.

Like squeezing Lydia’s hand. Or giving her a hug.

“No, it’s definitely that you are super awesome. I mean, I have zero distance from it right now. The accomplice to the attempted murder just sort of apologized to me in a stairwell,” she said, half laughing over it as she did. So it came as a shock when the half laugh suddenly tipped over into something else. One second it was light and happy, the next it sounded almost like a sob.

And then it sounded *a lot* like a sob.

A big, wrenching one that she had to cover her mouth to contain.

Much to Lydia’s consternation.

“Oh my god, Letty, okay. Okay, babe, it’s okay. It’s fine...hey, it’s going to be fine,” she said, and then that hug was suddenly happening. Arms were surrounding her. Strong, insistent arms, squeezing tight without having to ask. When Letty finally managed words, she had to do it from within the tight swaddling of the greatest embrace she’d ever experienced.

And they were better for it.

More honest. More heartfelt.

“No, no, you don’t understand. I’m not crying because I’m afraid or sad. I keep trying to be, but then I think about how much I longed for and dreamed of getting some kind of sorry, how hard I knew that it would never come because in dismal reality it never does, and then he’s just here and he says that he’s in the red. He says he’s in the red and that it’s going to take tons of good deeds to put him in the black.” Another sob snuck out, wet and rough against Lydia’s neat little red sweater. Not that Lydia minded. She was busy stroking her hair and helping her get the rest out. “He told me that I’m at my very best, when he was at his worst. Who says something like that in real life? No one says that in real life.”

“That *is* true. And it’s definitely awesome. Way better than a Lifetime movie. But to be clear on this, no matter how much he contravenes the laws of dismal reality, you don’t have to forgive him,” Lydia said.

“I know. I know.”

“He didn’t just sit by and let that dude do that to you. He stole your self-esteem.”

“That is a really great way to put it,” Letty said. “How did you know how to put it so great?”

“I know because when I offered to help you move in you looked at me like you were just waiting for the punch line to a joke I wasn’t telling. And

that's what bullies do to people. They don't just hurt you or make you feel bad for five minutes in high school. They create the backbone of every friendship you try to have from then on. They change your life forever."

"Oh my god that's an even better way to put it. They should just give you that psych degree right now. Freud should come back from beyond the grave to hand it to you," she said, and now the laugh they shared was easier. Less fraught, and more relaxed.

It didn't even change when Lydia said she was funny.

And her thoughts were suddenly all Tate, saying the same thing.

Chapter 6

She wasn't looking for him specifically among the crowd flooding into the lecture hall. But something did happen inside her when she spotted him. A kind of lightness, or a lifting of some heavy part of herself. He had listened to her. Everything was settling into a nice, normal routine. They were going about their daily lives in an ordinary manner, and they were doing it completely separately.

He sat in the fourth row like the first time, and she sat at the back. Only now there was no rising sense of dread. She didn't keep her hand to herself when Harrison asked a question. She answered, without the background sound of someone snickering. And even when it felt as though he was looking at her, when she snuck a glance at him she only ever saw the back of his head.

He bent low over his notes, and his head occasionally lifted a little as he really listened to whatever Harrison was saying. Once or twice she actually caught him nodding, or doing a little staggered-looking half laugh over some ridiculous concept.

As if he loved it all now.

He loved it so much he was sometimes at the lectures early. She would come in with Lydia, still giggling over something ridiculous, and get the faint prickle that told her he was already there. Only now when it happened it didn't make her want to cover herself up, or run and hide. There was nothing to hide from.

Everything was going to be super cool and totally fine from here on in.

Or it would have been, if it were not for the group project. The one that she was so excited for that she didn't process it when Harrison started reading out the names. She would be working with Lydia—that was a given. They were going to watch ridiculously filthy movies together and laugh about bobbing butts and ogle Ewan McGregor's penis.

And then she heard his name.

Followed by hers.

Distantly, like in a dream of being in class.

In a second she would realize she was naked—or worse.

“Miss Carmichael, do you have a problem with that assignment?”

Everyone was looking at her now. No—not just looking. *Examining*, as though she had become a new and baffling species. The girl who was not excited about being carried by Tate Sullivan. The creature who seemed horrified at the prospect of working with him. It made it difficult to do anything at all, even with Lydia urging her to say *yes, yes I do have a fucking problem*.

Though she still didn't expect the shake of her head to happen. Just one little accidental shake of her head and that was it. Harrison moved on to his next victim, leaving her in something she once had a nightmare about in ninth grade. Working with Tate. On a semester-long project.

About *sex in cinema*.

"Don't worry, we can fix this. Just go to his office and talk to him privately about it. He would have to be Satan himself to not understand," she heard Lydia whisper.

But the words seemed even further away than her name had when Harrison read it out.

"Right. Right. Yeah. You're right."

"I can come with you if you want."

"No, that's okay. That's fine."

"Are you sure? You look like you've been punched. In the face. With a small nuclear blast."

"I'm sure," she said, but soon came to regret that firmness in her voice. The steady nod that told Lydia it was okay for her to go in a different direction once they were outside. It only meant that she was on her own when she got to the tiny hallway outside Harrison's door.

And saw that Tate was already waiting.

Of course he was—he probably had the same concerns as her. No matter how sorry he was or what he thought of being in the red and being wrong, he would never want to work in close quarters with her for the entire semester. In fact, him being sorry likely made the situation seem worse to him. Most likely he had calculated all the awkward conversations they would have to have and how far apart they would have to stand to keep her comfortable, and found it as unbearable as she did.

Even though his expression seemed to say something else.

Oh god. His expression was saying something else.

Then he held up his hands, as though to calm her.

And she knew.

“All right, Letty, I know that you’re probably thinking it’s way better if you do this project with that gal pal of yours, but wait, okay? I got reasons why this is gonna be fine.”

“Is that seriously why you’re here? To *stop* me asking Harrison to switch us?”

“Well...no. Not stop you exactly. Stop is a really strong word.”

“While I’m glad you’ve learned that—” she said, her voice briefly catching when she saw his wince. *He winced*, her mind hissed, before she forced herself to finish. “I still think it covers what’s happening here.”

“I just wanted to talk to you about it for a second. Just, like, hear me out.”

“I want to. I really do. But come on. You know I wasn’t born yesterday. This has all the hallmarks of some kind of trap or prank or joke at my expense.”

“How could it *possibly* be a trap or prank? He put people together based on...I don’t even know what he put people together based on. But it couldn’t have had anything to do with me.”

She searched his face, looking for the lie. Waiting for him to show some hint of bullshit, beneath those too-kind eyes and his spread hands and the obvious logic of what he was saying.

Only there was nothing, nothing, nothing.

And it made no difference at all.

“Okay, I buy that. I do. Yet the fact still remains: I cannot do a project with you. Ever. You have to know that doing anything like that is completely impossible for me. Right?”

“I was just thinking that maybe...maybe you could give it a chance. You know, now that we’re on speaking terms and everything is almost cool between us.”

“You think everything is cool between us?”

“Well, maybe not cool exactly. More like...okay.”

“Still need to dial it back a notch, chief.”

“Reasonable? Not bad? Kind of semidecent?”

“That last one is getting close.”

He sighed, shoulders sagging.

Relenting, she thought. *He’s actually relenting.*

“Fine, we are a fucking disaster.”

“Now you’re getting the idea,” she said.

“But I figure we can work on it.”

“By doing a project on sex in the cinema together?”

“Well,” he said. “When you put it like that it sounds dumb.”

“There’s no other way to put it! That is literally what you’re suggesting.”

“Yeah, I get that. I just...want to not get that. I want it to be easier or better or just not the way this is.”

“That could have been my daily prayer in high school, Tate.”

He didn’t react the way she expected to, with more weird arguing.

He just closed his eyes.

He closed them like someone had just told him his family had been in a fatal accident.

“I wish I could go back and start over again. More than wish—I would give everything I have to start over again. The wrestling, this scholarship, every party I ever went to and every fun thing I ever did. And you can choose to not believe me about that, but—”

“I believe you.”

“You do?”

“I’m as surprised as you are, but yeah.”

“Then why does this have to be such a big deal?”

She thought of Lydia saying *attempted murder*.

The terror that used to flood her when he walked down the hall.

That ever-present sensation of a grille barreling into her body.

“Because understanding that someone is truly sorry and wanting to spend huge amounts of time with them are two different things. I might see that you mean this, and know rationally that I can almost sort of trust you. Maybe I even want it to be that easy, too. But your face is the one I had nightmares about for two years. Your smile doesn’t seem happy to me. I associate it with cruelty.” She shook her head. Glanced away from him so she didn’t have to see the defeated look on his face. “It’s hard for me to look at you, Tate, no matter how much I appreciate what you’ve done here.”

“That was a really well-thought-out and logically sound speech.”

“I know it was. I’m pretty proud.”

“And I have no argument against it.”

“You don’t need one. What you’ve done here...” She gritted her teeth hard and looked at the ceiling. But this time it didn’t stop the tears. They were already welling up by the time she explained the rest to him. “It means a lot. And a million men would never have done the same, I can promise you. I don’t have any messages from Jason on my phone. Patrick Whitworth isn’t going to call anytime soon. It’s just you, a rare fantasy in the middle of all this dismal reality.”

He turned around when she was done. All the way around—and then his arms went up to cover his head and she understood. What she said had affected him, strongly. Maybe more than his words had affected her. It took him twice as long to get it together, and even after he had he couldn’t quite look at her. He just kept staring at the wall and clenching his jaw.

And saying things. Oh yeah, he said things, in a strained, shaky voice.

“I meant what I said, you know. That you are the very best.”

“I know. That’s why I’m going to ask you not to say it again.”

“I can’t stop. I have the opposite of whatever idiocy infected me in high school.”

“What, like insane-need-to-compliment fever?”

“Pretty much, yeah,” he said.

“Well it has taken a raging hold of you, let me tell you.”

“I know it seriously cannot be stopped.”

“I think you have a terminal case.”

“Not a bad way to go, if you ask me,” he said, so soft and sincere it took all her strength to stop herself smiling in response. She could feel her lips trembling. Her cheeks ached with the effort of pinning them down, yet still she knew she was failing. She could see it in his satisfied expression.

And hear it in his words.

“That’s better. Seeing you look happy.”

“I *am* happy,” she said, then added without thinking: “Are you?”

Of course she didn’t mean anything by it. It was just a polite habit, based on interactions with people other than Tate. People who had actual problems, who lived troubled lives, who might answer with a *god no*. Tate would never need to answer with a *god no*. His life was full of endless possibilities and unfettered glory. He could snap his fingers and have a thousand people follow him to the ends of the earth.

He even looked that way, in the dim light of the narrow hallway between these offices.

His hair was the color of caramel, just as it started to burn. Every item of clothing suited him perfectly, from the rich gray-blue of his V-neck to the jeans he'd tucked into his sandy boots. He exuded cool from every pore; he could have stepped off the cover of a magazine.

Yet all she could see was his face as it slowly sagged. It was like watching someone cut the strings that had held a mask in place—a mask she hadn't known he was wearing. She thought that smiling golden god who had tormented her was the real him, but for a second she couldn't be sure. Just for one heart-rattling second, and then the door to the office opened and that glimpse of something else was gone—so fast she would imagine later that it had never existed.

It was just a trick of the light.

Better to focus on the real and the now.

“What can I do for you two today?” Professor Harrison asked.

Then she took a breath and answered.

“Nothing,” she said.

Chapter 7

She agreed to meet him on neutral ground to start with. The only problem was, it didn't really feel like neutral ground once she got there. The quiet of the library was suddenly stifling, and the spot he'd chosen was isolated and closed in. It was right at the back, between two towering shelves that shielded them completely from view. She took a step into that sheltered space and felt as though she'd dropped off the face of the earth.

There wasn't even a window.

There was just the dim quiet, rows of falling-apart books, and Tate Sullivan standing in the corner, like an ogre lying in wait for the easily duped damsel. The only thing that stood in the way was a table and two chairs, neither of which seemed like a good enough defense.

If he sat on one chair and she sat on the other, their knees would probably touch.

Their hands would most likely brush as they handed each other books.

She had to think fast, before any of that happened.

"Okay, before we get started—there have to be some ground rules."

He shrugged one big shoulder.

"I figured as much. Shoot."

"First of all...no sudden moves."

"What kind of sudden moves do you think I'm going to make?"

"Handing me a book when I'm not prepared. Waving a hand in my face if I start to fall asleep. Touching my arm to draw my attention to something."

"What if I just promise to do those things in a way that does not seem murderous?"

"Everything you do seems murderous to me. Literally everything."

"I could try moving super slowly like this," he said.

He actually demonstrated, inching toward a book on the table in such an exaggerated manner it made her want to laugh. Then he pretended to nod in agreement with the book's contents in that exact walking-through-mud way, and that *want to laugh* got even harder.

She had to cover her mouth before she spoke.

"If anything, that doubles the murderousness. It makes you look like the bit in the movie when the bad guy isn't really dead and swings for the

heroine in slow motion.”

“I want to argue here, but that actually makes a lot of sense.”

“I know, right? Thank you,” she said, but he wasn’t ready to give up. After a second of absurdly visible thinking, he snapped his fingers.

“What about if I make a warning sound?”

“Like a truck backing up?”

“Exactly.”

“I fear it will just give me the chance to murder you first.”

“You have absolutely no chance of murdering me first. I mean, you’re half my size and nowhere near as fast,” he said, half laughing as he did.

But once he glanced back at her, the half laughing stopped dead.

He saw her face—most probably tight with sudden alarm—and it was like a switch had been flipped.

“Not that any of that is a bad thing. Or a thing that I’m about to take advantage of. Is that how it just seemed? Like I was explaining exactly how I’m going to kill you?”

“It kind of had a whiff of that, yeah.”

“Okay, so what about this: I show you ways to nail me.”

“You...want to show me ways to...nail you.”

“I’m just going to breeze right by the double meaning of nailed and say yes. Absolutely yes.”

“You can’t be serious. Are you serious?”

“I am. First up, this knee right here?” He pointed to the offending body part, while lifting it a little so she could really see. “You could probably blow on it and put me down.”

“If that were true I reckon you would lose a lot more wrestling matches.”

“I don’t lose matches because no one knows my right leg is basically made of glass and sawdust. Half of wrestling is hiding your weaknesses so your opponent can never exploit them.”

“This must be pretty weird for you then. Describing exactly how I can do just that.”

“Actually it feels more like bursting a blister. Sort of painful but mostly a huge relief.”

“Because you always wanted to tell me how to bust your chops?”

She intended sarcasm, she really did. She intended it hard.

Only he didn't take it that way at all. He answered it straight, and sort of softly.

"Because you're the only person outside the team I've told."

Then carried right on as though it didn't mean anything at all.

"Now...when I lunge I tend to throw everything I got into it. So what you have to do is use it against me. You have to come back at me immediately, while I'm still committed to it."

"Tate, if you lunge at me chances are I'm going to pass out."

"You stood your ground when Jason threatened you with a fucking truck, Letty. If that doesn't make you lose your goddamn mind, nothing on earth will."

He paused then, but not to give her time to process this bombshell. He just needed it to clear the table to one side, so he could get into what she assumed was a lunge position—left leg crooked, right leg back, shoulders forward. While she stood there, heart suddenly thumping slow and thick, mouth too open, eyes too wide. If he glanced at her for even a second he would see how much he'd just affected her. How awesome it was to hear him talk as though she was brave.

But he didn't. Like with the confession about his weaknesses—he just hit it and carried on.

"Okay, so you see how the plane of my thigh is completely open here? You need to use that. You need to use it like a step—just put your foot right up on it."

"I really don't think I can put my foot up on your leg."

"Sure you can. Just give it a shot."

"You say that like you're not seven hundred feet tall. I think I might have to do the splits just to get anywhere close to your thigh," she said, though that wasn't really what bothered her.

It was the thought of what she might reveal when she did it. She was wearing jeans, but the jeans would probably pull taut in places she didn't want them to. Parts of her would crease and form rolls—and then there was her lack of balance. He knew she would wobble.

She *did* wobble when she tentatively attempted it.

She gingerly lifted her right leg, and almost went sprawling.

And there was no relief when she finally planted her foot.

“Now just climb. Get ahold of my shoulder and climb until you’re behind me.”

“Are you sure this is a method of defeating you? It sounds more like you want to help me audition for Cirque du Soleil. In which case I should probably remind you: I have all the coordination of a drunk puppy.”

“Seriously, just try it. It’s way easier than it looks.”

“And you know this how? Had a lot of girls springboard off your thigh?”

“Sure, it’s my favorite thing to do from *The Kama Sutra*.”

She jerked back at that—though not all the way off him.

And curiously, when she spoke her tone seemed to lack any real anger.

“Are you serious Tate? Is this just you goofing off because—”

“No, no, Letty I’m kidding, okay, that was me kidding. There is no thigh springboard in *The Kama Sutra*. I swear to god. That was just a joke come on. Come on, just put your hands on my shoulder.”

“I...okay. Okay, yeah, I can do that.”

She reached forward, tentative as a fawn. Eyes constantly on his face, to judge whether some sudden terrible shock was coming. Yet when it did come, she *still* wasn’t prepared.

“Oh baby, that feels so good,” he said.

Followed by her losing most of the shit she had left.

There was hand waving and jumping back and stern words.

“You fuck face. Fuck you I hate you so much.”

“I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard you say that and know you weren’t being serious. Kind of like hearing it come out half full of laughter.”

“It’s going back to all full of fury in a second.”

“No it’s not; come on. Just go for it.”

“What exactly am I going for here? I mean, once I’m behind you, what then?”

“Then you get me in a headlock.”

“Oh my god this is...this is the most ludicrous self-defense class I’ve ever been a part of.”

“How many have you been to prior to right now?”

“Like twenty. In my head. While watching *Kill Bill*.”

“And you think *this* is ridiculous? In that movie she escapes a coffin by punching it. This is completely reasonable by comparison—I mean all you have to do is grab ahold of my shoulder and haul yourself around me. Just think of it like mountain climbing. My body is a rocky outcrop you need to get past,” he said, which in some ways made it easier. She managed to get her hands on him, at the very least.

It was just keeping her hands on him, once they were there. He was almost impossibly muscular and solid seeming, in a way she wasn't really ready for. It was like grabbing the haunches of some enormous and powerful animal, right before it pounced.

And then there was the heat.

Was it normal for a human being to be this hot? Suddenly she was sweltering—though after a second she realized it wasn't just the contact. It was all the places where no contact was happening at all. His hand was almost but not quite touching her ankle, as though waiting to support her if she lost her balance. But it didn't feel like the safeguard he obviously intended. It felt like it was supercharging the air between them. She could almost make out the imaginary blister it was raising on her skin—but what could she say? Touching me is bad but not touching me is worse? That sounded insane. She would never be able to fully explain it.

So she simply went for it instead. She got hold of his shoulder and hauled herself around just like he had suggested, the move surprisingly easy now that she was motivated. It barely even occurred to her that her breasts brushed his arm and her butt was supremely visible to him for a good few seconds. There was no self-consciousness at all, despite the proximity of her gross body to his fantastic one.

Or at least there wasn't until she had to put her arm around his neck.

Then things got kind of...awkward and sweaty and weird. She had to almost force her arm into position, but even then she couldn't get it to go right against his throat. There was something too unsettling about it—*too violent*, she thought, as she leaned in, even though there wasn't anything violent about it at all. If anything, it seemed more like a bizarre kind of embrace. Any closer and you could probably call it a cuddle.

And *that* was when it clicked.

“You know I think maybe that's enough.”

“You do? But you're not even in the right spot.”

The right spot is too much like intimacy, she thought.

But of course she couldn't say it aloud. She just had to try, pushing her arm uncomfortably deep into the space between his enormous jaw and his throat. Breasts squashing against his broad back, legs too spread around his side, every inch of her bristling and bristling. The urge to back off was a living thing, writhing underneath her skin. It drove her steadily to the point where she had to pull away again.

And she would have, if it wasn't for his laugh.

God she'd never been so grateful to hear him laugh.

"Letty, honestly, is that what you think a headlock is?"

"Well, your head is locked by my arm."

"My head is not locked by your arm. I could blink and get out of this."

"Because you're a goddamn wrestler at the top of his game. You get out of headlocks for a living."

"Okay, fair enough, fair enough, just...here, lemme show you how to ___"

She didn't mean to jerk away when his hands closed over her forearm. It just happened, like feeling pain when someone stabbed you in the gut. She tried to grit her teeth against it, but still it came.

"Easy, easy."

"Sorry, I just—"

"It's okay. It's cool. You want me to just tell you how?"

"No. You can...you can put your hands on me."

"All I'm going to do is just..."

He reached up again, and this time it was better.

Partly because he went real slow.

Mostly because he was weirdly excellent at saying soothing things. That laid-back drawl she used to loathe so much swung effortlessly into a low sweetness. And each time she tensed, he gave her a little more of it. He doled it out like good medicine, until she was barely thinking about the closeness of their bodies at all. Instead, she focused on squeezing right where he told her to squeeze. At first gently, but then as hard as he prompted her to go. *Go on*, he urged, so she did. She tensed the muscles in her arm and tightened one hand around the other, until her heart was pounding and her breath was coming fast.

With the effort, she told herself.

But had no idea if that was true.

It could have been something else that made her bare her teeth and bear down hard. He'd told her to do it, but telling her to do it wasn't a great excuse. Not when she could nearly feel the pulse in his throat and the hand on her arm had slipped away and he was...he was...

Oh, Jesus, he was sagging forward like a puppet with its strings cut.

"Oh my god, Tate. Tate are you going to sleep? Am I putting you to sleep? Jesus Christ no, no, wake up, wake up, this is not cool. It's not cool. I don't like this, wake up now."

She released him and jumped back, but that was a mistake. Now he was falling backward instead of forward. She had to brace herself against his shoulder blades to stop him from crashing to the ground—though it wasn't exactly a successful move. Her feet started sliding as soon as she did it. She just wasn't big or strong enough to hold his enormous bulk, and now he was going to crush her.

This was how she was going to die.

Squashed like a bug beneath Tate's dead body.

"Tate, fuck, I can't hold you up," she said, but still he kept coming.

She was almost on the floor by the time he shook himself awake.

"Yeah," he half slurred as he staggered woozily to his feet. "That's much more like it."

"So knocking you unconscious and getting crushed by your body was the aim?"

"Pretty much. Except, you know, if I attack you, just *let* me crash to the ground."

"I was more afraid for it than I was for you. Probably would have punched a hole to the floor below."

He grinned, not in the least bit offended.

And then he told her why.

"Feel a little more comfortable now?"

She answered yes, because it was true. She did in fact feel more comfortable about being close to him. How could she not, after spending an hour play-wrestling with him in the goofiest possible way she could imagine? Hitler would probably seem like a great guy to hang out with, after that.

Yet when they sat down, it suddenly seemed like a lie.

Their knees bumped beneath the table, and when they did, a strange, slithery tingle ran right up the inside of her thigh. Like the kind of thing that usually happened when she felt embarrassed, only more intense somehow. Sharper, as though humiliation had just stabbed her. She had to spread her legs around the bulk of his to avoid it happening again, but doing so only seemed to make it worse.

The space she opened up between them turned hot and thick—just as it had when his hand came close to touching her. And the longer they sat there, the hotter it got. It burned, in a way that made it impossible to concentrate. She read over the same paragraph thirteen times and still it didn't sink in.

Though she did her best to pretend. She kept her head down, one hand almost shielding her face from view. Occasionally she wrote something in her notepad, sure he wouldn't notice that all of it was an irrelevant mess of song lyrics. He was probably just concentrating on the book he was looking at: *The Female Body in Film*. It had plenty for him to concentrate on, after all. Lots of juicy pictures of babes in tiny panties.

Or so she thought.

“Not really convinced we should write three joint essays and deliver two presentations on the lyrics to ‘You Ruin Me’ by The Veronicas.”

She kept her head down in the wake of his words.

It made answering easier—and more convincing.

“I...that was just a reminder for me for later on.”

“You wanted to remind yourself about some song lyrics?”

“Why would I lie about a thing like that?”

“I have no idea. You tell me, honey.”

“I'll tell you that we are supposed to be studying.”

“I know. Why do you think I'm so concerned?”

“You're not concerned at all. If you were you would be silently writing things down right now.”

“Silently writing things down, got it. No problem, boss.”

He sounded sincere—though it still surprised her when she heard the slide of his pen over paper. Halting at first, but then quicker and more sure. *Soon* all she could hear was frantic scribbling, as though he was really getting into it. He was forgetting her pretend notes and their banter, and just doing the work. She was sure of it.

And then came the note.

The torn-off, jaggedly written note, pushed under her nose.

So what do you like about “You Ruin Me”?

Of course she tried to resist replying. She really did. But he was talking about the song. He knew the song. And he had crossed out and started again so many times. She could see one sentence beneath the scribbles: *it would be really cool if we could talk a little bit.*

Then suddenly her pen was scribbling underneath his question.

I like that you knew it well enough to guess where those words came from.

You think I’m going to be embarrassed about being a fan of The Veronicas?

You used to be embarrassed about stuff like that.

And now I wish I hadn’t wasted so much of my time worrying about what the right thing to wear or say or do was. Look where it got me.

Being forced to study by your mortal enemy?

No. Seeing you call yourself my mortal enemy.

She hesitated there, pen hovering over the space she was supposed to fill. That one underlined word—*call*—going around and around in her head until the urge to write *no* in ten-foot-tall capital letters was enormous. It took almost everything she had to dial it back, and even when she managed to, her writing came out like his. Jagged and too firmly pressed into the paper.

Full of emotion she didn’t intend.

I don’t really feel like I am anymore.

What do you feel like you are?

Someone who needs to study, Tate, come on.

Answer truthfully and we can. I will. Just this one. Please?

Now she did look up, too desperate to see his expression to do anything else. Was he happy? Sad? Full of resentment? Just joking around? She couldn’t tell from his handwriting, or from the words themselves. She needed to see his face, no matter what was written all over it.

And then she did, and wished she hadn’t. He looked agonized, she thought, as if waiting for her answer was a terrible strain on him. Though once she had written it everything shifted again. *I think we are friends*, she wrote, and he simply nodded. He didn’t seem relieved or particularly

pleased. He just carried on with his work then, as though all that other stuff had never happened. And she felt like it hadn't, too.

Until they both got up to go. They shook hands and went off with separate things to work on, her just a little way in front of him. Or at least she thought she was just a little way in front of him. When she glanced behind herself and saw he wasn't there, she went back. She stood in the shade of the shelf she'd just passed, and watched him do something he obviously thought she would never see.

He tore off the paper that held her last words to him, carefully, so carefully.

Then just as carefully folded it up, and slipped that *we are friends* into his wallet.

Chapter 8

The party was so loud the walls of Kappa Phi seemed to shake. At least three different sets of speakers were playing three different sets of songs, and on top of that everyone present was either laughing, yelling, or knocking something over. It was total bedlam.

Yet somehow she still heard Lydia loud and clear above it all.

The question was like a chain saw, buzzing through everything else.

“So how did it go?”

Of course Letty knew why she had asked. Tate was just over by the makeshift bar someone had set up in what was once a living room. They could see him from where they were huddled, in a corner marked COMING HERE WAS THE WORST DECISION OF ALL TIME.

He looked nothing like the guy who had encouraged her to get him in a headlock or told her about his sawdust leg. He seemed twice as big, for a start. And that guilelessness was gone, replaced by the deadly cool he had possessed in high school. His smile was easy and effortless as he talked with some bro she thought might have been on the team with him. There was no hint of uncertainty there at all—this was Tate the top-notch athlete, the popular guy, the one who knocked back beers and thumped some guy’s shoulder.

It was disconcerting enough that she didn’t know how to answer.

The piece of paper he’d slipped into his wallet now seemed like a lie.

Worse: it seemed like a hallucination.

“Oh, you know he was civil. He didn’t do anything awful, if that’s what you mean.”

“Well that’s a start. At the very least I don’t have to murder him now.”

“You would murder him for me?”

She tried to keep the hopefulness from her face.

She knew she failed, however.

“Totally. I know you’d help keep me out of prison.”

“I was just thinking how hard I would cover up your crimes.”

“Bros for life, man,” Lydia said, then held up her plastic cup for Letty to knock hers against.

It was a pleasure to do it—and especially when she considered that word choice. Lydia was making fun of Tate. *She actually had someone to*

make fun of him with.

“I think this might be the best party I’ve ever been to.”

“You know, broseph, I was just thinking the same thing.”

“Even though we are just standing in this corner drinking lemonade?”

“*Especially* because we are just standing in the corner drinking lemonade. I never met anyone who hates beer and just wants to loiter at parties as much as I do. Typically, by this point I’ve been shamed into dancing and throwing up the five Jell-O shots I didn’t want.”

“I didn’t even get as far as the shaming. Usually I’ve escaped by now—and that goes double for anything Tate turned up at. Even seeing him now is giving me the urge to just go.”

“We can if you want, you know.”

“No. No it’s okay. I mean he’s not even paying attention,” she said, though some part of her already knew that wasn’t true. There was something about the way he was behaving that set her nerves on edge. As though his awareness of her was a ghostly presence around him, invisible to everyone else but clear as day to her. He knew she was here. She knew he knew she was here.

Though it still stabbed her in the gut when he glanced her way.

He did it so stealthily, so carefully—it looked like he was just nodding along to his buddy’s chatter, as casual as you please. And then he dipped his head and scratched a thumb over his brow, effectively shading the direction of his gaze from view. Gaze flicking up to her so quick you could almost think it hadn’t happened at all. Certainly Lydia missed it.

But Letty never could.

That light in his eyes was too familiar—shot through with the kind of teasing laughter she had grown to loathe. And then there was the way he narrowed them, as though planning on doing some mischief. He was with his boys now. Mischief was the thing to do. There was no room for brittle brand-new friendships and banter about headlocks here.

She knew there wasn’t, before he even started pushing through the crowd.

“Is he coming over here?”

Lydia sounded as terrified as she felt.

Comforting, in one way.

Awful in another.

“I think he might be coming over, yes.”

“Is he going to pull some shit?”

“Also possible.” She paused, trying to swallow the rising bitterness in her voice. “Goddamn I knew I shouldn’t have worn a dress.”

“Are you kidding? That dress is fucking amazing.”

Lydia was right, too. It was the sort of thing she’d always wanted to wear: the skirt was so full it rolled like a wave when she walked, and the bodice gave her both a waist and a hint of spectacular cleavage. In certain lights she could have passed for a 1950s pinup—though she knew that didn’t matter. What mattered was that the dress ended just above her fat shins. What mattered was that it wasn’t black, or loose, or designed to hide every single body part she had.

“I know. But he won’t think so.”

“Okay, we’ll get ready to defend me in court,” Lydia said.

But the best part was the way she took her hand and squeezed, just as he strolled up.

If she lived to be a thousand, she would never know how to thank Lydia for that.

“Hey, ladies. You enjoying the party?”

“We are. Hoping to continue that trend...Trent, is it?”

Letty wondered if living to a million would be enough time to think up an adequate thank-you. The tone Lydia used alone was enough to send a bolt of glee through her. But then there was the way she purposefully said the wrong name. God, it was beautiful. It was wondrous. She wanted to clap her hands.

Until Tate started talking, and all of her *hate Tate* instincts started to crumble.

“Oh, my bad. Let me properly introduce myself and my friends—I’m Tate, and this tall fucker with the insane eyebrows is Chad, and the even taller dude with the crew cut is Derek. Guys, this is Lydia, I believe...and of course the babe in blue is Letty.”

One of them—Chad, she thought absently, because his eyebrows seemed to consume almost all of his forehead—stuck out his hand.

Only she couldn’t shake it. She couldn’t move at all. Most of her was still waiting for the punch line to a joke that hadn’t been told, and the rest

was too shocked to do anything at all. For a full thirty seconds she just stared at the outstretched hand, unable to believe this was for real.

No insults. No bros being bros. No mean commentary on her dress.

Just an introduction. An introduction she still couldn't respond to.

Lydia had to shake the hand for her. "Nice to meet you," she said, while Letty watched and waited for Tate to make his move. He was still looking at her steadily. Surely something was coming?

There had to be something coming.

"You want to dance?"

Though God, she had not anticipated *that*. And nor had Lydia—she shot her a look almost immediately, one eye enormous and the other a scrunched up slit. It took all of Letty's willpower not to react to it, and just plunge on into whatever insanity this conversation was turning out to be.

"I...you know I would but this music is just..."

"Not exactly The Veronicas, huh?"

"No. I guess...no. Right. Yeah."

"But if you go around the back though you can at least make out a single song."

"That...um actually...the thing is I don't really know how to dance. I mean I know how to dance. But other people would probably describe it as more of a drunken spasm."

"Other people are fools and morons."

"That seems unlikely at best."

"Nah, you're just using the wrong scale."

"Oh, and which scale should I be using?"

"The one that says you're completely awesome always."

She wasn't sure what hit her harder: the words, or the sudden knowledge that everyone was watching them. Not just watching, in truth. Staring intently, as though the pair of them were a science experiment on the verge of doing something spectacular. Explode like a firework, maybe.

It certainly felt like it, inside of her.

And that went double when he held out his hand.

"Come on. I'll show you how easy it is."

"You're that much of an expert. At dancing."

"Oh, you know, I dabble," he said.

And here was where she made a big mistake:

She took him at his word. She let him lead her to some dusk-draped secluded spot behind the house, thinking that this was going to be a ridiculous fumbling pile of nonsense. Like the self-defense class, only fueled by the couple of beers he had obviously had and her faintly giddy astonishment. They would laugh, and joke in that same way, and she would act all incredulous and withering.

Then he slipped his hand around her waist, and the whole world went still.

The breeze ceased stirring the leaves on the trees around them. All the clocks stopped; the earth forgot to turn. Even he seemed to freeze for one insane second—but that was good. It meant that she could take everything in, one bizarre piece at a time. She glanced down at that big paw on her body, and the chest that was almost touching hers, and his face tilted down toward her, her eyes as big as dinner plates. And then he took her right hand in his, and they got even bigger than that. Once this man had made her lock herself in the janitor's closet. He had.

Now he was out here trying to dance formally with her to the strains of “Only You,” by Yazoo.

And that was really the smallest part of it.

“Okay, eyes up, we go on the three, not the two,” he said, all that mischief in his eyes and on his lips, but different, so different, because he knew she knew what those words were from. *Dirty Dancing*. *This is Dirty fucking Dancing*, her mind hollered, while her feet did their best to obey. He went back and she was supposed to go forward, and then he went forward and she was supposed to go back.

But she fumbled it. Of course she fumbled it.

Her heart was pounding so hard she suspected it was visible. Most of her body had turned to liquid, and the rest was trembling pretty violently. It was a given that she would fuck up whatever he was trying to do. She just didn't expect her almost stepping on his feet would make her laugh the way it did. Or make *him* laugh the way he did it—with the kind of affection she never thought he was capable of. It wasn't *at* her, it was *with* her. And best of all: It came partly because he liked it.

He liked her amusement.

He even seemed pleased that she couldn't dance to save her life, though she couldn't say why until he started to give her real instructions. “No, go

back, *then* to the side,” he said, and it hit her as hard as any insult he’d ever hurled at her. It gave him pleasure to help her do something. It was satisfying to him somehow—she could see it. His eyes lit up every time she got something right, and doubly so when she twirled beneath the bower of his arm. They were the Fourth of July for that, so bright and brilliant it stole her breath.

It made her think insane things, like *he doesn’t even look that way at women he dates*.

Before she shook it off. They were just having fun, that was all. He spun her back into his arms, but spinning into his arms didn’t mean anything. They were dancing; you were supposed to do that when you were dancing. And you were supposed to hold someone the way he was currently holding her, so tight to his body she could feel every curve and groove. She could feel each breath he took, as short and harsh seeming as her own. But most of all, she could see how little blue there was left in his eyes.

They were almost all pupil, as black as five past midnight.

And she knew this because she was staring up at him just as hard as he was staring down at her. She couldn’t seem to look away, as though he had somehow hypnotized her with dancing or smiling or whatever else it was that he had done here. *Something*, she thought. Something that made her skin feel seared and her head spin. She had to stop it before it got any worse.

Though she felt foolish after she had.

She practically ripped herself away from him, fumbling over words like *Lydia is probably wondering where I got to*. They sounded silly coming out, like he had done something seriously untoward. *Put a hand up your skirt*, her mind supplied, but that only deepened her blush. He hadn’t done anything of the sort, and to even think he might was beyond absurd. Not only was he not that sort of guy, she had all the sexual allure of a diseased snail to him.

And that would never change.

She was safe, completely safe.

Yet still, she ran.

Chapter 9

She kept her head down when he approached their table in the library. It seemed best to—that way, he couldn't easily ask her why she had run off like that. He would have to wait until she was completely calm and ready. She might even get a chance to breathe and come up with something casual in the meantime. Something like *I just remembered I left my curling iron on*. It was even possible that he would buy it, considering how he took his seat. He just did it silently, effortlessly, as though none of this was a big deal.

Girls panicked and fled from him all the time.

It was fine, it was fine.

And then came the note.

Did I do something wrong the other night?

She tried to ignore it, she really did. But there was just something so vulnerable about his writing—he'd pressed own way too hard, and crossed out three lines before hitting on the right one. Plus he had underlined *wrong*, as though aware of how bad he could be.

She just couldn't avoid him, or answer him meanly.

No, you didn't do anything wrong. I really needed to go, she wrote on the back of the paper he had passed her. Followed by a hastily scribbled answer, on his side.

It was more the speed you went at that concerned me.

I didn't go that fast. I just sort of jogged a little.

You hate jogging. It makes your boobs punch you.

How do you know that?

I overheard you tell Becky Rivero.

So you were just always listening in high school.

You make it sound like I bugged your bedroom.

Did you?

Yeah. Also there was that one time I climbed in the window when you were sleeping and watched you creepily from a corner. Don't worry though, I'm the hero of this story so it was totally romantic.

She paused there, eyes running over those words again and again. Every bit of sense in her head saying he was fooling around. Then every other bit of sense telling her to panic now.

We should probably get back to work.

Scared you with that romantic thing huh?

I wouldn't say scared exactly.

Good, because I didn't mean it like that.

Of course you didn't mean it like that.

It was just a joke, you know, because of Twilight.

He had drawn little cartoon vampires around the word, but she didn't feel comforted. She felt unsettled, somehow, as though someone had exchanged her clothes for ones two sizes too small.

I know. Obviously I know that. You spent four years telling me how hideous and unappealing I am to all mankind. I'm not likely to think you suddenly want to date me.

Right. Exactly. It would be pretty weird.

Extremely weird. And ridiculous.

Oh totally ridiculous.

Preposterous, even, she wrote sloppily in the margins of his side—because that was what they'd started to do now. Somewhere in the middle they'd descended into rushed scribbles all around the edges of each other's words, diagonal and upside down and scrawled in circles.

But that only made his pause more obvious.

His pen hovered, then touched the paper, then went back to hovering. He wrote a word and crossed it out, like he had at the start—only worse than that. Now he seemed pained by it, as though the words were sticking to the insides of his fingers. They wouldn't flow down the pen, to the point where he just had to talk.

It was like hearing a gunshot, despite the fact that he was whispering.

And god, the eye contact he made. She couldn't deal with it.

She had to glance down at her hands as they exchanged words.

"But just so you know...I don't think you're hideous."

"Okay, well that doesn't really make any difference to—"

"I mean that was all just me being a shallow asshole. Because clearly, you are not hideous at all. You have all the hair and those dark eyes and the real pouty top lip and...and you know," he said, but she didn't.

Not until he made a certain shape with his hands in the air.

An in-and-out shape, of the sort he was not supposed to ever, *ever* make.

“Did you just mime the curves of my body?” she asked, voice so thick with incredulity and confusion and horror that he jerked back. He shook his head once, hands suddenly flat on the table and eyes mildly panicked, as though he knew he had to back out of this fast.

And he tried to, too. He really tried.

“Nope. No, ma’am. No that is not what just happened,” he said, as firm as you pleased.

But it just as quickly collapsed. He crumbled over one eyebrow raise from her, face briefly scrunching in a way that would have been adorable if this wasn’t the weirdest thing of all time. He even half facepalmed, and followed it with an apology that somehow sounded like someone wincing.

“Please, can we pretend that is not what happened? I don’t know where that came from; it was super weird and I’m so sorry. I promise to never mime your body again.”

“It’s cool. It’s really fine. Let’s just go back to studying.”

“Yeah. Thank you.”

God, he sounded so relieved. Though for the next minute his face stayed the color of ripe tomatoes. And he didn’t write anything or read anything, either. She heard no scratch of a pen on paper. No whisper of pages being turned. Only silence.

Then finally, a far-too-mournful-sounding observation.

“I guess we can’t just expect to shift from enemies to friends without it being occasionally uncomfortable and sometimes full of inappropriate hand gestures.”

“Is that how *you* saw me? As your enemy?”

He didn’t look up at her when she said it.

Or when he answered, in the lowest possible tone.

“No. I was...I was just mostly talking from your perspective.”

“And what was yours? How did you think of the shit between us?”

“I don’t know. I think you want me to say *a game*, but that wasn’t true. It never felt like a game to me. It felt like I was trapped behind glass watching a really shitty version of myself operating my body.”

Now he looked up at her—right when she needed his eyes to stay down.

She knew she appeared too shaken by what he’d just said. She knew that he would see.

And he did. He just took it a different way from the one she’d expected.

“Though that’s not to absolve myself of responsibility. I don’t want to do that. I just...I don’t know how else to explain what it was like. I would go home and just be my ordinary self and wonder what the fuck happened. I still don’t know what the fuck happened.”

There were words she wanted to say here, but none of them came out.

Nothing came out. She felt suddenly frozen over—much to his consternation.

“Letty, are you still breathing?”

“Yeah. I just forgot how for a second.”

“Because you hate what I said?”

“Because you keep saying amazing things,” she said, part of her already wanting to take it back. It revealed too much and seemed too grateful. Her voice trembled in the middle. You could hear the tears in it.

But then he dipped his head to hide his smile, and she just couldn’t.

She had to make it a subject change instead.

“Now, can we actually do some work? I think we’ve written about three relevant words.”

“Well in fairness to us, it’s kind of hard to write relevant words about movies in a library.”

“We can do plenty. This is the part where we get a ton of quotes down so we can jam them into our presentations and essays to make us look super smart.”

“You do that? You, Juliet Judith Carmichael, take shortcuts to look super smart?”

She wanted to hate him for the raised eyebrow, and for using her full name.

But she couldn’t. The most she could manage was suppressing the laugh.

“I’m going to act like you didn’t say that dreaded thing and just skip straight to the question.”

“You really hate it that much, because I th—”

“I said, I’m skipping to the question.”

“Okay, cool, cool. What was the question again?”

“Do I take shortcuts to make me look smart? And the answer is yes. Yes I absolutely do all the time. I did it in school, I do it now, I will do it forever.”

“But you *are* super smart. Why do you need to pretend?”

“Everybody pretends, Tate. Even actually clever people.”

“You’re shitting me. Are you...are you shitting me?”

“No. Who really wants to read the whole of...” She searched for and held up the book she was most dreading. “*Theoretical Dynamics in Cinematic Interpretation?*”

It didn’t calm him down, however. If anything, it made him more animated.

And animated Tate was a ridiculously funny and marvelous sight to behold. He waved his arms. He somehow made a shrug seem sarcastic. He feigned sadness and outrage in the most delightful of ways, with every inch of his eyebrows and the most beautiful downturned mouth—and all while he said things that were more than enough on their own.

“You mean to tell me I just sat here and read about the alien in *Aliens* representing my anus for *nothing*? I can never now undo that mental image, Letty. You have forever tainted a major part of Jim Cameron’s filmography for me. All I wanted to do was have fun watching movies when I took this elective, and instead I now know way too much about buttholes and how obsessed every director seemingly is with them,” he said, and now she couldn’t suppress the laugh if she tried. It wriggled out the second he stopped speaking, and it shot right through the middle of her next words.

“Hey, I didn’t *order* you to read an essay called ‘James Cameron’s Butthole’!”

“I know, I get that, but I thought it would impress you. I’m trying to pull my weight here only to discover that you don’t give a hot fuck about any of this stuff at all. This whole time we could have been baking on the couch in front of *Dirty Dancing*, goddamn it.”

Now it was *her* turn to be animated.

She practically fist pumped. Her grin was unstoppable.

“I *knew* you liked *Dirty Dancing*. I fucking *knew*.”

“Hell *yeah* I like *Dirty Dancing*—because it’s the best fucking movie there ever was! Now are we going to get the fuck out of here and watch it or what?”

“Okay, maybe we could do that.”

“That doesn’t seem enthusiastic enough—lemme hear that enthusiasm.”

“Fuck yeah, we can totally fucking do that.”

“Now give me a high five,” he said, so het up she couldn’t resist.
But man oh man, did she live to regret it.

Chapter 10

She first knew she had made a major miscalculation when they got to his place. Images of cool lofts and fraternity houses danced through her mind, until they got to the building at the tail end of campus and she realized. He was living in a dorm. Tate Sullivan, king of cool, was in a tiny one-person dorm room like hers—in fact, his dorm room was *smaller*. He had to turn sideways to get between the desk and his bed, and said bed barely looked big enough for his enormous body. She was willing to bet every dollar she had that his feet hung over the end when he lay down. When he sat his knees touched the leg of his desk.

It was ridiculous.

But also wholly terrifying. Somehow she was supposed to sit in this tiny room with him, and not on the couch he had mentioned. He had lied about that, or else thought his bed counted—which she supposed in most ways it did. It was couch shaped and people could easily sit side by side on it. What was the big deal?

She didn't know.

She only knew that she was fidgeting, and not really listening to anything he was saying.

“Okay, so all I got is my laptop, but it's super big so it should be fine to watch. Do you think? I mean I guess we could see if the AV department has, like, a TV we could borrow or—”

He stopped short of finishing his sentence the second he saw her.

She couldn't blame him, however. She knew she looked...off.

“Letty? You still with me?”

“Oh. Yeah. The laptop. Cool.”

“You seem weird.”

“Don't I always?”

She let out a little laugh, but knew how it sounded. She read it from his uncertain, baffled expression, as clearly as if he had told her what he thought.

It was as hollow and desolate as a haunted auditorium.

“No. No not really. That was just something I said in high school because some asshole had briefly taken over my body. Remember? You have to remember. I said it like twenty minutes ago.”

“I remember. But really there’s nothing wrong. I’m fine.”

“Okay. Great. So you’re gonna sit down now.”

“Sure I am. Any second. Definitely about to happen.”

“Oh definitely. Yeah, I can see that you sitting next to me poses no problems for you at all,” he said, in a way that should have seemed nasty. Only it didn’t, and he made sure it stayed that way. “Or you know I could just take my desk chair and move it into the bathroom doorway, so we can both see my laptop without ever making you look as horrified as you do now.”

“I look horrified?”

“To put it mildly.”

“I’m sorry. My face disobeys me all the time. I tell it to look like an ordinary freshman about to watch a movie with wrestling champ Tate Sullivan, and all it can manage is what feels like anxious frowning.”

“It looks a lot like anxious frowning, too. But we can easily make that go away.”

He stood, and lifted his desk chair like it was made of paper.

“See I can just move this to here.”

“Stop. Tate, stop a second,” she said.

But he didn’t.

He just kept on rearranging furniture.

“And then if I just angle the screen...”

“Tate, no, no. Stop I said.”

“It’s really not a problem.”

“I know. But I’m just being ridiculous. I don’t need you to sit in the bathroom, okay? I can sit on the bed with you and everything will just be normal and fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

She nodded after the word, yet still he hesitated. More than that, in fact. His eyes roamed over every item in his room, as though looking for an alternative solution.

And he found one.

A really stupid one.

“I tell you what, then—how about we put something between us?”

“You want to put something between us. Like in medieval times.”

“Exactly, yes. That way, my leg will never touch your leg and my butt will never nudge your butt.”

“I wasn’t concerned about our legs touching. Or our butts nudging. Can butts even nudge?”

“My butt is a world-class nudging champion. But see, now you don’t have to worry about that,” he said, and he was completely right about that. She didn’t.

She had to worry about *everything else*.

When she sat down his scent assaulted her from all directions, too sweet and clean for her to fully accept it. He was supposed to smell like feet and farts and locker rooms, and instead everything was as fresh as a walk in the wintry air. His pillows could have been laundered that day. His comforter felt smooth and crisp beneath her fingers, and left the scent of meadows between them.

And then there was his body, his clothes, his hair.

That tart cologne she remembered so well from high school was gone, replaced by something that seemed incredibly familiar. It had a hint of almonds, warm and honeyed and so good she knew she should know it. It even reminded her of nice things, like sitting in the window seat of her bedroom with a book or driving to the movie theater for the first time with her friend Becky Rivero.

But it took her until twenty minutes in to dredge up the memory. Twenty minutes of puzzling and trying not to too obviously sniff him, before realization washed over her in a great facepalm-inducing wave.

It was her own perfume. The one *she* had worn in high school.

Or at the very least it was damned close. It was perhaps a touch more masculine, and that slightly musky man smell lurked beneath it. Yet once she figured it out, she couldn’t deny the fact. No matter how weird and inexplicable it was, Tate Sullivan had her favorite scent somewhere on him. Like a loaded gun, just waiting to go off and blow out most of her brains.

She already felt unable to think.

Logical reasons for this completely eluded her.

Questions she thought of asking were, at best, embarrassing.

In the end she just had to carry on watching the movie—but doing so hardly helped. *Dirty Dancing* was at least 30 percent sexier than she remembered it being. Within the first half hour, people were gyrating all

over each other. Swayze had his shirt off before the second act, and everyone seemed to be sweating constantly. It made *her* sweat, just watching them.

Or was it just the temperature of the room? It seemed to have risen at least ten degrees since she'd gotten here—quite possibly because of Tate. It was like sitting next to an enormous engine. Heat rolled off him in waves, thick and stultifying. She could almost feel it through the pillow, burning and burning until she could barely take it anymore. She came close several times to telling him to stop being so hot, and only resisted by patiently explaining to herself how stupid that was.

He would think she meant the *other* hot.

Even though she didn't. She totally didn't.

She hardly knew what she meant.

She only knew that he made her heart bolt its bone cage when he suddenly leaned across the pillow to whisper something. That her mouth went dry and all the hairs on her arms stood up and the heat...

The heat seemed to treble. Quadruple. Millionable.

"Do you think people were that sexually liberated in 1963?"

"I have no clue. We should probably write that question down," she said.

Of course she knew why she did it—because it gave her an out. She could lean down to get her pad and scribble, instead of enduring more of that scent and the heat.

"Yeah, maybe write it down. And while you're there write down that she initiates."

"She initiates what?"

"The sex."

"They have sex in this?"

She glanced up at the screen, sure that he was wrong.

But no, her top was coming off. There was a visible bra.

Followed by lots of sticky-looking kissing.

"Of course they do. I wouldn't have suggested we watch it otherwise. I mean, how are we supposed to talk about sex in cinema if we just look at movies that have no sex in them? What are we supposed to say? Their hand holding was particularly fascinating? The scene where you almost see a butt really meant something?"

“That...yeah, okay, you make a good point.”

“Though to be honest, this barely qualifies.”

“You don’t think this is a good sex scene?”

“He kisses her collarbone and then they look at each other while in bed. They could be searching each other’s faces for signs of rigor mortis. Both of them are barely moving.”

“They’re moving a tiny bit. His shoulder just jerked.”

“Oh man, that sounds hot. Shoulder jerking.”

“It looked kind of hot to me.”

“It looked like she was panicking.”

“Ah, so now you’re an expert on women’s facial expressions.”

“You don’t have to be to know she got nothing out of that. I bet he was one and done.”

“What the hell does one and done mean?”

“One thrust and done.”

“You can’t say that about Swayze.”

“I can and will and have.”

“But his hips though. His hip action.”

“All the hip action in the world can’t help you when you think collarbone kissing and some grinding is going to get her motor revving.”

“So what would get her motor revving?”

“Eating pussy would probably be a good start.”

She had been looking at him up until that point. But as soon as she heard the word *pussy*, she had to glance away. It rang out like an alarm in the tiny room: *turn back turn back turn back before it’s too late*. The only problem was: she didn’t know *how* to turn back.

Or know why she wanted to.

“Okay. Okay but you just said yourself that this is a pretty tame movie. I mean it’s not like they can just show him...doing that to her.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why can’t they have him going down on her? They show guys getting blow jobs in PG-13 movies all the time. Hell, they do it in pretty family friendly comedies.”

“They do not. Name one movie where that happens.”

“*Police Academy. Ghostbusters. Ace Ventura.*”

She went to protest again, then stopped.

Mostly because her brain was already supplying the scenes he was talking about.

“Oh my god. Oh my god, you’re *right*.”

“I am as amazed as you are.”

“Are you writing this down?”

“Hell yeah I will, now that you think I have a point. What should I put, like—more women need to get head in movies? Better class it up, huh.” He took out his own notebook and started carefully noting down the idea, reading it aloud as he did. “There...is...a sexual double standard.”

“Sexual double standard sounds pretty good.”

“We should totally count how many women get something onscreen that could possibly lead to them actually having a good time. Or at least, a time that could conceivably make them come.”

“And how are we going to judge something like that?”

“What do you mean by judge?”

“Well, we have to establish a criterion for a good time,” she said, then immediately regretted it.

He was going to say something like *pussy* again. Something that made her sweat even harder.

And she was right to worry, too.

“Jumping aboard and pumping for thirty seconds, nope.”

“Yeah, but in most films you’re supposed to see that as a kind of condensing.”

“Are you? Or do the dudes making it just want you to think that’s normal? Like if you’re not coming out your ears by thrust four there’s something wrong with you?”

She could feel him staring at her. How could she not? His eyes were practically burning holes in the sides of her face. Her only hope was that her face had seemed flushed before—because of the heat in the room or the sexiness of the film or just anything, anything but the truth.

“Oh my god. You *do* actually think that.”

Shit fuck shit fuck balls bastard.

“No, not exactly. No. Not at all in fact.”

“You totally think you should be coming by thrust four.”

“Well it wasn’t thrust *four*.”

“Holy shit, Letty, come on. Where is your head, girl?”

“I don’t know. I just blew a hole in it with my imaginary gun. My brains are all over your comforter right now. Can we please just not talk about this?”

“Yeah. Yeah of course we can,” he said, as casual as anything.

He was lying, however.

She could see the urge to ask shivering underneath the surface of his face.

It was in his tense jaw, and his suddenly tight lips.

“You’re thinking about it, aren’t you?”

“Just be quiet and let me try really hard not to.”

“Goddamn it, Tate. You *know* you’re the last person I want to talk about my sex life with. Like, I get that yours is really amazing and adventurous, but I’d rather not have my face rubbed in that right now.”

“What makes you think my sex life is amazing and adventurous?”

“Well, you sure make it sound that way.”

“Because I know what it takes to make a girl come? Honey, your bar is super low on the amazing-sex front. Like, you should be coming as the bare fucking minimum. That’s rock-bottom standard—getting the person you’re with off. Otherwise what’s the fucking point in doing it?”

“Maybe people just enjoy being close.”

“Did you?”

She didn’t answer.

She couldn’t.

And that was enough to tell him all he needed to know.

“Yeah, you didn’t even get that out of it, did you.”

“I really don’t want to talk about this.”

“So let’s talk about me instead. You want to know about my amazing sex life? Last girl I hooked up with escaped out the bathroom window while I was waiting naked in bed.”

“*What?* Bullshit. Bull. *Shit*. Why would anyone do that to *you?*” she gasped, only realizing at the last possible second what she’d just implied.

“Well, I’m flattered, Letty.”

“Hang on, I didn’t—”

“No really, it’s cool you think I’m worth sticking around for.”

“I don’t think you’re worth sticking around for. I misspoke.”

“Are you sure? Because that *bullshit* sounded pretty insistent.”

“I meant that no one would do that to anybody. Not specifically you.”

“Okay, whatever you say.”

“It’s a weird thing to do, all right?”

“Especially to me. Handsome and wonderful Tate Sullivan.”

She wasn’t sure what was worse: his singsong tone or the gestures that accompanied it.

He actually ran his fingers through his hair—then *licked* his *hand* and ran it down over his body.

He was a perfect nightmare of unbelievable awesomeness.

“You can’t have been that handsome and wonderful if she ran out on you.”

“She ran out on me because I have a can of Pringles in my pants.”

“Well, what the hell were you doing keeping them there?”

“No, Letty. No, honey. Not *literally* Pringles.”

There was a pregnant pause after that.

And when it gave birth...

Oh god, when she realized...

“Did you seriously just tell me that your dick is enormous?”

“That may possibly have been the gist of my point.”

“Oh *gross*. Shut *up*,” she said, then did the only possible thing she could. Asking further questions about this was not an option. Thinking about it was an abomination.

So she grabbed the pillow between them and whacked him with it.

“You did *not* just hit me with a pillow. You did not, oh my god.”

His tone told her to expect retaliation. It was so jam-packed with faux outrage and unstoppable good humor that it was bound to happen. She just wasn’t prepared for the *way* it happened. He didn’t whump her back with the cushion to the left of him. There was no wrestling for the pillow still clutched in her fists.

Instead, he went ahead and tackled her.

He got her around the middle and sent her sprawling back across the bed, hands in places she never expected them to be. One was pretty close to her right boob. Another grazed her butt, pretty distinctly. Yet the weird thing was, she couldn’t seem to conjure up any fear. Far from it, in fact: she

was laughing as he did it, and even harder when she felt his fingers needling at her rib cage.

He was tickling her.

The bastard was tickling her.

And it was fucking *awesome*. He had to be the best tickler the world had ever known. He got her to make the sorts of sounds she didn't know she was capable of, high and ridiculous and completely abandoned to the moment. Then just when she couldn't take any more, just when her stomach started cramping and tears were leaking out of her eyes, he backed off. He knelt over the tight little ball she'd made of her body, grinning so wildly she was afraid for his face.

She'd never seen anyone look so purely happy.

Or revel in something so much—because by God, he did. He waited until she had her breath back, all the time asking if she was good, if she was cool, if everything was fine. Then just as he seemed serious he dove back in. He *dove*, as though she were a big pool of Jell-O and he had the biggest, silliest hankering for it. He even made jazz hands before he did it, and made a noise that got her giggling all on its own. *Rargh*, she wanted to call it, but was too busy busting a gut to do anything of the sort.

“Stop,” she gasped. “Stop stop stop.”

And he did.

But only long enough to check she didn't mean it. Then it was right back to turning her spine to goo and her head to mush. Her face was wet from crying—but it was the right kind. The good kind. The kind that felt so amazing she wanted to thank him for it.

Instead, she returned the favor.

The next time he went in, she whipped in underneath his arms. Dug one knuckle into his ribs, until he made the most ridiculous sound in the world. It was a cross between a yelp of outrage and a giggle, breathless and too high. His voice shouldn't have been able to get anywhere near that octave, but it did. And it kept going when she found his suddenly exposed armpit. As soon as she got her fingers in there he did something even more delightful: he wriggled.

He *squirmed*.

She had to pin him down, but the moment she did things got way weirder. He absolutely refused to fend her off with his hands—as though he

knew how effective they would be. Maybe it even occurred to him that he might hurt her, so instead he buried them beneath his body. He tried to get away just by arching his back and burying his head in the rumpled comforter, and when he did his T-shirt rucked up.

That was a strip of his side and belly that she'd exposed, oddly vulnerable looking and incredibly taut to the touch. She knew because she skimmed it with her palm. She felt his hot, smooth skin and got a hint of more of it—further down and far too close to his ass. His jeans were loose and everything was completely tangled and then suddenly his arm was around her waist. He was turning her over, in a way that reminded her of one thing and one thing only.

When people change position midfuck.

Hell, her legs were even around his waist. They didn't mean to be, of course. It was just the result of crouching over him and then being flipped. But still, it was weird once she was under him.

And he knew it, too.

He had been laughing a second ago.

He wasn't laughing anymore.

His face had gone all strange and still, and for some reason it was suddenly very close to hers. She could have stuck out her tongue and licked his lips. For a second she even thought he might do that to her—as a joke, of course. Only she wasn't sure it would feel like a joke. The air between them was too thick; the silence was too intense. It seemed like a secondary presence in the room, getting bigger and bigger until finally she was sure she could feel it pressing against her.

It wasn't him bearing down on her chest.

It was the incredible, awful, enormous quiet. Slowly but surely it was crushing all the air out of her body—which probably explained why she was hardly breathing at all. Maybe it even explained why he wasn't breathing, either, though she couldn't deny that it looked like something else. *Anticipation*, her mind threw up, and then for some reason her heart just started pounding and pounding. She could feel it shaking her body. It seemed to be in her ears and her teeth and oh god it got so much worse when his gaze dropped.

She saw the fan of his long, dark eyelashes and the smooth gloss of his lids as he glanced down at her lips. And then he looked back up at her, and

everything was terrifying. Far too terrifying to take, or understand, or even attempt to process.

She just had to get out of this.

Now. Now. Now.

“You know I just remembered I have this thing.”

The words came out like she’d just cleared a clog in her throat—fast and messy, one tumbling over another to form a single giant sound. *Yanojusememembedthising.*

It was about as convincing as her attempts at self-defense, though he seemed to accept it. He disentangled himself from her immediately and sat back on his heels. Expression completely neutral, body language neither offended nor defensive.

Almost like nothing had happened.

And when she thought about it, nothing *had*. Him glancing down meant zip. His body on hers meant even less than that. They had just been having some fun, and then she had panicked over a look in the direction of her lips and now the fun was over.

“Sorry, I just...”

“Don’t be sorry, it’s cool.”

“Lydia will be waiting for me, so...”

“Of course, yeah—get gone, everything is okay.”

She stood then, but still couldn’t quite leave.

“It just feels like I fucked up or—” she started to say.

Only he cut her off. He shook his head and said the best possible thing.

“Hey. Hey. Trust me. We are good, babe. No problems, ever.”

And then followed it up with a completely normal gesture. It was just the back of his hand, brushing down the length of her forearm. Not insistently, not sensually, not anything but a kindly touch offered to a friend. He barely made contact, in truth, so she had no idea what her reaction was about. It just came on her in a great wave the second he did it, unstoppable and insurmountable.

She had to leave fast to stop him seeing her reaction—caught somewhere between elation and a heartbroken sob. In the hallway she put a hand to her mouth to keep it in, but it didn’t really help her. *She* knew it had happened. She was still filled with all these new and insane feelings.

And now she had to somehow go on, knowing all the while that they were there.

Chapter 11

She had decided not to mention anything about her last meeting with Tate. Not because there was anything weird about it—there wasn't. But whenever she imagined explaining it the whole thing somehow wouldn't come together. She didn't know what had made her panic like that. She had no clue why everything had gotten so intense and strange and full of meaningful staring.

How did you describe a brush of a hand against your arm that made *that* happen?

She wasn't even sure what *that* was. She wanted to call it goosebumps, only these particular ones had teeth and claws and bit through the skin on the way out. They were still with her now, as she sat with Lydia in the bustling cafeteria, over a bowl of teriyaki noodle salad. Every time she thought about it they gnawed at her, until finally she broke.

She had to let something out.

She just wondered why it had to be *this*.

“He has a massive cock.”

Lydia immediately whipped her head up, eyes like lasers.

That burned a hole right through her body, to the place where shame lived.

“*Who* has a massive cock?”

“Tate. Tate has one.”

“I'll be honest: I was really hoping you were going to say Ryan Gosling.”

“I hoped that, too, and I just said it, after finding it out.”

“You *found it out*? Oh my god, what the hell happened? Were you digging for gold and accidentally stumbled on the Lost City of Tate Sullivan's Dirty Dick?”

Part of her loved Lydia for putting it that way. For saying dirty dick.

But most of her just went red again and started flailing.

“Jesus Christ, Lydia, no. *No*. Oh my lord in heaven no. Is that what it sounded like I meant? No no no a million times no, I would never— I could never— The very thought of having sexual contact with Tate fills me with unspeakable horror. Are you kidding?”

“Then what the fuck happened?”

“Nothing happened.” *Apart from the tickle fight that felt like I was fucking him.* “He just told me.”

Lydia raised an eyebrow, fork halfway to her mouth.

“He told you he has a massive cock? Oh, well, that’s very convincing. Better call the FBI department in charge of large penises and let them know we cracked the case.”

“I want to laugh here, but his large penis is haunting my brain.”

“He probably doesn’t have a large penis. He was just...bragging.”

“He wasn’t though. That’s the problem. He completely organically brought it up in the middle of a conversation about having terrible sex.”

“Why were you talking about terrible sex in the first place?”

“We were watching *Dirty Dancing* for the project. Then a lot of things happened.”

“Bad things? Things you hated and are now traumatized by?”

She took a long time to answer. Filled the space with lots of fidgeting and eating and glancing away as though thinking extremely hard. Really though she was just fighting a battle with her words—more than anything she wanted to say yes, but yes was not cooperating.

“No. No I wasn’t traumatized. No it wasn’t bad. But maybe that just makes everything worse somehow. I keep having all of this...fun with him. Like the most fun I’ve ever had with anyone. Then I realize we are having the fun and it feels insane.”

“How insane exactly?”

“Like I died two years ago and this is all just my heavenly reward for all the shitty things I had to endure through the whole of my dismal, mediocre little life.”

“You just called him a heavenly reward.”

“I know. I already hate myself for it.”

She knew Lydia was looking at her in the silence that followed. But she couldn’t bring herself to check for sure. If the expression on her face was disapproving, or pitying, Letty wasn’t sure she could take it.

And then a hand went over hers.

“Don’t. Don’t hate yourself. There’s nothing wrong with enjoying someone being nice to you,” she said, and oh it was such a relief to hear. To see her friend’s face, all full of concern and acceptance.

Only that wasn’t all.

There was more, said half laughing but no less troubling for it.

“I mean, it’s not like you’re going to fall in love with him. Right?”

Lydia said.

And all she could do was nod.

Anything else was impossible, once those goosebumps bit down hard.

Chapter 12

She almost turned back around at the door to the gym. Of course she knew rationally that this was not the scene of so many high school crimes. It was larger, and airier, and the seating that surrounded the floor space was more impressive. It looked like an arena in there—yet still she hesitated. She thought of Tate, in one of those ridiculously revealing singlets, practicing his moves sweatily on some equally burly guy, and she hesitated. And when she finally did go in, she tried to keep her gaze casual and mostly focused on things above eye level: the clock on the wall, the scoreboard, the glass windows of Coach Parker’s office.

Not that she needed to.

He wasn’t in there. A sweaty and kind of strained-looking Chad informed her that Tate had broken early—whatever that meant. *He’s in the pool*, Chad said, and was so nice and friendly about it she didn’t think twice about following his pointing finger. She just went through the double doors that led out onto the grassy bank that separated the two buildings, and carried on to the pool.

Though once inside she realized what she had thought: that he would be in there with a bunch of other people.

Instead of just him swimming lazy laps on his own, in an eerily hushed and far too dimly lit sort of space. It made her want to check if the lights had been replaced by candles. She stopped before she got to the edge of the pool because her shoes seemed to make such a noise against the tile—though it didn’t matter that she did. He still heard her. He turned before she got anywhere close to the edge of the pool, something like *hey, Chad* on his lips.

Then he saw it was her.

He saw, and oh god the look on his face. It was like watching the light break through clouds made of atomic ash. Suddenly, she understood exactly why she had come. She knew why she’d ignored Lydia’s warnings after not hearing from him in three days. Everything was as clear as that gloriously happy look on his face.

And it only got clearer when he spoke again.

“Hey, you came to find me,” he said, as though that was the most exciting thing he could possibly imagine. It even made him start to swim

over to her, cutting through the water so smoothly and cleanly it made that hot feeling happen again. Then he got to her and did something that made it worse. He stopped at the edge of the pool, one hand reaching eagerly out of the water.

And he just touched one of her shoes with a single finger.

No, no, that was wrong. He *rubbed* over the tip of her shoe with one finger, in a way that should have meant almost nothing. It wasn't a sexy gesture. It was the sort of thing people who had been friends forever did, all tender and cute and intimate.

Though it seemed that this was enough.

She had to fold her arms to stop the shivers.

"That was pretty cool of you."

"Well, I just thought we should get back to work."

"Oh right, yeah. Work. Totally."

"I mean it's been three days."

"Longer than three days," he said.

While she tried not to hear the longing in his voice.

"Exactly. So are you going to get out?"

He gave her a look that was even worse than the glorious happiness.

This one had an eyebrow raise in it, and a head tilt, and oh good *Christ*, a lip bite.

No, god no, she couldn't deal with the lip bite.

"Actually, I was kind of thinking you might want to get in."

"Oh...oh no. No I don't even have my bathing suit with me."

"That's cool. Just jump in as you are."

He waved a hand at her like, "*Hey come on in, the water's fine.*"

But the water was not fine. It had him in it, making adorable faces.

"Are you kidding? Come on. I'm not doing that."

"Okay. Want to give me a hand then?"

"I'm pretty sure you can get out on your own."

"No, honestly, I just need like a little help."

She hesitated, considering. On the one hand, this was a classic way to drag someone into the water. But on the other...surely he would never do that now? He *looked* like he would never do that now. He was being so cute and cool it seemed almost churlish to refuse.

So she took his offered hand.

And immediately regretted it.

He didn't yank hard. But then again he didn't need to. One fairly firm pull was all it took to send her plummeting headfirst into the water, and once there things started to go really wrong. She was not a strong swimmer under normal circumstances, but these were not normal at all. These were terrifying and unexpected circumstances. She wasn't prepared for a face full of water, or to dive to the bottom while fully dressed. Now she was choking and blind, with two tons of wool and denim weighing her down.

She kicked, and got absolutely nowhere.

She struck out with her right arm, and got tangled in her sleeve.

At which point she really began to panic.

Maybe this had been his plan all along—earn her trust and then murder her in a swimming pool. “*Her clothes dragged her down, Officer, there was nothing I could do,*” she thought, and almost lost it completely. That tight feeling was starting to happen, in her chest. Her arms just weren't cutting through the water. It was entirely possible that she might die like this.

And then she felt his hands on her, strong, strong, strong. So strong he hauled her clean out of the water, then almost right over his head. She had to grab on to him just to stop herself going, when all she really wanted to do was murder him right back. She wanted to scream at him for doing that, but instead wound up with an arm tight around his shoulders and the other around his waist.

She was glad though, in the end.

If she had screamed and punched him, she wouldn't have gotten the full extent of his apology. She might have heard him saying sorry twenty times in that frightened tone, but she would have missed the hand spread over her back. She would never have known what it was like to feel him stroking the back of her head in these little frantic motions—as though he knew he had to fix things super fast. He had to prove the whole thing was just a joke, before she escaped him forever.

And he succeeded, too. He succeeded because of this: “I just forgot I wasn't always your friend.”

That was where they were now—on such good terms that he could pull a prank on her and assume that she would laugh. Their past had almost been erased for him, to the point where she was just his buddy and he was just

her buddy and that was—*good god*, she didn't know what that was. *Soothing*, her mind informed her.

Though it was possible that was just the feel of his hand on her back.

He was rubbing her in these soft, slow circles, so good she almost forgot they weren't always friends, too. The only thing in her head was how nice it felt, to just give in to this. Every tensed muscle unwound and every nerve in her stopped fizzing, until finally she was just a boneless weight against him. Her cheek was against his shoulder and her arms were draped around his, everything so still and quiet suddenly that she could have almost kind of... kind of...

"Are you...are you falling asleep?"

"I was just nearly killed. I'm entitled to a rest."

"Hey, I wasn't complaining. Sleeping on me seems way better than never wanting to speak to me again. Or trying to kill me in return. I mean, you are fully capable of doing it now."

"I was going to get you in a headlock."

"Yeah?"

"But then I got comfy."

"Is that what I am? Comfortable?"

There was amusement in his voice.

Good amusement. Warm amusement.

Plus, he was still stroking her back and her hair.

"Like a big couch."

"Never thought being called a couch would make me feel so good."

"Does it really? Make you feel good, I mean?"

"Nothing has ever made me feel better," he said, then seemed to hesitate. As though whatever he was going to say next might cost him. And when he started speaking, haltingly, she could understand why. "Know how many times I wished I could have done this for you after the bluff? Must have been a hundred. A thousand. A million."

It cost *her*, just to hear it.

"Well, you almost killed me again. But you saved me this time. You saved me," she said, intending it as a half joke to lighten things a little. Only somehow, it didn't work at all. Her voice came out brittle and broken, and when she was done he didn't reply. He didn't so much as whisper a word.

He just bunched her hair into his fist, like some kind of weird reflex.

Then pressed his face against her temple. Squeezed her hard in his big arms.

And he did it all for a long, long time. So long she could feel her throat starting to tighten. Her eyes starting to sting. *This is what regret feels like when someone puts it in the form of an embrace*, she thought, then suddenly that stinging sensation was twenty times worse. If she didn't say something soon, she was going to lose it. Though even more frightening was the idea that *he* might.

"Tate? Are you okay?"

"Uh, yeah. Yeah, why? Did it seem like I wasn't okay? Because I totally am. I wasn't crying or anything. I'm way too manly and macho to cry about something so stupid," he said, but she could tell he didn't really mean stupid at all. She could hear the secret words behind it: *something that means the world to me*. And when she pulled back, she thought she could see it in his face, too. Just a little around the eyes, red rimmed, and in his tensing jaw.

Though she didn't really get the full impact until she gave in to the urge to kiss him. Not on the lips, of course. Just on the cheek, to say thank you. The way a buddy might, definitely like a buddy—only it didn't go like that at all. As she leaned in she saw the shift in his expression, from moved somehow to something else. His eyes closed and an arrow appeared between his brow, like it pained him.

Like it bruised him, to be touched so tenderly by someone.

He wasn't used to it, she thought, but it was more than that, too. Different from that—and especially when she made contact. She pressed her lips to his cheek, feather light and barely moving, and heard a sigh escape his lips. So soft it was hardly there, but god it seemed loud to her. All of this seemed loud. Every sensation and feeling was heightened, from the tingle in her lips where they had touched him, to the way he looked at her as she drew back.

His gaze was hooded now, the blue between the lids a blurry line.

And those lips of his, so softly parted...

It made her think he wanted to kiss her cheek in return. In fact she thought he might have, if she hadn't pushed off from him at that exact moment. She had to shed her shoes to do it, but she managed it. She swam

back through the quiet waters, trying to grin and look casual as her heart battered against her breastbone.

Trying to *sound* casual, too, despite everything.

“You know, now you’ve got me in here we should probably try to have fun.”

“That would be a great plan, if you weren’t still in the clothes that almost drowned you.”

“I already ditched the sneakers.”

“Ditch the sweater and jeans and I’ll feel better about it.”

“If I do that I’ll basically be in my underwear,” she said, even though she could already see the logic of what he was saying. Her legs felt coated in lead weights. The sweater was getting heavier by the second. It was just a commonsense suggestion, yet somehow it didn’t feel that way.

And doubly so when he shook his head.

He just did it so awkwardly, like the physical equivalent of someone stuttering.

“I wasn’t...I’m not going to look at anything.”

“I know that. Of course I know that.”

“So then what’s the big deal?”

“No big deal, I guess.”

“I mean *I’m* half naked.”

He stood up, as though the point needed emphasizing.

But by god, it really did not at all. She already knew that he had those heavy pectoral muscles.

And the things she had no idea about were best kept a secret. She didn’t want to see his surprisingly narrow hips, or know that the strip of hair that trailed down to his bathing suit was darker than the hair on his head. All it did was make her stomach feel suddenly full of hot silver.

She had to look away before it spread to other places.

“I know. I was just wedged against your half nakedness.”

“And it wasn’t weird.”

“Weird isn’t the word I would have used.”

“What, then? Come on you can tell me. We’re friends here.”

“If you think I’m going to say *amazing* you are sorely mistaken.”

“No, I don’t think you’re going to say *amazing*. I think you were going to say *enormous* and *gross* and *misshapen*, like something you dug up that

might one day come alive and destroy humanity.”

“Dude, you can come up with all the great movie premises you want, I’m never going to give in to such a blatant fish for compliments. Compliments that you do not need, I might add. I mean, of the two of us, *you* are not the one who spent high school feeling like the blob.”

She turned back to him, still laughing.

Then stopped dead the second she saw his face.

He was serious, somehow. Really deadly serious.

And he kept on being serious, all through his next little speech.

“Yeah, but you totally get now that I never meant any of that shit. Whereas I know for a stone-cold fact that my size still completely freaks you out. In my dorm room you couldn’t get away fast enough—and the same thing just happened here. As soon as you realized how close I was you swam away. You even turned as soon as I stood up, like my body burned out your eyes.”

“I was just trying to get out of my jeans,” she said.

Then she wrestled with the buttons, to make it look like the truth. She even got her arm out of one sleeve of her sweater, to back it up—but could see it was having no real effect. He looked almost morose. He’d submerged every inch of his torso, as though her eyes on him were just a little too much. *Her* eyes on *him*, Tate Sullivan, the guy who’d once made her attempt to cut off her love handles with a pair of scissors.

It was incredible, unbelievable, infuriating.

Yet the ache to tell him otherwise remained.

“And besides, your body doesn’t burn out my eyes, Tate. I doubt it could ever do that to anyone, considering you’re a six-foot-five-inch athlete in the prime of his life.”

“What difference does being an athlete make?”

“Oh come on. You *know* what kind of difference it makes. Just look at the way girls drool all over your hot bod constantly. I swear to god the other day some babe tried to take an up-skirt picture of you, even though you weren’t wearing a skirt. Last Tuesday this incredibly hot cheerleader asked me if I would be interested in getting you involved in a threesome. And when I told her that we aren’t even doing a twosome, she said: ‘*Come on, no one on earth could spend that much time with him without at least sucking his cock.*’”

“Yeah, but that’s not the same. They all *like* the gigantic meat head and the enormous pecs and the total lack of any visible neck. They find it super hot, whereas you kind of gag over it.”

“And *their* opinion is the one that matters. Mine doesn’t.”

“Feels like it does though. I don’t want you to find my body gross.”

Now he was almost up to his neck in the water.

Apparently, hiding his nipples wasn’t enough.

“I don’t, Tate. I really don’t find it gross at all.”

“Boring, then. Boring and stupid.”

“I don’t think muscles *can* be boring and stupid.”

“No, but they make the people who have them look that way. They make you look like a big, lumbering oaf or....” He paused, clearly struggling. Though it was only after the next part that she realized why, exactly. “Or like some brainless lunkhead,” he finished.

And then it hit her, hard and right in the heart.

That was what *she* had called *him*.

“*Oh, like that means anything coming from a brainless lunkhead,*” she had said, shaky and over her shoulder, while running away. But even so, it was there. And more important, it had *affected* him. It had affected him so strongly that he still remembered it now. She had thought he would just shrug it off, that it would mean nothing to him, but it had.

It was making him hide right now, his face the only thing visible above the waterline. And when she drifted close, he was the one who backed away. He was the one who seemed shy now.

“I was just trying to get back at you, Tate.”

“I know that. I know. I don’t think you did anything wrong. It’s just now I can’t help wondering...is that how you see me? Do you still see me that way sometimes? Like at the party, I caught you looking at me. And your expression seemed to say ‘*Oh look at that dumbass with his dumb jock friends.*’”

“Probably because that’s what I *did* think—until you came over and were as cool to me as you were in the library. Because you know I was still afraid then. I still thought that maybe you would just switch back to the guy you were before, now that it wasn’t just you and me. But can you blame me? This guy, the one I’m talking to now, the one who admits mistakes and says sorry and has epic conversations with me about *Dirty Dancing*...I’ve

only just met him. I don't have four years of experiences with him to lean into."

"I wish you did. I wish I hadn't wasted so much time in high school."

"In what way do you think you wasted your time?"

She expected him to hesitate then. To give her a chance to prepare herself for what was coming.

But he didn't. He just came right out with it, like he'd always had it locked and loaded.

All he needed was someone to ask, so he could fire the thing directly into their heart.

"I thought being cool was the most important thing. So much so that I actually used to hide books I was reading inside skin mags. Once I got sent to the principal's office because I kept answering questions in this smart-ass way, like I didn't know. But I *did* know. I always fucking knew. I fucking know now, but still get this clenching feeling whenever I go to raise my hand."

She stopped then with the clothes. Her arm was still half in and half out of the sweater, but it didn't matter. What mattered were those words, and the way they just upended her whole world. Everything she thought she knew about him, gone in an instant.

Not just gone: obliterated.

"You made fun of me for things you actually wanted to do. You called me a fucking nerd, like, a million times, and all the while you were just dying to do the same things."

"That...was kind of the case, yeah."

"Oh my god. Oh my god, Tate, why didn't you just..." She threw up her hands, splashing water in two arcs. "Why didn't you just join me? Why didn't you stop and just come and talk to me like you talk to me now? You didn't have to hide books in fucking skin mags—I would have let you read them right in front of me without a goddamn word about it. I would have been happy to have you there!"

"I know that. Do you not think I know that? You're doing it right now. It literally took me like nothing at all to persuade you to accept me and let me sit with you and read with you and do all this nerdy shit," he said, getting louder and louder as he went. He had to take a steadying breath, just to make the rest of his speech come out normal. "It wasn't just you I fucked

over. I fucked *myself* over. Our lives are forever changed because I was too much of a coward to really go for...to really...to really be who I wanted to be.”

“It’s not too late though.”

“That’s really kind of you to say, honey, but I know it is.”

“I’m not just being kind. Look at everything you are now.”

“I’m a wrestler now. That shit is set in stone—there’s no going back. My scholarship is based on it. My whole future is built around it. If I stop, my family will see it as me throwing away millions of dollars. I *will* be throwing away millions of dollars. And for what? A few books I want to read?”

“I don’t think it’s just about a few books you want to read.”

“Then what do you think it’s about? How else would you put it?”

“You hate wrestling, Tate. You hate it. Like, a lot.”

She could see he’d been about to say something more. Protest the point, maybe, in a pretty fierce tone. But then something seemed to stop him. It made him stutter when he finally did get some words out, always on the verge of shaking his head but never quite managing it all the way.

“I...I wouldn’t say that I...I mean not hate, exactly.”

“It sounds a lot like hate to me, bub.”

“No, no. I mean there are things I like about it.”

“Yeah? Can you name three for me right now?”

“Absolutely I...” he started, but even he seemed to know he was never going to finish. It took around five seconds to cover his eyes one-handed as realization set in. “Okay, maybe I hate it a little. Like, the weighins are usually not a lot of fun. I don’t think I’ve eaten cake in ten years. And then there’s my knees and most of my joints and the constant ringing I have in one ear. By the time I’m thirty I’m probably gonna have the body of an eighty-year-old, if I even make it that far, and—”

“Did you just say *if* you make it that far? *If*, as is in maybe not?”

“It puts a lot of strain on the body. And then there’s, like...head injuries.”

“And you think you like wrestling? You think it’s really awesome?”

“I think I made my bed, and now I have to lie in it. Nobody to blame for that but me.”

He shrugged one now visible shoulder, that self-consciousness partly gone. Though what did it matter, when it had been replaced by this awful fatalism? He sounded like someone being slowly marched to his death, and he capped it off by being more concerned about *her*.

“You, on the other hand, have plenty to blame on someone else.”

“Like what? What should I really blame you for?”

“Are you kidding? You don’t trust anything I do. You don’t trust anything that anybody does.”

“And you would know that how, exactly?”

“Because you flinch about a second after anyone says your name. Because the look on your face when your new buddy comes running up is like a flower, grateful that the sun has risen again. Because you choose seats at the back without fail; you eat nothing in the cafeteria in case someone is watching. It took you twenty minutes to dare come into the gym because you knew other people like me were in there, and you always will until the day you die. I made that happen to you, Letty. I made you take the road marked FOREVER WARY OF OTHER HUMAN BEINGS, instead of the one you should have taken.”

“And what was the one I should have taken?”

“The one that leads to an apartment somewhere cool like New York City, surrounded by cool friends who all do cool things like writing articles and making documentaries, every night full of wine and TV marathons and board games, and you have some guy, some great guy who wears glasses and has a big, dark beard and knows how to quote poetry and make seasoned cashews and shit.”

She managed a laugh after that. Shook her head and even rolled her eyes a little—for the cashews part though, really. Not for the rest of it. The rest of it was making her heart rattle around in her chest.

“So you think I deserved a hipster boyfriend.”

“You know what I mean. You know what I’m saying.”

“I do. I just really doubt I would have ever had those things.”

“Yeah, but unlike me, you had a *shot* at living that fucking awesome life. And I swear to god, if it kills me, if it takes me a thousand years—I’m going to give you that back,” he said.

Then suddenly her eyes were stinging *again*. She had to start fussing with the sweater just to get it under control, finally getting it off. The tears

were still coming. They were starting to make her lower lip tremble, so obvious that the only way to truly hide it was to swim away for the second time.

But he caught it all the same.

He caught it before she could even make the turn.

“Oh my god. Are you...are you crying? Did I make you cry? Holy shit how do I keep doing this? That was meant to be reassuring. I was trying to be reassuring to you.”

“I’m not crying because you failed at reassuring me, Tate.”

“Then what are you crying for?”

“A ton of reasons. Happiness and regret and relief and, like, eight thousand other things. I mean, you just basically told me you want me to have something that you don’t think you’ll ever get. That is where you’re at right now: wishing me well while you probably die of wrestling-related head injuries.”

“I’m not going to die of wrestling-related head injuries, Letty. If anything, I’m probably going to die because mobsters got mad that I wouldn’t throw fights for them.”

He spoke the last part so flippantly she almost rode right over it. Her next words were going to be *but you just told me the head injuries could happen*, until she took a second to process. Then she just had to stop what she had been doing—swimming lazy circles around the deep end—and stare at him.

Hard. Really, really hard.

“*What?* What did you just say? Tell me you did not just say that.”

“Uh...uh...I don’t really...I’m not sure I remember.”

He got a look on his face like someone trying to do algebra in their head.

She knew what he was really doing, however.

Attempting to think up lies.

“You just said mobsters. That was the word you used. *Mobsters.*”

“Well, they weren’t exactly mobsters.”

“Oh my god. So now not only are you competing in a sport you hate, you’re competing in a sport you hate that mobsters are trying to control in some kind of illegal gambling ring.”

“It sounds way out there when you put it like that.”

“How else would you put it?”

He shrugged one shoulder, expression suddenly sheepish.

“Kind of exactly like that.”

“But you didn’t say yes to them, right? You laughed and walked away.”

“I don’t think you really want to be laughing at these guys. One of them looks sort of like a lizard in a real fancy suit. Like, the suit had a little pocket for his handkerchief and everything.”

“I don’t know how it’s possible, but that somehow makes it even more disturbing.”

“Yeah, I sorta figured that. My first instinct was: don’t get involved with a guy who has a handkerchief that looks like a dagger coming out of his breast pocket.”

“I would definitely agree with that assessment.”

“Plus, you know the amount of money they were offering was terrifyingly huge...”

She didn’t like the way his eyes slid to one side as he trailed off.

Like he didn’t want to meet her gaze while considering just how huge it was.

“Tate. Tate, just hold on here. Tate.”

“Like, massively ridiculously enormous.”

“No, Tate. No, this is a no.”

“More money than I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“Tate, seriously. Not a good idea.”

“I could buy fifty of the trailers I grew up in.”

“Still, not a good idea.”

“My mom would never have to work again.”

He almost got her with that one. Well, that and the one before it combined. She got a little flash of what his home had looked like when he said *trailer*, and the memory wasn’t a good one. Even then, at the height of his awfulness, she had seen the rust and the way it leaned, and his mother outside struggling with the laundry, and felt a twinge of sympathy. Now the twinge was a great bleeding hole in her gut, gushing freely with each new revelation. She had to put a fist in it just to keep on this track.

But it was definitely the right thing to do.

She didn’t like how he looked—shifty, she thought.

Like he might just go out and get himself killed right when they were just starting to be friends.

“I get that, but no. You can find another way to be happy. Maybe make yourself a nice side career in movie reviewing or gradually dial back the wrestling once you’ve earned enough cash. Find *yourself* a boyfriend with a beard who can earn enough to pay for the fancy New York apartment.”

“You really think I could get a guy like that?”

“I *know* you could get a guy like that,” she said, so delighted he went with the joke that she didn’t notice his face at first. The smile in his eyes and on his lips slowly faded, until all that was left was a soft warmth that melted her from the inside out.

And that was before he spoke.

“You’re a really good person, you know that? Best I ever knew.”

Her eyes weren’t just stinging after that.

They were actively leaking.

“Great, now I’m crying again. That’s awesome. Good job!”

“I had to say it. You’re here trying to give me the life *I* want.”

“Anyone would want to do that, Tate.”

“Not the person I *stole* a life from.”

“You didn’t steal it. You borrowed it. And now you’re giving back way more than you ever took out.”

She expected a quiet nod in return. Or maybe some soft acceptance.

Instead, he threw up his hands. His head went back.

And his voice when he spoke was completely agonized.

“Oh you did *not* just say that. Why did you say that to me? Now *I*’m going to start bawling.”

“Hey, you started it! I wanted to have fun and instead you decided to tell me how all your hopes and dreams have basically died. Oh, and that you mostly feel like a big, gross dumbass, thanks to me.”

“No, not thanks to you, no that wasn’t what I was—” he started, but seemed to get so frustrated in the middle that he just stopped. He drew a line through the air with his hands, and decided to take a different tack altogether. “Okay, look, you were right. We need to have fun right now. We need to have, like, the most fun any human beings have ever had. You with me?”

“I’m with you. I’m absolutely with you.”

“Prepare yourself, girl, because fun is coming at you.”

“I’m so ready for it. Hit me with the fun,” she said.

About a second before every light in the place snapped off, with an audible clunk.

When she finally spoke, it was into the strange, still quiet that only happens in total darkness.

“I think that might have been a sign.”

“What? No way. Pitch blackness is perfect for the fun I had in mind.”

“It...it is? Because I was thinking it was more perfect for us getting butchered by the campus killer.”

“There is no campus killer,” he said, tone so sure she nearly believed it. And then he finished, completely deadpan: “The guy who got decapitated dragged that locker down onto himself.”

“There was a *guy* who got *decapitated*? Are you serious right now?”

“No, I’m absolutely not at all serious. I just wanted to see how high your voice would go.”

She splashed water—even though she suspected he was miles away. It was kind of hard to get a handle on his position, and not just because she couldn’t see six inches in front of her. She also suspected that he was constantly moving around now, as though the dark gave him freedom to do so. He wouldn’t suggest anything by moving suddenly closer. Or feel gross, when her eyes lit on his body.

And she knew this, because she felt the same way.

She was happy to stand in the shallower end now and reveal her T-shirt-clad body.

“You *asshole*. You know I crap my pants over slasher movies.”

“I did not know that, but am filing the information away for the horror module.”

That stopped her. Or did it stop him?

There was a sudden lack of splashing water, at least.

“You want to keep working with me after this is done?”

“Oh god no. I was planning on healing all your wounds by never speaking to you again after this semester.” She could almost hear the eye roll. The wonderful, amazing eye roll. “Are you serious right now?”

“I’m definitely rethinking the seriousness, if that helps.”

“It does, considering we’re supposed to be having the fun now.”

“We are having the fun. The fun has increased by a good thirty percent already.”

“See? I know how to get a party started.”

“Is that what we’re going to do? Party? In a deserted, completely dark pool?”

“Well maybe not party, exactly. But think about it—I can’t see you. You can’t see me.”

“Oh are we playing a round of state the obvious?”

“I was thinking more of Marco Polo.”

She went to protest after that, but it died on her lips. After all, what would she be protesting for? He was suggesting a harmless game that kids played. There was nothing scary or weird about that, no matter how dark it was. Though she had to say, it did seem darker than it had before. The blackness felt denser somehow, now that everything was so suddenly silent.

Why was everything so suddenly silent?

He was still moving, she was sure he was. Yet there was nothing—not even the hush of his breathing as he got closer and closer, or the splash as he dove down to grab at her legs.

Though she knew he would probably do it soon.

It was the reason she kept quiet, when he called out, “Marco.”

“Come on, Letty. You have to say *Polo*.”

“If I say it you’ll get me.”

“I’m going to get you anyway if you keep talking.”

“That isn’t fair. I need to keep talking to ward off ghosts.”

“Now we got ghosts *on top* of campus killers?”

“It’s probably the spirits of his murder victims.”

“That is some sound horror movie logic right there.”

“Why thank you. I pride myself on it.”

“You know what’s not sound though?” he asked, and she went to answer him. It was just that he got there first: “Discussing horror movie logic when you’re trying to avoid me doing *this*.”

She didn’t mean to scream. Or to sound so delighted when she did the screaming. Part of her had thought she really *was* unsettled, that her heart was only pounding out of fear, that she was shivering because of nerves or anxiety. But then he got her in a kind of bear hug, and somehow everything

was upside down and inside out. She was almost laughing through her yelp of surprise.

And then he spun her around, and that *almost* disappeared.

The noise that came out of her was rich and full bodied. It sounded like the sort of thing other people did, at fairgrounds while holding hands in Taylor Swift videos. She even threw her head back the way they did, and clung to his big arms tightly. It was only afterward that she thought about where his hand was: directly underneath her barely covered breasts.

Or how something very bare and low skimmed something equally bare and low on him, as he spun her.

Before he set her down, and pushed away.

“Okay, now it’s your turn. You find me,” he said, voice just a touch breathless.

Though she was sure it was just the effort of lifting her. That was probably why he seemed like he was struggling to contain it—he didn’t want to offend her.

“Oh god, Tate, I’m terrible about this. I couldn’t even hear your voice getting closer.”

“I’ll talk louder this time. Come on, give it a shot. It’s a pretty small pool and I’m a pretty big guy.”

Still, she hesitated before calling out to him.

And when she finally tried, her efforts were halting. Wavery, as though he’d poked a finger into all the places that were sure and steady and sent ripples darting through them.

“Marco.”

“Polo.”

His voice came from somewhere to her left, she knew. And when he replied a second time, she guessed correctly that he was only a few steps away. Yet for some reason, she didn’t go in that direction. She went the other way, arms out in front of her as though she was really trying. If he could see her, somehow, he would never suspect she was avoiding him.

“I don’t think you’re playing the game right, Letty.”

“It is *beyond* dark in here. How do you even know that?”

“I know it because I’m basically an inch from you and you’re disappearing over there.”

“Maybe I just want to build the suspense. Keep you guessing, and then, *blammo.*”

“Or maybe you just want to avoid touching me.”

“That’s not even remotely true, Tate.”

“Give me your hands, then.”

“What?”

She made a scrunched-up, incredulous face to back the word up.

But she didn’t know why. He couldn’t see it.

“Let me help you grab.”

“Oh no that—” she started, but never got to finish. The words snapped shut the moment he took hold of her hands. Just the way he went about it was enough to silence her—fingers like thick bracelets around her wrists, his grip sure and warm but not insistent.

And then he placed her hands on his body.

She had no idea where. It could have been his chest or his stomach or his right thigh for all she knew, though in truth it barely mattered. It was the darkness and the silence and the idea of what he was doing that really set her heart off. He was making her touch him, and not in an obviously innocent way. This wasn’t like resting her head on his shoulder—that had been as platonic as you can get.

She could have been a kid there.

Here everything was very adult. He slid her hands over him, so slowly she could make out almost every bump and groove. She felt the scar she had seen him get when Brian Wannamaker snapped one of his ribs through his skin; the oddly feminine-feeling curve of his waist; the braid of his abdominal muscles that always looked so brutal from across a field or a gym. They bulged, in her memory. They did vicious, violent things. But in the quiet darkness, everything was different *He* was different. He could have been anyone standing there. Just some faceless hunk, gently persuading her to explore and uncover all the things she would never really get to again. She would never touch him like this in the daylight. And no other man like this was ever going to want her to. This was it, and for one delirious moment it made her eager. She came close to squeezing when he passed her fingers over his chest, and actually did when he got to his biceps.

In fact, by the time he got to his shoulders he wasn’t helping her at all. His hands left hers but she kept going, uncovering each new part like an

archaeologist unearthing the bones of an undiscovered dinosaur. She marveled over the slabs of his shoulder blades and the hollow at the base of his back—so deep she felt sure she could have slid right down into it.

And his hips. Lord his hips.

He had those arrows of muscle, she knew he did. Yet it was shocking to feel them beneath her searching fingers. They formed such a deep ridge that — “Letty, *goddamn it!*”

She snapped away the second she heard her name.

Though it was not the name that dragged her back to the reality of what she’d just done. It was his tone, sharp and frantic. It was that *goddamn it* on the end, almost cut off but not quite. They were the things that made it clear: *she had almost gotten to the waistband of his shorts*. Her hands had roamed below his navel, below his abs, below any point of friendly decency.

They might have even gone lower if he hadn’t shouted.

And she suspected he knew it. He wasn’t laughing, or saying anything else. There was just more of that thick silence—only now it seemed more like a nightmare than a secure little safety net. Even the darkness was no longer her friend, because darkness meant she couldn’t read his expression. Was he furious? Was this outrage? It seemed like it, but she had no way of knowing for sure.

She couldn’t ask him. She could barely explain. All she managed was an abrupt *it was just an accident*.

But he didn’t respond. He kept his silence, until she suggested they get out of the pool.

And then he said the worst possible thing she could imagine.

“We...what? Why do we...are you...I think that...things.”

She had broken him, apparently.

Broken him with her wandering hands.

“I...I don’t know what any of that means.”

“It means that I have...thinkings.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Totally. Fine.”

“There were a lot of periods in that last sentence.”

“*You* have a lot of periods,” he said, like a little kid saying I’m rubber and you’re glue. Only then he seemed to realize it hadn’t come out right,

and tried to correct himself. He tried to correct himself really, really badly. “In your sentences, I mean. Not in the *other* way, because obviously you have a lot of those. And that is a good thing, a normal thing, I wasn’t suggesting that was weird that you have periods.” He took a big breath—big enough that she could hear it. Big enough that she knew what it meant, before he verbally shook his head at himself. “Man, I am just saying a ton of words right now.”

“I know. I hear all of them.”

“That getting-out idea was probably the way to go.”

“Yeah, that seems best, I think.”

“Right, right, right. So lead the way,” he said.

And that was when she realized what her suggestion meant.

She was still in her underwear. Her soaking-wet underwear, which he would now be able to see in full Technicolor from head to foot. There would be no hiding under a veil of water once they climbed out. No darkness to cover her once he flicked on the lights. And he was going to flick them on, too. It was the first thing he mentioned once they’d fumbled their way out of the pool.

“Stay there,” he said. “I’ll go get them turned on.”

Then she had to just wait for her doom, in the dark.

Of course she thought about simply leaving. It would mean putting her wet clothes on, but she could manage that. And there were excuses she could make to him later. *I needed the bathroom* seemed plausible, as did *I felt unwell*. But by the time she’d come up with a plan he had returned, the light from the locker rooms now bright behind him. So bright, in fact, that she could see almost all of him.

Which meant he could probably see almost all of her.

In fact, she knew he could. His eyes stayed so tightly on her face they could have been superglued there. Every word he said about the lights was spoken carefully, haltingly, as though he feared jolting his gaze down. And when she moved in his direction, he seemed to look somewhere just above her head—like walking increased the danger of seeing something he shouldn’t.

Certainly it increased the danger for her. She saw a lot of things she didn’t mean to when he turned and started back toward the locker rooms. His shorts, for example, which were very small and very tight over the high,

well-rounded shape of his perfect ass. She could practically see every shift and flex of them, even in this meager light. And if he turned back around—
“Letty, I was just talking to you. Are you cool with that?”

Pringles can, she thought, then wanted to kick herself.

“Yeah, totally. I’m totally cool with it. Totally fine.”

“Really? Because if you want I can go back and look for the switch.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m okay...with this.”

She smiled and nodded.

But probably wouldn’t have done if she’d paid the least bit of attention to what he had just said. He had told her what she then discovered: the women’s locker room was still in darkness. The men’s was the only one lit up, and that meant she’d just agreed to go in there with him. To shower with him and dry herself off with him and get dressed with him—or at least to do those things with him extremely close by.

Too close by, if the locker room was anything to go by. Everything was completely open plan and brighter than the surface of the sun. No banks of lockers partitioned off the place. They just lined the walls and left shy people to fend for themselves.

And the showers...

“I can probably go without a shower.”

He turned as soon as she spoke, brow crumpled in a cross between incredulity and confusion.

She had no idea why, however. He couldn’t even look at her below the chin, never mind anything as intimate as getting under the spray and soaping himself up right next to her.

“Seriously? You don’t want to get all the chlorine out?”

“No, I’m good. You go ahead. I’ll just wait here.”

“I’m not going to look if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“No, god no, of course not. I mean, why would you?”

“Right. Exactly,” he said, then seemed to pause, considering. Like he knew he’d just done something wrong. And after a second, he got it. He got an implication even she hadn’t really thought about. “Unless you think that I...it’s not that I don’t *want* to look. Anyone would want to look at those... well you know. No, I just meant I would be a gentleman about it, obviously.”

Those, she thought.

Then had to fight not to panic.

“Oh yeah, yeah I know that. I know that you would be.”

“Cool, okay. I guess...I should just get you a spare towel here and some clothes you can put on...they’re not ideal, but they have to be better than putting on your wet things.”

Or being half naked in front of you for a second longer, she thought.

But of course she didn’t say. He was being so good about not looking at her. There really wasn’t anything to worry about—not even when she slipped her panties off behind the makeshift shield of his draped sweatpants. He was still pretty close by, but he never once gave the impression that he was sneaking a peek at her thighs whenever they edged around the corner of the material.

Oh no, no, no.

No, it was *her* who wound up doing the peeking.

Though she had no idea how. She thought she was completely occupied with tying knots in the material in order to make the waistband fit her apparently not-so-huge middle. Her eyes weren’t anywhere near him. In fact, she even turned her back to him once the sweatpants were on.

Though maybe that was the problem. She didn’t know where he was when she glanced up again.

She imagined him behind her, with his shorts still firmly on his body.

Instead of completely naked, under the spray of a shower she was now facing.

Of course, she immediately whipped back around. But it was just too late. She had seen Tate Sullivan without any clothes on, no matter how much she tried to pretend otherwise. *It was just an elbow and a foot,* she told herself, while the image of his bare ass flashed up at the forefront of her mind a thousand times. In fact, it was still flashing up by the time she’d pulled the T-shirt on.

She closed her eyes and it was all she could see—the soap suds slowly trailing over those taut curves, making everything glossy and golden. The glimpse of the dark shape between his legs when he turned a little, heavy looking and as shocking as he had suggested, and most important, fucking private. She was intruding on his privacy in the grossest possible way—a realization that made her cheeks heat. Somehow she was the one who hadn’t behaved like a decent person, both in the swimming pool and here.

She had touched him in inappropriate places and ogled his naked body when he assumed she wasn't looking, and *man*, that hit her hard in the humiliation center.

Doing all of this was bad enough.

But doing it to *Tate*, of all people.

She didn't find him gross at all, but she also didn't find him attractive. So what was going on here? Was it just curiosity? Surely anyone would wonder about that thick, dark shape between his legs. And his butt was pretty spectacular. It was probably just natural to find yourself hypnotized by it.

Everything was fine here.

Apart from how high she jumped when he suddenly spoke too close to her ear.

"You sure you don't want to go in?"

"Oh. Yeah. No. Cool. No. No."

She let out a little laugh.

A really, really unconvincing little laugh.

"Water's super warm. My shower gel is moisturizing."

"No, honestly, I just...I think I...just want to go," she said, thinking mostly of the safe, fully clothed haven of her dorm. Or at the very least, her mind was on avoiding the sight of him tugging on his clothes.

It didn't even occur to her how she would get there, until he offered to carry her.

Then she remembered her shoes at the bottom of the pool, and briefly flailed out of control.

"No, god, no," she barked out, so loud he jerked back. He stopped straightening the T-shirt he'd put on, a million explanations for something he hadn't done on his lips.

She had to cut in quick, before the whole thing turned into a disaster.

"I just meant that we probably don't want everyone seeing you swoop me out of here in your clothes, after we took a swim together. You know? People will definitely talk then."

"Oh, I got you, right. That makes sense." He laughed, but it was an awkward one. And he was blushing, too; god, why was he blushing? "Because for a second there I thought you were afraid, or like creeped out."

"No, no, not creeped out. Just thinking of your reputation."

“Hey, I care more about your bare feet than my reputation. Just let me help you out here, okay? If it makes more sense I can just give you a piggyback. What do you think?”

“I guess a piggyback might be better.”

“It totally will. No one can say anything about that.”

He knelt down in front of her, back turned for her to climb up.

Completely innocently, she knew, but being innocent didn't seem to matter anymore.

Things had gotten weird, and they were only getting weirder.

“What are you waiting for?” he asked, but she had no answer for him.

Saying *the image of your cock to fade* seemed like a real mistake, in light of the touching she had done. And lying was out of the question—at that moment, she could barely remember her own name.

Her only real option was just climbing aboard, but when she did everything got so much more intense.

He lifted her like she was made of paper, so high and so fast it stole her breath. It made her dizzy—as did everything else about this innocent, friendly piggyback ride. His back seemed super tight to her chest, those big shoulder blades shifting and sliding right where she least wanted them to. And the grip he had on her thighs...it was way too firm. She would probably have bruises tomorrow.

Beautiful bruises, her mind supplied.

Before she quickly changed the subject in her head. It was a little easier to do that now, after all. There were at least ten other things to pay attention to once they were outside. The grounds were so dark and quiet, as though they'd been in there for hours and hours. And when she asked, it turned out they had. It was nearly one in the morning, on a Wednesday night. Everyone was in bed, and it gave an eerie feeling to their journey.

As did his silence.

He was always talking—she realized that then. Sometimes he practically kept up a running commentary on everything and anything, yet here he was as quiet as stone. And it wasn't because he was exerting himself. He didn't breathe hard once the whole time. He could have been carrying a backpack full of air for all the physical trouble she seemed to cause him.

But the idea of mental trouble lingered. When she tilted her head a little, she could practically hear his mind going over and over things, in a way that just wasn't like him. He was easygoing. Happy-go-lucky. He never worried about things the way she did.

Until now.

"Tate, are you okay?"

"Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?"

"I don't know. You just seem a little..."

Like an ominous statue of yourself.

"I was just thinking what movie we should watch."

"Oh. Oh. You mean...right now?"

"Well, that's what you came to get me for."

"That's true, I did come and get you for that."

"Unless you don't want me in your room so late."

"No, no why would I...no, that's cool."

"You're in the Haverford Building, right?"

She had the strongest urge to ask him how he knew. But that seemed just as weird as objecting to him being in her room.

Instead she pointed, then wished she hadn't. Her bare arm brushed his face.

His stubble-bristled, firm-jawed, weirdly tense-seeming face.

"Yeah. You just go past the science block and then—"

"Right, right, right I got it, I got it. The statue of MLK is outside it, yeah?"

"That's the one. Then it's the third floor. Don't worry though, there's an elevator."

"Ah, it wouldn't have been a big deal. Feel like I could carry you around forever."

Her whole body seemed to flush at that, though she had no idea why. It wasn't an insult. In fact it veered very close to a compliment—one that rang true, too. He was no more tired when he got to her door than he had been when they started out. He didn't even put her down right away, which gave her a moment of panic.

Someone was going to see eventually, if they were just standing out here with her on his back.

It seemed like a miracle no one had already, despite the time. His footsteps were pretty heavy, and Lydia in particular was a very light sleeper...

“Do you wanna let me unlock the door?”

“Oh shit, yeah. Yeah, go ahead,” he said, and she slid off his back gratefully. Those big hands stopped squeezing high up on her thighs; her front no longer had to endure the heat of his broad back. Everything had returned to the way it should be now between them.

Except for the sexy movie they were now going to watch.

Alone. Together. On her bed. In the middle of the night.

Chapter 13

She let him pick the movie, thinking that would make things easier somehow. Nothing could be misconstrued, at least, that way. He wouldn't think she meant anything by her choice, whatever it might be. But she forgot that he might mean something with *his* choice. She watched the heroine trying to clumsily pick up the hero at the start of *White Palace*, and cringed so hard it felt more like a cramp in her gut. Her cheeks grew hot, in a way that made her grateful for the dim light of her feeble bedside lamp.

Otherwise he would see her face go red and know she understood his point—despite the fact that his point was fucking nonsense. She hadn't tried to seduce him with all that pool touching. She would never, ever try to seduce him. It was just all a big misunderstanding.

But how to explain that?

“This is even less realistic than *Dirty Dancing*.”

“Really? You think so? Like, in what way?”

“It just seems like she keeps pushing and pushing. No woman would push a guy that good-looking if he didn't seem into it. I can't think of anything more embarrassing.”

She didn't look at him, but knew he shrugged.

His arm rubbed against hers as he did it.

“Maybe she doesn't care.”

“I guess not.”

“Maybe she knows he's actually into it.”

“That could be one explanation.”

“Plus she obviously gets exactly what she was looking for.”

Onscreen, Susan Sarandon was going down on James Spader.

Which to her didn't seem to back up his point at all.

“Oh yeah, I'm sure she's having a great time getting absolutely nothing out of this.”

“That's what this looks like to you? Like she's getting nothing out of this?”

“Well, in movies they make it look like she is. But I doubt she really would be.”

“You doubt that giving a guy a blow job could be enjoyable for a woman.”

She glanced at him then, just to see if his expression was as incredulous as his voice.

Then had to look back at the screen quickly. If anything, his expression was worse. He had one eyebrow raised, and there was almost no humor in his eyes. This was serious somehow.

Much too serious.

“I don’t know. I mean it’s not really something you do for your own enjoyment. You do it for his.”

“So to you there’s nothing pleasurable about it. Nothing sexy about having a guy at your mercy. Begging you, moaning for you, trying not to push too deep when it gets too good.”

“You *do* those things?”

The words came out too fast. Too disbelieving, too.

But she just couldn’t stop them. They ripped out of her before she had time to talk it over with her mind, all ragged around the edges and maybe a little breathless. Just enough that he likely heard it, and wondered why. She couldn’t tell him, however. She didn’t know herself.

She only knew that when he started talking again she had the urge to put her fingers in her ears.

“*Of course* I do those things. Having your cock sucked is fucking amazing,” he said, which was absolutely fine. But then he kept going. He kept going. “The *heat* and the *slickness* and her looking up at you as she works it with her hands and lips and tongue. Especially the tongue. The tongue is the best part. Watching it curl right around the—”

“Well, okay, it sounds cool when you put it that way.”

God her voice sounded loud. And too fast again, too.

All her words practically jumbled together.

“I don’t know what other way it could possibly *be*.”

“How about *hold still while I fuck your face*? Some guy coming right in your eye? Losing a chunk of hair because he pulled too hard?”

“You’re not serious. Tell me honestly. None of that happened.”

Now his voice was bright with amusement.

But it didn’t make her feel any better.

“All of that happened. To me. More than once.”

“Yeah but *after*...”

“After what?”

“After he came then he...”

He made a circle with his hand, as though she should know that one thing logically followed on from the other. It was all completely easy and obvious.

Instead of the hardest quiz she had ever had to get through.

“Then he *what?* Gave me cab fare?”

“No. No. After that then *this* happens.”

She glanced at the thing he was pointing at.

Then had to look away again, quick. At her hands, at the bedspread.

At him, as he oh-so-slowly realized what her sudden awkwardness meant.

“This has never happened to you. Holy shit. You’ve never had a guy go down on you.”

“I *have* had a guy go down on me. I totally have.”

“Are you sure about that? You don’t look sure.”

“Well, maybe not like *this*.”

“There’s no other way to do it. This is actually the most basic, ordinary way to go about eating pussy.”

“Yeah, but this seems really exciting and sexy and hot.”

“Going down on a girl *is* really exciting and sexy and hot. Like I said about giving a guy head? Exactly the same principle. You get to see her writhe and shake and push herself against your mouth. Just like that, just like Sarandon is doing. Look at her. Look at her.”

“I am. I am looking,” she said, but she wasn’t, not really.

She was thinking of the shiver that had gone through her when he said *look*, soft as butter and so oddly tender. And the way that he was looking himself, eyes almost far away.

Like he was seeing Sarandon, but putting someone else in her place.

“Think about how it must feel.”

“Yeah I can...I get that...”

“Think about his tongue slowly easing over her soft folds.”

“Is that...how...is that what you...”

“Uh-huh.”

“And it works?”

Her voice was a whisper now.

But that was okay. His was, too.

It was so low he had to lean close to ask her questions.

He had to meet her gaze, and she had to meet his.

“What works?”

“It makes her...you know. Come.”

“Oh yeah. But you gotta take your time.”

“I see. I guess that makes sense.”

“Let it build, nice and slow. Start by just stroking her with your fingertips. Work her, you know, until her lips part. And then when she’s all open to you, you just trace the shape of her with your tongue. Lick and lick in these ever decreasing circles until you’re right...fucking...*there*.”

“Where? Where...where are you?”

She shouldn’t have asked. She knew she shouldn’t as soon as it was out. Their faces were too close together now, and his body seemed to be looming over hers. That was his shoulder, almost nudging her chin. And his thigh, pressing deep and hard into hers. His answer was never going to make any of this better.

Then it came, hotter than molten lava and twice as destructive.

“Her clit. Her slick, swollen clit.”

“I see. That makes sense,” she said, even though that wasn’t what she wanted to go with.

No, what she wanted to go with was more like *oh my fucking God this can’t be reality*.

“Then you just...stroke it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Until she’s mindless.”

“Yeah. Yeah.”

“Doesn’t even know what she’s saying anymore, or doing. She might tell you to bite, to fuck her with your tongue and fingers, harder or faster or some word that doesn’t even make sense. Hips coming up to meet you, greedy for it, horny for it, so horny she barely notices that her hand is in your hair and she’s squeezing tight enough for it to sting, so close to coming that her whole body is shuddering and shivering and flushed that deep, good pink. Soon as you see it you just know she’s burning. That her clit is aching and throbbing and her pussy is all open and slippery, and one more second of this will make her come. She’s already coming, before you even know where you’re at. Hard, hard, hard, like she never has before.”

She was holding her breath by the time he was done. She practically had to—his face was so close now she could have blinked and brushed his cheek with her eyelashes. Every word he said seemed to stroke against her face, cool at first but then more heated. As though he was starting to boil alive inside, too. Certainly he looked that way. She has never seem him flushed like this, not even when he pushed himself during a match.

Not even when he was embarrassed.

Though she supposed that wasn't a common occurrence. He didn't seem to be embarrassed now, and he'd just said all those words. He said *clit* and *pussy* and *slippery*, as if that was just a normal way to talk to your friend. And he did it all without flinching, too. Without glancing away or putting some distance between them. In fact, those eyes of his—now heavy lidded and so soft focus—seemed intent on her more than they ever had been before. They skittered all over her face, searching for something she had no idea how to give.

She didn't even know what the something was.

She only knew that it made her forget herself, just as he had described.

It made her search his face back, marveling over every brutish line and gentle curve. Those lips of his, as plump as a girl's yet so masculine at the same time. Like they'd been punched to swollen sweetness, without the stain of a bruise or the slash of some bloody split. Every inch of them gleaming, as if he'd slicked them with gloss in anticipation of a kiss.

Though even in that moment she didn't really believe she wanted that.

Until he whispered, low and heavy against her own lips.

"You can, you know."

"Can what?"

"Touch yourself."

It jolted her, when he said it.

But not as much as realizing *why* he said it.

She followed his gaze down, and took in the unmistakable sight of her hand in her lap. Really, really high up in her lap. Almost between her legs, in fact—though that was fine, it was cool, it was okay. She stuttered *no, no I didn't really want to do that*, but it didn't matter.

Because his hand was *actually* between his legs.

"I do," he said.

As the whole world as she knew it dissolved right in front of her eyes.

“You do?”

“Fuck, yes. I’m *dying* to.”

“Because of the film. Because of the movie.”

“Sure. We can say that, if you want.”

She closed her eyes. Swallowed thickly.

Wished hard that he hadn’t added that last part.

“If we could that would be awesome.”

“No problem. I mean it was probably inevitable that this would happen to us.”

“Probably, yeah. Almost definitely, in fact.”

“Just a natural response to a sexy movie.”

“Seems that way to me.”

“So you just slip your hand under your waistband, and I’ll slip my hand under mine,” he said, which was fine all on its own. The problem was that he then went ahead and *did it*. She tried not to look, but saw anyway. She saw the way he fumbled in his haste, as though all his talk was only calm on the surface. Underneath, something was paddling frantically. It was making his cheeks pink and his body all trembly.

And his dick hard. God, his dick was hard.

She could see that without even trying at all. The curving shape beneath his sweatpants was enormous and unmistakable, and even if it hadn’t been, his hand made it pretty clear. As she watched, he eased it over that solid length, before finally clasping it in a way that shoved the swollen head right up against the tented material. Now she could make out ruder details, like the thick ridge around the head, and the slit at the tip. Both pronounced, explicit, *rude*.

But that wasn’t what really got her.

It was the way he stopped to lick his palm, before shoving it under his waistband.

“Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god, are you serious?”

“It’s cool. it’s fine. We don’t even have to look at each other.”

“No I guess not. I guess...I guess that I can just watch the screen.”

“We’re just two people getting off over a hot movie.”

“Exactly. Exactly.”

But that wasn’t strictly true. She wasn’t getting off over the movie at all. Nothing was even happening anymore—it was just rich people looking

down their noses and arguments over a Dustbuster. If anything, it was vaguely depressing, rather than lust-inducing.

Yet still she sat there, face burning, body tender and rigid all at the same time. Half of her stuffed so full of embarrassment and shock she sort of wanted to block everything out, the other half just shamelessly straining to hear every single tiny sound he made. Never daring to look, of course, but then...

She really didn't need to.

He made so much noise that she could make out almost everything. Every little moan and gasp—and there were a lot of them, too. Lots of thick, guttural moans that started on an *ah* and ended with a kind of abrupt sigh, as though a knife had sliced through his throat before he could finish. So many soft *mmms* and gasps, like he honestly couldn't get enough of whatever he was doing.

Though it was the whispers that hit her hardest. They got her right in the gut, low down and deep enough to ache. *Oh yeah*, he murmured, as though the hottest sex in the world was happening onscreen. As though they were fucking like animals, up and down and left and right. His tone even sounded sort of tremulous, and it got more intense as time went on. Soon he was panting, and rocking, and every now and then uttering something he was clearly imagining himself doing.

“Ah, yeah, suck my cock, just like that,” he said.

Then just to make it extra agonizing, he spat into his hand.

To make it extra slick, she thought, like someone's mouth. Someone sucking him the way he'd described, slow and steady until he was actually shuddering, right here and now. The bed was moving, at least, and it wasn't because he was working that cock hard. He wasn't. He was going slow, so slow, squeezing and rolling rather than the short, fast kind of thing she'd always thought guys did. They almost never seemed to do anything else in porn...but then again they never did all this other stuff, too. She dared to turn her head a little more and saw to her astonishment that he had his hand pressed to his mouth. He was almost biting his fist, chest heaving, body shivering all over—but most important, *eyes closed*.

He couldn't even see her looking. She was free to do as she pleased.

Yet something held her back. She couldn't seem to do more than peek out of the corner of her eye, and even that made her feel strange. She kept

getting this clenching sensation—sort of like embarrassment or humiliation—and it got worse when his back arched. When he actually said out loud that he was almost there, that he was so close, that he was gonna come all over her sheets. *I need something to do it on*, he said, and even that had a shameful frisson of its own. She had a brief flash of him kneeling up and suddenly coming all over her face, or maybe pulling down that ridiculously large neck hole to expose her breasts.

Followed by an image of that thick white liquid coating her, striping her face, dripping off her tight little nipples. Him pushing his cock past her lips to finish off, groaning as he flooded her mouth.

And he would have flooded it, too. She glanced at him just in time to see him shove his sweatpants down, that big dick swelling under the pressure of his too-tight grip. Thick ribbons of come already hitting his bared belly, over and over until she was sure he must be done. He had to be, yet more kept flowing over his still-working fist. She watched it run down over his fingers in slippery trails before pooling in his lap.

Though none of it was what she kept seeing behind her eyes in the aftermath. Instead, she saw the way his face had looked as he shot his load. The open mouth, and the closed eyes, and most of all the strange, wrenching vulnerability that had covered him for a moment. No mischief, no macho bullshit—just a completely open and abandoned sort of ecstasy.

And all of it for her.

He knew she had watched him. He still knew now. She flicked her eyes back to the screen as he started to catch his breath, but the first thing he did was include her.

“Guess I kind of made a mess here,” he said, everything about his tone suggesting two conspirators, finishing off their evil deed. She even got up after he’d said it, to get him a tissue.

Though when she got back he’d pretty much taken care of most of it.

She stopped in the doorway to the bathroom at the sight: Him, casually licking his messy fingers.

It took her a good two minutes after that to go over to him, with her fistful of toilet paper. And when she did go, it was on very shaky legs. Her whole body felt shaky, in fact—though not in any way she’d experienced before. This was like being full to the brim with something burning hot, skin so close to ripping that it couldn’t keep still. Sometimes she thought

she could see it shivering slightly under the strain, and every inch of it was tender, so tender. His leg brushed hers as she sat down, and it was *agony*.

She even winced—then immediately regretted it.

He had been concentrating on cleanup. Now he looked up at her sharply.

And asked questions she was loath to answer.

“Have you...not? I mean have you not—”

“I couldn’t. I’m sorry, I couldn’t.”

“God, you must be bursting.”

“Honestly, I’m fine.”

The problem was though, she didn’t *seem* fine.

She couldn’t meet his gaze. Her hands were fists on her thighs.

And of course he could see all of that.

“You *look* like you’re bursting.”

“Oh yeah? And what does bursting look like?”

“Your voice is shaking.”

“Is it?” she asked, voice so light it almost passed.

Almost, almost, almost.

“Your cheeks are flushed.”

“Are they?”

“And then there’s the fact that your nipples are like diamonds. Fuck, look how stiff they are. Isn’t that agonizing, having them like that? I bet your clit’s the same. Bet your pussy is soooooo wet. So wet you’re making a mess of my nice, clean clothes.”

Her cheeks grew hotter and hotter as he whispered each word. By the time he was done they felt like they were going to melt right off her face. That tense, cringing feeling in her stomach was ten times worse, and that was *before* he got to the last point. The one about the clothes, and the mess, and oh god what if he was right? It felt as if he might be. She wasn’t wearing any underwear, and everything was really slippery between her legs. She could feel it, every time she moved.

“Oh fuck, sorry, sorry I don’t...I hope...it’s just that—”

“Honey, you don’t need an explanation.”

His tone was like sinking into a warm bath—and the thumb she could feel stroking over her forearm only pulled her deeper down. He just did it so idly. So like he wasn’t touching her at all.

Before she knew it she was up to her ears in liquid heat.

“Are you sure? Because it kind of feels like I do.”

“I’m sure. I mean, the movie *was* pretty intense.”

“Right, exactly. Super intense.”

“So why deny yourself?”

“I’m not...denying...anything.”

“I could leave, if you want.”

“No, god no,” she said, too fast and too fierce.

Though it was only afterward that she realized how it sounded: Not like someone trying to say she didn’t want to masturbate.

Like someone saying that she wanted him to stay.

And he took it that way, too.

“Or, you know. I could just...do it for you,” he said.

Then she just had to do her best not to go out of her mind.

She stopped herself from jumping up. Kept her hands from flailing.

Didn’t look at him, in case looking made her do something crazy.

“Oh my god. You can’t be serious. You can’t be serious.”

“Probably wouldn’t take a lot.”

“I *always* take a lot.”

“Even when you’re alone?”

“Especially when I’m alone.”

“Well, maybe we should see about that.”

Again, she had the urge to get up. Maybe she even would have, if it hadn’t been for the other things he was doing. The thumb stroking her arm was now the back of his hand, running the length of her arm over and over. And that was his breath against the curve of her throat, so close and warm he could have been kissing her there. It *felt* like kissing.

Only without the scariness of the real thing.

All of this was without the scariness of the real thing.

It was just a game, that was all—and one that she could win if she really put her mind to it. He thought he could get her so easily, but he was utterly and completely wrong. She was a rock, in the face of whatever he was going to do. She was impervious to the pleasure he seemed to think he was going to dole out, to the point where she almost laughed when he slipped his hand beneath the waistband of those too-big sweatpants.

It was weird. Slightly uncomfortable.

Not sexy in the least.

And then his fingertips just oh-so-lightly grazed the pouting lips of her swollen pussy, and things pretty much started to go downhill from there. The sensation it sent through her was just so intense, and over something so small. He hadn't even slipped between them to her clit, or eased a finger into her slick little hole. In truth, she wasn't entirely sure he'd touched her at all.

Yet she still had to clench her jaw.

She had to tell herself that it was just the stuff that had happened before—the film and him coming and then licking his fingers like a satisfied cat. It wasn't anything to do with this right now, with him touching her, with his skill. He wasn't skillful at all. He was terrible. Awful.

The worst lover she had ever had.

She had no idea why her thighs were trembling. Or what made her moan when he finally, finally, finally eased his fingers into that slick slit, and then topped it off by telling her just what he found there.

“Ohhhh fuuuuck you are wet. You're so wet. Jesus Christ, Letty, how can you stand it? How can you sit still and quiet with those eyes closed when your pussy is like this? So slippery I can just glide all the way down and ease on in and oh man, oh man,” he said, and all she could do in response was shiver and make a number of embarrassing noises. First for his words, and then oh god then for the *feel* of him doing it.

He used two fingers—two of those long, thick fingers—yet somehow it didn't hurt when he pushed into her. There was no fumbling or searching. Her body just seemed to open for him, as though they'd dated for years and he'd worked on her for hours. He knew exactly how to touch her there, and when he did she simply had to respond. Her gasp rung out in the small room.

Though she vowed it would be the last one. That was it now—she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of anything else. Not even when he started working his fingers in and out, slow and steady and so unbelievably good she kind of wanted to cry over the unfairness of it. Why was *he* the one who had to be so good at this? How did *he* know how to do it in this deliberate, teasing, tantalizing way?

Even watching him do it was exciting. She made the mistake of glancing down and all she could see was his hand rolling beneath the

material, the waistband occasionally stretching to give her a glimpse of her glossy cunt, his gleaming fingers, the way she was spread around that thick intrusion...

Fuck.

She had to look at the screen just to stop herself coming right then and there—though even those measures had an exciting quality of their own. James Spader was just doing something incredibly dull now, while she sat here watching through slitted eyelids, cheeks flushed and legs spread, as a man slowly fingered her slick, flushed pussy. Back and forth, back and forth, until she was so beside herself she wasn't sure she even *wanted* to hold back her moans.

She only knew that she was still trying, for reasons that seemed vague and far away now. *It just doesn't matter*, her mind hissed, but she kept it up anyway. She held herself more tightly and bit deep into her lip—deep enough that she tasted blood. And when he started to ease those fingers up, she shut her eyes tight. She thought of other things, more boring things: dry books and bird-watching.

All to no avail. He made one circle around her clit.

Just one tiny, insignificant circle, and that was it.

Her orgasm rolled up from that stiff little bud, in one all-consuming and all-powerful wave. It took away her control over her body—her toes curled tight and her back arched. But most important, it took away her control over her mouth. It let one little word slip out.

Though one little word was more than enough.

“Tate,” she said, and after that the game was pretty much up. That was gratitude in her voice and pleasure in the sigh behind it, and all wrapped in the neat little bow of his name. There was no more pretending that it wasn't him who had made her feel this way, or suggesting that all of this was just a game.

And he knew it immediately.

“Holy shit, holy shit,” he said, as though she'd cried out the filthiest thing on the face of the earth. And he didn't stop there. She could hear him fumbling with the waistband of his sweatpants already—though she tried to turn it into something else in her head. He was just pulling them up, she thought. They had slid down as he serviced her, that was all.

Only it wasn't all.

When she made the mistake of glancing his way, she saw so much more than she was ready for. It was supposed to be over now, completely over, but he'd shoved everything down to midthigh and his cock was in his hand again and *god god god* why was it so arousing? She'd had one orgasm already. He'd had one orgasm already, and now he was being so fucking filthy.

Yet somehow the filthiness only made it worse.

She came searingly close to telling him *yes*.

And *go on*.

And *come all over me*—just like she'd imagined.

For one wild second, it even seemed like he might. He was groaning and panting and he kept saying things, incredible things like *do you see what you do to me do you get how fucking horny you make me oh fuck just hearing you moan my name*. His hand was heavy on her shoulder, and she knew he was close. He was going to yank her top down any second now.

Any second, she thought.

Though she didn't realize how much she wanted it until the first thick burst slid over his fist.

Didn't know how little control she had over herself until he grunted her name and shuddered violently, that slick fluid easing over his still-pumping fist. After all, if she'd had any she would have stayed right where she was, content to just watch.

Instead of leaning forward to take that heavy, swollen, slippery head in her mouth, to catch the last ribbons of his salt-sweet come all over her eager tongue.

Chapter 14

The first she thing she wanted to do when she saw Lydia the next morning in the cafeteria was confess. But that was the whole problem: it felt like confessing, rather than just plain old telling. As if she had committed a terrible crime, and once it was out her beautiful, bright, funny, awesome friend would have to demote her to casual acquaintance or even mortal enemy. At the very least, Lydia was going to find her insufferably stupid. There was nothing clever about letting your high school bully come in your mouth.

Or rub you between your legs.

Or make you feel so good you still had an echo of that pleasure thrumming through your body the next day. She took her seat at the cafeteria table and got a sudden flash of it all behind her eyes. The way he had looked when he came; the feel of him all slick and hard in her mouth. And though her first response was to squeeze her eyes shut and wince, her second was more like a sort of melting.

It was intolerable. Her body was actively defying her good sense.

And there was just no way of explaining that to Lydia. Lydia made wise choices when it came to men. In fact, the first thing she said once they were settled was about Brad Gunderson. Tall, kind, clever Brad Gunderson, who got his picture in the college newspaper after organizing a soup kitchen for the homeless.

“He did a twenty-mile run to raise money for cancer awareness you know,” Lydia said.

And all Letty could do was nod weakly in reply.

Then let Lydia take the lead in what was surely going to be a conversation from hell.

“The real question I have to ask myself though is: is he hot?”

Not as hot as Tate Sullivan.

“He does wear those awesome V-necked sweaters.”

“You mean the ones that show off his pecs.”

“The very same. And you can always see his chest hair.”

“I love that it’s a different color from his head hair. Kind of makes me think of Vikings.”

“That makes no sense at all and yet completely makes sense to me on every level.”

Lydia grinned, those black eyes full of mischief.

“Think I should let him plunder my village?”

“And by village you mean vagina, right?”

“You know me so well.”

And you don't know me at all. No one knows me. Not even my brain, who should have known me enough to stop all of that before it even started.

“You should go for it.”

“I don't know.” Lydia sighed, stirring her bowl of oatmeal. “Sometimes I think...”

“You think what?”

“That maybe there should be something more there. That there's supposed to be that electric spark, you know? That thing that makes you go crazy for someone. Lose your mind and get all horny just at the idea of him. Every second you're alone with him all you can think about is...”

“Jumping his bones. Fucking his brains out. Fucking your brains out.”

“Exactly. Exactly.”

“Maybe you don't even know why.”

“Mmmm yes, perfect.”

“It just comes over you in a big wave that you can't stop or get away from, and then next thing you know you're doing insane things that you honestly never thought you could.”

After she'd said it she realized Lydia wasn't stirring her oatmeal anymore. She wasn't looking down at her bowl. She was staring right at her with this piercing sheen to those inky eyes, in a way Letty had come to know well. Usually it thrilled her, to know someone was so interested.

Now she felt her stomach drop.

“Do you have something you want to share, Juliet?”

“What? No. No.”

She tried to sound casual and calm.

But hearing her given name was enough to send her into a tailspin.

“Are you sure? I'm detecting a hint of bullshit. It has a faintly man-shaped aroma.”

“I've told you before—I'm an extremely boring person. I might be able to imagine thrilling shit like wanting to maul a guy the minute you're with

him, but it's never likely to happen to me. And if it ever did happen...if by some miracle..."

"Yes?"

"It would probably...just be a mistake. An accident, almost. Brought on by...exterior influences."

Lydia raised one eyebrow, but Letty felt better after that. Like she'd cracked the code. She could escape friend jail. She was still smart and good. It was just the movie that had done it, and the weird pool situation, and her hot, claustrophobic little dorm room. Anyone would have done the same given those circumstances; she was completely certain of it. Next time she saw him, everything would be back to normal.

And it kind of was.

He was so casual with her and warm, despite everything. Part of her had expected him to be standoffish, to never call, but he just came right up to their table. He laughed and joked around, like nothing had even happened. No one would know that he had offered to get her off, then orgasmed in her mouth. Even she was convinced, for the first five minutes. She was just about to write the whole thing off as a hallucination when two things happened at once.

Lydia turned to see who was calling to her—some girl from her Intro to Pysch course, maybe.

And when she did, Letty happened to glance up at Tate. Just for a second, but a second was enough time to see that everything about his face had abruptly changed. That easy smile was gone. His sultry, heavy-lidded gaze was back. It was back, and it had brought reinforcements. Now he was pretty much drilling great burning holes through her body. She wanted to throw up her arms and protect herself, or maybe use her tray to deflect his laser stare onto someone else.

That blond girl Sam, maybe, who was currently watching them curiously.

Yet before she could do either, he decided to increase the intensity. He damn near turned the dial up to eleven thousand, then snapped it off—and he knew it. She could tell he understood exactly what he was doing when he started moving his hand toward her. He definitely saw her eyes following its progress, with a kind of dawning horror. It even seemed like he provided the slow motion himself.

Though she was willing to accept she was just losing it.

That everything inside her was so mixed up she couldn't tell an affectionate hand being placed on her shoulder from a kitchen knife in a slasher movie. It made contact and she reacted like someone stabbed her, standing up too fast and knocking things over as she went. One hand already slapping his away so she could get to the wound. She was bleeding, couldn't he see that she was bleeding?

Judging by his expression: no, he could not.

He looked like a little kid who just put his hand in a fire because the fire seemed nice. He jolted all over, hand snapping back almost as fast as she had stood up. And the confusion on his face...it was so raw and honest. The image she had of him—that sure and confident image—dissolved almost instantly in the face of it. This was the real him, she realized. This baffled, affectionate creature who didn't understand why his tender gesture was being rebuffed.

But she couldn't help him.

She didn't understand, either.

And nor did Lydia.

“You okay, sis?”

Her watchful gaze flicked between the two of them—searching for some sign of his transgression, Letty knew. That one wonderful little word, *sis*, told her that much. It was a bubble of protectiveness briefly surrounding her, before she answered the only way she could.

“Yeah. I just...thought I saw a spider.”

“You positive about that?”

“I promise,” she said.

Even though she knew what would happen next.

“So, Letty,” he said. “You coming?”

Chapter 15

He suggested they go back to his place after class, which seemed like a good idea. Nothing had happened there, after all. And his bed was definitely bigger than her bed. It meant she could sit by the headboard with her feet pointing down, leaving no space for him to sit beside her. If he wanted to share, he would have to take the opposite end. The only thing that could possibly touch was their toes.

Or so she thought.

Until he went to shut the window behind her.

He put one knee on the mattress to get to it—and that was fine. But what seemed less fine was the way he leaned over her, those T-shirt-skimmed abs nearly brushing her face. Thighs almost straddling hers briefly, followed by a great wash of that almondy, her-perfume smell.

And then he decided to sit right next to her.

She had no idea how he did it. He shouldn't have been able to fit. There was a space the size of a thimble beside her, and she was sure she didn't move to accommodate him. Yet he wedged his way in here anyway. Suddenly his chest was her pillow and his arm was nearly around her shoulders, like they'd somehow become a cute couple who cuddled in bed while watching movies.

Without anyone actually agreeing to this.

She definitely hadn't. She wasn't even sure how she would broach such a topic. "*Hey, I know you found me really gross in high school, but could we possibly date now?*" And the possibility of him broaching it was just beyond the back of insanity. He would never want to. He found her repulsive.

No, this was all just a misunderstanding, brought on by the movie.

The movie that was nowhere near as sexy as the one he then suggested.

"What do you think about *Nine and a Half Weeks*?"

I think I would sooner eat a dead rat than watch it while lying in your arms.

"That sounds okay, I guess. Though you know we should really probably focus on more mainstream movies. I mean, *Nine and a Half Weeks* is a little soft porn, don't you think?"

"Maybe we should try *Y Tu Mamá Tambié*—"

“No!”

She cut him off so sharply and so loudly that he did that little jolt thing again, like in the cafeteria. But she just couldn't help it. She had seen that movie. She knew what happened in it. The two main characters masturbated together, in the most graphic way she could ever have imagined.

Prior to her sitting next to a masturbating Tate Sullivan. Watching it would be intolerable, with that lodged between them like a psychic splinter.

“I'm not...really in the mood for subtitles. *Nine and a Half Weeks* will do.”

“You sure? You sound a little...”

“Not at all. I'm fine,” she said.

And she was. It was easy to be when watching most of the movie with her eyes closed. Whenever something super sexy happened she simply shut them, angling her head so he would never see.

Not that he was paying any attention. Whenever she spied him in the darkened laptop screen, he looked 100 percent focused on the movie. His eyelids were heavy and his lips were parted, but then anyone's would be watching total hotties writhe around the screen. And if his breathing was a little unsteady, so what? Hers probably would be, if she didn't keep covering her eyes with one hand.

It was bad enough just hearing Mickey Rourke saying things like *give it up*.

And he apparently agreed.

“Jesus, this is fucking hot.”

“Yeah, Kim Basinger is really sexy.”

“Is that really what you think I mean?”

She paused before answering. Tried to catch a glimpse of him in the screen again, so she could judge his expression, too. Was he trying to trap her somehow?

It felt that way. It felt weird again, like everything was sliding sideways.

“I don't know what else you could be referring to.”

“I guess it must be that, then. Just her, getting herself off.”

“It's kind of...interesting to see. Not something you get...often.”

“Fuck, no. And especially when she's kind of a nervous person.”

“She is? I thought she seemed pretty confident.”

“Maybe he just brings it out in her.”

He spoke lightly, casually.

Too lightly though, in her opinion. The words seemed so insubstantial one tap could probably turn them to dust. The silence that followed almost destroyed them completely.

And her reply probably did the rest.

At the very least it made it clear: neither of them were talking about the movie.

“Maybe. Or maybe she just can’t stop herself.”

“So you think she’s out of control.”

“I think you could definitely make that argument.”

“That she just gets so horny she goes against all her better judgment?”

“She probably doesn’t want to. But then he does something and she just...”

“Gets all wet, and flushed, and ready to fuck.”

“Yeah that sounds pretty close,” she said, but only as a kind of compromise.

Her body wanted her to moan on hearing him say *ready to fuck*.

Her clit seemed to jump just at the sound of it.

“All she can think about is having his hard cock inside her.”

“I see. And does he think about that?”

“Oh fuck yeah. Yeah, all the time.”

“It makes him horny then.”

“Uh-huh,” he said, so gruff and broken sounding she could hardly stand it.

And then he went ahead and added *this*:

“Jesus, Letty. Keep doing that. Just like that, honey, don’t stop.”

At first, she had no idea what he was talking about. Nothing had been made explicit. It still could have been a simple chat about the film they were watching, instead of a thinly veiled seduction filled with innuendo and implication. There was no real hint of impropriety.

Then she realized, in a hot rush of embarrassment, that her hips were moving. Somehow, in the middle of the conversation, she had started rolling them. More than that, really: she was almost rocking back against him. She was squirming in his arms, to the point where he had actually gotten worked up. So much so, in fact, that after he spoke he put a hand on

her hip—as though he wanted to hold her there, and maybe make her push back against him more firmly.

Or maybe *he* could just push against *her* more firmly.

It seemed that way, at least. Suddenly she could feel something thick and solid, pressing into the split between the cheeks of her ass. Literally the only thing stopping his cock from going to some really rude places was her jeans, though they didn't seem like jeans in that moment. They seemed as thin as gossamer, ready to give any second under the pressure. Once or twice she even felt the head of that fat thing rubbing over the entrance to her pussy, like one good push would do the trick.

But scarier still was her reaction to that.

She moaned, loud and long. Too loud and long to explain away. It sounded like someone wavering on the edge of orgasm, full of desire strained to the breaking point and desperate pleas for more. In fact, at one point she actually did plead for more—so she could hardly blame him for acting on it. His hand went to the buttons on her jeans the moment she let the sound out, so eager about it that she almost let him. She thought of him shoving them down roughly, those clever fingers finding her wet and wanting pussy.

And then he could just push in with that big, fat cock.

Fuck her like this, to the strains of people having sex onscreen and his own harsh breathing. Rut over her until she was all but crushed into the mattress, her face pressed deep in the pillow to hide her cries of pleasure. And they would be cries of pleasure, too. She knew he would make it good.

It was just that he had to do something first in order to get there: Expose her. Bare her ass to the air, in a way that did not seem flattering. All he would see was the thing he had once hurled insults at, and the second that thought occurred her hand went over his. Hard enough to sting him, quick enough to startle. He made a little sound of surprise, as though he'd been operating under the same sexual autopilot she had for the last five minutes.

But it was fine, it was cool.

She knew how to get him back there.

All she had to do was act like her touch was meant in a slightly different way. Not as a stop sign. More like an urgent need to push him further. She rubbed the heel of her hand against him and the heel of *his* hand rubbed

between her legs, and to her relief he seemed to get it. He groaned, at least, and pressed that solid shape tighter against her ass.

Now he was practically dry humping her.

Though that was okay—she was pretty much riding his hand. He cupped her sex through her jeans and she urged herself against him, over and over until her cheeks were on fire and her nipples were two tight points poking through her jersey, and her clit, god, her clit. It seemed so swollen and stiff that even this kind of not-quite contact was way, way too much.

Then he spoke, and she realized she didn't know what too much was.

Really it was him, whispering breathlessly in her ear.

“So excited again. So ready to come. You been lying here just aching for it, huh? Watching them fuck, getting hotter and hotter until you couldn't help rutting like that, like some animal in heat. Pussy all greedy for something thick and solid, clit this tight little bead. I'm guessing a couple of strokes will do the trick, right? Just a little bit more of this and you'll do it, all over my hand. Tell me. Tell me you would.”

She honestly didn't know why she said nothing in reply. What made her bury her head in the pillow and cover it over with both arms. She only knew what he did in response: redoubled his efforts. No teasing here—he slipped that hand under the waistband of her jeans, and immediately searched out her clit. Found it and rubbed in tight circles until she kind of wanted to scream.

In fact, she *did* scream, when his other hand squirmed beneath her body.

Partly because he cupped and squeezed her right breast, fingers pulling at her stiff little nipple.

But mostly because she knew why he really did it.

Not to please her. Not to make her come faster.

He just wanted to fondle her there. He wanted to know what it was like—she was sure of it. And the second he found out, something seemed to shift in him. Suddenly he wasn't so focused on getting her off, hard and fast. It was like he wanted something from this, too, bad enough that he almost just said it right out loud. *Fuck I bet that pussy feels so good when you sink right in, so tight and hot and wet, Jesus*, he groaned, as he dipped those maddening fingers down and into her. Savoring the feel of her, she thought, before he returned to her clit.

Only now the memory of those words was behind it.

His rough breathing, his hoarse tone, the very idea of him pushing that big, thick cock into her. He would definitely fill her if he tried it. He filled her with his fingers, and they were half the size. And God, how would he be as he took her like that? He seemed half gone now, even though both of them were still fully dressed and barely touching. Surely if they were stripped, and sweating, and heaving together, things would be even more intense? They had to be, and yet...

When he shoved her jersey just a little way up, she still flinched.

She still thought of her belly, even though he could barely see it. She was mostly on her side and he barely lifted the thing, yet the feeling was there. And it stayed there, eating at her, until it became clear what he was doing. His hand left her breast and she felt him shift a little so he could get at his zipper, and then the room was abruptly filled with the most glorious sound on the face of the earth.

His hand, on his cock.

That was why he had done it: so he could do just what they'd both fantasized about. He wanted to coat her with his come, to the point where he could barely contain himself. His breath was coming in short, desperate gasps and those fingers on her clit were suddenly sloppy. But it didn't matter. She was already going over, just hearing him. Then the first hot ribbons striped her back, and she was there, oh god she was there.

Her clit all but burst against his still-working fingers, the bliss so intense she couldn't quite take it. She had to get away from it, but when she tried she found there was nowhere to go. He seemed to have her pinned, one hand now on her shoulder and the other so firm between her legs she couldn't possibly escape. She just had to lie there, as the pleasure went on and on and on.

It clenched every muscle in her body, tight as a fist. Soaked his hand, in a way that would have been embarrassing—if she'd been able to care. In that moment, she couldn't. She didn't. All she could do was grunt and jerk like an animal, as he eked every last drop of sensation out of her.

She was crying, by the time he had finished.

Sobbing, in fact, though she tried to hide it. She put her face in the pillow and feigned exhaustion, sure that in a second he would get up and go to the bathroom. Then she could wipe her face and tidy herself, as if none of this had ever happened. Not give him the chance to be weird about her

having feelings—because she was sure he would be. He might even start to put distance between them. Maybe throw in a few snide remarks until she got the right idea about what they were doing here.

They were just fucking.

Not even fucking, really.

Accidentally being super filthy with each other—*and that was all*. That was all, she told herself, as he tenderly cleaned her up. That was all, she told herself, as he slipped an arm around her waist.

That was all, she told herself, as he whispered against the nape of her neck.

“That’s the only reason I ever want you to cry, from now on.”

Chapter 16

She knew he wasn't looking at his books. She knew like she'd known the last time they sat across from each other in the library, only this was so much worse. Now they were at the point where things needed to be said. He was quite possibly *waiting* for her to say them. The only issue was, she had no idea what any of the words actually *were*.

If she laughed about it, he might think she was dismissing the whole thing. Mocking him somehow, only to find he was deadly serious. However, telling him that she had enjoyed the previous night—with the movie and the...other things—was just as bad. What if he thought she was desperate for him somehow? He might try to let her down gently—an idea that set her cheeks ablaze. She almost got up and walked right out, just thinking about it.

And probably would have done, if it wasn't for the note.

The one he slid over the pages of the book she wasn't reading.

I want to make you moan like that again.

No confusion, no way to misinterpret, no pretense. Just a direct statement in bold black, each letter printed clearly and carefully so there could be no mistaking. This was what he wanted, and he wasn't going to hide it anymore. Sometimes she wasn't even sure if he'd been hiding before. It had just been easier to think he was, or to imagine it was all just some accident they'd stumbled into.

And suddenly she couldn't do those things anymore.

He'd taken them away from her, and now all that was left was...

She didn't know. She only knew that when she thought of it, that panic got worse, not better. There was no relief following his note, or sense that she could just give in to it all now. Instead, she found her hands were shaking. Her palms were sweaty when she picked up her pen.

And she didn't write what she had thought she wanted to.

I don't know if that's such a good idea, she scribbled.

Though of course that didn't put an end to anything.

He just scribbled back, as calm and casual about it as she'd been frantic.

Didn't you enjoy it?

That's beside the point.

I enjoyed it.

The first letter was blacker than all the rest, as though he'd pressed down hard enough to almost snap his pencil. She couldn't fail to notice it.

Though she tried.

Guys always do.

Not like that they don't.

How was it different?

It was the wrong question to ask. She knew it. He took the paper from her incredibly quickly, and the writing he did never seemed to end. It went on and on, so messily scribbled she wasn't sure she'd be able to read it when it did come back to her.

She was wrong about that, too, however.

She read it loud and clear in five-foot neon letters.

No one has ever made me come with barely a stroke over my dick. I sprayed all over your ass and back like a fucking teenager—and it felt that way, too. It felt like I'd never had an orgasm before. I didn't know it could be like that, like you're bursting, like you can't take one ounce more pleasure, and then after we do that shit my fucking legs are always like rubber. The first time, I was still shaking twenty goddamn minutes after you left. The second time it was an hour before I could think straight. I'm still not thinking straight, because all I want to do is watch you moan and buck for me just like you did on my bed.

It took her a long while to reply. So long that she could tell he was getting impatient, even though she was barely looking. She watched him surreptitiously, from underneath her lowered eyelids, yet still caught him folding and unfolding his arms. And she could hear him after a second, too, cracking his knuckles one after the other like he used to do when he was bored in class.

Only now she wondered if it was boredom at all.

Most likely it was frustration at having to hide who he really was.

The way she had to hide the heat rolling through her body, right now.

Please don't write things like that.

You asked. I'm just being honest.

It makes it harder for me when you say this stuff.

Makes what harder?

Being your friend. Please. I just want to be your friend.

It wasn't what she expected to write. The words just pushed out of her, as strange to her as they were to him. He immediately scribbled back *why*, and it was only after he had that it dawned on her.

Because when you stop being my friend my life turns into a living hell.

She didn't look up after she passed it to him. She was sure she wouldn't look up, no matter what—but then he just took so much time to reply. There were no scratchings of his pencil, no curses as he stopped and started over. Just a long, endless silence as he processed what she was saying: *if we are together like that, our inevitable break-up will put me right back where I started.*

Though she wondered if he'd gotten the extra kick in the teeth there.

The one that left her mouth bloody the second it occurred:

Only now I will also lose a friend I care for deeply.

Too deeply to stand it, she knew. It was one thing to be taunted by an enemy. Quite another to be taunted by someone she had grown so close to. That would be bitter indeed—and she hoped he knew it. She hoped he at least understood, no matter how angry it made him.

Or how much it tore him in two.

She stole a glance at minute three, and he was just looking at her. His gaze shot through with pain so obvious she couldn't deny it, that muscle in his jaw working and working. In fact, it was more than his jaw. The tension seemed to ripple right up to his temples, as though he was dying to let loose.

She just wasn't sure what with, until he started writing furiously.

Until he passed it to her, mistake free and so quickly written most of the words flowed together.

No matter what happens between us, I will never make your life hell again. Mess with my head, turn me upside down, fuck seventeen guys behind my back, humiliate me in the middle of the cafeteria...it won't make any difference. I am yours now. And nothing you say or do will ever change that.

She paused, before replying.

But only because she had to fight back tears—because of the underlined *never*, for the anger that was only at himself, for the way he kept proving her wrong whenever she was sure their whole paper house was about to be blown away or burned to the ground.

That was a really cool thing to say, she wrote.

Keep it. Keep it as a reminder.

Like you kept the piece of paper where I wrote that you were my friend?

Yes exactly like that. Oh, did you think I would deny it?

Maybe, she started, then gave in and crossed the word out. Wrote the truth, to match what he had offered her. Yes. Yes, damn it.

How I feel about you is not a secret.

It is to me. Can you not see why it would be to me?

No, I really can't. I know I make it obvious every day.

You do you do you do. But this is pretty obvious every day to me, too.

She didn't intend to grab his hand to show him. She was just going to lift her hair—you could see the scar without a ton of effort. Yet when it came to it, somehow seeing didn't seem like enough. She wanted him to touch it, to really feel it, to know right down to his bones that it was there. Here was the evidence, and to hell with whether it made him uncomfortable.

Or whether it *didn't*. At all.

Not even a tiny little bit.

She closed his fingers over that curving knot around her ear, and he just *stayed* there. He stroked his thumb over it, so tender and direct she wasn't sure what to do for a second. This was not the way she'd imagined it going in her head. He was supposed to pull away sharply and tell her to get over it, and instead he just went ahead and doubled down. He put his whole hand over that terrible place, like the slight touch she'd encouraged wasn't enough.

And even that fell short.

He needed words, to go with it.

"I know there's nothing I can do to erase this. I wouldn't want to erase it, or act like it never happened, or pretend that it's not in your heart as well as right here under my hand. I get that this is always going to be there, saying you should doubt me. But I'm gonna work every day on making it

easier for you to ignore. I want you to believe in me, and I got all the hours in the world to help that happen.”

This time, she couldn't fight the tears.

One just streaked down her left cheek before she could stop it. And when she went to swipe it away, he got there before she could. He swiped it for her, with his thumb. Held her gaze, as if he never wanted to let it go. And in that moment, she wasn't sure *she* wanted him to.

This was as good as life got, and she knew it.

“That was even cooler than the whole humiliate-me speech.”

“I could write this down for you, too, if you want.”

“No, no that's okay. I now have it burned into my brain forever.”

He grinned then.

He grinned so wide it warmed her insides.

“Well, that sounds like a start to me.”

“As starts go it was pretty fucking good.”

“Then what are we waiting for?”

Instead of answering right away, she took his hands in hers. Maneuvered them slowly away from her head and her hair, until they were spread beneath hers over her open books.

That way, she didn't have to do this while he was holding her face.

It was hard enough as it was, without him drowning her good sense in affection.

“The rest of me to catch up.”

“Tell me which part is lagging behind.”

“The part that says you want me.”

“I thought we covered that.”

“No, we covered emotional damage. *Now* we have to get into the enormous fucking disparity between the way *you* look”—she waved a hand in front his face, then her own—“and the way *I* look. Because even if we pretend for a second that you are Bob and I am Betty and neither of us have any connection to each other at all, you still have to admit that Bob is way, way, way hotter than Betty.”

He snorted and shook his head.

“I don't have to admit that at all.”

“So you're going to claim, objectively speaking, that you are not hotter than me.”

“Actually, I’m going to claim objectively speaking that the other night I shot my load all over your back after about thirty seconds of fondling your right breast. Your move, Counselor.”

“I don’t have a move, damn it, you just *fucked* my move.”

“Yeah, and I came really, really embarrassingly fast when I did it.”

“It wasn’t embarrassing okay, it was—” she started, but then couldn’t finish.

He had been talking in the abstract. She was referring to the real thing.

And the real thing was complicated and weird and scary.

“It was what, Letty?”

“You *know* what.”

“So lemme get this straight: you get that I came so fast because of your hot tits, and the fact that I did come fast turns you on, and you are fully aware that this means I must want you—”

Now it was her turn to cut him off.

Mostly because he’d just said hot tits, and she needed a second to gather herself.

“I’m not fully aware of that at all. I need way more evidence to prove this hypothesis.”

“How about...when I turned tickling into a dry hump?”

“I don’t remember things happening exactly like that.”

“And when I almost kissed you, in the aftermath.”

“Okay, see I didn’t know that you almost kissed me. I thought—”

“Oh, and then there’s the fact that I got hard when you rubbed all over my body in the pool.”

She covered her face with her hands at that. She didn’t have a choice. It was like a reflex, like he’d hit her elbows with a tiny hammer and they’d jolted up—though she was glad of them once they were there. Her face was burning. Her eyes would not stop staring wildly in his direction, even though she could only see the insides of her fingers now. And it muffled the shock in her voice a little.

Though obviously, it couldn’t do anything about the words.

“Oh my god, I thought you thought I was a pervert. I thought that’s why you freaked out.”

“Well, now you know otherwise. I was actually the pervert who had to spend five minutes breathing hard in a dark locker room just to get back

some of his control. And by breathing hard I mean jerking off.”

“You jerked off in the locker room while I was in the pool panicking?”

“I might have. It depends how actually outraged you are.”

“I am *very* outraged. Extremely outraged.”

“God, I know I—”

“Tell me more about it and I might forgive you.”

Now it was *his* turn to be shocked—though obviously he was much better at it than her. He didn’t hide his face. He let her see it all in dazzling detail.

“Oh you *asshole*, I thought you were actually mad at me for a second.”

“I *am* mad at you. And the penalty is you confessing everything.”

He raised an eyebrow, half panicked and half incredulous.

“What, like every filthy thought I ever had about you? You realize I only have around sixty years left of my life, right? I was hoping to visit the Grand Canyon before I die.”

“The Grand Canyon can wait. I need details, if you want to convince me.”

“Christ, okay. Um...all right...”

“Tick-tock.”

“Stop, just...lemme block out the part of my brain that controls embarrassment, first,” he said, which apparently involved being completely adorable in every conceivable way. He winced and took deep breaths and fanned himself like a teenage girl before finally squeezing out some words. Some very good, very shocking words. “Okay, so, when you came across me sitting on the stairs? I may have possibly just sort of stayed where I was so you would...you know...squeeze past me. Not in like a gross way though, where I rub my face over your vagina as you do it. Just so I could possibly smell your perfume or feel, like, your shin against my arm or shit yeah I hear that this sounds bad now that I hear it, sorry.”

He shook his head at himself, face contorted into an expression best described as grossed out.

But he really didn’t need to be. Her focus was all on something else entirely.

“That far back? You had sexy thoughts about me *that far back*?”

“Well...yeah. I guess so. I didn’t think that was the weird part, to be honest.”

“It is totally the weird part. I mean...what changed *that* drastically between high school and college?”

“I guess...I did. I changed. Into someone who tries to get girls to rub their shins on them.”

“You *are* seeming a little like a creeper.”

“To be honest, most of these stories are going to make me sound like a creeper. I mean, there aren’t many decent ways to say *when you put a pencil in your mouth I thought long and hard about how those lips would look around my cock.*”

Her face heated—so much so that she glanced down to try to hide it.

She couldn’t, however, hide the excitement in her voice.

“You thought about that? While I was innocently taking notes? In the library?”

“I think the fact that it was the library only made it more thrilling, to be honest.”

“You’re not serious. You cannot be.”

“Think about it. You have to be super quiet—you moan once, everyone is going to hear you. There’s just enough shelter here to hide whatever we might be doing, but not enough to make either of us feel completely safe. Someone could walk up any time, see you on your knees, see you taking it all.”

“And by all you mean that...big thing.”

“Why not? In fantasy you can pretty much ignore the laws of physics.”

Now the heat in her face was up to five thousand degrees. It had taken over most of her throat and chest, and was slowly working its way downward. That was fine though. It was cool. He looked pretty red-faced, too. In fact, he was flushed all the way from his temples to his collarbone.

“So what you want is to make five plus ten equal three in my mouth.”

“No, what I want is to bend you over this table and pull that flirty little skirt up over your ass, then show you exactly how good getting your pussy licked feels. Matter of fact, that is pretty much all I’ve thought about since you said you’d never had it. I almost did it when you were in my bed, but I wasn’t sure I could manage it through a mouthful of jeans.”

“I’m not wearing jeans *now.*”

He fell silent then. Extremely, intensely silent, eyes heavy on her the whole time. Just a hint of mischief in them, and around the corners of his

mouth. Like he wanted to smile knowingly, but thought it better to play it cool. Check the ground he stood on first, before things went too far.

“Okay, I feel I have to warn you that despite what I said about fantasy, I would totally eat your pussy right here and now. Like, that’s not a problem for me at all. So if you keep talking about it, chances are I’m going to think you’re serious and make a total ass of myself.”

“And how exactly would you make an ass out of yourself?”

“I might say something like: slip your panties off and hand them to me.”

It was a smart way to make the suggestion, really. He gave it all the sly charm of the real thing, but without any of the negative consequences. She couldn’t rebuff him. He hadn’t honestly meant it. It was just a suppose so, a what-if—though tantalizing enough that it turned the temperature up another notch. Just hearing him say the words was enough to send a tingling shock through her. And then there was the sound of his voice, all low and slightly hoarse. The way he touched his tongue to his teeth after saying it, as if he was imagining what it would truly be like if she did.

Though he didn’t have to imagine for long.

“Oh my god, you’re actually fucking doing it. This cannot be real life.”

“You want me to stop? I can stop, if you really want.”

“Fuck no, never stop. Never, ever stop being this awesome.”

“You better be sure, because they’re almost at my ankles.”

“Are you serious right now? Are they—”

He ducked below the table to see, but he didn’t need to.

She had already pushed them into his hand—and the second she did everything changed. The faint wince that was still in the back of his expression disappeared entirely, and was replaced by a steely sort of single-mindedness that she recognized immediately. It was the look he got when he was about to take somebody down. It even had that quick assessment of his wrestling opponent, before he made his move—the one that reminded her of someone rifling through a dead man’s pockets.

And in this case, she was the dead man.

She had around ten seconds in which he stood to check no one was coming. Then he was on her, brisk and all business. “Stand up,” he said, voice so rough it should have scared her. It should have made her think of the bully he had been—only it didn’t.

Probably because his hand was on her breasts as he said it.

More than on them, in truth. He touched them as though he couldn't get enough. He fondled them, squeezing and exploring so thoroughly it kind of knocked her sideways. It underlined all the things he'd said, about the steps and the pencil and the pool. It made them unavoidably obvious—though even if it hadn't there were other signs.

Like the way he hurriedly stuffed her panties into his pocket.

To keep, before she could change her mind.

And the hand he slipped under her skirt, the second she stood up.

Gentle, but greedy all at the same time.

And his cock.

Fuck, his cock.

He wasn't exactly trying to push that stiff shape against the side of her ass. But he wasn't exactly not, either. Quite clearly, he wanted her to see and feel and know that she had done this to him at some point. She has made him hard—maybe when she handed him those panties. Maybe before, over some look she had no idea she had given him. *Everything* was possible, now.

Including him bending her over this desk in the library, in the middle of the day. Somewhere in the distance she could hear the squeak of a cart, the whisper of students trying to be quiet, the clatter of a book coming off the shelf. But it made no difference to him. He barely lowered his voice to tell her that she was wet. Words just blurted out of him, rough and ready.

"Fuck, baby, you're always soooo wet," he said. Then even sweeter: "Do I make you that way? Do I get you excited?"

As though he was a little unsure, too. He needed her to show him how much she wanted him, and when he touched her like this it wasn't so hard. He slid two fingers in and the *yes* came out all on its own, half moaned and half sighed. More than that, in fact: she practically pushed back against him. Her back arched before she could stop it, her whole body flushing as she felt him ease them back and forth.

Slow, at first. Easy enough to take.

Then faster, and firmer, and not quite as straightforward as he had before. In their dorm rooms he had used stiff, straight fingers, but not this time. This time he crossed them, one over the other, until each slow push into her pussy made her want to cry out.

But then someone called for quiet in the distance, and she remembered.

They were in a library. He was fingering her pussy in a library.

Being quiet was of the utmost importance, no matter how good he made her feel. No matter how firmly he worked the thick knot of his knuckles right over that aching, tingling place, no matter how many rude things he panted at her as he worked her pussy, no matter how shocking it was when he finally got down on his knees. She *had* to keep her mouth closed.

And then she heard and felt him move, and it got just that little bit harder. He was actually doing it. He was lifting her skirt and spreading her legs. How was she supposed to be silent when that was happening? It sent a zing of pleasure through her the size of a lightning bolt. It made her knees crumple and turned her hands to claws—holding it in was impossible.

But she managed. She put her fist to her mouth, as tightly as she could stand.

And just in time. A second later his mouth was on her, and after that there was pretty much nothing she could do. She just had to stand there with her face pressed to the table, trembling, teeth deep in her fist, as he showed her just what a kiss felt like on her spread pussy. As he licked around the slowly working fingers he still had inside her, before easing them out so he could taste the place they had just been.

More than taste, really.

He sank his tongue right into her, lapping in a way she didn't fully grasp until he made it explicit. "You like me fucking that pussy like this?" he said, and only then did it hit her. *Fucking, he's fucking me with his fingers*, her mind babbled as her body went haywire. Those trembles suddenly doubled, until she was pretty much shaking the table. Some sounds leaked out, and they were not small ones.

They were practically groans of agony.

Someone was going to come and check just to make sure no one was being killed back here, and she couldn't blame them. It *felt* like he was murdering her. He kept switching back and forth between his fingers and his tongue, and when he licked it was never a faint little flick that barely made contact. He *rubbed* the fucking thing over every fold and hollow, firm enough to make her go a little faint. And just when she was sure she couldn't accept another ounce of pleasure...

He found her clit with the flat of his tongue, and lapped and licked and sucked until she could hardly stand it or believe it or process it. Of course

she had known, on some level, that he had told the truth about going down on a girl. She had imagined someone licking her there often enough, while her own fingers strummed her clit. But even in her most lurid, intense imaginings, she couldn't have predicted this. This was life changing. It made all previous pleasure seem like a faint dream of the real thing.

She had sleepwalked through sex before now, and here was the waking truth. A hot, sweet ache that unfurled low down in her belly, and spread and spread and spread through the rest of her until she barely cared if anyone heard. She had to tell him, at least, how good this felt. Only when she went to do it, something more like a sob came out. A sobbed, broken sort of thank-you.

Then a *yes* and a *now* and a *more*.

Oh god, she would have given anything for more. Nothing was ever going to be enough from here on out. She would never be able to look at him again and not want this pulsing, shivering pleasure. She was done for, doomed, destroyed, and he knew it.

She could tell by the way he teased her, tongue dancing around her clit until it felt as though that little nub was straining. On the verge of bursting. After a minute of this insane torture she pushed back against him—like some beast in heat—but that only made it worse. He sat back as soon as she did, a half laugh on his lips. Words spilling out of him that sent her even deeper into the red. “You want to come, huh? You want to do it all over my mouth? Ohhhh yeah, you do, you do, look how swollen your clit is. Look at how wet you are. You want to see how wet you are? Come here, baby, lick these fingers. Taste your sweet pussy for me.”

But the most horrendous part was: she did it.

When he offered her his fingers, slick with her honey, she twisted her body and opened her mouth to accept them gratefully. Even greedily, if she was being honest. The look on his face told her how she must have seemed as she did it—those low-lidded eyes rolling up as she sucked eagerly, lips parting to let out a soft moan. And when he spoke again his voice was hoarser, rougher.

“Is it where we are? Or is it me?” he asked, and she answered with the truth.

“It’s you. It’s just you. It’s always you.”

That was all it took. There was no more teasing after that, no more hesitation. He just pushed his face between her legs, tongue lapping firm and insistent over her taut bud. One stroke, two, three and she was there, back arching, body shuddering, moans jammed tight against the bars of her gritted teeth. In the middle of it she might have even reached back to grab his head, forcing him to keep going and going.

Not that she needed to. He carried on licking long after the point where she couldn't take it—just like before, only so, so much more. Now it was completely unbearable and completely incredible at the same time, cramming more and more pleasure into her until she was sure there couldn't be room for anything else. That was it, that was all, and then he fucked two fingers into her tightly clenched pussy again and *fuck fuck fuck*.

She made a mess of his face. She knew she did; she felt it running down her thighs.

She saw it on him when he stood, all of it gleaming on his lips and chin.

Though she soon forgot about it, in light of the words he fumbled out. They were broken, those words, stuttered and too desperate—but all the better for it. “Is it okay to finish in your mouth?” he asked.

And she didn't even hesitate.

She was on her knees in front of him before he'd even finished speaking, hands shaky but capable on his bared cock. The cock he must have been stroking as he licked her. The cock that stuck out like a fist, swollen and slippery with pre-come, so ready to burst that she barely had to put a hand on him before it jerked and shot the first streamer of liquid over her lips. She had to quickly part them around that thick head to catch the rest, sucking and licking in an effort to make it as good for him as it had been for her.

Though she didn't need to.

His moans were high and desperate and much too loud, punctuated with the kind of praise she could have come over. “Good girl, get me off, take it, take my hot load,” he groaned, barely sensible of what he was saying but all the better for it. She would remember those words forever, in every fuck session she participated in from then on. Other guys might come and go, but nothing would ever be sweeter than this: Tate Sullivan saying the filthiest things, and turning them into bliss.

Chapter 17

She wanted to say something to him on the way back to her dorm. Something lighthearted, maybe, or at the very least grateful. But when she went to speak, nothing came out. Her lungs were suddenly full of sawdust and simply couldn't supply the necessary air. She could barely even lift her feet to take the next step, in truth. Every part of her was limp and weak, from her noodle arms to her rubbery legs.

And as for her face...

She knew how it looked. She made an effort to keep her expression neutral, but failed on every conceivable level. Her mouth just refused to close. The distraught frown wouldn't leave her face. All her features were set to shell-shocked, and nothing could change that.

It was the only possible response to everything he had done.

And all the things he had said.

Since the stairwell, she thought.

But it only made her dazed expression worse. By the time they got to her door she felt as though she'd just staggered through the rubble of a postapocalyptic wasteland. Her hair was sticking up on one side where she'd worried at it. Her eyes seemed to be staring far too intently at every single thing about him. And when she finally got words out, they were not the ones she had intended.

Play it cool, her mind insisted.

But her mouth had her other ideas.

"Do you want to come inside?"

Of course she immediately realized her mistake. His answering expression said it all. A grin stuttered across his face, followed by an excruciatingly disbelieving laugh. It was the one he used to aim at her when she tried to do something outside her wheelhouse—something cool maybe—and it made her flush all over just like it had then. It made her want to correct him: *no, I didn't mean for more sex*.

Only it was too late to clarify. Much too late.

"I would love to, but I really got to get some sleep."

"Oh right, yeah, absolutely."

"My wake up call's, like, six thirty."

"No, you don't have to explain, it's cool."

She tried to laugh like he had as she turned to put her key in the lock, but it didn't come out right. Her voice was too hollow, her amusement too tinged with that raw, red embarrassment. And it got worse the longer he just stood there. Why was he just standing there? He was supposed to go now.

Instead, he seemed to have gotten closer.

His voice seemed to have dipped lower.

“So that’s just it, huh? You’re going in. Goodbye.”

“Well, yeah, you just...said...You have to go.”

“Man, I can see I’m gonna have to give you as much of an education in how to be in a relationship as I am in all the crazy sex stuff. But that’s cool. That’s okay. We can start here.”

“Start where?”

She looked up at him as she asked, expecting to see that laughter in his eyes. The faint smile on his lips.

And that was when he kissed her. Right in the middle of those lingering memories and still-present doubts, right when she was at her most vulnerable. He just leaned right down and took her face in his two hands, lips pressing so sweetly to hers you would never know what they’d just done. It was almost chaste, that kiss. It was the kind of thing two teenage sweethearts might try at first.

But that made the loveliest sense to her.

They *were* teenage sweethearts.

They just hadn’t known it at the time.

They hadn’t understood what this would be like: all bright and burning and brilliant. He barely did anything beyond that one tender push of his mouth against hers, yet somehow it set her heart pounding in her teeth. Her lips were tingling in all the places where he made contact, and they continued to long after he had pulled away. As though he had tattooed her there with his feelings, she thought, then had to fight to stop herself saying something stupid and gushing and amazed.

Not that it would have mattered if she had. His first word was not a word at all.

“Whoa.”

“Yeah.”

“That...”

“Uh-huh.”

“Did you...feel that?”

“I felt that.”

He seemed to sag when she admitted it.

With relief, she thought, then wanted to cry.

Doubly so, when he spoke again.

“I think maybe I changed my mind about coming in.”

“That’s probably for the best. I need you to carry me the three feet to my bed.”

“Well I’m screwed then, because I was going to ask *you* to carry *me*. You might *have* to carry me. Feels like my knees just dissolved and ran right down my legs.”

“I want to mock you for being a romantic cliché, but I can’t because the butterflies in my stomach are trying to eat me alive and my heart is about five seconds away from exploding. Seriously, I might need a paramedic. You should call 911. Tell them I’m dying of feelings for someone.”

“Oh, say that again. Say it again only slower, way slower, super, super slow.”

He leaned as he said this, but that only made it harder to do.

Impossible, in fact. All she could do was blush and give excuses.

“I can’t. I’m embarrassed now.”

“That just makes it better. That means you mean it, right? You mean that you have feelings for me.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that that is the case. You’ll have to speak to my attorney.”

“Should I tell him or her that *I* have feelings for *you*, or will that come out later in court?”

“I guess...I guess it depends how guilty you are.”

“Oh, very guilty. Really, massively, stupidly, endlessly guilty,” he said, and she knew he was moving in as he did. She charted his syrup-slow progress between each word, that mouth getting closer and closer to hers until it was undeniable. He was obviously about to kiss her again.

Yet somehow it still took the wind out of her when he did it. In part, she thought, because it was still such a new thing. But more probably it was the way he went about it. There was nothing chaste about his mouth on hers this time. His lips were parted, and they urged hers to do the same. To open

beneath his rolling, pulling kiss; to let him feel the flicker of his teasing tongue.

And to taste.

He definitely wanted her to taste him, and after a second of this feverish dance she understood why. That was the tart sweet hint of her, behind the fresh hit of double mint. There was the evidence of what they'd done in the library, unmistakable and awful and awesome all at the same time. It made her want to hide her face or turn away, but the urge to pull him closer was just as strong.

Her hands fisting his T-shirt were testament to that.

As was her response when he suggested she open the door. She had never moved so fast in her life. The key was in the lock before he'd finished talking, everything so heated and frantic it seemed obvious where this was going to go. He even made it clearer the second they were inside, mouth dropping to kiss at her jaw and throat and breasts. *Lord*, when he got to her breasts. He only touched through her T-shirt, but touching through her tee was enough when he did it like this. When he made a wicked point of his tongue and worked it back and forth over the very tip of one pointed nipple, lips parted so she could see, breath coming so heavy and hot it went right through the material.

By the time he moved to suck and lick at the other nipple, everything was wet there—wet and aching and oh so good. She was shivering before he started using his hands as well as his mouth, and afterward all kinds of things happened. A gasp came out of her; the shivering turned into shaking. And for some reason, her hands were hovering over his head. Like maybe she wanted to hold him there or run her fingers through his hair, but couldn't quite work up the courage to do it.

What if he hated it?

He knew what she liked, but she had no idea what he did. Nor did she have any idea if he would enjoy the way she wanted to go about it. Maybe he preferred softer, more tentative caresses, instead of the desperate, clumsy grab she knew she was going to do. She could feel it building, until her hands were trembling with the effort of holding off.

And then he slipped a hand between her legs, and she forgot why she was. She just plunged her fingers into that hair right up to the hilt, barely caring if she fucked it up. Let him look like her, all tangled and sloppy and

stunned. Let him be a mess because she had made him one—with the fists she clenched in that hair and all the clawing at his back that she didn't quite intend.

She only meant to pull him closer.

Instead she wound up dragging him down on top of her, already bucking against that hand between her legs. Then when that wasn't quite enough, she went one further. She dragged his face up to hers—by his hair, no less—so she could kiss that mouth, that filthy mouth. So she could taste him again and again without thought or feeling toward the consequences.

But thankfully, it turned out okay.

He wanted to kiss her right back.

More than that, in truth.

She pushed her mouth against his just like he'd done to her, and the second she did he groaned. He said her name into her mouth, in the exact tone she would have used to say his. Desperately, she thought—though the rest of his words were worse. “I knew you'd be like this. I fucking knew when someone got you going you'd be horny as fuck—moaning for me and grabbing at me, goddamn,” he said, so hoarse and breathless she could hardly stand to hear him. She could hardly stand to *look* at him when those eyes laid on her. They were too heavy with lust for any reasonable person to take.

Though it didn't seem like she *was* a reasonable person.

“It's your fault, it's all your fault you've turned me into a sex maniac,” she moaned in response.

And didn't regret it for one single, solitary second.

“If I have, then lemme know how I did it so you never have to go back to the way you were.”

“Touching my tits like that is a really good start.”

“Like this? You like my hands on you like this.”

Who wouldn't like his hands on them like this? she wondered. Every time she bucked, he smoothed his palms over them. Up, up, up, and then a sort of rolling squeeze on the way back down. It was heavenly. Unbelievable.

“Fuck, yes,” she said.

“Tell me why. Tell me why, baby.”

“Your hands look so big. So greedy for me.”

“They are. I am.”

“And you...and you brush my nipples every time you do it.”

“Feels sweet, huh? They all sensitive from that licking and sucking I gave them?”

“Ohhhhh yeah. Yeah, oh my god, yeah. I had no idea, I had no idea you could make something so simple feel so good. Your tongue on my nipples, on my clit, your hand between my legs...I just can’t get enough. I came about an hour ago, but it feels like a thousand years when you last touched me like this.”

His eyes stuttered closed before she got to that last *this*—though it was what he did in the aftermath that really made her ache. He just kind of rubbed his face into her belly, as if the idea was so sexy to him, so good, that he didn’t know how to process it. He just needed to be closer for a second.

To bury himself in her, and never come back out.

And when he finally spoke, it backed up that idea.

“Oh, Christ. Oh, honey. You’ve no idea what those words do to me.”

He didn’t even sound like himself anymore.

Lust had stolen his voice, and turned it into a constant low growl.

“Show me, then. Show me what they do to you.”

She wasn’t sure what she was expecting when she said the words. He’d already admitted how deep his desire went, and revealed what it did to him with actions. But then he sat back on his heels, hands already going to his zipper, and suddenly she understood.

This was what she’d been hoping for.

Him kneeling between her legs, popping that top button for her all quick and frantic. Eyes roaming all over her body as he did it, like it pained him to stop for even this small amount of time. It barely took him thirty seconds to shove those jeans down to midthigh and set that gloriously hard cock free. And it took him even less time than that to show her the best evidence.

He just rubbed over the glistening slit at the tip of his cock.

Then brushed those now-slick fingers over her parted lips.

At which point, nothing more needed to be said or done. It hit her so hard her head just automatically went back, body shuddering under its impact. That was his pre-come she could now taste on her lips. That was

what she did to him—she made him leak streamers of that salt-sweet liquid all over himself.

It didn't surprise her when she pushed a hand under the waistband of her skirt at the thought.

It did, however, surprise her when she added words, as she strummed her swollen clit.

"Jerk off for me. Take that big dick in your hand and make it come for me."

"Ohhhh fuck me, are you serious? You're telling me to do it...to do it for you?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Quickly, I'm really close."

"You're so close that you need me to rub one out fast."

"That a problem?" she asked, voice so brisk it startled her.

It startled him, too, though in a slightly different way.

"Only if you stop there. If you stop telling me what you want."

"You want more things?"

"I want *everything*."

"Lift your shirt, then."

"Jesus, oh Jesus."

"Let me see you."

"Like this?"

He tugged up the material and exposed his hard abs, his taut stomach—though really it was the way he did it that got her. Like a first-time stripper, awkwardly trying to show off. Still unsure of how his body looked to his audience, but going for it anyway.

"Oh *yeah*."

"You like that?"

"I love that."

"What else? What else do you love?"

"This. Your voice. You asking. You telling me."

"You want me to tell you?"

"God yeah, tell me. Tell me what you want."

"I want you to lift your shirt. Show me those beautiful tits."

It was the word *beautiful* that almost made her do it. Well, that and almost everything else. Her excitement had reached some kind of fever pitch, and it robbed her of every rational thought. Suddenly it didn't seem

like a big deal to show him her body, because really, who cared anymore? What did it matter, as long as he kept jerking that slick, gorgeous cock and her fingers kept rubbing her clit and the pleasure kept coming and coming and coming?

In truth, nothing should have mattered in the face of that.

So when she sat up instead and took hold of his cock, she told herself that it was just what she wanted to do. To lick him and suck him until his head went back and moaned words escaped him—*oh god, Letty, I'm gonna come, I'm gonna come in your mouth.*

And if he forgot what he'd asked for, well, that was just an unintended side effect. It didn't make any difference to the pleasure she felt as his cock swelled and jerked and spilled all over her tongue. She still gasped as her own orgasm peaked, body tensing, face pressed briefly to the exposed strip of his stomach. It wasn't even a problem afterward—they whispered and laughed, and nothing more was said about it.

Except in her head, where all the conversations she wished she'd had played out, over and over again.

Chapter 18

She knew the sound was a bad one. But she didn't fully understand why until Tate made it super clear for her. He moaned in his sleep like a small disgruntled child, one hand dragging her pillow over his face in a way that *would* have seemed adorable. If it were not for his words. "Tell your buddy to come back at a reasonable time, like noon," he said, and then the full weight of the situation was on her.

The sound was Lydia, knocking on her door.

"Tate, you have to get up. Tate. Get up. You fell asleep."

"I know, and I would really love to keep making that mistake for another eight hours."

"You can't, remember. You had to be up at six thirty and it's already seven ten."

He turned his bleary face her way, hair all sleep mussed, eyes half open.

Wits as sharp and annoying as ever.

"That would be a really cool way to hide me from your friend if I seemed to care even a little tiny bit about practice this morning. But as I don't, that just leaves us with your subterfuge."

"I wasn't trying to be sub...ter...fuge-ious. I was just..."

"Politely asking me to hide under your bed?"

She sighed, resigned. Flopped onto her back.

"I was thinking the bathroom."

"Or...we could just say we studied real late."

"In our underwear. In a room that smells like come."

"The room is gonna smell like come either way, honey."

"I'll just leave her guessing as to who jizzed all over the room."

"So it only matters if it was me, specifically."

She didn't think he intended to sound hurt. When she turned to look at him his face was all good-natured amusement. But it had been there, she was sure of it. A tiny fragment of pain at the thought of her hiding him, buried deep beneath several layers of teasing bluster and sleepy good-naturedness.

It made her tread carefully, even if it was only her imagination.

It made her put a hand on his arm, as reassuringly as she could.

“It just might seem a little weird, that’s all. I haven’t told her anything, beyond the fact that you bullied me in high school. She finds you in here and she’s going to think I have Stockholm syndrome.”

“Hey, I have never *once* kidnapped you. Stolen all your good sense, yes. Kidnapped, no.”

“You haven’t stolen all my good sense. My sense is there, fully intact. I just don’t know how to prove that to her—so maybe if you could just take an extra long whiz right now...”

“I can do one better: I can leave a stench that will never leave your bathroom.”

“I will take that as the price I pay for sweeping you briefly under the carpet,” she said, intending something funny. And it worked, too. He snorted quietly as he ambled to the bathroom, as though the whole thing was just rolling off him.

But this time, he couldn’t quite cover over that hint of hurt.

She caught his wince, as slight as it was. She saw the slump of his shoulders.

The trouble was—she just didn’t know what to do about it. When she finally opened the door Lydia just gave her such a look. Eyebrows raised, eyes dancing with delight, everything about her saying *okay, dish. Tell me all about whoever you had in there.* And then somehow the words just wouldn’t come. They clung to the back of her throat, in a way they definitely wouldn’t have if he had simply been some guy.

So she turned him into one.

“He was handing out flyers in the library,” she said, thankful for the sheepishness in her own voice. It made it sound real, instead of like some furtive little lie. Lydia even gasped with delight to hear it.

“And yet you did not IM me the moment it finished happening.”

“You *cannot* be annoyed that I didn’t IM you after.”

“I’m kind of annoyed that you didn’t IM me during. Now I know almost nothing about the person I am desperately trying to see over your shoulder.”

Letty glanced behind herself at that, as though an echo of Tate somehow still remained.

But there was nothing to see. Just the scene of the crime—sheets still twisted into faintly sordid-looking shapes, the pillow he’d left curled like a

recently salted slug, the hint of what could have been underwear peeping out from beneath her bed.

“He’s in the bathroom.”

“Tending to his wounds, huh?”

“Men these days just don’t know how to take a finger up the butt.”

“You did *not* put a finger up his butt. Are you lying? I can tell you’re lying, Letty.”

“I have to go now. I promise I will talk about how sore his butt is at lunch.”

“How am I supposed to wait until lunch? That is not cool, Letty, no don’t close the door on me—”

“I have to, you’re a crazy person. And besides, I really need to sleep off all the super weird, rubber-wearing mega bondage we did.”

Lydia’s expression was priceless as she finished closing the door—caught somewhere between glee and frustration. In fact she was still laughing about it when Tate finally emerged, fully dressed and groomed and ready to go. She turned with that wicked grin still on her face, then felt it slowly wither and die. He just looked so...down, suddenly. Not like himself at all.

Though it was only after he’d left that she fully appreciated the issue she’d caused.

Her phone stayed free of his texts for the next three days.

—

She knew he was at the party. She overheard two girls talking about how amazing he looked tonight—and it was true. He did. The moment she saw him—standing all alone in the flickering glow of the bonfire someone probably shouldn’t have lit—her heart actually lurched. Her mouth went dry, her knees went weak, her head spun. For a second she was every cliché she’d ever read about girls who’d fallen hard for some guy, and she couldn’t fault herself for any of them.

He was just *that* beautiful.

She was allowed to admit now that he was beautiful. In truth she barely knew how she’d ever thought otherwise. Those brutal features were not brutal at all—they were so soft they almost seemed out of focus, so pretty he could have walked the runway tomorrow. The only thing that really marked him as a powerful man was that body. But you couldn’t really see it

beneath the dark red sweater he was wearing, the scarf he had around his neck, and the hat, the woolen hat, oh lord she loved that woolen hat.

It made him seem like falling leaves and spicy hot chocolate and a million things she probably shouldn't think about right now, considering he was still mad. No texts for three days meant mad. He even *looked* mad, just standing there on his own without the armor of his buddies or a bunch of girls. Everyone seemed to know he needed a wide berth tonight, so it didn't seem like that much of a reach.

Until he turned his head her way and held up one oddly hesitant, half-faltering hand—as though he had no idea if he should say hello. He could see Lydia was on her way back across the field with two beers in hand after all. Maybe a wave would give the game away. Expose them, in a way he knew she didn't want.

So instead he folded that hand back down, waiting.

Good god, *he had been waiting for her to say it was okay.*

She could see he had, yet for a second that idea was so staggering to her it just cycled around and around in her mind without ever really making contact with anything. Lydia handed her a beer and she just accepted it mechanically, nodding at whatever her friend was saying but unable to hear it. She couldn't even explain it. It felt like gravity had suddenly flipped, and now everyone was suddenly walking on the sky.

Tate was not the one ashamed of their relationship.

She, Letty Carmichael, thunder-thighed creature from the back of beyond, bane of their high school, scourge of anyone with eyesight, was the one.

She was the one ashamed of him.

And that was...god she didn't know what that was. Her mouth wanted to both tense into a pained line and grin more wildly than she had ever done in her life. Feelings flooded her body, but she didn't have a name for any of them. Most of them seemed too awful *to* name. They smelled like triumph, like victory, but they weren't the kinds that she wanted anything to do with.

Maybe before he had kissed her by her door.

Or further back, when he had held her face.

When he had made amends.

And carried her.

But not now, never now.

Now she just wanted to go over to him. To tell him all the things she'd always longed for him to say to her: I didn't mean it. I take it back. I'm sorry, I was a fool, I don't know what I was thinking. All the things he *had* said to her, and was still saying right at this moment. She could practically see it written across his features. It was there when his brows knitted together as he waited for her to decide, and there again in the relief when she told Lydia she had to go see him and then started to walk his way.

Had anything been as beautiful as that relief?

That happiness, when she took hold of his hand?

She knew he wouldn't pull away, she knew it, she knew she had nothing to fear—and it was glorious. All of the wonder of the world was in that one moment, when she threaded her fingers through his. It was like rewriting the past, and having it stick. Like time traveling, to put right what once went wrong.

And she knew he felt it, too.

If he hadn't, he probably wouldn't have brought her hand to his lips, to kiss. Right there in front of all the people milling around—his bros over by the keg and all the girls who adored him right down to their bones. In front of Lydia, who mouthed *I knew it* in a way that was both amazing and crazy, plastic cup raised in a silent salute that just about made it okay.

Things were going to be okay.

She could hear it in his voice when he asked, “Are you sure this is cool with you?”

“I'm sure. Are you sure?”

“You know I am.”

And she did. She did know.

How could anyone doubt, when he said it so softly, so gravely? He even glanced away after he'd told her, as if the emotion of doing it was just a little too much.

Though that might have been Lydia drawing his attention.

She pointed to her eyes and then pointed at him before turning to speak to Brad.

Who was in fact wearing a shirt that showed off his delightful chest.

“Your buddy looks kind of disapproving.”

“Well, in her defense, you did Stockholm me.”

“I want to deny it, but right now it kind of feels like I did.”

“I’ll let you in on a secret: I went willingly to my doom.”

“It will never be your doom. I promise you. I promise.”

He squeezed her hand tight. As if he could imprint that promise on her skin.

But really it was her, now, who needed to reassure him.

“Not even if I’m an asshole who keeps you like a dirty secret?”

“You weren’t an asshole. You protected yourself. I like that.”

“It doesn’t seem like you like it.”

“Not going to lie—it stings, too. But it’s a sweet kind of sting. Like the kind of thing you might get after taking a bullet in the shoulder for someone you love.”

She had something planned to say, after hearing that first *sting*.

But it started to melt at the idea of it being sweet. And then he got to the other part, the part about the bullet and the shoulder and the *love*, and the words dissolved altogether. She froze right where she was, looking up at him through the faintly smoky air. Half leaning on his arm, hand in his. Everything as it was, only he had just said those words.

And now he was slowly becoming aware of that fact.

She watched his eyes widen slightly, and then he jerked his gaze to her.

“Oh. Oh no, wait...no, I meant...you know what I meant.”

“Wow, okay, because for a second there...”

“Yeah, for a second I was like in love with you after five minutes of friendship.”

He laughed, while she tried not to think about how thin that sound was.

It was probably just her imagination. Or his embarrassment over this mistake.

“Right? Has it been five minutes? Because it feels like thirty seconds.”

“Well, actually it’s been around a month, but I take your point.”

“A month is still absolutely nothing.”

“No, god no. It’s a tiny amount of time.”

“And that bullet comment was totally cool enough.”

“You like the bullet thing?”

God, his tone was almost tentative.

And so full of *yearning*.

“I did. Like, a lot. I mean, I don’t want you to have a bullet lodged in your shoulder. But the fact that you would...that you have...that you don’t

mind that much...”

“I don’t mind that much.”

“You know what? Me neither,” she said.

Then hauled him down for a proper kiss.

One that had lips and lots of tongue, and left him grinning like a buffoon.

“If I had known it would have made you look this fucking giddy,” she said, “I would have kissed you in public waaaaay before now. Seriously, it’s weird that you’re this happy about it. Like I’m having déjà vu, only with everything the opposite of how it should be.”

“It’s not just the public thing. I was...thinking...”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” she said. “I heard it gives you wrinkles.”

“I knew you only cared because I’m so pretty. I get ugly and it’s over.”

“I will admit I do like your dewy, youthful skin.”

“So that’s all I am to you. Skin,” Tate replied.

“And ass. Oh my god, your ass. Do you have any idea what it’s like to actually be able to appreciate your ass? I used to tell myself it was like two rhinos wrestling in a sweaty sock.”

“Fuck, *why* did you not use that as an insult in high school? That would have *devastated* me,” he said.

She laughed at that. He laughed at it, too.

Though she couldn’t help noticing the emphasis he put on the word *devastated*.

Like he meant it, on some level. She had possessed the power to hurt him, even if she hadn’t known it.

“Well, too late now. All I got is drool and two grabby hands.”

“See this. This is what I was just grinning like a lunatic about. You realize we are actually a hundred percent dating right now? Like, we are absolutely together without eight miles of trauma standing between us and huge urges to hide everything and lots of pretending we are not mentally groping each other. This is real. You just said you want to grab my ass. I can totally tell you that I want to grab yours. I can say right out loud: I want to strip you down and kiss every inch of your hot little bod. And nobody cares.”

She nodded in the direction of three girls.

Three girls who had definitely overheard, if their reaction was anything to go by.

“I think a *few* people care. One of the ladies who wanted your number just fainted. Two others gave me gestures that suggest if I don’t let you do that to me I’m an enormous idiot.”

“Yeah, well they never had me create a toxic fog in *their* bathrooms.”

“I think they would still find you super sexy.”

“Uh-huh. I bet.”

“But not as sexy as *I* find you.”

His head went back at that, eyes rolling up.

“Oh, say that again.”

“I find you sexy.”

“I think I could hear that a thousand times and not ever get tired of it.”

“Then I guess I’ll have to say it a thousand more.”

“Not if I get there first.”

It was his turn to kiss her then.

So long and deep that even Chad looked a little weak at the knees at the sight.

“Come on, I got a surprise for you. Over in that spooky abandoned barn over there.”

He waved in its general direction, but she couldn’t see anything. Which was probably for the best.

“You have a surprise for me. In an abandoned barn. That is spooky.”

“Do you really have to say it like I did something crazy?”

“Well, considering I last heard that line in a film called *The Eyeball Eater...*”

“Nobody is going to eat your eyeballs, I promise.”

She loved that he crossed his fingers, then clumsily and obviously hid them. As though he was playing on the perception of him as a big oaf, just for her. He was secure enough with her to seem like a fool.

He knew she would laugh with him—and she did.

“You say that, yet used suspicious powers to predict I would be here.”

“I didn’t use psychic powers. Lydia told Brad and Brad told Chad and Chad told me.”

“I can’t believe I know two people whose names end in *ad*. Or that you value their information.”

“Hey, I value it because their information is solid. Look, here you are, coming with me to the place where they found a ton of cats with no eyes.”

She glanced down at her feet, and sure enough, they were walking in his direction, as he sauntered backward in the direction of the place.

“Ah, so the owner of the death barn practiced his evil trade on animals first.”

“They always do. They always, always do,” Tate said.

“You’re ridiculous. But I like it enough to tell Lydia I’ll see her later, and then join you in the probable nightmare barn,” she said as she turned to do just that. Though not before she saw him grin wildly.

Then pump his fist, like a kid who’d just won the world.

Chapter 19

He was wrong about the place. It was dark and hollowed out, but not exactly spooky. Or at least she thought so until she stood inside, listening to the wind rattle the possible skeletons hiding in every shadowy corner. She even thought she saw something very skeletonlike, over by the tarpaulin-covered monster that lurked beneath the loft.

It turned out to be just rusted tools.

That looked like they were covered in blood.

“Tate, come on. You know I’m afraid of being murdered by the scythe-wielding ghost of a disgruntled farmer. Even though I wasn’t until I saw something that looks very scythelike standing in the corner.”

There was no reply—unless you counted the now-howling wind.

So she just kept talking. Loudly, so as to ward off evil.

“I mean, seriously, how old is this place that there is a scythe here? Was it abandoned in 1763? I feel like it can’t have been, considering the amount of corrugated steel. Which probably just leaves me with option three: the barn murderer is really into disemboweling people with old farm tools.”

Still nothing. Eerily nothing, this time. It made her think of movies where the girl goes to look for her boyfriend, after they decide to have filthy, sinful sex. And then she opens a door like the one attached to the only stall in the place and— “*Mwahahaha*, Letty, here I come to disembowel your bowels!”

She did her best not to scream. And if he had only shouted such a ridiculous thing, she might have managed it. But he didn’t. He swooped in from somewhere behind her and got her right around the middle, then proceeded to lift her off her feet. The panicked shout was practically required.

The gasp that followed, on the other hand...

Well, that was something else altogether.

And if it sounded a little like excitement, that was purely because it totally was. It always made her neglected, thrill-less heart lurch into her mouth, to feel him haul her up like that and swing her around. Doubly so when she thought about what he was to her. This was pretty much her boyfriend behaving like this. Having fun with her, as if this really *was* a horror movie with some cool couple who’d made it to the end.

Still, she tried to play it off like it was nothing.

“I want to kill you. I *would* kill you, if it were not for that awesome wordplay.”

“Yeah I was pretty proud of that. *Little* bit worried you’d believe I thought *disem* was a word.”

“I believe you are a huge jackass, that’s what I believe. How are we supposed to make out if I poop my pants? Tell me that, Tate. Tell me what the plan was then.”

“Baby, I would still totally tongue kiss you if you messed yourself.”

“That is the least romantic while still being the sexiest thing I ever heard.”

“I’m just trying to keep your expectations low so that when we go up there it will seem way more awesome than it actually is. And also not at all creepy.”

She glanced in the direction of his pointing finger—to the shadowy loft above.

The one that you got up to using a ladder most likely made of old bones.

“Why? What did you do? Dare I ask?”

“It’s not so bad that you have to dare yourself to ask about it!”

“Okay, but do I need protective face gear? Should I brace myself?”

“I’m honestly not one hundred percent sure, because I’ve never actually tried anything like this. Plus you’re a real smart-ass, so it could end with your mockery ringing in my ears until the end of time.”

She was pretty sure he didn’t intend to sound vulnerable. It just came out that way, sort of faint on the end and with too much emphasis on *mockery*.

Plus there was the woolly hat.

The woolly hat really didn’t help. It somehow made him look younger—like a big kid playing around in emotions he didn’t know how to deal with.

“I won’t do that, come on. I promise, okay—I’ll be totally cool about it.”

“Swear on the undead soul of the barn disemboweler.”

“I swear. And you know it must be true now because if I’m lying, he gets to, like, eat my eyeballs.”

“Right, exactly,” he said.

But he still didn't move. She had to prompt him, with a flourish of her hand and *a lead the way, then*. Followed by a lot of pretending that this was not a big deal. Sure, he had clearly planned this. And he had done so knowing that she might behave in front of everyone as if they were just study friends, and never come with him to this place at all. But none of that really meant anything.

Not until she climbed the surprisingly sturdy ladder up to the loft and saw exactly how much he had done, with very little hope of it ever being recognized. He'd strung fairy lights across the hay-covered floor, and somehow powered them. They winked in the darkness like diamonds. And it didn't stop there. There was also an honest-to-god picnic basket, full of the kinds of goodies she liked. A bottle of sparkling elderflower wine, because he knew she hated champagne; a tiny speaker playing the music she loved.

And then there was him, eyeing her with a mixture of wariness and hope.

All of which just really guaranteed the complete dissolving of her heart.

"You really thought I was going to be a smart-ass about this?"

"Well, that was what happened in the nightmare I had about how this would play out. Though you also took off your skin and revealed you were actually Coach underneath, so...I probably shouldn't have put too much stock in it."

"Not unless you're secretly crazy about *him*."

He shook his head, but he didn't laugh.

Instead, he said, "No. Just you."

Then held her gaze until it started to destroy her.

She had to glance away in the end, just to hold on to her few remaining brain cells.

"Stop. I already need to climb down off this incredible cloud of total romance. If you do one more thing I'm going to end up on the romantic moon. NASA is going to have to send people to come get me."

"For real? You like it?"

"I like it."

"It's not too weird?"

She had no idea why he would think it was. What would make him bite one thumbnail like that and seem so awkward about it. But then she

remembered what he had said before he brought her up here: He had never done this before.

He had never done it for anyone, except *her*.

“Tate, weird is spending your whole life dreaming of blankets in barns and candlelight and looking at the stars with the guy you like, and never thinking you’re worthy of it. Actually getting it is amazing. I don’t know what to say. I should probably stop talking altogether before I make a fool of myself.”

“No, no, keep making a fool of yourself. It actually reads a lot more like something awesome.”

“Now I know you’re just full of it,” she said.

But her cheeks were tugging at the corners of her mouth anyway.

One more good pull and she would be grinning wildly.

“You only say that because you can’t see how cute you look. Blushing and trying not to look too excited.”

“I’m not blushing. It’s just super warm in here.”

“It’s fucking freezing and you know it. But don’t worry—I came prepared.”

He had, too. Behind the picnic basket was a battery-powered space heater, of the sort that was probably going to set them on fire. Damn though, did it feel good. He switched it on as she made herself comfy on the blanket, and seconds later she was taking off her jacket and he was taking off his hat.

Though she protested the latter.

“Seriously, the hat does it for you?”

“It makes me really appreciate all your features.”

“Guessing that means you didn’t appreciate them before.”

“Not like this. Not like I can’t stop staring at every little part. I feel like I’m eating you with my eyes. I feel like being six inches from your face isn’t actually enough.”

“Come closer, then,” he said.

Because he was a tricky fucker. He beckoned, and she was helpless to do anything but. She leaned and he leaned back and then his mouth was on hers. Gentle, at first. Soft, like at the door to her dorm room. But then she put a hand on his face, tentative but clearly greedy to feel all the things

she'd only just accepted as handsome, and something shifted almost immediately. It was like flicking a switch.

One second things were polite and romantic.

The next he had a leg between her thighs and a hand on her ass.

Not that she minded—her other hand appeared to be on *his* ass. Though she wasn't sure how it had gotten there. Or at what point she had decided that pushing under his waistband was a cool idea. In fact, there were a lot of things she seemed to be doing that she hadn't planned. Nor did she have full control over any of them. One second she was kidding him like a normal person. The next she was pressing her mouth to his so forcefully she could feel him pulling away. She could hear his muffled protests echoing inside her.

"I wasn't intending to...I didn't mean for this to be..."

"Oh. Sorry. I just..."

"Just what?"

"Really need to."

"Fuck. Fuck. Seriously?"

She wasn't sure what she liked best.

The spat curse words, or the breathless incredulity.

Both were impossible to fight, at any rate. Her hands were on him before he got to the question mark at the end of his sentence. No hesitating, no trembling, no trying to navigate around an imaginary force field. Just a lot of yanking at his sweater and shoving aside of things, while he did his best not to seem shocked.

And failed, pretty badly, on all fronts.

The sound he made when she smothered his face in his own lifted sweater was almost baffled, and several times it dissolved into laughter. She even heard him say from behind the woolen mask she'd made: *oh so everything is just coming off right here, I guess*. Though it wasn't meant in a reluctant, outraged sort of way. There was this gorgeous note of pleasure shining through his words. Just sheer, goofy pleasure, to have her wrestling him so eagerly out of his clothes.

Like in the room, when she'd ask to see.

Only a million times more intense.

He was almost shaking with it, by the time she started running her hands all over him. Face a picture of bliss and wonder and wanting, hands

hovering over a million different parts of her.

Though she didn't get why they were hovering, until she went one step further. She assumed it was a force field of his own, for some ungodly reason, and then she leaned forward and kissed where her fingers had just been, and got a short, sharp, and very arousing lesson. Almost the second her lips closed around one of his tiny, tight little nipples, he gasped out a bunch of words.

"Oh my god, so you're really just choosing to do that. This is actually what you're doing right now," he said, the meaning behind them clear as a bell. He wasn't touching her *because he wanted her to do it on her own*. No encouragement from him, no prompting, no hands pushing her in the right direction.

Just her own lust for him driving her to lick and suck.

And maybe leave a few marks. God, he seemed to love the marks. He made that cut-off *ah* sound every time she sucked some of his delicious skin between her teeth—and all the while those hands never touched her. Once or twice she thought she felt them brush the back of her head, and his thumb occasionally grazed her jawline. But then he'd back off, as though afraid of blundering in before she could make a decision herself.

Then each time she made one, she heard his sharp intake of breath.

She got to his belt and he groaned so loudly it echoed around the place—and even louder when she started unfastening it. "*Fuck*," he spat, but still he didn't try to encourage her. He just waited until his thighs were actually trembling and his face was flushed all the way up to his hairline and his hands were clenched fists at his sides. By the time she finally eased his cock free he was almost beside himself.

But still she couldn't stop going slow.

She couldn't give up the teasing—not when it made her feel like this. Her pussy was a hot, thick fist between her legs; her nipples two stiff, aching points. Whenever she moved she could feel her own slipperiness sliding over her tingling clit and the puffy lips of her sex, so intense she thought she might be able to come like this. Just a little rolling of her hips and some more teasing of his cock, and she would probably be there. And especially after he started talking.

He'd been pretty much silent up to now, but when she started rubbing her thumb around the slick tip of his cock he found his voice. His strained,

breathless, beautiful voice.

“Oh Jesus Christ, Letty. I can feel that in my fucking teeth.”

“That sounds bad. Maybe I should go a little slower.”

She eased back on the circles she was making with her thumb—and on the pressure she was applying, too. Now she was barely skimming the glossy tip of his cock, in a way that made him pound the side of his thigh with his fist. It made him clench his jaw, so that when words came out they were as tight as a drum.

“Holy *fuck* that’s even worse. I feel like I’m gonna burst.”

“Then I should definitely slow down.”

“You should if you’re trying to kill me. Are you trying to kill me?” he asked, then seemed to realize all on a rush. “Oh good god you are, that’s what you’re doing, you’re teasing me to fucking death on purpose. You’re doing this on purpose, and you’re *liking* it. No, scratch that, you’re fucking *loving* it, aren’t you? You getting off on playing with me like this?”

“That really depends on how you feel about that.”

“I feel like I’m going to blow my load just watching you get all excited over my body and my dick and what all this fucking teasing does to me. Look at you. Jesus, look at you. Look at those fucking devil eyes and that flush all over you and those spiky little nipples. God, you look like such a horny fucking *slut*.”

He spat the last word, the way people did when they meant it as an insult. Only he didn’t mean it that way at all. She knew he didn’t, because the second the word was out his head went back. A long, low keening moan wavered out of him, followed by what could only be described as a seizure. His whole body seemed to clench, to the point where she could actually see it. She saw his abdominal muscles tighten and the cords stand out in his neck, and then that big, fat cock was swelling in her hand.

He was coming, she realized.

She had made him come, just by teasing him and wanting him.

A second later the first thick streamer of come shot over her hand and arm, so violently that some made it much further. She felt it spatter her T-shirt and almost came herself right then and there, and again when his hand went around hers. No more letting her do it on her own now. He wanted every last drop of this orgasm, and that meant urging her to stroke him. To

pump his still-jerking cock until his shudders died down and that slippery liquid slowed to a weak trickle.

Though even then he kept it going.

He squeezed her hand around the solid shaft, gasping and moaning in a way that made her want to moan, too. She took in his flushed, slack face and his lust-fogged eyes and his heaving chest, and just needed to do something, anything, to relieve the ache thrumming through her.

Except for the thing he then suggested.

“Okay. My turn.”

“What do you mean, your turn?”

“I mean it’s my turn now to kiss and lick and tease you all over.”

He reached for the hem of her T-shirt, with all the serious intent he could muster. Though she knew the second he did it that he didn’t really mean it. He wasn’t actually going to just reach over and yank her top off.

It was obvious he just wanted to see her reaction.

And she cursed herself for immediately giving it to him. As soon as his fingertips grazed that hem, she jerked back. She just couldn’t help it. It was like some kind of primal instinct—one that he was well aware of, apparently. He sat back on his heels at the sight, already stuffing himself back into his jeans. And the expression on his face...

She wanted to call it pained ruefulness.

A description that was backed up by the tone of his voice.

“I knew it. I knew it. You’re nervous about taking your clothes off.”

“In an abandoned barn, sure.”

She sat back, too, as she told the lie. Folded her arms, to make it seem more certain.

Of course, it only had the opposite effect. Now she’d built an extra barrier between him and her body.

“You didn’t want to do it in your dorm room, either.”

“I didn’t not *not* want to do it.”

“I think that was a triple negative.”

“Which makes it a positive again.”

“That’s not...I don’t think that’s how that...” He paused, half frustrated and half amused. Shook a playful fist at her. “Stop using grammar against me!”

“You started it with your triple-negative jibe.”

“I did not. You backed me into—” he started, but he didn’t finish. Instead he took a calming breath, and restarted with a clearer purpose. “Okay, this is completely irrelevant to the point, which is: you obviously don’t want me to see or feel too much of you. And that’s ridiculous, considering how aroused I got over your bare leg like we live in nineteenth-century New Zealand and I stole your piano.”

She had to drop her folded arms a little for that.

And maybe put a bit of a moan into her voice when she replied.

“Ohhhhh, did you seriously just reference *The Piano*? Oh my god I just came.”

“Hell yeah I did, because I’m not a jerk who refuses to like movies that aren’t manly enough. I told you already I liked *Dirty Dancing*. *The Piano* is, like, a hundred times less embarrassing than that.”

“I dunno. *Dirty Dancing* doesn’t have Harvey Keitel’s penis in it.”

“Hey, I love Harvey Keitel’s peni—wait, let me back that up.”

“No, don’t. Keep going. I might get turned on enough to just strip.”

“In that case, I regularly fantasize about being mounted by him.”

She laughed at that. Loud and long and so good that her arms were no longer folded by the time she was done. Somewhere in the middle of it she had leaned back on her elbows, in an almost relaxed sort of way.

And when he slid across the blanket and lay down beside her, she didn’t flinch.

“This was your evil plan all along, right? Get me laughing until I feel totally comfortable about being nude up here in front of you.”

“You bust me so hard, babe. So hard.”

“But you love it right?”

“I *do* love it.”

God he sounded sure about that.

And he looked sure, too.

That little half smile, the hint of a raised eyebrow, the softness in his gaze.

“Okay, I’m going to give you just one boob. I’m warning you though, they’re nowhere near as great as my clothes might make them seem.”

“By clothes do you mean the seventeen layers that disguise your boobs as a woolen shelf?”

“No, by clothes I mean shut up being a smart-ass if you want me to continue.”

Of course the second she'd said it she wanted to take it back.

Now there was just the sound of her own breathing.

And the sound of *his* breathing, as it got steadily heavier.

“You've gone all quiet.”

“I'm trying not to be a smart-ass. You need me to talk?”

“Yes, please. Say words. Fill this eerie silence.”

“Felt kind of less eerie and more intense and sexual to me.”

“To me, too, but I'm trying not to think about that while my elbow is caught in my sweater.”

“Would it help if I did this?”

He leaned over, careful not to disturb the delicate undressing she was still in the middle of. One hand on the side of her face, most of his body still in its own separate space.

And then he just touched his lips to hers.

Soft, achingly soft.

“Yeah. Oh yeah, that helps.”

“And if I were to just...give you a hand...”

“I guess that might be...that might be...” she tried to say, but her sentence just wouldn't come together. It ran into trouble when he stroked over her bare back to help her slide her sweater off, and failed altogether the moment his gaze roamed over what she had revealed. She was just in her bra now—one that was fraying around the edges and had long since lost most of its pretty pale blue color. In fact, the kindest thing anyone could say about it was that it looked comfortable.

Though that wouldn't have described his reaction the same way.

It seemed more like the bottom had fallen out of his ability to restrain himself. He said “Oh man” around seventeen times, eyes everywhere all at once. Tongue curled out to lick his upper lip, as though just imagining what her skin would taste like. Hands flexing and unflexing in a way that suggested he really wanted to cup something or stroke something or maybe squeeze.

She didn't expect him to actually do it, however.

Or for it to feel as good as it did. He stroked down the slope of her breasts and ended in this almost rough sort of grope—rough enough that it

should have bothered her. But it didn't. Instead she got an intense reminder of how turned on she had been only a few minutes before. Her clit pulsed once, twice, nipples hardening under his desperate touch.

Then again when he moaned some words.

“Fuck, look at how you fill my hand, look at how I can hardly hold you. So fucking beautiful, man, just so sweet—can I take this off? Can I just get this off you?”

She didn't even know why he was asking by that point. Most of her concerns flew out the window as soon as that pleasure hit, and his desire just did the rest. It turned her limbs to syrup and left her practically lying in his arms, skin so flushed and body so restless he couldn't fail to know what he was doing to her. He had to know how good it was to hear the hoarseness of his voice and the shake in his hands as he worked on the catch between her breasts.

But he seemed to need her nod anyway before he spread the material. Reverently, she thought—and that was the way he looked at her, too. Like she was something rare that he wasn't supposed to see, something beautiful that he couldn't get enough of. His eyes almost devoured her, following each line and curve in such a way that she felt caressed before he even used his hands.

And then he did, and she wondered what on earth she'd been thinking. The difference between looking and touching was enormous. It stole her breath. He cupped one of her breasts—without making contact with her nipple or any other sensitive part—and she had to dig her nails into the arm she didn't know she'd been holding on to. He actually winced in response.

Though he didn't stop.

No, he just kept touching and staring until she thought it was possible she might lose her mind. Everything had shifted from something that made her nervous, to a gigantic tease—or was it some kind of mix of the two? She didn't know. All she knew was that when he traced the shape of her left breast with one finger, barely making contact, she had to say something.

The words just seemed to burst out of her.

“Will you...can you just...can you touch me while you do this? Please?”

“I thought I was touching you. Feels like I'm touching you too much.”

“Not between my legs, though, not between them.”

“Are you actually asking me to get you off?”

The shock in his voice and his eyes should have embarrassed her.

But it didn't. If anything, it only made her more desperate.

“I might well be, yeah.”

“While I fondle and kiss your bare breasts.”

“That sounds like you got the right idea.”

“Because doing all of this actually turns you on.”

“I think I might die if you don't, to be honest.”

“Undo your jeans for me, then.”

She could see he thought she was going to hesitate. But she was too far gone to even think about it. She simply yanked at the buttons and zipper, then started working on pushing the whole lot down. He had to stop her, and show her what he had really meant—just two fingers slipped beneath the elastic of her panties, to search out her bursting clit.

Though she didn't get a chance to be grateful that he was trying to take things so slow. Or feel foolish, for suddenly being the one racing on ahead. All that mattered were those tight, firm circles on her slick little clit, followed by him bending his head to attend to her breasts. And he *did* attend to them this time. There was no sense that this was what he wanted at all—only what she did.

He knew what would happen when he teased one stiff nipple with his tongue, as he rubbed over her aching bud. He seemed well aware of the connection between those two things, and how good it felt to have them toyed with at the same time. Then when she moaned and bucked, he went one further. He slid two fingers inside her, thumb still on her clit, mouth still at her breasts. Sometimes licking now and sometimes sucking and always, always making her lose her mind.

She barely knew where she was by the time her orgasm swelled through her. All she could think or see or feel was her clit swelling against his thumb and her cunt clenching around his fingers, every part of her completely present and unself-conscious in the moment. Abandoned to it, she would later think, so eager that she didn't hesitate when she saw the shadow over his shoulder.

It was only in the aftermath, still glowing with pleasure and lax in his arms, that she realized.

There was someone there, over by the ladder. Chad, her mind informed her.

About a second before the flash of a camera phone lit up the darkness to make his intentions perfectly clear.

Chapter 20

She tried not to think about it too hard. Thinking hard over something like this was her enemy. It made her want to not look at him when he started up the steps that bisected the lecture hall, and maybe pull her hand away the moment he took hold of it. It was resting on her desk and he just casually dropped his over the top, as though nothing had really happened.

Which was kind of true.

It was just her brain that kept telling her otherwise.

It kept whispering that his reaction hadn't been good enough. He'd immediately bellowed at his friend to get the fuck out of there, but he had said very little about the picture he might have taken. And though he'd told her he had nothing to do with it, she couldn't help wondering. Maybe it was all part of some elaborate prank—even though the word *elaborate* could never possibly cover something like this. To pretend to like her, to gradually wear her down, to seduce her in the strangest and most unintentional seeming way...it was all way too much effort for a nude picture he could make a joke of. Even Lydia had deemed the idea ridiculous, and she had spent the half hour prior to being told shaking her head over them dating.

He tried to murder you, she had said, which put her firmly in the not-on-his-side column.

If he did something wrong, Lydia would definitely tell her. She would know.

There was just no way.

“Are you okay honey?”

He leaned very close to whisper the words. So close his breath brought up goosebumps in places they didn't usually occur, like the side of her throat and the curve of her jaw. And then there was the expression on his face—so anxious and vulnerable.

It made any anger or doubt very hard to maintain.

Harder yet when she saw Chad slink into his seat about five rows down. Then he turned just a little, and she saw the reason for his bowed head. He had a black eye the size of a small grapefruit. The lids had swollen to such an extent that seeing was completely impossible, and there were only a couple of explanations. Fewer than a couple, if you factored in Tate's fist.

She hadn't noticed at first because it was his left, not his right, and he'd kept it out of her line of sight.

But when he reached down for his textbooks and piled them onto his desk...

There it was. A nice, livid corresponding bruise all across his bulky knuckles.

One of his knuckles was almost as black as Chad's eye, and twice as swollen. Broken, she thought, then got a hot shock of something through her body. Annoyance, she wanted to call it, but annoyance rarely made your heart thump like this. It didn't make your palms sweaty.

And it definitely didn't give your voice an awestruck tone when you whispered a question.

"Did you punch him in the face for taking a picture of me?"

"I literally have no clue what you're talking about."

"Just saying the word *literally* really strongly doesn't make it sound more true."

"I didn't say it strongly. I said it in a totally normal way."

"Even having it in there at all is kind of dubious."

"Dubious in what way?"

"The lady doth protest way too much."

He snorted at that, loud enough to almost interrupt Professor Harrison midflow. He was saying something about the grade criteria for the joint projects, and his attention flicked upward. Only briefly though, and not enough to stop their conversation.

They just had to do it more quietly, leaning close enough to feel each other's breath on their lips and cheeks. To see each other's eyes in color-streaked snatches.

"How do you know I'm not protesting the exact right amount?"

"Because your left hand looks like it was hit with a hammer."

"Maybe it was. Maybe I—"

"Had a confrontation with Thor?"

He rolled his eyes, which seemed pretty convincing.

But glanced away, in a manner that wasn't.

"My hand doesn't look that bad."

"I think the middle knuckle is broken."

"Man, those are some good X-ray eyes you've got."

“I don’t need X-ray eyes. It looks like it’s on backward.”

“It’s fine. It’s nothing. I did it in practice.”

“You haven’t been to practice for a week. Coach stopped me in the hall yesterday to ask if I had seen you and pretty much suggested that I had poisoned your mind.”

He had acted fairly casual until that point.

But now he whipped a look at her. He raised his voice an octave, loud enough that a pixie-haired girl in an absolutely gorgeous red jumpsuit turned around and shushed them.

“Are you *serious*?”

“Yeah.”

“He bugged you about it?”

“Kind of, yeah.”

“I’ll punch him, too.”

She knew he was being funny. He boxed the air with his one good fist, like some cartoon from the 1930s. *Why I oughta*, she thought, then wanted to laugh.

So it was a surprise when her voice came out so furious.

“You shouldn’t be punching anyone, *ever*.”

“Not even when the punching is justified?”

“Punching is never justified, you lummoX.”

He wanted to laugh, over *lummoX*. She could see it in the flash of brightness that suddenly lit in his eyes and the way his lips trembled at the corners.

But he managed to swap it for withering dismissal at the last second.

“Yeah okay, I know, I know, it’s brutal and aggressive and—”

“I don’t care about the brutal aggression. I care that your hand looks like raw beef. I care about you getting kicked out of college because you pounded some asshole who took a nudie picture of me.”

“He didn’t get a nudie picture of you. He got like half of your elbow.”

“Well then what did you hit him for? An elbow isn’t so bad.”

“An elbow is *worse*, are you kidding? How dare he invade the privacy of your right arm.”

He slapped his desk, loud enough to make the girl in the red jumpsuit turn again.

Though when she did, he did a masterful job of pretending to read one of his textbooks.

“Okay, now you’re just purposefully being ridiculous.”

“I know, but I’m enjoying myself, so just go with me on it.”

She loved the grin he snuck her after those words. It was lopsided and somewhat sheepish and so conspiratorial. As though they were partners in crime, and he’d just asked her to rob a bank with him. *It’ll be fun*, she imagined him saying, and then she was just grinning back.

It wasn’t hard. His amusement was contagious.

And she had contracted a fatal dose.

“I think I *have* to just go with you on it.”

“You don’t have to. You could tell me to be serious.”

“I see, and what good would that do me?”

“It might help convince you to trust me.”

“I do trust you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive,” she said.

And in that moment, she really was.

She held his warm and sincere gaze as he leaned in for a kiss, and everything was okay.

—

“You know, we really have to have something to show for our hours supposedly spent on this project.”

She turned on his bed and looked at him, one eyebrow raised. Pen still poised over the flow chart she’d just drawn in his room, to illustrate how the various parts of their project went together. Tone as stern as she could make it.

But it made no difference. He just kept right on fondling her under her T-shirt, oblivious to her concerns. He wasn’t even looking at her. He was looking at the progress his hand was making on her bra. Then when the progress proved inadequate, he tried with two. He pushed her T-shirt all the way up and went at those little hooks, tugging and wrestling until she was swinging completely free in front. All he had to do to see her completely bare breasts was lift the material.

Though she could tell he was wary about making that his goal. Stripping her had hardly gone well the last time. And besides, there were other things

for him to do. Really cool things, like sitting up a little so he could reach all the way around and inside, to where the already stiff points of her nipples were.

And then he teased.

He skimmed his fingers back and forth over those sensitive tips, pausing only to lick his fingers or gauge her reaction. Not that he really needed to: she was making her reaction pretty clear. The pen was the first casualty. It rolled out of her hand and under her desk before she could take hold of herself. Soon her notepad followed, forgotten in her rush to lean back against him.

Oh, and she was gasping.

She wasn't sure when it had started, but she definitely was. He made two fingers extra slick and then just circled one tight little bud, and the sounds just spilled out, despite all of her efforts at staying aloof. She reminded herself how long they had left to finish work they'd barely started, but it had no effect. Everything was his hands now, and his greediness. God, his greediness. It took him all of twenty seconds to progress from circling her nipples to getting big handfuls of her breasts. The kissing he was doing all over the side of her face soon became hotter, and wetter, and went lower down. Suddenly he was biting the curve of her throat, in between the hottest words she could imagine.

"Ohhh man, I just want to lick and kiss these beautiful tits. Can I do that? Is it okay if I do that?"

"I really want to say no. But if you don't, I think I might die of sexual deprivation."

"I've been dying of sexual deprivation since we were so rudely interrupted. Honestly, your breasts have haunted my every horny dream. Swear to god I had one last night about fucking in between them and woke up to find I'd pretty much come all over myself," he said.

After which, she pretty much lost it.

"Ohhhhhh my god oh my god."

"You like that huh, dirty girl? You want me to coat those beautiful tits? Or was it the idea of me in my bed all covered in my own come? Dick still hard, wanting more. Wanting me to fist it until I shoot again, while moaning your name. Because I did, you know. I jerked off with the first hot load

slicking the way, everything all slippery and easy, head full of the idea of those tits bouncing as you ride me.”

“Fuuuuck, are you kidding me? Are you kidding stop Jesus I can’t take it. I can’t take it. I just need you to fuck me now. Please fuck me now I want to feel that big dick inside me.”

She turned on the bed as she spoke, so eager she didn’t think to check that he was with her. She just sprawled back, legs already mostly spread.

Only to find he wasn’t following.

He was just staring down at her with this blank look on his face.

“You do? Are you...are you serious or...?”

“God yeah, I’m serious. Of course I am.”

“You’re not scared?”

“No, baby. No.”

“Holy shit, okay. All right. Um.”

Again he seemed to go blank, as though he couldn’t quite process what was supposed to happen or what he was meant to do. After a second of watching him sit there, frozen, hands not reaching for anything and gaze turned inward like some robot searching for a system error, she had to jostle him.

She sat a little way back up again and put a hand on his forearm.

“Tate. We need a condom.”

“Uh-huh, yeah, I just...”

He made a gesture she knew meant *I don’t have one*. It was caught somewhere between a shrug and a look of despair, empty hands spread out to really illustrate the total lack of them anywhere here.

Yet still she couldn’t quite believe it.

“You don’t have any? Tate Sullivan, super stud wrestling champ, has no condoms in his dorm room? Not even one in his wallet, or in the free pack they gave out at orientation?”

“No, I *have* the free pack. I just can’t actually use the tiny things they *put* in the free pack.”

“That has to be the hottest way anyone has ever said they can’t use a condom.”

“Are you fucking with me right now?”

“Not even a little bit. I don’t even know why you would think I was.”

“Most girls I get this far with don’t really want to go any further.”

He said the words slow slow slow. Like he was trying to spell out the concept for her.

But she got it. She had it. It was just other stuff she couldn't quite grasp.

“Are you saying that you've not actually had sex since you got here?”

This time his silence was deadly. She watched him lapse into it and almost died.

She was still almost dying as she squeaked out the words.

“Oh my god. Are you saying you've *never* had sex?”

“No. No. Fuck no. That would be insane. That would be the weirdest fucking thing in the history of ever,” he said, and to his credit he was laughing as he said it. He snorted and rolled his eyes and generally made a good show of dismissing her. It was just that all of his efforts were immediately decimated when he decided to add one little extra thing. “But let's say for the sake of argument that I've only...*kind* of had sex...”

He didn't even get to finish.

She was already covering her face with her hands.

“Noooooooooooo, Tate, no, come on, this *cannot* be true.”

“I just said it wasn't.”

“Yeah, but you're lying! How is it possible that you're lying? I must have seen you with, like, seventy different girls in high school. I once caught you getting a blow job behind the science block! You claimed to be some kind of sex expert, when actually you're a *virgin*?”

She said the word way too loudly, and knew it. It practically reverberated around the room.

Though luckily it seemed to have no impact. Or at least, not the impact she expected. His cheeks didn't go pink. There was no blustering after the fact, or sneering at the idea of virginity. Instead, his answering expression was almost scornful—and so were his words.

“Hey, just because I've never stuck my dick all the way into some pussy doesn't make me a virgin. I've done just about every other fucking thing you can think of. I've had two threesomes—one with another guy. I made a girl come just by kissing and sucking on her tits. Bondage, spanking, sex toys, fingers in my ass, fingers in *her* ass, voyeurism, exhibitionism...you name it, I've done it.”

Now it was her turn to fall silent, as several cogs turned in her head at once.

Spanking cogs. Bondage cogs. Cogs that featured someone fingering his ass.

And finally, the best one. The one she had to bring up, if only in passing.

“Okay, can we revisit the guy thing at some point when my mind is not still being blown by this other completely incredible revelation?”

“It’s not such a revelation. You’ve seen my dick. You know my problem.”

“The only problem I know of is that it isn’t in me.”

“You really wouldn’t be saying that if you *did* have it in you.”

“Why don’t you try and we’ll find out.”

She didn’t really mean it in a sexy way.

It just came out like that, all husky and teasing.

And *now* his cheeks turned pink.

“Okay. Okay. Look, if we are actually going to do this we need to do a lot of other shit first.”

“Like threesomes with another guy? Or do you just want me to finger pop your asshole?”

“This is not the time to be a smart-ass, Letty. This is the time for me to panic about splitting your vagina right down the middle like a dress that’s way too small for me.”

“Now is *exactly* the time to be a smart-ass if you really think that’s going to happen.”

“No I don’t really think it is. But you know what I mean. I have been with girls who screamed over barely the tip. Usually I at least get a grimace. I really don’t want our first time to be you grimacing while I squeeze a watermelon into an opening the size of a grape.”

“I’m not sure my opening is grape-sized.”

“It feels grape-sized. It feels like I can only just get two fucking fingers in there, so we’re gonna do this my way or no way. Are we clear on that?”

“Absolutely clear. You just tell me what you want me to do.”

His eyes stuttered closed at that. She wasn’t sure why, however. Was it still her teasing tone? Or more the idea of her doing whatever he wanted? Both, she thought, if his manner was anything to go by.

It was somehow shaky, yet as brisk as a man who planned this for years.

“Okay, so first off, I want you wet.”

“I think we can safely check that box. I soaked my panties back when you started talking about coming and jerking off and fucking my tits.”

“I figured, but soaking your panties really isn’t enough. I want you drenched. I want you so wet it’s all over your thighs and ass and my bed.”

She swallowed thickly, thinking of all the ways he could accomplish that.

Or maybe something else, something he hadn’t mentioned and she couldn’t think of.

“Uh-huh. And how...how do you...”

“Intend to do that? Think we should start by getting those jeans off.”

As soon as he said the words, she started wriggling out of them, fingers quick and eager on the buttons, mind barely glancing against the idea of what she was revealing.

Until he spoke, in a voice as thick as honey.

“No, no. Slower. Do it slower than that.”

“Why do you need me to go slower?”

“So I can jerk off while you do.”

“You really...that really...you...”

“God yeah. Come on, baby. Tease me.”

“I don’t know if I’m capable of...teasing.”

“Want to see what a good job you’re doing already?”

She nodded the moment he said it, so quick and eager he kind of laughed. But it was fine—it was a good laugh. The kind that unwound all the tension in her, and left nothing behind but anticipation. She was practically buzzing by the time he knelt, breath coming in shaky pants, hips rocking against nothing.

And then he eased his cock out, and all she could do was moan.

He hadn’t been lying—it looked heavier and more swollen than she’d ever seen it. When he fisted it, liquid welled at the tip and spilled down over his fingers. It seemed to jump in his hand, and again when he realized what she was doing. He watched her slide off the bed, still nervous but determined, and that hand sped up on his dick. A groan escaped him, loud enough that she found herself going for the buttons on her jeans before he said another word. She even managed to shove them down and off, without thinking too much about her jiggy thighs and her rounded hips.

In fact, she didn’t think about anything, until he spoke.

“Turn around.”

“What? What do you—”

“Turn around, honey. Show me those cute little panties clinging to that peach of an ass.”

“I really don’t think it’s much of a peach. More like a...bag of hammers.”

“Don’t think I’d need to stop myself coming over a bag of hammers.”

She flushed at those words. Partly because they were filthy.

But mostly because she knew they were true. He was as flushed as she felt and so lax looking, sprawled back on the bed like she’d somehow cut all the tendons in his body. One big hand at the base of his cock, squeezing hard enough to make her wince. Then on his balls, tugging and tugging as though that might make the slightest bit of difference.

It didn’t, however. His cock was still leaking streamers of pre-come at the end of all that effort. His hips were still bumping up, as if he could already feel her pussy sinking down on him. And the situation only got worse when she tentatively did as he had asked. He actually moaned once she was standing there with her back to him, clad only in her T-shirt and underwear.

And said things.

Oh, the things.

“Oh fuck, that’s good. Yeah, that’s good. Now just...just bend over a little. Let me see that sweet pussy pouting between your legs. Let me see how wet you’re getting.”

“I think the answer might be very. *God*, I had no idea.”

“No idea about what, baby?”

“That taking off my clothes could feel this good. That it could turn me on. It’s always been something I did in the dark, under sheets. Most of the time I don’t think I undressed at all. But man, just hearing you do that and talk like this...I can’t even describe it.”

“Try for me. Tell me everything, tell me all of it.”

“It’s like falling from a tall building only to discover you can suddenly fly.”

The words came in too much of a rush to stop—though she wished she had managed as soon as they were out. They just sounded so ridiculous. This was supposed to be sex, not sudden deep poetry feelings time.

Yet there they were, and he had heard them, and strangely, she wanted to stand by them. She even lifted her chin, defiant.

And got this, as her reward.

“You have *no idea* how good that is to hear.”

“I do know. I can hear it, too. I can hear it, and I know it’s true.”

“What makes you so sure? What makes things different now?”

“The fact that I’m not afraid to do more.”

She turned on the last word, hands already grasping the hem of her T-shirt. One swift motion and it was off, bra and all. Now she was utterly naked before him, without the comfort of that dim light in the barn or her own arms across her body. She let them hang at her sides, only moving them when it seemed like the most exciting thing to do. The sexy stripper thing to do—fingers threading through her own hair, back slightly arched, everything tilted at just the right angle.

And it was the right angle, too.

She could tell by the expression on his face, suddenly so much heavier. His eyes narrowed to slits and that tongue came out to wet his lips—only this time she recognized it for what it was. He was echoing the thing he wanted to do to her clit. Or at least, he was pushing her to think of that. To get her to imagine the soft, slow glide of it, until she could hardly stand it any longer.

She had to slide a hand between her legs.

It was pretty much a given, and yet the response...

“Ohhhhh fuck yeah, touch yourself.”

It was like she’d never done it for him before. Like he’d never seen *anyone* do it. His head went back and his fist tightened on his cock, only the tightening didn’t seem to help. It just made him buck and groan and writhe on the bed, and when he finally wrestled back control of himself, it was purely to demand more.

“Slide a finger into your pussy,” he said.

So she did. No qualms, no worries.

Just one foot up on the bed, so he could really see.

And then a torrent of words, each filthier than the last.

“Are you wet?”

“Sooooooo wet.”

“And tight?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Use another finger. Yeah, like that. Work them in and out.”

“Like this? Is this what you want?”

“Almost. Just...just...spread them as you ease out.”

“So I can take that big cock? Huh?”

“So it feels good, baby. Go on. It’s gonna feel so good.”

He was right about that much. It did feel good.

But it was even better when he took over. He suddenly lurched forward just as she was getting to the second long, slow push and pull, hands immediately going to her hips. That soft mouth not on her breasts or her pussy but on the soft swell of her belly, kissing and kissing until she couldn’t do anything but fold down over him. She wrapped her arms around his head, briefly burying her face in his hair. All focus on her still aching sex completely lost.

Until she felt him stroking there. First softly, cautiously, as if just testing the waters.

Then he slid two fingers in, and *god*.

She could have drowned in the sensation it produced. It was some kind of unholy cross between a tingle and a pulse, and it only got more intense as time passed. He kept spreading his fingers as he eased back out again, and whenever he did it was like getting an electric shock straight to the clit. Once or twice she was sure she felt it in her teeth and her toes and the tender place behind her knees.

And when he added a third finger, she *definitely* did. Her legs immediately decided to not hold her up anymore. He had to sort of catch her and help her back onto the bed.

But that worked out pretty well. Now he was between her legs, most of his body in the right position for sex. Basically all he had to do was find a condom and they were good to go. More than good to go, in fact. She was so wet she could hear what he was doing to her—and she got wetter yet when he started in on her clit. He found it with his thumb as he twisted and parted those three maddening fingers, rubbing until she was nearly beside herself. She tried to breathe but no air seemed to want to go in. Her back had arched so hard she felt sure she could have kissed her own ass.

Sucking one of her nipples into his mouth was pretty much the worst thing he could have done.

Yet he went ahead and did it anyway. He swirled his tongue around one tight peak, and as soon as he did pleasure punched through her. She moaned his name, so clearly wanting more it felt spelled out in neon.

However, he still didn't seem inclined to go any further.

It was *she* who had to prompt him to get a condom, and even after he'd managed to find a serviceable one he still looked strange. His whole body was shuddering, hard enough to make his teeth chatter. She had to put her hands on his face to calm him down—though it had very little effect. He still fumbled with the foil and fucked it up a dozen times, until she simply had to step in.

Partly because her patience was at an end.

But mostly because *holy fuck* was it hot to see him behave this way. For a brief moment, he wasn't Tate Sullivan, Super Stud Sexual Expert. He was Tate Sullivan, awkward virgin. He knew no more about what he was doing than she did—less than that, in fact. *Her* hands weren't shaking as she opened the packet. They didn't even shake when she rolled the condom over his insanely hard cock.

However, his were still shaking when she asked him to take off the rest of his clothes. He could barely get out of his T-shirt. She had to help him with his jeans, but when she did the trembling only got worse. "*I'm going to go off if you touch me one more time,*" he said, and she had to be honest. She knew exactly how he felt. Just hearing him say it was arousing enough. But combined with all the rest of it, with his sudden awkwardness and the sense of anticipation all tight and heavy in the air and then him over her...

Jesus, he was big over her.

Sometimes he was so different, so weird and smart and kind, that she forgot his cock was enormous. But she remembered it now, and for the first time truly *reveled* in it. She ran her hands up the arms he put on either side of her, feeling every plane and knot. Feeling the power there, held so carefully in check—and knowing that he held it for her.

It made her want to grin wildly and cry all at the same time.

In truth she probably would have if she hadn't felt him brush the head of his cock over her slick slit.

After which, all other considerations fell by the wayside. All she could think about from then on was the pure sensation of him, sliding back and forth through her slick folds. The deliberation of it, the care he took—and

of course the terrible fucking tease it soon became. After a second she was almost holding her breath, and doubly so whenever the swollen head of his cock grazed her entrance. Sometimes he did it slow and sometimes he did it fast, but it was always delicious agony.

Though it was his gaze that really got her. The one he locked on her the moment he started whatever this was, eyes wide and shot through with a million emotions she had never imagined he would feel. It felt like *she* was supposed to be nervous, *she* was supposed to be scared. But it was *his* brows that were knotted in the middle and *his* teeth sunk deep into his lower lip. He was the one who cursed and dropped his head—partly, she thought, because of the sensation.

Oh god yeah, the sensation was definitely getting to him.

But it was mainly the other stuff. She knew it was, before he even confirmed.

“I can’t, I can’t, I don’t want to hurt you,” he gasped, and she wondered if he knew what it sounded like.

More like I don’t want to seem as if I hate you than hurt you.

And especially after she replied.

“You won’t. I trust you. Go on.”

His expression shifted the moment she did, that frown dissolving down into the sweetest sort of relief she had ever seen. It looked to her like he’d been waiting for a hint of it for a thousand years, and now that he had it he could finally rest. He could just give in to everything he was feeling, without restraint or hesitation. No holding back anymore—and good god, was she ever grateful for that.

Just the feel of him easing into her—astonishingly painless and as easy as anything—was enough to leave her wasted. But the way he surrounded her with his arms as he did it, the way he kissed her, as though barely able to contain his affection and gratitude—it was beyond anything she thought sex could be. For the first time, she understood the connection between the physical and the emotional. Every hint of his tenderness toward her fueled the pleasure sparking between her legs, and every spark of pleasure made her cling to him tighter.

It made her kiss him back with the same need—like this was the last time she’d ever get to do it. And when he started moving, that feeling only doubled. Suddenly she couldn’t get enough of him. Her hands wouldn’t

hold him tightly enough and her kisses weren't as deep as she wanted them to be. Even smothering him with them wasn't enough, because when she did he made the most adorable faces.

He tried to grin and gasp at the time, pushing himself into every one of the soft touches of her lips against his jaw, his throat, his cheek. Like a puppy, she thought, seeking affection, then only wanted to do it more. She nuzzled him back, and he pretty much lost it. He said her name over and over, hands fisting in her hair and mouth suddenly hard on hers.

Though he still didn't do the one thing she really needed: move. God, she needed him to move. The sensation of his cock filling her was almost too much to stand—it sent this deep ache through her belly, all hot and sweet and good. It made her moan every time he so much as shifted position, that shaft so thick it brushed the best places inside her whether he wanted it to or not.

After the third nudge against that bundle of nerves, she honestly started to think she could come like this. Just from the pressure of him right there, right fucking there all thick and heavy.

And especially after she tried a little experimental squeeze.

It was barely anything, really. She didn't even mean to do it—another wave of sensation hit her and it just happened, like a reflex. But man, did it have an effect. The pulse that went through her was almost painful, so low down and heavy that she couldn't even get out the moan she wanted to make. She just had to lie there, shuddering and bucking, as it tapered off.

Then rose again, with his reaction. His face went slack at the feel of her, eyes rolling up in his head. But most important, as soon as it really hit him, he seemed unable to stop himself pushing against her. Just a little, but a little was a lot when you had what he did. She practically felt him in the back of her throat. She had to put her hands on his shoulders and push down—though after she had she wondered why she'd bothered.

This time, that pulse was *insane*.

It made her *grunt*; she actually *grunted*, and her response to his shock was not the one she expected. He went utterly still, clearly concerned, and then suddenly she was moving. Really, *really* moving, as though she could somehow fuck him from beneath all that bulk.

And as it turned out, she could.

All she had to do was shift a little and clamp his body between her thighs, and she could rock. She could work herself against his swollen cock, until that sweet ache returned with a vengeance. It took root in her belly, so hot and thick she wanted to scream.

Then settled for moaning. Lots and lots of moaning, and maybe some clawing at him, most of her lost to the realization that sex could be *this* good. Not even sex, really, because he wasn't doing anything. He was just watching, astonished, as she *used* him—because that was definitely what she was doing. She was taking her pleasure from him, so eager she didn't even stop to think about how she looked or what he thought.

Or at least, she didn't until he gasped *oh fuck, baby, fuck yes just do it, do it, come all over my cock.*

After which, everything seemed to ratchet up a notch. His hand went to her ass and squeezed, urging her on and on until she was moaning his name and trembling all over. That hot mouth was suddenly back on her throat and jaw, kissing and kissing—and then there was the best part. The sexiest, most awesome part.

He started urging himself against her.

Not a lot. Just a little. Just enough to make the pleasure build and build to some incredible crescendo.

Before crashing down over her, hard. “Tate,” she gasped, “Tate.”

And then it was happening. Her pussy was tightening hard around his cock, that ache swelling way past their point of connection. She felt it in her clit and her belly, before it spread further. It stroked over her nipples and her throat, slowly turning into a fizzing sweetness she couldn't quite take. She just jerked against him, filthy sounds pushing past her lips unchecked.

And *that* was the moment he chose to tell her to turn over.

“I want to fuck you like that,” he said, tone suddenly so gruff it almost made her come all over again. At the very least she groaned for it, deep and long, and when he sat back she didn't hesitate. She turned without a thought to how she looked, the only impediment her suddenly loose limbs. Her arms didn't seem to want to work properly nor did her legs—but that was fine.

Better than fine, in fact.

It meant he just did it all for her. He manhandled her into position, that strength suddenly apparent enough that she found herself babbling. “Ah yeah take me, baby, take me,” she gasped, as if she'd become a completely

different person. A greedy, lust-driven person, who keened when the fat head of his cock slipped into her and pushed back against him almost immediately. She didn't even wait for him to slide all the way in. She just bucked until he was there, then worked herself over it just as she had from underneath him.

However, this time...

Oh, this time he fucked her back.

He really, really fucked her back. His hands went to the hollows of her hips, tugging roughly until she was sure she couldn't take anymore. And then his fingers were searching out her clit and his hot moans of total abandoned pleasure were in her ears and she could, she could. She was coming again before she knew where she was, pussy tightening around his cock, cries of pleasure caught around the hand he put over her mouth.

God, when he put a hand over her mouth...

When he pulled her up, back almost to his front, that hand still on her clit...

There was nothing but pleasure after that. Nothing but him taking his pleasure, fierce and frantic enough that she would remember it forever. Just the sense of him wanting her, needing her—it was everything. It was the difference between the sex she'd had before, seedy and quick and without any thought to her beyond the hole she provided, and the sex she was having now. The idea that she mattered meant the world, and especially when he made it explicit.

"No one has ever made me feel the way you do," he moaned against the side of her face, and then he was coming, she knew he was coming. He wasn't silent, like other guys. He wasn't furtive about it. He gasped her name in her ear, over and over. He told her he was doing it, now, just for her.

All for her.

As she sobbed, for all the things that could have been.

And everything they now were.

Chapter 21

She woke with him surrounding her, to the point where it was almost uncomfortable. His massive thigh was over her legs, as if he was trying to hug her with it, and she was pretty sure that heavy thing squashing her left shoulder was one of his chest muscles. It felt like a brick, when she pushed back against it—as did the arm he had looped around her waist. It was entirely possible she was going to die because he wanted to hug.

Yet somehow she couldn't wipe the grin off her face.

Not even when his phone went off, and he fumbled for it.

He didn't stop swamping her, after all. He just read the text while continuing to give her a hug with his leg and his chest, then sprawled back over her once he'd discovered it was Coach Parker and decided he didn't give a shit. At all. He even informed her that he wasn't replying as he snuggled down again.

Which made her very reluctant to say anything.

Almost too reluctant, considering how insanely comfortable being crushed to death was.

But in the end, she had to do it. Having that bull-headed, temple-vein-popping psycho mad at him was not something she wanted Tate to endure. Hell, she didn't want to endure it, either, after the other day. She could still feel his spit landing on her cheek as he spat the word *poisoned*.

"You know you should really probably go see him. Just to let him know I haven't murdered you and turned your body into a skin suit that I wear around campus to convince people you're still alive."

"That is a super elaborate plan to disguise my untimely death."

"Thanks. I put a lot of thought into it back when I was sure you were out to get me."

"It wouldn't work though. Your wrestling skills are terrible."

"I thought I wrestled you pretty good last night."

"That's true. Though I think the wrestling board might object to a bunch of your moves. Last I checked, squeezing someone to death with your pussy was not covered in any of the rule books."

"Damn. That was going to be my secret weapon. Guess I'm going down hard."

“Definitely going down hard. On the upside though, you’ll be rich after you do.”

“Why would I be—”

It was his expression that stopped her dead. That sheepish, *I fucked up* expression. Of course he tried to hide it by pulling away and flopping onto his back behind her, but it made no difference.

She knew exactly what he had been referring to, without having to ask.

“Oh my god, are you *still* in contact with those mobsters?”

The sheepish look deepened. Now it had a too-rapid head shake to go with it.

“Not in contact, exactly. That makes it sound like we do secret deals in shady alleys.”

“It doesn’t make it sound like that at all. *You* just made it sound like that by saying those words.”

He paused then and seemed to consider. She didn’t know why, however. It didn’t make him sound more sensible.

“Okay, but you have to know that there was only one deal, and the alley was pretty well lit.”

“You have got to be kidding me. You *agreed* to throw a fight for them? Why, why, why would you do that? Why would you ever, ever do that? You could be arrested for wrestling fraud. Or gambling fraud. They might decide they want you to throw ten more matches, and if you don’t they remove one of your toes.”

“They’re not going to remove one of my toes, Letty.”

She honestly wasn’t sure what was worse: that he had done this, or that he was being all weary and withering with her about her perfectly reasonable horror.

“You say that, and then the next thing you know I’m digging through a Dumpster for your missing foot.”

“Now it’s my foot they’ve removed? Seems pretty unlikely when I definitely need both to wrestle.”

“Yeah, don’t worry. They’ll just take it after you’ve overstayed your welcome.”

“Sounds more like you’re just listing the plot points of most mobster movies.”

“Well, what else am I supposed to do? I’m a fat nerd from a small town. I have no fucking clue what the actual mob will do. Probably something with razors and salt and hammers and—”

He caught her flailing hands before she could go any further. Hell, he did it before she even knew she was doing it. She looked down and saw his big fists around hers and was surprised.

And then he spoke, and she got it.

“Letty, Letty. Stop. Calm down. It’s cool, okay. I’m handling it. I’m handling it.”

God, he sounded sure. Sure and soothing.

She just wished she could believe him.

“And if you don’t handle it, what then?”

“How is it possible to fail at handling it? All I have to do is go down.”

“I don’t know. You might slip.”

“Slip and accidentally win the match? It’s not possible, honey. I’d have to be fucking suicidal to somehow screw it up. I’d have to be out of my mind—like if you suddenly dropped dead.”

She snapped a look at him then.

Mostly to see if he was serious—which unfortunately he was.

“Don’t fucking say that. Don’t you fucking say that, you stupid shit.”

“Oh come on, you’re not *really* going to die.”

“And what if I do? You better promise me. You promise me now that upon my death you throw that fucking match so hard it hits the surface of Mars.”

“Okay, okay, I promise. I will. Better?” He held up two fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

But his expression seemed shadowed somehow, and didn’t back up what he was saying and doing.

“Not even remotely better. The *opposite* of better. I mean, there must have been some other option besides this. We *talked about* other options besides this. You were going to wait.”

“Yeah, I *was* going to wait back then, when I had no real clue what my life could actually be. But now I know different, don’t I? You’ve shown me exactly what I could have, and could be—not just some dumb jock asshole you hate, but a guy you like and admire. You think I want to wait to be that guy?”

“You already *are* that guy, Tate. You don’t have to quit the team to be him.”

“But I feel like I do. That’s the thing, honey. Every second I spend doing that shit isn’t just a second wasted on something I hate. It’s not just an obligation to help out my mom. It’s shit that takes me further away from you. Always, always it takes me further away from you.”

She turned in his arms. She had to.

He needed to wholly see how crazy she thought this was, as well as hear it.

“Hey, I’m right here. I was right here before you ever put this on the table. I don’t need you to not be on the team to be happy with you. I just need you to be alive, Tate. Okay? We can’t be together if mobsters murder you. But we can be if you trust in my feelings for you and let me help dig you out of the holes you think you’re in. We could have put a plan in place, gone to admissions, looked at getting your tuition some other way, or maybe—”

“I did all of that. I looked into it all. It would have meant reapplying next fall and maybe working two jobs and getting loans and just a whole bunch of shit that boils down to not having all of this right here and now. And maybe never having it at all. Who knows what’ll happen if I’m basically gone for a year? Maybe you’ll find some other guy who doesn’t have to grind just to get by or—”

Now it was her turn to cut him off. Hard, and with vigorous hand gestures.

“Stop. Stop. Just stop. This is the worst, most ludicrous thing I’ve ever heard. Are you seriously saying you did this because you’re worried I won’t be happy with someone who works two jobs? Because if you are, I might have to murder you myself. It was bad enough when you said the reason you got yourself into this was to have a different life and be personally fulfilled. But to do it because you think I don’t believe in you or won’t stick around...I just don’t even know what to say to that.”

“You do know. Try: ‘Tate, you’re a dumbass.’ ”

“That’s the most maddening thing! You’re not a dumbass at all. You’re not any of the things you still seem to think you are, and if that’s my fault then let me make it super clear: I adore you. I think you’re amazing, no matter what you do. And if you’d never done any of this and just gone

ahead with the plan you apparently knew you could do, I would have kept thinking you were amazing. I will always think you're amazing now—because you *are*, in every way that a person can be.”

He covered his face with his hands as soon as he heard the last word, and he didn't take them down when she nudged him. He didn't even take them down when she shook him, finally, after what felt like a thousand years. She had to speak and break the silence.

“Tate—”

“Don't talk. I need a second to compose myself.”

“Yeah, but your composing is adorable and I want to tell you that, too.”

“Goddamn it, stop. I can't take anymore. I'm going to lose my shit.”

“I think you already have lost it. But that's okay, because I'm pretty much doing the same thing.”

She was, too. Just watching him be like this was enough to do it.

And that was before he dropped his hands and shifted on the bed to completely face her.

Said things that left her wrecked, in all the ways anyone could be.

“I love you, Letty. I know it's way too early to say that, but I do.”

“Yeah, you're right. It is too early to say that. Pretty lucky then that I love you, too.”

“You do? Like, for real, or are you just saying that because I'm having a nervous breakdown?”

“I'm saying it because it's true. How could I not love you? You get involved with the mob so you can spend more time with me. I don't think many girls can say that their boyfriends did something that idiotic and dangerous just so they could watch more cheesy movies together in her dorm.”

“Watching cheesy movies together in your dorm has been responsible for the best moments of my whole shitty little life. And I know that's probably pathetic to admit, and makes me at least sixty percent less cool, but it's the truth. Everything else I've ever done doesn't compare. It's not even in the competition. I would trade away everything I have—money, my life, my peace of mind—just to sit beside you on this bed and hear you reply like what I said mattered to you. It's all I've ever wanted.”

She threw her arms around him then. What else was there to do? He had said the most romantic, heartfelt words she had ever heard. His sincerity

had never wavered, in either his soft gaze or his tone. Nothing could have ever been sweeter, or more real.

She could never have known in a million years that it was all just a lie.

—

She thought she would be nervous when Harrison got to their presentation. But when it came time to go up to the front, she didn't get the usual shakes. There was no sense that everyone's eyes would be judging her. The person who used to do that was up there with her. He squeezed her hand before they stood up, as though he knew what she might be thinking.

Most likely he did.

It was something he'd been very good at it, even when they were mortal enemies. He always knew just what would hurt the most, so she supposed it shouldn't have surprised her that he understood the opposite, too. He knew what would make her feel the best. Like him calling her *my learned colleague* when he finished his part of their introduction, and squeezing her shoulder when she stuttered over the first part of the section they'd call the *orgasmic double standard*.

Not that she stuttered often. In fact it was surprisingly easy to go into the gorier details. She spoke clearly about the difference it made to the rating when a film showed a close-up of a woman's face as she had an orgasm, and barely stumbled when she went into the examples they'd lined up. It was easy to talk about the rift between what movies implied about female sexuality, and even easier to listen to him talking when it came to his part of the main argument.

It made her realize, when he spoke, that this was the start. Seeing him be like this was the reason she had let him in—and especially so when every other guy seemed to have viewed the project as an excuse to look at boobs. That was the name of one presentation: *breasts in the movies*. The guys who had worked on it put up pie charts with various examples of bared boobs in different movies. There were categories like *side*, *full frontal*, *nipples*, and *size*. Everyone thought it was hilarious.

But Tate didn't. He rolled his eyes and whispered, "Morons," to her.

He was different.

She was absolutely certain he was different. That some seismic thing had occurred in him, still occasionally nameless and uncertain to her but definitely there. She had faith in it—of the same sort people had that the sun

would rise the next day and their loved ones would return after work and school and play. It had become an easy thing, a taken-for-granted thing, to the point where she didn't really understand what Professor Harrison was saying when she stopped by his office to thank him for putting them together.

"Well," he said. "I do like to respect my students' wishes."

Though even then she didn't fully grasp things.

She was still smiling when she asked, "Sorry, Professor. What wishes were those?"

"When students request to work together I see no reason not to accommodate them."

"I'm not sure what you mean. I didn't request for us to work together."

She shook her head, a little half laugh threading through the words.

But she knew it wasn't very convincing. Harrison glanced up from the books he was shuffling around on his desk as they talked, attention suddenly completely caught. As though he'd heard a warning beneath that fake sound of amusement, and wanted to see if her expression backed it up.

If she was frowning now—and she was.

Just a tiny one, but it was there.

"Oh? I assumed it was your choice, too. In fact, I believe Mr. Sullivan stated it was."

"Tate *stated* that I chose to work with him? That I wanted to work with him?"

"Indeed, yes," he said. "Though I can see by your expression that Mr. Sullivan was not entirely honest with me. Is that the case, Ms. Carmichael? Because if it is, I may have to take it up with that young man. I would very much disapprove of any trick you might be suggesting he has perpetrated here."

"No, I don't think...I don't think that he...it wasn't a trick."

The frown had deepened now. And it had gathered a few extras—a clenched jaw, some folded arms, a suddenly hammering heart.

"I see. Then your working relationship was perfectly amicable?"

"Yes. Yeah, absolutely, it was great. It was really great."

"And you had no problems with him at all."

"No, god no, none. He was a perfect gentleman in every single way. You would never, ever have thought that he had...that he had created this

situation, and certainly not for any awful reason.”

Her voice was strange by that point. Faraway, somehow, and robotic. And when she got to the end of the sentence, a part of it broke. The last word came out in several pieces, for reasons she tried not to think about. It probably wasn't what it looked like anyway. It was just like Chad taking that picture—an accident, a mistake, a thing that he had nothing to do with. Hadn't he punched him?

He had. He wouldn't have punched him if this was all some elaborate game.

“I just remembered I have a thing to do, Professor. Thank you for your time.”

She didn't wait for an answer. She just blundered through the lecture hall doors, dizzy with the dozens of crazy thoughts that were clamoring inside her head. For a second she actually had to lean against the wall in a stairwell somewhere and take deep breaths. Though it barely helped. Nothing helped—not even her phone buzzing to tell her that she had a message from Tate. *I'll be done in an hour*, he said. *Wait for me in my dorm*, he said. Everything so innocent it should have been fine.

But instead she climbed the stairs to his room wondering what would be waiting for her there. Her mind kept going to the movie *Carrie*, and the weeks of planning they had done just to dump pigs' blood on her head. How she might open the door and find *herself* covered in something. And even after she'd gone inside, she couldn't quite shake that feeling. She trod carefully over the discarded sweatshirt on the floor between his bed and his desk, as if there could really possibly be something underneath.

A bear trap, just waiting to spring.

Or would it be something subtler, something more insidious? Something like the flyer he had posted around school telling everyone to watch out for the whale that had gotten loose from SeaWorld, maybe—though when she riffled through the papers on his desk she found nothing. Just stuff that belonged to the new him, the him that she had come to love. There was a bunch of her notes to him, carefully saved. A book she'd mentioned—*The Amber Spyglass*—that he'd underlined passages in.

She read them sitting in his desk chair, teeth digging deep into her lip. Half convinced by the end that it was all just her imagination jumping at shadows again. How could it be otherwise, when he'd actually written *this*

next to the words *the birthday of my life has come, my love has come to me?* There wasn't a reason to do that. It didn't help with any master plan. He had no reason to think she would find this book and pick it up and be impressed by what he'd written there.

He had no reason to have done a lot of the things he had for her.

But the emails were in his sent box all the same.

Truthfully, she didn't intend to look. She knew she was already hovering on the wrong side of insane. Him lying to Professor Harrison meant almost nothing, and the picture Chad had taken meant even less—so really what was the point? She didn't know. She just clicked on his mail app anyway, like a sleepwalker who negotiated the living room furniture out of habit more than awareness.

And then she was scrolling through his emails.

She was doing worse than scrolling through—she searched for her name.

Though somehow she didn't really expect to find it. His in-box was largely flotsam and jetsam, party invitations jostling alongside subscriptions to typical *him*-type stuff like stress balls that farted when you squeezed them. There was nothing personal, nothing serious...until she hit Return and there they were. Email after email with *Letty* as the subject line, sent to some joker's address: FuckingDouchebag@yahoo.com, she read, and just knew.

It was probably Jason's email address. Or was it Patrick's, or Chad's?

It was hard to tell judging by the content, because there wasn't much of it. A few of them were just pictures of her—the one he'd taken when they'd eaten outside and a leaf had blown into her hair at a funny angle, and another of the weird hole she had discovered in her jeans, by the knee. A couple contained no more than a few sentences that she seemed to recall saying to him. No names, no sign off, no commentary—just the straightforward facts, like he was compiling some sort of dossier to give to the court.

Here are the things she did wrong, Your Honor.

Only it wasn't her that had done wrong. It wasn't her.

She hadn't sent anyone a video of them having sex.

God, God, *he had sent a video to someone of them having sex.* She watched the crooked, half-observed vision of her as she kissed him and

touched him and closed her eyes in ecstasy and happiness and love for him. Oh, you could clearly see how much she loved him—more than she'd ever said, more than she'd ever wanted to reveal. She thought she'd guarded her heart a little better than that, but no no no. It was raw and open and right there for anyone to see. He probably noticed it a thousand years ago, when she was busy still thinking she hated him.

And now she could never go back to that.

She couldn't go back to that perfect state where nothing might penetrate her armor. He had gotten through, and now the whole thing was full of holes. All he needed to do to wound her was half of this, one tenth of this, and yet she suspected he wasn't even done. This stuff was clearly leading to some big thing. Broadcasting it to the whole of campus maybe, or creating some kind of YouTube nightmare. She could imagine Jason having a vlog, full of mean pranks and cruel jokes.

And that was *before* she flicked through the pages to the first email, in search of the beginning of this elaborate scheme. Some word, some sign of what they were plotting together, some hint of revenge or festering resentments. Though she didn't really brace herself for how bad it could be. She imagined a sniggering email to Jason, and instead found an email to *her*.

One that he had sent the day after the accident, only to have it bounce. Probably because of her father, she thought, and thanked god for that. If she had read it at the time it would have destroyed her.

Though the destruction was much more complete now.

She read the lines with blurry eyes, sick with despair and disbelief:

Letty,

If you think I care that you're hurt, I don't. I'm not sorry about the shit that went down—it was your fault. Everything was all your fault anyway and you deserve all of this.

Fuck you, Letty, for doing this to me. Fuck. You.

Tate

Then sobbed, for all the things she had lost.

Chapter 22

She couldn't remember the twenty minutes it took for him to get to his room. Something must have happened in the interim, but she couldn't say what. The only thing she knew for sure was that she was still sitting in his desk chair when the door opened, that email still open on the laptop in front of her. Face wet and insides sort of hollowed out, as though that *fuck* and that *you* had reached in and scooped it all up.

And the only way to get any of it back was to rewind herself.

All the way back, to the girl she had been on that bluff.

"Man, I knew you could stoop low. But this a steep drop, even for you."

"What? What are you—"

She knew what cut him off before he could finish the question. He'd seen what she was looking at. That fucking email, the pictures she'd left up, the video still playing on an infinite loop in the corner. It made her bleed to see her own tender-hearted face over and over, but it was worth it somehow. This was the scene in their movie where the villain was confronted with the evidence of his wrongdoing.

Only the villain in this case was *him* and, oh god, she could hardly stand it.

Just hearing the bafflement in his voice. The *vulnerability*.

The fake, fake, fake fucking vulnerability.

"You went through my emails? Why would you...How could you...?"

"I don't think demanding answers from me is really the way you want to go."

"I don't know which other way I *should* go. I don't know what you think this is."

She stood up then. She had to. There was too much roiling emotion in her to stay seated.

And besides, she needed room to move. To throw her hands up and shake her fucking fists.

"Oh my god, are you serious? Are you seriously going to try spinning this garbage out? Look at this shit! Man, the jig is fucking up, asshole. I know, okay. I know that you've been fucking secretly filming me and sending emails to some dick—probably the same one that split my fucking head open."

“No wait, just wait a second, let me think.”

“Yeah, that sounds like it would be a super smart move for me to make. Wait so that you can dream up a way to weasel out of this. Or maybe you just want time to figure out how to dump the pig blood on my head anyway, huh? Bring your master plan forward a little, perhaps?”

Now it was *his* turn to throw his hands up. To lose it a little.

“This isn’t *Carrie*, Letty, goddamn it, I just—” he started.

But she couldn’t let him finish. Not when he was this good at making it convincing. Not when he could make his eyes seem so full of panic, and force that desperate tone into his voice.

“You just what? Your thumb slipped on the record button? You fell headfirst into emailing Mr. Douchebag? I can imagine all of that pretty easily. But you know what I can’t imagine? How you can possibly have meant your apologies, when right here in black and white you say that I deserved it.”

She managed to get through most of it before she broke. But then she got to the word *deserved* and her voice just started to fall apart. Every bit of her fell apart. She had to take a second to gather herself, to hold back the tears—though her efforts were nowhere near as good as they once were. Some still leaked out. Her chin still trembled. And when she finally spoke again, her pain was riddled through her voice.

She could hear it, and knew he could, too.

“And you know what, Tate? You were right. I did. I totally did deserve it. I deserve all of this, too, because honestly, anyone this fucking stupid should never get some fabulous and amazing happy ending. I fucking *knew* exactly what you were and still let you fool me. I honestly thought you cared for me, even after everything that happened.”

“You weren’t wrong to think I care for you, Letty, you—”

“Oh just fucking stop it, Tate, stop. There is nothing you can say that will make me believe you. You can’t trick some bumbling professor into setting me up a second time. I won’t take off my clothes again or tell you I love you—it’s done; it’s completely done. You’ve wrung every bit of joy and life and love right out of me, and now there’s not even enough to make it funny for you anymore.”

“You don’t mean that. Come on, tell me you don’t mean that part about it all being wrung out,” he said, voice and tone and expression so full of a

kind of pleading desperation that for a second she almost wavered. She had to glance away to get a grip on herself. She had to remember how good he was at knowing exactly how to get her, before she could go on.

“I’m sorry if it ruins your plans to torment me until the end of time. I really am. But it will always and forever be the case from now on. I never want to look at your disgusting face, or hear your pathetic voice, or acknowledge a stupid word you say, ever again.”

“That was...that was really harsh.”

“You think *that* was harsh? Oh, it’s got nothing on the stuff I came up with over years and years of sheer loathing. The hours I spent lovingly crafting insults just for you, my love. And now I have nothing left to lose, and a hundred times the ammunition.”

She stopped there, partly to calm her rising voice.

Mostly so she could push past him, while the blood was still hot in her veins. She didn’t think he would stop her, but who knew really? Who knew what this man was capable of—this man who stood there silently as she opened the door, still playing the part of a broken man?

She even saw him close his eyes as she spat her goodbye, so real it actually left her satisfied.

Like she’d really hurt him with that one last parting shot.

“Go on and give me an excuse to use it, motherfucker.”

Chapter 23

It took a month for him to accept the game was over. A month of deleted emails and texts, of him knocking on her door in the middle of the night. One time she woke from a fitful sleep to hear Lydia screaming at him in the hallway; in the morning she showed Letty the mark on the wall where she'd thrown a shoe. *I would have thrown a hammer if I was confident I would hit his massive head*, she'd said, as they lay in her bed all snuggled down together.

And to her surprise, she found it helped.

Having a real friend after the fact helped. There was someone there to hold her hand when things got rough, someone there to form a buffer between herself and everything that was awful and nightmarish. When they passed him in the hall, Lydia acted as a shield. She gave Letty the strength to look right through him, no matter how much she might want to search his face for some sign of the other him.

The fake him. The him he had made up, just to fuck with her.

It was brutal. But it got better. Or at the very least, it got easier. So easy, in fact, that when she saw Chad skulking toward the picnic table she had chosen—to avoid the cafeteria, where Tate nearly always was—she barely flinched. She didn't look down. She stared at him the whole way, stony faced, so that by the time he got to them he knew he was unwelcome.

And if he didn't, her tone made it clear.

"If he honestly thinks he's going to get to me through you, I should probably let you both know: that's the fucking stupidest plan I've ever heard of."

"That...no. No, I just saw you and thought..."

"Thought what, Chad? That I might flash a boob and let you get another picture?"

To his credit he turned crimson and looked away.

And then less to his credit, he kept trying.

Christ, why did they keep trying?

"So I guess that *is* why you don't talk to him anymore. Because of me."

"Is that really what you're claiming he told you? That this is all *your* fault?"

She put just the right amount of sarcasm in her voice.

But it didn't have any effect. He was on a roll now, apparently.

"He doesn't tell me anything anymore. We haven't talked since the black eye, and even then it was pretty much just *you fucking fuck you fuck you if you ever do that again I will turn you into a fuck fuck fuck.*"

"What exactly is a *fuck fuck fuck*?"

"I dunno, but I didn't want it to happen to me, so..."

"So you thought you'd come over here and pretend that you guys weren't in on all of it together? You know I have to say, that was a pretty convincing attempt. It almost makes me want to hear what comes next."

"Nothing comes next. I don't even know what you're talking about—there was no *in on anything* together with Tate. I did a dumb thing and he threatened to *fuck fuck fuck* me, that was it. And if you've ever seen what he's got in his underpants, you should totally understand why I am terrified of that. Like, I wouldn't even be here talking to you if I thought he cared anymore, just in case this casual chat gets me a minifuck."

"Wow. You are really good. I'm impressed."

"You shouldn't be. I'm *barely* following this conversation."

She stopped then—though not because she was falling for this, because she totally wasn't. There was just something about the word *barely* and the word *conversation* that made her want to push him, hard. Get real answers out of this fake-puzzled jackass.

"Are you honestly going to claim that you had no idea Tate was just screwing with me? That you're not talking to me so he can screw with me some more? That's really the play you're going to make right now?"

"You guys broke up because he was *screwing* with you? Like, as in a joke?"

Man, she didn't like his tone at all. He sounded almost as horrified as she felt.

And still with that confusion, too.

She couldn't *stand* his confusion.

"Of course as in a joke. You know I mean as in a joke."

"I don't see how I could when he goes around looking like he wants to die."

"Okay, you know what? It was really nice listening to this little fairy tale you're spinning, and my estimation of your IQ has definitely gone up a few points. But I've got to get to class now."

She stood up to leave—too fast, she knew. It didn't feel like the right reaction.

There was something panicked about it, rather than outraged.

“Letty, just hold on a second. Just wait, okay? I don't think you've got it right. If you did, if it was just some kind of prank, why would he be like this? He doesn't talk to anyone, he's dropped too much weight—Coach says that if he doesn't straighten out he—”

“I don't care what your coach says. I don't care what any of you say.”

“Letty, some guys stopped by the gym.”

He said it right as she was at the door back to the building, which really should have kept her walking. He was so clearly just trying to keep her talking, and probably not for good reasons. Maybe Tate was just waiting over the hill behind them, in a truck with a grille like the teeth of some vicious animal. She carried on doing this, and pretty soon he would mow her down.

And yet.

Yet.

She was listening.

“They looked like pretty bad news. I heard one of them say that if he didn't throw the next one, they were going to take action—and I don't think they meant a pat on the back. I think they meant serious fucking business, but Tate didn't even seem to give a shit. I tried to ask him after they were gone if he was going to do what they want, and he just shrugged. Like it didn't matter. Like nothing matters. If he didn't care about you why would he be like that? Why would he do that?”

“You say that like there's no way you could be full of shit, too.”

“I can tell you know I'm not. I know that you—”

“You don't know anything about me, Chad. You don't know what it was like to waste away half your life wondering when the next blow was going to come and how hard it was going to put you down. You're good-looking and popular and built, so you'll never understand what it's like to have someone take videos of you and pictures and send them to people with email addresses like FuckingDouchebag@yahoo.com. That just isn't your reality. So at least have the decency to not pretend you have insight into me and who I am.”

“You’re right. I don’t,” he said, and she knew, she just knew something else was coming. A screenwriter couldn’t have scripted a more pregnant pause if she tried. He even let his voice dip at the end of the *don’t*, as if he knew just how to get her.

Turned out, he did.

“But I do know that email address belongs to him.”

It hit her like that truck once had, though she tried to pretend otherwise. To herself, mostly, but to him, too. She didn’t allow herself to turn completely—she only looked over her shoulder. And when she spoke, she jammed every bit of derision she could into her stupidly wavering voice.

“Oh, come the fuck *on*.”

“I’m serious. Check it out if you don’t believe me. I bet you know his password, right? He uses the same probably shitty one for everything—I fucking know he does. I once saw him write his goddamn PIN on the back of his hand, so I’m willing to bet that address pops open for whatever garbage he’s using now. Just try it, Letty. You’ll see,” he said.

But she was already disappearing through the door.

“Goodbye, Chad.”

Chapter 24

She came very close to not asking. It seemed ridiculous to, for all kinds of reasons. And besides, Lydia was busy right at the moment she most wanted to do it. She was gathering up her shit, ready to leave for her babysitting job. Her jacket was almost on. She was checking her hair in the bathroom. It would have been so easy to just let it go, no matter how much it was nagging her.

Oh god, was it ever nagging her. Ever since the run-in with Chad, it had built and built until finally here she was, blurting it out just as her friend went for the door.

“Why didn’t he laugh?”

Lydia turned the second Letty spoke. Expression carefully neutral, but obviously just for show. She knew what Letty was talking about. It was obvious, despite the question she went with.

“Why didn’t who laugh?”

“You know who. You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do but I’m pretending otherwise in the hopes you’ll come to your senses.”

“I just...if it was all just a game, why didn’t he laugh once it was all over? Why didn’t he toss away the mask and turn into a total dick? Mock me about my sex noises and jeer at me for believing him? He had to know that he couldn’t spin it out beyond that point. He had to get that I would never trust him again.”

“Maybe you shocked him. Maybe he had an attack of conscience.”

“That sounds right. That sounds plausible. I can believe that,” she said, but heard how the words sounded. Mechanical, like a robot version of her trying desperately to make things fit.

“And people can be two things at once. They can grow fond of you and think of you as a sweet person and still want to keep treating you like shit. In fact, most of the world revolves around that very premise. People treat the people they care about like garbage, shocker.”

“God that sounds even better. You’re really good at this, keep going.”

“So you’re not looking for some hope from me that he’s essentially not a piece of shit.”

“Christ no. The opposite. Tell me how bad he is. Tell me he’s the worst.”

She expected the answer to follow immediately after those words.

But none came. Instead, there was just a long silence.

There were just Lydia’s pitch-black eyes, regarding her with a gravity she suddenly couldn’t stand. She had to glance away, only when she did all she could see was Chad’s face. The way he had looked when he told her about the *fuck fuck fuck* and the email address and oh *god*.

“I talked to his buddy today. Only his buddy claims Tate hates him.”

“You mean Chad Kilpatrick? The guy with the dark hair and the monobrow?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. That’s him.”

“Tate *does* hate him. Or at least, they don’t hang out anymore.”

“They don’t? You know that for sure?”

Lydia paused, as though considering some next move. Maybe wondering if she should make it or not—and still hesitant when she decided the answer was yes. Her voice was halting when she spoke, her gaze too soft and sad. Several times she seemed to want to stop, but she kept going.

“I don’t know anything for sure. None of us do. That’s the whole problem with the human race—our big design flaw. Pretty much everything relies on us being able to guess what someone else is thinking, and yet we hardly ever get it right. We can’t possibly get it right. I could tell you a thousand times that I hate you, while one *I love you* was right there in my head all along.”

“That was...that’s a pretty cool way to look at things.”

“It doesn’t sound like you think it’s cool.”

“It doesn’t?”

“No. It sounds like you’re really upset.”

“Maybe because he said a thousand times that he hated me...” she started.

But she couldn’t finish the thought. It was too awful to even contemplate. Too hard to think about him in high school with that one *I love you* lodged in his head. Each time the idea surfaced, she came close to losing her lunch, and after a little while of sitting with it the tears just forced their way through.

They were running down her cheeks and invading the sensible parts of her brain.

And it was their fault that she blurted out what she did.

“I just can’t stop thinking about what Chad said to me. And I know, I get how stupid that is, and I see that it makes me an even bigger fool than you thought I was for falling for him in the first place but I—” she babbled, but thankfully Lydia cut her off with a hug. And words, good, good words.

“Oh, sweetheart, I don’t think you’re a fool. I think you saw a chance at something nobody ever gets, and you took it. Of *course* you took it.”

“And then I threw it away.”

“You had reason to. You had every reason to. The evidence was—”

“The evidence was a bunch of mostly cute pictures he sent to himself.”

More silence rushed in after that bombshell. Worse: Lydia pulled away.

Not by much, and only so she could look at Letty’s face.

But it still felt bad.

“Why would he send pictures to *himself*? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“No. You’re right. It doesn’t. Unless you haven’t got the first fucking clue how to back your shit up and think emailing everything is definitely the way to go.”

“Are you saying here that Tate is that kind of guy or...”

“Tate is *definitely* that kind of guy. And he’s also the kind of guy who uses one password for everything, meaning I could definitely check if Chad’s claim is true.”

She looked at her friend then, though she didn’t know what she was hoping to find.

Understanding seemed like a long shot, until she saw the hopeful light in Lydia’s eyes.

“I think you should probably...”

“I know I should probably. But I just...I can’t. I can’t. I’m terrified of what I’m going to see. I’m terrified of what I won’t see. I’m terrified of everything always and I don’t know how to stop.”

“Then let me do it for you.”

She was firm now—so firm that Letty couldn’t imagine saying no. Though even if she had she wasn’t sure it would have had any effect. Lydia was already grabbing her laptop out of her bag and settling herself down on Letty’s desk chair. Feet up on the bed, fingers flying over the keys. It took

her all of thirty seconds to bring up his email provider and fill in the details Letty provided.

Then it was just thirty seconds more of agonized attempts at reading her friend's expression. Was it a yes? Was it a no? But more important: which one was the answer she wanted to hear?

It didn't feel like either in those few moments.

It felt like she was sinking deep into a mess of her own creation.

And she was right to have that feeling, too.

"It's his account. Password works. Plus there's a subscription here to burger-of-the-month club and an order for a T-shirt bearing the legend ONLY DICKS CALL THEM CHICK FLICKS, so I think it's safe for us to call this one."

"He does really love burgers. And hates people calling them chick flicks."

"I remember when the cafeteria had those sliders. I've never known anyone get so excited over what is essentially just bread and meat. I think he ate twenty-seven of them. In one bite."

"I found twelve more wrapped in a napkin in his bedside drawer."

She meant to lighten the mood a little with that confession.

Though somehow it just had the opposite effect.

"I fucked up, didn't I?"

"We don't know that for sure yet. He could have sent those pictures to other emails, too."

"Which is also something we could easily check."

"So let's do it, then. Just tell me what I need to be looking at."

"His other account is BigTaterTot@gmail.com."

"Remind me to tell you that's cute if he turns out to be a good guy."

"I will. Probably while crying some more and cramming comfort cheese into my mouth."

There was a pause as Lydia typed. Fast but not too fast, like she didn't want to seem eager.

And then she found what she was looking for, and couldn't hide it. Her eyes darted across the screen, taking all of something in. Taking a *lot* of something in.

Then finally, "Well. You should probably get out the good stuff. Maybe a nice brie or a block of Parmesan."

"Is it that bad? Or that good? Or both together; I don't know."

“Brace yourself.”

“Just tell me, okay? What are you looking at?”

“Emails. Dozens and dozens of emails. From right after your accident.”

“*Dozens of emails? No—there was one, there was just one. He only sent one and it was awful.*”

“Yeah. I know. But the rest...I think you need to hear the rest. Here: “*So I guess your dad or whatever has blocked me. Well, he can go fuck himself, too. Who the fuck did he think he was telling me that I wasn’t welcome? Didn’t I fucking drive you to the hospital? Was that like not enough to show that I didn’t have anything to do with that dumb fuck’s sudden decision to ram you off a fucking cliff? Because you know I didn’t at all. I didn’t even know what he was going to do all—*”

She held up a hand before Lydia could go any further, partly relieved that she hadn’t so drastically misjudged him. Partly sad, that everything was just the way she had thought. He might not have sent that video to other people, but he *had* said she deserved it. And he’d kept saying it, apparently, over several emails.

“Okay stop. Stop. This was a stupid idea. I don’t want to hear any more.”

“I think you should probably just listen to the next one.”

“The next one where he starts complaining about my mom, too?”

“No. The next one where he says: *okay so I fucked up. I know that I fucked up, too. I should have guessed he was getting out of control and, like, stopped him, but I just fucking didn’t, all right? It would have been a totally dumb thing to say: please don’t actively harm the person we shit on all the time. And every time I tried to bring it up he just laughed about it so obviously I didn’t think he’d push you off a fucking cliff. Jesus. Cut me some slack.*”

Lydia looked at her over the edge of the laptop when she was done.

Maybe to see what damage she was doing. Maybe because she knew she was doing no damage at all.

“Well...I guess that’s better.”

“Just wait. Just wait, God there’s so much more. Listen: “*I don’t know why I asked you to cut me some slack in that last email. You can’t hear me. You’re not holding any noose around my neck. So how come it fucking feels that way, huh? Why does it feel like I can’t breathe all the time and like I*

want to scream but I can't because I'm being fucking strangled? I don't even know what I'm being strangled by.

"Some days, I wonder if it's my own hands."

Letty closed her eyes about halfway through the words Lydia was reading.

It was easier that way to hear it. To just let her continue reading the email after that, like it was all just one big essay he'd written on the subject of her and him.

Why We Hurt Each Other, she thought.

Then Do It Again.

"You're still in the hospital. I called up pretending to be someone else, some cousin of yours, and they told me you're doing fine. They said you were lucky somebody got to you quickly and stopped the bleeding, but honestly I don't even remember doing that. I guess maybe I must have, because the sweater I used is still covered in your blood. It's stuffed in the back of my closet like that beating heart from the Poe story, only the weird thing is I don't feel frightened of it. Sometimes I just take it out and hold it, and think about you spilling this messy map of nowhere all over the front.

"Sometimes I hold it to my face. It still smells like you."

Letty almost told Lydia to stop after that.

But it was for different reasons than the first time. Her heart had started thumping at *called up*, and now seemed in imminent danger of collapsing in on itself, like a dying star. If Lydia kept on she was probably going to implode, and not just because of the words. She could hear Tate's voice when Lydia spoke, so soft and warm. Could see his face, without the mask she constantly wanted to put back over it.

He had saved her life and never said a word about it.

"I guess it's kind of crazy to keep emailing someone who isn't on the other end. Like I'm just talking to an electronic ghost, or an echo of the person you are. Maybe an echo is all I can handle—I saw the real you on the street the other day and couldn't get out of my car. I just sat there behind the wheel, watching you help your mom put groceries in the trunk. Thinking I should get out and go offer to do it for you guys, but scared of what would happen if I did. If you started crying or screamed or something like that, I don't know if I could take it. I can't even take it now, just thinking about it. Just knowing that this is the way things are between us forever. There is no

coming back from this, no moment when I stop being a stupid jerk and apologize and explain why I was such an asshole and you forgive me.

“I let someone violently assault you.

“I am the kind of guy who allows a girl to be violently assaulted.

“What could I possibly tell you to make that okay?”

This, she thought, but couldn't say.

He couldn't hear her. She'd gotten the email years too late.

Lydia continued reading:

“Dear Letty,

*“I came pretty close today to coming to your home. See, I thought I had figured out what I could do to make this whole thing right. I lay up every night this week planning what I was going to say to you, and what I was going to bring for you—not flowers, because you fucking hate flowers. And not chocolates, because I know how shitty that would look. I was going to bring you a first edition of *The Amber Spyglass*, because I know you love that book. But then I got to the end of your street, head all fucking full of how forgiving you would be, and it just hit me hard in the gut. I was doing all that shit for me.*

“So that I could be a different person, a better person, a person worthy of someone like you. I wasn't thinking about you. I've never thought about you. You weren't even a whole human being to me, not even back when I was a dumb kid with a crush. I just saw someone I thought I could be happy with, and when you laughed in my face after I asked you out I saw you as a thief. A girl who stole all my hopes for my own future. I never thought for one second about your future. About what you wanted.

“And I'm still doing it now.

“I want you to make things okay for me.

“When I need to think about what would make things okay for you.”

Even Lydia's voice was wavering now—but that was cool.

It made Letty feel less crazy for clutching at her chest.

“Dear Letty,

“I know how difficult the task ahead is going to be. It might even be completely fucking impossible. It's not like I can plan how to make sure you have a great life from now on. I can't force you to have fun and will you to be happy. But I know that I have to try. Even if you never know I'm doing it. Even if you do scream and cry; even if you beat the shit out of me. I want

you to beat the shit out of me, so I always know that when I'm doing this I'm only doing it for you. Break my arm and I'll just keep on going. Call me every name you know of; I won't give up. Put it all on me; I can take it.

"As long as I know you are one step closer to the life you should have had, I can take it.

"All my love, sweet one,

"Tate."

She managed to hang on until the very last line, and then it was just too much. The sob she had held in pushed past her lips and broke out into the room, loud and ugly and stupid. It was fine though, it really was, because Lydia practically did the same. She covered her face with her hands as soon as that *Tate* was out, so consumed by whatever she was feeling that she didn't even stop to balance the laptop.

It slid off her knee and onto the floor, most probably fucked.

Not that either of them cared. The first thing that Lydia did in the aftermath was stand up, and wipe her eyes with her sleeves, and then clap her hands together.

"Okay, so basically you have to go to him immediately. I fully accept that I gave terrible advice, and that he is not Satan himself, and just come on, get your jacket on, brush your hair, wipe your face, we are going right now to wherever he is. Right now, come on."

"We can't go right now. It's...he...he's at that college with the name that sounds like a bodily function, for some big wrestling thing. Trumphen or Furtberger or—"

"Parper U, you mean Parper U, Letty."

"Yes, that is the one, that is exactly the one and it's like a million miles away and *oh my god* I fucked up. I fucked everything up. And you know what's going to happen now? He's going to fucking die. He's going to be fucking killed without ever knowing that I know all of this and I just...I just I'm sorry and I—"

It was Lydia's hands on her arms that stopped her babbling. That slow stroking, with the little squeeze on the end. The way she urged her to sit back down, even though she didn't remember springing to her feet. And then came her soothing voice, like soft rain on scorched earth.

"Calm down. Breathe, okay. Breathe," she said, and Letty breathed. She believed everything was going to be okay—until Lydia attempted to

reassure her. “He’s not going to die. This isn’t a shitty novel written by Nicholas Sparks. This is real life, where we just sit down and wait for his triumphant return, at which point you then tell him you fucked up with as much beautiful vigor as you just told me.”

Now her voice was trying to rise again.

She was shrugging off those soothing hands.

“But you don’t understand. The reason this has been nagging me is because he’s not going to throw the match. He’s not going to throw it. I messed him all up and now he’s not going to throw it.”

“Okay, so you’re seriously going off the deep end. But that’s cool, because I have Valium that my mom gave me in case college was a nightmare, and we can just take half and then maybe talk about why not throwing matches is a good thing.”

“No, no, no, goddamn it’s not a good thing. He’s all mixed up with these...these...mobsters and he’s already fucked them once and if he does it again...if he does I don’t...I can’t breathe. I need to put my head between my knees.”

She did, though it didn’t help.

Mostly because Lydia said after a long silence, “Holy shit. We *are* living in a Nicholas Sparks novel.”

“Exactly,” she said from between her knees. “And I’m so not okay with that.”

“I know, I know. Just...you know what? Gimme a second to call the Hendersons about the babysitting I was going to do.”

“Why, why what do—why do you—”

“We’re going to take Brad’s car. We are just going to drive right up there and tell his coach or stop him or maybe, I dunno, murder a mobster behind some Dumpsters.” Lydia paused in the middle of texting, face so suddenly determined it flooded Letty’s chest with something like hope.

And especially when she added one last thing with a grin.

“Important question: do you have something we can murder the mobster *with?*”

“My insides feel pretty toxic right now. I could probably bleed in his mouth.”

“Perfect. Let’s go.”

Chapter 25

It seemed to take forever to get there. Every light was red, and they went the wrong way at least twice. By the time they pulled up outside the gymnasium her teeth were chattering. Lydia had to smooth Letty's hair down once they were out of the car because of all the pulling and finger combing she had been doing. She had to talk to her in a soothing voice about life and how it doesn't work this way.

"It's only in movies that people get there, like, a minute too late," she said.

And Lydia was right. Of course she was right. They snuck in behind a cheering, sign-waving crowd, and Tate was just wrestling some guy in the same way he always did. In fact, if anything he seemed even more focused than usual. She caught a glimpse of his expression, as tense and fearsome as she'd ever seen it. Saw him dodging and going for the weak spots like it hardly took any effort at all.

He was going to win, no problem.

Then she remembered in a rush: *winning was bad*. Winning in this case was really, really bad. She could even see two suspicious-looking dudes three rows down—one in the most beautiful suit she'd ever seen in her life, the other so big he dwarfed everyone surrounding him. Both of them watching intently, like they were just waiting for him to make the wrong move. "It might not be what you think," Lydia said, but that only suggested she had seen the same thing.

Now Tate was hurling his opponent around as if he were made of skin and air, and *god god god*, she just had to get down there right now. Even if it wasn't true. Even if this was all just somehow part of one last grand trick—she didn't care. She saw herself as he must have seen her, when he had asked her out all those years ago and she had laughed. Saw how mean it must have looked, even though she'd never intended it that way. She had always thought of it as the start of his cruelty, the start of his jokes and his tricks, instead of what it really was.

The thing that had divided them.

She couldn't let that divide happen again.

Not purposefully. Not like this. Not ever.

And so she took the steps two at a time, almost shoving anyone who got in her way. Popcorn spilled down the stairs to her right, though she had no idea why or how or from where. She didn't know anything but her goal—getting to him and telling him something, *anything*, to make him go down. Maybe even grab him, if she could get close enough. Run right out onto the gym floor like a maniac.

So it was lucky, really, that Coach Parker caught her. He put an arm out and stopped her before she could make it; barked at her that she was crazy. And the truth was, she couldn't argue with him.

She sounded it when she shouted his name.

“Tate, stop!” she yelled out, hardly expecting him to hear over the crowd.

But he did. For one brief second his gaze locked with hers, so full of relief and happiness and surprise she could have cried. In that instant, everything was real again. It was real and it was okay.

It was going to be okay, she thought.

Then he closed his eyes and dropped his arms, just in time for his opponent to smash him into a bloody pulp against the gymnasium floor.

—

It was strange, sitting next to his hospital bed. Like that gravity switch again, only ten times as fast and ten times as hard. Whenever she looked directly at him she got kind of dizzy, and breathing became a problem. But she looked anyway. She looked at all of him, the way he must have looked at her. Not like an enemy or a friend or even someone he ruined and wanted to put back together.

More like a woman he'd loved for years and years.

Far longer than she had loved him.

Longer even than she'd ever loved anyone.

They had both been sixteen when he first asked her, and she had laughed in response. They would be twenty-one soon, with almost five years of this bloody battle behind them. Five years of fucking up and fixing things and fucking up again. It seemed impossible and tiring and amazing and beautiful. It made her exhausted thinking about it and it made her happy, but most of all it made her desperately needing him to wake up.

What if he never woke up? It did seem like the right ending for reality, after all. In real life, you didn't get a neat resolution. Explanations never

happened, and if they did they were usually half formed. The brittle ice of his apologies to her, while underneath an ocean of what he really wanted to say surged and flowed. Never breathing a word about it, because what would a word have done?

It would have made *her* sorry.

And he wanted it to be him, only him.

Or at least, she thought so. But what if she never got to ask? What if she — “Are you upset because you think I’m taking the combination to the safe to my grave?”

She had her head in her hands when he suddenly spoke, which of course only made it ten times more shocking. The sound almost made her jump out of her chair, and she came extremely close to giving him a good whack. In fact, she probably would have if his face wasn’t a bleak mosaic of blacks and purples.

Instead she had to settle for shouting.

“Oh my god, you asshole. You total, total asshole. I swear to god if you ever let anyone smash your face into the ground like that again you better stay dead. Otherwise I’ll just fucking murder you.”

“It’s super nice to see you, too, Letty. I’m glad you...want to...murder me?”

“I *do* want to murder you. I want to murder you to fucking death.”

“Well, that’s typically the state murder leaves you in.”

“Do you not think I know that do you think—”

The tears just came, right in the middle of her rant.

One second she was furious, the next she was blubbing like a fool into her hands.

Though she suspected the word *death* had something to do with it.

“Hey, come on. You can’t cry. You’re supposed to hate me, remember?”

“I don’t hate you. How can I hate you when you wrote those emails?”

There was a long pause then. Long enough that she knew he knew what she meant.

It was even more obvious when he answered, in a tone that was trying hard to be casual.

“What emails?”

“The ones you sent me.”

“You mean...the one where I was a huge dick after your accident?”

“No, I mean the ones where you seemed to realize you had been a huge dick and then agonized over it and beat yourself up until I lost my fucking mind.”

Again, there followed a huge silence. And when he eventually spoke, his voice was even more unconvincing than it had been when he first asked which emails she meant.

“I don’t know what you might be referring to.”

“That’s okay. Because every word is burned into my brain, so it should be pretty easy to jog your memory. Let’s start with you being the person who called 911.”

“That...anyone would have done that. I would have had to be a sociopath not to.”

“Probably true, probably true. But less of one to get my blood all over you trying to save my life.”

“You think that makes me *less* of a sociopath? Come on, Letty. I had to do something. You were bleeding everywhere and it looked like there was a rock in your head and I just—”

“You just didn’t tell me anything about any of this.”

She looked up at him then, but it didn’t make anything any easier.

Now she could see those pained eyes among the forest of bruises.

“If I had told you, how would it have looked?”

“Like you wanted to get top marks from your target.”

“Exactly. I wanted you to trust me because I *earned* it. Not because I did the only fucking decent thing I could possibly do. Seriously, I was your worst enemy, but you would have still done the same.”

“If I had rammed you off a cliff? Yeah, probably I would have. But I don’t think I would have kept the shirt you bled all over and then written poetry about it.”

“I didn’t write poetry, I—”

“Wrote something that sounded like poetry.”

He looked up at the ceiling, as though she’d busted him for doing something terrible.

Instead of busting him for writing about the bloody painting and the telltale heart.

“Yeah. Okay. I’ll give you that.”

“Will you give me the other stuff, too? The stuff about you loving me about a hundred years before you actually said a single thing? Loving me even when you claimed to hate me?”

“You must have known. You must have known I loved you. I practically told you so, so many times and in so many different ways. Why did you think I was at Breckenridge? Didn’t you wonder what I’d been doing in those two years you took off to recover? Didn’t you think it was weird that I was here?”

“I thought it was you being an asshole. Like you couldn’t breathe without me being there to belittle.”

He winced at the word *belittle*—but she couldn’t hold it back.

He had to know the truth, no matter how much it stung.

“And after you realized that was totally not the case?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what I thought. I *do* know that you could have told me.”

“You wouldn’t have believed me. You don’t even believe it *now* after hacking into my emails and reading all my private thoughts and feelings that I never in a million years thought you’d see.”

Now it was *her* turn to sting, so sharply it made her eyes water.

Though it might have been more like crying, if she was being honest.

“God, don’t put it like that. I feel bad enough as it is.”

“You don’t have anything to feel bad about, honey.”

“But I do. I really, really do. I didn’t trust you, even after you did everything possible to help me. I blamed you for things that you weren’t to blame for. I jumped to terrible, shitty conclusions. And to top it off, everything was all my fault to begin with. You asked me out when we were sixteen and I rejected you in the grossest possible way.”

“And there’s the *other* reason I didn’t say anything. I knew that you would think that, I fucking *knew*.” He shook his head, despite the fact that it seemed painful to do it. Made a fist and punched the mattress beneath him. “But you’re not fucking responsible for shit that I chose to do. You didn’t owe me your love. You didn’t owe me a polite yes. It was not on you to let me down gently and somehow ward off punishment I was fucking stupid enough to think you deserved.”

“You weren’t stupid, you were *hurt*.”

“Yeah, and over what? You didn’t even fucking mean it. Right?”

She had to swallow a few extra breaths before speaking. Really calm herself down, after all this confessing of her own crimes. Though somehow, even after she'd gotten to the explanation part, everything still felt fraught and awkward. Her voice was so small when it finally emerged.

"I thought you were joking. I thought it was a joke. You were just so... you were so handsome, I just thought...I thought that was the start of you tormenting me. I didn't understand that you were serious or I would never, ever have laughed and called you a...a jughead."

It helped, that he laughed at the word *jughead*.

And when he reached over the space between them and put his big hand over hers.

"I *know* you wouldn't, honey. I realized within seconds of talking to you like a human being that you would sooner poke out your own eyes than upset someone you barely know." He paused to give her enough time to digest this. Then just whacked her with another sackful of emotional bricks. "And then when it dawned on me, I went back to my dorm and heaved my guts up for about six hours. It worked out nicely though—I made weight the next day super easily."

"Christ. I don't know which is worse: me or wrestling."

"The answer is C: *I* am. I am the worst."

She shook her head. Squeezed one of his fingers between her finger and thumb.

"You don't get to say that anymore. Not when the stupid conclusions I jumped to almost made you commit suicide by psycho mobster."

"Hey—that is *not* what happened. I got a little reckless and depressed, yeah, but that is all on me, not you. I'm the one who spent years fucking up my own life. I'm the one who chose to be an ass to you. I don't get to blame you now for trust issues *I* caused. You understand me? You have to understand—we covered this same thing like five minutes ago."

"I do understand you. I promise I do. I just—" she started.

But thankfully he finished it for her.

"Stop. Start again, by putting some of this on my shoulders."

"You're in a hospital bed, Tate. I think your shoulders have taken enough."

"My shoulders are fine. Come on. Just gimme one thing you wish *I'd* done differently."

It was hard to consider, with him looking at her like that. He had turned onto his side, even though she was pretty sure he wasn't supposed to do that. And she could see where the skin had split around his jaw—those paper butterflies were lined up in a curling row over the red.

Plus he was stroking her knuckles now.

How was she supposed to keep putting it on him, in light of that?

She had to glance away, just to get anywhere close.

“Why didn't you explain when I found all that stuff?”

“That's good. That's better. I don't have an answer for you, but it's better.”

“There must have been some reason you just stood there and took me yelling at you. I mean, later I could understand, because I basically deleted you from my life. But you had me right there and...nothing.”

“Honestly? I didn't feel like there *was* anything I could say. That first email is fucked up. It's like everything that was wrong with me before I started to get my shit together. And then there was that fucking video...why the fuck did I keep that fucking video? I knew as soon as I saw I'd somehow recorded us that I should have just fucking deleted it. It was so weird that I kept it. It felt weird, like being one of those guys who secretly puts their girlfriends on porn sites. But I just...I don't know you were so pretty and you looked like you loved me so much I...I'm making excuses again.”

She squeezed his hand tightly for that.

To reassure him, the way he always reassured her.

“As excuses go, *‘I wanted to keep evidence that you loved me’* is pretty good.”

“But the rest is kind of creepy though, right?”

“I don't think creepy would be the word I would use.”

“Stupid, then.”

“No.”

“Crazy?”

“Not even close. I was thinking more...heartbreaking. All of this is really, really heartbreaking. And it just gets more heartbreaking the deeper in I go. Like, I thought you smelled of my perfume for no reason at all, but now I'm thinking otherwise.”

She didn't know how to feel when his expression turned sheepish.

Thrilled, that she was right.

Sad, that it had taken him so long to say.

“That was kind of an accident. Some girl sprayed it on me in a mall and I just thought it was nice and it gave me a good feeling so I bought some. Then I got close to you in the library and realized that I’m a fucking dumbass who basically has no clue why he does anything ever.”

“Would it help if I said that I *like* you being a fucking dumbass?”

“It definitely wouldn’t hurt.”

“I like you being a fucking dumbass. I like that you don’t know why you do things.”

“Even though it’s responsible for ninety percent of the fucked-up shit we’ve been through.”

“And the other ten percent?”

“Is me knowingly making terrible decisions, like asking Harrison to put us together. I mean, I knew why I did that. I get that it was terrible. It’s just that I went ahead and fucking did it anyway.”

“I think we’ve established that it wasn’t so terrible,” she said.

But he wouldn’t accept it. He sighed and looked down at their joined hands.

“Yeah, it was. I didn’t stick to the plan, which was to basically make sure you were happy. It wasn’t *force Letty into a partnership that makes her even more frightened than she already is*. I should have just backed off and waited for my moment to help you. Beat up guys who were dogging you or —”

“Beating up guys who are dogging me sounds terrible, Tate. It was bad enough that you punched your buddy—who by the way is responsible for you not being killed by mobsters.”

“They weren’t going to kill me, Letty. People notice when mobsters murder wrestling stars who they just recently tried to draft into an illegal gambling ring.”

“Well even so, my point stands. Working with me on a project was a great idea. It *did* make me happy, Tate. It made me happier than I’ve ever been.”

“Doesn’t change how selfish it was. I just...wanted to hang out with you.”

“If you’re waiting for me to fault you for that, you’re going to be here a long time, babe.”

He looked up at that, in a way that reminded her of something.

And then she remembered: it was what she used to do, to stop herself crying in front of him.

“I love you. Do you know that?”

“I don’t see how I could possibly not. You’ve told me in every conceivable way.”

“I’m gonna keep telling you, every day and all the time and always. And I have time now to do it. I got five hundred thousand dollars in my back pocket and nowhere else I need to be.”

Five hundred thousand dollars! her mind screamed.

But she couldn’t focus on that now. Nor on where it would lead—because by God she would make sure it wasn’t somewhere bad. No, all she could think about was the world now opening up before them, built on trust and truth and love. Oh, so much love.

“No more wrestling?”

“No more wrestling. No more of anything except all the things we should have done seven years ago, before I fucked it up. All the movie marathons we missed and the hand holding we didn’t do...the music we didn’t share while lying on your bed in a room I never saw...” he started, voice wavering so much by the end that she had to pick up the thread where he had put it down.

She just didn’t expect it to be so easy.

As though the life they should have led had been inside her all along.

“Splitting pizza slices outside DiMarco’s, safe and warm inside your jacket.”

“And me driving you home, with ‘Pocketful of Sunshine’ blaring out of the speakers.”

“Then in the summer...in the summer maybe you take me to the beach...and draw our names in the sand...” Letty said, her own voice wavering now—for the loveliness of the past that never happened, and for fingertips that swiped away the tears.

“God yeah, honey. I’m right there. I’m doing it now, with a heart around them both. Do you see it?”

“I see it. I really see it. I see exactly how sweet our lives could have been.”

She was crying openly when she said it, one hand pressing his to the side of her face. Holding him there, so he would hold her. Though she didn't need to.

He had hold of her just fine. He would always have hold of her now.

“Oh my love. My Letty—” he said as he drew her to him. “Our lives have only just begun.”

For all of you everywhere who know what it's like.

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank my editor, Sue, for having the patience of a saint. And my husband, for doing his level best to get me well again so I could actually write this thing. But most of all I'd like to thank the twelve-year-old me, for not giving up. I did tell you it would get better.

BY CHARLOTTE STEIN

Dark Obsession

Never Loved

Never Sweeter

Never Better (coming soon)

About the Author

Charlotte Stein is the acclaimed author of over thirty short stories, novellas, and novels. When not writing deeply emotional and intensely sexy books, she can be found eating jelly turtles, watching terrible sitcoms, and occasionally lusting after hunks. She lives in West Yorkshire, England, with her husband and their now totally real and completely nightmarish dog. For more on Charlotte, visit: charlottestein.net

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The Editor's Corner

April is a promise of spring and Loveswept romance is here to warm things up.

L. P. Dover continues her edgy, emotionally gripping Second Chances series with the story of a beautiful widow who can't resist a chiseled NFL player in *Catching Summer*. The Society of Gentlemen series from K. J. Charles continues with the sizzling *A Gentleman's Position*. For a new series, ladies, meet Micah, a man who takes what he wants—until he meets the one woman he needs in Stacey Kennedy's *Bound Beneath His Pain*. An epic love affair steals the show in Stina Lindenblatt's *This One Moment*. Annie Rains continues her small-town Hero's Welcome series with a cowboy turned marine in *Welcome Home, Cowboy*. Gillian Archer is hot on the trend of MC romance, introducing her True Brothers series with *Ruthless*. And MC Sons of Odin returns with Violetta Rand's irresistible novel about a sexy-as-sin biker who tempts a good girl to go bad, *Possession*.

Off the Hook from *USA Today* bestselling author Laura Drewry is the first in her Fishing for Trouble series featuring three unforgettable brothers—each of whom is a great catch. Then the swoon-worthy McKinney Brothers series from *New York Times* bestselling author Claudia Connor continues with J.T. in *Worth It All*. *USA Today* bestselling author Alexis Morgan kicks off her new Sergeant Joe's Boys series with *Always for You: Jack*, where a foster son learns about love and life in record time. And the new Fireside series tells a story of an old love reunited in *His to Love* from new Loveswept author, Stacey Lynn. *USA Today* bestselling writing duo M. J. Fields and Chelsea Camaron are back with the Caldwell brothers in *Jagger*, which is not only full of swagger and sensuality but also packs an emotional punch as the last bachelor standing fights for a woman who's worth every ounce of trouble. And yet another Aces Hockey romance from Kelly Jamieson releases this month featuring pro hockey hunk Duncan in *Icing*. There's also something naughty for you from *New York Times* bestselling author Jen McLaughlin in *Lust Is the Thorn* where a soon-to-be ordained priest has to decide who he loves more. Then prepare yourself for razor-sharp suspense from *New York Times* bestselling author Patricia Rosemoor with *His Deception*. Two words for you: secret bodyguard. And

for fans of the hit TV show *Empire*, Lisa Marie Perry's *Sin for Me* kicks off the sizzling Devil's Music series.

Friend Loveswept and let the romance begin!

Until next month—Happy Romance!

Gina Wachtel

Associate Publisher

Read on for an excerpt from

Never Better

A Dark Obsession Novel

by Charlotte Stein

Available soon from Loveswept

She woke to the sound of heavy boots on hardwood.

Though it was something else that really set her heart racing: the faint *shush* beneath each step, as if the people wearing the boots were trying hard to be very quiet. If it had not been for that, she would have guessed it was workmen, come to retrieve something they'd forgotten from earlier. The Hendersons were having a new kitchen put in, and it seemed likely that they had given the men a key. But it got less likely, the more she saw and heard. If they had turned on the lights, it would have glimmered beneath the door. Yet that line of space was black as ink. One of them cursed as he ran into something; a millisecond later glass broke.

They were intruders, these men.

Thieves, possibly.

A threat, certainly—and not only to her. There was also the sleeping girl nestled deep into the curl of her right arm, one small hand still on the book Lydia had chosen to read to her. Greedy for more, she had thought, when the kid first fell asleep. Now it just seemed terrifyingly vulnerable. She could so easily be hurt.

Unless Lydia could think up some sort of escape plan. It was too late to go down the stairs—they seemed to be everywhere all at once in the rooms below. Alone, she might have been fast enough to evade them. But carrying a sleeping child? She had no chance. They would be on her before she got the front door unlocked, and god only knew what would happen then.

She didn't think thieves took kindly to people they stumbled across, during midnight break-ins. Hadn't someone been stabbed not long after disturbing an intruder? Someone over in Stanningly Park, maybe? She only vaguely remembered reading something in the college paper, but only vaguely was more than enough.

If they stabbed Ellie she would lose her goddamn mind. She could already feel it starting to fracture, before anything had actually happened. All her thoughts were fluttering high up in her head, threatening at any second to fly out of her entirely. Her teeth were chattering; her heart was a tight, tense animal in her chest.

And she was shaking. She tried to hide it, as she gently woke the kid. But it showed in her whispered entreaty for quiet. It was there when she brought her finger to her lips. Her only comfort was that Ellie seemed too

sleepy to notice. She rubbed her eyes and complied in that way two-year-olds always did, when woken way before they wanted to be.

It took almost no effort to scoop her up and get her over to the window, and even less to get the window open. The frame was new, and it slid soundlessly up despite the single hand she used to do it.

The next part was the difficult one. How were you supposed to explain to a two-year-old that she had to climb outside then wait? The possibility of her running right off the edge of the roof seemed insanely high to Lydia, in that moment. It almost made her climb out first, but of course doing so would leave Ellie alone with them.

She couldn't do that. She couldn't, not even for a second. Ellie had to go first, no matter what the risk—and for a moment it was high indeed. The kid just wouldn't fit through. She seemed to be all arms and legs, each of which caught on the frame or the window at some point or another. It was like wrestling with a tiny, half asleep octopus, while some unknowable doomsday clock ticked away in the background.

How long had it been since she got out of the bed, now?

Thirty seconds? Sixty?

It felt like a thousand. Every sound was their footsteps on the stairs, and yet still Ellie would not go through. Lydia sweated and tried not to curse and struggled until desperate tears tried to leak from her eyes, but couldn't get the task done. And then finally, finally, she got the kid out, only to lose her grip on those footie pajamas.

"No," she said, so loud and agonized it did actually stop Ellie from crawling away.

But the cost of that was steep indeed. The silence that followed rang in her ears. It filled the whole house, as telling as an intake of breath before the bullet hits. They had heard her, quite obviously. Now she had seconds instead of minutes, when what she needed was hours.

Climbing through the window would have been difficult without the time limit. With it, she was too frantic and too clumsy. She snagged the sweatpants she was wearing and twisted her ankle trying to put one foot through first, scraping various bare parts of herself as she jammed and forced.

Yet none of it was enough. If anything, her efforts only put her at a greater disadvantage. When they came through the door, she was panting

and bloody and bruised, frustrated tears standing out in her eyes. Most of the fight was already gone out of her, and that sensation only got stronger as she took them in.

They were both tall, very tall, and broad. And clearly they were experts, rather than opportunists. Their clothes were practically uniforms, from their thick canvas jackets to their utilitarian boots. Even their masks were identical—thin black material that turned every part of their faces into a featureless lump.

And that included their eyes.

For some ungodly reason, they had no holes cut to see out of. There was just a dark blank space where those holes should be, as though two sightless aliens had come here just to silently observe. They wanted to know what panic looked like.

But she was damned if she was going to show it to them.

Instead she composed herself, before shutting the window behind her. None of this was a big deal. Everything was absolutely fine. She was just a woman on her own who had heard a noise and tried to escape, but understood now that she had to comply with their requests. That was all there was to this, she told herself, in the hopes that it would show on her face.

She hoped a lot of things in that calm before the storm—that Ellie would be okay out on the roof until help came, that they would not think too deeply about an adult woman being in a bubblegum room full of toys and tiny furniture, that they would just threaten her, or maybe knock her unconscious.

But sadly, only two of her hopes were heard.

The taller one lunged before she'd even finished the last thought.



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